

**Welcome** to the summer edition of the WNCF newsletter. It might not feel like it yet but yes, in the wildlife calendar it is summer and during May and June many births and huge amounts of growth and change take place.

'Changeable' is probably a good description of the weather over recent months with what seems like a lot of rain, some cold wintry days and even a few sunny good washing-drying days. What we can expect over the next few months weather-wise is anyone's guess, but it's now definitely time for longer days full of busy birds, big buzzing bumblebees, fresh tree greenery, butterflies, sweet-smelling flowers and lucky glimpses of animal young.

We're off to the south coast for some sea air and big beaches for the kids to run around madly. My binoculars, wildflower ID book, bat detector and bucket and spade are ready to go, although I reckon it'll be the bucket and spade that get the most use. We're not quite sure at this stage how to fit everything we need in the car. I keep getting told that they sell food down south and so I don't have to take the contents of the kitchen cupboards and that the cottage has a washing machine and kids don't mind wearing slightly dirty clothes, but there's nothing like being prepared! When we get back I expect the garden grass (there's no way it can be called a lawn!) to have noticeably grown, the bluebells to be coming to the end of their flowering, the birch trees clothed in fresh green leaves, the blue tits busily flying back and forth to the nest box and the house sparrows being very noisy in their nests up behind the guttering.

The Forum is busy over the next few months with plenty of opportunities to get out and do some wildlife-focused activities. Hopefully the mix of surveys and visits will inspire you to join us. Details are in this newsletter or contact Helen Lacy ([hlacy@warrington.gov.uk](mailto:hlacy@warrington.gov.uk)) for more information. New members are always welcome.

It is said that knowledge is power and this is especially true of wildlife – if we know it's there we can work to protect it. Brian Martin, Chairman of the Forum, has been involved with swifts for many years and will be leading on the training and surveying sessions looking to update baseline population data collected in the 1990s. Swifts are one of those birds that look amazing in the air as they scream overhead but pretty ordinary in the flesh. When I used to drive to work, sitting in the traffic on Padgate Lane waiting for the lights to change wasn't such a chore during the summer months. The swifts were doing their acrobatics overhead and making their amazing noises. One memorable experience with a grounded swift still makes me laugh at my reaction: I picked the bird off the ground and as I did so large blood-swollen mites swarmed off the bird onto my hand. In shock or horror (probably both) I threw the bird away from me and luckily that was all it needed to soar off into the sky! Don't let my experience put you off though, the Forum survey will be looking at birds in the sky, I promise!

A big thanks goes to Helen Lacy for writing most of the newsletter this time. I've been a bit overwhelmed with my new baby and massive amounts of washing. If you have any articles or items of interest for the next newsletter please email [mel.bradley@sky.com](mailto:mel.bradley@sky.com)



## **The elusive harvest mouse....a trip to Gatewarth**

The search was on when Forum members visited Gatewarth Phase 3 on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> March. A number of years ago harvest mice were released on this site in the hope that a breeding population would establish. One of the ways of confirming the presence of this tiny creature is to find its distinctive nest and this is what we were looking for.

It was a dry morning when over a dozen members met at the Ferry Inn car park. Walking down past the Sankey Canal and up round the perimeter path towards the entrance to the site, we had a brief stop along the top banks of the River Mersey whilst it was low tide to see what birds were on Richmond Bank. The usual collection of gulls was spotted as were a small number of shoveler ducks and cormorants.

For those who don't know, Gatewarth Phase 3 is situated at the confluence of the Sankey and Mersey Valleys and is approximately 32 acres in size. It is the most westerly section of the 100 acres Gatewarth Farm closed landfill site owned by Warrington Borough Council. The site is designated as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) due to the significant population densities of skylarks (*Alauda arvensis*) and meadow pipits (*Anthus pratensis*) and is a prime site for a wide range of other species. The habitat classification is neutral grassland coupled with areas of bare ground. Adjacent habitat includes an area of recent tree planting (alder/willow) and a watercourse (Sankey Canal) with linear reed bed.

The group split up and began the search for nests and any other signs of wildlife. It was apparent straight away that foxes enjoyed using the site due to the high number of droppings. In amongst the long grasses we found a good number of voles' nests and the odd battered warblers nest too. A few dead frogs and toads were seen along with the remains of a pheasant and gull. Coltsfoot was in flower but it was too early for much else. The interesting sightings were that of a buzzard, at least 5 snipe and a skylark.

The wind was bracing to say the least (up there a light breeze feels more like a gale as it whips up over the Mersey!) and by late morning it got the better of us. No harvest mice nests were found on the day but it should be said that not every inch of the site was covered and further work may prove fruitful!

The fundamental factors underpinning the wildlife significance of Gatewarth 3 are the size and open aspect of the area and the relatively undisturbed nature. The site is **not** open to the public except for the single surfaced pathway and special permission needs to be obtained to access the fenced areas due to health & safety issues. The lack of regular disturbance is a vital factor in the success of the site as a breeding and hunting area, particularly for birds. Sites of this nature are increasingly uncommon within Warrington.

## **MAMMAL WORKSHOPS with Cheshire Mammal Group**

A series of informative workshops are planned for 2008 to help increase awareness and understanding of the mammals around us. These sessions will provide an ideal opportunity to learn more about the group of mammals and some of the techniques used to monitor them.

**Sea mammals** Saturday 7th June 10am Hilbre, Wirral

**Bats** Saturday 16th August 7pm Chester Zoo

**Dormice** Saturday 6th September 10am Bickley Hall Farm, Cheshire

**Small mammals** Saturday 27th September 9.30am Risley Moss

Places will be limited so booking is essential. Workshops are free to Cheshire Mammal Group members or £5 per workshop for non-members. To enrol contact Rob Smith on [rob.smith@halton.gov.uk](mailto:rob.smith@halton.gov.uk) or 07771 703209. Details and directions will be sent out nearer the date.

## Get out and look out for.....orchids

One of my favourite times in the British summer is the weeks at the end of May, beginning of June; not for the migrant birds or the sunny days but for the sight of the purple and pink spikes that appear. When I first saw a British orchid I was amazed that we could have something so exotic looking in our green and pleasant land (never mind Warrington!). My first encounter with bee orchids was on Sankey Valley Park in the area known locally as 'the long meadow', sandwiched in between Bog Wood and the edge of Gulliver's World car park. They're not huge or obvious and many people walked past them with out even knowing they were there at all, its only when you get a wash of common spotted orchids that people know we have such species in this country at all. The numbers of orchids can vary from year to year - bee orchids may be prolific in one location one year with no sign of them the following year.

We have nearly 60 species of orchid in the British Isles and they can appear on both natural and man-made habitats. Most orchids flower in mid summer, coinciding with the insects that visit them for their nectar and in turn pollinate the flowers. They can be a strange bunch though, orchids. Some species are monocarpic- they die once setting seed and rely solely on that seed to germinate in order for the plant to continue. Other species such as the birds nest orchid are saprophytes- devoid of chlorophyll and obtaining food from dead leaves. The very rare lady's slipper orchid is so rare that it has 24-hour security where it does occur. Some species rely on mimicry: either by looking like another insect in order to attract one to pollinate it or by smelling like one.

Sadly many of our orchids are rare but in Warrington you can find a few of our more common species if you know where to look. If you are visiting Sankey Valley Park, the long meadow is well worth a look as is nearby Bewsey Meadows (a former tip). Orchids crop up in the most surprising places including former industrial sites, newly disturbed areas, areas where management changes have been made such as reduced mowing, roadsides and even the on the least likely plots – they crop up in the most surprising places. Visit Birchwood Forest Park, Woolston Park or Rixton Clay Pits for reliable accessible views or go searching and let us know how you get on. Keep your eyes peeled in early June and see where you can spot them!



Photographs and text by Helen Lacy



## News from the Moss

If you've visited Risley Moss recently you can't help but have noticed the woodland management works completed in areas open to the public. The Rangers have worked alongside a specialist contractor over a number of weeks to open up sightlines along paths and given meadows some much-needed light. Sensitive woodland edge management practices have been used such as coronet cuts, bat boxes have been created and dead wood has been left where possible. The logs and chippings produced by this work have been left in the car park for members of the public to take for use in their own gardens (for free!).

The observation tower is now open again as the roof has been re-clad and new treads and steps installed. Funding is currently being sought for new interpretation boards and a viewing device on the ground accessible to those unable to climb up the tower.

Following surveys by the Rangers, great crested newts were found in pond 2. This has informed a change in the management regime around the pond. Mowing will be restricted and public access changed to prevent dogs from entering the water and disturbing this protected species.

Positive feedback was received following the Natural England site inspection in March. This was to assess the site condition with regard to the SSSI designation. Some areas of work were identified for attention to consolidate the mossland wetting scheme.

Bird sightings throughout winter included hen harrier, marsh harrier, merlin and peregrine. Little, tawny, long-eared, short-eared and barn owls have all been spotted. Buzzard numbers gradually increased until a splendid 11 were seen on 27th March. Oystercatcher, redshank, shelduck and an Iceland gull made appearances. The first swallow was reported in first week of April followed by sightings of curlew and an osprey being mobbed by gulls on 9<sup>th</sup> April. Reports of water vole were confirmed with a feeding station being discovered. Adder sightings have also started again this year. The Moss is lucky to have a dedicated band of wildlife watchers who record their sightings at the visitor centre for all to see. When you visit have a look at the board to see the latest. *Thanks to Ranger Mark for the Moss news*

**Is your garden being shaded out by overgrown trees and shrubs? Or do they provide protection for your property and a haven for wildlife?** If you live in Gorse Covert you might have noticed some tree thinning being carried out by the Council. There was an article in 'The Wire' (the Council magazine) explaining the rationale behind these works - due to the number of complaints from householders regarding gardens being shaded out or overhanging branches the decision has been taken to remove all vegetation within 2 metres of fencelines and/or property boundaries. Sub-standard or poorly sited trees and shrubs are being removed in favour of good specimens and selected shrubs are being coppiced. This is to create a denser shrub layer and give trees more room to grow.

This sounds to be logical, balancing the needs of householders and the woodland. However, 2 metres from fencelines is a big distance to remove **everything** growing. Bird nesting sites have gone, invertebrates have gone, ground cover has gone; fences and properties are now exposed. Visit Rockingham or Hazleborough Close to see what you think. It will be interesting to see how successfully these areas do regenerate. Comments, positive or negative, about the works can be sent to Dave Cotteril at the Council's Woolston Depot. Hawthorn Ave. (MB)

# Herons in Warrington

## By Brian Martin

This is the time of year when many people with garden ponds discover that their prize fish have disappeared. The culprit is often the grey heron which visits gardens early in the morning before people are up and about. One year I also suffered such an attack until the Heron's large bill also punctured the butyl liner and the water drained away! The angry response that such behaviour evokes is understandable but most people take avoiding action by covering their ponds with netting. Of course the herons are only doing what comes naturally and taking advantage of yet another "garden bird table".

At this time of year they can have up to four hungry young to feed and garden ponds must be very attractive to them. But where do Warrington's Grey Herons breed? Up to three or four years ago the nearest known heronries were near Runcorn and at Tabley, near Knutsford. I then heard of birds breeding (somewhat embarrassingly!) within a mile of my home in Grappenhall. I have since visited this heronry annually for the British Trust for Ornithology, national survey and up to nine pair's breed. The nests, which are large structures, are all high up in conifers and the site is believed to have been first occupied about six years ago. Although houses have been built up to the edge of the wood in the past few years this does not appear to have put the birds off and the heronry is thriving.

A second heronry was discovered in recent years on the western side of Warrington during the course of the Cheshire Breeding Bird Atlas fieldwork, and this site is also doing well. It has increased from one pair to four occupied nests this year.

Heron's breed early with adults at the breeding site in January and eggs laid in February. At this time of year large young are now visible in most nests and their noisy calls make confirmation of breeding relatively easy.

The Cheshire population now stands at over 650 pairs, one of the largest county populations in England. The steady increase in the county and national populations of Grey Herons is almost certainly the result of a long run of mild winters which have significantly reduced adult mortality.

There will be an opportunity to visit one of the heronry's this summer, see the activities page for more details.



Photograph by Helen Lacy



## Forum goes on....early Summer Activities

Get directly involved in nature conservation in your town.

- **Swift Survey training session** Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> May 7.30pm

Meet: Whitley Ave, off Kingsway South Westy. Please call/email Helen if you need directions.

- **Warrington Cemetery survey evening** Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> June 8.00pm

Meet: at the Cemetery, Manchester Rd opposite Chevys.

- **Private Farm survey evening**, Great Sankey. Date TBC

Time and date to be arranged. Potential for bats and birds to be roosting in a barn. This will be an evening visit & also include a look at a local heronry. Please email/call Helen if you'd like to come.

Survey work helps inform us on the current state of a certain species or habitat. The forthcoming swift survey will help us to see the extent of the breeding population across Warrington and we can compare our results to the data from the late 1990's. Data like this is valuable as it can inform BAP (biodiversity action plan) targets at the local and national level and also let us know if immediate action needs to be taken. Surveys can also help to inform management practices, for example if a mowing regime needs to be altered or work needs to be done at certain times of the year.

**Reminder.... as with all surveys and site visits, dress with the weather in mind and wear suitable footwear. For evening visits insect repellent is recommended for those prone to being a snack for biting insects! Bring binoculars if you have them and a small note pad and pencil (for surveys). Bring a friend-new members always welcome!**

Everyone can help with surveys, if you've never been out on one before there are always plenty of people willing to offer help and guidance. They're a great way of learning more about our local wildlife and your time spent observing and collecting data will be rewarded with great sightings and visits to unusual places. Unless new surveyors come forwards skills are lost and our wildlife suffers, if we don't know what's there we can't protect it! **So put the dates in your diary and help make a difference. Contact details : Helen Lacy 01925 442837 or [hlacy@warrington.gov.uk](mailto:hlacy@warrington.gov.uk)**

### Summer general meeting Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> June 7pm

As per tradition the summer meeting will be a site visit. This year we will be going to Woolston Eyes SSSI to hopefully observe the Black necked grebes with their young (as seen on BBC 1's Countryfile!). We'll be given a guided tour of this permit-only site, which has many species of bird and is rather special. Don't miss it!

**Meet:** Thelwall Lane barrier, past Latchford Locks, SJ642875

### Ranger Service events in the parks

Here are just a few of the things going on in the parks over the next few months. For full details pick up a leaflet from libraries or email [rangers@warrington.gov.uk](mailto:rangers@warrington.gov.uk) to request one. View it online: [http://www.warrington.gov.uk/Images/WBCWarringtonParks\\_tcm31-24705.pdf](http://www.warrington.gov.uk/Images/WBCWarringtonParks_tcm31-24705.pdf)

Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> May 7-9pm **Sunset Saunter** at Risley Moss


Booking essential 01925 824339

Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> June 1.30-3pm **Tree & shrub walk** at Rixton Clay Pits 0161779726

Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> June **Green Safari Day** 11-4pm at Risley Moss

Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> July 7-8.30pm **Wildflower Wander** at Black Bear Park 01925 232184

Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> July 7-8.30pm **'how not to get eaten' walk!** at Rixton Clay Pits



## Have you seen a Water vole?

Funding has been secured and two people are now in post as Water vole officers, one of which will cover the Warrington area. When you are out and about this summer please keep an eye out for Water voles, they are still clinging on in Warrington but we need to know where. If you have seen one (this year or last) please let Helen know so we can inform the officers and focus the surveys areas. This is part of a three-year project and sightings of Mink are also needed to establish the extent of their spread throughout the town.

## Frog spawn survey

Did you take part in the frog spawn survey? If you still haven't returned a form please do so. Only a small handful have been sent back, so if you saw any-say so!

## **Planning applications**

Did you know you could view all planning applications online? Take a look at what is going on across the town and pass your comments on.  
[http://www.warrington.gov.uk/Environmentandplanning/Planning/Searching\\_Planning\\_Applications\\_On-Line.aspx](http://www.warrington.gov.uk/Environmentandplanning/Planning/Searching_Planning_Applications_On-Line.aspx)

## **Keep an eye on.....**

Birchwood way! Areas of amenity grass have been sprayed out with herbicide and re-seeded with Wildflower seed. Sections of Winwick rd and Manchester Rd have also been treated and should provide some lovely colourful displays this summer. This has been done by WBC's Streets Services department, let them know what you think!

## **Useful numbers**

RSPCA.....	08705555999
Bat line.....	08451300228
Police Community Action Team.....	08454586385
Warrington Borough Council Dog Warden.....	01925 442599
Warrington Borough Council.....	01925 443322
WBC out of hours emergencies.....	01925 444400
Environment Agency.....	08708506506

If you are reading a paper copy of this newsletter you can also view it on line in colour at :-

<http://www.warrington.gov.uk/Leisureandculture/Conservation/wncf.aspx>

To join the forum mailing list please contact Helen.

