

MOOR GREEN LAKES GROUP NEWSLETTER



July 2006

A warm summer's messages!

As I sit in my study compiling this Newsletter the sun is beating down and while I would like to go for a walk in the sun it really is a bit too hot! Maybe by the time you receive this the hot weather will have passed and some much needed rain will have fallen but as I see it now, the water supplies are still dwindling and the River Blackwater is shrinking to a trickle! Rarely do we want rain but just now we really need it and plenty of it!

The Newsletter this time comes with your Annual report and invitation to rejoin the Group. We hope to receive your renewal soon and our new Membership Secretary, Keith Littler, who introduces himself later, will deal with them as quickly as he can. We have received a number of donations with your past subscriptions and these are very welcome and are put to good use as explained in our last Newsletter, we thank those members able to help the group in this way.

We are surrounded by different groups of people with common interests and this time we are featuring the Crowthorne Natural History Group with highlights of their current programme. Other local groups are also keen to attract new members include the Camberley Natural History Society who meet on the first Thursday of every month except August. For further details see <http://www.lightwatervillage.co.uk/CNHS.htm>, or if you don't have a computer you will find more details in local libraries or you can ring Bernard Baverstock, Chairman on 01276 22574. Coincidentally, Crowthorne Natural History Group is 40 years old next year, the Camberley Natural History Society is 60 years old this year and this coming season sees the 60 years milestone for the Reading Ornithological Club! The ROC will be adding a special event to its programme to celebrate this anniversary during the winter, and they have also produced a lovely calendar for 2007 adorned with Gordon Langbury's superb photos of birds found in Berkshire for just £6. Details from me or see an example on <http://www.theroc.org.uk/>

Two long term members of our Group have had a clear out at home and have presented me with copies of all the Moor Green Lakes Group Annual reports from the first in 1994 and up to the 11th in 2003-04. If you are a new member or you would like to have a complete set of these superb publications with such a detailed history of Moor Green Lakes Reserve and its wildlife, you are welcome to have them in return for whatever donation you wish to make to the group. Please contact me by 30 September and the best offer will win them!

Colin Wilson, Editor
1 August 2006

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

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Tel 01252 837411, Email colin.wilson@theroc.org.uk

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Sand Martin's Nests Saved

By Bruce Archer

On the morning of 15th May I noticed that Sand Martins were entering a hole in the side of the large gravel heap on the new workings. Sand Martins excavate horizontal holes in sandy cliffs to nest in and they had obviously taken advantage of the gravel heap to provide a nest site. This heap had been stockpiled in the autumn to be conveyed to the processing plant as required. There was a group of four holes close to the end of the heap from which gravel was being removed and these were obviously at risk of being demolished. I contacted Simon Weeks, the Moor Green Lakes Group Site Liaison Officer, who spoke to CEMEX, the operators of the quarry. Immediate action was taken by CEMEX to cordon off the area below the nest to prevent further digging there, and also to prevent vehicles working above the nest holes. Gravel removal was switched to the other end of the heap away from the nest site. This was done by the end of the day, and shows commendable reaction to the situation.

Sand Martins are trans-Saharan migrants and arrive in Britain from West Africa during March and April. They are a protected species and are of conservation concern. The population appears to be stabilizing after recovering from large reductions in 1968 and 1984 caused by droughts in their wintering areas of West Africa, when 90% of the UK population disappeared.

The initial activity around the nest holes seemed to reduce, indicating that they may be incubation in progress. While seven nest holes had been dug and Sand Martins remained present in the area, no proof of breeding could be established by early July as I write this.

The Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust

By Colin Wilson

This year sees the public launch of this new Trust, a charity which has as its main aim the conservation, protection and improvement of all we like about the Blackwater Valley. One of the main tasks of the Trust will be to raise funds for projects aimed at improving the environment and enabling use of the Valley by wildlife lovers and others who just enjoy walking or cycling (in appropriate places of course!) If successful, the Trust will be able to apply for grants and funds for exciting new projects that it has not been possible to put in place in the past.

The Trust launches with a free presentation about the wildlife to be found in our Valley by local experts on 20 September at Sandhurst Memorial Hall, doors will open at 19.30 for a 20.00 start. If you would like to know about the flowers, the mammals and the birds to name but a few come along to the evening and see what the Trust is all about. We expect a really interesting show, with a tea break, and it will finish in time for everybody to be away by 22.00 at the latest.

Watch out for more news about the Trust and the launch in your local area and we hope many of you will want to join and help us improve our Valley even more. Hopefully there will be more interesting events and activities available for everybody to enjoy and the Trust will work together with the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership to keep you all informed of what is happening in your Valley.

Please put our free show 'The Blackwater Valley – your wildlife oasis' at Sandhurst Memorial Hall, 7.30 for 8pm on 20 September, in your diary now and come and see what you have on your very own doorstep!

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A Disastrous year for breeding Terns and Gulls

By Bruce Archer

The return of Common Terns and Black-headed Gulls to nest on 'Tern Island' is part of the calendar of events at Moor Green. By the middle of February the Gulls began to set up territories and on 26 February I noted courtship displays. By this time the adults are in breeding plumage. On 31 March the first Common Terns arrived from West Africa where they spend the winter. As nesting got underway it looked as if we had record numbers of nests: around 30 Tern nests and 180 Black-headed Gull nests. Up to 90 Common Terns were recorded and 450 Gulls, which will include non-breeding and passing birds. This is a spectacular sight and sound.

The spring weather was cold and wet but by 23 May I noted the first young Gulls – they hatch before the Terns which had been relegated to an area outside the fence which encloses part of the island. It was 20 June before I saw a baby tern, which was several days old by then. Unfortunately this is the only one I saw, it seems that the cold weather had had a bigger impact on the Terns than the gulls, because up to 100 young gulls were evident by this time.

A visit on the 24 June showed that something serious had happened on the island - there were no Terns to be seen and I could see at least 8 dead adult birds. By the 27 June all the Gulls had left as well, including about 100 young that had been able to fly.

We suppose that Mink were to blame, one was seen in the ditch behind the hide a few weeks before. Mink are notorious killers and will kill far more than they need for food. It looks as if, after clearing all the birds outside the fence, they got inside and killed all the Gulls that could not escape.

The Group will do what it can to trap Mink in the area – any sightings of Mink should be reported on the mammal recording sheets in the hides, or to the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership on 01252 331353.

Moor Green Lakes work parties

By Peter Scott

The maintenance season gets under way once more in September. The first scheduled task will be on Sunday 10th. It will involve some mixture of: (a) mowing and raking the meadow next to Colebrook hide; (b) building a fence in the north-west corner of Colebrook Lake North to protect a section of the lake edge from trampling by cattle (which are due on site shortly); (c) removing vegetation that has grown on the 'bund' of Colebrook scrape over the last year.

How much of this we can accomplish obviously depends on how many people turn out. If you think you might be able to help (on this or future work groups) and are not already among our regular work party members, please contact either Simon Weeks (01189 730199) or Peter Scott (01252 878205), or simply turn up on the day – from 10.30am.

Checking nest boxes

Do you have time to help check the nest boxes on the Reserve? With the departure of Kevin Briggs we need help to do some monitoring of the nest boxes which gives a chance to see the reserve from a different angle! Contact Peter Scott if you want to know more on ppscott@aol.com



Reed planting at Manor Farm

By Peter Scott

Restoration plans for the Manor Farm gravel workings, just to the west of Moor Green, include the creation of a sizeable reed bed. As a preliminary to this, we have long intended to mount a trial of planting methods, to get some idea of what works best before committing a lot of time and effort to planting a large area. Steve Farmer made some progress on this a few years ago, planting seed obtained from a variety of sources: the small reed bed outside Grove hide is a product of Steve's efforts. However, we wished to extend this by trying stem cuttings and rhizomes.

At last, this spring, the opportunity arose to plant some reeds around the margin of the lake that has appeared in the south-east corner of the Manor Farm site. This lake, with a marginal reed bed, is to be a permanent feature of the site so, as well as forming a trial, the planting (if successful) would contribute to the restoration itself.

A work party in late May planted reed stem cuttings obtained from Lakeside Park near Ash Lock and rhizomes from the scrape beside Grove hide. A (roughly) 50-metre section of lakeside was used. To provide some protection from grazing wildfowl, which have been known to devastate new planting in some places, a double line of netlon fencing was first installed. The cuttings and rhizomes were then planted within the one-metre gap between the fence lines. [Apparently geese are reluctant to walk into such an enclosed space, so this should be sufficient protection]. A few were also planted beyond the ends of the fence, to see whether they could survive unprotected.

Five weeks on, the results look quite promising. Virtually all the rhizomes, regardless of whether they were left in clumps or were broken up into individual plants before planting, have become established and are growing vigorously. Those outside the fence line have survived, too. Many of the stem cuttings have also produced new shoots, though naturally this has taken longer as they have first had to put down roots. It appears that the 'take' could be about 10-20 per cent of the cuttings planted. Clearly this is way below the proportion of rhizomes that are successful, but, given the much smaller effort needed to obtain and plant them, it is a practicable method. On the other hand, they are more susceptible to grazing, so comparisons must allow for the effort of installing fencing.

About half of the main reed bed area has been restored to its target level and is currently being 'shaped' to create open channels and pools among the reeds (when they eventually appear). Although the area will not be formally 'flooded' for quite some time, parts already appear to be quite wet. Therefore it may be possible to make some initial plantings fairly soon. Advice from managers of other reed beds indicates that the best approach to planting a large area may be to do it 'piecemeal', planting in patches and then relying on the natural spread of the plants (they put out runners) to fill in the gaps. But whatever we do next, we have at last made a start.

Extension of gravel workings at Finchampstead

Many of you will know CEMEX is planning to apply for permission to extract gravel from land west of Longwater Road. They say the extraction is only economically viable if the existing plant at Eversley is used so the gravel would cross the Longwater Road by conveyor belt and all lorry traffic flows would remain as now. Inevitably there will be local views from different perspectives but CEMEX have outlined several options for the reinstatement of the land as a further nature reserve area. The reserve would have a mix of habitats similar to those in Moor Green Lakes and the proposed Manor Farm reinstatement, which, incidentally, may be delayed by this additional extraction. If you wish to know more please contact Ian Southcott, CEMEX UK Materials, CEMEX House, Rugby, Warwickshire, CV21 2DT or ian.southcott@cemex.co.uk

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Mammal Trapping at Moor Green Lakes

By Ian White

I conducted a small mammal survey of the reserve last year with Dave Williams of Surrey Wildlife Trust and I wanted to do some additional trapping in areas we hadn't managed to survey. Furthermore last year all our trap sessions had been for one night only; I wanted to see if leaving the traps for longer yielded any additional information. I was keen to complete the trapping before April as mammals will begin breeding in Spring. Any young left in nests may be unable to survive their Mother's absence for longer than a few hours. This is certainly true of shrews which require food at least every four hours.

I set 40 traps at two locations: the West Bank of Grove Lake and the North West Corner of the same lake (pictured below). The traps were set at 10am on Wednesday morning and checked twice a day before being removed on Friday morning.



The site on the West bank was relatively open but I thought there may be enough cover to support a small mammal population. I was hopeful that I may even trap field voles that have not been recorded on the site. Traps were placed near dead hedges, log piles, base of trees and grass tussocks. After the 2 days the only success was at the base of a bramble patch where I caught 2 male wood mice. This does perhaps demonstrate the importance of bramble to small mammals and the ability of the plant to provide both cover and food over the winter months.

The site at the North-west corner of Grove Lake is a woodland edge habitat. It is also an area where there is limited disturbance from either people or dogs. Even the BVCP motor scythe has not yet made it this far. Hence there are some good stands of bramble. Trapping at this site was much more successful yielding 6 wood mice after the first night and 7 after the second. Many of these animals were likely to be repeat catches. I also caught a 'trap happy' bank vole at the base of the same bramble patch every time I checked the traps.

After such a small survey it is almost impossible to draw any realistic conclusions, but it would appear that trapping during the day yields limited results and trapping for consecutive day's yields little additional information. It would also seem that for wood mice, bramble is good!

There were some other mammal records I managed to make whilst trapping. On Thursday morning I espied a group of 4 Roe deer on the Blackwater path. As I watched them so they watched me and eventually decided their best escape route was to swim across the swollen river. Having successfully crossed the water and shaken themselves down, they continued watching me from the opposite bank (see picture).



I also saw 3 of the most under-recorded mammals certainly in Hampshire and probably Berkshire and Surrey as well. They were grey squirrels that seemed to be making some use of a bird box (see picture below) for their Spring-time frolics. The common or European mole that I unfortunately didn't see but managed to identify through a field sign. The molehill really is a marvel of nature over physics. How does an animal not much bigger the 140mm long manage to move so much wet earth uphill? It's always such hard work when I dig the garden. Finally rabbits aplenty in the Reserve, which won't come as much surprise but they are rarely recorded.



When I finished and packed up the traps on Friday I had one last job to complete. Sue Dent of BVCP has set up 3 mink rafts in the area to see if there is a local population of these American predators. There has to date been no records at Moor Green Lakes but there have been verbal reports. It appears they may be present on some of the local fishing lakes. If they spread into the Reserve they may need to be controlled not least for the nesting wildfowl but also for water vole. Last year there were 2 records last year for water vole at Moor Green; were they brown rat or water vole? Impossible to tell, the 2 species can easily be confused. It would be exciting news if they were voles and I will be investigating further throughout the year.



Grey Squirrels in bird boxes



Mink trap

Berkshire Red Kite and Buzzard Survey 2006

For those who participated in keeping records for this survey it ended on 31 July so any records you have should now be sent to Mike Turton, 7 Fawcett Avenue, Woodley, Berks, RG5 3HX as soon as possible



Birds of Berkshire 2003

This 130 page report about the status of birds in the county has just been published by the Reading Ornithological Club and apart from data about every species seen in the county in 2003 it contains information about places to go and watch birds, articles on Herons in the County, The Berkshire Bird Index – how birds are faring in Berkshire, Wintering Gulls in the Thames Valley and much, much more. This is the best presented Berkshire Annual Report so far with better quality paper and colour photographs of many of the rarities. It also has a painting of a Bearded Tit by Robert Gillmor on the cover, one of the star birds of 2003, plus some excellent drawings by local artists.

If you would like a copy, you can get it from the Newsletter Editor (see front page for contact details) for £6 plus £1.50 P&P by sending a cheque payable to 'ROC'. The Report is free to members of the ROC – see www.theroc.org.uk or ask the Editor for more information.

Crowthorne Natural History Group

By Colin Wilson

Willie Winter and Sydney Wood co-chair the CNHG, which is approaching 40 years old and has its indoor meetings in the Parish Hall, Heathhill Road, Crowthorne. It has a mixed programme of walks at mainly local venues and talks with some well known local and national speakers. The new programme for 2006/07 started in July. The events in September are eye-catching with a talk by Brian Clews, a well known local naturalist on 'Birding in Lesvos', a spectacular birding location, on Friday 8th at 8pm and a walk in Pamber Forest, a delightful nature reserve at Pamber Heath, on Tuesday 25th meeting at 10.30am at OS 175 SU616622. October brings a talk to prepare you for winter with 'Ultimate Antarctica' by Audrey Olley, Vice President of the Guildford Travel Club, a corporate member of the Scientific Exploration Society, while November may warm you up when you need it with a talk 'Images of Northern India' by Mike Hillman. The year ends with a members Christmas Party on 8 December at 8pm.

Into 2007, January 12th enables Steve Bailey from the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership to educate you about 'Greening the Blackwater Valley' a very interesting topic for local people. February 9th is a good chance to hear Ted Green another well known local naturalist on 'Our Ancient Trees'. Dr Michael Keith-Lewis entertains the Group on March 9th with 'Wildlife of Namibia and South Africa' and on 13th April there will be time to sit back and enjoy 'A Country Life Remembered' by David Smith. A walk for that month will also be arranged and notified later.

In May the AGM takes place on 11th followed by a talk by Alistair Mackay about 'The London Wetland Centre' at Barnes, a true wildlife oasis in London. On 22nd April there will be a walk at Noar Hill, Selborne Arms Country Park meeting at 10.30am at OS 186 472335, chances perhaps to recall Gilbert White's lifetime as an early Naturalist? June 8th is the 40th birthday party for the Group and if the hangover has settled by 22nd join the members on a walk at Old Burghclere Lime Quarry at 10.30am at OS 174 743573.

The Group openly welcomes new members and also invites guests to its events for a modest contribution of £2.50, a bargain for a good evening's entertainment. If you want to know more feel free to call Willie on 01344 776927 or Sydney on 01344 780347 and your enquiries will be welcome.

A message from our new Membership Secretary

By Keith Littler

It was probably almost 30 years ago, when I was 9 years old and the school holidays had just started, that I became interested in birds. I was fascinated by the brown birds flying around the garden and I managed to convince my best friend Ken that we should spend hours on end in my Dads shed watching and counting these House Sparrows and all of the other birds. It did not take us too long to get hooked and the inevitable Christmas list of a pair of binoculars and a copy of the Observer Pocket Book of Birds came next. For the next 10 years we spread our wings and roamed around Merseyside, Lancashire & North Wales in our pursuit of birds. But however far we went we inevitably found ourselves putting in the hours at our local patch just 10 minutes from where we lived in Liverpool. It was a wildlife oasis on the edge of the city and was incredibly rewarding. Who could get fed up of watching 5 or 6 Short Eared Owls in the air at the same time?



Speeding forward 30 years and having my own young family, I inevitably find it hard to cram all of the things that I would like to do into the average week. I had not done any real birding for quite a few years but still found myself stopping and looking wherever I was. I had lived in this area for 16 years but had not heard of Moor Green Lakes. I noticed that my eldest son, who is 9, had started to take an interest in birds so we started Googling and came across the excellent Berkshire Birds website (www.berksbirds.co.uk). From the reports on there I realised that we had a birding oasis on our door step. It took one visit to realise that this was indeed a special place. And it had hides so qualified as a serious birding location in my book. But we could not get in them! We had to join as I wanted my son to get the full benefit from this place.

Just before Christmas last year an advert came onto the BerksBirds web site looking for a Membership Secretary for Moor Green. I thought "here is an opportunity to help out and contribute" so I applied and got the "job". And it is very rewarding. We are currently getting on average two new members a week and the membership figure stood at just over 600 at the end of July (the recent Red Footed Falcon seems to have encouraged quite a few new visitors to apply for membership). The annual membership fee is great value for money and that, and members additional donations, are used to make the reserve an even more attractive area for wildlife and pleasant place for people to visit. So many thanks on behalf of the group for your generosity and support.

As many regular visitors are aware the reserve is in the process of expanding over the next few years with the addition of new workings to the West of the current reserve boundaries. Looking at this area now I cannot help but feel a sense of déjà vu as it looks perfect habitat for Short Eared Owls. There is no better bird to watch and I cannot wait for them to be regular visitors here.

Monitoring the Barn Owl Boxes

By Bruce Archer

On the 14 June, Andy Glencross from Wokingham District Council and two volunteers from the Barn Owl Conservation Network undertook inspection of the Barn Owl boxes installed last October at Moor Green; I tagged along. From my observations, it appeared that a pair of Kestrels had taken over the box on the new workings at the beginning of April, because the regular Barn Owl began to appear in the other Box, north of Colebrook Lake. What we did not know was there were two Barn Owls using this box. One appeared to be a first year bird with darker plumage than the other. There was no sign of breeding as would be expected, because they do not normally breed until they are at least two years old.

The box on the new workings had indeed been taken over by the resident Kestrels and they 3 eggs. The eggs were laid directly on floor of the box which was strewn with the remains of owl pellets. Owls and other carnivorous birds regurgitate the fur, feathers and bones in a wad called a pellet. I collected some of the more complete pellets for Ian White, the MG Mammal Recorder to analyse and identify what the Owls were feeding on. Here's his report!

'Small mammals may be a hard group to survey but, like most things, easier if you can get someone, or something, else to do it for you. Bruce gave me some owl pellets from a site on the new workings earlier in the year to see what they were feeding on. I find the easiest way to get into them is to give them a good long soak in water before teasing them apart and it always amazes me how much material an owl can pack into a pellet. The most common species they were preying on were common shrew *Sorex araneus*. Shrew skulls are easily identifiable by the red-tipped incisors; separating them into species is a bit more difficult. I also found a number of field vole *Microtus agrestis* skulls in the pellets but only one wood mouse *Apodemus sylvatica*. This highlights the apparent different results of different survey techniques. My experience of trapping with Longworth traps on the site had shown an abundance of wood mice but limited signs of other small mammals. However analysis of owl pellets appears to demonstrate an abundance of shrews and field voles and few wood mice. It just goes to show that when you survey, try and use a variety of techniques. Now all I need to do is train the owls to use GPS and we could get some real data!' *Ian White*.

