

Summer 2020

# wren

Wildlife & Conservation Group

*Picture - Weevil on Gorse, Wanstead Flats by Rosemary Stephens*

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# a word from the chair .....

The tragic killing of George Floyd in the US has served to make many of us around the world reflect more profoundly on racism, privilege, and broader issues of diversity and what these things mean in our lives and communities.

Wildlife and conservation are passionate interests of mine, but I am concerned at the fact that whilst I live in a diverse part of London and have relatively diverse social circles, I know very few black or minority ethnic birders or wildlife recorders. My experience is borne out by the broader facts. A report from the Equality Trust in 2018 showed that only 3 per cent of people working in the environmental or conservation sectors identified as being 'non-white' - this is apparently the lowest level of diversity of any sector except for farming.

Pioneering young voices in conservation are starting to speak out and effect change (do look up Mya-Rose Craig (aka 'bird girl'), Sorrel Lyall, both British or Corina Newsome (aka 'Hood Naturalist') in the US on social media to learn more.

The Wren Group has always been welcoming and engages regularly with a variety of other community groups, but we know we would like to do more. We have been particularly delighted at the success of recent Virtual Field Meetings we have been hosting on the Zoom platform and know that we have been reaching people and places beyond our normal sphere of influence through this new medium. But we are also open to ideas about how we might improve and become even more integrated and reflective of the communities where we are based.

One small action we have taken to try and improve our engagement with young people is the launch of 'East London: Wild!' Showcase. We are open to artistic submissions from people

under 18 on the broad themes of wildlife, nature and what these things mean to you, especially in an urban setting. It could be a photo, a video, a painting or a poem: it isn't a competition, just an opportunity for young people to express themselves however they want.

So, if you have children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews, or young friends and neighbours, we would love to see what nature means to them. What have they seen locally and how would they like to depict that experience? We will do our best to showcase entries on our website, in our newsletter and, perhaps, at an event when we are able to all meet safely again. Please ensure that all appropriate permissions have been obtained before submitting entries to

[info@wrengroup.org.uk](mailto:info@wrengroup.org.uk)

James Heal  
Chair of Wren Committee



## 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](mailto:epping.forest@cityoflondon.gov.uk)



# Wren annual general meeting

In 2019 the Wren Group continued to develop and in the first part of 2020 (as this report has been delayed somewhat) we have had to adapt to dramatically changing circumstances.

It seems a little odd talking about 2019, when so much has happened in 2020. But we shouldn't forget entirely some of the things we achieved last year.

We continue to hit above our weight in East London and the Epping Forest area as a voice for conservation through our work with the Epping Forest Consultative Committee and through our broader advocacy work more generally on a range of local issues.

Through the year we worked with a range of different

community organisations: from one of our local churches, a riding school open day, and a local social enterprise network. We have also been working with much larger organisations from the London Natural History Society, the Field Studies Council, and the Mayor's Global City Challenge.

There were also several wildlife surveys, field trips, and plenty of practical work, with the Bluebells of Chalet Wood serving to cheer many people up in their lockdown walks, all as a result of the work of Peter and his team.

In 2019, several members stepped up their wildlife recording activities and we have started systematically recording what we find using the iRecord platform.

I would like to record my huge thanks to my fellow committee members whose quiet dedication and efforts have been a source of inspiration and encouragement for me. In particular, I would like to thank Kathy Baker for doing a wonderful job as Group Secretary but who has decided to step down from the role with this AGM being her last performing these duties - I am delighted that Kathy will continue to remain a valued member of

the group. I would also like to extend a special thanks to Mark Gorman our Membership Secretary who had intended to step down this year after an extraordinarily long period of service to the Committee, but who has generously offered to stay on another year given how difficult it would be to hand over his particular duties at this current time.

My final specific thanks are to Tim Harris, my predecessor who continues to provide wise counsel to me and who still exerts himself significantly on behalf of the group

I know that 2020 has been challenging for most people and hugely challenging for some. I hope that, whether it is through our virtual meetings, our newsletter, our website, or social media pages that Wren continues to be by your side through this period and we will be ready to get people together again (perhaps with some distancing) outdoors where we belong when we can.

James Heal

Chair Wren Group



Richard Oakman  
President



James Heal  
Chair



Simon Raper  
Treasurer



Peter Williams  
Works Co-ordinator



Mark Gorman  
Membership



Gill James  
Secretary



Tim Harris  
Committee Member



Mirza Rashid  
Committee Member



Moira Duhig  
Committee Member



Mary Holden  
Committee Member



Jackie Morrison  
Committee Member



Bob Vaughan  
Committee Member



Tony Morrison  
Newsletter



Tony Madgwick  
Committee Member



The background of the page is a blurred photograph of a city street with cars. In the foreground on the right, there is a green plant with several leaves. A dark, segmented caterpillar is crawling on one of the leaves.

# aspects of pollution

We live in a bright and noisy world, and much of that pollution is made by humans. Street lighting, traffic, machinery, electronics - it's a constant barrage of interference.

Recent studies are showing that our increasingly bright and loud world is having negative effects on a range of animals, across a variety of habitats – including humans.

Humans evolved to the rhythms of the natural light-dark cycle of day and night. The spread of artificial lighting means most of us no longer experience truly dark nights. Similarly, modern day noise detracts from nature's voice making it difficult to interact as we were designed to.

Here local expert, Tricia Moxey, discusses the problem as highlighted in the bliss of 'lockdown'.

## A rising tide of litter, concerns over poor air quality and pesticides often hit the headlines, but there are other forms of pollution which have impacts on wildlife and our own quality of life.

Over the past few months, we have been able to appreciate the time to immerse ourselves in the nearby natural world and the opportunity to hear bird song more clearly. We had become so accustomed to the constant and overwhelming background noise of traffic movements, emergency sirens and aircraft passing overhead that the natural sounds had almost become inaudible. To appreciate the richness of bird song was wonderful!

On Saturday 18 July there was a chance to celebrate World Listening Day as a reminder of how much we should respect the natural sounds not just of the wind in the trees, or raindrops falling into puddles, but the snuffling of hedgehogs, mating calls of other mammals, the musical notes of song birds, or the stridulation of grasshoppers. Early sound recordings have been archived but modern technology does allow for more sophisticated acoustic monitoring to record data from soundscapes. Sensitive recordings can explore how the diversity of sounds from wildlife in different habitats can change in relation to temperature, time of day and human-related noise levels. These techniques can be used to analyse individual calls or plot the passage of migrating birds at night as they keep in touch with one another and inform surveyors about bat species. Recordings have revealed that urban grasshoppers and song-birds are producing louder sounds so they can be heard above background noises.

The overnight weather forecast maps show clearly the brightly illuminated towns and cities in the UK. This widespread and pervasive form of environmental pollution spreads horizontally and can be reflected by low cloud cover over many kilometres.

“There is a way that nature speaks, that land speaks. Most of the time we are simply not patient enough, quiet enough, to pay attention to the story.”

*Linda Hogan*

Anyone living locally who has been trying to spot the Comet NEOWISE in the night sky will have appreciated just how much the artificial light after dark (ALAN) is interfering with the chance to see any but the brightest of stars. However, you can check the details for finding a dark sky location by searching the online-map of the 2020 CPRE's star count on [www.cpre.org.uk/starcountresults](http://www.cpre.org.uk/starcountresults). Fortunately, there are parts of Essex where star gazing can be extremely rewarding!

Certain creatures are more active during the hours of darkness and their behaviour can be modified by continuous exposure to light. This is another active field for researchers and their studies are just starting to reveal some unexpected findings, one of which is that exposure to 24 hours of light could be a possible factor in species decline.

For obvious reasons, observations of the insect plant interactions after dark are not well studied, especially their pollination activities. Concerns about the impact of bright lights on the behaviour of night flying moths assumed a greater importance when a report published in 2017 revealed that in well-lit areas, crop yields could be reduced by as much as 13% as the pollinating moths became disorientated. Moths transport pollen on their tongues and undersides as they flit from flower to flower under the cover of darkness.

Urban allotments are known to be biodiversity hotspots. Ongoing research is revealing the importance of various moths in pollinating flowers, including those of allotment or garden crops such as soft fruits, peas and beans. Reducing the number of bright lights round urban allotments should help increase crop yields. Since moth caterpillars need to eat it will also be important to provide a wide variety of their food plants by retaining unmown verges, establishing wildflower meadows and encouraging floristically rich gardens to help to boost their numbers. Such habitats will also boost the potential for all kinds of other creatures too!

Article by Tricia Moxey



# the first 500

Pan Species Listing: the first 500 locally by James Heal

Like so many people these days, I'm time poor. A full-time job and a young family mean that I don't have oodles of spare time. Any free time I do get, I ideally like to spend it outdoors; sometimes on walks with my family and sometimes on my own to recharge my batteries.

While I'm out, particularly on my own, I spend my time spotting wildlife and recording it. I have been doing this with birds for many years, I've been doing it with plant galls for a few years, and more recently I have become slightly obsessed with 'pan species listing'.





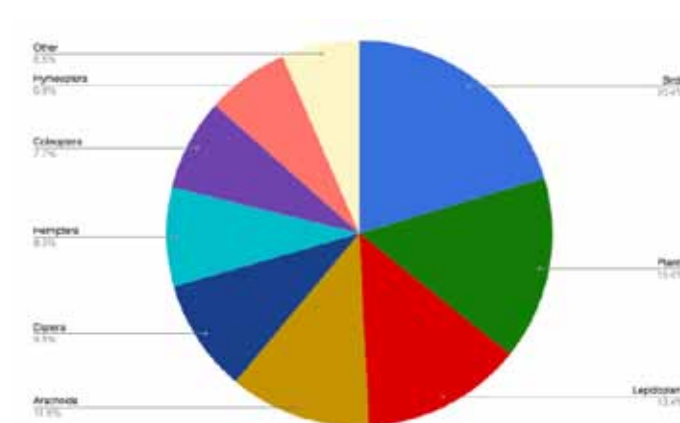
Pan species listing is all about being interested in, and recording, every species of wild organism. If I see a plant, I want to know what it is. If I see a beetle or a bee, I want to know what they are. And I submit details through iRecord to contribute to recording schemes and science.

*"I will enjoy nature more if I understand a bit about it"*

It is a reasonable challenge to ask why I can't just enjoy wildlife without having to categorise everything. The answer to that question is that I can, but I will enjoy it more if I understand a bit about it, what it is, how it behaves, what it feeds on, and how it connects with other species around it. I have written about 'wildlife recording' before so I will not dwell on the details, pros and cons, but I thought I would instead share how I have been getting on and some of my highlights for the year so far.

I am sharing this partly because I do this with very limited specialist equipment or knowledge. Essentially, anyone could do this. I mainly just pootle around my local patch slowly, peering at plants to see what's on them. I don't engage in moth trapping (yet!), I don't own a sweep-net (yet!); I just walk around looking at things and photographing them (with my phone and a cheap clip-on macro lens). I often only learn what I have seen when I am back at home with my books and the internet, and sometimes I learn too late that what I found would require a different angle view for ID or that it can't be ID'd at all without dissection. This is all part of the learning process.

Breakdown of major groups of organism for the year



As I said, some things can't be identified from photographs alone, but some things can. In fact, even though my technique is simple and I only manage a few hours out in the field a week, I have recently passed a small milestone of 500 species for the year so far. Given

that 100 species is easily do-able in a day, 500 is not a great achievement, but each hundred gets harder and it illustrates what is easily achievable with just a bit of time and effort. The pie chart shows my breakdown by major groups of organism for the year. Let's take each group in turn for a short summary.

## Birds

As a birder, it shouldn't be surprising that they take up the biggest share of my total finds. However, this year has been one of my poorest for bird listing since I started keeping lists. Locally I have only seen 82 species and I only recently passed 100 for my national year list (I guess a baby and then lockdown aren't exactly conducive to twitching and big listing).



Coal Tit - photo by James Heal

My birding highlights locally have included spending more time watching the birds in and around my garden

during lockdown. I have recorded 48 species of bird just looking out of my home office window with some highlights including: singing Coal Tit (a first for my garden), a calling Common Tern (another garden tick for me which flapped right past my window), watching three Red Kites fly past together back in April, several sightings of Hobby, and a calling Moorhen (also garden tick) one evening back in April as it flew over in the dark.

Before lockdown I travelled a little further and saw a few good birds with Iberian Chiffchaff just a few miles away in the Lee Valley, White Stork at Rainham, and an unseasonal Turtle Dove in Valentines Park in Ilford being three stand-out birds.

## Plants

If birds are my strong suit, in terms of my identification capabilities, then plants are one of weakest areas. I have definitely improved my botanical knowledge over the last two years, but that was starting from a very poor place. This weakness is emphasised by the fact that I have recorded fewer species of plant in seven months than a semi-proficient botanist could in a day.

Nevertheless, some local highlights have included the beautiful yellow flowers of Yellow Water Lily (*Nuphar lutea*) in Wanstead Park, the wonderfully succulent leaves of White Stonecrop (*Sedum album*) in St Mary's Churchyard, and a wild woodland bed of Common Cow Wheat (*Melampyrum pratense*) in Gilbert's Slade.



White Stonecrop (*Sedum album*) - photo by James Heal

## Lepidoptera (Butterflies and Moths)

Whilst Tim has been trapping a huge array of fantastic moths, my list of 68 'lepid's' is very much more modest, but I am very lucky to have had some absolute gems. Seeing Marbled White butterfly (*Melanargia galathea*) on a part of our local recording area I had never visited before (near Royston Gardens) was special on a rare break away from my desk during the week on one of the hottest days of the year so far.

I also felt privileged to be able to contribute two new moths to the local area list (given it is already so substantive).

First, the small and delicately marked, Oak Cosmet (*Dystebenna stephensi*) is a rare moth nationally and new for our recording area.

Second, and perhaps my best moth moment emerged out of confusion. I got clear photos of a tortrix moth on my front porch but could not identify it. The reason for the struggle wasn't just down to my own incompetence this time. It turns out that the moth in question, *Clepsis dumicolana*, is such a recent colonist of this country that it isn't even included in recently published moth ID books.



Tortrix Moth *Clepsis dumicolana* - photo by James Heal

## Arachnids (Spiders and Mites etc)

The number of arachnids (60) has been substantially boosted by the fact that I am very interested in plant galls caused by mites.

Spider highlights during lockdown has been finding six species of jumping spider around my house and garden,



two of which are considered nationally scarce albeit quite common locally: *Macaroeris nidicolens* and *Ballus chalybeius*. Finding the wonderful and nationally unique spitting spider, *Scytodes thoracica*, on my kitchen ceiling, was a bit of a 'Eureka!' moment as it was among my 'most wanted' spiders.



A jumping spider - *Macaroeris nidicolens* - photo by James Heal

Mites are very poorly studied in the UK and most gall-causing ones are microscopically small, but luckily they induce quite conspicuous galls in plants. Of particular interest are some hairy pustules on the midrib of Blackthorn leaves. I have submitted a paper on these to the British Plant Gall Society and we believe they are caused by the mites, *Eriophyes homophyllus*, which is only newly emerging as a species recognised as being present in the UK. This is second time I have found galls which were not previously recognised as being present in the UK.



Plant galls on Blackthorn caused by the mite *Eriophyes homophyllus* - photo by James Heal

## Diptera (Flies)

Flies are next up with 48 species. Flies are famously difficult to identify and so I have easily seen well over a 100 species but have only managed to take 48 to species or a uniquely distinct genus.

My best dipteran find, without a doubt, was a large and stunning aquamarine fly on my garden shed that turned out to be the first record of its species in London! Its name is *Liancalus virens*.



A fly - *Liancalus virens* - photo by James Heal



Hemiptera (True Bugs) *Rhodomiris striatellus* - photo by James Heal

## Hemiptera (True Bugs)

Only eight per cent of my finds were Hemipterans, despite this order of insects being my favourite. If the, so called, 'true bugs' are my favourite order, we can trace my preference down further to the sub-order, Heteroptera; then, to the plant bug family (*Miridae*) within that; and then to my absolute favourite species, *Rhabdomiris striatellus*. This species is not rare, but it bears some awesome markings, including an extraordinary 'heart and flames' motif which makes it look like it is sporting an 'old school' stylistic tattoo. It is mainly found on oak between May and June.

## Coleoptera (Beetles)

Just under eight per cent of my finds were beetles. It has been wonderful to watch, as the year progresses, our common beetles (soldier beetles, thick-thighed



A weevil - *Pachyrhinus lethierryi* - photo by James Heal

beetles, and some of our longhorns) emerge and appear ubiquitous for a few weeks. I have enjoyed the challenge of attempting and often failing to ID some of our local weevils such as the Nut Leaf Weevil (*Strophosoma melanogrammmum*) that I found in Bush Wood or the much rarer *Pachyrhinus lethierryi* which landed on my hand in my garden (I wonder how many in the bush that is worth?).

## Hymenoptera (Bees, ants and wasps etc)



Mining bee - *Andrena nitida* - photo by James Heal

I have only identified 35 in this Order, and some of those have been identified by the galls they cause on plants. I have made a bit more effort at identifying bees I have found, often with the assistance of my fellow committee member, Tony Madgwick, such as one of the mining bees,

*Andrena nitida*, or the wonderful wasp-like bees in the *Nomada* genus - the Cuckoo bees.

## 'Other'

Finally, and to avoid this becoming an overly lengthy list, I have found 33 'others' - organisms in groups as varied as mammals to molluscs, fish to fungi.

## Conclusion

There are clearly relatively simple steps I can take to improve the efficiency of my wildlife recording (getting a moth trap and sweep net are two), but I have thoroughly enjoyed a year of just walking around and observing. I have learned a lot, probably forgotten a fair amount, and made some fantastic finds. It will be interesting to see how close I can get to 1000 species this year and how much I can improve on that with some better techniques.

Article by James Heal



Ever wondered exactly how many UK species of wildlife you've ever seen in your life? Pan-species listing is an approach to recording wildlife centred around building your "life list" in a social and every-so-slightly competitive manner.

Go to [www.brc.ac.uk/psl/home](http://www.brc.ac.uk/psl/home) to find out more



# What's in a name

## Wanstead Flats or Wanstead Heath

Wanstead Flats constitute the southernmost tip of Epping Forest. The area is made up of patches of acid grassland, scrub, planted copses of trees, ponds and a spattering of football pitches.

The area is designated as a Site of Metropolitan Importance for its conservation value to London and part of the acid grassland is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. It is also one of the few breeding sites for Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) in London and is a notable stop-off for migrating birds, especially in the autumn. The area is hugely important resource for the people of east London, both for its provision of sporting facilities and also for the opportunity to experience a natural environment within urban surroundings. Wanstead Flats is one of the best recorded areas for wildlife in Epping Forest with considerable work undertaken by volunteers from the local Wren Group.

Today the area is known as Wanstead Flats, 'the Flats', the Lower Forest and, as the Corporation of London rather unceremoniously call it, 'Wanstead Flats Football Pitches'. However, Wren committee member and local historian Mark Gorman hints at a time when this remarkable area had a much grander name.



I have a confession to make. For a long time I have assumed that 'Wanstead Heath' was an ancient, rarely used name for Wanstead Flats, rescued from its deserved obscurity by local estate agents wanting to gentrify the Flats for prospective buyers. Having noticed that the interpretation board on the fairground site calls that area "Wanstead Heath, I did a bit of investigation.

That led me to find out how wrong I was – inexcusably too, since a quick search of the records reveals that in fact it is Wanstead Flats which is the relative newcomer, only really replacing Wanstead Heath as the most-used name for the southern end of Epping Forest in the past 200 years or so.

But why would the term "Heath" ever have been applied to Wanstead Flats? There were good reasons for the name. This southern edge of Epping Forest sits on the sandy gravels formed by the retreating river Thames during repeated ice ages until about 11,000 years ago. Early human settlements began to clear small areas of the woods and wood pasture spread across southern England, and grazing of animals gradually increased these areas in size.

By the time of the Domesday Book survey in 1086, the Wanstead area was probably open wood pasture, and local people had the right to graze both cattle and sheep on Wanstead Flats. This grazing and the clearing of trees

gradually turned the woods into heathland; soil nutrient levels fell and the soil became more acid, conditions which suited heathland plants.



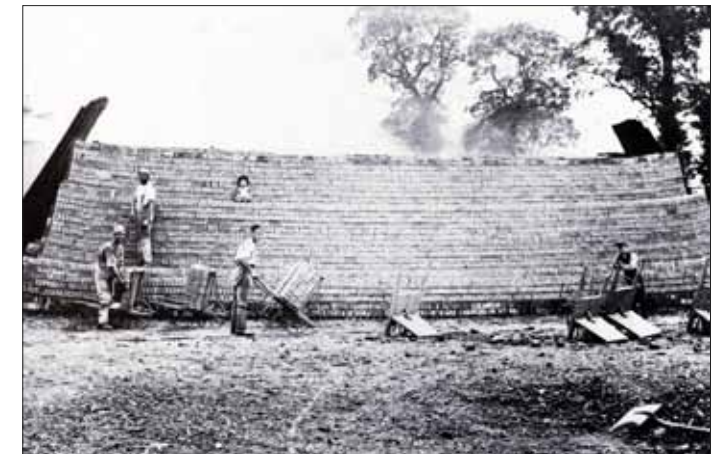
*Wanstead Flats were almost treeless from the C12th after the Abbots of Stratford were granted the right in 1199 to graze large flocks of sheep here. Known as Wanstead Heath from the early C17th, its use for grazing cattle and sheep continued up until the 1996 BSE crisis.*

One hundred years after the Domesday survey, the monks of Stratford Langthorne Abbey were granted a licence to pasture hundreds of sheep on the heath between Forest Gate and Walthamstow, a valuable right, since sheep-rearing powered the medieval English economy. English wool fetched top prices in northern European markets, making fortunes for many graziers, including monasteries like Stratford.

So how do we know that locals used the name 'heath'? Court records provide evidence – in the 1600s, for instance, cases were brought against local communities for fulfilling their duty of maintaining the 'common highway' across Wanstead Heath, while in 1646 'Richard

Boothby of Wanstead esquire' was prosecuted when he blocked the pathway across the heath with a ditch.

The use of 'Wanstead Heath' lasted well into the nineteenth century, as the area maintained its heathland quality, with sheep and cattle grazing limiting the encroachment of rank grasses, bracken and scrub, as well as slowing the establishment of tree saplings. In the early 1800s, there were frequent references to the peat-like soil of the Flats, which among other effects caused summer fires to spread rapidly. However from the 1850s onwards London nurserymen were buying up the topsoil of the Flats and carting it off to fill the plant pots of Victorian Londoners.



*One of the oldest methods of firing bricks was by a clamp. A clamp is a temporary construction of unfired or green bricks which is dismantled after firing and could be erected near the clay source.*

*Picture shows a clamp at Gregory's brickfield, Wood Street, Walthamstow c1885. Clamps like these would also be used on Wanstead Flats brickfields.*

In 1864 the Mornington estate leased 4 acres east of Centre Road to an east London builder to set up a brickworks, and for the next 17 years clay was stripped



from the Flats to make bricks and clay pipes. London was spreading east of the river Lea, and the brickworks contributed nearly 400,000 bricks a year to the thousands of houses being built around Stratford. The brickworks was a local eyesore, and the estate made sure that the brickworks operators agreed to avoid lawsuits with residents objecting to the “nuisance” caused by the operations there. The works closed in 1881, leaving a devastated site several metres lower than two decades before. The site flooded regularly, and the brickworks pond (now gone) was a local feature for many years afterwards.



*Looking south-west across Wanstead Flats at Centre Road in the early 1900s. The landscape still showing scars of local industry some forty or so years earlier. Picture courtesy of Vestry House Museum, London Borough of Waltham Forest*

The use of ‘Wanstead Heath’ had already begun to fade by this time, and ‘Wanstead Flats’ was increasingly used from about 1800. This may have been partly due not only to the changing appearance of the Flats, but also because of an annual event which began after about 1750. As

London’s population grew, meat was increasingly in demand. Large cattle drives from all over England, as well as Scotland and Wales, converged on London. Large grassland areas were needed on London’s fringes, where cattle could be fattened in the Spring before being driven into Smithfield market.

These ‘lean beasts’, together with the cattle and sheep owned by local people, ensured that the Flats remained open pasture, with trees and shrubs unable to gain a foothold as the animals grazed across the area. At the same time though, the term ‘Flats’ came into use, probably in reference to the fact that Essex grazing land along the Thames was commonly referred to as ‘Flats’.

The Flats have evoked mixed feelings amongst writers. Thomas Hood, the poet and novelist who in the 1830s lived locally at Lake House in the grounds of the Wanstead House estate, was unimpressed by Wanstead Flats. For him the Flats were ‘a wide barren level, clothed only by grass dwindled into moss, and trees stunted into shrubs’. ‘This bleak waste’ he declared, ‘was known by the significant name of the Flats’.

The name “Heath” got a more positive reaction. In a play about Mary Tudor, published in 1847, Mary asks her servant ‘How name you this fair prospect?’, and he replies ‘Wanstead Heath, by Epping Chase’. This leads Mary into a paeon of praise – ‘How blest these breezy downs with purple heath and golden gorse enamelled, each bosky bank with dewy windflowers strewn, each dell with cowslip and violet!’



*Grazing by cattle has taken place continuously in Epping Forest for well over 1,000 years. Grazing by free-ranging commoners’ cattle continued throughout the 20th century although numbers started to decline as farming practices changed.*

*A conservation herd of traditional Longhorn cattle was re-established on the Forest at Fairmead and Chingford in 2002 where they have now grazed for several summers. Who knows grazing cattle may one day be re-introduced to Wanstead Flats to help shape the area once again.*

By 1900 the ground in many parts of the Flats had become degraded, and its heath-like appearance was disappearing (though cattle grazing throughout the last century helped to maintain a mosaic of heathland-type habitats). “Wanstead Heath” had fallen out of use, and this southern edge of Epping Forest was known by one and all as the Flats. Or nearly all – while leading a history walk a few years ago I did meet someone who was convinced that Wanstead Flats was the name for the two apartment blocks (Fred Wigg and John Walsh Tower respectively) at the western end of the Flats...

Article by Mark Gorman



# a kaleidoscope of moths

Yellow, orange, green, purple, pink, red, black, white, and brown. They appeared in all colours and a variety of shapes and sizes, from delta-winged hawk-moths to twig-shaped prominents and Buff-tips. Never has there been such a good year for moths on our patch. At the time of writing (16 July), exactly 300 species of Lepidoptera (moths and butterflies) have been recorded locally. Among the ranks of these creatures of the night were several never recorded locally before. Most came to my light-trap in Belgrave Road, but others were seen in the grassland areas of Wanstead Flats, in the back gardens of assorted Wren members' houses, and at other light-traps in Grosvenor Road and Windsor Road. And an impressive number found their way to James Heal's porch. Tim Harris reports with some stunning photographs.







**Pale Prominent** *Pterosoma palpina*  
Resident. Adults fly from May to July.  
Caterpillars feed on the leaves of poplars and  
sallows. Belgrave Road, 12 July.

**Dewick's Plusia** *Macdunnoughia confusa*  
Vagrant and rare breeder. Adults may arrive  
from July to October. Belgrave Road, 6 July.



**Orange Footman** *Eilema sororcula*  
Resident. Adults fly in May and June and  
caterpillars feed on lichens on oak and  
beech trees. Belgrave Road, 17 May.

**Yellow Shell** *Camptogramma bilineata*  
A resident, which is often disturbed during the  
day. Adults fly from June to August. Caterpillars  
feed on chickweeds and sorrels. Belgrave Road,  
30 June-12 July.



**White Ermine** *Spilosoma lubricipeda*  
Resident. Adults fly from May to July.  
Caterpillars feed on a variety of herbaceous  
plants. Belgrave Road, 21 May-30 June.



**Campion** *Sideridis rivularis*  
Resident. Adults fly from May to July and  
caterpillars feed in the seed capsules of  
campions. Belgrave Road, 10-12 July.

**Coronet** *Craniophora ligustri*  
Resident. Adults fly in June and July and  
caterpillars feed on the leaves of ash  
and privet. Belgrave Road, 25 June.

**Clepsis** *dumicolana*  
First recorded in the UK in 2014 and still known  
from only a handful of sites, this individual was  
on Common Ivy in James Heal's garden on 14  
June. Expect to see more next year!







**Leopard Moth** *Zeuzera pyrina*  
Resident. Adults from in June and July. Caterpillars feed on the wood of deciduous trees. Belgrave Road, 6 July.



**Small Blood-vein** *Scopula imitaria*  
Resident. Adults fly from June to August. Caterpillars feed on privet and a variety of low-growing plants. Belgrave Road, 9 June.

**Elephant Hawk-moth** *Deilephila elpenor*  
Resident. Adults fly from May to July, visiting honeysuckles for nectar. Caterpillars feed on Rosebay Willowherb and bedstraws. Belgrave Road, 30 June-10 July.



**Puss Moth** *Cerura vinula*  
Resident. Adults fly from May to July. The spectacular, tail-waving caterpillars feed on the leaves of willows, poplars, and sallows. Belgrave Road, 15 May.

**Buff-tip** *Phalera bucephala*  
Is it a twig or is it a moth? Resident. Adults fly from May to July. Caterpillars feed on the leaves of many deciduous trees. 9 May-14 July.



**Brimstone Moth** *Opisthograptis luteolata*  
Resident. Adults fly from April to October. Caterpillars feed on the leaves of blackthorn, hawthorn, and other plants. Belgrave Road, 23 April-12 July.



**Clouded Border** *Lomasipilis marginata*  
Resident. Adults fly from May to July. Caterpillars feed on sallows, poplars, and Aspen. Belgrave Road,



**Swallow Prominent** *Pheosia tremula*  
Resident. Adults fly from May to July. Caterpillars feed on the leaves of poplars and sallows. Belgrave Road, 17 May.





# building a new normal

Biodiversity Net Gain – a concept everyone needs to know about

With the need for more housing, relaxed legislation and pressure to build on green space – how can we ensure that wildlife is not the victim of the current government mantra of ‘Build, Build, Build’. Here, local activist Susannah Knox discusses how we can all do our bit to keep our area green and wildlife safe from inconsiderate development.



In the last 25 years, an area of countryside and green space almost the size of Cornwall has been lost to development. Built up areas in Britain increased by nearly 3,500km<sup>2</sup> according to the UK Centre of Ecology & Hydrology, most of it in England. If someone had proposed to concrete over the whole of Cornwall, there would have been an outcry. But development is much more insidious than that. A little bit here, a little bit there. Each pretty insignificant, but collectively adding up to a vast area of land lost to nature.

The researchers calculated that between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of Britain that is built up rose from 5.8% to 7.3%. If that doesn't sound much to you, in real terms that was a net loss of 1.9 million acres of grassland.

With more housing urgently needed right now, not to mention preparing for the 3 million population increase predicted by the early 2030s, there is only one direction of travel, and that's more development. The key thing has to be how we develop – both in terms of siting new developments and how they are implemented. The Government is embracing the concept of Biodiversity Net Gain through the new environment bill. Biodiversity Net Gain means that developers will have to leave the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was beforehand. By measuring the value of existing

habitats in Biodiversity Units, the Net Gain approach will hopefully encourage habitats of high biodiversity value to be avoided or preserved, given the difficulty and cost in compensating for them. It should also lead to new developments integrating wildlife enhancing features into plans in order to boost their score of Biodiversity Units, such as trees, hedges, wildflower areas and ponds. If it's done well, Biodiversity Net Gain could have a significant, positive effect – especially as the Campaign to Protect Rural England says it is 'worryingly easy' for developers to build low density housing estates on greenbelt, local green spaces and grasslands.

"A little bit of development here, a little bit there. Each pretty insignificant, but collectively adding up to a vast area of land lost to nature."

That's the good news. The bad news is that currently Biodiversity Net Gain will only apply to major developments. There are noises about mandating a watered down version applying to smaller scale projects, but householder developments like extensions and driveways look set to remain exempt. And that is a problem for preserving biodiversity in urban areas



*In the fightback against development creep every 'green' initiative, no matter how small, can make a difference. Local conservation group Wild Wanstead have been working on a project to green small places - here tree pits in Halstead Road, Wanstead have been given a makeover.*

like Wanstead, where the majority of development is under the control of residents not developers. A little bit here, a little bit there. Each pretty insignificant, but collectively adding up to a vast area of land lost to nature. I wonder how many George Green's worth of garden have been concreted over in Wanstead the last 25 years. But it doesn't need to be like this. Green roofs on extensions, green driveways rather than acres of paving slabs, avoiding artificial grass and leaving space for nature in gardens, planting hedges and trees around the perimeter – there are a multitude of ways residents could create the homes of their dreams while leaving the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was beforehand. Shouldn't Biodiversity Net Gain be a requirement for every development – large or small?

Boris Johnson has alarmed everyone who cares about the natural world with his plans to cut environmental 'red tape' to encourage the country to build, build, build its way out of the COVID-19 recession. In his recent speech



on environmental recovery, Environment Secretary, George Eustice, attempted to allay concerns. He restated the role of Biodiversity Net Gain in the planning system and announced a consultation in the autumn on changing the way environmental impacts are assessed as part of the planning process. However, conservation groups remain deeply critical of the Government's ambition, policy and financial commitment to a green recovery. Based on the Government's poor track record, it seems foolish to pin our hopes on strong national policies that will improve biodiversity in our countryside and cities.

One of the positive outcomes of the COVID pandemic is a reconnection between people and their gardens. According to research by DIY chain, Homebase, across the UK, people have planted 322 million more plants this year than in 2019 as a result of being in lockdown. Nearly twice as many trees have been planted and people spend on average three extra hours a week in their gardens. This appears to be a moment in time when the general population is more engaged with the nature around them than ever before. It is a moment to be seized. Wanstead Councillor, Paul Donovan, is leading Redbridge Council's *Nature and Environment Task and Finish Group*. We are lucky that someone who cares so much about biodiversity is in this role.



*Another project fronted by the Wild Wanstead Group is the 'Grow Zone'. Areas are allowed to grow wild and are even seeded or planted with wild flowers to create urban meadows. Local people can also play a part by leaving a section of their garden wild and increasing planting in their driveways*

Paul is looking for ideas and proof of public demand for council action to help nature thrive. Without steps to stop the wave of concrete now lapping around many Wanstead doorsteps, our streets will end up grim and dead. If that's not a future

you care for, why not email him with any ideas you have to help reverse the decline in urban greenery – or even just to express how important this issue is to you. Sadly, we can't rely on national Government to ensure the next Cornwall-sized area of development does more for nature. But maybe, if enough people write in, we can influence things locally and help the idea of Biodiversity Net Gain to take root in the streets of Redbridge.

Please email [Paul.Donovan@redbridge.gov.uk](mailto:Paul.Donovan@redbridge.gov.uk) as soon as possible.

Article by Susannah Knox



See more of the work Susannah is involved with at the Wild Wanstead website [www.wildwanstead.org](http://www.wildwanstead.org)

For those people not living in Redbridge – why not get in touch with your local councillors and see what's happening in your area (Ed).

## then & now

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



# the simple pleasures

## of nature

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, people around the world are doing their part to prevent the spread of the disease by staying at home and practicing social distancing. If we can't go to the pub, the theater or out to eat, we can still go outside — or at least out our front or back door. Here Wren member Robert Nurden gives his take on becoming a pandemic nature convert.





As we live near Wanstead Flats and have a liking for Nature, my partner and I thought it'd be a good idea to join the Wren Wildlife and Conservation Group. Not the ideal time, of course, with Coronavirus holding us all in its vice-like grip. But, of course, the natural world is still going on out there, waiting to be enjoyed just as usual.

Our first Zoom event was entitled "Damsels and Dragons on the Patch" and given by Dr Tony Madgwick. We settled down with our mugs of coffee on the Sunday morning full of hope and expectation. Even before the talk started, we found ourselves impressed by the level of expertise on display as Wren folk discussed other members' wildlife sightings while offering insights and giving advice. Clearly, here were some earnest folk who knew a thing or two. We looked at each other nervously.

Then it was time for Tony. When I admit to never having heard of a damselfly, let alone having seen one, you'll know that I'm pretty ignorant about the whole species. By the way, is species the right word? Correct me if I'm wrong. Come to think of it, I've hardly ever seen a dragonfly either.

Anyway, despite being flummoxed by some of the botanical knowledge on offer, we concentrated hard and I even studiously made some notes so that when we went for our spot of exercise in Wanstead Park that afternoon (just the one, you understand, we are very law-abiding) we'd be able to see these eye-catching creatures for ourselves. It was a superb lecture, stuffed with goodies, much of it beyond us. But we were stoical. Besides, we were looking forward to getting out of the house for our walk.

Once in Wanstead Park we circled the ponds, our eyes

trained on the surface of the water and the banks, looking for the beautiful insects we'd just learnt about. Nothing. Not a thing to be seen. Deep disappointment. What were we doing wrong? We shrugged, gave up and went and bought ice-creams, happy to leave our light-winged beauties to their own diaphanous devices (that's if they were there at all).

Back in Chestnut Avenue, we opened a bottle of wine, sat back and admired our very own piece of nature - the garden. Lockdown meant it had never received so much attention. Even though we say so ourselves, it looked a picture: clematis, irises, roses. You name it, everything blooming in glorious technicolour.

Soon the sound of birdsong drifted into our glade of delights: robins, blackbirds, sparrows, great tits, even the cooing of some London pigeons who had just landed on the fence like a fleet of out-of-control Jumbo jets, leaving the structure wobbling.

Then came the discovery of the spring: the slightly nervous, incessant yet infinitely varied notes of a new bird on the scene. New for us anyway. We loved the way it seemed to quietly tune up like an orchestra before launching into the main theme.

In fact, I'd heard it last spring, too, but had wrongly identified it. After checking out its song on YouTube I'd thought it was a goldfinch. But this year I was more astute and realised my mistake. It wasn't a goldfinch at all. It was a blackcap. We first heard the song long before we saw the singer. In fact, we only saw it once or twice and only then with the help of binoculars.

It was bigger than we thought, and it was loud. I mean really loud. It was sitting near the top of a neighbour's tree and

sometimes a second one answered it from another garden nearby. Then it would fly off from its branch at breakneck speed and career over the roofs to look for a new spot to sing its aria.

I told Jason, a birder friend of mine, about our lovely new singing soloist. He concurred that it did indeed have a gorgeous song. In fact, he said, it was currently sitting in the number five spot on his chart of big-hit bird songs. Then he gave us a potted history of the misunderstood blackcap with all sorts of statistics. My mind glazed over ...

Simple pleasures, then, are best for us. The wine proved to be pretty good, too. We lead busy lives and don't have a lot of time. Nor do we have the desire to bring forensic and sleuth-like qualities to our observances of nature. I suppose our love is impressionistic, rather than realistic or scientific. It takes all types, as they say. Ignorance is bliss and all that.

England's greatest Nature poet, William Wordsworth, nailed it when he wrote:

*Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;*

*Our meddling intellect*

*Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—*

*We murder to dissect.*

Listen! The blackcap's back. Let's have supper in the garden.

by Robert Nurden





# grass snake survey

At the beginning of April, Gill James invited me to join her in laying down the mats for the spring reptile survey. We located the mats (about 30) from their winter storage and set them down on the City of London exchange lands, mostly in the locations remembered from last year. As this was the first time I had done this, Gill lent me an identification book but it was nothing like the thrill of actually seeing the Grass Snakes in their sleepy positions on lifting the mats. As the site has become more popular with picnickers during the lockdown, we have found that a number of the mats have disappeared – it is a mystery why this should be – but Gill has managed to replace most of these. It is with great anticipation that we go out on Thursday mornings to see what we can find. Our record so far this year is 12. Part of the pleasure has been to see the season change each week from tiny buds, to blossom and full leaf - and the grass has grown so much that we now have to seek out the hidden mats. We now go out much earlier in the morning to catch the snakes still under their covers before the sun makes it too hot for them – but the last two weeks have yielded zero. I think they must have moved to be near the lakes. I am very much a novice but am gradually learning more as I go each week and am thoroughly enjoying it.

by Brenda Thomason





*The wheatear is a summer visitor and passage migrant. Birds breed mainly in western and northern Britain and western Ireland, although smaller numbers do breed in southern and eastern England. It winters in central Africa. Pic by Nick Croft*

# spring bird migration

Report by Bob Vaughan

Bob Vaughan is a Wren Committee Member and keen birder with an increasing interest in others forms of life, including lichens.

Here Bob gives us his take on the birds migrating to our patch this season.



# Spring Migration of birds 2020

In putting together a short synopsis of the migrant birds this spring for a Wren virtual meeting I assembled a table of the date of their first arrival. Chiffchaff and Blackcap are excluded as they over winter these days.

## First date for spring migrants 2020

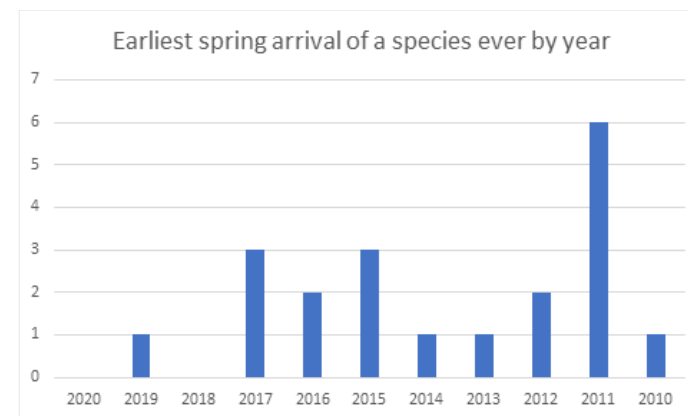
1	N Wheatear	16.03.20
2	Sand Martin	20.03.20
3	House Martin	03.04.20
4	Swallow	04.04.20
5	Cetti's Warbler	06.04.20
6	Willow Warbler	06.04.20
7	Yellow Wagtail	09.04.20
8	Whitethroat	12.04.20
9	Ring Ouzel	13.04.20
10	Lesser Whitethroat	14.04.20
11	Tree Pipit	15.04.20
12	Whimbrel	19.04.20
13	Swift	19.04.20
14	Green Sandpiper	21.04.20
15	Reed Warbler	22.04.20
16	Redstart	23.04.20
17	Sedge Warbler	24.04.20
18	Hobby	24.04.20
19	Common Sandpiper	25.04.20
20	Common Tern	26.04.20
21	Garden Warbler	28.04.20
22	Whinchat	28.04.20
23	Spotted Flycatcher	06.05.20
24	Cuckoo	30.05.20

This looks exactly as birders have come to expect, with Northern Wheatear usually the first to arrive followed by the hirundines (i.e. Sand Martin, House Martin and Swallow) and so on. We have excellent data recorded by many birders in the "Wanstead Birders collective" over the last ten years. This data is curated largely by Nick

Croft who has taken over from Tim Harris as producer of the Wanstead Annual Bird Report (see links on the Wren website). Please note that only six birds, House Martin, Whitethroat, Lesser Whitethroat, Reed Warbler, Swift and Hobby breed in our area. Out of curiosity I then checked the first arrival date for these 24 species over the last ten years and was a little surprised that no species had its earliest ever arrival date this year. Thinking of global warming and the idea that migrants are getting earlier each year I decided to check the first arrival date for each of the species above and drew a simple graph of which year recorded the most first arrival dates.

## Earliest ever arrival

1	N Wheatear	11.03.17
2	Sand Martin	14.03.15
3	House Martin	02.04.11
4	Swallow	25.03.16
5	Cetti's Warbler	17.03.19
6	Willow Warbler	29.03.17
7	Yellow Wagtail	09.04.16
8	Whitethroat	06.04.11
9	Ring Ouzel	30.03.11
10	Lesser Whitethroat	09.04.14
11	Tree Pipit	08.04.11
12	Whimbrel	(rarity)
13	Swift	18.04.15
14	Green Sandpiper	21.03.12
15	Reed Warbler	14.02.12
16	Redstart	02.04.11
17	Sedge Warbler	13.04.15
18	Hobby	20.04.10
19	Common Sandpiper	16.03.11
20	Common Tern	01.05.17
21	Garden Warbler	23.04.17
22	Whinchat	15.03.13
23	Spotted Flycatcher	26.04.15
24	Cuckoo	02.05.16



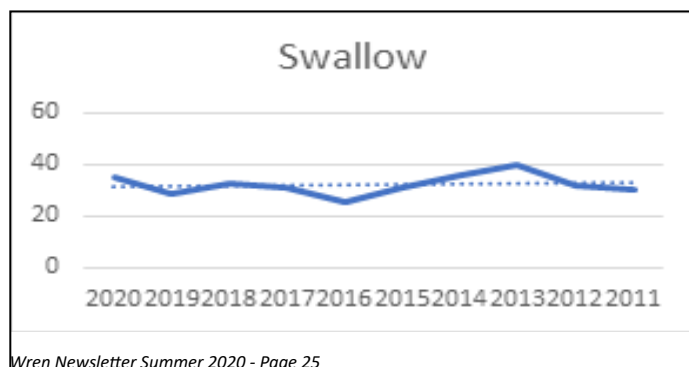
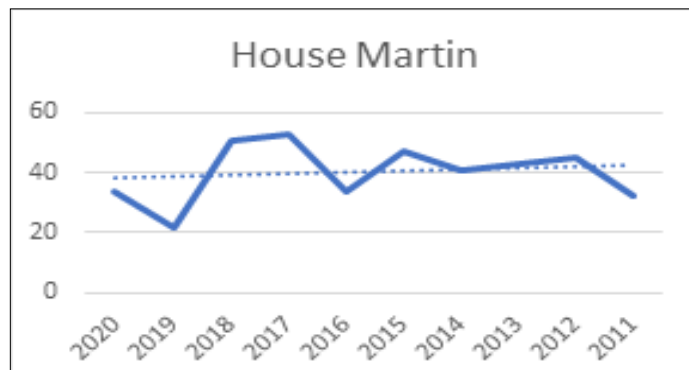
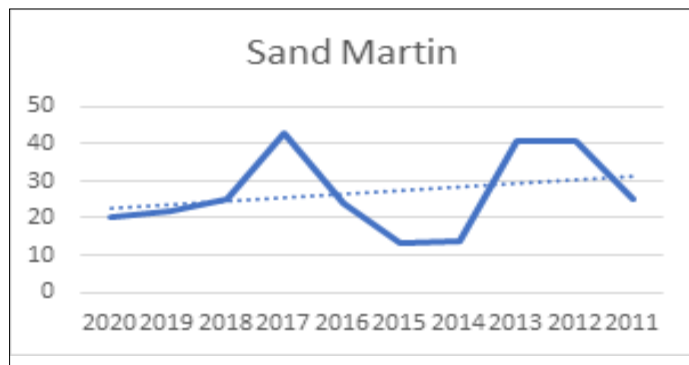
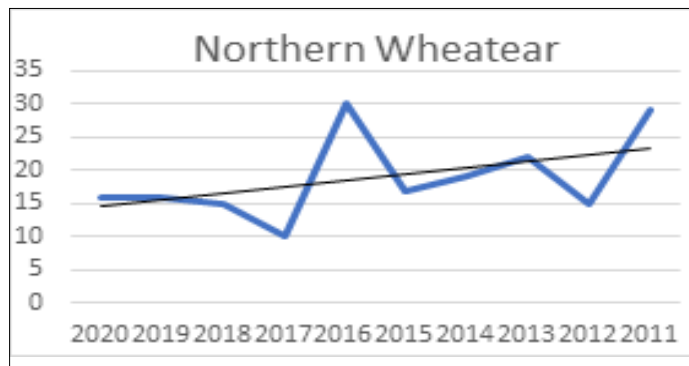
The best year turned out to be 2011 with six species having their earliest date of arrival, and the three most recent years did not give the impression that our migrants are getting to the patch earlier each year. The advantage of good data is that you can delve deeper, and rather sadly perhaps, I thought I ought.



The whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*) is a small migratory passerine bird breeding in Europe and western Asia and wintering in central Africa. Pic by Bob Vaughan

I put together a table of the first arrival date for each species that has regularly migrated through our area in spring over the last ten years. It was then easy to count





each date as the number of days after Jan 1<sup>st</sup>, add one day for each leap year and plot a graph for each species. To focus on spring for the graphs I used the number of days after 1<sup>st</sup> March, and to try to even out the variation I plotted a linear trend line in black. As an example, Northern Wheatear clearly shows a trend to be arriving earlier each year. The same is partly true for the hirundines, although there is variation, with Sand Martin clearly showing an earlier trend while House Martin shows only a shallow slope towards earlier arrival and for Swallow the slope may be better seen as no trend.



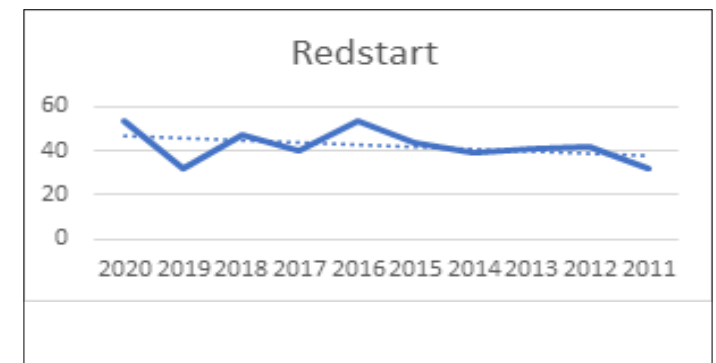
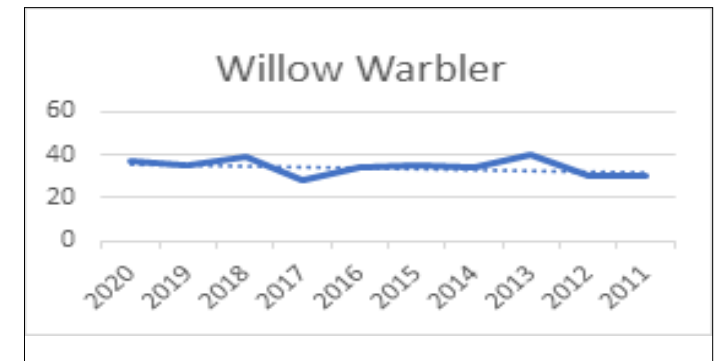
Spotted Flycatcher has become a poster-bird for the cause of African migrants. Silver-haired birdwatchers will remember these as common birds of gardens. Pic by Bob Vaughan

## Summary

..... avoiding many graphs:

- 1 Northern Wheatear, Sand Martin and Common White-throat show clear earlier arrival date trends.
- 2 House Martin, Yellow Wagtail, Swift, Spotted Flycatcher and Hobby show a shallow slope towards an earlier arrival date.
- 3 Swallow, Whinchat, Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Tree Pipit and Cuckoo seem not to have altered their spring arrival time in our area over the last ten years.

4 Redstart and perhaps Willow Warbler are two regular spring migrants that appear to have a later arrival time trend. Is this real or a sampling/data error?



Although the data set is good there are many variables that make any conclusions tentative and I have not attempted a statistical analysis. The weather and a bias towards weekend recording are two factors, but I suspect the overall fall in the numbers of our spring migrants makes a difference too.

It will be interesting to plot the earliest arrival dates over the next few years and see whether the trends observed here are supported. This will confirm the observed trends are valid and we can then speculate on reasons.

# *The Moon was but a chin of gold*

*The Moon was but a Chin of Gold  
A Night or two ago—  
And now she turns Her perfect Face  
Upon the World below—*

*Her Forehead is of Amplest Blonde—  
Her Cheek—a Beryl hewn—  
Her Eye unto the Summer Dew  
The likest I have known—*

*Her Lips of Amber never part—  
But what must be the smile  
Upon Her Friend she could confer  
Were such Her Silver Will ...*

*Emily Dickinson,*





# look out for .....

Hints by Tricia Moxey

The tall pink spires of the Rose Bay Willow Herb often indicate areas of burnt ground as its fluffy seeds germinate on such areas of Wanstead or Leyton Flats.

Of course, the purple flowers on the Heather are a special delight on part of Wanstead Flats where this heathland plant is spreading as a result of conservation measures. 150 years ago, this species would have been much more widespread across the intensively grazed ancient common lands of the Greater London area, but changes in land use on most of them means that it is now a much rarer plant within the confines of the M25.

Brambles are now in flower, providing nectar and pollen to many insects. Brambles come in many different forms: some of which will produce small fruits, but others grow large juicy blackberries. Many of you will know a good spot to gather plump blackberries to enhance an apple pie or turn into jelly! Why not see how many

different varieties you can find? The recent Springwatch programmes have shown just how many creatures nest and feed in Bramble patches, but Brambles do tend to take over, especially in a good growing seasons when they can grow several centimetres per day!

In Australia where European Brambles are an invasive plant, DNA profiling of the various forms is being carried out to find the most effective means of biological control. In the UK much of the time by conservation volunteers is spent on Bramble 'control'.

Of possible concern to those who like to produce their own sloe gin is the discovery that a number of Blackthorn bushes in the area are infected with a fungus which distorts the developing sloes. They become like an empty bag with no stone inside. The fungus is *Taphrina pruni*, a pathogen that causes the Pocket or Bladder Plum Gall, by producing chemicals which distort the developing fruit. The twigs on infected plants may also be deformed with small strap-shaped leaves. I have seen it too on some of the fruits on the ornamental plum trees in local streets.

It would be helpful to know how widespread this is in the Wanstead area as sloes are an important part of the winter food for birds such Blackbirds, thrushes, Redwings, Fieldfares, Woodpigeons and mammals like Foxes and Woodmice.

August! June and July are the pits, birding wise, in your local inner city patch, so it's time to look at other stuff, but then August arrives and the excitement really kicks

in. Expect returning waders by the end of July, and Wheatears from mid-August. Then of course it gets manic: can't wait!

If you're in the Park around August time, Small Red-eyed Damselflies will put in an appearance, as well as Common Darter and Emperor dragonflies. Meadow Brown and Gatekeeper butterflies will be everywhere there is long grass.

Family groups of Skylarks may be feeding in the areas of long grass on Wanstead Flats come August. Also there will be Large, Small and Essex Skipper butterflies and – hopefully – Burnet Companion moths. From mid-month, more and more birds will be feeding in the Elders and Bramble bushes around Long Wood, in the SSSI and near Alexandra Lake. Look for Blackcaps, Garden Warblers, Lesser Whitethroats and thrushes. Near the end of the month Spotted Flycatchers will hawk for insects in the same area, and there may be a Common Redstart or two.

At the height of summer there are a number of flowers which catch the eye. One in particular is the white Ox-eye Daisy, which is frequently seen alongside roads. It is often included in wild flower mixtures. Red Poppies naturally grow in disturbed ground, but additional plantings have been made this year as a reminder of the start of WWI.

Other members of the daisy family in flower at this time of year including the spiky purple-headed Spear Thistle and the yellow-flowered Ragwort, Hawkbits and Hawkweeds.



# feeding birds in summer

Following the spring and early summer breeding season, there are millions more hungry mouths to feed. Nesting parents will have to work hard to feed their young, while maintaining their own energy levels. They may have to cope with dry weather, when earthworms burrow deep beneath the surface or in wet weather, when foraging is difficult. So should you or shouldn't you ?

Article and pics by Tony Morrison





I don't know if it's just me but during the lockdown wildlife seemed to be much more abundant or at least more visible – and it seemed that this was even more apparent with regard to our feathered friends.

This was particularly the case on my favourite haunt Wanstead Flats. This may be because with the absence of so many humans there has been a lack of people feeding birds in parks and open spaces. It may be that birds were more trusting as humans became the minority. It may even be that birds simply missed us and sought us out.



*During spring and early summer there are a lot of young birds around - hungry mouths to feed. Finding enough nourishment and water can be a struggle in long periods of hot weather. Pic by Tony Morrison*

In any case the world was a quieter place during lockdown, allowing birdsong to be heard over the constant hum of the A406 and A12 and the din of aircraft flying overhead from our London city airports.

Slowly things began to return to the 'new normal', which seemed not so dissimilar to the old normal – except

maybe more so. Not surprisingly urban escapes such as Wanstead Flats, Wanstead Park as well as much of the Forest, became targets for those people yearning for the sight of an old friend, the kicking of a football in the open air or a picnic on the grass. Other, more discerning, visitors must have noticed that, along with the sound of voices, screams and the thud of footballs - nature had made a bit of a retreat - so did I.

## Things just got busy in my back garden

The Covid lockdown coincided with bird breeding season this spring. Being fortunate enough to have a garden my 'awakening' of nature turned itself to my back yard. Sparrows and tits started eyeing the myriad of nest boxes I had erected last year and nature kicked off with a flourish.

Watching and feeding wild birds in our gardens is a rewarding and enjoyable activity, not least during these unprecedented times, as the vast majority of us spend most of our time at home. So I kept feeding my feathered friends – partly to bribe them to stay in my garden but also because I saw, for the first time, how much work was involved in them raising their chicks.

Normally, I only feed my garden birds in the winter when the weather turns cold. However, in the summer birds have the challenge of finding enough food for themselves and their chicks. So I thought feeding the birds during the breeding season might allow the adults to use this for themselves and free up precious natural invertebrate food for the chicks.

In winter, supplementary food can be the only option for birds as natural food sources like berries get buried under snow and ice and insects are few and far between - but what about in the summer? Research was needed.

*"There's lots of value and fun to be had from feeding your garden birds in winter. But if you thought it was exclusively a winter activity, think again! We now know that there is still much value in continuing to play chef through the summer, and I don't have a day when I don't put at least some food out". RSPB*

I was fully expecting the jury to be out regarding whether it is beneficial to feed garden birds during the summer. Will it make birds dependent? Will it make them lazy? Would it stop them looking for natural food sources? Will it stop them migrating? As is common - I was fully prepared to surf the World Wide Web until I found an answer that corresponded to the answer I wanted to hear. Surprisingly, however, most of the reputable expert organisations did not frown upon feeding birds all year round. On the contrary most applauded it.



*In summer birds will still be grateful for extra treats as many are busy raising their young. The RSPB recommends little and often, and says that birds probably won't eat quite as much as during the colder months. Pic by Tony Morrison*

While it's true that there's more natural food for the birds in the summer months, there are also a lot of young birds around - hungry mouths to feed. Also, at the end of the breeding season most adult birds will completely replace their feathers in their annual moult, at this time good nutrition is particularly important.



*What do you do when your chick is nearly as big as you and won't stop asking you for food? Pic by Tony Morrison*

Finding enough nourishment can be a struggle in long periods of hot weather, especially for those birds that like to probe around in the soil. In the dry conditions, worms and other creepy crawlies keep themselves well hidden, and the ground is too hard for beaks to penetrate.



*Starling chick anxiously waiting for mum and dad to return with food. Pic by Tony Morrison*

## How to feed birds in your garden

The RSPB recommends little and often, and says that birds probably won't eat quite as much as during the colder months.

Only put out as much food as is taken every day or two, because food can quickly go off in the hot weather. It's good to start by just putting a little bit of food out until the birds get used to it being there.

You may want to feed in a way that only allows the smaller birds to get to the food, such as by using guardian feeders which sit within a wire cage, or by using Squirrel

Buster feeders whose feeding ports close when larger birds or squirrels try to use them.

In addition to food, water is essential for birds during the hot summer months. All garden birds need a source of fresh water for both drinking and bathing. A garden birdbath will also attract species of birds that do not frequent bird feeders but need a cool refreshing drink. As during any other season, keep the depth of your bird bath no more than three inches at its deepest.

Maintaining good hygiene at your feeding areas is essential, both by clearing up any spilt or uneaten food, and by disinfecting feeders and tables to stop the spread of the various diseases that afflict garden birds.



*Feeding birds during the summer is important to keep them healthy and it is one of the best times of year for you to observe birds when they are busy bringing up their new families and enjoying the warm weather. Pic by Tony Morrison*

Just like us, birds enjoy a bit of shade in the summer. When feeding birds, make sure there is plenty of shelter, such as a hedge or tree, nearby. This also means birds can fly to safety from predators if they need to.



# What to feed birds in summer

Birds need high protein foods during the summer, so mealworms, grated cheese and peanuts are ideal. Dried mealworms should be soaked, and peanuts should be crushed so baby birds can't choke on them. Never feed salted peanuts to birds as the salt is highly toxic to birds and can prove fatal. And although peanut butter is a convenient way of feeding peanuts to your garden birds be aware that it will melt when it is very hot and the oil can cling to birds' feathers.



*Birds need plenty of energy to raise their chicks and when they are moulting so extra food will be appreciated and even in the summer, in very hot conditions, they may struggle to find other food. Pic by Tony Morrison*

Fruit such as apples, grapes, pears and soaked raisins and currants will be popular with thrushes and tits. Chop them up and either scatter on the ground or place on a bird table or in a suet cage or apple feeder.

Bird seed will attract a variety of species. You can either use an all-round mixed bird seed or single-mix seeds

such as millet or maize which are popular with house sparrows, or sunflower hearts or niger seed if you want goldfinches to visit your garden.



*Remember that parent birds will be feeding their young so in addition to a healthy diet break some of the food into smaller bite-size chunks for chicks. Pic by Tony Morrison*

You can continue to put out your kitchen scraps for birds but be aware in hot weather food can go rancid more quickly so feed little and often. Any very high-fat foods such as suet aren't suitable during very hot weather, but you can buy specially formulated suet blocks that don't melt. And don't put out too much 'junk food' such as bread and rice as these foods offer little nutrition for nestlings and juvenile birds.

## Give nature a helping hand

A meticulous, groomed garden is considered by some people, the gold standard. During the summer months, think about letting nature take its course in at least part of your garden. Let the plants and grasses grow wild. Refrain from trimming back the bushes. Let the native plants grow with abandon. Even a small, wild area like

this will offer your garden birds a source of food and shelter during the hot summer months. In turn, you will have the reassurance that you are not disturbing nesting birds.

Consider skipping the pesticides this summer. Sadly, even products labelled 'safe' have negative consequences for birds. A common ingredient found in many garden products, neonicotinoids, have been linked to the deaths of birds and bees, even in the smallest amounts. Also, birds are a natural pest killer so keep them happy.

It's not uncommon to find a baby bird out of its nest in the summer. Many people make the mistake of picking the nestling up and bringing it inside. If you find a nestling out of the nest, it's best to leave it where it is. Most times the parents are nearby and know best how to care for their chick. The one exception to this is an injured bird. In this instance, you can take the bird to your local wildlife rehabilitation centre to be treated and released.



*Studies show that wild birds usually receive as little as 25% of their daily intake from feeders, and many common birds received an even lower percentage. Summer is an ideal time to be feeding garden birds. Pic by Tony Morrison*

# adopt something green

It's hard to imagine that not so long ago much of the country was under water. Now, we are approaching the height of summer, Thames Valley stands a very good chance of having a 'hosepipe ban'. With climate change very much in the news we should perhaps expect more extremes in our weather. All the more reason we should appreciate the benefits that trees provide.

Trees put oxygen in the air and take out carbon dioxide. They create cooler micro climates under their canopies. They create much needed shade, protecting us from harmful solar rays. They even help to clean the air by filtering out dust particles and pollutants, not to mention the desirable effect they have on softening the often hard urban landscape.

Every year your local council plant young trees in our streets to replace trees that have died or become diseased or damaged. Also, local community groups such as Wild Wanstead plant wild flowers in tree pits and vacant open spaces.

Unfortunately, hot dry summers can take their toll, especially so on young recently planted trees and flowers. Though your council will probably arrange for regular watering of new planting, drought conditions will always kill a few trees and in hot weather flowers are always

thirsty. So this year why not adopt a tree or help care for a 'green' patch ?



If you have a young street tree, planted tree pit or space outside or near your house or workplace, we are asking you to water it, please. You may notice a plastic pipe sticking out of the ground next to the tree, usually with a green cap on it. It would be great if you could pour water into the pipe and around the tree pit or patch, whenever

you can during the summer months. If you can water daily, or even once or twice a week with a bucketful it would really help the plants and trees to survive and to become established. To save on precious water use old bath water or other recycled water such as that from the dishwasher or water butt.



Your local Council will of course continue to water newly planted trees as part of their regular maintenance programme but trees give us so much why not give a little back - every little helps.

by Tony Morrison



No-one will object if you water thirsty street trees and plants but if you want to create new planting please get in touch with your local council. Take a look at the 'Wild Wanstead' website to see what can be done.

Goto: [www.wildwanstead.org](http://www.wildwanstead.org)



# morgue on the flats

We all had a terrible shock on April 1<sup>st</sup> when we saw what had appeared on Manor Park Flats. Rumours were soon confirmed that this large fenced anonymous structure was a temporary morgue facility erected as part of London's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of Forest land was directed under special government powers, thus giving the City of London no choice in the matter. This site, on the eastern-most arm of Wanstead Flats, was the largest such facility in London and provided convenient access to nearby cemeteries and crematoria.

The facility, we are told, began operations on 13<sup>th</sup> April. We have no official way of knowing the extent to which the site was used; nearby signs forbid the use of drones, which presumably might have attempted to record what was happening within.

The site was recently mothballed with the intention of retaining capacity through to 2021 to manage any potential second spike in COVID-19 deaths. However, the Mortuary Management Group has revised this plan and has suggested that the facility is not currently needed and have decided to close it.



*Manor Park Flats cleared and ready for re-wilding. The work will commence in August and later this autumn the soil will be reseeded with wildflower seeds, including seed harvested from nearby Epping Forest grasslands. Pic by Celia Parker*

We can assume that, in view of the progress of the emergency over the past few months, the threat of the NHS being overwhelmed is no longer realistic.

The three-week long decommissioning of the site began on Monday 13<sup>th</sup> July.

Provision has been made to fund the restoration of the site, and the Wren Group are naturally keen to have a say in this. Various suggestions have been made about what restoration might be made on this large but underused expanse of mown grass. Less serious suggestions include installing grazing goats or bison. More sensible suggestions include attempting to restore a more natural habitat, promoting the establishment of an acid grassland with more nectar sources probably including seed harvested from Wanstead Flats Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) area and/or Leyton Flats. We can expect to see some restoration commencing in the Autumn.

Report by Gill James



# manor park flats

Update by Mark Gorman

The temporary mortuary built on Manor Park Flats, was one of six temporary mortuaries set up across London, early on in the coronavirus pandemic. It has now been removed and will give way to a new wildflower habitat.

Work has already begun to reinstate the site, which will be harrowed and a seed mix sown, hopefully in September. This however depends on rain, and if September is very dry, sowing will need to be put back.

Brush mowing has harvested seed from the SSSI on the western (fairground area) end of the Flats earlier in August. This will be prepared for sowing on the mortuary site later in the autumn. Hopefully, seed from other plants, including Tormentil and Bird's-foot Trefoil will be sourced from green hay mown from the buffer lands to the north of the forest. This will be added to the mix.

A total of 40kg of seed will be



*The opportunity is being taken to improve Manor Park Flats grassland using a wildflower seed-mix, including seeds collected locally from nearby areas of the Forest.*

sown on the 1.7-hectare site. After being prepared for seeding, the earth will be sown in the autumn and again in spring next year. The Wren Group has been asked if we would be willing to plant some plug plants in the area next year to help enhance the botanical diversity, and we have willingly agreed.

The site will remain fenced until summer 2021 to allow the wildflowers and grasses to grow. Posters are to be put up on posts around the site to let people know what's going on. Further information will be made available - for example, the exact composition of the seed mix – once this is known.

This is very welcome news, given the importance of the Flats as one of London's key grasslands on gravel soils, a rare wildlife habitat supporting the huge variety of wild flowers, butterflies, moths and bees which Wren members have been recording over time. Special thanks go to Epping Forest Head of Conservation Jeremy Dagley for consulting with the Wren Group regularly about the restoration of the site.

## then & now

Were you right ?

In keeping with the Manor Park Flats - Wanstead Flats Bandstand around 1914 and how it looks today. 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.





and  
finally ...

join online or, easiest of all, call them on 0300 303 3464. The course reference is: C2227544.

Places are limited - to join us get in touch right away.

## Course available

Want to learn about nature, how you can foster it and, at the same time, make new friends? Then join us on a course tutored by Tricia Moxey: Wren member, nature expert and walks and talks leader. Committee members Gill James and Jackie Morrison have been attending Tricia's classes for years. The course is on Zoom, so you won't even have to leave your home to join us. Zoom is very easy to use and great for connecting with people safely.

This term's course includes how you can make and contribute to creating a nationwide data bank on plants, animals and fungi. This citizen science is essential to inform and influence decisions that can affect the future of our natural surroundings and ourselves. Learn how your gardens and open spaces and the countryside can be better managed to contribute to biodiversity. We've all looked to nature these past few months for solace, interest and well-being. Now we can learn how to help nature, and ourselves, thrive better together.

The course is ten sessions on Wednesdays, 13.00 -14.30, commencing Wednesday 23rd of September. It costs £48, payable to WEA (Workers' Educational Association). You can

## The 'East London Wild!' Showcase

Wren Wildlife and Conservation Group are looking for creative submissions from young people on the theme of 'nature' and 'wildlife' and what they mean to you - especially in an urban East London setting.

Are You .....

- Under 18 ?
- Living in the East End ?
- Studying in East London ?
- Looking for something to do this summer ?

Can you .....

- Take pictures or video with a camera phone ?
- Write a poem ?
- Draw or paint a picture ?
- Sing or write a song ?

Then .....

- Get in touch by emailing [info@wrengroup.org.uk](mailto:info@wrengroup.org.uk)
- Get permission if you're taking a picture of someone
- We will showcase as many entries as possible online and at a future event



# useful links

Got any links to go on this page? Get in touch [wreneditor@talktalk.net](mailto:wreneditor@talktalk.net)

Wren links page [www.wrengroup.org.uk/links](http://www.wrengroup.org.uk/links)  
Facebook [www.facebook.com/WrenOrg](https://www.facebook.com/WrenOrg)  
Twitter [twitter.com/wrenwildlife](https://twitter.com/wrenwildlife)

## Local

Wanstead Wildlife [www.wansteadwildlife.org.uk](http://www.wansteadwildlife.org.uk)

Friends of Wanstead Parklands [www.wansteadpark.org.uk](http://www.wansteadpark.org.uk)

RSPB North East London Members Group  
[www.rspb.org.uk/groups/northeastlondon](http://www.rspb.org.uk/groups/northeastlondon)

Wanstead Birding Blog  
[www.wansteadbirding.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.wansteadbirding.blogspot.co.uk)

Epping Forest  
[www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/epping-forest/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/epping-forest/Pages/default.aspx)

British Naturalists' Association [www.bna-naturalists.org](http://www.bna-naturalists.org)

Bushwood Area Residents' Association  
[www.bara-leytonstone.org.uk](http://www.bara-leytonstone.org.uk)

East London Nature [www.eln.yorkshirefog.co.uk](http://www.eln.yorkshirefog.co.uk)

East London Birders [www.elbf.co.uk](http://www.elbf.co.uk)

Epping Forest Heritage Trust [www.efht.org.uk](http://www.efht.org.uk)

East London Nature [www.eastlondonnature.co.uk](http://www.eastlondonnature.co.uk)

Plenty of info here about walking in Essex - including the forest  
[www.trailman.co.uk](http://www.trailman.co.uk)

Wild Wanstead - greening up the local area  
[www.wildwanstead.org](http://www.wildwanstead.org)

## National

BBC Nature [www.bbc.co.uk/nature](http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature)

British Naturalists Association [www.bna-naturalists.org](http://www.bna-naturalists.org)

BBC Weather [www.bbc.co.uk/weather](http://www.bbc.co.uk/weather)

Field Studies Council (FSC) [www.field-studies-council.org](http://www.field-studies-council.org)

London Natural History Society [www.lnhs.org.uk](http://www.lnhs.org.uk)

Natural England [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk)

RSPB [www.rspb.org.uk/england](http://www.rspb.org.uk/england)

UK Safari [www.uksafari.com/index.htm](http://www.uksafari.com/index.htm)

The British Deer Society [www.bds.org.uk/index.html](http://www.bds.org.uk/index.html)

The Wildlife Trust [www.wildlifetrusts.org](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org)

