

Nature Notes 7: Ponds and Pond-life

Not only have some bird populations declined rapidly in recent decades but so have some whole habitats. Over **80% of ponds disappeared** from the British landscape during the 20th century. Many were originally dug for stock to drink from but were replaced by clean piped water to reduce transmission of waterborne infections. As ponds became redundant, they also became a nuisance to mechanised farming practices, so were filled in.

Ponds are unique wildlife habitats, very different to rivers, streams and lakes. Many of their inhabitants only spend part of their lives in water. Larval **dragonflies and damsel flies** are voracious aquatic predators eating other pond animals including tadpoles. On maturity they crawl up a piece of emergent vegetation, split their larval skin and emerge as glitteringly beautiful adults which continue to prey on other insects but in flight. Sometimes they themselves, even though very rapid fliers, become prey for even faster fliers: hobbies, small very swift falcons, are sometimes seen hawking for dragonflies over the fen at Ugate.



An emperor dragonfly, the largest of the 17 species of dragonflies and damsel flies found on our commons. © Hugh Venables



A great crested newt, distinguished from smooth newts, by their "warty" skin and blunter noses. ©Alamy

Another group of pond dwellers that have declined steeply are **amphibians**. 57% of British amphibian species breed on our commons: smooth and great crested newts, common frogs and common toads. **Great crested newts**, now the most highly protected of all species found in the parish, breed in the marl pit pond from where they used to be regularly harvested by schoolboys for sale in the Attlebridge pet shop.

Common toads are no longer so "common" having declined nationally by 68% over the last 30 years. One morning nearly forty years ago, while cycling to work through Ugate, I counted 97 toads

squashed on the road. The spring migration season can last several weeks, so I calculated that there must have been thousands of toads that did manage to make it across the road to form heaving masses mating where aquatic plants provided support for their strings of spawn.

In Swannington it is hard to see why they have declined so rapidly as their **potential breeding grounds have increased by 400%** thanks to the "Restoration of Swannington Commons" project which, with help from the Norfolk Naturalist Trust, co-ordinated the efforts of Cawston Cubs, Taverham Scouts, Manpower Service Scheme groups, Bernard Matthews PLC and three groups of conservation volunteers, created eight new ponds. 40 years ago there were only two ponds on the commons with open water throughout the year; the the marl pit pond on Alderford Common and the "Hoss" pond on Ugate Common. Both have since dried up completely and would now be just be damp hollows had they not been re-excavated.



The marl pit pond on Alderford Common.

Swannington has a little known **claim to national fame** because while the UEA Conservation Corps was helping dig out the "Bottomless Pond", Tom Langton, head of the UEA Conservation Corps, and I conceived the idea of putting toad signs up to alert motorists to the presence of toads and toad helpers. Tom became Conservation Officer of the British Herpetological Society and implemented the idea nationally, persuading me to help by being filmed for "Look East", walking along the middle of the road at Ugate one rainy afternoon, stuffing toads into the pockets of my waterproofs, then releasing them in the pond while waxing lyrical about how Kenneth Graham's wonderful character, "Toad of Toad Hall", was part of our literary heritage and how we needed to protect his natural relatives from fast cars (that did not all go "POOP – POOP" in enough time for luckless amphibians to take evasive action). In the Anglia television studios they apparently regarded this as a "good piece". I, on the other hand, have rarely felt so acutely embarrassed!!!



Mark (April 2017)