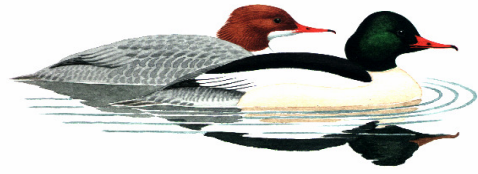


MOOR GREEN LAKES GROUP NEWSLETTER



January 2006

Happy New Year to all our members!

We hope you enjoyed and used your membership in 2005 and visited our excellent reserve. As you know, the wildlife sightings of our members and visitors are compiled in the Moor Green Lakes annual report, which you all receive as part of your membership benefits, so please do make sure your records are noted in the hides or send them to the recorders mentioned in this newsletter. A message from Ian White, our new Mammal Recorder, is on page 5.

Our Group goes from strength to strength, see Bruce Archer's articles on our finances later, but as with all voluntary organisations it relies on members offering their time to help it succeed. This time we have a vacancy to fill for a new Membership Secretary as our current incumbent, having served a second stint (can't be that bad can it?), has to give up his post because he's going to live elsewhere for much of each year! We are very grateful to Brendan for his work and offer every good wish for the future, but of course we need to replace him. If you have a little time to spare, please consider helping us out. Further details of the role can be found on page 6.

Those using the reserve will have noticed the work that has been keeping it in excellent order recently and we owe our thanks to the volunteers who give up their time to undertake this. The SEEDA grant has also been spent and benefits are flowing from that – details of this grant were in previous newsletters. Water levels are under better control now aided by the sluices but not without problems! See Peter Scott's report on page 8. We can also see some real progress on the Manor Farm site with some interesting habitats developing - there is still much work to do but judging by the numbers of Lapwing there on my last visit the birds are already talking to it like ducks to water, or is it like waders to mud? Barn Owls have started using at least one of the owl boxes so investment in the reserve is paying off. More about Barn Owls is on page 3.

Finally, please note the article about bird surveys on Page 4 and you will see, following a successful Kingfisher survey in 2005, Berkshire bird clubs are undertaking a new survey in 2006 on Buzzards and Red Kites – both of these are now seen at our reserve so please take part.

Best wishes for 2006 to you all from your Committee!

Colin Wilson, Editor
1 January 2006

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

Colin Wilson, Editor, Blakeney, St Catherine's Road, Frimley Green, Camberley, Surrey, GU16 9NP
Tel 01252 837411, Email colin.wilson@theroc.org.uk

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Egyptian Geese in the Moor Green Lakes area

Not quite on the reserve but on Horseshoe Lake, by the sailing club, a pair of Egyptian Geese proudly presented seven tiny chicks to the world at the beginning of October! This is not a normal date as you'll already realise and it is a most unusual occurrence according to the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. The young surprisingly survived the very cold spell at the beginning of December and six of them were still seen with their parents in exactly the same place shortly before Christmas. Considering these geese are supposed to be 'not well adapted' to British weather and have low breeding success (est 1.06 young per pair)* this is a remarkable record. Bruce Archer informs me two broods were hatched at Moor Green this year but only two young survived due mainly to fox predation. However, large numbers of them are now turning up at Moor Green, up to 65 in October this year and they are now spreading firmly along the Blackwater Valley my own records covering sightings from Swallowfield to Frimley. Bruce tells me they first bred at Horseshoe island in March 2004 - this confirms them as another introduced species that is adapting very well to British conditions, perhaps they may even compete with Canada Geese in due time – not that we would necessarily welcome that!

Colin Wilson

**Birds in England' A Brown and P Grice 2005*

Moor Green Lakes Group Finances

A while ago Simon Weeks (MGLG Site Liaison Officer) was approached by a new member of the Group, concerned that there had been a mistake with their membership – they had just received the annual report and thought that such a comprehensive and well produced document could not possibly be provided for a membership fee of just £3. In a way they were correct.

The Group benefits from the support of CEMEX, the site owners, with administrative help such as reproducing the newsletters and annual report. Also, the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership (BVCP) provides considerable help with the conservation activities by supplying the supervision, tools, equipment and vehicles that enables volunteers to carry out the work. (The Group does pay for the insurance necessary for conservation activities.)

In the year to 31 August 2005, the Group income was £1,906.78 of which £407.50 came from donations which some of the 619 members included with their annual membership applications. This is £100 more than received in donations the previous year. The Group does not actively solicit donations, but they are very welcome and provide extra money to help fund improvements to facilities of the reserve. The main items purchased from donations last year, were 12 new "woodcrete" bird nest boxes, rings for tagging birds, bird feeders and bird food.

This year, the Group plans to get some more bird nest boxes for the new workings and some small mammal traps so Ian White (our Mammal Recorder) can monitor the population of mammals on the reserve.

The recent provision of Barn Owl boxes and the Bird Feeding Station have both been funded from Grants totalling £1,500; of which £600 came from CEMEX.

There are plenty of ideas for further improvements, and with the expansion of the reserve in the next few years once extraction on the Manor Farm site is finished, there will be scope to do even more – and spend more.

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Thanks to the expanding membership, the Group's reserves increased by £682.81 last year. The Committee has decided to continue the modest level of the membership fees (£3 for single membership and £5 for family membership) which more than covers all the Group administration costs. We shall continue to implement practical improvements and seek alternative funding for these where possible. And, of course, your donations are greatly appreciated.

Bruce Archer – Hon. Treasurer

Barn Owls have Arrived

This time last year I wrote a piece for the new letter confidently saying that two Barn Owl boxes would be installed at Moor Green early in 2005. They were eventually installed on the 6 October. This was mainly because Colin Shawyer, the expert from the Barn Owl Conservation Network, was tied up monitoring Owl breeding, which began in February, more than a month earlier than usual. It appears to have been a very successful breeding season for Barn Owls generally with plentiful prey available.

The two boxes that have been installed at Moor Green are north east of Colebrook Lake and along the northern edge of the Manor Farm (new workings) site. Each box resembles a small dog kennel on a 4 meter telegraph pole. There is a south facing entrance to the main box for Barn Owls and a separate space in the apex of the roof that may be used by Owls or other birds. The installation was not entirely without incident, when the vehicles disturbed a wasp's nest along the north of Colebrook Lake. David Piper from CEMEX, who was following, was severely attacked by the irate insects and stung several times.

On the 25 October I was thrilled to receive a call from Martin Lenny to say that he had seen a Barn Owl flying around the Manor Farm box early that morning. I subsequently made a number of dawn and dusk observations and confirmed that a Barn Owl was roosting in the box on the 27, 28 and 29 October. It is likely to be a young bird dispersing from its breeding area, looking for a new home. The Owl has been seen several times since then, either entering or leaving the box at dawn and dusk and hunting on the surrounding grassland. It can occasionally be seen in daylight peering out of the entrance of the box.

On the evening of 8 November, a Kestrel was seen entering the top section of the Colebrook box. It seems to have taken up residence and is often seen sitting on the roof of the box. Buzzard and Little Owl has also been reported sitting on top of the boxes.

2005 was a good year for Owls generally at Moor Green. In April a Short-eared Owl was seen hunting on the open areas of the Manor Farm site on two occasions, which is the first site record since 1988. Tawny Owls and Little Owls were often to be heard and seen along Lower Sandhurst Road. In the autumn a Little Owl was often seen dozing in the lower branches of the old willow tree on the boundary of the reserve and the paddock south of the car park.

The Group is indebted to CEMEX (formally RMC) and the Reading Ornithological Club for the funding of the two Barn Owl boxes. The purchase and installation was organized by Wokingham District Council.

Bruce Archer

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Bird Feeding Station

Last winter (2004/05) Robert Godden installed and maintained some bird feeders on the reserve at both ends of Grove lake. These were very busy and attracted a good variety of birds. This winter the Group has installed a ground feeder to appeal to a wider range of birds.

The feeder consists of a 2.4 meter square of reclaimed paving slabs (thanks to Hilary Nash) laid over a weed-proof membrane. This is surrounded by a channel to contain seed which falls off the edge of the feeding area. Wood rails surround the feeder to provide perching and may be needed to support a wire netting to discourage Geese.

The location of the feeder on the small paddock just by Colebrook hide is not ideal, but is the best we could find away from the cattle. The feeder is close to cover so that small birds able to escape from the local Sparrowhawk, but is perhaps, a bit too close to the path.

Mixed seed is provided on the feeder, and the hanging feeders have been installed in the trees near by. The food is topped up every few days and the feeder cleaned and scrubbed down with disinfectant every month.

By December I had seen Blue Tit, Great Tit, Robin, Dunnock, Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Brambling, Jay, Magpie, Crow and Pheasant using the ground feeder.

The cost of materials and food for the feeding station has been funded by a grant from the Theale Area Bird Conservation Group (TABCG) bird race fund. Each year the TABCG organizes a bird race within Berkshire, for which teams obtain sponsorship to raise funds for local conservation projects. Details of the bird race can be found at <http://berksbirds.co.uk/birdracing.asp>.

Bruce Archer

Special bird surveys in Berkshire

Many thanks to those of you who provided records of Kingfishers for the survey carried out by the Reading Ornithological Club and Newbury and District Ornithological Society in 2005. These records have now been assessed and interpreted and a paper with full details and maps will be on www.theroc.org.uk by the time this Newsletter reaches you. If anyone would like a paper copy, please send a cheque for £1, payable to ROC, to Colin Wilson at the address at the end of page 1.

In 2006 it has been decided to undertake similar surveys of Red Kites and Buzzards in Berkshire and your records are very welcome. Buzzard is now one of the most often reported birds in Berkshire, but please don't think that means we don't want to know when you have seen them. All records help. The Red Kite has made a few appearances at Moor Green Lakes and in the area and again we need to understand its spread better for 2006. We will put forms in the hides for records, but please pick up one of the blue ROC leaflets and you should find a form inside you can take home, fill in each time you see these birds and send to us at the end of the survey. All contributors get a free copy of the results once they have been analysed.

Colin Wilson



Mammals at Moor Green

This is my first report as the new mammal recorder for Moor Green Lakes. I would like to give you a brief summary of the mammals that we know are in the reserve, what I would like to do with the records that we have, and what I plan to do in the future.

I collected past records from Katrina and have acquired some more from other sources. These date back to July 2002 and terminate in April 2004. Unsurprisingly they are generally records of our larger mammals; predominantly Roe deer and foxes, but quite a few weasels were recorded as well. Rabbits and Grey squirrels show occasionally, but with these two common species it is quite likely that they are being under-recorded. In due course I would like to build up a picture of the mammal sightings at Moor Green Lakes by entering the records onto Mapmate.

I assisted Dave Williams of Surrey Wildlife Trust on a Mammal Survey at Moor Green Lakes conducted between August 2004 and April 2005. The survey comprised a walkover of the site and a number of trapping sessions. Roe deer, foxes, rabbits and grey squirrels were seen during the course of the survey and field signs for Moles, a Brown rat and a Badger were identified. There were 310 traps set over nine trapping sessions and these yielded 78 animals; a success rate of 25%. Predominantly the species caught were Wood mice (70), but Bank voles (4), Common shrews (3) and Pygmy shrew (1) were also captured. It was surprising, given the area of grazed grassland on the reserve, that we did not trap any Field voles.

In the Spring I would like to run trapping sessions at 2 different areas on the reserve, each over 3 days. This means that the traps can be pre-baited and so have a greater chance of success. The survey could then be repeated in future years and may be able to identify local changes in the small mammal populations.

A new mammal records form has been sited in both of the hides on the reserve. This form has been adapted from one designed by the Hampshire Mammal Group – of which I am a member. It has been suggested that it may be complicated to fill in. The idea of the form was to be easy to complete, but comprehensive. We wanted to try and ascertain an individual's ability of mammal identification. Next time you see something that is four-legged and furry on the reserve, give it a go – any comments would be appreciated.

Ian White: IWhite2000@aol.com

It's good to walk!

We all know walking is good for us, but too often we need an incentive to get out in the fresh air. So what could be more enticing than a colourful booklet, complete with fascinating heritage details and wildlife snippets, comprising 12 circular walks passing through an ever-changing landscape?

Blackwater Valley Circular Walks is a full-colour, 56-page booklet produced by the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership (BVCP) designed to introduce people to some of the stories, events, characters, history and wildlife of the area, whilst showing them the many nature reserves, country parks, woodlands and meadows found in and around the Valley. All of the walks take in a section of the 23-mile long Blackwater Valley Path, which runs the length of the Valley, offering walkers plenty of different routes to choose from as well as walks of varying distance.



Blackwater Valley Circular Walks, costs £3.50 plus 50p+p. It is part of the 'Discover the Blackwater Valley Path' project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership produces three other booklets: Blackwater Valley Butterflies, Blackwater Valley Dragonflies and Blackwater Valley Path costing £3 each including p+p. They are all available from the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership (LG), Ash Lock Cottage, Government Road, Aldershot GU11 2PS. Please make cheques payable to Blackwater Valley Countryside. For more details visit the website: www.blackwater-valley.org.uk

Membership Secretary Vacancy.

As mentioned by the Editor, a new secretary is needed. The new secretary needs to be reasonably computer literate, own or have access to 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.
- 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 Brendan McCartney (phone 0118 9732393 email berksbirds@aol.com)

Phytophthora disease of alder

A survey carried out this autumn indicates that alders in the Blackwater Valley are beginning to show signs of a Phytophthora disease. This is a new disease for the UK. First recognised in England in 1993, it is now widespread on many river systems in southern England and Wales. It is caused by a fungus, or to be precise by a group of *Phytophthora* species that were almost certainly introduced to this country by the plant trade.

What does it look like?

Diseased alders are easiest to spot in mid to late summer: their leaves are small, yellow and sparse and the crowns stand out against their healthy neighbours. In severe cases the stem is often marked with black or rusty coloured patches anything up to 3m above ground level. The disease can take a long time to develop and some trees live with the infection and occasionally seem to recover.

How does it spread?

The disease is almost certainly spread through water and so moves easily through river systems. It is less frequent in trees that are 1-10m away from the water's edge. The progress of the disease seems to vary considerably. In some plots that the Forestry Commission has studied the disease has spread rapidly and eventually killed all the trees. In others disease levels have remained static for up to 10 years.

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What can be done about it?

The Forestry Commission advises that the disease cannot be eliminated once it is present on a site. They are researching two main ways of tackling the disease: coppicing and the use of resistant strains of alder. Coppicing encourages the regeneration of new growth and diseased, and even occasionally apparently dead, trees will produce vigorous new growth. Studies over an 8-year period show that much of this growth remains healthy, although far fewer shoots regenerate from the stumps of diseased trees than healthy trees. Nonetheless this may provide a way of maintaining the presence of alder on site, although its long term viability remains to be tested.

To date studies on the various strains of alder in Europe have not found any that are particularly resistant to the disease.

When managing sites and planting up new areas good practice should include:

- Check the provenance of new stock carefully to ensure that it is disease free. In disease free areas, where possible use natural regeneration.
- On riverside sites prone to flooding, where disease is likely to occur, plant a mix of flood-tolerant species.

What about Moor Green?

The autumn survey suggests that Phytophthora disease may be present at Moor Green. Certainly some of the lakeside alder to the north of Grove Lake are showing the signs of sparse and sickly growth. These trees are managed on a coppice cycle so it may be that no change in management is needed to maintain them. In the same area there is a row of more mature alder planted about 10m back from the lake which at present are not showing any signs of disease. These trees require little management, but in future, when working in the area, we will take care not to move brush and material from the lakeside alders over to the larger trees. If they do start to show signs of disease it may be necessary to start a coppice regime here as well. The row of mature alder is a significant feature of the reserve and we will also consider starting to plant in some other species to lessen the impact of alder losses.

In the Blackwater Valley

It is likely that Phytophthora disease of alder is present at several sites in the Valley. Early indications are that young trees are being worst affected, or are showing the worst symptoms. BVCP will be continuing to monitor sites in the Valley in order to track the progress of the disease. Sites where alder is a particularly important wildlife or landscape feature will be a priority for future management. Although there is no 'cure' for the disease it appears to develop slowly, and does not kill all the trees which it infects, so there should be time to adapt site management to lessen its impact.

Further information is available on the Forestry Commission, Forest Research website (with some digging).

Sue Dent
Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership
Countryside & Access Officer

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Work Party progress

This season's work parties have been continuing the usual cycle of site maintenance. The turnout on Sundays has been a little lower than in recent years, but the Tuesday work groups have, on occasion, almost exceeded the tools available. This has led to some rescheduling of work, with some obviously 'big' jobs, initially intended for Sundays, shifted to Tuesdays and *vice versa*.

Some jobs seem to become easier with the passage of time and clearance of vegetation from Tern Island, to create a bare shingle surface suitable for the eponymous birds, was a little less back-breaking this year. This may be due to the perennial weeds (bramble, willowherb) becoming less tenacious as we 'hit' them year after year, and being replaced by more shallowly-rooted annuals. It's encouraging when our efforts have obvious effects quite quickly.

Contrarily, the bramble on Plover Island seems to have become denser, probably because we haven't cleared the *whole* island in most previous years so plants have become firmly established. A plan to spray the bramble was foiled by wet weather, so will have to be attempted another year. This island hasn't proved as attractive to nesting birds anyway, probably because its proximity to the 'mainland' makes them more vulnerable to predation than on Tern Island, but we still try to clear as much vegetation as possible in the hope that birds will come to like it.

Maintaining the varied habitats on Long Island is a much bigger job and it is clear that we haven't kept up with the need. The new pontoon bridge has enabled us to get people to and from that island more quickly this year and, in particular, to get the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership's motor scythe across. This made the mowing of the island's grassed areas much easier, so we can be hopeful of preventing further spread of bramble. The scrapes around the island had become virtually useless to wading birds. Whereas the large scrape in front of Colebrook hide was renovated last winter with the aid of a JCB, those on Long Island have to be tackled manually. One work party had a go at this and one scrape is improved, but many more hours of work will be needed before a substantial improvement to this habitat is achieved.

Rotational coppicing of the woodland around the southern perimeter of the reserve may have to be cut back this year. It is proving rather expensive to have contractors cut the number of 'slots' in our ongoing programme. Therefore, volunteer work parties may tackle some of them, but it is slow work if only one person present has a chainsaw. The slow regrowth on sections cut in the last two years indicates that we also need to spend effort protecting the stumps from browsing animals: the objective is to create varied habitats, with vegetation at a mix of heights, *not* just to open up views of the lake.

Elsewhere, we have tackled the usual jobs of keeping bramble patches to a reasonable size (to stop them taking over the meadow areas) and cutting shrubs around the lake edges so that grazing wildfowl have easy access to the grassland. Removal of vegetation from the restored scrapes close to the two hides has taken on a higher priority than in past years. The hope is that, with a modest amount of annual work, these scrapes can be prevented from getting into the state they were in before the JCB did its job.

On a separate but related topic, it will be obvious to regular site visitors that the new facilities for controlling the lake water level aren't working. The problem is simple: the outlet pipe in the southwest corner of Colebrook Lake becomes blocked rather easily. The solution is more difficult, as the blockage tends to become firmly jammed against a 'lip' about halfway along the pipe – a fault in the initial design. A mesh over the inlet at the lake end should prevent some material entering, but there may be an ongoing need for occasional clearance of the pipe.

Peter Scott

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