



# LOHP Bird Surveys 2013: Webbs Fen, Broomscot Common & Scarfe Meadows

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Tea break from gorse clearance on Broomscot Common



Ditch reprofiling in progress Scarfe Meadows



Webbs Fen panorama showing newly excavated wetland in 2012

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## Abstract

Territory mapping surveys of breeding birds were undertaken in 2013, applying the same survey methods as used in 2011 (Langston & Langston 2011) and 2012 (Langston & Langston 2012), on Webbs Fen, in Thelnetham, Broomscot Common and Scarfe Meadows in Garboldisham. This report presents the results for 2013, the third and final year of this Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) Award. In the case of Webbs Fen, surveys followed restoration management to wet fen from rough grassland, 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 HLF has enabled the purchase and restoration of Webbs Fen and is contributing to management 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, 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 and Scarfe Meadows, on 20 April, 5 May and 8 June, and to Webbs Fen on 19 April, 6 May and 9 June, together with some additional *ad hoc* records which either add to species lists or help establish breeding status. Bird registrations were recorded on one map per visit and the compiled visits summarised on one further map for each site, distinguishing between one-off and repeat records of territorial activity. Circled two-letter codes (see Appendix I for explanation) indicate the estimated centre 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 (Appendix I).

## Results

The full, planned survey schedule was completed in 2013, albeit the spring was cold, delaying breeding activity for some species. 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 19 April
- 2 6 May
- 3 9 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. 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 Thelnetham 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, but 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, with no confirmed breeding in 2012, 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.

In 2013, at least three pairs of reed buntings bred, nesting among vegetation along the margins of the old ditch network (Figure 1). Reed warbler territories were recorded along the river. No lapwings or oystercatchers established territories this year. One pair of gadwall was seen regularly on the site in early spring and may have bred. Teal also were seen in early April, but no evidence of breeding was established. Most bird activity was associated with the wetland or marginal habitats. There has been further development of marginal aquatic plants around the wetland as it has matured, providing nest cover for breeding birds.

### **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 willow 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. In the winter of 2010/11, a programme of gorse management commenced to reinvigorate the plants and establish a greater diversity of growth stages. Regrowth has been patchy, sparse in places due to rabbit browsing, as protection for cut stumps has been only partially successful.

As in previous years, in 2013 the gorse scrub was mainly occupied by semi-colonially breeding linnets (at least 14 pairs), and yellowhammers (at least 5 pairs) (Figure 2). In contrast with 2012, in 2013 the second visit was notable for a lot of linnet activity, with several pairs collecting nesting material, rather later than in previous years. Linnet activity was much-reduced during the third visit. Visit three was characterised by a lot of activity by cuckoos, probably in response to the large numbers of nesting dunnocks in the gorse. Patches of mixed scrub, notably around the pool in the north-eastern corner, also were associated with clusters of probable breeding birds, with others occupying the boundary hedges. Open ground provided feeding habitat for adult and recently fledged starlings (during visits in May and June), carrion crows and jackdaws.

Breeding was confirmed only for blue tit and starling, probably because of the delayed breeding season. However, 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 and a source of additional birds that use the site for feeding but not for nesting.

## Scarfe Meadows

Survey visits:

- 1 20 April
- 2 5 May
- 3 8 June

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. Line-clearance undertaken in late summer 2012, preparatory to replacing the livestock fencing, reduced the density of the hedge along the western and northern boundaries to the site. Ditch reprofiling was undertaken over two seasons, in late autumn 2011 and 2012, to ensure availability of water vole habitat on alternate sides of the ditches.

Breeding birds were associated mainly with the mature hedges and scrub, notably in the north-western corner of the site and along the western boundary, although less activity was recorded in 2013, probably due to management interventions leading to a reduction in suitable habitat (Figure 3).

Breeding was confirmed only for stock dove, which subsequently failed in one of the nest boxes. Possible breeding was indicated for whitethroat, robin, blackbird and dunnock along the northern boundary (Appendix I). Buzzards were seen displaying over adjoining woodland and over the site, on several occasions, and lapwings displayed over the site in early spring.

## Discussion

It was more difficult to confirm breeding on the basis of 3 survey visits, without 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, visiting these sites, especially Broomscot Common, to feed. It is also likely that some birds that were singing early on in the breeding season moved to other sites to breed, for example the migrant redstart and redshank recorded, respectively, on Broomscot Common and Webbs Fen. A cold, late spring in 2013 delayed breeding activity by some birds and early failures prompted relaying by several species. Later activity further into June will have been missed by the surveys.

Broomscot Common is currently the most varied site in terms of habitat, comprising extensive gorse scrub, open grass and lichen heath and smaller areas of wet fen meadow and rough grassland with patches of sallow, mixed scrub and boundary hedges. Linnets,

yellowhammers, dunnocks and wrens characterise this site. Management of gorse and other scrub, together with restoration of the pond and fen have been of a less dramatic nature than management on the other two sites. However, some removal of gorse, to encourage open ground species, and coppicing (cutting to ground level) of over-mature gorse at the southern end of Broomscot Common has at least temporarily removed nesting habitat for linnets there, pending regrowth.

Webbs Fen is the site that has undergone the most dramatic changes in habitat owing to the restoration from rough grass with patches of Phragmites, woodland shelterbelts, and an internal network of drains, to wet fen with an area of open water bordered by marginal aquatic vegetation, and an area of Phragmites partially screening the site from the riverside footpath. It is too early in this habitat transition for the avifauna to have established a regular pattern of occurrence. Several wetland species have been recorded and evidence of breeding has been established in at least one of the years in which surveys have been carried out. Lapwing displayed on the site in 2011 but did not breed successfully. Snipe have been recorded early in the breeding season but we have not found evidence of breeding. Little grebes failed in their breeding attempt in 2012. Pairs of gadwall and teal were seen several times, early in spring 2013, but ducks are notoriously secretive once incubating and we did not confirm breeding, although we believe that they bred on LOHP sites in the valley.

Management of ditches and hedge boundaries on Scarfe Meadows has wrought considerable change to this predominantly grassland site, on which most birds species recorded are those associated with boundary hedges and the adjoining river, and Garboldisham Old Fen.

Active management interventions on these sites over the three years have modified the available habitat, leading to changes in the main bird species. Some of these changes are in the early stages of taking place and it will be several more years before the full effect of the management will become apparent. The bird surveys documented here and in the two preceding reports represent early records of the birds' response to management of Webbs Fen, Broomscot Common and Scarfe Meadows.

## References

Langston, R. H. W. & Langston, R. A. 2011. LOHP Bird Surveys 2011: Webbs Fen, Broomscot Common & Scarfe Meadows. Little Ouse Headwaters Project, [www.lohp.org](http://www.lohp.org). Report to HLF.

Langston, R. H. W. & Langston, R. A. 2012. LOHP Bird Surveys 2012: Webbs Fen, Broomscot Common & Scarfe Meadows. Little Ouse Headwaters Project, [www.lohp.org](http://www.lohp.org). Report to HLF.

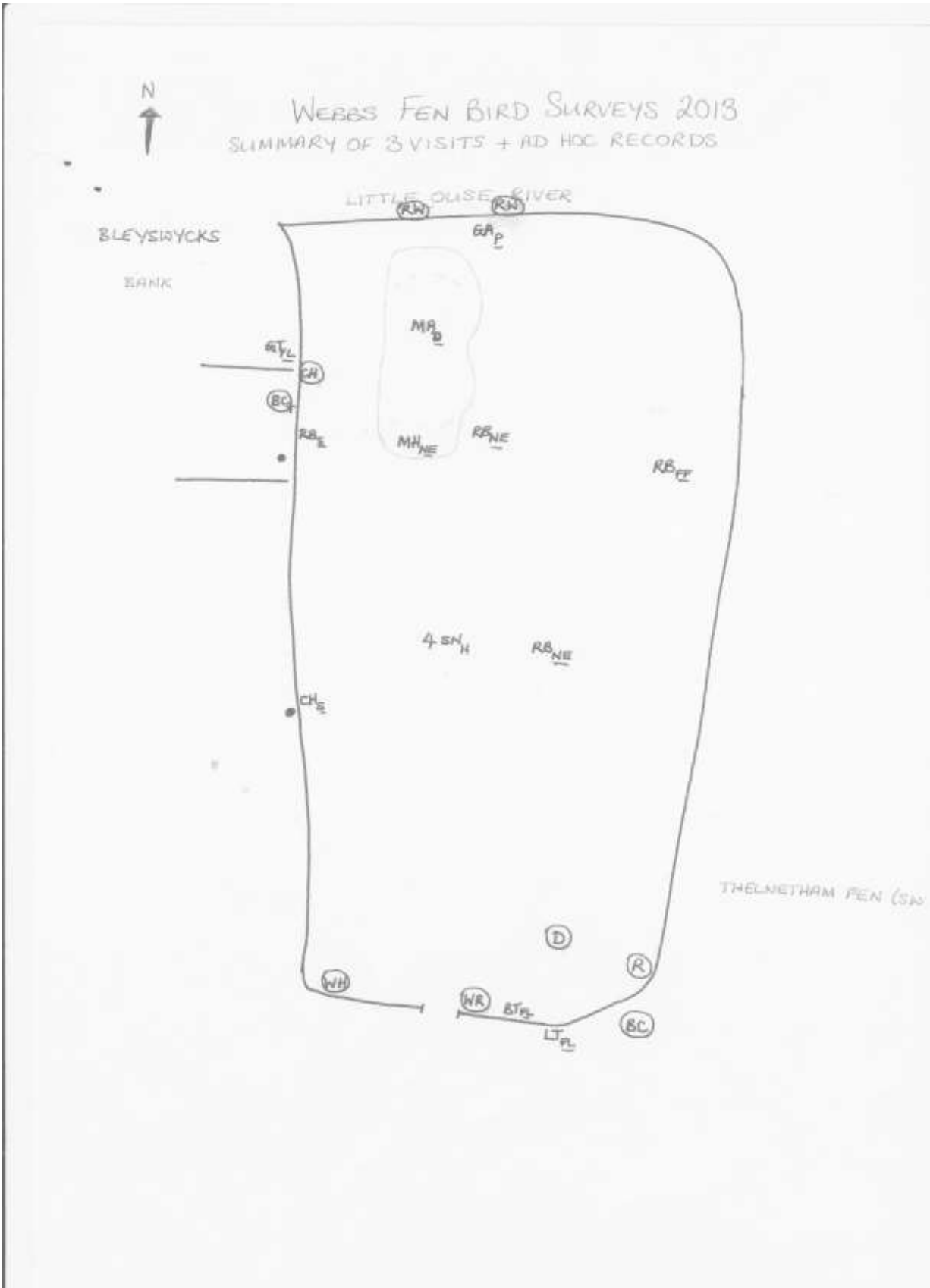


Figure 1. Webbs Fen summary of three bird territory mapping surveys in 2013

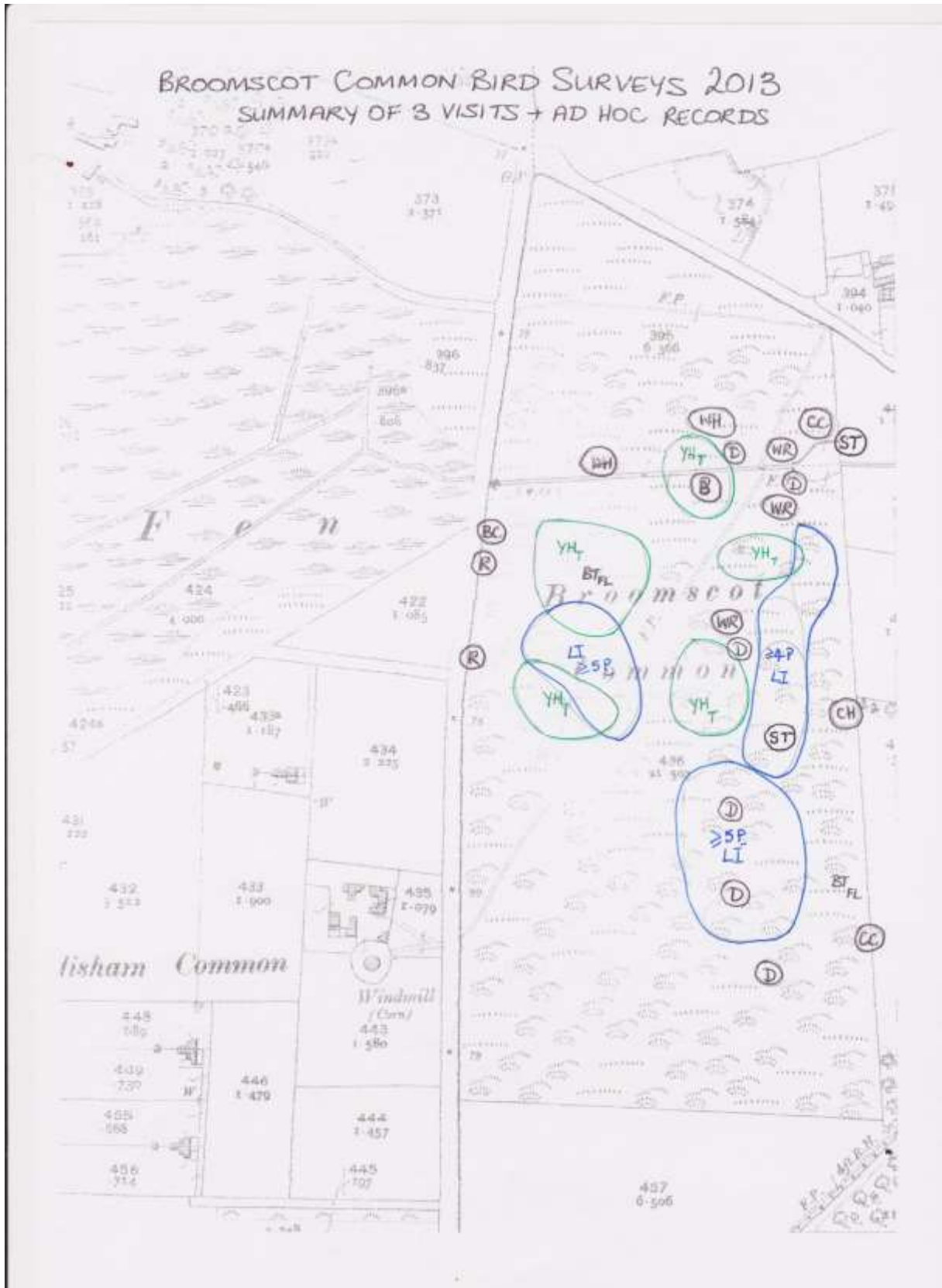


Figure 2. Broomscot Common summary of three bird territory mapping surveys in 2013



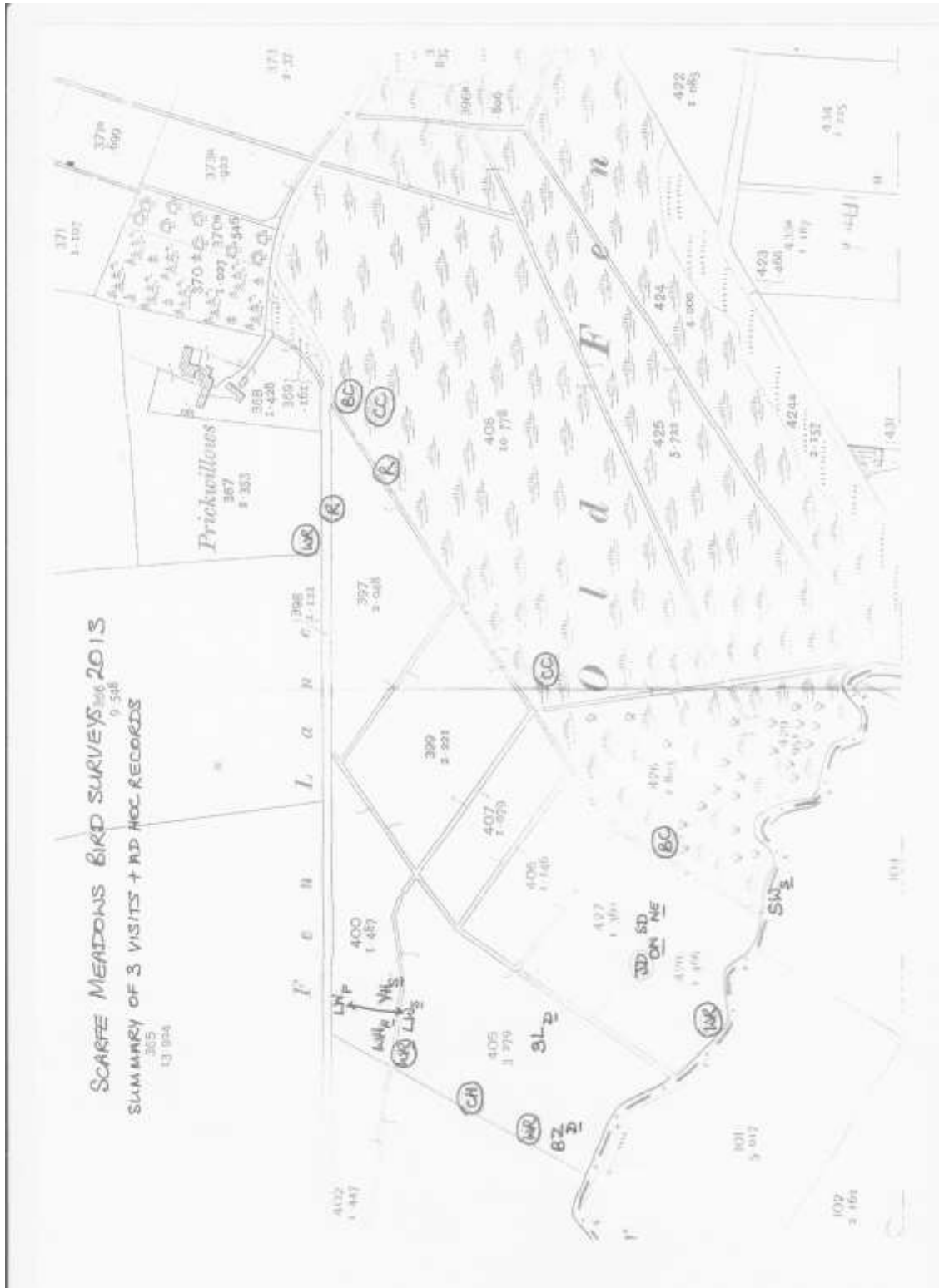


Figure 3. Scarfe Meadows summary of three bird territory mapping surveys in 2013.

Appendix I. Bird species lists with breeding categories for Webbs Fen, Broomscot Common and Scarfe Meadows 2013.

Species	Webbs Fen	Broomscot Common	Scarfe Meadows	Code
Little Grebe	H			LG
Little Egret	√			ET
Grey Heron			√	H
Greylag Goose	H			GG
Canada Goose	√			CG
Egyptian Goose	H			EG
Shelduck		F	F	SU
Gadwall	P			GA
Teal	P			T
Mallard	H		√	MA
Buzzard			D	BZ
Sparrowhawk	F			SH
Red-legged Partridge			√	RL
Pheasant	√		√	PH
Moorhen	NE			MH
Lapwing			D	L
Snipe	H			SN
Redshank	M			RK
Black-headed Gull	√			BH
Stock Dove	F	F	NE	SD
Wood Pigeon	D	D	H	WP
Collared Dove		H		CD
Cuckoo		D	S	CK
Great spotted Woodpecker		T	D	GS
Magpie		H	√	MG
Jackdaw	F	√	ON	JD
Carrion Crow	√	ON	√	C
Coal Tit		H		CT
Blue Tit	FL	FL	P	BT
Great Tit	FL	P	H	GT
Swallow	√	√	√	SL
Long-tailed tit	FL	H	P	LT
Chiffchaff	S	T	S	CC
Willow Warbler		S		WW
Blackcap	T	T	T	BC
Garden Warbler		S	S	GW
Lesser Whitethroat			P	LW
Whitethroat	T	T	A	WH
Reed Warbler	T			RW
Sedge Warbler			S	SW
Wren	T	T	T	WR

Species	Webbs Fen	Broomscot Common	Scarfe Meadows	Code
Starling		FL		SG
Blackbird	√	T	√	B
Song Thrush		T		ST
Robin	T	T	T	R
Redstart		M		RT
Duncock	T	T	S	D
Pied Wagtail		√		PW
Chaffinch	T	T	T	CH
Greenfinch		S		GR
Goldfinch		√		GO
Linnet		T		LI
Bullfinch		P		BF
Yellowhammer		T	S	YH
Reed Bunting	FF			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 **H**abitat

S Singing male

##### **Probable breeder:**

P **P**air in suitable nesting habitat

T **T**erritory defended over at least one week

D courtship and **D**isplay

N visiting probable **N**est site

A **A**gitated behaviour

B nest **B**uilding

##### **Confirmed breeder:**

FL recently **F**Ledged young or downy young

ON adults entering or leaving nest-site in circumstances indicating **O**ccupied **N**est

FF Adult carrying **F**aecal sac or **F**ood for young