

Moor Green Lakes Group

Newsletter January 2015



Is this a weasel or a Stoat? See Page 6 for the answer

Main Contents

Page 2	Stories from Moor Green – Stuart Croft
Page 3	Hibernating Butterflies – John Westmacott
Page 4	Walk the Path 2015 - BVCT
Page 5	Recent Bird Sightings – Roger Murfitt
Page 6	Moulsham Lane path – Editor and Autumn and Winter Work Parties – Peter Scott

AGM date is 19th March at Finchampstead Memorial Hall

A separate notice with details of the evening will be provided.
We look forward to seeing you then.

Volunteers are always needed for helping nature in the Blackwater Valley. Our Group always welcomes help for practical work parties or for some of the administrative duties. The Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust also needs helpers so please think about giving something back for nature. Contact Adrian Hobbs or Colin Wilson for details.

Stories from Moor Green by Stuart Croft, our BVCP Ranger

Gaggle of goats and volunteers

On the 2nd December Ben, Callum and I joined the volunteers at Moor Green Lakes, where we set up the pontoon to over to Long Island. The task was to cut the vegetation to open up the island for wintering wildfowl. We concentrated on north western end of Long Island to the view from Colebrook Hide. Our gaggle of eight goats do a sterling job munching bramble over the Autumn and a bit of a hand a couple of times a year.



walk
back
over-
the
clear

need

Chris and Tony Elston manned the motorscythe to cut the bramble whilst others set to work on the scrub. Shortly after tea break, when Andrew Pope led a mad dash to herd the goats away from our tasty sandwiches, Ben got the fire going. It was great having a roaring fire to entertain us and everyone was reluctant to leave the toasty spot at the end. Thank you to everyone for their hard work and Peter for looking after the goats, with 19 of us out that day it was a great task.

Chainsaw fun on the BV Path



On the 11th December Sarah, Callum and I cut down low trees overhanging the Blackwater Valley Path by Manor Farm in Finchampstead. This will make it much easier to mow the path next summer. There were enough awkward twisted willow trees to keep Sarah and I on our toes chainsawing, whilst Callum did a great job using the saw-on-a-stick to cut the high branches.

Birds of Berkshire – selling out!

A few copies of this highly praised publication are still available at a £5 discount to members of MGLG. Order yours from <http://berkshirebirdatlas.org.uk/the-birds-of-berkshire-atlas-avifauna/> 520 pages of information and a guide to the best birdwatching sites in the County. All proceeds go to Berkshire bird conservation. 85% of the print run has already been sold

Police activity at Moor Green Lakes

Some may have noticed police at Moor Green lakes over the Christmas / New Year holiday period. A male skeleton of indeterminate age was found in the Manor Farm workings. The police closed the car park which was used for their vehicles and equipment. Little further information has been made available but it was not apparently considered suspicious.

HIBERNATING BUTTERFLIES *By John Westmacott, Butterfly Recorder*

One of the interesting characteristics of Butterflies is their 'wintering arrangements'. In our last article we covered some of the migrant butterflies which fly off at the end of the summer to breed abroad, with the offspring returning the following year. Whilst most species over-winter in this country either in egg-form, or as caterpillars, or as pupae, a small number hibernate as adult butterflies, and three of these are featured below.

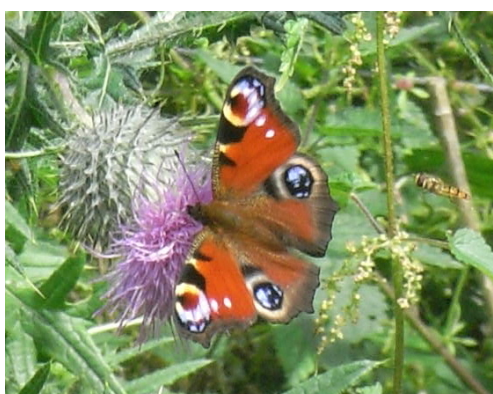
Perhaps the best known are the **Small Tortoiseshells** which hibernate in sheds, spare rooms, or roof spaces, even in churches. A lovely orange-brown butterfly patterned with black, yellow, white and blue markings, one that is well-known to gardeners for its habit of feeding on buddleia bushes and michaelmas-daisies. Adults surviving the winter appear in early spring, and their offspring will fly in June and July. There will then second brood from August onwards. Numbers vary greatly, and there has been much speculation as to the reason for this. It may simply be the result of changing weather patterns, but the Small Tortoiseshell is subject to parasitoids which prey upon its caterpillars, and this may be a contributing factor. After a disappointing year at Moor Green in 2013, last year was a good one for this butterfly and we hope that it will continue to be one of our most familiar species.



it is

be a

The **Peacock**, the butterfly with its four large 'eyes' on the upper and lower wings may be seen at almost any time of the year. It generally hibernates in holes in trees, or crevices or other dark spaces, often in considerable numbers. When it awakens on warm spring days, the males establish individual territories to attract females for mating. They are often seen feeding on spring-flowering trees and bushes at Moor Green. The butterfly lays its eggs on the underside of stinging nettle leaves, and, after hatching, the mass of black caterpillars spin a web round themselves and over the head of the nettle to devour the nutritious tips. As they exhaust the supply of leaves they move on to another nettle and repeat the process.



Eventually they disperse to pupate. In late July into August the adults hatch and spend the rest of the summer and autumn feeding themselves up for hibernation.

The third of the hibernating butterflies is the **Comma**, an attractive orange-brown insect with black markings and ragged edges to its wings; it can be mistaken for a small fritillary. It gets its name from a little white comma visible on the underside of its lower wing when closed. The Comma hibernates in woods seeking out places where dead leaves accumulate, so complementing the camouflage effect of its closed wings. The first butterflies awake in early spring and may be seen feeding on catkins and other spring flowers. There are usually two broods, one emerging in early summer, and the second flying in late September. The Comma is regular at Moor Green seen feeding on bramble flowers, and, later, on the ripe blackberries. It has a fast flight with frequent glides, and is most delightful butterfly.



a

WALK THE PATH – discover this natural gem on your doorstep

Get your walking shoes on and explore the area's most delightful natural feature, right under your nose: the Blackwater Valley. At the end of April the **Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust (BVCT)** is offering outdoor fans the opportunity to join an organised walk along the Blackwater Valley Path, which includes a few special sections not normally open to the public.

The River Blackwater is a hidden gem right on your doorstep. On **Sunday 26th April** participants in 'Walk the Path 2015' will be able to enjoy the last 17 kilometres (10 miles) of its Path, from Sandhurst to Swallowfield including the stretch past Moor Green Lakes – a riverside walk passing through beautiful rural countryside and a delightful variety of habitats.

This highly successful event – now in its 10th year – is organised by the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust and is extremely popular, with over 250 booked last year. In previous years the walk has proved to be a highly enjoyable day for participants as it features:

- transport at either the walk start or finish (because it's a linear walk);
- refreshment points en route;
- a collection service for participants if they are unable to finish the walk for whatever reason;
- variable start times from 9.15 - 11am to avoid congestion;
- a walk leader, back marker and designated walk guides;
- route maps so you can walk at your own pace.

Bring your friends and family, invite your neighbours, make up a group or come alone and walk this most beautiful part of the Blackwater Valley. If you've never explored this area of the Berkshire/Hampshire borders, this is the perfect opportunity to do so. Pre-booking is essential and places are limited - last year's event sold out. Taking part costs just £6 for BVCT members and £10 per person for non-members.

Full details including online booking can be found on the Trust website www.bvct.org.uk. Alternatively leave a message on 07825 469108.



BVCP and BVCT – are you puzzled by them?

Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership (BVCP) is what it suggests a Partnership of Councils in the Blackwater Valley. Not all councils contribute money but those that do help maintain the Blackwater Valley Path and local paths, recreational and wildlife sites. Funds from CEMEX help with BVCPs time at Moor Green Lakes.

The Trust BVCT has similar aims but is a Registered Charity and raises money Councils cannot access and has members to help fund projects throughout the valley. Examples are reedbed restoration at Frimley, resurfacing a path at Aldershot, installing bird and bat boxes and benches (such as the one at Moor Green Lakes).

Recent bird sightings (July to Dec 2014)

By Roger Murfitt (*Bird Recorder*)

In terms of breeding species, the Black-headed Gull and Common Tern colony on Tern island escaped the regular predation events that we have for several years. This coupled with some clement summer weather resulted in good productivity from the gulls with a count of at least 51 juveniles on and around the island in July representing an underestimate. The Common Terns were nesting among dense weed growth at the west end of island and so were difficult to monitor but several young were seen being fed at the edge of the island. As mentioned in the last Newsletter, there was a good brood of 6 young Barn Owls in the Manor Lake box and it has become evident that 2014 has been a very good year for breeding Barn owls countrywide due to the combination of better weather conditions and high vole numbers. These factors have also meant a good breeding season for Kestrels and "our" pair seems to have raised at least two young as a family party of 4 was seen on the reserve in late August. There were also good numbers of young Tufted Ducks with at least 7 broods counted during July.

Autumn wader passage was moderately good, not helped by an increase in water levels just as muddy edges started to be exposed on the New Workings. Despite this, counts of up to 6 Common Sandpipers and 5 Green Sandpipers were made as well as single Dunlin and Greenshank, whilst a flock of 5 Sanderlings was seen on 14th September. Passage of raptors was varied with the star turn being a Black Kite briefly over the New Workings on 20th July (a first for the site). The supporting cast consisted of 2 Marsh Harriers, a brief Osprey perched in the dead tree on Manor Farm on 12th September, a Honey Buzzard reported on 5th Sept and a Merlin seen on 11th Nov over East Fen.

Kingfishers became more noticeable in the autumn and were quite regular, and one was even seen apparently carrying a goldfish. The feral flock of Barnacle Geese began to visit the reserve again from August, having last been seen in the Spring, boosted in numbers by young of the year. Other features of the autumn period were regular Hobbies, with up to 3 seen together, and the beginnings of a roost of Little Egrets at the east end of the site, which has held up to 11 birds. An unusual record was of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker on 27th September, the first record for the site since 2011 and an increasingly scarce bird across the country.

December brought yet another new species for the site in the form of 2 Whooper Swans which visited Colebrook lake briefly on 10th December and on 7th December there was another sighting of a Water Pipit in the same area as the spring bird on the edge of the New Workings. Wildfowl numbers have been relatively slow to build up in this first winter period, probably reflecting the lack of a significant cold spell to push birds in from the Continent. A brief freeze after Christmas did result in high roost counts of 78 Goosander (as other waters used for roosting iced over) and 83 Cormorants, both on Grove lake on 29th December. A Jack snipe seen on the same day had likely been displaced by the frozen ground.

(A male scorpion fly from the Reserve.
By Martin Seward)



© MARTIN SEWARD

Access path from Moulsham Lane

The Group's Treasurer Steve Arnold alerted BVCT to the state of the footpath and bridleway from Moulsham Lane to our Reserve. Over many years a good grade of path has been submerged under a carpet of dead leaves and weeds. As the trees have grown over the sun and wind have been unable to help dry the surface leaving accumulating mud. The Trust has funded work by BVCP and, with the aid of Trust, Moor Green and student volunteers on 15th and 16th January, undertook a first set of tasks by cutting back encroaching vegetation and overhanging branches to creating better drying conditions. Subject to funding, a second remedy will be obtaining machinery to scrape the surface which is still strong in many places. Once the path has been reassessed after the scraping the Trust will see if it can fund Phase 2, if needed, to resurface critical sections. A separate section of path at the bridge has existed but become overgrown while walkers have used the muddy bridleway, the path has been reopened now and will benefit from regular use.



Is it a weasel or a stoat?

The picture on Page 1 does not show two critical identification features. The first is the tip of the tail which is black on a stoat. The second is the underbelly where the pale merges into the brown upperside on a weasel but is a clean division on a stoat. One other feature has been removed by Global Warming! The ermine coat of a stoat is not developed in mild winters and for this picture, taken in January, it might have helped!

So the balance of opinions seems to focus on weasel mainly due to size compared to the leaf litter although only a few centimetres difference exists.

In my personal experience stoats seem to appear more readily than weasels and I have seen the black tips to the tails. Numbers are about even in the UK so you could come across either!

Editor (with thanks to Bernard Baverstock and Martin Seward)

Autumn / winter work parties

Peter Scott

The Sunday and Tuesday work parties (aided by cattle and goats 'borrowed' from Millers Ark) have once again made good progress in maintaining habitat variety on site. Several days have been spent cutting back scrub along the northern shores of Colebrook and Grove Lakes so that these are probably clearer than they have been for a few years. The north-west quarter of Long Island has been cleared of the dense, low-lying bramble that was becoming impenetrable and much of Plover Island has been returned to the bare-shingle state that is desirable. Clearance of Tern Island, scheduled for 11 January, had to be postponed when the boat and outboard motor (borrowed from the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership) were unavailable: this will now be attempted in February. Other tasks to be tackled in the next two months are hedgelaying and track clearance along the public footpath around the perimeter of the reserve, and fitting tree guards around the newly-coppiced stumps in the woodland around the southern side. If the weather continues to be kind to us, these plans should be accomplished.