

Issue 102 WATERCRESS 2016

WWA ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

SUNDAY 20TH MARCH 2016

ST. ALBANS SUB-AQUA CLUB

COTTONMILL LANE

11AM – 1PM

The committee aim to make the AGM a very relaxed and informal affair, but also to make it as interesting and informative as possible for our membership.

The first half of the meeting includes reports from the Chairman, Reserve Manager and Treasurer. This is followed by the dissolution of the old committee and the election of the new one. There is a break for coffee and biscuits (it's worth going just for that!). During the interval there is an opportunity to chat with your WWA representatives and volunteers, or look at some of the fascinating display boards with lots of photos and history of the site gathered over the last 25 years.

We then resume, with an illustrated talk. This year, Sam, the WWA webmaster, has volunteered to do this and the theme is:

Exotic and Amazing:

Nature in your back garden.

Sam is an excellent photographer and runs his own wildlife blog at www.uknatureblog.com so we are all looking forward to his contribution to the morning's events. Do come along and support us...we will make you very welcome.

Our delicious WWA apple juice will be available at the AGM in exchange for a suggested donation of £2.75. You are very welcome to have a 'Taste Test' first to see if you like it. Apparently, it is very good!

The last few jars of our home-made Quince jelly, and other assorted jams, will also available.



Spring is here!

WASSAIL REPORT

So the only day of the winter that it snowed just had to be the day of the WWA Wassail! But did that deter people...of course not ...we WWA people are hardy outdoor types and don't let a bit of weather get in the way of having fun. There was a fine turnout from the Wicket Brood who entertained us all with their lively dancing and music.



After the initial dances we all followed the Wicket Brood to the Orchard where the ceremony is always held. I think we made enough noise to wake up the trees and scare away any bad spirits. Then it was back to 'The Old Allotment' for refreshments and more dancing and music.

Thanks go to everyone who contributed on the day, either by helping set up on the day, baking cakes, running the raffle or coming along to support us and making your generous donations towards the food. The event raised a marvellous **£620**. Fantastic!

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

The Association would like to extend a warm welcome to the following new members:

Agnes & Ben

Derek & Karen B

Steve & Teresa

Stephen

Ben & Steph

Nicola & Matthew

Thank you to all the members who have renewed their membership this year. If you still wish to renew, but may have overlooked it, the Membership Secretary would love to hear from you!

MONTHLY WORK PARTY NEWS

There has been a huge amount of work undertaken at the Reserve over the winter, both by professional arborists and our own volunteers. If you haven't been down to the site in the last few months you will be very surprised by the changes that have taken place. Quite a number of trees have been removed. These were self-seeded and were never meant to be part of the overall management plan for the area. Certain sections were getting far too wooded and gloomy for such a small site. The 'Boggy Area' was turning into a 'Carr Woodland'. This is natural succession, and can be wonderful, but not in this particular situation! And the Pygmy had about ten unwanted willows that would have become a real problem in a few more years. It all seems quite drastic but the work has opened up the Reserve quite wonderfully. And the Water Rail was seen last week so the wildlife has not been disturbed by all the work. The Water Rail is a secretive and shy bird but if it is still happy to be on the Reserve after all the work, then so are we!

November: The old bridge, by the inlet from the river, was in a dangerous state and was removed. It served no real purpose and that corner looks so much better for its removal. It also makes it easier to continue work on shoring up the river bank that was badly eroded in the floods a couple of years ago.

December: This was a pottering, post Christmas type of morning! In fact I cannot remember what we all did that day, but I'm sure everyone worked really hard! Mince pies were probably involved.....**Editor**



January: This was definitely a memorable work party. We had a huge bonfire to burn the residual brash left over from the tree works. Our volunteers spent all morning gathering waste material from all around the Reserve. What is it about a roaring blaze that is so fascinating? New log edgings have been put in place in the Shady Place, ably supervised by Derek. As a result of all the tree work, we've acquired vast amounts of woodchip. This has now been used to dress the paths and the Reserve looks superb at the moment. Hopefully, the paths won't need anything doing to them for a long time, now. The last lot washed away down river after the exceptional flood incident in 2014!

MONTHLY WORK PARTY NEWS



February: Most of the volunteers concentrated on constructing a new, low, willow fence around the Butterfly Meadow. They continued until they ran out of materials. It's ironic that we couldn't find enough raw materials to quite complete the job as we have just had so much work done to the trees. Still, we do have lovely woodchip paths! Well done, everyone.

WEDNESDAY WORKING PARTIES:

The Wednesday work party is growing and thriving and we have a great team at present. It is a credit to them all how much has been achieved these last few months.



November: The old elder (does that make sense?) by the entrance gate had died so Steve and Howard removed it. Work continued on shoring up the river bank by the inlet. Howard made a start on clearing the 'sight lines' from the Russo Bridge to the tunnel exit.

December: Following the closure of the lovely little Museum of St. Albans in Hatfield Road, Laurie managed to arrange for our volunteers to remove an assortment of suitable plants from the garden at the rear of the Museum. These have now been transported and planted at the Reserve.

WEDNESDAY WORKING PARTIES

December: Janet and Sheila have given the willow 'basket' sculpture on the Wild Spit a bit of a trim as it was getting rather too tall for its own good. Other volunteers cleared the Shady Place of unwanted nettles and brambles.

Howard pollarded one of the smaller Osiers by the far bridge and removed a small, failing Pear tree in the Old Allotment.

January: Vanessa and Andrew spent a morning pruning back the huge grapevine in the Old Allotment.

Andy Gardner and his team arrived at the beginning of the month to make a start on the tree work, just in time for us to have lots of lovely woodchips to put down for the wassail.

Most of the remainder of the month was focused on clearing up after the tree work. Although Andy and his team left everything as neat and tidy as possible there was still a lot of small brash to collect for burning.



February: Steve, Howard, Derek and Andrew have done a fantastic job of replacing the main gate post at the entrance gate. That doesn't sound like much of a task but when you realise it took three strong people to even pick the new post off the ground, you'll understand just what a great job they've done. The old post had rotted at its base and it was almost impossible to open the gate. Digging the hole was quite a challenge as you can see! Especially by hand!



WEDNESDAY WORKING PARTIES

February: The post is in, the gate has new fittings and....it opens! Special thanks must go to Chairman Steve who ordered all the materials and used his very capable, practical skills at organising this project. He has saved the Association a lot of money by not having to employ outside contractors.

The apple trees have, once again, been pruned this year by Peter. So that we have other volunteers who have some knowledge of apple pruning, (and especially the old veteran trees in the Orchard) Sheila, Howard and Katie went on a training course that was held at Earthworks, run by external trainer Anna Baldwin. It was a really interesting morning, involving some practical work in Earthwork's own orchard. We hope to transfer our new found knowledge into managing the apple trees better.

Another mention must go to Katie, who has taken it upon herself to don the waders and get stuck in (literally!) to work in the Boggy Area. So far, she has cleared a channel from the Russo Bridge to the bench by the Pyghtle. There's just no stopping her! And it's looking great, Katie.



WORK PARTY DATES 2016

Sunday 27th March: All the benches are in need of a good scrub down and treating with a wood finish. If you would like to help in a small group with this, just contact the Reserve Manager. We are replacing the bench overlooking the bird feeder by the Pyghtle with a lovely new hardwood one. This has been ordered and will be arriving in mid-March, so the old will need digging out as it is cemented in and the new one being set in place.

The hedge in the Old Allotment needs trimming back and the height lowered. The hedge in the Pyghtle also needs the height reduced.

Sunday 24th April: Now that the main gate post has been replaced, the old gate needs a little TLC to improve its appearance. The wood is in good condition but, like the benches, needs a good scrub down and treating with a fence treatment. The original WWA sign needs some sort of treatment as the lettering is peeling away. Any suggestions welcome.

WORK PARTY DATES 2016

Sunday 29th May: General maintenance, grass cutting and weeding the Butterfly Meadow.

Sunday 26th June: To be decided! How about having another Volunteer's BBQ?

The **monthly work party** is always held on the last Sunday of the month. All ages are welcome. Work parties start at **10am** and finish around **1pm**. Light refreshments are served around midday. Tools and gloves are provided.

The regular, **weekly Wednesday morning work party**, starts at **10am** and lasts for a couple of hours. If you are interested in coming along it is a good idea to give Janet, our Secretary, your contact details as she sends out an e-mail in advance of the work party to let you know what is planned that week. Also, she can let you know if the work party is cancelled for any reason.

VOLUNTEER THANK YOU PARTY AT THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

On December 3rd I was highly delighted to represent the WWA at the Volunteer 'Thank You' Party hosted by Anne Main at the House of Commons. The evening commenced with a short speech given by Anne Main. She spoke how she respects and values the work of all volunteers across the county. She also spoke briefly about the history of Westminster, offering a tour of the Chapel of Saint Mary Undercroft. This is still in use today. Children of Peers, who hold the title of "The Honourable", have the privilege of being able to hold their wedding here.

A delicious buffet was offered; this gave me chance to mingle with other volunteers which included people from Mind, CAB, Religious organisations and Grove House to name but a few. Armed with my recent knowledge supplied by Janet and Steve I felt confident to speak about the history of the WWA! It surprised me how many people had visited the site including Anne Main who remembered her visit well.

Vanessa

BIRD HIDE

The code to enter the bird hide is: **xxxx**

Please make sure the door and windows are closed when you leave for security reasons. Thank you.

Do write up any interesting sightings on the boards that are located inside and outside the hide.

* Keep looking out for Siskins, Lesser Redpolls, Goldfinches, Bullfinches and Greenfinches still coming to the feeders.

HERON WATCH 2016

Each weekend and bank holiday in March and April volunteers will be on hand in Verulamium Park to show park visitors this active heronry. Last year 11 out of the 17 nests on Verulamium Lake's islands were active, and it is hoped this year will see similar activity.



Photo courtesy of Andrew Steele, Verulamium 2015

Volunteers, with telescopes to see the nesting Herons up close, will be available from 11.00am to 3.00pm from 5 March. There will also be information about Herons, the RSPB and local nature in this part of Hertfordshire. Do go along and have a look. If you'd like to volunteer to show park visitors this natural spectacle, please email the local RSPB group on st-albans-rspb@hotmail.co.uk

Or contact WWA member Dan who can give you more information.

Some of the WWA members are helping at this event. Volunteering involves spending two hours on a weekend showing Park visitors the herons through our telescopes.

Birds seen during HeronWatch 5 March 2016

**Mute Swan
Canada Goose
Mallard
Pochard
Cormorant
Grey Heron
Sparrowhawk
Coot
Robin
Feral Pigeon
Woodpigeon
Carrion Crow
Long-tailed Tit
Magpie
Pied Wagtail
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Black-headed Gull Common Gull**

**Greylag Goose
Gadwall
Shoveler
Tufted Duck
Little Egret
Red Kite
Moorhen**

READER'S PHOTOS

SISKIN



Andrew Steele/ Eurasian siskin

The Siskin (*Carduelis spinus*) is one of our smallest finches (smaller than a Goldfinch). It has a relatively long and narrow bill for a finch and also has a distinctive forked tail. The plumage is predominantly a yellow-green colour, with a striking yellow band on the wing and yellow patches at the base of the tail. Adult males have a black crown and a lot of black in the wing, which contrasts with the yellow wing-band. Females are greener in colour than the males, streaked above and without the black crown. Juveniles resemble females but are buff-brown above and more heavily streaked (both above and below).

The breeding range of Siskins within Britain has expanded following the spread of new conifer plantations. This, coupled by the exploitation of peanuts and sunflower hearts provided in gardens, has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of Siskins visiting gardens during the late winter months. Almost invariably it is after the New Year that Siskins begin to be reported in increasing numbers in gardens. In spring, there is a rapid movement of birds away from gardens and back to the breeding areas. Birds continuing to visit gardens during the breeding season will be local breeders, with adults accompanied by young a feature of late summer in these areas. Siskins are common throughout most of Europe and Asia, with the UK enjoying a healthy population that is most numerous in Scotland and Wales. Those in England are joined in winter by an influx from Europe. Listen out for the song, a pleasant mix of twitters and trills, often performed in groups.

There are small flocks of Siskin still being seen, and especially heard, around the Reserve, early in March. They really are delightful little birds! Other notable birds seen at the Reserve and placed on the Herts Bird Club website this year are: Kingfisher, Red Kite, Fieldfare, Redwing and Ring-necked Parakeet.

Many thanks, Andrew, for your delightful photographs. And WWA members: please do keep sending your pictures in – they are always appreciated. They don't need to be of a professional standard. We just like to get a record of what our visitors see and enjoy around the Reserve.

READER'S PHOTOS

GOLDCREST

The Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*) is a really tiny bird, just six and a half grams in weight when adult; this makes it some 20-30% smaller than the Chiffchaff. Despite its energetic tit-like behaviour, it is still very much a warbler in shape. The plumage is olive above and buff white below, with darker wings displaying two white wing bars and an orange or yellow crown stripe flanked by a black edge. Adult males have an orange or orange-yellow crown stripe. In females this is yellow, and juveniles lack the crown stripe altogether.

Goldcrests have a very high-pitched song that many people are unable to hear. This is a shame because the song is sweet-sounding and it is often the first or only indication that a Goldcrest is present. The commonest call is an equally high-pitched 'siii' used to keep group members together.

Goldcrests are serial nesters, the female regularly starting the second clutch of eggs before the first brood of nestlings have fledged. The male does the feeding while the female builds the new nest. The nest itself is very neat and is basically a spherical hammock positioned in the outer twigs of a spruce or fir tree. This tremendous breeding effort can produce 20 chicks a year, something that is essential given the very high winter losses to cold weather. After very cold winters there may be only a quarter of the previous autumn's population left to breed.



Andrew Steele/ Goldcrest

Such a tiny bird would seem to be no candidate for long distance migration. Our own birds wander but do not really migrate properly. However, ringing has shown regular movements from countries around the North Sea and Baltic into Britain for the winter. One has even reached us from Russia and several from Poland, though Norway, Sweden and Finland are their usual points of origin. It seems amazing that any of them can survive two journeys as well as the cold weather but some clearly do as several Goldcrests ringed here in winter have been found back home in Fennoscandia.

WILDLIFE



Walking around the Reserve with the WWA Chairman and WWA members recently, we were pleased to witness the start of the new life cycle of our resident frogs. As a result, there is now a large mass of frogspawn (or 'Frogsporn' as our Chairman named it) that has recently appeared in the Boggy area.

If, like me, you'd like to understand a bit more about this natural phenomenon, and especially if you have a pond in your own garden, here is some information you might find useful about frogspawn, courtesy of The Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust. **Froglife** has a wealth of information on the subject, too.

www.froglife.org

Know your species

First things first, it's important to know what you are dealing with - frogs or toads. This is actually very simple to find out. Frog spawn is always laid in clumps, whilst toad spawn comes in long chains like strings of pearls draped over pond weed and submerged plants.

Don't fret over numbers

It is important to know that as long as you haven't introduced additional frogs into your pond, there is no such thing as too much spawn. Unfortunately it's a tough life for a tadpole - they have a number of natural predators and are susceptible to various amphibian diseases. Because of this, female frogs lay thousands of egg each year and only a tiny fraction of them will survive to adulthood. Your pond may contain a big black mass of writhing tadpoles, but this is how it is meant to be. Just kick back and enjoy watching these amazing amphibians.

Leave them be

Don't move the spawn or tadpoles into a different pond, as this can spread non-native plant species and amphibian diseases. Ponds that already contain spawn may not be able to support the increased population, and ponds that don't have any spawn are unlikely to be suitable for frogs - if they were suitable, the spawn would already be there.

WILDLIFE

There are many reasons why a pond may not contain frogs, and one of the most common explanations is newts.

Newts and frogs are not mutually exclusive, but they do tend to have a bit of a boom-bust relationship. Newts eat tadpoles, so ponds with lots of newts tend to have fewer frogs. This isn't always going to be the case though. A decrease in frogs means a decrease in tadpoles and that can lead to fewer newts. Then, frog numbers will start to increase.

This doesn't always happen; it may just be that your pond is more suitable for newts than frogs. This isn't a bad thing, newts are awesome too and their habitat is just as important as frog habitat.

The right environment

Sometimes you get spawn, in fact you get massive clumps of it, and then nothing happens - the spawn fails and turns to mush. It is frustrating when this happens and unfortunately it can sometimes be hard to find a reason for it. More often than not, though, it is down to the pond. The two things that all spawn desperately needs to develop properly are light and warmth. You need to let the sunshine in to your pond for your tadpoles to thrive. It may be cold outside but amphibians are already on the move looking for suitable ponds to spawn in. I don't know if you will be lucky enough to get any in your pond this year but I'm excited to find some on the Reserve this year. It hasn't been seen since the floods of two years ago when it was all washed away.

Editor

WWA COMMITTEE 2015/16

Officers

Steve/Chairman

Janet/Secretary

**Howard/Reserve Manager and
Membership Secretary**

Mandy/Treasurer

Members

Sheila/Newsletter Editor

Pat Bate

Sam/Webmaster

Cath

Margaret/Management Plan Advisor

www.watercresslnr.org.uk