



Spring 2009

A very Happy Easter to all our members and supporters!

In our last newsletter we were able to confirm that we had completed the purchase of Torpel Manor Field and signed a lease on land at Bainton Heath. This run of good news continues as we have very recently signed an agreement with Tarmac to work in partnership with them to manage the nature reserve at Etton Road – Maxey Pits.

We have been talking about this for some time so it is good to have completed the agreement and we can now take over management of the site and encourage our members to visit and enjoy this fabulous place.

The reserve lies to the west of the Etton Road as it runs north from the Maxey Cut, all the way up to the cross roads with the Maxey Road. It is our largest reserve at around 60 acres and is made up of areas of mud, reed, open water and grassland. In time it will develop into a large area of reed bed and wet woodland.

This is probably one of the best bird-watching sites in Peterborough and it is pretty good for insects and mammals too. Last year avocets bred here for the first time for many years in Peterborough and it attracted a rare buff-breasted sandpiper from America, as well as many other interesting passage waders.

But its real beauty for those who just love nature, rather than rare birds (I like both!), is as a lovely place to walk and enjoy the seasonal sights and sounds. Perhaps my favourite time of year at Maxey is late on a summer evening, when the pit is full of the noise of the gull and tern colonies and lapwings and redshanks flit back and forwards across the water foraging for

food for their chicks. Hobbies hunt overhead, catching dragonflies and eating them in flight. Sitting up on one of the banks you can enjoy it all – there is always movement and a very peaceful natural noise!

Access to the site will be by permit and Tarmac will (probably next winter) put up fencing and stiles. The good news is that whilst the permit will cost £10 for the general public, ***it is free for Langdyke members!*** Please let me know if you would like a permit.

We will be arranging a summer evening visit to the site and will circulate details shortly. In the meantime we are looking for volunteers who would like to be involved in running this reserve – perhaps from Etton, Glinton or Maxey? Please do call me (Richard Astle) if you would like to be involved.

Meanwhile our other three reserves continue to develop well. We have submitted an application for permission to start work at Torpel to English Heritage (we have to have permission as it is a scheduled monument). This will include re-fencing the site so we can graze it and starting work on the refit of the stables into a small exhibition centre.

We have also started survey work at Bainton Heath to work out the best management plan for this very sensitive site. As mentioned last time, there will be no general access to the Heath, but do come along to our nightingale walk there on 30 April.

And remember to keep looking at the Langdyke Blog: <http://langdykeworld.blogspot.com/> and if you need help using it, drop me a line richard@athene-communications.co.uk

The Natural World

I took the day off work today, 3 April, and spent the morning out and about. There are certainly plenty of signs of spring around, even if it is a bit cold!

Wood anemone and cowslip already carpet the floors of many of the local woods and the sound of the chiff-chaff, one of our earliest migrants rings out from the tree-tops. No sign yet of the more melodious blackcap – but I would expect the first birds to be singing from Royce Wood by Easter Sunday.

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Sand martins and swallows have already been seen locally. A swallow was at Swaddywell on 27 March and I saw my first sand martin flying over Heath Road the same day.

But if our spring birds are starting to arrive, our winter birds haven't gone yet. Peter and Judy Holt reported up to six reed buntings still feeding in their garden in late March and there are still redwings and fieldfare around too. Whilst over at Maxey there were 1200 golden plover this morning, many in their immaculate summer plumage of gold-spangled backs and black fronts, stopping off on their way to the northern moors for the breeding season.

Much the most exciting sighting of the period was the female Black Redstart at Swaddywell on 21 March. This is a pretty rare summer migrant, and a first for Swaddywell. It was joined on the same day by two wheatears (male and female). Mick Beeson, found a little egret on the reserve the following week – another first! (He also saw a hen harrier there earlier in the year!).



Black redstart - Photo by Peter Beasley. Many thanks. <http://peterbeasley.blogspot.com>

Barn owls continue to be very much in evidence across our area. It is particularly exciting to see a pair hunting right on the edge of Helpston – I have watched them hunting along Broad Wheel Road in the early evening and David Cowcill also reports a pair regularly seen between Ginton and Peakirk. Little owls too are out and about in these early spring evenings – there is regularly one to be seen in the trees south of the Maxey Cut, near the Helpston Road.

Langdyke Events

The highlight of the last quarter was the Wild Welly Walk, held at Swaddywell on 18 February by the local Wildlife Trusts. Nearly 60 parents

and children turned up on a rather dismal day to enjoy some pond dipping and to discover animal tracks. Many thanks to Becky Naman for organising this event.

In addition on 12 March, Richard Keymer and I gave a talk on Swaddywell to Hunts Flora and Fauna Society. There were also two work-parties at Torpel and one at Swaddywell.

Weather Report by Peter Holt

After a sequence of very mild winters, the past winter has been noticeably colder with the three winter months of December, January and February being the coldest in this area since 1996 with below average daytime temperatures for each month.

Although there was a spell of mild weather in the week leading up to Christmas, overall December was cold with nearly half the month having frosty nights with six consecutive nights of frost at the end of the month. Unlike the January's of the previous two winters, which had been exceptionally mild, January 2009 was another cold month. The start saw a continuation of the cold nights resulting in 13 consecutive nights with a frost.

In our part of the UK, the generally cold weather of December and January had not produced any disruptive conditions and any snow had been limited in amount and duration. However the weather in the first half of February had a real bite to it with our area seeing the coldest and snowiest weather of the winter. From late January to mid-February there were sixteen consecutive frosty nights with the lowest temperature being on 7th when minus 8°C was recorded in Helpston. This corresponded to the most snowy period, when in the week ending Saturday February 7th, three separate snowfalls gave up to 25cm of snow with the heaviest fall on the 4th when up to 18cm fell in Helpston. This was by far the snowiest weather here since the 1980's. The weather finally changed in the middle of the month with the last two weeks being mild. Even so average daytime temperatures for February were below normal for the month as a whole.

In contrast to the previous few months, March has been milder than usual with some pleasant sunny weather at times although a short-lived northerly blast at the end reminded us that Spring had only just begun.

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Looking specifically at rainfall for the winter; following a dry December, rainfall for January 2009 was a little below average. Most of February's precipitation came in the first half of the month as snow resulting in rather higher figures than usual. From then on the weather became mainly dry into March with high pressure predominating resulting in a dry month. Actual rainfall figures recorded at Helpston (in millimetres) for the past months were

	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
2008/9	29.5	47.0	47.0	26.0
Long term ave	53.2	50.7	40.6	44.8

For long periods this winter the weather has broken with the recent trend for mild winters. The following table of average temperatures shows what was the case rather than what we imagine the temperatures were.

	2008/9 max	2008/9 Min	Long term ave max	Long term ave min
Dec	5.6	1.3	6.0	1.3
Jan	5.1	0.8	5.6	0.6
Feb	6.1	1.2	6.5	0.6

Focus on - The Bee-fly

One particular insect to look out for at this time of year is the bee-fly – a great example of something that looks like it should – a fly that looks like a bee. The fly has a strong superficial resemblance to a bumblebee, although the long, spindly legs are rather different from those of a bee



It has a long, rigid proboscis held out in front of the head, which is used to probe for nectar while the fly hovers at flowers (rather like a hummingbird). Its hovering and darting flight, accompanied by a high-pitched whine, is much more agile than that of a bee.

The larval stages live as parasites in the nests of solitary bees where they eat the food stores and grubs of their host. Nice. You should be able to find plenty of bee-flies in your garden at this time of year.

Forthcoming events

Don't miss the annual newt and toad count at Swaddywell on 16 April at 8pm. As mentioned we will be holding a nightingale walk on 30 April at Bainton Heath, meeting at Torpel Manor Field at 7pm. We will park there and then go over to the site.

Finally, 21 May is the walk along the Nene Washes, meet outside the old post office in Helpston at 7pm.

Contacts

Newsletter and walks

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