



THE WETTEST WINTER ON RECORD

People are questioning whether this is climate change happening.

'Is our climate changing?' is the question posed by the Natural History Museum, which thinks bluebells may help provide an answer.

You may be able to help answer this. We hold over half the world's *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, the British bluebell, and the worry is that our bluebell is under threat from hybridising with the Spanish bluebell. Next time you see bluebells flowering in a British wood, look closely. The Natural History Museum is keen to hear from you what you see, as it may help them to determine whether our climate is really changing.

What will be the effect on wildlife? How will the warm, wet and windy winter we've had affect our wildlife? Read Grahame's view on this.

Thankfully, spring is about to begin.

A cheering note is that spring is just around the corner. One of the loveliest sights in spring is fruit tree blossom. A local community orchard is a suggestion put forward by Jean.

We also look forward to the advent of Easter. As well as eggs, rabbits and hares were symbols of fertility in antiquity, giving birth to large litters in spring. Sighting a hare in an open field is always exciting. You can help in a survey on brown hares by the Berkshire Mammal Group (page 6). The Easter Bunny was and is a fantasy character, and in legend was supposed to bring Easter eggs to the children. Find out more about one of our favourite mammals. Also, many of our wild flowers had significance to earlier generations, and were closely associated with Easter time.

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Our bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*)

Look closely. Are they true native bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) or have they hybridised with the Spanish bluebell? That the true British flowers are appearing earlier is anecdotal but, if true, then climate change may be the cause. Or it may be that hybrids invading our woods open earlier, on account of their Spanish 'blood'. The NHM wants to know whether the true British bluebell is opening earlier than in the past.

What to look for:



British bluebell: flowers mostly on one side, dark purplish colour, recurved petals, pollen is creamy white, delicate perfume.

Spanish bluebell : introduced as a garden flower, flowers much paler and more open, not so recurved, anthers blue, virtually no scent.

Hybrid bluebell: anthers a creamy green colour, petals bi-coloured, somewhat recurved, but not so much. A hint of one-sidedness, but usually flowers all the way round.

Go to www.nhm.ac.uk/bluebell-survey to find out more. Children will love to play 'spot the bluebell'. It goes without saying, it's not a good idea to chuck any unwanted bluebells from the garden into woodland. You may be hastening the demise of the beloved, delicate British bluebell.



Community orchard for Earley?

During our visit to Australia in late 2012, we spent a few days in Perth (W. Australia). While we were exploring the city centre, we found great activity at a set of raised beds erected outside the art gallery and above the main railway station: this was the community orchard, and the harvest of winter crops (carrots, beetroot, potatoes) was taking place. The next crop, of tomatoes, courgettes, chillies, peppers and aubergines was planted later that day – and, when we saw them the following week, had all grown well. (Photo of apple blossom by kind permission of John Johnston)

The whole venture is supported by the city council, but is run by volunteers, who have first pick of the produce as a reward for tending it. There were 2 fruit trees (peaches, doughnut peaches, nectarines, mulberries, apple and pear) in each of the 4 large raised beds, as well as the vegetables, with smaller beds containing plants to attract bees and other pollinators.



Although this type of cultivation isn't suitable for a suburban location like Earley, it made me wonder whether there would be scope for a similar venture here. On investigation, I found that Swallowfield, Twyford and Wargrave have undertaken similar ventures in the last 2 or 3 years, and they are run by volunteers on council land. Grants were available for groups wishing to produce food locally, to save on food miles and, in Wargrave's case, they were actually given some fruit trees by a local firm. The produce is available to all the local community, and often there is a community event at harvest time to show what can be made with each crop.

For now, I would like to find out whether anyone else would be interested in helping to set up an orchard (or more than one: Earley is a large suburb) and, if so, I would like nominations for a suitable site which would be reasonably near people's homes, but not prone to be vandalised. If this seems a reasonable proposition, there would need to be some ground preparation before planting takes place, and some organisation for keeping weeds and predators under control: my initial suggestion for trees would include some apples, pears, plums, damsons and possibly greengages, but that topic could be discussed at an appropriate time.

Grants for buying trees are still available, and we would have help and advice in making applications from the WBC Biodiversity Officer, Andy Glencross.

In the first instance, I'd like expressions of interest, to see if we could do something along these lines. I can be contacted *by phone on 986 1115, or by e-mail: jeanh149@btinternet.com*. **Jean Hackett**

Postscript to this: On March 1st Transition Town Reading began a project to plant a community orchard in Woodley - 20 fruit trees behind Coronation Hall in Woodford Park (mostly apples, pears, plums), and 40 fruit trees in Bulmershe Park (mostly cherry plums, pears, juneberry and Crab apple).

EEG member Edwin keeps a constant eye on Maiden Erlegh Reserve, and extracts of entries in his notebook from 2012 were included in the Dec newsletter. The following concludes with entries for 2013 on the presence of Great Crested Grebes on the lake.



In November, single sightings were the norm, and in December none. The family, it would seem, had dispersed...

However, this departure was not for long, and 2013 would bring a doubling of the grebes' fecundity. On 1st January there was a grebe – just one, but sitting on the coots' nest on the south-eastern 'corner' of the large island. Was this prophetic: a hint of what was to come?

Well, after an absence for the rest of January, a (the?) grebe was back on 2nd February, and by 23rd February there were two. On 3rd March these were performing the grebes' distinctive courtship display, and on 28th March the female was on her nest – the same nest as last year – on the north bank of Big Island. Whether it was the weather, or the re-use of an existing site, this year's occupation of the nest was two weeks earlier than in 2012. It was shorter, too. Compared with two-and-a-half months to the end of June, this year's brood appeared within the month. On Saturday 27th April the two were in the water, and it seemed as if one had newly-hatched chicks on his/her back. The next day there was no doubt at all: the grebes had chicks.

Counting them was tricky – obscured by protective wings, sightlines interrupted by constantly-moving birds – but by the following weekend it was clear that there were four. Some were being carried, others swimming, but there were four in total. There was one scare when a hungry heron tried his luck, attacking the chicks at the lake end of Big Is, but he was driven off by the commotion caused by the protective parents. By the end of May the family had diverged. Often three would accompany one parent up to the shallows near Swan Island, while the other parent would tend the remaining youngster in the lee of Big Island. As June drew on groups of young grebes would go out unaccompanied, skilful divers now, but at other times a parent (seldom two) would be in attendance. But at the end of June the family was still intact. **Edwin Trout**



AND THEN THERE WAS THE GREAT GREBE RESCUE...

The Great Crested Grebe is a beautiful fresh-water diving bird about 19 inches long. The RSPB says there are 5,300 breeding pairs in the UK. By the end of September last year, a pair on Maiden Erlegh Lake had raised a first brood of four, and were feeding two large young from a second brood. We strolled round the lake from the weir in the late afternoon, hoping to see them.

Strange, loud, guttural croaking noise from beyond the island ... something big splashing in the middle of the lake ... a fish? ... but fish don't croak ...

Field glasses ... focus ... a fishing line tight into the water nearby ... it surfaced ... a grebe, but not swimming elegantly as usual ... instead it went a short distance and dived, but then seemed to come to the surface flat on its back before splashing and righting itself ... and again that anguished cry ...

“Who ya gonna call?” – “Park Rangers!” Fortunately Grahame Hawker was still in the office and quickly arrived, alerted Martin, a fishing bailiff, and took control. Boat ... oars ... life-jackets ... gardening gloves (that beak is sharp) ... knife to cut line ... cardboard box to keep it in the dark to reduce its stress ... then row up the lake, with Anne on the back seat to assist ...

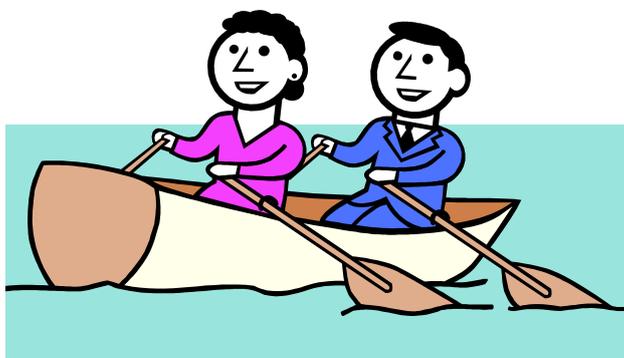
Did the bird wait gratefully to be rescued? It did not! It swam to the bank under overhanging bushes and submerged as the boat nosed in. Exhausted? ... Dead? ... then it floated to the surface, still, belly-up ... Grahame grabbed it and it came alive, drawing blood ...

It was badly tangled in line, and with a struggle it was put into the box where it became quiet. In the Interpretation Centre four people held it, quickly cut off the line which was wrapped all around it, and checked for injuries. Then back into the box and down to the lake where it sprang into the water, dived, and swam off vigorously towards the island ... success!

It seems it was not hooked, or caught in a recently-cast line, but an old line abandoned in the lake had become tightly wrapped around it. Snagged lines, both underwater and in trees, pose a terrible hazard to our water birds in particular.

John Booth

Our Great Crested Grebe lives to fight another day.



Grahame's comments on the recently extreme weather. . .

Weather and wildlife

What a winter!!! Warm, wet and windy.

Warm - I cannot remember a winter this mild. Frosts have been a rarity, as has ice on the lake. It is difficult to say for certain how this will affect the wildlife as every species is different. Those plants that are on the northern edge of their range will probably benefit, those that require a cold period to initiate flower bud production may struggle. On balance, most of the species that live in Britain have seen it all before, and are more affected by late spring frosts than low winter temperatures when they are dormant.

Wet - Despite some flooding along the Thames and Loddon locally, we have been surprisingly unaffected on the Reserve. The lake flows over a weir and so its level has barely changed, and the pathways have stood up better than we could have hoped. Our knowledge of the effects of long-term flooding on invertebrates and microscopic life is in its infancy. I suspect that months of inundation on some flood plains will have a detrimental effect, but that we will not notice much difference on the Reserve.

Windy - We have lost parts or all of about a dozen trees on the Reserve this winter. This is quite natural, and nothing to worry about. The gaps in the canopy will benefit woodland ground flora, and will soon be filled with natural regeneration. In addition, the dead-wood beetles and fungi will be very grateful!

Last year's record-breaking cold spring, followed by a record-breaking beautiful summer and then a record-breaking wet winter will have affected our wildlife. It will be exciting to see this spring and summer exactly what these effects are.

Like a good read? Here's a suggestion from Anne Booth

"Turned Out Nice Again", Richard Mabey

I was given this slim volume of 90 pages for Christmas. I've been an admirer of Mabey's for many years and have quite a few of his books. This one is sub-titled, *'Living with the weather'*, which is certainly appropriate at the moment (February) surrounded as we are by flooded fields and closed roads.

It is mostly a series of observations on our obsession with the weather, how it permeates our language, literature and memory.

I wasn't expecting much because of its small size, but the book is a delight. Beautifully written, it's full of insight and information, and with the warmth which is characteristic of his writing.

CLOSURE at Trinity Church of TRUE FOOD CO-OP

suppliers of organic wholefoods, local fresh fruit and vegetables and environmentally friendly household products.

At a late Jan special meeting, TFC announced they need to draw back slightly from some of their activities. As a result, they are no longer running a market for organic and sustainable produce at Trinity church on Saturdays, and have run only 1 market a week since then. They are exploring the possibility of having storage for goods at 1 of the 2 Reading venues (Queens Rd Methodist church on Wednesday, Wycliffe Baptist church, Newtown, on Thursday), but arrangements are taking a while to sort out.

There is also interest from some of the church members in resurrecting the Trinity market, but this will need committed volunteers, to prepare goods at the TFC shop ready for transport, drive the lorry from and to the shop, and man the market itself. This idea is being pursued with TFC, but needs to be agreed by the managing committee if a viable solution is found - again, this takes time.

For the time being the only TFC market is at Queens Rd Methodist church on Weds, from 5 to 8.15 p.m. The shop, at 61 Grove Road, Emmer Green (on Reading bus route 24 and Newbury bus route 2), is open from Monday to Saturday during normal shop hours, in case anyone would like to go there to top up their supplies.

EASTER IS ONE OF THE MOST CELEBRATED CHRISTIAN HOLIDAYS IN THE WORLD.



LOOKING FOR THE EASTER BUNNY? Our Easter family holidays always started off in Lymington, the joke was we might catch sight of the Easter bunny in the Saturday market. You won't be surprised to know we never did. He was nigh on impossible to find, but not so his endearing (unless you're a farmer) furry country cousin. Children and 'townees' get a thrill from seeing groups of them cavorting in the fields.

Fauna Britannica gives 29 common names for the rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), 'bunny' being one of them, yet it's something of an alien. No archaeological remains of rabbits have been found before the 12th century. They have no Anglo-Saxon names, no mention in Domesday. 'Rabbit' is Late Middle English, possibly from Norman French, as *rabet* was a French term of endearment, like 'bunny'.

It seems certain they were introduced by the Normans for food and fur, who kept them in enclosures called 'warrens', these sometimes being vast areas of great value. A 1756 map of Earley shows a field named **Coney Gree**, *coney* being the name for an adult rabbit up to the 18th century, which may have a connection to *cuniculus* (*L*). Rabbits don't like water, and warrens were often surrounded by water. Probably sheer coincidence, but just above 'Coney gree' on the old Earley map is an area called Moat Coppice showing small patches of water.

Inevitably the rabbits escaped from the warrens, and from being a luxury food in the 13th century had, by the 19th, become a poor man's supper. Rabbit stew was a familiar dish to me as a child, but disappeared from the menu with the advent of the horrible Myxoma Virus. The rabbit population, perhaps 100 million in 1950, was reduced by 99%. It has since recovered by some having immunity to the disease, and through emulating the hare and nesting above ground where there are fewer flea vectors. It is thought that there are now about 37million in Britain.

Sheila Crowson

Flowers of Easter

The church's seasons and festivals had their special flowers. Spring daffodils were *Lent Lilies*.

The *Pasque-flower* blooms early in spring; Pasque refers to Easter, and was originally associated with the Jewish Passover.

Another spring flower which blooms at Easter time is the *wood sorrel*. In the past it has been called 'Alleluias', because it blooms at the season when alleluias are sung in church.

The flowering shoots of pussy willow are used both in Europe and America for spring religious decoration on Palm Sunday, as a replacement for palm branches, which do not grow that far north.



Rabbits are often mistaken for hares. (From Laura Daniells, Surveys Officer, Berkshire Mammal Group)

Mammal for the month of March is the 'Mad March' Hare. Brown hares are present across most of the country in lowland areas, and our records for Berkshire are all in the west of the county to date (West of Bradfield). See if you can spot this speedy character when walking on farm or grassland. The Mammal Society factsheet can be found here: Don't forget to send in any records for us to add to our database.

http://mammal.org.uk/sites/default/files/factsheets/brown_hare_complete.pdf
surveys.bmg@gmail.com <http://www.berksmammals.org.uk/>
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/119314471525840/>

Footnote: The brown hare is now on the UK Red Data list. Once a valued animal of the chase, it was later regarded as a pest. There are records of 400 or more being shot in a day on estates in southern and Eastern England in the 1930s. ('Silent Fields' Roger Lovegrove.) SC

EARLEY GARDEN SURVEYS

Our regular contributors to the newsletter, Margaret and Gillian, continue to report on the winter visitors to their Earley gardens. The numbers are those recorded seen at any one time.

SOME VISITORS TO MARGARET'S GARDEN:

30+ redwings bathing/drinking each day, and enjoying the rowan and pyracantha berries; 10 blue tits; 10 long-tailed tits; 8 great tits. She noted it was great to see two song thrushes sunning and feeding in the pyracantha bush. Also seen: 2 coal tits, 1 jay and 1 black cap.

GILLIAN'S WINTER GARDEN VISITORS:

She was lucky to see a nuthatch on the seed feeder, and also had some redwings on the pyracantha. She was also visited by a jay, and green woodpecker. Great tits had begun inspecting the bird boxes. In December 5 starlings visited.

House sparrows were absent in both gardens. (*Note: a substantial number can be heard in Hartsbourne Road*).

In mid-January Gillian observed snowdrops out, crocuses showing and witch hazel beginning to flower.

Our thanks to Gillian and Margaret for providing us with Earley garden news.

Blackcap photo by Derek Cashen



Photo is from the EEG website. Check out other bird photos by members on the website.

LOCAL FORTHCOMING EVENTS 2014

Saturday, March 22

HELP! Litter Clean-up: (Huge Earley Litter Pick) Join the annual Earley Litter Pick. Two sessions, 10 a.m. to 12.30p.m. and 2.00 p.m. to 4.30 p.m. Everything provided. **Contact Grahame Hawker on 0118 986 8995.** Meet at Interpretation Centre, Instow Road. Show your community spirit and join in.

Monday, March 31st Damselfly and dragonfly identification, talk by Des Sussex, 7.30 to 9.30 p.m. Function Room, Maiden Place Community Centre, off Kilnsea Drive.

Monday, April 28th 'Love Food, Hate Waste' a session run by Emma Barnett of Wrap. (Waste & Resources Action programme). Tips and ideas on food safety, how to reduce food waste, and make the most of the food we buy. 7.30 to 9.30 p.m. Function Room, Maiden Place Community Centre, off Kilnsea Drive.

May event to follow. Please check posters and press.

Bits and Pieces

Exciting News. We're on Facebook!

The Earley Environmental Group now has a Facebook presence. We will be using this in addition to the main website, the Yahoo Group and the Newsletter as a way of keeping everyone up to date with our activities and to let you know about upcoming events. Members are also welcome to post news stories or any photographs relevant to the group. If you are a Facebook user, please do join up - just search for 'Earley Environmental Group' and we should pop up. Look forward to seeing you on there. (Mel Orros)

EASI (Earley Adopt-a-Street Initiative) would like more volunteers. Help keep your street clear of litter. Everything provided. Phone Brian Hackett on 0118 986 1115 or email ask.mera@btinternet.com.

Can you offer active **help to EEG**? If so, phone 0118 962 0004 or go to the website. We would welcome more member involvement. If you have no expertise and would like to get involved, you may be able to give practical help. Perhaps help with distributing the newsletter hard copies, or maybe you have graphic design skills (for occasional posters, leaflets), computer skills, any other skills to offer.

Join the **EEG Yahoo Group** and post your wildlife sightings and messages. You'll find a link to Yahoo on our website. EEG Committee Members can be found on www.earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk under Contacts, or phone 0118 962 0004

For **Wildlife Survey Forms**, go to the website or phone Earley Town Council 0118 986 8995

Comments or contributions to the newsletter to: sheila.crowson@ntlworld.com or 2 Reeds Avenue, Earley, RG6 5SR. We would welcome short contributions from members to the newsletter.

If you know anyone who would like to join EEG, membership forms are available from Earley Town Council, 0118 986 8995, on the [website](#) under Downloads, or send an e-mail to Liz Wild at liz@helva.plus.com.

SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL SHOPS

Pet Fayre 9 Maiden Lane Centre Lower Earley : A small independent shop, with bird feeders of all kinds, a variety of bird feed, large bags of which the shop is willing to deliver locally, or pick it up in your car from the back of the shop, tel 0118 926 6512, e-mail sales@petfayre-reading.co.uk or go on the comprehensive website

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