



## Winter 2009-10

Since the last Langdyke newsletter we have had some serious extremes of weather. For much of the period we enjoyed mild weather and were beginning to wonder if winter would ever come. But from 18 December, we had constant sub-zero temperatures, with snow and ice covering the ground, creating lovely landscapes, but treacherous roads and inhospitable times for local wildlife – of which more later.

At last, during this period, we have been able to start work at Torpel Manor Field, with our long term aim to restore the field to a wildlife rich meadow land with the remains of the ancient fortified manor at its heart. As mentioned last time, we have been waiting for the official permission from Government to allow us to replace the fencing and start work on a small visitor centre. We finally received this at the end of November and were able to get the fencing completed by the end of December. We have put in new kissing gates to improve access, but above all, we can now put the sheep on the field and begin to graze down some of the rough grasses.

We have also started ferreting on site – an unpleasant task, but a necessary one. The resident rabbits are doing considerable damage to the banks of the monument as well as to the crops of our neighbouring farmer. We will have to tackle this issue on a regular basis!

We had some very well attended walks and work parties in the last quarter of 2009.

The fungal foray on 1 November, proved a great success, even if we did have to move it from Bainton to Southey Woods due to the windy conditions.

The first work party scheduled for Maxey Pits was cancelled for what must be a unique reason – the presence of a glossy ibis! This very rare visitor to the UK turned up the week before we were due to get stuck into some serious tasks (digging out willow and weed). Its usual home is the Mediterranean, but for some reason a number of these beautiful birds reached our shores in the autumn and one took a liking to Etton – Maxey, staying for nearly two weeks, although proving quite elusive for some frustrated bird watchers.

Our second work party was much more successful with nearly 20 people turning up to take out willows at the southern end of the reserve and dig out weed on the long spur that reaches out into the middle of the water. We wanted to remove the willow to allow this area to remain a wet area of reed and sedge. Clearing the spur should encourage terns and gulls to nest there in the summer – when the vegetation gets too dense, they move elsewhere.

The annual walk along the Nene Washes was as ever a beautiful walk and fairly cold. But we failed to turn up many birds, with the notable exception of a barn owl, which turned up towards dusk and hunted to and fro in front of us for several minutes.

Finally, the New Year's Day walk attracted 30 members and guests for a lovely, snow covered walk around the Hanglands. Topically, given the focus on the bullfinch in the last newsletter, we found a male feeding in a hawthorn, giving us all great views of this stunning bird.

### Thursday afternoons

If you fancy getting out and keeping active as well as doing your bit for the environment then why not join up with the

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latest Langdyke initiative – a regular work party every Thursday afternoon.

This is an opportunity to flail a bramble, cut a willow, tidy up, or do any other physical (but reasonable) tasks to keep the reserves in good order - whilst enjoying good companionship and friendly access to expert nature observations. The reserves are quiet in midweek, and a sunny spell in sheltered Swaddywell can be magical - as John Clare tells us! The location will vary between Swaddywell and Torpel, as both locations offer lots of simple but rewarding tasks suitable for all ages, genders and experience levels. Please wear suitably stout clothes and footwear for the season and the task.. Tools are provided or you can bring your own favourites! Usual timing is 1.30 to 4.00 pm - or whenever you have had enough!

### **Swaddywell Rock Faces**

About 4 months ago the Swaddywell rock faces had almost disappeared from view under tentacles of bramble, some of them eight feet long and growing from both ends, and swathes of Old Man`s Beard, all suspended from above as well as growing up through the slats of the board walk.

Our challenge was to clear through this jungle, and that was the start of the Thursday working parties. For weeks the weather was kind and it is always sheltered down in the bottom of the Pit. We then started to work on the north facing rock faces through the gate and then the south facing rock faces. The results have been stunning. For the first time you can actually see the rock strata and begin to understand the huge forces at work along the Tinwell to Marholm fault and the reasons for the cessation of stone quarrying.

The organisation of the work parties has always been ad hoc and we have so far not strayed from Swaddywell but there will be no shortage of tasks to be undertaken at

Torpel and Maxey as well during the next six months and more volunteers would be welcome. Please let Frieda know if you would like to be included on the mailing list. [friedagosling@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:friedagosling@yahoo.co.uk)

### **Southey Woods**

You may have noticed that the car park at Southey Woods has been transformed by the Forestry Commission so that it is now completely visible from the road.

For a 3 month trial period the gate has been unlocked and locked on Saturdays and Sundays by volunteers. They are appealing for more volunteers so that they can create a rota. They would like to be able to open the Woods on weekdays as well so more volunteers will be needed. Again do contact Frieda if you are interested in helping.

Southey Woods are a great family asset, currently underused. The trees have been looking very well during the winter and a number of guided walks have been organised by the Forestry Commission and the Granary Cafe. Ufford Parish Council and the PCC Wildlife Officer are organising an Easter Egg Hunt on Sunday March 28th and a Bluebell Walk in April, so watch out for details.

### **The Natural World**

I said last time that I would use this column to point out some of the things to watch out for in the coming month rather than to report on what has been seen and heard in the recent past. You can find regular updates anyway on the Langdyke Blog (<http://langdykeworld.blogspot.com/>)

which I would really encourage you to look at and indeed add reports too so that it becomes a village wide record of what we are all seeing and enjoying in the natural world. Have a look at it now and check out the rescue of the mole and sad drowning of the deer!

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You don't have to stray far from your garden to see plenty of wildlife activity at this time of year. The hard weather is driving many birds in from the countryside in search of food that we wouldn't normally expect in the garden. This last weekend for instance, I had three lesser redpoll, 2 marsh tit, 2 tree sparrow and 1 reed bunting in my garden.



*Tree Sparrow*

I know that Trevor Valentine and Peter Holt have also seen several reed bunting and Ivan Cumberpatch reports a blackcap – normally a summer visitor, but one or two do (foolishly as it turns out) over-winter.



*Female reed bunting*

And do remember to feed the birds – they are literally fighting for survival at the moment and need to conserve as much energy as possible. The easier it is to find food, the more chance they have of surviving the cold.

This year certainly seems to be a good one for redwing and fieldfare. Before the cold

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snap there were hundreds of them feeding along the hedgerows around the Maxey Cut. Driving up to the Norfolk Coast in early January, I saw thousands of fieldfare feeding in an orchard beside the A47. They are now turning to gardens for food, stripping berries off any tree they can find.

Goosander can be found on the Maxey Cut between Helpston and Etton – always a sure sign of cold weather as they normally stay on the pits, but these are iced over. There is also a regular kingfisher flying up and down the Cut. Listen out for its shrill piping call – that will alert you to its presence. And if you keep your eyes open you can see a water rail lurking in the vegetation near the bridge over the Maxey-Helpston Road – there was one there on 31 January!



*Two Male and female goosander*

One of the best things about snow is that it provides an opportunity to find out just what is really about in our fields at night, as we can check the fresh tracks in the morning. A visit to Swaddywell after snow suggests that there is something of a party going on there at night – there are so many tracks! Fox, badger and muntjac deer are the most obvious, along, of course, with rabbit. But there are also plenty of smaller tracks, which are more difficult to identify but point to a healthy population of rats, voles and probably stoat.

I have seen several stoats out and about this autumn, so do keep your eyes peeled for this superb predator. One ran across the road in Bainton in October and there was one at Etton – Maxey Pits too.

## Weather Report by Peter Holt

The pleasant warmer than average weather experienced in September continued into October. However, during most of November and into December, a vigorous westerly airflow developed and one depression after another tracked past north west of the UK. Our area had the wettest period of what was otherwise a fairly dry year for us overall but in the Lake District record rainfall for England was recorded leading to severe flooding. During this period, temperatures in our region remained above average with the first air frost not until December 1<sup>st</sup>.

From mid-December the pressure patterns changed dramatically with high pressure becoming established to the north feeding in much colder air from the Arctic. From the 19<sup>th</sup> our area experienced the snowiest pre-Christmas weather since 1981. It was also very cold by day with five consecutive days where the temperature did not get above freezing. In spite of a mild start to the month, December was the coldest since 1996. The last few days of the year saw a brief respite but snowy weather returned in the new year and although the snow cleared by mid-January the month was generally cold with well below average temperatures. Average daytime temperatures were the lowest since 1985. (avg. 3.3°C compared to 1.5°C – normal is around 6°C.)

During the coldest spells of weather we did not experience the very low night time temperatures reported in other parts the country with nothing below minus 6°C so far this winter.

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

Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan
85.5	81.5	70.5	60.0

*Long term average*

Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan
60.1	55.4	53.1	50.9

## Membership update

We currently have a record number of 87 members. New Membership Secretary David Cowcill has rationalised the subscriptions into two periods - January to December and July to June. Existing members will receive a reminder (e-mail preferred) when to renew - at the first anniversary following the current "spread-out" dates. New members are always welcome and will be slotted into the next time period. Interested? Please contact David Cowcill on [dcowcill@aol.com](mailto:dcowcill@aol.com) or 01733 252655.

## Forthcoming Events

Saturday 13 February	Wildlife Round Here – Birds, Beasts, Bugs and Botany – an illustrated talk at Maxey Village Hall, 2-4pm
Sunday 28 February	Work Party, meet at Swaddywell Pit, 1.30pm
Wednesday 17 March	Indoor talk, Botolph's Barn, Helpston, 7pm
Tuesday 13 April	Toad and newt count, Swaddywell Pit, 7.30pm
Tuesday 4 May	Nightingale walk, Bainton Pits, meet Torpel Manor Field at 7.30pm

## Contacts

*Newsletter and walks*

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Photos of tree sparrow, reed bunting and goosander by kind permission of North East Wildlife – view [www.northeastwildlife.co.uk](http://www.northeastwildlife.co.uk)

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