

## Nature Day

**Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> July**

### Children's Events

**2.30pm - 5pm**

This date has been set for our annual 'Nature Day' and we shall be holding all the usual activities, including pond dipping, mini-beast hunts, Splat-the-Rat', the famous duck race on the River Ver and Pat's 'insect tattoos'. Kathryn (of Story Tent fame from the Trestle Theatre) will entertain the children in her own inimitable style - with stories and craftwork. There will be a small charge for all these activities as we need to cover our costs, and as we never charge an entrance fee for our events, a donation box will be put out instead, to relieve you of any loose change you may be carrying! It's all in a good cause: to raise money to keep the Association up-and-running.



Pond dipping can get quite messy so please make sure that any children are suitably dressed for the occasion in old clothes, and trainers or wellies. Also that any cuts are covered with waterproof plasters if your children are taking part in any of the water activities and that they wash their hands before eating or drinking. There will be fresh water and antiseptic hand gel/wipes available. It may be an idea to bring along your own hand towel although one will be provided.

If you are joining in the 'bug hunt'- cover those arms and legs with long sleeves and trousers as we have lots of stinging nettles! All equipment is provided.

Parents are responsible for their child's general safety. Although the committee and helpers are there to oversee events, it is not possible to keep an eye on everyone at all times!

---

## Evening BBQ

**7pm Onwards**

There is a separate event in the evening, for WWA members only, with a BBQ and a 'jamming' session open to anyone who brings along their own instrument! One of our newer working party volunteers has been the first to take up the offer - which we are all looking forward to hearing! Come on - you know you'd love to join in... There is not much seating available so please bring a picnic chair or rug if you like your home comforts. The BBQ will be lit around 6.30pm for a 7pm start and will be available all evening. Bring along whatever you wish to cook, plus your drinks. Water, paper plates, cups and cutlery will be provided. There may be a raffle if the Editor can get around to organising one so bring along a pound or two - just in case! As it gets to dusk, we'll also be watching and listening out for bats using our new bat detector.

## Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting on the 21st March was well attended at the Sub-Aqua Club and the new committee was voted in. Details can be found on the back page. Janet has taken over from Pat as the General Secretary while Pat is remaining on the committee in a different role. Thanks Pat, for taking the minutes for the last three years. Trying to make sense of our committee is no easy task and you did a great job - but now you can relax more during meetings!



Naturalist John Tyler gave a fascinating illustrated talk during the second half of the meeting entitled 'Life in a Nutshell' with amazing photos of the tiny things around us that we overlook on a daily basis - but even this was surpassed by the coracle lessons on the Mere after the meeting. John kindly brought over his own home-made coracle and allowed anyone willing to have a go. Great fun!

---

## Caption Competition



**What is this strange creature lurking in the reeds?  
Answers to the Editor, please**

---

## Help needed.....

Can you spare a couple of hours during the week to do a spot of weeding in our now, somewhat overgrown herb garden? It is not onerous but just needs someone willing to come down on a regular basis for short periods at a time. Please contact the Reserve Manager if you can help us out (see back page).

# New Birds to Look Out For

Of all the things announced at the AGM in March, none were quite as exciting for me as the mention of new birds that had been spotted visiting the reserve. If anyone's interested in looking out for them, here's what to look for and the best time to spot them.



Surely the most welcome sighting is that of the red kite (*Milvus milvus*). Once a fairly common bird across Europe (apart from Scandinavia), the intensification of agriculture over the past 200 years has reduced its favoured woodland habitat, leaving it more scattered and vulnerable.

In Britain, the red kite was formerly concentrated into four main areas; the Chiltern Hills, the Yorkshire Moors, the Brecon Beacons in Wales and the Cairngorms in Scotland. In the past 20 years a new conservation and breeding programme has allowed its range to spread a little further, so its appearance in the skies above the watercress beds is a welcome sign.

The red kite is a medium-sized bird of prey, with a wingspan of between 145 and 165 centimetres. If you're looking up, look for its deeply forked, silver-grey tail and darker-coloured flight feathers (dark grey to black) on broad, straight wings. If you're lucky enough to see one land, their bodies are deep reddish-brown, their heads are greyish-brown and their beaks are dark grey, but yellow at the base.

Red kites have an interesting diet. Most of the time they favour the typical diet of a bird of prey; small mammals, carrion and sometimes smaller birds. However, they have been known to descend to the ground and scratch for earthworms. Let's hope we've tended the soil well enough to tempt them!

Also seen at the Reserve in recent times were several new duck species:

- Gadwall (*Anas strepera*); though they appear grey from a distance, male is dappled buff and yellow with a dark grey bill, while the female is mottled brown with a yellow-orange bill.
- Pochard (*Aythya ferina*); look out for a reddish-brown head and scarlet eyes in the males, or for brown heads and breasts, black eyes and grey wings and tails in the females.
- Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*); these are like mallards in many ways, the males having dark green heads and blue-green wings and the females being dappled brown all over. Yet these ducks are a little smaller, and there's no mistaking their extraordinary stretched-out beaks!
- Teal (*Anas crecca*); these are Britain's smallest native ducks and have relatively short bills. Females are mostly grey-brown, but for a splash of green on the wings. Males are more striking, with a chestnut brown head, a green patch running from the eye to the nape of the neck, and a yellow tuft on the tail.



- Tufted duck (*Aythya fuligula*); males are black but for a white breast with a long tuft of feathers hanging down the neck, while females are dark brown with a shorter tuft and a white patch above the bill. Look out for their deep yellow eyes, like strongly coloured egg yolk.



These are all smaller relatives of the mallard, belonging to the same family, *Anatidae*. All but the tufted duck are all listed as being at "moderate" conservation risk in the UK, so it feels good to know they're paying us a visit.

These birds are best viewed in the winter, so you aren't as likely to see them visiting the Reserve at the moment. However, recently a snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) has visited the Reserve, which is best to observe from April to September. Despite being common in the right areas, many snipes are shot each year, so let's hope many more find refuge from hunters' guns at the watercress beds. Look out for a long-legged, long-billed wading bird with dappled black and reddish-brown flight feathers and a buff-coloured underside.

Any budding bird-watchers who can't wait for a visit from any of these species should know that the London Wetlands Centre is a recommended site to view many duck species and wading birds, including the six listed here.

*The above article was sent in by Robert - one of our regular volunteers at the monthly working parties. Many thanks, Robert. The Editor is always happy to receive any comments, articles and ideas from our members for publication.*

## Grey wagtail

Another brief avian visitor earlier on in the year was a Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*), a typical bird of chalk streams and one which we are trying to encourage onto the Reserve.



The Grey Wagtail has the longest tail of the wagtails, and like the others its tail is wagged continually. The long tail improves its agility while flying in pursuit of insects.

The grey upperparts contrast with black wings, and the breast and belly are yellow. The rump is bright yellow in both sexes (and all ages). The adults have a prominent white supercilium (eyebrows) and moustache. The legs are pink-brown. The male has a bright yellow breast and black bib in the summer. The female's breast is a pale yellow, and the black bib is less prominent. Juveniles are similar to the female, but the lower bill and throat are pink-buff coloured, and they lack the black bib. The potentially confusing Yellow Wagtail does not have blue-grey upper parts.

The Grey Wagtail's call is similar to the Pied Wagtails, but higher pitched and shorter, and sounds more like "chic".

Their diet comprises insects, such as midges and ants, which they find alongside rivers, etc. They will also take water snails and tadpoles from shallow water - so perhaps we should not encourage them after all!

## New Management Plan

In 2009 our 5 year management plan came to an end. A review showed us we had achieved almost everything that had been set out in the plan, including creating the Pyghtle as a quiet area where wildlife comes first. Looking back at older photographs we were struck by how much the trees and brambles have grown up over the period.

We ran a visitor and member's survey to find out what our users thought. Everyone liked the peaceful atmosphere and many mentioned the variety of habitat, secret places and the wildlife, especially the birds. We asked what should be changed and got a resounding response – nothing!

Yet, if we are to keep the habitat diverse then we will have to manage the scrub, cut down self-sown saplings, and trim some of the trees to let in the light in places, so that the meadows can continue to flourish. The bog needs occasional clearance to keep the water flowing. Without this management, the reserve will gradually become more scrubby and wooded and the more open habitats will fade away. Equally, we will need to ensure that we do have some new young trees to replace the older specimens when needed. So to keep it the same we have to continue to make some changes!

Survey respondents noted that the nettles and hogweed were becoming a bit too dominant. We are aware that our grassland areas are becoming poorer, with fewer flowers and mainly rye or couch grass even where there are no nettles or brambles. Some people said they would like better sight lines into the Pyghtle area and several of our birders would like views which are not disturbed by others walking across the sight lines – all good points and a challenge for a very small reserve!

The new management plan takes us through to the end of 2014. In it we have reaffirmed the vision and objectives of the Watercress Wildlife Association. These are:

### Vision

A rich and diverse wetland site which conserves the historic interest of the watercress beds and provides a valued wildlife amenity for local residents.

The site benefits from and will continue to contribute to the wildlife within the Ver valley

### Objectives and Management

- ❖ To maintain the Mere and further increase its interest as a site for wildlife
- ❖ To reduce the scrub and improve the range of grassland habitats within the woodland, orchard and grassland area
- ❖ To maintain or increase the range of bird, mammal, butterfly and plant species on site

- .....
- ❖ To maintain visitor enjoyment and awareness of the site
  - ❖ To improve the monitoring and recording of species on site
  - ❖ To consider and plan opportunities to extend the wildlife refuge and widen the range of habitats on site when the allotment site becomes available.

You will see that our priorities remain to keep this little gem as a peaceful wildlife haven for wildlife but which local people can also enjoy. We will try to increase the biodiversity (but only with native species) and you will probably see more of us trying to survey and identify the various wildlife we have. This will guide our future management. We spent last winter clearing some vegetation to try to keep the balance between

wood, scrub and more open areas. The plan allows for rotational trimming so that we do not disrupt the wildlife too much but maintains a variety of habitats and thus encourages the maximum number of species. We will gradually try to make the meadow areas more diverse and we will be considering, this year, options for better viewing arrangements for the Pyghtle. The planning process was completed before we knew that we would have access to the last allotment area, so now we will be writing an additional appendix to the plan to cover the development of this area. The same principles of wildlife first, habitat diversity and 'naturalness' will apply but also enabling visitors to enjoy all its rich variety.

Thank you for all your feedback, ideas and support for the Reserve which is what makes this site so special. If you would like to read some or the entire plan (there are some rather technical appendices) please contact the Editor.

Margaret

*The WWA committee would like to thank Margaret for her incredible effort in compiling this Management Plan, especially as she has been studying for her post graduate diploma in Conservation Management at the same time. Now we just have to put it into practice – the easy bit!!*

## Reserve Manager's Report



Part of the new Management Plan includes doing more surveys on the ecology of the Reserve. The first of these surveys was to establish what is living in the various wetland parts of the site. This took place in mid-June and involved a 'kick and sweep' method of collecting the samples and then analysing the results by tipping the muddy silt into white trays and, basically, watching what wiggles or moves. The new pond and the River Ver are due to be surveyed at the end of June and the results will be published in the next newsletter. Thanks go to our expert surveyor, Claire, who has kindly offered to help with this.



A lovely shot of a Grass Snake that was sunbathing in the entrance of the Reserve. A group of ramblers appeared at the same time and were thrilled to see this creature. It made their day as many had never seen a snake in England before.

## Work Party Dates

### Please note change of start time

Sunday 25 July: 10am - 1pm  
Sunday 29 August: 10am - 1pm  
Sunday 26 September: 10am - 1pm  
Sunday 31 October: 10am - 1pm

All tools and gloves are provided.

The WWA committee have decided to start the working parties an hour earlier as we always seem to run out of time to achieve what we have planned before lunch beckons!

All are welcome and the work parties will last for about 3 hours, with a break for refreshments. Of course you don't have to stay all morning or turn up so early, as any help is always appreciated - even the odd hour or so.

Much has been achieved at the last three working parties and there have been lots of new volunteers, which is great to see. Work has started on the newly acquired allotment and initially our volunteers have been making the area safe by filling in two old wells, removing wire netting, trimming back some of the trees, clearing away rubbish and creating access paths to enable us to do ecology surveys. Another new meadow area is being created on the space where we hold our annual Wassail. This area was nearly all stinging nettles so it will be interesting to see how it develops over the coming years.



## Membership Renewals

If you still haven't renewed your membership for 2010 it is not too late to do so. Those who do not renew this time will no longer receive the WWA newsletters and might miss out on our fun events! At present the Association has a membership of 224 paid-up households, which is the highest number in our history, so we must be doing something right!

If you do renew, please remember to sign the Gift Aid form if you wish the Association to claim back the tax. You may have signed before but it is a lot easier for our Membership Secretary and Treasurer to claim this tax benefit on an annual basis without having to refer back to previous year's records. Thank you.

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

## WWA Committee 2010

### Officers

Steve ..... Chairman  
Howard ..... Reserve Manager  
Membership Secretary

Mandy ..... Treasurer  
Janet ..... Secretary

### Members

Sheila ..... Editor  
Pat ..... Member  
Derryn ..... Archivist  
Penny ..... Social Secretary  
Sam ..... Website technical support  
Margaret ..... Management Plan Advisor  
Alison ..... Website advisor  
Jack ..... Member

## Donations

Our thanks go to the Footpath Society that has kindly given the WWA £100 towards funds. The WWA committee will ensure that the money is wisely spent.

In fact, the WWA are in the process of putting in some cycle racks after various requests from our visitors, so this money will go a long way towards the cost of installing them. The initial rack is already in place between the wooden shed and the main storage facility at the base of the Alban Way. Another rack is to be installed near the main bridge, tucked discreetly behind the Dogwood triangle by the steps. It is part of the conditions of our lease with the Council that we encourage people to visit the Reserve by bicycle so this is a good start.

## Bird Hide

With the summer holidays fast approaching, we are asking members to keep an eye on the Reserve and let the Manager know of any anti-social behaviour problems. Alternatively, contact:

John Massey  
Police Community Support Officer  
Victoria Street, St. Albans AL1 3JL  
01727 796042  
[john.massey@herts.pnn.police.uk](mailto:john.massey@herts.pnn.police.uk)

