

MOOR GREEN LAKES GROUP NEWSLETTER August 2012



Dear Members

This must have been one of the most remarkable years for weather in living memory! How many times have we prepared to wear our summer clothing to find the rain pouring and rain gear and wellington boots essential! Sadly, this weather seems to have taken its toll of our breeding birds as young birds seem few and far between this year. Even Blue Tits and Great Tits struggled to find the caterpillars as they were washed off the leaves, and the impact on butterflies and moths has been no less dramatic. However, these things tend to be cyclical so, with a bit of luck and better weather, next year should see a bumper breeding season.

This newsletter, as always, contains items we hope will interest you and keep in touch with what's going on in the reserve and elsewhere. Feedback is welcome. We encourage contributions from any of our members no matter what their specific interests, only requiring that they are relevant to the interests of our readers. If you are unsure whether your idea is appropriate or even crafted suitably just ask me and I'll be glad to discuss it with you.

In every issue we make mention of the need for volunteers. As you will see on Page 5 Peter Scott mentions changes affecting the management of our reserve. Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership are regrettably, no longer able to provide as much time and effort to the reserve due to financial cutbacks. Peter shows how, with a little more help, we could carry on without detriment to the reserve. The work is not hard, its whatever you want it to be, even making the tea is helpful and it's a sociable event you'll enjoy! Please see if you can come along to one of our Sunday gatherings and try it out. Contact Peter Scott on scottpeterp@gmail.com or contact me to get details.

One key need now is for someone to help with watching the cattle expected to arrive later this month. It's easy for someone who is a regular visitor to the reserve. All you need to do is count the cattle and make sure they are in the right area! They will be on site probably until the end of the year when enough grass will have been munched! You may walk in the non public areas if required to count them and if there is a problem simply phone the contacts given to you. Our aim is to need people to do this just once a week – so can you help us with this please?

Finally, we make no apology for mentioning the Berkshire Bird Atlas again. Moor Green Lakes Group has sponsored birds but more help is needed. See more about it in this Newsletter. The Atlas editors are also looking for photographs of Berkshire rarities or typical Berkshire habitats in winter or summer so if you have a camera and interest in helping please contact me.

Enjoy the rest of the year at Moor Green Lakes!

Colin Wilson, Editor

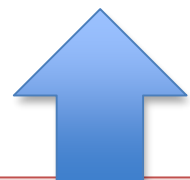
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Keen photographers
look here!



Membership subscriptions

Iain Oldcorn

Those of you that were able to attend our AGM on 1 March will recall that we indicated the need to increase our annual membership subscriptions from £3 to £5 for individuals and from £5 to £10 for families.

The background to the rise is that the fee has not been increased since 1998/9 while admin charges such as copying and postage have risen steadily as have maintenance costs for the upkeep of the reserve. In addition we need to invest significantly in extending the car park and to provide secure nesting facilities for terns and gulls.

Even with this increase, we believe that the subscriptions continue to give excellent value and so now the 2012/3 fees are due in late summer we do hope that you will renew; please remember to alter any direct payment arrangements if you have set them up with your Bank or Building Society.

It's been great knowing you.....

A message from Sue Dent of the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership



Leaving Blackwater Valley has meant saying a fond farewell to Moor Green Lakes and all who sail in her. I've had a fantastic 10 years working on the reserve and with the volunteers who manage it.

Some highlights? Seeing the display of summer flowers on the meadow last year, a real testament that everyone's hard work is paying off. Getting the bridleway from the car park surfaced – problem solved! A pontoon to get onto Long Island, how good is that? A March BBQ on Long Island in horizontal rain, not one of my better ideas. Simon Weeks frying 'puff balls' at a September BBQ was altogether more successful. And it has to be said, my recent favourite introducing goat grazing to Long Island, goat house and all. None of this would have been possible without the support, enthusiasm and, sometimes, patience of the MGLG members and other volunteers.

I would like to say a huge thank you to everyone I have worked with over the years. To Ken Crick who was Chairman when I started and put up with my early, if not too informed, enthusiasm. To Peter Scott his successor who did most of the hard work of planning the work on site and was unfailingly supportive. And most recently to Iain Oldcorn who is doing a great job of making sure the ship stays on course. And to the unsung heroes, all the volunteers who come out on task, come rain or shine, who have counted cows or checked mink traps. Thanks for making my time so memorable.

Sue Dent

(For those who are unaware of the relationship of BVCP to our reserve, they provide the expertise behind much of the project work and are responsible for the whole 23 miles of Blackwater Valley path and many adjacent areas, including nature areas and recreational facilities. BVCP is funded by many of the councils bordering the river and receives some funds from CEMEX for their support to Moor Green Lakes. Ed.)



More Moor Green Butterflies

John and Rachel Westmacott

In our last article we highlighted some of the family *Lycaenidae*, a group of small butterflies, of which we see some examples regularly on Moor Green Lakes Reserve. It is our intention to feature the hairstreak members of the family in this newsletter, but before doing so we must add another of the blues to our list. In late spring last year we were excited to find the first recorded example on the reserve, and indeed in the Blackwater Valley, of a **Brown Argus**, when we photographed an egg-laying female. This was followed in the summer by sightings of a small colony of these butterflies, which gives us hope that it may become firmly established on the reserve. The Brown Argus is classified as a 'blue' butterfly though it is not blue at all. It is a brown butterfly with orange markings round the wing edges, not unlike the brown form of the female Common Blue, but it has no blue on the upperwings and a different pattern on the underwings. The male is smaller than the female, and individuals are short-lived, surviving for only a matter of days. It flies in May-June and again in July-September, and because it reflects the sunlight appears silvery in flight. In recent years it has extended its range from chalk downland and dunes to other habitats including the grassland, and we hope that we shall regularly see this delightful butterfly around Moor Green.



Turning to the Hairstreaks, we have two breeding species at Moor Green, neither of which is very obvious to the casual observer. The **Purple Hairstreak** is widespread on the reserve, but because it is a tree-dweller it must be looked for with patience during its flight period of June-August. It frequents oak and ash trees and will often be seen flitting around the treetops; with binoculars it can be picked out resting on the leaves where it feeds on honeydew. The butterfly is small and dark but, when the sun catches a basking specimen, flashes of purple appear on the upperwings. More often it will be seen with closed wings crawling across leaves, the underwings being grey with a thin white line, the hairstreak, running down their length. Occasionally it comes down to rest on brambles or other bushes, and we have seen them along the pathways round Moor Green.



The other hairstreak, the **Green Hairstreak**, is even more elusive, largely because its emerald green colour enables it to blend in with the vegetation on which it lives. The only green British butterfly, it emerges in mid-late April and may survive into July. It occupies a variety of habitats but likes warm scrubby areas with gorse such as we have on the north side of Colebrook Lake North. It is inconspicuous and usually only gives away its presence when disturbed, flying about agitatedly before settling again. It always rests with its wings closed so the upper sides which are dark brown are only glimpsed in flight. Sometimes this butterfly appears on gorse or broom bushes along the paths at Moor Green and it may then be seen at close quarters.

Please continue to help in maintaining records of butterflies seen on the reserve by adding your sightings to the recording sheets in either Colebrook or Grove hides. Thank you.



Recent work on the reserve

Stuart Croft, BVCT

The volunteers have been hard at work in the recent months, with three tasks spent cutting back the lush paths and tracks to the hides, which had a growing spurt with all the rain. The newly laid hedges were cleared of goose grass to promote the hawthorn underneath and create a dense hedge, which is more beneficial for wildlife. Work was also undertaken on Tern Island, pulling ragwort, and repairing the MGL boat. Fleet Sea Scouts and Cubs joined us in June to learn about the abundant wildlife of the reserve, and get a chance to run about spotting trees.

The broken old fence by the bird feeders was removed by our happy volunteers shown here, and replaced with a sturdy new stock net fence which turned out surprisingly straight. Also our annual relocation of reeds to the Manor Farm reedbed is going well with over 50% of the tubers becoming established, and some sending out runners.



The barn owls on site are doing well this year with four chicks found in the southern Manor Farm box in our June Survey. Unusually, this year the chicks were ready to fledge, which was around a month early. This pattern has been reported nationally where the early hot spell in March is thought to have kick-started the breeding early. These results will feed into my ten-year report for all the twenty barn owl boxes erected across Wokingham Borough, with the summary typed up in the Autumn.



(Photo of Barn Owls by Martin Pickles)

The North Manor Farm box had two adult barn owls sitting on 12 eggs, a suspiciously high number which suggests that the breeding pair are infertile and retaining the previous years clutch.

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Work programme: 2012/2013

Peter Scott

The following is a 'draft' programme of site maintenance work to be carried out by volunteer groups this autumn and winter. The Sunday tasks will be run by the Moor Green Lakes Group itself and will take place on the second Sunday of each month, unless unforeseen events force changes. The Tuesday tasks will be managed by the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership (BVCP), but volunteers from the MGL group will be there and of course, are always welcome. The dates of these tasks have not yet been fixed, but they are likely to be in the second half of each month, so as not to be very close to the Sunday work.

We need more people to help with this work. This is even more so this year and in the future because financial constraints are forcing BVCP to reduce the effort that they are able to offer Moor Green: in fact it will be no more than half what they have done in recent years.



The number of volunteers turning out on Sundays has been relatively small on many occasions in the last couple of years. The programme reflects this by allocating 'smaller' jobs to Sundays than to Tuesdays. An extra (say) half-dozen volunteers on each Sunday would enable us to undertake an additional task each month, possibly making progress with the 'other jobs' listed below.

This plea for help is not new but it now has more urgency than in the past. So far we have managed to (just about) 'keep on top of' the most essential jobs, such as clearing scrub from the shores, thinning bramble on the grassland and clearing the bigger island of vegetation to make them suitable for breeding terns. Without more workers, the condition of the reserve's habitats will begin to suffer clear deterioration. If you wish to continue to see birds in the future, please come and help out, it is not physically hard. Just one or two tasks a year could make an impact.

	Sunday	Tuesday
September	a) Cut and rake 'meadow' near Colebrook hide. b) Maintain views from Colebrook hide and screen, and clear access to them.	a) Cut back invasive plants on north bank of Grove Lake. b) Clear internal track.
October	a) Trim hedge between car park and road. b) Prune hedge to maintain access along paths.	a) Clear scrub and cut back bramble on the western part of Long Island. b) Clear vegetation from various parts of Long Island
November	a) Thin scrub on bund of east scrape on north side of Long Island. b) Clear half of Goose Island. c) Clear saplings from shingle beach.	a) Clear scrub from shore of Long Island. b) Thin vegetation on Snipe I.
December	Clear Plover Island.	a) Cut back invasive plants on north bank of Colebrook Lake. b) Clear scrub from shore of Colebrook Lake N. c) Weed / renew vertical exposures.
January	Clear Tern Island.	a) Finish laying hedge south of Colebrook hide. b) Remake dead hedge (beside Colebrook scrape). c) Clear vegetation from Colebrook hide scrape.
February	a) Clear 'scallops' on north bank of Grove Lake. b) Restore scrape by Grove hide.	Thin vegetation on eastern half of Long Island.
March	Protect coppiced stumps with guards.	Plant reeds on Manor Farm site.

Other jobs.

- a) Clear ragwort. This is essential before cattle arrive on the reserve in late August and therefore needs an extra work party in advance of the above programme.
- b) Mend fences. The perimeter needs to be checked and repairs programmed (if required).
- c) (At least) make a start on clearing / pruning large trees on Long Island. It is possible that we might hire contractors to 'break the back of' this job, then maintain the situation with volunteers. Further consideration is needed.
- d) Dig out the ditch from Horseshoe Lake into Grove Lake, to maintain flow.

Host Surrey Hedge-laying Group, to continue laying hedge between the car park and Colebrook hide. Volunteers will be needed to collect and dispose of the brush created.

Moor Green Lakes Group Clothing

MGLG has available a range (Fleece and Polo/Sweat/T shirts) of high quality clothing in maroon, monogrammed in yellow/gold with our goosander motif above Moor Green Lakes Group. For details contact: iain.oldcorn@mglg.org.uk



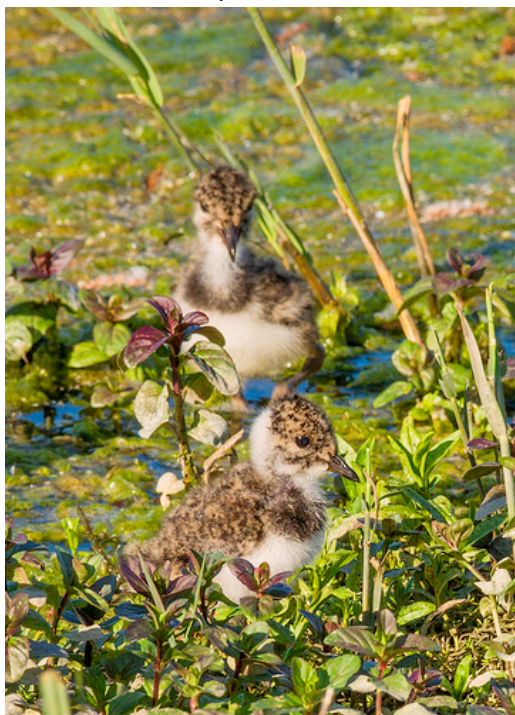
Observations on Breeding birds at Moor Green Lakes, 2012.

Roger Murfitt

Visitors to Moor Green Lakes this spring cannot fail to have noticed that Tern Island, on Colebrook Lake North, has been quieter than usual, lacking the usual noise and clamour of the gull/tern colony. This is the first year since their arrival in 2003 that there has been no colony of Black-headed gulls breeding on the island, whilst only a single pair of Common terns attempted to breed. Although the breeding gull/tern colony has been suffering from predation (believed to be from mink) for several years, it seems likely that the non-appearance of the colony this year is related to the founding of a significant new colony of both species on newly-created islands at Fleet Pond. We know that there is a good deal of interchange of terns at least between Moor Green Lakes and Fleet Pond so this may be where "our" birds have gone. However, these colonies can and do move around so we will have to await future developments.

On a more positive note, at least two pairs of Lapwings successfully hatched young on the islands of Colebrook Lake (though there was no evidence of successful fledging), Little Ringed Plovers attempted to breed but there was no evidence that Redshanks bred this year. At least three pairs of Great-crested Grebes have nested around Colebrook Lake, two broods of young Little Grebes have been seen on Manor Lake and several pairs of Tufted Duck ducklings have been seen on Manor Lake and the New Workings.

Amongst other species, is it just me or has it been a good spring for Garden Warblers? I have recorded up to eight singing males of this species around Colebrook and Grove Lakes this spring. We also have healthy populations of Reed Bunting, Reed Warbler, Whitethroat, Chiffchaff and Blackcap around the reserve, but only one Willow Warbler seems to have held territory this year, reflecting the significant decline in this species in southern England.



Finally, on a recent visit to the reserve with the family, we were treated to the unusual sight of a Buzzard carrying a snake as it soared above Colebrook Lake before gliding off to the Ridges. Buzzards have quite a varied diet and snakes may be on the menu more often than we think. Good birding!

Berkshire Bird Atlas - a summary update

Renton Righelato, Berkshire Ornithological Club

Ornithologists in Berkshire, including Moor Green Lakes members, have completed a full tetrad survey of the county. The fieldwork involved four hundred observers over four years, covering the whole county with winter and summer abundance surveys and recording of breeding status. The data, some 400,000 records, are now being analysed. Review and analysis of the records and preparation of the new atlas is underway, but we can give a provisional preview of results. The last (and first) Birds of Berkshire Atlas survey of breeding species was based on fieldwork done in 1987-9, so the current analysis allows us to measure the changes in status over twenty years.

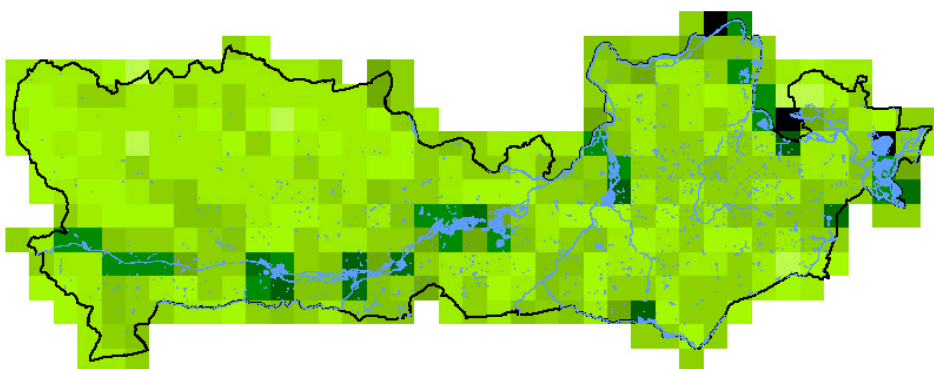


The total number of species confirmed to have bred in the county is (provisionally) 122, the same as in 1987-9, but there have been some important changes. A number of species have probably disappeared as breeders: Snipe, Wood Warbler, Hawfinch, all species that have been withdrawing from lowland Britain.

A number of other species are in serious decline. In addition to the Wood Warbler, other woodland specialists are declining fast, particularly the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Spotted Flycatcher and Willow Tit. There is probably no single cause to which these changes can be ascribed, but changes in woodland structure through changed management practices and grazing by deer are thought to play a part. Arable specialists are also faring badly: Turtle Dove, Cuckoo, Yellow Wagtail and Corn Bunting, for example, all show large declines in abundance. How much this is a result of changes in farming practice is unclear. In Berkshire over the last 20 years we have seen a large reduction in livestock and continued extension of oilseed rape and winter sown cereals. However, several of the declining species are sub-saharan migrants which may also be affected by the southward extension of the Sahel and by deforestation and other land use changes in central and southern Africa.

On the other hand, we have seen some species expanding dramatically, notably the birds of prey: Peregrine and Red Kite, which did not breed in Berkshire 20 years ago, are now well-established as are Buzzards. The new book will contain some remarkable comparisons. We now have Little Egret and Oystercatcher as new breeding species on gravel pits, which are now important havens for many species and, fortunately, many are protected. In and around our towns Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls now breed and the noisy Ring-necked Parakeet is fast expanding its range westward through Berkshire.

The overall picture is by no means bleak; but we must be concerned about the disappearance of many specialist habitat species. We want to use the atlas data, together with TVERC's habitat mapping and data on land use change to inform conservation planning and, we hope, help to retain and recover some of our most charismatic birds.



Avian species richness per tetrad observed ranged from 20 (lightest green) to 120 (darkest green). Wetland areas and rivers shown blue.



Atlas Sponsorship

Brian Clews

Whilst so much of the work has been done by volunteers and with help from the BTO, a project as complex and involved as this inevitably encounters expenditure e.g. venues for training sessions, necessary software, artwork and the ultimate publication and distribution of the books themselves. To meet these costs we have been actively fund-raising amongst both birdwatchers and Berkshire's industry.

The birding community of the Royal County have already raised over £6,700 through our 'Sponsor a Species' programme. Most of this has come in from individuals, but natural history groups, such as our very own Moor Green Lakes Group (Redshank, Teal and Goosander) have also got involved. However, there are still plenty of species awaiting an 'owner' so do look at www.berksoc.org.uk/atlas/species_available.pdf to make your selection. All species sponsors get mentioned in the Atlas itself and 20% reduction on the purchase price to recognise this support.

In addition, thousand of pounds have come in from businesses and local authorities and we hope to help bridge the remaining gap of a few more thousand through this means. An important issue to us is that we do not want the final Atlas to simply be read by an avid community of birdwatchers and then consigned to the bookshelf to gather dust. We want the important data it will contain to be available to a new generation of decision makers, conservationists, planners and land-management organisations to receive this information, Therefore, we are delighted that Eton College and the John Spedan Lewis Foundation have provided significant funds to enable us to distribute the book, free to schools, universities, libraries, local authorities etc in the county.

And finally, if our hopes and dreams are realised, when the print run has been sold, there will be a valuable fund arising from the proceeds which will be made totally available to conservation work in the county.

This project is probably the largest and most significant conservation initiative the county has seen since Charles Rothschild, exactly a century ago, inspired nature conservation by listing over 250 sites in UK in need of preservation, and included several Berkshire locations. So, if you haven't yet had the opportunity of supporting us, do please consider doing so, knowing you will be making a difference to future generations of birds in our delightful county.

More worm charming!

Colin Wilson

Most people think it's a joke when they hear about this subject but the last time the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust held a competition, someone (the eventual winner!) flew down from Scotland to take part!

I had my first experience on that occasion and it was great fun! Charming over 80 worms in 30 minutes was quite a surprise! We encourage children and grandchildren to come along as well, dress up (if they want) and sing, dance and play musical instruments as part of the fun side of the competition but the real key to encouraging worms out of the ground is vibration, largely done by wiggling a fork or other instrument in the ground.

The Trust is holding another competition at Holly Lodge School, opposite Snaky Lane Wildlife Area, Stratford Road, Ash Vale GU12 5PY at 11.00 am on 16th September and worms are guaranteed this time with such soft ground after a summer of rain! Teams of up to four invited.

Arrive a bit early and pay on the day, just £5 a plot and win a prize – its easy and its fun!

