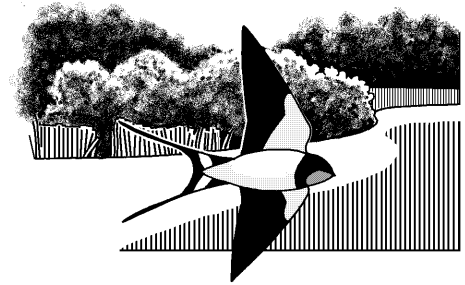


Little Ouse Headwaters Project (LOHP)

Members' Newsletter: Autumn 2009



As we move into the darker evenings we thought we'd update you on what we've been doing over the summer, and let you know about the new work party programme and forthcoming events including our AGM and annual talk on Thursday 10th December.

Parkers Piece and Bleyswycks Bank

The restoration work here is almost completed- dried out, degraded peat has been scraped off a large area and deposited on the south western part of the site, forming a low mound. We intend to plant this with trees to form an area of scrub to encourage nesting birds. We've also been cutting the vegetation on the site to control the growth of arable weeds and encourage a more diverse mix of species. In the near future we expect the first grazing stock to arrive, and in future years we hope to control the vegetation mainly through grazing rather than cutting. We are really encouraged by the fact that the deepest scrape on the site has held water throughout the very dry late summer and autumn, and has been a great place for dragonflies, damselflies and wading birds.

Although the archaeological assessment of the site that we commissioned before the removal of the surface peat failed to find any evidence of early human occupation, the radio carbon dating of the peat shows that the original fen was formed during the Later Mesolithic period. We await the results of analyses of the pollen record and plant remains in the peat which will tell us much more about the past development and vegetation of the fen. The new flora that is rapidly developing on the site consists of a mixture of weedy reminders of the site's recent agricultural past, together with fen specialities, such as the uncommon white-flowered brookweed, that have re-appeared from the seedbed.

A new bench, in memory of volunteer Margaret Malley's late husband Terry, is already in place, under a shady birch tree, overlooking the river. Please do use it to enjoy the views and, if you are lucky, see a kingfisher flash past. We recently learnt with sadness of the death of Mr Bernard Bleyswyck, former owner of Bleyswycks Bank. Mr Bleyswyck was anxious that his land should become a peaceful haven for wildlife that could be enjoyed by local people. We very much hope that it is turning into just that, and will be a fitting and enduring memorial to him.

Thanks to the hard work of Bob Hayward we now have all the permissions in place for the construction of a new footbridge linking Bleyswycks Bank to Betty's Fen on the north side of the river - we hope to have this in place in the next few months, opening up new possibilities for circular walks through the valley. We will also be installing a stretch of boardwalk across one of the wetter parts of the site, leading into Thelnetham Fen and joining up with the path maintained by Suffolk Wildlife Trust. As soon as the boardwalk and bridge are complete, we will be opening the site for public access. Next spring we will hold an official opening of the site to celebrate the restoration of this former area of Thelnetham Fen for wildlife and public enjoyment, and to thank everyone, including our many generous funders, who have done so much to make this project possible.

Other sites

Sheep and cattle have been grazing on The Frith and the Lows as usual this summer. In the early part of the summer it was so wet that the vegetation was growing faster than it was being eaten - the small herd of Dexter calves on the Lows were in danger of getting lost in the undergrowth! We had to cut material to supplement the grazing, but as the sites have dried out the growth has slowed down. This year we have been removing the cut vegetation from some of our more accessible sites rather than piling it up to rot down as we have done in previous years. This will help to reduce high nutrient levels in the soil (a legacy of these sites' recent agricultural history) which encourage the growth of species such as stinging nettles and creeping thistles at the expense of a greater diversity of less common flowers. The cut material will be taken away for commercial composting.

On Blo' Norton and Hinderclay Fens blocks of sedge have been cut as usual, some of it being raked off and stacked by volunteers. A new seat has been installed overlooking the fen meadow at the eastern end of Blo Norton Fen - it's fairly well hidden but a lovely spot to sit and enjoy the fen if you find it. We plan to have a mown access to it, from the roadside, in the near future.

A muddy group also dug a new pond at Hinderclay during the September work party. The wildlife at this very varied site continues to improve. Heather has spread considerably, with new plants appearing on the sandy margins of the wet fen at the western end of at site, as well as on the heath further east.

The 'constant effort' bird ringing, undertaken by the site wardens and other volunteers, showed that, for most species, it was an excellent breeding season. A total of 685 birds were ringed, including 104 long-tailed tits and 103 chiffchaffs, although numbers of reed warblers were lower than last year, perhaps because there is now too much encroaching scrub in reedbed (another task for volunteers!). A spectacular total of 16 kingfishers were ringed, with at least one pair breeding on the stretch of the river along the north side of the fen. Our excitement in the spring, when barn owls laid in boxes on both Hinderclay Fen and the Frith, was short-lived: neither pair reared young successfully, despite the Hinderclay pair laying a second, later clutch. Barn owls in East Anglia seem generally to have fared poorly this year, perhaps because of a shortage of small mammals after the cold winter. However, it is encouraging that our sites are clearly attracting these wonderful birds and we hope that they will fare better next spring.

Biological recording

We collect as much information as we can on the wildlife of our sites, and welcome reports of anything you've identified while out and about (with date and location, please). The regular BTO bird ringing site at Hinderclay Fen provides us with much useful information bird populations in the valley. Volunteers also regularly check the various nest boxes we've installed. This autumn our local bat volunteers will be checking the extensive network of new bat boxes which can be seen on trees on all of our sites, for the first time. We await the results with excitement and will report them in the next newsletter.

In September we were visited by members of the London Freshwater Group, who spent a day collecting and identifying plants and invertebrates, and were so impressed with our sites they hope to return next summer - when we hope that there will more water in our ponds, scrapes and ditches!

Forthcoming events – Dates for your diaries:

25th October – Autumn Walk

Starting from the White Horse, Thelnetham, 10.30 am

A chance to see the progress of the restoration work at Parkers Piece and Bleyswycks Bank, and enjoy the autumn colours and toadstool at Hinderclay Fen. We aim to be back in time for lunch.

Thursday 10th December – AGM and Annual Talk

Blo' Norton Village Hall, 7.30 pm

We are delighted to have Mike Linley, wildlife photographer and cameraman on the "Survival" series, as our speaker for what promises to be a very entertaining evening.

Please do join us for this event: friends and family are very welcome to attend - it is free to members but we welcome a donation of £2-00 from non-members to help cover costs. Visitors are welcome to come to AGM and annual round-up of the LOPH's year at 7.30, or to arrive for the talk at 8pm. As usual, the talk will be followed by seasonal refreshments and a raffle (contributions of finger foods and raffle prizes welcomed).

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 (venues may change depending on weather and ground conditions). 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 most 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 2009/10 Work Party Programme

Date	Venue	Task
11 th October	Blo Norton Fen	Pond digging and scrub removal
8 th November	Parkery Piece	Tree and hedge planting
13 th December	The Frith	Hedge planting & pollarding
10 th January	Hinderclay Fen	Scrub removal + bonfire
14 th February	Parkery Piece/ Bleyswycks Bank	Coppicing & hedge planting

Work parties start at 10-30am. You will need wellies or strong boots, old clothes and enthusiasm. We will provide tools, gloves and refreshments. For more information email enquiries@lohp.org.uk, look at our web site www.lohp.org.uk or phone Reg and Rowena Langston on 01379-898009, Jo-Anne Pitt on 01379-898684 or Helen Smith on 01379-687680

News from our sites, and dates of events, are always available on our website - remember to check out www.lohp.org.uk to keep updated.