

# Potteric Carr Highflyers

*by David Carroll*



After working for Yorkshire Wildlife Trust at Potteric Carr from 1994 to 2008, David Carroll is now a bird recording team volunteer at the nature reserve.

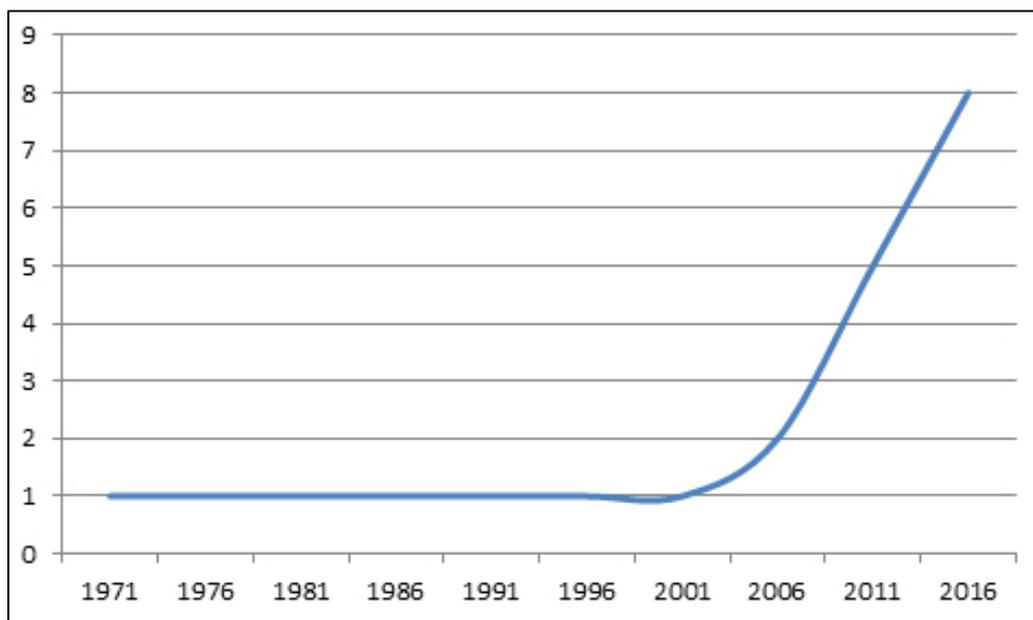
Potteric Carr NR was established in 1968 when YWT acquired a lease on the 13 ha Low Ellers Marsh, which was later designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest by the Nature Conservancy Council for its reappearance of reed-fen communities; a legacy of Humberhead Levels habitat before land drainage of the River Torne floodplain in the 1760s. The pedigree of Low Ellers was nationally renowned in 1984 when Britain's first proved breeding pair of Little Bitterns nested in its reedbeds and raised three young. It would be another 26 years before this happened anywhere else in the UK.

The reserve and its surrounding environmental buffer zones has steadily grown in size through ownership, leasehold, and YWT management agreements. In 2004 Huxter Well and Rossington Carr fields were added, when 73ha of arable farmland was transformed into a widely acclaimed reedbed-dominated wetland. This was part funded by the EU Life Nature Programme 'Reedbeds for Bitterns Project'. The most recent extension, in 2015, was Beeston Plantation and Loversall Carr fields, 35 ha in area, and mitigation for the impact of neighbouring residential sprawl and industrial warehousing. It increased the reserve to some 215 ha, and including surrounding buffer land, a significant total of some 278 ha (700 acres) is now managed and enhanced to benefit the natural environment. In recognition of the scale of operations at Potteric Carr, the Trust declared it a flagship reserve and the first of its Gateway sites.

After the change from Potteric Carr Management Committee, run by volunteers, to a reserve managed by staff with considerable voluntary support, a joint, wildlife Monitoring Group was formed. This Group has been partially responsible for the continued, successful habitat management of the reserve. It organises wildlife surveys and scientific recording which, in turn, can influence habitat management and target-species action plans, and also report on the condition of rustic facilities around the site. The Monitoring Group also

observers a set of species that are used as ecological indicators on the condition of the reserve's ecosystems.

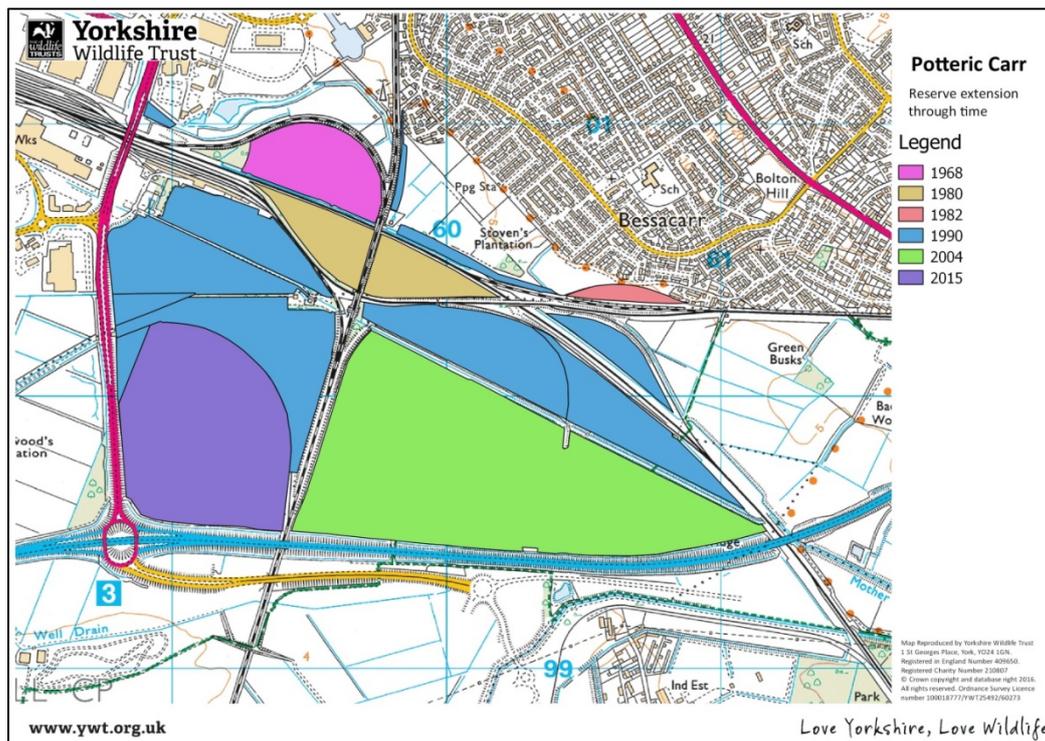
One example of these indicators is the number of Schedule 1 birds nesting on site used to assess Potteric Carr's ornithological performance, not only from one year to the next, but over longer periods of time. In the early years of the reserve's history there were few instances of any scheduled species nesting, usually only Kingfisher. Following the creation of Huxter Well Marsh wetlands the number of Schedule 1 species, or 'highfliers' as I have termed them, breeding on the reserve had increased to an extraordinary eight in 2016. These were Bittern (two booming males and at least one female producing young), Marsh Harrier (a male and two nesting females producing six young), Cetti's Warbler (9–11 pairs), Mediterranean Gull (one fledged young), Kingfisher (at least one pair had young), Little Ringed Plover, Barn Owl (the first pair nesting since 1975, had four young) and Black-necked Grebe (three pairs produced seven young). Black-necked Grebes are Potteric Carr's rarest nesting bird, and the reserve holds a significant five to six per cent of the British population. Avocets have also bred recently but success has been low due to predation.



*Graph showing the increase in Schedule 1 breeding birds at Potteric Carr 1971–2016*

The wide variety and patchwork of Potteric Carr's habitats have matured somewhat in the past fifty years, but essentially remain the same habitat types. Its principal habitats comprise areas of open water, common-reed fen and swamp, slow flowing drains and ditches, wader scrapes, neutral grassland, willow and alder carr wet woodland, birch woodland, and a stand of oaks dating back to 1834. Disused railway embankments constructed with local Magnesian Limestone are also a feature of the site. Grazing marsh, conservation grazing, and wild flower meadows are a recent addition to Potteric Carr's habitats.

Since the reserve was founded, a remarkable total of over 100 bird species have bred at least once within the Potteric Carr boundary, and in the five-year period 2011–15 there was evidence of breeding by 80 of them, with 66 species doing so in 2015. This latter year includes ten Red-listed species in Birds of Conservation Concern—4, published in 2015. The annual total of breeding birds is another indication of the state of the reserve. Meanwhile, the site’s bird checklist has risen to 236 species. The above figures are impressive for an inland site within two miles of Doncaster town centre.



*Map of Potteric Carr reserve’s growth 1968–2015 (© YWT)*

Nature conservation management including improved water quality delivered by on-site reedbed filtration systems has resulted in more diversity of the reserve’s birdlife since 1968, but the most significant changes and consequent improvement to bird status has been the enlarged area of land and creation of wetland habitats on and around Potteric Carr. For example, bird territories or pairs of birds increased on Huxter Well Marsh from 77 (1.02 per ha/0.43 per acre) in 2004 to a higher density of 193 (2.57 per ha/1.07 per acre) in 2010, excluding four hundred pairs of colonial Black-headed Gulls. By 2010, the Natural England species index value for Huxter Well Marsh was 43.5 per cent above the qualifying threshold required for SSSI accreditation. There was a rapid increase in breeding waterbirds after the new wetland was developed at Huxter Well Marsh in the mid-2000s. Of course, external factors, such as national trends, can also affect the abundance of birds at Potteric Carr and we are already seeing some effects of climate change.

All wildlife has benefited from habitat management, but Potteric Carr could perhaps be described, ‘as close to a local paradise for birds as we can achieve’, and has perhaps reached

its full potential? It now provides a tantalising insight into the 4000 ha fenlands and carrlands that covered the former, extensive Potteric Carr some 250 years ago, when frequented by eminent local botanist Thomas Tofield.

Today's protected site has clearly been made possible by a staff presence and volunteer assistants with a passion for nature, as well as the reserve's gated status. Potteric Carr provides an example of how land acquisition is a substantial benefit to nature reserves and is so important to Yorkshire wildlife conservation. However, due to surrounding urbanisation, there is now a risk of this site becoming ecologically isolated. Until recently, nationally declining Willow Tits had a regional stronghold at Potteric Carr, with territorial pairs in double figures annually. In spring 2016 we were down to a single pair holding territory. For such a sedentary species, recovery will be problematic. It is essential that there are green corridors to and from this wildlife-rich Gateway reserve and the Wildlife Trusts' challenging vision of a Living Landscape has to be pursued.

Nevertheless, the future looks promising for Potteric Carr, and hopefully its new visitor centre and education facilities will inspire future generations to appreciate, participate in, and enjoy Yorkshire's magnificent nature reserves.



*The first successful nesting of Barn Owls at Potteric Carr since 1975. Four young were ringed in June 2016 by Karen McDiarmid © Kat Woolley*

# The eight species of Schedule 1 birds that bred at Potteric Carr in 2016...

## Barn Owl

Until 2016 the last proved breeding at Potteric Carr by this species was in 1975. In spring this year, after a wait of 41 years, Barn Owls bred and produced four young, which were all ringed on 7th June.



## Black-necked Grebe

Three pairs of Black-necked Grebes, Potteric Carr's rarest Schedule 1 breeding bird occupied the site and produced seven young. With 55 pairs nesting in the UK, we have over 5% of the British breeding population.



## Marsh Harrier

For the second successive year, two pairs of Marsh Harriers bred in secluded reedbeds at Potteric Carr. Four young were in one of the nests in June and two juveniles fledged from the second in July.



## Cetti's Warbler

With 9–11 singing males in 2016, this Schedule 1 warbler has made Potteric Carr its South Yorkshire stronghold. This year the population reached its highest level so far recorded.



## Kingfisher

This annual nesting bird at Potteric Carr again bred in 2016, though, once again, not at its usual Piper Marsh nesting tunnel. A pair nested along Mother Drain and young were produced, with a second pair suspected.



## Mediterranean Gull

A pair mated and built a nest amongst the Black-headed Gull colony at Huxter Well Marsh. The sub-adult pair remained from May to mid-July, when a juvenile proved successful breeding.



## Bittern

One booming male was joined by a second boomer during the breeding season. Regular feeding flights by a female in May–June was evidence of young being fed at the nest. Juveniles appeared in June and July.



## Little Ringed Plover

Huxter Well Marsh was used for food provisioning in June–July by breeding Little Ringed Plovers that were believed to be nesting on disturbed ground at Potteric Carr's southern environmental buffer zone.

