

Wheatfen Magic

Rodger Goodrick 2008

You will probably know me from past newsletters as I spend some time at Wheatfen as a volunteer. I have got to know some of the best times and places to see the magic of the reserve and this is one of them. I hope I can do it justice when putting it into words.

First I had better set the scene, as I know some of you do not get to visit the reserve very often. Old Mill Marsh has a mixture of wetland plants including Reed, Meadowsweet, Hemp-agrimony, Yellow Flag Iris and many more, to name but a few, and is a delight to see during the summer months. Each winter normally late December/ early January the growth has to be cut. The timing of this depends upon the tides as this marsh floods regularly when we get high tides. When cut it is stacked and burnt as there is so much growth through the summer that this is the only way to get rid of it. The Thatch is at the southwest corner of Old Mill Marsh and easily accessed by wheel chair via the boardwalk. The grazing meadow is next to the reserve separated by a dyke. This very often has sheep grazing on it and is to the west and runs the full length of Old Mill Marsh with a hedge at the end.

I remember going down to Old Mill Marsh one January afternoon as the sun was just setting and the mist was just beginning to rise over the marsh. There was no wind and everything was silent. I was sitting on the seat near the Thatch hoping to see Chinese Water Deer when out of the mist from the far end of the marsh a ghostly shape emerged. As it came closer I could see it was a Barn Owl slowly quartering the marsh hunting for its supper. It stopped, hovered and then moved on, all in complete silence. It repeated this several times getting closer and closer, by this time I had no need for binoculars. All of a sudden it dropped to the ground and I lost sight of it behind one of the stacks that had not yet been burned. When it came up after a few seconds (it seemed like ages) I could see it had got something in its talons. I couldn't make out what it was as it flew over the dyke to a post on the grazing marsh, and promptly swallowed it whole. I think it was most likely to have been a Shrew. I stood up very slowly and watched as it sat perched on the post with its head always on the move looking for its next meal in the long tufts of grass. I think it must have seen or heard something move as it took flight on those silent wings. It swooped low but caught nothing and silently went on its way across the meadow, relentlessly searching for its next meal and disappearing into the next field as quietly as it came.