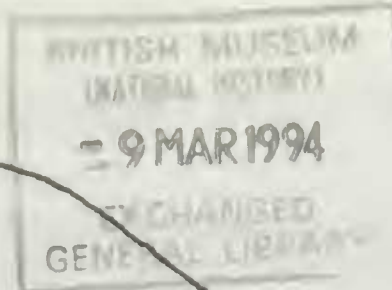




Number 44

THE NORFOLK NATTERJACK



February 1994

The quarterly bulletin of the Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society

VERGING ON EXTINCTION

You will have seen from the papers sent with this edition of Natterjack that I am standing down as your Chairman at the Annual General Meeting in March. I hope to continue to give active support to the Society, particularly in the arrangements for the Anniversary, but would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for the support you have given me over many years in my capacities as both Treasurer and Chairman.

One of the principal reasons for our 125th Anniversary celebrations in St. Andrew's Hall is to bring our activities to the attention of a wider public in the hope of attracting increased interest and, hopefully, membership. My successor, Rex Hancy, is ideally placed to take full advantage of the media coverage we trust the day will generate. The Society needs to encourage new blood (to avoid its own slow extinction!) and I hope that all existing members will do all they can to encourage wide support on 21st May 1994.

There are many pressures on our natural heritage and a number of species face the threat of extinction as Norfolk residents. For example, that traditional bird of the Broadland reed beds, the Bittern, faces a bleak future there unless the factors causing its decline can be established and corrected very quickly. Fortunately there remains a small population in the coastal reed beds from which recolonisation could occur if conditions improve. Similarly, some of the rare Breckland plants are under considerable threat as their preferred niches diminish and the opportunities to find new ones decline. Our amphibians are also faced with problems resulting from the destruction of their ponds or poor water quality in those which remain.

One very widespread habitat which seems to me to be under considerable strain at the present time is the roadside verge in our country lanes. A combination of the increase in both frequency and, more importantly, the size of traffic in our narrow lanes is resulting in the erosion of many stretches of verge. These narrow corridors of wildlife are often attacked from both sides with the plough encroaching from the fields and the ever larger lorries, tractors and trailers wearing frequent new "passing places" along the road edges. The wet weather of the last few months has made many verges fragile and prone to physical damage. It surely must be in the interest of both landowner and highway authority to preserve adequate verges on all roads and lanes if only to define the boundary between field and tarmac. Treating many of the lanes as single track roads and the creation of adequate strengthened "official" passing places seems to be the only solution. The planting of hedges where they have been removed would also help in defining and consolidating the verge. Otherwise in a few years time many of our narrow strips of green verge will also be extinct.

Don Dorling.

PHOTOGRAPHS APPEAL

As chairman of the Society's programme committee, I will be mounting a display at our 125th Anniversary exhibition. This will illustrate excursions and meetings over the years.

I am now aware that most members do not take photos of their fellows but concentrate on flora and fauna !

Please has any member got photographs illustrating our varied excursions, particularly showing members in action - be it birding; botanizing; fungus foraging, pond dipping, etc, etc.

In particular I am trying to locate a group photo taken at Blakeney Point in 1921 showing over 100 members on the Society's first excursion to the point.

So, up into the attic for a forage through old photos and a flip through more recent albums. Also, if you have a particularly good slide, it would be possible to get a print off it. All photographs will be returned after 21st May.

If you can help, please contact me on (0603) 33919.

Janet E. Smith.

PROGRAMME NOTES

Wednesday 23th March Annual General Meeting, followed by an account by Paul Banham of his recent travels to exotic places. Norwich City Library Lecture Theatre, 1930 hrs.

Tuesday 12th April "Reflexions on nature". The annual presentation by the Photographic Group of the Society. Reflexions ... reflex (camera)... Norwich City Library Lecture Theatre, 1930 hrs.

Sunday 17th April A 6-mile walk round the outside of Minsmere Reserve led by Mike Poulton. Meet at the cliff top car park, TM 477678 at 1100 hrs. Good views of birds, we hope - and Sizewell!

Wednesday 4th May "Norfolk Heaths", a talk by Tony Leech on the natural history and conservation of heathland in the county. Norwich City Library Lecture Theatre, 1930 hrs.

Sunday 8th May A visit to two green oases in Norwich - Lion Wood and Rosary Cemetery, led by Mary Cooper and Janet Smith. Meet at Pilling Park, Harvey Lane - TG 253088 - at 1100 hrs.

Saturday 21st May 125th Anniversary goings-on in St. Andrew's Hall. See separate notice about the day's programme.

Sunday 5th June A field meeting at the NNT reserve of Wayland Wood, south of Watton, led by the warden, Graham Goodwin. Meet at TL 924995 at 1100 hrs.

Sunday 12th June To celebrate the 125th Anniversary of the Society, a repeat of the first visit in 1869 to Heggatt Hall, owned by Mr. Richard Gurney. Meet at TG 271183 at 1100hrs.

Wednesday 22nd June An evening excursion to the NNT reserve at Thursford Wood, led by the warden, Alan Bristow. Meet at entrance off the A148 at TF 979333 at 1930 hrs. Park carefully on roadside verge, or on hard standing at entrance to the Old Coach House B & B.

Sunday 26th June A full day excursion to Barnham Cross Common south of Thetford, looking at the chalk side of the common in the morning and the acid side in the afternoon, mainly for plants, butterflies and birds. Park by the playing field on the RHS of A134 out of Thetford, TL 867818. Meet at 1100 hrs. Leader Nick Gibbons.

Please note that no dogs are allowed in NNT reserves.

MICROSCOPY GROUP

This year's programme will be issued in two parts. We have firm dates for the first three meetings. The others will be printed as soon as possible for you to transfer to your diaries.

Please note that while we may continue to park on the Castle mound, it is most strongly recommended you take all valuable items inside with you.

Feb 22nd 1930 hrs. Malcolm Thain will bring us up to date with his work on metallic particles in soil. Some members may have seen an article by Malcolm on this subject published recently.

April 21st 1930 hrs. Dick Hamond will take us Back to Basics! We feel it is time for newcomers to the group to learn from our maestro microscopist how to blend the mechanics of the microscope with the mechanics of the human frame into a harmonious whole. No more head-aches! No more back-aches.

June 25th 1330 hrs. Our annual jaunt into the outdoors. This year we meet at the Ted Ellis Reserve, Wheatfen. Space for microscopes will be available. Keith Clarke will lead. What could make a more perfect prospect?

All indoor meetings include ample time for Gossip. Do bring items of interest. A Bring and Buy session is in plans for the future!

THE NORFOLK BIRD REPORT

The special issue of the 1992 Norfolk Bird Report has been well reviewed and very few copies remain unsold. Members may be interested to read some of the comments received:

It has been very well received by our members. One member from the USA asked for two copies to send to editors of American bird reports who might benefit from a new approach (NORFOLK ORNITHOLOGISTS ASSOCIATION).

A bumper issue celebrates Michael Seago's fortieth as editor with over 100 pages plus over 50 colour photographs mostly of famous Norfolk rarities such as the 1987 slender-billed gulls and the 1989/90 red-breasted nuthatch and a complete Norfolk bird check-list with status notes. A collector's item and great value. (BRITISH BIRDS)

This book is Norfolk's best annual report ever - its 40th anniversary issue. Included is a full review of the Norfolk list and there are masses of colour photographs of many Norfolk rarities from years gone by including the Birdline/Birding World emblem bird the How Hill black-and-white warbler. If you only ever buy one Norfolk report, make it this one! (BIRDING WORLD)

Plans are well advanced for the 1993 Bird Report which will include an important paper on the creation and management of Holkham National Nature Reserve by the Head Warden. Among other features: Pink-footed geese in North-west Norfolk - a farmer's viewpoint and Marsh Harriers roosting in cereal crops. Colour photographs and artwork will again include a fine selection by both professionals and gifted amateurs.

BIRDING AT BENACRE - AND ELSEWHERE!

The best laid schemes can sometimes yield a bonus when they gang a-gley. The scheme at Benacre on Sunday, 30th January, was in two parts: Part 1 - "do" the broad in the morning; Part 2 - walk on across the shingle spit that separates broad from sea to have lunch and explore the area around the pits in the hope of seeing sawbills and grebes.

Part 1: no problem. The group of 20 or so split into two parties so that we could take turns to use the hide. A pair of long-tailed ducks swam past. Male and female goldeneye dived repeatedly, usually just as telescopes were lined up on them. Pochard, infuriating as ever, slept on with their chestnut heads tucked out of sight. Teal, shoveler, shelduck and mallard were also to be seen. A flock of knot flew in and joined a handful of redshank.

Part 2 was a non-starter. In the ferocious winter weather along this notoriously unstable stretch of coast, the sea had gouged a 10ft channel through the shingle bank and at high tide sea water was pouring into the broad.

So, after lunch in the sun on beach (this was January 30!), a change of plan. A diversion to Blythburgh - and a bonus.

From the start of the footpath behind the pub we looked across the reeds to the mass of white on the water and realised that swimming among the gulls was a small party of avocets. Then, to our delight, a flock of several hundred took to the air and circled. A few minutes later they did it again. It was sheer luck. An hour or so later, they had all disappeared.

Then came the real surprise. Careful scoping among the gulls turned up several ring-billed gulls, at least two adults and a second-winter bird, obligingly swimming alongside the similar but smaller common gulls so that a clear comparison could be made.

The scouring sea had done us a favour.

David Paull.

PROBLEMS WITH STINGLESS NETTLES

After being shown *Urtica galeopsifolia* at Woodbastwick, Dr. J. Wells realised he has something closely similar in the grounds of Oakhill at Heacham. When I went to look at them with him, we found that he has quite an assortment of different nettles. In the one that is closest to the stingless 'species' it is only the upper leaves that are particularly narrow, but what is more noticeable is their very long petioles, about the same length as the leaf blade. It is certainly stingless, and the lowest flowers appear from nodes 14 to 21, which is correct. However, we also found completely stingless nettles of perfectly normal appearance, with the flowers starting from well below node 14, and others with leaves narrow all the way down that sting! In my report on my season as Trail Warden at Hoveton Great Broad in 1969 I noted "many of these fen nettles have only a weak sting". Perhaps the taxonomists still have some work to do on this.

Paul Cobb.

REVIEW

BIRDS OF THE HOLKHAM AREA by Andrew Bloomfield, 1993. 144 pages, 31 black and white plates and numerous line drawings. £7.50 including p & p.

Between the eye-catching wrap-round cover of pink-footed geese (photographed by Chris Knights) and the highly original illustrations by James McCallum there is a wealth of information in this comprehensive publication.

The most important feature of a local bird book is its potential value as an introduction to the newcomer to the area. Andrew's guide scores well under each heading including good maps. The opening chapter revealing the history of Holkham is compelling reading. It will be surprising to read of Holkham Estate being described in the 18th Century as "barren sandy heath of windy slopes where sheep and rabbits fought for blades of grass". Eventually it became one of the largest and most successful estates in the country.

Perhaps it will also come as a surprise to read that Holkham Meals was first 'discovered' as a prime locality for vagrant autumn migrants as recently as 1968. Seven years later, during October 1975, the three-mile length of mature pines (including the breeding site of the famous parrot crossbills) interspersed with birches, dense bramble and elder scrub became firmly established on the national ornithological map. Four additions to the county list were discovered during that magical period. Ever since, whenever weather maps appear favourable "crowds of enthusiastic and optimistic bird watchers" begin arriving. Andrew reminds us that from the impressive Holkham list of 319 species, two (yellow-browed bunting and red-breasted nuthatch) are additions to the British List. In addition a further seven were recorded in the county for the first time.

But there is much more to Holkham than seeking lost wanderers. In spring the marshes nowadays attract many waders together with black terns and spoonbills. Since 1988 surprises have included Terek, pectoral, buff-breasted and marsh sandpipers, sociable plover, little and great white egrets and little bittern. During the summer bearded tits, marsh harriers, avocets and colonies of common and little terns may be expected.

Throughout the autumn Holkham Reserve is visited daily by many observers. The sheltered waters offshore attract a selection of marine ducks, divers and grebes. Brent geese follow and then a winter highlight: thousands of pink-footed geese. The book describes the highlight of 1967 when Holkham National Nature Reserve - extending from Overy Staithe to Stiffkey - was created. As a result of enlightened management water levels on the fresh- marshes have been substantially raised. Driving along the coast road the transformation is apparent to all. Even if parking is prohibited!

As would be expected the bulk of the book, over 110 pages, is devoted to the systematic list where each species is considered in turn. Detailed information is provided and each bird receives its fair share of space.

For many reasons this book achieves 'must' status for Norfolk bird-watchers, resident or visitors, either to give hours of pleasant browsing or as a valuable source of reference.

Copies are available from the author at Longlands Farm, Holkham Park NR23 1RU. Price: £7.50 including p & p.

THE NATURAL GARDEN

Often a neglected garden (like ours) and those that are managed for wildlife (like ours when the neighbours comment!) rewards the observant. Throughout last year while doing various jobs around the house and garden something of interest was usually seen. The following notes some of these encounters.

April 20th: Three Brimstone Butterflies (*Gonepteryx rhamni*) (2 male/1 female) frequented the sheltered side of a large (12' high) east facing privet hedge. This is not unusual, however, the given food plants, Buckthorn (*Rhamnus catarticus*) and Alder Buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*) are not known to be in the area, although these butterflies will range far to find even the most isolated tree. In the evening a swarm of 'gnats' were flying about 5' off the ground close by a tree. On catching one it was observed to move up and down when settled. It was a so-called 'Bobbing-gnat', actually a small member of the Crane-fly family.

May 22nd: Two pairs of the Large Red-tailed Damselflies (*Phyrrhosoma nymphula*) were busy darting over the garden pond. This is the third year that they have occurred since the pond was established in September 1988 and now number amongst the six breeding species so far recorded - Blue-tailed Damselfly, Common Blue Damselfly, Southern Hawker, Common Darter and Emperor Dragonflies.

June 19th: Three large Mullein Moth (*Cucullia verbasci*) caterpillars resplendent in their yellow bands and black dots were busily 'chomping' through the foliage of an Orange-ball Buddleia. Pupation takes place in the soil, usually in August, with the moth emerging the following April or May, however some authorities state that they may remain in the pupal state for up to five years.

July 28th: From discarded bird seed thrown haphazardly from our three Cockatiels' feeding dish numerous plants germinate and from time to time amongst the Sunflowers, Flax and Wheat some surprises are noted such as the pretty pink Buckwheat (*Fagopyrum esculentum*) from Asia and the exotic Canary-grass (*Phalaris canariensis*).

August 15th: During the evening a small moth entered the kitchen. On settling it was seen to have its wings divided into slender plumes. Each wing was made up of six individual plumes confirming this to be the Many-plumed Moth (*Alucita hexadactyla*). Later in the month (Aug. 24th.), our daughter, Ellie, noted a wasp carrying a fly to a hole in an old railway sleeper used to support a raised flower-bed. During the day the wasp carried in a number of flies. Outside the hole was a conspicuous spoil mound of 'powdered' sawdust indicating that the wasp was one of the solitary wasps (*Ectemnius* sp.) and had excavated a nest which it was now stocking with 'food' for its larva. The next day, Aug. 25th. while carrying out some pruning on an old ornamental cherry tree I noted a large dull brownish-pink caterpillar with diagonal yellow side stripes making its way down the trunk. It had a small blue horn tail and a distinctive rough-looking yellow plate on the end segment, a field mark that determined it as the Lime Hawk-moth (*Mimas tiliae*). Presently the caterpillar reached the base of the trunk and disappeared into the long grass - no doubt to enter the soil and pupate. The moth should emerge in May or June this year. This is my first record of Lime Hawk in Sheringham and also not on a generally recognised food plant.

September 4th: Another full-grown caterpillar is seen, this time crossing the path while clearing up after a family barbecue. It is pale green with diagonal purple/white stripes and a black horn tail. The unmistakable Privet Hawk-moth (*Sphinx ligustri*) larva looking for soil to pupate in.

October 15th: The garden played host briefly to a juv. Redstart and an immaculate cock Pheasant.

November 4th: A neighbour 'planted' an unusual plant in the front garden which she had removed from her own. It proved to be Green Amaranth (*Amaranthus hybridus*) from America and probably of bird seed origin. Later in the month, Nov. 9th., when removing an old cracked ceramic salt-glazed drain prior to the fitting of a new outside drain, some 12 Common Frogs were discovered hibernating beneath it. They ranged in size from about 1 inch to 4 inches. As it was a mild day they were quickly collected and transferred to a more secure habitat where they would hopefully return to their hibernating state.

The above are a few examples of the natural world in the garden during 1993. How many more discoveries await the observant this year?

Francis Farrow.

BIRDS AND GLAZING PUTTY

As a builder I may be asked to carry out all kinds of work to all sorts of properties and such was the case when a long established customer employed us to remove all of the old windows from his property and replace them with new and fit double glazing units to the new windows.

The property was originally a pair of marshmens cottages around three hundred years old and had been converted into one dwelling on the very edge of a Suffolk marsh.

The work was duly carried out, the glass was puttied in and later painted with undercoat and gloss paint and all seemed to be satisfactory.

At that time the house was only being used at weekends and the following weekend after the work was completed, I received a call from the customer regarding the putty in the windows so I went along to have a look.

The putty was showing signs of attack from birds, the bottoms were affected first since they could reach this quite easily from the sills. They are attracted to the oils in the putty and this is an old problem, usually caused by blue tits and starlings. However in this case it was caused by crows. No matter how often the putty was made good, they would, after a few hours, attack again.

Various actions have been carried out over the years in an attempt to eradicate this problem but none have proven to be satisfactory, of course, wooden glazing beads could be a solution but this is not always possible or indeed desirable.

In the end the problem was curtailed by cutting sheets of small mesh chicken wire, larger in size than the window and fixed in such a way that the whole of the window was covered, so that the birds could not get close enough to the putty.

This wire meshing, though most unsightly, was kept in place until the putty was too hard to interest the birds further, then they were removed with no further problems.

Very often, a builder's work will bring him into contact with situations not at all uninteresting to a naturalist.

Tony Brown.

CORRECTION - (N/L no. 43 - Nov. 1993)

A RETURN TO NOTHING.

In my note regarding nothing on Beeston Regis and Sheringham Commons I mentioned the capture of a Striped Twin-spot Carpet (*Nebula salicata latentaria*). This is a moth mainly of the North and West of Britain and as such was queried by Ken Saul (Norfolk Moth Survey). Luckily Ken Durrant had retained the specimen and was able to double check using microscopic characteristics. Unfortunately for us this determined the moth to be the much more generally distributed Dark-barred Twin-spot Carpet (*Xanthorhoe ferrugata*), albeit a faded specimen.

Francis Farrow.

*Please send items for Natterjack to Colin Dack
12, Shipdham Rd, Toftwood, Dereham Norfolk NR19 1JJ*

ADDRESS LABELS

Will members please take a good look at their address label on the envelope which contained this Natterjack. Reason, the labels have been produced on a new computer and new database. If you find an error please write the correct address beside the original on the envelope, place in an other envelope and send to Colin Dack 12, Shipdham Road, Toftwood, Dereham, Norfolk. NR19 1JJ