



Events

Saturday 10th January: Work Party**

Monday 26th January: Wat Tyler Country Park – power in the partnership. An illustrated talk by Steve Prewer. 7.45 in the Day Centre, Chantry Way. Meeting hosted by the Norsey Wood Society and preceded by their short AGM

Thursday 5th February Indoor Meeting: talk by wildlife photographer Russell Savory. 7.45 in the Reading Rooms.

Please see panel opposite**

Saturday February 14th: Work Party**

Saturday 14th March: Work Party**

Thursday 23rd April : our Annual General Meeting 7.45 in the Reading Rooms.

**** Work parties: Meet at The Scout Hall, Greens Farm Lane at 10.30.** Tools/gloves provided – wear old clothing and wellies or water proof boots

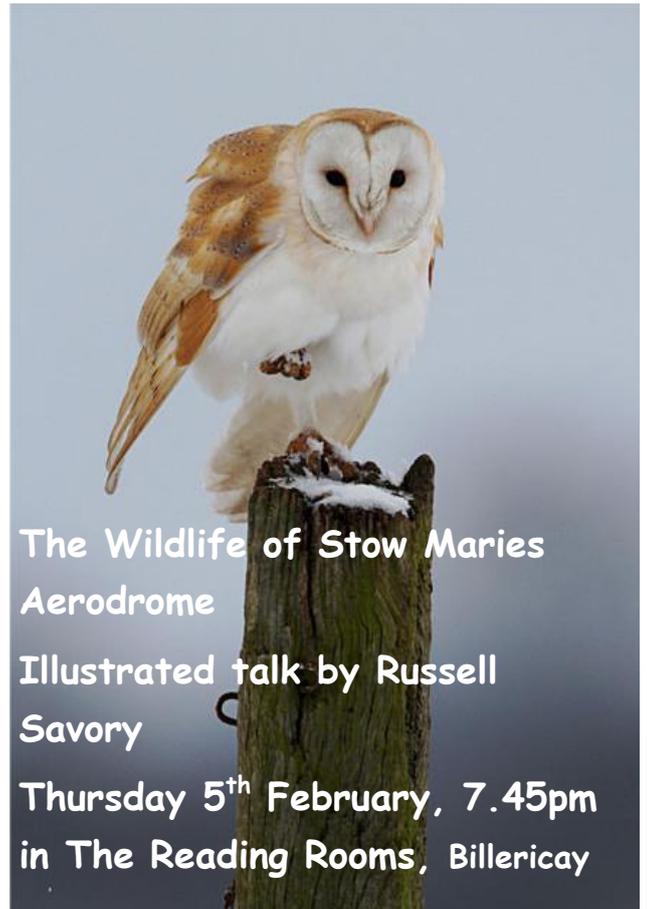
Chairman's Report

A Happy New Year to all our members.

We look forward to the planned site work which Chris is organising – please see his report below. We hope that most of the funding will be covered by a grant but the Mill Meadows Society are also contributing, which we are able to do thanks to your continued membership and some very generous donations – thank you for your support.

Since the last Newsletter, 2 more volunteers have joined the **cattle checkers** but if we could get the number to 14 that would be great – **more volunteers required please.**

We now confirm the our Indoor Meeting for 7th February – please see the panel above.



The Wildlife of Stow Maries
Aerodrome

Illustrated talk by Russell
Savory

Thursday 5th February, 7.45pm
in The Reading Rooms, Billericay

** to guarantee a place, please contact the
Chairman in advance **

*(if not fully booked, places will be offered on a
first come, first served basis at the event)*

The television coverage of Russell's photography at Stow Maries makes his talks very popular. We are offering first refusal to members of the Mill Meadows Society

Please see the article below on Stow Maries Aerodrome.

*And a final reminder – if you haven't renewed your **membership** please do so as soon as possible – payment by standing order is greatly appreciated.*

Neil Sumner, Chairman

Chair@millmeadows.org.uk, 01277 630849



Ranger's Report

Winter habitat management

Further to my last article I have drawn up a list of habitat management works I hope to get done over the remainder of the winter. We have already made good progress, thanks to the work parties, with a few items not listed here. The rest are as follows, but some are dependent on the success of the funding bid I mentioned last time:

Coles	Thin in woodland belt.
Hilly Field	Removing some trees and scrub to ensure grassland does not become overgrown, and re-create views from bench.
Hurlocks	Trimming Blackthorn hedge, clearing corner behind Chaffinch Crescent and trimming hedge. Thinning on path to Hilly Field to aid drying and encourage understory.
Old Mill Hill/Wards Hoppits	Create new pond further down stream line.
Oakfield	Coppice & replant hedgerow between end of wire fence and large oak and trim back sides of upper fenced section.
SSSI fields	Cut & clear to remove scrub.
Greens & Watts	Fell sycamore clump on corner of woodland and use logs to create reptile hibernaculum in bracken area nearby. Widen path in woodland. Recreate bank of vertical south facing bare earth to benefit bumblebees.
Hillmans	Widen diagonal ride.
Greens Farm Lane	Trim hedge.
Southend Road	Hedge - trim top of hedge laid last winter.

Grazing

The cattle were removed on November 21st. Thanks to all those who helped round them up on the day. I've been really please with the success of the new cattle, so will definitely be looking to have them again in 2015. I don't foresee any problems with this as the grazier has indicated he was very happy with the arrangement too, so they should return around March/ April time.

Butterfly transect results

In 2014 Paul Hudson organised a very successful butterfly survey project, ably assisted by a number of other volunteers (so thanks also go to Ken, Neil, John and Zoe). A total of 1,124 butterflies were recorded on the transect walks with 20 different species seen. (For the uninitiated, a transect is a route around the reserve that is repeated, in the case of butterfly monitoring, on a weekly basis). This has provided important information and will form a very useful baseline against which we can monitor future years, as I'm hoping this can become an annual survey. I'm sure the existing team would welcome some more help, so if you would like to get involved please let me or Paul know. Don't worry if you're not sure of your butterfly identification. Assistance can be given, and a few "novices" who started on the Norsey Wood surveys in 2013 have quickly become confident.



Mill Meadows Society Newsletter

Issue 68 Jan to Mar 2015

Highlights of 2014 at Mill Meadows were a Painted Lady seen in late April and two Marbled Whites in July. Painted Ladies are migrants that sometimes occur in Britain in large numbers, and the Marbled White records were the first known records for Mill Meadows. The most numerous species seen were Meadow Brown (363) and Ringlet (151). Rather surprisingly, no Brimstones were found on the transect walks, although I am sure they must have been seen on other occasions.

Totals:

Small Skipper	7	Painted Lady	1
		Small	
Essex Skipper	4	Tortoiseshell	34
Small/Essex Skipper	58	Peacock	60
Large Skipper	6	Comma	32
Large White	30	Speckled Wood	117
Small White	47	Marbled White	2
Green-veined White	5	Gatekeeper	95
Orange Tip	19	Meadow Brown	363
Small Copper	2	Ringlet	151
		Unidentified	
Common Blue	17	White	41
Holly Blue	7	Unidentified	20
Red Admiral	6		

Work party dates for your diary

January 10th - Tree works in Coles

February 14th – Widen woodland path in Greens

March 14th – TBA

I am hoping to organize a couple of one-off work parties during weekdays to fell some other trees before the start of the bird nesting season.

Happy New Year!

Chris Huggins

December 2014



Stow Maries Aerodrome

I am in an area south-east of Danbury Ridge, which is a distant wooded rise on the horizon. The Ridge was described many years ago by local naturalist J A Baker as 'like the low hull of a submarine'. The landscape here gently undulates away from The Ridge as it drops towards The River Crouch. It is a landscape of broad fields bounded by hedgerows punctuated with tall oaks.

From the Ridge where I am, this place looks like any part of Essex farmland. But it is no ordinary farm. It is not just the old buildings and flat grass fields that differentiate it, but the patches of scrub, the long strips of dead stalks of annual plants topped with seed heads, and a field of ploughed stubble where one hundred corn buntings and yellowhammers rise and fall in the biting winter wind.

This is Stow Maries Aerodrome, featuring a World War 1 museum, as well as being managed for its wildlife. It is Europe's largest surviving World War 1 Aerodrome with many of the buildings still in place from 1918.

The Aerodrome was in use from 1916 to 1919 as a home defence station against Zeppelin and aeroplane raids. Use continued after the war and in 1919 there

were 24 aircraft and 300 personnel based there but then the squadron was moved to Biggin Hill and the land was used for agricultural use. Now it is being restored to its 1918 state and is an open museum.

<http://www.stowmaries.org.uk/>

The wildlife of the site has featured in many TV documentaries, which showed stunning views of owls, Kestrels and Brown Hares in frosty settings. The BBC Winter Watch team are here today to add to the footage.

Our guide is Russell Savory, industrious conservationist and photographer, and he tells of the five species of owls and of the many breeding and migratory songbirds that he has seen. He speaks of a wealth of reptiles, as it is a receptor site for snakes and lizards translocated from land being developed for housing or roads. And he tells proudly of the Water Voles in his ponds.

<http://www.stowmaries.org.uk/>

Neil Sumner

(Part of this article also appeared in Around Town Magazine,
<http://www.aroundtownmagazines.co.uk/billericay/>





The Garden Bird List - Visitors Both Local and From Afar ~ by John Smart

There's something special about watching birds in one's garden. And if there are a variety of feeders and a birdbath then the species range recorded in just one day can be surprisingly varied. I adopt for Bird Observatory Rules, that is, birds seen in and from the garden and those heard. Thus any gull species flying over is counted and a Tawny Owl heard late in the evening, although some distance away, is also eligible for 'The List'! Over several years, one's Garden List can become comprehensive and will assuredly include the occasional unusual species. It also sharpens one's identification skills. This exercise is not treated as a survey discipline so one can fit in viewing (and listening!) as and when. But it can become compulsive and as time goes by, even though it's a case of diminishing returns!

Surprisingly there is a parallel with WW2 Lancaster rear gunners and birders. After many months of scanning the skies for the enemy and months of looking for 'little brown jobs' skulking in the vegetation, the brain goes into autopilot. One cannot consciously switch off looking for the quarry. Here I hasten to add, the parallel ends as the former was a highly precarious life and death wartime struggle and the latter is but a pastime. However, in that particular aspect, the psychology is similar, as one finds it difficult to 'switch off' the searching.

Both the RSPB and the BTO recommend feeding birds throughout the year but with emphasis in the winter. I hang minimal food out in the summer months and intensify feeding mostly in the autumn and winter through to the early spring. In addition to seeds, I hang out a container of suet balls in the winter months. In late December, on the shortest day, garden birds have under 8hrs to forage between dawn and dusk. So that's 16hrs in a nearby night-time roost in ivy-clad trees or a laurel bush. And even more critical if frost and snow lay about.

Bird Ringing in the garden revealed that although a stock of resident birds present, there were always

new birds visiting or passing through, whatever the species and whatever the time of year.

The Avian Clientele and the Overflying:-

Sometimes, and especially in the late afternoon, the sky can be awash with gulls; the **Black-headed Gull**, the **Lesser Black-backed Gull**, **Herring Gull** and the winter visiting **Common Gull**. After feeding on the adjacent ploughed fields, they lift off to roost on the waters of Hanningfield Reservoir. Others may come directly from the Thames Estuary and reflect the tidal conditions there.

In the summer months, **Swifts** and **Swallows** grace the sky. **Swifts** are on decline nationally but they still nest in two strongholds within the town. **House Martins** are in the area but their numbers have steadily declined over the years as the popular replacement PVC fascia boards are too slippery for their mud cups to adhere to. **House Sparrows**, also colonial nesters, appear to be undergoing a comeback in local areas across the town.

Canada Geese have regular routes across the town as they move between their feeding and roosting areas. Their continuous flight calls are unmistakable.

Grey Herons sometimes fly over keeping a check on the garden ponds for an opportunistic snack, and surprisingly, can land in very small gardens to predate a pond. Depleted fish stocks are not unusual in Billericay!

Billericay often has **Kestrels and Sparrowhawks** in its airspace and they breed locally (and one flying over the garden can create panic in the smaller bird community as they dash for cover!). A **Common Buzzard** can occasionally sail over on a thermal and a **Hobby** strafing the sky can be an occasional summer sighting. Sadly, the **Cuckoo** is rarely heard from our gardens now as they are in serious decline and the **Turtle Dove** is now conspicuous by its absence. A dire situation that our conservationists are trying to rectify by creating nearby suitable habitat for the latter. But **Green**



Woodpeckers and **Great Spotted Woodpeckers** continue to enjoy buoyant numbers.

The winter thrushes, **Redwings** and **Fieldfare**, can enter gardens when conditions are harsh to feed on the various berry producing trees and bushes. Some of these Scandinavian breeders (and maybe from even remoter areas further east) may not have seen humans before. Some of the **Blackbirds** in winter will be from the continent escaping the harsher conditions there.

The **Blackcap**, catholic in its choice of habitat, can overwinter in sheltered gardens or arrive in very early spring and feed on the suet balls. Their sub-song, a muted and jumbled warbling in April, is a harbinger of spring. A warbler that can look after itself when it comes to the avian argy-bargy surrounding a feeder!

The **corvid** family is usually well represented by its acorn caching **Jay**, along with the argumentative and inquisitive **Maggie**. **Carrion Crows** can nest in the mature trees nearby and the repeated 'chyak-chyak' calls of a passing flock of Jackdaws, often fills the sky. Meanwhile, our surrounding agricultural system of monoculture has inflated the **Wood Pigeon** and **Collared Dove** presence.

Some **Robins** may not be as sedentary as is supposed. Females can undertake anywhere between local movements to semi-migration movements down into southern Europe. The more robust male remaining on the territory with his wistful sub-song and tame demeanour.

Sometimes, in winter, **Redpolls** and **Siskins** will take advantage of the feeders and stay about for several weeks. Probably a mixture of UK bred and Scandinavian stock. Occasionally, a small flock of visiting Scandinavian **Brambling** will also take up temporary residence in one's garden to form a mixed flock with the **Chaffinches**, **Goldfinches** and **Greenfinches**.

And in the autumn or winter, a roving tit flock can descend on the garden. And whilst the feeders are visited by the tits, including both **Long-tailed** and **Coal**, the trees about may briefly hold a **Treecreeper**, a **Wren**, a **Chiffchaff** or a **Goldcrest**. An energized winter troupe of birds that rely on safety in numbers. Flitting about and leapfrogging over each other, they quickly move on.

Songbirds can become almost mute or resort to sub-song in the late summer/early autumn as they undergo their gradual flight feather and tail moult. The energy demands for feather replacement are such that they skulk silently in deep vegetation and thus give the impression that few birds are about.

Highlights Down the Years:-

A surprise in recent years was of a group of c.25 **Waxwings** that settled for a short while in a neighbour's mature oak in the winter gloom of a late afternoon. Seen from my lounge window, I had initially assumed that they were Starlings but what gave the game away was that they were all perched motionless facing in the same direction. It's a characteristic of their flocking behaviour. It pays to have a pair of binoculars to hand to check-out the unexpected!

A **Red Kite** flying over the house in June 2012 was being mobbed by a **corvid**. To escape the harassment, the Kite rose ever higher in a weak thermal and disappeared from view into the murk of a grey cloud, leaving behind its bemused tormentor. An avian illusionist! The occasional wandering **Red Kite** in Essex is not now that unusual.

An adult **Mediterranean Gull** was once picked out in an overflying large flock of mostly Black-headed Gulls, probably on their way to roost at Hanningfield Reservoir. A really lucky spot as their presence is usually associated with the Southend-on-Sea promenade area and its pier.



A pair or two of **Grey Wagtails** have now been a feature in the town for several years. Breeding nearby to garden ponds, and have even been seen and heard from the rooftops along the High Street. One has even frequented the recently reclaimed pond in the Willow Copse at Sun Corner. And **Pied Wagtails** form a large winter roost at a location along Radford Way.

Singleton **Little Egrets** are now regular in the surrounding farmland and overfly the outskirts of our town on occasions. They make for the banks of the River Crouch, the River Wid and the quieter backwaters in the area.

On another occasion, upon looking out of the window, a female **Sparrowhawk** was tearing open the breast of a prostrate **Collared Dove** with the blood smeared contour feathers surrounding the kill.

The **Ringed-necked Parakeet**, now a naturalized bird species in the British Isles, sometimes races over whilst constantly emitting its raucous call. A bird now present in considerable numbers in southwest London and Kent whilst still only occasional in Essex (The story goes that a pair were released in Carnaby Street by Jimi Hendrix and the species has thrived ever since!).

On one occasion I placed pieces of mackerel and other food items on the surface of my frozen pond in winter to attract the gulls down. Amongst the squawking and squabbling **Black-headed Gulls**, a couple of adult **Common Gulls** also landed. The latter species breed in Scandinavia, Russia and northern Scotland.

Many years ago several **Peacocks** and **Peahens** took up residence in the area! A species that is not on the British List but whose presence was considered endearing by some, but equally frowned upon by others. On one night they roosted high in a nearby leafless oak and could be seen silhouetted against a cloudless sky in the moonlight; presenting a surreal scene as if from the Asian continent. I

think it was their pre-dawn chorus that eventually signalled their removal!

Summing Up:-

I find keeping a Garden List increases my enjoyment of birds and keeps a check on the local abundance of our various common bird species. The advancing seasons bring about different species into the mix. Some species having journeyed amazing distances to be here. I am always impressed to think that our gardens can play host to birds from Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and Continental Europe whilst up above the hirundines and Swifts are from Africa.

My Garden List, commenced in late 1975 in SW Billericay, now tallies over 95 bird species. A year can go by now without an addition!

The overall **Billericay Bird Species List** now stands at **139**. A compilation of sightings put together over many years by various birders in and around the town. It illustrates the variety of bird species that can occur in our area and contains quite a few unusual entries. On occasions, birds flying to and from Hanningfield Reservoir fly over the town and can include **waders, wildfowl species** and **cormorants**.

John Smart – 19/12/2014.

I will gladly email the **Billericay Bird Species List** to anyone who is interested.

My email address is: john_smart3@btinternet.com



On Frozen Pond in John's Billericay garden: Two adult **Common Gulls** (one in the foreground with its wings spread) and several adult **Black-headed Gulls** squabble noisily over scraps of food (Mealtime etiquette not one of their attributes!).

And finally.....Cattle Congratulations !!

The Legacy Herd, (which graze Mill Meadows and other nature reserves) won the East of England Redpoll Cattle Society 'Best Small Herd' award this year. They visited Mill Meadow on 19th October 2014 as part of the award celebration.

