

HADDENHAM CONSERVATION SOCIETY

WINTER 2025

The Committee for 2024/25 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

Fifty Years with Dirty Hands: A Snapshot of Life as an Ecologist

Ann Sherwood is known to many of us through her voluntary work, using her decades of experience to provide ecological advice on sites such as our community green spaces, plus her very informative small mammal trapping public events to show us close up delightful creatures like voles, wood mice, and shrews. Now Ann has (sort of) retired, she chatted to Barbara Grafton about her career.



Ann in action and with six bags of dormice.



Membership information

Subscription rates
1 Jan to 31 Dec 2025
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.

B: How did you start as an ecologist?

A: Accidentally! I needed a job after 'A' levels in 1975, so my Dad, a country vet, wangled me an interview with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF). My 'A' level in biology, and assurance that I didn't mind getting my hands dirty, got me a job as an Assistant Scientific Officer in entomology. That was for ADAS, the Agricultural Development and Advisory Service, in Devon, where my focus was on insect pests affecting agriculture.

B: When did you get your degree?

A: ADAS gave me day release for HNC studies, and then I was very fortunate to win a bursary for a degree in Biological Sciences at Lancaster University from 1978-1981. I then worked in Cambridge and Lincolnshire in entomology, then on to Wildlife and Storage Biology doing thrilling things like climbing inside grain silos to look for weevils, and learning 101 Ways to Kill a Rabbit.

B: How did your botany interest develop?

A: In the early 1990s I was seconded to monitor environmentally sensitive areas alongside a botanist. We spent weeks surveying in different habitats, on grassland, heaths, river valley meadows, fenland, saltmarshes, and waterways, which included a crash course in the Latin names of plants.

B: Then you broadened out into general ecology?

A: I particularly love botany, but I've had a very varied career. To give examples, I've done security inspections at mink farms; advised farmers on storage of cow and sheep manure and the ammonia deposition impacts on natural habitats from poultry and pig units, how to discourage flocks of Brent Geese from damaging crops, and the conservation of habitats. I spent a week in Pentonville prison assessing populations of rats, mice, pigeons, and cockroaches; done the same in other prisons and young offenders institutions; looked for cockroach and pharaoh ant infestations in hospital boiler and plant rooms; and inspected some of the country's secret stockpiles of strategic food supplies including flour, sugar, margarine and 25-year old biscuits. I spent a very sad couple of months in Cumbria and Gloucestershire during the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001 monitoring rat populations and seeing the devastation the outbreak wreaked on local farming families and their workers. You don't forget the sight of cattlemen weeping, or sheepdogs rounding up ducks and chickens because all the sheep have gone.

B: You've definitely lived up to your "OK with dirty hands" promise!

A: I have! And it's a very physically demanding job. I've spent fifty years out in the countryside in old clothes, often with a hard hat, wellies, walking boots, and waders, carrying heavy equipment, through heatwaves, rain, sleet, and lots of mud. I've waded through watercourses looking for otter and water vole droppings, and searched hundreds of ponds countrywide for Great Crested Newts and rare plants, had my cars towed out of mud by helpful farmers, and got covered in scratches crawling through hundreds of hedgerows. I had to relocate c.7,000 toadlets on my own on one construction site, filling bucket after bucket with about 450 at a time. I've set out over 200 small mammal traps which are inspected twice a day for a week, weighing, measuring and marking (with tiny fur clippings) any captive animals while trying not to get bitten, and refilling the traps with food for the next day's inspection. My knees are suffering now for all the crawling and kneeling I've done. It's also not been a family-



The often elusive water vole.

friendly career. I've often been away from home, staying on my own in hotels and B&Bs, working very antisocial hours, and travelling a huge amount. I've also worked alone a lot, which is less acceptable these days for very sensible health and safety reasons.

B: Have you ever been in any really dangerous situations?

A: I've had to leap a fence and fight through thick vegetation to escape a bull. I got pushed over in the dark while doing a bat survey by a herd of bullocks, getting headbutted and losing my glasses. I was very bruised, and that was quite scary. I had to leave the Suffolk Brecks on one occasion, as I was surveying too close to rutting red deer. I once came face-to-face with a badger during a construction trenching operation to repair a collapsed road under a Natural England licence. Luckily, it got out of the trench and ran away. I was badly hurt when I put my leg through a rotten plank on a footbridge in a saltmarsh. I could hardly walk after another incident when I tripped in a tractor wheel rut, and had stitches after tearing a finger on a nail. And I had a blood-filled eye for a week after a grass stem poked into it. I've occasionally been challenged by overly-aggressive landowners, and gamekeepers carrying guns. And I once reported what I thought was a dead body next to my car in a layby, but which thankfully turned out to be a sleeping tramp.

B: You've also done a lot of desk-based work. And public enquiries!

A: Unfortunately, yes. A lot of ecology work is data collection, report-writing, applications for species licences, quality control, project management, and so on. I much prefer to be outside doing fieldwork, not sitting at a computer. As for public enquiries, and being an expert witness, I found that terrifying. There's huge pressure to calmly communicate scientific evidence on environmental issues, while the opposition attempts to challenge and undermine you.

B: What about the fun side?

A: There's been a great deal of fun. Being out in the countryside so much I've seen incredible scenery and wildlife, particularly in the Norfolk Broads, the Breckland, Scotland, Wales and Cumbria. I've done surveys on horseback, had curious cows licking my hair while surveying, been able (with the appropriate licences) to handle dormice and great crested newts, and watched clouds of bats emerge at dusk and then return at dawn. Although I'd rather they weren't disturbed at all, it's satisfying to provide mitigation solutions for species such as badgers and water voles when construction projects are inevitable. I've seen one of the rarest species in the UK, the flightless predatory diving beetle *Agabus undulatus*, in ditches on Cambridgeshire arable farmland. That's fun! As is working with ecologist colleagues, teams of surveyors, and especially construction workers who have to treat me like one of the boys!

B: So, what about your plans now you've retired?

A: I've officially retired, but I can't stop entirely as I enjoy it so much. I'm still going out as a second string with ecology friends, doing surveys, and still volunteering. Believe it or not, I have never seen an otter in the wild – so I still harbour hopes of that.



Agabus undulatus beetle

B: How do aspiring ecologists make a start now?

A: Mostly via a university course or degree apprenticeship, but you could get employment via a consultancy doing summer survey work. Above all, you have to show a real passion for the work, not just academic strengths – so volunteer with NGOs like the Wildlife Trusts, join local nature groups and build your field skills. It's a fantastic career, but definitely not for the faint-hearted. Or anyone who likes permanently clean hands!



Badger paw prints (left) and dormouse foot and prints (above).

Images:

Agabus undulatus beetle – Dick Belgers at Waarneming.nl, CC BY 3.0

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Agabus_undulatus.jpg

Water vole – <https://www.flickr.com/photos/peter-trimming/5522127259/>

Badger paw prints – Jeff Buck, CC BY 2.0 <https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/4355431>

Courtesy of Ann Sherwood: dormice in bags; dormice foot and prints; Ann in a copse.

Kingfishers Bridge Nature Reserve

Contributed by John Burgess

The New Life on the Old West project has been working for several years now improving wildlife and communication within a corridor around the Old West River (also known as the Ouse). Unfortunately, their funding via the National Lottery has come to an end, so as a swan song to their organisation and in recognition of the groups they had been working with, a free one-day event was organised at Kingfishers Bridge Nature Reserve.



The Haddenham Conservation Society (HCS), along with a variety of other local groups, was invited to participate in their special day. Having previously made some bug hotels for the closed cemetery in Church Lane (see *Volume 39 No. 3*), I was also invited to demonstrate how the bug hotels were constructed.

Krisztina duly volunteered to assist with the running of a dedicated HCS stall. Between the two of us, we would cover both bases.

As the construction of the bug hotels takes many hours, a partially assembled version was made to enable its completion within the timeframe. Various components were collected to enable audience participation during its construction.

The event was well attended by both participants and stallholders. There were various film shows and walks covering a host of nature-focused topics. The construction of the bug hotel went as planned, a number of young families were in attendance and participated eagerly in filling the relative hotel rooms with overwintering material for various insects. As it was still only partially finished, I completed the assembly after my allotted time, so that we finished up with a fully assembled hotel. There was an awards ceremony late afternoon at which point the newly constructed bug hotel was

donated to Kingfishers Bridge Nature Reserve.

The nature reserve itself was open. I had never been before, but I was most impressed by the variety of wildlife in attendance. The reserve covers a very large area and it was a wonderful place to walk around. There were Water Buffalo, Konik Ponies and an amazing variety of waterfowl, far too numerous for me to identify. A tearoom provided welcome refreshment after our tour.

During the afternoon awards, the HCS was recognised for its work in the community and presented with a certificate.

A wildlife photo competition had been running over the past few weeks and the competition entries were on display in the tearooms. The winning entry was a photograph of a Brown Argus butterfly taken by Laura Burgess.

All in all it was an excellent day, well attended and enjoyed by all who were there. There is little evidence when driving past of this excellent nature reserve but it's well worth travelling to Stretham for a visit.



Kingfishers Bridge Reserve Fact File

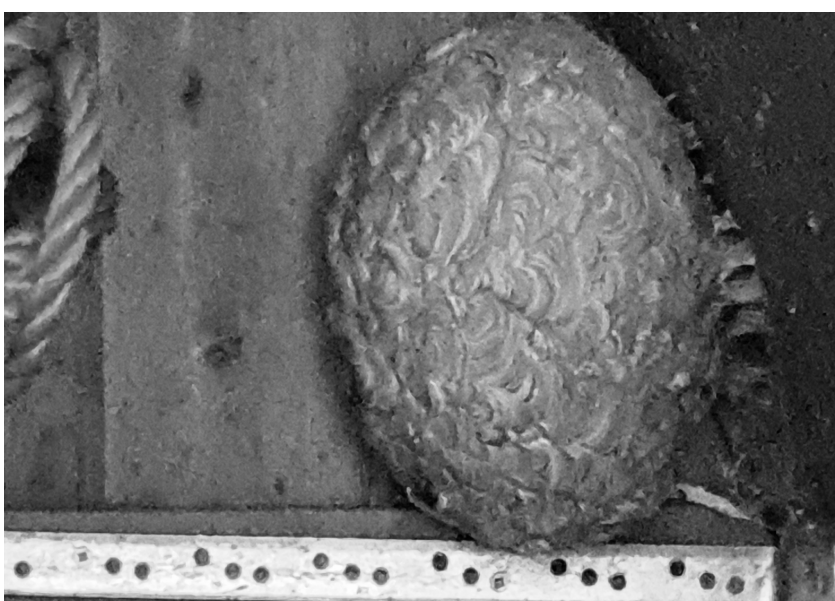
- Founded in 1995 when 250 acres of farmland were transformed into wetland
- Conceived and owned by farmer Andrew Green
- Visitors are welcomed during daylight hours
- Visitor centre with toilet
- The tearoom is open most weekends for hot and cold drinks and home-made cake but check first
- Website <https://www.kingfishersbridge.org>

A Shed Story

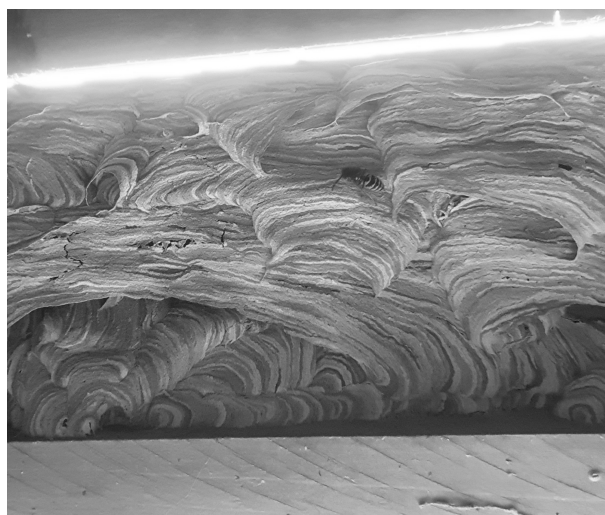
Contributed by Jez Reeve

Everyone who has ever had a shed will know that feeling of possibility, of sanctuary and utility that your own shed offers. When you first start to use it everything is neatly arranged and easy to get at; it looks like the advert for the world's best-kept shed. But the years take their toll and before very long the carefully arranged shelves at the back are cluttered with things in any order and the side where the tools alone were supposed to be stacked also have deckchairs and garden trugs, plant-holders and old mugs, netting full of dead bugs and...I hardly need go on...?

However, that sense of sanctuary still remains a possibility. You decide that this is the year to clear it all out and tidy up. But no, something has beaten you to it! That safety and darkness, the quiet and easy access to wood and water, has attracted the queen wasp. It was June this year before I really noticed how big the nest on the back wall of the 8 foot by 10 foot shed had become. Well, I thought, I will have to do the sorting out later in the year! As time has gone on, I have been relieved that I left the lawn mower and small tools by the door so that I did not have to disturb, or be disturbed by, the large family of wasps that seemed to be continually engaged on the now massive nest at the back.



Fair's fair though. It is now September and received wisdom informs me that after a bit of a drunken flurry over falling fruit the wasps will mostly die off and, provided that I leave the old wasps' nest in place, they will not return to do the same thing next year. Or so I thought! It is the second week in September and they have started building another nest in my forlorn shed, but this time it is right over the doors along the apex. It is not a rounded one, but lateral, all the way along the inside of the apex of the shed. I have researched wasp behaviour avidly but I cannot work out why they have started again so late in the season, as the temperature is dropping and the time for making nests is long past? I am going to leave it until the end of the month and see what happens, but it looks like the clear-up has been put off until next Spring!



News from Guppy's Pond

Contributed by Wendy Lanman

After a spring so wet that the pond rose well above its usual level, this summer has been so hot and dry that the water went down by over a foot. The good thing about that is the swans couldn't come into the garden and stomp all over the plants, fertilising everything along the way. Actually, whenever they do that, I readily forgive them anyway; it's such a privilege to have them.

We have had reasonable numbers of visiting Mallards. The Coots and Moorhens on our side both had young but sadly lost them well before they reached maturity for no visible reason I can see. The swans, as expected, had no young for yet another year.

Otherwise, we regularly see Goldfinch, Long-tailed Tits, Blue and Great Tits, Blackbirds, Kingfishers and pigeons.

Common, Pigmy and Water Shrews, as well as Bank Voles, appear quite regularly. I have seen quite a few bumblebees but not very many honeybees and only relatively few of the current small variety of wasps.

Maybe they were doing what I did during the very hot spells: staying somewhere safely cool.

As for plants and trees, they definitely suffered from the heat and drought but I did manage to keep them alive and now, after the recent rain and cooler temperatures, even had the great pleasure of seeing violets bloom this morning!



Bank Vole.

A Dramatic Lady

Contributed by Laura Burgess

During July I was walking alongside an area of rough grassland, when I noticed a distinctive funnel-shaped spider web. Further investigation revealed its maker perched in the middle of the web – and a dramatic lady it turned out to be. Having taken a few photos, later research identified it as a Wasp Spider. These are a continental species first discovered on the south coast of England in 1922, initially a rare find but due to mild winters and warm summers they have spread progressively northward. Completely harmless but an amazing find.



Welney Shuttle Bus

Greater Anglia's Customer and Community Improvement Fund has granted £9,334 to the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust for a shuttle bus service connecting Welney Wetland Centre and Ely railway station. The free minibus will run on Tuesdays and Saturdays, departing Ely railway station at 11.00 and 12.00, and departing Welney at 14.45 and 15.45. The bus will run from Tuesday 2 September to Saturday 29 November. Booking is essential and does not include admission to WWT Welney. Book by 12 noon the previous day. <https://www.wwt.org.uk/wetland-centres/welney/whats-on/events/community-minibus-ely-to-wwt-welney>

HCS Facebook

Contributed by Rachel Burgess

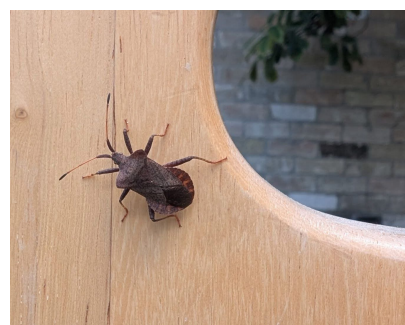
Wildlife sightings reported around Haddenham, Aldreth and Wilburton over the months of July and August from the Haddenham Conservation Society Facebook page. Please join the Facebook group and share sightings and photographs for us all to enjoy. If you are unsure of what you might have seen, ask on the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

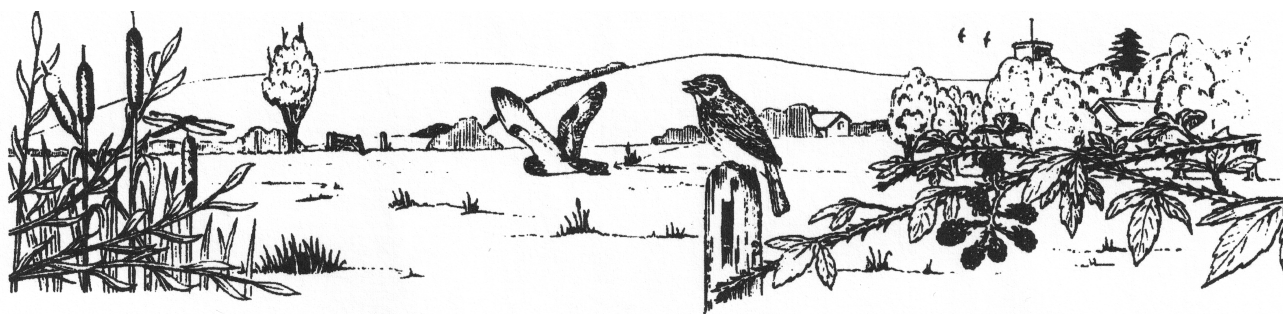
White-letter Hairstreak & Red Admiral Butterflies 3 July, Haddenham SS
Willow Emerald Damselfly, Carder Bee, Tree Bumblebees & Cinnabar Moth Caterpillar 3 July, Aldreth SS
Female Wasp Spider 17 July, Haddenham LB
Four Red Kites 23 July, Haddenham JS
Hummingbird Hawk Moth 16 August, Haddenham JR
Dock Bug 10 September, Haddenham CW

News flash Young Manx Shearwater found in a Haddenham garden hedge on 17 September. After advice from the Manx Shearwater Rescue Group it was launched over a cliff at Hunstanton and flew out to sea. It weighed 485g. CP



*Manx Shearwater (above) by Caron Pattern,
Red Kite (left) by Jim Sawyer and
Dock Bug (below) by Catriona Wilson.*





WINTER TALKS

*Indoor meetings are held at the Arkenstall Centre, Haddenham, on the second Tuesday of each month at 8.00 pm. There will be no talk in January.
Members free. Non-members welcome for a nominal fee. All are welcome to stay for a (free) drink and a chat after each talk*

14 October

Bringing Beavers Back

Nik Shelton of BCN Wildlife Trust will reveal all.

11 November

Fenland Nature – Stories Behind the Book

Simon Stirrup gives us the inside story.

9 December

Cetacean Conservation: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Greg Donovan will be telling all.