



Winter 2022

Wren

Wildlife & Conservation Group

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Jumping Spider - pic by Rose Stephens



a word from the chair

It ain't easy being a bird! Many small passerines like Wren or Robin have an average lifespan of a couple of years meaning they perhaps get a couple of breeding seasons in on average.

Extreme weather events can really take their toll on bird populations and I am mindful this year that we had a long hot summer drought and have just come through an unusually cold snap in December with the thickest snowfall locally for a decade. It looks very pretty, but the pressure it places on a lot of wildlife will be enormous. Sometimes, birders actually benefit from this pressure, as flocks of ground-feeding birds like Lapwing or Golden Plover

roam across the countryside looking for ground that they can feed on. In this December's cold spell, we recorded 311 Lapwing in flocks of up to 98 passing over locally, and this figure was dwarfed by the 1593 Lapwing we recorded in the cold snap we had in February 2021.

Watching a cloud-shaped flock of Lapwing float past my window in Leytonstone is rather magical, but the sad reality is that many birds like this in prolonged cold weather will not survive.

There are other pressures on populations. Let's take Jubilee Pond on Wanstead Flats as an example. It is a relatively small pond (three quarters of a hectare) and sadly not in great condition. The CoL Epping Forest has wisely fenced off some areas with vegetation but most of the banks are a muddy, poo-infested, rat-infested mess. There can be hundreds of Canada Goose on this small lake, many tens of Mute Swan, and large numbers of gull and Feral Pigeon. Frankly, there are too many of a lot of these birds for a place like Jubilee to be a healthy and balanced ecosystem and they are artificially sustained through industrial quantities of food being dumped here - we

are not talking about a few seeds being

thrown in the water, we are referring to piles of stale loaves or bags of rice which is a field day for the rats.

Watch what happens when food is thrown in the water. It becomes a feeding frenzy as the highly conditioned local birds flap and fight each other in a chaotic wrangle of feathers, snapping bills, scratching feet, saliva and water. Is this something we should be encouraging at any time? Probably not. Is this something we should be encouraging when there is an outbreak of infectious Avian Flu? Almost certainly not. Is there an argument to say that feeding birds suffering from Avian Flu might help them recover? Perhaps? And watching birds that barely lift their heads out of the water and almost certainly suffering from this dreadful disease is heart-breaking, but the artificial inducement of acute flocking at this time seems dreadfully irresponsible to me. And that is why the Wren Group strongly supports the CoL Epping Forest's call for people to stop throwing food for the waterfowl at this time of the outbreak (and to feed birds carefully and in moderation at the best of times).

James Heal
Chair Wren Group



The lark descending

by Tim Harris

If a single bird could be held responsible for sparking my interest in nature it would probably be a Eurasian Skylark singing over Farlington Marshes, Hampshire, one sunny day in May, many years ago. Before this encounter, I had only the vaguest awareness of what a lark even was, but I was treated to a virtuoso performance as this bird rose, plateaued, then hovered, its wings beating rapidly, while it issued a constant stream of notes. And this was taking place within walking distance of my home!



Judging by the number of poets and composers who have seen skylarks as a suitable subject for their compositions, I was clearly not the first to be moved. Although an “incessant outpouring of rolling, chirruping and whistling notes delivered quickly” is as good a description of its song as any I’ve read, no words can really do it justice.

Perhaps the violin cadenza of Ralph Vaughan Williams’s *The Lark Ascending* is the closest human impression. The song is delivered by males and typically last for about five minutes, though half-hour marathons are not unknown. It may be delivered on the ground or in the air, up to 200m up, although 50m is more common.

A long decline

Sadly, this iconic bird is nowhere near as familiar as it once was. 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, declines 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. In arable countryside, where the bulk of the UK population is, observations in the late 1970s showed that Eurasian Skylarks were changing their winter diet – away from seed and towards the green shoots of autumn-sown cereals. The BTO has speculated that this may have been an early warning of food shortages; with less winter stubble and a greater use of herbicides, fewer weed seeds were available.

Additionally, it is known that breeding birds desert autumn-sown crop fields when the sward reaches a critical height in spring – and this happens well before the end of the breeding season. In addition to preventing nesting, tall crop development influences where the birds place their nests. As the crop grows taller, they are forced to nest closer to vehicle ‘tramlines’, which are also used by predators such as foxes; consequently, predation rates are higher.

The decline continued into the new millennium, as shown by Breeding Bird Survey data. Between 1994-96 and 2007-09 the fall was most severe in Northern Ireland and eastern England. Overall across the UK, for every 100 birds in 1978 there were just 36 in 2018, though there seems to have been a very small uptick in recent years.

The Pan-European Common Bird Monitoring

Scheme cites a 56% decline in European numbers in the period 1980-2019, with a 12% fall between 2010-19. Although the overall decline mirrors our own, the decrease since 2010 has been more rapid than that in the UK, suggesting that continued agricultural ‘modernisation’ – which started later in parts of continental Europe – is still impacting the species negatively. It is easier to estimate the percentage population change than the actual size of the European population, which in 2000 BirdLife International put at between 25-55 million, a huge range of values.

Unbelievable numbers

Eurasian Skylark is a migratory species across much of Europe. Millions of birds breeding as far north as Finland and as far east as western Russia migrate to the south-west or west through central Europe, the Low Countries and Britain to France, Italy and Spain, some even ending up in north-west Africa. But as the species’ numbers have declined, so have its migratory movements.

It is worth looking at some historic movements and comparing them with their modern equivalents. Henry Seebohm (quoted in Donald 2004), wrote in the 1880s that: “The rush of Sky-Larks that land on our eastern coasts in autumn is almost past belief. Towards the end of October, or during the first week of November, the number that pass over these marshes

[the north coast of The Wash, Lincolnshire] is enormous. When the migration is on, you may see the great army of birds passing at a moderate height for days together ...". On the North Sea island of Heligoland, Arthur Butler, writing in the following decade, suggested that the 15,000 caught there on a single night did not even represent "one for each 10,000 individuals of such a migrant stream". Much more recently, in 1959 it was estimated that 360,000 passed over London between 30 October and 2 November; almost certainly these now-unthinkable numbers were mostly birds from the Continent.

Skylarks are generally monogamous, although extra-pair mating is relatively common. They usually return to the same territory and keep the same mate in successive breeding seasons.

Probably originating on the steppes of eastern Europe and Central Asia, they have adapted for life on arable farmland. This, along with open downland, heaths and dunes, is their primary habitat in the UK. However, although these environments are extensive in this country, Eurasian Skylarks are pretty choosy about exactly where they nest: it has to be on the ground in vegetation between 20-50 cm tall, where the plant growth is open enough to provide easy access to the ground. They also require vegetation of less than 25 cm for feeding and prefer incomplete ground cover. Additionally, they usually do not nest within 10 m of trees, tall fences or hedgerows.

Breeding adults make two or three nesting attempts between April and August. The time from egg laying to fledging is remarkably short, befitting a bird that breeds in an environment that may be trampled, burned or cut. Typically, four eggs are incubated by the female and hatch after 11 or 12 days. On average, the young leave the nest when they are just eight days old, although they still depend at least in part on being fed by their parents. They can fly and feed themselves after another 10 days.



Skylark on Wanstead Flats - pic by Tony Morrison

Adults feed mostly on the seeds and leaves of 'weeds' and crops, but the chicks are fed exclusively on protein-rich insects and spiders for the first week of life, with invertebrates also forming an important part of adults' diet from April to August. They don't necessarily feed close to the nest, often flying over other

larks' territories to access good supplies. The defended territory may be a small area, but the birds require a larger area to provide enough food for themselves and their new family.

Agricultural intensification is the biggest factor in Eurasian Skylark's decline. In the UK, this means especially the change from spring to autumn sowing of cereal crops, which reduces the number of possible breeding attempts and eliminates winter stubbles for feeding. One of the problems with winter wheat is that it usually grows too tall and dense to allow more than one brood. To this can be added the loss of mixed farmland and rotational cropping, and the widespread use of herbicides, which eradicate 'weeds'. Put together, this means not enough young birds fledged every breeding season, and not enough food for the adults in winter. On the Continent, an additional problem has been hunting.

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. Several pairs of Eurasian 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 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.

There is no winter wheat and no spraying with herbicides, but there are plenty of other problems. Until last year, although people were asked to keep to the tracks and dog-walkers to keep their animals on the leash, it was still a common sight to see canines rampaging through the area. Grass fires are common in summer. There is the regular drone of a model aircraft looping the loop overhead. And, before the end of the football season, desperate defenders or wayward strikers often send footballs into the grass.

With an annual footfall of more than 500,000, this is a site where disturbance is spelt with a capital D. There are large populations of foxes, rats and corvids, all known predators of eggs and young, along with less expected threats; I have seen a [Black-headed Gull](#) repeatedly attacking a song-flighting male.

For more than a decade, local campaigners worked with the City of London Corporation, which manages the site, to find a solution. A cutting regime, whereby 20% of the breeding habitat was mown each autumn to prevent scrub encroachment, seemed to stabilise the population for a few years, but from 10 singing males a decade ago, the figure had fallen to just three in 2020. Drastic measures were needed.

In spring 2021, 9 ha of the breeding habitat was enclosed with plastic mesh fencing, and

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. Human and canine disturbance was effectively eliminated and at least two young Eurasian Skylarks (possibly four) fledged.



Added bonuses were a midsummer singing [Common Quail](#) in the enclosed area, and less disturbance of our regular passage migrants, [Northern Wheatears](#) and the like. In late January 2022, males began to sing again, and hopes were high for the season ahead. But, unfortunately, despite at least two breeding attempts, we don't think any young fledged. Time will tell whether our local population will survive.

Hope springs

Projects elsewhere give real cause for optimism, though. One such is Hope Farm, Cambridgeshire, which the RSPB bought in 2000. Initially, only wheat and oilseed rape were grown, but a new rotation regime was introduced on its 161 ha, comprising winter wheat, spring barley, winter beans, winter linseed and spring millet.

By leaving two 16-square-metre 'skylark plots' unsown per hectare in the winter cereal fields, the farm has lost only about £7 worth of crops per plot but has increased Eurasian Skylark productivity dramatically. In 2000, there were 10 breeding territories and average numbers on site the following winter were 18. Those figures rose to 32 territories in 2019 and 48 wintering birds in February 2020. Other species, including [Yellowhammer](#), [Common Linnet](#), [Reed Bunting](#) and [Northern Lapwing](#), have benefitted as well. And, importantly, the farm is not run as a nature reserve but as a profitable arable concern, albeit a nature-friendly one.

The big challenge is to reverse Eurasian Skylark decline in its core arable habitat, and for this to happen there needs to be a much greater commitment on the part of government – which needs to really listen to ecologists – and for a culture shift by the arable farming industry along the lines of Hope Farm. If these things happen, plenty of other wildlife besides Eurasian Skylark will be the beneficiaries.



Song-flying male Skylark over Wanstead Flats lark enclosure - pic by Tony Morrison

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Written by: Tim Harris

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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 Wren Group would like to offer a very warm welcome to Gayle Chong Kwan – a new patron for the group. We are still so very proud to have Sir David Attenborough as a patron but he is a very busy man and we are hoping that Gayle may be able to spend some time engaging and working with the group.

Gayle was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, and lives and works in London. Her work is exhibited and published widely nationally and internationally, and is held in numerous public and private collections.

Here, Wren chair, James Heal poses some questions to Gayle about her background and her work.



patron

*Wren members will probably know Gayle best from her work *The People's Forest* - an exhibition of photographic and sculptural work exploring the history, politics, and people of London's ancient woodland, Epping Forest. A two-year project encompassing installation work at the Barbican, a solo exhibition at the William Morris Gallery, and workshops, walks, and events in Epping Forest that explored the forest as a site of protest, contested resources, conflict between capital and common, and as a threshold between rural and urban.*

Artist, photographer, academic. You clearly have many talents, but can you help add a bit of detail to the description of what you do and what gets you out of bed in the morning?

My work is incredibly varied, and each year there is a changing focus on where I will work. In the past few years I have spent time in Venice, developing a project with students and academics at Ca' Foscari University, which is also where my gallery, Galleria Alberta Pane, is based. Just before the pandemic I was developing exhibitions and installation in New Zealand and Hong Kong. At the moment I am a Teaching Fellow at Edinburgh College of Art so travel there a few days a month. I am also developing a project with Compton Verney in Warwickshire around their miniature portrait collection and Chinese Bronze funeral objects. Movement is integral to what I do.

I develop art works, exhibitions, installations, I teach and run workshops with a huge range of galleries and museums nationally and internationally, I make publications, and I do research in collections to ask how interventions in museums, galleries, institutions, and the public realm can question and challenge their acquisitions, modes of public participation, and the status of objects and collections and the ecologies in which they sit. I just completed my PhD on 'Imaginal Travel: political and ecological positioning as fine art practice' at the Royal College of Art.

Art, travel to work, new experiences, and my two young boys, all get me out of bed!

Many of us first came across you when you produced 'The People's Forest' exhibition about Epping Forest in 2018. For those who didn't get to see the exhibition, could explain a bit about what motivated the project and what you were exploring through it?

I was fascinated by the politics of the forest, both in terms of its history in the attempted enclosures and Epping Forest Act of 1878, and more recent protests in the 1990s against the building of the M11 Link Road. I was really struck by the liminal nature of the forest, as a place between rural and urban, and as a site of imagination, myths, and possibilities.

Like William Morris, I became fascinated by the forest's unique pollarded trees, which were shaped



Gayle developed portraits of people who have a special relationship with Epping forest, the oldest and largest forest in London, taken at sites of personal resonance, including conservation arborists, a Forest Keeper and guide, a circus-trained aerialist who rides in the forest, and an author with an allotment on the edge of the forest. Each wears a sculptural headdress created from photographs of the areas important to them complete with root, branch, and tendril-like forms cut directly into the surface, also exhibited as three-dimensional sculptural works on wooden stands that reference the wooden protest towers erected in the 1990s against the M11 Link Road.

by the commoners' right to lop or cut off their own wood supply. I also became interested in specific trees such as the Fairlop Oak and its tradition of an annual feast that stood in Hainault Forest and which suffered incursion by private landlords in the 18th Century, the George Green chestnut tree, which was a focus of the M11 Link Road Protests; and trees as symbols and the focus of protest movements more generally.

I was interested in the way in which art, artists, and the forest have intersected at various times. William Morris, who grew up near the forest and was inspired by the unique shapes of its pollarded trees, was active in its protection. More recently, artists played an important role in the creativity that marked the M11 Link Road Protests in the 1990s in the area, through temporary ACME Artists Houses that stood all along the soon to be demolished roads, along the exact road where I now live in Leytonstone.

Through a range of workshops, events, walks and talks, which focused on sensory experiences in relation to the history, politics and people of Epping Forest, I got to know people who manage and work in the forest and others who use it as a place for recreation. I then worked with an incredible range of people, from the forest arborists who showed me different types of tree cuts, to an award-winning aerialist who trains in the forest and climbs the trees, to a forest volunteer who runs so many activities for people to engage with the forest, to a published author who spend thinking and growing time in her allotment which edges the forest. What

mirrored my own experience of the forest was the intimacy of people's relationship with the forest and the importance of it as a thinking space, a place to engage with nature, a physical entity, and a place where important conversations, ideas, and reflections have taken place.



A series of photographs record intimate trees in Epping Forest that have grown to lean on and embrace each other, alluding to the liminal and illicit nature of the primeval woods, and the connectivity of growth.

The forest intertwines with people's lives to such an extent that I felt the forest is in them and they are in the forest, and it felt fitting to make portraits in which people's experiences of the forest become

something they wear on their bodies. I worked with a range of people to explore and walk with them in areas of the forest which are special to them, from which I made sculptural head dresses out of photographs I took, which I then photographed them wearing in the places which are special to them.

Who or what have been the biggest influences on your work would you say?

You have travelled and worked all around the world. But you have clearly chosen to live in our corner of East London - what keeps you in Leytonstone?

I've lived in London for over 25 years now and am a Londoner. I love this city. I never grow tired of it. I feel at home in Leytonstone. Through 'The People's Forest' project and spending lots of time in Epping Forest with my boys, the forest has rooted me in this special place. I feel like I truly have the best of both worlds, as I can be in central London in 35 mins and also have the incredible forest at my doorstep. I love this place.

We are delighted you agreed to become our patron, but could you share why you accepted our request to become Patron?

I was delighted to be asked! Wren is an amazing charity that celebrates, explores and protects important outdoor and green spaces, which are essential to us all. If I can play a part in promoting,

celebrating, and highlighting the fantastic work that Wren does and make new connections and links then I will be delighted.



Wastescape: weaving landscapes of politics, dairy, and waste (2019). the work explores the effects of the dairy industry on New Zealand's rivers and ecologies through waste, the body, photography and craft. A large-scale installation of stalactites and stalagmites made out of over 6,000 collected used and discarded plastic milk bottles - photo by Linda Nyland

What would you ideally like to be seeing a group like the Wren Group do more of?

How would you ideally like to get involved with the Wren Group over the coming years?

There's fantastic in-depth knowledge, research, and passion in the members and it would be great to connect them up with the creatives in and around the area and further afield to make new perspectives on outdoor and green spaces for people to creatively enjoy and have a greater understanding of them. I am looking at ways of developing creative activities around different aspects of Wren, around seasonal activities and communal experiences.

What role do you think art can or should play in big debates or challenges like the climate crisis or biodiversity and habitat loss?

Art can play a role in bringing new perspectives, not just thematically, but as different ways in which we might think about, model, and put into practice new ways of experiencing and treating ecologies, people, and places with which we engage.

In a modern day East London, if young people or parents of young children want to get more creative in their relationship with outdoor and green spaces, what would you suggest they do to get started?

Outdoor and green spaces can be an amazing inspiration for making artwork, but I think more importantly they can be places where we bring our attentiveness, our sensory and elemental appreciation of nature. It's not just about outdoor and green spaces being an inspiration but

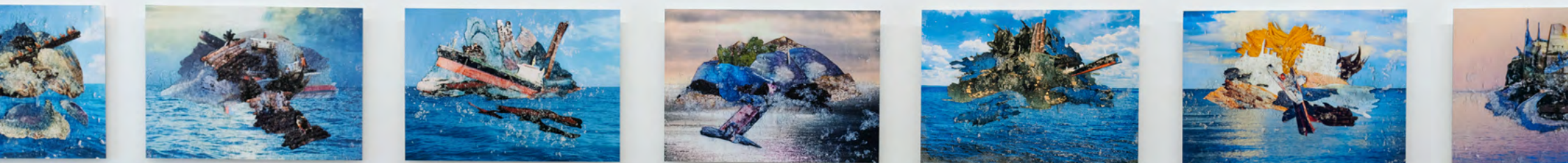
instead places where we can experience our whole selves.

Gayle Chong Kwan
Patron of the Wren Wildlife and Conservation Group

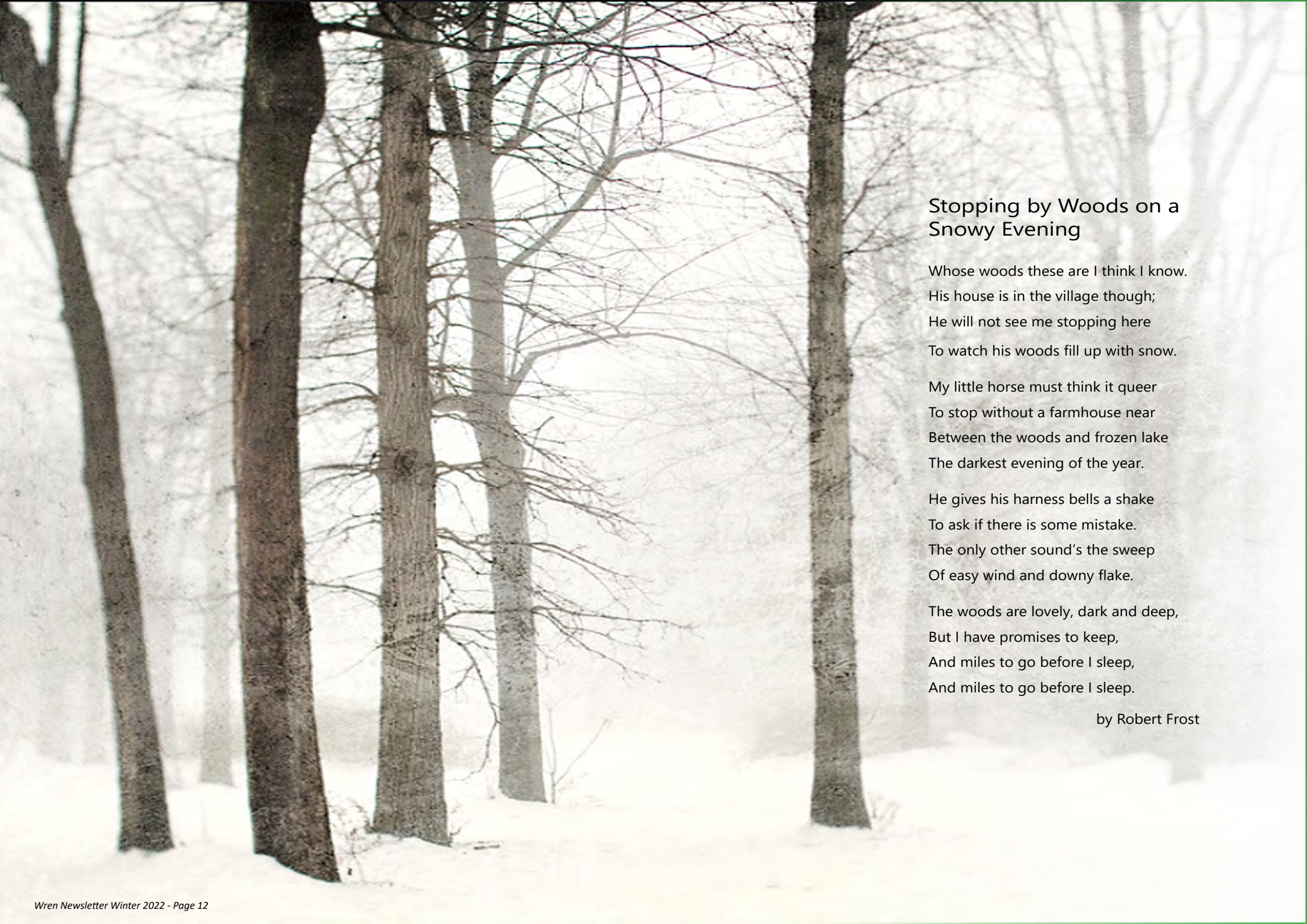
Website; www.gaylechongkwan.com



Gayle Chong - pic by Kwan Georgia Kuhn



Waste Archipelago - As winner of the 2019 Sustainable Art Prize Gayle Chong Kwan developed photographic, installation, public realm and event-based work that explores waste through the prism of the archipelago – the interconnectedness of how we conceive of, create, and manage waste through our actions, beliefs, and bodies. Gayle Chong Kwan worked with students and academics at Ca' Foscari University in Venice to explore theories, perspectives, and our lived experience of waste through a series of workshops and sessions 'Waste Matters' through which she developed the works in *Waste Archipelago*, including photographic collage, sculpture, and performance, to explore our bodies, the anecdotal, the herbarium, and recent major oil spills in relation to waste. 'Waste Archipelago' published by Ca' Foscari University.



Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

by Robert Frost

the only action

The protesters say that the world is in an emergency, with action needed now to stop a catastrophe unfolding. They do not believe that traditional forms of protest such as lobbying politicians, going on marches etc. are having the required impact.

Here Cllr Paul Donovan argues the claim that direct action is the only way to make politicians take up and listen.

Photo via Kevin Snyman on Pixabay



THERE is
NO
PLANET B

The efforts of Extinction Rebellion, Just Oil and Insulate Britain have caused discomfort for some across the country.

The environmental activists have been deploying direct action tactics to draw politicians and the public's attention to the climate and biodiversity crises, engulfing the earth at present. The activities vary from blocking roads, locking onto public buildings to taking action against those seen to be perpetuating the crisis.

Here Cllr Paul Donovan states the claim that direct action is the only way to make politicians take up and listen. Hence, the need for more direct activity.

Direct action protesters are right to demand that the Environmental emergency is taken seriously

The protesters argument has no doubt been aided by the actions or should that be inactions of the politicians over recent months. So, as Just Oil were blocking roads and locking onto bridges, politicians from across the world gathered for latest COP (27) meeting. More emissions created by participants flying into discuss why the actions agreed 12 months earlier had not happened. A major cause being the First World countries failure to come up with the money pledged.

Meanwhile, in the domestic arena, the Conservative Government was pledging billions to develop a new nuclear power station at Sizewell. Not only is nuclear

power expensive and dangerous but it will also take more than a decade to come on stream. Not exactly in the spirit of the emergency now facing the world.

The same Conservative Government also pledged to continue its ban on onshore wind turbine developments. Some Conservatives apparently don't like the look of the turbines - again, emergency, what emergency?

The protesters are right to take the actions they have. The report of the International Panel on Climate Change in 2018, warned that there were 12 years to address the crisis. So far, the first four years have been wasted. Emissions and habitat destruction has continued and even accelerated. It is as though the world is caught in some sort of giant bubble of denial.

There have been some actions taken at national and local level, with climate emergencies being declared. But do the actions match up to the words and even when they do is any of it happening quickly enough?

The media has adopted a somewhat disingenuous position. The number of times there is a news bulletin, with a report on some environmental devastation, which is then followed by coverage of a direct action being taken by protesters. The first report provides the basis for radical action but the second sees news editors adopting the public order terms of reference. It is all causing the public inconvenience - action needs to be taken ie police action. I don't recall such differences in nuance being applied during the last great emergency, namely, the COVID pandemic. That was accepted

very quickly as a real emergency and some very draconian actions were taken to deal with it.

Having seen how humanity reacts to a genuine emergency, can anyone wonder that those passionately concerned about our planet suggest that the environmental emergency is not being dealt with a similar level of seriousness?

The government response has been to legislate to make it more difficult to protest. They do not seem to understand this will just drive people to greater extremes. The only feasible response is to actually take the protesters concerns seriously, recognise that this is a very real emergency and treat it as such.

This will mean substantial changes in the way humanity lives on the earth. The changes need to happen now, not when it is politically convenient for the ruling elite. Emergency must mean exactly that at every level of government - until that happens people will rightly keep protesting in whatever form they consider necessary to obtain the fundamental changes required to save the planet.

by Councillor Paul Donovan



ruth's diary

Regular readers of this newsletter will know that I like to include a bit of the local history of our patch - hardline wildlife conservators may wonder why I like to do this.

Human intervention - such as industry and mining on Wanstead Flats, livestock grazing, the coming of the railway, the demise of Wanstead House, localising cemeteries, recreation and urban sprawl, pollution, alien species - to name but a few - has made an impact on our patch and influenced what it has become today.

Like it or not our patch is neither natural nor timeless, but is enmeshed in human histories.

The ways in which the environment was shaped by past human intervention determines its use today and if it is to flourish in the future.

Here Wren member, Robert Nurden, provides us with a glimpse of how life was for a young resident in our area more than 120 years ago.



Picture shows Wanstead Flats taken from the corner of Capel Road and Woodford Road at the turn of the last century. In the day the area boasted a fine pond and a bandstand.

An avenue of plane trees was planted by the council with a gravelled walk in between. Remnants of this can still be seen today parallel to Capel Road. This was the so called Monkey Parade, a tradition that had started in Mile End in the third quarter of the nineteenth century and equivalent to the passeggiata you may know from the continent. It was an opportunity on a Sunday evening to dress up in your finest, and take your lover or friend for a stroll, to see and be seen.

Without a doubt Ruth would have walked this avenue or sat chatting to her friends, listening to music or perhaps quietly writing in her diary.

The name Ruth Slate will mean nothing to most Wren members. Yet this radical, young activist from Manor Park was a ceaseless campaigner for social justice and women's emancipation in the early years of the twentieth century.

Her extraordinary diaries, now in the Women's Library of the London School of Economics, deserve to be better known. In them one can chart her development from conventional Methodist to fully paid-up pacifist, Quaker and suffragette. They make for remarkable reading.



Ruth Slate in her twenties

But it is the early years from 1898, when she was 15 and living with her father and mother at 90 Carlyle Road, that I want to focus on. In these entries she describes with loving detail the daily walks she took on the Flats and in Wanstead Park. These beauty spots on her doorstep provided an important backdrop to her development. She walked the paths of both parks, either alone in deep thought or with her friends, discussing the state of the world.

Her descriptions are as fresh today as they were over 120 years ago.



Wanstead Park, Heronry Pond at the turn of the last century.

9 December 1898

I went to Wanstead Park with Ewart [her boyfriend] and told him that I was going to work which news he could hardly believe.

13 June 1900

May [a Methodist friend] came and we went to

Wanstead Park. The trees and everything looked splendid. We met Ernie Round who still slouches along.

21 July 1900

It has been hot again; 88 degrees in the shade. On Monday it was 90. Grandpa came back last night and said it was dreadful up in the City; thee omnibuses had to keep stopping to get fresh horses, as the others would suddenly be taken so ill, that they could get no further. Most of them wore straw hats and presented an amusing sight.

On 30 May 1902 Ruth mentions Eva Slawson for the first time. Eva had just moved to Manor Park with her grandparents. Feminists in the making, Ruth and Eva were to remain close friends, attending political meetings together in the East End and discussing women's emancipation. At the end of that month Ewart's health deteriorated and he died from consumption. Eva was there to comfort Ruth.



Another view of Angell pond and the bandstand at a time when Ruth would have walked and written in her diary.

In Ruth and Eva's Sunday school there was a disabled girl of nine called Emma Clover. The friends took it upon themselves to teach her to read, write and sew, despite the fact that Emma had "scarcely any fingers on the right hand". She was confined to a "bassinet perambulator" [wheelchair] in which the girls used to take her for walks along Capel Road and on to the Flats.



Emma Clover and her bassinet perambulator

12 August 1903

I went for a long walk alone in Wanstead Park. The sky overhead was black and threatening and whichever way I looked I seemed to be utterly alone, for it was not an evening many would have chosen for walking. The wind rustling through the branches of the trees made a weird accompaniment to my thoughts. I was thinking of Ewart and the great influence for good he exercised over me.

22 August 1903

On Wednesday evening Eva and I went on a long, long walk. We told each other of the religious troubles we had met with.

In January 1904 Eva moved to Leyton to live with her Aunt Edie, but she and Ruth continued to meet and walk together. Ruth met Eva off the train at either Wanstead Park, Manor Park or Woodgrange Park or off the tram. She also mentions Daisy, another keen walker.

4 April 1904

I have enjoyed such a feast of Nature's beauty this morning that I feel impelled to write of it. Daisy and I jumped out of bed at a quarter to six and were soon dressed and out in the beautiful sunshine. Naturally we turned our steps Wanstead Park-wards and walked quickly across the Flats. The wide stretch of wavy grass, growing in peculiar little clumps and sparkling with dew, the delicate foliage of the newly-dressed trees, the beauty of the plantations, and the sweet

warbling of the skylarks, impressed us deeply. We were soon nearing the Park Gates and where three or four years ago the ground was bright with cornfields and poppies, we saw red-brick villas standing, and the sight made me feel sad, perhaps a selfish feeling. Inside the park all was beauty and I thought, 'How glorious is this place!'

24 May 1904

After dinner, Dad, Mother and I decided to go over to the park for a walk. Some very curious sights met our eyes. Hundreds of people flocked from Beckton and other places of stifling atmosphere, the electric trams making a now cheap and pleasant journey for them. Good-natured fathers and mothers, cross fathers and mothers, weeping children, laughing children in gay or ragged attire, all helped to make a very pleasant scene. At first, I felt a little vexed that people should come to my loved Wanstead Park and defile it. Then I felt ashamed of myself and thought perhaps the occasion was a very rare one, when these hard-working and weary-looking men and women could come and gaze upon so fair a spot.

By summer 1906 Ruth had a new boyfriend, Wal. But they fell out on a regular basis, Wal becoming petulant with her for taking an active interest in the suffragette movement.

16 June 1906

Wal and I met calmly, and walked in the direction of Wanstead Park. Presently I tried to make him see

how his letter hurt me, but I think I only partially succeeded.

9 March 1907

On Saturday I met Eva. She brought me two pictures for my birthday – they are so beautiful. We left about six and I saw her onto a tram, then walked on to the station to meet Wal. Would he miss his train, I wondered? Yes, and the next one as well. I felt free to give expression to vexed remarks when he did appear, after I had waited for nearly an hour. He did not appreciate them, and punished me by refusing to explain the cause of his lateness, and so we started out on our walk in no very amiable mood. I was then soundly berated for my obstinacy and independence – the latter quality I intend ever to cultivate and Wal must learn my intention. I am sure it would be better for many, many people if conventional ideas concerning women's dependence upon men could be altered – they are a hindrance to the true progress of women, and are not altogether good for men. I

believe so strongly in the possibilities and powers of my own sex, that I deprecate all custom ... that would retard their emancipation. Wal would shield and shelter, where I do not desire that he should.

The following Saturday I met Wal as usual, and as is now becoming usual, he missed his train. I said nothing, so to Manor Park we went, or rather were blown, for the wind was unusually high. We walked across the Flats, and if it had not been for those feminine articles of clothing which make one dread the healthy breeze, that walk would have been delightful. As it was, I enjoyed myself as much as possible with a hat and skirts to look after.

Wal left me a gift, and a pamphlet to read, entitled 'Woman – or Suffragette!' written by Marie Corelli. This pamphlet ... did not shake my convictions one bit, though it roused me so that I found myself composing replies which I was vain enough to think would entirely

vanquish the enemy, stir and awaken the inane, and strengthen the weak.

Ruth and Wal finished their relationship shortly afterwards and she moved to Birmingham to study at the Quaker college of Woodbrooke. She continued with her life of political and social activism.

by Robert Nurden



Robert Nurden is the author of 'Between Heaven and Earth: A Journey With My Grandfather' in which Ruth and Eva play a prominent part. It is available from his website – www.robertnurden.com – and from bookshops and Amazon.

“I think we need to take a step back and just remember we have no greater right to be here than any other animal.”

*Sir David Attenborough,
Patron of the Wren Group*



bird report

Autumn migration summary - 2022

Autumn could be described as the period between the first returning passage migrant after the summer and the departure of the last. In which case the first and last autumn passage migrant this year was the same species: Yellow Wagtail, with the first on 27 July and the last on 22 October. Of course, different forms of migration and movement continue on into November with finches and the thrushes etc.



August is when autumn migration kicks off for birders, but August 2022 was a relatively disappointing month in Wanstead.

We recorded a total of 86 species for the month of August which is dwarfed by the 98 we had in August in the previous year. September performed better and we breached the ton for the second year running (102 for September 2022 versus 104 for the month in the previous year). October was a bit down on average with 88 for the month (whilst each of the three previous years saw the month get over 90 species). In November we recorded 81 species, very slightly up on average, but four down on November 2021.



One of our two Dartford Warblers taken on 29 October 2022 on Wanstead Flats by Tony Brown

Highlights

September delivered two significant patch rarities: Tree Sparrow found by Mary on 2 September (our first since 1985!); and the first of two long staying

Dartford Warbler (our second and then third ever and first since 2009) found by Marco on 30 September.



Wryneck - pic by Nick Croft

Other good birds included: Wryneck (9 Sep); Cuckoo (4 Sep); Short-eared Owl (14 Sep); Yellowhammer (17 Sep); a well twitched Woodlark on the deck (29 Sep); and Merlin (14 October). Merlin would probably have got more column inches devoted to it if it wasn't the second (or third if you count that the first was seen over two days) record of this patch rarity for the year.

Bob's NocMig recorder also delivered some incredible results: most notably our first ever Pink-footed Goose (16 Sep), but also Oortolan Bunting (13 Sep); Barn Owl (30 Sep); and, Ringed Plover (1 November). All very high quality patch rarities for us.

Autumn Passage Migration

The table captures the phenological dates and counts of most of our classic passage (non-breeding)

migrants. I have been converted to the value of 'bird days' as a metric despite it always seeming nonsensical to me before. So, ten Wheatear on one day would be "10 bird days" as would one Wheatear every day for ten days.

Species	First and last Autumn	Bird days 2022 (Total records)	Bird days 2021	Average Count 2022	High Count (date recorded)
Sand Martin	09/07 - 28/09	↓31	98	3	13 (26/09)
Willow Warbler	03/08 - 14/09	↓68	89	2	10 (06/08)
Spotted Flyc'r	14/08 - 28/09	↑79	69	2	11 (14/09)
Swallow	13/07 - 16/10	↑946	293	19	207 (13/09)
Yellow Wagtail	27/07 - 22/10	↓29	76	2	6 (03/09)
Wheatear	27/07 - 23/09	↓56	68	2	6 (02/09)
Whinchat	01/08 - 02/10	↑185	85	4	13 (09/09)
Tree Pipit	09/08 - 06/10	↓16	18	1	2 (several)
Common Redstart	16/08 - 26/09	↑14	10	1	4 (20/08)
Garden Warbler	04/08 - 20/09	↑9	4	1	1
Pied Flycatcher	12/08 - 17/09	↓16	18	1	2 (18/08)
Ring Ouzel	-	↓0	1	0	0

Almost everything arrived earlier this Autumn than the year before, with some returning birds even appearing in July, including our first Autumn Wheatear on 27 July, compared with 16 August in 2021. The final departures, meanwhile, were not overly early or late, although we did have our latest ever record of Yellow Wagtail on 22 October.

In terms of volume of records Swallow and Whinchat numbers were very materially up on the previous year (223% up for Swallow and 118% increase for Whinchat). Let me try and bring that to life a little: this Autumn, we recorded 185 'bird days' or records of Whinchat, spread across 44 calendar days from 1 August until 2 October, with the majority of dates in August and September producing Whinchat.

Obviously some of these records will be the same birds stopping over for a day or more to re-fuel, but the average count of four birds, across each of the dates when records were registered for this species, is impressive, as is our high count of 13 Whinchat on 9 September.

Spotted Flycatcher, Common Redstart, and Garden Warbler numbers were also up, whilst everything else saw lower numbers of records than the previous year. Sand Martin (68% down on the previous year) and Yellow Wagtail (62% decrease) were particularly notable drops on the year before.

I am well aware that trends cannot be read into a dataset covering two years, but we only have eBird records from October 2020 and I don't have the patience to trawl through old bird reports or tweets to build a better data set.

Report by James Heal



Long Eared Owl - pic by James Heal

become a happy snapper



Members of the Wren Group are often out in the local area trying to capture on their phones the beauty of the flora, fauna and landscape of our local area.

Phone camera technology has improved hugely recently and most of us can now afford a camera which brings some impressive results. However, we'd all like to do better.

We have some talented snappers amongst our Group as was demonstrated this year, when we held an online competition. The three winners produced examples of excellence in three areas: landscape photography, bird photography, and macro photography. Luckily for the rest of us, all three winners have agreed to lead walks in 2023 when they will give us tips and hints about how we can do better. The groups will be limited in number so you will need to book (details in due course on www.wrengroup.org.uk).

Trees and Landscape: a Winter Walk for the amateur photographer

Sunday January 15th, 10am. Meet at the Tea Hut in Wanstead Park.

A short walk in winter, focussing on trees and landscape and how to capture their beauty. Bring your phone or camera! Local amateur

photographer and Wren Group member Andrew Spencer, who produced a stunning winter sunset shot across Wanstead Flats for our competition, will be offering tips and advice.

Bird and Wildlife Photography on Wanstead Flats

Sunday February 5th, 10am. Meet at Centre Road Car Park

We may see a variety of birds on the Flats such as skylarks, the little owl, waterfowl on Alexandra Lake, and small birds such as tits and finches. The walk will be led by James Ball who produced a gorgeous shot of a cygnet for our competition.

The third walk will be part of our special BioBlitz Weekend of summer events on Sunday 25th June, time tbc:

Macro Photography: capturing summer insects

Sunday 25th June, time tbc. Meet at Centre Road Car Park

Wren Group member Nicola won her competition prize for an exquisitely delicate shot of a dragonfly. There should be a cornucopia of other insects around at the height of summer.



.... don't forget

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

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

then & now

Were you right ?

The Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) by the Ornamental Waters in Wanstead Park, which is shown on Edwardian postcards leaning over the lake as it does now (perhaps more so now).

Note that in the earlier picture there were two trees. Note also that there seems to be a black swan at the waters edge - it looks like the much missed Bruce of Hollow Ponds may not have been the first such visitor to the area.





..... and finally

wren practical work

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

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

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

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

links

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

Facebook www.facebook.com/WrenOrg

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

Wanstead Wildlife

www.wansteadwildlife.org.uk

Friends of Wanstead Parklands

www.wansteadpark.org.uk

RSPB North East London Members Group

www.rspb.org.uk/groups/northeastlondon

Wanstead Birding Blog

wansteadbirding.blogspot.co.uk

Epping Forest

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

British Naturalists' Association

www.bna-naturalists.org

Bushwood Area Residents' Association

www.bara-leytonstone.org.uk

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

East London Birders www.elbf.co.uk

Friends of Epping Forest

www.friendsofeppingforest.org.uk

East London Nature www.eastlondonnature.co.uk

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

Wild Wanstead - greening up the local area

www.wildwanstead.org

BBC Nature www.bbc.co.uk/nature

British Naturalists Association

www.bna-naturalists.org

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

Field Studies Council (FSC)

www.field-studies-council.org

London Natural History Society

www.lnhs.org.uk

Natural England www.naturalengland.org.uk

RSPB www.rspb.org.uk/england

UK Safari www.uksafari.com

The British Deer Society www.bds.org.uk

The Wildlife Trust www.wildlifetrusts.org

