

HADDENHAM CONSERVATION SOCIETY

Vol. 27 No. 3
September 2012

SUMMER 2012

Dowitcher Uses Haddenham Airspace

The Committee for 2012/13 is as follows:

Barclay Arnott	740500
Ann Biggs, Chair	740810
John Burgess	749441
Freda Crofts, Hon President	
Susan Everitt, Treas.	740352
Wendy Lanman	741138
Jane Marsh	740680
Paul Mason	740219
Robert Norman	740473
Chris Prescott	749038
Gill Smith	741662
Mike Smith	741662

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).



Long-billed Dowitcher by Ann Biggs

Membership information

Subscription rates

1 Jan to 31 Dec 2012:

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 session).

A rare North American wader was seen to fly over the western part of Haddenham parish on Sunday 8/7/2012. It had been feeding with other waders on one of the most southerly fields of the Ouse Washes. Possibly because it had been disturbed, it then flew east and then south over fields near to the Earith-Sutton road, then across the A1421 southwards towards Cracknell Farm and out of sight. It was a **Long-billed Dowitcher** accompanied by some Greenshanks and Black-tailed Godwits and calling loudly.

This certainly makes a legitimate recorded parish first. In fact, the Godwits and Greenshanks are first records and have no doubt used Haddenham migration flyways before, but have not been seen or heard before.

The few lucky birders to have seen this event include HCS members Barbara York and David Hopkins.

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.



Old Burial Ground Update

Contributed by Mike Smith



To cut or not to cut, that was the question. This was the dilemma in mid-July, when we normally start to cut the vegetation in the Old Burial Ground to mimic a traditional hay cut. In the last two years our timing has been if anything too late, but this year the vegetation growth was maybe 3 weeks later than normal.

Our main aim in the burial ground is to allow the bulk of the flowers to finish flowering and set their seed before cutting to ensure a good population in the next year. Of course some individual species will be flowering over most of the summer months so we can never time it perfectly for every one, but cut too early and we know we will kill out some valued species.

Another consideration is the physical degree of difficulty for the strimmer to cope if we leave cutting too late. In recent years the vegetation growth has been early and light in density. This year it was late but very vigorous, much of it laid flat because of the weather. Hence our dilemma; how to balance the degree of difficulty to cut versus waiting for more of the flowering plants to mature. And on top of this, could we hit a period with enough dry days to complete the task? So, we decided to cut in mid-July.

Fortunately we had a couple of almost dry days at the start of the week to allow the cutting, followed by a dry Sunday (St Swithen's day!) to allow our valiant volunteers to rake up the hay. In between it rained on each of the 4 days, often heavily. Will this have prevented the seed heads from drying out and shedding their seeds? Only time will tell when we see the resulting wild flower stand next year.

At least the yellow rattle has grown well this year, so we hope it will spread and help to reduce the vigour of the grass growth. The clovers, vetches, trefoils, geraniums, bedstraws and hawkweeds all grew well. The ox-eye daisy excelled or was excessive, depending on your view, and the hogweed was definitely less vigorous than in previous years by mid-July. We believe that the colour and variation has been different, but at least as good as in previous years and appreciated by all visiting.

Our campaign against dog poo seems to have had some success; one pile was inadvertently sprayed about by the strimmer (and fortunately I was wearing protective goggles) and none was trodden in during the hay rake, although it was disappointing to note four new deposits in the four days between cutting and raking. So, thank you to visiting dog owners for the improvement, and please continue the good work! Thank you also to our team of volunteers for braving the threatening weather to rake up and clear the hay.

We hope that our visitors, whether dog owners, nature lovers or simply those seeking beautiful and peaceful surroundings, will continue to enjoy the site.

Next workparty: Sunday 15 October, 2:00-4:00pm to 'put to bed' for winter.

A Leek into the Future for our Lapwings



Mixed flock of Lapwing and Golden Plover by Ann Biggs

How widespread this has been is not yet known, but it has been noticed that, whilst breeding Lapwings have been pushed off the Ouse Washes this year due to excessive flooding, in the Haddenham/Aldreth fens several pairs have done quite well on farmland, especially in fields where the crop is leeks. These fields were not sown until about April when Lapwings were displaying over them. The seeds took some time to germinate because it had been dry before the deluges arrived. By mid-July they had grown quite well, but the rows are still relatively open. Several pairs of the birds have reared chicks and now some young are flying. Adults still aerially mob intruders. This is despite there being hordes of juvenile crows around, so the question is: do the leeks offer just enough cover for the Lapwing chicks to 'freeze' successfully enough to be hidden from the corvids?

Not many other predators, like Marsh Harriers, were around who would probably have found them.

Will these phenomena carry on so that we can look forward to seeing the crops protect Lapwing breeding in the future? If so, you must eat more leeks between you!

The only trouble is that when the leeks are harvested the fields stink for ages, putting off smaller birds.

Renew your subs!

Subscriptions were due on
1st January.
Please pay promptly if you haven't
already - it really helps.
Thank you.

Barn Owl Conservation in the Fens

Contributed by Peter Wilkinson

What sight could be more evocative of a balmy English summer evening than a Barn Owl floating gently over a field or along a ditch? Yet the fortunes of this charismatic and much loved bird have, over the last century or so, been rather mixed.

For much of the twentieth century the Barn Owl was clearly in steep decline. Unusually, it was the subject of a single species survey in 1932. Then, George Blaker collated records from far and wide across England and Wales and estimated a population in those countries of around 12,000 pairs. It was clearly still quite a common bird. In the mid 1980s, Colin Shawyer, as a volunteer with the Hawk and Owl Trust, repeated that survey using the same methods, but including Scotland and Ireland, and came up with a figure of a bit under 4,000 pairs for England and Wales and around 4,500 for the whole of the British Isles. This figure was subsequently confirmed by a joint BTO/Hawk & Trust survey in the mid 1990s using rigorous statistical standards, and the two breeding bird Atlases produced by the BTO show that much of the decline had taken place in the two decades between the two.

Such a steep decline, though, sadly, by no means unprecedented among farmland birds, prompted both a lot of thought and a lot of action. The causes of the decline seem to have been twofold, firstly the loss of habitat, and secondly the loss of breeding sites. Barn Owls are birds of rough, often damp, grassland as they are dependent almost entirely on small mammals (unlike woodland Tawny Owls which will eat anything from earthworms to Magpies). Such grassland has made a comeback in recent years, partly as a result of changes in mowing practices and partly as a result of agri-environment schemes, which pay for margins

around fields, thereby providing an increase in suitable feeding habitat. For breeding sites, Barn Owls require quite large cavities, such as those that occur naturally in the older style of Barn (as their name implies) or in large trees (or, indeed, still occasionally in cliffs on the coast or in quarries – neither exactly common in Cambridgeshire). Old barns are often subject to development, while new barns are often sealed and simply don't provide cavities, and large trees



Barn Owl, courtesy of BOCN

are not common in the fens. Fortunately, the lack of suitable nest sites is easily remedied by the provision of nest boxes, to which they take readily, and large numbers of which have been up. Indeed, some 75% of all our Barn Owls probably now nest in man-provided nest boxes, and there are more boxes available than pairs at the moment to occupy them. The birds have responded well to all this conservation work – they can have at least seven chicks in a brood in a good year, and even two broods, and they can move quite a distance to seek out new breeding sites. There is no official estimate of the current population, but a number of us who work closely with the species are sure that it must now be in excess of 7,000 pairs.

In what is now Cambridgeshire and Peterborough (the constant fiddling with boundaries does not help), the decline between 1932 and

the mid-1980s was particularly marked. Both George Blaker's and Colin Shawyer's surveys allowed estimates by county (the mid-1990s methodology did not). A decline from 214 to 46 pairs was among the steepest of any recorded. And now? I think the recovery will equally be among the best recorded, as, entirely as a personal guess, I would be surprised if there were fewer than 500-600 pairs.

Haddenham and surrounding parishes are well represented in this recovery, building particularly on work undertaken originally by Jake Allsop with boxes which he and I continue to monitor together. We now monitor well over 30 boxes locally (it isn't easy to count them as some of our designs attract both Barn Owls and Kestrels, a species also of some conservation concern at the moment) and, although they do go up and down depending on the small mammal population and the weather, it would be a poor year when we do not have at least seven pairs of Barn Owls nesting in them. Indeed, they are capable of astonishing density and a farm in Willingham, just across the Old West from Haddenham, and with whom we have had the pleasure of working for some years, now has one of the greatest densities anywhere in the country.

My colleagues and I acknowledge with gratitude the help and support of the many local farmers and landowners who not only allowed us to put up the boxes and allow us access to them for monitoring purposes, but who in many cases were the ones who initially asked us how to encourage Barn Owls to breed on their property.

We are always happy to provide advice about habitat creation, nest box design and siting, and to monitor boxes. Please do not hesitate to contact me on 07961 998010.

Nicholas Guppy - 1925-2012

Contributed by Paul Mason

Nicholas Guppy died on May 16 2012 in Bali. Why should that be of interest to Haddenham? Well, just think of Guppy's Pond which is now a parish owned Nature Reserve, part of the Fairchild's Meadows circular path system.

Nicholas Guppy was a brilliant naturalist and conservationist who lived in Haddenham in the 1960s-70s in a house that in turn became the "Cares" Wildlife Rescue base, but is now a private house. However, the pond, which is really a small 4.5 acre lake with a spinney, and was his own private nature reserve, has become a wonderful habitat for a great mixture for wildlife of all sorts: from fish, invertebrates and aquatic plants to birds.

During the time he lived here, he unfortunately became divorced from his then wife, Shushi Assar, whom he had married in 1962. She was an Iranian and a singer of her country's folk music and well known in her own right. She will be remembered by several Haddenham residents even though she died in 2008. The marriage ended in 1972 and the estate had to be sold off to settle alimony etc. That included their residence in Haddenham.

The site was subsequently bought by a developer and, as is common these days, it was to be built on. However, when the plans came up for discussion by local councils, Haddenham Parish Council negotiated as part of the agreement to accept by way of a Section 106 clause, that the pond area become public property to be retained as a nature reserve and managed by them.

Nicholas Guppy was one of a long line of a family of naturalists and explorers of distinction. His father was Robert John Lechmere Guppy who had discovered, in 1916 in Trinidad, the small fish named after him.

At their home in Haddenham, the couple gave hospitality to figures such as: Nicholas Kaldor, a renowned Cambridge economist; E.F. Schumacher, the famous thinker and economist; David Attenborough; and the environmentalist and philosopher, Teddy Goldsmith. Others from stage and screen are known to have included Herbert Lom, Peter Cook and Peter Sellars.

The fact that Haddenham was, for a few years at least, the home of such a distinguished naturalist, ecologist and anthropologist, should be marked in the history of our village.

References: Guppy D. 1996. *Roll the Dice*. Pub Blake, London; *The Daily Telegraph*; *The Guardian* 20/6/2012; *Wikipedia on the Internet*.

From Haddenham to Norway



During the last two winters a team of licensed ringers have been ringing birds in Robert Norman's orchard where many Fieldfares and Blackbirds etc. feed on fallen apples in the depths of winter. The first result is now in: a Blackbird ringed in Aldreth Road orchard in January 2011 was re-trapped in March 2012 ... in Norway! Very nice indeed. Stuart Sharp and several HCS members attended some of these ringing sessions.

A New Wild Flower Find

An addition to the list of Haddenham's wild plants was made when Ivy Broomrape was found under a hedge in Station Road in June last year by Wendy Lanman and another specimen higher up the road by Gill Smith. The Broomrape family is unique in that it also parasitizes other plants, amongst which are verbena and foxgloves. There are several different species in the UK and many are quite rare. They are unique also in that they contain no chlorophyll and so never have green stalks or leaves.



A regularly found one is of course Common Broomrape which lives off several plants including Wild Carrot, Clovers and some others in the Composite family (Daisies). We have yet to find that in Haddenham, but it is a distinct possibility. There is another that feeds on Knapweed and is considered by some authorities more common than the previous one so that could be found here too.

Ivy Broomrape predates Ivy, but only when it spreads on soil at the base of the growth. It is the first of the Genus we have found in Haddenham, but it is said to be a West Country plant, so rare in Cambridgeshire and, as such, specimens are recorded in situ by the County Recorder as special. There is a photo of it on the HCS website for August 2012 so have a look there to see what it looks like; maybe you can find more. Let us know and, if you do find any of the others mentioned, please inform us.

What Summer?

Continuing reporting the wildlife of Haddenham in this year of extreme weather conditions is not a happy task. Whether some species of birds, particularly, managed to bring up families successfully is not easy to assess. Yes, some were successful, like Song Thrushes, who enjoy the food wet weather brings. And this year the constant rain was good for Slugs and Snails, so this and others of the Thrush family had a cracking time! Wrens, though, had suffered in the icy February cold and were consequently hard to find in gardens, but Dunnocks seemed to have got through OK. Robins usually thrive in the cold and were later common as they reared 2 or 3 broods of young.

Out in the countryside Yellow Wagtails arrived back from Africa with the various warblers, but any species that nested on or close to the ground must have suffered drench after drench. Very few young wagtails were found following their parents in and out of the crops along the normal haunts on Dambank and Adventurers Drive. However, when the birds had just arrived it was a joy to watch three bright yellow males fly-catching off the parapet columns of Claytons Bridge. Common Whitethroats had their songs constantly repressed by day after day of pouring rain and it's almost impossible to guess how many young they reared in the nests placed near to the ground in Stinging Nettle beds. Hardly any Lesser Whitethroats were heard singing and only the few Garden Warblers we get were heard singing with any amount of gusto. They are the last to return from Africa and may have missed a large part of the rain. Nesting higher in scrubby bushes was an advan-

tage. Few other breeding warblers were found and whether even Chiffchaffs, that inhabit tall trees but nest on the ground below, brought up young is debatable.

While Reed Buntings were down on last year, Corn Buntings, for some unexplained reason, seemed to have good year and many males were singing from the electric wires along Dambank and Long Drive,

Whimbrel, from RSPB Website



indicating success. Yellowhammers, also a member of the bunting family, did sing quite a lot from bushes around the fen edge fields. They nest on the ground too, but maybe they were OK. Greenfinches sang a lot in village gardens and, as they are known to have suffered in the past from a debilitating disease, perhaps they are getting over it.

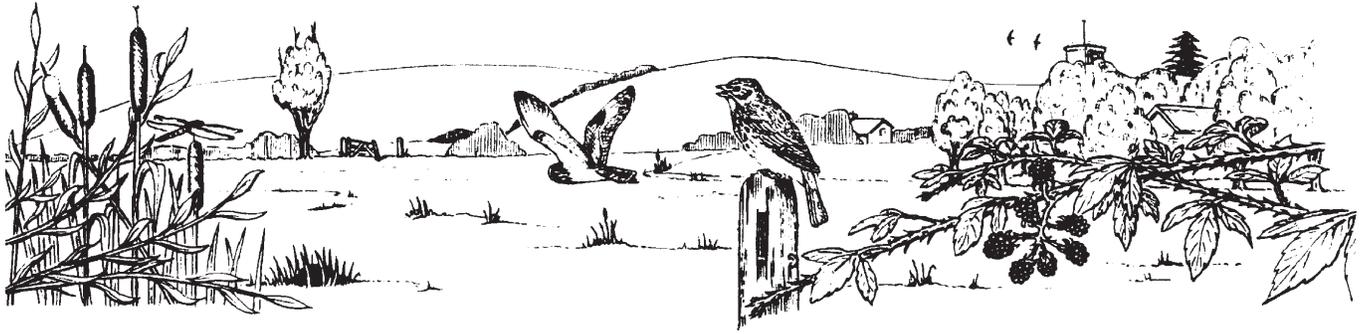
Woodpeckers are not much affected by the weather as they nest in tree holes and the excess of ants and large larvae meant it was all OK with them. Owls have not done well though. Little Owl chicks were in poor condition at one site and Barn Owls are the subject of another article by Peter Wilkinson. Kestrel pairs had few young with them after fledging time.

It is butterflies that have suffered disastrously, with all species affected. However, let's see if late

summer sunshine brings them back. On garden Buddleias the flower spikes were for a long time suffering a distinct lack of nectaring butterflies, although Jake Allsop had a Painted Lady for a day on his. This is all the more surprising as few had migrated in from West Africa this year! The spring/summer species like Brown Argus, Common Blue and Small Copper were practically non-existent and Speckled Wood, Meadow Brown and Ringlet flapped in very small numbers through the long, wet grasses. Few of the Skipper family showed up either. The brightest report came from Simon Stirrup when he found four Purple Hairstreaks flitting round the tops of Oak trees along Tinkers Lane. Difficult small butterflies to see at the best of times and which rarely come anywhere near the ground. Maybe second-brood autumn species will do better.

Dragonflies also had generally poor success early in the summer, but, as the weather became a bit brighter in late July and August, more appeared so maybe the local Hobbies will have a feast for their young still in the nest in mid-August. It's a great sight to watch these fantastic small falcons weave through the air catching them. As migration started in mid-July, a Whimbrel, a largish wader that breeds in the Shetland Isles and winters in West Africa, stopped off for three days in a field by Aldreth village. Usually they are only heard as they utter an eight note call from in flight, so to have one on the ground was a treat.

Don't forget to look for other wildlife stories on the website as they happened, together with lots of pictures: www.hcs.tinaboneuk.co.uk



SUMMER EVENT

Sunday 9 September, 2:00-4:00 pm, 1 The Pond

BOATING ON GUPPY'S POND

Our yearly chauffeured boating day with the HPC Pond Management Committee - it's magical, even in the rain!

WINTER TALKS

Indoor meetings are held at the Arkenstall Centre, Haddenham, on the second Tuesday of each month from September to April (NOT 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.

11th September

CORAL REEF OR CORAL GRIEF?

Corals are the forests of the sea hosting a myriad of other wildlife.

What future do they have and how can we save them? *Dr Francis Dipper* will give us some answers.

9th October

HOW PLANTS SURVIVE IN DIFFICULT ENVIRONMENTS

Each plant lives in its own niche environment and *David Elcome* will discuss the problems some encounter to continue to exist.

13th November

SEARCHING FOR SNOW LEOPARDS IN SOUTHERN SIBERIA

These wonderful cats are under threat from humans. To save them they have first to be found.

Peter Pilbeam went looking and tells what he discovered.

11th December

KINGFISHERS - UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

This star bird of our rivers is not easy to watch. *Jeff Harrison* has studied them closely and shows us what he has seen.

12th February

A BIRDER'S YEAR IN NORFOLK

Allan Hale is back to show us some of the fantastic birds he has seen in his native county of Norfolk.

12th March

WINE AND WILDLIFE

Just imagine sitting back, sipping great wine and watching great wildlife in one's own vineyard.

John Parish knows what it's like and what is to be found.

9th April

MOSESSES, LICHENS AND ORCHARDS

In Haddenham's and other orchards there are intriguing forms of plant life most of us ignore. *Agneta Burton* and her colleagues have studied them closely and will show us their secrets.

This will be followed up with a day to be arranged in Robert Norman's orchard during the coming summer when Agneta will take us around and illustrate her talk.

Preceded by a short AGM.