



LOHP Bird Surveys 2012: Webbs Fen, Broomscot Common & Scarfe Meadows

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Little Ouse Headwaters Project



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Abstract

Territory mapping surveys of breeding birds were undertaken in 2012, applying the same survey methods as used in 2011 (Langston & Langston 2011), on Webbs Fen, Thelnetham, Broomscot Common and Scarfe Meadows in Garboldisham. This report presents the results for 2012. In the case of Webbs Fen, surveys followed restoration management to wet fen, over the winter of 2011/12.

Introduction

Webbs Fen and Scarfe Meadows are owned and managed by the Little Ouse Headwaters' Project (LOHP), whilst Broomscot Common is managed by the LOHP on behalf of the Garboldisham Parish Charities. Funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund has enabled the purchase and restoration of Webbs Fen and is contributing to works on Broomscot Common and Scarfe Meadows. The bird surveys reported here are an important component of the LOHP's management of these sites for nature conservation, landscape and amenity, both to inform the timing and practical management measures and to enable us to assess the effects of our management in terms of the birds that use these sites.

Methods

A walking route around each site ensured coverage of all boundary features and internal features, covering the ground to within 100m of all parts of each site (RHWL & RAL). Three visits were made to Broomscot Common, in April, May and June, and to Webbs Fen in May and June, with *ad hoc* records of wading birds collected from off the site on several occasions during April to avoid disturbance whilst they were prospecting. Only two visits were made to Scarfe Meadows, in May and July; surveys were disrupted by the weather and the presence of a bull on site. All visits were completed before 0900hrs. Bird registrations were recorded on one map per visit and the compiled visits summarised on a further map for each site, distinguishing between one-off and repeat records of territorial activity. A combination of standard British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) bird territory mapping and atlas codes were used to indicate bird activity/interpreted breeding status – possible, probable or confirmed (Table A1). In addition, for Webbs Fen, there were extra visits for nest-recording and to obtain confirmation of breeding outcomes for key species (RAL).

Results

As indicated under methods, surveys were disrupted by the weather conditions, after a dry winter and spring, wet weather was a prominent feature of the late spring and summer of 2012. The summary results for each site are presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3, and full species lists with breeding categories in Appendix I. The highest order categories of breeding evidence are presented in each case, ie confirmation of breeding where available.

Webbs Fen

Survey visits:

- 1 Compilation of *ad hoc* records during late March & April
- 2 6 May
- 3 19 May
- 4 14 June

Webbs Fen is a remnant patch of valley fen that has been drained in the past and developed rough grassland with stands of *Phragmites*. Restoration to wet fen involved felling and stump removal of a wind break of non-native poplar and alder that formerly subdivided the site, infilling of internal ditches with cord and spoil from the creation of a shallow lake in the northwest corner of the site. An area of *Phragmites* has been retained in the northeast corner in part to screen the site from the riverside footpath.

In 2011, the internal ditches, scheduled for infilling as part of the fen restoration management, were the main internal features of the site associated with breeding birds, namely reed and sedge warbler, and reed bunting (Figure 1). The rough grassland that covered most of the area of Webbs Fen was used regularly by hunting barn owls, nesting (successful) in an owl box on Thelneham Fen (SWT) at the riverside end of the boundary with Webbs Fen. Other breeding bird species were associated with boundary features, ditches, scrub/hedges and the River Little Ouse.

In 2012, the new wetland attracted lapwing (3 pairs) and oystercatcher (2 pairs) which were seen on many occasions during late March and through April, which unfortunately did not breed (Appendix I). We hope that in future years they may breed successfully. A pair of greylag geese raised four young and a pair of little grebes laid, and re-laid eggs, but ultimately were not successful. A pair of Egyptian geese was present during April. The wetland also attracted mallard and, in late March, a pair of gadwall was observed.

The loss of internal ditches and their fringe of *Phragmites* led to reductions in reed and sedge warblers, and reed bunting, with no confirmed breeding, just a single reed warbler territory recorded and a singing reed bunting recorded on one of the visits. Most other bird activity focused on the margins of the site, apart from swallows, house martins and swifts feeding over the site. Barn owl was observed occasionally hunting over the area.

Broomscot Common

Survey visits:

- 1 22 April
- 2 20 May
- 3 23 June

Broomscot Common is a classic Breckland heath with extensive islands of mature and over-mature gorse, *Ulex europaeus*. The light soils support sparse vegetation, currently dominated by ragwort. A small area of wet fen lies in the northern part of the site, with a copse of sallow on the western margin. A pool sits on the eastern boundary, at the end of the ditch which bisects the site towards the northern end.

As in 2012, the gorse scrub was mainly occupied by semi-colonially breeding linnets (at least 30 pairs), and yellowhammers (Figure 2). The second visit was notable for surprisingly little linnet activity, at a time when most birds would be expected to be feeding young. Patches of scrub, notably around the pool in the north-eastern corner, were associated with clusters of probable breeding birds. Most other breeding birds were found along the boundary hedges. Open ground provided feeding habitat for little owl, adult and recently fledged starlings (during visits in May and June), carrion crows and jackdaws.

Breeding was confirmed for linnet, chiffchaff, long-tailed tit, blue tit and starling. Many of the species recorded were noted as possible or probable breeders (Appendix I). Broomscot Common has fen, wood and gardens adjoining it, forming a varied habitat mosaic.

Scarfe Meadows

Survey visits:

- 1 6 May
- 2 10 June aborted
- 3 1 July, partial due to presence of bull

Scarfe Meadows comprises three grass fields separated by ditches. The site's external boundaries are formed by mature, albeit gappy, hedges to the north and west, Garboldisham Old Fen to the east, and the River Little Ouse to the south. The site is grazed by cattle and the vegetation is currently species-poor. There are several mature maiden trees within the fields.

Surveys in 2012 were incomplete due to a couple of aborted visits and a partial visit due to the presence of the bull on the site on the occasions when weather and availability were suitable for bird surveys. Breeding birds were associated with the mature hedges and scrub, notably in the north-western corner of the site and along the ditch there; also along the western boundary and close to the river in a cluster of trees and scrub (Figure 3).

Breeding was confirmed for robin, from the northern boundary hedge. Possible breeding was indicated for blackcap and chiffchaff along the northeastern boundary (Appendix I).

Discussion

It was more difficult to confirm breeding on Broomscot Common and Scarfe Meadows on the basis of 3 survey visits, without the supplementary observations and nest-finding. However, it is thought likely that many of the possible and probable breeders bred on these sites, or on adjoining sites. It is also likely that some birds that were singing early on in the breeding season moved to other sites to breed.

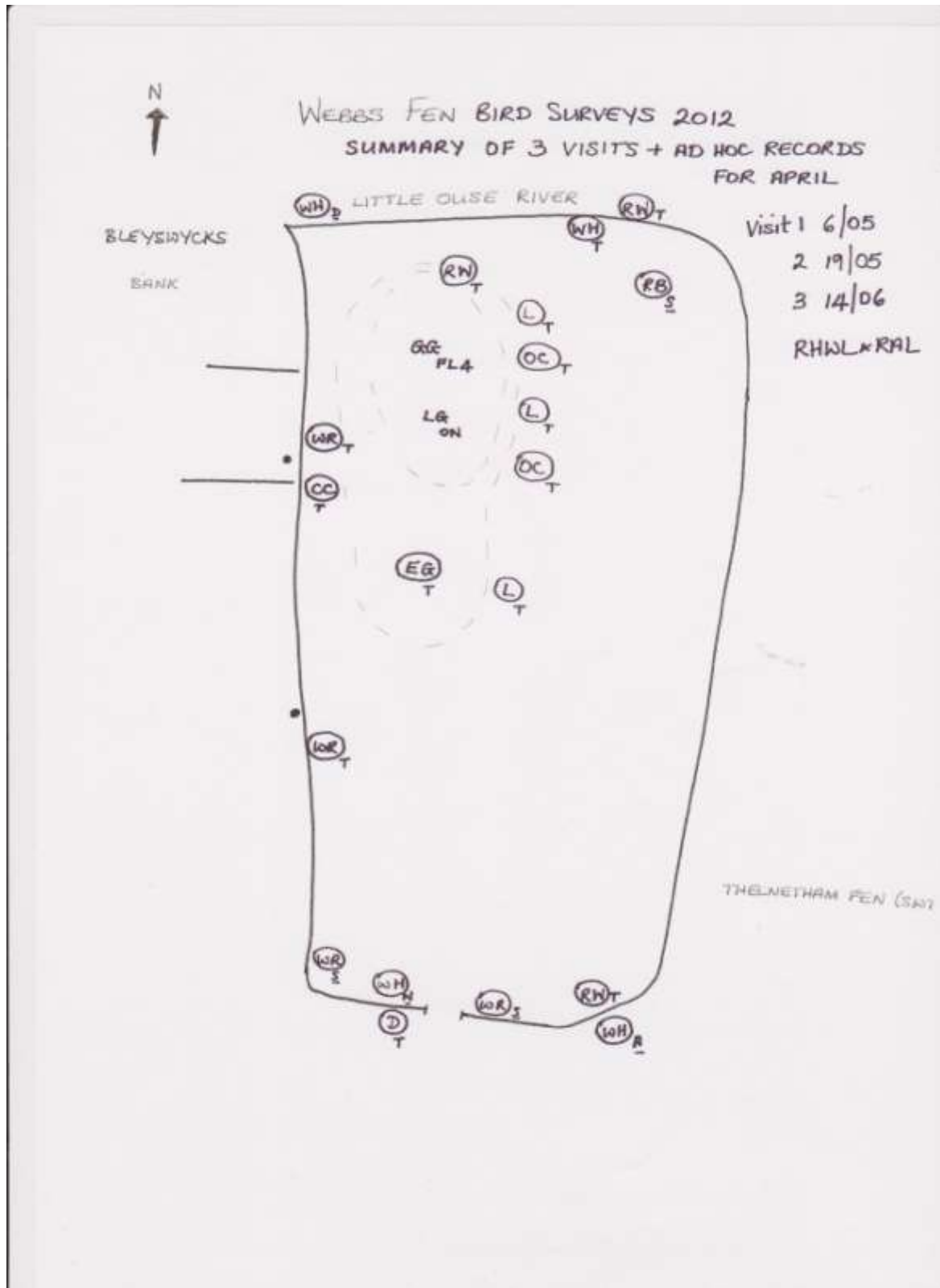


Figure 1. Webbs Fen summary of four bird territory mapping surveys in 2012

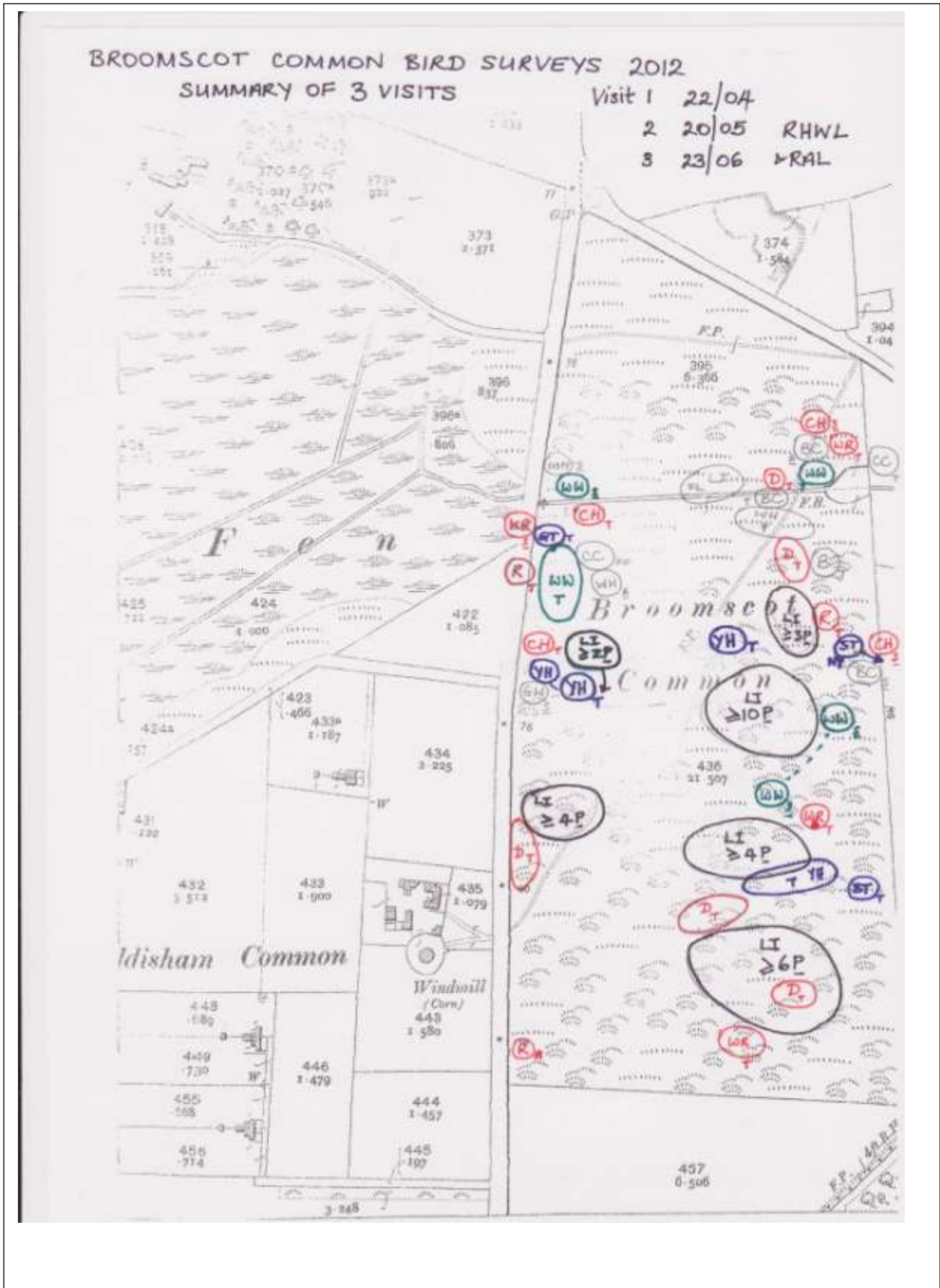


Figure 2. Broomscot Common summary of three bird territory mapping surveys in 2012

Appendix I. Bird species lists with breeding categories for Webbs Fen, Broomscot Common and Scarfe Meadows 2012.

Species	Webbs Fen	Broomscot Common	Scarfe Meadows	Code
Little Grebe	ON			
Greylag Goose	FL			GG
Egyptian Goose	T			EG
Gadwall	P			GA
Mallard	ON		√	MA
Pheasant	H			PH
Oystercatcher	T	F		OC
Lapwing	T			L
Wood Pigeon	F	√	H	WP
Collared Dove		P		CD
Cuckoo				CK
Barn Owl	√			BO
Little Owl		√		LO
Swift	√	F		SI
Green Woodpecker		√		G
Great spotted Woodpecker			H	GS
Skylark		F		
Jay		√		
Magpie		H	H	MG
Jackdaw	F	√		JD
Carrion Crow	√	√	√	C
Goldcrest		S	H	GC
Blue Tit	FL	FL	FL	BT
Great Tit	√	T	√	GT
Swallow	√	F		SL
House Martin	√			HM
Long-tailed tit	√	FL		LT
Chiffchaff	T	T	T	CC
Willow Warbler		T		WW
Blackcap		T	T	BC
Garden Warbler		S	S	GW
Whitethroat	N	T	√	WH
Reed Warbler	T			RW
Wren	T	T	S	WR
Starling		FL		SG
Blackbird	FF	T	H	B
Song Thrush		S	S	ST
Mistle Thrush		√		M
Robin		T	FL	R
Dunnock	T	T	S	D

Species	Webbs Fen	Broomscot Common	Scarfe Meadows	
Pied Wagtail		√		PW
Chaffinch		T	S	CH
Greenfinch		√		GR
Goldfinch		√		
Linnet		FL		LI
Bullfinch		H		BF
Yellowhammer	H	T	√	YH
Reed Bunting	S			RB

√ using site for feeding but no evidence of breeding, not in suitable breeding habitat

F flying over

BTO atlas categories of breeding evidence

Possible breeder:

H observed in suitable nesting Habitat

S Singing male

Probable breeder:

P Pair in suitable nesting habitat

T Territory defended over at least one week

D courtship and Display

N visiting probable Nest site

A Agitated behaviour

B nest Building

Confirmed breeder:

FL recently FLedged young or downy young

ON adults entering or leaving nest-site in circumstances indicating Occupied Nest

FF Adult carrying Faecal sac or Food for young