



Wild About Beds

Autumn 2012

Fluttering by in the Dordogne

by John Adams

During a trip to the Dordogne I was busy taking in all the sights and sounds – an Osprey diving for fish over the lake and a early Cuckoo calling when my attention was instantly switched onto a large butterfly.

To give you the background, I was in a large stone courtyard with 5 metre walls covered with ivy. A hillside stream fed into the courtyard via a stone pond containing numerous marbled newts and emerging dragonflies. Focusing on the butterfly, which initially looked like a White Admiral, I made notes of its markings and flight behaviour which I was able to compare with White Admiral flying nearby. This large butterfly glided effortlessly from one spot to another landing with open wings. At this point I decided to dive into the house for my camera. Of course when I got back the butterfly had vanished. Another hour or so later no sign.

That evening I consulted my books. Not White Admiral or Purple Emperor or Common Glider. A male Hungarian Glider *Neptis rivularis*!!

When I got home I mentioned to my son my Hungarian Glider sighting, where upon he took his mobile phone out of his pocket and called up Google: within seconds I had all the information on screen including range.

My sighting however was several hundred kilometres to the west of the 'home' range.

Some Glider! Some Hungarian!!



The Hungarian Glider *Neptis rivularis* occurs in central Europe and prefers forested landscapes. Photo by grialbasturi

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Wild About Beds is the newsletter of:



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Issue 164 - September 2012

The BNHS

The BNHS was formed in 1946, its main function to record the fauna and flora of the county. It has over twenty active Recorders who cover many branches of natural history study and whose annual reports are published in the *Bedfordshire Naturalist* journal.

Members receive a quarterly newsletter, *Wild About Beds*, and programmes of meetings. These meetings include field meetings to Bedfordshire sites and occasionally farther afield. During the winter months, there are illustrated lectures normally held in Elstow, Haynes, Toddington and Maulden.

The Society depends on annual subscriptions which are devoted to its working, as all offices are honorary. Membership is open to anyone, whether resident in the county or not. If you would like to join the Society, please contact **Mary Sheridan**, Honorary Membership Secretary, 28 Chestnut Hill, Linslade, Leighton Buzzard, LU7 2TR. Tel: 01525 378245, www.bnhs.org.uk.

BedsLife

BedsLife - Bedfordshire & Luton Biodiversity Partnership is a consortium of government and non-governmental agencies dedicated to promoting the maintenance and enhancement of Bedfordshire's biodiversity. The Partnership oversees the implementation and monitoring of the Bedfordshire and Luton Biodiversity Action Plan, which can be found online at www.bedsbionet.org.uk.

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Your comments/notes on anything that you have observed in the field, on the road or in a past *Wild About Beds* issue are welcome/essential for continuity. Please do send articles to me either as an attachment via email or through the post. Pictures are always welcome; material required by **15 December 2012** please.

Thank you in anticipation.

The next *Wild About Beds* will be published in **December 2012**. Please note that any views are independent of the Bedfordshire Natural History Society

Wild About Beds online

As most of you will probably know you now have the option of viewing *Wild about Beds*, programmes etc, electronically via the BNHS website www.bnhs.org.uk instead of receiving paper copies. Quite a few members have already chosen to do this. In these times of increasing postage costs we are hoping that even more members might consider this option; not only is it 'greener' but it does help to keep our costs down a little. Each edition of *Wild about Beds* will give an approximate indication of when the following issue will be due and a message will appear on the BNHS News Group when it is available on the website.

For those of you who are also members of The Bedfordshire Bird Club you can of course opt to view *The Hobby* electronically via the Bird Club website www.bedsbirdclub.org.uk.

Please let me know by e-mail, post or telephone if you would be happy to view either or both of these newsletters on the respective websites instead of receiving paper copies. I look forward to hearing from you.

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A Quarry in a Quandary: Houghton Regis Chalk Pit

by Rebecca Pitman, Reserves Office, Houghton Regis Chalk Pit, Wildlife Trust BCN

Burnt out cars, propane gas bottles, motorbikes and more shopping trolleys than you can count – this was the scene which greeted staff from The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire when the Trust took over the management of Houghton Regis Chalk Pit at the end of 2011. Despite the chaos, The Wildlife Trust believed this enormous 131 acre (53 hectare) abandoned quarry on the north-west facing slope of the Chilterns escarpment was a special place which badly needed conserving.

Quarrying activities ceased at Houghton Regis Chalk Pit in 1971, with the land now owned by DSM Demolition. The Wildlife Trust will manage the chalk pit for the next five years, thanks to Bovis Homes. The housing developer is building 140 houses on the eastern boundary of the site, and through compensation and mitigation for any loss of habitat, Bovis Homes has financially contributed towards the management of the area by The Wildlife Trust. The Wildlife Trust's objective is to transform this chalk pit on the urban fringe of Houghton Regis into a nature reserve for both wildlife and local residents.

The new nature reserve is part of The Wildlife Trust's 'North Chilterns Chalk Living Landscape'. This aims to create an extensive landscape rich in wildlife within and on the edge of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire, whilst providing recreational opportunities for local people. The Living Landscape involves bringing all remaining calcareous grassland sites into favourable management, creating new grasslands to link up fragmented areas and encouraging wildlife-friendly practices.

Houghton Regis Chalk Pit is a County Wildlife Site and a Site of Special Scientific Interest. These designations were attributed due to the site's expanse of lowland chalk grassland and the presence of marl lakes - the rarest form of standing water in Britain confined to chalk or limestone areas, of which there are very few examples in southern England.

Characteristically for marl lakes they support an abundant Charophyte flora covering the lake bed. This includes both shallow water species such as *Chara hispida* (var. *hispida*,) and deep water species such as *Chara aspera*. A rich mollusc fauna is also associated with the lakes, including the species *Potamopyrgus antipodarum*, a recent maritime colonist of freshwater typically found associated with beds of *Chara* in marl lakes.

Historically, there were two marl lakes at the chalk pit: one deep and steep-sided and one large, shallow lagoon. However, the latter lake began to dry up in the early 1990s leaving only willow carr as a remnant of its existence. Interestingly, due to the high level of rainfall we have received this summer, the shallow lake has since returned proving very attractive for gulls, waders and waterfowl.

Other significant developments at the chalk pit over the past year include two major rubbish clean-up operations, conducted by local volunteers in March and May. Rubbish removal will be an on-going process at the site, but the worst of 40 years of fly-tipping has certainly been overcome.

Work parties began last winter to make a start on much needed scrub removal from the chalk grassland, with hawthorn and blackthorn removed from south-facing slopes by Wildlife Trust volunteers. By preventing scrub encroachment, wildflowers and butterflies will once again dominate this precious habitat. For the birders out there – don't worry, some scrub will be left for nesting birds and migrants, with plenty more to be left on the periphery of the chalk pit.

It has been an exciting recording season this spring/summer, during what is the first year for the chalk pit



Houghton Regis Marl Lake SSSI. Photo by John Comont

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as a Wildlife Trust nature reserve. During May/June the chalk grassland was awash with yellow, courtesy of kidney vetch, horseshoe vetch and bird's-foot-trefoil. It has also been an excellent year for orchids, with common spotted orchids in abundance, together with the occasional pyramidal and bee orchids. In July/August hundreds of Chiltern Gentian began to flower; Houghton Regis Chalk Pit is believed to be one of the best sites in Britain for the species.

Due to the extremely wet summer it has been a dreadful year nationally for butterflies. Nonetheless, 22 species of butterfly have been recorded at the reserve so far this season, with key species being the chalk hill blue, small blue, green hairstreak and dingy skipper. Thanks to the plethora of horseshoe vetch, chalkhill blues have been faring particularly well - with up to 400 being counted on a (rare) sunny day. This of course begs the question of how many individuals could have been present had it been a good year for butterflies.

It was thrilling to discover not one, but two Turtle Doves at the chalk pit this spring - great news for this striking bird which has declined by an alarming 91% in the UK since the 1970s. Perhaps this pair even managed to breed, as many other avian species successfully did this season. Other avian highlights include: Hobby; Whinchat; Raven; Wheatear; Common Tern; Snipe; Swifts; Willow Warbler; Chiff Chaff; Blackcap; Common and Lesser Whitethroat; Reed and Sedge Warblers.

There have been many sightings of Great Crested Newt and Smooth Newt at the chalk pit this summer – predominantly under the remains of old burnt-out cars. An important reminder that the quarry should not be cleared of its debris entirely!

Dragonflies and damselflies are another group which have suffered this year, but Broad-Bodied Chasers, Common Darters, Common Blue Damselflies and Blue-Tailed Damselflies have made an appearance. The Scarce Blue-Tailed Damselfly was first discovered at Houghton Regis Chalk Pit in 1987, but unfortunately has not been recorded at the quarry in some years. As a greatly under-studied site, it is possible that the species may still be hanging on there. This begs the question of whatever else could be inhabiting the chalk pit awaiting discovery!



Houghton Regis Chalk Pit

To begin answering this question, a BNHS recorders' summer field meeting was held at the reserve on July 10th, with six members spending the day at the site. Highlights included the exciting discovery of a Red-Veined Darter and a Chalk Carpet Moth – both new records for the site. Another recorders' day was scheduled for the chalk pit on August 4th, but unfortunately heavy rain scuppered plans. It is essential that as much information as possible is collected about this new reserve, in order to ensure its management as a nature reserve in the future.

If any members of the BNHS are interested in recording at Houghton Regis Chalk Pit, I would be delighted if you got in touch. Please contact me by emailing rebecca.pitman@wildlifebcn.org or by phoning 07595090776 / 01525 874317.

Wrestlingworth Gravel Pits: a new parish nature reserve

by Ian Woiwod

The largely rural parish of Wrestlingworth and Cockayne Hatley lies on the eastern edge of the county adjoining Cambridgeshire. A parish questionnaire found that many of the inhabitants liked living in the area for the availability of walking and were also interested in the local natural environment and its wildlife, so a couple of years ago a Parish Walking and Wildlife Group (PWWG) was set up to promote both these important aspects of rural life. A monthly local walk was instigated, often looking at features of local natural history interest, such as spring flowers, butterflies or fungi depending on the season. Bird boxes were the next item on the agenda of the group and many of these have been successfully placed around the parish.



The new parish nature reserve. Photos by Ian Woiwod

The next priority of the PWWG was to find a natural area that could be adopted by the group so that some active management could be done to improve wildlife habitats in the parish. An immediate possibility was the neglected patch of woodland and water set in intensive arable farmland about 1 kilometre south west of Wrestlingworth village, known locally as the Gravel Pits (grid. ref. TL 248466).

Little was known, except that it was supposed to have been the place where local villagers were allowed to extract gravel in the past and indeed it is shown on the first Ordnance Survey maps indicating that the ponds were well established at least by Victorian times. Neither of the two farms surrounding the area

seemed to claim the area and further inquiries revealed that it was in fact owned by the Parish Council, was already registered as Common Land and had an area of 0.6 hectares. So, with the permission of the Parish Council, this area has now been declared a Parish Nature Reserve managed by the PWWG, to be known as the Wrestlingworth Gravel Pits Reserve.

The reserve area (above) is an oasis of trees and water in an intensive agricultural setting. However, the surrounding farmland is not as bleak as it looks. There are some rich hedges adjoining the reserve and a set-aside meadow on the south side of the reserve contains a colony of Marbled Whites. The farmland surrounding the reserve also holds useful populations of some of the declining farmland specialist birds such as Yellow Wagtails and Corn Buntings.

Initially the reserve itself seemed uninspiring, largely consisting of nettles, high willow and sallow scrub, and stagnant water. Some of the area had also been used by a previous landowner (almost certainly illegally) as a general tip, which didn't help the air of neglect of the site. It was planned to record the wildlife on the site for a year before starting to manage it actively, but unforeseen events took a hand as the ponds in the reserve completely dried out in the winter drought of 2011/2012. This was too good an opportunity to miss and with the help of a local contractor it enabled good access and a start could be made in removing a few of the large willow trees, allowing at least some light to reach areas where the ponds should have been.



Photo by Ian Woiwod

Luckily for the reserve the drought eventually broke in April and it doesn't seem to have stopped raining since. This was excellent news for the ponds which have filled up nicely and their associated fauna and flora have started to return and flourish, particularly as more sunlight is now reaching the water.

So what is present on the reserve. It's still early days, but to date about 20 species of bird have been recorded within the reserve area, including a roosting Barn Owl. There is a large active Badger sett on

the reserve, which is left undisturbed, and Muntjac, Fox and Rabbits have also been sighted, but nothing smaller in the mammal line has been recorded yet. Young newts have been seen in the ponds and opening up the ponds has also encouraged dragonflies and other insects to colonise. Moth trapping has been carried out over 2 periods and so far 74 species have been recorded including 6 which are relatively uncommon in the county: Ruddy Carpet, White Satin, Marbled Coronet, Dark Dagger, Dingy Shears and Cream-bordered Green Pea. It is notable that several of these are willow feeders and are probably long-term residents on the reserve (Don't worry there are still plenty of willows on the reserve, even after our winter management).



One of the reserve ponds after recent rains. Photo by Ian Woiwod

Much has been achieved in the first year of this reserve. More recording is required, so if anyone wants to come and look for their specialities, they are welcome (but access can be difficult and it's always advisable to bring boots). More management is planned for the coming winter and it is hoped that we will be able to open up the reserve further to improve habitat and access and possibly establish a dipping platform for younger members of the parish.

For further details contact Ian Woiwod (woiwod@supanet.com).

Endocrines or predation (Part II)

by Roy Bates

Part I of this article dealt with predation and featured in Issue 163 of Wild About Beds -Ed.

Invertebrate sampling is a simple procedure, consisting of walking across the river kicking the river bed, of usually a gravel consistency, for one minute with a net placed just downstream from one's feet. This is done over five minutes of usually five one minute kick samples from the same area. My sampling took place above Harrold Bridge once a month from April to October 2011. In April and May I sampled just below the first weir pool. However, due to very low flow rates bringing about excessive weed, reed and algae growth I had to change sites to one of a heavier flow rate for June to October. At this second site Signal Crayfish were very numerous, most were immature, around 1–1.5 inches in length and were found amongst the dens weed. Although a good diversity of species was recorded, many were in very low numbers, very similar to last year's findings.

For example of the 33 kick samples undertaken, freshwater shrimp was captured in numbers of only 11 species. Damselfly amounted to only 19, again mostly single species from each sample. The two most common species were saucer bug and unidentified mayfly. I do not believe that any species were recorded in numbers of over 10. All in all a poor result once again, and one that I consider just not capable of sustaining a viable fish population. This is not the Environment Agency's assessment of invertebrate life as per a response I had to my letter, from Nathan Hall.¹

If as I suspect endocrine disruption is seriously affecting the recruitment of fish, then surely something of a similar nature must occur with all the aquatic life within our rivers. According to the Salmon and Trout Association, flylife in the last 25 years has declined by some 33%. I leave you to your own conclusions, but the fish stocks are depleted as never before and that is a fact.

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During my sampling the following taxa were recorded:

- unidentified Mayfly
- Burrowing Mayfly
- Cased Caddis
- Uncased Caddis
- Saucer Bug
- Damselfly
- Demoiselle
- Freshwater Shrimp
- Freshwater Mussel
- Beetle
- Blackfly
- Adderfly
- Snail
- Sludgeworm
- Bloodworm
- Non-biting Midge
- Leech
- Freshwater Hoglouse

Also captured were:

- Stone Loach
- Spined Loach
- Bullhead
- Minnow
- Signal Crayfish

Editor's note:

Enclosed with Mr Bates' article was a letter from Mr Nathan Hall, Environmental Monitoring Officer for the Environment Agency (EA). As Mr Hall had not expressly permitted publication of his letter it has not been reproduced here. Instead I have attempted to summarise Mr Hall's key points:

- *EA data show consistent abundance and diversity of invertebrate life on the River Great Ouse, and have not shown a decline in relation to an abundance and diversity of fish populations.*
- *The EA is currently undertaking a national project to help broaden their understanding of endocrine disruption (feminisation) in male fish. The issue is widely debated and the EA is monitoring a wider range of chemicals to help manage their levels in the long term.*
- *Under the EA classification system water quality in the Great Ouse is classed as high. The only known significant water quality issues are nitrates and phosphates, which originate from sewage treatment works. These chemicals do not tend to have ecological effects beyond excessive weed growth.*
- *The EA acknowledges that many fish species are not present in historic numbers, and believe that this has to do with poor recruitment of juveniles. It is likely that siltation of spawning gravels is contributing to the issue. They are trying to promote better management practices but expect that resulting improvements in fish stocks will take some years.*
- *Signal Crayfish are recognised as a major issue contributing to demographic changes in fish populations.*

-Ed

Recently in the news

25 Aug: Tales from the River Ver in new book (*The Herts Advertiser*) - Whole chapters are dedicated to the various stretches of the river from its source at Kensworth in Bedfordshire to its confluence with the River Colne. Full article available at: http://www.hertsad.co.uk/what-s-on/tales_from_the_river_ver_in_new_book_1_1491154

10 Sep: The bulldozers are coming for the green belt (*The Telegraph*) - Huge chunks of the green belt around Cambridge are being gobbled up by developers — is this Britain's future? Full article available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/greenpolitics/planning/9533460/The-bulldozers-are-coming-for-the-green-belt.html>

10 Sep: Raw power of diving gannets wins best wildlife picture (*The Telegraph*) - A book which captures the diversity of Britain's wildlife is published as the winners of this year's British Wildlife Photography Awards are announced. Full article available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/wildlife/9532641/Raw-power-of-diving-gannets-wins-best-wildlife-picture.html>

12 Sep: 'Drip by drip loss' of wildflowers (*Bedfordshire on Sunday*) - Britain has lost 10 wildflower species from the countryside since the Queen came to the throne 60 years ago, a report has revealed. Full article available at: <http://www.bedfordshire-news.co.uk/News/UK-and-world-news/Drip-by-drip-loss-of-wildflowers-0-1178408.xnf>.

22 Sep: Caught on camera — thieves at the RSPB (*Biggleswade Chronicle*) - CCTV images of thieves who broke into the store at the RSPB headquarters have been released in hope that it may help track down the criminals. Full article available at: <http://www.biggleswadetoday.co.uk/news/local-news/caught-on-camera-thieves-at-the-rpsb-1-4290650>

Upcoming events

21 Oct The BNHS has a stall at this year's Apple Day at Bromham Mill: why not drop by?