



## Winter 2015-16

It is always a risk to mention the current weather as I start to write the Langdyke newsletter as things may have changed dramatically by the time you read it!

But to date it has been mild beyond anyone's recent experience with record temperatures in December, coupled with very heavy rainfall which has turned the paths in all the local woods into perilous streams of mud.

And this unusual weather has certainly had an impact on our local nature. As I write on 14 January there are daffodils out in Castor and Ailsworth, blackthorn in bud on the local hedgerow and regular sightings of bumble bees and butterflies. Song thrushes were in song in late December (rather than late January as is more normal), there is a dunnock singing in my garden as I write and birds are busily prospecting nest boxes. There were primroses in flower in early January in Oxey Wood.



The traditional Langdyke New Year's Day walk attracted 31 members but even more impressively identified 24 plants in various stages of flowering, including red and white dead nettle, yarrow, daisy, sweet violet and lesser celandine.

David Cowcill reported a red admiral on the wing at Ailsworth heath on 29 December. This beautiful butterfly is a migrant to our country with adults flying over from the warmer climates of north Africa and southern Europe in the spring and summer and traditionally dying out in our colder winters, but there is considerable evidence of an increasing trend of winter survival in southern England – although even so being on the wing in December remains unusual!



The warm weather seems to have roused the local badgers from their winter slumbers as well - there is plenty of activity around their local setts. We now have a thriving badger population at Torpel Manor Field which is a mixed blessing in some ways – it's great to have them there, but we don't want them to do too much digging around the medieval remains!

As well as sights and sounds that more properly belong to late February and early March, there are also some notable absences from the winter nature-scape, again a result of mild weather that means that many migratory birds remain in their central European homes, happy to tolerate the mild weather there rather than seeking shelter here. There don't seem to be as many redwing in the fields and hedgerows

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(although there are plenty of fieldfare) and numbers of winter ducks at Bainton and Maxey Pits are low with only a handful of reports of goosander - in a more usual year, they can be seen on every visit to the Maxey Cut and Pits.



Photo from [www.northeastwildlife.co.uk](http://www.northeastwildlife.co.uk)

One group of unusual winter visitors on the other hand is the whooper swans that have taken up residence in the fields west of the Helpston – Maxey Road, near the level crossing. These are not our resident mute swans with their prominent red beaks, but migrants with a distinctive yellow wedge on their beaks. Every year, around 11,000 Whooper Swans migrate here from Iceland to spend the winter. They have been recorded migrating at altitudes up to 8,200m where the ambient temperature is -40C. They are often seen feeding on arable fields out in the fens, but this is the first time I have seen them resident in our area, although we get the occasional ones flying over.

One of the most impressive sights of the last couple of months has been the growing kite roost at Belsize Wood, near Marholm. In November up to 30 kites were seen going into the Hanglands at dusk, but for some reason they switched their evening home across to Belsize Wood in December with numbers rising there from 53 in the middle of the month to an amazing 110 on 29 December. The birds circle the wood as the light fades, gradually settling in the trees and then occasionally bursting out again en masse in one final communal flight!

If you do go to see the roost – and it is well worth it – please do keep to the Marholm-Castor road and don't block the road into Belsize farm.

Other notable recent sightings include a marsh harrier along the Maxey Cut on 28 December with green wing-tags, indicating it is one of the birds that are part of a monitoring project by the Hawk and Owl Trust. They are tagging birds born in North Norfolk and tracking their movements – so if you do see one with very obvious tags on both wings, let me know!

Several members have reported barn owls recently - along Maxey Road, Heath Road and near Swaddywell. This is good news as barn owls have been struggling lately, they hunt by sound as well as sight and the prolonged wet weather will have had an impact on their ability to feed. Barn owl populations do fluctuate a lot – in early 2015 they seemed to be everywhere, I even had one hunting alongside me several times between Marholm and Woodcroft as I trained for the London marathon. But this spike in population put pressure on the main food-source – voles – and there was then a corresponding dearth of sightings as numbers fell again as food became scarcer.

Kingfishers have also been regularly seen along the Maxey Cut and ravens continue to be regularly heard and seen across our area.

### **Work on the reserves**

Most of our conservation work on our reserves takes place in the winter months as we try to get the land into the right condition for the summer ahead, without disturbing the wintering birds.

We continue to take out trees around the large ponds at Bainton heath, allowing a lot more light into the ponds, which should encourage plant growth and insect life. These ponds can be viewed from the footpath that runs north-south along the

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western edge of Bainton heath, linking Bainton village with the cut – and they are well worth a visit, particularly in summer, when they boast many species of dragonfly.

Work at Etton-Maxey Pits continues to focus on reducing the amount of willow and creating damp meadows in the centre of the reserve to encourage breeding lapwing in particular and to encourage a more diverse range of flowers and insects. We have made good progress over the last two years in clearing the willow from two of the four central meadows and then grazing them with sheep to prevent re-growth. Two pairs of lapwing were present in the spring, but didn't nest successfully.

We will also be cleaning the two tern rafts over the winter, pulling out all the weeds that have covered the gravel floors before the terns arrive from Africa in late April.

Willow is also a prime target at Swaddywell too, where the weekly Thursday work-party is making great progress – keeping the willow out of the small reed-beds and cutting back bramble which would otherwise choke many of the flowers, such as wild marjoram, which attract so many of the site's butterflies and other insects.

### **Community orchard and allotments**

We have always planned to take forward the idea of a community orchard at Etton High Meadow and with the help of Peterborough Environment City Trust we have planted 70 trees there over the last two years – a mix of pear, apple and cherry, with the odd greengage too.

And we now have a group of keen members looking after the new and the old orchard, with ideas about how to encourage more local people to get involved, ranging from cider making to wassailing! Watch out for more details, but if you would like to get involved in the community orchard, do contact me – details below.

Alongside the community orchard, David Rowell is also leading another group that is creating some small allotments in the old orchard area at Etton High Meadow for local people. Again if you are interested in being involved in this work, let me know.

### **Torpel Manor Field – Heritage and Archaeology Group**

Langdyke's Heritage and Archaeology Group held its annual review at Helpston Village hall on 12 December. Dr Steve Ashby and Dr Aleks McClain from the University of York presented a detailed explanation of the results of work this summer with the HAG volunteers. Activity had focused on further resistivity surveys, which had continued to show up new features of the medieval settlements, raising more questions about its history. Steve Ashby's conclusion after 3 years working on the site is that its significance is far greater than originally thought and that it is attracting interest on a national scale as an example of a lost medieval settlement.

### **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**

Our next events are

**14 February** – visit to Rutland Water to see wintering ducks, meet at Helpston Post Office at 1pm, return by 5.30pm or earlier if you have your own transport.

**26 February** – join us for our annual Green Leap day when friends from various local companies give up their afternoon to help out at Etton Maxey and High Meadow –

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starts with a picnic lunch in the barn at 1pm, ends with a bonfire and a drink!

**16 March – indoor talk** – Blossom and badgers, bees, birds and butterflies! Tips and advice on what to look for and where to find it in our local countryside in spring: 7.30pm at Botolph's Barn, Helpston.

**9 April – wildlife workshops** – experts from national charity, Froglife will be at Etton Maxey Pits from 1030-1230 and at Swaddywell from 2-4pm to help us identify and understand the life of our local ponds and how to make our gardens more wildlife friendly, great for children – a free event, but please book in advance.

### **Contacts**

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