

YORKSHIRE BIRDING

Volume 18 Number 1



Snow Bunting, Bempton, March 2009 - John Harwood

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THE CAYTON AND FLIXTON CARRS WETLAND PROJECT



Tim Burkinshaw

An exciting habitat restoration partnership is underway in the Vale of Pickering near Scarborough. The scheme's primary aim is to improve the area's attraction to wildlife, in particular breeding waders, but at the same time it is hoped that it can benefit the local farmers. The following article takes a look at the history of the area, before discussing how the scheme will function and what work has been carried out so far.

Ancient Wetlands and Modern Agriculture

The Cayton and Flixton Carrs Wetland Project is working with farmers on an area of lowland peat farmland known locally as The Carrs, forming the easternmost end of the Vale of Pickering floodplain. Historically the whole Vale was an extensive wetland area before land drainage schemes, notably since the early 1800s, transformed it into productive arable land. The prevalence in local place names of 'carrs' and 'ings' (wet woodland and water meadows respectively) is a reminder of how the landscape used to be. Today much of the Vale of Pickering is intensively cropped for cereals and potatoes.

Near Scarborough, on the Hertford River, a sluggish tributary of the Derwent, the floodplain is a little different. Here the deeper fen peat soils, in places up to two metres deep, represent the location of a former post-glacial lake, formed around ten thousand years ago, dubbed Lake Flixton. The lake, known to have been an important resource to Stone -Age hunter-gatherers accumulated sedge peat over thousands of years, encapsulating unique evidence of the Mesolithic humans' relationship with the ancient landscape.

The Lake Flixton peat deposits extend almost a thousand hectares (ten square kilometres) along the Hertford, between the villages of Flixton and Cayton. Now drained by a complex network of ditches into the straightened River Hertford, they have been shrinking steadily, much as the Fens in Cambridgeshire, as the surface layers dry out and oxidise each summer. The ground level has dropped by as much as half a metre over the last 30 years. Farmers are increasingly looking for new ways to manage land where drainage is compromised by lowering land levels. This is where the Cayton and Flixton Carrs Wetland Project fits in.

A Partnership Approach

Set up in 2004, the Cayton and Flixton Carrs Wetland Project is a multi-agency collaboration. There are five funding partners: Natural England, RSPB, Scarborough Borough Council, the Environment Agency and North Yorkshire County Council.



View across Flixton Carr towards Cayton and Scarborough from Flixton Brow.



The deep peat soils of the Hertford floodplain near Scarborough (coloured brown on this aerial photograph) are the focus of Cayton and Flixton Carrs Wetland Project. The drained peatland is owned by over 20 different farmers. A substantial area is managed under existing agri-environment agreements, due for renewal in the next 2-3 years. The Project has been engaging landowners in dialogue about Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) over a number of years, with the result that two HLS schemes, shown in pink, are already underway restoring breeding wader wet grassland. Two more, dotted in pink, are expected by the end of 2009 and several other farmers are considering applying.

Together they agreed to fund a project officer post to build working relationships with local farmers and get things going.

Working with local farmers - Environmental Stewardship

From its inception the Partnership's desire was to work through agreements with the existing landowners rather than acquiring land for conservation (an element of land purchase may become a consideration in the future, but requires multi-agency agreement). The mechanism for this is Natural England's agri-environment scheme, Environmental Stewardship, using a combination of ELS - Entry Level Stewardship, and HLS - Higher Level Stewardship. HLS funding is awarded to farming projects that make a significant contribution to landscape and biodiversity targets. It is discretionary but due to the Cayton and Flixton Carrs Project, Natural England has included it as one of their target areas in Yorkshire.

Higher Level Stewardship Schemes

Two HLS agreements began in May 2006 (Grove Farm on Cayton Carr) and in February 2007 (Star Carr). These ten-year agreements will, between them, restore over 120 acres of grass pasture as HLS option 'wet grassland for breeding waders', requiring careful management to create and maintain optimum conditions for the target wader species. Lapwing and Snipe are two waders set to benefit under the Stewardship agreements, which will also benefit important farmland and wetland species. It will be ultimately managed as a grazed pasture with a controlled water table in spring. Work on water level control takes a lot of planning to obtain permissions and ensure that neighbouring land use is not compromised. The floodplain falls within the jurisdiction of Muston and Yedingham Internal Drainage Board, from whom consent is required for all water level management changes. With a nearby landfill site at Seamer Carr, monitoring of the water table is especially important, to which end a network of over 30 field 'dipwells' have been established for fortnightly measuring.

Ecological Monitoring

Water table 'dipwells' across the area provide data for hydrological models and to monitor effectiveness of water level management schemes. Biological monitoring work plays a key role in the HLS applications, identifying important species or features and establishing a baseline from which to measure future success. Ecological surveys to date include wintering and breeding birds, water voles, aquatic invertebrates and flora of some seven kilometres of drainage ditches. Biological surveys are planned for other locations and taxonomic groups. Monitoring will become increasingly important as a management tool, as the restoration scheme grows.

In 2008 a Breeding Bird Survey, covering a number of farms in the Project area confirmed that the fields are already important for waders and key farmland species, even before any active management of water tables has been achieved. The survey would not have been possible without the help of volunteer surveyors from Scarborough Birders who gave their time and expertise. In 2009, as we go to press, a pilot wader productivity survey focussing on Lapwing is underway to establish success rates for chick rearing.



Standing water is a familiar sight on the open fields of Cayton Carr in the winter months but without water level management the under-drained fields tend to dry out quickly during April and May. The Higher Level Stewardship agreements allow wet grassland to be retained into the spring creating ideal habitat for breeding waders such as Lapwing, Redshank and Snipe. The installation of sluices has helped to maintain the splashy shallow pools such as those in the picture below which are ideal for wader chicks to feed around.



The ditches support good numbers of Reed Buntings, with Sedge Warblers and even Reed Warblers in places, along with Kingfishers. Water Vole and possibly Otter, which are known to be present around the River Hertford should also benefit from raised water levels in ditches during the spring. Corn Bunting, Skylark, Tree Sparrow and Grey Partridge are also found, along with Linnets, Whitethroat and Meadow Pipit. Wet grasslands could also see an increase in Yellow Wagtail.

Habitat restoration progress - Grove Farm

Four sluices have been installed in ditches in 2008, enabling water tables in adjacent fields to be held close to the surface in April, May and June each year. The sluices will be left open over autumn and winter but raised up in early spring to retain water through the wader nesting season. Within the wet grassland fields five shallow scrapes excavated by digger will enhance the feeding opportunities for wader chicks, slowly drying out by summer as the sluices allow the water table to drop back to normal summer level.

The grassland management regime involves grazing with cattle and sheep at reduced density in spring, to crop the sward to favour Lapwing. New fencing and water troughs have been installed enabling the farmer to control grazing field by field to optimise conditions. Two very rushy fields have good potential for breeding Snipe once the rush cover is thinned. Cutting in late August, possibly followed by selective herbicide will be carried out to manage the rushes annually to achieve 20-30% cover of taller tussocks recommended for Snipe by the RSPB and Natural England conservation advisors.



John Hewitt

Grazing of cattle and sheep at a reduced level during spring should be of benefit to Lapwings.

Public Access to Cayton and Flixton Carrs

Grove Farm is accessible via public footpath from Flixton Bridge. The Project's other stewardship site at Star Carr is also due for ditch and sluice works, subject to negotiations with neighbouring landowners, though sward management of the grassland sown in October 2007, a pre-requisite to any re-wetting works, is on-going.

We anticipate two further farms joining the HLS schemes in 2009 and discussions are underway with a further five landowners interested in HLS with wetland options. Enquiries from other landowners on the Carrs are always welcomed.

Tim Burkinshaw, Wetland Project Officer, Scarborough Borough Council
01723 374079 www.caytonflixtoncarrs.org.uk