

SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



HELPING TO PROTECT MILL MEADOWS
LOCAL NATURE RESERVE

Issue 46
July - Sept 2009

Check the society website for regular updates, information and pictures at <http://www.millmeadows.org.uk/>



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Events for your diary

Walks

Sat 11th July: 10.30 am Wildflower Walk. A guided walk where we identify and learn about the flowers on Mill Meadows

19th August, 8 pm Bat & moth evening.

27th September. 11 am – 4 pm. Norsey Wood Open Day. Come and see our photographic display at Norsey Wood, including new photos from our members

31st October 10.30 am Fungus Foray – the annual search for waxcaps

*For the above walks, meet at the **Scout Hall, Greens Farm Lane.** Duration is 1-2 hours. Advance booking via Countryside Services is preferred so that we can gauge numbers.*

Indoor Meeting

17th September: 7.45 pm. Talk: Honey Bees – at The Scout Hall, Greens Farm Lane

Work parties

12th Sep 10th Oct 14th Nov

These run from 10.30 to 12.30 – meet at the Scout Hall

Mill Meadows through the Lens – more entries please!

Enter our photo competition and add more pictures to our display boards – see inside the newsletter



Chairperson's Report

Summer is here and almost, you might say, with a vengeance after the last two year's washouts. Already the signs are good that we will have a much better year for butterflies. The orchid spikes have been outstanding and we will see what else is around at our wildflower walk this month.

People have now been generally co-operating with our request to keep to the path through Greens to give the scrub a chance to grow back and give more protection to the wildlife. The notices requesting people to use the path have been vandalised a couple of times but this was hardly unexpected. At least one member has raised concerns on the blocking of the 'unofficial' path in Greens. The concerns were, firstly, that one path through an area gets over-used and muddy, and secondly, when cattle are blocking the path, it can mean that quite a wide detour is necessary. Mud will always be a feature of The Meadows in winter but we will try and alleviate it on the main walkways especially on the Marked Trail. And although our cattle are very placid and more wary of us than we are of them, we do appreciate that some people find it daunting to walk so close to large beasts. I suggest that we have to take each walkway case on its own merits. In the case of Greens there is an alternative path through the woods very close by.

Balancing access for people with refuges for wildlife is a constant challenge on any nature reserve. On the one hand we do not want to create a free-for-all access with no wildlife refuge areas but on the other hand there is no point in having these areas if we cannot walk through and enjoy them.

On the subject of Watts and Greens, we have recently been informed that EDF have plans to place an electricity cable through this area and are currently discussing this with Countryside Services. This should ultimately be to our advantage as, once the cable is laid, they will put an improved pathway on top of the route of the cable. However, we on the Committee are very concerned about the extent of the disruption when the work is conducted and have written formally to Countryside Services expressing these

concerns. And we have asked that we have an opportunity to view the detailed plans and have time to issue a communication to our members before any work starts.

It's pleasing to report that there is now more use of the meadows by organised groups of young people. There is the continued Summer Ecology Project by Billericay School who, we were delighted to learn at the AGM, received an award last year for their work. And we have taken packs of Beavers and Brownies around The Reserve. Speaking at the recent Essex Wildlife Trust AGM, Germaine Greer made the point that we should 'catch them young' - stimulate people's interest in wildlife before their teenage years, as this usually leads to a continued or re-emerging interest in the countryside and its wildlife later in their lives.

Regarding our events, we had to cancel our guided walk at Langdon Reserves. We will try and re-arrange it for next year but will gauge interest and extent of clashes with holidays before doing so. Our bird walk was very well attended but the bird sightings were a bit sporadic. The rationale of holding the walk in May is that this was the prime time for bird-song, especially the summer visitors. However, our summer visitors are sadly much fewer and our resident birds' prime activity period seems to be getting earlier. So next year we will move this walk to late March or early April. As this will be before the leaves emerge, we should enjoy better views of our resident birds.

'Thank you' to all of you who attended our AGM. We did have a higher number than usual this year, although there were a few empty seats. Mr Andrew May from the Essex Wildlife Trust told us more about the national initiative on Living Landscapes and some of us have since been engaged in taking this forward locally. I see this work as having as much importance to Mill Meadows biodiversity as work on The Meadows itself. More on local birds and living landscapes below.

Enjoy the butterflies and flowers this summer and don't forget the sun cream!

Neil Sumner 01277 630849
chair@millmeadows.org.uk

Ranger's report

Managing grassland at Mill Meadows.

The annual grazing season is with us and I know there has been some concern about the new fencing that has recently been installed. I don't know if some members of the society share this concern, but I thought I would explain why we have done this. Hopefully, this will reassure visitors to the meadows that their enjoyment of the site should not be diminished. The new fence will obstruct none of the currently used major paths, and gates will be installed to allow visitors access to all the areas that were available before. I am aware that at first it can look unsightly, but I think once it has weathered and the vegetation has begun to grow up around it again the visual impact will be reduced.

Meadows like ours require regular removal of material from the grassland for two main reasons. Firstly, to prevent seeds from nearby trees and shrubs growing in the meadows and displacing the grasses and wild flowers comprising the distinct community of plants that form the grassland ecosystem, and secondly, to remove nutrients from the soil, so that wild flowers with better wildlife value can compete with those plants that are better able to use the nutrients, but which are often less good for biodiversity. This can be achieved in two ways (or a combination of them). The first option is a regular mechanical cut and removal of plant matter, often done annually in late summer, especially if hay production to feed livestock or for commercial gain is the main goal.

The alternative is to graze the meadows with livestock of some kind. This is generally thought to be the better option for wildlife, as it produces a more uneven habitat with different heights of vegetation that provide differing microclimates (varying areas of temperature, shelter and so on) that different plants and animals, in this case mainly insects and other invertebrates, need. More flowers, means more insects, means more birds, and so on along and up the food webs.

We are fortunate that three of the fields in Mill Meadows (Butchers, Oakfield and Cumborrow)

have been classified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Grassland like this is now rare in Essex and the SSSI fields represent a relatively large proportion of what remains. The council therefore has an obligation to ensure that they are kept in good condition for wildlife and for people to enjoy now and in the future. We have recently renewed our agreement with Natural England (the government body responsible for ensuring SSSIs are in good condition), whereby we receive funding towards maintaining the meadows, and between the two bodies we identified a problem of the cattle 'escaping' from the SSSI fields to graze elsewhere in the reserve. Given that one of the ways of improving the SSSI condition is currently to increase in the amount the cattle are eating, it makes sense to be able to restrict them to the SSSI fields alone. Hence the need to install new fencing more tightly around this part of the reserve. The fencing will give us the better control of the cattle and the option of grazing different parts of the reserve at different levels to improve the site for wildlife now and in the years to come.

Events and surveys

On a lighter note, I'm hoping to increase the number of wildlife surveys on the reserve. Weather permitting, Neil Sumner and Paul Hudson will have done two butterfly counts by the time you read this, and Neil continues his efforts to record the bird species. I'm also hoping to organise some live trapping of small mammals and a bat survey later in the summer, as well as a 'Creatures of the night' public event including moth trapping (live again – no animals will be harmed, in case you're wondering!) and bat watching. If you're interested in getting involved in any of these, or have any other ideas for species (animals or plants) that we might try and survey, please get in touch.

Thanks,
Chris Huggins
Countryside Ranger
01277 624553
chris.huggins@basildon.gov.uk

Very many thanks to all of you who have renewed your membership already. It has been a very positive early response and is much appreciated. Not only that, but another 10 have asked to receive the newsletter and all other correspondence via e-mail. Thanks to you all as this all goes toward keeping our costs down.

John Hathaway
Membership secretary

Sightings from near and far



How many Orchids did we have this year ? (by Paul Hudson)

Any members who visited the Meadows in early June will surely have been impressed by the number of orchids which flowered this year. I suspect it may have been the best year for some time - but if you know better, please let me know!

Although I have lived only a few hundred yards from the Meadows for 11 years now, it is only in the last five years or so that I have taken much interest in the orchids. I suspect I didn't walk through the meadows so regularly in the first half of the decade so perhaps I just missed the flowering period. I remember wondering three or four years ago how many flower spikes there were and deciding that, in Butchers at least, it would probably be difficult to count them accurately.

Last year there seemed to be fewer flowers so I did attempt a count, but unfortunately not until some of the spikes were beginning to die off. The total figure I arrived at was 410, about two-thirds in Butchers and one-third in Oakfield, but I suspect this was an underestimate of the true figure.

This year, the orchids were clearly more abundant again. It so happened that I had two friends staying with me for the first weekend in June - just as the orchids were at their best - so they found themselves recruited to help me do another count. We were amazed to find that we arrived at a total figure of about 3,100 ! The biggest concentration, nearly 2,600, was again in Butchers but the flowers seemed to be more widely spread than last year, particularly in the southern part of the field.

Oakfield produced about 500 and there were a few in Cumborrow and a solitary one near the pond in Brickfield.

You may have noticed that I have so far just referred to "orchids" without mentioning which species. It seems that our plants are generally regarded as common spotted orchids, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, though I believe that the shape of the flowers and markings on many of the spikes are closer to those of heath spotted orchid, *Dactylorhiza maculata*. These species do hybridise, which of course complicates identification, and I don't claim to be an expert, so if anyone has their own views on this, I would be pleased to hear from them.

If you can help with the identification query or can provide more information on the history of the orchids in the Meadows, please get in touch with Society Chairman, Neil Sumner, (contact details above) who will pass information on to me.

Paul Hudson
1st July 2009

Local Birds (by Neil Sumner)

It was only recently that I learnt that tawny owls breed very early. So April may have been too late to check for activity around the nest boxes, although there were at least two owls calling not far away at the time. In Gainsborough Close, there has been a young tawny owl roosting since March, causing consternation amongst the blackbirds when it emerges in the evening and sometimes calling during the day. We've often seen it flying into The Meadows at dusk so can claim it as a Mill Meadows 'tick'.

The other good news is that treecreeper sightings have increased with one of two territories in the Hillmans/ Boggy Piece area and a family in Hoppits. The regular common garden birds continue to show good numbers, as do blackcaps, and the estimate of great spotted woodpeckers breeding pairs should be revised to at least four. It has been a good breeding season for many species so far, especially noticeable being the families of tits and finches. The elusive pairs of bullfinches at

either end of the reserve continue to baffle as to where they actually nest. The whitethroats didn't seem to stay in Greens, and only sang from Brickfield and across in Greens Farm Lane. Their absence from most of the reserve is puzzling because they are doing well locally elsewhere and were once common all over The Reserve. It may be down to reduced scrub and nettles, and the maturing hedges, or simply that the overall population has declined so the birds concentrate in their most preferred areas. The sad trend continues with other summer visitors: cuckoos calling only occasionally but, like the garden warbler in Hilly Field and the lesser whitethroat in Butchers, they have not stayed with us. The missle thrushes seem to have given up on Mill Meadows but locally the news is better: a pair at Lake Meadows, evidence of a pair raising more than one brood near Greenway and two territories both in Norsey Wood and Barrenleys Wood.



This year, I've been involved with bird walks and Bird Atlas Surveys at Queens Park Country Park and the adjoining farmland. This area has a diverse habitat and still has some of the birds that we have lost from Mill Meadows. If any of you had stood with me listening to the cacophony of song and looked at hawthorn and bramble that was rosy with linnets then you would understand why I always push back to stop scrub clearance going too far. We counted 5 singing whitethroats, along with garden warbler, willow warbler, blackcaps, chiffchaffs and the usual tits, finches and thrushes all competing to be heard and to protect their patch. The breeding linnets are so important, given their massive decline in local farmlands. Cuckoos and a turtle dove were also seen on occasions.

Other exciting news locally is a sighting of marsh tits in Norsey Wood last year. Although there were no sightings this year, it does give us hope that another species lost to Billericay may return. Further hope for our local nature reserves was the discovery of a lesser spotted woodpeckers nest at Barrenleys Wood.

House Martins – request for information

It now seems that these delightful little birds, whose swooping flights and quiet twitters were once a feature of our housing estates, no longer breed anywhere in the Billericay town. The decline is a national one and the BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) are conducting a House Martin Survey. Personally, I have seen a single bird at Buckwyns Farm and pairs in the Stock, Ramsden Heath and Downham areas but none at all in the town, and only very occasional migrants over Mill Meadows. If you know of any nests locally please let me know (phone, post or email).

Neil Sumner

More photographs please!

Following the announcement of the photographic competition in the last newsletter we have had a few responses but not enough. Why not take some pictures and share them? The photographic competition is for all members and we are looking for your favourite photographs of Mill Meadows from all angles and in all weathers.

They don't need to be recent, and can be digital or hard copy. The competition will run until the end of September.

You can send your entries by email (if they are digital) to webmaster@millmeadows.org.uk or by post if not digital to Ross Holland, 33 Langemore Way, Billericay, Essex CM11 2BT. Please include, if possible, the date and where on the meadow the photograph was taken. The map of field names can be seen at <http://www.millmeadows.org.uk/marktrail.aspx>. Digital photos should be no smaller than 640x480 please.

There will be 2 categories – Under 16 and Over 16. If you wish your photograph to be entered into the Under 16 category, please ensure you include your age in with the photo. Any without an age will be entered into the Over 16 category.

The competition will be judged by the Committee, and the competition is open to all members and their families, except the Committee of course!

The only other thing to note is that we would like to include these photographs in our publicity material, on our display boards at exhibitions and on our website, so by entering the competition we ask you to agree that we can do this. You can view many fine examples of the photographs we currently have at our new Photo Search page on

the web site and an example at the foot of page 6.

Living Landscapes - a vision for the future of Essex

(by Neil Sumner)

Living Landscapes are large areas which are being restored for the benefit of wildlife, people and the local economy. This is a national initiative promoted by The Wildlife Trusts and supported by many organisations. Living Landscapes seeks to improve large tracts of land outside isolated nature reserves. To achieve this, it needs the cooperation of conservation bodies, landowners and government agencies. Essex Wildlife Trust has defined 80 Living Landscape Areas in The County, one of which is Area 34, Ramsden Heath and Woods.

Ramsden Heath and Woods Living Landscape encompasses Mill Meadows, Norsey Wood, and the collection of woodlands between Billericay, Ramsden and Hanningfield. We also recently agreed to extend the original map to include Queens Park Country Park and some adjoining farmland, to include Laindon Common and Frith Wood and we are requesting that the EWT designate corridors across to Thorndon Park and towards Laindon. The rationale is to protect important wildlife corridors to Queens Park and Mill Meadows.

Looking at Area 34 as a whole, it is a diverse mix of habitats, many of which are typical to Essex but including the special areas within the local nature reserves. It has a relatively high proportion of woodland and has a network of footpaths, bridleways and lanes which enable people to enjoy unspoilt countryside in proximity to major commuter towns.

However, the local nature reserves and local wildlife sites are fragmented and there is much unfulfilled potential for the enjoyment of people and for wildlife diversity. The Living Landscape Vision for Ramsden Heath and Woods is to improve the wildlife and improve access to the area in balance with landowner's economic interests.

Creating the Living Landscape

The first stage is to create a Vision Document for the Area. This is a voluntary activity, supported by some of our members, Essex Wildlife Trust, Basildon and District Council and Chelmsford Borough Council as well as local wildlife experts.

The production of this document will of course need the support of landowners, Parish Councils, businesses and residents' organisations, who we will be asking to help us define and deliver the vision. Currently, we are working on a one-page flyer sheet to inform these parties of the initiative.

When the draft of the Vision Document has been completed, it will be distributed to the landowners, councils and resident's associations. Then we expect to hold meetings to discuss the ideas that it proposes and then go on to initiate projects that will implement the Vision. The projects could be diverse, and could, for example, include wildlife surveys, management plans for local nature reserves, tree planting, hedgerow maintenance, adopting stewardship schemes, creating ponds, creating nature trails along public footpaths or creating management plans for local wildlife sites.

In itself it is certainly a massive undertaking and one that needs to be broken down into smaller activities which are given priorities. It could never really be fully completed, because other changes in the natural and economic environments will impact the original vision. But each project that arises from this initiative will be one area of improvement and, although there will be some resistance and scepticism, there will also be a lot of enthusiastic response too. One local landowner of an identified local wildlife site has already agreed to a management plan being produced and from that we will have a way forward of protecting and improving the area for the flora and fauna - as well as giving his business some good advertising.

Every journey begins with a single small step!

If anyone would like to help with this, please let me know. Assistance could be in many forms, perhaps by providing introductions to landowners,

businesses, associations or councils, or by
volunteering to do wildlife surveys.