

# The Nene Valley: Overwintering Bird Spectacle

## Introduction

The Nene Valley in Northamptonshire is home to a diverse array of special wildlife and is made up of a series of flooded gravel pits, wet grassland and woodland. The Nene Valley is an internationally important area for its overwintering bird populations. Within this area lies the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits Special Protection Area (SPA), which is specifically recognised for the importance to this group. The Wildlife Trust BCN manages around a quarter of the wetlands within the SPA, attracting thousands of overwintering birds every year.

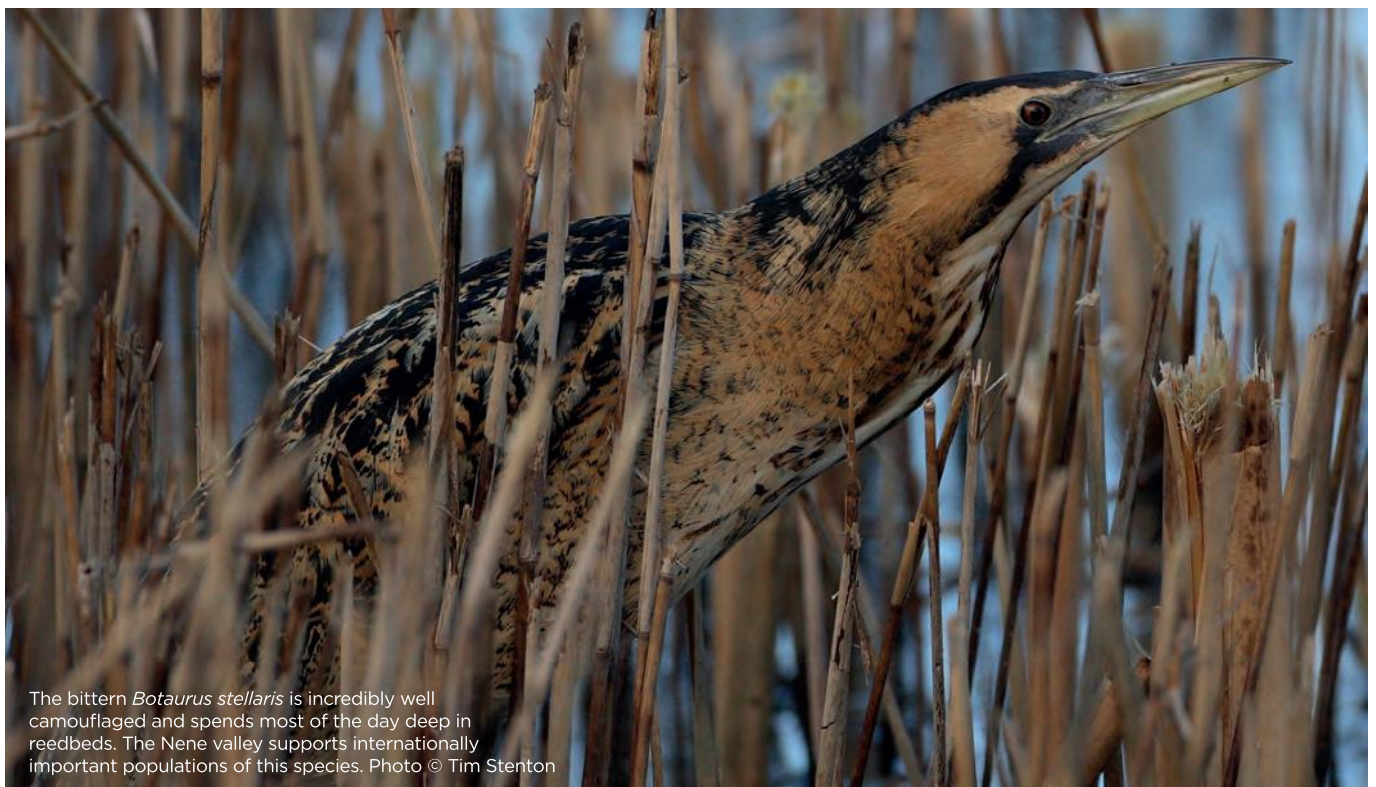
## The Nene Valley

The River Nene flows out of the hills of West Northamptonshire through a long valley that stretches the length of the county to Peterborough. The Nene and its numerous tributaries and wetlands form a connected landscape that provides a haven for a wonderful mix of wildlife. Throughout history, the Nene Valley has been shaped by people and nature. It has been of vital importance to the county's industry, including agriculture, the famous leather industry and gravel extraction. In many cases, these quarries now leave behind flooded gravel pits that are home to a wide variety of aquatic invertebrates and plants, alongside internationally important overwintering bird populations.

In 2005, 1,370ha of Northamptonshire's Nene Valley was notified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Much of the land was subsequently classified as a SPA and Ramsar site. The area comprises a chain of flooded sand and gravel pits, extending for approximately 35km along the alluvial deposits of the River Nene floodplain from Clifford Hill on the southern outskirts of Northampton, downstream to Thorpe Waterville north of Thrapston. (Anon, 2015).

## Wintering birds in the Nene Valley

The Upper Nene Valley SPA was designated for several reasons. Firstly, it has internationally important wintering populations of golden plover *Pluvialis apricaria* and bittern *Botaurus stellaris*. These species are both on Annex I of the Wild Birds Directive, which lists birds that are particularly threatened. It also qualifies under Article 4.2 of the Directive as it is used regularly by over 20,000 waterbirds. These waterbirds include; wigeon *Anas penelope*, gadwall *Anas strepera*, mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, shoveler *Anas clypeata*, pochard *Aythya ferina*, tufted duck *Aythya fuligula*, great crested grebe *Podiceps cristatus*, cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*, bittern *Botaurus stellaris*, golden plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* and coot *Fulica atra*.



The bittern *Botaurus stellaris* is incredibly well camouflaged and spends most of the day deep in reedbeds. The Nene valley supports internationally important populations of this species. Photo © Tim Stenton



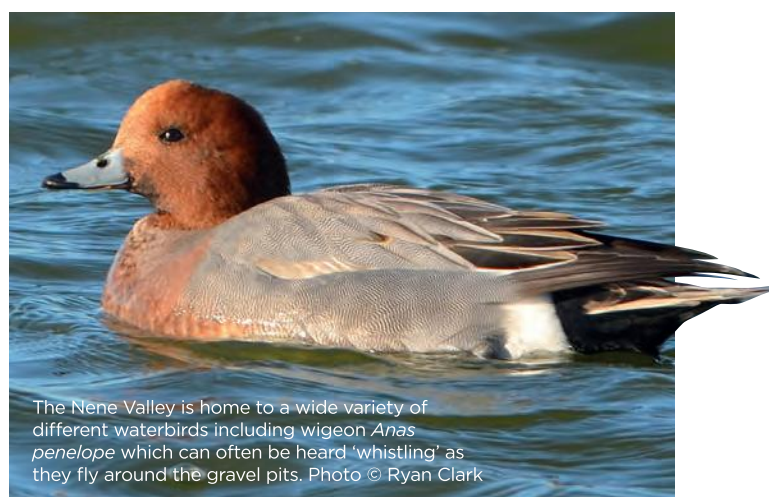


## Wintering birds on BCN Wildlife Trust reserves

The Wildlife Trust manages 329ha of land within the SPA, this is around 25% of the SPA area. These sites include the Nene Wetlands, Summer Leys and Titchmarsh. All of these sites are flooded gravel pits surrounded by extensive grassland that is essential habitat for overwintering birds.

To monitor populations of these important birds, the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) set up the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). WeBS monitors non-breeding waterbirds in the UK. Surveys began in 1947 with sites counted once per month, providing data for population, and trends in abundance and distribution. Volunteer surveyors mainly carry out these counts and this data is essential to protect these very special sites. WeBS provides a snapshot of the birds in the area on that day, with each surveyor covering a section of the wider series of gravel pits. This gives us an invaluable insight into how these birds are faring.

The table shows the 10-year averages (2010 – 2019) of the number of waterbirds on our sites, demonstrating the sheer number of birds that can be seen. The table also shows the averages of the peak

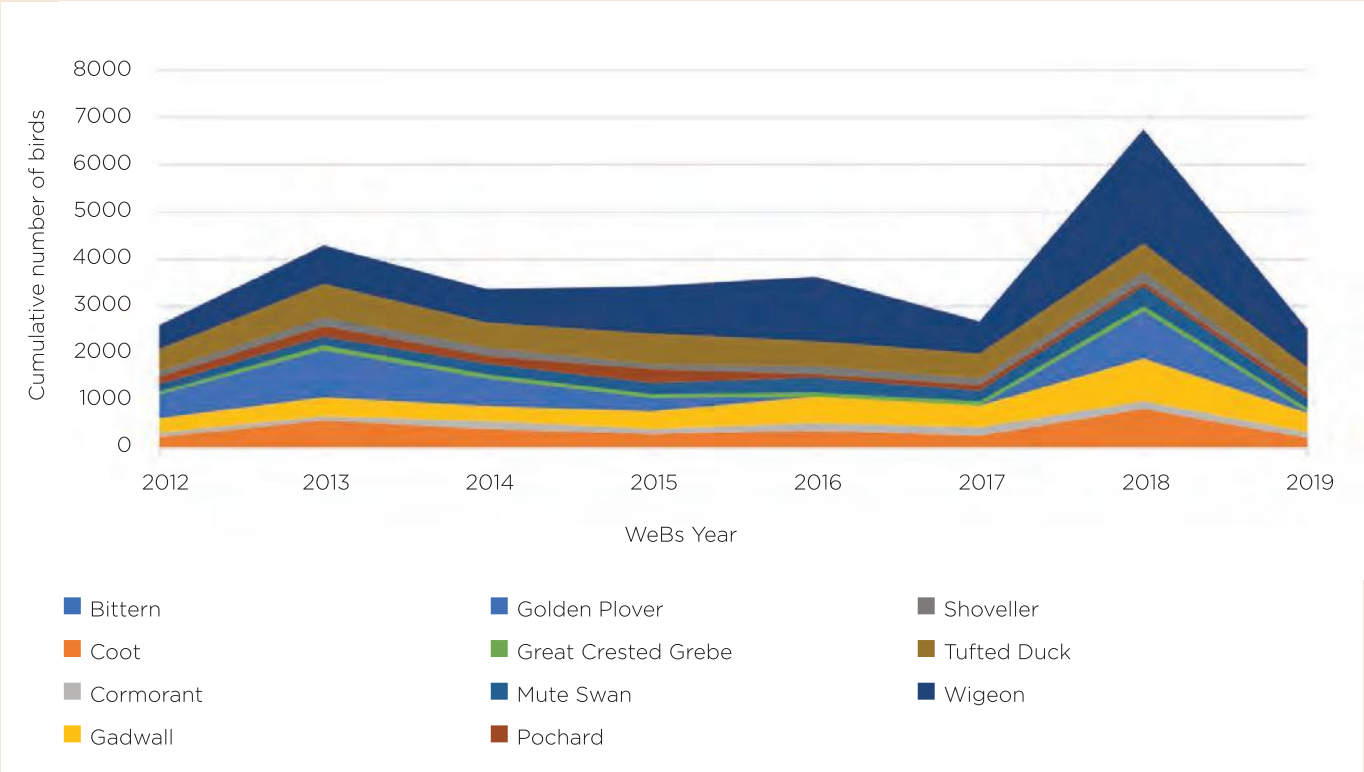


number of each species recorded in a year, known as the annual maxima. The number of birds wintering in the area and on our sites varies dramatically from year to year due to international weather patterns and food availability. The WeBS data shows that our sites within the SPA support significant numbers of wintering birds. The bittern *Botaurus stellaris* is difficult to record on the WeBS counts as they are an elusive species that often skulks in reedbeds. They are increasing in numbers on our sites and within the wider SPA area.

	Designation			Average Annual Maxima of birds recorded on our sites in the last 10 year period
	SSSI	SPA	Ramsar	
>20,000 Non-breeding waterbirds	Y	Y	Y	4816
Aggregations of non-breeding birds: bittern <i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	Y	Y		0
Aggregations of non-breeding birds: coot <i>Fulica atra</i>	Y	*		352
Aggregations of non-breeding birds: cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Y	*		98
Aggregations of non-breeding birds: gadwall <i>Anas strepera</i>	Y	Y	Y	423
Aggregations of non-breeding birds: golden plover <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	Y	Y		447
Aggregations of non-breeding birds: great crested grebe <i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	Y	*		65
Aggregations of non-breeding birds: mute swan <i>Cygnus olor</i>	Y	*	Y	214
Aggregations of non-breeding birds: pochard <i>Aythya farina</i>	Y	*		126
Aggregations of non-breeding birds: shoveler <i>Anas clypeata</i>	Y	*		123
Aggregations of non-breeding birds: tufted duck <i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Y	*		482
Aggregations of non-breeding birds: wigeon <i>Anas penelope</i>	Y	*		755

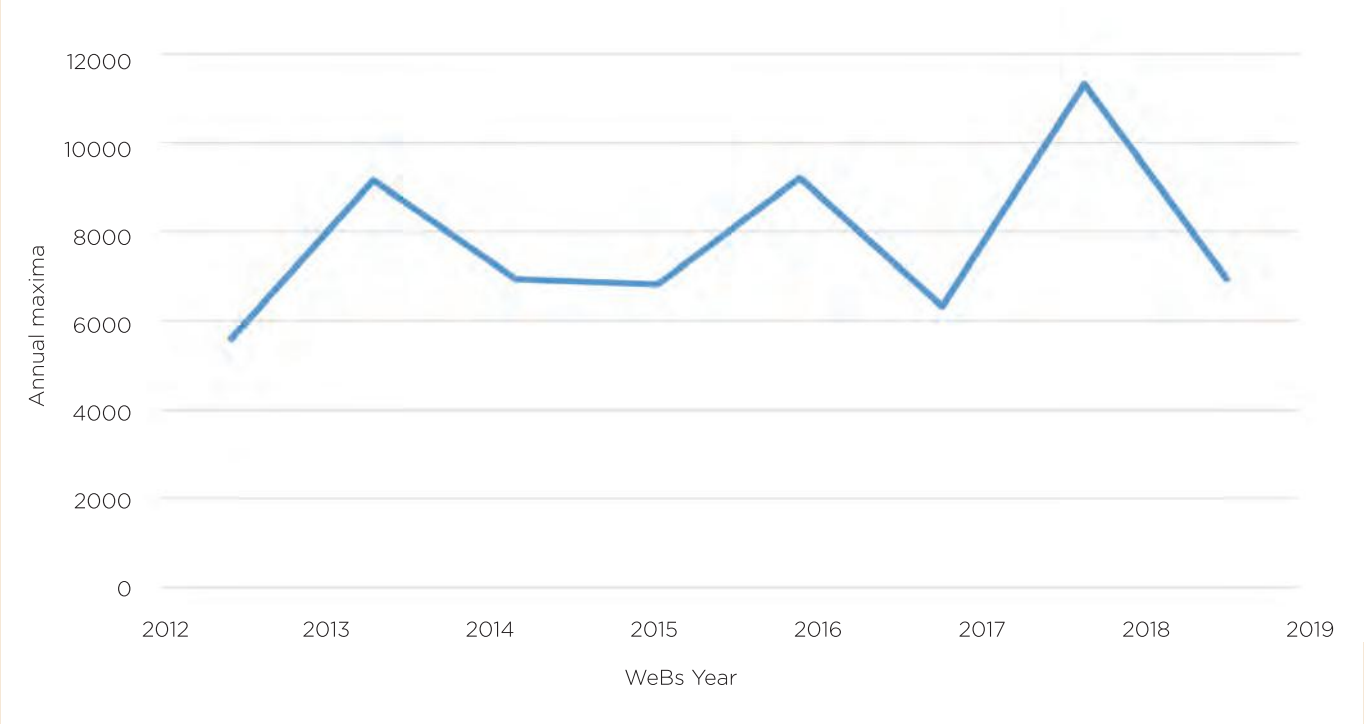
The features for which the SPA is designated for its overwintering birds, alongside those that are also listed on the SSSI or Ramsar designations. The average annual maxima of birds recorded on our sites in the last 10 years are also shown.<sup>1</sup>

## Annual maxima of SPA listed birds on Wildlife BCN reserves within the SPA



The annual maxima for each species listed on the SPA designation on our reserves, based on WeBS data. The numbers of overwintering birds in Britain fluctuates dramatically every year due to climatic conditions and food availability.

## Annual maxima of waterbirds on Wildlife BCN reserves within the SPA



The overall number of waterbirds (annual maxima) recorded on our reserves over the last 8 year period, based on WeBS data. The numbers of overwintering birds in Britain fluctuates dramatically every year due to climatic conditions and food availability. Taking into account this annual variability, the overall trend appears to be stable on our sites, which against a background of decline by 26% in the SPA since 2001/2002 (Woodwood et al., 2019), is welcome news.



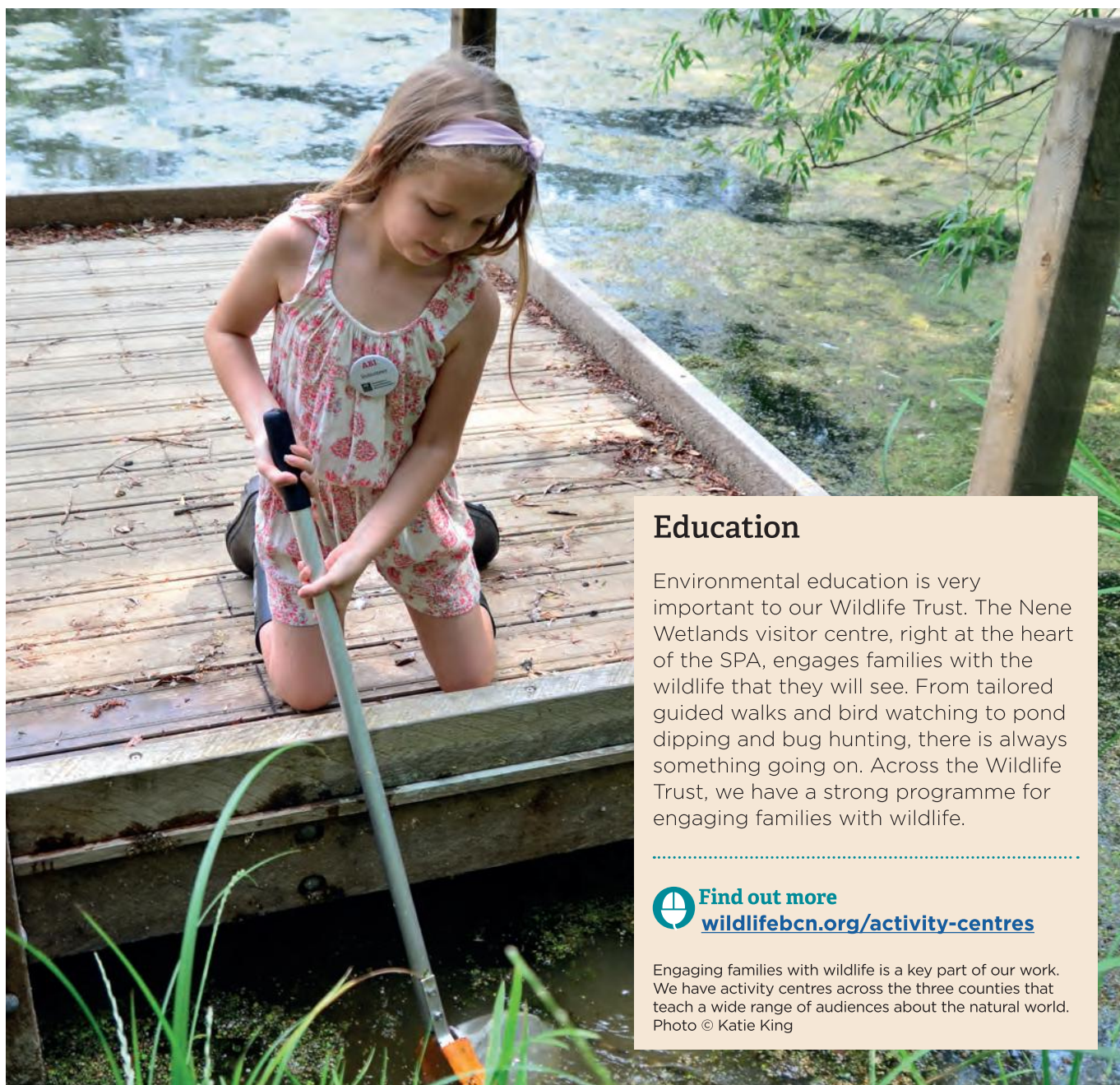
## The Ouse Washes in Cambridgeshire

Stretching from near St Ives in Cambridgeshire to Downham Market in Norfolk, the Ouse Washes is another internationally important area for overwintering birds in our area. The parallel rivers, ditches and banks of the Ouse Washes form a distinctive feature in this otherwise flat landscape.

The washlands were created 360 years ago to retain winter floodwater from the Ouse. Alongside flood alleviation, they are an amazing resource for a variety of wildlife including overwintering birds and breeding waders. Spanning over 2,500 hectares, the Ouse Washes is the largest washland in the UK.

The Wildlife Trust BCN owns part of the Ouse Washes alongside other conservation organisations such as the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust and RSPB who also manage sections of this fantastic area. Over winter, this area can support over 70,000 wintering birds, an incredible sight for visitors.

Along with the Nene Washes, the Ouse Washes are host to a population of breeding common crane *Grus grus*. The Wildlife Trust works in partnership to protect this unique and precious area and planned habitat creation is going to increase the suitable breeding habitat for waders by at least 500 hectares.



### Education

Environmental education is very important to our Wildlife Trust. The Nene Wetlands visitor centre, right at the heart of the SPA, engages families with the wildlife that they will see. From tailored guided walks and bird watching to pond dipping and bug hunting, there is always something going on. Across the Wildlife Trust, we have a strong programme for engaging families with wildlife.



Find out more  
[wildlifebcn.org/activity-centres](https://wildlifebcn.org/activity-centres)

Engaging families with wildlife is a key part of our work. We have activity centres across the three counties that teach a wide range of audiences about the natural world. Photo © Katie King

## Maintaining suitable habitats for overwintering birds

Without management, these sites would quickly become less suitable for overwintering birds and the wide variety of other species present on the sites. We cut and manage the reedbeds and scrub to ensure that the areas of open water are maintained while ensuring that the habitats are suitable for bitterns and breeding wetland birds. We also ensure appropriate management of our grasslands, which are important for roosting and feeding over-wintering birds, through scrub control and grazing. As the wintering habitats have been improved in areas like Irthlingborough, more birds are

consequently being attracted to use them. We have also created new ditches and re-profiled some lake edges, which seems to be having a positive effect. Ensuring safe access for everyone that visits the area is of vital importance too, paths and hides are well maintained and accessible to all. To protect species from disturbance we need to maintain quiet areas of reserves, where public access is restricted. Advances in technology have allowed us to monitor visitor numbers to ensure everyone can enjoy amazing views of these birds without disturbing them.

“ We allocate a huge amount of effort during the year to design and implement habitat management actions to make the sites as attractive as possible for wintering birds. It is really hard and challenging work, but very rewarding when we see that our modest, local work, is contributing positively to the conservation of many bird species at the international level, and to the enjoyment of the public who visit our nature reserves ”

**Toni Castello, Nene Wetlands Senior Ranger**

### Grazing our reserves

Alongside staff and volunteers, grazing animals are a key component to the management of many of our reserves. Getting the grazing right on our reserves is a delicate art and we approach it very carefully. We ensure that we use the correct breeds and amount of grazing pressure to create and maintain the best habitats possible. Too little grazing and scrub and rank grasses will develop, too much grazing and fragile habitats can be damaged. We use sheep and cattle, depending on what we want to achieve for a specific site, to control scrub growth, keep areas open or help manage the structure of the plant life to benefit certain species. Forty-seven of our reserves are currently grazed. Looking after all these animals takes a lot of work and is heavily reliant on the expertise of our livestock officers, graziers and volunteers. Our grassland monitoring tells us how the site is responding to grazing and feeds back into stocking rates for the following year.



The highland cattle shown here are relatively lightweight compared to other breeds which means reduced poaching on the ground. They also eat a wide variety of vegetation that other breeds may not eat. Photo: Toni Castello



## Summary

Our area is extremely important for overwintering waterbirds and our reserves support internationally important populations. Our management ensures that these areas are havens for birds, as well as for people to enjoy. Alongside the populations in the Nene Valley, our area supports other important populations of birds. The Great Fen supports large numbers of raptors every year. Grafham Water nature reserve is also one of the most important sites for a diversity of passage migrants and wintering birds in the East Midlands.

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“ The Nene Valley SPA provides highly valuable habitat for good numbers of wintering birds across a wide variety of species. Wildfowl and waders feature heavily of course, but the marginal parts of the sites also attract a range of passerines including wintering thrushes, chats and, increasingly, warblers such as chiffchaff and Cetti’s warbler. The location of the SPA, close to several residential areas, provides convenient access for many of the county’s birders, meaning that high-quality birding can be had year-round, almost on the doorstep. Featuring several sites in close proximity, the SPA also gives the opportunity to create an itinerary with enough interest to easily fill a varied day out in the field ”

Jon Cook, Northamptonshire County Bird Recorder

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the British Trust for Ornithology for the use of the WeBS data and all the volunteers who carry out these counts. Thanks also to Jon Cook for information about wetland birds in the area.

Data were provided by WeBS, a Partnership jointly funded by the British Trust for Ornithology, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Joint Nature Conservation Committee, in association with The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, with fieldwork conducted by volunteers. Although WeBS data are presented within this report, in some cases the figures may not have been fully checked and validated. Therefore, for any detailed analyses of WeBS data, enquiries should be directed to the WeBS team at the British Trust for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Thetford, IP24 2PU ([webs@bto.org](mailto:webs@bto.org))

## References

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