

Issue 110 WATERCRESS 2019

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting was held on Sunday 24th March at the St Albans Sub-aqua Club in Cottonmill Lane. The committee for 2019 was duly elected and details can be found later in this newsletter. After the usual reports from the Officers, and a break for refreshments, the audience was treated to two fascinating, illustrated talks about Heartwood Forest: **'Nature bounces back - given half a chance'** and **'What did trees ever do for us?'** by Brian Legg (an award winning volunteer from The Woodland Trust). Thank you, Brian.

WORK PARTY NEWS 2019

February: Ed and Mike donned waders and cleared vegetation from the backwater in the Allotment. Others cut back growth at the end of the Allotment. Derek cut hazel sticks in preparation for hedgelaying. Other volunteers removed earlier cuttings from the bank to the compost heaps. The entrance area was cleared of overgrowth and the driveway skimmed of the grass that was making it slippery for vehicles. Since the removal of the old fencing in the driveway a few visitors have taken to parking there, causing an obstruction, so we have installed a few wooden posts to prevent this. So far it appears to be working well. Hedgelaying started in earnest. With all the thinning out of the Allotment hedge prior to hedgelaying, there was a lot of material to burn so that was dealt with by having a huge bonfire.



March: Hedgelaying was one of the priority tasks to be done before the nesting season and the lads (and lasses!) got stuck in with enthusiasm. Steve repaired the donation box, again, with more robust fixings and so far these have stood up to attack from nefarious visitors! He has been gradually replacing the information signs with very smart new ones produced by local resident Lee, who has kindly revamped the old ones. Thanks Lee. Reserve Manager, Howard, cleared growth from the river.

The committee commissioned professional arborist Andy Gardner to come and do some tree work for us again. This work meant that we gained a huge supply of excellent quality woodchips. The paths around the Reserve were in desperate need of topping up and now look great.

April: We had another bonfire, hopefully the last one until late autumn. The seasonal grass cutting, hedge trimming, and barley straw treatments for the water have begun and will carry on throughout the year. Most of April's work parties concentrated on treating the bird hide, sheds and benches

WORK PARTY NEWS 2019

with wood treatments. Some of the benches are getting a bit shabby but they should last out the year. Everything else is looking very smart and these jobs won't need doing again for another year.

May: Volunteers finished the shed treatments and shifted the last few piles of woodchip that were dotted around the Reserve. The butterfly and herb gardens were renewed with new log edgings. Two new Damson trees were planted in the Pyghtle to replace an old one that will be removed later this year. Derek has done a sterling job trimming the hedges with his extra-long hedge cutter.



June: The Barley Straw treatment in the water continued but the algal blooms were still vigorous, despite our best efforts to control them. The Allotment area was scythed, and any holes and uneven patches filled in with woodchips. After a few cuts with the hand mower the ground is now flat enough to use the ride-on mower which will save a lot of time. We are still trying to create a meadow here but the hogweed and nettles have been winning the battle so far! Howard cut back the Flag Iris by the seat overlooking the Mere, to improve the view of the water for our visitors.

July: The speed of growth at this time of year is quite incredible and it takes most of our volunteers' time to keep on top of maintaining the paths and cutting the grass and hedges. But they are a great team and just get on with it without complaint. The things they'll do for some of Janet's most delicious carrot or lemon drizzle cake!! Thank you, Janet and everyone. You're all stars!



WORK PARTY DATES 2019



Sunday 29th September: Apple picking and general maintenance. Clearing river channel of watercress.

Sunday 27th October: Thinning out Flag Iris and Bulrushes in backwater alongside the Allotment. General maintenance

Sunday 24th November: General maintenance

Sunday 29th December: Maintain paths, trim hedges, general maintenance. Eat leftover mince pies!

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 it is cancelled for any reason.

ONGOING TASKS FROM THE MANAGEMENT PLAN

- ❖ Removal of Flag Iris in the Mere where it is becoming too dominant.
- ❖ Clearing The Bog of invasive and weedy species by 25% each year and keeping the Willows under control. These are difficult jobs that keep being overlooked so we need to have a concerted effort this year!
- ❖ Maintaining fences, paths, bridges and seats to a good condition.

THE BIRD HIDE



The code to enter the newly painted bird hide is: **CXXXX**

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. There are plenty of wildlife books and identification charts in the hide so it is a great place to watch the birds feeding on the bird feeder in comfort.

WWA Committee 2019

Officers

Steve/Chairman

Janet/Secretary

Howard/Reserve Manager and Membership Secretary

Mandy/Treasurer

Members

Sheila/Newsletter Editor

Sam/Webmaster

Cath

Margaret – Management Plan Guru

BIRD SIGHTINGS

Herts Bird Club sightings since February included Siskin, Little Egret, Lesser Redpoll, Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Kingfisher. www.hnhs.org

More information about the WWA Local Nature Reserve (LNR) can be found on our website.

www.watercresslnr.org.uk

THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR THIS MONTH

Cinnabar moth caterpillars

These colourful Cinnabar moth caterpillars have been seen on the Ragwort in the Allotment. They can often be found in large numbers, munching away on the yellow-flowered Ragwort, and the caterpillar's bold black-and-gold stripes make them easy to identify. As well as being the Cinnabar caterpillar's main food plant, Ragwort supports more than 40 other insect species and is an important source of nectar. It is also toxic and well known for its potential to poison horses and other livestock if eaten, particularly via contaminated hay. The toxins within the growing plant make it so bitter and unpalatable that it is usually avoided but the Cinnabar caterpillars feast upon Ragwort without ill effect. They benefit from its toxicity by eating enough of it to become toxic themselves, and their colourful stripes are a warning to predators: I'm poisonous and taste terrible, don't try to eat me!



Photo taken in the allotment, courtesy of Laurie

Newly-hatched caterpillars are vulnerable at first so will cluster together, starting at the base of the plant and working their way up. As they grow bigger and develop their toxic defences they start to spread out, and with hundreds of hungry mouths their host plant can be rapidly reduced to a ragged, leafless stem. Large populations can easily decimate an entire patch of Ragwort and many caterpillars will starve if their food runs out before they are fully grown, so as competition intensifies the caterpillars become more aggressive and may even turn to cannibalism in their quest for calories. It takes about a month for them to develop fully, at which point they will descend to ground level ready to pupate. They will remain here all winter, safe inside their cocoons, and complete

THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR THIS MONTH



their metamorphosis the following spring to emerge as beautiful black and red adults. It is thanks to this vibrant red colouration that the moth earned its unusual name, inspired by the red mineral cinnabar - a toxic mercury sulphide mineral that was once widely used as an artist's pigment (vermilion). The adult moths fly during the day and could easily be mistaken for exotic butterflies. They are brightly coloured for the same reason as the caterpillars, since the ragwort's toxins remain in their bodies and still provide an effective defence against predators.

FRUIT PICKING

Blackberries, Damsons and some of the apple varieties are ripe for harvesting. Derryn and Janet have been busy picking fruit ready for their annual jam making sessions. Volunteers will be picking apples shortly and putting them out by the entrance gate for people to take in exchange for a small donation, usually £1 a bag. This income all helps with the running of the Reserve.



Talking of harvesting, here is Derek picking the rare Morrisons trolley from the railway embankment.

TREECREEPER

Several visitors and your Editor have been delighted to get a glimpse of the elusive Treecreeper this year. It is a bird that many people have not seen but with over 200,000 breeding territories in the UK, it is a lot more common than you might think. It is rarely reported in gardens, but not necessarily because it isn't there. A quiet, unobtrusive bird, it blends in with its habitat and rarely ventures onto bird feeders. They are more likely to be seen between November and April, probably because they are more conspicuous in the winter when there are no leaves on the trees. They are solitary, sedentary birds so you'd be lucky to see more than a pair.

Once a Treecreeper establishes a territory it tends to stay within the boundaries, so with luck, we'll have some more sightings of this delightful little bird (one of the Editor's favourites, along with the Long-tailed Tits). The species has an annoying habit of avoiding you by moving quickly to the other side of the tree the minute you spot one!



Eurasian Treecreeper. © Daniel M/Getty

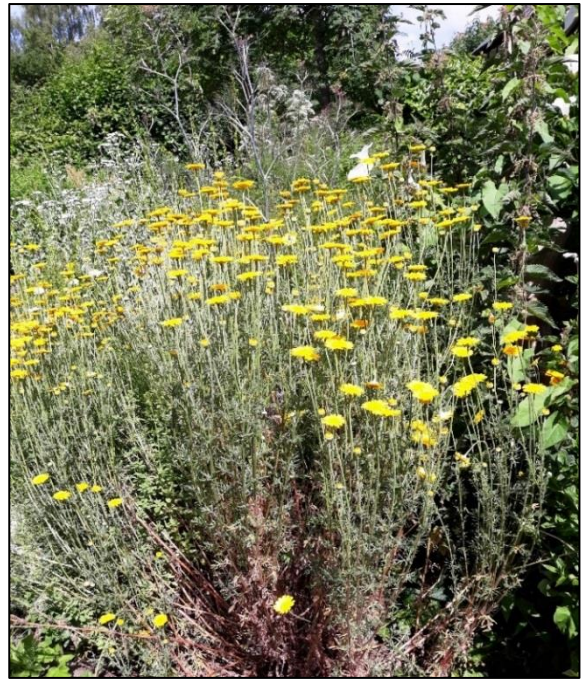
A local West Country name for them is the 'tree mouse' which suits it perfectly. It climbs up tree trunks in a mouse-like manner, supported by its long, stiff tail. Unlike the Nuthatch, it cannot climb back down headfirst. It must hop down backwards due to its tail getting in the way so will often choose to fly down instead. If a Treecreeper is disturbed, it generally freezes on the tree trunk. Its black and brown mottled plumage provides camouflage and makes it look like the bark of a tree. When it comes to nestbuilding, the Treecreeper did not opt for the most common solution.

Interestingly, it builds its nest behind a flap of loose bark. It starts with a base of twigs and then adds grass, moss, lichen and wood chips. It takes about a week to build the whole nest. The female then lines the nest with hair, wool and feathers. Given that a clutch size is about 5-6, the nest can get quite crowded towards the end.

Treecreepers breed between April and July, taking advantage of caterpillars to feed their young. You can buy wedge-shaped nest boxes that have been designed for Treecreepers, but they are rarely used. The WWA bought one years ago and found that out the hard way. But at least the Blue Tits like them!

If you see a Treecreeper, it is hard to mistake it for anything else. It has mottled brown and black plumage above and is mainly white below, with a long, slender, downcurved bill. It also has a white supercilium (stripe above the eye). Treecreepers are very small, the size of a wren, and only weigh 10g, though they look a lot bigger due to their bill and long, stiff tail. The Treecreeper's song and call is high-pitched and easily missed, sounding almost insect-like with a 'see-see-see' call. Good luck in spotting one!

HERB GARDEN



It is over 12 months since the herb garden was set up with 50 herbs, most of which have survived and are growing apace. They cover the full range of culinary, medicinal and aromatherapy herbs and a schedule is now being prepared giving further details of their origin and uses.

Did you see the spectacular show of the herbs which flowered in June? There was the Chamomile Dyers (pictured above) with its yellow daisy flowers which is used as a yellow dye plant. Your eye may have caught the yellow and violet flowers of Heartsease which dates back to the Middle Ages and has been used by herbalists to treat gout and the flowers can be added to salads. Bees are attracted to the flowering thymes and you can enjoy the smell of the mint plants if you touch their leaves. More colour and interesting foliage will follow throughout the summer and early autumn so do come again.

My apologies to Roger who sent in this (now edited) article in June when the flowers were in full bloom but your Editor very naughtily didn't get a newsletter out in time. Sorry, Roger! (Editor)



A lovely photo from Esther, who is doing a long term project: 'St Albans Unseen'. Esther called in at our Wednesday work party and caught us taking a well-earned break. More of her work is to follow, recording the hard work of our volunteers and photographing our very own 'Unseen' spaces.

Peter's Bird Records for 2018.

WWA member and keen ornithologist, Peter, has been keeping detailed records of the birds that he spotted throughout 2018. He has kindly allowed us to publish them in the newsletter. Below is his summary of the year.

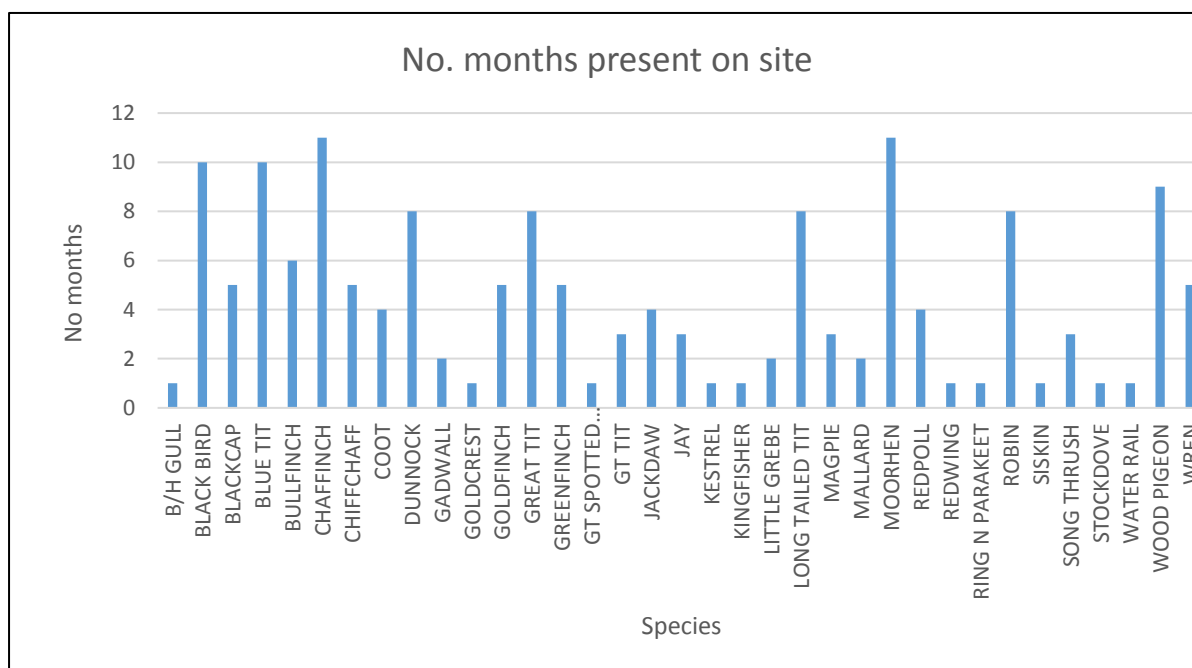
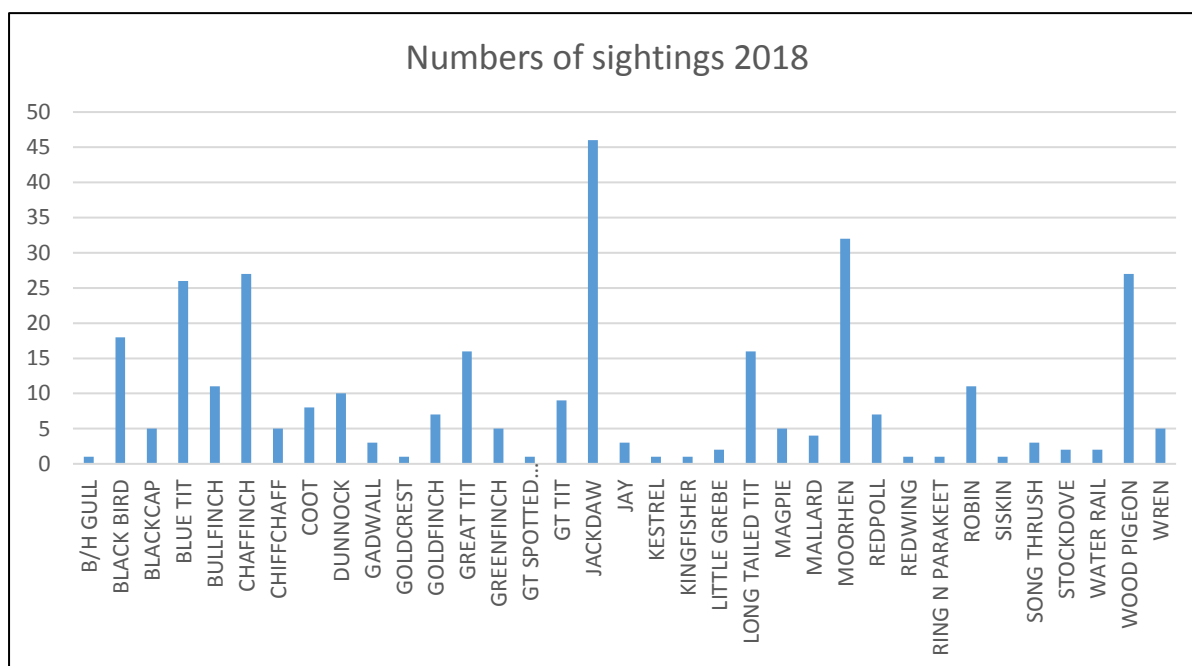
Number of species noted: 35

Largest population: Blackbird, Chaffinch, Jackdaw, Long-tailed Tit, Moorhen, Wood Pigeon.

Constant species: Blackbird, Blue Tit, Chaffinch, Dunnock, Great Tit, Long-tailed tit, Moorhen, Robin, Wood Pigeon.

Predominant summer visitor: Chiffchaff.

Predominant winter visitor: Long-tailed Tit, Redpoll, Siskin.



Thanks, Peter.

NOSTALGIA PAGE

This photograph came to light recently and shows the last allotment holder, Tony Russo, rotovating his plot. It was taken by the Editor from the Alban Way, sometime before 2007. Tony's mother, Assunta (nicknamed by us as Sussi) used to tend the plot before him and was quite a local character who lived in Cornwall Road after moving from Italy with her family, back in the 1960s (There was quite a large contingent of Italians living in Cornwall Road between the 1960s and 2000). Sussi could often be heard wheeling her squeaky wheelbarrow down the hill on the way to her allotment! She made her own wine with grapes sent over from her home village and her extended family would help her out, pressing the grapes and pouring the pressed juice straight into an oak barrel. Apparently, the juice was just left to naturally ferment without the addition of sugar or other ingredients. Sussi would bring some of her wine to our monthly work parties along with her most delicious home-made pizza. Happy days! Ironically, her sons weren't too keen on her wine, but the WWA volunteers had no complaints!

Tony was a great help to the WWA back then and if we ever needed any heavy machinery Tony knew 'just the man' to borrow from. He lent us a brand new rotovator when we were preparing the ground for our first attempts at hedge planting and another time he turned up with a 'Wacker Plate' for tamping down hardcore when we were laying paths. He never charged us, saving the Association hundreds of pounds and a lot of effort. I did slip him a bottle of his favourite Malt whisky for his trouble – paid for out of WWA funds, of course! Tony sadly passed away in 2007 and the allotment area was incorporated into the Reserve. There were quite a few allotments when the WWA took on the running of the site back in 1991 but gradually the allotmenters either passed away or moved away, so now the entire site is managed by the Association.

The area is what we now call The Allotment (you can't say we are not inventive!) and is a quiet, secluded part of the Reserve, not normally open to the public except for special events like the Wassail in January and our annual volunteers BBQ. Our helpers usually have their refreshment break here as it is a lovely environment to sit and have a coffee and Janet's wonderful cake and admire the views. You can just make out the River Ver on the left of the picture.

Sheila (Editor)

