

HADDENHAM CONSERVATION SOCIETY

Vol. 28 No. 2
May 2013

SPRING 2013

The Committee for 2013 /14 is as follows:

Barclay Arnott	740500
Ann Biggs, Chair	740810
John Burgess	749441
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

www.hcs.tinaboneuk.co.uk

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 2013:

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).

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.

Is Parish Wildlife Site under threat?

There are three County Wildlife sites [CWS] in Haddenham Parish: 1) Haddenham Engine/ Adventurer's Head Drainage System; 2) Aldreth Ponds; 3) Hinton Hedges and Guppy's Pond.

These are not SSSIs with full national legal protection, but are sites approved by County Councils and the Wildlife Trusts as being worthy of sufficient biodiversity interest to be taken into account when under threat of development.

Perhaps the one that is most important botanically is the fen drain system and we described it in a previous newsletter (Spring 2010 – Vol. 25 no. 1). It is not often visited by the public, but there is no reason why it should not be. It is a drainage system, unique in fen drains, where the water is very clean and it contains many rare plants, the most nationally important of which is Great Water Parsnip. There are other Nationally Important and County Rarities in it also like Milfoils, Crowfoots and Potamogetons. It abounds with Arrowhead and Water Violet; Flowering Rush, Marsh Bedstraw, and Water Forget-me-nots are also regularly found. A proposal to set up a wetland project scheme by the Environment Agency (EA) on the Sutton side of North Fen could endanger the water flows in the CWS. The plan is to store water in reservoirs in winter and then to release it in summer to keep fields marshy or near wet in summer. This would be to encourage wading birds from the nearby Ouse Washes, now subject to summer flash flooding, to breed on this new ground. The scheme itself would take too long to explain here, but information can be found on the EA website.

There were suggestions that the EA might build a reservoir well away from the Sutton site and thus channel water from near the Old West River through this present County Wildlife Site, in effect reversing the flow. Surely that would alter the whole quality of the water conditions and possibly kill off the botanically important species. An established place of such bio-diversity should not be threatened by a new proposal to set up a wildlife site mainly aimed at birds, which many people think is wrong in principle and may well not work anyway.

The arguments for and against the Sutton Wetland scheme can be discussed later, but it would be right for HCS to put this shot across the bows, metaphorically, of those sailing ahead with a plan to flood another fen. However, we do know that Haddenham Drainage Board is keeping a watching brief.

If you want details of these sites, log onto County Wildlife Sites/ Haddenham and, for information on the proposed Sutton Wetland scheme, log onto the Environmental Agency website.



*Greater Water Parsnip
by Karelj, The Botanical Gardens of
Charles University, Prague*

Chair's Report - AGM 2013

I would like to start by offering thanks to the Committee (who do most of the work), thanks to Christine Lowery who checks our books, Tina Bone who runs our website, and Steve Hawes who designs our indoor meeting posters. Apologies if I have missed anyone out!

It has been a busy year, with a well-attended programme of speakers during autumn and winter. We have exhibited at Blossoms & Bygones and the June Jubilee event in the village. Thanks to all who helped and supported us.

A cake and plant stall held in May raised around £400 for the Society which helped to pay for speakers and the production of our pre-school flower card sets. These were distributed to the local pre-school groups, free to every attending child, and were well received.

Our efforts at practical conservation have seen management of the Old Burial Ground in Church Lane, work at Guppy's Pond (assisting the Pond Management group) and work at the NineAcre Wood in Aldreth. The Woodland Trust who support our work at the wood have granted the Society a set of tools for use in the wood.

The Old Burial Ground has also seen the planting of two trees as a memorial to our late President, Freda Crofts. These were donated by the WEA and Freda's family and will flank a bench donated by the Society. We hope also to place two tractor seats to overlook Freda's favourite view.

Finally, please don't forget our 2013 Cake and Plant Stall on the Green on Saturday 4th May. All contributions and help will be gratefully received.

Ann Biggs, Chair



Urgent:

Speakers organiser needed

Ann Biggs who, for the last ten years has organised the speakers for our winter meetings, can no longer do so due to a very full schedule of commitments. All the other members of the Society's committee are also fully committed, so we desperately need a volunteer to organise, at least, this year's speakers.

Ann has a blueprint of the necessary actions, as well as stock letters and a list of possible speakers and is willing to explain in detail just what is involved.

The situation is such that, unless someone steps up, we shall have no meetings this winter.

Could anyone interested in taking on this task please call Ann on 740810.

Blossoms & Bygones



We had a tank teaming with creatures caught that morning in the Old West River, including baby pike only an inch long, fresh water mussels, snails of all descriptions, water beetles and dragonfly larvae. One bright young man pointed out an exoskeleton which had us all glued to the tank, intently examining its contents. All these creatures were of course returned to where they were found as soon as the day was over.

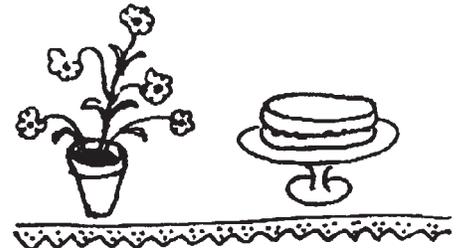
There was a display of wild flowers to encourage in the garden as they provide food for larvae and adult butterflies, moths and bees, a competition to test visitors' knowledge, with good prizes to reward the

winners; a stuffed long-eared owl and some intriguing pellets and skulls which fascinated the children.

Especially for the children, there was an owl-pellet dissection corner where many of the young visitors discovered what the owl had eaten, with the enthusiastic guidance of Jim Sawyer. Read about the Very Special Find elsewhere in this newsletter ...

It was great to see so many interested people of such varying ages and to share with them some of the not-so-visible assets of our parish.

Plant & Cake sale



It was cold, it was a bank holiday weekend, and all the plant growers had been struggling with plants reluctant to grow in this long, long winter, BUT our (rather small - it could do with some more helpers) team of cake bakers had plenty of delicious and varied produce to tempt visitors to our stall and we ended up with sales of approximately £360 in total, almost evenly distributed between cakes and plants.

Thank you to everyone who participated - gardeners, bakers, planters and eaters - as well as to all those who lent equipment or their help in installing it. Without you, we wouldn't be able to afford the speakers who visit during the winter. Everyone's help is greatly appreciated.

You will, however, have noted from the URGENT notice on this page, that, unless a volunteer steps up to organise speakers, all our efforts will have been in vain as we shall have no meetings this winter.

Snippets from birders' notebooks

Blue Tit recovery

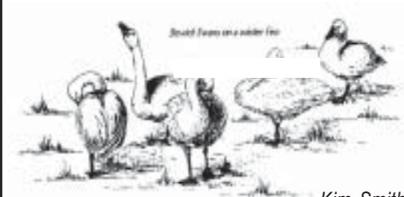
Contributed by Stuart Sharp

I've had a recovery from a Blue Tit I ringed in Robert Norman's orchard: BLUTI L447951. Ringed 30/1/11 as



a first year; controlled 16/2/13 at Wicken Fen as an adult; 748 days, 11km. These 11km may not seem like much, but this is great for a Blue Tit!

Bewick's Swans on muddy Aldreth field



During last February and March, 180 Bewick's Swans were to be seen on a very wet field to the east of Aldreth. They were feeding on sugar beet tops, but the field was largely under water which was what the birds liked, but the farmer most certainly didn't.

Renew your subs!

Subscriptions were due on
1st January.

Please pay promptly if you haven't
done so already - it really helps.

Thank you.

Dark cold winter evolves into a brighter spring



Woodcock

Nobody needs reminding what a cold wet winter we've just had and it was the second on the run. These affected our wildlife species enormously as they strived to feed themselves. Thankfully, many of you like to feed the birds and this helped all sorts of birds as more are taking advantage. This January to March period saw more than normal Redpolls feeding on nyjer seed and, interestingly, almost exclusively on it, yet others seemed to ignore that particular food. Up to 20 were noticed at some feeders, but mostly it was four or five at a time; it's been several years since they were observed in such numbers. Goldfinch numbers were probably down a bit, but Chaffinches and Greenfinches were about normal. One lucky garden owner had a Brambling for a short while; another one in Duck Lane was surprised by the visit of a brilliant Woodcock - now that was a stroke of luck.

Of course it is now well known that the 2012-13 winter was again a 'Wax-wing winter': up to 25 were seen in several gardens all the time. They like Sorbus berries as described in the last newsletter.

Because of a bad apple harvest last summer the wintering flocks of Fieldfares and Redwings had a harder time after they had cleared all the berries off Hawthorn bushes. With no fallen apples to fall back on, they had to search out what they could on fen fields when it was not frozen ground. Lapwings had a problem too, but Golden Plovers disappeared to warmer climes and were only noticed in mid-April on their way back to breeding grounds.

After a long spell with little activity out on the fens, by mid-April things woke up and well over 30 Wheatears appeared on migration in groups of four to six at varying locations. On one occasion they were accompanied by a superb male Whinchat. Common Whitethroats managed to arrive back on their stopping breeding sites at the end of April, but not as many as two years ago when they were everywhere. So spring has at last started; let's hope things get back to normal. Yellow Wagtails reached four pairs, but there may be more yet. Sedge Warblers sang brilliantly on May 1st from North Fen Drove hedges.

Watching Haddenham's Hobbies

Contributed by Simon Stirrup

I saw my first Hobby in Haddenham parish in 2008 after moving to the area two years earlier. I noted Hobbies irregularly in 2009 and this pattern of infrequent encounters would no doubt have continued had I not accidentally come across a nest with two juveniles in mid-August 2010. With further luck and perseverance I found the nest of presumably the same birds in 2011 and 2012. This provided me with the opportunity to spend many hours watching Hobbies at or near the nest.

The purpose of this article is to summarise my observations, give them context and hopefully convey some of the excitement I have experienced watching these secretive, acrobatic and fascinating falcons.

Historical background

The first confirmed breeding of Hobbies in Haddenham parish occurred in 1999 when a pair was observed feeding a single fledged juvenile. In 2000 a pair was observed feeding two fledged juveniles in the same general area. In subsequent years Hobbies were observed in the suspected nesting area although no nest or young were seen. In 2009, a probable nest was found and shortly afterwards two fledged juveniles were seen.

In addition, away from the main breeding area covered by this article, breeding was proved at a second site where an adult and three juveniles were observed in a stubble field on 9th September 2009 and breeding has been suspected in some years at a third site since 2000, but has never been proved.

2010 breeding season

On 18th August I stumbled across a Hobby nest, drawn by the strident

and distinctive begging calls of 2 well-grown juveniles. By 25th August they had left the nest, but remained close to the nesting tree. On 1st September the adults and juveniles were observed mobbing two juvenile Marsh Harriers sitting in a field near the nest. My last sighting of the year



was on 4th September when the adults were feeding the juveniles on Common Darter dragonflies well away from the nest. Other observers saw the family, or members of the family, later into the month.

2011 breeding season

My first local sighting was on 7th May when a Hobby flew over the 2010 nesting tree – the nest had disappeared over the winter. The following day a pair was seen flying exuberantly and calling excitedly over the 2010 nesting tree. Despite much searching, I failed to see any Hobbies until 1st June when a pair flew into a tree about a kilometre from the 2010 nesting tree. A single Hobby flew into the same tree the following day. This was an area

where Hobbies nested in 2009 and I was confident that I had found the 2011 nest site. However, despite further searching, I failed to see a Hobby for almost two months and I presumed that they had moved elsewhere.

It was with surprise that on 27th July I saw a pair circling together and was pleased when one bird landed on the dead branch of an isolated tree. When I approached the tree the bird left the perch only at the last moment and flew silently to a second tree about 50 metres away. A quick examination of the tree revealed a nest about 12 metres from the ground.

On 28th July I viewed the nest with a telescope from about 150 metres and watched the presumed female feeding two chicks. The chicks were off-white with a dark mask. The presence of the mask and the fact that they were able to stand suggested that they were about 14 days old.

On 5th August the two chicks were ringed (with permission from the landowner) by Stuart Sharp who had the appropriate ringing licence.

By 19th August, the chicks were becoming adventurous and climbing, with much wing-flapping, to a fork above the nest. On 21st the female brought food into the nest and fed a single chick. This was the last time that I saw the nest used. Between 23rd August and 1st September the adults and both juveniles remained in the vicinity of the nesting tree. There were then no sightings for two weeks. On 16th September it was a surprise to see a juvenile perched in a tree near the nesting tree. My last sighting of the year was on 18th September when a calling juvenile Hobby and an un-aged bird were seen within 750 metres of the nesting area.

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2012 breeding season

In preparation for the season the 2011 nesting area was checked in March for the presence of suitable old nests. This proved to be useful as I was unable to visit the area as often as I would have liked during the summer, due to relentless poor weather and other commitments.

On 29th April a single Hobby was found sitting in a tree next to the 2011 nesting tree. The next sighting was not until 2nd June when an adult was hunting in the general area and landed in a tree with a suitable nest from the previous year, but this proved to be a false alarm. On 17th June, two adults were heard calling from the 2010 nesting tree in which there was a Carrion Crow nest from the previous year. On 24th June there was no obvious activity around the tree. However, when two Carrion Crows flew past they were vigorously pursued by the presumed male. On 1st July an unsuspecting person walked under the presumed nesting tree and no Hobbies appeared. On 4th July I walked quickly past the tree and there was again no sign. The persistent wet weather and the poor state of the nest made it doubtful that they were still about. On 28th July, two Hobbies mobbing a Buzzard in the general nesting area was positive and later, when I walked past the tree, a Hobby flew silently away. On 8th August, when I walked past the tree, a Hobby flew silently away. A food pass on 11th August within 100 metres of the nesting tree was again positive. Later that week several chicks were seen in the nest. On 20th August there was an abortive ringing attempt. This confirmed that three juveniles were present which were ready to fledge and, therefore, were too old to ring.

By 26th August the three juveniles were being fed by both parents in a nearby field where straw

bales provided suitable vantage points. This field was used until 29th August after which date the straw bales were removed.

On 9th September the three juveniles were observed circling together and calling about 600 metres from the nesting tree. They remained in this area until 22nd September when a single food begging juvenile was my last sighting of the season.

[Find out more about our Haddenham Hobbies in the next two newsletters. Ed.]

Uncovered a rat?



When HCS run the Wildlife Room during Blossoms & Bygones at the Arkenstall Centre, we let children dissect Barn Owl pellets under the supervision of Jim Sawyer. He discusses what they find, usually field and bank vole bones and skulls. This year there was a surprise when one lucky dissector found several RAT bones. We knew it was unusual, so we asked our HCS specialist in Barn Owls, Jake Allsop, and this is his reply.

“Rat bones: the easy answer is that when their regular prey items are scarce, Barn Owls go for anything they can catch. We are anticipating a poor vole year after two good years in succession, so we will expect odder items. I have not heard of rat bones in a pellet. Birds and water voles are also likely prey in a poor field vole year.”



News from Guppy's Pond

Contributed by Wendy Lanman

At last - our new pair of swans have five cygnets, hatched on May 3rd. On the same day five baby coots hatched out too and, remarkably, both families often feed together in a sort of jumble. They also nest close to each other and there has never been any aggressive behaviour between them. We feel so very privileged to be able to watch them, especially when the female swan takes her little ones on her back during the early afternoon 'siesta'.

A blackbird keeps flying under our balcony and then out again, so we assume that he is feeding his mate on the nest. A few years ago, a duck made a nest in the same spot and was discovered sitting on her eggs when the boards were ripped off the balcony. She just stayed there, motionless, in spite of the noise and sudden disappearance of her roof. Needless to say, the builders moved off to the other end of the balcony to leave her in peace. The following day, all the ducklings had hatched and the nest was abandoned. What a lesson in motherly courage that was!

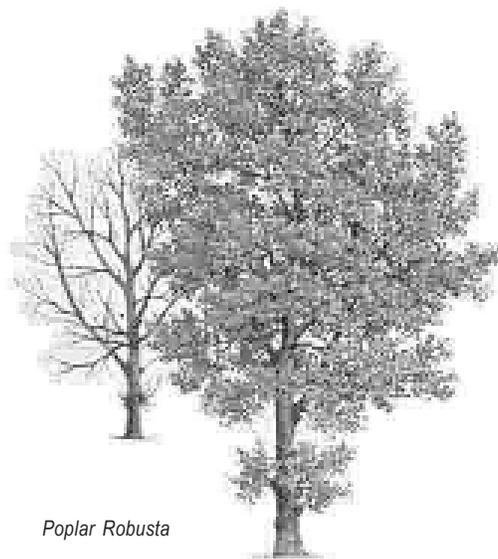
The reeds were so slow to grow this spring that the first reed warblers to return couldn't settle in the ones closest to us, much to my dismay. However, the reeds are now well developed and, as more reed warblers have arrived, they are now inhabited and we can enjoy the usual loud summer chatter of these little birds and watch them flit around and cling to the reeds.

Some of the gardens around Guppy's Pond are now regularly visited by rabbits, so I assume that their numbers must be growing.

We have seen brimstone and orange-tip butterflies and the garden is abuzz with bees. Not so many fish this year - probably due to the intensive activity of three visiting cormorants earlier this spring.

If you go down to the wood today

Contributed by John Burgess



Poplar Robusta

At the end of a very cold February a meeting was held at Nine Acre Wood. Ian Froggart (Area Manager for the Woodland Trust), Paul Mason and myself were there to discuss the Conservation Society's workparty objectives within the wood.

Ian, already having had a walk around, reported that the Ash trees, as within many other woods in the area, were suffering from Ash Dieback. It does take some finding, but some small shoots were dead and classic dieback bark lesions

were present. The effects of this fungal disease are not quick, so it will not be too apparent initially. Over a period of several years the tree will eventually die, and only time will tell how many and how much of the wood will be affected.

There has been concern for some time over the wood's lack of openness. Projected attention to the internal path edges had been raised; this was a good time to discuss our plans.

In order for the Conservation Society to work within the wood, we needed a Local Woodland Trust Volunteer; they would coordinate activities and ensure everyone is working safely. After completing a comprehensive risk assessment study, I am now officially registered as a Woodland Trust Volunteer, with a view to organising work parties within Nine Acre Wood.

The Woodland Trust, via Ian, has generously supplied a comprehensive selection of hand tools to assist in our task. We will be looking for helpers during the Autumn/Winter time to cut back the path-edge trees in a scallop fashion. It is hoped this will take away some of the severity of the border, let the light in and add to its diversity.

Barclay Arnott and I spent an evening trimming branches around the perimeter path; this is to give unrestricted access to the tractor mower. Nesting season is now in full flow so any further work has been delayed.

Some concern has been noted over the paint spots on a large number of mature poplars. Having spoken to Ian, he explained that he was indeed marking them for felling. Having enthusiastically marked his way into the wood, he soon realised that the task was considerably larger than he had initially anticipated. If you check the spots further into the wood, they are far less frequent; therefore some of the initial marking will be adjusted and some varieties of robusta poplar will be kept. This work is a natural progression for the wood; it will allow low level regeneration and break up some of the canopy to allow the light in. The work is to be completed by contractors, this winter at the very earliest, but probably later (normal non-invasive cutting rules apply).

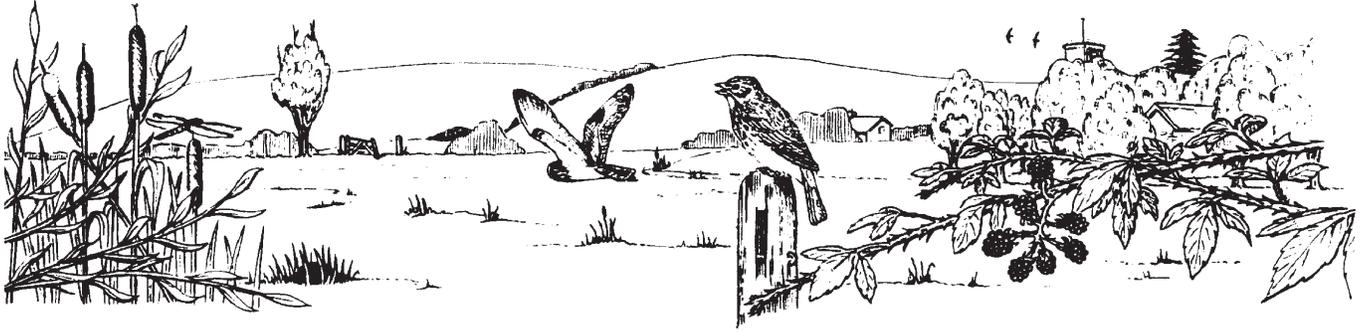
If you feel like getting involved, we will be looking for volunteers to assist with the path edge cutting - just the thing to cure those winter blues. Date and time to be confirmed.

Birds

*A swallow is hirundo, and noctua's
 an owl,
 The osprey's haliëtos, a most rapa-
 cious fowl;
 The sooty coot is fulica, the screech-
 owl is called strix,
 And pica is the magpie, so fond of
 playing tricks;
 And passer is the sparrow, and
 regulus a wren,
 And perdix is a partridge, gallina is a
 hen;
 And aquila's an eagle, and gallus
 chanticleer,
 Alauda is the skylark we love so
 much to hear;
 And turtur is the turtle-dove,
 monedula's a daw,
 And cornix is the crow or rook, that
 doth so loudly caw;
 An ostrich is called struthio, columba
 is a pigeon;
 Palumbus is the ring-dove, Penelope
 the widgeon;
 And larus is the sea-mew that wails
 above the wave,
 Just like the ghost of some one that
 found a watery grave;
 The cuckoo is called cuculus, and
 turdus is a thrush,
 And vultur is the vulture who on
 his prey doth rush;
 And pavo is the peacock, that wears a
 gorgeous train,
 Luscinia is the nightingale, and grus
 a long-necked crane;
 And corvus is a raven, and milvus is
 a kite,
 Accipiter the sharp-eyed hawk, so
 ready for a fight;
 And halcyon's a king-fisher, of whom
 a tale is told,
 Which you, my little boy, shall read
 before you're very old.*

Sara Coleridge (1802–1852)

from Pretty Lessons (1845)



SUMMER EVENTS

Sunday 30 June, Fairchild's Meadows
Meet at Chewells Lane gate at 1 pm - all welcome

BUG & BEETLE HUNT

Roger Booth, from the Natural History Museum in London, will be swishing his net along this leisurely walk. In the past he has found at least one rare beetle on each of his visits, so the probability is that he will find another one. You will enjoy his knowledge and enthusiasm and will probably discover a world you hardly knew existed. Make sure you are suitably dressed for uneven paths - and possibly a few nettles and brambles. If you need to contact Paul Mason, who is organising this walk, his telephone number is 740219.

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.

WE NEED A VOLUNTEER TO ORGANISE NEXT WINTER'S TALKS! PLEASE COME FORWARD.