

SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



HELPING TO PROTECT MILL MEADOWS
LOCAL NATURE RESERVE

Issue 41.

April – June 2008

Events for your diary

AGM

The Society Annual General Meeting This is your opportunity to comment on the society activities and influence future decisions. The formal meeting will allow time for any members to express their comments and ideas. **Following on**, a talk on “GRASSLANDS” Further information will be included on the marginal species. Please make a special effort to attend. **April 24th at 7:45 pm.** in the Reading Rooms. Refreshments will be available.

Walks, talks and visits

For all walks : meet at 10.30 am at the Scout Hut unless otherwise stated. Duration is 1-2 hours. Advance booking via Countryside Services is preferred so that we can gauge numbers.*

April 27th – **visit to Abbots Hall Farm**, the headquarters of the Essex Wildlife Trust. We will be met by a voluntary warden who will tell us about the management of the Reserve and show us the newly developing salt marsh. Meet in the car park at Abbots Hall at 10 am. Car sharing may be arranged so if you want attend please contact Neil Sumner (see contact details after Chairman’s Report). A small donation will be gratefully received by the EWT from non-members.

May 17th - **Bird Walk**: learn about the song-birds that breed in Mill Meadows. An early start for this one – meet at the Scout Hut at **6.30 am**

June 8th – **Visit to Chafford Gorges** country park at Chafford Hundred. Meet at the Visitor Centre at 10am. Car sharing may be arranged so if you want attend please contact Neil Sumner (see contact details after Chairman’s Report)

July 5th **Summer Walk***, led by a Countryside Ranger – we hope to acquaint with the butterflies on the Meadows and other marginal species.

August 2nd **Wild Flower Walk***, led by a Countryside Ranger.

September 6th – **Tree walk***, help in identifying the trees on the reserve.

November 2nd **Fungi walk***, follows up the successful foray of 2006 and 2007 looking for the elusive waxcaps.

We will have a further indoor meeting in October/November. We have some ideas but other suggestions are always welcome.

Work parties

April 12 Put wire on new boardwalks, tidy up in Bottom Mead

May 10 Install anniversary bench in Mousecroft, paint gates, fences etc.

June 14 Cut back entrances, paint more fences and gates.

July 12 Nest box building (at Norsey Wood)

Sept 06 Replace Jackdaw Close sign & dog sign, litter pick

Oct 11 Lay and replant hedge at Southend Road.

Nov 08 Hedge works - continued

Dec 13 Hedgerow works in SSSI (trim/replant)

Chairperson's Report

As you can see above, we now have most of our Programme in place for 2008. We have already held one event this year, which was the Marginal Species evening featuring several talks, with the 'top of the bill' being Lois Childs from Writtle College on Local Butterflies and on Reptiles. This event was well supported and it was nice to see some new faces along with those who regularly support our walks and meetings. (It would be nicer still to see a few more at future events!). This meeting was the 'launch' of the survey of marginal species which we covered in the previous letter. We learnt from Lois that capturing occasional records of species is one level of interest, but a formal Butterfly Transect Survey requires a different level of dedication - it requires walking a fixed route across a site, each week between April and September, whilst counting the number of individuals of each butterfly species. This may be something we can do in a future year if we can find enough volunteers.

Some good news to report is that the 'End of Award Report' for the Marked Trail was accepted by the Lottery Awards-for-All scheme. We are now left to dispose of the remaining funds in our own time. So we can close the file on the Marked Trail project, although there will always be some maintenance work. The remaining funds will be applied to the restoration of hedgerows, which will start in the autumn.

This month is the 10th Anniversary of the founding of the Mill Meadows Society. We will be marking this with an additional bench, complete with a small commemorative plaque, in Mouse Croft.

I know that many of you have been in the Society for the 10 year duration and also that many of Management Committee have been holding those positions for most of that time. Fortunately, only one of the Committee members has expressed a desire to relinquish one of the key positions and that was taken up by a new member (see below). We are also fortunate that the Committee

members are prepared to continue for another year, but we cannot rely on this being the case every year.

So, with the AGM coming up I will once again appeal for more of you to consider a position on the Committee. It is an opportunity to shape the Reserve and to work with people who share that same interest. If you are not keen yourself, how about spreading the word about the Mill Meadows Society to friends, neighbours and family and suggesting that they join The Society? In future years they may become keen enough to be active Committee members. Every promotion, or simple mention, of The Society may help to ensure its continuity and to protect our reserve.

Neil Sumner 01277 630849
Neilsummer123@aol.com

Ranger's report

Now that the winter is over (Easter weekend's snow being just a figment of your imagination!) the habitat management works will come to a close as the birds begin to nest.

You'll probably have noticed some work on the hedgerows taking place over the last week or so. This is part of the above-mentioned Awards for All project and aims to tidy up some of the hedges as well as recover some of the areas of meadow that have been invaded by scrub and trees. Mill Meadows is notified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for the old grassland, so whilst trees are generally thought to be nice they're not necessarily a good thing everywhere.

There will be an ongoing programme to restore more of the grassland over the next few years. This is as part of the Higher Level Environmental Stewardship Scheme (HLS for short!) that we've managed to agree with Natural England, whose job it is to maintain the condition of SSSIs throughout the country. This restoration work will involve erecting some new fencing around the SSSI fields so that we can more closely control the grazing. Fencing works will probably take place next winter and will initially mean the clearance of some trees and scrub along the proposed fence

line so that the work can take place. Once the fencing is in, we aim to gradually clear the scrub from the areas within the fields, but this may mean we can be a bit more relaxed about the areas outside. However, that's a decision we'll really have to take a bit later. Meanwhile, we're hoping the cows will arrive soon to begin they're grazing work for this year.

Those of you who attended the recent meeting might like to know that the reports of the 'marginal' species have begun to trickle in. So far, two reports of Song Thrush and one of Bullfinch have reached me. I'll be putting these onto maps of the reserve so that we can get an idea of their distribution around the reserve. We can then use this as a guide to how we manage the habitat, so please send your sightings in as soon as you can. (The list of species is near the end of this newsletter).

We've recently begun to build closer links with the scout groups who use the hut in Greens Farm Lane, and I've offered to help them manage the small area of woodland behind the hut as part of their activities. This won't now be able to start until next September, but hopefully will benefit both them and the reserve. I also spoke to one of their groups last week as part of their 'Forester's badge' preparations.

I've now completed mapping and measuring some of the ancient trees with the council's tree officer, and I'm hoping to meet up with him soon to discuss what we need to do to manage these to they're best advantage. The Awards for All grant has also allowed us to get a new set of steps installed between Hilly Field and Coles. The contractor who did the work thinks they may well 'settle' as a large tree root had to be removed to accommodate them, so they may well require a bit of filling in before they're finished. However, they should make this area a bit more easily passable.

Finally, please note above, the proposed work party dates and activities for the next few months. If you're not a regular attendee, please give them a try. You can do as much or as little as you like! All tools and equipment supplied.

Thanks,
Chris Huggins - March 2008

Chris Huggins
Countryside Ranger
Norsey Wood Information Centre
01277 624553 chris.huggins@basildon.gov.uk



Sightings from near and far

During the winter the birds in the editor's garden required regular feeding. Sunflower seed hearts are very popular with chaffinches, goldfinches and siskins. The blackbirds also feed on them and the bread (2 loaves per week!) and numbers are often in excess of a dozen at a time. The seed feeder also attracts a great spotted woodpecker (it is there as I type). Doves and pigeons are also common visitors. A special treat was a flock of brambling that were feeding on Easter Saturday. They are a very attractive bird when viewed close-up through binoculars. The bird that seemed to decline this year was the greenfinch which had been the most common visitor. Blue and great tits, sparrows and starlings are not the common birds they once were.

Another once common site from my childhood is the water vole. It was lovely to stand a watch these charming creatures when walking along one of the local footpaths.

We received the latest newsletter from South Essex Wildlife Hospital, a rescue, rehabilitation and public advice charity that cares for 10,000 cases per year. The charity was donated 3 acres of land on which to build a new hospital, as after 20 years they outgrew their existing accommodation. They have finally received planning permission from Thames Gateway. Fund raising continues so that the hospital project can be completed. For more information visit the website www.southessexwildlife.org

Membership reminder and other information from Frances Adams

Having been your membership secretary for ten years a lot of you have now become friends. I have decided to have a rest and in April I will be

handing over the role to John Hathaway. John joined the Committee in the winter and was keen to become more involved and has agreed to take over the membership duties and distribution of the newsletter. He will also bring us into the 21st century by transferring my pen and paper records on to a computer which should make the work quicker and more efficient. I shall still remain on the committee and will be 'tea-person' at the talks and events - so I will see you at the AGM.

Membership renewal is now due; the year starts 1st April until 31st March 2009. Thanks to all members who have already renewed and additional thanks for your generous donations. The Society membership remains steady and some new members joined this winter. Please send your renewal payments to John using the revised form at the back of the newsletter.

Frances

Scrub

The word 'scrub' or 'scrubland' often occurs when discussing the management of the reserve. It is an important habitat, as scrubland is a plant community characterized by scrub vegetation consisting of low growing trees (e.g. blackthorn and hawthorn), shrubs (e.g. gorse and broom), mixed with grasses and herbs.

Scrubland may occur naturally or as the result of human activity and may be the mature vegetation type in a particular region remaining stable over long periods of time. In our part of the country it is a transitional community between grassland and woodland occurring temporarily as the result of a disturbance, such as fire. Where grazing is allowed to reduce the lush grasses, they begin to be replaced by the coarser tussock grasses and broad-leaved plants. The longer-lived insects can then survive without disturbance. This is the first stage of what would be the return to mature woodland if left unchecked for hundreds of years. Scrub is a specialised habitat for an array of species, predominantly birds, providing ideal cover for nesting, insect-feeding and breeding. Unlike mature woodland, which has sparse ground cover, scrub is often close-growing, creating places inaccessible to humans and so providing a

safe refuge to wildlife. Therefore, despite an unappealing name, it has a vital part to play in the ecosystem within the reserve.

Birds in and around the reserve

It has certainly been a winter to remember. The editor has already mentioned the enigmatic finches that have graced his garden and the gardens of a few other lucky members. In the surrounding countryside, flocks of thrushes and finches have been reminiscent of the older days. This is probably down to a combination of poor seed harvests in the countries to the North and East of Europe and also to the fields of set-aside locally providing the birds with a bounty of food.

In contrast, the signs of spring were early. On the reserve, long-tailed tits started building in February and, on Saturday 23rd a missle thrush sang near Hillside Road – one of pair frequenting a local garden. Blackbird, woodpigeon, collared dove, robin and dunnock have all been seen building nests early in March. The nest-building was put on hold during the cold snap later in the month, although our first chiffchaff were singing around 15th March and paused only for few days until the temperatures warmed-up. Other birds of interest have been occasional sightings of treecreeper, wintering blackcaps and a woodcock in Boggy Piece.

Bird Atlas 2007-11

In previous Newsletters I mentioned this major national project to produce an atlas of birds. Bird atlases are a set of maps that show the distribution of each bird species at different times of the year. They are the basis of the distribution maps that we have in our bird books as well as helping ornithologists and conservationists to understand trends and influences in bird population.

The atlas will be collated from the observations of thousands of bird-watchers during the next 4 years. To achieve this, the whole country is broken-down into 10 kilometre squares and each square is decomposed further into 2km squares i.e. tetrads. Each tetrad is assigned to a surveyor who must carry out 4 visits during the period: early winter, late winter, early breeding season and late breeding season. Each visit must be timed to 1 or 2 hours during which all adult birds seen and

heard are counted, unless they are very obviously just passing overhead and not using the square. There are 4 tetrads actually converging on Mill Meadows at about the point in Greens where we can gaze over the fence at the ancient chestnut tree in the grounds of Gatwick House.

Thus my first timed tetrad visit on the Meadows was delimited to Oakfield, Greens, Hurlocks, Watts, Butchers and Brick Field. A timed tetrad visit should include as much variety of habitat as possible, not just the bits we like. So the same 1 hour walk included areas of housing where I was furtively taking notes and trying not to look like a prospecting burglar. Amongst the results, Woodpigeon was the expected most numerous species (62 birds – more than 1 per minute) and the surprise second was blackbird at 24 with Starling third at 22. If this had been last year blue and great tits would probably have occupied 2nd and 3rd places but they reportedly had a poor breeding season. The pleasing news was the 4 bullfinches and the 2 yellowhammers. In theory, the yellowhammers should not be counted as they were only passing overhead.

However, this species was to be included, as the second part of the survey was on the east side of Norsey Wood, including the set-aside field near Tylde Hall Farm. This had a flock of at least 30 yellowhammers, amongst many more chaffinches. Also in the field was a stonechat and, with 3 redpolls in Norsey Wood, the visit was much more rewarding than a contribution to the atlas.

The second visit was at the end of February. Encouraged by a bright day, many birds were in song so this led to high counts of 18 robins and 12 dunnocks in that part of the Meadows. Starling was the winner this time, with 47 birds seen. The set-aside field near Norsey Wood had so many highlights it was difficult to pick one. Was it the 120+ redwings emerging from the stubble, the 20 bramblings in the trees or the two flocks of yellowhammers totalling around 50 birds that flew between the trees and stubble? Reed buntings, meadow pipits, fieldfares and missle thrushes were all there too. Yes, a winter to remember.

Back to the Atlas - the timed visits will provide data on the relative abundance of species within each square. To supplement these records, the

atlas will also include 'Roving Records' which are simply any record of birds at any time during the period. This completes the picture of which species are present in each tetrad. These roving records could be complete list of birds seen in any location, such as a garden, on a given day or just one-off sightings of a species that is less common.

And finally....

If you've been patient enough to read all the articles in the Newsletter you may have been struck by the seemingly contradictory notes on scrub. Our Ranger is advising of our need to control it, whilst our Editor is extolling its virtues. In the hope of reconciliation, I'm reminded of an event many years ago when, whilst gardening, I was asked by a small boy "what is a weed?" The answer I gave was "It's a plant that is growing in the wrong place". This piece of philosophy could also be applied to scrub in Mill Meadows: we want lots of it, – but in the right places.

Mill Meadows Society **- Marginal Species Survey, 2008**

Just a reminder of the species we are surveying

Species:

The targeted species are:

Birds: **Bullfinch,**
 Song Thrush

Mammals: **Stoat,**
 Weasel,
 Hedgehog

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

Contact Chris or Neil if you want more information or have any sightings of the above

Notice that the Tenth Annual General Meeting of the Mill Meadows Society will be held at the Reading Room, Billericay High Street on Thursday 24th April 2008 at 7.45 pm. All members should attend; non-members will be very welcome but can not vote at the meeting.

Agenda

1. Apologies for absence.
2. Matter arising from the minutes of the ninth AGM held on 26th April 2007. See attached sheet.
3. Report of Chairman.
4. Report of treasurer, accounts for 2007–8 Copies will be available at the meeting.
5. Report of Membership Secretary
6. Election of general committee for the year 2008 – 9
 - Chairman
 - Treasurer
 - General Secretary
 - Other Committee Members
7. Resolutions and motions. Members are invited to submit motions for consideration and delivered to the General Secretary at 36 Beverley Rise, Billericay, prior to 14 days before the meeting.
8. Maintenance and development of the nature reserve.
9. Any other business.

Nominations – if you wish to nominate someone as a member of the General Committee please give details below and pass to the General Secretary at least 24 hours prior to the meeting.

Position for which nomination is being made

Name of nominee

Your name

Minutes of the 9th Annual General Meeting held at the Reading Rooms on Thursday 26th April 2007.

Present: Neil Sumner (Chair); Frances Adams, Geoff Forward, Liz Holdstock, Paul Jarmy and Ken Williamson (Committee members); Chris Huggins (Basildon District Council Ranger); and sixteen members of the Society.

1. Neil opened the meeting and welcomed all members and visitors present

2. Apologies for absence were received from Alan Sheehy, Jim Watts and Elizabeth Forward

3. Chairman's Report. Neil had now completed his first year as chairman of the Society and summarised events and achievements, notably the securing of the Lottery Grant, during the year. Two matters for consideration had been particularly brought to Neil's attention by members, the need for improvements to footpaths and the requirement for more biodiversity in the reserve. The proposal to establish the marked trail had resulted partly from the first request, however counter concerns had been voiced by members who feared that the trail would detract from the "wild" aspect of the reserve. Neil reassured these members that the trail would secure a firm all-weather base for the path and provide a basic guide to points of interest along the route; there was no intention to turn the area into a public park. Members had also reiterated the desirability of involving more young people in the management of the reserve; means of achieving this were being explored by the Committee. The programme of working parties and other public events, both on the reserve and indoor activities in the Winter, had been generally successful and would continue. An exhibition of the Society's work held at Billericay Library had been successful and had resulted in a number of new members joining the Society. Finally Neil thanked all members who had contributed to the success of the Society be they committee members, work party participants or helpers at indoor talks and social functions.

4. Treasurer's Report. Liz circulated a summary of the year's accounts which showed a significant balance of £10, 277 - 29 as against £1, 890 - 70 at the 2006 AGM, although this did of course include the Lottery Grant which had been received in March. Neil emphasised that, having been awarded the grant, it was now incumbent on the Society to ensure that it was spent productively.

5. Ranger's Report. Chris circulated a detailed summary of tasks undertaken by work parties and Council contractors during the year and of events held in the reserve including the very successful Wildflower walk and Fungus Foray. A copy of Chris's report was distributed to all members present at the meeting and will be attached to these minutes on file.

6. Membership. Membership currently stood at 178 households; in addition to their subscriptions many members made generous donations to the Society which was very much appreciated.

7. Election of Officers. All serving committee members had indicated their willingness to stand for re-election; in the absence, despite attempts to recruit new committee members, of any nominations or volunteers from the floor, the existing committee re-elected:

Neil Sumner (Chair), proposed by Frances Adams, seconded by John Bird

Geoff Forward (Secretary), proposed by Margaret Vaughan, seconded by Paul Jarmy

Liz Holdstock (Treasurer), proposed by Ken Williamson, seconded by Tim Smith

Frances Adams, Paul Jarmy, Alan Sheehy and Ken Williamson (Committee members), proposed en bloc by Jill Bird, seconded by Tim Smith

8. There being no other business, Neil closed the formal business of the evening and members enjoyed an interesting and humorous presentation on herb cultivation by the proprietor of "Herbs in Stock"

You may have a good memory for dates or may have been observant when reading the previous articles and realised it is our 10th anniversary. To celebrate the occasion here is a reprint of the first page of the initial newsletter. Some things may have changed but the issues we face and the events organised are very familiar. I wonder who produced the plant drawings. Perhaps our treasurer should become Chancellor of the Exchequer as the subscription remains unchanged at £3. On page 2 the bird species described include warblers, finches, thrushes, swallows and martins. Mammals included badgers, foxes, stoats and weasels (*some of our marginal species* – Ed). The cattle grazing ceased in 1989 and the current practice was to mechanically cut and remove the hay. It was hoped this was a short term management option.

MILL MEADOWS SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

Issue number 1. April - June, 1998

What is the Mill Meadows Society?

Eighteen months ago a number of Billericay residents expressed an interest in helping Basildon District Council manage its land at Mill Meadows. Since then the group has constituted itself as a Society, with nominated officers, a programme of events and a means of communicating its ideas and aspirations - a regular newsletter. The Society hopes to raise local awareness of the Meadows and encourage involvement in its management and conservation.



Where is Mill Meadows, and why does it need a Society?

The meadows lie between the Southend Road at Bell Hill and Greens Farm Lane, Billericay. In fact, until recently the site was known as Greens Farm Country Park.

Mill Meadows receives a lot of visitors -walkers, some exercising their dogs, families out for a stroll and local school children taking the short-cut to and from home on the adjacent housing estates. Basildon District Council were quick to spot the potential for damage to the wildlife of such a popular site and designated it a Local Nature Reserve. So there is a responsibility to manage the site with great care. In the long term, this will be better achieved through local help and co-operation.

'A gem in your midst'

Just five minutes walk from the centre of Billericay lies 90 acres of rolling meadows and copses - as charming and restful a place as you'll find anywhere in the county.

Mill Meadows, also known locally as Mini Meadows and Greens Farm, is an ancient site. Until recently it extended northwards across the valley to join up with Norsey Wood, another ancient beauty spot. The commanding views eastwards, over the whole district and beyond, are very impressive. But the main reason for Basildon Council bestowing Local Nature Reserve status on Mill Meadows was to give some protection to its wealth of flowers, insects and other wildlife.



Harebell



Devil's-bit scabious

From April to September a succession of species of plants delight the casual visitor and entice the enthusiast back time and again. Primroses, bluebells and wood anemones in spring, followed by ragged robin, spotted orchids and, later, harebell. The season culminates with the spectacle of thousands of bright blue Devil's-bit scabious, one of the finest displays in Essex, providing a late nectar source for the numerous butterflies that share the meadows. Over twenty species of butterfly have been recorded, including brown argus, small copper and common blue.

Birds too, enjoy the mixture of habitats. Tits and woodpeckers take advantage of the mature trees in the copses, with the green woodpecker visiting the meadows in search of its favourite food, ants.

