

# Issue 93 WATERCRESS Winter 2012/3

## HAPPY NEW YEAR FROM THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

I would like to wish all WWA members a very Happy New Year and to thank you for your continued support. This has enabled the Association to continue to thrive and flourish.

Even after 20 years the subscription rate has been kept at £10 per household (with a reduced rate of £5 for Senior Citizens and students), although any extra donations will not be refused!!

Our annual expenses add up very quickly and I would like to give you a rough idea of where some of your subscription money goes. Our Treasurer will be giving a detailed report of the accounts at the Annual General Meeting in March.

Hedgelaying fees, re-roofing of the allotment shed, new fencing on the allotment boundary, and tree work (£1800) bird food (£400), insurance and rent (£400), spares for mowers, and refurbishment of site signs (£400), toner cartridges for printer (£370), plants (£160), Barley straw treatment (£150) and miscellaneous expenditure including event equipment, hall hire, tools, etc, (£1300). As you can see, it costs a huge amount to keep the Association running efficiently which is why the support of the membership is so important to us.

Membership renewal forms are included either as an attachment or a paper copy depending on how you receive your newsletter. As usual please sign the Gift Aid declaration if you wish to use that facility. It does bring in an additional £300 a year to the funds.

In order to save on postage costs the Association had the foresight to buy £360 of second-class stamps before the price increase. These should last a while as many members choose to receive their newsletter by e-mail. This option is not suitable for everyone though and we are always happy to provide paper copies.

The Association holds two events each year. The Wassail is one of our main events and enables WWA members to meet up and celebrate the New Year and raise funds at the same time. The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary event held in September made just a small profit, but we were happy to just cover our costs on that day. It is not really organised to be a fund raising day...just a fun day!

The donation box recently installed by the main gate has so far generated an extra income of £260.

### Howard Membership Secretary



An early morning hoar frost captured on film by WWA Chairman Steve on the 12<sup>th</sup> December. The site looked stunning that morning. If anyone would like to see their photos in the newsletter, please send them to the Editor. Holiday snaps not included! All others considered for publication.

## 10<sup>th</sup> WATERCRESS WASSAIL

SUNDAY 20<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2013

2pm prompt

It is hard to believe, but this will be our tenth WWA Wassail\*. We have many regular WWA members who attend this event, but if you have never been to a Wassail before, come along and see what it entails, and help us brighten up a January afternoon. You may need to wear your wellies if the rains keep coming as the second bridge was under water a couple of times in December.

Wassailing is an ancient custom that took place on Twelfth Night, this being the last day of Christmas (6th January), but in 1752, England adopted the Gregorian calendar and dates were adjusted by 11 days to realign with the solar year. Although Twelfth Night remained on the 6th January, traditionalists regard the 17th January (Old Twelfth Night) as the proper day for Wassailing, and most Wassails are held around this time.



It is said that most villages had their own Wassailing song. With the revival of interest in traditional orchards and the growth of community orchards, Wassailing has become a part of the calendar once again.

At our ceremony we sing three Wassail songs, pour cider onto the roots of the trees, hang toast in their branches and make lots of noise (the one day of the year when we relax the rules!) to wake up the trees and to scare away any bad spirits that might be in the Orchard. This is to help ensure a good crop of apples in the coming year. This is followed with a feast of apple-based snacks and hot spiced apple juice (£1 a cup). There is no entrance charge but we do ask people to make a generous donation in exchange for the food and entertainment! Some home-made jams and jellies will be on sale, made with fruit from our orchard, but last year's harvest was very poor so supplies are limited. We obviously didn't make enough noise at the last Wassail.

The wonderful Wicket Brood Border Morris will give a display of dancing. Sandy will lead the ceremony and some of the Ver Players (St. Albans Ukulele group) will assist in helping the tunes along!

There will be a raffle so don't forget to buy a ticket, with the chance of winning some great prizes.

Could you make an apple-based snack (a cake, mini-pies, etc) for this event? Please contact the Editor if you can help.

\* 'Wassail' is from the Anglo-Saxon 'waes hael' meaning "be in good health"

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

SUNDAY 17<sup>TH</sup> MARCH AT 11am

### ST. ALBANS SUB-AQUA CLUB

This year we are delighted to have St. Albans resident, Luke, as our speaker at the AGM. Luke has helped out as a volunteer on the Reserve and often pops down with his camera for a photo shoot. He's hoping to set up a temporary Kingfisher perch shortly to enable him to capture some special shots of our favourite, but fleeting, star of the Mere. In his words he is a:

"21 year old wildlife cameraman & photographer specialising in anything that has wings, feathers, fur, scales, gills, legs, antennae but willing to venture into anything that could be fun.

I love being able to share stuff with people, to see someone learn something new, see something they've never seen before or just put a smile on their face. This is what I think photography is about from my point of view".

Luke is a rising star in the wildlife photographic world and has worked for the BBC, had articles published in Birdwatching magazine and recently worked with the world-renowned BBC Natural History Unit on a new series entitled Seasons airing in 2013. He also produced a calendar that includes a picture of a heron taken at the WWA site. Luke will be selling copies at the Wassail at the discounted price of £5.

2013 A Year in Wild Britain Calendar  
by Luke Massey



Luke will give his talk following the refreshment break, once the formal business of the AGM is finished. The various Officers will give their annual reports, the old committee will be dissolved and the new committee then elected. Nominations for committee posts must be received by the Secretary two weeks in advance of the meeting.

### ***New fence – (not one of Luke's photos!)***



## VOLUNTEER PARTY AT WESTMINSTER

Every year, local MP Anne Main hosts a special 'Thank you' party to express her gratitude to the many volunteer groups that do so much good work for the benefit of St. Albans. The WWA were invited again this year and Secretary Janet and committee member Derryn went along to the Palace of Westminster as the WWA representatives.

"The food and wine was nice, and Mrs. Main and her young staff looked after us very well. We were able to take a guided tour which included a trip into the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft. This was renovated after the major fire that destroyed some of the Palace of Westminster in 1834 and is available to any member of staff of the Palace/House who may wish to use it. Leo Blair was christened there apparently and it has a very ornate font to do the job. Anyone who wanted to get married though would have to be careful about the choice of dress. You get down through a very narrow spiral staircase so not suitable for a bride wearing a 'meringue' wedding dress!



***Chapel of St Mary Undercroft***

There were representatives from a number of churches/religious organisations as well as a range of secular charities. We spoke with volunteers from the Ver Valley Society, Alzheimer Society and also a support organisation for mental health called Rethink. There were also representatives from the local Macmillan fundraisers, Grove House, Guide Dogs for the Blind, and Helping Hands – a jolly good group who do shopping, garden tidying and so on for older people. They also drive people to hospital and GP appointments, and even try to accommodate the nicer stuff in life such as transport to the shops and hairdressers".

### **Janet/Derryn**

### ***Winter hoar frost – sent in by a member***





## WILDLIFE

2012... A GOOD YEAR .....

### FOR SLUGS!

Back in March seasonal rainfall and groundwater levels were at record lows and drought orders had been announced. We were preparing for the Mere to disappear and to get an opportunity to clear a conveniently dry chalk bed of accumulated silt. The water companies introduced a hosepipe ban and we were told that normal water levels would only recover if we had three months of continuous rain. How we laughed! Continuous rain, no chance!

The UK has now had the second wettest year on record, just a few millimetres short of the total for 2000. The Reserve is now so wet that the seasonal pond in the Pyghtle, which was on the verge of drying out completely, has grown into a complex of several areas of standing water. Good news for pond dwellers perhaps, and on the positive side, Hertfordshire remains one of the driest areas of the UK, being (according to my back garden statistics) about 25% below the national average.

All this (ironically much needed) water has not been good for insects. Big losers have been butterflies, moths and bees. Mammals have struggled through the cold, damp conditions, with hedgehogs and bats having been particularly badly hit. Apple crops were severely affected as the spring rain washed away the blossom and pollination failed. Perhaps last year's Wassail was badly timed? It seems that the only real winner has been perhaps the least attractive of creatures, the slug. There are 30 species in Britain and this year has seen the rise of the giant Spanish variety - **the Arion Flagellus**.

#### *Arion Flagellus - a nice orange example*



Believed to have crossed the channel in pot plants and salads, it has revelled in the damp conditions and examples up to 150mm have been reported. Not just unattractive to humans, they are particularly repulsive to predators due to their sticky defensive mucus.... an effective way of keeping enemies at bay, while helping them slide effortlessly through the undergrowth.

#### And there's the Irish Yellow slug... **Limacus Flavus**

More green than yellow, this variety (introduced from SE Europe), is closely associated with rotting wood and a common sight (if you're looking in the right places!) on the Reserve. It is often found in damp cellars and outhouses and apparently also has an affinity for wallpaper - so if you see that tell-tale mucus trail across the carpet, you know where to look! Despite the prevalence of slugs, reports indicate that rescue centres have had an influx of underfed hedgehogs - perhaps because of the cold conditions, but maybe an indication of how effective that defensive mucus can be.

## WILDLIFE



*Limacus Flavus*

Let's all keep our fingers crossed for a better balance in 2013 and hope that Nature's powers of recovery prove effective.

#### **Steve Chairman**

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There have been a few sightings of visiting swans but none, so far, have decided to set up home on the Reserve. We had regular breeding pairs nesting on site over the years but for some reason the habitat no longer seems to suit them. One theory is that the marginal vegetation has increased making the surface area of the Mere a lot smaller than in previous years. Swans have in the past 'crash landed' into the gardens of Riverside Road - much to the astonishment of the residents.



The mild weather so far this winter has meant that the Reserve hasn't attracted the more unusual wildfowl that visit when other local water courses are frozen. There have been no sightings of Water Rail or Little Grebes. A pair of Gadwall did turn up for about a week at the beginning of December and returned again at the beginning of January. Let's hope they stay a little longer this time.

Red Kites are being seen fairly regularly, soaring high above Riverside Road. They are clearly recognisable with their distinctive v-shaped tail. And a Little Egret popped in for a visit at the beginning of January.

Other recent sightings include Siskin, Goldfinch, Lesser Redpoll, Jay, Wren, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Kingfisher.

Robins are in abundance and vying for territory at the moment. There is a longer article about this species on page 5.

## RESERVE NEWS

**October:** One of the old willows in the Orchard was pollarded before it collapsed under the weight of its branches. These Orchard willows are very fragile, and the hollow shell of the oldest finally toppled over in October. It lies where it fell and creates a new habitat in its process of decay. The huge amount of material created by pollarding was taken to the bonfire site and burnt.

The ugly, old fencing that separated the Sanctuary from the Old Allotment was taken down and the wood burnt. Most of the metal has been taken to the Council recycling facility but we are still left with a large garage door to dispose of. Does anyone have an idea on how we can get rid of this?

**November:** Pollarding of the willows continued, with the lovely old specimen by the bridge being the first to be cut back. Again, this created another massive pile of waste material so this was burnt on the day.

The WWA does try and keep the bonfires down to an absolute minimum but on these occasions there was no alternative but to have a fire. At least one of them was on Bonfire Night!

**December:** The entrance area had its winter clearance of brambles and nettles. The snowdrop leaves are poking through the undergrowth already and now have a better chance of making a good display later in the month.



*I'm a volunteer. Get me out of here.....!*

## WWA COMMITTEE 2012

### Officers

Steve /Chairman

Janet/Secretary

Howard/Reserve Manager & Membership

Mandy/Treasurer

### Members

Sheila/Newsletter Editor

Pat/Member

Derryn/Member

Penny/Social Secretary

Sam/Webmaster

Margaret/Management Plan Advisor

[www.watercresslnr.org.uk](http://www.watercresslnr.org.uk)

## WORK PARTY DATES 2013

**Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> January:** Laurie has asked for volunteers to help with digging and tidying the Butterfly Beds. If you can spare a couple of hours to help, please do come along and offer your assistance. The low willow fence that protects the Butterfly Beds by the main steps needs to be extended. If anyone would like to have a go at a spot of simple willow weaving, let the Reserve Manager know and he can cut some suitable lengths of willow from the trees on site.

Clearance of the watercress in the boggy area is still an outstanding task. Watercress is very invasive and needs clearing out often so anyone who would like to volunteer for this, please contact the Reserve Manager.

**Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> February:** Coppicing and pollarding

**Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> March:** Last chance to do some coppicing before the nesting season.

**Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> April:** General maintenance

All ages are welcome. Work parties start at **10am** and finish around 1pm. Light refreshments are served around midday.

Tools and gloves are provided.

## NEW FLEECES

Pictured below are four WWA 'models' showing off their lovely, new, warm embroidered fleeces. These have been paid for with this year's grant money of £250 from Fund for the Future which is administered by the Hertfordshire Community Foundation. This was first awarded to the WWA three years ago. The award lasts for five years and enables us to plan for certain purchases each year. So far we have received £750 from the Fund – a very welcome boost to financing specific projects. The fleeces give the Association staff a more professional image and it means that visitors can quickly identify individuals who are connected with running the Reserve (but please don't ask us anything too complicated!)



*I bet David Bailey never had this trouble!*

## BIRD HIDE CODE

The code to enter the bird hide is **Cxxxx**. Please make sure the door and windows are closed when you leave, for security reasons. Thank you.



## ROBINS – GUARDIANS OF OUR ORCHARD!



In a mild winter, Robins start courtship in January, but the breeding season normally begins in March. The birds pair only for the duration of the breeding season. Most nests are located on or near the ground in hollows, nooks and crannies, climbing plants, hedge banks, tree roots, piles of logs and any other situations that provide a fully concealed cavity. If a nest box is provided to attract robins, it needs to be open-fronted, and placed in a hidden location in a climber or other such vegetation. Robins are famous for nesting in all kinds of unlikely locations, including sheds, kettles, boots, hanging baskets, coat pockets, under car bonnets, in farm machinery, even on boats in daily use.

The cup nest, built by the female alone, is made of dead leaves and moss, lined with hair. Courtship feeding is a very prominent activity, and the male can supply over a third of his mate's food intake during nest building and egg laying.

This extra food is important and can make a difference to the clutch size, particularly since a complete clutch represents about 90% of the females total body weight. Normal clutch size is 4-6, with one egg laid each day, usually early in the morning.

The birds are very sensitive to any disturbance during the nest building and egg laying, and will easily desert the nest if they think that the nest has been discovered. Unless the birds are used to people, it is best to stay clear of the immediate vicinity of the nest until the incubation starts.

Once the clutch is complete, incubation is by the female alone for 13 days. The shells of the hatched eggs are removed immediately from the nest by the female, who sometimes eats part of them for extra calcium.

The chicks hatch naked, and are totally dependent on their parents for food and warmth. Both parents look after the nestlings. Feather growth will become evident with the appearance of quills at three days of age. By five days the eyes start to open and they are completely open by eight days.

By this time, rows of feathers will start to appear on backs and flanks. The body is more or less feathered by 10 days. Flight feathers are the last to grow, and as the chicks fledge at 14 days, they will not be able to fly for another couple of days.

The young are tended by their parents for up to three weeks after fledging. Frequently the care of the fledged young is left to the male, while the female prepares herself for the next nesting effort. Robins have two broods a year. Three successful broods a year is not uncommon, and in a good year even four are known.

These multiple broods result in a long breeding season, and nestlings can be found until late July. There are considerable losses during the egg and chick stage - only about 57% of eggs from completed clutches result in fledged youngsters.

Despite being fiercely territorial against their own kind, robins do not normally bother about birds of other species near their nests. The parental instincts of robins are highly developed, which has led to the frequent reports of robins feeding the chicks or fledglings of other species. The most regular recipients of this unexpected care are song thrush, blackbird, spotted flycatcher and willow warbler.

### RSPB VISIT

We were pleased to welcome a group of birdwatchers from the local RSPB on what must have been the coldest day of the year. The weather had been appalling over the previous few days but following an overnight hoar frost the Reserve looked stunning. Unfortunately, the birds decided it was too cold to venture out. Either that or they were frozen to their nests! And the birdwatchers didn't tarry long in the sub-zero temperatures. After a short guided tour and a break for coffee we all decided to seek out warmer climes.



Their visit reminds us that it is soon time for the annual

### RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch.

Taking part in the Big Garden Birdwatch couldn't be easier. Simply follow these three steps:

- ❖ Watch the birds in your garden or local park for one hour on the weekend of 26th – 27th January 2013
- ❖ Record the highest number of each bird species you see at the same time. Don't count the total over the hour as you may get the same birds visiting more than once. Only count those birds that land within your garden - not flying over.
- ❖ Once your hour is up, tell the RSPB what you've seen. Even if you didn't get as many birds as you expected, or your 'regulars' didn't appear, do still please let them know. It's all really useful information. Their online form will be open from the Birdwatch weekend until 15 February 2013 for you to tell them what you've seen.

[www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch/](http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch/)





## NOSTALGIA PAGE



These are believed to be old pig sheds. Pigs were kept on the site according to local resident and former watercress worker, Gerald.

And this is the view of our storage sheds now. Pigs not permitted!

