

Spring 2024

# Wren

Wildlife & Conservation Group

*Longhorn Cattle return to Wanstead Park - pic by Tony Morrison*

- Page 02 - A Word from the Chair - a few words from the chair James Heal
- Page 03 - Wren Annual General Meeting - year update by James Heal
- Page 05 - Epping Forest for Everyone to Love - article by EFHT Chief Executive Peter Lewis
- Page 07 - Clever birds hitch a lift - article by Tony Morrison
- Page 09 - Wild Geese - Poem by Frederick Peterson
- Page 10 - An Unloved Flower - the Dandelion by Tony Morrison
- Page 11 - Skylark - by Tim Harris
- Page 14 - The Power of Trees - View by Cllr Paul Donovan
- Page 16 - Bird Report - a take on the years sightings by James Heal
- Page 19 - Leaves from a Keeper's Tale - article by Mark Gorman
- Page 22 - A Nature Fix is Good for You - from Frontiers in Psychology
- Page 24 - Norman Olley - a tribute by Wren President Richard Oakman
- Page 26 - Wanstead Wildlife Weekend - something for your diary
- Page 27 - Useful Links





# a word from the chair .....

I live in Leytonstone and very close to Wanstead Flats. My house was built in 1870 and was one of the first to be built on my road.

A year after my house was built, something incredible happened on my doorstep; a real act of people power. Thousands gathered on Wanstead Flats to protest against its enclosure by a local landowner. The popular uprising helped secure the support of the City of London Corporation and eventually led to the groundbreaking Epping Forest Act of 1878 which protected the Forest for the use and enjoyment of the people.

This amazing story is told in much greater detail and colour by Wren member, former Committee member, and local historian, Mark Gorman in his wonderful book, 'Saving the People's Forest: open spaces, enclosure and popular protest in Victorian London'.

The Epping Forest Act states that, it shall be kept "uninclosed [sic] and unbuilt on, as an open space for the recreation and enjoyment of the public". This is noble and proper and something the Wren Group has always supported. The act also states that the Conservators shall "as far as possible preserve the natural aspect of the Forest", something the Wren Group has fought and worked hard to support as well.

As Wren members know, a tiny fraction of Wanstead Flats is cordoned off for a few months a year to try and protect the last few breeding Skylark. The vast majority of people we talk to about this, including many, many dog walkers, are very supportive of these efforts. Sadly a very small minority are not supportive.

It appears that an extreme libertarian perspective ("I will do whatever the hell I want" mentality) interprets the current single cordon of rope fencing to be an impingement on their own 'rights' and perhaps feels that it is a form of enclosure. It is unacceptable enough to them to lead to repeated and systematic

vandalism of the rope, with large sections being vandalised repeatedly.

I fear for the future of our Skylarks, but I also fear for sections of humanity if we warp and twist hard won freedoms and rights into a bloody minded and destructive selfishness that tramples on the very rights for other species to exist.

Dialogue has been such an important part of our quest to protect the Skylarks. I know that dialogue with the most extreme view on the issue of the fencing may not work, but if we win over enough hearts and minds, the greater the likelihood that someone the vandal may listen to could influence them enough for them to drop their misguided crusade of rope cutting.

James Heal  
Chair Wren Group



*Nature is like air, water, health and well-being .....  
it belongs to everyone and is not anyone's to sell or exploit.*

*To be custodians of nature is a privilege not a business.*

# Wren annual general meeting

## Chair's Report

If I reflect back on 2023, I would say that a stand-out theme for me of the Wren Group activity would be 'exploring our natural world in new ways'.

As in previous years, our flagship event was the midsummer bioblitz-type event - renamed, the Wanstead Wildlife Weekend. We renamed it as the focus was slightly different, and some of the activities were new and exciting for us. The central focus was less on how many species we could identify (although as long as I remain Chair of the group, wildlife recording will always be an important part of what we do) and more about finding different ways to explore and enjoy wildlife.

Our Patron, the acclaimed artist Dr Gayle Chong-Kwan and local artist Jo Wood both led art-themed activities as part of the weekend, and we held three separate photography workshops led by our members. The Wildlife weekend saw a record number of partnerships with different groups and experts - and I would like to pause at this moment and extend particular thanks to Gill James who was the driving force behind this event - I think it was the

most enjoyable we have organised in my time with Wren. I remember being sat with the family picnic and partnership with Transition and other groups and seeing so many children enjoying the activities and feeling a wave of hope about our future.

Several Wren members also participated with local photo artist, Annick Wolfers, in a public art project and many of our experiences have received the billboard treatment on Leytonstone High Road.



*Budding artists with our Patron, the acclaimed artist Dr Gayle Chong-Kwan trying their hands at a bit of 'wild art' as part of Wanstead Wildlife Weekend*

Studying and celebrating the local wildlife will always be a central pillar of what we do, and in 2023 we recorded 126 species of bird - which was sadly some way below par for us, but it did include some quality local rarities: A small flock of flyover Whooper Swans for a small number of lucky locals on 25 November was probably the stand-out highlight as it is our first

ever record of Whoopers locally. Other highlights included: Pintail duck, Wood Warbler, and Corn Bunting. More worryingly, it was the second year in a row that we have gone without recording a Bullfinch locally (have they gone the way of Marsh Tits etc for the local area?) and 2023 was the first year for many where we didn't have a record of Jack Snipe.

I know many members care greatly about the fortunes of our ground nesting birds on Wanstead Flats. As some of you may know, we sadly lost Meadow Pipit as a breeding bird (although individuals still remain present for many months of the non-breeding year) about three years ago. Meanwhile there is better news about our Skylarks. We conducted a walkover in September and found 11 separate individuals which means there were likely 4-5 fledged birds; perhaps from two or three successful broods.

There was also some great invertebrate recording. Tim Harris and a small group of other local moth trappers led the way with Lepidoptera records. There were 26 species of butterfly and 299 species of moth recorded locally in 2023, taking our patch total to an enormous 694 (let's hope 2024 sees our 700th species). Highlights included further colonisation by Marbled White butterfly, and new moths included: The Festoon, Large Emerald, The Sprawler, Clancy's Rustic, and Small Clouded Brindle. There were also two Convolvulus Hawk-moths (massive creatures if you have ever encountered one) in October.



One particular invertebrate highlight was found by visiting entomologist, Tristan Bantock. Ten years ago, Tristan found a new beetle for the UK at Wanstead Flats: a Broom weevil called *Enedreytes hilaris*. Since then only one or two have been found since at other locations in the UK. In September 2023, Tristan returned and found this super rare beetle again. I met Tristan for the first time then and it was great to have such a strong beetle and bug expert showing

us his techniques for finding them.

[Tony Madgwick presented a short piece on bees and Peter Williams presented a short piece on practical work]

As always, I am hugely grateful for all the efforts of Committee members and other active members. The events all take lots of effort, the ticketing, the recording, the newsletter, the website, the finances,

the membership, the Facebook group and everything that requires work.

I won't name you all, but thank you for everything you do - the Wren Group wouldn't exist without you.

James Heal  
Chair Wren Group



## your wren committee 2024



Richard Oakman  
President



James Heal  
Chair



Simon Raper  
Treasurer



Moira Duhig



June Nicholson



Gill James  
Secretary



Jackie Morrison



Tim Harris



Mary Holden  
Membership,  
Social Media



Bob Vaughan  
Wren Website



Marion Lobo



Tony Madgwick



Lucinda Culpin



Neil Herrington



Tony Morrison  
Wren Newsletter



Peter Williams  
Works Coordinator





# epping forest

for everyone to L♥ve

As we begin to see the, very early, signs of Spring, we are also delighted to see fresh new strategies, research and growth at the City of London Corporation after the "winter" of restructure and understaffing.

Here Peter Lewis, Chief Executive of the Epping Forest Heritage Trust, gives a short update on potential 'fresh green shoots' in the organisation.



Firstly, at a strategic level, the City of London Corporation has announced [4 new headline strategies for the Natural Environment Directorate](#), picking up on lots of issues, that we and others have been feeding in over the last few years.

There seems to be a much greater emphasis on improving biodiversity in the Forest, and commitments to equity and community engagement, to collaboration and partnerships, and to master planning for sites across the Forest. They are definitely worth a read if you care about the Forest.

These strategies are high level, and the City are beginning work to develop these into a 5 year business plan for the City.

Secondly, the City commissioned and has published the outcomes of a [Natural Capital valuation of all of its green spaces](#), including Epping Forest. This puts a financial value on the public benefits of Epping Forest of £64 million a year, or £1.9 billion over 50 years. It is a fascinating report picking up on lots of different ways the Forest contributes to our wellbeing – from the health and wellbeing of visitors to its ability to sequester carbon, from its ability to cool the temperature to absorbing water to protect from floods.

And it has already been a great asset for the City in communicating the benefits of their green

spaces, including raising the profile of Epping Forest, which is great.

From a policy perspective perhaps the most interesting aspect is that the report concludes that the better condition the Forest is in, the more biodiverse it is, and the more people it welcomes, the higher its value. And already the report says that for every £1 the City invests in Epping Forest, the Forest delivers a £20 return.

I think about how much I care for the Forest, and how much I worry about the pressures it is facing now from encroaching development, air pollution and climate change.

Finally, we are really pleased that the restructure that has been the blight of the local Epping Forest team for many months is now over, and they are in full recruitment and induction mode, meaning that over the forthcoming months, amongst other things, we will see more Keepers in the Forest as well as an enhanced conservation team. More details on the



*We can all think of many ways that Epping Forest contributes to our wellbeing - but who would think there is a financial benefit. A new report has revealed that the network of internationally important open spaces managed by the City of London Corporation – including Epping Forest – are worth £282.6 million each year in benefits to society.*

City's new staffing structure can be found in the papers to the Epping Forest Consultative Group [to provide link].

Personally I am really excited about all the new developments at the City, and hopeful it will mean really good things for the Forest we all care about so much moving forward.

Peter Lewis

Chief Executive  
Epping Forest Heritage Trust



# clever birds hitch a lift

Article and pics by Tony Morrison

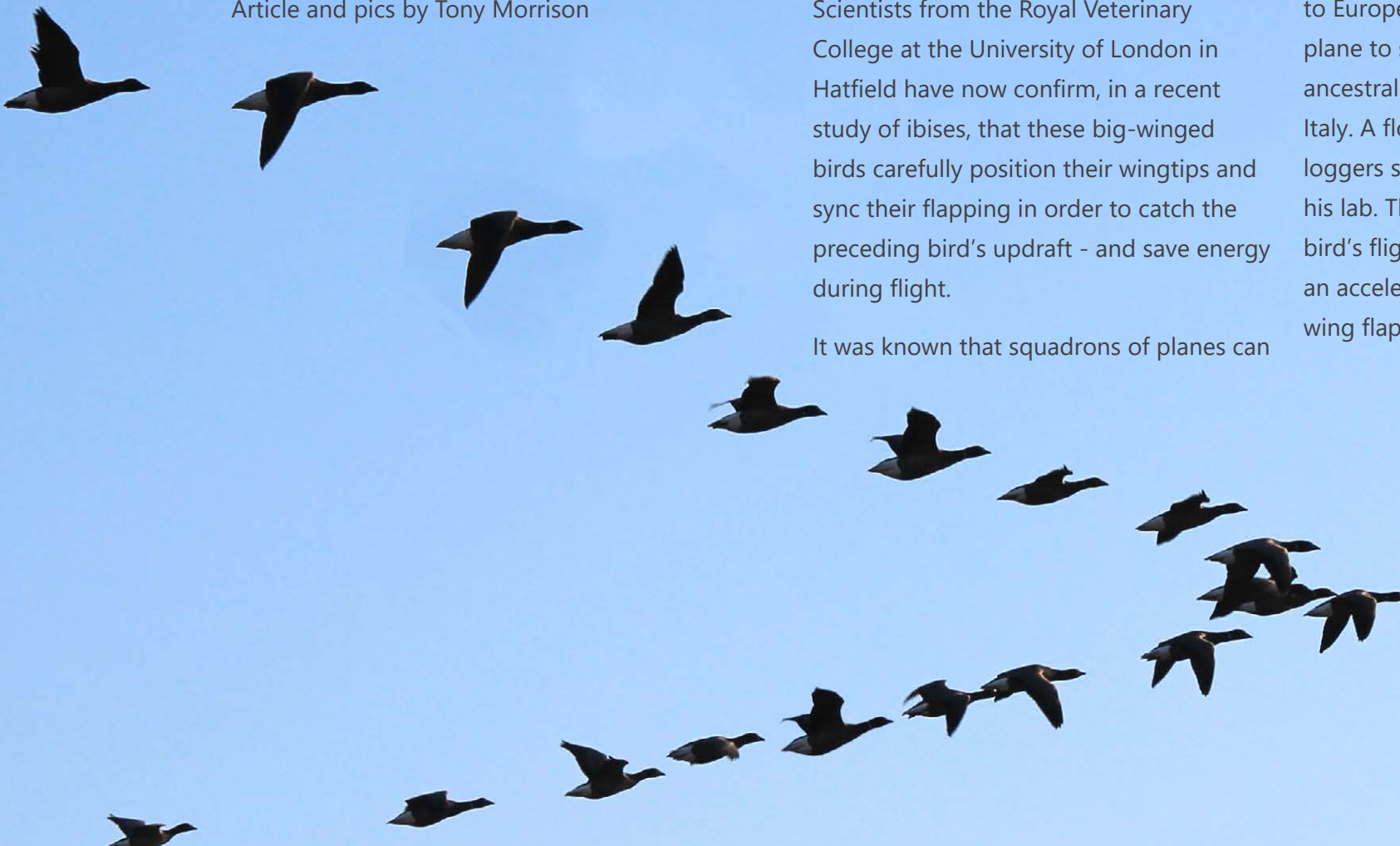
Anyone watching the autumn sky knows that migrating birds fly in a V formation with birds taking turns taking the lead. More attentive birdwatchers have always assumed that the reason for this was to somehow share the burden of flying what can sometimes be very large distances.

Scientists from the Royal Veterinary College at the University of London in Hatfield have now confirm, in a recent study of ibises, that these big-winged birds carefully position their wingtips and sync their flapping in order to catch the preceding bird's updraft - and save energy during flight.

It was known that squadrons of planes can

save fuel by flying in a V formation, and many scientists suspected that migrating birds did the same.

The study, published online today in Nature, took advantage of an existing project to reintroduce endangered northern bald ibises (*Geronticus eremita*) to Europe. Scientists used a microlight plane to show hand-raised birds their ancestral migration route from Austria to Italy. A flock of 14 juveniles carried data loggers specially built by Usherwood and his lab. The device's GPS determined each bird's flight position to within 30 cm, and an accelerometer showed the timing of the wing flaps.



Just as aerodynamic estimates would predict, the birds positioned themselves to fly just behind and to the side of the bird in front, timing their wing beats to catch the uplifting eddies. When a bird flew directly behind another, the timing of the flapping reversed so that it could minimize the effects of the downdraft coming off the back of the bird's body. "We didn't think this was possible," Usherwood says, considering that the feat requires careful flight and incredible awareness of one's neighbours.

The findings likely apply to other long-winged birds, such as pelicans, storks, and geese, Usherwood says. Smaller birds create more complex wakes that would make drafting too difficult. The researchers did not attempt to calculate the bird's energy savings because the necessary physiological measurements would be too invasive for an endangered species. Previous studies estimate

that birds can use 20% to 30% less energy while flying in a V.

Scientists still do not know how the birds find that aerodynamic sweet spot, but they suspect that they somehow align themselves either by sight or by sensing air currents through their feathers. Alternatively, they may move around until they find the location with the least resistance. In future studies, the researchers will switch to more common birds, such as pigeons or geese. They plan to investigate how the animals decide who sets the course and the pace, and whether a mistake made by the leader can ripple through the rest of the flock to cause traffic jams.

For more click on the links below;  
<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v505/n7483/full/nature12939.html>  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-25736049>  
<http://english.pravda.ru/science/mysteries/16-01-2014/126613-bird-formation-0>







## Wild Geese

How oft against the sunset sky or moon  
I watched that moving zigzag of spread wings  
In unforgotten Autumns gone too soon,  
In unforgotten Springs!  
Creatures of desolation, far they fly  
Above all lands bound by the curling foam;  
In misty lens, wild moors and trackless sky  
These wild things have their home.  
They know the tundra of Siberian coasts.  
And tropic marshes by the Indian seas;  
They know the clouds and night and starry hosts  
From Crux to Pleiades.  
Dark flying rune against the western glow—  
It tells the sweep and loneliness of things,  
Symbol of Autumns vanished long ago.  
Symbol of coming Springs!

by Frederick Peterson



# "an unloved flower"

In 1911 poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox said in her poem, The Weed, "A weed is but an unloved flower!" All plants were once wild and weedy. The ones humans favoured were nurtured, bred and coveted; they were chosen, and they were loved. The ancestors of our most loved plants were wild, all beginning life as weeds until their value was discovered and their breeding and cultivation began.

It is how we view and judge these things that we define what is and isn't a weed.

The Dandelion is typically thought of as a weed. Maybe we need to really get to know a weed before you can love and appreciate it.

## Dandelion Facts

- ❑ Dandelions are not weeds
- ❑ A Dandelion seed can travel up to 5 miles before it lands
- ❑ Every part of a Dandelion is edible
- ❑ One cup of Dandelion greens = 535% of your daily recommended vitamin K
- ❑ A cup of Dandelion greens = 112% of vitamin A
- ❑ Up until 1800's Dandelions were seen as extremely beneficial. People would remove grass to plant them.

Please don't spray or pull spring Dandelions - they are one of the first food sources for our bees and other insects.

Our gardens are a vital resource for wildlife, providing corridors of green space between open countryside, allowing species to move about. In fact, the UK's gardens provide more space for nature than all the National Nature Reserves put together. So why not try leaving wilder areas in your garden, such as patches of dandelions in your lawn or nettles near your compost heap, to see who comes to visit?





# skylark

Skylarks arrived from Europe originally and were here in great numbers until a two thirds population decline over the last 30 years. This is mainly caused by changes to countryside arable farming practice such as changes to the crop sowing seasons and increased use of herbicides.

The birds nest in grass 30-50cm high and have 2-3 broods a year March- August. The nests are very shallow and hard to find. Eggs hatch after 8 days and in 12-13 days are out of the nest. The skylarks feed on both the long grass and also the short mown grass on their site.

The other ground nesting bird which you might see on patch is the meadow pipit.

Our Wanstead Flats breeding population is the nearest to Central London and has declined from about 10 singing males 10 years ago to about 2-3 pairs now.

## Skylark vulnerability

Nationally, the population of Skylarks has been in decline for decades. Skylarks are on the 'Red List' of Birds of Conservation Concern. In the UK, the population halved during the 1990s, and is still declining.





**S**skylarks are a victim of changes to farming practices and habitat loss. In their preferred habitat of farmland, numbers crashed by 75% between 1972 and 1996.

Cereals are now sown in autumn, not spring. Autumn-sown cereals are taller and denser throughout the season; fewer Skylarks nest in these crops, and those that do are unable to raise as many broods as in spring-sown crops. Additionally, insect populations have declined due to the use of insecticides and the intensification of grazing on grassland.



*Tim Harris, Gill James, Ben Murphy (Chair of the Epping Forest and Commons Committee), John Tullah and Tom Boughton (CoL Campaigns and Fundraising Officer) - on a suitable site where it is likely Skylarks will choose to nest.*

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

grass, such as football pitches. This makes Wanstead Flats – the only breeding population of Skylarks in inner London – even more important.

The Wren Group – in conjunction with the City of London Corporation – is trying to give local Skylarks a fighting chance.

In 2021, and each year since, temporary fencing has been erected around two areas of the Flats. Between March and early September, this has meant that the birds – whose eggs and chicks are particularly vulnerable to disturbance – were protected from heavy human and canine footfall during the nesting season.

## The introduction of fencing last year lessened disturbance from walkers, cyclists and dogs and has improved numbers.

However - this year someone has been cutting down the ropes which make repairing the fence in spring more costly and time consuming and disturbs the Skylarks.

We are not sure why this is happening.

It may be that they feel that the fencing is a waste of money, environmentally unfriendly or just plain ugly. To reduce cost, use of single-use plastic fencing and create less of an eyesore, the City of London Corporation is this year experimenting with blue

rope together with signage asking people politely to keep out. Alternatively, it may be that these individuals feel that their freedom to wander has somehow been taken away – but the fencing comes down in August when paths are restored to the public.



*Wren volunteers Tim, Gill and John help string blue rope to demark a suitable breeding site for our local skylarks. The Larks that choose to nest in this area will have a much better chance of raising young.*

Please respect this fencing, the future of our larks may depend on it. If you see the rope being vandalised, please report to the police 101.

The UK is already one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. But it's not too late to stop the decline of wildlife in our area. If we create the right habitats in our gardens, parks and open spaces, it will help populations recover and nature will have a chance to thrive on our doorsteps – now and in the future.



## So far - so good

We believe that three pairs of Skylarks raised four young on the Flats during 2023. It is hard to be certain, but an end-of-season walkover found 11 individuals, and there were seven at the beginning of the breeding season. In March 2024 there appears to be a minimum of seven birds and at least three singing males.

Assuming these males pair up, we are hopeful that the females will lay eggs and that these will successfully hatch, with the young going on to fledge and join the local population.

There are lots of 'ifs' there. Eggs may be abandoned if there is too much disturbance,

If you get up very early from April to August, and go out on to Wanstead Flats, the Skylark is likely to be the most prominent bird you will hear, starting even before the sun rises. When you see or hear one stop awhile – or better still, lie down and give your neck a rest so you can enjoy an 'exaltation of skylarks' - the wonderfully descriptive collective noun for this little bird.

But this could be a thing of the past if we're not careful - we've already lost Larks on Leyton Flats.



*In the absence of arable fields locally, Skylarks construct their nests on the ground in areas of unmown grass; they also feed on areas of mown grass, such as football pitches. This makes Wanstead Flats – the only breeding population of Skylarks in inner London – even more important. Pic by Tim Harris*

or they may be predated by other creatures ranging from crows to snails. And even if they do hatch, the young may be taken by a range of predators. It's a

wonder ground-nesting birds ever succeed in raising young! Hopefully, a reduction in human and canine footfall will reduce the disturbance factor. The rest is down to the birds' fecundity and ability to dodge their enemies. We believe that there is probably some movement between different parts of an east London 'meta-population' of Skylarks, including birds at other sites such as Fairlop and Hainault. This is being further investigated during 2024.

Update by Tim Harris





A large, ancient oak tree with a hollow in its trunk, set in a forest. The tree's branches are bare and spread out against a light sky. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and moss.

# the power of trees

Trees have a vital role in the battle to overcome climate change. They absorb carbon dioxide and contribute much to biodiversity across the planet.

Here Redbridge Cllr Paul Donovan gives his slant on the complexity of how trees operate as revealed in a fascinating new book, the Power of Trees, by German forester and teacher Peter Wohlleben.

Wohlleben describes the intricate, interdependent world of the ancient woodlands. How trees are linked together and provide mutual support.

Oak tree at Hollow Ponds - pic by Tony Morrison



The connected fungi and microorganisms. Trees learn down the years how to survive. So photosynthesis can stop, with the leaves on trees closing down. Sugar and water reserves can be used or saved depending on the circumstance but overall the story is one of great resilience and interdependence. A forest community, as it were.

Wohlleben is very critical of the forestry industry across Germany and beyond. Many of the old deciduous forests have been cleared, being replaced with conifers and other fast timber producing trees.

Cutting down the trees, destroys the forests as carbon sinks and sources of cooling. Then, many of the trees cut go to create wood pellets for fuel, thereby releasing more carbon. Many of these re-planted areas lack resilience, so the new trees don't survive.

One of Wohlleben's most serious charges is that the forestry industry, whilst claiming to be combatting climate change is by its actions doing the opposite. His answers really come from the rewilding school of thought, namely to leave the ancient woodlands that remain alone to regenerate. Then, when planting new trees make sure the type and conditions are right to replicate what has gone before. But when talking of tree development, the cycle is for hundreds of years, not 20 years before felling for timber. The monetary value of such a plan in pure market terms is negligible. So investment is likely to have to come from government - as will regulation.

Wohlleben cites cattle as a major problem in causing deforestation and climate change. There is the clearance of forests to make way for cattle. Then, the methane produced by cattle. Also, the ongoing carbon costs right up to the point that the meat arrives on the plate. So opting to go vegetarian is advocated as a major way people can advance forest development and the battle against climate change - though, sustainable farming must have a place in the future.

**“The survival of the fittest? Trees would just shake their heads—or rather their crowns. Their well-being depends on their community, and when the supposedly feeble trees disappear, the others lose as well.”**

*Peter Wohlleben*

Planting, trees of course, is another vital way of contributing to carbon reduction and cooling the climate around us.

What is heartening is to see how forest lands are managed in the local area. The fantastic trees in local woodlands like Wanstead Park, Bushwood, Epping Forest and Hainault Forest are all managed in the sustainable style that Wohlleben suggests. When trees fall or have to be felled, they are left to

become part of the regenerative process. Insects, fungi and much else vital to progressing the biodiversity prosper. It becomes a virtuous circle. We do have some fantastic trees around, with many oaks and birches. There are some really ancient trees in Hainault and Epping Forests. So we are very fortunate in this area to have so much green infrastructure around us. It is also pleasing that it is all so well managed.

The challenge going forward is how to expand the tree cover. It is something being promoted by the Mayor of London. There has been much planting of new areas in Redbridge. This work must be ongoing - it also has to be done in an appropriate way that gives the time and longevity to be of real biodiverse value.

But also remember the best way of advancing woodland is to leave what is already there alone. Trees are great at regenerating and spreading, when left to their own devices. Let the woods regenerate and spread. In the end, they might just save us all.

by Cllr Paul Donovan



Power of Trees - how ancient forests can save us if we let them by Peter Wohlleben. Published by Greystone Books £18.99



# bird report

The general sense amongst the birders was that the patch seemed to go off the boil from early Autumn and it went from being an average year to a poor year. Having said that, two of the regular birders were bemoaning what a poor Autumn it had been when the flock of Whooper Swans flew over - a brand new species for the patch.

Chair of the Wren Group and local ornithologist James Heal gives his take on the years bird sightings.



*Black-necked Grebe - pic by Jonathan Lethbridge*



2023 saw a total of 126 species recorded, which was quite some way down on the two previous years: 2022 - 135; 2021 - 143. I don't think we can draw any real conclusions from this; other than it is a little disappointing, as we would likely want to see a clear trendline over several years to feel comfortable identifying a pattern.

The best birds through the year, by local scarcity factor, included:

- ❑ Whooper Swan - 25 November. Five birds flew high over NNW. Found by Jono Lethbridge. As a new record for the Patch, and the 200th patch species by my count (others may have slightly different views on this), this was a very good record.
- ❑ Pintail - 10 September. First found by Mary Holden on Jubilee before it relocated to Heronry where it stayed for a week. This is the first twitchable Pintail since 1975.

- ❑ Corn Bunting - 4 June. Found by Nick Croft in the Brooms.
- ❑ Crossbill - 19 August. Six flew south over the Brooms, first picked up by Jono Lethbridge.
- ❑ Wood Warbler - 22 August. Also found by Jono Lethbridge; it was seen on a few occasions on 22 and 23 August around the eastern side of Long Wood.
- ❑ Woodlark - 16 August. Recorded calling over Brooms by Bob Vaughan.
- ❑ Merlin - 29 April. Seen low over Brooms by Bob Vaughan.
- ❑ Black-necked Grebe - A female joined the returning male on 28 March raising hopes briefly that they might breed before the female departed and the male succumbed.
- ❑ Great White Egret - three separate records.
- ❑ Dartford Warbler - two birds seen in Brooms from 1 Jan to 1 March.



*Wheatear - pic by Nick Croft*

We believe that at least two pairs of Skylark successfully bred in the temporary enclosure with the end-of-season organised walkover flushing 11 birds suggesting 4-5 recently fledged birds. Meadow Pipits did not breed (and nor did they in 2022).



*Great White Egret - pic by Bob Vaughan*

I won't cover all of the passage migrants, but thought it might be interesting to dive into the stats for a few species:

Wheatear. There were an astonishing 203 bird days (meaning each Wheatear counted each day, albeit many will likely have stayed for more than one day) which may be a record or close to. The bulk (154) were Spring birds. 203 was over double the number we had in 2022 and two thirds more than we had in 2021.

One might presume that if it is a good year for one species of sub-Saharan passage migrant, then it will be a good year for all of them, but that is not the case. There were 83 Whinchat bird days in 2023, which was similar to 2021, but was down from a monster 193 in 2022. Taking Pied Flycatcher, there were only nine bird days in 2023 (as always, all in the Autumn) down from 16 in 2022 and 18 in 2021.

Turning away from African migration and towards Scandinavian / northern migration, 2023 was a very poor year for Brambling. Only three birds were recorded in 2023, with some of us not connecting with any of these flyover finches at all. This was very similar to the picture in 2024 (four birds) but down from 20 in 2021.



*Woodlark - pic by Tim Harris*

I love bird statistics and phenology (as you might have guessed) but I am also very aware that numbers



*Pintail duck on Jubilee Pond, Wanstead Flats - 10th September 2023. Wren committee member, Mary Holden, took the picture in the morning flushed pink by the rising sun.*

*Later that day it reappeared on Heronry Pond in Wanstead park and stayed until 14th September before it went looking for a more suitable habitat.*

*This was the first recorded Pintail since 2020 when one was spotted flying over. It was the first one that was seen on a local pond since 1975.*

don't make birding alone and that memories make birding special. I saw my third patch Wood Warbler and the length of views were lower than the first two (in 2015 and 2019), but the moment when the bright yellow and white warbler perched up in front of me in the Old Enclosure (east of Long Wood) for a split second was a moment of patch birding magic. Let's hope 2024 brings plenty of memories too.

Report by James Heal





# leaves from a keeper's tale

In the early 1960s, the memories of Sidney Butt, one of Epping Forest's earliest Keepers, were recorded and published as "A Keeper's Tale". They speak of aspects of the forest which by the mid-twentieth century had long since vanished, yet half a century on we can see that a surprising amount remains. Here are some of Sidney's thoughts.

Article by Mark Gorman, material from Fred J. Speakman, A Keeper's Tale (1962) with acknowledgement to Nick Croft, the WREN Group and Rose Stephens for additional information plundered from their blogs etc.

*Picture - a common sight at the turn of the last century a keeper or tenant using a sledge as the easiest method to transport materials in the forest.*

*Lopping rights were traditionally limited to those holding ancient tenements. Lopping was permitted only between 1 November and 23 April and might be done only on Mondays. The wood had to be removed on sledges, wheeled carts being forbidden, and no lopper might employ more than two horses to draw his sledge.*





Sidney Butt began his life as an Epping Forest Keeper at the age of 22, in 1894. At that time, he said, a journey to the forest was a day's outing by [horse-drawn] brake or bicycle or on foot along the gravel roads, lanes and fields. By the 1960s the car had brought the forest within the reach of thousands. "Change was inevitable, and I have watched the changing face of the Forest" said Sidney.



*Epping Forest workers at the time of Sidney's service as a keeper*

One early change that Sidney saw was the ending of lopping for firewood, with the result that the pollards' crowns grew into an unwieldy mass, their branches filling the sky, shutting out the air and light so that seedlings and flowers withered and died. Primroses and bluebells, which had been abundant, dwindled in number. Bracken also began to take over some areas, driving out heather and harebells.

Sidney might have been cheered to know that bluebells have made a comeback at least in some parts of the forest. The spring display in Wanstead Park's Chalet Wood, the result of years of volunteer clearance work each winter, is the best known, but there are also large numbers further north in the forest, for example near Strawberry Hill ponds and in Upshire.



*Sidney Butt, Epping Forest keeper, in uniform around 1916. People from all manner of trades and professions joined the armed services in the opening months of the war.*

Sidney also remembered abundant birdlife, including some which have all but vanished. Sparrowhawks could be found nesting throughout the forest, including in the Wanstead and Walthamstow areas, in bundles of twigs just visible thirty feet up, often in Oak trees. Other birds of prey such as the hobby, buzzard and merlin were doomed, said Sidney, "because every man's hand was against them". In the early days of the City of London's management, the Corporation and its guests had the right to shoot game, and each spring jay shoots took place, while the Keepers acted as beaters. "Sometimes many were shot; on a bad day we might kill no more than half a dozen".



*Charcoal burning in the Forest*

Nevertheless, again despite Sidney's gloomy predictions, even birds of prey (which were hunted and shot across the forest in the early days of the last century) still make an appearance - hobbies,



sparrowhawks and buzzards all among the regular visitors to Wanstead Park and the Flats. Nowadays, a bird of prey such as the kestrel has more trouble from attacking crows than being shot by the local gentry. Sidney had no time for crows. "The crow is worse than all the hawks. If you have jays magpies and carrion crows they'll take the small birds for you quicker than anything".

Sidney Butt's memories area a unique record of Epping Forest and its wildlife a century and more ago, a time when the forest was still remote enough from London to retain the feel of a much earlier era. Yet Sidney might be cheered to know that much has survived, and continues to make up the unique habitat that we know today.

by Mark Gorman

Updated article - first published  
summer 2017



*Forest horseman sledging logs - a common sight at the turn of the last century.*

## 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.





# a nature fix is good for you

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

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

But while we know it works, the parameters have been a bit murky: What kind of nature works? How often should one spend time in nature? And for how long?

With this in mind, researchers from the University of Michigan set out to discover the relationship between the duration of a nature experience (NE), and changes in two physiological biomarkers of stress – salivary cortisol and alpha-amylase.

The research is novel in that, among other things, the study participants were free to choose the time of day, duration, and the place of a NE in response to personal preference and changing daily schedules. For eight weeks, 36 urban dwellers were asked to have a NE at least three times a week for a duration of 10 minutes or more.

As the study explains:

“The NE was defined as anywhere outside that, in the opinion of the participant, included a sufficiency of natural elements to feel like a nature interaction.

Participants understood they were free to adjust the place, time of day, and duration of the NE in response to changing daily circumstances to best accommodate their goal.”

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

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

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



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

From the study:

"For salivary cortisol, an NE produced a 21.3% per hour drop beyond that of the hormone's 11.7% diurnal drop. The efficiency of a nature pill per time expended was greatest between 20 and 30 minutes, after which benefits continued to accrue, but at a reduced rate. For salivary alpha-amylase, there was a 28.1% per hour drop after adjusting for its diurnal rise of 3.5% per hour, but only for participants that were least active sitting or sitting with some walking. Activity type did not influence cortisol response."

Hunter says that we know that spending time in nature reduces stress, but until now it was

unclear how much is enough, how often to do it, or even what kind of nature experience will benefit us. "Our study shows that for the greatest payoff, in terms of efficiently lowering levels of the stress hormone cortisol, you should spend 20 to 30 minutes sitting or walking in a place that provides you with a sense of nature."

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

"Healthcare practitioners can use our results as an evidence based rule of thumb on what to put in a nature-pill prescription," says Hunter. "It provides the first estimates of how nature experiences impact stress levels in the context of

normal daily life. It breaks new ground by addressing some of the complexities of measuring an effective nature dose."

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

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



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

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

*Alaxandra Lake, Wanstead Flats - pic by Tony Morrison*



# norman olley

On behalf of the Wren Group would like to pay tribute to our former and very long-standing Treasurer, Norman Olley, who sadly passed away recently. I know the thoughts of the Committee and membership are with Norman's wife, Kathleen and wider family.

Norman had a great interest in life and was always an active member of one group or another. The 27th April 1988 was a significant date for Norman – he joined the Wren Wildlife Group! Initially because his friend Geoff Boshier joined at that time also and, as he did with societies he joined, it wasn't long before he became a regular at meetings using his camera whenever he could on the Group's walks organised by Peter Aylmer – notably the Capital Ring Walk.

He became more involved in 1995 as a diligent hon. Treasurer and post which he held until 2017 returning

to hold the fort after a successor became ill. I think he enjoyed meeting people – he would greet members as they arrived at meetings and collect any dues or sign up new members. He even, one member told me, expressed particular concern if they had rushed to the meeting without their evening meal!

The society was ever so grateful for his contribution; he was made an honorary member in 2017.

Norman became a good friend of mine. He would phone me and say "was I free tomorrow as he had a walk planned". I wasn't always free at such short notice but we had a good many walks. One following instructions in his book and, as these are always subject to interpretation, resulted in us wandering aimlessly in the Essex countryside, under the watchful gaze of a buzzard, until I found a signal and google maps! We ended up in in a churchyard and then a country inn.

On another occasion, I was told the destination was a secret one and we took the train to Kings Cross and thence to the Camley Street wildlife park followed by

a walk along the canal to Camden Lock. Our last walk, which was in October last year, took us to Tower Bridge and then along from there to Limehouse stopping off at The Town of Ramsgate pub for food and a pint. I then got him down the ancient steps onto the sandy beach of the Thames (the tide was out). He enjoyed the location so much and out came the camera! So engrossed was he that he didn't notice the small wave coming towards him until he felt his foot getting wet. I have this on record! We shortly deemed it wise to leave the beach.

I enjoyed joining him at his Club in Covent Garden and having Kathleen and Norman to lunch in my Club – though again pictures were taken!

Thus they were good times and, like others, I shall miss you Norman very much.

Richard Oakman  
President of the Wren Group







# .... don't forget

During the spring and early summer breeding season there are millions more hungry mouths to feed. Nesting parents will have to work hard to feed their young, while maintaining their own energy levels.

It can still be pretty parky out there and food may be hard to come by for our birds.

So please keep an eye out for our feathered friends.

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

## then & now

Were you right ?

The fountain at the southern end of Wanstead Flats, at the junction of Capel and Woodgrange Roads was erected in memory of Joseph Fry (1809-1896) who was responsible for the construction of many drinking fountains, for people and horses, around London. The older picture was taken c1905. The recent picture was taken around 2006 - the area has since been subject to roadworks and the fountain has been moved.





# Wanstead wildlife weekend

22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 10am -5pm

Save the date!

## 'Reptiles ..... and more'

We have booked an exciting free educational display from a company with a good reputation for animal welfare which will be showing live British wildlife such as small rodents, a barn owl, a snake, invasive marsh frogs, hawk moths and caterpillars, depending on their life cycle, and even a (rescue) hedgehog. They will be present on both Saturday and Sunday and will be a great attraction for children.

## Programme:

- ☐ Two Tindersticks Bush Craft workshops
- ☐ Wildlife Explorers Treasure Trail for children
- ☐ Moth Trap Reveal early morning at the Temple
- ☐ Butterfly Transect Walk in Wanstead Park
- ☐ Bees and Hoverflies with Tony Madgwick
- ☐ Spider Hunt & Invertebrates Safari with David Carr
- ☐ Pond Dip at the Shoulder of Mutton Pond
- ☐ Art workshop with local artist Jo Wood
- ☐ Insect Stories for Unde-5s
- ☐ Minibeast Hunt
- ☐ Family Eco Picnic and workshops in the Woodland Play Area
- ☐ Invertebrate walk for all, from bugs to plant galls with James Heal

Can you help? Tell us what's missing.

Info Tent: help wanted to run the info Tent by the Tea Hut on both days.

Contact: [gilljames@btinternet.com](mailto:gilljames@btinternet.com)





# links

Wren links page [www.wrengroup.org.uk/links](http://www.wrengroup.org.uk/links)

Facebook [www.facebook.com/WrenOrg](https://www.facebook.com/WrenOrg)

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

Wanstead Wildlife

[www.wansteadwildlife.org.uk](http://www.wansteadwildlife.org.uk)

Friends of Wanstead Parklands

[www.wansteadpark.org.uk](http://www.wansteadpark.org.uk)

RSPB North East London Members Group

[www.rspb.org.uk/groups/northeastlondon](http://www.rspb.org.uk/groups/northeastlondon)

Wanstead Birding Blog

[wansteadbirding.blogspot.co.uk](http://wansteadbirding.blogspot.co.uk)

Epping Forest

[www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/epping-forest/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/epping-forest/Pages/default.aspx)

British Naturalists' Association

[www.bna-naturalists.org](http://www.bna-naturalists.org)

Bushwood Area Residents' Association

[www.bara-leytonstone.org.uk](http://www.bara-leytonstone.org.uk)

East London Nature [www.eln.yorkshirefog.co.uk](http://www.eln.yorkshirefog.co.uk)

East London Birders [www.elbf.co.uk](http://www.elbf.co.uk)

Friends of Epping Forest

[www.friendsofeppingforest.org.uk](http://www.friendsofeppingforest.org.uk)

East London Nature [www.eastlondonnature.co.uk](http://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](http://www.wildwanstead.org)

BBC Nature [www.bbc.co.uk/nature](http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature)

British Naturalists Association

[www.bna-naturalists.org](http://www.bna-naturalists.org)

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

Field Studies Council (FSC)

[www.field-studies-council.org](http://www.field-studies-council.org)

London Natural History Society

[www.lnhs.org.uk](http://www.lnhs.org.uk)

Natural England [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk)

RSPB [www.rspb.org.uk/england](http://www.rspb.org.uk/england)

UK Safari [www.uksafari.com](http://www.uksafari.com)

The British Deer Society [www.bds.org.uk](http://www.bds.org.uk)

The Wildlife Trust [www.wildlifetrusts.org](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org)



*Egyptian Geese by Tushar*