



Autumn 2011

A walk around Maxey Pits this evening reminded me that autumn really is here – not because the weather is any colder, in fact it is surprisingly warm still, but simply because of the birds we could see.

The terns, swallows, martins and warblers of summer have all gone now. Instead there are redwings in the hedgerows, green sandpipers and snipe probing for food in the mud of the quarry workings and redpoll feeding in the birch trees.

And, although not particularly, a sign of autumn or winter, there was a very noisy and active kingfisher flying up and down the Cut and over the ponds in the old pits. A grey wagtail flew over the bridge on the Helpston Road and a flock of 12 little grebe were diving for food on the main wildlife lake by the Green Bridge.

All this activity reminded me that the autumn newsletter was sadly overdue! The autumn newsletter is usually a review of the summer, as we don't produce a summer newsletter, so here goes.

I mentioned in the last newsletter that despite the sunny weather in April and May there didn't seem to be many butterflies on the wing and personally I think it has been a poor summer for butterflies generally. Certainly we saw nothing like the influx of Painted Ladies that was such a feature of 2010 and sightings of the beautiful White Admiral in the local woods were few and far between. Numbers of common butterflies

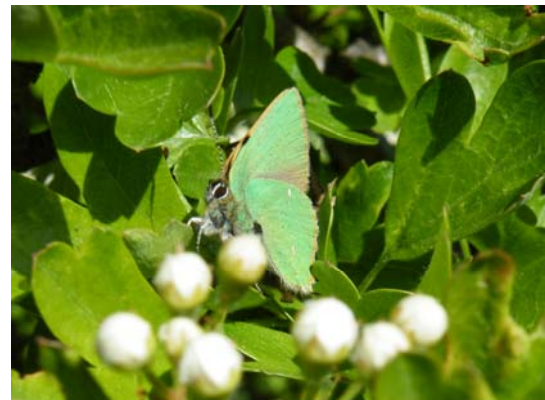
such as small tortoiseshell, red admiral and gatekeeper seemed generally low and orange tip were very scarce.

On a brighter note there were several sightings of silver washed fritillary at Castor Hanglands. This beautiful and relatively large butterfly had disappeared from local woodlands part of a much wider national decline, but it appears to be generally recovering and has made its way back to our area in the last year or two.



Silver wash fritillary - picture by Trevor Valentine

Marbled white and chalkhill blue butterflies were in evidence at Barnack Hills and Holes as usual and the fine weather in April brought out large numbers of the striking green hairstreak.



Green hairstreak - picture by Trevor Valentine

There were several reports of the migrant hummingbird hawk moth in the Peterborough area this summer, with reports from West Deeping and Helpston. This striking day flying moth looks just as you would think – a small hummingbird!

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It wasn't a great year for bee orchids at Swaddywell – in fact there were distinctly fewer spikes of this pink and black flower than in previous years and it seems to have been on something of a decline over the last 2-3 years – not particularly unusual as this is famously an erratic flower, appearing in great profusion one year and often disappearing the next.

Pyramidal orchids were however present in good numbers and seem to be spreading across the top meadow, reaching out from their original colonies on the eastern side of the reserve. And the south-western corner of the pit was alive with the mauve of wild marjoram in mid-summer, and buzzing too with countless bees and other insects feeding on this popular food source. Wild carrot too had a very good year spreading across the reserve in profusion.



Wild carrot at Swaddywell, Jean Stowe

Back with orchids: last year we discovered a small group 3-4 spikes of pyramidal orchids at Etton-Maxey Pits. This year there was an impressive 60-70 spikes.

On another positive note it was a great year for nightingales at Castor Hanglands. There were at least 18 singing birds around the reserve, the highest number since the

1960s, I think. And there were also good numbers at Bainton Pits and Heath.

I mentioned in previous newsletters that many local birds would have been hit hard by the snow and ice of last winter. One noticeable casualty was the barn owl that hunted regularly around the Etton Maxey Pits reserve last summer, flying over from Northborough, where presumably it had a nest. There was no sign of barn owl on the reserve at all this summer, although one was seen in late October and the pair in Hilly Wood Barn Helpston was still around and gave wonderful views at dawn and dusk as they hunted over the fields behind Rice Wood.

Little owls too were easy to find around the villages. There is a pair in resident at Torpel Manor field and if you walk around the site at any time of year you stand a very good chance of seeing them.

Perhaps the greatest success of the summer though on our reserves was the pair of common terns that took up residence on the new tern raft at Etton Maxey and fledged three young. We hadn't expected the raft to get used so quickly after its launch!



Picture by Trevor Valentine

Langdyke News

Visitors to Torpel Manor Field will have noticed the erection of new interpretation boards at both entrances to the site and

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hopefully will have picked up the new leaflet on the site. If you haven't got a copy, you can also down-load one from our web-site.

The bird hides and a pond dipping platform have been put in at Etton Maxey, although the hides remain locked. We will be putting combination locks on them at our next work party on 27 November and they will be open for use then.

We hope to submit our application to the Heritage Lottery Fund very shortly for the costs of a small visitor centre and exhibition at Torpel Manor and we hope if this is successful to establish a small project group to take this work forward. If you are interested in being part of this group, or of either of our two reserve management groups, please do contact me (details below). You don't need any experience of conservation work to be involved, just a healthy interest in the natural world and our local heritage!

We are working with our partners at the John Clare Cottage, John Clare Society, Wildlife Trust and Natural England to produce a single programme of events for 2012, combining our own offering of walks, talks and work-parties with events at the Cottage and walks organised by others, so you have more to pick and choose from.

Sheep and Lambs

It wasn't a great year for lambs this year, as the ram in charge of our main breeding flock proved to be infertile! In the end we only had eight lambs – two Jacob rams and six Hebrideans.

The sheep will be grazing at Swaddywell and Torpel over the winter, with small flocks as usual at the Pits at Castor Hanglands and of course at the Green Man, Marholm.

Weather Report by Peter Holt

The settled weather pattern associated with high pressure established in March continued throughout April with the weather being exceptionally dry and sunny.

Average temperatures in April were more than 4°C warmer than usual and were comparable with those of a normal May. Throughout this period there was very little rain with only one day of measurable rainfall being recorded in April. Actual rainfall figures (in millimetres) for the whole period are shown below:-

	Actual (mm)	Long-term average (mm)
March	4.5	43.5
April	3.5	45.7
May	19.5	51.4
June	48.5	51.2
July	75.5	52.5
August	55.5	58.0
Sept	42.0	51.5
Oct	27.0	59.7

Apart from July which as can be seen above was a wet month, total rainfall for 2011 to-date has been generally well below average running at about 60% of normal.

Following the warm weather in April, temperatures for the subsequent months were not far from average. There were no frosts in April but on the night of May 4th following a warm sunny day the air temperature fell to around freezing but local frost hollows experienced significant damage to tender plants and some of us lost most of their apple and plum crops. The hottest day of the summer was on June 27th when the temperature reached 32.5°C.

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Such heat was as exceptional as the months of July and August were generally disappointing with a lot of cloud and rain and the second half of August as in the previous year was especially dull and damp. This weather continued into the first part of September but it became dryer and warmer by the end of the month when a warm flow of air originating in North Africa gave an exceptional spell of sunny and very warm conditions with temperatures reaching 26°C on the first three days of October.

The high average temperature for April and the very warm days at the beginning of October both broke previous records for this area since 1964 when I started logging daily temperatures. In addition, spring was the driest recorded since rainfall started being logged in 1975.

Forthcoming events

Sunday November 27th from 12.00 noon Work party Etton Maxey Pits.

Autumn clearance tasks. Please bring weatherproof clothing and stout footwear. Tools will be provided. Meet at the car park from 12:00 noon onwards till 4.00 pm (you choose your start time and duration to suit).

Sunday January 1st 1pm – New Year Walk –
around Swaddywell area – also to celebrate 100 anniversary of death of Charles Rothschild. Meet at Swaddywell main car park (via Stamford Stone entrance) at 1pm.

Contacts

Newsletter and walks

Richard Astle 01733 252376
richard@athene-communications.co.uk

Membership

David Cowcill 01733 252655
Email dcowcill@aol.com



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