

MARK OLLETT (NWT)



It is the county's newest broad and lies at the heart of Norfolk Wildlife Trust's first 'urban' nature reserve. **Steve Snelling** explores the natural wonder close to home that is Thorpe Marshes.

The sky's pink blush is fast fading but lingers long enough to cast a beguiling sheen across the darkening broad. A chill breeze shakes skeletal branches and combs coarse marshes sodden with water. In the dying light of a winter's afternoon, there is about this place a raw, almost eerie, beauty.

Beyond broad dykes brimming with water and teeming with plant life you could be forgiven for thinking yourself lost in some wetland wilderness faraway from the maelstrom of modern life.

It's hard to imagine these saturated acres just a few years ago when industrial-scale quarrying transfigured an age-old pastoral scene. Harder still to credit that this bewitching landscape is barely a five-minute walk away from an escarpment studded with hundreds of homes and a short bus ride from the throbbing heart of Norwich.

Of course, the clues are there, albeit half-hidden by a natural screen of distant vegetation. Look one way and you can just pick out the towering tip of Thorpe's parish church peeping above twilight-darkened trees. Turn around and you'll notice fragments of buildings that mark the beginning of Broadland Business Park fringing an invisible Dussindale with its sprawling maze of residential avenues and cul-de-sacs.

Listen and you'll hear the swish of traffic competing with the cawing of gulls and the gusting wind as it hums a constant refrain.

Yet it is hard to shake those initial impressions. At first glance and, indeed, for much of my time spent wandering across this slither of wetland sandwiched between railway line and river, Norfolk

Wildlife Trust's first 'urban' nature reserve seems something of a misnomer, a trade description wonderfully at odds with reality.

And therein lies its essential appeal and particular charm. Thorpe Marshes, more than any other Broads' nature reserve, represents a rare, wildlife-rich piece of protected countryside that's not merely close to home for thousands of urbanites but spread out before them - in their own backyard.

Kevin Hart is in no doubt about the reserve's special qualities. "It's fantastic," he says in the course of a leisurely guided tour. "You can get out on to the marshes, walk around the broad and get close to the river and it feels as though you're in the middle of the countryside. You could have driven for an hour to find a similar kind of setting and yet it's right on Norwich's doorstep."

As warden for the trust's latest addition to its impressive list of wildlife havens, Kevin fairly oozes enthusiasm for the place. "The reserve's proximity to so many people is important, but it's not the only thing that makes Thorpe Marshes such an exceptional site.

"There's a wonderful range of species and rare species at that.

As well as a good population of water vole, the dykes are floristically incredibly rich which tells you all you need to know about the quality of the water. They are packed with water soldier and that, in turn, has helped the Norfolk Hawker, a rare and iconic species of dragonfly, to flourish.

"And then there are the marshes themselves.

They've been grazed for such a long time that there's a diversity in the sward that you

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Our latest loca

only get from not having artificial fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides put on the land. It means you have all the natural building blocks from which everything else grows and it's all within easy walking distance of thousands of people's homes.

"Norwich is so lucky to have it and the wildlife trust is very lucky to be in a position to maintain it and not so much improve it, as it's already a lovely environment, but to ensure that no harm comes to this habitat and that the management of it is appropriate for the species that exist here."

Just what form that care and control will take is as yet unclear. These are early days for Kevin and Thorpe Marshes. The site, dominated by the broad that grew out of a Lafarge gravel quarry, was only leased to the trust by Crown Point Estate in the summer, just a matter of months after Kevin joined the trust with responsibility for managing 5,000 acres spread across nine Broads' reserves.

"Hopefully," he says, "it'll be a case of us growing together. We both more or less started with the trust at the same time, so we'll be developing as we go along and as I get to know more about this and all the other reserves I am fortunate to work on. "The next few years will be really

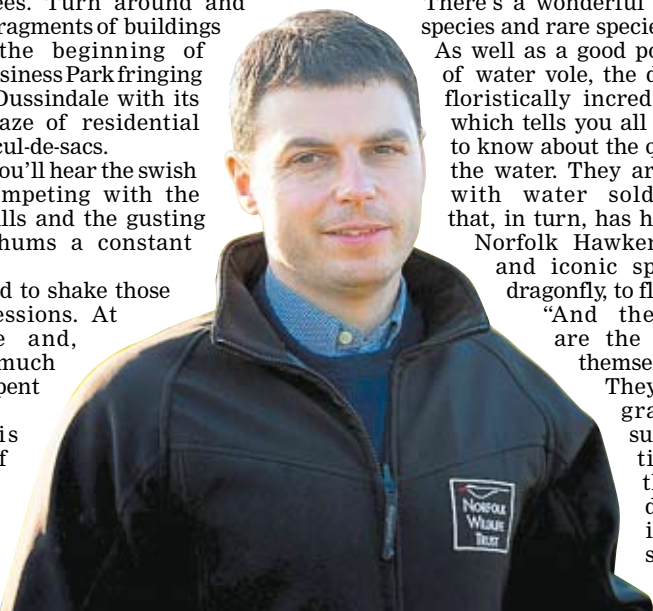
interesting, learning more about what's actually here and getting to know the site more intimately."

A Norfolk man born and bred - his family hale from around Happisburgh and he grew up in Stalham - he had been working with an environmental children's charity at Whitwell, educating youngsters about the countryside and the wild world.

"Our objective there was to get children to engage with nature," he explains. "We had a lot of school parties come to stay and they'd enjoy some old-fashioned camping. It was a way of introducing them to the countryside. It's amazing how many people, not just children, feel quite uncomfortable when they leave the urban surroundings of towns and cities. It was matter of trying to put them at their ease, to feel comfortable in the countryside, so that they might start to care for it and value it."

Such goals bear a striking similarity to the aims currently being energetically pursued at Thorpe Marshes, only here the focus is not simply on involving children but an entire community.

As well as a series of educational initiatives with local schools, a host of nature workshops are being planned and volunteers recruited to assist in managing the site and recording the myriad species





Wildlife to watch: Norfolk Hawker. Picture by Barry Madden (NWT).

Factfile

- ◆ Families are being invited to explore Thorpe Marshes next week as part of a free 'discovery day'. The event, being staged by Norfolk Wildlife Trust, takes place on Wednesday (11am-3pm).
- ◆ Other free workshops taking place on the nature reserve over the coming weeks include the following:
 - ◆ January 22: practical volunteer habitat management day with Jerry Kinsley (10am-3pm).
 - ◆ January 23: a winter bird walk with Chris Durdin (10-12 midday).
 - ◆ February 4: an introduction to fungi and their identification with Dr Tony Leech (10am-3pm).
 - ◆ February 5: a winter bird walk with Chris Durdin (10-12 midday).
 - ◆ If you want to sign up for any of the free workshops telephone 01603 598333.

appropriate management, but we'd have a site that was both connected to the local community and loved by it."

Broader appeal, however, brings with it potential problems. And its unusual proximity to such a large conurbation means that Thorpe Marshes, more than most nature reserves, will have to strike a careful balance between people and wildlife.

Just a stone's throw away from Whitlingham Country Park and its people-focused leisure activities, Norfolk's newest 'urban' reserve may share a common history that owes much to gravel workings but is poles apart in its ideals and priorities.

"As our name suggests, our main interest is conserving and making sure wildlife can survive," says Kevin, "but this site gives us a special opportunity. We want to encourage more people to visit Thorpe Marshes to enjoy the species and the habitats that are there and it's up to us to get the balance right.

"Obviously, visitors do put a certain amount of pressure on places such as this, but then there are also certain invasive species which can put pressure on native species. It's all about managing these things.

"There may be times when we will need to restrict access to certain areas at certain times. For example, there's a possibility we could get ground nesting birds such as terns settling here on the shingle banks and if that is the case we would have a responsibility to protect them, but we also want to maintain and increase the number of people coming out here to explore and to enjoy free access to this wonderful piece of countryside."

And there is, indeed, much to enjoy. At different times of the year you might chance upon kingfishers and otters, orange tip butterflies and reed buntings or even Chinese water deer and the occasional elusive Cetti's warbler.

In the course of my wintry walk such delights were unsurprisingly noticeable only by their absence, but that hardly mattered. The bird-freckled broad with its ring of dykes and watery marshes casts a serenely hypnotic spell all of its own.

Kevin was clearly hooked by it long ago. As we squelch along paths slippery with mud, he revels in the natural wonders that abound here, from the gin-clear water that is a tribute to the gravel extractors'

environmentally-sound management of the site to the abundance of water soldier.

And as we walk and talk I can't help wonder whether he has any particular favourite aspects of the reserve. "I suppose," he says, "I'm a bit of a sucker for the marshes themselves. I think it's got something to do with human links with the countryside and the fact that people have had a hand in how it looks and how they manage it.

"It's in us all. It's where we all came from. No one came from towns originally. And to see animals out there, grazing on the marshes, is to see agriculture working hand in hand with nature conservation. That's true sustainability. It's the key to everything we're trying to achieve and it's a sight I never tire of."

He pauses for a moment as though imagining the scene. The light has all but vanished, swallowed by the oncoming night, but the vision burns bright.

"When you can walk out and watch cattle standing there with Norfolk Hawkers flying up and down beside them and hear the plop of a water vole disappearing into a dyke, I have to say that ticks a lot of boxes.

"And all of that within walking distance of the centre of Norwich..."

Norfolk Wildlife Trust's Thorpe Marshes reserve can be accessed via a footbridge over the railway line off Yarmouth Road opposite Thunder Lane (NR7 0QA). Parking is limited and dogs are allowed but should be kept on leads to avoid disturbing livestock and breeding birds.

If you are interested in volunteering to help manage and work on the reserve or would like to know more details about future events and workshops you can contact community officer Jerry Kinsley by emailing him at jerryk@norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk or by calling him on 01603 625540 and leaving your

1 natural wonder



that thrive there.

Jerry Kinsley, the reserve's recently appointed community officer, hopes that local people will act as the trust's 'eyes and ears', not only identifying potential problems but reporting wildlife sightings that will help shape the site's management.

"Sometimes when you take on a new site there are pressures to establish a management plan," says Kevin, "but it's absolutely critical to have good quality baseline surveys, to pin down what's there and which areas are most valuable in terms of bio-diversity. It's important to know what's there first and to design management plans around the species and habitats, not the other way round.

"That's why I think one of the key things here is to engage the local community with the marshes. Of course, we have to make sure we move in the right direction, maintain what's there, what's so special about it, and make sure that nothing lapses. But I think what would be a great outcome would be if in five years' time, or even sooner, we had a network of local people involved with and caring for the marshes.

"That way we'd not only be able to develop really comprehensive lists of species to enable us to apply the

Main picture, Reeds blowing in the wind at Thorpe Marshes. Far left, Kevin Hart, reserves manager for Norfolk Wildlife Trust, at the reserve. Left, a swan on the new broad.

BILL SMITH