

MOOR GREEN LAKES GROUP NEWSLETTER



January 2007

A New year, its events and its challenges

Your Committee wish you a very happy New Year and hope to see you around the Reserve helping with the tasks or just enjoying the wildlife and facilities during 2007. Inside this newsletter you will find some information on activities around Moor Green and on wildlife matters which we hope you will find interesting.

We have some dates for your diaries and the events are set out below. Those of you that keep in touch with the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership may already know about some of these. There are all sorts of events going on around the Valley and in our last newsletter we mentioned just a few of the local nature groups and societies anyone can join to learn more about our local wildlife. I urge you to join at least one of these in 2007. Even if you can only help with money (by being a member for example) membership numbers do give each group influence when dealing with businesses and organisations and to fight planning applications that may damage local wildlife sites.

In my role with the Reading Ornithological Club (www.theroc.org.uk) I provide data on bird records for potential developments and the Club also helps to fight some of the more damaging applications. We have managed to gain the very influential support of the RSPB to fight the Kennet Valley Park application by Prudential's consortium which plans to house around 20,000 people south of Reading damaging Wildlife Heritage Sites and other valuable areas, some of which are on the functional floodplain according to the Environment Agency. Our strength comes from our membership which we still need to build to enable us to make a real difference in these instances.

Whatever you do this year, we hope you will enjoy Moor Green Lakes and if you would like to supply an article for possible inclusion in the July newsletter please feel free to send it to me. Last Summer the Newsletter had a few photographs included which reproduced poorly, I apologise for that and this time it is only text, maybe soon we will crack the issue of colour and cost of a better product!

Colin Wilson, Editor

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A few events in early 2007

Wild Bird Photographer of the Year Award - 24th January 2007. David Cromack, the former Editor of "Bird Watching" magazine, presents work from this major competition at Reading Ornithological Club. 8pm at Room 109 Palmer Building, Reading University, Whiteknights Campus. See www.theroc.org.uk

Moor Green Lakes AGM

16 February 2007 at Finchampstead Memorial Hall. See separate notification for details.

Canal Connections A circular walk of about 5 miles exploring the countryside around the Canal at Mytchett. Weds 28th February, 10am - 12.30 pm

Meet at Canal Centre, Mytchett SU 893550. Ring 01252 331353

Countryside Connections A circular walk suitable for keen walkers, 7 miles exploring the countryside south of Aldershot and beyond the A31. Thurs 29th March, 10am - 1.30pm

Meet at Rowhill Field Centre, Cranmore Lane, Aldershot. SU 849499. Ring 01252 331353.

Walk the Path on 12 / 13th May. Keep the weekend free to join the Blackwater Valley Countryside Team on their annual walk covering 23 miles of the Blackwater Valley Path over 2 days. Ring 01252 331353 or keep an eye on our website www.blackwater-valley.org.uk

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Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust

By Colin Wilson

The Trust was successfully launched in September at a very well attended talk, 'The Blackwater Valley – your wildlife oasis' at Sandhurst Memorial Hall as promoted in our last Newsletter. It has now started the process of finding members, both household (an all embracing family membership) and Corporate. At a bargain price of £5 per family per year, or £100 for a company or business, this is an ideal way to show support to the continuing enhancement of the natural environment throughout the Valley. A leaflet is enclosed with this Newsletter and we hope you will consider joining the Trust which has as one of its areas of interest, the Moor Green Lakes area.

The first grant to the Trust was for work to a small local park called Snaky Lane, near North Camp station. This now has a good wheelchair accessible path around the attractive site with a seat overlooking the pond to enjoy sunny days in relative peace! Other projects are under consideration and some are developing into substantial ideas which are beyond the resources of the Trust as it now stands. However, the input of local people via the Trust means these projects should certainly add value to the Valley in future.

As the Trust develops it expects to provide newsletters and opportunities for walks and visits to places of interest within the valley. It will also work closely with the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership, the organisation supported by most of the Councils bordering the Valley. Inevitably, with pressure on finances the local people cannot expect the support to the Partnership to be endless or unlimited so the Trust may be the main way to raise funds for our Valley in the longer term. In the meantime, please note the events outlined in this Newsletter and feel welcome to use the websites for the BVCP <http://www.blackwater-valley.org.uk/index.htm> and the fledgling Trust at <http://www.bvct.org.uk/> for further information.

We would love to get the Trust off to a really good start so please fill in your application form in the leaflet and let us get working together on protecting and improving our Valley for the future. If you work for a local business how about asking them if they would join the Trust to help local conservation? A visit can be arranged if they wish to talk about how we can all work in partnership together and we are also interested in using the expertise of their staff if they wish to join the Committee and add their skills to our team.

Reedbed update

By Peter Scott

In the last issue I described the planting of an experimental reed bed around the edge of the lake in the south-east of the Manor Farm site. By the autumn it was clear that this had been quite successful.

The planting of rhizomes, whether as whole clumps or broken up into separate roots, has given the best result, with around 80 per cent 'taking'. Stem cuttings have a much lower success rate – about 20 to 30 per cent – but involve a lot less preparation. There is evidence that protection from geese is worthwhile, as plants in more exposed spots appear to have been grazed. The fencing that was installed obviously gives some 'shelter', and it appears that clumps of rush (*Juncus sp.*) may perform a similar function, though they will have the disadvantage that they also compete with the reeds.

We may be able to begin planting in the main reed bed sometime in the coming months. A large part of this has now been 'sculpted' to its final design and recent rain has made it wet enough for an attempt at planting to be worthwhile.

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A tough year for Horse Chestnut trees

By Sue Dent

You may have noticed that Horse Chestnut trees throughout the valley have struggled this last summer and some may have died. Conker trees throughout south east England have been hit very hard by a combination of disease, pests and the very dry weather.

The trees have been hit from three sides this year.

- firstly by a bark fungus called bleeding canker which attacks the living tissue under the bark and causes weeping or 'bleeding' from the tree trunk.
- secondly by a leaf miner moth which eats into the leaves of the tree causing leaves to wither and fall and
- thirdly by the summer drought.

On their own any of these weaken and damage trees although they seldom kill them however the combination of disease and drought this year been much more severe and badly affected trees may not recover. Both the bark fungus and moth have spread across southern England in the last five years and they are being monitored and studied by the Forestry Commission to assess the damage they are causing and how they might be controlled.

Andy Ford, of Rushmoor Borough Council said that "The drought this summer has affected a lot of trees in the Borough and some are beginning to look very 'stressed'. But trees can be very resilient and we hopeful that many will come back successfully next spring, we won't know until then if any permanent damage has been done".

An interview with our Dragonfly Recorder

Birds and the study of birds at Moor Green figure highly in our newsletter and annual report and rightly so, most of our members join the group because of the birds. There are however, other areas of fauna and flora that are studied at Moor Green sometimes only by the Group's own species recorder.

Ken Crick has been recording the dragonfly life on the reserve for over nine years and recently had a paper on one aspect of his studies published by the British Dragonfly Society. Here is an interview based on this part of his work:

Ed. Ken, what was the subject of your recent paper?

KC. The title covers it really 'Variations in key features of the final instar larvae and exuviae of the Common Blue Damselfly *Enallagma cyathigerum*'.

Ed. Why the Common Blue Damselfly?

KC. Well Moor Green has a long established, numerous resident population of them and supplied much of the material used in the study. The Common Blue is one species specifically mentioned in our Management Plan as a key indicator species for monitoring the health of the water on site and I was having problems matching some of the features of individual specimens with those detailed in the published keys.

Ed. Can you tell us what 'final instar' and 'exuviae' mean?



KC. Each time a larva sheds its outer cover (cuticle) it enters another instar or growth phase. A larva may go through 6 – 15 instars, depending on the species. The exuvia is the shed skin (cuticle). The exuvia most commonly found and those used in my study are those left by the transition from aquatic insect to air-born terrestrial insect.

Ed. Could you summarise your findings?

KC. It is not safe to establish the species of a damselfly larva or exuvia on the basis of a single feature. A combination of features is significantly more reliable. Many of the key features are variable or not always present. I provided a Pictorial Key with my paper to help explain these (See Note below).

The three feather like appendages at the rear of the insect that assist the larva to breathe, known as caudal lamellae, are described as in most keys as usually bearing 1-3 narrow transverse stripes, with a diagram showing the stripes to be at 90 degrees to the major axis. The sample I studied contained 15% with no stripes at all. Only 8% of the sample possessed three stripes. Where multiple stripes occurred stripes could be separate or linked by a mottled dark pattern along the lamellae major axis. Stripes may be complete or incomplete (failing to reach the margins of the lamellae). Stripes often lay at an oblique angle to the major axis.

The keys claim that stout setae (very small hairs) reach the mid point on both margins of the lamellae. I found this not always to be the case, 47% of my sample had stout setae on the lower end of the mid caudal lamellae, terminating within one third of the margin length.

The larva's modified lower jaw contains an element known as the prementum and two others referred to as the palps. All are populated by stout hairs. The number and disposition of these stout hairs are used as diagnostic aids and proved to be somewhat variable in number and size. At the root of the hair nearest the mobile claw on the palp is a small spine. One well known key has the spine in the wrong place. The presence of the spine is diagnostic of the Common Blue Damselfly when found in its final instar. However, the spine is not always present missing from 20% of my sample on one or both palps.

What I did not know and only learned as a result of the data being published, was that on earlier instars of both Azure and Blue-tailed Damselfly the spine is also present but is absorbed by the insect as it reaches maturity.

Ed. Have you had any feedback as a result of the publication of your work?

KC. The subject is, of course, of limited interest, even among dragonfly enthusiasts but yes, I have had a request for a copy of my paper from a University Institute of Biology in Poland. I have had correspondence with a dragonfly enthusiast in Germany and two very nice letters from well respected members of the British Dragonfly Society. Both of these members have provided me with further reading and diagnostic data not readily available.

Ed. Will this publication mark the end of your larval studies?

KC. No, I have data for eight other species of damselfly and I continue to collect exuvia wherever I find them. Many hours are spent during the winter months recording the variations I see under my microscope. To date I hold data on about 800 individuals.

Ed. Ken, thanks for sharing this work with us and for being such a diligent and expert recorder for our Group. I'm sure all the members wish you well with your future work.

Note: Space precludes the printing of the Pictorial Key produced by Ken which helps to understand the parts of the Common Blue Damselfly. Anyone wanting this by email can ask the Editor for a copy on colin.wilson@theroc.org.uk



Message from the Membership Secretary

By Keith Littler

It is now some weeks since the peak work period of the membership year for me and I am happy to report that the present incumbent managed to survive the experience, but only just at times! My youngest son has never before collected so many Royal Mail red elastic bands as he did during September! Organising the processing of the renewals themselves was quite challenging and regrettably, did cause delays in some members receiving their renewal confirmation which I hope did not cause too many to be disgruntled. At the time of writing the group membership number stands at 625 members which, looking back on old records, appears to be the highest number ever.

Our decision to start utilising members email addresses to send renewal confirmations and other communications in the future has, judging by the feedback received, been met with universal acceptance. A good number of members also responded to my request to consider providing me with their email address if I did not already have it, and I am sure there are more of you out there who might like to do the same after reading this. I would like to thank you all for your support in what appears to have been a fairly painless transition period. The group's funds will benefit from this development but I would also like to reiterate that we are committed to provide an unchanged level of service to those members who have not embraced the internet & email.

Staying on the subject of internet & email, my own email address has recently changed. You can now reach me on my new address of kslittler@googlemail.com. We are also looking into setting up a website for the Moor Green Lakes Group to give a greater level of information about the reserve and our work to potential visitors. Hopefully, something will be in place before the summer newsletter.

Our Group's Finances

by Bruce Archer – Hon. Treasurer

The Group had another very positive financial year ending on 31st August 2006. Income increased by £415 to £2,322, thanks to additional donations and £350 of grants. Expenditure was £1,373, which is £210 more than the previous year.

The main differences in expenditure were £134 spent on a global positioning system (GPS) which now enables the plant and reptile surveyors to accurately relocate their survey areas – not easy once the cattle have been there for a few months, and spending £127 on bird feeding. A Grant of £300 was specifically provided last year for bird feeding and this will continue through this winter period, including maintaining peanut feeders on trees near the car park. Interestingly, the change in postal charges in August reduced the cost of posting the Annual Report from 71p to 55p per copy.

The full accounts will be presented at the AGM on 16th February 2007.

The current year's accounts are looking even better with donations set to top £950, over £400 more than last year. Thank you to all who have contributed – our challenge is to use these funds wisely for the benefit of the wildlife and the benefit of you, the members of the Group, and the visiting general public.



Scarce Ducks at Moor Green in 2006

By Robert Godden

Observers checking the flocks of duck using the Moor Green Lakes Nature Reserve have been rewarded this year with sightings of some scarcer species. A female Red-crested Pochard visited Grove Lake and Horseshoe Lake on a few occasions in March; there were at least 3 reports of Garganey during July and August; finally on November 19th, a female Ring-necked Duck was seen on Grove Lake. This article describes some of the points to look for to identify these species.

The Red-crested Pochard is reported each year in Berkshire, usually from Wraysbury or the Reading area, but most records probably relate to birds from feral populations. The drake is very distinctive with its bright red beak and orange head, but the female and juvenile are less striking, and are best told by their pale brown plumage and pale cheeks contrasting with a darker crown. The female that visited Moor Green was a very pale individual, and with only a cursory glance it could have dismissed it as a farmyard duck. The Garganey is a scarce but regular summer visitor to Berkshire; it is possibly annual at Moor Green but easily overlooked. This small duck frequently occurs in pairs which is just as well as the drake in breeding plumage has a highly distinctive head pattern - a broad white stripe curving down from the eye to behind the purple-brown cheeks. Older bird books tend to 'duck out' of the problem of identifying all other plumages, describing them as like a female teal but more stripy on the head. In fact, on the female, juvenile and eclipse male, the head pattern is again very distinctive though more subtle than the drake (see one of the modern guides such as *Collins* for accurate illustrations).

The North American counterpart of our Tufted Duck is the Ring-necked Duck, and these are reported each year in the UK especially in the winter in the west of the country. The drake is similar to the drake Tufted Duck but has grey flanks with a leading vertical white flash, and the head is pointed at the rear lacking any tuft. Female Ring-necked Ducks are more similar to Pochards than Tufted Ducks, with a more pronounced white eye-ring and fine white stripe curving down from the eye behind the cheeks. The body colour differs from both British species - sandy brown on the flanks contrasting with dark brown on the back. In my experience, these birds spend a lot of time asleep, but they have come a long way after all! This bird is still being reported from a gravel pit in Yateley at the time of writing, so it may well make a return visit to Moor Green this winter.

Each winter Moor Green's regular population of common duck species is joined by small numbers of Goldeneye and Goosanders (especially on Grove Lake). The Goosander is, of course, the emblem of the Moor Green Lakes Group and shown on this Newsletter and our Annual reports. There are signs that Pintail are becoming more common which would be a welcome trend, while Ruddy Duck and Shelduck, though common elsewhere, continue to be scarce at Moor Green. Several other unusual duck species have visited Moor Green over the years (Green-winged Teal, Long-tailed Duck & Smew to name a few), taking up temporary residence with our more familiar species. Unfortunately, rare ducks don't tend to stand out from the crowd, so it often takes a careful scan through a flock to pick out the one that is different. Let's see what 2007 turns up!

Collins Bird Guide: The Most Complete Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe by [Lars Svensson](#), [Peter J. Grant](#), [Killian Mullarney](#), [Dan Zetterstrom](#)

Stop Press: 2 Smew, a male and a female have been seen at Moor Green Lakes, joining the roost of Goosander, just before Christmas.

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Red-footed Falcon at Moor Green Lakes

By Bruce Archer

This is the tale of the first Red-footed Falcon to be seen at Moor Green. This small falcon is similar to a Hobby in that it takes and eats large insects in flight, but also takes mice and voles by hovering like a Kestrel. Hobby and Kestrel can be seen regularly at Moor Green. Red-footed Falcon normally breeds in Eastern Europe and spends the winter in tropical South Africa. Between 5 and 10 birds are reported in the UK each year, often birds on the first returning migration.

On afternoon of Saturday the 8th July 2006, I bumped into Jim Reid at Moor Green, who told me he had been watching what he thought might be a Merlin. We both watched the bird briefly hunting dragonflies over the new workings. I concluded that it was a juvenile Hobby at that point. There was also a first summer Hobby (a non breeding bird that would be a year old) there as well. The bird in question was very brown and scruffy. At this time I was unaware that the first juvenile Hobbies would not normally be out of the nest for another month.

The same bird was seen that weekend by Allan Worgan, who also thought it may be a juvenile Hobby, but wisely, had some suspicions about his identification. After some discussion on various email groups, the prospect of it being a first summer female Red-footed Falcon emerged. This was confirmed on the morning of Saturday 15th July when it was seen by a number of experienced birders, including Ian Brown, the Moor Green bird recorder.

It remained until Wednesday 19th July and was seen by as many as 100 bird watchers who came to see it. The confusion about its plumage was due to very late moulting of the juvenile plumage, with only a few signs of the female plumage beginning to show. Late moulting can happen when birds are under stress or not getting sufficient food. It takes a lot of protein to grow a new set of feathers. There is always something to learn, don't you find? And, in case you were wondering, it did not have red feet – only the males of the species have those.

If you would like to see more about this bird Jerry O'Brien has put some interesting notes on his website – see <http://www.birdsofberkshire.co.uk/LatestRFFatMG.htm>

Beware of the dog!

By Peter Scott

One of our members was recently prevented from reaching Colebrook hide by a dog which seemed to think its duty was to guard its master who was inside the hide at the time. As my correspondent tried to walk past the animal, it bit him on the ankle, fortunately causing no injury. It was quite clear that further attempts to reach the hide would be repulsed in the same way! After ten minutes or so, the dog's owner emerged from the hide and was most apologetic.

If any members bring a dog to the reserve and must leave it unattended for a while, please tie it securely out of others' way.

Work in progress

By Peter Scott

The 'maintenance season' is in full swing. A couple of days on Long Island have seen some of the grassed areas cleared of encroaching bramble and some large patches of the latter have been reduced considerably. About 40 barrow loads of vegetation were removed from the scrape outside Grove hide, Plover Island was almost cleared and, by the time this reaches you, Tern Island should have been returned to bare shingle ready for returning terns in the spring.

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The outlet pipe from the south-west corner of Colebrook Lake to the river became blocked by penetrating roots again. As this seems likely to be a recurrent problem, CEMEX have now removed the top half of the pipe over about half its length, effectively converting it to an open channel. The improved access should make future clearance much easier. We just have to hope that it doesn't prove attractive to vandals as a dumping site.

A contractor will be on site in late winter to coppice several 10-metre-wide sections of the woodland between the perimeter footpath and the lakes. This is bound to be somewhat disruptive for a few days, but the payoff is more varied habitat for the wildlife and some additional viewing points for bird-watchers.

Volunteer work parties will be attacking bramble patches and other unwanted shrubs on the meadow areas around the lakes, clearing vegetation from Goose Island and cutting open areas through the dense growth on Grove Island. There may also be an opportunity to do a spot of hedge-laying, something we haven't done in the last couple of years.

As usual I end with a request for more help. The Sunday work parties, in particular, could do with a boost in numbers, so please come and give a hand if you can: even just an occasional half-day would be extremely helpful. Apart from being useful and quite good fun, it's a chance to get a different view of the reserve.

Blackwater Valley

We want YOUR views

Walkers, cyclists, families, wheelchair users, horse riders, anglers, dog owners, young and old all use the countryside of the Blackwater Valley and one of our challenges is to ensure we continue to meet the needs of all of them.

To help us identify issues and discuss solutions, the Blackwater Valley Users Group meet three times a year. Their collective advice and support make an important contribution to the Valley's long-term development and planning for improved access. We are currently looking to expand this group and are seeking some new recruits.

So are you a user of the Blackwater Valley Path or other countryside areas in the Valley? Would you be willing to work with others to identify and discuss particular issues and problems? Could you represent the views of a particular group? Have you got the time and inclination to help? Meetings are usually held during the day in Ash or Mytchett.

If you are interested and would welcome the opportunity to get involved, please get in touch with Sue Dent on 01252 331353 for an informal chat, or email sue.dent@hants.gov.uk.

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