

WATERCRESS

Issue 73 Summer 2007



Summer is here but many people would be hard-pressed to believe it! The WWA 'Midsummer Madness' family day took place on the 23rd June and, luckily, the rain held off for the children's activities. Twenty-four youngsters (and their parents) enjoyed a treasure hunt, duck racing on the river, a raffle, 'splat-a-rat' and face painting. But the moment the BBQ was the lit, the heavens opened and rain teemed down for the whole evening. However, those brave enough to stay the course in the evening were entertained by local guitarist and singer, Richard (who lives in Riverside Road and the editor has forgotten his surname!) who performed brilliantly - a real star. If you decided not to come to the BBQ because of the weather, you certainly missed a real treat. Tucked away under the new awning with good company, music and bottles of fine wine – who cared about the rain? Despite the appalling weather the WWA not only broke even on expenses but made a profit of £100 to go towards the very appropriately named 'WaterWhealers'.



On the subject of finances, the WWA has been very fortunate to receive a good income from membership subscriptions and donations in the last year and so various items have been purchased to make the running of the Reserve much easier. Top of the list has to be our new ride-on mower – something we could only dream about for many years. But thanks to the generosity of our members (and their employers) this dream has finally come true. Extra special thanks must go to the Rufford Maurice Laing Foundation for £500 and to The Mercers' Company for £1000 (via a WWA member). The Association was also able to buy a new professional level brushcutter (with a hedgetrimmer attachment) at the same time, negotiating a reasonable discount from the garden machinery centre because of our charity status. The Association is now well set up with decent tools and equipment for many years to come. In the interests of security the mower is being temporarily stored at a secret location until its new home at the Reserve (currently under construction) is finished. Another purchase that had been on the 'wish list' for many years is a set of sturdy, moulded plastic, folding trestle tables. These will make catering at the Wassail and the annual summer BBQ a lot easier, and they will be very useful for the times when we take the Association display boards to outside events like the Earthworks Annual Summer Fair and the adjacent Verulam Angling Club Family Day.

Membership update

The Membership Secretary has been updating the database, and renewal forms have been included with this newsletter for those whose membership renewal has recently lapsed, and which may have been overlooked. We look forward to your continued support. The Association now has around 200 household memberships which brings in enough income to pay for the everyday running costs

Volunteer Sam supervising the 'Splat-a-rat'

Reserve visits

Howard and Sheila were pleased to give guided tours around the Reserve to a couple of groups in July – the first being the 4th St. Albans Cub Scouts at the beginning of the month. We were pleased to have them visit as Ian XXXX (Scoutmaster) has supported the WWA since its inception by allowing us to use the Scout Hut in Riverside Road for all our AGMs and other events. The other group was made up of thirteen environmentalists from Kimpton, who enjoyed the Editor's unique oratory so much that they had a whip round to pay her to stop talking. No really – it was because they said how interesting the evening had been. She is kindly donating this to the WWA to pay for a proper guide!

STOP PRESS:

Mandy XXXX, our new fundraiser, has successfully applied for a grant from her employer KPMG (as part of the firm's policy to support the volunteering activities of their staff) to provide £826 towards paying some of the costs of developing the new Butterfly Garden. The money will help to pay for new plants, and also an interpretation board for the benefit of our visitors. This will be added to a donation that was received earlier in the year so the project is off to a good start.



WATERWHEELERS UPDATE



Both tandems have been well-used since the last newsletter. In May, some committee members - along with Yvonne XXXX and co-rider Graham XXXX - took part in the St. Albans Rotary Club Charity Bike Ride. The riders had decided to do the 30 mile route this year but conditions were not good. After weeks of rain, the roads were covered in sharp flints and thorns, and hundreds of riders had punctures on their bikes, including our group with both tandems being affected. Around the half-way stage, the rain poured down and the last ten miles were no fun at all. The group had planned to go for a pub lunch after the event and sit out in the warm sunshine - instead, everyone rushed straight home to a hot bath and warm, dry clothes! Yvonne and Graham have been training for some months and went on in July to complete the 'Bike Events' London to Oxford ride - 64 miles in total - along with a large group from the BUPA hospital in Harpenden where they both work. Well done to the both of you. Yvonne was especially pleased as that is the furthest distance she has ever ridden. There will be photo from the ride in the next newsletter.



Monica XXXX, and her friend Corinne XXXX, borrowed the smaller tandem to take part in the Sawbridgeworth charity ride in late May. This year, being fit after their 'Cycle the Nile' challenge (as reported in an earlier newsletter) they chose to do the 50 mile route - which they thoroughly enjoyed and send their thanks to the 'Waterwheelers' for once again lending them the tandem.

During late April and early May riders were experiencing punctures on every trip out, which was becoming a real chore, so it was decided to try out the latest 'puncture proof' tyres (Continental's Contact Security). They certainly seem to work and there have been no punctures in the last two months. The tyres were expensive - £100 to equip both tandems - but it was definitely worth the expenditure.



Graham mending yet another puncture!

EARTHWORKS SUMMER FAIR



The WWA was, once again, delighted to be invited to man a stall at the Earthworks Summer Fair on Sunday 17 June. The Saturday had seen torrential rain fall for the most of the day so it was such a relief for the organisers and stallholders that the Sunday turned out to be so lovely and sunny. There were displays of marching from young majorettes, folk music, food and craft stalls and representatives from various local environmental groups. As usual, there was a very relaxed feel about the day and, hopefully, Earthworks made a good profit to help with some of their many projects.

BAT CONSERVATION TRUST SUNSET/SUNRISE SURVEY

Every year, the Bat Conservation Trust holds a Sunset/Sunrise Survey to get people to count the bats in their area. The survey this year took place on the weekend of 21-22 July (or within 3 weeks either side of those dates) and WWA committee members and friends decided to participate in the Sunset Survey (so much easier than getting up at 4am for the Sunrise Survey!). All that was required was to spend time in a garden (or in our case, at the Reserve) and watch out for any bats that fly past. Then note down how many, which species - if you are confident enough to identify them - and the direction from which they are flying. The survey is aimed at beginners and is an excellent way to contribute to the bat monitoring programme if you have no previous experience of surveying. Our recorders spotted three bats (which we think were Pipistrelles) but there was one bat skimming low over the water so it may have been a Daubenton. There is another survey taking place throughout August - the Waterways Survey - which is solely to count Daubentons. Surveyors are asked to walk a route along a randomly allocated 1km stretch of river or canal on two evenings in August to record Daubenton's bat activity with a detector and torch. It may be a good idea for the WWA volunteers to go out again to see if they can get a definite sighting of this species which would be a first for the Reserve.



Daubenton's bat (myotis daubentonii)

News from around the Reserve

Those of you who visited the Reserve in the last month may notice that work has finally started on completely revamping the Butterfly Meadow/Garden. The work will take place over the next two years - clearing the land, restocking with nectar plants, weeding and general maintenance. Butterflies visit gardens to drink nectar from flowers. They are active creatures and the nectar provides them with the energy to keep airborne. Our aim is to provide flowers throughout the butterfly season, but especially in the spring and autumn. Early flowers are great for butterflies just emerging from hibernation, while in late summer and autumn some species need to build up their reserves in preparation for winter. Many of the 'butterfly friendly' plants are perennials so, hopefully, the WWA won't have to keep restocking every year.

Spring nectar plants include:

Aubretia, Bluebell, Clover, Cuckooflower, Daisy, Dandelion, Forget-me-not, Honesty, Pansy, Primrose, Sweet Rocket and Wallflower

Late summer/autumn nectar plants include:

Buddleia, French Marigold, Ice Plant, Ivy, Knapweed, Lavender, Marjoram, Michaelmas Daisy, Mint, Red Valerian, Scabious and Thyme.

Providing these plants for adult butterflies is one way to help them survive, but it is equally important to provide food for the caterpillars.

Some of the plants for caterpillars and the species they will attract:

Stinging nettles (and we have plenty of these!)

Comma, Red Admiral

Holly and Ivy

Holly Blue

Buckthorn and Alder Buckthorn

Brimstone

Cuckooflower and Garlic Mustard

Orange-tip and Green-veiled White

Hop

Comma

Common Bird's-foot-trefoil

Common Blue

A good garden could be visited by 22 species of butterfly, depending on location. There are 59 resident and regular migrant species of butterfly in the UK and almost all have been recorded in gardens at one time or another. *

*Source material – Butterfly conservation

So far, volunteers have planted Lavender (Hidcote and Munstead Blue), Valerian, Purple Cone Flower, Ice Plant, Hemp Agrimony, Michaelmas Daisy, Verbena Bonariensis, Cupid's Dart (Catanache), Hebe, Spanish Scabious, Garlic Mustard and Wallflower (Perennial Bowles Mauve)



Careful with that fork, Laurie!

Comma butterfly – picture taken 8 July at entrance gate



The Comma butterfly is easily recognised by its 'ragged' wings which are mottled brown below (resembling dead leaves), providing perfect camouflage, whilst over-wintering in hedges or undergrowth. The name derives from the distinctive white 'comma' mark on the underside of its wings. The larva, resembling a bird-dropping, feeds on nettle, hop and elm. The Comma is found in most of Europe except Ireland and Northern Britain in light woodland, hedgerows and gardens.

Trees

The continuing wet and windy summer is having quite an effect on the tree population in the area with many Willows and Elders keeling over. The combination of saturated ground and the trees being in full leaf is the main cause for their demise. On the plus side, one of the trees that had fallen into the water has become a useful perch for a hungry kingfisher so it may just be left where it has fallen. At the time of writing, another large Crack Willow came down and is lying across the river by Riverside Court.

Barley straw

Two bales of barley straw were added to the Mere in April to try and counteract the algal bloom but with only moderate success. Two fresh bales will soon replace these to hopefully improve the situation. The desilting of part of the Mere last year has resulted in a sudden flush of watercress and an unexpected show of Purple Loosestrife. It is hoped that the Loosestrife will seed itself around the lake margins as it is one of the few colourful plants on the Reserve in summer (another being the Willowherb family).

Wildlife

There are two families of moorhens, one with teenagers and one with toddlers, and a group of Mallard ducklings are pictured below having their first swimming lesson! The Canada Geese returned briefly (with their friends) but they were gently encouraged to fly away by the Reserve Manager as they can create a real problem if they stay and breed. After last year's drought, when the Mere dried up, all the fish perished but the good news is that 'tiddlers' have been seen in large numbers around the Reserve. This could explain why the Kingfisher is back on site to delight our visitors.



Are you sure this isn't the deep end?

Dates for your diary

2007 Working parties – starting at 11am

Sunday 12 August
Sunday 9 September
Sunday 14 October

The main tasks for the next few months are preparing the second section of Butterfly Meadow (which will involve thoroughly digging over the rubble-strewn ground), cutting back brambles and general site maintenance.

All tools and gloves are provided – everyone welcome.

Verulam Angling Club Fun Day

Riverside Road (adjacent to the WWA site).

Saturday 4 August
10.30am – 9pm

Check out their website for an itinerary of the day's events.

www.verulam-angling.co.uk



Bird hide code

The code to access the bird hide is: XXXX

The hide contains useful identification charts and lists of flora and fauna. For security reasons, please ensure that the windows and door are closed on leaving.

Progress report on the Pyghtle

Progress continues with the new pond being gradually dug out by hand, with the area around the pond being cut on a regular basis to create a small meadow. When the funds are available it is hoped to build a viewing platform just off the main path for visitors to see the pond from a discreet distance. Much of the Pyghtle will remain fairly unmanaged, as cover for wildlife. The hedges are being trimmed to encourage thick, bushy growth, rather than height, at present. Already the pond has attracted frogs and numerous 'froglets' have been sighted nearby. The Association has been given some young native Water Lilies (*Nuphar lutea* and *Nymphaea alba*) which are growing on in the new pond until they are large enough to be planted out in the Mere. The compost heaps and log piles are growing in size so it is possible that grass snakes may have utilised them for laying their eggs this year (June/ July). These would hatch out in late August or early September so keep your eyes peeled – you may be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of one of these shy creatures



There was great excitement as the new mower was delivered. Three committee members were given a training session from the supplier in how to use the new mower, followed by a test run around the Reserve. It is a brilliant machine – easy to handle and best of all, it has a system that finely mulches the grass so that no raking up is required. This is a major improvement on the previous machine. It is now possible to cut all the grass in a couple of hours – and with a great deal less effort! Perhaps this will also encourage new volunteers to have a go?



WWA COMMITTEE 2007

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Secretary:

Anne XXXX

Treasurer:

Laura XXXX

Site Manager and Membership Secretary:

Howard XXXX

Editor:

Sheila XXXX

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