

Warden's Wildlife Report 2005

David Nobbs, 2006

The year will be remembered at Wheatfen for the late leaf fall well into December. Walking through the woods early that month was like being there in late autumn with hazel and oak in full leaf and still green in parts. I have now been observing the seasons here at Wheatfen for thirteen years and this has really brought home to me how the seasons are altering. I often reflect on what the predictions for climate change will mean for Wheatfen in the future?

January started mild but with the fen flooded. Teal and tufted ducks were on both broads on the 7th. On the 13th there was again a very high tide and coots on Home Dyke were nibbling on reed canary grass overhanging the dyke. A woodpecker could be heard drumming very early on the 14th and a good view of a Chinese water deer swimming across Penguin Dyke was had the next day. Also, early (at 7.30 am) on the 15th a barn owl was hunting over the cut areas on Old Mill Marsh. That was the first in a series of sightings stretching over the next few weeks. Snowdrops were out on the 19th in the garden and at the top of Home Dyke. The 19th and 20th saw the fen flooded again. On the 22nd I found the headless remains of a moorhen and on the 25th there was a kingfisher on Mack's Dyke and the barn owl again on Old Mill Marsh. Towards the end of the month over 100 teal were on both broads and there were deer on the paths in good numbers.

February, by contrast, had very low tides; it appeared almost as though somebody had pulled the plug out at Wheatfen and left stretches of mud exposed. On Alder Carr path I found a dead Chinese water deer which had been scavenged by foxes. Low tides continued on the 4th. By the 11th a few early bumble bees had emerged due to the very mild weather. Sedges had started to show very early signs of spring growth and large numbers of wood pigeons were roosting in the woods on the 14th. On Penguin Dyke, on the 18th, a green woodpecker was feeding on ants by the path next to the decayed wreck of the wherry "Penguin". By the 20th we had snow and the rest of the month remained cold and frosty.

From the 2nd to the 5th **March** snow lay on the ground. Long-tailed tits in flocks were going from willow to willow in search of food. Woodcock were seen in the wood on the 8th and by the 9th milder weather had set in. Bird song was strong and rabbits were active on the edge of the wood. Out on the fen reed buntings could be heard and on the 15th frogs were mating in the dyke along Smee Loke. On the 16th the first spring butterfly – a peacock from hibernation – was seen on the edge of the garden and a brimstone butterfly also. Coltsfoot was in flower. Woodpeckers could be heard drumming on the 17th and the next day the first chiffchaff made itself heard by the cottage. Mining bees were about and a large pike was also seen by the tide gauge in Home Dyke. Two pairs of grebes were a welcome sight on both broads as spring was warming up. On the 23rd a lesser spotted woodpecker was seen behind the office. (An RSPB survey indicates that generally numbers of this bird are declining, but I am pleased to report that they are holding up at Wheatfen). With the warm weather a grass snake had emerged from hibernation and was sunning itself on the path by Home Fen. Marsh marigolds on the 24th were in flower along a number of dykes. However, it was a false spring and the end of the month became cold and cloudy.

April arrived with better, warmer weather. Brimstone and peacock butterflies were about and tortoiseshells also. Due to high tides, frog spawn had been washed up on the bank along Smee Loke and was returned to the water safely. There was an unusually good quantity of spawn this year as the rise and fall in the tidal waters on the scale we see at Wheatfen is not well suited to the frog life cycle. On the 4th our first muntjac deer was seen initially in Osier Carr by the boardwalk, then in the garden and there were a number of further sightings later in the year. This is not a welcome addition to our list of fauna as muntjacs can do a great deal of damage to the coppiced hazels. Sedges were in flower on the 7th and willow catkins were in evidence. On that day also a pair of marsh harriers were seen over Thack Marsh. The first blackcap was heard in the garden on the 9th. The next day holly blue butterflies were seen by the car park and the first willow warbler was heard by Penguin Dyke. On the 12th there was a repeat of last year when I found a small lamprey dead on the bank of Eleven Bridges Dyke. Heavy rain followed over the next few days. By the 21st large bittercress was in flower and on that day a water vole was seen swimming along Smee Loke. The inaugural meeting of the Norfolk Spider Group was held on the 23rd, a lovely spring day, and many records were added. Brimstone butterflies were in good numbers on the 24th. The Spring Walk took place in good weather with orange tip butterflies in the garden. Some unusual lesser celandines and wood anemones with multiple petals proved of

interest. By the 26th there were dandelions in profusion along the path of Eleven Bridges which looked particularly impressive with the new bridges all in place. The first cuckoo was heard by the river and sedge and reed warblers could be heard on Blake's Marsh. Orange tip and speckled wood butterflies were evident in good numbers around the reserve. Coot chicks had hatched on the pond by The Thatch on the 28th. Over the next few days green-veined whites and small white butterflies were on the wing.

At the beginning of **May** the sight of four silver bream spawning at low tide in Penguin Dyke was one of the most interesting observations of the year. Oak trees were coming into leaf and alderflies were about on the 3rd. The Dawn Chorus Walk was held on the 8th – a lovely early morning, albeit cold at 4am! Robin and tawny owl were the songs heard first this year. An osprey was seen on Deep Waters, which was an unexpected bonus. Pipistrelle bats, flying in the evening, were observed by a visiting group. The first dragonfly of the summer, a hairy dragonfly, was seen at the top of Home Dyke and adders tongue fern had emerged and was showing along Smee Loke. Early in the morning of the 16th, while inspecting the repair work carried out on a bridge and casting my eye over the new planking, I looked up and saw a young fox cub on the other end of the bridge returning my gaze. What a surprise – at least to me – and what a lovely moment. The 18th was a warm summer's day. There was plenty of wildlife to see and bird song was in full force. Along Smee Loke the red cardinal beetle was in evidence on vegetation in good numbers and on the 25th banded demoiselles could be seen hawking along the link dyke from Wheatfen Broad. The first swallowtail butterfly was seen on the 26th on Four Acres. Two days later a single red kite, an occasional visitor, was seen flying over Hard Marsh. Flag iris was coming into flower on Old Mill Marsh and that was the start of a wonderful display. Orange tip butterflies were still about and on the 29th the first Norfolk hawker dragonfly was observed resting by the garden. By the end of the month guelder rose bushes had come into flower as had the first of the common spotted orchids along the edge of the path by Surlingham Carr.

At the start of **June** swallowtails had started to emerge with half a dozen spotted by the river path. Also seen was the first southern hawker dragonfly and the osprey was still about. On the 3rd four-spotted chaser dragonflies and a red-eyed damselfly were observed at the end of Penguin Dyke. Meadowrue was in flower by the 7th. Taking my small boat out on to the Fen Channel, I was surprised when I disturbed a large pike in the water lily beds. Following this, a young jack pike was seen in Smee Loke Dyke – the dyke which had been dredged earlier in the year. There were also at this time Norfolk hawker dragonflies over the car park which shows yet again that you do not have to go far to see something of interest at Wheatfen. Swallowtail Day was held in conjunction with Butterfly Conservation on the 12th but cloudy weather allowed only two hours viewing and small numbers were seen. Eggs on milk parsley, the caterpillar's plant food, proved of interest. I did manage to rescue a swallowtail from a spider's web and visitors had a good view of a live specimen. By the middle of the month in excess of 120 common spotted orchids were in flower along the edge of Surlingham Carr. It was a very good year for this plant. When walking into the wood I came across a newly emerged stinkhorn fungus with flies on the mucus tip for about an hour. Black-tailed skimmer dragonflies were about over the dykes and peacock butterfly caterpillars could be found on nettles, their plant food. By the 21st meadow brown butterflies were evident in good numbers and, beside the path on Smee Loke, marsh pea was in flower. The 23rd and 24th were very hot days at around 30 degrees C and humid too. Small skipper butterflies were quite numerous and swallowtails were about. The end of the month became stormy with some rain.

July opened up with the first white admiral butterflies in the clearing in Surlingham Wood. This site is so good for this species that sightings will always be had on a good sunny day in the summer months. Other butterflies, including ringlets and gatekeepers, were on the reserve in good numbers. Purple loosestrife was in flower on the 2nd and the next brood of tortoiseshell butterflies were active. From the 5th to the 7th there was heavy rain and the fen was flooded in parts. Meadowsweet was in flower by the 10th of the month. Swallowtail caterpillars in good numbers could be found on Thack Marsh and Four Acres. It was a very good year for yellow loosestrife, which was in profusion, and milk parsley was also now in flower. On the 16th a visit by a party from the RSPB enjoyed a good view of a bittern flying past us on Blake's Marsh and also the wonderful sight, for several minutes, of a kestrel mocking a marsh harrier on Crake's Marsh. The first few peacock butterflies had emerged, but 2005 was a very bad year for this species. High tides flooded the paths on the 22nd. By the end of the month, and later this year than normal, the fen was beginning to come fully into flower. Small white butterflies were in good numbers.

August started with the sighting of a painted lady butterfly in the garden and brown hawker

dragonflies on Home Dyke. On the 3rd, on a visit to the reed beds to look at swallowtail caterpillars, I got completely and utterly soaked in a rain storm. However, a lovely view of a kingfisher sitting on the bridge on Penguin Dyke made up for all the discomfort. Our Natural History Day was a complete contrast to recent years which had been very hot. This year cold winds kept the temperature below 21 degrees C and high tides did nothing to help the situation. White admiral butterflies appeared in the garden when the sun did come out. The first wall brown butterfly was seen by the Thatch on the 11th. There is some concern for this quite scarce species. Also, in the vegetation by the car park, harvestman spiders with red mites on them proved a good photo opportunity. Also, at that time dark bush crickets were in large numbers. Early in the morning of the 13th and by the Thatch, I had the pleasure of seeing three young stoats. As I returned to the car park on the 17th a fox was roaming around and evidently inspecting the new bench seat put in for the Wherryman's Way. I wonder if it approved. On the 18th, an early misty morning, there was the lovely sight of cobwebs in their hundreds in the vegetation. Migrant hawker dragonflies were seen later in the day hawking over Home Marsh. On the 19th there was a repeat of last year when I found a pipistrelle bat on the floor in the cottage kitchen. Along Sluice Dyke in the woods a rotten oak tree with many holes in its bark yielded up a number of lesser stag beetles. This species had not been recorded at Wheatfen previously which is surprising as they are not uncommon in other locations. By the 23rd high tides were flooding some paths and red admirals butterflies were in the garden. On the 26th the hornets, which had found a place to set up home in the cottage, were very active with coming and going at a rapid pace. All this was above the toilet door - not the most convenient place. However, if they are left alone they cause no harm. A red underwing moth, a quite large and day flying species, was sitting on the brickwork at the gable end of the cottage. By the end of the month some flowers were beginning to die off. Common darter dragonflies could be seen on the handrail by the Boardwalk. August ended dry and sunny.

September started with the weather unchanged. A few fungi had emerged in the woods. By the 6th brown hawker dragonflies were still active along Home Dyke. A pair of swans with four cygnets also made a pleasant sight. By the 13th red admiral butterflies were about in good numbers and the grass, which needed much more cutting this year, was growing again on the paths. The 18th was Fungus Workshop Day and sixty-four species were found. The list included the rare parasitic fungus, which lives on other fungi, found in the clearing in the middle of the wood. Also proving of interest was the very attractive, somewhat exotic, sycamore moth caterpillar. Wasps were active on the fallen apples in the orchard on the 20th. There did not seem to be so many this year, but that did not stop them from using me for target practice as you will see later in this report. I found a queen hornet from the nest inside the cottage. It was a very impressive insect. Bird song on the reserve was now quieter with summer migrants having left. On the 24th the Bat Evening was held in perfect conditions except for the lack of bats. This was put down to its being a poor year for moths - only eight were caught in traps that evening. On the 27th there was a very special moment for me when, at the end of Penguin Dyke, a kingfisher flew right over my head. Bees and flies were now on the ivy blossom and migrant hawker dragonflies were still numerous. There were strong winds and high tides on the 28th and the month ended windy and a little cold.

Early **October** was sunny and on the 4th I had a surprise visit from ten red-legged partridges wandering the car park. Red admiral butterflies were feeding on rotten apples in the garden on the 6th. Whilst scything the right hand side of Home Dyke, I disturbed some tree wasps which had set up home in the jetty. First, I was stung three times and chased to the car park. I went back later to retrieve my scythe only to be chased to the Thatch. I was surprised that I could still run that fast! It took a good couple of days for me to recover from swollen arms. On the 11th the odd peacock butterfly had come out of hibernation as the temperature was 21 degrees C and it was like a summer's day. The hornets were still active and teal had arrived on the broads. There was a very high tide on the 18th. Plenty of fungi were now showing in the woods by the 21st. The following day a kestrel was hunting for a long period over Old Mill Marsh. The 27th was again as warm as summer and a brimstone butterfly was flying over Home Dyke. On the 28th a little grebe was in Penguin Dyke and common darters dragonflies were over Home Dyke. The fallen sweet chestnuts in the wood were of excellent size this year and ideal for roasting. I am pleased to say that I beat the grey squirrels to them this year and gathered some before they had had them all.

There were two very high tides to welcome in **November**. Two red admiral butterflies were in the garden on the 3rd and some of the leaves on the trees were starting to fall at last. On the 8th an old, and now disused, hornets' nest was found by the pond on Alder Carr. On the 16th a kingfisher was seen again on Penguin Dyke. This has become the place where one is most likely to see that beautiful bird. Woodcock had arrived on the 17th and provided four sightings in the wood. The

Winter Walk took place on the 20th, a cold and frosty morning. Surviving hornets at the cottage were looked at closely as were reed cigar galls and wrens' nests. On the 23rd there was very low water with mud exposed then, in contrast, two days later we had the highest tide for five years with paths and parts of the garden flooded. Chinese water deer were seen in the woods and on the paths and on the 28th a fox was observed crossing the lawn by the cottage. Many rooks and crows were seen overhead in the evening.

As **December** began fieldfares and redwings were occupying the guelder rose bushes and by the 13th many teal were on the broads. There was a further sighting of a muntjac deer in the garden on the 15th. The barking call of Chinese water deer could be heard during this their rutting period. Up to two inches of snow had settled on the 17th with wind and the fen flooded. On the 21st coots, in number approximately fifty, were observed on both broads. On the 26th a white hybrid mallard was on Mack's Dyke. A snipe got up from Home Dyke on the 29th. For the final few days of the month there was snow and, with heavy frosts, Wheatfen appeared even more magical. Many animal and bird tracks were found along the paths.

This diary reflects the seasons at Wheatfen and indicates in a small way what can be seen here throughout the year. Why not pay the reserve a visit at a time when you might not normally come – in winter, say, or early spring – and get a sense of this special place as it reflects the seasonal changes. I also look forward to seeing you at our organised events in 2006.