

The Naturalist.
Newsletter of the BSDNHS
No 13.December 2011.

From Bob Reed:

Dear Member,

First of all a big thank you to all of those of you who have supported the society throughout the year. The society is only as good as its members and the more input we can have from you at both Winter and Meetings the more successful and interesting we shall be. As already outlined in the spring Newsletter it has continued to be a really peculiar year weatherwise, and unusually dry spring followed by an indifferent Summer and an equally dry and unusually mild autumn with above average temperatures up until the last few days. There is quite a lot to go into this newsletter so first of all a quick roundup on the summer programme. April's visits have already been described and we continued with a successful moth light trapping evening in Pishiobury Park, a good number of members attended and we were entertained not only by the moths but also by a good number of bats early on in the evening. As in previous years the Big Forest Watch went ahead starting at 7.30a.m. as before it was a very enjoyable morning and is now making a really valid contribution to the bird records in the Forest at this time of year. Chris Swan has provided a detailed report which I have included later. Similarly, members attending the Amwell Nature Reserve were not disappointed and had an excellent visit. Once again I am very pleased that individuals have contributed records and accounts of the visit which I have included in a separate section. These reports give a really good picture of society events and whilst not wanting to make any one individual responsible, it would be good if someone were to take it on themselves to write an account and keep a record for this newsletter later. I am sure it would inform and encourage other members to attend future visits. Due to the very early nature of the year visit to Balls Wood was if anything a little bit late. We did see a number of butterflies and two of us were fortunate to have a good sighting of a White Admiral which was the real aim of the visit. Unfortunately, the trip to Hatfield Forest for dragonflies had to be cancelled because of wet weather and has been rescheduled for 2012. We had a guided tour of the Aubrey Buxton Nature Reserve on the evening of August 5th and work shown the large amount of work that had been done on the ponds in particular. As in previous years we joined with the Coppicing Volunteers at the Hatfield Forest Wood Fest, it proved to be a very busy weekend, we had been given a good position and had a large number of visitors. The society's contribution was to use a variety of seeds, etc to allow children to build models of insects on wooden blocks using large volumes of glue - some impressive models were made and everyone enjoyed themselves in a good weather. Small mammal trapping at Rushey Mead proved an equally successful evening, 18 traps were put down and resulted in a catch of . The evening was well supported with the results being provided by David Parsons. We did have a really enjoyable afternoon. Finally, I would like to invite as many of you as possible to contribute to the running of the society, the sort of things I have in mind are contributing articles no matter how small or apparently insignificant to this newsletter and also to revive the idea of bringing specimens or objects of natural history interest to the evening meetings. This item used to be on the agenda in the old days but with the smaller room it has not proved easy, however, we now have a good-sized table which is moved outside in the break and can easily accommodate any you might care to bring.

Programme secretary.

After putting together a Winter Talks Programme for a large number of years, Carol Wylde will be standing down at the next AGM. We are very pleased to welcome Gemma Kiff who has volunteered to take her place and we will be working with Carol to put together the 2012-2013 programme. What I would ask is that we give Gemma every support particularly in terms of suggestions and ideas for speakers. I have done this job myself before and know that you need a continual supply of ideas and suggestions to together the sort of programme that we all enjoy.

Kingfisher Nest Bank. I visited RSPB Amwell in early June and was very impressed by the success of their artificial Kingfisher Bank which I gather raises two broods every year. As the National Trust has been very good to the Society both in terms of offering us a free meeting room and also providing photocopying facilities free of

charge then I thought it would be good for us to give something back in return. Kingfishers have always traditionally been present on the Lake in the Forest and a quick reconnoitre showed that there could be a suitable artificial bank site at the west end of the Lake. The committee was in general agreement that we would be willing to use our funds to provide materials for the construction of such a bank and that the Trust would provide volunteer labour from the various groups that work on the Forest throughout the year. The bank had to be planned and the site surveyed and because it is a SSSI then a Consent had to be or obtained from Natural England. All this has taken time and the Consent did not come through until late November. In order to avoid damage to the SSSI then they can't Consent ran until the end of February. After consulting with various staff members and taking into consideration the fact that the weather could easily change for the worse and that we need to sort out some final details regarding the construction, it was thought best to postpone the project until late summer/early autumn 2012. This would give everybody a good opportunity to get properly organised and the whole project planned out.

Barn Owl Box News.

Of the six boxes we put up in the Stort Valley last year, two had been used by Barn Owls as evidence by pellets. One box had a Stock Doves nest in it. Both the existing boxes at Thorley, one held a roosting adult owl, and the other sadly, had a deserted Barn Owl nest, there were 10 eggs which had not been incubated and it looks as if one of the parents had been killed. There was evidence of successful breeding in a hollow Oak near to one of the boxes that we had put up ourselves.

Lee Valley Regional Park Nature Improvement Area.

Many of you will be familiar with the situation in the past where the Stort Valley is at the extreme edge of both the local Wildlife Trust Areas. For this reason although we have some good nature reserves in the valley both Trusts always seem to have been reluctant to have further involvement in the area. Recently, however, the Lee Valley Regional Park has applied for a government funded Nature Improvement Area grant of £600,000. The Area extends to the whole of the Lee catchment including all the tributaries i.e. Stort, Beane, Mimram, Ash and Rib. I have been representing our society at the various meetings and am pleased to say that the bid has reached the last 20 out of the 76 applicants. Staff in the various bodies are now working frantically to get the final application in by 16th December, the final 20 will then be reduced to 15 and of the 1512 bids will be chosen for funding. A wide variety of projects are being put forward all of which will benefit us in the Stort Valley. What the NIA has done is to highlight and bring to the fore many aspects of the stort Valley which previously had been to a great degree ignored. The Environment Agency is recognizing the stort as a special area due to the intact floodplain which is an increasing rarity with rivers of these days - they are due to designate the Stort Valley as a Wildlife Site. All this activity represents a really positive move forward and we can look forward to an exciting future where I believe the society should and could be in the forefront of its development. Part of the proposals include a Conservation Working Group who will undertake restoration projects in the Stort Valley and I would hope that as many of you as possible would be willing to take part in a volunteer group of this kind. More details later especially when the result of the bid is known early in the year!

Update on what is happening in the Stort Valley.

- The changeover from the Environment Agency of Thorley Flood Pound to be Heart and Middlesex Wildlife Trust is largely complete and the construction of a new access bridge in Spellbrook Lane is due to start in the New Year. The reserve is to be called Thorley Wash and we shall be doing some surveying there as part of our summer programme in 2012.
- Work is going ahead to restore Hallingbury Marsh, this is a SSSI in under a report condition due to encroaching scrub. The programme will be fairly brutal and expect to see a lot of apparent destruction in the next few months. The area has already been fenced off, a new sluice to control water levels is to be installed and they whole area is to be grazed by Koniks ponies.
- Plans are being put forward with the backing of the Wildlife Trusts to turn what is called Sawbridgeworth Meadows, better known locally as Mill Fen, into a community wetland nature reserve. This project is in its infancy and is a long-term with excellent of objectives.

- Gilston and Eastwick have a community project which has allowed them to use the Big Lottery Fund to purchase 40 barn owl boxes. These are currently being made up and will be installed all the way down the Stalled Valley from Hazel End down to Netherhall farm at the top of the Lea Valley.
- The mink control programme goes ahead strongly with 20 trapping sites on the Stort catchment as a whole. Mink seemed to be under control but the effort has to be ongoing.
- No signs of the return of Water Voles as yet.
- There have been sporadic records of the otter visiting the very lowest part of the Stort Valley.
- Natural England have a new project called Catchment Sensitive Farming, this applies to the Stort and Upper Roding. These areas have been identified as having a very high import of chemicals from farming into the rivers. The project aims to raise awareness and to get farmers to take measures to reduce their impact. As a spin-off from this there is planned to be a programme of phosphate stripping at the Bishops Stortford Treatment Works next year, this will have a big impact on algal and weed growth in the river and should lead to an improvement in biodiversity.

Report on the Amwell Reserve visit.

Below you will find a composite report from Chris Swan, Claire Matthews and Andy Sapsford. Reports of this are very useful to read and it would be really good in future if someone could take responsibility for a write-up to appear later in our Newsletter.

Today's trip to Amwell was attended by 11 members and it was a very pleasant visit. Bird highlights included Little Ringed Plover, Redshank, Lapwing on nests, Common Terns on nests on the tern rafts and a vocal Cetti's Warbler, plus lots of the more common birds and a good range of summer visitor warblers.

We did have a really enjoyable afternoon. After lunching sitting on the grass overlooking Hollycross we ventured some way into Ash Valley. I felt we had time and everyone was happy to do so. Shirley and two of her friends were with us so we had on board a flower expert which was good. Just before leaving the lake area we had a good look at what was left of the early southern, spotted and marsh orchids. Going into Ash Valley Andy spotted the hobby and then we saw the buzzards. We followed the Ash River for some distance enjoying seeing many fish (no one could identify these but there were lots!)

Coming back into the reserve we went to White Hide where we spent some time looking at the variety of birds on the lake and mud banks (again Andy please confirm names!) Coming back into the reserve we went to White Hide where we spent some time looking at the variety of birds on the lake and mud banks.

Cormorant	Tufted Duck	6 Redshanks
Great Crested Grebe	Mute Swan (with cygnets)	1 Little Ringed Plover
1 Little Egret	Canada Goose	1 Lesser Black-backed Gull
Heron (with juveniles)	Greylag Goose (with goslings)	Black Headed Gull
1 Hobby	Coot	Common Tern
2 Buzzards	Moorhen	Wood Pigeon
Mallard	2 Oystercatchers	Swift
Gadwall	6 + Lapwings	House Martin
Pochard		Whitethroat

Blackcap	Long tailed Tit	Female Four spotted Chaser
Garden Warbler	Jackdaw	Male Broad bodied Chaser
Cetti's Warbler	Carrion Crow	Common Blue Damselfly
Chiffchaff	Jay	Azure Damselfly
Great spotted Woodpecker	Magpie	Banded Agrion
Wren	Robin	Blue tailed Damselfly
Dunnock	Blackbird	
Goldfinch		Small White
Chaffinch		Meadow Brown
Blue Tit	Emperor Dragonfly	Red Admiral
Great Tit	1 Hairy Dragonfly	

There was a small colony of what appeared to be a mixture of Southern Marsh and Early Marsh orchids by the lake in a fenced off area. Apparently, these had sprung up on an area of dumped PFA (pulverised fly ash), which is also the source of other colonies of these orchids in the Lea valley.

**BISHOP'S STORTFORD AND DISTRICT NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY
HATFIELD FOREST BIRD WATCH
Sunday, 22nd May 2011**

Introduction

The society has a long involvement with Hatfield Forest as a result of which many reports have been produced, particularly on the birds of the forest. This report continues on the theme of a "Big Forest Bird Watch", in which members of the Society spent a morning recording as many as possible of the birds present in the area being surveyed. The number of areas surveyed depends on the number of people present; this year 11 members attended and this enabled surveys to be made in all of the five areas into which the forest has previously been divided for this purpose. The weather was fine after overnight rain and was predominantly sunny, although with a moderate westerly wind.

Acknowledgements

The Society is indebted to The National Trust for their interest in such surveys and for their encouragement and the positive attitude always shown to the Society's members. Grateful thanks are due to the participants for their time and interest in undertaking such survey work and to David Arch whose Excel spreadsheet from previous surveys was used as the framework for the current work.

Participants

Hugh Coe, Jim Fish, Tim Fuller, Ali Mafoud, Claire Matthews, David Parsons, Bob Reed, Andrew Sapsford, Maggie Shiels, Chris Swan, Dave Webber.

Methodology

The Forest was notionally divided into five areas, described as northwest, northeast, southwest, southeast and lake. These are shown on a map which is appended as a jpeg document and this is the map that has been used in previous surveys. The surveyors covered as much of their areas as was practicable and recorded both the total numbers seen for each species and also noted whether birds were breeding using the usual commonsense indicators, such as birds observed holding territory, sitting on nests, carrying food or nesting material, or the presence of young birds. Where young birds were observed, numbers are shown; otherwise "Yes" is entered to indicate that breeding is considered likely to have occurred using the other criteria.

Survey teams were arranged as follows:

Northwest: Jim Fish, Ali Mafoud, Claire Matthews.

Northeast: Hugh Coe.

Southwest: Tim Fuller, Maggie Shiels, Dave Webber.

Southeast: Bob Reed, Andrew Sapsford.

Lake: David Parsons, Chris Swan.

Results

The results are presented in a spreadsheet that is appended as an Excel document. For purposes of comparison and interest, the total species numbers recorded in the 2008, 2009 and 2010 surveys are shown in addition to this year's results.

Discussion .It must be remembered that a survey such as this is not claimed to be comprehensive; it is simply a "snapshot" of those species seen on a particular occasion. As a result, a repeat survey a few days later may give different numbers of species, and indeed even additional or fewer species compared with this exercise. Nevertheless, since the methodology is essentially unchanged, the results may be compared with earlier years and valuable information may be gleaned on the status of the various species observed. Some duplication may occur; for example, the corvids noted in all areas are very mobile and it can be difficult to obtain accurate counts as the birds constantly come and go. It is also difficult to be certain that the same group of birds is not counted twice as a result of moving from one survey area to another during the morning.

A potential area of concern was the effect of the severe 2010/2011 winter on resident birds but the results do not indicate any statistically meaningful decline in populations of most species with the possible exception of Nuthatch, Blue Tit and especially Great Tit, where numbers were substantially reduced compared with earlier years. The fact that no Starlings were seen this year is not seen as significant, since substantial flocks are present elsewhere.

Encouraging aspects of this year's survey are the successful breeding of the Great Crested Grebe with two separate broods to date and the return of the Common Tern which is currently nesting on the Tern Raft. Additionally, it is pleasing to note that the Tawny Owl, often missed in previous years due to their nocturnal habits, was identified as being present by a daytime call heard by one observer. Warblers, most of which are unaffected by the UK winter weather since they are summer visitors, were again observed in pleasing numbers.

The total number of species observed this year was 51 and although this is 8 fewer than last year it is only 2 fewer than the average of the four years 2008 to 2011.

Chris Swan

25th May 2011.

Sawbridgeworth Marsh Update – November 2011.

After a very dry and warm spring, the traditional summer months came with traditional summer weather – rain and wind. On a particularly memorable Friday evening in June, the Bishop's Stortford Natural History Society came to visit and survey the new pond in Little Valet Homes. The rain was torrential and the visit was curtailed somewhat, but we were at least able to have a look at some of the numerous invertebrates and aquatic plants that have now colonised this pond, even though it is still only 2 years old. The discoveries included water boatmen, hoglice, damselfly nymphs and leeches. We were also able to take a look at the wet meadow area behind the willow pollards. A spectacular number of orchids were in bloom here – over a hundred southern marsh orchids and 11 early marsh orchids – as well as a good display of a rare subspecies of marsh bedstraw. This meadow seems to go from strength to strength. The highland cattle returned in late June to graze Rush Mead. This year we had a total of six heifers, three

calves and Archie the two year old bull! The grazing is really begin to make a difference to the peatbank on Rush Mead with a notable decrease in meadowsweet and willowherb and increase in both number and distribution of wetland plants such as marsh orchids and marsh valerian. Although very effective in browsing down meadowsweet and willowherb, the cattle are less keen on Blunt flowered Rush, the dominant plant type on the M22 rush pasture that makes up the peatbank. The decision was therefore taken to cut this area in September and attempt to bale it and remove it from site. In the event, although cut and left to dry in the September sun, the rush proved too much for the baler and we had to collect the cut material and burn it, as in previous years. This was a bit disappointing for me, as one of the aims of introducing the cattle was to avoid having to burn the material. At least the fire sites were kept in the same places as were used in past years to heap up cut vegetation so no new ground was despoiled. I would still like to find another means of removing cut rush in the future, however. The cattle were taken off at the end of October so that the ground doesn't get too poached up. This happened during the first year that we had them, during 2009, when we were unable to move them until December 5th, by which time parts of the peatbank resembled a ploughed field. While some poaching is considered beneficial in that it creates bare ground for plant seed to develop, the bad poaching experienced during 2009 was probably detrimental to the orchids which have been notably less prolific since that date, although the annual peatbank survey in May found a good number of new small plants. Hopefully, things will improve steadily with time.

Significant records include a Barn Owl found sitting in the Oak tree by the main entrance gate on the evening of 16th June, which then flew off when disturbed and proceeded to quarter the sedgebeds. A Grasshopper Warbler was heard reeling from the sedgebeds on 26th June. More recently, a flock of about 20 siskins was observed feeding in the alder trees on the riverbank on 12th November and a woodcock was flushed from the sedgebed on 2nd November. Good numbers of butterflies were on the wing during the early part of the summer, including small white, large white, green-veined white, orange tip, large and Essex skippers, meadow brown, gatekeeper, ringlet, small copper, brimstone, peacock, small tortoiseshell, speckled wood, red admiral, comma and holly blue.

Andrew Sapsford, Marsh Warden