

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 11am -1pm

The Annual General Meeting is being held on **Sunday 19th March 2017** at the Sub Aqua Club in Cottonmill Lane, starting promptly at **11am**.

We aim to make the AGM as relaxed and informal as possible, maybe even entertaining! There are short reports from the Chairman and other key Officers, followed by refreshments (including Derryn's home-made biscuits!) and an illustrated short talk. This year, one of our regular helpers, Derek, is giving an account of his time volunteering abroad, titled 'A Kenyan Adventure' where he spent time with the charity 'Cricket Without Boundaries'.

<https://www.cricketwithoutboundaries.com/>

There is still some of our delicious apple juice (made from our orchard fruit) and assorted jams and Quince jelly available, in exchange for a suggested minimum donation of £2. The produce will be on display at the AGM.

2017 is the 25th anniversary of the founding of the WWA and there will be lots of archive photos and information boards showing how the Association started, so if you are interested in the history of the Association do pop in and say 'Hello'. You will be made most welcome!



MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

Membership renewals have been coming in thick and fast but if you have overlooked this and still wish to remain a member you will find a renewal form attached with this newsletter. You can pay by cheque, cash or bank transfer. If you wish to pay by bank transfer, it would be helpful if you can add the payment reference using your first initial and surname: e.g. **JBLOGGS**

If you renew by bank transfer, we still like to keep paper records of our membership so could you please return the form, either by post or electronically, to the Membership Secretary.

We've also updated the Gift Aid section of the form. Although it is not necessary to have to send out the form each year, it is easier for our Treasurer when it comes to claim back the tax.

Howard (Membership Secretary)

WASSAIL REPORT



Sue (above right) reciting her version of the 'Apple Tree Man' fable.

The Wassail went ahead, despite the grim weather forecast and around 60 people turned up. Much credit must go to the hardy Wicket Brood, who turned out in force and danced away with their usual gusto. Thanks also go to everyone who helped out on the day by making cakes, serving drinks, setting up and packing away at the end of the afternoon, and to the lovely Sue who read out the fable of the 'Apple Tree Man' in the drizzling rain. We even managed to raise £350 despite all, so it was not a wasted day. Everyone who attended said they enjoyed it. And the cakes were lovely!

The main raffle prizes were kindly donated by the Odyssey cinema, Aylett Nursery and Charlie's coffee shop in London Road and we send our thanks for their generous support.

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

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

Stephen
Sue & Dave
Karin
Matthew
Toby & Nicki
Neilson
Miriam
Susan

We hope you enjoy the Reserve. This time of year everything is bursting into life and it is a great time to visit.

TAWNY OWLS AND BOXES

The WWA are now the proud owners of a beautiful new purpose-made tawny owl box. This is a collaboration between the Baker family members and the Association. And it is a thing of beauty! You certainly can't miss it as you walk around the site.



The Baker family with the new nesting box

All about tawny owls

The tawny owl is one of the most common owls in Britain, with a population of about 20,000 breeding pairs and able to live in a wide variety of habitats including deciduous and coniferous woodland, wooded farmland and parkland. It can also be found in towns where there are large trees, such as in parks and churchyards. Despite this, because it is nocturnal it is rarely seen. Most often, we only know of its presence by the familiar deep 'tu-woo' or 'kee-wick' most commonly heard about two hours after sunset in late autumn or winter. The tawny owl may be seen in a variety of wooded locations. However, because it is active only at night and its brown body is very difficult to spot when it roosts against a tree trunk or among ivy, it is not often seen. Sometimes it can be seen in daylight, but only when it is disturbed. If this does happen, its presence is often revealed by the mob of small birds which are harassing it to keep it away from their nests.

What to look for

The tawny owl is 37-39cm long, with a rounded head, body and wings. It has large brown eyes, with its face surrounded by a ring of dark feathers. Its upper parts are usually reddish brown, with a line of dark and light patches on its wings and crown of the head. The under parts are yellowish-beige.

TAWNY OWLS AND BOXES

Tawny owls have fixed territories which they patrol very conscientiously and appear to know very well. Within the territory their roosting place is regularly changed.

In urban areas, the owls prey mainly on small birds such as sparrows, thrushes, blackbirds and starlings. Rodents make up only about 7% of the owl's total diet. In woodland areas, small birds form only about 10% of the owl's diet. The rest consists of rats, rabbits, moles, shrews, bats, mice and voles. The hunting methods of city and woodland owls also vary: in city areas, small birds are snatched from their roosts.

Places like roofs and telegraph poles are used as vantage points to hunt from. In the woodland, owls usually perch close to the ground and wait for their prey to appear, then pounce.

The tawny owl's feathers have a velvety pile and fine fringe that help to reduce the noise of the wings when flying, so the owl can approach its prey as quietly as possible. When hunting, tawny owls rely heavily upon their sight and hearing and use their talons only during the attack.

Tawny owls nest in tree cavities, old crows' nests, squirrel dreys and nest boxes in the breeding season; only when these are not available will they nest on the ground.



Photo courtesy of RSPB

The tawny owl lays 2-3 large, white, round eggs in late February and March and incubates them for 28-30 days. The young tend to leave the nest about four weeks after hatching but are still dependent on their parents for two to three months afterwards, and occasionally on into autumn. It can be extremely difficult for the young owls; sometimes only one or two owlets per pair are successfully raised each year.

THE BIRD HIDE

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

Please make sure the door and windows are closed on leaving. If you see anything interesting at the Reserve feel free to please put it up on either of the sightings board.

HERON WATCH – VERULAMIUM PARK

Grey Herons and Little Egrets are regular visitors to the Watercress Beds, either flying over, or fishing in the Mere. Both species breed just half a mile away at the heronry in the middle of Verulamium Lake. There are eight heronries in Hertfordshire, but St Albans' is the only one that is so accessible to humans. The nests are in the trees on the main island with a few nests some years on the North Island. Herons have nested there since 1995 and reached a peak of 23 nests in 2008. The number has since decreased to about 12 each year in line with a general redistribution of herons across Hertfordshire.

Verulamium Lake and islands



The Little Egrets have been nesting on the main island with the herons since 2014. There have been two nests so far, and ringing records show that chicks reared in Verulamium have returned to rear their own young the following year. There are four other Little Egret colonies in Hertfordshire, all of which are shared with Herons. They first colonised Hertfordshire in 1989 and have increased steadily since then to about 18 nests in total.

Verulamium Herons and Little Egrets can travel far more widely than the Watercress Beds after they fledge. Ringing records of Verulamium herons and egrets by Barry, warden at HWMT Lemsford Springs, has shown that while many herons stay local,



HERON WATCH – VERULAMIUM PARK

some have been found in Chelmsford, Hazlemere, Beaconsfield, Ivinghoe, Northamptonshire, and Greater Manchester. There are fewer egret records, but the colour rings that are used can be detected in the field, and one St Albans' egret flew to Dunstable and then on to an estuary in South Wales. Another has been spotted on a reserve near Coventry. As ringing increases, there will be more far flung records of these longer distance travellers in search of food during the winter.

Heron photos courtesy of Andrew Steele



Each year, the RSPB St Albans group runs a HeronWatch to show Verulamium Park visitors what is happening in their local heronry. Breeding begins in late January/early February, so by mid-March when HeronWatch begins, there is plenty of activity and the first eggs could be hatching. Over the next two months, eggs hatch and the chicks quickly grow, and indeed some herons may fledge by the end of HeronWatch in mid-May. Every weekend on two shifts from 11.00-1.00pm and 1.00-3.00pm, volunteers set up the telescopes generously loaned from Viking Optics on the heron nests. Viking also provides a digiscope connected to a small screen, so children can see what is going on more easily.

Three WWA members, Katie, Andrew and Dan are among the volunteers making HeronWatch happen, and each year we are looking out for more people to give a couple of hours for one, or more weekends in the spring. There is generally one RSPB St Albans committee member for each shift, so it's not essential to have encyclopaedic knowledge of herons. Volunteers are there to chat to passers-by, distribute information leaflets, and keep an eye on the optical equipment. If you would like to volunteer, please email Dan and he'll explain more about how it works.

Dan

LEUCISTIC OR ALBINO BLACKBIRD?

Many visitors to the site have been puzzled by the appearance of an unusual 'white-headed bird'. It is in fact, a blackbird with Leucism and not a strange alien species.

Leucism, or leukism, is an abnormal plumage condition caused by a genetic mutation that prevents pigment, particularly melanin, from being properly deposited on a bird's feathers.

Thus, the birds do not have the normal, classic plumage colours listed in field guides, and instead the plumage have several colour changes, including:

- White patches where the bird should not have any
- Paler overall plumage that looks faint, diluted or bleached
- Overall white plumage with little or no colour apparent

The degree of leucism, including the brightness of the white and the extent of pigment loss, will vary depending on the bird's genetic makeup. Birds that show only white patches or sections of leucistic feathers – often in symmetrical patterns – are often called pied or piebald birds, while birds with fully white plumage are referred to as leucistic birds.

Leucistic and Albino Birds

Albinism is another genetic condition that can turn a bird's plumage pale, but there are distinct differences between albino and leucistic birds. Leucism affects only the bird's feathers, and typically only those with melanin pigment – usually dark feathers.

A leucistic bird with different colours may show some colours brightly, especially red, orange or yellow, while feathers that should be brown or black are instead pale or white. Some leucistic birds, however, can lose all the pigment in their feathers and may appear pure white.

Albinism, on the other hand, affects all the pigments, and albino birds show no colour whatsoever in their feathers. Furthermore, an albino mutation also affects the bird's other pigments in the skin and eyes, and albino birds show pale pink or reddish eyes, legs, feet and a pale bill, while leucistic birds often have normally coloured eyes, legs, feet and bills.

Leucistic blackbird (courtesy of BTO)



PROBLEMS WITH BIRD LEUCISM

Birds with the condition face special challenges in the wild. Lighter plumage may rob the birds of protective camouflage and make them more vulnerable to predators such as hawks and feral cats. Because plumage colours play an important role in courtship rituals, birds with leucism may be unable to find strong, healthy mates. Melanin is also an important structural component of feathers, and birds with extensive leucism have weaker feathers that will wear out more swiftly, making flight more difficult and eliminating some of the bird's insulation against harsh weather. White feathers also reflect heat more efficiently, which can be fatal for birds that rely on sunbathing and solar radiation for heat in northern climates.

Our blackbird (Photo courtesy of Andrew Steele)



It is not yet clear why blackbirds appear to be particularly affected. It could be that they are unusually susceptible to the condition. However, being black or, in the case of female blackbirds dark brown, any light-coloured feathers show up particularly clearly.

Although many of our visitors have seen this bird, WWA member and photographer Andrew has managed to get the only photo to date. If any reader does manage to get a better image of this elusive bird, we would be very pleased to post a copy on our website and publish it in the website. Now there's a challenge to all you bird photographers out there!

WILDLIFE

A few things to look out for in March:

Frog spawn has arrived (by second bridge).
Great spotted woodpeckers are around and nested on the Reserve last year. Will they do so again?
Marsh marigolds and daffodils are coming into flower
Flag Iris will follow soon.
Pulmonaria is in flower in the Shady Place (by the notice board).
Kingfishers and the water rail are regularly seen.

MONTHLY WORK PARTY NEWS

January: If you were wondering what the large, strange, chestnut paling enclosure that has appeared in the Pyghtle might be, it is our new composting area and not somewhere to herd up stray volunteers!



February: Among the heavier jobs tackled were removing bulrushes (*Typha latifolia*): well done Eloise and Dave; shifting the encroaching compost heap at the end of the Allotment; thanks go to Caroline and her able assistant for that job. Other volunteers shifted the bark chippings that were left over from the recent tree work and lowered the height of the hedge in the Allotment. They also cut back lots of the overgrown brambles around the Reserve.

WEDNESDAY WORKING PARTIES

January: The river bank was cleared of vegetation in advance of the snowdrops making their annual showing. The barley straw used as ground cover for the muddy sections at the Wassail has been raked up and deposited in the lake. Barley straw is supposed to help inhibit the growth of algal blooms.

February: The team concentrated on work in the Allotment and Pyghtle: clearing 'sight lines' from the viewpoints, thinning out vegetation along the waterside banks, landscaping the area around the pond and cutting back brambles. We had to have a couple of large bonfires to get rid of the brash but that should be it now until the autumn.



Does the Reserve Manager always do all the work?!!

WORK PARTY DATES 2017

Sunday 26th March: Planting hawthorn along the boundary in the Orchard. Removing Flag Iris from the Mere.

Sunday 30 April: Treating the bird hide and sheds with wood preservative. Removing more Flag Iris.

Sunday 28th May: General maintenance and cleaning benches.

Sunday 25th June: General maintenance.

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 work parties are a great way to get to meet new people. Come and give us a try!

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.

www.watercresslnr.org.uk

OTHER WORK

Tree surgeon Andy Gardner and his team have pollarded 4 willow trees and lowered the height of the Pyghtle hedge to 2 metres, making it a lot easier to manage. They did a very neat job on the hedge and it's looking great. Thanks, lads.

WWA COMMITTEE 2017

Officers

Steve: Chairman

Janet: Secretary

Howard: Reserve Manager and Membership Secretary

Mandy: Treasurer

Members

Cath

Margaret: Management Plan Advisor

Pat

Sam: Webmaster

Sheila: Newsletter Editor

NOSTALGIA PAGE

An interesting early photo showing the 'main bridge' made from old garage doors and supported by plastic beer crates. Things have definitely improved since then!

