



# THE MAGPIE

April 2016

## The Newsletter of the Milton Keynes Natural History

Days are longer, bumble-bee queens are out in force, hibernating butterflies have woken up and hedgehogs are on the move. All this can only mean one thing.....Spring is here!

What with all the warm weather we are bound to have, why not get out and about with like-minded individuals in a special interest group? Ian explains more on p.2

This year the MKNHS website celebrates its first anniversary (this website is so good that it is even visited by American wildlife enthusiasts!) This is a great place to look for up to date news of recent sightings in the area, details of local nature reserves and national wildlife news.

This Summer volunteers are needed for two exciting events: A Bioblitz at Linford Lakes Nature Reserve and a Nature Day at Howe Park Wood. If you would like to get involved more details are on p.1 and 2

Prepare to battle the green-eyed monster as you read Julie's account of her recent trip to the Maldives (p.5). Retirement certainly seems to suit some people!

Finally, before you rush out to observe, record and enjoy the resurgence of local wildlife, have a go at the mystery bird competition (answer on p.4).

### Howe Park Wood Nature Day

**WE NEED YOU!!!! PLEASE**

Following last year's great success, The Parks Trust is organising another Nature Day in Howe Park Wood on **Saturday 2nd July**. We would like the Society to be involved again as much as possible, so please put this date in your diary if you would like to help out. It is going to be an even bigger event this year, running from 11am until 4pm for the main set of attractions, with evening events such as moth trapping and bat walks to follow.

We will be looking for people to lead walks, man our beautiful display (which helps to publicise the society and attract new members) and help with the activities on the woodland trail (manned by Jo and myself last year).

It is wonderful to see families out enjoying themselves in the wood, with little kiddies running around madly, having fun and learning about nature at the same time. They are the society members of the future and without them our wildlife will be in real trouble, so let's make it another marvellous day for them.

**Julie Lane**

President	Roy Maycock
Vice-President	John C Wickham
	Martin Kincaid
Chair	Julie Lane
	Linda Murphy
Treasurer	Joe Clinch
Secretary:	Steve Brady
Committee:	Arthur Allen
	Jean Cooke
	Paul Lund
	Peter Hassett
	Mary Sarre
	Ian Saunders
	Carol Watts
Specific responsibilities:	
Publicity	Carol Watts
Website	Peter Hassett
Membership	Arthur Allen
Programme	Jean Cooke
	Gordon Redford
Publications Editor	Jo Handford

### Mystery Bird Competition



## BioBlitz – Linford Lakes Nature Reserve

## Interest Groups

The Parks Trust and Friends of Linford Lakes Nature Reserve will be hosting a BioBlitz at the nature reserve on Friday 24<sup>th</sup> and Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> June. We hope that as many Society members as possible can come along and help with this mammoth recording session.

Those who participated at similar events at Stony Stratford in 2013 and 2014 will remember how enjoyable and frenetic these occasions are.

The objective is to record as many different species as possible in twenty four hours. We need volunteers to help with pond dipping, plant recording, counting birds and small mammal trapping in particular. Overnight we will continue recording with moth trapping, bat recording and nocturnal pond dipping on the agenda!

One species we will be targeting at night is the spined loach, a small, scarce fish which hasn't been spotted on site for several years. Is it still present in the ponds? Spotlight surveys and netting may tell us the answer. We will also put out plenty of camera traps to help us record the more elusive animal species.

The Study Centre will of course be open should the weather turn against us and all the facilities – toilets, kitchen, classrooms - will be available to recorders. Refreshments will be served!

I am currently beginning to put together a list of recorders for each taxa so if you are interested in helping out please let me know by Friday 20<sup>th</sup> May, preferably by email: [m.kincaid@theparkstrust.com](mailto:m.kincaid@theparkstrust.com) We will also be inviting BBOWT, Bucks Bird Club, Bucks Invertebrate Group and a number of other wildlife recording groups but it would be great to see as many faces from the Society as possible.

**Martin Kincaid**



The elusive spined loach

Some members have suggested that the summer evening excursions can be a little overcrowded or noisy for their personal tastes, whilst others clearly enjoy the social side of the occasion.

Are you someone who prefers to experience wildlife in smaller groups at your own pace? Or maybe you wish you knew someone who could help you increase your knowledge and appreciation of wildlife on a more one-to-one basis?

If you are a complete rookie wanting to learn, or competent in your field but looking for others to join you, or perhaps you have a project in mind but need more than one pair of hands, ears or eyes to do it, then a special interest group may be for you!

Depending on the scale and nature of the response to this idea, MKNHS is proposing to put members in touch with each other so that they can do their birding, botanising or whatever interests them in smaller groups of like-minded naturalists.

If this idea appeals and you would like to get involved, simply email the following details to [mknhsinterestgroups@gmail.com](mailto:mknhsinterestgroups@gmail.com)

Your name

Your area(s) of interest and level of expertise.

If this scheme has sufficient appeal and support, the MKNHS will compile and coordinate the groups. It will be for members only, and no email addresses or other information will be publicly shared.

**Ian Saunders**

## Groan Corner

**Some of the otters leave the river Iken at night to mark their territories. The otters are filmed by motion sensitive cameras.**

Oh dear Paul. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!

## Winter Wildlife Around the Area

It may have been wet and windy but locally we have enjoyed a mild winter—and so has most of the wildlife. December was declared nationally as the warmest since 1910 and daffodils bloomed around Milton Keynes. Also members of this Society recorded seeing knapweed, hedge bedstraw, scabious, lesser stitchwort, buttercup, dandelion and daisies in flower during that month.

**Mammals** - Roe deer were reported at Elfield Park and Oakhill Wood in December and one was seen in Little Linford Wood in February. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of January we had the first record of a bat, possibly a noctule, seen near Manor Farm, Old Wolverton. At the beginning of the year there were more reports of otter at Linford Lakes and also at Foxcote lake. One highlight was the discovery of a baby otter beside the path in the Ouzel Valley Park, Woughton, by a couple out for a walk on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January and believed to have been separated from its parents during the effects of the swollen river. It was taken home, the RSPCA notified, and eventually transferred to the rescue centre at Tiggywinkles. Martin Kincaid later contacted Tiggywinkles and they confirmed that it was a female, approximately 5-6 weeks old, feeding well, and a 'bundle of energy'. Later Tiggywinkles confirmed it had been transferred to a similar organisation in Scotland to be with other young otters in care. In the last edition of the Magpie I commented on the use at Malvern College of a labrador that had been trained to find harvest mice nests and suggested one might be trained to find our elusive dormice at Little Linford Wood. Well, now we have discovered that the People's Trust for Endangered Species do indeed have a dog, called Charlie Brown, that has been trained to find the winter nests of dormice. They also have one that can find water voles.

**Birds** – Over winter several members of the Society recorded seeing blackcaps visiting their gardens to feed. Records for ringed blackcaps indicate that some had migrated from Europe. During early December local residents were entertained by the aerial movements of the murmuration of starlings over Willen Lake, before they settled down for the night in the surrounding reeds (starlings not humans). During the same month records around Milton Keynes

included a merlin in flight near Stony Stratford, a raven over Newport Pagnell, a long-eared owl over Bury Field, Newport Pagnell, and a ring-necked parakeet in flight near Walton Lake.

In January, Manor Farm in Old Wolverton attracted stonechat, goosanders, pintail ducks, a first winter Mediterranean gull and a barn owl. Observations at Linford Lakes included pintail ducks, a bittern, Egyptian geese and two whooper swans, whilst at the Blue Lagoon two ravens, a juvenile Iceland gull and two Caspian gulls were recorded.

During February oystercatchers returned to several of the local lakes but there were two particular highlights for the birders locally. At the beginning of the month a ferruginous duck stayed for several days at Caldecotte Lake and a black-bellied dipper was recorded and photographed on the stream between Bradwell Abbey and Lodge Lake, Loughton. This bird, believed to have migrated from Europe, was later observed near Furzton Lake. Unfortunately, both birds were seen in areas of Milton Keynes not covered by any members allocated tetrads.

Recently chiff-chaffs have been heard at Linford Lakes.

**Reptiles & amphibians** – Several members reported frogspawn in their garden ponds by mid-March and several common lizards were found just outside of the locality, Stockwell Park, whilst searching for elusive adders.

**Insects** – Garden plants still in flower during December attracted buff-tailed bumblebees and two species of moth, the aptly named winter moth and December moth, both attracted to the moth trap in my garden. There were also reports of a brimstone butterfly seen at Bancroft and a red admiral at Tongwell. The red admirals must over-winter for I found one sunning itself on the wall of my house on the 24<sup>th</sup> February this year, and three days later a buff-tailed Bumblebee appeared. A tree bumblebee, *Bombus hypnorum*, was discovered in early February locally and by mid-March common quaker, clouded drab and Hebrew character moths were recorded by two members of the Society.

Go out and enjoy the local wildlife this coming summer.

**Tony Wood**

## Happy Birthday To Our Website

In the summer of 2015 there were discussions about replacing the old website with a new site that would be easier to maintain and where “non techies” could update the site.

I thought that a Content Management System (CMS) would provide the features that were required, and I knew that WordPress was the most popular CMS system. I decided to get my hands dirty so I bought a couple of WordPress manuals (500+ pages) and sat down with the proverbial large jug of coffee to find out how to use it. I built a prototype website in October 2014 to enable people to comment on the proposed site. In January 2015 the Committee approved the website and agreed a budget to run it.

It was interesting that I spent nearly as much time incorporating people’s views on the colour and design of the Magpie logo and the header image (which appears at the top of every page) as I did on creating the whole site in the first place! The Society’s new website [www.mknhs.org.uk](http://www.mknhs.org.uk) went live on 17 March 2015. That’s the history to the project. Let’s look at some statistics on the website:

- There are 59 pages on the website (a page is a screen that you access from one of the menus).
- We publish 1-2 news items a day. There are currently 447 news items on the site.
- WordPress allows you to add additional features through “Plugins”. One plugin I’m very grateful for is our spam filter which has stopped 4856 spam messages and 3545 malicious login attempts this year.
- There have been 6048 visits to the website. On average, 50 pages or news items are viewed each day. The highest number of views was 131 on 12 January, 2016 and the total number of views is 17729.

- 26% of views are on a Tuesday and the most popular time to view is 4:00PM (I bet you are all checking the programme)!

I think the most unusual request received was from a library in America (10% of visitors are from America). The library has been using our website to teach children about butterflies. The librarian asked us to add a link to an American guide to butterfly gardens. I wasn’t sure how best to handle this. It doesn’t really fall under the “Milton Keynes wildlife” umbrella, but we should be doing all we can to support children to learn about wildlife. After much head scratching I added a new section at the bottom of our links page “North American Butterfly websites”. Now you know why that unusual entry is there.

As one of the goals of the website is to attract new members, we also have a page on the Natural History Museum website which details our programme <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/take-part/nature-groups-near-you/naturegroup-details/538>

I hope you enjoy using your website. Please send me pictures to add to the gallery and any articles you would like published. If you read an interesting wildlife article, why not send me a link and I will publish it as a news item so that we can all learn more about our wonderful wildlife.

**Peter Hassett**

[webmaster@mknhs.org.uk](mailto:webmaster@mknhs.org.uk)

### Mystery Bird Competition Answer

Ferruginous duck, Caldecotte Lake, February 2016

## There He Blows!

Three days into my holiday aboard the Ari Queen with a small group from Naturetrek, we were travelling on the open ocean inbetween two of the 26 coral atolls that make up the Maldives. We had spent the previous day watching large pods of exuberant spinner dolphins launching themselves into the air like slim grey exocet missiles or falling into line with their chums and riding the bow wave of our boat. These spinners had also been travelling with spotted dolphins and we had seen groups of bottlenose dolphins as well. What could be better?

Nothing prepared me for the what happened next! Off in the distance, small bush-like puffs of water above the waves signalled a whale (each whale has its own signature blow so our leader Chas Anderson knew immediately what they were). As we drew nearer a huge grey log surfaced and progressed slowly across our bow, its blunt head dipping and resurfacing, blowing regular puffs of water out of its single off-centre nostril. This, and its wrinkled prune like flanks, provided us with the unmistakable identifying features of a sperm whale! To be in the presence of something so big, iconic and so trusting was awe-inspiring, an experience of a lifetime. We stayed alongside this beast for a few minutes when, with barely a ripple, it rolled its great body, lifted its fluke and disappeared into the depths below to hunt for its prey, deep sea squid. It left behind a dark oily slick on the surface, the remains of its last digested meal.

Soon there was a shout and we headed off to travel alongside a couple more of these beautiful creatures, so close you felt you could reach out and touch them. In all we spent about two hours with a group of about 5 young adolescent bulls (bachelor) sperm whales as they dived and resurfaced seemingly unconcerned by our presence.

Sperm whales can hold their breath for roughly one minute for every foot of their length and these were down for roughly 30 minutes at a time. Their massive heads make up a third of the length of their bodies and contain the spermaceti oil which

was so sought after in the days of whaling for cosmetics, ointments and lubricants. This oil is thought to be involved in echo-location and possibly regulating their buoyancy, although this is not yet proven.

They are toothed whales with large conical teeth up to 1kg in weight- useful when grappling with slippery squid! They are widespread throughout our oceans but need deep water to hunt for their prey, so are most often found in submarine canyons near the edge of continental shelves. They tend to move towards the poles in the summer and the equator in the winter, where we were lucky enough to spot them. Sadly, a similar bachelor group strayed into our shallow North Sea waters this winter, where it is thought they perished due to starvation.

The holiday was full of wonderful experiences. Snorkelling on the coral reefs was incredible, the reefs being home to unimaginable numbers and varieties of stunningly beautiful fish. We spent our days riding the seas in search of cetaceans and mooring each evening near tropical islands with palm fringed beaches. We had a few days of unseasonal weather and thus failed to swim with mantas which was disappointing, but nothing could take away the exhilaration of seeing those gentle monsters from the deep and sharing their lives for a brief while!

**Julie Lane**



A sperm whale fluke



# MILTON KEYNES NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

## 47<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting Cruck Barn, Bradwell Abbey – March 15<sup>th</sup> 2016

In attendance: Roy Maycock (in the Chair), Julie Lane (Chairman), Ann Strutton (Treasurer), Jean Cooke (Minuting), Margaret and John Wickham, Peter Meadows, Chris Roberts, Viola Read, Linda Murphy, Martin Kincaid, Helen Wilson, Alan and Linda Piggott, Gordon Redford, Frances Higgs, Mike Killeby, Mike Sheridan, Ian Saunders, Paul Lund, Michele Welborn, Philip Brown, Mervyn Dobbin, Mike LeRoy, Janice Robertson, Joe Clinch, Peter Hassett, Carol and Arthur Allen, Mark Strutton, Jane Griddale, Carol Watts, Paul Manchester, John Prince, Tony Wood

1. Apologies for absence were received from Steve Brady, Mary Sarre, Jenny Mercer, Kate Redford, Di Parsons, Robert Williams and Aaron Woods.
2. Minutes of the 46<sup>th</sup> AGM held on March 17<sup>th</sup> 2015, circulated in the April 2015 edition of The Magpie. Adoption of these as a correct record was proposed by Gordon Redford, seconded by Alan Piggott, and agreed nem con.
3. There were no matters arising.

#### 4. Combined Officers' Report

This was read to the meeting by Julie Lane. The main points were as follows:

- 4.1 Attendance at meetings was good and we were attracting new members -this was to a considerable extent due to the work of the Programme Organisers – Gordon Redford for the Outdoor Programme, and Jean Cooke for the Indoor Programme.
- 4.2 Special thanks were due to those who undertake the day-to-day work of the Society – the team of venue-openers (Gordon Redford, Tony Wood, Paul Lund, Martin Kincaid, Jean Cooke), Colin Docketty for organising the refreshments, Jo Handford for editing The Magpie, Peter Hassett for the huge amount of work he has done in producing and maintaining our now excellent website, Tony Wood for his work on the Tetrad Recording Project, The Hazeley Wood Project Coordinators (Jean Cooke, Peter Hassett, Gordon Redford, Tony Wood).
- 4.3 Thanks to Ann Strutton, for her sterling work as Treasurer for four years but now stepping down from that role.
- 4.4 2015-16 was also marked by a very successful Family Wildlife Day held in conjunction with The Parks Trust in memory of Bernard Frewin. So successful that the exercise will be repeated on July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2016. And the Society celebrated John Prince's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday!
- 4.5 Looking to the future, the Committee will be looking at how to extend the recording work of the Society, and how to involve new people in the running of the Society so as to secure its dynamism into the future.

Adoption of this Report was proposed by Mike Sheridan, seconded by Mike LeRoy, and carried nem con. Thanks was also due to the Committee for all their work on behalf of the Society.

#### 5. Treasurer's Report

The main source of income as ever are Member Subscriptions - raising £2180 in this year. Donations, sales of items including refreshments, raffles, etc raised additional funds. The main expense was hall hire, costing £1920. Speakers expenses are low – £210, administrative expenses in the form of photocopying, postage, etc are now very low as a result of moving to largely electronic means of communication, and

website costs have proved to be lower than estimated. In consequence the Society's net worth, at £1,455.78, is up on last year (£1,140.19)

Accounts of the Gordon Osborn Fund were also presented, and it was to be noted that these had not been drawn on for several years now.

Detailed audited balance sheets are available.

A member asked for information about the purposes of the Gordon Osborn Fund. Roy Maycock, from the Chair, explained that initially £2,000 had been left to the Society by and in memory of Gordon Osborn, and this (together with some capital additions from later donations) formed the fund, the interest from which was available to the membership for Projects.

Adoption of this Report was proposed by Arthur Allen, seconded by Margaret Wickham, and carried nem con.

## **6. Election of Officers**

Julie Lane took over the Chair and called for nominations for the role of President of the Society. She nominated Roy Maycock, seconded by Martin Kincaid. There being no other nominations he was declared elected.

Roy Maycock resumed the Chair and called for nominations for Vice-President. He indicated that the Committee thought it wise to resume the position of having two Vice-Presidents, and himself proposed the nomination of John Wickham and Martin Kincaid. There being no other nominations they were declared elected.

Nominations for Chairman of the Society were called for. Roy Maycock explained that the current Chairman, Julie Lane, was unwilling to continue to carry this role alone as it restricted her other activities too much. However she was prepared to remain in a role-sharing capacity. He therefore proposed Julie Lane and Linda Murphy as joint Chairmen. There being no other nominations they were declared elected.

Nominations were called for Treasurer. Ann Strutton nominated Joe Clinch, Linda Murphy seconding. There being no other nominations he was declared elected.

Nominations for Secretary were called for. Arthur Allen proposed Steve Brady, Alan Piggott seconding. There being no other nominations he was declared elected.

## **7. Election of Committee**

The Constitution of the Society provides that the Committee consist of the above Officers plus a further 8 members. 7 present members of the Committee – viz Arthur Allen, Jean Cooke, Peter Hassett, Paul Lund, Mary Sarre, Ian Saunders and Carol Watts were prepared to continue. They were proposed en bloc by Mike LeRoy, seconded by Joe Clinch. There being no further nominations they were declared elected.

The full membership of the Committee is, therefore:

Arthur Allen, Steve Brady, Joe Clinch, Jean Cooke, Peter Hassett, Martin Kincaid, Julie Lane, Paul Lund, Roy Maycock, Linda Murphy, Mary Sarre, Ian Saunders, Carol Watts, John Wickham.

## **8. Any Other Business**

8.1 Issues were raised around the welcoming of new members. While experiences varied it was clear that the Committee needed to revisit this question as it was very important that new members, or potential members, were made to feel welcome. The use of name badges was suggested to facilitate this.

8.2 Problems which arose in some indoor meetings re the use of our speaker system were also raised. Some speakers did not make good use of this and very frequently, when questions were asked at the end, it was impossible to know what the question had been.

8.3 It was announced that annual subscriptions could be paid at the end of the meeting.

8.4 The absence of psocids from the meeting was deplored – and the meeting formally closed.