



Number 57

THE NORFOLK NATTERJACK



May 1997

The quarterly bulletin of the Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society

1997 PROGRAMME

Wildlife 2000 is gathering momentum. Recording forms will be available at all outdoor meetings and it is hoped that you will take the opportunity to record whatever are your interests. All meetings are full day, some are guided all day, others only in the mornings, leaving time to record in the afternoons which start at 14.00 hrs. Please bring portable lunch if staying all day.

Sunday 8 June

Full day field meeting at Easton College to look at woodland habitats. There are four small woods planted with different species for teaching purposes. Meet at Broom Farm, TG 130101 at 11.00 hrs. Leader Robert Maidstone who is a freelance tree expert.

Wednesday 18 June

Full day field meeting to study grasses. Meet at Roydon Green, TM 104805 at 11.00 hrs and Wortham Ling, TM 089798 at 1400 hrs. Leader Arthur Copping is a retired schoolmaster and an expert on grasses.

Sunday 29 June

Full day field meeting at Upton Fen. The morning will be devoted to a workshop on dragonflies; the afternoon to exploring Upton Fen. Meet, TO 379137 at 11.00 hrs. Leader Dr Pam Taylor who is County Recorder for dragonflies and wife of George Taylor, the Warden of Upton Fen. Upton Fen is a Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve and one of the best sites in Norfolk for dragonflies and damselflies.

Wednesday 9 July

Full day field meeting at Litcham Common, a Local Nature Reserve run by The Norfolk County Council Countryside Officer, Raz Woollacott. Meet in reserve car park on Dunham Road, TF 886173 at 11.00 hrs. Raz would welcome any species lists members may compile in the afternoon.

Brenda and Ron Shaw will be pleased to welcome members in the afternoon to visit the Litcham Historical Society Village Museum and the bird sanctuary, both at 'Fourways', Mileham Road, Litcham. An old lime kiln with resident bats should be open. Adjacent parking and entry are free, though small donations are gratefully received.

Saturday 19 July

Full day field meeting at Wells Field Study Centre. Meet at Centre, TM 918434 at 11.00 hrs. The morning will be spent on the salt marshes studying the flora and fauna. The afternoon will be spent at the Centre looking at and identifying things found in the morning. Leader Paul Banham, retired Director of the Centre.

Sunday 27 July

Joint full day field meeting with Yarmouth Naturalists' Society. Meet at Blocka Lane off the Beccles road TM 467998 at 1100 hrs. This is about 0.5 mile south west of the Fritton Decoy Tavern. This site is good for insects, butterflies, moths, dragonflies. Meet at Lound Waterworks, TG 504005 at 14.00 hrs. This site is good for insects and birds,

Sunday 10 August

Joint full day field meeting with British Plant Gall Society at West Stow Country Park. Meet at Visitor Centre car park, TL 800714 at 11.00 hrs. Leader Rex Hancy.

Sunday 17 August

Full day field meeting at Lynford Arboretum for tree workshop. Meet in car park by Lynford Hall, on Lynford Road off the A1065 between Ickburgh and Mundford, TL 822943 at 11.00 hrs. Leaders Rex Hancy and Norman MacCreath. Norman is a retired Forestry officer who worked in this area.

Sunday 12 October

Getting to know fungi. A guide to their identification and cookery. Meet at Gresham's School, Holt, TG 088393 at 10.30hrs. The day will consist of an introductory talk in the Biology lab. followed by a foray into the woods, led by Tony Leech. Then a mushroom cookery demonstration by Mike Strong followed by lunch in Dave's Diner, max charge £5. After lunch, a short foray followed by time in the lab for identification. Finish about 16.00hrs. Places are limited to 20 so please book by ringing Stephen Martin on 01603 810327 or John Mott on 01603 810442.

John Mott

BROADLAND ENVIRONMENTAL FORUM

Broadland Environmental Forum was formed in 1994, initially intended for people living, working, or concerned with environmental issues, within the Broadland District Council area, or representing interested organisations within the area. The aim of the Forum was to allow for presentation of the Council's proposals on environmental issues and to seek the views of its members.

Since then, the emphasis of the Forum has widened, such that the points of discussion are often of national interest, while membership of the Forum is no longer necessarily of Broadland people only.

Meetings are held in the Council Chamber at the Broadland District Council offices in Yarmouth Road, Thorpe St Andrew, and usually include a presentation on a subject of general environmental interest. Recent presentations have been on the subjects of light pollution, our disappearing coastline, home composting, aluminium recycling, flood alleviation. Future topics are likely to be – water, its quality and quantity, conservation, irrigation, mercury pollution and flooding; Norwich Airport, aircraft activity, etc; waste, disposal, tips, litter; county wildlife sites and tree preservation, hedgerows and roadside verges; road signage.

Anyone interested in attending these informative but informal type meetings, who is not necessarily a Broadland resident, should contact Michelle Kerry on Norwich 431133 ext 2211.

Phyll Hardie

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS - 2 MARCH 1997

Our children had asked to go to Foxley for a nature walk and we had arrived. Pulling into the parking area, I was surprised to see just one other car on such a bright Sunday afternoon.

Before setting off, we decided to have a drink whilst still seated. It was fortunate for us that we did not rush because a few moments later I noticed a movement on one of the paths that lead away into the woods. At first I thought it was just a dead leaf blowing in the wind, but as it got closer we realised it was a tiny mammal. Closer it came, bounding along the path then out across the rutted mud car park, swimming a puddle as it made its way. It continued right up to our car, much to everyone's delight and judging by the short stubby tail, I presume it was a field vole. We then lost sight of it as it passed behind us but managed to catch one further glimpse before it disappeared into a patch of dogs mercury on the other side of the clearing.

As if this was not enough, a couple of minutes later we spotted another movement. This time I soon recognised it as a weasel moving swiftly through the tangled undergrowth then along the path. It paused frequently to scent both the ground and air and I am sure it was tracking the vole because a very similar route was followed until, that is, it reached the puddle.

Here it stopped, not ten feet away, and we marvelled at the beautiful creature before us. It seemed confused, looking this way and that, head up and down, moving slightly to the left then off to the right. I guess the water had broken the scent trail for it lingered just a few more seconds before dashing off in another direction and was gone.

We then got out of the car. Nature walk? Nature sit seems more appropriate!

Andy Beaumont

1997 WATER VOLE SURVEY OF NORFOLK.

During this summer Norfolk Wildlife Trust are conducting a survey of water vole colonies in the county. This survey, funded by the Environment Agency and Essex and Suffolk Water, is designed to find out the current distribution of this threatened mammal in order to provide baseline information for a county Biodiversity Action Plan. Preliminary results, recorded during the NWT/EA/ESW otter survey over the past winter, indicate that the water vole still appears to be doing well in central and east Norfolk and in parts of the Broads, but there was a worrying lack of records from south and west Norfolk. These latter areas showed signs of occupation by American mink, a known water vole predator. The survey intends to cover all water vole habitats, i.e. rivers and tributaries, ponds, lakes and gravel pits, and ditches and other wet areas. As well as a main survey undertaken by a trained professional surveyor and trained volunteers, all casual records of water vole between now and the end of October are welcomed, and will be incorporated into the results to give as complete a picture as possible. Please send your records to Rob Yaxley at NWT, 72 Cathedral Close, Norwich NR1 4DF.

"WILDLIFE DAY 1997" AT BUXTON HEATH

The Buxton Heath Wildlife Group is hosting its annual open day on Sunday 6th July, from 10.30 until 4.30.

This year, our display area will incorporate the Society's WILDLIFE 2000 publicity display in an attempt to stimulate further interest in this invaluable project.

Previous events have been supported by Ken Durrant, Reg and Lil Evans, Colin Dack and Eunice Phipps. It is hoped that other Society "specialists" will accept our invitation to join us this year, and perhaps help us to "sort out" some of those difficult species. We tend to struggle with most beetles and spiders, and so we throw down the gauntlet to Martin, Rex and Garth!

Those attending should bear in mind that parking space is quite limited at the site. To avoid becoming "blocked-in" it might be wiser to park outside along the perimeter rather than in the car park itself.

Guided walks will take place during the day, so, as always with Buxton Heath, pack your wellies !

Colin Penny.



MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

Members who pay by cheque are reminded that subscriptions fell due on 1 April, 1997. Current rates are £10 for ordinary and family members and £15 for affiliated groups. Please make cheques payable to Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society and send them to:

D.I. Richmond
42, Richmond Rise,
Reepham,
Norfolk, NR10 4LS.

From:.....
Address:.....
.....
.....

WHEATFEN - RESEARCH

It has been proposed that the Society should try to organise some regular research in connection with Wheatfen. After discussion with Roy Baker, the Microscopy group have commenced work on one project. I have agreed to look into the possibility of three other projects.

(i) A study of the breeding birds of Wheatfen.

This could not begin properly until early in 1998, but it is hoped that a start could be made this year, if only to identify what work will be necessary early next year and to obtain a preliminary idea of how many species are involved.

(ii) Regular counts of wintering wild fowl at Wheatfen, beginning towards the end of this year.

(iii) A study of the Chinese Water deer.

It appears that none of these investigations have been carried out previously, even by Ted Ellis, and we could therefore add significantly to what is known about Wheatfen. Roy Baker has offered the use of the boat for (ii) and might be able to provide useful equipment for (iii).

Anyone interested in organising or assisting with any of these projects is asked to contact Mike Poulton, Chairman of the Research Committee. (telephone 01953- 603700)

MHP

DEFORMED RATS' TEETH

In the early 1970's Philip Cambridge and myself used to do geological surveys together. One day we stopped to talk to two gamekeepers at Elveden. It was near the old stud. While Philip was talking to the gamekeepers I was looking at the skulls of the rats etc. below the gibbet (fence) where the keeper used to hang the items he had killed. I found many of the rat skulls to have deformed teeth. The teeth were very long. They were not meeting and so had not worn down in use. In all I saw about a dozen skulls with deformed teeth, all hanging close together. When I showed them to the gamekeepers the older one said that it was his line and he could not remember noticing the teeth. He thought they had been shot near by as that was where the pens were that the young pheasants were raised in.

We ask many other gamekeepers what they thought about it. None could give a satisfactory explanation. At that time, looking at geological sites, we spoke to many gamekeepers as they knew the land and knew where the old pits were. We used to tell them we were there as on most of the estates that was part of getting permission to go on the land. No other gamekeeper could find rats that they killed with deformed teeth in any significant number. From time to time this has gone through my mind but I still don't have a satisfactory answer. The best idea that I have been able to come up with is that they were all the offspring of one pair who both had one defective gene, which was not being a problem to them but was showing up in, and being very bad for, their offspring.

Colin Dack.

PHOLCUS PHALANGIOIDES

At the rear of Honingham Church a water tank was examined. A male spider of this species was found. It was almost dead and did not recover. Here also drowned was a tiny moth *Chrysoclista linneella* remarkable for its brightly coloured wings.

Reg & Lil Evans.

ARACHNOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

Hollywood, with its latest technology, provides its heroes with super human powers. These powers are matched and can be shown as inferior compared with the abilities nature has provided for spiders.

I read somewhere that if a house spider *Tegenaria duellica* were scaled up to human size it would complete a hundred yard sprint before an athlete had run a single yard!

If we scale ourselves down to spider size we can see some extraordinary results.

I have watched *Arctosa perita*, a *Lycosid* or hunting spider, common along our Norfolk coast, have two, cupped hands full of beach sand dumped on top of it. Within seconds the spider erupts, unharmed from the top of the pile of sand. This would be the equivalent of about six lorry loads of cobble stones being dumped on one of us!

And the orb weaver *Zygiella x-notata* who travels with you, having spun her web across your wing mirror or rear screen wiper. She hangs on, seemingly without effort at speeds of seventy miles an hour (not more I trust) whilst braving the most enormous wind speeds if scaled up to our size!

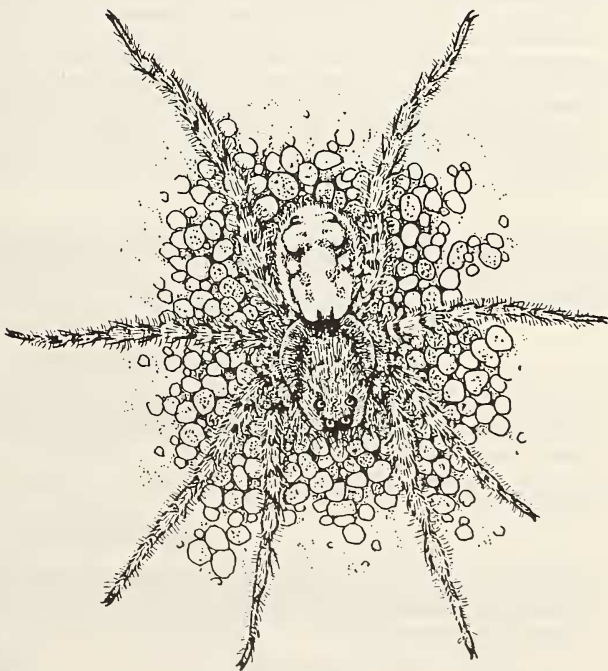
The feats of strength performed by the beautiful, ivory coloured, female crab spider *Misumena vatia* could be likened to a five year old child throwing around a Sumo wrestler with one hand. I have watched her grab a fly, two or three times her size with one outstretched leg. She flicks it towards her fangs and having bitten it hangs onto it while it struggles and dies.

How long would a man survive in a tube filled with boulders twenty times or more his own weight as the tube rotates and the boulders roll around inside?

The only way I could catch very small *Salticids* or jumping spiders whilst hunting them on a shingle bank was to scoop up the shingle, into which they had disappeared, with a jam jar. I would then slowly tip out and sort the stones looking for my catch. The stones would roll about and I always feared for the spider's safety, however, I was amazed, almost beyond belief, to observe the tiny creature leaping from stone to stone as they crashed together, constantly avoiding being crushed. This must require super powers far beyond anything Hollywood could devise for its heroes. I was now in total awe of the abilities of *Euophrys erratica*. Perhaps *Euophrys schwarzenegger* would be a more appropriate scientific name? The spider had even allowed in its calculations for the glass sides of the "tube" which it could sense, although without doubt it could see through!

I request that you do not try this as an experiment. I did lose one out of six spiders in this way, although it was crushed on the edge of the jar before even being captured.

The more I study spiders the more I admire them. However I am still glad that I was born a human being. If I were not human I could not



Arctosa perita (female)
showing camouflage on beach sand.

ARACHNOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

Nature poses many questions which I imagine could be answered if enough effort were put into researching them.

One question which intrigues me is why certain species have distinct variations? The Carrion, Hooded Crow for example. Or the Guillemot and Bridled Guillemot. This also appears with spiders.

Many species have great variation in colour or pattern but remain recognisable as those species. However a small number of species have variations in both colour and pattern so different from each other that only the taxonomical anatomists can say why they are but one species. The three most striking examples are all orb-weavers.

Meta merianae, whose choice of habitat is the mouths of drains, rabbit holes and semi-dark, damp situations, has a variety (var. celata). This has a golden band running along the centre of an otherwise dark patternless abdomen. This is a huge contrast to "normal" specimens with their highly patterned brown abdomens. Of the hundreds of spiders of this species I have seen only one, from Glen Coe, was a "var celata".

Agalenatea redii, a medium sized heathland orb weaver has three distinct varieties showing quite different abdomen patterns. I have never found a specimen which was neither one or other of these variations.

The most striking example of variation is found in the large spider *Araneus marmoreus*. The most commonly encountered variation (var. pyramidatus) has the most beautiful lemon yellow or cream abdomen with a dark chocolate coloured wedge at the rear. This generally uncommon spider can be found in abundance in late Summer and Autumn in its preferred damp habitat at Woodbastwick fen, Upton, Wheatfen and Strumpshaw reserves. The wet ditches at Foxley wood has this species and it was there I found the "normal" variation of *A. marmoreus*. I believe this was the first specimen ever found in this County. It has a brown or grey abdomen overlain with white spots and marks. I observed this particular female as she was courted by a male of "var pyramidatus" and wondered if I might find some intermediates between the two distinct variations. This proved difficult and although I examined hundreds of spiders I have only found two which could be called intermediate. They were both completely different from each other and extraordinarily beautiful.



Female *Araneus marmoreus*
(var. *pyramidatus*)

Found on bushes and high vegetation -
particularly Marsh Thistle.

Clearly the answer to this question of variation lies in genetics, a subject far too complex for a simple naturalist like me.

Garth Coupland.

A RARE FUNGUS

Cucurbitaria laburni was found in 1986 and was still present in 1996 on a weak, possibly dying, laburnum tree. This is our only Norfolk record, but it is probably in gardens or parks and unrecorded. It occurs on dead branches blackened by the fungus. We should be pleased to identify any specimens sent to us.

Reg & Lil Evans.

POISONOUS FUNGUS

A toadstool found under Beech trees in Blue Stone Wood had been crushed but not beyond recognition. Its ability to turn reddish on bruising, and microscopic details proved this to be *Inocybe patouillardii*, described as dangerously poisonous. We have few records of this species in Norfolk.

Reg & Lil Evans.

Please send items for August Natterjack before 1st July to Colin Dack 12, Shipdham Road, Toftwood, Dereham, Norfolk.

NR19 1JJ.