

# Warden's Wildlife Report 2004

*David Nobbs 2005*

Water is the basis of life and at Wheatfen its influence is great. As mentioned elsewhere in this newsletter, the past year was no exception to this cycle with flooding on many occasions. The month of August was the wettest on record with over four inches of rain. I find it interesting to speculate on what climatic changes we might see in the future and the effects these would have on Wheatfen's flora and fauna.

**January** The year started with the lovely sighting of a kingfisher fishing along the cleared Home Dyke and swans grazing on the pond weed there. On the 6th, with the temperature at 11° Celsius and the sun shining, one might have thought spring had arrived. Goldcrests, chaffinches and marsh tits were all singing from the scrub by the Boardwalk. By the 13th, plenty of Chinese water deer could be seen along the paths because of flooding on the fens. This continued on the 14th and again on the 17th. On the 23rd a tiding of magpies was making its raucous presence heard behind the office. Towards the end of the month heavy snow covered Wheatfen from 27th to 31st. Many animal and bird tracks could be seen and that gave me good reason to get out the identification books and brush up on those. Good flocks of geese also were seen flying over the reserve.

**February** The month started very mild with 15° Celsius on the 2nd. Two days later snowdrops were out in full. We had a visit from the Loddon Society on that day and many birds were singing. Later in the day, with the tide over the paths, I saw a Chinese water deer swimming across Home Dyke. On the 7th, as a result of the previous night's high winds, we had quite a large oak tree down in the wood. This also took down a beech tree. The fen was also flooded at this time with water over the Boardwalk. On the 12th one lone heron was seen at the heronry. On the 18th of the month a group of swans were feeding on the reed rhizomes which had been recently dug out of Middle Marsh Dyke. On the 20th, as cold easterly winds were blowing across Old Mill Marsh, many birds were taking shelter. On the broads, tufted ducks and teal were in good numbers and stayed until the 26th. From that date more snow fell and remained until the end of the month.

**March** On the 2nd snow was still on the ground, but by the 6th, with the promise of better things to come, coltsfoot was in flower. A bird which I have not mentioned in past reports, but which is increasing in number with many sightings, is the green woodpecker. On the 6th one was feeding on the path by Penguin Dyke. A pair of little grebes were on Middle Marsh Dyke that same day. On the 9th the over-wintering teal were still about on the broads. A week later, and with the daytime temperature up to 16° Celsius, spring was in the air with three brimstone butterflies and bumblebees on the wing, lesser celandine in flower and marsh marigolds also. Continuing into the 17th, tortoiseshell butterflies were awake from hibernation. On the 20th gale force winds were much in evidence, but I was cheered by the song of the first chiffchaff near the Thatch. There was further indication of the improving quality of the water at Wheatfen on the 24th with the sighting of ten frogs spawning in Smee Loke Dyke. On the 30th woodcock were seen on the edge of the woods and on the last day of March peacock butterflies were about in small numbers.

**April** The month started sunny and by the 6th garlic mustard was in flower and the willows on the fen were coming into leaf. On the 10th the first willow warblers had arrived. The 13th was a warm and sunny day and grass snakes could be seen basking on litter heaps along Smee Loke; trees were coming into life; many flies were active and on Old Mill Marsh meadow-rue was showing. The first orange-tip butterflies were seen on the 14th and blackcaps were singing in the wood. On the 15th I had my best view ever of the elusive Cetti's warbler with one singing male on Old Mill Marsh. He stayed on his territorial bush for some days. Cuckoo flower was out with a good number of plants on the previously mown Thack Marsh. On the 16th, green veined white butterflies were flying, tussock sedge and tufted sedge were in flower. I had a rare sighting of a red-legged partridge on Home Fen path. The first sedge warblers arrived on the 17th. There was a late frost on the 20th, but later in the day whitethroats and willow warblers could be heard in good voice. There was a sad occasion on the 21st when I found the male of a pair of mute swans floating, dead, on Mack's Dyke. They had just started nest building on the pond by the Thatch and I think the female must have sensed that something had happened as shortly afterwards she abandoned the site and I did not see her again. By the 23rd spring butterflies were about in good numbers. Walking by Smee Loke Dyke on the 24th I had a good view of a water vole feeding and there were also newly emerged alder flies. Comma and speckled wood butterflies were evident on the edge of

the cottage garden. I also rescued three tortoiseshell butterflies which were fluttering inside the window of their hibernaculum - the outside tool shed. The first cuckoo was calling by the river, but this was three days later than in 2003. Our Spring Walk was attended by thirty people. We looked at oak apple galls and adders tongue fern just coming through, but the most unusual find was of a small lamprey discovered by the path on Eleven Bridges. To close the month we had heavy rain and even the car park was flooded!

**May** Cloud and rain persisted for the first few days of May, but by the 6th the sun was out and I had a good view of a whitethroat by the cottage. Visiting in the evening, a group of twenty people enjoyed a tour of the fen with a special look at plants. A hairy dragonfly, the first dragonfly of the year, was seen by the path to Wheatfen Broad. Our Dawn Chorus Walk was held on Sunday the 9th and twenty early-risers were in attendance. The first bird heard was a cuckoo and that was followed by a heron flying over the cottage. On the 13th flag iris was in flower along Home Dyke and orange-tip butterflies were on the wing. In a truly remarkable year for them to be seen, banded demoiselles were active along Link Dyke at Wheatfen Broad. On the 19th I had a good view of a cuckoo sitting in a low tree on Four Acres and, beside it, my first Chinese water deer fawn of the season. Many beetles, including cardinal and fen longhorn, were feeding on the vegetation along the paths of Smee Loke. On the 22nd I found a small jack-pike, dead in Mack's Dyke. I always look forward to my first swallowtail butterfly of the year and one fluttered past me on Smee Loke on the 26th. (I like to think of it as saying a 'thank you' for the work we do to maintain the open fen). The red-eyed damselfly was seen on water lily leaves at the end of Penguin Dyke on the 26th. A day later, I had a wonderful view of a kingfisher preening itself for some minutes on a branch by Deep Waters. That was one of my highlights of the year. Due to mild winters and the improving water quality, kingfishers are doing very well nowadays. Two Norfolk hawker dragonflies also were seen along Middle Marsh Dyke. At the end of the month good numbers of swallowtail butterflies had emerged a foretaste of the weeks to come.

**June** The month started warm and sunny with the temperature up to 20° Celsius. Summer was in full swing: swallowtails were in good numbers; meadow-rue was in flower; black-tailed skimmer dragonflies were by the broads; common spotted orchids were along Home Fen path; and soldier beetles were on many flowers. The sighting of a red kite heading east over Four Acres was a special bonus. On the 5th we had a visit by the Aylsham and District Natural History Society and there was a view of a pair of mating swallowtail butterflies doing their ritual dance flight over the path down to the river. Azure damselflies in great numbers were observed ovipositing on weed in Mack's Dyke. A most unusual thing happened at the end of the day when a pipistrelle bat had fallen into the sink from its roost in the loft space above the kitchen in the cottage. It was very nearly washed up with the cups. I dried it 'up' and put it on a wood pile in the shade to recover which it did. By the 8th the temperature was 27° Celsius and reed canary grass was in flower. On the 10th and 11th we had a visit from the pupils of Hethersett High School who were carrying out plant surveys and dyke studies by the marsh on Mack's Dyke. Swallowtail Day on Sunday 13th was yet again blessed with fine weather. About 150 visitors came along and saw the butterflies feeding from irises on Four Acres; it was truly a sight to behold. Also seen was a water vole, with four young, and brimstone caterpillars on buckthorn. All in all it was a great day at Wheatfen. On the 15th meadow brown butterflies were active. We had a busy next few days with an artist group from Brooke on Friday, the Conchological Society on Saturday and the Harrow Natural History Society on Sunday the 20th, this day also welcomed visitors attending the Grasses and Sedges Course! The weather was overcast with outbreaks of rain, but one swallowtail was seen. By the 22nd, meadow brown, gatekeeper and painted lady butterflies were on the wing over many of the fen paths. Marsh pea and marsh vetchling were both in flower. On the 25th the first white admiral butterfly was seen in a clearing in the wood. On the 27th I was fortunate to find a rare musk beetle on Smee Loke. This featured as the star of my display at the Norfolk Show and was returned to the same spot on Smee Loke two days later after having been much admired.

**July** Good numbers of white admiral butterflies could be seen on the 2nd of the month and the first brown hawker dragonflies emerged on the 3rd. Quite a bit of clearing up was required after gale force winds on the 7th. Artist's Days were held on the 11th and 12th and the first swallowtail caterpillars were found. Meadow sweet was coming into full flower as was common valerian. It was quite a year for froghoppers and they would jump onto my clothing as I brushed past the foliage along the sides of paths. On the 17th a small group of the Norfolk Wildlife Trust (Norwich branch) visited and white admiral butterflies were seen in the wood. Thereafter we spent the morning sheltering from thunderstorms and eventually the visit was cut short. I walked over Thack Marsh on the 21st and found a good number of marsh fern and milk parsley plants on the restored fen. On my way back I discovered the caterpillar of the magnificent emperor moth. Broad-bodied

chaser dragonflies were about on the 27th and angelica was coming into flower on the 31st. Twelve members of the Wildflower Society toured the fen on an overcast day looking to identify, among many others, the nationally scarce fibrous tussock sedge.

**August** August, with a few exceptional days, was a month of rain! On the 7th purple hairstreak butterflies were seen on the oak trees by the Thatch. In the blistering heat of the next day, the Natural History Day was held in conjunction with the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society. A number of guided walks and mounted exhibits proved of interest to members of the public. Migrant hawk dragonflies were in good numbers with southern hawkers and common darters on Home Dyke on the 14th. I found a dead Chinese water deer in Middle Marsh Dyke on the 17th. Heavy rain again and high tides were with us on the 19th and there were very few butterflies about. Those conditions continued for a further week, but I did glimpse a barn owl hunting early on Alder Carr while nearby two young deer were grazing on the path quite oblivious of me. There were just one or two red admiral butterflies in the garden of the cottage and on the 28th the fen was flooded again. August proved to be a disappointing month for observing the flora and fauna at Wheatfen.

**September** I closed the paths because of flooding on the 1st. Two days later, on the 3rd, and very early, I had a good sighting of a young osprey sitting on a tree by Deep Waters it stayed in the area until the 8th. We held our Fungus Workshop in conjunction with the Norfolk Fungus Study Group on the 19th. Additionally, thirty members of the public were in attendance. Sixty-three species were found including some nice examples of common earth stars near the garden. By the 21st common darter dragonflies were by the Boardwalk and several species of butterfly were active along the paths.

**October** Continuing the weather pattern of the last few years, the month started warm and sunny. Geese, in skeins, could be seen flying overhead on many days. Speckled wood, red admiral and comma butterflies were all in evidence in the orchard on the 2nd. A kingfisher was seen on Home Dyke on the 12th and male Cetti's warblers were singing again after the summer. On the 19th I recorded the first frost, but during the day species of flies and numerous red admiral butterflies were about. A little grebe on Deep Waters was a delight to watch and on the 28th a peacock butterfly was seen in the garden. By the end of the month there was evidence of a migration of woodcock with up to six seen in the wetter parts of the wood. I was particularly pleased to see them, as there are reports of declining numbers of this species.

**November** Brimstone butterflies and hornets were still evident due to the mild start to the month and on the 4th I found two frogs along Smeeloke Dyke. By the 5th several families of swans had moved onto the reserve and were feeding on the pond weeds throughout the dyke system. There were further sightings of woodcock on the 9th. A stoat, on the path at Thack Marsh, appeared to be playing a game with me hiding under the bridge and then bobbing up again. It was as if he were saying 'Now you see me - now you don't!' Fools' watercress was still actively covering many of the dykes this is a real problem at present and it takes a lot of effort to clear this invasive plant. There was another very high tide on the 13th with many paths flooded. On the 19th two kingfishers were flying along Home Dyke and on the following day a male mute swan arrived on Mack's Dyke. He had a green ring on his leg signifying, I gather, that he had been rescued by the RSPCA. He spent several days at Wheatfen. On Sunday 21st forty-two people attended our Winter Walk. Although it was an overcast day those who attended had much to see including fungi and lichen. By the 27th tufted ducks and little grebes were seen on the broads along with good numbers of teal. Early on the 30th I watched a barn owl hunting over Home Fen.

**December** There were plenty of over-wintering teal on both of the broads at the start of the month and on the 4th the occasional snipe was seen on some of the small foot drains on Crake's Marsh. I was surprised to see a frog active on Smeeloke on the 11th. In the middle of the month we started cutting Old Mill Marsh and fieldfares and redwings were busy taking the berries off guelder rose bushes. On the 21st an unusually low tide exposed the mud even on the broads. It was as if someone had pulled the plug out of Wheatfen. The rest of the month remained fairly dry and frosty and there were more sightings of deer around the reserve. On the 30th, a dry day for mowing reed, I had a wonderful view of a marsh harrier hunting over the fen to finish the year.

I have written reports now for several years and have tried to pass on to you what can only be a 'flavour' of all the flora and fauna to be enjoyed and appreciated here at Wheatfen. I do hope you have the opportunity, either by yourself or as a member of an organised group, to come along

during 2005. The reserve is open every day (flooding permitting!) and there are many events and courses organised by the Friends. You will always be very welcome.