

# WATERCRESS

SPRING 2008

ISSUE 75



## Message from the Editor

Unfortunately, my computer hard drive 'crashed' and I foolishly had not backed up all my data so I have lost many of the photos that I was intending to put into this edition. So this issue may be a little short on colour and content, but hopefully, things will get back to normal in time for the summer newsletter. And I will back up all my material from now on! Honest.....

## The Wassail

This event has become a victim of its own success and so this year was not advertised outside of our membership base. Around 100 people turned up, which made for a much more manageable and relaxed affair than the previous year. The Wicket Brood put on a special display of Morris dancing at the entrance to start the afternoon, followed by the Wassail ceremony, led, once again by Sandy Glover. Refreshments followed, with more dancing until late afternoon. Thanks go to all those who helped out this year - and especially Annette who made such a beautiful cake for the raffle. There was a really good team of volunteers this year - with people helping with the food, setting up for the event or serving refreshments - and your help is always very much appreciated. Thank you, all. An added bonus of the day was the £400 taken - all profits going to help fund the 'WaterWheelers' project.

## WaterWheelers Update

It's time to dust off the tandems and get cycling. The first event is the St. Albans Charity Bike Ride in May which is being done by some of the intrepid WWA committee again this year. Let's hope for better weather and less punctures this time! Yvonne McCarthy and her co-rider Graham are entering the London to Oxford again and we wish them good luck with that. Our new Treasurer is taking part in the London to Brighton bike ride but we have yet to persuade her to do it on a tandem.....

## Annual General Meeting

The AGM was held on the 2 March, at which twenty-eight people attended - which was quite a good turnout as we hadn't realised the date clashed with Mothering Sunday! There was a slight hitch as the Scout Hut had had a break-in the previous week and no-one had told us that the locks had been changed and we had an old set of keys! So there we were, with speaker Patty Briggs on her way with her bats, and no venue. Luckily, she has a great sense of humour and we had a good laugh about the whole thing. By sheer luck, we managed to track down a mother that used the playgroup, and after various frantic phone calls, found someone who had a set of keys and we eventually entered the premises around 11am. Everyone mucked in and



we set up the tables, tea urn and projector in record time. In order to keep to the speaker's schedule we raced through all the reports and managed to settle down to hear Patty's fascinating talk exactly at the planned time!

The Association are hoping to purchase a more modern 'Bat Detector' soon, so we can record the species that are in the area. Patty gave us some advice on the best model for our purposes and the Duet is probably the model we will buy, along with software that enables recordings to be analysed through a computer.

The new committee for 2008 was duly elected and details can be found on the back page. Three committee members are standing down this year and thanks go to them for their support. Laura Gravestock has resigned as Treasurer after keeping our accounts in order for the last two years for which the Association is very grateful. Mandy Neale has offered to take up the post. Anne Weightman stands down as Secretary and is being replaced by Pat Bate, our current Minutes Secretary. Sam Hudson is also stepping down as she hopes to go travelling this year. The Association would like to congratulate new committee members Sam and Penny Carr on their recent wedding and wish them every happiness for the future.

## A Message from the Membership Secretary

At present, our membership is at an all-time high, with 183 members having rejoined this year. I would like to thank everyone who continues to support us and to those who give extra donations. Our usual running costs and equipment maintenance eat away at our reserves, but with your support we can go forward with new projects to enhance the Nature Reserve. Some of our members have been with us since the early days and I hope that they have enjoyed all the many changes and improvements that have taken place over the years. A special thank you goes out to them.

There are around 40 households who haven't renewed so far this year -maybe an oversight, or perhaps they have moved away. There is a membership form included with this newsletter as a gentle reminder and I hope we will soon be able to welcome them back! For anyone who has lapsed for over a year, this will be the last newsletter sent out to them.

## Butterfly Meadow Update

Work seemed never-ending on the preparation of the next stage of the Butterfly Meadow but the end is in sight and all the digging is now finished. Our volunteers have done a tremendous job, even working in the rain to get it finished. The only thing now is to determine the position of the paths, and then we can start the planting! It is great to report that the first section has been attracting our flying friends already this year and we have seen Orange Tip, Comma, Peacock, Holly Blue and an unidentified White.



Comma butterflies feeding on the perennial wallflower Bowles Mauve (above left and below) and Honesty (above right)



## Barley Straw

At the last working party, volunteers made up a long barley straw 'sausage' to be placed at the top of the Mere in the annual attempt to keep the algal blooms in check. This usually turns out to become the favourite roost for our resident Mallards and their offspring! The barley straw has a chemical reaction when it decomposes in the water which is supposed to inhibit the growth of the algae.



## Flora and Fauna

Spring is always a lovely time of year at the Reserve and this year is no different. The new Medlar and Quince trees at the entrance are doing well and the blossom is just coming out. Further along on the grassy bank is a large patch of Greater Stitchwort with its starry white flowers. Apple blossom, Red Campion, Cow Parsley, Ramsons, Primroses, Bluebells, Marsh Marigold, Green Alkanet, Sloe blossom and Fritillary are all showing around the Reserve.

At the beginning of April, fish suddenly appeared in quite large numbers in the Mere, and under the bridge next to the Wild Spit. One dead fish was found on the bridge, probably dropped by a predator, and it has been identified as a Three-spined Stickleback. This is encouraging news as none have been seen for a while and now there is plenty of food for our normally resident Kingfishers and visiting herons. The pair of Kingfishers that were very active around the Reserve in December has not been seen so often – but it may be that they are nesting somewhere along the River Ver during the breeding season. Other sightings during April include a Muntjac deer, Fox and Bank Vole.

## Midsummer Madness

There will be another event this summer, following the success of last year, but hopefully with better weather. The date is still being arranged but not confirmed but it is looking likely that it will be the 28<sup>th</sup> June. Details will go up on the website as more information is available and a flyer will be sent out nearer the time as a reminder. As an Association that runs a Local Nature Reserve for the benefit of wildlife, events may include racing ducks, splatting rats and hunting bugs!!

## BIRD NEWS

There have been some really good sightings since the last newsletter. On the day of the Wassail, the WWA was treated to a visit from a Little Egret, who only stayed a couple of days but caused great excitement among at least two people! Little Egrets are becoming far more common – but only a few years ago they were considered to be quite a rarity in this country. Common they may be, but who cares? They are an absolutely beautiful bird, heron-like but a crisp white colour. They also have striking yellow feet. Committee member Sam Carr managed to get a shot of it -which is now on the WWA blog – along with many other excellent photos from Keith Chapman and other budding David Baileys. Check it out! There have been regular sightings of these birds in the fields near Sopwell House. On one visit the Reserve Manager counted 6 birds – fantastic! They are found in a wide variety of open wetland type of habitat where they feed during the day on a variety of animals



such as insects, frogs, reptiles, etc. They use a variety of hunting techniques including foot stirring with its feet which seems to attract prey within the range of its bill.

Two hundred or so years ago, it appears that there were Little Egrets in the UK and throughout the rest of Europe but by the beginning of the twentieth century, they had been driven into decline due to hunting. Their plumes, or 'aigrettes' were sought after by milliners, originally for officers' helmets and later for ladies' hats. A gradual re-colonization has taken place over the last 90 years or so, and numbers in Europe are now between 24,000 and 34,000 individuals.

There was a small group of Siskin noisily feeding on the Alder seeds throughout March and there are two pairs of Bullfinches regularly taking seeds from the new feeder. A pair of Great Spotted Woodpeckers was seen on the dead Horse Chestnut at the far end of the Reserve in Riverside Court. This seems to be their favourite tree so keep a look out for them there with their offspring.

Another first for the Reserve, as far as we know, is the appearance of two Reed Buntings. They turned up in March and were quickly spotted by Keith who sat patiently until he managed to get some good shots.

### Fascinating Facts about Reed Buntings

Reed Buntings are not early nesting birds. The average first clutch is started in the first half of May and if they manage a second clutch it is not started until early July. These birds nest on the ground in dry areas and use tussocks or piles of reeds in wetlands. The eggs are superb and even the most dedicated conservationist can almost understand why people in the past collected them to treasure and admire. The pale glossy shell is tinged purple, brown or olive and has spots and blotches, scrawls and scribbles of which Jackson Pollock would have been proud! The chicks leave the nest before they can fly and are cared for by their parents for another three weeks or so.



Since oilseed rape has been grown on a large scale in our countryside it has generally been viewed as rather wildlife-unfriendly but in fact the bases of the dense strong stems form ideal Reed Bunting nesting habitat. When rape fields are ready to be harvested the plants are first killed and left to dry in situ for a couple of weeks and this can be done either with a mechanical flailing machine or with an herbicide spray. It happens that this operation must be done just when Reed Buntings have laid their second broods and these broods are of course destroyed by the mechanical cutting. A BTO\* research project (funded by the agrochemical company Zeneca) confirmed suggestions that when rape fields were sprayed with herbicide instead of cutting, the second broods tended to survive and many more of them fledged successfully during the extra two weeks before the crop was finally gathered. This suggests that where birds have adapted to intensive farming, we should be careful about assuming that chemicals are always the worst management method.

\*British Trust for Ornithology

## Dates for your diary

### 2008 Working parties – starting at 11am

Sunday 25 May

Sunday 29 June

Sunday 27 July

Sunday 31 August

(Working parties are always last Sunday in month)

The main tasks for the next few months are planting up the second section of Butterfly Meadow, extending the new pond in the Pyghtle, keeping the pathways clear and general site maintenance.

All tools and gloves are provided – everyone welcome.

## Larks in the Parks

Sunday 29 June 2-5pm

As part of the St. Albans Festival there are various 'Larks in the Parks' taking place around the city. Sopwell Residents Association are organising their event in the grounds of the Marlborough Pavilion in Cottonmill Lane. Entry is free and they invite you to take a picnic along and enjoy an afternoon out with your friends and neighbours. There will be various activities for children and a talent competition. For further information check out their website at:

[www.sopwell.org](http://www.sopwell.org)



The WWA have been invited to set up a stall again this year at the Earthworks Summer Fair. There is always a lovely atmosphere at this event with stalls, food and entertainment to tempt you along so pop along and see what they have been up to this year.

[www.earthworksstalbans.co.uk](http://www.earthworksstalbans.co.uk)

## Bird hide code

The code to access the bird hide is XXXXX

Please ensure that the windows and door are closed on leaving. The hide contains useful identification charts and lists of flora and fauna.

## WWA 2008 Committee

*Chairman: Steve XXXX*

*Secretary: Pat XXXX*

*Treasurer: Mandy XXXX*

*Reserve Manager and Membership Secretary:  
Howard XXXX*

*Editor: Sheila XXXX*

*Website: Alison XXXX*

*Website Technical Support: Sam XXXX*

*Social Secretary: Penny XXXX*

*Committee Member: Jack XXXX*

*Archivists: Derryn XXXX/Bud XXXX*



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[www.watercress-net.org](http://www.watercress-net.org)