

## RECENT EVENTS

### Natural Inspirations: Spring, 15 May

It seemed that it was only a few weeks since the Winter Natural Inspirations Workshop when members of the Breckland Society met once again at Clermont House to celebrate the arrival of spring. Fortunately, the warmer weather reflected the progression of the seasons, and we were able to explore and admire the reality of spring in the beautiful gardens and arboretum there.

As usual at the start of the workshop, James summarised for us the effects of the protracted cold weather on spring bird migrations. By May, most resident birds were advanced in their breeding cycles and there was evidence of this. The lawns at Clermont provide an excellent vantage point for some ad hoc birdwatching, although James



The grass snake in John's arboretum

told us that we would be fortunate to hear a cuckoo, because their numbers are in decline in the Brecks. We were lucky enough, however, to see a pair of buzzards, very much on the increase locally. John pointed out bee orchids, marked by small stakes in the meadows, which were just beginning to grow. The wildlife shelter within the arboretum was lifted once again for members to spot smaller species of wildlife, as well as a magnificent grass snake which slithered away smartly.

Thence back to the house, where Lucinda had brought along some edible props to aid our appreciation of the importance of this season to our ancestors. The delicious goat's cheese and yoghurt prompted discussion of ancient traditions surrounding Easter and May. We recognised the significance of warmer weather and more light producing renewed growth and rebirth in nature – important reassurance to our ancestors that there would be food and warmth for the forthcoming six months.



Liz spinning a yarn

We were treated to delicious Easter biscuits and savoury muffins cooked by Sue, and some delectable rook pasties prepared by Mark Powell.

The final session of this workshop was once again filled by Liz, who had brought along a whole sheep fleece. She demonstrated part of the process required for conversion of the fleece into woollen products. This was made to look very easy in Liz's skilled hands, as she effortlessly spun some yarn, although by the end of the demonstration we could appreciate how very arduous this process would have been for our ancestors.

As usual, the workshop ended with seasonal poetry, read by John. We all left with ample reading matter as well as much food for thought.

Delia Cook

### The first humans in East Anglia: a talk by Nick Ashton, 4 June

Nick Ashton, Curator of Palaeolithic Archaeology at the British Museum, transported the audience back 600,000 years, to a time when Britain was connected to continental Europe by a land bridge. For a number of years he has spent part of each summer excavating evidence of prehistoric human activity in East Anglia and this was the theme of his presentation at Barnham Village Hall.

His enthralling talk was illustrated by excellent slides, conjuring a wonderfully clear picture of the prehistoric landscape of this country and of the formation of the North Sea when, as a result of climate change, water levels rose at the end of the Anglian Glaciation about 450,000 years ago.

Nick described how waste flint flakes were found on the banks of a prehistoric river which flowed from the Midlands, predating the ice sheets which later destroyed it. This site was at High Lodge, Mildenhall, just below Mildenhall Warren Lodge. Another site discovered at Barnham, and dating back 500,000 years, showed evidence of the use of fire and the making of tools.

Recent work has been even more revealing, as coastal erosion has exposed remains of human activity going back 600,000 years. Dating has come from the examination of mammal bones, especially voles, as it is known when certain species of these tiny animals became extinct.

Nick gave us a hint of the extraordinary discoveries made recently at Happisburgh, details of which were released to the media a few days after his talk. The history of human presence in Britain has been rewritten as a result, with the Happisburgh evidence suggesting that humans were living there as far back as 800,000 years ago.

For more information see [www.happisburgh.org/history/archaeology](http://www.happisburgh.org/history/archaeology).

#### Mildenhall Warren Lodge Open Day

Mildenhall Warren Lodge is open to visitors on Sunday 12 September from 11am to 4pm, by Friends of Thetford Forest Park in partnership with Forest Heath District Council's Heritage Open Days Weekend.

For further info and directions contact the Forestry Commission's District Office on 01842 810271.

#### If you would like to contribute to the Breckland Society Newsletter, please contact the Editor at The Breckland Society

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#### Lectures on Tudor houses and landscapes

Members will recall the excellent tour of Culford Park by Ann Gore and George Carter three years ago. Ann has now joined up with architectural historian Caroline Knight to run a three-day course this autumn entitled *A Tudor Legacy*. Held in the beautifully restored barn at George's Silverstone Farm, the course will look at various aspects of Tudor palaces, gardens and interiors and include six lectures, a film, a site visit to a Tudor house and a demonstration of topiary.

Dates are 13-15 October 2010, cost is £195, which includes all activities plus morning coffee, lunch and afternoon tea. Further details are available from Ann on 01553 840974/[gore.a@tesco.net](mailto:gore.a@tesco.net) and Caroline on [knightcaroline@aol.com](mailto:knightcaroline@aol.com).



## BRECKLAND IN BLOOM

*This spring and summer have proved to be a bumper season for wildflowers, with a show on a scale not seen for several years. Orchids have been especially stunning, with impressive displays in traditional locations and with some species turning up in places where they have not been recorded for years. Orchids are worth looking for everywhere: along sheltered verges, in meadows and heaths, and besides pools and marshes, right across the Brecks. Sue Pennell provides tips below on how to identify some of the more frequently seen varieties.*

This is a simple guide to some of the more common orchid beauties you may find. It is not foolproof, however, because orchids are somewhat wayward, hybridising with each other and frequently confusing all but the expert!



Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera*

Bee Orchids *Ophrys apifera* may be found during June and July, often in meadows and even on disturbed ground. They may be found in their dozens on occasion, but are rather whimsical, not always flowering two years running and sometimes completely disappearing from a particular site. There are similar species – Wasp, Spider and Fly Orchids all look alike – but Bee Orchids are the most common. They have pink sepals and green petals with a red-brown lip that is rounded at the tip, looking somewhat like a bee at rest on a flower.

Pyramidal Orchids *Anacamptis pyramidalis* can be discovered from June to August in dry grasslands such as at Cranwich Camp or on the butterfly reserve at Narborough, as well as in dunes near the coast. The tightly packed flowers resemble a pyramid and are unique in shape. But beware – they can be white as well as purple, and sometimes carry a rather foxy smell.

The Common Spotted Orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* also appears from June to August. It can vary from white through to pale pink or lilac with flowers dotted or lined with crimson

or purple on the long spur-like lip or 'tooth'. The spots after which it is named are found on the leaves of the plant, but sometimes these are very faint or there may be no spots at all. Foulnden Common has good populations of this species, both  
*/cont'd on page 2*

### WHAT'S ON forthcoming Society events

#### Saturday 7 August

Natural Inspirations: Outdoors and Within, *Summer*, with the Breckland Society Committee at Clermont House, 2-5pm. Booking essential.

#### Saturday 11 September

Visit to Heygates Farm, near Swaffham. A rare opportunity to see the processes involved in potato production at one of the biggest producers in Britain. The tour will be followed by a sandwich lunch, courtesy of Heygate Farms. Booking essential, via Sue Whittle, 01366 328190, by 1 September. £5 members, £7 non-members.

#### Friday 8 October

Presentation on the Society's recent Warrens Project, by James Parry and Anne Mason. 7.30 at Oxborough Village Hall. Members free, non-members £2.

#### Saturday 4 December

Society Christmas event – details in October newsletter.



with and without spots, and it should also be looked for along roadside verges.

Early Marsh Orchids *Dactylorhiza incarnata* may be taller than most species and can be very variable in colour: pink, purple, brick-red or even yellow. This plant is distinguished from the Spotted Orchid by its plain green-coloured leaves and by the shape of the flower lip, which is rounded and with only a small central 'tooth'. It flowers between May and June on damp grassland, marshes and fens and is relatively common across the Brecks. This picture below is of a plant in a colony on a roadside verge near Hilborough.

Fragrant Orchids *Gymnadenia conopsea* do indeed smell sweetly when in full bloom during June and July. The flowers are less densely packed on the stem than on other common orchid species and can be identified by the very long, slender spur at the back of each flower. This species is the most localised of the regular orchids; Foulden Common has a good colony, however.

Nowadays, of course, it is illegal to disturb orchids or other wild plants, but in the past orchids had their culinary uses. In *Food For Free*, Richard Mabey writes that around the Mediterranean certain dried orchid tubers were mixed with other ingredients into a drink and that similar liquid refreshment was served in Britain in the past. Now it is just a case of search, look and enjoy.

There are excellent close-up photographs on [www.ophrysphotography.co.uk](http://www.ophrysphotography.co.uk) that show the great variations in colour that are found in these and other British orchids. All photos in this article were taken by Sue Pennell.



Pyramidal Orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis*



Common Spotted Orchid  
*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*



Marsh Orchid *Dactylorhiza incarnata*  
at Hilborough



Fragrant Orchid *Gymnadenia conopsea* at Foulden

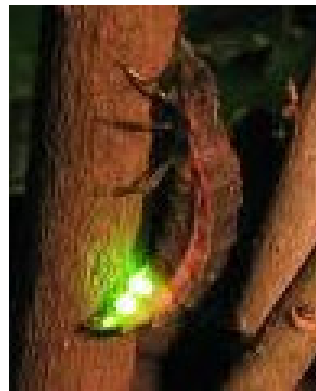
## Glowing in the dark!

**A survey is under way across Norfolk of one of the strangest nocturnal creatures: the glow-worm.**

There are not many records of glow-worms in the county, and in fact glow-worms are not worms at all! They belong to a family of beetles called the Lampyridae. Only the adult female glows brightly, using a chemical called luciferin to produce a pale green light to attract a mate. She is flightless and has a segmented body, whilst the male is much smaller and looks like a typical beetle, complete with wings. On average, females are twice the size of males. The glow-worm life cycle takes one to three years, with adults emerging in high summer. As they do not feed, they live for only a couple of weeks.

The survey is being coordinated by the Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service (NBIS), which collects records of plants and animals, insects and fungi found in Norfolk. There is also a national glow-worm

survey, for which the Norfolk recorder is Society member Sue Pennell. Both the NBIS and Sue would be pleased to receive any records of glow-worms.



Your best chances of seeing glow-worms are on a moonless or overcast night (wait until your eyes can no longer make out colours), on heathland, grass verges, along disused railway lines, churchyards, woodland clearings or rides. Look for a luminous green light in low vegetation, and contact either Sue on 01366 328452 or the NBIS on 01603 224458.

Happy hunting!

## Duleep Singh exhibition at The Ancient House Museum, 15 July

*Society members enjoyed a private view of a new exhibition at Thetford's Ancient House Museum on one of the area's most fascinating former residents: Maharajah Duleep Singh.*

Born in Lahore in 1838, Duleep Singh was the heir to Maharajah Ranjit Singh of the Punjab, one of the most powerful and wealthy of all India's princely states. He acceded to the throne at the age of five, but his kingdom posed a real obstacle to the expansion of the British Raj and after two bitter wars the British forced the Sikhs to capitulate.

Fear of a further rebellion remained so great that the decision was taken to remove Duleep Singh from India altogether and send him into exile in England. An early audience with Queen Victoria marked the beginning of what was to become a deep friendship with both the queen and her consort, Prince Albert, with Duleep Singh establishing himself as the quintessential English country gentleman. He bought Elveden Hall, near Thetford, and converted it into an Indian-style palace, hosting extravagant house parties and proving himself to be a top sportsman. With the Prince of Wales a close friend and frequent guest, Elveden became a symbol of the glittering yet hypocritical excesses of the Victorian aristocracy.

Yet by the early 1880s Duleep Singh was tiring of his life as an English country squire. Overweight and depressed, he became less sociable and increasingly bitter about his treatment at the hands of the British. He was also running out of money. His mind turned towards a



An emerald and pearl necklace that belonged to Maharani Jind Kaur, and which was part of the Sikh royal collection

permanent return to his homeland, to regain his throne and possessions. He re-embraced the Sikh faith and refused his British stipend, later having to sell almost all his remaining possessions. He even tried to return to India, but was prevented from doing so by the British and finally died in Paris in 1893, a broken man.

The exhibition draws together a range of fascinating memorabilia associated with the Maharajah and his family, tracing his remarkable story and highlighting the local legacy of the Sikh presence. The exhibition continues at the Ancient house Museum until June 2011.

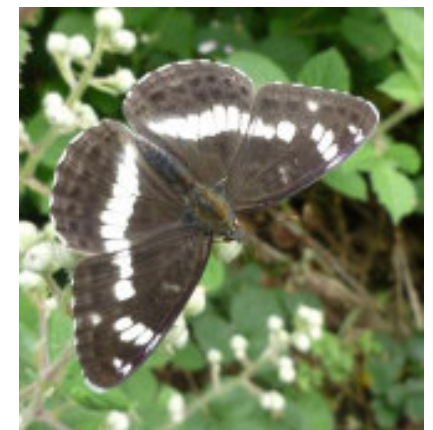
## LATEST WILDLIFE SIGHTINGS IN THE BRECKS

High summer, and the skies are teeming with swifts, swallows and house martins. Many pairs are feeding their second brood of chicks, as are many other species of bird - thrushes and blackbirds may even be rearing a third round of young, which will help their populations recover from the impact of last winter. Sadly, it proved to be a poor spring for nightingales. Once widespread across the Brecks, these superb songsters are suffering from the destruction of their habitat by overgrazing deer: Foulden Common, formerly a stronghold, failed to attract any singing males this year. Other classic Breckland bird species are doing well, however. Nightjars are plentiful on the forestry plantations - with the males still uttering their bizarre churring song at night - and stone-curlews seem to be having an excellent year, thanks to the dry conditions.

Many Breckland verges are currently lined with a profusion of wildflowers, including viper's bugloss, knapweed, scabious, mignonette and lady's bedstraw, the latter so named as it was traditionally used to stuff mattresses and pillows, its fragrance helping to mask unwelcome domestic odours.

Butterflies have also benefited from the fine weather, with good numbers of all the commoner species. One of the most interesting discoveries this year has been of a hitherto unknown population of white admirals at Drymere. Dependent on bramble and honeysuckle, this woodland species is scarce and localised in East Anglia, but seems to be expanding in the Brecks and is worth looking out for.

Other unusual insects have included hummingbird hawk-moths, one seen in South Pickenham in early July and another at Oxborough on 18 July; and two glow-worms, found at Foulden Common earlier in the month.



White admiral



Lady's bedstraw



Hummingbird hawk-moth