

Spring  
Newsletter 2021  
ISSUE 44

Open 10:00am –  
4:00pm weekends and  
Bank Holidays from  
April until October.  
At other times the key  
may be borrowed from  
The Norris Museum or  
One Leisure with a £20  
deposit.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

AGM Wednesday  
6th July 7pm in the  
Corn Exchange with  
guest speaker.  
Further details to  
follow



like us on facebook:  
Holt Island Nature Reserve

Visit our website:  
[www.holtisland.org](http://www.holtisland.org)

The Friends Group  
is a voluntary  
organisation dedicated  
to the promotion and  
protection of Holt Island,  
Wilhorn Meadow and  
the Thicket in St Ives for  
the enjoyment of all.

## SECRETARY'S NOTE

I'm very pleased to write that the Island is now open again following its winter closure. Many thanks to HDC Ranger Paul and our dedicated volunteers who worked so hard to get the boardwalk and Island ready in time. Turn to page 3 to find out how you can help with ensuring the boardwalk's future. If you have ever thought about joining the committee then now is your chance as we have vacancies coming up! Details on page 3.

Helen Cripps

### OTTER HOLT

I recently read some historic documents and discovered that back in 1987, when the Island first became a nature reserve, there was an objective to build an otter holt on our island. Well – we now have one!!

This has been made possible thanks to a Waitrose donation of £330 under their Community Support programme, and Paul Claydon, our HDC ranger, and his band of volunteers - see photos.

The "Holt" is made from recycled plastic, and as can be seen from the photos, has a main compartment where pups may be born and cared for in their early



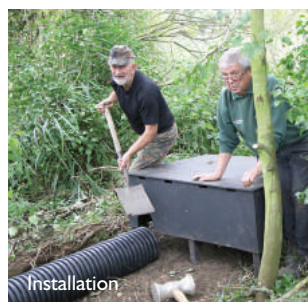
The holt

days. There are two entrances/exits, one from the river and one on the land side. When pups are very young they are scared of water and their mother will take them through the land access in the early days.



Installation

It is known that there are otters in the St Ives area using the river between Houghton and Needingworth. Otters are at the top of their food chain. If otters are healthy and increasing in number it reflects much in the quality of the river and



Installation



Finished

its ecosystem, so this is good news, as it is a sign of a healthy Great Ouse.

Otters can breed at any time of the year with an average litter of two pups. The young stay with their mother for about 12 months. The female reaches breeding age at 2 years. Wild otters rarely live beyond 5 years, but in captivity have lived up to 15 years. Adults only generally get together to breed, so when seen in groups they tend to be a mother and pups.

Otters are nocturnal and can see better under water than on land. They can live on many types of waterways and wetlands and love wet wooded habitat and reed beds, which we of course have. They prefer good bankside cover for resting up during the day, with areas of dense scrub and log piles, again something of which we have plenty.

Otters can cover a vast territory, up to 20 km. Whilst we cannot guarantee that our new Holt will be attractive to an otter, one thing for certain is, if we haven't got one, then it can't be used!

Watch this space.

Nigel Sprowell "Friend "

All photos: Nigel Sprowell



This wonderful photo was NOT taken on the Island but is too good not to include here!

# HOLT ISLAND RINGING REPORT FOR 2021

During 2021 we aimed at ringing once a month on the Island to sample what was present, and also during the summer months to target the warblers. The aims were mainly achieved but we were not able to ring in January due to the floods preventing access to the Island. During the rest of the year the Island was used more intensively than it had been in 2020 with many more visitors which had some effect on bird numbers.

The weather had a major effect this year on the lack of success for a lot of breeding birds. The year started off with a lot of rain so the Island remained flooded for most of January and part of February. The spring was then a very cold one which held back the growth of plants so they came into leaf very late. This in turn affected the insects, holding back a major food source when it was most wanted for the development of the young in the nest. The result was that the tits, warblers and other insectivorous species did poorly. No Great Tits fledged from the nest boxes and only 34 Blue Tits fledged, about a quarter less than last year. However birds like blackbirds did well as the ground remained soft and moist right into the summer so worms were plentiful. This was reflected in the numbers of birds caught in 2021.

In total 926 birds were caught of 29 species which was down on 2020 by 180 birds and one species less, mainly because there were fewer juveniles around.

There were a number of firsts for the Island including a Corn Bunting in May; they can be heard on the other side of Hemingford Meadow but have never before been seen on the island. In April a beautiful male Redstart was caught, which must have been a passage migrant as they breed in the north and west of England. And finally a juvenile Water Rail in August; it is likely that they breed in the vicinity of the Island but have not been seen as they are very secretive.



Corn Bunting. Photo: Julian Limentani

The number of nestlings from nest boxes was down by over 25% as many died in the nest from lack of food and the available food not being suitable for young growing birds as they need a moisture rich diet. The number of juvenile Reed Warblers and juvenile Blackcaps was down



Male Redstart. Photo: S Limentani



Water Rail. Photo: Julian Limentani

significantly. This year no Sedge Warblers bred on the Island and no Willow Warblers were caught. However five juvenile Blackcaps were caught in December and a very heavy Reed Warbler weighing 19.4 g was caught in November, suggesting the river is being used as a flyway for birds travelling south.

There were two interesting recoveries: a juvenile Chiffchaff ringed on the Island on 14th July 2021 and controlled by the Beachy Head Ringing Group at Beachy Head on 16th September. It was released to continue on its journey south. The second was a juvenile Reed Warbler ringed on the Island on 19th August 2021 and killed by a cat in Eastbourne, East Sussex on 30th September.

During the year a couple of birds ringed on the Island were re-trapped at Wyton Bomb Dump, a Garden Warbler ringed on 14th May 2021 was re-trapped on 24th June and a Reed Bunting ringed on 29th July 2019 was re-trapped on 15th November 2021.

A male Blackcap ringed on 8th June 2014 has been caught each year since including on 13th April 2021.

Ringing during 2021 has confirmed that the River Great Ouse is used by migrant birds to navigate within this area and that Holt Island is an important feeding area for those migrants, particularly in the autumn, when the aphids are very plentiful.

Julian Limentani



# YOUR BOARDWALK NEEDS YOU!!

In our last Islander we explained the problems we have been experiencing with our boardwalk, primarily due to age and adverse weather conditions, notably flooding. The costs of these repairs are becoming prohibitive, even more so as we are now being asked by Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) to effectively fund 100% of the costs.



The foreground of this photo shows 16 new boards – cost £240

There are approximately 2700 boards making up the boardwalk which is now 11 years old and it is envisaged that 10% will need replacing each year. With rising timber prices, each board costs approximately £15, making an annual cost of £4000 for boards alone!

We have paid out a substantial amount of money recently, some £7000 primarily for boardwalk repairs and maintenance. With annual budgeted costs of £5000 we need to generate more income to ensure we can keep the Island safe and open for you. If we fail to achieve this, there is a real risk the HDC will close it on safety grounds.



These 20 boards cost £300

## We need your help!

Boards can be purchased for £15 each, you may buy as many or as few as you like. Every purchase will make a real contribution to keeping our Island open.

Please send your donation to our Treasurer Basil Belcher, 18 Redwell Close, St. Ives PE27 6NY, or [treasurer@holtisland.org](mailto:treasurer@holtisland.org)

Please be assured we are determined to explore all avenues to raise funds to keep the Island safe and open for all to enjoy. We really do appreciate all the support you provide.

## PLEASE PLEASE BUY A BOARD .

Thank you.

*Photos: Nigel Sprowell*

## YOUR COMMITTEE NEEDS YOU – COMMITTEE VACANCIES!!

We are also pursuing other sponsorship and grant avenues and to help with this we are actively seeking two new committee members as we will shortly have vacancies.

If anyone would like to join our very enthusiastic and dedicated committee then please contact our Secretary Helen Cripps – [secretary@holtisland.org](mailto:secretary@holtisland.org) or any committee member. It would be ideal, but not essential, to have fundraising experience.

### Recent events the committee have attended

#### St Ives Community Fair

On 12th March we attended the now annual Community Fair, held this year back in St Ives Corn Exchange after a two-year break due to Covid.

This is an ideal opportunity to find out more about some of the community organisations active in St Ives and what they can offer.

Although the numbers of the general public were not as great as we had hoped we still



Our stall at the Community Fair Photo: Jill Burt

managed to encourage people to visit our stand to find out more about what the Friends do to support Holt Island Nature Reserve.

In addition it was pleasing to know that some people attended to actively seek us out.

#### St Ives Farmers Market

On Saturday April 2nd we attended the Farmers Market to coincide with the spring opening of Holt Island. It was a beautiful sunny but cold morning and people were visiting our stall and display even before it was fully erected!



Our stall at the Farmers' Market Photo: HC

We had lots of interest in our visual display especially our artefacts which included 'Match the Skull' to the mammal with the help of clues. This was specifically designed for children but adults also loved having a go!

We again raised our profile and topped up our membership plus gained some more ADOPT-a-BOX sponsors.

All in all a very worthwhile morning.

# NATURE NOTES

## SPRING FLOWERS



Sweet violet *Viola odorata*



Willow *Salix* spp



Currant *Ribes* spp likely red (*Ribes rubrum*)



Spring blossom, fruit



Willow *Salix* spp



Blackthorn *Prunus Spinosa*

All photos: HC

## GOAT MOTH

During a work party on the 18th March a larva of the Goat Moth (*Cossus cossus*) was found on the Island. This is a nationally scarce, very large, moth. It lives in broadleaf trees such as Willow, Sallow, Poplar, Ash and Alder. It feeds on the wood making tunnels which contain runs of fermenting sap. The larva lives up to five years before forming a pupa and emerging as a moth in June or July.

Goat Moth Larva Photo: Colin Knott



It likes areas such as river banks, fens, parkland and marshes and is found mainly in East Anglia south of the Wash. The striking larva can grow to 10cm long and is reddish in colour. The moths are large at 68 to 96 mm wing span and grey/brown mottled in colour to camouflage them.

Its name is derived from the goat-like smell the larva gives off.

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