

Spring 2021

# Wren

Wildlife & Conservation Group

*Wren making her nest in Capel Rd garden - pic by Tony Morrison*

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# a word from the chair .....

The Buddhist monk, Nichiren, famously said that 'Winter always turns to Spring'. I am certainly looking forward to the first arrival of our passage Wheatear on Wanstead Flats and the increase in invertebrate life as the days lengthen and warm up. Similarly, it feels that with the roll-out of vaccinations, we are hopefully seeing the light at the end of this pandemic which has been a dark tunnel for so many.

There is lots happening locally as well. The Wren Group virtual field meetings have re-started and we are thinking hard about how we can bring the outdoors inside in new and innovative ways whilst we still can't meet in big groups (watch this space!), and maybe even having more of a mixed physical and virtual agenda going forwards anyway.

After years of lobbying, the Wren Group is pleased that the City of London has put up some temporary, light-weight fencing to protect some of the Skylark breeding areas on Wanstead Flats. We just hope that this hasn't come too late and that we see a stabilisation or - hopefully - an increase in breeding numbers again from such a low base.

The Wanstead Park Wetlands Project could also be an exciting development locally: improving the habitat on the River Roding (which forms the eastern border to much of Wren's wildlife recording area), improving the Park's wetland features and water quality and retention, and hopefully improving their capacity as ecological environments in their own right.

This is important work as the Wren Group has been concerned by the low numbers of wintering ducks that we recorded in the Park this winter. It wasn't long ago when several hundred Gadwall might be counted and yet this winter only a fraction of those numbers have been seen. We really aren't too sure why, but improving the water quality, the biodiversity, the ecological features of the water bodies, and the general water retention would surely combine to help matters.

All of these issues remind me of the constant need to keep monitoring, wildlife recording, and surveying so that we might be best placed to help inform any future actions which are required locally. If you aren't sure how to do this or you don't know what to do with your records, do get in touch and one of the Wren Recording Sub-Group will be delighted to assist.

Finally, I want to extend two important 'thank you's': first, to the Wren volunteers and one or two others on the periphery who have continued to safely conduct their practical work across a number of locations in the area to help improve the habitats for wildlife; secondly, to the mini-army of volunteers who have been helping to spread the message of why the skylark fencing was needed. You may have seen them wearing their hi-viz tabards and handing out leaflets.

JamesHeal  
Chair Wren Committee



Never forget what's important



# epping forest deer

Deer were introduced into the forest for Royal hunting and have not just survived but thrived because of the natural habitat and protection.

The City of London became the Conservators of Epping Forest in 1878 and deer are the only wild animals to be specifically mentioned in the Epping Forest Act. The gradual loss of interest by the Crown for hunting in the Forest eventually led Queen Victoria to relinquish all Royal hunting rights in 1882.

Epping Forest's deer population is made up of dark fallow deer, thought to have been introduced to the forest from Scandinavia by King James I, and Muntjac, a small Asian deer introduced by the 11th Duke of Bedford to his Woburn estate at the turn of the century. Escapees successfully bred and can be found throughout the Epping Forest district.

Wren committee member Gill James describes the type of deer to be found in the forest and their necessary management.

Two species of deer are regularly to be found in the Forest, Fallow and Muntjac. It is difficult to estimate deer numbers but studies suggest there are 500-700 Fallow deer across Forest and Buffer Lands, within a larger concentration of well in excess of 1,000 across South West Essex.



*Native to the Mediterranean region, Fallow were introduced to Britain by the Normans in the eleventh century when they were released into forests as highly prized quarry. James I is thought to have introduced some dark coloured Fallow into the area from Scandinavia and their descendants are the distinctive, almost black Fallow deer often seen in Epping Forest today.*

## Fallow Deer

Fallow deer are a medium to large sized deer, historically associated with the Forest since the Twelfth Century. Fully grown males (bucks) stand at around 0.84 to 0.94m tall at the shoulder and weigh between 46 to 93kg. Common fallow are tan/fawn, with white spotting on flanks and white rump patch outlined with black

horseshoe shaped border. Coat fades to a general grey colour during the winter. Melanistic Fallow deer, to be seen in the Deer Sanctuary, are black, almost entirely black or chocolate coloured. Fallow deer are the only species in Britain with palmate antlers. These become full-sized after the deer are three/four years old and can reach up to 0.7m in length. Does and their young give short barks when alarmed. Bucks groan loudly during the breeding season.

## Muntjac Deer

Muntjac are a small but stocky species of deer that stand at around 0.44 to 0.52m tall at the shoulder. Fallow deer are less common in the south of the Forest but Muntjac deer numbers are rising and they are now common in the south of the forest.

When fully grown males (bucks) weigh between 10 to 18kg as adults. Muntjac are a russet brown colour for most of the year, turning to a dull grey in winter.

Characteristically, Muntjac have a 'hunched' appearance, as their rumps are higher than their shoulders. They have a wide, flat tail, which is raised erect to display a white underside when disturbed. Muntjac males have small antlers on top of a long fur-covered base (pedicle). These are usually straight with no branching. The face of the male is striped with pronounced downward black lines, light coloured cheeks and very large facial glands below the eyes. The ears are oval-shaped. Does have no antlers and a dark crown patch on their heads.



*The eleventh Duke of Bedford introduced the Muntjac, a small Asian deer, to his Woburn estate at the turn of the century. Escapees from Woburn successfully bred and have now spread over much of the country. They have become widespread throughout the Epping Forest district.*

## Why is deer management necessary in the Forest?

Maintaining a Balance: Forest and Buffer Land management aims to strike a balance between controlling grazing levels by domestic cattle and wild animals in order to maintain the open character and habitat types within the ancient Forest whilst enabling sufficient regeneration to allow woodland succession with sufficient understorey and flora to support a wide range of species.

Negative browsing impact: There is a statutory obligation under the 1878 Act to manage deer as a 'natural ornament' to the Forest. Our deer have no natural predators and increasing deer numbers in recent times impact on vulnerable flora and fauna: for example deer browsing is now impacting on the regrowth of



beech coppice stools, some of which are more than one thousand years old. Overgrazing inhibits essential woodland regeneration and can destroy habitats essential to invertebrates, woodland birds and small mammals. Scarce food sources also reduce the overall condition and health of the herd.

**Deer/Vehicle collisions:** There are now more concerns with public safety and animal welfare caused by deer vehicle collisions on the roads. Currently about one collision a week is reported, depending on the season. Speed reduction measures on roads can be expanded, additional seasonal signage considered, and animal bridges and underpasses introduced, but all have had limited success.

The proximity of the Forest to urban areas and the division of the landscape by the M11 and M25 motorways, high density of traffic levels on all road networks throughout the Forest, and heavy recreational pressures all compound the challenge and make management necessary.

## Deer Culling

Culling, or shooting, on Forest land began around 1996-7 as the deer population expanded. In 2016 the management of the deer was awarded to the Capreolus Club, but following public opposition this was terminated in 2017 and since then has been undertaken by dedicated Forest staff whose duties include, for example, dealing quickly and humanely with deer vehicle collisions.

Alternative control options are rewilding, contraception and translocation, but these have been found to be ineffective and lead to significant animal welfare issues.

## The Birch Hall Deer Sanctuary

The Deer Sanctuary was set up near Theydon Bois in the late 1950s to contain and nurture a black 'melanistic' herd of fallow deer thought to date back to the seventeenth

century. This black breed is now thought not to be especially valuable or genetically unique. However visits to the Sanctuary are popular as an opportunity to get close to the deer, and it now functions as a public amenity and educational facility.

Article by Gill James



## Resources:

The British Deer Society website offers more information about deer [www.bds.org.uk](http://www.bds.org.uk)

The Epping Forest and Buffer Lands Deer Management Strategy Review, published in 2020, recommends a 20-year management strategy that covers health and welfare considerations, conservation objectives, economic impacts, deer vehicle collision impacts and public safety.





# bird report

This is the first winter that the local birders have been collectively capturing their notable records using the eBird online platform. Some of us use the platform personally, but this new 'team account' will hopefully make retrospective reports - like this one - a little easier and allow us to track and compare changes in the data over time more successfully. This report covers the winter months of December to February - each in full.





We recorded a total of 87 species over the winter (74 in December, 78 in January - I believe our best start to a year ever, and a pretty decent 83 in February).

## Highlights

A big highlight was undoubtedly the fact that we joined much of the country in getting closer to White-fronted Goose than normal in December. Until then, I had only ever seen one flock pass over on the patch in the past 6 years. We had a long staying bird (of the Russian subspecies) that was joined by a second on 18 December and they both remained, to the immense relief of those of us who keep a year list, until 1 January when they departed for the last time (one of them relocated a couple of miles west at the Walthamstow Wetlands where it remained until 6 Jan).



*White Fronted Goose - picture by Jonathon Lethbridge*



*Goosander on Perch Pond - picture by Jonathon Lethbridge*

The Goosander on Perch Pond on 28 December was a patch tick for many of us, but things just got better. The drake was joined by a second male on 31 December and, then, at least 7 birds were seen on 1 January (there was a bit of movement hence the uncertainty). A single drake was reported on 2nd, 7th, 12th, and 16th January and then two birds on 24 January so quite an extraordinary period for this previously patch-rare bird.

Most of the other highlights were associated with the early-February cold-snap (or the mini 'Beast From The East' which certainly shared a number of similarities with its meteorological namesake from three years ago).

As the cold weather front came in from the continent, the bird sightings began with a single Lapwing circling the football pitches on Sunday 7 February. Then, just off-patch for the local birders, but still within the Wren Recording area, yours truly had a flock of 5 vocal Redshank fly over my house (a real local rarity). These birds were heard some time before they were seen over

the rooftops and I strongly suspect that they were circling over the Western Flats, or even had come up off the ground. I then continued to hear calls even after they had passed over which suggests they circled back round again or there were more birds which I didn't see.



*Common Snipe - picture by Richard Rae*

As temperatures continued to fall, the frozen ground pushed increasing numbers of birds in search of feeding areas. In the week from Sunday 7 Feb to Saturday 13 Feb, we had an astonishing 1593 Lapwing pass over (only six fewer birds than we recorded during the 'Beast' in 2018) and with our peak day on Monday 8 Feb with 565 birds. If Lapwing are the 'cake' of eastern cold fronts, then Golden Plover are the icing. Nine birds were seen on 12 Feb and a single bird was seen on the following day. The cold weather also brought a record 12 Snipe (including a single flock of 10 on the Fairground/Police Scrape on 8 February) and a Shelduck to Jubilee, and occasionally Alexandra, lakes. This rather tame individual is the first of the species 'on the deck' for some time. It was still present as of 27 Feb.

But, to continue the analogy, if Lapwing and Golden Plover were cake and icing, then the cherry on the top was a Kittiwake on Alexandra Lake on 9 February. Found by Richard Rae, this was the first patch Kittiwake since 2014 and was a patch tick for many of us. The clearly exhausted bird stayed long enough for all the local regulars to get a good view before, hopefully, heading back out to sea.



Kittiwake - picture by Tony Brown

Many of us struggled to concentrate on working from home as cloud-shaped flocks of Lapwing floated past - mostly heading west or south west - and occasionally settling briefly on the ground to test their luck or perhaps out of exhaustion.

Whilst wonderful to see these birds, it is bittersweet at best as sadly many of them will likely not have made it back to where they came from. It is a reminder that cold weather is often little more than an inconvenience

for many of us; but it is literally life and death for large numbers of birds and other organisms.

## Duck numbers

Duck numbers have been shockingly low this winter; particularly in the Park where we have previously had many hundreds of Gadwall and good numbers of other duck. We are not sure what has caused this fall, but perhaps a water quality test of the lakes is due again? Shoveler and Teal both had high-counts of 28 and averaged only 10 and 4 respectively per day that they were recorded. Gadwall averaged 5 birds per day with a high count of 42. The day of the Kittiwake (9 Feb) was also the only day this winter that we have had Wigeon on the patch; nine birds on Alex only present for a few hours. Some of the waterfowl numbers have been crunched in the table.

Species	Bird days (recorded)	First and last (from Dec to Feb)	Average count	High count
White-front Goose	27	01/12 - 01/01	1	2
Shelduck	16	08/02 - 27/02	1	1
Shoveler	57	01/12 - 26/02	12	28
Gadwall	59	01/12 - 28/02	6	42
Wigeon	1	09/02	9	9
Teal	31	01/12 - 27/02	6	28
Pochard	38	02/12 - 25/02	3	7
Goosander	6	28/12 - 16/01	2	7
Little Grebe	34	09/12 - 27/02	3	8
G Crested Grebe	11	13/12 - 27/02	1	2

## Gulls

Again, although 'off patch' for many of the local birders, the regular wintering - and now adult - Caspian Gull on Eagle Pond continued to delight visiting gull fanatics - it really is a stunning bird. It has occasionally been joined by a 2nd winter bird.

There have been three reports of Caspian Gull on Wanstead Flats this winter although sadly not with any photos - on the 26 Dec, 11 and 14 Jan.



Mediterranean Gull (first winter) - picture by Tony Brown

We have been lucky to have a very long-staying 1st winter Mediterranean Gull found on 19 December and still present at the time of writing. On the 19th and 21st we actually had two Med Gulls (actually causing a bit of confusion on the first day they were here together).

We have also had Yellow-legged Gull appearances sporadically through the winter with a maximum of two birds (an adult and a 2nd winter) on 7 February. It was



also on this day that we had the highest count of gulls overall; extensive flooding and cold front meant we had heavily inflated numbers of gulls on the pitches (which more resembled pools at the time). We made a rough count of at least 1800 Common Gull and over 1000 Black-headed Gull with three figures of Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gull.

## Other birds or numbers of note

We always have one or two wintering Chiffchaff and Blackcap and this season was no different. A single Chiffchaff was encountered a few times in the Old Sewage Works through December. The first Chiffchaff of the new year was only seen briefly by Cat and Dog Pond on 6 January and there was then a gap until 28 January when one was picked up in the Old Sewage Works. Since then, it/they have been encountered more frequently (although never certainly more than one bird a day) and we have had one singing by the stables. It is a similar picture with Blackcap although wintering birds seem more frequently found in adjacent gardens to the Patch than in key habitats centrally.

There have also been four days' worth of sightings of Firecrest in Bush Wood and a couple more near Eagle Pond.

Skylark began to be consistently seen or heard by around mid-January and in February we have had a high-count of five birds and 3 singing males.

Throughout December and January, we have had two pairs of Stonechat over-wintering; one pair by Cat & Dog

pond (helping to entertain those working on restoring the pond to a more appealing habitat), and another mainly found around the south Brooms area and Angell Pond. However, by mid-February, these wintering birds had departed and were almost immediately replaced by some others on passage (we had a winter high-count of 7 on 20 Feb) and then a single longer-staying female in the Brooms since. This has been a good winter for Stonechat on the patch and follows our record-breaking Autumn (a high count of 16 birds on 7 October).



*Song Thrush - picture by Nick Croft*

Two of our finch species are worth noting. We have consistently had a good flock of Lesser Redpoll with up to 40 birds being counted on numerous dates; mostly in the SSSI, but often, later around Alex and a/the same flock of c26 birds by the Roding in the Old Sewage Works on 21 February.

We consistently get a flock of Siskin frequenting the Alders at either end of Perch Pond in the Park. This year's

winter flock was first noted on 10 November and we had a high count of 29 birds on 1 January. The flock was last reported on 31 January although a visiting birder did report 2 Siskin in the Park on 12 February.

As the cold snap ended and we were blessed with some better weather, we started to hear more bird song (Skylarks are warming up - and will hopefully have temporary fencing to help protect their nests this year), Mistle Thrush, Song Thrush, even Chiffchaff. Our thoughts are turning to Spring. We may have started to see the first Spring Stonechats replacing our overwintering bird, but the bird many of us have in mind as the Spring pioneer passage migrant is Wheatear. Our earliest ever arrived on 11 March. You can bet that the birders will be ready to welcome them.

Some data on a selection of our passerines is included in the table in case helpful.

Species	Bird days (recorded)	First and last (from Dec to Feb)	Average count	High count
Coal Tit	15	5/12 - 27/02	1	2
Skylark	38	01/12 - 26/02	2	5
Chiffchaff	9	07/12 - 27/02	1	1
Cetti's Warbler	7	09/01-27/02	1	2
Blackcap	4	26/01-27/02	1	1
Firecrest	4	25/01 - 26/02	1	1
Stonechat	49	27/02	2	7
Song Thrush	24	02/12 - 27/02	4	9
Redwing	70	02/12 - 28/02	32	90
Fieldfare	49	05/12 - 21/02	19	35

Report by James Heal





# skylark

## In Trouble

The current pandemic has shown us all how important nature is to not only our well-being but possibly also our survival.

However, the UK's ongoing loss of wildlife and plants is showing no signs of slowing.

The most comprehensive assessment yet of the state of nature in the UK has found that the area occupied by more than 6,500 species has shrunk by 5 per cent since 1970. Much of this is due to human activity.

“At the UK scale, the abundance and distribution of species has, on average, declined over recent decades and many measures suggest this decline continues. There has been no let-up in the net loss of nature in the UK”

State of Nature Report [nbn.org.uk/stateofnature2019](https://nbn.org.uk/stateofnature2019)





Even in our area, many creatures that were once a regular sight are becoming scarce. The Wren Wildlife Group, London Wildlife Trust and Wild Wanstead have identified 10 species under threat of extinction on our patch.



*If you get up very early from April to August, and go out on to Wanstead Flats, the Skylark is likely to be the most prominent bird you will hear, starting even before the sun rises. But this could be a thing of the past if we're not careful.*

Hedgehogs, Toads, Swifts, Pipistrelle bats, Stag Beetles, Tawny Mining Bees, Common Blue butterflies, Smooth Newts, Skylarks and even House Sparrows could all disappear locally unless we act to save them.

Many of you will be aware of the Skylarks on Wanstead Flats and will have heard them singing as they soar into the sky, lifting everyone's spirits with them.

Skylarks are on the 'Red List' of Birds of Conservation Concern. In the UK, the population halved during the 1990s, and is still declining. They are a victim of changes to farming practices and habitat loss. In their preferred habitat of farmland, numbers crashed by 75% between 1972 and 1996. Cereals are now sown in autumn, not spring. Autumn-sown cereals are taller and denser throughout the season; fewer Skylarks nest in these crops, and those that do are unable to raise as many broods as in spring-sown crops. Additionally, insect populations have declined due to the use of insecticides and the intensification of grazing on grassland.

Epping Forest staff did an excellent job of erecting the fencing, which is unobtrusive but keeps people and dogs from the 'core' nesting areas. Hopefully this will increase the number of young birds fledged - and help build the only significant lark population in inner London.

Tim Harris

In the absence of arable fields locally, Skylarks construct their nests on the ground in areas of unmown grass; they also feed on areas of mown grass, such as football

pitches. This makes Wanstead Flats – the only breeding population of Skylarks in inner London – even more important.



*In the absence of arable fields locally, skylarks construct their nests on the ground in areas of unmown grass; they also feed on areas of mown grass, such as football pitches. Pic by Tony Morrison*

We're lucky enough still to have several pairs of Skylarks in the unmown grass on Wanstead Flats. While it's fantastic that they still nest here, they do face problems of disturbance. If people stray off the main paths or let their dogs run into the long grass during the breeding season (from the end of March to the end of August) they may disturb nesting birds. Disturbance can cause birds to abandon their nests and any young birds may flee, get lost and end up starving to death.

We are in danger of losing the last few of this critically endangered species. They have already been lost to Leyton Flats.

## Help Prevent their Extinction

Stick to the paths and keep dogs on a lead in the marked areas on Wanstead Flats between March and the end of August to stop ground nests being disturbed. Oppose plans that would create increased disturbance on Wanstead Flats, and support stricter controls on people and pets in the main breeding areas.

To help protect the breeding Skylarks, temporary fencing has been installed in an attempt to create some breathing space for them to breed.

While the fencing is going up members of the Wren Group will be around as much as

Thanks to the 40+ Wren volunteers who are now engaging with the public on the site. And thanks, too, to Epping Forest for making this commitment to conservation.

possible to answer any questions you may have. Please feel free to approach us - at a safe distance of course.



*Picture shows Epping Forest installing temporary fencing to help protect the skylark nesting areas. Members of the Wren group will be also be patrolling the area to explain the importance of not disturbing the birds during the breeding season to ramblers and dog walkers. Pic by Mary Holden*

## What More Can You Do

In addition to the Skylark there are many more creatures having problems. Some of these species are in trouble right across the UK. Others are common species that are locally endangered because of how we treat our gardens and outdoor space. The UK is already one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. But it's not too late to stop the decline of wildlife in our area. If we create the right habitats in our gardens and parks, it will help populations recover and nature will have a chance to thrive on our doorsteps – now and in the future.

The group 'Wild Wanstead' have produced a 10-step guide to what you can do to help stop the decline of species in our area [www.wildwanstead.org](http://www.wildwanstead.org)

Report by Tim Harris





# leyton flats

As you wander its shingly shores, between the ancient oaks, and past the spiky gorse, it's worth remembering that, without the hard labour of a bunch of unemployed Leytonstone men well over a hundred years ago, Leyton Flats may not even exist at all.

Leyton Flats is the historic and official name of the area of the forest near Whipps Cross Road that most locals know as Hollow Ponds.

The ponds themselves are old gravel workings that were abandoned by 1880 or so and over the next 30 years were transformed into recreational ponds, and are now essentially one largish lake fed by a spring.

Here, three Wren members and expert in their own fields give a personal take on the much loved area.



## The Area by Paul Ferris

Leyton Flats is, like the somewhat similar Wanstead Flats, an open area in the southern reaches of Epping Forest, close to, and almost surrounded by, heavily populated residential areas. The borders of Leyton Flats are Whipps Cross Road to the south-west, Lea Bridge Road in the west, Snaresbrook Road in the north and the Central Line railway cutting and Hollybush Hill (road) to the south and the east.



*The boathouse and cafe at Hollow Ponds*

The private grounds of Snaresbrook Crown Court are in the north-east corner as is the Eagle Pond, which is part of Epping Forest. More forest land in the neighbourhood of Whipps Cross Hospital is separated from Leyton Flats by Whipps Cross Road.

Leyton Flats proper comprises about 75 hectares of land, of which 38 hectares is flat open grassland, 20 hectares woodland and the rest mainly ponds or

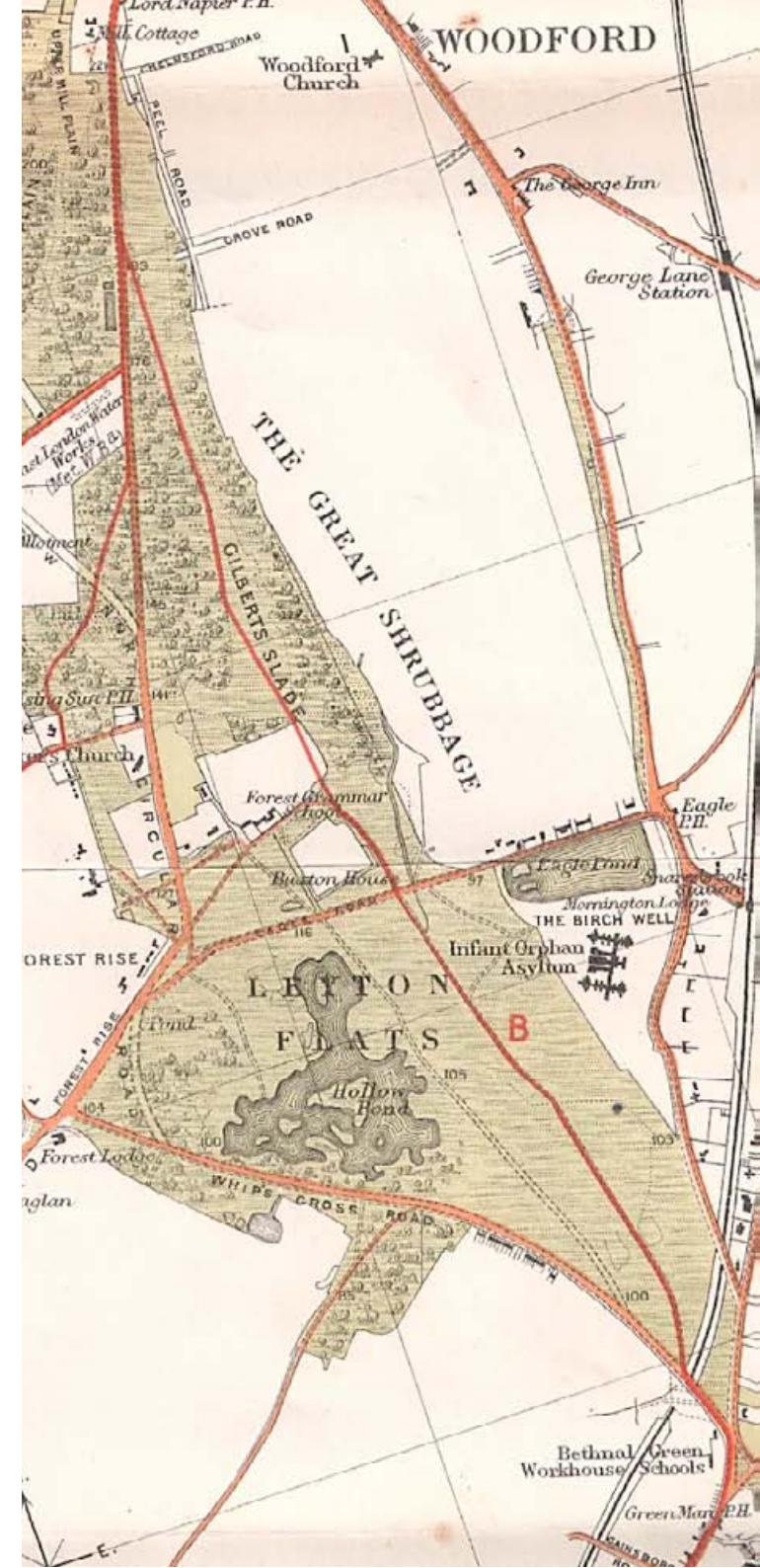
wet areas. The same cattle grazed on Leyton Flats as on Wanstead Flats, though it seems that they had preference for the latter which might be related to differences in the vegetation of the two areas.

Poor drainage of rain-water from Leyton Flats give rise to considerable waterlogging of the grassland, particularly during winter. There are a number of drainage ditches across the area, of which some drain to the Hollow Pond or the Eagle Pond. Numerous other ponds or damp hollows are mostly the result of past gravel diggings and are scattered around the north and west edges. They have a variety of shapes and sizes, and of these only that at the west edge of the Flats by Lea Bridge Road normally has a covering of water for any length of time.



*The ponds were formed after gravel was extracted out of the forest land to use for road building, but this ceased in 1878 and what was left was a series of water filled pits on marshy land. Pic shows the pond at the turn of the last century.*

*A so-called 'Distress Committee' organised the work of extending the ponds by unemployed men in the early 1900's for recreational use.*





At the north end of the large Hollow Pond is a much smaller expanse of water known as the Round Pond, which drains into its larger neighbour. The water that feeds this pond is mainly gathered from Gilbert's Slade to the north. There are some kiosks and a boat-house by the Hollow Pond, the only buildings on the Flats.



*Tucked away on Leyton Flats in a Birch Wood near to the boundary fence of Snaresbrook Crown Court and near the Eagle Pond is the Birch Well - pic courtesy of Paul Ferris January 2002*

In a birch wood adjacent to the fence of Snaresbrook Crown Court (once the Royal Wanstead School and before that the Infant Orphan Asylum) and close to the Eagle Pond, is Birch Well. This is a small spring enclosed by a stone surround about five feet across, once used for drinking water. Particularly in the north and west part of the Flats and mainly around the edge are areas of woodland; there is a scattering of trees elsewhere.

## A History - From Gravel Pits to Boating Lake by Peter Williams

Geologically, Hollow Ponds sit on something called the Boyn Hill Terraces, great areas of gravel created by a River Thames that was a couple of miles wide at the end of a glacial period, when the Thames was a tributary of the River Rhine. Much of the gravel was laid down about 400,000 years ago. Wanstead Flats sits on a slightly lower Thames terrace. Hollow Ponds is about 30m above sea level.

This press cutting showed a start had been made before the end of the nineteenth century in converting the abandoned gravel pits to recreational use.

**The Leyton District Council did the right thing in voting £300 towards the cost of converting the Hollow Pond at Whipps Cross into an ornamental lake with facilities for bathing and boating. The estimated cost of the undertaking is about £1,200. Towards this sum each of the Verderers has subscribed £25, Mr. BARCLAY £25, and the Forest Committee of the City Corporation £100, and now that Leyton has agreed to contribute £300 it is confidently anticipated that the Court of Common Council will consent to the balance coming out of the coffers of the City Corporation.**

*Chelmsford Chronicle 12 Mar 1897*

The minutes of the City of London indicate enlargement of the ponds started in 1902, and there were further expansions in 1906, and then in 1908 there is a reference

to the water body just north of the Hollow Ponds that eventually became the separate swimming lido, which closed in the 1980s.

In the early 1900's, there was widespread unemployment, and a number of lakes were dug on the flats by unemployed men. The Alexandra Lake on Aldersbrook Road was dug and expanded about the same time. So-called Distress Committees organised the work. They tended to be bigger employers working with the local council (in this case Leyton borough council) and the City of London. It was a kind of job creation scheme, and the ponds were hand dug.

## Housing on Leyton Flats

At the end of World War 2 a large number of prefabs were built along Whipps Cross Road, in total there were 117 homes.



*Picture of Whipps Cross prefabs shortly before they were demolished c1960*



*Whipps Cross Road – VE Day party 1945 (Image from Facebook). These are Nissen huts – there were in fact many kinds of prefabs during the war. For example, ones on Wanstead Flats opposite the Golden Fleece pub were more like bungalows and considered posher than these Nissen huts.*

There are still one or two signs in the ground of the estate, including a strip of bricks on the flats opposite Forest Glade and the Hindu Temple (which used to be a Christian Science Reading Room).



*An RAF aerial reconnaissance photo of Leyton Flats taken probably in summer 1944. The rows of prefabs can be seen along Whipps Cross Road. To the right are some larger looking white buildings. These could be military huts.*

## Wildlife by Tony Madgwick

Leyton Flats is a large expanse of acid grassland punctuated with stands of trees and large patches of Gorse and Broom. To the west of the Flats, Hollow Ponds is the largest body of standing of water and there are several smaller ephemeral ponds, hollows and streams stretching across the flats to Eagle Pond in the North East of the site. The predominant wildlife groups recorded on a regular basis are birds, and to a lesser extent, insects.



*Black Headed Gull at Hollow Ponds - pic by Tony Morrison*

A recent list suggests at least 123 bird species on site, distributed between the acid grassland that makes up the greatest area of the site, water birds Recent frequenting Hollow Ponds and its banks, and the woods and shrubland that ring the whole site. There are many visitors throughout the year with the greatest footfall around the Hollow Pond. Many are there to feed the ducks and swans (mostly Mallard and Mute Swan).

As a result of the abundance of food, there is a large population of Carrion Crows (many which exhibit leucistic feathering) and Feral Pigeons, along with Canada Geese, a small number of Greylags. Black-Headed Gulls can always be found in abundance, along with a few Common Gulls, Herring Gulls, and Lesser-Blackbacks.



*Greater Spotted Woodpeckers can be seen and heard in the wooded areas adjacent to the ponds - pic by Jonathan Lethbridge.*

In recent years Egyptian Geese have increased in number as they now breed on the site and seem particularly partial to human company. In winter Hollow Ponds hosts a number of other wildfowl, including Tufted Duck, Gadwall and Shoveller. The woods around the edges of the site echo with the calls of Nuthatches, roving bands of Tits (Great, Little, Long-tailed, and the occasional Coal), and in recent years, Ring-Necked Parakeets keep up a wall of sound as they fly to and from the area. Song is provided by Robins all year round, and in Spring they are joined by Song Thrush, Blackbird, Chiffchaffs and wheezing Greenfinches. Greater Spotted and Green



Woodpeckers can be seen and heard drumming and yaffling. Infrequent or rare visitors include Garganey, Green Sandpiper, Common Snipe, Goosander, Spotted Flycatcher and even, recently, Black Swan.



*A recent visitor to Hollow and Eagle Ponds - Bruce the Black Swan. Pic by Tony Morrison*

Up until the late 1990s, Skylarks could be heard singing over Leyton Flats, but these birds are now only occasional visitors, and the

last recorded Skylark was a single observation in 2018. Loss of these as breeding birds may well reflect the popularity of the Flats for human recreation and dog walking which leaves little space undisturbed. A somber warning of what could happen to this bird's breeding success on Wanstead Flats if protection is lost.

The most frequently seen mammals on the site are Grey Squirrel and the ubiquitous Brown Rat. Several species of bats can be found across the area, including Common and Soprano Pipistrelles, and Daubenton's Bat skimming low over the water of Hollow Ponds. Foxes, Hedgehogs and Muntjac deer are also seen occasionally.

Invertebrate recording on the site has been patchy over the years, but the complex mix of wet and dry habitats,

including the heavily poached pond banks and paths, provide a network of dense cover and long margins supporting a huge and diverse invertebrate fauna. A wide variety of the more popular insects, such as bees, dragonflies and damselflies can be seen from early Spring and into the late autumn.

On the last point, there is a drive to improve our knowledge and understanding of the fauna of Leyton Flats. Please contact the Wren Wildlife and Conservation Group to find out how you can help us to record and monitor the site that it can be managed for the benefit of both wildlife and its many human visitors.



## 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.





# Trees

*I think that I shall never see  
A poem lovely as a tree.  
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest  
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;  
A tree that looks at God all day,  
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;  
A tree that may in Summer wear  
A nest of robins in her hair;  
Upon whose bosom snow has lain;  
Who intimately lives with rain.  
Poems are made by fools like me,  
But only God can make a tree.*

*by Joyce Kilmer*



# weathering the storm

## of Forecasters' Woolly Words

by Robert Nurden

Forest Gate seems to boast a whole range of great photographers who, happily for us, often post their stunning images of Wanstead Flats on local websites. Many of the best pictures show the clouds looming on the western horizon, banking up behind the blocks of flats towards Leytonstone.

But what about those few hours before the weather pattern makes itself apparent and we have to make our plans unsure of how the day will pan out? We head, of course, to the official weather forecasts on TV or radio. Understanding these predictions used to be so easy, didn't it? Meteorologists used simple words like rain, sun and cloud. The joke in the old days was that the forecasts weren't always right but no one minded very much. At least we understood what they were getting at. And, besides, this was Britain, where winds from the Atlantic made guessing the weather a hazardous occupation at the best of times. We got by. The language was basically down to earth.

If only we could be guaranteed some of that now. These

days it's as if the meteorological office has given staff their own dictionary or Thesaurus in order for them to hype up the language just in case we're falling asleep from boredom. Forecasters now seem intent on making their predictions with what they think is down-with-the-people language. But this only serves to confuse. The point is the weather needs prosaic language so we can take it in while we're occupied with other tasks.



On Radio 4's Today programme the other day I heard the ridiculous expression 'rattle the windows'. Seconds later came 'wet and windy fare' and finally 'how do I break this to you gently?' Within days of hearing that tsunami of nonsense, I'd added more to my list of informal gobbledygook: 'plume of cloud', 'get out and about after tea', and even this one: '13 to 14 degrees? No way, Jose! More like three or four'.

The culprit, more often than not, was weatherman Phil Avery. I know just what you're trying to do, Avery, but

you've got it wrong. Your evangelical drive towards colloquialism has nothing to do with trying to make the weather more intelligible. I suspect it has everything to do with you, as a fact-filled meteorologist, using the airwaves to bend our ears with your brand of repressed lyricism. How dare you foist this obfuscating drivel – or should that be drizzle? – on us!

Then I heard younger forecasters tarting up anticipated wet weather with 'pulses of rain' and 'showery regime'. Once they slipped in the oleaginous, pseudo-helpful snippet: 'that's the scene for someone on the school run'. I wonder if deep in the bowels of the Met Office they hold seminars on how to soften the impact of unpleasant weather predictions by aping the style of the proverbial, mealy-mouthed vicar – a kind of curate-climatologist. I've also heard: 'The wee small hours of Monday', 'Lovely day - wish I'd seen some of it', and 'Let me get you out of the door first'. This is nanny state encroachment. This weather-lite school of approachability clearly feels the need to take us by the hand and lead us towards some kind of comfortable, warm front of comprehension.

Leave us alone! We're British and we're East Londoners and we're used to hearing about nasty weather. We're quite capable of putting up with a bitter wind. We don't have to be told that 'cold air will slump down and whistle through the rigs on Friday' or that 'five to eight should just about cover it'. Abandon your woke, snowflake language and just tell us – simply - what the weather is going to do.

Thank you.





# Wanstead moths & butterflies

Butterflies and moths are an important gauge of the health of any environment. If numbers fall, that trend is likely to reflect more general problems. And if the number of species declines, that points to negative changes in an area's floristic diversity.

Amateur naturalists have been recording the butterflies and moths of the Wanstead area for many years. In the case of butterflies, this probably goes back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with moths taking a back seat – the nocturnal nature of most makes them harder to enumerate. This began to change in the 1980s when former Wren chairman Colin Plant conducted serious moth-trapping, and in the early years of this century Paul Ferris picked up the recording baton. The years since 2013 have probably seen the most consistent efforts to find out what moths live in our area, and those efforts continue to this day.

Thirty species of butterfly and about 600 different types of moth have been noted – in Wanstead Park, on Wanstead Flats and in the gardens of a dozen or more amateur entomologists in Forest Gate, Manor Park, Leytonstone and Wanstead.

A photographic report summarising these is now available on the Wren website, divided into Butterflies, Larger Moths and Micromoths. And don't forget to record any sightings of these beautiful insects. You can do this at Butterfly Conservation's National Moth Recording Scheme: [www.mothrecording.org/index.php?c=folder&m=fol&mm=fol](http://www.mothrecording.org/index.php?c=folder&m=fol&mm=fol)

Or use iRecord: [www.brc.ac.uk/irecord/join/wren-wildlife--conservation-group](http://www.brc.ac.uk/irecord/join/wren-wildlife--conservation-group)


Tim Harris



Brimstone - pic by Tim Harris





A close-up photograph of a male hairy-footed flower bee (Anthophora plumipes) perched on a green, leafy plant. The bee has a fuzzy, orange-brown thorax and head, with long, dark antennae. Its legs are dark and hairy. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting a natural outdoor setting.

Male Hairy Footed Flower Bee out in the sunshine.  
Picture by Rosemary Stephens.

# signs of spring

furry awakenings from a winter sleep...

Two of the earliest insects to emerge from their winter torpor are the Dark-edged Bee-fly (*Bombylius major*) and the Hairy-footed Flower Bee (*Anthophora plumipes*). On a warm Spring morning, while both may be active, their behaviour could not be more different. The Bee-flies will be found sunning themselves in a sheltered sunny spot so that can warm themselves enough to become active. The males will look for females for mating and the mated females will then search for the nest sites of ground-nesting mining bees. The female Hairy-footed Flower Bees will emerge from their warming nest sites in South facing walls and mortar before flying off in search of nectar and pollen, facing the intentions of the waiting males...

# Dark-edged Bee-fly *Bombylius major*

There are four British *Bombyliids* but the Dark-edged Bee-fly is the only species to have been recorded in our area, and indeed across London. They are common flies and can be found in our gardens as well as in the open spaces and hedgerow margins of the of the Flats and Wanstead Park.



A male Bee-fly (*Bombylius major*). Note the characteristically long proboscis, the single pair of wings with darkened leading edges and held flat and away from the body, and the furry, fluffy appearance. The large eyes meeting at the midline of the head tells us that this is a male. Picture by Linda Pryke.

They are distinctively furry flies with a bizarrely long proboscis used to feed on nectar from a range of flowers including Primrose, Ground Ivy and Dandelions. They can also be seen above head height, nectaring in flowering fruit trees, Blackthorn and Hawthorn. They spend a great deal of their time either feeding over flowers or hovering low over the ground searching

for egg-laying sites, or if they are males, for potential mates.

Bee-flies have an extraordinary life cycle. They are brood parasitoids of solitary mining bees. This means that the Bee-fly larvae eat the larvae of the host bee. Before this can happen, the male flies, with distinctively large eyes that touch in the midline of the head, establish loose territories. These are held hovering a few metres off the ground and darting to intercept anything that looks like a potential mate or a competing male to be chased off. The females will lay large numbers of eggs, flicking them away from her body in a lunging hover. If you look carefully at the back-end of the fly you may see the last segment of the coated in dust. She coats her translucent 0.5 mm eggs with dust to weigh them down. This ensures that the egg falls to the ground without being blown away. It makes it almost impossible for us to find the eggs once she has flicked them away!

The egg hatches shortly after being deposited and the active and legless larva wriggles, aided by thoracic and tail bristles, its way to the entrance of a mining bee burrow. Once the Bee-fly larva enters the underground nest of the host, it will seek out a brood cell containing the host's egg and pollen store. The larva cannot eat the pollen, instead it becomes inactive. The bee's egg hatches and the bee larva feeds to the point where it is ready to pupate. This is when the Bee-fly larva becomes active again and starts to feed, ultimately



Oviposition - in this picture you can see the dust particles held in the "sand chamber" on the last two sternites (lower abdominal plates) of the abdomen. The more widely spaced eyes can just be seen and help to confirm that this is a female fly. Picture by Linda Pryke.

consuming its host. The Bee-fly larva then pupates over the winter. It will emerge in Spring, corkscrewing its way to the surface, leaving the pupal case sticking out of the ground. This may seem hard on the bees, but you shouldn't worry as only a small proportion of brood cells in mining bees' nests are targeted successfully.

## Hairy-footed Flower Bee (*Anthophora plumipes*).

This is one of the largest and commonest bees to be seen in our Spring Gardens. The males are a light brown bee, with feathery hairs on their lower legs and distinctively yellow faces if you can get close enough to see. This is not always easy as these bees seem to be in constant motion, hovering around flowers waiting for



females and darting after them, alone or in marauding groups! The female bees look quite different, being jet black with smart orangey-yellow hairs on their hindlegs.



*A female Hairy-footed Flower Bee foraging on Wanstead Flats. The female bees look quite different to the male, being jet black with smart orangey-yellow hairs on their hindlegs.*

*Photo by Rosemary Stephens*

These bees nest in dispersed colonies using holes mined into vertical, sunny faces. These are usually made in old walls and new, soft mortar. Chimneys seem to be a favoured site in East London! The females can be seen foraging from a range of flowers including Spring shrubs (such as Sallows, Blackthorn, Cherries, Plums and Apples),

Ground Ivy, Common Gorse, Bird's-foot Trefoils, and are especially partial to the ubiquitous Green Alkanet!

The nesting and forage habits of these bees means that there are frequently associated with urban environments with good numbers of suitable flowering plants within foraging distance of the nest site.

As with most solitary bees, the males emerge before females and hang about waiting for the females to appear. Emergence usually begins in early March. This year (2021), the first males were being reported on Wanstead Flats in the second week of February, with the first females recorded on 27 February (2021).

We are keen to record the number and location of Hairy-footed Flower Bee nesting sites on our patch. Please contact Tony Madgwick ([bees@lnhs.org.uk](mailto:bees@lnhs.org.uk)) with details of when and where the nests were active. All such details of site will be recorded anonymously and treated as sensitive with only aggregated data being reported.

#### Authors:

Tony Madgwick is the LNHS Recorder for Bees and Wasps, a member of the Bee-fly Watch verification team and sits on the committee of the Wren Wildlife and Conservation Group.

Linda Pryke is an ecologist and the LNHS Recorder for Diptera (True Flies).



*A male Hairy-footed Flower Bee. The males are a light brown bee, with feathery hairs on their lower legs and distinctively yellow faces. Photo by Rosemary Stephens*

# eco warrior

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

If you think it doesn't happen that often or not on our patch - think again !!! Local eco warrior Tushar Bala spotted a heron in distress in our very own Wanstead Park recently. In Tushar's words .....



*Litter is not just unsightly - our rubbish can pose a real threat to wildlife. In a lot of cases causing a slow and painful death. Pic by Tushar Bala*

Photography is my new hobby, 4 months. I take a walk almost every day through Wanstead Park and I take pictures of the wildlife and some landscape. It takes me

about an hour and a half to get to where the heron is and it's not always there. But on this day, I reversed my walk and arrived there much earlier than usual.

I saw the heron, and I thought it was a different species, I could see something sparkling on its head - initially I thought it was some exotic plumage. Then it started to shake its head and put its head in the water. I looked through the camera eyepiece and realised it was plastic strips (like the one that hold beer cans) wrapped around its head. Its eyes were wide opened and it was obvious it was distressed.

If that picture stops one person from throwing rubbish into a lake and prevents innocent wildlife from being injured or dying then JOB DONE!

So I took a few shots, but to be honest it was hard to press the shutter button - especially when it was violently dipping its head into the water and then shaking it. I also thought; how would it catch its prey and also if it did go for a fish under water the plastic could get caught with something else and then it could potentially drown. I'd like to say I ran back home, but with wellies on and a quagmire of mud...let's say I walked with purpose. Once back, I googled "birds in distress tangled in plastic. I was met with a plethora of suggestions...it was a blur basically. I emailed who I thought could help, the City of London Parks Environmental Agency, who got back to me

within 30/40 minutes, and I contacted the "Friends of Wanstead Park". I even emailed the local MP !



*A happy ending for this Heron but for a lot of wildlife the ending is not a good one. Pic by Tushar Bala*

I had a lesson, and explained to my line manager, parent and student and they were brilliant and totally understood I had to reply to emails, as the authorities wanted the exact location - which meant utilising the whole of my limited skills to screenshot a map.

The experience of seeing the heron in such a state was traumatising and made me feel incredibly angry... Tushar is convinced that the heron is now clear of debris from his second picture taken a while later. However, herons do look alike so it may be this picture is of another heron as, to-date, Epping Forest have not reported that the heron has been trapped by them. It may also be that the heron managed to free itself. Either way it is good that users of the area like Tushar take pride in the area and help protect the local wildlife.



# grotto

The Grotto is located on the banks of the Ornamental Water, in the eastern section of Wanstead Park in the London Borough of Redbridge.

The Grotto, one of the last surviving remnants of the 18th century Wanstead House, had limestone, shells, fossils, mica chips and crystalline minerals which sparkled by candlelight and included a boat channel and dock for gondolas to pull up for guests to enjoy the beautiful entertainment rooms inside.





The Grade-II listed grotto in Wanstead Park was damaged by fire in 1884 and while it has had patchy repairs since then it has been badly declining and was placed on the Heritage at Risk register in November 2017.

The City of London Corporation has approved a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) for the Grotto in order to remove the Grotto from the Heritage at Risk Register and to identify ways to protect it for the future.

The Grotto is only a small part of Wanstead Park - but it complements the Park's ecology by providing a different type of habitat supporting different ecological groups.



*A rear view of the Grotto from the rear showing the pit where boats could draw up allowing the rich and famous to climb aboard for the great tour - Credit Gill James*

Compared to the lush greenery of the park itself, this habitat is one of stone and brick masonry which provides a substrate on which a range of plants and animals can live. The ruins - arches and alcoves support several crevices and cavities. These provide nest sites for birds

such as wren and potentially others such as kingfisher (which nested in the past), pied wagtail, etc. These crevices and cavities also have high potential to support bat roosts of species such as common pipistrelle, soprano pipistrelle, Daubenton's bat, etc.

Visiting it today The Grotto can accurately be called a ruin, as very little of the original splendour or size. The principal chamber, with its dome and octagonal lantern, was an eclectic array of materials: a floor made up of coloured pebbles laid out in patterns and figures, and the roof and walls were covered with coral, seaweed, stalactites, elegant sea-shells, and petrifications. The furnishings were equally as mixed, ranging from a wooden coffin to three ostrich eggs. But the grotto served another purpose, because directly below the main room was a boathouse, which opened directly onto the water.

Woody species, such as trees, shrubs, climbers, have overgrown the structure - shading out most other plants. If the structure is kept free of 'woody' vegetation and not sprayed with herbicide, other plants including wild flowers, grasses, ferns, bryophytes and lichens will gradually colonise and increase in abundance and diversity.



*Willow saplings threatened to grow into full-sized trees until they were lopped off by the Wren Group, with help from the City of London's tree team. Picture shows Wren member and action man Alan James. Credit: Haydn Powell*



have allowed vegetation to become established on the lake bed. This has included woody plants, mostly willows, which were starting to form a screen in front of the Grotto hiding it from view.



*Plants in the low-water lake bed obstructed the view of the grotto - picture Wren member Tony Abbott and Wren Works Organiser Peter Williams - Credit Gill James*

Back in January, volunteers from the Wren Wildlife and Conservation Group, with help from Epping Forest staff, put on their thermals and donned their wellies to help remove the young trees.

The work was carried out in conformity with social distancing requirements and current regulations give specific exemption for volunteer work.

## A Brief History

Sometime around 1760 an elaborate building known as Grotto was constructed by John, second Earl Tylney, on the west bank of the Ornamental Water. The structure was completed by 1764 and is said to have cost £2000, but with the addition of decoration and ornamentation was later valued at £40,000. Grottoes were a type of folly (that is, an architectural erection without functional intention) very popular with rich 18th century landowners. In fact, in many cases it is said that the landowner engaged a person to live in the folly and act the part of a real hermit. Whether this happened in the case of Wanstead Park is not known. In the case of the

In the garden, which consists partly of green lawns crisscrossed by gravelled paths, and partly of woods made up more of native than foreign trees, is the remarkable grotto. One marvels at its sombre entrance, with various minerals, petrifications and shells. The first glimpse of the interior is similarly astonishing. It is also very cleverly composed of minerals, petrifications and shells, with one side having three arches.

*Ferenc Széchenyi a distinguished Hungarian visitor to the Grotto in 1787*

park's grotto, it is probable that the structure was lived in at some time, and below the living accommodating there was a boathouse - so that this one was more functional than many!



*Photograph of the interior of the Grotto before the fire in 1884. The uppercrust of society would come down and watch theatre and firework displays on the lake. Audiences, often including royal family, would sit in punts and boats and witness performances put on in front of the Grotto.*

The front of the building, facing the lake, was of rough stone with a variety of ornamental details including arches and niches, with a landing stage for boats. A central open arch gave access to a boathouse in which were storage and repair facilities. A passage on the north side of the building gave access to a domed top-lit chamber above the boathouse, which was also accessible





A picture postcard of the Grotto from the turn of the last century. Image from Richard Arnopp - Wanstead Image Archive

by means of steps from the lake. The chamber had a stained glass window, an elaborate pebble-pattern floor and was decorated with shells, crystals and mirrors. A remains of a very few of these could still be seen even up to the 1960's, but only a few embedded small shells

remain visible now. There were two smaller rooms behind the chamber - one above the other - which may have served as an apartment for the keeper. When the Park was opened to the public in 1882 part of the enclosed space surrounding the old Grotto was white in early spring with snowdrops.

In November 1884 the Grotto was damaged by fire. The most usual account of what happened relates to a workman who was re-tarring the boat which was kept in the boathouse under the Grotto. He did not notice the tar bubbling over, and the Grotto was set alight. Unfortunately, the lake had been drained for cleaning, so there was no ready supply of water available to fight the fire, and the building was all but destroyed. The facade survived, together with some of the interior and the access passage.



Another picture of the Grotto at the turn of the last century. Apart from the water level and overgrown vegetation not much had changed in over 100 years. Image from Richard Arnopp - Wanstead Image Archive

More

Click here for [Corporation of London Plan](#)

History courtesy of Paul Ferris [Wanstead Wildlife](#)

Images from Richard Arnopp - [Wanstead Image Archive](#)

Article by Gill James



# Litter kills

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

If you think it doesn't happen that often or not on our patch - think again !!! This photograph was taken recently in our own Wanstead Park by local photographer Tushar Bala.

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)



# a nature fix is good for you

A new study reveals that for urban dwellers, spending just 20 minutes with natural elements significantly lowers stress.

Have you heard about “nature pills” and “nature prescriptions”? After repeated studies have concluded that contact with nature reduces stress and improves well-being, doctors have started “prescribing” time spent outside.

But while we know it works, the parameters have been a bit murky: What kind of nature works? How often should one spend time in nature? And for how long? With this in mind, researchers from the University of Michigan set out to discover the relationship between the duration of a nature experience (NE), and changes in two physiological biomarkers of stress – salivary cortisol and alpha-amylase.

The research is novel in that, among other things, the study participants were free to choose the time of day, duration, and the place of a NE in response to personal preference and changing daily schedules.

For eight weeks, 36 urban dwellers were asked to have a NE at least three times a week for a duration of 10 minutes or more. As the study explains:

“The NE was defined as anywhere outside that, in the opinion of the participant, included a sufficiency of natural elements to feel like a nature interaction. Participants understood they were free to adjust the place, time of day, and duration of the NE in response to changing daily circumstances to best accommodate their goal.”

During a NE, they could sit, walk, or do both – with only a few rules.

“There were a few constraints to minimize factors known to influence stress: take the nature pill in daylight, no aerobic exercise, and avoid the use of social media, internet, phone calls, conversations and reading,” explains Dr. Mary Carol Hunter, an Associate Professor at the University of Michigan and lead author of the research.

To measure stress, levels of the stress hormones were measured from saliva samples taken before and after a nature pill.

What they found was that just a twenty-minute nature experience was enough to significantly reduce cortisol levels. And even better, if you bump that up to between 20 and 30 minutes, cortisol levels dropped at their greatest rate. After that, de-stressing continues, but more slowly. From the study:

“For salivary cortisol, an NE produced a 21.3% per hour drop beyond that of the hormone’s 11.7% diurnal drop. The efficiency of a nature pill per time expended was greatest between 20 and 30 minutes, after which benefits continued to accrue, but at a reduced rate. For salivary alpha-amylase, there was a 28.1% per hour drop after adjusting for its diurnal rise of 3.5% per hour, but only for participants

that were least active sitting or sitting with some walking. Activity type did not influence cortisol response.”

Hunter says that we know that spending time in nature reduces stress, but until now it was unclear how much is enough, how often to do it, or even what kind of nature experience will benefit us. “Our study shows that for the greatest payoff, in terms of efficiently lowering levels of the stress hormone cortisol, you should spend 20 to 30 minutes sitting or walking in a place that provides you with a sense of nature.”

This is such valuable research because now doctors can have measurable standards for which to prescribe nature pills.

“Healthcare practitioners can use our results as an evidence-based rule of thumb on what to put in a nature-pill prescription,” says Hunter. “It provides the first estimates of how nature experiences impact stress levels in the context of normal daily life. It breaks new ground by addressing some of the complexities of measuring an effective nature dose.”

Imagine skipping the pharmaceuticals and having an effective, low-cost tool of preventative medicine so readily available. With increasing urbanization, sedentary and indoor lifestyles, and a preponderance of screen time, it’s good to know that the road to well-being could be as easy as a walk in the park.

The research was published in *Frontiers in Psychology*.  
[www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00722/full](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00722/full)



# .... don't forget

During 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.

It can still be pretty parky out there and under lockdown, with fewer visitors, food may be hard to come by for our birds - so please keep an eye out for our feathered friends.

- Provide fresh clean water every day.
- Give kitchen scraps like cheese, cooked potato and bread.
- Clear up uneaten food at the end of the day as it could attract rats.
- Avoid giving salted nuts and only give peanuts from a good supplier.
- Clean feeding areas regularly to prevent any disease.



*Long Tailed Tit in Capel Road garden - pic by Tony Morrison*



# look out for ...

## Late April

Birds: Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs are early summer visitors whose voices join those of resident Wrens, Robins and Blackbirds. If weather conditions are poor, look for Sand Martins feeding over Heronry Lake. The first Swallows pass through our area, but they won't stop. Listen for Meadow Pipits in song on Wanstead Flats. The big arrivals of summer migrants take place. Common Whitethroats will be back on territory in the SSSI and the old sewage works. House Martins reappear, and Skylarks should be song-flighting over Wanstead Flats. Listen out for a Cuckoo!

Butterflies: On sunny days, look for Small Tortoiseshells, Commas, and Peacocks pretty much anywhere. Brimstones can be seen in Wanstead Park, while Holly Blues will visit gardens around the area. The first Small Coppers should emerge on The Plain and in the old sewage works; Orange tips may be seen in Wanstead Park.

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

## Early May

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

Butterflies: Green-veined Whites and Small Whites can be seen in gardens and in Wanstead Park. Look for Green Hairstreaks on Wanstead Flats: a colony was discovered

there last year. If we are lucky a Brown Argus or two may be in the Old Sewage Works, but this species is notoriously fickle, appearing one year and disappearing the next. Small Heath should appear in areas of rough grassland on The Plain and on Wanstead Flats.

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



*Look out for the Green Hairstreak (Callophrys rubi) on Wanstead Flats early May. Although this is a widespread species, it often occurs in small colonies and has undergone local losses in several regions.*

## Late May

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

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

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

## Early June

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

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

Damselflies and dragonflies: Banded Demoiselles should be flitting around aquatic vegetation along the banks of the River Roding. The sluice by the old sewage works is a good place to watch them. A few Emperor dragonflies will probably put in an appearance. Broad-bodied Chaser and Black-tailed Skimmer dragonflies may be seen around Heronry Lake; the latter often bask on the concrete rim of the lake.

## Late June

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

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

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

by Tricia Moxey



# dennis stone

## Chairman of the Lakehouse Lake Project

*Dennis, who was a co-founder and became the first and only chairman of the Lakehouse Lake Project, which saved and renovated Jubilee Pond, died in January. Rob Howell, who is a member of both the Lakehouse Lake Project and the Wren Group, has written this appreciation.*

*Mark Gorman*

One afternoon in the late 1980s a local plumber was returning home from work, and driving past the Model Yacht Pond on Dames Road he stopped. The pond had fallen into disrepair and the plumber had in his van some left-over grouting. He started to use the grout to fill in some of the cracks in the concrete lining of the pond which no longer held water. He was stopped from doing this by an Epping Forest Keeper who told him that this was an offence. The plumber was Dennis Stone who, less than pleased with this, stormed into a local pub and expressed his displeasure in the most colourful of terms.

Also in the Lord Rockwood that day were local residents, Dave Salt and Fred Wanless. The discussions that afternoon led to the founding of the Lakehouse Lake Project, dedicated to saving and renovating what has become Jubilee pond. It was extremely fortuitous for the project that these three individuals had a wide range of complementary skills. Dave Salt became Secretary and Fred Wanless used his research skills and extensive

knowledge of ecology and botany to give academic clout to the group. Dennis Stone was appointed Chairman, a position he held until his death in January this year. Dennis was the public face of the LLP and was the best possible advocate for the Jubilee Pond and Wanstead Heath (the name given to Wanstead Flats west of Centre Road).

As Chairman Dennis used his tenacity and sheer force of character to mould a disparate group of locals into a powerful campaigning group determined to see improvements to the pond. As the group became less of a campaigning one and formed more of a co-operative partnership with the Corporation of the City of London, Dennis played a major part in liaising with the City, Epping Forest and various contractors. For his role in the development of the Jubilee Pond (along with other charitable work) Dennis was awarded the Freedom of the City of London, an award of which he was justifiably proud.







*Dennis (right), with his grandson Cullen, the late Fred Wanless and Stanley Ginsberg of the Epping Forest Committee, at the opening of Jubilee Pond in 2013.*

It is often said of a person that, 'they threw away the mould when they were made' and 'they were a one-off'. Never was this more true than in the case of Dennis Stone. The sheer force of his character combined with his charming sense of humour meant that very few people who met Dennis, even if only once, ever forgot him.

Those who have attended an AGM of the LLP will have witnessed Dennis' unique style of chairing a meeting. However, it proved effective and many important issues were decided at these meetings. Dennis also organised and funded the 'Chairman's raffle'. At the end of every AGM Dennis would hand a raffle ticket to everyone who had attended and a draw was held for bottles of red and white wine. Not only was this fun but it defused any animosity that might have been expressed in the meeting. Dennis was always at the centre of 'Fun

Days' and other events organised by the LLP ensuring that all was in order and that everyone was having a good time.

Dennis will be sadly missed by his family, friends and colleagues. Without Dennis it is unlikely that the Jubilee Pond would exist in the form that it does today. The tremendous debt that local residents owe Dennis is all the more obvious as Wanstead Heath and Flats become an increasingly popular destination for exercise and enjoyment. It is a remarkable legacy for a remarkable man.

Robert Howell  
February 2021



## then & now

Were you right ?

Wanstead Flats model yacht pond in 1914 and the Jubilee Pond as it is today. The London Plane trees newly planted in 1914 now completely obscure Dames Road houses and shops.



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=IwAR2tI3IRSudyYpn9c\\_IF5YySy8bOksS-56TSXmkpr1CyGEbngbpoVGVRnfk](http://www.positive.news/lifestyle/10-ways-to-connect-with-nature-without-leaving-your-home-this-spring/?fbclid=IwAR2tI3IRSudyYpn9c_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](http://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](http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/52216267)

Wildlife Watch - downloadable spotting sheets

[www.wildlifewatch.org.uk/spotting-sheets](http://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](http://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](http://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/](http://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/lifestyle/1252432/watching-the-birdies-is-a-chance-to-connect-with-nature-and-each-other-during-lockdown/)

