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SUPPORTING SHOREBIRD CONSERVATION

Registered Charity (England and Wales)
1183748

Wader Quest Objectives:

To raise public awareness about, and to promote an understanding and appreciation of, waders or shorebirds (birds of the sub order Charadrii and to include the family Turnicidae, as defined by the Handbook of Birds of the World Volume 3 del Hoyo, Elliott and Sargatal eds 1996).

To raise funds, which, at the discretion of the Board of Trustees, is to be used to make small grants or carry out appeals for wader conservation projects worldwide.

To promote for the benefit of the public the conservation and protection of waders or shorebirds and improvements of their physical and natural habitats.

To advance the education of the public regarding the conservation and protection of waders or shorebirds and their natural habitats.

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Wader Quest Articles

Willen Lake; how a leak led to a waderfest - Andrew MacGarvey



Willen Lake with low water levels - Elis Simpson

On the 5th September, word came through various birding messaging services that Anglian Water was present at Willen Lakes. There was a problem with a valve and water was flowing out of the lake at a fast rate. The level of North Lake had already dropped significantly, revealing around 20 feet of mud around the island. Given the time of year, this news provoked immediate interest as the possibility of passage waders dropping into Willen was now significantly increased.

Initially, the mud was inhabited by gulls Northern Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* and Green Sandpipers *Tringa ochropus* that had already been on the site. However, the water continued to flow out of the lake. By Sunday morning, Mike Wallen was reporting, the water level had dropped by a metre. It later emerged that the sheer pressure of the water exiting at this stage prevented engineers from making the necessary repair. Local birders were reminiscing about the 1980s and early 90's – at that time the water level was managed for wildlife leading to ideal conditions for passage waders and there was even a pair of Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* seen for a few days in 1988.



Northern Lapwing, two Black-tailed Godwits and two Eurasian Teals *Anas crecca* - Elis Simpson



Willen Lake; how a leak led to a waderfest - cont'd

Various members of the Buckinghamshire Bird Club decided to set up informal 'shifts' confident that similar conditions would attract some interesting waders to the site.

During Sunday 6th, the Green Sandpipers had been joined by a Dunlin *Calidris alpina*, up to four Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa*, and a Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*. On the non-wader front, concerted watching in the area in front of the Pagoda turned up a very smart Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*.

On Monday 7th, 6 Common Ringed Plovers *Charadrius hiaticula*, 3 Dunlins, and at least 9 Green Sandpipers were recorded along with a Great White Egret *Ardea alba*. Towards the end of the afternoon, two juvenile Wood Sandpipers *Tringa glareola* joined the party.

By Tuesday 8th, the number of Green Sandpipers had risen to at least 12 birds and a Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*, the two Wood Sandpipers, up to three Common Ringed Plovers, a Dunlin, a Common Snipe, a Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, and two Black-tailed Godwits were recorded on the mud. The variety of species clearly showed the potential for Willen to provide a resting and feeding stop for passage waders.

The next new species for the period was a Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, which was picked up on the 10th and over the following few days numbers of previously recorded birds fluctuated as some birds departed and others arrived. Notably, there were at least ten Common Ringed Plovers present at times during this period.

On Saturday 12th, the 'morning shift' picked up a juvenile Ruff *Calidris pugnax* which remained until at least the 25th September.

As the mud began to dry out in favourable weather conditions, reports emerged of people walking out towards the birds, and many were flushed. Following the disturbance, the numbers of birds dropped significantly. Before the water level began to rise again, a juvenile Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* dropped in, and up to three Ruffs were reported.

In an interesting sub-plot, the lower water level made seeing the resident European Otters *Lutra lutra* much easier, and they were seen regularly. There is excellent video footage of up to three Otters playing on the lake. The conditions allowed birders to more carefully monitor the Water Rails *Rallus aquaticus* at the site. These birds are resident, but there is no way to accurately record breeding success unless the water level drops.

One thing is certain, the troublesome valve that caused the drop in water level increased the diversity of birds on Willen Lake North. There is clearly an argument to manage this site for the benefit of waders and other birds at certain times of the year. Willen is a well-watched site, but this incident drew many more birders in and provided great interest over September. The increased activity sparked wider public interest in the site, and this in itself has to have been a boost for the promotion of conservation in the county.

With thanks for additional information from Mike Wallen - This article also appeared in the Buckinghamshire Bird Club Bulletin – October 2020

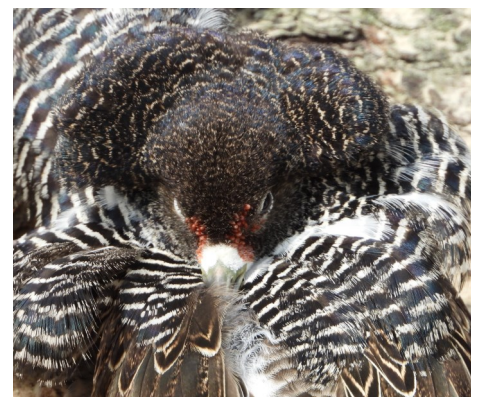


Common Redstart - Elis Simpson

Willen Lake's 'halcyon days'.

Quote about the status of Ruffs at Willen Lake illustrating how times have changed as alluded to in Andrew MacGarvey's account above. This extract is taken from *The Birds of Buckinghamshire* (2nd edition 2012) Edited by David Ferguson.

'In common with many of Buckinghamshire's migrant waders, Ruffs became much more frequent between the mid-1970s, when the south basin of Willen Lake was filled in 1975 and the north basin in 1978. In 1975 22 birds were recorded, but the following year saw a maximum number of 18 birds at Willen on 18 Sep in addition to 13 birds at other sites. 1981 saw the largest flock: 43 birds at Willen on 16 Sep, but two years later the autumn maximum was down to just six birds. This halcyon period lasted until 1999 when the area became urbanised and the water level was kept high. Since then along with many other migrant waders, numbers at this site have dropped dramatically.'



Ruff - Elis Simpson

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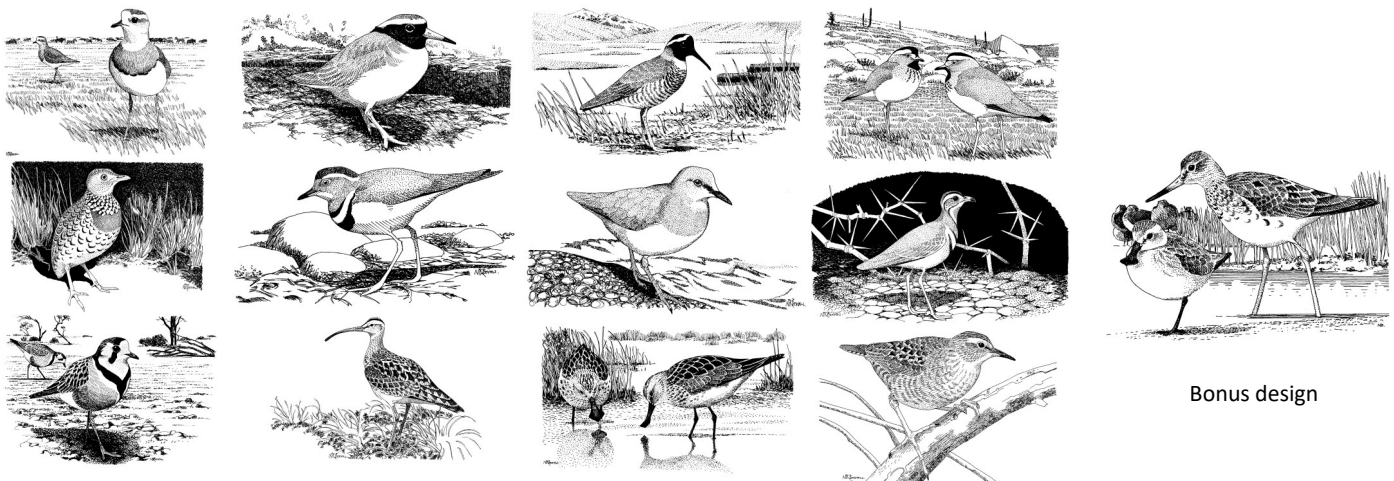
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