



## Spring 2015

After a warm and sunny April, May seems to be a much more normal English spring, pretty unsettled with bits of sunshine, lots of rain and strong winds!

But whatever the weather our natural world is as exciting as ever at this time of year with our migrant birds pouring back into the countryside and vibrant displays of colour across the woodland floors and in the hedgerows.

It is of course the time to be out and about!

So if you are planning a country walk, what should you be looking out for and where?

**Castor Hanglands** is full of noise at the moment and is the place locally to go in search of nightingale. There are plenty of them there too – Stella Baylis who conducts the annual Natural England survey there reported 12 singing males on 20 April and 25 on the 28 April. The main heath remains the best place to find them and you can check out the song at various on-line sites in advance so you know what to listen out for – try the recording on our website at <http://langdyke.org.uk/sounds-of-helpston/>

An evening at the Hanglands will also offer the chance to hear Tawny owl calling from the woodland and a variety of other summer birds including turtle dove, garden warbler and blackcap. Look out too for the common spotted orchids over the next few weeks, particularly in the meadow that stretches west from the ponds. And

interestingly this year there seems to be profusion of oak apple galls across the woodland. This is an unusual growth caused by a parasitic insect; the gall wasp



Oak apple gall at the Hanglands, May 2015

**Swaddywell** will be another place to visit over the next 4-8 weeks as the bee and pyramidal orchids come into flower. Look for them on the eastern side of the reserve particularly across the fence from the public footpath. Other plants to look out for are meadow saxifrage, grass vetchling and yellow rattle.



Meadow saxifrage at Swaddywell

You almost can't miss red kites at Swaddywell now, but look out for yet another returning bird – the raven. There

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was one over the reserve on 9 May, a large crow with a powerful beak and diamond shaped tail – its shape is very different from that of the commoner rook and carrion crow. This is a species that was common around the area in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but disappeared due to persecution and has recently re-established itself in the area. You usually hear the raven before you see it – a deep sonorous ‘cronk-cronk’ alerts you to its passage overhead.

Earlier in the spring there were 2 stonechat on the reserve, a ring ouzel turned up in mid-April and there was a female wheatear on 19 April.

As we move into late May and early June, Swaddywell also becomes a good place for butterflies – last year marbled white, dingy and grizzled skipper all put in appearances, as well as the more frequent small tortoiseshell, red admiral and peacock. The ponds in the pits will also be alive with dragonflies – in particular the large emperor dragonfly, which can fly at speeds up to 30 mph, and black tailed skimmers.



Small Skipper

Finally once we get in to high summer, you might just come across the sound of Roesel’s bush cricket – rather like the buzz of an electricity pylon but coming from the grass beneath your feet, not overhead. This insect used to be restricted to a few coastal

sites in the south and east of England but has expanded its range considerably and is now resident at Swaddywell!



Roesel's Bush Cricket

### Maxey Cut

The Maxey Cut is not only a great place to walk, it is also a wonderful place to see all kinds of highlights of our natural world.

Perhaps most conspicuous are the little egrets that can be seen feeding in the Cut itself at any time of day. These pure white birds with black legs and yellow feet are so common these days that it is easy to forget that they only arrived here on a permanent basis in the last 15 years, before that they were rare visitors from Europe!

Also easy to see and hear are the common terns that feed along the Cut, hovering over the water and diving after small fish which they carry away in their beaks back to their hungry young on the tern rafts at Etton Maxey.



Common tern

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There are two singing Cetti's warbler along the Cut too – a very distinctive burst of loud, staccato song from this dark brown warbler – another bird that has only been with us for about 10 years - like the little egret it has expanded its range across the country in recent years.

The Cut is also an interesting place to see chironomids – tiny non-biting midges, which form dense spirals of many thousands of males curling up over the water like an arch of smoke in the late evenings. They may not bite, but they can be unpleasant to walk through!

Bats too use the Cut as a source of food. Look out for both pipistrelle and noctule bats. The noctule is a large bat that typically hunts high up above the water, swooping after larger insects in the air.

And there's always a good chance of a barn owl hunting over the neighbouring fields and sometimes along the banks of the Cut itself.

As for otters, who knows – will they be back to delight us again this year??

### **Etton Maxey Pits**

At the moment there are three things not to miss at Etton Maxey – brown hares, which are currently running around across the meadows in the north of the reserve; kestrels – there is a pair nesting in the pole box on north meadow; and the noisy common terns – we have 9 pairs nesting on the tern rafts at the moment!



The reserve is also a great place for flowers and insects too. There is an expanding colony of pyramidal orchids in the north-western corner of the reserve. Emperor dragonflies fly along the ditches here too.

For the first time this year, there is a grasshopper warbler singing on the reserve – near the north hide – there was also one opposite the entrance to Etton High Meadow too. There was a ring ouzel on the reserve on 25 April and a single avocet on the 26th. Cuckoos too are often on the site, calling loudly from the alder trees before dashing across the fields, distracting the reed warblers and meadow pipits while the female sneaks in to lay eggs in their nests.

And of course do visit the reserve to take advantage of the relocated hide that now offers really good views out across the pits and particularly of the tern rafts.

### **Torpe Manor Field**

When we think about Torpe we tend to focus on its heritage, not its wildlife – but there is plenty to see here too.

This year badgers have taken up residence on the reserve and a dusk visit might just offer a chance to see this wonderful mammal. And at the same time you might catch a glimpse of our resident little owls, that flit along the hedgerows and occasionally perch on top of the hawthorns, surveying the world (there was one there for the Langdyke committee meeting on 11 May).

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One of our objectives at Torpel is to increase the number and variety of wild flowers on the site. This is something of a struggle against nettles and the more dominant species of grass, but we are starting to see more bulbous buttercup and ground ivy in the field and hope to keep this trend going over the coming years.

### **Torpel Project**

With the completion of the HLF project to establish the cabin, the members of the project team who have given their time and support to the archaeology and historical research have now become a recognised committee within the Langdyke structure.

The History and Archaeology Group (the HAG) have continued their activities over the winter with a weekend of fieldwalking in February, lovingly referred to as the 'Mud & Molehills' event where the land to the South and West of Torpel was surveyed. As predicted, there were few finds made as this was the former deer park, though some Roman pottery has been recovered. One group including members of the Fenland Young Archaeologists Club, with their leader Anne Horspole, examined the molehills on Torpel Manor Field. Pottery sherds from Roman and Medieval times were found in some of the 199 molehills covered! This has given us new records for part of the site.

Paul Blinkhorn (ex-Time Team) visited us in April for a workshop on pottery identification, which greatly increased our confidence and perhaps our expertise! The group are currently evaluating the results of a trial Test Pit exploration of the origins of Helpston, held over the May Day weekend. Pits were dug at the school by pupils from Years 4 & 5 as well as several across the village by families of pupils. Pottery from Roman, Saxon, Medieval and Tudor times was found showing occupation over 2,000 years.

The Helpston Test Pit Project will run for several years and anyone interested in the results and particularly in being involved should contact Frieda Gosling on 01780 740343. All training, help and materials will be supplied free of charge!

The group welcomes all enquiries and will be busy in July when York University returns to continue their resistivity survey of Torpel Manor Field.

### **Langdyke on Facebook**

Not only do we now have our own new Langdyke website [www.langdyke.org.uk](http://www.langdyke.org.uk) , we are also on Facebook – you can use these pages to post about what you have found out there in the countryside and to post photos of the natural world – you can find it at

<https://www.facebook.com/langdykeCT>

### **Langdyke Events**

**20 May – Spring at Bainton Heath**, evening walk around the pits and heath listening to nightingales, 7.30pm meet at Torpel Manor Field

**27 May - The Geology of Swaddywell**, a guided walk. Meet at 7pm in the main car park. Wear strong shoes. Charge £3.00. This event is part of the Peterborough Wildlife Festival.

**3 June – Nene Washes summer walk**, meet at Helpston Post Office at 7,30pm

**4-5 July and 11-12 July** – our artists in residence, View 5, will exhibit in the Swaddywell cabin as part of Peterborough Artists Open Studios

**4 July** – in conjunction with exhibition at Swaddywell, there will be a **guided wild flower walk** around the reserve, starting from the cabin at 2pm.

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**25 July – Summer Family Day** at our Etton Maxey reserve, pond-dipping and other activities, 1pm onwards – park at the main entrance on Etton Road.

### **Contacts**

#### *Newsletter and walks*

Richard Astle            01733        252376  
[richard@athene-communications.co.uk](mailto:richard@athene-communications.co.uk)

#### *Membership*

David Cowcill            01733 252655  
Email                      [dcowcill@aol.com](mailto:dcowcill@aol.com)

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