

HADDENHAM CONSERVATION SOCIETY

SPRING 2024

The Committee for 2023/24 is:

Barclay Arnott	740500
Ann Biggs	740810
John Burgess	749441
Sheila Dickerson	749443
Krisztina Lakatos, Treasurer	
Wendy Lanman	741138
Robert Norman	740473
Chris Prescott	749038

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 2024
Individual: £10 Family: £15
If you wish to join the Society, please contact Krisztina Lakatos on krisztinalakatos@yahoo.com.
The membership will entitle you to receive our regular newsletter and will give you free entry to the seven winter talks, a saving of £3.00 per person per session.

The Fascinating Mouldywarp

Contributed by Barbara Grafton



We have probably all said, 'don't make a mountain out of a molehill', attributed to Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), but given no thought to the little mammal making the molehills. I think it sad we no longer use the medieval names moldwarp, mouldywarp or mouldiwarp – from mold (soil), and warp (throwing), hence 'one who throws soil' or 'dirt-tosser'.

The Ultimate in Adaptation

The European/Common/Northern mole (*Talpa europaea*) is globally widespread and of Least Concern in conservation terms. Found in England, Wales, and inland Scotland, but not in Ireland, they use many habitats including mixed woodland, upland, grassland, farmland, and rural and urban gardens. They have been on earth for millions of years and, native to the UK, are the only 'pest' not introduced here by man.

Moles are unmistakable, and perfectly adapted for digging, with spade-shaped bodies, sharp claws on powerful forepaws, and an elongated wrist bone acting as an extra unjointed thumb to push aside soil. Their ears have a flap to stop soil entering. Their tiny eyes are not entirely blind (except when covered by skin or fur), but are colourblind and nearsighted. However, they readily distinguish light from dark. They have good hearing and sense of smell, and the end of their snout is highly sensitive to touch and vibration. Their dense fur lies in all directions so they can run fast along their 5-cm-high tunnels. They can also tolerate higher levels of carbon dioxide than other mammals, so survive low oxygen levels underground.

Dig to Eat

A mole weighs 72-128 grams, and an adult's body is 11-16 cm long plus a c. 4 cm tail. Yet, these tiny animals can shift ten kilogrammes

of soil (100 times their body weight) in twenty minutes and daily tunnel up to 20 metres. Appropriately, the collective noun (for a group of moles) is a 'labour'. Tunnel systems (a main tunnel with branching smaller tunnels) can extend to 2,000 square metres (half an acre), and are multi-tiered at depths of a few centimetres to over a metre.

Moles mainly eat earthworms, plus slugs, snails, beetles, centipedes, insect larvae, small insects, and – rarely – mice and shrews. Being omnivorous, they will eat plant matter including mycorrhizal fungi, but not crops. An 80-gram female eats 50 grams of earthworms a day, and any surplus (paralysed by a toxin in the moles' saliva), is stored in larders until periods of food scarcity. Before eating, moles squeeze worms between their paws – just like we squeeze toothpaste tubes – to remove earth from their exterior and gut.



Sociable Times

Moles mostly lead solitary lives in their own territories but come together in the breeding season and early winter. From February to May males (boars) extend their tunnels and squeal loudly in attempts to locate a female (sow). The boars play no part in pup-rearing, so sows line nest chambers with dry plants and after a gestation period of just over a month give birth to 3-7 naked pups. At 14 days the pups' fur will appear; at 22 days their eyes will open; they will be weaned at 33 days and able to leave the nest; and after 45 days will disperse on the surface to find new territories. Two litters may be born per season, and the young will breed the following spring. Moles typically live two or three years, but can live up to six.

Undesirable Traits

The UK has c. 35 million moles, rising to 40 million in early summer. They have no legal protection except safeguarding against 'unnecessary suffering' under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. They cause far less damage than badgers, but to many farmers, horticulturists, green-keepers, heritage organisations and gardeners, they are a pest because:

- Shallow tunnelling in newly planted areas may disturb and kill plant roots and disturb seeds, particularly small ones, e.g. sugar beet
- On amenity land, e.g. racecourses, sports fields, grass airstrips, and cycle paths, mole diggings may injure people and animals
- Digging can expose stones that damage machinery
- Tunnels can damage watercourses and drainage systems, and provide access for undesirable species such as voles and weasels
- Molehills soil contaminates grass destined for silage and encourages weeds, reducing crop yields
- Aesthetically, molehills and collapsed tunnels spoil lawns.



Fur Mania

Humans are the moles' main predator. Unlike rabbits, hares, or squirrels, we never eat them. The eccentric Dean of Westminster William Buckland (1784-1856), who attempted to eat his way through the animal kingdom, said mole tasted almost as 'vile' as bluebottles.

However, moles have long proved useful in other ways. In the Fens up until 1971, bags containing their hands and feet were carried around the neck as protection against ailments such as toothache, epilepsy, and rheumatism. By the 18th century, every parish had a mole-catcher who deployed dogs or traps with springs of willow or hazel twigs. In the Fens until the mid-1970s mole-catchers' costs were covered by the rates paid to the Drainage Boards. Mole-catchers would sell the tiny grey, black, brown, tan, or – exceptionally rare – white pelts for a few pence. These would be tanned, cut into rectangles, dyed one colour, and made into working men's waistcoats.

It was the trendsetting wife of Edward VII, Queen Alexandra, who created a craze for mole fur by ordering a c. 600 pelt wrap in 1902. Suddenly, mole fur coats, trousers, gloves, hats and muffs were all the rage. In 1903, 100 moleskins cost £1. By 1926, it was £15.

Control

Demand for mole fur lasted until the 1950s when processing costs rose substantially, and because of a shortage of pelts. Mole-catchers were replaced by dropping strychnine-doused worms into tunnels, so the dead moles remained underground. Death by strychnine is slow and agonising, and its use led to the accidental deaths of many wild and domestic animals. It was banned in 1963 for all wildlife management except for moles, then banned entirely in 2006.

No poisons or chemical repellents are now approved for moles, but mole-catchers have made a comeback. They control moles with a variety of traps, shooting, harrowing/rolling the molehills, and acetylene, phosphine, and nitrogen gases. Unregulated spring traps cause immense suffering when they fail to kill instantly; if not found immediately after trapping, moles die from dehydration, exhaustion, or starvation. Humane traps hold live moles so they can be relocated – but these must be checked at least daily to prevent suffering. Deterrents of debatable effectiveness include smoke bombs, sonic devices, cat litter, human/pet urine, diluted castor oil and soap, garlic, and TCP-soaked rags.

Time for a Rethink?

Moles are often culled unnecessarily, and appreciation is growing that they are ecologically positive:

- Tunnels help drain and aerate heavy soils, enhancing water infiltration and root growth, and provide shelter for insects, spiders and small amphibians, and nest sites for ground bumble bees
- Moles help seed distribution
- While resident in their tunnels, they deter harmful pests including vole
- They prey on many harmful insect larvae such as leatherjackets (crane fly), cockchafer, wire worms (click beetle), and carrot fly, and invertebrates and molluscs
- Their droppings enrich the soil
- They are excellent food for foxes, hawks, owls, buzzards, weasels, stoats, pine martens, cats and dogs
- As an 'indicator species' their presence or absence can signal habitat degradation
- Their tunnelling can expose interesting archaeological artefacts.



Many farmers and others concerned with land use are no longer controlling moles unless they pose a threat to safety or to infrastructure/amenities. Research shows that moles often abandon tunnels where traps or deterrents are used, so they create more molehills digging new tunnels. And if a mole is removed from an area, another will simply move in. Generally, moles dig fewer tunnels if they are left alone. If molehills are a big problem on lawns, removing them will improve the visual impact, and the friable soil is ideal for potting plants.

The best months to see moles in the Fens are April and May when the young leave the nests, and in late October-early November when they relocate from fields to the sides of the dykes and move into deeper tunnels. They are strong swimmers, so can be seen in watercourses. If I am lucky enough to spot any, I will take time to admire their remarkable habitat adaptations, which are probably the most effective in the animal kingdom.

Images:

Close-up mole rb.gy/h8y3ta

Baby moles in hand rb.gy/uonc5n

Cycle track rb.gy/kk5ug8

1880 engraving, French mole-catcher rb.gy/v8vvde

1921 fur advert (own collection)

Mole with potato rb.gy/5fdxjy



Spring Thoughts in the Gallery Garden

Contributed by Ann Biggs

Late winter brings a river of tears to flood nearby low-lying meadows, soaking the land and closing roads. Wolf winds are abroad, prowling grey skies, ripping last dead leaves from thrashing branches where rooks lose young from nests in the tops of ancestral trees.

Boots sodden from wet grass, I walk the Garden, searching for signs of new life, finding a haven of calm. Spring is here on butterfly wings, a moment of Brimstone, Orange Tip and early Holly Blue. Warmer winds bring visitors on their way home to breed, a fall of warblers, Blackcap and Chiffchaff accompanied by a traveller, enroute to Wales, who rests in the new leaves for an hour before calling softly, leaving as quickly as he came. Plans for a seat in a sunny spot abandoned, I race for a camera and snatch two photos of a handsome male Pied Flycatcher, graphic against sunlit green, sombre in clerical black and white, before he continues the long journey home.

In the Arts Centre a range of new and familiar workshops continue to delight customers, from life drawing to pottery, working with Blended Monkey on a pole lathe, baskets with Jane Frost and many others. Visit the centre in person and talk to our friendly staff and volunteers, while you sample our cakes and lunches, to get details of the new crafts that you can try. Or visit our website – haddenhamartscentre.org.uk.

New for this spring we welcome a selection of 'food' vans which will visit on Friday evenings with a variety of takeaway meals such as burgers, fish, sausages, and many others for you to pre-order and collect, or order from the van.

Pied Flycatcher by Ann Biggs



A final thought from the Garden.

In an uncertain world, as you walk through life, keep senses awake, put away your phone, for the moments you miss may never be repeated.

News from Guppy's Pond

Contributed by Wendy Lanman

We have been watching the swans yet again this spring. All the signs good again with the same nest being repaired and made ready for this breeding season. Eggs must have been laid as a swan remained on the nest for several weeks, only leaving it for short periods to feed. All our fingers were kept tightly crossed so that maybe, just maybe, this would at last be the year we would see cygnets again.

But the swan has left the nest and there are no little ones again this year.

Our hopes have been up and down more than once recently as first one Great Crested Grebe, then another joined it on the pond. Will there be a little family of striped babies to

come? But hopes were dashed when, after only a few days, the two visitors disappeared.

Seven ducklings – with their mother as well as a drake – swam around, sharing the small area of the pond in front of our house with four moorhen chicks and their parents. All the little ones were nowhere to be seen only a couple of days later.

Otherwise, it is mostly as usual at this time of year, although the Water Dock is multiplying, as are the reeds. The latter will need to be controlled again soon.



There has been, however, one exciting event: a good-sized Grass Snake swimming across the pond. So there is probably a nest somewhere close by, and we might see some babies soon – if we are lucky.

Nature's Wonders

Contributed by John Burgess

The Northern Lights were always one of the sights that I wanted to experience, but I had been somewhat less than enthusiastic about getting myself to the Arctic Circle. At half past midnight on Friday 10 May, our daughter woke me and my far better half to say that this spectacular stellar phenomenon was visible from our garden.

Having looked on previous occasions without any success whatsoever, despite our sleepy demeanour it seemed an opportunity that shouldn't be missed. From the dark of our garden, we looked skyward to observe a wide band of pinky hued light going from east to west radiating shards of misty colour towards the north. I'm sure those who have incurred the cost of a trip to Norway to see their vivid green in the very north of the hemisphere would dismiss the Aldreth showing as unimpressive. Notwithstanding that, the Northern Lights we saw were full of wonder and well worth the disturbed slumber. My son, in his typical cavalier manner, convinced his friends to walk down to Aldreth High Bridge, as the sky there would be that much darker. Whether the view was any better is questionable but it will be something they will all remember forever.

Nine Acre Wood

Anyone who has been to the wood recently will have noticed that growth, particularly in the understory has been prolific. The paths, which were barren through the winter months, have experienced a huge surge, resulting in a carpet of long ankle-caressing flags. Everything is now very green, particularly at the gate end. The extra light percolating through the canopy stimulates plant growth at all levels and the coiled spring of the season has definitely sprung.

Some years ago, a happy band of fellows coppiced the edges, along the top of the figure-of-eight path. If you look to the canopy a distinct hole is visible. This has let precious light to the understory below, invigorating the lower vegetation. It was an attempt to diversify elements of the wood where the heavy canopy led to minimal undergrowth. These areas still exist, but the intervention appears to have worked very well.

The paths are due for trimming. This always seems a most violent event in an area of natural beauty, but nature will soon recover and to the benefit of the greater good. Access is important and positively encouraged, you don't have to be an environmentalist to enjoy this rich reserve. When I was there the other evening, two sets of joggers passed me doing a lap of the wood – fair play to them.

As you walk around the wood there are multiple variations on the woodland scene, open areas to dense cover, with everything in between and always in a state of flux. This is perpetuated by what tree fell where, as hurricane Matilda (or whatever the last weather event has been called) passed through. There have been numerous casualties from the early season high winds. I always seem to be droning on about dead wood microcultures, but to reiterate, the fallen trees are not

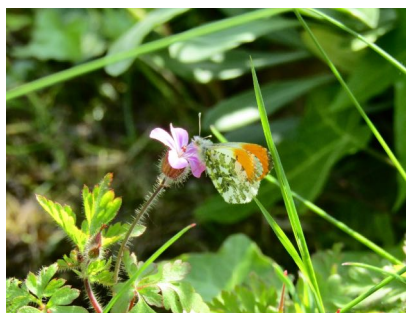


removed, they are trimmed and stacked to provide micro-environments for fungi, insects and small mammals, etc, etc. Safety is always an obvious concern, so any trees falling to obstruct the pathway are dealt with in a similar manner.

The Woodland Trust have a long-term management plan to maintain and promote the health of the wood. It involves periodic safety maintenance, along with some long-term coppicing of the northern side. It will be interesting to see how this pans out.

Butterfly season, if it can be called such a thing, is well underway. As an underachieving lepidopterist, I have seen Orange Tip, Tortoiseshell, Peacock, Holly Blue and Brimstone. I'm sure there are many more at large but beyond my identifying capabilities. On those rare days when the sun shines, they can be numerous. With their vibrant colours and impossibly erratic flight, always beautiful.

So, make a worthy effort to enjoy a nature-infused walk (or jog); it will be to your benefit in so many ways.



Orange Tip.
Laura Burgess.

Chair's Report 2024

As always, thanks are due to many people who have contributed to the ongoing success and vitality of the Conservation Society. I will include a full list in the newsletter, but especial mention goes to Sheila, who has been recruiting and signing up speakers for the winter talks for many years, and to Hazel and Alastair Hull for taking over. We look forward to the talks continuing for long into the future. Thanks also to Susan for looking after the Society funds, and to Krisztina for taking over as Treasurer.

Reporting on the year

We are pleased to have planted a hornbeam as Paul Mason's memorial, on Bury Lane on the edge of the proposed football pitches. It is hoped this can be supplemented by a bench in the future.

Meanwhile we have continued with our usual maintenance of Nine Acre Wood, in conjunction with the Woodland Trust, and the Burial Ground on Church Lane, now reopened since the collapsed wall has been rebuilt, in conjunction with the Parish Council.

A new initiative is to encourage a habitat favourable to Turtle Doves in Wayman's Pits, in conjunction with the RSPB. This is a long-term project that will involve work on the hedgerows, and creation of a suitable foraging strip. As a starting point we will be distributing supplementary seed that has been provided by the RSPB. We know there have been Turtle Doves nearby in recent years, notably at Willderland.

Another piece of good news is the extension until 2025 of the Old Life on the New West project, and I have met with their new staff, Tate Oulton and Karen MacKelvie, and shown them round both the Burial Ground and Wayman's Pits. They were excited about both as wildlife areas, and we look forward to taking advantage of their advice and contacts to help enhance these spaces.

Finally, we are pleased to be represented on the Parish Council's Environmental Oversight committee, which is helping to increase the profile of wildlife in the village.

Chris Prescott
9 April 2024

Thanks due to:

Sheila Dickerson for the winter talks
Sally MacEachern, and all contributors to the newsletter

Tina Bone for hosting the Society's website
Rachel Burgess for the Facebook page
Christine Lowrey for reviewing the Society accounts

Mike Overall, and all who have helped with the Burial Ground
Haddenham Parish Council

Church Lane Burial Ground

The Burial Ground on Church Lane (sometimes known as the 'Closed Cemetery') reopened following reconstruction of part of the wall on the western side. Some further pointing may be necessary to maintain the stability of other sections of the wall. The Conservation Society continues to manage the area for wildlife, with a light touch. In February, the butterfly garden was cut back to permit more light. A variety of wildflowers has been observed this spring, including cowslips and bluebells.

Stop press

The Chair reports that he has written to Cambridge Beekeepers Association to clarify why their speaker was unable to give the talk on 14 May. And we have been contacted by the Cambridgeshire Mammal Group who are planning a small mammal trapping event in Fairchilds Meadow in late summer/early autumn. We may be able to build some kind of event around this – watch out for details.



Turtle Dove. © Simon Stirrup.

Cake and Plant Stall

The cake and plant sale on 27 April was remarkably successful this year considering the awful weather we had in March and April. There were few plants compared with previous years and practically no vegetable ones. They still made £85.45, with hopefully a little more from those we will have sold at the Aldreth Fair.

The cakes all went, hoovered up by enthusiastic buyers. They made £119.50 and their creators deserve to be warmly thanked.

So, adding both up, the very worthwhile sum of £205 was achieved. Many thanks to all those involved.

No Longer Endangered

The Norfolk Hawker dragonfly became extinct in the Cambridgeshire Fens in 1893, most likely because of the drainage of ponds and marshes. It then became almost entirely restricted to the Norfolk Broads.

In recent years the Norfolk Hawker has been spotted in Cambridgeshire, Kent and Herefordshire. The populations in all three counties have become stable and scientists have declared that it is no longer endangered. Although this seems to be good news, there are still significant threats to its wetland habitat. The only way to ensure that it continues to thrive is to protect and restore its current wetland and fen habitats in the broads and across East Anglia.



The Norfolk Hawker has clear wings, green eyes and a distinctive yellow triangle on its body. Good sites to see Norfolk Hawkers are Hickling Broad, Upton Broad, Strumpshaw Fen and How Hill Nature Reserve.

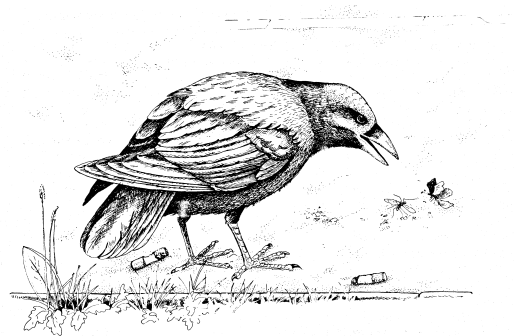
(With thanks to *The Guardian* <https://tinyurl.com/wf4a3p9h>)

Norfolk Hawker © Elizabeth Dack.
Norfolk Wildlife Trust.

Quick Nature Quiz

How will you fare? Answers upside down.

1. What is the collective name for a group of crows?
2. How many wings does a bee have?
3. Lemurs are only native to which country?
4. What does a nidologist study?
5. The kakapo is the only flightless species of which type of bird?
6. What is the fastest moving land snake in the world?
7. What type of creature is a Dog Face?
8. *Acer* is the Latin name for which tree?
9. In nature, Buttress, Tap and Strangler are all types of what?
10. Digger, Plasterer and Orchid are all types of which creature?



- Answers:
1. A murder
 2. Four
 3. Madagascar
 4. Bird's nests
 5. Parrot
 6. Black mamba
 7. Butterfly
 8. Maple
 9. Root
 10. Bees

HCS Facebook

Contributed by Rachel Burgess

Wildlife sightings reported around Haddenham, Aldreth and Wilburton over the months of January, February, March and April from the Haddenham Conservation Society Facebook page. Please join the Facebook group 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.

2 Chinese Water Deer, 9 Corn Bunting, 80+ Whooper Swans & 1 Great White Egret
1 January Aldreth, Dam Bank Drove & Ewell Fen SS

500+ Whooper Swans, Hen Harrier, Peregrine, 1000+ Wood Pigeon, 50+ Stock Dove, Chinese Water Deer & 13 Roe Deer **10 February** Aldreth SS

Frogs **14 February** Haddenham BY
 Frogs & spawn **23 February** Haddenham BY
 2 Chinese Water Deer, Hen Harrier & Peregrine **25 February** Aldreth & Ewell Fen SS
 Primroses **28 February** Aldreth MS
 Green Comma **3 April** Haddenham AG
 Raven **3 April** Haddenham TS

Muslin Moth, Pebble Prominent, Chinese Character, Swallow Prominent, Powdered Quaker, Hebrew Character, Black Sexton Beetle, Caddisfly **13 April** Aldreth LB



Pebble Prominent (above), Black Sexton Beetle (below). Laura Burgess.



Whooper Swans ©
 Simon Stirrup.

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