

Winter 2020

wren

Wildlife & Conservation Group

*Photograph of Wanstead Park at sunset looking
towards Shoulder of Mutton Pond by Tom Court*

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a word from the chair

I am writing this just as we have discovered that we are entering a second England-wide national lockdown due to Covid-19. The national battle against this awful pandemic continues as the toll is also felt on our economy and national mental health and wellbeing.

As with the first lockdown, people are still able to take exercise outside (and, this time, engage in some forms of recreation). Wanstead Flats and Wanstead Park will remain vital lifelines for many of us needing to occasionally break the monotony of being stuck indoors.

This further emphasises the importance of our local area as a place that supports flora and

fauna as well as a place where people can enjoy it. Given this, the Wren Group continues to advocate for measures to improve and protect our precious landscapes and wildlife.

In the summer, we led a socially distanced walk with some of the key officers of the City of London Epping Forest committee on Wanstead Flats and we followed up with making six asks for the Flats. These are published in full here in this newsletter on the following page and can be summarised as:

1. Protecting the mosaic habitats - recognising that Wanstead Flats flourishes when the right balance between habitats is found.
2. Specific protection for our ground-nesting birds - perhaps roping off small areas where our Skylark and Meadow Pipit pairs breed and nest.
3. Turning a section of the largely-unused Brick Pit pitches into a wildflower meadow to support invertebrates and for all to enjoy.

4. Work done to preserve and sustain Cat & Dog pond in the west of the Flats.
5. Expanding the water-retention potential of parts of the SSSI - essentially doing limited work to help keep some parts of this area wetter for longer to support a range of species.
6. Reiterated our opposition to the site being used for major events and calling for careful consideration of access routes if similar events are proposed again.

The Wren Group will continue to advocate for these measures and others to ensure that pandemic or not, local residents and our local wildlife are able to thrive in the green spaces that we have left here.

James Heal
Chair of Wren Committee



I give you air

Breath



Wanstead Flats

six asks for the future

Wanstead Flats is an area of open rough grassland in the southern-most part of Epping Forest. It is a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation classified as an area of Metropolitan Importance because it includes one of the largest areas of acid grassland in London and is exceptional for its insects and other invertebrates, including many rare species.

The Wren Wildlife and Conservation Group has always seen one of its responsibilities as lobbying on behalf of, and highlighting threats to, the natural environment of the Forest. We are mindful of one of the provisions of the Epping Forest Act (1878), that *“The Conservators shall at all times as far as possible preserve the natural aspect of the Forest...”*

In the summer 2019 there was a proposal by the City of London to hold large scale music events on the Flats. Given the fragile state of the ecosystems on Wanstead Flats, especially after the worst grassland fire in London’s history earlier last year, the Wren Group were concerned about what impact such large scale events would have on the local environment and wildlife.

Last summer, we led a socially distanced walk with some of the key officers of the City of London Epping Forest committee on Wanstead Flats and we followed up with making six asks for the area.

1. Protecting the mosaic habitats

Much of the Flats that we walked over, there is a precious mix, or 'mosaic', of habitats that makes it so important in London as a place for wildlife.



Although acid grassland is scattered across 27 of the 32 London Boroughs it is mostly now in small fragmented and vulnerable remnants. Wanstead Flats is one of only four remaining large sites in London (which include Richmond Park, Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath).

The acid grasslands are recognised and protected, the Broom-dominated scrub needs careful managing but should be maintained as a significant feature given its importance for a range of wildlife; most notably passage passerine migrating birds.

To illustrate this, there is an area of 'enclosure' to the eastern-most edge of the largest copse, 'Long Wood'. When Broom, Brambles, and other bushes were removed from the perimeter of this area, we noticed an almost immediate depletion in nesting and passage birds using that part for little benefit to the overall aspect of the grassland.

Through liaison with Wren-group ahead of maintenance work, we can hopefully all contribute to ensure the balance in habitats remains optimal and hopefully the City of London can save some money through efficient application of scrub-removal and mowing etc.

2. Specific protection for the ground-nesting birds

Wanstead Flats is a London-wide (and occasionally even nationally recognised) site for birds and we attract hundreds of birders and other wildlife watchers annually.

Most notable are the remaining handful (sadly almost literally a handful) of breeding Skylark (closest remaining nest-sites to St Paul's) and Meadow Pipit.



The recent and dramatic population decline of the Skylark put it on Red List. Wanstead Flats is the closest place to London that this iconic bird can be seen - pic by Tony Morrison

The risks to the nests come from foxes, fire, rats, crows and perhaps some other 'natural' predation, but there

is also some more directly-relevant risk from dogs off leashes (a dog would only need to tread on or disturb a nest for it to mean that a pair of Skylark may not breed successfully that year).

Given this and, as we discussed, we think the best action would be low-level, minimally intrusive fencing at key times of year in the most sensitive areas. It wouldn't stop a determined incursion, but it may make people think twice about wandering off the paths or letting their dogs stray into fenced-territory. It isn't guaranteed to work, but it could potentially help protect these iconic birds.

Small and simple posts and netting should be easy to erect and fold down annually and the Wren Group would be happy to consider how we can assist with practical work required.

3. The 'Brick Pits' pitches

We saw and discussed the western end of the Brick Pit pitches and how the City of London could conserve costs by leaving a greater proportion of the least-used end unmown to enable the area to become more of a wildlife meadow.

4. 'Cat & Dog' Pond

Although we didn't visit this pond on the walk, this small lake in the western end of the Flats is currently almost completely clogged with Phragmites reeds.

In the longer term, this may well absorb so much subterranean moisture as to render the pond unsustainable as a body of water.

We agree with Jeremy that a relatively simple solution may be to transfer some of the Phragmites to Jubilee pond which would benefit from some additional vegetation and reed cover.

5. Expanding the water-retention potential of parts of the SSSI

Small parts of the SSSI part of Wanstead Flats remain wet and slightly boggy for parts of the year.

With minimal effort - mainly just digging out small parts of this ground - the boggy parts could be encouraged adding greater, and different, wildlife-attractive habitat to the area.

6. Consideration of walking routes for any proposed major events

We have exchanged correspondence on this topic before, but hopefully it was helpful to see how some of the precious and fragile habitats we have on Wanstead Flats are directly in between the largest section of pitches (the site where the proposed music festival was considered) and the two nearest stations if the site would be reached by public transport and by foot.

You will have noted that the small footpaths, the steep and crumbly mounds are not suitable to have mass foot-traffic and the potential damage and disturbance it could cause on the surrounding habitat.



Members of the Wren Practical Working Team. No strangers to getting their waders wet - seen here after clearing the boggy area on the Ornamental Waters in Wanstead Park.

Nature is like air, water, health and well being
it belongs to everyone and is not anyone's to sell
to be a custodian of nature is a privilege not a business

bovine magic

Three large mammals with large curving horns appeared in Wanstead Park one Thursday morning in September.

There was shock. 'Look who's here!' shouted Facebook.



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. Pic by Tony Morrison

Some people were angry. What about me and my space? What about my dog's space? Most people were filled with delight. They asked questions. Where have they come from? What are their names? Can my child touch? What about all the mess? What are those humps and lumps in the grass? What happens next? People saw new things which had been there all along.

But most people just stopped and gazed, with smiles on their faces. Then they took snaps and called their friends to share these new things.

Some people struggled to express what they felt about this. I feel like Robin Hood in Sherwood forest, said one. Little boys became explorers and hunters in the jungle and crept from hump to lump.

Those beasts reminded people of something. But what? Was it the cows which used to roam Wanstead Flats and eat our roses? Was it the cows on a long-ago childhood farm back in Ireland or India? Or was it something deeper, a distant memory of something even further back in a rural past?

These cows, for they were of course just cows, named Nuru, Nina and Quinine, half-tame and happy to follow the grazier's bucket when he came, seemed to belong in this landscape. That was part of the magic. A small patch of managed green in a London park, left half-wild, with rough grass, water and trees, and surrounded by the

hustle and bustle of London streets. What a sight for sore eyes.



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. Longhorn on Chingford Plain by Tony Morrison

Nuru, Nina and Quinine were magic in another unexpected way. They gazed at us thoughtfully. Calm down, you frantic urban creatures, they said. Though not in so many words. And just a few days after that first frenzied warm weekend, the Park went quiet. The cow-gazers still came, but now there was acceptance that this was a special space to share and enjoy. Dog walkers, strollers, cyclists, joggers, we all have to make space for each other. And smile. And look.

Now that the cows have gone back to their herd in the north of the Forest, can we remember to carry on keeping calm?

A little bit of English Longhorn history

English Longhorns are large lean beef cattle with an impressive sweep of horns that curve down to around

the nose. The body may be any one of a wide range of brindle colours but they all have the characteristic white line or "finching" along the back and down the tail. Cows range in height from 130 to 140cm and weigh 500 to 600kg- about the weight of eight humans, so not a good idea to get in a fight with one.

The Epping Forest herd is kept primarily for grazing rather than beef. These large herbivores keep the scrub down in the Forest to help maintain an open woodland habitat, known as 'mosaic', which experts now think is what once covered prehistoric Europe, rather than the deep forest we have imagined. Such cattle have shaped the landscape, first in the wild and later as domesticated livestock.



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. Pic by Peter Mayo

Amongst farmers, they are known for ease of calving, excellent milking ability and they rear their calves very well. They are excellent mothers and their docile nature makes them an easy breed to manage - an important characteristic in an animal with large horns. Their

breeding, longevity and relatively low body weight makes them very economical and inexpensive to feed.



For 800 years after the Norman Conquest common rights of grazing, along with wood-cutting, provided Epping Forest's cultural and economic heartbeat. This created the unique and very special landscape and wildlife diversity of Epping Forest. Pic by Peter Mayo

The English Longhorn originated from the northern counties of England in the 16C and 17C. It was used as a draught animal and its milk was used for butter and cheese. The creamy white horns were treasured by manufacturers of buttons, cups, cutlery and lamps. Fine slivers of clear horn were a poor mans' glass and many a household were grateful for the end product of these elegant long horns.

The most usual method of cattle keeping in those early times would have been one or more animals belonging to an individual, kept on common grazing, which were served by a bull owned by the Lord of the Manor.

They are often the breed of choice in naturalistic rewilding projects on large farms such as Knepp in Sussex. With a strong herd instinct, they have shown themselves

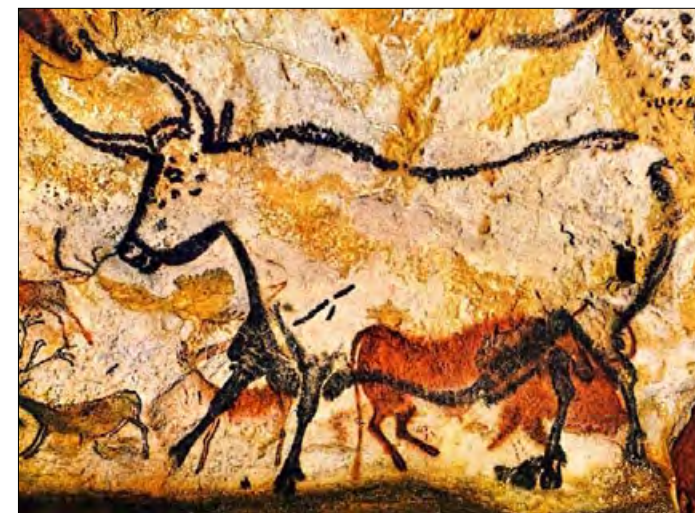
more than equal to the challenges of naturalistic living. Even with empty barns to shelter in, they will often prefer to lie up in woods or hollows in bad weather at Knepp, and they come through the winter in remarkably good health. They are able to choose what grass, leaves, branches or twigs they want, and can self-medicate. For example, after giving birth, cows often tuck into patches of nettles, rich in iron. The Epping herd is not left out all winter, however, but retires to the comfort of a farm.



In the early 1980's, farmers in the Waltham Cross area periodically released around 200 cattle onto the Forest and were a familiar sight wandering towards Wanstead Flats – which was apparently the cattle's favourite feeding area. When the vegetation was good, the cattle tended to stick to Wanstead Flats, but in dry summers and in the latter parts of the summer when they had gained confidence, they were often tempted towards people's gardens and wandered into adjacent roads. Cattle on Wanstead Flats before the onset of the BSE crisis in 1996, which led to the cattle being kept off the Forest.

Cattle are also important vectors of seeds, transporting up to 230 species of plants around a landscape through their gut, hooves and fur. This is an extraordinary number compared to, say a roe deer, whose efficiency at digesting and preening, means it transports only around 28 types of seed.

The longhorn is similar in appearance to the extinct aurochs, which we can see depicted in prehistoric cave paintings such as at Lascaux. Julius Caesar described them and said that their strength and speed were extraordinary. The last aurochs died quite recently, in 1627 in Poland. Since then various attempts have been made to recreate a similar herbivore. The first attempt was made by the Heck brothers in Germany in the thirties and Heck cattle can be seen in rewilding projects today.



Aurochs in a cave painting at Lascaux in France - the extinct ancient ancestors of our present day Longhorn cattle.

When we looked at the longhorns grazing in our Park, did we imagine for a moment the ghost of that extinct aurochs, the large horned grazing cattle of our ancient past?



Article by Gill James

bird report

Most wildlife watching is enhanced by being in the right place at just the right time. Unlike birds which migrate backwards and forwards "Time's Winged Chariot" goes ever onwards so no rerun is possible, which is a complicated way of saying that most of the scarcest birds in the period were fly throughs for one or two lucky observers.



Bird report for Wanstead Park and Flats in July August and September

On the 6th of July Common Crossbills were heard flying over, the first since 2015. The two people who heard these birds, on the same day in different places, are the only two to have seen/heard them on the patch in earlier years. Fingers-crossed this will turn into a Crossbill invasion year.

A Curlew flew over the football pitches near Alexandra Lake early on the morning of 12th July, much to the delight of the single observer. A Treecreeper was heard calling in Reservoir Wood on the 17th July and by contrast showed well on subsequent days to most birders.



Pied Flycatcher 13th August in Long Wood - Pic by Bob Vaughan

On to August when autumn migration starts in earnest. A Marsh Harrier flew over the SSSI on the 3rd, only the

seventh of recent times. The first Pied Flycatcher of the year arrived on the 9th of August and although often elusive we had a very good year for this attractive bird with as many as three in Motorcycle Wood in late August.



Tree Pipit on the Flats 22nd August - Pic by Bob Vaughan

Tree Pipits were also relatively common this year with up to three near Long Wood on the 17th and three also in the birches in Motorcycle Wood later in the month. Common Redstarts are always a delight, the first appearing on the 17th and we had a good year for these migrants, being seen on most days in late August into September. In contrast more common migrants such as Willow Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher and Northern Wheatear, although easy to find, had fairly average years.

On the night of 12-13th August a Whimbrel was recorded flying over my house, and that morning a single Northern Lapwing flew over the Flats, seen by just two birders. Perhaps the best bird of August was the Common Nightingale found skulking in the burnt patch next to

Alex by Tony Brown on the 15th. It stayed for a few days, calling intermittently but only visible very briefly. Two



Nightingale (behind the Robin) very early (ISO 5000) on 16th August - Pic by Bob Vaughan

Short-eared Owls were seen in the period covered, the first was on the 25th August, which is the earliest autumn date, and another appeared on the more typical date of 26th September.

With the pace of migration hotting-up we move into September

On the 5th September a Greenshank was heard flying over the brooms by two "observers". A Woodlark flew off from the recently ploughed mortuary site on the 17th, again for just one lucky person. Then came the Dunlins: three were seen on Alex by just one person relatively late on the morning of the 20th and then another turned up on Alex on the 29th and stayed for a few days. Waders are difficult birds to see on the patch and this bird was much appreciated.

The 21st was misty and there was a big fall of a few hundred Meadow Pipit on the Flats amongst which a Rock Pipit was heard. On the same day a Green Sandpiper flew over the Flats but only seen and photographed by a visiting birder. A Turtle Dove flew through the Flats on the 23rd and was seen quite well by a group of birders, this bird has declined seriously in the UK and is now a major rarity. Perhaps most extraordinary of all two Common Cranes flew over the Park, seen from the Flats by three observers. These birds had been reported at Tytenhanger at 09-40, were seen from the Flats at 10-12 and then Rainham at 10-25. Assuming a straight SE trajectory that is about 50-70 kph with a tail wind. These were a first for the patch and the official patch total now stands at 199 species, vote now for the 200th.....

The 28th saw the first Brambling of the winter, a bird we mostly see on passage. Another rarity had time to squeeze into September in the form of a female Pintail that flew over Alex and then back again a few minutes later on the 29th. Astonishingly this was the first for 45 years and was fortunately photographed on its return flight.

Overall the rarity quotient in the period was high, probably because there are now double figures of bird-watchers out at the weekends and plenty during the week. The standards of the observers are high too, so heard-only and fly-overs are being identified more regularly, but of course no-one can be in the right place all the time.

Report and pictures by Bob Vaughan



Dunlin on the Alexandra Pond, Wanstead Flats in September - Pic by Bob Vaughan





keeping mum

Despite the daily loud squawking, the nest and chicks must have been in residence for a week before I registered that it was, in fact, there. A brood of noisy Wren chicks was being reared in a nest right over my front door!

Sharon Coles was overjoyed to find Wrens nesting in her garden again, but it turned out there was another surprise in store.

Intermittent choruses of loud calls throughout the day had penetrated my consciousness, but I had not paid specific attention. We were in lockdown and all the sounds of birdsong seemed to be exaggerated with low traffic noise pollution. Also, as I was not going in and out of the house as frequently as usual, I hadn't noticed the increased activity around the nest-site.

One day when watering the garden I was mesmerised by the numerous House Sparrows flying between the branches of the rambling rose surrounding the front door and the ivy on the house wall. But it was some argumentative fighting between a House Sparrow and a Wren that caught my attention - the diminutive Wren was determined to stand its ground against the comparatively large sparrow. It then dawned on me that Wrens had returned to the garden. They had been here last year, though all three of their chicks had died.

It was at this point I noticed the nest. I alerted Tim Harris on 6 July, hoping he would find someone to take photos. As no-one was available, my neighbour took some, revealing that there were four chicks.

When Tim came to observe the nest activity on 10 July he noticed that, incredibly, a female House Sparrow was feeding the Wren chicks! There was clearly competition between the two adult Wrens and the House Sparrow regarding which of them should be doing the feeding. At one point, the sparrow grabbed one of the adult Wrens by the bill and literally threw it away.

The next day I watched the nest activity for two hours, timing the visits and making notes. During this time, I

counted 18 visits by Wrens and 10 by the House Sparrow. I thought the chicks had been there for about a week and, since Wren chicks stay in the nest for 15-18 days after hatching, it seemed there were still a few days before they would be ready to fly.



However, on 12 July, I noticed one loudly squawking Wren chick perched on the rim of a flowerpot, almost directly below the nest. The young bird looked fully fledged. It half jumped, half flew onto the wall next to the flowerpot before walking the wall a little way and flying across the path to a *Hypericum* bush, a distance of about 7 feet. It perched on a branch, chirping loudly for about a minute before flying a similar distance to the top of a fence. A sparrow flew to sit with it, but not for long. It quickly flew from there, again about 7-8 feet onto the washing line (see link to video). From there, it was escorted by a parent Wren and flew another 8 feet up to the fence demarcating the boundary with my neighbour's house. It disappeared from view shortly after and I did not see it again.

I was very lucky to see this Wren chick leave the nest. Rather than being an accidental fall from the nest, it had been the last one to leave in style! I wished it "*Bon voyage*" and was relieved to see it flying off with its duo of escorts, rather than meeting the fate of the struggling chicks of the previous year, which sadly didn't make it.

Article by Sharon Coles

Pictures by Robert Gibbons FRPS



Tim Harris adds: this phenomenon is described as cross-species feeding, and – according to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) – in the UK mostly involves Robins, Blue Tits, Great Tits, Starlings, Blackbirds, House Sparrows, and Wrens, though I couldn't find any reference to Wren chicks being fed by House Sparrows. Robins seems to be involved most often, but then they are one of our most common birds. Some instances seem truly bizarre, for example a Blackbird seen feeding a Jay chick – despite the fact that adult Jays predate Blackbird young! And why does it happen? Various ideas have been proposed but the most likely is that it happens after nest failure, when some adults are 'programmed' to carry on feeding young birds, even if they're of a different species. So bereaved Robins have been seen feeding Song Thrush chicks, and Spotted Flycatchers that have lost their chicks have fed young Blackbirds. The BTO describes this as "the unwanted consequence of an otherwise beneficial behaviour".



good shepherd

Davies Lane runs right up to, and effectively on to Wanstead Flats - around the Evelyn's Avenue area on the Wanstead Flats. Davies Lane is well known for its large school (named after the road), but there is another large building on the street: a large disused Victorian Children's Home.

Despite being bequeathed to the local community for the purpose of supporting young people, the area is now at risk of being built on. Occupied by temporary caretaker guardians, the site is slowly reverting back to nature.

Nature and time make their mark on the perimeter wall of the Good Shepherd Children's home - pic by Tony Morrison

This building - now with temporary tenant guardians living there - along with another, now demolished and replaced building were the sites of 'Good Shepherd Children's Home / Children's Home Industrial School for Girls, Leytonstone' and, later, other names and were home to children between 1865 and the Second World War. Sadly, during the Victorian period, there were allegations of cruelty and miss-treatment of some of the children, although there are no such reports from the 20th Century period of its history.



The Good Shepherd building

The remaining Victorian building and a modern youth centre on the site of the older manor house are surrounded by approximately quarter of a hectare ($\frac{1}{4}$ acre) of semi-wild garden with lawns, stands and rows of trees and a large, fenced-off and overgrown pond (dry at the time of visiting).



Dried pond area

Despite being bequeathed to the local community for the purpose of supporting young people, the area is now at risk of being built on.

The local resident's association, who act as custodians for the garden area - known as the 'Davies Lane Pastures Garden' - invited the Wren Group to visit and conduct some preliminary wildlife surveys. We visited twice; in late August during a very rainy day, and on a September evening to survey bat activity.

Here are some of our survey findings:

Day visit - 24 August

There are a number of mature trees at the site including two large, mature willows (*Salix cinerea* - seemingly an uncommon sub-species that would require further examination for precise identification), several oak (*Quercus robur*) of varying degrees of maturity, several mature holly trees (*Ilex aquifolium*), several Leylandii (*Cupressus x leylandii*), Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*), Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*), amongst others that were not examined (especially around the perimeter of the site).

In the scrubbiest areas of the site there were parts that were very heavily dominated by bramble (*Rubus sp*) with also high concentrations of ivy (*Hedera sp*), docks (*Rumex sp*), and bindweeds (*Calystegia sp* and *Convolvulus sp*)

There also seemed to be a good array of other herbaceous and flowering plants. Whilst we did not conduct a thorough botanical survey in the time we had, it was of particular interest to find what appeared to be Black Nightshade (*Solanum nigrum*) with specimens in flower and some fruiting, as this does not seem to be common locally.

Whilst the weather was very sub-optimal to find invertebrates, a few were found and there were even more clues to their presence. In particular, we observed quite high densities of plant galls caused by invertebrates. There were some common local galls such as those caused by the wasps *Neuroterus numismalis* (which causes the silk-button gall on oak leaves), *Neuroterus*

quercusbaccarum (causer of the spangle gall), and *Andricus quercuscalicis* (causer of marble galls also on oak). More interestingly, on the willows growing in the pond area, some of the leaves were galled by a gall midge called *Iteomyia capreae*. This observation was of particular note as it is the first record of this fly locally. The plants and pond area clearly support an interesting diversity of invertebrate life.



Iteomyia capreae is a gall midge which forms galls on willows. It was first described by Johannes Winnertz in 1853. Source Wiki

Given the weather, we did not employ any techniques of invertebrate collection such as sweep-netting, leaf-litter sorting, or beating. However, in the short time we were there, some invertebrates were visible, such as a soldier fly called 'Dull four-spined Legionnaire' (*Chorisops tibialis*), and flies from the *Lucilia* genus. Given the profusion of dock, we were pleased to find good numbers of Dock Bug (*Coreus marginatus*).

With more time, a study of some of the dead wood at the site, including at least one impressive stump,

could well produce some interesting beetles and other invertebrates.



Coreus marginatus is a herbivorous species of true bug in the family Coreidae. It is commonly known as the dock bug as it feeds on the leaves and seeds of docks and sorrels.

Even in a short visit on a rainy day, several bird species were recorded making use of the mixed woody habitats. Despite the late time of year, Goldcrest was recorded singing in the trees surrounding the pond area and there were reasonable numbers of common woodland birds around site including Blue Tit, Great Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Robin, Blackbird, Collared Dove, Carrion Crow, and Wren.

Bat Survey - 22 September

Three Wren committee members conducted a bat survey at the site and recorded significant foraging from two bat species: Common Pipistrelle and Soprano Pipistrelle.

From the evidence we gathered from our two visits, our estimation is that the site is unusually good (relative to average urban or sub-urban residential areas) for

invertebrates (the vegetation mix, the dead wood, the pond, the presence of insectivorous birds and good numbers of spiders, and the high concentration of plant galls all support this). It also clearly support foraging bats; although no conclusion could be made about whether the bats roost in the old building.



Bat survey

The Wren Group finished with the following message: we were "pleased and heartened to find such an interesting site of mixed habitats in a residential area and was interested to learn about the history and its role as a community resource. We hope that any planned development of the existing buildings or the wider site are conducted sensitively and with careful regard for any protected species (such as any bat species), as well as the broader community importance of this small but interesting location".

Report by James Heal



shieldbugs on the move

In 2011 a continental, and largely Mediterranean, shieldbug was found in Kent: Rambur's Pied Shieldbug (*Tritomegas sexmaculatus*). Since then, this species has made a steady advance north-west and has since been found in an increasing number of locations in Kent and towards London.

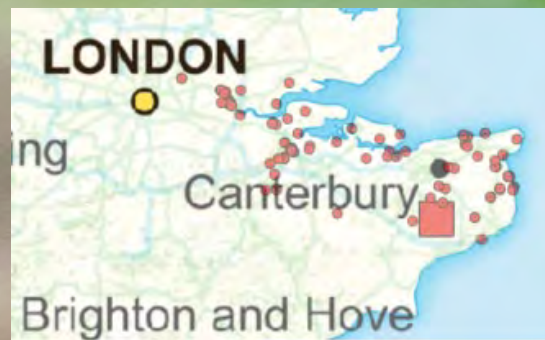
The species is very similar to the commoner and closely related Pied Shieldbug (*Tritomegas bicolor*). The main differentiating characteristics for the adult bugs are more extensive white patches on the pronotum (the armoured section immediately behind the head and before the wing cases begin) and the darker (black) wing membrane at the bottom centre of the bug in the case of Rambur's.

In August we were contacted by someone studying and mapping the spread of this species, partly to see if it had got as far north and west as Wanstead Flats yet. That individual later came herself and found the species on its host plant, Black Horehound (*Ballota nigra*).

For me, and at least one other Wren member, the news of a national rarity found on our

patch was too tempting an opportunity and we both went separately and found bugs of different stages of maturity ourselves.

This map from iRecord shows the progression of the species up towards London - with all the red dots being records of this species. At the time of submitting my own records, Wanstead Flats was the most northerly and western location Rambur's Pied Shieldbug had ever been found. We now expect to hear of records further in to London and the country.



The spread of this species is likely to be a result of the warming climate and similar movements can be seen across a range of other species.

by James Heal





You have heard the saying never judge a book by its cover. Well I think that depends a great deal on how good the cover is. The foundation of good signage, like the cover of a book, is its ability to communicate the intended message on its surface.

Signage is probably one of the most important tools for the management of responsible access and use of our green spaces – it is a simple way to

communicate between those people who look after our green spaces and those people who use them.

Signs offer an obvious welcome and have an important part to play in promoting and learning about nature. They also have an important role in combating misuse and anti-social behaviour.

Wren member, Robert Nurden discusses the merits of the humble sign in relation to our own patch of nature.

signs of the times

A number of notices have appeared on Wanstead Flats in recent months and it has got me thinking about the ins and outs of signage. More specifically, what makes a good sign, one that everyone takes notice of – and if you're lucky follows, learns from or obeys – and what makes a bad sign, one that people ignore and walk past?

It's a complicated issue, but the essentials are the same as ever:

A sign will normally have one of two purposes: either to prohibit or order a course of action; or to inform and educate.

I think anecdotal evidence is permissible here. In my experience the sign that is often seen in more manicured parks: "Do not walk on the grass" is usually adhered to. The words are direct and Anglo-Saxon in origin and don't require a dictionary. If someone intrudes onto forbidden territory, an eye-witness may well point out the transgression. Readers of a certain age will remember "Keep Britain Tidy", another example of the imperative approach but more subtle and one that appeals to a sense of nationhood. That one, I think, was less adhered to and I'm not sure why. As I say, it's complex.

In the past we have seen the same approach adopted on Wanstead Flats. At Alexandra Lake, a sign used to say: "Please do not feed the ducks". A high percentage of the time this was ignored.

Sentiment plays a part. It's nice to feed the ducks, particularly if you have children in tow. Admonishment from a remote authority is easy to resist when no one can see what you're doing. A more pantheistic theme operates here, too: looking after the planet's vulnerable wildlife has to be a good thing, the argument goes.



Epping Forest have introduced interpretation boards that try to explain and educate - over the course of several hundred words we are given a gentle ecological lecture

But even these feel-good notions are short-sighted. Ornithologists tell us that bread is largely bad for birds and ducks to eat. So, in response to this science and despite their reluctance to introduce too much signage to the area, the Epping Forest authorities have

introduced interpretation boards that seek to explain and educate. Entitled: "Please be careful what you feed them", one has the subheadings: "What should birds eat?", "Malnutrition", and "Habitat damage" and over the course of several hundred words we are given a gentle ecological lecture.

So why, then, are people still feeding the ducks bread?

We come back to language. Newham now has, I believe, the richest ethnic mix of anywhere in the world with its population regularly using well over 150 languages. The number of people who will understand some of the nuances contained in the English language constitute a small part of the whole. Many will see the wad of dense print and move quickly on.



Local resident Misty Cudahy believes that conventional signs have lost their impact and we really need to create something shocking and completely visual

Given this demographic, could a simpler and more direct approach to signage be required, as one Flats enthusiast believes? “The conventional signs have lost their impact and we really need to create something shocking and completely visual,” said Misty Cudahy. She has designed a sign that says: “Please do not feed the birds!”, accompanied by a diagonal, red line struck through a graphic of birds being fed titbits by a human hand. Again, the language is Anglo-Saxon in origin, employs imagery from road traffic signs and jumps linguistic hurdles. Nevertheless, as Wren member Mark Gorman says: “Unless there are people out talking to the bird feeders, notices about not feeding bread and rice aren’t going to have much impact.”



Paradoxically, a home-made sign that appeared on Wanstead Flats this summer seemed to be universally followed, and Wren itself can take the credit. It said: “Rare birds nest on ground here in rough grass April to August. Please stay on paths. Dogs must be on leads.” Then two little cartoon-style watching eyes completed the picture. There was no sense of an impersonable authority at work here. Rather, its DIY provenance and sheer unexpectedness added weight. And I hope the skylarks and meadow pipits benefited.

An interpretation board at the easterly entrance to Capel Road adopts a hybrid approach (see intro photo). It is packed with historical information and up-to-date wildlife facts. But at the bottom, in a starkly different tone, it states: “No fires or barbecues”, “Put litter in bins provided” and “Pick up after your dog”. The no-nonsense strictures work because they are contextually softened by the informative nature of the rest of the notice.



No less than 27 notices are stapled to the perimeter fence along with two large green interpretation boards to mark and inform the boundary of the planned flower meadow on the site of the temporary morgue, Manor Park Flats

A few yards away, on Manor Park Flats, Epping Forest under the inspired leadership of ecologist Jeremy Dagley has planted a wildflower meadow on the site of the temporary morgue. And, of course, a sign is required to explain the fenced-off area. No less than 27 notices are stapled to the perimeter fence along with two large green interpretation boards. If all goes to plan, next summer we will be blessed with a beautiful flowering meadow.



Sometimes no amount of signage is going to change behaviour

So, can this disparate picture be drawn together? At bottom, a sign communicates a message. But the way that is communicated in one context is necessarily different in another. If a message is to work, the public needs to be engaged. Sometimes that may be best done quickly and efficiently with an imperative sign; at other times, a slower more subtle process of drip-feed information and education will be required. Whichever it is, it requires careful thought. After all, the future of the planet is in our hands.

august bank holiday

In the Park

Bank Holidays began with an Act of Parliament in 1871. There were four holidays and two 'Common Law' holidays (Good Friday and Christmas Day). Other days have been added since. The August Bank Holiday occurred on the first Monday of the month until 1971 since when it falls on the last Monday in August.

The following is an extract from the East Ham Echo, 5th August 1904 depicting a Bank Holiday Monday in Wanstead Park.



Reading of the many thousands that flocked from West Ham and East Ham to the seaside, one would almost think for the moment that the districts were empty on Bank Holiday. But anyone who was out and about recognised that this was not the case.

Despite the fact that the Great Eastern Railway carried 121,371 passengers to suburban stations, and the London and Tilbury, 40,000 to Southend, there were droves of people all over the district who were holiday-making close to home. The opening of the new line of municipal electric tram cars to Wanstead Flats saw every car packed; in fact, Monday must have made Mr. Blain's heart glad. Every recreation ground had its teeming multitudes, but the great thing seemed to be a visit to Wanstead Park.



Things don't change so very much. A family or possibly a nanny with her charges taking rest in The Glade, Wanstead Park 1906.

With light fleecy clouds overhead which travelled slowly across the sky and veiled the face of the sun from time

to time - with a soft wind blowing from the south, and rustling the trees in the groves, Wanstead Park on Monday was a glorious place for a holiday, and some thousands of people caught time by the forelock and revelled for hours in the beauties of that fine playground.



Ladies in their finery taking the air in Wanstead Park 1904.

By ten o' clock the number of people in the park was not large, but after that time they arrived in hundreds. Tram after tram, at intervals of about three minutes, came gliding up from East Ham and Manor Park, and deposited loads of happy holiday-makers at the entrance of Wanstead Park Avenue. These people were augmented by the large number who walked to the park from Forest Gate, Leytonstone, Wanstead and Ilford, so that by mid-day, Wanstead Park was pleasantly full.

The crowd - although a large one - was good-tempered and good-mannered. It was drawn from that strata of society who believe that, after all, enjoyment is not to be found in drinking and street singing. There in the quiet



Works were carried out on the Heronry Pond in 1906-07 by the West Ham Distress Committee to provide 'work for the unemployed' and make the lake more suitable for boating and bathing.

nooks beneath the trees, by the waterside, where the white and golden water-lilies swayed gently to and fro by the action of the breeze, in the glade, which commands a view of the lake beneath, could be seen groups of men, women and children enjoying the peacefulness of the scene.



Dapper Gents walking in Wanstead Park 1912.

Of course, the great attraction for the more boisterous of the children was paddling in the lake. Tiddlers had a lively day on Monday; the mere sight of one led to quite a commotion, and sometimes to a capture. And when this desirable end was brought about, the marmalade or pickle jar was requisitioned and tiddler was borne away to scenes anew. But when the tiddler refused to be beguiled, a forward movement was made on the small frogs - many of which were carried away in pickle bottles and delight to meet a speedy death in the dry and unseductive realm known as dad's garden, in order to complete a small boy's holiday.



Ornamental Waters, Wanstead Park 1905. The Cedar of Lebanon is still there today although age and gravity have given it more of a leaning. What stories that tree could tell.

When the sun had passed its meridian, and begun to throw shadows to the west, you could come across groups seated beneath the umbrageous foliage of the trees, and revelling in all the delights of a picnic. But some of those picnic baskets must have been terribly heavy if the sweat poured down father's face, and his ejaculatory expressions count for aught. But there - ginger beer is enclosed in very heavy bottles. But when



The Chalet, Wanstead Park 1908 - an elaborate refreshment building that was situated some yards to the west of the garden of the Temple. It burned down, it's thought, on 23 November 1948. Now the site of Chalet Wood where each year we are treated to a wonderful display of Bluebells

the cloth was spread and 'dad' had wiped his brow for the last time, all thought of the trouble departed. Then comes mother's turn, and - but who has not known the joys of a picnic in his or her youth?



Children playing on the waters edge of Ornamental Waters, Wanstead Park early 1900s

In the ornamental water, where the angler is not allowed to play his seductive art, a crowd gathers to watch the

movements of a shoal of small roach. They are "on the feed" as the anglers put it, and fight valiantly for the small pieces of bread which have been thrown in for the ducks. Their small tails stir to life the otherwise placid face of the waters, and the crowd on the bank hazards conjectures as to the species of the fish. But suddenly there is a whirr, and from the sedges on the opposite side of the pool, half flies, half swims, a coot, and seizes the pieces of bread nearest mid-stream. Back again goes the half-terrified bird - gay in its summer plumage - and a minute afterwards it can be seen sharing its prize with its more sombre mate.



The Temple in early 1900s. Image was taken from the Chalet refreshment building now the site of Chalet Wood.

These are but a few of the quiet amusements which helped to make the Bank Holidays a pleasant one for the many thousands who visited Wanstead Park.

Researched by Tony Morrison (pics belong to author but he didn't actually take them)



Originally published September 2012



Wanstead flats pickers

Illegal fly tipping at Epping Forest has sharply increased, by over 50%, during the Covid-19 lockdown period. Between January and April this year there was a total of 192 fly tips on Epping Forest land. Over the same period in 2019 there were 126, which means there has been an increase of 52.3%.

The growing cost of removing fly-tips and litter has forced the City Corporation to divert £320,000 each year away from managing the Forest for public recreation and wildlife conservation to simply disposing of waste.

Local, Sarah Shaw tells us how we can get involved with Epping Forest in helping to tackle litter and flytipping on Wanstead Flats.

Wanstead Flats Pickers have been going for just over five years now and while we had the odd month when we got 20+ pickers, generally we had around 10-12 and mostly close neighbours. Despite the often smallish numbers I reckon we've collected close to 2000 bags of rubbish over the years.



We took a break during the early months of lockdown, but once restrictions eased we got the band back together in June. On that first day back I wasn't sure what to expect, would we be criticised for bringing people together, would anyone even turn up?

So just before 11am, I walked down Capel Road with my fingers crossed. I was staggered to see a beautifully socially distanced queue of around 40 people. Overwhelming for many reasons and I don't mind admitting to a tear in my eye. More turned up over the next half an hour and we got to about 50 people. Amazing huh?

Clearing flytips have to be added to the substantial amount of litter that gets dropped across the Forest and we are very grateful for the support and help offered by local communities in helping us tackle this problem.

Epping Forest is a Registered Charity, owned and managed by the City of London.

As a charity issues around littering and fly-tipping are a significant draw on resources. Epping Forest is determined to tackle the issue by strengthening ties with partners such as Local Authority, Police and Environment Agency. Epping Forest is also working with the Chartered Institute of Waste Management to deliver enforcement training to support our investigating and prosecuting teams.

If you come across a fly-tip taking place, please call 999 as it is a Criminal Offence. You can then call the Forest Keeper Team on 020 8532 1010.

If you can, and staying out of harm's way, record as many details as possible but please don't put yourself at risk.

Remember that these people aren't renowned for being smart, and what they are doing is illegal so they are unlikely to take kindly to people observing them.

Useful information includes:

- Description of the people (gender, clothes, hair colour, race, other distinguishing features)
- Vehicle details (make, model, colour, registration, signs)
- What you saw being fly-tipped (how far away were you, did you have a good view?)
- When and where you saw it happen (date, time, weather conditions)

Corporation of London



Litter is not a victimless crime - it costs local ratepayers, is unsightly, spoils the use and enjoyment of our greenspaces, is dangerous for those people having to clear it up and causes pain and suffering for local wildlife.

Since then we've had 25-30 people turn up every month. So what's changed? I reckon people feel more connected to their local community these days. Many of us are spending almost all our time at or near home and have come to rely on our beautiful green space more than ever. During the summer lockdown it was a place I played Frisbee with the kids, went running, lay



in the sun, had a glass of wine with a friend and sat by the lake after a long and draining day at the laptop and contemplated our new lives.

As our worlds shrank what and who was near to us mattered more than ever.

I think some were also motivated by the shocking state the Flats were left in some days. I still don't understand why people who bothered to make the effort to come to such a beautiful green space, then thought it was ok to leave all their rubbish behind.

But good has come out of all that. Adversity and isolation has pushed us out of front doors and together, to take action.

I often tweet about the 'litter picking high'. That feeling post litter pick as you stroll home having seen lots of lovely faces, had a few chats, collected a massive pile



Wanstead Flats Pickers meet on Wanstead Flats, Capel Road, opposite the Golden Fleece. Litter pick sticks, gloves and hi-vis waistcoats are provided by our friends at the Corporation of London. We gather at 11am and are out til 12.30. Feel free to come later and leave earlier if that suits. Children are most welcome.

of rubbish and enjoyed whatever weather the Flats has granted to us (although nearly involving always a head clearing breeze/wind/gale). You go home having satisfied that human need for connection, activity and purpose.

We couldn't do it without the Forest Keepers from the City of London - big shout out to the lovely Roy.

Sarah Shaw
Keeper Roy Nattage



We are a friendly and welcoming bunch and welcome anyone who would like to join us - our youngest picker was only a few weeks old, data protection prevents me revealing the age of our oldest picker.... We meet on the last Sunday of every month from 11-12.30, on Wanstead Flats, opposite the Golden Fleece on Capel Road. Gloves, bags and litter pickers are provided. Also provided free of charge, the litter pickers high! Come and try it.

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.



WE FELL ASLEEP

..... AND THE PLANET SAYS
WE FELL ASLEEP IN ONE WORLD
.... AND WOKE UP IN ANOTHER
SUDDENLY DISNEY IS OUT OF MAGIC
.... AND PARIS IS NO LONGER ROMANTIC
NEW YORK DOESN'T STAND UP ANYMORE
....AND THE CHINESE WALL IS NO LONGER A FORTRESS !
MECCA IS EMPTY.
HUGS AND KISSES SUDDENLY BECOME WEAPONS
.... AND NOT VISITING FRIENDS AND FAMILIES BECOMES AN ACT OF LOVE
SUDDENLY YOU REALISE ...
... POWER, MONEY AND BEAUTY ARE WORTHLESS ...
...AND CAN'T GET THE OXYGEN YOU'RE FIGHTING FOR
THE WORLD CONTINUES ITS LIFE ...
...AND IT IS BEAUTIFUL !
IT PUTS HUMANS IN PERSPECTIVE, LOCKED IN THEIR HOMES.
IS IT SENDING US A MESSAGE ?
"THE EARTH, WATER AND SKY ARE FINE WITHOUT YOU ..."
"WHEN YOU COME BACK REMEMBER ..."
"... YOU ARE MY GUESTS ..."
"... NOT MY MASTERS..."

HAROON RASHID

Watch video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_BjAguUUil&ab_channel=VerbatimVO



evergreens

During the winter months seeing evergreen trees and shrubs reminds us of the continuity of growth. It is probably for this reason that the long tradition of bringing evergreen branches into the home during the dark days at the turn of the year still survives, it helps to cheer us up!

There are many legends which surround our native evergreens, the Yew, Holly and Ivy and these are well described by Richard Mabey in his 1996 publication *Flora Britannica*.

The leaves of evergreens are by their very nature tough and leathery, lasting for more than one season before turning yellow and dropping off. Their chemical makeup makes them less palatable than deciduous plants, so they are avoided by many herbivores, both big and small. Cattle, sheep and deer will eat Holly leaves and so do a few invertebrates. However Holly and Ivy berries and the red arils on Yew are eaten by a number of birds and the nectar rich flowers of Ivy provide valuable fuel for autumnal insects such as bees, wasps, moths and flies.



Holly berries are an important food for birds, but you wouldn't want to snack on them - the berries are toxic to humans, and can cause vomiting and diarrhoea.

All green plants need sunlight, water and carbon dioxide for photosynthesis. When the ground temperature falls below freezing, water cannot be taken into the roots.

To overcome this problem, deciduous trees lose their leaves and become dormant during the cold winter months, but many evergreens can continue to make food via photosynthesis even at low light levels provided the ground remains unfrozen. They too shut down in periods of intense cold.

In folklore Holly's prickly leaves represent the crown of thorns that Jesus wore when he was crucified. The berries are the drops of blood that were shed by Jesus because of the thorns. In Scandinavia it is known as the Christ Thorn. In pagan times, Holly was thought to be a male plant and Ivy a female plant.

The Holly is native to western and southern Europe. It is a pioneer species that can recolonize clearings, but it also thrives under shade, growing slowly into a tree 10 m tall. It often forms an impenetrable understory in oak or beech woodlands and there are good examples of this

in parts of Epping Forest. The leaves on the lower limbs have three to five sharp spines on each side, pointing in alternative directions, while leaves of the upper branches lack spines. Such tough leaves take several years to rot down once they have fallen from the tree.



Hollies are divided into male and female specimens. ... Male flowers are loaded with pollen and often attract insects to the garden, while female flowers contain the egg that will produce seeds in the berry. Consequently, if your tree does not have berries at all, it is possible your tree is a male.

The Holly is dioecious, either growing as male or female plants; the females will produce the familiar berries, usually red, but sometimes yellow. Each fruit contains 3 to 4 seeds which are spread by passing through the digestive system of the seed predator! They germinate two or three years later often beneath a perching post. Planted as a hedge Holly forms a good stock proof barrier providing some shelter from biting winter winds and also good nesting sites!

With the spread of the railway lines out of central London, it became fashionable to plant hollies or

other evergreens in the front gardens of the larger houses. Sadly, as many of these front gardens are now given over to parking spaces for cars such hedges have been removed, but where they do survive their visual importance is recognised and they have become a feature within conservation areas.

In addition to the dark green of the common Holly, a number of distinct varieties, some with variegated leaves have been selected for planting in gardens or in public parks and certain weeping forms were popular in cemeteries. The City of London Cemetery is an excellent place to see many of these forms.



Ivy is one of our most familiar plants, seen climbing up trees, walls, and along the ground, almost anywhere. It is a great provider of food and shelter for all kinds of animals, from butterflies to bats.

Many Holly leaves have a dark blotch on them. This is caused by a single tiny larva of the Holly leaf-miner *Phytomyza ilicis*, a small black fly. Some of the larvae are eaten by birds, including blue tits, which peck out the insect leaving a v-shaped tear on the leaf.

The female adult Holly leaf-miner flies lay her eggs on young holly leaves in June and July. The eggs hatch and the larvae crawl out feeding by making a tunnel and eating the leaf from the inside. Each larva carries on eating throughout the autumn and winter reaching a maximum size in March. It pupates between March and May, but before pupating, the larva prepares a thin triangular area on the underside of the leaf. In late May and June, the insect presses against this thin area, and the adult fly emerges from the leaf, leaving an emergence hole about 1mm wide underneath the leaf.



Only mature plants produce flowers. They are yellowish green and appear in small, dome-shaped clusters known as umbels. Ivy nectar is an essential food source for insects during autumn and winter when little else is about. Gardeners should always consider putting off trimming hedgegrows until after Ivy has flowered.

Holly flowers are the food plant of the Holly Blue butterfly which has two broods a year. This butterfly passes the winter as a pupa in the ground and the adults emerge in April, mate and the females lay eggs on the unopened flower buds. The caterpillars eat the contents

of the flower buds and they pupate at ground level before emerging in early August. The females of the second brood feed on Ivy flowers before descending to the ground to pupate in the autumn.

In folklore Ivy, being an evergreen plant, represents eternity, fidelity, and strong affectionate attachment, such as wedded love and friendship. The ivy plant is also a strong plant, which can grow in the hardest environment. Another association with Ivy is perennial life and immortality.

Ivy is a native evergreen climber which frequently grows up tree trunks, holding fast by many adventitious roots which stick firmly to the bark. It will also clamber up walls and fences and in gardens it can become something of a pest as it can spread along the ground too. Once it has reached a certain height, it will produce flowers on branches which have a tendency to form a bushy shape.

Most healthy trees will shade out the Ivy growing up the trunk, but a thick cover of Ivy round a tree could be hiding a hollow trunk.

A thick tangle of Ivy provides shelter and food for many invertebrates including certain caterpillars, spiders and snails. For many birds such as Wrens and Dunnocks there is shelter in cold weather, tasty food to be eaten and potential nest sites too.

If the clambering Ivy is in danger of overtopping a wall, keep it trimmed back as it can form a top-heavy leafy mop covered in autumnal flowers and then black berries. However, as it does produce irritating toxins do be careful when cutting it back.



Apart from the flesh on the berries the rest of the Yew contains toxins which are very poisonous. This also applies to any mushrooms growing on or under the tree as there is the possibility they may take in the toxins.

Variegated forms of Ivy and Holly provide winter contrast in a garden, but both grow well and look their best where there is some sun.

The Yew is very toxic. The oldest yew is known to be at least 3,000 years of age ... This aspect of death (mortality) played against its symbolic longevity (immortality) would add tremendous strength to its symbolism.

The evergreen Yew can grow into a tree 20 m. The highly toxic, flat, dark green leaves are arranged spirally on the stem, but on many shoots they are twisted into two flat rows either side of the stem. An understory shrub in deciduous woodlands, it is now becoming more frequent within Epping Forest as birds such as Thrushes and Blackbirds distribute the seeds.

As individual Yew trees can reach a considerable age it is often associated with ancient sacred sites and is frequently grown in churchyards and cemeteries.

Trees with fine needle like leaves such as the pines, firs and spruces can survive snowy conditions as snow slides off their branches.

How you can help

Our gardens are a vital resource for wildlife, providing corridors of green space between open countryside, allowing species to move about. In fact, the UK's gardens provide more space for nature than all the National Nature Reserves put together. So why not try planting native plants and trees to entice birds, mammals and invertebrates into your backyard? But think about planting more evergreens to provide food and shelter throughout those sparse months. Also consider delaying that autumn pruning to let those evergreens such as Ivy and Holly to come into berry and flower providing much needed food for our wildlife.

Article by Tricia Moxey



To find out more about encouraging wildlife into your garden, visit the Royal Horticultural Society's and Wildlife Trust's joint project 'Wild About Gardens' - there's plenty of facts and tips to get you started at <https://www.wildaboutgardens.org.uk>

A person is walking a dog in a field of tall, dry grass at sunset. The person is on the right, walking away from the camera. The dog is on the left, facing the person. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The sky is a mix of orange and grey.

walking & wellbeing

Our opportunities to engage with nature may be fewer during the pandemic but there are still a number of things we can do to stay connected, look after our wellbeing, and keep safe. One of them is to walk. Here Wren member Kathy Baker discusses the merits of walking your way out of the lockdown blues.

Dog walker on Wanstead Flats - pic by Tony Morrison

During the Covid-19 lockdowns for which 2020 will always be remembered, many of us have taken to the great outdoors more than ever. This we may have done to give a greater sense of purpose to the days in which we are told to stay at home and be local, or for those working at home, to provide ourselves with a much needed break with time to re- energise.



Present Covid restrictions limit us to how many people we can meet up with outdoors - but whether you are alone or with company walking is a wonderful therapy.

We have also gone outside to connect with our household members and to socialise with family and friends (when we have been allowed!) in a socially distanced fashion. However, whatever we do outside - walk, run, cycle, stand and talk, study our surroundings and/or take photographs, many of us during 2020 have re-learned a simple lesson. Being active outside and making links with our natural environment have strong links with an increased sense of wellbeing.

The last few months have seen some unprecedented and

disruptive changes to our daily lives in a bid to keep us safe and lessen the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The UK is currently in its second lockdown of the year and it's uncertain how long this pandemic will last. What is certain is that the current situation, and the advice regarding social distancing and self-isolation, could have a massive impact on our overall sense of wellbeing

There have been numerous studies connecting life outdoors with improved mental health. For me the chance to take a regular walk of a varying length during the week allows me time to breathe and slow down a little, inside and outside lockdown. So much of modern life is about rushing here there and everywhere and even a short slow stroll through a small green space can reap huge rewards.

For many people the aim is to lose weight, or get a bit fitter – and those are key goals – but walking can be an important part of our overall wellbeing for reasons which stretch way beyond our waistlines. Regular walking is proven to reduce the risk of stroke, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, asthma, obesity and some cancers, and helps maintain musculoskeletal health. On average, walking 10,000 steps burns 400kcal a day.. Countryside walks also offer nature, tranquillity and fresh air.

But it's not just about the occasional one-off feel good factor. Walking and being active in other ways has a whole range of benefits when it comes to mental wellbeing. It improves self-perception and self-esteem, mood and sleep quality, and it reduces stress, anxiety and fatigue. Physically active people have up to a 30%

reduced risk of becoming depressed, and staying active helps those who are depressed recover. In older people, staying active can improve cognitive function, memory, attention and processing speed, and reduce the risk of cognitive decline and dementia.



The author Kathy Baker, (centre right) practicing what she preaches on a pre-covid walkabout with fellow Wren members at Mucking Tip nature reserve

Our mental health is as critical as our physical health and obviously they are both closely interrelated. When our mental health is in good shape, we have a strong sense of emotional wellbeing, we are able to look after ourselves and to get involved in activities that we care about. Struggling with mental health issues can result in feeling overwhelmed and being unable to manage daily life.

A booklet, [Thriving with Nature](#), published jointly by [WWF](#) and the [Mental Health Foundation](#) and publicised on World Mental Health Day in October, explores the relationship between nature, wellbeing and mental health. The publication argues that there are many ways that spending time outdoors helps to support good

mental health and wellbeing. These are underpinned by evidence and include:

- Time in green spaces: Researchers have found a link between access to fields, parks, forests and gardens and improved mood and increased life satisfaction
- Finding nature in the city: Green spaces can be difficult to find in big cities. It makes sense to seek out parks, canals, squares and courtyards. Research suggests that making the most of urban green spaces is positive for outlook and life satisfaction.
- Staying Active: Evidence suggests that walking and running seems to provide an added boost when carried out in a natural environment rather than indoors. Exercising in green spaces for as little as five minutes was found to improve mood and feelings of self-esteem.
- Relaxation and mindfulness: Taking quiet time to reflect on our natural surroundings, based on all our senses, can be positive for mental health and wellbeing.

- The booklet cites evidence that '*forest therapy*' or '*forest bathing*' (known as '*shinrin-yoku*' in Japan) can lead to improved mental health.
- Connecting with others: As we know, having strong and positive relationships with those around us is also vital to our sense of wellbeing. Nature has a link with these relationships, as we often use green spaces to meet and socialise with others, (increasingly so during 2020 when we have been unable to meet up with other households inside!). Meeting in this way provides support for good mental health according to the studies referred to by the *Thriving with Nature* booklet.
- Interacting with wildlife: Certain studies referred to are beginning to show that activities observing and interacting with wildlife in their natural habitat can improve people's feelings of well-being and connection with nature.
- Gardening: People who spend time gardening, farming and working on the land show improvements in mood, in views of their quality of life and in their sense of community.

On a personal level, I have always enjoyed walking and running, but walking has become increasingly important to me in the last six years or so, since I stopped working full time. This was in part to the walks organised by Wren over time which combined exploring new areas and socialising with other members while enjoying a variety of wildlife.

Maintaining a connection with nature is more important than ever if you are stuck indoors for most of the day.

This year walking outside has become a lifeline for all the reasons included in this article. However, while outside I have come to realise that we may be living under lockdown during the Coronavirus pandemic, but outside the natural world carries on and the seasons have continued to unfold -Spring, Summer, and now Autumn and Winter. I have never been so aware of those natural transitions and all the best of each season as I have in 2020, ironically, probably the most challenging year that we have ever experienced in our lifetime!



In every walk with nature, one receives far more than they seek

John Muir



look out for

What can you see in Winter? There is always a degree of uncertainty about the weather. Will the coming months bring high winds, crisp snow or just some long spells of overcast grey and rainy days when we will be slithering about in the muddy countryside? Being outside even for as little as 20 minutes a day is sufficient to bring health benefits so wrap up warm and get out there!

One of the great pleasures of being outside during the winter months is the chance to see frost on many of the fallen leaves, the dead stems of grasses or ferns. This tends to highlight their form and textures which might be so easily overlooked and thus, the seemingly ordinary is transformed into something magical!

An instructive activity is to make a note of flowers that are actually in flower at the turn of the year as many flowers are responding to the mildness of the current winter season. This list can include just the 'wild ones' or can include those found in gardens too! Comparisons year on year are interesting and of course there are some

insects which will find them vital sources of nectar and pollen. There are several types of Mahonia which are in full flower at this time of the year and some of the winter flowering Viburnums are sweetly scented too. Primroses and Sweet Violet are now in flower from late autumn through to spring and in addition you may well find Dandelions, Chickweed and Hogweed. What will be your score? More than 25 is a good one.



Towards the end of January the catkins on Hazel start to lengthen and once fully expanded, they shed their pollen grains which can then be blown about to be caught on the stigmas of the tiny red female flowers. As the days lengthen, the leaves of Honeysuckle start to grow to be followed by sprouting shoots on Elder bushes. Look out for the yellow flowers of Coltsfoot as they push through the barren ground of roadside verges or wasteland sites.

Those who feel the need to mow their lawns in winter may have continue to do so if the ground temperatures remain above 6°C for several days, but for many of us, it is preferable to leave it slightly longer. This gives you the chance to notice that the uncollected leaves will disappear underground as various species of earthworm remain active, pulling different leaves into their burrows. Recent research using an infra-red webcam has revealed

that the 25cm long Night Crawling Earthworm, *Lumbricus terrestris* shows a particular preference for the fallen leaves of Alder, Ash and Birch over non-native Eucalyptus, Sweet Chestnut and Sycamore. Interestingly in the 1880's Darwin came to similar conclusions without the help of webcams! You could conduct your own experiments to see which leaves are preferred – some worms apparently even like chocolate!

It is easy to overlook the smaller components of vegetation, but the bright green mosses are more obvious as many species produce their seed capsules on long stalks at this time of the year. The tops of walls, fallen logs, rockeries, lawns and the tops of flower pots are all good places to find these interesting

plants. The British Bryological Society has produced a downloadable guide to *Common Mosses and Liverworts of Town and Garden*. Check out the website to download your own copy! www.britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk

by Tricia Moxey





wren work group

Almost half the global population of bluebells can be found on our shores, so there are plenty of places to soak up their beauty and scent. What's more, their presence often indicates you're walking through ancient woodland.

One great show, of these lovely wild flowers, locally is in Chalet Wood, Wanstead Park within sight of the Temple - convenient for visitors to Wanstead Park from either the Wanstead end at Warren Road or the Aldersbrook end at Northumberland Avenue.

Spring and the delightful show of Bluebells in Chalet Wood seems a long way off from this dark lockdown winter. But it will soon be with us heralding warmer days to come, colour not grey and offering some optimism.



Wren Group Practical Work Team are out in all weather between the months of October to March. Here members of the team are moving logs to better delineate pathways through Chalet Wood in order to protect and increase the show of bluebells each spring.

But this show doesn't happen without a little bit of help. There are problems with invasive bramble and - sad to say - people. Because of the nature of the wood particularly during the autumn and winter, there are few clearly defined pathways through the woods; even those that are tend to get covered in leaves. This means that in early spring, just as the bluebells are beginning to show above ground, people unwittingly wander at will, damage the plants and compact the soil meaning that the plants struggle each year to make any new ground. Even the visitors that come to enjoy the show can add to this, by walking amongst them (however pleasant this may be), or stepping on them to take photographs.

Wren has built up a good reputation with the Corporation of London and Epping Forest and we are trusted to get on with key tasks. One of our main achievements over recent years has been to extend the area in Chalet Wood where the bluebells show, perhaps by 30% over 15 years. We have also laid timber edgings to delineate the paths in the bluebells to reduce trampling.

Early in December the group get together to clear the area of brambles to give our little floral friends a chance to bloom again next spring.



Peter Williams practical work organiser (2nd in from right) with some members of his team. Working in the forest is a great way to keep fit, meet new people and see the forest close up in a whole new way.

So why not some and join us. All tools and gloves are provided, as is basic training in health and safety about

the forest. It is an excellent way to keep fit, meet new people and see Epping Forest close up, sometimes on hands and knees. It's a wonderful way to come to appreciate this stunning environment on our doorstep.



We are still meeting every Thursday at 10am, as the City gave us permission to proceed. We have a Covid protocol (not sharing tools, keep social distance etc) but otherwise we are going ahead as normal. All the participants are very much enjoying the chance to be out and getting some exercise each week.

Wren's practical conservation work takes place in the winter from October to March, first Sunday of the month, and midweek most Thursdays 10-12.30. In addition to the work in Chalet Wood we carry out a variety of tasks including clearing scrub; keeping paths open; and various pieces of work requested by the City of London where they do not have the resources or where their machines cannot go.

You don't have to commit to anything – just turn up if you fancy it on the day. To join the group contact Peter Williams 07716 034 164 or e-mail wrengroup.distribute@gmail.com



and finally ...

Owing to Covid restrictions all of the regular Wren activities have been cancelled. However, we are using new ways to keep in touch with our members.

We are holding free online meetings and presentations using Zoom. Go to our website and Facebook page to keep in touch with new online events.

In addition to our Facebook page we have also created a new interactive group page where people can ask questions and post photos, links to relevant articles and more. You will need to join the group in order to post and interact and everyone is welcome. You will find it at; www.facebook.com/groups/832656587539209/

If you follow our existing Facebook page you will find a link pinned to the top. There is also a link on the website.



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The Wren Wildlife and Conservation Group also has a new email address wrenconservationgroup@gmail.com

Please visit our website <https://www.wrengroup.org.uk> for more information

[Facebook page](#)



[Facebook Group](#)



Twitter [@wrenwildlife](#)



[Instagram](#)



[YouTube](#)



then & now

Were you right ?

Wanstead Flats, Alexandra Lake in early 1900s and how it looks today. The view is the edge of the lake opposite the Courtney Hotel looking north. It's impossible to get the same picture today owing to the overgrown brambles on the lake shore.



We may be living under lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic, but outside nature carries on and winter has well and truly arrived. Maintaining a connection with nature is more important than ever if you are stuck indoors for most of the day.

Our opportunities to engage with nature may be fewer during the pandemic but there are still a number of things we can do to stay connected to nature, look after our wellbeing, and keep safe.

Instead of our usual 'Links Page' we will be maintaining a list of online resources and ideas to help keep us all engaged with nature.

lockdown links

Ten ways to connect with nature without leaving your home this spring

www.positive.news/lifestyle/10-ways-to-connect-with-nature-without-leaving-your-home-this-spring/?fbclid=IwAR2tl3IRSudyYpn9c_IF5YySy8bOksS-56TSXmkpr1CyGEbngbpoVGVRnfk

Enjoying nature from your home or garden is good for your mental health

www.richmond.gov.uk/council/news/partner_comment_spot/new_blog_enjoying_nature_mental_health

#VitaminN: How to enjoy nature under lockdown

www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/52216267

Wildlife Watch - downloadable spotting sheets

www.wildlifewatch.org.uk/spotting-sheets

Home birds: how to spot 20 of the most common species from your window, walk or garden

www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/16/home-birds-how-to-spot-20-of-the-most-common-species-from-your-window-walk-or-garden

How to avoid people and stay in touch with nature during lockdown

www.scotsman.com/news/environment/how-avoid-people-and-stay-touch-nature-during-lockdown-2521708

Watching the birdies is a chance to connect with nature – and each other – during lockdown

www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/lifestyle/1252432/watching-the-birdies-is-a-chance-to-connect-with-nature-and-each-other-during-lockdown/

In the coronavirus lockdown, open a window and see nature at its most thrilling

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/in-the-coronavirus-lockdown-open-a-window-and-see-nature-at-its-most-thrilling-6jr8cwqcd>

