



20p where sold – free to members

Autumn 2007

As the nights draw in and we think back on the summer, it is surely Peter Holt's weather report that sets the scene for this Langdyke update - for this was the summer it rained!

And yet this was also a wonderful summer for wildlife in many respects. For the first time in many years, there were at least four occupied barn owl territories around Helpston, Maxey and Etton; red kites and buzzards nested in the area, bat numbers seemed to be up and Maxey Pits played host to some very rare and exciting new dragonflies, as well as being a focal point for migrant birds.

The return of the barn owl to two sites in our area this summer is certainly a cause for celebration. Villagers in Helpston, Etton and Maxey can all see these wonderful birds, regularly hunting around the village edges at dusk. This increase in numbers is probably due to the recent succession of mild winters, allowing more young to survive and breed. It remains to be seen whether the increase will be sustained next year. Sadly barn owls can't hunt in the rain and there is a strong chance that fewer young than normal will have fledged. Indeed in 1997 – another year of heavy rain, fledging rates were very low. The older chicks, sadly, turn on and eat their younger siblings as times get hard. Nature eh, red in tooth and claw!

Once again red kites were a common site in June and July around the villages and we know that they successfully bred nearby. Buzzards too continue to increase – a family party of 5 birds soared over Helpston on 15 September, proof of

a successful breeding season. Slightly away from our area, but of general interest was the first ever record of breeding Peregrine Falcons at Peterborough Power Station this year. Another smaller falcon, the hobby was also very much in evidence with a family party of four wreaking havoc on the dragonflies (which they catch and then eat in flight) at Maxey Pits on 16 September and other birds seen regularly at Milton Park, Swaddywell and Bainton Pits.

Another highlight of the summer was the amazing display of Pyramidal Orchids at Swaddywell in late June/early July. This pink/purple flower appeared in hundreds – if not thousands – of separate plants, making a wonderful site across the grassland field and earning the site rave reviews from a number of botanists who visited the reserve this year. Two other new orchids were found on the reserve this year – twayblade and southern marsh – making this a six orchid site!

Focus on the hobby!

The hobby is a wonderful bird. Its latin name *falco subbuteo*, means small buzzard and is where the football game gets its name from.

This smallish, grey-blue falcon hunts on small birds and dragonflies and is one of the most acrobatic of birds – its aerial chases after prey are quite spectacular.

Hobbies have increased greatly across southern and eastern England in recent years in part as a result of gravel extraction. Once the pits have been dug and returned to nature they provide new homes for dragonflies and, for their predator, the hobby.

Hobbies are relatively common around the villages to the west of Peterborough. They can often be seen around Bainton and Maxey Pits and in late September over the villages themselves as they eye up the tasty young house martins, flocking together before the migration of Africa.

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Weather Report

The weather once again has been far from normal and has continued the extreme theme. Following the warmest, sunniest and driest April on record, the second week in May saw a change in the character of the weather with the high pressure, which had persisted throughout April, being replaced by long periods of low pressure associated with the jet stream being much further south than usual for the summer months. This type of weather pattern usually gives rise to cool, overcast wet conditions and most of the summer was like this.

In our area, rainfall for May, June and July was more than twice the average. Actual figures (in millimetres) were:-

May	June	July	August
106.5	106.0	109.5	33.0
long term avg.			
53.7	50.7	52.3	55.8

The dreadful flooding which occurred in some parts of England has been extensively reported and in a large part of central England it was said to be the wettest summer recorded. That fortunately was not the case for our area. As relatively recently as 1992, the months of July, August and September were wetter. Although we escaped the worse, the wet days came in groups for example in that there was no rain for the first two weeks of June and then it rained on 21 of the next 23 days making conditions especially miserable. Our wettest days gave up to 28mm of rain but those areas of the country which did have floods had this same pattern plus local thunderstorms giving an additional 50mm extra in a day.

With the long periods of cloud and rain it is not surprising to report that temperatures for the above months have been no better than near, or especially in July, somewhat below average. Cloud cover gave mild nights but day-time temperatures were disappointing.

The best spells of weather were in the beginning and end of August with the warmest day being the 5th when a temperature of 29°C was recorded.

The jet stream went back to where it should be and the latter part of August saw high pressure re-established over England and the improved weather continued into September which is back to where we started, with clear blue skies and warm sunshine.

Sheep at Swaddywell

This year our resident ewes produced 19 lambs. We will be dividing the flock into three over the winter, the main breeding flock at Swaddywell and smaller flocks at the Hanglands and in the field by the Green Man at Marholm.

Recent and Forthcoming Events

Sunday 7 October – Fruits and Fungi, a walk around Castor Hanglands, meet at Helpston Post Office on

Wednesday 7 November - Indoor talk, 1930 at Botolph's Barn, Helpston - 'I am Swaddywell' - from poem, to tip - from racetrack to nature reserve, the story of a troubled place, an illustrated talk with slides.

Sunday 18 November - Swaddywell Work Party, 2pm start at the main entrance to the pit.

Sunday 9 December - Wildfowl on the wetlands - walk around the Nene Washes in search of winter ducks and raptors. Meet Helpston Post Office at 1.45 pm

Thursday 27 December - work off that Christmas cheer with a work party afternoon at Swaddywell, bashing bramble and whacking willow! 2pm at the pit, - bring your mince pies!

Contacts

Newsletter and walks

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Membership

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