

LOVE OF NATURE

February – March 2023 Newsletter

December - Donna Nook

For thousands of years the grey seals of the North Atlantic have gathered in large numbers at various coastal locations around the UK. One of those locations is a long stretch of beach on the coast of Lincolnshire known as Donna Nook.

For slightly less than a thousand years Doncaster u3a's Nature group have made the journey to see this impressive gathering. The reason for this event, which takes place annually, is firstly for the females (cows) to give birth to their young (pups) and secondly a few weeks after the births for the male seals (bulls) to start the whole process over again.

The attraction of this event to our group is the huge number of seals taking part in this event. This year well over two thousand pups were born on this stretch of beach and on this occasion we were privileged to witness a birth taking place. It was an amazing experience to see a new life beginning. This event was the highlight of our visit.

Sixteen of us made the trip which was enjoyed by all despite the cold. We had a bright sunny day and there were no icy North Sea winds as there can be in December.

The welcoming fire in the nearby `Bay Horse` and the hot meal topped the day as we told our tales of the seals visit.

Mike Bowser



Newborn



2 minutes old



52 minutes old





December 2022 – January 2023 Newsletter

November - Old Moor

The Love of Nature Group visited Old Moor RSPB in the Dearne Valley for its November outing. The group were fortunate that the weather remained clear with good visibility across the various lakes, reed beds and wetlands where a variety of birds were identified, including the spoonbill and pintail duck.

The viewing hides visited by the group were excellent in that they were all large enough to accommodate the group of nearly twenty, plus any additional visitors, without being overcrowded. They also provided excellent vantage points for those using binoculars and for those without, to enjoy the spectacular scenery and of course the birds. The group closed the morning by enjoying the delights of the café, however the much anticipated and acclaimed Yorkshire pudding speciality was not on the menu but would return as from next week. Another visit beckons.

Diane Williams



October - Humberhead Peatlands

A fine autumn morning found a party of 15 members of the Love of Nature group at this peat moor. Formerly, separately known as Hatfield Moors and Thorne Moors, it is now run under the title Humberhead Peatlands Nature Reserve.

The site is just south of Lindholme Prison. The walk was an easy one on level ground for about one and a half miles. The only (optional) climbing was up a steel viewing platform to an elevated position 20 feet above ground. Adjacent to the viewing platform was a reproduction of a mediaeval lane built with tree trunks and branches laid upon the site of the actual line of the old lane.

The party were particularly pleased to see the bounteous outcrops of fungi, especially Fly Agaric with its beautiful red domes before they were decimated by birds and insects.

Peat extraction ceased in 2004, but work has been going on ever since to block up the old drainage dykes in order to raise the water table and so let the slow growth and decay of sphagnum moss start to rebuild the 278 hectare reserve. Work to control the invasive species of tree such as silver birch, alder and willow is ongoing.

There is a purpose-built visitor centre with toilets and a great room with tables, chairs and beverage making equipment, available at modest rates for courses or group meetings. A series of seasonal visits would enable us to observe the changes in the flora and fauna throughout a year.

David Allen







August – September 2022 Newsletter

In **June** the Love of Nature group had a very interesting visit to Gombe-Lindholme Hall. The Hall is an International Centre for the practice of Tibetan Buddhism and has had many international visitors staying there including Richard Gere and his wife. The centre is working to manage the 180 acre estate in a way which supports and encourages the biodiversity of the fauna and flora that exist in the rare peatland. The area for some conservationists is considered as important as the Amazon rainforest.

The group were taken on a short tour of the area surrounding the Hall and given the opportunity to visit the meditation building. In the meditation building a slide show was given on the carbon neutral developments that had taken place since the Hall and surrounding land has been purchased in 2009. There had been a number of very rare species of insects identified, including two of which could only be found in four locations in the world and one of those was in the area surrounding the Hall and another located close by at Thorne; half the world's population on our doorstep.

The centre is in a secluded location, which can be quite difficult to find. However, all our intrepid group did get there in the end. The visit concluded with tea, coffee and biscuits and Paulette, David and Michael, who had all facilitated our most enjoyable visit, joined us for an informal chat. The centre is having a garden fete on the 30th July and would welcome any visitors from the u3a.

Diane Williams



Our **May** meeting of the Love of Nature group proved to be a highlight of our 2022 season. We travelled to the Old Moor RSPB site near Wath.

With our new group leader Diane being away, Jane took the lead and we were joined by eight of our members.

The extensive wetlands proved a great attraction for a multitude of birdlife and as we left the visitor centre we had our first sighting with a pair of tits squabbling over the food in the feeders.

The day was bright and warm with only a slight breeze. The air was full of birdsong from the outset with a multitude of various species in the air and on the water.

On the very pleasant stroll and from the hides, numerous sightings were made.

A passing robin spotted the curious sight of our group peering out of the hide windows and decided to investigate. He landed on a post right in front of the hide window. His appearance surprised us so much we failed to get a shot before he flew off, but surprised us again by returning and this time getting our picture.

Then it was our turn to visit our own feeding station (RSPB Cafe) Yorkshire Pudding wraps filled with beef, onions and gravy - heaven.

Our spotting record is as follows:-

Pochard	Lapwing
Grey Lag	Great Crested Grebe
Robin	Sandpipers
Blackheaded Gulls	Comorant
Canada Geese	Marsh Harrier

Mike Bowser



April – May 2022 Newsletter

The 'Love of Nature' Group used the **March** meeting to consider future visits to possible places of interest. This meeting was followed by a walk round Potteric Carr in glorious weather. Group members shared their knowledge of Potteric Carr and this was supplemented by jokes courtesy of a member. A very enjoyable morning had by all. The sun was dazzling and because of this the photo had to be taken from the reverse side of the wicker frame.

Diane Williams



February – March 2022 Newsletter

December 2021 – Donna Nook Seal Sanctuary

Donna Nook is a coastal nature reserve north east of Louth in Lincolnshire, best known as a seal watching paradise. In the two months leading up to Christmas each year, thousands of grey seals come ashore to breed and give birth to more than 2,000 exceedingly cute seal pups.

We had to choose the date of our visit carefully, for the window is small. On the 28th October, there were just 3 bulls and 5 cows, but no pups had been born. One month later, wardens counted 520 bulls, 1,599 cows, and 1,589 pups. Numbers would rise a bit more, but by Christmas most will be gone. Our only option was Tuesday 7th December.

What did Rabbie Burns say about the best laid schemes? In the week before the 7th the forecast worsened, with heavy rain, high winds and low temperatures as good as promised on the day of our visit. Further, storm Barra might be heading our way. For those who don't know, Donna Nook is on the exposed North Sea coast, with no available shelter. With weather conditions not just looking unpleasant but potentially dangerous, the group agreed to call the trip off, at least for that day.

We tried, but it wasn't possible to get everyone together again for a rescheduled trip before it was too late in the pupping season. However, as soon as the weather improved, a number of us made the journey individually or in small groups, and were glad that we did so.

Arriving at the reserve, a low wire fence separated us visitors from the beach where the remaining grey seals of the season were reclining, and in some cases mating, fighting, or a combination of the two. In peak season, numerous newly born pups are just a few feet away from the viewing area, but this late in the year most were older and further out on the mudflats, piling on the last of the fat needed for their survival at sea.

One celebrity presence was a cow named Ropeneck, so named due to a scar left by fishing line, which had been cut away by rescuers some twenty years ago. Ropeneck has returned to Donna Nook to give birth every year since then, and the first sighting of her in mid-November this year caused widespread delight.

For some, this was their first visit to Donna Nook, so it was a shame that timing and the weather were against us. Time it right, and it is one of nature's great spectacles, and one that is a real privilege to witness right up close. However, the photographers among us were still able to record some stunning images – and the pub lunch at nearby North Somercotes rounded the trip off nicely for others! Must do better next year, though.

Lesley Bassett



Seal pup by David Bryan



Cow and pup by David Bryan



Catching up by Lesley Bassett



Ropeneck by Richard Croft (creative commons – on internet)

2nd November 2021 – Autumn in Sherwood Forest

The theory behind a trip to Sherwood Forest at this time of year was (obviously!) to take advantage of the autumn leaves. However, it turns out that changes in weather patterns are playing fast and loose with our seasonal expectations, and we arrived to find much of the forest foliage greener than we'd hoped.

Sixteen of us congregated outside the snazzy new RSPB visitor centre, and set off to follow the circular Greenwood Trail, one of four waymarked walking routes through the ancient woodland. Our chosen trail included a loop around the iconic Major Oak in the centre of the forest, thought to be between 800 and 1,000 years old. Folklore tells us that Robin Hood and his chums used to camp beneath its branches and hide inside its massive trunk, a practice that is, apparently, frowned upon by modern day RSPB wardens.

We enjoyed a leisurely walk of approximately 2 miles, giving us plenty of time to stop and look at things along the way, and for photographers to get creative. Even without a stunning display of russet, reds and gold, there was plenty just asking to have its photo taken.

Part way round, some heavy-duty metalwork caught our attention. Two massive braces had been bolted around a dead tree trunk (see image). It turns out that the cores of ancient trees are amazing microhabitats teeming with organisms including insects, fungi, lichen, birds and bats, and we learned that the girdles were there to protect the ecosystem within the trunk for as long as possible.

Ideally, these organisms would move through successive generations of trees as they age and rot, but what we didn't realise was that ancient forests like Sherwood have managed to lose an entire generation of trees, largely due to the demands of wars and shipbuilding prior to the use of iron. One by one, the truly ancient trees are disappearing, and there are not enough 'newly ancient' ones ready to take over.

Enter 'veteranisation', the intentional damaging of younger trees to speed up the ageing process and create habitats that properly ancient trees offer. This includes sawing or drilling holes that woodpeckers, mammals and insects might have created, and removing bark from lower trunks and surface roots to mimic the damage caused by horses and other animals. Natural branch breakages from storms and lightning strikes are replicated using chainsaws. All this aggression is believed to initiate internal decay sooner than would occur naturally, thereby recreating the kind of habitats that rare organisms need to prevent them dying out forever. Truly a case of tough love, but hopefully the end will justify the means. Time will tell.

On a cheerier note, a spot of light lunch and a look around the adjacent craft village rounded off a very good morning for our band of merry men (and women).

Lesley Bassett



Love of Nature group with the Major Oak



Tree girdles



Fungi and ferns