

News from the Ouse

ISSUE NUMBER 14

August 2015



Coming soon!

Rowena Langston

Wild highlights - past and future

As a result of the mild winter, this summer started with a good survival of resident birds. Lots of blue tits sought out nest sites in our nest boxes and raised lots of young. Long-tailed tits also had a good breeding season, in spite of the cold, dry spring. The much rarer marsh tit bred on at least two LOHP sites, in natural holes.

In July we caught and ringed increasing numbers of juvenile birds, including blackcap and chiffchaff. Meanwhile linnets did well on Broomscot Common, with many young birds around the gorse and dry heath.

Cuckoos were active around our fens with the male's familiar call heard regularly. The 'bubbling' call of the females showed that some reed warblers in the valley will be rearing cuckoo chicks instead of their own.

After an absence of several years, we were delighted to hear and see woodcock making their display flight and call (known as *roding*) at dusk around their territory.

Several tawny owl pairs have raised broods of two and three chicks, and barn owls have done well locally (though not on LOHP sites this year).

With the warm, sunny summer weather, come butterflies and dragonflies. Small copper butterflies should now be on the wing, especially on Hinderclay Fen, on the flowering heather. Migrant hawk dragonflies fly over the wetter areas, often in small groups. Lucky visitors may see grass snakes. These are harmless - look for the yellow-green stripe across the back of the head, even on the pencil-thin youngsters.

All too soon, it will be time to search for fungi, including the brightly coloured but highly toxic fly agaric.

Rowena and Reg Langston



Small copper butterfly

Reg Langston

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WELCOME

to the newsletter of the Little Ouse Headwaters Project.

As you will see from the articles in this edition, we are continuing with many of the themes that were started with our last HLF grant (2010-2013), including working with local schools, creative activities, and 'walks and talks' providing a chance to learn more about how special the habitats we manage are.

While some of this is funded by a new HLF grant, much of the activity has continued thanks to the efforts of our volunteers and those who have been inspired by the landscape and wildlife in the valley. The LOHP is still run entirely by volunteers and we are grateful to everybody who supports the project with their time, expertise and enthusiasm.

Jo Pitt, Chair

News from the Ouse?

The HLF grant which pays for this newsletter is soon coming to an end. We think it's an important way to let local people know what we're doing and why, and invite everyone to come and join in. But in future we may have to consider how to cut costs. If there's a secret millionaire out there who wants to support it - please get in touch!



Whose tummy?

Surprising answer on page 7



Children's work thwarts hungry nibblers

Albie Spriddell, Clara Merriman and Mrs Feakes describe Beech Tree Class's visits to Broomscot Common in March 2015



Three years ago Beech Tree Class did an experiment to see if they could devise a way to protect young gorse bushes from the rabbits that were eating them all. We talked about their experiments and wondered if we could find a better way of doing it. In 2012, the year 5s and 6s had used an area cleared of other plants for their experiments so they could find the tiny gorse plants.

Modified approach



Mr Langston told us the experiments were successful but only while the defences were in place. We needed to find something which would allow the gorse to regrow continuously. Gorse provides an important habitat for insects and resident birds such as linnets. This time we were going to build our protective structures in the middle of clumps of old and straggly bushes. We cut away the

straggly growth until there was a little shoot of new gorse left close to the ground, then we built our structures round them, out of wooden posts and chicken wire. Some of us built them round, some square and some triangular. We had to make sure that the rabbits couldn't get underneath the wire to nibble the shoots, and that they were high enough so that the rabbits couldn't jump into our structures and get caught.



Enlisting support

We labelled our structures carefully so that visitors to the Common could understand what our experiment is about and to ask them not to damage them.



Slow but steady progress

It has taken the gorse in the previous plot about three years to grow to a height of $\frac{3}{4}$ metre, so we are not expecting instant results.

Discovering habitats

Children from Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 from Garboldisham School enjoyed a happy afternoon at Broomscot Common in the spring.

Who lives there?

Despite a grey and chilly day, 44 well wrapped-up youngsters made the trek to the LOHP site to investigate the habitats and lifestyles of insects and animals living in this interesting landscape.

Signs of different lives

Rosemary Humphries and Reg Langston met us there and helped us compare the different areas of the Common, to explore rabbit warrens, to pond dip and find evidence of the creatures living amongst the gorse and grasses. As well as rabbits we found evidence of spiders, beetles and snails.



The amazing bees' nest ↑

We were also lucky enough to have a close look at a honeybees' nest found on the Common by a work party. Rosemary explained to the children how the nest was created and why the bees no longer needed it.

All the children and adults enjoyed the practical work at the Common and would like to thank Mr Langston and Rosemary for giving up their time to help us learn more about this special area of our village.

Lisa Howard and Carol McGahan

Concern in action

Peter Coster who has known and loved Redgrave and Lopham Fen, on the Waveney, for decades, welcomed the chance, twelve years ago, to put some of his energies into the Little Ouse wetlands when he became a LOHP trustee nominated by South Lopham Parish Council.

'I see a Trustee's role as being one of concern,' he said, 'Concern for what the Project is about, concern for the environment and concern to see us

achieve our aims. It's very rewarding to be able put back something into the countryside which has given me and my family so much pleasure. I'd really like to leave things a bit better for my grandchildren.

'The LOHP is a very people-friendly organisation. The Project recognises how important it is for people to be able to enjoy their local wildlife sites and to get to know them well from walking in them. I really like the way the LOHP puts people on the same footing as wildlife.'

In Peter's view, one of the outstanding elements of the LOHP's work has been the encouragement of the arts. 'It's been very valuable to broaden the appeal and focus of our work so that artists and writers are brought in as well as people interested in natural history. I'd really like to see that continue and thrive.'

Peter had a long and successful track record in finance and marketing and brings some of those creative and problem-solving skills to his work with the LOHP.

Bearing in mind the dedication of the volunteers who run the LOHP - it's no wonder it's successful

One of his proudest achievements for the Project was helping to negotiate the purchase of Parker's Piece. 'It's still my favourite LOHP site, I think,' he said, 'it's got a bit of everything: river,

pools, open grassland and trees.

'The LOHP really runs very smoothly - no mean feat for a voluntary body which manages 11 separate sites. It's a tribute to the core group of local enthusiasts who started and still run the Project, some of them professional scientists for whom it must be a bit of a busman's holiday. They work quite selflessly. It's a pleasure to work with them and I learn from them all the time.

'It's exciting to pursue the LOHP's aims, one of which is, slowly, to join up the fragments of wetland along the Little Ouse. When I hear local people saying what a good job the LOHP are doing in their parish I feel very proud to be part of that.'



Peter Coster with one of the sculptures at The Frith

Looking at familiar places with new eyes

Becky Whatley describes two of Mike Harding's walks and talks which revealed the factors shaping the LOHP sites

'May 10th was a beautiful day, the sort you feel you're missing when you go inside. We met in Blo' Norton village hall, with lovely refreshments, to hear Mike's talk about the structure and water dynamics of fens, and the effects of water quality on flora and fauna. It was not hard to understand, but once we went outside it was even easier to see that the place we're all so familiar with fits perfectly with Mike's explanations.

I came specifically hoping to catch sight of invertebrates for the LOHP creative group project. I not only enjoyed seeing the lie of the land, and

the wonderful plants, but also saw dragon- and damselflies, tiny spiders, and a wonderful orb spider. Knowledgeable people identified things along the way and the birdsong and delicious smell of water mint sweetened a perfect walk.

A month later we tackled the landscape and social history of the valley fens. The much-needed rain had come the day before and freshened the valley. Mike gave us a brief history of the interaction of humans and the fens, with many additional facts and histories offered by the well-informed audience. The power struggle for the resources of the fens was brought vividly alive - the directing of the water use clearly as much an economic as a class issue. On our walk we saw where ditches and river had been reshaped, and the effect on water quality and levels.

We started at Blo' Norton Fen. The season had moved

on and now orchids joined the lousewort in a colourful display. The rushes were flowering, and, underwater, the stonewort (*Chara*) was going white, on its way to becoming the marl of the future.

In the delightful wet landscape of Thelnetham Old Fen we found bog pimpernel, and early marsh orchids. On Webbs Fen cattle grazed peacefully as they have for centuries, and on Thelnetham Fen the orchids, grasses, lousewort, and flag irises were at their finest.

We were very lucky to have a warm damp day - but without mosquitoes!



What are Valley Fens and why do they matter?

A valley fen is a very specific kind of wetland - different from all others. Norfolk and Suffolk is a European centre for valley fens, with the Little Ouse valley being particularly rich.

Valley fens are found only at the heads and margins of small valleys, often at the sources of rivers and their tributaries.

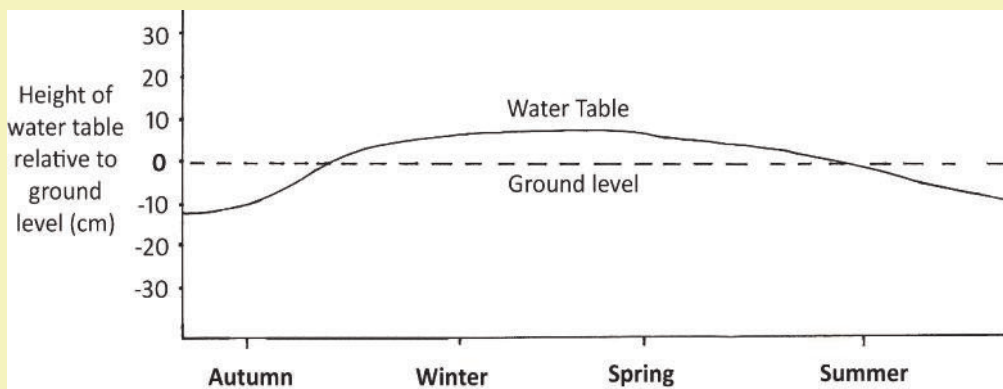
The environment of the valley fen

In a valley fen, the water table is very close to the surface all through the year. In winter, it may be above the surface because of rainfall, but the water is never very deep – a few centimetres perhaps. Through spring and summer the water table drops below the surface but not by much. Each type of fen habitat (see the table opposite) has a different water table profile through the year.

Water levels are kept high because of the constant throughput of groundwater, coming up from deep chalk aquifers or oozing out from the sandy valley margins.

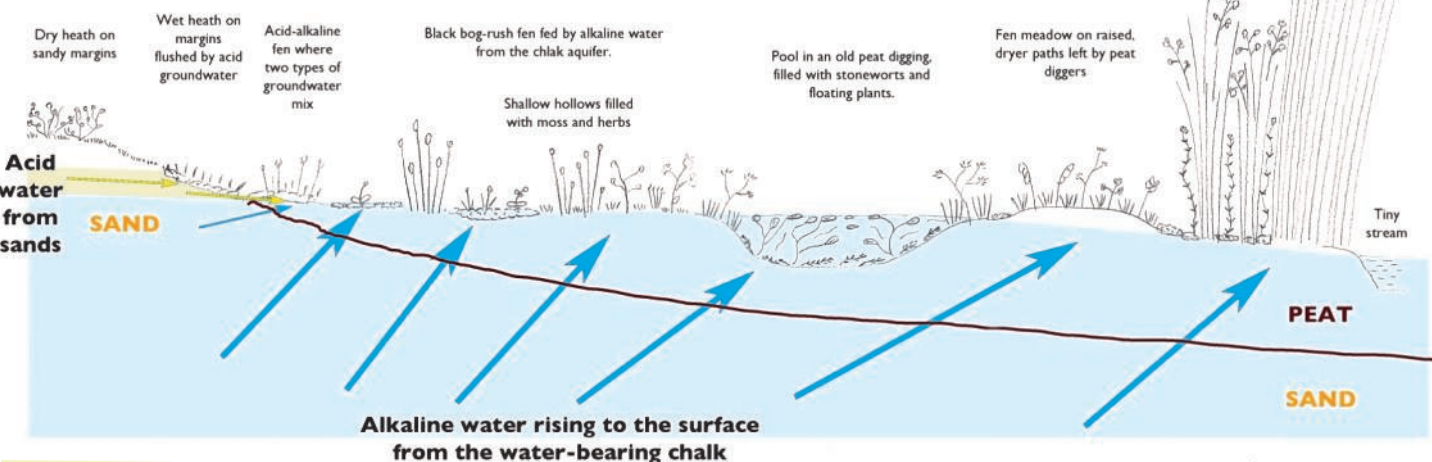
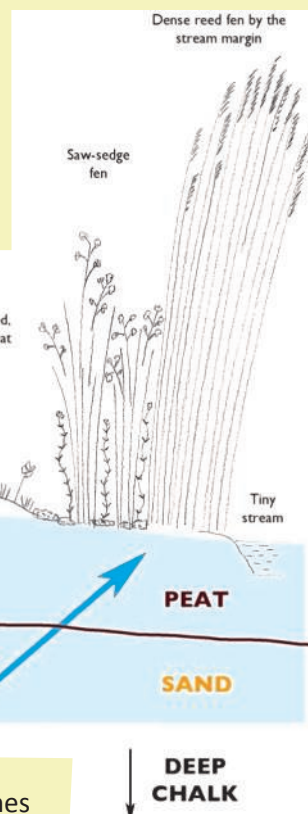
Sometimes the groundwater reaches the surface as springs.

Valley fens depend on this groundwater to stay wet. For them, winter rainfall which refills the aquifers for slow summer release, can be at least as important as summer rain.



Highly contrasting pH levels

The chemistry of the water is as important as the amount. Water from the chalk rocks is alkaline, and low in nutrients. This creates a rare, chalky wetland, rich in plants and animals. Water from the sands is also low in nutrients, but is usually acid, like the sand itself. This produces a different kind of wetland, equally rare and just as valuable. Because the water flushes through the soil from the margins, rather than sitting immobile in flooded fens, the root zone is high in oxygen, helping to maintain diverse plant communities.



Humps and hollows

Variation in the land surface – *topography* – is equally important. If the ground is flat it floods for long periods - creating floodplain fens, which are very different. If the ground is steep, the water table drains away. Valley fens occupy only *very* gentle slopes that neither drain rapidly, nor very slowly. The soil surface is also extremely uneven: usually because of old peat diggings and barrow-ways, but also because of the way tussocky plants make their own ground. This micro-topography creates a huge diversity in wetness and soil conditions, which in turn produces an enormous range of variation in wildlife.

Where micro-topography combines with a water table that is at the surface all year, and where acid and chalk water are both present, the vegetation can be 'layered', with acid, rain-fed plants growing above chalky, groundwater-fed plants. This layering can sometimes be seen on individual fen hummocks (see diagram opposite). This complicated arrangement is so precarious, and so vulnerable to change, that it is now very rare indeed. Small areas can be seen at Market Weston Fen and there are returning areas at Redgrave and Lopham Fen.

Diverse soils too

The soils, too, vary widely. The margins are often sandy, free draining and acid. The main fen lies on top of peat. Patches of marl and shell make the peat very chalky in some places; in others sulphides and iron compounds make it acid and orangey-brown. Silt and clay within the peat, make it more fertile in some areas. The soil type can change in a matter of a few metres, which changes the vegetation radically. The patchy plant communities give keen-eyed visitors a good clue to what lies beneath.

Rare and precious

Very few landscapes can provide in one place the great range of very particular conditions needed to build a valley fen. That is why they - and their wildlife - are so rare. Norfolk and Suffolk do provide these conditions they need, so we're lucky to have several beautiful examples on our doorstep.

No ordinary habitats

The different habitats found on valley fens are summarised in the table below. The last column (V) refers to value. Red means protected under *European* law, blue means *nationally* important.

The amount of 'red' habitat - protected by European law - is remarkable. Most of our valley fens in reasonable condition have been listed for this protection. Norfolk and Suffolk have perhaps the greatest concentration of valley fen habitats in western Europe. All the other habitats are nationally important – nothing is ordinary in a valley fen.

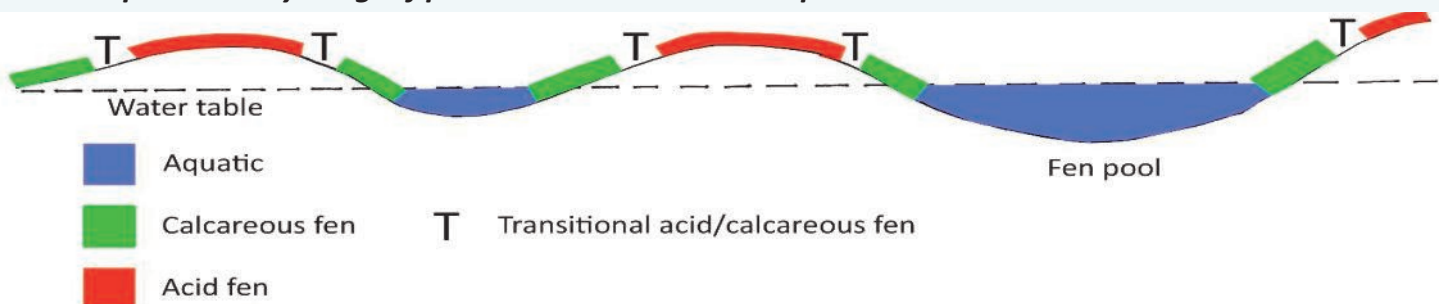
Valley fens and us

We have a special responsibility to care for this glorious wetland resource. That the upper reaches of the Little Ouse and Waveney rivers are so dense with these extraordinary wetlands is truly astonishing. How lucky we are to live among them!

Mike Harding

Habitat type	Whereabouts is it and what is it like?	V
Dry heath	Valley margins on sand and gravel. Heather heath and acid grassland. Often lost to agriculture.	Blue
Wet heath	Transition between valley margin dry heath and peat fen. Usually in a very narrow band.	Red
Chalky spring-fed fen	Usually toward the margin, otherwise seemingly random and dependent on suitable pathways for rising aquifer water. Very small in extent.	Red
Acid fen	At the fen margin, or on sandy areas in the peat. Also on rain-fed tops of fen tussocks, where water table is high. Often in mosaics with chalky wet fen.	Red
Peat pools	Randomly sprinkled throughout the peat areas of the fen. Variable in size and depth. Vary from permanent and aquatic to summer-dry and fenny.	Red
Purple moor grass fen meadow	On the wetter fen margins, raised paths in the peat fen. In slightly dryer areas than rush meadow or wet fen types. Cut annually or every two years.	Red
Rush fen meadow	Throughout the wet peaty fen. Cut annually or every two years.	Blue
Saw-sedge fen	Very wet, chalky, low nutrient peat areas in the main fen. Cut on long rotation in summer.	Red
Tall herb fen	Main peat fen, variable water table and fertility. Cut on long rotations, can be converted to fen meadow by annual mowing.	Blue
Reedbed	Lowest parts of fen. Often near the fen drainage channel. Water stands for long periods and is deeper. Shows that conditions are changing from valley fen to floodplain fen.	Blue
Alder and willow carr	Wet woodland with understorey of fen plants that can tolerate shade. Last stage of the fen succession, often a sign of long term dereliction.	Red

The complicated 'layering' of plant communities in humps and hollows





Rowena Langston

Tired - but triumphant

'This photograph taken by Rowena Langston, of one of the earliest workparties on Broomscot Common in November 2011 is one of my favourite LOHP pictures. Working together we collected a small mountain of litter from amongst the gorse - mostly lager cans (over 5 kilos, so it must have been some party!) which I later took to a place in Thetford and exchanged for cash to add to the LOHP coffers.

There are two reasons why I have selected this photo. Firstly it shows what the LOHP is all about - *volunteers*. This was one of the best turnouts ever at a workparty. Many of the regulars from day one are in this picture, and of course many new volunteers have joined in since. LOHP would not function without volunteers, and we mustn't forget all the others not in the picture who work behind the scenes tackling the bureaucracy that even a small organisation such as LOHP must endure. The second reason I like this picture is that nearly everyone

is smiling in spite of having spent the previous hours up to their chests in prickly gorse.

Most of them are still coming back for more - even if there *is* a suspicion that they only come to workparties for the cakes.'

Reg Langston

Could you do with some healthy exercise in the company of friendly people?

Work parties happen on different LOHP sites every second Sunday of the month and weekly on Wednesdays. See the back page and the website for details.

Exciting yellow orchid on the Fens...

Sharp-eyed visitors to Blo' Norton Fen and Thelnetham Fens this spring noticed this yellow subspecies of the (usually pink) early marsh orchid. It has previously been recorded only on Market Weston Fen in this valley.



Helen Smith

An unusual yellow form of early marsh orchid - which 'ought' to be pink. It was yellower in life than it looks here - honest!

...and a rare golden mole!

Becky Whatley saw and photographed this unusual mole on Parkers Piece in early June. Searching the web has confirmed that it's a rare



Becky Whatley

partial albino form known as *leucistic*. The fur is extremely beautiful but obviously hopeless as camouflage. When a mole has to travel above ground (which young ones do, for example, when they leave home to look for their own territory) pale gold is the last colour you'd want to be.

Early risers rewarded

A beautiful dawn birdsong walk

Because of awful weather, the LOHP's early morning birdsong walk with Professor Rob Fuller of the BTO had to be postponed by a day - but what a piece of good luck! Monday 4th May brought, in contrast, a mild and calm morning with most beautiful light.

You who were still in bed at 5am missed an ornithological treat - thoroughly enjoyed by everyone who was there. In total we recorded 35 species of birds



Rowena Langston

including blackcap, garden warbler, whitethroat, chiffchaff, willow warbler, reed warbler, hobby, swift, and cuckoos among the birds heard and seen. An exciting extra was confirmation of barn owls occupying the owl box on Thelnetham Old Fen.

Margaret Malley & Rosemary Jones greeted us with breakfast rolls, scones, pastries and hot drinks when we returned, with the added bonus of Rosemary's homemade marmalades and blackcurrant jam!

See you there next year?

Rowena Langston



Lyn Bennett

Mary Thompson, preparing pictures for hanging

At the May workshop we learnt about lino printing and printed our invertebrate creations with the help and guidance of the experts at Cupiss Printers in Diss. All in all these were two very enjoyable workshops thanks to Sheila, who, with Helen Smith, has produced a brilliant book on the Raft Spider called *On the Margins*.

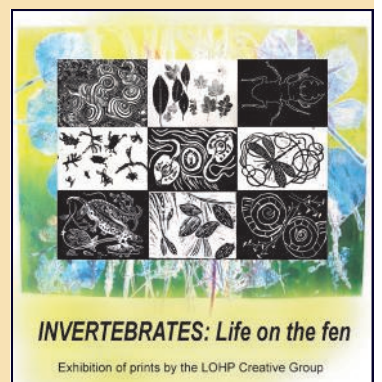
The Creative Group will continue to explore different artistic processes using the Little Ouse as inspiration.'

Lyn Bennett

LOHP Creative Group on show at Redgrave & Lopham Fen

'I hope you were able to visit this impressive and varied exhibition of the LOHP Creative Group's printed works at the Suffolk Wildlife Trust's lovely centre at Redgrave and Lopham Fen in June.

The prints were made during Sheila Tilmouth's workshops last September and May. The September workshop dealt with mono-printing techniques using the Fen and its plants and invertebrates as inspiration and included pond-dipping - which is just as much fun whether you are 5 or 65! At



INVERTEBRATES: Life on the fen

Exhibition of prints by the LOHP Creative Group

You are very welcome to join the group, which currently meets monthly. Contact: lyn.bennett16@btinternet.com

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 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 places.

9 Aug	Blo'Norton Fen road verge	(cutting/raking)
13 Sept	Hinderclay Fen	(sedge raking)
11 Oct	Blo'Norton Fens	(wet scrub clearance)
8 Nov	New Fen	(coppicing)

Reg & Rowena Langston	01379 898009 (Hinderclay)
Jo-Anne Pitt	01379 898684 (Blo' Norton)
Nigel Clark	01379 890460 (Hinderclay)
Pete Fox	07500 044587 (New Fen)

Keep up to date with the LOHP news through Twitter

Twitter is a digital information network made up of short messages called 'tweets'. It's an easy way to get the latest news about something you're interested in. Find out more about using twitter at <https://support.twitter.com/> You can follow us @LOHPProject

You don't have to have a twitter account to read the latest LOHP tweets, just go to the homepage www.lohp.org.uk and click on the little bird symbol.



Events

- ◆ Autumn walk
- ◆ Annual talk/AGM

Look out for details on the website.



Fly agaric

Reg Langston

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