

January 2024



Moor Green Lakes Group Newsletter



*Company on a cold winter's day while bird ringing takes place!
by Colin Wilson*

Contents

- Page 2 - Moor Green Work Parties
- Page 3 - Bird sightings July - December 2023
- Page 4 - Bird photos from July - December 2023
- Page 5 - What is in a name?

Latest News

Work creating the new bridleway at Manor Farm (immediately to the west of MGL), is progressing. Fencing, bridge works and drainage to be completed during spring 2024. Anticipated opening of the new path is May/June 2024.

Moor Green Lakes Work Parties

by Jane Heritage

We started the 2023/24 season in September with 17 volunteers turning up to help with our annual task of clearing the reeds from in front of Grove Hide to give a clear view of the lake during the autumn and winter. In addition, we cleared the stream that runs past the hide and some saplings were removed from around the nearby acidic scrape.

In October a fantastic 24 turned out to tackle another annual task of clearing the vegetation from Tern Island. This is a task we have really managed to get on top of over the last few years so a small group was able to complete the job in the morning. Others were able to clear the acidic scrapes in front of Colebrook hide and remove the willow along Colebrook Lake North western shoreline. We managed to remove more willow than in other years, creating an excellent new view of the lake from the footpath leading from the car park to the River Blackwater.

In November 22 volunteers moved on to clearing Plover Island, a much more challenging task than Tern Island owing to the large amounts of both bramble and bracken. Access was via the pontoon, making it easier to get rid of the large amounts of vegetation. Having such a good turn out of volunteers enabled us to clear almost of the island. In addition, yet more lakeside willow was removed from along the nearby shoreline.

December was wet but it didn't stop the group of 21 enjoying more than a few Christmas goodies and warming mulled wine (non-alcoholic, of course) during the breaks. Thanks to all who brought treats! The task was to work in the meadow north of Colebrook Lake North, removing yet more shoreline willow, gorse and bramble.

Over the years, small and large clumps of gorse and bramble have encroached on the meadow, restricting the areas available for wild flowers. They are both good habitat for many species of wildlife but they are plentiful in other areas of the reserve so removing them from this area helps keep the much more limited meadow habitat.

In general, our policy is to avoid having a bonfire but we did have one in December, mainly to get rid of the gorse and bramble (and warm us on a dismal, wet day!). Some willow was also burnt but some was used to create a dead hedge.

As well as the Moor Green managed work parties on the Sundays, BVCP manage additional work parties on the Tuesday following each Sunday. Tasks tackled on these days have included:

- Hay cutting in the paddock.
- Removing and dismantling the tern rafts.
- Clearing and widening many tracks and removing some areas of bramble on the reserve - BVCP rangers Eddie & Matt used a remote control Robomower, a most impressive and time saving piece of equipment.
- Cutting of trees overhanging the car park and fill the potholes. The entrance gate was rubbed down but, owing to the rain, the painting has been left until the weather is dry and warmer.
- Clearing the view to the owl box from Colebrook hide.
- Continuing the meadow and willow clearance along Colebrook North.
- Cutting extra bee verticals and clearing scrub to ensure they get full sun along Colebrook North.
- Removing the internal gate to Grove Lake in preparation for the installation of a new gate.

All the above add up to an impressive list of jobs, which we could not do without the help of our regular volunteers and a few who have joined us for the first time.

Work party dates for your 2024 diary:

- Sunday 11 th and Tuesday 13 th February
- Sunday 10 th and Tuesday 12 th March

Currently, hedge-laying and coppicing has been achieved in January. Jobs for February and March are yet to be decided. Many thanks to all the volunteers for their hard work throughout the year - every hour's effort counts and it really does make a difference.

We look forward to seeing you all again soon.

Joint Work Party Leaders

Jane Heritage, Duncan Clark, Jon Needes and Sarah Elston.

JOIN A WORK PARTY

Anyone interested in joining us can make contact via workparties@mglg.org.uk.

Meet nice people, learn about the reserve and its wildlife and get some free exercise - it's great fun!

Bird sightings July to December 2023

by Robert Godden, Bird Recorder

For many birdwatchers, autumn is the most exciting time with birds migrating and the possibility of something a bit more unusual turning up. The autumn return bird passage was soon in full swing in July with a variety of waders reported. Curlews are scarce visitors to Moor Green Lakes with even fewer reported each year than Whimbrels, so three Curlews on Jul 1st was a notable record. A Common Sandpiper was reported on many dates in July, while Green Sandpiper numbers built up to a peak of seven on Jul 22nd. There were three arrivals of Black-tailed Godwits: up to seven between Jul 3rd and 5th, and singles on Jul 10th, and on Jul 15th and 16th. A Ruff was a good find on Jul 8th and 9th – bright chestnut fringes to feathers on the upperparts indicated that it was still in summer plumage, though just a tuft of its white ruff remained. Mediterranean Gulls that had been largely absent during the spring made a surprise appearance with three adults late evening on Jul 3rd and one on the 4th, presumably just there to roost.

The Goosander family made a welcome return mid-July; by now the young were well grown so that it was hard to pick out the female adult amongst a group of eight seen on the river on Jul 12th. Reports of breeding activity were coming to an end – there was a final brood of six Gadwall ducklings on Finch Pond, four young Little Grebes were on West Fen, there were four Common Tern nests on Tern Island, and the Redshanks were last seen on the 6th. Reports resumed of what was probably the same Marsh Harrier that was present last autumn and in the spring. In August it was apparent that the bird was moulting, and when it started to grow a grey feather in its tail, its identity as a male in its second summer was known. It was interesting to watch the progression of the moult, resulting in a combination of a dull version of an adult male's together with the cream-coloured crown of a juvenile. The bird remained until Oct 15th but on at least one occasion in that time, a second Marsh Harrier, a juvenile, was present.

In August, migrant waders included single Wood Sandpipers on the 7th and 24th, and a Ringed Plover also on the 24th. Migrant passerines included a Wheatear on the 18th and up to two Whinchats in the last week of August, while Spotted Flycatchers appeared twice including a family party of three. A Lesser Whitethroat, now quite a scarce bird at Moor Green Lakes, was amongst other warblers on the New Workings on Aug 9th and 13th, and a Firecrest was in a mixed flock on the 21st. Hobbies delighted observers all month with up to four in the air together hunting dragonflies. A Garganey was present mid-month and two were on West Fen on the 22nd, and the feral Barnacle Goose flock returned for the winter on Aug 18th.

September heralded a relatively quiet end to the year, with few new birds turning up, though some of August's species continued to be reported. Up to four Hobbies were regularly seen until Sep 26th, a Garganey was present for a week mid-month, Green Sandpipers were occasionally reported, and of course there was the Marsh Harrier. A Dunlin made a short stay on Sep 5th and a large flock of around 150 hirundines, mostly Sand Martins, passed through on Sep 23rd. A Barn Owl hunted on Sep 1st. A large falcon (possibly a Saker or a hybrid) sporting falconer's jesses tussled with a Red Kite as it passed through on the 25th. (see Page 4).

October saw some returning winter species: Great White Egret reports resumed on Oct 4th, as did reports of Tawny Owl in their favoured tree by Grove Lake on Oct 21st; three red-head Goosanders were by Plover Island on Oct 25th, and their numbers had increased to 28 by Nov 23rd. A male and female Pintail were on Colebrook North on Nov 17th.

Finally in December, two Great Black-backed Gulls, a surprisingly scarce species at Moor Green Lakes, were on West Fen on Dec 15th, and the same day a flock of well over 100 Siskins were above the bridleway by Colebrook South. An intriguing report of a Black Redstart on the New Workings on Dec 16th was unfortunately not followed by further sightings.

For some photographic highlights from Members see the next page.



*Hobby, 18 September 2023
by John Savage*



*Marsh Harrier on 14 September and Red Kite grappling
with an escape falcon 25 September
By Peter Craig*



*Tufted Duck family 10 August
by Elaine Charlson*

What is in a name?

by Alan Holmes

Nothing was more intimidating when I began looking at dragonflies than, when an expert looked over my shoulder, pronounced “*Enallagma*”, and walked on. Why could he not have said “Common Blue Damselfly”? Scientific names, what were once called “Latin” names, and sometimes also referred to as “preferred” names can be off putting.

They have advantages. When a Japanese scientist writes about *Sympetrum* dragonflies we know it is very similar to our own *Sympetrum* darter dragonflies. There is no uncertainty. While scientific names can express commonality they can also imply a difference seen in the debate about moving the Willow Emerald from the genus *Lestes* into its own *Chalcolestes* to emphasise that while Common Emerald Damselflies may lay their eggs into vegetation, the Willow Emerald goes very much further and the anatomy is modified to suit.

There are two views on scientific names. There is the idea that if people and in particular children are interested enough, they will conquer them the way they have sorted out their *Tyrannosaurus Rexes* and their *Brontosaurus*. This dominates for example in the true flies, *Diptera*, where few have English names. Considerable effort is made to identify very precisely according to the latest genetic understanding and scientific knowledge, but there must be a limit for the passing field naturalist. For example, there seem to be so many cryptic species identifiable only by the DNA among bumblebees, it makes precise identification tricky.

Another approach is to seek to make natural history as open as possible to all. For the younger generation that famously struggles to recognise a Kingfisher expecting scientific names seems a bridge too far. Better to make the field accessible and focus on the simple, distinctive and the charismatic and hope that the young mind delves deeper and into more challenging species.

It is not that English names are actually that great. “The garden warbler prefers a very different habitat from most gardens and speaking as a Scot, the English name one chooses can become a matter of political controversy with one having to call the black guillemot a “tystie” to show one’s nationalist credentials.

English names were recognised in the late Victorian age, as being an excellent way of introducing even adults into natural history, resulting in many English names being given to moths for the first time. Some of these were wonderful indeed, such as the “Hebrew Character” named after a famous Jewish lepidopterist, while the “Uncertain” describes all you need to know about the ease in identifying the species. And think of the “Enigma” diving beetle- which has solid populations in some ponds- but avoids other apparently identical ones.

The early 20th century saw an industry in providing English names for various groups. for example, in the 1950s dragonflies received many beautiful names. Why call something “green” when you can call it “emerald”? But this can go wrong. For example, the pine ladybird was named by an expert only for it to be discovered to be not restricted to pine as had been his experience.

English names, to be of any use, end up having to have similar conventions to those of scientific names which are covered by very specific protocols with the first description given priority – which can create a problem such as when the first describer of the Norfolk Hawker, apparently mis-spelled the word “isosceles”, missing out the second “s”, causing confusion forever. And the species is now spreading out of Norfolk so there is a move to the European name “green eyed hawker”- though this is resisted in Norfolk!

All names must be clear. I recently encountered an old and very detailed set of survey data referring to the “Red Darter” and it was only from other evidence clear this was the Common Darter, not the Ruddy Darter, as might have been assumed.

However sometimes the standardisation can cause problems. The so-called “Common Hawker” is now largely absent from our area, with no records in Berkshire in the past few years. This is a trap for the unwary and has resulted in 10% of Common Hawker records not being accepted, far higher than the normal 2% for dragonfly records. Perhaps the alternative “Moorland Hawker” would reduce the frustration of observer and verifier alike.

Articles and observations are always welcome for the Newsletter

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