

HADDENHAM CONSERVATION SOCIETY

SPRING 2021

The Committee for 2020/21 is:

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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

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

Membership information

Subscription rates

1 Jan to 31 Dec 2021

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.

Ratty

Contributed by Jackie Mitchell and Tim Cox

'Since early morning he had been swimming in the river, in company with his friends the ducks. And when the ducks stood on their heads suddenly, as ducks will, he would dive down and tickle their necks, just under where their chins would be if ducks had chins...'

We have yet to see our furry friends tickle the chins of the ducks in our pond (there are plenty they could do that to) but we have been honoured and delighted that this rare little creature has decided to take up home with us. But what is it? If you recognise the quote above from the acclaimed book *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame you may recognise that this describes some of the antics of 'Ratty', an unfortunate misnomer as Ratty was actually a Water Vole.



We have lived in Haddenham for 13 years and have a large natural, clay-lined pond which we understood was originally dug for the clay to make local bricks. Whilst clay is no longer 'harvested', leaving us with surrounding soil that I swear I could dig up and make pots from; we're nevertheless the lucky ones as we have this beautiful pond on which we have seen all sorts of wildlife, both unusual and common visit over the years.

But back to Ratty...

Until just a few weeks ago we had no inkling that Water Voles came to our pond. We have seen the occasional true rat but put that down to nearby neighbours having chickens. Then one afternoon in spring, as Tim was walking over the wooden bridge across the pond, he caught sight of something small and furry sitting on steps just above the water, merrily munching its way along a grass stem.

Tim watched fascinated until it finished eating and shot off. Excitedly, he told me about it and said he didn't think it was a rat. The main distinguishing characteristic of Water Voles is that they have rounded snouts rather than pointed ones like rats. "Yes! It had a rounded snout" said Tim. "Well, I think so..."

Of course, we had to Google it. Features of a Water Vole: rounded snout, hairy feet, hairy tail, and hairy ears that are largely hidden from view. The problem was they are roughly the same size as a brown rat and, on a fleeting glance, could be confused with one. We needed to find out more.

Luckily, we have a nature cam that we regularly set up in the garden to take photos and videos of wild visitors. We set it up just at the spot Tim had seen 'Ratty' and waited. We had plenty of footage: Mrs Duck with her ducklings, Moorhens feeding their chicks, even a Badger....and then, there it was! We caught video footage of a brown ball of fur darting along the steps and snacking on grass stems. Careful examination confirmed that it was indeed a Water Vole.

But now what should we do? We were completely aware of how rare it is to see these little characters; that they are protected and considered an endangered species in the UK, and feature on the 'red list' of endangered mammals in England. What a responsibility!

It should be mentioned at this point that although our pond is natural, we have had to do an immense amount of work on it in recent years, as the banks were eroding, and therefore enlarging the pond whilst also silting it up (too many ducks and carp nibbling at the edges). Dry summers and huge willows added their burden and meant that a pond extending 15 x 46 m (50 x 150 ft) dried up to a puddle just 4.5 m (15 ft) across and a few centimetres deep in the summer and autumn of 2019.

So, having boarded the banks around half of the pond with thick timbers a few years previously, we had no option but to complete the work around the rest of the pond, dredging and deepening it too as we finished the work to stabilise the banks. We now have a pond with stable banks, but with sheer sides. We have put in ramps and steps to allow ducklings and Moorhen chicks to get out; as well as allowing us, deer, Foxes and Badgers (to name just a few) get down to the water when needed. But would this suffice for Water Voles too? Alarmingly we were about to find out...and go to the rescue.

We had yet to spot where the Vole had its nest. A latrine and area of flattened grass can often be a signal, but we hadn't seen it. With thick reed and rushes around much of the pond it could be anywhere, but we didn't want to wade in and risk displacing it.

A short while later Tim was walking by the pond when he saw a shape swimming in circles

in the water. Looking closer he could see that it was small and furry. And it seemed to be in trouble. Grabbing a fallen branch from a willow he reached out, the animal grabbed on and Tim hauled it in and onto the bank. The poor thing was exhausted and bedraggled. It sat huddled, gasping for air. Was it a Vole? It was much smaller than the adult we'd seen previously, but looked the same. We put it in a cardboard box with some grass stems and newspaper to hide under and left it alone to recover – we hoped.

It was indeed a Water Vole, but only a baby; well, a youngster anyway. We found out that babies leave the nest after 28 days or so, allowing the mother to get on with having multiple broods in a season. Perhaps this had been its first venture from the nest and whilst the adults had worked out how to get to and from the water, this little chap hadn't yet mastered the technique.

Unable to find any advice online and with no response from phone calls and twitter messages to Water Vole conservationists we had to make a decision. Water Voles need to eat 80% of their weight a day to survive and the longer we kept it in a box the more we surmised it would struggle. Luckily the Vole recovered over a couple of hours. Its fur dried out and it ran round the box, full of energy. Feeling that it was best to let it go, we released it close to the steps where we had caught footage of what must have been at least one parent, expecting the nest to be close by. The Vole shot off into the undergrowth, hopefully living to see another day. As it happened, later the same day we found the Vole latrine on the other side of the pond, nowhere near where we'd seen it munching grass stems!

We have since set up the nature cam close to the latrine and put in many more ramps around the pond. Although we have yet to see them again on camera we have watched them from the opposite bank. They come out in the daytime, so by sitting quietly and waiting we have seen glimpses of the furry shapes scurrying from clump of grass to patch of reed back and forth along the pond edge. Sadly, Water Voles don't live very long, but with luck Ratty is here to stay for now and, hopefully, will raise many more babies.



Slaphead spotted in an Orchard Way garden. Babs York confirmed that it is an adult male Blackbird that has lost its head feathers. This is quite common at the end of the breeding season as their reserves are depleted. The feathers should grow again around September.

Quite Different After All: House Martins, Swallows & Swifts

Contributed by Barbara Grafton

Wow! They've arrived! From thousands of miles away in Africa, heralds of summer. The Swallows first, in late March, the House Martins in mid-April and the Swifts later that month. It is thrilling to see these long-distance migrants performing their high-speed aerial acrobatics over the villages. Like many, I found it hard to tell them apart in flight. But some basic facts about their behaviour, body shapes, sizes, and calls helped me with identification, and hopefully they will help you, too.

Although there is competition between them for food, they favour different heights for catching insects. The Swallows prefer low-flying over open areas such as farmland, wetland and parks. The House Martins are more mid-height (say, house-eaves) specialists, and also hunt mayflies, damselflies and dragonflies on wetlands. The Swifts are the high-fliers, chasing insects up to 1,000 metres in the warmest weather. In colder weather they descend and can scoop up water although generally they catch raindrops from the air.

The Swallows and Martins, closely related species, fly at similar speeds, covering between 11-20 m a second (25-45 mph), their wings beating 4-9 times a second. The fighter jets of the three are the aptly named Swifts, actually close relatives of hummingbirds. Their typical flight speed is 12 m/s (22-26 mph). However, during one study (rb.gy/ko2kj0), they were recorded flying at 20.8 m/s (47 mph), with one Swift registering a top speed of 31 m/s (69.3 mph). The birds occasionally reached top speed during steep climbs. This means that Swifts are faster than Peregrine Falcons in powered level flight.

House Martin - <i>Delichon urbicum</i>	Swallow - <i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Common Swift - <i>Apus apus</i>
		
Stocky body, Orca-shaped Broad, pointed & short wings Forked, short, chunky tail Short, thin beak	Slender, elegant body Long wings Tail distinctly forked with long streamers Short, wide beak	Slim, tapering body Long, crescent-shaped wings Forked, short tail Short, wide beak
Length: 12-13 cm Wingspan: 26-29 cm Weight: 15-23 g	Length: 17-19 cm Wingspan: 32-25 cm Weight: 16-25 g	Length: 16-17 cm Wingspan: 42-48 cm Weight: 36-50 g

You can also distinguish the birds by their distinctive calls (to hear examples, type the links into your browser). The House Martin makes a sharp "jik, jik" (rb.gy/amgr6g) and twittering (rb.gy/mqa9bh); the Swallow's calls are "vit, vit", trills and twitters (rb.gy/i0buxq); and the Swift makes an unmistakeable piercing "shreeeee" scream (rb.gy/xalum2).

If you are lucky enough to see them close up, their colours alone will differentiate them.

House Martin - <i>Delichon urbicum</i>	Swallow - <i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Common Swift - <i>Apus apus</i>
		
Bright white throat, rump and underwings Shiny blue-black upper parts Brown-black wings and tail White-feathered legs and feet Pink legs and feet Small black beak	Red throat, chin and forehead Off-white/cream belly Shiny blue upper-parts White along inside edges of tail fork Black-brown legs Black beak	Dark sooty brown, except for a pale throat Black-brown legs shortest of all birds relative to body size * Black beak Deep-set eyes with front bristles

There is so much more to write about these remarkable birds, but sadly not enough space. It is vitally important to get across that they are declining. Causes include climate change in Africa and along migratory routes; changes in farming practices reducing insect numbers; conversions of barns and other rural buildings into modern homes; and changes in construction methods. The House Martin was moved from the UK green to the amber list in 2002 due to breeding population decline; the Swallow is green listed but in decline; and the Swift population is in steep decline (by 57% in 22 years) and was amber listed in 2009 (all data from the British Trust for Ornithology rb.gy/dobuni).

What a tragedy it would be in a few decades' time to no longer see and hear these incredible acrobats wheeling and circling across our skies for six or seven months of the year. Please take a look at these websites and do what you can to help if you aren't already:

House Martins: will use artificial nest boxes e.g. rb.gy/umfdse or make your own rb.gy/f5lmjg

Swallows: rb.gy/vmgrpgo

Swifts: rb.gy/hfa1rv + rb.gy/5yjgyb + rb.gy/jndb6e

John Stimpson, from Twentypence Road, Wilburton, may have swift boxes available after Chris Packham saluted him on Springwatch last month for making 27,000 of them; or swift bricks are more discreet, retrofitted into existing walls or built in as part of a new-build. The ones mentioned in this article are here in Haddenham, photographed by Simon Stirrup: rb.gy/vbkyac.

** Although an adult Swift can take off from the ground with difficulty, being grounded is likely to be the end for a juvenile. The RSPB asks that no-one attempts trying to launch a downed Swift. So if you find one, please keep it safe in a box with plenty of air holes and warm fabric and contact the nearest Swift rehabilitator on the Swift Conservation website rb.gy/abqbmnp.*



Eco-Day

Contributed by Carly Juneau

To celebrate the wonderful habitat and general inspirational place that is the Haddenham Art's Centre garden, Wildlife Friendly Village and Sustainable Haddenham were delighted to run various nature-inspired events at June's Eco-Day. With a mind to combine creativity and a sense of caring/responsibility for our natural world, both groups brought craft activities such as block printing wildlife friendly slogans, Bee Bomb making and paper pot creation to a host of interested visitors young and old.

The event also provided an opportunity to introduce the Wildlife Friendly Village Pledge to the community. Aimed to celebrate good practice as well as educate householders to the vital role their gardens play in supporting wildlife and biodiversity, the pledge encourages people to commit to 10 'Wildlife Friendly' initiatives. Locations of individual Pledge Holders will be added to a map of Haddenham and Aldreth with the ambition of turning Haddenham green! To find out more, and to add your garden/green space to the ever-growing map, please visit the Wildlife Friendly Village or Sustainable Haddenham page. Alternatively, please get in touch at this address Haddenhamwfv@gmail.com.

A Whole Kingdom of Grasses!

Contributed by Jez Reeve

It takes a fresh pair of eyes to see the obvious sometimes. And so it was with the wildflower grassland of Fairchild's Meadow on 27 June this year. A new volunteer came to help the old hands to do the annual flower and grass counting and, after half an hour of identifying grasses and wildflowers, exclaimed, "It is a whole kingdom of grasses!" When she first walked into the field, she said that all she saw was grass, but gradually she was introduced to 13 different species of grass and 19 different wildflowers leading to her wonderful remark.

Compared to last year there has been an overall increase in Yellow Rattle, although it is still struggling to make an appearance in the south end of the field, where there are more grass species than flower species. Yellow Rattle is a semi-parasitic plant that gets some of its nutrients from neighbouring grass roots, which is why it is a particular guide to the success of the wildflower meadow. More Yellow Rattle means less grass, creating more space for wildflowers.



Identifying species
on the ground.

Always bring your
identification book with you!

In comparison with 2020 the following gives an idea of what has flourished and what has not done so well. The extremes of sun in April followed by the rain in May may be the reasons for this.

Increase of:

Wildflowers
Common Hogweed
Common Mouse Ear (middle of field)
Lady's Bedstraw (north end)
Meadow Buttercup
Meadow Vetchling
Oxeye Daisy
Yellow Rattle
Grasses
Cocksfoot
Creeping Bent
False Oat Grass
Red Fescue

Decrease of:

Wildflowers
Common Knapweed
White Clover
Grasses
Meadow Barley
Meadow Foxtail
Yorkshire Fog

Some species are holding their own by comparison; Common Vetch, Field Bindweed, Hop Trefoil, Birdsfoot Trefoil, Red Clover and Sorrel were observed at similar densities to last year with the remains of Cowslips still in evidence. Of the grasses, Rough Meadow Grass, Sweet Vernal Grass, and Timothy keep up a steady presence.

In order to enhance the opportunities for wildflowers to find space and grow it is proposed that the southern half of the meadow be cut and cleared in July in order to create space for wildflowers to come forth. If the odd clumps of Common Knapweed can be avoided in the cut, the plan should help these to seed this year. The northern half of the meadow, which is much more species diverse and floriferous, should be left as late as possible (late September or early October) before cutting to help the variety of flowers to seed and

colonise the space. Weather permitting, another full cut and clear next year in the spring (end March or early April), before the Cowslips come up, would help reduce the 'thatch' of grass in both halves. Every year the results of the flower and grass count help with deciding on a management plan to get the best from the field. Without the generous time of the special volunteers we would be lost. So, thank you to all who came to help this year: Ann, Bang, Chris, Jackie, Lydia, Martha and Tim!

Summer Thoughts from the Gallery Garden

Contributed by Ann Biggs

A new day dawns, Apollo rises, peering through the summer green to dapple our new pond with shadow where beetles whirl and gyrate in a mad courtship of love.

A questing Grass Snake circles the water's edge, searching for tadpoles, while light brings singers, Robin, Wren and Blackbird, adding to the chorus that celebrates their brief lives.

The day warms, a dither of damsels flash blue amongst the lilies, while newts rise to bask the sunlit shallows, revelling in the rising heat. Meadows surround the pond, untouched by man's chemical hand for over forty years, colours light our way as we leave the water to walk where wildflowers, newly planted, crowd with waving grasses. Cornflower, blue at midday, Yellow Ragwort, rivalling the sun's face, and bramble, kissed by honeybees who steal nectar from ranks of white blossom. Poppies smile, diminished by giant thistles who reach in vain for the cloudless sky.



Blackbird. Artwork by Ann Biggs.

Afternoon brings sleep, so visit our Arts Centre Café for lunch, homemade cakes and delicious ice cream. We give thanks now to Hazel, Alastair and Wayne whose efforts created this haven for us to sit in and enjoy.

So...in the quiet of evening, the day retreats, the dizzy circling of beetles dies away, and bats bring the night shift in a dance of death...until day dawns again.

“STOP!

Or you will run over that duckling!”

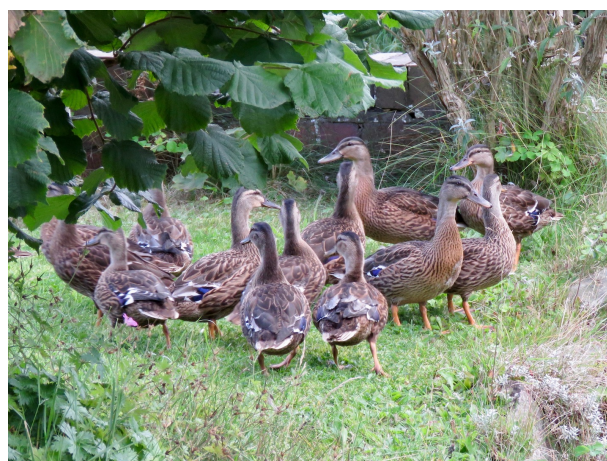
Contributed by Jez Reeve

It had been a quiet day except for the leviathan roadmaking trucks on Station Road which passed by occasionally. I was quite enjoying the peace and tranquillity so I went to the front of our property to look at how much the road-makers had done and got the shock of my life. Twenty-six ducklings were waddling past on the pavement going up towards Sutton. I blinked at the empty black road and the ducklings and wondered if they were aiming for Guppy's Pond, down Hinton Hedges. Suddenly one of the white service vans was driving towards me and the ducklings from the Sutton direction.

I did the only thing possible and put my hand up in the most authoritative manner I could. The van stopped in the road and one of the road-makers, dressed in orange, jumped out. I was telling him that I was going to guide the flock down Hinton Hedges off the road when the leviathan tarmac-dumper appeared from the other side of the road reversing towards the spooked ducklings. Mr 'dressed-in-orange' yelled at his mate to stop – just in time. Meanwhile I had herded, if that is the word for duckling-guiding, most of them into the top of Hinton Hedges just outside Anson's old factory.

About four ducklings had run up the road, but I had to concentrate on the rest. Luckily Mr 'dressed-in-orange' cut the errant four off and they quacked their way through the verge to join the others.

I kept my distance and followed my waddling troupe all the way down Hinton Hedges until they were on the grass by the Pond. The four at the back were still a bit slower than the others and none of them seemed to like walking on the stony path, but the main group waited for the slower four to catch up. I left them waddling off into the distance, hoping that they would be safe and settle somewhere out of sight.



News from Guppy's Pond

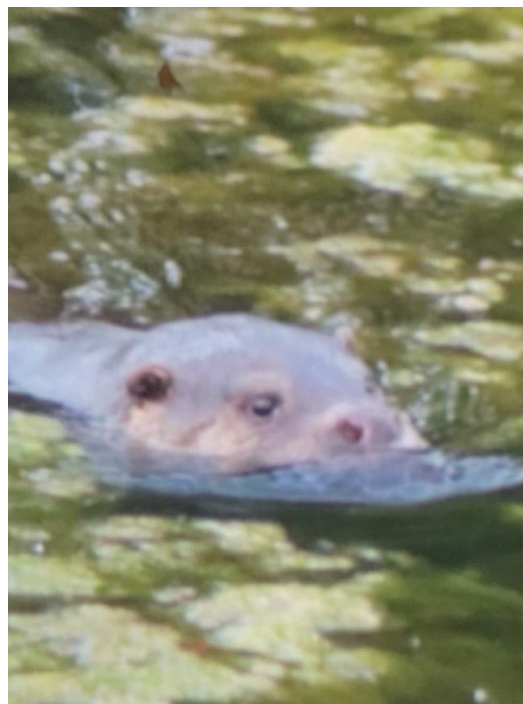
Contributed by Wendy Lanman

I was going to keep the main news to the end, but you will have seen the photo. An Otter in Guppy's Pond! Jackie Robinson watched it from her garden for about 45 minutes. Her daughter managed to take some photos but was so excited she was trembling, and keeping up with such an active creature was difficult, so they all came out a bit fuzzy – but they are proof that the Otter was really there!

Jackie's next-door neighbour, Charley, had seen one there last year so this might be the same one, as Otters are territorial. There have been efforts to attract Otters to the river at Earith. Maybe this one came from there as they can travel as far as 30 km (18 miles). If you would like to find out more about our native Otters, visit the Mammal Society website (mammal.org.uk). All my other news is going to pale into insignificance after this!

We had been hoping, with fingers tightly crossed, that we would see cygnets this year but, alas, there have been none. The pen was on her nest for weeks just as the weather turned very cold in April and early May. It's possible that she couldn't keep her eggs warm enough in spite of the cob's heroic efforts at keeping visiting geese off the pond. Fingers crossed again for next year.

Another disappointment is the resurgence of the reeds, which are growing thick and strong again where they should have been uprooted.



But I shall not leave you on a sad note because we have seen Kingfishers on many occasions, families of ducklings, and a few baby Coots and Moorhens when they venture out of the reedbed. And my favourite sound of all is back: the chatter of Reed Warblers.

A Blob Comes to Haddenham

Contributed by Wendy Lanham

Walking past the rather large heap of slowly decaying wood chips in my garden I noticed a bright yellow scattering of what looked like scrambled eggs. It wasn't there yesterday, and I don't know for how long it will be visible. I knew what it was because I have read several French Facebook gardening pages about a 'blob' but had never seen one in real life. That's almost its official name there, after the US film about an invading Blob.

Not here – I had to search 'blob' first in French to find the Latin name (*Physarum polycephalum*) in order to find information about it in English. It turns out to be a very interesting creature/fungus/thing which is being used in research. Try Googling (or Ecosia-ing) the Latin name and you will access a Wikipedia article and many others. It's quite fascinating and otherworldly.



When first spotted and one day later.



Ratty's Return

Contributed by John Burgess

For the last few years, three lifelong friends and I have been cycling the droves and byways of the local area. The objectives being to exercise, put the world to rights and observe any wildlife we come across.

One of our number, Mark Alsop, while dog walking, had noticed several holes in a dyke bank and was keen to establish whether or not they had been made by by rats, or could they possibly belong to Water Voles? (Or water rats, as he insists on calling them.)

An April evening ride took us across Haddenham Fen to a large dyke bank, where we were to observe several textbook locations. As the bank foliage had yet to fully develop, it was easy to locate the 2-in holes a foot away from the water level, with evidence of a narrow track from the tunnel entrance. We observed from the opposite bank, identifying several holes, taking photographs and comparing them with stock images from the internet. All seemed to be pointing to Vole inhabitation.

Mark's dog had previously managed to find a dead individual and although it was in a semi-decomposed state, crucial features (half-body-length tail, dark fur) seemed to confirm their establishment.

Mark, being the owner of a trail camera, decided to prove the theory once and for all. So, in early May a suitable hole was selected. As it was on a public drove, the camera was duly camouflaged and the trap was set.

The following morning, with great anticipation, the camera was eagerly checked – nothing whatsoever had been recorded. The disappointment was somewhat offset when the nose of a small mammal was spotted in an adjacent hole. Something was definitely in residence. A second attempt was made the following evening, at the new location.

The next morning there was a very different outcome; the camera had picked up the illusive Vole, scurrying around the entrance to the burrow, then exiting the burrow and swimming away. It was easy to identify and a real pleasure to see.

As the species has endangered status and is on the red list, its positive identification in our local area was all the more welcomed. There are several other burrow holes along this particular water course, so long may they thrive.

The video is posted on the Haddenham Conservation Society Facebook page if you want to have a look.



© Simon Stirrup

Broad-bodied Chaser photographed by Simon Stirrup.

HCS Facebook

Contributed by Rachel Burgess

Some of the sightings reported around Haddenham and Aldreth over the past three months on the Haddenham Conservation Society Facebook page. Please join the page and share sightings and photographs for us all to enjoy.

Reed Bunting *30 March* Aldreth. LB
Kingfisher & Toad *30 March* Aldreth. LB
Nine Buzzards *19 April* Haddenham. JS
Thirty plus Yellow Wagtails & 1 White Wagtail
1 May Aldreth. SS
Water Vole *3 May* Haddenham. MA
Roe Deer *9 May* Aldreth. SS
Common Broomrape *13 June* Haddenham. SD
Broad-bodied Chaser
Dragonfly & Azure
Damselflies *17 June* Aldreth. SS
Privet Hawk Moth *24 June* Haddenham. MH
Bank Vole *25 June* Aldreth. RW
Grass Snake *25 June* Haddenham. LB



Common Broomrape.

WINTER TALKS

We very much hope to hold our usual October to December talks later this year.

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