

Newsletter

Autumn 2009

Diary Dates 2009-2010

FRIDAY 20TH NOVEMBER 2009

AN ANCIENT WOODLAND ON YOUR DOORSTEP

Speaker is [Gary Dobrin](#).

Gary is a member of the Wood Warden Group which looks after Sherrardspark Woods.

FRIDAY 29 JANUARY 2010

TRAVEL WITH A CAMERA

Speaker [Bill Wastell](#).

Bill is an Architect and enthusiastic photographer. His talk will include natural history, wildlife, people, and places from around the world.

FRIDAY 26 MARCH 2010

NEW ZEALAND, SOUTH ISLAND, BIRDS, FLOWERS, AND WHALES

Speaker [Bruce Bennett](#).

Bruce is a very active member of the Potters Bar RSPB Group and has made numerous natural history journeys abroad.

FRIDAY 25 JUNE 2010

AGM + UNDERSTANDING HERTFORDSHIRE SCENERY

Speaker [Mike Howgate](#).

Mike has made a particular study of the underlying geological effects on the countryside.

FRIDAY 8 OCTOBER 2010

BIRDS IN HERTFORDSHIRE

Speaker [Brian Sawford](#).

Brian is a retired Countryside Officer having worked with the North Herts District Council and author of several books on the countryside.

FRIDAY 26 NOVEMBER 2010

VIDEO PRESENTATION WITH A NATURE THEME

Speaker [John Astin](#).

John is a long standing member of the Potters Bar Cine and Video Club.

CHAIRMAN'S COLUMN

The Lake is a fine amenity but it's wasted if nobody knows about it. Therefore, the Society promotes itself in various ways, for example we had an information stall at the Welwyn Festival Street Market in the summer. About ten new members joined, and if you are one of them, a special welcome to you, and I hope you will value your membership and enjoy your access to the Lake for many years to come.

Another way we promote ourselves is the obvious one of a large sign at our main gate. (This is how I myself first learned of the Lake when I moved to the area!) In addition, thanks to an outstandingly generous donation by the family of a now deceased couple who were members, an information map of the Lake will be put up in their memory inside the grounds but within sight of the main gate. Paving slabs will be placed to allow you to read it without slithering in mud. This project has been under way since early 2008, to replace an earlier map which was falling apart, but it has been dogged by problems, for example when the new map finally arrived from the factory it was found to be damaged and had to be sent back for replacement. We are hoping our contractors will set it into the ground (this is beyond our own resources to do) within the next few weeks.

The Lake area has never had weedkiller or fertiliser applied, or certainly not within the last fifty years (the

Society was founded in 1957), and this makes its grassland an exceptional habitat. The Herts & Middx Wildlife Trust is undertaking an ecological survey of the grassland, and we shall publish the survey results here. The survey will become part of the county Biological Records co-ordinated by County Hall, and (if it detects enough "indicator" species) will help confirm the Lake's current status as a site of county wildlife significance.

As you know, apart from maintaining the Lake, and circulating this Newsletter to you, the Society also provides a social focus, namely its programme of guest lectures on occasional Friday evenings at Digswell Village Hall, on natural history and related topics. As from 2010, because of generally rising costs, whatever the Cost of Living Index says, we are having to charge £2 admission. (It had been held at £1 for as long as I can remember.) We have carefully considered whether to apply a higher charge to non-members, but we do not wish to discourage non-members from visiting our lectures, because such visitors do sometimes then join the Society.

We always like to encourage young people to visit the Lake and become familiar with it, for example through school nature study visits. A very helpful such visit was a few weeks ago, when the 1st Welwyn Cubs came on a competitive litter pick - they collected huge amounts of litter, and are likely to make a return visit.

The Lake was created as an ornamental feature for Digswell House in the year 1810, and if you would like to suggest how we might celebrate the 200th birthday of the Lake (which we believe is 21 June), please get in touch!

Peter Neville

MARKS HALL GARDENS AND ARBORETUM, COGGESHALL, ESSEX

My wife and I regularly travel along the A120 road to the east coast and had no idea - until friends pointed it out - that where the road by-passes Coggeshall (a very interesting town in its own right) there exists a very well established estate with origins traceable to the Norman Conquest. The estate was owned by the Honeywood family for some 300 years from 1605. In 1897 it was sold to Mr Phillip Price who, on his death in 1932, left it to the nation, with his third wife having a life interest, the bequest to the nation not taking place until she died in 1966. During the second world war large parts of the estate were requisitioned for the USAF personnel based at nearby Earls Colne airfield. After the war the buildings, estate and lakes fell into disrepair and, despite controversy, the house was judged to be beyond repair and demolished in 1950.

In 1971 the Thomas Phillip Price Trust was formed to restore the property and create an arboretum of national importance and the Trust has been extremely successful in its endeavours. The estate was opened to the public in 1993 and has been featured in the house magazine of the Royal Horticultural Society. When the estate was given to the nation it included 1,700 acres of farmland, over 300 acres of managed woodland and a 150 acre park with a herd of deer. Today one can have access to a very large part of this fine managed grass parkland and woodland, with the advantage of an excellent visitors' centre and cafeteria set in an original 15th century barn which has been moved to its present location.

There are so many features to be enjoyed, including two lakes reputed to have been dug by Cromwellian troops billeted here in 1648 and which have a large stock of coarse fish. At one side of the upper lake is a walled garden of two acres built around the 18th century, which may be unique in having walls on three sides and the lake on the fourth. When the Trust was set up the walled garden was derelict but now a lot of it is grassed and a new 450 ft double border and five terraced gardens formed, each by a different modern designer. Across from the open side of the walled garden, looking out over the lake, one can view the new arboretum on the opposite slope, nicely reflected in the water, the design and placing of the trees carried out to enhance the reflective

effect. There are other interesting sights, such as the 800 year old Honywood Oak, the 18th century iron bridge and the Memorial Site where five acres of grass is laid out to represent the wartime runways of Earls Colne airfield to remember the servicemen who flew from there from 1942-1945.

There is so much to do and see here that I recommend you make a note to visit.

As mentioned earlier, you turn off the A120 near Coggeshall onto the B1024 going north and follow the signs.

Opening times are April- October: Tuesday - Sunday 10.30am - 5.00pm

Winter weekends, including Fridays: 10.30am - dusk or 4.30pm More information 01376563796.

Don Fisher

DIGSWELL LAKE BIRD REPORT

MARCH 2009 - SEPT. 2009

Compiled and submitted by Colin Hull

I have had a few reports from members during the Spring/Summer season, thank you.

Murray Brown reported to me a **Common Buzzard** on 1st March, flying over the site. I suspect this will become a more frequent occurrence in the future. British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) breeding bird surveys have shown a strong increase since 1967. From 1967-2006 there was an increase of 419%, much of this includes an eastward spread of breeding grounds. Even between 2001-2006 there was 7% increase and there have been various reports of breeding in this part of Hertfordshire.

I reported previously that **Mute Swans** bred on site last year. Well they came back again this year. There was a nest early in April in the same place as last year. Four eggs were laid but unfortunately only 1 hatched. The chick did however grow to maturity and was seen later in the season. BTO data shows there was an estimated 28,600–35,200 Mute Swans in Britain in 2002 and that the population has been fairly stable since the 1960s, have increased progressively since the mid 1980s. Winter trends as measured by wetlands surveys have shown a parallel upturn. There have been some reductions in breeding performance. The mean clutch size (number of eggs laid) has dropped from 5.89 – 5.64. Daily nest failure rate has increased from 0.61% nests/day to 1.41% nests/day. However although statistically significant, these changes may be to some extent artefacts of the relatively small and perhaps unrepresentative annual samples in the 1990s. In some other EU countries populations are not doing so well and so the Mute Swan now has Amber List Status for conservation concern.

As part of my participation in the BTO nest records scheme I again kept records of **Coot** and **Moorhen** nests. We had three pairs of Coot on site, two on the lake and one beyond the dam. The west end pair had a brood of 4 chicks and middle lake pair had a bumper brood of 7 chicks. However on a late date only 5 were seen. The pair beyond the dam were seen with one juvenile later in the summer. **Moorhen** nests are more difficult to find/follow through dense lakeside and riverside vegetation. A few nests were found but all the outcomes were uncertain. On the other hand some juvenile Moorhens were seen so there must have been a few successes.

There were some large flocks of **Siskin** in late February and a report to me on the 1st March was of a flock of over 100. Looking at the BTO Birdtrack records for the period it confirmed that nationally we had peak numbers in the UK during those weeks. **Redwing**, another winter visitor, showed up in low numbers in early March and were seen feeding under the trees by the river. In this case probably feeding ready for departure back north.

Among the summer visitors we had **Chiff Chaff** (at least three pairs) and **Blackcap** (at least three pairs).

Nationally these two species have been doing well, possibly helped by mild winters in Europe and some do not migrate to Africa. The BTO Breeding Bird Survey 2008 report says that

during 1995-2007 their populations increased +36% and +57% respectively.

In addition to the birds it is good to report that a **Water Vole** was seen several times along the river.

And finally Digswell Lake will be part of the Herts and UK Bird Maps, as part of a BTO Atlas project. For the third time the BTO is using volunteer birdwatchers to map the birds of Britain by noting where birds are in Winter and Summer months. Volunteers are assigned a Tetrad to survey and note all the birds they see on timed visits and also other roving records. From the records maps of distribution of each species are compiled. Data is being compiled between 2007-2011, so we are now in the third year of recording. It is now over 15 years since fieldwork for the last summer breeding atlas and over 20 years since the last winter atlas. In the intervening period much has happened to Britain and Ireland's habitats and climate but how have our birds been affected? The new Atlas will provide some interesting comparisons.

The lake is part of a tetrad being surveyed by Tom Gladwin so all his records, plus a few of mine, will be included in building up a picture of the birdlife of the area. (I have been carrying out my Atlas survey in Ayot).

(If you have access to the internet and want to know more about the BTO Atlas and other BTO surveys and projects you can find them at www.bto.org)

Colin Hull

If you wish to report a "sighting" please contact Colin by telephone on 01438813074 or by e-mail - colinhull88@btinternet.com

HERTFORDSHIRE & MIDDLESEX BAT GROUP

www.hmbg.org.uk

Digswell Lake Survey – 22nd May 2009

In early May 2009 we contacted the Digswell Trustees asking if they would be interested in the Bat Group undertaking a survey of their lake. James Godbold responded and kindly allowed us access for the evening of 22nd May.

7 members of HMBG attended and we split into 3 teams. Team 1 started in the woodland area, Team 2 took the glade area, Team 3 surveyed the viaduct area. It was a good evening, the temperature at sunset was around 17°C, calm and with good cloud cover.

1 member of each team recorded the output from a frequency division bat detector for later checking and analysis. Bat detectors listen to the bats ultrasonic calls they emit when flying and hunting for insects and reduce them in frequency to allow us to hear them. The rhythm, sound and frequency output can be used to identify the species, in most cases.

Sunset was just before 21:00 and we arranged to meet at the lake at 22:00 by which time most of our 17 species should have left their roost and be out foraging for their insect prey.

Not long after sunset bats began to visit the site. The first bats recorded were some high flying noctules, *Nyctalus noctula*, around the viaduct area. This species is known to emerge early and are sometimes seen

feeding with the swifts before they settle down for the night. Noctules are one of our biggest bats, weighing in at up to 40g, with a 36cm wingspan.

Here's a photo of a male noctule that was grounded and later released after a few weeks in our care in 2007.

Noctules are almost always found roosting in trees, usually old woodpecker holes. Their early arrival suggests they may be roosting on site or very close by.

The next bats to arrive were 45 kHz pipistrelles, *Pipistrellus pipistrellus*, coming from the West towards the woodland team, quickly followed by 55 kHz or soprano pipistrelles, *Pipistrellus pygmaeus* again from the West. Pipistrelles make up around 90% of all of our bats, much smaller weighing in at around 4g with a wingspan of 22cm, wings closed they can easily fit into a matchbox. Again their early arrival suggests they may be roosting on site or very close by.

The next species to pass overhead were some serotines, *Eptesicus serotinus*, by the viaduct, and later in the glade. Serotines are again a larger bat, weighing in at around 28g with a wingspan of 35cm. They tend to roost in older buildings and are only usually found in the southern third of the UK. The serotines were followed shortly after by a Leisler's, *Nyctalus leisleri*, a smaller relation of the noctula and considered quite rare.

We had a brief *Myotis* pass around 10pm in the glade, but not a good enough recording to identify the bat to species level. Unusually, there was little bat or insect activity over the lake itself. In light of this we decided to venture off to the woodland and the River Mimram where we found some Daubenton's, *Myotis daubentonii*, one of our medium sized species. Daubenton's are also known as the Water bat as they usually skim the water surface, plucking off the insects as they go.

In all we recorded 6, possibly 7 species of bat using the area, we also heard a tawny owl calling somewhere in the woodland.

Thank you for allowing us access to your lake, the trees are beautiful and it's so nice to see deadwood and good patches of nettles left, most of the moths we saw were around the nettles. A wonderful oasis for people and wildlife.

If you'd like to find out more about our group or bats, please visit our website www.hmbg.org.uk

COMMENTS

from our

Treasurer and Membership Secretary

New membership has continued to increase during the year although lapsed membership still puzzles me. Access to the Lake for a minimum of £5.00 for a year seems to be such a bargain that it is worth maintaining even if used rarely. I am glad to see that many of our new members are setting up a standing order – so easy to use and no extra stationery and postage for me!

Members who have a standing order, please check that it is being processed properly; there have been two occasions recently where money was being taken monthly and not yearly.

Two examples of generosity and thoughtfulness have given me a little glow recently. Derek Bailey, who had been a member since 1976 died earlier this year and his executors named us as the charity for flower donations; we received a cheque for £90.00 in his memory. Mr E.G Edgecombe also died this year and his son and daughter-in-law found the Lake key in his house when they were clearing out prior to selling. They got in touch with me and the outcome was a DLS 'pack' left for the new owners, who have already joined in their

own right – welcome Mr & Mrs Pitman.

My husband and I have both had some health problems during the year and I would like to apologise to new members who may not have received their membership details as promptly as I would have wished. I hope they and all our long term members are now enjoying the Autumn colour at the Lake and are looking forward to Winter and the compensations of wintry sun and dramatic monochrome landscape.

Best wishes for Christmas and the New Year.

Carole Dale

ORFORD NESS AND HAVERGATE ISLAND

In June the local Wildlife Trust Group organised a coach trip to Orford Ness in Suffolk. We drove to the pretty village of Orford from where we had a five minute boat ride across the River Ore to the Ness which is the largest vegetated shingle spit in Europe.

Wild and remote, it has a fascinating history as it was used for secret military testing including the development of radar and the atomic bomb. Many of the military buildings remain and are now used to house displays of military and natural history.

Now owned by the National Trust, the Ness is an important site for birds such as avocet, meadow pipit and whitethroat and also specialist plants like horned poppy, sea kale and sea campion that like the salty habitat.

We were lucky enough to see all their species and also had an amazing view of the whole area from the observation tower which was originally constructed to view the bombing runs of aircraft training to make nuclear attacks.

The abandoned bits of military hardware created a haunting atmosphere amid the shingle seascapes and vast skies so typical of this part of Suffolk.

Later in the year, in August, I was again in Suffolk to experience a “Havergate Adventure”, a tour of Havergate Island organised by Woodbridge RSPB Local Group.

The low lying island is in the middle of the Ore estuary and consists of saline lagoons, salt marshes and mud flats. It is famous for its avocets which returned to breed there in 1947; the first time they had bred in Britain for 100 years. The bird is now the symbol of the RSPB.

The boat again left from Orford quay and it took 20 minutes to get to the island. We were guided round by a very enthusiastic 17year old with a telescope and who certainly knew the bird species. He pointed out dunlin, avocets, whimbrel, golden plover and 10 young spoonbills that had come over from Holland for the summer.

We finished our walk in the visitor centre where volunteers made us very welcome with tea and home made cakes. It was a lovely day out in a very special place.

Jenny Brewster

Waddesdon Manor

July 24th 2009 was special in many ways. Not only was it the first time we had been to the 19th Century manor at Waddesdon, near Aylesbury; but my husband had reached his half century birthday. So out came the new picnic hamper with a birthday feast in it and we headed off up the A41 for approximately 49 miles taking just over one hour.

The Manor was built in (1874 - 1889) by Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild to entertain his guests and display his vast collection of 18th century French decorative arts. Furniture including Marie-Antoinette's writing table, made by Riesener, Savonnerie carpets and a fine collection of Reynolds and Gainsborough portraits are just some of the wonderful collections to see.

A personal favourite was the Sevres porcelain, a huge collection of hand painted crockery with beautiful birds on, seemingly each one different and something for each course and every type of food imaginable.

The Victorian gardens are considered one of the finest in Britain and famous for the parterre to the south of the house, containing statuary, fountains, seasonal planting and views of the vast acreage owned by Waddesdon. On the west side is the Aviary, stocked with species that were once part of Baron Ferdinand's collection; and a circular Rose Garden.

The wine cellars at Waddesdon are modelled on the private cellars at Chateau Lafite-Rothschild and contain thousands of bottles dating back to 1868. The wine shop is most attractive - magnetic almost.

Of course there is a restaurant and a few outdoor eating places particularly around the stables area which has been sensitively restored with small businesses around the courtyard.

Regrettably we ran out of time and missed the plant centre which is situated off the exit drive and accessible from the main road so next time we are nearby we may just stop for '5 minutes' and enjoy another lovely day there.

Shirley Dobrin

For further information

www.nationaltrust.org.uk

www.waddesdonplantcentre.com

www.waddesdon.org.uk
