

**The Naturalist.**  
**Newsletter of the BSDNHS**  
**No 10. July 2010.**

From Bob Reed:

Dear Member,

I am writing this interim Newsletter to keep you informed of several developments and to try to kindle your interest and enthusiasm for a couple of proposed projects. Firstly, as you will be aware we are supporting the ‘Living Landscapes Vision’ for the Stort Valley as proposed by the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust. Part of the vision was to have a practical working party to be available to carry out conservation tasks along the river. I was advised to approach British Waterways and have received a very favourable response from their regional volunteer co-ordinator. They are very interested in our proposal and are very happy to help and advise us where we might be working on BW land or to give us practical and safety advice about working near water. They have referred to us as ‘River Stort Conservation Volunteers’. As you know, we are already involved in carrying out scrub clearance on The Hermitage and this is the type of project we would like to promote outside of nature reserves. The sort of thing I have in mind are controlling Himalayan Balsam and Malaysian Pennywort, scrub clearance or woodland management, maintaining ditches on the flood plain and maybe taking over the management of one of the backwater loops which are recognized as being so good for wildlife. The proposal is that we adopt a conservation species – the Kingfisher. Everyone likes these birds but there are fewer on the river than used to be, nationally they are ‘Amber’ listed – a source of conservation concern. As I see it the problems faced by the Kingfisher on the Stort can be listed as follows:-

- There are limited nesting sites available. Places where kingfishers have been known to nest in the past are now either heavily disturbed, eroded away or heavily overgrown. Unseasonal, flash flooding is also an issue during the breeding season.
- Most of the Navigation has been dredged out to a depth of 1.5m (5 feet) often close into the bank. Kingfishers can only effectively fish in waters up to about 40cms (15inches). They are therefore mostly restricted to fishing in the backwaters many stretches of which are also too deep.
- I do not think that food supply is an issue. Although we seem to have lost the large shoals of Minnows, we still have Bullheads and there is a lot of fry in evidence in the Navigation. The problem is opportunities for the birds to fish effectively.

If we carry out tasks to encourage Kingfishers then we shall indirectly benefit other wildlife. The sort of tasks could include – putting up feeding perches over shallow margins on the Navigation, identifying and enhancing potential nesting banks, installing nest boxes or creating nest banks, highlighting water quality issues which may influence food supply, help create fish spawning areas, identify and maintain sanctuary areas away from the Navigation ‘honeypot’ sites subject to disturbance. Well I already have a small nucleus of people interested in practical work, if you would like to be included then please contact me through one of the groups given at the end of this newsletter.

### **Hatfield Forest BioBlitz.**

At the last committee meeting members were a bit uncertain about what to do at the Hatfield Forest Wood Fest this September. Since that time I have been reading about ‘BioBlitzes’ after seeing the Wembury BioBlitz on the BBC programme ‘Museum Life’. For those of you who do not know, a ‘BioBlitz’ involves an intensive and competitive survey of an area over a 24-hour period. During that time experienced naturalists and members of the general public are involved in finding and recording as much biodiversity as possible for a given area. I am suggesting that we have

a mini BioBlitz at the Wood Fest where we will investigate the area of woodland that the coppice volunteers work on. The idea is that it would run from midday Saturday to midday Sunday, during that time a series of activities would take place and information, specimens and records would be returned to our display tent which would become our 'Base Camp'. At base camp we would assemble records and displays of material as it was produced by the survey teams. By Sunday afternoon we would hope to have a really good picture of the ecology of the woodland. I can hear you say that sounds really ambitious! Yes, it's true, but I am prepared to shoulder the burden of organising and carrying out a large number of the tasks. What I would ask of members is that you give a couple of hours to oversee an activity or do some recording. The main thing to stress is that you do not need to be an expert in anything, the objective is as much to show people what is present and to educate ourselves as to carry out an academic exercise. On the other hand we would aim to produce a report and this would be really useful for the National Trust. As you will gather I am really excited about the potential for this exercise but the whole thing will be wholly dependent on the support by the BSNHS membership. I feel that this is a really good way forward for the society, it is certainly aimed at the younger generation and families, recruiting from this age group must be one of our major aims. Below I have given the sort of programme I would envisage for the two days. What I would really like is for people to contact me and say that they would like to lead a particular section- it does not mean two days commitment and unless you felt otherwise, you need only be there for the period of your activity. Please do not worry about having expertise in any particular area, I am very willing to brief people about what is involved and what they would have to do - it is not difficult!

Suggested programme:-

Midday Saturday. Plant survey. Set up insect traps.

2 p.m. Insect survey, sweep netting. Look for animal tracks.

4 p.m. Tree survey. Inspect insect traps. Inspect dormouse nest tubes. 6 p.m. Set out small mammal traps.

8 p.m. Bat detectors. Moth traps and wine roping.

Sunday.

8 to 9 a.m. Walk around for birds. Collect camera traps.

10.00am. Check mammal traps. Deer survey from indirect evidence. Collect nuts for dormice.

12.00am. Pitfalls trap collection. Vacuum sampling.

This sounds like a mad schedule, it is intended to be intense but it yields loads of data and if we pulled it off would be a lot of kudos for the BSNHS as well as putting us the forefront of this pioneering activity which is gaining popularity all over the country (Cambridge BioBlitz at Coe Fen 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> July). It could supply records and data at the general and specialism level as well as generating lots of interest. I will try and drum up support through the NT ASAP if you give the project your support, we also have several other avenues of publicity open to us to try and generate interest in advance of the Wood Fest. However, the whole thing is dependent on your support, as I have said before I can do a lot but not all of it so please volunteer to give a couple of hours even if you are not sure what vacuum sampling involves! Looking forward to you offering your services.

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Postscript: A Water Vole has been photographed in the Roydon area. Hopefully this may signal the start of recolonisation of the Stort from the Ryemeads area.

A nest of the Tree Bumble Bee (*Bombus hypnorum*) has been recorded in the roof of a house in Maple Avenue, Bishops Stortford. These bees have only been known in this country since 2000 and have spread rapidly, they are easily recognized by having a ginger thorax and a white tail.

Barn Owls have bred successfully in a nest box at the Thorley Flood Pound. It is suggested that one of 'StortWatch's' first projects might be to install similar nest boxes in a secluded situation to the south of Sawbridgeworth. We have the farmer's blessing and only need to obtain some boxes and select some suitable sites. Barn Owls have been seen

hunting regularly over the adjacent Harlow Marshes so this should be a good site. If you are interested in helping then please let me know through one of the contacts above.

Due to the very dry weather a lot of wildlife is having a very hard time finding food. This includes badgers and a good number of cubs have been found in starving condition, they are being looked after by members of our local badger groups.

