

Nature Notes 13: Sharing Observations of Wildlife in the Parishes

Earlier this year about a dozen parishioners kindly agreed to help run a pilot study of collating records of wildlife seen on the commons, originally prompted by changes in the frequency with which the barn owl has been sighted over recent years. Several problems very quickly became apparent:

1. Participants felt it would be more meaningful to extend this from the commons to the whole of the parish so that they could include wildlife they had seen in their gardens or while walking along the roads or footpaths.
2. People differed in their confidence in identifying species of different groups of wildlife.
3. The biggest flaw was that I had asked two questions rolled into one: I had asked
 - a. Which species had they seen where? and
 - b. Which wildlife features of the commons had they found most interesting?



Barn Owl (RSPB)

These two questions need different approaches:

The first question (a) requires a self-confessed IT dinosaur (me) to be dragged kicking and screaming into the 21st C. Jeremy, our Swannington webmaster, has suggested that for this question an interactive “blog” type of approach might be better, instead of me accumulating large tables of data that would then require collating and analysing. He suggests that it might be much more interesting to have an immediately available open interactive “Forum” on the Swannington website into which anyone could simply add any sightings they had found interesting (perhaps with photographs? A Swannington wildlife “Facebook” approach?? A “face”, now that really would be a first for me!!) e.g. Chris was excited to have seen a hare in front of his house for the first time. It lolloped down the road, turned right down the drive towards Barry and Pam’s house, stopped for a scratch and hopped into the grassland.

Audrey noted that a family of newly hatched moorhens on the “Hoss Pond” did not seem bothered by the blanket of weed round the edge of the pond, whereas she may not have seen the coots there this year. In late May someone might have noticed the spectacular display of white and pink flowers on the “Bottomless Pond” which it did not matter they could not name (once alerted someone else could go along and identify them later if they wished). Someone else saw three large black and white butterflies round the edges of the birch woodland on Alderford Common (white admirals), while someone else heard the soft purring coo of a turtle dove singing there.

Once alerted in this way, others who might be interested, say, in an exceptionally vigorous strand of orchids by the fen, could become aware they were there and go down and to see them before they died back.

Do you agree with my surprising conclusion that IT actually does have a valid use after all? Please “watch this space” for more details of how to access the forum when Jeremy has unravelled the best way of mounting it on the web.

The second question (b) could benefit from a different approach. Thirty years ago one of the UEA students visited about half a dozen of the more senior residents in the parish and asked them for their recollections of the commons in previous years. I will ask Jeremy to post transcripts of these conversations on the web.

I suggest that the second question could be more appropriately tackled by repeating this sort of approach again now and comparing the results with those obtained thirty years ago. When we have got the original transcripts on the website we can think about exactly which questions to discuss, but I would expect them to include “what do people living here now most value about the commons in Swannington?” and “How do they perceive that the commons have changed over time?”. Answers can be collated again and then a summary of consistent comments could be posted on the web to prompt further discussions.

I look forward to having a talk with any of you who might be interested in chatting about such questions. With very best wishes for Christmas and the New Year.

Mark (November 2017)