

MOOR GREEN LAKES GROUP NEWSLETTER



January 2008

Happy New Year – what about a really valuable resolution?

Each year we probably sit at home at this time thinking of a few New Year's resolutions. Some of us make a few and keep to them, some may keep to just one or two and others keep to none! I probably fit in between the second and third categories! Our Group needs you to make a resolution to help us this year. In recent months our Plant Recorder has retired, our Membership Secretary has had to give up for work reasons and now our Secretary also and we need help to keep the Group strong. None of these jobs is onerous; it just needs someone to take on a responsibility to put in a few hours here and there to help us out.

Of course, we all love our Reserve which makes a wonderful place to enjoy a visit in any season of the year. Supplying this environment needs a bit of time from your committee to organise permissions and work parties, do a few surveys or maybe to type up committee notes or, if you want my job, to hassle people for interesting articles for this Newsletter! The Membership Secretary role is probably a little busier than some, in Summer when the renewals occur is when this role is busiest. Please consider if you would be willing to give something back to the Group. It's so easy just to enjoy benefits and not commit in return but we need to share the load which, when shared is small, but when falling on few becomes more onerous.

Later in this Newsletter you will find an article on the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust. With a small number of volunteers, the Trust has raised over £30,000 for projects in the Valley in its first year, including a contribution to our reserve. If you live in or near the Valley this is another opportunity to volunteer perhaps to bring business skills to the Trustees, or to bring expertise in your favourite recreational activity or much needed skills in fundraising. At the very least please consider becoming a member, like Moor Green Lakes, it is at a very low cost.

For all you birdwatchers out there, have you taken on a tetrad for the national or county Atlases currently underway? Berkshire, Hampshire and Surrey all plan atlases and are collecting bird records for every inch of their counties for the next four years. It's easy enough to take part so yet another chance to make a resolution to do something to help this year! Contact me for details.

Finally, a task which combines helping while enjoying visits to the reserve is checking our new mink rafts. You will see an article later in the Newsletter on this subject and a regular visitor would find this an easy, interesting task to undertake and help the Group and our wildlife.

Having badgered you with all these tasks I shall leave you to read and enjoy the following pages filled with information I hope you find interesting and useful. Please send me any contributions you wish included in the next Newsletter by the end of June 2008. Meantime, have a great 2008!

Colin Wilson, Editor

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Moor Green Lakes Group website – www.mglg.org.uk

Bruce Archer

The new Moor Green Lakes Group website came into being in mid January 2007. At the time of its launch at the AGM in February it had 16 pages of information. As I write this in December, it now contains 65 pages of information and there is still more to be added. The use of the site is increasing steadily, but is still modest. The average number of visits has risen from 10 per day in February to 40 visits per day.

There are still several areas of wildlife to be covered. Also the historic Annual Reports are being made available, which take some time because the original documents have to be scanned and converted to electronic format.

The website is updated about once a week or so. The "Latest News" column on the home page tells you what has changed in each update. I welcome suggestions for improvements and contributions of pictures and content on topics which have yet to be covered.

The Group owes thanks to Bruce for his excellent work on our website so please visit it often – Ed.

Birds of Surrey

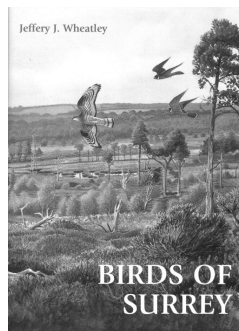
Colin Wilson

This wonderful book has just been published by Surrey Bird Club. It was a long time coming (I paid last September) and I had almost given up on it when it finally arrived just before Christmas! And I must say, it would have made a great present!

There are just under 700 pages packed with information about birds found in Surrey. It is a complete avifauna and a testament to the knowledge and skills of Jeff Wheatley, County Recorder since 1983. Apart from being filled with facts about birds, habitats and birding sites in Surrey, the colour illustrations by John Davis give the book a distinctive, instantly attractive and homely appeal especially to someone like me who lives so close to Surrey's superb heathlands.

The systematic list is encyclopedic and has such fascinating information as the only record of Golden Eagle in the county and the very readable story of Buzzard which has now firmly returned to the county as a breeding species. Ringing recoveries are also covered such as the Turtle Dove ringed at Thorpe as an adult in 1976 and found 1118 km south west, eight years later. A good section is devoted to the history of Ring-necked Parakeet, very much a Surrey bird and now very common in much of the County with some spectacular roost sites.

If you like birds and live in or near Surrey I recommend this book, at a cost of £35 it is not cheap but it is so packed with information it will keep you dipping in for much time to come! Available from Surrey Bird Club <http://www.sbclub.ukonline.co.uk/> or ask the Newsletter Editor for details.



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2007 - A record year for Waders

Bruce Archer

I spend much of my time at Moor Green Lakes watching birds – or trying to find birds to watch! My favorite group is the waders that mostly pass in the spring heading north to breed and in the autumn as they return south towards their wintering grounds. Their long legs and long bills give them an exotic appeal, coupled with the challenge of finding and identifying them. Some do not spend long, perhaps stopping only a few hours to feed, while others may stay for several days, particularly in autumn. Redshank and Little Ringed Plovers stop to breed in the area while Snipe and Green Sandpipers spend the winter. The only wader species resident all year at Moor Green Lakes is the Lapwing, although numbers increase considerably with wintering continental birds.

An examination of Ian Brown's bird reports in the MGLG Annual Report shows that 30 wader species have been recorded on and around the Reserve since 1990. The maximum number of species seen in a year was 19 in five of those years. This year 24 species have been recorded. I think there are two reasons why so many different species have been seen: firstly the habitat of the workings on the Manor Farm site (the "new workings") has been particularly attractive to passing waders and secondly, because of this more people have been looking for them. Ian Brown provides full details in the Annual Report – I will pick out some of the highlights from the Monthly Summaries which are posted on the Reserve notice board and the website (<http://www.mglg.org.uk/bird-report-index.htm>).

The year started with the usual Snipe, one Green Sandpiper and Lapwing numbers reaching 900 by February. Also by this time a few Golden Plover were seen as well as a Dunlin and the first of four Oystercatchers seen during 2007. March was relatively quiet with the expected arrival of Little Ringed Plovers and Redshanks to breed. A Ringed Plover also arrived and stayed for over a month raising hopes of breeding, but that was not to be. In the early years of the Reserve they bred regularly. Snipe numbers are difficult to determine: however, more than 30 were counted by Ian on a survey of the lake margins.

For the past few years the odd one or two Snipe have lingered until May raising the prospect that they could breed – perhaps the wet meadowland that will be provided at the west end of the Manor Farm area will entice them to start breeding in Berkshire once more. Common Sandpipers, Greenshanks and more Dunlin passed through in April; as did a Spotted Redshank and an Avocet on the 20th. This is only the second record of Avocet at the site after one in 1992. I was present when Noel Silver spotted it flying in to the wet area at the east end of the new workings where it fed for a short while. After about ten minutes it took off and flew around and off. It makes you wonder how many birds visit the area without being seen by anyone.

After a mild sunny April, May and June were wet and cool, making breeding more difficult for birds and other fauna. Just two young Redshanks were seen, probably from separate nests, but I don't think either of them survived. Four or five pairs of Little Ringed Plovers hatched up to 7 young, but only one appeared to survive to fledge. The number of Lapwing raised was also below average. This bad weather probably caused migrating birds to remain longer than usual; the last spring Green Sandpiper I saw was on the 4th May. The highlights of the late spring were a Little Stint, two Wood Sandpipers, a Whimbrel, a flock of seven Sanderlings (a site record count) and a Knot which is only the second record for the site. The latter two were during atrocious weather late in May.

The first returning wader of the year was a Green Sandpiper on the 16th of June. July saw the departure of the breeding Little Ringed Plovers and Redshanks, although a few of the latter passed through in later months. Lapwing numbers started to build up, a couple of records of Curlew, four Whimbrel, five Turnstones, Greenshank, Dunlins and seven Black-tailed Godwits were recorded by the end of July.

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By August Common Sandpipers were - well, common and Green Sandpipers even more so for a couple of months. Another Little Stint stayed for five days and a Ruff for one. Eight more Black-tailed Godwits dropped in for a day in August. Greenshanks became regular for a few weeks with a maximum of five at one time. Snipe returned in mid August and Lapwing numbers increased to 400 in September when a third Little Stint showed up for a day and a second Ruff stayed for 15 days.

Probably the most notable record of the year was a further flock of 28 Black-tailed Godwits seen by Martin Mitchell on the 2nd September as they landed on the reed-bed-to-be at the east end of the workings. Not only is this number of birds a site record but also, I believe, an all time Berkshire record. Toward the end of the month three Curlew Sandpipers dallied for a few hours marking the end of the true passage migration. The twenty-fourth wader species was a Jack Snipe found by Ian Brown in October.

The final excitement of the year was the buildup of Golden Plovers at the end of November and into December with numbers exceeding 600. Given that the Moor Green site record was 71 flying over, this number is exceptional. Hopefully the new habitat of the Manor Farm site will mean this becomes a norm. I wonder what 2008 will bring....

Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust

Colin Wilson

The trust held its second AGM at the Sandhurst Memorial Hall in October with a talk about 'global warming' and its impact on those of us living in the Valley. This was well received by the members and showed the many factors and impacts that would need to be taken into account by local authorities and residents in years to come. The next Trust members Newsletter will contain further details.

2006/2007 was the first active year of the Trust and it was pleasing that it raised over £30,000 for local projects in that period. During the year funds were used or raised for:

- creating a multi user path at Snaky Lane, Mytchett, a pleasant local green space
- a contribution to path work at Moor Green Lakes
- ongoing work at Hawley Meadows to install a cattle crush, car park resurfacing, a new ramp and car park signage
- a hydrological survey at Hawley Meadows so the impact of future work can be understood and wildlife habitats improved.

Various activities for members and residents also took place including birdwatching walks, bat and moth evenings and the Trust supported the popular annual two day 'Walk the Path' event in the summer.

The Trustees' 5 year business plan aims to raise and use funds for more improvements. Ideas are being advanced and projects devised and managed for the benefit of all who live here in the Blackwater Valley stretching from Aldershot to Swallowfield.

The Trust is a charity so contributions from taxpayers by way of subscriptions or donations are increased by tax refunds. The Trust seeks new members (household membership is just £5 and corporate membership is just £100) and this income is added to funds raised by other methods to meet the Trust's aims. To join the trust or learn a little more visit www.bvct.org.uk or write to Dave Pilkington, Chairman, Ash Lock Cottage, Government Road, Aldershot GU11 2PS.



Manor Farm Progress

Peter Scott

CEMEX are still on schedule to finish extracting gravel and sand from the site by mid-2008. Their application to excavate west of Longwater Road is currently being considered by Wokingham DC. As advised on our website, the final date for public comment was 20th December.

The reeds planted in spring 2007 suffered badly during the summer flooding, which seems to have resulted in a substantial inflow of very acidic groundwater. For a while the plants looked to have been killed, but recently there are signs of regrowth. Once established, reeds are quite hardy: indeed, reed beds are often used as 'filtration systems' to clean polluted water. Therefore, while the conditions may slow growth, there is still hope that the reed beds will eventually get going.

An illustration of their hardiness is provided by the reeds that were planted along the edge of the lake in the south-east corner of the site. Most were totally submerged as the level of this lake rose, and remained so for many months. However, a recent inspection revealed strong growth, of those that were planted as stem cuttings as well as the rhizomes.

Some visitors from Butterfly Conservation commented that part of the restored grassland in the north-east part of the Manor Farm site had quite a good mix of plants attractive to butterflies. This is pleasing and also slightly surprising, as no particular effort was made to plant a 'wildlife mix' of seeds. Annual mowing of the area will, we hope, build on this good start.

The northern edge of this grassland area is earmarked as 'woodland edge / scrub'. However, some of the species that have been planted there are quite inappropriate and will become full-grown (non-native) woodland if left. A recent work party made a start on removing some of the unwanted saplings.

As the above summary indicates, our group is already playing a part in restoring and maintaining parts of Manor Farm, even though the site as a whole remains a working quarry. It is clear that our current levels of effort will not be sufficient to maintain the whole site, in addition to our commitment to Moor Green, once digging has finished. If the area west of Longwater Road were to be added, we would be even more stretched. CEMEX are aware of this and are examining options for future management of the whole complex.

Moor Green Lakes Finances

Bruce Archer - Treasurer

Another positive financial year ended on the 31 August 2007. Income from Members was £1,525 in membership fees and a further £1,008 of donations. £1,322 was spent on running the Group. The major expenditure was resurfacing the path to Colebrook Hide which cost £3,477. Most of this cost was met by a £2,000 grant from Johnson's Wax and a grant of £500 from the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust, for which we are truly grateful. This left us with a £296 surplus for the year. Thank you to every one who contributed to financing the Group last year, and those continuing to do so in the current year – donations already received exceed last years total!

We have a number of initiatives under way for the coming year such as a colour ringing scheme for the Black-headed Gulls that breed on the Reserve. A proposal to enlarge the car park off Lower Sandhurst Road is being discussed with CEMEX; and we are involved in making repairs to the main footpath from the car park damaged by flooding in July. We are also assessing the issues involved in converting the Moor Green Lakes Group into a charity, the main benefit being that the Group can claim the basic tax refund on much of our income. If you have any comments on this feel free to write to the Newsletter Editor or to attend the AGM.

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The Mink Raft Solution

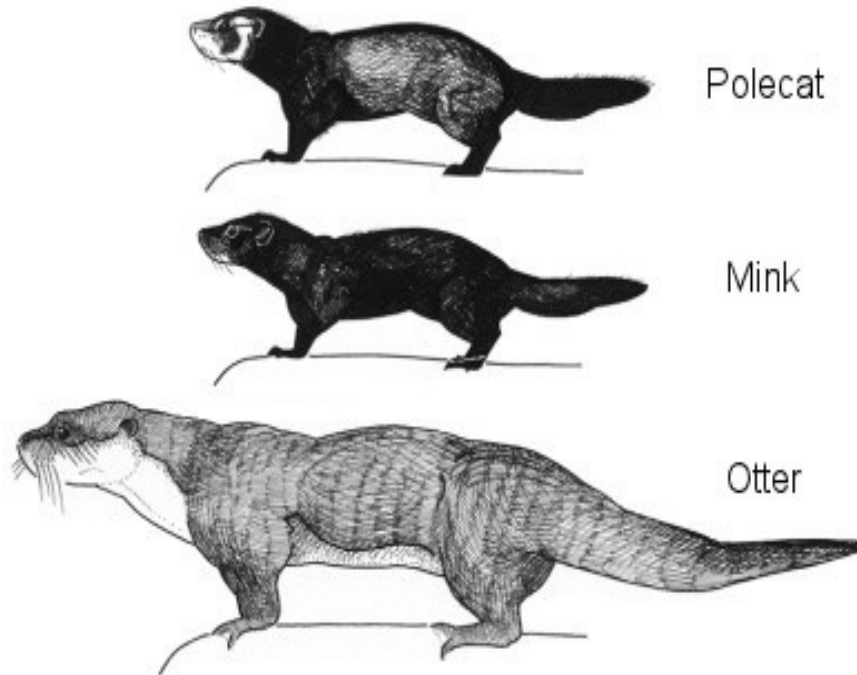
By Ian White

Mammals are a bit of a pain. Unlike birds which are active by day and may occasionally be seen against a clear sky, they are often well disguised and nocturnal and hence hard to spot. Individual species can also have a greater detrimental impact on the environment than birds. *Corvids* and Wood pigeons (*Columba palumbus*) may be considered a nuisance, Canada Geese (*Branta Canadensis*) and even Hen Harriers (*Circus cyaneus*) may be considered a pest in certain areas, but no species of bird has had the negative effects of species like the brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*), the grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) or the American mink (*Mustela vison*).

The American mink was introduced into this country at the beginning of the 20th century for the fur farming trade. If a compromise had been considered at the time between conservation and commerce, perhaps the European mink (*Mustela lutreola*) should have been introduced as it is within its geographical range and it is more habitat specific. It is also now endangered. However as soon as mink farms had been established in Britain, the mink began to escape, sometimes perhaps with misguided help, and establish a feral population in the wider countryside.

The mink is an efficient and highly versatile predator that feeds on a wide variety of fish, mammals and birds, as well as invertebrate prey. Due to its ability to swim, dive, and climb (as well as enter small burrows) with ease, very few of our native species are safe from its predation.

Approximately twenty years ago there was a brief national effort organised by the Ministry of Agriculture to control mink based on a bounty system. However, this was soon abandoned and control was undertaken locally. Usually the animals are trapped before being dispatched, but this requires substantial effort as once a trap is set it needs to be checked on a daily basis and mink, with relatively large ranges, may not use the area for weeks.



A size comparison for guidance



It had been noticed during the Coypu (*Myocaster coypus*) eradication programme in the 1980s that mink were using rafts baited with carrots to entice the coypu. They clearly were not attracted by the carrots – perhaps they just liked rafts! This led to the development of a Game Conservancy Council Mink Raft, originally designed as a means to survey for mink. It consists of a buoyant raft base in the centre of which an open wooden tunnel is constructed. Protected by the tunnel, a clay bed, kept moist by a florist's oasis, is used to check presence of mink (and other species) by their footprints. The raft is floated on a water course, secured to the bank. Initially as the raft does not contain a trap, it can be checked for mink footprints relatively infrequently. Once mink are found using the raft, a trap can be sited under the tunnel and checks will then need to be undertaken on a daily basis. Non target species such as Water vole (*Arvicola terrestris*) can be released.

It is felt that there may be a problem with mink at Moor Green Lakes. It would not be a surprise as they use the Basingstoke Canal and are closely associated with riverine habitats. Last year there was a suggestion that they had predated a number of birds on Tern Island. Hence the decision was taken to build and site 4 mink rafts to see if we do have a mink problem. To make this important project succeed we need to find one or two people willing to undertake a check of a mink raft every two weeks to look for footprints. This is vital so please volunteer by contacting Sue Dent of the Blackwater Valley Conservation Partnership on 01252 331353 – this will be easy and rewarding as an activity with a real benefit to the reserve.

Further information on Mink Rafts is available at <http://www.gct.org.uk/uploads/minkraftleaflet.pdf>

Planning Application for Further Gravel Extraction

Bruce Archer

At the end of November 2007 CEMEX, the Quarry owners and operators, submitted a planning application to Wokingham Borough Council seeking permission to extract sand and gravel from an area west of Longwater Road and north of the river Blackwater. This amounts to continued digging for 1.5km west of the existing workings on the Berkshire side of the river. The land has been owned by CEMEX for some time as part of Fleethill Farm. The plan is to restore the area for "nature conservation involving wet woodland with lakes and pastoral land".

This represents a potential extension of the Moor Green Lakes Nature Reserve beyond the Manor Farm extension where restoration is progressing, making a 137hectare (338 acre) Nature Reserve stretching for 3.5km (2.2 miles) along the Blackwater. This would create a Reserve four times the size of the existing Reserve. The outcome of the application should be known by the end of January 2008.

If permission is granted, a conveyor will be installed from the new area, under Longwater Road, to the existing stockpile where the sand and gravel would be stored and conveyed to the existing processing plant as required. This will mean that restoration of the south west section of the Manor Farm site will be delayed for another 4 or 5 years until extraction at Fleethill Farm is completed

The new area would be wet dug – the excavations would not be pumped, but material would be dug under water. This is because of the difficulty of disposing of pumped water and the need to maintain the health of a large number of mature trees which will be retained. Existing footpaths over the site are limited, but will remain open during the excavation period and additional paths will be provided by the restoration.



At the north of the area to be dug is Fleet Copse, an area of mature woodland with a good mix of species indicating that it has been present for 200 years or more. This adds to the biodiversity of the new area.

CEMEX have indicated that this will be the last opportunity to extract minerals from the general area and that the application is only economic because the processing plant nearby can be utilised.

Moor Green Bird Race

In the previous issue we mentioned that we would be staging a bird race as a social event for our members, taking the form of a day-long competition to see as many species of bird as possible in an area around Moor Green. We are having to postpone this event for the time being, but would appreciate some feedback as to its likely popularity - if you would be interested in such an event would you please let us know (robert.godden@mglg.org.uk).

Can You Help?

The Moor Green Lakes Group is looking for a new secretary. It is an interesting job that offers an insight into what goes on behind the scenes, but really isn't very demanding - it involves taking minutes at four committee meetings and an AGM each year, and re-booking the room for the next meeting. Access to a computer and email is an advantage. If think you can help, please get in touch with Peter Scott on 01252 878205 (peter.scott@mglg.org.uk) or Robert Godden on 01252 872503 (robert.godden@mglg.org.uk) who can provide more details about the role.

And finally!

Don't forget the AGM! This year we have a talk by Des Sussex of Natural England about protection of the Thames Basin Heaths.

See the enclosed notice for details. We look forward to seeing you there to hear about the Group and enjoy the refreshments kindly provided as always by CEMEX.

