



Autumn 2023

Wren

Wildlife & Conservation Group

Kestrel on Wanstead Flats SSSI - pic by Mary Holden

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a word from the chair

I have written in this edition of the newsletter about how technology (in this case, artificial intelligence) is changing wildlife watching. Give it a read. Let me know if you disagree. I love a healthy debate.

But I have also recently enjoyed more of an analogue creative expression in my wildlife watching. In particular, 'notebooking' - excuse the clunky language. I am not old, but I am of a vintage where my bird watching days began with binoculars and a notebook - simply listing the birds I would see on a trip. eBird now means that my lists can more easily contribute to science and I can pull my data easily.

But I looked with envy at wildlife watchers with beautiful neat handwriting and, even more, those with the artistic ability to sketch what they saw. So, I left it alone. I stuck with spreadsheets and lists and the science and left the creativity to those who had some artistic genes.

But, something changed. It was actually on a Wren activity with local artist Jo Wood. Jo gave each of us a little blank log book and encouraged us to draw what inspired us - she even broke the ice by asking us to do the worst

drawing we could of the first 'thing' that we found. I enjoyed it.

Almost since then, I have been keeping a notebook. At the end of the day - after I have any wildlife experiences - I write down my observations, thoughts, ID notes and even do the odd sketch of what I have seen.

My drawing capabilities are so bad that sometimes they make me laugh, but sometimes I even surprise myself with the sketches looking more effective than I thought I was able.

But the true value I am finding from this, is that the act of writing and sketching my observations helps me reflect and remember better what I saw. It helps me think more deeply about the identification features of what I saw and to be able to play back what I saw. For example, I am sure most of us could identify a male Chaffinch, but how many of us could recall or draw where on the wing the white wingbars or other markings appear?

In an age of faster identification aides and digitalisation, my notebook is helping me to better notice things, slow down, observe and learn. I won't be putting down my phone any time soon, but I will be spending more time with my notebook in my hand.

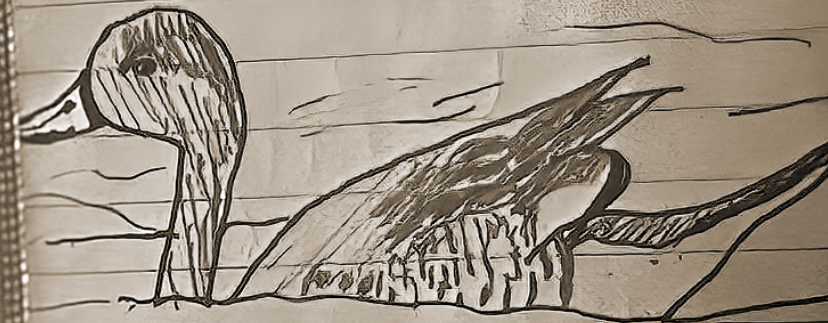
James Heal
Chair Wren Group



Otiorynchus sulcatus



Eclipse male Pintail - Heaney
10/09/2023



epping forest

for everyone to L♥ve

Valuing and celebrating Epping Forest

The next 15 months will be crucial for the future of nature and more specifically Epping Forest.

In May there will be local elections in Epping Forest District Council and the London Mayoral and London Assembly elections, with the likelihood of a UK-wide general election later in the year. Already in progress, and taking place over the next few months, the City of London, the Conservators of Epping Forest, will be undertaking a series of important

consultations on their future corporate strategy, as well as on a strategy specifically for Epping Forest.

As people who love and care about the Forest it is crucial that we make our voices heard in these elections and consultations.

Now is the time to influence politicians standing in those elections, as they develop their manifestos, and make commitments that we can then hold them too in future years. We must not look at the broken political promises and give up hope, but look at the scrutiny that comes when promises are clearly broken, and remain resolute and hopeful that change can come at all levels of government.

And I know that corporate strategies drive investment and change. Many of us have been upset at the reduced priority that has been given to Epping

Forest and other of the City's Green Spaces over the last few years. Their current corporate consultation is an opportunity for us to feed in, and raise the importance of their Green Spaces in their corporate strategy with a view to increasing their investment in them, for the benefit of people who visit and love the Forest, as well as for Londoners and people from Essex more widely.

To kick off our thinking we hosted a debate, Agenda for Nature, on 14th October at Forest School in Waltham Forest, with a range of speakers setting out their views on what we should be asking for and how, over the upcoming months. If you missed the debate keep a an eye out for future events here.

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/cc/epping-forest-talks-1711459>

Epping Forest - The Big Walk EFHT The Big Walk 2023 @blackdaffodilphotography



We are also pleased to be a partner in the More Natural Capital Coalition, alongside organisations including CPRE London, the Woodland Trust and London Wildlife Trust, and currently feeding into its manifesto for the London Mayoral election, making sure Epping Forest is properly recognised as the largest open green space in London, and that manifesto asks will make a positive difference for the Forest and its biodiversity.



Tim Harris from the Wren Group talking about the work the group has been doing to help protect skylarks on Wanstead Flats.

In relation to the [City of London's Corporate Strategy consultation](#) it is important we all feed in, so that their senior officers and politicians recognise how much we care, and how important their Green Spaces, and Epping Forest in particular, are in creating a future London where people and

businesses want to be. We would like them to give a higher, more strategic priority to tackling the biodiversity crisis, to sit alongside their commitments to tackling and mitigating climate change. We know that greater biodiversity is hugely important for both climate resilience and carbon capture; we also know Forests and trees have a cooling effect on their neighbourhoods.

We can all play our part in sharing our love of Epping Forest, and helping to raise it's profile. The more politicians and the City understand how much we care about the Forest, as well as all the evidence about its positive impacts on City life, the more they will commit to, and invest in, it.

As a part of that I am really grateful to the Wren Group, and Tim Harris in particular, for his talk as part of the Epping Forest Big Walk, about the fantastic work the Wrens have been doing to protect the Skylarks on Wanstead Flats. The Big Walk gives us the opportunity to attract new people to the Forest, as well as to engage politicians and policy-makers in celebrating the Forest. And this year we had fantastic support from politicians of different political persuasions: Sir Stephen Timms, MP, not only gave a stirring speech at the start, but walked the whole 14 miles with us; Grace Williams, the Leader of Waltham Forest, joined us in Higham Park and committed to work with us on tackling inequality of access to the Forest; Ben Murphy, Chair of the Epping Forest & Commons Committee wished participants well at our lunch break and Holly

Whitbread, the leader of the Conservative Group in Epping Forest congratulated walkers on their arrival in Epping. This face to face engagement with the Forest is vital, and we need to make sure we do as much of this as possible in the weeks and months to come. If politicians don't know and love the Forest, they are not going to care about protecting and enhancing it in years to come.

To finish, I have an ask. I have written about our work on community engagement several times over the last few months, setting out the importance of involving engaging different communities of people in the Forest, so that they come to enjoy and love the Forest as we do, and explaining our work with Muslim Hikers and Black Girls Hike. As a result of that work we were delighted to have a more diverse group of participants on the Big Walk. A virtuous circle. But we need to do more. And to enable us to do more of this work we are currently a partner of the [Aviva Wild Isles Community Fund](#), raising money to specifically support our work in this area. If you are able to donate as part of this campaign, your generosity will be tripled by the Wild Isles Fund – for every £10 you give, we will receive £30 towards this work. If you are able to support us, I would be really grateful.

Peter Lewis

Chief Executive
Epping Forest Heritage Trust



artificial intelligence and the natural world

When a Willow Warbler is not a Willow Warbler



As Autumn migration begins (normally during August), our local patch sees numbers of Willow Warbler join their similar, and summer resident, cousins, Chiffchaff; often in large mixed flocks.

Separating Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler has been a perplexing challenge for as long as people have observed birds, although there are many ID clues in physical appearance: primary wing projection, general colouration, supercilium vividness, leg colour, amongst others. In Spring the two distinctive songs make them easy to separate (Chiffchaff repeats its name whilst Willow Warbler has a more complex and lovely descending melody). In Autumn, the young birds normally look quite different, even from a distance: Chiffchaff is dull and has olive tones to the general beige/green/brown appearance whilst Willow Warbler is normally much more yellowy and bright looking. But the contact calls are more challenging: Chiffchaff normally has a simple ascending 'hweet', whilst Willow Warbler has more of a disyllabic 'hu-weet' (a flat first tone ending in an ascending second tone).

As we were waiting for the first Autumn appearance of Willow Warbler a local Wren member told me that the Merlin app on his phone had picked up a Willow Warbler call in the SSSI on 29 July. He played me the recording and showed me the sonogram and I could only see and hear what I believe was Chiffchaff ('hweet' not 'hu-weet'). I went to Motorcycle Wood and tested the Merlin App myself.

The science behind AI bird ID

I will pause the story here to explain to anyone unfamiliar with the Merlin App what it is. It is an app developed by the ornithologists and Artificial Intelligence engineers at Cornell University in the US. You enter the location and date (or it tracks it automatically) and then will either provide ID of a photo of a bird you have taken or it will 'listen' to birds calls and songs and identify any birds within its audible range.



Separating the call of the Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler has been a perplexing challenge for as long as people have observed birds - pic Chiffchaff by Nick Croft

It is incredibly clever and largely very accurate. I have tested many photos I have of birds and it is mostly correct. The sound ID is also impressive, especially if you are in a place where there are a range of different bird calls happening at the same time - it seems to be better than the average human brain at handling multiple sounds at the same time and separating them into bird call. Crucially Merlin and the underlying AI technology learns using the

millions of photos uploaded to eBird, which is a bird recording site I use extensively to capture local records alongside hundreds of thousands of others around the world. So the technology is getting better all the time, but it is far from perfect. Let me pick up the Willow Warbler story again...

Willow Warblers part ii

I stood in the Motorcycle Wood and could hear several Chiffchaff calling and switched on the Merlin app. It too heard Chiffchaff and then it picked up Willow Warbler! I couldn't hear a Willow Warbler call and the shape of the sonogram looked like Chiffchaff to me. Eventually a single Chiffchaff showed itself close by and helpfully called repeatedly - Merlin was reporting Willow Warbler incorrectly. Then, it switched and recorded the same bird as a Chiffchaff and then back to Willow Warbler. This was enough to make me dismiss the current capabilities of Merlin to identify Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff from contact calls.

Coincidentally, the following day I went back and found Willow Warbler (seen and heard) in the same location. 30 July our first returning passage Willow Warbler. And if you are wondering, yes, I did test Merlin on it, and yes, it correctly ID'd it as Willow Warbler. Confusingly, over the next hour or so that I stayed with the first couple of Willow Warblers, I noted that their calls varied more than I had, perhaps, fully appreciated, with classic 'hu-weets' sometimes interspersed with more intergrade 'huweets' and 'hweets'. And I won't even start on the occasional Chiffchaff 'swee-oo'! The point being that

bird identification can be complicated and requires time, patience and careful observation in the field.

Interestingly, while I was testing Merlin with the phylloscids (the family group including Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff) it also 'picked up' Marsh Tit (a ludicrous report of bird long since departed from this area) and Rook (another local rarity that was not present). When I did some 'pishing' (making a 'pshhh' noise to try and lure birds out of deep vegetation to investigate), Merlin thought I was a Barn Owl!

The Treecreeper's tale

The same Wren member as mentioned earlier had also been using Merlin in Bush Wood and reported a Treecreeper (heard only) - a bird which can be tricky to scarce locally. Another birder went to investigate and found a Treecreeper at the location given. A few days later the same member reported Treecreeper in the copse to the East of Jubilee. I was interested as I am not aware of Treecreeper being reported from there. I listened to the Merlin recording and, whilst I acknowledged it sounds the right pitch for Treecreeper, the calls sounded too short and 'insistent' to me. I suggested it might be the begging call of a young passerine, perhaps a Robin. A few days later, I was walking through Bush Wood and heard the same insistent high pitched call. I couldn't see the bird so switched on Merlin and it immediately reported Treecreeper. I was determined to uncover the mystery. Deep in the holly and ivy, I eventually found two, not yet fledged, Wren chicks making begging calls as their parents came back and

forth to feed them. Merlin continued to tell me that they were Treecreeper.



Sometimes AI can get it wrong - Merlin confused the call of a Treecreeper with that of a two Wren chicks making begging calls. Pic Treecreeper by Nick Croft

What's that bug?!

AI is not just transforming the bird identification world. Apps like iNaturalist have a photo ID function. I have used it a few times and it is handy if you find an invertebrate and you are not sure where to start with its identification. From my experience, it appears to be correct with the ID about 70% of the time - a useful, but far from perfect - tool.

For me, it has sometimes proved a useful starting point if I am struggling with something, or if I want a second opinion. If the app gives me a species or genus, I can then look up that species in books or online and check against my photos. I aim to use websites with a good reputation (British Bugs by Tristan Bantock; Steven Falk's varied Flickr folders of bees, wasps, and flies; Bladmineerders for plant galls and similar; the BAS website for spiders; UK Moths for moths etc). And the crucial thing I look for

when investigating an invertebrate I have found is whether it can be confused with another species. If a moth says 'gen det only' (requiring dissection and consideration of the genitalia under a microscope) then I will not be recording it to species level off a photo alone.

Are the robots taking over the world?

There is no doubt that AI is changing the world in front of our eyes. The advances are happening at an astonishing rate. For the first time, we have technology that not only advances at pace, but is able to advance and improve itself!

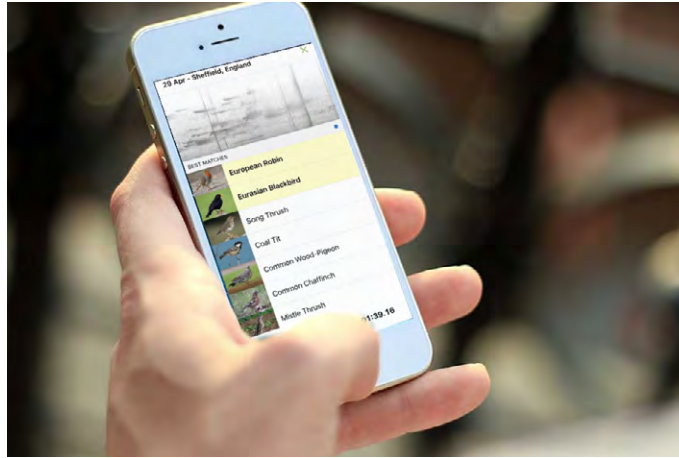
There is an arms race underway with countries and companies fighting to stay at the forefront of the developments and harness them for economic and other means. But there are also concerns with some experts recently signing a letter warning that safety protocols need to be developed before the technology advances much further. Much like the Three Laws of Robotics invented by the late great SciFi novelist, Isaac Asimov, some people fear that humanity itself could be under threat from AI unless sufficient controls are developed quickly.

I am not expert enough in this area to comment, but I have witnessed AI shifting in a short number of years from being unheard of to being freely used in wildlife recording and reporting. I recognise the benefits and the opportunities; but I also see risks.

As my examples above have shown, the technology

can be wrong and it can lead people to blindly follow tech instead of developing the rigorous identification skills and experience which can allow us to better understand the natural world around us.

Wouldn't it be sad if the birders of the future spent their time looking down at their phones instead of up at the trees? Wouldn't it be sad if the ancient skills of learning the bird song or the berries or the insects were replaced by a machine that tells you the 'answer'.



There is certainly a place for AI and apps such as Merlin but it would be a sad day if birders spent their time looking down at their phones rather than looking up at the sky.

But I can see a place for it. Look, listen, learn (would be my three first suggestions with the natural world). If unsure, then feel free to use AI as a tool to assist; a starting point but not a finishing one in identification. If Merlin tells you there is a bird calling, try and find it,

note the call, observe the songram shape, take a picture of it if you can, go back and test it - read what it says in your books, look online, talk to others.

I intend to consider sound and photo AI identification as another tool in my wildlife toolbox. I do not intend to throw away my toolbox or my 20+ years of experience in the field simply because some technology is getting better. Where would be the fun or joy of discovery in that?!

Article by James Heal



*"Put your phone away - look up not down.....
.....because this world is amazing."*

To a Sparrow by Francis Ledwidge

Because you have no fear to mingle
Wings with those of greater part,
So like me, with song I single
Your sweet impudence of heart.
And when prouder feathers go where
Summer holds her leafy show,
You still come to us from nowhere
Like grey leaves across the snow.

In back ways where odd and end go
To your meals you drop down sure,
Knowing every broken window
Of the hospitable poor.
There is no bird half so harmless,
None so sweetly rude as you,
None so common and so charmless,
None of virtues nude as you.
But for all your faults I love you,
For you linger with us still,
Though the wintry winds reprove you
And the snow is on the hill.



larking about

The morning of September 3rd Team Skylark did its annual walkover on Wanstead Flats to assess the season's lark breeding success. 16 Wren members (not all pictured) walked the breeding areas and found 11 birds, an increase of 4 or 5 since the start of the season - so we have had a successful breeding season. In large part this is due to the two fenced areas, which prevent human and canine disturbance from March to September. Hopefully more of the same next year.



safeguarding

Wren Group New Policy Principles

Technology has been responsible for bringing the world to young people. It has also provided a source of fun and entertainment. However – along with the good there is also the risk that young people and vulnerable adults no longer engage with nature and the world outside.

Many researchers agree that young people who play outside are happier, better at paying attention and less anxious than those who spend more time indoors.

Spending time in nature can build their confidence. There's a lot less structure than most types of indoor play and they can choose how they interact with the nature around them. This gives them practice managing their own actions and encourages creativity and imagination.

Being outside get young people moving - regardless of what they're doing, there's usually more exercise involved than if they were sitting indoors at their computer. Not only is exercise good for youngster's bodies, but it seems to make them more focused. This is especially helpful for kids with ADHD. Being outside also helps youngsters feel less stressed.



An important part of the work of the Wren Group is to reach out to young people and disadvantaged groups and engage them in natural history, observation, recording, conservation and related skills.

However – all this must be done in a safe and risk-free way. Because of this the Wren Group have produced a 'Child Safeguarding Policy'. Child safeguarding refers to a set of policies, procedures and practices employed to make an organisation safe for all children they work with. Child protection is about making the world safe for children. It refers to actions done to protect specific children from concerns of risk or harm.



Permissions must be sought before using photographs else faces obscured

WREN believes that all children, young people and vulnerable adults should be able to enjoy WREN events and activities we organise in safety and in a framework that minimises risk of harm to children, young people and vulnerable adults through accident or abuse.

Children under 16 must always be accompanied by a parent/carer.

Code of Conduct/Responsibilities of staff and volunteers

You should:

- ☐ Set a good example; you are likely to be seen as a role model and should adopt an approach that encourages mutual respect.
- ☐ Always respect an individual's right to privacy and personal space.
- ☐ Be alert to inappropriate or potentially harmful behaviours within a group
- ☐ Always seek the consent of a child, young person or vulnerable adult if you need to touch them to administer first aid or to help with clothing.
- ☐ Respond sensitively to those anxious or unsure about participation in any activities.
- ☐ Encourage a culture of openness, where anyone experiencing upset feels able to report it.
- ☐ Immediately report any concerns you have about the welfare or safety of any child, young person or vulnerable adult or of inappropriate behaviour of other adults. The main contact will be the Wren Group Chair, James Heal.
- ☐ Ensure other adults attending a group (such as children's parents) or family event recognise the need for appropriate behaviour around children.
- ☐ Ensure that parents give permission for photographs of their children to be taken and used for publicity purposes.



environmentalists must work together

Perhaps a part of the solution is the return to more local 'small holding' food production - picture shows a Redbridge allotment.

Intensive farming, fertiliser abuse and manure management - together with food miles all contribute to the UK's greenhouse footprint. Environmentalists and food producers don't always see eye to eye on just how to improve the situation.

Here - Paul Donovan argues the case for better dialogue between farmers and environmentalists and a return to more local sustainable food production.



There has been a recent focus on the cost of agriculture in terms of greenhouse gas generation. The agricultural sector accounts for 11% of greenhouse gas emissions in Britain, with methane from the livestock and nitrous oxide due to the use of nitrogen fertilizer and manure management being the main causes.

The problem is bigger in a country like Ireland, where agriculture accounts for 38.4% of emissions. In Ireland, radical moves like mass cattle culls are under consideration by government. What the call for a cull highlights the often blunt instrument approach to the emissions issue.

There is a divide between farmers and environmentalists.

I recently, attending a talk in Rye, Sussex, about wildlife and biodiversity in the area, the division between farmers and environmentalists became immediately obvious. The talk was being given by a National Trust representative. He was explaining what was happening, with a rewilding plan, putting back hedges, returning to nature to restore biodiversity - so enhance carbon capture. It was all good stuff. A couple of farmers in the audience, though, were less impressed, criticising certain elements of the plan. The speaker was unwilling to dialogue, so the farmers were shut out. Speaking to one afterwards, he was just keen to work with the program in order that it worked better for everyone. The farmers, though, had not been taken

into the equation. This type of polarisation of opinion is not uncommon. The farmers in one camp, environmentalists in the other, and never the twain shall meet.

“Farmers are needed, both to provide food and look after nature in their fields, hedgerows and more. But to do so, they need to be paid more, either through higher food prices or through more subsidies.”

James Rebanks

Writer and Cumbrian hill farmer James Rebanks has explored some of these dilemmas. In his excellent book, *English Pastoral*, he describes a journey, which results in him totally changing his farming methods. So the farm still deals with livestock, only much more sustainably produced. He also does all that is possible to promote biodiversity, so reduce emissions. He has also been an advocate for this approach, working in co-operation, with his farming neighbours. The two things can work well together - producing food and enhancing the environment. Nations need feeding but the livestock must be dealt with sustainably.

The consequence of a Rebanks style approach is

that products like meat will cost the consumer more. Whether the consumer will accept such developments, especially at a time of a cost of living crisis, remains to be seen. Though, government subsidy for this form of sustainable farming can soften the blow.

What is for sure is that this more co-operative approach must be the way forward. Farmers and farming cannot just be slashed to meet an emissions target. Working together in the way Rebanks and others suggest must be the way forward.

Another project that shows real initiative in this area is the Our Food 1200 in Monmouthshire and the Brecon Beacons. The local bodies there are trying to bring new farmers in to take on small holdings. There are 1200 acres of plots to be handed out - the amount needed to feed the region.



Some four per cent of food in Britain comes from allotments and gardens. It cuts food miles, packaging, as well as contributing hugely to people's mental health. Pic - Redbridge Allotments.

The plots vary between 3 and 10 acres. The new farmers then produce the food required in the area. It becomes a virtuous circle. No more transporting

food around the country, generating emissions, it is being produced sustainably and consumed locally

This type of imaginative project must be spread across these islands and beyond.

In areas like Redbridge, this locally produced food can be further enhanced by expanding allotments and community gardens, as well as promoting food production in private gardens.

What the moves being taken to address greenhouse emissions to reach net zero underline is the need for change. The world has been slow to address the crisis. The warnings of scientists were at first ignored, then only given secondary status. Even today, many governments still believe climate issues can be put on the back burner until affordable. Though, an increasing number of governments realise delay, means an even greater cost down the line.

People's lives do need to radically change; the deniability bubble



In areas like Redbridge, this idea of locally produced food can be further enhanced by expanding allotments and community gardens. However pressure on land for building, higher rents and lack of appropriate space make this difficult. Pic - Redbridge Allotments.

is no answer. At least in Ireland there is a will to embrace the challenges, the UK government seems determined to promote the most damaging ways

of living, aka fossil fuel extraction, in a populist desire for electoral success.

There is recognition in Ireland and Britain that less use of petrol cars and planes plus a better diet all have parts to play. It will mean a different way of living, maybe a step back in some ways to a simpler way of life. But the benefits are manifold, not just saving the planet from climate and biodiversity disasters but also bringing about a healthier more fulfilled way of living, embracing the land in a more holistic way. The future can be bright.

Article by Cllr Paul Donovan



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.



Giant House Spider This spider is probably the one that you'll see the most this autumn, with it choosing to hide in homes, attics, sheds and out buildings, and spinning thick sheet web with tubular retreat. The *Eratigena atrica* can survive several months without food or water and is around 10mm to 14mm in length. However, including the legs it can measure up to 60mm and females tend to have a broader abdomen. They are seen all year around but mate in the autumn time.



spiders are on our side

If you have a house, you probably have house spiders. They might live in your loft, cellar or on your windowsills - or they might just be sitting there and watching you from your houseplants. But despite their reputation as creepy interlopers, most house spiders haven't simply wandered away from home: Our houses are their natural habitats.

Some people think of spiders as insects, grouping them together with six-legged invaders like cockroaches or ants. But they're not insects, and they don't want to raid our cupboards. Much like their outdoor relatives that eat pests, house spiders just want to quietly kill the insects that are after our food. If anything, they're on our side.

The spiders found on your windowsill are descendants of 7-foot-long marine animals that lived 480 million years ago. True spiders evolved about 300 million years ago, which means they pre-date dinosaurs - not to mention humans. They were here first and they've been living with us for a very long time. In fact, many house spiders are now specially adapted to indoor conditions like steady climate, sparse food and even sparser water.



The giant house spider, now with the scientific name Eratigena atrica, is one of the biggest spiders of Central and Northern Europe. (Wiki)



In this country the daddy long legs spider Pholcus phalangioides is found indoors in houses, outhouses and cellars etc. It favours undisturbed parts of houses where its untidy web passes unnoticed or is permitted to stay. (Wiki)

House spiders can be helpful.

Spiders are an efficient defence against pests like aphids, moths and beetles. House spiders offer similar benefits indoors, helping to keep down a wide variety of insects without the need for harmful insecticides. Spiders feed on common indoor pests, such as cockroaches, earwigs, mosquitoes, flies and clothes moths.

If you want to make sure your house spiders are pulling their weight, check in and under their webs to see what they've been eating. Many web-dwelling house spiders simply drop the remnants of their prey to the floor after eating, which can make an annoying mess but also provide evidence of their contribution to the household.

Male house spiders are seen at this time of year

running around people's houses as they are looking for a mate. Female house spiders remain behind skirting boards on their webs so it is usually the males that are seen running along floors and walls in homes.

Spiders are not invading your house for the winter — they are hiding out there all year round

It's often thought that spiders come in for shelter from the cold and as cold weather approaches an army of spiders invade our homes - but in fact they've probably been with us all along. In fact, our eight-legged friends often appear to become more frequent and vast in size as summer turns to autumn when the weather is not particularly cold says Chris Cathrine (British Arachnological Society).

"Generally only about 5 per cent of the spiders you see indoors have been outdoors and house spiders that are thrown into the garden by well meaning householders will die from the cold."

Geoff Oxford, British Arachnological Society

Although some house spider species can survive outdoors, they may not do well there, and some may die rather quickly when removed from the protective indoor habitat. So you're not doing them a favour if you evict them – no matter how carefully.

"It is unlikely that the large specimens we see in our houses in autumn have come in from outside, as is commonly assumed. They may well have spent their entire lives in our company without us being aware of it."

Geoff Oxford, British Arachnological Society

Just as indoor spiders are suited for indoor conditions; it wouldn't really suit outdoors spiders to come indoors. Spiders are cold-blooded, not attracted to warmth and are able to live at temperatures all the way down to -5C - those that are used to living outdoors would probably die off when they arrived indoors. However, sometimes outdoor spiders do wander inside. If you release one of these outside, you might actually be doing it a favour. Just be sure to let the right one out.



Steatoda nobilis - commonly known as the false widow spider - is native to Madeira and the Canary islands, and is believed to have arrived on British shores via a cargo transporter before 1879 (Wiki)

The 'spider season' is a period in early autumn, usually around the beginning of September, when large house spiders are far more visible around UK homes. This is because male spiders, after a summer of gorging themselves on moths, flies and other insects, become sexually mature and start emerging from their domestic hiding places – in search of a mate.



Gray cross spiders are reportedly common on man-made objects, yet rarely found on vegetation (Wiki)

This year, however, the season started in August which is earlier than usual. According to experts, it all comes down to that much-talked-about heatwave we've been having. The warmer weather has provided the ideal conditions for spiders to grow quickly with better access to food thanks to a boom in insect population.



The sector spider, which eats small insects, is found all over Britain all year around, often on window frames and inside homes (Wiki)

Research Tony Morrison



More

<https://metro.co.uk/2016/09/06/uk-spider-identification-17-common-british-spiders-you-might-find-this-autumn-6110982/>

ups and downs

Incredibly, before this summer it had been eight years since the previous breeding birds survey of Wanstead Park and Flats. Given the changes that have taken place since then, it would be nice if we could organise the next one before 2031!

Here Tim Harris reports on this year's breeding bird survey. Thanks to Tim and all those who participated, including Andy, Bob, Eve, Gosia, James, Jo, John, Karin, Louis, Mary, Nate, Nick, and Simon.



This year's winner – as in 2015 – was the Wren. Pic by Tim Harris

Just as in 2015, rather than estimating numbers based on transects, we attempted to map every individual territory for the target species, in every part of the patch.

The survey work was conducted between mid-March and mid-May. There are a couple of qualifiers: a few corners of our area weren't covered as thoroughly as they were previously, and reduced numbers for the commonest species are likely to reflect this. And we didn't target every species we know breeds locally. Jackdaw, Magpie, Carrion Crow, Woodpigeon and Blue Tit were some of the omissions. In hindsight, I wished we'd surveyed the Ring-necked Parakeets.



The decline in sightings of the Chaffinch patch-wide is not easily understood - certainly not due to under-recording as a special plea went out to look for these.

The accompanying table shows the top 14 species based on the number of territories, with 2015 figures in parentheses. Of these, the Song Thrush total was a pleasant surprise, and – given the increase in parakeet numbers in the Park – I was also happy that fellow hole-nesting Stock Doves have actually increased (as have Great Spotted Woodpeckers, with 21 territories). It was nice, too, to record Cetti's and

Reed Warbler territories, although there were no Garden or Willow Warblers. The other real success story has been Nuthatch, with five territories in the Park; there were none in 2015. Although I think Firecrests are probably breeding locally – maybe in the City of London Cemetery? – this has yet to be proven.

Bird territories of 14 most numerous surveyed species, Wanstead Flats and Wanstead Park (2023)		
Wren	180	(243)
Robin	171	(186)
Great Tit	128	(159)
Blackcap	92	(94)
Blackbird	56	(91)
Chiffchaff	56	(54)
Dunnock	37	(40)
Song Thrush	36	(40)
Common Whitethroat	31	(38)
Stock Dove	28	(17)
Great Spotted Woodpecker	21	(18)
Long-tailed Tit	14	n/a
Green Woodpecker	11	(18)
Greenfinch	8	(14)

That's the good news. However, some of the other findings make uncomfortable reading. Some declines – for example Dunnock and Common Whitethroat on the Flats – can be explained by habitat change. But the absence of Meadow Pipits on the Flats and the near absence of Chaffinches patch-wide are not so easily understood. They are certainly not due to under-recording – a special plea went out to look



There has been a slump in the number of blackbird sightings possibly due to the drought during the 2022 breeding season. Hopefully the wetter summer of 2023 will help reverse this trend.

for these. The fall in Greenfinch numbers began long before 2015 but has continued. And what about the disappearance of Mistle Thrush territories and the slump in Blackbird numbers? For the latter, a decline from 91 to 56 territories can't be ignored. Was this related to the drought of summer 2022 making it impossible for adults to find enough food for their young when the ground was baked hard and herbaceous vegetation had died back almost completely in many places? Hopefully, the wetter July and August of 2023 will have a positive impact on breeding Blackbird numbers next year.

Macro-level changes have registered, too, including the northward shift of Willow Warbler's breeding range; this beautiful songster used to be an annual breeder in good numbers – the 1980 Wren bird report enumerates 21 territories locally – but it was effectively lost already as a breeding species before 2015.

It will be interesting to see what ups and downs spring 2024 brings.



.... 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, Alexandra Pond in 1930 and how it is today in 2023. The area used to be known locally as 'The Sand Hills' - the sand probably being the spoil from when the lake was created by unemployed labourers back in 1906/07. It is thought that the hills were more substantial but sand was taken to fill sandbags during the second world war.





..... 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.

LOST GARDENS OF WANSTEAD HOUSE

TALK BY DR HANNAH ARMSTRONG

author of 'East London's Lost Palace'

TUESDAY NOVEMBER 14th, 7.30pm

Doors open 7.00pm.

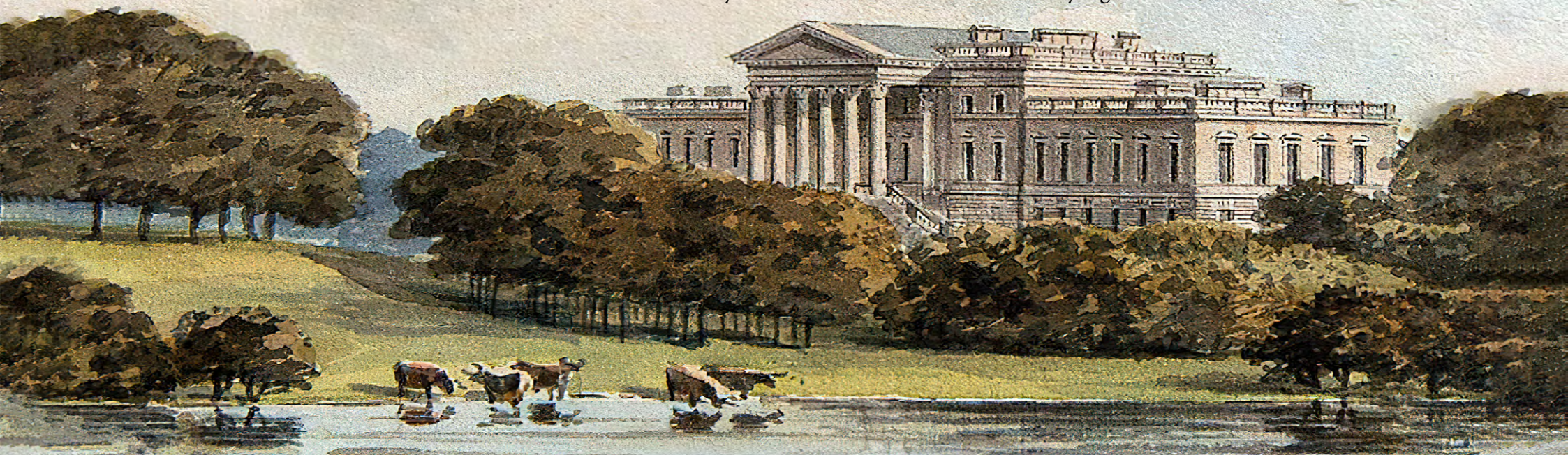
Aldersbrook Bowls Club

Aldersbrook Road, E12 5DY

Buses 101 & W19 stop outside

Tickets £5 non-members, Free to AHS members

Aldersbrook Horticultural Society: www.aldersbrookhorticulturalsociety.org.uk



Dr Hannah Armstrong invites you to travel back in time and visit the magnificent gardens of one of Georgian England's most significant residences, Wanstead House. The demolition of what was once crowned 'the noblest house not only in England, but in all of Europe', brought about the demise of a landscape once associated with some of

the leading designers of the era including George London, William Kent and Humphry Repton. Piecing together evidence from historic prints, maps, paintings, written accounts and archaeological remains, Hannah will document the garden's evolution from the late 17th century until the early 19th century and recreate this important lost landscape.

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

