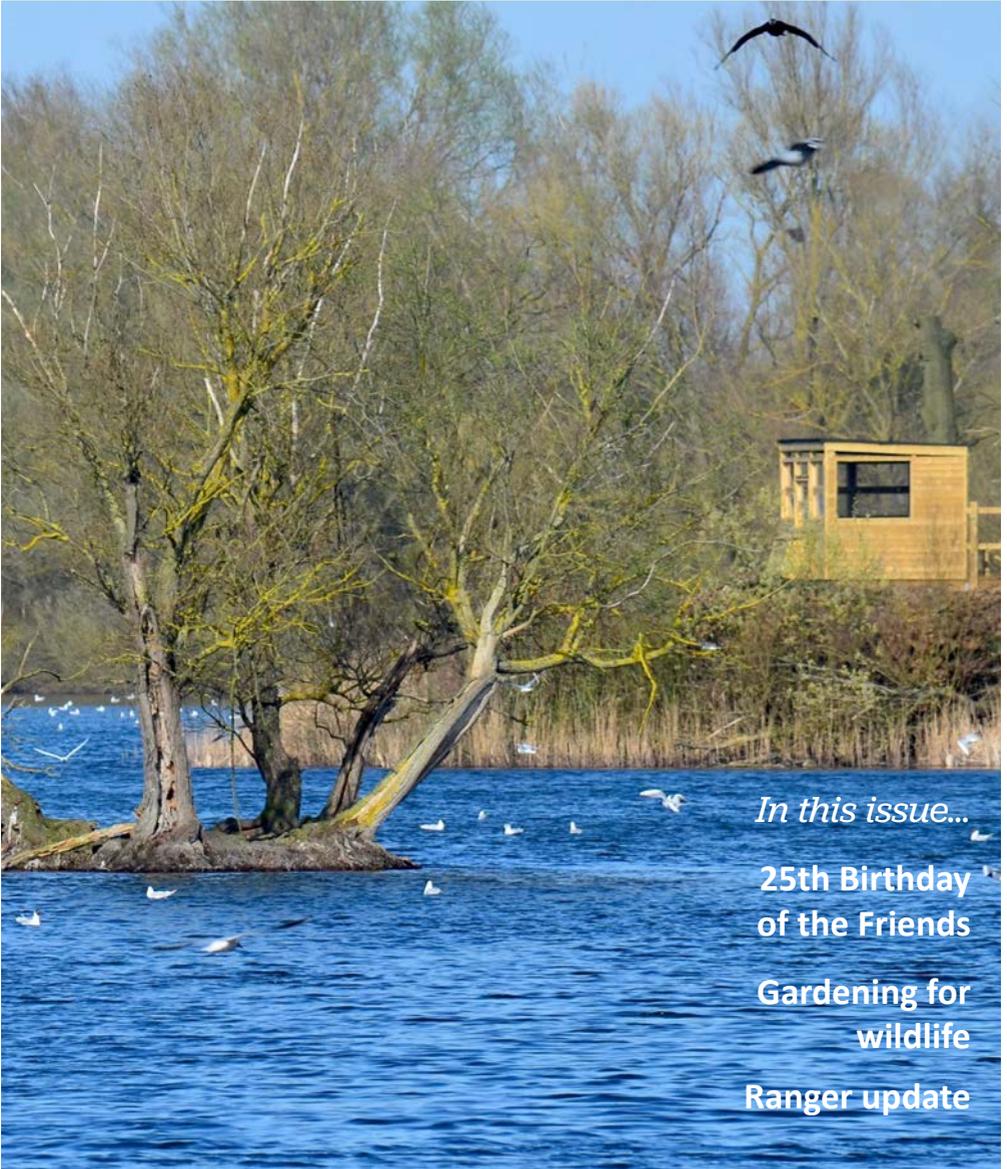


The Newsletter of the Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve

Between Friends

Spring 2020



In this issue...

**25th Birthday
of the Friends**

**Gardening for
wildlife**

Ranger update

The Friends of Paxton Pits newsletter

Welcome to the spring edition of *Between Friends*.

In this issue – the first of our 25th birthday year – you'll find a report from our latest events, wildlife gardening tips, Ranger Matt's first update and a huge thank you to our members.

We hope you enjoy reading about your local nature reserve. Please do visit the website, too, where we will be publishing more regular news updates, reports and blogs: www.paxton-pits.org.uk

If you have any comments or feedback, please email us at friendsofpaxtonpits@hotmail.com

Contributors

- Sophie Baker
- Mavis Battey (MB)
- Trevor Gunton
- Matt Hall
- Martin Runchman (MR)
- Jim Stevenson (JS)
- Mike Thomas (MT)
- Cover: The Reserve in March, by Jim Stevenson

Join us at the AGM

Our AGM is coming up on 13th March at Little Paxton Village Hall, and we very much hope to see you there at 7.30pm. Full details are on the back page. See you there!



Otter sightings

There have been some reports that there are more otters around at the moment, but spotting them isn't always easy. Otters are seen on every lake at the Reserve and along the Ouse Valley Way. The best tip is to regularly visit known haunts, especially the Kingfisher Hide and the River Viewpoint. In both cases start looking before you get to the spot. The boardwalk leading to the hide is flanked by trees that have fallen in the water that provide good fishing areas. My second tip would be to talk to people and follow up on any leads.

Sightings were spread throughout the last 12 months. Mostly these involved single animals but occasionally two or even four were seen together. The sightings cover Heronry Lakes, Island Pit, Pumphouse Pit, Washout Pit and Rudd Pit.

If you get lucky, please make sure that your sighting

is recorded. You can email the Rangers or the Friends or pop into the Visitor Centre and enter the record in the book. JS

Winter events update

Angela Potter gave a fascinating and informative talk to 45 visitors in November about Creating Wildlife Gardens. Her tips on keeping the garden full of colour and interest, with an emphasis on gardening for wildlife, were very well received, with many people avidly taking notes. For more wildlife garden inspiration from the Reserve and Ranger Jim, turn to page 5.

In December we had a 'Festive Winter Walk' on the Reserve. Thirteen intrepid walkers set out despite showers rather heavier than expected. Although there wasn't a lot of wildlife about, that we could see anyway, we did manage to witness jackdaws and cormorants coming into roost later in the afternoon, a spectacular view from our recently constructed Bus Stop Hide.

New Year's Day attracted 42 walkers for our annual Tick'n'Twitch walk. 37 species were seen and recorded and tea, coffee and cake went down a treat at 25p per item to celebrate the beginning of the Friends 25th Anniversary year. Although usually called an 'Ice Breaker', we've decided in future not to use that title as we haven't had any ice for a few years! MB

IMAGE: JIM STEVENSON



National Nest Box Week

No sooner are the festive celebrations over, we start to anticipate the arrival of spring. Our garden birds are on the same wavelength and are beginning to get ready for the coming breeding season. With the help of the Wildlife Trust, children have been busy building and decorating boxes that have replaced old ones around the Reserve (pictured).

Why not help your own garden birds this year? National Nest Box Week takes place 14-21 February, and it's a great time to do it. Your garden will become more alive and interesting and you will be able to enjoy the birds as they start to raise a family.

Nest boxes can be purchased at most garden centres and from the Reserve, where a good quality nest box is just £8.00. Alternatively, you could take advantage of our Sponsor a Nest Box scheme and support your favourite box – and its residents – out on the Reserve. Details are available at the Visitor Centre. MR

IMAGE BY DEBBIE MCKENZIE, THE WILDLIFE TRUST BCN

Kingfisher Lottery: past results, future plans

We are very proud that the Kingfisher Lottery Club has helped to fund successful projects across the Reserve. We have provided vantage points for visitors like the Cobham Hide, which offers a different view of birds and insects in a marshy habitat, and Washout Pit Screen, where you can watch the summer migrants without causing disturbance. In recent years, our tern rafts, located on Heronry North Lake, have proved to be a great success with around 70 chicks fledged in total. Though the 2019/20 season proved to be difficult for the birds with extreme heat (up to 37.8°C!) followed

by incessant heavy rain, we look forward to the new breeding season.

Our next project, with work already underway, will be to provide nesting tunnels for our resident kingfishers around Heronry South and North Lakes where we already enjoy frequent sightings. And further ahead, we're planning to extend our existing programme of work to provide additional areas to maintain and increase our insect population. Some will be larger structures, "insect hotels", with additional areas for bat, birds and mammals. Others will be smaller single unit "habitat boxes". Your support is vital for all of this work, so thank you! MR

Kingfisher Lottery Club – renew or join

We wish to invite current Kingfisher Lottery Club members (those who pay their annual subscriptions by cash or cheque) to renew their lottery membership.

A lottery number/share costs £12.00 per year and your number(s) are entered into four draws.

Please renew your membership or join for the first time. Your support for the Reserve is vital to continue the work of safeguarding the environment. The natural

world needs all the help it can get.

How to join or renew: Fill in a form at the Visitor Centre, from the Lottery Promoter on 01767 690093 or kingfisherlottery@yahoo.com or downloaded from our website: paxton-pits.org.uk

December 2019 Results

£100 RANDLE	39
£100 BARTRUM	332
£100 PURKISS	15
£50 MOON	292
£50 WILSON	188
£25 MORGAN	285
£25 COCKRILL	256
£450 TOTAL	

25th BIRTHDAY

By Trevor Gunton

2020 marks the 25th anniversary of the Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve. The original concept in 1995 was to provide both practical and financial support for the newly established nature reserve at Little Paxton, which had been set up by Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC). Twenty five years on, this remains our sole objective.

The world was a very different place all those years ago. John Major was Prime Minister, a loaf of bread cost just 49p and the average home in the UK cost about £51,000. The idea of a local nature Reserve was very new. For the first few years, HDC managed the reserve with just one member of staff, supported by a few local volunteers, mainly from Little Paxton Village. Some of these people (including me!) remain active today.

There was considerable national interest in our fledgling nature reserve as we had become only the second place in England to host a breeding colony of cormorants – in 1995 the colony had reached around 200 breeding pairs! This exceptional number has more than halved in recent years as the national inland breeding population has stabilised and spread out; and this is not the only change.

Nightingales feature strongly in the public eye, and in 1995

at least 25 singing males were recorded at the Reserve. This explosion of spring song drew visitors from all over England, and we estimated that about 1,000 visitors each year were coming to hear our nightingales. In 2019 this bird, hailed as the world's greatest songbird, failed to breed on the Reserve for the first time since the 1970s: 90% of these birds have disappeared nationwide.

It has also been sad to see the decline of so many previously common farmland and garden birds. Traditional Huntingdonshire farmland is now just a memory, thanks to intensification and changes in practice.

Gone are breeding lapwings, snipe, yellow wagtails, corn buntings... and even the previously common skylark is now confined to just a few local areas.

However, we have also seen the recovery of some exciting species, such as barn owl, otter and harvest mouse, as well as new species such as little and great white egrets, red kite and buzzard. Some of these are now regular visitors to the village and the Reserve.

The Friends have worked hard over the last twenty five years, cooperating with local landowners, HDC and both Parish and District Councils to provide a place for nature, and for the local community to experience and enjoy it. We hope you'll join us in looking forward to the next twenty five.



IMAGE: PETER HAGGER

GARDENING FOR WILDLIFE

By Jim Stevenson



If you want good ideas to attract more wildlife to your garden, look no further than your local nature reserves and wild places. You can imitate any wild habitat from mountain top to sea-shore but it's best to work with the local soil and climate. The University Botanical Gardens in Cambridge is a good place to get ideas – or just go for a walk on any nature reserve, take a photo of a feature you would love to copy and set about making it. Paxton Pits Nature Reserve itself can be a great inspiration, and you know the local wildlife likes it too. Here are a few ideas I have borrowed for my own garden:

- Get rid of that old fence and **plant a native hedge** using blackthorn, hawthorn, spindle, cherry and field maple and reward yourself with blossom, berries, nuts and glorious autumn colours.

- **Use garden cuttings to create some habitats:** Use winter trimmings to create a pile for bugs to hide in and birds to hunt in; Make a log and turf bank for toads to winter in; And keep some rotting logs or stumps for beetles and for fungi, as we do in Rory's Wood.

- **Make a mini or small raised pond:** We bought some large pots (without

holes in the bottom) and filled them with potato-sized pebbles before topping up with rain water. We have planted small, emergent water plants in them, and frogs hide among the stones. Something bigger, like an old tin bath lined with butyl rubber and stacked at one end with stones, reflects the sky and attracts dragonflies and water boatmen. And you don't have to bury them. We have surrounded our free-standing pond on three sides with large pots so that frogs and newts can make their way over the rim.

- **Plant for insects:** Top Paxton plants for insects include knapweed, scabious and viper's bugloss as well as the ubiquitous buddleia. You don't have to use wild varieties and by having a mix you can extend the flowering season as well as the range of colours. I have also tried sowing a patch with wildflower seeds (like the nectar mix we use in our arable fields) which worked well for me, and for the bees.

- **Make or buy a bug hotel:** Those frames filled with hollow canes, reeds, fennel-stems and elder twigs are all the rage, and they work too. Mine has leaf cutter bees in it as well as other useful insects like lacewings and ladybirds. All you need is a sunny wall to hang it on.

9th May Plant Sale at Paxton Pits
The perfect opportunity to purchase locally-grown plants for your garden.

We're also seeking plant donations.
Could you set some seeds ready to sell in May? Contact Ann Thomas at friendsofpaxtonpits@hotmail.co.uk

**Birthday Party:
you're invited!**

Please join us to celebrate our 25th Birthday on 19th July at the Visitor Centre. We'll have live music and refreshments, plus the chance to meet with Friends new and old.



THANKS TO YOU

By Mike Thomas

The charity, Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve, has one of the biggest memberships for a non-aligned group in the area of wildlife. This is very gratifying, but it is also essential for generating income to run the Reserve. The funds we raise from our £4 per year membership, and the donations that come with it, allow us to fund conservation projects on the Reserve and improve facilities for our visitors. Part of the £4 goes to servicing membership (e.g. stationery and postage), but the remainder goes to improving the Reserve and Visitor Centre for wildlife and visitors alike.



Over recent years visitors to the Reserve will have noticed increases in the length of the all-ability footpaths, particularly around the Meadow Trail. Although we have a friendly quarry next door to us, we still have to pay commercial rates for the aggregate. Our all-in costs for these footpaths is about £17 per metre – you do the maths! You will also have noticed the new Cobham and Kingfisher hides and the Bus Stop viewing platform. Although we build them using volunteer labour – we enjoy doing it really – there is still a significant cost involved. Admittedly we build them to our own design and to a better specification than the bought-in



versions, but timber isn't cheap these days. The new Kingfisher Hide and associated boardwalk came out to about £27,000.

You will also have noticed some new interpretation boards springing up around the Reserve. Metal isn't cheap either, especially in good quality, durable and, hopefully vandal-proof, lectern mounted notice boards. These boards cost around £600 each but have been well received by our visitors. We are also looking at improvements in the Visitor Centre and are in the process of installing a new till that is capable of taking payment by card, hardly anyone carries cash these days! Not that this new technology is cheap either!

So, thank you for your support. Your membership is vitally important to us, and to the habitats and wildlife we look after.

Renew your membership

At this time of year, we send out our renewal reminder, so don't forget to fill the form in and join us for 2020/21. Please encourage your friends to join as well.

IMAGES: JIM STEVENSON

RANGER UPDATE

By Matt Hall



With Jim Stevenson retiring at the end of December after 17 years at Paxton Pits, I am now the new, full-time, Senior Ranger. I've worked on the Reserve for 12 years now and am really pleased to be taking the site into its next phase, though I have some big boots to fill!

So far, winter 2019/20 has been a very busy (and muddy!) one for the Rangers and Volunteers. Other than the annual management jobs, we've spent a lot of time trying to rejuvenate some of the important nightingale habitat in East Scrub, just opposite the Kingfisher Hide and Wray House Garden. This area has become very sparse and all the thick, dense scrub that birds like nightingales favour has all become very tall, leaving bare and empty patches at ground level. We've taken what could be considered a rather drastic approach in clearing a big patch of this scrub; either coppicing or laying it to allow it to rejuvenate into the thick undergrowth that we need. We will see how the section we've done this winter progresses over the spring and make a decision then as to whether we do another section next year or wait until the following year. This project is a bit of an experiment but isn't just dreamt up.

We have taken advice from organisations such as the RSPB and the BTO who have done similar things on other sites, with a good success rate. To protect the work we have done and to encourage excellent growth, we've installed a fence around most of East Scrub too. This fence will minimise disturbance in the area, with the intention of providing a safe and quiet place for birds to nest and chicks to fledge.

On a normal year, our Visitor Centre is open 7 days a week and is almost entirely manned by volunteers. Unfortunately, we've seen an increase in Visitor Centre closures this winter for a variety of reasons. In short, we are desperately seeking new volunteers to help in the Centre. Our VC volunteers help out for many reasons. Some love nature and are great at talking to visitors about things that can be seen; some have retail experience and have helped to increase shop sales; some come along purely for a bit of socialising and to make new friends. If you think you may be able to help us and have a few hours (or even a day) a week spare, then please drop into the VC and have a chat. If you can make a cup of tea then we'd love to hear from you!

IMAGE: MATT HALL

WHAT'S ON – Spring 2020 Events

Wednesday 4th March • 2:30pm

The Insects of Paxton Pits *An illustrated talk by Keith Porter*

Keith is an entomologist who has recently retired from Natural England. He will talk about the last 25 years of recording insects on the Reserve, and explore which habitats are most important.

£2.50 each, pay at the door



Sunday 26th April

Springwatch on the Reserve

Come and visit our Reserve and talk to local guides who can advise you on what might be around. There will be a display inside the Visitor Centre.

Free, all welcome

Friday 13th March • 7:30pm

at Little Paxton Village Hall

The Friends' AGM *A short AGM followed by a presentation by Jim Stevenson*

Reminiscences from Ranger Jim, Senior Ranger at Paxton Pits for almost 20 years. Plus refreshments on sale, a raffle, sales of pre-read books, and the opportunity to renew your membership, etc.

Free, all welcome

Saturday 9th May • 10.30am-3.30pm

Plant Sale

Many types of plants will be on sale at this popular event run with the Little Paxton Gardening Club.

Events are held or begin at the Visitor Centre unless otherwise specified

More events online: www.paxton-pits.org.uk/visiting-paxton-pits/events

The Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve

Paxton Pits Nature Reserve is managed by Huntingdonshire District Council with support from the Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve.

Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve is a charity registered in England & Wales, No. 1125221, and is funded entirely by members and fundraising activities.

Thank you for your support.



www.paxton-pits.org.uk



Paxton Pits Nature Reserve