

Winter  
Newsletter 2023  
ISSUE 47

Open 10:00am –  
4:00pm weekends and  
Bank Holidays from  
April until October.  
At other times the key  
may be borrowed from  
The Norris Museum or  
One Leisure with a £20  
deposit.

**UPCOMING  
EVENT**  
**SPRING QUIZ**

Friday 14th April  
See back page  
for details



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Holt Island Nature Reserve

Visit our website:  
[www.holtisland.org](http://www.holtisland.org)

The Friends Group  
is a voluntary  
organisation dedicated  
to the promotion and  
protection of Holt Island,  
Wilhorn Meadow and  
the Thicket in St Ives for  
the enjoyment of all.

Registered Charity Number:  
1198894

## CHAIR'S NOTE

As I write this, the frosts have abated, and the river has gone down. There were days when it was quite possible to stand on an icy boardwalk, with water lapping at, and over, the bottom of my wellies. On one particular morning, as the currents across the flooded island abated, flooded areas of the boardwalk were covered in a light film of mud in clear water. Tracks in this mud showed that a heron, a fox and an otter had all used the same length of boardwalk within a short space of time.

Standing on a flooded boardwalk brought home the fact that we need to have a long-term vision of how we ensure that the island remains open for public access along the boardwalk in the years ahead. The Committee is currently assessing a wide range of options to keep the boardwalk in ideal condition in the future, and we will explain these a little more in the next Islander.

Tim Reed, Chair

### WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE REED BED?

In the late 1920s, the commercial use of Holt Island for willows meant that space was at a premium. As a result, nature hardly got a look in. As you can see in the first photo on an image held by the Norris Museum, there was no reedbed at the eastern end of the island. Instead, there was a turning and loading area, with punts often moored up in a little bay.

By the 1960s, with commercial willow growing now a memory, that bay had been colonised by a reedbed mat. The reedbed, a mixture of reeds and sedges, partly on silt, and also over water, was extending into the river. As it has grown, so it has trapped silt from floods, and built up with reed and other river-borne plant and wood debris, and been colonised by willows on the northern margins facing the Museum and Waits.

Whilst the river edge reeds are still doing well in 2023, the main parts of the reedbed have shown signs of suffering, with the wavy plumed flowering stalks of Phragmites being decidedly wispy. The reeds are now also competing with invasive plants such as bindweed, hops and a number of aggressive species that favour a little bit of dryness. This was especially obvious in 2022, as the Great Ouse levels dropped by 25cm in the summer, transforming much of the bed from wet to dry underfoot.



The eastern end of Holt Island showing the bay where the reedbed has grown. Image courtesy of the Norris Museum



The cut slots on the reedbed on Holt Island on 9 January 2023. Photo: David Brooks (X-Copters Aerial Media)

Breeding bird surveys in 2022 showed that warblers and buntings used the best growth areas by the river, with fewer in the drier areas. After consulting the best brains in the RSPB Reserves Department: responsible for developing and managing the reedbeds at Ouse Fen and Lakenheath Reserves, we accepted their

Continued on page 2



### WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE REED BED? ...contd

advice to cut some trial areas within the reed bed. Why? To reinvigorate the growth, clear out all of the old debris and see if the reeds will respond. After almost nothing being done to the area in 100 years, our experimental cuts will help us see if we can manage the area positively for the future. From David Brooks' superb drone photo taken on 9 January 2023, the day after the Ranger and volunteer work party cut two blocks, we can see the stripes of cut and uncut reedbed. Almost all of the debris has already been taken from the cut areas, which are now in striking contrast to the uncut areas. Building on the 2022 baseline work,

we will be monitoring the biodiversity of the whole area over the next two years, comparing the ecology of the cut and uncut areas.

If all goes well, and the cut areas respond positively, we will practice a cutting rotation, allowing biodiversity to thrive, and keeping willows and invasive species under control. We hope to have more of David Brooks' brilliant drone photos to help us understand patterns of change, and allow us to follow the seasons as they unfold.

## WINTRY SCENES



View of the eastern end of the Island with Hemingford meadow behind *Photo: Ian Jackson*

Church View from the boardwalk with the Parish Church spire visible in the background *Photo: Colin Knott*



Another view from the boardwalk; by the river with two cormorants just visible in the large tree

*Photo: Colin Knott*



# COMMON DARTER *Sympetrum striolatum*

Spotted by Ranger Paul in late November.

Named for their habit of darting out from their perch to catch prey (usually flying insects). They will often return to the same perch to eat. Mature males (as in the photo) are red; females and immature males a golden-brown. Both sexes have a distinctive yellow stripe on black legs; distinguishing them from similar darter species. They are 38-43mm in length with a wingspan of around 60mm.

They are common throughout the UK (although less so in Scotland), and can be found around a wide variety of water bodies, as well as away from water.



Photo: Paul Clayton

## HOLT ISLAND PICTURES FROM THE PAST

This rather battered map from the Norris Museum collection shows a single island in 1728 (before the division into two halves created by the swimming pool nearly 200 years later). It is separated from the Parish Church by the backwater, and fronts an open area by The Waits. It was known then as Picket's Holt and Town Dens. Both terms refer to light woodland.

The caption suggests that the island was formally enclosed in 1723 and planted up. This was presumably with willows and it founded the industry that carried on for about 200 years. It is represented today by the two small blocks of pollarded willows grown on the island for demonstration purposes.

Tim Reed



Image courtesy of the Norris Museum

## CHRISTMAS FUNDRAISING DAY

Our Christmas fundraiser last November raised an impressive £644. Thank you to all the Friends who attended! A great selection of cards, gift wrap and other stationery items was available to buy from Liz Hardy of Flamingo Paperie. Heather Wells of Riverport Remedies was also there selling a fantastic-smelling range of soaps handmade with essential oils.

Both Liz and Heather donated a generous percentage of their proceeds from the day to the Friends, and we are most appreciative. Funds were also raised from the sale of Holt Island honey, calendars, Adopt-a-Box and raffle tickets.

With grateful thanks also to Helen and Peter Whatnell for hosting the event.



Sue Limentani with a selection of the raffle prizes Photo: Ian Jackson

# RANGER'S REPORT

Ranger's report December 2022 and January 2023.

Our practical volunteers carried out 5 work parties over this period, equating to 231 hours of work.

The new storage shed (located at the rear of the Holt) is almost finished; with just some guttering, soffit and trims to add.

We have carried out the usual trimming back of encroaching willows from around the boardwalk as well as cutting back the willow from the margins of the reedbed and along a section of the grass path.

All of the osier bed beside The Holt, as well as around half of the second osier bed, has been cut and stored in the old soaking pond.

The whole of the boardwalk was leaf-blown in December, so should probably only need one more session on it before the end of winter, keeping the leaves from being slippery and adding to decay of the walkway.

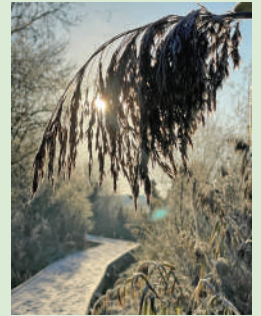
More boardwalk boards have been replaced and our "stock" is now under 30 boards (short ones only).

The Holt storage compartment and interpretation areas are being prepared for our new solar lighting. Almost all materials have been purchased and I am working with the contractor to agree installation dates.

We have tried for the first time in some 30 years to manage the reedbed on the tip of the island by cutting two trial sections and removing the debris to hopefully improve the quality of the reedbed (with thanks to Tim Reed for the research).

As always, thanks to both the committee and the practical volunteers for all of their time and hard work.

Paul Claydon



Common Reed (Phragmites). Photo: Paul Claydon

## NEW STORAGE SPACE!

We thank the volunteers for their work on erecting our new shed over the last year, nicely positioned alongside The Holt and again (we hope) above the flood level. Many factors delayed the work but we now have more valuable space to store bird food and ringing equipment, plus our gazebo, table and chairs, and much, much more! We are grateful for a Magic Little Grant contribution to costs from the People's Postcode Lottery administered by Local Giving.



Photo: HC

## HOLT ISLAND RINGING SUMMARY FOR 2022

Unfortunately there isn't room for the full report in this edition of the Islander, but it can be found on our website (under Sightings and Reports). During the year we caught 27 species and a total of 1232 birds of which 50% were new birds. The report also contains a number of photos including Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Lesser Redpoll and Siskins.

With many thanks to Julian and Sue Limentani for all their bird ringing work throughout the year and for compiling the report.

Also on the website (again under Sightings and Reports) is our bird and wildlife list for 2022. We reached 100 species of birds recorded on or from Holt Island in 2022!

With many thanks to Nigel Sprowell for compiling the list.

Friends of Holt Island Nature Reserve

**Quiz Night**

St Ives Corn Exchange

Friday 14<sup>th</sup> April

7.15 for 8 pm start

QUIZ MASTER ED GOODMAN

Bring your own nibbles but please not alcohol

Bar available

Teams of 6 people • £6 per person

Tickets from St Ives Corn Exchange or online from [ticketsource.co.uk/cexevents](http://ticketsource.co.uk/cexevents)

Tickets available from  
[www.ticketsource.co.uk/cexevents](http://www.ticketsource.co.uk/cexevents) or from  
St Ives Corn Exchange  
01480 496955.

## 2023 CALENDARS

We have a few Friends of Holt Island desk calendars remaining. These are available at half price for £3.50. Please contact Jill Burt ([jillburt@btinternet.com](mailto:jillburt@btinternet.com) or 07796 326931) if you would like one (or more!).

**Chair:** Chair: TIM REED [chair@holtisland.org](mailto:chair@holtisland.org)

**Treasurer:** BASIL BELCHER [treasurer@holtisland.org](mailto:treasurer@holtisland.org) 07704 142990

**Secretary:** HELEN CRIPPS [secretary@holtisland.org](mailto:secretary@holtisland.org)

**Membership Secretary:** JULIAN LIMENTANI [membership@holtisland.org](mailto:membership@holtisland.org) 07802 166722

### Committee Members:

JILL BURT [jillburt@btinternet.com](mailto:jillburt@btinternet.com) 07796 326931

PAUL CLAYDON (HDC Ranger) [paul.claydon@huntingdonshire.gov.uk](mailto:paul.claydon@huntingdonshire.gov.uk) 07810 637545

IAN JACKSON [ian89424@gmail.com](mailto:ian89424@gmail.com) 07836 248360

STEPHEN MOLLER [mollerfam@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:mollerfam@hotmail.co.uk) 07867 685475

NIGEL SPROWELL [nigel.sprowell@btopenworld.com](mailto:nigel.sprowell@btopenworld.com) 07899 908336

JAMES KNIGHT [jj-knight@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:jj-knight@tiscali.co.uk)