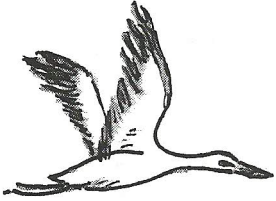


Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke Newsletter Number Six August 2002



Late, late edition



This newsletter should have thudded onto your doormats during August, but I will skip the excuses and take pleasure in announcing that Sharon Hearle's baby arrived on July 11th. Our warmest congratulations to Sharon and her husband, Pete Smith, on the birth of their son, Max. During her absence on maternity leave, the work of the Greenbelt Project is being shared by Iain Webb and Mark Ricketts, with Iain Webb in charge of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke.

The Fleam Dyke Restoration Project by Rob Mungovan, Ecology Officer, South Cambridgeshire District Council

The Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke are not alone in trying to support the work of the Green Belt Project on the Fleam Dyke. The Dyke is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) as well as being a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM). This means that statutory bodies such as English Nature and English Heritage also have an interest (and a duty) to see the restoration of this important Cambridgeshire site. To this end, Donna Radley, the English Nature Conservation Officer responsible for the Fleam Dyke, called a meeting at which all the relevant organisations were invited to discuss their aspirations for the site. Representatives from the Cambridgeshire Archaeological Unit, the Cambridge Green Belt Project, the County Council's Countryside Services Team, the Devil's Dyke Restoration Project, English Heritage, English Nature, the Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke, South Cambridgeshire District Council, and the Wildlife Trust, met to discuss future work on the site. The Fleam Dyke Restoration Project is a name for this plan, not a separate organisation.

Within recent memory, the Dyke has changed significantly in its appearance. The growth of shrubby bushes of elder, hawthorn and blackthorn have produced areas of dense scrub. This has shaded out sun-loving chalk grassland flora, and increased the fertility of the surface soil, encouraging the invasion of taller, tougher plants and grasses. Soil erosion has also occurred where there is little vegetation beneath some parts of the scrub. The scrub is also preventing people from using the footpath. If people cannot visit the site and appreciate its value, then they will not be inclined to ensure its protection for future generations. What is to be done?

It was agreed that we all shared a vision for the Fleam Dyke to be managed in such a way as to protect and extend the species-rich chalk grassland for which the whole dyke was once famous, and that the ideal method of maintaining such habitat is by sheep grazing. The plan would be to remove much of the invasive scrub, over a period of years, leaving occasional small bushes to provide singing posts for songbirds. Hedges and belts of scrub would mark the boundaries of the Dyke, and also serve to protect the flora and fauna against drift from farm sprays.



Norfolk Horns. Rare Breeds Survival Trust

Fleam Dyke is an SSSI and English Nature has a duty under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, 2001, to see the special interest of such sites maintained and, where possible, further enhanced. English Heritage wishes to see the site protected, where necessary restored to good condition, and maintained at this standard. (Burrowing by rabbits and badgers can damage the Dyke) Finally, chalk grassland is a priority habitat for conservation within the National Biodiversity Action Plan: a habitat which is particularly scarce in Cambridgeshire.



The practical work of the Green Belt Project has already been well reported and praised in the local media, but to remind you of how the transformation of the scrub to important chalk grassland is possible, I will recap on some of the present successes. Patches of rock rose, thyme, milkwort, salad burnet and harebells have already colonised the bare chalk at the top of the banks where there was recently thick privet, shaded by dense scrub. Further down, under the nettles, thistles and hound's tongue, it is remarkable how many small plants of horseshoe vetch and harebell can be seen. The seeds of many plants can remain dormant in the soil for many years just waiting for the right opportunity; we aim to provide that opportunity. It is hoped that in some areas the existing seed-base will be rich enough to replenish the chalk flora. In others, seeding may be required, but this will be undertaken using seed obtained from the site whenever possible.

The famous juniper trees, *Juniperus communis*, have remained because they can to a certain extent compete with the scrub. However, their reproductive capacity was severely limited due to poor seed germination conditions, and competition from the seedlings of other shrubs. The extensive tree and scrub clearance completed in the winter of 2001 has provided the juniper trees with more favourable conditions and a number of seedlings are now being closely watched and cared for. The junipers on Fleam Dyke are the North European strain, that is to say that they are genetically distinct from the South European juniper, which prefers a warmer climate. In previous centuries, these junipers grew in other places in the county, in particular, Hildersham, which was known as Juniper Hill. Today, the only wild junipers in Cambridgeshire are those on the Fleam Dyke.

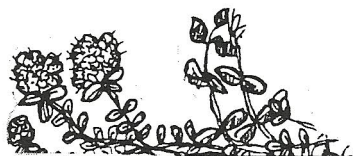


Juniper
in flower

So the case for action is clear, and the programme of work begun by Sharon Hearle, the Green Belt Project Officer, is showing very good results. There is agreement on the need to remove scrub, and an initial £8,000 is to be spent on this work in the coming autumn. (This sum includes the £5,000 granted to the Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke by the Awards for All section of the Lottery Fund.) Once the scrub is cut back, the area requires careful management if unwanted seedlings are to be kept at bay. Initially, this can be achieved by mowing and raking, as is being done by at Mutlow Hill. However, quite soon this job will be done more continuously, and better, by sheep. Sheep fencing, paid for by English Nature, is being erected on the stretch of the Fleam Dyke which runs from the A11 to the Bedford Gap. Similar stock-proof fences will be installed round Mutlow Hill, and along the flower-rich area of the dyke between Mutlow Hill and the disused railway. Provision will be made for access along the footpath, but walkers with dogs will be asked to keep their dogs on leads when passing through an area where sheep are grazing.

Before the next stages of clearance work progress in this Autumn and Winter it will be necessary to collate information on species that could be negatively affected, such as badgers, and on areas which are the favourite hunting grounds of owls and other birds of prey. If you have any concerns about the proposed work please let a committee member know your views.

Rob Mungovan
May 2002



News from the Roman Road Chicanery near Wandlebury

South Cambridgeshire Southern Highways Division, which is in charge of byways such as the Roman Road, decided to give up replacing ineffective bollards at the Wandlebury end of the road, and install an earth bank barrier, known from motor racing terminology as a chicane. Such banks have been found effective elsewhere in the county, and though initially rather unsightly, it will green over in time, and will protect this ancient track from surface damage by four wheeled vehicles and from rubbish dumping.

Any Old Iron near Balsham

At the other end of the Roman Road, where four wheeled traffic is still permitted, so-called Travellers arrived again in April in 18 caravans, and were evicted several weeks later. Walking past their encampment is never particularly pleasant: "the usual aggressive dogs and lippy children", as John Richards said. They left behind them twelve wrecked or burnt out cars, two old fridges, two broken bicycles, two usable child's pedal cycles, a microwave oven, a calor gas heater, large plastic containers, and so on. Numerous bursting black bags were thrown into the ditch and other rubbish was thrown around into hedges and onto banks. All this had to be picked up by the workers delegated to this unpleasant job by the contractor who clears fly-tipped rubbish for South Cambridgeshire Environmental Health Department. The contractor was paid £1,200 for this job, but that was by no means the full cost of the work. The Council had to send an officer to assess the work. The local farmers used their own time and equipment to move the wrecked vehicles onto the road, and then we all pay for the disposal of the rubbish in the appropriate places. The real cost of this clean up is more like £2,000; and that is without calculating the cost of police time and of the legal process required.

A Practical Solution

In response to this recurring problem, the Parish Council of Balsham called a meeting to which local landowners and other interested parties were invited. Our Chairman, Sam Agnew, attended on our behalf. After the problem had been defined and discussed, Sam proposed that Balsham Parish Council should apply for a **Traffic Restriction Order** on the section of the Roman Road which runs from Hildersham Road to Linton Road and from Linton Road to Bartlow Road. The resolution was adopted unanimously, with one abstention: County Councillor, Dr Terry Bear.

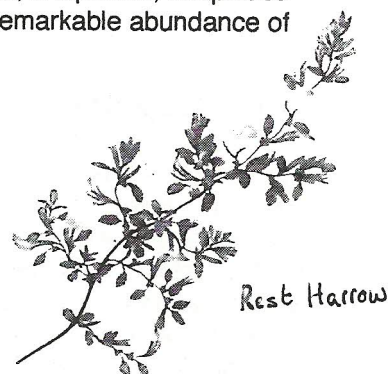
Submission of Evidence

The Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke were asked to submit evidence in favour of the proposal, along with the local landowners and farmers, who regularly deal with the problem. Therefore, on 5th June, John Ady, our new Treasurer, Pam Nicholes as emergency chauffeur, and I set off to collect the evidence which I have summarised above. We took photos to support the case, and noted the damage to the flora, particularly to the stretch of road just above Mark's Grave. Unfortunately, this end of the Roman Road is not an SSSI, despite an extensive bank of field scabious, lady's bedstraw, white campion, knapweed, knapweed broomrape, perforate St John's wort, hoary plantain, rest harrow and others, and a remarkable abundance of marjoram. This was all summarised and sent off in early June, and we are waiting to hear the outcome. If any member knows a County Councillor, now is the time to nobble him or her and point out that we do not want a repeat of all this damage, mess and expense. The Roman Road may not be an official nature reserve, but it is so in effect, and it seems strange to have to spend so much time and effort to obtain permission to protect it.

And now for the Good News....

Thyme found on the Roman Road

One of the regular Mid-week Conservation Volunteers is Steve Hartley, who is studying Ecology at Anglia Polytechnic University. In July, he noticed a patch of thyme on the higher ground near Copley Hill. This is very good news, as it was thought that this classic chalk grassland plant had been quite lost from the Roman Road, where it was once so common. A few weeks later, I walked along the same stretch of the road doing a butterfly count. Having forgotten to check with Steve where it was, I just peered hopefully at the turf here and there. In a patch of newly cleared and fairly bare earth, the small white flowers of common pearl wort caught my eye, and there beside them was a small plant of thyme. Is this the signal for a Friends' Thyme Hunt?



Making Hay while the Sun Shone on the Roman Road July 14th

In early July, the County Council mowed the Roman Road and the Fleam Dyke, in accordance with their duty to keep byways open. Rather than leave the cut grass lying as mulch on the flowers we are trying to encourage, it seemed a good idea to get a work party out there to rake up. Many thanks to all those who turned up with enthusiasm, hats and supplies of sun cream, and in particular to Iain Webb, the organiser. (If you are still wondering where Omar Bin Laden is, look carefully at my not-very-good photograph.) It was hot at ten o'clock, and very hot by lunch time, but we walked and raked and talked and noted flowers happily. A decade of work by Sharon Hearle and the Green Belt Project is showing clear results in the increase in the areas of flower-rich verges and banks. There was a good patch of rock roses where they had not been noted last year, and a steady spread of dropwort, hoary plantain and other chalk grassland flowers.

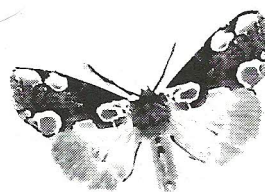
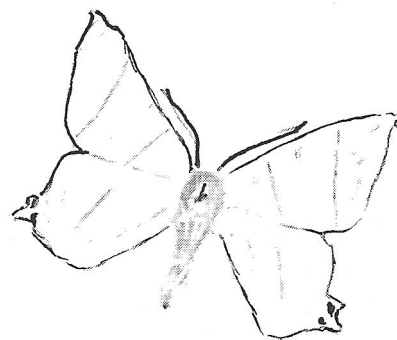


Left to right: Peter Pilbeam, Christine Newell, David Seilly, Norman Gutteridge, Sara and her mother, Steve Hartley and Iain Webb. Front Row: Donna Hilton and Liz Tym. (Apologies to Sara and her mother for a failure to note names fully.)

Moth Trapping on the Roman Road, July 12th

On an evening of dramatic sunset light and lowering clouds, John Dawson trundled his wheel barrow loaded up with generator, two moth traps, white sheet, and allied kit, along the foot path from Lodge Farm, Babraham Road, to the junction with the Roman Road. If you think it sounds as though he might have done this before, you will be right. John is now the Moth Recorder for Cambridgeshire, and an impressive expert on the subject. For those of you who have not been to a moth trapping, I should say at once that the moths are not harmed in any way. They are drawn to specially bright bulbs, and after a bit of fluttering around, they settle on the surfaces provided, either a white sheet, or in and under a series of egg trays, (yes, egg trays, the kind designed for 24 eggs), arranged at angles in a box designed for the purpose. Once they have settled down, the egg trays can be picked up and the moths examined quite easily. It was a warm still night, and the moths came quickly so that the air was soon full of them, and they landed all over the place, often taking refuge on dark jackets and jeans. For readers who find moths alarming, may I point out that although moths will land on heads or hats, they have no desire to get tangled in one's hair, which to them would be as thick as a ship's cable or bigger. The list of moths noted by John Dawson is too long to include here. Suffice it to say that there were numerous examples of the micro-moths which John identifies with such apparent ease. There were lots of furry-bodied noctuid moths, whose wings offer an apparently endless series of variations on a theme of brown camouflage patterns.

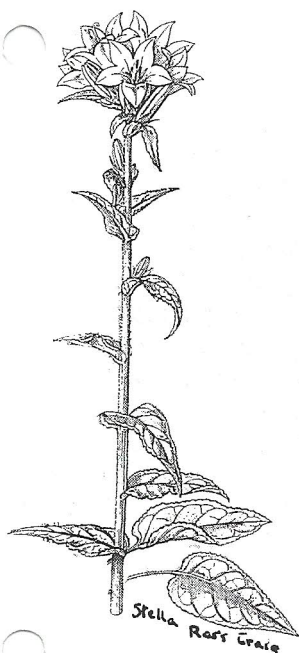
The Emerald moths, large and small, which look more like butterflies, are always drawn to light, along with the pale yellow Swallow Tailed moth and the smaller Brimstone moth. There were even two Peach Blossom moths, with their improbable pink patterned wings, which I think of as special because I so much wanted to see one when I was a child, and because pink is such an unusual colour for a moth. As the night drew on, the larger moths arrived, culminating in a splendid Privet Hawk moth. And so to bed at midnight. John stayed on. Moth Recorders, like Bat enthusiasts, do the night shift.



News from the Fleam Dyke

Clustered Bell Flowers on Fleam Dyke

Last year there were good numbers of tall clustered bell flowers on the section of the Fleam Dyke from Mutlow Hill to the disused railway line. This year things seem to me to be even better. On the recently cleared area just east of Mutlow Hill, the clustered bell flower is blooming all along the path, and where scrub has been cut back beyond the old railway line, there are numerous plants in flower. The County Council mows the path twice a year, so the Bell Flower spikes on the path all get topped; but this does not harm the low growing basal leaves of these perennial plants, and without this minimal maintenance, the path, the bell flowers, the violets and cowslips would all have vanished completely. Similarly, at the Fulbourn end of the Dyke, where the path was opened out by a work party of Friends on 10th February, there are a good number of clustered bell flower plants and quite a few spikes of deep blue bells.



The Friends' Scrub Clearance area near Fulbourn, Feb. 10th.

Progress Report

On the bank itself, where we raked down cut material into a massive bonfire, and cleared more scrub, there were at first very few plants at all in the dry spring, only numerous smallish black spiders, speeding across the barren surface, eatingwhat? In early summer there was a sea of sow thistle, and little else. By August 21st, the sow thistle had dried up, and there were still very few plants of any kind, not even grass, on the dry, friable bank: one scentless mayweed, one plant of white horehound, some bittersweet and lots of elder seedlings. However, at the edge of the path, flourishing in the restored light, there is a good patch of violets, an equally large patch of harebells, and, a metre down the bank there is a small clump of the clustered bell flower, blooming in solitary beauty. (The plant must have been clinging on under the ivy and privet.) It will be interesting to see what else emerges from the seed bank. This result is unlikely to knock anyone off their perch in astonishment, but I was surprised to see an instant improvement in butterfly numbers. Where last year, one could only see an occasional Speckled Wood, I saw one Large White, one Green-veined White, three Holly Blues, two Speckled Woods, five Meadow Browns, and a Red Admiral, plus two species of dragonfly: a Migrant Hawker, and a Common Darter. In addition, the opening gives a marvellous view over the fields, where, on August 21st, bright golden stubble gleamed in the afternoon light, as the combine harvester cut the last stand of corn. All quite idyllic, except for the machine noise.



The Friends' Ragwort Pulling morning on Fleam Dyke, Sunday May 26th

Many thanks to all those who turned up to help get rid of the ragwort before the sheep arrive. The Midweek Conservation Volunteers had already cleared quite a lot of lush young plants, and some more work had been paid for, but there was still plenty left to do. Working among the growing thistles and nettles was getting difficult by May 29th. The precipitous slopes of the Dyke are pitted with rabbit holes, and the luxuriant plant growth concealed treacherous stumps of hawthorn and elder. In addition, it is always easy to slip on the crumbly surface of the bank. Many thanks to Helen Chubb, Richard Fowling and their son, Sam, who brewed up tea for us all; also to John Ady, Rachel Gray, Pam Nicholes, Ray Thompson, and Liz Tym, Stella and Roger Wolfe from Ipswich, and finally to Peter Pilbeam and David Seilly who both do so much practical conservation work on the Wildlife Trust reserves for which they are Voluntary Wardens, and whose presence ensured that we were covered in case of accidents.



Did we clear it all?

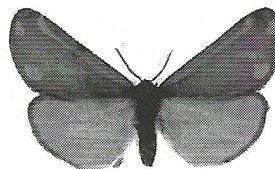
Alas, no. By late July, the south west bank of the Dyke was glowing with a sheet of yellow ragwort flowers. Not good news even for Norfolk Horns, which can cope with a bit of ragwort. Undeterred, Iain Webb organised a series of seven ragwort pulling evenings on Mondays and Thursday. Many thanks to Lucy Brock, Rebecca Burt, Tim Cumine, Susie Eilowart, James Fisher, Steve Hartley, who came every single time, Rachel Remnant, Mark Ricketts, Catherine Scott, David Seilly, Justin Turkentine, Lucy Wilshaw, and Phil Wilson. If anyone is thinking this sounds like a merry rustic event, think again! By August, ragwort pulling on the Fleam Dyke meant working shoulder high among very tough, tall nettles, ferocious spear thistles, masses of creeping thistles and even more hound's tongue, whose hooked seeds adhere to any remotely furry surface, and get into socks, gloves and hair as well. In addition, it was very hot. The ragwort was by then shoulder high, and often exceedingly hard to pull up. Once out, the plants had to be piled on the top of the bank, and carried off the site. You would be surprised how heavy an armful of tall ragwort plants can be. However, the evening skies were beautiful, the company amusing and friendly, and we adjourned to the pub for drinks afterwards. Evening after evening, there was always more to do, until suddenly we were all converging on the last patches, and it was gone. Wonderful. Mission accomplished. Congratulations all round, especially to Iain who thought it could be done, and made sure it was.

Good Riddance to Bad Rubbish?

Readers may have seen recent articles in the press in which ragwort is described as some sort of Yellow Peril. "It's out there. Coming for Your Horse, and You." DEFRA responded by saying that they were not aware of any change in the situation. It may be worth pointing out that Ragwort is a native plant, and if it has become more of a problem, then it is worth looking for the cause. For example, on the Fleam Dyke, ragwort invaded the newly cleared, disturbed soil. There was almost none on the side of the dyke which has a thick covering of grasses and flowers. Is there more empty, disturbed soil around than there used to be?

The Case for the Defence

Ragwort is the main food plant of the black and yellow striped caterpillars of the Cinnabar moth, a day-flying moth with bright scarlet underwings.



In the last forty years, herbicides and pesticides have wiped out the 'woolly bear' caterpillars that used to live in the weedy corners of every garden. Today, the jolly ragwort caterpillars are often the only ones that children seem to know. A new ragwort site, such as the scrub-cleared area of the Fleam Dyke, has remarkably few such caterpillars, but over several years, a Cinnabar moth population will build up into very large numbers, with the caterpillars stripping each ragwort plant bare before they move on to the next.



Moths of the British Isles.
Richard South, 1907

Ragwort is also eaten by the caterpillars of a dozen or so other moths, though these also feed on other plants: the Garden Tiger, the Ruby Tiger, the White Ermine, the Muslin Ermine and the Lime Speck Pug, to name but a few. The golden flower heads are visited constantly by insects of all kinds, including many butterflies and numerous moths. The only time I have seen a colony of the Wall Brown in Cambridgeshire they were nectaring on ragwort. There was almost no other nectar source in the area. In my small suburban garden, a self sown ragwort plant flowered constantly from early July to the end of August, and in addition to the usual bees, bumble bees, hoverflies, and flies, it was visited every sunny hour by Gatekeeper butterflies. (My thanks to Dr Brian Gardiner, who told me how important ragwort is to moths other than the Cinnabar.)

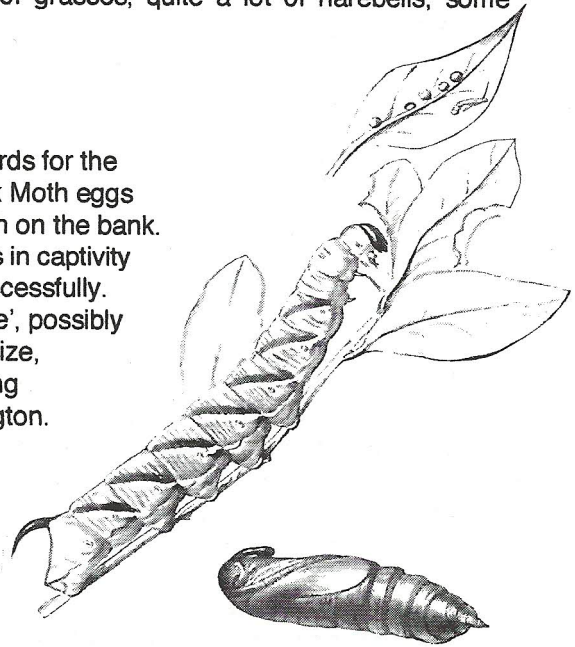
Chalk Grassland Flower Walk, 7th July

Unfortunately, Dr Grubb was laid low in June and early July with a particularly virulent form of 'flu, and was unable to lead our walk, to the great regret of those who had turned up for the event. However, we walked to the Bedford Gap and back across the overpass to the disused railway line, sharing comments and observations. An area of particular interest is that near the A11 layby, where last year's forest of hound's tongue has, to my amazement, been succeeded by a variety of grasses, quite a lot of harebells, some mignonette and several thriving patches of lesser meadow rue.

Privet Hawk Moths

Roger Lemon, who has made time this year to keep butterfly records for the Roman Road from Worsted Lodge to Balsham, found Privet Hawk Moth eggs and tiny green, horned, caterpillars on some of the privet regrowth on the bank. I took two to raise, on the grounds that survival rates of caterpillars in captivity are a great deal better than in the wild, and mine usually hatch successfully. So much for confidence. I am sorry to say that, one 'failed to thrive', possibly due to a bacterial or viral parasite, but the other grew to splendid size, turned into a deeply impressive chrysalis, and is now over wintering in a plant pot of damp moss, on the recommendation of Jo Darlington. Whether I shall be able to see it emerging is another matter.

Illustration from Richard South's
Moths of the British Isles, 1907
reduced by 20%!

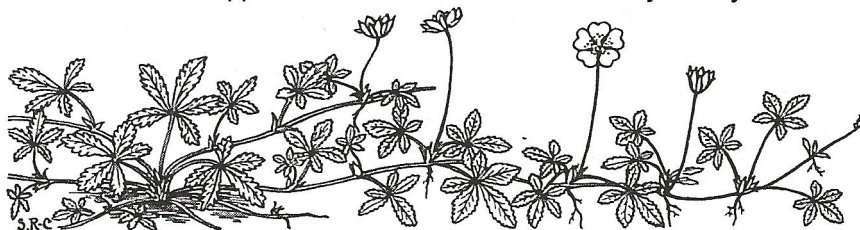


Jo Darlington is an entomologist, a specialist in Tropical Termites, who has kindly offered to record insects on the Fleam Dyke. This is a great deal more time consuming than butterfly recording, as it involves not only walking the site with sweep nets and popping unidentified insects into small tubes, but also laying out pitfall traps or dishes of water with a dash of washing-up liquid, into which one hopes a representative collection of insects will fall. There is then the time consuming business of identifying a range of familiar and unfamiliar bugs and beetles. So, to Jo as to all our experts and recorders, many thanks.

Juniper News

In addition to the sheep fencing that is being put in along the Fleam Dyke from the A11 to the Bedford Gap, there will be new fencing round the juniper trees, in case the Norfolk Horns develop a taste for fresh juniper leaves. The tallest of the junipers broke off in the gale that also brought down other single trees on the same stretch of the Dyke. Although it still presents a rather dismal sight, it started sprouting quite quickly and now has strong green shoots on its remaining upper branches. Various Friends tried to take cuttings from the broken branches. Mine looked deceptively healthy for several months, but gradually turned up their toes. As far as I know, only Christine Newell has succeeded in getting cuttings to grow, which many not be unconnected with the fact that she is a plant scientist with a beautiful wildlife garden. The six Millennium seedlings, found by Sharon Hearle after scrub clearance, have dwindled to three, but though still tiny, the survivors are looking healthy. It will be interesting to see just how long it takes them to reach knee height. Whatever gene there is that makes Leylandii grow like magic beans, it is not to be found in the Northern Juniper.

Meanwhile, the two plantations of juniper cuttings beside the A11 are doing well. There are about fifteen bushes left in each section now, but they are looking very healthy, and bushing out well above their protective tree collars. There are no plans to move any of them onto the Dyke, as the discovery of seedling junipers encourages us to hope that there will be no need to do so. The plantation will still be useful as habitat for the insects that depend on juniper for their existence. The ground beneath the juniper cuttings is carpeted with Cinquefoil, the food plant of the Grizzled Skipper; but in the absence of a nearby colony I had better not get up my hopes.



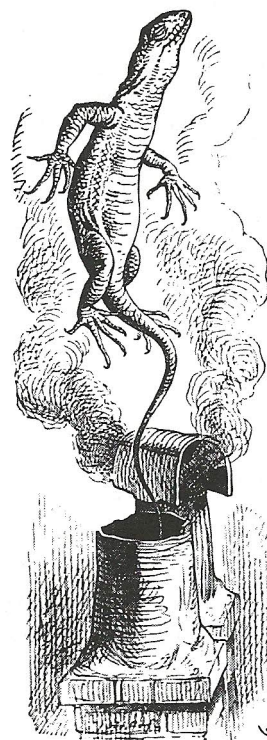
Good Lizard Days



In May, during an early Ragwort pulling session, David Seilly saw a Common Lizard on the south bank of the Fleam Dyke, where the scrub clearance had left bare, warm soil.

In early September, Iain Webb saw a whole lot more on the fencing along the edge of the A11. If you park at the A11 layby, and walk along the footpath towards the entrance to the Dyke, keep an eye out for Common Lizards basking on warm soil, or on the bars of the fence. Iain saw nine lizards near the layby and four on the fence further along, as you walk towards the footbridge. They need to bask more as the days get cooler. Any other sightings?

There is also a very pretty patch of blue Corn Mint, which flowers in August, on the side of the small ditch there. A little further on all summer the Roesel's Bush Crickets have been singing their high pitched, continuous song above the noise of the traffic.



A Bad Lizard Day

Billy the Lizard evicted by Alice during her adventures. Unforgettable, unforgotten drawing by John Tenniel.

Drive Carefully. Take a Break!

Last month Stella and Roger Wolfe tried to park on the A11 layby, but were asked to move onto the grassy concrete grid, by a man serving coffee and tea from a travelling snack bar. He wanted to keep the layby free for his customers. Possibly he himself was then asked to move over, because when Liza Steele, John Davison and I visited the site at the end of August, the van was installed on the grassy area, with a table and chairs conveniently provided for customers. I very much hope he will do good business there, as his presence will protect all visitors to the Dyke from the miserable experience of returning after a pleasant walk to find broken glass all over the place and expensive repairs to be arranged. He wanted to know more about the Fleam Dyke, and offered to put up information about the site next to his counter.

BIRDS OF PREY AND THEIR PREY

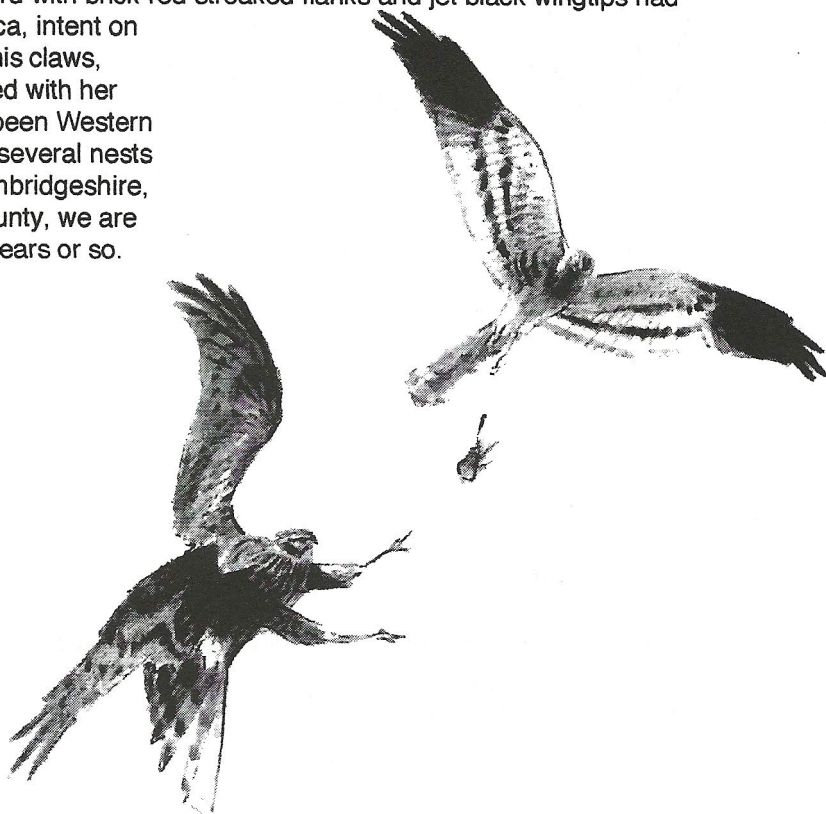


At our First Anniversary Meeting on the 6th February, Dr Roger Clarke gave an extremely interesting talk on Birds of Prey and Their Prey. By no means all of our members were able to attend, so I asked him to write us an article on the subject, which he has very kindly done.

LOWLAND RAPTORS by Roger Clarke, The Hawk and Owl Trust

Skylark song from the set-aside on which I lay wheeled round inside my head; the heat threw distant power cables into distorted lines and muffled the rushing sound of the distant line of toy cars on the main road. A slight movement needing checking with the 10x power of binoculars drew my attention to the outstretched scimitar shape of a fantastically long-winged male Montagu's Harrier coasting in over the dyke and sailing out over the wheat. A few weeks ago this lanky grey bird with brick-red streaked flanks and jet black wingtips had been gliding low over the cotton fields of West Africa, intent on detecting locusts. Here he carried a limp skylark in his claws, calling up his brown ring-tailed female who answered with her screams and reared up to take the catch. Had this been Western France and the feeding easy on continental voles, several nests would have been dotted about the field, but in Cambridgeshire, in the chalk belt slashed across the south of the county, we are lucky to have one nest anywhere once every five years or so.

The other harriers also use this open farmland: lumbering Marsh Harriers from their wetland nest sites in the fens, checking for leverets and game bird poults, and bluff Hen Harriers from Northern Europe, cruising for Skylarks in the winter. Neither carries quite the élan of the Montagu's that I have watched milling in their thousands over semi-arid grassland roosts near locust fields in India.

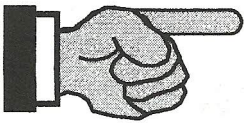


All the harriers use the super-sense listening abilities hidden in their owl-like facial discs to detect prey from relatively low flight over the ground. Migrating thousands of miles, harriers use space by the tens of square kilometres, ranging far and wide in their 'cold-search' hunt for prey. By contrast, the lifestyles of other raptors can be far more economical of space. The Common Buzzard soars but is relatively sedentary, staying home in winter and, in the right terrain, existing on a few hundred square metres to each breeding territory. Quite a large bird, which has recently moved into south Cambridgeshire from the west, the Buzzard feeds on a mix of rabbits, smaller mammals, earthworms and other small beer. The Buzzard can be inclined to sit and watch for its opportunities from some lofty perch. The smaller Sparrowhawk is most likely to be seen flashing over the hedgerow as it exercises a practised ambush technique on small birds. Its short wings allow it to crash into a

bush, following its prey into the twigs with impunity, stabbing at its victim with long black talons on long lemon legs without fear of getting caught up. The Kestrel has noticeably decreased in recent years, and is now more rarely seen hovering over linear rough grassland, such as the dyke and roadside verges. Are the constituents of new road fuels poisoning the small mammals?

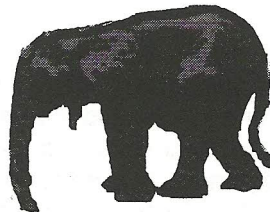
For these small creatures, the night brings other dangers from those super-senses merchants, the owls, with their ludicrously large heads and wide eyes which engender feelings of affinity in human admirers. The grassland hunters such as the dark-eyed Barn Owl, which is rare in Cambridgeshire south of the fens, the yellow-eyed Short-eared Owl and the orange-eyed Long-eared Owl depend totally on grassland being left uncut to grow rank and tussocky for years, allowing the small mammal population to build up. The presence of bird remains in their pellets indicate a poor a season for these vole specialists, which usually hunt by pinpointing their mammal prey in the rough by sound. Rough tussocky grass is a rare commodity in lowland England (and in much of sheep-grazed upland Britain too). Linear habitats such as ditches and dykes are therefore very important for their areas of rough grassland as well as for their flora. In the management of such areas there is a fine balance to be struck between mowing for wildflower reasons and leaving enough areas rank for small mammals.

Roger Clarke, August 2002



Wanted !

Have any readers got old photographs of the Fleam Dyke and the Roman Road tucked away somewhere? We should like to make a collection of photographs of these sites as they were in the last hundred years or so. Please get in touch.



Needed !

What? Elephants on the Roman Road? No, this is just a way of catching the eye of those Friends who joined before the autumn of 2001, and have not yet paid their subscription. (£5 per household)

Corrected !

Following in the steps of the Guardian, and in view of the capacity of this editor to muddle names, botanical or human, this newsletter will in future have a Corrections section. In the last newsletter, Dr Peter Grubb was described as Head of Plant Sciences. My humble apologies to Prof. Roger Leigh, the holder of that position. Dr Grubb was until recently Head of Investigative Plant Ecology. By a happy coincidence, I met Dr Grubb on the Devil's Dyke, at the same spot where in May 2001 I had met the three charming Belgians who believed Wandlebury Rings was the site of Troy (see Newsletter 2). After a certain amount of fishing around for clues as to the identity of an obviously expert naturalist, I reached the "Dr Grubb, I presume" moment, and was able to make my apologies.

Julia Napier

Mid-Week Conservation Group

Meet at the Barn , behind Bidwell's, Trumpington Road, Cambridge. **Please ring 01223 712410 if you intend to come**, in order to check the meeting place.

The programme for mid-week dates was not fixed at the time of going to press, but the volunteers will be going out as usual to work on the sites managed by the Green Belt Project, including Fleam Dyke and the Roman Road. Good exercise. Nice people. Interesting places. Two dates so far:

Wed	25th September	Fleam Dyke Mowing in preparation for the arrival of the sheep
Wed	23rd October	Roman Road Mowing botanically important sections

Sun 27th October The Autumn Scrub Clearing Day for the Friends

We shall be clearing scrub from the sides of the Roman Road, extending the area already cleared, where the flowers are making a good comeback. Meet at Worsted Lodge on the A11, at the eastern side of the intersection between the Fulbourn and the Wilbraham fly-overs, near the BP garage. Old clothes, tough shoes and thick gardening gloves. Scrub can be very prickly!

Talks Organised by the Cambridge City Group of the Wildlife Trust These talks are held in the Gilmour Building of Cambridge University Botanic Garden. Please note that the entrance is via the drive beside 47 Bateman Street, **NOT** at the Bateman Street gate of the Botanic Garden. All talks are at 7.30pm. Entry: £1.50 for members of the Wildlife Trust, £2.50 for non-members

Thurs 26th September, "Some of Britain's Rare and Localised Wild Plants"
Illustrated talk by Brian Laney, naturalist and expert on British Native Flora

Thurs 24th October, "Wildlife and the Planning System"
Illustrated talk by David Denman from English Nature on the relationship between wildlife, planning and the law. This sounds dry as dust, but concerns matters such as the protection of Great Crested Newts and Badgers in a development such as Cambourne.

Thurs 28th November, "Organic Farming and Biodiversity"
Illustrated talk by Jason Ball, biodiversity officer at Sheep Drove Organic Farm. The talk will also include a section on the Barn Owl Conservation Network.

There are numerous talks and activities organised by other local groups of the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Peterborough this autumn. Events in the Cambridge area include:

Friday 18th October, Cambridgeshire's Butterflies, illustrated talk by Val Perrin, Butterfly Recorder for Cambridgeshire. Cottenham Village College 7.45pm

Monday 21st October, the Wildlife of the Ouse Washes, illustrated talk by Jonathan Graham of English Nature. 7.30pm at Over Town Hall.

Monday 18th November, Wildlife Friendly Farming, illustrated talk by Roger Buisson about the RSPB farm at Knapwell. 7.30pm at Over Town Hall.

Contacts

Iain Webb
Cambridge Green Belt Project
3b Langford Arch
London Road
Sawston, Cambridge, CB2 4EE

Julia Napier
Secretary, Friends of the Roman
Road and Fleam Dyke
30a Hinton Avenue
Cambridge, CB1 7AS

tel: 01223 712410,

tel: 01223 213152

