

# Bishop's Stortford & District Natural History Society's Newsletter *The Wildside*

Spring 1999

Volume 3 Issue 1

The society meets fortnightly on winter Friday evenings at 7.30 for 7.45pm.

At present the venue is at the Sixth Form Centre at Birchwood School, Parsonage Lane, Bishop's Stortford.

There are reports and observations from members. This is then usually followed by a talk from a guest speaker. There is a coffee break and the meeting ends at 10.00pm.

There are well organised walks to places of interest in the summer months

The Bird Group have informal meetings at the Bricklayers' Arms in Hadham Road on the first Monday of the month. For more information on Field trips please contact Arthur Curtis on 01279 651687

## President Mr John Fielding

The Society held its AGM in December. The retiring Chairman, John Godfree, gave an account of the activities and events of the past year and thanked all those who had contributed to the success of the Society. Although the membership is healthy, there continues to be concern over the lack of new members, particularly those in the younger age groups.

The year was marked by the untimely death of Tony Waugh. Tony had been a member of the Society for many years and had served on the committee. He was a true countryman, having considerable factual knowledge as well as an innate understanding of the natural order of the countryside. As Farm Manager on Patmore Hall Estate, he was invaluable to those members of the Society who undertook a detailed survey of the flora and fauna of the Estate in 1985-7. Their work was made so much easier by his willing cooperation and the contact resulted in Tony joining the Society. His expertise was greatly respected and he was always ready to offer help and advice. Being essentially a practical man he had considerable experience of working tools and equipment.

Tony, and his wife Sue, were in the fortunate position of having a home on Patmore Heath which encompasses the nature reserve managed by the Herts. and Middx. Wildlife Trust. He took seriously the responsibility that this entailed and monitored changes on the Heath as well as being involved in active conservation work. On several occasions members had been able to take advantage of his knowledge during field trips in the area. Thanks to his, and Sue's, hospitality one of the summer House Meetings was held at his home where Tony had created a garden to enable them to enjoy the wildlife in which they took so much interest. This had been a labour of love since the area had been part field but the number of birds visiting the garden was an indication of how successful he had been.

Tony had suffered ill health over a number of years before he died but he was not one to complain. His enthusiasm particularly with regard to the seasons was almost infectious. To him a grey, wintry sky was not an occasion for gloom; this was nature following its course and therefore a subject of interest. He kept rainfall records on the Heath and a report of the Society's own records from Stansted are printed elsewhere in this leaflet. It is sad that there can no longer be a comparison between the two sets of figures. He will be greatly missed.

J.K.C.

*If you are interested then please come along.*

**The annual subscription to the society is £10.00 payable to the Treasurer in January.**

**Visitors at any evening meeting are asked for a donation of 50 pence.**

**For general information please contact the hon. secretary**

**Mary Tappenden  
tel: 01920 822419**

## Ornithological Section Report

The Bird Group led no fewer than 14 outings during the year ranging from local visits to an overseas trip. The year started with the traditional outing to North Norfolk on 17th January, where we saw **Snow Bunting**, huge numbers of **Knot**, **Slavonian Grebe**, **Barn Owl** and a pair of **Hen Harrier**. On 21st February a visit to the Ouse Washes and the North Norfolk coast yielded **Tree Sparrow**, **Water Pipit** and **Great White Egret**, whilst on 27th February - 1st March, new ground was broken with an overseas trip to the Lac du Der / Chantecoq area of France, where highlights included **Black Woodpecker** and huge numbers of **Common Crane**.

Other outings (with highlights) comprised Rutland Water and Eyebrook; Old Hall Marshes and Abberton; Hatfield Forest (**Nightingale**); Norfolk (**Stone Curlew**, **Laughing Gull**, **Collared Pratincole**, **Quail**); Bempton and Blacktoft; Dunwich, Minsmere and Buckenham (**Dartford Warbler**, **Bearded Tit**, **Bittern**); Oare Marshes and Dungeness (**Long-billed Dowitcher**, **White-rumped Sandpiper**, **Black Tern** and no fewer than **8 Little Egret**); Landguard and Bawdsey (**Spotted Sandpiper**); Lackford and Titchwell (**Grey Phalarope**) and finally Horsey Mere (**Common Crane**, **Hen Harrier**).

Unusual records in the Bishop's Stortford area included a **Pied Flycatcher** (the first since 1985), whilst regular monitoring confirmed the virtual disappearance of **Tree Sparrow** and **Corn Bunting**. Members were again involved with the Hatfield Forest survey of breeding species, which will continue in the future, together with a **Lapwing** survey. Such activities assist in the compilation of accurate statistics of local species.

Sales of the latest edition of 'The Birds of Bishop's Stortford and District' have slowed down but the publication was a success in financial terms, with revenue to the Society exceeding the Society's initial outlay by more than £100. External sponsorship, however, remains essential if we are to maintain the same high standard in future editions.

Chris. Swan

**The Bird Group meet on the first Monday of each month ( or the second Monday if the first is a Bank Holiday ) at 8pm at the Bricklayers Arms on the Hadham Road. Meetings are completely informal and new members and friends are welcome.**

### RAINFALL

There was much welcome rain in 1998 although February had only 0.2 ins. April was the wettest month with 4.68 ins followed by an unseasonably wet September with 3.68 ins.

The total rainfall as measured in Stansted was **30.06 ins** and the winter rainfall 13.89 ins.

The last 2 years have recorded only 18.91 ins & 18.8 ins respectively with a winter total of only 6.93 ins last year. This year, ditches are running again and the Stort is in flood. We hope that the spectre of stand-pipes in the streets has receded — at least for the near future.

**Rain was recorded on 189 days last year.**

### BATS

On 16th July 1998 there was a successful 'Bat Evening' in Hatfield Forest. It was led by Vicki Forbes who is the National Trust Estate Manager and also a registered bat worker. Some 15 people attended and both **Daubentons** and **Pipistrelles** were seen and heard.

In August, at a house meeting on the edge of Birchanger Wood, members were able to use their bat detectors but on this occasion only **Pipistrelles** were identified.

It is hoped to arrange more activities in 1999 for those interested in the bats in this area.

The secretary will have details.

## Botanical Section Report

Throughout 1998 the Society has been engaged in botanical recording in W. Essex, in preparation for a new County Flora. Progress is slow due to the very limited number of active botanists who are prepared to help. However TL 42 has been surveyed on a 1Km square basis and work is progressing on TL 43, TL 51 & 52.

Already we can see changes since the last County Flora was published in 1970. There has been a marked decline in some arable land species and an increase in alien weeds, for example. One of the most notable changes has been the increase in coastal plants found locally; **Plantago Coronopus** ( Buck's-horn Plantain ), **Cochlearia Danica** ( Danish Scurvy Grass ) and **Puccinellia Distans** ( Reflexed Salt-marsh Grass ) all now grow commonly alongside main roads due the salt which is spread to prevent icing.

**Any one with an interest in botany would be very welcome either to help with this recording or simply to accompany those with more specialist knowledge. Extra pairs of eyes are always useful . Trips are made both at weekends and during the week. The secretary has the information on whom to contact.**

Charles Watson

## Moth Recording

An article in the last newsletter gave details of the work that has been done locally by the lepidopterists. As with the botanical group, there are few active recorders within the Society and volunteers would be welcome.

**On suitable nights there are field trips using a mercury vapour light run off a generator. Please contact the secretary for information .**

## Fungus Foray 15th October 1998

A local fungus foray was led by Charles and Shirley in an area with mature oaks and beeches although the first interesting observation was of a strawberry tree; **Arbutus unedo**.

There were numerous specimens of fungi especially of the species **Lactaria**, the milk caps, which exude drops of milky-white liquid when damaged. **Lactarius quietus** is the **Oak Milk Cap**. A smaller cap fungus with a greenish tinge was identified as **Hygrocybe psittacina** or **Parrot Wax Cap**. Several **Clitocybes** were found; they have decurrent gills and the caps are frequently funnel-shaped. **Lepiota rhacoides**, the **Shaggy Parasols** were seen in various stages of development and were very common. They have rings on their stems and scales on their caps which make them quite distinctive. A delightful find was **Helvella crispa** or **Common White Helvella**. This is saddle-shaped and deeply lobed and bore an exact resemblance to the illustrations in the books. **Puffballs** were common, particularly the **Prickly Puffball**, **Lycopodium perlatum** which has an outer layer of short pyramidal warts especially dense on the head. **Common Earth Balls**, **Scleroderma citrinum** were also found, as were several species of **Boletus**.

Bracket fungi were present on many of the tree stumps including **Coriolus versicolour**, the **many-zoned polypore** but the **Giant Polypore** , **Meripilus giganteus** was also found.

An unusual find on a beech stump was the delightfully named **Plums and Custard**, more correctly known as **Tricholomopsis rutilans**, a yellow mushroom covered in reddish-purple downy tufts.

**If you wish to be notified of future fungus forays, please give your tel.no. to the Secretary**

## Sawbridgeworth Marsh Update

The generally unsettled conditions during 1998 have meant that Sawbridgeworth Marsh water levels have been higher than the past few years, although spring flow levels on the peat bank have continued to decrease throughout the summer and are only now starting to recover. Heavy rain at Easter caused spectacular flooding for several days.

Work has continued all year, despite inclement weather. The **Osier** bed was coppiced and the cut withies used to extend the bed over a large area of rank vegetation. An area of sedgebed was cut, with the help of the newly restored Allen scythe, between February and May. This provided both nesting and feeding areas for **Snipe** and adults were seen both drumming and calling to young in this area in late spring. An area of thin reedbed invading the peatbank was cut repeatedly through the summer in an attempt to eradicate it, as it is infested with nettles and goosegrass. Hopefully, the area will return to an appearance similar to the remainder of the peatbank within the next few years.

The flora on this part of the marsh has been spectacular this year, with good displays of **Southern** and **Early Marsh Orchids**, although the **30 Bee Orchids** present in 1997 did not reappear. **Ragged Robin**, **Cowslip** and **Marsh Valerian** also seem to have increased.

More recently a number of pollarded **Crack Willows**, both on the riverbank and in Little Valet Homes, have been recut in keeping with our plan for a rotational cycle of five years. Most of the loppings will be put to good use, including the repair of sunken pathways, planting of new pollards to replace the ageing ones, and the creation of willow revetments into eroded sections of the riverbank. These constructions of willow brushwood, tightly woven around willow posts, themselves dug into the riverbank, effectively slow erosion by acting as silt traps. The poles, being rooted into the bank below the waterline, also grow, providing additional strength.

Notable records include a **Water Rail's** nest with 8 eggs in April, a **Grasshopper Warbler** holding territory in the grazing enclosures, a **Turtle Dove** present in July and three young **Hobbies** overhead during September. Encouraging signs of **Water Vole** presence are still being recorded and **Grass Snakes** have been seen regularly.

It is planned to finish the five year surveys of both **Southern Marsh Orchid** and **Cowslip** populations within a 30 x 30 m square of the peatbank during the coming year. Other survey work is likely to include extensive mammal trapping, with special attention being paid to the **Harvest Mouse**, an Essex Wildlife Trust indicator species for this reserve, Although certainly present, our knowledge of its population and distribution are sparse.

Andrew Sapsford ( warden ) December 1998

### Working Parties

Work is carried out on the Reserve every Sunday morning - weather permitting.

Starting time is 9.30 am and work usually finishes around 11.30 am.

Stout boots and protective clothing are recommended.

For further information, please contact the Warden on 01279 725017