

HADDENHAM CONSERVATION SOCIETY

Summer 2015

Vol. 30 No. 3
September 2015

The Committee for 2015/16 is as follows:

Barclay Arnott	740500
Ann Biggs	740810
John Burgess	749441
Sheila Dickerson	749443
Susan Everitt, Treas.	740352
Elver Langley	
Wendy Lanman	741138
Caroline Lee	
Paul Mason	740219
Robert Norman	740473
Chris Prescott	749038

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).

HCS Website:

www.hcs.tinaboneuk.co.uk

Membership information

Subscription rates
1 Jan to 31 Dec 2015:
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:

Susan Everitt
21 Twenty Pence Road
Wilburton, Ely CB6 3RM

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 person per session.

Ouse Washes Landscape Partnership Awards Grant to HCS



'Find Me, Tick Me' cards designed for pre-school children in Haddenham. Artwork by Ann Biggs.

Haddenham Conservation Society has won a grant of £625 towards producing a fun Ouse Washes wildlife-based game for Haddenham and Wilburton schoolchildren. It's a Happy Families type game but with wildlife. Not just any wildlife but species found in and around the famous Ouse Washes – one of the most important wildlife areas in Europe.

The game is designed for four- to five-year-old children and a free set is to be given to each child of that age group in the two schools. It is hoped that when playing the games the children will learn more about their surroundings.

HCS members will design and create the sets of cards. Their free labour will be counted as matching fund money from the grant. The project is planned to be finished in summer 2016.

'This project is made possible with a Community Heritage Fund grant from the Ouse Washes Landscape Partnership, a Heritage Lottery Fund grant-aided scheme to promote the Ouse Washes Landscape. We are extremely proud to have been awarded it.' So said the HCS committee chairman Chris Prescott.

Mark Nokkert, Programme Manager for the Ouse Washes Landscape Partnership, said 'We are absolutely thrilled with the number and quality of applications received for our Community Heritage Fund grant scheme. The Haddenham Conservation Society's project stood out for its unique approach of making good use of the society's knowledge about the rare and interesting fauna of the Ouse Washes Landscape and delivering beautiful artwork for local school children to use exploring their own surroundings in an interactive and fun way'.



Supported by
The National Lottery[®]
through the Heritage Lottery Fund



Merlin and the Wintering Linnets of Long Drove

Contributed by Paul Mason

Linnets are in danger nationally, having suffered a serious decline due to changes in agricultural methods over most of the 20th century and into the 21st century. Whilst there are no records of their numbers around our parish in the early 1900s, it can reasonably be supposed that there was a larger population then because there were many more hedges in a condition to support breeding Linnets than there are now. This can be seen by examining the hedges around fields along Bury Lane. They are kept tidy yes, but are bushy and wide at the bottom. Compare these with the hedges around large areas of land intensively farmed in prairie fashion between Haddenham and Witcham Toll. Many of those hedges are kept very tight and small and are subsequently no good to 'man or beast'. Well, birds anyway!

The male Linnet, a member of the seed-eating finch family, is a delight to behold in summer, being a bright brown bird with a beautiful orangey red breast and a blue-grey head with a red patch above the beak. It gives forth a bell-like song greatly favoured by the Victorians, making it a common caged bird in those times, as portrayed in a popular music hall number sung by Marie Lloyd.

Females, in common with many other species, are a drab light brown so they are camouflaged when on their nest. In the breeding season they can often be heard around many of Haddenham's suitable hedgerows, as well as out on the fens. Linnets cleverly make use of crops like tall oilseed rape and, more unexpectedly, bushy potato foliage. They are remarkably faithful to each other as pairs. When disturbed, they fly off as a pair in a bouncy fluttery flight and return to the original spot as we proceed by. Linnets also feed close to the ground on small to medium sized seeds from arable weeds, such as Knotgrass and Dock, and crucifers like Charlock, Chickweeds, Dandelions, Thistle and, noticeably in the fen, on Perennial Sow Thistle.

Those plants are plentiful in fen fields and along ditches so when Linnets gather in winter into large flocks, sometimes numbering around 300, they seek out the food, hugging close to the ground but constantly on the move.

Wherever you see such a wintering flock, and fields along Long Drove are favourite places, then patience can sometimes be rewarded by the sudden appearance of what may be the Linnets' main winter predator, the Merlin. The Merlins are mostly juveniles or females with brown plumage that blends well with the surrounding soil. They sit patiently before making a quick dash just above the ground. It's a lucky watcher who sees a catch as the flock moves on almost in ignorance that there is one less Linnet among them. If the Linnet flock happens to be perched on a bush, an approaching Merlin is likely to be spotted and the Linnets will scatter in all directions before reforming in another flock behind the marauder.

Merlins come to winter at lower levels from their upland moorland summer breeding sites. If you see a male it is a sight to be enjoyed because of its blue-grey wings and striped orange breast, but they are far rarer in a fen habitat.



Male Linnet
© RSPB Images



Juvenile Merlin
© RSPB Images

Cake and Plant Sale



The May cake and plant stall was a great success, raising a total of £355.02 – plants £203.11 and cakes £151.91. Many thanks to everyone who contributed; and thank you to all those who bought. These funds will help to pay for speakers over the winter.



Wind Farm Fears Over

REG Windpower withdrew their planning application to place three 125-metre high turbines at Berry Fen, Dambank Drove, near Aldreth. This happened only days before the ECDC Planning Committee was due to consider it. The reason they gave was that they couldn't find anywhere to link into the mains electricity supply. Aldreth power station was running at full capacity, taking all the power generated from the nearby solar farm.

Anyway that's what REG said, and as things stood that may have been correct, but maybe there were other reasons too. We don't know. We do know, however, that the ECDC planning officer dealing with this application was due to recommend to her committee that it be refused on five important counts. Of those, fears for wildlife figured prominently, particularly the danger to wintering swans. Plans for an offset scheme to distract these large birds (and others) from flying through the turbine blades by putting out diversionary food in fields away from the site were considered very contentious and unlikely to work.

HCS worked with Cambridgeshire Wildlife Trust and the RSPB to emphasise the dangers present and future and many members also sent in their objections, for which we'd like to say 'thank you!'

Whatever the reasons, we now know that Haddenham parish's wildlife will be safe from whirling blades.

News from Guppy's Pond

Contributed by Wendy Lanman

We have had an interesting summer here at Guppy's Pond. First, the Tree Bumblebee episode described below and lately the release of a Pipistrelle Bat and another Hedgehog. That probably sounds very mundane and unexciting, but it makes me look at my garden in a whole new way as I try to see it through the eyes and noses of the creatures we are releasing – or attracting.

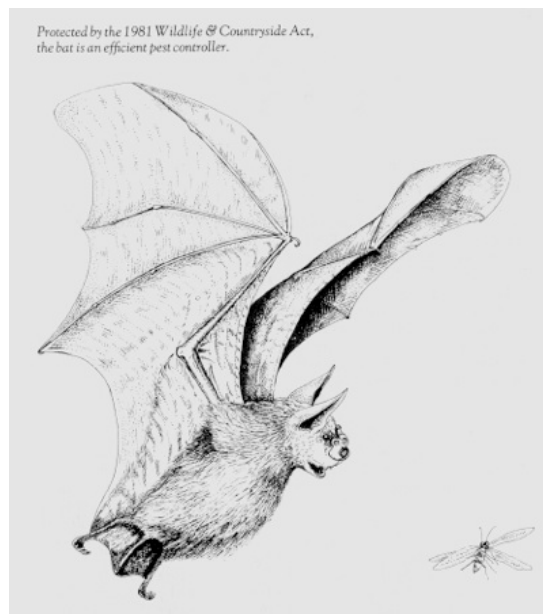
It makes me consider the food sources and shelter they will find and whether they will be able to find a large enough territory to not be in competition with another of their species, as in the case of the hedgehog, or be able to join an existing group, as for the little bat.

It makes me consider additions to my garden in terms of not only aesthetics, but also the needs of the wildlife within it already or which I wish to attract. It's also a wonderful excuse to accept 'weeds' in some corners to feed and host additional beauty: butterflies.

Apart from the above, we have had no swans this summer except for a few fleeting visits, probably due to the geese taking over during the breeding season. We have, however, often seen Kingfishers and at least two young. Ducks are back and have had several broods whose numbers the Pike have kept down. Both Coots and Moorhens have raised and lost chicks so that numbers are relatively stable.

As I write this, Dragonflies and Damselflies are plentiful, the Hawkers busily zigzagging across the water when they are not coupling and laying their eggs in the water or close vegetation.

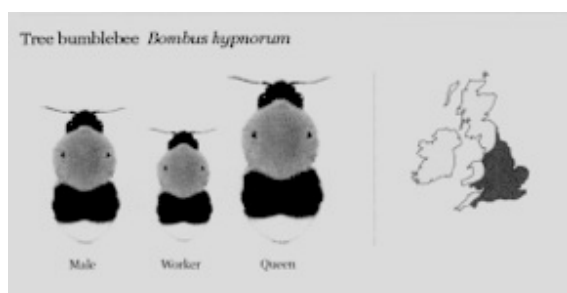
We have been promised a bounty of Painted Lady butterflies, but haven't seen them yet. Maybe something I shall be writing about in the next newsletter.



This illustration was taken from 'A Guide to Countryside Conservation' by Dr John Feltwell.

Tree Bumblebees

Contributed by Wendy Lanman



From 'Buglife Guide to Bees of Britain'

We only noticed them in May because the nest box was half hidden in the wisteria. It wasn't until they were very busily foraging and the male bumblebees were hovering outside the box hoping to pounce on a female flying out that we realised they had taken over the box.

The entrance hole was completely and neatly blocked in except for a small hole just big enough for the bees to fly in and out of. There was also a growing heap of something which I took to be rubbed-off pollen as the bees went in just underneath the entrance, but which, I found out, was actually their droppings.

Although the entire colony fitted into that small box, those female workers did a sterling job in the garden and seemed to fill every flower open at the time. Every foxglove flower along a stem had a bumblebee in it, not to mention all the other flowers in the garden.

They seemed so docile that I took close-up photos of the box without any problem (except that the photos were very blurred), but when I tried to prune the wisteria nearby I got stung! Unpleasant but not very painful. That told me to leave them alone, which I did. I found more information on the Internet and discovered that Tree Bumblebees are docile, but very sensitive to vibrations and can become angry. The males don't sting, but the females do. So, if you are lucky enough to have these little visitors in your garden, just leave them alone. They will be gone by mid July.

This new species, which arrived in Britain only a decade ago, is an excellent pollinator and will help fill the gap caused by the decline in honeybees, so we can welcome them with open arms (as long as we are not using secateurs!).

Wildflower Survey

Contributed by Jez Reeve



Inventory plot: 5 x 5m plot survey in Fairchild's Meadow
 Date: 13 July 2015 19:30–20:30
 Conditions: Overcast, damp under foot
 Square: TL 4695/7685
 Domin scale: Ranges from 1 = 1% cover to 10 = 100% cover
 Surveyors: Barclay, Chris, Clare, Jez, Robert

Common Knapweed	8	4
Yellow Rattle	4	4
Meadow Buttercup	3	5
White Clover	3	2
Ragged Robin	0	1
Red Clover	4	3
Oxeye Daisy	1	2
Self-heal	0	2
Common Mouse Ear	0	1
Greater Bird's-foot Trefoil	4	3
Creeping Thistle	1	1
Lady's Bedstraw	3	0
Yarrow	1	0
	32	28



Bird's-foot Trefoil

Frothy Lady's Bedstraw on the increase!

The wildflower count in Fairchild's Meadows this year found an increase in Lady's Bedstraw, Common Knapweed, White and Red Clovers, Yarrow and Bird's-foot Trefoil. We also recorded Yellow Rattle, Oxeye Daisy, Meadow Buttercup and, of course, Creeping Thistle. However, the Creeping Thistle has been managed and has not increased at all, which is good news for the wildflower meadow. The project to create the wildflower meadow is one that has been going for 10 years and is proving to be successful. A small subcommittee of the Parish Council oversees the environmental management of the three fields that make up Fairchild's Meadow.

N.B. No grasses identified this year; no linear transect across field because it was cut the following day before it could be done.

Up the Creek at Wendy's

Contributed by Paul Mason

On Saturday 22 August it was so hot that Ian Dickerson and I decided to go looking for Willow Emerald Damselflies. The Willow Emerald is a 'newcomer' species from continental Europe that arrived along the east coast a few years back and is now slowly spreading west. News that some had been seen at Roswell Pits, near Ely, inspired us to look at the similar habitat of sallows and willows at Guppy's Pond.

Wendy and Brian Lanman kindly allowed us to look-see from their magnificent balcony overlooking a great willow/salwood and reedy creek. Just right for a Willow Emerald. It was very soothing watching Brown Hawks, Southern Hawks (including one pair mating among the

reeds), many Common Darters paired and laying eggs in the water, one late Four-spotted Chaser chasing and Emperor Dragonflies grandly patrolling over all the activity below.

Despite no Willow Emerald Damselflies making an appearance, we were pleasantly surprised to find two Small Red-eyed Damselflies perched on a small amount of Blanket Weed. This is another fairly new species for the UK, although we spotted our first about six years ago on the pond at Fairchild's Meadow.

The water was noticeably clear but no fish showed themselves, neither did the Kingfishers that have bred there this year. Well you can't have everything!

A Changeable Mixed Summer

Contributed by Paul Mason

The spring and summer of 2015 have been difficult for wildlife, starting cold, then with record heat on 1 July, followed by record July cold on the last day. In May and June several Wheatears passed through to upland breeding sites. Many birds didn't breed or reared few young because insect food wasn't available; it was too cold. Tits failed and hirundines had very mixed fortunes. House Martins arrived at some nest sites but were seen to leave, while others in Hillrow had a good season. Early Swallows didn't bother but some caught up with their family responsibilities and three pairs were still feeding young in August under bridges over fen drains. Yellow Wagtail numbers were down but three families were seen feeding in the lee of potatoes near Clayton's Bridge. Contrarily, a very early Turtle Dove arrived in Aldreth on 10 March – a county earliest date ever. It found a mate later in May and they were heard singing all over the hamlet, regularly perching on Rosemary Gorman's house. Barbara York reported a new leucistic Blackbird on 17 March and two Short-eared Owls were reported south of Aldreth. At one time we thought a pair of Marsh Harriers was going to nest in a rape field but that came to nothing, although a male and female were seen in the vicinity for some time after. Common Buzzards weren't proved to nest either.

Even seed feeders like Goldfinches abandoned nests because of the unseasonal cold in May/June and few charms and young were noted in the fens later. Some did have success though and brought their families to garden feeders. Linnets weren't too successful either. Although some beautiful males were prominently showing themselves off to females, not many seemed to have large families. Red-legged Partridges chose to leave parentage until later and two family parties of week-old young were noted in early August.

Orange Tip butterflies were not as numerous in May as usual and other small butterflies like Common Blue, Brown Argus and Small Copper were hard to find. Conversely, in June and July there were up to seven White-letter Hairstreaks visible on bramble flowers (their favourite food plant) in Fairchild's Meadow. So that was a plus. Three Spotted Flycatcher chicks were ringed but fears for their success later were fuelled by a suspicion that only the female was feeding them. Good luck in West African wintering grounds is what is really needed.

Dragonflies and Damselflies were well down on normal in the fen drains but one Banded Demoiselle found itself in a Station Road garden, a long way from the Old West River where it is normally found. An unusual find in June was the discovery of a number of mini volcanoes in roadway

sand in the orchard near the Great Mill. They turned out to be Brassy Mining Bee nests. This harmless bee is very small and we couldn't photograph one but watched them stocking up their nest holes with pollen and little dead insects before laying an egg in each hole. (To see a picture of the nests visit the HCS website.)



*Brassy Mining Bee
Nests.
Image Paul Mason*

Hemlock was everywhere along fen droves and field edges in abnormal amounts so a cold spring must have been just to its liking. It grew to great heights and smothered many of the smaller plants that would be expected nearly all summer. In July the Cambridgeshire Botanist County Recorder, Jonathon Shanklin, approved the site of an unusual, but not rare, plant find – Spreading Bur (or Hedge) Parsley near Dambank Bridge. Four specimens at least of the nationally rare Great Water Parsnip were found in Gall's drain. Talking of drains several Little Egrets were seen in them and flying over.

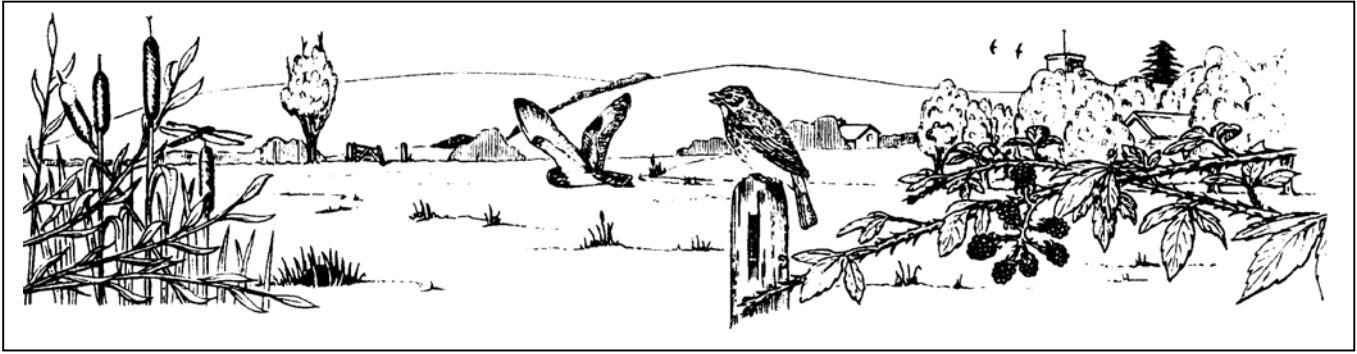
By August the wildlife still didn't know whether it was coming or going. Gadwalls were still in Church Fen drain and a Corn Bunting singing in August perhaps meant he was hoping for a second family. However, the cover crops in which to nest were soon coming down as harvest continued, so we wait to see what will come in autumn. Meanwhile, we finish with a report from Simon Stirrup as he looked around Aldreth over the weekend – Buzzard juveniles calling (possibly three), Sparrowhawk juveniles calling (two or three), a Swift (most have now gone), a Turtle Dove still purring, one Painted Lady and two Hummingbird Hawk-moths (one rescued from a spider's web).



HCS Winner

Simon Stirrup entered one of his fine pictures of a Barn Owl in the Ouse Washes Landscape Partnership photographic online competition and it won him first prize in the Wildlife section. Simon is well known for his photography but says it is the first time he has won a prize.

You can often find his pictures on the HCS website (www.hcs.tinaboneuk.co.uk). Have a look at the latest sightings and pictures, all taken within Haddenham and Aldreth parish boundaries. It is a great website to look at and to add to, if you have any pictures. They don't have to be professional, as long as they are in the parish – even in your own garden. It's a great way to record our wildlife.



2015/16 TALKS

Indoor meetings are held at the Arkenstall Centre, Haddenham, on the second Tuesday of each month from October to May, but NOT in January, 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.*

13 October

BIODIVERSITY IN THE FENS

Brian Eversham from Wildlife Trust has studied this intriguing issue. What are the problems? And, more important, how do we sustain it.?

10 November

PLANT HISTORIES

Where do they come from? And when? **Andrew Sankey** has the intriguing answers.
Plus 10 plants to guess when they first arrived here – you'll get a few surprises!

8 December

RUTLAND WATER

The Nature Reserve and its development – **Joe Davis** explains the general conservation work needed to maintain its wildlife, including animals, fish and birds, notably the Ospreys.

9 February

SWIFTS – Problems and Solutions

Dick Newell of Action for Swifts team discusses why Swifts have been declining for the last 40 years. Population dynamics, the results of geolocator studies, have been amazing and may help find reasons for the decline, and some of the things that we can do about it, in particular the preservation and provision of nesting sites.

8 March

FASCINATION OF BIRDSONG

With sound recordings and photographs **Terry Barnatt** explains when, why and how birds sing, including Blackbirds, Warblers, Nightingales and Curlews.

12 April

WILDLIFE WET AND DRY DOWNUNDER

Adventures of a naturalist in Australasia. **Francis Dipper** returns to tell the tale of her latest trip.

10 May

THE COLOUR OF HADDENHAM

Our own parish of Haddenham is full of wildlife according to local naturalist **Paul Mason**. An informative evening to end the season with.

*Every effort has been made to obtain copyright permission for the illustrations, but has not always been successful.
We shall act on any information provided by readers to rectify the situation.*