

Ryburgh Wildlife Group

February 2026 Newsletter

We made it through the longest month of the year. Phew. Thank goodness February is a short month.

At the start of the month we held our AGM which was followed by an illustrated talk about Ryston Rachel's Hedgehog Hotel. Janet's hedgehog presentation is attached to the covering email, as are the AGM papers and minutes. A couple of things that made me smile, and I think many of the audience, was the courtship and mating ritual. The male circles round the female who initially rotates to keep eye contact until either the male gives up and goes away, or she stops and things happen. Bit like the teenage disco. What also made me chuckle was how Janet talked about the rather generous size and positioning of the male's working part, which enable prickly-free mating.

On the subject of meetings, we as a group are keen to link up with other link-minded organisations to learn from each other and ultimately help link up pockets of wildlife. To that end last year, we hosted a meeting in the memorial hall with the Norfolk Wildlife Trust (NWT) and a number of organisations to help build relationships and networks. At the start of February we had a further meeting with NWT on "nature networking". There is currently a big drive for collaboration across the county and I was particularly interested in the various mapping initiatives going on as I'm not out the starting stalls yet with our special tree mapping. What was also really satisfying was to hear several people saying that they made useful links with other groups that all stemmed back to the initial meeting we held in Great Ryburgh. I think that is a major achievement for which we should all be proud.

Bird song is starting to fill the air again. Ian Wilson sent me an article from the Guardian (4th February) reporting on scientists in Germany who found out that paying attention to the calls of birds can reduce stress. The article by Kate Ravilious is reproduced below.

Feeling stressed? Try a dose of birdsong to lift the spirits. A new study shows that paying attention to the treetop melodies of our feathered friends can boost wellbeing and bring down stress levels. Previous research has shown that people feel better in bird-rich environments, but Christoph Randler, from the University of Tübingen, and colleagues wanted to see if that warm fuzzy feeling translated into measurable physiological changes. They rigged up a park with loudspeakers playing the songs of rare birds and measured the blood pressure, heart rate and cortisol levels (a marker of stress) of volunteers before and after taking a 30-minute walk through the park. Some volunteers experienced the birdsong-enriched environment, some heard just natural birdsong, and some wore noise-cancelling headphones and heard no birdsong. Half of the recruits were asked to pay attention to the birdsong. Reporting in Landscape and Urban Planning, the researchers found that all groups, even those wearing noise-cancelling headphones, experienced a reduction in blood pressure, heart rate and cortisol levels, demonstrating that simply going for a walk was beneficial. Adding in rare birdsong did not reduce stress more than natural birdsong but, interestingly, paying attention to birdsong did. No matter where you live, birdsong may be just what the doctor ordered.

If you are not confident with your bird song identification, now is a good time to learn the songs of our resident species before all our summer visitors arrive and complicate the

matter. The Merlin app really is a good tool you can use to help identify birdsong.
<https://merlin.allaboutbirds.org/>.

Back in January I came across a BBC website article about a rare fungus being found in Hemel Hempstead. I worked in Hemel for a number of years and it is not a place you expect to find wildlife, apart from a patch of land managed by the Box Moor Trust where the River Bulbourne joins the River Gade (both chalk streams) at, not unsurprisingly an area called Two Waters, that separates the town from its railway station.

The fungus in question is the Vaulted Earthstar, scientifically known as *Geastrum britannicum*. They look very human-like. Jonathan Revett from the Norfolk Fungus Study Group first came across the fungus in Cockley Cley in 2000. The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew originally said it was a variation on an existing species but in 2015, after some investigations by a Spanish research team, it was recognised as a brand-new species. Apparently it likes churchyards and is recorded in several sites in Norfolk. Keep your eyes peeled.



Photos by Jonathan Revett

I don't know about you, but non-avian wildlife seems scarce so far this year. I blame the weather. Since the new year, I've seen only one butterfly dashing around, I'm guessing it was disturbed from its hibernation spot and was trying to find cover again. Even the Alexanders and Lesser Celandines seem late. The white sheets of Snowdrops also seem to be lasting longer than I remember. One cheery sight is that of Hazel trees which are looking gloriously yellow with the profusion of long pollen laden catkins.

Having said that I recently went for a walk around Binham with some friends, who on the day before, had been the Wassail King and Wassail Queen, and we saw a good number of hares. If you are up and about early in the morning look out for hares boxing in the fields as part of their mating process. The saying refers to them as mad March hares but as with most species, the timing is a little earlier than it used to be.

The 2nd annual Wassail in the community woodland, followed by morris dancing and a mummers play, was a great community success. The Pop-up-Pub had challenged the morris dancers to drink the 36-pint pin of real ale, which we duly did. A very good choice of beer. Well done to the dancers from the village who joined in the social dance Horses Brawle. If you were wondering what the instrument was that Roddy from Holt Ridge Morris was playing, it is a hurdy gurdy.



The inside of a hurdy gurdy.



Photos by Barley Wilson.

Wassail King and Queen leading the procession. Holt Ridge Morris performing their mummers play.

Julie and I were driving along the A1122 between Swaffham and Downham Market when we passed what is obviously a plantation of deciduous trees. When people talk of monocultures I think of bright green grass leys, but this patch of trees feels like a monoculture. The girth and height of every tree were pretty much identical. Julie referred to them as a herd of elephants' feet. Have a look at the base of their trunks (excuse the pun) next time you go that way.

With the rather wet weather recently I've had the opportunity to read the recent copies of the British Wildlife magazine. Two habitat management articles were of particular interest. One was about grass mowing regimes in urban environments and the other was about how to reduce damage by browsing deer.

The grass mowing article reiterated what I think we all know. If you do not cut your grass, you will get more wildlife. Over a 12-week period the study measured plots mown every two weeks (the control treatment), four weeks, six weeks and no cut at all. Across all sites 362 pollinator were counted. From an insect perspective the most recorded insects were butterflies and moths (42% of records), bumblebees (30%), beetles (23%) and honeybees (5%). The most frequently recorded flowering plants were Selfheal; Daisy; dandelion; Creeping Buttercup; and White Clover. Interestingly the results showed that cutting every four weeks did not significantly improve wildlife compared to the control treatment of cutting every two weeks. So, this year it is definitely **"no mow May, June and July"**.

The browsing deer article talked about using a commercially available deer-repellent spray called Trico made from emulsified sheep fat in an ancient woodland site in Cambridgeshire. The trials showed that post coppicing regrowth height was much improved in the sprayed area compared with non-sprayed areas. I know there are avid gardeners amongst us who have problems with deer so Trico might be worth a try.

Dates and events for your diary

Sunday 26th April – Spring walk in Sennowe

We have another opportunity to enjoy Spring within Sennowe, courtesy of Tom Cook. The walk starts from Sennowe bridge at 10.00am. Please register for the walk by emailing to info.ryburghwildlife@gmail.com.

David

Membership Secretary