

20p where sold – free to members



### Spring 2007

As I write this on 6 May, it is raining very gently – pretty much the first rain we have had for nearly six weeks. This newsletter includes a new feature – a round-up of recent weather patterns by Peter Holt. Peter's articles used to appear regularly in the old Helpston Chronicle, back copies can be found on the Botolph's Barn website. From now on we will have a quarterly focus on the weather, which has such an impact on our local wildlife.

The warm and settled weather has certainly encouraged the early return of this year's migrants. Chiff-chaffs were singing in Royce Wood as early as 8 March and were joined by blackcaps on 8 April. Swallows were back at Willow Brook Farm in the middle of the month and swifts were back over the roofs of Helpston on 29 April.

An interesting feature of this spring's migration has been the high numbers of wheatears and ring ouzels seen around Peterborough. Both birds breed in the upland areas of northern England and Scotland (the ouzel is often known as the mountain blackbird) and are only seen here on migration. This year there were many reports than usual, with one ring ouzel at Swaddywell on 19 April and several reports of wheatear, at Swaddywell and at Maxey Pits, with Trevor Valentine reporting two birds near Ashton on 5 May (he saw 5 at the same spot last year).

Maxey Pits continues to be one of the most exciting bird watching places around Peterborough attracting both birds and birdwatchers. This spring has seen a lot of wading birds passing through, including a flock of over 30 bar tailed godwits. Trevor Valentine saw several there on 3 May, plus a greenshank. At the moment this is also a great place to see little ringed plover as well as lapwing chicks!

This is also the time of year to get up to Castor Hanglands to listen to the nightingales and grasshopper warblers. The best place to go is the new plantation – park at the second entrance (if you are coming from Helpston – make sure your car is locked!) and walk along the track and then turn left through the plantation. Go at dusk and just listen to the reeling noise of the grasshopper warblers and the jug-jugging of the nightingales. There were 12 grasshopper warblers and 4 nightingales on 23 April.

Cuckoos too seem to be back in good numbers locally – certainly they are very vocal at Bainton Pits, where they were back by 22 April, at Maxey and at the Hanglands, although I have yet to hear one in Helpston. Anyone else come across them locally?

Bats too seem to be enjoying the spring, with several chasing insects along Heath Road throughout April. Bainton Pits is another good place to watch bats – particularly Daubenton's Bat, which skims low over the water of the main pit, searching for insects. You can also find the much larger Noctule Bat here, this hunts quite high in the evening sky, characteristically swooping down on its prey.

Thanks to those of you who came along to hear Stuart Irons' talk on dragonflies, which we are glad proved so enjoyable. We hope to be offering a new talk on John Clare's landscapes – we trialled this with a group in Oundle in March and it proved very popular – look out for the pink sheep!

#### Focus on ..... Bats!

Clare describes children in Helpston watching bats fly over head on summer's evenings

*On summer eves with wild delight  
We bawled the bat to spy  
Who in the 'I spy' dusky light  
Shrieked loud and flickered by;  
And up we knocked our shuttlecocks  
And tried to hivy the moon,  
And wondered bats should fly so long  
And they come down so soon*

Bats are thought to have been more affected by the intensification of agriculture than any other British animal. The felling of old trees

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and the loss of nesting holes in roofs and barns combined with the reduction in food sources, particularly beetles, have led to some species declining by over 90%.

Bats are very difficult to identify on the wing, but three species can still be found around Helpston and picked out in the summer sky with some confidence.

Pipistrelle bats are very small and can often be seen hunting over gardens and by the light of street lamps in Helpston itself. They make their nests in roofs and lofts.

Noctule bats are much bigger - about the size of a swift - and fly higher in the sky, swooping down to catch their prey above fields and hedgerows. Noctules have been seen recently at Bainton Pits and hunting over the fields at the top of Health Road and over Swaddywell and Ben Jonson Pits. They nest and roost in trees and can live for ten years and more.

Often called the water bat, Daubenton's bats are also very distinctive in the way they hunt, flying low over water, searching for water based insects, such as mayfly, and sometimes even small fish! The main pit at Bainton is a good place to look for them.

### **Weather Report**

Before looking at our more recent weather it is worth a quick look back over the year of 2006. While rainfall was a little below average (total of 594mm against the long term average of 614mm) one thing stood out about the weather and that was "high temperatures". The year started off with average temperatures, and March gave quite cold weather, but from May onwards the temperatures were mainly above average and in the case of July and September, record breakers. The net result was that our area in keeping with most of England had the "warmest year on record". To be fair records have only been kept for a few hundred years and there is evidence that even within the past thousand years temperatures have been higher at times than at present. However since the late 1980's there has been a distinct warming trend especially in the winter.

What about 2007? Records have continued to be broken with the mildest winter recorded since at least the 1930's, with all the winter months being warmer than average.

The most significant weather event of the winter was that of strong winds. During the gale on Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> January, the Met. Station at Wittering recorded a gust of 78mph. This was the fifth highest wind speed they had recorded since records started in the 1950's. The previous strongest was in 1994 but the strongest winds were all in the 1970's with the stormiest and by far the most damaging being on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1976 at 104mph!

After a mild wet winter, this spring, sunny weather has been to the fore. March gave near average rainfall but it only rained once in April giving a total of 2.0 mm for the whole month compared to an average of around 50mm. More records! This was both the driest April and the driest month ever recorded at Helpston since rainfall records started in 1975. In addition April was also some 4°C warmer than usual and was the warmest April since I started keeping temperature records at Helpston in 1964.

Fortunately the "drought" came to an end on 7<sup>th</sup> May and it rained sufficient to give a months worth of rain in the following week. It's no wonder we talk about the weather so much.

### **Botolph's Barn Website**

You can now find the Langdyke Countryside Trust web pages simply by using [www.langdyke.org.uk](http://www.langdyke.org.uk). In addition the website now includes leaflets with details of local walks.

### **Black Lambs at Swaddywell**

Forget paying to go to Sacrewell Farm! Take a walk around Swaddywell instead and see the reserve's jet black lambs which have arrived late this year, the first being born on 29 April.

### **Recent and Forthcoming Events**

31 May - an evening walk around Castor Hanglands. Meet at Helpston Post Office at 1930.

7 June – work party with Helpston Scouts at 1930 at Swaddywell.

### **Contacts**

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