



News from the Ouse

ISSUE NUMBER 8
AUGUST 2013



Ken McKenzie

WELCOME

to the newsletter of the Little Ouse Headwaters Project.

As you'll see in this issue, recording wildlife isn't only about those species that are easily seen or heard – tiny creatures, some no bigger than a pinhead, can tell us a lot about the state of nature as well – you just have to know how to find them, and having found them, how to identify them!

We hope that by providing opportunities to look more closely at nature in the company of experts, whether identifying birdsong or microscopic snails, we are helping to ensure that there will be people enthusiastically keeping records of the comings and goings of wildlife on our sites for years to come.

Jo Pitt, Chair

Bird song, sunny weather and 60 children - a perfect combination!

After the coldest spring for 50 years the sun blazed down on Broomscot Common in early June. The birds were singing their hearts out and 60 children from the Primary School were there as part of a special project to record the songs and learn more about them. Particular stars among the singers on the Common were blackcap, cuckoo, blue tit, chiffchaff, willow warbler and blackbird.

Read more about what the children did next - on pages 2-3.



Peter Hughes



GET OUT THERE NOW!

What better time could there be to explore the LOHP sites than late summer and autumn? Inside we explain what makes Betty's Fen and Blo' Norton Fens so special and give you some hints on what to look for when you're there.

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Jo Pitt

What on earth are they doing? Find out on p 7



Birdswing comes to Garboldisham

'It looks like bones and mountains'. No, not hallucinations but a child's description of the patterns created on screen by a skylark's song when transformed into visible graphs (spectrographs) by some clever software.

Funded by HLF money from the LOHP, the Goldfinch Foundation (formerly Opera Unlimited) swooped into Garboldisham Primary School for three days in early June with their project *Birdswing* and transformed the way children and staff perceived the wild world. Led by Peter Cowdrey, five professional musicians, bird enthusiasts, teachers and IT specialists worked with the 7-11 year olds indoors and out on Broomscot Common to weave together technology, music and the direct experience of nature to create an extraordinary set of performances of birdsong.

Reg Langston gave invaluable support by taking the musicians round the Common in advance to show them the likeliest hotspots for



singing birds. By the end of the three days the children could recognise some birds by their sounds and were able (with the help of some very clever technology) to imitate their songs convincingly. The Birdswing team were very struck by the children's knowledge of the Common, their pride in the work they've done there and their sense of ownership. Their comment was that Garboldisham obviously has something pretty special about it!

'Seeing' a place through your ears

Rosie Johnston, Birdswing's artistic director said, 'We often take birdsong for granted, but what we're hearing is an extensive and sophisticated communication system. The songs are extraordinary and complex. Our aim is to get the children really listening and show them a new dimension to a place they already know well by sight. The project uses the beguiling fascination of technology to make children want to go out and find wildlife to record. By this creative process we hope to strengthen the visceral and emotional connections between children and their local wild places, while linking it with good observation and record-keeping. Birds are a great indicator of the health of wild habitats. If people love cuckoos when they're young the hope is that they'll work to make sure there are cuckoo-rich places around when they're older.'

Human ears work better at slower speeds

The children's first job outside was to find good locations for listening and recording bird song. Their quiet concentration was impressive, as was the stealthy way they approached their singing targets. Back in school the children listened to the birds' songs slowed down to a quarter or a tenth normal speed and re-created the sounds themselves by singing. When they were filmed doing this and the film then played speeded up they found they'd made a reasonably realistic birdsong.

Cutting edge - online mapping

Another aspect to the project is the creation of an interactive online map of Broomscot Common using the children's own location photographs and recordings of greenfinch, linnet, whitethroat, blackcap, chiffchaff, chaffinch, wren, woodpigeon, cuckoo, yellowhammer. When it's ready there will be a link from the LOHP website.



Hear the children's greenfinch song (or the 'Garbfinch' as it was known) in Tim Brook's blog at www.digitalglue.org/2013/06/slow-sweet-and-low-down.html





What the children said:

We used a massive dome-like object that had a huge microphone in the middle it was pretty amazing. One group heard a yellowhammer and a woodpecker then we saw them fly away. Another group heard a chiffchaff and we also heard a wren. It was a sweltering hot day and a really lovely walk. We used so much hi-tech sound equipment as well as Smart phones, iPods and cameras. The Birdswing people go to different schools and teach people how amazing birds can be.

Laurie and Alahne

At Broomscot we found the chaffinch the most. We found a cuckoo - it is very rare. We saw a swallow, we saw two wrens. We found lots of birds.

Eddie, Riley and Leo

We practised mimicking slowed down versions of bird song using programs called Raven and Audacity that are now installed on computers at school. On the last day they showed us a video of everybody's attempt to make a birdsong. We were all very impressed by the way they could turn our voices into very beautiful yet realistic birdsong. We also saw a video of a woman doing a really good impression of a nightingale.

Louis and Jakob

What the staff said:

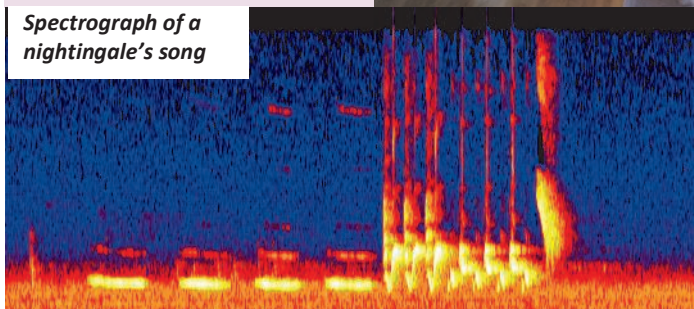
Brilliant! It has captured the imagination of everyone. Even the children who weren't directly involved were interested and they all loved seeing their friends in the final video performance. Everyone is talking about it.

It was so lovely to see the children really listening to all the birds and picking out their different songs.

The activities were very varied, involving and inclusive, all the children had the chance to do new things and to do them well.



Spectrograph of a nightingale's song



Broomscot Birds: how did they do in 2013?

Rowena Langston has been monitoring the breeding birds of Broomscot Common (and other sites) throughout the recent period of the LOHP Project's conservation works.

A 'linnety' place

Linnets breed happily in the Common's gorse, though numbers are down to only 12 or so pairs this year compared with 30 pairs last year. The number of calling cuckoos makes us wonder whether all the breeding dunnocks (a favourite cuckoo-target) are actually raising their own babies or whether they have interlopers in the nest.

Wonderful songsters

Three or four yellowhammers could be relied on to sing from their favourite gorse tussocks. Along the northern edge, in the scrub, blackcap, garden warbler, whitethroat, lesser whitethroat and bullfinch held territories.

Regular diners included...

Mistle thrushes were often seen feeding on the bare areas round the rabbit burrows. Swallows, swifts and house martins were frequent swooping visitors over the Common, and a little owl was regularly seen.

Blo' Norton and Betty's Fens

Lying between the raised valley margin and the Little Ouse river, Blo' Norton and Betty's Fens show how much of the valley floor in the whole of the headwaters area would have looked before it was drained and turned to other uses, although most of the woodland is a relatively recent development.

Blo' Norton Fen, which the LOHP leases, is a Fuel Allotment, set aside for the benefit of the poor of the parish at the time of large scale land enclosure. Betty's Fen is named after the late Betty Williams, who lived in Blo' Norton for many years and sold the land to the LOHP in 2004.

Local supply for local needs

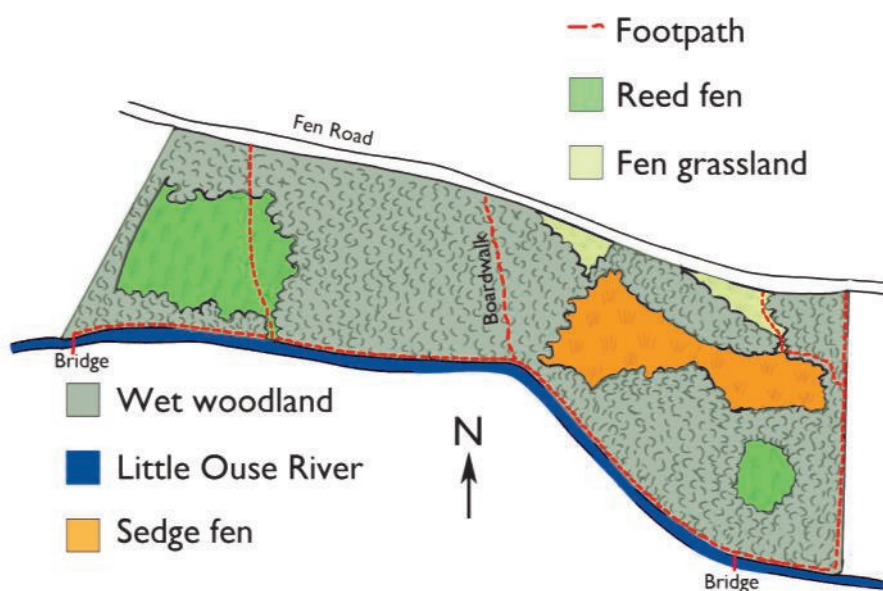
The fens were generally the most difficult land to drain for agriculture, lying on deep peat, but they provided a ready source of food and materials for the community – reed and saw sedge for thatching, wood and peat for fuel, marsh hay and grass for stock, and wildfowl and game for the table.

Uneconomic to drain

Because of their role as a valued community resource, they remained unchanged when land all around was transformed by agricultural improvements. The legacy of this early act of conservation – albeit for economic reasons – is one of the richest sites for wildlife in the valley. It is part of the Blo' Norton and Thelnetham fens complex, an area protected by national and European law because of its rare habitats, plants and animals.

Water is the key

The lifeblood of the fens is water which comes from the underground chalk aquifer acting like a great sponge, recharged each winter by the rains. This water is low in nutrients, high in calcium and other minerals and is released slowly throughout the year, keeping the fen wet to the surface throughout all but the driest summers. It sustains chalk fen habitats that are dominated by plants such as saw sedge, black bog rush and blunt flowered rush.



Marsh helleborine

Arthur Rivett

Beautiful and bizarre

Among the rushes and grasses are a huge variety of mosses and herbs, including the most beautiful of wetland orchids, the marsh helleborine, and the rather bizarre marsh lousewort, a plant which is part parasitic on the fen plants around it. It absorbs nutrients from their roots, stunting their growth.

Pits left by digging

Digging peat for fuel has left a series of old shallow peat pits and long depressions scattered across the fen. These watery depressions form mini-ponds, full of aquatic plants and animals. Mixed with the shorter



Arthur Rivett

Grass snake



Marsh lousewort

Arthur Rivett

mown fen and the tall reed and sedge, they are a vital part of the rich fen mosaic.

Primeval-feeling swamp

Where the fen has not been recently mown or grazed or dug for peat, woodland has taken over. The interior of the site is covered by dense alder woodland, wet and boggy in the middle, drier along the margins. It is a mysterious and primeval place of great alder trees and sedgy bogs.



Mike Harding

Hard physical work

Before local volunteers started managing the fens, almost all of the open areas had been taken over by woodland and dense scrub. Because the sites are so wet and uneven, it is not possible to do much work with machinery, so many hours of manual labour have gone into the restoration of these areas.



Charles Greenhough

Peacock butterfly

The fen vegetation is maintained by regular summer mowing, with the cuttings raked off by hand and stacked, forming a habitat for slow worms, grass snakes and many invertebrates. Cuckoos, an increasingly rare species, are regularly heard here in the summer months, as are reed warblers, these tiny birds unknowingly raising the cuckoos' offspring.

Fascinating and accessible to visit

The fens are accessible along well defined paths and boardwalk, with two footbridges leading over the river to Thelnetham Fen and Parkers Piece.

Mike Harding & Jo Pitt
May 2013

Learning to take even better photos...

Those of the Creative Group with an interest in photography enjoyed a masterclass from professional landscape photographer Richard Denyer in May and June this year.

The group visited some of the sites managed by LOHP, held a lunchtime discussion on how photographers can portray landscape in their work, and followed this up with a practical session in Blo' Norton Fen. We hope the photographers will be contributing to the creative group's series of exhibitions later this year.

Unravelling some miniature mysteries

Whoever said, 'Ne'er cast a clout 'til May is out', knew a thing or two. A sharp breeze blows across Hinderclay Fen as spider enthusiast Alan Thornhill beats the yellow gorse with a walking stick.

He sprays the bush with water to show up any webs and holds out a tray ready to catch any unsuspecting arachnids. So far the rich variety of habitats here has yielded around 100 species, but there is probably twice that number, he says. He is hoping to find *Marpissa radiata*, a jumping spider found only in wet reed or sedge beds. It's probably the rarest species to be



The only specimen found so far of the distinctively shaped *Cyclosa conica* on Hinderclay Fen

found so far on Hinderclay Fen, he says. No luck today, but it is only his first visit of the year – the best times to come looking are when spiders mature, in either late spring and early summer, or late summer and

early autumn: it is only as adults that they can be identified accurately.

When Alan catches a spider, he has to decide whether to take it home to identify, 'Some I can tell are species already recorded, some I can tell are not adults so I wouldn't be able to identify them. On the adult male at the front of the body, projecting from near the jaws, are the palps, and they become enlarged, clubbed, and are quite visible. With a female it's harder to see – she'll have a large abdomen, which might be full of eggs. To take one home I pop it into alcohol and then look at it under the microscope.'

Money spiders, or *Linyphiids*, form the biggest family of arachnids in this country, and they are well represented on the fen, he says. There is quite a variety of orb web spinners, plenty of wolf spiders, crab spiders in the heather and various sorts of ground hunting spiders.



***Cercidia prominens*, an attractive orb web spinner. Uncommon nationally and on Hinderclay Fen**

Alan's early career in the entomology department at Brooms Barn Research Station near Bury St Edmunds brought him into contact with all manner of invertebrates. Always interested in natural history, his father had taken him and his brother bird-watching as boys, but it was a book, *The World of Spiders* by WS Bristowe, part of the New Naturalists series, that really sparked his interest in arachnids.

'I joined the British Arachnological Society and went on their identification course, and then started collecting. I studied spiders on agricultural land – which is quite a useful habitat for ecological studies as it is quite simple, whereas a reed bed is not just reeds, and there are different levels of vegetation each with its own spiders.'



Alan hopes to discover how widespread *Marpissa radiata* is on Hinderclay Fen: so far he has only found it on one side of the reed bed, and its distribution is probably quite fragmented, he says.

Words - Judith Tooth

Pictures - Judith Tooth and Alan Thornhill

What's that snail?

A slightly chilly Sunday morning in June saw eight potential snail experts arrive at Blo' Norton village hall. Our trainer, Toby Abrehart, was already there laying out all manner of specimen tubes with samples of snail shells for us to examine later in the day.

Getting to grips with differences

After introductions over a cup of coffee we set off, plastic sampling trays in hand, to Betty's Fen. Toby showed us how to take samples of the molluscs in the vegetation around the scrape. The salient identification features of the different species we found were pointed out as we started to get to grips with the slender amber (*Oxyloma pfeifferi*) and the amber (*Succinea putris*). Due to the recent dry weather the snails were a little thin on the ground but several other species were found at Betty's including the herald snail (*Carychium minima*), brown-lipped field snail (*Cepaea nemoralis*) and the dwarf pond snail (*Lymnaea truncatula*).

One tiny star of the day ...

Before leaving the scrape we found a number of one of the LOHP's rarest species, Desmoulins whorl snail (*Vertigo moulinsiana*). This species is only found on fens fed by calcareous water and is very locally distributed in the UK, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, Denmark and Southern Sweden. It is the largest whorl Snail, measuring anywhere from 2.2 to 2.8mm! The group had a quick look in the fen at Blo' Norton and Toby was somewhat surprised to find it quite lacking in snails, although we did find a glow-worm larva (*Lampyrus noctiluca*).

... and one even tinier

We headed down to The Lows for lunch and to search for another of the LOHP's rarities, the narrow-mouthed whorl snail (*Vertigo angustior*). This snail is even smaller than *V. moulinsiana* and, unlike other snails we had seen, its shell curls to the left and not the right. We found a number of specimens and after a chat about its habitat requirements we returned to the village hall.



Microscopes in the village hall

We finished the day by using microscopes to have a look at some of the shells Toby had brought with him, and trying to identify some species using a mollusc key. Everyone agreed the day had been not only educational, but also very enjoyable. Hopefully some of us will follow up this fantastic introduction to some of the Little Ouse Fens' smaller inhabitants and continue our mollusc education.

Pete Fox



And it was this big!

Jo Pitt

Bird ringing event

Hinderclay's mid-June bird ringing demonstration evening was washed and blown away by showers and high winds.

It isn't safe or fair to catch birds in bad weather, so the elements defeated us this time.

Heritage Walk - all welcome!

On Sun 22 September we will be looking at different types of grazing on LOHP's Frith and Lows sites (rabbits, cattle and sheep) and Suffolk Wildlife Trust's Redgrave and Lopham Fen (horses). The walk will last from 10.30 to 3.30 approx. Bring a packed lunch.



It will be led by Denis Jenkins, LOHP's grazier and Richard Young, warden of Redgrave and Lopham Fen.

Further details nearer the time.

Booking essential - ring Bev Blackburn on 07747 691285

Membership application

Name:

Address:

Postcode:

Phone:

E-mail:

I wish to support the LOHP as an:

Ordinary member:	(£2 per annum)	
Friend of the Fens:	(£10 minimum per annum)	
Junior member:	(25p. per annum)	

Please tick one category and indicate the amount paid for Friend of the Fens. Please make 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



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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.

If you would like to get involved, or 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** on 07500 044587.

Work parties

Get out and enjoy yourself whatever the weather at a LOHP work party. Monthly on Sundays (dates below) and weekly on Wednesdays.

11 Aug	Blo' Norton Fen	Hay raking/pond digging
8 Sept	Hinderclay Fen	Hay raking/pond digging
13 Oct	Blo' Norton Fen	Turf pond digging
8 Dec	Hinderclay Fen	Scrub bashing

Check details on the website or ring for information:

Reg & Rowena Langston	01379 898009 (Broomscot)
Jo-Anne Pitt	01379 898684 (Blo' Norton)
Nigel Clark	01379 890460 (Hinderclay)

Heritage Walk 22 September

Details on p 7

Exhibitions

LOHP Creative Group

To celebrate the distinctive features of the Little Ouse valley we will be presenting a wonderful series of exhibitions featuring art, words, music and textiles created by members of the LOHP Creative Group (co-ordinated by the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts).

Paintings, sculptures, textiles, photography, illustration and writing inspired by the valley, the source of the river and the tiny details that make it a unique place will be on show.

There will be readings, and music and events.

The work will be presented, with some for sale, over two weekends at:

Sat 19 & Sun 20 October, 11– 4 Lopham Village Hall
Sat 26 & Sun 27 October, 11– 4 Thelnetham Village Hall
and also Blo Norton Village Hall.

The exhibitions are **free** and **open to all** so please come along and enjoy them.

More info from Liz at ballardliz@hotmail.com.