

# **Wheatfen's Spiders**

***David Nobbs, 2003***

Two years ago, to celebrate the new Millennium, Dr Roy Baker published 'The Fauna of Wheatfen'. Looking through its pages we decided that there was a gap in our knowledge and recording in recent times concerning spiders.

In the 1930s Dr Randell Jackson had collected specimens (these were rediscovered in April 2002 in a dust-covered box in the outhouse at Wheatfen). Capt. Maurice Cockle, the previous owner of Wheatfen also collected spiders and took them to Ted Ellis at the Castle Museum, Norwich. Later, in the 1970s, Dr. Eric Duffey led a meeting at Wheatfen of the British Arachnological Society and discovered two rare spiders which are now classed as Red Data Book 2 species. More recently, one of our volunteers, David Lester, also added to our data and brought the total number of species recorded to 118.

We thought it time to bring our list up to date and consequently invited the British Arachnological Society to Wheatfen in 2002. With the country's leading spider experts on the reserve, we saw this as a great opportunity to improve both our knowledge and our records. Roy Baker and I met David Nellist from St Albans to consider how best we could survey the Fen. It was proposed that there should be visits from the Society in late May and again early in September: this would give us a chance to see adult and young spiders at their peak and provide another opportunity to identify species not found on the earlier occasion.

It was also agreed that during the May to September period I would 'pitfall trap' spiders on selected sites: Smeeloke, Four Acres and Crake's Marsh. A pitfall trap consists of a plastic coffee cup containing a solution of water and antifreeze. The mixture would preserve the spiders as I was only collecting once a week. The spiders were sorted from other insects, put into tubes with alcohol and sent by post to David Nellist. I remember sending one lot and telling the postmistress, to her great surprise and even greater consternation, what the parcel contained - dead spiders preserved in alcohol! One problem I did not foresee concerned the tidal nature of Wheatfen. On some sites the cups tended to float away on the high tides and had to be secured with roof slates. Heavy rain did not help much either!

The Society visited on the weekend of the 25th of May and collected species from all parts of the reserve including litter heaps (an excellent habitat) and sorted them onto tables in the Thatch - with the return visit on the 8th of September. Spiders are a difficult group to identify, and a good microscope is needed.

As a result of the work of the Society, a grand total of 167 species are now recorded from Wheatfen. I should like to thank David Nellist and his colleagues for their excellent work and for helping me to understand spiders and their conservation needs at Wheatfen.