

# SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



HELPING TO PROTECT MILL MEADOWS  
LOCAL NATURE RESERVE

Issue 42.  
July – September 2008

## Events for your diary

### 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.*

August 2<sup>nd</sup> **Wild Flower Walk\***, led by a Countryside Ranger.

October 4th – **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.*

### **Butterfly Survey**

19<sup>th</sup> July and 9 August

Would you like to help identify the butterflies! Please contact the Chairman – contact details below

### Work parties

- 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)

### Leaflet Distribution by email

*We are able to send the newsletter out by e-mail. This reduces costs of paper and printing and, in some case, postage as well demands on our delivery volunteers.*

*If you would like to receive your next newsletter by this method, please advise our Membership Secretary, John Hathaway, by e-mail at [john.hathaway@hathaway.co.uk](mailto:john.hathaway@hathaway.co.uk)*

*Please note that subscription by email is entirely voluntary.*

### Please visit our new website

We now have a new website which will be updated regularly with information on forthcoming events and maintenance work, and wildlife sightings. Please bookmark and visit regularly and send the link to local friends and relatives who may be interested in Mill Meadows and the Society.

[http://www.millmeadows.org.uk/](http://www.millmeadows.org.uk)

A big 'thank you' to our 'Webmaster' Ross Holland who has set this up for us.

We have re-used much of the material and layout from our old site which will be closed down. The new site will be maintained much more regularly and will be devoid of advertisements. It also contains many useful links to other natural history sites as well as Countryside Services and the local. AboutMyArea/CM12 site.

One particularly nice feature is the random photo – keep clicking Refresh on any page.

## **Chairperson's Report**

The last 3 months have been most satisfying: the launch of our new web site, some interest from one of the local schools (please see Ranger's report, below) and some very enjoyable and informative walks and talks. The AGM was well-attended, with some newer members joining the regular supporters. I should add, though, that there was still space for more people.

The talk on Grasslands by Rod Cole was fascinating and delivered with infectious enthusiasm. We heard much about, and saw many photographs of, the great variety of wild-flowers and other wildlife that can be encouraged by careful management. We really need to put Langdon Hills Nature Reserve on our agenda for a visit next year.

A few days later we were accommodated by the Essex Wildlife Trust, at Abbots Hall farm, and then in June, again with the EWT, we visited Chafford Gorges. The attendance at the former was very good but less so at the latter. A guided walk with a Ranger or Warden adds so much value to the visit so I hope more of you take advantage and join us on future walks.

On the reserve, the new bench has been installed in Mouse Croft, with a small commemorative plaque. We plan to have a press photograph to publicise this.

Turning to the subject of conservation, there is a question that must be common to all recorders of wildlife – "are they just not being reported, or are they no longer there?" Such a question could be posed regarding some of our mammals. Have hedgehogs, stoats and weasels really disappeared from the locality, or will the Marginal Species Survey tell us otherwise? We have had some response to the Survey but I hope for more, especially as we have Summer now started and we need you to get more reports of the insects and flowers.

The membership renewals elicited several comments and suggestions on the Society – please keep them coming. I always try to follow these up and we will now be pressing the Council to see if

there is anything that can be done to deter the litter and dog mess which still occur on the Reserve.

There has been a lot of disappointment expressed regarding the felling of birch trees in the SSSI area. Our big failure as a Society, and for which I take full responsibility, was not to inform or consult our members in advance before the work was done. I was aware that there was work in Oakfield to restore the meadow but hadn't given sufficient thought to whether the trees would be affected. This was a mistake I will really try not to repeat. Before we commence the hedgerow restoration we will inform people in advance of any work that is being undertaken that creates a notable appearance in part of the Reserve. This will include a walk to point out where work will be done and why, if there is sufficient demand.

With the new Website adding another way of disseminating information, along with the information boards, we no longer have to rely on the newsletter as the only way of reaching members and of publicising the Society. With regard to publicity, though, I am conscious that we haven't used the display boards this year and intend to rectify this by approaching local public places that could accommodate them. We will use the library again and approach visitor centres, such as EWT sites. If you have suggestions of places where we could leave our display boards for a few days, please let me know. Also, I'll always be grateful for anyone who can spare an hour to set-up or take down the boards or even attend them for a short while and spread the work about the Mill Meadows Society.

In the meantime, I hope you have many pleasant summer walks on the Reserve amongst butterflies, colourful flowers and peacefully grazing cattle.

**Neil Sumner 01277 630849**

[chair@millmeadows.org.uk](mailto:chair@millmeadows.org.uk)

## **Ranger's report**

There are two major items of interest to report since the last newsletter. A few weeks ago I received a phone call from the teacher in charge of biology at Billericay School asking if their year 9 classes could use Mill Meadows for some of their GCSE ecology coursework. This seemed too good

an opportunity to miss so I thought about what survey work would be useful. It seemed important to me that any work they did should be 'real' i.e. things we would like to know about, rather than making work just to give them something to do, and I came up with several ideas:

- Declining flowers and soil moisture: Are the flowers associated with wet conditions declining, and if so is it because the meadows are drying out?
- Pond management: What species are in the ponds and how should we manage them?
- Marginal species birds – Bullfinch and Song Thrush: More effort towards our marginal species survey
- Reptiles: Again, more pairs of eyes looking for our elusive species.

I was invited to give a talk to all the students involved, probably about 400 in all. These all seemed to go well, and I also went along on a couple of occasions when they were doing some of the fieldwork. They've promised to let me know the results and I'll be going along to a presentation of their findings on July 22<sup>nd</sup>. I'll let you know what they found.

The second item of interest is that we've had our five yearly SSSI condition assessment conducted by Natural England. Knowing this was going to be done I also went and did my own, using very similar protocols to the ones that they use. This involves taking samples of various things at 20 stopping points on a walk that aims to cover most of the area being assessed. The samples taken are as follows:

- Extent – whether there has been any loss of habitat due for example to scrub encroachment or development.
- Ratio of herbs (broad leaved plants) to grasses in the sward.
- Presence of a list of positive indicator species.
- Presence of a list of negative indicator species.
- Presence of indicators of waterlogging (e.g. rushes, large sedges)
- Average sward height
- Amount of dead plant material
- Amount of bare ground

My conclusion was that the SSSI was still in unfavourable condition, but that it had not declined recently. The reasons for the unfavourable verdict were the high percentage of grasses (as opposed to herbs), a slight loss of extent due to scrub encroachment, and a lack of sufficient positive indicator species at a high enough frequency. I've since had a brief chat with Charlie Williams of Natural England since he did his assessment, and found that his conclusions were quite similar, the underlying cause probably being that not enough material has been removed over recent years by cutting and/or grazing. This is obviously something we will have to address, but which should be covered if we are able to implement the terms of the new Higher Level Environmental Stewardship Scheme. The need for the previously mentioned tighter fence line around the SSSI fields to enable us to concentrate the grazing better becomes more apparent. The full report from Natural England should be received soon, but hopefully will not need to change the proposed management regime too much, if at all.

Many Thanks

*Chris Huggins*

*Countryside Ranger*

*Norsey Wood Information Centre*

01277 624553 [chris.huggins@basildon.gov.uk](mailto:chris.huggins@basildon.gov.uk)



### **Sightings from near and far**

Thanks to the regular contributions from Neil and Chris I have very little extra information. Recently a juvenile bird (probably a blackcap) flew into our patio door and lay stunned in the garden. To avoid it becoming prey to the local cat population I decided to rescue it. To overcome the shock it was lightly wrapped in a cloth to keep it warm and placed in a box. I then placed the box off the ground and in the shadows of an open shed. Within an hour it had made a recovery and flown away.

**Membership renewal is now due;** the year starts 1st April until 31<sup>st</sup> 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 Hathaway using the form at the back of the newsletter.

## Marginal Species Survey

So far, grass snakes, slow worms and common lizards have all been reported. Song thrushes are doing very well and bullfinches are clinging on with two territories. Thanks to all those who have told me about these species and also to Paul Jarmy for the photograph of the snakes. As mentioned earlier, there have been no mammal sightings so far.



## Birds in and around the reserve

The more reliable songbirds have held their own this year but none of the 'marginal' birds stayed to breed. It was a cool start to Spring so it was fitting that one of first sightings of interest in April was the 3 wintering bramblings, seen at the end of the work party. We had been serenaded by a willow warbler earlier that day but this was the only record this year. In early May, a cuckoo sang briefly from early morning mist but, like the willow warbler soon moved on. Nationally, cuckoo numbers have taken a further drop in numbers this year. A lesser whitethroat has sang on a few occasions and a garden warbler was present one evening in mid June; its alarm calls seemed to be due to a tawny owl. The owls formerly bred on the reserve and we hope to encourage their return with another nest box.

There has been plenty of song from blackcaps, chiffchaffs and chaffinches and song thrushes are almost ridiculing their 'red-list' status, although most territories seem to be in neighbouring gardens. Of the migrants that use Africa, only the

whitethroat is now a confirmed breeder on the Reserve. There are 4 whitethroat territories, only a fraction of the numbers in the early 90's. These warblers entertain us with song flights well into the Summer and one is still singing profusely in Greens at the time of writing.

A pair of missle thrushes have returned, first seen and heard around the Hillside Road area then moving to somewhere either side of Greens Farm Lane. However, a single bird in early May was not showing any signs of having young.

Grey wagtails did breed near the reserve this year, as suspected when one was disturbed from one of the ponds in April. It was the day of the Bird Walk when I found a striking male carrying food in its beak and giving alarm calls from the chimney pot of the Society's first secretary. Perhaps we need to expand the habitat on this walk in future, although I doubt that the residents of Chapel Street would be happy with a group of people staring through binoculars.

Our attempts to get coal tits to use the nest boxes failed again. One was occupied by blue tits, in spite of the small entrance hole. The other had a pair of coal tits courting close by but it was never used by them – probably because the blue tits were always trying to break into it. Perhaps the answer is to give the blue tits an alternative home in the same spot? We have to wait another 9 months to find out.

This Spring has seen a good crop of migrating birds of prey in the area, including a few instances of osprey, red-footed falcon and marsh harrier. Red kites were around in June, too, and we were treated to a beautiful view of one at Chafford Gorges. On the previous day, two were spotted by Chris and others over Queens Park and then flew up to Stock giving me a distant view whilst I was staking out next year's Bird Atlas route. On at least two occasions a buzzard flew over in early June and one has also been seen over Norsey Wood. In fact I have seen buzzards and little egrets over the Reserve as often as house martins and swallows this year – reflecting some of the losers and winners in the changing bird populations.



