

ONGAR WILDLIFE SOCIETY

An Occasional Newsletter

August, 2009

Number 15

I hope everyone had a good summer's break. As a reminder to everybody and for the information of our new members, OWLS keeps a Record Book so if you have seen anything you wish to report upon either at home or on holiday, this book will always be available at our regular meetings for you to look at or take home to make an entry. Descriptions of our visits/outings over the years appear in the book with all the various sightings of the wildlife.

New Committee: The weather was perfect for the AGM and buffet lunch/garden party held in Allan and Rita's lovely garden in Fyfield. Presentations of book tokens were made to Rob Brooks who was standing down after eight years as Chairman and to Richard Cook who was standing down after twelve years on the Committee. Alan Brett was elected as OWLS new Chairman and Keith Snow as Vice Chairman. Rob Brooks remains on the Committee. The future programme will be organized jointly by Alan Brett and Keith Snow. A new member was elected onto the Committee – Bob Jenkins, and we welcome him to our Committee.

Following a delicious summer buffet meal, most members relaxed in the garden! A few of us left on a 45 min. walk around Fyfield through the fields and by the river. The afternoon was so warm that there were many Demoiselles (an iridescent damselfly) by the River Roding and an abundance of butterflies – a Ringlet was seen, and the plant Marsh Woundwort was growing on the riverbanks. It had been a lovely afternoon in an idyllic setting.

A Mystery: At the end of the AGM afternoon did you inadvertently take the wrong chairs home with you? Two members upon arriving back from the short walk found that the only two chairs remaining were not theirs, although they were very similar! The two missing chairs are folding green chairs, one new chair with arms and a cupholder, and the second one, also green, was from Field & Trek. Also a black and green (Black Watch Tartan) blanket/rug was found on the lawn unclaimed. Please check your garden sheds and if you know anything about these items please contact either Tanya on 01277 363947 or Allan Cook on 01277 899240.

Visits 2009: OWLS had a return visit to **Rainham Marshes (RSPB)** in February. The site had been developed considerably over the past few years and now boasted a brand new Visitor Centre – rather an ugly construction but nonetheless very welcome. Also there were now boarded walkways making it much easier to get around and see the wildlife. Jim Smith, the Assistant Warden, was our Guide for the day and we were able to see over 35 different species of birds.

Great Crested Newts in Epping Forest: In April Laurence Jarvis, a Field Tutor with Epping Forest Field Centre led us on a walk with Crested Newts in mind. Laurence is specializing in Great Crested Newts as part of his studying at the Centre

and he will be following up this walk with a talk at our meeting in January, 2010. Laurence explained to the members that both the Great Crested Newt and Palmate Newts were less in number due to the fact that the ponds in Epping Forest contained terrapins and fish such as trout which would eat the eggs before they had a chance to hatch. However, we were able to see the Newts in some small “experimental ponds” providing a special environment for them. Laurence will give you much more information on the Newts in his forthcoming talk.

A Wet Day at Wisley:



Saturday, 6th June, saw a coach full of members and friends making their way to RHS Wisley gardens. The weather was a bit wet but it did not deter anyone from enjoying the beautiful gardens, and the soft light created by the light rain was ideal for photographs. Heavier rain in the morning meant members headed for the superb new glasshouse to view exotic species of plants from all over the world, or else to the nearest coffee spot! If there had been a prize for the best umbrella at Wisley that day then I think one member of our coach party (pictured above with the sunflower broly) would have been the lucky winner! The grounds were extensive and varied and provided something for everyone.

Studies on Wild Birds: Two members of OWLS, Stan Ball and Keith Snow, have been carrying out research into microscopic parasites that invade the intestines of British wild birds. This work has been undertaken over a number of years by examining the droppings (faeces) of 5568 birds, representing 141 bird species from 40 families. In addition to collections by Stan and Keith, 32 bird ringers sent samples from various localities in the British Isles: 23 in England, 5 in Scotland, 3 in Ireland and 1 in Wales. And you thought we didn't have fun!

The disease that results from harbouring these parasites has no common name and is referred to as coccidiosis. Its effects can vary from slight weight loss to severe debility and death, and the symptoms are influenced by a number of factors including the level of infection, the location of the parasites within the bird's body and the susceptibility of the bird.

Most research on coccidians has not been on the parasites which occur in wild birds but on those which are pathogenic to domestic animals, such as poultry and cattle, because of the potential economic losses involved. There is also a report of these parasites infecting a bird, the pheasant, which is of economic importance in some areas, succumbing to disease and requiring drug treatment.

The Forest Research website¹ provides more information on leaf miners. However, unfortunately the leaf miner is not the only threat that the horse chestnut has to face. Bleeding canker on the trunk and branches of trees is a more serious disease for those trees that are afflicted. Caused by a fungal pathogen, which has been around since the 1970s, the disease is eventually fatal for the tree. About one in three trees in rural locations in East Anglia are affected. Again refer to Forestry Research for more details. Please keep an eye on your local chestnut trees. How is your neighbourhood doing?

Rob Brooks

¹www.forestresearch.gov.uk

Our Families of Mallards:

We are fortunate that our garden includes ponds. These ponds are the remains of clay pits, placed on the parish boundary that divides Greensted from Stanford Rivers. They are not spring fed, and consequently dry out during the mid-summer. A larger pond in the garden of the house over the road is fed by a spring. All ponds are usually leased to families of mallard ducks. We have watched these families develop for many years now, and this year has been no exception although only one family has been fully raised to maturity, as far as we can tell.

Their main place of residence is the pond over the road, but for some reason most families undertake the short trek several times a day between this pond and our rather undistinguished ponds. The journey is not without its hazards, the road is quiet but has to be negotiated; while across the intervening grassy areas, small ducklings are vulnerable to preying birds, dogs and the occasional fox; moorhens can attack the very young; the pond sides are steep. Yet the short migration is regular and rewarded by food – bread, and only the best seeded off-cuts from a local source, corn and “duck soup”.

We have watched these young families often enough to realize that their chances on reaching maturity are heavily dependent on the skill of the mother, and standards of motherhood vary widely. Poorly disciplined, young families can disappear overnight while those adults with a firm hand (webbed of course) can demonstrate remarkable control and resource to ensure near total success in the upbringing. Good parenting has achieved success with rates of survival to maturity greater than 80% even for large broods of up to fourteen young. Of course, the ducks are summer residents and are partially domesticated (at home in the kitchen when the opportunity allows) and not necessarily representative of those wholly wild.

This year, only one family has shown sufficient organization to survive in numbers, and the mother has been exemplary. The group is controlled by quiet command which results in them being tightly packed when just one day old, to being allowed progressively more freedom until they are fully fledged when they just retain a group identity but are allowed to wander.

This summer has been typical with some moments of drama. On one occasion, at three weeks, one of nine of the duckling family was found, cold, wet and abandoned, near our back door... from where their meals are usually served. The duckling was recovered, given drops of ‘rescue remedy’, and confined to a padded box with a hot water bottle. With such attention, recovery can be unexpected, and in this case the

Although there is scanty information concerning wild birds, a number of reports associate illness and death with these parasites, for example mortality in the black siskin, *Carduelis atrata* in Italy and weight loss leading to a condition called (going light" in the greenfinch, *Carduelis chloris* in Britain. Considering the possible pathogenic effects of invasion of these parasites, it is likely that infection could at times be significant in many species of wild birds and may exacerbate other illnesses and food shortages. It may therefore be the reason for the decline of certain species and account for yearly variations in population sizes.

The overall results in this study, to be published shortly, showed that these parasites occurred in 19% of the birds examined and that most belong to the genus *Isospora* with lesser numbers of *Eimeria*, *Caryospora* and *Tyzzeria*. Further research is necessary to establish just how much these parasites affect our native birds.

An interest in wildlife from an early age: Keith Snow and Stan Ball also are involved in a training programme with a local Primary School. Their initial aim is to teach the children about different fruit and vegetables and how to grow them. Following this a nature trail is being prepared, helping children with identification of species and then the preparation of charts to record sightings. Nature talks will be arranged for various classes at appropriate levels, and it is hoped to involve OWLS' members in giving short talks on subjects of special interest to themselves and the children. Keith and Stan will start with talks on Mosquitoes and Great Crested Newts and then maybe a talk on Parasites to follow the more familiar topics. Keith and Stan are asking for any volunteers from OWLS to help with this work. At the end of the talks, summaries of the subjects will be given to the children to take home to parents. OWLS' future lectures/talks will be mentioned with the ultimate aim of promoting the activities of the Society and encouraging new members.

Leaf Miners and the Horse Chestnut – a progress report: In an earlier newsletter, the problem afflicting the leaf of the horse chestnut was outlined. One year on, at the end of the first week in July, the characteristic patches of leaf discolouration have returned. The hope that maybe a cold winter would perhaps restrain the larvae of the *cameraria ohridella* moth, the source of the problem, has proved to be misplaced. Maybe the winter was consistently cold, but there was no period of exceptionally low temperatures.

At present, the incidence of the discolouration does not appear to be as severe as one year ago and the leaf fall has only just commenced. In our own garden, we collected and burnt the leaves at regular intervals, but this can only provide a very local, partial and temporary solution; remember that in this country the disease has been able to spread at the rate of 40 to 60 kms annually. 'Collect and burn' is the only practical measure to be offered as a solution, perhaps justified by the observations reported here.

Locally, the trees seem to be surviving despite this unsightly and widespread affliction. This year the horse chestnut will have enjoyed at least three months of apparently uninterrupted leaf, and only a small proportion of leaves have dropped so far.

convalescent duckling was reintroduced successfully to the pack during the following breakfast.

On a further occasion, on their return to the pond opposite the party was waylaid by a small dog. The dog was let out while the ducks were on their trek back. Ducklings were scattered. One was caught by the dog and had to be put down when it failed to recover from the confrontation. It was not the fault of the dog. The mother duck now realized that the previous route had suddenly become hazardous to a degree which made it unusable, and an alternative had to be sought. The next day, the previous, direct route was abandoned and a more secure, but involved, route had been put into operation. The new route did not cross the garden used by the dog, and by going out through the side of the garden, walking down part of a public footpath, crossing the road perhaps 30 metres from the original crossing, through our front gate and along the grass to a point which linked again with the old route, it was a perfect detour.

There are two features worth commenting on. The first is the speed at which the new route is put into use – the change is made overnight and the old route is lost immediately. Of course it is not just the mother who has to adapt, but the family, of now eight, have also to be 'instructed' on the change. This is accomplished seamlessly and efficiently. The new route has eliminated the dog, left in the fenced area of the garden, suggesting perhaps that the new route is a reasoned result simply based on avoiding the dog.

The second comment concerns the drill with which the road is crossed. On the road, the ducklings are relatively exposed. There are predators and some traffic. We have watched the drill. The family is taken to our gate, and in a close pack, they listen, and wait for a clear road. We have seen them wait for a horse to pass before crossing. Then they run, as fast as they can, across the road to safety. It is good to know that they do not feel the need to run while in our own garden.

The result of this careful parenting is that eight out of nine survive, the one loss being due to human mistake. The ducks are now fully fledged and are all taking a course of wing exercises! Strangely, and we have not noticed it quite as marked before, there is considerable variation in the size of them. At times in their development some have appeared to be about three weeks younger than their larger siblings. There appears to be a tendency for any discrepancy to be enhanced by the smaller ducks to be beaten in the feeding scrum. The smaller ducks do their best to compete for food but if you are a duck physical size does help. Maybe the mini-ducks might not have survived, had they been wilder.

Rob Brooks

A Visit to Pashley Manor Gardens and Merriments Gardens, Kent:

Although not officially an OWLS outing, several of our members went by coach to these gardens with the Moreton and District Horticultural Society.

The Manor is a family home and it is not open to the public. It is a Tudor house built by Sir Thomas May who purchased the Estate in 1543. The fine Georgian façade was added in 1720. The gardens were first opened to the public in 1992, and subsequently the eminent landscape architect, Anthony du Gard Pasley was much involved in bringing them to their present splendour.

The 11 acres of garden revealed a very varied selection of fine trees including several Tulip trees, a Maidenhair tree (*Ginkgo biloba*), Alder, Monkey Puzzle, Californian Redwood and two very mature and spreading Oaks (250 to 300 years old). The gardens had hundreds of blooms in over 40 different varieties of Lily. There were fountains, springs and large ponds and a range of creative sculptures displayed in a number of different gardens within the 11 acres. The superb walled vegetable garden supplied produce to the excellent restaurant.

After lunch onto Merriments Gardens which were so different. Here were 4 acres of borders displaying perennials, ornamental grasses and rare plants. In the wildlife garden there was a bird hide where you could sit and watch Great Tits, baby blue tits in the bird bath, Greater Spotted Woodpeckers, Goldfinches and Greenfinches. With a long stay you were rewarded by the sight of a couple of Nuthatches characteristically feeding head-first from the nuts. After indulging in a strawberry tea served while you relaxed on the lawns of the gardens, the visit ended with a look round the shop and the Wild Bird Centre. It had been a splendid day and the weather perfect.

Tanya Welford

The remaining meetings for this year are as printed in the programme and are as follows:

21st Sept.: Orang-utans by Nikki Payne.

19th Oct.: "Where Yeehaa meets Ole" the S.W. states of the USA – Ralph Todd.

16th Nov.: Mosquitoes by Keith Snow.

14th Dec.: Bedfords Park by Daniel Bridge (Essex Wildlife Trust).

(Don't forget the 14th Dec. meeting is the second Monday in the month due to the proximity of Christmas).

Visits:

10th Oct. (Saturday) – Coastal Walk. This will start from Heybridge Basin, and we will meet at 9.00 a.m. at the Lorry Park, Ongar and travel there by cars.

5th Dec. (Saturday) – Coach trip to Welney (Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust). Please put your name down on the list for this if you wish to go. This trip was so successful five years ago that the Committee are arranging a repeat visit. There will be an opportunity to see the Whooper Swans from Iceland and Bewick's Swans from the Arctic plus many ducks, geese and other water birds from the comfort of a centrally heated observatory, and a short talk will be given by a guide just prior to the birds' feeding time. All the birds gradually fly in over the water ready for the 7.00 p.m. feed and the whole sight is spectacular. The coach will leave Fyfield at 2.00 p.m. and Ongar at 2.10 p.m. to travel to Welney, and following the feeding time at Welney the coach will leave at 8.00 p.m. to arrive back at Ongar at around 9.30 p.m. There is a tea room and shop on the site.

*Keith Snow
Rob Brooks
Tanya Welford.*