

## RECENT EVENTS

### Natural Inspirations Workshop, 31 October

In spite of damp, foggy weather 18 members arrived at Clermont House for the first of the Seasonal Workshops. We were greeted warmly by James and John, who guided us around the superb grounds of Clermont house, explaining and pointing out the plant, bird and animal activity.

After this invigorating experience we moved indoors to be restored to warmth and comfort, where Lucinda led the next module, exploring the significance of autumn and old country customs that affected the lives of our ancestors, and which still play a significant part in our lives today.

Sue provided a scrumptious selection of autumnal homemade cakes for tea – they were very well received.

The next module was led by Liz, who described the use of seasonal produce for eating and medicinal and other household uses, together with tips for gathering, growing and preserving the produce.

The afternoon was brought to a close by Mark Elwes, who read two inspirational and much appreciated poems.

It was a most interesting and enjoyable afternoon. Each module was well researched and thoughtfully presented by Committee Members. They are to be congratulated for organising another imaginative and instructive event – well done and thank you. *Eileen Powell*



Workshop participants look for wood-boring beetles in rotting timber.

## CPRE Norfolk Awards: a Breckland winner

*The CPRE Norfolk Awards were held in November 2009 at a packed ceremony at the Assembly House in Norwich. Twenty-four outstanding projects which enhance the countryside were recognised at the ceremony including, for the first time, a Litter Education Project – an issue very close to the heart of CPRE and its president Bill Bryson.*

The litter project is managed by Environmental Awareness Officer Michelle King of Breckland District Council, and involves the whole Breckland area. The aim is to raise awareness of litter, and in particular highlight to children the dangers of litter to wildlife. An environmental mascot, Spike the Hedgehog, has been created to help illustrate the dangers. Spike now has his own page in the council's magazine, *Breckland Voice*, focusing on environmental issues and encouraging feedback and participation from children. Children are also given re-usable bags with a picture of Spike on them, encouraging them to take their litter home and 'protect Spike's wildlife friends'.

The project also involves practical litter-picking with pupils from years 5 and 6 and with Scout groups, with the children completing an audit of the litter they collect. Other aspects of the project promote the recycled potential of waste, with children involved in craft sessions using recycled materials.

For further information on the litter project, contact [michelle.king@breckland.gov.uk](mailto:michelle.king@breckland.gov.uk)

westacre theatre



Call the box office: 01760 755800

For all the information about what's on at Westacre Theatre during the Spring and Summer, visit our website at [www.westacretheatre.com](http://www.westacretheatre.com)

Westacre Screen: Great Films for Spring at Westacre Studio Theatre

Wed 10 Feb 7.30pm *The African Queen* (1951) £5

Sun 14 February 12 noon *Bright Star* (2009)  
A special screening for St Valentine's Day  
£35 for two incl lunch

Fri 26 Feb 7.30pm *Crash* (2004) £5

Wed 24 March 7.30pm *Don't Look Now* (1973) £5



Saturday 8 May 7.30pm  
Concert at Houghton Barns



Julie-Dawn Lloyd (*soprano*),  
Bob Arnett (*bass baritone*)  
Mary Howard (*piano*)  
and Lucinda Mackworth-Young  
(*piano, including extracts from opera and musicals, and Brahms and Dvorak piano duets*)

Further info and bookings from  
Lucinda Mackworth-Young: Tel 07850 912006,  
Email [musicmindmovement@btinternet.com](mailto:musicmindmovement@btinternet.com)



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

The Hay Barn, Hall Farm Barns  
Oxborough, Norfolk PE33 9PS  
Tel 01366 727813  
or email [liz@dittner.co.uk](mailto:liz@dittner.co.uk)  
[www.brecsoc.org.uk](http://www.brecsoc.org.uk)

Newsletter 27 — January 2010



## COPING WITH THE BIG FREEZE

*Depending on your view, the recent harsh winter weather may have been a time of great beauty or a tiresome inconvenience, but for the natural world it really has been a matter of life or death. James Parry looks at how birds have coped, and what the implications might be for next spring.*

With early January temperatures in the Brecks among the lowest in eastern England, and frequent heavy snowfall giving a blanket across the region, wildlife has been having a hard time so far this winter. While most native species are able to cope with brief periods of harsh weather, prolonged snow and ice pose real problems. With lakes and ponds frozen over, the most immediate casualties are birds that depend on fish for food, such as herons, bitterns and kingfishers. Many will move to large rivers and to the coast, but those that stay put struggle to survive. During the 1962-63 winter the British population of kingfishers fell by as much as 70 per cent, and while a fall of quite that scale is unlikely this winter, there is no doubt that there will be fewer kingfishers around now than would normally be the case.



A classic Breckland pine row, near Gooderstone, in early January

Meanwhile, this has been an excellent winter so far for watching bitterns. Normally hiding away in the reedbeds, many have been forced out into the open to try and find food, and there have been regular sightings – often of multiple birds – up on the Norfolk coast and of several individuals closer to home in the Brecks. In hard weather even the smallest patch of reeds and most modest pool of open water can host a bittern. Also worth looking out for are water rails, brightly coloured and long-billed relatives of the moorhen and coot, and best looked for as they pick nervously along the reedbed edge.

Birds of prey have been having a mixed time. Barn owls will have suffered, unable to find their prey of voles under the blanket of snow. Already fewer reports than normal have been received, and

several frozen corpses were picked up locally in early January. Tawny owls – becoming very noisy now as they establish territories – have fared better, as they hunt mainly in woodland where snow cover is less complete. Sparrowhawks, meanwhile, have been having a positive field day, taking advantage of the concentrations of small birds that have flocked into gardens in the hope of a meal.

If you are ever in any doubt about whether to put out food for the birds, don't be – they really do depend on it, and it can make the difference between life and death. One afternoon in January I counted almost a hundred birds in my garden, all busy around the nut and seed feeders and foraging on the ground where I had cleared a patch

*/cont'd on page 2*

## WHAT'S ON forthcoming Society events

Friday 26 February 7.30pm

*The Strange Life of Dragons and Some of our Best-loved Insects*, by Nick Gibbons. Oxborough Village Hall. £3 members, £5 non-members, to include refreshments (To be followed up at Thompson Common on Sunday 13 June)

Saturday 10 April

Afternoon visit to the Battle Area. Numbers strictly limited, so book as soon as possible with Sue Whittle, 01366 328190.

Saturday 1 May, 2-5pm

Natural Inspiration: Outdoors and Within, *Spring*, with the Breckland Society Committee at Clermont House. Booking essential.

Friday 14 May

Society AGM, Cockley Cley Hall. Full details in April newsletter.

If you are concerned about driving in the dark, or simply need a lift to a Society event, please contact Sue Whittle, as it may be possible to arrange transport with other members.

LIVING AND BELIEVING IN THE BRECKS

cont'd from page 1

of ground and put out stored windfall apples and kitchen scraps. The usual community of house sparrows, robins, chaffinches and blackbirds were joined by pied wagtails, tree sparrows and the occasional redwing and fieldfare, winter thrushes from the north which arrived in East Anglia in massive numbers this winter.

Cold weather brings the possibility of even more unusual garden visitors, forced to leave their normal habitat in the quest for food. This winter has seen unusually high numbers of woodcock visiting gardens. Although a resident breeder in our area, numbers of this cryptically plumaged and long-billed bird, normally a denizen of woodland, increase in autumn with the arrival of incomers from continental Europe. Even



This winter has seen an invasion of woodcock, with many appearing in gardens

more than usual have arrived this year, and they have been seen poking around in flowerbeds in many gardens, desperately trying to find patches under shrubs where the ground is not frozen solid.

In conclusion, we can say that the severe cold and snow will have had a definite impact on some bird populations. Certainly small birds like wrens and goldcrests will be in shorter supply come spring – with such a small body mass, they really struggle in intensely cold conditions. But with large clutches and two or three broods a year they are able to rebuild their numbers fairly quickly. Barn owls and kingfishers may take longer, but such setbacks are not permanent.

Spare a thought, meanwhile, for the Dartford warbler, a gorse specialist which has its stronghold on the heaths of southern England; in recent years it has been extending its range from there into East Anglia and was eagerly awaited in the Brecks. The heavy snowfall of February 2009 saw numbers in the core of its British range fall from around a thousand birds to fewer than two hundred. That population will have been reduced even further by this winter's severe weather, serving as a check – albeit a temporary one – on the advance of this species through England and into our area.

## MY LIFE AS A WARRENS DETECTIVE

*Diane Jackman, one of 40+ volunteers who have helped make the Society's Warrens Project such a success, explains how she set about tracking down the story of one of the Brecks' least known warrens.*

It all began with a visit to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge to see the Macclesfield Psalter. I was captivated by the marginal illustrations of rabbits, so when James Parry appeared in the EDP asking for volunteers to survey Breckland's mediaeval rabbit warrens, I was hooked.

At the first meeting I chose Snarehill Warren because it was my side of Thetford; and the drawback – no map and only three references, one of which was Blomefield, who had confused Great and Little Snarehill, and thoroughly confused me. The internet came to my rescue. Great Snarehill, which seems to have been one enormous heath, was part of Rushford and Little Snarehill extra-parochial, until they became part of Brettenham in 1935. Our first task was to look for any physical remains of the warren but, with no idea of its location, finding a map was essential.

This was when I discovered that research is an uneven mixture of slog and serendipity.

In Thetford Library local history section, I took every book off the shelf and consulted the index for mention of Snarehill. Nothing. Then I opened the Brettenham parish folder, a useful ragbag of village information containing the OS map of 1881 showing Snarehill's boundaries, and an extract from Hugh Harper's Breckland Portraits, describing the destruction of Snarehill Warren by John Musker to protect his racehorses. Now I had an end date c1900, as well as a first mention in the Thetford Priory Registers, which listed retiling materials for Snarehill Warren Lodge in 1537.

Early maps in the Norfolk Record Office and online showed Old Lodge, east of the A1088, on the present Shadwell Estate. By kind permission of Mr Alan Lee, Estate Manager, Anne Mason, James Parry and I made a site visit. My excitement that morning was intense, but what a blow. The Buxtons' ruinous passion for agricultural improvements had swept away the Old Lodge and replaced it with model cottages c1850. The site looked right, being on a knoll with views all round, and there was a range of flint farm buildings down the slope, the lower part built of random flint, the upper walls of uniform dark grey flint. Were we looking at the mediaeval lodge recycled? I like to think so. But any banks we saw that morning were probably field boundaries, so no opportunity to practise the fieldwork training given by Dr Tom Williamson.

When I eventually tracked down the sale catalogue and estate map, it was clear that the warren, much reduced in size



Warrens can be highly elusive. That at Snarehill was subsequently covered by a wartime airfield

by 1898, was under Snarehill Airfield, built 1911 and used as a bombing range during the Second World War.

Meanwhile, I was trawling the internet, trying to fill in the succession of owners since the Dissolution of Thetford Priory. Nineteenth-century books provided some of the narrative, while access to archives brought up transcripts of marriage settlements from the Champion family papers in the East Sussex Record Office and the deed of sale to the Buxton family in 1768.

With such a tiny place and hardly any population, according to the census and parish registers, the few references were generally relevant. This was a great help in consulting the documentary records in Norfolk and Suffolk Record Offices and the invaluable Buxton Papers in Cambridge University Library. Without the immaculate cataloguing of their papers, I would have been struggling to find any evidence in the 135 boxes deposited by Sybil Buxton. Miss Buxton had helpfully tagged the documents stating type, date and names of parties, so I could record the existence of a lease, even if I could not decipher the handwriting.

The Society's Warrens Project has opened up all sorts of opportunities, not least the chance to turn detective and try and track down the history of these often elusive places. That the results of my sleuthing will appear in the project's published report makes it all the more rewarding. And even eighteen months after I started, as I write this and the project moves towards completion, I hear from someone who may have found a warren bank at Snarehill. The hunt goes on!

## SWIFT OF FLIGHT AND SHARP OF CLAW

*There is something about birds of prey that seems to attract anyone who has even the slightest interest in birds and wildlife. In the first of a series of articles on raptors in the Brecks, Nick Gibbons, formerly Conservation Officer with the Forestry Commission, looks at two of the most regularly seen – the kestrel and the sparrowhawk – as well as at a local speciality, the much scarcer goshawk.*

Raptors can be a difficult group to get a positive identification on. For a start, many are very similar in shape and are often seen only fleetingly or at distance. Second, they have a wide variety of plumage colorations and can quite dramatically change their shape, depending on what they are doing. For example, kestrels can fly with very pointed wings when at speed or in direct flight, but for soaring may spread their wings into a very rounded shape and look much more like a sparrowhawk. Beware also for other birds 'pretending' to be raptors – woodpigeons are notorious for imitating small raptors as they do their sequences of glides and dips.



kestrel in flight

kestrel soaring

Most people are familiar with the kestrel as it hovers with its head so steady, watching for the movement below of a small mammal or large insect. Luckily, it is just about the only raptor in the UK which has this trait, so hovering can be a quick method of identifying it. At other times look out for the pointed wings – the sparrowhawk's are blunter – and the more regular pattern of wingbeats: the sparrowhawk tends to glide and soar more. Kestrel numbers have declined somewhat over recent years but they are still a regular sight across the Brecks. The two hawks most frequently encountered in our area are the sparrowhawk and goshawk. The former is now a regular sight, even within towns, whereas the latter remains rare and elusive. Sparrowhawks are most commonly seen either soaring high up, drifting across the landscape in search of prey, when the broad wings and longish tail clearly identify it as a hawk. The other view is normally of a bird sweeping fast and low across the countryside as it homes in on its prey. In both cases, look out for the characteristic 'flap-flap-glide, flap-flap-glide' flight pattern. Such is the speed of the sparrowhawk that it regularly kills prey by sheer impact. Sparrowhawks have had a bad press from those who blame them for the recent reduction in songbird numbers, yet the real culprits of this decline are habitat destruction and introduced predators, such as domestic cats. Like all raptors, sparrowhawks are a natural part of the ecosystem and the long-term evidence shows they have no impact on songbird populations.

As with many birds of prey, the female sparrowhawk is much larger than the male, a factor of some relevance in terms of identification

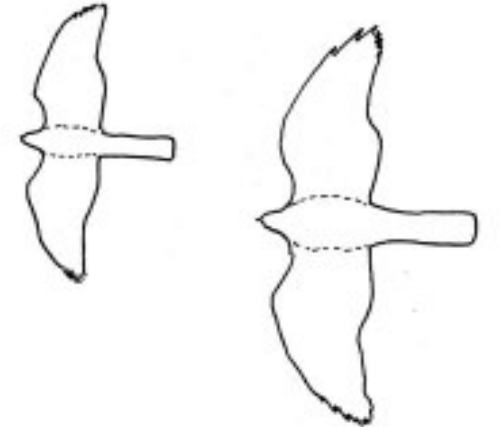
## NEANDERTHALS AT LYNFORD

*The BBC and the British Museum have joined forces to tell the story of the world in 100 objects. Museums around the country are encouraged to participate, featuring objects that have a particular significance to their region. A current display at The Ancient House Museum in Thetford features objects from a prehistoric site at Lynford.*

Excavations in a gravel quarry at Lynford in 2002 by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit recovered evidence of an ancient river channel, beside which early humans (Neanderthals) had been making and reworking flint tools. These were being used for hunting or to scavenge meat from the carcasses of at least nine woolly mammoths, woolly rhinoceroses, reindeer, horse and bison. More than a thousand worked flints were found, including 50 handaxes, and several thousand bones, some of which have been gnawed by scavenging hyaenas.

County Archaeologist David Gurney described the site as one of the most important prehistoric sites discovered and excavated to date: "With a date around 60,000 years ago, this site represents the earliest recorded appearance of Neanderthals in this area. Once again, Norfolk is at the forefront of research into this very exciting period".

between sparrowhawk and goshawk. It also affects the type of prey taken by the male and female. The female sparrowhawk is nearly as large as the male goshawk and will take quite large prey such as pigeons with ease. The male, being smaller, can have quite a tussle with prey of this size and I always remember seeing a male sparrowhawk in the middle of the road trying to overpower a lapwing which it clearly managed to bring to ground but which refused to give in easily – the lapwing escaped.



sparrowhawk (left) and goshawk, drawn to scale

The goshawk is the largest and most powerful of our falcons and accipiters (hawks) and has been known to take prey up to the size of a buzzard in the right conditions. It is a woodland bird and one of the most elusive in the pine forests of Breckland, where horizons are not always too wide. When you are down amongst the trees and without a good view of the sky, the call of the bird is an important clue to its presence. In some large clearfells in the forest good views are possible, especially in early spring when the male is displaying. Its display of rapid diving and dipping flight, interspersed with spells of soaring, are a joy to watch. Goshawks have been making something of a comeback in Breckland, although numbers remain low with maybe only five or six pairs in total. Like most top predators, they only occur in fairly low numbers and the fact that there are regular sightings in areas where no nest site is known is a tribute to this bird's elusive qualities.

Nick is giving a talk to the Society on 26 February – see front page for details.



A pair of handaxes found at the Lynford site

These artefacts are currently on display at the Ancient House Museum as part of the *Moving Stories* exhibition, together with a mammoth rib bone and tooth, and a collection of beetle cases, all dating back 60,000 years.