

The Gravel Pits at the Barnwell Picnic Site, Oundle, Northants.

Supplementary Article: Flora and Fauna observations prepared by Mr Ioan F. Thomas. Feb 20th, 1972.

Transcribed 2015 with limited editorial comment.

Late in 1965 work began on the extraction of gravel from the fields between the Thrapston Road and the River Nene to the west. Earlier gravel workings had been started in 1940 in the area, which is now the Marina (ed. Oundle Marina), and in the pit to the south of the Marina. The Marina Pits were first used for mooring boats about 1964 and an opening to the River was then made and sheds and office buildings were built. Before the gravel working was begun, all the fields were used for grazing for cattle. They were often flooded in winter.

The machinery for sorting the gravel was placed about fifty yards north of the location of the Warden's Hut (ed.: now approximate location of Visitors Centre). The diggers loaded up lorries which carried the gravel to the machinery. The first pit to be dug was the one which is now surrounded by the high willows. Later, the pits to the south-west and south-east were dug and, finally, the large deep pit to the north was dug. Gravel working stopped in 1967 and the area was unused, except for a few fishermen, until it was acquired by Northants County Council for use as a County Picnic Site. In the summer of 1970, channels were dug which joined almost all the pits together and, early the following year, the bridges and shelters were built. In July 1971, the Park was declared open to the public. Its popularity was quickly established and, as many as fifty cars were there one sunny afternoon in September (ed: 1971). The Park was closed in November for tree planting; also weeds were cut and grass seed sown.

While the digging was being carried out, the bare gravel became colonised by plants: first annuals, like Willow Herb and Fat Hen; short-lived perennials, like Coltsfoot; and plants with runners, like Creeping Buttercup. At the water's edge, self-sown willows grew; they are now nearly 20 feet high (ed. approx. 6m). The succession of marsh plants is very clearly shown in the pool now surrounded by willows: the Bullrush (*Scirpus lacustris*) has its roots constantly under water; in rather drier areas the Reedmace (*Typha latifolia*) puts up shoots; and the Common Reed (*Phragmites communis*) occurs in patches. The growth of these plants has caused this area to become still drier and willow seedlings now cover much of it. By 1965, 110 species of plants were growing in the whole area of the gravel pits.

There was extensive flooding in January 1959 and again in 1960. The river flowed into all the pits and was probably the major means by which they were colonised by fish and snails; many of the insects could reach them without the help of the floods because the adults can fly over from other areas of water to their eggs here. In these early days, the Waterfleas were characteristic of waters with very little humus: *Daphnia longispina* and a species of *Bosmina*. In June 1959, the bizarre predatory waterflea, *Leptodora kindtii*, was found; it is characteristic of very open waters. It was seen again a few times but we have had no record of it since 1961. It is probable that it came into the pits from larger pits up the valley but there were no other records of it from the Nene Valley.

Rabbits have been increasing recently but their numbers have been reduced to enable the recently planted trees to survive. Tracks in the snow suggest that an Otter may be present.

Canada Geese have nested in the area since 1961 and have raised a brood almost every year. Great Crested Grebes are also regular breeders. They arrive in February and begin to

establish their territories. Little Ringed Plover were attracted to the area of loose gravel in 1961 and were seen there regularly until 1970. They raised young in 1961 and again in 1966-1969. They were seen in 1970 but conditions were no longer suitable for them and we have no record of them in 1971.

The open water of the pits attracts swans and ducks, and a few stay to breed. The numbers are highest in winter when as many as 70 Tufted Duck have been recorded. They are easily recognised by the conspicuous white patch on the flank. Pochard are less common though there may be as many as 20 present. About 50 Coot frequent the open water and, like these two ducks, they dive for their food. Moorhens are more likely to be skulking along the banks of the River or at the edge of the pits. They are distinguished from Coot by their red bill and white outer tail feathers; Coot have a large white patch above the bill on the face. Kingfishers are sometimes seen. They became very rare after the hard winter of 1962-63, but, in 1971, were again common. A flash of blue may be all that one sees but they are often perching at the side of the river almost motionless and invisible. Herons are the other silent fishermen at the water's edge.

Some birds visit the gravel pits only for a short time while they are migrating further north. In April, the bushes seem sometimes alive with Warblers but then most of them move on. Terns, looking almost like large white Swallows, move quickly through sometimes keeping close to the River as they migrate. One day, early in May 1971, as many as 28 were seen. Less frequent are Black Terns which migrate through on their way to nesting sites in Holland. They are more frequently recorded in spring than in autumn and it is possible that their return journey is by a different route. Swallows and House Martins come down to the pits from their nesting sites in the Town to feed on the insects which emerge from the water. A few Sand Martins sometimes nest in banks near the water.

The bushes and reeds attract many small birds. Reed Buntings are present for most of the year and their numbers increase in the spring. At first sight, they look like Sparrows but the male has a striking black head and white collar. Great Tits, Blue Tits, Long-tailed Tits, Robins and Hedge Sparrows are resident. Goldfinches feed on the Teazels by the river and Bullfinches, Greenfinches and Chaffinch are often in the trees by the roadside. In the more open parts, Pied Wagtails hunt for insects with their small black and white bodies and very long tails they could be confused only with Yellow Wagtails which arrive in April after wintering in Africa. The Yellow Wagtails, like the Larks, make their nests on the ground and may not be able to continue here as more people visit the area.

In addition to these birds, unexpected visitors are sometimes seen. Great Skua, Goldeneye, Red-crested Pochard and Water Rail have all been seen in recent years.

Editorial Comment:

For those interested in species of Flora and Fauna reported in this document, the following links are provided for more details.

Bulrush (*Scripus lacustris*): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schoenoplectus_lacustris)

Reedmace (*Typha latifolia*): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Typha_latifolia

Common Reed (*Phragmites communis*): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phragmites>)

Daphnia longispina: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daphnia>

Bosmina: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bosmina>

Leptodora kindtii: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leptodora>