

RECENT EVENTS

Visit to Heygate Farms, Swaffham 11 September

There were rain clouds in the sky as a group of the Society's members assembled at Heygates Farm, just outside Swaffham, but the rain held off. This farm visit was a new venture for the Breckland Society, yet we live in a farming area, and the thought was that members would find it interesting to hear what is behind the operations we see in the fields around us, and what makes a modern commercial farm tick.



Heygates are a big milling and baking group (with one of their mills next to Downham Market station), but their farm at Swaffham is run independently of their other interests. William Gribbon, the energetic farm manager who hosted our visit, gave us a highly articulate account of the crops they grow and the problems of growing them, as well as the conservation work they fit in alongside producing food for the market.

William proved well able to hold his own with the challenging questions that our spunky group of members fired at him, taking even the plainly provocative points with good humour. He spoke of his eleven different potato varieties much as a wine-grower would speak of grape varieties – reverently; and told of his uphill efforts to get Swaffham Waitrose to take more of his truly *local* produce. We are to watch for “Norfolk Peer”. We now understand the system of rotation, not quite as it was when Coke of Norfolk introduced it at Holkham, whereby potatoes are succeeded by pigs (to clear up) and pigs in turn by grass (to clean up and rest the land after pigs).

With the season for lifting potatoes in full swing we were taken in best shooting-party style by trailer to see two complex machines driven in tandem; lifting, cleaning, sorting and boxing the crop all in one operation. From field to supermarket can be done in a day.

Low rainfall in the Brecks means that water for crops is often in short supply and a giant on-farm reservoir, filled by recent rain, is ready for next spring's irrigation. Cropping aside, parts of this farm are managed to encourage wild birds, including the Breckland speciality, the stone-curlew. William explained how dependent this side of the business is on government subsidies, for which the outlook beyond 2012 is uncertain. For now, the birds are doing well. A record-breaking flock of woodlarks has been seen there.

Our warm thanks to Heygate Farms Ltd for allowing us to see behind the scenes and to William Gribbon for leading this event so engagingly.

Richard Carden

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SOCIETY LANDS COVETED AWARD FOR WARRENS PROJECT

The Breckland Society's Warrens Project has been awarded a prestigious award by the Norfolk branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England. The CPRE Norfolk Awards scheme was founded in 1979 to recognise significant achievements in buildings and landscape. It is one of the longest-running awards schemes in the county and to date over 300 projects have received awards.

This is the second time that the Society has been honoured in this way – we landed a similar award in 2007 for the Vernacular Architecture Project. Society secretary Sue Whittle and project manager Anne Mason will receive the latest award on behalf of the Society at a ceremony in Norwich's Assembly House on 11 November.

Attention has been especially focused on the project's findings and their implications for aspects such as the future protection of surviving warren banks.

The project's main conclusions were:

- that the Brecks contain extensive archaeological remains of 20+ Medieval warrens, more than anywhere else in Britain

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Mildenhall Warren Lodge, in Thetford Forest

Although the Warrens Project officially ended on 31 March, it continues to attract accolades and attention from many directions. Anne Mason has given several presentations on its methodology and findings, and the *Eastern Daily Press* carried a double-page article on the project on Sunday 17 October. Particularly rewarding has been the response of English Heritage, who provided the enabling grant, and of the Forestry Commission's East of England Director Jim Lyon, who commented: “Many congratulations on the Warrens Project award, this is great news. The project has helped the Forestry Commission understand and appreciate the importance of these archaeological features”.

WHAT'S ON forthcoming Society events

Friday 10 December 7.00pm

Society Christmas Party at Beachamwell Hall, by kind invitation of Mrs Jane Bonning. Members £12.50, non-members £15, to include welcome drinks, two-course supper, wine and coffee. Numbers are strictly limited, so please book places with Sue Whittle on 01366 328190 asap and **no later than 25 November**.

Thursday 10 February 2011 7.30pm

Visit to Seething Observatory (8 miles south of Norwich) for a guided tour of this fascinating place and, weather permitting, a look at the constellations through telescopes. Members £5, non-members £7.50, to include refreshments. Places must be booked in advance with Sue Whittle.

If you are concerned about driving in the dark, or simply need a lift to a Society event, please contact Sue Whittle, as it may be possible to arrange transport with other members.

- that so much warren evidence has survived on the ground is largely due to Forestry Commission ownership (survival rates on farmland are much less common, owing to ploughing activity)
- for the first time, extensive archival material has been identified and collated for individual warrens and evaluated against fieldwork findings
- the warrens represent a unique resource which should be protected and valued for future generations
- the Breckland warrens are of international significance and deserve to be recognised as such.

It is clear that opportunities exist for greater research into several aspects of Breckland's warrening heritage, such as the international dimension of the rabbit fur trade and the socio-historical aspect of the fur factories. Meanwhile, the warrens project database, complete with detailed information on each warren, is expected to go "live" within the next few weeks. Next month will also see the publication of a leaflet, *Discovering the Warrens of the Brecks*, which highlights the best sites at which to see warren banks and lodges.

The Plowright Medical Centre

Another local project to win a CPRE Norfolk Award is the Plowright Medical Centre in Swaffham.

Designed by Gitte Kjeldsen of Chaplin Farrant architects, this welcoming, modern and environmentally sustainable medical centre is now a landmark building in the Ecotech Park in Swaffham. The building is constructed primarily from natural, renewable materials including glulam timber, timber frame and timber cladding, whilst internally the use of natural ventilation, daylight and natural finishes has created a light, airy and calming space for staff and patients.

The Ploughright Medical Centre in Swaffham



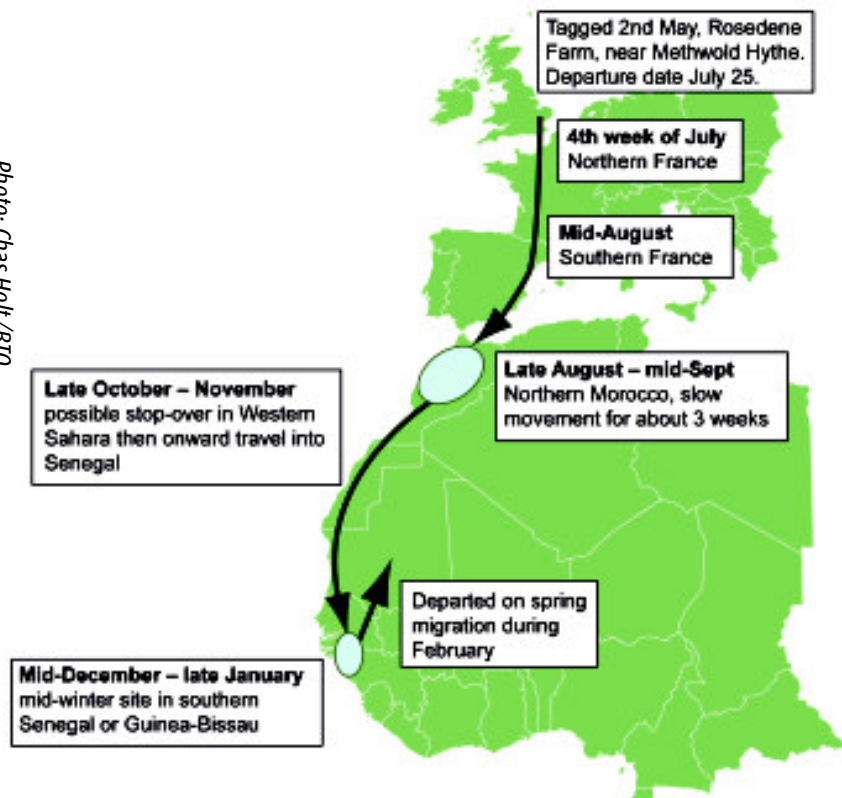
BRECKS NIGHTINGALE ENLIGHTENS SCIENTISTS

The secret winter destination of one of our best-loved songbirds has been discovered, thanks to a tiny piece of cutting-edge technology attached to some Breckland nightingales. In 2009, geo-locators the size of a shirt button were harnessed to the backs of 20 nightingales trapped in East Anglia, including some at Methwold Hythe, on the western edge of the Brecks. The plan was to find out where the birds go when they leave our shores after breeding – whilst it was known that they went to Africa, exactly where was a mystery till now.

Six of the monitored birds made it back to Britain this spring, including one of the Methwold Hythe birds, which was retrapped by scientists from the British Trust for Ornithology just 50 metres from where it was caught



Photo: Chas Holt/BTO

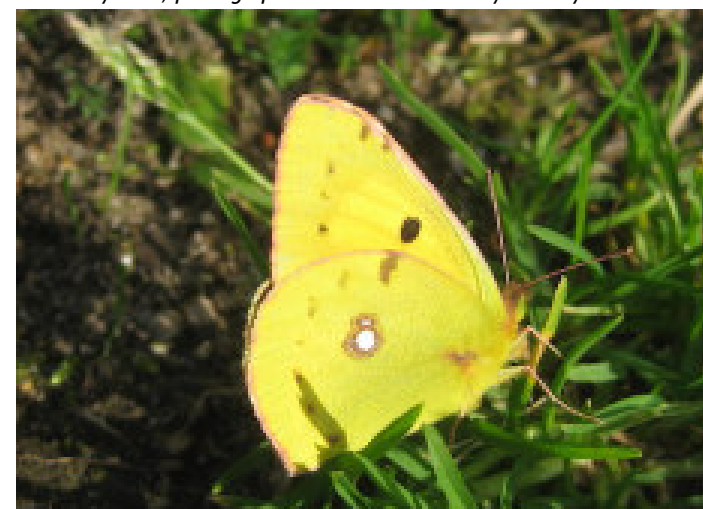


Nightingales are in trouble, both in the Brecks and more widely – Britain has lost 92 per cent of its nightingale population in the last forty years. This is partly due to a decline in managed woodland – they love hazel coppice – and loss of undergrowth to grazing pressure from deer, especially muntjac. Problems in their wintering grounds may be making things worse, but at least we now know where to keep an eye on them! Meanwhile, the BTO has plans to use geo-locators on other birds whose movements remain imperfectly understood, such as swifts and house martins.

LATEST WILDLIFE SIGHTINGS IN THE BRECKS

Autumn is very much in the air, with the recent cold northerly winds bringing a host of winter visitors in numbers that we might not normally expect until nearer Christmas. Redwings and fieldfares have been about in their hundreds, feasting on the hips and haws along hedgerows and even moving into gardens to take advantage of fallen apples. A brambling at the BTO Nunnery in Thetford on 29 September was an early vanguard of larger flocks to come. Also notable here was a peregrine on 15 October, two bearded tits on 17 October and a female otter with four cubs, seen on and off over the past two weeks.

Clouded yellow, photographed on 6 October in Drymere by Sue Pennell



An otter, spotted by Mike Toms recently at the BTO Nunnery in Thetford

Summer is not totally beaten, however, and there are still a few butterflies on the wing. Commas and small tortoiseshells remain in evidence on mild sunny days, but much more exciting was the recent arrival in East Anglia of some clouded yellows, a migratory species from Africa and southern Europe. One was seen and photographed at Drymere on 6 October, and another was spotted at RSPB Lakenheath Fen on 10 October. There have also been a few hummingbird hawkmoths around, and there are even a few of the Brecks' most iconic bird, the stone-curlew, still in the area: eight were present at Cavenham Heath on 17 October.

NATURAL INSPIRATIONS WORKSHOP: SUMMER

Summer may have become a distant memory for most of us, especially now that the days are becoming shorter and the outdoor temperatures are noticeably cooler. However, the Natural Inspirations Summer Workshop held in August at Clermont House once again captured the essence of the season, its importance to our ancestors and its subtle yet enduring influence upon life in the 21st century.

In order to remind us of exactly what nature was doing during the month of August our Workshop began with our customary tour of the grounds at Clermont House with John and James. Spring and early summer had been good for all birdlife and in particular ground-nesting species. Consequently, most species had benefited by producing several broods in order to repopulate following the harsh winter. The annual migration of birds had begun: several members confirmed having already seen swifts preparing to leave the country for warmer climes. Other wildlife, however, was in abundance, particularly damsel- and dragonflies. James added that it had been a particularly good year for butterflies and, as a consequence, next year ought to be good also. The pond at Clermont looked magnificent with its flowering water and marginal plants, and the surrounding wildlife was proof of its value as a habitat.

Indoors, Lucinda emphasised how vital this time of year was to our ancestors as it represented the season for growing crops and managing livestock to produce meat and other provisions, some for the forthcoming winter months. The end of this season was also the conclusion of the hard work associated with the long hot days of summer, reaping the crops grown in the fields. Wheat was a staple of our ancestors' diet and vital for survival during winter months. We sampled this simple diet by eating some harvest loaf baked by Liz, who was unable to attend this workshop. For our ancestors this was a time for celebration, with thanksgiving festivals and ritual sacrifices, to give thanks for the harvest, and to ask the gods and spirits for survival during the long winter months ahead and for a good year to follow. Early Christians adopted the harvest festival, thus helping to ensure its survival into the 21st century.



Once again at tea-break we all enjoyed delicious seasonal fare baked by Sue. We feasted on lemon curd and blueberry loaf cake, raspberry bakewell cake and ginger and chilli caramel biscuits.

The smell of summer rain was noticeable as we resumed our tour of the gardens in the late afternoon sunshine. A variety of seed heads and fruits were already visible in the garden, evidence of the variety of survival techniques harnessed by nature. John provided an informative narrative to our tour and answered the questions posed by workshop attendees keen to learn the secrets of his success. The prominent compost heap provided one clue to the abundance of produce in the garden.

To close the final workshop John recited some seasonal poetry – and sadly the workshop ended. The series of workshops has given us an appreciation of the importance that the seasons still have in our lives – a more subtle impact now than previously, but we nevertheless still react to the subtle changes in daylight, natural colours, wildlife activity, seasonal fruits, vegetables and meats. We too continue to celebrate many ancient seasonal traditions, albeit in different guises. The Natural Inspirations Workshops provided an excellent opportunity for learning and discussion, altogether a fascinating start to understanding more about how nature influenced our ancient customs and traditions and how these continue to be relevant to modern life.

Many thanks to all Breckland Society members who gave their time and energy to facilitate these workshops by providing a suitable location, research, practical demonstrations and seasonal food for us to enjoy.

Delia Cook