



## Spring 2010

Once again the prevailing memory of the season must be the varying extremes of weather. I am writing this following one of the hottest weekends in recent memory – and yet it is only a week since I walked out along the Maxey Cut one morning with the grass firm under a hard, winter-style frost.

Since our last newsletter management work has continued on three of our reserves. At Swaddywell volunteers have continued to clear the key rock faces in advance of the opening of the Geology Trail on Sunday 13 June and a party from the Environment Agency spent a day on site on 20 April cutting down willow from around the edges of the ponds. This was part of the Agency's "Day off for Charity" commitment and the team are all working on the water treatment plant at the neighbouring Ben Jonson Pit.

At Torpel Manor Field, local company Plant Fencing completed the fencing of the site and installed new gates. This has allowed us to put sheep on the field and they have been busy actively managing the site since late January and they are already making a difference, keeping the grass in check and encouraging the growth of more wild flowers which in turn will support more insect life.

At Torpel we have also had the old stable block taken down in advance of erecting a smart new exhibition centre later this year. Our plans at the moment are for a building of the same size and style as the old stables

which can provide a meeting room and exhibition space as well as room to look after the animals! We also hope to install compostable toilets so that the facility can be easily and comfortably used by all.

If you would like to get involved in planning the new building, we are keen to have more volunteers involved, so do please contact me.

Fencing work was also completed at Etton-Maxey Reserve and new gates put up to help us manage access. We will graze the grassy banks of the reserve next winter to encourage a more biodiversity-rich grass and flower structure.

A work party in late March cut back the vegetation on the spits that project out into the open water areas. We need to keep this low to encourage breeding birds such as ringed and little ringed plover. We have also taken out some of the trees that had been planted at the southern edge of the reserve to ensure that this remains an area of reed and marsh.

If you want to visit this reserve, you do need a permit and the combination lock for the gates – permits are free to all Langdyke members.



Great crested newt – see next page

There have been no significant developments at our Bainton Heath reserve, but we are starting to understand the management requirements of the site – so look out for some work parties here in

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the winter. Chris Hughes continues to use the site for bird ringing and provides us with some fantastic records every time he visits. We are hoping to organise a morning session with Chris for members and will provide details shortly. This will be an opportunity to find out more about bird ringing – but be warned, it is a very (very) early start!

As ever we have held a number of walks over the late winter/early spring period. Helpston Scouts visited Swaddywell on 15 April to conduct a Newt and Toad count – always great fun, splashing around in the water in the dark with torches and spotlights and the Scouts were rewarded with excellent views of great crested and smooth newts.

There was a well attended nightingale walk around Castor Hanglands on 4 May. For the first time we started this walk with a talk and refreshments at The Granary at Willow Brook Farm – a very welcome new feature of our walks! And we were able to listen to several notable songsters as the nightingales put on a superb performance in the gathering dusk. We also found St George's mushroom and toothwort – a parasitic plant!

The spring walk along the Nene Washes was similarly well attended and also very rewarding as we listened to at least seven corncrakes calling from across the reserve and watched snipe, black-tailed godwit and redshank displaying all around. Corncrakes were common birds around our villages in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, but disappeared across England as a result of changes to agricultural practice. They have been re-introduced on the Nene Washes and seem to be doing very well there. Their evocative, if monotonous call, used to be a sound of rural life – they reckon a male corncrake calls over 20,000 times in a night!

Finally we held a walk for residents of Etton on 27 May around the Etton-Maxey Pits reserve. Thirteen villagers walked up from

the pub to the reserve and were rewarded with great views of a hunting barn owl, displaying lapwing, redshank and ringed plover.

### **The Natural World**

The weather may have been mixed, but it has been a remarkable spring for bird migration around our villages – not just in terms of scarce species turning up, but also the numbers of birds.

The first migrants back as ever were the sand martins – reappearing above the Maxey Cut on 20 March and soon taking up noisy residence on the now aptly named Martin Pit south of the Cut and west of the Green Bridge. There was a concern that the slopes they burrowed into last year have been covered up by Tarmac's recent working, but they soon found new homes on the opposite site of the pit. A new experience for me was watching a flock of sand martins over a rape field near Helpston at dusk on 20 April, twisting to and fro like a shoal of fish, shimmering brown then white as they turn from side to side.



Sand martins by [www.northeastwildlife.co.uk](http://www.northeastwildlife.co.uk)

The 'rarity' highlights of the period were an osprey over Castor Hanglands on 26 March, a blue-winged teal (all the way from America) at Etton-Maxey on 17 April, a pair of ravens at Milton Park, a bittern flying over Maxey Church on 1 May, 3 sandwich terns on the Cut on 29 April and the female ring ousel at Swaddywell for ten days during

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April. Often known as the mountain blackbird, this is a migrant thrush that nests in the uplands but stops off at favoured sites on its way through. We usually find one each year at Swaddywell but never before has one stayed for so long!

Wheatears which also turn up every year at regular sites, were notable by the numbers that stopped off on migration north this year – with a maximum of four at Swaddywell in April and birds hanging on at Etton-Maxey until mid-May raising hopes that they may breed – but in the end they decided to travel on!

Brown hares were much in evidence at Etton-Maxey and in the fields south of the Cut. And a walk around Barnack Hills and Holes in April revealed a group of Morels, an interesting and tasty mushroom that appears in the spring.



#### **What to look out for in summer!**

Early June sees the first bee orchids in flower at Swaddywell with pyramidal orchids following later in the month. The best place to see them is alongside the fence on the eastern boundary of the field. Do take care as you walk through not to damage the flowers.

And it will soon be dragonfly season too. Banded demoiselle and black tailed damselfly are already out on the Cut, but look out too for four spotted chaser, broad bodied skimmer and emperor dragonfly at Swaddywell.

It hasn't been a great year yet for butterflies but June and July should see the usual species appearing. White admirals can be seen lazily flapping around the edges of our woods; small coppers at Torpel Manor Field; small and large skippers at Swaddywell and the rare black hairstreak at Castor Hanglands as well as the beautiful marbled white at Barnack Hills and Holes.

At Etton-Maxey now is a good time to see barn owl – one regularly patrols the grassy banks every evening. And hobbies too are easy to find at this time of year as they hunt above the water for a tasty dragonfly. The wading birds – lapwing, ringed and little ringed plover - will be looking after their young and there is always the chance of seeing a cuckoo dash across the reserve.

Finally do look out for bats too – pipistrelles are commonly seen in and around the villages. Daubenton's bat is also quite common too and can be seen hunting over water for insects – Bainton Pits is a particularly good place to find them.

#### **Weather Report by Peter Holt**

Following the very wintry weather experienced in December and January, February continued with colder than usual conditions although nothing quite as severe. March also started cold with night-time temperatures down to minus 6°C but from the middle of the month temperatures actually recovered to above average. The months of March and April overall were milder than usual with a fair amount of sunshine.

The last recorded air frost was on April 24<sup>th</sup> when the temperature just dipped below freezing but there were a number nights in

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the first half of May when night temperatures hovered around freezing point with ground temperatures well below resulting in damage to tender plants. May also was very chilly by day during the first two weeks but a short lived “heat wave” towards the end of the month saw temperatures peak to 27.5°C on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Even so temperatures for the month were a little below average.

Apart from February when precipitation of either rain or snow occurred on 15 of the 28 days, the weather in the following months has become very dry associated with high pressure and at times winds from a northerly direction which brought Icelandic ash but little rain. In the past two months there has been less than half the usual rainfall.

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

	Actual	Long term average
Feb	72.5	60.1
March	36.0	55.4
April	21.0	53.1
May	22.5	53.2

### **Forthcoming events**

**Sunday 13 June** – Opening of the geology trail at Swaddywell. Walks starting from Willow Brook Farm shop at 11am and 2.30pm.

**Friday 9 July** – arts and the environment at Torpel Manor Field. An evening of poems, painting, wildlife and music as part of the John Clare Festival, from 7-9pm. Don’t miss it!

### **Contacts**

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