

# The Nene Valley – floods of beauty

What makes the reserves along the Nene Valley so special? Wildlife journalist **Lizzy Dening** asked **Tom Day**, the Trust's conservation manager for Northamptonshire.



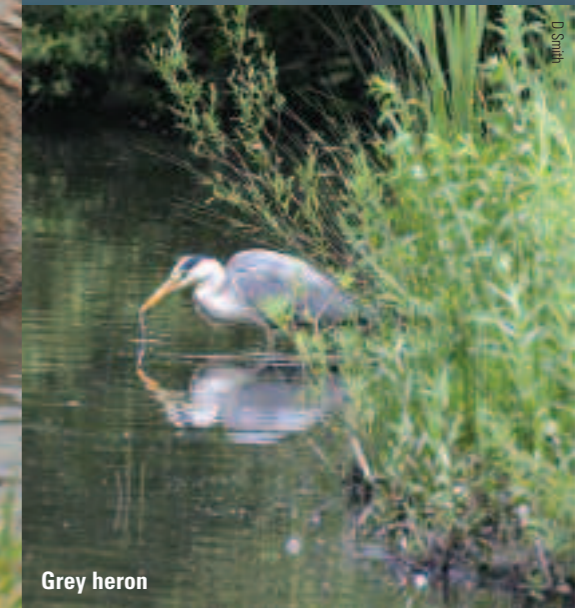
Marsh woundwort at Ditchford Lakes nature reserve near Wellingborough.



A joined up Nene Valley landscape will help otters thrive.



Stibbington



Grey heron

Covering an area three times the size of the Great Fen, near Huntingdon, the spectacular Nene Valley is potentially the largest of the Wildlife Trust's *Living Landscape* schemes. But what exactly does this term mean?

'A *Living Landscape* is an area large enough to allow wildlife to build up bigger populations, adapt to changing conditions and move safely around into new habitats. A bit like a huge wildlife corridor,' explains Tom, running his finger along a map of the Nene Valley. 'Or to put it even more simply, we are making a landscape that is bigger, better and with more joined up habitats for species. The Trust currently manages 15 wetland reserves along the valley, including three that are actually in Peterborough near the River Nene; wildlife doesn't respect county boundaries, so you can see it's a large area we are concerned with.'

The Nene Valley is of particular importance to wildlife, with large sections collectively designated as a potential European Special Protection Areas (SPAs) because of flocks of overwintering ducks, wading birds and swans. The birds are significant



Short-winged conehead



Grass snake

both in terms of the mixture of 40 different species, but also because of the sheer numbers that gather, with flocks of over 20,000 wetland birds including around 5% of Britain's population of gadwalls. Several Wildlife Trust reserves are part of this designated area, including the ever-popular Summer Leys. During winter, large number of golden plovers, sometimes over a thousand, gather to roost on the islands. We have recorded 17 species of dragonfly and damselfly, and the reserve is a good place in the summer to see the uncommon hairy dragonfly – a species that colonised the county in the late 1990s.

Tom tells me that at Summer Leys, which is near Wellingborough, wildlife was considered in the early stages of creating this nature reserve. 'Even before the sand and gravel were extracted the final intention was to create a nature reserve, unlike gravel pits such as those at Titchmarsh nature reserve, just north of Thrapston. Gravel extraction there happened a lot earlier and left steep sides. It wasn't looked upon as a potential nature reserve by the gravel extraction companies and local authorities.'

Only thanks to the tireless efforts of Wildlife Trust staff and volunteers have these older pits been allowed to flourish, producing richly populated habitats – an example of the Wildlife Trust’s long-term vision being achieved by local people for the permanent benefit of the wildlife.

Titchmarsh shelters a wide variety of ducks, swans and geese in the winter months, especially goosanders, wigeons and herons that have reached nationally important numbers. In fact it has one of the largest heronries in the county. It is also great for Cetti’s warblers, kingfishers and breeding barn owls. The Nene Way footpath provides a good opportunity to see numerous butterfly species in the summer months, as well as the mesmeric flight of larger dragonflies like the brown, southern and migrant hawkers.



**The bioblitz at Abington Meadow recorded 639 species.**

Tom and I met at Lings Local Nature Reserve – an oasis of woods and grassland surrounded by new houses and busy roads. The area is popular with dog walkers looking to escape the pressures of their working lives, and families encouraging their children to get some exercise. It’s clear that the Trust is dedicated to making nature accessible to local people by fitting it side-by-side with metropolitan life, and Tom is keen that the expansion of the Nene Valley’s Living Landscape nature reserves do just that too.

Alarming, the picturesque Nene Valley winds through an area which, for the past 10 years, central government has targeted for its highest levels of house-building. But Tom explains that proximity to residential areas needn’t be a bad thing for wildlife. ‘If we work with the Government, planners and house-builders, it should be possible

to accommodate the new houses and improve the neighbouring landscape for wildlife. Everyone agrees on the importance of public green space. People love the idea of living near a fabulous nature reserve, so it may even make it easier to sell the houses.’ With this in mind the Wildlife Trust is currently in negotiations to manage Northampton’s beautiful site at Abington Meadows on behalf of the local council. The Trust has been involved in the site for many years and last summer organised a ‘bioblitz’ survey of the site, which excitingly resulted in finding 639 species in just 24 hours, including the pondweed *Potamogeton friesii*, which hadn’t been recorded in the county since 1948.

Although the Trust has lots of work to do to create a Living Landscape, it is following a natural ‘grain’ of the landscape and allowing existing nature reserves to function more healthily in a wider



**Around 5% of Britain’s gadwall population spends the winter along the Nene Valley.**



**Small red-eyed damselflies**

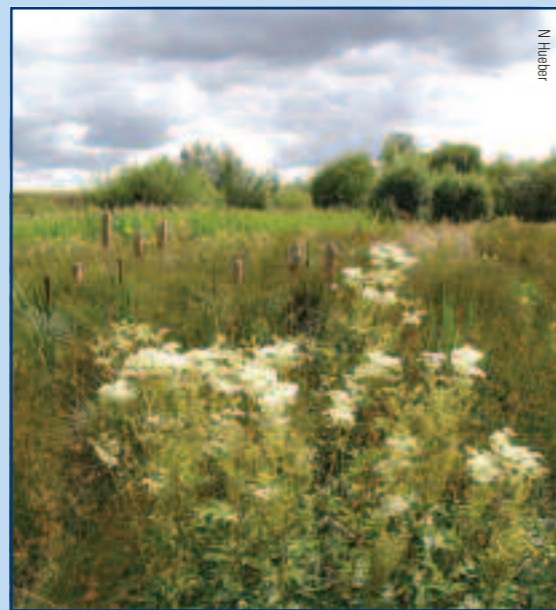
### Over 30 years of Wildlife Trust conservation in the Nene Valley

- 1 Bugbrooke Meadow
- 2 Storton’s Pits/Duston Mill Meadow
- 3 Kingsthorpe Meadow
- 4 Barnes Meadow
- 5 Abington Meadow
- 6 Summer Leys
- 7 Southfield Marsh Farm
- 8 Ditchford Lakes and Meadows
- 9 Wilson’s Pits
- 10 Higham Ferrers Pits
- 11 Titchmarsh
- 12 Yarwell Pond and Dingle

Only Wildlife Trust reserves that are part of the Nene Valley Living Landscape are shown.

Woodston Ponds, Stanground Wash and Stibbington nature reserves in Peterborough are part of the Nene Valley Living Landscape, but are not shown on this map.

Visit our website to find a list of other Trust nature reserves in this area.



#### 4 ABINGTON MEADOW

**Landscape:** a rich mosaic of wetland habitats, including wet pasture, marsh, ponds and reedbed.  
**Key species:** snipe, grass snake, small red-eyed damselfly.



**Lapwing**



Map by Steve Brayshaw based on Ordnance Survey mapping © Crown copyright. AM 37/10



**Snipe**



#### 6 SUMMER LEYS

**Landscape:** gravel pits, flood meadows, grassland and hedges.  
**Key species:** little ringed plover, hairy dragonfly, brown argus butterfly.



#### 11 TITCHMARSH

**Landscape:** grassland, reedbed.  
**Key species:** great burnet, red-eyed damselfly, otter, grey heron, kingfisher.



Look out for uncommon hairy dragonflies at the Trust's Summer Leys nature reserve on sunny days.

context. This approach benefits resident species, but will also attract many new ones. The Nene Valley provides much more than just a river, with a number of other diverse habitats such as meadows of wildflowers, ponds and shallow lakes, seasonally flooded grassland perfect for wetland birds, and even willow woodland. Much of the Trust's long-term work has involved reconnecting the river to detached floodplains, and managing water levels where the drainage has been altered by other land uses, to restore and recreate wildlife habitat. By connecting reserves and increasing the area under sympathetic management, the Trust intends to protect the valley's precious wildlife. In times of an uncertain climate, the ability to move around and adapt are of particular importance to species.

'While it might not sound glamorous, a lot of our work is looking to the long-term, so things like water level management and wildlife surveys are very important. That's not to say we haven't had short-term success with certain species.' Smiling, Tom proudly informs me about the success in encouraging migrant birds at Summer Leys nature reserve to stay and breed during the summer. Last year was the first recorded case of little ringed plovers breeding on site for a long time and four pairs were successful – much to the delight of birdwatchers and reserve staff. Like a white dove at the end of a flood, the plover chicks are a beacon of hope for the area. And with the Trust's long-term plans looking ambitious and achievable, it is set to be an exciting time for the people of the Nene Valley.



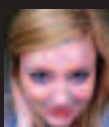
Little ringed plover



Southern marsh orchid

### The Trust's plans for the Nene Valley's future

- Keeping our existing reserves in good working order.
- Working with neighbouring landowners to encourage wildlife-friendly land management.
- Identifying key areas of land to purchase to join up our nature reserves.
- Protecting sites of wildlife value from development and making sure planned developments in the Nene Valley contribute to the growth of the living landscape.
- Organising more surveys – once we know what is living in the area, we can work to protect it.
- Encouraging our members and the public to enjoy the Nene Valley and learn about its varied beauty.



**Lizzy Dening** is a freelance journalist with a passion for wildlife. She currently works for various wildlife magazines, and enjoys writing poetry in her spare time.