



Winter 2007

If it has been, until the last week or two, an unusually mild winter, then it has also been an unusually quiet winter too on the nature front with many people remarking on the low numbers of winter birds visiting our area this year.

Certainly the numbers of winter ducks at both Maxey and Bainton Pits has been lower than usual. Instead of the expected 20+ goosanders every evening at Maxey Pits, there has been the odd sighting of 3-4 birds only. And flocks of winter thrushes such as redwing and fieldfare have been few and far between too. Almost certainly this reflects the mild weather – as long as the temperatures remain above freezing many of these birds will stay as long as they can in their summer homes in Scandinavia and central Europe.

It also seems to have been a fairly good season for berries in the local hedgerows and woods, which probably has an impact on the number of birds visiting our gardens - although there was a notable increase in the numbers of blackbirds and great and blue tits coming into the gardens during the recent cold spell.

So what have been the seasonal highlights in the natural world? Well certainly the sight of an osprey flying over Bainton Pits and across the fields towards Helpston was cause for excitement on 28 October. These magnificent raptors are becoming commoner across the country, with birds breeding at nearby Rutland Water, so perhaps such sights will become more and more common – who knows, could they even breed locally in the future? Not as far fetched as it sounds: who would have predicted even 20 years ago that red kites and buzzards would fly over Helpston again?

Although numbers have been low recently there was a good influx of both fieldfare and redwing in late October, with a noticeable

influx on 2 November when several flocks of fieldfare, totalling around 750 birds, flew over Swaddywell. This 'visible migration' is fascinating to watch – the same thing happened on a smaller scale on 26 October when 260 redwing flew over the pit.

Tree sparrows continue to flourish at Swaddywell with a flock of 70 there on 10 February and a small number haunting the gardens along Heath Road. Despite the upsurge in numbers locally, this bird remains scarce both regionally and nationally.

Another bird to take up residence at Swaddywell this year has been the water rail. This shy and retiring bird is related to the moorhen and is very rarely seen as it skulks around feeding at the base of damp vegetation. But it gives away its presence with its weird, pig like squeals – often heard at dusk from the midst of the sedge or reed beds. Surprisingly a single bird was seen twice at the pit this year – including on 9 February in the snow, as it flew (oddly) over the top of one of the pools.

The snow also revealed just how much activity there is out in the countryside at night. A visit to Swaddywell on 9 February revealed countless badger and fox tracks across the reserve, as well as the prints of smaller mammals, probably including rat and stoat and the wing prints of partridge and pheasant. There is a lot of badger activity again at the pit, so we hope that this year we may even have a breeding family on site.

The snow was, of course, in stark contrast to the weather at the end of January, when several Trust members reported sightings of peacock butterfly, hornet and hover fly – all species that just shouldn't be around at all at this time of year!

Swaddywell work parties

Many thanks to all of you who joined us in January for the two work parties at the pit. A strenuous, but satisfactory time was had by all as we hacked down large areas of bramble.

Bramble is a wonderful habitat and there is plenty of it on the reserve, but it needs controlling as otherwise it would take over much of the grassland and prevent the growth of flowers and grasses which in turn provide food and breeding sites for many insects.

Maxey Quarry

We will be running another work party at Maxey Pits on 24 February, helping to replace trees that failed to take after planting last year. Please do join us and take the chance to see this wonderful new site in development.

Focus on the water rail

The water rail is a small member of the rail family, related to both the moorhen and the corncrake. It likes nothing more than to poke around with its long beak in the margins of dykes and in thick vegetation, particularly reed.

John Clare described the water 'craik' as 'very scarce here but has been seen and its nest found'. That scarcity probably relates to the lack of wetland around Helpston in the nineteenth century following the drainage of the fens.

Today there is much more suitable habitat around the village, created by the gravel workings of previous decades. Both Bainton and Maxey pits are good places to try to see or hear the water rail, and they can occasionally be seen at dusk prodding around for food along the banks of the Maxey Cut.

Strangely this usually timid and insectivorous bird can sometimes turn predator, using its long stiletto-like beak to impale its prey or to seize it and drown it!!



Botolph's Barn

Following the notice in our last update, the Botolph's Barn website has recently been expanded with a series of articles about the history of Helpston and the surrounding area, as well as a selection of new pictures illustrating the wildlife pages.

Many thanks to Jennifer Britton for her help with this work and in searching for old history articles from the Helpston Chronicle. George Boyden also supplied a great deal of material including the copy of the original enclosure order for 1821, which is now on the site. There is also a school master's log and, courtesy of Peter Holt, a copy of an early indenture of land.

If any of you have any other articles or materials that you would like to put on the site, do let Richard Astle know.

Please do take a look at the website and use it – if for nothing else - to remind yourself of Langdyke events and read back copies of our reports!

What else would you do on a dark winter's evening? www.botolphsbarn.org.uk

Forthcoming Events

24 February - working party (tree planting) at Maxey Pits. Meet at the entrance to the Tarmac workings (east of Maxey) at 1000 am.

14 March - evening talk with slides about the dragonflies of our area by Stuart Irons, Botolph's Barn, Helpston, at 1930.

12 April - annual newt, frog and toad count at Swaddywell Pit. Meet at the pit entrance (off the Marholm-Ufford road) at 2000.

8 May - evening walk along the Nene Washes, looking for displaying waders, marsh harriers and barn owls – a wonderful evening walk, although often very cold! Meet at Helpston Post Office at 1830.

31 May - as part of Peterborough's Green Week, an evening walk around Castor Hanglands or Swaddywell listening to nightingales, cuckoos and grasshopper warblers. Meet at Helpston Post Office at 1930.

Contacts

Newsletter and walks

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