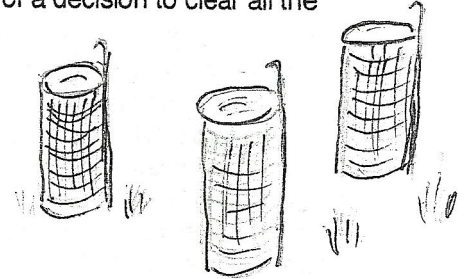


Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke Newsletter Number Two August 2001



Hold the Front Page

Hot news from the Fleam Dyke. On Wednesday 18th July, Sharon Hearle and the Conservation Volunteers were cutting back the regrowth of elder and privet on the newly cleared area near the A11, when Sharon found five Juniper seedlings nestling under a mat of cleavers. This is the first time seedlings have been found in fifty years and is a cause for great celebration. It appears to be the result of a decision to clear all the scrub around the remaining Juniper trees, but other factors may be involved: suitable climatic conditions for a good crop of berries on the two surviving female bushes; a protective covering of cleavers deterring the rabbits; the wettest winter in over two hundred years. Whatever the reason, five little Millennium Junipers are now safely protected by plastic tree guards, and the future of the Wild Juniper in Cambridgeshire seems less bleak.



In addition, there is a back-up team of Juniper cuttings in two triangular plantations on either side of the A11 entrance to Fleam Dyke, near the layby. Of fifty cuttings taken from trees on the dyke, and grown in the Cambridge University Botanic Garden, about 25 are now well established little bushes, sprouting above the confines of their plastic tree guards. How many are male, and how many female remains to be seen.

Credit Where Credit is Due

It would be nice to think that this was all the result of your decision to join the Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke, but miracles take a little longer! So it seems a good moment to pay tribute to Sharon Hearle of the Green Belt Project, whose hard work on these sites, and many other local wildlife areas, has been rewarded so dramatically.

Another person who should get a mention is our Chairman, Sam Agnew, who saw the need for a support group. Those of you who came to the initial meetings on 1st February and 5th April will have noticed how well Sam defines the objectives of a meeting and how skilfully and pleasantly he gets us there. His experience as a District Councillor is invaluable, and his range of contacts has already brought in many new members, and the assurance of financial support from South Cambs District Council.

Members

We have just registered our fiftieth member. If you could all recruit just one friend, (the maths gets difficult here, sorry) we could double our numbers. A substantial number of members would strengthen our hand when we apply to grant-giving bodies for money to buy essential equipment and to pay for skilled contractors to do major clearance work on the sites.

$$50 + 50 = ?!$$

Work in Progress

A simple baseline survey of flora and invertebrates was carried out on Fleam Dyke on 20th June. It is hoped to repeat this work at regular intervals in subsequent years. In addition to the work described above, the Midweek Conservation Group have also paid two visits to the Roman Road, mowing and raking, cutting back scrub regrowth, and treating the stumps with Ammonium Sulphamate crystals, which give the roots a massive overdose of nutrients. With luck, and no immediate rain, the stumps and roots die. Another essential job done by the Conservation Group is to collect the seeds of fine grasses, thyme, rock roses etc. in order to reseed cleared areas.

However, those of you who have walked the routes regularly, or done this sort of work yourselves, will know that things like Hawthorn, Privet and Elder are extremely tough, and may still sprout again the following year. Rank grasses and hardier plants such as thistles and hogweed can easily smother everything. The best solution to this problem has four legs and five letters: sheep. Our long term aim is to restore the chalk grassland flora on these sites by grazing. In the interim, skilful mowing is required to restore the sort of turf in which dozens of flowers grow among small grasses such as sheep's fescue.

Say not the Struggle Nought Availeth

As anyone can see, the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke became progressively overgrown in the last few decades. In many places trees and bushes shaded out the sun-loving chalk grassland flowers. Parts of the Fleam Dyke were almost impassable, but a programme of clearance and management work carried out over the last decade is showing some exciting results. If you have time for a walk from A11 towards Dungate Farm, you will see how small plants of salad burnet, harebells, rock roses, dropwort and thyme are beginning to creep down the slope where scrub has been cleared. Several seedlings of horseshoe vetch are growing on the dusty slopes which were only cleared in February, showing how tough such apparently fragile plants are, given the right habitat.

However, as you walk up onto the that part of the dyke from the A11 layby, the first plants to be seen in early summer, are rather less welcome: masses of nettles, creeping thistles and sow thistles. Although they provide food and nectar for innumerable insects, they will smother the seedlings of the smaller chalk grassland flowers, which are our target here, if not closely mowed or otherwise dealt with. Another intruder which has done spectacularly well on the newly cleared slopes of the dyke is hound's tongue. This handsome biennial, with its furry grey leaves and small burgundy-red flowers uncoiling steadily in prickly succession, takes its name from the shape and texture of its leaves and from its pungent smell. The wearing of a bunch of leaves and flowers was reputed to ward off aggressive dogs. I don't know what it did for interpersonal relations.

There has also been an outstanding crop of the tall yellow spikes of mullein, which seem to have adopted the area nearest the bushes which shield the entrance. In June the furry leaves and buds had their usual ration of fat caterpillars, which survive by mimicking the colours of the opening buds. However, be warned, the adult mullein moth is a disappointment. It is just one of the numerous middle-sized brown moths which most of us find so hard to tell apart. The subtle patterns on their brown upper wings are designed for camouflage in the day time, not for sex appeal. If your love life is conducted in the dark, there is no need for fancy dress.



GREAT MULLEIN

The Fleam Dyke Flower Show

For those of you who have not been able to visit the Fleam Dyke often, or even once this summer, I should like to describe the season so far. I have been visiting the A11 end of the dyke regularly, partly for pure pleasure and partly to record the butterflies. See next newsletter. On my first visit, the quantity of violets amazed me. They were flowering in abundance on either side of the dyke, both in the thick grass and in the newly cleared areas. In the early spring, there is a shortage of nectar sources for butterflies emerging from hibernation, so I was interested to see a tortoiseshell and a peacock exploiting the yellow clusters of wild mahonia, the Oregon grape. Unfortunately, I missed the cowslips, which are flourishing in some areas of the Wilbraham side of the dyke and must have been a pretty sight.

In June, the rock roses were the star turn, producing scattered patches and large drifts of bright yellow flowers: good news for the brown argus butterfly and its caterpillars. In early July, there were over two hundred yards of thyme in a purple carpet along the top of the dyke. Later there was dropwort, with rosy pink buds and delicate sprays of creamy white flowers. To see fifty in one patch, and more scattered all along the bank is a great pleasure, especially when you know that the area was cleared of scrub not so many years previously. In July also, the inconspicuous squinancywort suddenly produces little mounds of starry white flowers. Areas of previously uninteresting grassy bank turn into sunny yellow sheets of lady's bedstraw. Along the top of the dyke, where rabbits and passing feet keep the turf down, the small scabious is thriving.

Further down the grassy banks there are the purple heads of, first, greater knapweed and then black knapweed, providing abundant nectar for visiting insects: assorted bumble bees, hover flies, and the larger butterflies, particularly the meadow brown and the gatekeeper. Later, as July turns into August, the most eye-catching display is put on by the beautiful sky-blue harebell, not just in ones and twos, but in clumps and larger patches. If you look closely, you will see that this fragile-looking flower is often in the vanguard of the chalk grassland flowers moving down into newly cleared soil.



HAREBELL

CLUSTERED
BELL FLOWER



However, for me, the big surprise was the quantity of clustered bell flower in bloom in mid July, in the area beyond Mutlow Hill, going towards Fulbourn. Earlier in the month I had seen one or two in flower, with little paths trodden in the grass where people had gone to look at the dark blue clusters of bells rising among the yellowing grasses. But later there were dozens of them: a real tribute to the patient scrub clearing and mowing that has been going on over the last decade.

**And Finally,
Remember, you read it here first!**

Not many people know this, but the Brent Ditch, the Fleam Dyke and the Devil's Dyke are part of the Trojan defences against the Greeks.

- Oh, really? So where was Troy, then?
- On Wandlebury Hill, of course. What do you think those double-ditch defences were built for?
- Well, I sort of thought ...but, er.... Didn't Homer say it all happened rather nearer the Mediterranean?
- Yes, yes, but that has all been disproved. There is a Belgian professor who has spent thirty years researching the story. He has worked it all out. Here is the book which proves it, and you can see

This, or something like it, was the conversation that I had with three Belgians whom I met on the Devil's Dyke in May. They were very nice, cheerful, friendly, and apparently entirely sane. I was too astonished to note the title of the book or the author, and so charmed by the idea that I quickly suspended critical judgement. If any Friend is going to Belgium, perhaps he or she can go into a book shop and ask about this historical breakthrough. As we parted they said that they were going on to Ely Cathedral. It was quite a small cathedral, they had heard. Yes, I said, very small, quite tiny in fact, but worth a visit.

Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke Newsletter. First with the News.

Julia Napier, August 2001

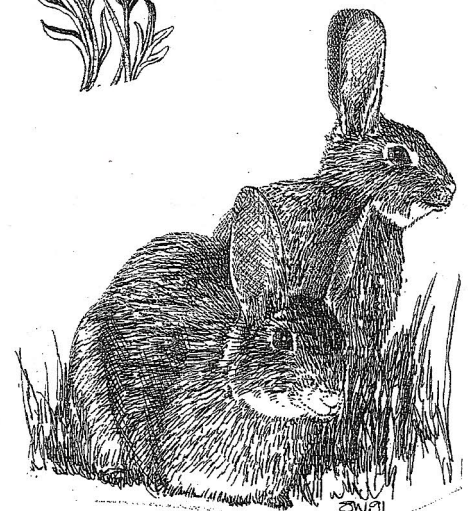


ROCK ROSE



FIELD SCABIOUS

PS
You may have noticed that most of this newsletter is about the Fleam Dyke. What about the Roman Road, I hear you cry. What indeed, my Friends! The next edition will be entirely devoted to the Roman Road. If you have any news, records or items of interest about the Roman Road, please let me know. Perhaps it was not a Roman Road at all. Perhaps it was designed for one of the Chariots of the Gods. Watch this space.



Mid Week Conservation Group Practical Conservation Events

Meet at the Barn, behind Bidwell's, Trumpington Road
Please ring 01223 712410 if you intend to meet on site, as plans may change.

Wed	5 Sept	Mowing, raking scrub clearance as needed on the Fleam Dyke	
Wed	12 Sept	"	"
Wed	26 Sept	"	" Roman Road
Wed	3 Oct	"	" Fleam Dyke
Wed	24 Oct	"	" Roman Road
Wed	7 Nov	"	" Fleam Dyke
Wed	5 Dec	"	"
Wed	12 Dec	"	" Roman Road



The Cambridge Conservation Volunteers will also be running practical conservation tasks on both sides on Sundays, mainly after September. Contact Sharon Hearle for their task list.

Other Events

Sun 26 August **"Come and look for butterflies, flowers and birds on the Fleam Dyke"** Meet on the London bound layby of the A11 between Great Wilbraham and Fulbourn turns. Bring a picnic. Meet 2.0 pm
tel: Julia Napier on 01223 213152

Sun 2nd Sept **Wildlife on the Roman Road 3 mile walk.** Worsted Lodge to Worts Causeway. Meet at 1.30 pm at the Babraham Park and Ride site to arrange lift sharing.

Sun 7 October **'Have a go at Conservation' on the Fleam Dyke.**
Richard Townley, who owns the Fulbourn end of the Fleam Dyke is keen to see scrub clearance begun at the Fulbourn end of the dyke. We hope to make a good start. No skills required. Wear gloves, old clothes, strong shoes, bring waterproofs, and a packed lunch. Tools provided, but bring your own if you prefer. If you are qualified to use power tools, you will be very welcome. Please let Sharon Hearle know in advance. Unskilled labour is just as useful, because we shall need helpers to drag away the branches which have been cut and to pile them on the bonfire. If you like playing with fire, this is your big opportunity.
tel: Sharon Hearle 01223 712410

6 Feb 2002 **Anniversary Meeting** at the Six Bells, Fulbourn
An evening to celebrate our first year of existence. **Dr Roger Clarke, an expert on local birds and a specialist on birds of prey, will give a talk with slides.** We are hoping to get a speaker from English Nature (formerly the Nature Conservancy) to talk about chalk grassland and explain the management plans for the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke, for which English Nature has ultimate responsibility. More details in the Autumn Newsletter.
7.30 - 10.00 Entrance free Tea and coffee in the interval

10th April 2002 **Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke. AGM**

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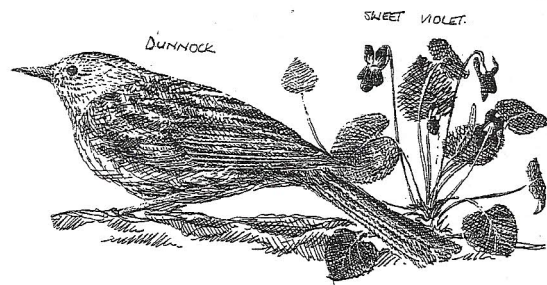
Fleam Dyke

by Ivan Scurll

Bird Survey

and Graham Jones

Ivan Scurll and Graham Jones have both had a lifetime interest in birdwatching. They regularly walk and birdwatch together, which they say is a great help in making firm identifications. They say that May 9th was, by chance, their best birdwatching day ever on Fleam Dyke.



Balsham Church to Fulbourn Nature Reserve

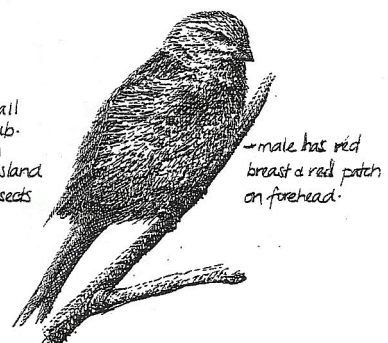
Other Birds seen during the last twelve months in the same area

9th May 2001

Blackbird
Chaffinch
Collared Dove
Crow
Cuckoo
Dunnock
Green Finch
Green Woodpecker
House Sparrow
House Martin
Lesser Whitethroat
Jackdaw
Kestrel
Magpie
Mallard
Merlin
Red Legged Partridge
Pheasant
Robin
Rook
Skylark
Sparrow Hawk
Starling
Swallow
Tit, Blue
 Great
 Long-tailed
Thrush, Mistle
 Song
Willow Warbler
Wood Pigeon
Wren
Yellow Hammer

Blackcap
Black-headed Gull
Brambling
Chiffchaff
Coal Tit
Corn Bunting
Field Fare
Golden Plover
Goldfinch
Grasshopper Warbler
Herring Gull
Hobby
Lapwing
Linnet
Meadow Pipit
Owl, Long-eared
 Short-eared
 Tawny
Pied Wagtail
Redwing
Red Poll
Siskin
Spotted Flycatcher
Swift
Turtle Dove
Wheatear
Whitethroat

Linnet's nest in small colonies in low scrub. Nestlings are fed on seeds from the grassland nearby as well as insects found in the scrub.



Roman Road Bird Survey
by Ivan Scurll and Graham Jones

Horseheath to Wandlebury
Beechwoods

29th June 2001

Blackbird
Blue Tit
Chaffinch
Collared Dove
Corn Bunting
Crow
Cuckoo
Dunnock
Gold Finch
Greenfinch
Grey Partridge
House Sparrow
House Martin
Linnet
Jackdaw
Jay
Kestrel
Magpie
Meadow Pipit
Red Legged Partridge
Pheasant
Robin
Rook
Skylark
Song Thrush
Sparrow Hawk
Starling
Swift
Tit, Blue
 Great
 Long-tailed
Warbler, Garden
Wood Pigeon
Woodpecker, Great Spotted
Wren
Yellow Hammer



Other birds seen during the last
twelve months in the same area

Blackcap
Bullfinch
Buzzard (passing over)
Chiffchaff
Dove, Stock
 Turtle
Fieldfare
Goldcrest
Goldfinch
Golden Plover
Gull, Common
 Black-headed
 Herring
 Lesser black backed
Heron (passing over)
Hobby
Lapwing
Linnet
Marsh Harrier (passing over)
Mistle Thrush
Owl, Little
 Short-eared
 Tawny
Raven (3, on 1st January!)
Redstart
Redwing
Redpoll
Sand Martin
Siskin
Spotted flycatcher
Stonechat
Swift
Tit, Coal
 Willow
Treetreeper
Tree pipit
Tree Sparrow
Wagtail, Pied
 Yellow
Warbler, Grasshopper
 Willow
 Wood
Wheatear
Whitethroat
Woodpecker, Green
 Lesser Spotted