



# HELFORD

## Voluntary Marine Conservation Area

Newsletter No. 34 Spring 2007

### HELFORD'S HERONS AND ENIGMATIC EGRET

Two of the Helford's most noticeable birds are the two resident members of the Heron family the Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) and the Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*). Almost the size of a Golden Eagle, the Grey Heron is the most widespread large predatory bird in the UK, equally at home in the remote highlands and islands, rivers and marshes in the English lowlands or in many urban parks. The Little Egret on the other hand, is currently progressing a steady march northwards from the English Channel coast which commenced in the late 1980s.

By the time you read this, I will be undertaking my annual count of the nests of these birds on the Helford for the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). Started in 1928, the BTO's Heronries Census is the longest-running single species survey in the world. Quite obviously a mass of data has been gathered over the years that enables the population to be monitored very accurately indeed. The UK population is currently estimated at around 14,200 pairs. This represents a 30% increase since 1978. Helford contributes about 0.1% towards this total! Since the mid 1980s, all the herons on the Helford have congregated to form a single heronry in the mature oak woodland on the western side of Polwheveral Creek. Since that time

numbers of pairs have usually been in double figures. Recent counts include (number of pairs in brackets): 2006 (14), 2005 (13), 2004 (12), 2003 (10) - generally very stable numbers. Prior to the mid 1980s there appear to have been smaller heronries scattered across the Helford Estuary - for example at Carne in Gillan Creek.

However, studying some of the statistics surrounding the Little Egret, it almost beggars belief that the species is doing so well. You may well know that the trade in egret feathers in the Victorian and Edwardian fashion industry led directly to the formation of the Society for the Protection of Birds in 1889 (it became 'Royal' 15 years later), but are you aware of some of the astonishing figures behind the headline? In the first quarter of 1885, 750,000 egret skins were sold on the London market; in 1887 a single London dealer handled 2 million skins; in 1914 India, 1 ounce of feathers was trading at 10-28 times the equivalent weight of silver. We might think that 'factory farming' is a relatively modern phenomenon - it isn't. To meet the insatiable demand, egret farms developed with pens holding up to 60 pairs. When the eggs hatched, they were removed and hand-reared, causing the birds to lay again. Sometimes pairs had 4 or 5 broods a



**Aim:** To safeguard the marine life of the Helford River by any appropriate means within its status as a Voluntary Marine Conservation Area, to increase the diversity of its intertidal community and raise awareness of its marine interest and importance.

For further information relating to the Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area please contact

the HMC Group Co-ordinator: PE Tompsett, Awelon, Colborne Avenue, Illogan, Redruth, TR16 4EB. Tel: 01209 842316

Chairman: David Muirhead Co-ordinator: Pamela Tompsett [www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk](http://www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk)

Design: Sheila McCann, Cornwall Wildlife Trust Illustration: Sarah McCartney, Cornwall Wildlife Trust

season. As if this wasn't bad enough for them, they were themselves plucked four times a year.

Considering that this only took place a century ago, one can only marvel at nature's rejuvenating powers. From the 1950s the Little Egret colonised westwards across much of Europe arriving in Brittany in 1960. 20 years later they had reached the UK and following a long period of raised hopes by ornithologists, breeding was first confirmed at Brownsea Island in Poole Harbour in 1996. Helford followed a close second the year after. Nature herself can be fickle however. While numbers of pairs nesting at Helford jumped from 5-6 pairs in 2004/5 to 11-12 in 2006, during a visit to Brownsea last year the warden told me that they are now seeing no young fledged due to predation by ravens. Would anyone condone action to protect a new 'invasive' species against a long-standing native? The question is rhetorical.

Each year I am surprised how difficult it is to accurately count the nesting pairs. Despite their large size and the fact that they nest early before leaves are out, the nests

can be well hidden in the dense ivy that clumps in the canopies of the oaks. It seems to get denser each year. The egrets sit slightly later than the herons. By Flora Day the oaks are bursting and it is a real challenge to pick out the motionless snowy-white birds through the foliage. By that time the heron chicks are well-grown and often standing up in the nests awaiting their next meal.

If anyone fancies experiencing a dawn watch at Polwheveral, the dawn chorus walk at 0630 on Sunday 22nd April will get us quite close. I can't promise a repeat of last year, though, when on a cold but sunny April morning I had fantastic views of only my second Cornish Osprey fishing below the heronry and then perching alongside it. But you never know.....

It will be interesting to see if the number of Egrets overtakes the Herons this year, and to observe if their interactions change as the balance of the two species alters in their breeding colony.

**Martin Rule, with thanks to BTO and Birds Britannic**

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## Helford around the world

The Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area has had it's own website for some time now. The site is hosted free of charge by the Cornwall Wildlife Trust and it has its own domain name.

The site, which contains general information about the group, wildlife, and conservation efforts in the area, is written and edited by Dr Pamela Tompsett. It also gives details of organised events, both past and present.

Last year Ruth Williams put together a selection of quizzes and games to create a new 'Kids page'. This has given a new dimension to the site.

The group's newsletter, which is produced twice a year and is also edited by Pamela, is designed and produced by Sheila McCann of the Cornwall Wildlife Trust. Since Issue 26 (Spring 2003) selected articles have been published to the web site and the newsletter in its entirety has been made available to download. This makes it accessible to people all over the world.

During 2006 there were over 18,000 visits to the site and statistics show a continuing rise in visitor numbers throughout this year.

If you have any comments about the site or any articles that may be suitable to publish please contact Pamela. Also don't forget to tell people about the site. If you have a web site of your own, or know someone who has one, try and get a link from it to the HVMCA site and also to the Cornwall Wildlife Trust web site.

Help us spread the conservation message for the marine environment and for Cornwall.

**Jayne Herbert (Web Manager)**  
Cornwall Wildlife Trust

[www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk](http://www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk)  
[www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk](http://www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk)



## Natural England Update - Spring 2007

### What is Natural England?

Natural England has been formed by bringing together English Nature, the landscape, access and recreation elements of the Countryside Agency and the environmental land management functions of the Rural Development Service.

Natural England will work for people, places and nature, to enhance biodiversity, landscapes and wildlife in rural, urban, coastal and marine areas; promoting access, recreation and public well-being, and contributing to the way natural resources are managed so that they can be enjoyed now and in the future.

Natural England is working towards the delivery of four strategic outcomes, which together deliver on our purpose to conserve, enhance and manage the natural environment for the benefit of current and future generations.

- **A healthy natural environment:** England's natural environment will be conserved and enhanced.
- **Enjoyment of the natural environment:** more people enjoying, understanding and acting to improve, the natural environment, more often.
- **Sustainable use of the natural environment:** the use and management of the natural environment is more sustainable.
- **A secure environmental future:** decisions which collectively secure the future of the natural environment.

For further details about Natural England, its objectives, targets, and ways of working visit [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk)

### Natural England in Cornwall & IoS

Cornwall & IoS are now part of a wider Natural England Team, which is the Cornwall, Devon & Isles of Scilly Team. The team manager is Phil Collins who is based in Exeter.

### Contacts for the HVMCA

Roger Covey has now moved on to the SW Regional Advocacy & Partnership Team of Natural England as Senior Specialist Marine, although he is still based in Truro.

Jeremy Clitherow is still based in Truro and the Lizard and is responsible for the land management aspects surrounding the Helford, Lizard and Isles of Scilly, as was his role with English Nature previously.

Sangeeta McNair is Maritime Adviser for Cornwall & IoS and is your contact for marine issues and for the Fal & Helford Special Area of Conservation.

### Sangeeta McNair

Maritime Adviser  
Cornwall, Devon & Isles of Scilly Team  
[sangeeta.mcnair@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:sangeeta.mcnair@naturalengland.org.uk)



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## Cycleau Cornwall

**After 3 successful years, Cycleau has finally come to a close. A lot has been achieved locally on the Fal & Helford in those 3 years thanks to all our partners. The Cycleau website will be maintained for the next 5 years by the environment agency. Please visit [www.cycleau.com](http://www.cycleau.com)**

Local information can also be found at [www.cycleaucornwall.org.uk](http://www.cycleaucornwall.org.uk) Cycleau Methodology - A tool, in the form of a CD-ROM, that can be used by all as a guide to best practice for water environment management, and to help to monitor your own aquatic environments in a better way is now available from the main website. Please do send off for your own copy through the main website or to request your copy, please contact [cycleau@environment-agency.gov.uk](mailto:cycleau@environment-agency.gov.uk)

Cycleau Cornwall wishes to thank the Helford MC Group for all its support over the last 3 years.

### The Cycleau Cornwall Team



## Annual Report April 2006 – March 2007

### NETWORKING

A significant 20 year milestone in the history of the Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area (HVMCA) will have been reached at the end of October 2007. This was the date when the results of 4 years of discussion, survey and consultation came together and the Cornwall County Council Planning Committee approved the creation of the HVMCA. This was followed in July 1988 by a public launch with naturalist, Tony Soper, and a poster competition for local children in Gweek Village Hall. Despite many changes in these two decades the central theme of 'Community, Commerce and Conservation', aimed at improving and protecting the sensitive marine wildlife of the Helford River, is as strong as ever and indeed the Group has had remarkably wide recognition.

Quarterly meetings have continued to provide a well-used local forum attracting an average of 21 representatives from the many different river user and conservation sectors who exchange ideas and information and learn from invited specialists.

Topics discussed in the last year include Finding Sanctuary – SW coast Marine Protected Areas, Ship to Ship Oil transfer, Fal River Links, water quality monitoring, the new pontoon and ferry, native oyster bed regeneration with the culture of other shellfish and seabed damage by scallopers near the HVMCA. Dolphins had been seen again in the HVMCA with one casualty at Durgan (the total cetacean casualty list for Cornwall in 2006 was 175).

A major European initiative, the Cycleau project (water cycle), which took place in the South West along with other water catchments in Cornwall, Brittany and Ireland, came to an end and the valuable lessons learnt about water catchment management, community participation, sediment movement and water quality were being disseminated widely. The project specifically included the involvement of specialist community groups such as the HVMCA Group and linked cultural activities.

HVMCA members have again been involved with local and national marine conservation issues through Cornwall County, District and Parish Councils; English Nature now Natural England; Environment Agency; South West Water; WWF (UK); the National Trust; Duchy Oyster Farm; Helford Moorings Officer and other River users. Locally the first-time sewage scheme at Helford village engendered some heated discussion, as did some water-side planning decisions, whilst nationally, the Chairman, David Muirhead, had linked the Group with ministerial discussion on the Marine Bill proposals.

Detailed reports of HVMCA meetings on request keeps some 55 email and 17 postal recipients in contact: not all attend meetings regularly. Numerous telephone requests had been received from other organisations and students of all ages.

### PUBLIC AWARENESS

Attractive leaflets covering background information and current events publicised the Group widely on land and, through moorings and Harbour officers, many boat-owners. Thanks are due to all leaders of the monthly events and volunteer helpers.

Matching laminated A3 and A2 size posters have been prepared to sell for indoor display.

The National Seal Sanctuary, Gweek, has kindly offered to display the HVMCA boards and accommodate items needing storage following the loss of the Kerrier District Council's Helston office.

Two simple A4 x8 newsletters, Spring and Autumn reported on species, habitats and people. Our thanks to Sheila McCann for her DTP assistance.

The HVMCA 10 leaflet information pack was being updated in two stages as resources became available. Support had been offered from the National Trust, Cycleau Project and the HMCG Members Section.

Substantial grants from the Esmée Fairbairn Trust, the Cornwall Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Sustainable Development Fund, the Duchy of Cornwall and the National Trust with additional support from other Associate Members and the HMCG Members section was gratefully received. Sincere thanks are offered to all our supporters.

Links with other VMCA's and various marine projects has continued, in particular the Cetacean Stranding project and the Seasearch divers' recording scheme which is a valuable contribution to the Helford recording tradition.

### EVENTS

The Helford MC Group Members Section Chairman, David Nightingale, reports that the section has been actively supportive taking a significant role in various events and promoting the marine conservation message widely.

Over 477 people had taken part in 11 events (one had been postponed)

In January, John Boyle of Shark Bay Films, presented some wonderful marine pictures from his award-winning films, to an enthusiastic audience of 44. A month later Doug Herdson, of the National Marine Aquarium, fascinated a group of 49 with how climate change might affect our marine environment as our northern fauna moved north and southern species moved nearer. A well attended AGM (72+) had the benefit of Dr Paul Gainey's excellent Helford pictures and lively presentation. Winners of the Poetry Competition were presented with their prizes.

A sunny April day attracted a large number of families and friends 70+ to the Helford Passage shore to explore the rock pools and sandy beach with Pamela Tompsett.



The beautiful Budock Vean Hotel grounds and the adjacent road and shoreline was the unusual setting for the traditional Helford spring flower walk with botanist Keith Spurgin.

A lively group of families and friends (14) met Roger Butts at the National Seal Sanctuary, Gweek, to look closely at the river, the woods and the seals around them and make pictures in words.

In July a full complement of 100 joined the Enterprise boat for another Annual Cruise in glorious sunshine to learn more about the very special local marine scene. One highlight was the shelduck with their ducklings diving as we passed. National Trust volunteers with sea water tanks enabled everyone to have a close look at crabs, worms and molluscs, while Derek Goodwin, a bass expert, showed his first hand experience of young fish using his aerated tanks.

Ruth Williams, returned in August and her group of 21 adults and children constructed some strange monsters and mermaids on the Treath shore. Later in the month Dr Carol Williams gave a most interesting illustrated talk on bats at Trelowarren, but a sudden heavy drizzle curtailed the anticipated evening flight. A September event planned at Gear Farm unfortunately had to be postponed as the leader was called away.

A birds-eye view of the numerous ancient sites and landscapes of the Lizard and Helford River area shown by Steve Hartgroves of the Cornwall Historic Environment Service was enjoyed by some 75+ in October. Martin Rule and Duncan Lyne completed the 2006 programme with a lively expedition around Frenchman's Creek.

A group of Helford MC Group members benefited from a evening visit to the Falmouth Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

## PROJECTS

Derek Goodwin's Helford juvenile bass investigation begun in 1994 has been scaled down but he was able to report that 2006 hatchlings were found, although in very small numbers. A wide range of other fish species were present.



Tony Sutton's reports from dives made in the HVMCA indicated a generally healthy state of affairs although he had seen less fish than usual. His recent survey of the historic oyster beds would provide good baseline information as regeneration took place. Small patches of living maerl had been found again and the main subtidal eelgrass beds were spreading. Warning cards and buoys advising against anchoring in the beds to avoid damage to the eelgrass rhizomes have deterred many boat-owners.

Pamela Tompsett had been recording the welcome return of small patches of intertidal eelgrass on Bar Beach, Helford Passage. She had also published a list of marine algae of the Helford VMCA together with Stella Turk and Paul Gainey.

Student Rhiannon Mather, had produced an excellent review of HVMCA triggging activities 1996-2006.

## HELFDOR VMCA WEBSITE

With the help of Jayne Herbert the site manager, Ruth Williams, Pamela Tompsett and Rhiannon Mather, the HVMCA website has been updated and extended to include a children's page. The Helford CD can be purchased on-line and the extracted newsletter, events and news can all be accessed at [www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk](http://www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk). Jayne provides regular monthly statistics.

## THANKS

Co-ordinating the full range of HMCG networking and public awareness commitments has resulted in another busy year for me, Pamela Tompsett, so the help and enthusiasm of various members and some other organisations has been most welcome. Thank you to everyone.

Many individuals and organisations have generously contributed their time and expertise in a variety of ways for the benefit of the whole Helford VMCA - a real joint effort!

**Pamela E Tompsett** Helford MC Group Co-ordinator

## HEAVENLY HELFORD

*The river we know at present courses  
Through a valley formed by primeval forces.  
When ice held its grip, sea level was low  
So just a small river continued to flow.  
The bed of the stream with tributaries  
Was eventually clothed with various trees.*

*As the ice melted, the sea level rose  
Affecting five miles with salt water flows.  
Marine life in plenty followed the sea,  
The shelter ensuring good diversity.  
Fringed with rock reefs and other substrates  
We find sand, silt and gravel and greywackey slates.*

*This watery Eden has niches galore  
From its watery depths to each varied shore.  
Tidal water reaches Polwheveral and Gweek  
As well as each sinuous large and small creek  
On east and west sides, from the north to the south,  
With Rosemullion Head and Nare at the mouth.*



*Ancient settlers are shown by un-English names  
Given by people who had quite different aims  
From those of us now who have far more leisure  
Who sail, dive and watch the wildlife for pleasure.  
Where oaks meet the water and dolphins may play  
That is the wonder of Helford V M C A.*

**Stella M Turk (Oct.2005)**

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## BBC team get their feet wet to film Helford's fantastic rockpools

**Cornwall's coastline is the most prominent natural feature in the county with dramatic cliffs and rocky coves, spectacular sea views, long stretches of sandy beaches and dunes. It is also home to a plethora of wildlife and that is why the BBC came to visit the Helford in the autumn to film some of our wonderful wildlife to share with the nation as part of their new series, Nature's Calendar.**

I had been asked on behalf of HVMCA to help the film crew to find and identify some animal life in the rich rockpools of Prisk Cove. So duly armed with buckets and nets, I met the film crew of 4 at Mawnan Church on a bright but chilly morning in November. The walk around the coast path to Prisk was the first thing to hit them, stunning in the watery autumn sunshine and the perfect opening shot for the film!

The tide was receding when we got down to the shore, revealing the secret world of the rockpools. I had warned the producer that November wasn't the best time to find things on the shore, most sensible life was battening down the hatches ready for the winter and moving into slightly deeper water where the temperature is more moderated. But the sunshine still had warmth in it and after a relatively short search we had found a wide variety of marine life; shore crabs, the beefy looking Xanthus crabs, blennies and prawns, cushion stars and pipefish. The cameraman set to filming close ups and underwater shots of some of this colourful life, interspersed with informative chat between the presenter and myself, as the 'expert'. This was a complete surprise to me and I was totally

unprepared for a TV moment, so apologies to anyone who sees the final film when it is broadcast, I'm the scruffy looking one with very silly bright wellies on!!

The producer desperately wanted to find a cornish sucker fish to film, and after much searching we found several of these strange but colourful fish for him to choose from. Being a short piece of film we focussed on three of the species found, the dog whelk, cornish sucker fish and a rather feisty velvet swimming crab!

The crew left after a successful few hours filming and I look forward to seeing the results which will be shown in this coming autumn's series of Nature's Calendar. Keep an eye open for it!

**Ruth Williams**  
**Marine Conservation Officer**  
Cornwall Wildlife Trust



## Fal River Links 2006 Summary at a Glance.

Fal River Links (FRL) is now an organisation with a membership of 29 comprising 16 private businesses and 13 public sector and charitable bodies. This year we welcomed three new companies to the Co-operative; Mylor Boat Hire, Sail Cornwall and Helford River Boats. 2006 also saw two new ferries on the water from our existing partnership; the Queen of the Fal renovated by Peter and Rhos Newman and of course the new King Harry Ferry.

- The season began with a visit from The Countess of Wessex for the official launch of the new King Harry Ferry and subsequently from Shaun Woodward, Government Minister for Tourism and our local MPs Matthew Taylor and Julia Goldsworthy.
- We also had a visit from Jennie Bond, ex royal correspondent whose research team contacted Fal River Links as location to film a programme for the Cash in the Attic series.

### Marketing, FRL ticketing and events

- A new FRL illustrated map has been developed and used in the wide range of advertising from local guide brochures to newspapers and the FRL website.
- Over 11,000 cars have used the park and float Falmouth to Trelissick link.
- Presentations were given to a very wide range of organisations including the Helford MC Group
- A recent survey carried out by BDRCA says that the number of visitors using a website before visiting a destination has increased by 10% since 2004 to 36% in 2005/6.

- Many local businesses are trying to achieve the Green Tourism Business award. Part of the criteria for this is promoting 'car free days out' .... all good news for us.
- It is encouraging to know that plans are going ahead for a FRL Bio fuel station at Ponsharden

### Support

- Targeted support has been received from Rural Renaissance/Cornwall Enterprise, HSBC, Cornwall Marine Network and the FRL was recognised with a Highly Commended Cornwall Partnerships Award.
- A Fal River Pass proposal is being developed to increase loyalty and encourage repeat business. It relies on support from you, our partners.

If there are other people/ businesses you think would like to become a Fal River Links partner please do let us know.

### Jemima Ball

Project Officer - Tel: 01872 861914



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## Helford Shellfish notes

### Water classification

- Falmouth and Truro Port Health Authority (FTPHA) officers continue to sample shellfish and water on a monthly basis in the Helford and generally the results have been encouraging.
- Helford Point mussels continue to give good test results and a classification for a foreshore bed near the new water treatment outlet will be available shortly. This could possibly be an 'A' giving a good baseline measure in advance of any use of the outlet.
- The current water classification for the Helford is Long Term B from Passage Cove across to Helford Point up to Bishops Quay.
- Additional shellfish sampling regimes and preparatory work are being undertaken by the Duchy of Cornwall Oyster Farm and the FTPHA to extend the shellfish area from Helford point eastwards to the boundaries of the Duchy of Cornwall's ownership (Toll Point and Mawnan Shear).

### Shellfish collection

- Cockles - the FTPHA has not been asked to classify any beds for the collection of cockles and so therefore the commercial gathering of these is still prohibited.
- Winkles - the legal position of these has not changed at the moment, in that collection areas are not required to be classified as they are for bivalves. Following discussions with CEFAS, this position is about to change whereby collection areas will have to be classified. However, official movement documents from the FTPHA are still a legal requirement for anyone harvesting and transporting winkles.
- Permission from the Duchy of Cornwall Licence holders, the Duchy of Cornwall Oyster Farm Limited, is required before shellfish can be collected from the shellfish areas.
- The FTPHA will take formal action against anyone not complying with the law with regards to movement documents, etc.

Gary Cooper and Colin Bate

## PEOPLE PAGE

### Martin Rule

After nearly 13 years with the Environment Agency as a Conservation Officer Martin has decided to alter course. He will give up the daily Wendron to Bodmin drive and a busy office life dealing with wildlife species and habitat consultations for an equally hectic but self-determined life in his home locality providing a landscaping service with an emphasis on attracting wildlife. We know that his deep interest in conservation and his extensive knowledge of the birds in Cornwall will not be diminished and we understand that he hopes to continue to be a part of the HMC Group but in a different capacity. We wish him every success in his new venture. His contact details are: Martin Rule 01326 561 952.



### A new Commodore on the Helford River

We offer congratulations to our long time Treasurer, Rob Hewett, on being elected Commodore of the Helford River Sailing Club. Rob has been a stalwart of the Sailing Club for many years and has played a major part in establishing it as an important centre of sailing with excellent facilities and notable catering for sailors.

Rob has been, at different times, Hon. Secretary, Hon. Treasurer, Rear Commodore both for sailing and administration, Vice Commodore and now, Commodore.

He has been a prime mover in the arrangements for the annual pursuit race to L'Aberwrach and has maintained a close liaison with our Breton friends. Well done and many thanks for your services to the HVMCA.

W L Collins



### Sangeeta McNair

Sangeeta McNair has successfully combined part-time posts for English Nature in the Tamar & wider Cornwall area and the Cycleau Project in the Fal-Helford catchment for the last three years. She has now taken up a new challenge as full-time Maritime Adviser for Natural England in the Cornwall Office, Truro and will continue her close links with the Helford MC Group. We wish her a satisfying and enjoyable year ahead in her new job.

