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## Newsletter Winter 2007/08

### **New anemone for the Fleet**

A population of the anemone *Haliplanella lineata* has been found by Dr Lin Baldock in the West Fleet. This orange-striped anemone is an introduced species thought to originate in the western Pacific. It was first recorded on the east coast of the US in 1892 and the first European record was from Millbay Docks, Plymouth in 1896. It has since been reported from many locations around the UK and throughout Europe. The anemone is found in sheltered sites and is tolerant of fluctuations in temperature and salinity. Population numbers seem to vary widely and it may disappear from a site only to remerge again at a later date.



### **Improving access around the coast**

Government is considering legislation for the public to have the right to walk around the entire English coast in addition to existing rights of ways. The Reserve has made a contribution to the consultation process expressing great concern. Unrestricted access along the shores of the Fleet would undoubtedly cause extreme damage and disturbance to wildlife interests. We already contend with some boisterous activities such as games, sponsored events involving large numbers of people and even unauthorised firework displays, and in increasing the access and introducing 'spreading room', the development would not only be disastrous for wildlife but also have far reaching consequences for landowners and commercial concerns. Many improvements could be made to access such as linking bridleways, linking inland routes to the coast and providing round walks, but it is firmly believed that this could be achieved through the existing mechanisms and without introducing a new bill. The South West Coast already delivers what the vast majority of the public want in terms of coastal access.

## Chesil Bank and the Fleet Bird News

Mid-May to Mid-October 2005

Spring passage was still much in evidence in early June – most notably off the beach in Lyme Bay – with small flocks of Manx Shearwaters, Arctic Terns and Common Scoters along with single figures of Balearic Shearwaters, Storm Petrels, Arctic Skuas and Mediterranean Gulls passing up channel. The June highlights were both at The Swannery – with a Marsh Warbler in song in the withybed on the 4<sup>th</sup> and a Squacco Heron briefly in the water-meadow on the 27<sup>th</sup> (the first on The Fleet since 19<sup>th</sup> century). A Red Kite north of Abbotsbury on the 4<sup>th</sup> was probably a genuine migrant.

Just as the spring northward migration trickled to an end with a few late Knots at The Swannery, the southward bound wader passage began to gather pace. Stretching from July to October the highlights were four Kentish Plovers at Ferrybridge on the 2<sup>nd</sup> August and a Pectoral Sandpiper at The Swannery on the 26<sup>th</sup> September. Other noteworthy species scattered along the lagoon among flocks of their commoner cousins included Avocets (2 at Ferrybridge on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August); Little Ringed Plovers (singles at The Swannery on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> August); Knots (peaking at 18 at Ferrybridge on the 4<sup>th</sup> September); Sanderlings (peaking at 13 at Ferrybridge on the 24<sup>th</sup> July); Little Stints (peaking at 6 at The Swannery on the 1<sup>st</sup> October); Curlew Sandpipers (peaking at 3 at Ferrybridge on the 8<sup>th</sup> September); Ruffs and Reeves (peaking at 2 at The Swannery in October); Wood Sandpipers (singles at The Swannery on the 12<sup>th</sup> July and 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> August) and last but not least a Purple Sandpiper (at Ferrybridge on the 7<sup>th</sup> September).



Sanderling

Larger wading birds were headlined by the occurrence of the reserve's first Black Stork. First seen over The Swannery on the 7<sup>th</sup> August it was then reported high over The Fleet at different localities on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. Also a Great White Egret graced the Langton Herring and Rodden Hive area on the 8<sup>th</sup> October and a flock of 20 Spoonbills circled The Swannery on the 18<sup>th</sup> October. The only duck of note among the already returning commoner species was a Garganey at The Swannery on the 12<sup>th</sup> August.

Southbound seabirds from July to October included a Pomarine Skua at The Swannery on the 16<sup>th</sup> October; an Iceland Gull at Ferrybridge on the 25<sup>th</sup> October and several Arctic Skuas and Arctic Terns. The regularly returning Yellow-legged Gull over-summered at Abbotsbury for its' 18<sup>th</sup> year (and was occasionally joined by other individuals) and Mediterranean Gull numbers began to build with a peak of 20 at Ferrybridge on the 25<sup>th</sup> October.

Raptors were also on the move from July to October with the odd Hobby and several Merlins and Ospreys along with a couple of Marsh Harriers and with the darker evenings in October 1 or 2 Barn Owls began to reappear along New Barn Road, Abbotsbury. Other notable 'land' migrants were a Nightjar (at The Swannery on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August); 3 Ortolan Buntings (over Ferrybridge on the 27<sup>th</sup> August); a Wryneck (at Langton Herring on the 8<sup>th</sup> September); Ring Ouzels (at least 1 at Ferrybridge on the 15<sup>th</sup> September); several Firecrests and the odd Tree Pipit; 30 Bearded Tits (at The Swannery on the 12<sup>th</sup> October); a Brambling (at The Swannery on the 24<sup>th</sup> October), Redpolls and Siskins and a late Red-backed Shrike (at The Swannery on the 30<sup>th</sup> October). Good numbers of commoner species included several flocks of Yellow Wagtails, with 100 roosting at The Swannery in late August, along with several White Wagtails. Visible migration was not outstanding but hundreds of Woodpigeons and Jackdaws flew west over Abbotsbury on several dates in late October and Ferrybridge logged a good passage on the 22<sup>nd</sup> September when around 5000 Swallows and 1000 Meadow Pipits flew south.

With the threat of colder weather just around the corner came the timely appearance of the first winter wildfowl. Among their ranks were a Black Brant and a Pale-bellied Brent Goose at Littlesea from the 19<sup>th</sup> October, while at The Swannery there were 2 Scaup from the 20<sup>th</sup> October; a Red-crested Pochard on the 21<sup>st</sup> October and a Black-necked Grebe from the 24<sup>th</sup> October.

## Marine Week August 2007



As reported in the summer newsletter, Heritage Lottery Funding (HLF) was awarded to the Reserve and the Portland Ranger Project to celebrate National Marine Week on Portland. The Mayor of Portland, Cllr Tim Munro, launched the project at the Chesil Beach Centre in the presence of guests who included Tony Richardson, representing the HLF. A specially commissioned sculpture, 'From Ferrybridge to Deadman's Bay', by artist La Hitchcock, made from man-made debris found on Chesil Beach was unveiled by the mayor and is still on display at the centre.

The programme of events ran daily throughout the nine days. It offered 12 guided walks, paddles and rambles led by experts, 8 workshops for children of various ages led by artists, three different boat trips (120 trips in total), a round Island minibus tour (15 trips), two days of historical demonstrations, two evenings of talks, an open air concert and a walk with songs, guided open days at gardens and archaeological sites and a sea themed community fayre. Self guided walks, quizzes, displays and exhibitions were available everyday throughout the week.

Permanent displays during the week included a temporary eco shelter partially made from straw bales erected at the Chesil Beach Centre. The shelter housed displays of solar energy, energy conservation, marine litter and environmental information. A traditional lerret fishing boat, one of the very few remaining examples of the boats that are used off Chesil to catch mackerel with seine nets, was displayed beside the eco-shelter.

GPS navigation equipment with special software to create guided commentaries, portable audio equipment, a large plasma screen and a video modem system to facilitate more options for images from the wildlife cameras were purchased for Marine Week and remain at the Centre. A new information display was commissioned for Portland Museum introducing the shipwrecks and smugglers gallery there. A display during Marine Week in Portland Bill Visitor Centre on marine conservation and wildlife specific to the Bill was the precursor to permanent live feed cameras and interpretative material to be installed there later this year. Two large puppets, a Tompot Blenny and a cuttlefish, and a lobster bodysuit were commissioned from a local craftsman. These will be used as education aids to involve young children and families in conservation issues.

'Seafest' - displays, activities and games run by the six Dorset Coastlink centres – held at Chesil this year - made a fitting finale to Marine Week. Speciality displays included the Hi-Tech, Wild Trek trailer/laboratory with microscopes and computers, the Cool Seas Roadshow display of realistic inflatable marine animals, and a drop-in sculpture workshop using marine litter.

Despite the terrible weather for most of the week and the open-air nature of Marine Week, there were participants in all of the 36 events, displays, quizzes, boat and minibus trips presented. It is believed that the main objectives of the project - to provide a programme of activities and exhibitions - were achieved. Many respondents to the audience questionnaire said that the programme was impressive, interesting and well balanced. From the Reserve's point-of-view, the project was successful. It helped promote the importance of our local marine life, using some innovative interpretation techniques and highlighted environmental concerns. Portland Marine Week was also rewarding in that many neighbouring concerns shared a most enjoyable experience.

We would like to thank the Portland Ranger, Lyn Cooch, and Island Volunteers for You (IVY) who bore the brunt of the workload, the many organisations and individuals who made fantastic contributions to the effort and lastly but not mostly to Joanna Morland, who co-ordinated the project. Jo worked against the clock to ensure that the many elements of the project not only took place but also were of the highest possible quality.



### **New signs helping the birds at Ferrybridge**

The importance for birds of the sand flat at Ferrybridge cannot be over emphasised. It allows migrating waders to take a break and have a meal on the rich invertebrate life lying just below the surface, and in recent years an increasing number of Brent geese choose to spend time quietly conserving their energy in between feeding on the sea-grass further up the Fleet. A single uncontrolled dog can cause a total disturbance and it is for this reason that new signs have been erected requesting dog walkers to avoid the area. Similar areas elsewhere on the Fleet should also be avoided.

Incidentally, a ringed Brent goose sighted on 10<sup>th</sup> November here and was ringed as a first winter bird in Terschelling, the Netherlands, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2006. Terschelling is one of the Waddensee islands, an area where many, spring migrating, dark-bellied brent geese gather before undertaking a non-stop journey in excess 3,000 km to their High Arctic coastal tundra breeding grounds.

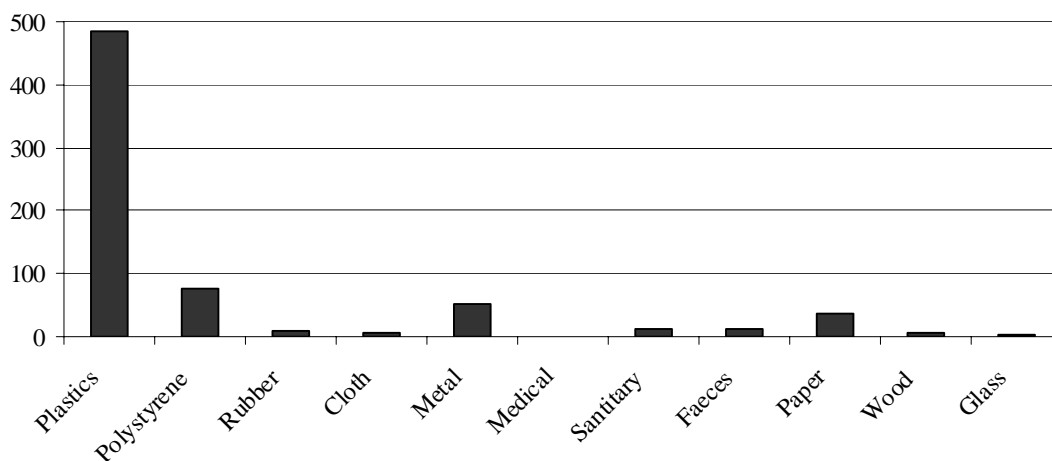


### **Napoli takes another weather hit**

In the summer the grounded vessel MSC Napoli was successfully cut in half and the fore deck towed away for further demolition. Since then work has continued to lift the still viable engines from their holds but the stormy weather in the third week of November caused the boat to be destabilised. It is now doubtful if the engines can be rescued and the remainder of the boat will probably have to be dismantled in situ.

## BAE Systems litter pick

Without voluntary help in clearing washed up and deposited litter Chesil would be a sight for sore eyes. To have an offer of 30 people for a day to work at the problem is not the kind of offer you turn down, and so through the good offices of the Marine Conservation Society, Andy Gill, of BAE Systems in Dorchester, made contact with us and arrangements were put in place. Andy and his team cleared an amazing 50 bags of rubbish from the Chesil and Ham Beaches and also managed to analyse some of it. The pie chart below summarises the findings. There was no report of any oiled lumps, no medical, wood or metal items found, and the count of glass items was surprisingly low. This almost certainly reflects the efficient cleaning up work carried out by the workforce contracted to clear items washed up from the Napoli. Lighter plastic and polystyrene items, though probably mainly originating from the sea and open shore of Chesil, were found everywhere having been blown around by the wind. Heavier plastic objects, not affected by the wind, such as cigarette lighters and bits of rope were almost exclusive to the open shore. The wood items that were counted were lollipop sticks! Many thanks to BAE for their help.



## Another poor year for Little Terns and Ringed Plovers breeding on Chesil, but the Common Terns continue to thrive

The little terns arrived in reasonable numbers and at the expected time. The overall numbers of them consistently present in the colony during the season averaged 40 representing a continuing decline in colony numbers. There was an unexpected and worrying delay in the commencement of egg laying. With only eight breeding attempts recorded, it is believed that only a proportion of the birds present nested. No young were produced. No incubation lasted longer than eleven days. Crow predation was the most likely cause of breeding failure. The drop in numbers may be attributed to a lack of recruitment owing to poor breeding in recent years. The late start and apparent non-breeding may have been due a number of factors including predator presence, the change in appearance of the nesting site due to an increase in fencing, and the weather influencing feeding conditions. A number of management improvements were implemented including some night wardening, an increase in anti-fox netting and the most successful signage arrangements to overcome human intrusion. The performance of the birds is disappointing.

In the Ringed Plover Survey carried out this year, a further decline in numbers is evident as shown in the table below.

Selected Ringed Plover nesting data (pairs/territories)

Year	Abbotsbury	West Fleet	Mid Fleet	East Fleet	Portland	Totals
1981	N/C	12	16	18	N/C	46
1997	1	2	9	11	N/C	23
2007	1	1	4	6	1	13

Around 30 – 35 pairs of Common Terns nested on the island in the West Fleet this year. 51 fledglings were ringed but it is believed that least 55 actually fledged – an excellent result.

## Burton Cliff rocks and rolls

Late November saw a substantial rock fall at Burton Cliff where waves undercut the soft cliffs and inevitably the overhanging Bridport Sandstone tumbles down. Heavy rains saturating the ground probably assisted the fall.



*The fall cascades across Chesil into the sea but will be washed away.*

## 'In Celebration of Chesil Bank'

Fine art student Liz Dell was so moved by the immensity and importance of Chesil Bank that she travelled the 140 miles between Amersham and Wycombe College in Buckinghamshire and Abbotsbury three times to research, prepare and finally install her work titled "In Celebration of Chesil Bank".

The work is inspired by the protection Chesil affords to the Fleet and the birds, animals and plants that thrive among the West Fleet reed beds unharmed by the breakers just yards away. The installation was composed of fragile structures made from reed donated by the Swannery. Small, low, star-shaped structures, bedded into the pebbles, represented the plants and wildlife; they were not very visible, just as the plants and wildlife naturally blend with their habitat. A large fragile sphere, placed between the star structures represented the continuity, the cycles, and the protection afforded by Chesil Bank.

Liz said, "We only notice our precious wildlife when its existence is threatened. I wanted to get this across by creating a scene where the small star shapes would be more visible against the threatening foam of a breaker than against the benign pebbles. The sphere is more visible, but it is clearly not robust; it should urge us to look deeper and see what is at risk."

The structures were placed on the beach at low tide, on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> October. It was then watch and wait; would the sea only threaten the structures, or would they be destroyed?

Within minutes, an exceptionally high wave reached the installation, pulled out a few star structures, and bounced the sphere around. For the next 2 hours the waves lapped against the structures, some bigger than others, but none too boisterous. Each wave moved pebbles up the shore, casually, unhurriedly burying the star shapes deeper, anchoring the sphere, cornering the prey and waiting to pounce.

Without warning, just as the sun ducked behind a cloud a mighty breaker gathered itself, black and green on the underside, foaming white at the crest. It towered, halted for an instant and crashed onto the beach, roaring the pebbles and smashing the sphere with one blow. The sea retreated; an expanse of level pebbles and a crushed heap of reed was all that remained.

Those who stopped to talk to Liz said of the installation "Fascinating .....A lovely metaphor to demonstrate the fragility of nature ..... A metaphor for climate change".



These photographs from the "performance" and art work inspired by the experience can be seen on .....<http://www.saa.co.uk/art/lizdell>

## **Anchors**

This autumn four anchors were found buried together in the shingle on Chesil at Ferrybridge. Possibly they were involved with the anchor testing station that existed on the nearby sand-flat. Marine archaeologist, Gordon Leppard, has provisionally identified the anchors as late 19<sup>th</sup> century Royal Navy ones. Interestingly one has a fluke cut off so as to be used in shallow without endangering the ship it is securing.



## **Avian Influenza H5N1**

The Abbotsbury mute swans transferred to an isolation unit in 2006 were returned to the Swannery on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2007. All the birds came back in good condition and most nested.

With the fresh outbreaks of virus in Britain this year, bio-security has once again been stepped up with regular monitoring along the Fleet for any sick birds, and carcasses of any bird species are being forwarded to Defra for analysis. There is still no evidence that wild birds are spreading the virus.

## **Lyme Bay mapping and management**

Principally through the initiative of the Devon Wildlife Trust, much research into the marine life and habitats in Lyme Bay is being carried out. Initially work was undertaken to look at the damage being done to pink sea fans and other sensitive organisms on rocky reefs by dredgers harvesting clams but now the project has been extended to include all habitats and activities. It is understood the reefs themselves are being reduced to rubble, but no significant decrease in dredging activity is likely.

## **Fleet Observer season**

The boat has just completed its fifth season since being acquired by the reserve, and its third under the management of Roger Quigley. The season was the longest ever achieved with the boat being in the water from Easter and not taken out until the completion of the October half term. If it weren't for the miserable August weather the record for the highest number of passengers for the season would have been well and truly broken. Nevertheless the season was good and the skippers did very well in running as many trips as they did. The boat proved a great success in Portland Marine Week.

This winter the boat is due for an extensive refit and a professional survey has already been undertaken to detail the work that has to be done. Operating on a 'not-for-profit basis' the boat generates sufficient income to cover its operating expenses but not enough to provide for long-term maintenance costs. In the New Year it is intended to launch a fund raising campaign to cover the refit costs and provide further improvements. The campaign needs to be successful to ensure that this unique little boat can carry out its 14<sup>th</sup> year of hard work in 2008, and continue. Should anyone wish to help with the promotion of the fund raising or in any other aspect of the boat's operation, please contact us.



*The Fleet Observer with a group of children from Chernobyl on a sponsored holiday in Weymouth*

## **Fleet plant life survey**

This autumn Dr Lin Baldock led a team of biologists to carry out a survey on the status, particularly in the West Fleet, of the important populations of *Zostera*, *Ruppia* and *Lamprothamnium*. The aim of the survey was to make comparisons with past studies. It is understood that there is a possible decline in the West Fleet but the survey work is difficult to carry out and owing to different methodologies being used in the past reliable comparative data is insufficient to make any sound judgments. The results will be publicised in the next newsletter

## Abbotsbury Swannery

One hundred and forty two pairs of mute swans nested and the first cygnets hatched on 13<sup>th</sup> May. As usual, territorial competition caused physical interactions between some of the swans with the result that nine pairs deserted their eggs. Overall the hatching went reasonably well but crows and other predators claimed a number of young cygnets just as they began to venture from their nests. Periods of unfavourable weather towards the end of May, and on through June and July caused additional problems.

This year the ability to manage the birds was severely limited. Normally cygnets have tiny identity tags clipped on their webs soon after hatching. This procedure allows displaced cygnets to be returned to their parents and improve their chances of survival. However with the introduction of the Animal Welfare Act in 2006 the clipping which involves piercing the web is no longer permitted. An experiment with expandable plastic rings has been carried out but this proved unsatisfactory.

Cygnets web marking has been carried out on the Abbotsbury cygnets for centuries. The loss of this management ability this year resulted in the survival rates being the lowest ever recorded with just 62 full-grown cygnets being ringed – normally there is more than a hundred. It is hoped a special permission to use web-tags in 2008 will be given, not only for the benefit of breeding productivity but also for the successful continuation of the intensive study of the Abbotsbury swans, started in 1974, and which has enhanced the scientific information of several species of swans throughout the world.

*A cygnet's web tag. The web is pierced but veins are avoided and no bleeding ensues. Tags are usually removed when the birds are ringed as fully grown cygnets, but if left make absolutely no impact on the huge web which dwarfs the tag.*



## Swan Round-up

The 14<sup>th</sup> biennial swan roundup took place on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> July and Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> July, made possible with the help of nearly 200 volunteers. Having been gently pushed up the Fleet over the two-day period, the swans as usual were closely inspected and data collected on the age, sex, weight etc., and the timings of their moult. This year a team of vets and researchers from America helped examine and vaccinate the birds against Duck Viral Enteritis - 'Duck Plague'. In total, 805 swans were caught in the round-up which included 295 'Crown' birds (ones not bred on the Fleet and therefore not belonging to the Ilchester family). With the permission of the Queen's Swan Marker, David Barber, Crown birds were also included in the vaccination programme.

## Chesil and the Fleet Audio Trail

Thanks to our marine week grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, MP3 players may now be hired from the Centre for an enjoyable amble on Chesil. This self guided audio trail lasts approximately one and half hours, with the audio player periodically explaining some fascinating facts about Chesil and the Fleet at Ferrybridge.

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The newsletter has been compiled by Don Moxom and Angela Thomas, with the help of information contributed by Lin Baldock (New Anemone), Steve Groves (Bird News), Joanna Moorland (Marine Week) Liz Dell (in Celebration of Chesil Bank) and Dave Wheeler (Abbotsbury Swannery, Avian Influenza).

On behalf of us all on the Reserve, at the Chesil Centre and on the Fleet Observer thank you for your support and wish you a Happy New Year.