

OXFORD WILDLIFE

NUMBER 114 **NEWS** SUMMER 2017



To members of the Oxford Urban Wildlife Group. A message from Janet Keene.

After tests at the John Radcliffe I was recently diagnosed as having suffered a mild stroke. Whilst the prognosis for an eventual good recovery is good as long as stress is avoided, I have decided that it is in my best interests to resign my post as 'chairperson' of the committee of OUWG, post that has been variously described as Administrator, Coordinator or Director.

I have been with the OUWG for many years and the organisation is close to my heart and I will attempt to facilitate as smooth a transfer of my post and the responsibilities that have accrued to me as is possible. The Committee will be meeting soon to redesign the division of responsibilities and consider the future of the group. During the interim period I will continue in my present posts and, in the longer term, I would hope to continue to be an active member of the Committee, but not to return to the 'lead' position.

In my view the various posts within the OUWG need to be spread so that no one post, including that of the 'chairperson' is too onerous. This may mean that the Committee has to be enlarged or some posts might be filled without being a committee member. If anybody would like to see the sort of range of posts that Committee members commonly undertake I would be happy to provide such a list if I was approached by email or by letter.

Yours sincerely,

Janet Keene,

7 Norwood Avenue, Kingston Bagpuize with Southmoor, Abingdon, OX13 5AD.

Tel: 01865 820522 email: keene@ouwg.org.uk

Again much hard work has been done at Boundary Brook and still more needs to be done.

We still need more physically fit helpers any time they can come.

Ring Alan Hart on 07901 120 308 or 07979 608 013 to find out when he will be there. He is usually there on a Tuesday or Thursday but also on other days. On Sundays there are regular work parties (see details on page 12). Ring Alan first before you start out to check he will be there.

PAST EVENTS

Preparation for the Slow Worms: a lot of work went into constructing the slow worm hibernacula - as seen in the last newsletter.

Fritillary Survey

Because the mild spring weather resulted in the early flowering of fritillaries (as seen in the photo in our last newsletter of the Boundary Brook fritillaries) it was decided to cancel the proposed fritillary survey planned for 22 April as Tim King had visited Hinksey Meadow on 2nd April and counted 216 blooms. By the time 3 weeks had passed it would have been too late. When Tim visited the site he counted 331 flowers and 6 vegetative plants. This is a higher count than any in the last 14 years. His first count in 20013 was 64 flowers and this has increased over the years until this record-breaking year.

Walk around Radley Lakes

On **Saturday 22nd April**, David Guyoncourt, a most knowledgeable guide, led us on a walk around Radley Lakes. The weather was good and it was a marvellous experience as he was able to tell us so much about the wildlife we saw. We saw many interesting wildlife events – on the edge of the paths orange tip butterflies were laying eggs on the garlic mustard, arum lilies were flowering and orchids, white helleborines, were sending up shoots but were not flowering yet. On the lakes the birds were many and various – many were nesting on the small islands or on shallow patches where they had built their own islands. There was a swan, coots, ducks including tufted and shoveler, noisy black-headed gulls, Canada geese and many others. Two new wooden tern rafts were awaiting the arrival of their future residents. In one small pond there was a terrapin resting on the bank – an escaped pet I imagine! The paths around the lakes are open to the public so if you missed our visit follow the instructions in the last newsletter and pay them a visit, it is well worth it. **Janet Keene**

FUTURE EVENTS see page 12 for the next events until December.

Front cover picture 'Swift' submitted by **Mike Langman**

Our New Treasurer

We are delighted to welcome **Jon Willis** as our new Treasurer. He has taken over from our noble temporary replacements and is making great progress.

OUWG Subscriptions

Your 2017-18 subscription is due for renewal. We hope that you will want to renew it, which means that you will continue to receive our regular newsletter "Oxford Wildlife News", as well as details of forthcoming OUWG events.

To minimise costs, we would prefer to send your newsletters as an email attachment. Please send an email to the treasurer - jtwillis@gmail.com - confirming your preference. The newsletter can also be viewed on-line where pictures can be viewed in glorious colour - www.ouwg.org.uk The opening 'home' page has a list of choices at the top of the page. Tap "Books to read". You may then choose a recent newsletter or information on other nature books which we stock.

Subscription rate: Individual £5; Joint/Family £8 per annum; Unwaged or under 16 are free. Any donations to help towards the running of OUWG would be very welcome, and if you are a UK tax payer, we can claim 25p in Gift Aid for every £1 you donate. The Gift Aid declaration form can be found on the OUWG website.

Please either pay by BACS or standing order, to sort code 30-80-45 account 23101668, using your name as reference. If you cannot do that, please send a cheque, made payable to OXFORD URBAN WILDLIFE GROUP, to the treasurer: Jon Willis, Oxford Urban Wildlife Group, 2 Maywood Road, Oxford, OX4 4EE.



Trap Grounds news

In mid-May we held a hugely successful Springwatch event. More than 100 children and adults enjoyed an afternoon of activities for all ages: a wildlife quest, pond dipping, guided walks, creative writing, and bush-craft games. Our resident pair of Mute Swans paraded their six newly hatched cygnets for all to admire, but were nearly upstaged by a Mallard with her 12 ducklings. Most of our wildlife news is aquatic: Water Voles have been seen swimming in the Canal next to the entrance to the Trap Grounds

In a shady corner of our site we are in the process of transforming a graveyard for rusty old boilers into a ferny dell with a rockery and a creek. On the sunny meadows for the past five years we have been carefully collecting and dispersing seeds from half a dozen plants of Yellow Rattle kindly donated by Janet Keene; the Rattle is gradually spreading and doing its job of suppressing coarse grasses and allowing other wildflowers to establish themselves. Result: Small Copper butterflies, Brown Argus, Holly Blue, Speckled Wood, Ringlets, Commas, and lots more. Thank you, Janet!

Our next all-day work party, led by Oxford Conservation Volunteers, will be on Saturday 29th July from 10 am to 4 pm; but before then there will be occasional half-day sessions, with details announced on our website: www.trap-grounds.org.uk. **Catherine Robinson** Secretary, The Friends of the Trap Grounds.



Photo by Nicola Devine. A Club-tail dragonfly eating an Azure damselfly. Trap Grounds.

A Common Club-tail dragonfly (a real rarity, despite its name: not known anywhere else in Oxfordshire apart from on the Thames at Goring) was photographed devouring an Azure Damselfly on one of our ponds in the last week of May, alongside a Hairy Hawker (also rare) laying eggs ... Kingfishers are nesting somewhere nearby and fishing in our stream ... and there have been several recent sightings of an Otter in backwaters of the Thames about half a mile from the Trap Grounds.



3-day-old cygnets. Trap Grounds 21st May 2017. Photo by Nicola Devine.

Request for volunteer support in the Donnington Park.

The Donnington Tenants & Residents Association have received funding from OCC to improve the recreation area, bordered by Meadow Lane, Freelands Road and Cavell Road, and develop it as a Park and leisure space for the local community in Donnington. A survey established the need for leisure and social open space in this area. The DTRA are now working with the Council and local Community to deliver all age football, benches, bins, a green gym and a wild flower/life area. The football pitches, bins, benches and wild life area are Phase 1 of a 3 Phase plan. The Over 50's Group, which is linked to the DTRA, are looking for local volunteers who have an interest in the environment and wildlife to work with us in develop the wild life area. Oxford City Council will prepare the ground for us, but we need people with knowledge of wild life and planting to help us with the future care of the area We already have wild flower seed and need to decide on the soil conditions and ongoing voluntary care of the area. We do have members of the Over 50's group who have gardening experience and helped with a recent project to plant hanging baskets and tubs in the Donnington Doorstep and Community Centre and the group belong to the OUWG. We have appreciated Janet's support over past years with our efforts to improve our wildlife areas and hope that there are local residents willing to be involved in this community project which we hope will bring the local community together. We look forward to a future with a group of willing volunteers to support our local environment. If you feel able to join us or contact me for more information. **Cecily Kirtland** 01865 242852.

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I am writing on behalf of **John Corble** who has lived in a flat facing Iffley Road for about 16 years. He has a keen interest in wildlife, gardening and the local environment. He is a keen member of our local Community Association.



He lives in a second floor flat and has a balcony which faces a sheltered area of trees and grass protected from the traffic and noisy main roads. He has observed blue tits nesting round his balcony and hangs feeders and photographs the wildlife he sees around.

Other birds he has regularly nesting and visiting the area are robins, coal tits, and even a wren. Some years he has observed up to 11 blue tit chicks nesting on his veranda and he feeds them with maggots and other bird food. He hangs bowls of food around the veranda and enjoys watching them around about the area. John is a very active member of the local community and every year he plants hanging baskets and the ground surrounding the area.



It is always a blaze of colour and he shares his skills with us at the Doorstep and Community Centre. We are planting baskets outside the Donnington Community Centre and Doorstep this coming Tuesday to brighten up the area and hope to encourage the community to share in the activity.

Cecily Ann Kirtland

Ten things you might not know about swifts

Swifts really are the birds of the moment. They're now returned to many areas of the UK after a winter spent in Africa to scream and scythe their way through the sky. Many more are winging their way to us, so keep scanning the skies for that unmistakable sickle-winged shape, and **listening out for those calls**. If "your" birds aren't back yet, don't worry: swifts will continue to arrive throughout May.

There's no mistaking a swift - just remember all black plumage and "boomerang" shape see the front cover.

(Mike Langman <http://www.rspb.org.uk/community/ourwork/b/natureshomemagazine/spb-images.com>)

In our RSPB Summer 2017 *Nature's Home* magazine has the most beautiful close up swift on the cover (it's my favourite cover ever) and a great feature all about the work going on in towns and cities around the UK to help them - building the swift cities! Not only that, we need you to participate in the RSPB swift survey. This really is the month of the swift. What a beauty - check out those big eyes and a bill that was made for insect-eating.

I've picked out 10 of my favourite swift facts from the RSPB's archives to keep the swift celebration going and to hopefully tickle your fancy with a few things about these amazing birds you may not know...

1. Swifts have an average life span of about five and a half years. One bird in Oxford was found dying in 1964, 16 years after it was ringed as an adult, so was likely to be at least 18 years old. This bird probably flew about four million miles in its lifetime, the same as flying to the moon and back eight times.
2. Swifts have four toes, four arranged in twos, with each pair pointing sideways rather than forwards, a bit like a chameleon or a koala.
3. They use saliva for building their nests in roof spaces and cavities.
4. The swift probably eats more species of small insect and spiders than any other UK bird – well over 300.
5. Swifts drink by gliding over smooth water and taking sips and bathe by flying slowly through falling rain. Swifts very rarely land, but they have to for nesting of course.
6. Their eyes have moveable bristles in front – sunglasses for reducing glare when they are on the wing.
7. Swifts can sleep on the wing – a French Airman in the 1914-18 war glided down with engines off behind enemy lines. At 10,000 feet he found himself amongst apparently motionless birds. One of them was caught in the machine and on the following day was found to be an adult male swift.
8. When they are about month old, baby swifts do 'press ups' in the nest to strengthen their wings. They lift themselves up by pushing down on their wings. By the time they're ready to go, they can hold their bodies clear off the ground like this for several seconds.
9. Each ball of food that the parents bring to their babies weighs just over a gram and contains 300-1,000 individual insects and spiders.
10. There are seven species of swift on the UK list. Our familiar swift is the only one that breeds here, but there are six other rare visitors. The Alpine swift is a big swift with white underparts and throat, but the pallid swift is extremely similar to "our" swift. The little swift lives up to its name and has a white rump like a house martin. Then there are the really rare ones: Pacific swift, chimney swift from North America and the awesome, and incredibly fast, needle-tailed swift.

Tell us about your swifts! Once your local swifts have returned, We'd like you to **let us know where you have seen them and where they're nesting.** Watch out for screaming groups of swifts flying at roof-height (that means they're breeding nearby), or where you've seen swifts entering a roof or hole in a building, which means they are probably nesting. We need sightings from anywhere across the UK and you can enter as many records as you like at different times. You can even submit sightings you remember from the past - the more records, the better! Put some time in your diary this summer for searching for swifts - and tell us about them! (Ben Andrew rspb-images.com) If you have sent in records before, it's important to know if birds are still returning to the same areas. Please tell us what's happening there this year. Your information will increase the RSPB's knowledge of swifts, so that more nest sites can be provided and protected for these beautiful birds during their short, but very important time spent in the UK. www.rspb.org.uk Have a great swift summer!

Unexpected Item in The Bagging Area...

The RSPCA estimate that there are 8.5 million dogs and 7.4 million cats in the UK. There may be more cats than dogs in Oxford because households which include a university graduate are more likely to own a cat than a dog. People who live in the countryside are more likely to have a dog than a cat - both facts come from a survey carried out by The Veterinary Record, which is the 'Wildlife News' for vets.

I've written in the past about the number of wild birds killed by cats and the cunning ways to keep them - cats that is - out of your garden. There are high-pitched squeaking devices, old teabags soaked in Jeyes Fluid, orange peel, water pistols, lion dung and sticks to bang together for shock effect. Since then I have become a dog-owner, so I'll take the lead on that topic.

As you wander around a park, a reserve or along a country footpath, your wonder at the beauty of nature may be disturbed by damp, wrinkled items - often black, sometimes green or possibly pink -



Everywhere that dogs and dog-owners go there are signs saying 'Bag it and bin it!' There are threats of a £1000 fine for dog-fouling. You'll see special bins and even outdoor dispensers offering free poo-bags. In fact, they are cheap and easy to buy - I can get a roll of 100 for less than a pound. Your local paper has angry letters about dog-muck. Your local council may have wardens to catch the messy culprits. Every dog-owner says 'It isn't me!' (and it isn't me) but nothing changes.

Something has changed: the Forestry Commission has asked dog-owners to find a stick and flick the dog-dirt into the undergrowth. This won't work on a sports pitch of course, but in wilder places the mess will decay without a plastic wrapper to make the problem worse. It looks like this major land-owner has shrugged and said 'If you can't beat them, join them.' The result could be that blackberry-pickers don't fancy the blackberries, or children get the wrong end of the stick, or dogs infect other dogs or people with parasites. Time will tell.



A dog-walker's gift

to the Lake District >

Finally, have you seen 'Notes and Queries' in The Guardian? It's a weekly column in which readers send in questions and other readers give answers. It can be silly and flippant, but it can also be thought-provoking. For example, a reader asked why there is cross-breeding of dogs but not of birds. My dog Roly is half-Labrador and half-Lurcher but I've never seen a bird that is half-swan and half-duck. Several readers answered that dogs are all from one species, *Canis lupus familiaris*, whereas birds are from many separate species. Therefore, goes



the opinion, genetic differences make cross-breeding impossible.

I looked for a second opinion to check whether this is true. I found Dr I.J. Lovette writing in The New York Times in 2013. Cross-breeding is apparently found in gulls, ducks and carp but the young may be too weak to compete with pure-bred rivals. The hybrids often struggle to find a mate and may even be sterile. For example, the mule (a horse/donkey

cross) cannot reproduce. In the survival of the fittest, I think we can see, cross-breeding is a fatal weakness. There's an intriguing theory that animal species have become so distinct in colour, shape and sound to prevent the accidental mingling of incompatible genes. That doomed cross-breeding would be a waste of energy and fertility, so nature or God or Richard Dawkins have put an unmissable warning sign ahead of it. Perhaps my dog sees the world as a series of signs - some of them smells, sounds and sights that I'm never aware of. I wish I had a copy of his Highway Code.

John Gorrill, Canine Correspondent.

Take A Look Up

Now the temperatures are improving, I see many more heads bobbing up and down over the garden fences as more people get out and enjoy their gardens in all their forms.

How aware are we though, of the nature and the actual environment around us?

Many of the gardens I see around have trees in them, but how many of us really spend time looking up in the canopy? There's often a whole new world of life up there, bathed in dappled sunlight as the wind rocks and sways the branches.

A whole range of different insects regularly call tree canopies home, and they often differ from those you find on the ground, enjoying your flowers, plants and crops with you.

The initial burst of life in Spring of our garden Blue Tit's as they pair up, mate, have young which hopefully fledge, is followed by what seems silence as they disappear. They haven't though as these Tit families climb into the canopy of trees and gorge themselves on the insects and caterpillars that inhabit that space. So, after the current breeding season is complete, look upwards and see if you can spot these family groups.

Maybe do a quick survey and see if different species of birds, not just the Blue Tit's, prefer different species of trees.

So, the message of this piece is get out and enjoy your garden, local park, or even woodland. Remember to look upward too. Nature is all around.

Happy Gardening

Stuart Mabbutt www.wildmaninspires.co.uk 01865 747243

BARRACKS Lane Community Garden Project

Website details - <http://www.barrackslanegarden.org.uk/>

now on facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/BarracksLaneCommunityGarden>

photos: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/barrackslanegarden/> calendar: <http://calendar.yahoo.co.uk/barrackslanegarden>

EVENTS FOR OTHER ORGANISATIONS (For contacts see page 11 unless otherwise listed)

JULY

Tuesday 4: Alpine Flowers of Central Chile A travelogue presentation by **Dr C. M. Jackson-Houlston** - about the plants found in mountainous regions of Central Chile, based on an Alpine Garden Society tour there in January 2017. Many of these are high-alpines from volcanic scree, and Chile is still a centre of volcanic and seismic activity. However, because of its latitude, plants at comparatively high elevations may enjoy more temperate conditions. Caroline Jackson-Houlston is a recently retired lecturer in English Literature from Oxford Brookes University but has a life-long interest in botany and has led several botanical trips to the Balkans. **7.45pm**, The Old School Room, St Peter's Church, First Turn, Wolvercote, Oxford, OX2 8AQ. Members Free, Visitors: £2. (ANHSO)

AUGUST

CONTACTS FOR OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire (ANHSO): Oxford 863660
Volunteers www.ocv.org.uk (OCV): Jo 07887 928115

Barracks Lane Community Garden (BLCG) 07729 655 543
Oxford Ornithological Soc. (OOS): Barry Hudson 07833 350288

Botanic Garden: (BGO) Oxford 286690
Oxford Preservation Trust (OPT) Rachel Sanderson 01865 242918

British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) 01296 330033
Oxford Tree Club (OTC): Ian Gourlay Oxford 245864

Butterfly Conservation: David Redhead Oxford 772520
Oxfordshire Amphibian and Reptile Group Rod d' Ayala, 01235 511 861

Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE)
Sietske Boeles Oxford 728153

City's Countryside Sites or Biodiversity in Parks Oxford 252240
Oxfordshire Badger Group: Julia Hammett Oxford 864107
email: parks@oxford.gov.uk
Oxfordshire Bat Group: David Endacott 01235 764832

Friends of Aston's Eyot (FAE) Ruth Ashcroft 01865 248344
Oxfordshire Mammal Group (OxMG) Judith Hartley Oxford 775476 ext. 211

Friends of CS Lewis Reserve (FoCSL) Oxford 775476
Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum now Wild Oxfordshire

Friends of Lye Valley (FoLV) Judy Webb 01865 377487
Oxfordshire Flora Group (OFG) Sue Helm 07774205972

Friends of the Earth (Oxford): Fiona Tavner 07954390933
Science Oxford Live (SOL): Oxford 810000

Friends of Milham Ford Nature Park (FoMFNP)
Judy Webb 01865 377487
Shotover Wildlife (SW): Chair: Ivan Wright Oxford 874423

Friends of the Trap Grounds (FoTG)
Catherine Robinson Oxford 511307
SS Mary & John Churchyard Group, Ruth Conway Oxford 723085

Friends of Warneford Meadow (FoWM)
Sietske Boeles Oxford 728153
Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC)
Hannah Boylan Oxford 815418

Fungus Survey of Oxfordshire (FSO)
Molly Dewey Oxford 735525
Wild Oxfordshire (Formerly ONCF): Oxford 407034

Local Wildlife Trust (BBOWT): Oxford 775476



We discover what was ruining our front door mat. (photo: Peter Keene)

OUWG EVENTS www.ouwg.org.uk

SEPTEMBER

Saturday 17th September Open Day at Boundary Brook Nature Park from 2-4pm. There will be a book stall if dry, puzzles for children, plants for sale and guided walks to explore the park for those who want to join in.

OCTOBER

Sunday 15th October. Children's Autumn activities 2-3pm. Puzzles, quizzes and treasure hunt for children Suitable for children aged 5 and over. All children to be accompanied by an adult at all times.

NOVEMBER

Sunday 19th November. Guided walks around Boundary Brook Nature park 2pm. Meet at the main entrance to the park at the end of Boundary Brook Road near the start of the cycle track (see map below) and be shown around this prize-winning Nature Park. All children to be accompanied by an adult.

DECEMBER

Sunday 17th December Christmas get-together from 5.30pm. OUWG will provide roast chestnuts and other Christmas nibbles as well as Christmas punch for the adults and a non-alcoholic version for the children. Do come and join us – non-members welcome. Admission free.

As you know from our last newsletter we have prepared the habitats for the slow worms and their arrival is expected to take place in late summer and through September and into October. When the translocation does take place there will be the opportunity to involve local school children.

WORK PARTIES at Boundary Brook Nature Park: Sundays between 10am and 1pm.

Refreshments provided. **Ring 07979 608 013 or 07901 120 308 on day to ensure park will be open.** **BOUNDARY BROOK NATURE PARK.** Come and help us to manage the Nature Park. You can choose your task from a variety of jobs. A warm welcome guaranteed. You need not come for the

whole time. Please ring on the day of the work party to ensure it has not been cancelled through bad weather etc.

Contact: Alan Hart on **07901 120 308** or **07979 608 013**. There is often someone working at Boundary Brook so, if you want to come at other times, find out who will be there and when by ringing Alan Hart but check before setting out to make sure it is still on.

Bus route: Stagecoach Route 3.

OXFORD URBAN WILDLIFE GROUP If you wish to contact OUWG or would like to become a member write to the editor: Janet Keene, 7 Norwood Ave, Southmoor, Abingdon OX13 5AD or Tel: Oxford 820522. E-mail: keene@ouwg.org.uk

