

Wassail, wassail all over the town



Or at least in the WWA orchard as it is almost time for our now famous Wassail ceremony. Put on your warm clothes, collect your loose change and head on down to the Nature Reserve for an hour or two of general silliness and celebration of our pagan past. The Wassail is the Association's most important event for fundraising in the WWA year,

but it is also held to have fun at the same time. For those new to the ancient custom of wassailing here is an idea of what will happen. We sing songs, pour cider onto the roots of the trees, hang toast in their branches and make lots of noise to scare away any bad spirits that might be in the Orchard by firing party poppers into the trees and banging willow sticks on dustbin lids. Shotguns were used in previous centuries but the local residents might not be too pleased if we strictly adhere to tradition! This is to help ensure a good crop of apples in the coming year. The ceremony is followed with a feast of apple-based snacks and hot, apple and ginger cordial (£1 a cup). There is no entrance charge but we do ask people to make a generous donation in exchange for the food and entertainment! Home-made jams and jellies, made with fruit from our orchard, will be on sale. Unfortunately the quinces rotted on the trees before ripening, so no Quince Jelly this year.



Sandy Glover has agreed to be our Master of Ceremonies – and the racy Wicket Brood will be bringing their unique style of Morris dancing to the event.

The Place: WWA Nature Reserve

The Time: 2pm prompt

The Date: Sunday 16th January 2011

This year the refreshments will be served in the newly acquired allotment – but the ceremony will be in the Orchard as usual.

There will be a raffle to win £25 of Aylett Nurseries vouchers

HELP NEEDED

Any help with organising this event is always greatly appreciated, whether it is selling raffle tickets, making a cake or helping with the clearing up afterwards. If you would like to be involved, please contact the Editor (very soon, please, as the event is almost upon us!) who would dearly love to hear from you.

Membership Renewals

January is here again and so it is time to remind everyone that membership renewals are now due. Once again, the subscription fee stays at £10 a year for a household membership, and £5 for concessions (students and senior citizens). The situation in respect of getting grants is likely to be more difficult in the foreseeable future which means that the Association will be even more reliant on its membership base for funding. We have been fortunate in getting some extra money from the 'St. Albans and District Fund for the Future' which was launched in 2001 by John Peters (pictured below, right), then Mayor of St Albans, to support charities and voluntary groups in the area. It aims to provide annual grants over a five year period, without reapplication. This often offers a lease of life for recipients, as applying for grants can be continuous, labour intensive, and exhaustive of volunteer resources. John is also a Trustee of Hertfordshire Community Foundation - the Fund administrators. The WWA have been awarded £250.



So far 21 groups have received grants of up to £500 a year for each of five years. Many of these have commented on the value of a regular pattern and the reassurance of the five year period. They have also been delighted that groups do not need to explain what they spend the money on, as long as they continue their basic task of helping local people within St Albans City and District.

For those of you receiving their newsletter by e-mail, the membership form is included as an attachment. When renewing, please can you confirm your preference on how you would like to receive your newsletter (either by post or by e-mail).

Please remember to sign the Gift Aid form if you wish the Association to claim back the tax. You may have signed before but it is a lot easier for our Membership Secretary and Treasurer to claim this tax benefit on an annual basis without having to refer back to previous year's records. Thank you.

As Membership Secretary I would like to take this opportunity to thank every member for their support without which the WWA would not be able to function.

Howard (Membership Secretary)

Reserve news



If you go down to the woods (or WWA) today, you may be in for a surprise. Parakeets. They've arrived! First one, then four ...and now eight have been seen at one go. Parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*) are originally from India. So why are they able to survive - and thrive - here? Bedecked with emerald green feathers and a rose-red beak, the ring-neck parakeet brings a touch of tropical glamour to suburban gardens in London and the South East. There have also been sightings in the North West and in Scotland. How does a bird that looks more suited to warmer climes cope in the UK? "They actually originate from the foothills of the Himalayas, so they don't need it to be that warm to live comfortably," says Andre Farrar of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Three factors influence whether a species can adapt to a new habitat - food supply, climate and competition with other species. "From the evidence before our eyes, the answer to whether these birds have successfully adapted is clearly yes," Mr Farrar says. The population numbers about 32,000 across London and the RSPB estimates it will rise to nearly 50,000 by 2011. In the Big Garden Birdwatch 2006, the ring-neck parakeet was among the 20 most-sighted birds in London, seen in all 33 boroughs and jumping from 19th place in 2005 to 15th. "There is a stable and reliable food supply in suburban gardens for their diet of seeds, berries, fruit and nuts. And there has been an increase in the number of people putting bird-feeders in their garden," says Mr Farrar. But he pooh-poohs any suggestion that global warming might have something to do with the population explosion. "They're long-lived birds and in the 40-odd years that they've been here, they have survived some quite cold winters." He puts the boom down to natural population growth - there are more birds to breed and so produce more chicks.

Foreign invaders

The Government is currently developing a framework for dealing with non-native species - such as the parakeets, Chinese mitten crabs and grey squirrels - and assessing the impact on native species to these shores. As yet, there is no strong evidence that the parakeets are adversely affecting native birds that share similar habitats, such as starlings and woodpeckers. But if the growth of wild parakeets continues at its current rate, there are concerns that they could become a pest to farmers or threaten other wildlife. "Competition for resources would be the main threat," says Mr Farrar. "This is

a much wider issue, both in the UK and globally." The introduction of invasive non-native species is one of the main causes of biodiversity loss worldwide, second only to the destruction of habitat. There are a number of sometimes fanciful theories as to how parakeets came to make their home here, such as the urban legend that the birds escaped from a container at Heathrow airport or from Shepperton Studios in west London during filming of *The African Queen* in 1951. For a recent study on whether these birds are becoming a real problem for our native birds, there was a fascinating report in *The Independent* newspaper on the 20th December 2010. Check it out at the link below:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/parakeets-cause-problems-for-british-wildlife-2165449.html>

The Pyghtle



If you have strolled around the Reserve recently you may have noticed the new viewing point that has been created, looking into the Pyghtle. This nearly completes the development of the area and makes an interesting stop-off point on the circular walk without causing disturbance to the wildlife habitat. Last year the Pyghtle proved to be the best spot for watching butterflies, so this new feature will hopefully add to the enjoyment of your visit. At some point it is intended to experiment with 'laying' a section of hedge from the River Ver boundary to the far bridge. Donato Cinicolo (champion Hertfordshire hedgelayer) has kindly offered to inspect the hedge and give us advice on how to progress.



Work Party Updates



The work parties have been well-attended and we have a really fantastic group of volunteers at present. Over the winter they will concentrate on preparing the old allotment for incorporating into the Nature Reserve. Once the ground has been made safe and all rubbish removed it is planned to split the allotment in two. We are hoping to hire a skip to coincide with the March working party but this will depend on the weather conditions. The entrance driveway gets very slippery in the winter and the skip lorry could get stuck. The Sanctuary can then be extended once the ugly fencing that is there at present has been removed. The remainder of the allotment that reaches to the Alban Way will either be fenced off, or a new hedge planted, with some sort of viewing point, perhaps similar to that in the Pyghtle. This will create a dedicated bird watching area – something that has been requested by quite a few of our members. This has the added benefit of minimising any disturbance to the far end of the Mere and the backwater where various waterfowl nest. The old hut is being kept and renovated to be used as an additional storage area. It could be used as a bird hide in the future, if required. A permanent spot for holding the various WWA events is needed and the extended Sanctuary is being considered as a possibility. Whatever is finally decided, this whole area will become a great asset to the Reserve.

Laurie and Margaret are continuing working their way across the Rough Meadow areas and they cut down a large patch of bramble which was getting very old and contained a lot of dead wood. This should regrow and provide fresh blackberries and new cover for the birds, in time.

Work Party Dates

Sunday 30 Jan:	10am - 1pm
Sunday 27 Feb:	10am - 1pm
Sunday 27 March:	10am - 1pm
Sunday 24 April:	10am - 1pm

All tools and gloves are provided.

If you feel like getting out in the fresh air, meeting interesting people and helping your local charity, come along and spend an hour or two at a WWA work party. We are a friendly bunch, and ability and special skills are not required. Nothing is too onerous (or if it is we get Phil to do it – don't we Phil?) and you can relax over a coffee and cake when the work is done. And don't forget your wellies or stout shoes as the Reserve can get a bit damp this time of year.

Bonfire night



The giant bonfire went ahead as planned despite the heavy rain that evening. A mass of conifer was burned along with a huge, old chicken coop that had been dismantled at a previous working party. Thanks go to those stalwart volunteers who turned out in appalling weather. It was fun, though.

Wildlife

Winter began in earnest with quite heavy snowfall in December – just in time for the school holidays. Perfect! The other plus side, apart from all the sledging and snowball fights, was the freezing temperature which meant that the WWA saw the arrival of some interesting waterfowl. The Mere was almost frozen over at one point, which is unusual as there is a slight movement of water coming up through the artesian boreholes at the top end of the lake that raises the temperature slightly. December sightings included Tufted Duck, Pochard, Water Rail, Teal, Shoveler, Gadwall and Kingfisher. One hungry Heron attacked a Little Grebe and tried to kill it, but with the help of a well thrown snowball from the Reserve Manager, the Little Grebe escaped – but whether it survived later attacks is still unknown. One shouldn't really interfere with natural events but the Reserve Manager's wife is particularly attached to the Little Grebes and he hates to see her cry! They were a pair that seemed to be settling in and staying, but they haven't been seen since. It's getting to be just like Springwatch here on the Reserve....

If any readers would like to contribute their pictures, or ideas for articles for this newsletter, please send them to the editor for possible inclusion. Below is a lovely winter shot sent in by Jack.





Friends of Verulamium Park (with contributions from WWA committee members Sheila and Howard) have written the history of the development of the Lake. It traces negotiations between St Albans Council and central government, and is based on contemporary documents and photographs. It can be bought from the St Albans tourist information centre, Verulamium Museum and the Inn on the Park. Sheila (WWA Editor) has some copies, which retail at £5 a copy.

WWA Committee 2011

Officers

- SteveChairman
- Howard..... Reserve Manager
Membership Secretary
- Mandy.....Treasurer
- Janet..... Secretary

Members

- SheilaEditor
- PatMember
- Derryn.....Archivist
- PennySocial Secretary
- SamWebsite technical support
- Margaret.....Management Plan Advisor
- Alison.....Website advisor
- Jack.....Member



R.S.P.B. Big Garden Birdwatch

This is taking place on the 29th and 30th January which coincides with the working party on the Sunday. Committee members will be dedicating one hour between 11am and noon to record the number of species on the Reserve that visit during that hour. If anyone would like to join in we shall have plenty of identification charts, pencils and recording forms for you to use. For more information just visit the R.S.P.B website:

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

Bird Hide

Please note that the code to the bird hide is being changed from January 23rd for security purposes. The new code will be: **xxxx**. This is following unauthorised use of the hide and we hope this will improve the situation.

If any member sees anti-social behaviour on the Reserve please call either:

P.C. Ben Kirby or John Massey (Police Community Support Officer)
Safer Neighbourhood Team
Victoria Street, St. Albans AL1 3JL
01727 796042
ben.kirby@herts.pnn.police.uk
john.massey@herts.pnn.police.uk

Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting is being held on Sunday 20th March in the Sub-aqua Club at the top of Cottonmill Lane, starting at 11am. Any nominations for persons to serve on the committee must be received no later than two weeks before the meeting and sent to the Secretary. The formal part of the meeting lasts about an hour and is followed by a refreshment break. There will then be a short talk with a question and answer session. At the time of writing we are hoping to book Donato Cinicolo who, as mentioned earlier, is a champion Hertfordshire hedgelay. Donato has been a hedgelay since 1989, winning the County Championship's cup four times.

Details of the AGM will be confirmed in the March newsletter.

Exciting New Website

Have you checked out the WWA website recently? If not, you will find a modern new look which replaces the original sightings blog and website. It incorporates a blog as the core of the site so we can put new and interesting content front and centre, and to make it easy to keep the site fresh and vibrant. It also contains pages of non-blog material which will be added to over time.

Note that we have a new URL for this new site so change your bookmarks: <http://www.watercresslnr.org.uk>

A copy of the old website has been incorporated into this new system and is available from a link in the right-hand menu so it will still be accessible for ever more.

Thanks go to Sam for all his hard work on updating the website, and also to WWA member Eric who has recently assisted Sam with this.

www.watercresslnr.org.uk

PLEASE NOTE CHANGE OF WEBSITE ADDRESS

For those who would like to know the tunes we use at the Wassail please check out this link:

<http://bit.ly/cb7H9Owassail>