

Report of the performance of the Horsey winter wildfowl refuge 2005/06.

Key Facts 2005/06

- Peak numbers of wintering waterfowl on Horsey Mere at around 4300 in January 2006
- After disturbance, bird numbers took a week to recover, depending on further incidents
- 15% of days within the four month refuge period had disturbance events
- Prior to Xmas disturbance was non-fishing; post Xmas as a result of pike angling
- Disturbance events were followed up where information was available
- In all but two cases of disturbance people agreed to modify their behaviour
- Of 50 days available for the fishing trial only 10 days were used
- The trial fishing did not result in significant impact on wintering waterfowl

Overall Conclusion

Bird numbers much improved 2005/06. However level of human disturbance is adversely affecting the protected wintering waterfowl populations and therefore the SSSI.

The results of waterfowl monitoring.

The results of bird monitoring of the winter waterfowl refuge on Horsey Mere are presented on the attached graph. The cold winter weather did not arrive until the second half of November. Consequently numbers of waterfowl using the Mere were low in the first part of November, but rose steeply to 1147 birds during the second half of the month. Recorded disturbance during the first half of the month probably had a lesser impact than later in the year due to the small numbers of birds on the Mere. This however would not have been the case in a year where harsh weather arrived at the beginning of November. December saw a background waterfowl population of between 1900 and 2600 birds. However it appears that the recorded disturbance events significantly depress these figures. During January waterfowl numbers continued to increase to a peak of 4371 birds and then recede to between 1500 to 2500 individuals. Again recorded disturbance appears to significantly depress numbers to the 500 bird level. February started with a count of nearly 1400 waterfowl but quickly dropped away to between 800 and 500 birds throughout much of the month. February finished with a count of 151 birds. Once the Mere opened in March no birds were recorded except for one short period when waters elsewhere in the Upper Thurne system were iced-bound.

During December the impact of a disturbance incident was recorded over a number of days. The day prior to the disturbance, 2054 waterfowl were present on the Mere, the day after the disturbance there were only 673 birds, by the following day it had recovered to 1087, and on the third day 1358 waterfowl were counted. A week after the disturbance event, numbers had recovered to 2345 individuals.

The results of disturbance monitoring.

Disturbance events were recorded on 19 days during the four month refuge period; this represents 15% of days. However it is clear that many disturbance incidents were under recorded, particularly night fishing and fishing from the bankside. The majority of disturbance incidents prior to Xmas were from a variety of sources, primarily non-

fishing activity. Whereas post Xmas the majority of incidents were pike fishing related. Disturbance was spread throughout the refuge period, however with increased disturbance during the Xmas/ New Year period.

Where reliable information was available for a disturbance event these were followed up either by telephone and/or letter and leaflet. In all but two cases once people were aware of the impact they were causing they agreed to modified there activity, by avoiding the Mere during the refuge period or for those leaving Waxham Cut, doing it is such a way as to minimise impact on wildfowl. The two cases where individuals chose to ignore the advice were pike angling in the post Xmas period. No formal solicitors' letters were issued this season.

The results of the fishing trial from two pegs in the southwest corner of the Mere.

This year was the first year of a trial for three days a week fishing from two pegs in the southwest corner of the Mere. This opportunity was not actively promoted for fear of it being oversubscribed, and this resulted in few inquiries. Of the approximately 50 days on offer, only 10 were utilised. Through examination of the impact on the birds while the formalised fishing from the pegs was being undertaken, it has been concluded that such fishing does not result in a significant impact to the wintering waterfowl.

Conclusion to be drawn from the 2005/06 season.

The Mere did support significant populations of wildfowl throughout the refuge period. While overall peak numbers were reasonably good, it is clear that regular recorded disturbance significantly decreased the numbers of birds for period following the disturbance. It must be remembered however that this past season is much better than two years ago when the Mere supported very few waterfowl.

Overall we conclude that while bird numbers are much improved, the level of human disturbance is still such that it is adversely affecting the recognised and protected SSSI populations.

Report produced on behalf of Horsey Estate, National Trust, English Nature and officers of the Broads Authority.

Wildfowl counts and disturbance events on Horsey Mere winter 2005/6

