

# **A Guide To Wheatfen In Summer**

***Rodger Goodrick 2008***

Hello. If this is your first visit to our reserve, we hope you enjoy the peace and tranquillity of Wheatfen. This is a guide to what you may see on your way around. We recommend either wellies or walking boots. We also recommend that if the wind is very strong you should take care in the wood as trees can blow over or branches can break and fall. We take great care to keep the reserve safe so please keep to the footpaths as it can be very dangerous to stray. If you see a sign that says "no entry" it means just that. Please do not pick or disturb anything, thank you. Enjoy your visit safely.

This is what you might expect to see and hear if you visit the reserve during the summer months, June through to the end of August. As we enter June the birds are still in good voice, but as the month progresses they sing less and less. They have young to feed and in July and August they begin their moult, so they skulk in the undergrowth keeping themselves to themselves. This is the time of year for flowers and insects. A good field guide would be very useful, especially on flowers and insects, as we do not have room in this guide to give full descriptions of all the plants and animals. A good insect repellent is advisable as the mosquitoes can be a bit of a nuisance.

If you start your walk by the notice board in the car park, go through the gate up the drive towards the cottage. Just past the cottage on the right hand side you will see post one as shown on the reserve map. Carry on until just before you get to the boardwalk and to your right you will see lots of Comfrey, which is in flower most of the summer. Cross over the bridge and you have Home Dyke in front of you. Turn left and follow the boardwalk, post two on the map. On cool days this is a good place to see dragonflies resting on the rails trying to get warmed up so they can fly. This is also a good time to see the difference between damselflies and dragonflies. At rest the damselfly folds its wings over its back but dragonflies keep theirs out flat by their sides. Being cold blooded, as are all insects, they need the heat from the sun to give them energy. In June you could see one of the Norfolk Broads specials, the Norfolk Hawker. This has a brown body and green eyes and a small yellow triangle on its back. Not to be mistaken for the Brown Hawker. This is about the same size but does not have green eyes and also has amber wing colouring which the Norfolk does not have. This also flies at this time of the year on the reserve. Here is a good place to see other dragonflies including Black-Tailed Skimmer, Four-Spotted Chaser and numerous others which can be seen around the reserve during the summer months.

To continue your walk, turn left by the pond and into The Thatch where you will find lots of information and pictures of the flora and fauna, plus some of the history and conservation work of the reserve.

Turn right out of the thatch to post three. As you walk along the path, on your right Old Mill Marsh is coming into flower with Yellow Flag Iris, Common Meadow Rue in June, followed by Meadow Sweet in July and the bright red of the Guelder Rose berries in August. These are only a few of the plants you can see on Old Mill Marsh.

At the end of the path, turn left down to Alder Carr, post four. The new seed cones on the Alders can be seen now; these are the green ones, the black ones are last year's crop. When you leave the Carr the path leads onto open marsh. This is Crake's and Thack Marsh. Beside the path on the left hand side you may see some largish round leaves about fifteen to twenty centimetres from the ground. These belong to the Coltsfoot which bloomed in early spring. This is a good place to see birds of prey including Marsh Harrier and Hobby (which is an occasional summer visitor). Sparrowhawk and Kestrel can often be seen here too. The Hobby feeds on dragonflies, swallows and swifts and is sometimes described as looking like a large Swift if seen silhouetted against the sky. These are probably the only birds of prey that can catch these when in full flight.

When you reach post five on the map, you can turn right and go across the marsh or carry on down to the river and along the summer path. We sometimes have to close this due to flooding when we have an extra high tide, as this path can be wet at any time, so you really need wellies or good walking boots. If you go by the river you may see Cormorants drying their wings perched high in a tree. If you turn right and go across the centre path, from late May through to the end of June, on warm sunny days, there could be another Broadland special, the Swallowtail butterfly, on the wing feeding on Yellow Flag Iris. It depends upon Milk Parsley to lay its eggs on. We have a

special day in mid-June to guide you to the best places on the reserve to see the adult butterflies, their eggs and caterpillars. In August, on this path, there is Angelica in flower, and if the Swallowtail has a second flight they often feed on this. At the end of the path turn right. You are now on Smea Loke and post six. The river path rejoins here.

This is one of the best parts of the reserve to see butterflies as it is sheltered from most of the wind and gets lots of sunshine. It also has an abundance of wild flowers including, in June, Ragged Robin, Common Meadow Rue and Yellow Flag Iris. In July there are Meadow Sweet, Hemp Agrimony, Purple and Yellow Loosestrife and a rarity, Marsh Pea. These and other flowers help to keep the butterflies, including Peacock, Red Admiral, Gate Keeper, Ringlet and many other species, supplied with nectar.

Cross over the bridge and turn left at post seven. This is called Eleven Bridges. Beside the path on patches of Stinging Nettles, keep a look out for large groups of black caterpillars. These are Peacock butterfly larvae. In August, look for the Marsh Sow Thistle which can be anything from six to eight feet tall and has yellow flowers. This plant is very rare nationally. At the end of the path turn left and this leads you to Fen Channel which is a dead-end path but well worth a look as you may see Red Eyed Damselflies sitting on the lily pads. Return along the path until you reach the bridge on your left, cross and follow the path through the carr (this is the term used for wet woodland). Turn right, you are back to Home Dyke. Follow the path and boardwalk until you get to post nine. Continue straight ahead and on each side of the path in June, Common Spotted Orchids bloom. These have green leaves with black spots on them and the flowers are pinkish purple on a single stem up to twelve inches high. On this stretch of path in July if you are really lucky there could be Purple Hairstreak Butterflies coming down low. These butterflies spend most of their time high in the tree canopy feeding on the sugar rich honeydew that aphids pass after feeding on Ash and Aspen. They very rarely feed on nectar. The eggs are laid on young Oak leaves in July when the Oak produces its second crop of leaves.

Turn left at the junction and carry on beside the wood. Turn right and then left. This brings you to Wheatfen Broad and Deep Waters, post ten. In July the dyke that runs between is a good place to see Banded Demoiselle Damselflies. These look more like butterflies with their erratic flight and their deep Prussian blue wings. The females are more subdued having brownish green wings. You may also see Grey Heron and Great-Crested Grebe on the broad. Follow the boardwalk looking out for the numerous other species of damselflies and dragonflies we have on the reserve including Broad-Bodied Chaser and Migrant Hawker dragonflies and Common Blue, Azure Blue and Blue-Tailed damselflies. As you cross over the bridge, look in the dyke on your right and you will see lots of Starwort growing in the water. Carry on through the wood. We have laid a path of logs here as the ground is nearly always water logged and very boggy. We call this type of surface corduroy and we use coppiced wood for this purpose.

At post eleven, cross over the next dyke, listening for "pick pick" call of the Great Spotted Woodpecker which can be heard any time of the year. You may see it high in the canopy or flying between trees with its bounding flight. When you get to post twelve, in July this is a good place to see the White Admiral Butterfly. We regularly coppice the Hazel here to let in the sunlight so Bramble will flower supplying nectar for the adult butterflies to feed on and Honeysuckle for the caterpillars (this is their favoured food plant). Follow the path and this will bring you back to the car park keeping an eye out for Chinese Water Deer and sometimes Roe Deer on the way.