

## NEWTOWN TOWN SURVEY REPORT 1986

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The twenty-eighth annual survey was held from Wednesday, May 14th to Wednesday, May 28th 1986. I present the account of this year's survey work as recorded in my diary.

The advance party arrived the day before in fine, dry, windy weather at 1300 hrs. An excellent team that included Philip Morris, Colin Newbold, Matthew Parker, David Schofield from the VIth Form, Peter Turner, a past student, and Dale Cooch, Tim Pressey and Robert Stewart from the IVth Form. They set to work with a will and in fine conditions rapidly prepared the camp site. All major items were completed and the majority of stores stowed by the evening.

*Wednesday, May 14th* dawned fine and sunny following a windy night with some heavy rain. The advance party completed the preparation of the site during the morning, and made some initial investigations during the afternoon, prior to the arrival of the main party at 1400 hours.

Initial discoveries were as follows: Dark Pond – moorhen with five eggs, mallard with ducklings; Top Pond – (in the meadows) moorhen with eight eggs; trees on the site were only just breaking into leaf, blackthorn was still in flower and there were early purple orchids in the meadow.

Along the north cliff there was heavy slippage along the length of the shore with a storm beach raised up two feet. Along the shoreline of the saltings were many bird bodies as the result of the lengthy cold, snowy spell in February and late spring. Never before have we had such a count of dead birds. They were: 10 teal; 4 redshank; 2 golden plover; 1 whimbrell; 2 blackheaded-gull; 1 lapwing; 1 shelduck; 1 brent goose. In addition: 1 rabbit; 1 toad; 1 wood mouse.

Primroses and violets were still in full flower, the adders tongue fern was just emerging. Lesser whitethroat and whitethroat seen in the meadow and trees. There is a lack of tree cover.

The rest of the party duly arrived comprising the following students:

3rd Year: Michael Martin, Jason Penny, Darren Taylor, Mark Young.

4th Year: Justin Brett, Paul Jones.

Mrs Philo was in charge of this group accompanied by her daughters Sara and Emma. Students were soon accommodated and camp life was in full swing with preliminary tours and instruction for new pupils. My camp diary continues:

*Thursday, May 15th*

Newcomers started with a tour of the meadow and salt marsh to examine the habitat and identify the birds present there. The wattle hide was overhauled, boated out and set up in the salt marsh. All plants were behind hand, primroses and violets blooming on the tumbled cliff of the North shore and early purple orchids at the cliff top. More bodies were found along the shore line. The mammal traps were set out on prebait, the usual found within the camp site and one set to the north of the house.

*Friday, May 16th*

Following a cold night the morning started cloudy, fine by midday. Newcomers' tour of the ponds and saltings to consider the habitat and associated animal life. The essentials of hide drill explained and the wattle hide manned using the drill. Lapwings and skylarks were evident in the meadow. More bodies discovered along the shore and some in the vicinity of the Dark Pond. Hares were observed displaying and mating in the fields adjacent to the freshwater ponds. Bird skeletons to date: 13 teal; 8 redshank; 3 golden plover; 1 whimbrell; 2 blackheaded-gull; 2 lapwing; 1 shelduck; 1 brent goose; 1 unidentified. Visit to the reef at low tide, still on neaps, but a bison jaw discovered to the north of the fascine breakwater. Rowing and engine practice in the dinghies for 3rd and 4th years at high tide. I note: Robert rams the landing stage!!

Astronomy. With clear cold nights students have a good view of the night sky and have set to identify the main constellations. Under Mrs. Philo's supervision pupils are constructing home-made theodolites to track the path of named stars. A satellite has been observed passing above our site at 2030 hours for two nights.

*Saturday, May 17th*

A clear morning at first light but raining by 0700 hours. Continuous rain all morning. A shelter erected over the fire to protect the cooks. Hide drill at the Dark Pond is sheltered and more rewarding as the moorhen's eggs start to hatch. Tim, Justin and Paul hard at work spreading shingle at the tents, fire site and down paths before we start to sink into our usual mud. The outboard engine on hire from the Youth Service is found to be not working. The cooling water is not circulating. The boat is proving difficult to handle in high winds as it has a lot of free board and is very light.

Mammal trapping continues with the wood mouse count proving higher than for several years. 27 wood mice captured to date compared with 17 last year. The bank voles remain steady with a catch of 5. We need to check our scales because we seem to be catching overweight wood mice. A grass snake was found on the salting immediately to the south of camp. It disappeared down a hole under a log of driftwood. Tim Pressey reported sighting a nuthatch (?) in the copse to the North of the house. He is a reliable observer and keen bird watcher but has yet to get a second sighting in company with another observer and present accurate field notes.

*Sunday, May 18th*

Dr. Eccles, Head of Science, arrives at 09.00 with his son, Tim. My wife Mary joins us for the day and Clive Chatters, from the NCC, also arrives. The usual boat trip was not undertaken because of rough weather. Our visitors had the extended walk via Elmsworth to reach us. Dr. Eccles takes a team to investigate the pH of different habitats. His results are of value in supplementing the information we are gathering on set transects within the site. Unfortunately Mark Young slices open his finger and has to be despatched to hospital for stitching. He returns next day on the high tide. Mark's accident activated our flag signalling to the main shore.

Fossiling. This is a keen group anxious to follow the tide down as it ebbs as we are finding a lot of bison bone.

As we gather for lunch a weasel is noticed trotting along the boundary fence twenty yards from where we are sitting. The assembled group sits quietly for twenty minutes as the weasel makes repeated journeys, carrying one of its young, from its nest to another one some yards away.

We are concerned about 'something' that seems to be lying at the bottom of our rainwater butt. The disintegrating object is removed, proving to be a sparrowhawk. Another set of bones for Colin Newbold's collection.

*Monday, May 19th*

A fine, sunny day. The school group is proving to be a good unit. Students have settled down to the pattern of camp life and study, each with individual interests developing in addition to the main studies. Clive Chatters takes a group to investigate the general ecology of the meadow. Pond dipping provides many specimens for identification and the pond itself another example of the zonation within a habitat.

Fossil digging proves most rewarding: femurs, tibia, vertebrae and scapula have all been found within a site. A jaw bone and teeth are discovered but remain too deep to be excavated before the tide returns.

*Tuesday, May 20th*

A heavy thunderstorm at 05.00 followed by a stormy day with further thunderstorms in the early afternoon. Birds song dominant in the sunny periods between the storms. Willow warblers, whitethroat, linnets and chaffinches all in full song. Oystercatcher on the saltings has two eggs and is in good view of the wattle hide.

Work continues with the excavation of the bison skull, it requires great care as parts are fragile and are deeply buried. Time is short before the tide returns each time.

Bat watching is in today's schedule as Frank Heap from the National Trust is expected to arrive with the bat detector. As dusk approaches students are placed in teams to plot the emergence and the flight path of bats. Although a careful watch is kept on the house none have been seen emerging. The bat detector plots the calls of pipistrelle and whiskered bat.

During the day the prevalence of adders tongue fern has been checked. There are numerous specimens in the meadow to the west of the site and in the field to the east that contains the ant colonies.

*Wednesday, May 21st*

Change over day with high winds and continuous rain. Pupils' arrival and departure goes smoothly. Those who have left are replaced by Catherine Bell, Vicky Biggs and Paul Wyeth from the 4th Year and Denise Hunnybun and Miranda Pointer from the 3rd Year. Nicholas Osborne, who left the VIth Form two years ago, joins us later in the week for three days. The supplement of stores arrives safely and is welcome, particularly the supply of fresh bread. Hides in the meadow, Dark Pond, beside the pond and in the saltings are manned and active. Two pairs of nesting oystercatcher are under observation in the saltings located at its western extremity, a pair at the northern tip has three eggs, the pair at the southern tip has four.

Bat watch again at dusk; particular observation is kept on the house but no emerging bats are seen. Colin and Matthew have covered the rafters with polythene sheeting and this has yielded results as bat droppings are found on the clean sheeting the following day. It is the first time that any evidence has been obtained indicating that some bats do use the house for roosting.

*Thursday, May 22nd*

A close watch was kept on the meadow as the weather improved. A pair of male yellowhammers were sighted and the flight displays of a pair of skylarks was observed.

An all-out attempt was made to complete the excavation of the bison's skull and proved successful. The site of a second skull was identified by Paul Wyeth but it was in such a crumbly state that we did not attempt to dig it out.

*Friday, May 23rd*

The activities of observation and recording are in full swing. Students have a routine and are pursuing their individual studies. A chaffinch nest has been located near the Dark Pond and contains five eggs. During the day a survey team has been at work

plotting a transect in the meadow to the west of camp and at right angles to the datum line. The transect line runs southwards to the lower shore on the edge of the salting. This line is to be marked for permanent use and may prove useful in plotting vegetation changes.

*Saturday, May 24th*

Jonathan Cox and Clive Chatters from the NCC join us today and will assist students in their identification of the vegetation down the new transect line. Tracy Hart has already done the ground work and has a record. The task took the whole of the afternoon.

*Sunday, May 25th*

Mrs. Connie Pelham from the Isle of Wight NHAS joins us today and maintains the contact established over the last few years. Pupils have been prepared for the insect studies that Connie will supervise. Fortunately the warm corners of the field provided an abundance of insects for observation and photography. As usual Connie's tips to candidates on photography are most welcome and her own photographs are an essential part of our display.

*Monday, May 26th*

A bright but windy, cold day. Catherine Bell and Vicky Biggs checked and measured the datum line on the North cliff originally laid down by Colin Bell five years ago. The computer record and graphic display shows the rate of erosion and change of vegetation in that time.

A check of orchid sites revealed a group of pink spotted orchids on the eroded cliff, approaching the waters edge close to the reef on the North shore. They were also located, in bud, at the edge of the cliff pond adjacent to the 'football field' where scrub had been cleared the year before by the farmer. Green-winged orchids were plotted in the fields below the ponds and in the fields between camp and the lower pond.

Moth traps set up at night but a fault in the trap meant no catches. The great black-backed gulls nested again on the wall beside the Clamerkin. Colin took the dinghy and camera to film the bird life along the wall. Tracy and David put down permanent markers along the newly established transect.

Paul Bright, who is completing research on dormice, joined us for an all night session radio tracking wood mice. Teams were prepared and ready to start at 21.30 with the intention of tracking in relays throughout the night. Unfortunately the radio collar provided difficulties that eventually proved insurmountable. The project was abandoned at midnight.

*Tuesday, May 27th*

A fine, windy day with a rough sea by the afternoon. The last opportunity for the canoists. Final observations for the bird watchers before dismantling the hides and a last search of the shore for fossils. Some good bones were collected by Paul W, Denise and Miranda.

Further filming was completed of the great black-backed gull. Oystercatchers were observed mating on the saltings. During the day preliminary work was started for breaking camp the following day.

*Wednesday, May 28th*

A vast amount of cleaning, packing and dismantling to be completed throughout the day in order to meet the tide and return to Cassey Bridge at 16.00 hours.

I complete my report with the following observations that impress upon me. There is an increase in the oystercatcher population near to our site, two pairs following a period

when we have seen none. There is an increase in species and numbers of small birds in the scrub-encroached meadow. Few ringed plover, although occasionally seen, no longer nest in the shingle of the north shore. At least one pair was always present. Pheasants have been heard in the meadow. Adders tongue fern seems to have particularly increased. The great black-backed gull has become a regular feature. We thought we had seen the end of bison and elephant bone on the north shore but this year found some magnificent specimens of bison bone. Grass snakes not previously seen by students have been recorded in the last two years.

Finally my annual thanks to Pat Ewbank, the Reserve Warden, who continues with his help and support. To Oliver Frazer for his ever present support. To Connie Pelham and Barbara Philo. Barbara joins us from the Mathematics Department. She brings enthusiasm and support and a love of Newtown that is evident in all the work she does.

I previously recorded the loss of mature students who have left for higher education but as ever they have been replaced by equally good students whose enthusiasm, growing expertise and maturity is good to see. I am particularly indebted to Colin Newbold and Matthew Parker who conducted the Open Evening last February (1986) in my absence. They have since presented our work to outside assessors and we are hopeful of obtaining a Schools Curriculum Award in recognition of the work completed by students at Newtown and in the community.