



# News from the Ouse

ISSUE NUMBER 16

April 2016



**A strange LOHP ritual?**  
Find out what he's really doing inside!

## Winter walk

2016's hardy new-year walkers were rewarded for braving an ominously cloudy sky with views of buzzards, little egrets and siskins, and with delicious soup back at the village hall, provided by our lovely volunteers.



Alice Baillie

## WELCOME

**to the newsletter of the Little Ouse Headwaters Project.**

Firstly, I am pleased to report the purchase of two important new pieces of land, bringing to 14 the number of sites managed by the project, together covering an area of over 70 hectares. We are very grateful to the Heritage Lottery Fund for the award a grant - our fourth - towards the purchase and initial restoration costs. For only the second time in our history we are launching a public appeal for donations towards the remaining costs of restoring our very special fen wildlife on these sites. Please read more about this on *Page 2*; we will be very grateful for any financial gifts readers can make.

These new acquisitions will grow the involvement of our volunteers and the trustees in the enjoyable work of conservation, monitoring, training and administration. Consequently we have started to re-organise the way we work and to divide our management into three groups: Conservation, Finance and Communications. We hope that we can encourage any reader who has skills in any of these areas to come forward and join us.

Sadly this may well be the last issue of *News from the Ouse* in its current high-quality format. Since 2011 it has been generously funded by HLF, but unfortunately this grant has ended and to date we have been unable to raise sufficient funds to continue to produce and distribute newsletters widely among the parishes. We will continue to seek a new source of funding and would welcome any suggestions. Meanwhile we would like to express our grateful thanks to our editor Nicky Rowbottom for her excellent work in making *News from the Ouse* such an enjoyable read and success.

LOHP members will still receive regular news and we will go on posting our news and events on our website ([www.lohp.org.uk](http://www.lohp.org.uk)), on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/LOHPProject](http://www.facebook.com/LOHPProject)) and Twitter (@LOHPProject) and in parish magazines. Basic membership of the LOHP still costs only £2 and remains the best way to keep in touch. If you're not already a member, find the application form on the last page. There is much going on, and we can now look forward to a new season on the fens. We hope to see you, your family and friends enjoying this wonderful area.

**Peter Coster, Chair**

## AGM - 2015

At the packed annual meeting in December, LOHP's grateful thanks were expressed to Reg Langston for looking after the finances for the last 10 years and for being an honorary officer since the project began and our first chair. Peter Coster was elected the new chair, and made a presentation to Jo-Anne Pitt in thanks for her second stint as chair, and the period between as Hon. Secretary. Otters were the subject of this year's talk. Richard Woolnough, who has watched them for decades in Scotland and more recently started studying them intensively in East Suffolk, gave a lively talk. The droppings (spraints) from LOHP sites seem to show a diet of masses of small fish - but ours, unlike their East Suffolk cousins, are finding many bullheads. There is still a lot to discover about what the otters are up to - and where.

A call for volunteers to start a study group on LOHP sites was taken up enthusiastically. Read more on p7.

### Whose poo smells like jasmine tea?



Richard Woolnough proved that fresh otter droppings smell nice - and that with a digital microscope you can identify what they've eaten

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## Two new sites

**Helen Smith and Jo-Anne Pitt describe the exciting steps towards fitting more pieces back into the wetland jigsaw**

Just two days before Christmas, we completed the purchase of the final piece in the jigsaw of seven sites that now cover the area occupied by Thelnetham Fen in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ordnance Survey maps from that time show the Fen covering a much more extensive area than the two fragments that still bear the name – the Suffolk Wildlife Trust nature reserves of Thelnetham Middle and Old Fen. The purchase by the LOHP in recent years of Parkers Piece, Bleyswycks Bank, Webbs Fen and New Fen, largely reunified the original fen.



*The strange flower of great burnet ...one of the species to benefit from Thelnetham Fen's restoration*

The final fragment - our new land - lies at the heart of the area, between Thelnetham Middle Fen and Webbs Fen. It is a narrow belt of wet woodland with two small meadows and an old track (a drag-way) lined by ancient,

coppiced hazels. Its purchase, as well as providing the opportunity to realise

## Appeal for Thelnetham Fen

**Please give if you can**

Our HLF grant covers 82% of the cost of the purchase and initial restoration of the new land in Thelnetham. Your contributions, however small, to the remaining costs will make a vital difference to our ability to restore the precious fen wildlife of this area.

Please send donations to Edward Coales (LOHP Treasurer) at The Farthings, Long Green, Wortham, Diss, IP22 1PU (cheques payable to Little Ouse Headwaters Project) or visit our website [www.lohp.org.uk/our-sites/new-land-thelnetham](http://www.lohp.org.uk/our-sites/new-land-thelnetham) for more info

its full potential for wildlife, will enable us to manage all Thelnetham and Blo'Norton Fens together to achieve the best results for their many internationally and nationally important species. We will be working on this in partnership with Suffolk Wildlife Trust.

### Grant aid for purchase and works

Purchase of the new 1.9 hectare site was made possible by a generous grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. As well as contributing to the purchase costs, the grant will help us undertake initial management of the site and assess its longer-term needs. Funded activities also include a programme of guided walks, training for volunteers and, excitingly, a

weekend-long 'bioblitz', which will be on the weekend of 25-26<sup>th</sup> June.

### Bioblitz - a 'storm' of recording

The bioblitz - or biological recording event - will bring in volunteers from the local area and further afield, to record everything from plants and mammals to moths and snails. It will set a baseline for the new land and also help us assess how the wildlife of the surrounding land is changing as a result of conservation management. Whether expert or just interested, everyone will be welcome to join us.

### A new meadow too

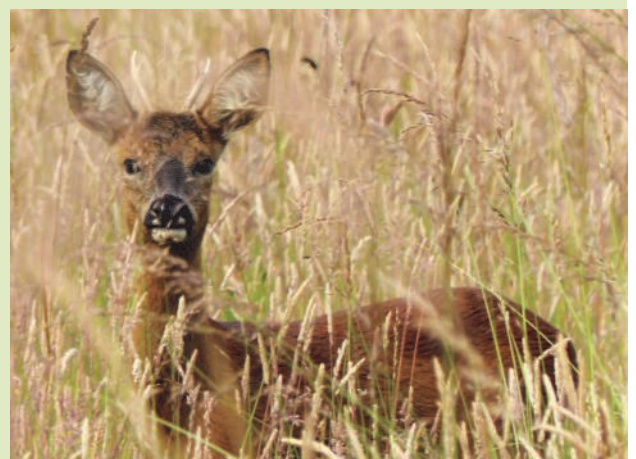
The pre-Christmas bonanza brought not just one exciting new site but two; in November we were fortunate to have the opportunity to buy an old hay meadow on a tributary of the Little Ouse just south of Hinderclay Fen. Lowland, unimproved meadow habitats like this are estimated to have declined by over 97% in the last 75 years. Hemmed in by high mature hedges, the spring-fed, damp grassland promises to be a wonderful opportunity to restore our own flower-rich meadow. Access to the meadow will be established later this year.

The new land in Thelnetham can already be accessed from the track that leads through it from the right-angle bend of Loggers Lane into Thelnetham Middle Fen (see map on centre pages).

Watch our website for more info. on these sites and associated events.



*The new land in Thelnetham is approached along an ancient track*



*As you walk on our sites, look out for the shy roe deer. Even if you don't see them they will have seen you!*

## School update

In the Autumn, Beech Tree Class met Reg Langston and other volunteers to dig peat. In Spring they will compare it with wood as a fuel to boil water.

With Reg, Years 3 and 4 will continue the tradition of monitoring and protecting the gorse on Broomscot Common, and will be describing the place as though they are explorers discovering it for the first time.

Year 1 and 2 hope to visit LOHP sites to look for signs of Spring and as part of their geography studies will map the area. The Reception children will be looking at bats and their habitats.

**Carol McGahan**



## The LOHP - what an adventure!

### The newest addition to the LOHP Trustee group has a very strong pedigree

Rob Fuller spent 40 years of his professional life in one organisation, the British Trust for Ornithology, retiring recently from his post as one of the two science directors. Rob has had a long interest in woodland and forest management but also studied farmland bird declines, breeding waders, and how best to manage scrub. 'Caring about the bird populations of a habitat is very useful', he says, 'because it forces you to look hard at habitat structure. You have to think, for example, how to balance the requirements of species which need grassland with those which need scrub. It's hard to get it right with ephemeral habitats such as scrub, but there's lots of biodiversity in them, so they need careful thought and management.'

#### The choice to join in

Rob has lived in Diss since 1992 and says that the LOHP 'seeped' into his consciousness. He came to the Annual meeting a few times, talked to friends, visited sites, and started to realise what remarkable achievements the project has made and what an adventure it represents. Since becoming more closely involved he has seen the complex and demanding work of managing the sites and raising money, and has been impressed with the energy and effort put into improving sites for wildlife at the same time as bringing benefits for the local communities.

**Caring about the bird populations of a habitat is very useful, because it forces you to look hard at habitat structure**



**Rob Fuller, chair of our new conservation working group, well-known for his work on breeding birds in woodlands, is equally at home in wetlands**

#### LOHP deserves more renown

Rob believes there are aspects of LOHP work which ought to be made known more widely – for example the way the project has managed to work with many local landowners. 'It's a great example of a community-led organisation,' he says, 'which has achieved astonishing things locally.'

#### Linking science with practical management

While Rob spent his professional life working to build up the scientific reputation of the BTO, in retirement he wants to engage even more with the application of ecology to real conservation in practice. He would love to see better interaction

between ecologists and conservation practitioners, where currently he sees a big gulf. 'The scientific ecology community is big and active but the science doesn't often get out of the scientific journals or if it does it's not intelligible.' He says, 'The science isn't always addressing the key questions conservation managers need. Some of these are quite basic – 'How much scrub should we have?' Or 'How often should we cut the scrub back?' These aren't very attractive questions for researchers to study.'

#### What will success look like?

Rob sees his role as helping LOHP plan strategically, setting priorities for what it can achieve in the next ten years in the context of these two amazing river valleys. He wants to address questions like, 'How big should a project be?' 'What are the most important contributions our sites can make for conservation of wildlife into the future and for local people to have on their doorsteps?' His aim will be to be able to look back with satisfaction to say, 'Our sites are in a good condition and well managed for wildlife, the organisation is sustainable and is putting its efforts into the right things.'

#### My favourite site?

'No, honestly I can't pick one out', says Rob after a moment's thought, 'What I like best about the LOHP sites is their diversity when taken *as a whole* - so much diversity packed into a small area. You can walk from dense, carr woodland into open fen, alongside flowing water, past grazing marshes onto heath and different kinds of grassland. It's a really fantastic example of a habitat network. They're great places to see barn owl and little egret – the wildlife you ought to see in these valley wetlands but which in most places you don't see'.

## Woodcock in trouble

The secretive woodcock, until recently a much-loved breeding species of the Little Ouse headwaters, is one of 19 species to join the latest 'Red List' of British birds of Conservation Concern. Published in December 2015, the list is based on expert assessment of 244 bird species assigned to Red, Amber or Green lists.

Although continental woodcock still winter in our wet woodlands, the loss of breeding birds reflects the national pattern of a severe contraction in range.

The males' roding display - a patrolling flight accompanied by whistling and grunting calls - on summer evenings used to be one of the iconic sounds of our fens. The nightingale, whose song was also part of the magic of summer nights on the fens, preceded the woodcock onto the Red List and has

now been joined by another of our great songsters, the mistle thrush, or storm cock.

To read more about the Red List for birds visit [www.bto.org/science/monitoring/psob](http://www.bto.org/science/monitoring/psob).



**Where's the woodcock?**

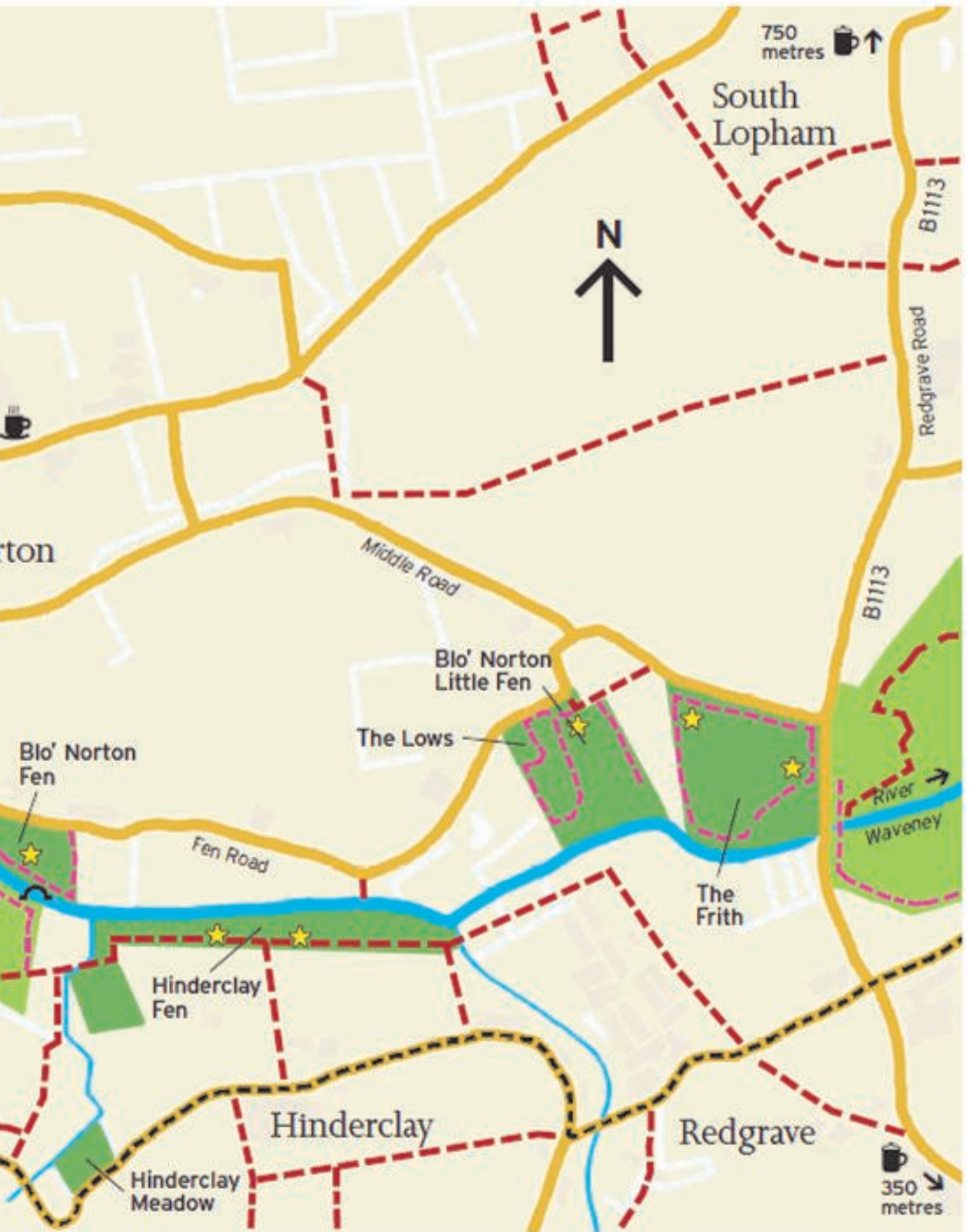




**KEY**  
LOHP sites  
SWT sites

Public footpaths  
Permissive paths  
Regional Cycle Route 30

Footbridge  
Sculpture  
Village Hall





-  Public house
-  Coffee shop

For more detailed maps see O.S. Landranger 144: Thetford & Diss, or Explorer 230: Diss & Harleston

More information on walking and cycling at [www.lohp.org.uk/our-area/where-walk](http://www.lohp.org.uk/our-area/where-walk)

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## Why should we look after fens?

**Mike Harding argues that we all benefit from keeping fens in a wet and healthy state**

The first of these articles described how East Anglia had one of the most important concentrations of valley fens in Western Europe. Chalky fen habitats are rare and so too are many of the plants and animals they support. Because of this, most of the best sites are protected by UK and international law.

These laws put a legal responsibility on the owners and managers of the sites to keep them in good condition.

Regardless of the law, we have a responsibility to society to maintain these amazing sites. With a history that is as old as the geology that made them, and a strong positive effect on our health and wellbeing, these are national treasures that we should be maintaining for the communities who host them, and for those who will come after us.

### Looking after soil and water

Valley fens have a delicate water regime. They depend on a finely balanced mix of water from the chalk aquifer and from the sandy valley margins. They also depend on rainfall, and there is often some input from surface sources such as streams and ditches which is not always welcome. All of these sources have very different chemistries. Any change in the balance of these water sources, or any reduction in clean water, can spell disaster for the ecology of the site. Looking after the hydrology of the fen is the single most important conservation action. Preventing drainage by ditches or rivers, stopping removal of water by groundwater boreholes and preventing flooding if rivers are polluted by nutrients, are all important aspects of conserving fens.

Perhaps more surprising is that soils also need to be managed. Valley fens depend on certain soil conditions – most importantly, low fertility. Many of the plants that grow in fens cannot compete with vigorous grasses and sedges that grow in rich soils. Anything that raises peat fertility –

drainage, flooding with nutrient rich water, leaving vegetation cuttings on the fen or leaving the fen unmanaged – will damage the habitats.

### Managing natural change

Although fens are wild, they are not unmanaged. Habitats that are left to themselves undergo a natural process called succession. Succession happens when natural changes allow one habitat to be replaced by another.

If a pond is left, sediment accumulates and plants of boggy land colonise. The pond becomes fen-like. As the fen grows, plant material falls to the

ground year after year, and raises the ground surface. Over time, the boggy areas dry out. As the surface dries, trees germinate and take hold. The habitat slowly turns to scrub, and then to woodland. As the habitat changes from pond to fen to woodland, the plants and animals associated with each phase change. New species colonise, but established species die out.

So, if we want to maintain the most diverse sites for wildlife, they should contain all stages of succession, from open water to woodland. Most valley fens are rather small, and it can be difficult to accommodate all of the stages of succession in one site. A tiny area of wet woodland does not harbour the richness of a great tract of carr. Sometimes we have to choose: we have to retain decent-sized areas of the most valuable habitats and forego some stages of the succession to make enough room for them. In valley fens, the most valuable stages in succession are often the early ones, when the habitat is changing from fresh open water to 'young' fens still with wet hollows and open ground.



Arthur Rivett

**Succession early stage - open water (Betty's)**



Arthur Rivett

**The next stage: short, open, species-rich fen (Blo' Norton Fen)**



Arthur Rivett

**A later stage: tall, dense, species-poor fen (Betty's Fen)**



Arthur Rivett

**A late stage: fen woodland (Blo' Norton Fen)**

Habitats from the early part of the succession change most rapidly. Strong management by site owners is needed to maintain them. This means digging new ponds, mowing the fens and cutting out trees. This isn't gardening; it is using traditional techniques to manage the natural



process of succession and to maintain as much wildlife in as small a space as possible.

**Competition**

In a fen, there is an unending and ruthless competition for nutrients, light and water between species and between members of the same species. This competition for resources is deadly.

Only the fittest survive. Plants which can grow taller, or more bulky,

or have better root systems or more efficient leaves will squeeze out smaller or weaker plants. That is why rank and dense vegetation is so much poorer in species diversity than short, open and thin swards.

Left to itself, a habitat will tend towards density and species-poverty as the great competitors gain the upper hand. Management such as mowing aims to level out competition by reducing the vigour of the tall and bulky species, providing the opportunity for the smaller plants to survive. Often these small plants, because they are so uncompetitive, are rarer.

**Succession and competition**

Succession and competition are intimately inter-twined.



Mike Harding

*Several LOHP sites have needed radical work to turn back the succession clock and regain their diverse wildlife communities (Bleyswycks Bank)*

Early successional habitats are generally open and provide space and light for the smaller species to thrive. Competition is minimal. As succession progresses, the tall vigorous plants bulk out and dominate the habitat, out-competing the small species, which are excluded. This is why early successional habitats can often be so much more diverse. As a result, management to reduce competition is often the same as management to hold back the natural succession.

**Making management decisions**

There is often disagreement about what is the best management for a site, even among conservationists. There is much we do not know – such as how big a block of habitat needs to be to maximise diversity. Local people may have a very different view of

provide a clear explanation of the issues faced by a site, and how the managers are responding to those issues. Because it's a written document that everyone in the local community has access to, it allows everyone to understand what is being done in their local fen. All the LOHP's sites have a Management Plan, available in the website archive.

**Mike Harding**

what makes a nice landscape and do not like to see changes to familiar places. These might include clearing trees, making sites wetter or introducing grazing. The Management Plan is the place to resolve any concerns. The Management Plan is a document that explains how a site will be managed and why those management decisions have been taken. It should

**This isn't gardening, it's using traditional techniques to manage the natural process of succession and maintain as much wildlife in as small a space as possible.**



Arthur Rivett



Arthur Rivett



Arthur Rivett

*Mowing and grazing achieves broadly the same ends, reducing competition and allowing the smaller, rarer plants to thrive*

**LOHP Mammal Recording Group**

Following the excellent talk given by Richard Woolnough at the AGM we set up the LOHP Mammal Recording Group. Around 17 members came to the first meeting in the Redgrave & Lopham Fen visitor centre in January.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> March Richard Woolnough and Mark Smith from the Suffolk Mammal Group kindly ran an otter workshop where members learned how to survey rivers for signs of otters and the joys of collecting and analysing spraint [otter poo]. Other survey training will also be organised, including small mammal surveying using the LOHP mammal traps.

If anyone would like to get involved with the group contact Reg ([rlangston@outlook.com](mailto:rlangston@outlook.com)) or me ([arthurrivett057@btinternet.com](mailto:arthurrivett057@btinternet.com)). Roll on the summer!

**Arthur Rivett**



## Membership application (not renewals)

Name:

Address:

Postcode:

Phone:

E-mail:

I wish to support the LOHP as a . . . .

Ordinary member:	£2 a year	
Friend of the Fens:	£10 min a year	
Junior member:	25p. a year	

Please tick one category and write the amount paid for Friend of the Fens. Cheques payable to 'Little Ouse Headwaters Project'.

I wish to donate £..... to the Little Ouse Headwaters Project

I want all my subscriptions and donations to the LOHP to be Gift Aided until I notify you otherwise. I pay Income Tax/Capital Gains Tax at least equivalent to the value of my contribution.



Signed:.....

Dated:.....

Registered Charity No: 1098232

**Note on renewals:** All renewals are due in April. We send a letter to all members. Please don't use this form to renew your membership.

**A big thank you to all those members** who have sent donations along with their renewal. We greatly appreciate this extra support for the work we're doing to enhance the valley and its wildlife.

## The LOHP needs you!

The LOHP relies on volunteers to run the charity and help with conservation (and other) work. Might you have some energy and some time? If so we'd love to hear from you.

To get involved, and for more info, send an email to [enquiries@lohp.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@lohp.org.uk) or ring: **Bev Blackburn**, Volunteer Coordinator and Event Manager on 07747 691285 or **Pete Fox**, Hon. Secretary on 07500 044587.

## Workparties

Get out and enjoy yourself whatever the weather at an LOHP work party or event. Work parties are monthly on Sundays (dates below) and weekly on Wednesdays. Check details on the website for confirmation of where to go.

<b>10 Apr</b>	Thistle digging	<b>The Frith/Lows</b>
<b>8 May</b>	Thistle digging	<b>Parkers Piece</b>
<b>25-26 Jun</b>	<b>The big LOHP Bioblitz</b>	<b>(Watch the website)</b>
<b>10 Jul</b>	Cutting/raking	<b>Blo'Norton road verges</b>
<b>14 Aug</b>	Sedge raking	<b>Blo'Norton Fens</b>
<b>11 Sept</b>	Sedge raking	<b>Hinderclay Fen</b>
<b>9 Oct</b>	Tree planting	<b>New Fen</b>
<b>13 Nov</b>	Tree planting	<b>New Fen</b>

<b>Reg &amp; Rowena Langston</b>	01379 898009	(Hinderclay/Parkers)
<b>Helen Smith</b>	01379 687680	(The Frith/Lows)
<b>Nigel Clark</b>	01379 890460	(New Fen)
<b>Jo-Anne Pitt</b>	01379 898684	(Blo'Norton Fen)

## Want to see up-to-date news and great photos? ... follow LOHP on Twitter



You don't have to have a twitter account to see the latest tweets, just go to the homepage [www.lohp.org.uk](http://www.lohp.org.uk) and click on the little bird.

## Events

- April 24 Bird Nest walk** - learn about birds and their nests with local experts Samantha Franks and David Hodgkinson on a walk around Hinderclay Fen. Participants will learn about the nesting behaviour of several breeding birds and will see nests belonging to some of them. **Booking essential** as spaces are limited. Ring Bev on 07747 691285. Bad weather may mean having to cancel.
- May 1st Dawn Chorus walk, 4.30 am - meet** at Blo' Norton Village Hall **Booking as above**
- June 25-26 The Big Little Ouse Headwaters Bioblitz** - a weekend recording extravaganza in the valley fens. Barbecue for recorders on the Saturday evening. More details on LOHP website, Twitter and Facebook.

*Apologies to Bev Blackburn for missing her name off the article she wrote in the last issue about Skanska's team-building day. Sorry, Bev, it won't happen again! Ed.*

## To contact the LOHP

Email: [enquiries@lohp.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@lohp.org.uk)

Write: LOHP, Waveney Cottage, Redgrave Road, South Lopham, Diss, IP22 2JN Phone: 07500 044587 Website: [www.lohp.org.uk](http://www.lohp.org.uk)

