

Summer 2024

# Wren

Wildlife & Conservation Group

*Cover image. Sometimes you see it sometimes you don't – but if you walk across Lake House Road from Jubilee Pond, or take the rough route over the ant hills in that same direction, you may discover a small, semi-permanent pond that goes by the curious name 'Cat and Dog Pond'. The pond presumably gets its name from the fact that it's only visible when it's been raining 'Cats and Dogs'. Pic by Mary Holden*

Page 02 - A Word from the Chair - a few words from the chair James Heal

Page 03 - Skylark Update - Report by Tim Harris

Page 06 - Invertebrate Report by James Heal

Page 09 - Reviving the Mosaic - Article by Tanith Cooke - Epping Forest

Page 12 - A Butterfly Emergency - Report by Tony Morrison

Page 15 - Fall, Leaves, Fall - Poem by Emily Bronte

Page 16 - Crafty Oaks - Manipulative trees source Steve Mould

Page 18 - The Need for Rewilding (and quickly) - View by Cllr Paul Donovan

Page 21 - Things that go Chirp in the night - what does bird song look like by Bob Vaughan.

Page 24 - Practical Work - join the team by Peter Williams

Page 26 - Useful Links



# a word from the chair .....

I love wildlife. This should not be a surprise to anyone who reads this newsletter or who knows me. I also love literature and reading. Surprisingly, I am not an enormous fan of wildlife / nature writing as a genre. I find it is often a bit twee. But, occasionally, a great book slips through.

The Peregrine by J.A. Baker is one such book - absolutely stunning descriptions based not on someone using overly florid language after a walk in the countryside, but by someone who has watched and studied Peregrines for hundreds of hours:

*"Like the seafarer, the Peregrine lives in a pouring-away world of no attachment, a world of wakes and tilting, of sinking planes of land and water. We who are anchored and earthbound cannot envisage this freedom of the eye."* - The Peregrine, J.A. Baker

Similarly, I love The Snow Leopard by Peter

Matthiessen. A book which exemplifies to me the spirit of the journey being more important than the destination. An inner journey as well as a physical one:

*"The secret of the mountain is that the mountains simply exist, as I do myself: the mountains exist simply, which I do not."* - The Snow Leopard, Peter Matthiessen

My third recommendation is The Fly Trap by Fredrik Sjoberg which captures wonderfully the quietness, precision and wonder of entomology and, like the first two books, as much about an inner reflection and philosophy as about the subject of the book:

*"Every summer there are a number of nights, not many, but a number, when everything is perfect. The light, the warmth, the smells, the mist, the birdsong - the moths. Who can sleep?"* - The Fly Trap, Fredrik Sjoberg

If, like me, you generally avoid specific nature writing but you want stunning examples of the wild, then Blood Meridian by Cormac MacCarthy could be for you. This one comes with a health warning though - this historical western is horrifically violent and explores the very depths of what humanity can

wreak on each other. Not for the faint hearted!

*"The jagged mountains were pure blue in the dawn and everywhere birds twittered and the sun when it rose caught the moon in the west so that they lay opposed to each other across the earth, the sun whitehot and the moon a pale replica, as if they were the ends of a common bore beyond whose terminals burned worlds past all reckoning."*

My fifth and final recommendation is another one of the great examples of writing about the wild, and somewhat closer to home (the Cairngorms in Scotland to be specific) The Living Mountain by Nan Shepherd:

*"Yet often the mountain gives itself most completely when I have no destination, when I reach nowhere in particular, but have gone out merely to be with the mountain as one visits a friend with no intention but to be with him."*

Which wild or wilderness-themed books would be in your top five? Let me know!

James Heal  
Chair Wren Group





# skylark update



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.

Sadly, this iconic bird is nowhere near as familiar as it once was. The Eurasian Skylark breeds in a wide range of open habitats, with territory density in the UK greatest on coastal marshes, then – in order of descending density – heathland, natural grassland, arable farmland, moorland and pastoral farmland. Although arable farmland does not support the highest densities, it is the single most important habitat simply on account of its great extent. Within this there are significant density differences between cereals, root crops, legumes, cabbages and turnips, for example. Because of the huge area given over to cereals, though, this is the single most important area of concern.

In the UK, the decline of the Eurasian Skylark probably began in the 1950s, although they accelerated sharply in the late 1970s. Between 1968 and 1995, the total number of breeding birds halved from 6 million to 3 million.

## A local success story

At the end of the road where I now live, in the heart of east London, is the semi-acid grassland of Wanstead Flats. There, areas of unmown grass sit cheek by jowl with patches of broom and brambles. Skylarks still nest in the tussocky grass and feed on the shorter sward of the tracks running through it, the football pitches nearby and even the mown grass



*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*

of the adjacent model aircraft runway. It is definitely 'sub-optimal' habitat. In many ways it defies belief that this, the closest population of the species to central London, can survive here at all.

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



*Lark on Wanstead Flats Skylark enclosure boundary post - pic by Tony Brown*

Over the years the Wren Wildlife and Conservation Group have been monitoring the numbers of singing males on Wanstead Flats and have noticed a rapid decline from double figures in 2010 to just three or four in the last few years. As it is a ground nesting bird the Skylark is prone to disturbance, and with the increase in footfall on the Flats the Wren group were concerned that Skylarks might soon be lost as a breeding species locally. A further complication is that Skylarks will not nest near tree cover, they prefer open spaces.

In 2021 the City of London agreed to put up fencing during the breeding season (March to August) over a couple of small areas in the middle of the Flats. The Wren Group mobilised 40 volunteers to engage with people, especially dog-walkers, to win support for the scheme. The public were far more supportive than I could have imagined, even in my wildest dreams.

This experiment has worked well and, although it is difficult to be precise, with no breeding recorded in 2020 it is believed at least one pair bred successfully. The public have been very supportive and appreciated the lovely lilting song as they walk through on the main paths.



*Epping Forest, RSPB North East, the Wren Wildlife Conservation Group and loads of volunteers at September's 'Fun Day' where, amongst a variety of activities, the temporary fencing for the lark enclosure was taken down.*



## This year marked the 3rd year of fencing the 'Lark Paddock'.

A perfect way to mark the end of the skylark nesting season and show support for local wildlife happened at the beginning of September. Epping Forest, RSPB North East, the Wren Wildlife and Conservation Group and loads of volunteers helped remove the temporary fencing for the lark enclosure.

The 'fun' day also included wildlife walks, art workshops, kite flying, face painting, a photography workshop, sweep netting, nest building, hide and seek and much more.

With another breeding season over, members of the public are now free to wander through these areas of rough acid grassland. The ropes will be installed again in late February 2025.



*Yours truly giving a guided walk of the area.*

It is always difficult to gauge Skylark breeding success but we do know that young were being fed in at least two nests this summer.

Thanks to everyone who helped install, maintain and dismantle the fencing. And a very big thank you for City of London staff, who have given tremendous support - both time and resources - to making sure that "operation Skylark" is a success.

Tim Harris



A terrific day in the sunshine, celebrating the end of another successful Skylark nesting season, meeting new friends and enjoying the natural beauty of Epping Forest.

A reminder of what can be achieved when we all work in partnership together.

Benjamin Murphy

Chairman, Epping Forest & Commons Committee at City of London



*Not everyone so keen on campaigning for our local skylarks. Young kestrel perched on boundary post of Lark Paddock - pic by Andy*





# ~~INVERTEBRATE~~ ~~bird~~ report

## Naturalist's Journal: Summer Invertebrates

As I spend more time looking at invertebrates than birds during the summer months, I thought I would share with you some notes on a small selection of my invertebrate records this summer - all of the species mentioned have been added to iRecord.

by James Heal



*Red-headed Cardinal Beetle (Pyrochroa serraticornis) - pic by James Heal*

# May

Wolf Spiders are those spiders that run across the path - sometimes carrying their round egg sacs. They are also notoriously difficult to ID to species, and sometimes even to genus level. *Trochosa terricola* is one of our largest wolfies and can be identified through a combination of detail on the abdomen and carapace (head area). A chunky adult female ran across the wet path after quite heavy rain. Only the third of this species I have recorded locally despite them being common nationally. So much of this summer season was a wash-out which we suspect has made it very challenging for some invertebrates, but this large wolfy seemed to be managing ok.

One of the great challenges of invertebrate recording is recognising that some species cannot be identified reliably without inspection under a microscope. However, sometimes even without determination to species, some invertebrates can still usefully be recorded to genus level. One particularly difficult genus of plant bugs is 'Psallus'. They are very small, can vary in colouration, and there are a lot of different species. On 4 May, I beat my first Psallus bug from oak for the year - a tiny red nymph. Interestingly, identification within this genus is getting even harder as climate change is meaning new species are appearing creating even greater confusion. I always think they look 'expensive' - they come in gold, purple, maroon, browns, and blacks

and have quite thick and rich pubescence on the wing casing.

Most of our lepidoptera recording comes via Tim Harris who collects his own moth records and those of one or two other locally who do some light trapping as well. Just occasionally we add to the invertebrate lists with moths in their larval (caterpillar) form. This was the case with Scarce Umber on 4 May and Mottled Umber on 6 May. The adult females of these species are unusual in that they are wingless / don't fly.

As a 'galler' or amateur cecidologist (study of plant galls), we have to build our knack of determining between leaf damage and genuine plant galls. Sometimes it is obvious; sometimes less so. One of the more subtle galls on Oak is caused by the midge, *Polystepha malpighii*: just yellowy bumps on the upperside and slightly raised areas on the underside of the leaf containing the larvae for a delicate dipteran inside. The subtlety may be a reason why this species is so under-reported in the UK - there are only seven records on iRecord in the UK and I am responsible for four of them; including a record on 10 May.

The Red-headed Cardinal Beetle (*Pyrochroa serraticornis*) has to be one of our most handsome beetles (See main picture). Aptly named in English and Latin, this beetle's colouration really is as fresh scarlet as a cardinal's robes, and the heavily serrated

antennae (hence 'serraticornis') are stately and impressive. I found an adult male basking in the sun. This species doesn't need to worry about being picked off by birds - their colouration serves to warn off predators and they contain toxins which the males develop and, interestingly, pass across to the females via copulation - a truly 'toxic relationship' perhaps?



*Volucella pellucens* - pic by James Heal

# June

A great pleasure for me this season has been the Volucella hoverflies - some of the most impressive mimics and often very large. The Pellucid Fly (*Volucella pellucens*) is apparently one of the largest flies in Britain and its shiny black appearance with an ivory white band across the abdomen make it very striking indeed. There was a patch of brambles skirting the eastern edge of the westernmost part



of Long Wood that was very productive over the season for invertebrates and Volucella hoverflies in particular.

Talking of productive places for invertebrates and micro habitats, perhaps the most interesting one I experienced this season was the unassuming sandy bare patch of earth near the picnic tables to the west of the tea hut and north of Heronry. Tony Madgwick spent some time at this place during his summer bee walk and we all enjoyed watching the Pantaloons Bee (Dasypoda hirtipes) near their nest holes as well as a range of different parasitic wasps, each specialising in a different prey also with their nest holes on this bare earth.



*Female Pantaloons Bee (Dasypoda hirtipes) - pic by James Heal*

## July

Perhaps largely due to the wet and, sometimes,



*Essex Skipper (Thymelicus lineola) - pic by James Heal*

unseasonably cold weather we experienced for much of the summer, numbers of butterflies seemed to be late and low. Some of our most numerous butterfly species locally are the grassland specialists: Essex and Small Skipper. These butterflies can only really be distinguished from each other by the tips of the antennae (black for Essex Skipper and orange for Small Skipper).



*Ornate Bee Fox (Cerceris rybyensis) - pic by James Heal*

Skipper caterpillars feed on different grasses and so, unsurprisingly, the numbers can be very high but this year they arrived a little late it seemed.

Returning to the bare patch of earth in July was productive. Cerceris rybyensis, sometimes called the Bee Fox, were carrying bee prey. I also enjoyed photographing some of the jewel or cuckoo wasps, including one that there are some questions around - as in which particular species we have.



*Jewel or Cuckoo Wasp Hedychrum sp - pic by James Heal*

The suspicion is that we have Hedychrum rutilans, a cleptoparasitic wasp that lays its eggs on the bee prey of the Bee Wolf (Philanthus triangulum) - another wasp that we have locally. I am sure Tony Madgwick will keep us updated as we learn more.



A photograph of a forest with tall, slender trees and a dense canopy of green leaves. Sunlight filters through the trees, creating a warm, golden glow on the right side of the image. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and moss.

# reviving the mosaic

Epping Forest is one of only a few remaining large-scale examples of ancient wood pasture in Britain. It is a living testament to the complex relationship between nature and people. For millennia human hands shaped its landscape into a thriving mosaic of habitats. As traditional practices faded so too did the Forest's ecological tapestry. Facing the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change the Forest still depends on and reflects its human populations.

Can active restoration revive the Forest's past and secure its future ?

Article by Tanith Cook  
Head of Conservation - City of London Epping Forest



Humans are increasingly able to perceive the impacts our species had long before recorded history. Beginning around 9000 years ago in Europe, the Holocene era saw a trend from foraging to farming.

Pollen analysis has found plant communities, especially in forests across northern Europe, became increasingly diverse during this shift. ["Surprisingly, these increases in diversity are often linked to growing levels of human activity."](#)

Reflecting on this distant history I am reminded how inextricably linked both our past and futures are to the natural systems that surround us. I see this too when walking in Epping Forest. It was through the cutting of trees for fuel and fodder and the grazing of animals that the Forest's wood pasture landscape emerged.

Wildlife communities developed in parallel with how the land was used. Species that favoured the pollarded trees and the open habitats thrived.

Walking through a late medieval Epping Forest, short, 2m tall trees cut every 13-15 years stretch away in all directions. A lush carpet of plants covers the forest floor. Above expansive grasslands and heathlands, the air throngs with insects and birds. Habitat types weave into each other creating a mosaic full of bustling transition zones known as ecotones.

Changes to this pattern of land use accelerated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the decline of pollarding, followed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the decline of grazing. The result was more young trees and scrub which grew between the ancient pollards competing for light. They encroached into the grasslands and the heathlands and shaded the streams. The now over-mature, lapsed pollards formed high woodland with their increasingly tall uncut branches. This density and crowding suppressed other trees, important mosses, and ground vegetation. Their weakened crowns made them susceptible to wind and drought.



*Pollarded Beech trees in Epping Forest. The use of the forest for a source of fuel and fodder meant that wildlife adapted - species that favoured pollarded trees and open spaces flourished.*

By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Forest had become more uniform. Shady thickets of holly and young trees, absent ground flora proliferated. The veteran trees were increasingly of a similar age

and condition. This pattern is not unique to Epping Forest. Across British woodlands since 1971 there has been an [increase in holly, a reduction in open habitats and a decline in the diversity of forest floor plants](#). Many readers will recognise this pattern when comparing forest walks now with those of their youth.

This period has seen a rise in various forms of pollution and the intensifying impacts of an altered climate. Both nationally and globally, the rapid decline in wildlife abundance and diversity has escalated into a [biodiversity crisis](#). As they always have, humans are leaving their mark on the Forest.

Epping Forest is confronting the compounded threats of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation. We could choose to minimise our management, trusting that a new balance of habitat types can emerge. The likely outcome is the disappearance of the heathlands and grassland along with their specialist plants as they become overgrown. Here and there trees would collapse creating temporary glades, but not in sufficient size, number, or duration to preserve many plant populations. The untended pollards would die prematurely due to lack of light or crown collapse. With no replacements, habitat for insects would be diminished, reducing the availability of food for birds, bats, and small mammals.

The City of London Corporation has instead chosen to try and improve the condition of Epping Forest.



The wildlife here has adapted to the influence of people and thrived. By understanding those processes, we can restore lost habitats and re-establish the Forest's mosaic of diverse, rich, habitats. The more types of habitats we restore, the more chance different species will find a home. We will create new pollards ready to become ancient trees of the future. Tree growth, while good for absorbing carbon dioxide, cannot alone alleviate the biodiversity crisis. This means in places we will favour important open habitats, [which can be significant carbon stores in their own right](#).



*Cattle once grazed freely throughout Epping Forest and many of them made their way down as far as Wanstead Flats. They were a common sight in the summer months and the cause of occasional traffic hold-ups as they wandered across the roads - but they were much loved.*

In centuries past, human impact on the Forest was the result of what the Forest could do and provide for locals. In an increasingly nature poor world, [what the Forest does for us](#) is clear. The question now is,

what we can do for the Forest? The answer relies on watching to see what works.



*English Longhorn cattle have already been re-introduced to parts of the Forest. As well as upholding an ancient forest tradition, it brings significant benefits to the Forest's ecosystem, allowing more flower and plant species to flourish such as the lousewort.*

Beginning in 2020 our Habitat Restoration Programme built on a strategy started in 2008 and the work of staff and volunteers over preceding decades. Our limited resources are focused on the most important habitats. At these sites we have seen the movement of cows spreading scarce species like lousewort and how haloing has improved the health of veteran trees. We have been encouraged by the benefits to purple emperor butterfly and dung beetle populations and by sightings of sparrowhawks, lesser spotted woodpeckers, and firecrests.

One such important habitat site is Leyton Flats where you may have noticed holly smothering many veteran trees. Beginning in September, our 2024

programme will clear the thick holly and trees of low conservation value to increase light to the veteran pollards and encourage ground flora. Where the acid grassland has been encroached, we will remove trees and where competitive grasses have spread, we will expose the seedbank. For more details visit [here](#).



*Ancient trees in dense forest stand the risk of being overtopped by younger, taller trees. Haloing involves the removal of these young, competing trees from around the ancient tree. This helps create more open wood pasture and ground flora releasing ancient trees from competition and allowing them to survive for longer.*

Our goal is to foster a healthier Epping Forest where diverse habitats flourish and wildlife thrives. Through thoughtful stewardship and cooperation with nature (and between ourselves!) we can hope to pass on this remarkable Forest, and a vibrant ecosystem, to future generations.

by Tanith Cook  
City of London - Epping Forest





# butterfly emergency

UK charity 'Butterfly Conservation' has declared a "butterfly emergency" in the UK due to the lowest recorded number of butterflies in the 14-year history of the Big Butterfly Count.

The average number of butterflies per 15-minute count was just seven, and eight out of the 10 most-seen species have declined, including common blue, small tortoiseshell, small white and green-veined white. Butterfly Conservation is calling for an outright ban on neonicotinoid pesticides, which have been exempted by the UK government since 2021. Conservationists warn that the decline of butterflies is a key indicator of wider environmental issues.

Sourced by Tony Morrison

*The summer of 2024 was particularly bad for butterflies and the worst year on record for once common species, including the common blue (pic).*





## UK summer count hits record low

Butterfly Conservation has declared a “butterfly emergency” in the UK after the Big Butterfly Count recorded the lowest count ever since its inception.

Participants in the survey recorded an average of only seven butterflies per 15-minute count this summer, a record low. Widespread declines were recorded in once-common species, including the common blue, small tortoiseshell, small white, and green-veined white. Eight out of the 10 most-seen species have declined substantially over the survey’s history.



*2024 was a very bad year for butterflies and the worst year on record for once common species such as the Small Tortoiseshell butterfly.*

Butterfly Conservation is calling on the government to declare a “nature emergency” and ban neonicotinoid pesticides, which it believes should be banned outright with no exceptions. The EU



*Not such bad news for the Gatekeeper Butterfly - the most reported species during the 2024 Big Butterfly Count - 190,413 sightings (32%).*

and the UK banned neonicotinoids in 2018, but the previous UK government has authorised their use on sugar beet annually since 2021. Prior to the election, Labour promised to ban all neonicotinoids.

## Conservation group calls on government to ban insect-killing neonicotinoid pesticides outright

Richard Fox from Butterfly Conservation said that this year’s figures are even worse than previous records and that a third of the species recorded have had their worst year on record. The data was in line with other evidence indicating that the summer of 2024 was particularly bad for butterflies. Fox went on to describe the importance of butterflies as a key indicator species: “When they are in trouble, we know that the wider environment is in trouble too.” He has urged authorities to take urgent action

to “turn the tide” against such rapid declines and protect species for the future.

Observations of insects such as beetles and wasps have shown that there have been crashes in populations during the summer following a cold and extended first half of the season. However, experts suggest that the declines in butterflies and other flying insects appear to be more than weather-related fluctuations.

It was the worst year on record for once common species, including the common blue, small tortoiseshell, small white and green-veined white. Eight out of the 10 most-seen species have declined – in many cases dramatically – over the counts history.

The gatekeeper was the most-seen butterfly in the latest count. However, during the 14 years of recording, the species has fallen 32%. Other species making up the top 10 have had similar long-term declines. These include the small white (down 19% over 14 years), peacock (down 30%), speckled wood (down 38%), and green-veined white (down 65%).

The ringlet was the only butterfly faring significantly better than in 2023 as its caterpillars feed on grass and benefit from damper weather. However, over 14 years, the species’ abundance has declined by 47%.

More than 85,000 citizen scientists recorded 935,000

butterflies and day-flying moths during three weeks in July for the Big Butterfly Count, down by nearly 600,000 compared to the previous year. In 9,000 counts, participants didn't see any butterflies or moths, the biggest number of zero-counts in the programme's history. Butterfly Conservation has requested that people sign its open letter to environment secretary, Steve Reed, calling for a complete ban on neonicotinoids.

A spokesperson from the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs stated that nature is fundamental to everything and protecting pollinators, including butterflies, was essential. The department is committed to changing current policies, including a ban on neonicotinoid pesticides that threaten pollinators.

The ten most-reported butterfly species during the 2024 Big Butterfly Count were:

1. Gatekeeper, 190,413, -32%
2. Meadow brown, 177,844, -15%
3. Large white, 138,424, +2%
4. Small white, 112,814, -19%
5. Peacock, 50,847, -30%
6. Red admiral, 47,109, +28%
7. Ringlet, 44,278, -47%
8. Speckled wood, 30,112, -38%
9. Comma, 24,498, -20%
10. Green-veined white, 18,951, -65%

Locally - the Butterfly Conservation team with Tim Harris have set-up a butterfly transect walk of about a mile in Wanstead Park. This covers several habitats and Lucinda Culpin and Bob Vaughan have been co-ordinating the project this summer. Each week, on suitable sunny days, volunteers have walked and recorded all butterflies seen. The results have disappointed our expectations, both in numbers and variety, but will act as a baseline for monitoring in future years.

Sources;

[Butterfly Conservation](#)

[BBC](#)

[The Guardian](#)



*The Ringlet Butterfly was the only butterfly doing better than in 2013 - however, over 14 years it has still declined by 47%.*





## Fall, Leaves, Fall

by Emily Brontë

Fall, leaves, fall; die, flowers, away;  
Lengthen night and shorten day;  
Every leaf speaks bliss to me  
Fluttering from the autumn tree.  
I shall smile when wreaths of snow  
Blossom where the rose should grow;  
I shall sing when night's decay  
Ushers in a drearier day.



# crafty oaks

You're probably aware of the relationship between oak trees and squirrels, but you might not know that oak trees do something incredibly manipulative to the squirrels.

It's all about seed dispersal. Oak trees want to disperse their seeds far away from the parent tree in the hope that a new oak tree will grow and it won't be in the shadow of the parent.

So the oak tree makes acorns. An acorn is basically a container of nutrients with a little embryo near the tip. Because they're full of nutrients squirrels eat them in their entirety, including the seed, which is no good for the oak tree.

The reason this relationship is so beneficial, to both the tree and the squirrel, is because squirrels are caching animals - they save resources to use in winter.





**T**hey do this by burrowing acorns in little caches underground. The reason this works for the oak tree is because occasionally a squirrel, will forget about one of it's caches or will die before getting around to that cash. So there's potential for a new oak tree to grow from that location.

That much, you probably already know. But oak trees are able to vastly improve their chances of getting acorns into abandoned caches by doing something called masting.

Approximately every 5 years, though it varies a lot, an Oaktree will produce a huge overabundance of acorns - like tens of times more acorns than on a normal year. These years are called masting years. This bumper crop of acorns is much more than the local squirrel population and other predators could possibly bury and eat. But squirrels give it a good try and bury as many acorns as possible. As a result loads of those caches end up unused and that's exactly what the oak tree wants - it wants abandoned

acorns that have the potential to grow into new oak trees.

But if an oak tree has this capacity to produce insane number of acorns on certain years, why not just spread that capacity out?

Well if oak trees did that then the predator population, including squirrels, would rise up to meet that capacity. During mast years squirrels get a huge boost in nutrition so they make more babies and the squirrel population goes up. But the following year this squirrel population will go back down again because we're back down to a normal level of acorns. So doing it this way, where you have mostly low yield years followed by some spikes of yield, the predator population is controlled keep it at a low level.

Scientists don't know how this coordination happens. It might be that all oak trees have a mast year under very specific weather conditions - so it always happens for all oak

trees. Or it might be a chemical signalling in the roots underground.

Our last mast year was 2020. Mast years normally happen every 3 to 5 years, and the crop following a mast year is always unusually low, as we saw in 2021. Low acorn years can have worrying results for wildlife, but they serve an important purpose!

Lately, hot weather gives us a longer (but drier) growing season. Warm spring temperatures often result in impressive acorn crops - and as we know, spring is getting warmer and earlier every year. This might result in more acorns each year, which throws off the natural mast year cycle.

[Source Steve Mould](#)



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

# the need for rewilding

and quickly

Rewilding has become a popular way to restore biodiversity, address climate change and improve the planet.

The term rewilding originally referred to large-scale restoration of ecosystems with the aim of minimal human management so that natural processes shape the landscape and its habitats...

Recently, however, the term rewilding has made its way into the public domain as a term that is used to describe any kind of wildlife friendly natural habitat creation, for example creating a wildflower meadow in a park or planting a small area of new woodland.

Here - local councillor and environmental campaigner Paul Donovan argues the need to get a move on.





There have been the big projects, like Knepp in Sussex - an early convert to the process. The rewilding on farmland at Knepp began in the early noughties.

The farmland was allowed to go wild, with fascinating results, including, soil restoration, flood mitigation, air purification and carbon sequestration. There have also been wildlife successes, like the proliferation of nightingales and turtledoves. Numerous butterflies, including the Purple Emperor are present as well as a multiplying bat population.

In other areas, species like the beaver have been reintroduced, helping counter flooding with the heavier rainfalls.

At a more local level, there have been the grow



*Grow Zones in Redbridge are areas of wild grass and weeds on the edges of parks and roads where the grass is left to grow long to encourage wildflowers and other plants to grow. The areas are cut and collected once or twice a year to improve the range of species they can support.*

*Live near a street tree? Why not adopt it and plant wildflowers at its base? This can help bees and other creatures when they're moving about and stop the use of harmful chemicals. Pic courtesy of Wild Wanstead.*

zones in Redbridge. These are areas where the land has just been left alone to rewild. There are grow zones on George and Christchurch Greens plus the Roding Valley. The flourishing grasses and wild flowers are a sight to behold.

The new flood garden at the top of Belgrave Road is another welcome addition. Maintained by Lakehouse Estate & Aldersbrook Horticultural Society Gardeners the bed is full of wildflowers. The effect has been stunning, improving biodiversity, helping prevent flooding but also lifting the spirits of those wandering and driving by.

There are also some lovely areas in Newham, such as coming down from the cycledrome in the Olympic Park to the River Lea. Here there are fabulous combinations of wild grasses and poppies. These





developments improve biodiversity as well as helping reduce carbon, thereby addressing climate change.

The City of London Corporation has played its part, with encouraging rewilding efforts in Wanstead Park and on the Flats.

It is important though to communicate what is going on to the wider population. Those not in the know can assume it is the council just not cutting the grass. Well, that is true but it is a deliberate action, on purpose, for all the earlier stated reasons -not because they can't be bothered or cannot afford to do the task.

## It is important for local authorities and others to communicate what is going on and maintain the areas.

Around the country it is not unusual to witness outcries against good rewilding practice.

It has been the desire of human beings to dominate and exploit, rather than work with nature that has brought the biodiversity and climate crisis. Rewilding amounts to a tilting or correction of the balance in favour of nature.

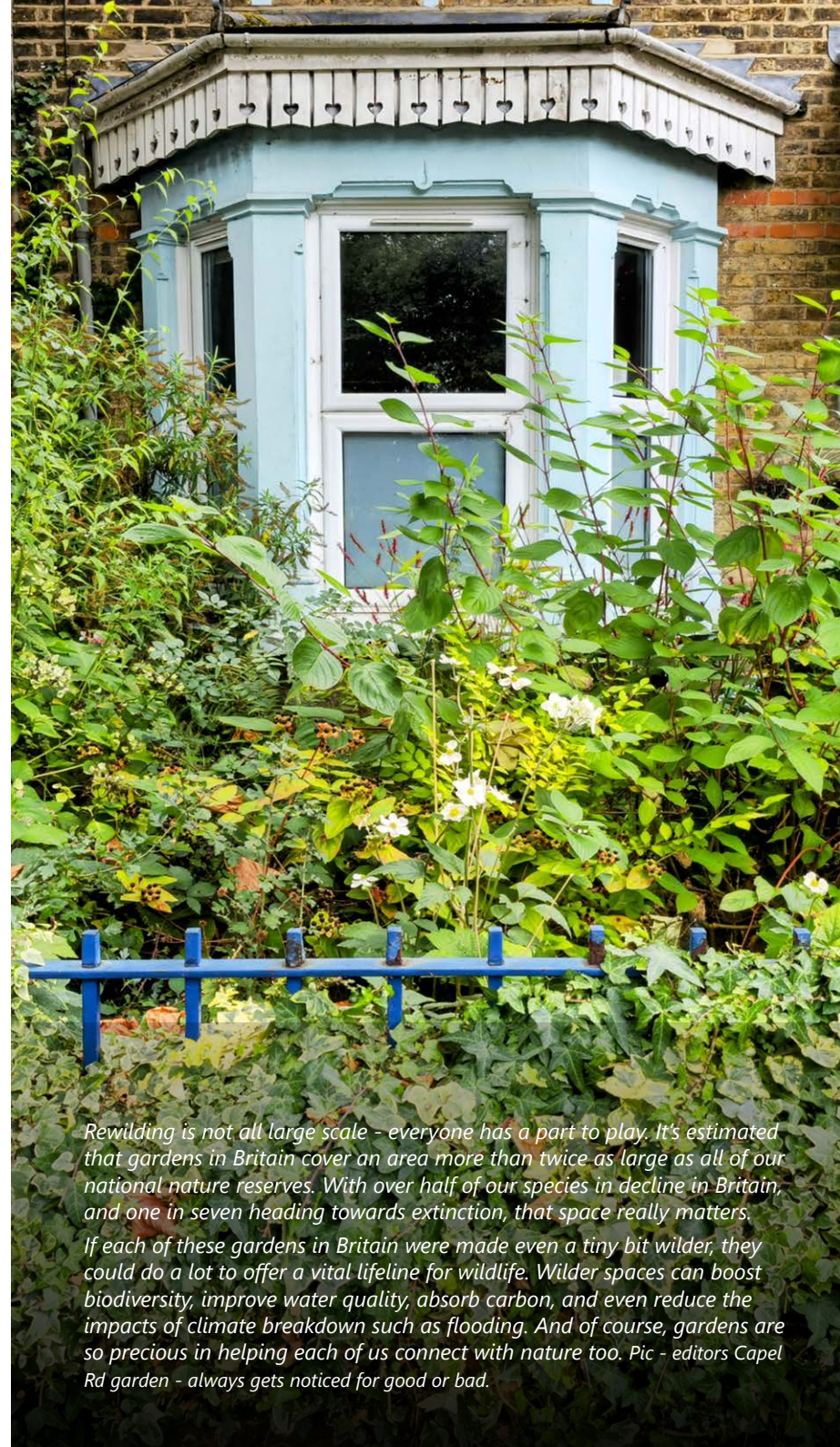
There needs to be more rewilding across the

country, in public and private spaces. Take up some of that concrete and let the earth breath. It is fascinating just to leave a section of the garden (if you have one) clear to develop alone. The different vegetation offers a sight to behold.

One of the big challenges is to connect more people with nature. The desire of some to concrete over vast swathes of their properties suggests a total disconnect. It is frustrating and to a degree counterproductive to be promoting rewilding and biodiversity in the public space whilst in the private sphere more concrete goes down. This is not good for biodiversity and increases the flood risk.

There are encouraging developments but more can always be done, individually and as part of the community. But communication about what is going on is also a key part of the process. The more people know the more can be done. What is more we don't have time to delay, all the developments mentioned are encouraging but more are needed and quickly, the clock is ticking - nature and the environment are in crisis.

by Cllr Paul Donovan



*Rewilding is not all large scale - everyone has a part to play. It's estimated that gardens in Britain cover an area more than twice as large as all of our national nature reserves. With over half of our species in decline in Britain, and one in seven heading towards extinction, that space really matters. If each of these gardens in Britain were made even a tiny bit wilder, they could do a lot to offer a vital lifeline for wildlife. Wilder spaces can boost biodiversity, improve water quality, absorb carbon, and even reduce the impacts of climate breakdown such as flooding. And of course, gardens are so precious in helping each of us connect with nature too. Pic - editors Capel Rd garden - always gets noticed for good or bad.*



# things that go chimp in the night

I have already written an article for Wren about recording birds migrating or flying over at night. If the birds call, this can be picked up by a microphone and recorded on a simple device like a Dictaphone to analyse later. Surprisingly, birds often do call at night, to communicate with fellow travellers or maybe even to echo locate. Here is an update on my use of what might be called AI.

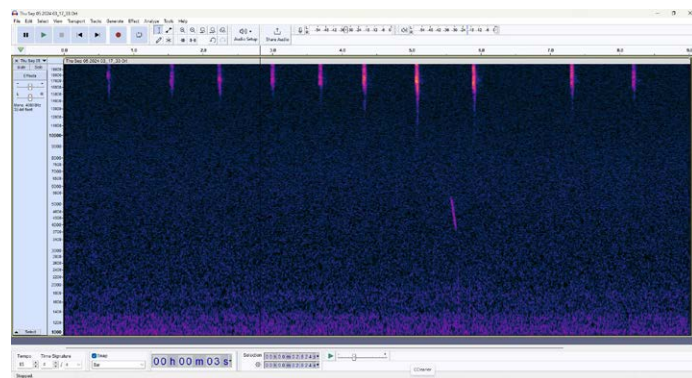
by Bob Vaughan

*Just what birdsong looks like. This is a record of an Avocet taken last May - not much to look at but a first for our patch.*



The recording part is straight forward, put a microphone outside pointing at the sky, preferably wrapped in cling film given our climate. Using a cheap plastic parabolic reflector with the microphone at its centre can extend the range of the microphone.

The problem then becomes how to analyse the recordings. This can be eight or more hours of sound, so listening during the day is time consuming! I have described how the recording can be visualised on a computer screen using a programme such as Audacity or Raven. It looks as below:



*What the sound of a Noctule Bat looks like using a programme such as Audacity or Raven (The dashes at the top are the bat's ultrasonic calls).*

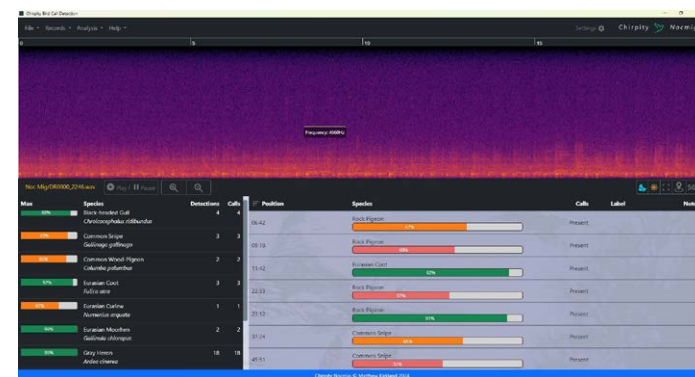
The dashes at a very high frequency at the top are the ultrasonic calls of a Noctule Bat. The sloping dash in the centre is a Yellow Wagtail. Load the recording and click through at about 30 secs at a time to visualise sounds on screen. Having found an

interesting pattern trace you can then play it back on your speakers or through headphones. The next problem is of course figuring out what the sounds represent, locally car horns and sirens are the most common.

Software has become available to analyse bird song and calls. Online there is Birdnet <https://birdnet.cornell.edu/api/>. You can just upload snippets of recording and it will tell you what it thinks the sound is, with a percentage likelihood. This website is however based in America and the accuracy of the predicted bird has a transatlantic bias. Much of its large bird database is US and Mexican, nevertheless we do share some birds and waders are often accurately diagnosed. There are downloadable versions of this software, which will allow you to input geographic area, however my attempts at getting this to work have failed.

Another free software package, called Chirpity and developed by Matt Kirkland, has changed my approach to analysing nocturnal bird calls this year. Load four hours of recording and Chirpity will go through in a few minutes and produce a report of what it has detected. Here is one I did from 21-30 on 3rd September through to 01-30 on the 4th September.

Each bird called by the software is marked with a percentage estimate of how likely it is to be correct.

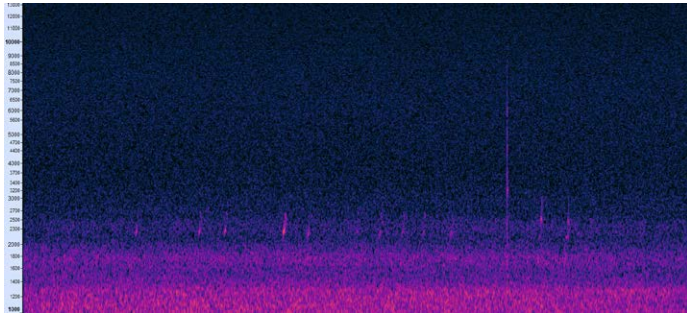


*Another free software package, called Chirpity and developed by Matt Kirkland. Load four hours of recording and Chirpity will go through in a few minutes and produce a report of what it has detected.*

Clicking on each one focuses on the event and allows play through or annotated download. As with most AI there needs to be human censoring, not everything is as it says. The 67% Curlew was in fact a section of an emergency vehicle siren. The 83% Common Snipe was a background noise. There was one acceptable Coot and one moorhen that night. The Heron was also correct but as it was flying around so only one event. Each call can also be compared to reference calls in Xeno Canto with just a click. Xeno Canto is an enormous website repository containing songs and calls of over 95% of the world's birds with hundreds of examples for many of the birds found in the UK. There are filters for nocturnal and daytime recordings in Chirpity, another for world or local birds. This is immensely powerful and particularly useful when sorting out the common and scarce birds that might be recorded in the wonderful cacophony of the dawn



chorus. I am still getting used to Chirpity, but it has increased the number of flyover waders I've recorded this year, including some Avocet at 22:27 on the 23rd May this year. Not much to look at, but with software and confirmation from experts on the WhatsApp Noc Mig group the first record for Wanstead (below).



The continued improvement in applications for machine learning, and the software to harness it, is influencing many modern occupations. It is good to see that it is being applied to biology and citizen science.

## then & now

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

## The important thing to remember is that the software is there to help you, not tell you.

Check the results, I always used to estimate the results from a simple calculator before accepting I had pressed the right buttons and got the right answer.

Another illustration of the power of recent software is Merlin, a bird-watching phone app recently discussed by James in a previous issue of Wren magazine. I was listening to the first episode of High Country, an Australian detective TV series. The main character was wandering through an Australian forest when we heard the cry

of a bird with brief views in the sky. I thought it was probably a Wedge-tailed Eagle so I went to get my phone and opened Merlin. Typing in Wedge I found Wedge-tailed Eagle and loaded it, pressing the button for its call I heard exactly what I'd just heard on the programme. I didn't enjoy the programme much, but being able to confirm the identity of a bird halfway around the world, awesome.

by Bob Vaughan





## Now autumn is upon us it is time to set out plans for Wren Groups habitat management and conservation work.

Habitat management has been a key Wren Group activity for many years. We have a large selection of hand tools, and a tool shed to the rear of the Keepers' cottages in Wanstead Park. It is here we meet for most of our activities.

We have been able to build up a regular set of activities to help the Corporation, both in the park and on Wanstead Flats. We regularly meet with a member of the management team of the Forest, have a walk around and agree some key priorities for the coming season.

So why not some and join us. All tools and gloves are provided, as is basic training in health and safety about the forest. It is an excellent way to keep fit, and we work in virtually all weathers. You do not have to commit to anything – just turn up if you fancy it on the day. And also you see Epping Forest in such a detailed way, sometimes on hands and knees, so it is a wonderful way to come to appreciate this stunning environment on our doorstep.

From the beginning of October we will meet each Thursday morning at 10am and we usually finish soon after midday.

We also meet on the first Sunday of the month, same timings.

Venues for the first part of the season

Thursday - October 3rd, 10th, 17th, 24th,  
31st - 10 am

Meet at The Temple, Wanstead park in the disabled car park adjacent to the building

November Thursday we are likely to meet at the Stables Gate, Empress Avenue but there will be further emails before then.

Sundays - October 6th, November 3rd, December 8th - 10am

Meet Temple Wanstead park

We provide all tools and gloves. Please wear suitable clothing and footwear for mud. You can usually work at your own level if you are out of practice doing this kind of manual labour.

Email me if you have any questions at this stage - <mailto:wrengroup.distribute@gmail.com>

Peter Williams  
Team leader - Wren practical work

A photograph of a person wearing a blue jacket, a high-visibility yellow vest, blue jeans, and a black beanie. They are bent over, working in a field of tall grass and brush. The background shows more of the field and some trees.

# practical work





# .... don't forget

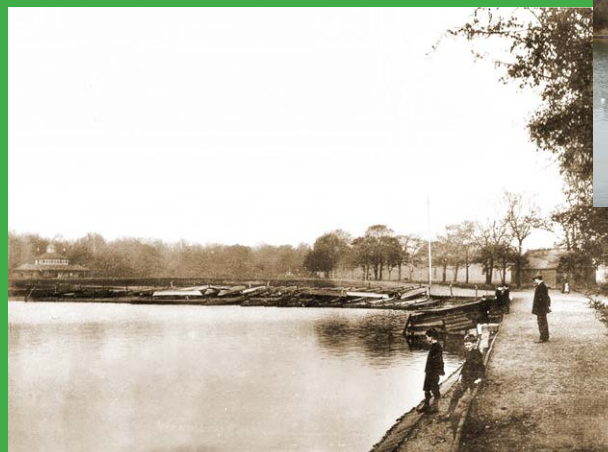
It's that time of year again so please keep an eye out for our feathered friends.

- ☐ Provide fresh clean water every day.
- ☐ Feed a seed mix meant for wild birds.
- ☐ 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 Park - Heronry Pond (Old Boating Lake) taken in 1913 and how it looks today. To the left of the old picture can be seen the 'Chalet' an elaborate refreshment building that was situated some yards to the west of the Temple. It is thought to have burned down in November 1948. This is now the site of Chalet Wood and the park's wonderful show of bluebells.





# 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*