Welcome to the Great Fen Local Group newsletter

In 2012 our talks programme continued, with a variety of topics ranging from heritage to wildlife. This included fen skating, the flora of the Great Fen, Whittlesea straw bears, the Cambridgeshire County Farms, and art from the fens with Carry Akroyd. Our rambles took in many local areas, with visits to Woodwalton Fen, Holme Fen, Monks Wood, Aversley Wood and Archers Wood, generating donations of £413.12.

This money, so generously donated by our walkers, together with what we raise from talks, goes towards supporting specific projects on the Great Fen. At the end of 2012 we decided to fund the purchase of much-needed equipment for bird ringing on the Great Fen (see p2). This is the first major project the Local Group has been able to fund. In 2013 we will be considering other Great Fen projects to fund in the future.

2012 was a significant year for the Wildlife Trust as it celebrated the centenary of the foundation of the wildlife trust movement by Charles Rothschild and his co-workers. A celebration at Woodwalton Fen was attended by more than 500 and our Local Group helped by manning the bungalow and stands. The Local Group was also involved in a Bioblitz in July when 1,077 species were identified over a weekend at Woodwalton Fen. And we raised more than £80 with a tombola at Bury Fete on a very windy day!

The Local Group was also involved with a socio-economic forum arranged by Hunts DC, and a local meeting of the Beds, Cambs and Northampton Local Groups. The Local Group is also represented on the Great Fen Access Group Subcommittee which looks at access into the Great Fen from the surrounding communities for walkers, cyclists and horse riders. Volunteers from the Local Group continue to support the Great Fen staff. A big project during the summer we were involved with was the construction of a straw bale bird hide at New Decoy Farm.

Once again we thank Andrew Cuthbert for completing the 46-mile Pathfinder Long Distance Walk in a single day in June. He raised more than £700 for the Great Fen.

In 2013 our talks programme will start again in March with a mixture of heritage and wildlife subjects. Our walks programme continues throughout the year with a mixture of themed walks and rambles (see programme p9). Please support these events as they are a great opportunity to find out what’s going on.

Finally, I would like to thank the committee members for all their support and enthusiasm, without which all this would not be possible. Also, thank you to the volunteers who offer their time and energy to help in various ways.

Adrian Kempster, Chairman

Read more about the Local Group Committee and its members on page 8
Ringing on the Great Fen
How bird ringing will aid conservation

Bird ringing is a technique used to study wild birds. Small, individually numbered, metal or plastic tags are attached to the legs or wings of birds. The ability to identify a re-captured individual at a later date enables various aspects of the bird's life to be studied. Ringing allows us to understand what is happening to birds in the habitats in which they live and how this affects population increases and decreases. This knowledge is vital for their conservation, and can also provide information on the movements individual birds make, how long they live for, territoriality, and feeding behaviour. Rings are very small and do not harm or hinder birds in any way. To a bird, having a ring attached is roughly equivalent in weight to you carrying a mobile phone in your pocket.

On the Great Fen ringing will provide information on breeding productivity, as the relative abundance of both adult and juvenile birds in species populations can be determined. Trained ringers are able to age birds from plumage characteristics when a bird is in the hand, something that is not possible in the field during visual bird surveys. The relative proportion of different aged birds allows us to determine breeding productivity in a given year. The ability to capture marked birds can also tell us where birds on the Great Fen come from, and where they go when they leave. This is a great way of investigating landscape connectivity, one of the major aims of projects such as the Great Fen.

Sightings of birds and other wildlife on the Great Fen are reported at www.greatfen.org.uk and on our Facebook page. If you have something to report, please email paul.tinsley-marshall@wildlifebcn.org with details of WHAT (species), WHERE (grid reference), and WHEN (date) you saw it.

Paul Tinsley-Marshall,
Great Fen Monitoring Officer

Monitoring wildlife
Get involved in a Great Fen survey

So far as wildlife on the Great Fen is concerned, this could be a very exciting time for any budding naturalist. As the project develops, entirely new habitats are being created to replace less diverse farmland, and these will doubtless draw in new species of all sorts of flora and fauna.

Paul Tinsley-Marshall is the Great Fen Monitoring Officer, and under his guidance a few important surveys have already been undertaken to provide a benchmark against which the success of the project can be measured. One of these was for the water vole, another was for butterflies and another is for wintering birds, but in the first two cases the weather was not really on the side of the volunteers involved. However, these and other surveys will be ongoing, so the glitch caused by the odd poor spring and summer will make very little difference to the growing picture. It’s at times like these that I wish I was at least 30 years younger, so that I could see the rewards brought about by so much hard work and foresight.

In case anyone didn’t know, the Wildlife Trust runs a number of workshops every year. Each one is led by an expert, and is designed to improve knowledge of various classes of plants, mammals, insects etc. These enable participants to identify rather more easily their quarry, and
thereby help them with the important work of surveying what is present and also what is not present. Nil returns carry as much significance as those brimming with ticks and totals. Paul cannot achieve what’s needed without volunteer commitment, so why not offer to help out the next time some survey work is needed?

Martin Lovell

BBC reporter visits Great Fen
Mike Dilger says thank you
On Saturday 9th June, the Great Fen was visited by wildlife reporter, Mike Dilger, of The One Show on BBC. He also met with members of the Great Fen Local Group committee.

Mike was visiting the Great Fen in order to thank the Esmée Fairburn Foundation for a significant donation to the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire & Northamptonshire. The Foundation, set up to commemorate the wife of its founder, Ian Fairburn, recently celebrated its 50th anniversary by giving donations to 15 organisations, of which the Great Fen was one. The money will help the Great Fen achieve its goals of restoring wildlife habitats and improving biodiversity in the project area.

Mike had a great time and was particularly interested in the activities of the Local Group and the volunteers who support the Wildlife Trust. He explained that he too had volunteered on various projects in his time and proclaimed the volunteers as “the lifeblood of the organisation”.

Andrew Cuthbert

The joys of moth recording
A rare grey carpet and a mega bioblitz
After a promising start in 2012, the UK’s weather went rapidly downhill in late spring and only recovered some of its normal pattern in the third week of July. For moth recorders such as myself, those weeks of cold, generally unsettled weather spelt a period of relatively empty light traps and short lists of species captured.

Concerns have been raised in other quarters about the possible detrimental effect the low numbers of other invertebrates as well as moths will have had on other wildlife, notably nesting birds that rely upon adequate supplies of larvae and adults to sustain their young. Adverse weather and lack of available food at the right time, combined, do not usually make for successful first or only broods. Fortunately, nature takes occasional conditions like these in its stride, so populations should recover quite quickly except, perhaps, for those species that are already on the brink of local extinction.

Even with all this doom and gloom, there have been occasional glimpses of light that brought the odd surprise. One such example was a Grey Carpet, a moth so uncommon that it has its place on the national Red Data Book and is found only very locally in the Breckland which, as the crow flies, is some 30 miles to the east of where I live. Its larvae have just one foodplant, flixweed, which is found on frequently disturbed ground. It has only ever been recorded four times elsewhere in the UK – once in Essex in 1995, and once in Lincolnshire, Yorkshire and north Norfolk in 2002. It had never been recorded in Huntingdonshire, until one flew into my garden trap in May. Quite why this particular individual should migrate westwards over such a large distance and be drawn to a low-powered...
8w light instead of countless streetlamps, car headlights, lighted windows and those dreadful solar-powered garden lights is something only to be guessed at. Was it pure chance that it flew into my trap, or was it one of many that chose to explore new horizons that night?

Occurrence such as this are one of the many reasons why I like recording moths. I have a good idea what I can expect to find whenever and wherever I place the light trap overnight, whether it be woodland in January, a hedgerow in April, grassland in July or an arable field in October. Opening the trap the following morning often brings surprise catches – moths that are where they shouldn't be, or where they have not been recorded previously, or are on the wing well before or after their usual flight season. Indeed, when I am sorting through a night’s catches I have that childlike anticipation and excitement akin to opening Christmas presents, only with moths this happens throughout the year.

As one who is sufficiently mad enough to capture and record moths at any time of the year, including mid-winter, I am reluctant to introduce potential newcomers to them via an evening session until the numbers flying are enough to fascinate and inspire. Sadly, 2012 did not produce anything like ideal conditions until very late, and well after the time when moth recorders are usually busy emptying their traps nightly. However, one or two keen souls joined me for a couple of sessions at the Countryside Centre, one of them being on the night of the magnificent Bioblitz where, in just four hours, 49 macro-moth species and 12 micro-moth species were recorded. In all, we counted more than 140 moths attracted to the light. Other lights run at Woodwalton Fen that night produced rather fewer moths, thereby illustrating the wealth of species to be found at this splendid little nature reserve. I have recorded moths at the Countryside Centre only occasionally during the last three years or so, yet the eastern end has so far yielded 190 moth species in that time, and the western end 152 species.

\[ \text{Martin Lovell} \]

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**Local History in 2012**

**Great Fen Local History Group brings back memories**

When members of the Great Fen Local History Group and Ramsey Rural Museum volunteers visited Jones Court, Mill House and Red House in Ramsey over the summer, residents were reminded of their youth. Curious items from the past trigger all sorts of stories of childhood exploits, such as working on the land or nights out with friends. Stories like these have often been forgotten, but resurface with the sight of a small glass milk bottle or a bar of carbolic soap from one of our memory boxes that we take to these of these sheltered housing units and residential homes. The volunteers also visited Ramsey Senior Citizens Club at Bury and Park View at Huntingdon.

Members of the Local History Group have been working with the Fenland Museum Partnership creating two travelling exhibitions entitled ‘Living on Land’ and ‘Water and Fen Rivers and Meres’. There will be five exhibitions in total with the overarching theme of ‘Fenland Lives’ and they are funded by Heritage Lottery Fund. The exhibitions will be travelling around the local museums and community centres from September 2013.

The Local History Group is currently researching the history of peat; its formation, exploitation, shrinkage and importance for the future. Our aim
is to create a mobile exhibition which can be taken to events or lent out to interested groups. If you have any photos or memories of peat cutting on the Fens, please get in touch.

Our next meeting is at the Wildlife Trust Countryside Centre at Ramsey Heights on Monday 21st January 2013 at 10.30am. We are always looking for more volunteers, so if you would like to get involved in the work of the Great Fen Local History Group please contact Louise Rackham at the Countryside Centre.

Eilish Storey

Visit to Lakenheath Fen

What the Great Fen might look like
In July, Great Fen Local Group committee members visited the RSPB’s Lakenheath Fen nature reserve. They wanted to get a glimpse of what parts of the Great Fen may look like in a few years.

As David White, the reserve’s information officer explained, the reserve used to be a poplar plantation for Bryant & May who used the wood for making matches and pallets. But since the RSPB acquired the 750-acre site the transformation has been spectacular and rapid. It now attracts around 32,000 visitors a year.

The poplar woods have been retained as a home to the rare golden oriole, and other birds such as blackcaps, garden warblers and woodpeckers. In just 17 years the RSPB has converted the intervening areas of arable farmland into a large wetland, consisting mainly of reedbeds and grazing marshes. 300,000 reeds were planted by hand and these new reedbeds have attracted hundreds of pairs of reed warblers and sedge warblers, as well as bearded tits and marsh harriers. Bitterns have been seen increasingly in all seasons of the year. Barn owls and kingfishers are regularly seen during the winter months.

The site visit gave the committee members a real insight into how our own habitat restoration at Ryme’s Reedbed to the north of Holme Fen may progress, and how quickly tangible results will be achieved.

Andrew Cuthbert

Natural History Museum at Tring

Another Rothschild bequest
While checking out a few historic properties in the home counties recently, I took the opportunity to pop my head around the door of what is officially known as the Natural History Museum at Tring.

For anyone who has not been to the Museum before, I recommend it as one of the places outside of London that is well worth a visit. It is a remarkable collection, even if you only marvel at a few of the eyebrow-raising curiosities that help make it up. At the Great Fen we are familiar with Charles Rothschild and his vision for
Woodwalton Fen, but this museum is based on a collection by another of the Rothschild dynasty, this time Walter. On his death in 1937 he bequeathed the museum and what remained of his vast collection to the state.

Apart from the usual suspects of mammals and birds, the fishes and invertebrates on display are a fascinating reminder of the wealth of wildlife that is, or was, found on our planet. Getting face-to-face with a mounted gorilla, big cat, polar bear, rhinoceros, hippopotamus or sea-lion and knowing that they’re stuffed is reassuring. But meeting live specimens of any of them, and grumpy ones at that, and with nowhere to run is something not to dwell upon. Their sheer size and power must have been pretty daunting for the hunter, even if he did carry a high-velocity rifle and suitable ammunition.

It’s odd, but most of us can bear the sight of long-dead skins on long-dead creatures reasonably well, but I found the mounted dogs more than a little disturbing. Maybe it was the thought that, at some time or other, they might have been loved household pets and never roamed the wild. Their glass eyes are very appealing.

What is on display is a mere fraction of Walter Rothschild’s original collection. No more than 50 or so exotic moths and butterflies are on public view in sealed cabinets, yet this man accumulated some 2,250,000 of them in his time, as well as 300,000 beetles. Not surprising, therefore, that he ran out of room and had the building enlarged to accommodate these and everything else. Significantly, a vast bird collection went to the United States to help clear growing debts, and pay off a blackmailing actress – one wonders how he found the time to entertain her. Nevertheless, we have a great deal to thank the Rothschild family for. Bankers they may have been and still are, but there must have been something unique in their genes to spawn such great naturalists of their time.

_Martin Lovell_

### Autumn and winter

*Where do the birds go?*

In the same way that so many people I know love the warmth and sunshine that a British summer sometimes brings, I’m one of those who have a preference for short days, and cold, steel-grey skies that make your eyes water. I reckon it stems from my youth. What little I can recall of that in wildlife terms was treks across icy and snowbound roads and tracks criss-crossing parts of the South Downs.

For reasons that escape me, I found then, as I did when I lived in the Welsh hills, that some birds don’t desert the high ground as winter beckons. Indeed, they turn their backs on sheltered valleys where more abundant food supplies must be easier to find. Their determination to stay out on the tops can have nothing to do with the pressures of competing for food at lower levels, as observation has shown there is plenty to go around.

Small birds that are found on the Great Fen, such as meadow pipits, will remain at altitude until the ground is frozen. Snow doesn’t seem to bother them too much, particularly where there is livestock to trample vegetation and expose the soil beneath. But why undergo all that fight for survival when other meadow pipits luxuriate down below? I can only think that the reason has more to do with predators, and the relative ease with which they can hunt over some terrain, but not others. I have watched those heather-moor specialists, merlins, zip across undulating upland at knee-height, pouncing on whatever they happen upon. But, given a choice, it must be a lot easier for them to catch their prey if they can spy it over level ground from a long way off. The same must apply to other raptors, although the sparrowhawk relies upon cover, total surprise,
aerial agility and very long legs. Kestrels do take small birds occasionally, as will harriers and, what with predatory mammals hunting them at roost when darkness has fallen, it could well be that high, broken ground is a safer bet if you want to see another day.

So, if anyone wants a bit of entertainment one winter’s afternoon, there’s little better than finding a sheltered, comfortable tussock or bank on which to sit, and scanning the horizon and sky for predators. With the Great Fen attracting ever-larger numbers of waders and wildfowl the luxury of the new bird hide on New Decoy Farm is going to be an unmissable treat, and even more so when the scrapes are there.

Martin Lovell

Walks in 2012
The monthly walks organised by Local Group chairman Adrian Kempster have raised over £400 in 2012 for the Great Fen.
Whatever the weather, everyone enjoyed themselves. Here are a few pictures:
Great Fen Local Group committee

In the interests of transparency and in the hopes that you may recognise and approach them with your ideas at walks and talks, the committee is detailed below. Anyone who wishes to help on a casual basis, or get more involved, then please speak to one of the committee. You may be able to help on a stand at a local event, distribute posters and leaflets, prepare the Countryside Centre for talks, or help with refreshments. Any assistance you can give will be greatly appreciated.

Many thanks to Vanessa Bennett and Nigel Green who both stood down in 2012. We welcome Paula Monaghan as Events Secretary and Mike Grant as joint Publicity Secretary. Chairman Adrian's walks have already raised over £400 in donations. As we consider our fundraising for 2013, we would like to hear your thoughts on how we could spend the money we raise. The committee would like to thank members for their support at a well-attended December talk on kingfishers. Seeing so many friendly faces on the night makes the effort of organizing our talks all the more worthwhile. Do please keep up your support for the 2013 talks.

Chairman: Adrian Kempster

I run the midweek rambles for the Great Fen Local Group. Some of the ramblers among you may know that I am the Footpath Officer for Huntingdon Ramblers Association and I serve on the area committee for that group.

Treasurer: Martin Lovell

I am involved with moth recording and would like to form a small group to join me for moth light-trapping sessions on Woodwalton Fen. Sessions usually run until midnight or later. If anyone is interested in joining me, please let me know.

Secretary: Andrew Cuthbert

I started volunteering in December 2010 and now regularly attend group volunteer parties as well as volunteering individually on a weekly basis at the Wildlife Trust Countryside Centre.

Events Secretary: Paula Monaghan

I became a volunteer ranger for the Great Fen in 2012. I also volunteer for the Wildlife Trust ecology group and I am involved in the Big Wetland Bat surveys at the Fen. I am looking forward to helping the Local Group and feel proud to be part of the Great Fen.

Fund-raising Secretary: Clare Dean

I am a Watch leader volunteer on the Great Fen. Watch is the wildlife group for 8–12-year-olds meeting on the third Saturday of each month at the Wildlife Trust Countryside Centre. We run a varied programme with outdoor and indoor wildlife activities in all weathers. I also volunteer for the work parties held on alternate Fridays.

Local History Group Rep: Eilish Storey

I am involved in the Local History Group, a partnership between staff and volunteers on the Great Fen and Ramsey Rural Museum. We are compiling an archive of local history of the Great Fen area. This helps bring the landscape to life and is key to interpreting the long-term vision of the Great Fen and engaging a broad spectrum of the population. New members are always welcome.

Publicity Secretaries: Mike & Cindy Grant

We both have an interest in wildlife and public access and regularly walk in the Great Fen area as it is on our doorstep. We are really enjoying seeing the Great Fen develop and the new habitats evolve. Mike is a wild plant enthusiast and has an interest in the broader landscape, and the use and history of the Fens.
Local Group events 2013

Talks
Unless stated otherwise, talks are held at the Wildlife Trust Countryside Centre, Chapel Road, Ramsey Heights, PE26 2RS. 7.30-9.00pm, donation £3, booking advisable

Fri 8 Mar Dragonflies by Henry Curry. Henry is a local dragonfly expert and Secretary of the British Dragonfly Society.

Fri 5 Apr Fenland Waterways by Tim Atkin. Tim and his wife Wendy have cruised the River Great Ouse since 1985. In that time they have had two boats based at Ely Marina. The first one was a Norman 27 and the current one is an Atlanta 27. From the outset Tim developed an interest in the history of the Fenland waterways, and this illustrated talk arose from that.

Fri 3 May Bird Ringing by Paul Tinsley-Marshall. Paul is the Great Fen Monitoring Officer. As well as keeping an eye on all the wildlife colonising the Fen he is a licensed bird ringer.

Fri 7 Jun Folk Cures & Remedies by Tom Doig. Previously Director of the Cambridge and County Folk Museum, Tom's interest is in Victorian rural life. He writes and lectures on social and local history and appears on BBC Radio Cambs.

Fri 5 Jul Wildlife in the Middle Level by Cliff Carson. Cliff is Environmental Officer for the Middle Level Commissioners drainage board. His talk covers some history of drainage of the Fens and historic structures as well as Middle Level wildlife initiatives including otter holt construction, water vole recovery support, kingfisher nest site opportunities, bat and barn owl box provision, and eel access.

Fri 2 Aug, Fri 6 Sep, Fri 4 Oct
Titles and speakers to be confirmed.

Fri 1 Nov Farming and Wildlife by Nicholas Watts MBE. Nicholas is owner of Vine House Farm near Spalding and an award-winning conservationist. His experience stems from a lifetime’s work of farming and studying the birds on his farm. The talk describes why our farmland birds are in decline and what can be done about it.

Fri 6 Dec Title and speaker to be confirmed.

Walks
Unless stated otherwise, walks start at 10am, donation £2.50, booking advisable

Wed 16 Jan Winter Bird Ramble. Start from Woodwalton village (grid ref. 227/TL215808). A 5-mile walk passing the site of the old Cistercian monastery at Sawtry.

Wed 13 Mar Signs of Early Bird Migration. Start from Jackson’s Bridge, Woodwalton Fen (grid ref. 227/TL235849) for a 4-mile walk.

Wed 24 Apr Bird Song, Bluebells and Orchids. Start from the Cross Keys pub in Upwood (grid ref. 227/TL259828). A 5-mile walk through Upwood Meadow to Lady’s Wood.

Wed 8 May Woodwalton Dusk Watch. Listen for the sounds of nature settling down for the night. Meet at Jackson’s Bridge, Woodwalton Fen (grid ref. 227/TL235849) at 8.30pm for an evening walk around Woodwalton Fen. Bring insect repellent, binoculars and a torch.

Wed 12 Jun Ramble through Monks Wood. Meet at the south end of the wood (grid ref. 225/TL199792) for a 5-mile walk.

Please see website for walks later in the year.

Walks – Adrian Kempster 01487 815994, 07983 850886 panda@kempster1947.fsnet.co.uk

General enquiries about the Great Fen Local Group: greatfenlocal@gmail.com
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Booking and contacts
Talks – Please book through the Great Fen team at the Wildlife Trust Countryside Centre in Ramsey Heights: 01487 710420 or info@greatfen.org.uk

Walks – Adrian Kempster 01487 815994, 07983 850886 panda@kempster1947.fsnet.co.uk

Quiz Night – general knowledge fund-raiser
Sat 15th June, 7.15pm
Bury Village Hall, Brookfield Way, Bury, PE26 2LH
Bring a team of up to 6, or turn up and join one.
Info & tickets: Clare Dean 01487 710134
Ticket price will be a donation (amount TBC)