



Spring 2011

After the long cold winter this early spring weather is quite glorious.

And the warmth and the southerly winds have brought many of our spring migrants back to their nesting homes much earlier than usual.

Already as I write this on 8 April, there are swallows on the telephone wires in Etton, sand martins prospecting nests along the Maxey Cut and even nightingales singing at Castor Hanglands.

This is pretty much a fortnight earlier than usual. For instance, I wouldn't normally start looking for nightingales until 20 April. I was at the Hanglands today and yesterday and the place was alive with the song of chiffchaff, willow warbler, blackcap and grasshopper warbler.



Photo courtesy of www.northeastwildlife.co.uk

The blackthorn is in full bloom too - its distinctive white petals standing out in all the local hedgerows. In fact this is quite

late for blackthorn to blossom. In previous years of milder winters it has been in flower as early as February. What is unusual is to see the blackthorn alongside the hawthorn already in leaf. More often we see the white of the blackthorn against the black of the bare hawthorn trees. This year the contrast is with the green of its new leaves.



And the woodland floors are alive with the white flowers of wood anemone and the yellow of the celandine too. Primroses and ground ivy are already in flower and bluebells are just beginning to open.

Butterflies are the one thing that haven't (to my knowledge) appeared in numbers yet this spring, although there have been a few brimstone on the wing and the odd small tortoiseshell. Butterflies are generally in decline across the country, mainly due to loss of habitat.

Another distinctive feature of this spring is just how many red kites there are in the area. They have nested nearby for some years now, but I can't remember seeing quite so many so regularly before. On Saturday 2 April, there were five soaring

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together over Swaddywell, along with two buzzards!

It is interesting to speculate as to why our spring migrants are arriving so early this year. It has nothing of course to do with the winter weather here – something these birds will know nothing about, sheltered as they were in their Mediterranean and sub-Saharan winter homes. It is actually about the combination of the current warm weather across Europe and the persistent southerly winds that have respectively induced them and helped them to make the journey north earlier and more quickly than normal.

I wrote in the last newsletter about the impact of the cold weather on our local resident bird populations. Interestingly the RSPB reported recently that small bird populations had bounced back quickly after the cold weather in 2009-10 with record numbers of birds recorded in this year's Big Garden Birdwatch. Others have remarked that this might be less to do with high populations than with the need to find food in gardens as the countryside froze over!

That said, I have been surprised about the relatively high numbers of small birds around recently despite the winter. Long-tailed tits seem to be doing well locally and I have had the delight of lesser redpoll in my garden for several weeks, normally quite a rare bird locally. Less positively, we know already that our local barn owl population has been badly hit by the hard weather, when they find it impossible to hunt.



Photo courtesy of www.northeastwildlife.co.uk

Langdyke News

There have been two major developments on our reserves recently.

At Etton Maxey we have had some new gates and fencing put in to make the site stock proof and to improve visitor access off the Etton Road. There is now a pedestrian gate into the hard standing area.

We will shortly be putting some of our Hebridean sheep on the reserve to graze the vegetation to the optimal height and to create a mosaic of habitats. They will be joined by five Galway cattle, who will work to the same tasks.

We are still waiting for the bird hides and pond-dipping platform to be installed. There have been a number of delays to this work but hopefully it will be completed soon.

We should be putting up new interpretation boards at Torpel and Etton-Maxey and publishing a new leaflet about Torpel very soon. The artwork is all done, just need to get them produced

At Swaddywell we have completed work, funded through the Government's Growth Area Funding Programme, putting in a concrete base for a new building that we will use for livestock and for visitors (yes the two can mix!). We will open this in late April, so do come and visit.

Lambs

Our first lamb of the year appeared at the paddock next to the Green Man at Marholm in early March, followed on 26 March by triplet Jacob lambs at Torpel Manor. Sadly one of the three disappeared mysteriously shortly afterwards, but the two little boys are doing fine. Do go along to see them.

The main breeding flock will be on the field immediately south of Swaddywell from

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mid-April onwards and can be viewed from the public footpath that runs between Heath Road and the Farm Shop.

Weather Report by Peter Holt

After the very wintry conditions of the previous two months, the weather during the rest of the winter passed by relatively quietly with no further snowfalls. By the 13th January the temperature exceeded 10°C, the first time temperatures had been this high for two months. The coldest weather was at the end of the month when on the 28th the maximum was only 1.5°C with minus 4°C on the following night. There were eleven nights with air frost but overall temperatures for the month were a little above average.

The warming trend continued, as although February 1st started with a frost of minus 2.5°C after that there were no more frosts with temperatures 3°C above average. However the weather was very gloomy and wet at times. March started chilly with a frost of minus 3.5° on the night of the 8th and a final air frost of minus 2°C on the 19th but after that it became warmer and sunnier and 15°C was exceeded for the first time this spring on the 21st and the month overall was a little milder than usual. April started rather dull but by the 6th turned "summery" with temperatures up to 21°C and lots of sunshine. The weather of late has been dominated by high pressure over or to the south of England and so far this trend has continued into April with little or no rain in the forecast.

In fact the most significant meteorological feature of the weather over the past month or so has been the exceptional dryness with no recorded rainfall at Helpston from the end of Feb to 30th March. In fact March 2011 was the driest March recorded at Helpston since starting recording rainfall in 1975. The driest month ever was April 2007 with only 2.0mm. This was followed by three consecutive months with over 100mm. Oh dear we shall have to wait and

see! Actual rainfall figures recorded at Helpston (in millimetres) for the past months were:

	Actual	Long term average
Jan	35.5	50.4
Feb	48.5	41.5
Mar	4.5	43.5

Forthcoming events

Spring Chorus - Tuesday 26 April Evening Walk to Castor Hanglands, meet at 7pm Southey Woods car park

Nightingale Walk - Wednesday 18 May Evening Walk Bainton Pits, 8pm Torpel Field

Open Farm Sunday at Willowbrook Farm
12 June Walks to Swaddywell at 12 noon & 2pm

Evening at Etton Maxey Pits - Wednesday 15 June, 7.30pm at the Etton Road entrance

Picnic, poems and performers – as part of the John Clare Festival, bring your picnic and enjoy poems and music at Torpel Manor Field, Friday 8 July 6-8pm.

Contacts

Newsletter and walks

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