



# **SOCIETY WORKING WITH CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT RURAL ENGLAND TO HELP PROTECT THE BRECKS**

*The Breckland Society has joined forces with the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) to help safeguard the environment of the Brecks. A joint event, held in February at the Houghton Centre and including a lecture by Tom Williamson of the Centre of East Anglian Studies at UEA, has proved the launch pad for closer collaboration. Over 80 Breckland Society and CPRE members attended the Houghton event, and a follow-up meeting has prompted the revival of the CPRE's previously moribund Breckland district branch.*

The CPRE Breckland group, on which a representative of the Breckland Society will sit, will carry out the sort of work undertaken by other CPRE districts branches across England. This is mainly focused on planning matters, and will include the monitoring of applications and development change within Breckland, as well as active campaigning on issues of particular local concern, such as light pollution, wind turbines and the degradation of landscape character.

Working closely with bodies like the CPRE is all the more crucial for the Society in view of the various pressures that are building locally. With far-reaching and potentially worrying changes proposed by the government with regard to the planning system, and continuing pressure to attain high housing targets and provide increased opportunities for business expansion in rural areas, the risk of unsympathetic and ill-thought out policies is all too clear. When confronting these issues, the Society will now be able to draw on the national reach and experience of the CPRE, a resource that should help strengthen our position locally.

Some of the more worrying issues were addressed at a recent Society meeting, when Breckland District Council planning department's Greg Britton outlined the main changes that are to take place in planning, among which is an increased focus on 'sustainable' development in and around the area's market towns. How these changes are to help deal with existing difficulties, such as the lack of time and resources to consider the detail of all planning applications, and the enduring problem of how and where to provide affordable housing for people on low incomes in places close to their work – is unclear. Furthermore, the increased emphasis on regionalisation, with the East of England RDA playing an enhanced role, may result in devolvement of power away from district and county level.

All the more reason why local organisations like the Breckland Society and the CPRE's new Breckland group need

to work together to ensure that local views are expressed constructively and on an informed basis to those responsible for making decisions on the nature and future of our environment.

Any member interested in becoming involved in the Breckland district branch of the CPRE, especially on the planning side, should contact James Parry on 01366 328676.

## **SOCIETY SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR 2004 NOW DUE!**

April 5th is the renewal date for Society subscriptions. We launched the Society in April last year, and over the last twelve months have made tremendous progress. We now have over 120 members, and many of you have attended the various field trips, lectures and other events held through the year. With the development of the Society's Vernacular Architecture Project and our increasingly useful links with organisations such as the CPRE, we really are beginning to make a difference locally.

We therefore hope that you will continue your support and renew your subscriptions for 2004. As you know, the Society is run entirely by volunteer effort, and in order to keep administration to a minimum we would like to encourage as many of you as possible to renew by direct debit, as this helps keep our costs down. As a further incentive, we are offering a substantial discount for those renewing by direct debit: £12.50 (as opposed to £15) for a single membership, and £22 (rather than £25) for two adults at the same address. Enclosed with this newsletter is a renewal form, and I hope that you will use it and enjoy a further year of membership. (Those members who have joined since 1 January this year will not need to renew until 2005.)

# VIEWPOINT

*Viewpoint is an opportunity for members of the Society to air their views on subjects of interest to other members and/or of relevance to the work of the Society. We welcome members' submissions and comments, but make the point that any opinions expressed are those of the individual(s) concerned and not necessarily of the Society (although of course we always listen to what you have to say!). In this issue Angela Knapp from Didlington argues for a more informed and research-based approach to habitat and wildlife conservation.*

I am a director of the wildlife charity known as Watermill Broad Nature Reserve, which covers 135 acres on the south side of the River Wissey and the Didlington Park lakes. I also own a mile of fishing on the River Wissey. I was interested to read Elizabeth Sutcliffe's plea for the introduction of a mink eradication scheme, but question whether the time and money spent on such an exercise in our area would not be better put towards an extended programme of controlled research. We might then get more accurate information about the increased predation of breeding waterbirds, and of the interaction of the various species, both indigenous and introduced, before the balance between them is irrevocably upset.

American mink are undoubtedly a serious problem and would certainly be better eradicated, if that were possible. They have been a significant factor in the decline of water vole populations, as they can access their burrows on land and take the voles in the water. However, over the past few years in Breckland, we have had, in addition to the mink, a relentless rise in fox numbers – which includes the stealthy release of urban foxes into Thetford Forest. I believe the foxes, probably not the urban variety, take a huge toll of ground-nesting birds on Watermill Broad. The cormorants, starved of fish at sea, are now breeding inland and using freshwater lakes and rivers. They compete for fish with the mink, the herons and the recently reintroduced otters. If the stocks of coarse fish in the river become depleted, will that endanger our native brown trout? What of the population of European crayfish? An adult otter needs to eat over a pound of fish, or part of its equivalent in crayfish, mammals, birds or amphibians each day. We so welcome the otter's return, but what numbers are actually sustainable in a fragile modern ecosystem?

In *Observations on Heron Hawking*, first published in 1826, Sir John Seebright states that 'A well stocked heronry in open country is necessary for this sport, and this may be seen in the greatest perfection at Didlington in Norfolk. This heronry is situated on a

river, with open country on every side of it. The herons go out in the morning to rivers and ponds at a very considerable distance, in search of food, and return to the heronry towards evening.'

Sadly, the poor heron of today is probably going out in the morning to fish in someone's goldfish pond, incurring terrible 'pond rage' as a result! We no longer have the vast numbers of amphibians, which amazed and delighted me when I first came to Didlington, nor the same number of grass snakes, which used to prey upon them. No wonder that the modern heron, living in a now very modest heronry – when not eating goldfish – has to specialise in preying on young ducklings.

The River Wissey and its surrounds are an important Breckland habitat, but increasingly it is not a 'natural' environment, and has but limited space. We desperately need more knowledge to enable the various species to be managed for the benefit of the whole, rather than face their ultimate destruction and loss through ignorance.

## **The Chairman adds:**

Managing wildlife habitats is a subtle and complex business, and Angela's point about the need for proper – and long-term – research is an excellent one. Equally salient is the emphasis on management of the *whole*, rather than undue focus on any particular species (although specific and direct action may be desirable when one species causes a particular problem). Most conservation organisations with responsibility for managing wildlife sites aim to maintain an overall balance in the habitat, on the basis that this will benefit the widest range of species. 'Single-species management' – managing a habitat specifically for a rare or endangered type of creature – can be both costly and philosophically contentious. Equally, leaving habitats alone to 'just get on with it' rarely works; we need to actively manage our landscapes, and can take appropriate decisions only if we have the proper information to hand.

## **Orchids**

Breckland is home to several beautiful and interesting species of orchid. Among the rarest is the military or soldier orchid (*Orchis militaris*), found on only a handful of sites in the UK, one of which is the Rex Graham Reserve in Suffolk, managed by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, part of what was Mildenhall Warren. The flower has a pale lilac 'hood', formed by the sepals, giving the appearance of a military helmet. Less distinct are the rows of purple 'tunic buttons' down the length of the lip, which may also have influenced its name. On the same day as the Mildenhall Warren Lodge event (see the *Breckland Warrens article on the back page*), the Rex Graham Reserve has its own open day. The Breckland Society will be organising a visit to the Reserve next year.

More widespread in Breckland are bee orchids and pyramidal orchids, which can be locally common, and in good years can be seen in their hundreds. The pyramidal orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) is a native perennial growing on chalk grassland and calcareous dunes. While it is fairly common in north, west and south Norfolk, it is less frequently found in the Breckland. It can grow as tall as 50cm, but is typically considerably smaller than this. Its pink, conical flowerhead, which appears between June and August, often has a slightly foxy scent. The Society has arranged a special visit to a private site where there is a particularly large colony – see **What's On**, on the back page, for details.

## ENCOURAGING WILDLIFE IN THE BRECKS by John Davies

*What is it that distinguishes the environment of Breckland from that of other landscapes? We are all familiar with the twisted roadside pines, dense conifer plantations and wide, open fields of sandy, flint-filled soil. Yet the Breckland landscape is very like virtually every other landscape in Britain in that it is manmade, the result of a succession of human activities going back thousands of years. Landscapes are dynamic, changed by the economic needs of those who occupy the land. Those of us who attended the superb illustrated lecture given by Anne Mason at Oak Lodge saw photographs of Breckland that few would recognise today: wide, open heathland given over to rabbit production. Today, less than a century later, the area has been transformed by the wholesale planting of mainly coniferous woodland and by arable agriculture, which have brought a dramatic change in the character of the local landscape and the wildlife it supports.*

Each of us has an impact on the wildlife value of land that we own or occupy, whether it be a small garden or a larger farm or estate. Collectively we can have a huge impact. For example, the late twentieth-century decline in songbirds is due almost entirely to human activity, factors such as the 'tidying-up' of the countryside and, in towns and cities, the huge increase in the domestic cat population. Equally, introduced species such as the muntjac can have a disastrous effect on indigenous flora.

Even when we try to correct earlier mistakes, we can get it wrong. Generous grants and subsidies provided by the taxpayer to replace hedgerows that, ironically, were grubbed out with the help of government grants some twenty-five years ago, are responsible for the countryside now being littered with trees and hedgerow plants constrained within hideous plastic tubes. This kind of environmental 'enhancement' often fails because the motives are financial, rather than driven by a genuine understanding of what is required in terms of care and maintenance after the initial planting. Sadly, there is too much of this one-dimensional approach and we are being short-changed while our wildlife suffers even further decline.

The agencies that supervise such programmes have much to answer for. It too often appears that there is no system to measure the net gain to the environment from these schemes. Slavish adherence to textbook theory leads to planting programmes for trees and hedges that often do not provide a balanced environment and so do little to enhance wildlife and habitat diversity. In many cases, the environmental 'yield' has been abysmal. For example, planting single species – mainly hawthorn – into narrow tubes eventually produces a hedge that resembles rows of oversized lollipops. The 'bottom' is sprayed out each year and the hedge is trimmed hard so that it is never allowed to flower or produce berries. The wildlife value of such hedges can be minimal.

The number and diversity of bird species in particular can provide a good measure of environmental health. A wide-open space given over to monoculture producing cereals supports little in the way of wildlife. There is little prospect of a return to traditional rotations including grassland and spring cereals and we must therefore look to provide for our wildlife off the farmed area, but including field margins and boundaries.

To survive, birds need:

- a supply of food available naturally at all times of the year
- nest sites to raise their young in safety
- protection from predators

Some food sources are obvious; they occur on trees and shrubs as berries and fruits. Insects are also an important food source to many birds, especially when feeding their young, and are to be found on a range of host plants and trees. We are told that the English oak (*Quercus robur*) is host to more than 280 different

insects, whereas the willow (*Salix*), birch (*Betula*), and hawthorn (*Crataegus*) support fewer but still significant numbers. It is important therefore that these native species be planted as part of any environmental scheme. It follows also that nettles, brambles and other historically unwelcome plants, hosts to many insects and their larvae, need to be present in sufficient numbers to provide a diverse and balanced food source. Many birds feed on earthworms and it is recognised that these occur in greater numbers in grassland, where balanced rotational cropping systems are operating, and in woodland.

Conservation is not wholly within the domain of farmers and landowners. Anyone with a garden or small paddock can contribute to enhancing the environment, and such areas can form vital refuges and corridors for wildlife. Non-native plants can have a role to play. There are many reliable fruiting shrubs and trees that are not indigenous but which provide valuable food at times of the year when native species are not fruiting. The berries of the native rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*) colour in late August and are eaten over a very short period. As winter progresses, other species of non-native *Sorbus* are taken by birds and other creatures, *Sorbus cashmiriana* being among the last to go. Similarly, the native crab (*Malus*) ripens and is eaten in late autumn, whereas probably the best fruiting species (*Malus* 'Red Sentinel') holds on to its fruits until March or April, although it may have some of its bright red apples taken earlier, during periods of hard weather. For birds, the availability of suitable nest sites is vital. By the excessive cutting of grass in ditches and rougher areas in our gardens, we deprive many species of suitable habitat. Our wildlife would benefit enormously if every gardener could resist the urge to tidy up, retaining an area of nettles, long grass and brambles to be kept in check rather than eliminated. Furthermore, if farmers could be persuaded to delay trimming their hedges until February or March, and then to trim them sympathetically in an 'A' shape, 2 metres high and at least 2 metres wide at the base, the benefit would be enormous. There is nothing more depressing than to see hedges hacked back in September and October, their berries and fruits – a vital source of winter food for birds – wasted.

Finally, I make a plea for a better understanding of, and respect for, birds of prey, especially the much-maligned sparrowhawk. The sparrowhawk is not responsible for the decline in songbirds! Destruction and insensitive management of habitat are the main causes, together with changes in farming practices, including the use of herbicides and pesticides. The sparrowhawk does predate on small and medium-sized birds and clearly has to eat to survive, but its numbers increase and decrease in line with its prey. This is one of the reasons that birds such as thrushes, robins and sparrows have two or three broods of youngsters each year: they expect to lose several to sparrowhawks! The key is to increase the food supply, habitat and shelter for all birds by adopting a pragmatic and balanced approach to landscape management, and try to bring about a better understanding by those in a position to effect change.

# The Breckland Warrens

*On 27 January the Society welcomed Anne Mason, who delivered an excellent talk on the Breckland warrens, and the rabbit meat and fur industry that was a mainstay of the region for many centuries.*

Rabbits were introduced to Britain by the Normans; the first record of a warren is from the Scilly Isles in 1176, but the first one mentioned in this area was in Lakenheath, in 1251. Breckland had more than 20 warrens, many of which were owned by monasteries. During the Middle Ages, rabbit meat and fur were luxury items, bringing a good commercial return in good years, as well as a supply of fresh meat in winter. Huge numbers of rabbits were sent up to London, especially to the court, both for food and for use in making fur robes.

A warren was an area of heath designated for the farming of rabbits, in which the animals were bred, nurtured, protected and finally trapped by warreners. The lodges were defensive buildings, to protect them against raids by organised gangs of poachers; indeed the whole warren was protected by ditches and high gorse-topped banks to keep the precious rabbits in and predators and poachers out. Rabbits were caught in purse nets, long nets and tip-traps, during autumn and early winter, with the help of ferrets and lurcher dogs. There were trapping banks in the warrens and around the perimeter banks – banks can still be seen in forest plantations.

Rabbit production peaked in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and fur factories in Brandon and Thetford processed the skins into felt for hats, which were exported to South America. During the agricultural revolution and the 'high farming' period of Victorian prosperity, parts of some of the warrens were enclosed; farms were established, stands of timber were grown and the warren area was thereby reduced.

After centuries of warrening, much of the land had become impoverished, or 'rabbit-sick'. Rows of pine hedges were planted to prevent the consequent sand blows and loss of topsoil. With the break-up of the warrens, rabbits escaped into the countryside, and when the Forestry Commission bought up bankrupt Breckland estates after the First World War, it needed to employ 36 warreners to control their numbers.

There remain many reminders of this industry that once dominated our landscape: place and street names, artefacts used by warreners, and the banks and warren lodges. Maps survive of Methwold Warren (1599), Downham High Warren (1791) and Lakenheath (1835); Elektra May kindly brought along two splendid maps of Beachamwell Warren for us to have a look at.

Research is being done on sites of medieval warren lodges; two lodges survive, at Thetford and Mildenhall (see *the May 2003 Newsletter*), which give some insight into the life and work of the warreners.

There will be an **Open Day at Mildenhall Warren Lodge on Bank Holiday Monday, 31 May from 11am to 4pm**, providing an opportunity to go inside the 14th-century lodge. Documents relating to its history, and to warrening in Breckland generally, will be on display. This is a joint event between Friends of Thetford Forest and The Forestry Commission.

Tel 01842 810271 or 01353 741416 for further details.

## NEWS FROM THE BRECKS COUNTRYSIDE PROJECT



Here is the summer programme of heathland walks:

Sat 8 May, 10–2.30pm Santon Warren and Forest Nature Reserve, 5 miles

Weds 2 June, 7.30–9.30am Knettishall Heath, heathland breakfast, 3 miles

Sunday 18 July, 2–4.30pm Cranwich Camp, chalk grassland old and new, 4 miles

All walks are free, but please book in advance.  
Sturdy footwear recommended.

For further details or to book a place, please call 01842 761569  
or email [brecks.project@et.suffolkcc.gov.uk](mailto:brecks.project@et.suffolkcc.gov.uk)

## WHAT'S ON

### Forthcoming Society events

#### Wednesday 7 April

Tour of Brandon by local historian Leigh Yeager. Historically an important river crossing and market town, Brandon is surprisingly rich in heritage. Leigh will lead a walking tour lasting 2–3 hours. 10.30am start, meeting in the George Street car park at the junction of the Bury and Thetford roads, behind The Flintknappers Arms.

£1.50 members, £2.50 non-members.

#### Wednesday 12 May

Nightingale evening on private land at Foulden. This area boasts one of the highest densities of nightingales in England, and it is sometimes possible to hear two or three singing simultaneously. 8pm start, numbers strictly limited, and places must be booked in advance, by phoning James Parry on 01366 328676. £4, to include a glass of wine.

#### Thursday 17 June

Evening visit to view orchids on private land near Oxborough. If conditions are right we should be treated to a spectacular display of pyramidal orchids. Places must be booked in advance by phoning Sue Whittlely on 01366 328190. Small charge for non-members.

#### Saturday 19 June

(This event was originally scheduled for 1 May.)

Champagne reception at Oxburgh Hall, kindly hosted by Henry and Mary Bedingfield to celebrate the Society's first anniversary. Numbers strictly limited. Tickets from Sue Whittlely (£12 members, £15 non-members).

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