

RECENT EVENTS

A History of Thetford: a talk by Oliver Bone at the Ancient House Museum, 12 October

Members gathered at one of the Society's favourite venues, the Ancient House Museum in Thetford, on 12 October for a talk by the museum curator, Oliver Bone. *A History of Thetford* provided Oliver with the opportunity to guide his audience through over 2,000 years of Thetford's intriguing past, including its strategic geographical location and time as part of the territory ruled by Boudica and her Iceni, through its development as the sixth-largest town in Saxon England and then an 11th-century heyday as an influential ecclesiastical centre with several monasteries. A gentle decline followed over the ensuing centuries, a time punctuated by the periodic emergence of seminal figures such as Thomas Paine. Agriculture, including warrening, dominated the town, which during the age of steam was home to the world's largest manufacturer of traction engines (the Burrell Engineering Works). However, hard times hit Thetford in the 1930s, by which time the population was lower than it had been at the time of Domesday and with many of the inhabitants living in poverty. The post-Second World War period saw the arrival of new factories and estates built for relocated Londoners, a development which changed the face of Thetford forever. Their appetites whetted, some of the audience asked if it might be possible to have a guided tour of the town at some point, and we are looking at arranging this for sometime next year!

Wild Norfolk: Plunge into Nature!

The Norfolk Wildlife Trust has organised a series of free events in and around Thetford. These offer the chance to learn about some of Breckland's fascinating wildlife.

Wednesday 7 November, 2-3.30 pm

Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves

Join Simon Harrap and through this illustrated talk discover the mysterious world of orchids.

Venue: BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, IP25 2PE

Details: Free, no need to book.

Society members on a previous field trip at Thompson Common



Picture courtesy of Ancient House Museum.



An early-20th-century postcard extolling the attractions of Thetford.

Wednesday 28 November, 2-3.30pm

Introduction to Stone Curlews in the Brecks

The RSPB will be exploring the secret life of this charismatic bird and looking at what is being done to protect it.

Venue: BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, IP25 2PE

Details: Free, no need to book.

Thursday 29 November, 1-4pm

Practical Conservation Afternoon

Carry out some practical conservation work with the Wardens at NWT Thompson Common.

Venue: NWT Thompson Common

Details: Free, but booking essential. Please call 01603 598333.

Wednesday 5 December, 2-30pm

From Midnight Sun to Norfolk Winter

Which birds travel all the way to Norfolk to spend the winter? Why do they travel such distances? These are just two of the questions answered on this talk on winter migration.

Venue: BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, IP25 2PE

Details: Free, no need to book.

If you would like to contribute to the Breckland Society Newsletter, please contact the Editor by email at lizdittner@tiscali.co.uk or tel 01366 727813

THE SUMMER THAT NEVER WAS...

James Parry reflects on the impact on wildlife and the countryside of one of the wettest and coolest summers for decades.

"One swallow doesn't make a summer" runs the old adage, and any swallow that washed up – no pun intended – on English shores this summer could have been forgiven for thinking that it had come to the wrong place at the wrong time. Incessant wind and rain, together with maximum daily temperatures in June and July of only 15 degrees C or so, made for a grim time for insect-eating birds like swallows. Along with their aerial peers, swifts and house martins, swallows struggled to find enough to eat as insect numbers were low, inhibited by the cool conditions and high levels of rainfall. As a result, swallows and swifts had their worst breeding season for several years, with many pairs failing to breed at all and leaving early for their return trip to sub-Saharan Africa.



A reed warbler busy attempting to satisfy its oversized foster chick!

The situation was little better for non-aerial insectivorous birds like warblers. Especially vulnerable were reed warblers, which build their hammock-like nests halfway up reed stems and often over water. It does not take much imagination to realise how vulnerable such nests are to high winds, and many warbler nests, eggs and young were destroyed by the weather this summer. Undeterred, many pairs rebuilt and tried again, and thankfully the rather more benign conditions in August gave them a last chance to bring off a clutch. As a result, there were still young reed warblers in the nest well into September, a time when they would normally be fattening up and preparing to migrate south. At Cranwich, where several hundred reed warblers nest, there was the welcome news that at least three

young cuckoos fledged from warbler nests – the reed warbler is a favourite host species.

The combination of cloud, wind and rain spells bad news for butterflies, and this summer was spectacularly poor for many
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WHAT'S ON

forthcoming Society events

www.brecsoc.org.uk/news-and-events

Friday 14 December 7.00 for 7.30pm

Society Christmas Celebration at The Crown Inn at Mundford. A three-course festive dinner with mince pies and a glass of wine. Members £20, non-members £23. Booking essential by 1 December. Please see enclosed menu and booking form.

Friday 8 February 2013, 7.00pm

Roman Roads in the Landscape: a talk by archaeologist James Albone. Barnham Village Hall. Directions: Access is off the A134 Thetford-Bury road. Coming from Thetford, go straight on at the traffic lights, ignoring the signed turning to Barnham on the left. Then take the next left, also signed Barnham, and the Village Hall is the first building on your right.

Members £4, non-members £7, to include refreshments.

Friday 15 March, 7.00pm

Hearth, Heath and Howe: magic and witchcraft in Breckland. A talk by Imogen Ashwin. Swaffham Community Centre.

Members £4, non-members £7, to include refreshments.

If you are concerned about driving in the dark, or simply need a lift to a Society event, please contact Sue Pennell, as it may be possible to arrange transport with other members. In particular, if there are any members who live near Necton and would be willing to give a member there a lift to events, please contact Sue Pennell.

If you need any further information about events, please contact Delia Cook on 01842 820663.

species. Only the early emergers – such as orange tip, brimstone and the two Brecks specialities, dingy and grizzled skippers – managed to enjoy decent flight seasons, and even then their eggs and larvae may well have been washed away by the bad weather in June and July. Butterflies that are normally on the wing at that time – such as the common blue and brown argus – were generally very scarce.

Exactly how bad or not this summer was will only become clear next spring, when we see how many butterflies emerge and when we can start counting the number of returning bird migrants. With birds, even that may not be a truly accurate barometer, as we now know that overwintering migrants in Africa are facing problems there too, especially in terms of habitat degradation due to overgrazing.

However, the wet conditions were not bad for all wildlife. Amphibians have had a bumper year, and it appears that grass snakes, too, have been more common than usual. Some were still active until mid-October, although slowing down as they coasted gently into hibernation. Meanwhile, the autumn brought spectacular displays of wildflowers, boosted by all that rain. Sites such as Foulde Common were ablaze with devil's bit scabious and clustered bell-flower, still blooming well into October. As we go to press, autumn tree colours are beginning to sparkle and all we need is a bit of frost to really set them off. The northerly winds are also bringing in the first winter birds, with over 1,000 redwings seen at Foulde on 22 October and pinkfooted geese – unusual so far inland – heard over Oxborough the day after. A taste of things to come!



A beautiful grass snake. Mature adults can reach up to four feet in length.

A NEW PROJECT TO MONITOR ARCHAEOLOGY IN THETFORD FOREST

Thetford Forest contains a large number of archaeological sites, including burial mounds, deserted settlements, rabbit warrens, historic buildings, flint mines and World War Two military remains. Many of the features survive as earthworks, with others known from below-ground remains and surface artefact scatters. A project has recently been launched to involve volunteers in monitoring the condition of these sites, with Society members participating in a two-day workshop last month.

On the first day, representatives from the Forestry Commission, Suffolk County Council, English Heritage and Norfolk County Council told of the large variety and age of archaeological sites in Thetford Forest, their national and international importance, and how they are protected during forestry operations.

All scheduled and other sites of archaeological note on private and public land throughout Norfolk and Suffolk are subject to regular inspections to ensure they are maintained in as good condition as possible. However, visits may occur only twice in a decade and therefore volunteer help is required to assist the professionals on a regular and systematic basis. Volunteers will be trained how to monitor and record sites with public access in Thetford Forest and were assured that professional advice would be always available. This accurate and up-to-date information will help Norfolk County Council's Historic Environment Service, Suffolk County

Surveying Blood Hill tumulus



Breckland Society members at the St Helen's practice site, Santon Downham, completing monitoring forms.

Council's Archaeological Service and English Heritage to collate condition information in Historic Environment Records and between site management within and outside Thetford Forest.

A second day took members to Santon Downham to hone their skills. The group visited a deserted medieval village, a medieval moot and church, a Neolithic burial mound and the site of a Viking grave. Sites were surveyed, forms completed and professionals listened to intently before volunteers departed, eager to begin their 'condition monitoring monuments' careers.

Further details may be found at:
www.norfolk.gov.uk/condition-monitoring

THE BRECKS: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

County councillors, parish council chairmen, representatives of organisations such as Anglia Water and the NFU, as well as from voluntary groups – including the Society's chairman, James Parry – recently joined a morning's tour of the Brecks at the invitation of Ian Monson, chairman of Norfolk County Council. The objective was to encourage greater networking among Brecks stakeholders and flag up some of the key issues facing the area in terms of conservation and tourism. The tour, which was supported by the Brecks Partnership, visited three sites: Grimes Graves, Cranwich Camp and Lynford Water. Managed by English Heritage, Grimes Graves is one of the most important archaeological sites in the East of England. As Society members who took part in the test-pit surveys will be aware, the flint diggings there cover a greater extent than was previously understood and the full potential of the site, for historians and casual visitors alike, is only now unfolding. Cranwich Camp, once under military occupation and then subsequently partly covered in forestry, is now a key site for scarce plants and invertebrates. Tim Pankhurst from Plantlife International explained to the group the importance of maintaining bare and open areas of soil, on which Breckland floral specialities can thrive. The final site visit was to Lynford Water, owned by the Forestry Commission and potentially of great value as a recreational site. Closing the morning's visits, Ian Monson said, "This is a very special area and it is important that we all work together to ensure that as many people as possible can come and enjoy what it has to offer without destroying those very qualities."



photo by Sue Pennell

The prolific pink is found only in the Brecks, but requires very special conditions in which to thrive



NEWS FROM CPRE

West Norfolk District annual lunch with guest speaker Nicholas Crane – Friday 16 November, 12.30pm.

Travel writer, *Coast* presenter and CPRE Vice-President Nicholas Crane will be guest speaker at the West Norfolk District Annual Lunch at the Knights Hill Hotel, King's Lynn. Ticketing arrangements to be posted in the October's bulletin.

CPRE Norfolk Awards Ceremony – Wednesday 21 November, 7pm for 7.30pm.

Hear about this year's award-winning landscape, education, restoration and conversion projects which enhance the Norfolk countryside. This is always a positive and heartening event, showcasing the work of individuals and groups who really do make a difference to our beautiful county. Tickets from Rosemary Bryan on 01553 760166.

Spring in Venice: A Celebration of Music Inspired by La Serenissima – Sunday 3 March 2013, Holkham Hall, 3-5pm.

Be transported to Venice with a stunning concert at Holkham Hall next spring and help raise vital funds for CPRE Norfolk in the process. Tenor Andrés Hernández-Salazar, soprano Jayne May-Sysum and pianist Lawrence Tao will present a programme including music by Vivaldi, Rossini and songs in Venetian dialect. This event is hosted by kind permission of Lord and Lady Coke. Tickets will cost £20 for CPRE members or £22.50 for non-members and will include a glass of wine. However, we shall be offering early-bird tickets for this event at £17.50 for members or £20 for non-members – this offer will apply only until 1 December. Details from Katy Jones on 01603 761660

A darker future for Norfolk's skies

CPRE Norfolk's campaign to protect dark skies and dark rural landscapes from light pollution has received a boost following the successful efforts of one of our most tenacious and committed campaigners, David Hook. For almost 10 years he has worked with and advised Norfolk County Council on the specification for street-lighting across the county. NCC has adopted a policy of using 'full cut off flat glass streetlights' (the optimum kind for reducing light pollution) in rural dark landscapes. CPRE has also actively supported NCC with their introduction of part night lighting and dimming technology. David's campaigning is having a national impact too; following a recent talk he gave at De Montfort University, Leicester, David was contacted by Stuart Beale of the Highways Agency, the organisation responsible for lighting on trunk roads and motorways. Mr Beale is keen that the HA adopt best practice with regard to their rural street lights, in order to minimise light pollution, and he has asked David's opinion as to the best lamp types and column heights to use in order to restrict light spill in the countryside.

So that members do not miss any of our events or changes to our programme, and to ensure that the Society records are up to date, please would you let the Secretary know your contact details. Just email her on suemar@f2s.com or write to her at 16 All Saints Way, Beachamwell, Swaffham, PE37 8BU.