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## Events

**\*\* 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

**Monday 26<sup>th</sup> October: "The Life of a Wood"** – an illustrated talk by Roger Hance. At the Day Centre, Chantry Way, 7.45 pm. Hosted by The Norsey Wood Society.

**Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> November:** Our popular family event – the **Fungus Foray**. Look for waxcaps and other species and get them identified by an expert. (*there is also a Fungus Foray at Norsey Wood at 10.30 on Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> October*)

**Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> December: Work party,** ending at midday for the traditional mulled wine and mince pies

## Chairmans Report

The Society is ticking over, with volunteers active in work parties, cattle checking and observing the wildlife. We would like to see a few more membership renewals for this year, though – if you haven't renewed please may I ask that you do so.

Although the ground is dry as I write we anticipate some of the paths becoming muddy as the days shorten. Chris continues to push Natural England to agree to more footpath improvements through Oakfield. Because of its SSSI status and its importance as unimproved grassland, they want work in this field to be minimal. My view is that providing a good surface will actually preserve grassland because when a path becomes muddy people tend to walk around it and make the muddy path wider hence reducing the

area of grassland. So I hope NE will agree with that view and give us permission. Once we have that permission we can start looking for sources of funding but that too will take time so it probably won't happen this Winter.

Someone asked me recently if Mill Meadows is safe from development. In reply, I could state that the site itself is safe, being protected by a covenant until 2070. But not all of the populations of wildlife are safe because of pressure around it. Take, for example, the proposed development along Southend Road in South Green. This will reduce overall populations of some species and take them closer to a level where they aren't sustainable. Until the ecology survey is conducted we don't know which species are affected. Protected species, such as reptiles, are usually translocated although this is a wasted exercise unless they are moved to suitable site which is not already fully occupied by that species. The sad fact is the impact on the 'squeezed middle'- those species such as Song Thrush and Hedgehog which are slowly declining due to loss of habitat, but for which there is no enforced habitat mitigation in the planning system.

If you comment on the planning application please demand that there is mitigation locally for the loss of the hedgerows, grass and scrub. We are fortunate to have good nature reserves in Billericay. Those of us with long memories know that much of our local wildlife has declined but we also know that much of it remains. We cannot take it for granted and it is up to us as residents and electors to ensure that nature is kept high up the agenda in the face of other pressures. Neil Sumner, [Neilsumner123@aol.com](mailto:Neilsumner123@aol.com)



## Rangers Report – Spring 2015

The first fog of the autumn today reminds me that the grazing season should be drawing to a close in the next few weeks. It's a bit early to say how successful it's been, as there are probably a few weeks to go, but it is only the second year of the new agreement with the Essex Grazing Project who supply the Redpolls, but I think 'so far, so good'. Thanks again to all the cattle checkers who make the scheme possible. Cattle numbers were up to 25, and now at 23 and grazing in the non-SSSI areas.

I'm hoping by the time you read this they will have been back in the SSSI fields to finish off grazing there. There should be enough grazing in the non-SSSI after that to keep them in good condition, as it's had a few weeks to recover. I'm also looking to get the remaining scrub etc. mechanically cleared shortly whilst the dry ground conditions continue. I will also soon be looking at the management plan to see what habitat management tasks are due to be performed this winter.

The butterfly transect period is also over. There are still a few weeks data to collect, but so far it seems overall numbers could be slightly down on 2014. Specieswise (if that's a word), there has been a slight drop in richness (from 21 to 20), with no Painted Ladies or Marbled Whites recorded this year, despite rumours that it would be a good year for the former. Brimstone was added to the list, I'm sure there would have been Brimstones about last year though, I suspect the surveyors just didn't get lucky. Anyway, I'll give a full report once all the data is in. Further thanks go to all those involved.

Having data that is systematically collected is more useful than casual records alone. Don't let that stop you letting me have your casual records though! They can alert us to changes that may be taking place, for example the arrival of a new species could be noticed first by a casual sighting.

Apologies for the delay in some of the repairs needed around the reserve. The contractor I like to use has been extremely busy with other work. I am hopeful that I will be able to meet him on site shortly though to discuss some fencing and gate repairs and the installation of some new benches the MMS committee has discussed. As Neil states above, I am applying to Natural England for permission to do something about some of the worst muddy areas along the public footpath. It isn't certain what they will allow us to do, and the funding would have to be raised too, so

progress is likely to be slow I'm afraid, but I am trying to progress it. Better news is that I have begun talking to the council's graphic designers about a new leaflet to promote Mill Meadows, and I'm hopeful this could be available in the next few months. Sorry to be vague about the timescale!



Water Vole



Brown Rat

## Rat or Vole ?

Finally, there have been a couple of reports of Water Vole from around the stream near the Millennium Bridge (that's the one that crosses from the corner of Cumborrow into Hilly Field if that helps the less familiar), so please keep your eyes open around there.

The only thing of a similar size with which it could be confused is Brown Rat. Water Vole would be an important species for the reserve, as it's apparently the fastest declining British mammal. The Water Vole is rat-sized, but with a blunt nose, dark chestnut-brown to black fur, short rounded ears and a hair-covered tail, which is about half length of head and body.

Both the Water Vole and Brown rat (just in case you have not been 'lucky' enough to see one) are pictured above.

Chris Huggins, Ranger



## All change at the top at Essex Wildlife Trust

Those of you who are not members of EWT may not know that John Hall MBE is retiring as Chief Executive Officer of Essex Wildlife Trust at the end of this month.

John's last AGM and Members Day was on 3<sup>rd</sup> October, the date set to co-incide with the opening of the Ingrebourne Valley Visitor Centre next to Hornchurch Country Park. The guest speaker was Iolo Williams who apparently entertained and inspired those of us who weren't on car park duty. John's successor is Andrew Impey, who joins EWT from the RSPB.

At the AGM, there were Living Landscapes awards given to our member **Paul Hudson** for his work on the **Countryside Walks** and to our neighbours **Laindon Common Conservators**.

The new Visitor Centre is set on a nice aspect overlooking pools, scrub, and boggy grassland with a backdrop of farmland and from which you can enjoy birdsong in the Spring, dragonflies in the Summer, and flocks of duck in the Winter. Water Voles, reptiles and amphibians are all present. The river runs south-west towards Rainham and provides a natural migration point for birds: Osprey, Redstart, Whinchat and Wheatear were all logged as recent sightings.

## A late Summer bird migration on Mill Meadows.

The August Bank Holiday weekend and the week leading up to it this year were wet and it was my week for the Butterfly Count.

Butterflies were few and the Meadows seemed initially typically quiet for a late Summer. Walking along the hedge at the foot of Cumborrow I was delighted to find a Spotted Flycatcher, once a local breeding bird favouring mature gardens and woodland but now only seen on passage on its return towards Africa. So it was a most pleasant surprise to find 2 more that day around the trees in Oakfield.

And it got better. Emerging back into Cumborrow, numerous Long-Tailed Tit made their 'see see see' calls which usually indicates a feeding flock of many species.

And this was the case, the trees were alive with movement as small birds dangled from the leaves and moved restlessly from twig to branch. It was impossible to focus the binoculars on every bird and identify it, but I did find countless Chiffchaffs, many Blackcaps, the predictable Blue and Great Tits but also picked out around half a dozen Willow Warblers, another migrant bird distinguished from 'Chiffys' by its pale legs. There was another larger warbler too which I didn't identify, and Treecreepers called somewhere behind the thickly-leaved branches. Not to be outdone, Flycatchers re-appeared.



*Common Redstart in Wantsfield  
- photo by Basil Thornton*

The finale was yet to come. Approaching the hedge on the east side of Wantsfield, there was a call more familiar in the New Forest or in Welsh hanging oakwoods and on sheep farms with dry stone walls – a Common Redstart. It was easily located, perching on hawthorn twigs and bramble in the hedge and sallying from these to the ground to pick up a grub or insect. It stayed for a few days – giving time to be enjoyed by a few other bird-watchers and also to be photographed.

Neil Sumner



The Living Landscapes Award Winners with Iolo Williams, centre; including Susan McCaffrey who chairs the Billericay Countryside Walks team (4<sup>th</sup> from left) and Terry Joyce of Laindon Common Conservators (3<sup>rd</sup> from left). Photo by **Daniel Bridge** for Essex Wildlife Trust



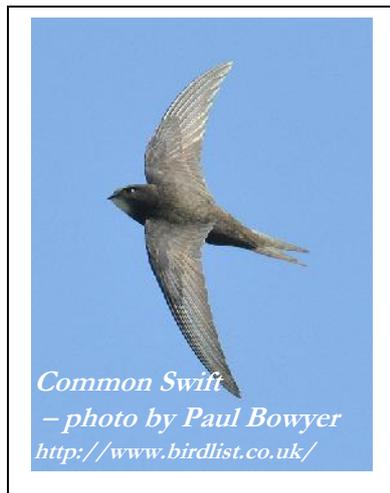
## Common Swifts (*Apus apus*) in Billericay ~

As far as I'm aware, there are two colonies of swifts in our town. The main one is at Grey Lady Place (originally an ex-workhouse, then St Andrew's Hospital but now converted to quality residential) and another at the Catholic Church (built in 1910) adjacent Sun Corner. It is not a coincidence that these older style structures serve their purpose as they allow the birds entry to the niches under the eaves. Modern structures don't allow such openings as insulation requirements seal them off.

I have been monitoring their status for several years now and last year was an extremely successful breeding season for them. This year I estimated that there were 15 pairs and 8 pairs respectively at the two locations. Locating the nests is extremely difficult as they enter in the evening twilight in one very quick swoop. In early July, they were still congregating above their colonies at 9.30pm and forming 'screaming parties' in the gloom above the nearby rooftops. This behaviour is seen as a social bonding of the colony and is the best way to estimate their breeding numbers.

The young begin to fledge during the first few weeks in July, but later if the spring weather has been poor for the parents to hawk the aerial insect fare. They spend a long time in the nest so when they fledge they are fully independent and have no need to return to the nest or have any further contact with their parents. Once paired, swifts remain faithful to each other throughout their lives, unless one should outlive the other, and usually return to exactly the same nesting location each year. Swifts live a long time (21 years potentially, as proven by ringing, but most survive for 7 to 10 years of age) and only become sexually mature after their third or fourth year.

The swift has evolved to undergo torpidity whilst in the egg, as a nestling and as an adult. The heartbeat is reduced to conserve the use of stored fats. It's an adaptation seen to combat long periods of being chilled and unfed. This allows the parents to make long journeys to gather food. The egg slows in development and the nestling effectively goes into semi-hibernation.



Hummingbirds, a close relative of the swift, also have a similar ability.

I have no data referring back to earlier times in the town with regards our swift population except for the following clues. A birder emailed me to say that he remembers 'screaming parties' of swifts flying up and down the High Street in the mid-seventies. I'm not aware that this ever happens now. Once in the early eighties I witnessed a feeding flock of swifts hawking with House Martins up and down a ride within Norsey Wood.

The RSPB has estimated that the British Isles swift population has declined dramatically in the last ten years (And is now in the 'Amber Zone'). Perhaps this is a combination of events due to the renovation of structures reducing the nesting opportunities as described above and the fewer insect fare available due to vehicle pollution and agricultural insecticides. Luckily, swifts do not suffer the slaughter that many migratory bird species undergo on their bi-annual migratory journey between Africa and the British Isles.

Most Swifts are only with us for c.100 days a year, arriving in late April and departing in during August. The young of both swifts and bats are on the wing in July. Their similar insect requirements surely dictate such an event.

### Sleeping on the Wing:-

Swifts sleep on the wing away from their nesting duties. A lifestyle shared with House Martins and the tropical Frigate Bird. It was reported by a French airman on the return from a night sortie in the 1914-1918 war where, at 10,000ft, he flew through a flock of swifts. Since then, Dutch military radar has further confirmed that these 'radar angels' exist. It is thought that sleep is achieved by the alternate sides of their brain taking turns to rest.

John Smart

### Swifts – Summer on Hold! ~

Pray avoid being prey!  
Your absence is my angst  
I focus on infinity  
With nothing in-between  
Wishing the World to fully turn!

In the spirit of my mind  
Screams echo in the silence!  
You are there but not there!  
Before all reason escapes me  
Swiftly return for my sanity!



## Orchids at Mill Meadows – 2015

Of all the flowers that bloom at Mill Meadows, the most spectacular display is surely that provided by the thousands of heath spotted orchids that appear in the lower fields (the area designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest) in June each year. The Meadows are generally regarded as the best site in Essex for this species.

A few years ago, attempts were made to count the number of flower spikes and the total figures were:

2009	3,119
2010	5,265
2011	1,272
2012	3,018

Another count was made on 21<sup>st</sup> June this year and the total was 4,665. The year-to-year variation almost certainly reflects the weather conditions and whether it has been possible to arrange spring grazing, which reduces the sward-height and seems to allow the orchids more space and light.

In the earlier years, Butchers, the field nearest the Scout Hut, contributed around 80% of the totals, with most of the rest in Oakfield and a few in Cumborrow. From 2012, rather more spikes have appeared in Oakfield and this year the proportion in Butchers was only 62% with Oakfield making up most of the remainder.

Paul Hudson  
10<sup>th</sup> October 2015

## Pond Clearance



In the previous newsletter (issue 70) the chairman mentioned concerns that the pond near the scout hut had dried out. During a recent work party society members took the opportunity afforded by the lack of water to remove some of the rubbish from the pond and increase the potential volume by a further spade's depth. The pond should now hold more water than before and this may enable the water level to be sufficient for tadpoles to successfully mature next year. Shortly after this photo was taken some late summer rainfall has partially filled the pond.