

Issue 99 WATERCRESS 2015

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 22nd March 2015 11am – 1pm St. Albans Sub-Aqua Club

It certainly doesn't seem a year since our last AGM! But it is that time again where we like to give our members an update of the activities of the previous year. The AGM is a very relaxed affair and we try to keep it as entertaining as possible, and usually succeed! There will be the usual reports from the Officers, followed by the election of the new committee for 2015. All committee nominations must reach the Secretary before the day of the meeting.

We have a fascinating subject for after the coffee break: **"Birds of Bray"**

Chris and Sue have lived in Eaton Bray since 1975 and established "Birds of Bray" over twenty years ago after attending training courses on the husbandry and flying of birds of prey and the keeping of just three birds. This has grown over time to their present collection of 28 birds.

Why not come along to the AGM and ask Sue and Chris any questions you may like to ask about these beautiful birds of prey?



Falconry dates back many centuries and many of the terms used today have originated from this activity. For example "fed up" which relates to the bird not having the inclination to fly to hunt because he is full of food. Another term is "to come to the end of its tether" which means the bird has come to the end of its training line and needs to be set free.

The birds are not camera shy and are very used to being filmed, with or without flashes, so why not bring your cameras along and take pictures of them at close quarters. And you may even have a chance to hold one of the birds or catch one as it flies around the room. Apparently, the Barn Owl is quite used to this!

Who said AGMs have to be dull?

www.watercresslnr.org.uk

WASSAIL

Another year, another great Wassail! And we raised over £455 for our efforts, so an excellent result. Thanks go to the lovely Wicket Brood, who turned out in force. It was great to see some new faces (difficult to recognise under those disguises) for whom this was their first Wassail. The weather was kind to us, the food delicious and the atmosphere jolly.

Thanks go to all those who helped make the event a success, either by baking cakes, helping with the raffle, setting up and dismantling the awning and a host of other jobs that needed doing. And a special thank you goes to Sandy, who stepped in at the last minute to be MC for the ceremony. And you thought you had retired, Sandy!



Raffle prizes were generously donated by the Odyssey cinema (6 tickets and two complimentary bottles of wine, as two prizes. Thanks, Anna!), a family Sunday lunch for four at the Hare & Hounds, and a glass tankard and ale from the Beer Shop in London Road. It was great to be supported by these local businesses. Thank you.

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

If you were planning on renewing your membership this year but have just overlooked it, or lost the form, please find another attached. 140 of last year's members have renewed so far this year, and I would be delighted to hear from you if you wish to renew, too! I would like to extend a warm welcome to the following new members, who have joined recently.

Paul
James & Jessica
Lisa & Giulio
David
Woody
Peter
Liz
Ian
Paul
Veronica & Graham
Tim
Andrew
Janet
Martin

Howard (Membership Secretary)

WORK PARTY NEWS



Some of the workers enjoying a tea-break

January: Volunteers started clearing the area that is to be opened to the public soon. It was a lovely, sunny day and it was great to see some new faces. All the bramble roots have been dug out and much of the ground dug over to level it out.

February: There has been a lot of tree work done by the Council on the Alban Way, as part of their 'Green Ring' project and this generated lots of lovely bark chippings. The Association asked if we could have the chippings and we received two van loads. These were barrowed around various sections of the Reserve and now there are smart new paths in the Butterfly Meadow, Shady Place and elsewhere. Let's hope we don't flood like last year when all the previous paths floated away down river!

Wednesday working parties: A smaller group of volunteers has been busy cutting back the brambles in the entrance area before the emergence of the snowdrops and native daffodils. The Quince trees have been pruned and the whole area tidied up. Steve and Howard pruned back the large osier in the Bog that is slowly spreading and rooting itself in the silt. We don't want the Bog turning into woodland so the newly -rooted suckers were pulled out. Janet and Sheila took all the cut material to the bonfire pile for burning.

The huge pile of brash was finally burnt at the beginning of March. It is always amazing how such a large quantity of material ends up as a small pile of ash. This can then be put around the apple and alder trees.

VISITOR SURVEY

There is now an online version of our visitor survey. The Association likes to hear the views of our members and visitors to help us in our decision making at committee meetings.

www.watercresslnr.org.uk/visitor-survey

RESERVE NEWS



One of the new mink rafts

New mink rafts have been installed at the WWA, the adjacent Verulam Angling Club and also at a location near Sopwell House. The old wooden rafts had almost fallen apart but the new ones are made of recycled plastic so should last a lot longer. There have been no sightings of mink locally for a long time but that doesn't mean they are not around. If you see a mink on site please let the Reserve Manager know so we can step up our monitoring programme.

WORK PARTY DATES 2014

Sunday 29th March: There are two main tasks for this work party. For those who have some experience of hedgelaying, we would like to work on the section of hedge between the Pyghtle gate and the bench sited near the bird feeders. And if you have no experience, this is an ideal opportunity to have a go. We will have the necessary upright stakes and willow binders ready prepared. If you have a billhook, bring it along.

We are nearly ready to open up part of the Allotment to the public. We just need to put down some bark chipping paths and build the viewing platform and we're there.

Sunday 26th April: Putting up the new chestnut paling and cutting through from the Reserve to the newly cleared area.

Sunday 31st May: General maintenance, grass cutting, weeding, etc.

Sunday 28th June: 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.

VISITORS

The Association were pleased to welcome a natural history group from the U3A for a guided tour of the Reserve. Most were keen birdwatchers and we were lucky to see quite a few Lesser Redpolls visiting the feeders that day. And the guides joined the group for lunch at the local pub to thaw out. Lovely!



BIRD HIDE CODE

The code to enter the bird hide is **XXXX**. Please make sure the door and windows are closed when you leave, for security reasons. There are plenty of books, wall charts and posters to help with identification purposes, and it is a great place to shelter if it starts to rain! If you do see anything unusual, feel free to write it up on the sightings board inside the hide, or on the blackboard outside. We are always interested in recording what is found around the Reserve.

WWA COMMITTEE 2015

Officers

Steve /Chairman

Janet /Secretary

Howard /Reserve Manager & Membership Secretary

Mandy/Treasurer

Members

Sheila/Newsletter Editor

Pat

Derryn

Penny /Social Secretary

Sam /Webmaster

Margaret /Management Plan Advisor

WILDLIFE

CHRISTMAS PARTY AT WESTMINSTER

A report by WWA volunteer, Robert

Thursday 4th December 2014 was a big night for Janet and me. That was the night our local MP, Anne Main, had invited representatives of numerous St Albans volunteer groups to join her for a Volunteer Thank You Party at the House of Commons.

The chill winter's evening and stone-cold air in the entrance to Westminster Hall did little to bring my spirits down. It was the first time I had ever been inside any government building and I enjoyed the experience as much as I could. A particularly special moment was when I got a photograph of Big Ben from near the base.



Inside Westminster Hall's private apartments, a buffet dinner had been laid on. We got the chance to talk not only with volunteers from our local area, but the people they help as well. I especially enjoyed talking with representatives of Hearing Dogs for the Deaf, who had brought along not only the people the dogs assist, but the dogs themselves! Anne Main gave her personal thanks to us in a short speech. She also put on a raffle, although sadly neither Janet nor I were winners. Later, some of the party guests had the privilege to go and see a hidden chapel beneath the Hall which is not accessible to the public. It was a Catholic chapel, a relic from the days when free worship was a foreign concept in the UK. Around a century ago, an audacious Suffragette sneaked into the chapel while Parliament was in session, technically becoming the first woman in the House of Commons!

All in all, it was a very special evening. Let's hope that Ms. Main invites us back next year.

Professional arborist, Andy, and his team will be carrying out various tree works around the Reserve now that we have permission from the Council. They will be on site from Monday 9th to 11th March.

Some wintery facts from Sam



Squirrels don't hibernate!

It's a common misconception that squirrels hibernate. They do spend longer sleeping in their dreys (nests) up in the trees, keeping warm and saving energy, especially during bad weather when they might sit it out for days at a time. However they must come down regularly to forage for food throughout the winter and they even breed through December and January, as well as in the summer.

The cheeky red chap in the picture, photographed in Northumberland (no red squirrels on the WWA Reserve I'm afraid) prefers to stick his head in a box of nuts and pretend that the weather's fine really.

A brown Green lacewing is probably perfectly fine

This close up picture (top right) of a Green lacewing shows the ruby red eyes that you only notice at this magnification, unless you've peered very closely at one before. The rest of it is mostly a bright, light green.

At this time of year you might find one or two in your house or shed, and chances are it has faded to a dull brown. You might assume, as I once did, that you are looking at the desiccated, fading husk of a creature that died a while ago. They are most likely just hibernating though, and will perk up and move on when better weather arrives. Well, realistically, if they're trapped in your house they probably haven't a very bright future ahead of them, but you get the basic idea.

Green Lacewing



Snowdrops are surprisingly interesting

I have Snowdrops (*Galanthus*) putting on a good display in my garden right now. But did you know these facts about snowdrops?

Snowdrops are not a native wildflower and were probably introduced in the 16th century from mainland Europe, though there is some confusion over this.

Snowdrop bulbs are the most traded bulbs in the world

However, in many European countries where they grow wild they are a critically endangered species because they get dug up for gardens. They are protected by law in many of those areas.

The seeds are spread by ants. There are fleshy structures called elaiosomes attached to the seeds, rich in proteins and lipids. The ants take them into their tunnels for the larvae to feed on the elaiosomes, and then the seeds find themselves in a great place to grow.



Thanks, Sam

BIRDS

The photos (shown right) have been sent in by one of our regular bird watchers and photographer, Andrew. Can you identify all these birds?

We have had lots of visits from birdwatchers throughout February and March and the Herts Bird Club has a dedicated slot on their sightings archive – Watercress LNR (St Albans) to which one can send in any interesting sightings. Below is a selection of entries recently posted by Andrew and other visitors to the Reserve.

2nd March

Watercress LNR (St Albans), 10+ **Lesser Redpoll** (Andrew Steele)

Watercress LNR (St Albans), **Red Kite** (Andrew Steele)

Watercress LNR (St Albans), 5+ **Redwing** (Andrew Steele)

Watercress LNR (St Albans), **Water Rail** (Andrew Steele)

Watercress LNR (St Albans), 2+ **Siskin** (Andrew Steele)

It has been an absolutely fantastic year for Lesser Redpolls on the WWA site and a pleasure to watch them coming to the feeding station in the Pyghtle. Other sightings on the website are:

1st March

Watercress LNR (St Albans), **Kingfisher** (Dan Fletcher)

Watercress LNR (St Albans), 10+ **Lesser Redpoll** (Dan Fletcher)

Watercress LNR (St Albans), 2+ **Siskin** (Dan Fletcher)

Watercress LNR (St Albans), **Water Rail** (Dan Fletcher)

28th Feb

Watercress LNR (St Albans), **Little Egret** (Bob Harris)

Watercress LNR (St Albans), 2 **Ring-necked Parakeet** (Bob Harris)

Watercress LNR (St Albans), 30+ **Lesser Redpoll** (Bob Harris)

Watercress LNR (St Albans), **Blackcap**, male at feeders (Bob Harris)

Watercress LNR (St Albans), **Kingfisher** (Bob Harris)

27th Feb

Watercress LNR (St Albans), 30+ **Lesser Redpoll** (Andrew Steele)

Watercress LNR (St Albans), **Kingfisher** (Andrew Steele)

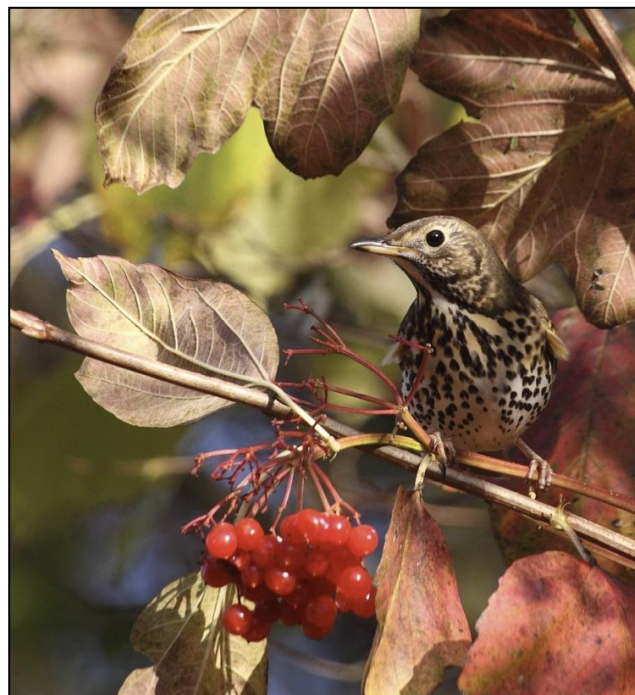
Watercress LNR (St Albans), **Water Rail** (Andrew Steele)

Watercress LNR (St Albans), **Little Egret** (Andrew Steele)

It appears that we have cornered the market in Lesser Redpolls this year! Paul has posted a great photograph of a beautifully coloured Lesser Redpoll on the Herts Bird Club website (22nd Feb) taken at the WWA. It is well worth a look.

<http://www.hnhs.org/birds/>

BIRDS



AND MORE BIRDS!

If you wonder why there is such an emphasis on bird life in this issue, it is because winter is the most interesting time of year for unusual sightings. Chairman Steve sent in these photos of a pair of Tufted Ducks and two male Gadwalls that have been visiting regularly this year.

Tufted Ducks



Gadwalls



The male Gadwall is a very smart, neat looking duck if you can get close enough to see the finer detail of their plumage. Our visiting birds are very timid and will fly to the end of the Mere when people approach, which is great, as we want our wildlife to be 'wild' and not behave like pets! So you really need to take binoculars or a camera with a long- range focus to see the finer details. Or, of course, you just look them up on the internet! Not as much fun, though, as seeing them in a real life setting.

WATERWHEELERS



Spring is in the air and thoughts turn to going out in the fresh air, getting fitter and enjoying the lengthening days. Many of our newer WWA members may not be aware that the Association run a small operation called the 'WaterWheelers' as part of our activities. The WWA are owners of two lovely tandem bicycles that are available for use by our members. Various WWA members take part regularly in the local St. Albans Charity Cycle Ride organised by the Rotary Club. This year it takes place on Sunday 17th May and there is a choice of 10, 20, 30 and 40 mile rides. If you fancy having a go on one of our tandems for this event, just contact the Reserve Manager or Editor.

For more on the charity bike ride, see the website at:

<http://www.saccr.co.uk/>

On another note St. Albans Council has been developing a 'Green Ring' around town. This will be a continuous walking and cycling route (approx. 9Km long) that will encircle the city centre. The route primarily enhances existing cycling and walking routes and extends from Townsend in the north to Fleetville in the east, Sopwell in the south and into Verulam Estate to the west.

As mentioned earlier, there has been a lot of tree work along the Alban Way (as part of the Green Ring plan) adjacent to the WWA, to and it is looking really good now that it is finished. Some subtle tree work was done by the Council on the embankment overlooking the Nature Reserve to improve the view, and the litter bin at the top is to be removed for which the Association is very grateful. We will no longer have to scramble up and down the slope clearing the rubbish that gets thrown down the bank!

St. Albans Green Ring

