



The Islander

Newsletter of the Friends of Holt Island Nature Reserve

CHAIR'S REPORT

Life for all of us has changed in ways we could never have imagined a few weeks ago, and sadly we have not been allowed to open Holt Island to the public so far this year. However, I am happy to tell you that wildlife on the Island and the backwater has continued to flourish, and I hope our contributors to this newsletter will give you a flavour of what has been happening.

Currently all our planned events for this year have been cancelled, but we still hope that we may be able to open later in the season.

Our Annual General Meeting will be held remotely. We will send you details of what will happen and ask you for nominations for the Committee around the middle of June.

Please stay safe, and let's all look forward to when we all get back to some kind of normality, whatever that will be.

A NEW SWAN FAMILY!

Last year our swans gave pleasure to many whilst nesting on The Waits side of the Island, producing a family of 8 cygnets, all of which eventually reached adulthood, a remarkable achievement.



A perfect spot on the backwater! Photo: Tony R

This year it turns out she has found herself a nice secluded spot on the backwater between the Sea-Scouts and Copley Scouts - and has now proudly

presented another batch of 8 cygnets to her admirers at The Waits.

We wish them all well and let us hope they are as successful as last year.

Nigel Sprowell, Friend



Proud mum with a very well-behaved family! Photo: Nigel Sprowell

ST IVES COMMUNITY FAIR 2020

On March the 2nd we attended the now annual Community Fair, held this year at the Burleigh Hill Centre. The theme was 'Combatting Climate Change' and it was an ideal opportunity to find out more about some of the community organisations active in St Ives and what they can offer.

Although the numbers of the general public were small, we still managed to encourage people to visit our stand to find out more about what the Friends do to support Holt Island Nature Reserve and the environment. We even topped up our membership!

Jill Burt



Mayor Daniel Rowe and Amy Frances visiting the Friends of Holt Island Nature Reserve stand. Photo: Jill Burt

Summer Newsletter 2020
ISSUE 38

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.

CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE DUE TO COVID 19 RESTRICTIONS



like us on facebook:
Holt Island Nature Reserve

Visit our website:
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.

ANALYSIS OF A MYSTERY PELLET!

On 7 April Nigel and Muriel Sprowell found a "mystery pellet" on Waits side of the boardwalk just before the ash tree. The pellet was a dark brown colour when fresh, drying to grey. It was cylindrical, tapering at the ends and forming a 'tail' at one end. (Image 1). It weighed 1.4g and measured 40mm long, with a maximum diameter of 16mm.



Image 1 Pellet

The pellet was then dissected and analysed. Following steam sterilisation the pellet was hard to break up as it was so well compacted. Although it was soaked in water it was still difficult to separate the residual remains of the prey items, which were retrieved and catalogued.



Image 2 Dissected Remains

There were only a few bones to be recovered which were grouped and photographed (Image 2). The jaw bone and teeth were of a small mammal and a key was used to identify this as most probably a field vole (*Microtus agrestis*) (Image 3). Tooth pattern is typical and teeth have grooves running down them. The main constituent of the pellet was grey rodent fur. (Confirmed by microscope).



Image 3 Rodent Jaws

There were also chitinous remnants recognised as arthropodic, using a magnifier it became clear these were remnants of an insect, probably a moth.

(Image 4). Chitin is a tough, protective, semitransparent substance and is the principal component of arthropod exoskeletons – an arthropod is an invertebrate (an animal without a backbone) such as an insect or spider.

Also presents were thin fragments of vegetation.

We concluded that the presence of the skeletal remains of a vole, along with insect and vegetable matter in the pellet strongly indicate that this pellet was produced by a kestrel. {ref A}. This is supported by the compacted nature of the pellet. The size and appearance of the pellet is in a range possible for kestrel {ref B}.



Image 4 Insect remains



?moth antenna



Insect (Moth?) Leg

It could reasonably be expected that any owl pellet might contain several small rodent remains. Here we have the pellet of a bird eating a single small rodent and perhaps a medium sized moth which does indicate a kestrel.



Kestrel in flight. Photo: Nigel Sprowell

References:

Ref A: Yalden and Yalden 1985 An experimental investigation of examining kestrel diet by pellet analysis. (Bird Study 32)

Ref B: Davis 1960 Kestrel pellets at a winter roost. Brit. Birds July 1960

S Limentani 16/04/2020

EYES OVER THE FLOODED MEADOW

When our river rises and the Hemingford flood meadow fills, as it is supposed to do, it is fascinating to see the winter birds the new lake attracts. Here are notes of those spotted opposite the Island over the period from November to March as the level rose and fell at least four times this year.

1. The Little Egret is the most reliable regular. Always solo he crouches and probes the margins of the lake as it shrinks. Pure white and elegant he is sometimes missed in the hundreds of gulls also feeding.



2. In contrast, his big brother the Great Egret is less frequent but equally striking and able to wade deeper. Also solitary. The presence of egrets is evidence of global warming (if we need any more!) as they spread north from their Mediterranean range.



3. This year Wigeon, pretty ducks with a yellow Mohican stripe, have formed large flocks widely scattered over the meadow lake in early morning. Constantly on the move they appear fidgety and the first jogger of the day sets them off.



4. There is a local single pair of Egyptian Geese sometime seen on the river. Another bird with interesting head plumage, sunglasses always come to mind!



5. The black bottom of the Gadwall is a giveaway and it has been seen just once this winter in small numbers. In close up the plumage is elegant grey.



6. Tufted Duck in contrast are plain black and white and seen here are often a sign the surrounding lakes are frozen.



7. The male Pintail on the other hand is positively stunning. A long white neck and chestnut head picks him out easily, along with his pin tail of course. Only one pair sighted this year.



8. Last of the ducks, is the one with the oversized bill, the Shoveler. Fascinating to watch, a small flock of seven sieved through the water with back and forth bills, seemingly keen to make the most of their short stay.



9. Now the waders. A wonderful flock of magnificent Black-tailed Godwits graced the meadow just once. They busily probed the soggy grass with impressive bills while moving elegantly up and down on stilted legs. A joy to watch.



10. And then a big flock of the more dumpy Dunlin, more usually a shore bird but welcome in St Ives. A flock turning together in flight flashes dark and then white as the white underwings catch the light. Thrilling!



So, how to see this wonderful array of (mostly) winter visitors spending time with us? There are two viewing points. One is Floods Tavern patio from which you can scan most of the St Ives end of Hemingford Meadow and keep your feet dry! You'll need at least 10x50 binoculars or better still a scope. Or, if you can venture through the Dolphin Hotel passage in wellies you can stand in the flood for your views! Happy spotting.

I am indebted to Nigel Sprowell for the photographs which are taken from a variety of locations.

Committee Member Ian Jackson

ADOPT-A-BOX NEWS!

The boxes all seemed to be very quiet at the end of March, but in April, as the weather warmed up and the caterpillars and insects emerged, the activity increased and thirteen boxes were found to have nests in them.

By early May most of the boxes had adults sitting on eggs except boxes 1, 5 and 10 which had young in them as well as eggs. There seem to be more broods but with smaller brood sizes.



Box 27C (Blue Tits)

We believe there are at least 13 pairs of Blue Tits breeding on the Island which is 1.86 pairs per acre, much higher than the one pair per acre that would be expected.

Other birds nesting on the Island include Blackbird, Dunnock, Robin, Blackcap and Chiffchaff. The Reed and Sedge Warblers are also back including at least one Sedge Warbler on the Waits side of the Island.



Box 10 (Great Tits)

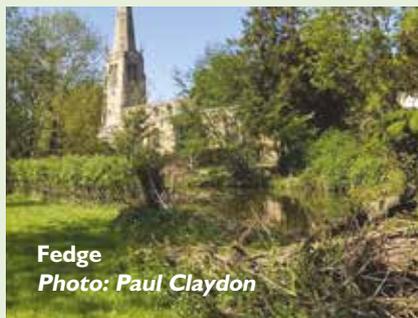
Nigel Sprowell and Julian Limentani

HOLT ISLAND RANGER'S REPORT MAY 2020

Although six work parties were scheduled we were unable to carry them out; in these unprecedented times due to COVID-19 we had to stop all volunteers working on all our sites for both their and staff safety.

Social distancing and sharing tools etc. means that even when lockdown is eased, HDC will have many things to consider and new plans to make. We have a new risk assessment for COVID-19 working, and we are discussing how we might be working when we return. For now, we can have no practical volunteers but thankfully, I am able to continue working on the Island.

On Holt Island I have been mowing, weaving the willow on our fedge and



tunnel and putting down more of our non-slip panels - around 100 so far. I brought over and drilled 100 more

non-slip panels; we have about 200 now in the Holt and around another 100 to come from Hinchingsbrooke Country Park. Fitting them is going well but slow with just me doing them, as well as mowing fortnightly and weaving fedge and tunnel, so there is still plenty to keep me going.

I think that's it for now other than to say the Island looks great so hopefully you can all visit it very soon.

Ranger Paul Claydon



BLUE TITS ON HOLT ISLAND

In the bird ringing report we produce each year the bird that is caught most on Holt Island is the Blue Tit. Over the years 2015 to 2019 - a total of five years - we have caught 1,259 Blue Tits. Of these there were 591 newly ringed Blue Tits, the rest were re-traps. So over one hundred new birds are caught each year.

The numbers being caught are quite significant. Blue Tits favour broad leafed woodland so the Island is a perfect habitat and supports at least 10 pairs in the reserve and many more on the rest of the Island, Barnes Walk and the Thicket. This number of pairs is high as they are normally at a density of about one pair per acre.

Blue Tits are resident birds not moving far from where they hatched, but small numbers move more than 20 km during the winter. We have caught one Blue Tit that had been ringed in Madingley Wood near Cambridge, 16 km away; one that had been ringed at Knapwell, 10 km away and one that was ringed on the Island and re-trapped in Wenden Lofts, Essex 39 km away.

Blue Tits are very adaptable and will feed on a number of different types of food. In the spring it tends to be small caterpillars and insects, in the autumn berries and fruits supplemented with seed and peanuts from bird tables. This diversification has helped them to

be as successful as they are. Their weight averages at 10 gm, varying from 9 to 12 gm. They can lose 1.5 gm overnight in the winter months.

Blue Tits nest in holes, they start breeding in April and if the first brood fails they will start another. They lay 7 – 12 eggs which are incubated for 13 – 15 days from when the last one is laid. On the Island the maximum number of eggs found has been 12 eggs. The young fledge in 18 to 21 days. The maximum number we have had fledge from any one box on the Island is 10 young.

Mortality of the young is very high with 21% dying within a month and their average life span is 2.7 years. The oldest ever recorded Blue Tit lived for 21 years! We started ringing on the Island in 2014 and in 2019 caught one for the second time after five and a half years.

The species is a very successful one, seen in most gardens because it has been able to adapt to different foods at different times of the year.



Male Blue Tit, yellow on head from pollen.

Chair: HELEN WHATNELL chair@holtisland.org

Treasurer: BASIL BELCHER treasurer@holtisland.org 07704 142990

Secretary: HELEN CRIPPS secretary@holtisland.org

Membership Secretary: JULIAN LIMENTANI membership@holtisland.org 07802 166722

Committee Members:

JILL BURT jillburt@btinternet.com 07796 326931

PAUL CLAYDON (HDC Ranger) paul.claydon@huntingdonshire.gov.uk 07810 637545

ALISON GRAY peruvianparrot@gmail.com

IAN JACKSON ianjackson@ntlworld.com 07836 248360

STEPHEN MOLLER mollerfam@hotmail.com 07867 685475

DANIEL ROWE daniel.rowe14@virginmedia.com 07748 157702

NIGEL SPROWELL nigel.sprowell@btopenworld.com 07899 908336