



## Langdyke Countryside Trust – Summer 2004 Update

Welcome to the very first Langdyke Countryside Trust quarterly update! Without the Helpston Chronicle, it seemed appropriate to launch our own newsletter in order to keep people in touch both with what we are doing and what is happening in the countryside around us.

### Summer 2004 – where did it go?

As the clouds gather over head and the rain starts to fall again, it hardly seems like summer as I write this. But despite the rain (and Swaddywell's ponds are as full now as they were in the winter) the natural signs of summer are all around us.

The Trust's annual glow worm walk on 12 July proved a great success, with over 40 tiny pin pricks of light revealing the presence of female glow worms at the Hills and Holes nature reserve. Given that the females die after mating, these are the tell tale signs of the remaining spinsters. Left on the shelf, perhaps, but at least they are still alive! If you find glow worms around Helpston, do let us know.

Butterflies too are beginning to emerge in better numbers than during June and early July. There were large numbers of small tortoiseshell and gatekeeper feeding on the flowering marjoram at Swaddywell on 17 July, along with large, small and Essex skipper – small orangey-brown butterflies, only told apart by size and the colour of their antennae! And there have been one or two records of white admirals, a relatively uncommon, but striking black and white woodland butterfly. One turned up at the school fete on 11 July. But this has not been a season to rival 2003 when Helpston was alive with painted ladies, commas, red and white admirals and large numbers of other more common butterflies.

Nor have I seen any hummingbird hawk moths yet – last year they were reported in record numbers throughout the village. There have been sightings elsewhere in Peterborough, but they don't seem to have reached us. Nevertheless, now is a good time to wander through the top field at Swaddywell and look out for some striking day flying moths – five spotted burnet in particular is a colourful black moth with (you guessed it) five red spots. Look out for it feeding on the blue field scabious. Down in the reeds in the ponds two tiny but very pretty 'micro'

moths were discovered this year; the ringed and beautiful china marks.

Flowers too are in full bloom at Swaddywell. The bee and pyramidal orchids have faded away now, but both were present in very high numbers in June. A walk through the pit now will reveal a lot of field scabious, yellow-wort (very prominent yellow flowers and unique leaves which grow right around the stem), common centuary (a bright pink gentian) and, the big white and pink umbellifer flowers of the wild carrot. Down in the quarry look out for wild marjoram and tucked away in the corner, a new species for Swaddywell, the common cudweed was discovered on the open day in June. Don't search for it – it may be quite rare (only four other records in Huntingdonshire), but it is not particularly pretty!

As summer draws on so the number of swifts, swallows and house martins increases as the first broods of young fledge and fly over the village. Swifts seem in very good numbers again this year. They are busy chasing each other over the rooftops at the moment, screaming loudly, but will be leaving us within the next two weeks. House martins and swallows will stay on until well in to October, raising two or three broods of young, if the weather permits. As you watch them do look out for hobbies, now is a good time of year to see this dashing falcon which likes nothing better than a tasty young house martin.

### Focus on ..... the Grasshopper warbler

We are just about at the end of the season to hear singing grasshopper warbler at Castor Hanglands, but if you rush up there in the next week or so, you will hear one of local nature's most distinctive sounds – the loud, reeling of the male grasshopper warbler, singing from dense vegetation.

This year is a record year for grasshopper warblers. In May there were at least 18 singing males, mainly found in the large area of new planting to the east of the Hanglands, just off the Ailsworth Road. There were still eleven singing away on 19 July. The best time to hear them is at dusk (21:00 onwards at the moment). You can hear them from the road.

The gropper (as it is known by ardent bird watchers) is a very secretive migrant bird. They arrive from winter quarters in Africa towards the end of April and can be heard singing alongside nightingales throughout May and early June at both Castor Hanglands and Bainton pits. But, just like the nightingale too, they are very seldom seen – I haven't seen one for about twenty years! They feed in the undergrowth, mouse like, rarely flying – why would you if you have to fly to Africa and back every year!

Look out too for the spotted flycatcher in Helpston church yard – it can often be seen sitting on gravestones and then flying up vertically in pursuit of insect prey. Buzzards can be found soaring over the woods at the top of Heath Road, whilst

sparrowhawks are frequently seen carrying prey across the village, perhaps they are nesting in Royce Wood? Barn owls can sometimes be seen at this time of year along the Maxey Road, feeding earlier and earlier as their growing young get more and more demanding. If you do see one, do let me know, we are trying to keep tabs on their population around the village.

Another owl that can be seen very close to the village is the Little Owl. On several occasions over the last six weeks I have seen one at dusk sitting on the telephone wires across Maxham's Green Way.

#### **Focus on .... Wild Carrot**

Forget the home grown variety in your vegetable patch, the large white and pink umbellifer flowering in profusion at the moment at Swaddywell is the ancestor of all the modern varieties – although the wild one is unfortunately inedible!

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century a concoction of its red flowers was thought to be a great remedy for the 'falling disease' what we know today as epilepsy. In the next century it was used as medicine for such illnesses as stitch, kidney stones and dropsy. The herbalist, Nicholas Cullpeper considered them beneficial too to expectant mothers, advising that wild carrot could help conception when boiled in wine!

I'll leave that with you!

#### **Progress at Swaddywell**

We have left Swaddywell to do its own thing this summer. Now that the site is secure from too much disturbance, plants are growing back quickly, presenting us with a new problem of how to maintain areas of bare earth and to prevent take over by bramble. A lot of rabbit were trapped over the winter to protect crops growing in neighbouring fields, but without their constant nibbling the bramble has spread through the bottom of the pit.

As a result we are now considering whether to start sheep grazing on the reserve. This would be beneficial to many species of flower, but would be a considerable expense and require a lot of attention.

We hope too over the autumn and winter to establish a proper nature trail on the reserve, allowing permanent access across the site. To begin with this would be simply a case of marking out paths and trails across the field and through the quarry, although in time we hope to put up interpretation boards and may be even produce an explanatory leaflet.

In the meantime do feel free to walk through the reserve. Entrance is best from the public footpath that runs from Heath Road and comes out on Marholm Road nearly opposite the farm shop. Cut across the top field from this footpath and then go down the road into the pit. It is muddy, so take your boots!

Another task for the winter months will be to tend to the hedges we planted last year, replacing those trees that didn't make it and cutting back vegetation around those that did. We will also need to dig out some of the ponds, as the reed and sedge is starting to encroach quite seriously on the open water.

#### **Plea for help**

To date all our work at the pit has been met either from our own pockets or, for the purchase of the land, from grants. We now need to find at least £1000 a year to ensure we can complete the tasks listed above, and pay the lease on the top field.

Our target is to recruit 50 family members at £20 a year. If you haven't already joined us, then please do consider it. We can't make Swaddywell the community asset it should be without that support.

Equally if you would like to help with any of the work we have planned, just let me know!

#### **Next Walks**

The next Langdyke walks are

25 August - Badger watching at Ferry Meadows.  
Meet at Helpston Post Office at 1930

31 October – Fungal foray – meet at Helpston post office at 1930

#### **Next newsletter**

Due out at the end of October!

#### **Contacts**

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