Welcome to our first Great Fen Local Group newsletter!

After a very well attended meeting at the Ramsey Heights classroom in September this year we were able to form a committee for the Great Fen Local Group on 6th October 2011. It is very gratifying to have eight enthusiastic members bringing to the committee a wide variety of experiences.

We are continuing the midweek rambles programme in the new year and hope to find space for some evening and weekend walks. Some of the walks have themes, such as Butterflies and Bluebells.

The talks programme is starting in March, with the mixture of wildlife and heritage subjects that proved so popular in 2011.

For the more robust of us, on-site volunteering is continuing in the support of Jon and Alistair on various jobs around the Fen.

This year brings the Wildlife Trust centenary celebrations and the Local Group will be supporting these festivities. All in all, 2012 promises to be very interesting and full of a variety of activities.

Last but not least the committee would like to thank all the staff at the Wildlife Trust Countryside Centre at Ramsey Heights, particularly Louise and Mandy, for their help in getting this local group underway and for their continuing support as we find our feet.

Adrian Kempster, Chairman

You can read more about the committee and its members on pages 3-4.

Another waxwing winter?

What to look out for in the coming months

Despite winter’s often cold, steel-grey skies, biting winds and shorter days, our countryside offers plenty of opportunities to get out and about and observe birds and mammals in their ceaseless struggles for survival.

I have a greater awareness of this on late afternoon strolls when dusk is falling and optical aids improve vision. It is then that many creatures make for a secure overnight roost.

Small flocks of starlings merge gradually with others as they fly miles towards their established roosts and, on reaching them, perform spectacular aerial displays before plummeting to earth as if sucked down by some gigantic Dyson. I often wonder what the purpose of these mesmerizing performances is – are they assembling and wheeling through the darkening skies to give newly-arriving flocks a marker, or is it merely a communal expression of their gregarious nature? We’ll probably never know, but who cares? The synchronized somersaults are riveting to watch.

Pheasants making for roost are another fascinating sight. I have observed individual birds stalking stealthily to a convenient low tree and gradually climb to a branch beyond the reach of a predator. They don’t seem to require overnight company, unlike the greenfinches that roost nightly in Ramsey TC cemetery.

Good birds to observe until winter departs are marsh and hen harriers, barn, short eared, and little owls hunting in broad daylight, and occasional peregrines and merlins. All of these have their own hunting methods. If we get a repeat of the last two winters, with landscape and watercourses freezing over, snipe, woodcock and even jack snipe should be obvious and – who knows? – we might even have another waxwing winter.

Waxwings are stunning birds, quite [cont]
indifferent to legions of approaching twitchers – unlike me – I’d run a mile. As work on the Great Fen progresses, more and more habitat suitable for waders, geese, ducks and swans will be created. Add to these bitterns, bearded tits, cranes and heaven knows what else, and the Great Fen will become a reserve which is brimming with biodiversity.

Martin Lovell

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**Winter Wetland Birds**

**Talk and walk, held on 27th November**

A sizeable group of nature lovers was treated to a thoroughly enjoyable morning, with a talk at the Countryside Centre and a stroll around Woodwalton Fen.

Our speaker was Jon Smith, Great Fen Restoration Officer. With his customary enthusiasm Jon gave a very helpful illustrated guide to identifying many wintering wetland birds, most of which can already be found in the area – swans, ducks, waders, owls, raptors and a few passerines. Armed with knowledge about their features and behaviour, we then made our way onto the Fen.

Under a bright, breezy sky we were given an insight into the future through views across Middle and Darlow’s Farms, where the gradual transformation of farmland into a place of national and international importance for wetland birds is already underway.

Unfortunately for it, one of its wings was being pinioned by a stoat. Squealing like a piglet, the water rail fought bravely until human intervention enabled it to make a successful bid for freedom. It might be argued that the balance of nature was compromised by denying the stoat its meal, but I reckon the emotions that separate us from most other life-forms are qualities worth having.

Our thanks go to Jon for an entertaining morning.

Martin Lovell

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**Bringing a landscape back to life**

The Great Fen Local Group occupies the unusual position of being attached to a restoration project. This means that whilst looking ahead to more varied wildlife in the Fen, we are also interested in the history which has been ploughed and furrowed into this special piece of land. The local group committee would therefore not be complete without a history and heritage representative. We are lucky to have Eilish Storey to provide the vital link between the wildlife and the history groups. In the article below she gives us a glimpse into the grassroots history that is being recorded right now in the Great Fen locality.

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**Great Fen Local History Group**

This group is a partnership between Great Fen staff and volunteers, and Ramsey Rural Museum. The aim is to gather together an archive of local history relating to the Great Fen area. The group has been involved in assembling Memory Boxes to use in visits to day centres and local groups; interviewing people who have lived and worked in the area and compiling booklets and CDs of local memories.

An important project this year has been the production of a film with young people from Abbey College re-enacting memories: a wonderful opportunity to work across the generations. Sound-bites and information about all these will be available on the new website. Although not directly related to wildlife, this work helps to bring the landscape to life and is a key aspect of interpreting the long term vision of the Great Fen and engaging a broad spectrum of the population now and in the future. New members are always welcome.

Eilish Storey
Introducing your Great Fen Local Group committee

We are pleased to report that the committee is running smoothly on all cylinders and we are confident that the year ahead will be memorable for the talks, walks and events we have organised.

You may be able to help us by manning or womanning a stand to receive visitors at the centenary celebrations, or distributing posters and leaflets, preparing the Countryside Centre for talks or serving refreshments. Any assistance you can give will be greatly appreciated.

Chairman Adrian’s walks have already raised over £300 in donations. As we consider our fundraising for 2012, we would like to hear your thoughts on how we could spend the money we raise.

In the interests of transparency and in the hopes that you may recognise and approach them with your ideas at walks and talks, the committee have been persuaded to introduce themselves......

Committee chairman: Adrian Kempster

Before I retired I worked as an Industrial Chemist. Retirement has given me time to get involved in a number of local groups. I have been running the midweek rambles for the Great Fen Local Group for some time now, and some of the rammers among our readers may know that I am the Footpath Officer for Huntingdon Ramblers Association and I serve on the area committee for that group.

Among my other local commitments are: serving on the committee of the Rainbow surgery patients group in Ramsey, fund-raising for Macmillan Cancer support, and volunteer driving for Ramsey and Warboys district voluntary services.

Treasurer: Martin Lovell

My mother once told me that I took an interest in birds when I was still recumbent in a pram. I have now been an amateur ornithologist for more than 50 years – never a twitcher chasing reported rarities, but one to observe.

In the course of my career I joined several societies including the BTO and RSPB. During that time I carried out survey work and recording and, in Kent, as a 10km steward, I monitored various species such as nightingales, reed buntings, corn buntings, yellowhammers and barn owls. I was among the first to conduct BTO Breeding Birds Surveys and Winter Mammal Surveys. On moving to Wales, I concentrated on birds of upland moor and forest – stonechats, whinchats, nightjars, redstarts and pied flycatchers, grasshopper warblers during the breeding season and golden plovers and roosting starlings in winter.

With the ageing process one can steadily lose the hearing of birds whose calls employ the upper range of notes, so I now rely even more on observation. Before this occurred, however, I became fascinated with moth recording. I cannot claim to have anything approaching a profound knowledge of moths, but their sheer diversity, beauty, and the fact that they fly in every month of the year, makes them an absorbing pastime.

For the Wildlife Trust centenary celebrations in 2012, I hope to focus on Woodwalton Fen, where Charles Rothschild used the Bungalow while recording lepidoptera at a time when they were common. The knowledge that I shall, in my small way, be repeating his efforts 100 years later, makes this an exciting prospect.

I should like to form a small group to join me on moth light-trapping sessions on Woodwalton Fen and the Countryside Centre reserve. Sessions usually run until midnight or later. If anyone is interested in joining me, please let me know.

Secretary: Andrew Cuthbert

Having had a great interest in nature and wildlife as a boy, I was lucky enough to study Plant Biology at University and eventually gain an M.Sc. in Plant Pathology. Not that I use those qualifications as a volunteer on the Great Fen - I’m usually to be seen enjoying myself with a spade or a set of loppers!

I’ve always retained a keen interest in wildlife and the environment and, following a guided open day visit to Woodwalton Fen, I became aware of the work on the Great Fen and immediately wanted to become involved. I started volunteering in December 2010 and now regularly attend group volunteer parties as well as [cont]
volunteering individually on a weekly basis at the Ramsey Heights Countryside Centre.

I thoroughly enjoy volunteering on the Fen; meeting lovely people, keeping fit and getting out in the fresh air. As Secretary of the Local Group I’m able to help raise awareness of the project and help fund-raise for the Wildlife Trust. All very rewarding and helpful for the environment, wildlife and the local community too!

\[Events secretary: Nigel Green\]

I moved from London to Holme ten years ago when I met and married Teresa. I obtained a degree in Environmental Sciences when it was a much less topical subject and somehow this led to me working as an accountant in the public and charity sectors.

However, I still have an interest in the environment, be it the earth, atmosphere or water, and human interaction with it.

On the Great Fen, I am an outdoor volunteer and I help to organise the Local Group talks. I am looking forward to seeing the Great Fen evolve and I am keen to promote a fuller appreciation of what the Great Fen is about and what it has to offer.

\[Fund-raising secretaries: Clare Dean and Vanessa Bennett\]

\[Clare Dean\]

I have lived in the Great Fen area for 25 years and have been a regular visitor to Woodwalton Fen and Holme Fen. Wildlife and the environment are very important to me and give me great pleasure as I love to be walking and bird-watching in the countryside. I have previously been involved with the Huntingdon Local Group and I am a regular at the local RSPB meeting.

My first volunteering for the Great Fen was as a Watch Leader. Watch is the wildlife group for 8-12 year olds and we meet on the third Saturday of each month at the Ramsey Heights Countryside Centre. We run a varied programme with many outdoor and indoor wildlife associated activities in all weathers! This group started in March 2008 and through this contact with the Great Fen staff I soon volunteered for the work parties. These are now held on alternate Fridays and I am always very disappointed if I have to miss a session. The work is very varied, including willow planting, path clearing and reed burning - to name a few regular tasks. The rewards from these sessions don’t just benefit the Great Fen: it is a good way to make new friends and to keep fit!

Having already attended the monthly meetings of the Great Fen Local Group I decided to join the committee in order to help in the running of the group. I believe these groups need support to run a full programme of events and to raise money. I am looking forward to many more Great Fen experiences.

\[Vanessa Bennett\]

I joined the Great Fen Local Group after having spent the last six months volunteering for the Great Fen work party, which meets on alternate Friday mornings. I receive great pleasure from not only knowing that my small contribution is benefiting the local wildlife, but also from being outside in the great outdoors, appreciating the fresh air, getting exercise and enjoying the company of like-minded people. I also help out at the Watch group and regularly attend the activities that are held for families at Ramsey Heights with my children, as well as enjoying the monthly talks held there.

I grew up in the Fens and have always been inspired by the countryside and its wildlife, although I tend to get my kicks from walking through the trees, as opposed to climbing them, these days. I love the diversity of the fenland wildlife and my family and I never cease to be in awe of the beautiful barn owls that we frequently see when driving alongside Ramsey Forty Foot drain. I feel we are so lucky to have such a vast area of countryside to explore just on our doorstep and I feel really excited about being able to be involved in the Great Fen project.

\[Local History Group rep: Eilish Storey\]

I work part-time for Cambridgeshire County Council as a tutor of Adults with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities.

My involvement with the Great Fen began in 2009 when I [cont]
answered an appeal for people to work on a tactile map that would enable visually impaired people to engage with the Great Fen. This is an ongoing project with regular “stitch ins” at the Countryside Centre at Ramsey Heights. I am also involved in the Local History Group and have had the pleasure of interviewing a wide range of people who have lived, worked and played in the Great Fen area.

Publicity secretary: Cindy Grant

In the house I grew up in, Richard Mabey’s book, Food for Free, was consulted almost weekly after Sunday walks. Along with some other favourites, it was checked and double checked again and again for whatever we had collected and the flowers we had seen along the way. Dinner was sometimes a bit experimental – including the no-longer-recommended, but delicious, comfrey fritters. The ‘lawyers wig’ fungi were for the adults only, though, in case mum’s identification skills were lacking – she said. One year we found and ate a giant puffball which was bigger than a football.

I promise that I won’t eat everything I find in the Great Fen - I actually grow a lot of my own food these days. Having enjoyed ten years teaching History, I am as drawn to the heritage side of the Great Fen as I am to the wildlife. I now work for the national education team of a well-known animal charity.

Local Group Events

Walks

Unless stated otherwise, all walks start at 10am, suggested donation £2.50, booking advisable

18th Jan - Monks Wood, 4 miles, meet at layby on south side of wood, Grid ref. TL225 199792

15th Feb – Woodwalton Fen, 5 miles, meet at Jackson’s Bridge, Grid ref. TL227 235849

14th Mar – Aversley Wood, 5 miles, meet at Judith’s Lane car park, Sawtry, Grid ref. TL227 170829

25th and 26th April – Bluebells & Orchids, 5 miles Lady’s Wood & Upwood Meadows, meet Cross Keys Pub, Upwood, Grid ref. TL227 259828

26th May - Centenary walk, Woodwalton Fen NR, 5 miles, meet Jacksons Bridge, Grid ref. TL 227 235849

June (date tbc) - Black Hairstreak butterfly, Brampton Wood, 2-3 miles, meet Brampton Wood, Grid ref. TL225 186698

13th June - Castor Hanglands, 5 miles, meet car park by Southey Wood, Grid ref.TF227 110023

11th July – Woodwalton Fen NR, Church End, Upwood, 10 miles & pub lunch, meet Jackson’s Bridge, Grid ref. TL227 235849, finish 3.30pm

25th July – Woodwalton NR & Darlows Farm, Evening walk 7pm, 5 miles, meet Jackson’s Bridge, Grid ref. TL227 235849, finish 9.30pm

Talks

Unless stated otherwise, talks are held at Ramsey Heights Countryside Centre, 7.30pm, suggested donation £5, concession £3.50, booking advisable

2nd March – Flora of the Great Fen, Peter Stroh

13th April – Rare moths and butterflies of East Anglia, Sharon Hearle

11th May – The history and future of Woodwalton Fen; the first Rothschild reserve. A talk by Alan Bowley as part of the Wildlife Trust Centenary celebrations

1st June – Talk on art and the Great Fen (title tbc), Carry Ackroyd (venue tbc - in conjunction with Ramsey Arts Festival)

6th July – A Bioblitz-related talk, details to follow

Main contacts

Walks – Adrian Kempster 01487 815994
Talks – Can be booked through the Great Fen Team: 01487 710420 or info@greatfen.org.uk
General enquiries about the Great Fen Local Group: greatfenlocal@gmail.com

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