



A 'Happy New Year' to all our members

The Wassail

Although this is very short notice, the date for our annual fund-raising Wassail is on **Sunday 13 January 2008**. This year there will be displays of dancing from the Wicket Brood Morris, Wassailing songs and the usual general silliness. And of course, no WWA Wassail would be complete without our own Master of Ceremonies, Sandy Glover. Apple-based snacks (made by our members) and hot spiced apple juice will be on offer to all Wassailers and there will be some pots of delicious home made jams and jellies for sale – all made with fruit from the site. So do come along and brighten up a winter's afternoon and help support the WWA at the same time. This year all monies will go to the 'WaterWheelers' to cover maintenance/servicing costs and replacement parts for the tandems. Proceedings start promptly at **2pm** but please arrive by **1.45pm** so WWA committee members have time to persuade you to purchase a raffle ticket or two. This year, committee members and helpers will be identified by their bright yellow fluorescent jerkins. There is only one prize this year and it is a special cake, made by one of our regular visitors, Annette, along with a year's free household membership of the WWA. Last year, Annette made an amazing 'Apple Tree' cake but she will not divulge any information about this year's cake in advance of the day!

IF ANYONE CAN HELP WITH THIS EVENT, EITHER ON THE DAY, OR BY MAKING AN APPLE-BASED SNACK PLEASE CONTACT THE EDITOR AS SHE WOULD BE DELIGHTED TO HEAR FROM YOU!



Annual General Meeting

The Scout Hut in Riverside Road has been booked for Sunday 2 March 2008 as the venue for the Annual General Meeting. The meeting starts at 11am and is expected to last for about 2 hours. Coffee and biscuits will be served around noon. The agenda for the first part of the meeting covers the previous year's achievements along with reports from the Reserve Manager, the Treasurer, the Membership Secretary, and an update on the 'WaterWheelers'. The election of the new committee for 2008 is the most important part of the proceedings and any nominations for new committee members must be sent to the Secretary or Chairman two weeks in advance of the meeting.

The second part of the AGM is an illustrated talk *-Basically Bats-* by Patty Briggs from the Herts Bat Group. Her illustrated talk not only explains the essential role that bats play worldwide in the maintenance of the ecosystem of our planet through pollination and seed dispersal but also illustrates how to discover where bats live, how to find them and dispels the usual preconceptions that people have of bats. She may also bring some bats for us to see (but not handle) at close quarters.



Membership renewals

This last year has flown by (a sure sign of getting older, I'm told) and it is my pleasant duty to once again persuade all you lovely members to pay your subscription fees for the coming year. At the risk of repetition, the WWA really does rely on the money that is received via its members, without whom there would be no Association. It is as important (probably more so) to have members who are not physically active in running this charity but who help fund those that do. Once again, the WWA committee has decided to keep the subscription at £10 a year per household (with a concessionary rate of £5 for senior citizens, students or unwaged). For ease of administration I ask those who would like to 'Gift Aid' their subscription to sign the form in the appropriate place. Strictly, this only needs to be done once but as the Association claims on an annual basis it makes things simpler for me and the Treasurer! A Membership renewal form is enclosed with this newsletter, unless you joined after 1st September - in which case your membership carries over to the following year. I would like to update the membership details – especially e-mail addresses – so that members can be reminded of forthcoming events electronically, instead of spending extra money on postage. If you are happy for this to happen please include your e-mail address on the form. Your details will not be passed to anyone else and will be kept in complete confidence. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Howard XXXX
Membership Secretary

People

Antonio Russo [1950-2007]



Some of our long-term members will remember the wonderful community of Italians that initially tended allotments on what has now become the WWA Reserve. It is with great sadness that I must report the death of Tony Russo, who had been ill with cancer for a couple of years. Many will remember his dear Mama – ‘Sussi’- about whom there was a tribute in a recent newsletter. Tony continued to tend his mother’s allotment after her death, and made many improvements over the years, including putting up a polytunnel this year, even though he was having difficult treatments for his illness. His allotment garden gave him a huge amount of pleasure and helped to keep his spirits up when he was feeling down. We often spoke, as we were both on the Reserve on an almost daily basis, and he always maintained a cheerful optimism about his illness, until the time came when he could no longer visit the site. He once told me he would have loved to build a proper log cabin on the allotment one day but I’m not too sure if the Committee would have agreed with him! Tony was a great help to the WWA and if ever we were in need of machinery, Tony could ‘fix it’ for us. He provided (free of charge) a fantastic rotovator for when we were preparing the ground for hedge planting, saving us a couple of hundred pounds. He also turned up once with a ‘Wackerplate’ - a machine used for tamping down hardcore when we were laying paths. Again, at no charge to the Association (although I did slip him a bottle of decent malt whisky for his trouble – paid for from WWA funds, of course!). He also organised (at reduced rates), along with his brother John, the excavator used for desilting the lake in 2006.

I, personally, will really miss his sense of humour, his practical knowledge and his help. The place just won’t seem the same without him.

[Editor]

News from the working parties

Work continues on the Butterfly Meadow at each monthly working party. A good proportion of the designated area has now been dug over with vast amounts of rubble and rubbish being dug up at each session. Special thanks must go to Laurie and Margaret who come and regularly work on this project. They have ordered the next batch of plants from the local branch of the Herts Butterfly Conservation Trust in readiness for planting out in the Spring. The first section of the Butterfly Meadow is doing reasonably well but the new plants were not mature enough to attract any butterflies in the summer, although many people reported that it was not a good year for butterfly sightings because of the wet weather.

Two willows were due for pollarding and this work has been completed along with a fallen willow in the Bog. A lot of bramble has been cut back around the Reserve where it was becoming too invasive. Quite a bit of tree work is necessary this winter and this will be carried out before the nesting season begins. The other main projects for the coming year are to continue developing the pond area in the Pyghtle, constructing new composting areas and planting more native daffodils, snowdrops and foxgloves around the Reserve.

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Men and machines

Our Chairman can be seen below modelling the latest in colour co-ordinated safety gloves. Very fetching, Steve! We’ll get you a new fleece to match



The new machine is proving to be ‘worth its weight in gold’ (and grey!) and has made a huge difference to the amount of time spent in mowing and raking the grass.

IMPORTANT NOTICE

Working party dates

The current working party day falls on the same Sunday as the St. Albans Farmer’s Market and some of our volunteers (including Committee members) would like to attend both but find it is a bit of a rush to do so. Therefore, the Committee has decided to move the working parties to the last Sunday in the Month. The dates for the next few months will be:

Sunday 13 and 27 January (to allow for the changeover, and to set up for the Wassail)

Sunday 24 February

Sunday March 30

Sunday April 27

Sunday May 25

Working parties always start at 11am and usually last for a couple of hours. All age groups are welcome. Tools and gloves are provided. If anyone would like to help out at other times, then please contact Howard, the Reserve Manager.



The Big Garden Birdwatch 2008

Taking part in the Big Garden Birdwatch is simple and fun. Why not come along to the WWA Reserve where we will be holding our own event on Sunday 27th January at 11am when we’ll spend an hour counting the birds, recording the highest number of each species seen on the Reserve (not flying over) at any one time. You could also do your Birdwatch in your garden or a local park. Either way it’s best to decide on a place where you can see the birds well and where you can sit quietly so they are not disturbed. If you decide to have a go, either join us at the WWA, or download the recording forms from the RSPB website and follow the instructions. Recording forms and pencils are provided if you do decide to come along – and remember to bring your binoculars!

Bird reports



Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*)

The campaign to stop people feeding the Mallards continues successfully, and as a result, we have managed to keep the numbers down to between 12-15 birds. This is still too many for such a small site but vastly better than the 50-60 that appeared in previous years. One new arrival this year is a Little Grebe (Dabchick) who flew in at the end of November. We have had visits from this species before, but the last pair that came here a couple of years ago did not stay long because of too much disturbance from the Mallards and Swans. This particular bird shown above (photographed by the exceptionally patient Keith) has been feasting on our small fish – let's hope he saves some for our resident Kingfishers!

Another return species is the Eurasian or Common Coot. For many years there was always a pair that appeared each winter and stayed to breed, leaving again at the end of summer. There is only one Coot on the water at present – perhaps this is one of that original pair?



The Kingfisher

Keith has patiently been trying to get good shots of the pair of Kingfishers that has been very active on the Reserve throughout December and pictured right are the best so far. The Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) is one of Britain's most brightly coloured and interesting birds. They are not much bigger than a house sparrow (17-19cm long with a 4cm beak) and are very brightly coloured. They have bright orange underparts with a white bib while the wings are bluish-green, and the back, rump and tail are bright blue. The Kingfisher's head is blue with orange marks in front and behind the bird's eyes, and a white mark on each side of the head. The legs are short and orange in colour. The bright colours are most obvious when the bird is in flight. Males and females are almost identical, but the female can just be distinguished by the orange colour on the lower part of her bill. Their wings and tail are relatively short, and the bill is long and pointed. Common Kingfishers are found throughout Europe, except the far north, and also North Africa and Asia.

They live around streams, slow-flowing rivers, ponds and lakes where they feed on aquatic insects and small fish, such as sticklebacks. When hunting for food, they perch on a favourite branch near to the water and watch out, with their keen eyesight, for a suitable fish. When a fish is spotted, the Kingfisher will dive, beak first, into the water. The Kingfisher has to rely on memory to predict where the fish will be after it has entered the water and will sometimes return to the surface with a stone in its beak if its prediction was wrong. After it has caught a fish the bird will fly back to the perch with the fish in its beak. The Kingfisher does not eat it immediately and instead will beat the fish against the perch to kill it and then consume it head-first. Kingfishers will regurgitate pellets containing accumulated indigestible material such as fish bones. These are very helpful to the scientists who are studying Kingfishers, as they contain evidence of their diets. Kingfisher courtship occurs in early spring when the male will approach the female with a fish in his beak. He will hold it so that the fish's head is facing outwards and attempt to feed it to the female. If he is unsuccessful he will simply eat the fish himself. He may have to repeat this feeding behaviour for some time before mating occurs. Kingfishers make burrows in sandy riverbanks. The burrow consists of a horizontal tunnel with a nesting chamber at the end and is usually about a metre long. The female usually lays about 6 or 7 eggs, but sometimes will lay up to 10 eggs, and both parents will share the job of incubating the eggs. The chicks are normally ready to leave the nest when they are 24-25 days old, but if the fish supply is poor, they can take up to 37 days. Once out of the nest, the young are fed for only four days before the adults drive them out of the territory and start the next brood. During the breeding season, Kingfishers can often be seen hunting around the deep pools that form in the bends of rivers. These locations are rich in the young fish that the Kingfishers feed to their young. Kingfishers are very sensitive to cold weather and a particularly harsh winter can seriously reduce their populations. Their call is a shrill 'tsee' or 'tsee-tsee' call, often repeated rapidly, especially when in flight. The vivid colours in Kingfisher plumage are iridescent. Iridescence is more correctly known as structural colour. Pigment colours are seen when certain wavelengths of light are absorbed and all others are reflected. Structural colour is a result of interference between different wavelengths of light as they are reflected from different layers in the surface of a substance. This is how the rainbow colours are produced on the surface of bubbles. The pigment in Kingfisher feathers is actually dark brown but the structural colour produces blues, greens and oranges. The feathers on the bird's back can seem blue or green depending on the angle they are viewed at. Whereas pigment colours break down after time and exposure to light, structural colour does not.



Photographs courtesy of Keith XXXX