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# Sevenoaks Experimental Wildfowl Reserve

## History

The restoration of gravel pits for purposes of wildlife conservation is taken for granted nowadays, thanks largely to work done at Sevenoaks. Yet the Reserve began at a time when habitat creation, as opposed to simple protection, was rarely considered, and it was due to the foresight of Dr. Jeffery Harrison. In 1955 he approached the gravel company which were excavating wet pits at Bradbourne, Sevenoaks, and arranged management rights over the area which was to become the Sevenoaks Experimental Wildfowl Reserve.

The first few years were a period of basic research involving an analysis of the stomach contents of locally shot duck. This led to an extensive planting programme in and around the lakes, using those species which it had been determined were food for the local wildfowl - plants such as bur-reed, reed sweet-grass and pond sedge which also provided cover at the waters edge. A large number of trees were planted round the lakes, particularly alder, silver birch and willow; as well as providing shelter and attracting insects, seeds of alder and birch are a wildfowl food.

In addition to the planting programme, other management techniques were developed at the Reserve in order to improve the habitat for wildfowl. Where possible, straight banks were broken up by spits and bays to increase the shoreline. In the absence of many islands, artificial nesting rafts were built to provide safe breeding sites, whilst areas of "duckling survival habitat" were created where plentiful insect food and shelter were available for the young birds. Loafing spots were provided by sandbanks. The results of this work were such that the formerly bare gravel pits were converted into a series of attractive lakes which, in 1968, was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

## The Wildfowl Population

The success of the management programme is shown by the wildfowl populations which have gradually increased over the life of the Reserve, whilst reaching a plateau in recent years. As expected, the mallard is the commonest duck with up to 85 pairs in the breeding season; a recent decrease in numbers is possibly due to the increasing attraction of other local areas such as new reservoirs. Gadwall have also nested on several occasions. Of the diving ducks, tufted duck are present in varying numbers throughout the year - they breed and also moult on the Reserve, as well as being winter visitors.

A wide variety of other ducks have been recorded, especially over the winter when there are always numbers of pochard, teal, wigeon, shoveler and shelduck. Hard weather brings in different species, particularly smew, goosander and goldeneye. Less regular visitors include garganey, pintail, scaup and red-breasted merganser.

Both greylag and Canada geese were introduced to the Reserve and both have bred successfully. The Canada gees reached a peak of around 400 birds, though recently they have moved away to colonise other lakes in the vicinity. The greylags have increased steadily from about 50 birds which were introduced to a maximum of nearly 500. Several other geese have been seen on the Reserve, including bean, pink-footed, whitefronted and a number of barnacle geese. White swans use the Reserve regularly and both whooper and Bewick's swans have been seen occasionally in winter.

## Waders and Other Water Birds

Several areas of the Reserve have been managed specifically with wading birds in mind. One, a low-lying field, partly flooded and with good

cover of rushes, was called the "snipe bog" as it attracted snipe and jack snipe in large numbers. This field was later excavated and most of the waders are now seen at a sand-bank on the main lake; this area has been divided into a series of shallow lagoons which can be flooded by means of a pump. As well as wintering snipe, this sand-bank attracts green sandpipers and lapwings throughout the year and, on migration, common and wood sandpipers, greenshank, redshank, dunlin and ringed plovers, as well as occasional less common species such as avocets. On the more bare gravel areas, little ringed plovers have bred regularly for several years, whilst areas of damp woodland attract woodcock.

Several pairs of great crested grebes nest on the Reserve every year, as do numerous coots, rather fewer moorhens and reed buntings and one or two pairs of kingfishers. Water rails and grey wagtails have also bred on occasions. Herons, which nest at a small wood to the west, regularly come to the Reserve to feed. Less frequent visitors have included bittern, bearded tit, spotted crake and the smaller grebes, whilst ospreys have been recorded regularly on migration, as have six species of terns.

#### Other Wildlife

The woodland areas of the Reserve have all the usual tits, warblers, thrushes and finches (including siskins in winter), as well as treecreepers and all three species of woodpecker. Recently, a rookery has developed in an area of alder woodland, whilst for about 20 years there has been a sand martin colony of varying size in the sand excavations. The kestrel is the only bird of prey seen regularly, with occasional hobbys and sparrowhawks, and both little and tawny owls have nested. Amongst the rarer visitors have been hoopoes, great grey shrikes, waxwings, black redstarts and a Dalmatian pelican.

As well as the bird life, other animals have taken advantage of the habitat creation work, including many small mammals which are preyed upon by foxes, stoats and, recently, mink. The Reserve supports a large variety of dragonflies, as well as other aquatic life and butterflies. There is a good population of grass snakes but surprisingly few amphibians.

Since restoration work began, many plants have colonised the area naturally, including a number showing attractive flowers, such as common spotted orchid, water speedwell and water forgetmenot, common centaury and scarlet pimpernel. A few species growing on the Reserve are quite uncommon in Kent, including a good colony of danewort.

#### The Future

Following the death of Jeffery Harrison in 1978, the Reserve is now leased from the owners, Redland Limited, and managed by The Jeffery Harrison Memorial Trust. The work which has gone on in the past continues, and the Reserve is constantly evolving. Several small new lakes which have been dug recently are being restored with trees and aquatic vegetation and one is being planted as a reed bed, whilst another area of sand flats is to be managed as wader habitat. Two hides are in use and a third is to be built, as is a visitor centre. Visits, by school groups or organised parties, are welcome, but must be by arrangement with the Warden; a small charge is made for each visitor. For further details, contact the Warden at "Tadorna", Sevenoaks Wildfowl Reserve Bradbourne Vale Road, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 3DH (Tel: Sevenoaks (0732) 456407).