

SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



HELPING TO PROTECT MILL MEADOWS
LOCAL NATURE RESERVE

Issue 47
Oct -Dec 2009

Check the Society website for regular updates, information and pictures - or get in touch with The Society - at <http://www.millmeadows.org.uk/>



In Issue 47

- Purple Hairstreak Butterflies: *Butterfly watching with binoculars*
- Predators and Prey: *facts and philosophy*
- Council clamps down on dog poo: *new dog orders – will it give us a cleaner Meadows?*

Events for your diary

Walks

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

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.

Work parties

10th Oct 14th Nov 12th Dec

These run from 10.30 to 12.30 – meet at the Scout Hall. The Christmas Work Party will feature the usual festive celebration of mulled wine and mince pies

B's NE's

New 'Junior' Membership coming in 2010.

By early spring next year we aim to have a junior membership ready to launch.

- It's open to children of any age and is free.
- It will have links (but is not restricted to) Billericay's three nature reserves' Societies: Norsey Woods, Mill Meadows and Queens Park. Events will also be supported by Basildon Council Countryside Services
- **B's NE's** members will receive a quarterly newsletter by email, with child-friendly maps, nature identification cards to collect, competitions, etc.
- We plan to have seasonal celebrations held at the various reserves, e.g. Summer Solstice Fairy Ball, Autumn Equinox Conker Tournament.

Please get in touch with me, SUSANNAH_HERVEY@hotmail.com if you have anyone who would like to join.

Many children have already signed-up to join after meeting us at the Norsey Wood Open Day. Chris has very kindly offered to work alongside us for Basildon and District Council.

If there is anyone who would like to help with the production of the newsletters or with the events please let us know – any type of help will be appreciated.

The children of Billericay have waited long enough for something like this and I know that they will love this new adventure as much as they love nature!!

Susannah Hervey.

Chairperson's Report

We on the Committee are delighted with the emergence of the B's NE's. We have often received suggestions that there should be more activities for children and now that Susannah has come forward to initiate this, it looks like something is going to happen.

As with all community activities its success depends on people's participation and support. Please spread the word and give your children, grand-children, or friends' children a chance to join. And please, try and give Susannah support in this venture - every little bit will help.

With no apology for repetition, I'm going to again refer to Germaine Greer at the Essex Wildlife Trust AGM: 'we need to catch them young' - stimulate people's interest in wildlife before their teenage years.

I'm very aware that the new fencing hasn't been popular with everyone. We have discussed this at the Management Committee Meetings and Basildon Council have listened and responded and made some adjustments: putting in styles for some of the secondary/ traditional pathways and reducing the amount of barbed wire. The original impact of the changes is always hard to swallow (I remember how unhappy I was back in the Nineties when the hawthorn was cleared from Hilly Field).

Many of us believe that weathering and re-growth of the scrub will mitigate the visual impact of the new fencing, but only time will tell. No-one likes receiving complaints but the alternative – apathy – is worse.

In the last Newsletter I mentioned the EDF cable that will be laid through Mill Meadows. The first plans submitted to The Council – on which The Committee were copied – were not detailed enough and we came up with a long list of concerns and questions. So we continue to be very concerned about the extent of the disruption when the work is conducted. We will ensure that members have a chance to understand the impact of the work before it starts. (In the unlikely event that this doesn't happen you may see me in Watts with a pair of handcuffs and scouring for a suitable tree to attach to.)

We were given an excellent talk on Honey Bees by Ian Grant last month. Some feedback I've had was that this was one of the most interesting talks we've had in recent times. 'Thank you' to those of you who attended and also who gave to the Epping Breast Cancer Unit on the night. Also, my thanks to those of you who put out and stacked the chairs, and Frances and Margaret for the refreshments.

I had hoped for more attendees at the Bee Talk, especially given that this is such a topical subject – so we perhaps need to push the publicity for such events outside The Society.

If you haven't yet renewed your membership for 2009/10 may I please ask that you do. Its one of those small tasks that is easily over-looked and we have lost people in the past just because they don't get round to renewing. Due to the new process implemented by John, we keep these losses to a minimum. But there will always be a loss of members and we need a steady trickle of new members to compensate. Also the problem of attracting future committee members is still one that concerns me and I need to do more to address it. That is something to contemplate whilst out walking amongst the colours of Autumn, breathing in the heady smell of decaying leaves

and hearing the calls of feeding bird flocks. If anyone else contemplates it too, and receives inspiration, please get in touch.

Neil Sumner 01277 630849
chair@millmeadows.org.uk

Ranger's report

Not much takes place during the summer months as we don't want to disturb the wildlife. The cows continue to graze and have free access to the whole reserve at the moment. I would have liked to keep them confined to the SSSI for a bit longer, but it seems that the grazier felt there wasn't enough to eat, so released them to the previously ungrazed areas. However, I'm reasonably pleased with the progress so far. I would have settled for the current situation at the start of the year and there's nearly a month left to go, so I'm confident of a reasonable outcome this year.

I've also been planning the winter works programme for this year, and I'm reasonably hopeful that we can get some hedges trimmed and some overdue hedge management as well. I'd like to get the Greens Farm Lane hedge cut and the Chaffinch Crescent hedge trimmed to below the level of people's back fence. The plan of coppicing this hedge on a rotation isn't really working out as it grows so quickly. By cutting it all to the same height I'm hoping to be able to keep it in check as well as thickening it up to provide more nesting sites for birds and small mammals. I'm also hoping to be able to restore the Southend Road hedge to a more compact shape. We'll then be able to see where the gaps are and hopefully plant these up. In addition to the hedge works I'd like to get the scrub re-growth removed from the SSSI fields again, and from the area of Hilly field that was opened up about three years ago.

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

PURPLE HAIRSTREAKS AT MILL MEADOWS **(Butterfly-watching with binoculars)**

Most of us probably know that if we want good views of birds, a pair of binoculars is a very useful aid. However, to see butterflies, surely all we need to do is stand near a clump of colourful flowers on a sunny day and they will be easy to observe at close quarters as they come to feed on the nectar.

Well, that may be true for many species - but not for all! The Purple Hairstreak is one of the exceptions as this is a species that spends most of its life in the tree-tops. It particularly favours oaks, of which we are fortunate to have plenty in the Meadows, but is also seen on ash. It feeds mostly on honeydew, secreted by aphids onto the surface of the leaves of the trees.

Purple Hairstreaks are still widely found across southern England wherever there are oak trees and I knew there were records from the Meadows a few years ago. I made a couple of unsuccessful searches for them in 2008 and, as 2009 seemed to be a better year for butterflies generally, I decided to try again this year. I was rewarded with several sightings, initially on 13th July, when I probably saw about 20 individuals, but I found them again in smaller numbers on 3rd and 11th August.

The butterflies are inevitably hard to see as they tend to bask on the upper surfaces of leaves so are usually invisible from below. Careful searching with binoculars will sometimes reveal an apparently brown butterfly on a suitable tree. I thought the colour similar to the upper surface of a Ringlet and only rarely saw the purple sheen that gives the species its name. The presence of the butterflies was often revealed when they took a brief flight, two sometimes spiralling upwards together for a few seconds. In flight it is the silvery-grey underside of the wing which is evident.

On 13th July, I initially found Purple Hairstreaks in the oak tree beside the Scout Hut, but there were others in one of the oaks along the Butchers/Oakfield boundary and in Watts. My best views were where ash and oak trees meet above the footpath leading from Watts back

towards Butchers. Here the butterflies were low enough for me to see clearly, with binoculars, the white line or “hairstreak” on the underside and this fully confirmed the identification.

Butterfly books suggest that this species is easiest to find in the early evening and all my sightings were between 6.00 and 7.30 pm on warm, sunny days. Next year, I will try and check other areas of the Meadows to establish how widespread our Purple Hairstreaks really are.

Paul Hudson
3rd October 2009

Nature at its saddest – Predators and Prey

One of our members recently witnessed a woodpigeon, whilst on its nest, being attacked by a crow. The crow quite brutally pecked the woodpigeon which eventually was driven off the nest and fell down through the tree. The crow then ate the contents of the nest, which may have been eggs or young birds.

Woodpigeon’s nests are just a simple saucer of twigs so very easily raided. Stoats, squirrels, rats, magpies, crows and jays would all take the eggs or young. In most cases the adults can probably drive most of the predators away, if the nest is attended. Maybe this crow was just a particularly aggressive beast with a fondness for eggs or it was struggling to find other food, or maybe the parent pigeon was already injured or debilitated in some way and the crow realised this so saw it as an easy target. Crows are great opportunists - I've seen crows feeding for hours amongst rabbits in a field then suddenly turn on one and kill and eat it.

Many of our most magnificent wildlife examples are predators. We can enjoy watching a fox, a badger or a soaring buzzard but not enjoy witnessing them taking a rabbit. Our same member saw a sparrowhawk attacking a green woodpecker which gave off heart-wrenching distress calls – fortunately the woodpecker escaped.

We all know that predation is a fact of nature and, when we witness predation, we often conclude that this is factor in decline of a species - though

not with woodpigeons, of course which are numerous and increasing. They breed from February through to November so the predation has no undue impact on their population. But we often hear of crows and magpies being blamed for the decline in song-birds. Historically, the crow family were culled by game-keepers but this practice declined after WW2. Magpies increased and moved into the suburbs and the initial impact on songbirds was very noticeable. But many songbirds have adapted and we still have them in our gardens. It may even be that more of them died of starvation when they had higher nest successes.

Predation is often quoted as a reason for the decline in farmland bird numbers, but most species can withstand high levels of predation. A pair of birds only has to produce two young in their lifetime, which survive to breed, to keep a population stable. RSPB studies show that we need to eliminate the predator entirely if there is to be any improvement in fortunes for the prey species. Also a study by The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust found that total removal of crow and magpies boosted many song-bird species’ populations. But as the RSPB would never advocate total removal of any species and have found that partial culling is not successful, they prefer more positive measures, which is to provide more nest sites for the bird species that are under pressure.

The recovery of sparrowhawks is also sometimes cited as a reason for declines in some of the songbirds. I think that this is unlikely – in fact some bird survey evidence has pointed to the decline in songbirds coinciding with a decline in sparrowhawk numbers too. This makes sense: when the food reduces, the population reduces. The increase in the hobby, during the nineties, was probably due to a rise in the dragonfly population at that time. Hobbies also take swallows and house martins. A single bird provides a lot more food than many insects so catching a martin as opposed to chasing dragonflies is a good way of conserving energy. So, did more hobbies mean less martins and swallows? We don’t really know – because, since the rise of the hobby, the swallows and martins have declined for other reasons, at home and abroad.

In some cases, a highly-adaptable predator with a varied diet will add to the pressure on a prey species, if that species is already in decline. One example is the decline in terns in North America in the latter part of the 20th century, which is attributed to an increase in gulls and hence gull predation.

What about our friend the badger? They have a varied diet, they are now at the top of the food chain and are increasing. The reverse is true for the hedgehog which is not only out-competed by the badger for slugs and worms; it is also one of its meal choices. But there are other reasons for decline in hedgehogs, and these are man-made. Again, positive measures to help the prey should be our first choice of corrective action,

We could be philosophical and say that “man is the environment” - and species must adapt or disappear. Well that’s fine if you want to live in a world of mainly crows, gulls, rats and foxes! It’s a very complex issue and varies from species to species and often we don’t know how changes in the environment will affect our wildlife until they happen. And it often takes a long time to study and understand the causes.

Most of us are aware that the grey squirrel takes songbird eggs and chicks, and many of us would like to see this non-native species reduced in numbers or removed altogether and replaced by our original native red squirrel. But not everyone knows that the red squirrel is also a voracious predator of small birds’ nests. Red squirrels, however, are more thinly spread and specialized than the grey squirrels, so the predation itself has no adverse impact

Some other interesting examples of predation that are not commonly known: great-spotted woodpeckers, stunningly beautiful and nowadays very successful, will drill into the nests of smaller birds and take the young. Grass snakes will climb through ivy and take young wrens, but could themselves fall victim to any raptor or scavenger such as a crow or fox.

The British Trust for Ornithology is conducting a study on the success rate of woodlark nests and the reasons for nest failure. Web cams placed near

the nests showed eggs or young being taken by foxes, jackdaws, magpies, badgers, hedgehogs, adders, mice, stoats, weasels, pheasants and even manta deer! The most bizarre example I’ve seen is hardly ‘predation’ but more of opportunism: a dead young woodpigeon being nibbled by a blackbird. They are all food for each other.

References:

hedgehogs:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2006/jan/17/g2.ruralaffairs>

game conservation:

http://www.gwct.org.uk/documents/singing_fields_report.pdf

DEFRA:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/gaec/info-note-farmlandbirds.pdf>

An important message for all dog walkers

We assume that recipients of this newsletter are already picking-up their dog litter – this is not an appeal, its information that members may wish to be aware of, especially as it is an ongoing issue.

Basildon Council are introducing a new order making it an offence if a person in charge of a dog that defecates on land open to the public does not remove it immediately. This comes into force in mid-October.

How easy it is to enforce is another question. The offence is rather like fly-tipping – it’s hard to get witnesses and proof. At least if any of us do witness and report an offence it seems more likely now that it will lead to prosecution. Perhaps some publicity of this new order will be enough to deter many of the regular offenders? No doubt we will discuss this again.

Incidentally, you may be interested to know that there is a free booklet available to dog walkers: ‘You and Your Dog in the Countryside’ available. It can be ordered through Countryside Agency Publications 0870 120 6466 or www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk

And finally, reference was made to this fellow in an earlier article, is it a predator or prey? This photo was taken by one of our members in his Billerica garden. Wildlife has little regard for boundaries decided by humans. Please let us know of any sightings you see of wildlife whether it is on the reserve or nearby or something that you wish to celebrate witnessing.

