



Number 62

THE NORFOLK NATTERJACK



August 1998
THE NATURAL
HISTORY MUSEUM
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EXCHANGED
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The quarterly bulletin of the Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society

PROGRAMME

Sunday 13 September

Holt Country Park is owned and managed by North Norfolk District Council and Holt Lowes is an NWT Reserve. Tony Leech, biology teacher from Greshams School, will lead the party around the site in the morning, mainly for fungi. In the afternoon there will be a chance to look at specific areas.

The car park is on the right of the Norwich to Holt road just south of Holt.
TG 081 375. Toilets available.

Tuesday 15 September

This talk continues our woodland theme.

Sunday 27 September

Ashwellthorpe Lower Wood is an NWT Reserve. It is ancient semi-natural woodland on boulder clay. Trees include alder, ash, oak, hazel, hornbeam, field maple, holly, elm, hawthorn and blackthorn. Shrubs include dogwood, guelder rose and spindle.

Parking is in the Warden's meadow, just past a wood yard in the middle of the village. Do not try to use the old entrance. TM 142 977.

This is the second visit to this reserve looking at it through the seasons. We plan to visit again in April. We have no winter meeting but the warden advocates visiting the day after fresh snow has fallen, to see foot prints.

Sunday 11 October

Wheatfen is reached through Surlingham village. Passing the school and the village pond you will come to a fork. Take the left fork down 'The Green' and continue a quarter mile. Turn sharp right into 'The Covey' and continue for half a mile. The road becomes a rough track. Continue another 300 yards and you will find Wheatfen car park on your left. TG 325 056.

Thursday 19 November

Marriott's Way is a seven mile path from Hellesdon to Attlebridge along the old M. & G.N. railway. We meet in the old station car park at Hellesdon on Marlpit Lane off the A47. TG 197 100.

Sunday 22 November

Buxton Heath is managed by Buxton Heath Wildlife Group in conjunction with the NWT. The heath is on a basin of acid sand with a chalky stream flowing through the centre. This gives a mixture of dry and wet heath with a valley mire in the middle and some woodland around the perimeter. It is one of the best areas for Sphagna in Norfolk. Robin Stevenson is the bryophyte recorder for Norfolk.

Car park at TG 173 214, on Heath Road off B1149. Go down narrow track to left opposite first house.

John Mott

NORFOLK BIRD & MAMMAL REPORT

David and Iris Paull have taken over responsibility for the sale and distribution of the annual Norfolk Bird & Mammal Report from Mary and Don Dorling .

They can be contacted by post at 8 Lindford Drive, Eaton, Norwich, NR4 6LT, or by telephone on 01603 457270.

Progress in producing the 1997 Report is on schedule. Publication is expected early in the Autumn and copies will be sent to all members of the Society and other regular subscribers as soon as they are available. Copies of the Reports for 1996 and many other prior years are still available. For details of price and availability, please contact David at the above address.

Don Dorling.

A NEW GALL FOR NORFOLK

At a meeting of the Wymondham WATCH group at New Buckenham Common I took a look at a lone alder tree planted next to the large pond in the centre of the common. It still had several of last year's seed cones hanging on some of the branches and on a few of the cones, stiff, curled, leaf-like appendages could be seen. These I recognised as being something I had seen a picture of in one of my books, so I collected a few and took them home.

From my book I identified them as a gall caused by the fungus *Exoascus alni-incanae* (Kuhn). Later that week I contacted Rex Hancy, on other matters, and mentioned what I had found – neither name or description rang any bells with him. So I took a sample to him.

His books, one in French and another in Dutch, gave the name as *Taphrina alni* (the new name for this species) and he confirmed it as a species new to Norfolk.



Two days later while talking to a neighbour in Wacton I saw several of these galls on a small lone alder planted by his gate! Since I have collected cones from this tree in previous years I am sure I have not overlooked these galls in the past.

Robert Maidstone

CHRISTMAS PRESENCE

Every now and again the everyday household chores are brightened up, particularly if the chore is washing up and the kitchen window overlooks the garden.

During such pre-Christmas activity (Dec. 21st 1997), while at home in Sheringham, Cherry noted a small bird on the neighbour's Silver Birch. Grabbing the binoculars for a closer look we were surprised to see that the bird was a Chiffchaff. The following day, whilst amongst the soap suds, I noted a "Starling" on a television aerial across the road. I looked again as the bird appeared to have a crest. Through the quickly focused binoculars the "Starling" revealed itself to be what I had subsequently suspected - a Waxwing. To have two such visitors when doing the chores almost makes such work worthwhile!

Francis and Cherry Farrow

A GAGGLE IN THE MIST

About 8.00am on the 29th December, 1997, while indoors at Sheringham, I became aware of the clamour of many geese overhead. The constant calling lasted a few minutes and was, I believe, that of Pinkfeet. Not one goose was to be seen, however, as the countryside was still bathed in thick fog. The geese, no doubt, were flying blind, although they seemed to be heading westwards. The number of geese involved must have been considerable from the amount of calling and I wonder if anyone spotted them.

Francis Farrow

I am sorry these two articles from Francis and Cherry are late. I mislaid them. They were meant for the February issue.

ARACHNOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

Whilst on night shift during May this year, I was admiring the superb specimens of *Larinioides sclopetarius* that spin their large, orb webs around the lights on the security building at the entrance to Cantley Sugar Factory. I marvelled at the way they had obviously chosen the light site because it attracted insects. Their webs were much cluttered with insect corpses of many and varied species.

However, alarm bells rang in my mind as I remembered that such assumptions about nature are usually made with a wondering human point of view and often very wrong. I decided I should investigate further.

Of course spiders build webs where there are no lights at all but this fact did not help prove or disprove my assumption.

I had concluded long ago that the main factor involved in "web sites" was the physical characteristics of the site itself. I had seen orb webs of the Garden Spider *Araneus diadematus* strung like flying buttresses all around the base of a circular garden conifer. I discovered over twenty webs, all in a line along the overhang at the top of a cricket score board belonging to *Zygiella x-notata*. These, and countless other sites could not possibly give any special advantage in the catching of flying insects. They were just convenient. I therefore wondered if the physical presence of the light fittings gave better conditions for stringing one's snare but I found webs close by, but unconnected to the light's housing. A careful check around the building confirmed that the webs were only on or near the lights, leaving yards of apparently quite suitable sites quite bare of webs. My original assumption was looking good! Or was it?

I then considered other theories that did not involve spider intelligence. Could it be that spiders, like many insects, are also attracted to lights? This phenomenon is in itself intriguing. Or could I be observing a process of evolution? The spiders who build by lights would become more successful by way of better feeding.

This would possibly increase their size, metabolism and fertility. Their offspring would therefore be better equipped for survival and would carry the tendency to build webs near lights.

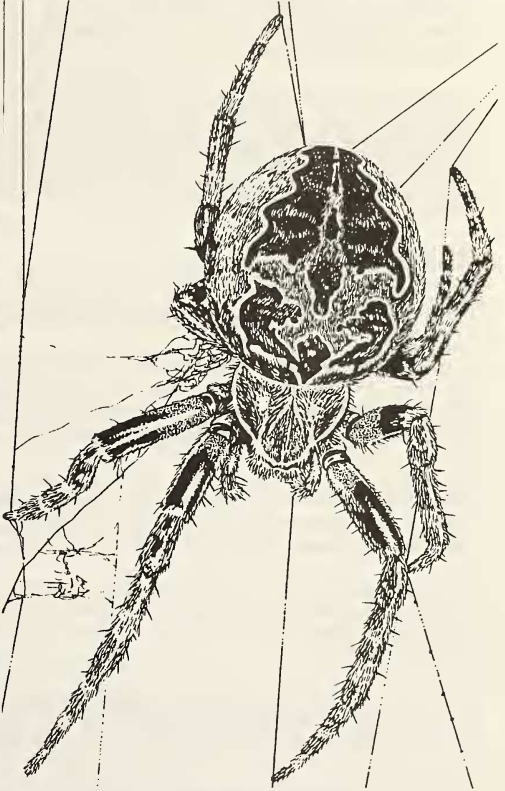
I fear the question remains unanswered and that my original assumption was flawed. The only conclusion I can reach is that I was correct in questioning my assumption in the first place!

I do not believe that a spider figures out in its mind that it will fare better if it builds its web near a light. I favour the theory that lights attract many creatures and therefore where they are present they will draw those creatures towards them.

I would be interested in the views of others on this subject as I can be sure there is some point I have missed or some theory I have failed to consider.

Garth M. Coupland

Please send items for November Natterjack before 1st October to Colin Dack 12, Shipdham Road, Toftwood, Dereham, Norfolk. NR19 1JJ.



Larinioides sclopetarius
Cantley - May 1998

BOTANICAL MYSTERY IN WELLS!

In the 1970's, I photographed Pale Flax, *Linum bienne*, and Meadow Saxifrage, *Saxifraga granulata*, on the main sea wall in Wells. The former is quite rare in Norfolk, and the latter found in scattered localities, this being its only site in the Wells area. In 1978, after the February tidal surge and flood, the sea wall was completely rebuilt, using mainly local material from the harbour, with some imported topsoil. I suspect the latter included seeds of Viper's Bugloss, *Echium vulgare* and Weld, *Reseda luteola*, both of which appeared the following year, and have persisted ever since.

However, in the early 90's, the Pale Flax re-appeared, and now grows along both sides of the Beach Road, where its range has extended, the seed being perhaps carried along by car-produced eddies. This year, 1998, two separate colonies of Meadow Saxifrage are there as well – as far as I can recall, very near to where they used to grow 21 years ago! O.K., I agree that someone might have scattered seed, but who? – and why? And why just those two species, which had a foothold there in pre-flood days? My feeling is that they somehow survived, and have taken all this time to "work their way through". Any better ideas?

Paul Banham

A DEVICE TO ASSIST AN AILING MEMORY

As one gets older the memory tends to deteriorate and for some time I have been looking for some assistance. My interest is bryophytes which are not the easiest things to identify, being so small. I have always been interested in computers and so perhaps one of the small personal organisers would fill the bill. If one looks in the Argos catalogue there are so many different models that it is difficult to find out which would do the job.

What I wanted was a database with a record for each species of moss and liverwort. In Norfolk there are 260 mosses and 80 liverworts so I would need space for perhaps 500 records altogether to allow for those found elsewhere. For each record I needed 15 fields to enter information as follows: Species, Synonym, Type, Habitat, pH, County, Leaf, Nerve, Auricle, Cells, Stem, Capsule, Gemma, Colour and Notes. These were the fields for mosses; liverworts were slightly different.

The next thing to find out was the memory needed. Computer pundits in the society told me to multiply the number of records by the number of fields by the length of each field. The field size I did not know yet, so I estimated 100 characters. The calculation was therefore $500 \times 15 \times 100 = 750000$. This, theoretically, is the number of bytes of memory, or 3/4 of a megabyte.

In order to be able to retrieve information quickly, a search facility was required. It would be useful, for instance, to be able to search on the species first, but it would also be a help to be able to search on any field. If I found a moss with a hair point, to be able to display all the mosses with a hair point would be a help.

I started going round shops which sell these devices but could I find anyone who knew anything about them, not a hope. They are really sold to replace the great thick note books which high power executives carry around to remind them of appointments and to hold telephone numbers. Most of them have databases which are pre-programmed to contain: name, address, telephone, fax, etc., and these headings cannot be changed. Most do not have a search facility.

Then I went into Currys in Norwich and found a young lad to explain to me what they would all do and he took one out of a holster on his belt and explained that he had put every piece of kit in the shop on his and could recall the information on about four key taps. This organiser was called a Psion Series 1. He suggested that what would be best for me was a Psion Siena which was sold as a 512 kilobyte or a one megabyte; I therefore went for the latter.

One worry was batteries. It runs on two AAA batteries with a small watch battery as back-up. When you get low on power you are warned to fit new batteries. These last about 26 hours and you can check at any time how many hours have elapsed since the batteries were changed. The Siena switches off automatically after a pre-set time, which can be altered. When you switch on again, the computer is at the same point you left it; no loading up again as in a PC.

The second concern was back-up. With a PC you back-up your files onto floppy disks. Psion sell a cable to connect the Siena to your PC with software to make it work, which includes the database. This means that you can back-up onto the PC and even work on the databases on the PC and then copy them back to the Siena. It also gives you the facility of printing out the database or parts of it.

So far I have entered 365 mosses, 98 liverworts, 68 names and addresses with telephone numbers and 40 events in the diary and have only used about a third of the memory. It fits comfortably in a shirt pocket although I have bought a shoulder holster to keep it safe. It does exactly what I wanted.

John Mott

Wildlife Music. How about a Top Ten?

In the dim and distant past, the would be wildlife watcher went out into the field using his eyes and ears. A bird song or animal sound would be followed through the wood, or wherever, until the maker of the sound was discovered. The sound and appearance of the creature would be mentally filed, and, over a period of months and years, a personal memory bank of animals and birds would be built up until the person doing the study became part of the countryside in which they lived, its sights and sounds as much a part of life as eating and breathing.

Today, things have changed, with videos of the wildlife and CDs and tapes of all the sounds of the wild which make it possible for the observer to learn all these sights and sounds without even getting up from the fireside chair. With all these tapes and CDs perhaps it is time that we had a 'Top Ten' of wildlife music of all time. A combination of the music of our culture allied to the wildlife of the countryside? Here are a few suggestions.

"Nessun Dorma," (None shall sleep), from Turandot by Cy Fonaptera and the Bed Bugs.

"Little Boxes," by The Tit Family Singers.

"Bury Me Out on the Prairie," by Necro 4 Us and the Investigators.

"The Green Green Grass of Home," by Medd O'Brown and the Crambids.

"Something Tells Me I'm in to Somethin' Good," by Geo Troopies and the Dung Beetles.

"The Last Rose of Summer," by Avis Rosier.

"I dreamt that I dwelt in Marble Galls," by Andricus Kollari.

"The Humming Chorus," from Nabucco by Moss Keyteau and the Drones.

"They Cut Down the Old Pine Tree," by Cyrus Gigas and the Horntails.

"Speed the Plough," by the Vespas,

Alec Bull

DAMSELFLIES IN THE POND

I first noticed Large Red Damselflies emerging from our garden pond on 1st May. The pond in question is only one year old so I was rather surprised as the amount of detritus on the bottom must be very small and I would not have expected it to be suitable for them so early. But there they were, climbing up the iris stems as rather ugly little beasts and an hour later they had transformed into beautiful damselflies. One which I watched from the point of it starting to emerge, took just forty minutes until it flew. The wings when first meeting the light of day are very small but quickly reach their full size. The insect is very pale on first emerging, but as the wings gain length and strength so the rich colour is gained. Later in the day a pair were already egg laying on the surface plants. The wheel of life turned full circle yet again.

Tony Howes. June 1998

WOODPECKERS IN THE GARDEN

Recently we have had the pleasure of a Greater Spotted Woodpecker visiting the bird table in the garden. The blood red nape marks it as a male.

This is the first year that we have continued feeding through the spring and shredded suet has been the attraction for this particular visitor. It nearly always announces its arrival by a sharp, single call. Any other birds that are already on the table are bullied off by a threat display with wings spread. Even the wood pigeons give way to this aggression. He puts his head down sideways and using his beak almost like a shovel scoops as much suet as he can into his bill and then off he goes again.

I have followed the flight path back to the wood nearby and by this means found the nest which is in a dead silver birch tree, fifteen feet or so above the ground. The young could be heard chattering away inside. The distance in a straight line from nest to bird table would be about 400 yards.

I have, over the last week, managed to entice him down onto an old log drilled with a few holes to hold the suet. This was on the lawn in good light with a suitable background of conifers. With my hide erected 8 feet or so away, I managed to get what I hope will be some fine photographs of this colourful and welcome visitor.

Tony Howes. June 1998

LAPWING BREEDING NEAR NORWICH

While checking on great crested grebes on the river Yare at Whitlingham Lane near Norwich I came across some lapwing that were breeding on the marshes. Most of these marsh fields are now gravel workings and are already filling up with water but the one area left was being used by an estimated ten pairs of birds. In most cases the young were already wandering about on their own but with attentive parents close by. Any crows passing over the marsh would instantly be subjected to a 'sorting out' by several adults. I also saw a kestrel receive the same treatment.

The young from each nest could be seen from the car quite clearly. They kept roughly together but at times wandered some distance from each other. Through the binoculars they were small bundles of mottled fluff in shades of brown, cream and black. They had the same feeding manner as the parents - run a few steps, then stop, pick up an item of food, then run another few steps. Most pairs of adults seemed to have a full count of four chicks, so they were doing very well. Lapwings generally, like many of our birds these last few years, seem to be diminishing in number as a breeding species so it was pleasing to witness their success on this marsh.

In passing, it was interesting to note that at least eight little ringed plovers were displaying and flying around the newest of the gravel pits. The fact that heavy machinery is still being used, did not seem to alarm them at all. As there are plenty of shingle and sandy areas around the margins it's almost certainly going to be home for some more new babies in the near future.

Tony Howes. June 1998

CRIME PREVENTION ADVICE!

As everyone knows, Herons will rob you of the fish that you carefully nurture in the garden pond.

My pond, however, has never lost a fish although others around me regularly have early morning raids by Herons. I believe that garden centres will sell you a plastic Heron to place by the pond as the birds apparently prefer to feed alone. Consequently I also believe that if you build your pond close to a large window, as I did, the Heron will see its own reflection as it lands and be on his way without further ado!

Possibly a large mirror, placed at dusk and removed the next morning would be a preferable alternative to unsightly netting for those whose ponds are away from large windows?

Garth M. Coupland

