

Urswick Tarn Association
Wild life and Management Report
Oct 06-May 07

Concern has been expressed once again about the lack of Coots on the tarn compared with `what used to be` and the need for some action on the matter.

Despite the lack of hard evidence i.e. actual counts for much of the period-there seems little doubt that the `folk` memory of older village residents that Coots were once much commoner here is correct –so why the decline.

Predation would perhaps be the first thing in many people's minds and the list of characters which will take Coots-their young and eggs when they can find them is long indeed but always has been.

With no obvious increase in predators-the return of the Otter leading to a significant decline in the number of Mink on the tarn- and no evidence that otters themselves have taken to eating Coots predation should actually have declined.

The large number of Geese on the tarn has also been suggested as a factor in the decline- the geese competing with the Coots directly or indirectly but there is little evidence for either.

The large increase in Geese in recent years and their habit of feeding on reed shoots in the spring have however slowly but surely reduced the reeds in the shallows to a shadow of their former self with several hundred sq metres of reeds having been almost imperceptibly nibbled away.

As the reed bed fragment into smaller areas any birds nesting in those reeds become ever more vulnerable perhaps explaining at least some of the Coots decline,

On the plus side the Geese themselves have come under increasing pressure in recent months with the new male Swan very territorial-attacking the geese on numerous occasions-so much so that one Goose nest with 5 eggs was abandoned.

But not all the disappearance of reeds is down to Geese.

During the autumn areas of reeds standing in the shallows on the East edge of the tarn began to die back- apparently prematurely- giving rise to concerns that something other than the passing of the seasons was affecting them.

While at the time the `premature` nature of this die back was not universally accepted during the following days and weeks it became obvious that these particular reeds were dying back unlike anywhere else on the tarn.

On the South end of the area the reeds died and began to disappear very quickly with whatever ailed them appearing to gradually work its way north for some 40-50- metres where it came to a stop.

In contrast to the greens and muted colours of even their immediate neighbours these reeds began to turn a deathly grey-their stems quickly succumbing to wind and wave action while neighbouring stems have withstood the winter and still stand today.

A contact from the Environment Agency was unaware of any disease capable of causing such an effect and was unable to arrange an analysis of the dying stems but several samples were taken just in case.

As was said at the time-time will tell-if the reeds regrow in the spring so much the better.

A check in recent days found reeds all round the tarn sprouting vigorous young shoots but in the area of premature die back there appears to be no sign of any regrowth although neighbouring reeds continue to thrive-we appear to have lost yet more of what has made the tarn green and pleasant throughout its history and gained a less than attractive banking to gaze at from the west!

Early in 2005 a proposal was put forward for a jetty in the NW edge of the tarn-`the work to commence shortly`-a scheme which it seemed would inevitably lead to the loss of yet more reeds.

To guard against this it was suggested that whatever the area of reeds lost to the scheme a similar sized area should be created on the site as `compensation planting`.

This suggestion was included in subsequent planning conditions for the development` prior to commencement of any development on the site reed beds shall be planted along the tarn edge in accordance with a scheme to be submitted and approved in writing-any reeds which are removed-die or are damaged shall be replaced with reeds of a similar size and species`

The reasons given for conditions on the scheme were

- (2) To ensure the development will not have an adverse impact on Urswick tarn a designated County Wildlife site.
- (3) To ensure the development will protect the appearance of the tarn frontage.

During the Autumn it was reported that a large area of reeds on the site far bigger than was ever envisaged or would be required for a jetty had been torn or cut right through the reed fringe-it remains bare today.

It is clear the damage to the reeds in that area represents an adverse impact and that the appearance of the tarn frontage in that area has changed dramatically and for the worse, we await development and replanting with interest.

The planting of reeds has been carried out on a small scale in other parts of the tarn with some success but is of course only of use where the original problems do not recur!

Where they have been used the barriers of live willow branches and fencing put in the tarn during recent years have proved very effective at protecting the reeds from further goose damage and encouraging some regrowth but even in these areas recovery is slow and will take several years-outside them the reeds are still slowly declining so much more needs to be done.

An added bonus of the willow branches is that the thin stems have become a favourite roosting site and literally support a significant proportion of the tarns Coot and Moorhen which roost on them up out of harms way almost certainly reducing night time predation.

Counts of Coots-nests –eggs-success or failure have all been suggested as a way of monitoring the population but will be time consuming and less accurate as the vegetation increases-at the moment two such counts would appear to be taking place!

Most people will be aware of the young Otter which was found near Little Urswick during December, how- and why it first came into contact with humans was and still is far from clear but a phone call from a concerned villager for which we are grateful told of a young Otter on the road.

After a short search the young dog Otter-perhaps 5 weeks old-was found on the edge of the beck in a cardboard box where it had apparently been put in the hope of reuniting it with its mother, as it was slightly wheezy and far from lively we took it home kept it warm and fed it kitten milk through an eye dropper.

After initial scares and a dose of antibiotics he began to thrive-as he was incredibly tame we decided people should be allowed to see him and many did-a once in a lifetime experience for most.

After virtually doubling his weight `Sniffer` was considered fit enough to move to the Otter sanctuary on Skye where he continued to thrive for sometime-sadly at some 5 months old he died of pneumonia-a sad end but when one considers the natural mortality of young Otters not altogether unexpected.

While there has been one actual sighting of an Otter on the tarn in recent months-the first I'm aware of- there is ample evidence they are still about.

Management work has carried on much as usual and has included maintenance on the path system on the Hagg and Landing.

While some bramble is essential for nest sites the large areas by the roadside had become over large and hollow so have been cleared-smaller areas will be allowed to grow back.

In the Croft more willows have been cleared both to keep the view open and to reduce shading-some being treated to stop regrowth.

In all some 120hrs work has been put in on various aspects of tarn management.

On the fishing front the local lads continue to report catching sizeable specimens of several species-recent reports refer to an increasing population of tench, while some of these are relatively large a good range of sizes has been reported and has been seen as an indication that tench are now breeding in the tarn better than ever before.

More recently the reporting of what was thought to be a Barn owl round the tarn was unusual other records of what is a scarce bird here being during Autumn-winter.

Several dusk outings to find the bird proved fruitless but visits later in the evenings were greeted by the unmistakable hissing-snoring calls of a Barn Owl.

Later in April 3 common Sandpipers turned up (a record for here) birds which predominantly nest on gravelly lakeside and riverbanks they merely migrate past the tarn but true to type spent most of their time on the stone jetties on the north end of the tarn.

