

The Naturalist.

Newsletter of the BSDNHS

No 2. December 2006

From Bob Reed:

Welcome to the second edition of the newsletter. With this newsletter you will receive a reminder from the treasurer regarding renewal of your annual subscription. Currently, the society is walking a financial tightrope. Evening meetings in the winter are expensive to run and I would urge you to renew your subscriptions if we are to maintain a full winter programme as we would like.

Since I last wrote, the summer programme has passed by with varying degrees of success. Shirley Watson's afternoon walks to look at the flora of the Stansted area and the Fungus Foray were attended by a core of members. The Moth trapping in Hatfield Forest was attended by five members and no one at all from outside in spite of posters placed at the entrance and by the busy area at the Shell House. The small mammal trapping was more successful and was thoroughly enjoyed by the seven or so members who took part. We caught Wood Mice, Bank Voles, Common Shrew and Pygmy Shrew. A special attraction was the evening visit to the Green Man in Takely for refreshments afterwards! Why didn't more of you come?

Summer programme 2007. The committee are planning to run a full summer programme next year. If you are willing to hold a House Meeting one evening then please let me know as soon as possible.

The future of the society?

In spite of all our efforts this summer to publicise and promote the society we have recruited no new members. A lot of effort went into the exhibit at the Hatfield Forest Wood Fair. It was a thoroughly enjoyable occasion for the members that helped and I say 'thank you very much' to them. We gave away a lot of 'fliers' about the society and there was a lot of interest but no-one followed-up. Even people who contacted the society as a result of seeing the posters, and who had information given or sent to them personally, have not materialised. It is very difficult to understand why we do not attract and retain more members from the 35,000 plus residents of Bishop Stortford, not including other towns and villages in the area. Looking closely at the evening meetings paints a rather depressing picture. We are grateful to the core of members who continue to attend, but meetings these days are sadly lacking in exhibits and specimens and we no longer receive any correspondence to speak of. Those of us who attend regularly enjoy the evenings but have to admit that they follow what many would consider to be an out of date and stale format. The question 'What do we do?' was the main item of discussion at the last committee meeting. We can put our heads in the sand, look the other way and continue as we are. If we do this we are likely to

see the society fail in the next few years at most. Most of us would hate to see this happen as we thoroughly enjoy the meetings as well as the opportunity to meet people with shared interests in the natural world. Several options were discussed at the meeting, firstly we could become a field society and not have the costly winter programme. This might work but we would probably lose what interest and coherence we have at present. In Sawbridgeworth some of you may be aware of a group called the Stort Valley Project. This group was formed some years ago and focuses on local issues which may or may not be of an environmental nature. They raise the profile of such cases, write letters and generally make people aware. They have been successful in a number of projects locally. Nowadays, people are not so interested in the academic side of nature but they are often interested in environmental issues. One thing we are not short of in this area are proposals for development. Would it not be more attractive to potential members if we were seen to be involved in local issues of an environmental nature? Should we be being proactive and writing to bodies such as the environment agency to voice our concern? It was also felt by some that the term 'Natural History Society' was in itself a turn off for most people. Maybe we should consider giving the society a new name and a new image? Constitutionally, this would be difficult but why not something along the lines of BSNHS Wildlife Focus Group? Running a group like this would need work and effort - are we prepared to do this as a society? It would be essential to recruit new blood. Reporting back on local wildlife issues could be the basis for meetings and we could still retain our programme of speakers and academic interest. Some of you may say that we lack expertise but we have our common sense and an interest in nature and there are probably more resources within the society than we realise. Some of the topics which we could focus on as annual projects could be 'Surveying the spread of alien waterweed species in the River Stort' and asking the Environment Agency what can be done about it? Still with the Stort, there has been extensive dredging through Sawbridgeworth, apparently British Waterways do not do any ecological monitoring - 'Does anything live in the Stort anymore?'. The proposed bypass at Little Hadham has reared its head again, did we not ought to be able to comment on the threats to wildlife from the prospective routes? Nobody seems to know what is happening at the wet land area at Thorley Wash. The bird group have a lot of records but did we not ought to be in a position to make relevant comments if and when any proposals for development of any type the proposed? The Countryside Management Service would like us to be involved in monitoring the butterfly population in Pishiobury Park to check the effectiveness of their new grazing regime. And so the list goes on. There is a lot of local interest in topics like these and we may be able to pull in interested individuals. It could be contentious but it might give the society a new impetus and respect locally. The Stort Valley Project committee would be very receptive to us affiliating with them as their area extends from Harlow to Twyford Lock. The committee are thinking of holding an exhibition next year to celebrate our 70th year. Why not use this opportunity to try and relaunch and revitalise the society? Some of you may have strong views either way on these points but please write and let the committee know. (Bob Reed, 32 Springhall Road, SBW. CM21 9ET or coppicereed@hotmail.com)

On a lighter note, David Sampson has sent me an account of the Camberwell Beauty butterfly he saw in his garden. Please let me have any other contributions for this newsletter and let's make it a society publication.

15 August 2006

It proved a real Red Letter day for me today. I mean it's not everyday when one gets to record a rare and spectacular species in ones own garden. But it happened today; at 1.30pm precisely.

I'd already noticed several butterflies flitting by the front room window minutes before; so I thought I'd just take a peak out of the kitchen window, as the Sun was bathing one of our buddleias in a beautiful, golden light. Suddenly, my attention was drawn to a movement at the rear of the buddleia - a large (no huge) dark-winged butterfly, with a wide creamy-white border along the outer edge of the insect's wings. I knew immediately what it was, even though I'd never actually seen the species anywhere before..... it was a spanking adult CAMBERWELL BEAUTY!!

Unfortunately, the sighting brought about a major lack of judgement on my part, and instead of remaining at the window to see what the butterfly did next, I tore upstairs to retrieve my camera, whilst at the same time hollering to my father to the effect that it was a very rare butterfly and he should come out double quick!! But by the time I'd returned, the butterfly had high-tailed it away to the East and out of sight; and I never even got the chance to record - digitally - the sighting for posterity. Still, despite failing to get any kind of photograph, I was at least wholly content that I'd not erred in my identification; I was well chuffed.

I stayed around in the garden for the best part of the ensuing three hours - camera poised for action - in the vain hope that the butterfly would return, but I was to be disappointed on that score. But two separate Hummingbird Hawk Moths on each of our buddleias - one being successfully photographed - provided some compensation.

All in all, a truly fabulous record, and the envy of many I'm sure. All I needed to do now was to get the powers that be to accept the record..... and arguably just as important to get my local birding/butterfly/dragonfly colleagues to believe me; which I'm pleased to say I subsequently did!!

10 September 2006

One could be forgiven for thinking that one couldn't possibly match the excitement of seeing a Camberwell Beauty in one's own garden (see 15 August); but I think I might have topped even that.

The weather was set to be fine and warm with a light southerly or south/easterly breeze on Saturday 9 September; so I was slightly aggrieved (although that's probably a touch strong) that I'd already promised to be available to help with the Bishop's Stortford Natural History Society exhibit at the Woodfest at Hatfield Forest - which actually went very well, with a good contingent of people showing a modicum of interest in the Society's activities (though disappointingly, no firm commitments to join). But with private arrangements for Sunday morning falling through at the last

moment, I decided that with another warm, sunny day on the cards, it was right for a foray along the River Stort, through to Thorley Wash.

Arriving at Southmill Lock, my attention was immediately taken with the relatively high numbers of Migrant Hawker dragonflies present; so I took the opportunity to attempt further photographic close-ups of the insects in flight, with only a modicum of success. A pair of Grey Wagtails preying on crane flies were a welcome distraction for a while, before my attention turned to attempting close-ups of several huge Common Carp which were browsing together near the surface; these really are enormous fish, and were surprisingly 'tame' and fairly co-operative.

Having temporarily sated my thirst for photographic delights, I continued along the Stort, whilst every now and again cursing the numbers of dog walkers and in particular the kayaking Club, some of whose members were displaying their skills between Southmill Lock and Twyford Lock half a mile or so further on. I know I shouldn't really begrudge them their bit of fun, but from a purely personal point of view such activity only serves to disturb the tranquil atmosphere along that part of the Stort in particular; and that's not much fun if one cannot take advantage of such tranquillity by photographing it; natural charms. But luckily, there was very little such 'disturbance' once I crossed the road at Twyford Lock, and I continued on with renewed hope.

I hadn't gone far along the towpath, when I happened to look down, along the grassy margins, and saw this noticeable sizeable (at least for Britain) in its orb web amongst the tussocks; and immediately had to catch my breath - for here was my first ever sighting of a Wasp Spider (*argiope bruennichi*); a species which only relatively recently has colonised parts of Southern England. And what a stunner it was, with its distinctive yellow and black bands along the underside (which was the only view I could get - otherwise I would have had to have waded into the Stort; something I didn't even consider). This particular one was a brute of a female; the male being a tenth of the size and with no distinguishing features as such. In fact, the male was cowering lower down grass, keeping well away from his mate, in the event that she chose to consume him; which the females are known to do, following mating! I felt so privileged, since it had been an ambition of mine to see this particular species of spider since it was first discovered in Essex several years ago.

It didn't matter if I didn't see anything else of note that morning..... nothing could take the place of my discovery; it might even be the first record for Hertfordshire (though I doubt it; in fact it has since been established as an Essex record), but certainly the first for Thorley Wash. I was well pleased.

David Sampson