

# Rodger's Ramble

## *Rodger Goodrick*

Members who received last year's newsletter may remember me as the swimming volunteer. If you do you may also remember I really enjoy being at Wheatfen, so putting my RSPB Wildlife Explorers leader's hat on, I arranged for our group, the Norwich Nuthatches, to come and visit in late March this year. For those who don't know, this is the young persons RSPB group, formerly known as the YOC.

I enlisted the help of David Griffin to lead our group of about ten children and parents. The day was nice and sunny but cold. We left the car park and headed for the woods, the Great tits were on full song with their 'teacher teacher' calls. As we strolled along the path, David was pointing out the different trees and how you could name them by their twigs and the buds. The children had loads of questions and between us we answered most of them. We looked for basking Grass Snakes amongst the piles of logs and fallen leaves but, as you can imagine with us lot coming through the woods, they were long gone, but we did manage to see a Woodcock fly off through the trees. We then came to a clearing where we had coppiced the Hazel trees. The children were interested to find out that this was to encourage Bramble and Honeysuckle to grow which, in turn, helps the White Admiral Butterfly as the adults sip nectar from the Bramble flowers and then lay eggs on the Honeysuckle leaves, which is the main food for their caterpillars. At this point, we left the wood and joined the path alongside the field where David pointed out some English Elm suckers and the cork like growths on the trunks. They did not look very healthy, it looked as if the Dutch Elm Disease had taken hold.

As we walked beside a field of winter cereals, a Sky Lark rose up singing its beautiful song, rising so high until it was lost to the naked eye. We carried on the field margin until we could see Rockland Broad and across the Yare Valley. We then returned down the hill and back into the woods where we looked at the root balls of some of the fallen trees, which the children found amazing. David told us that Kingfishers will sometimes nest in these as there are not many high river banks near the reserve. Some of the Birch trees that had fallen had Bootlace fungus under the bark which is the result of a Honey Fungus attack which eventually kills the host tree.

We then came back to the main path through the wood and headed for Wheatfen Broad where we saw a Grey Heron perched in a tree. We also hoped to see an early Osprey, but we had no luck.

We left the broads and continued along the woodland edge and Home Marsh until we got to Home Dyke where we heard our first Chiffchaff of the visit. We carried on along the path to the thatch and went inside. The children were told and shown some of the history of Wheatfen.

Leaving the thatch, we went beside Penguin Dyke to Eleven Bridges walk where David explained that despite it being twenty miles from the sea, we sometimes have to close this path due to flooding when we get a very high tide.

At the end of the path we turned right and went up Smee Loke. About half way along we stopped and decided upon our next route. After a quick check of footwear, those children and parents not wearing Wellington boots carried on walking along the main path. However, those wearing boots were delighted to be taken into the reed bed. The children thought this was great with the reed towering above their heads and soft wet marsh squelching under their feet. In the middle of the reeds we came across some Bog Mirtle which has a very strong aroma when crushed between your fingers. We followed a path through the reeds which had been made by Chinese Water Deer. There were many paths in the reed bed so it was a good job we had David to guide us through as we could not see where we were heading for a lot of the time.

We eventually came out on the path that runs across the centre of the marsh and headed for the river. Those on the main path had already started heading back towards the car park.

As we walked to the river we saw a Marsh Harrier hunting over the other side of the river. There was very little to see on the river, only a few Mallard so we then returned back through Alder Carr looking and listening for early signs of spring. We heard Mistle Thrush singing in the trees alongside the meadow just outside the reserve. We continued back past Old Mill Marsh where we saw some Daffodils in the middle which had been there for years. It is thought that these were

planted many, many years ago as a crop for cut flowers but nobody really knows.

We then returned to the car park where the others were waiting with Brenda and Chris, the other Wildlife Explorers leaders.

The children thought it was a great morning and I think we were successful in wearing them out. One of the youngsters who came with us, who was only five years old, slept all the way home!!