

Nature Notes 5: Swannington Beck

As a flash of blue and chestnut speeds low over the water of Swannington Beck have you ever wondered what sort of fish our resident kingfishers catch? Results of the Environmental Agency's monitoring of the Beck give us some clues. When they used electro-fishing to temporarily stun fish in a 100m stretch downstream of the bridge by the Village Green they caught several species.

Most abundant were minnows, with three-spined sticklebacks a close second but there were also several larger species including bullheads or miller's thumbs with their spiny fins, stone loach, which my children delighted in catching from under the bridge when they were younger, dace and several brown trout, the largest of which weighed more than half pound and was nearly a foot long.



Brown trout caught just downstream of the bridge



A brook lamprey

They also caught a brook lamprey, a member of an ancient lineage of fish which looks a bit like an eel but instead of gill covers, lampreys have seven holes on each of their sides behind their heads. Their mouths are also very different as lampreys are primitively jawless. Instead of jaws they have a circular sucker used to attach themselves to other fish on which they feed parasitically.

Otters also eat fish in the Beck. The River Wensum was one of the first rivers in which otter populations recovered following the steep declines they experienced until the 1980s. During the last two decades footprints and spraints (droppings) have been seen along Swannington Beck. The otters themselves have also occasionally been seen by the lucky few.

Less welcome have been their close relative, the mink, an invader from North America. Descendants of escapees from fur farms have devastated populations of water voles which have declined in this country by over 90% since the 1970s. Because they are smaller than an otter, mink are able to get into the burrows of water voles. There used to be a dense network of burrows in the banks of Swannington Beck at intervals from Upgate Common down to where the Beck joins the Wensum but by the 2000s the voles had almost completely disappeared. However, due to being rigorously controlled, no mink have been recorded in Swannington for about 15 years. Consequently there have recently been several sightings of water voles along the beck, a very welcome return for an animal immortalised by Kenneth Graham as "Ratty" in *Wind in the Willows*.

Another sight, that has not been seen for a very long time, is that of residents of The Street drawing water from the Beck for household use. Grooves are still visible today that were worn through the coping stones on the top of the upstream wall of the bridge by the ropes used to lower and raise buckets before the pump was built and long before mains water was installed. They were even more visible on the downstream wall until that was demolished by an accident on the bridge in the 1970s.



Ratty taking Mole for a row on the river

Mark (February 2017)