

SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



HELPING TO PROTECT MILL MEADOWS
LOCAL NATURE RESERVE

Issue 40.

January – March 2008

Events for your diary -

February 20th evening meeting: Marginal Species and Management of the Reserve. Learn about some of the rarer species of birds, mammals, flowers, insects and reptiles on Mill Meadows and how you can help us assess the populations of these. This will be in the Reading Rooms in Billericay High Street at 7.45 pm.

April 24th Annual General Meeting (AGM) Also in the Reading Rooms in Billericay High Street at 7.45 pm

8th June: guided walk of Chafford Gorges - meet at the Visitor Centre at 10am. Details of possible car sharing in the next newsletter. See a later article for the report of the warden's evening talk.

For the events for which we do not yet have dates, keep looking out for posters in the Information Boards; or Internet users can look at www.aboutmyarea.co.uk/cm12

Work parties – meet at 10.30 at Scout Hut on 2nd Saturday of every month.

January 12th : Coppicing another stretch of the hedge behind Chaffinch Crescent

February 9th : Clearance on Boggy Piece (or continuation of above)

March 8th : Boggy Piece or some thinning in Hillmans wood

Chairperson's Report

With the marked Trail almost complete, we now have to submit our 'End of Award Report' to the Big Lottery Fund. This has to report our actual expenditure and happily we are well under-budget with our grant. We have ordered the final pathway work, which is the drainage in Oakfield, a walkway over the stream at Bottom Mead and improvement of the path that adjoins Coles and Hilly Field.

The Report to the Big Lottery Fund also has to indicate how many people have benefited, or will benefit, from the project. This needs a rather subjective estimate. How many people in and around Billericay do take advantage of this important green space? Certainly, there are many more users of the Reserve than there are members of the Society. It's hard to say, but at the rate that the stocks of Marked Trail leaflets have been distributed, and the size of the surrounding population, it is probably measurable in thousands rather than hundreds – though thankfully they don't all walk on the Reserve at the same time!

Whilst the Management Committee have been successful with the Lottery grant, Countryside Services have achieved something even more significant for Mill Meadows in 2007. This is the admission of the Meadows into Natural England's Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme. This will provide more funding for conservation and emphasises even further the importance of this ancient meadow system.

Finally, we should remember 2007 as the year in which our Work Parties were assisted by the Air Training Corps (ATC), and they have certainly made a difference. Our thanks go out to these hard-working and enthusiastic young people who have helped us with sycamore clearance, bench installation, hedge maintenance, litter-picking, brush clearance and other tasks.

We have started putting together the programme of events for 2008. Our first event will be an indoor meeting which will start a project to make records of 'Marginal Species', as mentioned in the

previous Newsletter. Mill Meadows has a 'species database' maintained by the Ranger, and this incorporates records from many surveys as well as 'casual' records submitted by the Society's members.

One aim is to boost these records by capturing more sightings of some of the rarer species on the reserve. We will also pass on records to the relevant County conservation bodies. We are asking for anyone to participate and records can be submitted in writing, preferably on a form, delivered by hand, post or by email.

The recording form is included towards the end of the Newsletter. The form is optional but the aim of having a form is to ensure that we get all the information we need so please give us all the data even if you don't use the form.

If you want to learn more about how to find these key species, we will be giving short explanatory talks at the indoor meeting in February. Please do come along to this meeting if you can and then contribute some records. Doing so is good for Mill Meadows, because the records underline the importance of the Reserve. It could also make your walks more interesting and fulfilling if you are looking out for rarer species and telling us about them.

Other events will include guided visits to Chafford Gorges and one other nature reserve which we hope to be Abbots Hall Farm, the head quarters of the Essex Wildlife Trust. We will also include our usual walks focusing on birds, flowers and butterflies and one or two indoor talks.

We have reduced the shortfall of people on the Management Committee, with the addition of Mr John Hathaway. However, there are still 2 vacancies, so I am still appealing for more people to join the Committee. Please do consider and if you would like to join, my contact details are below.

I wish you a Happy and Healthy 2008.

Neil Sumner 01277 630849
Neilsumner123@aol.com

Ranger's report

Happy New Year! Actually, its not even Christmas as I'm writing this, but the year is almost over so lets look back on what's been happening recently.

Ancient trees

Over the last few weeks I've been working with the council's Tree Officer, Gary Meadowcroft on investigating some of the ancient trees in Mill Meadows. The work party did begin to record the details of some of these in the Butchers/Oakfield area in 2006 so Gary and I concentrated on Hillmans and Boggy Piece. Some of the trees here fit the description of veteran or ancient (as far as I can tell the terms are used interchangeably) more closely than the ones we recorded before. Things that differentiate true veterans from other large mature trees include:

- Major cavities
- Decay holes
- Bark loss
- A large amount of dead wood in the canopy
- Fungal fruiting bodies
- High aesthetic interest

Reference:

Read, Helen. 2000 Veteran Trees – A guide to good management. Peterborough: English Nature. Available at <http://www.english-nature.org.uk/pubs/handbooks/>

We've now recorded the details of 33 trees and sent them off to the Ancient Tree Register. Although some of them don't qualify as ancient yet, if we look after them they may well do in the future. The highlights of those recorded so far are an Oak of considerable girth in the hedge between Oakfield and Cumborrow, and several old pollarded oaks in Hillmans/Boggy Piece. We've had some surgery done to one of the Oaks in Hillmans and had a very productive work party, with help from the ATC tidying up the logs and brash. We'd like to get some work done on some of the others when funds allow. Hopefully, this will extend their life.

Fungus forays seem to be amongst the most popular events we hold at the moment and this year's fungus foray was again well attended and everybody seemed to enjoy themselves. However, the search for the Waxcaps wasn't as successful as last year, with only two of these species found. Apparently we weren't alone as it wasn't a good year anywhere for waxcaps.

Other news

Early in the New Year I hope the contractor will start work to replace the boardwalk in Oakfield and reinstall the bridge in Bottom Mead. As mentioned above, this is being paid for out of the grant gained by the society from the Awards For All fund. I'm also hoping to talk to the same contractor about some work to reinstate the hedge lines in the SSSI fields.

Countryside Services has recently signed a new agreement with Natural England for the management of the meadows. This will include new fencing to make it easier to restrict the cattle to the SSSI fields, giving us more control over the amount and location of the grazing. This is in its early stage, but we are hoping to be able to supply the fence posts necessary from Norsey Wood thus using materials produced from a local sustainable source.

Finally, many thanks to all the society members who have supported the work in Mill Meadows during 2007. It really would not be possible to achieve as much without your efforts.

Many thanks

Chris Huggins

Countryside Ranger

Norsey Wood Information Centre

01277 624553 chris.huggins@basildon.gov.uk



Photo of some of the fungi on display at the end of the Fungus Foray.

List of fungi found on Mill Meadows Fungus Foray on 3rd November 2007

Latin Name	English name
	Orange Peel Fungus
<i>Aleuria aurantia</i>	
<i>Amanita muscaria</i>	Fly Agaric
<i>Armillaria mellea</i>	Honey Fungus
<i>Bjerkandera adusta</i>	Smoky Bracket
<i>Clavulinopsis helvola</i>	Yellow Club
<i>Clitocybe dealbata</i>	Ivory Funnel
<i>Clitocybe fragrans</i>	Fragrant Funnel
<i>Clitocybe gibba</i>	Common Funnel
<i>Clitocybe nebularis</i>	Clouded Funnel
<i>Collybia butyracea</i>	Butter Cap
<i>Coprinus atramentarius</i>	Common Ink Cap
<i>Cortinarius purpurascens</i>	Bruising Web Cap
<i>Daedaleopsis confragosa</i>	Blushing Bracket
<i>Ganoderma australe</i>	Southern Bracket
<i>Handkea excipuliformis</i>	Pestle Puffball
<i>Handkea utriformis</i>	Mosaic Puffball
<i>Hygrocybe ceracea</i>	Butter Wax Cap
<i>Hygrocybe chlorophana</i>	Yellow Wax Cap
<i>Hypoholoma fasciculare</i>	Sulphur Tuft
<i>Inocybe geophylla</i> var. <i>lilacina</i>	Lilac Fibre Cap
<i>Laccaria amethystina</i>	Amethyst Deceiver
<i>Laccaria laccata</i>	The Deceiver
<i>Lactarius quietus</i>	Oak Milk Cap
<i>Lepista flaccida</i>	Tawny Funnel
<i>Macrolepiota procera</i>	Parasol Mushroom
<i>Meripilus giganteus</i>	Giant Polypore
<i>Mycena flavoalba</i>	Ivory Bonnet
<i>Mycena galericulata</i>	Common Bonnet
<i>Mycena galopus</i> var. <i>nigra</i>	Black Milking Bonnet
<i>Nectria cinnabarina</i>	Coral Spot
<i>Panaeolus acuminatus</i>	Umbrella Mottlegill
<i>Panaeolus papilionaceus</i>	Bell-shaped Mottlegill
<i>Paxillus involutus</i>	Roll Rim
<i>Pholiota squarrosa</i>	Shaggy Scalycap
<i>Piptoporus betulinus</i>	Birch Polypore
<i>Russula atropurpurea</i>	Purple Brittlegill
<i>Russula fragilis</i>	Fragile Brittlegill

<i>Stereum hirsuta</i>	Hairy Curtain Crust
<i>Trametes gibbosa</i>	Lumpy Bracket
<i>Trametes versicolor</i>	Turkey Tail

CHAFFORD GORGES NATURE PARK

Around thirty Members enjoyed a fascinating talk by Matthew Minter, warden at Chafford Gorges which has been opened recently by the Essex Wildlife Trust in Chafford Hundred to the west of Grays. The Nature Park covers an area of former commercial chalk pits abandoned in the 1950s, leaving several shallow lakes surrounded by high chalk cliffs. These are separated by narrow strips of land at the original surface level now covered by scrub and woodland which has also taken a hold on steps on the cliff sides and on islands and dryer areas within the pits. However, there are also a wide variety and varied species of wildflowers, including kidney vetch, bladder campion, and nine species of orchid, including the bee orchid. Also present are a wide range of animals including reptiles, bats, butterflies, birds, bees, wasps and beetles. The Trust is managing the park to protect and encourage this wildlife especially the many rare species already present, and has started to clear areas of scrub to achieve a balance between water, grassland and woodland. It is also keen to encourage public access and to stimulate local interest and participation to counter negative influences as expected in the close proximity of a large town. These measures have proved successful, and helpful contacts have been established with local schools and organizations. For example, local anglers were encouraged by Matthew, himself a keen angler, to set up a club to assist with the regulation of fishing in one of the lakes. These enthusiasts have voluntarily set about the onerous task of clearing away debris accumulated over years of neglect.

A magnificent visitor's centre is now open which may be reached from the A13 and A1012 Hogg Lane. This is worth a visit if only for the views from the centre but a system of pathways through the gorges has been set up and is being steadily improved. You can obtain more information from the Chafford Gorges Visitor Centre, Drake Road, Chafford Hundred, Grays, Thurrock, RM16 7RG. Tel. 01375-484016

Thanks to John James for the above article.

Notes on birds

After last winter's unprecedented lack of wintering birds, this autumn and winter have already been more promising. There are a regular party of Redwings on the Meadows and the occasional Siskin.

Bird-of-the Autumn has to be the Brambling. These finches are irregular winter visitors that breed in Northern Europe, with a range that extends further north than the Chaffinch. They are most likely to be seen in Britain feeding under beech trees or in stubble with other finches but they can turn up anywhere, including in our gardens. (The Brambling was a welcome report from one of our members – please don't hesitate to contact Neil or Chris if you have any interesting observations to add).

The Fieldfares are more often seen passing over the reserve than using it and this was the case with more than 50 on 25th November. One or two may linger in the trees and do sometimes feed around the old apple tree near the Scout Hut. They are quite cautious birds and don't let you get too close so you really need binoculars if you want to appreciate their claret and blue colours. As the year closes we have many in the fields around Billericay and to see them it is best to find areas of grazing pasture and avoid the lifeless fields of green winter wheat.

Just off the Reserve, 4 Siskins on garden feeders early on Boxing Day included a handsome cock bird with its dark cap. There were greenfinches too; possibly part of the flock of at least 70 that can be seen flitting around Gainsborough Close just before dusk as they gather to roost. The Grey Wagtail is back in the Chapel Street area (or did it ever go away in the Summer? one was singing from a rooftop near the traffic lights on the High Street in early May!).

When the weather is bright or mild, the resident birds often exhibit some spring-like behaviour. Robins, Dunnocks, Wrens, Song Thrushes, Great, Blue and Coal Tits are bursting into occasional song and the a Great-Spotted Woodpecker barely waited for the shortest day to pass before he started drumming out his territory around the site of the old Greens Farm House.

Mill Meadows Society
- Marginal Species Survey, 2008

Notes on submitting records – please use the form overleaf.

Species:

The targeted species are:

Birds: **Bullfinch,**
Song Thrush

Mammals: **Stoat,**
Weasel,
Hedgehog

Flowers: **Devil's Bit Scabious,**
Bethany,
Harebell,
Ragged Robin (see below)



Insects:

Butterflies: **Brown Argus**
Clouded Yellow
Small Heath

Moths: **Four-spotted moth**
Cinnabar moth

Dragonflies: **Ruddy Darter**

Reptiles: **Slow Worm**
(all records) **Common Lizard**
Grass Snake
Adder

Date/ Time: the time of day is useful but not essential.

Where: if the species was seen on the reserve, please state in which field, if possible (names are on the map on the Marked Trail leaflet).

Records in nearby gardens/ roads are also of interest. If in a nearby garden or road, please give the name of the road.

Notes: add anything of interest: this could be on its behaviour, location and, in the case of the animals, any evidence of breeding or young.

If you are not 100% certain that it is the species, add any distinguishing features. For example, if you see a snake but are unsure of which species, add comments on its colour and markings.

Sending records:

Email: Send records to either

chris.huggins@basildon.gov.uk

or

neilsumner123@aol.com

Post/ drop-off to Mill Meadows Society at either of the following :

Norsey Wood Information Centre, Outwood Common Road, BILLERICAY Essex, CM11 1HA

Or 19 Gainsborough Close, BILLERICAY, CM11 2DB

