

The reach of the EEG's *Nature in Earley* calendar appears to be extending. The print run rose to 250 last year (up to 300 this year) while the associated exhibition of photographs at St Nicolas is being repeated for a second year (see p.6 for details). Then when I was at a recent meeting of an entirely unrelated organisation – the Berkshire Industrial Archaeology Group – I was asked by a member whom I know only in passing if I could advise on how to submit photographs. I was delighted she'd heard of the calendar and hope that interest in our activities continues to spread!

The big feature in this issue is Grahame Hawker's retirement as Senior Park Ranger at Earley Town Council. As you'll read on pp.3-4, Grahame has had an enormous impact on the local environment – not least the nature reserve – and on environmental awareness generally. He was a founder of, and a driving force behind the EEG. We salute him for his achievements, but look forward to his continued involvement with the Group in the years to come. In his honour, this issue is longer than usual. Read on

Edwin A.R. Trout

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The Loddon Lily

Grahame Hawker retires



Photos: Edwin Trout

The cake presented to Grahame Hawker at the Earley Town Council offices in February, on his retirement as Senior Park Ranger.

Committee News

Announcements from the AGM and latest committee meeting.

Annual General Meeting 2024

At the AGM on 20 January, Chairman Bob Collis offered a comprehensive review of the Group's activities over the past year, and Hon. Treasurer a reassuring report of the finances.

Stewart Macleod was elected as Hon. Secretary – affirming his *de facto* role – and all incumbent committee members were re-elected, though Brian Hackett, while remaining on the committee, announced his intention to step down as Webmaster.

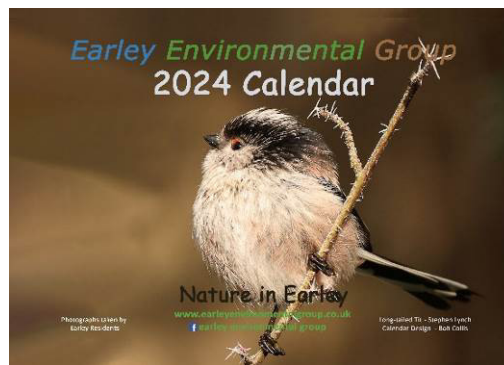
Donation

We are grateful to Mary Bather for holding a coffee morning on 20th March for the Pitts Lane area of Earley to raise donations for the EEG and the Earley Adopt-a-Street Initiative (EASI). She and local residents raised just over £75 for the two organisations to use in their work in protecting the local environment and keeping our streets clear of litter. Thank you to Mary and all who donated.

I am a PhD student at Royal Holloway, University of London. I work on pollinator conservation and citizen intervention and am looking for participants for the second year of the citizen science study. This study will be looking into how you can manage your gardens to help bees, butterflies and other pollinators. In the study you will be given a mowing frequency to follow and then you will count pollinators in your garden each week. The study will take 15-25 minutes a week.

The EEG's continued calendar success

Thank you to all who bought the EEG's 2024 Community Calendar, 'Nature in Earley'. The calendar proved to be very popular; with record sales of 250, making around £450 for the Group. We are grateful to the organisations that sold calendars on our behalf, including Earley Town Council, The Crescent Centre, St Nicolas Church, Huntley & Palmer Allotment Association, East Reading Horticultural Society, Our Lady of Peace Social Club and the Earley Community Choir. Most importantly, thank you to all the photographers who submitted such wonderful photos for the calendar.



The EEG's five calendars have, so far, contributed a total of just over £1,500 to our funds; enabling us to continue to hold events for our members, publish newsletters, run our website and cover our insurance costs. This has also enabled us to fund the production of next year's calendar.

You are now invited to contribute photographs for the EEG's 2025 calendar. As usual, we would welcome photographs celebrating the natural environment in the Earley area. Photos can be taken specifically for the 2025 calendar or have been taken in previous years. Scenes of the woods, lake, green spaces and wildflower beds, as well as pictures of the trees, birds, flowers, fungi, animals and insects found in Earley are welcome.

The copyright of all selected images would remain with the photographer, but by providing the image for the calendar the photographer would grant perpetual license to the EEG to feature the image in any of its publications. All images used will be credited to the photographer. The deadline for the submission of images is **31st May 2024**. Photographs should ideally be submitted in JPEG format and no larger than 5MB in file size. Please send me your photos with your name, preferred photo titles, if you have these in mind, and your contact email address to: collismob@ntlworld.com

Bob Collis, Calendar Editor

In 2023, we had 180 participants and saw a 75% increase in pollinator numbers in one of the groups! We hope to build on this work, so we have robust advice to give members of the public about managing their lawns to help pollinators. I am looking for volunteers to participate in the study, and hoped this would be of interest to members of the Earley Environmental Group, as you'd have a good skill set to complete the study. If you are interested in taking part, you can find more details and/or sign up using the following link to the Google form: (<https://forms.gle/scmLF3h1XvoHTkcSA>)

Thanks in advance,
Morgan Morrison

E-mail: morganmowing2023@gmail.com
Twitter: @morgsmorrison73

Senior Ranger retires

We pay tribute to Grahame and his many achievements on his retirement as Senior Park Ranger.

Grahame Retires

To celebrate Grahame's great work, the Wednesday Volunteers held a lunch at the Interpretation Centre on his last 'Volunteers Wednesday' and presented him with a smart pair of working boots, a book on fungi and a voucher for visiting the Knepp Rewilding project. Much to Grahame's delight, Robin Christian presented him with a 19th Century Farmworkers smock, which he couldn't wait to put on (*below*).



At his work leaving do, the Earley Environmental Group presented him with a drone photo of Maiden Erlegh Lake taken by Jamie Rose, a book on rare butterflies, a photo-book of him in action at the reserve and another Knepp Voucher, so he'll have no excuse for not visiting. Thank you to all who contributed to these well received gifts. We will still see Grahame around, as he remains a key member of the EEG and EASI Committees, and he is involved with many environmental and community organisations in the area. If you see him, please say 'Thanks for the Living Legacy'.

Grahame Hawker's Living Legacy

A tribute by Bob Collis



As many of you will know, Grahame Hawker retired from his role as Earley Town Council's Senior Park Ranger at the end of February. Over the 25 years, or so, that he has been responsible for the protection and upkeep of the Maiden Erlegh Local Nature Reserve and other green spaces in Earley, Grahame has created a tremendous 'living legacy' of environmental and

ecological initiatives and projects. Parodying his own joke (as I did at his leaving event); Grahame has left not only a 'LegaC', but also a 'LegaA', 'LegaB' and onward to 'LegaZ'!

Maiden Erlegh Local Nature Reserve and Lake

Grahame's LegaA has to be the Maiden Erlegh Local Nature Reserve, which he has loved and laboured over during his entire time as Ranger; making it an attractive and diverse natural space for all – sitting as a jewel in the heart of Earley. He installed the popular duck feeding platform, the wildfowl platforms and the reedbed comprising 10,000 reeds planted by volunteers, and the silt entrapment pond and straw bales filtration system (known as 'the sausages') to protect the lake from algae. He established the meadow which runs from Instow Road to the lake, and he implemented the 'scallop' planting areas along Instow Road which include beds of cowslips and other wildflowers. He has improved many hedges and planted many snowdrops, wild daffodils, wild garlic and other wild flowers in the woods, and upgraded the paths, walkways and sign boards; including the invertebrate signs dotted around the reserve.

The Woods

He has ensured that the Gemini Oak is well protected and has constructed a bird hide with feeders in the woods near the lake, and more recently, installed owl boxes which Tawny Owls have occupied at times and which have attracted many sightseers and photographers.

Project Hairstreak

Working with Alan Broodbank, he implemented the White-Letter Hairstreak project aimed at encouraging that butterfly species to return to the area through planting disease resistant elms donated by Alan's relatives who had moved to Canada. I have since photographed a White-Letter Hairstreak in my garden which is close to the reserve – it has indeed worked!

The Butterfly Garden

Grahame is an expert on butterflies and moths, and his favourite project on the reserve seems to be the Butterfly Garden just off Instow Road; where each section includes a flowering wild plant to attract a different species of butterfly (*see photo overleaf*). He is now insisting that each member of the Wednesday Volunteers adopt a section to ensure that this part of his LegaA continues to thrive. Mine is the cowslip section.

Cont. overleaf

He has also run conservation tasks on the nature reserve for companies such as Vodafone and SSE, and led many ecological walks and events, as well as teaching ecology to children. He has led work on removing invasive plants, chaired the Wokingham Biodiversity Forum, sat on the Berkshire Local Nature Partnership and Local Wildlife Sites Panel, and run the Earley Green Fair for twenty years. Wow!

The Interpretation Centre

Grahame's LegaB has to be sourcing the funding for the Interpretation Centre at Instow Road, and overseeing its design and construction. The Centre provides the base for the management of the reserve and has hosted many groups, such as the Berkshire Moth Group, and educational events, including bug-hunts, dawn choruses and bat walks, and lantern making for the Christmas Carols event, as well as construction projects such as the wildfowl platforms on the lake. Under Charlotte Allchin's leadership, it has hosted the Earley Elfins, the Earley Oaks and the Earley Environment Junior Group. The Centre has welcomed all, especially the Wednesday Volunteers, who have made many 9.30 starts to their mornings' work helping to maintain the reserve.

EEG and EASI

Grahame's LegaC is the Earley Environmental Group, which he set up to promote environmental activities and help protect the local natural environment. The EEG continues to thrive, having over 300 members, a regular programme of activities and this Newsletter. Grahame has overseen its development and,



often with some gentle arm-twisting, has encouraged members to join its committee to organise its regular events; some of which have become regular features in Earley's calendar. These include the Broodbank Bug Hunt for youngsters, regular talks on environmental topics, bat walks, dawn choruses and nature walks around the reserve.

Environmental protection

In recent years, Grahame has been the inspiration behind the Earley Green Corridor Network and Lower Earley Nature Reserve proposals, both now playing a role in the development of the Berkshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Grahame remains determined to see these pioneering environmental proposals adopted locally and becoming exemplars for similar projects in other areas.

Litter-picking

Added to all this, Grahame has championed the local litter-picking and waste recycling group, the Earley Adopt-a-Street-Initiative (EASI), and on behalf of the town council, has led many Huge Earley Litter Picks (HELP). The group has been nominated twice for the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service.

The Wednesday Volunteers

His LegaD is the one which I feel he has had the most pleasure from – the Wednesday Volunteers. Grahame set up the Volunteers to provide a working party to help maintain the local nature reserve and provide a means for people, such as retirees and students, to 'give something back' to their community whilst benefiting from the social interaction and, hopefully, the hard work involved. The Volunteers have been a great success, having worked with Grahame on many projects around the nature reserve, as well as at Culver Lane Allotments, Mays Lane Cemetery, Meadow Park, Sol Joel Park, Redhatch Copse, Paddick Drive and other locations. This has involved many popular tasks and some less-favoured ones, such as ivy pulling and path gravelling, but the work gets done regardless of the job and the weather – as long as there are biscuits at the break!



Graham, with his wife Lesley

EEG Talks

Reports of talks given at recent EEG meetings.



Teresa (left) with event organiser, Charlotte Allchin

Children, outdoor play and mental health

Charlotte Allchin spoke in January on the above theme. Local data shows that there are 7000 young people within a 1.5 mile walk of Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve who would benefit from spending more time there. Dr Miles Richardson of Derby University has done much, oft-cited work on the value of nature connection over nature contact and has explored the idea that young people gain immensely from prolonged experiences and free play in outdoor spaces.

The amount of unsupervised outdoor play that children can enjoy has reduced due to factors such as traffic, low quality housing layouts, inadequate facilities, along with a lack of parks and green spaces that are suitable for the type of play that young people need.

Alongside this, the mental health of young people is in decline with one in five diagnosed with a mental health condition by the age of 15. The Nature Premium would provide funding for outdoor education and investment in outdoor experiences for everyone aged 3 to 18 and would work much like the Sports Premium that followed the UK Olympic Games.

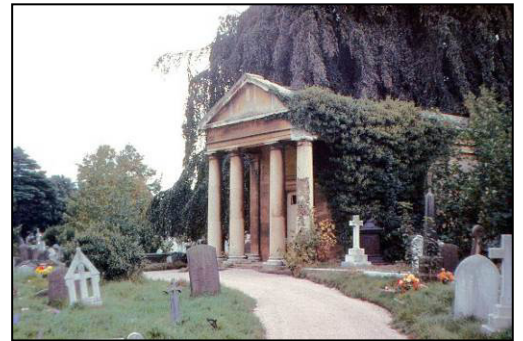
Captivated by Reading Old Cemetery talk A report by Bob Collis

Teresa Verney-Brooks captivated the audience at Maiden Place Community Centre on 27th March with her splendid talk on Reading Old Cemetery; covering its history, the conservation work being undertaken by the Friends of Reading Old Cemetery (FOROC) and the future of the site.

Reading's 4.8-hectare old cemetery is located at the well-known Cemetery Junction. There are 120,000 people buried there and 12,000 gravestones and monuments. Many of those buried in the cemetery lie in common, unmarked graves. However, there are 206 war graves, and the cemetery is a Grade II listed historic space.

It was opened in 1843 as one of Britain's earliest 'Garden Cemeteries'; a design concept established by the Victorians for the development of private cemeteries to overcome the high demand for burial space at urban parish churches resulting from high population growth. In London, the 'Magnificent Seven' cemeteries were established on the edge of the then built-up area of the city, at Kensal Green, West Norwood, Highgate, Abney Park, Brompton, Nunhead and Tower Hamlets. These cemeteries were for the well-off, laid out with pathways and attractive planting areas, and seen as places to stroll and reflect.

Reading's old cemetery had a grid system of pathways and two chapels, now demolished, one each for Anglicans and non-Anglicans (known as Dissenters), as well as separate burial areas for each. The Dissenters chapel is shown on the right. The cemetery has many mature trees, some of which were planted by Sutton Seeds, and six of which are recorded on the Woodland Trusts Ancient Tree Inventory, including a majestic weeping beech tree.



The site is a Local Nature Reserve and forms part of an important wildlife corridor in East Reading. Two areas of grassland are managed as flower rich meadows by the FOROC volunteers who also help to maintain the pathways, the planting and wildlife habitats. FOROC is a member of Caring for God's Acre and the National Federation of Cemetery Friends. FOROC's working parties meet every first Sunday afternoon of the month.

The cemetery is owned by Reading Borough Council which is looking to reduce maintenance costs and considering the possibility of allowing new graves to be dug over the top of existing graves. In addition, the arch at Cemetery Junction is in a poor state of repair and may soon be closed for public access. To retain access, the two side gates on London Road and Wokingham Road would need to be opened and it is not clear whether there is a willingness to do this. It would, therefore, be worthwhile visiting the cemetery soon in case public access becomes restricted.

Thanks to Teresa, for such a great talk, and to Charlotte for organising the event.

EEG Activities

Reports of other EEG activities over the past few months.

Garden Surveys

Sheila Crowson looks at garden survey records for January and February 2024

JANUARY

Gillian noted on 6 January a Great Spotted Woodpecker on fat balls, and on 13 January, a Jay on her garden lawn. Jays are famous for their acorn feeding habits and, in the autumn, you may see them burying acorns for retrieving later in the winter. On 25 January, a fox was seen running across the patio at 9.45 am. Foxes' peak mating period is early New Year. March sees birth of cubs.

FEBRUARY

Sue notes the usual residents - blackbird, blue tit, great tit, but a heron was seen on 27th February. The sight of this very large bird at close quarters is awesome. Its wingspan can be up to 2 metres. Brimstone, comma and red admiral butterflies were seen during the latter part of February. Gillian was lucky to see a sparrowhawk on her garden fence.

EEG Photography Exhibition: 'Spring'

Earley Environmental Group Photography Exhibition 'Spring'

St Nicolas Church
33 Sutcliffe Avenue, Earley,
Reading
3 April to 12 May 2024
(normal office hours)



Meet the Photographers Day: Saturday 4th May, 2pm to 4pm

Lower Earley Walk

A walk along the footpaths and green spaces of Lower Earley attracted a good turnout earlier in the year as the photo taken in Chalfont Park below testifies. The route followed was one from a forthcoming EEG book of walks and cycleways compiled by Mary Bather and Grahame Hawker, both of whom appear in the front row of the photograph.



Transport

Articles on two very different types of road use in Wokingham



Toad Patrol By Elaine Butler

On Priest Hill in Farley Hill, the toad migration started on 4th February, and was declared over on 25th when the number of toads returning from the pond exceeded those attempting to reach it. During that time 830 toads and 6 frogs were moved, with unfortunately 38 dead toads and 1 dead frog. This total isn't as high as last year, when we moved 1118 toads (with 42 dead), but it is still a good tally.

The nightly totals ranged from 0 to 247 (including 112, 91, 57 & 51), but there were none, or just two toads on four nights. On one night (6th February), 54 were moved during the early part of the evening, but when one of the local volunteers got home at 23:30, she found another 40. She says she hasn't seen them moving so late in previous years.

A post on the Swallowfield Facebook page was a great success in raising awareness and several new volunteers were recruited. Many thanks to all the volunteers and I hope they will want to patrol again next year!

Wokingham Transport Strategy

By John Booth

Wokingham's consultation on a draft Local Transport Plan (LTP) closed in March - a revised version should be adopted later this year. It is essentially a 'strategic' document supported by detailed 'plans' for buses, cycling and walking, and other 'plans' to come.

As such the LTP contains many good ideas but it is lacking in quantified objectives and commitments. It details neither what steps will be taken nor what will be achieved – probably because no-one knows what may be desirable, possible or affordable over the 15-year period of the strategy. One of three themes is to “Reduce Environmental Impacts”.

Consistent with local, regional and national targets, the LTP will support the transition of the transport sector to carbon neutrality. Achieving this will require improved travel choice and changes in travel behaviour for all to reduce travel and congestion. This includes promoting low emission vehicles, developing a core network of attractive bus and cycle routes across the borough, and the removal of all air quality exceedances in the borough.

Wokingham's Climate Emergency Action Plan identified transport as responsible for 31% of the Borough's emissions in 2020 and seeks to reduce this by more than half by 2030 by people switching to electric vehicles, reduction in road freight, more 'Active Travel', less travel overall, and more use of public transport.

But the LTP does not suggest mechanisms by which these changes may be achieved and funded. No detailed discussion of:

- the 'polluter pays principle' – road pricing and/or carbon pricing to replace fuel duty as vehicles go electric
- the 'user pays principle' – congestion charging to help fund alternatives to cars and incentivise people to use other modes of transport and avoid routes with bad air quality
- the importance of particulate pollution from brake and tyre wear and road abrasion – a growing issue as battery-electric vehicles are likely to be heavier than conventional cars.
- a 'Third Thames Bridge' from Caversham to the A329 – as proposed by Reading – which seems likely to increase road travel in and through Wokingham Borough.
- highway changes to cope with new housing and film studios south of Reading, including a possible additional M4 junction proposed for Hall Farm.

Demand management to achieve traffic reduction is key. Congestion increases very rapidly with increased traffic volumes. I would like the document to illustrate the benefits of reduced traffic by modelling the sensitivity to traffic volume of different impacts.

<https://engage.wokingham.gov.uk/en-GB/projects/a-new-local-transport-plan-for-wokingham-borough/2>

Climate Change

Taking note of weather records and the changing climate trends.

Robert Marsham The founding father of phenology

I didn't know the name for it until fairly recently, but I realise I've been practicing phenology myself for the past couple of decades, noting the first bloom of flowers, the arrival of chicks on Maiden Erlegh Lake, and am aware that others in the EEG note the first sighting of certain birds each year. Phenology, as a systematic study of nature 'events', is attributed to the example of a Norfolk gentleman, Robert Marsham.

Marsham was born in January 1708 and lived at Stratton Strawless near Norwich. In 1736 he started to record his "Indications of Spring", systematically noting 27 nature 'events', and he continued to do so for another 60 years. These 'events' included the appearance of snowdrops and the leafing of trees, the arrival of swallows and cuckoos, nest-building by rooks and the croaking of frogs. His descendants maintained this ongoing record until the 1940s.

According to Tim Sparks of the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology in Cambridge, these and similar records are now being used to monitor climate change. "His records provide the longest British records of phenology recorded in one place. They can be compared to the temperatures of the years in which they were recorded and demonstrate how responsive nature is to warming: high temperatures leading to earlier springs. There may be a few older records, but it was Marsham's systematic collection of data that encouraged others in the 19th and 20th centuries."

Edwin A.R. Trout
see right for link

Climate Change – must try harder!

By John Booth

Data analysis continues to show the world is getting warmer. The EU's Copernicus Climate Change Service has concluded "the global mean temperature for the past twelve months [Feb 2023 – Jan 2024] is the highest on record ... at 1.52°C above the 1850-1900 pre-industrial average."

For the UK, the Climate Change Committee June 2023 report to Parliament said, "Confidence in the UK meeting its medium-term targets has decreased in the past year ... a key opportunity to raise the overall pace of delivery has been missed." If the UK is to achieve its 2030 target "the rate of emissions reduction outside electricity supply must almost quadruple." Its assessment (in March 2024) of the third national adaptation programme finds that it falls short on Vision, Ambition, Delivery, Monitoring and Development.

Wokingham's Climate Emergency Action Plan defines 102 Actions to target roughly 54% drop in emissions from 2020 to 2030. This includes emissions within the Borough and from power generation outside the Borough but excludes emissions associated with other activities (such as production and transport of things we consume) outside the Borough.

In September 2023 Wokingham's fourth progress report on its 'Climate Emergency Action Plan' acknowledged "We need more resources and support from Central Government to deliver the bold decarbonisation actions set out in this plan."

<https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/climate-emergency>

Whither the weather? Some record-breaking figures

Hasn't it been wet? Well, wet and unseasonably warm for much of the winter, if we exclude a short cold snap in January. And by early April, with Storm Kathleen, we'd had a record-tying 11 named storms over the winter. The following are just a few of the meteorological announcements of the past few months:

- Early in January, Wallingford experienced its highest flood water for 80 years.
- On 9 January, the EU Copernicus Climate Change Service confirmed 2023 as the hottest year since 1850.
- On 26 February, the University of Reading declared the month to be the wettest February since its records began in 1908.
- On 1 March, the Met Office declared February 2024 to have been the warmest on record for England & Wales, with an average temperature of 7.5 degrees C exceeding the previous record of 7 degrees in 1990.
- On 14 March, Prof Ed Hawkins confirmed that "the reign of King Charles has been the soggiest on record and rainier than any of his predecessors ... The 18 months since the king ascended to the throne have been the wettest on record [for England] since 1836."
- In April it was reported that there hadn't been a dry week in Berkshire since October.

Today, the UK Phenology Network, also known as 'Nature's Calendar', records 100 such events. For more information, visit www.naturescalendar.org.uk

Berkshire & Beyond

Snippets from the press on the changing flora and fauna of Berkshire and beyond.

Is there a Beast of Berks?

The report of an unidentified large cat in Berkshire prompted an article in the *Reading Chronicle* recently, listing other unexplained sightings. The latest was seen by Lesley Windmill, when driving along the Ashhampstead Road from Chapel Row to Upper Basildon on 27 January. It was “at least three times bigger than any cat I’ve ever seen” and “jet black all over”, with a tail that looked “fatter than a cat tail”. The animal was “bounding, but very slow bounding”. A year earlier, in January 2023, lorry driver Joe Ashford reported seeing a “small leopard with hyena-like colours” when he was driving along the M4 southeast of Reading and Isaac Latchman saw something similar in the wooded stretch between Junctions 11 and 12 of the motorway. In July 2022, Tom Woods saw a “large cat-looking creature” with sandy colouring run across the road in front of him near Junction 13.

(*Reading Chronicle*, 1 Feb 2024)

English hedges grow 10 times round globe

A hi-tech map of England’s hedgerows has revealed they are long enough to go around the world – ten times. In a project led by Dr Richard Broughton, laser scanning found 242,334 miles, with 20% in the South West. The UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology hopes it will trigger restoration of habitats as the Government pledged to restore 30,000 miles by 2027.

(*Metro*, 31 Jan 2024, p.8)

Trapping invasive mink with gland scent ‘could help save British wildlife’

Last year we reported sightings of the American mink along the River Blackwater, on the county’s southern border, and so it was with interest I saw an article with the above headline in the Bracknell News on 15 January. It reported the results of a trial in East Anglia to lure individuals of this invasive species into cages using a scent from their own anal glands – Ed.

Over the last four years, conservationists have maintained a defensive wall of traps, cutting off the region from the rest of the country. It is now free from mink, leading to an immediate recovery in the species on which it preys, such as water voles, which are now much more abundant in East Anglia.

Prof Tony Martin, chairman of the Waterlife Recovery Trust, explains how the project worked: “There are two key things that are different between our way of working and what had gone on before. Firstly, every trap we have has got a little box in it which tells us when the trap door closes, so we know immediately that there’s something in the trap and we can go there quickly to attend to it. The second thing is we use a scent lure – anal gland lure, ‘eau de mink’ – and that makes the traps very attractive to anything that might be passing”. He estimates that by using this system, the whole of Britain could be cleared within five years. If successfully undertaken, it would be the world’s largest eradication project.

(*Bracknell News*, 15 January 2024)

Parakeets arrive in Earley

The presence of invasive green parakeets in parishes to the east (as close as Woodley) has been reported for several years, and so it has been thought to be only a matter of time before they would arrive in Earley. And now they have. They have been seen in the Old Pond Copse behind Silverdale Road and reported in the *MERA Magazine*. Thus prompted, your editor has been on the lookout and sure enough, on 3 March, found half a dozen variously roosting in the branches, or flying from tree to tree above the shallow waters of the copse. Their distinctive call attracts attention and their bright green plumage provides easy confirmation. Love them or loathe them, they are here now – Ed.

Natural History Museum project start date slips

Mace, which is under a pre-construction services agreement, has been given a start date for the new £200m Natural History Museum collections centre in Berkshire. The Museum has secured planning permission from Wokingham Borough Council to build a new facility at the Thames Valley Science Park in Shinfield. It will house new collections, research and digitisation activities. The expected start date has slipped to early 2025, though target completion for main construction remains 2027. Fitting-out the 25,000 sq m facility will take rather longer.

(*Construction Index*, 15 March 2024)

Wildlife in the Garden

Exploring the locality with the report of an EEG walk and Ray's findings from around the reserve.

Mowers are prickly issue for hedgehogs

Crash test dummies are being used to find out if robotic lawnmowers are a danger to hedgehogs. The 3D-printed models were created by researchers at Oxford University to check the effects the devices have on hedgehogs, and tests showed that some don't even detect them, potentially leaving them with fatal injuries. Team leader Dr Sophie Lund Rasmussen argues there is an urgent need to identify and phase out mowers that pose a threat to this vulnerable species.

(Metro, 18 Jan 2024)

British Birds

British Birds: bottled by Worthington, is a charming and highly entertaining collection of cartoons first issued in the mid twentieth century as promotional imagery for the brewer, Worthington. Collated and published retrospectively in book form by the Bass Museum, Burton on Trent, each page contains an anthropomorphised image of a bird and – under a punning headline and cod Latin designation – the description of a certain type of person in the style of an ornithological guide. Each type is linked somehow, to the beneficial consumption of Worthington's beer. To the right is an example, which while not typical, is appropriate to this time of year.

The Budgetigar (or Hardto Swallow) *Exchequer ataxia*

Who Killed Cock Robin?

I saw a pudgy cat a creeping up on me!

In all seriousness, this is not a nursery rhyme or cartoon situation. It is estimated 75 million birds in the UK are killed each year by cats, domestic or feral. Whatever the background to that estimate, cats are certainly responsible for the death of huge numbers of birds, including some species at great risk, and many other small creatures.

This is natural: "nature red in tooth and claw". True to a point, though it is claimed that birds evolved earlier than cats and appropriate adjustment to the later creature's incursion has proved ineffective. A contentious theory perhaps?

In this country there are millions of cats. Many are fond pets purring by the fireside, but other times hunting mice and birds. More serious are the feral cats that have to prey on smaller creatures to survive. Combined with other factors, such as destroyed habitats, cats are a threat to the bird population, never mind small mammals such as field and dormice. The RSPB reports alarming falls in the number of once familiar birds, such as sparrows and thrushes, and the rarer ones might and do face extinction.

No Dodos now exist, thanks in part to mankind (are we learning quickly enough?), nor Lyall's Wrens, thanks, it is said, to the predations of a New Zealand lighthouse-keeper's cat, Tibbles.

Research is always ongoing in to the threats to the natural world and efforts to offset them, but perhaps the threat from 'puss' is not appropriate. Suggestions have been made, some wildly imaginative, but others simple and prudent, such as a bell collar on Tom to save Jerry. A cull of feral cats seems eminently sensible, but imagine the outcry!

This is a topic that has recurred repeatedly in the media over recent months, on the BBC's *South Today*, for instance (reporting on the campaign for collar bells) and in both the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail*: 'Its time to wage war on killer cats', by Stephen Moss (14 Dec 2023)

P.J.R. Trout

Indeed, this was the subject of an EEG talk by Mel Orros a while ago. Responses are invited – Ed.



The BUDGETIGAR (or Hardto Swallow)

Maiden Erlegh Lake

A round-up of the changing wildlife scene on and around our local nature reserve.

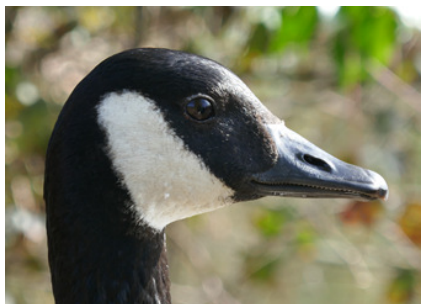


Photo: Edwin Trout

Arrivals on the lake

Swans

With the cygnets gone on 2 March, the swans have been just a pair as they enter the breeding season. The female has since been seen sitting on last year's nest near the sediment pond.

Tufted ducks

Noticed right away on 10 February were Tufted Ducks, two drakes and a duck, floating passively in the middle of the lake. They stayed still, while remaining a conspicuous novelty on the water. A pair has returned periodically since.

Grebes

A pair of great crested grebes has been on the lake since mid-March, the first time we've had grebes in several years.

Heron's nest

Social media had been full of it: the herons were nesting. And so they were, in the cleft of a tree on the western end of the main island. Chicks followed, their image captured in close up by Stephen Lynch and others on Facebook. There were four originally, but now just two, and growing by the day.

Cont. below right

Canada Geese

The expanding range of an increasingly large nursery of goslings grazing on the verges and lawns of Maiden Erlegh's streets in recent summers, has prompted a response from the residents' association MERA, which has organised a petition demanding action. An article has been published in the MERA Magazine under the heading 'A Gaggle leads to a Hagggle', but surprisingly its central argument – that Earley Town Council reduce the number of goslings or clean up the mess – has found a wider readership. MERA's position has been set out in the *Reading Chronicle*, and then found its way onto the BBC local news. It has even been reported – albeit briefly – in the national *Metro* newspaper under the heading "Oops... Riled geese fill our lawns with poops".

Upmarket locals say their lawns and pavements are piling up with the droppings from a flock of Canada geese, which they fear may be harmful to children. The geese are said to be avoiding a pair of wild swans who attack them in a nature reserve nearby in Earley, Berkshire.

Calmer counsel has been encouraged by ETC, which invited Edwin Trout – who monitors the Canada geese of Maiden Erlegh – to offer councillors an objective assessment of the bird's behaviour and numbers over the past three years. Edwin spoke to a specially convened meeting in March, providing access to his records as a factual basis for decision-making – *Ed*.

Egyptian Geese

Other visitors to the lake were a pair of Egyptian Geese on the bank in the fishing bay at the foot of Allendale Road, quietly stretching the wing feathers and preening. I didn't take much notice at first. There is usually a pair to be seen and has been for years; they are almost a fixture. Except these weren't that pair, as became evident when I heard the distinctive raspy honking of Egyptian Geese coming from Lakeside, and went to check. There were the resident geese, on the lawn they favour at No. 54. Ah ha: two pairs! This could be interesting, I thought, as the resident pair slowly progressed along the road. I headed back, wondering how they would react when they found the visitors. Experience suggested there would be animosity. Indeed, I was slightly surprised that the visitors hadn't reacted to the sound of honking from Lakeside, but very soon I saw the male through the trees, flying off downstream. Back at the fishing bay, I found the female was still standing on the bank. The residents approached and eventually, at the last moment, the female flew off to join her mate on the pontoon opposite the bigger island. There had been almost no display from the residents up to that point, but then their intermittent hoarse honks picked up both pitch and pace and became a raucous outpouring, the male in particularly shaking with the effort. Then off they flew, one after the other, down to the pontoon and chased the visitors off. I suspected they'd keep up the chase until they had the lake to themselves, but I had other things to do and couldn't wait to see the resolution.

Since then I have repeatedly seen a solo Egyptian goose – around the lake and even on the verge opposite the Silverdale Road shops – quite distinct from the pair that now have a brood of seven goslings. Reported on 27 March, there were nine initially, swiftly settling at seven. You'll see them in Lakeside and on the south bank opposite the bigger island.

Edwin A.R. Trout

EEG Programme

We list the Group's forthcoming walks and talks – and to the right, reports of practical conservation.

2024 Programme Walks and Talks

Please see the EEG website and public notice boards for further details and updates.

4 April – 15 May

Spring Photography Exhibition
St Nicolas Church

19 May

Old Lanes and Lower Earley Woods Walk

3.00 to 5.30 pm. Meet at Chalfont Park car park

8 June

Trees and Wildlife Walk

Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve, 10am to 12.30 pm, starting at the Interpretation Centre

15 July

Maiden Erlegh Lake's Fish & Fishing: a talk by Martyn Mills
(Maiden Place, 7.30 – 9.00 pm)

3 August

The Green Fair

1 September

Bat Walk

8.00 pm in Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve. Led by Berkshire Bat Rescue

17 October

Photography Walk

(Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve)

Contributors

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Rook's Nest Wood

By Edwin Trout

Driving to and from work last summer, rather than taking my customary train, I was able to vary my route, and having passed through Finchampstead a number of times, I began to notice an unfamiliar car park in Barkham Ride. One evening I decided to pull in. On that occasion it was largely empty, tucked behind the hedge but clearly indicated by a yellow barrier. I parked and got out to investigate. The site was, as I had begun to suspect, a nature reserve: Rook's Nest Wood. With no map and no signs to indicate direction, I selected one of three paths out of the car park and headed into the reserve. There were tall, mature trees to my right, with young trees and scrub to my left. I soon came to a pond, which looked as though it had recently been excavated, and an interpretation board that explained the orange and oily appearance of the shallow stream nearby. Not pollution, it seemed, but iron oxide from the clays of the Reading Beds and the effects of natural bacteria. A boardwalk took me into the wood and then to a gate overlooking open country beyond. I carried on, drawn by curiosity, past cows grazing in the adjoining field, though meadows to another wood. A public footpath leading off to the right was signposted Barkham church, so I had a rough idea of direction. Out of the wood and into the scrubland again. I headed for the sound of the road, ignoring paths branching off to the left, and found myself, half an hour later, back in the car park. It had been a self-contained circuit though delightful and varied countryside, offering opportunities to explore further on the various divergent paths. I was keen to return.

When I got home I looked up Rook's Nest Wood and found that it had recently been farmland, used for grazing, but was taken over as Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace in 2011 and maintained by WBC Countryside Service as one of their 27 'nature parks'. It has since been planted with 15,000 native trees – oak, ash, silver birch and hazel, with some aspen and willow – and its area of fen designated a Local Wildlife Site.

I've been back since, several times, and have enjoyed it as much each time. There are usually a few dog walkers, but it is otherwise quiet and peaceful. The peripheral path is long enough for a stroll, but undemanding, and the intersecting paths allow for multiple permutations of route. There are surfaced paths totalling 2.2 km, with an additional 1 km unsurfaced, in a site extending to 18.3 hectares. For me it has been an unexpected oasis at the end of the day, and located conveniently close to Earley. If you haven't been, I'd encourage you to visit and explore it for yourself.

Location: RG40 4EU; or SU 78875 65814

Site map: www.wokinghamcountryside.co.uk/nature-parks/

EEG Newsletter

Edited by Edwin A.R. Trout, Earley Environmental Group.

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