



## Langdyke Countryside Trust – Autumn 2004 Update

As ever the changing populations of our local birds are a good indicator of where we are with the seasons.

This year summer clung on into late September and early October with some bright and sunny days. Large numbers of swallows and house martins gathered over the village. By early October they – and the decent weather - had largely gone, although I saw 6 swallows flying over Swaddywell on 17 October on a damp, murky afternoon – now why would they be leaving, I wondered, as I pulled my hood over my head!

Two weeks before that the first redwings had already flown in from northern Europe to take up winter lodgings here. And on the 16<sup>th</sup> another winter visitor, the stonechat, turned up at Swaddywell.

Equally water levels at Swaddywell are a good indicator of what kind of weather we have been having. Not surprisingly, the technical description is currently WET! Although in fact water levels are only now getting back to normal after the dry summer of 2003.

One local species that seemed to like the wet conditions during July and August was the grass snake. Many of you reported sightings of snakes slithering across lawns and roads and one Sunday morning was greatly enhanced by the presentation of a five foot snake skin at the Church's Sunday club. There were also a number of young snakes that fell foul of traffic along Heath Road, so all in all it looks as if we have a pretty healthy population of this harmless snake.

Less harmless (although nothing to worry too much about), but also alive and kicking locally is the adder. After much speculation over many years, adders have been found at Castor Hanglands this summer. An important, if isolated colony.

Otherwise it has been a fairly quiet period for birds over the last three months or so. We didn't have as many wading birds at Swaddywell as usual over July and August, but even so a walk down the bottom of the pit will usually flush one or two snipe, short, dumpy birds with long beaks for digging around in the mud for food. They should be with us throughout the winter.

Look out too for green sandpipers – they can turn up almost anywhere locally, usually feeding in ditches or, for instance, along the Maxey Cut. They are small, black and white wading birds – looking quite like a house martin.

For the first time in over 150 years, red kites bred in Cambridgeshire this year. I don't know exactly where, but the chances are that before long we will have our own breeding birds locally as they spread across from Northamptonshire, where they are now well established.

Another bird returning after a long absence is the buzzard. We have had a pair with us most of the year, often seen over the woods at the top of Heath Road. This autumn groups of 6-8 buzzards have been seen soaring over Southey Woods, Milton Park and Burghley estate – proof that the local population is indeed doing well.

### Focus on ..... the spindle tree

One of the great sights of autumn in the local woods and hedgerows is the spindle tree.

A relatively small and unassuming tree for most of the year, the spindle comes into its own in October as its distinctive pink-red fruits stand out amongst its dark red leaves. There is a tall and very beautiful spindle in the meadow of the Blacklands reserve, opposite Castor Hanglands.

The white wood of the spindle has been used from ancient times for making – yes you guessed it, spindles! The 'spinsters', usually unmarried girls, held raw wool in one hand and rotated it onto a spindle with the other. The wood of the spindle was also known as skewerwood and pegwood – indicating its other uses.

Previously the powdered leaves and seeds of the spindles were dusted onto the skin of children and animals to drive away lice.

Now there's an idea ....

### Progress at Swaddywell

As mentioned in the last bulletin, the high rainfall and low rabbit population has meant some fairly rapid vegetation growth this summer.

We have recently submitted a major grant application to cover the cost of stock proofing the reserve in order to start grazing. We hope to hear shortly and if we get the go ahead to begin work on this over the winter. If we don't get the grant, we will have to look at other options for managing the vegetation.

### Shooting at Swaddywell

You are welcome to visit Swaddywell any time, but we are permitting shooting on 13 and 27 November; 11 and 18 December and each Saturday in January.

Please do keep away from the bottom of the pit on these dates. If you notice shooting over the pit at

any other times, please let us know. There shouldn't be any!

### **Nestboxes**

The nest boxes in Royce Wood were well occupied again this year, by the usual species of great and blue tit.

The nest boxes in the paddock on Heath Road (many thanks to Andy and Annette Mays for allowing us to put these up) were occupied by at least four pairs of tree sparrow. This is a bird that has suffered declines of over 90% in some areas, although it seems to be recovering again now. Our little colony is, therefore, quite significant. Let's hope they come back next year. Do look out for tree sparrows feeding in your gardens during the winter – there were up to 17 on Heath Road last winter and another 20 plus at Swaddywell.

### **Focus on .... Saw Sedge**

The Trust's chairman, Richard Keymer, was very excited this autumn on discovering saw sedge growing well at the bottom of the pit.

And quite rightly too. Not only is this a very graceful plant – i.e. it looks good – it is also quite rare locally – so it might help with grant applications!! A recent book on the flowers of Huntingdonshire and Peterborough has no records of saw sedge from Peterborough. So this could be a local first.

It is also an interesting plant. Known as saw or great fen sedge its leaves are sharply serrated and will give you a nasty cut if you aren't careful. It was, previously, the most popular variety of sedge used to cap a roof of thatched reed. Sedge was used for capping as reed is dry and brittle and will snap if bent. The leaves of the saw sedge are pliable but still very strong.

The poorer cuts of saw sedge were used to thatch hay rick and sometimes stacks of drying peat. Unlike reed, saw sedge is normally harvested in the summer and used to provide alternative employment for men who cut reed in the winter.

### **Update on membership**

The Trust's appeal for people to join as members has had a marvellous response so far. We have over 50 family members as well as a couple of corporate members, so have achieved our initial target of £1,000 for this year. Many thanks.

This will help pay for the lease on the top field and also for the purchase of hedging to go in over the winter and for the rental of equipment for clearing out some of the encroaching vegetation in the ponds. Pictures from the late 90s show the ponds as virtually clear spaces of water. They are now probably 70% vegetation, so work is needed.

### **Get involved**

If you would like to get more actively involved with the Trust, we meet every second Tuesday of the month. We are looking for a Treasurer and for help in managing community events.

### **Thanks to**

Apologies for not mentioning in the previous newsletter the work and support of the local Regionally Important Geological Sites group. The RIGS group provided funding for the installation of a board walk at the bottom of the pit and for work to uncover the pit's geological features. Many thanks.

### **Next Walks**

31 October – fungal foray at Bourne Woods. Meet at Helpston Post Office at 1330

21 November – Swaddywell working day – come along and help out! Lots to do and a bonfire at the end. Work starts from 1330 at the pit.

### **Next newsletter**

Due out at the end of January!

### **Contacts**

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