



Newsletter

Autumn 2009

We aim to work in friendly collaboration with landowners and farmers, conservation organisations and relevant public bodies.

AUBREY BUXTON.

A Pioneer for Wildlife Conservation

This article is a tribute to Aubrey Buxton, whose practical conservation work was a great inspiration to the founding members of the RGCG.

Lord Buxton died peacefully in his sleep at the age of 91 at his home, Stiffkey Hall Farm in North Norfolk, on the 2nd September. He was greatly respected for the creation of the Survival series as a founding director of Anglia TV in 1958. This was driven by his life-long passion for wildlife, in particular birds. The programmes began in 1961, and over the years, some 500 were made. They reached audiences world wide, and made a huge contribution to public interest in wildlife.

I first met Aubrey Buxton some 12 years ago. There was a proposal that off-road 4WD vehicles had the right to drive along the track from Stiffkey to Morston Greens, following the line between farming land and the salt marshes, one of the most extensive in Europe. In addition to the massive impact that this would have had on such a sensitive landscape, it would have affected by disturbance his Stiffkey Fen, created a few years previously, and lying at the outfall of the River Stiffkey at Morston Freshes. Fortunately the representations made by Aubrey, CPRE and others helped to make sure that the claim was turned down.

This led to a wider contact on the conservation work he had carried out at Stiffkey Hall Farm. The farm had been at one time the home of Henry Williamson, best known as the author of Tarka the Otter; he wrote of his experiences there as a Norfolk farmer in the agricultural depression in the late 1930s.

When Aubrey purchased the farm some 25 years ago it was run as a mixed farm, with cattle on the river meadows, and arable on the 'upland' parts, which give long views over the sea. The meadows had been kept drained and 'dry' by a series of ditches and sluices to graze the cattle more intensively.

One of the first thing he did on his 500 acres was to change this, and use the drainage system in 'reverse', and manage the sluices to keep the meadows 'wet' into spring and early summer. This changed the ground conditions and food availability for young birds, and together with some 'scrapes', resulted over time with a large colony of breeding avocets. This was perhaps the earliest example in Norfolk of providing an alternative site to those on other parts of the coast, reclaimed some 200 years ago from salt marsh to give freshwater grazing marsh, that would in time revert back under the pressures of a receding coastline.



Stiffkey Fen October 2008

AUBREY BUXTON. A Pioneer for Wildlife Conservation



River Stiffkey & meadows

Downstream of the river meadows he created Stiffkey Fen, again a 'first', with the reversion of arable land to create a new habitat. The site was a 35 acre field, used for the cultivation of barley and 'wrapped around' by the river on two sides at the tidal sluice outfall. It was dug out to leave islands and flooded, and the water level maintained from the river when 'held-up' by the tidal sluice. Reed beds were planted, taking stock to start from some of that growing in nearby ditches. This became a valuable site for birds, used by over-wintering wildfowl and waders. The lapwing was his favourite bird. The

site has good protection from the sea, with an ample bank set behind and well protected by the large area of saltmarsh in front of it.

Much other work was done, such as the planting of new tree copses on the heights of the rolling arable farmland, and making a permissive footpath across the river valley, with tree planting to provide screening and avoid disturbance to breeding waders in the summer, and ducks and geese in the winter. He also created a large lake close to his house, and the planting around this attracted several species of warbler. The restoration work on the river was aimed at varying flow in the lower and flatter reaches which crossed his land. This was achieved with his typical mix of insight and pragmatism, putting in place measures which would be 'self-maintaining' in keeping at least the central line down the river clear of silt even at low flow.

My last contact with Aubrey was a year ago, with two officers of the Wild Trout Trust. The purpose of the visit was to discuss sea trout, but ranged across other matters. He and his wife Kay had not been able to keep cattle on the river meadows for three years past. He had observed at the same time some progressive fall in the numbers of waders successfully reared, and considered that this was likely due to the decrease in insect life associated with the cattle, and an important part of the early diet of the young. We were able to introduce him to a grazier with Highland cattle; a tiny 'payback' in respect of what we had been able to learn from his example.
Ian Shepherd, photos Tim Jacklin [WTT] October 2008



Lord Buxton, Simon Johnson [WTT] Ian Shepherd

A message from the Treasurer

Increase in Annual Subscription

With our printing and postage costs moving ever upwards keeping our annual subscription at the original and very low figure of £5 became untenable. At the AGM in May this was discussed and a Members' resolution to increase the annual subscription to £10 was passed unanimously.

Enclosed you will find a new Standing Order form which will increase the annual subscription to £10 from 1st January 2010 and on that date in future years. Please complete this form and get it to your bank.

Don't delay. Please do it now! Thank you, we need your continuing support.

Blakeney Freshes – Breeding Bird Summary 2009

We experienced the usual mixed bag of success and failure for the breeding birds of Blakeney Freshes this season. Successes included Marsh Harriers, who raised 5 fledglings from 3 nests and Cetti's Warblers (3 territories) who fledged at least four young to register their first confirmed breeding success on the Freshes.

Although breeding success is hard to quantify for species like Reed Warblers (36 territories), Sedge Warblers (65 territories) and Bearded Reedlings (4 pairs, with at least 8 fledged young), it was thought that conditions widely suited their requirements, good hatches of insects in and around the reed beds meant that food supply was plentiful throughout the breeding season. 45 pairs of Lapwing, 18 pairs of Redshank, 9 pairs of Oystercatcher, and 7 pairs of Avocet attempted to breed on the Freshes this season, enjoying good hatching success.

This is a testament to the effective control of ground predators; however losses of young were suffered to avian predators (gulls, herons, harriers and owls), but more significantly the drought conditions that prevailed throughout the breeding season accounted for many more young. Many birds chose to move their young over the seawall onto the salt marsh, where more favourable conditions existed.

Bitterns proved elusive, with breeding unproven for the 2009 season; however individuals were seen on the Freshes later in the season. These sightings hold some promise for the future.

The Blakeney Chapel area, north of the realigned Glaven again proved to be a very important area for breeding waders and wildfowl. 14 pairs of Avocets, 4 pairs of Redshanks and 2 pairs of lapwing nested with some success. Shoveller, Shelduck and Gadwall also used this area and a pair of Ringed Plover managed to fledge 1 youngster.

David Wood, National Trust



Three years on at Thornage Common Meadows

Towards the end of 2006, The River Glaven Conservation Group, along with the Wild Trout Trust and the Environment Agency, carried out their first major practical restoration works on Thornage Common Meadows. Some 700-1,000 tonnes of spoil was removed from a stretch of river bank, reconnecting the river with its floodplain and thus restoring the precious terrestrial-aquatic interface.



A year on we surveyed the plant species colonisation and found up to 20 species per square metre on the restored bank. Despite the determination of the Highland Cattle that mark their territory again this year, we re-surveyed the site a full three years on. Full coverage of the results will be presented in the next newsletter but initial signs show that fast-growing colonisers, such as toad rush, have been replaced by more competitive species, but species diversity remains high at about 15 species per square metre.

Additionally, in our last newsletter we highlighted the benefits of water meadow grazing, and preliminary results from the recent survey show that the introduction of Highland Cattle onto the restored reach and the surrounding meadows has reversed the previous deteriorating vegetation diversity.

Tori Shepherd

Crayfish survey on the Glaven Catchment. A Battle for Survival !

The River Glaven Catchment was surveyed for crayfish in 2006 and 2007 by Martin Pugh of Essex Ecology Services on behalf of the Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership. Martin has produced a very detailed and comprehensive report which reflects the thoroughness of the work carried out.

The survey is of much more than local interest. The native White-clawed Crayfish has been devastated in many rivers throughout Britain, to the extent that its survival as a species is now in considerable doubt; and the whole ecology of our rivers faces a major threat. The threat comes from the arrival of 'escaped' non-native Signal Crayfish, which grows to up to twice the size of the White-clawed, predated and competitively excluding the native species, usually leading to extinction within five years.

As well as the direct threat to the native species, Signal Crayfish also act a carrier of the crayfish 'plague', a highly virulent fungal pathogen, to the White-clawed. This is thought to be responsible for the dramatic decline in the 1990s, particularly in the southern Britain populations, and has affected entire catchments as far north as the River Ribble in Yorkshire.

In 2003, Environment Agency records showed that there were large numbers of catchments in the UK where the non-native species are present. The Glaven and Stiffkey were thought to be the only ones free of the Signal in East Anglia.

As the White-clawed crayfish cannot be co-exist with the Signal, and the Signal cannot be prevented from expanding its range (they are capable of travelling

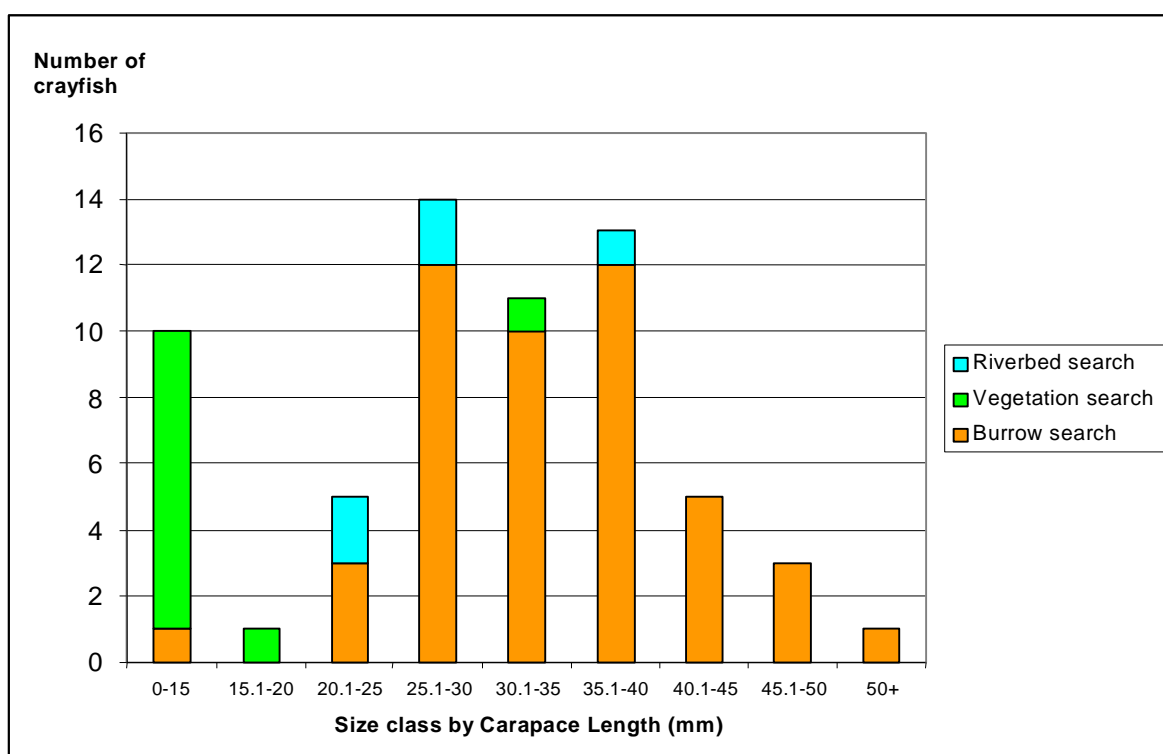
considerable distances over land), the only locations where the White-clawed crayfish will survive in the long term will be isolated sites which are free of the non-native species, and well distanced from them. So-called 'Ark' sites which meet these criteria are the top priority for the conservation of the white-clawed crayfish. So the purpose of these surveys was to establish if the Glaven is, or could be, an Ark catchment.

The 2006 survey was carried out at 30 sites on the main river and nine across the three of the larger tributaries, and used several types of search. The methods of search included 'stone-turning'; lifting vegetation; searching for



UCL. Msc group at Lt. Thornage Meadows

crayfish burrows and teasing out any occupant; torchlight surveys at night, when crayfish become active and move about; and trapping. This has to be done under licence



Crayfish survey on the Glaven Catchment contd

from Natural England, which Martin has with his professional training and qualifications, as the White-clawed is a protected species.

In the 2006 survey period a total of 90 White-clawed crayfish were recorded at 12 of the 35 sites surveyed across the River Glaven catchment. The high level found in burrows [see *histogram*] was a significant and unexpected finding. These positive sites were clustered along the 8.2km central reach of the main river from Hempstead Mill to Letheringsett Ford. None were found in any survey sites upstream or downstream of this central section, or two of the main tributaries, or any of the stillwaters surveyed (Selbrigg Pond, Edgefield Hall Lake, Letheringsett Lake and Bayfield Lake).

However a single male adult Signal Crayfish was discovered in the Water Lane tributary, which enters the River Glaven via Letheringsett Lake. The follow-up 2007 survey focussed on this tributary, which was intensively set with traps. A total of 12 Signal were caught between 3rd September and 6th November 2007, six of these following heavy rainfall on the 9th October.

None were found in Letheringsett Lake, or in the Glaven downstream of Letheringsett, which were also trapped. However the presence in the Water Lane tributary disqualifies the Glaven as being an Ark site, which are sorely needed. But the matter does not rest there, as the RGCG has obtained the necessary permission to eradicate the Signal Crayfish from the tributary and the original source. This would be an extremely expensive and lengthy programme. We very much hope that the funding and resource can be found to contribute to the survival of the species.

The RGCG are grateful to the Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership and the Environment Agency for funding the surveys and the Norfolk Wildlife Trust for managing them. Also to those RGCG committee members and others who assisted Martin Pugh in the 2007 trapping programme.

River Glaven Tidal Reach

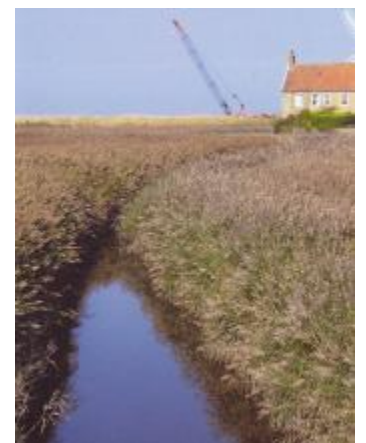


Recently the flood protection gates just downstream from Cley Mill have been renewed, and will soon be in operation. Readers will be aware that the tidal stretch of the river runs from the sluice gate under the Blakeney/Cley road and then runs for about 300 m. And passes through the flood control gates and then onwards without further control to Blakeney Freshes and the sea.

The 300m. Length of river concerned here has been subjected to considerable growth of rushes as can be seen from the photographs. This stretch of the river provides mooring facilities for members of Cley Boat Club and others. In recent years the reeds have gradually invaded this length of the river, and as a result the width of the river is now very narrow, and at times of high river flows could cause flooding. The reeds are very invasive, and have closed open ponds of water that were formerly used by the bird life.

Photos September 2009

John Woodward



Otters are back, but what are they eating?

When the RGCG was founded in 1999 the otter was present in the Glaven catchment, but sightings were rare and numbers probably low. Just over ten years on, it is a different story. Otters are definitely back with us and we think that there are now several animals in the catchment, with evidence for their presence from Bodham to the coast. The recovery of the otter is a feature of the UK more generally and has been heralded as a victory for conservation measures. Nonetheless its return has not been greeted by all with the same delight. Anglers in particular are voicing concerns over predation of fish by otters with this especially true in the Wensum valley.

Since the 1970s angling and the aquatic environment have changed. Now in many river systems valuable fisheries have been established focusing on species such as common carp and barbel. Carp are stocked in stillwaters but, have been known to 'escape' into Norfolk rivers; and barbel in the River Wensum, the only river to have them in Norfolk. In carp fisheries some big fish are valued at thousands of pounds, so when an otter takes one great upset is caused both for fishery managers and anglers alike. In the Glaven valley, for example, otter predation has been most profoundly evident in Bayfield Lake, where several carp and tench have been taken over the last 5 years.

To understand more about the recovery of otter in the Glaven catchment including the implications for fisheries, a study is underway of otter diet. Since January 2009 RGCG members Derek Sayer, Terry Linford and Carl Sayer and Bayfield Angling Society chairman Carl Cornwall have been collecting otter droppings ("spraints") and observing otter meals (i.e. dead fish) at 6 fixed points in the Glaven valley including lake and river sites. Observations are made on a weekly basis and the content of collected spraints will be analysed by a European otter expert in association with the Centre for Fisheries and Aquaculture Sciences (Cefas) at Lowestoft.

At the end of the study, which will continue for a year, we hope to reveal the species which currently underpin otter diet in the valley including the extent to which they are feeding in the river relative to stillwaters. In the early 1970s otter diet studies in the Blakeney area (by Weir and Banister) showed eel and stickleback to be the most important items in the otters' diet. It will be interesting, therefore, to see how their diet might have changed since this time.

Carl Sayer



Footnote: The River Glaven Fishing Association, who fish the reach around Wiveton, reports that they have regular sightings of otters, but have not noticed any deterioration of trout stocks. There has however been some reduction in the numbers of eels, roach, perch and pike.

Otters: in the angler's view

We invited a guest to our September meeting, and as an agenda item he spoke on two topics, the conservation work being undertaken on the River Wensum, and an angler's viewpoint on the otter. The RGCG unreservedly welcome the 'come-back' of the otter on the Glaven and other Norfolk rivers, following the decline and loss due to pollution and other human impact in the 60s and 70s. We accept that as a top predator it will take fish and other live items in the diet, and be opportunistic in its feeding habits. Numbers may now be the highest since the draining of the Fens.

We are a broad-based group and listened to the concerns of Roy Church, a long-standing member of the Norfolk Anglers Conservation Association and also the Wensum Fishery Action Plan (WTAP). This is what he had to say —

Otters: in the angler's view contd

Last winter there was a long period of continuous frost when many still water lakes in the valley were frozen over to the point that otters fed almost exclusively during that cold spell on fish from the river. At Taverham they almost cleared the river of fish - even chub, which had always been there in great number, became nearly impossible to find. Meanwhile, at Sayer's Meadow at Lyng the otters took specimen barbel from the river some of which were approaching national record weight. As for the roach in the river it appears that they may have been the first to go.

The Wensum Fishery Action Plan, sponsored by the Environment Agency, comprises a committee of water users who want to see the river restored and re-stocked as appropriate - especially with roach and barbel for which the river was once famous.

The increasing predation of fish throughout the valley was seen as a major problem and WFAP invited the Wensum Project Officer from Natural England and the Area Manager of the Environment Agency to their meeting at the end of March. The increase in predation was made clear to both departments. It has been recognised by anglers that as the otter numbers increase they predate more fish - you hardly need to be a Ph.D. to work that out!

Natural England put the point to the meeting that otters are a protected species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and there was nothing that they could or were prepared to do. They will not agree even to investigate the numbers and assess the damage done despite the fact that anglers now see otters as increasingly damaging still water fisheries. The Environment Agency accept that anglers are important partners in achieving their river restoration plans through an over-arching strategy for the Wensum.

DEFRA at one stage offered grant aid for fencing but there appears to be little progress with the scheme. One of the main problems is to assess what fencing is effective. However considering the extreme scenario, if all still waters were effectively fenced then there would be little hope for fisheries on the river. At Taverham Mills the otters have demolished goat netting fencing and the rabbit netting tried at East Ruston has similarly proved to be of limited effect: The otters simply knock it down or burrow under it. Otters will climb chain link fencing unless the fence is topped with 3ft. boarding to prevent them getting over. The cost of such fencing would be prohibitive to many fisheries.



Barbel eaten by otter

The Environment Agency has done its best to recognise the problem and propose to take steps to re-stock the river to compensate for predation. However, this will require ongoing stocking 'to feed the otter population' as well as to benefit anglers.

Some 95% of otter sightings are by anglers; very few of the public see them but despite this the public hold otters in high esteem. What is not evident is having consumed the products of fisheries and expanded in number what will become of the otter population - will, for instance, numbers reduce through starvation?

The WFAP members argue with Natural England that this can hardly be the basis on which they were set up to guard the countryside and further investigation needs to be done.

Roy Church, WFAP and NACA

The points Roy makes above have been the subject of long-running discussions between anglers and conservationists. While a national experience that the strong recovery impacts on fish stocks, it is particularly acute on the Wensum; there is a high incidence of stillwaters close to the river, a legacy of the extensive quarrying for sand and gravel along much of its length. The middle and upper reaches are EU designated as SAC, Special Area of conservation. There is some unease at stocking with barbel, which goes back for decades, but may not be a native fish, and may have some impact on the ecology of the river.

Conservation bodies state that it is possible to install otter-proof fencing for stillwaters, albeit it is expensive. The fencing to exclude otters on many sites is not a technical issue, but of anglers being reluctant or unable to pay the bill. Damage to fencing can arise from vandalism or poachers. To stock a river with barbel or other species will inevitably invite some predation by otters and is a known risk that anglers should accept.

The population of any species will fluctuate with the availability of food. However the implied suggestion that the otter population could "crash" if anglers lose all interest in stocking fish (which is unlikely) would not happen. The population would stabilise at a somewhat lower level than it is now.



Newsletter

Autumn 2009

News Items

- Max Garrett and Tori Shepherd are producing a publicity sheet to support the recruitment of new members to the RGCG. We plan to target villages along the Glaven.
- The AGM talk on the 30th May was on invasive non-native species. Thanks to Mike Sutton-Croft (Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership Project Manager) and Carl Sayer for their well illustrated presentations to a very interested audience.
- Arising from the AGM formal agenda members proposed that the RGCG annual subscription be raised (after ten years) from £5 to £10 (and see page 2)
- The Little Thornage site has again been grazed by Highland cattle for a full six months. The site still has a steady stream of visitors interested in the restoration work done in October 2006 and since then. Also it is still regularly used for visits by students from Norfolk schools, organised by the Holt Hall Field Studies Centre. We appreciate the continuing support of the landowners in permitting access for educational purposes.
- We plan to recast the RGCG web site. The aim is to make it more user-friendly to the wider public. The primary emphasis however will seek greater use by youngsters and specialist A level students at school, and those at University, including post-degree students. While a high priority, don't hold your breath, we are all very busy!

Simon Johnson has moved on after 6 very successful years as Director of the Wild Trout Trust (WTT). In this role he was travelling many thousand of miles a year, which was hard on the family with two young children. He has taken a new post as Director of the River Eden Trust. We have made Simon an Honorary Member of the RGCG in recognition of the key support he provided for 'Cinderella' our first major restoration project, which was carried out on the river at Little Thornage meadows with the help of consultant Vaughan Lewis. Simon's support and the sourcing of the funding for this project was a milestone in the progression of the RGCG. Simon is succeeded as Director by Shaun Leonard who has been Head of Fishery Studies at Sparsholt College since 1992.



Amongst other new arrivals at the WTT we welcome in particular, Tim Jacklin. Tim came from the Environment Agency after a number of years of experience in river conservation. The major project management job awaiting him at the WTT was to project manage the East Anglia Sea Trout Project. His first visit to the Glaven was to look at the barriers in the river to migratory fish, the first step in considering how these might be overcome. I went with Tim and Simon when they went to look at the lower reaches of the Stiffkey and talk with Lord Buxton.

Ian Shepherd.

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