

# SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



HELPING TO PROTECT MILL MEADOWS  
LOCAL NATURE RESERVE

Issue 39.

October – December 2007

## Events for your diary - Last Events for 2007

**November 3rd fungi foray**, an expert will identify the types of fungi and tell you all about them. You may be amazed at the size, colour and variety of the fungi on the Meadows. Children are best at finding them – bring them along. Meet at The Scout Hut at 10.30 am.

**November 15th evening meeting – an illustrated talk on Chafford Gorge** – Essex Wildlife Trust reserve. Come and learn about this unique reserve. We will also follow-up with a visit to it, next year. The talk is in the Reading Rooms in Billericay High Street at 7.45 pm.

Next year we hope to visit other places of interest. Please let the committee members know of places you want to nominate.

**Work parties** – meet at 10.30 at Scout Hut

\*\*\*Please note changes to dates \*\*\*

Our work parties will be on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday of each month for the last quarter of 2007:

- **20<sup>th</sup> October**: this is to combine it with the **Billericay Town Litter Pick**. There will be other tasks too – Install new bench in Butchers, Sycamore clearance, litter pick.

**17th November**: pond clearance in Brickfield and Oakfield: bring your Wellingtons/ boots

1

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- 15th December: not much work, but will be festive hot punch and mince pies

## Chairperson's Report

Many of you will have seen in the local press that the 'Marked Trail' was officially launched at the end of August. My thanks to all of you who came along to the event, and also thanks to the members of the Committee who helped with the preparation and publicity. The cake (pictured later) was enjoyed by all, accompanied by something sparkly in a glass and we were also blessed with excellent weather. The publicity from the two press articles has been good too. Many people who barely knew of the Meadows' existence have remarked that they saw the articles. We have also had some excellent feedback on the information boards and the leaflet.

There is still work to do between now and early 2008 when the project finishes and we then have to submit our return to The Lottery. There are some additional benches to install, some drainage to put into Oakfield and a walkway over the stream in Bottom Mead to be completed, plus some work on maintaining the hedgerows.

We have also been promoting The Society by showing the photographic display in Billericay Library and at the Norsey Wood Open Day. Consequently, we have had a steady trickle of new members during the last few months. We need this to compensate for the attrition, because there will always be a slight drop in members due to people moving away, retiring from use of the Meadows or just not getting round to renewing their membership.

Publicity brings other benefits too. You may recall that one of our objectives is to increase the use of the Meadows for educational purposes. This is partly because it is one of the objectives of the Countryside Services' Management Plan. But also because it stimulates an awareness and appreciation of the Meadows and the importance of these open spaces in general – get them while they are young! Recently I was approached by representatives of two local schools who want to

use the Meadows for an educational walk and a local history study. So I am more hopeful now that we will see some improvement in this area.

Having covered recreation and education, I'll turn to the third objective of the Management Plan – biodiversity. We would like to make a theme for 2008 of 'Marginal Species'. What we mean by marginal species is those species that are occasional and/or rare on the Reserve. All conservation work needs records of sightings and everyone can contribute to these - no matter how little, it is always valued.

We will start by selecting a few marginal species from birds, flowers, insects, fungi, reptiles and mammals. Then we will hold an indoor meeting to educate anyone who is interested in identifying and recording these species. We will also make specific mention of these in the various guided walks that we hold at appropriate times of the year. After that, we will give out simple recording forms, and then it is up to anyone who wants to contribute.

More details will follow in the next Newsletter. Once the indoor event is booked then look out for a poster in the Information Boards; or Internet users can look at [www.aboutmyarea.co.uk/cm12](http://www.aboutmyarea.co.uk/cm12)

Some sad news to report is the resignation of one of Management Committee members. This means that we now only fill one general position (in addition to the chairman, secretary, treasurer membership and newsletter positions) out of the four general positions that we have. This does limit our ability to carry out any projects or stage any events.

Once again, I appeal to people to join the Management Committee. Having been on the Committee for less than 2 years, I can testify that it is a great way to learn about managing a nature reserve, to meet new people who share that interest, and get a feeling of satisfaction from being involved in a community activity.

If you are not interested in a Committee position, we are always grateful for a bit of help. Could you, for example, spare a few hours to attend the display boards at one of the local events or venues? Next year is our 10th anniversary and it

would be good to stage an event to commemorate this but to do so will require some volunteers to help with organizing and running. If you do wish to help, please let me know – contact details are below.

In the meantime, I wish you all a pleasant Autumn.

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### **Ranger's report**

#### **Grazing**

You may remember, we've had problems in recent years achieving the right level of grazing on the meadows. Generally, we have not been able to get a sufficient number of cattle for long enough for them to eat the necessary amount of grass. From a conservation point of view the sward level should be lower to allow the more interesting wild flowers to develop.

This year has been no exception, but thing might be looking up. Having tried to improve the situation it did appear at more than one point that we would end up taking a backward step. However, over the last few weeks the cattle seem to have been making some steady (if uneven) progress. The fields they seem to prefer, if allowed to roam throughout the reserve, are those towards Southend Road, especially the High Street end, and as last year these seem to have been grazed fairly well. Unfortunately, this has been at the expense of the more important fields forming the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Over the last couple of weeks the cattle have therefore been confined to the SSSI fields in order to 'catch up'.

They still seem to have been making uneven progress even within the SSSI. For example Oakfield appears to have had more attention than Butchers. Following the move of the cattle we managed to persuade our grazier to 'top' some of the non-SSSI fields, cutting back a lot of the thistles, rushes etc that the cattle don't like to graze close to, and where consequently the grass tends to grow too tall. These fields now look in quite reasonable condition, although no methodical assessment of the sward quality has taken place. Up until October 4th, it also looked as though we might have a longer grazing period which would have benefited the SSSI fields. 'Its an

ill wind...' and so on and it looked as though the Foot and Mouth and Blue Tongue movement restrictions would do us a favour by not allowing the grazier to move his cattle off. However, some of the restrictions were then lifted, and he may feel the need to remove them before any potential re-imposition of the movement restrictions. We'd also like to get him to 'top' the rest of the meadows. If we did manage to get that done we'd be fairly satisfied with the progress made this year, but that may be pushing our luck. Anyway, watch this space...or at least the space between Greens Farm Lane and Southend Road!

#### Natural England

We also recently had a meeting on site with representatives from Natural England regarding entering Mill Meadows into the new Higher Level Scheme for environmental management. This was generally a very positive meeting and may mean they can financially support some of the conservation management of the meadows. Its early days yet, but we're quite hopeful. Watch that space again!

#### Awards for All works

Society members have been a real help to me recently with all the work they have done associated with the Lottery Awards for All grant. Having people prepared to put in so much effort on an independent initiative has enabled improvements to take place that would otherwise have had to wait, if they would have happened at all. The project is still ongoing, with other items under active consideration being the restoration of some of the hedgerows in the meadows along with work on some of the ditches.

#### Wildlife surveying

The Chairman's Report mentions the idea of some wildlife surveys. We're investigating which species might be appropriate, the idea being that it's something people can do on their usual visits to the Meadow, so if you would like to 'register an interest' please do, either with myself or any member of the MMS committee.

Many thanks

*Chris Huggins*

*Countryside Ranger*

*Norsey Wood Information Centre*

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#### Summer walk

The walk in 2006 was listed as a butterfly walk. However the weather had different ideas and the windy conditions meant that none were seen. Therefore when this year's timetable was compiled in late winter the walk was entitled a summer walk. The indifferent weather in 2007 (apart from a glorious April) meant even this generalisation might be over optimistic. Luckily the weather did improve in July and the walk on the 28<sup>th</sup> was a great success. 10 people, including children, joined Chris in exploring part of the reserve. Some of the sightings included the common and not so common species but all were enthusiastically studied and recorded to the best of our ability. Butterflies were seen, making up for last year, and the harebell happened to be in flower.

My list (as recorded in chronological order) included the following but as we were spread out across the fields I may have missed some.

Peacock butterfly

Leech (yes water remained in the pond until mid summer)

Pond Skaters

Sneezewort

Black Knapweed

Honeysuckle

Meadow or field grasshopper

Gatekeeper butterfly

Meadow Brown butterfly

Ringlet butterfly

Funnel spider

Hazel nuts

Seed head of the orchid

Large white butterfly

Essex skipper butterfly

Molehills

Oak galls

Hawker dragonfly

Green-veined white butterfly

Rosele's cricket

Chamomile (stinking?)

Scarlet pimpernel

Betony

Red-tailed bumblebee

Comma butterfly

Red Admiral butterfly  
Harebell.

The lesson to learn when wanting to see butterflies is not to call it a butterfly walk, then you should see 9 different species

### **Neil's notes on birds**

Summer is never an easy time for seeing birds. After the breeding season, the singing stops, many birds are in moult and keeping well hidden in the thick foliage. One of our great-spotted woodpeckers is obliging even in the Summer – in the bare branches of the dying ash at Bottom Mead – if you want to see one of these woodpeckers it's a very good place to look. The poor summer meant there was some late breeding and I have seen or heard of evidence locally of blackbird, song thrushes and wrens breeding in August.

To see small birds in late Summer relies on them being noisy. On one fine day in mid-September many chiff-chaffs were making their presence known with their 'hoo-eet' calls, and one became territorial by chasing others and bursting into brief song. I counted at least 10 of these and about the same number of goldcrests, but only from their high-pitched calls. A blackcap and a late whitethroat each gave a brief alarm call. Long-tailed tits were calling in small groups mixed with great and blue tits, two coal tits called to each other across Mill Hill and one of our marginal species, a treecreeper, was around Greens.

At least some interesting birds were visible: a male and female sparrowhawk were being harassed by 4 crows, high above the Meadows, treating us grounded humans to some fine acrobatics. Several small parties of meadow pipits,

one numbering 18, passed overhead, giving a flavour of Autumn. If you ever walk on moors you will have seen and heard meadow pipits which are very numerous in this habitat. In the autumn they move to feed in field stubble and the coast. Occasionally they may be disturbed feeding in Wantsfield or Cumborrow.

### **Can you count cows?**

As you know, cattle-grazing is part of the management of the habitat of the Meadows. One problem that Countryside Services have in recruiting graziers is our location. The grazier has to make a special journey to check on the cattle every day of the week. To mitigate this, we are offering to check on the cattle ourselves 3-4 days of each week. It just requires a walk around the Reserve, to check that each animal is present and well.

To try and share the work outside the Committee we are asking for volunteers to help with this. If you are willing to check the cattle during the middle months of the year, either weekly or fortnightly, or perhaps only when another member is on holiday, then please let us know. Contact the Chairman (details above).

### **Reminder**

Membership renewal is now due; the year starts 1st April until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008. The society membership is about 186 households but some may have moved away as 52 households have not yet paid. Please use the form at the back of the newsletter to renew your membership so that we have an accurate membership role.

