

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



Chairman's Introduction

Simon Stebbings, Chairman

In this edition of the Newsletter I would like to focus on the Society's membership and finances. As we all know, the Society's continued existence depends almost entirely on the income received from us, its members, by way of our annual subscriptions, occasionally supplemented by very generous legacies and other donations. For the Society to continue, these sums must exceed – or at least equal – its outgoings. And we should all be determined that it **does** continue, as it provides a valuable green space on the edge of Welwyn Garden City and a key element in the green corridor along the Mimram that connects the River Lea to open country via the Panshanger Country Park and Tewinbury Nature Reserve.

However, as can be seen from our Treasurer's summary on page 7, the Society did not break even in the nine months to the end of June this year – indeed far from it. This might be seen as an exceptional event as it was caused by significant tree work being required across the site. Unfortunately it is unlikely to be an exceptional event, with some of the most magnificent trees at the Lake (such as the Horse Chestnut pictured on the left) being well past their prime. Couple this with climate change introducing a variety of new diseases and there is – at least potentially – a looming problem. One that needs to be addressed today to prevent it materialising.

The Society has taken steps to reduce its outgoings, for instance many of us have now agreed to receive information by e-mail rather than by post, but there are few further savings to be made. The Society could, of course, ask us to contribute more by way of an increase in our annual subscriptions, which have remained unchanged for many years despite considerable increases in the Society's costs. While this is not something that can be ruled out, a better way would be for more people to become members and contribute what many regard as a modest annual sum to the Society's future.

On a positive note, membership has remained relatively stable over the last few years, though well down from the immediate pre-COVID period. However, it would be good to get numbers back up again. To that end, your committee is looking at creating a more active social media presence to spread the word about the Society and what it does. Any suggestions you may have about the best way to implement this or anything you can do to help promote the Society would be most welcome. Please do get in touch.

Digswell Lake Bird Report (March 2024 - June 2025)

Colin Hull

St Francis of Assisi wrote *The Canticle of the Creatures* towards the end of his life, in which he referred to all things in nature as his brothers and sisters. It's always a joy to walk around the Lake at all times of year to greet the 'brothers and sisters.' I particularly enjoy greeting the migrants, some of whom travel thousands of miles to come to us. Changes in climate are already having impacts on both breeding in this country and on their migration routes and stopover areas. If you hear or read about climate induced disasters, it's not only humans that are affected. Long term climate changes may be good for some species but for others it will be a real struggle against extinction.

Spring & Summer seasons

I followed the **Coot** breeding attempts for the BTO Nest Record Scheme. In Spring-Summer 2024, two pairs nested successfully after some initial failures. This year again we have had two pairs on the Lake. The east end pair had at least four chicks, but only two growing juveniles. So far, despite two nest attempts, there has been no sign of young from the west end pair.

After several years of nesting, there were no **Mute Swans** nesting in 2024 or this year.

The two regular summer migrants — **Chiff Chaff** and **Blackcap** — were heard and sighted on a number of visits. Both species have had population increases in the UK in recent years. In 2024 the first **Chiff Chaff** occurred on 8 April and the last was seen on 22 September. This year, the first was seen on 5 April. In 2024, the first **Blackcap** was seen on 5 April. The first for 2025 was on 11 April. There have been at least three singing males in both years.

It's hard to judge the true numbers of breeding **Moorhen** on site, as they tend to hide away in the vegetation around the Lake and on the river while nesting. At least one was seen on 88% of visits. Sometimes they get out of the Lake and walk on the grass and, on 8 March 2025, I counted six, just prior to the start of the nesting season.

Winter season

Various duck species and other common species, including **Blackbird**, winter in the UK from Northern and Eastern Europe, Iceland and Siberia, although often not distinguishable from the UK population. On the other hand, three species — **Siskin**, **Fieldfare** and **Redwing** — are much more abundant as visitors, compared to small breeding populations in the north of the UK. However, none were observed during visits in the winter 2024-2025 season.

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 as a result of changes in climate and environment. From the mid-1970s many species have declined. Inclusion in the UK's "amber list" indicates a decline of 25-50%; inclusion in the "red list," more than 50%. Red and amber species that occurred at the Lake are highlighted in the Systematic List.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the people who have sent me reports during the year, 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.

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Key for systematic list:

SV summer visitor / WV winter visitor

Birds of national conservation concern:

Red list >50% decline

Amber list 25-50% decline

Systematic List of Birds at Digswell Lake

Little Grebe Regular visitor and breeding. Seen on six visits.

Grey Heron Occasional visitor. Single noted on 8 March 2025.

Little Egret Occasional visitor. Increasing UK population which breeds in the Lea Valley. Single visit to the Lake on 30 April 2025.

Mute Swan Previous regular breeding. Two adults on fifteen dates but no breeding in 2024 or 2025.

Mallard (*amber list*) Common resident and migrant. Seen on 75% of visits. Females seen with young in both breeding seasons.

Gadwall Regular visitor. Seen on 75% of visits. Typical counts of 2-9, but more than 10 on 4 October 2024. No breeding records.

Tufted Duck Frequent visitor. Seen on 50% of visits. Typical counts of 4-10.

Mandarin Duck Occasional visitor. One seen on 16 October.

Common Buzzard Now a common Herts resident. One overhead on 4 October 2024 and 25 February 2025.

Red Kite Increasingly common breeding resident in Herts. Occasional visitor to the Lake. Seen overhead on 8 March, 30 April & 22 May 2025.

Moorhen (*amber list*) Common breeding resident. Chicks and juveniles seen in both breeding seasons. See highlights.

Coot Breeding resident. See highlights.

Wood Pigeon (*amber list*) One of the UK's most abundant and widespread species. At least one was seen on 100% of visits.

Stock Dove (*amber list*) Resident. Singles or pairs heard calling or seen on 75% of visits.

Lesser Black-backed Gull Winter visitor to the area but also increased inland breeding in Herts. Some seen in summer. Two seen on 8 March this year.

Black-headed Gull Autumn–winter visitor to Lake and on nearby river. Two on the Lake on 27 January this year.

Green Woodpecker Breeding resident. Seen on two visits.

Great Spotted Woodpecker Breeding resident. Heard or seen on four visits.

Swift (SV) (*red list*) Occasional flocks overhead. A single record for 30 June this year.

Grey Wagtail (*amber list*) Occasional visits. Usually seen on the weir and nearby trees at the east end of the Lake. I have records for spring and autumn migration seasons.

Wren Common breeding resident. At least one on 88% of visits. Up to 5 singing males on several dates.

Dunnoek (*amber list*) A few singing in April–May. At least one heard or seen on 50% of visits.

Robin Very common breeding resident. Seen or heard on 75% of visits. Up to seven singing males on 8 March 2025.

Blackbird Common resident. I have only six records for the period with up to 4 on 11 May 2025.

Song Thrush (*amber list; recovery from red list*) Resident and breeding. At least one on four visits.

Redwing (WV) Normally regular winter visitor, but not in 2024–2025.

Mistle Thrush (*red list*) Breeding resident. Two records for the period.

Fieldfare (WV) Normal regular winter visitor but not seen in 2024–2025.

Blackcap (SV) Common breeding species. Up to three singing males in both years.

Chiffchaff (SV) Common breeding species. Up to three singing males in both years.

Goldcrest Common resident. Only one recorded on 4 October 2024.

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Long-tailed Tit Common breeding resident. Only two records, in October and November 2024.

Blue Tit Common breeding resident. Seen or heard on 50% of visits.

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

Coal Tit Common resident. Unusually, no records at all in this time period.

Treecreeper Reasonably common woodland species. Not seen or heard this year.

Nuthatch Common woodland species. Only two records.

Jay Common resident. Seen on 25% of visits.

Magpie Common resident. Seen on 63% of visits.

Jackdaw Resident breeding colony. Seen on 50% of visits.

Carrion Crow Common resident. At least one on about 40% of visits.

Chaffinch Common but declining resident. Seen on about 13% of visits.

Bullfinch (*red list*) Not seen in 2024-2025.

Siskin (WV) No records for last winter.

Welwyn Festival Street Market 2025

Shirley Dobrin



Once again, Digswell Lake Society Committee members were pleased to attend the festival on the morning of Saturday 21 June to support the charity event and meet the local community. We are always trying to enrol more members to the Society as it is the annual subscriptions that assist in the upkeep of the Lake and surrounding reserve.

It was a lovely morning and many people attended the event, resulting in ten new members. Others came to renew their membership, not having paid in April, and some just stopped to say hello, having been members for many years and wanting to catch up.

It is always good to hear from members about their walks at the Lake, what they have noticed whilst there and report any concerns or exciting discoveries. Collectively, we can take care of a very special place.

Fungi-watch

Lindsay Bruce-Smith

I was sent these photos of two beautiful fungi to include in the newsletter.

The first (top, right) was identified as 'Chicken of the Woods.' From what I found online, Chicken of the Woods is the common name for several species of *Laetiporus*. These are edible mushrooms, so-called because of they are often described as tasting like and having a texture similar to chicken. They are also known by the less-appetising name 'Sulfur Shelf Mushroom.'

They usually grow in individual 'shelves' of around 5-25cm across. Like most fungi, *Laetiporus* species are parasitic. As such, they are usually found on wounded or dying hardwood trees, mostly oak, but have also been known to fruit on living trees.

I was given no identification for the second picture (bottom, right), but a reverse image search suggests it may be *Cerioporus squamosus*, commonly known as 'Dryads Saddle' and 'Pheasant's Back Mushroom.'

Squamosus species have a scaly appearance on the cap and a characteristic underside with pores made up of tubes packed closely together.

These species are annual mushrooms, commonly found attached to dead logs and stumps or on living hardwood trees at one point with a thick stem.

Dryad's Saddle is described as edible when young and cooked, but rubbery and inedible as it matures, often becoming infested with maggots.

If you are planning on foraging...

Whether it's mushrooms or anything else you are planning on looking for, please refer to a reliable reference source, such as wildfooduk.com, to avoid mistakes. We'd hate to lose DLS members through mistaken mushroom identity!



The Battle with balsam

Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) is a tall annual plant that spreads by seed. It is non-native and invasive and, according to the Royal Horticultural Society website, listed on Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 it is a Species of Special Concern. They say it is illegal to cause Himalayan balsam to spread, and there are restrictions on growing, cultivating, selling and transporting it.

The balsam is back at the Lake with vigour this year, after we tried hard to pull as much as possible last year, but making what seems to be little impact. June is the best time to pull the plant including the root, to prevent it laying its stem down and re-rooting from the sections up the stem. When the stem is very tall, the seed pods can explode 2-3 metres if not more. Our objective is to prevent the seeds from flying into the lake and river Mimram in order to avoid the seed from travelling further down river and emerging next year.

During the June work party, the team was joined by three members who were able to concentrate on a section of balsam by the river, which made a big difference. We also ran a special balsam-pulling session in July and another in August, joined by a few members keen to help control the spread of its seed. Special thanks to Chris, Bob, Liz, Fanny, David, Anne, Hugh, Barbara and Kathy for their time and enthusiasm with this important task.

These photos show what a robust plant this is when it is established. Bear in mind that James, Head Work Party Convenor, is over 6 ft (1.83m) tall. In the smaller picture, you can see the amazingly intricate root structure of one Himalayan Balsam plant.



Read more about:

Schedule 9

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/schedule/9>

Species of Special Concern

<https://www.nonnativespecies.org/legislation/species-of-special-concern>

DLS Annual Accounts Summary

Digswell Lake Society Latest Financial Position

| | Full Year 23/24 | Oct 24 - Jun 25 |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Income and Expenditure Account | £ | £ |
| Income | | |
| Membership Subscriptions | 3934 | 3735 |
| Gifts & Donations | 100 | 0 |
| Interest | 4935 | 4259 |
| Total | 8969 | 7994 |
| Expenditure | | |
| Maintenance | 2724 | 15092 |
| Insurance | 248 | 0 |
| Newsletter | 110 | 0 |
| Accountancy | 125 | 125 |
| Misc. Expenses | 113 | 24 |
| Website | 84 | 84 |
| Total | 3404 | 15325 |
| Surplus/(Defecit) | 5565 | -7331 |
| Balance Sheet | | |
| Funds b/f | 128655 | 134220 |
| Surplus/(Defecit) | 5565 | -7331 |
| Funds c/f | 134220 | 126889 |

Thank you

The Society received a donation of very useful tools and equipment to help with maintenance at the Lake.

The donor, was a keen gardener but will be moving to a smaller home, where she won't need all her gardening tools.

With thanks for the kind donation, we all wish her happiness in her new home.

Opportunities to help

Help with Saturday work parties is always appreciated. See page 8 for upcoming dates.

If that's not an option for you, would you consider joining the committee? We meet quarterly and this would be an opportunity to contribute to the management of our nature reserve.

Encouraging membership is also important for the long-term survival of the Society. You can help by spreading the word locally to friends and neighbours, many of whom may not be aware of the Lake's existence, or that they could have access to it for only £10 a year.

Finally, if you don't get the newsletter by email, please consider doing so to save print & distribution costs.

Tribute to Bob Leys

Simon Stebbings

I'd like to offer a short tribute to Bob Leys, who was a member of the Society for around 40 years and the editor of this Newsletter for 29 of them. Bob contributed a huge amount to the Society, both as editor and a committee member. His farewell piece in the Summer 2021 edition of the Newsletter included an excerpt from Robert Burns' poem "Tam O'Shanter" recognising the unstoppable nature of time and fate. Sadly Bob passed away last spring, greatly missed by all who knew him.

Dates for your diary

Working Party Dates

Meet at the Lake at 9:00am.

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

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

2026

24 January
28 February
28 March
25 April
23 May
27 June
25 July
22 August
26 September
24 October
28 November
26 December

2025

23 August
27 September
25 October
22 November
27 December

AGM

5 September 2025 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

Digswell Lake Society
0845 003 5253
info@digswell-lake.org.uk

Note, calls to 0845 numbers are not included in most telephone call packages. Calls cost **approximately 10p per minute**, but additional charges may apply.

If you prefer to call one of the numbers below, please remember they are personal phone numbers. Be prepared to leave a message.
And please only call during sociable hours!

Chairman & Membership

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Working parties

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Newsletter feedback / contributions

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Bird sightings and information

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