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Diary Dates

Oct 25th Midweek Work Party

Nov 11th Fungi Walk (see below)

Nov 11th Work Party

Nov 22nd Midweek Work Party

Dec 9th Work Party followed by
Festive Nibbles & Drinks !

Fungi Walk

11th November

Meet us at the Scout Hall on Greens Farm Lane to join us for an amble through Mill Meadows in search of autumn fungi, starting at 10.30am. You are recommended to bring baskets, yogurt pots and ice cream tubs to protect fungus samples.

Members of the Essex Field Club will help identify our finds. Waxcaps will be recorded as part of Plantlife's national survey.

The event is free for Mill Meadows Society members and children or £2.00 cash for adult non-members to be collected on the day. If you bring your dog please keep it on a short lead.

Wanted!

We have an enthusiastic group of work party volunteers but always welcome more people. If you fancy some fresh air, some gentle exercise and a chance to socialise come and join us The next dates are shown in column one.

Goodbye for the winter



Summer has belatedly departed and the days are getting progressively shorter. Consequently, the cattle have now been relocated and we look forward to their return next spring.

Secretary's Jottings

Conservation in action

Some years ago I was startled by a comment about Mill Meadows stating that if we did nothing to the land, it would revert to sycamore scrub. How true that is. An aerial photograph of Billericay taken in 1952 shows the meadows just as open fields with tree lined hedgerows. (Historic England aerial photo EAW043701). Type the reference number into Google and have a look. All the woodland areas have grown up since then as the agricultural use of the fields declined. The pace at which nature can take over grassland has been evident at our volunteer work parties undertaken this year.

The last two work parties have concentrated on clearing a fenced pond in Wards Hoppits. This area was cleared of scrub and the pond dug out during the winter of 2014/15 but has subsequently been concealed by the rapid growth of trees, brambles etc. Our mid-week work party at the end of September made a start on clearing the extensive undergrowth in and around this pond, and we completed this at October's Saturday work party, also building up one side of the pond to restrict the outflow of water. We look forward to monitoring the wildlife that visit this pond in future months and years, and we are planning the restoration of other ponds.



Before: 28th September 2023



After: 15th October 2023

The Red Poll cattle departed at the end of the September. It was felt that they had grazed the fields to an acceptable level. They were transferred to another conservation grazing site at Highwoods, Colchester. In the weeks prior to their departure it was pleasing to see the cattle enjoying the grass in the former calving pen area in Coles. This is an area that hadn't been grazed for many years and had reverted to scrub. Trees such as ash and sycamore developed and eventually reached such a height that in bad weather they tripped out high voltage power cables supplying electricity to Gainsborough Close.

The combined efforts of contractors for UK Power Networks, Basildon Borough Council's Countryside Services staff and Mill Meadows Society volunteers led to the cutting down and removal of most of the trees, clearance of rubbish and erection of fencing such that the cattle could be allowed in to graze. Since the



removal of the taller trees it was apparent that more areas were redeveloping as pasture. Further input (and output) from the cattle next year should improve this area and minimise scrub re-growth.

We showcased this work at a Basildon Borough Council event entitled 'Celebrating Volunteers'. Representatives from volunteer groups for Parks and Open Spaces across the Borough were present. Council Directors and the lead Councillor for Parks and Open Spaces wanted to hear and see about the work undertaken by the Mill Meadows Society. They also noted our concerns about encroachment issues involving neighbours who have created unauthorised access routes, and others who mistreat the boundaries.

Countryside Services winter works 2023 – 2024

Basildon Borough Council Countryside Services have been busy in the meadows in recent weeks. The 'bramble mow' is well under way in the SSSI fields. Please note that not all bramble is to be removed – it does have its place in supporting wildlife. Bramble and bracken in Greens and Watts has been cut back. Future planned work includes the felling of some smaller trees to allow neighbouring oak trees to develop.

Funding has been secured to provide additional water troughs. These and associated pipework will be installed when ground conditions allow

Additional funding is also being sought for extra tracker devices for the grazing cows when they return. These, in conjunction with the extra drinking places will allow grazing to be targeted to defined areas within the meadows.

A virtual fence can be drawn using global positioning systems (GPS) technology. When the cow approaches the virtual fence the tracker device on its neck collar emits a sound and/or vibration that encourages the wearer to move away.

This year Betony, a purple flowering plant was hardly seen. Was it cattle fodder? Probably, though the fluctuating weather conditions may have affected its growth. It is typically seen in the lower third of Butchers, the field adjacent to the Scout Hall. The hope is that next year, areas where Betony is prolific, and where the Heath Spotted Orchid grows, can be made bovine out-of-bounds areas prior to and during the flowering period.

Countryside Services staff have experience of using GPS technology with goats at Pitsea. We look forward to seeing it assist targeted grazing by the red poll cattle next summer.

Apart from planned conservation work the Council staff are aware of the repairs needed to the Scout Hall car park steps and the rotted gate post in Greens woodland.

Peter Croot

Visit to Nevendon Washlands 12th July 2023

Jon Cranfield from Herpetologic Limited, a newt specialist, who gave the talk at the Mill Meadows AGM in April 2023, took a group of the Basildon Wildlife and Countryside Forum representatives around this private nature reserve located alongside the A127 near the Sainsbury's junction at Nevendon.

The site was really interesting and we had the opportunity to see the newts living in the ponds as well as an amazing array of wildflowers including yellow rattle, red bartsia, common centaury, salsify, hop trefoil and many others that do not grow at Mill Meadows - a mere 8 miles away by road.

The nature reserve was developed as part of a planning agreement between a developer and Basildon Borough Council which entailed relocating various flora and fauna living on the site to be developed on the opposite side of the A127. Jon Cranfield's company organised the whole translocation project and is currently monitoring and managing the site for the owner Aviva.



View Across Nevendon Washlands



Checking out the Newts

We could arrange a visit next Spring so If anyone is interested please contact:

Sue Goss. admin@millmeadows.com

Mill Meadows Society



Mill Meadows Breeding Birds

Being a regular visitor to Mill Meadows, I've always had a 'feel' for the fortunes of the site's breeding birds, but had not undertaken a formal survey for many years. It was Frank Street who pricked my conscience by requesting that we carry out a formal breeding survey of the site.

The method used is based on a Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), which is defined by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and used in many selected plots across the Country, the findings of which are produced in an annual report. (The BTO is the engine room that informs bird conservation, gathering surveys data, capturing millions of casual observations, conducting statistical analysis, identifying trends and patterns in populations and, where a worrying or encouraging trend occurs, directing more focussed and detailed surveys so they can try and identify root causes).

The BBS requires two visits to a site, at the start and in the middle of the breeding season. The observer counts adult birds only. This doesn't give a complete picture for a particular site, as not everything is captured in two visits, but it is obviously of value to the BTO, who can identify trends as long as enough surveys are repeated year after year.

To get a fuller local picture for Mill Meadows, I add anything of interest seen on other visits. Hence the table below is compiled from the formal surveys and augmented by encounters on casual visits, dog walks, or imparted by other observers. Only those bird species vaguely likely, possibly, probably or undoubtedly breeding on Mill Meadows are listed. There are others too that can be seen in the season, examples being the Starlings and House Sparrows that breed in the adjoining houses and forage on the Meadows, Buzzards soaring overhead, an acrobatic Hobby chasing large insects in spring and en route elsewhere, and the Town's remaining Swifts that are almost permanently aloft and picked out by scanning with binoculars from one of the vantage points.

The Table on the following pages shows the results of **2023 breeding bird survey on Mill Meadows**.



Mill Meadows Society Newsletter

Issue 103 October 2023 to December 2023

www.millmeadows.org.uk

Species	Highest count of adult birds	Breeding Evidence	Notes
Stock Dove	6	Confirmed (nest)	At least five territories including one pair and one nest
Woodpigeon	38	Confirmed (nest)	estimate 30-40 pairs; at least one occupied nest seen
Sparrowhawk	2	Probable (territory, juveniles)	seemed to be on territory in Hillmans at start of season but (noisy!) fledged young in Mousecroft/Wards Hoppits
Great-spotted Woodpecker	6	Confirmed (nest with young)	At least two nests with young with a probable one more and another close by in grounds of Gatwick House
Green Woodpecker	2	Probable (territory, juveniles)	pair in Oakfield and with fledged young in Coles later in year; probably bred on site
Jay	2	Probable (permanent territory)	secretive in nesting season, probably under-recorded
Magpie	20*	Probable (permanent territory)	no nest found but breeding probable and estimate six territories; * includes a large number of non-breeders throughout summer;
Jackdaw	10	Confirmed (nest with young)	Circa 8-12 pairs; at least four nests in Bottom Mead; probably approximately the same number in Boggy Piece
Carrion Crow	6	Confirmed (nest)	at least three pairs, including one with nest
Coal Tit	4	Confirmed (recently fledged young)	recently fledged young in Hillmans (pursued by Jays) and also in Mousecroft pine trees; hence two breeding pairs
Blue Tit	22	Confirmed (recently fledged young)	at least ten territories; at least 2 family parties seen on late visit; some may breed in neighbouring gardens
Great Tit	17	Confirmed (recently fledged young)	11 singing males; at least two family parties seen on late visit;
Long-tailed Tit	6	Confirmed (recently fledged young, feeding young in nest)	evidence of at least two nests in early spring; three family parties encountered on late visit
Chiffchaff	13	Probable (nest building)	at least 11 territories, at least one building nest; no proof of breeding found but undoubtedly does
Blackcap	23	Probable (nest building)	estimate 19 territories; agitated behaviour; no proof of breeding found but undoubtedly does
Garden Warbler	2	Possible	again, unable to find a female despite male on permanent territory
Lesser Whitethroat	1	Unlikely	briefly sang early May; no attempt to breed
Whitethroat	4	Probable	four singing males on one visit; breeding not proven this year but visiting likely nest site
Goldcrest	1	Possible	one singing in pines in June
Wren	29	Confirmed (fledged young)	estimated 30-40 pairs; young calling on at least one visit
Nuthatch	3	Probable (agitated behaviour)	behaviour indicated nest Butchers/boundary with Gatwick House



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Treecreeper	2	Probable (visiting nest site)	probably at least two territories: singing in Greens, probable nest site in Mousecroft but breeding not proven
Song Thrush	9	Confirmed (pair extremely agitated by Magpie)	at least six territories; certainly attempted to breed though no young found but can be secretive after fledging
Mistle Thrush	1	Unlikely	flew from suitable nest area in April but only seen on one occasion
Blackbird	19	Probable	estimated 15-25 pairs. No fledged young found but can be secretive after fledging
Robin	31	Confirmed (recently fledged young)	estimated 25-35 pairs; juveniles heard calling in spring
Dunnock	13	Confirmed	estimated 10-15 pairs; nest found; and feeding young
Chaffinch	2	Possible	not seen on BBS surveys, permanent territory in Watts in June but no sign of female; alarm call on one date in Cumborrow
Greenfinch	1	Possible	heard occasionally at west side of reserve; formerly common near Scout Hall but none this year
Goldfinch	2	Possible	possibly breeds nearby

The table misses out the many birds lost to the Meadows. Had this survey been carried out thirty years ago, the list would have been longer; a point lamented on in my first Newsletter article on Mill Meadows birds in 2005. That article stated 'Mill Meadows reflects national trends', and that is still true. The abundant species that have learnt to co-exist with man's shaping of the environment are flourishing, whereas others struggle.

I still have the paper copy of Bill Stone's article in one of the first Newsletters produced and that shows that we were then in a different world, when Cuckoo, Turtle Dove, Mistle Thrush and many finches were taken for granted. Bill beautifully described the coming together of two flocks of Bullfinches, a species which is our most recent loss to the site. In 2005, I also wrote 'there were so many Chaffinches singing, I always seemed to be in earshot of one, and sometimes two or three'. They have declined significantly, a trend noticed by the BTO around eight years ago but only recent noted in our County. Conversely, back in Bill's days, a lingering Red Kite would have had Essex birdwatchers flocking here to add it to their County or Year List.

There is good news. We have recently seen the return of Nuthatch and also of Common Whitethroat, giving us at least one sub-Saharan migrant. The plentiful scrub on the site enables a good supply of bird song, with flourishing Blackcaps being the core of that orchestra, and the ancient trees mean that there is always a chance of finding a quiet Treecreeper. It is an important site for the Song Thrush too, though they are not to be taken for granted as the increasing droughts and warmth are not conducive to their prey species of snails and worms. (You didn't really expect there to be no mention of Climate Change, did you?) The continuing management will preserve the habitat mix to help birds and all wildlife, but there is only so much that the Council and Society can do on the site. Reversing declines requires big change in the wider landscape, rural and urban, to restore the insects on which so many birds depend.

Neil Sumner