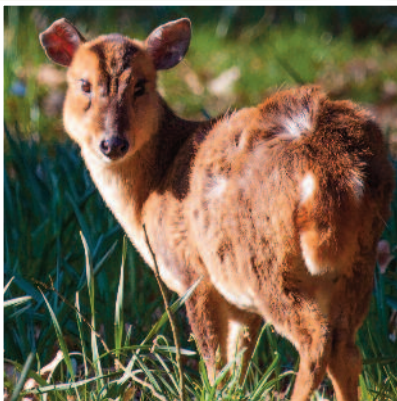


The Stour Valley Heritage Compendia

The Natural History Compendium

Written by James Parry



Acknowledgements

The author would like to extend particular thanks to Martin Sanford and Ben Heather of the Suffolk Biological Records Centre for their advice and cooperation. He is also grateful to Dawn Balmer (British Trust for Ornithology), Simone Bullion (Suffolk Wildlife Trust), Jasmin Hicks, Sue Hooton, Geoffrey Kibby, Peter Kitchener, Tony Leech, Neil Mahler, Geoff Nobes, Tony Prichard, Stuart Read, Lorna Shaw (Essex Wildlife Trust), Clive Sheppard and Mick Wright.



'Native Black Poplar' © Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Project



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Introduction

The lowland landscapes of the Stour Valley, encompassing the floodplain of the slow-flowing River Stour itself and the gently undulating slopes either side, contain a range of important wildlife-rich habitats. As elsewhere in many parts of East Anglia, the underlying rock is chalk, overlain by drift deposits. Much of the area has loam-dominated soils, with boulder clay prevailing on the higher land in the west and alluvium and peat in the low-lying valley floor itself. Farmland landscapes dominate, threaded by tributary streams, ditches and hedgerows, interspersed with other habitats. Many of these, such as the parcels of ancient woodland and riverside water meadows, are important remnants of what were once much more extensive tracts of forest and wetland. They provide vital last refuges for what are often highly vulnerable species with specific habitat requirements.

Although twentieth-century agricultural practices reduced soil diversity generally, with drainage and the use of nitrates having a particularly negative effect on many of the traditional wetland habitats, greater conservation awareness is now helping certain types of wildlife thrive, both on farmland and elsewhere. Education and careful management is essential if the biodiversity of the Stour Valley is to be maintained and potentially enhanced in future. A network of designated protected areas, including several Sites of Special Scientific Interest and over 100 Local Wildlife Sites, plus the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, provides the focus for many of the wildlife conservation initiatives currently in hand. These range from the provision of nesting boxes for birds such as Barn Owl to the creation of habitat corridors for endangered species including Dormouse, with several such initiatives taking place as part of the Managing A Masterpiece Landscape Partnership.

The species lists and descriptions in the following sections are intended to give a general indication of the status and distribution of plants and wildlife within the Stour Valley area. All records given are selective and not intended to be comprehensive.

Plants

Over 1500 species of plant have been recorded in the Stour Valley area, with those favouring riparian and wetland habitats particularly well represented. The most common trees in such situations are various species of **willow** *Salix* sp., which were traditionally pollarded or coppiced to provide material for basket-weaving in particular. Mature pollarded **Crack Willows** *S. fragilis* and **White Willows** *S. alba* are an important component of the local landscape.

An iconic Stour Valley tree is the native **Black Poplar** *Populus nigra subsp. betulifolia*, which requires moist to wet soil and was formerly a classic species of floodplain woodland. Today it occurs only as isolated trees in wet meadows, hedgerows and alongside farm ponds and rivers, its current distribution reflecting the former practice of striking cuttings in damp places. Most surviving trees have reached old age and mortality rates are high, with the Suffolk/Essex border containing a significant proportion of the British population. There are particularly impressive specimens at Stoke-by-Clare sewage works and by Wiston Hall at Nayland.

Black Poplar timber was traditionally valued for making planks and for use in floor-boarding, and the haywain famously depicted in Constable's eponymous painting was probably made from this species. The Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Project have set up a Black Poplar clone-bank containing cuttings from 150 Suffolk and Essex parent trees. New trees are grown on and made available to landowners throughout the Stour Valley, with 500 young Black Poplars planted in the project area to date.

Typical riverside herbage along the Stour and its tributaries comprises species such as **Hemp Agrimony** *Eupatorium cannabinum*, both **Great and Hoary Willowherb** *Epilobium hirsutum* and *E. parviflorum*,



Bee & Pyramidal Orchids, © Stuart Read



Cuckoo Flower, © Stuart Read

Stinging Nettles *Urtica dioica* are ubiquitous, but important for being one of the primary host plants for the curious and Nationally Scarce **Greater Dodder** *Cuscuta europaea*. The Stour and the Brett are hotspots for this parasitic species, which appears to rely partly on flowing water to disperse its seeds. The Essex bank of the Stour is the only known location for it in that county.

Marginal plants growing at the water's edge include **Common Reed** *Phragmites australis*, **Purple Loosestrife** *Lythrum salicaria*, **Water Forget-me-not** *Myosotis scorpioides*, **Water Mint** *Mentha aquatic* and **Yellow Flag** *Iris pseudacorus*. Growing out in the water itself are the true aquatics, including **Yellow Waterlily** *Nupha lutea*, the scarcer **White Waterlily** *Nymphaea alba*, **Fan-leaved Water Crowfoot** *Ranunculus circinatus* and **Amphibious Bistort** *Persicaria amphibia*, as well as emergents such as **Arrowhead** *Sagittaria sagittifolia*, **Bulrush** *Typha latifolia*, **Common Club-rush** *Schoenoplectus lacustris* (traditionally harvested for use in weaving), **Water Dock** *Rumex hydrolapathum*, **Water Plantain** *Alisma plantago-aquatica* and **Flowering Rush** *Butomus umbellatus*.

Lakes and gravel pits support much the same flora, but with the obvious exception of those species that require flowing water. Cornard Mere was traditionally one of the Stour Valley's most important botanic sites and whilst adversely affected in recent decades by nutrient enrichment and drainage, it still supports a range of important wetland species. These include **Water Violet** *Hottonia palustris*, recorded only from here, Arger Fen and a handful of other sites in the area, and the even scarcer **Bog Pimpernel** *Anagallis tenella*. Two interesting species well represented in wetland habitats in the Stour Valley are **Trifid Bur-Marigold** *Bidens tripartita*, an annual found in nutrient-rich mud or gravel by ponds and slow-moving water, and **Common Water Starwort** *Callitriche stagnalis*, which is often recorded from temporary stands of water such as puddles in wheel ruts and ditches.

Riverside water meadows are one of the Stour Valley's most important habitats and were once a common sight along much of the river and its tributaries. As elsewhere in East Anglia, the second half of the



Bugle, © Stuart Read



Deptford Pink, © Stuart Read

twentieth century saw many of them adversely affected or destroyed completely by drainage and unfavourable farming practices. Those surviving at Sudbury Common Lands can claim the longest history of continuous grazing in East Anglia, with two meadows being recorded by name in the late 12th century. **Lady's Smock** *Cardamine pratensis*, **Meadow Buttercup** *Ranunculus acris*, **Meadowsweet** *Filipendula ulmaria*, **Common Meadow Rue** *Thalictrum flavum*, **Ragged Robin** *Lychnis flos-cuculi* and **Skullcap** *Scutellaria galericulata* are among the classic damp meadow plants found here, where they are joined by the scarce and localised **Tubular Water Dropwort** *Oenanthe fistulosa*. There are orchids too, notably **Southern Marsh Orchid** *Dactylorhiza praetermissa* and **Common Spotted Orchid** *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*.

The meadows alongside the Stour Valley Path north of Bures are another good example of traditional unimproved damp grassland. The sward here is characterised by **Meadow Foxtail** *Alopecurus pratensis*, **Sweet Vernal Grass** *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, **Creeping Bent-grass** *Agrostis stolonifera* and **Crested Dog's-tail** *Cynosurus cristatus*, with the wetter areas supporting most of the water-meadow plants listed above, as well as **Bog Stitchwort** *Stellaria alsine*, **Lesser Spearwort** *Ranunculus flamula* and **Common Valerian** *Valeriana officinalis*. The floodplain grassland further downstream along the Stour (notably at Dedham Old River Marshes) is also interesting botanically, with a similar suite of plants living in the damp meadows and drainage ditches.

Some of the most important surviving fragments of dry unimproved grassland, often acid in character, survive on commons and greens and in old churchyards, such as those at Dedham, Great Horkesley, Mount Bures and St Mary's, Langham Hall. Typical grasses include **Yellow Oat-grass** *Trisetum flavescens*, **Red Fescue** *Festuca rubra* and **bent-grasses** *Agrostis* sp., alongside **Field Wood-rush** *Luzula campestris*, an indicator of infertile grassland. Plants found in such situations but which have largely disappeared from the surrounding countryside include **Yellow-rattle** *Rhinanthus minor*, **Vervain** *Verbena officinalis*, **Common Knapweed** *Centaurea nigra*, **Barren Strawberry** *Potentilla sterilis*, **Burnet Saxifrage** *Pimpinella saxifraga* and



Flowering Rush, © Clive Sheppard



Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage, © Stuart Read



Oxlip, © Stuart Read

Pignut *Conopodium majus*, with **Lady's Bedstraw** *Galium verum* and **Sheep's Sorrel** *Rumex acetosella*.

Harebell *Campanula rotundifolia*, a once common species locally but now much reduced in number and distribution, is also notable, as is **Lesser Calamint** *Clinopodium calamintha*. This shortlived perennial is a Stour Valley speciality and prospers on sunny banks in rough grassland and other exposed locations such as railway embankments. Meanwhile, churchyard walls are good for ferns such as **Wall Rue** *Asplenium ruta-muraria* and **Black Spleenwort** *Asplenium adiantum-nigrum*, as well as for mosses and lichens.

One interesting species found locally is **Deptford Pink** *Dianthus armeria*, classified nationally as Endangered and with a small colony at Sudbury Common Lands.

Grazed grassland slopes are one of the scarcest habitats in the Stour Valley, with Lodge Hills near Wormingford one of the few remaining sites. The well drained upper slopes here support a wide diversity of grasses as well as **Gorse** *Ulex europaeus*, **Sheep's Sorrel** *Rumex acetosella*, **Common Stork's-bill** *Erodium cicutarium* and **Mouse-ear Hawkweed** *Pilosella officinarum*. Equally rare locally is heathland, of which only a tiny number of relict patches (such as Newton Green) survive; indeed, **Heather** *Calluna vulgaris* is known only from a single site in the entire Stour Valley.

Much of the Stour Valley area comprises arable land, much of it farmed intensively. In such situations there is usually little place left for any other than the most resilient plants such as **Common Poppy** *Papaver rhoeas*, although field margins can support a greater variety of species. These include **Creeping Thistle** *Cirsium arvens*, **Common Fumitory** *Fumaria officinalis* and **Scented Mayweed** *Matricaria recutita*, among others, as well as **Viper's Bugloss** *Echium vulgare* in some locations. Opportunistic and pioneering plants also do well in other manmade habitats, such as roadside verges and railway embankments. For example, stretches of the disused railway line between Lavenham and Melford have developed a varied grassland sward containing **Salad Burnet** *Sanguisorba minor*, **Meadow Saxifrage** *Saxifraga granulata* and **Lesser Calamint** *Clinopodium calamintha*. Rare species such as **Autumn Gentian** *Gentianella amarella* and **Woolly Thistle** *Cirsium eriophorum* have also been recorded here. Roadside verges often boast impressive displays of **Oxeye Daisy** *Leucanthemum vulgare* and can also be excellent for orchids, particularly **Pyramidal Orchid** *Anacamptis pyramidalis* (eg along the Long Melford bypass) and **Bee Orchid** *Ophrys apifera*.

One of the more interesting episodes of plant cultivation in the Stour Valley is centred on the crops of **Deadly Nightshade** *Atropa belladonna* and **Henbane** *Hyoscyamus niger* that were grown around Long Melford in the early years of the twentieth century for use in the pharmaceutical industry. They were harvested and then taken across the Stour to a processing plant at Liston; plants of both species are still recorded locally and are doubtless descended from this lost local industry. Other plants grown

commercially at the same site included **Foxglove** *Digitalis purpurea* and **Chamomile** *Chamaemelum nobile*.

Less than five percent of the Stour Valley area is wooded. Stands of deciduous woodland typically feature a mix of tree species, with **Pedunculate Oak** *Quercus robur*, **Ash** *Fraxinus excelsior*, **Silver Birch** *Betula pendula* and **Sycamore** *Acer pseudoplatanus* usually the most frequent. **Beech** *Fagus sylvatica*, **Sweet Chestnut** *Castanea sativa* and **Holly** *Ilex aquifolium* are also common. In such situations the understorey is usually poor and composed mainly of **Bramble** *Rubus* sp., **Stinging Nettle** *Urtica dioica* and **Ivy** *Hedera helix*. Drier woods can also support stands of **Broad Buckler Fern** *Dryopteris dilatata*. **Bracken** *Pteridium aquilinum* is locally common in some woods (and also in hedgerows), but is generally absent in areas of boulder clay.

Scots Pine *Pinus sylvestris* is often found growing in mixed deciduous woods and, like all coniferous species found locally, is an introduction. Grown either as a commercial crop or as ornamentals in parks and gardens, these include **Sitka Spruce** *Picea sitchensis* and **Norway Spruce** *Picea abies*. The deciduous **European Larch** *Larix deciduas* also occurs as a commercially grown species, with the dense plantations in which it and conifers are generally grown usually supporting little by way of ground flora.

Much greater diversity is to be found in the Stour Valley's important fragments of ancient woodland. A key indicator species of this hugely important habitat is **Small-leaved Lime** *Tilia cordata*. The area between Sudbury and Hadleigh is especially important for this species which, like **Hazel** *Corylus avellana*, was traditionally coppiced. Other typical ancient woodland species are **Pedunculate Oak** *Quercus robur*, **Ash** *Fraxinus excelsior*, **Field Maple** *Acer campestre* and occasionally **Wild Service Tree** *Sorbus torminalis*.

A particularly notable tree in Stour Valley woods is **Wild Cherry** *Prunus avium*, with some impressive mature specimens at Arger Fen, for example. Typical ground flora in such situations includes **Bugle** *Ajuga reptans*, **Dog's Mercury** *Mercurialis perennis*, **Bluebell** *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, **Primrose** *Primula vulgaris*, **Wood Sorrel** *Oxalis acetosella*, **Lords and Ladies** *Arum maculatum*, **Wood Anemone** *Anemone nemorosa* and **Common and Early Dog Violets** *Viola riviniana* and *V. reichenbachiana*. **Early Purple Orchids** *Orchis mascula* also occur at scattered woodland locations across the area, with **Greater Butterfly Orchid** *Platanthera chlorantha* and **Broad-leaved Helleborine** *Epipactis helleborine* surviving at a handful of sites. In a few places, eg. Bulls Cross Wood and Ladygate Wood near Haverhill, the enchanting **Oxlip** *Primula elatior* can be found. **Herb Paris** *Paris quadrifolia*, another ancient woodland indicator, is much rarer, hanging on at only one or two places.

Wetter areas of woodland typically comprise **Alder** *Alnus glutinosa*, which can form dense stands of



Water Violet, © James Parry

monotypic 'alder carr'. **Wild Garlic or Ramsons** *Allium ursinum* can often dominate the ground flora in such situations, and wet flushes are good for **Marsh Marigold** *Caltha palustris*, **Water Chickweed** *Myosoton aquaticum*, **Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage** *Chrysosplenium oppositifolium* and **Large Bittercress** *Cardamine amara*.

Despite several decades of damage and destruction during the second half of the twentieth century, a process only partly reversed by limited replanting in recent years, hedgerows remain one of the defining features of the Stour Valley landscape. Indeed, the Suffolk side of the river has one of the highest densities of hedges in that county. The superstructure of the area's hedgerows is typically composed of a mix of species including **Hazel** *Corylus avellana*, **Elder** *Sambucus nigra*, **Field Maple** *Acer campestre*, **Hawthorns** *Crataegus* sp., **Blackthorn** *Prunus spinosa*, **Dogwood** *Cornus sanguinea*, **Spindle** *Euonymus europaeus*, **Guelder Rose** *Viburnum opulus* and **Crab Apple** *Malus sylvestris*. In the far west of the area, **Wayfaring Tree** *Viburnum lantana* can also be quite common.

Older hedges are often the relict edges of lost tracts of ancient woodland and in such cases can feature trees such as **Pedunculate Oak** *Quercus robur* and **Small-leaved Lime** *Tilia cordata*. **Elms** *Ulmus* sp. were also once a common sight in Stour Valley hedgerows but, as elsewhere across Britain, have been seriously affected by fungal Dutch elm disease. Mature specimens are now very rare but young sucker growth remains common until it reaches the age and height – usually about three metres – at which it attracts the attention of the *Scolytus* bark beetles that spread the disease.

Bramble *Rubus* sp., **Honeysuckle** *Lonicera periclymenum*, **Hops** *Humulus lupulus*, **Wild Roses** *Rosa* sp. and **Traveller's Joy** *Clematis vitalba*, often growing in a mixed tangle, provide a mid-storey layer to hedgerows. Down below, a wide variety of plants is to be found. Hedgerows typically feature species characteristic of the woodland floor and its dappled shade (see above), but with their banks supporting species requiring more open conditions. Typical are **Foxglove** *Digitalis purpurea*, **Red Campion** *Silene dioica*, **White Campion** *Silene latifolia*, **Garlic Mustard** *Alliaria petiolata*, **Cow Parsley** *Anthriscus sylvestris*, **Hogweed** *Heracleum sphondylium*, **Herb Robert** *Geranium robertianum*, **Greater Stitchwort** *Stellaris holostea*, **Lesser Celandine** *Ranunculus ficaria*, **Tufted Vetch** *Vicia cracca*, **Goosegrass or Cleavers** *Galium aparine* and **Cowslip** *Primula veris*, although many other species will find suitable niches in these situations.

Birds

Over 175 species of bird have been recorded in the Stour Valley in recent years, with about 80 of those breeding regularly in the area. Waterbirds are particularly well represented, but the area also hosts an excellent selection of classic farmland species, as well as those more dependent on woodland habitats. The valley itself serves as a flyway for migrating birds of many different species, and increased levels of recording are yielding a surprisingly diverse list of rarities.

The **Mute Swan** *Cygnus olor* is a regular sight on the area's waterways and a common breeding bird.

Sudbury Common Lands hold one of the highest densities of nesting pairs in the whole valley, with five broods and 17 juveniles recorded in 2011. Numbers at this location can exceed 100 birds during the winter months and sizeable herds gather elsewhere along the Stour. **Whooper Swans** *Cygnus cygnus* are scarce winter visitors, usually in small numbers and often seen flying overhead.

The two commonest geese in the area are the **Greylag Goose** *Anser anser* and **Canada Goose** *Branta canadensis*, both of which are year-round residents. Flocks of over 300 Greylags occur in winter and late summer. The most regularly recorded of the other goose species is the **White-fronted Goose** *Anser albifrons*, which occurs almost annually in small numbers although nowhere regularly. Large numbers of **Brent Geese** *Branta bernicla* overwinter in the Stour Estuary and occasionally move west, with up to 1500 recorded at Cattawade Marshes in 2010, for example. There are also regular records of **Barnacle Goose** *Branta leucopsis*, probably birds dispersing from the feral population in the Netherlands which is now colonising parts of England. **Bean Goose** *Anser fabalis* and **Pinkfooted Goose** *Anser brachyrhynchus* are very rare vagrants to the area, and there have also been recent records of **Egyptian Goose** *Alopochen aegyptiaca*.



Barn Owl, © Clive Sheppard



Bullfinch, © Clive Sheppard

The wetland habitats in the valley are also attractive to a variety of ducks, several species of which gather in favoured locations in large numbers in winter. A remarkable 2500 **Wigeon** *Anas penelope* were recorded at Gifford's Hall in 2011, for example. Flocks of up to 400 **Teal** *Anas crecca* have been seen at the same location and there are also occasional breeding records of this species from the valley. Good numbers of **Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula* and **Gadwall** *Anas strepera* overwinter at Thorington Street Reservoir, as well as at other sites. Both species breed regularly in the

valley, with **Shoveler** *Anas clypeata* also nesting in very small numbers. Wintering ducks also include small numbers of **Pintail** *Anas acuta* and **Pochard** *Aythya ferina*, with a handful of **Goosander** *Mergus merganser* reported in most years. **Shelduck** *Tadorna tadorna* is present throughout the year in small numbers and breeds locally. **Scaup** *Aythya marila*, **Smew** *Mergellus albellus*, **Common Scoter** *Melanitta nigra*, **Goldeneye** *Bucephala clangula*, **Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca*, **Red-crested Pochard** *Netta rufina* and **Garganey** *Anas querquedula* have all occurred as occasional visitors. The valley also supports a small and elusive population of **Mandarin Duck** *Aix galericulata*.

Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* and **Red-legged Partridge** *Alectoris rufa* are both resident and widespread across the area. Formerly common but now much declined is the **Grey Partridge** *Perdix perdix*, which hangs on in small numbers in scattered locations. **Quail** *Coturnix coturnix* is a scarce summer visitor, with one or two singing males recorded from the area in most years.



Common Buzzard, © Clive Sheppard

The **Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo* has increased hugely in numbers in Suffolk and Essex in recent decades and is now a common sight in the area. The **Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea* is an iconic bird of the Stour Valley and a regular sight, usually singly or in pairs and frequently seen flying overhead when commuting between feeding sites. There are heronries at Stanstead Great Wood and at Little Wratting, with others located just outside the area, from which the herons seen locally are doubtless also drawn. The **Bittern** *Botaurus stellaris* is reported irregularly but usually annually. The **Little Egret** *Egretta garzetta* is an increasing visitor to the area, usually seen in ones or twos but also in larger numbers; over 50 were at Cattawade in August 2011, for example. The **Great White Egret** *Ardea alba* is an occasional vagrant; one was at Cattawade in August 2011.

Both **Great-crested Grebe** *Podiceps cristatus* and **Little Grebe or Dabchick** *Tachybaptus ruficollis* breed in the area, although at a relatively small number of sites. Six pairs of the latter bred at Thorington Street Reservoir in 2010, for example, with up to 26 gathering there in September that year. Both species have a reduced local presence in winter, when the breeding population largely moves to the coast.

The commonest raptors in the Stour Valley are **Sparrowhawk** *Accipter nisus* and **Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus*, both of which are widespread residents, although there are signs of a recent decline in Kestrel numbers. A reduction in human persecution and an increase in the rabbit population have prompted the recent return of the **Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo* as a breeding bird to the area. It is now a regular sight at all times of year, sometimes forming flocks when on passage: 14 were seen over Nayland in September 2010, for example. There are also increasing sightings of the potential next returnee, the **Red Kite** *Milvus milvus*. A few pairs of **Hobby** *Falcon subbuteo* spend the summer in the area and breed locally, whilst winter brings the occasional **Merlin** *Falco columbarius* and **Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus*. **Marsh Harrier** *Circus aeruginosus*, **Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus* and **Peregrine** *Falco peregrinus* are all recorded annually as vagrants, with infrequent sightings also of **Rough-legged Buzzard** *Buteo lagopus*, **Honey Buzzard** *Pernis apivorus* and **Goshawk** *Accipter gentilis*.

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* and **Coot** *Fulica atra* are both common residents, breeding widely in suitable habitat. Sizeable flocks of the latter gather in winter, as with 230 at Thorington Street Reservoir in November 2011. **Water Rail** *Rallus aquaticus* is a regular (if under-recorded) winter visitor across the area, with evidence that breeding may occur at one or two sites.

The **Great Bustard** *Otis tarda* died out as a breeding bird in Britain before 1850 and remained a very rare vagrant until a reintroduction project began in Wiltshire in 2004. A single bird seen and photographed near Long Melford in April 2013 was a wandering bird from this project. There are several historical records of **Common Crane** *Grus grus* from the area, including a migrating flock of 26 seen over Higham in October 1977. More recently, three were seen at Flatford in April 2010 and, with a small but expanding breeding population in Suffolk and elsewhere in East Anglia, further sightings can be expected in the Stour Valley. The **White Stork** *Ciconia ciconia* is a rare vagrant; one was seen on rooftops in Sudbury in May/June 2012.

Several species of wader breed in the area, with others recorded on passage and during the winter months. **Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago*, **Lapwing** *Vanellus vanellus* and **Redshank** *Tringa totanus* all used to nest regularly in the water meadows along the Stour, but have decreased greatly in recent decades. Good numbers of the last two species still breed however at Cattawade Marshes, where **Avocet** *Recurvirostra avosetta* have also attempted to breed in recent years, but the Common Snipe is probably extinct as a regular Stour Valley breeder. Reasonable numbers continue to visit in winter, when there are also a few records of **Jack Snipe** *Lymnocyptes minimus*. Autumn and winter also bring small numbers of **Woodcock** *Scolopax rusticola*, but this declining species is very scarce locally as a breeding bird. On the plus side, the **Oystercatcher** *Haematopus ostralegus* appears to be increasing, with recent records of nesting. Pairs of **Little Ringed Plover** *Charadrius dubius* have also bred in the area in recent years. **Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia* and **Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus* are both regular passage



Grey Heron, © Stuart Read

migrants, with up to eight of the latter recorded together in July and August. Less frequent but still reasonably regular are **Curlew** *Numenius arquata*, **Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus*, **Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos*, **Wood Sandpiper** *Tringa glareola* and **Dunlin** *Calidris alpina*, with **Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula*, **Grey Plover** *Pluvialis squatarola*, **Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres* and **Bar-tailed Godwit** *Limosa lapponica* among other wader species recorded on Cattawade Marshes. Sizeable flocks of **Golden Plover** *Pluvialis apricaria* overwinter on farmland across the area, with 600 recorded at Long Melford in March 2011.



Corn Bunting, © Geoff Nobes

In winter large flocks of gulls congregate at open water and on farmland in the area. These are mostly composed of **Black-headed Gulls** *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*, with smaller numbers of **Common Gull** *Larus canus*, **Herring Gull** *Larus argentatus* and **Lesser black-backed Gull** *Larus fuscus* (of which there is also a noticeable spring passage). **Greater black-backed Gulls** *Larus marinus* are much more uncommon, with relatively few reported each year, and the **Mediterranean Gull** *Larus melanocephalus* is an even rarer visitor; one was seen near Stoke-by-Nayland in February 2011. Of the terns, only **Common Tern** *Sterna hirundo* is recorded regularly in the area, usually as a passage migrant although pairs have nested in the past and still prospect suitable breeding habitat.

The **Woodpigeon** *Columba palumbus* is one of the most abundant birds in the Stour Valley, seen almost everywhere and sometimes in gatherings of several hundred. The **Stock Dove** *Columba oenas* is also well distributed, although in generally small numbers. **Feral Pigeons** *Columba livia* are usually restricted to human settlements, which are also where the greatest concentrations of **Collared Dove** *Streptopelia decaocto* occur. Flocks of up to 50 have been recorded in Sudbury, for example. Although the local numbers of **Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia turtur* have fallen dramatically in recent years, as elsewhere in the UK, the area remains important for this threatened species. Breeding pairs are reported annually from several sites and as many as six singing males were heard next to the Stour at Wissington in July 2011. The **Cuckoo** *Cuculus canorus* is another once-common species currently in decline, although calling birds are still reported regularly across the area during spring and summer.

The **Tawny Owl** *Strix aluco* is the most regularly reported owl in the area and can be found in towns such as Sudbury as well as in rural areas. **Little Owls** *Athene noctua* are also well-distributed and fairly common; four calling at Cornard Country Park in January 2011 was the highest count in Suffolk that year. After years of decline, **Barn Owls** *Strix aluco* are now increasing in numbers thanks to the provision of nestboxes to replace traditional nesting sites in old trees and farmbuildings (the latter often now converted to residential use). They are thinly but widely distributed throughout the Stour Valley. The elusive **Long-eared Owl** *Asio otus* is occasionally recorded and there have been recent breeding records from the area, whilst the **Short-eared Owl** *Asio flammeus* is a scarce and irregular visitor, usually in autumn and winter.

An iconic bird locally, the **Kingfisher** *Alcedo atthis* is a reasonably common sight along much of the Stour as well as on other waterways in the area. Although resident, numbers reduce in harsh winter

weather as birds seek milder conditions on the coast. The **Hoopoe** *Upupa epops* is a rare vagrant, with one seen at Stoke-by-Clare in September 2011. Both **Green Woodpecker** *Picus viridis* and **Great Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos major* are fairly common and widespread, and whilst the **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos minor* is much less often seen or heard, the area does support an important population. In recent years this species has been reported from near Hadleigh and at Stoke-by-Nayland.

A former common breeding bird, the **Red-backed Shrike** *Lanius collurio* is now only a rare vagrant. The **Great Grey Shrike** *Lanius excubitor* is an occasional winter visitor to the area, most recently in early 2012 when one spent several weeks at Lower Layham near Hadleigh.

Crows are one of the most visible bird families in the area. **Rooks** *Corvus frugilegus* and **Jackdaws** *Corvus monedula* are a very common sight on farmland, often gathering in autumn and winter roosts that comprise thousands of birds. Both the **Magpie** *Pica pica* and **Carrion Crow** *Corvus corone* are also widespread and common, including in towns such as Haverhill and Sudbury. The **Jay** *Garrulus glanarius* is the least recorded of the corvids in the area, but is a fairly common breeding bird in woodland and roams more widely in winter.

Goldcrests *Regulus regulus* are common and widely distributed, with occasional records of **Firecrest** *Regulus ignicapillus*. Among the tits, **Blue Tit** *Cyanistes caeruleus*, **Great Tit** *Parus major*, **Coal Tit** *Peripatus ater* and **Long-tailed Tit** *Aegithalos caudatus* are all common and widespread, including in towns and villages. The **Marsh Tit** *Poecile palustris* is relatively common but more localized, breeding in some localities but apparently absent in others. The **Willow Tit** *Parus montanus* was formerly resident in the area but has not been reliably reported in recent years, despite the presence of extensive suitable habitat.

Common Swifts *Apus apus* are a common summer visitor to the area, breeding in colonies in Clare, Sudbury, Stoke-by-Nayland, Cavendish and Bures, for example. Flocks of over 100 are a regular sight in late summer, as they gather before migrating south. **Swallows** *Hirundo rustica* are also widespread and common, although numbers have declined noticeably over the last thirty years. The **House Martin** *Delichon urbicum* is a common summer visitor, nesting in towns and villages; at Long Melford several pairs use artificial boxes. **Sand Martins** *Riparia riparia* are a common passage migrant but more restricted as a breeding species due to their habitat requirements; there is at least one nesting colony in the area.



Sedge Warbler, © Nick Ford

All the regularly recorded warblers in the area are primarily summer migrants. Both **Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* and **Sedge Warbler** *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* are fairly common breeding birds in suitable habitat, including along the Stour itself, with also a few records most years of **Grasshopper Warbler** *Locustella naevia*. In areas of scrub and woodland, **Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus collybita* and **Blackcap** *Sylvia atricapilla* are very common between April and September, with a few individuals of both species sometimes overwintering. The **Willow Warbler**

Phylloscopus trochilus is also a common (if declining) breeding bird, whilst the **Whitethroat** *Sylvia communis* appears to have increased in recent years and is currently a widespread summer visitor. Although less frequently recorded than most other warblers, the **Lesser Whitethroat** *Sylvia curruca* is well distributed across the area. Long Melford appears to be a hotspot for rarer warblers, with a single record of a **Marsh Warbler** *Acrocephalus palustris* there in June 2010, followed by a **Siberian Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus collybita tristis* in early 2012.

The **Starling** is common and widespread throughout the year, although apparently declining as a breeding bird. The population increases in autumn with the arrival of overwintering birds from Continental Europe. **Waxwings** *Bombycilla garrulus* are irregular autumn and winter visitors, sometimes visiting in sizeable flocks. Recent winters have brought good numbers to the area, with 150 seen in Sudbury and 103 in Long Melford in December 2010 for example, and up to 150 again in Sudbury in December 2012, with 12 at Boxford the following month.

Both the **Blackbird** *Turdus merula* and **Song Thrush** *Turdus philomelos* are common residents, the latter species apparently showing signs of recovery after a previous decline in numbers. The **Mistle Thrush** *Turdus viscivorus* is a fairly common resident; a flock of 46 seen at Arger Fen in 2011 was the largest recorded in Suffolk that year. The **Ring Ouzel** *Turdus torquata* is a scarce spring and autumn vagrant. Both the **Redwing** *Turdus iliacus* and **Fieldfare** *Turdus pilaris* are common and widespread winter visitors, sometimes gathering in mixed flocks of 100 birds or more; 300 Fieldfares were seen at Cornard in December 2012. The **Robin** *Erithacus rubecula* is one of the most common and widespread birds in the area, resident and breeding in many locations. Meanwhile, numbers of the **Nightingale** *Luscinia megarhynchos* are falling. Singing males are still recorded each spring however and breeding almost certainly takes place at a few scattered sites. The **Redstart** *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*, however, is



Waxwing, © Stuart Read

now extinct in the area as a breeding bird. During the 19th century it was common in the Stour valley, nesting in riverside pollards from Bures to Nayland, as well as in Sudbury. Fourteen nests were once found in a single evening in Long Melford! Today it is reduced to the status of an uncommon passage migrant. The **Black Redstart** *Phoenicurus ochruros* is an irregular visitor, usually in autumn and winter, although it has bred occasionally in the past. The **Wheatear** *Oenanthe oenanthe*, **Stonechat** *Saxicola torquatus* and **Whinchat** *Saxicola rubetra* are all scarce migrants to the area, with a few records each year. The **Spotted Flycatcher** *Muscicapa striata* is another summer migrant seemingly in trouble. Numbers are well down on thirty years ago, but it still occurs regularly in the area, with evidence of breeding success in some locations: two family parties comprising eight birds were seen at Long Melford in 2011, for example. The **Pied Flycatcher** *Ficedula hypoleuca* is an occasional migrant, not recorded locally every

year. The **Dunnoek** *Prunella modularis* is a very common resident across the area.

The **Treecreeper** *Certhia familiaris* and the **Nuthatch** *Sitta europaea* are both widespread and fairly common residents where there are mature trees. **Wrens** *Troglodytes troglodytes* are very common in almost all habitats, although numbers can be severely affected by harsh winters. Very unusual was a record of a **Dipper** *Cinclus cinclus* at Long Melford in April 2013.

The **Skylark** *Alauda arvensis* is a common resident over much of the area, breeding on farmland and often the most obvious bird in areas of intensive cultivation. **Meadow Pipit** *Anthus pratensis* is a much more localized breeder, more numerous and widespread on passage and during the winter. **Pied Wagtails** *Motacilla alba yarrelli* are widespread and fairly common, gathering in sizeable numbers at their autumn and winter roosts. In 2011 there were records of 85 at Clare and 107 at Long Melford, for example. **Grey Wagtails** *Motacilla cinerea* are thinly and locally distributed in suitable habitats. A pair bred at Little Cornard in 2011 and five were seen together at Long Melford in July of that year. The **Yellow Wagtail** *Motacilla flava flavissima* was formerly a common summer visitor, now arriving in much reduced numbers but still hanging on as a breeding bird in a few locations such as at Great Waldingfield.

Both the **Yellowhammer** *Emberiza citrinella* and **Reed Bunting** *Emberiza schoeniclus* are common residents. The Stour Valley is particularly important for its surviving population of **Corn Bunting** *Emberiza calandra*, a bird that has disappeared from many parts of England in recent decades but which still breeds locally, albeit in small numbers. The **Lapland Bunting** *Calcarius lapponicus* is a very rare visitor, with single birds recorded in 2006 and 2011. The **Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs*, **Greenfinch** *Carduelis chloris*, **Linnet** *Carduelis cannabina* and **Goldfinch** *Carduelis carduelis* are all common residents, often seen in mixed flocks during the winter. The **Bullfinch** *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* is less numerous but still fairly common and well distributed. The **Hawfinch** *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* and **Common Crossbill** *Loxia curvirostra* are both infrequently reported, with just one or two records each year from scattered sites. Finches recorded primarily in autumn and winter include the **Brambling** *Fringilla montifringilla*, which often gathers in large flocks; 400 were seen at Flatford Mill in October 2010, for example. Both **Siskin** *Carduelis spinus* and **Lesser Redpoll** *Carduelis cabaret* occur widely in winter, usually in small flocks of up to 20; the latter species has bred locally on occasion. **House Sparrows** *Passer domesticus* are a characteristic bird of towns and villages, although recent declines have seen its disappearance from some settlements. The **Tree Sparrow** *Passer montanus* is uncommon and highly localized; in recent years it has disappeared from former strongholds but has still been recorded lately from a few sites, including near Stoke-by-Nayland.



Turtle Dove, © Clive Sheppard

Mammals

Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*

Few mammals have captured the public imagination as much as the native Red Squirrel. Cute and attractive, its appeal has been arguably enhanced by the fact that it has disappeared completely from Suffolk and Essex within living memory. Once a common sight in woods, gardens and overgrown hedgerows, it retreated under pressure from the introduced Grey Squirrel (see below), to the extent that it is now extinct in both counties and across the vast majority of mainland England. The last reliable records of Reds from the Stour Valley date from the early 1970s, with no confirmed sightings since.



Dormouse, © Alison Looser

Grey Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis*. A native of North America, the Grey Squirrel was introduced as an ornamental species to the UK during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It subsequently spread across much of England and Wales, and has since penetrated into Scotland. Populations of Red Squirrels have declined and, in many cases, died out as the number of Greys has increased. The first Greys appeared in the Stour Valley about 1960 and the species is now common and widespread throughout the area in suitable habitat. In parts of Britain where both species co-exist, research continues into the precise nature of the relationship between Reds and Greys, but the larger and stronger Greys appear to outcompete the Reds in terms of access to food and other resources. They also transmit the squirrel parapoxvirus, which is fatal to Reds but to which the Greys appear largely immune.

Bank Vole *Myodes glareolus* and **Field Vole** *Microtus agrestis* are both very common species in the area, with the former most often found in scrub, hedgerows and woodland, and the latter in grassland and fields. A survey at East Bergholt in the 1980s–90s revealed that the Bank Vole was the most numerous small mammal in local woods.

The decline in recent decades of **Water Vole** *Arvicola amphibius* numbers has attracted extensive media attention. Already under threat from pollution, habitat loss and disturbance, during the 1980s this engaging inhabitant of slow-flowing rivers, streams and other watercourses came under severe pressure from the UK's burgeoning population of feral American Mink (see below). Mink predate water voles, and in many areas the species was almost wiped out as a result. The populations in the Stour Valley and its tributaries were greatly reduced, but following the introduction of a mink control programme in 2001 there are signs that the numbers of this BAP species are recovering.

Wood Mice *Apodemus sylvaticus* are common and widespread in the area, and found in a range of different habitats, not solely woodland related. The **Yellow-necked Mouse** *Apodemus flavicollis* is much more localized and found mainly in deciduous woods, especially those in the eastern half of the

area. The **Harvest Mouse** *Micromys minutus* is usually found in areas of long grass and rank vegetation, especially reedbeds and fens. It remains widespread in the area but its distribution is patchy and it is thought that numbers have possibly declined in recent years. Certainly less common than was the case historically is the **House Mouse** *Mus domesticus*. Once a major agricultural pest, this species has been adversely affected by modern farming practices and control methods. Now it is almost entirely restricted to urban habitats and buildings.

Brown Rats *Rattus norvegicus* are abundant throughout the area.

The engaging **Hazel Dormouse** *Muscardinus avellanarius* is a Stour Valley speciality and the subject of an ongoing project designed to bolster its numbers and help fragmented populations connect with each other. This species is confined to ancient woodland and historic hedgerows and has undergone a serious decline in numbers and contraction in range in the UK since 1900. It survives at scattered locations across Suffolk and Essex, with surveys indicating that the Stour Valley accounts for the majority of recent records. The dormouse stronghold is centred on clusters around Bentley, Polstead and Assington, with outlying records from Raydon, Layham, Great Cornard and Sudbury. Since 2002 the Essex and Suffolk Dormouse Project has been surveying dormice in the two counties using specially designed "nest tubes". The county wildlife trusts have also erected dormice nestboxes on their reserves and are working with landowners to provide advice on how sites with dormice should be managed and how suitable opportunities for habitat creation and improvement can be maximized. Efforts have also been made to improve dormouse connectivity, eg, through the creation of a hedgerow "dormouse corridor" between Tiger Hill and Arger Fen.

Rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus* are abundant and widespread throughout the area. The **Brown Hare** *Lepus europaeus* is more localized but still relatively common in some arable areas, although numbers may be declining.

Both **Common Shrew** *Sorex araneus* and **Pygmy Shrew** *Sorex minutus* are abundant and found throughout the area. The **Water Shrew** *Neomys fodiens* is much more restricted in range and numbers. Considered a 'character species' in the Suffolk Biodiversity Action Plan, it occurs primarily along clear, unpolluted watercourses and there have been recent records from the Stour between Sudbury and Bures, for example. It also occurs in related fen and reedbed habitats, and has even been recorded in woodland and grassland.

Moles *Talpa europaeus* are abundant and ubiquitous almost everywhere. Animals with a yellowish tint to their normally black fur have been recorded at Flatford.

The **Hedgehog** *Erinaceus europaeus* is common throughout but, as elsewhere in the UK, numbers appear to be declining. This is probably as a result of agricultural intensification and reduced habitat and foraging opportunities in gardens.

Eight species of bat have been recorded in the Stour Valley area, although some are certainly under-recorded. The **Barbastelle** *Barbastella barbastellus*, **Daubenton's** *Myotis daubentonii* and **Natterer's** *Myotis nattereri* are all seemingly



Brown Hare, © Stuart Read

scarce and known from only a handful of sites each. Much more widespread and common are the **Common Pipistrelle** *Pipistrellus pipistrellus* and **Soprano Pipistrelle** *Pipistrellus pygmaeus*, with a particularly large roost of the latter at Flatford, and the **Brown Long-eared Bat** *Plecotus auritus*, which is closely associated with buildings, including modern structures. The **Serotine Bat** *Eptesicus serotinus* favours areas of pasture with livestock, and has been recorded from scattered sites across the area. The **Noctule Bat** *Nyctalus noctula* is a tree-dweller, and particularly noted from sites along the Stour itself.



Water Vole, © Nick Ford

The **Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes* was a rare animal in the area during the 1800s, but increased greatly in the second half of the 20th century. It is now common in all rural areas, as well as in towns such as Sudbury and Haverhill. Urban fox populations are prone to periodic attacks of sarcoptic mange, but this does not appear to be inhibiting a long-term increase in their numbers.

Both the **Stoat** *Mustela erminea* and **Weasel** *Mustela nivalis* are common across the area, if under recorded, and now occur in numbers considerably greater than in the days when they were heavily persecuted by gamekeepers. Such persecution was also responsible for the total extinction locally of the **Polecat** *Mustela putorius* during the 19th century. One of the more remarkable mammal events in the area in recent years was the discovery in June 2010 of a roadkill Polecat near Stradishall, marking the return of this enigmatic species to south-west Suffolk. This was the county's second modern-day polecat record, following one at Red Lodge near Newmarket in 2006. More can be expected to follow.

An escapee from fur farms established in England, particularly in the 1950s, the **American Mink** *Mustela vison* first appeared as a feral animal in Suffolk and Essex during the 1970s. It is now widely distributed across both counties, including in the Stour Valley, where its predatory habits can have a serious impact on numbers of waterbirds and particularly Water Voles (see above). In an attempt to try and contain this impact, a mink control programme has been underway for over a decade. Although mink have not been totally eradicated, their numbers have been reduced. Also encouraging is potential evidence that the recent increase in the area's Otter population (see below) may be inhibiting the population levels of mink, although the correlation is complex and not yet clear.

South Suffolk and North Essex now have a high density of **Badgers** *Meles meles*, but this was not the case in the mid-20th century – during World War Two there was only one known badger sett in all of Suffolk, for example. Numbers have since expanded greatly, and the animal is now common across the Stour Valley area, particularly favouring woodland and mature hedgerows.

Otters *Lutra lutra* had almost certainly become extinct in the area (and, indeed, in Suffolk and Essex generally) by the early 1980s, as a result of persecution, pollution, habitat destruction and disturbance. A reintroduction programme by the Otter Trust from 1984 onwards provided the nucleus of a new population which has since expanded and recolonised all the major waterways in the area. Otters are now present in good numbers along the Stour and its tributaries and can even be spotted in the centre of towns such as Sudbury.

Four species of deer have been recorded in the Stour Valley. None has lived here continuously since prehistoric times, and all are therefore the result of introductions or reintroductions.

One – the **Reeves's Muntjac**

Muntiacus reevesi – is a relatively recent arrival, the result of animals escaping from Woburn Abbey in first half of the twentieth century. It is now

common and widespread across the area, and the population is increasing rapidly. The resulting browsing and grazing pressure may have implications for the populations of certain plant species, such as bluebell, and for some ground-nesting birds, as well as on woodland regeneration. The **Fallow Deer** *Dama dama* was introduced to Britain by the Normans for the purposes of hunting and subsequently became a popular ornamental species in country house parks. For example, Polstead Park near Boxford was recorded as having a herd of 80 Fallow Deer in 1892. Escaped animals later established themselves ferally and their descendants now roam extensively across the area, although nowhere in large numbers. Along with the muntjac, the **Roe Deer** *Capreolus capreolus* is the commonest deer in the Stour Valley and found widely in woodland and farmland habitats. It has increased considerably in both range and numbers in recent years, its expansion in Essex fuelled at least in part by animals crossing the Stour from Suffolk. The **Red Deer** *Cervus elaphus* is the rarest deer in the area, but is recorded not infrequently at widely scattered localities, doubtlessly the result of animals dispersing from more established populations elsewhere.



Otter, © Nick Ford



Reeves's Muntjac, © Nick Ford

Reptiles and amphibians

Four species of reptile have been recorded from the Stour Valley. The **Grass Snake** *Natrix natrix* is widespread and common, especially in wet habitats such as along the Stour itself. The **Common Lizard** *Lacerta vivipara* is more restricted in range, found mostly in drier situations but is still fairly common and with reasonably sized colonies at several sites, such as the Lavenham–Long Melford Railway Walk and around Sudbury. **Slow-worms** *Anguis fragilis* are also well distributed across the area and probably under-recorded. **Adders** *Vipera berus* are much more scarce. On the Essex side of the Stour they have been reported from Gun Hill Place (where the three other reptile species have also been reported), but there had been no reliable Adder records from the Suffolk Stour until the discovery of one at Arger Fen in 2012.

Four species of amphibian are known from the area. **Common Frog** *Rana temporaria* and **Common Toad** *Bufo bufo* are both very common and found throughout, while two species of newt are also present in suitable habitat. The **Great Crested Newt** *Triturus cristatus* is a European Conservation Priority species and recorded from various sites in the area. The **Smooth Newt** *Lissotriton vulgaris* is generally more common and widespread, although at some sites it can be outnumbered by the Great Crested.



Common Lizard, © Stuart Read

Butterflies

As elsewhere in the United Kingdom, butterflies in the Stour Valley have decreased over the past century in terms of the total number of species, their distribution and the general size of their populations. Some butterflies are now extinct locally, including the **Large Tortoiseshell** *Nymphalis polychloros*, which in 1901 was described as “excessively abundant in North Essex and on the Suffolk side of the River Stour...” On the positive side, however, several species are currently increasing in numbers and one or two are even recolonising the area.

Currently 27 butterfly species occur regularly in the area, with two more almost certainly now extinct locally and a further two recorded as irregular migrants.

Three species of skipper are found in the area, **Large Skipper** *Oclodes venata*, **Small Skipper** *Thymelicus sylvestris* and **Essex Skipper** *Thymelicus lineola*, all of them common and well-distributed in grassy habitats. The **Clouded Yellow** *Colias croceus* is a migratory species, occurring most years but in very variable numbers and at widely scattered sites. The **Brimstone** *Gonepteryx rhamni* is among the first butterflies of the year to take to the wing, regularly appearing on mild days in March or even earlier. It is common throughout and may be increasing in numbers.

All three whites – **Large White** *Pieris brassicae*, **Small White** *Pieris rapae* and **Green-veined White** *Pieris napi* – are common everywhere in the area. The **Orange Tip** *Anthocharis cardamines* is also a regular sight in April and May, and has appeared in good numbers in recent years.

Three species of hairstreak occur within the area, but all are thinly distributed and none is easy to find. First in the year to emerge is the **Green Hairstreak** *Callophrys rubi*, best looked for in May around stands of gorse and broom and recorded from a handful of sites locally. The **White-letter Hairstreak** *Strymonidia w-album* is dependent on elms and has declined as a result of the impact of Dutch elm disease. It flies mainly in July and has been recorded at several sites, although it may be overlooked at others. More widespread is the **Purple Hairstreak** *Quercusia quercus*, on the wing in late July and August at woodland sites across the area. This species is probably more common than records suggest, as it mainly flies high among the oak canopy and can be difficult to spot.

The **Small Copper** *Lycaena phlaeas* is a characteristic species of open countryside with areas of bare soil on which it can bask. It is common and widespread across the area, as are the **Common Blue** *Polyommatus icarus* and the **Brown Argus** *Aricia agestis*, both best looked for in grassy habitats and with the latter having expanded its range and numbers considerably in



Common Blue, © Sue Pennell

recent years. Hedgerows, woodland edges and gardens are the preferred habitat of the **Holly Blue** *Celastrina argiolus*, which is common and widespread but subject to dramatic population fluctuations from one year to the next.

The **White Admiral** *Ladoga camilla* is a quintessential woodland butterfly and currently enjoying an expansion in range and numbers following declines during the second half of the 20th century. It has already been recorded from several sites in the area, and is a likely colonist at others if the present rate of increase is sustained. It should be looked out for particularly in areas of woodland with extensive Honeysuckle, its preferred larval foodplant.



White Admiral, © Stuart Read

Red Admirals *Vanessa atalanta* are a familiar sight from July onwards, frequently seen on *Buddleia* bushes in gardens. They are often joined there by the generally common and widespread **Peacocks** *Inachis io* and **Small Tortoiseshells** *Aglais urticae*. The native populations of Red Admiral and Small Tortoiseshell are augmented by influxes from continental Europe, which help explain their relative abundance in some years and distinct scarcity in others. The **Painted Lady** *Cynthia cardui* is also

attracted to garden plants and is overwhelmingly a migratory species. In some years, most notably and recently in 2009, vast numbers arrive in the UK and can be seen almost everywhere, whilst in other years only a few individuals may be recorded.



Comma, © Clive Sheppard

Another regular garden species is the **Comma** *Polygonia c-album*, a great rarity in East Anglia during the 19th century but which has increased steadily since the 1930s and is now common and widespread. The **Camberwell Beauty** *Nymphalis antiopa* is an irregular immigrant from the Continent, not recorded in the Stour Valley annually but with a handful of individuals noted in recent years at widely scattered locations.

There are currently no populations of fritillary extant locally, although historically several species have been recorded from the area at various times (although none for several decades). One – the woodland-loving **Silver-washed Fritillary** *Argynnis paphia* – may be about to make a return. In recent years it has recolonised several former

haunts in Essex and Suffolk (partly as a result of reintroduction projects such as that at Markshall Wood near Braintree) and is likely to spread further, including into suitable locations in the Stour Valley.

The **Speckled Wood** *Pararge aegeria* is one of the commonest woodland butterflies in the area and has increased markedly in recent years, a result perhaps of its adaptability. Sadly, the **Wall** *Lasiommata megera* has not shown such versatility and is now almost certainly extinct in the Stour Valley. It was once a common and widespread farmland species, but began declining in the 1980s and none has been recorded from the area for over ten years now. This collapse in numbers mirrors the situation elsewhere in inland East Anglia.

Another butterfly in trouble is the **Grayling** *Hipparchia semele*. It favours similar habitats to the Wall, requiring bare open ground on which to bask. Formerly recorded regularly at several localities across the area, there have been only two records in the last decade and none since 2008. It is probably now extinct in the Stour Valley. Meanwhile, the local populations of **Small Heath** *Coenonympha pamphilus* are also showing worrying signs of contraction and decline. Although still present at a reasonable number of sites across the area, it has disappeared from many locations and overall numbers appear to be falling. Fortunately, local numbers of the **Gatekeeper** *Pyronia tithonus*, **Meadow Brown** *Maniola jurtina* and **Ringlet** *Aphantopus hyperantus* remain relatively healthy in their favoured grassland habitats.



Green Hairstreak, © Sue Pennell



Small Heath, © Sue Pennell

Dragonflies

Over 20 species of damsel- and dragonfly have been recorded in the Stour Valley to date, which rates as one of the foremost areas in East Anglia for this group of insects. Recent surveywork has revealed that the populations of several species are undergoing change, with new colonists arriving and consolidating their position, whilst other species may be declining.

The **Banded Demoiselle** *Calopteryx splendens* is one of the most distinctive species and found commonly in suitable habitat – slow-flowing streams and rivers – throughout the area. It is especially characteristic of those stretches of the Stour with lush herbage and floating vegetation.



White-legged Damselfly, © Peter Kitchener

The **Emerald Damselfly** *Lestes sponsa* favours small, shallow pools and ditches and has been recorded at a few scattered sites in the area, eg. Cornard Mere. The **Western Willow Emerald** *Lestes viridis* is a very recent colonist to the UK, with the first reasonable numbers recorded in 2009 in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. It has since been recorded in good numbers at several sites in the Stour Valley (eg Peck's Meadow, Sudbury), and should be looked out for across the area. It prefers still water with overhanging trees.

One of the earliest species to emerge in spring, the **Large Red Damselfly** *Pyrrosoma nymphula* occurs in a broad variety of wet habitats and is reasonably common across the area, if rather localized.

The Stour Valley is also important for **Red-eyed Damselfly** *Erythromma najas*, which has expanded its range considerably in recent decades. It is easily confused with the **Small Red-eyed Damselfly** *Erythromma viridulum*, a recent colonist which has been recorded at scattered sites (eg Starfield Pits) across the area in recent years.

The **Azure Damselfly** *Coenagrion puella*, **Common Blue Damselfly** *Enallagma cyathigerum* and **Blue-tailed Damselfly** *Ischnura elegans* are all common and widespread in the area, locally abundant at certain sites. The latter species is particularly tolerant of polluted water. The **Variable Damselfly** *Coenagrion pulchellum* is reported occasionally in East Anglia, and in 1970 was recorded from the Suffolk side of the Stour.

Uncommon nationally, although abundant in some favoured locations, the **White-legged Damselfly** *Platycnemis pennipes* is clearly a species on the move locally. Although recorded relatively widely from Essex, until the 1990s the presence of this species in Suffolk was confined to the section of the Stour roughly between Bures and Dedham Bridge. Recent surveys have revealed that from this baulkhead it has now extended its range both east and west along the river, with outlying colonies to the west near Cavendish and beyond. It is also penetrating the county along the Stour's northern tributaries, for example the Rivers Box and Brett.

The **Hairy Dragonfly** *Brachytron pratense* is the earliest of the hawkers to emerge and has been recorded from various locations along the Stour, with Sudbury Common Lands one of several regular sites.

The **Emperor Dragonfly** *Anax imperator* is the largest of British dragonflies and common and widespread across the area. Patrolling males are often seen some distance from water.

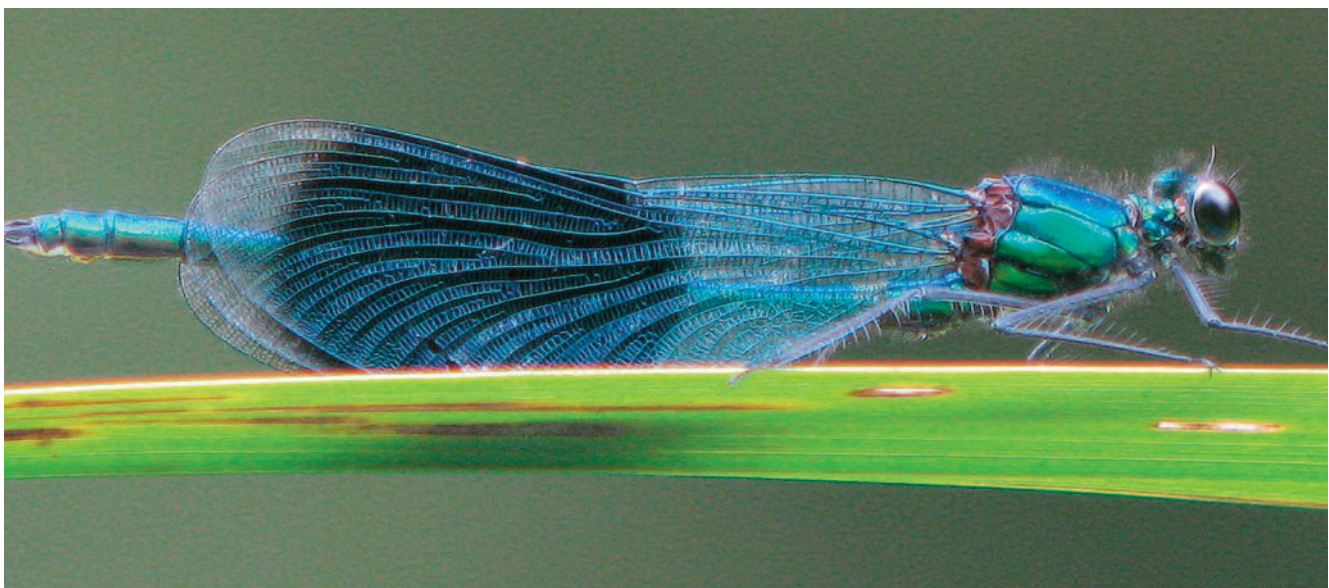
The **Broad-bodied Chaser** *Libellula depressa*, **Four-spotted Chaser** *Libellula quarimaculata* and **Scarce Chaser** *Libellula fulva* are all found across the area, with the latter species particularly common along the Stour itself and often the most abundant dragonfly in spring.

Three species of hawker are equally well-distributed: **Southern Hawker** *Aeshna cyanea*, **Brown Hawker** *Aeshna grandis* and **Migrant Hawker** *Aeshna mixta*, with the latter sometimes still on the wing in November. Although not yet confirmed in the area, the **Southern Migrant Hawker** *Aeshna affinis* should be looked for; a rare vagrant, it has been recorded increasingly in recent years at other sites in East Anglia. Meanwhile, the **Black-tailed Skimmer** *Orthetrum cancellatum* is widespread and fairly common, and usually one of the first dragonfly species to colonise new ponds and areas of wetland creation.

Three species of darter have been recorded in the Stour Valley: **Common Darter** *Sympetrum striolatum*, (often seen around garden ponds) and **Ruddy Darter** *Sympetrum sanguineum* are both common and widespread, while the **Red-veined Darter** *Sympetrum fonscolombii*, is an irregular migrant.



Hairy Dragonfly, © Peter Kitchener



Banded Demoiselle, © Peter Kitchener

Other invertebrates

Moths

Almost 1,000 species have been recorded in the Stour Valley. They include species typical of wetland habitats, such as the wainscots, with alder carr along the Stour also producing records of Alder Moth *Acrionicta alni* and Sallow Kitten *Furcula furcula*, among others.

Mature hedgerows and deciduous woodland support moths such as Great Prominent *Peridea anceps*, Blossom Underwing *Orthosia miniosa*, Oak-tree Pug *Eupithecia dodoneata*, Lilac Beauty *Apeira syringaria*, Oak Beauty *Biston strataria*, Red Underwing *Catocala nupta*, Merveille du Jour *Dichonia aprilina*, Sprawler *Asteroscopus sphinx* and Orange Footman *Eilema sororcula*. Among the larger moths, hawkmoths are particularly notable. The most frequently recorded are Elephant *Deilephila elpenor*, Privet *Sphinx ligustri* and Poplar *Laothoe populi*, with Lime *Mirnas tiliae* and Eyed *Smerinthus ocellata* also regularly reported. The Small Elephant *Deilephila porcellus* and Pine *Hyloicus pinastri* are more uncommon and the Convolvulus Hawk-moth *Agrius convolvuli* is a rare vagrant. The migratory and day-flying Hummingbird Hawkmoth *Macroglossum stellatarum* is recorded annually, although numbers vary greatly from year to year. Other day-flying species seen commonly in the Stour Valley include Silver Y *Autographa gamma*, Cinnabar *Tyria jacobaeae*, Latticed Heath *Chiasmia clathrata* and Six-spot Burnet *Zygaena filipendulae*. The more localized Narrow-bordered Five-spot Burnet *Zygaena lonicerae* has been recorded near Sudbury. There are indications that many species of moth are in decline, with species previously regarded as common – such as Garden Tiger *Arctia caja* and Magpie *Abraxas grossulariata* – becoming increasingly scarce.



Elephant Hawkmoth, © Stuart Read



Narrow-bordered Five-spot Burnet, © Stuart Read

One moth that is currently expanding in the area, however, is the Least Carpet *Idaea rusticata*, a scrub, fen and grassland species which has extended its range into the Stour valley from the south and west. It is now relatively common locally. Two other moths that look set to follow suit are the Dotted Chestnut *Conistra rubiginea*, for which the second Suffolk record came from Cornard in 2011, and the rapidly expanding Pale Pinion *Lithophane hepatica*, first recorded from the Sudbury area in 2013.

Crayfish

The indigenous White-clawed Crayfish *Austropotamobius pallipes* was once common and widespread along the Stour and its tributaries. Following an expansion in the numbers of introduced non-native crayfish, especially the Signal Crayfish *Pacifastacus leniusculus*, which is a carrier

of the so-called 'crayfish plague' *Aphanomyces astaci*, numbers of the native crayfish crashed locally, as elsewhere in East Anglia. The sole remaining population in the Stour Valley, comprising over 50 individuals at Chad Brook near Long Melford, was decimated by plague in July 2011 and died out shortly thereafter. The species is now considered extinct in the area and is very scarce elsewhere in Essex and Suffolk.



Stag Beetle, © Stuart Read

Snails

The Roman or Edible Snail *Helix pomatia* is the biggest species of native snail and also one of the rarest. It is usually found on lime-rich soils and is now known from only two sites in Suffolk, one of which is near Long Melford.

Bumblebees

Of the 23 species of bumblebee recorded in Essex and Suffolk, 15 have been reported from the Stour Valley, although four of these have not been seen since before 1980. The most common bumblebees locally are Buff-tailed *Bombus terrestris*, Red-tailed *Bombus lapidarius*, Small Garden *Bombus hortorum* and White-tailed *Bombus lucorum*, as well as the Vestal Cuckoo Bee *Bombus vestalis*, which parasitizes the Buff-tailed. The Early Bumblebee *Bombus pratorum* is rather less common, but probably under-recorded. Arguably the most dynamic species at present is the Tree Bumblebee *Bombus hypnorum*, for which the second Suffolk record came from Flatford Mill in 2008. This species has since spread across much of the area and occurs regularly in gardens, where it will make use of nest-boxes ostensibly erected for birds.

Stag Beetle

The largest terrestrial insect in Britain, the Stag Beetle *Lucanus cervus* is dependent on rotting tree stumps and other forms of decaying wood. Still quite common in some parts of the Stour Valley, it has been the focus of conservation initiatives, including the provision of 'stag beetle pyramids' of stacked and piled deadwood to help boost numbers at known sites.



Blue Shieldbug, © Stuart Read

Shieldbugs

Occurring wherever there are bushes and trees, including parks and gardens, some shieldbugs, such as the widespread Common Green Shieldbug *Palomena prasina* and Hairy Shieldbug *Dolycoris baccarum* will feed on a wide variety of different plant and tree species. Others are much more specific. Birch Shieldbug *Elasmotethus interstinctus*, Gorse Shieldbug *Piezodorus lituratus*, Hawthorn Shieldbug *Acanthosoma haemorrhoidale* and Forget-me-not Shieldbug *Sehirus luctuosus* all feed almost exclusively on their eponymous foodplants and are found throughout the Stour Valley where these occur. Formerly restricted to native juniper stands, and therefore scarce and localized in Britain historically, the population and distribution of Juniper Shieldbug *Cyphostethus tristriatus* have increased and expanded greatly in recent years as a result of the planting in gardens of ornamental junipers and related trees, such as Lawson's Cypress. It is now widespread and common in the area. The Pied Shieldbug *Tritomegas bicolor* feeds on White Deadnettle, whilst the dramatic Blue Shieldbug *Zicrona caerulea* is one of only four British predatory shieldbug species. Some of the first Suffolk records came from Cornard Mere. Other notable shieldbugs found locally include the Bordered Shieldbug *Legnotus limbosus*, recorded from the Brett Valley, and the scarce Scarab Shieldbug *Thyreocoris scarabaeoides*.

Grasshoppers and crickets

Both groups are well represented in the Stour Valley, with areas of rough grazing and unmanicured hedgerows offering the best habitats for most species. Cornard Country Park is a particularly good site. Dark Bush-cricket *Pholidoptera griseoptera* and Speckled Bush-cricket *Leptophyes punctatissima* are both common, the latter's high-pitched chirp best picked up via a bat detector. Also widespread are Field Grasshopper *Chorthippus brunneus*, Meadow Grasshopper *Chorthippus parallelus* and Lesser Marsh Grasshopper *Chorthippus albomarginatus*, with the last species preferring habitat with longer grass than that favoured by the first two. The Oak Bush-cricket *Meconema thalassinum* is common in scrubby and wooded areas. The distinctive buzzing of Roesel's Bush-cricket *Metrioptera roeselii* is increasingly frequent in the area, as this species continues its expansion north and west from its original headquarters along



Speckled Bush-cricket, © Stuart Read

the coast of south-east England. The Long-winged Conehead *Conocephalus discolor* is also extending its range and increasing in numbers locally. The largest member of the cricket family in the UK, the Great Green Bush-cricket *Tettigonia viridissima*, has also been recorded in the Stour Valley. Particularly interesting are records of the non-native House Cricket *Acheta domesticus* at a factory in Sudbury, where over 50 individuals at varying life cycle stages were captured in November 2002, with more recorded in late 2010.

Fungi

This is currently a very under-recorded group in the Stour Valley, with only 155 or so species so far listed for the area and doubtless many more awaiting discovery. Fungi occurring regularly in meadows and other areas of open ground include **Common Puffball** *Lycoperdon perlatum*, **Parasol** *Macrolepiota procera*, **Shaggy Inkcap** *Coprinus comatus*, **Yellow Fieldcap** *Bolbitius titubans*, **Field Mushroom** *Agaricus campestris* and **waxcaps** *Hygrocybe* sp. Woodland floor fungi typically include **milk-caps** *Lactarius* sp, the dramatic **Common Stinkhorn** *Phallus impudicus* and, when Scots Pine or Silver Birch are present, **Fly Agaric** *Amanita muscaria*.



Fly Agaric, © Nick Ford

Some of the most spectacular woodland fungi are bracket species, such as **Chicken of the Woods** *Laetiporus sulphureus* (best looked for on willows in the Stour Valley, despite preferring its more usual hosts, Oak and Sweet Chestnut), **Birch Polypore** *Piptoporus betulinus*, only found on Silver Birch, and **Dryad's Saddle** *Polyporus squamosus*, which parasitizes a wide range of dead and living tree species. The alder carr along the Stour is excellent habitat for two specialists, **Alder Bracket** *Inonotus radiatus* and **Ochre Aldercap** *Naucoria escharioides*. Also noteworthy is the jelly like, orange-pink **Wrinkled Peach** *Rhodotus palmatus*, which grows on dead standing or fallen Elm.

Rarities found in the area include **Sandy Stiltball** *Battarreia phalloides*, growing in atypical habitat at a single site, **Piggyback Rosegill** *Volvariella surrecta*, **Agaricus phaeolepidotus** and **Paxillus vernalis**, a North American species known from only two sites in the UK, one of which is near Flatford Mill.

Stour Valley Natural Historians

One of the earliest confirmed botanical records for the Stour Valley is contained within Nicholas Culpeper's 1653 *Complete Herbal*, in which he refers to Dittander or Broad-leaved Pennywort *Lepidium latofolium* at Clare. Several decades later, Joseph Andrews (1688–1764) of Great Cornard near Sudbury assembled an impressive herbarium collection. Now in the Natural History Museum, it has been the source of many first Suffolk county records. Meanwhile, what is probably the first Suffolk record of a bryophyte came from the Stour Valley, from Stoke-by-Nayland in 1746. Later, another fine herbarium was compiled by John Durbin Gray (1825–1925), who was vicar of Nayland for ten years and good friends with the eminent Suffolk botanist (and fellow cleric) William Marsden Hind, who published the county's first flora in 1889.

Few reliable records exist of the wildlife of the Stour Valley until the 19th century, when increasing interest in the natural environment saw the emergence of a renowned – if not notorious – cadre of naturalist-collectors. JD Hoy (1797–1839) of Stoke Priors, Stoke-by-Nayland, was described as “a first-rate shot, a skilled bird-stuffer and an ardent naturalist.” He studied and collected wildlife across East Anglia and amassed a collection of over 260 cases of stuffed birds, which were later gifted to Southend Museum. William Doubleday King (1801–70) was active around Sudbury and in 1838 published ‘A List of Birds found in the neighbourhood of Sudbury’ in *Fulchers Sudbury Magazine*. Another Sudbury-based naturalist was Johnathan Grubb (1808–?), who contributed to Loudon's Magazine of Natural History and wrote ‘Birds of My Premises’ in the *Friends' Quarterly Examiner* of 1876.

In terms of the official collation of wildlife records, the Essex Field Club was established in 1880 and was the first body in that county to gather systematic information on the local wildlife, including from the Essex Stour. The Suffolk Naturalists' Society followed suit in 1929. Both organizations continue to thrive, and in 1974 were joined by the Suffolk Biological Records Centre, which serves as a focal point for the documentation and interpretation of wildlife data across that county, including the Suffolk Stour. Both counties also have a range of countywide and local amateur groups with interests in particular types and classes of wildlife, and some of which have a presence in the Stour Valley. See page 35 for further details and contacts.



Woodland ride at Arger Fen, © J Parry

Places to visit

The following selection of Stour Valley sites are all open to the public, but please check the relevant website before visiting for details of access and what wildlife to look out for. Note that the grid references given below do not necessarily denote the point of public access.

Arger Fen and Spouse's Vale TL931353

www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/reserves/arger-fen-spouses-vale

Cattawade Marshes TM093321

www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/c/cattawademarshes

Clare Castle Country Park TL770456

www.clare-uk.com/pages/clare-castle-country-park-602.htm

Cornard Country Park TL898392

www.cornard.info

Cornard Mere TL886386

www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/reserves/cornard-mere

Daws Hall TL888369

www.dawshallnature.co.uk

East Town Park/Haverhill Country Walks TL686448

www.haverhill-uk.com/pages/east-town-park-819.htm

Lavenham to Long Melford Railway Walk TL916492/866483

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/article-1356402829141

Loshes Meadow TL873369

www.wildessex.net/sites/Loshes%20Reserve.htm

Sergeants Orchard Nature Reserve TL907308

www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/reserves/sergeants-orchard

Sudbury Common Lands TL868418

www.sudburycommonlandscharity.org

Tiger Hill TL924358

www.dedhamvalestourvalley.org/assets/Publications/Biodiversity/Tiger-Hill.pdf

Many other areas of interesting wildlife habitat are either crossed by, or are viewable from, public footpaths, including the Stour Valley Path and St Edmund Way. The Field Studies Council runs a range of environmental courses from its field centre at Flatford Mill, see **www.field-studies-council.org/centres/flatfordmill.aspx**. Countryside and craft courses are also available at Assington Mill, see **www.assingtonmill.com**, and at Daws Hall Centre for Environmental Education, see **www.dawshallnature.co.uk/course-details**

Further reading and information

Selected books (published post-1990) with information on the natural history of the Stour Valley area:

- Benton, Ted, *The Bumblebees of Essex*, Essex Field Club/Lopinga Books (2000)
- Benton, Ted & Dobson, John, *The Dragonflies of Essex*, Essex Field Club/Lopinga Books (2007)
- Bullion, Simone, *The Mammals of Suffolk*, Suffolk Naturalists' Society (2009)
- Corke, David & Goodey, Brian, *The Butterflies of Essex*, Essex Field Club/Lopinga Books (1997)
- Dennis, MK, *Tetrad Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Essex*, Essex Birdwatching Society (1996)
- Dobson, John, *The Mammals of Essex*, Essex Field Club/Lopinga Books (1999)
- Goodey, Brian, *The Moths of Essex*, Essex Field Club/Lopinga Books (2004)
- Killeen, JJ, *The Land and Freshwater Molluscs of Suffolk*, Suffolk Naturalists' Society (1992)
- Mendel, Howard, *Suffolk Dragonflies*, Suffolk Naturalists' Society (1993)
- Piotrowski, Steve, *The Birds of Suffolk*, Helm (2003)
- Sandford, Martin, *A Flora of Suffolk*, Suffolk Naturalists' Society (2010)
- Sandford, Martin, *The Orchids of Suffolk*, Suffolk Naturalists' Society (1991)
- Stewart, Richard, *The Millennium Atlas of Suffolk Butterflies*, Suffolk Naturalists' Society (2001)
- Wood, Simon, *The Birds of Essex*, Helm (2007)

The Biodiversity Action Plan for the Dedham Vale & Stour Valley can be downloaded at www.dedhamvalestourvalley.org/assets/Publications/Biodiversity/DVP-Biodiversity-5.pdf

Natural history and conservation organizations covering the Stour Valley area:

Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty & Stour Valley Project
www.dedhamvalestourvalley.org

Essex Biodiversity Project
www.essexbiodiversity.org

Essex Birdwatching Society
www.ebws.org.uk

Essex Field Club
www.essexfieldclub.org.uk

Essex Wildlife Trust
www.essexwt.org.uk

Suffolk Biodiversity Partnership
www.suffolkbiodiversity.org

Suffolk Biological Records Centre
www.suffolkbrc.org.uk

Suffolk Naturalists' Society
www.sns.org.uk

Suffolk Ornithologists' Group
www.sogonline.org.uk

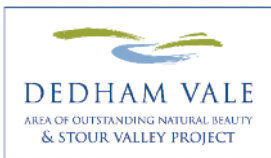
Suffolk Wildlife Trust
www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org

Other useful websites:

Managing A Masterpiece – Stour Valley Partnership **www.managingamasterpiece.org**

The National Trust **www.nationaltrust.org.uk**

Natural England **www.naturalengland.org.uk**



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*Managing a
Masterpiece:*

The Stour Valley
Landscape Partnership