

# WATERCRESS

Winter 2008

Issue 78



WWA  
Winter

## Wassail

It hardly seems possible that a year has passed since our last Wassail – but it has – and so it is time to remind our members that we are holding this popular event on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> January 2009. [Sandy Glover](#) has, once again, kindly agreed to host the proceedings and the colourful (and slightly scary looking!) [Wicket Brood Morris](#) is providing music and dance for all to enjoy. Song sheets have been printed up, party poppers are at the ready and dustbin lids dusted down ready for all the children to make as much noise as possible (it's OK, just this once!) to drive away any bad spirits that may be lurking in the Orchard. We are asking everyone to arrive by 2pm to give us time to sell you a raffle ticket and perhaps some of our home-made jam before the ceremony begins promptly at 2.30pm. This will be followed by a small feast of apple-based snacks – made by the WWA committee, members, local residents and friends - who do this every year without too much complaint! There will also be hot spiced apple juice available (from the Farmers Market) for which there will be a 50p charge to cover our costs.

As this event is to raise funds for the WaterWheelers we are asking people to make a generous donation in exchange for the food and entertainment.

**The Place:** [WWA Nature Reserve Orchard](#)

**The Time:** 2pm prompt

**The Date:** [18<sup>th</sup> January 2009](#)

As always, if anyone can help out with the preparations, the WWA committee would be very pleased to hear from you. We need people to:

**Set up the awning on Saturday,**

**Make the apple-based snacks**

**Help out on the day (serving drinks, etc)**

If you can assist with any of the above, please contact the Editor to find out more. Many hands make light work and it is a great way to get to know your neighbours and the WWA volunteers.

Another Green Man (pictured left) has appeared on the Reserve – see if you can spot him at the Wassail.....he has travelled all the way from Hay-on-Wye to join in the festivities!



## Annual General Meeting

The date for the WWA Annual General Meeting has been booked for the [8<sup>th</sup> March 2009](#). This will be held, as usual, in the Scout Hut in Riverside Road. This year we hope to have a set of keys that work as the Editor does not need the amount of excitement that occurred last year! We are lucky to have Alison Hauser from the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) coming along to give us an update on the Hertfordshire Water Vole Project. We may also ask Alison to give us some advice about our pond project and talk about managing wetland habitat in general. The AGM is fairly informal – but still a very, necessary part of the WWA calendar. The meeting will start at [11am](#) with an introduction by the Chairman. Then will follow short reports of the year's activities from the Reserve Manager/Membership Secretary and Treasurer. The committee for 2009 then has to be voted in, which finishes the business side of the meeting. Coffee and biscuits are served at noon and then we will hear Alison's talk. Please come along and support us, and also find out more about the work of the HMWT. The whole meeting takes about 2 hours. There will be display boards showing how the WWA Reserve has changed over the last 18 years. If anyone wishes to read a copy of the minutes of the previous AGM before the meeting please contact the Secretary.

## Snow in October!

Everyone was surprised by the sudden snowfall at the end of October. Hertfordshire was the worst county affected, and as some trees were still in leaf when the snow fell (which then froze onto the trees) quite a lot of damage was incurred around the Reserve as branches just snapped under the weight. The new 'Green Team' - which works on Wednesdays - has finally cleared away the damage. Willows seemed to be the most badly affected although one fully grown Hazel just keeled over. It doesn't look like a great deal of damage in the picture, but it is amazing just how much wood there was to deal with – and how long it took to cut it up for disposal.

It may be the time to consider planting new trees as so many are reaching the end of their natural life.



## Membership report

Our household membership has gone up from 191 (at the end of 2007) to 226 at present – this is the highest number of household subscriptions since the Association was set up, way back in 1991. So my thanks go to all those who support us financially, or give their time as committee members or volunteers. Our funds were diminishing rapidly towards the end of the year but have been boosted by a grant from the Gannett Foundation (£1488) via the Review and Observer Newspaper. This money has been awarded solely for the purchase of new tools, including extending loppers, secateurs, farm wheelbarrows and a



replacement Hayterette mower (which is needed on some of the rough areas where the ride-on mower cannot go). This enables our volunteers to help maintain the Reserve to the high standard

that is seen today. But despite this welcome award, we still need the regular income from our membership to fund expenditure on bird food, petrol, insurance, etc so I would like to remind everyone to please renew their memberships for 2009, even in these difficult times! The household subscription is staying at only £10 (£5 for concessions). I would like to thank, once again, everyone who has kept the money rolling in over the years and also those that gave a 'little extra'. Without you all, there would be no WWA.

### Gift Aid

If you pay UK income tax, the WWA can claim back the tax on all donations, including annual subscriptions. This means that for a membership subscription of £10 the WWA can get an extra £2.82 from the Inland Revenue. It will not cost you a penny more, all you need to do is sign and date the appropriate section of the enclosed Membership Renewal Form.

The Inland Revenue is now dealing with claims on an annual basis so to help us with our administration, we ask you to sign the declaration again this year even though you may have signed a Gift aid declaration in previous years.

Many thanks

Howard xxxxx  
Membership Secretary

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## WaterWheelers

If anyone would like the opportunity to have a go at tandem cycling then please contact the Reserve Manager with your details. We are hoping to get a team together for the St. Albans Charity Bike Ride in May - so if you would like to be part of the WWA WaterWheelers team (on either a tandem or a solo bike) you would be most welcome. There are choices of distances but we usually choose either the 20 or 30 mile event – depending on how lazy we feel! You can choose to do a ten-mile ride (great for the kids) or 40 (for the fitter amongst you). It is a great event, very well organised and friendly and raises lots of money for local charities.

We are also on the look-out for front riders to take out our visually-impaired members so if you fancy a go, we would love to hear from you.



## Let's modernise!



As Editor of this delightful quarterly newsletter, I am constantly aware of my limitations in computer skills but do realize that in these cash-strapped times that the WWA must try and use its (very welcome) funds wisely. It has been mentioned before in a previous newsletter that the time is ripe to give our readers a chance to receive their newsletter electronically. This would save the Association a lot of money in postage, toner cartridges and stationery, and also be more environmentally friendly. The wheels of the WWA move slowly (and far slower than those of the WaterWheelers!) but it is time for the Association (and especially the Editor) to drag itself/herself into the modern world. So I am asking our members if they would like to:

- Receive an e-mail newsletter
- Receive a printed copy

Not everyone has access to the internet so it is important that we have the correct information before proceeding further. And of course, it goes without saying that all personal information will never be passed on to a third party and will only be kept by the Membership Secretary and the Newsletter Editor

As it is the time of year for membership renewals, this is the ideal time to create a newsletter e-mailing list. If you are happy to receive your newsletter by e-mail, could you please (very clearly) fill in the line on the membership form with your e-mail address and tick the '**I wish to receive the newsletter by e-mail**' box.

If you wish to continue to receive a printed copy, please tick the '**I wish to receive a printed copy of the newsletter**' box.

The Association would also like to keep an e-mail database to enable it to send out notices/reminders of forthcoming events so if you are happy to receive these, please put your e-mail address on the form.

Gosh, it is going to be an exciting year for the WWA

If any readers would like to contribute to the newsletter, please don't hesitate to send in your views, letters, articles or photos. I would be very pleased indeed to hear from you – and know that you are out there and not just a figment of my imagination. Is there any feature that you would like to see added to the newsletter? Just let me know.....

Sheila xxxxx  
Editor



## Reserve and wildlife news



Well, the swans and cygnets came, then they went, then some came back, and then went, then one cygnet came back and then went again. At present we are swanless but anything could happen. Our pair of Little Grebes and a Kingfisher is still around and managing to find fish - but one wonders how long the supplies will last!

The cold weather at the end of December seemed to have encouraged flocks of delightful Long-tailed Tits onto the Reserve. They are always a pleasure to watch as they flit through the trees playing 'follow the leader'. Siskin have also arrived and can be heard (they really are quite noisy little birds) high up in the Alder trees foraging for seeds. There are also groups of Greenfinch and Goldfinch - attracted to the bird feeders. The Goldfinches have adapted well to eating the sunflower hearts that we provide.

During the first week of January, Howard (Reserve Manager) spotted quite a few unusual birds. Firstly, there appeared a male Shoveler. This is a new sighting for the Reserve so was a pleasant surprise. The following day a female Shoveler turned up to join her mate. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have something other than Mallards breeding at the WWA? This was followed by Howard seeing a Goldcrest taking a 'bath' in the shallow, clean water near the inlet, almost completely submerging itself before flying off to join another Goldcrest on a nearby branch. Two male Teal were then seen over a period of two days but they are very timid and fly away at the slightest disturbance. These have also never been seen at the WWA before so it was quite an exciting week. We think it may be because Verulamium lake, and other still bodies of water, froze over and these birds are temporarily seeking alternative accommodation. Teal (pictured below) are small dabbling ducks. The males have chestnut coloured heads with broad green eye-patches, a spotted chest, grey flanks and a black edged yellow tail. Females are mottled brown. Both show bright green wing patches (speculum) in flight. In winter birds congregate in low-lying wetlands in the south and west of the UK. Of these, many are continental birds from around the Baltic and Siberia. At this time, the UK is home to a significant percentage of the NW European wintering population making it an Amber List species. Oh - and aren't they pretty?

On a walk across the Verulam golf course on Xmas morning, Howard also spotted two pairs of Gadwall and a Little Egret on the old watercress bed that is tucked away in the middle of the golf course. It is amazing what is around if one takes the time to find out.....



Willows in the Orchard were pollarded as they are getting extremely fragile. They are all mostly hollow now but are valuable habitat for insects and fungi.

The channel from the Ver inlet has been cleared right through to the pond in the boggy area and has become the favourite spot of our resident Water Rail. For such a timid bird, it is lovely that quite a few of our visitors have spotted it and asked "What is that unusual bird?" There will be no more disturbances to this area whilst we have such a distinguished guest staying! Competition is fierce as to who is going to be the first to photograph this elusive bird.....

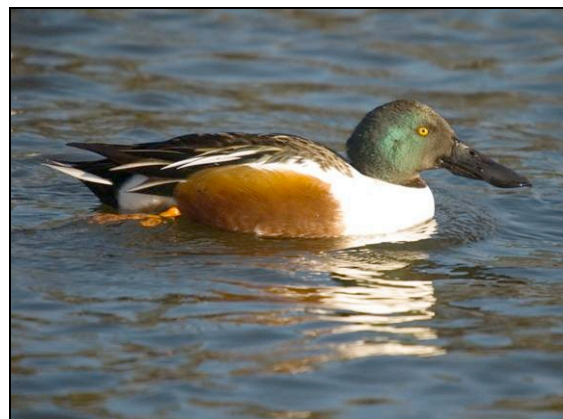
There are many photos of WWA wildlife on the Association's website 'blog'. Committee member Sam xxxx has recently posted a delightful sequence of a kingfisher trying (without success this time) to catch a fish. Check it out on the sightings blog at :

[www.watercress-net.org.uk](http://www.watercress-net.org.uk)

Sam is also in the process of modernising the website - which we are all looking forward to seeing.

Pictured below is a male Shoveler (taken by Keith xxxxxx at Verulamium Park). We couldn't get close enough to photograph our visitor. Shovelers are surface feeding ducks with huge bills. Males have dark green heads, with white breasts and chestnut flanks. Females are mottled brown. When flying, birds show patches of light blue and green on their wings. In the UK they breed in southern and eastern England, especially around the Ouse Washes, the Humber and the North Kent Marshes, and in much smaller numbers in Scotland and western parts of England. In winter, breeding birds move south, and are replaced by an influx of continental birds from further north. The UK is home to more than 20% of the NW European population, making it an Amber List species. Although widespread in winter, they can be seen in large numbers at places such as the RSPB's Ouse Washes nature reserve, Rutland Water and Abberton Reservoir in Essex. There are usually a small number at Verulamium Park where they feed on small insects and plant matter sifted from the water.

Shoveler (taken by Keith xxxxxx at Verulamium Park)



# Projects

A major project for the coming year (which has been planned for a long time but never completed) is the digging-out of a decent-sized pond in the Pyghtle. This is the remaining major task to complete from our current management plan. The committee has decided to hire a mini-digger for a weekend at the end of March to save all the back-breaking work that would otherwise be needed. The soil will be spread around the Reserve by volunteers so if anyone can help out on this please come along to the March working party. Steve Simpson (Chairman) is to be the project manager as his skill with a mini-digger is legendary!



We hope that this pond will be beneficial to dragonflies and invertebrates as it will have a different ecology than the lake and boggy areas. If funds are adequate, it may be possible in the future, to build a proper pond-dipping platform that can be used on our open days and, perhaps, as a facility for the local school. Our new pond will have to be lined- probably with a butyl liner (unless anyone out there has experience of using 'puddled clay' - a very traditional method but labour extensive and expensive). We have tried digging down to the water table but it didn't work very well and remained dry nearly all year. So with the mini-digger, Steve will gouge out the basic shape to the suitable depth, leaving one side with a gradual slope to allow any wildlife to easily get in and out. There will also be a muddy area as this is beneficial to birds like the Grey Wagtail and the House Martin.

Once finished and planted up this new pond will complete the plans for the Pyghtle, and along with all the log piles, compost heaps and hedge the WWA should have created a good habitat for amphibians, invertebrates and other wildlife.

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## Dates for your diary

### Working parties

#### Sunday 25 January 2009

Clearing the entrance area of brambles/removal of ash saplings  
Big Garden Birdwatch (see below)

#### Sunday 22 February 2009

Pollarding willows in boggy area

#### Sunday 29 March 2009 (BST begins - hurrah!)

Let's start to build that pond!

#### Sunday 26 April 2009

More pond work

Work parties start at 11am and last around two hours.

Tools and gloves are provided along with light refreshments. Everyone is welcome

### Bird hide code: xxxxx

Please check that the bird hide is secure on leaving. Thank you

## Big Garden Birdwatch 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 25 January 2009

Taking part in the Big Garden Birdwatch is simple and fun. All you need to do is either watch in your garden (Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> or Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> January) or come along to the WWA for an hour on Sunday 25 January at 11 am. Then simply record the highest number of each species seen in your garden or on the Reserve (not flying over) at any one time. So you need to count all the birds you see, right? Wrong. Some birds will return to your garden many times in the hour, so seeing the same blue tit come back 10 times does not make 10 blue tits! Wherever you decide to do your birdwatch, it's best done in a place where you can see the birds well and where you can sit quietly so they are not disturbed. If you decide to join us at the WWA all recording forms and I.D. charts are provided. So just bring yourself and a pair of binoculars if you can. We will send in the results to the RSPB.

### WWA Committee 2008

Chairman: Steve xxxxxxx

Reserve Manager and Membership  
Secretary: Howard xxxxxx

Secretary: Pat xxxx

Treasurer: Mandy xxxxxx

Editor: Sheila xxxxxx

Website: Alison xxxxx

Website Technical Support: Sam xxxxx

Social Secretary: Penny xxxxx

Committee Member: Jack xxxxx

Archivists: Derryn xxxxx

Bud xxxxxx

The Association Chairman can also  
be contacted via the website;

[www.watercress-net.org.uk](http://www.watercress-net.org.uk)

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## Birds seen in the first week of January 2009 on the Reserve

For those who likes lists:

Water Rail, Kingfisher, Teals (2 male), Shovelers (M+F), Little Grebes (2), Coot, Moorhen, Mallard, Heron, Black-headed Gull, Bullfinch, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Chaffinch, Jay, Wren, Siskin, Goldcrest, Blue tits, Great tits, Long-tailed tits, Magpie, Robin, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Pigeons, Collared doves, Dunnocks, House Sparrows, Cormorant (flying over), Starling and Redwing.



## Flora

Snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*) are beginning to show along the river bank and a few have small white buds forming - so in a few weeks there should be quite a display. The first sight of these bright white nodding heads of snowdrops peeping through the undergrowth signals that winter is coming to an end. These plants are very hardy, and the colder the weather, the longer the flowers last, with some flowering into March. They will best be seen by standing at the River Ver inlet -then look to the left.

Catkins are forming on the Hazel trees.