

WILDLIFE AND MANAGEMENT REPORT

APRIL - OCTOBER 2009

With 7 **Coot** nests located round the tarn early in the summer hopes were high that we would see an increase in young reared but this was not to be.

Although an early clutch definitely hatched there is no evidence that any of the other nests produced any young at all and by late June with 12-15 Coots in a loose flock in the meadows we suspected that for whatever reason their breeding season had all but ended.

Not until August 12th did one surviving juvenile Coot appear from the reed beds, if any more were present I failed to find them!

Moorhen on the other hand again did well with several broods very obvious during late June. What was considered to be late young appeared by the catwalk in late August but even later young were reported near the Croft well into September!

For some reason one of the two pairs of **GC Grebes** on the tarn early in the year chose to build a nest right in front of the catwalk bank - one of the most disturbed areas on the tarn.

By May 9th the nest contained two very obvious white eggs - by 24th both eggs had disappeared. Although both pairs exhibited nesting behaviour in various reed beds for much of the summer there was no evidence of any more eggs being laid and by late summer the Grebes had left once again.

On May 24th the **Cygnets** began to hatch - on the evening of the 25th 5 Cygnets were round the base of the nest apparently unable to climb back in - the female continuing to sit on the remaining eggs - the male apparently oblivious. With dusk approaching the Cygnets could well have died of cold so wading out I began to put them back in the nest.

The male - no longer oblivious - took exception and being battered on the back and arms by an irate swan while up to ones waist in water is not the pleasantest experience.

Using a willow branch as a shield I managed to put the Cygnets back in the nest, the following day one Cygnet was dead - two eggs now abandoned contained Cygnets ready for hatching - perfectly formed but dead, the remaining 6 Cygnets continue to thrive.

Although broods of **Mallard** were reported my only sighting was a female with one tiny young in early June until on July 3rd when two broods each of 7 well grown young appeared.

Reed Warblers continue to do well and by late June were singing in virtually all suitable habitats round the tarn, recent conservation work should help their numbers increase even further.

Of the two pairs of **Reed Bunting** found round the tarn one definitely reared at least three young.

A female **pheasant** disturbed during grass cutting in late July had at least two very lively young with it but another chose to build a nest containing 8 eggs right beside the main path on the landing.

Unfortunately spraying to control nettles - brambles has to take place during the growing season and prior to the nests discovery was carried out along the path, as the vegetation died back the unfortunate hen pheasant became more and more exposed and despite efforts to hide the nest with twigs and grass until hatching time this only delayed the inevitable and the nest was deserted.

On the late afternoon of May 9th the tarn area was suspiciously quiet - no birds moved or sang - often a sign of an avian predator.

After a short while a crow began to call and 'mob' something in the edge of Postlethwaite's 'fen' area thinking it might be an Otter I crept round the tarn edge but the Crows calls were interrupted by the harsh 'ha-acking' call of a **Peregrine Falcon**.

Creeping nearer a trail of wind blown feathers led directly to a superb female Peregrine which was vigorously plucking a freshly caught Moorhen.

After a short while the Peregrine took off carrying the Moorhen SE along the ridge above Holme Bank Farm presumably to a more secluded dining area.

Another visit to the same area on Sept 27th was again suspiciously quiet but this time no Crow called - a walk across the meadows produced nothing until something took off near the beck - again it was a Peregrine Falcon with a Moorhen in it's talons - again it flew SE then slowly gaining height it disappeared over the ridge towards Baycliff, why it should fly so far to eat its meal is a mystery but clearly the Falcon knows the meadows are a good place to hunt.

As the Peregrine disappeared from view life returned to the tarn as ducks slowly emerged from the reeds, first a few Mallard then a female **Shoveller** followed by two more then three more - finally 12 female plus 1 male Shoveller appeared which is double the previous record for here!

During August up to 16 **Gold Finches** (many juvenile) frequented the bushes on the Hagg and - a complete surprise - what must surely have been a family group of at least 5 **Jays** flitting among the bushes.

September 5 a **Kingfisher** appeared on the beck, September 11 it or another was by the main footbridge - catching a small fish it was instantly mobbed by a family of Magpies but managed to retain its catch by diving back into the water, behaviour I have never seen before.

On the 17th with the sun sinking a Kingfisher perched by the beck mouth - only 10 metres away it was 'backlight' and virtually colourless with a silver bead of water on the tip of its beak.

Oct 1st again in the beck mouth a kingfisher flew 'peeping' past after sunset heading down the beck to roost.

During early September **Greylags** began to appear in large numbers in the meadows, on the 14th a Goose count in the meadows reached 280 before they took off heading for Dalton.

Perhaps an hour later Geese could be heard returning but this time they had brought friends. The line of Geese now extending from Scout wood to Little Urswick contained at a rough count some 450 birds the most ever here thankfully they kept flying East.

In early October the process was repeated only this time an unbelievable 6-700 greylags flew east past a full moon - an impressive sight and sound. The most recent count on the tarn itself another record - 400 greylags.

Otters continue to appear sometimes two together - one seen at dusk in early June near the North end of the tarn was out in the middle when two onshore" anglers began a conversation - one would expect the Otter to rush for cover but instead it chose immobility floating like a log, head-back-tail barely showing above water until it felt safe enough to continue.

Mid August what turned out to be 2 Otters could be heard splashing presumably (pursuing fish or eels) in the croft reed bed - one surfacing to check out 2 anglers in a boat just a few feet away!

Of our **butterflies** most were scarce some absent - a migrant **Painted Lady** on May 25th was one tiny part of a mass influx from North Africa with at first hundreds then thousands then probably millions dispersing north.

At least 4 **Speckled Wood** butterflies were on the Hagg - landing but the best showing of the year was **Meadow Brown**, no overall count was attempted but 14 almost underfoot in an area of long grass was the best showing I am aware of since the 1980's .

Areas where grassland has been more intensively managed are definitely changing for the better with an increase in other species, the recently introduced **Yellow Rattle** increasing to some 90 flower spikes.

In June a single flower spike of an Orchid species appeared high on the Hagg - a strange place for what was considered to be a **Marsh Orchid**.

Two developments during the period will have a beneficial effect on the tarns wildlife.

The first - a long running boundary dispute concerning a sizeable area of wet reed fen on the east edge of the tarn bordering Mr Jackson's land has finally been resolved by the PC to whom thanks are due. This area will now be protected and managed rather than being infilled as much of the area has been in the recent past.

The second development - after much discussion - was the completion of fencing on the south end of the tarn, a project first proposed by experts in 1974-75!

Thanks to South Cumbria Rivers Trust, the Environment Agency (who part funded the work) and - most importantly - the Postlethwaite family (without whose permission the scheme would not have been possible) we now have a fence protecting all of the south east verges of the tarn and a section of the beck. We wait to see how the geese react to the blocking of their 'traditional access' routes to the meadows.

Management work during the period has been long and varied.

Clearance of remaining willows etc in the boathouse area was completed.

On the Hagg more bramble, nettles etc have been sprayed - areas of rank grass cut to create a "mosaic" of different areas and more yellow rattle seeded.

On the Landing rank vegetation - nettles etc have been sprayed in an attempt to increase the area of grassland.

In the "scrub" zone on the tip edge selected trees have been felled to allow more light in and encourage regeneration – the branches heaped into 'habitat' piles.

In the main reed bed another willow barrier some 50 metres long has been put in the water to protect reed growth, Phragmites reeds dug out during ditch cleaning have been transplanted into areas where reeds used to grow until relatively recently.

In the Croft area the willow barrier has been cut back from the reeds to ensure it doesn't root and a dead tree (honey fungus) cut down on the road verge.

In the meadows our existing 'enclosures' were cleared to make way for the new fencing scheme.

In all some 230 hrs of work has been carried out during the period.

Harry Stables
Urswick Tarn Association
October 2009