

Tophill Low visit Wild Things September 2024

The weather was unpromising and Tophill quiet when fourteen of us turned up, but we had a pleasant surprise on entering the Visitors' Centre. Richard the warden was there, and he gave us an impromptu talk about the origins of Tophill Low, which is now an SSSI and an important inland site for overwintering waders.

Counterintuitively perhaps, he told us 'low' means 'mound', and there is evidence of nearby slightly higher land occupied by prehistoric people and their grave mounds. In fact, a friend of ours, with an East Riding dialect worth recording for posterity, has told me that 'Low' should be pronounced to rhyme with 'Howe' which is another local word for mound, so this makes sense.

John, one of the volunteers, gave us a fascinating tour of the recent rare plant polytunnel and outdoor nursery, where scarce plants which were once plentiful in our wetlands are being grown from seed. These have all been collected locally from sites where they are surviving in small numbers and will be reintroduced to Tophill and other suitable habitats. Many of these have been virtually wiped out in the wild by drainage and intensive agriculture.



Above: John shows how volunteers at Tophill are collecting seeds from the rare Great Fensedge *Cladium mariscus*. Overleaf: seed pots of the rare Lesser Water Plantain *Baldellia ranunculoides*; John shows the underwater roots of carnivorous Bladderwort *Utricularia vulgaris*, which bear the carnivorous 'bladders' that trap tiny aquatic creatures.



Insects were thriving in the polytunnel, including some plant specialists like the Skullcap Sawfly, and Marsh Frogs were hopping about outside.



left: A Skullcap Sawfly alights by the flowers. Its specialist caterpillars eat the leaves.
Below: a predatory Dance Fly.



We loved the Oxford Sandy and Black Pigs troughing in the mud nearby. These pigs have been brought back from the brink of extinction in the last few years with the surge of interest in rare breeds. (The Howitt Report of 1955 recommended that only three breeds of pigs be reared in this country to counter competition from abroad). Slow to grow to



maturity compared to the standard porkers, they are, however, prolific and careful mothers, hardy and resistant to sunburn, and perfect to roam woodlands such as those at Tophill, keeping the scrub under control. They also, apparently, end up as excellent bacon!

We walked through occasional drizzle via hides to South Marsh, where we saw numbers of waders and five stately Herons standing in a row. One of our group told us the collective noun for a group of herons is 'siege' and they certainly seemed to be standing guard, still and alert.



The peace was disturbed by a frantic panic flight of Lapwings, and we looked for the Marsh Harrier for a few moments before we spotted it, then it flew off, unsuccessful. Still, the herons remained stationary, unphased.



We envied Paul, who'd fallen behind and glimpsed an otter cross the murky pools by the path. Both the otter and the harrier were too fast for our cameras.

Left: 'Halloween Hands' sculpture in the murky pools where Paul saw the Otter.



Above: Little Egret; left: Snipe; Over: Ruffs; female Northern Shoveler; Green Sandpiper; view over Southern Marsh





Bird list by John Kitson recorded on <https://app.bto.org/birdtrack>

Black-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*)

Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)

Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*)

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*)

Coot (*Fulica atra*)

Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)

Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*)

Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*)

Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*)

Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*)

Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*)

Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*)

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*)

Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*)

Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*)

Pochard (*Aythya ferina*)

Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*)

Ruff (*Calidris pugnax*)

Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*)

Teal (*Anas crecca*)

Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*)

Woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus*)



Above a spider on the hide window, probably a *Zygiella x-notata*, which is often seen on windows.



Left: a Large-flowered Hemp-nettle (*Galeopsis speciosa*), an annual which had self-seeded around the polytunnel area. Once a common agricultural weed, it's now a treat to find.

Report HK. Photos Helen and John Kitson