

Warden's Wildlife Report 2006

David Nobbs, 2007

The year 2006 will be remembered at Wheatfen as the Year of the Otter, with over ten sightings by visitors and two wonderful close encounters of mine which I shall share with you later in my diary. To commemorate such unforgettable moments the otter features on the front cover of this newsletter. The weather as always played its special part in the year with an exceptionally cold spring and a very warm autumn running well into November.

January started mild with some very low tides allowing mowing on Old Mill Marsh. On the 4th a little grebe was seen along Home Dyke and two days later a male Cetti's warbler was singing in the bushes along Old Mill Marsh and Smee Loke. Also, at this time many mole hills had sprung up along the paths. Early morning on the 7th, to start my day, five waves of geese flew low over the cottage and a kingfisher flew along Penguin Dyke. While stacking reed on the fen I found my first harvest mouse. Sadly, this one was dead, but numbers of this beautiful small creature must be good as many nests are found. By the 11th great tits were singing noisily. On the 13th I glimpsed a Chinese water deer walking across Home Dyke as it took advantage of the low tide. On the 20th the weather was mild and a lone marsh harrier was seen hunting over the cut reed beds on Old Mill Marsh. That sighting was followed by one on the 23rd of a barn owl at 8 am. By the next day cold east winds had set in and, with the temperature down to -4 degrees C, some parts of the broads were frozen. A pair of snipe were seen along Eleven Bridges on the 28th. At the end of the month cold days and low tides prevailed which enabled winter work to become well advanced.

February arrived and on the 2nd at 8 am a barn owl was seen again over Old Mill Marsh. Also, on that day a lone woodcock flew up by the cottage. On the 4th many teal were on the broads, snowdrops were now out and, to my surprise, a peacock butterfly had awakened from hibernation and was flying in the garden. The 9th brought a change in tides and the fen was flooded. There was a little grebe on Home Dyke again. I had a good view of a weasel on the Boardwalk on the 14th and, later that day, a stoat by Middle Marsh Dyke. By the 18th the weather was milder; the female flowers on hazel were just visible and some winter gnats and flies were in evidence. Also, a green woodpecker was observed on the paving slabs just past the cottage. The mildness was short lived as the cold east winds returned on the 21st. Siskins were flying in the alder trees on Alder Carr and there was some growth in evidence on the fen with leaves of willow herb showing. Snow arrived on the 28th and stayed for two days making many deer and mammal tracks visible.

High tides on the 1st of **March** welcomed in the new month. While walking by the cottage I was intrigued to hear a great tit sounding just like the ring of a telephone. It would seem from this that they, as other birds, are able to mimic sound. On the 7th I came across a treecreeper which had flown inside the Thatch and had collided with a window. I am glad to say it was none the worse for his encounter and was released safely outside. The small and beautiful scarlet elf cup fungus could be found in good numbers along path edges in the wet carr by Wheatfen Broad. Great tits were in loud voice, but there were no real signs of spring growth; only one marsh marigold was in flower. By the 11th the cold east winds had set in again with low tides. A pair of swans were feeding on the Canadian pond weed in Home Dyke. On the 21st herons were noisily engaged in early nest preparation by Four Acres. Two days later a Muntjac deer was seen grazing in the garden by the cottage where daffodils were still to come into flower. I wondered if spring had arrived at last on the 25th with the temperature up to 14 degrees C: honeysuckle was in leaf, a single comma and five brimstone butterflies were on the wing, and toads were croaking in the pond by the Thatch. On the 27th toads were seen also in Smee Loke Dyke and two heron nests had been established by Four Acres. I set up two woodcocks on Old Mill Marsh, lesser celandine was in flower and sedges were starting into growth. On the 29th a tortoiseshell butterfly was seen and mining bees and bumble bees were active. The following day provided one of the highlights of the year when a red kite perched in a tree by the car park. At the end of the month, with the temperature at 15 degrees C, bullfinches were seen along the Boardwalk and sightings of butterflies were on the increase.

April started cold. On the 6th, while walking along Smee Loke, I saw a pike swim under the bridge into shallow water. It remained motionless and this enabled me to take a photograph head on. When I viewed the image later I was surprised to see that a leech had attached itself to the side of the pike's head. I was able to identify the leech as a new species to Wheatfen - an unusual way to obtain a record to say the least. By the 7th the first of the migrant birds was noted - a willow

warbler on Blake's Marsh. Later that day a weasel was seen on Middlemarsh path. On the following day a blackcap was heard singing behind the Warden's Office and a sedge warbler again on Blake's Marsh. A cuckoo, the first of the year, was in evidence by Wheatfen Broad on the 14th. The weather was much milder at 13 degrees C and I wondered whether spring had finally set in, though the trees were still not in leaf. A grasshopper warbler, a bird not at all common these days, was heard on the 16th churring on Four Acres. By the 18th cuckoo flower (lady's smock) was in flower and meadow rue was starting to grow. There was much bird song and there was a good show of marsh marigold along the dykes. Two grebes were on the Fen Channel and brimstone and peacock butterflies were in numbers around the reserve. This on the 21st. The Spring Walk took place on the 23rd with the weather cloudy but mild. Twayblade leaves were showing, as were oxslips, and hazels were just in leaf. There was a good view of a male blackcap in the woods. Cetti's warblers, which tend to skulk low in bushes, are the most elusive of birds and very difficult to observe. I had, however, a wonderful view of a pair on the 25th of the month. They were a mating pair engaging in their ritual repertoire of chasing, wing flapping and calling. In all, this lasted for about twenty minutes on a thicket by Smee Loke. The first orange tip butterflies were seen on the flowers of the now fully out dandelion. The month ended with very mild temperatures at 16 degrees C and, a cause for concern, grey squirrels seemed to be widespread on the reserve.

May started sunny and warm with an osprey seen briefly on Wheatfen Broad. This was the only sighting of it on its migratory passage north. By the 3rd of the month the nests of moorhens and coots could be seen along Mack's Dyke. 20 degrees C had brought out a good number of butterflies including small white. St Mark's fly was also in evidence. The Dawn Chorus Walk took place on Sunday the 7th. I was surprised by a lone male Cetti's warbler singing in total darkness at 3 am. One hour later, as dawn was breaking, thirty to forty pipistrelle bats circled round the chimney of the cottage. This was a magical time that lasted for about ten minutes and then all was quiet. A Chinese water deer was heard barking about 6 am. By the 9th of the month large bittercress was in flower and the first dragonfly of the spring was seen: a female hairy dragonfly in the garden on a day with the temperature at 20 degrees C. I had also a good view of a cuckoo in a crack willow tree on Crake's Marsh. By the 13th azure damselflies were in good numbers along the dykes and ponds and on the 16th a large red damselfly and a red admiral butterfly were seen on Smee Loke. Later this year because of the cold spring, the first flag iris came into flower on Old Mill Marsh by the 17th. Another first were the coot chicks which had hatched on the Thatch pond. Great crested grebes had started nest building on Wheatfen Broad by the 23rd and a good number of buff tip bumble bees were about at that time. I came across a very approachable female pheasant on Middle Marsh Dyke which then began to follow me along the path. The first swallowtail butterfly was seen on the 25th of the month and, with the late spring, orange tip butterflies were about still. Banded demoiselle damselflies had emerged by the 30th and could be seen by Wheatfen Broad. There was rain on the last day of the month and the temperature was 14 degrees C, but flag iris in full flower brightened up the day.

Rainy conditions lasted into the first days of **June**, but by the 3rd the temperature had risen to 17 degrees C and a few swallowtail butterflies were on the wing and ragged robin was in flower also. A great tit had built a nest in a hole by the back door of the cottage and the young could be seen being fed on a frequent and regular basis - every 30 seconds by my watch. On the 4th a great spotted woodpecker's nest was seen in an old tree on Smee Loke and great activity was heard. Later that day I saw a Norfolk hawker dragonfly flying in the car park and then four swallowtails on Middle Marsh Dyke. Black-tailed skimmer dragonflies and four-spotted chasers were seen by Wheatfen Broad on the 7th. Our Swallowtail Day on the 11th was attended by about 150 people throughout the day. The weather was hot and humid with the temperature up at 29 degrees C. Swallowtails were in abundance. There were Norfolk hawker dragonflies hawking and marsh pea was in flower. All in all it was another successful though exhausting day. At this time common valerian, the tall pink fen plant, was showing well along Eleven Bridges. On the 13th southern marsh orchids and meadow rue were in flower on Thack Marsh. One week later, red-eyed damselflies could be seen on lily pads at the end of Penguin Dyke and purple loosestrife was in flower. Two grass snakes were seen on litter heaps and meadow brown butterflies were about. A pair of mallards with five young were on the Pond. This sighting was especially pleasing as it was an unusual event at Wheatfen. Skullcap, a small purple plant, was in good flower this year along Thack Path. On the 22nd a swallowtail butterfly was flying in the car park and common darter dragonflies were in the wood. On the following day the first white admiral butterflies in the cleared site in the wood and a lobster moth caterpillar on a birch twig proved of great interest. Four grasshopper warblers could be heard by the river's edge and a pair of bullfinches were observed along the Boardwalk. At the end of the month froghoppers seemed to be everywhere and many willows had evidence of their 'spit' on the foliage. Their numbers seem to be increasing every year.

On the 1st **July**, a hot day at 27 degrees C, a visit by Hadleigh Naturalists' Society was greeted by swallowtail and white admiral butterflies. Members also had the opportunity to inspect the damage to the horse chestnut trees by the cottage. The foliage of the trees had been left brown and shredded by a small leaf miner moth. 2006 is the first year this condition has been seen at Wheatfen - an unwelcome record. The weather continued very hot, reaching 28 deg C on the 4th. A painted lady butterfly was seen by the Boardwalk and on the next day white admiral butterflies were still about in the wood. Peacock butterfly caterpillars, in larger numbers this year, were found feeding on nettles. I came across a female partridge with ten young which I followed along the path along Mack's Dyke and, by the 6th, meadowsweet was in full flower. Swallowtail caterpillars, prior to their chrysalis stage, could be seen grazing the umbels of milk parsley; I counted ten on one plant. The butterfly was being aided this year by the hot weather and I was hopeful that there might be a second brood in the early part of August. I also hoped that all this activity was a positive sign for the swallowtail in 2007. On the 16th a lone purple hairstreak butterfly was seen by the oak on the boardwalk to the Thatch. Brown and southern hawker dragonflies were in good numbers hawking the dykes. By the 24th the annoying and biting cleg (horse) flies were becoming a real nuisance this year. It was a very hot day of 26 degrees C on the 25th and fleabane and hemp agrimony were in flower. Peacock butterflies had emerged in good numbers this year and could be seen all over the reserve and in particular along Smea Loke. Bird song had died down with the exception of that of the great tits. I found a poplar hawkmoth on the door of the Thatch which made a good photographic opportunity. The hot weather continued towards the end of the month at a time when the troublesome Himalayan balsam had to be rogued out from parts of Crake's Marsh. It is necessary to remove it while it is still in flower and before it begins to seed. The month finished with the temperature somewhat cooler.

At the start of **August** there were still one or two painted lady butterflies about and some southern hawker dragonflies. On the 2nd a kingfisher flew past me as I sat on the seat at the end of Penguin Dyke. On the 3rd temperatures were cooler and strong winds were in attendance. Looking round the fen I noticed what a very good year it was for the tall marsh sown thistle. It was hotter by the 6th when we held the Natural History Day. Three second brood swallowtail butterflies were seen egg laying on angelica along Eleven Bridges. This is something I had seen only once before - in 1995. Our rare leaf beetle had emerged and was feeding on creeping thistle. At this time, good numbers of visitors had guided walks round the fen. On the 7th I took the small boat out onto the broads and I was pleased to see that hornwort, along with other water plants, is increasing there. That is very good news. But not in every case. On the down side, common reed is now blocking the entrance to the Fen Channel and will need to be dredged in the future. There were a large number of angelica plants this year and by the 9th of the month they were in full flower. The flowers of the broad leaved ragwort were to be seen on Home Fen at this time. Also, butterflies such as gatekeepers, green veined whites and peacocks were still active around the reserve. The 11th provided the most unexpected sighting of the year: a Reeve's pheasant, which is larger than our English pheasant and has black and white markings on its head, was walking along the path by Wheatfen Broad. It had evidently escaped from some enclosure in the village earlier in the year. And there were other unusual sightings, also of escapees, on my way along the road to Wheatfen: a black rabbit and a Lady Amherst's pheasant. The 12th should have been our Bat Evening, but there were gale force winds and rain - weather good for neither man nor bats - and the event had to be cancelled. By the 15th flowers on the fen were nearly over and only the occasional swallowtail was to be seen. On the 17th a young heron was standing by my car in the car park. This was the first in a series of encounters with this fearless bird and, later, photographs were taken when the heron was seen along Home Dyke and again when it was perching on the chimney of Wheatfen Cottage. Migrant hawker dragonflies were hawking on Home Fen on the 21st. Sunny days had returned by the end of the month and the temperature reached around 20 degrees C. A stinkhorn fungus, which had just emerged, was surrounded by fungus flies attracted by its sticky head. This lasted for about one hour and was quite a spectacle.

Our first Spider Course was held at Wheatfen and the Village Hall on the 2nd **September** which was, on the whole, a wet day. A break in the weather enabled us to show collecting techniques on the reserve. There was an invasion of crane flies this year and on the 7th many of them were egg laying on the muddy parts of the paths. At that time, we also had the first very high tide of the autumn. I came across some peacock butterflies hibernating in the garage and behind the large wooden seat to the cottage's outside loo. On the 9th was held the Wild About Norfolk event over two days in Norwich and I collected some examples of our rare beetle, a hornet's nest and some photographs of the fen in general. By the 12th plenty of geese were flying overhead on the migratory flight to the Yare valley. Fungi, in the woods, were plentiful due to the recent wet and

mild weather and there were red admiral butterflies by the apple trees. The temperature was still fairly high at 22 degrees C on the 16th and the fen began to take on an autumnal look. I disturbed a heron by the Thatch Pond on the 19th. Walking by the garden end of the cottage I heard a scratching noise and discovered a grey squirrel had got in and seemed to be making itself a home by the water tank in the loft. It was quickly shown the door! That on the 20th of the month. The following day was hot at 24 degrees C, common darter dragonflies were ovipositing in the Thatch Pond and reed was beginning to die off. Hornets had built a nest into a tree stump by the boardwalk on Home Dyke and a great deal of activity could still be seen. Red admiral butterflies were getting nectar from the ivy in bloom by the entrance to the reserve. On the 28th I disturbed a Chinese water deer on Smeeloke and for about 30 seconds we seemed to be eyeing one another motionless across the dyke and only yards apart. At the end of the month strimming of the paths was continued as both nettles and grass were growing at full pace.

As we moved into **October** temperatures remained high at around 20 degrees C. Still red admiral and other late species of butterflies remained active. On Sunday the 8th our Fungus Workshop was attended by 24 people in three groups. Over 60 species were identified including a good showing of the common earth star by the garden. On the 12th migrant hawk dragonflies were active, common darters were along the Boardwalk and swans graced both broads. Sycamore trees had shown some leaf fall, but other trees were still in full green leaf. I started my autumn/winter work on the 23rd - later this year because of the weather which was remaining warm and humid. By the end of the month cloudy damp conditions prevailed.

What a month **November** proved to be. At its start there was the most serious flood I have seen in the fifteen years I have been at Wheatfen and the worst recorded since 1990. The tide gauge measured 134 cms. (the paths are well flooded at 80 cms.). I needed waders even on the Boardwalk and, on the path by Sluice Dyke, I came across a Chinese water deer living up to its name with water up to its shoulders. The flood came to the very edge of the garden, but fortunately not into the cottage itself. Four bridges were lifted off their footings, creating more work for the volunteers! All this did raise concerns about future prospects and possibilities. As for the flora and fauna, on the 2nd a woodcock was seen by the cottage and a kingfisher on Thatch Pond. The first frost was recorded on the 4th. My first encounter with an otter occurred on the following day, Sunday the 5th November. Walking along Penguin Dyke towards the Thatch I heard a splash and saw a young otter swimming along the edge of the dyke and under the bridge. I reached the bridge quietly to see it come out onto the cleared bank about ten yards away. It shook itself then slid back into the water. With its head up and looking at me it seemed almost to say, "I'm off!" and went. What an introduction! High tides and cloudy mild weather were the conditions on the 9th and then, on the 10th, I had a good sighting of a little grebe and a water vole on Mack's Dyke. Flooding returned two days later and a stoat was seen in the late afternoon. A pair of swans had moved on to the Thatch Pond by the 15th. My second encounter with an otter, this time a dog otter, took place on Smeeloke Dyke on the 17th. I was walking back with a fork and a rake in hand to my work site along the dyke and had just reached the small bridge half way along when I saw bubbles and a wake like a small torpedo coming towards me. I could see the otter clearly as it popped its head out just a few yards away. It then went up the bank and into the wet carr woodland beyond. I wished that I had had a camera to hand instead of my tools. It was a frosty clear morning on Sunday the 19th as thirty-two people attended the Winter Walk to look around the fen at the work going on. The nest of a harvest mouse was found and there were other signs and tracks of interest to be seen. I was working on dyke clearing along Home Dyke on the 23rd, a mild day, when a common darter dragonfly kept attempting to sun itself by alighting on me while I was taking a (well earned) break. The weather was mild by the 26th and the rutting season of the Chinese water deer was in full swing with deer seen on many parts of the reserve and signs of fighting between the bucks with quantities of hair left on site. At the end of the month I had great pleasure in playing a game of hide and seek with a stoat. The stoat may have had other ideas, but that is what I took it to be as it went under and over the Boardwalk and kept poking its head out at me.

High winds and low tides welcomed us into **December** and I started mowing reed on Old Mill Marsh on the 8th. I came across several old nests of harvest mice as I worked. I found a dead female Chinese water deer on Home Dyke. The remains had attracted foxes, with the clear evidence that a meal or two had already been taken. Even as late as December one or two oak trees were still in green leaf especially in the middle of the wood. From the 20th frost and fog set in for a number of days up to Christmas Eve. There was a good sighting of a kingfisher sitting on a post by Home Dyke and a barn owl hunting over Old Mill Marsh on Christmas Day itself. This was repeated two days later. The year ended with the weather cloudy but dry and the fen was flooded

on the 31st.

Well, what a year with such extremes of weather. I think that that was, on the whole, beneficial to the flora and fauna at Wheatfen, but flooding is a major concern for us. The return of the otter I did not expect in my time at Wheatfen. As a result, I shall now never be surprised at what Nature turns up for us in the future. Whatever occurs in 2007, you will be welcome to come and share the delight that is Wheatfen.