

# Menaces of the Future

**T**he winter wildlife numbers for December and January get better than ever. Each winter, vast flocks of Plover - both Green and Golden - are ever increasing; some days on the marsh and foreshore they are beyond counting. One day near the haven there was a flock of Turnstones which were in excess of 100. Twenty years ago I thought it was good if I saw five together. The Blacktailed Godwits are still in strength of around 1,000, with the Ringed Plovers & Dunlin on the out-marsh, not forgetting the Curlews.

On the inside marsh there is the odd Kingfisher to be seen and the Little Egrets are still around the fladges of water and drains. When I was at the Marsh-side Reserve at Southport in December, there were three on the marsh, and the warden said they are no longer an attraction there for there is a 40-strong colony of them at the other side of the estuary (the Ribble) and they can be seen regularly flying over for a visit to this colony or vice versa. Though they are not in such numbers here, it may not belong before they are.

The Otter footprints in the Goxhill/East Halton Beck are still to be seen at times. When the ones bred in captivity were released in the rivers around Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk during the 1990s, there were reports and complaints that they were relieving the Goldfish Ponds of their contents in rural villages near the rivers. Many people believe otters only live in rivers and lakes etc, however they can move around on land and do so at a fast speed if they wish, often for some distance from water if need be, though they like to have water around when resting to slip into if danger threatens. Dogs are the otter's only enemy, so with Otter Hunting banned by the 1960s, they are in little danger except for the occasional dog which may meet up with them. I remember in approximately 1945 an occupant of Council Villas on Thornton Road found one in his chicken run one morning and shot it for the chickens' safety (I don't remember if it had killed any or not). Another one, only half grown, was killed by dogs at Hogcotes, the old Pinfold field in Goxhill Marsh some years later - and this one should still be somewhere around for it was set up (skinned & stuffed) by a Taxidermist on a plinth for preservation.

Last winter there were many reported sightings of Deer visiting the village itself, though there is some confusion on identification between our resident deer, the Roe and the Muntjac. Roe deer are of British origin, while the Muntjac were imported from Asia in around 1900 by the Duke of Bedford to his Woburn Abbey estate in Bedfordshire, some of which escaped and have in the past century spread across the countryside, and arrived at Goxhill. The Roe are the largest and can be identified as such by their rump - when they run or move away from you, they show a round patch of white like a powder puff in winter and are dark brown, while in summer the powder puff is buff and their coat is a foxy red. The bucks' antlers are two-feet long when mature. Meanwhile, Muntjac, are smaller (the smallest deer in Britain) and at a glance not unlike

a Golden Labrador dog in size or colour. Like the Roe, their coats change with the seasons: a red/brown in summer and darker in winter; their rump has a vertical streak of white between the legs, the tail on the under side is white and they lift it vertically if they are alarmed and run away from you extending the white streak. They also have a black V on their forehead and look potbellied compared with the Roe deer. The bucks' antlers are only four-inches long. The fawn of the Roe deer are born in May or June while the Muntjac has no breeding season and the fawn can be born any month of the year; both species can be seen feeding at anytime of the day or night. Before these two species arrived some 12 years ago we always had the odd Fallow Deer for a visitor and mostly likely come from the Brocklesby Woods.

February saw the winter visitor numbers remain stable with the flocks of Waders and Mallard Ducks feeding on the tide edge in numbers as big as ever. A Little Egret was seen feeding in the Dyke along the side of the road at Littlewick in South End, and there were also sightings of it in the inland dyke of the marsh. Otter footprints could be seen in the beck at South End, a mile further toward Thornton Abbey than previously - near Langmere wood - and again in the Sykes Lane area which is almost three miles away as the "Crow Flies." They get there by swimming up the connecting drains, which means it may have been the same Otter. If so, it had been on a nine mile journey. Experts say that an Otter has a 40-kilometre territory of Rivers, Streams & Drains (a favourite home for them at Goxhill is the old clay pits of the derelict brick-yards) in which they can swim. They are great travellers, and though mostly nocturnal can be seen in the summer evenings out and about before dusk. Though otters are said to be loners, I have in my time seen two together, which I expect would be a pair; I have also twice seen three that I expect would be a Mother and her two young (called Kits), which usually stay with her for a year until fully grown. This of course was over 50 years ago before the poison pollution in the rivers & streams made them almost extinct. Their holes are usually in rotten tree roots on the waterside and known as a "Holt".

On Beck-side animal paths or tracks, the footprints of Foxes, Badgers, Roe and Muntjac Deer could all be seen on the same path in places where it is mud due to the recent rains.

Towards mid-January small flocks of Starlings were seen gathering over the village doing their evening flight before bedtime, approximately half an hour before dusk. They started with a few hundred, but increased to something like 2,000 or more by the beginning of February. Many watched them as they outmanoeuvred the RAF's Red Arrows.

March update: On 10<sup>th</sup>, I saw a Marsh Harrier visit the nest site at the Dawson City reserve. Whether it was

*Continued over the page...*