

Chairman's Column

With this Newsletter comes your new key for Digswell Lake. The lock is being replaced this Sunday.

We are acting after (I must admit) years of increasing complaints from Members who have had difficulty in making their key work. The problem arises mainly because, as membership has grown, extra keys have been cut from copies (of copies (of copies)) of the original, and the patterns have subtly diverged. These new keys have been ordered as one lot, cut together, in sufficient quantity for every current Member plus a reasonable number for future Members.

We considered other options, such as an exterior-quality lock with digitally cut high-security keys. This option had the big advantage that all future keys would be an exact fit, because of the digital technology, but it would have been significantly more expensive. This option had a further advantage, that it would be more weather-proof than our previous lock, but, then again, the previous lock had lasted 20 years or more.

We considered a cheaper option too, namely a push-button numerical-combination keypad lock, but such locks are not at all robust for exterior use, and are vulnerable to interference (such as being super-glued). Also, the relevant buttons become worn and tell any would-be trespassers which ones to try. Of course, we could change the pass-number from time to time to spread the wear, but we considered it unreasonable to expect Members to have to be memorising new numbers all the time, to get in. That's why we went for the middle-of-the-road option. If it doesn't work, we can always go for the superior lock mentioned above.

Complete restriction to Members-only remains, sadly, a pipe-dream, because every effort we make to restrict entrance via the Bessemer Road gap is met by highly determined counter-action (cutting fence wires, trampling down hedging etc). At the AGM, a Member kindly offered his professional surveying experience to help us in this regard, but we are so perplexed by the problem that we do not really know what we want to ask him!

We believe that educating children is the long-term route to respect being shown by the wider public to nature reserves such as the Lake, and we have long encouraged schools to take parties to the Lake. Curiously, although it is a Science specialist school, and the Lake teems with possibilities for science-based field trips, Monks Walk (nearby) is currently not active in taking parties of students to the Lake.

Some years ago, the County Council (with our enthusiastic permission) erected a stout table for school fieldwork near the edge of the Lake, and, if you have visited the Lake recently, you will have seen how this table has been the target of serious repeated vandalism (which we have so far chosen to repair ourselves, rather than wait for the County Council). This strengthens our desire for children to visit the Lake in an orderly way for constructive and educational purposes, and any teacher reading this is invited to get in touch to discuss the possibilities (contact: Peter Neville 01438-714394 or Carole Dale 01707-895854).

Lastly, and it might really be lastly unless we can turn the corner on this one, the band of volunteers who diligently maintain the Lake every fourth-Sunday-morning of every month is shrinking. We are at the point where they can hardly keep up with even the most urgent work, let alone attend to longer-term work such as desilting. I do invite you,

even if your expertise runs no deeper than litter-picking, to come to one of the Working Parties (contact: James Godbold 01707-372073). If our more skilled volunteers can be freed from litter-picking and similar unskilled but necessary tasks, then they will be able to apply their specialist skills to conservation issues which otherwise will cost us serious money to sort out. If it gets to the point that we can no longer look after the Lake using our own efforts, we will have to make some hard decisions about its future.

Peter Neville (Chairman)

DIGSWELL LAKE IN AUTUMN AND WINTER - A HERBALIST'S VIEW

In centuries past, the local herbalist would have had an intimate knowledge of all the plants that grew in her area. She knew where to find particular herbs for particular medical conditions and just the right time to pick each plant. It may sound rather like an old wives tale to say that plants must be picked at certain phases of the moon or time of the year, but there is now scientific evidence that there is a different array of plant chemicals at different times of the plant's life, as well as at different times of the day and the month. For example, once nettles have flowered they are less helpful for conditions such as gout and arthritis because the levels of oxalates are higher- so nettles are best thought of as a spring herb and have always been used as a spring tonic. Other herbs, such as St John's Wort are used for their flowering tops. And many herbs are at their best just before they flower.

The Digswell Lake Herbalist would know that comfrey grows on the edge of the lake by the bench. She would pick the young leaves in spring as a vegetable; she would pick the mature leaves in summer to use as a plaster cast for broken bones. She would wait for the winter solstice when all the leaves had died down, to take advantage of the root which would then contain very high levels of complex carbohydrates which are excellent for soothing internal wounds such as gastric ulcers and colitis. The roots are also good for external wounds such as cuts, and skin problems.

So autumn in the weed world is mostly about fruits and winter is about roots. The autumn equinox is the ideal time for picking elderberries for making elderberry wine and elderberry cordial. Elderberries have clinically proven anti-viral properties so are idea for using over winter to keep colds and influenza at bay. Ask me for the recipe so you can make your own cordial next autumn. And of course we have the nuts and seeds in autumn. Those of you that heard Jane Crew's wonderful Autumn talk will know how useful conkers can be. We herbalists also use the conkers for piles and varicose veins. Recent research on beech mast suggests that its oils my have a use in psoriasis. Other roots that can be found around the lake include, of course, dandelion, which is a famous liver tonic, often used as a coffee substitute, dried and ground. Meadowsweet also grows along the lake and, as the original source of aspirin, the tops can be a useful tea for those with inflammatory problems such as arthritis, but the root was once prized for its almondy taste and was used for sweetmeats.

This autumn has had a surprising second harvest of so many edible weeds and there is much to graze on, for those given to this. A fine green salad could be made just now, before the frosts start, from dandelion leaves, jack by the hedge, yarrow, deadnettles, daisy leaves and so much more! Why not try drying some leaves from your own garden for winter use to make teas to use over the winter? Just hang up bunches of herbs such as nettle, dandelion, lemon balm, in a warm room or a garage to dry and then put in paper bags in a dark place until needed.

Mary Barton, Medical Herbalist

Editors note:

After last year's AGM Mary, a member of the Society, gave a talk on "hedgerow herbs for food and medicine" and earlier this year conducted a walk around the lake with a view to helping us recognise wild herbs and learn about their traditional uses for food and medicine. Mary also wrote a very interesting article for our October 2004 issue. Hopefully there will be more to come.

If you wish to obtain the recipe for the elderberry cordial, referred to earlier, Mary's e-mail address is as follows: www.marybarton.com

DIGSWELL LAKE BIRD REPORT - 2006

COMPILED AND SUBMITTED BY COLIN HULL

Introduction

During the year 15 visits were made to the site, with most made during the spring and summer to monitor breeding birds. In addition Tom Gladwin submitted a report to me for 14th Nov.

Highlights

Monitoring of Coot and Moorhen nesting was the main focus of attention in spring a summer, plus some monitoring of spring/summer visitors. The presence of Garden Warbler on site was less usual as they do not appear on site every year. Little Grebes nested on the river again . In the winter periods Siskin were again present in small flocks in the Alders near the river. Tom Gladwin also reported 2 Redpoll. There was a Sparrowhawk on 31 Dec.

Pride of place this year are two records for Water Rail. These secretive birds tend to hide in bankside vegetation and reeds. More often heard than seen. I heard one in Feb. and Tom Gladwin reported one in November. Not sure if they were present in between or only occurring as winter visitors. Tom Gladwin also reported a Lesser Redpoll.

Full species list

In the species list below the following designations are given:

- R Resident, may be seen all year round.
- P Passage visitor on migration in spring and autumn
- W Winter visitor (typically Sept-Apr)
- S Summer visitor (typically Mar-Sept)
- B Breeds on or near site
- Oc Occasionally present
- R Rare occurrence
- Red High conservation concern because of national or regional decline
- Amber. Medium conservation concern because of national or regional decline

Little Grebe. R/B. One pair present in breeding season. One nesting attempt was observed but the outcome was uncertain because no young were observed.

Grey Heron. Oc. One seen twice in December near the viaduct.

Gadwall W/P/Amb.. Present in small numbers in Spring and Autumn with a maximum of 14 on the 9th April.

Tufted Duck. W/S/B. Up to 2 pairs present on various dates.

Mallard. R./B Present on most visits and included a male hybrid. There was one family of ducklings seen.

Canada Goose, Oc. A pair was present Feb-April.

Sparrowhawk.Oc. One of this year's high -lights with a female seen on 31 Dec.

Kestrel. Oc. Not noted this year.

Pheasant Oc. 1-2 on some visits.I received one report of a female with young.

Moorhen. R/B./Amb Up to 8 seen at any one time. The only evidence of nesting was a female carrying nest material near the lake and a pair with young on the river.

Coot. R/B. There were 2 pairs on the lake and 1 pair on the river near the dam. Each had one successful brood.

Water Rail. R. Unusual and welcome records in Feb and November.

Black Headed Gull. W/P. Apart from some flying overhead on several dates there was flock of 15 settled on the lake on 31 Dec.

Stock Dove. W/S. 1-2 seen on some visits.

Wood Pigeon. R. Tom Gladwin counted 14. Always noted a few on every visit.

Kingfisher. W/S/B/Amb. 1 noted on 17 Aug and 14 Nov

Green Woodpecker. R. 1-2 seen or heard on several visits.

Great Spotted Woodpecker. R. 2 noted on 18th June.

Swift, S. A few sighted overhead in June.

Swallow. S/Amb. None noted this year.

House Martin. S. None noted this year.

Carrion Crow. R.1-2 on several visits.

Rook. Not normally seen on site but nest in a tree nearby and seen in adjacent fields.

Jackdaw. R/B. Max of 20 noted by Tom Gladwin.

Jay. R.. 1 on 31 Dec was the only record for the year.

Magpie. R. 1-2 on several visits

Great Tit R/B and. Blue Tit. R/B Seen and heard on most visits

Coal Tit. R/B. The only records this year were for December.

Long Tailed Tit. R/B. A few on several visits

Nuthatch. R/B. One calling in March.

Treecreeper. R/B.2, possibly 3 noted by Tom Gladwin.

Wren. R/B. Up to 6 singing males noted in breeding season.

Mistle Thrush. R/B./Amb 2 singing males in March.

Song Thrush. R/B/Red. 3 singing males in April is a good number for the site.

Redwing. Oc/W. and **Fieldfare.** Oc/W. Neither were noted this year.

Robin. R/B. Up to 6 singing males in Mar-April.

Blackcap. S/B. Only 1 singing male noted during the season.

Chiff chaff. S/B. 2 singing males in Mar-May was usual for the site.

Garden Warbler. Oc/S/B. Not always present each year and several sightings during Apr-May probably indicated a breed pair this year.

Goldcrest. R/B. There were no spring or summer records this year but 3 were noted in November.

Spotted Flycatcher. Oc/S/Red. A species much in decline. No records this year.

Pied Wagtail. Oc. No records this year.

Grey Wagtail. Oc/W/S/Amb. No records this year
Starling. Oc/Amb No records
Chaffinch. Oc/R. One record in April
Goldfinch. Oc./Amb. No records.
Siskin. W. None were recorded Jan-Mar but three flocks of 30-60 in Dec.
Lesser Redpoll. Oc/W. Reported by Tom Gladwin in Nov.
Bullfinch. Oc/Red. No records.
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Bullfinch. Oc/Red. No records.

Colin would be pleased to hear of your “sightings” at the Lake.

Colin’s telephone number is: **01707 390424**

DIGSWELL LAKE BIRD COUNT

The following list is extracted from a more detailed report compiled and kindly passed to the Society by the **Reverend Tom Gladwin**.

The ‘count’ was carried out on the **29th April of this year between 2 pm and 3.30 pm** when the weather was recorded as **mild and generally sunny**.

BOU No.	Species.	Count.	Details.
20.0	Gadwall	2	Pair
23.0	Mallard	5	All males. Females presumed on eggs.
61.0	Pheasant	3	
124.0	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	1	
131.0	Common Kestrel	2	Pair at nest.
145.0	Common Moorhen	5	2 pairs with nests on lake and river.
148.0	Common Coot	7	3 pairs at nests. 1 pair and "7th" bird on river.
283.0	Stock Pigeon (Dove)	3	Pair at nest. One also possibly nesting.
284.0	Common Wood Pigeon	58	Feeding on fresh buds.
321.0	Green Woodpecker	2	Pair.
323.0	Great Spotted Woodpecker	3	Pair at nest hole. 1 at east end of island may be paired.
362.0	Winter Wren	22	11 singing.
366.0	Hedge Accentor (Dunnock)	1	One singing in north hedge.
369.0	European Robin	20	10 singing.
399.0	Common Blackbird	3	Male singing. Pair nesting.
406.0	Mistle Thrush	1	Singing.
429.0	Blackcap	8	4 singing males. All paired.
452.0	Common Chiffchaff	8	4 singing. At least 3 paired.
463.0	Long-tailed Tit	2	Pair nesting.
464.0	Blue Tit	14	At least 7 pairs nesting.
465.0	Great Tit	12	At least 6 pairs nesting.
471.0	Wood Nuthatch	2	Pair nesting near west entrance.
486.0	Eurasian Jay	2	Pair at nest.
487.0	Black-billed Magpie	2	Pair at nest.

490.0 Eurasian Jackdaw	8	At least 3 pairs nesting.
492.0 Carrion Crow	2	Pair at nest.
504.0 Chaffinch	3	Male singing. Pair nesting.

Minimum number of birds present: 201

Minimum number of species present: 27

Editor's note:

For those who don't know (and I didn't) the BOU No. is the British Ornithologists Union 'species' reference number. A full list can be found on the Union's web site: www.bou.org.uk/recbrlst1dna.html

WORK PARTY REPORTS

April to September 2006

The end of April saw 3 volunteers carry out a number of jobs in light rain. Further sections of the Bessemer Road boundary hedge were laid and woven to provide a stock proof fence, well at least to prevent human stock getting in via that route. In sections where there had been clear human activity additional rewiring of the fence also took place.

A number of wood piles were created on site, these consisted of fallen and dead wood from around the meadow area and will provide habitat for many small insects and small mammals.

A large mass of algae had built up down stream of the weir, aided by lower water levels and poor river flow; this was broken up and removed to the bank along with sections of reed that had encroached further into the river.

A general litter collection amassed 6 carrier bags of rubbish much being food related packaging from both sides of the Bessemer Road boundary.

The May Whit Bank Holiday weekend was a sunny day at a pleasant 10 degrees C. Sadly the main tasks this month were to repair damage caused by vandalism at the site.

The notice board attached to the garage had been subjected to repeated attacks in an attempt to smash the Perspex. The Perspex we use is vandal resistant so in a last ditch attempt to cause damage the vandals/arsonists set it on fire. Both doors had to be completely replaced, the charred frame cleaned up and re-stained and the lock and bolts replaced.

Work was required to the picnic table which had been damaged beyond repair with the burning of disposable BBQ's on it's surface. These had been allowed to burn through substantial pieces of timber turning them into charcoal, new timber was used to return the table to a presentable standard.

Very little other work was achieved apart from the strimming of the site and collection of 3 bags of rubbish.

During May one of the two vehicle entrance gates had been replaced with heavy duty mesh and painted.

The 25th June work party was attended by a number of extra volunteers normally associated to Sherrardswood Wood Wardens, which increased the work party to double figures. A sunny day all round with the pump extracting silt at John Cheers seat, a fallen tree removed from across the river, Sycamore saplings removed from the island and a further section of Hawthorn hedging laid and woven along Bessemer Road. The new notice board was given a second coat of wood stain, the garage swept and made tidy and the normal collection of litter took place.

With the extra man power Japanese Knott weed was removed along with the lower dead limbs of mainly oak trees adjacent to the open grass area. The site was also fully strimmed - what a difference those extra hands make! Thank you to the Wood Wardens for their assistance.

In an effort to secure more volunteers on a regular basis we are considering holding a Saturday working party, still on the 4th week of every month but alternating between the current 4th Sunday of each month and a Saturday. Would this be more convenient to any potential volunteers? Please let us know your views or pass on suggestions by e-mailing info@digs-well-lake.org.uk or Tel: 0845-003-5253.

July's work party was not as strenuous as with only 2 attending and the weather not so nice a general tour of the site was undertaken and work noted for future action.

Into the traditional holiday period and another bank holiday weekend numbers back down to 3 volunteers, who on this warm sunny day took to removing a fallen willow from the lake just to the left of the large horse chestnut trees. With the river being so low and no flow from west of the lake it was an ideal time to wade up river to remove debris - both rubbish and natural river matter. Upon exiting the river further sections of Knott weed were removed, as was some Balsam around the boat house pond so as to more clearly define the waters edge. A couple of bags of rubbish were collected during the morning.

September saw us return to the normal 4 helpers and a wet start. A wheelbarrow puncture was repaired and some maintenance carried out to the mower. Sadly more vandalism in the form of graffiti on the entrance notice board; this we managed to remove and generally cleaned up the board which has recently been updated with the lake e-mail address and 0845-003-5253 telephone number. Some strimming was commenced until a large fallen tree across the island path obstructed further progress and dictated that we re - prioritise our jobs to include the re - routing of the path round the tree. At about 1.8 meters diameter the tree was certainly not going to be moved by the four of us! New mesh was fitted to the boards that provide a path across the weir and existing mesh was re-stapled where salvageable. A haul of 5 carrier bags of rubbish. Left site at around 13.00 by which time it was a sunny 17 degrees.

Within days of the work party it was reported that 3 shopping trolleys had been dumped in the lake and the picnic table, that had been repaired only months earlier, had again been vandalised with the top having been ripped off!

James Godbold Maintenance Convener

