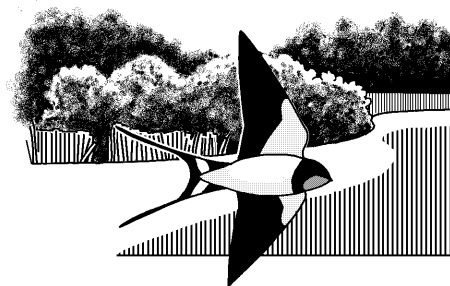


Little Ouse Headwaters Project (LOHP)

Members' Newsletter: Autumn 2008



We've been busy all summer and into autumn, both maintaining our "old" sites and moving on with the restoration work at Parker's Piece/Bleyswyck's Bank. Our major event of the year was the Frith Fayre open day at the end of June, celebrating the end of 5 years Heritage Lottery funding for the Frith and the Lows restoration.

Parker's Piece and Bleyswyck's Bank

The restoration work on these sites has continued over the past few months, although we had to limit some of the activity to avoid any disturbance to breeding birds during spring and early summer. After the earlier clearance of the plantation trees at Bleyswyck's Bank, we re-aligned one drainage ditch and installed culverts close to the river in two ditches, allowing easier access for both machinery and people. Although we will not officially open these sites to the public until the major restoration work has been completed, many local residents are already taking advantage of the LOHP's policy of open access to explore this new area. In the coming months we may have to restrict access while heavy machinery is working there, but eventually there will be new paths linking with other sites in the valley.

Fencing of the site is now complete, and we have been able to install wide access kissing gates thanks to a grant from the CLA Charitable Trust. We have started a regime of mowing and removal of the cut vegetation, and intend to add grazing to the management 'recipe' next year, as we have done with such success on the Frith and the Lows.

We are awaiting various permissions to proceed with the removal of a layer of degraded soil overlying the fen peat, which will create conditions for the re-colonisation of fen vegetation, and hope to start this work in the very near future.

Land management at other sites

It has been very much business as usual at most sites. The Frith has been grazed by sheep and we've had both sheep and cows on the Lows - together with regular topping of nettles and thistles, and some hand-digging of thistles by our ever-willing volunteers this is making a real difference to the sward on these sites. We are continuing to keep the grazing pressure high on this land for the time being because the vegetation still needs close control to prevent fast-growing, weedy species re-establishing - at some stage in the future we expect to be able to relax this grazing regime at certain times of year to allow some of the currently less common plants to flower and set seed.

The very wet conditions during this spring and summer made access to the lower field on the Lows very difficult, so we have installed a new culvert at the point where the access crosses a ditch, which will make it easier for people, cows and machinery to cross!

At Blo Norton and Betty's Fens routine summer management work included the biennial mowing of the flower-rich fen meadow at the western end of Blo' Norton Fen. This area has many rare species, including black bog rush, great burnet, bog pimpernel and marsh helleborine orchid, that benefit from more frequent mowing than the adjacent beds of saw sedge, which are cut on a five year rotation. At Betty's Fen the tall fen vegetation developing around the turf pond was mown to reduce the dominance of creeping thistles and encourage the slower-growing species fen that are so successfully re-colonising this site. Areas of tall reed were left uncut to benefit the breeding reed and sedge warblers.

At Hinderclay Fen we have continued to cut and remove vegetation from the wet fen, and a recent work party dug new turf ponds on the site. Some of our volunteers have established a bird ringing site on the fen which is part of the BTOs network of "Constant Effort Sites" - these sites are monitored a set number of times each year using a standardised method. As well as helping to monitor changes in numbers and species of breeding birds on the site this scheme also contributes to larger scale analysis of national trends in bird populations.

Small Copper Butterflies on Hinderclay Fen

The area of heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) is spreading on Hinderclay Fen. At the eastern end especially, where the birch scrub has been removed, heather is flourishing. On the western end the small patch is also expanding. Rabbits prevent any of the plants growing tall - several years ago most heather resembled a billiard table, grazed low by the large number of rabbits. Myxomatosis is controlling rabbit numbers at present and the heather has grown taller, flowering well in the last few years despite the presence of heather beetle that causes dieback in the plants. The peak of the heather beetle infestation is now past and plants, especially at the western end of the site, are recovering.

On 29 August this year, a bright sunny day, there were large numbers of small copper butterflies on the heather, an estimate of 120 at the eastern end and 30 at the western end. Many were newly hatched and had benefitted from the extensive sward of sheep's sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*), the caterpillars' food plant, on the heath. As it has been a wet year the sorrel had not died back as much as usual and there appeared to have been a sizeable second hatch of these butterflies. Males were displaying to females and defending territories aggressively. This butterfly can occur in large numbers in years when the food plant thrives, but this occurrence at Hinderclay was reported to the local butterfly recorder who considered it a notable record. It is usual to see no more than a handful of this attractive small butterfly with, if one is lucky, a few common blues.

Access

As part of our commitment to making our sites accessible we have begun installing carved oak "finger posts" indicating where the footpath entrances are - these signs are being produced for us by Raymond Warren from Thelnetham.

With the exception of our new land during the restoration phase (see above) all our sites are open for you to visit at any time. We welcome dogs if kept under close control - please remember always keep your dog on a lead when there are grazing stock on site, and during the bird breeding season. Many ground-nesting species of birds are easily disturbed by dogs, to the extent that they may abandon their nests. Our sites have a mixture of public and permissive footpaths, so not all the paths will appear on Ordnance Survey maps - do contact us, or check on the website ('where to walk' on the left-hand menu) if you're not sure where the paths are. Please note that the paths we maintain are for pedestrian access only and are not suitable for cycling or horse riding.

Events

We lost count of how many people came to the Frith and Lows Open Day (the Frith Fayre) in June, but our offer of free admission to cyclists and walkers seemed to encourage many local people to get out their bikes or walking shoes. In the middle of such a disappointing summer we were lucky to have a fine day, although the windy conditions proved challenging for the occupants of the gazebos and small marquees! The local crafts, music, morris dancing, food and local beer, the excellent display of falconry and the bird ringing and sheep dog demonstrations kept everyone entertained - we are really grateful to everyone who took part and made it such a success.

Other less ambitious events (at least for the organisers!) during the summer have included walks and talks for various local groups, and our usual monthly work parties (see below or more details of future work parties).

Forthcoming events - Dates for your diaries:

AGM and Annual Talk, Thursday 4th December

This years AGM will be at the Lophams' Village Hall, with a talk by Tim Pankhurst, Fens Officer with the national charity Plantlife. As usual, the business meeting will be relatively brief, and non-members are welcome.

New Year Walk, Sunday 4th January 2009

Starting at Redgrave Activities Centre and taking in the Frith and the Lows, this walk will start at 10.30, and we aim to get you back in time for a pub lunch. Everybody welcome, we can arrange a shorter course for anyone who doesn't want to do the whole walk, and we're happy for you to bring well-behaved dogs along too.

Work parties:

Details of the Sunday programme for the next few months are given below, and up-to-date information is posted on the website. Everyone is welcome - even if you can only spare a couple of hours it still makes a real difference to what we achieve on our sites.

Reg Langston is also running **mid-week work parties on Wednesdays**, which are really helping us to get through our list of smaller jobs on each site - please call Reg for more details if you'd like to join in with any of those.

Autumn/Winter 2008 Work Party Programme

Date	Venue	Task
14 December	Parkers/Bleyswycks	Scrub clearance + bonfire + Christmas treats!
11 January	Hinderclay Fen	Scrub clearance + bonfire
8 February	Hinderclay Fen	Tree seedling clearance
8 March	Blo Norton Fens	Scrub clearance

All work parties start at 10-30am and are on the second Sunday of each month. Please come for as little or as much time as you like and bring your friends along - all contributions are valuable. You will need wellies or strong boots, old clothes and a drink. We will provide tools and gloves and other refreshments.

Venues can change, depending on weather and ground conditions, so for up-to-date information nearer the time email enquiries@lohp.org.uk, look at our web site www.lohp.org.uk or phone:
for Hinderclay Fen, Reg and Rowena Langston on 01379-898009
for Blo'Norton & Betty's Fen, Jo-Anne Pitt on 01379-898684
for the Frith and the Lows, Helen Smith on 01379-687680

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