



Autumn 2022

Wren

Wildlife & Conservation Group

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a word from the chair

Wren started fifty years ago when a socially-conscious group of young friends got together to find ways to engage other young people with the natural environment around them.

On 8 October some of those original founders came back together, along with those of us who have been involved with Wren for much shorter periods and shared memories. It was a wonderful evening where old and new friends with a shared love of the local area and of wildlife came together to celebrate.

I was lucky enough to share the stage with several of Wren's pioneers and leading lights. People like Colin Plant are known to me from the books that grace my

bookshelves but I had never met before. It was great to hear some of his stories, like how he picked Sir David Attenborough up from the tube station to take him to speak at a Wren event and Sir David had to sit in the back seat of Colin's beaten up Ford Anglia because there was so much stuff on the front seat.

I got to meet David Spivack for the first time who told us how he was ten years old when Richard Oakman, our President, came up to him while he was fishing in Wanstead Park and invited him to get involved with Wren. That was David's first involvement with conservation work but sparked the direction of his life's career. Dave now lives and works in Yorkshire.

Wren Committee members, Mark Gorman and Peter Williams, gave a brilliant talk on the social history of the local area, including the incredible story how thousands of local working people saved Wanstead Flats from becoming enclosed (which in turn would have likely meant it would now have been developed on).

I was struck by the parallels of local people coming together to protect and celebrate our green spaces with the work of Wren.

It was also wonderful to meet some of our much newer members, including some of our winners of the photographic competition who are really blazing a trail in the quality of their images.

The night was celebrated with raffles, music, food, and drink. Whether people enjoy Wren most for the practical work, wildlife recording, or for any other reason, I think we are all united in friendship based on a common cause. I like to hope one day people will similarly come together to celebrate Wren's 100th anniversary. Happy Birthday to us!

James Heal
Chair of Wren Group



Old Friends
From left to right: Colin Plant, Tricia Moxey, James Heal, David Spivack, Richard Oakman, Paul Ferris



bird report

by James Heal

I have been following strict calendar boundaries for my quarterly bird reports (so this edition should cover June, July, and August). But I have decided to try a change given that bird migration cycles do not follow such strict human-imposed calendar dates.

So, I shall now try and have: 1) a write up which touches on a previous year overview and winter highlights; 2) a spring migration edition [very little change here from current format]; 3) a summer overview which may sometimes need to range more broadly than birds given birding is often pretty poor in June and July; 4) an Autumn migration edition (which may well include some migratory records from August and possibly even July).



Stonechat - pic by Tony Brown



June saw 71 species of bird species recorded which was two lower than June of the previous year.

There was not a lot of excitement to report in bird terms in the month, although an unseasonal Shelduck and even more unseasonal (for Wanstead) Stonechat (a young bird) were birds of note. Beyond that, the best birds were often found by studying the sky: 10 Red Kite for the month (a score we would have been pleased with for a full year not so long ago), and 18 Common Buzzard. There was breeding evidence from our few remaining Skylark on the Flats and from Reed Warbler in the Park.

The Black-necked Grebe that appeared (back) on

Alexandra Lake in April remained through June and July but was last seen on 29 July.

July will be remembered for the drought, heat, and fires, but we also managed to record 82 species of bird on the Patch (a July record) with an early Wheatear and Yellow Wagtail (more on passage migration the next update) at the end of the month as well as a smattering of good waders (by 'good' I mean any wader as Wanstead is not exactly rich in suitable habitat or regular wader records). Green Sandpiper (30 July) was seen but the others were picked up by Bob's nocturnal recorder: Lapwing, Whimbrel, Redshank, and Oystercatcher.

*"Don't waste electricity, don't waste paper, don't waste food
..... live the way you want to live but just don't waste."*

*Sir David Attenborough,
Patron of the Wren Group*



a tale of two hawk-moths

The Summer of 2020 - everyone will remember it for many different reasons, some good some not so good. For me, three little lives fell into my hands that July and make me smile to this day even though they are long gone.



Turning homeward into St Margarets Road after a long walk in Wanstead Park on a very windy afternoon, I came upon a damaged, exhausted Eyed Hawk-moth being blown about on the pavement. Unsure as to where she would prefer to be, I sat and put her on my lap while looking online for ideas. Clearly not bothered about my researches and having no thumbs to twiddle, she passed the time laying two fresh green eggs on my trousers. I put her in a seemingly suitable place and hoped that her last hours would be peaceful.



Eyed Hawk Moth & eggs - day 1

Getting the eggs off my trousers and into a pot turned out to be harder than I thought (the first egg tumbled into my carpet and out of sight, requiring a lint roller for retrieval) but eight days later, two tiny caterpillars appeared in their egg-pot eager to get started on their feasting binge. I named them Hawkeye and Trapper.



An old net cake cover and plant-pot base made a luxury Caterpillar tent

An old net cake cover and plant-pot formed a luxury tent on prime real estate next to my kitchen sink, housing three mini-vases of specially selected, hand-picked "Taste the Difference" willow leaves in water. For the next three weeks I foraged for their leaves, mucked out their tent, and gazed lovingly at them several times a day, often with



Hawkeye newly hatched - day 8

a camera. For their part, they thrived on their all-you-can-eat buffet pausing only to shed their skins from time to time, seemingly oblivious to my presence.



Hawkeye & Trapper 21 days

By Day 23, they were big, luscious, 7cm-long beauties, almost fully grown. Time to move them to new quarters - a bucket each of potting compost with an arrangement of protruding twigs where they would burrow down to pupate, spending 10 months in the shed. For weeks afterwards it felt strange to walk past willows without picking a few leaves, but those "empty-nester" pangs were eventually replaced by the anticipation of seeing my babies as adult moths.

By the following May, it was time to bring them into my lounge, placing their open buckets into a pop-up garden waste bin covered with a clear plastic bag. Having identified a good, strong willow in the park for their release, I was all ready. Except I wasn't – I had overlooked



Hawkeye day 22

one simple, basic fact about adult Eyed Hawk-moths – they are nocturnal.

Engrossed in a TV drama at 10.30pm on 31st May, I heard frantic fluttering coming from the bin. Beside myself with delight at my first perfect little moth – this was

Trapper, always the smaller of the two - I was hit with the realisation that he needed to go to the park there and then, a time when it is a dark and scary place for me to be alone. Adult Eyed Hawk-moths have no mouthparts so cannot feed, living on stored energy reserves alone until mating within a short 5 – 14 day life span. The best I could do was to put him into a pot and take him just past the entrance of the park near to trees hoping he would fly off in search of a mate (at least a male doesn't need a willow). After clinging to my hand for about 20 minutes, he suddenly launched himself off, plopped into the long grass in front of me and was gone into the darkness. I will never know what happened after that, but I hope he made it.

The following night was rather different. 11.00pm,

a slight rustling inside the bin and there was Hawkeye crawling nonchalantly up the side ready to hang on the edge and expand her wings. She was in no particular hurry to do anything after that, least of all flutter. The female of the species does very little moving about, her mission simply to stay put on the nearest willow, exude pheromones and wait for a male to find her. I went to bed. The next morning, I took her to the willow, placed her out of sight and bade her farewell. Did their story continue? I will never know but I can hope.

by Denise Rooney



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.





Autumn
is a
second
spring
when
every
leaf
is a
flower

Albert Camus

a small bird with a loud voice

A monarch dies. Or rather a former monarch dies. Edward VIII died in 1972, 35 years after his abdication and 50 years before the death of his niece who only became Queen as a result of Edward's action so very long ago.

50 years ago, in 1972, many things were very different; miners were striking, Ted Heath was Prime Minister, Sir John Betjeman was made Poet Laureate (more on him later), a pint of beer cost 16p, and the tragedy of Bloody Sunday occurred.

1972 was also the year that a small group of young people in East London formed something called the Wren Action Group. They wanted to find ways in which young people could be motivated to take practical action to understand and protect the natural environment around them. 50 years later, and now called the Wren Wildlife & Conservation Group, it is still going strong and is celebrating its half century anniversary.

In the 70s - when the Wren Group was founded it was concerned with not only the practical aspects of conservation but also speaking up for all wildlife - particularly that at risk. When asked why it was called the 'Wren Group' the group president and founder said because it was a 'small bird with a loud voice'.



It is fair to say that the average age of Wren membership is somewhat higher than it was back in 1972, but the driving principles of engaging locally to promote and protect the wildlife on our doorstep (most particularly the southern end of the Epping Forest around Wanstead Park and Wanstead Flats, but also encompassing Leyton Flats, Hollow Ponds, Gilbert's Slade and other areas across three London Boroughs), are still alive and largely the same.

Some of the challenges facing the Wren Group are different. In the mid 1970s Wren Committee members went to visit fellow young members who had been locked up in remand homes. But, some of the challenges remain the same. In the 1970s, Wren was concerned about falling bird numbers just as we are today. Back then, members were noticing falling numbers of Willow and even Marsh Tits; sadly those birds have long since gone from our local area. Buzzards were rare birds back then and Red Kite sightings unthinkable whereas today both are commonly reported whilst we have recently sadly lost Meadow Pipit as breeding birds on Wanstead Flats which would have been common back then.

In the 1970s Wren wrote to Sir John Betjeman - the Poet Laureate to ask him to be our Patron. He responded earnestly but said he would agree to be "a patron,

but not the patron" and so we reached out to another public figure who agreed to join Sir John. The Wren Group is hugely proud that Sir David Attenborough has been our patron for over 45 years. Sir John passed away long ago, but now in our 50th year, we have just agreed a new partnership with a new patron to join Sir David.

The Wren Group is thrilled to announce that renowned international but locally-based Artist, Dr Gayle



From left to right, Richard Oakman who is still the president of the Wren group, unknown, Keith Eaterford, Jane Essell and Paul Webb. The very early days of the group back in c 1980.

Chong-Kwan will be a patron for Wren. Gayle was due to address the membership on 8 October at our anniversary celebrations but unfortunately was taken ill with COVID and could not attend. However, Gayle

will be meeting with the group soon and will no doubt touch on the major piece of art she did recently inspired by Epping Forest - watch out for the next quarterly newsletter for more.

Since Wren was founded, we have a huge amount to be proud of. We were instrumental in getting an ancient East London churchyard recognised as a Nature Reserve (we have recently organised a return visit), we have

organised hundreds of events (bioblitzes, walks, and talks), we have worked with local children and youth groups, we have lobbied to protect the local wildlife (such as successfully getting temporary fencing around the Skylark breeding grounds on Wanstead Flats), and we have done thousands of hours of practical work helping to protect and support the local habitats.

Like all dynamic organisations we have tried to adapt with the times. We know our virtual meetings during lockdown were welcomed by those who may not have even felt safe to go outside, for example, we also increasingly engage through social media with our members and followers as well as through our digital newsletter and I hope we will continue to adapt and grow, to help embrace new local and wider challenges (doing our bit to fight the climate crisis, stop

biodiversity loss, and encourage greater diversity in local engagement with wildlife). If we do that, we might even still be around in another 50 years. I hope so.

a day to remember

By Steven Swaby

A day trip to Walberswick with the Wren Group way back in 1983 had an unexpected long-term influence.

There below us in the wan December sunlight lay a stretch of wild coast that seemed full of possibilities. Growing up in Newham in the 1970s, I'd had limited opportunities to travel very far from London, and today was my first experience of proper East Anglian fenland.



Paul Webb and RFO with Troglodytes at The Temple

The big skies, endless sea of pale winter reedbeds and the distant shingle spine of the seawall beyond made me feel this was going to be special. It was my first day

trip with the Wren Group beyond the local axis of East Ham and Wanstead, having joined just a few months previously. I was 13, with my interest in wildlife – birds in particular – really just beginning to take off. Early experiences had sparked something quite addictive, and now with a local group I had opportunities to travel a bit further and feed this new addiction.

The group had a couple of particularly hardy leaders – Dave Spivack and John Skerry – who were not the sort to be put off by minor obstacles like ten minutes of wading through incredibly swampy woods no sooner had we left the car park. It seemed like an initiation test at the time as I slopped about in the mire, but I was soon rewarded with my first-ever Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. Two, in fact; a species that had up to that time eluded me locally in Wanstead Park. It was a good start.

The other teenage birders in the group had begun filling me in with lurid tales of the rarities found along this stretch of Suffolk, including the 'so-mega-it's-almost-mythical' Houbara Bustard. My imagination got all fired up about this, until I learned that the bird was actually seen in... 1962. Even with the boundless enthusiasm of youth I realised I wasn't likely to see one of those today. And although I would eventually find one of these birds, years later on the remote steppes of Kazakhstan, I still haven't seen one in Britain – but then, neither has anyone else.

Nonetheless, an air of possibility charged the day as we emerged on the footpath down into the fen. I was bound to see *something* new today. The low sunshine lit up countless thousands of *Phragmites* heads like candles, and turned the coast a rich gold. A male and female Hen Harrier appeared, quartering the marshland and conjuring eruptions of wildfowl into the air – mainly

Teal, Mallard, Gadwall, Shoveler and Pochard – all scattering in unruly lines across the fenland sky.

As we went deeper into the reeds visibility shrank to our immediate surroundings, and listening became even more important. Listening for things like the bell-like *Ping! Ping!* of Bearded Reedlings, for instance, which were picked up distantly a few times but which remained tantalisingly out of view. Until suddenly a flock of eight bounded in and settled right next to where



President of the Wren Group, the very dapper Richard Oakman at The Temple back in 1979 - and inset still very dapper today.

we stood. We watched them clambering up the reed stems, too preoccupied with feeding on the seedheads to pay us any notice. Seeing these smart little birds in the flesh for the first time was a revelation: the slightly washed-out plate in my newly minted *Shell Guide to the Birds of Britain and Ireland* just didn't do them justice.

Eventually we made it to the seawall, to be met with a bracing wind and a very choppy North Sea, where we struggled to keep track of a distant flock of Common Scoter just below the horizon. A cloud front had moved in, turning the sea grey and sombre. Brackish pools hosted parties of Dunlin, Redshank and Brent Goose, and my first-ever Stonechat popped up jauntily on some dead vegetation nearby. Another slightly masochistic initiation test followed; scanning through hundreds of gulls looking for something unusual. Believe it or not, we *were* rewarded: not with the hoped-for white-winged gulls but my first-ever Mediterranean Gull. A particularly shabby winter-plumaged individual it was too, but having the ID features explained to me by more experienced hands was a small revelation, as if some arcane secret had been decoded and I was now that bit better-equipped for future birding trips. It was an early lesson in how invaluable that transfer of knowledge – and by extension, confidence – in the field really is.

As we neared the halfway mark on the long walk back, scopes and bins were suddenly trained on the distant car park, with much sniggering from certain individuals – because the Group's 'missing' third carload had finally turned up several hours late, and among them was future Wren Group President, Richard Oakman. In the years that followed I would learn what the others already knew: that broken-down vehicles and the venerable Oakman went hand-in-hand. Many's the hour I would end up spending with him and an assortment of

AA mechanics... usually in remote places like Dungeness, or remote mountainsides in the French Pyrénées. Oh, how we laughed.



Keith Winterflood, John Skerry and Linda Savidge in The Bund

A few things from my notebook that day stand out as significant at over thirty years distance. Willow Tits were seen in that boggy woodland and we barely batted an eyelid, having no idea the species was heading for a freefall decline in the years ahead. Likewise, a flock of Twite was a sight still pretty much guaranteed on a winter's walk along the east coast in the 1980s, but today is sadly so much scarcer. One member of our group glimpsed a Coypu in the reeds; those fenland outlaws were on borrowed time even then, and would be eradicated from Norfolk by the end of the decade, thought probably fewer people would mourn that particular absence from our countryside. Also notable was something that *wasn't* seen that day – Little Egret. Nowadays very much part of the scenery, back then the species had yet to colonize the UK and it was still a bit of a rarity. In fact, I later travelled all the way to Cornwall to see my first one, perched dejectedly in the rain

behind a petrol station. Oh for a little hindsight, eh?

But there was something more personally significant about that day than any of those experiences. Of the small group that made the journey up to the Suffolk coast on that midwinter Sunday, half of them went on to become my lifelong friends. I ended up as college roommate with one in Devon, and I travelled far and wide twitching and birding overseas with several of them. Some 20 years later, one of them even became my brother-in-law when I married his sister; another was best man at the wedding. That's a pretty good return on the meagre annual subscription fee to the Wren Group, wouldn't you say? Even if it does make us sound slightly like a bunch of banjo-strumming in-breds from some remote Tennessee backwater.

Ultimately, what the experience of that day at Walberswick did was feed my interest in the natural world at just the right time, and it began a process of widening my horizons that continues to this day. I feel it underlines the value of local organisations like the Wren Group in connecting like-minded people and offering them a platform to do something positive, be it practical work, collecting local records or joining trips further afield. It is the opportunity to engage, learn, share, have fun and maybe make a difference. Today, with the mounting pressures on our wildlife and urban kids so often growing up disconnected from nature without opportunities to engage and explore, that all seems more important than ever.

Steven Swaby is a freelance writer and heritage consultant. He is currently Curator of the Walthamstow Wetlands project. First published 11th August 2015 edition of the Wren newsletter



.... don't forget

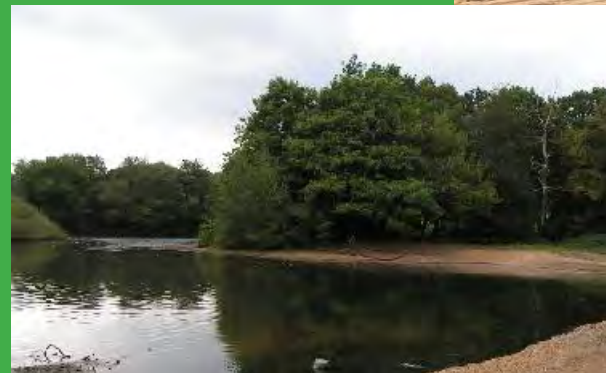
It's that time of year again to keep an eye out for our feathered friends.

- 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 ?

Alexandra Lake, Wanstead Flats, in the early 1900s with the Courtney Hotel on Aldersbrook Road behind and to the right - and how it looks today.



In addition to being a backdrop for nature our woodland landscapes are also places for human recreation, health and wellbeing - but that can bring problems of over use and conflict.

making space for nature

On Saturday 5 October, Tony Juniper CEO of Natural England, gave a stirring and thought-provoking presentation to an attentive audience which filled the Lopping Hall in Loughton. He had been invited to give the keynote address ahead of the Epping Forest Heritage Trust's AGM. (See end for video link).

Speaking without notes, Tony explained that due to the train strike he had driven from Cambridge to Loughton. The last section of his journey had been through the stunning ancient woodland of Epping Forest, and he commented that habitats like this had been more widespread in the past.

Today our woodland landscape should remind us of their cultural significance. In addition, they are excellent areas for biodiversity and soak up carbon and mitigate flooding. They are places for human recreation, health, and wellbeing too, but that brings problems of possible overuse.

He reminded us that across the countryside there are many protected areas which are noted hot spots for biodiversity, but most are isolated from one another. Natural England is now looking at ways of joining up certain ones so that much larger areas can become designated National Nature Reserves where interconnectivity along green corridors between the varied habitats can be enhanced.

At the present time, initial discussions are taking place to examine the feasibility of creating such a designated site centred around Epping Forest, but with boundaries that will include several adjacent habitats. Over time this could become an extensive accessible nature rich area on the edge of London. This is an exciting project

but will require co-operation from the surrounding local authorities and many landowners and adequate funding too.

Gathering evidence about existing biodiverse hot spots is necessary to provide base line information about species diversity, so long-term records are invaluable. The Wanstead area has attracted the attention of naturalists for many decades whose observations now provide a wealth of information of what was living there many decades ago to provide a comparison with what is there now.

At the party to celebrate the 50th Birthday of the Wren Conservation Group we were reminded about the detailed survey work which commenced in the 1970's with pioneering recording by Paul Ferris and Colin Plant whose printed reports are fascinating documents. See www.wansteadwildlife.org.uk

Thanks are due to the many volunteers who have contributed over the years to the breeding bird counts, wintering wildfowl surveys, reptile and hedgehog surveys that have demonstrated the importance of local habitats.

As invertebrates are key food sources for many larger creatures, regular moth trapping, bee and spider surveys

serve to highlight some trends and issues of concern. Lichens are sensitive to air quality and up to date information is valuable too. It is vitally important to continue with this recording to monitor for any changes within the protected area of the Forest as well as the corridor of the River Roding, allotments, gardens and other local green spaces.

We all benefit from interacting with the natural world and we can all encourage so many creatures to flourish in our own surroundings by planting suitable flower mixes, installing a pond and planting shrubs and trees.

by Tricia Moxey



Video of Tony Juniper's (CEO of Natural England) talk can be viewed [here](#)

epping forest

for everyone to L♥ve

The cooler, wetter days of autumn have been welcomed by the Forest after the prolonged heat of the summer had challenged it in many ways, including through a number of localised fires. Fungi are generously displaying their wares and the Forest floor is getting a new golden carpet. Many, like me, are looking forward to the slower pace of autumn after a busy summer season at Epping Forest Heritage Trust.

We launched our new strategy in July, built on the 3 pillars of educating and inspiring people about the Forest, conserving and growing the Forest and protecting the Forest through advocacy. We can only optimise our impact for the Forest if we fully embed our values of inclusion, collaboration, being trustworthy and sustainable. Through being inclusive more people will come to love the Forest, and care about protecting it; through collaborating we can build more effective programmes and projects to conserve and protect the Forest, and avoid dangers of overlap and competition.

Now, at a time when the Forest is under the greatest threats it has faced in a generation, it is incumbent upon all of us to work together protect and preserve it for generations to come.



Tony Juniper (centre right) on a panel with me on the left, Judith Adams our Chair and the Superintendent Paul Thomson on the far right.

We were also delighted to have Tony Juniper, Chair of Natural England, and previously CEO at Friends of the Earth, as they keynote speaker at our AGM. With many people in the conservation sector understandably concerned about the current government's focus on growth at the expense of the natural environment, it was fantastic to hear an upbeat and inspiring talk, focused on the positive natural recovery that is happening and that Tony is convinced will continue. He encouraged

us to think bigger for the Forest due to the evidenced nature benefits of joining up green spaces, and thought that the potential proposal to become a National Nature Reserve could be a helpful tool to help achieve that. A big challenge for us all to think about, whether linking better to the Lea Valley in the West, the Roding Valley to the East, or connecting better north through the Buffer Lands and out in a Green Arc deeper into Essex.

Tony's enthusiasm for the Forest and the future was matched by over 200 people who participated in the Epping Forest Big Walk on 25th September, over half of whom walked the whole 14-mile route from Manor Park in the south, across Wanstead Flats and up through Waltham Forest to Epping. After a 3 year break we were delighted to have such a diverse and energetic group of people, clearly enjoying each other's company as well as the Forest itself. Already looking forward to walking it again next year!

To finish I have a request. As I mentioned further up we are embarking on a new strategy. And as part of that [we are currently recruiting for new Trustees](#) to steer our work. Might you have the skills and experiences we are looking for? Might you help us better connect into communities around the Forest? Please get in contact if you think you could us in our mission to protect Epping Forest for generations to come.

by Peter Lewis
Chief Executive EFHT



bioblitz

As part of our celebrations for our 50th anniversary, we spent three days in the summer leading a range of BioBlitz activities across Wanstead Flats, Wanstead Park, and Leyton Flats.

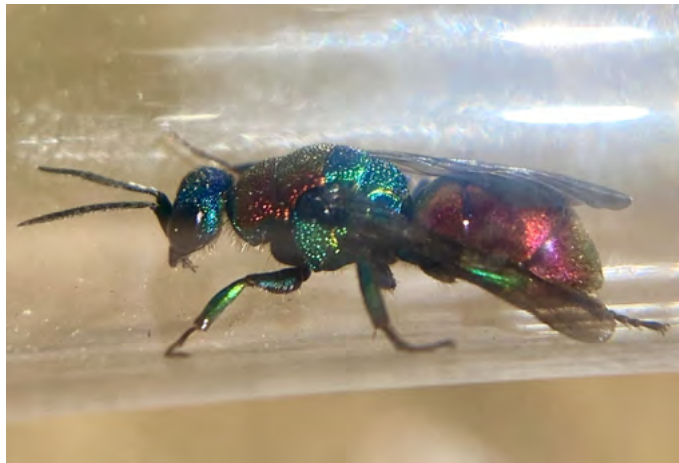


Saturday 25 June started very early with an 'almost dawn chorus walk'. Several people set their alarms to walk into Bush Wood to listen to the birdsong at 5.30am. Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Song Thrush, and Blackbird serenaded us as we walked, but a highlight was a singing Reed Warbler, not in a reed bed, where they are more usually found, but in a rose bush.



Large Shaggy Bee (*Panurgus banksianus*) - pic by Tony Madgwick

A few hours later, a larger group joined for a walk on Wanstead Flats. Tony Madgwick helped find and identify some interesting bees and flies. Amongst other things, we found a sandy ground specialist, Large Shaggy Bee (*Panurgus banksianus*) and also several Green-eyed Flower Bees (*Anthophora bimaculata*) and the Small Spotty-eyed Drone Fly (*Eristalinus sepulchranis*) which lives up to its name in having spotty eyes. We also found the yellow 22-Spot Ladybird (*Psyllobora vigintiduopunctata* - try saying that after a few sherries).



Cuckoo Wasp *Hedychrum niemelai* - pic by Tony Madgwick

Later in the day, we were joined by spider expert, David Carr. The conditions weren't great for spiders as, despite the warmth, it was windy and the branches we were checking were clear. However, David's eagle-eye spotted the tiny nationally scarce jumping spider *Salticus zebraneus* on a tree in one of the Flats' plantations. This is a stripy zebra spider and is closely related to its more common, and similar but larger, cousin, *Salticus scenicus*, that you may well find in your homes and gardens (one to look out for). We also saw another nationally rare, but locally common spider, a running spider (*Philodromus rufus*).

Later that day, Tim put out two moth traps near the Temple in Wanstead Park. The next morning was another very early start to check the moth traps. The highlight was a beautiful salmon pink and black moth called a Rosy Footman (*Miltochrista miniata*) - the first time it has been found locally. Later in Wanstead Park, led by Tony Madgwick again, we watched the macabre sight of Beewolf wasps (*Philanthus triangulum*) carrying paralysed Honey Bees down to their nest holes in the

ground to feed their larvae. We also saw some incredibly coloured Cuckoo Wasps including *Hedychrum niemelai*.

We were joined by some local school children to do some pond dipping where the kids marvelled at being able to hold a young newt in their hands. The day ended watching and listening (using electric sonic detector technology) to bats near Perch Pond.



Spider hunting with David Carr

The following weekend, Tony also led the charge on a slow walk around parts of Hollow Ponds and Leyton Flats. We found some interesting banks sloping down to the lake which had quite a lot of activity. Highlights included the oak specialist butterfly, Purple Hairstreak (*Favonius quercus*) and the Red-barred Tortrix moth (*Ditula angustiorana*). We also saw several different species of bee and wasp including the Ornate Tailed Digger Wasp (*Cerceris rybyensis*).

Overall, it was great to gather, meet people and look at some wildlife over two weekends.

by James Heal



living with the seasons

The arrival of autumn is always a special time of year.

That golden sun shining as nature transitions from summer. The leaves turning a myriad of colours.

It is the time for harvest. The crops that have been nurtured through spring and summer reach fruition.

A good year for squash and marrows, less so beans. A time to gather in.

The blackberries have finished but the sweet chestnuts are just beginning.

Birds set out on migration, the swallows lining up on telegraph lines ready for the great exodus (some stay here, as all round residents).

It is a great time to be a birder, as each day can bring something different in terms of bird life...wheatears, stonechats, winchats, spotted and pied flycatchers.

The autumn is always special but so too are all the seasons.

Spring brings the new life, the freshness. Summer, the hot days and long light evenings. Then winter, shorter days, cold and wet but still life asserting.

Travelling through the natural timetable we come to appreciate the uniqueness of each season. Walking in the sunshine of a summer evening, you can remember doing the same walk in the cold of winter, wrapped up to keep warm. There is a great sense of fulfilment and continuity, looking and moving from one season to another.

A reassurance in knowing what comes to follow.

An appreciation of the seasons and nature helps us come to accept our own mortality.

Most move from Spring to Summer, onto Autumn then Winter. Each time has its unique features. If we are in tune with the seasons and nature, it is much easier to make sense of our own lives and time on this earth.

It is when humans set themselves aside from nature, as being in some way different or superior that problems arise. Humans are part of the circle of life, just like any

other living creature.

We need to live in accordance with and be at one with nature. All are born, live through the seasons and die. Death is as much part of that cycle of nature as birth and life. We need to come to terms with death. It is the one inevitable that we all share.

Indeed, humanity has done much to extend average life spans, especially in the rich world.

Life can be nasty, short and brutish for many of our fellow creatures in the natural world. Victims of predation by others or simply unable to do the basic functions needed to survive. Death can be lonely, long and painful.

The arrival of winter marks the end for some but also new beginnings. A time that precedes new birth.

None of us can turn back the clock but we can all appreciate the steady rhythm, as we pass through the different seasons, enjoying each for what it offers. The sense of fulfillment coming from a truly rich experience - a dignified end or new beginning.

by Cllr Paul Donovan



ode to a blackcap

by Robert Nurden

For some time now my partner and I have bemoaned the fact that our neighbours' garden has become unkempt and overgrown. It shouldn't matter and it doesn't really but nasty, unwanted weeds have taken to crawling under the fence at night to take root in our border. Then there's the wall of ivy that has scaled the fence and is slowly smothering our climbing plants.

In what can only be described as an act of small-minded, nimbyish, urbanised revenge, we gathered up all the snails and slugs that these incursions have produced and lobbed them back over the fence. At first, we did it under cover of darkness. Then we grew bold and showered the offending plot with a regular supply of crustaceans in broad daylight. Shameful.



Our neighbours are such indoor creatures that even if they had seen us out of the back window, they wouldn't have cottoned on to what was happening. Their seeming sole use of their garden is as a smoking room after 11pm. As they scream down their phones, cigarette in hand, the issue of noise pollution is added to an already toxic cocktail. At the end of the day, though, we are probably the losers: all the slugs and snails will do is simply return from whence they came: our garden.

Yesterday I was in the garden enjoying a book in the lovely weather. I was also nursing Covid, having gone down with the bug a few days previously. I was over the worst of the disease and I felt fine, except for two things: my sense of taste and smell had disappeared and I was still testing positive. It meant that our holiday in Portugal had fallen through. And I had to self-isolate. The only thing to do was sit, read and wait.

We have some bird feeders and at this time of year they are overloaded with sparrows and starlings. The fledglings can also be seen lined up in rows on the fence waiting to be fed by their parents. We love to watch them as gradually they gain in strength and confidence and swoop to the feeders themselves where they squabble and jostle to get to the front of the queue.

We are also visited by a pair of pigeons which are massive and land like jumbo jets with their massive undercarriages on the fence, sending it rocking. Then, at quiet times at the beginning of the day, robins appear bobbing along the path vacuuming up the dropped seeds. Great tits and blue tits, too, and a squawking magpie

on top of the tall fir tree. That just about completes the picture. We have to admit that no exotic species visit our al fresco dining table but that's the way it is these days with bird populations declining so rapidly. We are just glad to be able to host something.

As I sat reading, ever so imperceptibly, snatches of bird song wormed their way into my consciousness, gently pushing aside my focus on the storyline of my book. It was a good novel so the reason for the distraction had to be good, too. It was. The sound grew louder and more insistent but that was probably my imagination as my mind quietly - and without complaint - distanced itself from the clutches of plot and character. Eventually I put the book down.

An unfamiliar, chattering, warbling song was drifting over the fence from our neighbours' untidy garden. It came in bursts and lasted roughly three seconds. It rose and fell with lightning speed. There was something of the manual typewriter about it. Yet it was also a pretty, sweet sound like a flute in its higher register - and it entranced.

The song was coming from midway up a tree with dense foliage, so I couldn't see the singer. All afternoon, it stayed hidden except for two occasions when I managed to spot it. The first time it was flying, darting with a slightly swooping trajectory, from one safe haven to another. The second time it boldly perched on the branch of a tree without foliage in full view. It sang its little heart out and I looked and listened, transported. On its bare branch, I could just about make out its black head, which probably meant that it was a male blackcap. The female has a brown head.

I listened for perhaps another half an hour before

returning to my book. At the end of each chapter, I put down the book as my choral evensong was still flowing with mellifluous ease from the undergrowth. I phoned my partner, said nothing and let her listen. Then I phoned a friend.

Research that evening showed that the blackcap was nicknamed the "northern nightingale" or "mock nightingale". It is classed as a warbler. Happily and rarely, its numbers are increasing in Britain, probably because of global warming. It used to migrate to warmer climes in the winter but since the 1960s a growing number of blackcaps have started overwintering here.

This, in turn, is having a bizarre knock-on effect on, would you believe it, mistletoe. For the birds who stay here, one of their favourite winter foods is this white-berried parasite. Apparently, they separate the berry from the seeds, which they smear over the branches of the host tree and this encourages growth. So, more mistletoe and, hopefully, more kissing at Christmas, too.

The blackcap is shy in every other way. Its plumage is mostly grey so looks don't really come into it. And, like the nightingale, its fame rests on its song. And what a song that is.

Now we don't mind our neighbours' garden being overgrown. In fact, we prefer it that way. To be honest, we're a little bit jealous because - without them knowing it - the dense undergrowth in their garden is probably hosting a pair of blackcaps complete with nest, tiny mottled, grey eggs and, before too long, young chicks.

Oh yes, and this morning I finally tested negative for Covid, thanks perhaps - you never know - to the healing powers of my beautiful, serenading blackcap.

look out for

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

by Tricia Moxey



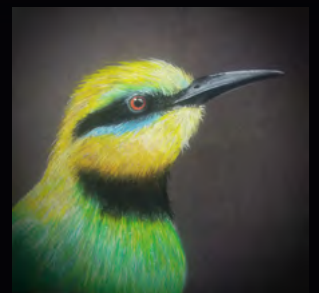
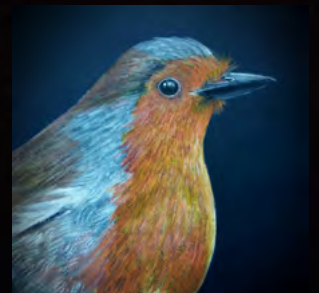
feathered art



At a recent exhibition I was introduced to a talented local artist and teacher Mel Carson. Mel caught my attention because of her wonderful wildlife illustrations and I particular birds. You can see more of Mel's work at www.instagram.com/mel_carson_diver

In Mel's own words - I originally studied Fine Art and have a Bachelor's and Master's degree in painting. I have been teaching Art and Design at secondary school level for a number of years and I am now starting to focus more fully on my own creative practice. Through teaching, I gradually began to move towards producing work of a more illustrative nature. I am always drawing in front of the pupils I teach as a way to engage and hopefully inspire them. As I have always loved animals, I began to slowly build up a portfolio of wildlife drawing work. My interest in the natural world began to extend further around 8 years ago when I took up free diving. I then started to expand my portfolio to include marine creatures. Whilst I initially focused on producing finely finished pencil drawings, I started to work in oil pastels a couple of years ago. I particularly like the rich, vibrant colours of this medium and this in turn led me to start drawing birds. I have since completed a number of bird commissions including a range of British garden birds, a gannet, an Atlantic puffin and a rockhopper penguin. I like to work on black Canford paper as it is easier to keep clean when working with highly pigmented pastels. Whilst I particularly enjoy drawing exotic and colourful birds, I have also found inspiration amongst the less flamboyant but nonetheless beautiful birds native to the United Kingdom. Aside from teaching, I am currently busy producing a range of wildlife work for my website (which is under construction) and attending a ceramics course.

by Mel Carson





..... and finally

wren practical work

Wren's practical conservation work takes place in the winter from October to March, first Sunday of the month, and midweek most Thursdays 10 - 12.30.

We carry out a variety of tasks including clearing scrub; keeping paths open; and various pieces of work requested by the City of London where they do not have the resources or where their machines cannot go. Some tasks suit an approach with hand tools, and keen volunteers. For example we are clearing alder re-growth on the banks of the Ornamental Waters in Wanstead Park.

You need no particular expertise or strength to join us as we can adapt work to all levels. We supply tools and gloves. We just need some basic enthusiasm and a willingness to get a bit muddy. It is a great way to keep fit, get some fresh air and meet other Wren Group members.

To join the group contact Peter Williams 07716034164 or e-mail wrengroup.distribute@gmail.com or just turn up on the day.

links

Wren links page www.wrengroup.org.uk/links

Facebook www.facebook.com/WrenOrg

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

Wanstead Wildlife

www.wansteadwildlife.org.uk

Friends of Wanstead Parklands

www.wansteadpark.org.uk

RSPB North East London Members Group

www.rspb.org.uk/groups/northeastlondon

Wanstead Birding Blog

wansteadbirding.blogspot.co.uk

Epping Forest

www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/epping-forest/Pages/default.aspx

British Naturalists' Association

www.bna-naturalists.org

Bushwood Area Residents' Association

www.bara-leytonstone.org.uk

East London Nature www.eln.yorkshirefog.co.uk

East London Birders www.elbf.co.uk

Friends of Epping Forest

www.friendsofeppingforest.org.uk

East London Nature www.eastlondonnature.co.uk

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

Wild Wanstead - greening up the local area

www.wildwanstead.org

BBC Nature www.bbc.co.uk/nature

British Naturalists Association

www.bna-naturalists.org

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

Field Studies Council (FSC)

www.field-studies-council.org

London Natural History Society

www.lnhs.org.uk

Natural England www.naturalengland.org.uk

RSPB www.rspb.org.uk/england

UK Safari www.uksafari.com

The British Deer Society www.bds.org.uk

The Wildlife Trust www.wildlifetrusts.org

