

Winter 2021

wren

Wildlife & Conservation Group

Urban Fox, Capel Rd Garden - pic by Tony Morrison

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a word from the chair

I don't know about you but the COP26 Climate Conference in Glasgow in November felt the closest and most pertinent of the 26 conferences to me. That is presumably partly because it was held in Scotland, and partly because over the last couple of years, the climate crisis has seemed to be at a turning point - we either take very decisive action extremely soon or we all suffer.

There was hope, and there was disappointment. There was unity and there were, inevitably, disputes. Even if the agreements reached by global leaders and their negotiators were not as ambitious or tangible as many of us will have liked, it felt like progress was made.

Countries, corporations, and all of us, will now have to deliver and commit further to do more.

I realise also, that big global agreements on phasing out fossil fuels may seem far removed from all of our lives. Maybe some of us feel anxiety and powerlessness, maybe some of us feel numb, cynical, and disconnected. But there is always hope and there is always action that we can take.

The Wren Group joined a climate action day recently at St John's Churchyard in Leytonstone. We are all united in our love for the precious wild areas and green space we share and enjoy locally in the corner of East London with our scrubby, grassy, and tree-rich parts of the southern Epping Forest.

Perhaps some of us have been endeavouring to make our gardens, allotments, window boxes, or even shared spaces (my street has started planting flowers in boxes around the street trees) greener, wilder, and more attractive to invertebrates and other wildlife? Perhaps some of us are investigating

electric cars, air pumps, solar panels, better insulation, eating less meat, flying and driving less? There are always things we can do.

Whatever you are doing personally, I am sure that if you set a determination to reconnect or connect further with nature in 2022, it would be a New Year's Resolution that you wouldn't regret.

Wren turns 50 next year, but we have no intention of slowing down and putting our slippers on. We plan to hold lots more events and activities next year, and we will continue to stand in solidarity with anyone protecting the natural world, particularly on a local level. I look forward to seeing you out there. I hope everyone enjoys the festive season and stays healthy.

James Heal
Chair Wren Committee



"In my lifetime I've witnessed a terrible decline.
In yours, you could and should witness a wonderful recovery."

*Sir David Attenborough, COP26
Patron of the Wren Group*





from grey to green

The loss of plants and green spaces can have a profound impact on our wider environment, climate and wildlife.

Here, Redbridge Councillor Paul Donovan asks whether there is a need for a revolution in terms of development to address biodiversity and climate crises .

We are so lucky living with so much nature on our doorstep but we should never take it for granted. Keeping our open spaces and ensuring 'green' is designed into new development is essential for the wellbeing of both us and our wildlife.

The whole landscape of Redbridge needs to change if the climate and biodiversity crises are to be addressed.

The need to increase biodiversity, whilst countering climate change means that the built as well as natural environments need to change – there has to be a coming together.

The world sits at a pivotal moment where nature and the environment are simultaneously threatened by a lack of biodiversity and by the climate crisis, and these threats need to be addressed in unison

Councillor Paul Donovan



Frankly, there is just too much concrete around – whether that be housing or shopping centres or office blocks.

Yes, these things have a place but increased biodiversity and schemes like for active travel, that address health and carbon emissions, need to be integrated as part of a new vision.

The idea of the park in one place and the shopping centre somewhere else is something that has had its day. The two must integrate together.

Under the new Environment Act, there has to be a 10% net biodiversity gain in any newly built property. If properly implemented this should have a dramatic impact on the urban landscape. The building will simply be part of the wider vista.



Eco Home - 47 Greenleaf Road. A 120-year-old Walthamstow house has been transformed into an “energy efficient eco-home”. Picture courtesy of Aston Group.

On older housing stock, Waltham Forest Council have come up with some interesting ideas, including working with the Aston Group on a retrofit of old property. Called [Eco Home - 47 Greenleaf Road](#) it's a costly enterprise but really reducing emissions and enhancing biodiversity.

In Redbridge, the report of the [Nature an Environment Task and Finish Group](#) (which I chaired) has just been published.

It is intended as the third part in the council's response to the climate and biodiversity crises – the other two being the Climate Action Plan and the Green Urban Landscape policy.

A report published by Waltham Forest Council in 2019 highlighted that:

51% of the borough's carbon emissions were generated by residential homes

14.6% of homes in the area were fuel poor households

70% of Waltham Forest's 107,216 homes pre-date 1944

New-build properties with energy-efficient technology are only part of the solution, so it's vital to find a way to reduce carbon emissions from existing homes, through retrofitting.

Among the recommendations are the extension of Growzones across the borough, Wetlands and more tree planting.

There are 14 recommendations coming out of the report, which seeks to extend biodiversity in the borough.

Other recommendations include developing wildlife corridors, phasing out pesticide use and promoting allotments and community gardens.

[Growzones](#) began in Wanstead. We have seen successful areas developed on George and Christchurch Greens as well as at the Roding Valley Park – Elmcroft Avenue entrance.



Cllr Paul Donovan helping to plant some 500 wildflower plugs on Christ Church Green and adjacent verge on Wanstead Place - part of the 'Growzone' initiative.

There have been encouraging biodiversity gains at all of these sites, which helped in the effort to promote the idea across the borough.

We also need to look at how to encourage measures to help biodiversity on private land - the fruit tree giveaway was one such initiative.

It was a concern raised by community groups giving testimony to the T&F Group that too much of the borough is going under concrete.

This has been happening incrementally, with front and back gardens getting concreted over for a variety of reasons. The report calls for a review of present processes, with possible stipulations on the amount of an area that remains in natural state.

The report highlights the potential for Wetland developments which can help deal with flood threats as well as extend biodiversity. And as Walthamstow Wetlands and others across the country show they are a great visitor attraction.

A review of the Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (sincs) with a view to extending their coverage is another integral element of the report.

The whole approach has to be holistic, taking in every part of life. There also needs to be a flexibility of approach – tree planting is very good in terms of cutting carbon dioxide but it is not the only way to do this. Increasing biodiversity is a broad canvas, which offers an opportunity in many formats.

Plants in our gardens absorb carbon and release oxygen, improving the quality of the air we breathe.

As the number of vehicles on our streets increases, plants play an important role in absorbing some of these emissions.

Urban gardens also help keep our cities 'above water' since the soil in gardens naturally absorbs rainwater, reducing the risk of flooding.

Trees, hedges and climbers can also reduce the cost of heating and cooling by as much as 30% - they slow the speed of air movement around a building, as well as the temperature difference between incoming and outgoing air.

Trees and plants provide habitat and food for wildlife and us humans.

Plants and trees benefit our general mood and wellbeing

Plants and trees nurture soil

Plants and trees are beautiful and improve the look of our environment



London was struck by heavy rain this summer that saw parts of Wanstead Park made impassable. There is so much ground covered in buildings, tarmac or concrete that rainfall has nowhere to soak away. As a result surface water runs straight into our rivers which cannot handle the deluge and floods adjacent areas. Picture by Paul Donovan.

All parts of the environmental policy need to interact together from planting more trees and developing wetlands to facilitating more active travel and extending the electricity vehicle charging network.

All of these things need to work in unison, if the dual threats of biodiversity and climate disaster are to be tackled.

What is important is development per se becomes a far more holistic notion with climate and biodiversity considerations forming part of every element of council policy. It will be a steep learning curve but it needs to happen if there really is going to be

the sort of revolution required to start addressing climate and biodiversity crisis.

And what is for certain is that time is running out to act. These early reports and initiatives are now in place but they cannot be allowed to sit on the shelf and gather dust – we all need to see the initiatives, and more, happening immediately as the whole change in culture starts to develop.



Article by
Councillor Paul Donovan

A typical street in Ilford, south Redbridge. A lack of 'green' is the legacy of past council policy to do away with on-street parking - benefits of this were easier access for waste vehicles and more efficient/cheaper use of mechanical street and pavement cleaning over traditional manual road sweeps. Tree planting was also discouraged and trees even removed to cut maintenance costs. Pic by local resident John Cochrane





loughton camps

A speculative view by Verderer Paul Morris

Loughton Camp is an Iron Age (500BC) hill fort in Epping Forest, a mile North West of Loughton. The earthworks cover an area of 10 acres and are visible today as a low bank and ditch encircling a now forested main camp. The banks were most probably once a single high rampart and the appearance of the ditch suggests it was once very wide and deep in places.

A further set of ancient earthworks are a mile further north at a site called Ambresbury Banks.

The camp was discovered by local priest Benjamin Harris Cowper in 1872 and the first archaeology carried out was by General Pitt-Rivers in 1881. In 1882 the Essex Field Club further excavated the banks.

During COVID 19 there was an unprecedented increase in visitor numbers to Epping Forest especially in the Northern areas of which includes the two main Iron Age Hill forts. This increase in footfall has opened up numerous desire line pathways meaning previously quieter parts of the forest have become more accessible to walkers and cyclists alike. This has enabled a better view and sense of the layout of the landscape especially around Loughton Camps.

The most noticeable features of the wider area around the camps are the unusual distributions of ancient beech pollards and coppices or “coppards” These are an obvious feature on the ramparts of the camps, very distinctive and aligned quite unusually on the actual banks themselves.

Walking the wider area around the camps this pattern of ancient tree distribution happens to be found on some other outer embankments and earthworks. These also are situated in a manner whereby they form an outer ring much wider than realised around the camps in an irregular circular pattern but with the same ancient trees all situated on the edges of these earth banks.

Hill forts or encampments were quite the desirable places to live in the pre-history era from what I can understand they were not necessarily military, they could be defended if needs be but in the main a bit like a desirable housing development or gated community today but previous to the more settled Iron Age they were more

features of sacred places and meeting points. The climate was different back in the Neolithic period and warmer in general than now so hilltop encampments would have been naturally desirable.



Beech pollards in Epping Forest. Epping Forest has the highest remaining concentration of historic pollard trees in Britain, so these are of particular significance in the Forest. Many of the trees we see now on the site may well be ancient in their own right but these trunks are growing from root systems that are far older than the trees we see today.

There are so many factors involved in their purpose that we probably struggle today to reason as to why they were constructed at great effort but they have a varied purpose of being built for social, religious, economic and defence purposes. The irregular shape of Loughton camps and the outer features I am speculating about would be probably earlier than late Iron Age where these features became more regular and circular in design. Earlier constructions seem to have relied more on working with the natural lay of the land and following easier routes than being made perfect in shape.

Some studies carried out on trees in the area have dated many of the ancient tree root systems to originate from around the first Roman invasion era. Realising the age of the trees and their placement on earth banks has led me to investigate these features further.

I feel these extra banks have probably been overlooked and incorrectly assumed to be remnants of either the short gravel extraction period in the forest or bomb craters from WW2 air raids.

I doubt the gravel extraction explanation for a few reasons. Primarily because of the remote location of the site and how small the pits and ditches are compared to the amount of effort it would have taken to remove the gravel from the area, gravel extraction sites such as found in what are now mostly ponds in the forest are quite near to the roads and all are different in appearance to these features.

The placement of the ancient tree root systems on the earth bank features and also in many cases at the bottom of the ditches seems to suggest to me that they have been dug well over a thousand years ago as these ancient tree root balls wouldn't be at the bottom of ditches dug in the 1800s. Many of the trees we see now on the site may well be ancient in their own right but these trunks

are growing from root systems that are far older than the trees we see today. When some of these trees have fallen I have found Stone Age tools within their root ball systems.

Under ancient forest law it was an offence to use a carted vehicle with wheels and only sledges were permitted for removal of timber. Old Leet and Manorial court records show people having been bought before the court for having a wheeled cart on the forest so to have been removing any significant amounts of gravel prior to the Construction of the Epping New Road would most certainly have been recorded as it would have been of such a noticeable scale right in the centre of the forest away from any road to have not drawn attention.

The next possibility to rule out is damage or being part of the WW2 air raids and anti-tank defences, There is only one recorded bomb that was dropped in the area of Loughton camps and that was further away towards the North East, close to what is now the gravelled path leading from Green Ride to Mount Pleasant car park. This was between what was the old main path continuing straight up from the Clay ride pathway this was the main path until about thirty years ago and has now all but grown over. I also know local people that were living in Loughton during the blitz and they can pinpoint the locations of all the damage locally. These are the kind of memories that stay with people when they have experienced such dramatic events. The Anti-tank or Outer London Defence ring cuts through the forest much further north than Loughton camps, very close to

Ambresbury Banks and can still be easily distinguished today. Modern online mapping confirms both the bomb site and ditch locations.

The outer London defence ring is easily visible to the south of Ambresbury banks and probably becoming a historical feature in its own right now.



Ambresbury Bank is thought to have been built around 500 BC and, occupying one of the highest points in the Forest. It is thought to have been a hill fort although it's use was probably more than just defence.

Locally some of the ancient earthworks or pits are known nowadays as “The bomb holes” and as such are not being afforded the protection they potentially should receive but rather being used as a cycling jump feature. These are not just the pits immediately adjacent to the camps and again have the familiar pattern of ancient trees. Using a hand held metal location device in the tree trunks should highlight some sort of shrapnel and there should be some visible damage still traceable on these ancient trees if a bomb were to have been dropped and exploded

right amongst them. There isn't any trace of either. None of the forest arboriculture teams I have spoken to have found shrapnel during tree works in this vicinity.

After eliminating the more modern influences on these outer earth banks in the surrounding area to the camps I have visited them many various times during heavy rain fall to watch how the water is distributed towards the streams to eliminate the potential of natural erosion. These banks mainly run across the natural flow of water rather than acting as a tributary or enabling water to flow downhill. Two separate sections of these outer rings have been damaged; one section almost certainly due to water erosion and that is downstream from the water source that originates within the camps itself. The flow of water has also been diverted at points and a small pond has been created that is fed by a plastic drain pipe probably to address flooding over the Green ride from the water source within the camps.

Another section has been seriously eroded immediately downhill from the designated footpath around the south and west parts of the camp ramparts. The banks here have been damaged many years ago from what I understand and this was mentioned in the Essex Field club reports, this section was the access through to the Green Ride from the Epping New Road as far as I can make out and the counterscarp was pushed down the hill to form this pathway around the camps. Some remnants of piles of earth can be made out further downhill from here and water erosion has continued to wash these features away in this section.

I can find no other natural reason for the outer earth bank features and to the best of my abilities have eliminated any other reasons of their origin except that these are the remnants of an outer defence or land delineating ditch that circles the inner workings of the camps.

I personally have no archaeological training, indeed I am not an academic nor qualified in any sort of research of this manner but rather I am a builder with an engineering background and someone that over the years has dug many a trench and hole in the ground myself and most importantly dug a lot of trenches locally to this area, I know the ground and grew up living on the edge of this very part of the forest on the opposite side of this valley right on the edge of the forest.

I have sought opinions from Someone I know to have some archaeological training and who has experience in Iron Age fort archaeological studies. Upon taking him to see these outer banks he agreed with me that what I had explained most probably warrants further investigation and agreed that these certainly appear to be relevant to the camps, similar in design and in an outer circular fashion to the camps.

I wasn't really aware of all the earlier documented research prior to my initial realisation but since having read more about it have been able to directly compare those findings to what I had realised myself, most interesting to me was that Cowper had alluded to the

Green Ride having intersected the camps and he had noted outer earth works but not being able to conclude their relevance didn't include them as part of his map of the site.

General Pitt-Rivers and the Essex field club also have noted the existence of further earthworks and recommended the need for further investigation work. This was all over a hundred years ago now and most probably at the time the forest would have had a different "tree scape" and landscape view. The trees would have been pollarded and lopped to a more uniform height when the forest was being worked, most likely with less Holly invasion and almost probably far less desire line pathways and less access to be able to see the large area these works cover however at least this explained Cowper's comment of the Green Ride intersection of the camps as indeed it does intersect the outer ring or ramparts and since COVID is now open and accessible to see.

Whilst waiting to see what response there would be to my suggestions I decided to continue my site visits and research out of pure interest in the forest in general, being a Verderer I spend a lot of time walking the woods and decided to concentrate on the Great Monkwood area this year, it being my favourite part of the forest in general and I have been researching some of the aspects of the ownership of Stratford Langthorne Abbey (Now Canning Town) of Great Monkwood and the works the Monks carried out plus also some local folk legends that

feature this part of the forest. The forest has probably been saved by itself over the years by not being the best ground to work or build on and farm and yet the Monks from Stratford Langthorne went to great distances from what is now Canning Town to this specific area. I wonder if that is because the land within the outer bank area I have mentioned was previously farmed and worked so an easier and more opportune site to work?

To the east of the camps between the Green ride and the outer ditch I refer to there is an obvious absence of mature and ancient trees until you reach the ditch. There is very little pollarding on trees compared to the rest of the area and the land is unusually flat for the forest. This piece between the Green ride and clay ride is not typical to the rest of the area and I wonder if this was once flatter open field or grassland. After the ditch the land falls steeply away. The usual distribution of ancient trees against the embankment acts to bind the soil today and where trees have fallen the ground quickly washes away downhill. I suspect it's entirely possible that the trees were planted to serve as natural retaining wall feature and much the same as the banks at the camps themselves the trees are holding the earthworks in place. That could be the simple reason for them being placed there but on the scale that they encircle would mean a far larger area of habitation and land working than previously realised.

Ambresbury has within its banks a smaller similar area of much younger trees and flatter land.

As nothing more than a pure observation whilst walking in Little Monkwood rather than searching I noticed that within the root balls of some fallen trees there was an unusually high amount of larger flints than is commonly distributed around the forest floor much larger in fact. On closer inspection one stuck out to me as being the similar to what I had been shown as a flint tool. This particular piece looks to be either an axe head or Thames pick. So for the rest of the summer each time I am in the forest in this area I have been carefully inspecting the root balls and mounds left by fallen trees and have found many various flint tools and some of what I now realise is ancient pottery after reading some of Pitt-Rivers descriptions of finds within the excavation trenches cut through the ramparts of the camps.

These are widely distributed finds throughout the whole area I feel to be part of the wider area of the camps than currently scheduled.

The tree patterns I mentioned previously also lead to another observation regarding the camps and that is to the pits on the outskirts of the northern ramparts immediately adjacent to the camps, currently deemed to be gravel pits I feel that the situation of the ancient trees within them dismisses this as previously explained with regards to the outer ramparts. Upon reading research

into other sites the presence of these pits isn't unique and indeed I have been drawn to the example of Old Oswestry Hill Fort in Wales. Old Oswestry has similar pit features and is also known to have been adapted over different periods. The previous excavations through the ramparts of the camps indicated there were tools found that were much older than the assumed period of construction of the ramparts in the relic beds.



Flint tools can be found in the root balls and mounds left by fallen trees. These can be found in a much wider area of the camps than currently recorded.

Pit houses are a feature that would have been useful in the location. It is set on relatively high ground; the headland faces the prevailing winds. It is possibly easier and warmer to build lower walls to span with a roof and the notable feature of these pits compared to other locations in the forest is that these pits do not flood. Other parts of the forest where holes have been dug

have become ponds but not here. The ground make up enables something quite important in forest living and that is the ability to keep a relatively dry floor, even just short distance away from the camps this isn't possible and the ground quickly becomes waterlogged when wet. Given my personal experience with digging holes and trenches it does not seem logical to me to keep digging separate pits right next to each other as if you were chasing gravel it would be easier to dig sideways and keep opening the ground up rather than starting a new hole. Therefore I feel these unusual features are far more likely to be a significant feature to the camps and would better be preserved if afforded greater protection.

Loughton camps has compelling evidence pointing towards it having been a multivallate Hill fort rather than a univallate and of being adapted and potentially re fortified at different stages of occupation. The City of London has some unpublished geophysical ground radar research carried out by students in a small area some years ago. Their findings give a strong indication of the presence of round and square shaped structures and a fire hearth within the camp boundaries. These various building designs indicate different periods of habitation and usage plus that of being used for more than just an animal enclosure. Couple that with different era stone and pottery finds during the limited initial excavations it all points to the site being repeatedly inhabited over various different stages.

My personal feelings are that this site has much more to reveal about itself and given the huge progress made in technology since the previous excavations around a hundred years ago it most probably warrants some further investigations and revaluation.

I feel that this was more likely either a multivallate hill encampment covering a much wider area given the extent of the wider earth work features still visible and I feel that given the close proximity to Ambresbury and the visible remnants of an ancient track between the two I think it is more likely to have been inhabited by the

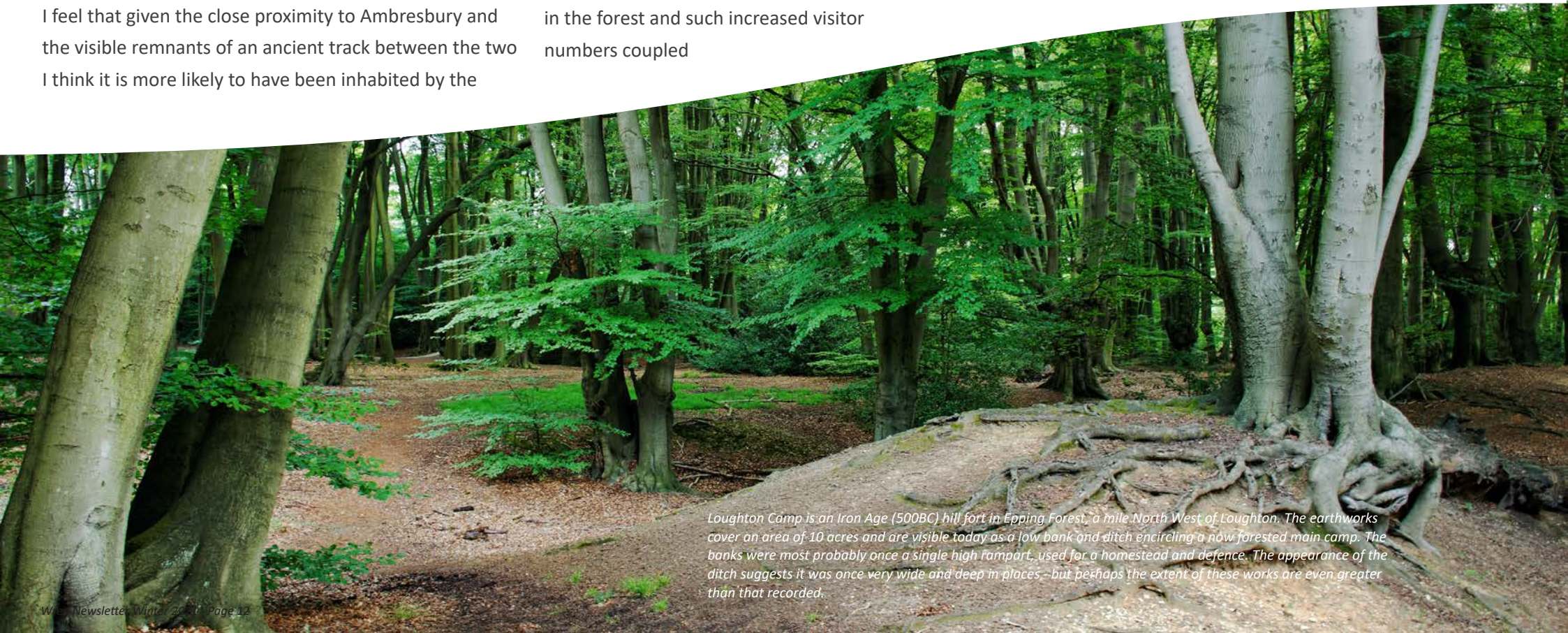
same tribes than opposing ones, potentially both being part of the same defences. I have found evidence of two mounds that look to be earth barrows between the two sites and some LIDAR indicates some further earthworks nearer to the Theydon side of the forest.

The other alternative is that for reasons unknown Loughton camps ceased to be a desirable location and Ambresbury became the new encampment, better designed in shape, less prevailing wind influence, it certainly feels better designed in shape and layout and with probably slightly newer “Mod Cons” such as a better water source and easier to access.

It is important that given the rapid pace of change of use in the forest and such increased visitor numbers coupled

with the environmental pressures and management that we at least revisit the potential that this site has been underestimated with regards to its design and significance and look towards relocating pathways and attempt to further reduce cycling impact, even possibly address footfall to an extent with innovative ways that enable access but reduce damage.

Verderer Paul Morris
November 2021



Loughton Camp is an Iron Age (500BC) hill fort in Epping Forest, a mile North West of Loughton. The earthworks cover an area of 10 acres and are visible today as a low bank and ditch encircling a now forested main camp. The banks were most probably once a single high rampart, used for a homestead and defence. The appearance of the ditch suggests it was once very wide and deep in places – but perhaps the extent of these works are even greater than that recorded.



fungus walk

Setting off in driving rain on October 31st 2021 to drive to Wanstead, I feared that no one would turn out to join me on the foray, but on arrival I was delighted to discover that a group of over 25 enthusiasts, suitably attired, had gathered in anticipation of an interesting excursion into the squelchy wilderness of Bush Wood!

Yellow Fieldcap - pic by Tony Morrison

Setting off in driving rain to drive to Wanstead, I feared that no one would turn out to join me on the foray, but on arrival I was delighted to discover that a group of over 25 enthusiasts, suitably attired, had gathered in anticipation of an interesting excursion into the squelchy wilderness of Bush Wood! We were not disappointed as the copious amount of rain had encouraged the production of many fungal fruiting bodies!

I briefly outlined the different forms of fruiting bodies and how fungi play a crucial role as decomposers and recyclers. As decomposers, different species utilise the various substrates found in fallen branches, leaves, fruit or dung, breaking down complex molecules by enzyme action and releasing nutrients which are then available for reuse by plants or other organisms including soil bacteria. The physical structure of their microscopical



The Deceiver, *Laccaria laccata* - pic by Bob Vaughan

threads or hyphae penetrate the soil and help to retain moisture and reduce erosion by binding the mineral particles together. Certain fungi are parasitic on plants causing economic loss of crops. Most species are predated a variety of animals such as deer, squirrels or slugs and there are at least 1,000 insects which are associated with fungi, some are very specific only feeding on one species of fungus.



Scarlet Waxcap *Hygrocybe coccinea*- pic by Bob Vaughan

The group quickly discovered that the grassy area was studded many tiny white or grey Fairy Bonnets *Mycena* spp which breakdown the dead material. A few toadstools of the fragile and short lived Yellow Fieldcap *Bolbitius titubans* were spotted beside a favoured path by dog walkers. This widespread species is associated with dung enriched grassland.

There were large numbers of small brown or lilac coloured toadstools in the grass. The brown ones were examples of the Deceiver *Laccaria laccata*, a common

but very variable species with slightly hollowed stems. Its scientific name relates to its appearance of being covered with lacquer. The lilac form is the striking Amethyst deceiver *Laccaria amethystea*. In addition, upright fruiting bodies of Yellow Clubs *Clavulinopsis helvola* were conspicuous.



Fairy Bonnets *Mycena* spp - pic by Bob Vaughan

Although the association of certain fungi with the roots of specific trees has been known for many years, recent research has confirmed that trees share and trade food via this fungal mycorrhizal network that connects their roots. The term the wood wide web is now widely accepted, and such webs are also found in other habitats including grassland and garden soil. The host plant supplies synthesised food materials to its associated fungi in exchange for water and minerals. As 80% of plant species have this beneficial or symbiotic association with one or more fungal species this is the hidden value of fungi within all ecosystems.

We found two examples of this symbiotic relationship with the discovery of several glistening toadstools of the Scarlet Waxcap *Hygrocybe coccinea* in the grass close to its host plant Ribwort Plantain and several fruiting bodies of the Oakbug Milkcap *Lactarius quietus* among the fallen leaves beneath its host oak trees.



Sulphur Tuft *Hypholoma fasciculare* - pic by Bob Vaughan

Fungi are everywhere but certain species are more commonly noticed than others. These include clumps of Sulphur Tuft *Hypholoma fasciculare*, a brown and white striped bracket Turkey Tails *Trametes versicolor*, Candle Snuff *Xylaria hypoxylon* fungus as well as the Common puffball *Lycoperdon perlatum* all of which are found on rotting wood. Another common species is the Buttercup *Collybia butyracea* with greasy caps which often appears beneath the brambles beside the paths surviving until mid-winter.

As clouds parted and the sun shone we noticed that a patch of star moss was dotted with the miniscule

toadstools of Orange Mosscap *Rickenella fibula*. However, the finale of the walk was the sighting of some splendid Fly Agarics *Amanita muscaria* beneath the clump of small silver birch trees on the edge of the Flats and among them was a large slimy dark coloured specimen of the Ugly Milkcap *Lactarius turpis*. The visible presence of both of these mycorrhizal species beneath these birches demonstrates that more than one species of fungus can support the host tree.



Common puffball *Lycoperdon perlatum* - pic by Bob Vaughan

Although largely hidden from view fungi provide vital assistance with mitigation measures for climate change as their varied functions underpin the wellbeing of all habitats helping to store carbon within the soil and growing vegetation. Soils with a vibrant biome store more moisture retention reducing soil erosion and providing other economically important ecological services. However, increased pressures from soil compaction, pollution and climate change are causing some changes in the mycota which will disrupt the

wellbeing of these and monitoring their presence or absence in different habitats is vital.



Fly Agarics *Amanita muscaria* - pic by James Heal

Although autumn is main season for the production of fruiting bodies, certain species do appear in other seasons, and I would encourage you to upload clear photos of fruiting bodies onto i-record to help monitor what is happening as a result of climate change.

Article by Tricia Moxey



If you are interested in fungi then do check the websites for the British Mycological Society <https://www.britmycolsoc.org.uk> and the Fungus Conservation Trust <http://www.abfg.org>.

bird report

by James Heal

Autumn - which, for the purposes of most of this brief report, is simply from the start of September to the end of November - added 10 species of bird to our patch year list (now at a record 142) with many of our local birders also breaking their personal bests already. Monthly totals were also impressive: September = 104 (our highest month score on record); October = 90 (somewhat lower than the 95 we had last October); November = 85 (seven more than November last year) and a total of 120 species across the three Autumn months.

However, this may simply reflect good coverage and focused recording, rather than the year being somehow better than others. Indeed when we analyse our data on the autumn passage passerine migration (see below), and compare with data from previous years, we can see that 2021 was really poor to middling.



It feels appropriate to start with our very long staying Black-necked Grebe which arrived on Alex on 3 May (and, for those who haven't been following our patch exploits, this was only our second ever record of this species) complete with full 'sum plum' golden ear tufts and then through the Autumn moulted into the more subtle, but equally beautiful, monochrome shades. It was present throughout the Autumn but was last seen on 28 November when it departed as the first ice of the season spread across the lake.



A big highlight was the first Wryneck on the Flats in six years and our fifth patch record. Pic by Nick Croft

A big highlight was the first Wryneck on the Flats in six years and our fifth patch record. Jono found it feeding on the edge of the model aeroplane field by the Brooms on 4 September and it was seen by most of the locals and a fair few visitors for two further days.

The day after (5 September) the Wryneck find, a similarly rare patch spectacle came when Richard, Jono and others picked up a flock of six Curlew flying west over the Flats. I was at home (off patch) when the news came through but was able to see them flying further west over Leytonstone (just one of several locally-rare birds this year I have added to my house list but not my patch list).

Our best ever September (for total species) ended with an excellent record and photo from Nick of a Gannet flying south over the Flats (only our fourth patch record). Nick also had our fourth patch record of Merlin north over the Flats on 13th October.

The best of the rest included:

- ❑ A long-staying juv Cuckoo that frequented several copses on the Flats and last seen on 7 September
- ❑ Sedge Warbler on 3 September on the Flats
- ❑ Marsh Harrier heading west over the Flats on 7th September found by Nick (another one I saw from my house)
- ❑ Mediterranean Gull on 12 September on Alex from Nick
- ❑ Mandarin on 16 September on Jubilee from Bob and a pair on Heronry from Rob on 20 November
- ❑ Simon found Green Sandpiper on 18 September and Nick heard another on 19 October
- ❑ Jono and Bob had Golden Plover over the Flats west over the Flats on 22 September (the first since the cold weather birds back in Feb)

- ❑ Jono had our only Short-eared Owl for the year NW over the Flats on 21 September
- ❑ Lapwing on 7th, 8th, 10th October and again on 5 November
- ❑ All of our Jack Snipe records have been this Autumn, with the first on 2 October and last on 5 November
- ❑ Jono had our second Woodlark of the year on 11 October (still a patch bogey-bird for yours truly)
- ❑ Jono also had our only Ring Ouzel of the Autumn, which was also our second latest, on 5 November (see more under passage migrants below)
- ❑ Nick had our first Firecrest since April on 7 November.



Mandarin spotted 16th September on Jubilee by Bob Vaughan - pic by James Heal

Bob's nocmig recorder has also been hard at work this Autumn with: Redshank on 6th and 8th of September (plus another on 23 October); Oystercatcher on 7th September (also a record on 24 November); Ringed Plover on 23 October; and, Dunlin on 9 October.

Autumn Passage Migration

In the last bird report, I covered the beginning of Autumn migration (August), but now the eBird data can provide a fuller overview of the full migratory period this Autumn.



Wheatear - pic by Nick Croft

Autumn migration kicked off with the first departing Sand Martin on 5 August and Willow Warbler on 7 August. The earliest of the ‘big seven’ (Wheatear, Whinchat, Redstart, Spotted Flycatcher, Pied Flycatcher, Tree Pipit and Yellow Wagtail) was Spotted Flycatcher on 11 August; a pretty standard date. However, as with most phenological trends this year, most passage birds appeared to be arriving later than normal. In fact all of the species tracked in the data table arrived later than average with the exception of Willow Warbler (across species tracked they were over three days later than average).

We actually recorded more bird days than the recent average (2016-2019) for each species over the Autumn except for Ring Ouzel, but I suspect this may have been more down to strong coverage and recording. Indeed, if we just compare with 2019, the key species are all down except for Yellow Wagtail (see column four in the table).

Some time I will attempt to crunch more of the historical data to give a more accurate picture over time.

Using the same comparisons against the mean over the last few years, the average day counts were all pretty similar with a few notable exceptions: Swallow numbers were down by around half on the average. More positively, Sand Martin, Tree Pipit, and Pied Flycatcher numbers were all up on average.

Species	First and last Autumn	Bird days	Bird days vs 2019	Average Count	High Count
Sand Martin	05/08* - 26/09	10		10	42
Willow Warbler	07/08 - 19/09	33		3	11
Spotted Flycatcher	11/08 - 21/09	28	-5	2	9
Swallow	14/08* - 18/10	26		11	52
Yellow Wagtail	15/08* - 09/10	31	16	2	8
Wheatear	16/08 - 21/10	27	-1	2	12
Whinchat	16/08 - 25/09	32	-8	3	9
Tree Pipit	18/08 - 06/09	12	-10	2	3
Common Redstart	19/08 - 12/09	9	-14	1	2
Garden Warbler	21/08 - 07/09	4		1	1
Pied Flycatcher	21/08 - 21/09	10	-5	2	4
Ring Ouzel	05/11 -	1	-4	1	1

Tree Pipit - pic by Bob Vaughan



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 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*.
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00722/full>



bag it & bin it

(If you'd be so kind)

Anyone taking a walk around Wanstead Park and Wanstead Flats these days can hardly fail to notice the growing number of plastic bags hanging from bushes and trees.

The practice by dog owners of collecting up their pets' faeces, placing them in a bag which they then hang on a handy branch has reached such a level that locals are saying enough is enough.



Not only does the phenomenon create an ugly eyesore; it is also against the law. As a dog owner you're expected to poop and scoop and discard in your own black bin or in dog waste bins provided. If anybody is spotted hanging their dog mess from trees, they are risking a fine, even though the mess is bagged. Quite simply, it's classed as littering, as you're knowingly discarding bagged waste.

It is also bad practice from a long-term environmental point of view, claim critics. When the packages eventually fall to the ground, the plastic will not biodegrade, so it remains in the soil for years. Even Biodegradable plastics take three months to a year to decompose fully.



There is a growing trend to hang dog poo bags from trees. It may be that people don't want to walk around with it on their person and fully intend to pick it up on their return - but forget. It may be just laziness - but bagging and hanging seems more work than just leaving it on the ground. Or it may be some kind of protest against those people who find the practice so abhorrent.

The bagging problem comes against a background of an estimated 1,000 tonnes of dog poo being produced by Britain's eight million dogs every day, according to the Keep Britain Tidy group.

Much like carrier bags, plastic dog poop bags can accumulate quickly in landfills, it is estimated that a dog pooping three times a day can generate 1000 bags a year.

Approximately 500 million plastic poop bags are used annually throughout the world.

One plastic bag can take over 500 years to degrade in a landfill; that is if it ever fully degrades.

Even biodegradable dog poop bags need ideal conditions to break down and can take anything from 3 months to a year to decompose.

Meanwhile, objectors have received strong backing from the Kennel Club. "It is important that dog owners clean up any mess their dog leaves behind, whether that is on a street, in a park or on a countryside pathway," said Dr Ed Hayes, Head of Public Affairs.

"When taking their dog for a walk, owners should always carry several poo bags to make sure they can clean up after their dog, and dispose of those bags in an appropriate bin, or if not possible, take it back home with them to dispose of it there. Never leave the bags or any other litter behind when walking your dog," he said.



Dog fouling is an environmental crime. The law allows Council's Environmental Crime Enforcement Officers to give anyone seen not clearing up after their dog an on-the-spot fine called a fixed penalty notice (FPN).

By any criteria, the practice is bizarre. If someone is environmentally aware enough to pick up their dog's excrement, how then can they make an even greater negative footprint by adding a polluting substance into the equation, critics wonder.

In mitigation, dog owners may point out that there is a lack of bins in which to deposit the waste. But it is understood that the Corporation of London (which administers Epping Forest) is reluctant to introduce more bins because, it argues, that encourages fly-tipping.

To dog lover Clare Lee, the answer is crystal-clear: take your dog's mess home and get rid of it there. "Being a responsible dog owner means being a caring citizen, too," she says. "Scooping up the poo and leaving it suspended from a bush in an unsightly black plastic bag is irresponsible. Beautiful places to walk the dog don't remain beautiful if they are covered in dog poo, whether on the ground or hanging from a branch. We have got to put a stop to this. The mantra should be: bag it and bin it."

She concedes that the habit could have started in an entirely innocent way. "It may be that owners who hung the waste from branches fully intended to come back at the end of their walk, remove it from the branch and dispose of it at home, but more often than not they forgot, so it became the norm."

On wilder areas of land, some might say that pushing the excrement out of the way into the longer grass is an adequate way of solving the problem. But the "shit and flick" method, as it is known in

some parts, has its drawbacks.

Dog faeces are detrimental to soil quality because they introduce unwanted nutrients and can change the terrain irreversibly. Many heathland areas are nutrient-poor habitats and the rare plants that grow there require these low nutrient conditions to survive. Dogs nowadays eat largely man-made, processed foods – often known as kibble, which is a dried

biscuit made from extract of meat, vegetables and grain. Other people feed their dogs raw or tinned meat, which makes the waste potentially even more damaging to the terrain.

In practical terms this type of poo left on the ground encourages brambles, nettles and rank grasses to overrun the more sensitive flora already growing there.

Dog waste is essentially a very different product from that emitted by cattle which biodegrades naturally and actually enhances the soil.

Bagging and hanging your pooch's poo on a tree is, however, one environmental problem which is potentially easy to solve. It is also capable of being resolved locally and very quickly.

Law-breaking dog owners, you have been warned: locals will be watching!

article by Robert Nurden



then & now

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



The Wonder of Winter

As the chilly winds blow and the darkness falls
Winter enchants as the robin calls
Spectacular colour on all the trees
Autumn sunshine can easily please

The Silvery moon and stars so bright
Frosty days misty rain and wintry nights

Squirrels and foxes scavenge food to survive

In the garden we feed the birds so they can thrive

Fires are glowing as winter draws near
Icicles and snow may often appear

So, do not forget those hats and gloves
Go out and find the things we love

Forever winter seems to last so long

Till spring returns and the pleasant bird song

So, my friends the message is clear
Be kind, keep safe and warm

Look forward to a brand-new YEAR

Janet Briggs, November 2021



Winter Moon , Wanstead Flats by Tony Morrison

robin

A familiar sight in our gardens at this time of year is the robin - in particular robins are one of the only UK birds to be heard singing in the garden on Christmas day.

Legend has it that the robin's red breast gives it a direct link to Christianity. In some legends, it was an all-brown bird until it was touched with the blood of Christ as he hung on the Cross, sometimes depicted as singing into his ear to alleviate the agony of his final moments. In another version, the robin is seen as trying to pluck out the nails or the thorns from the crown or trying to staunch the wound in Christ's side made by the legionary's lance. Yet another legend says that the robin scorched its breast in the fires of Purgatory, mercifully taking drops of water in its beak to the lips of the parched souls in torment.

Another (more likely) story is the association between the robin and the red-coated Victorian postmen nicknamed "robins" – this may sound too convenient to be true, but early Christmas cards depicted robins carrying letters in their beaks.



The robin is, without doubt, one of our favourite garden birds. It seems to trust us, staying close when we're in the garden and even taking food from our hands. Their melodious voices, along with their cheeky attitudes, have endeared robin redbreasts to the British public, and in 2015 the robin re-won the honour (of the nation's favourite) in a poll, beating off the blackbird, swift and barn owl.

The robin was not always so popular. In the past it was associated with death. One superstition was that if a "robin taps three times at the window of a home, then any sick person inside will soon die". One old rhyme warned against hunting them: the robin "brings death to the snarer by whom it is caught".

The silvery balm of robin song in the autumn is one of the great consolations of the silenced season or sounds like that to us. But for the robin it's fighting talk

Despite its cute appearance the robin is a pugnacious fellow. It is aggressively territorial and quick to drive away intruders fighting with its own kind and attacking other birds - robins will even attack a bundle of red feathers or their own reflection if they mistake it for another individual. Initial attacks between rival robins usually involve striking the opponent single blows with

feet and wings, or bowling it off a perch. But as fighting develops, both adversaries begin rolling over and over on the ground, before fluttering face to face while striking with legs then tumbling to the ground interlocked. Each robin then attempts to pin its rival to the ground. The victor rains blows down on the vanquished bird's head particularly around the eyes even blinding or killing it. The majority of fights last less than a minute before the loser (almost always the intruder) flees. But some encounters continue off and on for an hour or more and exceptionally over several days.



In 2014 the robin topped a poll of more than 200,000 people to choose the UK's first national bird. Ornithologist David Lindo - who launched the campaign - said the robin was "entwined into our national psyche" as a "Christmas card pin-up".

Robins hold their territories all year round, warning off intruders with song and males may hold the same territory throughout their lives.

It was thought that robins migrated but British robins are largely resident. They don't really disappear over the summer – they just become a bit less visible. When food

is more readily available during the summer, robins are more likely to forage out of sight in the woods rather than coming to your bird table in the garden. However some, mostly females, cross the Channel to spend the winter as far south as southern Spain and Portugal. At the same time there is an influx here of Continental robins from Scandinavia and Russia avoiding the severe northern winter.

In October a small number of British robins, "perhaps 5 per cent", leave the country each autumn to spend the winter in mainland Europe, mostly in northern France — although some have been spotted as far south as Spain and Portugal (the rest stick around to pose for our Christmas cards).

Behaviour changes around Christmas-time. Robins begin exploring other robins' territories seeking a mate. By mid-January the majority will be paired and the females stop singing. Male robins continue singing, declaring what has become a joint breeding territory. On occasions singing lasts into the night especially where there are street lights prominent. Detailed research shows that a few robins hold more than one territory simultaneously for up to six weeks. These are usually adult males moving up to a third of a mile between breeding and winter territories.

let them eat bread

Official Statement from the Queen's Swan Marker.

As many of you know there has been a lot of debate about feeding swans and other waterfowl bread. We have always maintained that feeding them bread is fine, Today we received a this statement from The Queen's Swan Marker, David Barber, MVO, endorsed by Professor Christopher Perrins of the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology at Oxford University.

"There has been a lot of press coverage recently regarding the 'Ban the Bread' campaign which is confusing many members of the public who like to feed swans.

Supporters of the campaign claim that bread should not be fed to swans on the grounds that it is bad for them. This is not correct. Swans have been fed bread for many hundreds of years without causing any ill effects. While bread may not be the best dietary option for swans compared to their natural food such as river weed, it has become a very important source of energy for them, supplementing their natural diet and helping them to survive the cold winter months when vegetation is very scarce.

There is no good reason not to feed bread to swans, provided it is not mouldy. Most households have surplus bread and children have always enjoyed feeding swans with their parents. The 'Ban the Bread' campaign is already having a deleterious impact upon the swan population; I am receiving reports of underweight cygnets and adult birds, and a number of swans from large flocks have begun to wander into roads in search of food. This poses the further risk of swans being hit by vehicles. Malnutrition also increases their vulnerability to fatal diseases like avian-flu which has caused the deaths of many mute swans and other waterfowl in the past.

Furthermore, there have been statements made in the media claiming that feeding bread causes angel-wing in swans. Angel-wing is a condition where a cygnet develops a deformed wing. Professor Christopher Perrins, LVO, FRS of the Department of Zoology at Oxford University stated, 'There is no evidence of a connection between feeding bread and angel-wing; at least some cygnets develop this condition without ever having seen any bread'.

I therefore encourage members of the public to continue feeding swans to help improve their chances of survival, especially through the winter."

We'd like to thank everyone for their support and we hope that this will help these beautiful birds.



<http://www.theswansanctuary.org.uk/cause/official-statement-bread-queens-swan-marker/>

.... don't forget

It's that time of year again to keep an eye out for our feathered friends.

- Provide fresh clean water every day.
- Feed a seed mix meant for wild birds.
- Also 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.

then & now

Were you right ?

Wanstead Flats early 1900s a view from Blake Hall Road with Woodford Road (Centre Road) leading to Forest Gate and Aldersbrook to the left leading to Manor Park





and
finally ...

Practical work

Our team continues to meet each week to do habitat management around Wanstead park

- 30th December Thursday meet 10am Temple
- 2nd January Sunday meet 10am Stables gate Empress Ave E12
- 6th January Thursday meet 10am Stables gate Empress Ave E12, and then each Thursday in January same time and place

All tools and gloves provided but come prepared for mud!

Antarctica - illustrated Zoom talk

Dave Playford on his trip from Ushuaia to Antarctica aboard the GAdventure expedition ship. He spent 6 days making trips on to the ice of the Antarctic Peninsula viewing thousands of penguins and other birds such as albatross, sheathbills, blue eyed cormorants and skuas . Leopard and huge elephant seals were also seen. Photographs will be shown of all the wildlife as well as icebergs and the incredible beauty of the Antarctic landscape.

Please get your free ticket here, and then you will get sent a Zoom link nearer the time

<https://www.ticketsource.co.uk/wren-wildlife-and-conservation-group>

We may be living in and out of 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
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>

