

Wissey Wetlands Creation

July 2015



Environment
Agency



Norfolk Wildlife Trust (NWT) and Environment Agency (EA), together with Natural England (NE) have embarked on an ambitious programme to create new wetland habitats adjacent to the River Wissey. Partly they are to replace reedbeds and grazing marshes on the coast that will potentially be lost over the next few decades but also to restore some of the wetland habitats that were present in the Fens prior to widespread drainage for agriculture. This fourth newsletter provides an update at an important time in the development of the wetlands as construction work on Hilgay has finished and the site was wetted up last winter, while work has restarted on the Methwold site after the winter break.

Methwold

The vision is to create an integrated wetland of reedbed, wet grassland and fen, using water from the Hilgay site. The main element consists of approximately 19ha (47 acres) of reedbed, in two compartments, surrounded by a low (0.9m high) bund and perimeter ditch. The aim is to attract nesting Bitterns and Marsh Harriers and other wetland species, such as Water Voles and Otters. The development will also help to preserve the archaeological features of the site dating back to Neolithic times.

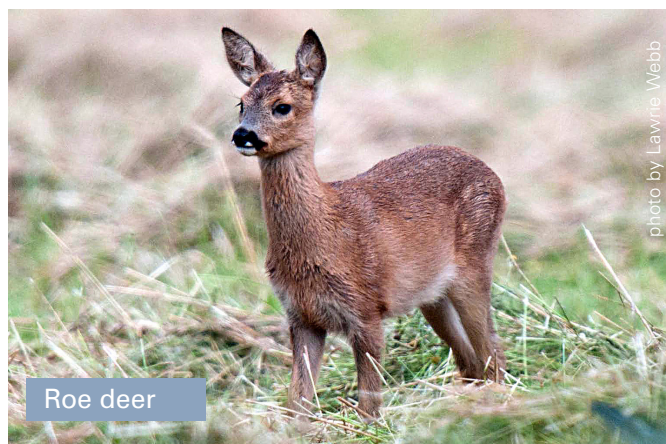


Methwold site under construction

photo by Hexcam

Fen Group started construction of the new wetland in August last year and progressed well before the winter break. Over the winter, trees were felled where the reedbed is being

constructed and to give a more open landscape. Where possible existing trees are being retained and a screen of scrub and trees will be planted around the edge of the site. A Centrica work party has already planted some trees at the northern end of the site.



Roe deer

photo by Lawrie Webb

The most obvious wildlife using the site is a small party of Roe Deer that graze in the fields, although red and muntjac deer are also present. Buzzard are frequently seen soaring over the fields. In the woodland, wintering Woodcock are frequently flushed but there is no evidence that any stay to breed. Marsh Tit and other common woodland birds are resident. The woodland block is unaffected by the reedbed construction.

Hilgay Reedbed

This new wetland extending to 65ha (160 acres), largely of reedbed, is to replace protected habitat on the north Norfolk coast that is likely to be lost in future due to coastal erosion and flooding. Construction by Fen Group was completed in 2014. One of the last jobs was the installation of the electric pump which takes water from the perimeter ditch back into the storage lagoon. The abstraction system from the River Wissey is operational and allowed the filling of the storage lagoon over last winter and the wetting up of the rest of the site. This has enabled the testing of the water control structures and functioning of the site. Bar a few issues the site is operating as expected and retaining the water well over the summer period.



Saving **Norfolk's Wildlife** for the Future

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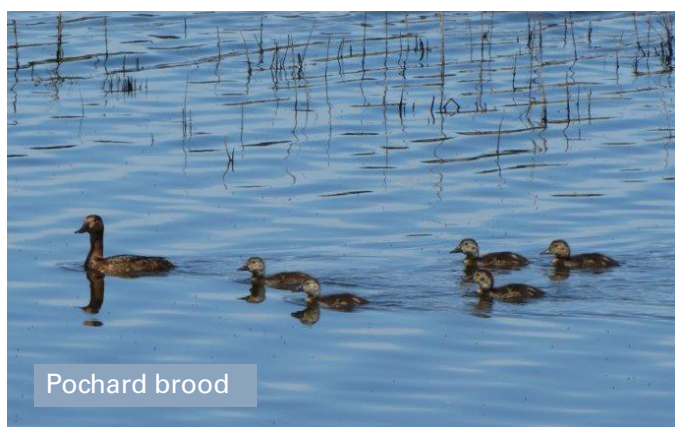
Reeds have colonised naturally and planted reed plugs and rhizomes have also become established. This will speed up the development of the reedbeds for nesting Bittern and Marsh Harriers, along with other wetland species. The planted areas were caged to deter deer and feral geese from grazing on the young reeds. The reeds planted by NWT's Watch Group in 2012 along the eastern edge are doing well, as are the locally-sourced reed rhizomes planted in the storage lagoon.



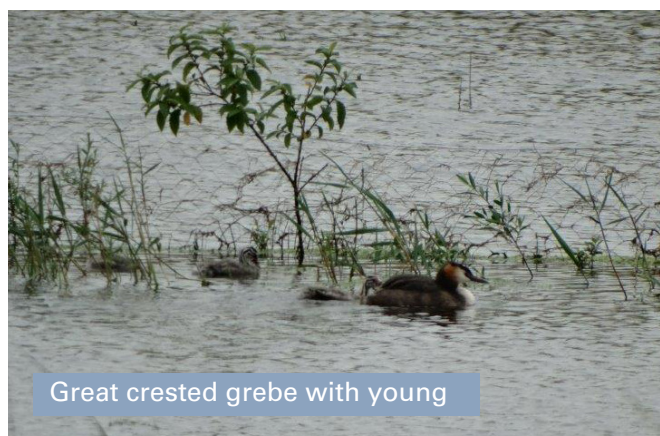
Hilgay site

photo by Hexcam

A flock of teal, up to 300 birds, 50 tufted duck and other wildfowl have been using the site overwinter and several jack snipe have been flushed in the lagoon area, along with common snipe. Great crested grebe and pochard bred for the first time and a large colony of black-headed gulls has become established in the north east compartment close to the river. Wetland plants have started to colonise the site with over 60 species recorded in 2014.



Pochard brood



Great crested grebe with young

Water plantain, various sedge species, hemp agrimony, toad rush, purple loosestrife, water mint, broad-leaved pondweed, marsh yellow-cress, water figwort, bulrush, pink water speedwell are already well-distributed across the site. Other plants, such as, water violet, spiked water-milfoil, knotted pearlwort, marsh woundwort, meadow-rue and blue water-speedwell are more localised.



Water violet

Access

With construction still going on at the Methwold site and reed establishment under way there is no public access to the area but views across the Hilgay site can be obtained from the River Wissey bridleway. Plans will be drawn up for public access when all the construction work has been completed without compromising wildlife.



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