

# Warden's Wildlife Report 2007

*David Nobbs, 2008*

If I had to use just one word to reflect the past year at Wheatfen it would be "flooded". Flood conditions prevailed from early January, through the wet summer to the North Sea surge of 9th November, which provided the highest water levels at Wheatfen since 1953, and the many flooded days of December. But one must not forget the hot, sunny and dry days throughout April. All these extremes of weather conditions had their influence on the reserve - on both the wildlife and on my work programme as my report will show.

**January.** The month started cloudy and damp, but with some sunny days and a kingfisher seen on Penguin Dyke. From the 2nd onwards the fen was flooded, but little grebes could be seen on Home Dyke. On the 5th I found a dead water vole on Alder Carr Path. On the 10th, at nine in the morning on the marsh adjacent to Old Mill Marsh, two foxes were chasing each other around the rushes and making loud barking calls. There was a flood on the 12th with water up to the garden and many Chinese water deer were forced up into the wood. A barn owl was seen flying over Alder Carr on the 14th of the month and two days later there was a further sighting of a kingfisher by Wheatfen Broad. Snowdrops were out in the garden of the cottage on the 17th. A strong gale blew up on the night of the 18th and two large trees came down by Wheatfen Broad. By the 24th the first snow had fallen, and many tracks could be seen, including those of an otter by Crake's Path near the river. For the next few days the snow still lay on the fen and on Four Acres a small flock of bearded tits was seen. By the end of the month there was flooding again and on the 30th, in mild weather, a marsh harrier was hunting over Thack Marsh.

**February.** The first day of the month was like a spring day and bees were buzzing round the hazel catkins. The temperature was up at 13 degrees C and the unseasonable weather continued for a further two days. But changes occurred and by the 8th there was a light covering of snow on the fen. On the 9th more otter prints were observed, but this time at the end of Penguin Dyke. This seems to be the site favoured by the otters at Wheatfen. Scarlet elf cup fungus was showing its bright colour on the fallen logs in the wet carr woodland. Sedges started to grow and the wood was alive with grey squirrels everywhere. On the 13th three little grebes were on Home Dyke and two days later I found a dead Chinese water deer by Sluice Dyke Path. Our resident swans feeding by the jetty on Home Dyke made a welcome sight. Flag iris was coming through on Old Mill Marsh and on the following day, at 7.15 am, the barn owl was hunting over that same marsh. By the 22nd mild conditions had set in with temperatures at 12 degrees C. Bees were noisily active again by the hazels and there was spring growth everywhere. The remains of a male Chinese water deer were found by the paving slabs near the cottage. The rest of him had evidently been dragged off by foxes. By the end of the month coltsfoot was in flower as were a few daffodils by the cottage. On the 28th I was delighted to finish mowing Old Mill Marsh - despite the floods.

**March.** The month opened with strong winds on the 2nd and, with a very high tide, the fen was flooded. I noticed bluebells were coming through in the wood and opposite-leaved golden saxifrage was flowering along the wood's damp paths. There was plenty of bird song. By the 6th the temperature had risen to a very mild 14 degrees C. Frogs were mating in the pond - a sight that is becoming more common at Wheatfen as year follows year and peacock, brimstone and tortoiseshell butterflies were in evidence having just awakened from their winter's slumbers. Marsh marigold leaves were also showing. The following day two woodcock were seen in the middle of the wood. By the 14th the weather was still mild and toads were active in the pond. A lone toad swimming on the Fen Channel came right up to my feet and I was able to take a super photograph of it. On the 16th the first chiffchaff had arrived and was singing by the Boardwalk. As the month progressed and the temperature stayed around 14 degrees C lesser celandine and marsh marigolds were coming into flower. Even milk parsley had emerged on the fen. These were all signs of an early spring (so very different from the one of 2006) and were the forerunner to an extraordinary April. On the 20th the fen was flooded again and the headless remains of a grass snake were found on Home Dyke. I suspect a heron to have been the guilty party in this case. There were further signs of the presence of otters when, on the 21st, I found the well-eaten remains of a large bream along Penguin Dyke. Also, I watched a stoat get a good meal from a small jack pike which I had seen dead earlier that morning. Growth was evident all over the reserve at this time with meadow-rue coming through on Old Mill Marsh. At the end of the month, whilst walking over by Four Acres, I discovered the remains of a large pike on a bridge over the dyke - another otter meal.

**April.** Even though the month opened with sunny and mild weather few would have expected it to become the warmest and sunniest on record. By the 4th there were many butterflies on the wing and the first orange tips and holly blues were seen the following day. Greater tussock sedge was in flower and flies and early insects were about. The temperature on the 10th was 13 degrees C and the first willow warbler was heard along Penguin Dyke. There was also a wonderful sight of six marsh harriers displaying over Four Acres on the 12th. The temperature that day was 18 degrees C. The first blackcap was singing by the office; the cuckoo flower (ladies' smock) was in flower; and over-wintering peacock butterflies had come from their hibernation and were in very good numbers along the paths. The following day, the 13th, the temperature rose to 22 degrees C. A bittern was heard booming by the river early on the morning of that day. The temperature remained high the following day and speckled wood butterflies were about. I also saw the largest brood of mallard ducklings I have seen at Wheatfen - fourteen. It had been nearly three weeks since any rain when on the 17th water levels were noticeably low. That was one of the very few times in the year that such low water occurred. With all the warm weather the fen was coming into rapid growth. The first sedge warbler was heard on Blake's Marsh and I had the good fortune to catch a glimpse of a lesser spotted woodpecker on an old alder tree along Smee Loke. Dandelions were in flower along all the paths and willows were well into leaf. Even oaks were starting to come out. Twayblade orchids were flowering along some paths; bluebells were in the wood; and a large red damselfly landed on my hat. By the 19th adder's tongue fern was in leaf on Smee Loke and dog violets were in flower - three weeks earlier than the previous year. The 22nd saw the Spring Walk at Wheatfen with 27 people in attendance. The temperature, at 20 degrees C, was very warm for a spring walk. Green-veined white butterflies and small whites were about as if it were a summer's day. The first whitethroat was heard on Old Mill Marsh, a grasshopper warbler on Four Acres and the first cuckoo on the fen by the river. Oak apple galls were showing and the apple trees in the garden were in bloom. All this on the 25th April with the temperature at a very warm 21 degrees C. The highlight of my year occurred two days later on the 27th of the month when, about three weeks earlier than expected, I observed a swallowtail butterfly. This is the earliest known record of that butterfly on the wing in the UK. As I walked along the edge of the wood, and to my amazement, I noticed a freshly emerged swallowtail feeding on ground ivy. I did not have time to take a photo as it was up and away. It left me speechless, first for seeing it there at all, and second because I missed the photo! The same day I saw the first female hairy dragonfly and also a red admiral butterfly. The month ended warm and sunny. What a month.

**May.** The first day of May was warm and sunny and ragged Robin was out along Smee Loke. A queen hornet flew into the office looking for a place to start up a new home and was shown the door. The first garden warbler for many years was heard by Crake's Dyke and the path to the river. As the fen is a tidal waterway, certain creatures are relatively rare, but a lone newt was seen in the pond by Alder Carr. This was only the second record of such a sighting. All trees except ash were in leaf and the hawthorn was in full flower and was looking splendid. There were more large red damselflies along Smee Loke than I had seen for many years. By the 3rd one or two flag irises were coming into flower. On the 6th we held the Dawn Chorus Walk and a Cetti's warbler was singing at 3 am in complete darkness. There was another "highlight of the year" on the 8th. At around 8 am I was walking in that part of the wood where the white admiral butterflies are to be seen and I heard a nightingale singing. It stayed for three days and I was able to get a good sound recording of its glorious song. Glimpses of it could be had as it hopped about in the low bushes. This was, I believe, the first nightingale to arrive at Wheatfen in over thirty years. On the day following that I had yet another special sighting. Early in the morning I found a fox cub sleeping on the path to Penguin Dyke. Later that same day, as I walked along the path to Wheatfen Broad, I saw the first banded demoiselle of the year. By the 15th many butterflies were active along the paths in sunny weather with the temperature at 15 degrees C. A nest with young of the great spotted woodpecker was found in an alder tree along the path by Smee Loke and a moorhen's nest with eggs by the bridge. Despite the early emergence of the lone swallowtail butterfly on 27th April it was a poor year for this butterfly as the heavy rains in June were to reduce successful egg laying. However, on 16th May one swallowtail was seen flying over the reed on Four Acres. Flag iris was well in flower now with about 60 % of it in flower some two and a half weeks earlier than last year. By the 18th the temperature was at 20 degrees C. Azure damselflies were about on Home Dyke, our rare leaf beetle larvae were on meadow-rue and further swallowtails were seen on the 19th. While walking along the dyke edge on Smee Loke I saw a most unusual sight. A mating pair of hairy dragonflies fell into the water and they used their wings as oars to "row" to a reed stem. They clasped this, climbed up and dried themselves out. Later that day I had only my second sighting of a newly emerged scarce chaser dragonfly by the small pond next to the Boardwalk. This was the forerunner to about twenty such recordings at Wheatfen.

There was a big expansion in the number of sightings of this species across the country during 2007. On the 24th the temperature was 21 degrees C. Four-spotted chaser dragonflies and common blue and azure damselflies were all in good numbers and red-eyed damselflies were on water lilies at the end of Fen Channel by Penguin Dyke. On the 25th some egg laying by swallowtails had taken place prior to terrible bank holiday weather (two and a half inches of rain fell over the weekend with temperatures at a very low 9 degrees C). A young mole, alive, was found on the Eleven Bridges Path and I had a good sighting of a scarce chaser dragonfly by the pond at the Thatch. The weather recovered by the end of the month.

**June.** The 1st of June was a sunny 19 degrees C and a swan family with six cygnets was along Home Dyke. This group afforded me one of the best photographs of the year. Meadow-rue and guelder rose were in full flower at this time and, by the 2nd, black-tailed skimmer dragonflies and a few swallowtails were on the wing - the highest number of swallowtails seen in one day was six on the 6th. Common spotted orchids and flag iris were in flower and a lone painted lady butterfly was seen by the cottage. Also, just noticeable, was a herald moth caterpillar camouflaged on a willow leaf by the Boardwalk. On the flower heads along the paths were soldier beetles in profusion. On the 8th heavy rain did not bode well prior to the Swallowtail Day. And so it turned out - overcast and dull. Most of the visitors journeyed from the East Midlands and were rewarded with a lone specimen resting on a reed stem. On the swallowtail site on Four Acres other insects were seen including the fen longhorn beetle. The first white admiral butterfly was seen flying over the car park on the 15th. Water levels in the dykes were high at this time because of the heavy rain that had been falling over the previous few days. Brimstone butterflies were in good numbers on the 19th and their caterpillars were found on buckthorn. More white admiral butterflies were seen in the wood. There was overnight rain and paths were flooded. The cuckoo was still singing by the river on the 22nd and there were plenty of hornets active. Purple loosestrife was in flower and I was able to take my best photograph of a grass snake sunning itself on a stack of last year's cut reed. Again, on the 26th and 27th the fen and the car park were flooded due to the previous days' heavy rain. On the 28th meadowsweet was in flower and comma butterflies were active. The month ended with high tides, but that true gem of Broadland, the marsh pea, was in flower and silver Y moths were present having migrated from across the Channel.

**July.** The month opened with a good sighting of a hobby over the wood by Wheatfen Broad on the 3rd. Two white admiral butterflies were seen in the wood and the mallard ducklings, now bigger, were still skittering about on Mack's Dyke. Later that day, at 4 pm, there was a hail storm. By the 4th brown hawker dragonflies were hawking over Home Dyke and flying round the car park. The car park is and always has been a good place to see wildlife. I took a walk on the fen on the 5th to search for swallowtail caterpillars, but, as I feared, the heavy rains in June had washed away all but a few. This will have a carryover effect onto the numbers of adults to be seen in 2008. Ringlet butterflies were about on the 6th, but several were without the normal pattern of small spots. On the 7th I prepared to take the small Ted boat out on to the broads. As I turned the boat over I could see a small number of peacock butterfly chrysalises hanging inside the boat. They were transferred to a suitable spot to emerge in comfort. I was delighted to see that the plant arrowhead was growing in Deepwater Broad and that there was also very little algae this year with submerged bur-reed growing all over the broads. It is difficult to take a boat with an outboard motor on to the waterways because of all the weed there, but it does indicate what excellent water quality we have now. The shoals of fish now present show that also. The following day I was somewhat surprised to see a hare sitting on the car park gravel. By the 10th the first peacock butterflies had emerged and angelica was in flower. On the 13th ruddy darter dragonflies were perched along the handrail on the Boardwalk and dark bush-crickets in large numbers were sunning themselves on brambles. The temperature on that day was 22 degrees C. By the 17th grass snakes were along the paths and meadowsweet was flowering in profusion on Old Mill Marsh. There was further evidence on the sparsity of swallowtails this year when a week later I noticed milk parsley heads in very good flower. Normally these would have been eaten back by the caterpillars. On the 25th brown hawker dragonflies were egg laying in Sme Loke Dyke and I found, on thistles, the first of our rare beetles. Walking along the paths late in the month I noticed plenty of the small and attractive self-heal plant. There was also skullcap. The 30th was warm and sunny at 20 degrees C and there were plenty of butterflies around the reserve.

**August.** With the temperature at 22 degrees C the first migrant hawker dragonflies could be seen hawking over Home Fen. On our Natural History Day, the 5th, the temperature had risen to 27 degrees C and white admiral butterflies were about in the wood. There were plenty of insects and the fen was in full bloom. On the 8th a swan, as it preened by the small pond, was pulling out feathers in abundance. A stoat was also seen later in the day by the Boardwalk. There were signs

of otter activity with many footprints found at the end of Penguin Dyke. With warm and humid weather, we had perfect summer conditions for our Bat Evening on the 11th when pipistrelle and Daubenton's bats were both detected and seen. By the 14th heavy rain set in for two days and following on from this butterfly numbers were very low. Peacock butterfly numbers did not fulfil earlier hopes and expectations. On the 21st the swan, mentioned above, was swimming round in circles in the small pond. It was the most odd and unusual behaviour to watch. It later transpired that, for several days, a cob and pen had been occupying the dyke next to the pond and I think this swan must have felt enclosed and trapped. What I had been watching was behaviour brought on by some form of stress. Later that day I found a half eaten bream at the end of Penguin Dyke - yet another good meal for an otter. On the 24th two wasp nests were found on paths to Crake's Marsh. I stepped on one. This necessitated a very speedy withdrawal and signs were put up to warn visitors. By the 28th the attractive orange balsam was in flower. The first osprey of the year was seen circling over Middle Marsh Dyke at lunchtime on the 29th. It stayed for some time in the area between us and Strumpshaw Fen across the River Yare. Many hoverflies could be seen on ivy plants around the reserve. The month ended sunny at 20 degrees C and there was another high tide.

**September.** On the opening day of the month a hobby was seen catching dragonflies over the car park. On the 4th the osprey was occupying the same tree as it had in previous years at the back of Deepwater Broad. On the 5th, by Wheatfen Broad, I found the dreaded harlequin ladybird on angelica. Most were the black with two red spots variety. By the 8th the fen was flooded again. Mole hills appeared in abundance this year on the cottage lawn. Common and ruddy darter dragonflies were in good numbers by the Boardwalk. On the 12th the "feel of autumn" seemed to take hold of Wheatfen which is not surprising given the early start to the very long growing season we had had. There were bees everywhere and wasps and hornets seeking the ivy blossom. By the 19th fungi were beginning to emerge in the wood and red admiral and speckled wood butterflies were in good numbers on the reserve. I was surprised to hear a chiffchaff still about on the 25th. There was heavy rain during the days leading up to the end of the month and the fen was flooded for two days.

**October.** A cloudy and windy start greeted the opening day of the month. The vegetation and most flowers had died off and winter work on the reserve started on the 4th. Our Fungus Workshop held in the woods resulted in 60 species identified including the rare brain fungus which was found growing under a beech tree. By the 11th the fallen apples in the garden were being visited by red admiral butterflies and many wasps. Also, hoverflies in good numbers were still about. On the 13th the Wheatfen volunteers, while working on clearing Home Dyke, were surprised to see a grey squirrel swim across it. That day was sunny and warm at 18 degrees C, but on the 18th the first frost was recorded. Later that day I came across a young male swan walking on the Boardwalk to evade an angry looking large male swan which, interestingly, was sporting a numbered green leg ring. The fen was also flooded that day. The brilliant autumn colours of the trees this year were splendid and, on the 19th, the bright pink berries and leaves of the spindle tree drew one's attention. The male Cetti's warbler had started singing again by the 23rd. Later in the month the rare yellow-necked mouse was found in the cottage. Common darter dragonflies were still active along the Boardwalk on Home Dyke.

**November.** The weather was sunny and mild for the first few days of the month. By the 7th the wasp nest on Crake's Marsh was still showing signs of activity. A nice group of fly agaric fungi had emerged on the path along Alder Carr. November the 9th will be in my memory for quite some time. The previous evening the radio had issued a warning of a North Sea surge and of serious flooding because of gale force winds. Next morning, I arrived with my torch at 6.15 am to find water up to the garage and the cottage garden flooded. With my waders on I went to check the mower which is stored on higher ground by the Thatch. I found the water lapping its wheels. I continued to monitor the water level during the morning and by noon it had reached its peak. The wood was flooded up to areas I had never seen wet before and a number of Chinese water deer were there taking refuge on higher and drier ground. I am pleased to report that Wheatfen Cottage was safe but the previous day's gales had brought down several large trees on Sluice Dyke. In addition, one bridge over Smee Loke had floated off. A day to remember indeed. By the 14th the reserve was open again. After the clearing up I found a dead heron beside Home Dyke. The first woodcock was seen in the wood and on 16th teal were on Wheatfen Broad. The annual Winter Walk visitors were rewarded with the sight of a water vole swimming along the edge of Penguin Dyke. A snipe got up off the path on Thack Marsh on the 20th and on the following day there was still remaining one lone common darter dragonfly on the handrail by Home Dyke. The fen was flooded again for two days from the 23rd but little grebes were active on Home Dyke. For

about a week at the same time each day in late afternoon and from the car park I was able to watch several hundreds of rooks flying home to their roost across the river. As the month drew to a close many Chinese water deer were seen along the path system at Wheatfen during their rutting season.

**December.** The weather was mild at the start of the month, but the fen was flooded again and the reserve had to be closed on the 3rd and 4th. A Chinese water deer was seen swimming across Home Dyke near the jetty and later in the day woodcock and snipe were seen. The 5th and 6th brought more heavy rain, and flooding from the 8th to the 11th closed the reserve again. A very heavy frost on the 12th transformed the fen into a scene from an old fashioned Christmas card and provided an occasion to get the camera out. A small flock of bearded tits was heard on Thack Marsh. The barn owl returned and was seen over Old Mill Marsh early in the morning of the 18th, and on that day I had the chance at last to start mowing Old Mill Marsh. This despite the cold easterly wind that had set in and remained until Christmas. Two snipe were seen on the 29th and at the end of the year there was mild weather and low tides at last.

As you can see there is never a dull moment at Wheatfen and there are always plenty of incidents to report. I hope my report has also done justice to the variety of flora and fauna to be seen, studied and enjoyed on the reserve. Also, I hope you will take advantage of visiting here either as part of an organised event or on an individual basis. I look forward to welcoming you to Wheatfen in 2008.