

WALTHAMSTOW WETLANDS

SSSI AND RAMSAR SITE

A LONDON WILDLIFE TRUST NATURE RESERVE



REPRINTS OF TWO PAPERS FROM THE
LONDON BIRD REPORT

A journal of the London Natural History Society

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Mathew Frith, Charlie Owens and Tony Wileman (LBR 2019)

LONDON BIRD REPORTS 2018 AND 2019

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LONDON BIRD REPORT

NO.83 FOR THE YEAR 2018

AUTHOR'S REPRINT

WALTHAMSTOW'S SPRING IN THE SUN

—
DAVID BRADSHAW



PUBLISHED MAY 2020

WALTHAMSTOW'S SPRING IN THE SUN

DAVID BRADSHAW

Walthamstow Reservoirs - or Wetlands as we now have to get used to calling it - is a complex of ten working reservoirs towards the southern end of the Lea Valley. It is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and has RAMSAR status, largely because of its nationally-important gathering of moulting Tufted Ducks and the Grey Herony, once the second biggest in the country.

The mix of concrete-banked and reed-fringed reservoirs, some with wooded islands, makes for a pleasant day's birding with the chance, particularly in migration season, of seeing sixty species in a visit. It has resident Kingfishers, Peregrines and now Little Egrets, as well as recently being one of London's most regular wintering sites for Scaup.

Over the years, the reservoirs have also had their share of London rarities including the capital's first Dusky Warbler in February 2010 as well as the more expected scarce herons and ducks. But even its most ardent admirers would not claim it was rarity-rich.

The much larger King George V reservoirs, just a few kilometres to the north, tend to siphon off rarer waders and storm-driven seabirds. Neighbouring Alexandria Palace and particularly Wanstead grab the lion's share of migrant passerines, especially in the autumn. The height of ambitions for a visit doesn't usually stretch beyond a Greenshank or Spotted Flycatcher or, if extremely lucky, the annual fly-over of an Osprey or rarer grebe on Lockwood.

London's first Little Bunting since 2007 stayed for over two months. (Phil Aylen)



So nothing prepared the small group of birders who regularly watch the site for the remarkable run of genuine London rarities in early 2018. In just over three months, Little Bunting, Serin, Bluethroat, Hoopoe and finally Black Kite were seen. For a brief period, Walthamstow could justifiably claim to be the best rarity site in the capital and perhaps one of the most successful inland patches in the whole country.

This was even more unexpected following the well-publicised difficulties at the site - now thankfully largely overcome - following its full opening to the public. Publicity drew large crowds with over 7,000 people visiting on one of the first weekends. There were challenges, too, with the initial 'no barriers' vision with a complete lack of fences, no policing and little signage to tell visitors that it was a dog-free site or that cycling and running were not permitted around any of the reservoirs.

The inevitable result was the Wetlands in the first few months was treated as a park, not a protected nature reserve. It would be fair to say the mood among those who had regularly watched birds at Walthamstow was gloomy.

This gloom began to lift on January 19th with the discovery of Walthamstow's first ever Little Bunting. It dropped into the weedy patch at the north end of East Warwick almost next to the path as Paul Whiteman and I were walking past. Paul's excellent hearing and persistence turned a possibility into a certainty and the news was immediately put out. It was the first Little Bunting in London since 2007 so not surprisingly proved quite a draw.

In the early weeks, the Bunting was elusive and only seen when it flew out of the tall weeds where it fed to rest in the hedge behind. But when it was spotted feeding regularly in a relatively open area close to the main path, seed was put out to see if it might make viewing easier and reduce the temptation for frustrated visitors to flush the bird. It worked with the Little Bunting, often in the company of Reed Buntings, giving wonderful views to all with patience.

The food supply, increased during the two bitter spells in March, may help explain why the bird remained until April 5th. In its final few days, it was heard singing to show it was not a female as had been originally thought. Over its three month-stay, it is thought that over 1,000 birders from as far afield as Lancashire, the East Midlands and Ireland came to see it, often as part of a two-target twitch with the Horned Lark at Staines.

My excited notes on the day of its discovery said, with the experience of 30-plus years of birding at Walthamstow, that 'I can't help thinking it won't get any better on the patch'. The prediction didn't last a month. On February 10th, visiting Herts birder Roy Hargreaves found a male Serin by the feeders close to the Engine House. It did not stay long but was heard to sing briefly and was photographed by Sara Morrison. There was no sign of the bird the next day and it seemed as if it would be one that got away. But almost a month later on March 6th what was presumably the same bird was found by Jamie Partridge with a flock of Linnets close by its original sighting. This time the Serin hung around to give all who could manage to get time off mid-week the chance to see it. The bird again showed well on the 7th - when it was possible to view it and the Little Bunting at the same time - before being seen briefly the following day.

Two London rarities on one day seemed incredible but it was to happen again three weeks later. After enjoying another look at the Little Bunting and topping up the seed on March 23rd, I continued onto West Warwick reservoir. As I walked down the east reed-



Walthamstow's first ever Serin visited the site twice. (Phil Aylen)

bed, I saw a bird perch up on a low bramble which I hoped might be a Stonechat. When I lifted my binoculars, I realised that I was instead looking at a Bluethroat which immediately flew further down the reservoir side out of sight. Rather than chase it, I waited for reinforcements which quickly arrived in the shape of Lol Cummings, Lol Bodini and David Darrell-Lambert. After a nervy wait, it was re-found and confirmed as a male White-spotted Bluethroat.

The London Wildlife Trust team immediately agreed to allow escorted access to West Warwick, which is usually out-of-bounds to non-permit holders and it was not long before the first visitors arrived. The Bluethroat was flighty at first but eventually settled down to feed out in the open until dusk. Sadly, there was no sign next day. It was the first Bluethroat recorded at Walthamstow since 1936 - just across the rail line on East Warwick - which was also the first ever seen in London.

After a stay of 77 days, the Little Bunting was seen for the last time on April 5th but the reservoirs did not have to wait long for another rarity. Next afternoon, a Hoopoe was found and watched by LWT volunteers and staff working on the path between No. 2 and 3 reservoirs - the same day as a bird was discovered at Brent Reservoir. Unfortunately, they did not fully realise that the last record of a Hoopoe on the site was in October 1993 and local birders were not told until early next morning.

More in hope than expectation Lol Bodini, Lol Cummings, Terry Rawlins and I walked down the path and were astonished to see the Hoopoe fly off towards East Warwick. It



*The Bluethroat was found just yards - and over 80 years - from the site of London's first.
(Magnus Andersson)*

was not seen on the ground again but it flew back over our heads towards No. 5 and then again past us before it seemed to drop safely into its original area. Unfortunately, it obviously kept going as that was the last time it was seen.

April is traditionally the best period for birding at Walthamstow and, even without the rarities, it was a good month. Two Ospreys were seen along with a long-staying and ridiculously confiding male Ring Ouzel, a flock of up to eight Brambling and a Sandwich Tern which visited on three days - each good birds for the reservoirs.

The month is also one of the best times for Red Kite over the reservoirs with two seen on the 12th and singles on the 16th and 22nd. This was, perhaps unsurprisingly, the species Jamie Partridge and I thought we had through the trees low over East Warwick on the 24th. Fortunately, Jamie fired off a series of shots as it went west and, on checking back, quickly began to think it was a Black Kite. Although there was understandably some debate in social media when he posted the initial back of the camera pictures, he was proved right. His decision to stick his neck out and post the sighting also helped the bird be tracked across London.

The Black Kite, another new species for the reservoirs, was not the final good bird of the year. A pair of out-of-season Long-tailed Ducks turned up in the summer and a Black-throated Diver, the first for two decades, in the late autumn. But they are the sort of records expected at the reservoirs. Birding at the Wetlands was back to normal.



The Little Bunting drew birders throughout its 77 day stay. (David Bradshaw)

Is there any explanation why Walthamstow enjoyed such a stunning and unprecedented period for rarities? There were, of course, more birding visitors to the site since its opening, particularly after the discovery of the Little Bunting. But only the initial sighting of the Serin was by a visiting birder.

What is also certainly the case is that the Little Bunting encouraged more regular visits from those who regard the reservoirs as their 'patch'. Again, however, late March and April when most of the rarities were found is the time when coverage is at its most thorough.

It seems as if this remarkable run is simply another example of the phenomenon known in the States as the Patagonia Picnic Table Effect - named after a lay-by in Southern Arizona - where birders looking for one rarity turn up more. But Walthamstow does not border Mexico but Hackney and Haringey. In the end, serendipity appears the likeliest explanation which should give hope to all who regularly work unglamorous London sites that theirs, too, might enjoy a time in the birding limelight.

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WALTHAMSTOW WETLANDS; A BIRD AND PEOPLE HOTSPOT?

LESSONS FROM THE FRONT LINE

MATHEW FRITH, CHARLIE OWENS & TONY WILEMAN



LONDON NATURAL
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PUBLISHED MAY 2021

WALTHAMSTOW WETLANDS; A BIRD AND PEOPLE HOTSPOT?

LESSONS FROM THE FRONT-LINE

MATHEW FRITH, CHARLIE OWENS & TONY WILEMAN

Introduction

The Walthamstow Reservoirs opened in October 2017 as a new publicly accessible nature reserve in the Lee Valley. A long-standing site of importance and interest for the avifauna it supports and attracts, there were justifiable concerns by some that the newly branded Walthamstow Wetlands might adversely impact its biodiversity value.¹ However, management of the Wetlands since its initial phases in 2014, including monitoring and analysis of the key bird species found at the reservoirs, has indicated that despite some of the challenges thrown up by its new-found popularity, its avifauna populations appear so far to fluctuate within expected natural parameters.

The Walthamstow Reservoirs in a changing urban landscape

The Walthamstow Reservoirs barely need an introduction to readers of the *London Bird Report*. This suite of 10 operational reservoirs, constructed between 1853 and 1904, lie in the middle of the Lower Lee Valley, wholly within the London Borough of Waltham Forest, and bordering the boroughs of Hackney and Haringey. Owned by Thames Water Utilities Ltd ('Thames Water'), they form part of the Lee Valley Reservoir Chain, and the company's most important water supply and treatment facility within Greater London, providing potable water to 3.5 million households and businesses in London. They also serve as Thames Water's most important commercial fishery. From an ornithological perspective the Reservoirs have long been cherished by birdwatchers for the birds that the large expanses of open water support and attract. This is also reflected in the conservation designations that the Reservoirs have been afforded.

Since the late 1960s much of the industry that was built along and had shaped both sides of the Lower Lee Valley, from Enfield downstream to Bow Creek, has vanished and its infrastructure has largely been demolished. This legacy had slowly but steadily been transformed through a mixture of economic and political interventions, from the establishment of the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority (LVRPA) in 1966, the London Docklands Development Corporation in 1981, to the creation of what is now the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (QEOP), largely completed by 2015. This evolution continues, perhaps more controversially, as the growth of London is planned to be accommodated through new development areas such as those at Meridian Water, Tottenham Hale, Blackhorse Road, Stratford and Blackwall. This also reflects a changing demography, as the purpose of these changes is primarily residential development.

This transformation to date has not been without benefits to nature. The LVRPA's role

¹ There is overlap between the names; Walthamstow Reservoirs is used here for historical or specific references and official designations (e.g. the SSSI) and the Wetlands refers to the broader operational site post-2014.



Male Shoveler on one of the reservoirs. (Phil Aylen)

has done much to bring about new nature reserves from previous mineral workings in the Valley north of Enfield, opening those at Middlesex Filter Beds (in 1988), Bow Creek Ecology Park², and East India Dock Basin (1998), and ensure the continued conservation of Tottenham Marshes and Walthamstow Marshes SSSI. The QEOP, the legacy of the London Olympics & Paralympics 2012, created over 48 hectares of new habitat, partly to mitigate that which was lost in the site's development (Rambaran, 2012; LLDC, 2019). Local authorities and community organisations have contributed too, such as at The Paddock, Springfield Park, and Wick Woodland. In addition, the improvements in air and water quality - whilst still short of what they should be - have brought about benefits to the Lee Valley's wildlife over the past 50 years.

The development of Walthamstow Wetlands has to be seen in this context, part of a desire to make the Lee Valley a greener, attractive and accessible place to visit. This has been a political goal since at least the County of London Plan of 1943, and is still embedded within the objectives of the London Plan, the LVRPA, and the Local Plans and strategies of the six London local authorities in which the Lee Valley lies.

From Reservoirs to Wetlands

Proposals to 'open up' the Walthamstow Reservoirs first arose in the early 2000s. East-west access over the Valley in London, for pedestrians, as much as vehicular traffic, is restricted to a few 'pinch points'. A multi-partner Upper Lee Strategy³ published in 2010, identified areas for future investment that could enhance and open up access to

² Created by the London Docklands Development Corporation in 1994, handed to LVRPA in 1998, and opened to the public in 2006.

³ Biogeographically the Upper Lee valley is within the London area.

existing green spaces, and complemented that already underway for the Olympics, for which Walthamstow Reservoirs was a prime candidate.

A feasibility study commissioned by Thames Water, on behalf of the Upper Lee partners, assessed five options that sought to attract an additional annual visitor audience ranging from 25,000 (option one) to 175,000 (five). A combination of option four, 'Walthamstow Wetlands - a Family Fun Day Out', and the more nature-focused option two, was chosen as the basis to proceed with a more detailed masterplan (Chris Blandford Associates, 2010).

Earlier London Wildlife Trust, through its relationship with Thames Water⁴, had also identified the site's potential, primarily from an 'access to nature' angle, publishing '*Walthamstow Reservoirs: so near yet so far*', the results from a community consultation (Pearson, 2009) funded by Natural England. This identified the invisibility of the reservoirs and their wildlife to many people that lived within three kilometres of them. Their closed access to all bar those with a permit (anglers and birdwatchers) exacerbated their exclusion to local people.

"They [Herons, Cormorants] live over there? You're joking!"
(Walthamstow Reservoirs: so near yet so far)

The report provided the foundations upon which proposals for the Reservoirs could be developed, with fundamental attentions paid to the requirements of the local community: *"Engagement and involvement with, and strong connections between, the community and the site should be regarded as paramount in providing a truly inclusive, successful urban nature reserve with both longevity and real social value."*

The development of Walthamstow Wetlands was led by Waltham Forest Council, forming a partnership with Thames Water. In 2014, London Wildlife Trust ('the Trust') was appointed as the delivery partner delivering community engagement activities, volunteering opportunities and conservation work for an initial five-year period (subsequently extended to the end of January 2021⁵).

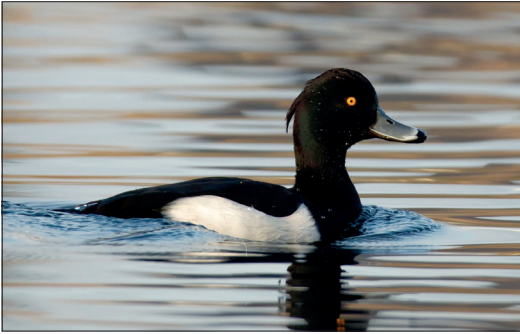
The Wetlands project was largely enabled by £10.6m of funding including grants from the then Heritage Lottery Fund⁶, Thames Water, Greater London Authority and Waltham Forest Council. The transformation included habitat enhancements, designed access routes, and the conversion of two historic buildings into a visitor centre, café, classroom, shop and viewing platform. Habitat enhancements included dredging of the three oldest reservoirs, producing 9,000m³ of excess sediment to create 1.8 hectares of new reedbed habitat.⁷ Programmes for schools and family-based education form a core element of the

⁴ The Trust had then been managing other sites on behalf of Thames Water; Isleworth Ait, parts of the Stoke Newington Reservoirs and Old Ford Island.

⁵ The original contract included a provisional 5-year extension. However, at the time of writing the Trust had just been awarded a new 5-year contract to continue its work at the Wetlands (including management of visitor facilities and income generation), starting in February 2021.

⁶ Now National Lottery Heritage Fund.

⁷ Thames Water are legally required to prevent accumulate excessive sedimentation and maintain an operational reservoir depth.



Male Tufted Duck. (Giles Greenwood)

engagement activities, as well as site tours and volunteer training. In addition, a programme of arts and craft activities help to generate income, to complement that from the café, car park, shop and a limited number of private hires for weddings (all limited in and around the restored Engine

House in keeping with Thames Water's requirements).

A team of staff (employed by the Trust and the Council) has managed the Wetlands' activities, conservation works and shop (in addition to those of the café (a concession), and Thames Water's on-site operations and fishery staff).⁸ The Council, Thames Water and the Trust - as the Wetlands Partnership - subsequently oversaw the development of the Wetlands through to the end of the main grant period in 2021. The Wetlands were opened to the public in October 2017 and have since been promoted as 'Europe's largest urban wetland nature reserve'.⁹

Internationally important, locally critical

Walthamstow Wetlands encompasses Reservoirs One, Two, Three, Four & Five, East and West Warwick Reservoirs, Low Maynard, High Maynard and Lockwood Reservoirs, as well as tracts or edges of the Coppermill Stream, River Lee, and Lea Navigation, and a network of vegetated embankments, tree belts, scrub, and grassland, covering about 211 hectares.

The site encompasses the Walthamstow Reservoirs Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), contributes towards the Lee Valley Special Protection Area (SPA), and forms part of a larger Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation (SMINC, site M071 *The Lee Valley*).¹⁰ The Wetlands abuts Walthamstow Marshes SSSI to the immediate south, and lies close to a number of other Sites of importance for Nature Conservation (e.g. Tottenham Marshes, Springfield Park), reinforcing its strategic wildlife value within the Lee Valley.

The Lee Valley SPA was designated in 2000 for its importance for overwintering waterfowl, namely Shoveler, Gadwall, but also Bittern. Gadwall and Shoveler, however, occur on the Reservoirs throughout the year in varying numbers. The SSSI designation outlines the site's importance as a breeding site for Grey Heron (supporting the country's fifth largest herony), Tufted Duck and Pochard. Furthermore, the SSSI also identifies the

⁸ 2018 it was six Trust employees and three Council employees, but by the end of 2020 it was five and one supported by casual staff as required.

⁹ Recognising that definitions of Europe, urban and wetland are open to interpretation.

¹⁰ The boundaries of the Wetlands do not entirely align with those of the SSSI and SPA. It falls entirely within the SMINC.

importance of the site for post-breeding and over-wintering Tufted Duck, over-wintering Shoveler, Pochard, Great Crested Grebe and Coot, and winter-roosting Cormorant. The Wetlands also falls within the Lee Valley Ramsar site designated in 2000 under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, 1971.

The Reservoirs are also noted for a few London ‘records’; these include the first recorded breeding of Little Egret (2006), the largest flock of Red-breasted Merganser (1956), the longest staying Black-throated Diver (nine months up to June 1957), largest colony of Cormorant (360 pairs, 2004), earliest arriving migrant Common Tern (9th March 1924), and first and only record of Dusky Warbler (2010). In early 2018 it appeared to be one of London’s best sites for rarities, including Little Bunting (staying 77 days), Bluethroat and Hoopoe (Bradshaw, 2020).

A dedicated group - the Walthamstow Birders - provide a detailed update on birds seen at Walthamstow Reservoirs and environs on their website (143 species in 2019, 148 in 2020), and a number of national survey schemes (e.g. WeBS) are undertaken on the site, reflecting its regional importance for birdwatching and recording.

A requirement to monitor

Given the international conservation importance of the reservoirs, the proposals for the Wetlands had to ensure that they would not undermine this. From the Trust’s perspective this was critical, not just for the wildlife but also our reputation. As the delivery partner for the Wetlands, this was the largest and most important site we were to take on in the Trust’s history. Our experience of balancing the potential conflicts between nature and people at other nature reserves played a crucial part in the design and development phase. However, other matters also came into play, primarily Thames Water’s obligations to maintain safe water supply but also Waltham Forest Council’s desire to add a new destination to their cultural portfolio.¹¹ From the outset the design of the Wetlands inevitably was a balancing act, not without its challenges.

Prior to developing the Wetlands for opening to the public, BSG Ecology were commissioned by Waltham Forest Council to undertake a survey to inform the Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) process and to guide the planning application conditions (BSG Ecology, 2014).¹² This initial survey was used to inform long-term patterns of waterfowl distribution on site and the seasonal access constraints (e.g. through path closures) around Walthamstow Wetlands upon opening to the public.

Walthamstow Wetlands received planning consent in June 2014, subject to a number of Conditions, several of which related to ecology, including a requirement for monitoring of the key bird species present. Predominantly these are based on the recommendations of the HRA Report. In order to achieve the discharge of the planning conditions, a Five-Year Bird Impact Management Plan (BIMP) was compiled (Waltham Forest Council, 2014),

¹¹ The Council has relatively few public open spaces within its jurisdiction; much is owned and managed by the City of London Corporation. The Wetlands falls within the Cultural Services part of the Council, rather than Parks & open spaces (it does not feature on the latter’s web-pages).

¹² Actions that might affect a Special Protection Area or Special Area for Conservation requires a HRA prior to consent from Natural England; Thames Water had commissioned BSG Ecology for earlier baseline surveys in 2011-13.

and submitted to Natural England and the Walthamstow Wetlands Partners.

BSG Ecology were contracted to deliver the first three years of the BIMP, with London Wildlife Trust delivering the last two years, 2018-20. The objectives of the monitoring and annual reporting were to identify whether there is evidence of:

- Any significant reduction in the extent and distribution of the habitats used by key species;
- Any changes to the structure and function of the habitats used by key species;
- Any changes to supporting processes upon which the habitats of key species rely;
- Any significant reduction in the populations of key species using the site as a result of increased recreational use;
- Any significant changes to the distribution of key species within the site as a result of increased recreational use.

Following initial assessments and liaison with Natural England, a number of the key species for which the Reservoirs are designated were excluded from the monitoring programme and for the following reasons:

- Great Crested Grebe; population not nationally important and baseline work did not identify birds affected by bankside disturbance;
- Bittern; frequency of over-wintering visits is low, and Walthamstow is not one of the current resources of the SPA's population;
- Grey Heron; surveys in 2013 showed that birds within the site's heronries did not show reaction to people on the banks, and most foraged off-site;
- Cormorant; winter-roosting population not deemed of conservation concern;
- Coot; population not nationally important and baseline work did not identify birds affected by bankside disturbance.

Therefore, the focal species for monitoring considered in detail for the period 2015-20 were:

- Breeding Tufted Duck, Gadwall, Shoveler and Pochard;
- Post-breeding (moulting) Tufted Duck;
- Over-wintering Tufted Duck, Gadwall, Shoveler, and Pochard.



The methodology for the monitoring was first established in 2013 and has been maintained to fit within the Trust's operations until the current day (Frith, 2018). It has consisted of a survey across the site every fortnight:

- during the first visit of each month all waterfowl species are counted (as individuals) and mapped using a grid system, including those using islands and the immediate shoreline - the Full Count;
- the second visit in each month consists of a Full Count whilst also recording disturbance events.

Disturbance events are listed by type (e.g. cyclist, vehicle) and impact on a scale from one (no behavioural response noted) to nine (birds

Grey Heron ringing in 2018. (Adam Wilson)

apparently leaving the site and not returning).

The Trust has also undertaken additional standardised surveys - Breeding Bird Survey and Heronries Census - and reviewed WeBS data to help inform the conclusions of the monitoring work. In addition, a visitor monitoring strategy was designed to aid and inform the bird monitoring, as well as inform other aspects of the Wetlands' operations.

A new nature destination

Before opening to the wider public, the Reservoirs received c19,000 annual visits, of which 14,000 were anglers and the remainder were mostly birdwatchers. However, Walthamstow Wetlands has proven significantly more popular since October 2017. Unlike Rainham Marshes or the London Wetland Centre, access is free and not dependent on membership of the Trust. This aligns with one of the Trust's founding principles on access to nature. Nevertheless, this popularity outstripped the expectations of the Wetlands partners, which had conservatively estimated the total number of annual visits to reach 230,000 after five years (2022); 353,000 visits were recorded between March 2018 and April 2019 (Salter & O'Connor, 2020).

However, the Wetlands were 'new', were heavily promoted from the summer of 2017, and formed an important element of Waltham Forest Council's 'London Borough of Culture' programme over 2018-19. They were also to provide the focus for the Trust's London Wildlife Festival in August 2019, which had to be cancelled due to inclement weather (and postponed in 2020).

The visitor monitoring survey has unsurprisingly revealed the following since March 2018:

- the main drivers of visit rates are daily weather patterns and day of the week/public holidays, with weekends/public holidays significantly busier than weekdays;
- the southern part of the reserve is significantly busier than the north with just under 70% of visits;
- more visitors come in from the south (Coppermill entrance, 28%) than the north (Lockwood, 20%);
- proximity of the site to home is a key factor influencing visit choice - over half (c53%) travelled on foot, followed by those on public transport (20%);
- over half (57%) of interviewees lived within a 2km radius of at least one of the four entrance points (the two on Ferry Lane are almost opposite) (Salter & O'Connor, 2020).

In addition, around three quarters of those interviewed were aware of the inter/national importance of the Wetlands. However, the visitor monitoring methodology, involving face-to-face questionnaires, has since been reviewed, as much of it was self-selecting (to assist in direct experiential feedback).¹³ From 2020 this has included observations of visitor behaviours; joggers and cyclists, who tend not to stop as they travel across the site and arguably cause more disturbance incidents, will feature more in future monitoring.

In April 2020 the millionth visit to the Wetlands was recorded since October 2017. Whilst 2020 was exceptional in many ways, the site remained opened throughout lockdown with additional support and resources from the Wetlands Partnership (the Council were

¹³ Asking visitors whether they were aware of the international importance of the Wetlands was unlikely to expose all those admitting they didn't know or didn't care.



Visitors at the Coppermill entrance, showing a tendency to walk up the embankment rather than keep to the path. (James Cracknell)

anxious not to be seen to deny residents access to green space and the Trust provided a significant proportion of the daily staffing requirements to keep the reserve open). Whilst the Wetlands saw a 140% increase in footfall between March and December 2020, there is anticipation that c345,000 visits a year might no longer be exceptional in the future.

Nevertheless, there are constraints to public access that should not be forgotten; the Wetlands are only open between 09:30-16:00 during winter and 09:30-17:00 during summer¹⁴, car-parking is limited, dogs are excluded, access to the water is prohibited, and alcohol and barbecues are banned from all of the site.¹⁵ Nature can also sometimes work its magic; at a time when the Wetlands is important for over-wintering waterfowl it can be very cold, especially if a north-easterly is blowing.

Design flaws and responses

Whilst the Wetlands is arguably a wholly sensitive site, temporal and spatial differences assist in managing people across it. Indeed, it would probably be designed very differently if the large expanses of water did not dominate the site and in themselves provide a natural refuge for many birds. In terms of the designated conservation features

¹⁴ Opening time from March 2020 was 10:30 to allow Thames Water's operations staff to conduct work with limited public access. Angling and bird permit holders access adapted in line with government Covid-19 guidance on sport and recreational pursuits.

¹⁵ Alcohol is only permitted at licensed private events limited in and around the Engine House.

the critical times are November to March (for overwintering Gadwall, Shoveler and Pochard), July to August (for post summer-moulting Tufted Duck), and February to July (for breeding ducks, Cormorant and Grey Heron). However, these birds are not generally equitably distributed across the site, and two of the reservoirs are considerably less utilised by these species than the rest.

Access by visitors throughout the Wetlands was designed to be passively controlled via a network of seasonal gates and footpaths, aided by appropriate signage, in 'day-time hours' only. This was to ensure disturbance could be prevented, minimised or avoided as far as possible, in areas sensitive to the designated conservation features during key periods of the year (BSG Ecology, 2014).

Most of the site enhancement and access works have proven to be successful from an overall visitor perspective. However, some elements of the Wetlands' design revealed their conservation management flaws fairly quickly after opening. In short these were down to two key aspects; access infrastructure, and interpretation and 'messaging'. Improved access included a new north-south cyclepath from the Lockwood to Coppermill entrances,¹⁶ but funding constraints, together with aesthetic requirements, reduced the planned extent of gates and fencing across some routes. Signage was also reduced in scope (to minimise visual 'clutter') and largely limited to visual symbols. Further, the Wetlands' dedicated website and social media promoted the site as a country park, with activities implicitly suggesting behaviours commensurate with the Council's other parks. The nature conservation sensitivities of the Wetlands were, maybe inadvertently, downplayed.

In part, the impacts from these flaws were exposed by visitor numbers outstripping expectations, especially in the first spring and summer. However, many people ignored signage, behaved inappropriately, and in a few cases were deliberately abusive when asked to keep to paths or put out their barbecues (let alone preventing their dogs joining them on site¹⁷). Whilst there were incidents of swimming, naked sunbathing and more, it was primarily vaulting fences, cycling or jogging down closed paths or excluded parts of the site, which persistently caused levels of disturbance.

This led to concerns being directed to the Trust along the lines of 'how could we allow this to happen?' and that this 'wasn't appropriate for a nature reserve', some with photographic evidence. Some of these points were from birdwatchers worried about the management priorities and the accumulative impacts of 'uncontrolled' access. A couple of the Trust staff (one of the authors and the Chief Executive) met with some of the birdwatchers a few times over 2018 to listen and take these matters on board. They subsequently led to changes in the seasonal opening of routes, helped us instigate and manage the HRA's recommended seasonal path closures, and ensure areas of the reserve remained permanently out of bounds to visitors as long-term mitigation measures. Whilst security staff had been on site for weekends and holidays since opening, from the summer of 2018 Thames Water funded daily on-site patrols to manage visitor behaviour (and eject visitors if needs be).

¹⁶ Funded primarily by the Greater London Authority.

¹⁷ All dogs, bar assistance dogs, are banned from site, a welcome Thames Water stipulation, but which also supports the HRA recommendations to minimise disturbance.



Visitors out by High Maynard in the winter sun. (Peter Salter)

The Trust has since sought the critical input of the birdwatchers, who know the site well, into the analysis and conclusions for each of the year's monitoring surveys (e.g. Owens, *et al*, 2020). Many have also helped serve as 'guides in the hide'.

What does the monitoring show?

The following are summaries from the 2019-20 report, in most cases reflecting the whole monitoring period from 2015-2019.

Breeding season

- **Tufted duck:** Distribution during breeding season has remained relatively even across the site and within individual reservoirs. However, three areas have shown a slight divergence in the last two years of monitoring compared to 2015-17. There has been a reduction of numbers and, by association, distribution of Tufted Duck in Reservoir Two and along the eastern edge of Reservoir One. On East Warwick's southern edge there were no records in 2018 and whilst there were records in 2019, they were significantly lower numerically, but recorded across more grid squares.
- **Gadwall:** The latest year showed the most widespread distribution of Gadwall and for the first time in the five-year period, birds were recorded on all reservoirs. However, there was a reduction of records in reservoirs One, Two and Three, more specifically the latter. In 2019 only two Gadwall were recorded in this area on one survey day and in 2018 there were none. In all other years Reservoir Three has been of importance in relation to numbers present in those years.
- **Shoveler:** Distribution across the five-year monitoring period has remained broadly the

Gadwall pair. (Ann Playford)

same. Birds were unanimously recorded on the southern side of the site and were recorded most frequently on East Warwick and, to a lesser extent, Reservoir One. There is no discernible pattern to the distribution that can be attributed to the presence of visitors to the site.



- **Pochard:** In the years since opening birds have shown a propensity to aggregate towards the north island of High Maynard, East Warwick's island and restricted to the southern end of Reservoir Three within proximity to the island.

Post-breeding period

- **Tufted Duck:** Moulting Tufted Duck were recorded on all reservoirs and as with all previous years of monitoring reservoirs Four and Five were of high value such that, when combined, they attributed to over 55% of the total season's records. The average number over the five-year monitoring period is 2,644 birds present during the post-breeding moult.

Over-wintering season

- **Gadwall:** Distribution is broadly the same across the entire five-year period. The areas of importance to over-wintering Gadwall prior to opening continue to be of importance: Reservoir Five's island and, to a lesser extent, the northern arm of High Maynard.
- **Shoveler:** The only discernible trends across the five-year period were a greater use of the northern half of East Warwick and around its island and, to a lesser extent, the eastern island and corner of Reservoir Five.
- **Tufted Duck:** Since opening there has been a shift with the highest peak numbers recorded on Reservoirs Four and Five whereas yearly peaks in 2015-18 were captured on the Warwick reservoirs. There is also an area in the north of Reservoir Two that show the highest number of accumulated records for the season in proximity to an open path (which is screened by vegetation and operational infrastructure).
- **Pochard:** Distribution of over-wintering birds was largely consistent over the five-year monitoring period. However, numbers of Pochard have declined and more so since the opening of the site.¹⁸

These do not capture the detail presented in each of the monitoring reports, and we are mindful that they are interpretations of a limited data-set over a relatively short period and without a detailed comparison of these key species' trends and patterns elsewhere in the region.

¹⁸ Perhaps reflecting the long-term trend across England, but not the more mixed picture from other wetland sites in and around London.

Disturbance; is it significant?

Evaluating the significance of disturbance across a five-year study period is not without its flaws and too much, or too little, may be postulated from the results. The relatively limited data prior to opening may not, for many reasons, be truly representative of bird distribution without public presence as it only spans three full years of observation (2014-17).

Whilst the monitoring reports have identified several distributional differences between the pre- and post-opening years, these changes, in most cases, were minor in relation to the population size at the time. Tufted Duck, Gadwall and Pochard were recorded less frequently in areas identified as key visitor locations, such as site entrances and ramps to reservoir embankments. It should be no surprise that these locations were broadly similar to those identified as experiencing high levels and frequency of disturbance events.

Nevertheless, though some of the results can be deemed to be as expected, this is not a case of ignoring them, nor the fact that other observations also require vigilance. For example, Pochard were less frequently recorded in areas adjacent to seasonably open pathways, more frequently in proximity to islands and showed significant reductions of records close to a key visitor entrance (Owens *et al*, 2020). In isolation these changes seem negligible but given that the Wetlands specifically has a Medium Alert for Pochard the redistribution may serve to exacerbate the recorded on-site decline.

These apparent distributional shifts have been reported to the Wetlands Partners and Natural England, together with recommendations for future consideration. At the time of writing they are not deemed to be of such significance as to require any major remedial actions to be taken. Nevertheless, the Trust is acutely mindful that we and our partners need to ensure that minor changes do not accumulate into larger irreversible issues. It is incumbent upon us to keep monitoring these species in respect of how the site is used by people if we are to help sustain its international ecological importance.

Conclusions

On the whole, opening the site to over 340,000 visitors a year has clearly caused some minor effects on the distribution of key species, particularly away from the busier pedestrian and cycle routes by reservoir edges. However, the seasonal access routes, opening and closing hours and ongoing monitoring all serve to provide an appropriate balance between local people's access to green space and protecting the natural sensitivities of an internationally important site for birds, many of which are vulnerable to the pressures that humanity places upon them. There is also flexibility that can be applied to the closure of parts of the site if needs be.¹⁹

Since May 2018 we have liaised with the LVRPA, statutory agencies and neighbouring local authorities - the Walthamstow Partnership - to provide a forum to discuss management issues of the wider Upper Lee Valley region, such as security, incidents and access, in order to develop a co-ordinated approach and message. We also - critically - consider the nature conservation matters of the broader Valley, and work collaboratively on maintaining an accurate assessment of bird trends and other biodiversity issues across

¹⁹ This particularly applies to Thames Water's operational requirements.

the wider landscape, in line with the Lee Valley Regional Park BAP (LVRPA, 2019). In light of the increasing development pressures in this part of London, we need to maintain vigilance and gather robust data in order to inform decisions that, whilst they seek to embrace the contemporary desire for people to benefit from contact with nature, we don't kill the geese that lay the golden eggs in doing so.

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*The Little Bunting drew birders throughout its 77-day stay.
(David Bradshaw, above; Phil Aylen, below)*

