

Noise Annoys

Gordon Edgar 2003

I have recently joined your Trust, and I write this offering for your Newsletter to introduce myself. My name is Gordon Edgar and my hobby is sound recording. I am a keen member of the Wildlife Sound Recording Society (WSRS), which fosters the activity and provides technical support - more of which later.

I have only managed two fleeting visits to Norfolk so far, but already I know my way around Wheatfen and have met the leading personalities. They have all made me very welcome.

Sound recordists are pernickety people as we are searching for good signals against quiet backgrounds. So, how do I rate Wheatfen as a venue?

Evidently, there is no shortage of species, and many are scarce elsewhere. Verdict; no problem getting good-level signals with modern equipment.

As for my concern about backgrounds, I am not always seeking 'clinically-clean' recordings of individual songbirds; indeed, I am eager to make stereo soundscapes of habitats and atmospheres.

However, I am seriously prejudiced against manmade sounds and I spent my early weekends at Wheatfen on reconnaissance, getting the measure of the acoustics and assessing ambient noise levels.

My microphones are, of necessity, very sensitive and unfortunately they pick up all the unwanted background noises and amplify them exceedingly.

The weather is not peculiar to Wheatfen and I count leaf-rustle as noise. Reed beds in particular are problematical; the lightest breeze agitates the reed stems generating broadband frequencies. This ends up as a nasty hissing noise on the audio that cannot be tuned out in the editing stage without affecting the valid signal.

Accordingly I can only operate in calm weather. The rub is that, when the air is still, low-frequency sounds travel for miles (literally) like long-wave radio signals and tsunami waves. There is no escaping the sounds of human civilisation, even at a haven like Wheatfen. Having said that, it is considerably quieter than my other haunts near Stansted Airport and the M11 motorway.

Nevertheless, at my last visit in March (2002), my best moments were lost to the infernal combustion engine. On the Saturday, I had four Marsh Harriers calling, in range, from my position on The Avenue, but I lost that sequence to a passing train.

Doubtless, broadland residents are blasé about Harriers but I counted their display as a real treat and I had the idea that they might repeat the performance next day on the Sunday, when the railway would be less active.

I noted the time and set-up a stakeout, with my equipment positioned on the Summer Path. I watched from afar as a pair of Harriers displayed over Blake's Marsh, right on cue and right above my microphone. I was miffed, to say the least, when the entire episode was drowned out by engine noise from a passing light aircraft. And I thought I had a competition-entry in the bag. Well, even cookery is a competitive sport nowadays!

My next visit will be in the tourist season, and then I will have to contend with engine noise from the river boats which may thwart my purpose.

I am by inclination a loner, and sound recording in the field is not a sociable activity. However, if anyone is genuinely interested I will make time for them and next time you see me staggering around with my paraphernalia, you will know what I am about. If I am lurking empty-handed it is because my equipment is hidden somewhere nearby, recording unattended.

Wildlife Sound Recording Society

I already mentioned that the WSRS provides a forum for my hobby. We have members from around the world, but not many in East Anglia. We keep in contact with our Journal, Sound Magazine (CD of members' offerings), an annual spring meeting, technical workshops, recording holidays and the annual competitions.

Members are individualistic (euphemistically speaking); some are esoteric academics working in bioacoustics, others are techno-buffs from sound engineering or the media. Most however, are amateur naturalists just following a hobby; indeed, many members are not active recordists at all, but listeners who appreciate the audio produced.

It is not all about birds: last summer, for example, I helped with a biological survey identifying the Orthoptera (grasshoppers) from oscillographs of their stridulations. Another friend of mine is working on ultrasound in small mammals and insects, and I plan to collaborate with Paul Westley on his ongoing Cetti's Warbler project. I believe we could identify birds holding territory at Wheatfen as individuals by finding distinctive patterns in their digitised waveform displays.

The Society has close links with the British Library and almost all the recordings in the National Sound Archives (NSA) and the BBC collection were made by WSRS members; and the same goes for the commercially published sound-guides. For example, the recordings of Hydropotes (Chinese Water Deer) at NSA were made right here at Wheatfen.

I am really looking forward to my next visit.