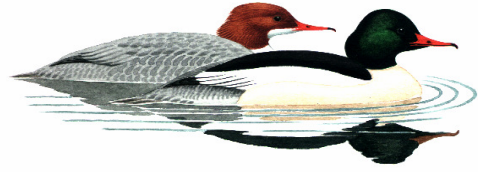


MOOR GREEN LAKES GROUP NEWSLETTER



July 2008

Summer is here! So they tell us!

The summer season of long warm days is here (sometimes!) and if you haven't whiled away some time in the hides at Moor Green Lakes you still have plenty of days left before autumn! Later in the summer expect some more of the spectacular sunsets we enjoy there and look out for the Hobbies hawking for dragonflies over the lakes and waders passing through on passage.

A lot has happened since January and inside your Newsletter I hope you will find articles of interest. Contributions are always welcome, you do not have to be a regular writer or author of articles and help is always on hand to develop ideas that might interest members. Of course we always expect to have material about birds but as that is the predominant interest of members it is very welcome. On the other hand, I have always found it interesting to read about dragonflies and plants or mammals subjects less close to my comfort zone! So, please write to me with any items or ideas you would like to include. My grateful thanks go to those who provided articles this time.

Since the last Newsletter Roger Murfitt and David Bishop have taken over as Secretary and Membership Secretary of the Group and we are very grateful to them for devoting their time and efforts on your behalf. We still need people to join our workparties, staying healthy by gentle exercise is very much a popular topic so why not join us – details are available from Simon Weeks on 01189 730199 or simon.weeks@mglg.org.uk.

Finally, never underestimate the ability of poor downtrodden wildlife lovers to make an impact! I have mentioned a few times before the massive proposed housing development (7500 units) in the Burghfield area south-west of Reading which would have totally destroyed one of the best wildlife areas in Berkshire. After many representations to Government via MPs and by petitions and constant efforts of dedicated individuals the Minister has now overturned the proposal (and incidentally, also accepted the advice of their own agencies such as DEFRA and Environment Agency). Nowhere is safe of course, the latest South East Plan seeks even more housing than originally planned but at least this one area has been given a reprieve, at least for the moment!

Helping our fight on this occasion was some good data about birds and other wildlife such as bats and Water Voles. These records come from people like you and I and I encourage you to submit them wherever you live, it provides a picture of the health of our wildlife but may also help you in stopping unsuitable development in another place. An article about the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre is in this newsletter which tells you more about how records are managed in Berkshire and every County has an equivalent so please do what you can to help.

Have a great summer!

Colin Wilson, Editor

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Manor Farm / Fleethill Farm

Peter Scott

It's taken longer than expected, but Wokingham DC has finally approved CEMEX's application to excavate at Fleethill Farm – i.e. the area to the west of Manor Farm, on the other side of Longwater Road. After restoration in, say, five years' time, the wildlife interest of this area will be improved over what is there at present. The planned areas of wet woodland will add another new habitat to the Moor Green / Manor Farm/ Fleethill Farm complex.

While gravel extraction is in progress there will, of course, be a certain amount of noise and disruption. Despite this, there were (perhaps surprisingly) few objections to the plan from local people. From CEMEX's point of view, the timing of the approval is welcome as it comes just as they are finishing extraction at Manor Farm, so there will not be an inconvenient gap between works on the two areas and they can continue to use the same processing plant.

Restoration work has continued on Manor Farm, including some effort by our group and the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership. In March one of BVCP's Tuesday work parties planted more reeds, using rhizomes taken from the scrape outside Grove hide and an overflow channel at Manor Farm itself. Recent observations indicate that these have become established and are growing, though those that were not well-protected by netting have been grazed by geese. Some of the reeds that were planted a year earlier, and which were badly affected by highly-acidic conditions during the floods of summer 2007, have put up a few new shoots, but they still look very weak.

A group from the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers continued the removal of unwanted alder saplings from the northern side of the restored grassland.

Part of the field nearest to the paths separating Moor Green and Manor Farm is being ploughed again. This year we are beginning the planned rotational planting of a proprietary wild songbird seed mix, with the intention of providing winter feed. Poor weather has delayed the planting, but there should still be enough growing season left for this crop to produce results.

A message from Roger Murfitt, our new Secretary

I have recently taken on the post of Moor Green Lakes Committee Secretary and have been asked to introduce myself to the membership, so here goes! I have lived in Finchampstead for some 13 years now and, as a keen birder, count myself lucky to live close to Moor Green Lakes, one of the best bird sites in the county. I am a long-time member of the MGL group and frequent visitor to the reserve, often with my wife and two children. You may have seen us feeding the children snacks in the hide to bribe them to stay quiet (!), though they are beginning to show an interest now as they get old to enough to use binoculars.

I have long had a strong interest in birds and nature conservation, studied Biology at University and in my younger days worked in a temporary capacity for the RSPB, both as a summer warden and surveying wetland birds in Norfolk and Somerset. I now work in the field of Environmental Safety assessment. Growing up in rural Cambridgeshire, my early stamping grounds were the Ouse Washes and Wicken Fen, where I trained as a bird ringer as well as working as a volunteer warden. This background has given me an affinity for wetlands and their wildlife and I am excited by the plans for a reedbed etc. on the New Workings at Moor Green Lakes. I look forward to playing a part on the Committee during what should be an interesting time for the reserve as the plans begin to come to fruition.

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Nest boxes at Moor Green Lakes

Bruce Archer

I had always assumed that birds build nests, laid eggs, incubated them and fed the young until they could fly away. It turns out to be more complicated than this, as I discovered last year when I took over the annual monitoring of nest boxes at the Moor Green Lakes nature reserve.

There are 30 Tit boxes and 15 larger boxes used by Stock Doves and Mandarin Ducks. The monitoring is done under the BTO Nest Record Scheme, involving visits every 7 to 10 days during the breeding period. By recording the state of occupation, it is possible to determine dates when laying started, and the hatching and fledging dates with the numbers of young involved.

Species	Year	Nests	Eggs	Hatched	Fledged
Blue Tit	2007	11	98	77	77
	2008	9	86	37	36
Great Tit	2007	17	155	110	97
	2008	22	183	137	121
Mandarin Duck	2007	5	41	36	-
	2008	5	44	35	-
Stock Dove	2007	7	14	7	3
	2008	4	5	2	2

The above Table gives the annual summary which shows that Great Tits did better this year at the expense of the Blue Tits. The weather linked to food supply probably accounted for 2008 dates being about a week later than 2007. It was also noticeable in 2008 that the nests closer to the peanut feeders were slightly earlier than those further away.



Last year I took this picture of a Blue Tit (the left-most bird) in a nest of Great Tits ready to fledge; this was the first sign of some more complex goings on. The incubation and fledging periods are the same for both species and a Great Tit did the incubation, so either a Blue Tit egg was laid in a Great Tits nest or Great Tits took over a Blue Tit nest.



This year there were a few shared nests: One started with Blue Tit eggs and ended up with 4 Blue Tit and 5 Great Tit eggs before being abandoned. In another case a Blue Tit began incubation of 10 eggs when another Blue Tit laid 7 more eggs in the nest. The colour tone of the eggs was different so they could be distinguished. Six of the first clutch hatched and a few days later one of the second clutch. The late hatchling was significantly smaller and probably could not compete for food, so did not survive. The remaining 9 eggs did not hatch and were probably removed by the adults. It is quite possible that two females were sharing incubation, but because the birds are not ringed it was impossible to know. Another nest had 5 Blue Tit eggs added to an existing nest of 12 but was then deserted. A nest of 16 Blue Tit eggs resulted in 14 fledglings so large broods can be raised; there was no indication of more than one pair involved. A deserted nest of 6 Great Tit eggs was used by (another?) Great Tit to lay 6 more eggs in and raise 4 to fledge.

I would conjecture that this year's cold wet April and May has meant that birds that should have been incubating spent more time finding food for themselves and this had led to other pairs laying in nests while unoccupied. Male Tits do not incubate. There always seems to be competition for nest sites with Tits using some of the bat boxes as well as natural sites.

Ducks also lay in shared nests, termed egg dumping, and happens with Mandarin Ducks which breed in tree mounted nest boxes as well as natural nest sites at Moor Green Lakes. This year a nest of 17 eggs contained at least 3 eggs from a separate female. This was confirmed by the laying rate – all but the biggest birds can lay up to one egg a day, so higher rates must involve additional females. Clutches of up to 30 eggs have been found in previous years, with 24 young hatched from one nest.



Young Mandarins leave the nest the night after hatching, so I was very lucky to see this box of 12 hatched ducklings, with more eggs hatching.

Apparently the young are capable of jumping a couple of feet in the air and this enables them to get out of the box when called by the parents.

Stock Doves are breeding for 6 to 8 months of the year with up to 5 broods of 2 eggs normally, but I don't monitor beyond June. Stock Doves and Mandarins will often lay in the same nest, causing desertion, but the main cause of failure seems to be Grey Squirrels, which usurp nests during laying for their own breeding.

See Newsletters in colour

If you would like to see the pictures etc in the Newsletter in full colour look at the news archive on the website www.mglg.org.uk. Unfortunately, we cannot produce the newsletter in colour for our mailings due to cost. Most libraries have computers available for free and you can get help to look us up on the internet and get the latest news whenever you want.

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Health and safety

Peter Scott

The Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust, jointly with Zurich Insurance, recently organised a review of health and safety procedures among conservation groups within the valley. Their final report is generally supportive of the procedures followed by all groups. However, some suggestions for improvement were made. In particular, they suggest that we (MGLG) should have its own clear safety policy and a Health and Safety Officer to oversee its use, rather than relying on Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnerships procedures. Developing a policy statement shouldn't be onerous: examples that could be adapted to our particular situation already exist within other groups. Would anybody out there be interested in taking on the role of Health and Safety Officer? Ideally such a person should have some degree of involvement with our conservation work parties. Please contact me (ppscott@aol.com, or 01252 878205) if you're interested to find out more.

Downy Emerald at Moor Green Lakes

Ken Crick

At the January 2008 management committee meeting, a proposal for an additional permanent viewing slot located on the western shoreline of Colebrook Lake South, was tabled. This viewing station, though sought by bird watchers, should also provide those of the membership interested in Dragonflies, with some excellent views of Downy Emerald *Cordulia aenea*. Downy Emerald was first recorded at Moor Green (MGL) from the 10th May 2000. That year it was independently observed by three reliable observers and exuvia was recovered from the bank side vegetation. This nationally scarce species is difficult to observe at MGL as it habitually patrols the lightly shaded tree lined margins of the lake. With the proposed new view slot pushing through the tree cover to within feet of the water's edge, there is the prospect of good views of this moderate sized green / bronze hairy compact dragonfly. The sun positively sparkles off the metallic green thorax. There are only two species of lowland emerald dragonfly in the south of England and MGL habitat is unsuitable for the Brilliant Emerald *Somatochlora metallica*, so identification should be straight forward.

Larvae tend towards nutrient poor, slightly acidic, sheltered wooded still waters, with at least some of the shoreline over-hung with trees and shrubs. Larvae live on the bottom among coarse leaf-litter close to the shoreline. The larvae usually rest upside down on the underside of large fragments of detritus within the upper surface of the leaf-litter. They are thought to hunt mainly at night, feeding on a variety of aquatic invertebrates. Larval development takes two to three years.

At MGL the adults have been observed emerging from their aquatic state during the early morning, always early in May. I have seen one emerging adult killed by a heavy rain drop hitting it squarely between the eyes. Another within seconds of the commencement of its maiden flight flew straight into a spiders' web. If my observations are typical they are a singularly unlucky species.

This dragonfly is most likely to be observed at MGL between mid May and late June. Their daily flight period starts earlier and finishes later than other dragonflies, they will continue to fly in cool, and windy conditions that will cause other species to seek shelter. Males set up a territorial transect which they patrol at about 1/2meter above the water. They rarely cross open water preferring to be close to the lakes margin, skirting areas of deep shade and areas of dense emergent vegetation. Flight is fast and direct punctuated with periods of hovering. Males occupy territory for only a short time before abruptly departing almost vertically into the tree cover. Incoming males and females appear to arrive on a much shallower trajectory. Mating is rarely observed as it tends to take place on the top branches of local trees. Females egg-lay unaccompanied by males in shallow water among emergent and surface vegetation in unshaded areas.

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Swans and dogs

Colin Wilson

Quite a few instances have been mentioned recently about Mute Swans being attacked by dogs. While none have been drawn to my attention at Moor Green Lakes it is worrying that uncontrolled dogs are allowed to cause so much stress to wildlife. I was asked some while ago about a succession of Swan corpses found at Tongham Pond, near Aldershot which seem most likely to have been caused by dogs, although foxes cannot be ruled out. Obviously, the need for dog owners to exercise proper control over their pets is crucial, especially where birds are nesting on the ground or may be using the waterside vegetation for nest sites. Apparently, this year Mute Swans have had a poor breeding season in Berkshire due to high water levels on the River Thames so it appears they may need our help for some time to come.

If you find an injured Swan, or your pet causes one injury, you can contact Swan Lifeline on 01753 859397 and they have facilities to help. Obviously, being a charity they need money as well so a donation is always welcome! You can find out more about Swan Lifeline on the internet on <http://www.zen117019.zen.co.uk/index.html> or by writing to: Swan Rescue Headquarters and Treatment Centre, Cuckoo Weir Island, South Meadow Lane, Eton, Berkshire, SL4 6SS

Berkshire Ornithological Club's new season

The 2008/2009 new season for the Club, starting in September, has now been published. There are 27 outdoor events including visits to a tremendous variety of local and more distant locations and 14 indoor meetings mainly at Palmer Building, Reading University on winter Wednesdays. The Club organises a weekend every year in February to Norfolk during which over 100 bird species are generally seen and next summer will be spending a weekend in Pembrokeshire to concentrate on seabirds, perhaps enjoying close ups of gannets and shearwaters amongst others. More local venues on midweek morning walks include Greenham Common and areas of Swinley Forest. Day long visits, often at weekends, are planned for places like Isle of Sheppey, one of the best raptor locations in winter usually offering Rough-legged Buzzard as a speciality bird, and a coach trip to Slimbridge in January when the winter swans are at their most numerous. Perhaps most exciting is a visit to Portland Bill in April when migration is at its highest and almost anything may turn up. I have happy memories of seeing a Hoopoe fly in off the sea on one occasion!

Indoor meetings in winter will include Chris Bowden from the RSPB advising about the Asian Vulture crisis, our own President Gordon Langsbury, a brilliant photographer, speaking about 'the Bird Islands of Britain: Shetlands to the Scillies' and Keith Offord, an outstanding speaker with 'What's that Raptor' a guide to identification with some stunning photographs. There are talks about our declining populations of Swifts, African birds, Antarctica, Brazil and a fun social evening in December at which a humorous quiz provides even the least knowledgeable members with a chance to win a (not too valuable) prize! Centrepiece of the programme may be the annual photographic competition which attracts many and varied entries and encourages us all to use the camera when we go birdwatching. With our two excellent judges we have seen how, with a little tuition over the years, newcomers can soon be winning prizes and having their photographs published in a national magazine! Even digi-scopers have a chance to win in their own category.

Membership of the Club is only £15 a year (£20 per family) and includes a free copy of any Birds of Berkshire Annual Report produced during the membership period. You can turn up to any indoor meeting and pay a nominal entrance charge as a guest, which is refunded if you decide to join. This year we are printing the 2004 Report which will be available to all members from August. Further details on any of these subjects are available from the Newsletter Editor (see page 1) or see the website at www.berksoc.org.uk

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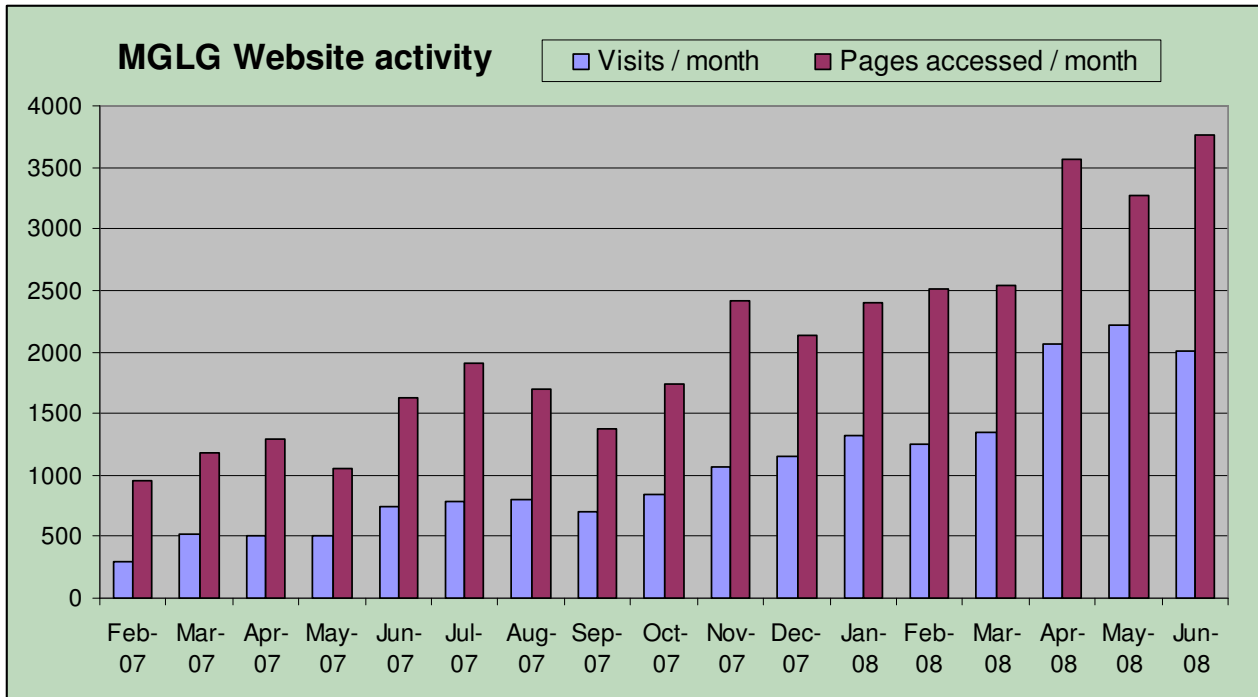


Moor Green Lakes Group website – www.mglg.org.uk

Bruce Archer

The Moor Green Lakes Group website has been available for 18 months and the information presented has continually increased. On its launch at the AGM on 16 February 2007 the site comprised 17 pages of information, by July 2008 there are 91 pages. A large part of the additional information is the complete set of Annual Reports which are now available online. These contain a considerable amount of information about the Reserve from the surveys carried out by the wildlife recorders with input from experts and Members of the Group.

The following graph shows the use of the website in terms of the number of visits to the site and the number of pages viewed each month. The current daily average is 65 visits viewing 125 pages.



We aim to provide topical and current information. It is planned to cover more categories of wildlife and provide more detailed information about the expansion of the Reserve by restoration of the gravel pits to the west.

If there are Members who do not have access to the internet, or find that accessing the Annual reports is too slow, a CD containing the 14 issues of the MGLG Annual Reports can be provided at a cost of just £2. A PC with Microsoft Explorer or similar browser is required. Contact Bruce Archer on 01344 762439 or bruce.archer@mglg.org.uk.

Yellow Loosestrife - *Lysimachia vulgaris*

Before a walk around Frimley Hatches recently I had never heard of Yellow Loosestrife! I knew the (unrelated) Purple Loosestrife of course, a very common flowering plant found in the Blackwater Valley. Yellow Loosestrife, a member of the primrose family, was in a number of locations off the normal path at Frimley and made an interesting discovery for a plant novice like me. I checked our past MGLG reports for the last couple of years and it doesn't appear to be present. It seems the plant is not particularly common but the Valley is a stronghold. If you look it up on the internet (try- <http://www.plantpress.com/wildlife/o892-yellowloosestrife.php>) you can see what it looks like and maybe in walking the valley this summer you may get to enjoy spotting this lovely plant.



Gull Ringing and breeding in 2008

Bruce Archer

This year, with the help of the Reading and Basingstoke Ringing Group, we planned to "colour ring" the Black-headed Gulls that breed on Tern Island on Colebrook Lake. This involves attaching a plastic ring to the leg of juvenile Gulls which has a unique number/letter code on it. Each scheme for ringing has particular coloured rings – black characters on a white background in our case. The rings are readable at a distance (using binoculars or telescope helps) so birdwatchers can report the presence of individual Gulls wherever they are seen. This provides much more information about locations visited by individual birds than the traditional BTO metal ring which can only be read in the hand – which usually means that the bird has been found dead!

Last year was a poor year for the Gulls with only 79 young being ringed from 124 nests; on average containing 3 eggs each. The long wet period at the end of May prevented adults collecting sufficient food and chilled the young chicks and eggs. 2008 was a disastrous year – from an initial count of over 100 nests, only 2 young were present on the 19 June when the ringers visited the Island. There were still 21 nests containing eggs, so there was still a possibility of more young; but none appeared.

Once again it seems that very heavy rains, over 2.5 inches in a 9 day period at the end of May and early June, caused the death of almost all the small chicks and chilled the eggs which were near hatching. A few pairs fared better on Sandpiper Island and between 4 and 6 birds fledged from there. There was some good news in that as many as 10 pairs of Common Terns nested on the Island this year – there were none last year. From these nests 3 young were raised and fledged successfully.

Gulls are long lived birds (20 to 30 years) and their traditional coastal nest colonies are often inundated during rough weather, so the experience of the past 2 years is something they can withstand following on from 3 years with over 100 young raised each year. We still have the rings and hope for more success next year.

We have had news of one of the 2007 Black-headed Gulls chicks that was ringed at Moor Green on the 15th June – it was taken to a vet on the 24th January 2008 as a road casualty at Risca, Newport, Gwent, 159 km from Moor Green Lakes.

Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre

The Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre collects, collates and makes available information to help people make sound decisions about our natural environment in Oxfordshire and Berkshire. The information is also widely used for education and research purposes.

TVERC aims to hold all available information about the plants, animals, wildlife habitats and important wildlife and geological sites in Berkshire and Oxfordshire. There are many people collecting information about our natural environment and by collating all this information at TVERC, everyone can get a better picture of the status and distribution of wildlife.

To find out more about TVERC's work or to pass on your records please visit their website www.tverc.org.uk or contact Melanie Hardie at TVERC Berkshire, c/o Council Offices, Market Street, Newbury, Berkshire RG14 5LD.

