

Easton Wildlife Then and Now

Thank you for inviting me to say something about my 60 year tenure in Easton in relation to the wildlife around us. **Conservation** is, perhaps, rather a bold term, but this certainly underpins my approach to the natural world around us.

Well, I came to Huntingdon in 1960 as part of the research branch of the NC to study the effects of pesticides on wildlife. Beth and I were just married and we lived at Holywell beside the river Ouse for 3 years. We came here and built Avens in autumn 1963 because it was the first bit of rolling countryside west of the A1 and only a fifteen minute drive to work at the newly built Monks Wood Experimental Station - **so, yes, we have been here 60 years**. I enjoyed exploring every nook and cranny in the parish that I could reach, and in those days I could name most wild plants by their Latin names. Much later, in 2005, I started to write a short **Nature Note** for the **Easton Newsletter** and continued this for **18 years up to No. 123**, covering a wide variety of subjects. I still spot '**new records**' from time to time, like the charming miniature buttercup called **Mousetail** growing around a muddy pool beside the Spaldwick track in 2020.

Hartham Street was a lovely green lane when we first came and the hilly part next to Calpher Wood was rich in wildflowers. I made a survey with a group of colleagues in our very first summer here in 1964, and published a list of over 130 species of plants including such uncommon species as **Butterfly orchid, Broad-leaved helleborine, Gromwell, Betony, Adder's tongue fern and Elecampane**. When this lane was converted to a Byeway-open-to-all traffic (BOAT) in the early 1990s, all these, apart from a few surviving Elecampane, were lost through the onslaught of motorbikes, landrovers and other vehicles using it as part of the Three Shires Way and enjoying a mudbath in wet weather. **For ten years** I had an exchange of letters with the Huntingdonshire District Council and Cambridgeshire County Council over the ruination of this historical route for walkers. Eventually, winter restrictions were imposed on access by 4-wheel vehicles but this did not deter motorbikes and the damage was already done. It has now been entirely resurfaced and is OK for walkers but dull botanically.

Soon after our arrival in Easton I discovered a really important colony of the beautiful and nationally uncommon **Crested cow-wheat** growing on the eastern side of the Stocking Lane road verge between **Diddington Brook** and the turning to **High Park Farm**. The Wildlife Trust was at that time negotiating with the County Highways Authority over protecting such significant sites from damage and I managed to get this area scheduled. One can still see the **marker posts** delimiting the protected area. **In 2003** I collected cow-wheat seed and scattered it on the opposite road verge as an experiment to see if this would establish, and for "insurance" against damage to the original verge. This has taken well, so that both sides now support a flourishing colony of this important plant.

I was on the Parish Council when **Plant-a-Tree** year was declared nationally in 1973. I had always admired the fine line of oaks along the **Woolley to Alconbury road** so we ordered some fine standard oak trees and a gang of us planted these along the east side of the Stonely road at **50 metre intervals**. A couple were knocked over by grass cutting but were replaced, and today these oak trees are a significant feature when entering the village from the south. "**Plant some more in '74**" was duly fulfilled by planting ash trees, and since then the tradition of tree planting on roadsides and around the Playing Field has been richly continued by succeeding Parish Councils - a testament to faith in the future.

The churchyard is, perhaps, the best example of a species-rich grassland **IN** the village, resulting from centuries of mowing without fertilisers. (Before the advent of lawnmowers it used to be scythed by hand, according to Cecil Clarke, and the produce removed.) **In 2001** I made a survey and recorded 70 species including four grasses and five wildflowers not seen elsewhere in the parish. From time to time I have asked that **a small patch be left unmown** until the plants have had a chance to flower and set seed.

Would you know it? The General Synod of the C of E has just issued a **Notice** saying that all parishes should develop plans for conserving wildlife in Churchyards! **They call it God's Acre.**

You all know the little wood called **Shepherds Close**. In the first years after we arrived, I remember **sheep grazing** in the fields on either side of the Stonely road beyond Sewell's Barn, and the very name, **Shepherd's Close**, testifies to the historical use of this land. Records show that this field was already an old enclosure in 1774 and was notable for its **large anthills**. It was ploughed up for potatoes during the war but later planted up with Norway spruce for Christmas trees and poplars for matchwood. They did not thrive on these dry slopes and the plot was given to the **Wildlife Trust in 1966**, and in winter 1983/4 I was tasked, **as voluntary warden**, with converting it into a **mixed woodland**. With a group in the village I planted 84 oak trees, 80 ash, 40 field maples and about 30 other assorted trees and shrubs on a 5 metre grid. **Hands up anyone who remembers helping with this.**

During the early years nest boxes were put up and it became **good for small birds**. Thirty species were trapped and ringed in 1989 as part of a BTO scheme. Between 1990 and 1993, over **300 species of moths** were likewise trapped including three kinds of **hawk moths and Lappet moth**. The full history of Shepherds Close warrants a record of its own. Suffice it to say that most of the ash and field maple have done well, while **90% of the oaks** have succumbed through shading from fast-growing elm suckers and lack of moisture. Today it is notable for its colony of beautiful **Scarlet elf cup fungi** (68 seen in February this year).

Easton village is today a little **green oasis** amidst an arable sea. Mature gardens, offer a variety of habitats, of course, and by the year **2000** the village had some 60 individual gardens **echoing with bird song** in the spring. This stimulated a few '**dawn chorus**' walks around the village starting at our garden and finishing at the Bells for breakfast. **Thankyou Pam.**

I still have a note from 2002 when our little band of **ten** early risers consisted of **Ray & Val Ellis, Alistair & Rona Graham, Geoff and Gwen Prigmore, Phil & James Bell and us**. We saw or heard 23 different birds including nine wrens and seven robins. A fuller list of nesting Easton birds would include **Tawny, Barn and Little owls, Kestrel** and nowadays, **Kite**. One may have mixed feelings about **raptors**, but their very presence depends on a healthy population of small mammals and birds.

Richard Burton's Stewardship land deserves a separate account for his **conservation of a whole suite of wildlife**, but here I will just mention his nesting **Lapwing, Skylark and Grey partridge**, once common but now increasingly sparse in farmland.

For many years we used to have **Spotted flycatchers** in Easton but these have been declining nationally. This attractive little bird has, to my knowledge, nested in seven different gardens in Easton, including our garden for **over 20 years**. In 2021 I published a little paper entitled **A Flycatcher Diary** describing their arrival times and success in rearing chicks. For a few years chicks were ringed as part of a study by the British Trust for Ornithology. They were also fitted with **trackers** so that they could be followed through their 16,000 mile round migration to and from Angola and Namibia. (Nature Note July 2015.)

Half of our garden had always been a bit untamed and for several years I used just to cut **paths through the long grass** in the orchard, which our grandchildren enjoyed running round. But later I decided to try and diversify the central area and produce a more species-rich meadow by **sowing wild flower seeds**, which I could collect by hand from existing old meadows. In the event, I introduced ten wildflowers and four grasses most of which have survived, including **Yellow rattle** and the scarce and attractive **Grass vetchling**.

Since then, **Barry Dickerson**, the county moth recorder, has been coming five or six times a year to record moths and our total now stands at **533** including seven kinds of hawk moths. I have also seen 24 kinds of butterflies in the garden including **White-letter hairstreak and Marbled white**. Most big gardens could yield good numbers, but I like to think that it is the **18 different native trees and shrubs** as well as the meadow plants in the garden– which support this diversity.

More recently, during the Covid years, Beth has had a **large pond** dug to further enhance the wildlife in the garden. We had great help and mole-like activities from **Peter Gould and Steve Thomason** in laying the waterproof liner. Three different waterlilies have become established and tall plants are starting to form an attractive fringe. Dragonflies are already laying eggs here and we are hopeful of attracting frogs, toads or newts. We are still some way behind the established ponds elsewhere along Chapel Lane and Broadweir, but have **confidence in the future**.

Brian Davis

March 2024