

The Society maintains Digswell Lake and the surrounding wooded parkland as a nature reserve and place of tranquil beauty

## Our dragonflies

*Simon Stebbings*

We have had a bird report (courtesy of Colin Hull) for many years but haven't kept a record of the other things we find at the Lake. I thought it was about time we corrected that so, starting with this edition of the newsletter we will, with your help, see if we can produce at least an occasional report of the dragonflies and damselflies we see at the Lake.

Dragonflies and damselflies begin their life cycle as fearsome underwater predators, spending one or more years as larvae largely unrecognised by anyone. Only if you go pond or river-dipping will you see them in this state. Towards the end of this part of their life they

undergo a complete metamorphosis, emerging from the water as adult flying insects. Unlike other aquatic insects such as mayflies which live for only a very short time as adults, dragonflies and damselflies live as adults for several weeks or even months, feeding on other small insects such as gnats and mosquitoes.

There are approximately 30 breeding species of dragonflies and damselflies in Hertfordshire with Amwell Nature Reserve and Panshanger Park (a designated "hotspot") being key locations. Even allowing for differences between males and females this is a fairly small number to get to grips with – if only they stayed still and close to you! Since they are cold-blooded, the



*Banded Demoiselle*



*Willow Emerald Damselflies*

Rather more common were Willow Emerald Damselflies [see image] which are a relative newcomer to the County, having first been recorded only as recently as 2019. Perhaps another sign of how climate change is affecting our local environment. Like many other damselflies these are rather easier to photograph if you can get close enough as

greatest number will be seen when they have warmed up – i.e. from later in the morning on calm sunny days from spring to early autumn.

At the Lake they can be seen flying low over the water and occasionally on the grassy areas where they are hunting for their prey. Probably the best place to see them is towards the head of the Lake, from what used to be a dipping platform off the path running round the back of the settling tank. Dragonflies are strong fliers, generally larger and, when at rest, holding their wings outstretched. Damselflies are smaller, more delicate and very much weaker fliers. At rest, the wings are normally folded back over the body.

A visit to the Lake last autumn revealed the presence of maybe half a dozen different species. Perhaps the most dramatic were the Vagrant Hawkers which tend to hover near the bank, making them a “relatively easy” subject to photograph in flight [see image]. Not something to be attempted unless you have the patience of a saint, though.

they are often found perched by the water’s edge. Other common species seen included Banded Demoiselles, Common Darters and Large Red Damselflies.

There are a number of field guides which provide a lot of useful information, such as the ***Wild Guide to Dragonflies*** (fifth edition) and the ***Field Guide to the Dragonflies & Damselflies of Great Britain and Ireland***.

With warmer weather (hopefully) on the way we’d love to hear about any sightings from the Lake at our usual e-mail address.



*Vagrant Hawker*

# Digswell Lake Bird Report (July 2025 - January 2026)

Colin Hull

This period of reporting covers late summer, autumn, and mid-winter. For most species this is post breeding and migration.

## Highlights

Although in theory summer visitors, such as **Blackcap** and **Chiff Chaff**, may have been present until at least September, I did not see any on my visits. They are however generally quiet as they move about feeding on berries and any insects they can find.

Counts of all duck species were low and usually less than five, apart from one count of 12 **Mallard** on 6 September 2025. I did not see any **Mandarin Duck** in the recording period. Some young **Coots** from this year were still present with the two pairs of adults, but had gone by September. The adults remained and were present on all visits.

The continued national increase of the populations of **Red Kites** means increasing frequency of seeing them drifting over the reserve from surrounding areas. Two were observed on 2 January 2026 along with a single sighting of a male **Kestrel** on 1 October 2025.

**Grey Wagtail** is a species often associated with running water and hill streams. The little waterfall at the weir is an attraction to them and so the sighting of one on 1 October 2025 was a typical record for the season.

From October onwards I always keep an eye out for the three common winter visitors **Siskin**, **Fieldfare** and **Redwings**. The **Siskins** more often feed in the Alder trees on seeds in the small cones. I had only one sighting, but it was the best encounter I have ever had at the Lake. About 20 were bathing in a large puddle under trees at the west end and then moving around in the bushes just a few metres away from where I stood. One of those "wow" moments of wild wonder. Sadly, there

were no **Fieldfare**, but I did see a few **Redwing** up close, feeding on some ivy berries. It was difficult to be sure, but my estimate was approximately 5-10 before they flew off into some other trees and out of sight.

## Birds of Conservation Concern

The long running counts from BTO volunteers are used to track bird populations and this has shown how very precarious our wildlife is, and how sensitive it is to changes in climate and environment. From the mid 1970s many species have declined. Designated declining species that occurred at the Lake are highlighted in the Systematic List on p4.

## Acknowledgments

Thanks to the people who have sent me reports during this period especially Simon and to all who take an interest in the bird life of the Lake. I am always happy to hear from people who may also note the birds they see during visits as it helps to supplement my own data. Even reports of common birds are of interest, especially any counts. If you have any interesting sightings or information in connection with birds at the Lake please contact me by phone or email. (My contact details are on the final page.)



Lake Swans

# Systematic List of Birds at Digswell Lake

**Little Grebe.** One on the Lake on 9 August 2025

**Mallard.** Amber List. At least two on most visits, 12 on 6 September 2025

**Gadwall.** Regular visitor. Up to five on several visits

**Tufted Duck.** Frequent visitor. Two to three on several visits

**Mute Swan.** One pair on three visits

**Red Kite.** Increasingly common breeding resident. Two on 2 January 2026

**Kestrel.** Amber list. One overhead on 2 January 2026

**Moorhen.** Amber List. At least one on all visits. Four on 10 December 2025

**Coot.** Breeding resident. Two pairs present throughout the period

**Wood Pigeon.** Amber List. A few on all visits

**Stock Dove.** Amber List. One on 2 January 2026

**Black-headed Gull.** Autumn–Winter visitor. Two on 6 January 2026

**Green Woodpecker.** Breeding resident. Seen on two visits

**Great Spotted Woodpecker.** Resident. One record on 10 December 2025

**Grey Wagtail.** Amber List. One on 1 October 2025

**Wren.** Common breeding resident. Only two records for singles during the period

**Duncock.** Amber List. One on 2 January 2026

**Robin.** Very common resident. At least one on all visits

**Blackbird.** Common Resident. Up to four seen on five dates

**Song Thrush.** Amber List, Recovery from Red List). None recorded during the period.

**Redwing (WV).** Normally regular winter visitor. One small flock of about 5-10 on 2 January 2026

**Mistle Thrush.** Red List. One on 10 December 2025

**Fieldfare (WV).** Normal regular winter visitor but none this season

**Goldcrest.** Common resident. Not recorded

**Long-tailed Tit.** Common breeding resident. Flock of 10+ on 10 December 2025

**Blue Tit.** Common breeding resident. Only one record for the period

**Great Tit.** Common Resident. Seen or heard on 75% of visits

**Coal Tit.** Common Resident. Not seen during the period

**Tree creeper.** Reasonably common woodland species

**Nuthatch.** Common woodland species. Three present on 2 January 2026

**Jay.** Common resident. One or two on each of three visits

**Magpie.** Common resident. At least one on all visits

**Jackdaw.** Resident breeding colony. At least one on all visits

**Carrion Crow.** Common resident. A single record for the period

**Chaffinch.** Common but declining resident. None seen during the period

**Siskin (WV).** One flock of 20 on 10 December 2025

## *Key for systematic list:*

SV summer visitor / WV winter visitor

## **Birds of national conservation concern:**

Red list >50% decline

Amber list 25-50% decline

# Peter Warwick Neville

Peter Neville was a former Patent Attorney, Parish Councillor, author, cellist and double bass player, lover of trains and (most importantly as far as we are concerned) a long-standing member of the Digswell Lake Society. Sadly Peter passed away in October of last year.

Leaving his origins in Dundee, Peter was educated at St Catherine's College Oxford where he read metallurgy. While at Oxford he acquired an interest in trains which developed over the years to include his writing, with other local notables, a book entitled "Welwyn's Railways: A History of the Great Northern Line 1850-1986". This was no doubt influenced by his living next to Welwyn North station through which the line passed before crossing over the Digswell Viaduct adjacent to Digswell Lake.

Peter joined the Society in 1980 and immediately became an active member. At that time the Lake and its surrounds were leased from the Commission for the New Towns but in 1985 the trustees of the Society negotiated a sale of the freehold. Execution of the transfer of the land was witnessed by Peter, his impeccably neat and readable handwriting being something of a trademark of his. Very shortly thereafter the Society became a limited liability company with Peter as one of its initial directors.

By that time, already a committee member, Peter was elected to be the Society's Chairman on 27 May 1987, a position he held until he stepped down after 30 years in the post. In that time Peter saw the Society develop from a relatively small group of enthusiastic individuals into an organisation dedicated not only to preserving a valuable open space on the outskirts of Welwyn Garden City but also the Lake as a refuge for wildlife and as a community asset for those lucky enough to live close by. In his time the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust recognised the value of maintaining the Lake as a refuge for water voles and a readily accessible circular walk (at least in the drier months) was created by the construction of the Graham Elliott crossing. Peter opened the crossing in June 2017 [see image].

At the same time as guiding the future of the Society, Peter maintained his love of music. As an accomplished cellist and double bass player, he was kind enough to play, as part of a string quartet, at the wedding in 2009 of two of the Society's members. Later he wrote a series of short stories about playing in orchestra pits, entitled "Tales from the Pit".

This short note can only scratch the surface of Peter's achievements both as a key member of the Society and in the wider world outside. We will remember Peter for all of this but, perhaps most memorably for his precise, almost pedantic speech which, even after all the years spent away from home, retained traces of his Scottish ancestry. He will be missed.



# Work Party Updates

## Work Parties

James Godbold

Numerous jobs have been carried out over the recent months by a core of regular volunteers and also with one or two new helpers who are always welcome.

River margins have been opened up and lake vegetation cut back, in particular the dogwood, *Cornus sanguinea* 'Australis'. This can grow to six metres tall, is not native and is a bit of a bully, shading out other plants. We continue to regularly work on the vistas by cutting back trees and shrubs on grass areas. Some new trees have been planted courtesy of donations and the local district council who give away 'tree whips', which are very young and need protection from nibbling rabbits and other creatures.

There continue to be ongoing discussions with Thames Water, regarding the ownership of the settlement tank which has become neglected function-wise and structurally. It is an area that has attracted much Himalayan Balsam as well as litter. We are keen to get this cleaned up, especially for the benefit of the river, which it discharges into.

Monthly our rubbish haul ranges from sweet wrappers, coffee cups and sandwich wrappers all the way up to car tyres and bikes, necessitating a few trips to the recycling centre!!

A replacement picnic table is in the pipeline but sadly some of the timber needs straightening, which one of members is working on.

The river has risen and fallen over the months and with it the weir & vegetation buildup has changed. The weir crossing design was based on average water levels at the time and the pipe heights set accordingly. With reduced abstraction and fluctuations in rainfall and river height it has unfortunately given rise to the need to spend time removing surface vegetation and

### Join our work parties

*Please make time to help and meet fellow working party members.*

**Work parties are usually on the fourth Saturday of each month.**

**Meet at the Lake at 9:00am.**

Wear old clothes, gloves and wellington boots. Refreshments normally provided mid-morning.

making sure the pipes are clear. While there is ample capacity for the water, the sticks, leaves and algae etc. tend to stay on the surface and are prevented from flowing through the pipes.

Rainfall over recent weeks has made the UK drought free as of January 2026 with all rivers flowing at normal or higher levels than expected for the time of year. Soils are saturated which helps recharge underground water levels and will feed the Mimram's springs over the coming months and years. The rains have, however, not been fully successful in filling all reservoirs across the country. Some are typically still only at average levels with the exception of East of England (Essex) Hanningfield & Abberton reservoirs still below 60% capacity!! So weather can be deceptive, no sunshine and lots of rain does not guarantee there will be no hose pipe ban this summer!! We can predict with some confidence that the springs at Digswell Lake & the Mimram will continue to flow but at not at what height. So how much vegetation gets caught still manages to surprise us both pleasantly and 'Oh no that's a good hour's work to clear!!'

# Work Party January

Shirley Dobrin

During our January 2026 work party, a few volunteers were able to clear around the head of the lake area where one of the aquifer springs rises. This area is known as the 'boat house', because it is where many years ago a boat house was present, prior to the formation of the Digswell Lake Society. Sadly, time has taken its toll and now there is very little sign of it.



Where the boat house once stood

Interestingly, there is wild watercress growing on the water that can be seen curving around the stream, however the advice is not to eat it due to the risk of possible parasite infection, such as liver fluke. Happily, the watercress should have small white flowers in spring which will benefit invertebrates, small insects and birds.

Opposite the fallen hornbeam, the pond was re-defined by pulling back the vegetation to the edge with a tool called a crome. This has large bent tines which allows the user to get beneath the rooted grasses and marginal plants. It's heavy work and a job well done, especially at this time of year, causing least disturbance to pond life.

The body of water on the other side of the large pipe which divides the pond was also cleared as can be seen.

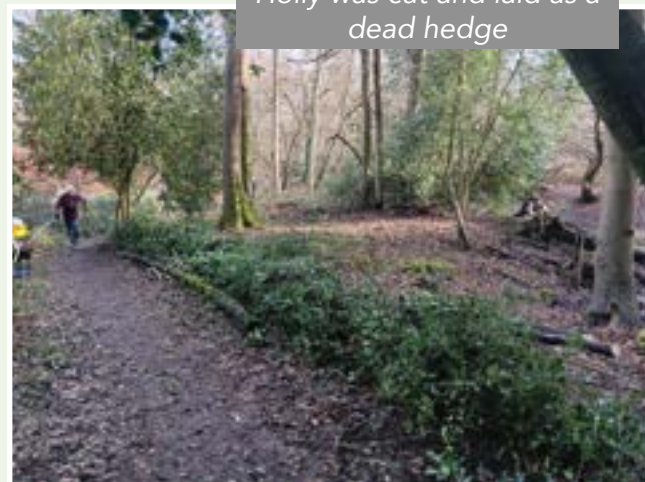
Members may have noticed there are red flags intermittently placed in this area. This is part of a valuable monitoring project to see if the Japanese Knotweed that was present last year in that position, returns this coming year. Whilst not a major infestation the Society is keen to keep it at bay.

Additional work was carried out in this area whereby a large amount of holly that was shading the aquifer spring was cut and laid by the path as a dead hedge.



Watercress is of benefit to insects and birds

Finally, on the left hand side approaching the river, volunteers cut and pushed back a significant amount of bramble that had flourished as a result of the large decayed beech tree being felled a few years ago. This has benefited access towards the river for Members as the path had recently deviated too close to the pond edge.



Holly was cut and laid as a dead hedge

Water on the other side of the large dividing pipe being cleared



Red flags mark the site of a former Japanese Knotweed infestation

# Date for your diary

## AGM

13 May 2026 at 7:30pm

Digswell Village Hall

All members are encouraged to attend.

We look forward to your participation and chatting over refreshments after the meeting.



## Contact information

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### *Working parties*

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