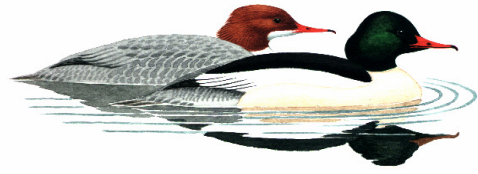


MOOR GREEN LAKES GROUP NEWSLETTER



July 2007

Your summer newsletter

At the time of writing this newsletter the weather is wet and very changeable. Although many predictions about a long hot summer have been made so far it has been quite a damp squib. I hope by the time you get this the sun has made a more consistent showing!

Our reserve is continuing to thrive and the Manor Farm site is developing nicely into a valuable addition. Peter Scott has written an update on the progress for you inside. Peter has also written about the Cowslip which can be found on our reserve in several places.

I wish to draw your attention to two items on this occasion, the first being the appeal from Simon Weeks to join in as a volunteer with an invitation to check out how it all works on a date in October, an essential date for the diary? Second, we are commencing a major project nationally and in Berkshire to map all our birdlife and Chris Robinson, our Berks BTO Representative, gives a flavour of the project and how ordinary birdwatchers can contribute in his article on page 8, only with your help can we realise such a major piece of work.

The preparation of each Newsletter prompts me to request new articles for inclusion from members and other contributors and it is pleasing to have some this time. This is your Newsletter and it would be good if we could include some of your material in it occasionally. Whether it is one of your Moor Green experiences or something locally in nature you want to write about why not give it a try? If you are not sure if it is suitable or want some help to 'knock it into shape' just send it along to me by post or email and I will gladly help.

Enjoy the reserve this summer and autumn and we hope to send you another Newsletter in early 2008!

Colin Wilson, Editor

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Advance Notice...!

Robert Godden

We have often thought about holding a social activity for members of the Moor Green Lakes Group - a chance to get together other than at the AGM! One suggestion that we are considering is to stage a Bird Race (probably in the New Year) in which small teams would aim to find as many bird species as possible in a day in an area centred on the Moor Green Lakes Reserve. At the end of the day, teams would meet up at a local hostelry for refreshment, to sort out the winners and to compare experiences. I have taken part in these events many times, and they are always enjoyable; we hope in our case that the event will appeal to birdwatchers of all abilities and a wide cross-section of our membership - families, the young and the not so young, etc - while still retaining a mild competitive edge!.....Look out for further details in due course!

NEWSLETTER July 2007



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

Bruce Archer

It was a new year's resolution that started me off on the construction of the Moor Green Lakes website. I had a hankering to build a website, but had never got around to doing anything about it. The need had been discussed at the autumn committee meeting, recognising the demise of the basic website established by Brendan McCartney some years ago. So, it was a matter of reading it up and dabbling with the tools available. Following a bit of trial and error, I felt I was able to do something. By talking to a few people dealing with websites, I advised SupaNames as our ISP (Internet Service Provider) and registered www.mglg.org.uk as our website address. For the technically minded, for £56.38, we have registration and 2 years of service on a London based UNIX server and 500Mb of storage with guaranteed 99.9% availability.

Having worked in Information Technology for most of my career, I am aware of the danger of concentrating on the technology at the expense of the information, so you will find that the website is basic and does not use fancy features and graphics! However, you should find it quick, reasonably well structured and telling you something useful. I update it at least every month and am adding additional pages as I gather more information, much of it from members of the Group, particularly the wildlife recorders.

The website provides information about the Moor Green Lakes Group and its activities, and also about the Reserve itself. Since its launch at the AGM in February, it has consistently received over 500 hits (visits) a month. The peak times are between 4pm and 5pm, suggesting that some people are accessing it before leaving work, and 7pm to 8pm, suggesting they look after getting home!.

I welcome suggestions for further topics and improvements. I would also like to add more pictures of the Reserve and its wildlife – which are heavily biased toward birds at the moment. So if you have digital photos of plants, insects, fish, reptiles or mammals taken at Moor Green Lakes or very close by, I would be interested in using them. I and the other committee members can be contacted via the Contacts page of the website or via the Editor.

Wokingham Biodiversity Forum – Needs You.

Ken Crick

Members of the MGLG who live in the parishes controlled by Wokingham District Council, should seriously consider registering with the Wokingham Biodiversity Forum. Membership is free. The Forum meets three times a year and has representatives from many of the local conservation groups within its members, including MGL which lies just inside Wokingham District's administrative boundary. The Forum issues a very good newsletter to members, reporting on many of the current conservation initiatives within the district. It is also involved in promoting training courses some of which are free.

The greater the number of MGL members registered with the group the higher our profile will be. As a registered member of the Forum there is no need to attend any of the meetings, unless of course you want to but when it comes to trying to bring pressure to bare on conservation matters, the higher the Forum's membership the greater its ability to make an impact.

Every three years the Forum undertakes an audit of all the local parish councils, to assess their commitment to biodiversity issues, with top scoring councils being awarded a certificate of achievement. To find out more contact Andy Glencross on 0118 9342016 or via e mail at andy.glencross@wokingham.gov.uk.

Please do consider registering with the Forum - it will make a difference!

NEWSLETTER July 2007



Barn Owl Update

Bruce Archer

A Barn Owl has been seen at Moor Green Lakes throughout the winter, often during the day standing in the entrance to the pole mounted box at the north of new workings. (The "new workings" is the partly restored area of land to the west of the Reserve, where gravel extraction still continues.) On the 3rd of April, I saw two Owls enter the box at dawn; surely this must be a pair, I thought. Also, it was evident that a pair of Kestrels had occupied the top section in the roof of the same box and were likely to be breeding there.

Apart from a few sightings in early April, the Barn Owl did not regularly appear in the entrance again until the 14th May. The duration of this absence from the front porch was exactly the incubation period for Barn Owl, so I suspected that we had owlets. On the 6th June Andy Glencross, Wokingham District Council's Biodiversity Officer led the annual Barn Owl box check. Two adults flew out as the ladder was put up against the box and inside we found four baby Owls, all slightly different in size as usual with Barn Owl chicks. There were also a number of prey items in the box – I counted two mice, a vole and two young birds that were almost certainly Pheasant chicks. This shows that there is plenty of food about this year with a stash to keep the young fed during wet periods when hunting is more difficult.

The Kestrel's fate was not so good, one abandoned egg was in the top section of the box and the shells of two more eggs were on the ground below. It is unlikely that they were successful this year – it appears that something had taken the eggs. The inspection of the other Barn Owl north of Colebrook Lake revealed that it was being used by a pair of Stock Doves, incubating their usual two eggs.

My observations of the Owl boxes are by using a telescope from the footpaths, usually the one by the river west of the Reserve. Under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 it is illegal to disturb a Barn Owl nest unless you have a license. I am told that the male Owl can be seen from the path, hunting the grassland local to the box, appearing just after sunset.

Footpath surfacing

Peter Scott

Recent visitors to the reserve will have seen the smart new path leading from the perimeter footpath to Colebrook hide. During last winter's wet weather this path became a quagmire and was impassable to wheelchairs (and not easy for pedestrians). We believe that the new surface will provide 'all-weather' access for the foreseeable future. 'Greenleaves', who surfaced the perimeter path between Colebrook Cut and the river bank two years ago, were appointed to do the work, applying a similar surface as they did then.

This work is obviously not cheap, but we have been fortunate in obtaining a grant from the Johnson's Wax company in Frimley Green which will pay over half the cost. We are seeking further support from elsewhere. The money that we have accumulated from members' donations will cover the balance.

The job took a little under two days and the hide was not accessible while it was being done. The temporary disruption was unfortunate, but will surely be outweighed by the long-term benefit.

Birdfair - 18 August 2007

A luxury coach will be taking birdlovers for a great day to the Birdfair on Saturday 18th with pick up points at Newbury, Reading and Maidenhead. Tickets, including entrance are just £25. Contact the Editor if you'd like to go. The Birdfair is a great day out – see www.birdfair.org.uk/ for details.

NEWSLETTER July 2007



Manor Farm Progress

Peter Scott

CEMEX expect to finish extracting gravel and sand from the site by mid-2008. Restoration work will continue for a while after that. The outcome of their application to dig west of Longwater Road will affect the timing, as their plan involves transport of the aggregate by conveyor across the Manor Farm site to the processing plant south of the river.

Meanwhile, restoration of the eastern end of the site has continued and much of it is approaching its final intended form (though the gravel 'mountain' will probably remain - and fluctuate in size - for eighteen months or so). With the eastern section of the main reed bed now at its final level, and with the winter rains having flooded much of it to a couple of inches' depth, we have at last been able to make a start on planting. A work party in late March dug clumps of reeds from the scrape beside Grove hide and replanted them in a (roughly) 150-metre-long strip beside one of the deep channels in the new site. Fencing was erected to protect the plants from geese. A few clumps were also planted outside this fence, but these seem to have been destroyed already.

In addition, Steve Farmer has planted reed seeds which he obtained from Fleet Pond, again (mostly) following the edges of deep channels. These have not been protected with fencing. The fate of the reeds that were planted last year along the edge of the lake in the south-east corner of the site is uncertain. All but the tallest plants (i.e. those generated from rhizome clumps) were submerged due to the high lake level. This has not yet fallen enough to allow close inspection. However, even if the stem cuttings have all perished, the trial can still be regarded as a success as it demonstrated that a good proportion of cuttings will 'take' on site and produce viable plants.

News from Lavell's Lake LNR

Fraser Cottingham

The replacement 'Tern Hide' is all going well and will be built by the end of July. Friends of Lavell's Lake (FoLL) intends to recommence feeding birds on completion of the hide, a successful activity last year. Most of the original feeders have been destroyed by squirrels so the Group wants to invest about £150 in metal feeders to deter them. It costs FOLL about £500 per winter to keep the feeders full (that tells you how many birds are there!) so do join the group if you want to support them. You can do this very cheaply via their website <http://www.foll.org.uk/> or by picking up a leaflet in a hide at Lavell's Lake or at Dinton Pastures.

Nearby, the new Lea Farm hide is delayed while Environment Agency consent is awaited so it could be July 2008 before FoLL start construction of their first ever 'Members only hide', another very good reason to join the Group. Members can also join a rarities helpline so when something good turns up they are alerted quickly.

Time allowing in the late autumn, FoLL are planning a Bittern awareness day, obviously to promote the importance of Lavell's Lake as a wintering Bittern site. This will hopefully, be an opportunity for people to see a Bittern, the reserve and learn more about FoLL which, like Moor Green Lakes Group, is a volunteer organisation working in partnership with others, in their case mainly with Wokingham District Council.

If you don't know this super little reserve that turns up rarities like few other sites locally, you can find it with its dedicated car park, at SU784728, by turning left on Sandford Lane one mile north of Dinton Pastures main entrance. Just like at Moor Green Lakes, always remove valuables from your car and leave nothing on show.

NEWSLETTER July 2007



60 years of history and now Berkshire Ornithological Club is born!

Colin Wilson

This year is the 60th anniversary of the Reading Ornithological Club and on 21st March, the members of the Club voted for a name change to reflect the current nature of its work including maintaining the bird record database for Berkshire, publishing the county bird reports, serving members throughout the county and managing the Birds of Berkshire charitable fund. So, in future you will hear about the Berkshire Ornithological Club, the BOC. To reflect the change a new website www.berksoc.org.uk has been developed where you can see what the Club is all about.

One way the anniversary was recognised was a dinner at Caversham Heath Golf Club on March 9th. Attended by almost 70 people, including three of the original members, one of whom was the first club recorder, the evening was a great success. Professor Jeremy Greenwood, Director of the British Trust for Ornithology was the guest of honour and made an amusing speech including recalling his last visit to the ROC 10 years before to celebrate the 50th anniversary!

Robert Gillmor, the well known artist and illustrator and ROC President Emeritus, presented three special awards to members who have made an enormous contribution to the Club and to conserving birdlife during this time. Robert first presented a certificate to Phil and Carol White for their years of dedication in many roles, not least as Field Meeting Organisers for a long period and in more recent times for Carol's stint as Chairperson and Indoor Programme Organiser. A further award was made to Brian Uttley, Conservation Officer who has stepped down after almost twenty years in the post. Brian was a principal mover in the creation of Lavell's Lake LNR at Dinton Pastures and also has lead the Theale Area Bird Conservation Group in many projects including the adoption and development of the superb Hosehill Lake LNR near Theale.

Last, but not least, Peter Standley, well known to us at Moor Green Lakes as a Committee member and valued adviser, was recognised for his unstinting work for the Club and in acting in the Recorder role in various guises within the County over a very long period. Peter has now retired as County Recorder but continues to serve on the Berkshire Rarities Committee and in many other roles around the County, putting his valuable experience to continued good use.

Special event: *The Chief Executive of the RSPB, Graham Wynne has accepted an invitation to be celebrity lecturer at a special anniversary celebration meeting on November 7th . Guests are welcome to attend and further details will be made available via the BOC and MGLG websites.*

Cowslips on site

Peter Scott

The cowslip, along with its 'cousin' the primrose and the bluebell, is among the most-loved springtime wild flowers. It was once a very common plant in the countryside, but declined dramatically from about 1950 onwards as a result of intensive farming practices. By 1990 it seemed to be common only in some churchyards and a few other places subject to conservation efforts. However, since then it has made a bit of a comeback and can now sometimes be seen along roadside verges.

It is also present at Moor Green, though unfortunately not in locations easily visible from the perimeter path. There are two clumps near the reptile hibernaculum (last year there were three, but I couldn't find the third this spring) and one very healthy one in grassland at the far eastern end of Colebrook Lake, behind Goose Island. Then just recently a team conducting a botanical survey found another patch on the north shore, opposite Plover Island. This species was not included in the wildflower mix that was planted when the meadow was created, so it was probably introduced in the soil that was spread on the area.

NEWSLETTER July 2007



Volunteering at Moor Green Lakes

Simon Weeks.

Have you ever considered volunteering to help with the upkeep of Moor Green Lakes Reserve? Volunteer work parties (one on a Sunday the other on a Tuesday) take place every month from September to March each year. We meet at 10.30am - normally at the main reserve car park off Lower Sandhurst Road and generally finish by 4pm. To avoid disturbing the wildlife during the breeding season, we get a few months off from April to August!

Our volunteers are male and female, from teens to seventies with a wide range of fitness and stamina levels. The size of the group varies but usually ranges from about 6 to 20 volunteers. No special skills are required - there is always an experienced and trained leader in attendance and we provide all tools and any special safety equipment required for the tasks. All you need is some older clothes plus outerwear and footwear appropriate to the weather conditions on the day. Whilst tea/coffee/biscuits are provided, most of us bring a packed lunch so they can replace the calories they burn off. There is no need to book - just turn up on the day. Notices with work party dates are posted on the 3 notice boards at the reserve or see the website for more details.

Tasks performed by the volunteers are many and varied and have recently included bramble bashing, reed planting, tree thinning, hedge and grass cutting, clearing vegetation from the islands and fence repairs. Incidentally - this also provides a great opportunity to see many parts of the reserve that are normally closed to visitors, which helps give a better perspective of the entire site.

Why not come along and give it a try? You will find the work groups are very sociable and always make new volunteers most welcome. You can work at your own pace and can stay for just a couple of hours if you prefer. We often have participants who can only attend for part of the session. Some of our volunteers attend every month, whilst others are just occasional supporters but all are equally welcome.

If you would like to find out more, please contact me - details below. Email reminders are sent out to all our volunteers a week before events, so we can easily add you to the list. We need to boost our volunteer numbers, particularly as the reserve continues to thrive and expand.

Volunteering Taster Day Sunday 14th October 2007

Why not come along and meet the team? Join in for a while or just see what is going on and have a biscuit and a hot drink.

We'll be based in the Meadow beside Colebrook Hide and probably working on Long Island clearing scrub and renovating the scrapes.

We'll be there from 10.30 am till 4 pm, pop in any time and stay for as long as you like.

For more information call Simon on 01189 730199
or email simon.weeks@mglg.org.uk



Egyptian Geese seen eating *Crassula helmsii*

John E. Warren

On 30 June 2007 I went to Moor Green Lakes Nature Reserve, to observe general natural history. It was raining when I arrived and was forecast to do so later, so I went and sat in the hide on Colebrook lake 'til the rain stopped and then walked along the River Blackwater.

I returned to the hide at 7pm, in rain again. I settled to watch 13 Egyptian Geese feeding on the wader scrape in front of the hide. I quickly saw that they were feeding on *Crassula helmsii* and felt this was a very important observation. They ate plants up to 6mm high, with two eating plants up to about 10mm high. They fed for at least 30 minutes, apparently only on *Crassula*.

Crassula helmsii is an 'aggressively colonising species ... first cultivated in Britain in 1927 and was first discovered in the wild in 1956 (Greensted, Essex). Since the late 1970s it has spread rapidly north and west' (New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora, Oxford, 2002). It suppresses all other plants and is considered a major pest species.

Conservationists have been trying for years to control it with very limited success and at Moor Green it is now controlled with limited success by spraying of herbicide. My observation hints at a natural control method for short plants of *Crassula*, but needs more research as the following is unknown:-

- Do Egyptian Geese feed regularly on *Crassula*?
- Does their grazing control *Crassula* or just spread it, as *Crassula* grows easily from small pieces?
- Do other geese feed regularly on *Crassula*? Apparently somebody reported seeing Canada Geese doing this at Moor Green a couple of years ago, but I am unaware of later reports.

Ed's Note: *Observations on this subject or similar are welcome for future editions of this Newsletter. The author also pointed out the importance of avoiding spreading or introducing non-native species as the damage by some can be significant.*

Garden birds

Colin Wilson

There are a number of surveys of garden birds and they all add to the growing store of knowledge about bird feeding, population movements and the value of gardens as nature reserves. Many people enjoy garden birdwatching as much as going out into the countryside! If you enjoy watching the birds in your garden why not contribute to one of the surveys so your time will be valuably used adding to this store of knowledge, they are simple and participation is enjoyable?

The RSPB have promoted annual events known as the 'Big Garden Birdwatch' which have been very well supported in the past – see <http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch/index.asp> for more details - this is limited to a weekend and usually receives much press coverage when it is about to take place. The British Trust for Ornithology also offers a scheme for continuous recording of birds. Called Garden Birdwatch the scheme costs £12 a year to join but includes a quality quarterly magazine and a free Garden Birdwatch book. You can keep records on paper or on your computer if you wish – see <http://www.bto.org/gbw/> for more.

On a smaller scale, but relevant to those living in Berkshire, the Berkshire Ornithological Club also offers a free paper based scheme to its members who receive Newsletters, county bird reports and various indoor and outdoor meetings for a subscription of £15 a year or £7.50 if you are retired. Further details of the BOC offering can be found with details of other surveys on www.berksoc.org.uk or by contacting the Editor.

NEWSLETTER July 2007



Berkshire Bird Atlas 2007 - 11

Bird Atlas 2007-11 is a huge and exciting project being run by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) that will map the abundance and distribution of birds in Britain and Ireland during the breeding season and winter. It will be fascinating to look at the changes in distribution since the last breeding and wintering atlases. There have been two previous breeding atlases (1968-72 and 1988-91) and just one previous winter atlas (1981-84). Have Buzzards continued to expand? Have Ravens spread eastwards? Have Wood Warblers disappeared from our woodlands? Where do we find Snipe in the winter? Are Siskins in the same places in summer and winter? It's amazing to think that Little Egret was only recorded as a non-breeding visitor in three 10-km squares in the 1988-91 Atlas and now they are breeding in many counties, including Berkshire.

In Berkshire we are taking the opportunity to update our county atlas at the same time as the national atlas work is taking place. Surveying for our last (and only) county atlas occurred at the end of the 1980's and there are likely to have been many changes during the intervening years. Apart from breeding bird distribution, the new county atlas will, for the first time, map wintering bird distribution; map relative abundance across the county; attempt to explain changes in distribution and estimate overall population numbers. In short, an exceptionally important work of reference on the county's ornithology!

Both atlases will include winter distribution and breeding season data and the survey work for these will be spread over four years starting in November 2007. Although the county atlas will be based on tetrads (2km x 2km squares) and the national one on 10km squares, BTO have offered to collect and process all our records to a tetrad level and we therefore intend to use the BTO survey method and tools for both atlases, extending the coverage where necessary to gather the extra information required for the Berkshire atlas. By effectively combining the two surveys we will considerably reduce our data collection and analysis effort.

Berkshire records and offers of help within the county are of particular interest for us but from November we need all your records – whatever you see, whenever it is, wherever you are! There are two components to the fieldwork: **Timed Tetrad Visits (TTVs)** and **Roving Recorders**. TTVs involve two visits in the summer and two in the winter to a tetrad (2 km x 2 km square). Each visit is for a minimum of one hour (although we would prefer two) and the idea is to record species you see and hear along with their numbers, so we can calculate the relative abundance of species in the 2-km squares. Of equal importance are Roving Recorders who make general birdwatching visits to 2km squares where the aim is to compile a species list of everything you see and hear. An important part of a Rover's task is to try to gather evidence of breeding as they go along (three levels – Possible, Probable and Definite).

With over 450 tetrads in Berkshire there is a lot of counting and recording to be done! Whatever your level of birdwatching skill you should be able to contribute something to this project; please get in touch with me if you are able to help in any way. If you have access to the internet, you can find a lot more information about the national atlas at www.birdatlas.net which explains the methods and strategy as well as how to stake a claim for a tetrad and submit your data when the time comes!

Chris Robinson
(Berkshire BTO Rep and Berkshire Bird Atlas Group Chairman)
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NEWSLETTER July 2007

