Guiding the county to a biodiverse bright future

As Dr Scott Perkin, Norfolk's biodiversity services co-ordinator, prepares to move on to new environmental challenges overseas, he spoke to **MARK NICHOLLS** about his tenure and what may lie ahead for Norfolk's varied biodiversity.

NORFOLK'S BIODIVERSITY IS CONSTANTLY EVOLVING AS IT STRIVES to meet the challenges man and nature throw at it across the county's varying landscape.

From the Brecks to the Broads and up to the North Norfolk coast, the terrain, landscape, creatures and plant life that survive within it are incredibly diverse.

Yet maintaining and preserving this biodiversity (biological diversity) needs guiding hands.

Over the last seven years, a key role in that has been played by Dr Scott Perkin, Norfolk's biodiversity services co-ordinator.

But as he prepares to leave the county to take up a new environmental role in Asia, he warns there remain challenges – as well as opportunities – ahead for Norfolk and its fabulous biodiversity.

In recent years, Norfolk has been swept along under what some observers may regard as a golden age of biodiversity as legislation, action plans and an eco-friendly attitude helped our county's biodiversity survive and thrive under the protective eye of Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership.

It can trace its origins back to the watershed Rio Earth Summit of 1992, which saw countries sign up to develop national strategies and plans for conservation and biodiversity.

Within a couple of years, the UK had become the first country to move this forward and produced the UK Biodiversity Action Plan which was then cascaded down and translated into local action plans with local partnerships established.

The Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership was set up in 1996 and now has 21 members including district councils and county council, statutory agencies such as Natural England, and non-governmental groups such as Norfolk Wildlife Trust and the RSPB. There is an annual forum, a steering group and nine topic groups mostly based on habitat lines.

By 1999 the Norfolk biodiversity action plan (BAP) was launched, setting out clear actions for threatened wildlife in the county.

Dr Perkin, whose role was to support the implementation of the BAP, said: "I think the UK has done better than any other country I am aware of in translating its national biodiversity action plan right down to local level."

A Canadian, Dr Perkin arrived in Norfolk after working overseas in conservation with the World Wildlife Fund and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). That included working in East Africa for seven years in Nairobi and in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area near the Serengeti, developing a management strategy for the area that met both the needs of the biodiversity and also of the Maasai people who lived there.

It was there that he became more interested in the interaction between people and the environment and came to the University of East Anglia to do his PhD on the subject.

Later, IUCN roles saw him operate in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Laos before returning to Norfolk to take up his present role.

He said: "There were challenges when I arrived in implementing the local action plan but I think in the future we will look back on this period as the golden era of conservation in the UK because there was such a lot going on for biodiversity."

> **"In the future we will look back on this period as the golden era of conservation in the UK because there was such a lot going on for biodiversity..."**
> Dr Scott Perkin

Dr Perkin, 50, reflects on the positive impacts that have been brought about by the introduction of environmental stewardship schemes to help farmers adopt biodiversity-friendly measures; Planning Policy Statement 9 as a powerful framework for biodiversity conservation; strong biodiversity policies contained in many local development frameworks which have replaced the local plans; and government targets such as ensuring that 95pc of sites of special scientific interest (SSSI) were in a favourable or recovering position and to halt biodiversity loss by 2010.

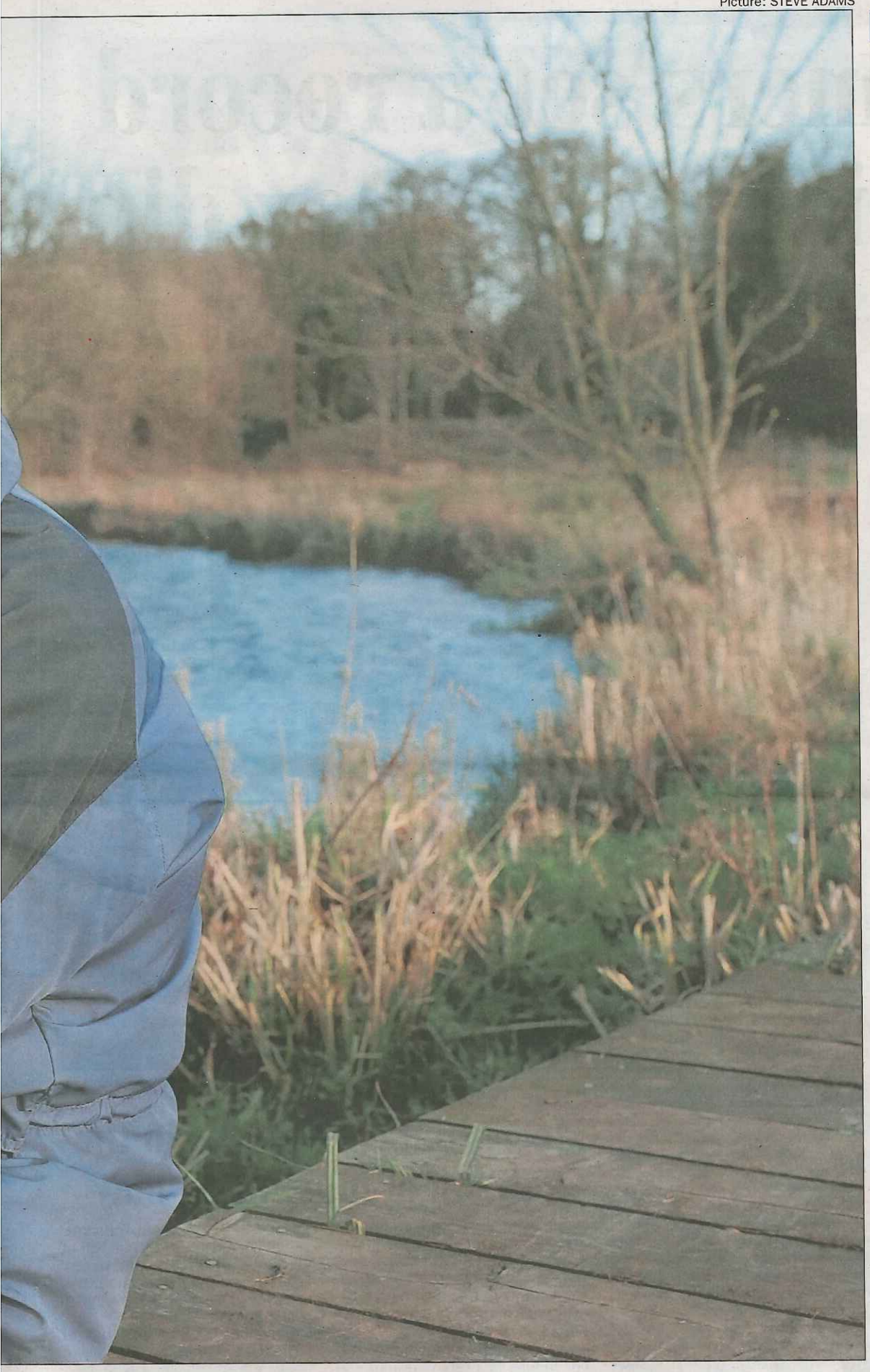
In Norfolk, large areas of new habitat have been being created in areas such as the Brecks and West Norfolk; previously neglected SSSIs and county wildlife sites, incorporating wetlands, grasslands, heathlands and woodlands, have been brought back into proper management and several flagship species such as the bittern and otter have seen their populations increase.

Against this backdrop have been the challenges of balancing new development with biodiversity concerns and also combating the impact of non-native species as well as facing the threat posed by climate change and the economic downturn.

Dr Perkin, who lives on the Broads, said: "I am worried about the economic situation coming to the top of the agenda because with that drive to improve the economy is a risk that the environment might be sacrificed.

"It is obviously important to have a

Picture: STEVE ADAMS



strong economy, but I think we also have to be careful to conserve the natural environment at the same time and recognise how we depend on our natural environment for our wellbeing in Norfolk – and that includes our economic wellbeing.

"You only have to look at areas like the Broads, the north coast and the Brecks and all the tourism and jobs they generate, to see how important a high-quality natural environment is."

He said he was also wary about a shift of emphasis in the planning system that would see a presumption in favour of development.

While the arrival of alien species in Norfolk remains a threat, a highlight of Dr Perkin's time in the role has been the launch of the Norfolk non-native species initiative with funding which enabled the appointment of a full-time officer to raise the profile of invasive species and to control and eradicate them. A flagship project has been to tackle floating pennywort on the River Waveney.

"We were concerned because of its potential to spread from bank to bank and clog the upper reaches of the river with a devastating impact for boating, angling, recreation and biodiversity.

"That meant getting on to the river, looking for the plant and removing it in a painstaking way to ensure that it did not spread further and that every fragment was removed. We hope to eradicate it in 2012."

Norfolk is also hoping to lead a 2.5m euro European project to further tackle invasive species.

In addition, the development of the Brecks biodiversity audit has been a major success. This pioneering study was carried out by UEA with support from the Biodiversity Partnership and many other organisations. It revealed that the Brecks supported many more threatened and endangered species than previously believed, and the method is now being expanded to the Broads and Fens and could be developed into a national tool.

MOVING ON: Above, Norfolk biodiversity and environmental co-ordinator Dr Scott Perkin at Trowse Meadow. After seven years working in the county he is taking up a new environmental role in Asia but warns there remain challenges – as well as opportunities – ahead for Norfolk. Inset left, several flagship species such as the bittern have seen their population rise.

While there are challenges and the threat from the economic situation, there are positives to look forward to, according to Dr Perkin.

The government White Paper on the environment is proposing local nature partnerships (LNP) which will work with local business, the NHS, education sector, local communities and local enterprise partnerships. Norfolk and Suffolk have been awarded an initial tranche of money to begin working towards a joint LNP for the two counties.

The other positive within the White Paper is biodiversity off-setting where developers will be required to make adequate compensation available to re-create habitats damaged by development in a more strategic way. Norfolk has been selected to become a pilot area for this initiative.

While a new Norfolk biodiversity services co-ordinator is set to be appointed, Dr Perkin's new role will see him based in Bangkok with the IUCN from January as head of a biodiversity conservation programme covering projects in south and south-east Asia, China, Korea and Japan.

"It seemed too good an opportunity not to take up, but it was a tough decision. I have loved working with the partnership in Norfolk and with such a wonderful group of people – it has been a privilege.

"The county is so important from a biodiversity perspective and areas such as the Broads, the Brecks and the north coast are just fabulous. They are just special and I hope they will remain special in the future.

"Living in the Broads and being able to hear bitterns booming from your bedroom... how many people get to do that?"

FUTURE CHALLENGES

There are a number of challenges to Norfolk's biodiversity that Dr Perkin believes need to be kept in check to maintain a balance between development and the environment. Planning changes and Norfolk's growth agenda will be an issue, with the number of new houses planned for Norwich, Thetford and King's Lynn.

"Growth and development are vital but it is important that we plan carefully and make sure that biodiversity is considered as part of the process," he said.

In the long term the big challenge is climate change, said Dr Perkin. The Norfolk eco-system is vulnerable to climate change and sea-level changes with the Broads and the creatures that live there particularly vulnerable to increased salinity.

INVASIVE: American signal crayfish.

Despite the early success of the Norfolk non-native species initiative, alien species remain. A surprising number of invasive species are present in the county, including Japanese knotweed, giant hogweed, aarrot's feather, crassula (New Zealand pygmyweed), American mink and American signal crayfish.

While some plants were introduced in Victorian times, others have escaped from gardens and some are still being sold at aquatic garden centres.

■ **For more information on the Norfolk Diversity Partnership visit the website at www.norfolkbiodiversity.org**

GRACE CORNE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Sisland, December 26

Good and bad news about hares' disease

Last month I wrote of the discovery of a hare showing all the signs of myxomatosis, and, as such a thing had not been reported before in this area, I feared it might be the start of another appalling episode in the history of our wildlife.

Therefore I am grateful to John Goldsmith who told me the disease was not myxomatosis but leporid calicivirus hepatitis, or European brown hare syndrome virus, which had actually occurred in Britain before the rabbit disease first arrived here. John had found an affected hare in the Yare Valley and said it was a contagious disease easily passed from hare to hare.

We are fortunate here in that it is not uncommon to see hares running on the fields, possibly due to local gamekeepers restricting the fox population, so giving leverets a chance to survive. However, although foxes are now fewer in number, marsh harriers and buzzards have become more plentiful, so the life of a hare is always far from easy.

Hares are very probably a native species, which the related rabbit is certainly not. A fully-grown hare can be 60cm long and weigh 4kg. It can be recognised by its long, powerful hind legs and its long, black-tipped ears. It is the fastest British mammal, with recorded speeds of 45mph. Its coat is redder than that of the rabbit. Hares tend to be solitary animals and they live above ground, resting and giving birth in what are only slight dips (forms) in the soil surface.

The leverets, perhaps two or three, will be left alone by the parents in these hollows most of the day, and the mothers return only for a short while to feed their young. These babies are born at any time throughout the year, already covered in fur and amazingly resilient, having been seen in very cold conditions under snow and ice. If danger threatens they instinctively remain absolutely still. It has been noted that hares returning to their form do not run straight to it but jump from a considerable distance to avoid leaving a scent trail.

It is unfortunate that hares, which eat only green food, should have a noticeable effect on agriculture – it is said a hare will eat as much as a sheep and farmers resent losing so much of their crops. This has led to persecution of the animals in many ways and accusations of associations with bad luck and even witchcraft. If a hare was encountered on the way to work the worker would often return home to escape any bad luck, fishermen would not set out to sea and miners would not go underground.

WHERE TO JOIN

- **Norfolk Wildlife Trust**: 01603 625540
- **Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society**: 01603 457270
- **RSPB (East Anglia)**: 01603 661662
- **Norfolk Ornithologists' Association**: Tel:01485 525406
- **British Trust for Ornithology**: 01842 750050