

## Summer

One swallow may not make a spring, but the arrival of the swifts definitely heralds the arrival of the summer. The last of the summer visitors to arrive, these birds will have been flying non-stop since they left their breeding sites last August. They return here to feed on the midges and other flying insects over the water, before heading to their nesting colonies in nearby villages.



Common tern

The low-lying islands are home to a busy colony of breeding black-headed gulls. The comings and goings of these birds can be extremely noisy, as they quarrel with their neighbours over nest sites or join together to mob the crows or larger gulls that may try to take their eggs or young. Hidden away amongst the gulls, sitting lower on their nests, are a small number of common terns. Smaller and more graceful than the gulls, the terns catch fish by diving into the water.



Roesel's Bush Cricket

In late summer, the tussocky grassland comes alive with the songs of grasshoppers and crickets. A particularly noisy song comes from

Roesel's bush cricket, a large and colourful insect that sounds like the buzzing of electricity pylons. Once restricted to the south coast, this species has spread north across the country in the last decade, perhaps in response to warmer summers.

## Autumn

Autumn is a time of plenty in the hedgerows around the reserve. The shrubs are a mass of fruit for the next few months. Look out for dog rose hips, hawthorn haws, blackthorn sloes and the berries of bramble, elder and buckthorn. These autumn fruits are a vital source of food for thrushes and finches, wood mice and squirrels, even badgers and foxes.

The hedgerows often prove very popular with migrant birds heading south. Blackcaps stock up on elderberries before finally leaving for warmer climes, while later on in the autumn winter thrushes, fieldfare

and redwing, arriving from the north will make a beeline for any fruit-rich hedgerows to rebuild their strength after their long flight south from Scandinavia. These well-managed hedgerows act as a well-stocked larder for an enormous number of animals through the autumn and winter.



Yellow wagtail

Also moving south are the waders, which drop in to feed on the exposed muddy shoreline. Common species to look out for on the wader scrape include redshank and greenshank, common and green sandpipers, which may be joined by occasional turnstone, whimbrel or spotted redshank.

## Winter

As the autumn turns to winter, so the numbers of wildfowl build up. Particularly during hard cold spells, keep an eye out for smew, a handsome little white and black diving duck which occasionally visits in ones and twos.

The rough grassland is grazed by wigeon and gaggles of both greylag and Canada geese. If it has been a good year, the grassland will be alive with small mammals. Common shrew and field voles are particularly numerous, while careful inspection of the taller reeds and rushes may reveal the ball-shaped woven nests of the harvest mouse, our smallest rodent. Harvest mice spend their time feeding up amongst the tall stems, holding on with their prehensile tail.



Barn owl

As day turns to dusk and your thoughts turn to heading home, remember to keep a look out for the barn owl. This ghostly pale bird is present all year round, but is perhaps most easily spotted during the winter as it quarters the grassland, hunting for field voles.

## Nature Trail

**1 WINTER WILDFOWL.** Large numbers of wildfowl travel here from northern Europe each year to spend their winter in the Nene Valley. Teal, wigeon, pochard and tufted duck are all common, with smaller numbers of goldeneye and shoveler. They are joined by hundreds of golden plover and lapwing which use the low-lying islands as a safe roost, feeding out on nearby fields.

**2 ALDERS AND FINCHES.** During the winter months, small flocks of siskin can often be found feeding high in the trees on alder cones. The male is a particularly handsome finch, bright yellow beneath, green above and with a black cap and chin.

**3 GRAVEL ISLANDS.** The low-lying islands are home to nesting common terns, oystercatcher and ringed plovers during the summer. These three species are more normally thought of as coastal birds, nesting on shingle beaches, but have moved inland in recent decades as gravel excavation has resulted in similar conditions.

**4 TREE SPARROWS.** Tree sparrows are a particular speciality of this reserve. The mature hedgerow that runs along the eastern edge of the reserve is home to the largest breeding colony in Northamptonshire, and the birds can be seen throughout the year from the Charles Towler hide, visiting the feeding station.

**5 KIM'S CORNER.** At the northernmost point of the reserve, Kim's Corner is a fragment of species-rich neutral grassland, once widespread in the Nene Valley but now only found at a handful of sites. At its best during the summer, look out for great burnet, lady's bedstraw and bird's-foot trefoil.

**6 OTTER.** Otters are a rare but regular visitor to the reserve as they increase in numbers throughout the Nene Valley. Their tracks and signs are regularly found along the river, but to catch a glimpse of the animal itself requires luck.

**7 BIRDS OF PREY.** When all the birds on the reserve panic, look upwards. They may have been spooked by a hunting peregrine. This large falcon winters here, feeding on the wildfowl that make the valley so special. In the summer, the peregrine is replaced by its smaller cousin, the hobby. This sleek little falcon with its rusty red thighs specializes in hunting dragonflies and hirundines (swallows and martins).

**8 BUTTERFLIES.** Warm sheltered spots are good places to watch for butterflies. During the spring, look out for the bright yellow brimstone and the dainty orange-tip. Later in the summer, common blue and brown argus may be found. In some years large numbers of painted lady may be seen, a real long distance traveller of the butterfly world, flying here every summer from North Africa!

**9 DRAGONFLIES.** During the high summer, the air can be alive with dragonflies: 16 species of dragonflies and damselflies have been recorded here. During June, check the reedy margins of Marigold Pond for the hairy dragonfly, a species that first colonized the county in the later 1990s. Around the main lake, watch for the powder-blue black-tailed skimmer flying low over the water, a favourite food for the hobby. Check floating lily pads for the aptly-named red-eyed damselfly. Sheltered hedgerows are a favourite hunting ground for the migrant hawk in the later summer.



Otter

-  Reedbed
-  New woodland
-  Dry grassland
-  Open water
-  Circular walk
-  Wheelchair accessible paths
-  Reserve boundary
-  Road
-  Car park





Protecting wildlife  
close to home

# Welcome to Summer Leys



Bedfordshire  
Cambridgeshire  
Northamptonshire



The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire  
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If you would like more information about this reserve, other reserves in Northamptonshire or about how you can support us, please contact: The Wildlife Trust, Lings House, Billing Lings, Northampton NN3 8BE  
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Your local Wildlife Trust protects wildlife and countryside for people to enjoy in Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire. We are a charity dependant on voluntary contributions.

## Further Information

We hope you enjoy your visit

## Welcome to Summer Leys

It is hard to imagine that in the late 1980s Summer Leys Local Nature Reserve was just two wildlife-poor bean fields. Since then, in common with large areas of the Northamptonshire Nene Valley, the fields have been quarried for gravel. After quarrying finished, rather than filling the holes in and restoring the area back to agricultural land, careful landscaping in partnership with Hanson Aggregates has created one of the most important wetlands in the area.

The result of this restoration work is a reserve of almost 50 hectares, made up of the main lake with gently shelving banks, shallow areas of water and ponds, low-lying islands and a fringe of reeds and willows, surrounded by grassland and wet woodland. The varied nature of the site is reflected in the wildlife which makes its home here, and in particular the variety and number of wildfowl and other water birds. This has resulted in Summer Leys (along with the other gravel pits in the area) being both designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and as a Special Protection Area (SPA), reflecting the national and international importance of the Upper Nene Valley for wintering wildfowl.



Winter wildfowl

## Management

The rough grassland around the banks of the gravel pit are important for grazing wigeon in the winter, and for small mammals which are in turn fed upon by barn owls all year round. To help maintain this important habitat and prevent it developing into dense willow scrub, the areas are managed with a mix of cutting and grazing with rare breed sheep and cattle. You may notice the livestock corrals built into the fencing on the site as you walk around.

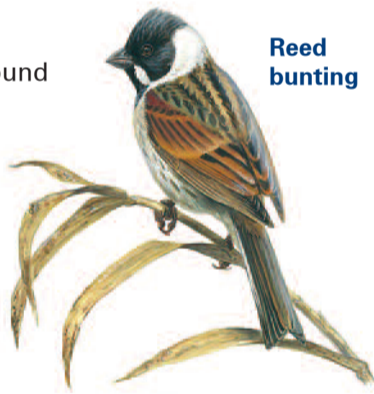
For the two small ponds, it is important to keep the open conditions. Allowing the sun to get through to the water encourages water plants to grow and produces the slightly warmer conditions that frogs and newts enjoy. We cut back the vegetation every few years and remove encroaching scrub.

A regular job, both to maintain the open nature of the banks and to create a varied age structure of the trees, is willow coppicing: cutting them back to ground level, from where the trees will re-grow.

Kingfisher



The Wildlife Trust reserves team, aided by a volunteer warden and local volunteers, carry out all these management tasks and maintain the paths, fences, hides and car park, and collect litter. We always welcome extra help. If you are interested in helping to conserve the wildlife at Summer Leys, please do not hesitate to contact the Reserves Manager at the Trust.



Reed bunting

## What to look for

There is a good variety of habitats in and around the reserve, ranging from mature hedgerows and species-rich neutral grassland to a variety of wetland habitats, including open water, small ponds, bare mud, gravel islands, reedbeds and wet woodland.

This variety means that there is something of interest to see all year round.

## Spring

The first signs of spring come as the days begin to lengthen, with the willow, hazel and blackthorn bushes coming into flower. These early flowering shrubs are an important source of nectar for the first bumblebees and brimstone butterflies to emerge from hibernation. On a bright sunny day, sheltered out of the cold and wind, willow catkins can be a-buzz with feeding hoverflies and the occasional queen bumblebee, getting a head start on the year.

As March turns to April, so the first summer migrants arrive. Chiffchaffs and willow warblers sing from the tree tops, while sand martins hawk insects from above the lake. These tiny birds have made their mammoth journey here, having spent the long cold winter in sub-Saharan Africa. As the year warms up they are joined by sedge warbler, blackcap, swallow, yellow wagtail and a variety of other visitors. Very occasionally, the reserve may be visited by an osprey on its way north to

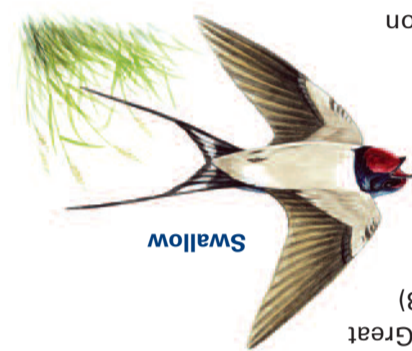


Brimstone

Scotland from its wintering grounds along the west African coast, pausing here for an hour or two to catch a fish.

## How to find the reserve

OS Sheet 152 Grid Reference SP 885 634



Swallow

Leave the A45 on the Great Doddington exit (B573) and follow the brown 'Summer Leys Nature Reserve' signs. Access to the reserve is via the car park off the minor road between Wollaston and Great Doddington. A bus goes from Wellingborough to Great Doddington which is a one and a quarter mile walk from the reserve.

## Access

Stout footwear is essential if you intend to follow the 2 mile circular walk. However, the hides and Marigold Pond near the car park are accessible by all-weather paths suitable for wheelchairs.

Please follow the country code.

Water birds are particularly prone to disturbance, and we would therefore ask that visitors keep to marked paths. Please keep dogs on leads at all times and clean up after them.

## Thankyou!

