

ONGAR WILDLIFE SOCIETY

An Occasional Newsletter

August, 2005

Number 9

I hope everyone enjoyed the summer break. Don't forget to make entries in our record book of any important sightings over the season. All our summer outings are written up in the book and members are invited to record anything they personally see in and around the countryside.

At the AGM in June, the previous Committee were re-elected and Christine Feetham joined us as a new Committee member. We welcomed Christine and hope she will enjoy being one of our group. A delicious BBQ was served following the business of the AGM. We then donned our "thinking caps" to solve two of those brain-teasing types of quiz set by our Chairman, Rob (one on Film Titles and the other on Famous Sayings), and finally Rob took us on a short walk from Greensted, down Colemans Lane and through onto the bridlepath trying not to get us too muddy before our return to Repentance Cottage!

During the business of the meeting our Programme Secretary asked if any members had any ideas for the future programme. Suggestions had been the Scott Polar Institute and nearby Botanical Gardens, Orchids in the Lea Valley and a barge trip, and finally a visit to Pitsea Landfill site to see foxes and badgers. If you have any other suggestions or ideas for future talks, please let Alan Cook or any member of the Committee know.

WALKS



OWLS members on the seawall at Abbots Hall

Our walks this summer were quite well attended. We had a guided tour of the newly acquired RSPB site at Aveley and Wennington Marshes and also a guide took us

afternoon! However, undaunted we made our own way along the coast watching the many Avocets and their chicks, and further inland we were rewarded by sightings of the Marsh Harrier. One dedicated member waited for 1½ hours in a hide before spotting Bitterns in flight! Dr. Peter Ellis's talk on European Orchids at our April meeting had inspired us to search for the Southern Marsh Orchid, of which we found several examples at Minsmere.

Aveley and Wennington Marsh had been used formerly as a firing range by the MoD, and had only been acquired by the RSPB in 2000. Much work had already been done clearing the land and making it suitable for wildlife and a new Visitor Centre had yet to be built. It was hoped the whole area would be open to the public next year. We managed to avoid any remaining landmines and enjoyed our visit! We were able to see many different species of wading and marshland birds, especially an abundance of Shelducks. Our guide told us that already there were 16 pairs of nesting lapwings and the same number of nesting Redshank. It would be interesting to see the Reserve again when all the work was finally completed.

The coastal alignment scheme was the main attraction at Abbots Hall, and our guide explained the sea wall had been dug away in places to allow the tide in, to recreate the salt marshes where seawater plants could grow and eventually be harvested to help supplement the income required to maintain the whole site. Upon the original salt marsh there were large expanses of beautiful sea lavender. Abbots Hall is a site of historical interest and we saw the red earth of the Roman saltworkings whilst walking along the currently dried out earth of the salt marsh. Further inland the hedges had been replaced and field margins created along with beetlebanks, the beetlebanks providing habitat for the insects which eat the aphids as they appear on the organic wheat crop.

EWT AGM: This was in June at Abberton Reservoir not far from Abbots Hall Farm. OWLS is affiliated to the EWT, and I attended as Representative. Following the business of the AGM and short presentations by staff on the work of the Essex Wildlife Trust, several guided tours of the area had been arranged and I opted for the walk around the Reservoir. From one hide we were able to watch the Little Terns with their young on the Tern Raft which had been constructed as the Terns were such poor nest builders themselves, and the sides of the raft prevented the chicks from falling into the reservoir. The guide explained that a scheme was envisaged to convert some of the concrete bank around the reservoir into mud banks for wading birds. Later in the day we had an illustrated talk by Prof. Andrew Watkinson from the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research.

EPPING FOREST FIELD CENTRE COURSE on Dragonflies and Damselflies – 17th July, 2005.

I was fortunate to attend this course on a hot sunny day, and therefore was able to see so many dragonflies. The one-day course cost £30 which was good value as the Tutor was excellent, and a pub lunch was included! In the morning, following an introductory lecture, we were able to go outside to the pond areas at the Field Centre. We watched the Emperor Dragonfly "hawking up and down" catching food in flight, and at the edge of the pond two Southern Hawker Dragonflies were emerging from their larva cases. The Azure Damselfly's habitat was at the pond edge and the

Common Blue Damselflies were swarming towards the centre. Also we spotted the Ruddy Darter and the Common Darter Dragonfly.

In the afternoon we travelled in the Field Centre van to a site in Epping Forest where we could watch the Brown Hawker Dragonfly, the Black-tailed Skimmer and the Four-spotted Chaser, and the Blue-tailed Damselfly. We then travelled on to a premier site for dragonflies at Cornmill Meadows, near Waltham Abbey. Here where the Cornmill stream meets the Old River Lea there were many beautiful Banded Demoiselles, an iridescent damselfly with striking wing spots on the males giving them a flickering helicopter effect in flight. They appeared almost tropical in the sunshine. Here we also saw the Large Red Damselfly and the less common White-legged Damselfly, the latter having a "ghost-like" appearance. We then returned to the Field Centre having enjoyed a very worthwhile day.

Course students had travelled from Sussex, Norfolk and London, some being in full-time employment as Wardens of Wildlife Reserves or Voluntary Wardens and others just attending as a result of a keen interest to learn more about identification of the beautiful species of Dragonflies (our Tutor told us he felt sorry for Lecturers on insects such as spiders!). The Epping Forest Field Centre is situated just behind the Kings Oak Hotel, High Beech, Loughton, and is managed by the Field Studies Council. Courses are run throughout the year on a variety of wildlife topics, so keep a look out at our future meetings for information on courses being held at the Centre. We are fortunate to live so close to Epping Forest and to facilities such as these.

Are Buzzards Breeding Locally?

Birds sometimes get media headlines. When they do, it is usually because either a rare bird has been observed or the numbers of a once common bird are deemed to be in decline. Perhaps less newsworthy are the breeding successes, but these are often outnumbered by the reports of a continuing decline. However, the buzzard in Essex is one such success.

Recently, on a July afternoon walk between Terling and Little Leighs, a buzzard rose from his perch, circled briefly and chased off along a hedge line. With its huge wing span, the buzzard represents a commanding authority, and this size makes identification routine.

In the past years buzzards have been seen over Greensted. They have usually been observed characteristically wheeling high in the sky. Their mewing, identified as a repeated 'peeee-uu', can carry to the ground from this height. However, a few days after the earlier walk, buzzards appeared over Greensted. A family of four (or five, trees obscured a firm count), probably two adults and two (or three) young, circled at low level in a disorganized manner. After a short display, the family group disappeared towards Draper's Corner.

Have buzzards been seen over Greensted or Chipping Ongar earlier in the year? Have they bred locally? Are there recent sightings? If you can confirm any sighting please inform Tanya Welford or Rob Brooks. The intention is then to inform the Essex Birdwatching Society, which is maintaining a record of such observation.

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The buzzard is increasing within Essex. Numbers are thought to be at their highest level for more than 200 years. Around ten years ago *The Essex Bird Report* consistently reported:

“Slowly increasing though scarce visitor at all seasons. Has Bred.”

In the most recent report, the Report for 2003, the buzzard has been revised to:

“Slowly increasing though uncommon visitor at all seasons. Recent colonist.”

Twelve pairs were reported as breeding within Essex during that year. We hope that the buzzard will be allowed to prosper.

OWLS Committee Day Out



My conscious tells me that you must be let into the secret. The OWLS Committee have a Summer Day Out. Last year a walk followed the water meadows from Dedham to Flatford, then Flatford Mill and back, concluding with a stroll round Dedham and the church. This year on Saturday, 23rd July, we followed the *Three Forests Way* from Hatfield Broad Oak to Hatfield Forest.

Starting at St. Mary the Virgin, Hatfield Broad Oak, the *Three Forests Way* may be picked up at a gate at the W end of the churchyard. There are some convenient parking places at the end of the churchyard and along the short lane continuing from the post office. From this park, it is down the incline to Pincey Brook at the bottom of the valley. The walk then follows the brook N, and with just a short section along a quiet lane then enters Hatfield Forest at the Bush End gate.

The optional route then leads through Gravel Pit Coppice to the lake, usually populated with a variety of duck – a little tern was also spotted. Those of you who visit the forest will have seen the Shell House clad in polythene, but the restoration has now been completed. In the illustration, the committee can be seen advertising the Hatfield Broad Oak sausage! After lunch, it was a walk to the forest warren then out of the forest through the Woodside Greengate and back to Hatfield Broad Oak and

a short investigation of the churchyard and village. The church is interesting because of its earlier association with a Benedictine priory on the site.

The walking is easy and quiet. Hatfield Broad Oak has its charm... and its sausages. Hatfield Forest is a unique remnant of Royal Forest. The round trip is about seven to eight miles dependent on the diversions encountered, and there are route options at Woodside Green. Parking is secluded.

This year Christine Feetham, as a new committee member, joined the party. You will be pleased to hear that the Treasurer kept the Society finances padlocked and subscriptions will not have to rise next year as a consequence!

Absence of Otters in the River Roding.

As mentioned in a previous Newsletter some of our members have been carrying out otter surveys, and the following Report has been sent to us by Mark Iley, the Essex Biodiversity Projects Officer:

“First I would like to thank everyone who has taken part this year, thank you for your time and effort. Without it we would not be able to achieve such extensive coverage of the county. Sorry to those who have found only negative sites, but those results are important too in forming a picture of the whole county.

A rough summary of the results shows that the Chelmer, Colne and Stour remain key rivers that have positive sites through their length and there are positive sites on the Cam and Stort. Crossing into Suffolk the Box and the Brett also have positive sites. There were no positives from the Roding this year but coverage was incomplete on this and some other rivers. There are occasional positive sites occurring elsewhere but no concentrations.

There have been anecdotal reports of otters in the south east of the county, the Dengie/Crouch/Foulness areas, but no field signs have been confirmed. Additional survey points will be added next year to cover these areas.

Unfortunately I can report two dead otters this year that I am aware of – there are undoubtedly others unreported.

The first was in February on the A12 at Braiswick to the west of Colchester where St. Botolphs brook, a tributary of the R. Colne is culverted under the A12. The body could not be recovered, as it was too dangerous. The police said they would do it but were distracted by other events and it did not get done. The body remained there for some months clearly visible and was finally moved by the recent heavy rains.

Discussions are ongoing about otter fencing this short stretch of road as we have had otter deaths here in previous years.

In June an otter was killed near the Army & Navy roundabout at Chelmsford where the road crosses the R. Chelmer. The corpse was recovered by a member of the public and taken to the Environment Agency offices from where it made its way to Wales for post mortem.

I will write to everyone on my list early next year to confirm sites etc. and forward the full report. The training session will take place in March as in previous years. Please contact me if you no longer wish to be involved in the surveying. Thanks again for your help."

Marcus Dain was one of our OWLS members taking part in the survey of the River Roding and Marcus tells us that Mark Iley agreed with his (Marcus's) suggestion that the absence of sightings on the Roding may be related to the major pollution of eighteen months ago, now that it is behind us, otters may eventually return. Marcus will be checking again throughout next spring. Mark Iley did not think that the vegetation which chokes parts of the river across the entire width is too much of an impediment to otters returning.

FORTHCOMING ATTRACTIONS

Lee Valley Regional Park: I think at the time of going to press our Lee Valley Walk will be about to take place or will have taken place. This is on Sunday, the **21st August**, leaving from the Lorry Park (opposite Two Brewers), Ongar at 10.30 a.m.

September meeting: Following the summer break, our first meeting will be on **Monday, the 19th September** and the lecture will be "**On the Trail of the Crane**" by Ralph Todd. The crane was a premier roast on Elizabethan aristocratic tables, eventually becoming extinct as a resident species. For the following 400 years it was a temporary British resident, but now it seems the big bird is here to stay. At our September meeting we will hear about its miraculous comeback.

17th October: Hedgehogs by Barbara Edwards.

21st November: Gunpowder Mills to Nature Reserve by Dr. Peter Adams.

12th December: The Flora of Mt. Kenya and Mt. Kilimanjaro.

OWLS Committee

Rob Brooks (Chairman) Tel. 01277 364305

Tanya Welford (Secretary) Tel. 01277 363947

John Turnbull (Treasurer)

Allan Cook (Programme Secretary)

Anne Brooks

Richard Cook

Mike Devonald

Rosina Lacombe

Christine Feetham

*Rob Brooks,
Chairman*

*Tanya Welford
Secretary*