

**"There is no season such delight can bring,
As summer, autumn, winter and the spring."**

- William Browne, *Variety*, 1630

FAVOURITE SEASON? If there was a vote for our favourite season, it's unlikely winter would come top, although most of us no longer suffer the distress Earley cottagers faced a hundred or so years ago: homes cold enough to make the bones ache, perhaps threadbare garments, the prospect of long, dark nights and, worse still, the possibility of disease and famine. Our seasons have evened out, the misery all but banished through modern-day living. With very little personal discomfort we can enjoy all the seasonal changes in the natural world, the pattern of which differs little from year to year.

A MAST YEAR You may have noticed one very obvious change this year, the bumper harvest of acorns, it being a mast year for oak and beech. This is good news for wildlife: birds, badgers, squirrels, deer and mice benefit from this, helping to see them through the winter. Acorns are particularly rich in nutrients. Creatures such as jays and squirrels bury them and, failing to collect the odd one, contribute to the next generation of oaks. In some countries pigs are still let loose in the woods to forage for acorns. In the New Forest 6000 pigs were turned out for the right of 'pannage' in the 19th century, but now it's only likely to be between 200 and 600. Wokingham Victorian school children were granted days off to collect acorns to feed the pigs at the 'big house'. Not all animals benefit, the acorn being toxic to horses and cattle.

MEN OF THE TREES, now known as the International Tree Foundation, was founded by the visionary Dr. Richard St. Barbe Baker in the UK in 1924, and is dedicated to the planting and conservation of trees. Why not become a man or woman of the trees and, as suggested by the RSPB, pop an acorn in your pocket and plant it when you get home?

<http://internationaltreefoundation.org/about-us>



Jay rummaging on the path round Maiden Erlegh lake.

There's a good chance of spotting a jay in Maiden Erlegh Reserve. In a good year, jays can store up to 5000 acorns with excellent memories for retrieving them.

Items of special interest:

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Solar Power in Earley – update

Things seemed to be going so well, with solar panels appearing in several places in Earley. John Booth writes about the setback to solar power installations:

What a difference two months makes! In the EEG September Newsletter I wrote that “For typical domestic systems installed before the end of March 2012 homeowners will receive 43.3 pence (index-linked) per unit generated”.

Now the government proposes to cut the payment to 21 pence from 12th December this year, and has announced a 'consultation' into this until 23rd December - a classic case of 'shoot first and ask questions afterwards'.

The 'Feed-In Tariff' (FiT) payment for electricity from solar panels had been very successful - since April 2010 over 80,000 systems had been installed, many jobs had been created, and costs had fallen.

It's right that the FiT should be reduced now that costs are lower, but the proposal to slash the payment with only six weeks' notice will cause chaos, distress and loss for would-be purchasers and suppliers alike.

Unless it modifies its approach the government will shoot itself in both feet - failing both in its wish to be the 'greenest government ever' and in its wish to have a healthy economy with growing small businesses. Purchase of 80,000 systems must have put close to a billion pounds into the economy.

In a survey Reading Friends of the Earth carried out at the Earley Green Fair

- 82% of people agreed that "more green energy should be generated locally e.g. through solar panels on roofs or wind farms owned by councils or communities" and
- 46% thought that the highest priority for investment in energy should be in power from the sun, waves and wind

but these things won't happen without adequate support from a FiT or similar mechanism.

I urge members to contact their MPs to complain, and to sign the Friends of the Earth 'Final Demand' petition at www.foe.co.uk .

John Booth

What a scoop!
Sent in by Liz Henderson. See her series of photos of this event on the EEG website



Murder in Wilderness Road!

GOING FOR SILVER - RADSTOCK PRIMARY SCHOOL

RADSTOCK PRIMARY SCHOOL is going for silver, not in the Olympics, but for the EcoSchools Silver Award.

Eco-Schools is an international award programme, and Radstock School will be aiming for Silver in the coming year. Certain criteria have to be followed, and these are listed on the EcoSchools website <http://www.keepbritaintidy.org/ecoschools>.

The school has its own **Eco Club**, which meets every week and consists of two children from each class, and together with the enthusiastic involvement of head Drusilla Derrick and teachers Susan Doyle, Chris Richardson and Kat Prowse, they decide the environmental aims of the school. The school already has well established wildlife areas –a pond, raised beds for vegetables, wildflower areas, a herb garden and the youngest pupils have planted spring bulbs. All these things are used in delivering the National Curriculum and to add to the learning experience of all the children.

But they are determined to improve their natural environment even more with the help of the children, staff, parents and outside advice, including Grahame Hawker, Senior Park Ranger for Earley Town Council (offers of help no doubt gratefully accepted). Watch this space for further developments. Something of which they are very proud is the solar power installed two years ago, and which is constantly monitored by the pupils for energy input. <http://www.school-portal.co.uk/GroupHomepage.asp?GroupID=124697>



Vegetable beds (above)

Pond Wildlife area

Photos by Radstock School



Bumblebee
Year: Winter

January:
Queens hibernating

February:
Some queens emerge in spite of cold

March:
Queens look for nest sites

April:
Early bumblebee workers appear

(Source: Bumblebee Conservation Trust)



All that glisters... Dishing the dirt on the Kingfisher

A recent birthday card with a gorgeous image of a Kingfisher coincided with my preparation of a talk to schoolchildren on the subject. So this seems a good opportunity to look a little closer at Britain's most showy bird...

A sharp whistle may be your first clue. A streak of electric blue over the water may be your second. Often that is all you hear and see. The Kingfisher is so rarely seen or recognised that many people have little idea just how small it is. Put a long bill on a House Sparrow, give it a quick re-spray, and that would be about right.

The brilliant colours for which it is famed are remarkably deceptive: that electric blue is not pigmentation, but rather an effect of reflected light, which largely disappears when the bird settles in shade. The other bold patches of colour tend to break up the profile of the bird, thus making it less obvious to a predator. Seen in the sunlight, the Kingfisher's upper parts are a shifting kaleidoscope of purples, blues, turquoise and green, which sparkle with the diamonds of brighter light from paler feather tips. The rich russet-orange of the undersides and bright patches of white all add to the glamour. It is justifiably a bird of myth and legend in many cultures. But it has a secret, darker side too, one which its PR agents keep pretty well hidden...



Firstly it is not a good neighbour: its aggression towards its own kind in defence of a fishing territory is such that a pair may own neighbouring territories in winter, yet clash bitterly over the boundary rules. Breeding rivals are not above attempting to drown each other.

Then there is the matter of the domestic arrangements. The nest is a small chamber at the end of an upward-sloping tunnel, which is anywhere up to a metre in length. The design doesn't include air-conditioning, so the problem becomes considerable when the growing young start to regurgitate fish bones onto the nest floor and to defecate into the entrance tunnel. By the time the third brood is growing, conditions become really unsavoury, since each brood averages six or seven chicks. **Ray Reedman** (read more about the Kingfisher in the Mar newsletter)

There are many benefits of a green space like **Maiden Erlegh Local Nature Reserve** and adjacent **Laurel Park in Earley**. Some of the varied uses: **wildlife watching, walking, jogging, dog walking, football, cricket, ball games, picnicking, fishing, educational research and latterly t'ai chi**. Two overseas students were seen recently gracefully practising this by the **Beech Lane entrance**.



Robert Gillmor Exhibition

There is a retrospective exhibition of the work of Robert Gillmor, the Reading-born bird artist, and former President of Berkshire Ornithological Club, at Reading Town Hall, until 29th April. It includes the art-work for the "post and go" stamps, which Robert has designed for the Post Office, and a number of "New Naturalist" cover designs.

There are several supporting art-related events, while some major bird elements are provided by BOC, as follows: 12th January: a talk on "Tufted Ducks and their Cousins" by Ray Reedman of BOC at 1.00-1.45 p.m. (walk-in) 23rd February: a follow-up walk to see the wildfowl at Dinton Pastures at 10 a.m. (meet at the Aviation Museum car park) 25th February: Birder's Day at the Museum, 11 a.m.-3.30 p.m., (which Robert Gillmor hopes to attend), with talks by Renton Righelato and Neil Bucknell, both of BOC. 28th March: illustrated talk by Colin Wilson of BOC: "Spring Chorus in Reading", 1.00 -1.45 p.m. (walk-in) 19th April: Walk: "Spring Chorus in Reading", Dinton Pastures 9.00-11.00 (meet at Aviation Museum car park). (All BOC events are free)

In addition to the above, Ray Reedman will be giving a "beginners/improvers" level workshop for BOC on Wildfowl Identification on 18th April at Earley St Peter's Hall at 8 p.m. (non-members £4). Ring Ray at 01189864338.

Interested in learning how to keep bees?

Ed Batchelor from SIFE (Students In Free Enterprise) would like to set up an apiary on Whiteknights campus. This could eventually develop into a Social Enterprise Company involving students, staff and community members. SIFE is a not for profit organisation run in 1,800 universities in 47 countries. SIFE students form teams that serve their communities by developing projects that take what they are learning in their classrooms and use it to solve real world problems for real people.

SIFE have done some preparatory work in costing out how much they will need to raise in funds for beehives, equipment and training for those interested, and there are outlets such as MERL, RUSU shop and farmers' markets where honey and wax products could be sold. Ed is also looking at help from the Co-op Plan Bee Scheme which campaigns to reverse the decline of bees and other pollinators.

In the meantime, the group has expanded to include some members of staff, one of whom, Gary, is a registered bee-keeper who has already agreed to loan a hive to the project and provide a swarm to start them off, and Val who works in Biological Sciences is also offering support and advice. It has been agreed that a corner of the Walled Garden within the Harris Garden can be used as a location for this. Two members of the Friends of Harris Garden who have recently been trained as bee-keepers are now involved as well.

In order for the project to be sustainable and to generally encourage bee-keeping, it needs to include members of the community as students will come and go and those initiating the scheme will be leaving next year. If anyone living locally would like to get involved please contact e.batchelor@student.reading.ac.uk

Come to the EEG talk on Bees Feb 8 (see p.8)

University of Reading red kite feeding questionnaire

Can you help? The University of Reading would like people who feed red kites in their gardens to fill in an online questionnaire. The purpose of the survey is to gather information on the types and amounts of food that people put out as well as how often they feed and their location etc. Go to website

<http://www.survey.bris.ac.uk/reading/redkites>

GREAT NEWS FOR the TRUE FOOD CO-OP

Many of you will have visited True Food in Earley where they offer a range of general groceries, including organic wholefoods, local fresh fruit and vegetables and environmentally friendly household products.

They have just won the prestigious award for 'Best Retail Initiative' at the BBC Food & Farming Awards. They had a very exciting day rubbing shoulders with the likes of Sheila Dillon, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Rick Stein.

The category was almost the last to be announced which was very nerve-wracking for the True Food contenders.

Everyone was very impressed by True Food, whose organisers are extremely proud that this great organisation now has national recognition.

Look out for the special feature in the BBC Good Food magazine.

Alex holding the award



Adventures with the Berkshire Mammal Group

Edwin A.R. Trout

Established in December last year the group was set up to further the interests of mammal conservation in Berkshire and to undertake active survey and monitoring work. It was launched with a series of evening talks during the winter months, taking place at Leighton Park School. My son and I joined in time for the last of these evenings, a revelatory talk about the hitherto unsuspected spread of the *glis glis*, or edible dormouse, through the Chiltern woodlands around Tring.

Shortly afterwards we took part in our first weekend activity, making nest boxes for the native hazel dormouse, and mounting them on trees in the nature reserve at Moor Copse. The momentum built up early in the year slowed a little over the summer, though the group did hold a bat walk in July – similar to, and not long after the Earley Environmental Group's own bat walk – and had a stall at the Earley Green Fair in August.

September saw a burst of activity. Having heard about the edible dormouse, it was our turn to help survey them *in situ*. A small group of us, including five associated with EEG, visited Hockridge Wood near Chesham, and spent a day inspecting nest boxes for dormice, weighing, micro-chipping and recording our findings. We were promised that we'd be able to handle the animals and we were not disappointed. Between us we collected and returned an incredible 123 of these secretive creatures, including a family of newborns. Considering these dormice are arboreal and nocturnal, inhabiting just a small area of the Chilterns, these are usually a very fair sighting. They are also fairly vicious, and despite thick gloves, we were nursing several wounds by the end of the day!

Another activity in September was helping the West Berks Ranger Service survey hedgehogs in Paice's Wood near Aldermaston. Every night for a week, BMG volunteers took turns to join the ranger in checking hedgehog boxes and watching the animals' known routes through the woodland.

The following Sunday we turned again to the hazel dormouse and spent a morning at Basildon Park on a 'nut hunt' led by EEG's Ricki Bull and dormouse specialist Daniel Atter. The plan was to search through the estate's woodland in search of hazel nuts that had been opened by dormice. Needle in a haystack!? We found many nuts with holes in, but usually they were the evidence of squirrels or wood mice. Dormice leave a distinctive trace of tooth marks on the shell of the nut, more regular in shape and at a different angle. Eventually a member of the group found the tell-tale signs, and further hunting in the locality yielded several more opened nuts. Satisfyingly, we had established that the dormouse was alive and well in this woodland. Another nut hunt is planned now to take the search to beyond Newbury.

With winter upon us the season for talks is being planned. Details of these and future activities can be found on the group's website: www.berstmammals.org. Membership is £8 a year (£5 concessions and free for children), and all those with an interest in mammals would be welcome.

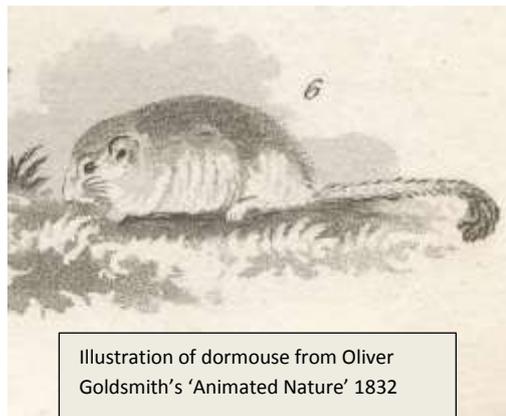


Illustration of dormouse from Oliver Goldsmith's 'Animated Nature' 1832

NEWS FROM BEYOND EARLEY

Fracking : Another thing to worry about! A controversial technique to extract gas and oil reserves from underground by a process of hydraulic fracturing of shale rock using high pressure liquid to release the reserves, a process green groups claims is damaging the environment. A theory has been put forward that it was highly probable it was the cause of earth tremors which hit Lancashire's Fylde coast earlier this year. Others dispute this.

Loss of valuable nature reserves: Already rendered vulnerable by neglect and lack of funds, nature reserves in Bosnia and Herzegovina are being destroyed by fire. Both regions hold healthy populations of the European bee-eater.

The nature conservation system in Bosnia and Herzegovina fails in many aspects, but the main problem is lack of interest by the authorities. The limited availability of funds and manpower do not help support suitable management, conservation and protection programmes.

Hutovo Blato natural park was burned to the ground recently, probably by fires being intentionally set to burn unwanted vegetation. The park is a Ramsar site (wetlands of international importance) and Important Bird Area, and is formally designated as a protected area, holding populations of globally endangered species like Pygmy Cormorant and Ferruginous Duck. The government has been reducing conservation budgets each year, which leads to the dismissal of rangers, an increase in poaching and the absence of maintenance of park infrastructures.

EARLEY NEWS and WILDLIFE SIGHTINGS

Another foreign invader.



The newsletter has in the past reported on alien plants often growing on roadsides or kerbs in Earley, which come seemingly unbidden from as far away as South America. Another one recently rediscovered in Earley, having already been recorded in 1995, is the Purple Potato *Solanum vernei* from South America. *Solanum vernei* is widely used in potato breeding. It has potato-like tubers just like the edible potato. It does not seem to pose a threat.

Green Waste - changes in collection

For all Wokingham Borough residents the rules for rubbish collection are changing from next April. For green waste in particular, you will have the choice of:

- (i) paying £60 a year to be given a 240 litre wheelie-bin (which you could share with a neighbour) and have it emptied fortnightly,
- (ii) buying, filling and putting out any number of (supposedly) 75 litre brown paper sacks at "around £1" each -- the price doesn't seem to have been finally fixed yet,
- (iii) disposing of your green waste yourself, either composting it or taking it to the Smallmead tip.

Source, Peter Soul, MERA (Maiden Erlegh Residents' Assn).

LOCAL FORTHCOMING EVENTS 2012

16 January 2012: Monday 19.30 to 22.00 in Function Room, Maiden Place Community Centre off Kilnsea Drive, Earley, RG6 3HE. **AGM followed by a talk by Edwin Trout - 'Building and Construction, can it really improve the environment?'** All about recycling and enhancing the environment while producing building materials and during construction projects.

8 February 2012: Wednesday, 19.30 to 21.30 in Maiden Place Function Room as above. **A talk on BEES by Lorna Rivett.** An informative general talk regarding honeybees from an enthusiastic hobbyist beekeeper. Come and hear why and how "they are busy as a bee" and the benefits of local honey.

25 March 2012: Sunday. **HUGE EARLEY LITTER PICK (HELP).** Volunteers needed. Be prepared for all weathers. The annual Earley Litter Pick has two sessions:

10:0 - 12:30

14:00 - 16:30

Meet at the Interpretation Centre at Instow Road for each session. Contact Grahame Hawker at Earley Town Council Office, 0118 986 8995.

25 April 2011: Wednesday, 19.30 to 21.30 in Maiden Place Function Room **Roger Bentley talks on PEAK OIL,** the situation and implications.

Everyone welcome to the above events. For details of events by other environmental groups, check the EEG website/Events.

Bits and Pieces

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.

We need some new blood! 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. Do your bit for the environment.

Join the **EEG Yahoo Group** and **post your 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. **Please inform Liz if you intend to change e-mail or address** at 50 Kenton Rd, Earley RG6 7LG, or send an e-mail.

SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL SHOPS

The True Food Co-op, Silverdale Centre, Earley (next Maiden Erleigh School). **Winners of the BBC 'Best Retail Initiative' Food and Farming Award 2011.** The True Food Co-op operates in Earley, their most successful market, on Fridays, 5 to 8.15 p.m. Their mission is to take low-cost organic food out to the people, bypassing the supermarkets which charge a lot for organics. They have a website giving dates www.truefood.coop.

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 www.petfayre-reading.co.uk

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