

Pat reflects on her time with NBRC/NBIS

“As most of you already know, I retired from NBIS at the end of April, after nearly ten interesting and productive years. Martin and Su have asked me to jot down some impressions and reminiscences of my time at Gressenhall.

After moving to Britain in 2000, having taken early retirement from the Botany Department at the University of Cape Town, I settled in Norfolk, had a few months holiday discovering the delights of an English spring, and then looked for a job, preferably something to do with wildlife and conservation which had been my main interest for most of my working life. I realised such posts might be few and far between, but responded to an advertisement for a Biological Records Assistant for three months in a “recently re-established Local Records Centre which will act as a focus for the collection, management and use of biological information in the county”, and was appointed to the NBRC from January 2001. Although I had a very good knowledge of Southern African flora, birds and mammals, I had much to learn about British species and John Goldsmith proved a knowledgeable and generous source of information.

Norfolk was one of the first counties in England to be given Recorder software by English Nature to start a local wildlife database in about 1985 and it was therefore very disappointing when, shortly after establishing the permanent post, the museum service found it expedient to ‘delete’ it in a budget cut in Christmas 2001. Protests from local recorders and far-sighted, environmentally-aware councillors rescued it, not only that year but the following December when the entire Records Centre was put up for deletion. Closure was again averted, in the face of local protest. Had this extraordinarily myopic decision been adopted, it would have been necessary to resurrect the Centre a few years later and start again, especially when ‘green’ and biodiversity considerations became better understood and highly visible in local, national and European conservation agendas. I do not, of course, know about everyone who took the trouble to write in or telephone their protest, but we owe a particular debt of gratitude to Gillian Beckett and Heather Bolt. I hope they feel their faith in us has been rewarded. There are now very few, if any, counties now which do not have such a centre or service, some run by County Councils and some by Wildlife Societies. John left in 2005, and although progress and funding had been discouragingly slow, it was left to me to try to keep the Centre operational in terms of ecological enquiries and information, and attempt to maintain the interest and support from local recorders which is critical to the success of any such operation.

In 2006 the transfer of the Centre from NCC Cultural Services to the Environment Section of the Department of Planning & Transportation was suggested. P & T were enthusiastic about the idea and after several months, the transfer took place. There was another half-year hiatus while internal NCC responsibilities were sorted out, and then John Jones took on the line management of the Centre. His support, and his local and European contacts, meant that we never looked back. Within months we received new computers, new software, new training, extra staff and funding to get experts to import our

old DOS-based data into Recorder 6, with G.I.S. compatibility. We were in the 21st Century!

In October 2008, Martin Horlock, who had spent five years with the Suffolk Biological Records Centre, was appointed, and he will take forward the Centre, renamed the Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service better to reflect its philosophy and ethos. Modern record centres and services require advanced technology. Data are imported, exported, sorted, interrogated, uploaded, updated and manipulated constantly, and centres need technically-sophisticated data managers to reflect the new reality.

I feel very grateful to have been given the opportunity of making a contribution to my new county and country (I become a British citizen somewhere in the middle of all this) and feel privileged to have worked with that fine band of dedicated naturalists, Norfolk's County Recorders. Almost without exception, they were generous with their time, knowledge and records, and the Service is still dependent on their expertise if sensible decisions are to be made regarding planning, conservation and management of Norfolk's wildlife. I hope you will continue to support Martin and Sam, Lizzy and Su to provide just that.

Giving up the day job means I continue to learn about hedgehogs by night (I have 17 marked individuals), and bumblebees and solitary bees by day, with Tim Strudwick's patient help and I have pictures to prove it. Good wishes and thanks to you all, and I hope to see you from time to time."

Pat Lorber

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