

# HADDENHAM CONSERVATION SOCIETY

Vol. 24 No. 3  
September 2009

SUMMER 2009

The Committee for 2009/10 is as follows:

Barclay Arnott	740500
Ann Biggs	740810
John Burgess	749441
Freda Crofts	740235
Susan Everitt	740352
Brian Lanman	741138
Wendy Lanman	741138
Jane Marsh	740680
Paul Mason	740219
Robert Norman	740473
Chris Prescott	749038
Gill Smith	741662
Mike Smith	741662
Andrew Treadgold	740650
Barbara York	741624

Please feel free to get in touch with any committee member with questions or information you might have. If you have any specific records of flora and fauna, please send them to Paul Mason, 13 Aldreth Road, Haddenham (740219).

## Membership information

Subscription rates

1 Jan to 31 Dec 2009:

Individual: £6

Family: £10

If you wish to join the Society, send your cheque, made out to Haddenham Conservation Society,

with your name, address and telephone number, to Brian Lanman, 1 The Pond, Haddenham, Ely CB6 3XG.

This will entitle you to receive our regular newsletter and will give you free entry to the winter talks.

(A saving of £2.50 per session).

## Rare Raptor Visits Haddenham Fens

One of the most rare of raptors ever to be seen in England was found in our parish on Sunday evening 6<sup>th</sup> September about 5.30 pm. It was a Pallid Harrier and is the smallest of the harrier family. The male bird as seen is a very pale almost white bird and a sort of wedge of black feathers almost inserted into the wing tips, unlike the other three species the Marsh, Montagues and Hen harriers. The Marsh Harrier is common in our fens in summer and autumn and at least 4 have been present in late summer and early autumn. They are rumoured actually have bred in our fen this year. The Hen Harrier is generally seen in winter with the Montague's usually seen only occasionally in spring and autumn passage periods. This bird was around all the next day and may have stayed even longer at the time of writing.

Look for the Pallid Harrier in your guide books, but they will need to be of all Europe. It is not likely to be included in one confined only to British breeding birds. The Pallid breeds only in an area from Ukraine east to countries like Afghanistan north to Kazakhstan and is well off-course in this country. They winter in east Africa, mostly south of the Sahara, but can be recorded even in The Gambia.

Congratulations to Simon Stirrup for finding the bird which drew many birders from all over the country.

This is the rarest bird we have ever had in Haddenham.



*Pallid Falcon by Ann Biggs*

## What is Happening at Top Corner?

Contributed by Jez Reeve



*Top Corner last February*

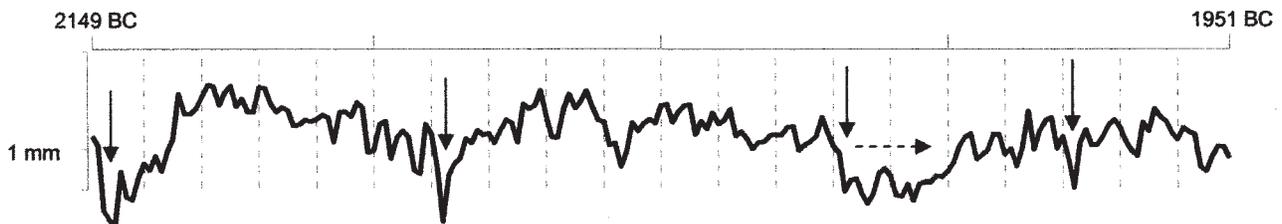
Haddenham Conservation Society has been successful in getting a grant from East Cambs Community Fund to find a lasting solution for Top Corner. Haddenham Galleries are going to lead on this by drawing up a brief and having

a competition that will be judged by a panel of Haddenham people of all ages.

There are so many ideas for the Top Corner that this is the only fair way of getting a solution that works for everyone. Over the next 3 months there will be a lot of activity around getting people involved in the competition and judging. Cambridgeshire Community Fund are keen to receive an application for the costs of the successful design when the judging is completed in November. There is a sign on the top corner encouraging people to put forward ideas. An application form to make suggestions, attend a workshop or sit on the judging panel is out now.

Date of workshop: 31 Oct 2-5 at Arkenstall School; judging day 7 November, 2-5 pm, Arkenstall School.

## Tests Reveal Age of our Bog Oaks



After the story of the appearance of 50 bog oaks in our fens at one time and the interest created in the media, a sample was sent for dating to the department of Archeology at Sheffield University. Cathy Tyers, a research fellow at the department carried out tests to date the example and this is the result of her findings.

“Analysis of the bog oak sample from Haddenham Fen that was sent to the laboratory has now been undertaken using standard methodological approaches (English Heritage 1998; [www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)). The sample contained 199 rings and thus, allowing for the missing innermost rings to the pith and the outer-

most heartwood and sapwood rings to the bark surface, it is clearly derived from a tree well in excess of 200 years old when it died.

The measured ring sequence was successfully dated to the period 2149-1951 BC. This indicates the year in which each ring present in the sample was formed. In the absence of any trace of the outer part of the tree, the sapwood, it is unfortunately not possible to determine precisely when this tree died. However, based on the minimum number of missing sapwood rings, it is clear that the tree died no earlier than 1941 BC. By taking into account previous analyses of bog oak groups and the degradation of the

outer surfaces, it seems reasonable to suggest that this tree had however died by the mid 1800s BC.

This particular tree has suffered several periods of very slow growth, highlighted on the illustration above. These are likely to be the result of localised adverse environmental conditions which, bearing in mind its location, could include water inundation. This ring sequence is very similar to a number of bog oak groups previously analysed from the Fens, particularly those from Holme Fen and Sawtry Fen. Thus this tree forms part of an early Bronze Age forest present on the Fens.”

# Birds of the Summer

Before talking about the summer birds we have to get rid of some hangers-on from winter and in this context several Bramblings were still hanging around gardens in West End and Duck Lane. A maximum of 3-4 was seen at any one time. Whether this refers to the same birds visiting each garden is not clear. Three Redpolls briefly visited a Bury Lane garden and four Snipes were in another garden as the last of the cold weather left us.

As spring started to show its face Bullfinches were in a Station Road garden and Shelducks were prospecting straw bale stacks for nesting in Ewell Fen, Aldreth. By April 7<sup>th</sup> three Yellow Wagtails had returned to Foulmire Drove. It's always great to see these brilliant birds in pristine plumage. Subsequently they had a good breeding summer with several young seen later in the year. Common and Lesser Whitethroats returned soon after and their song emanated from many hedges and bushes. Sedge and Reed Warblers could be found in any suitable habitat, especially along Aldreth Causeway and around the bridge over the river. However, it was news received only in late August 09 of a bird seen in early May 09, described by a non-birdwatcher, as a large bird of prey that kept diving into the Old West River near Nineacre Wood, but they didn't know what it was, could only surely mean an Osprey fishing while on migration! Grrrr.

All in all most birds had a good summer except that Mistle Thrushes were not so noticeable whereas Song Thrushes could be heard singing in many gardens. They are more of a garden bird now and less likely to be

found out in the fens. Our resident woodpeckers Green and Great Spotted were seen almost everywhere, even in small groups of trees around the fens. Barclay Arnott had Greens nest in the same tree in his garden for two years running. We even had a committee meeting in the



garden whilst the female sat quietly nurturing her brood.

House Martins did not have a good year. The first pair to be noted when they started breeding was in Aldreth Road on April 27<sup>th</sup>. (They did manage to rear two broods). It was not until several weeks later that two more pairs returned to the house on The Green that had been a traditional site from time immemorial. They seemed to be the only ones around Haddenham this year. Swallows on the other hand were up to scratch with muster, many pairs sitting on telephone wires along Hillrow and also

nesting under at least three bridges out on the fens. Swifts had a great year with at least seven pairs breeding in the High Street, with another one or two pairs where West End meets Hillrow.

There were fewer migrating Wheatears this spring, but seven were found on May 10<sup>th</sup> along Dambank Drove and the Yellow Wagtails there numbered one Blue Headed race among them. The blue-headed race of wagtails normally breed further east into Europe but this is the second time we have recorded it in Haddenham.

Another surprise was two Coal Tits coming to feed on nuts in a garden along Hop Row. This probably indicated breeding nearby, but they would need a pine tree of some sort. It is especially good to record that, on May 23<sup>rd</sup> at Hinton Hedges, a Spotted Flycatcher was found and later another was seen near Haddenham Surgery by Barbara York. Even better was that some also bred in a wooded garden in Station Road. This site used to be quite traditional up to about 5 years ago. Many will remember it belonged then to the late member David Purves and his wife Ann. It is good to know that this now quite rare breeder found the same place after all this time.

Barn Owls, Tawny Owls and Little Owls all did well with young recorded in many places. Kestrel numbers seemed down and, although individuals were seen, it is not known if Hobbys bred. Two juvenile Marsh Harriers were also seen near Grangers Drove on August 16<sup>th</sup>.

One big disappointment was the low numbers of Turtle Doves breeding, but that seems to be a general situation countryside.

An early autumn migrating Wheatear was noted on August 1<sup>st</sup>. This is an early date as most are in September so we shall wait to see how many more there will be ...

# A Good Summer for Butterflies

2007 and 2008 were cold, constantly wet and miserable summers. This was particularly noticeable when it came to insects like butterflies and dragonflies and those poor years were to have a greatly differing effect on the numbers seen in summer 2009.



*Brown Argus: Haddenham's smallest butterfly with wing span barely 30 millimetres. The plumage of the male is a deep brown edged creamy white.*

In 2008, despite the cool wet conditions, Large White commonly known as Cabbage White butterflies were so numerous that gardeners and allotment holders were complaining that the caterpillars were decimating leaves of the various brassicas they hoped to harvest. Other than this particular species, butterflies were noticeably in short supply. The difference between 2008 and 2009 for Large Whites was remarked on by many and whilst some were to be seen, mostly later in the summer the numbers were greatly down. Gardeners weren't complaining now, but what was the reason? There could have been several; after all it is well known that all insects have plentiful years alternating with shortage years and this is quite normal as long as man has not interfered. When there were many Large White caterpillars around there were also many of the species of Ichneumon fly that lays eggs within the body of the caterpillar. Perhaps you have seen cases where what was expected to be a white butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, there were instead a

number of small yellow objects looking like eggs. Those were chrysalis of the predator instead. This caused fewer white butterflies in 2009 - with fewer complaints from gardeners.

Otherwise it is generally thought to have been an excellent year for other butterflies.

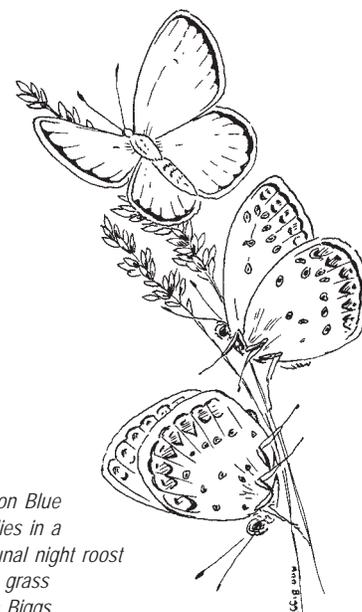
Orange Tips, Common Blues, Brown Argus, Meadow Brown, Ringlet, Gatekeeper numbers were well up on 2008, but the stars of the year were the immigrant Painted Ladies. They came in from Morocco via Spain and France during May, travelling literally by tens of thousands, even millions, a day. Around a hundred per hour were noted at Aldreth, all travelling fast northwards. Others had decided to settle here and those would lay eggs on our local thistles.

By the end of July a second brood of the ladies appeared and there were even more to be seen around flowering buddleia bushes and out in the countryside. They were joined by masses of Peacocks and Small Tortoiseshells and, quite noticeably, the brilliant orange jagged winged Comma. The close relative of those species, the Red Admiral, was far less numerous.

In August, in the right habitat, Common Blues were really common and Haddenham's smallest butterfly, the Brown Argus, was so numerous it was spreading into gardens, no doubt looking for new places to breed. Ringlets, Gatekeepers or Hedge Brown, always quite common in July, were lasting well into the next month. A close relative, though never very common in the best of years, the Wall Brown was still very hard to find during its normal August flight period and there are concerns that it might be one of the species now in decline.

## *But where were the dragonflies ?*

2009 really was a very poor year for dragonflies and damselflies locally. The first dragon to appear is the Hairy Dragonfly (a member of the Hawker family) and a moderate number could be found in May in their favourite habitat along the drains in the fens. Not particularly numerous, but at least there to be found. After that things went downhill with poor numbers of Scarce Chasers, usually found in late May along the banks of the Old West River, but their cousin the normally common everywhere Four-spot Chaser was really scarce. In June the only species to be any way obvious was the Broad Bodied Chaser and females were noted egg-laying, especially in the restored pond in Fairchilds Meadows. It then went downhill again with very few Brown Hawkers and seemingly fewer Southern Hawkers. Common Darters were far from common. Perhaps things will pick up and a final report will be made in the next newsletter. Use your field guides to appreciate these fascinating insects.



*Common Blue butterflies in a communal night roost in long grass by Ann Biggs*

## News From Guppy's Pond

Contributed by Wendy Lanman



*Robert practising life-saving techniques*

As those few of you who came to the Boating Day - and thoroughly enjoyed it - will have noticed, the level of the water in the pond is at one of its lowest yet, probably about 30 cm (1') lower than usual.

This didn't prevent boats from being moored and rowed around on a rather pleasant day. Robert and Barclay even had a life-belt throwing competition to see which of the classic or modern versions was the most suitable. As you see, we test the equipment thoroughly!

As for the wildlife this summer, one great disappointment was that there were no cygnets at all. During a maintenance workparty we did find broken, empty eggshells and so must deduce that a fox probably ate the eggs.

We also saw the relentless killing of the moorhen chicks by the coots - my, those birds are ferocious! They think nothing of attacking a swan if it gets too close to their young and, as for the moorhen chicks, they actively hunted them down within the undergrowth (where they don't usually go, but where the moorhens hide) to rid themselves of these potential rivals for food and territory.

Two white ducks have appeared on the Pond this summer. No curly tail feathers, so they might be two females. We shall probably see a motley bunch of ducks next year.

## Curioser and Curioser

Contributed by Jake Allsop

### Barn Owl saga

You remember I told you about the Barn Owl box that I put up in March on a Thursday which had three adults in it, a male and two females, by the following Tuesday? Well, when I went back in early July to check the box, three adults again came out, a male and two females. And, in the box, there were four chicks, two very young on one side of the box, and two much older chicks on the other side of the box, clearly two different broods, ie, one for each female. This is only the second time I have come across the phenomenon of two females breeding in the same box. My fear was that the two older chicks would hog the food and the two young ones would not make it, but when I returned three weeks later to ring the chicks, all four were thriving - full bellies and flight feathers growing nicely. Clearly, two devoted mothers, who did not regard each other as rivals. And a father who managed to service both of them, and his four offspring. How's that for a successful ménage à trois?!



*Barn Owl - photo Mike Read*

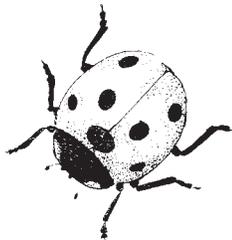
### Kestrel saga

You remember I told you about the ringed adult female Kestrel that was found injured on Woolden Farm by Natalie Burrows and her friend, and how they wrapped it in a sweater and took it home? This was in June last year. I took the bird to the Raptor Foundation and waited for news, but none came. One of three things can happen: [1] the bird doesn't recover; [2] the bird recovers but cannot be returned to the wild; [3] the bird recovers and is released where it was found.



This June, I had occasion to visit the Foundation again, accompanied by graduate research student, Claudia, who is doing her PhD in the ecology of Kestrels on farmland. While there, I inquired after my female Kestrel. They couldn't locate any record of the bird, but promised to get in touch with me when they did. In the meantime, Claudia and I went to look at a pair of category [2] Kestrels that had mated and produced four chicks (We were there to take measurements of the four chicks). I commented on the fact that the female of the pair was ringed, and, yes, you are ahead of me as usual, it turned out to be the female that had been rescued by Natalie and her friend the previous year. How's that for a story with happy ending?!

# Have They Been Harlequinned?



Some five or six years ago it was thought that, because a new type of large ladybird called the Harlequin Ladybird was getting more and more common, there might be a threat to everybody's favourite, the Seven-Spot Ladybird. This was because an interloper which had initially come from Mongolia via the United States, where it arrived in 1988, was bigger and had been found to devour the larvae of seven-spots as well as the adult flying insects. It also ate many other adults and larvae of pest species and there were fears that the Harlequin would exterminate our favourites just as it seems to have done in the US. It has arrived also in much of north-west Europe.

Surveys were carried out under the supervision of the late Dr Mike Majerus (who had given HCS a talk about the possible threat) and it was found that the Harlequins were, and still are, gradually moving north and west through Britain.

There are 46 species of Ladybird (Coccinellidae) that breed in Britain and the fears are that the recent invader has the potential to put the future of most of them at risk.

During a period from about mid- July through to August this year one was quite right to ask "was the concern justified?" Suddenly there were swarms of seven-spots coming in over the North Sea and many were to be seen around Haddenham. Even greater numbers of other Ladybird species have been noted, including twelve-spot, two-spot, 22 spot and others that are green, yellow etc. and very few people have found a Harlequin this year. So is the worry over? Are Harlequins a threat after all? Will they just gradually find their own niche and settle down. Will it be found that they have their own predator?

Some coleopterists (people who study beetles) were less concerned so should we be worried that our seven-spot has "flown away home"? Keep a look out.



## Work party at the Old Burial Ground

Ten willing volunteers turned up to help with the hay cut and tidying of the butterfly garden on a lovely sunny Sunday in mid July. In spite of variable weather in the earlier part of the week the whole of the wildflower area had been strimmed and the cut hay left to dry and allow any seeds to fall out. At the work party this was raked up and carted away and the area mowed and again all the cuttings raked and removed.

The reason for all this removal of the hay is to keep reducing the fertility of the soil so that the wild flowers will thrive in preference to grass. We still have not succeeded in establishing any yellow rattle – a parasitic plant which weakens grasses, but does not affect the wild flowers. We shall keep on trying!

The other main work was to weed the butterfly garden and then spread wood chippings to act as a mulch to reduce further growth in the areas

between the clumps of chosen plants. We are most grateful to Mr Glen Conway who kindly supplied us with a load of wood chippings for this and who also gave us some useful tips on how to use the chippings most successfully.

With a welcome and well deserved break for drinks and biscuits it proved to be a most worthwhile couple of hours' work and left the Burial Ground looking trim and tidy.

Depending on the weather between now and the autumn, we may not need to cut the wild flower area again, and only need to have a final tidying session before the winter.



*Wren on Tombstone by Kim Smith*

So, many thanks to Barclay, Marrian, Sheila, Ian, Sally, Gareth, Andrew, Gill and Mike for all their hard work. They all agreed it had been an enjoyable and sociable time. If you would like to 'lend a hand' at the next work party you will be most welcome. The date is usually posted in the Burial Ground or you could phone Mike or Gill on 741662 to be added to the list of possible helpers to be notified of the next date.

•••••  
 • The next work party, to rake up  
 • the cut grass so that all looks tidy  
 • for the winter, will be held on  
 • **Sunday 4th October, 2-4 pm.**  
 • There will be free tea and biscuits!  
 •••••

## To The Cuckoo

O blithe New-comer! I have heard,  
I hear thee and rejoice.  
O Cuckoo! shall I call thee Bird,  
Or but a wandering Voice?

While I am lying on the grass  
Thy twofold shout I hear;  
From hill to hill it seems to pass,  
At once far off, and near.

Though babbling only to the vale  
Of sunshine and of flowers,  
Thou bringest unto me a tale  
Of visionary hours.

Thrice welcome, darling of the Spring!  
Even yet thou art to me  
No bird, but an invisible thing,  
A voice, a mystery;

The same whom in my schoolboy days  
I listened to; that Cry  
Which made me look a thousand ways  
In bush, and tree, and sky.

To seek thee did I often rove  
Through woods and on the green;  
And thou wert still a hope, a love;  
Still longed for, never seen.

And I can listen to thee yet;  
Can lie upon the plain  
And listen, till I do begot  
That golden time again.

O blessed Bird! The earth we pace  
Again appears to be  
An unsubstantial, faery place,  
That is fit home for Thee!

William Wordsworth

## New Wild Flower Finds



*Kidney Vetch*  
(yellow flower)



It's quite amazing that, even after a 5-6 year survey of Haddenham's plant life, new species are still being found. This shows the diversity that we have in a simple Cambridgeshire fen parish. Not entirely unexpected, but not discovered until this year along the New Cut Drain bank, was Kidney Vetch. This is a lime-loving plant usually found on chalk downs or maybe along the Devils Ditch near Newmarket racecourse. A specimen was discovered along the north fen section of the bank.

More significant and interesting is the finding of just one specimen of the intriguingly-named Skullcap. Found along the edge of the Old West River, tucked into the bank, was just one example of this member of the Labiate family - which

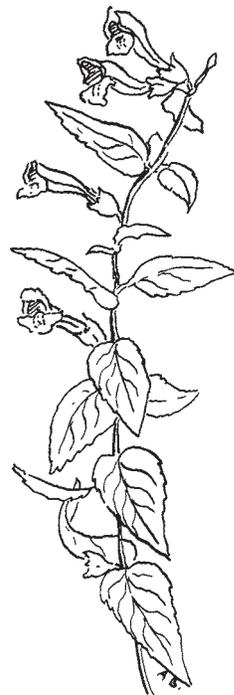
includes mints like Water Mint, Self Heal and Ground Ivy. Skullcap is quite a scarce plant in Cambridgeshire, growing mostly in fens like Wicken and Chippenham. The rivers Cam and Great Ouse where it is occasionally seen are connected to the Old West so the find is quite logical.

As to the origin of the name, Grigson's *Englishman's Flora* reveals that the Flemish botanist, de l'Obel, who was the first to record it in England, thought it was a loosestrife and called it the

'blue-purple loosestrife with a calyx like a small galerum', a leather skull-helmet worn by the Romans. In Germany it is called Keppen-helmkraut, 'cap-helmet plant', and the French call it *toque bleue*.

So everyone seems to see a resemblance to some sort of hat, though it must have been a pretty small roman as the plant

is barely a foot high and the flowers less than a centimetre long.



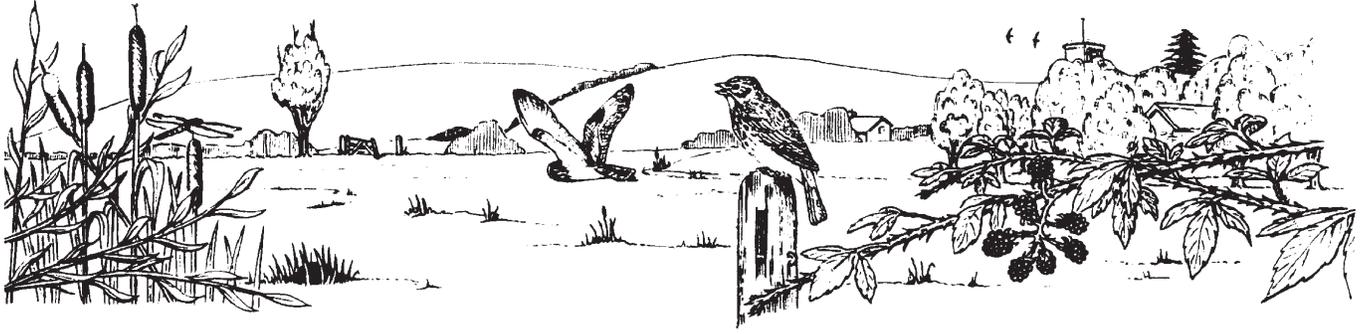
*Skullcap by Ann Biggs*

### Renew your subs!

Subscriptions were due on  
1st January.

If you haven't yet paid, please do so  
quickly.

Thank you.



## WINTER TALKS

Indoor meetings are held at the Arkenstall Centre, Haddenham,  
on the second Tuesday of each month from October to April, at 8:00 pm.

Members free. Non-members welcome for a nominal fee. All welcome to stay for a (free) drink and a chat after each talk.

October 13

### THE BEAUTY OF TREES

**Cathy White**, our local tree officer, loves and cares for trees. She will describe the various species and place them in the context of our woodlands, gardens and other open spaces. Trees are essential to a great variety of other wildlife, but we need to look after them. How can we do it?

November 10

### “NO BONES ABOUT IT”

**David Sheppard's** enigmatic title for this talk is bound to be about his passion for insects. They can be intriguing in behaviour and beauty: so come and find out more.

December 8

### HODBARROW NATURE RESERVE

On the edge of the Lake District National Park in Cumbria, by the Irish Sea, this now flooded 200-acre iron-ore mine is home to a great variety of wildlife including wildfowl, waders, seabirds - and Natterjack toads, as **Doug Radford** will explain.

January 12

### THE ASIAN BIRD TRADE

TRAFFIC is the international wildlife monitoring network that works to ensure trade in the world's wild plants and animals is not a threat to their conservation. **Richard Thomas** explains how it all works and will describe some of the individual cases they have had to deal with.

February 9

### A PATTERN OF ISLANDS

Scotland has hundreds of islands; **David Garner** will show us the wealth of sea birds and other wildlife found on some of them. Gannets, Kittiwakes, Puffins etc etc!

March 9

### PAXTON PITS

Since **Trevor Gunton** last talked about this reserve a few years ago it has changed and developed enormously. He will tell us of the work involved and the wildlife now seen there.

April 13

### EELS, PUNTS AND WILLOWS - A LIFE ON THE FEN

Eel man **Peter Carter** knows the fen rivers and its eels and other fishes well. In his entertaining presentation we shall learn of his unique way of earning a living, now under threat.

This meeting will be preceded by a short AGM.