

Winter
Newsletter 2024
ISSUE 50

ADOPT-a-BOX



**Spring is on the way
and it's not too late
to adopt a bird box!**
Details on back page.



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Holt Island Nature Reserve

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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.

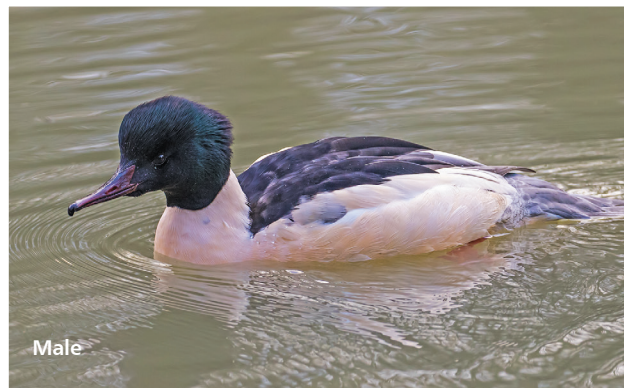
Registered Charity Number:
1198894

A WINTER VISITOR

This winter we have been blessed with the arrival of a Goosander (*Mergus merganser*). This handsome diving duck is a member of the sawbill family. Its bill is serrated, like a saw, and is ideal for catching fish. These birds are not often seen around the Island.

I first spotted this drake bird in mid-November in the Waits stretch of the river, sheltering in vegetation against the Island. It is believed to be a young bird, possibly in its first winter. By mid-December it had developed its gorgeous salmon-pink tinge – as seen in the photos. This is a typical winter/spring feature of a drake's plumage. The bill colour will change from dark to bright red as the bird matures.

The females and juveniles of the species have a gingery head and grey body: see photo (not taken near the Island).



Goosanders breed on lakes and slow-moving rivers and usually prefer deep clear fish-laden waters. This can't really be said of the Waits, apart from the fact that there tends to be an abundance of fish! "Our" bird did disappear during the floods but has returned to the stretch of backwater, at least at the time of writing (early February).

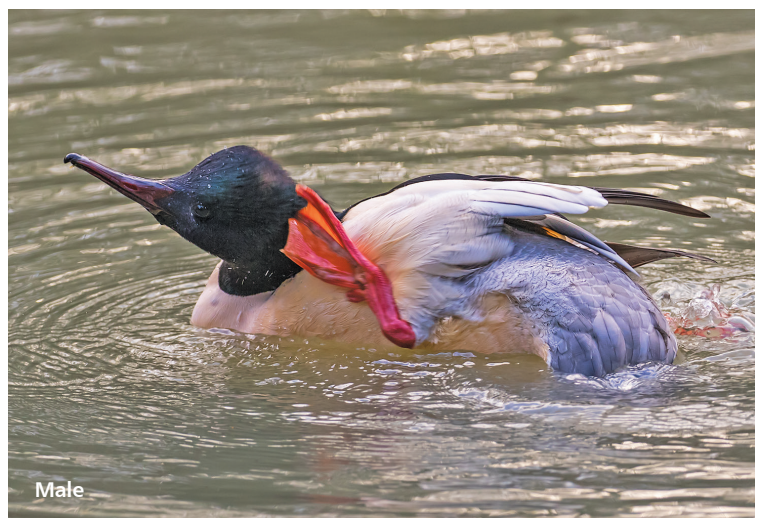
These birds tend to be a northern species in the UK, first colonising Scotland in the late 1800s. Numbers have dramatically increased albeit concentrated in Scotland, Wales and northern England. They tend to nest in large tree cavities and sometimes large nest boxes. They have one brood of around 10 eggs annually and normally commence breeding in their second year. Average lifespan is 7 to 8 years. There are around 5000 breeding pairs in the UK, with numbers swelling in the winter to approximately 15000 thanks to an influx from the continent (as per figures from the British Trust for Ornithology).

Small groups of these birds can sometimes be seen at the local RSPB Fen Drayton Lakes reserve.

Our bird may be a winter visitor and could return to the continent in the spring, but hopefully it will stay to enjoy our food and hospitality during the winter months.

I encourage you to go and look for this large duck – it is really a magnificent bird!!

Nigel Spowell, Friend
All photos: Nigel Spowell



A LOOK BACK AT SOME EVENTS FROM LAST YEAR

CHRISTMAS FUNDRAISING - November

As members, you are all aware of our ongoing campaign to replace the wooden boardwalk with a Fibregrid alternative so we can ensure the Island will remain open to the public for many years to come.

As such, one of our first events with this in mind was a Christmas fundraising event at our house.

People had the opportunity to browse an excellent range of unique Christmas gifts over coffee and biscuits.

Liz Hardy of Liz's Cards displayed her lovely birthday and Christmas cards and stationery. Barbara Brooks of Aubergine Designs had a wonderful range of her handmade jewellery, and Heather Wells of Riverport Remedies had her natural aromatherapy products for sale. They all generously donated 20% of their takings to the campaign.

Veronica Bonnett sold her handmade cards depicting photos of the fauna and flora of the Island, Hazel Hardy donated her beautiful hand-knitted Oak Folk Dolls for sale.

In addition, it was a great opportunity to sell our ADOPT-a-BOX scheme, membership and the 2024 Calendar.

Around 60 guests attended the event all of whom were supportive of Holt Island with an amazing £796 raised.

A big thank you must go to Julie Pepper, Bunty Rawlings, Moo Melrose and Helen Tiddy for serving the refreshments: they were kept constantly busy! And to everyone who donated raffle prizes. Also to Sue and Julian Limentani and Basil and Sue Belcher for organizing a very successful raffle.

FAMILY FUN DAY - August

"Brilliant Bugs" was the theme of our joint event with the Norris Museum and - for the first time - with the Methodist Church.

The weather was perfect for our 13th Family Fun Day, as we welcomed 450 visitors to the Island.

The children could Design a Bug, Stencil a Bug and have a go at searching and identifying bugs in our meadow.

The Nature Table is always popular with children and adults alike who had the opportunity to ask our knowledgeable volunteers all sorts of questions about our wildlife objects such as animal skulls, birds' nests and snakes' skins. The pike's head always attracts attention displaying its 300 razor sharp teeth.



Stenciling bugs Photo: Jill Burt

We had some wonderful comments on the day:

"What a fabulous afternoon, thank you to everyone involved - my grandchildren had so much fun"

"Was a great day, lots of people! Well done to the organisers"

Again, this event would not be possible without the support of all our wonderful volunteers.

HERITAGE OPEN DAY - September

As with previous years we took part in the nationwide Heritage Open Day event and were blessed with glorious weather.

We had around 200 visitors coming from various parts of the country and we received many wonderful comments, including 'we must come back and visit St Ives and Holt Island again!'



Basket weaving.
Photo: Veronica Bonnett

In the Holt there was a display of original Harrison baskets and tools on loan from Charlotte Jordan, daughter of Jack Harrison.

Alan Morris (who is also a Fen Drayton RSPB volunteer) brought some items that he had made from willow and gave an interesting and very informative basket weaving demonstration to all our visitors throughout the day.

Jill Burt

WAXWING *Bombycilla garrulous*

We don't have any reported sightings of waxwings on the Island (it's not a source of food for them) but this winter has been a great year to see waxwings in the UK and this photo - taken by Nigel Sprowell in Coton in mid-December - was too good not to include.

Nigel writes "I was close and used a 400mm lens. One has to be very still and patient as they are very flighty birds. If you come across a Rowan tree they are using, they usual mass high up nearby and send down a single bird, and if that one is comfortable then the mass descend, scoff like mad for a few minutes then clear off for half an hour or so before returning - if you are lucky!"



Photo: Nigel Sprowell

THE REEDBED EXPERIMENT 2023

The Holt Island reedbed is a dynamic thing. Since beginning to colonise the eastern tip of the island in the 1930s it has spread, filling in a scoop of formerly open water. As it grows, and reed dies back each winter, so it accumulates material, added to by silt and debris in the floods. The effect is to raise it, and dry out the top layer - it is still ultimately floating in a mat above the water - that becomes colonised by willows and other plants that accelerate the drying. With it has come reduced growth away from the river. These areas were being used less by warblers than the better-growing wetter river edge reeds.

Last winter, after seeking advice from the RSPB, two blocks were cut in the bed, and all material removed, to see if that might stimulate improved regrowth. Within each we established two 1m x1m quadrats: areas where we were to record the growth of reeds and other plants, and compare these with two 'control' areas in the uncut bed: looking at the reed growth and growth of the lower, herb layer.



Area B after being cleared

The process of growth in each quadrat was recorded across the spring and summer by FOHINR volunteer Veronica Bonnett. Our Chair, Tim Reed, looked at the control areas. The initial recording in March 2023 was hampered by floods, but then growth began in earnest in the cleared areas.

What did Veronica find? Initially, the cleared plots had patchy regrowth of sedges and reeds. The reeds then grew rapidly. Initially, both at ground level, and in the lower levels of the reeds, there were nettles, bindweed and marsh

woundwort. As the reeds grew, the other plants either followed suit, or died. Some did both. Once the reeds were tall, hops emerged, and locally used the stems as support, before they too died back.

By the end of summer, reeds in the quadrats nearer the river were the same height (210-260 cm) or higher than the controls. The controls also had a few nettles as undergrowth. The number of flowering reed heads were similar too.



Marsh Woundwort Photo: HC



Area B in late autumn 2023. The 2m tall pole is one of the quadrat corners

What of the birds? As the cut areas grew, so we saw birds using them. The acid test will be in 2024 when we will see if the cut areas grow better and get used more or less by birds too.

Thanks go to all of the volunteers for cutting and clearing the trial areas, and to Veronica for counting the quadrats, and for relocating them as they became ever taller and harder to find.

Tim Reed and Veronica Bonnett

Reedbed photos: *Tim Reed and Veronica Bonnett*



WINTER FLOODING – GREAT OUSE, ST IVES

This drone image captures the Island on 6th January, the day the river was recorded at its highest level (in St Ives) during the recent flooding.

Photo: Mark Dearnley

WINTER ACONITE *Eranthis hyemalis*

A wonderful display growing along the Thicket path. A sign of spring on the way. The flowers are a good

nectar and pollen source for early-emerging pollinators. Each flower is surrounded by three lobed leafy bracts. After flowering the plants die back to their underground tubers, emerging again the following year to take advantage of the light before the woodland canopy above comes into leaf.



Photo: HC

ADOPT-a-BOX

ADOPT-a-BOX makes a wonderful present for a loved one or a birthday. We provide a certificate along with a photo of the box and a map of its position. We send an interim and final report giving details of all boxes and their success, and we aim to do a guided walk for adopters.

Please send your donations of £10 per box to: Julian Limentani, 4 Links Way, St Ives, Cambs PE27 6DW or membership@holtisland.org. Details of our bank account can be sent if requested. A downloadable form is available from our website here: <https://www.holtisland.org/index.php/adoptabox>

CORRECTION: In our last issue photos of the woodpecker, swan and long-tailed tit were incorrectly credited. We should have credited Nigel Sprowell. Our apologies.



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