

# MOOR GREEN LAKES GROUP NEWSLETTER



July 2005

Dear Members

## **Welcome to the new membership year**

With this Newsletter you will receive your invitation to join again for another year and we sincerely hope you will support our local nature reserve once again. If anybody asks what value you get for your subscription, access and facilities on such a good reserve, plus newsletters and the superb annual report surely make this the best package possible at the price! And don't forget the sociable AGM with refreshments to which you are all welcome – details will be published in advance for you to note your diaries.

This year has seen some significant investment in the reserve, as a result of the SEEDA grant mentioned in our last newsletter, and this is detailed in Peter Scott's report below. We are also now seeing the first signs of reinstatement at Manor Farm where the reserve will have some new habitat developed offering great new potential.

As spring has gone and summer is upon us the reserve is ever changing and it is always worth a visit, maybe for the purpose of using the hides to birdwatch or just as part of a walk along the Blackwater Valley. As for the apparent influx of Curlews on the site lately, I must warn you that the sound of Curlews owes more to the new reversing warning on the CEMEX (the new name for RMC) digger than to a surprise ever present rare bird in Berkshire! Apparently, several people were lead to report Curlews at Moor Green in the spring until Bruce Archer, our treasurer, issued a warning to save people's embarrassment!

This year has seen a first sighting in Berkshire of a Whiskered Tern and Bruce Archer, the finder, has told the story for us in this newsletter.

We hope this Newsletter is of interest to you and if you have any items you would like to offer for future copies please feel free to send them to me. We are happy to include details of other groups and nature reserves events in the newsletter, after all many of us are nature lovers on a broadscale.

**Colin Wilson, Editor**  
**5 July 2005**

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## **Car thefts and break-ins**

*By Colin Wilson*

Local birdwatchers seem to be subject to a spate of thefts from cars, or sometimes just damage with nothing taken. Reports from local birdwatchers in Berkshire confirm places that are known birdwatching sites are vulnerable including Moor Green Lakes, Dinton Pastures and Snelsmore Common. Several times a red car has been noted and a person was watched breaking a car window, even a registration number noted, but the police have not yet been able to stop the activity.

We all need to be aware of suspicious activity. As your Newsletter editor, I am willing to collect any evidence or information you have, including potentially suspicious behaviour and use it to help police on investigation. We also need to watch out for second hand equipment as the stolen goods have to be turned into money eventually. Car boot sales have been mentioned as one place where they are sold at very low prices and for computer users, ebay is a likely place for sales.

I prefer you send any information in writing or by email to [colin.wilson@theroc.org.uk](mailto:colin.wilson@theroc.org.uk). It's only by working together we can do something about this.

Please note that the school holidays have been a particular problem time in the past, primarily in the afternoons, so watch out for this over the next few weeks. Don't leave valuables or bags on show in your car and make sure the car is always securely locked.

## **Work at Moor Green: update**

*By Peter Scott*

The work that was funded by the SEEDA grant (as described in the January newsletter) is now complete. Regular visitors to the reserve will undoubtedly have noticed a number of changes, the most obvious of which is probably the improved surface of the footpath between Colebrook hide and the bridge across the river. The main objective of this is to avoid the path degenerating into the boggy state of past winters. It will not be clear until next winter to what extent this has been achieved.

The work on the path required the contractors to move a large amount of material in dump trucks from the car park to the work site. At the time this led to a noticeable deterioration in the path as far as the hide, mostly due to trucks' wheels moving soil from the verges onto the path. The contractors' efforts to clear up, followed by a few months of warmer weather, seem to have returned the path to its condition of previous years.

Perhaps the other really obvious change is to the scrapes close to the two hides. Removal of vegetation and reshaping of Colebrook scrape has improved the habitat for wading birds, many of which are already taking advantage of the new space. The bare ground there also seems to be attractive as a site for newly-fledged terns to settle while being fed by their parents. Perhaps Tern Island is becoming rather crowded for them.



The main problem at Grove scrape was not so much vegetation (though there *was* too much at the southern end of the scrape) as lack of water, leading to very high acidity and very little life. Dropping the level of the northern half of the scrape has achieved the objective of letting lake water into the scrape, but it probably needs to be 'flushed out' for a whole winter before there is any real chance of substantial improvement. Time will tell.

Contractors also cleared some vegetation from scrapes around the shore of Long Island, but unfortunately little progress was made. As it is not possible to get a large JCB onto the island, this task was tackled manually. We had hoped that contractors, being younger and presumably fitter than (most) work party members, would make more progress. We were wrong! This is the one component of the work that did not come up to expectations.

Ongoing management of the scrapes for wildlife requires an ability to control the level of water in the lakes. CEMEX (formerly RMC) have now repaired the sluices, to a higher standard than they were originally, in fact. Bruce Archer has proposed a regime of changes that should, with reasonable cooperation from the weather, create muddy margins for wading birds and help to keep vegetation at bay.

Several sections of fence were also repaired. This work is not so obvious to a casual glance, but is nevertheless essential to the state of the reserve. For example, we cannot have cattle grazing the meadow if they can easily escape. 'Gates' at the ends of the footpath and bridleway were also changed, with the intention of making motorcycle access more difficult, whilst maintaining wheelchair and horse access.

The moveable pontoon bridge, acquired in late winter, has already proved valuable in getting work parties to and from Long Island. This should enable us to get the Blackwater Valley group's motor scythe onto the island next winter, which will make it easier to maintain the grassy parts.

That more-or-less summarises work at Moor Green. On a separate but related issue, our input to the restoration work at Manor Farm continues. However, our hopes of a reed bed trial this year were set back by a lack of water in the area that had been earmarked.

Our annual round of work parties will resume in September. In the last few years we've established a dedicated group of volunteers who, between them, have put in a considerable number of working days. However, we can always use more help, so new faces would be very welcome. Please don't be deterred by the thought that you may only be able to turn out occasionally, or only for a half-day. Any contribution reduces the work that others will have to do otherwise.

## **Beware of adders!**

One reptile sighting really can't wait for next year's annual report. On 28<sup>th</sup> June M. Philpott and R. Warden found an adder inside Colebrook hide! They "gently ejected it with a stick". Clearly it pays to have a good look round inside the hide before settling down to watch birds.



## Upcoming events for birdwatchers

The Reading Ornithological Club has two events to offer to Moor Green Lakes members.

### Birdfair

We are taking a luxury coach to the Birdfair at Rutland Water on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> August. Tickets are £25 including your entry, and pick up in Reading will be at the University Whiteknights campus. Full details are available from Ray Reedman on 0118 9864 338. On offer are free lectures from well known birding personalities, bird art of all kinds, photography, a chance to see and buy the latest birding equipment, books, holidays etc and entry to the nature reserve where Ospreys now breed and Tree Sparrows are still seen. A great day out and tickets are on a first come, first served basis.

### Ian Wallace lecture

Many will have heard of Ian and know him to be one of the country's greatest living ornithologists who has a reputation for his wit and skill as well as his authorship of many books. Ian has decided to retire from public speaking but has agreed to make his final presentation to the Reading Ornithological Club on 14 September 2005. The ROC is honoured by this and has reserved the main lecture theatre at the Palmer Building, Reading University for the event. Apart from Ian's own paintings and books (e.g. *Beguiled by Birds*) on display on the night, we will be raffling an original drawing by Robert Gillmor, used for the cover of the 1998/999 Berkshire Bird Report. Entry is free for ROC members and only £3 for visitors. Further details and directions can be obtained from Ray Reedman now or watch the ROC website, [www.theroc.org.uk](http://www.theroc.org.uk). We look forward to seeing as many of you as possible on this special occasion.

### Kingfishers in Berkshire 2005

The ROC and Newbury District Ornithological Club are carrying out a survey of Kingfishers in Berkshire in 2005, inviting sightings from all birdwatchers or anyone able to identify the birds in the period from 1 January to 31 July. As you know this is an easy bird to identify, not only does it call loudly when it's flying but it also is so brightly coloured it can't be mistaken for anything else. Posters have been in the hides at Moor Green Lakes publicising this survey and we are keen to know of all sightings. If you have seen a Kingfisher at Moor Green or anywhere else in Berkshire, please simply note the date, the number of birds and the location and send the details to Chris Robinson, 2 Beckfords, Upper Basildon, Reading, RG8 8PB. Thank you.



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## The Big Pull

In July the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership are working together with countryside teams and volunteers to highlight the threat posed by the Pink Peril – Himalayan Balsam (see pictures below) and to begin to do something about it.

Himalayan Balsam is an alien species in the UK and very invasive. Introduced in the 19th Century it can be found along river banks and in areas of damp ground. It loves the rich moist soil found there and can grow in full sun or heavy shade. It grows taller and faster than native riverside plants forming dense stands so our native grasses and other plants simply cannot compete and so disappear. Being an annual the plant dies back in Autumn, leaving river banks exposed and prone to erosion.

Himalayan Balsam has serrated, lance-shaped leaves on purplish-red stems which can grow up to six feet high (2m). It flowers July to September, when it bears bright pink, slipper-shaped flowers each of which develops a seed pod containing up to 800 seeds. The pods explode when ripe, scattering seeds over a large area. Because these seeds then get transported downstream they can rapidly colonise new areas.

Himalayan Balsam is common throughout the Blackwater Valley area. It is tempting to think that it provides a welcome splash of colour, however it is a real danger to native plants and to the stability of river banks. Getting rid of individual plants is easy. They can be pulled out by hand with little effort or cut low to the ground in which case they won't re-grow.

If you would like more information please contact Sue Dent at Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership on 01252 331353.



## **Barn Owls on the Increase in Wokingham and Finchampstead**

This is the third year of monitoring the 13 custom-built barn owl nest boxes installed by Wokingham District Council Countryside Service. Last year was an awful year for barn owls nationally, and only 2 chicks were recorded in Wokingham District. However this year the population has bounced back and a bumper 18 chicks were found during recent monitoring. One nest box in Swallowfield contained 7 chicks. Colin Shawyer of the Barn Owl Conservation Network commented "This is the largest known clutch of barn owl chicks anywhere in the country this year".

Barn owl pairs bond for life and are remarkably faithful to their nest sites, the same pair is likely to return to the same box for years to come. Andy Glencross, Wokingham Biodiversity Officer said, "Barn owls nest sites are hard to come by in an area where many barns have been converted into houses, so it's extremely gratifying to know that practical action by the project partners has caused a really significant increase in local population. We are hopeful that if the weather holds some pairs may even have a second brood".

Building on this success Wokingham District Council has secured funding from RMC, Reading Ornithological Club and the Environment Agency for 6 further boxes to be installed, including at Finchampstead. Since the first boxes were put in 3 years ago 27 barn owls have been raised, so with the extra boxes it is hoped this total will grow and grow and that barn owls will become a common site throughout Wokingham.

## **Pillwort – Moor Green Lakes star, or maybe its dullest plant!**



On the scrape at Grove lake is a small, fern like plant called Pillwort or *Pilularia globulifera*. The plant grows to about 15cm in height and grows from rhizomes, it resembles green hair, curling at the tip when young. The rhizome has hard pill-like swellings which give the plant its English name.

This plant has been carefully protected as work on the scrape at Grove Lake has been carried out, although it's interesting to note that it needs regular disturbance to survive and it particularly likes changing water levels. Pillwort is a plant of pond and lake edges where it favours neutral or slightly acid sedimentary type soils and can sometimes be happy submerged. The plant is threatened generally by the excessive use of herbicides and nitrate and phosphate run-off polluting the water bodies holding the plants.

A true fern, the plant reproduces by its spores found in hard capsules that can survive for many years but open when swollen with water releasing megaspores, which are fertilised by the microspores which are also released.

The status of Pillwort in the UK is now supported by the UK BAP with an action plan in place. It has declined by over two thirds when measured by presence or absence in 10k squares over the last century until 1970. It is vulnerable in Europe and has the same classification in the UK. The action plan aims to stabilise and enhance the population, achieving natural colonisation of suitable sites, re-establishing the plant at former sites and undertake various studies.

Moor Green Lakes is proud to have this important plant amongst its residents and we will continue to look after it in future years. Sadly, it is not a showpiece plant and so, if you are sitting in the hide at Grove Lake one day hoping to see a beautiful plant growing on the scrape, think again and look for a straggly fern like plant as boring as you can imagine!

Colin Wilson

## **Whiskered Tern at Moor Green – 21<sup>st</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> May**

*by Bruce Archer*

A Whiskered Tern arrived at Moor Green on Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> May causing quite a bit of interest among local birdwatchers. It was a first for Berkshire as well as a first for Moor Green. The Whiskered Tern is a member of the marsh tern group, which are fresh-water terns that breed around rivers, lakes and marshes. Whiskered Terns breed locally across France, Spain and the rest of southern Europe. One or two arrive in Britain annually as they overshoot on their spring migration from Africa, where most of them spend the winter.



Whiskered Terns have a black cap and white cheeks like the Common Terns that breed at Moor Green, but the body is darker grey, and most noticeably almost black beneath with a short white tail. They are smaller than Common Tern and do not have the bouncy flight of the Common Tern. These were the characteristics that enabled me to identify it in the early dawn light at 04:50 on that Saturday morning. At this point I should explain that I am not normally at Moor Green that early, but I was expecting a Whiskered Tern to be there.

A Whiskered Tern was reported at Tundry Pond in Hampshire at 15:45 on the 20<sup>th</sup> May. Tundry Pond is about 3 miles SW of Fleet Pond where a Whiskered Tern turned up that evening and was then seen leaving at 21:06 by John Clark, heading north in the company of 3 Common Terns. Moor Green is less than 5 miles north of Fleet Pond and from my observations there is a strong correlation in the numbers and dates of Common Terns arriving at the two sites in the spring. Some of the 50+ Common Terns breeding and roosting at Moor Green must feed at Fleet Pond, as well as several other lakes in the general area. Hence there was a strong possibility that the same Whiskered Tern would roost at Moor Green that evening. I am indebted to John for putting out prompt information of the sightings via the Hampshire Ornithological Society email group. By the time I arrived at Moor Green on that Saturday morning many of the Common Terns and Black-headed Gulls were leaving Tern Island where they spend the night in safety, and heading off to find breakfast. I soon spotted a darker tern on the NW corner of the island a bit apart from the remaining Common Terns. It took off and flew around the lake, enabling me to identify it as the Whiskered Tern. After making a couple of calls to people who I knew would not mind being woken up and texting some others, it was light enough to see that someone was in the hide. It turned out to be John Clark who had arrived before I did, and had also seen the Whiskered Tern.

The Tern remained until 06:15 when it was seen flying off north, much to the disappointment to birdwatchers still arriving. Ian Brown (the Moor Green bird recorder) who had set out as soon as he read my text message, found it on Horseshoe Lake for 10 minutes at 07:10. It returned to Moor Green early that evening and was seen on and off until dusk when it settled on the island for the night. It remained until 08:30 Sunday morning and was seen again on Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> and in the evening of Friday 27<sup>th</sup> May. During the week it was seen at Staines reservoir in Surrey - it could be identified as the same bird because of a missing tail feather. I believe there were 5 other Whiskered Terns in Britain during this period, one at the Cotswold Water Park in Gloucestershire and 4 together in the Midlands. Is this another sign of global warming?

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

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