

# Warden's Wildlife Report 2003

*David Nobbs 2004*

The year 2003 will live long in my memory for the long hot days of Summer, for the 96° Fahrenheit on a day in August and for the dry Autumn months. As my diary shows, the flora and fauna at Wheatfen responded to this as they have done through all the years.

But first, to go back to the beginning of the year, in early **January** the reserve was closed because of high tides - on the 3rd it was the highest recorded for two years. Snow was on the ground for three days up to the 10th. Woodcock were seen in the wood and Chinese Water deer were also there feeding on ivy. Fieldfares were in good number by the cottage on the 11th and on the 17th I had a good sighting of two male bullfinches by the office. The following day a water rail was heard on Home Fen. On the 21st kingfishers were on Mack's Dyke and marsh harriers were hunting over Smee Loke and Thack's Marsh on the 22nd. Around the 30th of the month about 6 inches of snow blanketed the fen; tracks of birds were clear and fox prints were evident along the paths.

As we went into **February**, with the snow thawing, again the fen was flooded over the Boardwalk on the 4th. There was a good number of goldcrests in the wood and teal and tufted ducks were on Deepwaters on the 5th. I found a male deer dead on Smee Loke - having succumbed to the cold and damp of the flooding, I presumed. A few days later it had disappeared, having been dragged off by a fox. Only the hairs remained to be seen. By the 18th many sedges were showing signs of growth. On the 20th there were good numbers of teal on the Pool Area (which had been mud-pumped the previous year). At this time I looked over to the area where the herons nest, but so far there was not yet any sign of activity. On the 21st there were good sightings of bearded tits on Four Acres by the path. Whilst walking back to the cottage I saw a little grebe (dabchick) active on Home Dyke.

**March** arrived with a sighting of a snipe on Old Mill Marsh in one of the grups (foot drains) and a water rail was also seen. By the 6th coltsfoot was in flower and showing bright yellow against the dark background. On the 8th I had a good view of a kingfisher fishing along a dyke by the wood. On the 14th the first chiffchaff was heard singing on the edge of the garden and also, on this warm Spring-like day, the first brimstone and peacock butterflies were in the garden by Wheatfen Cottage. Daffodils were being visited by the brimstones. On the 19th Spring was in its full force with comma, peacock, tortoiseshell and brimstone butterflies all on the wing. On the 21st tussock sedge was in flower and much growth elsewhere was well under way. At the end of the month I had an opportunity to look at the newly reclaimed dyke on Four Acres which had been dug out in February. It was an astonishing sight with millions of empty snail shells on the spoil heaps. This indicated just how rich the fauna of the dykes must have been over 40 or 50 years ago.

**April** started with another sighting of a snipe on Old Mill Marsh. A blackcap was singing by the garden and lesser celandines were coming into flower on the 3rd. The arrival of willow warblers took place on the 4th with many singing on Four Acres. On the 5th I had the wonderful opportunity to see four marsh harriers displaying high up in the sky. I was somewhat surprised the next morning to see frost on the roofs of the workshop and office - just a reminder that Spring was yet in its early, unreliable days. On the 11th three Chinese Water deer were seen by Home Dyke. As the volunteers and I were walking by the river on the 12th, we came across a freshly emerged male emperor moth. It was a beautiful specimen. On Sunday the 13th we were visited by the British Bryological Society whose interest is in mosses and liverworts. There were further findings of our very rare moss, the warrior moss, and several new finds of other species. On the 15th red admiral and speckled wood butterflies were about and hornbeam and birch were coming into leaf. The first orange tips and green-veined whites were active on the 16th. A grasshopper warbler was heard on Blakes Marsh on the 17th and the first cuckoo was calling across Old Mill Marsh on the 22nd. On the 27th a Spring Walk was enjoyed by twenty-two visitors around the fen and large numbers of our rare beetle larvae were evident on meadow-rue buds - a good sign for the population later in the Summer and Autumn.

On **May** 1st St Mark's fly were seen in good numbers, common spotted orchids were coming through and the woodland bluebells were in full flower. Twenty-four members of the Watton Society visited on Sunday the 4th. It was a warm sunny day and holly blues were active around the garden. Milk parsley was evident in good numbers and growing actively along with the rest of the fen. A female hairy dragonfly had emerged on Thack's Dyke. Whilst walking through the wood

I came across a recently fledged group of long-tailed tits. I approached closely and they showed no evident alarm at my presence. A painted lady butterfly greeted me on my return to the car park. We held an Early Migrants walk with twenty-two visitors attending. It was a lovely sunny Sunday morning and many calls of the recently arrived migrant birds were identified. Flag iris and sanicles were in flower - the carpet of yellow iris on Old Mill Marsh was the finest display I have witnessed at Wheatfen. I found tortoiseshell caterpillars on nettles and these proved to be the first of several generations to appear throughout the hot Summer. By Wheatfen Broad a heron was being mocked by a couple of crows. Soldier beetles were everywhere, ragged robin was in flower and starwort was showing in the clear dykes. Heralds of a wonderful year were two freshly emerged swallowtail butterflies on Four Acres bridge. Also on Four Acres, a bittern was seen flying across to Strumpshaw Fen and southern hawker dragonflies were on Middle Marsh Dyke. At the end of the month ten banded demoiselles were busy on Wheatfen Broad. That was the start of a remarkable year for this species.

At the beginning of **June** the first Norfolk hawker dragonflies were flying along Home Dyke while meadow-rue was coming into flower. On Penguin Dyke three fluffy new-born cygnets were riding on their mother's back - what a lovely camera study that would have made! Red-eyed damselflies were active over water lilies at the end of the dyke. On the 5th four-spotted chaser dragonflies were seen on the pond by the Thatch and black-tailed skimmers were busy on Wheatfen Broad. On the 6th, along Smee Loke, silver Y moths were in good numbers as were click beetles. Taking the punt out on the link dyke between the broads, I counted about 30 banded demoiselles. This was in line with the high numbers seen in the Yare Valley this year. Meadow brown, swallowtail and painted lady butterflies were on many parts of the Reserve on the 13th. Swallowtail Day was just perfect. In lovely sunny weather, over 100 people had wonderful views as the butterflies fed on flag iris within feet of where the visitors stood on Four Acres. A memorable day for all. There was also a bonus as we recorded our first scarce chaser dragonfly on Deepwaters Broad. The rest of the month continued with warm and sunny weather. On the 18th longhorn beetles were in good numbers on Smee Loke, as were skippers. A particularly memorable moment for 2003 occurred on the morning of 21st. As I was walking along the edge of Home Fen, I saw over 50 black-headed gulls swooping silently and gathering up emerging flies. This continued for about twenty minutes and then suddenly ended. It was such a privilege to witness. On the 27th the first white admiral butterflies were seen in the cottage garden. They were heralding in an excellent season for this butterfly. Also at this time, meadowsweet and meadow vetchling were well in flower.

**July** started with some unexpected high tides on the 2nd and 3rd of the month. Walking on the edge of the wood, I found on the path a damaged purple hairstreak - a beautiful little butterfly. Brown hawker dragonflies and ruddy darters were seen over Deepwaters on the 9th. On the 13th July, fourteen visitors attended the Wildflower Course (Part 2) and enjoyed the many wildflowers on the fen. White admiral butterflies could also be seen feeding on brambles in the cleared area at the end of Surlingham Wood. On the 15th, a very hot day at 86°F, the fen was looking its very best with many peacock butterflies on Smee Loke. By the 18th common reed was coming into ear and many insects were about - including mosquitoes! I found our first rare leaf beetle on meadow-rue and also good numbers of dark bush-crickets on the 24th. For the first time in some years I came across a comma caterpillar on nettles on Smee Loke. In the car park there were good numbers of migrant hawker dragonflies.

**August** was a very hot and dry month. On the 2nd the temperature was 82°F and the second generation of swallowtail butterflies were seen in the garden. A wall butterfly, a steadily declining species at Wheatfen, was seen in the car park on the 6th. On the 7th, as I walked along Smee Loke, I came within feet of two young Chinese Water deer fawns. Angelica was coming into flower on the 8th on an increased number of plants this year. Swallowtails were seen feeding on knapweed by the garden on the 9th. On the following day, with the temperature at 96°F, we held the Natural History Day at Wheatfen in conjunction with the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society. Despite the heat and humidity, good numbers of visitors enjoyed their day with swallowtails and plenty of dragonflies to see. On the 13th new generation tortoiseshell butterflies were about as were commas. These were in evidence the next day when twenty members from Lowestoft RSPB visited the Fen. On the 19th there was a commotion as male swans were fighting on Mack's Dyke and the female and cygnets had taken shelter in the Thatch. I had a little clearing up to do afterwards. On the 20th pristine red admiral butterflies were numerous on the fen while, overhead, there was a lovely sight of a flock of Canada geese. This fly-past occurred again on the 28th.

The settled warm and dry weather continued at the start of **September** and migrant hawkers

could be seen hunting over many of the fens. On the 6th I had my only sighting this year of an osprey. It perched in a tree by Deepwaters, but it stayed for the morning only. On the 12th at the edge of the wood the tiny sepsis fly were swarming in their thousands - only the second time I have seen this impressive sight. Common darter dragonflies, large and small white butterflies were all in good numbers on the reserve. Walking along the path by Alder Carr I came across the remains of a dead swan which had been eaten by foxes. I surmised that its death was probably the result of the fight I had witnessed about three weeks earlier. On the 21st we held our Fungus Workshop Day. Despite the very dry weather we turned up a fair number of species, including wax-cap and oyster fungus in the wood. We were assisted throughout the day by expert advice from members of the Norfolk Fungus Study Group. On the 23rd high tides caused the fen to flood. On the next day we had the first frost of Autumn. A kingfisher seen on Penguin Dyke was one of many sightings since the reed had been cleared from the middle of the dyke. On Saturday the 27th, a warm day, I was sitting by the beech tree in the clearing in Surlingham Wood when, to my great surprise, two white admiral butterflies fluttered by. These in fact were second generation ones. Because of the hot weather, they had gone through next year's life cycle in seven weeks. This phenomenon was noted in several parts of the country. A possible down side to this is that there could be fewer white admirals about in 2004. On the 27th speckled wood butterflies were about.

The weather at the start of **October** continued to be very dry and small tortoiseshell, speckled wood, brimstone and red admiral butterflies were still in evidence. On the 8th there were high tides and a kingfisher was sitting on the new barrier on one of the paths on Home Dyke. On the 15th there was an unexpected sighting of a wall brown butterfly on Eleven Bridges path. A water rail was seen by the edge of Wheatfen Broad on the 22nd. The month finished with wet weather and heavy rain and the wildlife in a sheltering mood.

**November** started with bearded tits on Thack's Marsh and many flocks of geese, in particular Canada geese, flying overhead. On the 4th common darter dragonflies were on the handrail of the Boardwalk and by the 15th migrant hawkers and common darters were still to be seen in good numbers. On the 23rd the Trees in Winter Walk had to be cancelled because of heavy rain (over two inches fell that weekend). The fen was flooded for a couple of days. On the 26th high winds brought down an old alder tree on Alder Carr and led to the discovery of a vacated hornets' nest and a spotted woodpecker's nest.

On the 2nd of **December** I enjoyed the rare sighting of a flock of redpolls feeding on alder cones. Early on the 9th I had a glimpse of a long-eared owl across Four Acres. This was in line with reports of others in the Yare Valley. On several days we had a beautiful frost covered fen and wood. That seemed to bring out plenty of Chinese Water deer - this being the rutting season. On the 17th there was a little grebe on Middle Marsh Dyke and on the 18th two Chinese Water deer on the Boardwalk by Home Dyke. On the 23rd I saw a mole popping down a mound it had just thrown up - there have been many mounds on the paths this year! We had the first snow on the 22nd and the rest of the month remained changeable. As ever, I look forward to meeting those of you who are able to visit Wheatfen during 2004, whether as a private visitor or to attend one of our special day events. Whatever the reason, I know you will appreciate, as I do, what a wonderful place Wheatfen is.