

WATERCRESS

Summer/Autumn 2009

Issue 80

A message from the Editor

Apologies go to all our readers for not sending out a summer edition of the newsletter but I have been having problems with both the laser printer and the software on my computer. Hopefully, these issues are now resolved. Many of you opted to receive the newsletter by e-mail and this is the first edition to go out electronically. Enjoy!

Our new image



The committee finally managed to agree on a design for some new polo shirts that they can wear at events and working parties. We thought it is very helpful for visitors to identify WWA officials - if any questions need answering about the Reserve then we are instantly recognisable as being able to help.

It also helps visitors realise that the site is managed by a group of volunteers - and not by the local Council - as is often thought. All committee members are now proud owners of a smart new polo shirt - so look out for us next time you visit.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness

.....and home-made jams and jellies. 2009 has been an absolute bumper year for fruit on the WWA Reserve. Derryn, Jack and Sheila have been making lots of delicious preserves, including both Quince, and Crab-apple jellies and Damson, or Blackberry and Apple jam. Most will be available to buy at our annual Wassail event - but some can be sold now (in time for Xmas). There will be some Crab apple jelly and some Damson jam available at the next working party. We suggest a donation of at least £2.00 a jar. This barely covers costs so feel free to be more generous if you can. After all, it is not a 'Sainsbury's basics' product (excellent as they are!) - it is more a 'Farmers Market' product - lovingly made from our own organically-grown fruit by unpaid volunteers! A new innovation this year has been to bag up and sell the surplus apples at £1 a bag and this has proved to be very popular, and raised funds for the WWA at the same time. Nearly all the best apples have now gone and one tree has been left unpicked to provide food for wildlife. The committee is considering having a permanent donation box on the Reserve, as we are possibly missing out on a source of revenue from passing visitors who would like to support what we are doing, and also as a place to put money for the produce that we sell.



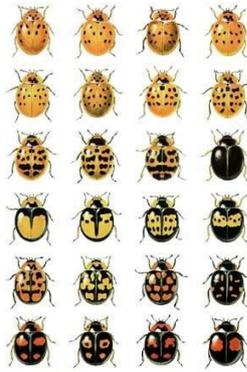
Quince fruit (shown left) makes an unusual jelly - a few jars will be available at the Wassail. This is definitely not one you can buy at the supermarkets.....

Working party dates

Sunday 25 October
Sunday 29 November
Sunday 27 December

More details are on page 2

Welcome visitors - or unwanted guests?



As I sit in my study typing, I look up and am fascinated by the huge colony* of ladybirds that has decided to colonise a corner of the room. Has anyone else noticed the same thing in their household? The big question is: are they the native species - or are they the unpopular Harlequins (pictured left). A seemingly simple question, one would think, but on studying further there are over 5000 described species worldwide (but only

26 recognisable as ladybirds in the U.K. The Harlequin originated in Asia but was used in the USA and mainland Europe as a biological agent. It only arrived in England in 2004 and has rapidly extended its range and is expected to spread to most of the U.K within a few years. It has been described as the most invasive ladybird species on Earth and poses a serious threat to bio-diversity. It has the potential to out-compete native ladybirds and other insects for food. The Harlequin has a more generalised diet than our own ladybirds that eat coccids (scale insects) and aphids, and can turn to other food sources if these are limited, including the eggs and larvae of other insects (such as butterflies and ladybirds).

The dietary needs of all ladybirds are diverse - but most species are quite specialist in their feeding habits. Many ladybirds are predatory, feeding on aphids or coccids as mentioned earlier, but others eat mildew, and two species feed on plants (the 24 spot and the bryony ladybirds).

Most ladybirds have bright colours and exude reflex blood (foul-tasting yellow fluid) when disturbed. This defence mechanism is very effective and only a few predators and parasites are associated with ladybirds including: birds that feed in flight, parasitoid wasps, mites, roundworms, fungal disease and male-killing bacteria.

Many of our native ladybirds must have a spell of winter dormancy before they can reproduce. Harlequins can reproduce continuously through the spring, summer and even autumn, enabling populations to increase rapidly.



AND I THINK THEY'RE ALL IN MY STUDY!

Wassail

The WWA will be holding their annual Wassail again in January. This is always a popular event and the Wicket Brood will hopefully be able to come along and liven things up for us. The date has not yet been finalised but it is held traditionally on the 17th January (the old 'Twelfth night') so this fits perfectly as this date falls on a Sunday

Perfect..... Look out for more details nearer the time, either on the website, by newsletter or by e-mail.

* These are now arriving in huge swarms - and smell awful! Time to get out the vacuum cleaner, perhaps?

Nature Day

The Association organised a very successful 'Nature Day' in June. There were all sorts of activities, including pond dipping, mini-beast hunts, story telling, the duck race on the Ver, 'Splat-the Rat' and insect 'tattoos'. It was a really great family afternoon and around 30 children brought along their parents to join in. The weather held out all afternoon - but can you believe it - as soon as it was time to light the BBQ the most amazing storm began, with thunder, lightning, torrential rain and hailstones. There was a musical evening planned and the two musicians had just arrived as the storm began. It was so fierce that they (and around 8 WWA members) were basically trapped under the awning - as it was too wild to leave! It was certainly exciting! But we carried on and managed to cook under the awning and enjoy the odd beverage or two.....



WWA Committee 2009

Chairman:

Steve xxxx

Reserve Manager and Membership

Secretary:

Howard xxxx

Treasurer:

Mandy xxxx

Secretary:

Pat xxxx

Editor: Sheila xxxx

Archivist: Derryn xxxx

Website Technical Support: Sam xxxx

Social Secretary: Penny xxx

Committee Member: Margaret xxxx

Website: Alison xxxx

Committee Member: Jack xxxx

Committee member: Janet xxxx

The Association Chairman can also be contacted via the website:

www.watercress-net.org.uk

Working parties

Working parties are held on the last Sunday of the month, starting at 11am and all are welcome. Refreshments are supplied (often including delicious home-made cakes made by Penny). In addition, there is to be a 'Green Team' again this year on Wednesday - starting at 10.30 am and continuing into the afternoon for those energetic enough! Even if you can help for just an hour or two you will be made most welcome. If you intend to stay on after lunch, please bring a sandwich and a drink. There is a huge amount of coppicing and clearance work that needs doing over the winter, so come and get some fresh air and exercise - all for free.

Verulam Angling Club 75th Anniversary

The Association were invited in July to put up a stall at the neighbouring Verulam Angling Club's Open Day - which we did and had a very enjoyable afternoon. There was also a stall manned by the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust so it was a good opportunity to catch up with old friends. As reported later in this newsletter, the WWA were having particularly unpleasant problems with the water quality on the Reserve so we managed to get some advice from Fisheries Consultant Keith Wesley which we are about to implement.

Water quality

Earlier on in the year, the water quality in the Mere reached an all time low with putrid algal blooms forming during the short, but hot spell of weather we experienced that seems so long ago, now. The algal blooms turned black and were covered in flies that fed on the decaying vegetation. Very nasty, indeed. We took some advice from the Angling Club next door when we attended their Open Day. There are two problems with the water. One is that it is fairly shallow, and when the sunlight is particularly strong the conditions are perfect for the algal blooms to grow. Secondly, the silt, which is quite deep in places, is fairly anaerobic (lacking in oxygen) which adds to the problem. There are also many trees overhanging the water which shed vast amounts of leaves each year into the Mere. After taking advice from various people, we are going to try and improve the quality of the silt and decrease its depth. This is by adding a product called Siltex to the water. To quote from the suppliers:

"Siltex has been one of the great revelations in water management and is probably the most efficient method of controlling organic silt. Siltex is a highly porous form of Calcium Carbonate consisting of microscopic particles with an average size of less than 5 microns (5 thousands of a millimetre). Being Calcium Carbonate, Siltex is harmless to plants and animals. Odours are caused by the bio-degrading of fish and waterfowl faeces, algae, rotting weed, and rotting leaf litter. As these rot and fester in the water they produce methane gas, which causes an unpleasant smell. By boosting the aerobic bacteria and micro-organisms the smell disappears. Other benefits of using Siltex are that it can:

- Decrease organic and oxidisable matter, which shows as a reduction in silt levels.
- Increase oxygenation by stimulation of aerobic micro-organisms.
- Improve water clarity by settling suspended solids.
- Reduces methane production by silt body
- Counteract acidity in water and silt.
- Provide essential calcium for plants and animals
- Increase biodiversity within water bodies

Siltex is harmless to humans, mammals, birds, fish, invertebrates and water plants".

Well, it sounds a wonderful product; we shall see..... As we have spent £200 on buying one tonne of the stuff, let's hope it does what it says on the packet!

The treatment is done in two phases. We have been advised by the suppliers that as this is our first use of Siltex, to put half of the powder we have purchased into the Mere straight away - whilst the leaves are falling - and the second half within a few months, but no later than April. The powder is safe to handle but rather messy. We were also advised not to do this job on a windy day or our volunteers will leave looking like ghosts. Well, it is nearly Halloween...!

In early spring we will add barley straw but in much greater quantities than we have been doing. Apparently we have not been using the best method - which is to soak two or three bales in the water, turning them over in the water until they are fully soaked (which takes about a week), then breaking them open and just letting it float away.

Management Plan

Margaret xxxx has been working extremely hard on developing the new management plan for the next five year period. Much discussion has taken place amongst all committee members and the finalised document should be ready soon for publication. Margaret has put a huge amount of effort into this and the management committee thank her for her tremendous effort.

BIRDLIFE

Well, where to start. There are some wonderful wildlife photos on the WWA blog and this is the best way of keeping up to date with what has been seen around the Reserve in the last few months. With the ever ongoing campaign to keep the Mallard numbers down (which has worked remarkably well) it is a delight to report that there have frequent visits from different dabbling ducks this year. Our regular photographers have managed to get some pretty good shots of Gadwall but not the shy and elusive Teal.



A real joy this year has been the arrival of a pair of Little Grebes who stayed all summer and then produced five offspring. There are still two of these birds on the Reserve which are assumed to be the parents. The chicks have already been kicked out to find their own homes, perhaps?



It is great to report that a kingfisher is back and fishing at the reserve and Keith xxxxx managed to get this fabulous close-up of a male perching on an old metal stake at the top end of the Mere.



Earlier in the year a family of swans visited and stayed for a few weeks. There were two adults and six cygnets – which was a lovely sight indeed. They didn't stay long, though, as the Mere is probably not large enough to support such a large family. The downside was the vast amounts of 'swan poo' they made – not so good for the water quality. Maybe it is a good thing they have moved on, and perhaps we should just enjoy the transient nature of their intermittent visits?

WILDLIFE



The new pond is looking really great and has been turned into a nursery for cultivating some native water lilies – prior to being planted out in the future into the Mere. This is part of the plan to cut down the amount of sunlight that shines onto the water surface that adds to the problems with algal blooms. Very shortly after the pond was created (which filled with groundwater as it was being dug) it was colonised by a male Broad-bodied Chaser (*Libellula depressa*) dragonfly which is the first recording of this species on the Reserve. Broad-bodied Chasers favour shallow ponds in sunny locations, with a good mosaic of adjacent short grassland, long grasses and scrub nearby for shelter. They tend to be found by ponds and shallow lake margins and are known to often be the first to colonise new ponds. They are rarely found in rivers and canals.



The appearance of the male was followed very rapidly by the female of the species. You can probably guess the rest. Our Chairman managed to get plenty of photos of the whole process of dragonfly reproduction. Mating is very brief and usually takes place in the air, lasting only a few seconds. The female will then lay her eggs by dabbing the tip of her abdomen at the surface of the water, while the male guards her by hovering close by. The eggs hatch after a couple of weeks and the dull brown, hairy larva (or nymph) will live underwater for 1-3 years.

When fully grown, the larva will climb out of the water onto a leaf or twig and the beautiful winged adult will emerge from the dull larval case. As adults, they only live for about a month, at most. Males are very territorial: they perch on marginal vegetation to look out for females and will suddenly fly out to battle with other males, returning to their perch after successfully chasing their rivals off. This was certainly the case with our male who staked his claim to the pond by settling on a particular piece of reed!

Visitor questionnaire

In order to keep in touch with the views of our members and visitors, the WWA has published a short questionnaire to find out what people think of the Reserve. We have had quite a few forms back and nearly all respondents commented on how they enjoy the peace and calmness of the place – which is one aspect of the Reserve that is so appealing in this modern world. In answer to the question: "What do you like about the Reserve", here are a few of the replies....

"Everything"

"The peacefulness, the Mere, the winding paths leading to secret places."

"What a blissful surprise – I really hope local residents use & appreciate this space. Wonderful!"

"It is a garden of Eden, and a tribute to those people who have thoughtfully and imaginatively created it..."

What lovely comments – it makes it all worthwhile.

Green fingers? Want to help our butterflies?

The wonderful plants in our butterfly bed were grown by Alan Downie on behalf of the Herts and Middlesex Butterfly Conservation and sold to us for peanuts! But, for personal reasons, he has had to stop and so our supply of cheap plants has dried up.

Of course we do not need hundreds of new plants because most are perennials and doing well, but some have died off and there are places where we need to increase the density. So we do want some for planting out next spring. Of course we can buy them at commercial rates but that is expensive. Which is where you can help, if you have green fingers and the time? Can you grow some plants for us ready for planting out next year? [Of course we would cover your expenses buying the seeds etc]

If you are able to help, give us a ring, Margaret xxxx and Laurie Gibson, on xxxxx xxxxxx or e-mail xxxxxxxx so that we can co-ordinate volunteers. We know we will need some more Michaelmas Daisies and Marjoram but there are others too which would be useful.

Get in touch and we can talk about what you might do.

Margaret xxxxx
Laurie xxxxx



Bird hide code

The code for the bird hide is xxxxx. Please always remember to close any shutters and make sure the door is properly locked. Thank you.

SURVEYS

Margaret xxxxx is to be applauded for all her hard work in setting up a monitoring system to record the number of species of butterfly that has been seen over the summer. There is now a small team of regular volunteers who walk a set route, about once a week, and who fill in recording sheets as they go around the Reserve. The results of which will be in the next newsletter. Thanks also go to Malcolm Hull from St. Albans Butterfly Conservation for his advice on this project.

BATWATCH

WWA committee members have been making good use of the new bat detector which was purchased last year and have taken part in various surveys over the year. The committee spent one evening at Verulamium Lake and Sam xxxx managed to capture these amazing photos (right). Here is his description of how he managed it - especially for those 'techies' out there in our membership.

"Photographing bats in flight is rather tough, especially without specialist equipment - like say a powerful floodlight or infra-red camera. My technique, which is being slowly refined with practice and experimentation, is to use the following tips with my Nikon D300 DSLR camera:

- The darkness and the speed with which the bats change direction will make it near impossible to use the viewfinder, so hold the camera up around your chest and aim as best you can. Review the shots regularly to hone your targeting, but beware of the LCD ruining your night vision.
- Use a lens with fair telephoto, but not so narrow a field of view that it's impossible to get the bats in frame, given you'll only be roughly aiming in the right direction. I've been using a 105mm lens, but I'd be tempted to use a slightly longer telephoto next time since I've got better at targeting.
- Use flash. You literally don't stand a chance without it and it doesn't seem to bother the bats. Be aware that it might bother other people though.
- Set to manual mode for aperture and shutter speed, with aperture wide open (f2.8 in my case) and shutter speed at least 1/200.
- Manually focus at about the distance you're seeing the bats and leave it set there. If it's more than 5m away then they're probably going to too small and dim in the frame though. The wide aperture will give very shallow depth of field so your subjects will be out of focus unless you catch them at just the right distance. This takes a lot of patience and experimentation, but autofocus doesn't stand a chance in the darkness and you can't see anything through the viewfinder so you have little choice. With a powerful flash and very high sensitivity settings you could probably use a smaller aperture for greater chance of non-blurry results.
- Use as high a sensitivity setting as is necessary in order to get a reasonably exposed result given the manual settings above. This can only really be determined by experimentation and you'll only be sure once you've got a bat in the frame. I varied between ISO 800 and 3200 so the results are going to be very noisy.
- Ideally position yourself so you can see the bats against the remaining light of the sky, but if that's not possible (they might be skimming a few inches above the water) or if it's so dark that you just can't see the bats with the naked eye at all then a powerful torch is vital. If the torch has a relatively narrow beam you can even tape it to your camera such that it shows where your lens is pointing, improving your overall accuracy.

Having done all of that, this is the best I managed shooting bats above a wooded lake in Hertfordshire. After endless shots of black featureless sky it's tremendously exciting to get something that's identifiably a bat! These are most likely pipistrelles of some variety."



Committee members also took part in the 2009 field survey run by the Bat Conservation Trust. Surveyors are asked to walk a triangular route in a randomly allocated 1km square on two evenings in July to record noctule, serotine, common pipistrelle and soprano pipistrelle bat activity with a bat detector. We were allocated Broad Colney Lakes and were surprised at how many bats were around. Details of our results will be published later. For more about bat surveying, just follow the link http://www.bats.org.uk/pages/field_survey.html.

And if you are interested in joining in any of these events next year, just let us know - you would be very welcome.