

From the archives

Historian **Mike Petty** tells us what made headlines in Cambridge in years gone by. Visit mikepetty.org.uk and search for the Fenland History group on Facebook.

July 22, 1965

The Ministry of Transport has consented to the withdrawal of rail passenger services between Ely and Newmarket which involve the closure of Soham and Fordham stations. It would mainly inconvenience six people who travel daily from Soham to Cambridge. This would be reduced by extending the 7.36am Eastern Counties 122 bus from Soham, arriving at Drummer Street at 8.42am, to be carried on to the railway station to connect with the 9am train to Liverpool Street.

July 23, 1979

It is the start of an intensive six-week season at the Arbury Adventure Playground. Between 150 and 300 children will daily pour into the enclosure off Wagstaff Close. It is laid out like an outpost of the US Cavalry. There is a 10-foot-high perimeter stockade, big main gates and a high watch-tower in the middle. In one corner is the livestock, all snuffling, clucking and crowing.

July 25, 1913

A film of great interest is being shown at the Picture Playhouse, Mill Road, special pictures having been taken by the theatre's operator of the suffrage procession in Cambridge. The film is 230ft long and depicts incidents of the arrival of pilgrims on Saturday and the departure on Monday. Classical and popular music played by Max Bennett and his orchestra adds much to the enjoyment.

July 26, 1974

After all the artists had been booked for the first Cambridge Folk Festival 10 years ago, the agent of a young American singer rang director Ken Woollard to see if he could be added to the bill. They accepted £14 of complimentary advertising in the first programme and the singer appeared. His name was Paul Simon. Ten years on, with the Simon and Garfunkel partnership already history, he is top of the world in his own right. So too, in its own world, is the festival.

July 28, 1927

Ely Housing Committee found a case where 17 people were using one WC and that sort of thing could be dealt with. More difficult were houses that were absolutely dangerous and unfit for the habitation of pigs. Water supplies and the cheap manufacture of soap had done a great deal to encourage people in the ways of cleanliness and they now wanted better housing conditions for people to live in.



A roe deer makes an appearance



The area has LED lighting, but no flash is used, so to achieve a high enough shutter speed for any flight shot, a very high ISO was required



A juvenile tawny owl

Owls, roe deer and a fox make for a special night

Editor **Paul Brackley**

returns to Kevin Robson's incredible wildlife photography hide in South Cambridgeshire.

Visiting Kevin Robson's tawny owl hide in South Cambridgeshire has become something of an annual treat.

Each year, I look forward to finding out what drama has unfolded within the owl family that nests on the edge of a private woodland. It's like being at the heart of an episode of *Springwatch*...

This is, without doubt, one of the best wildlife photography hides I've visited. The intimate views you gain of the tawny owls are simply incredible – it's a rare privilege to see them.

And there is often something else to enjoy alongside the owls: an unexpected bonus.

As I headed to Kevin's home to meet up for the short trip to the pop-up photography hide location, I wondered what was in store this year.

"This season the female owl kept us guessing right up until the last minute exactly where she would nest," Kevin tells me.

"From early November 2025 until late February 2026, she roosted in the nest box that she had used for the past two years.

"I wrongly assumed she would again nest in that box but she surprised me by moving out and into another – smaller – box nearby, promptly laying her eggs just a few days later. The smaller box has only ever been used by the owls as an occasional winter roost, so I have no idea why she chose to use it as a nest site this year.

"This season's eggs were laid five days later than last year's. This bucks a trend over the previous three years where egg laying has been slightly earlier with each passing season.

"This season the female laid three eggs but only two of them hatched. We never quite know why certain eggs don't hatch but it may be that this egg wasn't fertile, or perhaps wasn't incubated correctly.

"2026 is the first season the male has taken a full role through the entire process. Usually after the eggs hatch, the female takes command of the territory and moves the male away. Last season, this happened when the owlets started to take their own food. However, this year the male has remained throughout and has taken a bigger role in feeding and raising the chicks."

After a couple of minutes' drive from Kevin's house, we arrive at the woodland.

Kevin has three pop-up hides set

up, including one that can seat two people, with comfortable chairs. The front of these canvas hides is fully open, giving you an unrestricted view of the perches set up around the trees – and the owls are entirely comfortable flying in and out of the area while being watched.

The area is carefully lit by LED lights – no flash is used in photographing the owls. Nonetheless, since you are visiting at night – after 9pm in our case – you will need a sturdy tripod and a very slow shutter speed of around 1/30 to 1/60 second to gather enough light for most of your images. A telephoto lens in the range of 400mm to 600mm is recommended for close-up views.

Once we're settled into our hides, Kevin begins by putting out some food for the owls, tucking it into the perches and branches. He takes his seat in the centre hide and then we wait...

It's not long before the first owl visits, flying in silently and majestically.

Kevin has multiple perches set up, meaning you can capture a range of images. The male bird is the primary visitor to begin with, although we do have a brief sighting of one of the juveniles.

But before long, another special visitor arrives. A fox, in beautiful condition, trots in and starts seeking out some of the nuts that Kevin has

scattered on the floor for her.

To my amazement, the male tawny just sits on his perch watching this – aware, no doubt, that he is high enough to be quite safe from the vixen.

The fox is eager to find food, but also very alert of her surroundings.

When a muntjac turns up, the fox's ears prick up and she immediately assesses if she is in any danger. The muntjac is no threat, so she carries on, and the muntjac grazes for food too.

As if this extraordinary scene wasn't busy enough, a beautiful roe deer then arrives on the scene. Much taller, and more elegant than the muntjac, it's a somewhat rarer site in Cambridgeshire, and a real delight.

To the fox, the roe deer seems more of a concern – probably due to its size.

The fox scampers off, and the owl then resumes feeding from the various perches, occasionally flying off with food for the

juveniles, whose strange rasping calls can be heard from the trees around us.

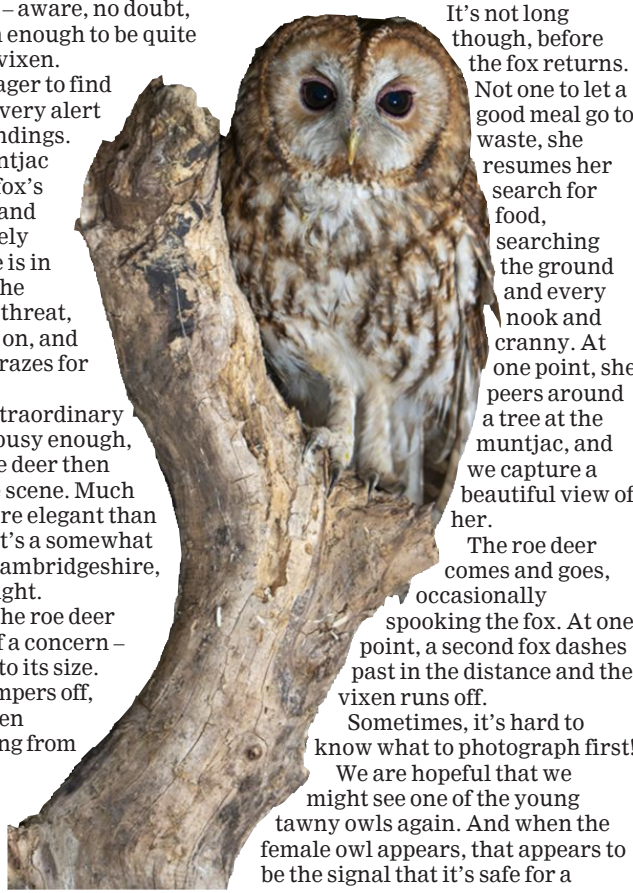
It's not long though, before the fox returns. Not one to let a good meal go to waste, she resumes her search for food, searching the ground and every nook and cranny. At one point, she peers around a tree at the muntjac, and we capture a beautiful view of her.

The roe deer comes and goes, occasionally

spooking the fox. At one point, a second fox dashes past in the distance and the vixen runs off.

Sometimes, it's hard to know what to photograph first! We are hopeful that we might see one of the young tawny owls again. And when the female owl appears, that appears to be the signal that it's safe for a

One of the adult tawny owls and, right, a fox enters the scene
Pictures: Paul Brackley and Jack Brackley



juvenile to fly in. It spends a long time on the perches, flying from one to another, stopping to feed, and affording us views we can scarcely believe.

By the time we pack up it's well past midnight and the time has flown by. We've had several hours of extraordinary views and filled our cameras with images and video.

This is my fourth visit to the hide, but every time there is something different and remarkable to enjoy.

And Kevin's hide – which has just closed for this season, but is now available to book for when it reopens in spring 2027 – is clearly helping these birds to thrive.

Although the food he puts out is never enough to make the owls reliant on the supply and they still need to hunt successfully on their own, it clearly gives these magnificent birds a head start.

"Over the six years the hide has operated – 2021-2026 – the owls have bred successfully in every year except 2021. Over that period we have now seen 15 owlets fledge successfully," says Kevin.

■ The prices for 2027 are £100 for a solo photographer, £180 (£90 each) for two photographers who book and come together or £270 (£90 each) for three photographers who book and come together. Visit <https://khrimages.co.uk/to/book>.