

Spring 2018

Wren

Wildlife & Conservation Group

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a word from the chair

In these troubled times it's tempting to dwell on the miserable aspect of the world around us. But let's not do that. There's such a lot of good stuff going on all around us, it would be a shame to miss out. Yes, I'm talking about nature.

This morning, before my Central Line journey to work, I spend an hour on Wanstead Flats. The sun was shining, the sky was (mostly) blue, and the grassland was a lush green - the payback from weeks of rain.

If I was in a glass-half-empty mood, I'd register that most wildflowers have been very late putting in an appearance this year. But in fact there were patches of Lesser Stitchwort in several places, and the

flowering Red Dead-nettle this year is probably the best I've ever seen.

Again, I could bemoan the fact that flytipping is still a massive blight on our area, and curse the selfish individuals who dump their unwanted plasterboard, filing cabinets and car panels on our open spaces. But one of the best patches of Lesser Celandine on the Flats is growing next to a regular dump.

Some dog-walkers are still ignoring the signs politely asking them to keep their dogs on the leash as they walk across the area where there are ground-nesting birds. I found the vandalising of a couple of the signs - which feature drawings made by local primary school children - particularly upsetting. However, on a recent RSPB walk, which it was a pleasure to lead, 22 of us had wonderfully moving views of a singing lark, possibly the best views I've ever had. It sang from an anthill a few metres in front of us, in perfect light, for at least 15 minutes. And this morning's walk revealed six Skylark territories - which is an increase on last year - and plenty of signs of

Meadow Pipits sticking around to breed, too.

I could gripe about the late first arrival dates for many migrant birds, but the 10 Ring Ouzels seen by 18 April, including one trio of males, represents the best spring ever. Wheatears have been late, but those that have graced our area have given some cracking views.

So, yes, humanity is doing a lot of things very badly, but if you need a re-boot of your spirits, get outside - even if it's only for an hour - and let the sights, sounds and smells of spring overwhelm you. Wanstead Flats, Leyton Flats, Wanstead Park, Gilbert's Slade, Connaught Water, Walthamstow Wetlands... there are many options nearby, and at this time of year, none will disappoint.

Tim Harris
Chair Wren Group



Litter kills

People's rubbish doesn't look nice and spoils the enjoyment of our green spaces for everyone. But aside from its environmental impact, flytips and other litter also pose a real hazard to wildlife.

If you see a flytip or excess litter on Epping Forest land please report it.
Call 020 8532 1010 (24 hours) or mail epping.forest@cityoflondon.gov.uk



Wren annual general meeting

March saw The Wren Group's AGM. The past year has been another very good one for the Group. Membership has pushed over the 300 mark, and our level of activity has also been maintained at a high level.

Our ever-improving newsletter and Facebook presence reflects much of what our members are doing to find out more about our natural environment, and to both publicise and protect it. Our programme of education and practical work has continued, with more sessions of the latter than for many years.

Our keynote speaker at the meeting was Jeremy Dagley, Head of Conservation for Epping Forest, who gave an excellent presentation on a 'Vision for Nature' - describing the environment of Epping Forest, the problems that face the Forest and Jeremy's vision for the future.

After the presentation followed business proper where the years' work was outlined in the Annual Report and a new committee was elected. I was re-elected as chair and the evergreen Richard Oakman continues as President. Jackie Morrison, although remaining on the committee, stood down as secretary, with Kathy Baker taking her place. New members Mary Holden and Bob Vaughan were welcomed to the committee.

Tim Harris
Chair of the Wren Wildlife and Conservation Group



A PDF of the 2017/18 AGM Report can be found on the following link.

http://www.wrengroup.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/AGM_2017_R001.pdf



Tim Harris
Chair



Richard Oakman
President



Kathy Baker
Secretary



Simon Raper
Treasurer



Jackie Morrison
Committee Member



Peter Williams
Works Co-ordinator



Peter Aylmer
Walks Coordinator



Gill James
Committee Member



Mark Gorman
Membership



David Giddins
Website



Mirza Rashid
Committee Member



Mary Holden
Committee Member



Bob Vaughan
Committee Member



James Heal
Committee Member



Tony Morrison
Newsletter



harvest mouse

Welcome to Wanstead!

A new mammal ID for Wanstead!

You might be surprised what turns up amongst the ever-encroaching brambles during Wren Group Practical Work sessions, along with the usual beer cans, vodka bottles or chewed doggie toy. Back on a cold Sunday in February, a small, round nest made of woven grasses fell out of the sea of old brambles near the River Roding.

A sunny clearing was being created to make space for next summer's butterflies. Probably it was a last-season small bird's nest, I thought. But no, it had the tiniest of entry holes. A little masterpiece. Perhaps made by a mouse?



So home it came and Mr Google was consulted. And then the local experts. Lo and behold, only one kind of mouse makes a nest like that - a harvest mouse! A rarity in Essex and the first to be recorded in our area, thanks to the Wren Group.

The tiny Harvest Mouse lives in long tussocky grassland, reed beds, and hedgerows and around woodland edges. They build a spherical nest of tightly woven grass, high up amongst the tall grasses. They are mainly vegetarian, eating seeds and fruits, but will also eat invertebrates.

The harvest mouse is the smallest rodent in Europe, weighing an average of only 5-8g which is about the same as a 2 pence piece. It has pale, ginger or yellow fur and a white belly. Its tail is almost hairless and nearly as long as its body.

The loss of our field margins, hedgerows and grassland habitats is a threat to this species...

Past studies have suggested that the harvest mouse has undergone a rapid decline of 70% since the 1970s due to changes in farming practices across the UK... Now it is more often found in wildlife corridors across town and country, which are good for both wildlife and people. Harvest mice are listed as a BAP (Biodiversity Action Plan) Species because they are thought to have become much scarcer in recent years and they require conservation plans to reverse the decline. Changes in habitat management and agricultural methods are thought to be the main cause for the loss of populations from certain areas, although there have been no reliable studies to quantify this change.

General Ecology

Harvest mice are extremely active climbers and feed in the stalk zone of long grasses and reeds, particularly around dusk and dawn. Their hearing is acute and they will react sharply; they either freeze or drop into cover in response to rustling sounds up to 7m away. Harvest mice have high energy requirements; the cost of being warm blooded and coping with a high surface to volume ratio.

Breeding nests are the most obvious sign indicating the presence of harvest mice. The harvest mouse is the only British mammal to build nests of woven grass well above ground. Harvest mice are renowned for making nests which are woven from living plants such as grasses and reeds. The mice split the leaves down the veins to keep the strength in them and use their paws to make the intricate nest in just one night. Harvest mice usually have two or three litters a year in the wild, between late May and October, but even into December if the weather is mild. Most litters are born in August. Cold wet weather is a major cause of mortality. There are usually around six young in a litter. The young are born blind and hairless but grow extremely quickly and start to explore outside the nest by the 11th day. The young are abandoned after about 16 days, but continue using the nest which may at then start to look rather dilapidated. A fresh nest is built for each litter.

Nests tend to be found in dense vegetation such as grasses, rushes, cereals, grassy hedgerows, ditches and brambles. They are generally located on the stalk zone of grasses, at least 30cm above ground in short grasses and up to a metre in tall reeds. The size of the nest can vary from only 5cm in diameter for non-breeding nests to 10cm in diameter for breeding nests.

Harvest mice have many predators: weasels, stoats, foxes, cats, owls, hawks, crows, even pheasants.

This find highlights the importance of maintaining the kind of untidy tracts of grassland and quiet wild spaces and corridors which we are lucky enough to still find in our semi-urban area. Wildlife which is now declining in farmland now depends on places like this for their survival.

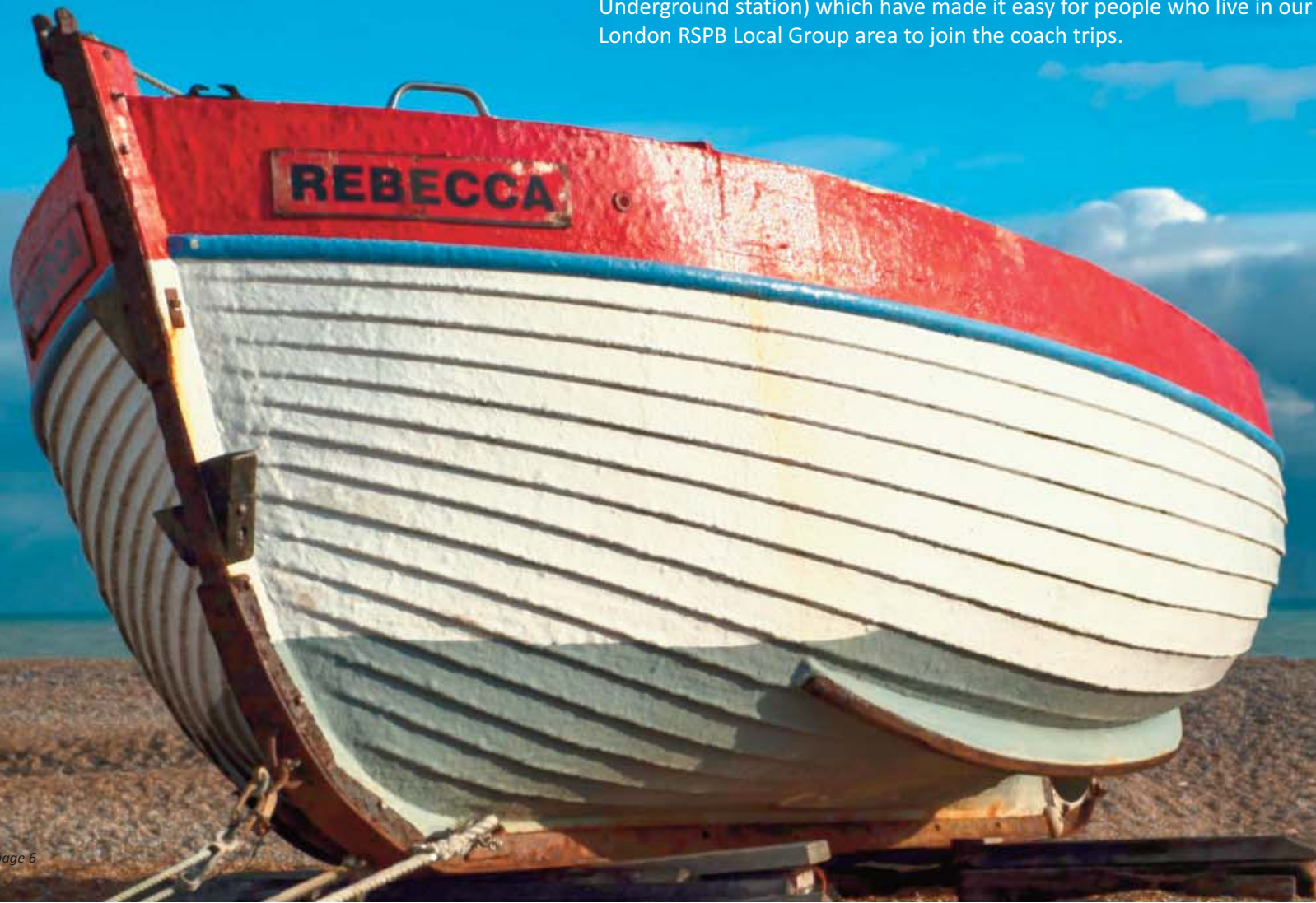
Article by Gill James



rspb coach trips

..... a day out to some excellent nature reserves

Havering RSPB Local Group have been running coach trips for many years. In the last few years, extra pick-up stops have been added in our local area (e.g. Redbridge Underground station) which have made it easy for people who live in our North East London RSPB Local Group area to join the coach trips.



A wide range of friendly people come on the trips – for some it is a chance for a relaxed walk in the fresh air, enjoying a chat, while others are keen birders in search of unusual birds, while for others it is somewhere in between! All are welcome.

People lead such busy lives these days that the old times of a full coach rarely seem to happen and it would be such a shame if we lost the coach trips due to lack of support. So WREN have kindly started listing the coach trips in their events diary and I've included a write up of our trip to Dungeness in Kent at the end of January in the hope we may persuade you to give them a try.



Dungeness, Gadwall pair - pic by Alan Shearman

"Twenty eight of us arrived by coach at Dungeness head at 09:40 - we had an hour and twenty minutes to explore this unique area. Some headed off to the shingle ridge viewing point for a bit of

sea watching. Others headed to the old fishing boats, while a few successfully found the Black Redstarts that frequent the power station. The weather was kind with blue skies and some sunshine but the strong wind chilled your face.



Dungeness, Goldeneye female - pic by Alan Shearman

Out at sea Gannets, both adults and immatures were passing by and stopping now and again to plunge dive for food. A couple of lines of Common Scoter passed by as did the odd Guillemot and



Dungeness, drake Smew - pic by Alan Shearman

Razorbill. At the outfall a couple of Kittiwakes were spotted amongst the masses of gulls.

11am and we are all back on the coach and heading the short distance back to the RSPB reserve. About half the passengers got off at the entrance to explore the ARC pits while the remainder stayed on and began their exploration from the visitor centre.



Dungeness Slavonian Grebe - pic by Alan Shearman

We all had a great day with 62 different species seen collectively with some outstanding highlights. Probably, although it was distant, the Black-throated Diver on the ARC lake was many people's bird of the day. Also spotted were Great White Egret along with Firecrest and Chiffchaff on the ARC side. At the gatehouse everyone enjoyed watching the Tree Sparrows coming to the feeders. Out on the reserve a Slavonian Grebe along with a drake Smew and two red-heads were seen from Christmas Dell hide but always stayed frustratingly distant. At around 15:30 the weather had completely changed and was now beginning to



Smew pair, Dungeness - pic by Alan Shearman

rain. Time to head to the visitor centre and warm ourselves with a cup of hot chocolate. As we viewed the main lake and its islands through the

centre's massive picture window, our group leader Michael picked out the immature Glaucous Gull which had come in to roost on one of the islands. What a fantastic way to end a brilliant day!"

Thanks to Havering for this excellent report of the trip and to Alan Shearman for sharing his photos.

The onshore winds brought the birds surprisingly close for the sea watching, normally I find they are distant dots! People in the group are really good at helping others to get on to the birds they've spotted – the ARC Pit hide was especially good.

I enjoyed watching the courting display of what I assumed were a pair of Smew.
There was definitely

head nodding and the female lowered her body in the water, stretched out her head and put her tail up but the male was more interested in fluffing up his own feathers! I didn't know there was a second female vying for his attention... (see my rather blurry, phonescoped shot of the pair!)

Hope to see some WREN members on a future trip.

Article by Debbie Burkett



Website Editor for North East London RSPB Local Group

<https://ww2.rspb.org.uk/groups/northeastlondon>

rescue on leytonstone flats

There was a very unusual sight over the Flats on the evening of 1.6.2017. A Coastguard rescue helicopter flew over Wanstead Flats and landed near the tea hut Whipps Cross Road.

Whipps Cross hospital has one of the very few hyperbaric units (decompression chambers) in the south of England. So very occasionally the coastal search and rescue (SAR) helicopters fly patients in. These are often divers who have got into trouble with "the bends", or excess nitrogen in their blood which forms bubbles that can be fatal. Time is critical so there is a well rehearsed procedure to land

near the Hollow Ponds. And then an ambulance from Whipps transfers them. In 2014 I saw a yellow RAF Sea King SAR helicopter do the same thing. Police and keepers are called to keep crowds clear of the landing site, hence the keeper's truck above.

The SAR helicopters are a less well known government privatisation. The RAF and Royal Navy no longer provide this service. Instead there is a government contract with Bristow helicopters and the Maritime and Coastguard agency provide the service. So no more yellow Sea Kings so familiar from holidays by the sea.



Photo Alison Tapley, keeper.

plant diseases

a real cause for concern by Tricia Moxey

Although some fungi are of assistance in supporting healthy plant growth, there are others which cause various diseases. Over the years the importation of infected material from other countries has allowed certain fungal diseases to spread to our native trees. These include Oak Mildew, Dutch Elm Disease and Ash Dieback. More recent arrivals are Chestnut Blight and Phytophthora.

Bacteria can also cause disease and one which is posing a threat to our native trees is the bacterium *Xylella fastidiosa*, which can occur as several subspecies. It is widespread in the Americas where it causes considerable damage to susceptible crops as well as trees. It had not been noted in Europe until it was found in 2103 damaging Olive trees. Since then, this infective agent has been recorded in France, Spain and Germany.



A healthy ash tree - pic by Tony Morrison

Like many forms of bacteria, it is capable of rapid change. One strain of this bacterium is likely to infect broadleaf trees such as Common Oak and Wych Elm as well as many other wild flowers.

There is real concern that it will reach our shores soon, and if it does so what will be the impact on our habitats? *Xylella fastidiosa* affects its host plants by invading their water-conducting systems thus stopping the movement of water and nutrients through the plant, which can ultimately cause death. It is spread from plant to plant by sap sucking insects including the common froghopper *Philaenus spumarius*. Although such insects usually only fly short distances of up to 100 metres, they can be carried much longer distances by the wind. Symptoms range from leaf scorch where the leaves turn brown to dieback and death. Symptoms vary depending on the host plant species and its degree of susceptibility, but include marginal leaf scorch, wilting of foliage and withering of branches.



The bacterium *Xylella fastidiosa* is commonly spread from plant to plant by sap sucking insects including the common froghopper *Philaenus spumarius*.

Xylella has been found in more than 350 woody commercial plants such as grapevines, Almond and other stone fruits, citrus and Olive trees as well as herbaceous plants like Oleander, Lavender and Rosemary. There is considerable concern in the UK horticultural trade about the importation of potentially infected material from Europe. To reduce this risk the Horticultural Trades Association and several garden retailers and growers have embargoed imported plant stock from infected areas of Europe. Let us hope that this will be sufficient to keep it from spreading to the UK.

Xylella is not like Dutch Elm Disease or Chalara (Ash Dieback) that affect one type of tree, but a disease that, to date, the EU has identified affecting 73 host plants, including oak, elm and Prunus (plums, cherries) to name a few !

<https://www.pitchcare.com/news-media/major-uk-nurseries-want-action-on-plant-bacteria-xylella-fastid>

For more information in England and Wales, please contact: [Animal and Plant Health Agency \(Apha\)](#), on 01904 405138 or planthealth.info@@apha.gsi.gov.uk;

For scientific information check out [The University of California Xylella](#) website which has an extensive host list and details of the current research findings.



Ash die-back has been found throughout Europe but hadn't been observed in the UK until February 2012 when the fungus was detected in trees at a Buckinghamshire, England, nursery that had received stocks from a nursery in the Netherlands.

Over time, host plants may be able to overcome the infection, but as European plants have not been previously infected it may take some time for them to develop any resistance to this pathogen.

Article by Tricia Moxey



The Royal Horticultural Society is supporting a post graduate research student, Nick Turnbull, who is based at Imperial College's Centre for Environmental Policy. Nick will be investigating risk management and communication to find ways of best managing the risk posed in the UK by this disease. For updates check out Nick's blog at rhs.prg.uk/turnbull-xylella-blog



keep Wanstead buzzing

Article by Susannah Knox

Wild Wanstead is an exciting project to create a multi-garden nature reserve here in the heart of Wanstead.

The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world and many birds, insects and other creatures are in a period of sharp decline. London's gardens make up nearly a quarter of the capital's area and play a vital role as a home for wildlife. But like other parts of the city, gardens in Wanstead are getting squeezed as room is needed for parking, patios and extensions. Actively using the space that's left to help wildlife can make a big difference.

Wild Wanstead is asking members of the community to add their gardens, balconies and other outdoor space to the jigsaw of the nature reserve by making one or two small changes, like planting pollinator-friendly flowers, greening up an unused corner of their driveway, growing ivy up a fence or making a log pile for beetles.

By acting together, built-up areas of Wanstead will be nurtured as a vital green corridor linking the Flats, Wanstead Park, Epping Forest and the River Roding, so that birds, insects and other creatures can more easily find a home and move around – essential to sustain and regenerate their populations.





The decline in Britain's wildlife over the last few decades is shocking, but you could help reverse the trend by being part of a new project to transform Wanstead into a multi-garden nature reserve



Susie Knox (left) wants to make Wanstead more accommodating for plants and animals

Recent news about Europe's beleaguered wildlife has made grim reading. Research from German nature reserves indicates a 75% reduction in flying insects since 1989 and latest data on the "catastrophic" drop in farmland birds in France mirrors Britain's own huge losses. With almost two thirds of UK species declining in

the last 50 years – and intensive farming and urban development in the frame – it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the scale of the problem and powerless to act.

But there is one place where we are in control and we

“Our wonderful nature is in serious trouble and it needs our help as never before.”

*David Attenborough
UK State of Nature report, 2016*

can all have an influence – our gardens. According to the naturalist, Chris Packham, gardens are a huge and under-appreciated reservoir of wildlife. In a BBC documentary last year, five suburban gardens were found to provide a home for nearly 700 different wildlife species. However, gardens in London are under pressure, with an area of vegetated garden land the size of 2.5 Hyde Parks lost each year. Like many parts of the capital, Wanstead gardens are getting squeezed as room is needed for parking, extensions and patios. If we actively used the space that's left to help wildlife it could make a big difference – especially by acting collectively.

wildlife in trouble

- ❑ Almost two-thirds of species in the UK have declined in the last 50 years
- ❑ Britain's Hedgehog population has dropped from around 30 million in the 1950s to just 1 million today
- ❑ London's House Sparrow population has fallen by 75%, Starlings by nearly 60%, Swifts by half and Blackbirds by more than a quarter since 1995
- ❑ 69% drop in urban butterflies in 20 years
- ❑ Evidence from Germany points towards a 75% drop in flying insects in the last 25 years

That's the principle behind a new community project which aims to create a multi-garden nature reserve in the heart of Wanstead. **Wild Wanstead** is asking members of the community to add their gardens, balconies or other outdoor space to the jigsaw of the nature reserve by adopting a few wild ways, like planting pollinator-friendly flowers, greening up an unused corner of their driveway or building a log pile for beetles. As well as residential gardens, the project will work with community spaces to join the footprint of the nature reserve. St Mary's churchyard and the Corner House garden have already got involved.

With a wealth of knowledge from decades spent studying the plants and wildlife of this area of East London, the Wren Group is providing conservation ideas and advice to the Wild Wanstead project, for example suggesting the addition of nuthatch nest boxes in St Mary's churchyard to give a helping hand to the growing population in Wanstead Park.



Digging-in a log pile for happy insects in St Mary's churchyard, Wanstead

Collectively, small steps like these can make a difference, helping improve the built-up area of Wanstead as a vital green corridor linking the Flats, Wanstead Park, Epping Forest and the River Roding. However big or small, every

single space that's part of the nature reserve will be an important stepping stone for wildlife and help nature thrive on our doorsteps.

10 ways to make a difference

1. Grow wildlife-friendly plants
2. Ditch the mower, go for a mini-meadow
3. Green-up hard surfaces
4. Build a log pile
5. Open a leaf or compost café
6. Plant a small tree
7. Boost your boundaries: hedges not fences
8. Provide homes for birds, bugs and hedgehogs
9. Have a pond or patio water feature
10. Be yourself, be natural

How to get Involved

It's easy! Just think about your outdoor space and consider any areas that could be more wildlife friendly

Adopt a few Wild Ways (if you've already got some wildlife features... just add more)

Join the Wild Wanstead community
Follow the project and share your Wild Ways and

nature photos with our Facebook group www.facebook.com/groups/Wildwanstead
Collect a free window sticker to display from The Stow Brothers or Heads 'N' Tails on the High Street

Article by Susie Knox
on behalf of Wild Wanstead



Find out more at www.wildwanstead.org



Installing a Nuthatch nest box at St Mary's churchyard, Wanstead

A close-up photograph of a bumblebee with black and yellow stripes, positioned on a large, spherical purple thistle flower. The flower has many small, delicate petals. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting foliage.

can you still smell the flowers .. ?

.... another reason for extra plantings by Tricia Moxey

It is great that the group Wild Wanstead is encouraging the planting of as many wildflowers as possible in suitable places including spare bits of gardens to help the insects, but they can thrive on garden flowers as well and we should consider filling our own gardens with all kinds of fragrant cultivated flowers too to combat a recently discovered problem. Our native Insect pollinated flowers produce a variety of fragrances. However, over the centuries gardeners have been keen to fill their borders and pots with more richly perfumed flowers include roses, lavender, sweet peas, honeysuckle and sweet violets. But have you noticed that in built up areas we have to get close up and personal to smell such fragrances? If we can't smell the flowers, then what is the impact on insects?

An article published on 17 February 2018 described that recent research has found that the various chemicals present in traffic fumes are quickly disrupting the chemical signatures of these plant fragrances making them unreadable by insects. Thus, vital pollinating insects cannot sense the flowers they need for their essential supplies of nectar and pollen. Pollination may not occur so seed production will be compromised.

As it is unlikely that there will be a significant reduction in vehicle usage in the immediate future, so do get planting as many flowers as possible to counteract the degradation of these vital fragrances and create a district wide perfumed environment to be enjoyed by us and the vital pollinating insects.

Trees work well in soaking up traffic fumes, but they must be the right species in the right places. In urban areas they may be grow too large for small gardens, so please make sure your street trees are cherished and where possible ask for for more of them!

Thames Water Marine Engine House. Part of the new Walthamstow Wetlands. Includes visitor centre, cafe and viewing platform.

eastern promise

We didn't venture far from east London over the winter, writes walk leader *Peter Aylmer*, but our two trips out showed what good excursions can be had near home.

We are lucky in this part of town in having easy access to one of the largest urban wetlands in Europe, the Walthamstow Wetlands. Our nine-strong group took the train up to Tottenham Hale from Stratford (Blackhorse Road station is an alternative from Leyton or Forest Gate) to enjoy a saunter through this 211ha site, opened last October after a £10m redevelopment.

The Wetlands are in fact a group of reservoirs holding much of London's drinking water, a role they have fulfilled for 150 years. For long a secret preserve of London's anglers, they now boast public access by a wide variety of waterside trails, with a new southern entrance permitting access from both ends.



Work to prepare the Walthamstow Wetlands

Some of the redevelopment cash went to visitor facilities, most impressively a new café at the



Walthamstow Wetlands - new reedbeds a haven for birdlife

restored Engine House just a few minutes from the Ferry Lane entrance where we entered the site. Another refurbishment was the Coppermill Tower at the southern end – it's a great viewpoint, but on this day with a Siberian wind whipping in, not a place to dwell long!



Walthamstow Wetlands - a reedbed

But the purpose of the redevelopment is only partly human benefit. New reedbeds have broadened the diversity not just of birdlife – look for little egret, shoveler, pochard and gadwall – but of invertebrates and amphibians too. One of the reservoir islands hosts arguably Britain's largest heronry, so you can be assured the reservoirs are full of fish!



Walthamstow Wetlands - one of the reservoir islands hosts arguably Britain's largest heronry

The plan was to continue through Walthamstow Marshes to end at Lea Bridge, where both train and bus head back to Stratford, but at just three miles, most of the party wanted more. We continued by the Middlesex Filter Beds and the course of the old River Lea before heading through the Wick Woodland to the Lee Navigation, and hence the Olympic Park. The Lea may be one of London's great industrial rivers, but it's heartening to see the variety of habitats that can be enjoyed even in its lower reaches.



Curtain crust fungus Hainault Forest

February's walk was far more rural

The 247 bus from Hainault tube dropped us on the edge of Hainault Forest Country Park where, after another early coffee stop, the six trusty walkers headed up to the remnant of Hainault Forest. Compared to Epping Forest, which it once rivalled, there isn't much – an 1851 Act permitted its



Hornbeam pollards in Hainault Forest

destruction, and in those early days of mechanised tree-felling, all but 8% was gone within weeks, only for landowners to find that the soil was too poor for meaningful agriculture. Some of the cleared land is now a golf course.

What does remain is certainly worth seeing. The Woodland Trust reckon it harbours 10,000 hornbeam pollards, something of an exaggeration by our own limited count, but it's still a good place to find these, plus oak, ash and the wild service tree, and it's important in national terms for invertebrate diversity.



Lambourne Church

Out of the forest, we headed by an old green lane to our lunch stop of the pretty church at Lambourne, with its Norman door arch, 15th century wall painting, and 18th century plasterwork. Abridge is not far away, downhill – don't disturb the alpacas – and we had time for a quick visit to its Blue Boar pub before the bus back to Theydon Bois tube.

These two walks feature in Peter Aylmer's two guidebooks for Cicerone Press. The walk down the Lea is based on Walk 6 in *Walking in London*, and the Hainault Forest walk is adapted from Walk 9 in *Walking in Essex*.



Just to prove Peter's walks are not all work and no play - the day ended with a brief rest stop at the Blue Boar pub in Abridge

Walk and Talk by Peter Aylmer



Nature Ramble dates

Anyone who has been on one of Peter Aylmer's nature rambles will know what a great day out they are - why not join him for his next walk.

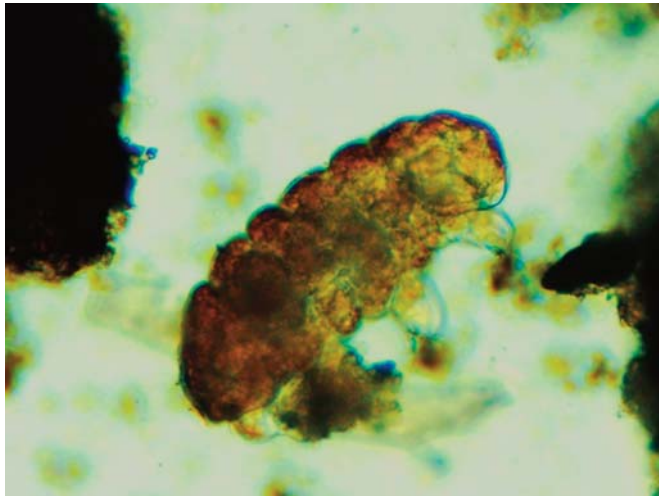
Tuesday 5 June. Meet 10am at Stratford station, outside Jubilee line platforms 13-15. Just turn up, no need to book. Bring a snack, drink and Oyster or Freedom Pass. Back about 4.30.

a bear in the back garden ...

.... and some other remarkable organisms by Paul Ferris

...well, actually a bear on the roof – in Manor Park. It doesn't sound very likely, but I found the first bear on the roof of my house at the beginning of January, 2018, closely followed by others at ground level. These were 'Water Bears' – Tardigrades.

Some time ago in a Wren Group Newsletter I wrote an article in which I talked about searching for them, and being unsuccessful. It probably wasn't anything to do with the microscope that I was using (oh, yes, I should point out that Tardigrades are pretty well microscopic), just a bit of luck, as with most wildlife in my experience. You can go out to deliberately search for something and not find it, and another time it'll swipe you round the back of the head, having found you.



A Tardigrade or "Water Bear"

But, I had recently purchased a new microscope, with much the same level of magnification possibilities of my existing one but with a binocular eyepiece. In fact, trinocular, because there is a

third viewer into which a camera may be mounted.



Euglena – a very mobile single-celled organism

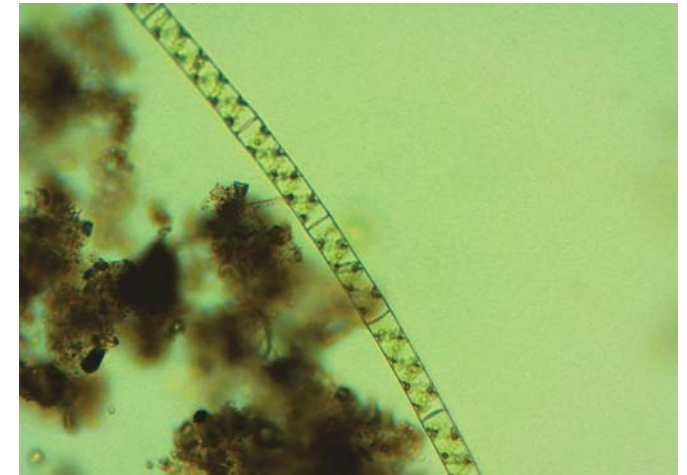
So, as one of the first trials of the new device I grabbed a bit of moss from off the roof, and there was the bear! It wasn't actually the water bear I expected, because this one looked a bit more like a



A variety of algae from a garden pond

more than a bear, but then there are a few different species of Tardigrades. I am not ready to put a species name to them yet, but all of those that I have discovered so far have been one species, I believe.

Stating that "All of those that I have found..." sounds as though my garden is infested with Water Bears. Well, it probably is; they are actually very common creatures, found in a variety of habitats almost all over the world. And that variety of habitats is amazingly varied, because Tardigrades are renowned for their ability to survive extremes



Spirogyra – One of the "classic" algae

of temperature and other conditions, with a good possibility that after some major catastrophe affecting almost all life on Earth, Tardigrades will just "come back to life" and maybe even evolve into the dominant species. But – on the other hand – why should they evolve? They seem to be doing alright as they are.

The enthusiasm of using the new microscope, with its nice camera facilities (video included) also gave me the opportunity to "discover" some more amazing organisms. In some cases whether these



A testate amoeba

were animal or plant – or something else or in between – may have been quite debatable. One of the larger and more mobile of these was a freshwater single-celled organism called *Euglena*, which had something of the appearance of a serpent. Though not obvious in the photograph, protruding from its ‘mouth’ is a long whip-like structure called a flagellum with which it propels itself forward. I



A “naked” amoeba

have found these in a small garden pond in Harpenden Road, from which came a remarkable number of specimens of other organisms, including some beautiful algae, the variety of which may be seen from the photograph. Also in the pond – and perhaps not so beautiful – was a plentiful supply of the “classic” freshwater infesting alga *Spirogyra*. That small garden pond provided so much variety for viewing under the microscope, and included also a species of amoeba which did not match my impression of what I thought these should look like. What can be seen in the photograph is the



Phacus – corkscrewing through Alexandra Lake

‘test’ of the amoeba, which is a protective shell from which the pseudopodia emerge. This shell is produced by the amoeba itself, unlike those ‘naked’ ones which is perhaps the more common idea of what amoeba should look like. A photograph of one of those – which is a different species – is also shown, though by their nature they are not so easy to photograph. That particular one was from my garden pond.

Alexandra Lake was also sampled, although very

quickly and at an inappropriate time of year (January). However, it provided an interesting organism which my biologist friend Roger had not seen before. It took us some research to discover what it was, with a few false leads on the way. Perhaps it should be said here that you can’t really just go out and by a ‘Field (or pond) guide to microscopic organisms of Britain and Northern Europe’ and hope to be able to identify something



A Rotifer – attracting food by means of its “wheel” of cilia

down to species level. It doesn’t work in the same way as – say – birds or plants. The expertise required to identify most of these organisms is extreme, and – as I have stated before – I’m not an expert in anything, let alone these things. I just hope that I can go a little way towards knowing what I may be looking at. Anyway, we decided that that this intriguing little organism was *Phacus*. This is small, and green, and corkscrews through the water at a rather rapid rate. *Phacus* looks a bit like an Archimedes screw, and is related to *Euglena*, mentioned earlier.

From my own garden, amongst other things, were

plenty of specimens of rotifer, a fairly well known invertebrate animal that are commonly known as 'Wheel Animicules'. This name is because they have a circular arrangement of tiny hair-like structures (cilia) at their front end which move in a synchronous pattern, giving the appearance of a turning wheel. That is difficult to see in a photograph, but is wonderful to watch through the microscope. These cilia create water-currents that attract smaller organisms, providing food for the rotifer. I have found plenty of rotifers, not only in the garden pond but also in a variety of containers (such as watering-cans) left around the garden. From the garden pond came another quite dramatic creature which – if somewhat larger – may have looked good in a fantasy or sci-fi film – maybe 'Dune'? This was *Gastrotricha*, a somewhat worm-like creature, commonly called a "hairyback". This name, however, is something of a mis-translation of gastrotrich which derives from the Greek 'hairy stomach' (gaster thrix) . Oh well...

Yes - "Oh, well!" There were plenty more "things" to be seen under the microscope, and indeed within the first few weeks of looking I discovered about 30 different wildlife specimens that I could add to the list of finds in the area that I'm interested in. Not all down to species level, of course, but what a variety of shapes, colours, sizes and movements!

Article and pics by Paul Ferris



If you would like to see a list, and photographs, of some of these you could try this page of my Wanstead Wildlife website:

[https://www.wansteadwildlife.org.uk/index.php/cent-additions](https://www.wansteadwildlife.org.uk/index.php/recent-additions)





photo workshop

report and pics by Andrew Spencer

Last March, Wren members were invited to take part in a photography workshop run by Marion Sidebottom, Artist-in-Residence at Epping Forest. Marion was ideally placed to help us take better pictures of the local flora and fauna on Wren's patch. Keen photographer Andrew Spencer shares the experience.

You had to be pretty keen to learn on the day in question if you were attending Marion Sidebottom's 'Creative Tree Photography' workshop. The temperature was 1°C and the wind chill was making it feel well below freezing. Snow was lying on the grass and under the trees around The View visitor centre where the workshop was taking place.

Over the last year Marion had been the Epping Forest Artist in Residence based at The View. She spent the first hour and a half of the workshop guiding the seven intrepid Wren Group members who had made it there, towards improvements in the quality of their photography. By showing her own brilliant tree photographs projected on a

screen, she demonstrated how the various principles of camera viewpoint, composition and lighting can be used together to create successful images. Then we headed out into the cold to put these principles into practice. We photographed the trees in the nearby Barn Hoppitt area, before focussing our attention on a well-known ancient Oak estimated to be over 400 years old which stands beside Warren Pond. This is a tree which you are bound to remember once you have seen it. It is remarkable for its hollow, cave-like interior which you can actually climb into under the roots. Generations of children and adults too, have climbed inside and have been photographed peeping out. However, the members of our group tried to capture the tree's uniqueness with photography in a more serious manner, using the methods we had just been learning.

After half an hour outside, Marion deemed it too cold to carry on, and we went back to the learning room for a very welcome hot cup of tea and sandwiches provided by Gill and Alan James. In the afternoon Marion continued to guide us in ways to improve our photography, and we also visited her exhibition in the gallery on the first floor. Though it was a shame we could not spend longer outside taking photographs, I felt that the workshop had been very worthwhile, and thought that the snow had contributed an unexpected bonus to our photography on the day.

Report and pics by Andrew Spencer



Find out more about Marion Sidebottom
www.marionsidebottom.co.uk





plant galls

Article and pics by James Heal

I remember finding acorns as a child with strange growths on them. I was fascinated and a little repulsed at the same time. I wondered what strange disease afflicted them. It was only many years later that learned that these growths were the 'knopper gall' a type of plant gall caused by a tiny wasp, *Andricus quercuscalicis*.

What is a plant gall?

Plant galls are abnormal growths on plants caused by another organism or virus (I would say, 'think of a plant version of a wart or verruca', but I don't want to put you off reading this article or the editor won't ask me back). Very many of the most obvious are caused by invertebrates, with types of aphids, midges, wasps, sawflies, and mites being among the most common.

Many of the invertebrates are very difficult to find or see - with some being microscopic - but we can still detect and record their presence in a location by the galls they cause on plants. So, you may never see the wasp, *Andricus quercuscalicis*, and if you did you would struggle to distinguish it from other small cynipid wasps without microscopic dissection and inspection, but, if you see a 'knopper gall' on an acorn, you can be certain of its presence.



Andricus foecundatrix - pic by James Heal

Galls caused by invertebrates tend to serve as both protection and sustenance to the growing larval offspring of the parent that parasitised the plant by laying eggs in it. Whilst it is clear that the plant rarely gets benefit from the situation, it is rare that an infestation causes mortal damage to the plant; after all, the causing invertebrates need the plants to survive and reproduce to provide hosts for their species' survival.

A survey of Wanstead Flats and Park

Last summer I decided to use the lull in interesting birding opportunities locally to undertake a reasonably thorough survey of galls found locally. My survey produced 59 galls with different causer species, of which 38 are new to the local patch, and one of them is a brand new species for Epping Forest, as confirmed by the City of London entomologists.

The following report is a summary of my findings and is organised by the 'causer', but it is worth dwelling briefly on the 'hosts' - the affected plant - as well. The 59 galls have been found on a total of 24 plant hosts. It should be no surprise in Britain that oak (*Quercus*) is the most galled plant genus, with 14 types of gall (12 caused by wasps). In joint second place come the maples (*Acer*), birches (*Betula*), willows (*Salix*), and limes (*Tilia*), each with four types of gall that I have found on them.

But it isn't just trees that are affected, herbaceous plants are also frequently galled. A major reason for the bias in my findings towards galls on trees is simply that I am better at identifying trees than I am herbaceous plants.

Aphids

I have only found three galls caused by aphids in my survey work so far, and two of them affect elm leaves. *Eriosoma lanuginosum*, is an aphid which can cause most or all of an elm leaf to form a large pouch gall which can be up to 8cm across. These conspicuous green galls will eventually burst open revealing large numbers of the waxy aphids, and the remaining structure turns yellow, and then brown with these empty shells often remaining long after the leaves have fallen. Somewhat smaller than *E. lanuginosum*, but no less impressive are the extraordinary club like stalks (fig galls) that grow out of elm leaves and are caused by the aphid, *Tetraneura ulmi*.



Eriosoma lanuginosum - pic by James Heal

Midges or gnats

The botanical name for galls is 'cecidia', and someone who studies them is a cecidologist. A major group of gall causers are the family of flies appropriately known as

the *Cecidomyiidae*: the gall midges or gnats. There are at least 6,000 species of this family known to science worldwide and they rarely grow more than 2-3mm in length. I found twelve galls caused by this family locally.

Some of the galls are quite tricky, but can be fun to find. Think of the catkins of the birch family. As they mature they turn brown and crispy. Try rubbing the catkin during this stage between your fingers. Tiny little papery scales surrounding a little nut will separate in your hands; hundreds of them from one catkin! Take a closer look - maybe with a magnifying glass for a good view. The scales are like little wings on the nut. In fact they essentially are wings as this helps carry them in the wind to grow into new birch trees. If you sift through the scales, you might be lucky and find some with a swollen nut and reduced or absent wings. These are likely to have been galled by one of the *Semudobia* midges. There may well be three species present locally from this genus alone; I have found two of them.

Mites

All of the invertebrates I have so far mentioned are pretty tiny - just a millimetre or two long, but they would appear as giants compared to many of the gall causing mites. Six or seven of these worm-like arachnids could stretch nose to tail and barely make up one millimetre. Walking through a wood when they emerge from their protective galls, you could inhale large numbers of them without ever knowing and without causing you any damage whatsoever [Sorry! If that puts you off going for a walk, remember that you are likely

to be inhaling far worse things in the dust of your own home, even if you are clean and tidy].

I have found more galls caused by mites than any other causer type and all 21 are from the Eriophyes family. So far, around 3,400 species of mite are known from this one family worldwide and experts believe this may only be around 10 per cent of the total. So just think of the scope for discovery out there, maybe even locally!

Take a walk in the summer up Evelyn's Avenue (the lime tree avenue stretching from Ferndale Road to the North Western edge of Bush Wood on Blake Hall Road). Examine the lime tree leaves and you may notice that some of them have bright red 'nail gall' growths on them. Large-leaved lime are affected by the large and pointy nail galls caused by the mite, *Eriophyes tiliae*, while the small-leaved lime will have slightly smaller and more rounded versions caused by the mite, *Eriophyes lateannulatus*. The hybrid common lime can be galled by both.

Wasps

Everyone knows what a wasp looks like, don't they? Yellow and black, aggressive, and partial to ruining picnics. Well, as I'm sure many of our Wren Newsletter readers will know, wasps come in all shapes, sizes, and colours. They range in size from the smallest known insect, which is only 0.14mm, through to the formidable Asian Giant Hornet that is as long as your wrist is wide and packs a sting that would hospitalise you. There are literally hundreds of thousands of species in between.

Many wasps cause galls, and some of them are the most noticeable galls you can find - like the 'knopper gall' mentioned at the beginning. If you examine oak trees in the summer, you would almost find it impossible not find at least a few different types of wasp-caused galls. Aside from knoppers, hard, spherical 'marble galls' are extremely common, especially on the young, retarded scrub oak specimens. They are caused by *Andricus kollari*, a wasp that was introduced from its native Middle East in the 1830s. It was brought here deliberately because the galls can be used to extract tannic acid to make iron gall ink. In the Middle East these galls have been used to make ink for almost two millennia and recent research has shown that it was used in the Dead Sea Scrolls and on the 'lost' Gospel of Judas.

You may also find some of the leaf buds have swollen significantly and look like perfect little artichokes. These are caused by *Andricus foecundatrix*, the 'artichoke gall wasp'.



Neuroterus numismalis - pic by James Heal

In mid- or late summer, try turning over some oak leaves and see what you find? You may find button-like galls, sometimes hundreds of them growing on the leaves, each one a protective casing for a wasp larva. 'Silk button' galls, in particular, are stunning structures that look like little gold coins which explains their specific name: *Neuroterus numismalis* (think of numismatics – the study of coins and money).

So, we have knoppers, marbles, artichokes (and I didn't even mention oak apples), buttons and coins. If you keep looking closely at oak trees, as I do, aside from some strange looks from dog walkers, you may also find green twisted protuberances that have suitable scientific and vernacular names: 'rams horn galls' (*Andricus aries*). These were first found in the UK as recently as 1997, but have now spread through much of Southern England and are all over our local oaks.

But there is also an even more recent addition to be found locally. Probably the most significant discovery of my survey was on one of our ancient Bush Wood sweet chestnuts. The gall, which forms a growth on the leaf vein of this tree that distorts the leaf shape, is caused by the wasp, *Dryocosmus kuriphilus*, otherwise known as the 'oriental chestnut gall wasp'. This gall was first discovered in the UK (in Kent) in June 2015. I found it two years later and it was confirmed by entomologists as the first record for Epping Forest.

Sawflies

Sawflies are closely related to wasps. For reasons I

don't understand, all three of the sawfly-caused galls I have found locally have all been on the willow family. They seem to form colourful 'bean galls' on the leaves that can be easily found.



Dryocosmus kuriphilus - pic by James Heal

Other causers

I have used this article to focus on galls caused by invertebrates, but galls can also be caused by other

organisms. Plants can even cause galls on other plants. The most famous is mistletoe that affects a large number of different hosts (I am keen to know the different host plants of mistletoe, so do let me know what trees you find it on).

Fungi causes a range of 'rusts' and galls that alter the way a plant grows, and I found a few fungal-caused galls locally, including on the pear tree in my own garden (look out for orange rust patches on the topside of the leaf, and strange spore-releasing growths on the underside, caused by *Gymnosporangium sabinae*).

Bacteria may be microscopic, but they cause some of the largest galls you are likely to find, including huge rough tumours on tree trunks (*Agrobacterium tumefaciens*). Even tinier than bacteria are viruses, of course. I haven't yet found a gall caused by a virus, but maybe we will this year. This brings us full circle, and hopefully - if plant galls were a new or vague topic - you now have some appreciation that they are so much more than a wart on a plant. Hopefully it is also clear how much more there is to learn in cecidology. If you are out locally and find a strange growth on a plant, feel free to take a photo or collect a sample and send it to me, and I will try and help identify it.

Article and pics by James Heal



Good numbers of Redwings could be watched feeding in the horse paddock at the end of Empress Avenue in February. In early March some had started to sing. Pic by Nick Croft

winter bird report

by Tim Harris



A game of two halves?

In January's newsletter I mentioned birds to look out for if there was a really cold spell. Well, the 'Beast from the East' certainly qualified as such, and although hoped-for Smew and Goosander didn't materialise on the River Roding, and there was no Bittern tucked away in the bulrushes at the Shoulder of Mutton, the others did turn up.



Fieldfares were one of the species moving in large numbers across our area on 28 February. Coordinated counts logged more than 300 fleeing south-west over our area during the day. Pic by Nick Croft

Small flocks of Lapwings had been passing over our area from 24 February as temperatures in continental Europe plummeted, but the drama really unfolded on 28 February. Nick Croft and I spent both spent seven hours in the field on a day when the air temperature was -6.9C



Fieldfare. Pic by Nick Croft

at dawn and the windchill temperature hit a new local record of -11.2C by early evening. We worked different areas of the patch, noting the direction of flight of the Lapwings (and Fieldfares, also on the move) and their numbers. Jono joined in from the warmth of his Windsor Road 'observatory', and James number-crunched to



Single Hawfinches seen in the Old Sewage Works and Chalet Wood were presumably part of the extraordinary influx from eastern Europe, which started in October 2017. Six birds were seen to fly from Chalet Wood on 6 March. Pic by Nick Croft

ensure no duplication of numbers. Scores on the doors at the end of a bitterly cold day in the field were 860 Lapwings and more than 300 Fieldfares fleeing towards the South-West. To put this in perspective, since December 2009, a total of 3,002 Lapwings have been counted over our area (thanks, James, for working out the figure), but six days at the end of February accounted for more than half this total. Fieldfares



This Dunlin was one of the birds brought in by the Beast. It was found on the part-frozen Perch Pond on 1 March. Note the ice on its left leg. Pic by Nick Croft

Other birds to feature in this spell were Jack Snipe on 27 February, Snipe and Woodcock on an almost daily basis, with five of the former in Wanstead Park on 1 March, and a wonderfully confiding Dunlin on a half-frozen Perch Pond on 1 March. One other 'cold-weather' bird we scanned for hours for was Golden Plover, but surprisingly the only two seen were heading south over the Flats on the 'day of the beast'.

There was a Treecreeper in the park.

Spring at last?

However, by 6 March, Great Spotted Woodpeckers were drumming and Green Woodpeckers doing courtship in suitable habitat. Stock Doves were grunting and other songsters included four species of tits, Robins, Wrens, Dunnock, Song and Mistle Thrushes and Blackbirds.



Mistle Thrush. Pic by Nick Croft

Nuthatch numbers remained high, with five or six present in the Park on several days, and a Treecreeper remained in the Park, though I was unable to find it. Single Hawfinches were seen off and on near the Yew hedge in Wanstead Park and in the Old Sewage Works, with the latter still present at the end of March; six flew south from Chalet Wood on 6 March.

So Friday 16 March should have been the start of spring. Why? Because Rob found two male Wheatears



Several Little Owls could be seen on Wanstead Flats. Pic by Nick Croft

on Wanstead Flats, freshly arrived from an African winter holiday, and there could have been a third bird. They were clearly not hanging around, though, and had disappeared before anyone else saw them. That Friday also featured at least two singing Chiffchaffs and a movement of Buzzards over our area, possibly involving 14 birds. However, this switch from cold-weather movement to spring migration was quickly stymied by another cold snap the following day and, to be honest, it's been pretty chilly ever since. As I look out of my window at the thoroughly soggy back gardens of the Lake House estate, with March done and dusted, I have to conclude that for migrants at least, spring hasn't happened yet. Maybe tomorrow ...

Report by Tim Harris



look out for

Early April

Birds: Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs are early summer visitors whose voices join those of resident Wrens, Robins and Blackbirds. If weather conditions are poor, look for Sand Martins feeding over Heronry Lake. The first Swallows pass through our area, but they won't stop. Listen for Meadow Pipits in song on Wanstead Flats.



Small Tortoiseshells - Pic by Kathy Hartnett

Butterflies: On sunny days, look for Small Tortoiseshells, Commas, and Peacocks pretty much anywhere. Brimstones can be seen in Wanstead Park, while Holly Blues will visit gardens around the area.

Damselflies and dragonflies: On a warm day look for Large Red Damselfly, the first of our 'damsels' to appear in spring.

Late April

Birds: The big arrivals of summer migrants take place. Common Whitethroats will be back on territory in the SSSI and the old sewage works. House Martins reappear, and Skylarks should be song-flying over Wanstead Flats. Listen out for a Cuckoo!



Skylarks to be seen and heard on Wanstead Flats - Pic by Tony Morrison

Butterflies: The first Small Coppers should emerge on The Plain and in the old sewage works; Orange tips may be seen in Wanstead Park.

Damselflies and dragonflies: Early Common Blue and Azure Damselflies emerge to add a bit of colour to lake margins.

Early May

Birds: The late arrivals of spring finally turn up: Hobbies and Swifts. Listen for the descending lilt of a Willow Warbler or the tuneless rattle of a Lesser Whitethroat in the Old Sewage Works or on Wanstead Flats; they may attempt to find a mate for a few days but will probably move on.

Butterflies: Green-veined Whites and Small Whites can be seen in gardens and in Wanstead Park. Look for Green Hairstreaks on Wanstead Flats: a colony was discovered there last year. If we are lucky a Brown Argus or two may be in the Old Sewage Works, but this species is notoriously fickle, appearing one year and disappearing the next. Small Heath should appear in areas of rough grassland on The Plain and on Wanstead Flats.



Common Blue Damselfly - Pic by Tony Morrison

Damselflies and dragonflies: Large Red Damselflies should be visible around the lakes in Wanstead Park. Hairy Dragonfly is one of the first of the 'dragons' to appear in spring; it may be on the wing in April, but early May is a good time to look for it.

Late May

Birds: With 50 species of birds breeding in our area, the dawn chorus now in early June is worth getting up for. Mind you, they're not all great songsters. Egyptian Goose anyone?

Butterflies: Large Whites in Wanstead Park and in gardens. Hopefully, the first Common Blues should be flying near Long Wood and in the Old Sewage Works. Small Heaths still on the wing.



Emperor Dragonfly laying eggs in Perch Pond - Pic by Tony Morrison

Damselflies and dragonflies: Large Red Damselflies will still be visible around the lakes in Wanstead Park. Common Blue and Azure Damselflies and Blue-tailed Damselflies can be seen with them. Look on lily pads for Red-eyed Damselflies; later in the

year these can be confused with Small Red-eyed Damselflies, which emerge later.

Early June

Birds: The dawn chorus is starting to peter out as birds get down to the business of raising chicks.

Butterflies: Many of our regular species will peak around now but for some it is still too early.

Damselflies and dragonflies: Banded Demoiselles should be flitting around aquatic vegetation along the banks of the River Roding. The sluice by the old sewage works is a good place to watch them. A few Emperor dragonflies will probably put in an appearance.

Broad-bodied Chaser and Black-tailed Skimmer dragonflies may be seen around Heronry Lake; the latter often bask on the concrete rim of the lake.

Late June

Birds: Bird song seems like a distant memory, but plenty of young birds will be begging for food or making their first flights.

Butterflies: Large Skippers appear on Wanstead Flats. Several species of whites will still be on the wing. Early Purple Hairstreaks breed in oaks; now is the time to look for the first of the summer, especially flying around the canopy in Bush Wood.

Damselflies and dragonflies: Emperor dragonflies patrol powerfully over the lakes in Wanstead Park; good luck if you try to photograph this species – it rarely stays still!

Article by Tricia Moxey



now & then

In each edition of the Wren newsletter we will be showing you a picture of a street in our area taken around 100 years ago and how it looks today. Just for fun have a guess where this picture was taken (answer ahead). If you would like to see your area in this slot why not get in touch and we will see what we can do.



love is all they need

The stag beetle is Britain's largest land beetle, almost 8cm in length, and is easily recognised by the male's distinctive antler-shaped jaws.

Despite stag beetles being in steep decline across Europe, London remains a hotspot. From May to July the beetles emerge from seven years underground and take flight to find a mate. But all too often the search for love ends before it's begun as they are crushed by traffic or pedestrians.

Passionate about wildlife - Londoner Mike Strick took to Facebook to raise awareness of the plight of stag beetles and was very surprised to find his post received more than 60,000 shares in a fortnight.

I read this short but important post by Mike and with his permission I have published it here. Mike offers some good advice on how we can help this remarkable but endangered species.



Every year in early summer, the stag beetles emerge to find mates. They have spent the first five to seven years of their life underground as larvae and now have just a few short weeks to live as adults.



Although the male beetles look fierce they are harmless to us. They use their massive jaws to wrestle with other males when looking for a mate.

Every year I'm shocked by how many people fail to recognise these icons of British wildlife, and am saddened by how many beetles end their lives crushed underfoot. Stag beetles have been around virtually unchanged for millions of years, and are not equipped to survive in an urban environment. Their numbers have declined drastically over the past few decades and the species is seriously endangered.

If you see one on a pavement, please move it out of harm's way. Despite being large (the male can be up to three inches long), they are placid and harmless provided you don't stick a finger between the male's large 'antlers', which can inflict quite a strong pinch. Pick them up gently with finger and thumb on either side of the thorax (the middle part of the body, behind

the head) and move them into a garden or similar. If you're not sure how, here's a video of us rescuing a male from a path: <https://youtu.be/3vflpPExBuU>

Please keep an eye open for them. In flight in the early evening they are phenomenal, flying in an upright and rather ungainly style, making a noise like a small fighter plane. They tend to make a pretty uncontrolled landing, often ending up on pavements, which is where you're most likely to see them and where they need your help to get to safety. The recent high winds are probably giving them trouble, meaning that they could end up in particularly tricky situations.

 I do remember in my childhood when the stag beetles flew in early summer you'd go out in the evening and they would be buzzing around all over the place – now it's relatively rare.



Enjoy observing such a magnificent beetle. Leave it where it is (unless it's in immediate danger of being run over or trodden on) and then record your sighting. If you do have to move a stag beetle for its own safety, then please move it as short a distance as possible (into a nearby hedge or plant for example).

Three local sites – Epping Forest, Richmond Park, and Wimbledon and Putney Commons – are European Special Areas for Conservation for stag beetles.

Researchers still don't know why there have been relatively fewer sightings across north and east London.

May is usually the start of the 'stag beetle season', which lasts until late July.

The males fly clumsily with a faint clattering whirr, and are most likely to be seen on sultry summer evenings an hour or two before dusk.

If you have children, it would be a big help if you could make sure they know about stag beetles too. Kids probably come across them more frequently than their parents. If they know what they are and what to do, the beetles are more likely to survive the encounter!

These are spectacular animals. We really have nothing else like them. It would be a shame if we lost them forever.

Another way you can help is to report any stag beetles you find to one or both of these sites. More data on where they're found will help establish why they're declining and how we can prevent it:

<http://ptes.org/get-involved/surveys/garden/great-stag-hunt/>

<http://www.wildlondon.org.uk/stag-beetle-survey>

Article by Mike Strick





After the Winter

by Claude McKay

Some day, when trees have shed their leaves
And against the morning's white
The shivering birds beneath the eaves
Have sheltered for the night,
We'll turn our faces southward, love,
Toward the summer isle
Where bamboos spire the shafted grove
And wide-mouthed orchids smile.

And we will seek the quiet hill
Where towers the cotton tree,
And leaps the laughing crystal rill,
And works the droning bee.
And we will build a cottage there
Beside an open glade,
With black-ribbed blue-bells blowing near,
And ferns that never fade.

events diary

April 2018

Saturday 28th April - RSPB Coach trip to Paxton Pits Nature Reserve. One of a series of Monthly coach trips (on last Saturday of the month) to bird reserves that Havering RSPB Local Group organise and the North London RSPB support. For other events click North London RSPB Events.

May 2018

Sunday May 20th - Music in the Temple Garden -
Meet: Temple Garden, Wanstead Park from 3pm-7pm
David Bowie Tribute Band plus a host of local talent
Bring a picnic! Bar and refreshments available.

Tickets £7.00, children free.
Contact Ron Albrow for details: 07827 327 365

June 2018

Sunday June 3rd - Aldersbrook Garden Trail -
Meet: Aldersbrook between 12pm-5pm.

Around 16 gardens open to the public. Teas, plant sales, etc.
All-in ticket £5.

Tuesday 5th June – Nature Ramble
Meet 10am at Stratford station, outside Jubilee line platforms 13-15.

Just turn up, no need to book. Bring a snack, drink and Oyster or Freedom Pass. Back about 4.30.

More information: Peter Aylmer 07884 235784
or Email peteraylmer@hotmail.com

Sunday June 17th - Music in the Temple Garden
Meet: Temple Garden, Wanstead Park from 3pm-7pm
Main band to be confirmed plus a host of local talent
Bring a picnic! Bar and refreshments available.
Tickets TBC, children free.
Contact Ron Albrow for details: 07827 327 365

23rd to 24th June Bioblitz - All weekend
Meet: Wanstead Park and Wanstead Flats. Details TBC

now & then

Were you right ?

Wanstead Flats Bandstand around 1914 and how it looks today but not as you may think the bandstand adjacent to Angel Pond. This is the bandstand at the Wanstead Flats 'triangle' at Manor Park, erected by East Ham Corporation. I framed the recent picture by the position of the London Plane trees - see how they have grown in more than 100 years.

The site of the bandstand can be seen defined by a copse of trees behind the Epping Forest sign. More recently the site was occupied by an underground bunker now buried.



links



Links

Got any links to go on this page? Get in touch
wreneditor@talktalk.net

Wren links page <http://www.wrengroup.org.uk/links>

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/WrenOrg>

Twitter <https://twitter.com/wrenwildlife>

Local

Wanstead Wildlife
<http://www.wansteadwildlife.org.uk/>

Friends of Wanstead Parklands
<http://www.wansteadpark.org.uk/>

RSPB North East London Members Group
<http://www.rspb.org.uk/groups/northeastlondon>

Wanstead Birding Blog
<http://wansteadbirding.blogspot.co.uk/>

Epping Forest
<http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/epping-forest/Pages/default.aspx>

British Naturalists' Association
<http://www.bna-naturalists.org/>

Bushwood Area Residents' Association
<http://www.bara-leytonstone.org.uk/>

East London Nature <http://www.eln.yorkshirefog.co.uk>

East London Birders <http://www.elbf.co.uk/>

Friends of Epping Forest
<http://www.friendsofeppingforest.org.uk/index.htm>

East London Nature <http://www.eastlondonnature.co.uk>

Plenty of info here about walking in Essex - including the forest <http://trailman.co.uk/>

National

The Wildlife Trust <http://www.wildlifetrusts.org>

BBC Nature <http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature>

BBC Weather <http://www.bbc.co.uk/weather>

British Naturalists Association
<http://www.bna-naturalists.org/>

RSPB <http://www.rspb.org.uk/england/>

UK Safari <http://www.uksafari.com/index.htm>

Natural England <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk>

The British Deer Society
<http://www.bds.org.uk/index.html>

London Natural History Society
<http://www.lnhs.org.uk/>