



Mill Meadows Society Newsletter

Issue 73 April to June 2016

www.millmeadows.org.uk

In this issue

Chairmans Report	1 & 2
Rangers Report	3
Membership Secretary Report	3
Starling Pre-roosts	4
Notification of AGM	5
Minutes of 2015 AGM	6
Membership renewal forms	7-9

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

Saturday 9th April: Bird Walk at Norsey Wood – meet at 7am at the Education Centre

Saturday 9th April : Work Party**

Monday 11th April : Anecdotes of 65 years in horticulture a talk by Jim Buttress. Day Centre, Chantry Way, at 7.45 pm. Hosted by The Norsey Wood Society

Thursday 28th April : illustrated talk by Graham Ekins (see panel) – after our **Annual General Meeting** **Please note change of date**

Saturday 7th May: Bird Walk at Queens Park Country Park – meet at 7am at the car park

Saturday 14th May: Pond Dipping at Mill Meadows. Meet at The Scout Hall, Greens Farm Lane at 10.30.

Sunday 15th May : Green Woodlands Day at Norsey Wood. 11am to 4 pm, *please see below**

Saturday 11 June Wildflower Walk on Mill Meadows. Meet at The Scout Hall, Greens Farm Lane at 10.30.

Monday 13 June: Badgers in Essex and Norsey Wood. A talk by Frank Last, member of Badger Rescue and former Chairman of The Essex Badger Protection Group. 7.45pm in the Day Centre, Chantry Way, Billericay hosted by The Norsey Wood Society

Saturday 9th July. Butterfly Walk on Mill Meadows. Meet at The Scout Hall, Greens Farm Lane at 10.30.

See Rangers Report for events in Q3 and Q4 of the year



© Graham Ekins

Wildlife of Thailand : a photographic talk by

Graham Ekins

Thursday 28th April, 7.45pm in The Reading Rooms, Billericay

Chairmans Report

AGM time again. This year, for a speaker, we have broken with a de facto tradition of local themes and gone for something completely different, as you can see from the panel.

Graham Ekins is an ecologist and has been a keen birder for many years, especially in ringing where he has run courses and ringing stations for the Wildlife and Wetland Trust. After he retired as a former Deputy Head teacher, Graham has travelled around the world, recording and photographing wildlife. His photography is stunning and his talks are delivered with knowledge and enormous enthusiasm. I have seen Graham several times and he has a way of illustrating verbally and pictorially so that the audience get a real sense of the place and the wildlife he is describing.

Because Graham is so popular as a speaker across Essex, booking is highly recommended. So, members, please book with me as soon as possible (if you haven't already done so by email)

** please could you spare an hour to help with our photographic display on the day. ?? we need 2 people to help set up from 10 am and until 11 and to take down at 3.30 pm. Contact Chairman - details below*



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Chairman's Report (contd)

I will release the AGM invite to the general public just 3 weeks before the event so members (who read Newsletters!) will get priority.

In 2006, I took over the chairmanship of The Society. I've probably gained the most from the last 10 years, having my eyes opened to other wildlife, learnt something (but far short of everything) about practical conservation and made many new friends and acquaintances who share a common passion – a love of the natural world.

It was Mill Meadows, being part of one of their Living Landscapes that led me into a role with Essex Wildlife Trust. This has been good and bad for The Society – good because I have learnt much and been a bit more useful in influencing the management but bad because I have less time to spend on it. The Society would benefit from a new Chairman who has fresh energy and ideas but until someone comes forward, I will keep bu****ing on, as Winston Churchill once said.

One of my big concerns is that our account balance keeps going up each year. The problem is that the funds are barely dented by small projects, such as benches and nestboxes, but not enough for large projects. For example a quote to restore the paths through Oakfield is around £16k, which is 4 times our total funds. Some grants require 33% match funding but we need one that requires only up to around 15%. We haven't been successful with one grant application but will try others. We always welcome suggestions to use the money to improve Mill Meadows for wildlife or people's enjoyment – please get in touch if you have any.

Other aspects of the Marked Trail that need a refresh are in progress: a new information leaflet and replacement of damaged waymarks are in hand and will happen as resources permit.

What makes this improvement important is because Mill Meadows is noticeably wetter than 10 years ago. It almost seems as if the water table has risen with new springs appearing.

Membership has fallen in numbers in the last 10 years, but not greatly so, and largely because we are more strict on lapsing non renewals. In terms of member's activity, I think this has increased slightly with good numbers at work parties, doing cattle checking and wildlife walks.

(This next bit is pasted from last year's Newsletter without apology): we always welcome new faces at work parties and **we do need more cattle checkers** to share the workload a bit more out.

In the 10 years, much has been put by Basildon Council into the Management of The Reserve, especially with the extension of the areas grazed and the arrival of the

Endearing Red Poll cattle. Chris continues to take us steadily through his comprehensive Management Plan.

What of the wildlife? For one who's first passion was songbirds, it has not been a good decade, especially with migrants 'Out of Africa'. Many of these declines took place in the 80s and 90s, but we are still seeing declines with some resident birds, such as Greenfinch and Bullfinch. On the positive side, we have seen the return of Nuthatches and Buzzards and Red Kites overhead.

Butterflies seem to have declined (other than the Small Tortoiseshell which has recovered), despite our efforts in maintaining the unimproved grassland. Our Butterfly Transect results should start to give us more insight into the trends over the forthcoming years. We continue to have our local Foxes and Badgers, and we get the occasional sighting of Stoat or Weasel but, alas, things seem gloomy for once-common Hedgehogs. It is harder to find Common Lizards but I usually see at least one Grass Snake every year and our Common Frogs and their spawn are appearing in more ponds than before. Much of the flora, for which Mill Meadows is of special importance, are doing well with some spectacular orchid numbers.

What of the future? The Residents Association have invited The Society to submit our hopes and fears for the next 10 years. I cannot help believing that Mill Meadows will come under pressure from an increased population. Extending the reserve, if this happens, will mitigate this to some extent but only if it is done well. Incidentally, the comments of The Committee on this proposal are on our web site, under Documents – if you don't have Internet access and want a copy please get in touch. I would also welcome any views on your hopes and fears.

Education is key – we must try and ensure that everyone understands that Mill Meadows is, first and foremost, a Local Nature Reserve.

My thanks again for another year of service to all the Committee members: Ken for the Newsletter, Peter as General Secretary, Dave as Membership Secretary, Alan the Treasurer and to Paul and Frances for continuing to support us.

Also, thank you for your membership and support for the past year and I hope you will renew your membership once again.

Neil Sumner, Chairman. Neilsumner123@aol.com
07908 139 080



Rangers Report – Spring 2016

Grazing

The cattle should have returned to the meadows by the time you read this. If they are it means we will have been able to get an early graze in the SSSI fields this year – the first time for a few years. This is important as, on the whole, it has been a mild and wet winter, meaning there is more grass present which could outcompete the wild flowers if left unchecked. This will be a short graze for a few weeks only, after which they will be transferred to the rest of the reserve until mid-July. Thanks to all those who helped with the fence repairs recently, and to those of you who undertake the cattle checking.

Winter works

We achieved most of the planned works for this winter, with a few exceptions. There was some thinning (felling) in Hillmans and Bottom Mead I had hoped to get done, but this will keep for future years. Unfortunately my experiment with using people from our parks team to cut the hedges was not entirely successful, as the ground was unsuitable (too wet) for their tractor tyres. I will try and get the hedges on Southend Road and Chaffinch Crescent trimmed in late summer/early autumn this year, meaning the next cut after that would be planned for January/February 2018.

Invasive pond plant

Unfortunately, we have acquired some Water Fern *Azolla filiculoides* in the pond in Brickfield. This is a very invasive plant and will multiply very quickly to the detriment of other pond species. We are looking into the best way of dealing with this, but in the meantime, please do not move it around the reserve (or into any other ponds that you know) under any circumstances.

Benches and bridge

I have four benches to install on the reserve: two replacements and two new ones (for Coles and Wantsfield), which should be on site very shortly. We are also investigating the possibility of installing a new bridge in Wards Hoppits to cross the stream near the new pond.

Events

The front page shows the events for this quarter. I have also made provisional bookings for the remainder of the year: these dates will be confirmed in future Newsletters.

August 13th	Tree Identification
September 8th	Bat Walk
September 10th	Work Party
October 1st	Work Party

November 12th	Fungus Foray
December 3rd	Veteran Tree Walk
December 10th	Work Party

Chris Huggins, March 2016
Countryside Ranger, Basildon Council

A message from the Membership Secretary

Along with the welcome return of Spring, in the last few weeks my attention has turned to membership renewals for the Mill Meadows Society. Our membership year runs 12 months from April, so very soon the standing orders for membership renewal that many members have set up will come in. For those who don't have standing orders, please do send your renewal subscriptions through to the address listed on the renewal form. The 2015/16 membership year saw our total number of members remain exactly static with the previous year – a good achievement after a few years of declining numbers. Your membership of the Society is very important to help keep the society's standing and influence. With such issues as Basildon Borough Council's consideration of building on green belt land in Billericay as part of the Draft Local Plan, it is critical to keep the Society's size and standing so as our voice is listened to by the Council and potential developers. The Society has members with considerable knowledge on local wildlife and habitats, it is important that we have an active Society to enable that knowledge to be used for the protection and betterment of the nature reserve and SSSI that we are so lucky to have.

I hope to receive your membership subscriptions very soon.

I have been Membership Secretary since 2014, and a member of the management committee since 2013. In that time there has only been one new addition to the committee. Our committee is a long way from being fully staffed so it would be great to see some new faces fill the vacant roles in the committee this year. I balance my role in the committee with a very busy and often stressful full time job that is only getting busier, and other members of the committee are involved with a number of outside wildlife interests and groups – new faces on the committee who inject fresh ideas and help us drive our Society forward would be most welcome!

Regards,

Dave Slawson



A Starling Pre-roost in SW Billericay ~

John Smart 23/03/2016

In mid-March this year I happened to notice a mini-murmuration of Starlings, over a nearby farm, from my garden. I estimated that the tight-knit flock was composed of c.140 birds. There is a line of mature conifers that borders the farm and after about 15 minutes of to-ing & fro-ing over them, in the blink of an eye, they funnelled down from the sky as if liquid pouring into an empty vessel. Safety in numbers and the shared warmth within the roost have led to such survival behaviour.

Prior to this I had noticed in an adjoining mature oak, a gathering of Starlings. Some nights it was c.40 birds and on other nights considerably more. But it was far from static as there were always several Starlings leaving the flock whilst others were arriving and alighting. There appeared to be a hierarchy involved, as the topmost twigs were squabbled over, presumably by the dominant birds. Then as the evening progressed, they would simultaneously lift off and join another pre-roost flock already in the air to form a mini-murmuration over the farm's conifers.

A week later, on a chilly evening, there were two pre-roosts atop the nearby oaks with a combined estimated total of 900 birds. The chatter was like a multitude of unsynchronized castanets! Suddenly the chatter ceased and seconds later they all lifted off, combined flocks and in the traditional shape-shifting sphere that we are used to seeing on our television screens, displayed the 'invisible throws and flows of life energy' before entering their final roost for the night.

On another night, there was a distant view of a pre-roost several hundred metres away atop an oak. From that distance the Starlings resembled as if a black ribbon had been draped over the tree's topmost profile. The

These lifted off and joined the pre-roost adjacent to my garden. These gregarious birds are living in the fast lane, bursting with energy and just as vocal!

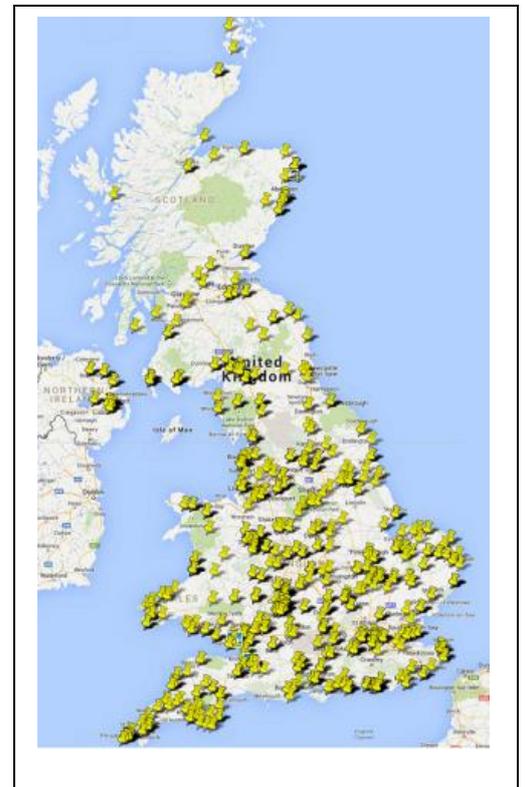
It was noticeable that as the pre-roosts built up, birds were arriving from various points of the compass. Birds that had been feeding on farmland and in urban areas in the wider landscape during the day were responding to the lessening in the evening's light level and began to gather en masse in readiness to enter their final roost location.

It is believed that birds dispersing first from the roost in the morning are the birds that found good feeding locations the day before. And this forms part of their communication skills within the flock that leads the other birds to good feeding opportunities.

The popular view is that these are mainly mainland eastern European birds; here to escape the fridge-like temperatures in their winter homeland before returning later to breed. These birds migrate over the North Sea twice a year, with its vagaries of predators, inclement weather and gas flares from the offshore platforms. There has been concern that some flocks of Starlings (along with other passerine species) after flying into fog over the sea, have become disorientated and then attracted to the gas flares; have either perished or have received singed wings. Coastal bird-ringers have been alerted to look for the evidence.



flighty Starling pre-roost! - Photography by Bill Moss.



A map compiled by the RSPB (above) shows the location of Starling roosts for the United Kingdom.



Looking at a larger version of the map it shows c.460 roost locations as reported by the general public. These vary in size from a modest number in the low hundreds through to the classic aerial spectacle of 100,000 + (one hundred thousand).

Starlings are great mimics; they say that you can hear the calls of birds not native to this country amongst their chatter.

The science behind how a morphing cloud of a murmuration appears the way it does has reached a conclusion that each bird responds instantly to the seven birds that are closest to it. So if a bird has reason to change its flight path, then those immediately about it instantly respond to maintain their distance and those about them respond accordingly. Thus the pulsing effect is instantly transmitted throughout the flock. It has the appearance of collective intelligence. There is no evidence that there is a lead bird.

Even though that these great concentrations of birds would have us believe that all is well with their population status, compared to previous times there has been a significant decline in their numbers. This has been put down to modern agricultural practices: CAP, lack of permanent pasture, farm chemicals and lack of nesting sites. A familiar tale that is not only unique to the Starling.

According to BTO data, the longest recorded lifespan of a Starling is just over 17½ years. However, it is likely that they generally live for only a third of that time; only to be cut short by the many dangers that they encounter.

Ironically, there were two pairs of Starlings, in resplendent breeding plumage, of British stock beginning nesting operations in holes in an oak just under the pre-roost location!



An aerial ballet! – Photography by Bill Moss.

Notice that the 18th Annual General Meeting of the Mill Meadows Society will be held at the Reading Rooms, Billericay High Street on Thursday 28th April 2016 at 7.45 pm.

Agenda

1. Apologies for absence.
2. Matter arising from the minutes of the 17th AGM held on 23rd April 2014.
3. Report of Chairman.
4. Report of treasurer, accounts for 2014/5.
5. Report of Membership Secretary
6. Rangers Report
7. Election of officers and general committee for 2015-16: nominees so far:

Chairman: Neil Sumner

General Secretary: Peter Croot

Treasurer: Alan Talboys

Membership Secretary: David Slawson

Event Organiser: **POSITION VACANT**

Newsletter: Ken Williamson

Other Committee Members: Paul Jarmy, Frances Adams,

Nominations – if you wish to nominate someone as a member of the General Committee please give details, to the General Secretary at least 24 hours prior to the meeting. Include the Position for which nomination is being made, name of nominee and your name.

8. Resolutions and motions.

Members are invited to submit motions for consideration and delivered to the General Secretary (petercroot@btinternet.com or c/o 19 Ganisborough Close CM11 2DB) prior to 14 days before the meeting.

9. Maintenance and development of the nature reserve.

10. Any other business.



Minutes of the 17th Mill Meadows Society Annual General Meeting

Held on **Thursday 23rd April 2015** at the Reading Rooms, High Street, Billericay at 7.45 pm.

Present; 29 members and guests

1. Apologies for absence. Seven were noted
2. Matters arising from the 16th AGM held on 24th April 2014 – None
3. Chairman's report. Previously circulated in the Spring 2015 newsletter (issue no 69)
Key points emphasised by the chairman included;
 - 8 new members had joined during the past year. There had been a slight decrease in the number of members but an increase in the proportion of active members
 - It had been a good year for the Reserve with a lot of good habitat management work undertaken
 - The Red Poll cattle herd has been a welcome addition, more participants in the cattle checking rota would help spread the work load
 - The talk by Russell Savory had raised our profile in Billericay
 - A poor year for birds, but an excellent year for butterflies
 - The poor state of the path through Oakfield in winter is of concern. Ideas for improvement are being discussed with Natural England. Grants to part fund the work will be required
 - Society members have supported Living Landscapes activities including pond and woodland restoration at Sun Corner, and the publication of a second series of Countryside walks around Billericay
4. Treasurer's report. The audited accounts were circulated and agreed. Alan Sheehy has agreed to continue as auditor.
5. Membership Secretary's report. Currently 106 paid up members, 60 of whom pay by standing order.

6. Ranger's report. Previously circulated in the Spring 2015 newsletter. Main points highlighted to the meeting by Chris Huggins were;
 - Very successful new grazing arrangements
 - The beginning of annual butterfly monitoring
 - The best winter yet for habitat management work, aided by the funding available
 - Thanking society members for their support with the butterfly transect, the cattle checking rota and the monthly work parties

It was noted that the Scouts will be locking the car park gate from April 29th.

7. Election of Officers. The following nominations had been received;

Chairman: Neil Sumner
General Secretary: Peter Croot
Treasurer: Alan Talboys
Membership Secretary: Dave Slawson
Newsletter Editor: Ken Williamson
Committee members: Paul Jarmy, Frances Adams

Nominations proposed by Paul Hudson, seconded by Alan Sheehy

The meeting agreed en bloc that these nominations be accepted

8. Resolutions and motions – None received
9. Maintenance and development of the nature reserve – no new matters raised
10. Any other business – None

The meeting concluded at 8.15 pm. Following the interval Ray Bowler, Secretary of the Red Poll Cattle Society gave an informative presentation about the breed and their use in the Essex Grazing Project

All members are invited to attend; non-members are very welcome but cannot vote.



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I would like to -

Membership Year

apply for membership

2016/17

renew my membership

(please tick as appropriate)

*From 1st April 2016
until 31st March 2017*

Name

Address

Post Code

Telephone

E mail

(all correspondence & newsletters will be sent via e-mail when an e-mail address is quoted)

In our household there are -	adults	&	children		
Subscription, per household, @ £4.00 p a.				£	:
Donation - thank you	(please state amount)			£	:
Cheques should be payable to " Mill Meadows Society"				TOTAL	£ :

If you would like to pay by standing order, please complete the attached form

Calling all young people Do you have any young people amongst family & friends who would like to learn more about nature? We are linked to a group that is devoted to children of all ages and it is called B's Ne's (Billericay's Nature Explorers)

If you would like more information then please tick this box

Please send this form together with your subscription &/or standing order form to:

**Membership Secretary, Mill Meadows Society,
c/o 19 Gainsborough Close, Billericay CM11 2DB
Email: mms-membershipsec@hotmail.com**

If you require a membership card, please enclose a stamped addressed envelope

Please use the reverse of this form if -

- (a) you wish to air your views about the Society, its management or have suggestions of topics for future meetings
- or (b) names of other persons who may be interested in joining the Society

For Society use only



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date received	s.a.e	date card issued	S/O received	date S/O to bank	xl entry	date subs to Treas	membership number
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YES / NO

YES / NO



Pay by STANDING ORDER

Please complete the form below and return it to :-
Membership Secretary, Mill Meadows Society,
c/o 19 Gainsborough Close, Billericay CM11 2DB

STANDING ORDER MANDATE

To: (name of your bank) _____

(Your bank's postal address) - _____

Please make the following payments to :-

Bank: LLOYDS TSB Billericay Branch

Sort Code: 30 – 90 - 80

Beneficiary: MILL MEADOWS SOCIETY

Reference: Mem No: _____ Name: _____

Account No: 0 1 0 4 2 8 2 3

Amount:	Annual Subscription	£	4.00
	Donation	£	_____
	TOTAL	£	_____

Due Date: IMMEDIATELY then 1ST APRIL ANNUALLY

Commencing:

Last Payment: Until Further Notice

And debit the following account :-

Account Name: _____

Account No: _____

Signed :

Date :