

# Warden's Wildlife Report 2002

*David Nobbs 2003*

Although 2002 was the Year of the Horse in the Chinese calendar, at Wheatfen it was the Year of the Spider! Visits in the spring and autumn by the British Arachnological Society brought up to date our list of species: the number recorded now stands at 167. This shows what a wonderful all-round habitat Wheatfen is.

**January** started with cold and frosty weather, the broads were frozen and there were wonderful hoar-frosts. On the 2nd, bearded tits could be seen on the tops of reeds on Thack Marsh. As milder weather set in on the 5th, teal were busy on Deepwaters Broad and little grebes were active on Home Dyke. On the 11th I counted 80 coots on the broads and the next day I had the welcome sight of a kingfisher flashing past me on Mack's Dyke. I have often written about the wildlife in the vicinity of the Warden's Office and now goldcrests were in evidence about the brambles behind the workshop. There was a highlight on the 26th with two merlins hunting over Crake's Marsh. These were the first I have seen at Wheatfen.

Early **February** was very mild and on the 9th the temperature was recorded at 13°C. Whilst walking in the wood I was surprised to see maize cobs littered about the paths. It was only when I saw a grey squirrel with one in its mouth that I realised the cobs had been collected from a field some distance away and were being enjoyed as a meal in the wood. Grey squirrel numbers are increasing year by year. On the 12th early spring was in the air: snowdrops out, tits singing, bees active on the gorse, and hazel catkins in abundance. On the 14th I took the small boat out to the new dyke, Smee Dyke, which we had dug on the boundary of the reserve. There I found good numbers of willow tits on the scrub alongside the dyke. The middle part of the month was busy with mowing the fens, while marsh harriers often put in an appearance overhead. Rain and windy weather set in from the 20th and there were gale-force winds on the 26th. Nevertheless, I was still able to observe kingfishers and teal on Crake's Dyke.

**March** 3rd was the follow-up day for those who had come on the previous September's mosses course, and many more species were identified and recorded. A lone overwintering peacock butterfly was seen near the cottage. On the 5th a sparrowhawk was hunting in the garden and along the edge of the wood. On the 16th the first chiffchaff was heard and I observed three brimstone butterflies in the garden - spring was on its way! On the 19th, toads were seen in Penguin and Smee Dykes. Sedges were coming into flower on the 20th and I counted 30 cormorants flying over Blake's Marsh near the river. An incident which I had not recorded before took place on the 21st - as I was walking down Smee Loke a stoat ran towards me, decided he was not going to pass me and swam across the dyke to the wet carr woodland in Pool Carr. Later that day I disturbed three woodcock in the wood near the cottage. On the 23rd I was alerted by splashing sounds from Home Dyke: two quite large pike were swimming in very shallow water towards the jetty. Later, another pike was seen in Crake's Dyke. The first blackcap, singing by trees next to the Boardwalk, was also recorded on that day. Spring was certainly gathering pace: lesser celandine, willow catkins and marsh marigolds were all in flower; mining bees were in evidence; and great spotted woodpeckers were drumming in the woods. On the 28th peacock butterflies which had overwintered in the outbuildings were seen.

Willow warblers were singing on **April** 2nd and tortoiseshell butterflies were active. On the 11th the first spring butterfly, an orange-tip, was seen by Home Dyke. On the 16th I heard my first sedge warbler of the year on Blake's Marsh. The weather was very mild at 16°C on that day and a grass snake which had emerged from hibernation was basking beside the path on Smee Loke. Alder flies - one of my favourite insects - were emerging and could be seen by the dyke edges. On the 20th, small white and green-veined white butterflies were in evidence on the fen feeding on bitter-cress and cuckoo flower. By the 23rd the first damselflies were active as were holly blue butterflies around the holly in the car park. On the same day the churr of the grasshopper warbler was heard on Blake's Marsh. After chasing away a pair of greylag geese, who also liked the look of the site, two mute swans started a nest on Thatch Pond on the 24th. April was a very dry and warm month - indeed from the 20th to the 25th the daytime temperature was often significantly above 20°C.

In early **May** I took the small boat out to the edge of the reserve and found a further pair of mute swans building a nest on the edge of Dove Passage. The first cuckoo of summer was heard on that

day, the 3rd. Old Mill Marsh was looking a picture on the 8th with hundreds of yellow flag iris coming into flower. The first hairy dragonfly was recorded on the 9th. We held our Dawn Chorus Walk on the 12th with 18 in attendance. Pipistrelle bats were flying around the cottage on our arrival - it was a magical early morning. The less common wall butterfly was seen by Home Dyke on the 15th, and on the next day, on Mack's Dyke, the first moorhen chicks were busy feeding. On the 22nd red admirals were about and a kingfisher was seen at the end of Penguin Dyke. On the 23rd I found tortoiseshell caterpillars on nettles by Middlemarsh Dyke and garden tiger caterpillars on reed stems on Decoy Marsh. The 26th was the day of the Grasses and Sedges course led by Bob Ellis. The day started with heavy rain, but this cleared later and a good day was had by all, with participants gaining greater knowledge in this difficult area of study. On the 29th I had a close view of a Chinese water deer with its fawn on Home Dyke path. At the close of the month on the 31st I heard unusual noises coming from the pond by the Thatch. Creeping closer I saw two mute swans fighting. Suddenly one jumped on top of the other and, pinning it by the neck, held it down for some time. It appeared that a young cob had come from the adjoining dyke onto the pond and had proved an unwelcome visitor.

At the beginning of **June** reed canary-grass, meadow-rue and common valerian were coming into flower. On the 6th on Home Dyke eight young mallard ducklings were a pleasing sight. On the 8th, two rare Norfolk hawker dragonflies were hawking over the car park. It seems they like this site as I see an increasing number of them year by year as they visit from the dykes at nearby Rockland St Mary. Swallowtail butterflies were seen on Four Acres, which was a good omen for our Swallowtail Day to be held on the 16th of the month. We had a visit on Sunday the 9th from 22 members of the Mansfield and District Group of the RSPB. It was an overcast day, but most enjoyable as some swallowtails were seen. Banded demoiselle damselflies seem to be increasing and quite a few were seen by Wheatfen Broad on the 11th. Sunday 16th was a magical day and a highlight of the year. It was the first time we had put on a joint venture with Butterfly Conservation in holding our Swallowtail Day. A few weeks earlier I had mown a path through the reed beds on Four Acres and I noticed there were plenty of flag irises close by. I thought this would be a good site for swallowtails to feed and this proved to be the case. On the day we had wonderful close views of them feeding on the iris flowers and flying over our heads. Some visitors also had the chance to see eggs of the brimstone butterfly which had been laid on some buckthorn.

A most unusual event occurred on the 19th. While I was sitting having my lunch on the veranda of the office I saw in the distance a dark object crawling over the gravel of the car park. To my surprise, I found it to be a mole. I picked it up and placed it over to the left of the car park on soft ground - only to repeat this twice more. Then I decided to put it to the right hand side - to see it no more. It seems it isn't only chickens that need to get to the other side!

On the 21st, red-eyed damselflies were active on the patch of water lilies at the end of Penguin Dyke. The following day large skipper butterflies were flying and on the 24th we had our first osprey of the summer fishing on Wheatfen Broad.

As the reserve moved into **July**, meadowsweet was coming into flower, although many fen plants were late in flowering owing to the poor weather in June. Peacock butterfly caterpillars on nettles and brown hawker dragonflies along Alder Carr were found on the 6th. An unfamiliar plant was now starting to flower along the path on Crake's Marsh. It turned out to be great lettuce. During the winter, we had coppiced an area of old hazel on the edge of Surlingham Wood and this proved of great benefit, allowing brambles and honeysuckle to flourish. It is now the best site for the white admiral butterfly and no more so than on the 10th of the month with good numbers and an excellent opportunity for photographs. Comma and large white butterflies also put in an appearance. Ringlet butterflies were active in the area of grass by the cottage. Yet another highlight was recorded by the car park on the 11th when a red kite perched in an oak tree. I had good views with binoculars and this was repeated with a second sighting in August.

14th **July** was Wildflower Day at Wheatfen with Grace Corne and Alec Bull leading walks on the reserve with fen and flora at their peak. The following week, on the 21st, saw the second part of the Sedges and Grasses course, with many of the grasses now in flower and seed heads to help identification. The first emerging peacock butterflies were now active. As I looked round the reed beds on the 24th I found good numbers of swallowtail caterpillars on milk parsley. Common reed was coming into seed head on the 27th.

On the 4th of **August** our Natural History Day was held in conjunction with The Norfolk and

Norwich Naturalists' Society. The day started with heavy rain, but cleared later and the red kite, last seen in July, was seen flying over the adjoining marshes and Old Mill Marsh. Dr. Pam Taylor of the British Dragonfly Society pointed out a southern hawker dragonfly emerging from Mack's Dyke in the morning. It was a good day and it was especially enjoyable to see the collections and exhibits brought along by members of the society. Angelica and fleabane were coming into flower on the 6th and there was a late swallowtail on Two Acres. By the 13th, southern hawker and brown hawker dragonflies were in good numbers on the reserve. I had received a publication on rare aphids earlier in the year. This was not an area of study that I had followed before, but I am pleased to report that on the 15th of the month I found the rare birch aphid on an old birch tree next to the office. A microscope was needed to identify the large antennae. This was a first record for the reserve and it shows that unusual and under-recorded insects are there to be found. Three kingfishers were fishing on Home Dyke on the 16th, and as I walked along Crake's Dyke later that day, I saw a migrant clouded yellow butterfly - one of many seen in Norfolk during this period. More than 100 coots were gathered on the two broads on the 21st - it was as if all the coot families had assembled for their own regatta. It was good to see the rare musk beetle again on angelica along Smee Loke. Whilst clearing vegetation at the end of Middlemarsh Dyke, Bob Ellis pointed out the water plant frogbit. The few plants which he found last year had greatly multiplied and its healthy return after many years is yet another important sign of the improving quality of the water at Wheatfen. On the 26th an osprey was seen over the broads. By the 27th migrant hawker dragonflies were evident in good numbers over Home Fen. The 28th showed that our rare beetle, *Galeruca*, about which I have written in past reports, is now increasing greatly; up to twenty beetles per plant were observed on thistle leaves by Crake's Marsh. This is a very promising report from its only known site in Great Britain.

**September** opened with the osprey still about on the reserve on the 3rd. Two Chinese water deer were seen close by the Thatch on the 6th giving an excellent photographic opportunity - unfortunately I never have my camera with me when I need it most! On the 11th I took a look in the woods to see what fungus there was to be found in preparation for our Fungus Workshop with Mike Woolner planned for the 22nd. I discovered a beautiful bright red beefsteak fungus at the early ox-tongue stage. We experienced a very dry period up to the day of the event which, sadly, reduced the number of fungi found. On the 18th I had a lovely view of six comma butterflies feeding on the fruits of a single bramble bush - the most I have seen together at one time. On the 24th, whilst cutting a hazel stump, I got closer to the nature study of wasps than I had bargained for - I had to have treatment for a badly stung and swollen left arm after disturbing their nest!

On the 9th of **October** common and ruddy darter dragonflies were in large numbers on the Boardwalk. The next week was cold and wet with only a few brimstone butterflies active when the sun shone. I also recorded our first frost on the 19th. On the 22nd a flock of Canada geese flew overhead. Speckled wood butterflies were still in evidence as were plenty of other flies. Monday the 28th was a day to remember as it was the day following the great gale. Having arrived as normal, I walked past the cottage, but I could not see Home Dyke - the view was blocked by a large 200 year old oak, a landmark tree, which had crashed down through a fence and the Boardwalk. A total of fourteen large oaks were down in the wood along with birch and sycamore. The dangerous ones near paths were cleared away with the help of John Ellis. Some will be used for firewood by Phyllis; the rest will be left for nature to reclaim. At the end of the month kingfishers and migrant hawker dragonflies were still to be seen.

Into **November** and brimstone butterflies were still about and hoverflies and bees were active on ivy. From the 5th to the 8th we experienced high tides and heavy rain. On the 12th a water rail was heard by the edge of Home Dyke and again the next day on Crake's Marsh. On the 15th a peacock butterfly was seen on Smee Loke - one which should have been in hibernation! There were still high tides on the 16th and there were plenty of Chinese water deer to be seen. Also, a bird which I don't mention very often, but which is increasingly making itself both seen and heard, the green woodpecker was in evidence. On the 24th we had a lovely sunny day for around 50 visitors to attend our Winter Walk. Ongoing practical work throughout the reserve was explained and a pygmy shrew was shown to the visitors. On the 28th the volunteers cleared Mack's Dyke of the rampant fool's water-cress, an umbellifer which is choking the dykes after being found only two years ago. To my surprise, on the 29th a further peacock butterfly was flying on Smee Loke. This is the latest sighting I have recorded.

**December** started with cold east winds! Teal were in good numbers on the broads and several good sightings were made of kingfishers. High tides had forced deer to graze on the paths. Regular flocks of geese were flying over the reserve on the 10th and 11th. At the end of Penguin Dyke, on

the 19th, I found a jack pike half-eaten, possibly by an otter or, more likely, by a mink - which is not good. Many water birds were feeding on reed canary-grass growing in the dykes on the 20th and 21st. During the rest of the month there were sightings of fieldfares and redwings and other birds associated with wintertime.

I hope my report has conveyed to you what has been for me yet another interesting and rewarding year. I look forward to meeting many of you in 2003 when we can share the joys of Wheatfen.