

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Sunday 21st March
Sub-Aqua Club
Cottonmill Lane
11am till 1pm

This year's AGM looks set to be an interesting event, as we have enrolled the help of naturalist, John Tyler, to give us one of his illustrated talks. John appeared on T.V. (with Chris Packham from Springwatch) in his role as Glow-Worm expert in the BBC's 'Nature's Top 40' programme in 2008. He has also made his own coracle and carved a wooden Wassail Bowl – so the WWA committee just couldn't resist asking him to come to our meeting! For the sake of brevity, I won't go into all his details but he has a website where you can find out a lot more about him. We hope that you will come along and hear John's talk about 'Life in a Nutshell'.

"Nature is full of countless small and minutely detailed things, most of which go completely unnoticed by humans. Everything illustrated in this talk, whether the scales on a butterfly's wing, a caterpillar or even a slime mould, would fit comfortably inside a nutshell and most can be found within a mile or two of your chair, just waiting to be spotted".

John also does a talk on Wetlands and Wildlife - so we may change the theme at the last moment. Exciting, isn't it? So come along and find out which talk the committee finally choose!

<http://www.johntyler.co.uk/index.htm>



Oh, and I suppose we had better elect a new Committee while we are there! But we will endeavour to keep the AGM bit as short as possible so we can get onto the interesting stuff. Any new nominations to join the committee must be sent to the Secretary before the meeting (see back page for her contact number). Refreshments will be served after the official AGM business, just before the talk starts. We look forward to seeing you there.

Sheila (Editor)

PRODUCE

There is still some produce left that was not sold at the Wassail so if you wish to buy some crab-apple jelly, or spiced apple and elderflower juice, both (at £2) will be available at the AGM and the March working party. But be quick – or you will have to wait until the Autumn for the next batch!

WASSAIL



Well, what a WONDERFUL wassail! This proved to be the best ever, so far, and it was great to receive so many lovely comments after the event about how

much fun it was. With all the snow and ice that was present in the previous weeks, we were on tenterhooks as to whether we would need sledges and huskies to transport everything around the site - right up to the day of the event. But who could have believed that the day started with clear skies and sunshine – and stayed that way all day. About 150 people turned up to enjoy a lively performance from the Wicket Brood. We really thought it would be too dangerous for them underfoot, but the snow melted just in time for them to give us all a great display of their own style of Morris Dancing with music. Sandy was on good form as our Master of Ceremonies, and Kathryn of 'Story Tent' fame from the Trestle Theatre entertained the children with a special tale about a golden apple.

The Association committee was quite taken aback to find that we took over £650, which means a clear profit of £500, after expenses. Thank you, everyone, who gave so generously. And, as always, many, many thanks go to all those kind volunteers who gave their time making the jam, baking cakes and helping on the day. Brilliant!

NATURE DAY



The Wicket Brood have offered to come and dance at our summer event – provided they are not away on tour – which would be great fun. We just need to pick an evening when there is neither torrential rain and hail, nor thunder and lightning! We have certainly been unlucky with the weather over the last three years. Whatever happened to those long, balmy evenings of summer? Maybe, just maybe...the weather this year will be kind to us. We haven't yet set a date for our annual Nature Day but will notify you when it has been decided. It will probably follow a similar format as in previous years, with pond dipping, mini-beast hunts, the 'Duck Race', 'Splat-the-rat' and 'insect tattoos' taking place in the afternoon, followed by a BBQ in the evening.

CAPTION COMPETITION



"My hair wasn't white before I started the Siltex treatment!"

The exciting prize of two jars of WWA jam goes to Ben of Ramsbury Road. Sorry Penny!

BIG GARDEN BIRDWATCH

The Association took part in the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch at the end of January. The results (below) have been sent off to the RSPB who will then collate them and publish the findings in March. At the time of writing the results had not gone up on their website:

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch/>

Bullfinch
Redwing
Great spotted woodpecker
Blackbird (2)
Collared dove (14)
Greenfinch
Robin (2)
Blue tit (3)
Dunnock (3)
House sparrow
Song thrush (2)
Jackdaw (20)
Chaffinch (5)
Goldfinch (1)
Long tailed tit (5)
Wood pigeon (6)
Great tit (2)
Magpie (2)
Wren
Mallard (6)
Coot (2)
Black headed gull
Kingfisher
Gadwalls (6)
Little grebe (2)
Siskin (2)
Water rail

Some of the birds that were spotted are not included in the overall count as they are not typical of garden birds. But we were pleased to see them, anyway.



NATURE

It was mentioned in the last newsletter that the cold weather had brought in some unusual bird life and it has definitely been the most interesting winter for sightings since the inception of the WWA. The sightings board for January says it all.



Missing from the list is the Little Egret that graced us with its presence at the Wassail. The exact same thing happened the year before – it must just like the music! Teal, Pochard, Tufted Duck and Snipe are all 'firsts' for the Reserve, and Shoveler and Gadwall have only visited sporadically. Now that the snow has disappeared, so have most of the waterfowl, but two male Gadwalls were still on the Mere with three females at the time of writing. Lucky chaps!



Another recent sighting has been that of a Tree Creeper. Many years ago one was seen on the big old oak tree halfway up the railway embankment but then it disappeared. So it was a real treat to have seen another one – this time in the elder trees by the Orchard. We actually have a special Tree Creeper nest box on the Reserve – but it is believed that blue tits are the usual residents. The Tree Creeper has a streaked brown back, and white underparts. The upperparts are excellent camouflage against bark and it will be most likely the brilliant white underparts that will catch your eye. It climbs up trees, mouse-like, and usually starts at the bottom and works upwards in a spiral around the trunk. The brown downward-curved beak is used to probe crevices in the bark for insects and spiders, and its stiff tail is used as a prop (like woodpeckers). The legs are pale brown. In autumn and winter, it often joins flocks of tits and other small birds, so if you come across such a flock in a wood, it is worth listening out for a Tree Creeper among them. Both the male and the female build the nest behind loose bark, cladding on a building, or ivy. The nest is made from twigs, grass, and moss, and lined with feathers. The eggs are about 16 mm by 12 mm. They are smooth and non-glossy, and white with fine reddish-brown speckling. The female incubates the eggs by herself, but both parents feed the young after they have hatched.

Look around carefully and you may catch a glimpse of this delightful bird yourself!

RESERVE MANAGER'S REPORT

Despite the snowy weather (do you remember when all winters were like this?) a lot of work has been carried out on the Reserve. Before the Wassail, last minute preparations included clearing a space to put up the awning, renewing some of the apple tree signs and cutting back brambles. The apple trees also had their annual pruning, with guidance from Peter Botsford. This is the second year we have been renovating them and hopefully an improvement in their shape and fruiting will be evident by harvest time.



The second treatment of Siltex has now been completed. Richard, along with Howard (Reserve Manager), waded up the Mere dispersing the chalky powder, trying to disturb the wildlife as little as possible. We now wait to see whether it has any effect. The water went 'milky' for a day which puzzled some of our visitors, including the Little Grebe, but it had cleared by the following day. Thanks go to our friends at the adjacent Verulam Angling Club for the use of their boat. They also agreed to let us have as much woodchip as we want following tree work recently done on their site. This has been used to top dress the path in the Shady Place and the two paths through the Butterfly Meadow. Our students from Watling View School came along and spent an afternoon barrowing the woodchip to the required sites. Thanks guys – and I hope we didn't tire you out too much! The paths look really great and should last another year before needing doing again. The students have been coming regularly to the Reserve on Wednesday afternoons to assist with cutting back any brambles that are overhanging the paths, putting down straw where the ground is saturated and collecting up and taking to the bonfire pile or compost heaps all the prunings from the apple trees.



Other tasks achieved include the annual cleaning out of the bird boxes. We can report that all the boxes were used with the exception (again!) of the special Robin box, tucked away in the Orchard. Some birds are just too picky! The large bird feeders are also cleaned out on a regular basis for hygiene purposes.

Howard (Reserve Manager)

WORK PARTY DATES

Sunday 28 March: 11am -1pm
Sunday 25 April: 11am – 1pm
Sunday 30 May: 11am – 1pm
Sunday 27 June: 11am -- 1pm

All are welcome and the work parties last for about 2 hours, with a break for refreshments, including delicious home-made cake that Penny has been providing. The new meadow is taking shape slowly and has been dug over many times to try and eliminate the weeds. It is hoped to be planted up soon with grasses and some wild flowers.

All tools and gloves are provided.

WWA HISTORY

Many of you may have wondered what is hidden behind the locked door to your left, after crossing the small bridge next to the Wild Spit. This is, in fact, the last of the six allotments that were being worked on the old watercress beds site when the WWA was formed. The Council wished to evict the allotment holders, back in 1991, but the newly-formed WWA committee thought this unfair when they took over the site, and so they managed to persuade Council officials to let the plot holders stay. A binding agreement was reached between the Council, the WWA and the allotment holders. One condition was that all the plots would eventually become part of the Nature Reserve as each allotment holder died or moved away. This last remaining allotment has now become available and will be incorporated into the management plan for the Reserve. It is quite a large plot and much consideration will be given by your committee as to how the area develops over the next few years.



View of one of the allotments in 1991 – taken at the end of the newly formed 'Wild spit'



Re-surfacing of the WWA driveway sometime in the last century!

WWA Committee 2009/10

Officers

SteveChairman

Howard.....Reserve Manager/Membership
Secretary

MandyTreasurer

PatSecretary

Members

SheilaEditor

DerrynArchivist

Penny.....Social Secretary

Sam.....Website technical support

Margaret....Management Plan Advisor

AlisonWebsite advisor

JackMember

JanetMember

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

It was a bit of an experiment sending out the Membership Renewal form by e-mail to around half of our members and the results are not unsurprising. We have received quite a significant drop in renewals compared to the same time last year. A reminder e-mail did help bring in some subscriptions, and this newsletter may jog the memories of any last stragglers! I think that next year we will send out the renewal form by post – but still send the newsletters by e-mail to those who have requested them by that method. It certainly saves on printing costs – but if we lose people then it is somewhat counter-productive! If you receive your newsletter by post and have not renewed your membership this year a renewal form has been included. Please accept my apologies if you do not wish to renew your subscription – but of course I hope you will! The WWA appreciate every single membership – as each one helps to keep this wonderful local facility going.

Please remember to sign the Gift Aid form if you wish the Association to claim back the tax.

Howard
Membership Secretary



WINTER WONDERLAND



It seems hard to believe that this winter would ever finish, but spring is in the air and the snow seems a distant memory. The photo above captures the spirit of the moment, just after a heavy snowfall. And after the snow melted, glorious snowdrops appeared (pictured left).

BIRD HIDE



As usual, please check that the door is securely closed on leaving. We are still having problems with a group of three teenagers who insist on being a nuisance by scrawling graffiti on the benches and trying to set fire to the posters. It has been mentioned to the local community policeman, so if you see any suspicious behaviour (other than that of the Reserve manager and his wife!) please contact him at the address below.

John Massey
Police Community Support Officer
Victoria Street, St. Albans AL1 3JL
01727 796042
john.massey@herts.pnn.police.uk

www.watercress-net.org

A late sighting has been that of a Grey Wagtail on the main bridge. More about this species will be in the next newsletter.