

## Black-winged Stilts at RSPB Cliffe Pools.



*Juvenile Stilt, by David Fenton-Scott*

It has taken much work and dedication from a wide range of people within the RSPB to get to the stage this year where we fledged 7 young Black winged stilts at RSPB Cliffe Pools. Reserve staff, reserve ecology, investigations and of course our dedicated band of volunteers all contributed to this amazing success after 3 years of heroic failure.

Throughout the 4-year saga, much has been learned about the birds requirements, and consequently year on year changes have been made in approach but most importantly the ability to react to changing circumstances while the birds are on site has been implemented.

**2014** saw the first attempt by Black-winged Stilts to nest at Cliffe. They chose one of the main breeding islands on Radar pool. Although a good choice in terms of terrestrial predators, it was also within the large black headed gull colony. The islands are within deep water and steep sided due to erosion, therefore do not provide good feeding opportunities for the young. Four chicks hatched, but disappeared after the 5th day.

**2015** saw two pairs nest with the Black barns pools amongst sea club rush, around 20 metres from each other. Predator management was undertaken on site, with an electric fence considered around the nests. However due to the water levels and amount of vegetation, this was not possible. Levels were dropped in the pool to minimise chances of the nest been washed out. Both nests failed around the end of May (22nd and 27th), both had been predated by foxes.

By early June, both pairs had re-nested on the main breeding islands on Radar again, amongst the large Avocet colony. Although safe from ground predators, the large Black-headed gull colony was still. Five young hatched from the two nests; however all were predated by Black-headed gulls, the last as the parents attempted to swim it off the island to the shore.

### **2016**

Following the failings of 2015, plans were made to maximise the chances of successful breeding, The priority was to encourage nesting stilts into a location that contained good chick rearing habitat and where the nests could be protected from predations by foxes and badgers, and also avoid the situation of the bird nesting near or within the large Black-headed gull colony.

Black Barns 5 was decided to be the ideal place to concentrate our efforts after they had nested there in 2015. Topping out large stands of Scirpus, but leaving enough for cover, and grazing by horses to open up margins was done in late winter. The pool was also encircled with an electric anti-predator fence. We sat back and waited. A female stilt arrived on the pool on the 13th April, a further pair on the 17th and a fourth the following day. Two birds left on 19th but 3 days later the remaining pair were joined by 6 more birds, the pair that had left and a further 4 (3 females and a male). Stilts had been recorded at 2 other sites in the UK in April, yet 8 birds had passed through or settled on Black Barn 5.



*Will Tofts 2016.*

Three pairs eventually settled, 2 within the fenced area and one nest outside. Despite predator control being carried out on site, the nest outside the electric fence was predated by a fox, several days after nesting and the second nest, bizarrely, failed due to the other male within the fenced area removing the eggs from the nest.

The remaining nest hatched 2 young; however both died in two separate torrential downpours, one chick only 10 days away from fledging.

The pair that nested outside the fence reappeared at Higham Marshes and nested around 10th June. Incubation went without drama until 2 days before hatching was due when the nest was predated by Carrion crows.

*A full account of Black-winged Stilts from 2014 - 2016 can be found in British Birds Vol. 109.643-700.*

## **2017**

Preparation for the arrival of stilts in 2017 by extending the area that was fenced in 2016 and the continued cutting and grazing regime. After the extremely dry winter, water levels were significantly down around the Black Barn pools. These are only rain fed, so availability is restricted to what is there. Black barns 4 and 5 had dried out the previous summer/autumn and levels hadn't risen to where we had wanted them be. Consequently we moved all the water out of BB4 into 5, to improve the levels, but also to make BB4 (which is unfenced) less attractive for nesting in.

The stilts arrived in the UK late March/early April, with one turning up in Sussex on the 29th March (5th earliest record in the UK), with the first stilt turning up at Cliffe on the 31st March. Over the next two weeks, there was a big influx of birds, with one even turning up in Iceland on the 20th April (their first record). There was plenty of toing and throwing between reserves in the Thames basin, with Cliffe, RSPB South Essex and RSPB Rainham Marshes have the majority of bird days.

One pair seemed to settle at Cliffe in Black Barn 2, and were seen copulating on 5th April. No nest building was seen, and the birds left site around a week later, turning up at RSPB South Essex alongside another pair of Stilts, which nested on the 29th April at Vange Marsh. Unfortunately this nest failed 5 days later, probably due to fox predation. We all thought that this would be the end of the stilt saga this year, as most of the big influx of stilts so far had departed.

However both pairs from South Essex returned to Cliffe on 9th May and started nesting on the 18th and 19th May, both within the fenced area. One nest on a spit of land, the other nest built up within the water.



*Rob Budgen 2017*



*Rob Budgen 2017*

The incubation period proceeded mostly uneventfully with little work required but to manage water levels within the pool during the occasion downpour. The pair that nested within the water did stop incubating for 8 hours on 24th May, which caused some worry that the eggs might have chilled.

Thankfully both nests hatched on the 11th June and 12th June, both producing 4 young each. The first week or so, the young spent most of their time around the nest sites, not wondering far, and were defended diligently by the parents from any gulls commuting over the pool. The 8 pairs of Avocet and their young dominated the best feeding areas within the pool, yet despite this the young stilts still only used a small amount the area they were in to feed. After only

2 weeks the young stilts were able to fend for themselves reasonable well, with them seen seeing off several black-headed gulls feeding nearby.

A laser (consented to be used by Natural England), which has been used previously to deter gulls at Tern colonies was used to move on loafing Lesser Black-backed gulls in the adjacent pools.

Unfortunately one of the young was lost from the pair with both adults. The chick seemed to be smaller in size and had been spending quite a bit time away from the rest of the family. It had disappeared previously, only to reappear a day or two later which led to it being named Lazarus.



*Rob Budgen 2017*

Management after the young hatched consisted of keeping water levels up within the fenced area by moving water from the rest of the black barn pools. This has two impacts of reducing food available to Black-headed gulls feeding on chironomid larvae made available as levels dropped and also encouraging the young to feed nearer to vegetation that can be used as cover from aerial predators.

Sadly the male stilt from the pair that nested in the water disappeared from site 2 weeks after the young hatched. Although it is not known what happened, it is unlikely he would have abandoned the female, so was therefore assumed to have died. We believe this was the male stilt that had also nested at Cliffe in 2015 and 2016 and had been given the nickname 'Darth Wader.'

Throughout the nesting period through to fledging, so many of the RSPB volunteers and local birders put in countless hours from dawn until dusk watching over the nests and young. Their work was invaluable and is greatly appreciated. Eggers remain a potential problem (although very small) for new colonising species and consequently news was not put out regarding their breeding.

Although stilts had a successful breeding season in 2017 across Britain, with 4 pairs fledging 13 young, their establishment as a regular breeding species in Britain is by no means assured. There is little suitable breeding habitat which is free from disturbance from people and dogs, and where predation levels are sufficiently low. Key measures include minimising predator, especially by foxes and badgers; preventing disturbance from humans including bird watchers and photographers; preventing theft of the eggs; and minimising rapid fluctuations in water levels at nest sites.

These key intervention needs for pioneer birds has been established and implemented at Cliffe Pools and with some luck we hope to see them flourish for many years to come.



*Rob Budgen 2017.*

**Will Tofts**