

Wassail

The Wassail was a great success - after a week of last-minute upsets. Ignoring dire weather warnings we went ahead and put up the awning the day before the event (to save time). By the following morning, the awning was in shreds and the wooden cross-bars had snapped after 70mph gusts of wind. Oops! But no matter, we are made of stern stuff and had the brilliant idea of borrowing another brand-new awning from the local allotment society (who had made their own version of the one designed by our Chairman, Steve).



So the Reserve Manager and Editor made some frantic early morning phone calls to various allotment committee members, and all was well again....

The new awning was put up, tables were laid out with lots of lovely food, the spiced apple-juice was heated up, the Wicket Brood arrived and gave their inimitable Morris Dancing display, Sandy Glover led the ceremony around the apple trees, Kathryn Holt performed a story for the children, cider was poured on the roots of the trees, toast hung up in the branches, party-poppers were popped and many people commented on what a pleasant afternoon they had enjoyed. And we also raised £400 as a bonus (which will be used to fund the 'WaterWheelers' expenses). The Wicket Brood have offered to dance at our summer event (see below), providing they are not booked elsewhere.



Summer event

The Association are hoping to hold their regular fund-raising summer event on Saturday 27th June 2009. The format will be similar to last year, with childrens' activities in the afternoon, including pond dipping and mini-beast hunts, the duck race on the river, face painting, 'Splat-the-Rat', storytelling and craftmaking.

Hopefully, the evening event will have a musical theme (weather and musicians permitting!) along with the usual BBQ. As all the details are not yet finalised, more information will go up on the website nearer the time.

Newsletter update from the Editor

I have not finished creating the database for sending out the newsletter by e-mail. Hopefully this will be done by the next issue.

Annual General Meeting

The AGM finally went ahead on the 8th March after another week of last minute upsets - the main one being the double booking of our usual venue - and not being told until a few days before the meeting. This is the second year we have been let down at the Scout Hut and so the committee hope to use the Sub-Aqua Club in Cottonmill Lane for future meetings (and we'd like to thank those lovely people from the Club who kindly helped us out at incredibly short notice. Many, many thanks to you all!)

After the official AGM business was completed, Laurie and Margaret gave an informative presentation on the development of the new Butterfly Meadow. This was followed with a slide-show about the Herts Water Vole Project, presented by Ali Hauser, with help from Alison Washbrook, both from the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust.

There have been some changes to the committee, and special thanks must go to Bud, who stood down this year, and who is a founder member of the Association. He has had many different roles over the years and was responsible for publishing the newsletter for many of them. He has also been responsible for keeping an archive of the WWA history, along with his partner Derryn (who still remains a committee member). There are two additions to the committee: Margaret and Janet (who have both been regular helpers at the working parties and events), and the Association would like to welcome them to the team. The full committee for 2009 is listed on the back page.

Gannett Foundation Award



The Association are pleased to announce that the new tools and equipment have finally been purchased, with help from staff at Aylett Nurseries, who sourced all the items for us. As mentioned in the last newsletter, we were awarded a grant of £1500 from the Gannett foundation (via the Review newspaper) and we asked Aylett director, Adam Wigglesworth, for his help in gathering together all the different items, and delivering them to the Reserve. Thanks also go to Aylett's buyer, Steven, for his hard work - saving the Reserve Manager many days of waiting in for different deliveries. We were able to get a discount from Aylett Nurseries and with the extra money, the Association has purchased eight 'Woodcrete' bat boxes which will be put up around the Reserve shortly. See if you can spot them on your next visit.

Thanks also go to the anonymous benefactor who donated a shopping trolley full of almost new tools to the Association. We will make sure that good use is made of them all.

St. Albans Rotary Club Charity Bike Ride

Once again, WWA members are taking part in this charity bike ride on the 17th May 2009. It is a great event for all the family - and it is always lovely to see so many children taking part each year. Entry forms are available in the Herts Advertiser - or you can enrol on the day. There are 10/20/30/40 mile routes so all levels of fitness are catered for. The Association will be taking out both of the 'WaterWheeler' tandems but we do have a spare tandem for any pair of riders tall enough to use it. It is a racing style tandem, with drop handlebars, and a rather large frame! But we would love someone to have a go on it. If you fancy trying it out - just let us knowand off you go!

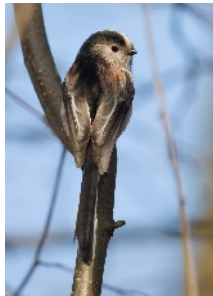
www.watercress-net.org.uk

Birds

Firstly, a little about the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch. More than 552,000 people took part in this year's Birdwatch, counting over 8.5 million birds. 73 species were recorded in 279,000 gardens across the UK over the weekend of 24th and 25th January. And the [Long-tailed Tit](#) has flown into the top ten for the first time in the survey's 30-year history. Numbers of this highly sociable species nearly doubled compared to last year. The increase is being linked to the mild winters leading up to 2009. Small, insect-eating birds like Long-tailed Tits are particularly susceptible to the cold as the food they rely on is hard to come by in frosts and snow, so milder conditions have contributed to a higher survival rate. And the Editor is especially pleased as this is her favourite little bird. Aaah...lovely.

The top 12 species recorded were:

1. House Sparrow [1]
2. Starling [2]
3. Blackbird [3]
4. Blue tit [4]
5. Chaffinch [5]
6. Woodpigeon [6]
7. Collared dove [7]
8. Great Tit [9]
9. Robin [8]
10. Long-tailed Tit [14]
11. Goldfinch [10]
12. Greenfinch [11]



The numbers in brackets show their position in the 2008 Birdwatch and one can see that the Long-tailed Tit was 14th last year.

Our own results for the event, recorded by Sam and Penny, were: Blackbird, Black-headed Gull, Blue Tit, Carrion Crow, Chaffinch, Coal Tit, Collared Dove, Coot, Dunnock, Goldfinch, Great Tit, Greenfinch, House Sparrow, Jackdaw (24!), Kingfisher, Little Egret (very exciting!), Little Grebe, Magpie, Mallard, Moorhen, Robin and Wood Pigeon.

Other notable sightings since the last newsletter include Gadwall, Reed Buntings, Coal Tit, Bullfinches and Red Kites. Red Kites have been seen regularly over the Gorhambury Estate in the last few years - but it is only recently that they have been spotted over the WWA Reserve and the adjacent allotment site, just across the river from us. They are getting quite common after becoming almost extinct. If you would like to find out more about these beautiful birds, there is an excellent website which has everything you need to know about the Chilterns Red Kite breeding and re-introduction programme at www.redkites.net

The first two broods of Moorhen chicks have hatched out and eight have been spotted so far in the reeds. The Coots made a nest but seemed to have failed again in producing any young - as both parents are off the nest - with no sign of any young in tow. This happened last year and they went on to try again.

There are sightings boards, both inside and outside the bird hide, so feel free to add anything of interest. A record of what is spotted is being kept by the Reserve Manager.

Spring has arrived



Spring always seems to be the best time to visit the Reserve, as everything looks so fresh and new. Pictured above is the first Yellow Flag Iris to blossom. These follow on from the Marsh Marigolds (or King Cups) which are just beginning to fade now. Greater Stitchwort is out on the Pioneer Woodland bank, Ramsons (or Wild Garlic) is flowering in the Shady Place. There are still Primroses, Periwinkle and Cowslips in bloom. Even the Fritillaries survived this year without being picked!



Wildlife

Fish have been seen by the far bridge (in the last week of April) - very small and very few - but it is a start. The Little Grebes that stayed for several months have possibly almost depleted what fish stocks there were in the Mere. Hopefully, the fish will breed prolifically - to provide some food for the Kingfishers! Now the weather is warmer, many butterflies have been sighted including Orange Tip, Brimstone, Peacock, Holly Blue, Comma, Green-veined White and Speckled Wood.

Surveys

There is to be another Water Vole survey soon by staff from the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust. There are still no signs of these delightful creatures on the Ver - but we need to keep up-to-date with our records. We are also hoping to arrange another macro-invertebrate survey, as the last one was done in August 2001. This involves taking samples from the Mere and boggy areas following the standard Environment Agency methodology which is a combination of 'kick and sweep' sampling with a pond net. In addition there is a hand search of boulders and other movable material present within the cress-beds. It will be interesting to see how the ecology of the cress beds may have changed in eight years. The previous results are on our website under the heading 'Wildlife'.

Working parties

Two remaining tasks from the 2005-2009 Management Plan have now been completed. At the end of March, the Association hired a JCB mini-digger for a week to coincide with the working party, and so we have finally managed to get around to digging out the new pond. Originally, this was just to be a 'shallow pool' but this proved not to work very well, so it has been deepened and enlarged. The idea is just to leave it (and not line it), to see what happens naturally. While the digger was at the Reserve it seemed a pity not to make the most of it and so an extra new 'seasonal' pool was dug. Although the earlier pool did not really work, this one is slightly deeper and we hope it will stay as a muddy area as the temperature fluctuates throughout the year. All of the spoil from digging out the ponds was carefully distributed around the Reserve, filling in hollows on the paths to make them easier to mow, and filling in some of the old drainage ditches on the former allotment.

Both ponds appear rather bare at the moment but we look forward to seeing new growth around the margins fairly soon.

Other work done at the March working party included making the annual barley straw 'sausage' to try and inhibit the growth of the green algae - which the Mallards soon adopted as their new sleeping quarters!



Butterfly Meadow

Work continues on the Butterfly Meadow and where plants have failed, others have been put in to fill any gaps. Some Alder Buckthorn and Common Buckthorn have been planted nearby (as the plant food of the Brimstone butterfly) and a section of the Meadow has been sown with a mixture of grasses (suitable as larval plants for butterflies), including Yorkshire Fog, Cocksfoot, False Broom, Bents and Red Fescue. Malcolm Hull, from Herts and Middlesex Butterfly Conservation, walked around the Reserve with committee members to work out a monitoring route for doing future surveys. We plan to offer training sessions to volunteers who would like to help with the surveys a bit later in the year, when there are reasonable numbers of butterflies to be seen. This year is a pilot year so we are not too worried if we get a late start. If you are interested in being a 'Butterfly Surveyor' then please contact the Reserve Manager for more details. It does not take very long to do a 'walk - around survey' and it is only done on lovely sunny days!

Dogs on the Reserve

It has been reported that some members of the public are ignoring the sign stating that dogs are not allowed on the Reserve. If you see anyone with their dog, please report it to the Reserve Manager (or even give the dog owner a gentle reminder of the rule). It is unfair on other dog owners if they perceive that some people can take dogs on to the Reserve - and others cannot. The rule has been in place since 1992 and the Management Committee decided back then that it was inappropriate to allow dogs onto the site. The current Management Committee still support that view.

Orchard



The chestnut paling fence between the Orchard and Riverside Court had been in a state of disrepair for some time and was intended to be dealt with many years ago. With funds available this year, the work was completed at the working party in April - by Jack, Howard, Dave, Sam and Bruce. It certainly looks a great deal better, and is much more robust than before. Well done, lads! Following round from the new fence, a brushwood screen has been put up along the back of three houses in Riverside Road - and the bank in front planted with Buddleias and Holly. In time this should provide some privacy for our visitors. This area was looking rather forlorn after having to cut down some of the almost- dead elders at the February working party. The bank was also cleared of Brambles to give the apple trees more light. New Elders are being planted around the Reserve as they all seem to be reaching their 'sell-by date' at the same time and we need to re-stock.

Over the winter (and especially in February) the Association was pleased to welcome Peter, who offered to help us with the Orchard management. Peter is going to try and renovate a couple of the very old trees, including the Bramley. This has to be done over a period of three years as too much pruning would shock the trees. He has been giving some committee members tips on training and pruning the newer trees - which have been somewhat neglected. The trees have had a good dose of 'Growmore' and the area around their base has been cleared of any grass and weeds to give the apple trees a better chance to flourish. There is still much to do and Peter will be back in June to thin out the crop. The idea is to obtain fewer but bigger apples this year. In a couple of years, there should be an improvement in both the shape and the health of the Orchard.

Working party dates 2009

Sunday 31st May

Sunday 28th June

Sunday 26th July

Sunday 30th August.

The working parties start at 11am and all tools are provided. There is a refreshment break with tea, coffee, apple juice and cake on offer. All are welcome.

Jobs that will need doing include:

Giving the wooden benches/sheds their once-a-year spruce-up

Ongoing weeding of the Butterfly Meadow

Grass cutting

Keeping the pathways clear of nettles, etc

This article was submitted by Alison.

Have you seen the WWA sightings blog, yet, at <http://www.wwasightings.blogspot.com/>? It was set up in 2007 and has turned out to be a useful and interesting chronological sightings record of birds, animals and various other unexpected creatures such as terrapins, which have been spotted on the site. We're fortunate enough to have 2



keen photographers, Keith and Sam, who have taken some excellent close-up photos, which have really helped members to appreciate and learn to recognise different species. I find it is particularly handy in informing amateurs like myself what I might expect to see on the site at different times of the year. The photos suit the blog as they are informative as well as attractive.

I'm in the processing of indexing the entries, so you'll be able to go straight to a photo of, say, a kingfisher, if you want to. I'd recommend the Kingfisher photos and also those of the Great Spotted Woodpecker.

The sightings blog is also a useful record, in the current context of climate change, to how the natural environment is gradually being affected and it may prove useful in the future to be able to look back and see what was spotted when. Any member's photos or comments are welcome as the key thing about the blog is communicating what we've seen on the site. **Contact:** Steve's email on the WWA website.

Here are some examples



Great Spotted Woodpecker



Muntjac

And just in case we take ourselves too seriously, we have entries from members such as Steve, to make us laugh at ourselves.....

Activity on site Sunday morning. Most creatures naturally adopt a pose to reduce the effects of the prevailing wind



This rare breed is generally migratory and only seen briefly on site in January



Extraordinary! Is it Denis Healey or a House Sparrow on the feeder? It may be that a few feathers need smoothing down

And just to add to Alison's choice, the Editor's favourite...



After due consideration of the Health and Safety policy and a detailed risk assessment, intrepid volunteers scale the site uplands looking for early flowering alpine

Steve - I think you should write the newsletter - you're a natural! (Editor)

WWA Committee 2009

Officers

- Steve Chairman
- Pat Secretary
- Mandy..... Treasurer
- Howard..... Reserve Manager

Members

- Sheila..... Editor
- Derryn Archives
- Penny Cake-maker extraordinaire
- Sam Web technical support
- Margaret
- Alison Web archivist
- Jack
- Janet

Membership renewals

Thanks go to all those who renewed their membership so promptly. For anyone who may have overlooked this and who wishes to continue supporting the continuing work of the WWA, please find enclosed a membership renewal form. I know I am always pressing the point that it is our members who keep the Association going financially - but it really is true! So far this year 189 people have re-joined out of a possible 230 which is really great news for the WWA. Without wishing to embarrass any particular individuals, special thanks go to those who were extra-generous with their membership subscriptions. But we never forget that each and every membership is important to us.

Howard (Membership Secretary)