

# MOOR GREEN LAKES GROUP NEWSLETTER



January 2005

## **A Happy New Year to all our members!**

Well, my first year as a Committee member at Moor Green Lakes is just about over and I must admit it has taught me a great deal about the issues facing the reserve and how much we all owe to those who manage it. Many of our Committee do a great deal in addition to active conservation work but our Group still needs more who can turn up at working parties to get the management tasks completed. Alternatively, there are jobs available where you don't have to 'put your back into it', even in the modest way needed. Details of two positions vacant are shown later and we would welcome any help you can give with these or, with joining working parties for which dates are shown elsewhere in the Newsletter, so please make a New Year's resolution and fill in one or two in your diary now and help us out!

Our AGM has been arranged for Friday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2005, 7pm for a 7.45pm start. Details are enclosed and we hope to meet you then.

Finally, your committee wishes you all a Happy New Year and we hope to see more and more of you involved in our Reserve in 2005.

**Colin Wilson, Editor**

## MOOR GREEN LAKES TO BENEFIT FROM £38,000 SEEDA FUNDING

*By Peter Scott*

Moor Green Lakes Nature Reserve is the fortunate recipient of a grant worth almost £38,000. The money will accelerate work on a number of projects that would otherwise have taken several years. The funding was secured through the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) from the English Nature Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund (ALSF). Work has already started and it is hoped that most of the projects will be done during the winter months, with some elements being completed in the spring and summer. Some of these jobs may create temporary inconvenience, but we trust that you will agree that the improvements justify this.

The planned work comprises a mixture of habitat and access improvements, surveys and equipment purchase. The following list gives a little more detail:

### HABITAT WORK

#### Ditches and scrapes

- Ditch clearance to improve drainage and habitats.
- Re-modelling of scrapes for bird feeding to provide better winter feeding areas for wildfowl and waders.
- Removal of encroaching vegetation from scrapes.

NEWSLETTER January 2005



### Fencing and gates

A secure boundary fence is vital for the site, keeping dogs out and cattle in. Grazing is an important management tool to maintain the grassland and encourage wildflowers. Related tasks are:

- repair reserve boundary fencing and replace one of reserve gates;
- install 200m of new fencing to the north-east of Colebrook Lake North .

### Surveys

Surveys of the wildlife enable us to assess current populations and decide how habitats might be improved in the future. The grant will fund two surveys of wildlife groups which haven't been looked at before:

- mammals, especially small mammals e.g. harvest and field mice, pygmy and water shrews, bank voles etc.;
- aquatic invertebrates, living around the edges of the lakes and in the ditches.

### Equipment

To assist with monitoring and maintenance, the following will be bought:

- water quality testing equipment;
- a movable pontoon to run between Long Island and the mainland. This will make it much easier to access and work on the island, allowing large equipment such as the motor scythe to be taken on to the island to manage the scrub. (One of major themes of managing the reserve is keeping the bramble, willow etc from invading, as over-wintering wildfowl and waders do not like scrub growing on the lake edges.)

### Access

The Reserve is very popular with the public and the Blackwater Valley Path forms the southern boundary of the site. The following work will maintain and improve access:

- upgrade 250m of path to provide a better, drier surface;
- build up the eroded path on both sides of the bridge over the Blackwater River. This is currently impassable for wheelchairs;
- improve access from the main site car park to encourage all users, whilst limiting access by motorbikes, by installing a horse stile on the bridleway and a motorbike inhibitor;
- replace worn out fence separating footpath and bridleway.

### Membership Secretary Vacancy.

After three years in the job, the present Membership Secretary, Sheila Farmer, intends to resign. Another member to take on this important role is now sought. At present the number of members is just over 500, from about 300 households.

The new secretary needs to be computer literate with a computer and printer, and be familiar with Excel and Word. Access to the Internet and e-mail would also be useful. This job might suit a husband and wife team so that the work could be shared but it is not particularly onerous. The busiest period is renewal time from late July to mid-September.

- The Membership Secretary sends out new membership cards when members return renewal forms. Membership details are entered in an Excel spreadsheet and subscriptions sent to the Treasurer. New members' cards are then sent out with the hide combination lock number and latest Newsletter.
- New members are also recorded and sent packs as they trickle in during the year.
- Address labels are produced from the membership spreadsheet for the Postal Secretary for the posting of the Annual Report and the AGM Notification with the latest Newsletter.

**NEWSLETTER** January 2005



- A list of members with an interest in Conservation Work is sent to the Site Liaison Officer.
- This position is on the Management Committee which meets just four times per year.

If you would like to find out more please contact Peter Scott (phone 01252 878205 e-mail ppscott@aol.com ) or Sheila Farmer, (34 Mill Lane, Yateley, Hants, GU46 7TN, phone 01252 409868, email sheila.farmer3@ntlworld.com).

## Mammal recorder needed

Katrina Slocombe has served as the group's mammal recorder for some years. However, with work commitments preventing her from spending much time on this activity and with no prospect of this situation improving in the near future, Katrina has decided to resign from the role. We are very grateful to Katrina for her past work for Moor Green Lakes Group.

If any member is interested in mammals and would like to take on this job, please contact Peter Scott (tel. 01252 878205; email ppscott@aol.com). To find out more about it first, contact Katrina (tel. 01276 35062).

## Barn Owl boxes coming soon

*Bruce Archer*

Working in conjunction with the Biodiversity Officer for Wokingham District Council, the MGLG Committee is planning to install two pole mounted Barn Owl boxes on or around the Reserve early in 2005. These charismatic birds used to be a feature of the reserve some years ago but are only seen occasionally now.

The objective is to install two roosting/nesting boxes to encourage Barn Owls to breed once again at Moor Green. The female and young use one box, while the second box provides a roosting site for the male nearby. The male does most of the hunting to feed the female and young during the breeding period. The increasing amount of grassland in the area should provide ample hunting for a family of Barn Owls, which live on voles and mice.

Old trees with natural nest holes are scarce these days with the tendency to remove dead or dying trees regarded as untidy or unsafe. Competition for nest sites is fierce with secluded nest boxes preferred by Tawny Owls, Little Owls, Stock Doves and Mandarin Ducks, all of which breed on the reserve. This is why nest boxes mounted on tall poles in an open area are more successful with Barn Owls. It is optimistic to expect breeding in the first year, but the boxes will be monitored each year for signs of roosting and breeding.

The two boxes at Moor Green are part of a plan to add five new boxes to the 13 that have already been installed within the Wokingham District.

The Group is indebted to RMC, the site owners, and Reading Ornithological Club for providing a conservation grant to jointly fund the provision and installation of the two boxes.

## Autumn Birds at Moor Green

*Bruce Archer – December 2004*

I visit Moor Green Lakes a few times a week and hence see the changing seasons and the arrivals and departures of birds that make "patch watching" so interesting. In this article I try to give a flavor of this changing scene based on my observations and on others that I am aware of. Ian Brown provides a summary of all sightings in the Group annual report.

NEWSLETTER January 2005



Firstly, a snippet that I discovered while chatting to the RMC driver one day. A pair of Pied Wagtails nested in the green gravel hopper that feeds the conveyor on the new workings. The diver was careful not to bump the hopper when filling it, if he did the parent would come and furiously 'wag' at the digger's wheels. The young fledged successfully. Pied Wagtails are well known for choosing strange nesting places.

The start of autumn is marked by the departure of Swallows and Martins as they head for Africa. The last Sand Martins I saw were on 20<sup>th</sup> September, the last Swallows were on 3<sup>rd</sup> October and the last House Martins were approximately 100 on 14<sup>th</sup> October feeding low over the lakes. Within half an hour they had all gone. The last Hobby that I saw was on 4<sup>th</sup> October. As well as feeding on dragonflies, Hobby is the only bird of prey nimble enough to catch Martins and Swallows in flight.

Little Ringed Plover breed on site and I saw a total of 4 young fledged in three different locations this season. The last sighting was 10<sup>th</sup> August as they left to spend winter in the Mediterranean or North Africa.

Many birds breed north of us and spend winter south of us. These "passage migrants" pass through the reserve, and in the case of Green Sandpiper, one has stayed for the winter. Green Sandpipers breed from Norway to the Baltic and most spend winter in Europe. The first returning Green Sandpiper was seen on 25<sup>th</sup> June, with a maximum of 6 on 20<sup>th</sup> August. Common Sandpipers, which breed in northern Britain, passed through in good numbers on their way to the Mediterranean, with a maximum of 10 being seen on 10<sup>th</sup> August. Less common was the juvenile Wood Sandpiper which was present from 5<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> August before continuing its journey to central Africa. Dunlin, on their way from the Arctic to the coast of Britain or to central Europe, were represented by 4 sightings between 14<sup>th</sup> July and 16<sup>th</sup> August. A single Greenshank was seen on 16<sup>th</sup> August and a juvenile Ruff on 15<sup>th</sup> August. Ringed Plover used to breed at Moor Green, but are now only seen passing through, with a couple of singles and one group of 3 between 1<sup>st</sup> July and 16<sup>th</sup> August.

Other birds passing through were Wheatear on their way to spend the winter south of the Sahara. Six birds were seen between 15<sup>th</sup> August and 18<sup>th</sup> September. Unusually, no Whinchats were seen on site this autumn, although one was seen nearby at Ambarrow Farm. It was also a poor autumn for Yellow Wagtails with just one sighting of a bird flying over the site.

The most spectacular passage migrant is the Osprey with four sightings this autumn: one on 11<sup>th</sup> September, two birds together on 16<sup>th</sup> September and one on 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> September. With perhaps 150 pairs now nesting in Scotland and increasing, such sightings of parents and young heading for East Africa may become more frequent. These large fish eating raptors have been seen circling over the lakes, but no one has yet reported an attempt to catch fish at Moor Green. This may be because the local Lapwings, Gulls and Crows greet Osprey with hostility when they appear, even though they pose no apparent threat.

The good numbers of Lapwing that can often be seen on the islands during the winter months comprise local breeding birds supplemented by travelers from Scandinavia and northern Europe escaping the frozen conditions there. By September, more than 300 Lapwing were based on the reserve, moving out to local fields to feed. By December an estimated 400 are present.

Snipe breeding in Britain are joined for the winter by birds from Scandinavia and Russia. The first Snipe to reappear at Moor Green were 13 briefly on 22<sup>nd</sup> August. Numbers of Snipe on the reserve may reach 50, but they stay well hidden with just a few being seen around the margins of the lakes unless freezing conditions push them out.



Of the nine duck species that are present all winter, six breed elsewhere and arrive during the autumn. The first returns that I saw were Pochard on 8<sup>th</sup> August, Teal on 13<sup>th</sup> August, Wigeon on 7<sup>th</sup> September, Shoveler on 20<sup>th</sup> September, Goldeneye on 10<sup>th</sup> November and Goosander on 13<sup>th</sup> November. A peak count of 21 Goosander were present in the Grove Lake roost on 15<sup>th</sup> December. In addition a Ruddy Duck was present on 21<sup>st</sup> November and 7 Pintail on 18<sup>th</sup> December.

The first Redpoll of the autumn that I saw was on 7<sup>th</sup> November, the first Siskin on 10<sup>th</sup> November. Goldcrests seem more numerous than usual this winter, arriving from the local conifer forests where they breed.

A number of autumn rarities merit a mention:

- A Sandwich Tern was reported fishing on Horseshoe Lake on 13<sup>th</sup> October. The only previous record was in 1991.
- A Barn Owl was seen successfully hunting on the fields just north of the new workings on 1<sup>st</sup> November.
- A Bittern was reported on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December.
- A first winter Slavonian Grebe was present from 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> December. This is the first record for the site.
- A Black-tailed Godwit was seen on 16<sup>th</sup> December, which I believe is the latest date ever recorded in Berkshire.

And to end on the theme on which I began – the pair of Egyptian Geese, that successfully bred last season, were seen setting up territory in the same location during December. These fugitive orange/brown geese with the donkey-like call have increased in number this year with up to 20 regularly roosting on Tern Island.

During 2004 I have seen 112 different bird species at Moor Green.

If you have access to the Internet, then you can find up-to-date information on local bird sightings, news and events by going to [www.berksbirds.co.uk](http://www.berksbirds.co.uk).

## **Manor Farm Restoration**

*Peter Scott*

Anybody who has walked down the footpath from the car park on Lower Sandhurst Road can hardly fail to have noticed that RMC is no longer digging up the land immediately to the west and, instead, has for some months been filling in the big hole there. Sand and gravel extraction is more-or-less complete in the eastern half of the Manor Farm site and quarrying is now moving westwards towards Longwater Lane.

An outline plan for restoration of the site has existed for some time. Recently a committee has been convened to add some detail to the plan, advising on such matters as the seed mix to be applied to the grassed areas. RMC, the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership and the Moor Green Lakes Group are all represented.

One of the main features of the site will be a reed bed. Other people's experience indicates that reed beds are not always easy to establish and that the most effective method of planting can vary between locations. For that reason a trial is being planned. Towards the northern side of the site a small lake has been created. This will feed water to an adjacent area that will become a small reed bed, separate from the main one. Profiling of this is almost complete and it will be available

**NEWSLETTER** January 2005



for a trial of reed planting next year. Seed and seedlings will be sought 'locally'. One thing clear from elsewhere is the need to protect the plants from geese until they are established.

Another feature is the woodland along the northern edge of the site. Most of this was planted some time ago to screen the quarry workings from Lower Sandhurst Road. Unfortunately much of it is of poor quality for wildlife, being too dense and containing many exotics. It is hoped that this will be thinned and that more native trees will be introduced.

Of course, not all species will regard the restored site as an improvement. Little Ringed Plovers, for example, have enjoyed the bare dereliction of the working areas. It is hoped that more severe and regular clearance of vegetation from the scrapes around Moor Green will give them alternatives. Certainly the reed beds, if successful, should result in compensatory increases in other species.

## **Camberley Natural History Society**

*Chris Rose*

A secret life as a spymaster combined with a passion for the natural world and an interest in keeping many unusual animals as pets was the life of Major Maxwell Knight who lived in Camberley. At the end of World War Two he started a new life as a much admired radio naturalist. He thought it would be a good idea to bring people together to enjoy and learn about the wildlife in the local area and the wider world. After an announcement in the local newspaper and a public meeting, the Camberley Natural History society was founded in 1946.

Today, as then, the Society still meets for talks on the first Thursday of the month throughout the year, except August. Early speakers at Society meetings included many great names in the natural world, mostly friends of Maxwell Knight and our first Vice-Presidents, Lord Alanbrooke and the bird artist George Lodge. Members were able to hear from Peter Scott about his reserve at New Grounds, Slimbridge, from James Fisher on his journey across America with Roger Tory Peterson, and listen to the great Ludwig Koch with his revolutionary recordings of bird songs. Many lectures were by the leading scientists of the day relating to their latest research on many subjects from radar tracking of migrating birds, the way of life of many animals, from ants to whales.

Today, we continue that tradition by finding people actively involved in research and persuading them to tell us about their specialities. Subjects covered in the last two year's programmes include: whales and dolphins; ancient trees; Harvest Mice; Mayflies; Moths; Goshawks and other raptors; Shrews and Ladybirds. Our President Pat Morris has entertained us with his own work on British mammals, especially hedgehogs, whilst introducing many of his students from the Royal Holloway College to enthral us with their latest zoological research.

Alongside these indoor events we run monthly outings to see and learn about wildlife in the countryside. It is a pleasure to walk in the countryside and yet to learn something new from a visiting expert or one of your own fellow members. We can learn to identify birds on the local gravel pits or find out how the gravel got there in the first place. Also, we learn why trees are a wonderful thing to have in Windsor Forest but not on local heathland.

All these things are offered by the Society where visitors or new members can enjoy a friendly atmosphere amongst like-minded people. For further information contact Bernard Baverstock on 01276 22574 or come along to a meeting at High Cross Church, Knoll Road, Camberley on the first Thursday of each month at 7.30p.m.



## **Work parties**

*Peter Scott*

We are now about halfway through this year's programme of Autumn/Winter work parties. The main tasks completed to date are:

- cutting the regrowth of bramble in the patches that were cleared by a contractor last year, to prevent the north banks of Colebrook and Grove Lakes becoming totally overgrown by this rampant species;
- cutting saplings and scrub along the shoreline of Colebrook Lake North, to preserve 'open access' from the lake to the grassland for those waterfowl that like to graze;
- clearing Tern and Plover Islands of as much vegetation as we can manage, to preserve the bare gravel surface required by breeding terns ;
- thinning the woodland just south of Colebrook hide and on the corner where the footpath meets the river.

This last task has not been done in previous years. As is normal, these patches of woodland were planted at a much higher density than that required for an 'established' wood, the intention being to thin it after a few years, removing those trees that have not 'taken' and a proportion of others, to let in more light. This enables the remaining trees to grow more vigorously and gives an opportunity to ground-level herbs. Eleven years was rather longer than we should have left it, but we will watch with interest what species, if any, colonise the open patches we've created.

The objective of the woodland thinning is distinct from that of coppicing sections of the plantation around the western and southern boundaries, which has been done most years. There each selected section is cut more-or-less to ground level, so that as it regrows patches of vegetation at different heights are created around the reserve, to give a variety of habitats. A contractor should be cutting this year's quota of patches soon.

Much of the work still to be tackled this year is on Long Island. This has been scheduled for the end of the 'season' so that we can take advantage of the floating walkway bought with a portion of the recent ALSF grant. This will ease the job of getting people and tools to and from Long Island (and also, possibly, Plover Island, as it is moveable), which takes anything from 30 to 60 minutes each way using the boat alone.

The wader scrapes also need further work, but we hope that a contractor can do most of that for us.

Work Party dates are planned as follows. Meet at 10.30 at the car park, Lower Sandhurst Road.:  
TUESDAY 18 JANUARY, SUNDAY 13 FEBRUARY, TUESDAY 22 FEBRUARY, SUNDAY 13 MARCH,  
TUESDAY 22 MARCH, TUESDAY 24 MAY

## **A walk down the Valley of the Whitewater.**

*Steve Farmer*

The River Whitewater is one of a small number of chalk streams in North Hampshire that run off the North Downs to join the Loddon and flow into the Thames. The Whitewater, in very marked contrast to the Blackwater, runs through a largely unspoilt rural landscape, avoiding all towns and villages and is well worth exploring.

Early on a fine, clear, sunny morning in mid-November I set off from the village pond in the centre of Upton Grey to walk down the whole valley of the Whitewater. The first frost of the autumn had left a dusting of hoar frost on the grass. The River Whitewater rises from a number of chalk springs near Bidden Water. Here the road crosses the little gurgling brook for the first time. Two

**NEWSLETTER** January 2005



kestrels wheeled and called in the bright morning sunlight. I turned off the road down a path to Greywell Fen. This fine nature reserve (SSSI) is managed by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust. Greywell Mill was the last working mill on the Whitewater and the mill wheel is still in place. A wren scolded angrily as a weasel went bounding across the rough meadow by the mill. The path then follows the river to Greywell Church, originally built by the Normans. The picturesque line of old brick cottages of Greywell village stood in the sunshine across the meadow.

Greywell Tunnel on the Basingstoke Canal is a nationally important winter roost for bats. At midday on a sunny February day I have watched bats hunting over the canal in broad daylight. Today there were nearly a dozen little grebe as I walked down the towpath to King John's Castle. Another kestrel flew over at the ford across the river to North Warnborough Green. The two meadows here are a botanist's delight in summer, full of wet meadowland wildflowers. Across Hook Road and there was a green sandpiper, grey wagtail and a dozen lapwing beside the river. At Lodge Farm I had an excellent view of a perched kingfisher above the river. Here another kestrel flew over. I diverted a short way to look at the stilling pond below Poland Mill.

Near Potbridge Farm a single bold magpie challenged a buzzard invading its territory as I passed through the long pedestrian tunnel under the railway embankment. A poor battered comma butterfly was warming itself on a dead thistle head. Five female roe deer obligingly splashed across the wet meadow just ahead of me. As I walked towards the Crooked Billet the hedges were alive with fieldfares, blackbirds and thrushes enjoying the rich harvest of hips and haws.

Just beyond Whitewater Mill (formerly Hook Mill) the path crosses a wide riverside meadow with the river babbling along on the east side. Two herons flew up calling noisily. Now heading towards Diple I saw more roe deer does - 3 still with their chestnut summer coats, the others dull brown. Diple Mill is a fine place for snowdrops in the winter. The path now crosses wet meadows beside the river towards Mattingley Church. Beware, the farm track immediately behind the church is often very, very, muddy! A slightly longer way is to walk round via the road. Mattingley Church with its thick timber framework and herringbone brick in-fill is worth noting.

From here I walked via Linchmere Farm through the woods to Hounds Green, then down another track, crossing the river again, to Alder Moor Farm. Another buzzard flew overhead. Holdshott Mill was built on an artificial channel of the river to get a better head of water and gave its name to the Holshott Hundred. At Park Farm I found chicory still in flower. Riseley Mill was the last mill on the river Whitewater. Down the lane to join the line of the Roman Road to Silchester. The afternoon sunshine lit up the woods and fields on the hills of the valley to give a tapestry of colour.

Finally across the last bridge over a river grown from a babbling brook to a sizeable stream. At Thatcher's Ford I walked back along the Blackwater for a short distance to see where the two rivers join, then up Sandpit Lane in afternoon sunshine to Farley Hill, the end of my journey.

There is no designated path down the Whitewater Valley so you will need a good map and a bit of map reading to link the existing paths. In some places there is a choice of alternative routes. You will need OS Explorer Maps 144 and 159 (or older Pathfinder Maps 1188, 1204 and 1224). In winter walk from south to north so the sun (hopefully!) is not in your eyes. You will never be more than half a mile from a road but it feels like real countryside. The reserves at Greywell Fen and North Warnborough Green are managed by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust. For further reading try and borrow a copy of "Journey Down the Whitewater" by Anne Pilcher (1982). Enjoy your walk!

**Items for the newsletter are welcome from all. Please send them to:**

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NEWSLETTER January 2005

