



# THE WEASEL

## HIGHLIGHTS IN THIS ISSUE:

- ☞ OCV AGM
- ☞ Foxholes Open Day  
13th May
- ☞ Outdoor cookery
- ☞ First aid training and  
ICE advice
- ☞ Port Meadow
- ☞ OCV's first task site
- ☞ MoD's home for birds

## OPPORTUNITIES

OCV is always looking for task leaders and drivers. Our tasks can only go ahead if two people come forward to volunteer just a tiny bit more of their time. Next time you come out on a task why not ask the leader what's involved?

Be sure to check for upcoming tasks on [www.ocv.org.uk](http://www.ocv.org.uk) (look under 'Events').

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

<i>OCV AGM</i>	1
<i>Focus on Foxholes</i>	1
<i>Foxholes Kitchen</i>	3
<i>First Aid Training</i>	3
<i>Port Meadow</i>	4
<i>Not so Permanent After All</i>	4
<i>A Lonely Impulse of Delight</i>	5
<i>OCV Events Calendar</i>	5

## OCV ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Crowds of eager volunteers descended upon OCV mission control on the 1st of May for the 2007 Annual General Meeting.

The highlight of the meeting was the election of the OCV Executive Committee. Members of last year's committee were re-elected to the positions of: chairperson (Miranda Rix), secretary (Chris Skepper), treasurer (Emily Crane), newsletter editor (Emmanuelle Denis), task programmer (Gary Hillier), tools officer (Martin Crane), webmaster and membership secretary (Mike Thyer), van officer (Jim Richardson), and social secretary (Naomi Berger).

The committee voted to combine the vacant position of publicity officer with the newly created

role of fundraising officer. Anyone interested in taking up this exciting position and helping to play a vital role in keeping OCV going strong for the next 30 years is encouraged to contact the committee by email ([chair@ocv.org.uk](mailto:chair@ocv.org.uk)). Alternatively, come along to one of the monthly committee meetings and get a feel for the behind the scenes work that keeps OCV ticking.



## FOCUS ON FOXHOLES

By Martin Barnsley

Foxholes Nature Reserve covers 159 acres and is mainly mixed uneven aged semi-natural woodland (a remnant of the ancient Wychwood Forest). There are 10 acres of wet meadow alongside the River Evenlode, three well hidden ponds fed by two streams, and semi-open areas of bracken or scrub. Much of the Reserve is SSSI status. 58 acres are owned freehold and 101 acres are leased from Bruern Estate or other neighbouring landowners.

At any time of the year Foxholes Reserve is worth a visit - except perhaps when muddy and wet - but in Springtime it is extra special. In early May the woodland floor is carpeted with bluebells and this sea of rich blue is interspersed with the pink of champions, sunny yellow of primroses and the purple of violets, bugle and the

occasional early purple orchid. Along with wood sorrel and stichwort these colours are complemented by the fresh greens of spring leaves.

The first brood of speckled wood butterflies emerge in March and April and are to be found in the open glades along the woodland paths. A male brimstone, with its curved yellow forewing, may appear at the edge of the wood.

The whole scene will resound to the spring song of the birds. The nuthatch, a small slate blue and reddish-buff bird which creeps up and down the tree trunks, is one that always manages to be heard above the rest, only silenced from time to time by the loud 'yaffle' of a green woodpecker.

*(Continued on page 2)*

# FOCUS ON FOXHOLES

(Continued from page 1)

The Reserve is between the hamlets of Bruern, near Milton under Wychwood, and Foscot, near Kingham Station and Bledington.

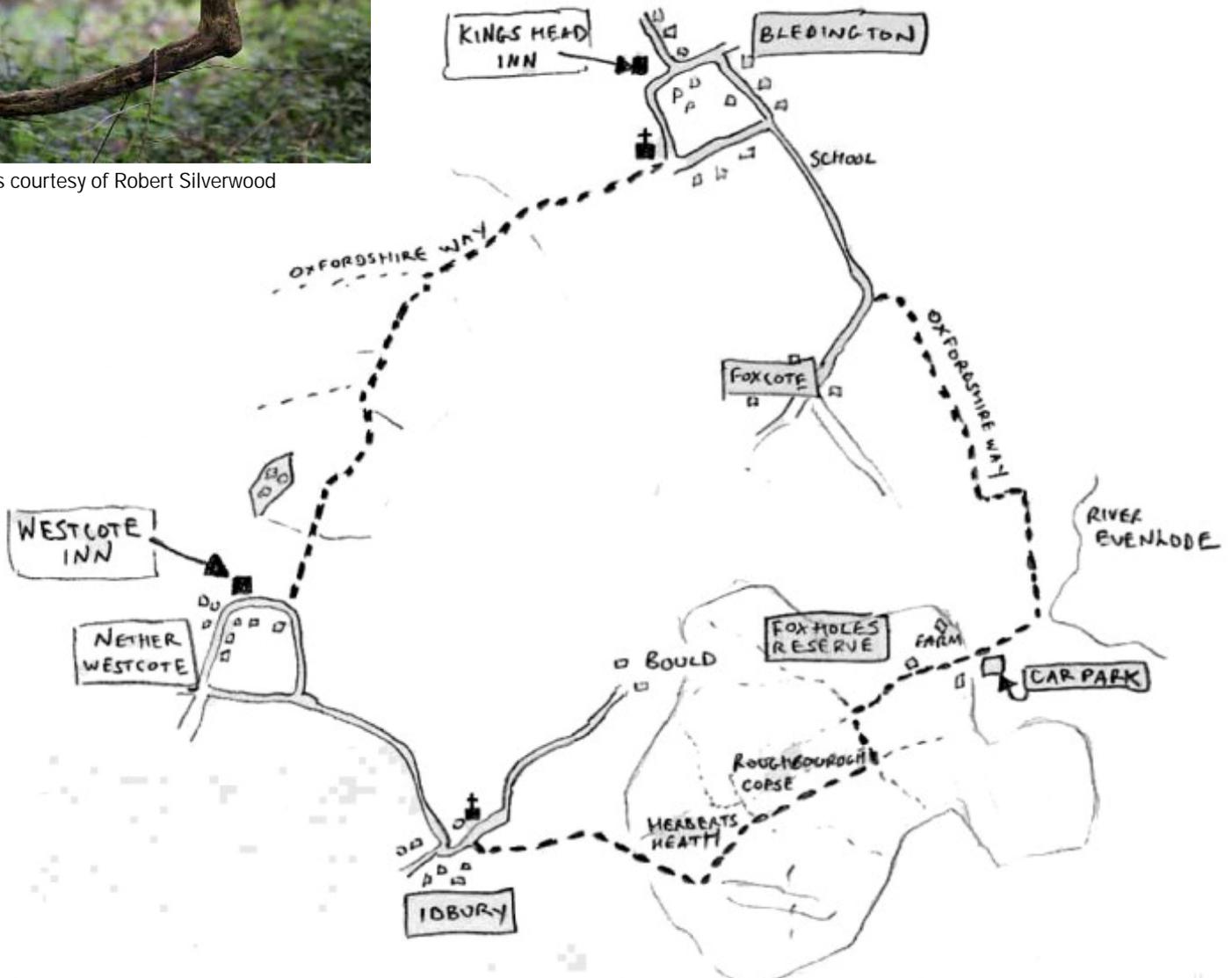
The area is blessed with good inns where you can enjoy a meal or a drink. The closest are: The Kings Head, Bledington; The Westcote Inn, Nether Westcote; The Tollgate Inn, Kingham; and The Merrymouth at Fifield. A picnic in the woods is also an option. Sunday 13<sup>th</sup>

May 2-5 pm is Foxholes Open Day with teas and guides placed in the wood.

Below is a sketch map of a walk you may like to try. Check on your OS Map Landranger 163 grid ref for Reserve Car Park 259206.



Photos courtesy of Robert Silverwood



By John Gorrill

## FOXHOLES KITCHEN

A baked potato is never more than a potato that has been baked, whereas a parsnip from a bonfire is a golden beauty. Somebody once said, 'That's the best parsnip I've ever eaten' at a fireside lunch-break - and I agree. Someone else told me that the change in flavour derives from caramelisation of sugars within the parsnip. That's how a yellow root that's often dull or rank in a stew becomes sweet and juicy after 30 or 40 minutes beneath the ashes of an OCV blaze. Your jacket potato needs butter and salt to make it almost worth the effort of scorching your fingers and gums, but the parsnip needs only silver foil. Brian Williamson used to bake them in a metal biscuit tin, but he's long gone to Devon and biscuits arrive in plastic these days.

So what else is possible in bonfire cuisine? Well, I have the OCV cooking gear for residential trips in my shed, so I took from it an ancient frying pan with a metal handle that fire cannot damage. When I go to a task with a fire, I often take the frying pan, sausages, some cooking fat and a bit of wire. I cut a long wooden pole and fix it to the pan's handle by twisting the wire round both. You can see this cunning device in one of the photos. I once bought pork sausages and vegetarian ones too, but the veggy bangers cost three times as much and tasted like the sawdust from a busy gerbil cage. And that Fair Trade coffee I bought from the Co-op for the teabox tastes equally dismal. Perhaps veggies and eco-types are solemn and pallid because they suffer from constant bad guts, shopping debts and thin air on the moral high ground.

Crispy sausages eaten off a cocktail twig are fun, but how about baked

fish? I bought a pair of mackerel for about £1.60 from my friendly local shop-keeper Mr Tesco. He has relatives in many other towns, so you can do the same. The fish had already lost their heads and, though I tried to make them happy, they were gutted too. All I had to do was sprinkle a few herbs and wrap them up in silver foil. You can see one of these in my photo. I reasoned that 40 minutes in the fire alongside the parsnips would burn the fish entirely, so I settled on 20 minutes and it worked fine. The cooked flesh fell away from the bones, which I threw on the fire in one piece. If I do this again however, I'll oil the fish skins to stop them sticking to the silver foil.

What else could we cook on or under the fire? Some people put marshmallows on sticks, boy scouts mix flour and water to make a primitive bread, others put apples in silver foil but I never tasted the result. Susan once brought chestnuts to a Christmas task at Foxholes, but they were in the fire too long and came out like sooty pebbles. The bonfire chef, as you see, must have an instinctive sense of timing. I'd like to try baking food in clay. The subsoil of the Foxholes reserve is yellow clay for example. We saw it when we pulled out metal posts that had held up the deer fencing. You can guess it's there too by looking at puddles and mud on the paths long after rain has fallen. Covering food in (let's say) half an inch of damp clay would be a useful experiment - more Robinson Crusoe than Raymond Blanc - but who knows what might come of it? We normally throw old silver foil in the ashes where it takes years to decay. Baked clay would return to nature in days. Yes, there's my next experiment.



The OCV frying pan with its ergonomic handle



One pound of sausages shortly before lunch



A 3-course dinner to die for with tea from the storm kettle.

## OCV FIRST AID TRAINING FEBRUARY 2007

By Gary Hillier

As part of OCV's ongoing investment in the skill set of our volunteers, this quarter we were proud to reward the commitment of some of our most dedicated leaders and drivers by funding certificated First Aid Training provided by the British Red Cross.

Delivered at British Red Cross HQ in Abingdon, the 7 hr training course was an informative, lively mix of theory, practical exercises and good old common sense - chosen specifically for its relevance to a conservation volunteering worksite.

From the basics of how to assess a situation

calmly, we went on to cover CPR, bleeding, burns, choking, shock, sprains, fractures and heatstroke - (well, that's most eventualities of the storm kettle covered!) We learned how to recover a casualty to a safe and stable position, and apply basic first aid while waiting for help to arrive. Sadly we didn't have time to cover the 'biro emergency tracheotomy', but have that to look forward to next time!

One bit of First Aid that **YOU** can do **NOW**, is to make an entry in your **mobile phone book**. **SAVE** the contact number for your next of kin/emergency contact (remember to let

them know you are doing this!) under the name of **ICE** (In Case of Emergency). If you are ever found hurt, unconscious or in distress, the emergency services can look here first for someone to contact.

**Gary Hillier, Ray Hitchins, Renaud Meunier and Mike Thyer** joined the ranks of qualified OCV First Aiders - so well done all!

If you are interested in future training that OCV can provide, or becoming a leader or driver for our weekly Sunday tasks - please email Task Programmer via the Contacts List on the website.



# SOME FACTS ABOUT PORT MEADOW AND WHAT THE OCV HAS DONE THERE

By Peter Gillott

Port Meadow is a large area of grassland just northwest of the city, which will be known to many or most OCV members. In terms of its natural history, it's seen as valuable and quite unusual, as will be explained in the following. The OCV have had many work days scheduled there over the years, ragwort pulling being what we tend to get booked to do. That the task we end up doing often is something different may be partly attributable to the success of past efforts, as will also be explained.

Ragwort is a notifiable weed, which means in this case that a landowner who has it on their land can be required to stop it spreading on agricultural land. It is poisonous to grazing animals. It seems also to have the potential to spread at the expense of other plant life, but I'm a little unclear on that one – if, reader, you can enlighten me, I'd be interested to hear.

The work we do at this site is for the city council's Countryside Service, for which Anthony Roberts is our main contact. Anthony has helpfully provided me with some information on the ragwort pulling (and other points). Volunteers have been doing this for 30 or more years, and for the last couple of decades the ragwort has been in decline. Although ragwort

flourished across the country in 2005, there was virtually none on Port Meadow (and there was also very little this year). It's not certain what's caused this decline: reduced summer grazing levels over the last decade may have contributed in some way, but Anthony "would like to think that the efforts of volunteers .... [have] been the main cause (thanks to all of you)".



Port Meadow is mentioned, under the name Portmaneit, in the Domesday Book of 1086. Its unusualness lies in the length of time for which it's been managed in the same way. It was used as pasture for grazing animals then, and it is now; the only recorded interruption is the harvesting of hay in 1644-6, during the civil war, by Charles I. It is "unimproved" except for limited applications of herbicide in the 50s and 60s. This continuity of management and

the plant community which has resulted are the reasons for Port Meadow (in combination with the smaller, adjoining Wolvercote Common) having been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest. (A more detailed account of all this can be found at [www.english-nature.org.uk/citation/citation\\_photo/1000153.pdf](http://www.english-nature.org.uk/citation/citation_photo/1000153.pdf))

It also forms part of the Oxford Meadows Special Area of Conservation (SACs forming a network of protected wildlife areas across the European Union). Its inclusion in this SAC is down to the presence of one species, until recently absent in the rest of the UK, creeping marshwort. The other components of the area are Pixey and Yarnton Meads to the north. These too have been managed in the same way for a long time, but in this case by cutting the grass for hay. A consequence, incidentally, is that if you want to see the wildflowers in Pixey and Yarnton Meads, the earlier part of summer is the time to do it. By late July last year, the cutting had been done and the flowers were gone. With Port Meadow there's no such drastic "cut off", the cows and horses and anything else grazing there doing so throughout the summer and the plants thus having to be ones that can survive this treatment.

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## NOT SO PERMANENT AFTER ALL

By John Gorrill

Nearly 30 years ago the OCV worked on the first Sunday task. The time: 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1977. The place: BBOWT's Hook Norton Reserve. I wasn't there, but I went to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1987. I hadn't been back since, so on a beautiful Easter Sunday I went to see what's changed and how we could mark the group's 30<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The reserve is two sections of railway cutting whose track was lifted in 1963. BBOWT bought it in 1972. You wouldn't guess it now, but the area was quarried for iron ore which went by rail to steelworks in South Wales. What's left are the stone piers of a

dismantled viaduct at the northern end, a road-bridge mid-way down and then a tunnel that's 418 yards long. South of the tunnel is the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the reserve, ending with the abutments of an over-bridge. All the metal and sleepers have gone, but the brick- and stone-work were

built to last and still proclaim the path of the permanent way.

The northern section is the deeper cutting. Even in dry weather, the stone retaining walls drip and seep with water which feeds lichens, mosses and hart's-tongue fern. Landslips have pushed onto the track bed in many places, so it feels less like a man-made corridor than a series of moist, green grottoes. I found a 1950s photo of a freight train leaving the tunnel and running through here. I couldn't take a picture from the same position because 50 years of tree-growth have blocked the view, but my photo from a lower level makes a telling contrast. What you see is an SSSI.

The southern section makes another contrast: dry, open and just the place for



*A 1950s freight train leaves Hook Norton tunnel*

*(Continued on page 5)*

## NOT SO PERMANENT AFTER ALL...

a summer picnic. The busy rabbit holes reminded me that OCV's first task was to clear the boundaries for rabbit-fencing and so protect the neighbouring fields from being guzzled. There's no trace of that project after 30 years, for all I could see was larger mesh designed to keep in the sheep which crop the turf for BBOWT.

I'm a train buff, so I'm sad to see the vast ambition of the railway age go to



*The southern tunnel-mouth*

waste. As a conservationist though, I'm happy that nature can reclaim and beautify the debris of a heavy, destructive industry. The tunnel for example houses bats, ivy climbs the stone piers and scrub has turned the cuttings into woodland. If we wipe out our 6 billion selves with greenhouse gases or atomic bombs, nature could do the same on a bigger scale. And 30 years of conserving

- has it been worth it? Did the foxes of Hook Norton do more for rabbit-control than the OCV's fencing? I don't know, but nor does anyone else who tries to make a difference.

**T**he human side counts more for me: the people I met, the jokes and the doing things together. I've forgotten what I did at Hook Norton back in 1987 for example, but I remember something that happened in the break. We stayed in a primary school for the weekend, you see, and someone made a big batch of sandwiches to take out for lunch. I was eating one when I heard the question, 'What's in the sandwiches?' It was tuna, so munching non-stop I wagged my hand like a swimming fish. Then the reply, 'What would you have done if it was cheese?' That was funny.

But people aren't always a laughing matter: if ten of them agree to run a group, three will do the work and seven will behave like puddings. Volunteers can get money, work, tools and even minibuses with ingenious pleading, but sharing duties equitably is more difficult. To be honest, I've rarely seen it done in the OCV. Does it happen in other groups? In your workplace? In your family? Once again, I don't know.

The conservers I remember most are the ones whose energy and cheerfulness disguised the effort they were making. In the 1980s when I joined these were Roger Heath-Brown, now a maths professor at Worcester College, and Brian Williamson, who's led a few OCV courses lately but lives in Devon where he makes hurdles for a living.

A group with 30 years of regular work behind it may look as strong and everlasting as a railway but, as we see, nothing is permanent. I'm sure the anniversary will be fun whatever we do, though it's trivial compared to the harder work of bringing new people into the OCV and enthusing some of them to organise its events. We're as strong as our next new volunteer and looking forwards beats looking back, so there's my last word.



*The railway cutting now. The tunnel is hidden by a landslip.*

*By John Gorrill*

## A LONELY IMPULSE OF DELIGHT

**S**ometimes it's good to work in a group. Other times and in other moods it's best to wander alone like Wordsworth deflowering the daffodils or Alfred Wainwright sketching the Lakeland fells for a new guidebook. This last fellow, an accountant during business hours, said he'd rather leave a path and hide behind a rock than meet another person on his rambles. Quite right too.

That's how come when the OCV were trimming the feet of sheep at Aston Rowant on February 18th, I set off in the opposite direction for Otmoor. I worked there with the RSPB volunteers two years ago and saw part of their project: re-flooding arable farmland to restore the wetlands that were drained as lately as the 1960s and 70s with governments grants to the farmers. Now lottery money has allowed the RSPB to buy the land, raise the water level with banks and sluices and dig shallow waterways with an American ditching machine towed

behind a tractor. It's an ambitious, multi-million pound scheme, so I wanted to see how it's going. If you haven't been, just head for Beckley village a few miles beyond Headington, look for the Abingdon Arms pub and near it the turn into Otmoor Lane. Then coast downhill for a mile to a carpark, bike racks and the entrance gate.

As I got to the pump-house where the true reserve begins, I saw vast flocks of lapwing swirling and wheeling like wisps of smoke above the wetlands. A locked gate stops you walking ahead and onto that great green field. Most people turn left here and follow a bridle path to bird hides and to earth banks from behind which you can see a lot of bird-life without it seeing much of you. But curiosity got the better of me and I turned right towards the Military Firing Range. Further up the muddy path I saw a red circle and 'KEEP OUT', so it looked like no-go. As I got nearer though, I saw some

smaller words below, 'KEEP OUT when either the red flags, red lights or flashing orange lights are displayed.'

Well, there was a white flagpole but no flag, no lights and no sound of firing. In fact the place looked entirely deserted and just the place for a peaceful country walk. A map near the gate showed a bridle way leading along the edge of the firing range to Murcot and beyond, so why not follow it for a bit?

This was the week after the heavy snowfall and water levels often threatened the top of my wellies. Using a stick from the hedge and by dodging reeds which signal the deepest water, I headed for a gate and footbridge maybe half a mile



# EVENTS MAY-JUNE 2007

## Foxholes Open Day

Sunday, 13 May

There is no task this weekend so why not head to Foxholes for their Open Day? See details on pages 1 and 2.

## OCV Social: Walk along the Thames (including pubs!)

Tuesday, 15 May

As there was no task last weekend Naomi thought we should have a social. The walk will start at the head of the river pub in Oxford at 7pm, we should end up in Iffley before it gets too dark! We will also be visiting the Isis which is at the side of the river before the Iffley lock. Bring your bike with you. More info will be sent in an email.

## Footpath maintenance at Aston Rowant

Sunday, 20 May

Essential footpath maintenance work at this SSSI Natural England site in the Chilterns AONB

## Trail Maintenance in the Brecon Beacons

25 to 28th May

A weekend residential working for the National Trust contributing to essential trail maintenance and upland erosion control on the glaciated slopes of Pen Y Fan (at 886m the highest mountain in Brecon Beacons National Park). This residential is now full.

## Pond creation/ woodland management in Kingham

Sunday, 3 June

Out in the Cotswolds AONB, working at this Foxholes sister reserve. We are creating a pond here to increase biodiversity and provide an oasis for water-loving species, so we will be digging out the pond, and clearing the aggressive bramble that tries to strangle and smother the life out of all the other flora, and scratch all the fauna. Long sleeves recommended!

## OCV Meeting: Oxford Town Hall Jury Room

Tuesday, 5 June

Monthly committee meeting for discussing the running of OCV. All welcome.

## Project Clearway - Footpath Hanborough Parish

Sunday, 10 June

Working alongside the Parish Council's own volunteers to improve access on the important, Public 'Coffin Path' Footpath between the villages of Long Hanborough and Church Hanborough, near Bladon. A short ride from Oxford, we have a day in the sun clearing back the turf that has grown over this 8ft wide tarmac footpath (created to be useable by all), and reduced it to a 1ft wide track (useable by 1 person).

## Habitat/biodiversity at Aston Rowant

Sunday, 24 June

This site is an OCV favourite. It's managed by English Nature to maintain the important chalk grassland habitat. Today, we will be working to clear invasive juniper and ragwort.

**\*\* Be sure to check [www.ocv.org.uk](http://www.ocv.org.uk) for the latest event details \*\***

## ...A LONELY IMPULSE OF DELIGHT

ahead. That bridge crosses a ditch and, looking at the debris on its banks, I guess the water levels had been three feet higher the week before. I was musing on this when a 'whoosh' overhead made me look up. A flock of lapwing had flown just a few yards above me. My green jacket and grey cap had made me seem part of the gatepost on which I was leaning, so the birds saw no reason to turn or fly higher. I was an accidental bird-watcher and rather good at it, if I say so myself.

Nobody knows how flocks of birds synchronise their flying. They move so fast and so close together that you cringe in fear of an aerial pile-up, but it never happens. Between you, me and the gatepost however, they've got it only 99% right. In a hedge nearby were young trees growing much taller than the hedge itself. When the flock swept low over the hedge, I saw a few birds forced to break the formation in order to dodge a tree. Those birds lost speed and couldn't regain their position in the flock. They turned and joined up with the birds at the back five or ten seconds later.

This set me thinking: does one same lapwing steer the flock all the time, does a leading group design the sudden twists and turns, or does a collective intelligence guide them all equally? Me and the gatepost watched for ten minutes, but we have no answer because lapwings look so alike. Tracking individuals in a flock of several hundred is impossible with the naked eye. With a video camera, a slow-motion replay and some fancy computer software, we might detect a pattern. Meanwhile, I got dizzy and the gatepost felt unhinged.

**B**eyond the bridge was rougher land with wide pools of water. Snipe flew low above these and I heard many duck calls, but only intentional birdwatchers could name the callers. There were solitary hawthorn and dog rose up to six feet high with no other tall plant that wasn't a reed. Do hawthorn and dog rose survive there because they're spiky or because their roots can deal with the water? I wish I knew or could devise some cunning experiment to find out.

Back at home, I checked on the internet - another fine place for nosy parkers. The

Ministry of Defence own about 1% of the UK landmass with 4000 sites including 179 Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Otmoor is one, and Dartmoor or Salisbury Plain are others you'll have heard of. A body called Defence Estates manages the land by "delivering estate solutions to defence needs". As to how they do it, I got bogged down in "the suite of appraisal tool methodologies" and no wellies could save me. Look at [www.access.mod.uk](http://www.access.mod.uk) if you enjoy this kind of wordy swamp.

The MoD have become conservationists just as I became a birdwatcher - by accident. The story of the RSPB is more intriguing. It grew from the Fur and Feather Group set up in Manchester on 17th February, 1889, by Mrs Emily Williamson. She and other women refused to wear the feathers of any bird not killed for food, except for the ostrich (but don't ask me why). Today the two bodies work side-by-side at Otmoor. The difference is that the RSPB reserve had a dozen cars and many visitors while the Firing Range had just me and the lapwings. If there's no shooting, I recommend it...but please don't tell anyone else.