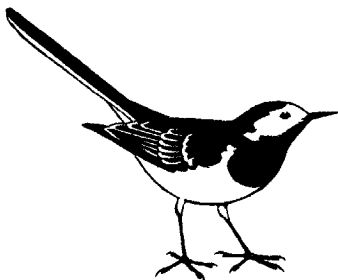


The Newsletter

HILLINGDON NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY



Spring 2009



Bladderwort from Park Road Ponds
seen through a microscope

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Chairman's Review.

The Thursday work parties at Harefield Place continue to good effect. The wet weather caused flooding of the path and so thanks to a grant we are building boardwalks to keep our (and your) feet dry.

Phil continues to provide us with a super programme of events and Ann finds us excellent speakers. Attendances at our indoor meetings are increasing which is most encouraging. The cold wet spells limited attendance at the outdoor meetings. Phil is getting a reputation as a 'Wet Day' organiser. (It's not your fault Phil - honest!)

The Christmas Social was most enjoyable, with a natural history True or False quiz.

We have had our information leaflet professionally printed - you will have a copy in with this newsletter. I think it really looks good.

The web site has attracted a couple of people to meetings. Any suggestions for inclusion in its contents would be welcome. No contact details other than the leader's name will be published on the web. All correspondence is done through me. The web site address is www.hillingdon-naturalhistorysociety.org.uk

Contact us at enquiries@hillingdon-naturalhistorysociety.org.uk or click on any of the links on the web pages. Your comments are always welcome.

Thanks to the committee for all their help and support, without which none of what we do would be possible.

Thanks as always to the writers of the articles in this publication. If you come on any of our trips, why not put chalk to slate, pen to paper or better still, fingers to keyboard and let the rest of the membership know about it in the next newsletter?

Alan Rix

Front cover picture by Alan Rix

The Day of the Eagle Owl...

Willen Lake was excavated from riverside farmland and has been flooded since 1973, becoming fully operational as a balancing lake for Milton Keynes in 1978.

The two parts of the lake have developed different characters.

The south lake is the busy area with water sports, events, hotel and refreshments. The north lake has become a quiet informal area that is now a Site of Regional Importance for birds with over 190 species recorded. We walked around the latter.

On the coldest day of the winter so far nine intrepid souls turned up for this trip in Milton Keynes. From the car park you approach the south lake first and we saw a number of water birds in spite of the frozen state of the lake. In a small area where the water was clear of ice we saw Mute Swan, Coot, a Goldeneye, Lapwing and Black-headed Gulls. Whilst looking at this area Peter W suddenly got excited and pointed out an owl sitting on one of the ramps in the adventure area. Identification ranged between a Long-eared Owl and an Eagle Owl. We even stopped a passer-by to show him this bird that he would probably not see again in a hurry. But then Alan zoomed in on the bird to reveal it as a wooden sculpture. So much for experts! We quickly moved on.



The north lake was more exposed and the birds that were present were close to the shore in small unfrozen areas. In the trees near the lake we saw a Kestrel that tried to grab a Robin right in front of us. Along this north shore of the lake we also saw a solitary Reed Bunting. An unfrozen area here gave us Gadwall and Pochard. As we rounded the north-east corner of the lake the wind hit us and the moaning started. At this point some of us also saw a Kingfisher flash by. Although it seemed very dark the shape of the body and the size of the bill confirmed the id. After this we dropped down the bank of the lake to get some shelter from the wind. Further round we were able to get back on to the bank but even the hide did not reveal anything of great consequence.

Other waterfowl seen during our visit were – Little Grebe, GCG, Cormorant, Greylag Goose, Canada Goose, Wigeon, Teal, Mallard, Tufted Duck, Moorhen, and Coot.

From the hide we scooted back to the relative warmth of our cars and home. Alan and Ann who came back to Greens Norton with us were able to add Tree Sparrow and Siskin to their list for the day and a few other more common species. This while sitting in our dining room eating lunch.

Last week (I feel a diversion coming on) we recorded twenty-nine species of bird in the garden for the BTO Garden Birdwatch. Here is the complete list with numbers seen at any one time.

Blackbird 35	Redwing 1	Blue Tit 5
Robin 2	Crow 2	Starling 2
Chaffinch 8	Sparrowhawk 1	Coal Tit 1
Tree Sparrow 1	Collared Dove 2	Wren 1
Dunnock 2	Wood pigeon 33	Fieldfare 4
Pheasant 2	Goldcrest 1	Yellowhammer 1
Goldfinch 9	Long-tailed Tit 2	Great Tit 1
Song Thrush 1	Greenfinch 11	Stock Dove 7
Grey Wagtail 1	Magpie 2	Mistle Thrush 1
Siskin 2	Reed Bunting 1	

Not bad for the view from a Northamptonshire dining room. Unfortunately the Great Spotted Woodpecker that had been visiting the garden regularly to feed on sunflower hearts did not appear this week, at least we did not see it. That would have made a nice round number. But to complete this diversion, the week before, a Water Rail appeared in the garden. I was sitting at the dining room table when it appeared from the right presumably having followed the stream into the garden. It moved quickly in to the clump of sedge in the pond then a few seconds later it appeared and ran left back into the stream and out of the garden. It hasn't appeared again so it must have been moving through the area and Jannette missed it! With the hard weather continuing we are wondering what we will see next in the garden.

Peter and Jannette Warden

Learning a valuable lesson.

On Sunday 8th February, I made a morning visit to Staines Reservoirs. Making my way up onto the causeway, I met a group of eight or nine other birdwatchers who were scanning across the south basin through several telescopes. I asked the usual “Anything special about?” question, and was told that there were two male Scaup out in front of us, amongst a group of Tufted Duck. I was shown a group of five sleeping ducks which, although fairly close to us, were somewhat difficult to see clearly, due to the strong, direct sunlight, which gave a ‘silhouette only’ view of the birds. Looking at these ducks through my ‘scope, three of them were obviously ‘Tufties’, whilst the other two showed the grey back and pale sides that are characteristic of Scaup. Although at the time, I had a nagging feeling that these two ducks “looked a bit Pochard-y”. But who was I to argue? The other birdwatchers, despite the poor viewing conditions, were all convinced that these ducks were Scaup.

After a while, the other birdwatchers all left and I carried on scoping around both basins, adding both a solitary male Smew and a Green Sandpiper to my list for the day. Returning my gaze to the Scaup, I carried on studying them when, the sun suddenly disappeared behind the clouds and, a few moments later, the two birds obligingly raised their heads..... they *were* Pochard!

More than a little irritated, I began another search of the south basin. After almost an hour, in a now biting wind, I finally managed to locate a *definite* male Scaup, way over on the far, distant edge of the reservoir – just about as far away as my ‘scope could view. Thankfully, another helpful and very knowledgeable birdwatcher (who just happened to have a zoom eyepiece on his ‘scope), then arrived to confirm my sighting. The Scaup in question had been around the far bank of the reservoir for the last few days and had been seen by many other birders in that time.

The moral of this tale is simple: it’s not always wise to take another person’s word for granted. Make *absolutely* sure for yourself. When first shown the two ‘Scaup’ I immediately thought “Pochard”, but

dismissed my own doubts, as eight other people must know more than me. On this occasion, they didn't!

Phil Taylor.

A View from the Past

In my boyhood we lived in Ruislip and my two aunts lived nearby. A favourite outing was the walk to Denham. My sister is six years older than I am, so when I was quite small we would go in two parties. Aunt Ella would walk all the way with my sister, following the fields by the Pinn and crossing Breakspear Road, then through more fields by Brackenbury Farm and across Harvil Road to the Golf Course.

Aunt Win would take me to Ruislip & Ickenham (now West Ruislip) station where we would take the train (steam of course) to South Harefield Halt and walk along the canal to meet the others at Denham lock, then walk between the Colne and the Misbourne to Denham for tea in one of the cottages. After tea, full of scones and strawberry jam, the whole party would walk to Denham station to return to Ruislip & Ickenham and so home. This would be in the later 1920's.

As my legs got longer I'd be able to walk all the way. From Ruislip along the Pinn up to and through the golf course the walk is not much changed to-day. On leaving the course, where now there are gravel-pit lakes on either side, then there was a conifer wood on your left and commercial watercress beds on your right. The path dived down under the bridge of the South Harefield to Uxbridge railway, thus bringing you to the roving bridge over the canal, then of course in its original state before the middle was blown out in the second world war to deter possible invaders. So along the canal to Denham Lock, and the stroll between the two rivers to Denham, which then was closely grazed by cattle but otherwise is the same today.

Walking in this district today, I always give thanks for the green belt. Before the war the area around South Harefield Halt was all marked out for development, and would be just another suburb now but for the establishment of the Green Belt.

Alfred Moon

Spider Recording at Harefield Place 2008.

I have recorded all species of spiders found in and around Harefield Place during 2008. Recording took place regularly throughout the year, weather permitting, and used a variety of methods. A total of 36 species were found.

During the winter, finding small invertebrates such as spiders and insects is somewhat difficult, so the project began in earnest once April had arrived and the temperature began to rise. Before the web-spinning spiders mature and begin to construct their webs on vegetation and other structures, the best method for finding spiders is to 'grub about' amongst dead wood, large stones and leaf-litter. Using this technique, hunting spiders, that do not use webs, are often encountered. During this time I managed to find nocturnal species such as *Clubiona corticalis* and *Drassodes pubescens*, both of which prowl around dark and damp places at ground level in search of prey.

Behind the bark of a dead elm tree I located two specimens of *Marpissa muscosa*, a jumping spider whose front legs are much larger and more powerful than the other three pairs of legs. *Marpissa* is found right across southern Britain, but is generally uncommon. I have not found it again yet, so it will be interesting to see if it appears anywhere else on our patch.

Amongst a pile of logs I found several specimens of *Anyphaena accentuata*, a common woodland species that is known as 'the buzzing spider' - due to the male's habit of vibrating his abdomen on a leaf in order to attract a mate. This, apparently, produces a buzzing sound.

Once the leaves had appeared on the trees, many more spiders began to make themselves known. Several beautifully-marked Theridiids such as *Theridion pictum*, *Achearanea lunata* and the always common *Enoplognatha ovata* were found. Theridiids are small, globular-bodied spiders that spin messy-looking 'tangle' webs on bushes and low vegetation. Viewed through a x10 hand lens, the markings on these and many other similar species are exquisite. The smallest of all the Theridiids is *Paidiscura pallens*, a tiny spider that grows no larger than about 1.5mm in length. During June, many females of this species were

found, usually under oak leaves, all guarding their strange, sputnik-shaped egg sacs that are larger than the spider itself.

During early summer the most abundant spider on the Reserve was, without doubt *Tetragnatha extensa*. This is the spider with a long, slim body that stretches itself along reeds and other leaves when resting. An inhabitant of any vegetation close to water, it appears to be found just about everywhere at Harefield Place and, it seemed that by examining or gently beating any type of plant, with a collecting tray held underneath, that thousands could be found on any given day.

Most spiders of all were found during the ‘high summer’ months of July and August. Throughout this period, the best areas were found to be meadows and other places where tall grasses are dominant amongst the plant life; and, by using a sweep net, I located more species in this environment than anywhere else. These included orb-web spinners such as *Larinioides cornutus*, *Neoscona adianta* and the superbly-coloured but somewhat small *Mangora acalypha*. Also found were *Heliophanus flavipes* - a tiny jumping spider with a black body and bright, lemon-coloured legs; and *Misumena vatia* – the ‘flower spider’, a sinister, all-white coloured crab spider that lays in wait on flower petals for unsuspecting prey such as flies, small beetles and even bees!

Also, in the grasslands were *Neottiura bimaculata*, a small brown Theridiid with one yellow stripe on its back, which was found on three occasions; and *Theridion sisypium* – a close relative – which seemed to be guarding an egg sac on just about every dead flower head during August.

On into September and two extremely numerous orb-web weavers became commonplace as the respective females of both became mature; these were *Araneus diadematus* - known to us all as the garden spider, and *Metellina segmentata* which, although not found in gardens often, is thought to be one of the most abundant of all orb-web spinners. Harefield Place certainly has many of the latter species at this time of year.

Once mid-October had arrived and the leaves began to fall as the weather worsened, locating spiders again became more difficult. By this time of year, one of the best methods to use is to sieve a pile of leaf-

litter into a tray and see what you've found. Many of the spiders found using this method are Linyphiids – 'money spiders'. More than 40% of British spider species are Linyphiids and most are extremely small with little or no recognisable markings. Several species can be identified however, and I located *Labulla thoracica*, *Drapetisca socialis* and *Lepthyphantes minutus* – all supposedly common species, although I had not found them here before. The vast majority of these spiders, though, were unidentifiable without using a microscope; this is something I hope to rectify in the future. In early December, once the really cold weather had arrived, I abandoned 'spidering' for more traditional – and, some might say, - sensible pursuits.

The total number of spider species recorded at Harefield Place now stands at 43.

My thanks to all those who helped me with spiders throughout the recording during the year; especially to Alan, whom I constantly badgered to add "just one more" species to our Harefield Place Species booklet before publication.

Phil Taylor.

2008 Bird Race

The eleventh Bird race between the Ruislip & District NHS and the Hillingdon NHS took place on 8th November. There were just two teams this year as the Hillingdon Athletic Club had a prior engagement.

Both teams began as usual in the North and South of the Borough and would eventually meet up by chance in the Colne Valley during the day. The Ruislip team began at the Lido where we were soon adding species to our daily list. Highlights here were a mixed flock of Siskin and Lesser redpoll plus the first Kingfisher of the day but not the hoped for Teal.

Moving on to the Colne Valley mid morning we first visited Stockers Farm where the resident Little Owl obliged and showed well in the old willows. As we reached the Lake the rain arrived and, with memories of last years very wet Bird race, we were soon sheltering in one of the hides. The shower soon passed and Goldeneye, Wigeon and Grey

Wagtail were now on the list as we moved to the Maple Lodge Reserve for lunch and, hopefully, more species. The reserve proved disappointing however, apart from Ring-necked Parakeet, and we were to learn later that our rival team saw a Brambling there just after we left.

It was now after mid day and, with much improved weather conditions, we moved smartly on to nearby Woodoaks Farm where we saw the wintering Golden Plover easily although numbers were well down on previous years. Four Common Buzzard were impossible to miss as they drifted over the hill behind the farm but we could not find the reported Stonechat. A Barn Owl reported roosting in hay bales in the barn by the farmer also remained out of view to us.

It was now mid afternoon as we moved to our last port of call at Broadwater stopping for a quick look at Lynsters Farm at West Hyde where we saw little of interest. By late afternoon the gulls were starting to gather to roost and it was not long before both Greater Black back and Yellow legged were added to the list plus a small group of Greylag Geese and, at last, Teal. Another Kingfisher and a heard only Water Rail were on the river Colne as we awaited for the the dusk arrival of Little Egrets and, sure enough, four birds suddenly appeared as if from nowhere to roost in the gravel island trees. The rain which had held off for most of the day now arrived with a vengeance so it was time to head off to the comfort of the Coy Carp pub at Harefield to meet our friends from Hillingdon and to compare scores for the day.

A count up revealed that the Ruislip & District NHS were winners of the 2008 Bird race and retain the winning shield for another year with a score of sixty nine species seen . The Hillingdon NHS scored fifty seven species . Congratulations to both teams followed after a full day out 'in the field' and all agreed it had been an enjoyable day, illustrating once again what can be seen in just eight hours of birdwatching in the local area.

The Ruislip team this year was as follows, and congratulations to all who took part on both sides.

Margaret and Mike Beatley, Colin Bowlt, Dick Middleton, Gordon Tranter, Martin Sullivan, Steve Pash and myself.

John Edwards.

RSPB Garden Birdwatch

For 30 years the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has asked the public to watch their gardens for one hour during a January weekend and count the species and numbers of birds seen on the ground. Last year 40,000 people took part.

Making enquiries at the indoor meeting on 4th March and later by phone, I discovered 17 society members had taken part. (There may be more.) People were asked to search their memories for numbers of species and approximate total bird counts. The weather was poor and reports suggested that some regular visitors were not turning up as expected. Here is a list of birds which came to at least one garden.

Collared Dove, Bluetit, Greenfinch, Crow, Great Sp Woodpecker, Feral Pigeon, Great tit, Goldfinch, Magpie, Parakeet, Wood Pigeon, Siskin, Chaffinch, Jay, Song Thrush, Starling, Coal Tit, Blackcap, Wren, Pied Wagtail, House Sparrow, Blackbird, Robin, Dunnock, Grey Wagtail, Long-tailed tit,

Number of species in each garden varied from 1 – 16, average 8.
Estimates of total number of birds seen in each garden varied from 1 – 45, average 17.5.

The most bird-friendly gardens were in Ruislip and Pinner with Ickenham residents also doing well. Uxbridge and Hillingdon were least occupied with other records coming from Harefield and Hayes. Of course the surrounding gardens and countryside as well as the bird feeding activities of members have great influence.

Can we try this again next year? I'd be pleased to receive your accurate lists and compare them with this year. Can anyone achieve a list like Peter and Jeannette's on page 5?

Ann Rix

Amwell Quarry

On the 22nd February four members met at Amwell Quarry, in the Lee Valley. The day was mild, breezy and mostly cloudy and we set off towards the railway line that runs along the river towards Ware. The hedges and field did not have the usual incumbents, but we found Blackbird, Crow, Sparrow, Chaffinch, Goldfinch and Bluetit on the way to the lake.

Then across the bridge over the river to the lake where there were (in the order we identified them) Mallard, Mute Swan, Common Gull, Coot, Canada Goose, Snipe, Moorhen, Lapwing, Gadwall, Black-headed Gull, Teal, Shoveler, Goldeneye, Great Crested Grebe, Greater Black-backed Gull and Pochard.

We then walked along the path between the lakes and the river to the first hide. This is an 'upstairs' hide with windows overlooking the lake and also the bird feeders in the wooded area around the hide. We saw Greenfinch, Robin and Dunnock and Long-tailed Tit and were delighted to have excellent close up views of a pair of Reed Buntings.

Then the walk round the boardwalk to the second hide. This is a magnificent structure - there is room to hold a dance inside it! There we had our lunch adding Lesser BB Gull, Shelduck, Herring Gull and Magpie to the list.

On the walk back to the car we saw Siskins in the trees by the path.

We then decided to go to Fishers Green to see if we could see the Bittern there. We went into the aptly named Bittern Hide, and watched with a dozen others for about 15 minutes getting tantalising glimpses of the Bittern in the reed bed until, suddenly it decided to cross the gap in the reeds, giving those watching an excellent view of the bird.

I can recommend Amwell for a visit at any time of the year, both for woodland birds and watery ones.

Alan Rix

Reserve report - The Parrot has landed

The primroses are blooming at last! Those with the lovely lush, long leaves were hit by the frost and snow so have had to regroup and are now pushing out dainty buds and blossoms. Pussy willow pollen is attracting the tits and hazel catkins/ flowers, birdsong and deer prints all herald the coming of Spring.

Not long after the Winter 2008 newsletter was issued a buzzard was seen flying over the feeding area and fortunately failed to notice the treecreeper down below. Himalayan balsam had crept back into the northern part of the North Wood so the Greylags were kept busy pulling that by hand. The autumnal frost pre-empted the need to treat with herbicide. Windblown trees required attention and the north meadow received its Autumn trim.

The boat was launched and the fallen sallow and vegetation which was blocking the entrance to the scrape was cleared over several weeks. This obviously met with the approval of the kingfishers which are now able to fly through 'Kingfisher Alley'. They don't seem to like flying up and over. Overhanging willow and alder was then cut back by the Wildfowl Lake, utilising the boat once again and improving the view from the hide.



In the feeding area the fallen lime was pleached to allow in more light and to allow a better flight path to the feeders. Lesser spotted woodpeckers have been the superstars in the feeding area. A bird report seems apt at this point so...

Nuthatches continued to visit the feeding area until recently. Goldcrests, siskins, dunnocks, magpies, great tits, bluetits, coal tits, dunnocks, robins, blackbirds, great spotted woodpeckers, chaffinches, thrushes and jays have delighted the Greylags at the beginning of their workdays. On the golf course jackdaws, greenfinches, fieldfares, goldfinches, redwings, mistle and song thrushes, moorhens and green woodpeckers greet the workers as they walk down from the car park. As mentioned

last time, there are huge numbers of Canada geese compared with previous years and the Egyptian geese have indeed moved elsewhere. A bird not noted previously in such numbers are starlings and it is great to see their aerial display before alighting in the trees: the noise is unmistakable.

Teal may not been seen on the Wildfowl Lake but that lake really lived up to its name in January with goosanders, cormorants, herons, great crested grebes, black-headed gulls, coots, pochards and shovelers one morning. In March at least thirty male shovelers could be seen flying and swimming there. Pairs of swans are once again on each of the lakes and they have been using Kingfisher Alley to explore the scrape. That pair made another adult swan feel so unwelcome that he was wandering around the North Wood where there was not enough open space to all for take-off!

News from the heron roost is that six herons have been seen on or perching beside six of the nests; we await the clatter of tiny beaks.

The Nature Trails were revisited and the leaflets for both the North and South Reserves were revised and printed recently. Hides have been repainted and feeders repaired and replaced. If you go down to the woods today you're sure to get a surprise as, with the help of a grant from the London Tree and Woodland Grant Scheme: The Forestry Commission's Community Grant Scheme with the Mayor of London, a huge new boardwalk is being built. By the time this newsletter is published, the project will be finished.

Less welcome visitors to the feeding area have been sighted, not just the grey squirrels but noisy, flamboyantly green parakeets. At first content to perch in pairs, they now empty the peanut feeder which the tree rats are unable to reach. Yes, the parrot has landed!

Judy Cross



Help – Information Wanted

Following on from the reminiscences of Albert Moon in this newsletter, what do you know about ‘your patch’, its history and changes in its use? Actually, could you let us know anything of interest about greenspaces in Hillingdon, Buckinghamshire etc.

For example,

What was the Harefield Place Nature Reserve before it became a reserve?

Was it really used as a market garden during the Second World War?

Do you remember when the Denham Quarry Lakes were created?

How was that land used before gravel was extracted?

What was that gravel used for – M25 or M40 possibly?

Was celery grown in the Frays Valley Local Nature Reserve?

Apparently there was a mink farm in Harefield and gravel extracted from Stockers Lake was used in the construction of Wembley Stadium.

Maps back to 1813 are in the Local Studies area of Uxbridge Library and an aerial photograph from 1966 shows no lakes south of the railway line. The OS map in 1970 shows just two to the west of the disused railway line. What are the tales behind the maps and photographs. Any anecdotes or insights would be greatly appreciated – I so don’t do maps!

Write your answers in an email and send them to Information@hillingdon-naturalhistorysociety.org.uk or to me, Judy Cross, at the address on the back cover.

Judy Cross

Warnham Local Nature Reserve

Ann and I went to the RSPB reserve at Pulborough Brooks in March. On the way Ann was looking for other places to visit and came across the Warnham Local Nature Reserve just off the Robin Hood roundabout on the A24 near Horsham (at TQ167324). We decided to call in on the way back.

The reserve is entered through the Visitor Centre and Cafe. There is a £1 entry charge.

The reserve is bounded by a golf course to the West and the railway line to the east, although the eastern edge of the lake is private and not accessible. The area contains a large Mill Pond which is thought to date from around 1583 with two bird hides on its western edge and a reed bed at the north end. There are areas of marsh, meadow and woodland - both deciduous and coniferous.

A bird feeding area has been set up where we were lucky to see a Marsh Tit amongst the many other woodland birds congregating there. We saw two others in the woodland later.

The path then goes through the marsh flood plain and on to the woods. There are many 'Cricket Bat' Willows here. The path through the wood is steep(ish) and muddy (and slippery ...oops!) in places. The lower levels are all boardwalked, with seating areas at intervals.

The area has over 400 plant species recorded as well as many dragonflies and butterflies (including the migrant Clouded Yellow). Our first Brimstone of 2009 was flying in a woodland glade.

I think a day trip to Pulborough and Warnham would make an interesting addition to our programme.

Alan Rix

How to be a serious NaturaLIST

– on a walk in the Chess Valley

I have several tips about how to be a serious naturalist:

- Carry pencil and paper with you to note what you see
- Maintain a reference library of leaflets and books
- Walk with people who know what to look for and where
- Neat handwriting
- Chocolate and hot beverages
- Carry a camera
- MAKE LISTS

Even though it is Lent so no chocolate for me, I tried to put most of the above into practice as we walked in the Chess Valley on a lovely Spring Sunday. I blame the gooseberry yoghurt beforehand for the sugar rush which could explain the atrocious handwriting and the lists made.

Four lists were made: The Wish List; The What I Saw List (WIS); The Heard by Steve Pash List (HSP) and The What Everyone Else Saw List (oh), better make that The WOS List (What the Others Saw). Those on the walk should know what belongs on which list, having their own lists, and a hint is that Chiff Chaff is on the Wish List.

In my rucksack I carried field guides for birds, wild flowers and insects as well as a bottle of water, waterproofs, mobile phone, secateurs, first aid kit and kitchen sink; on my belt was my new digital camera, purchase inspired by Doug and Alan in their talk; and around my neck hung binoculars. Ann, Wendy and Steve were the experts in botany, lepidoptery and ornithology with Peter as the walk leader, marshalling 18 of us for the five-mile, three hour walk.

The walk began with my noting lesser celandine, dog's mercury and an unidentified small dark butterfly whilst listening to great tits calling "teacher teacher". Some bad bluebell leaves too but deeper into the woods were English bluebells.

Perhaps because of all the TV programmes celebrating Darwin's theories and experiments, I looked on things in an offbeat, naïve way. Could that pile of wood pigeon feathers on top of a molehill indicate that moles eat pigeons? That beech tree, seemingly used by a dog with a problem, were the fungi an omen of its imminent demise?

Flashes of spring colours became more obvious with a male brimstone and both purple and white dog violets. Perhaps the low growing daffodils were native too. A robin investigated a molehill for a potential meal whilst a coal tit shouted from the trees. Bluetits, siskins and goldcrest were heard in the aesthetically unappealing larch and crows and jackdaws flew by. Joan and I referred to Jan's book to help identify conifers – definitely European larch and that drooping one with cones growing downwards would have to wait until I got the cone home – probably *Picea breweriana* (Brewer's Weeping Spruce). Thought so yet I can't agree it is a graceful ornamental as the book says. Parakeets and snowdrops displayed 'alien' colour then, just as it was remarked that no birds of prey had been seen, Steve spotted a buzzard. That is probably what alarmed the green woodpecker. Coots, tufted ducks and mallards swam along the Chess with a little grebe and kingfisher reported. Blue-green and golden lichens adorned the trees and evidence of the holly leaf miner was picked by the lynchets at Sarratt Bottom. A song thrush sang, Canada geese honked and a red kite soared overhead whilst a little egret perched in a tree just below a heron. With its black beak and legs, an egret circled low above the water cress beds. More robins than a rabbit bounced along, this was a lovely Sunday afternoon stroll. Ann found another plant in flower, the diminutive common mouse ear. Leaves of anemone edged the path as we listened to great spotted woodpeckers drumming and calling near a nuthatch, even a peacock cried out.

More than half way through the walk and yet species not seen already delighted us such as green woodpecker, goldfinches, blackbird and mistle thrush. We remarked on the red-crested white bucket, a companion for the previously seen lesser white bucket. I think we liked those more than the woodpigeon but less than the magpie. In pursuit of flowering plants I looked to the hazel and its tiny red flowers, stepping warily around a *Bombus terrestris* queen.

A moorhen flew up into a willow as we strained to identify the two birds squabbling amongst the ivy – wrens. Reports reached us of redwings and siskins heard. What of the ickle birds such as redpoll and chiff chaff? Well, hen chaffinch and a small flock of siskins were the last sightings along the walk.

There a saying – something about leave only footprints and take only photographs. Maybe next time I'll remember to take photographs – and the tree book, the 'Poo' book and...chocolate! I failed to be a serious naturalist as I was enjoying the walk far too much obviously.

Two final tips then:

- Don't just carry a camera, use it
- Don't take it too seriously – enjoy the company as much as the countryside.

Judy Cross

Merlin's mutterings

In the thick of the mobile aspect of existence - no longer limited by the time and distance potential of a decent packhorse - your ancient wizard once again found himself paying the periodic duty and affection visit to his only sibling, now heading towards her 97th birthday. A warm, tranquil October weekend with no inkling of what was to come in a matter of five short weeks.

The usual range of chores presented, including the filling of feeders for a variety of small birds. The cottage lies at the bottom of a narrow, winding valley with a small stream, the Kitt Stream, running through. On the west side of the stream an ancient river terrace indicates the presence of a far larger body of water. As it stands, sadly it has not been immune from agricultural improvement, to the detriment of its orchid and sheep's-bit population, the latter once feeding a thriving population of marsh fritillary butterflies. Curlews were present up to the early Sixties, but - as in other places - the liberators were busy releasing mink

to the detriment of moorhens, snipe, water voles and others - including my sister's poultry!

But back to the feeders. The bird list has always been quite enviable compared with my own, but on this particular weekend it was just a bit different. Blue tits and great tits were few, the principle visitors being a constant flow of coal and marsh tits, with a strong and dominant leavening of nuthatches. The rapidity of their return indicated a minimum five individuals, three of which were almost certainly males, judging from the richness of their colour.

Occasional inescapable idleness is a feature of those East Devon visits, and results in prolonged gazing at the feeders. It is this kind of leisured watching that revealed the degree of sexual dimorphism in nuthatches. The males which come to the feeders are always a richer dusky salmon-pink, extending onto the upper breast and tinting the cheeks. Feathers of the back and shoulders are a deepen steely blue. At least in this population the females are noticeably paler, with upper breast and cheeks almost white.

Another aspect is the pecking-order, well enough known in chickens - and doubtless to other bird watchers apart from me - but as others will attest, I'm a bit slow sometimes. They think. Actually it stems from a determination never to rush to judgment. Put a frog and toad side by side on a low table and see what happens!

Pecking order on feeders. Size plays but a minor part with smaller tits but, because in spite of it being roughly equal to a blue tit, the coal tit is definitely the underdog, and invariably does a lightning dash on to the feeder, only to vanish in the foliage and prepare for the next raid. Next, blue tits, who will hang around for some time, often two or three on the same feeder, but the arrival of the great tit triggers deference and a measured withdrawal to the other side of the feeder - or moving onto another. Long-tailed tits don't seem that fazed by anything much, behaving as a tail flashing rent-a-mob, but a nuthatch takes some getting used to. Few birds seem to stay and dispute the priorities with them. Every other species seems to feed off the ground below, along with the

bank vole who lives under the yellow potentilla and has at least four different bolt-holes in the steps and a low stone wall; that these holes belong to the same family is easy to prove, since every appearance shows a vole using any one or two of the holes.

Since these observations on an October weekend, the weather did indeed become unfriendly and unpredictable, with a strong bias towards frost day and night on occasion, with a slight relief for around Christmas. January and much of February - well, it has not been a nice winter, as the small group that visited Willen Lakes will testify, but for me the highlight of that day was the incredible hoar frost all the way into Berkhamstead, across Ashridge and down into the Vale of Aylesbury. The other outstanding sighting for me that day was the site of a very fine eagle owl, sitting proud and solitary on the top of a water-ski ramp in the middle of the main “activity” lake, so still that it could have been carved out of wood. Yes, well, I wasn't the only one! Even called it to the attention of a total stranger. Jolly nice piece of carving, all the same.

And what does the future hold, I wonder? Nice visit to a bank headquarters with a shotgun? Can't say that – it's incitement. So? Spring is here. Be good - or at least not so frightfully good that someone at once says “Ah, and what mischief have you been up to?” Children's hour, circa 1931-40

Ciao - Merlin

Goshawk Sighting

This large raptor is a rare bird in England, resembling a sparrowhawk but the female is as large as a buzzard.

Charles Youell reports seeing one flying over Langley Park on the 16th March.

The best place to see them is Mayday Farm in East Anglia.

Garden Bumblebees

Our excellent talk given by Mick Massie on 4th March entitled “Bumblebees for Beginners” was an inspiration to many of us who like to name what we see but are confused by so many variations in the sizes and colours of bumblebee queens, workers and males.

Mick told us that there were 23 species of bumblebee but only six of these are common. Bees are distinguished by the pattern of coloured stripes in shades of buff, white, red, brown and black on thorax and abdomen.

The six are :

<i>Bombus pascuorum</i>	Common Carder
<i>Bombus lapidarius</i>	Red tailed
<i>Bombus pratorum</i>	Early Nesting
<i>Bombus terrestris</i>	Buff-tailed
<i>Bombus lucorum</i>	White-tailed
<i>Bombus hortorum</i>	Garden

The inserted identification chart is freely available from the Natural History Museum website with an invitation to print your own copy and take it to bumblebee sites.

This is an excellent time of year to begin recording as we see the large queens emerge from hibernation ready to forage for pollen and nectar. The queens establish a nest where first the workers then the males will develop.

Soon after the true bumblebee queens have emerged, the Cuckoo bumbles will appear. These resemble the true bumbles in colouration but have a shinier appearance to thorax and abdomen as they are less hairy. They have no pollen baskets on the hind tibia as the true bumbles do. The Cuckoos search for nests of their host species, often kill the true queen then lay their own eggs. These are raised by the true bumblebee workers. The Cuckoos only produce males and new queens.

Already this year we have seen *B. lucorum*, *B. terrestris* and *B. lapidarius*. Can we find the other three?

Ann Rix.

