

Moor Green Lakes Group

Newsletter September 2015



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Dragonflies and Damselflies

Our Recorder Chris Bean is unable to continue in this role and we are delighted Stuart Croft has volunteered to take it on. Please post your sightings in the hide, they are very helpful. Many thanks to Chris for his past help as Recorder.

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.

Cattle-watchers needed

By Peter Scott

We now have three calves on the reserve, helping to keep the vegetation in check. It's likely that two or three more cattle will arrive in the autumn.

A small group of volunteers checks that the animals are alive and well. Ideally they should be checked daily, but this is difficult with the current size of the team, so we need more volunteers. Quite often the check can be done with the aid of binoculars from the footpath surrounding the reserve, but the animals sometimes hide themselves and then it is necessary to go onto the reserve to find them. This can be regarded as a good excuse to see the reserve and its wildlife from a new angle.

The cattle aren't at all aggressive and no special precautions are needed – just the careful watchfulness that one would observe around any large animal. If you are interested in helping with this job and would like to know more, please contact Peter Scott on 01252 878205.

Bruce Archer

By Roger Murfitt

The Moor Green Lakes Management Committee would like to express their sincere thanks, on behalf of the MGL Group, to Bruce Archer who retired from his role on the MGL Committee at the AGM in March 2015. Bruce had been a member of the MGL team since 2004 and had made a very significant contribution to the running of the reserve. He served in a number of roles including Treasurer, Webmaster and Nestbox monitor, and was one of the MGL representatives on the Steering Committee and Eversley Quarry Liaison Committee.

As well as his official roles, Bruce was a very committed birder as far as Moor Green Lakes was concerned, putting in a lot of time birding on site, and was duly rewarded with some of the more unusual sightings of scarce birds that pass through. He was instrumental in developing the Groups first website (mglg.org.uk) and had the vision and drive to get a nest-chamber dug into Plover island specifically for Shelduck. It is perhaps appropriate that it was this year that the latter has borne fruit with the first nesting of Shelduck at Moor Green Lakes, apparently in the very same nest chamber!

Things that go on.....

By Ed.

Some members or visitors may not always realise how many things go on behind the scenes or perhaps, unobtrusively, while they enjoy our Reserve.

The Committee and a loyal group of volunteers undertake many tasks not obviously known about by members. Have a look at a few of the activities in the last few months;

- Repairing the height barrier to car park (Thanks to our neighbour, Slavey for his help)
- Redesigning the Moor Green Lakes Group leaflet
- Repairing Barn Owl box damage
- Checking of cattle on the reserve
- Planning and installing new waste bins (estimates, designs etc) – see picture
- Organising and assessing the Membership Survey
- All the nestbox, butterfly, dragonfly, plant and other surveys done by our team

Needless to say, other things happen, ponies encroaching, police visits, volunteer work parties etc. So can you help to share the load is the question? Use the contact form on the website to see if you can.

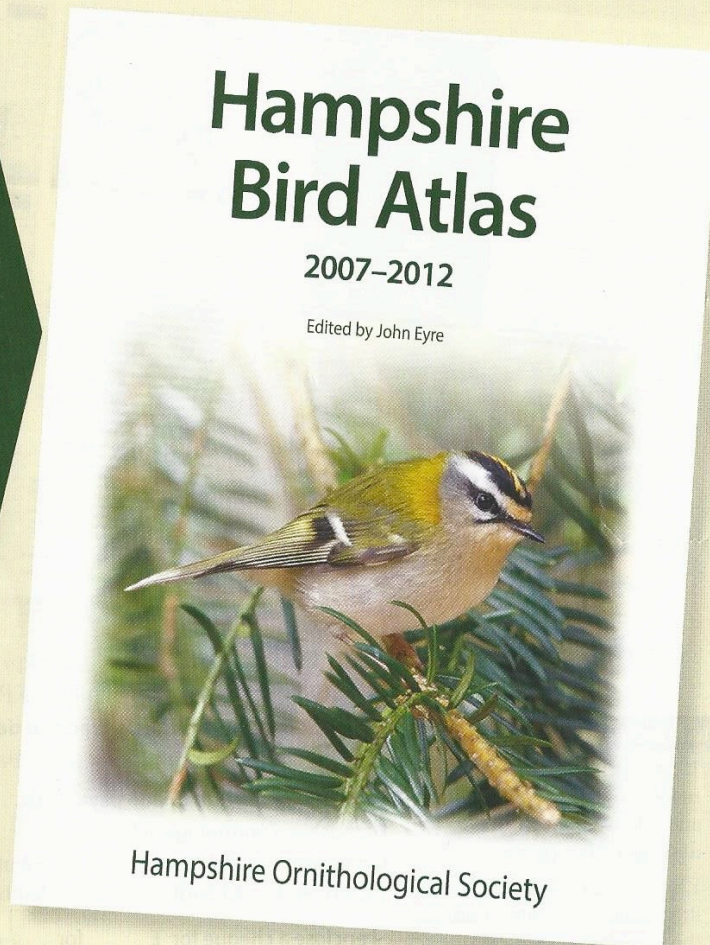


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Moor Green Lakes Member Survey – Highlights

By Steve Arnold

Firstly a big thank you to all of our members who completed our first online survey. The response rate was nearly 50% which is a great result. This article is just some of the insights from the survey.

Why did we do a survey?

Two main reasons, firstly our membership numbers over the last 3 years have declined, not by a lot, but the trend is there. We wanted to check that we were not missing something obvious that our members want and we are not providing. This does not seem to be the case. One interesting result was that 71.5% people thought our membership fees are about right, 28.5% thought they are too little, but astonishingly nobody thought they were too much. And 100% of respondents thought the subscription provides gives good value. This is a really positive result. Just a reminder, you are welcome to make a donation alongside your subscription.

The conclusion about declining membership is we are possibly not marketing Moor Green Lakes Group enough to attract new members and replace the inevitable churn in membership numbers. The second reason for doing the survey is looking ahead. As you may know, CEMEX, should complete the extraction and restoration of Manor Farm and Fleet Hill Farm over 2 to 4 years. Exact timing still unknown. It is likely, when restoration is complete, the new landowner will be the RSPB. This is not yet a certainty, no deals have yet been signed, so this could still change.

One question we had was understanding what organisations our members belong too. Over 82% are RSPB members, over 56% National Trust, nearly 20% Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust and around 12% for both the Woodland Trust and Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. On reflection this is not surprising. People who have become members of Moor Green Lakes Group, are likely to be people happy to join environmentally friendly organisations. Add to that the benefit of hide access to members, which will appeal to bird enthusiasts and the RSPB percentage is no surprise.

Please continue to support Moor Green Lakes Group. We hope in the coming months/years we will get a better understanding of the potential working relationship with the future land owners. It will undoubtedly be very different to the relationship with CEMEX.

Regarding the Car Park, 80% of the respondents found it adequate, and there were some nice comments about the recent small changes that have been made. It is still hoped to one day expand the car park, but it depends on planning permission and funding.

Several people complained about the opening hours. This is tricky because we rely on volunteers to open and close the car park. Also it would be unwise to leave it open 24/7 as this would increase the likelihood of fly tipping and youngsters using it as an evening meeting place.

One question we did not ask, was the age group of our members, although we can make a good guess. However over 75% of the respondents have been members for 3 or more years. Lastly it is important to remember this was a member survey and not a Moor Green Lakes visitor survey.

We will be publishing the survey results on the website soon, and continue looking through the comments we received. So once again, thank you to the people who did complete the survey. We appreciate your input.

Moth recording field meeting at Moor Green Lakes, 13th June 2015

By Ian Sims

During a survey conducted at Moor Green Lakes in 2011 by Jon Cole and Ian Sims a strong population of the Small Elephant Hawk-moth (*Deilephila porcellus* Linn.) was identified. On the 6th June 2015 a field meeting was held between the British Entomological & Natural History Society, the Berkshire Moth Group and the Moor Green Lakes Group, with the dual aim of assessing the continuing health of the Small Elephant Hawk-moth population and recording other species of nocturnal Lepidoptera.

A total of four 120w mercury vapour light traps were operated around Colebrook Lake North from 22.00-hrs on the 13th to 05.00-hrs on the 14th (Fig. 1). These attracted a total of 84 species of macro-Lepidoptera and 21 species of micro-Lepidoptera.

I'm pleased to report that the population of Small Elephant Hawk-moth (Fig. 2) is still doing very well, with over 20 freshly emerged (pristine) individuals being seen during the meeting. Most came to the lights between 22.00 and midnight, with a second smaller flight before dawn (around 03.00). Three other species of hawk-moth were recorded: singletons of the Elephant (*D. elpenor* Linn.) (Fig. 3) and Eyed Hawk-moths (*Smerinthus ocellata* Linn.) (Fig. 4), while 2 of the nationally commoner Poplar Hawk-moth (*Laothoe populi* Linn.) (Fig. 5) were also seen. Other good records included the Poplar Lute-string (*Tethea or* ([D. & S.])), Grass Rivulet (*Perizoma albulata* ([D. & S.])), Least Black Arches (Herr.-Schaff.) and Bird's Wing (*Dipterygia scabriuscula* (Linn.)).

(All photos are subject to copyright)



Fig. 1. Paul Black's light traps on the west bank of Colebrook Lake North.



Fig. 2. Small Elephant Hawk-moth



Fig. 3 Elephant Hawk-moth



Fig. 4. Eyed Hawk-moth



Fig. 5. Poplar Hawk-moth

Himalayan Balsam – thank you

By Steve Arnold

As you may already know, Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) is an attractive plant that easily colonises river banks and waste land, and has become a major weed problem in the UK. It is one of the UK's most widespread invasive weeds.

Two of us from the Moor Green Lakes Group committee (myself and John), spent several sessions along the river adjacent to the reserve, trying to clear the Balsam. If you have been walking along the river path you might have seen one or both of us.

One problem with Himalayan Balsam is when the seeds ripen they explode and can be ejected several feet. Our objective was to try and make sure any sign of the weed on the reserve was removed – there was one infested area alongside Grove Lake - and clear along the river edge to try and prevent the infestation jumping the path. Sadly it is a task that will need repeating each year.

Research at CABI (see www.cabi.org) is investigating a rust that may be useful as a biological control. However it is still some years away before it will be available. So in the meantime, pulling the weed out is about the best we can do.

We would like to thank everyone who has done a bit of clearing while walking around the reserve. I know of at least two other people who have been involved in pulling the alien invader. As a well-known supermarket says, every little helps.

We hope that next year we can be a bit more organised and have a balsam bashing day or days.

Moor Green Lakes Barn Owls

For some years now the Barn Owls have been monitored by Stuart Croft as part of a Wokingham Borough wide programme. Years vary considerably and this years results were not very good. A small team helps Stuart clearing the pathways, carrying the ladders and repairing the boxes! The results this year for the three Moor Green boxes were as follows:

- Moor Green Lakes pole-box - One kestrel in the attic and one barn owl with a failed clutch of 3 eggs in the bottom
- Manor Farm pole-box - the attic was empty and one barn owl was in the bottom
- Manor Farm tree-box (near river) – One barn owl. We found and replaced the broken door. (This was broken when the police investigation into human remains was carried out – see last Newsletter).

Much depends on the availability of food which is often cyclical so next year may be completely different! See Bernard's next article for information on small mammals.....



Small Mammals at Moor Green Lakes Reserve

By Bernard Baverstock

Those of you who attended the mammal trapping at 2014's open day may have been surprised by the number of animals we had in the traps, 36 animals from 45 traps. 2014 was obviously favourable for small mammals but the population of these different species is known to fluctuate over the years, most famously in Lemmings, and it is difficult to pin-point what causes this phenomenon.

One could assume that with this high population going into a mild winter, that there would be a good survival rate and therefore a large population in the following spring. This was not the case at Moor Green in 2015, when the same area was trapped in May, of the 40 traps set, only two shrews were caught.

This remarkable result is impossible to explain and researching other peoples work on such population cycles has not given me a definitive answer. It seems that researchers have concluded that certain factors, by themselves, do not cause these cycles but that it is probably a combination of factors which influence population dynamics. This is a bit vague but in respect of our reserve there was not much difference in habitat between the two sessions, no major changes were done over the winter, so one would assume the food source might be good but it could be that the high numbers of animals ate themselves out of available food before the spring. Another factor locally was the success of the Barn owls, 2014 was generally a good breeding year for barn owls which were obviously taking advantage of the bumper food source. At the end of the year there would have been more birds needing to find food in the naturally restricted habitats and this would have put a lot of pressure on small mammal populations.

Should we be worried about this year's decline?

It might seem dramatic but it is a well-recognised occurrence, even if poorly understood, and no doubt the animals are busy building up their numbers, so the owls will just have to wait for a better breeding season in the future. Look out for our Annual Report where the answer may be found!

Trust clears the way *by Colin Wilson*

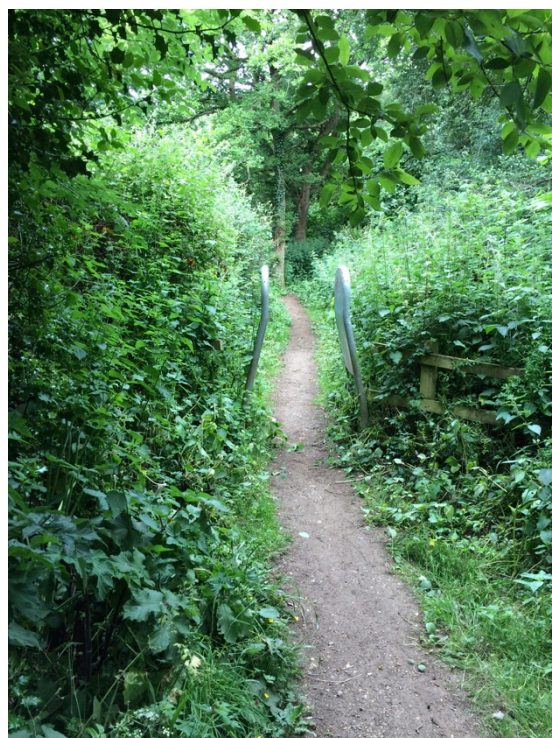


Treasurer Steve Arnold takes a regular walk from his home in Yateley to Moor Green Lakes via the footpath from Moulsham Lane. Last year he reported how wet and muddy the surface was and how the undergrowth was encroaching on the path. Several 'new routes' had been forced by walkers, avoiding mud and brambles.

The Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust is perhaps best known for its wildlife oriented projects but on hearing of this problem the Trust exercised its role in also encouraging access for people in the valley and took on the task of improving the path.

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As readers can guess, the cost of resurfacing long paths is very high but this path has a good base having been constructed when the gravel company originally set up the adjacent working site. After an initial inspection and review, volunteers aided by the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership staff (paid for by the Trust), cleared the encroaching bramble and overhanging tree branches to increase the sunlight and air to the path, thus helping it to dry better. The volunteers also opened up the original footpath that runs parallel to a separate bridlepath section at the bridge end.



Phase two of the project was to remove the mud and accumulated debris to expose the harder surface beneath. This was done by hiring heavy machinery to scrape the surface and improve the drainage at the points where flooding, especially in winter, affects the path most. Again, the Trust paid for the assistance of the BVCP staff to provide the expertise needed for the job.

Those using the footpath will hopefully have noticed a great improvement this summer. Of course, we await the experience in winter when we will see if the flooding has been largely rectified.

The Trust is hopeful Steve and many others can once again enjoy this attractive route in all seasons!

If you know of a path in the Blackwater Valley that is well used and in need of attention please contact the Trust via its website contact page (Project Assistance) <http://www.bvct.org.uk/contact-us/> and they will see what they can do.

Recent bird sightings at Moor Green Lakes, Jan to June 2015

By Roger Murfitt

During the first winter period of 2015, the "resident" pair of Smew was joined by a third redhead (probably a juvenile male) from 10th Feb and they were last seen 23rd Feb, presumably heading back North to their breeding grounds. A normally sea-going Scaup was seen on 18th and 23rd Jan and there was another sighting of a Dartford Warbler. This was in the Fen area of the New Workings on 5th Jan, and follows a sighting in the same area in the previous autumn, so is likely to be the same bird wintering. Another winter visitor, the Jack Snipe, is notoriously difficult to flush and you virtually have to step on them to make them fly. Hence although they are annual visitors to the reserve, they can be very difficult to see. However, I saw one flushed from the margin of Colebrook Lake North whilst clearing willows from the lake margin on 11th Jan; one of the benefits of getting involved with working parties (shameless plug!). We had been working in the area for at least half an hour before the bird finally took off at the feet of a worker. I was also fortunate to see another on 23rd April – this bird was flushed from East Fen, along with all the other waders (2 Greenshank, 3 Common Snipe and 1 Redshank) by a low-flying hot air balloon!

Spring migration got under way with an early Wheatear on 12th March whilst Sand Martins were first recorded on 29th March. There was a good Spring migration of waders this year as the water level on the New Workings was reduced by pumping in order to facilitate the start of land-filling operations. This had the beneficial effect of revealing sandy islands/bars which were quite attractive to waders. There were a number of sightings of Dunlin with small flocks of eleven on 26th April and seven on 9th May, Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers, a Turnstone on 25th April, Curlew, Whimbrel and a single Black-tailed godwit. Other passage birds included Arctic Tern in April, Whinchat, Yellow Wagtail, Marsh Harrier on 20th April and an Osprey on 17th May which paused briefly over the New Workings before heading on westwards. Breeding activity began in late Feb as Black-headed Gulls began to dispute territories on Tern Island and a pair of Oystercatcher (presumably last year's successful pair?) also took up residence there. Space for the gulls on Tern Island (approx 40 nests) and the Tern rafts (8+ nests) was at a premium and some gulls also nested on Plover Island (8 nests) and there were even a few nests on clumps of rushes on East Fen. Common Terns also nested on Tern Island, perhaps 5 pairs but difficult to be sure as they were hidden amongst vegetation. The Oystercatcher hatched out 3 young in early May and although within about 10 days two of these had disappeared, the remaining chick survived to fledging. Also nesting on Tern Island and bravely sitting tight amongst the raucous clamour of the gulls, was a pair of Lapwings, which hatched 3 young in late May. They soon moved the young birds to Colebrook Lake



scrape, the chicks presumably swimming across though there is anecdotal evidence that Lapwings will sometimes carry their young in their legs! The damp scrape provides better feeding conditions for chicks but is less secure than Tern Island from

ground predators and unfortunately on 31st May the adults were alone on the scrape calling forlornly with no young to be seen! The gull colony also suffered from predation with all the nests on Plover Island failing, perhaps due to a visit from a fox (as this island is relatively close to the bank), whilst several times I witnessed a Carrion Crow flying in low to land on Tern Island, despite heavy mobbing from the gulls. The crow seemed to know to move around close to the fencing a lot of the time, which made it very difficult for dive-bombing gulls as they had to pull up to miss the fence. The gulls still succeeded in fledging reasonable numbers of young and at least 2 broods of young terns fledged.

It was a good Spring for Redshank on the reserve, with up to 6 seen in April and a good deal of territorial activity, particularly on Plover Island and on the north bank of Colebrook Lake

North nearby. It seems that the winter clearance of marginal shrubs and brambles in this area had the desired effect of making it more attractive to breeding waders. I was delighted, therefore, on the evening of 19th May to see a newly hatched young Redshank at the water's edge with 2 adults nearby sounding the alarm. As I watched a fox ran past only about 10 yards away but luckily it had already caught a rabbit. This is the first time that young Redshank are known to have hatched on the reserve since 2008. Unfortunately the young bird(s) disappeared within 3 days but then on 28th May another brood of 3 young just 1-2 days old was seen at the water's edge though these also suffered the same fate and quickly disappeared. Amongst the wildfowl, a Gadwall female was seen with 6 ducklings and a new breeding species for the reserve was recorded when a pair of Shelduck with 9 newly-hatched ducklings was seen on Colebrook Lake North on 15th May. Unfortunately the latter brood gradually declined in numbers over the ensuing days until all the ducklings had disappeared – in this case maybe pike are responsible for some of the losses as they do predate upon ducklings.

To sum up then, an interesting period with some good passage birds and an eventful breeding season, but with our ground-nesting waders finding it hard to successfully rear young. This is a common trend nationwide where several reserves are resorting to electrified fencing to protect ground-nesting birds from mammalian predators, not something we are able to achieve at Moor Green Lakes at present.



Photographs by Roger Murfitt both taken on Colebrook Lake North scrape in May 2015