

Annual Report for Sept 2019 – Sept 2020 for WSCC

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*This report outlines the RSPB's management activity at Pagham Harbour Local Nature Reserve during 2019-20 (including an update on key breeding bird species), reporting against the Service Level Agreement with West Sussex County Council.*

### **Headlines**

- The Covid-19 pandemic had a diverse impact on the reserve with multiple issues arising but increased visitor footfall on site.
- Despite impacts, a full plan of reserve management was carried out.
- Management of the breeding seabird colony is seeing continued unprecedented success.
- The broad ecological results on the reserve remain good but a major new project is being developed for the Ferry pool/fields area in order to address concerns there.

## **1. Ecology**

### **Key wintering bird species:**

#### **Dark-bellied Brent Goose:**

The maximum count during the winter of 2019-20 was 2526, down on last year but still comfortably in excess of the Management plan target is 2000+.

#### **Northern Pintail:**

The maximum count was 121, a decrease from the previous year (346). Numbers continue to be lower than the target figure in the management plan, (600), but this would appear to be consistent with the fall in the national wintering population of pintail in the UK. In particular, the continued mild, wet winter of 2019/20 appears to have impacted duck numbers arriving to overwinter nationally.

### **Key breeding bird species:**

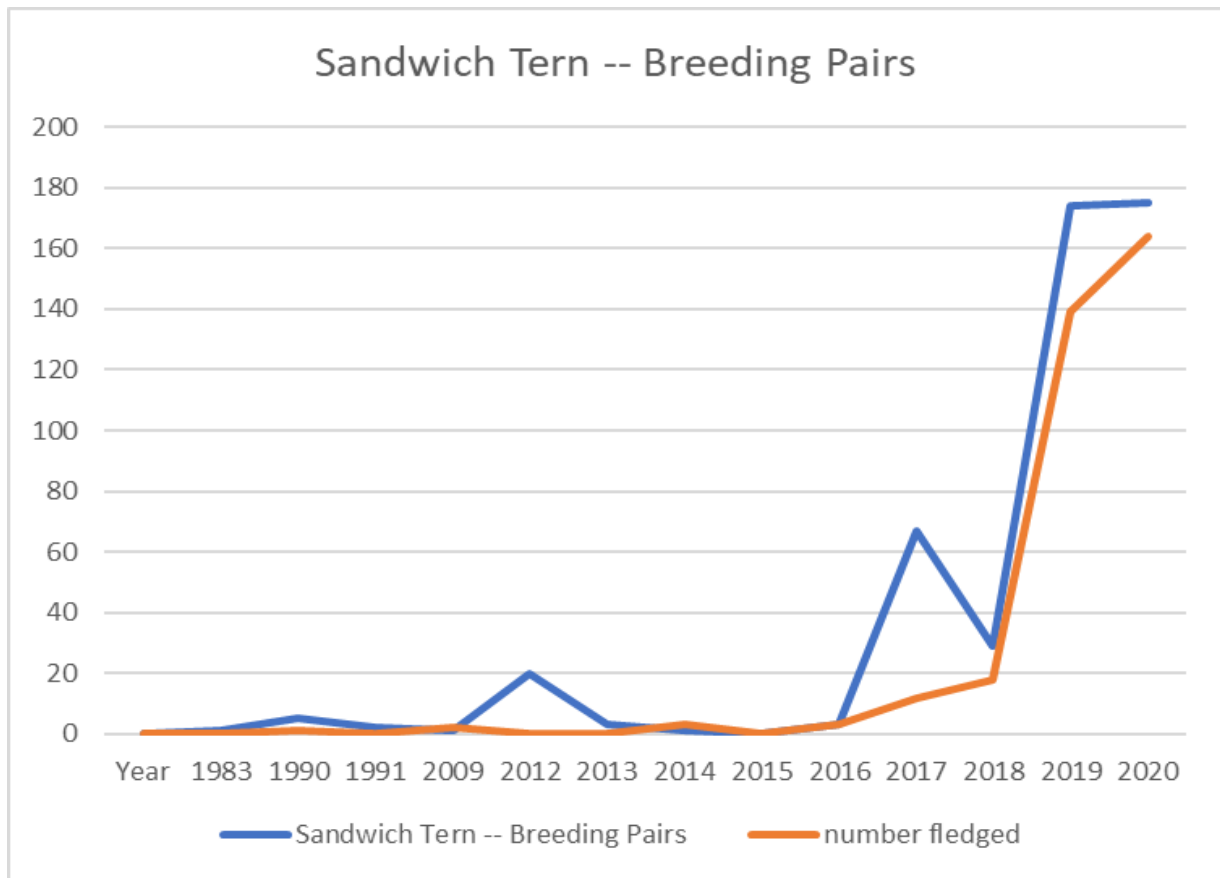
#### **Little Tern:**

The same number of pairs as last year (21) bred successfully on Tern and New Islands, producing 15 chicks, a productivity rate of 0.71 and third highest number since 1990(!). This continues to exceed the management plan target of 12 pairs and a productivity of 0.5. Pagham Harbour consistently performs as one of the most productive sites for Little Terns on the south coast with the only other colony of comparison being the colony under 24hr protection at Portland/Chesil.

#### **Sandwich tern:**

2020 saw a further successful development of the sandwich tern colony which is fast becoming the most successful on the south coast of Britain and of national importance within

the UK. A new reserve record of 175 pairs fledged a total of 164 chicks. This shows a rapid growth since the major seabird works in 2018.



**Common tern:**

A further decrease in nesting pairs from 12 in 2019, to 11 in 2020 but productivity remains good (and above the management plan target) with 8 chicks fledged (0.73 productivity)

**Black-headed gull:**

This species has gone through a remarkable population increase, 304 chicks fledged from 294 pairs in 2017 (already a fivefold increase on 2016) 580 chicks fledged from 459 pairs in 2018 610+ fledged from an impressive 523 pairs in 2019 785 fledged from 583 pairs in 2020.

**Mediterranean gull:**

2 pairs fledged a total of 3 chicks this year.

**Lapwing:**

There were three known attempts at breeding on the Ferry Field this year with no known success. Monitoring of this species was impacted severely by the pandemic and emergency measures.

**Redshank:**

There were 4 known breeding attempts by Redshank on the Ferry field during 2020 and no known fledged young. As with lapwing, monitoring of this species was severely impacted by the pandemic and the emergency measures introduced to combat it.

**Little Egret and Grey heron:**

The trend for both these species is on the increase but breeding pairs of both species dropped slightly this year. Little egret dropped from 25 pairs in 2018 to 23 pairs this year and grey heron dropped from 17 pairs in 2018 to 13 this year. Compare these figures with 17 pairs in 2015 and 9 pairs in 2014 for Little Egret and 14 pairs in 2015 and 10 pairs in 2014 for Grey heron.

**Cattle Egret:**

During the winter of 2018-19 a large aggregation of cattle egret was present in and around the reserve reaching 26 by mid-winter. Although they did not breed in 2019 the birds did return in the winter 2019-20, remained throughout and in May, 5 pairs were recorded in the Heron count as nesting. When the roost count was carried out in July a minimum of 5 juveniles were recorded. This is a first for Sussex.

**General bird breeding results:**

Along with the designated wetland birds using the reserve to breed, the Pagham Harbour reserve has quite a variety of other bird species making themselves at home. During the 2020 breeding season, this included a pair of Tawny Owls raising 3 chicks, a pair of Kestrels raising 5 chicks, Stock Doves and Blue tits all of which raised young in nest-boxes with cameras inside. Usually, these images would be beamed back directly to a multi-screen TV monitor in the visitor centre where visitor could watch them live over a drink or snack. Sadly, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, although the technology was back in place and slightly upgraded by March 2020, it was not possible to invite visitors inside to watch during the breeding season this year. We look forward to offering this facility again during 2021.

**Other notable bird species:**

Of particular note over the course of the reporting period, the following species of interest were recorded: Bee-eater, Black winged Stilt, Golden Oriole, Snow Bunting, Nightjar, Rose-Coloured Starling, Yellow Browed Warbler and Lapland Bunting.

**Ecological and infrastructure Management:**

The main features affecting ecological management during the period September 2019 to August 2020 were the exceptionally wet winter and spring of 2019/20, the dry summer of 2020 and of course the near ubiquitous impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and all that came with it. Despite this, a near full management year was carried out with mostly successful results.

Grazing was able to take place on almost all the areas intended and for the most part, temporary fencing for this was installed either before or after the severest lockdown period. As noted earlier, some monitoring of designated breeding species was impacted (particularly early spring wetland breeders) and so the full result of this management is difficult to measure during this year. Nevertheless, the continuing long term management keeps us in a good position to see further positive results next year.

The ferry pool and fields accumulated a large amount of freshwater during the winter/spring which lowered the salinity of the pool to zero on occasions. Salt water exchange via the sluice in the south east corner was used at times in order to adjust this but due to the current, very limited, infrastructure for controlling water levels and seawater/freshwater exchange, it was not possible to keep the salinity within management plan levels. Likewise, despite the excess freshwater over winter, the dry summer led to hyper salinity as a significant part of the pool evaporated. In order to mitigate this, a commercial water pump was hired and bought onto site to abstract water under licence from the rithe in order to keep water levels at an appropriate level until the Autumn rains returned. The experience of this

year has fed in to the developing major project for this part of the site, covered under infrastructure in section 3.8.

Vegetation management for breeding shorebirds on the harbour islands was carried out over winter 19/20 and spring 20 with extremely successful results (as noted above). The anti-predator fencing now securing 'Tern Island' was bought back online shortly before the lockdown period as well as seasonal anti-predator fencing on 'New Island'. Special mention must go to the warden team who worked long, unsociable hours in order to get this completed as the global situation worsened and restrictions started to be implemented. Temporary fencing on the Church Norton spit was put in place before the main easing of the spring lockdown and this had a clear impact.

Continued erosion on the Pagham Spit has resulted in a large scale change of the geography there over the past year. Although responsibility for the various infrastructure there remains an unresolved issue, the RSPB has taken proactive action to remove the leading edge of the boardwalk as it become undercut by erosion and risks being lost to the sea or causing a risk to the public (multiple days' work twice a month at times). Likewise, fencing has been removed for the same reason.

The reedbed in Mill Pond Marsh continues to be cut and cleared, on rotation, by RSPB staff and volunteers. As with all group work this year, a number of changes had to be made in order to carry out this task in a Covid secure manner and volunteer numbers on any one occasion were limited.

Scrub clearance as needed has been carried out and attention was paid to sluices and ditches where need during the heavy rainfall over winter. Multiple discussions with property owners neighbouring the reserve were carried out as part of this and so far, the majority of issues have been resolved.

Work at Norton Priory, to create and maintain glades has continued with positive results. New fencing has been installed as part of our agreement with the owner to the mutual benefit of the reserve.

## **2. Archaeology**

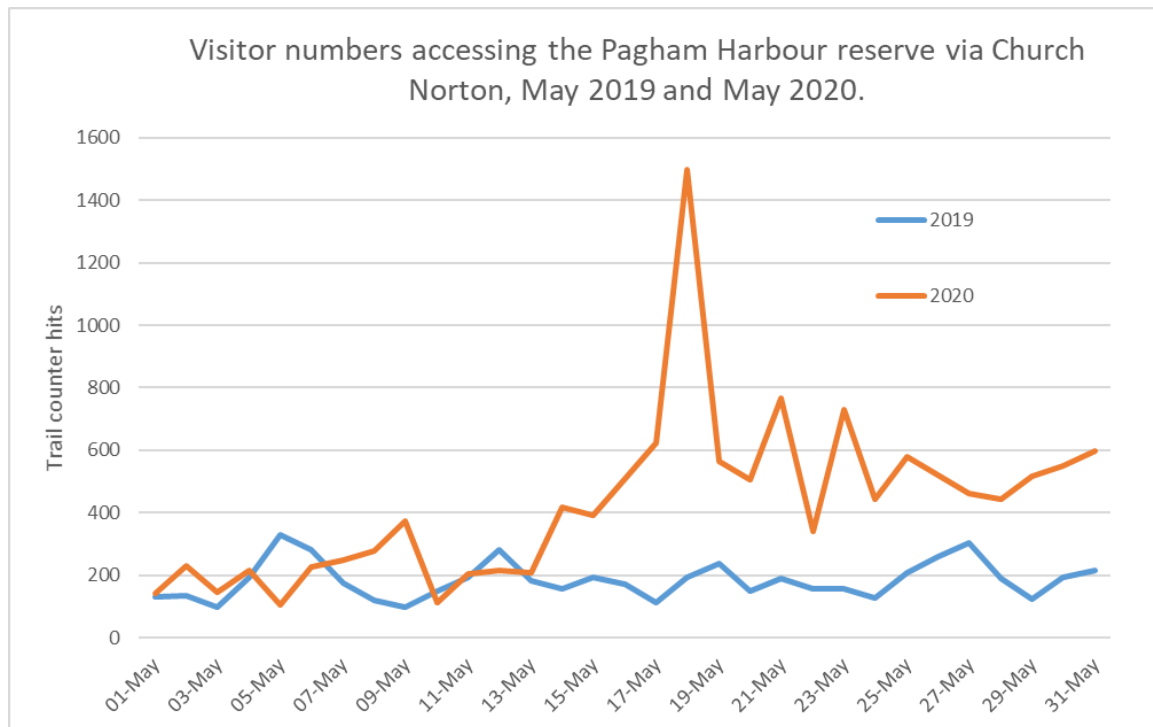
No major archaeological discoveries were reported within the reserve during Sept 2019-Sept 2020. As normal, the mound at Church Norton continues to be grazed by a small number of sheep and any invasive scrub is removed by hand. No digging or disturbance to the Scheduled Ancient Monument has been found.

## **3. Visitors and local communities**

### **3.1 Visits**

The impact of the pandemic on the number of visitors using the reserve has been significant. Government guidance to make use of outdoor spaces has resulted in a substantial increase in demand to access the site. There was a sharp increase in footfall just prior to the first emergency lockdown period as guidance initially changed followed by a period of more normal (presumably very localised) visitor traffic during the spring lockdown itself. Towards the middle of May, as the first lockdown period eased, massive and at times overwhelming demand was felt across the reserve as the public from a wide area (in many cases travelling multiple hours) arrived to access the site. Footfall across the reserve peaked at around 650% higher than last year in the middle of May before stabilising at approximately double that of 2019 throughout the rest of the summer. This has caused a variety of capacity and

other issues which staff spent a large part of the year responding to. Numbers eased slightly but remained higher than previous years as the summer continued and moved into the Autumn.



The RSPB has an engagement programme for children called “Connections to Nature”, which is a measurable encounter with the natural world. Unfortunately, the pandemic response has put a stop to our active promotion of this, but we still managed to record 1294 Connections to Nature in the period April 19 – March 2020.

The split between RSPB members and non-members visiting the reserve seems to have remained stable at about 45% & 55% respectively.

### 3.2. Bird disturbance mitigation:

The newly appointed Visitor Experience Officer assigned to minimising breeding and roosting bird disturbance on the reserve had carried out 90 patrols as of September 14<sup>th</sup>, generally lasting 2-3 hours each at an average of 2.6 patrols a week. 105 ‘in depth interactions’ had taken place with visitors by mid-September whilst on patrol. Sadly, as well as a wealth of pleasant conversations with visitors, the post lockdown boom did see a marked increase in anti-social behaviour with fires lit on the beach, incursions into fenced off (nesting) areas, dirt bikes and quads trespassing and littering. The visitor experience officer also produced an array of new leaflets and temporary signage which were used this year as well as planning and preparing for events (for example, dog training days in co-ordination with local businesses) which had to be postponed and will now go ahead in 2021 instead due to restrictions in spring and early summer.

### 3.2. Field teaching visits and outreach

After a relatively standard winter period, field teaching visits and outreach was suspended in March in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions. The staff leading this (based at our Pulborough reserve and within the national team) remained on furlough for the

summer but are now returning. Current plans are being put together to relaunch this facility in a Covid secure manner during early 2021.

### 3.3. Public events

Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic response, our planned 2020 events programme was paused at the end of February. Nevertheless, we've been investigating other options in the meantime. Of particular note, following the launch of our reserve twitter and Facebook accounts this year, we have trialled two successful 'live' online moth trapping events with reserve experts talking through the species recorded and taking questions directly from the public.

Our 2019 programme (a period partially covered by this report) ranged from drop-in type events such as "Guides in the hides", organised walks, children's holiday activities, right through to specialist interest events such as photography and art workshops. In addition, we worked with outside events such as the Selsey Outdoor & Walking Festival.

Below is a breakdown of the events programme for 2019.

- Guided walks – 19
- Workshops – 13
- Children's holiday events – 32
- Others (beach cleans, guide in hide events etc) 11

### 3.4 Headlines from visitor questionnaires

Visitor experience is extremely important to the RSPB and we continue to monitor visitor's comments through an annual questionnaire. In addition, during 2019, we carried out surveys after events to ascertain which are most enjoyable and have the longest-lasting impact on potentially changing visitor perceptions and behaviour.

#### 2016-2017

6. How would you rate the reserve on the following?	Very good	Good	Neither good nor poor	Poor	Very poor	Don't know
Standard of maintenance and upkeep	178	134	10	1	0	3
Friendliness and welcome of staff	298	26	1	1	0	2
Quality of facilities for my group	100	101	11	0	0	23
Quality of facilities for visitors with disabilities	47	41	17	4	1	104
Visit here today in terms of overall quality of experience	223	94	3	1	0	1

#### 2017-2018

	Very good	Good	Neither good nor poor	Poor	Very poor	Don't know
Standard of maintenance and upkeep	179	106	12	2	0	0
Friendliness and welcome of staff	260	39	2	0	0	1
Quality of facilities for my group	123	69	11	2	0	24
Quality of facilities for visitors with disabilities	63	37	16	4	0	93
Visit here today in terms of overall quality of experience	182	96	4	1	0	2

#### 2018-2019

##### Headlines from visitor questionnaires for 2016-2017

	Very good	Good	Neither good nor poor	Poor	Very poor	Don't know
Visit here today in terms of overall experience	195	65	2	0	0	1
Opportunities to learn something new about nature/wildlife	138	92	24	1	0	4
Standard of upkeep and maintenance	190	64	4	0	0	2
Friendliness of staff and volunteers	245	21	1	0	0	0
The quality of facilities for visitors with disabilities	126	39	4	0	0	76

The tables above are snapshots from the visitor experience questionnaires showing a decrease in ratings of "Poor" and "Very poor".

2019-2020 shows no poor or very poor scores:

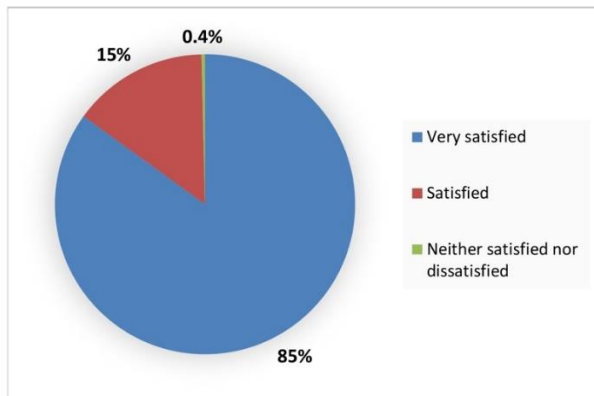


RSPB Visitor Survey Report 2019/2020  
Pagham Harbour – 259 questionnaires

Q7 How would you rate the reserve on the following, both questionnaires?

	Very Good	Good	Neither good nor bad	Poor	Very poor	Don't know	Total
1. Overall experience	220	36	2	0	0	0	258
2. Learnt about nature	184	59	6	0	0	2	251
3. Standard of upkeep	213	34	8	0	0	0	255
4. Friendliness of staff	247	9	0	0	0	0	256
5. Facilities for disabled	111	35	5	0	0	78	229

Q8 Thinking about your visit overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are with your visit, both questionnaires?



Satisfaction Level	Number
Very satisfied	215
Satisfied	37
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	1
Dissatisfied	0
Very dissatisfied	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>253</b>

### 3.5 Volunteers

As in all areas, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact on both our volunteers ability to be part of reserve delivery and also our ability to use volunteer support. All group activity was suspended in March 2020 with only limited numbers currently allowed to return to supporting roles in a Covid Secure manner. The demographics of our volunteer team and the nature of the pandemic have meant that a higher percentage than the general population are considered vulnerable to severe impact from infection via current UK Gov advice.

Nevertheless, currently we still have 101 volunteers registered at the reserve. Volunteers support in various ways – practical reserve management every Monday and Wednesday (currently limited to 6 people in each group working in a Covid secure manner); monitoring and surveying (mostly singularly, in socially distanced pairs or within one 'bubble', general odd-jobs to keep the site running and serving drinks, snacks and information to the public (from behind a clear acrylic screen) at the visitor information centre on Selsey Road.

Volunteer hours account for approximately 6,800-7,000 hours per annum – equating to 3.5 extra full-time staff.

Two volunteer social events are normally organised each year, a winter get-together at a local village hall, and a summer barbecue at the visitor centre. Sadly, the initial winter get together had to be cancelled due to the danger to life warning issued for Storm Ciara which it coincided with. The rescheduled get together was then postponed due to the Covid-19

restrictions as the situation began to develop at speed in March. These are an opportunity to thank the volunteers for all their hard work and have been much missed by staff and volunteers alike. Currently, the aim is to have a significant volunteer thankyou event in Spring/Summer 2021 in order mark what is hoped will be the end of the major impacts from the pandemic.

The volunteers continue receive quarterly newsletters, with articles predominantly written by staff, updating them on all aspects of the reserve. In addition, volunteers this year have received regular updates from the wardening team in order to keep them connected with the reserve during the restrictions. Our Volunteer Coordinator, a volunteer himself, takes on the recruiting and induction of the new volunteers, including coordinating any student work experience placements, of which we get 2 or 3 each year.

### **3.6 Pagham Harbour Local Communities Forum**

No community forums have been able to take place this year due to the restrictions brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic since later February 2020. At present, we are not envisaging the ability to host an in person forum will exist before Spring/Summer 2021. Options for a digital forum early in the new year are being researched but the format will necessarily be slightly different.

### **3.7 E-updates**

Although the previous e-updates are no longer possible (as covered in the last report), the reserve now has it's own Twitter and Facebook feeds where updates of some of the work being carried out and the wildlife visiting the reserve are posted. Number of interactions have been steadily increasing since launch with over 1300 people now following updates. Previously, social media was carried out nationally or regionally within the RSPB but we are now planning for local content on a regular basis with a particular thrust on this aimed for the coming months and into spring 2021.

### **3.8 Infrastructure projects**

After the substantial structural and visitor facility upgrades started in 2017 and covered by the previous report, no significant infrastructure projects have taken place during the period Sept 2019 – Sept 2020.

Plans are currently being worked on for a major ecological habitat creation/restoration project on the Ferry Pool and Field area of the reserve with the aim of these coming to fruition (subject to permissions and funding timescales) in the first quarter of the decade. Initial estimates place the cost at around £200,000 with the results being better control of water levels, increased breeding habitat for the designated species and others, a better visitor experience and increased resilience to climate change.

Smaller but still significant plans are also being developed for the Halsey's Farm area of the reserve in order to increase breeding success of designated species and maintain its wetland nature during dry summers.

A review of visitor infrastructure across the reserve in response to the increased footfall during the Covid-19 pandemic will be taking place during 2021.

Some basic trail infrastructure upgrades are expected as part of the English Coastal path currently under development and we'll be working with Natural England where possible to deliver these in an appropriate manner for both the public and wildlife.



### **3.9 Pagham Harbour and Coastal Issues Advisory Group**

Verbal update by Wez Smith.

### **3.10 Staffing:**

The current level of staffing is outlined below. All of the current staff are full time.

**Yianni Andrews** – Area Manager for Sussex, Surrey and London

**Wez Smith** – Acting Site Manager for Pagham Harbour and Medmerry, Site Manager for Langstone and Chichester Harbours. (Site Manager: Eastern Solent Reserves as of Jan 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 encompassing all the above).

**Ivan Lang** - Warden

**Adam Taylor** – Warden

**David Whelan** – Warden (Also covering the Langstone Harbour reserve on a near 50/50 split). Started on March 23<sup>rd</sup>.

**Roy Newnham** - Visitor Experience Officer

**Francesca Aaskov** – Visitor Experience Officer (bird disturbance mitigation). Finished October 25<sup>th</sup> 2020.

**Lucy Tozer** - Learning Officer (based at Pulborough Brooks reserve)

The past twelve months has seen multiple changes in staff. A new area manager, Yianni Andrews, took over in September 2019 following a national structural reorganisation within the RSPB. Wez Smith took over as acting Site Manager in late December 2019. David Whelan started as a Warden covering both Pagham, Medmerry and Langstone Harbour on March 23<sup>rd</sup> and has been deployed extensively at Pagham during our response to the surge in demand.

One warden and two visitor experience officers were furloughed by necessity during the initial spring lockdown with the RSPB paying full salary during this time.

Two additional new members of staff will be employed early in the new year to facilitate the bird disturbance mitigation work in co-ordination with Arun and Chichester District councils, a full time visitor experience post to replace Francesca and a 0.5 visitor experience offer to further deliver this.

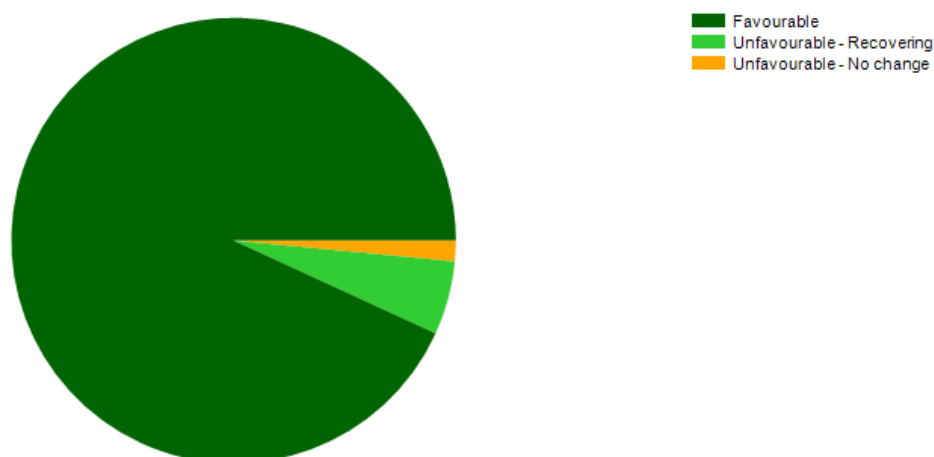
In addition to this, LIFE funding has now been secured for a wider eastern Solent role to support beach nesting birds over the next three years and this role will support our work at Pagham as well as elsewhere.

#### 4. Statutory condition assessments and consents

Pagham Harbour LNR has 21 reportable Site of Special Scientific Interest units, assessed by Natural England. The table below shows the latest SSSI Condition Assessment results. (no new assessments have been published since the last report).

	% meeting area of favourable or unfavourable recovering	Favourable	Unfavourable - Recovering	Unfavourable - No change	Unfavourable - Declining	Partially destroyed	Destroyed	Not Recorded
<b>Area (ha)</b>	619.61	585.93	33.67	9.41				
<b>Percentage</b>	98.50%	93.15%	5.35%	1.50%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

Condition Summary



NB – some of these assessments date back to before the RSPB were involved with the management of Pagham Harbour, such as the assessment below. However in this case the Woodland Grant Scheme and the works planned during the period of the grant have both been completed.

Broadleaved, Mixed and Yew Woodland - Lowland	Kristoffer Hewitt	29/04/2009	Unfavourable - Recovering	WGS has been agreed for the wood and is underway, with works concentrating on removal of bracken, rhododendron and sycamore. Early results are very encouraging.
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#### 5. Agreements with Landowners

At the start of September 2020, our FBT covering the majority of The Severals area was ended by the land owner. As a consequence, this part of the reserve has been withdrawn from our agri-environment scheme as our management rights there have ceased. It remains part of the SSSI with all relevant protections.

## 6. Finances

2019/20 budget actuals

Income (k)	£ ('000s)	Expenditure	£ ('000s)
Net income	£198.470	Net expenditure	£196.891

Financial summary:

- Both income and expenditure were significantly lowered due to a delay in employing staff under the bird disturbance mitigation work. Likewise, a significant local saving to the Pagham budget between December 2019 and April 2020 was the result of staff from other RSPB sites covering vacant roles (primarily the Site Manager position).

2020/21 budget forecasts

Income (k)	£ ('000s)	Expenditure	£ ('000s)
Net income	247.932.	Net expenditure	£246.336

Financial summary:

- The initial forecast for 20/21 aimed for a small local surplus of £1.59K on the budget at Pagham Harbour. This is now certain to change due to near total loss of event income and a fall in and sales income along with the increased cleaning and other pandemic related costs.

NB - It is important to note that the expenditure figures do not account for all the spend (estimated at several tens of thousands of pounds) on in-house RSPB support from Land Agency, Project Management, Special Projects, Finances, HR, IT and Ecology. All this support came out of core RSPB charitable reserves.

## 7. SLA obligations:

Flood defence –

The RSPB has continued to engage positively with the Pagham Harbour and Coastal Issues Group. Both the acting site manager and warden have attended meetings including site visits at Church Norton further discuss how to facilitate landform changes without negatively impacting the habitat as well as possible mitigation works if needed.

Public access –

A considerably increased amount of staff and volunteer time has been expended over the year in order to maintain rights of way and permissive paths free from encroaching vegetation by cutting back trails, mowing paths and path edges. This has been of considerably increased importance due to impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic with social distancing meaning passing places have been much more important and the vastly increased number of visitors on site being able to flow relatively freely without bottlenecks. Thankfully, the management regime from the previous year prepared us well for this. A particular issue this year has resulted from the increased use of foot only rights of way by a very small minority of cyclists. Signage has been repeatably placed around the footpath network in order to explain what usage is appropriate but this has not been completely successful.

The RSPB has continued to support further development of an appropriate and suitable cycle network including facilitating the expansion of the network south to Selsey via

Medmerry in co-ordination with WSCC. There remains work to do on this area and further expansion is desired.

#### Car parking –

Car parking access remained available except for during the strictest part of the spring lockdown (at which point they were official closed although still used by the public).

Due to the vastly increased demand for time outside once the initial lockdown ended in mid-May, car park demand was greatly increased. This was a particularly bad problem at the Church Norton carpark which resulted in numerous complaints from the adjoining residence and also church goers and people visiting the graves of loved ones in the cemetery. The sheer scale of demand to park at this carpark meant that cars were regularly queuing up to park as well as parking illegally along the side of the road whilst yet more arrived and turned around. As the only proximate access for this part of the harbour, the church and the nearby houses, both the road and carpark here already faced serious questions with regards to long term ability to cope with growing demand anyway but this was massively brought into focus by the pandemic's impact. Although the carpark area is owned by WSCC and comes under the terms of the SLA, three spaces at the northern end of the carpark are requested by signage to be kept clear for people visiting the church. These were full as standard in the post lockdown period and people visiting graves at this active cemetery were often left unable to do so and distressed. A meeting was held via zoom in June with attendance from RSPB, WSCC, Chichester District council, the church and a local resident but no satisfactory result was able to be determined. For the RSPB's part, we added temporary signage at the main road turn off stating that there was no sea access, regularly requested via our social media channels that people use our main carpark at the visitor centre and offered to make the carpark access only via request with the church or us, this was not desired by the other parties. The situation has calmed down now but demand remains at above pre pandemic levels and the potential for further exacerbated issues remains.

#### Visitor centre opening –

The centre opening hours remained the same as in previous years up until the start of the pandemic (10am to 4pm, 7 days a week). The visitor centre was closed during the spring lockdown period but reopened under Covid secure principles during the summer with a number of volunteers returning to a slightly different role behind a clear acrylic sheet and staff present during opening hours to answer questions and process contactless payments for takeaway snacks and drinks. The upgraded toilets remained open except for the initial spring lockdown period and are now on an increased cleaning regime utilising both staff and outside contractors' multiple times daily in order to meet covid secure standards.

Previous to the pandemic, the centre was only closed on Christmas Day, Boxing Day and during exceptional circumstances (severe weather events or funerals for example). Closing the centre has always been a last resort and we are very much aiming for a full and improved visitor centre experience during 2021.