

BERGH APTON CONSERVATION TRUST - AGM, 26 September 2014

Chairman's Annual Report

In comparison with more momentous recent years, the last year has been a year of quiet consolidation. Much of our effort has focused on clearing-up Valley Marsh after the trauma of last year's cricket-bat willow extraction, mainly by filling ruts, and burning residual brash and top wood. The vegetation has remarkably recovered well, with a diverse and colourful display this summer. The site has already benefitted from the improved light regime and reduced transpiration of water. However, all this may belie a longer-term problem, as because of the deep ruts, we are no longer able to use our power-scythe over large areas of marsh, which consequently have not been cut. We are currently considering the use of a tracked digger to grade the surface of the most rutted areas and clear the ditches; another possibility is the introduction of grazing animals to replace cutting, if we could overcome the animal husbandry and welfare challenges. The warm, wet winter has probably encouraged the dense cover of duckweed on the big pond during summer and the unpleasant aromas of decomposition noticed before Christmas; this is another long-term problem to be grappled with.

In January, replacement willows were planted, in accordance technically with J.S. Wright's felling licence, in a dense shelter belt along the northern edge of the marsh, where they should have little impact on its hydrology or vegetation. These looked like unprepossessing pointed sticks at the time but rapidly burgeoned into growth in the spring. We took the opportunity of planting a cutting of a black poplar from the village at the same time.

It has been a good year for public engagement. We were well represented again at 'Wild about Norfolk' on 12 October 2013. Work days have been augmented by volunteer groups and some not quite so voluntary but good-natured community service. There have been repeated visits from various combinations of Rainbows, Brownies, Guides, Beavers, Cubs and Scouts. In the summer we hosted them for an afternoon, when activities included pond-dipping from our new platform; last week, they came on three consecutive evenings, enthusiastically pulling sycamore seedlings and raking-up cut vegetation. We are grateful particularly to Jacquie Ratcliffe and Shirley Rimmer for organising and managing these events. Plans for next year include collaboration with South Yare Wildlife Group to present educational events for local schools that would be hosted on our reserve.

Another collaboration with SYWG was manifested as a joint bid to buy over 3 acres of orchid-rich wet meadow in Hellington, which was already designated as a County Wildlife Site. Sadly, this was thwarted by the greater financial muscle of a local land owner.

The autumn fungus foray on 20 October 2013, ably led this year by Alex Prendergast, was as usual our best attended field event, attracting members of SYWG and other local people. The traditional 'do-it-yourself' Christmas party was held Flint Cottage on 21 December and proved as convivial as ever. The similarly traditional midsummer barbeque and bonfire on the 'millennium pageant' field was held on 21 June, courtesy of Christopher and Liz Meynell. Our 'Breakfast with the Moths', with Judy and John Geeson, on 29 June 2014 hit a magical window in otherwise rainy and wet weather to reveal a beautiful gallimaufry of moths. Bob Kerry led two further, productive hedge survey evenings on 6 June and 17 July.

Following on from the second of these, the annual outing to a site of conservation interest was to Peewit Farm, Briston, near Melton Constable, on 20 July; here we were taken on a farm walk by

Herbert Kittle, who was the winner of the Norfolk FWAG Conservation Prize, and who showed just how wonderfully colourful and biodiverse a sensitively managed farm can be. We thank Herbert for his hospitality and Shirley Rimmer for organizing the event. Another innovation, on 14 September was a 'Reptile Ramble' on our own reserve. Sheets of roofing felt, distributed two weeks earlier as refuges, yielded slow worms and newts when they were inspected with the help of Christian Whiting, who entertained the group with a wealth of information on 'herps'.

The trustees met formally four times during the year: 7 November 2013, and 18 February, 6 June and 17 July 2014. At the first meeting, Tony Davy, Stephanie Crome and Bob Kerry were re-elected chairman, secretary and treasurer, respectively.