

HADDENHAM CONSERVATION SOCIETY

SPRING 2023

The Committee for 2023/24 is:

Barclay Arnott	740500
Ann Biggs	740810
John Burgess	749441
Sheila Dickerson	749443
Susan Everitt, Treas.	740352
Elver Langley	740583
Wendy Lanman	741138
Robert Norman	740473
Chris Prescott	749038

Krisztina Lakatos

All numbers are 01353

Please feel free to get in touch with any committee member with questions or information you might have. If you have any specific records of flora and fauna send them to Sheila Dickerson on hadconsoc@gmail.com

Send articles or photos for the newsletter to Sally on hadconsoc@gmail.com

HCS website:
www.hcs.tinaboneuk.co.uk

Membership information

Subscription rates

1 Jan to 31 Dec 2023

Individual: £8 Family: £12

If you wish to join the Society, send your cheque, made out to Haddenham Conservation Society, with your name, address and telephone number, to: Susan Everitt, 21 Twenty Pence Road, Wilburton, Ely CB6 3RM

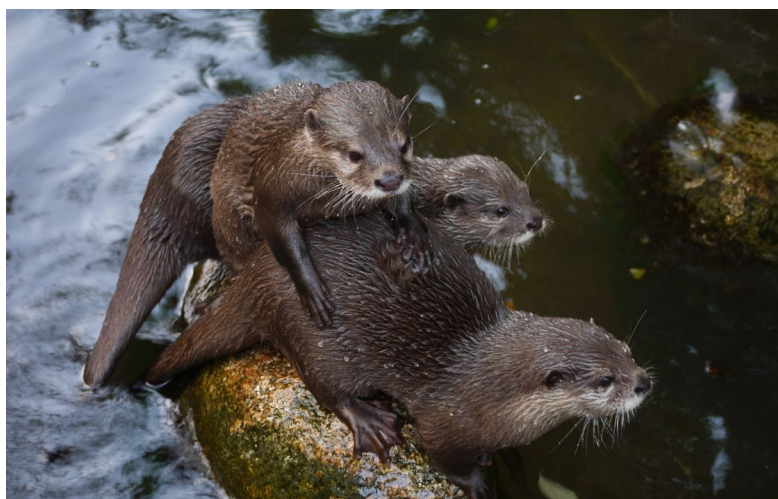
This will entitle you to receive our regular newsletter and will give you free entry to the 7 winter talks, a saving of £2.50 per person per session.

Otter-ly Magical

Contributed by Barbara Grafton

I dream of them, crossing like pirates the East Anglian tundra, ears honed to the wind, carved out of laughter and let loose more currents and bends in their bodies than a whole river. Kenneth Steven, Otters.

Ever since I read and re-read Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter* and Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* as a youngster, I have loved otters: beautiful, intelligent, shrewd, playful and untameable, slipping with ease between land and water.



Back from the brink

The otter found in the UK is the Common, European or Eurasian (*Lutra lutra*) Otter. They are mustelids, carnivorous mammals, along with weasels, ferrets, polecats, pine martens, badgers, mink, and others not found in the UK such as wolverines, which evolved in the Oligocene Epoch some 30 million years ago. Otters first inhabited the British Isles 500,000 years ago in the Cromerian Interglacial period.

Humans have hunted otters for their pelts for centuries, including with otter dogs. Hunting in the UK was only banned in 1978. The 19th century saw a huge demand for their fur to make coats, hats, and collars. Hunting, polluted watercourses and habitat destruction including land drainage brought them to near-extinction by the 1960s, and they had disappeared entirely across East Anglia. Now, they are one of the few success stories in the catastrophic collapse of Nature in the UK, although populations are still fragmented. Aided by reintroduction programmes using captive-bred otters, which started in East Anglia in 1983, the construction of artificial holts made from breeze blocks, paving slabs or log piles, and watercourse/habitat management, they had returned to every English county by 2011. They are a species requiring special

protection according to the EU Habitats Directive, and are protected by law under Schedules 5 and 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 which makes it illegal to capture, kill, disturb or injure one. The only exception to this is when they are found inside a commercial managed fishery where Natural England will permit them to be caught and removed to outside the fishery boundary. Without a licence, it is illegal to even possess or sell a stuffed otter.



Looks and skills

It is impossible to misidentify an otter. Covered in two layers of insulating sleek brown fur (the outer layer waterproof) which is often paler on chest and belly, they have a broad face, long slender body, long powerful tapered tails, short legs, and webbed feet. They are large mammals: mature males, known as dogs or boars, weigh around 7.5kg (16.5lb) at the age of 14 months, while mature females, known as bitches or sows, will weigh 4.6kg (10lb) by the age of ten months. A large male in his prime could weigh up to 12kg (26.5lb). Nose to tail, both sexes measure 94-155cm (37-61in). At the shoulder, height is 25-30cm (9.8-11.8in).

Otters are fast swimmers, travelling at about one metre per second underwater or low in the water, and have the stamina to maintain a swimming speed of around 2km/h (1.2 mph) for up to 8 hours. They can also dive to depths up to 14m (46ft.)

Eyes high on their heads, the ability to close their ears and nose underwater and to hold their breath for up to 45 seconds, are further adaptations for these expert swimmers. Generally, to avoid waterlogging their fur, they spend more time on land than in water, travelling with a characteristic humpback walk. They are renowned for their playfulness, reflected in one of their collective nouns being a 'romp' of otters (along with a 'bevy', 'family', and 'lodge').

Territory

Depending on habitat and food availability, otters can have large territories and travel long distances (a male's home range can be about 13km (8 miles) long and up to 40km (25 miles). To travel so far and to feed, they need unpolluted moving and still freshwater sources such as rivers, lakes, ponds (including in gardens), gravel pits, canals, ditches, wetlands, fen, and marshes.

Along the coast, otters need freshwater to remove sea salt which reduces the waterproofing in their coats.



Their territories are marked by greenish-black-grey droppings, called spraint, deposited on rocks and logs beside water. They are packed with bones, feathers, scales, fur and shells, the indigestible remains of prey. To a human nose, spraint smells sweetish, often described as like jasmine tea or freshly mown hay. For otters, spraint's multiple scent components communicate information about age, gender, reproductive status, and even the identity of individuals. Females with young will reduce sprainting to avoid detection.

Voracious appetites

Otters spend 4-6 hours each day hunting and foraging in water and on land as they need to eat as much as 20-33% of their entire body weight, but they are so strong and agile they can take down prey equal to their own size. Hunting takes place mostly between dusk and dawn (although coastal otters are usually out in daylight).

They have a strong preference for fish (as much as 95% of their diet) including trout, salmon, carp, tench, grayling, pike, perch and, especially in East Anglia, eels. Taking weakened fish, as they often do, they help maintain the health of wild fish stocks. They will also eat water birds such as coots and moorhens, small mammals including water voles, water rats and rabbits, eggs, insects, amphibians in spring, freshwater mussels and crustaceans, including alien species such as the American Signal Crayfish and Chinese Mitten Crab. For many of these prey species they are competing directly with American Mink, and they will behave aggressively towards them (and to other mustelids – there has even been a report of an otter fighting a badger).

Homely holts

Otters create dens, called holts, lined with soft vegetation in riverbanks, crevices amongst tree roots or rocks, in thick undergrowth, and in man-made structures such as culverts, pipes, and artificial holts. Each holt has several entrances, including underwater, and may have more than one chamber including one for use as a latrine. They may have more than one holt, including a natal holt for birthing and a nursery

holt for raising the pups after they reach three months. While away from the holt, otters will rest in overgrown vegetation on constructed 'couches'.

They are 'aseasonal' (all year round) breeders, with one litter of cubs or pups a year, although there is a peak of births between May and August depending on location. Generally solitary animals, pairs are together only for mating. Typically, females will breed from the age of two and males from the age of three. Sadly, some otters may never have the chance to breed as typical lifespans are just five years in the wild (the oldest known was 16 years). In captivity, a female at Zürich Zoo lived to be 18 years 2 months.

Two or three blind, grey-furred cubs or pups will be born in the holt, up to 13cm (5in) long and weighing about 100g (3.5oz). Their eyes open after around 30 days, and they will be outside the holt within ten weeks. The female will introduce them to water at around three months' old, and a month later, fully weaned, they will accompany her on fishing trips. Males do not participate in caring for the young, but the female may have the help of previous offspring which remain with the family for up to 14 months before seeking their own territories.

Vulnerabilities

Otters have almost no natural predators in the UK, although Golden Eagles in Scotland will take pups, as may our largest bird of prey the Sea Eagle or White-tailed Eagle. The highest non-natural mortality risk for otters is humans. Many are killed by traffic, especially in urban areas, some drown in nets – including eel fyke nets – but some meet violent, illegal, deaths by people such as gamekeepers. Habitat loss, pollution and human activity, including dog walking, remain major causes of death or displacement.

Only 14% of rivers in England are at good ecological status, and all fail chemical standards primarily due to historic pollution. Otters are extremely vulnerable to contaminated water, including oil spills that de-waterproof their coats, and poisoning by heavy metals and pesticides. Fish and other food sources are also reduced in polluted waters. Traces of drugs and medicines, and the pervasive plastic pellets, deposited in our water courses are also present in otters' bodies – as they are in ours. Otters are also vulnerable to the cat parasite toxoplasmosis, which they can pick up from droppings.



Otter-spotting

So, how does one go about seeing these beautiful, engaging mammals in the wild?

Great opportunists, otters are increasingly sighted in urban areas and are well documented in cities such as Sheffield, Manchester, Birmingham and London, as well as in smaller places such as Colchester, Thetford, Winchester and Exeter. It is much easier to see them in known spots in towns and cities, but it is possible to see them in the countryside and top locations for them in our county are the RSPB reserves at Fowlmere, Fen Drayton and the Ouse Washes; Woodwalton Fen; Burwell Fen and the adjacent Wicken Fen; and Lark Rise Farm in Barton.

In 2022, staff and volunteers of the Wildlife Trust for Beds, Cambs and Northants and members of the Cambridgeshire Mammal Group undertook the seventh survey on Cambridgeshire's otter population (following on from 1992, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2012 and 2017) across a total of 292 sites. Otters were found on all main rivers and across many smaller watercourses. The Middle Level Commissioners' provision of many artificial holts in the Middle Level of the fens has proved to have been very successful in attracting otters. Otters were also present in Cambridge City. The survey showed that overall the population in our county appears to be stable. The full results are here <https://bit.ly/421hTID>.

For the last four years we have had confirmed sightings of an otter in Haddenham's own watery wildlife reserve, Guppy's Pond, as reported by Wendy Lanman in the Spring 2021, Spring 2022 and Winter 2022 editions of this newsletter. The lake is perfect otter territory, protected by a no fishing policy for over 30 years, with ample cover, and breeding swans, mallards, moorhens, and coots.

Now is a good time for otter-spotting, as females may be active with their young around water bodies. Of course, take the greatest care not to cause disturbance to any otters or their habitat.

They are noisy creatures, so listen out for them splashing into water, scrabbling on banks, making vocalisations such as 'chittering' threat calls, squeaking or whistling contact calls, and the 'chirrup' from young cubs. Look for spraint, half-eaten fish, piles of fish scales and mussel shells, particularly under bridges, muddy semi-circular 'slides' into a river, and five-toed webbed prints in sand or mud (although only four toe prints may be visible) around 40-80mm (1.5-3in) across. These are easy to differentiate from the similar but much smaller prints of American Mink, and from dog, fox and badger prints which will show claws, whereas otter prints do not. They swim with their heads and backs low in the water, leaving a V-shaped wake, but their tails will be visible when they dive. If they are underwater, you will see a stream of bubbles. Even that subtle trace, I promise, will give you the thrill of knowing there is an otter about.



Helping otters

There are many ways to help otter conservation. The Otter Trust has two Norfolk-based reserves, at Dickleburgh Moor and Earsham Wetland Centre: <https://www.theottertrust.org/>. The Devon-based Wild Otter Trust <https://ukwildottertrust.org/>, which has a 100% success rate in rehabilitating and returning otters to the wild, has an otter adoption programme.

If you see a wild otter locally, please complete a report via The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Environmental Records Centre (CPERC) <https://bit.ly/40zsov7> which is part of the Cambridgeshire Mammal Group's 'CambsMammalSpot' project. Nationally, the free Mammal Mapper app from the Mammal Society can be used to record sightings on the go: <https://bit.ly/2Vxrakp>.

Images:

<https://pixabay.com/photos/otter-mammal-clawed-otter-friends-1096993/> smartart,
<https://pixabay.com/photos/animal-otter-mammal-good-water-755677/> Lenka Sevcikova
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/anax/31187049387/> Jeremy Halls,
<https://pixabay.com/photos/waters-wildlife-nature-mammal-3369253/> Lutz Peter
<https://pixabay.com/photos/otter-stream-wilderness-nature-4661986/> Jurgen



Dawn Chorus at the Gallery Garden

Contributed by Ann Biggs

A single Wren opens the greatest symphony ever written, her song heralding first light on a May morn, calling dawn colours to streak an ever-brightening sky. In alto voice, Blackbirds add their melodies to hers, welcoming other birds to greet a new day, while in distant trees, Willow Warblers sing a descending scale to liven a two-tone drone from a pair of Chiffchaffs.

Adding rhythm, a Woodpecker drums a staccato beat, as high in swaying branches, Thrushes repeat regular phrases to add variation to the swelling sound. A voice replaces Blackbirds in soprano range, a Robin, with a peal of power, silences the other singers and holds the stage alone.

During weekends in July, Cambridge Open Studios visit our garden with resident studio artists throwing open their doors to visitors for four weekends. The Gallery and Tea Shop will be open as usual on Saturdays, so come to get insight into how 'art' is made.

Meanwhile overhead, heated by rising air, hirundines fly an azure sky and decimate the clouds of newly hatched insects until Swifts, our sickle-winged screamers, arrive to rule the sky once more.

Each dawn will continue to thrill but in years to come, if we fail to make space for our birds, the chorus will fade, passing into history, leaving Silence!



Join New Life on the Old West on Saturday 24 June in Fairchild's Meadow. The event will run from 11 am to 2 pm and is free. The Bumblebee Conservation Trust will be combining a stall with bumblebee walks in the adjacent meadows, a local ecologist will be running botanical surveys in the meadow, the Cambridgeshire Mammal Group will be doing trapping overnight. Other attractions include RSPB Operation Turtle Dove, the Cambridgeshire County Moth Recorder, a local pollination expert, HistoryNeedsYou, Fen End Farm organic apple juice for sale and much more.

New Life ON THE OLD WEST Made possible with **Heritage Fund**

OPEN FOR NATURE DAY: HADDENHAM

Free event!

Saturday 24th June 2023 (11am - 2pm)

Fairchild's Meadow, Chewells Lane, Haddenham, CB6 3SS

A day to discover local wildlife and find out how you can support our much loved species

We will be joined by:

- RSPB
- Bumblebee Conservation Trust
- Cambridgeshire Mammal Group
- & lots of other local groups!

Let's help wildlife thrive!

For more information visit WWW.NEWLIFEOLDWEST.ORG.UK



Drought Persists

Contributed by Barbara Grafton

Despite what may feel to those of us fed up with grey skies like a lot of rain this spring, most of East Anglia, including the Cam Ely Ouse catchment, remains in drought. In fact, East Anglia saw the driest February since 1959, although it was followed by a wet March delivering well above average rainfall. In our area we need steady rain over the next couple of months to reduce the drought risk during what may well be another baking hot, dry summer.

John Leyland from the Environment Agency has made this plea: *As ever, it is important that we all continue to use water carefully to protect not just our water resources; but*

our precious environment and the wildlife that depends on it.

For the latest Environment Agency briefing see <http://www.cprecams.org.uk/downloads/Environment-Agency-East-Anglia-Drought-Briefing-Update-Apr2023.pdf>

Image

<https://pixabay.com/photos/climate-change-drought-climate-dry-2241061/> Jody Davis

In Full Colour

The Winter 2022 Newsletter led with an article by John Burgess 'Jack Frost Pays a Visit' but sadly his beautiful photos appeared in yellow and black! Do visit our website www.hcs.tinaboneuk.co.uk, go to 'Newsletters and Publications' and click on volume 38, no 1 for a visual treat.

'The Mound'

Contributed by Carly Juneau

On Saturday 29 April, which must have been one of the hottest and most gloriously sunny days of the year, a group of green-fingered folk met at an area of the recreation ground infamously known as 'The Mound'.

After submitting a proposal to the Parish Council over two years ago, I set about growing plants and contacting nurseries to supply the planting scheme. The proposal aimed to introduce a range of low-maintenance, drought-tolerant species of plants to an area that had become a monoculture of Nettle and Lady's Bedstraw. Given the mild, wet spring, the removal of the existing vegetation was no mean feat. After consecutive weeks of hand pulling, digging out, raking and hoeing the main offenders were considerably less in number, if not totally eradicated!

A call for help with the planting up of the site saw members of the Conservation Society, Chris Prescott and Krisztina Lakatos, join other Haddenham residents to dig, water and bed in a range of new plants.

The newly exposed ground was sown with vast amounts of perennial and annual wildflower seed,



Photos © Martha Howe.



including Poppy, Cornflower, Corn Marigold, Corncockle and Oxeye Daisy.

Five main areas were then prepared to create year-round interest and much needed biodiversity by mulching with cardboard, soil improver and woodchip to create good growing conditions. Lavender, Rosemary and Yarrow were then planted. Further additions included over 150 wildflower plugs plus Comfrey, Camomile and Nasturtium.

It is hoped that in years to come, as the plants mature and the wildflowers self-seed, this once overlooked area of Haddenham will provide food and shelter for the local insects, birds and butterflies, as well as a pretty sight for the community to enjoy.

Help!

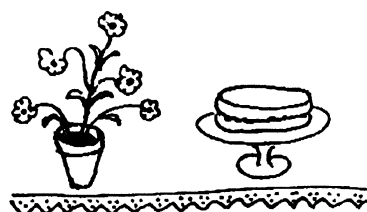
We are looking for a member/non-member keen to take on the task of arranging our Winter/Spring talks with immediate effect.

Sheila Dickerson has been doing this for 10+ years. The time has now come to relinquish this enjoyable task to someone else. She is willing to guide someone through the first year.

We look forward to welcoming anyone interested in Nature – wildlife of land, sea and air – and not forgetting plants.

Sheila can be contacted on mobile 07917431912.

If no one volunteers, there can be no future Winter Talks.



Plant and Cake Sale

Haddenham felt very quiet on the morning of Saturday 29 April. But we still made £103 on cakes and £93 on garden plants. Thank you to everyone who helped or brought things to sell.

Chair's Report

As always, thanks are due to many people who have contributed to the ongoing success and vitality of the Conservation Society. Especial mention goes to Sheila, for researching and signing up speakers for the winter talks such as this evening's, and to the speakers themselves, who often travel a significant distance to give their talks, and to Sally, for editing the Society Newsletter, and to all contributors.

Reporting on the year

We are pleased to have found a location for Paul Mason's memorial, which will be a Hornbeam tree and bench on Bury Lane on the edge of the proposed football pitches. It is the Parish Council's intention to include trees and hedges as part of the football area, and hopefully there will be opportunities for some conservation educational features for the many young people who will be using the pitches.

Old railway line to Wilburton

We have been communicating with the Parish Council over the use of the old railway line to Wilburton. The landowners have recently withdrawn the permissive use which has existed for several years. However, the line has been in use as a footpath ever since the railway was taken up, and there was an article by County Councillor Bill Hunt in the latest *Village Voice* with reminiscences of his own use. It would be good to assemble more written evidence of usage going back more than 20 years, so let us know if you have any evidence which can be put forward to support the case for the line being an official public footpath.

Meanwhile we have continued with our usual maintenance of Nine Acre Wood and the Burial Ground on Church Lane. As you know, the Burial Ground has been closed since part of the wall collapsed last year, but I believe the PC has arranged for it to be rebuilt soon and the area reopened. During the autumn we helped New Life on the Old West with wildflowers in the closed cemetery.

Membership subscriptions

After many years of membership subscriptions at £8 for singles and £12 for couples, ever-rising prices, including for rental of this room for talks, means that we need to increase to £10 for singles and £15 for couples, as of January 2024. If you have standing orders, please adjust them.

Some sad news to announce – the recent death of Kathy Mackinnon, whom some of you

will have known. Kathy was a world leader in conservation matters across the globe. Her funeral is on Friday at 2pm at the Holy Trinity, and a reception is at 4.15 here in the Arkenstall. The family have kindly agreed for part of any collection to be donated to the Conservation Society.

Finally, turning to upcoming events, this year's Plant and Cake Stall will be on the Green on Saturday morning, April 29 at 9.30 am. As always, all contributions of cakes and plants will be welcome.

On the same day there will be some wildflower planting on the Mound at Haddenham recreation ground, starting at 10.30 am.

Chris Prescott
11 April 2023

AGM Minutes

Held on – 11 April 2023 at the Arkenstall Centre, Haddenham.

Apologies for Absence – Tracey, Carly, Wendy, Elver.

Matters Arising – The minutes of the last year's meeting were read out by John Burgess, there were no matters arising.

The Minutes were Approved – Michael Church (proposed), Robert Norman (seconded).

Finances – Printed copies of last year's financial report were distributed among the guests, there were no questions arising.

Chair's Report – Chris read out his report of the year's activities, thanking everyone for their efforts in the process (*see left*).

Chris advised that the committee were willing to be re-elected including our new member Krisztina Lakatos. The guests were asked if anyone else would like to join the committee, there were no responses.

The committee were elected en bloc – Barbara York (proposed), Ian Dickerson (seconded).

Date of next AGM – 10/04/24

The meeting closed at 8.10pm.

News from Guppy's Pond

Contributed by Wendy Lanman

No further Otter sightings since the last newsletter, but the Swans have restored their nest and the pen is sitting on eggs. As there have been no cygnets in the past two years we wonder whether the cob is infertile but are still hopeful. It might have been the cold weather last year or the attack by the geese the year before ...

The reeds were dug out by not one but two machine boats this time for a full day, after the reeds had been sprayed to weaken them in November. Huge piles of uprooted and cut reeds were deposited on the banks and the worked areas remained murky and smelly with bits of floating debris for many weeks afterwards. Since then we have had torrential rain a couple of times and the water is now very clear. However, a sprinkling of young reeds is appearing, so we are holding our breath and willing them not to multiply. Something we shall have to monitor closely.

I heard the Reed Warblers a couple of days ago. I hope there will be enough reeds around the pond edges to enable them to nest as I so love to hear their chatter throughout the summer.

No dragonflies yet but plenty of butterflies – Brimstone, Orange-tip, White, Peacock and

beautifully vibrant Large Blues. Bee flies are everywhere, their second comeback year after several years of absence. This is just their normal cycle and it's lovely to see them again.

Blue Tits, Long-tailed Tits and Great Tits are so numerous even I have noticed them. I have been very busy so not as consistent an observer as I should have been. The Ring-necked Doves are also back after a couple years of absence and there are plenty of Wood Pigeons and Stock Doves too. A Blackbird was singing its heart out at the top of a tree yesterday early evening.

The Mallard Duck population has grown and we're seeing more of them regularly again. The Moorhens opposite us have four chicks, hatched two days ago. So far, no geese this year and, although they are lovely birds, they do tend to take over the pond a bit too energetically so I'm hoping they will stay away.

The fish have come up from the depths of the pond, the lily pads are starting to float on the surface, and I heard the frogs singing earlier this year. So, just a bit more warmth and all will be well.



*Moorhen
photographed
by Simon
Stirrup.*

© Simon Stirrup

HCS Facebook

Contributed by Rachel Burgess

Some of the sightings reported over the months of February, March and April from the Haddenham Conservation Society Facebook page. Please join the Facebook page and share sightings and photographs for us all to enjoy. If you are unsure of what you might have seen, ask on the page and it's likely another member will be able to assist with identification.

Long Tail Tits *17 February* Haddenham. BY
Peregrine *17 February* Haddenham. BY
Frogs *17 February* Haddenham. BY
Moorhen *6 March* Aldreth. SS
Swallows *6 April* Haddenham. SD
House Martins *6 April* Haddenham. SD
Raven *10 April* Aldreth. JB
Chiffchaff *14 April* Aldreth. JB
Great Spotted Woodpecker *15 April* Haddenham. JR



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