



Newsletter

Spring 2014

AGM at Bayfield Hall Saturday 21st June

Our AGM will be held at Bayfield Hall in the meeting room at the rear of the building, from where there is a splendid open view across the Lake and Parkland. The programme for the afternoon is:

- 2.30pm. The AGM formal business
- 3pm. An informal look at the past and future of the RGCG
- 4pm. Tea and biscuits and enjoy the company and the view
- 4.30pm. Depart

The AGM held at Bayfield in 2003 was our first, a step up from the steering group formed in late 1999. Robin Combe continued as Chairman of the RGCG and has done until now. In February Robin expressed his wish to stand down from the chairman role, and it is fitting that we begin and end his stewardship of the RGCG at Bayfield. He will however remain on our committee, and will continue his pursuit of signal crayfish, and look to foster the interest of local youngsters in the countryside through fishing at the north end of the Lake.

We are very fortunate to have as Chairman designate Henry Crawley, who many of you will know. Henry lives close to the river at Hunworth, and has done for some 30 years. He went to school locally and spent all his professional life here. He has quickly proved himself to be a very effective organiser of practical conservation work, principally to date on the long tributary Gunthorpe Stream. His energy, enthusiasm and wide range of practical skills have greatly boosted our volunteer core.

We have two other changes for our committee. Len Bentley stands down, and Max Garrett has already done so in the committee role. Len is one of our founding members, and as our first Treasurer and Membership Secretary remained in that role until 2010. Max has provided the technical expertise in producing our Newsletter since the first edition in Spring 2004, and continues to do so.

Two new committee members are proposed, Andrew Cannon and Lorraine Marks. Many will be aware that Andrew runs Natural Surroundings; he is a very experienced and able ecologist. Lorraine was co-opted as our Environment Agency contact person some five years ago; and in now taking early retirement from the Agency we have moved quickly to make her a committee member in her own right. Both are very committed to the river and its wildlife.

We looked forward to seeing many of you at this AGM. We feel it is timely for an informal and collective look at achievements since our inception; what is in the planning stage; and what we should be doing in the future.

This Newsletter

The content of the Newsletter provides examples of two key RGCG themes. The articles on the Gunthorpe Stream and the Eel Project, and the work carried out by the Natural Surroundings business, require volunteers to be involved in practical restoration projects and conservation management work; and the need for continuous monitoring of all that happens on the Glaven. Secondly there is the need to work in partnership with specialist bodies. In particular note the activities of the Norfolk Rivers Trust, who have the responsibility for the implementation of the Catchment Restoration Fund, and the projects supported by this on the Glaven.

The two themes are intertwined in all we do; that and the crucial support of the landowners concerned.

Gunthorpe stream restoration 20th-21st January

The 3 year project approved in Jan 2012 has taken a significant step towards completion this last winter. The aim of the RGCG volunteer led work here is to re-wild the stream, and diversify the flow dynamics of this long tributary of the Glaven. It has been over widened and ditched in former times for land drainage purposes. By making focal alterations in the stream bed with various techniques, the sinuosity and velocity can be varied to increase oxygenation, create pools, riffles and woody debris sanctuaries for invertebrates and fish. This contrasts with the current uniform nature of some parts of the stream. We have chosen areas where natural improvements are not likely to happen by leaving the stream alone even though debris clearing and ditching having ceased some years.

Last year we worked with volunteer parties in Brinton, close to the lake at Brinton Hall, and the interventions have stood up well to the winter floods.

This year a stretch either side of Thornage was chosen as an area that could benefit from both woody debris work within a woodland zone, and more direct stream bed manipulation with dig and dump techniques. With the encouragement and support of the Astley and Stody Estates (the landowners) and the Norfolk Rivers Trust, we organised 2 days of intensive work in January. We obtained some financial support from The Norfolk Coastal Partnership community fund of the Nine Chalk Rivers project. The NRT with help from the EA kindly arranged pre-intervention electrofishing surveys in the chosen areas with a control site on the stream. It is planned to repeat these surveys in years to come to see if the hoped for improvement in fish numbers materialises. This is one way of assessing the diversification of wildlife in the river system that we aim to preserve and improve.

The photographs demonstrate some techniques used to insert woody debris dams and angled deflectors in a stretch lined with alders. As you can see the flow was quite high that day and the clouding of water disguises the bed alterations achieved. Follow up point photography will demonstrate changes in the future.

Where possible trees are dropped directly into stream and pinned down. This would ideally be with living trees but the narrowness of the stream and deep banks made that less easy to achieve. Where trees have naturally fallen into the stream, excellent habitat arises in the pools and turbulence created.



Alder trees: timber to hand



Making the woody structures

We also had the advantage of a tracked digger which could access the non-wooded margin. This greatly speeded up the digging of pools below the woody debris. The stony aggregate was used to narrow the stream up from the woody debris and re-enforce the riffle effect. The increased velocity as a result maintains a scouring effect on the pool below to prevent silting up. These interventions should be flood proof and self-sustaining. It was pleasing to see how quickly we could change a shallow wide uniform stretch into a more babbling brook.



Completed woody structures



Digger support for pool creation

Gunthorpe stream restoration 20th-21st January contd

On the second day with the digger, under the expert guidance of Dr Nigel Holmes who surveyed and encouraged the project, we worked through the open meadow up from Thornage Common and created another set of pools and riffles. In all over 2 days, we were able to make more than fifty discrete adjustments to the stream bed. Since January we have had some heavy flows down the stream and with one exception all the interventions have held up well accumulating more woody debris and deepening pools. Monitoring will continue, and where necessary, a suitable adjustment made.

I am extremely grateful to all our volunteers and the working partners of the RGCG who gave up their time and effort to make a real difference. Thanks to Dom Arnold whose digger skills saved our backs. Further work is planned next winter.

Henry Crawley

Natural Surroundings: wildlife observations

Visitors venturing from the café into our dark, mysterious woods are thrilled to come upon the cool, clear, Glaven; very much the heart of our reserve and what makes it unique. Our stretch of river is unusual, mostly in deep shade, with little emergent vegetation and hence a distinct ecology and fauna. It flows through Alder carr with an interesting suspended succession; re-wetting by springs has left ecologically valuable standing dead wood. Downstream, the rising west bank was planted by Sir Alfred Jodrell with White Poplars that are now very striking. To the east, what looks like a flood meadow is an independent fen, again spring-fed, from which we have historically excluded the enriched river water, though as this has vastly improved since the Bayfield Lake was dredged and bypassed, we are now more tolerant of fallen trees and other 'LWD' that will eventually cause the river, wood and fen to re-connect in unpredictable and interesting ways.

Along the Glaven this April morning I've had great views of Cuckoo, Kingfisher and the first Trout of the year; newly-arrived Whitethroats are whittering in the scrub while, in the wood, Nuthatches, Treecreepers and Marsh Tits are feeding tiny hatchlings. There are fresh Otter tracks as usual but no sign of the Water Vole photographed earlier this month, a refugee from the Cley floods, or perhaps the first of many? Our friendly Soay Sheep (from Itteringham Mill) are busy grazing the meadows, although they prefer orchids and cowslips to boring old grass and so need to be moved regularly. Speckled Woods are chasing Brimstones and Peacocks from their territories and many of the 500-plus species caught by our Tuesday Moth Club are already munching their food plants. The Harvest Mice in our captive breeding colony have more tiny babies - we've already released a dozen teenagers this year! The orchids are rewarding us for our hard work cutting and raking the fen; just half a dozen flower spikes after last year's cold spring was discouraging but many more are now on the way.

There's much more to do and more rewards to reap and we welcome anyone interested in getting involved. Natural Surroundings is a small sustainable enterprise owned and run by local residents, aiming through the conservation and interpretation of wildlife to support an economically viable rural community among enriched biodiversity. We exist thanks to the Bayfield Estate and are grateful to them, our customers and our friends for generous support. Find out more via www.naturalsurroundings.info



Water Vole. A refugee

Andrew Cannon

Thanks to Chris Jarvis for this excellent photograph of a water vole at Bayfield.

More photographs of Natural Surroundings in April this year can be seen on the back page.

Norfolk Rivers Trust Projects on the Glaven

All the Norfolk Rivers Trust projects on the Glaven are now underway, with projects at Wiveton, Bayfield, Thornage, Selbrigg, Baconsthorpe and the headwaters; either they are completed, underway or in the later stages of planning.

The work at Wiveton, where we part-funded an Environment Agency and River Glaven Fishing Association Project, was completed in Spring 2013. New gravel riffles have been constructed in the river, and at low tide they improve flow diversity at the site greatly. The riffles are full of invertebrates and are already being colonised by aquatic plants, so are looking good. It will be interesting to see if there is enough flow through the gravels to keep them free of silt in the long term.

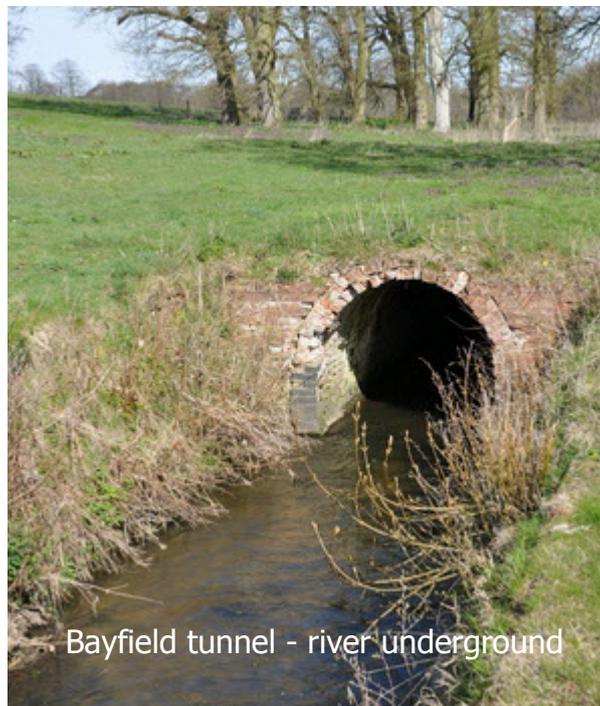
At Bayfield we hope to begin work on the new river channel around the lake in early summer. It has taken well over a year to agree a design with the Environment Agency and the District Council, but all parties now seem to be agreed and we should be able to start digging soon.

This will be especially exciting, as the river currently runs through a tunnel and we will effectively create a brand new stretch of river which we think will be colonised very quickly.

Downstream of the lake we are working with the owners on a project in the meadow upstream of Glandford Ford, currently looking at possible wetland creation and river channel enhancement.



RGFA celebration Wiveton 31st May 2013



Bayfield tunnel - river underground



Bayfield - Glandford river meadow

Norfolk Rivers Trust Projects on the Glaven

Further upstream, between Little Thornage and Thornage we are planning a project for later this year, designed to improve the floodplain habitat and river margins at a site where the river itself is already in good condition. The site is full of water voles and native crayfish, so getting the balance right between improvement and interference is critical.

At Selbrigg Pond we have now re-enforced the crumbling pond wall and by the time the newsletter appears we will have removed a large amount of accumulated sediment from the pond, restoring it as freshwater biodiversity hotspot. The pond is spring fed and a vital source of clean water for the river.

At Baconsthorpe Castle we have been talking to English Heritage and the owners about removing silt from the pond to preserve habitat for the rare and wonderous crucian carp and also protect the river from further siltation. We hope to begin work there in early 2015.

Up in the headwaters around Baconsthorpe and Bodham we have worked (and are still working) with several farms to reduce the amount of silt getting into the river. We have taken a variety of measures here, emptying existing silt traps and ponds, helping farms re-locate beet storage to keep soil off roads, fencing off bits of vulnerable fields and creating wetlands in appropriate places in drainage ditches to trap silt and nutrients. Early monitoring work suggest this work is working well, but we need a downpour to really test it out.

Jonah Tosney
NRT Projects Officer

Photographs by Ian Shepherd



Selbrigg Pond. New retaining wall.



Selbrigg Pond. Reed and silt clearance.



Baconsthorpe Castle. Algae on the silted pond

Conserving the remarkable European eel

Almost every countryman and fisherman has a memorable or sometimes unfathomable story about eels; eels blocking tile drains under fields, eels in the wet grass on moonlit nights and eels in horse troughs with no way of telling how they got there. The list goes on!

Our relationship with eels is a long one. Certainly hunter-gatherer humans would not have ignored them as food. We know that eels were caught using fishing spears, and weirs, during the British Mesolithic period and ever since this time there is plentiful evidence for eel collecting and eating. In fact the old methods of catching eels are not so different to those used in the modern era. For example, the eel fork, a particularly vicious looking spear, was used widely in the Norfolk Broads up until at least the early twentieth century, whilst the basic design of the eel trap has barely changed since the Bronze Age. Indeed the fyke nets that we use today to catch eels from rivers and lakes are not so dissimilar to traps discovered in a recent archaeological dig in Cambridgeshire that dates to 1100 BC.

This continuity of catching eels sends a spiritual and cultural thread way back through time and in England nowhere is this thread stronger than in East Anglia. Ely takes its names from the millions of eels that used to live in the undrained wilderness that it looked down upon and in every East Anglian town and village eels must have been variously captured, traded and eaten. But over the last two decades eel populations have been in steep decline and eel fisherman have largely hung up their nets - the rich cultural heritage that surrounds the eel has started to slip away.

The story of the eel is nothing short of inspirational and is worth thinking on as you tour the Glaven valley. It spawns in the Sargasso Sea way out in the Atlantic off Bermuda and the resulting larvae drift on the Gulf Stream for at least three years, before they run into British estuaries as elvers or "glass eels". These tiny see-through eels then head up-river to live in all kinds of places - streams, ditches, lakes and even the most isolated of field ponds that have no surface connection to the river system.

How eels find their way into remote ponds is poorly known, although it is said they can travel through the damp grass at night. So next time you slip over on a short-cut back from the pub get your torch out and have a look! Eels can live for up to 30 years (and maybe much longer) and can grow to quite a size (3 feet and over) where food resources are abundant. At some point, however, they feel the urge to spawn and get back to the ocean. Eels heading to the sea take on a beautiful silvery sheen and in the past local people used to catch them en-masse in the autumn using cleverly constructed eel traps ("racks") installed in water mills.

In line with a UK-wide decline in eel populations over the last 25 years, eel numbers in the Glaven have been dropping. In the past local people used to talk of a river black with elvers in spring and eels were widely caught for food by eel catchers and for fun by local children. These things are no more and the RGCG aim to help the eel as much as possible so that it might become a prominent part of local culture once again.

The Norfolk Coast Partnership, RGCG and NRT have all contributed to a Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) bid which, if successful, will focus on Glaven valley eels, especially eel conservation and the preservation of eel culture and stories - keep your fingers crossed! We hope to go into schools to tell children about eels and we want to talk to the eel catchers who spent their lives trapping and observing eels. In addition the project will enact a whole series of eel surveys and conservation measures, including the removal of barriers to eel migration.

Just as the HLF bid was being written, eels surprised everyone! In 2013 the spring elver run was big on the west coast of Britain – the biggest for many years suggesting a resurgence. Importantly they were seen in the Glaven for the first time in many years in a small Letheringsett stream. For more information on the Glaven eel project, especially this years elver trapping, see our web site and the RGCG blog: www.riverglaven.co.uk

If you have seen elvers or eels in your local Glaven stream or pond, or if you have an eel story and are keen to pass it on, please do get in contact with me.

Carl Sayer

c.sayer@ucl.ac.uk; 07766717245)

Conserving the remarkable European eel



Eel Group at Glandford Mill 4th April; RGCG, NRT, and EA



Glass eels



Mature eel



Advisor, Roger Grady retired eel catcher on R.Wensum



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April at Natural Surroundings, Bayfield

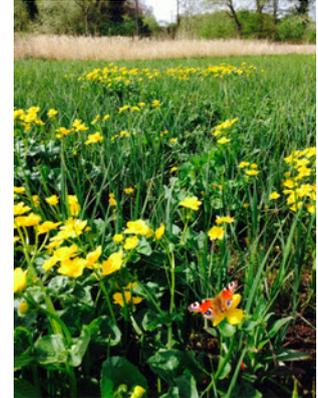


Great Silver Water Beetle.

Caught by the Tuesday Moth Club. The first recording at Bayfield

Marsh Marigold.

Two years of cutting and raking the fen has already given a great improvement.

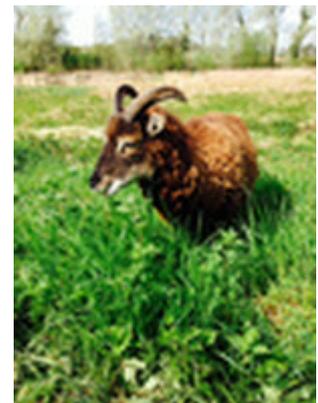


Cowslips.

Summer cut and rake, followed by Winter grazing by Soay Sheep

Soay Sheep.

Easy to manage grazers, but but are not selective eaters.



News in brief

World Fish Migration Day was held on the 24th May, and received active support from the Wild Trout Trust. Trout, eels and other fish species migrate between the sea and rivers to complete their life cycle. Barriers such as weirs, dams and sluices in rivers and on the coast, impact on this migration, and the aim of this event (and embodied in EU Water Framework Directive) is to draw attention to the problem and facilitate solutions. A less common type of barrier is represented by the under-grounding of the Glaven in a tunnel at Bayfield, running parallel to the Lake. By a happy coincidence the project to bring the river back to the surface was given the go-ahead in late April when there was approval for the Land Use Planning Consent, Flood Defence Consent, and the necessary Environment Agency water transfer licences. The project is managed by Tim Jacklin of the WTT, and an August start is planned.

The RGCG supported event days organised by the NRT to generate local interest in the Rivers Mun, Burn, Heacham and Ingol held on four days in the period January to March.

We aim to work in friendly collaboration with landowners and farmers, conservation organisations and relevant public bodies.

Robin Combe Chairman 01263 712058
Ian Shepherd Secretary 01263 713370
Anne Rolfe Treasurer & Membership Secretary
Web site www.riverglaven.co.uk