



## NIGHTJAR FIELD TRIP GETS THE BIRDIE

*Eighteen members of the Society enjoyed one of the great sights of summer in the Brecks on June 18<sup>th</sup>, when they were treated to a display of nightjars near Cockley Cley. An indifferent weather forecast, promising showers and wind, proved thankfully inaccurate, and instead a light breeze and spectacular Breckland sunset greeted the party as it arrived at the nightjar site shortly before 9.30pm.*

Just after 10pm the first male nightjar was heard 'churring', a strange bubbling sound with an almost mechanical quality to it, and soon thereafter the first bird appeared, a dark shape with pointed wings and a strange marionette-like flight. Over the next hour or so at least two males were heard singing regularly and up to five different birds were seen, quartering the open areas in search of insects and often approaching quite close. On one occasion a particularly curious individual hovered barely six feet away and some of us were also lucky enough to hear the clapping of the male's wings in display.

We also saw several woodcock engaged in their territorial flight, known as 'roding', as well as a large bat, possibly a noctule. Being out at night at that time of year is one of summer's great joys; next year we hope to repeat the nightjar evening and are also considering field trips to look for nightingales and that other night-time songster, the grasshopper warbler.

### **More about the nightjar**

Nightjars are odd-looking birds, rather like a cross between a cuckoo and a bird of prey. They are strictly nocturnal and rely on their immaculate camouflage to escape detection during the day, when they roost either on the ground or on tree boughs. They are summer migrants to Britain, arriving in mid-May and leaving for Africa again

in September, and prefer open country, such as heathland or, increasingly, clear-fell. The male's extraordinary song, a monotonous yet evocative drone, is usually delivered from a prominent dead branch or bush top. Careful analysis of recordings has revealed the nightjar's song to contain up to 1900 individual notes per minute! Male birds patrol their territory with a dancing, jerky flight, flashing their prominent white wing patches (both to ward off other males and to attract potential mates) and often bringing their wings into contact behind their backs to produce a loud 'clap'. Nightjars nest on the ground, laying their two eggs on the bare soil.

Much folklore surrounds this species, not least the contention that the bird drinks goat's milk, hence its traditional country name of 'goatsucker'. As with many such terms, however, the reality is disappointingly prosaic. Nightjars feed primarily on night-flying insects, especially moths, and so are attracted to places where these are plentiful – such as near livestock. Birds will range quite widely on their nightly forays, and have even been known to enter villages and hawk the moths and beetles attracted by streetlights.

Nightjars are widely but thinly distributed across England, Scotland and Wales, and after decades of decline, due to habitat loss, are now increasing in number again. The Brecks are one of their British headquarters, with an estimated population of some 500 churring males (more than 10 per cent of the British population), and this is one of the best places in Britain to see them.

## SOCIETY VISIT TO THE ANCIENT HOUSE MUSEUM

*On the 9<sup>th</sup> July a group of members attended a fascinating lecture given at the Ancient House Museum in Thetford by the Curator, Oliver Bone. His talk on the history and role of the museum, and of the building in which it is housed, preceded a tour of the museum's collections and displays. These range from photographs of old Thetford to archaeological artefacts unearthed in and around the town, as well as a wealth of material on the wildlife, countryside and history of Breckland, going back several centuries.*

The Ancient House dates from around 1500 and is of timber-framed construction. It is one of very few such buildings still existing in Thetford, where flint architecture dominates, and was probably built for a wealthy local merchant. Retaining many original features, including some spectacular timber (believed to have been brought from Little Fakenham) and sections of ancient wattle-and-daub, it occupies a town centre site on White Hart Street, once Thetford's most fashionable thoroughfare. Originally a detached building, it was later linked into a terrace and converted to shops, their counters opening onto the street. Ancient House itself was later reduced in size by the demolition of one of these shops.

Interestingly, the exterior of the house would not have been the classic black-and-white originally; more a 'brown-and-tan' combination. The practice of blackening the timbers by tarring them became commonplace only in the 19th century. Ancient House was buried beneath render for many years until 1867, when this was hacked off to reveal the Tudor building beneath.

At the time of the house's construction, Thetford was a thriving market town. It had been an important commercial, political and ecclesiastical centre since the 7th century at least, and during Saxon times was the sixth largest town in Britain. It even had its own mint. Its earlier history had been equally illustrious. The Castle Mound, on

which a hillfort once sat, dates from 500BC and is one of the most impressive in Britain. The Thetford area was once part of the Icenic domain, and another fort with links to Boadicea was discovered in the area of the present industrial estate at Fison Way. It may not have been her headquarters, but was certainly an encampment of some significance and possibly a ceremonial site. The Romans destroyed it in reprisal for damage inflicted on their army by the Icenic. Not surprisingly, Thetford has yielded many fascinating archaeological finds, notably the celebrated Thetford Treasure, a series of late Roman artefacts unearthed in 1979 by a Mr Brook, who at first chose not to disclose his discovery, keeping several of the key

finds on his mantelpiece. Most of the treasure is now in the British Museum and the site, near the A11 bypass, has since been partly built over.

Ancient House became a museum as the result of an unlikely gift. In 1921 Prince Frederick Duleep Singh of Elveden bought the property, paid for its restoration and then donated it to the town of Thetford, together with various paintings and artefacts. It was opened formally in 1924 by the Duchess of Grafton, whose family owned and lived at nearby Euston Hall. Since then it has served as a focal point for those interested in the history and heritage of Thetford and the surrounding area, receiving over 10,000 visitors each year.

## BARBECUE AT CLERMONT

*Nearly 40 members enjoyed a barbecue kindly hosted by the Society's Treasurer, John Davies and his wife Diana at Clermont House, Little Cressingham, on 30 August.*

Clermont House was built in 1971 in what was formerly the walled kitchen garden to Clermont Hall and since then John and Diana have created a superb garden in a spectacular and peaceful setting. John's great love for trees is reflected in the arboretum he has planted, which features both ornamentals and many native species. Berry-carrying shrubs and trees have been planted to attract birds, and a beautifully landscaped manmade pond is home to a wealth of wild-

life, including many species of dragon- and damselfly. The most recent addition to the garden is a stunning grass labyrinth, created in a beautiful glade and modelled on the twelfth-century stone labyrinth in the nave of Chartres Cathedral. A tool for meditation and stress therapy, this has been used as such by Christian and pre-Christian religions for centuries.

## TIME FOR A CLEAR-UP?

*Wherever we look these days we see litter and rubbish – on the verges of country lanes, along dual carriageways and motorways, in lay-bys and in town centres. It is particularly noticeable when the roadside verges are cut; swathes of long grass (and many wild flowers, besides) are removed to reveal an unsightly trail of jettisoned newspapers, drinks cans, carrier bags and other detritus. The Society's Secretary, Sue Whittle, visited both California and Australia this year and on returning was shocked at just how cluttered with refuse parts of East Anglia have become. The A11 Thetford bypass is a prime example; possibly the most littered road in the Brecks?*

California has a programme called 'Adopt a Highway', whereby various individuals, clubs or organisations adopt a stretch of road and regularly clear the rubbish from it into bin bags, which are then left on the side to be collected by dustcarts. Consequently such places are spotless, a pleasure both to be in and to look at, and a source of civic pride rather than an eyesore. This sort of direct action might serve as a useful model over here, although it is not clear exactly what the attitude of British officialdom might be. What would the Highways Agency make of teams of volunteers patrolling the roadside gathering litter? Clearly there would be safety implications. And after all, is keeping the roadside clean and tidy not the responsibility of the local authority? (the answer is yes).

Meanwhile, there is a serious and growing problem over here with waste disposal. Hence the piles of 'white goods' and electrical equipment that are increasingly dumped in lay-bys, and the burnt-out cars that have become such a regular feature of our quieter lanes, especially at the entrance to rides in Thetford Forest. In the last few weeks, a spate of car tyres has appeared. In all these cases, it is cheaper to dump the items concerned rather than take

them away for proper disposal. As the landfill tax rates have risen from £14 to £35 per ton, fly-tipping is now expected to become an even larger problem, especially for those landowners (mostly farmers) whose land lies in close proximity to towns. If they cannot prove that they neither knowingly caused nor knowingly permitted fly-tipping to take place on their property, the Environment Agency and local authorities can force them to remove the waste from their land within a specified time or PAY for its removal by waste collection authorities. Landowners and occupiers will have to prove that they have taken 'all reasonable steps to prevent fly-tipping from taking place' in order to avoid being penalised in this way.

It is obviously not easy for landowners in isolated, rural areas like the Brecks to secure their land from fly-tipping. The National Farmers' Union and Country Landowners' Association have been in discussion with the Government about ways in which it might be possible to discourage fly-tipping without penalising landowners. We wait to see what emerges from these discussions. Meanwhile, if you live within the Breckland District Council area and have a problem with fly-tipping, there is a number to call: 01362 656201.

**DIARY DATE** In the last newsletter we mentioned that **Patience Tomlinson** would be performing her one-woman show, *A Tale That is Told*, for the Society later this year. This event has now been booked for **Saturday 29 November** at the **Houghton Centre** at 7.30. Tickets are available from Sue Whittle (01366 328190), price £10 for members, £12 for non-members, to include a glass of wine. See enclosed flyer for booking form.

# 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 Arthur Rackham of North Pickenham asks:*

## WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THE BRECKLAND PINES?

*'One of the most distinctive and enjoyable features of the Breckland landscape is the many types of tree, but especially the twisted Scots pines that line the roads, near and around Thetford Forest in particular. I believe, however, that their future is being severely threatened by attack by ivy. This is growing on many trees in the area, wherever one cares to look, but especially on the pines. The growth starts up the trunk, soon engulfing the main branches and eventually the minor ones, ultimately causing the tree's death.*

*I appreciate that dense growths of ivy provide a habitat for many species of bird and insect, but the unchecked spread of this parasite is having a devastating overall effect on many Breckland trees. No one seems to take an overall interest in this issue, or assume responsibility for it, one problem being that of ownership: some of the trees are on private land, whereas others, along the highway for example, are presumably 'owned' by the local authority. I believe that the Society should take a lead in calling for action to avoid the loss of such a distinctive feature of our local landscape.'*

### **The Chairman adds (after having done some research!):**

There's no doubt that the twisted pines of the Brecks are one of the area's most characteristic symbols and one that we should do everything possible to maintain (see below). Rampant ivy can certainly obscure the idiosyncratic profile of the trees, which is precisely the element we value most about them, at least visually. Arthur is right to point out that ivy has high wildlife value, as it provides both shelter and food to many insects and birds, especially in winter, and can be important to roosting bats.

Ivy is not actually a parasite, however. It has its own root system in the ground and uses trees (or non-natural structures, such as walls) only for support. However tightly ivy attaches itself to a tree, its small hairy rootlets do not penetrate below the uppermost layers of bark and certainly do not 'suck' the tree dry, as has been claimed. Most scientists agree that, whilst ivy does not *directly* affect the health of trees, it can restrict their growth by choking out light, thereby reducing photosynthesis, and when well established it can be heavy and bulky enough to make trees top-heavy and so vulnerable to high winds. Even so, there is evidence that ivy really prospers only on old or unhealthy trees, ie those with an opening crown through which light seeps through – this encourages the ivy to grow. Healthy trees with dense canopies usually do not have an ivy problem.

Even if there may not be justification for removing ivy on the grounds of tree health, there is an aesthetic argument that it should be controlled in cases where it is working to obscure a valued landscape feature. This is certainly the case with the Breckland pines, but ivy is only one of the issues these trees now face. Many are old and in need of replacement – another issue entirely – and their age may explain why ivy is now taking such a hold on them. Meanwhile, the answer is surely to strike a balance by removing ivy from some trees, but retain it on others on the grounds of its wildlife value. That way we can continue, within the Brecks landscape as a whole, to enjoy the elegant shape of the bare pine trunks in the knowledge that we have not completely removed a valuable wildlife habitat.

### **The Breckland pines**

The pine rows of Breckland are a subject of some uncertainty and much debate, ranging from discussion on their age to how best to maintain them. They are widely but irregularly distributed across the Brecks, with the heaviest densities to be found on estates such as Cockley Cley and Elveden. Some of the trees were planted during the Enclosures of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, probably as boundary markers or windbreaks. Others were planted later and were subsequently maintained as hedges to try and stop the incidence of sand-blow on the fields that were increasingly carved out of what had been huge expanses of open Breckland heath. The young pines were 'laid' by hand in traditional style, with lateral growth removed and the main stems (or 'pleachers') cut three-quarters of the way through and then bent diagonally so that each one overlapped with its neighbour to form the hedge. At some point in the more recent past – no one is quite sure when – this practice was abandoned, presumably when soil improvement techniques were advanced enough to hold the soil together without needing the confining hedges.

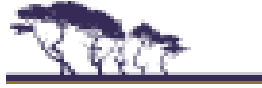
The twisted shape of the pine trees is a source of endless speculation. Some authorities maintain that the deformed trunks are the result of the trees having been maintained as hedges, whereas others claim they are the result of attacks by pine shoot moth in the early decades of the twentieth century. The moth larvae ate their way inside the bud stems, stunting growth and causing structural deformities. Probably both explanations have something in their favour, although the often regular pattern of pine rows – with a particular shape or profile replicated consistently through a line of several trees – would seem to support the hedge theory rather than the moth argument, which would surely have resulted in a more haphazard effect. Either way, there are hardly any examples of maintained pine hedges left today, most having grown out into the straggly lines we know so well. There is, however, one short stretch of well-maintained pine hedge on the west side of the B1106 near the pub next to the Elveden crossroads. Meanwhile, many of the pine trees are approaching old age and dying off or falling victim to high winds and storms.

In recent years, limited replanting of roadside pines has taken place at some locations, but the rate of loss of the older trees is now outgrowing the pace of replacement. In response, the Brecks Countryside Project is launching an initiative this autumn, aimed at encouraging local landowners to replant pine rows where possible. EU European Objective 2 funding is available to help with this.

However, it is not simply a question of replanting. Without appropriate management, the new trees will simply grow up straight, lacking the characteristic 'kinks' of their ancestors. The Project is therefore looking into ways in which this effect can be perpetuated and the contribution made by these trees to the Breckland landscape sustained into the future. If you have any knowledge of the hedges in their heyday, or better still, old photographs of them (none are known to exist), then please contact the Society's Chairman, James Parry, or the Brecks Project team (details overleaf).

*See also Pine Line Restoration in the update from the Brecks Countryside Project on the back page of this newsletter.*

# NEWS FROM THE BRECKS COUNTRYSIDE PROJECT



## Have a go in the Brecks

The Brecks Countryside Project will be holding a free 'taster day' at Weeting on Saturday 11 October 2003 for anyone interested in the wildlife and heritage of their local area. You will have the chance to get advice on setting up a community group, on the funding and support available, as well as meeting other local groups and finding out what's already going on and how to get involved. See the enclosed flyer for more details, or contact the Brecks Project.

## Otter good piece of news!

The fourth Otter Survey of England has just been published and the results are looking good. Of 3,327 sites investigated, 35% showed evidence of otter activity – this is a five-fold increase in the last 25 years. These figures do not include the Norfolk or Suffolk Brecks as, until now, surveys have not been carried out in this area. The newly-formed Brecks Countryside Project Otter Surveyors' Group are remedying this. Twice a year, over 30 volunteers are surveying 60 sites within the Brecks, checking for signs of otters. We hear many tales of otter sightings and, unfortunately, road deaths, but the timing of the surveys and the choice of specific sites will enable us to gain a good picture of the otter population in the Brecks. For further information, please contact Vicky Stone at the Brecks Project.

## Pine Line Restoration

As part of a joint project with the Brecks Tourism Partnership and with European Objective 2 funding, the Brecks Countryside Project will be planting 2,250 Scots pine in the Brecks over the next three years. Originally planted as hedges for functional reasons, to stop sand being blown from the fields, the shelter belts or pine lines which we see along the roadside or field edges have become an integral part of the Brecks landscape.

The aim is to restore and re-create pine lines by 'gapping up' existing belts and planting new ones, with the help of the Brecks Conservation Volunteers. Do you know of a pine line that could benefit from restoration, or a site suitable for new planting? Would you like to be involved in helping out with the tree planting? If so, or if you would just like further information on the project, please contact The Brecks Project.

## Walks

The Project's series of waterside walks continues this autumn, as follows:

Sun 28 Sept The River Lark, Mildenhall, 6 miles, 10-1pm

Sun 2 Nov Knettishall Heath to Hopton Fen, 6 miles, 10-1pm

Sun 7 Dec The River Thet, Harling, 5.5 miles, 10-1pm

All walks are free, but please book in advance with Vicky Stone on 01842 761569.

Contact the Project: Tel 01842 765400/761569

email [brecks.project@et.suffolkcc.gov.uk](mailto:brecks.project@et.suffolkcc.gov.uk)

[www.brecks.org](http://www.brecks.org)

## Message from Liz Dittner, Newsletter Editor

We are planning to run a series of articles on the architecture and building materials of the Brecks, starting with the December newsletter. We should like this to include the whole story, from the quarrying of materials, through their preparation for use, to their final incorporation into buildings and other structures such as roads and walls. If you have any experience of flint, chalk clunch, clay lump or pantiles and pammments, then please do get in touch so that I can pick your brains! If you are happy to write an article yourself, so much the better, but if not I would be delighted to hear from you anyway, with a view to using your knowledge in an article.

Tel: 01366 727813, email [liz@dittner.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:liz@dittner.freeserve.co.uk)

# WHAT'S ON

## Wednesday 15 October

Lecture on *The Churches of Wayland* by Bronwen Tyler, at St Mary's Church, Watton. The church is located slightly outside the town centre, off the Norwich Road: turn off the main road at Dorrington House (old people's home). The church is on the right, about 400 yards down this road, with ample car parking round the corner. Bronwen will talk to us about some of Breckland's most delightful churches. Refreshments at 7.30, talk starts at 8.00.

## Wednesday 12 November

Award-winning bird photographer and local farmer Chris Knights will speak on *Farming in the Brecks*. Few people know Breckland and its natural history better than Chris; his approach to agriculture, combining production with the conservation of wildlife, has redefined the contemporary farming agenda. Croxton Village Hall, 7.30. Tickets on the door, £3 members, £5 non-members.

## Saturday 29 November

Patience Tomlinson performs her excellent one-woman show *A Tale That is Told*, on forgotten Breckland novelist Mary Mann. Houghton Centre, South Pickenham, 7.30. Tickets must be booked in advance. Please see enclosed flyer.

## Tuesday 27 January 2004

Anne Mason, an expert on Breckland's warrens, will speak on *Warrening: The Story of Rabbits in the Brecks*. Anne has been researching this subject for many years and this promises to be a very interesting evening. Venue to be decided. See December's newsletter for details.

## The Breckland Society

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