

Ewelme Watercress Beds and Local Nature Reserve Management Team Newsletter No.38

We had a wet Saturday workday at the start of October after Ann loudly proclaimed that it hardly ever rains on work mornings. However despite the weather we had a better turn out than usual including a young couple recently moved to the RAF Base and they came with their baby! What a morale boost for the older workers. We hope they inspire a few more volunteers to join us. In spite of being featured on Radio Oxford there were no new volunteers to the November 1st workday but nevertheless we had 15 attendees and the weather returned to the norm for our workdays – sunny and warm! We invite anyone, who has volunteered during the year, on the first Saturday in December (6th) when The Friends of the Watercress Beds are providing seasonal refreshments at the end of the morning session. As a good start to the New Year we also hope to welcome new volunteers on the first Saturday in January (3rd). The Friends will be providing a simple lunch at the end of the morning session and we hope some volunteers will stay to do a bit more work after their lunch. We are very fortunate to have such support from the Friends Committee who put in a lot of time and good will in support of our activities. Regular workdays are held throughout the year on the first Saturday and third Wednesday each month from 9.30am to 12.30pm. Please contact Tom on 836888 or thomas.stevenson@ntlworld.com for further information, or to be added to the email circulation list. Alternatively, turn up at the Watercress Centre during the session.

We appreciate and greatly value help from our neighbours in maintaining the beds alongside their property. This is best achieved on our regular workdays but we realise that these are not always convenient. Sometime ago the Management team discussed work by neighbours outside regular work sessions. It was agreed that this could be permitted but that work must be restricted to clearing 1m wide channels down the sides of the watercress beds. This was because we have to work to a Management Plan. Ideally material removed from the beds should be left on the bank for 24 hours to allow invertebrates to return to the water before removing to compost heaps. It should not be left there to decompose as this adds ammonia to the stream which can poison invertebrates and fish.

The family activity event Bats, Birds and Bones held on the Friday evening at the start of half term had seasonal appeal. The evening was fully-recruited, with a waiting list, and it was a great success – word is obviously getting around! After activities involving dissecting barn owl pellets, making bat models and segregating fox bones into different parts of a skeleton, we took the children on a ghost walk in the meadow where various “decorations” such as skeletons, skulls and pumpkins adorned the trees on the route. The children were equipped with torches and tasked with finding and counting silver stars hanging from vegetation. One parent commented:-

“My two children absolutely loved the evening, especially as it was so different to the summer activity day. The owl pellets were so stuffed full of skulls and bones, the bats were all so individual (amazing what you can do with monochrome!) and the bones were fascinating for adults and children alike.”

The next event is scheduled for 17th April. Please contact Margaret on 07879 461593 b.e.connolly@live.co.uk or Ann on 835173 to get on the email circulation list. Places are given on a first come, first served basis. Children need to be aged from seven to twelve and are asked to bring wellies, warm clothes and an adult if they wish to attend.

Paul Mason chairman of the Management Team in Ewelme and a Vice Chairman and Trustee of the Chiltern Society has found that within the Society, Ewelme is the leading site for monitoring

the flora and fauna and for its work on increasing biodiversity. In the last 19 months the Society has taken on the management of eight more nature reserves and heritage sites. Paul sees a great opportunity for the work being carried out at Ewelme to inspire all the other conservation groups in the Society.

An astonishing year for butterflies with highest counts for 5½ species (Red Admiral was equal to the highest previous count). I am sure this must be, in part, due to the management strategy of the site though the weather also played a big part. I was amazed to see two Clouded Yellows fluttering about in the wildflower meadow on 28 October. This was my first double sighting at Ewelme of this immigrant to the UK, originating from North Africa and southern Europe.

Those tiny insects you might see flying around the water's edge are not moths but Caddis flies and it seems to have been a good autumn for these though, somewhat surprisingly, we haven't caught many in our net when riverfly monitoring. Plenty of other invertebrates though so our stream remains healthy and there is lots of food for the creatures higher up the food chain – fish, birds etc.

It has been slow going with winter visiting birds with only brief views of redwings and they haven't settled just been seen flying over. No sign of any water rails as yet but with such a skulking bird it is always possible that they are hiding from me. I am sure that with the weather and bountiful food everywhere autumn has just been delayed. Up until a few days ago there were still good numbers of blackcaps and chiffchaffs foraging for caterpillars and berries and numbers of these usually decline rapidly from the beginning of October.

There is wildlife interest on site all times of the year and if you wish to find out more come on one of our first Sunday in the month guided walks. The next ones will be held 7th December, 4th January and 1st February. Please be at the Watercress Centre for a 10.30am start. Entrance is £3 but free for accompanied children and members of the Friends. Please remember to wear sturdy shoes.

The next team meeting will take place on Wednesday 28th January at 7pm at the Centre and we of course welcome visitors.