

Issue 94 WATERCRESS Spring 2013

NATURE DAY

Saturday 15th June

2pm onwards.....

The events for the afternoon will include **pond -dipping**, **mini-beast hunts**, the annual **duck race** on the River Ver, **'Splat-the-Rat'**.... and new for 2013..... **coracle rides** on the lake.

If anyone can help on the day (and we especially need help with running the bug hunt and supervising the 'Splat-the-Rat') please contact the Editor.

Kathryn Holt (professional storyteller from Trestle Theatre) will be working her magic in her 'Story Tent'.

What people say about 'Story Tent'.

"Brilliant! The best thing for pre-school children in St Albans" *Parent*

"Story tent brings stories really alive, helps my child to listen carefully and develops her imagination. The craft activity helps her remember the story and she re-tells it all week!" *Parent*

"Wonderful and magical... fascinating for kids, relaxing for mum" *Parent*

But Kathryn reminded us that everyone is welcome, young and old, to join in or just come along and listen. There is no age limit!



Programme of Events

2pm.....Opening Speech by Chairman

2.15.....Start of activities

4.00.....Duck race Sponsor a duck for £1. There are normally only two heats and a final so get your tickets early!

4.30.....Prizegiving

There will be light refreshments (cakes, teas, coffee and soft drinks) available to purchase throughout the afternoon.

All times are approximate...we are never that organised!

www.watercresslnr.org.uk

A WINTRY WATERCRESS WASSAIL



The Association has been incredibly fortunate to have had reasonable, even sunny, weather for the Wassail over the past decade. But this run of luck had to change and this year we were treated to some very seasonal snow flurries following quite a heavy snowfall the previous day. But were we perturbed.....of course not... we always carry on regardless! A strong contingent of the wonderful Wicket Brood put on a great display of dancing in front of the sixty WWA members who had wrapped up and braved the cold. It was certainly quite atmospheric! One element missing from the day was that of Sandy who has been Master of Ceremonies (and advisor on all things Wassail!) since we first started doing this event. He was unable to get down to the site because of the bad weather. He is also retiring from the post and we all wish him a huge 'Thank you' for helping to make the Wassail such a popular event in the WWA calendar. Thanks, Sandy.

Thanks also go to Cuthbert's Toys who, very generously, donated a splendid wooden fort as one of the main raffle prizes.



ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting was held on the 17th March at the Sub-Aqua Club in Cottonmill Lane. Following reports from the various officers and the election of the committee for 2013, Sandy, from The Sopwell Residents Association (SRA) gave an interesting talk about the Sopwell Project.

The Sopwell Project is an ongoing project to research the history of the Sopwell area including mapping the changes to the built environment. The project aims to interview many of the elderly residents to collect and preserve their recent memories; to research the local newspapers and archives; and to share all the research with the community.

Recently, the SRA has been given a grant of £10,000 to continue the oral history work and broaden the historical research undertaken by the Sopwell Project. The project, titled "**More Memories of Sopwell**" will officially be launched on **Saturday, 18th May** at St Julian's Church, Abbots Avenue, St Albans. Celebrations will start from 2pm until 5pm.

To find a full account of the whole project and how it all started log on to: <http://blog.sopwellmemories.org.uk/>

A MESSAGE FROM THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

I would like to thank those of you who renewed your membership subscriptions so promptly. If you have overlooked your renewal and still wish to remain a member, there is a renewal form included with the newsletter. Please consider signing the Gift Aid declaration if you wish to use that facility. It does bring in much welcomed extra cash.

There have been some generous donations from certain individuals and I would like to thank them on behalf of the WWA committee. We will make sure this extra money is spent wisely.

The Wassail brought in extra funds and we took just over £300 on the day. Considering the weather we were pleased just to cover expenses and actually made about a £200 profit.

Howard
Membership Secretary

The bridge by the Allotment has been under water many times this year. Wellies definitely needed!



MESSING ABOUT IN THE RIVER



Allen (Chilterns Conservation) demonstrating assessment of water quality by identification of water fauna

On a cold, windy day in April, an opportunity to stand for several hours knee deep in running water was something I would normally try to avoid, but by invitation of the Environment Agency, WWA Reserve Manager Howard and I joined about 20 other interested volunteers at a "Practical Masterclass in River Habitat Enhancement". The event was organised by the Wild Trout Trust and the venue was the River Ver, next to Drop Lane, Colney Street, where we were to be given demonstrations of various techniques relating to river quality enhancement.

Fortune however, favours the brave! The wind dropped, the sun shone and wading about in the river proved to be an enjoyable and enlightening experience.

The Ver is not unusual in being a chalk stream where the natural conditions and habitat have been slowly degraded by centuries of human intervention. The short stretch of river forming the western boundary of our site is a classic example of canalisation, where the original course has been altered to provide an increased and consistent head of water for the mill at Sopwell. Nowadays river habitat is very uniform and a shallow gradient results in a slow flowing stream which cannot lift or carry away the silt which builds up and covers the natural gravelly, chalk river bed. To make matters worse, overhanging growth excludes the daylight necessary for oxygenating plants to get established. Fish, a crucial sign of water quality, have nowhere suitable to spawn and shelter from predators.

The objective of river enhancement is to create variety in the stream bed by altering flow patterns, creating "scour pools" where silt will be naturally washed away, and selectively clearing sections of the river bank to admit more daylight to encourage plant growth. All of this can be achieved by simple re-use of fallen and cut trees. The day at Drop Lane saw practical advice and demonstrations of various techniques including those shown in the following photos.

MESSING ABOUT IN THE RIVERcontinued



Bundles of twigs and small tree debris are fixed in position to catch silt and establish areas for new growth.



Pinning logs to divert and vary river flows, resulting in the creation of small, but naturally scoured areas of river bed.



Deliberately felling riverside trees into the water. One particular lesson learnt was not to remove all fallen timber, but to select and fix fallen logs where altered flow could be seen as beneficial.

By the end of the day, several timber constructions had transformed a steady and uniform flow into a sinuous and varied stream. The effectiveness can and will be monitored over the coming months.

We hope to be able to try some of these techniques along our stretch of the river. Waders will be available for keen volunteers!

To see the results of the day, there is a riverside car park in Drop Lane (nearest postcode AL2 3TX). Follow the footpath from the end of the car park south across and along the river. Videos of similar enhancements can be seen at www.wildtrout.org



Logs staked to divert flows.

Pointing upstream, the v-shaped arrangement disrupts flow which creates a scouring effect immediately downstream at 90 degrees to the logs.

**Steve
Chairman**

FLORA AND FAUNA

Spring has finally arrived and there are snake's head fritillaries, primroses, wood anemones, ramsons, lesser celandine, periwinkle, marsh marigolds and the first (unfortunately) Spanish bluebells in flower.

Interesting bird sightings include Goldcrest, Red Kite, Redpoll, Little Egret, Bullfinch, Blackcap and Gadwall. There is a lot of Kingfisher activity along the stretch of the river Ver and around the Reserve so we are hoping there will be a breeding pair again this year.



Snake's head fritillaries



Marsh marigold

WORK PARTY NEWS

January: Volunteers tackled the bank stretching from the main gate down to the storage sheds. This involved cutting back all the dog roses, brambles, nettles and anything that stood in their path! This has opened up the understorey and the extra light has resulted in a proliferation of wild garlic (ramsons) appearing.

February: The shrubs adjacent to the new Allotment fence have been removed* as they have grown far too tall and are shading the Sanctuary. All of the brash from the old shrubs was burned and any large logs added to the (ever-increasing) log piles.

March: Just inside the main gate, the Butterfly Beds and Herb Garden were weeded and the buddleias pruned. Holes were dug in preparation for planting up a new hedge alongside the new fence adjacent to the Allotment. Any suitable branches cut at the previous work party have been made into a 'dead hedge' along the river bank. This creates a barrier that prevents dogs coming in from the river and is also good for wildlife. Laying all the branches in one direction looks attractive, too.

April: At the mid-week work party Steve, Howard and Richard continued with the planned programme of thinning out some of the scrub that has outgrown its usefulness around the Reserve. This work meant that large piles of cut material was left lying around in piles so this was gathered up at the main work party and stacked ready for burning. Other volunteers continued weeding the Herb Garden and Butterfly Beds.

*A new hawthorn hedge has been planted up in their place and a couple of rowan trees are ready to be planted to add a little more interest. This area has been under water for much of this year so it is hoped that the hawthorn will survive in such damp conditions.



Other tasks that have been completed recently include the first grass cut of the year and the introduction of barley straw treatment into the lake.

WORK PARTY DATES 2013

Volunteers are still needed to help with digging and tidying the Butterfly Beds or Herb garden on a regular basis. If you feel you can spare a couple of hours, once or twice a month, please contact the Reserve Manager.

Sunday 26th May: Getting the site ready for our summer event.

Sunday 30th June: General site maintenance, path clearance, putting in new log edgings, weeding, etc.

Sunday 28th July: General site maintenance.

Sunday 25th August: General site maintenance.

All ages are welcome. Work parties start at **10am** and finish around **1pm**. Light refreshments are served around midday.

Tools and gloves are provided.



Some of the volunteers enjoying a well-earned cuppa.

BIRD HIDE CODE

The code to enter the bird hide is **xxxxx**. Please make sure the door and windows are closed when you leave, for security reasons. Thank you.

WWA COMMITTEE 2013

Officers

Steve/Chairman

Janet/Secretary

Howard/Reserve Manager & Membership Secretary

Mandy/Treasurer

Members

Sheila/Newsletter Editor

Pat/Member

Derryn/Member

Penny/Social Secretary

Sam/Webmaster

Margaret/Management Plan Advisor

SPOTLIGHT ON WAXWINGS

It is always a pleasure to be able to publish interesting photographs taken by our members or local residents and these are particularly delightful examples. As I was walking home along Riverside Road one cold day in January, I was most excited to see a group of about a dozen Waxwings in a tree overlooking Riverside Close. They were coming to feed on the berries of a small shrub in one of the front gardens. Not owning a Smartphone or carrying a camera I was glad that David, who lived next to where this was happening, had also spotted them and managed to take some snaps through his window. This was only the second time I have ever seen these birds in Hertfordshire, so a rare treat indeed. **Sheila (Editor)**



Waxwings are about the size of a Starling and in flight they look very similar with their short, triangular wings. Waxwings are natives of northern Europe where they breed in the summer and feed on insects. They are surprisingly acrobatic while feeding, behaving more like a Tit or Warbler. They occasionally migrate to Britain in the winter; irruptions (sudden invasions of large numbers) occur when the combination of a good breeding season, and the failure of the birds' food source in the European forests, force them to forage further afield. They often show up around supermarkets and retail parks because many car parks are now bordered with rowan or hawthorn bushes. They will also visit urban gardens and you may also be able to entice Waxwings into your garden by hanging apples from branches.

Perhaps you were also lucky enough to have seen some this year?



RAMSONS

One interesting plant found around the Reserve is the ransom, otherwise known as wild garlic. A member of the Allium family, the plant's elegant broad, pointed leaves have the same pleasing combination of sweetness and astringency that make leeks, onions, spring onions, chives and bulb garlic so useful in the kitchen.

Although edible, the bulbs of the wild garlic plant are usually too small to be of much use and if you ever buy a bunch you're unlikely to see any bulb at all (digging the bulbs out means no foliage for next year). The characteristic white flowers however, are perfectly edible – and pretty too – although the plant is at its best before too many flowers appear, signalling tougher leaves and a more bitter flavour. In April, when wild garlic is at its peak, you are more likely to find delicious tight buds than open flowers.



Eaten raw the leaves are at their most pungent and fiery, but they come into their own when cooked. In fact they are almost endlessly versatile: quickly blanched or wilted in olive oil they make a delicately garlicky alternative to spinach (but bear in mind they perform the same trick that spinach does of turning a carrier bag stuffed full of leaves into a measly side portion for two).

The season for wild garlic leaves is short – they're gone by June – but they are one of the most abundant wild foods and come into their own when paired with other spring ingredients. If you're a garlic lover but not a regular forager, you might worry about the chance of picking something poisonous, and the wild garlic leaf looks very similar to that of the fragrant yet toxic Lily of the Valley. While misidentification is a real hazard with wild mushroom hunting there is no mistaking wild garlic: for a failsafe test, take a leaf and crush it in your hand, then inhale.

Admire our plants, but please do not forage them from the Reserve as we don't have very many!!



Another attractive plant found on the Reserve (only in the Shady Place) is the Wood Anemone. This flowers between March and May and has lovely white flowers which open and close according to the amount of sun.

NOSTALGIA PAGE



These two photos were taken on the 4th April 1992 by Janet, a founder member of the WWA. The area shown is now the 'Butterfly Bed' situated just inside the main gate. We still dig up loads of rubbish every time the soil is turned over!

