

MOOR GREEN LAKES GROUP NEWSLETTER



July 2004

Message from the new Newsletter Editor

This is my first Newsletter for Moor Green Lakes since I recklessly volunteered to do the job. One thing I have done since knowing my fate has been to visit Moor Green more often although I have to admit it is far less than I would want and than many others seem to do. This reserve is special and it's appeal to so many people and their diverse interests is testament to that – see below for more details of member interests.

One of my motivating forces in undertaking this task was to learn more and understand better how conservation minded people could co-operate better in Berkshire. It is a lively County in a conservation sense, now split of course into the six unitary authorities, but largely due to its geographical shape, the east and the west and even the centre of the County seem to lead quite separate existences. As we lack significant county wide organisations (BBOWT perhaps excepted), it is a County where the voice of conservation may not be as strong as we might like.

One example where we ought to use greater co-operation to our advantage is in the area of planning applications and development challenges. I confess to being concerned about where my children will be able to live so am not against building houses where they are needed. What bothers me though is that the biggest proposed development I know of in Berkshire is going to damage an area with 5% or more of the UK Nightingale population, a Heronry with frequent Little Egrets, where the Hanson Challenge for industrial sites with wildlife potential has shown it to be number one in the UK for birds and where Schedule 1 birds abound. I am referring to the Prudential Kennet Valley Park proposal (for those with computers have a look at www.kennetvalleypark.com) and while it talks about making proposals to secure wildlife habitats most local birdwatchers and conservationists are horrified at the damage they think will be caused to nature to the south of Reading.

I will not rattle on about this any longer but I implore members of Moor Green Lakes Group to join other organisations with similar interests in the County. I am Chairman of the Reading Ornithological Club, which produces the annual reports of 'The Birds in Berkshire', and we expect to be fighting this proposal firmly but constructively for the conservation lobby. Additional membership numbers would be very helpful to the Club in getting its voice heard at such a critical time so, if you agree that we need to work together and help conservation win in Berkshire one thing you could do now is join the ROC. Further details including all the other member benefits are on their website www.theroc.org.uk or can be obtained from me. Please help if you can.

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Now my tirade is over, I pass you on to other interesting matters with a final request that you send me any articles you would like published and where you feel they would be of interest to members of our Group.

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Members' Interests in 2003/4. **By Sheila and Steve Farmer**

When we sent out the invitations to renew your membership last year we asked you what your main areas of interest were. It was intended to help the Committee to get a better idea of the interests of our members. Obviously it could not be a comprehensive questionnaire. Our thanks go to all those who filled in this section. We have also included the same questions on the application forms for new members.

In the last year we have had 331 membership forms returned (from single people and families). 307 applicants filled in our simple questionnaire. Of these the majority had ticked "Birds", but there is clearly a lot of interest in other areas. The following table shows the proportion of the completed forms and their interests in each of the five different categories.

Category of interest	Percentage of completed Questionnaires.
Birds	97 %
Mammals	27 %
Butterflies	31 %
Dragonflies	18 %
Plants	23 %

On quite a lot of forms members had ticked more than one category, which explains why the sum of all the classes appears to be greater than 100%!! The proportion of application forms with all the five categories ticked was 7%, showing that some members have very widespread interests.

This very simple survey gives an indication of the wide range of interests of our members. The Moor Green Lakes site is not simply a bird reserve but in the truest sense it is a nature reserve.



Membership reaches record levels!

By Sheila Farmer

Membership has continued to rise over the past 4 years as can be seen in the table below. Up to June 22nd 2004 we had 546 paid-up members. (Our year ends on July 31st so there's still time for more people to join!)).

Year	Total number of members	Renewals	New members
2001	379	312	67
2002	429	334	95
2003	489	355	134
2004	546	429	117

Good News

By Ken Crick

Work undertaken to remove *Crassula helmsii* from the scrape in front of Colebrook hide has made a fantastic difference. For two years a solid mat of this pernicious alien invader covered the scrape. Hardly a dragonfly was to be seen in front of the hide. . Already this year the cleared scrape has provided an attractive habitat for the aerobic and aggressive flight of Four – spotted Chasers perusing Downy Emerald dragonflies whose regular patrolled beat is also disturbed by fast low flight of Black – tailed Skimmer. The newly revitalized scrape was also visited by a Broad – bodied Chaser a species only rarely encountered at Moor Green.

Female Four – spotted Chaser has been observed egg laying in the scrape with many small damselflies working the water. Whilst observing dragonflies a Red Shank with two young appeared in front of the hide feeding in the scrape. Two years ago I could find no evidence of aquatic insect life within the scrape but now waders are able to find food and the birders amongst you must also be benefiting. Thanks to all the volunteers who worked so hard on the scrape and to Adrian Douglas for his work in spraying the *Crassula* and its regrowth. The clearance of *Crassula* looks like being a feature of work on the site from now on.

Early season netting brought unexpected bonuses in the form of close encounters with Fox, two Grass snakes and a weasel. There were very few Dragonfly or Damselfly larva to be found and I started to fear another poor season. Small fish, water stick insects, caddis fly and mayfly larva were abundant. The season has in fact got off to a strong start reflected in the exuvia of mainly Common Blue Damselfly found in abundance on shore side vegetation, there have been so many emerging simultaneously that they have been climbing over one another as they emerged. The uppermost insect trapping the lower inside its final aquatic skin, where it died, unable to delay or complete its metamorphosis.



There is also good news with respect to the lakes snails; the shells are notably thicker this year. The lakes are still acidic as is the river. The worst condition on site has a pH of 2.3 but generally the figure is around a respectable 6.5, in common with much of the standing water throughout the northern end of the valley.

More Bird Watching For The Not Very Sharp-Eyed!

By Bette and Gordon Harland

Editor's note: This article was submitted for inclusion in January's Newsletter but arrived just too late. Any references that may seem out of date are therefore due to this.

Moor Green, January to June 2003

This report describes the bird species that the one with poor sight hopes to see when he is out on his own and visiting just one or other of the two hides. The species mentioned are drawn from our lists of the fifteen species most frequently seen each month on visits to each of the hides in the first half of last year (2003).

Sharp-eyed visitors should have no trouble identifying *Chaffinch*, *Dunnock*, *Long-Tailed Tit*, *Robin*, *Starling* and indeed many other small birds on visits in all seasons. However, for the poor-sighted they all tend to appear small and brown, which makes identification difficult. *Dunnock* and *Chaffinch* were easiest to identify in the early summer, when there was a lot of activity feeding young, who were not particularly wary of people. There was a flock of *Long-Tailed Tits* regularly visiting the path to the Grove hide between February and April and we usually encountered these either on the walk to or from the hide. *Robins* are very territorial and once found nearly always appeared near the same places and could be seen on every visit before the leaves grew on the trees.

The regulars

On most visits to either hide we saw *Blackbird*, *Carrion Crow*, *Coot*, *Magpie* and *Tufted Duck*. *Tufted Duck* numbers in the winter months may be enhanced by the presence of migrants from Northwest Russia and Scandinavia but quite a few remain all the year. *Coots* move to moult assemblies in the summer (June to August) and may go absent as a result. The *Blackbirds* move around between the fields and woods in winter but can usually be seen searching the pasture fields often in company with other thrushes. In the spring they can be found along the footpath hedges and trees noisily proclaiming their nesting territories. *Carrion Crow* and *Magpie* were usually seen, either perched in the trees or feeding in the pastures around the reserve.

Canada Goose, *Mute Swan* and *Moorhen* were probably present somewhere on the site every day but could be missed during a one-hour visit to a single hide. Over winter the *Canada Geese* (and our other goose species) associate in flocks to graze the fields on and adjoining the sites: thus they may be down at the other end of the reserve from you. The *Mute Swans* also tended to flock: they seem to feed mainly in the water, sometimes on lakes away from the observer. *Moorhens* can be hidden by rushes and long grass but they were probably always present.



In spring and summer *Mallard* were found on all the lakes and along the river but were missed on some winter visits. Our resident breeders, which are fairly tame, may move away in winter and be replaced by shyer cousins migrating from Northwest Europe.

Lapwings and *Black Headed Gulls* were common at the Colebrook end of the site. Winter flocks of *Lapwings* were seen either on Tern and Plover Islands or on the new workings west of the footpath. In summer these flocks dispersed but a few pairs remained to breed and could be observed with their chicks in the scrapes near the hide. In winter, the *Black Headed Gulls* flocked on the new workings or on Colebrook North. They were absent on several days in April but in May established nests on Tern Island and reared young to fledging during the following months.

Winter visitors

In winter when Scandinavia, Russia and much of Central Europe freezes most birds fly to warmer climates. For wildfowl the Baltic, North Sea and low-lying wetlands along their margins provide a migrants' motorway with frequent service stations. Very large numbers of birds move down to the North Sea coast of Germany, to the Low Countries and to England. Moor Green is fortunate in being the chosen destination for migrant *Gadwall*, *Goldeneye*, *Goosander*, *Pochard*, *Shoveler*, *Teal* and *Wigeon*.

Pochard, *Teal* and *Wigeon* were present at both Colebrook and Grove during our visits in January and February. In this period we were more likely to see *Shoveler* at Colebrook but *Gadwall*, *Goldeneye* and *Goosander* at Grove.

The large wintering flocks of *Gadwall*, *Goosander*, *Pochard* and *Wigeon* left the reserve by Mid-March. The *Goldeneye*, *Shoveler* and *Teal* could be seen regularly up to Mid-April. A very few of these ducks breed within Great Britain but not on our reserve. However, we made very occasional sightings of *Teal* during the summer and small numbers of *Gadwall* remained at Grove. But if you want to be certain of seeing all these ducks (especially the drakes in their glorious breeding plumage) you probably have to visit no later than the end of February.

Cormorant and *Grey Heron* could be seen regularly at both hides in January and February. The *Cormorants* favoured Tern Island or perching on the structures on Horseshoe Lake while there was nearly always a *Heron* somewhere around the margins of both the Colebrook and Grove lakes or along the river. Both these species prefer to congregate for breeding away from our reserve and were not seen so frequently during the spring and early summer.

A small flock of *Snow Geese* were often seen on Grove Lake or grazing the adjoining fields.

Summer sightings

The onset of nesting and feeding fledglings facilitated regular sighting of *Barnacle Goose*, *Common Tern*, *Jackdaw*, *Little Ringed Plover* and *Pied Wagtail*. In April breeding pairs of *Barnacle Goose* left the main flock to select nest sites and several pairs chose sites around Colebrook Lake: several young were fledged later in the summer. Also in April, the *Terns*



were arriving from their winter in West Africa and claiming nest sites on Tern Island – fortunately without too much competition from the *Black Headed Gulls* (mentioned above).

We saw *Jackdaws* around Moor Green Farm regularly from May onwards and would guess that we were watching a young family.

Little Ringed Plover were seen fairly regularly at Colebrook from April onwards and at Grove from May. They are very well camouflaged but had favoured locations, such as the western end of Tern Island, and could be found, even by the weak-sighted, after a careful search using binoculars. Sometimes the stones above the water line would seem to ripple and binoculars or telescope would reveal this delightful little bird running along the shoreline.

Pied Wagtails are a resident species and may be seen occasionally in any season. A pair must have nested successfully near Grove hide because there was a flush of juveniles around the Grove scrape throughout the summer. At first the parent birds fed them regularly but later they would perch at the edge of the scrape and attempt to catch insects over the lake.

Colebrook Cut Sluice

By Peter Scott

Members visiting the site recently will be only too aware that the hoped-for replacement for the sluice in Colebrook Cut has not appeared. Also, the planned barrier to restrict flow through the pipe from the south-west corner of Colebrook Lake North to the river has not been installed, so that water continues to be lost even though the lake level is now very low.

The reason for this unsatisfactory situation is that RMC is reconsidering its strategy for keeping water out of the Manor Farm quarry and it is taking quite a while to produce a scheme that it's happy with. One option being considered is to delay reinstatement of the sluice until the Manor Farm site is worked out (about 7-10 years from now) and to use just the fore-mentioned pipe (with barrier), together with a new 'dam' to reduce inflow from Horseshoe Lake, to control the through-flow of water. The feasibility of this is being studied by consultant hydrologists.

In the meantime we have *no* means of controlling the water level in the lakes. We inform RMC of what we see as the likely effects on the reserve and its wildlife of any schemes it considers, but we cannot implement water-flow control systems ourselves. Our hope, now, is for the problem to be resolved by *next* year.

Security.

By Steve Farmer.

Grove Hide was vandalised on the morning of Monday 9 February 2004. This was the worst incident of damage to the hides since 30 July 2002 when Colebrook Hide was broken into. Thank you to the three different members who reported the damage so promptly to the Committee.

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Early on the Tuesday morning three members of the Committee turned out to assess the damage. The vandals (probably a couple of truantiing school children) had attempted to kick in the door of the hide from the outside. They had then climbed on the fence at the east end and kicked in the viewing port (the turn-buttons were no match to the onslaught with boots). Having gained access by wriggling through the opening they had torn down most of the notices and display boards. Most of these notices had then been thrown outside into the scrape. They had also burnt some of the leaflets inside the hide on the floor as shown by dead matches, ash and cigarette ends. The plywood panelling on the inside of the door had been torn off and the door then attacked with boots from the inside, splitting the outside wooden planking.

The Committee members nailed the panelling back on the door. Damaged notices and leaflets were replaced. The display boards were re-installed. Two members returned in the afternoon and fitted extra bolts to the most vulnerable viewing ports. By the end of the day the hide was back in action.

We were very lucky the damage was not much worse. The hide could easily have been burnt down!!

If you see anyone acting suspiciously please contact a member of the Committee immediately. Long light summer days provide plenty of opportunity for idle hands to cause mischief. Please make sure that all viewing ports are fastened securely before you leave one of the hides. The hides represent the most valuable assets of the Group and would be very expensive to replace.

Snakes

By Peter Scott

In my role as reptile recorder, about every 10-14 days I check the 'basking tins' for reptiles. This involves simply lifting the edge of each tin to see what's underneath. Usually it's nothing (except ants' nests!), but sometimes one or more grass snakes will be present. Until one visit in early June, I had never found any other reptile species using the tins, though adders and slow worms have been seen elsewhere on the reserve.

This had led me to become complacent about the need for protective clothing. In particular, I had thought that if I *did* find an adder, it would be so obviously 'different' that I would be able to step back quickly out of harms way. On this occasion I lifted one tin and my attention was caught by two grass snakes, one of which began to slither away into the undergrowth. It was only after several seconds that I noticed a third snake lying quietly about 10 inches away from the grass snakes, and it took still longer for the zigzag marking on its back to impinge on my consciousness.

Clearly I was lucky that the adder was not bothered by my presence, as it would have had ample time to strike before I even noticed it. After this salutary lesson, I shall be wearing thick gardening gloves on future visits.



Spring Bird Arrival Dates - 2004

By Colin Wilson

I wondered how well watched Moor Green Lakes was compared to other Berkshire sites so I decided to check the arrival dates of a few migrating species from the limited data so far available for this year. The source of my information is www.berksbirds.co.uk which can be accessed directly or through the Bird News page of www.theroc.org.uk. The berksbirds website is owned by Marek Walford who is well known to most local birdwatchers and provides this valuable resource free of charge to them.

There are a few points to make here. The only data I have is records entered on www.berksbirds.co.uk and so observers at Moor Green Lakes who don't enter their records there may feel aggrieved at my table of earliest sightings. It is not critical that records are entered this way but it is very easy and it speeds up the production of the annual 'Birds of Berkshire' reports if records are at least submitted in a computerised form soon after the year end. The websites give advice on how to submit records and the species where field descriptions are required to be submitted to the County Recorder. Arrival and departure dates, breeding evidence and high counts are very welcome.

Unfortunately, despite plenty of observers at MGL we failed to get a first date in the County according to berksbirds but you may know different! If you have records better than those I am showing below please make sure you submit them this year and our information base will be much enhanced. I have shown a couple of species where we ought to have dates but don't have any so far. So here goes!

Species	County first date (berksbirds)	Location	Moor Green Lakes first date	Observer
Hobby	6 April	Theale Gravel Pits	30 April	Bruce Archer
Little Ringed Plover	7 March	Twyford GP	23 March	Bruce Archer
Common Tern	1 April	Theale GP	2 April	Marek Walford via Birdguides.com
Cuckoo	10 April	Lower Farm GP	22 April	Robert Godden
Swift	16 April	Two sites	21 April	Paul Bright-Thomas
Sand Martin	15 March	Lower Farm GP	20 March	Nicholas Godden
Swallow	20 March	Two sites	2 April	Gary Randall
House Martin	3 April	Dinton Pastures	10 April	Gary Randall
Sedge Warbler	23 March	Theale GP	8 April	Bruce Archer
Reed Warbler	16 April	Theale GP	???	
Lesser Whitethroat	19 April	Jealott's Hill	???	
Whitethroat	13 April	Theale GP	16 April	Martin Mitchell
Garden Warbler	17 April	Sandford	19 April	Nicholas Godden
Willow Warbler	21 March	Bray GP	11 April	Martin Mitchell

