



The Magpie

August 2017

The Newsletter of the Milton Keynes Natural History Society



MKNHS Photo Exhibition Poster

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Greetings and welcome to the August edition of the Magpie! I would like to begin the introduction to the newsletter by saying a big thank you to Jo Handford for her hard work on The Magpie. It has been appreciated by everyone in the Society.

This edition looks at what has happened since the last one, the Society's involvement in the MK50 celebrations (Happy Birthday Milton Keynes!), a piece on the beloved bumblebee, and your nature sightings in Milton Keynes.

We would also like to thank everyone who has supported and worked on the Society's involvement in the MK50 celebrations. Work, such as the photo exhibition poster above, is much appreciated by everyone and will help to raise the profile and awareness of the Society.

If you have anything you wish to contribute to the next edition of The Magpie, whether it be in MK or on your holidays, photos of wildlife or a short article, please email me at lewis.dickinson91@gmail.com for inclusion in the next issue. Please have your submissions in to me by the 27th November. Enjoy the rest of the summer and autumn!

- Lewis Dickinson

Since the Last Edition...

By the time you read this our summer programme will be drawing to a close but I hope you've been able to get to at least a few of the meetings to sample the excellent range of wildlife sites in and around Milton Keynes.

On many evenings we were fortunate to have wonderful summer weather for getting out and about to enjoy the wildlife, for example a magical walk around Willen North Lake accompanied by Arctic Terns and a stunning day at Bucknell Wood with butterflies galore! Of course there were a few wild, damp evenings such as the visit to Sewell Cutting or Finemere Wood, but nevertheless those hardy souls who turned out were rewarded, for example with a Black Hairstreak pupa at Finemere, thanks to Stuart Hodges.

You can read more about some of the summer site visits on the website together with some of the records collected during these visits. Thanks to everyone who has led the summer walks. Their planning and preparation has ensured very interesting and enjoyable visits throughout the season.

As we move into autumn and the days draw in don't forget to send in the records that you have made during the summer if you didn't do it at the time. The recording section of the website has plenty of information on how to do this and it's been great to see members using the iRecord app during site visits. – *Linda Murphy*



MK Festival of Nature Walk at Willen Lake led by Martin.



and the MKNHS

Apart from our summer programme the Society has been busy making a contribution to the MK50 celebrations. Hopefully you were able to get along to The Central Library at some point during July to see the fantastic photographic exhibition showcasing the wildlife of Milton Keynes put together by Paul Lund using nearly 100 photographs taken by Society members. We hope that this exhibit will have helped to raise awareness of the great variety of wildlife that can be found in Milton Keynes at the same time as raising the profile of the Society. We have revised our publicity leaflet to coincide with the celebrations and if you know of a place that would be happy to have some leaflets to display, please contact either Julie or myself.

We made sure that the foundation of the Society in 1968 appears on the timeline of the History of Milton Keynes on the MK50 website. In fact it's the first entry after the founding of MK itself! Those of you who check the MKNHS website regularly will be aware that Peter Hassett created an MK50 page which sets out all the Society's contributions to the celebrations.

Apart from the exhibition there have been several other activities. Three self-guided walks have been created (by Harry Appleyard, Colin Docketty and Julie Lane) which anyone can download and use to explore three of the wildlife sites which we describe on the website: Tattenhoe, Walton Lake and the Blue Lagoon. Why not try them out if you haven't been able to join many of the summer visits on a Tuesday evening?

MK50 and the Society cont.

The Society took part in the first Milton Keynes Festival of Nature as partners with the Parks Trust and BBOWT. This included a Nature Day at the Howe Park Wood Centre where we set up our display stand and ran several activities including a Scavenger Hunt and a chance to 'match the feather to the bird'. Children did noticeably better than their parents at that! Gordon Redford and Ayla Webb displayed some stunning moths, including the much photographed Buff Tip and Privet Hawk-Moths, trapped the night before at Linford Lakes, and talked people through the moth lifecycle with help from some Emperor Moth caterpillars, also a great hit with the children! Altogether we talked to more than a hundred people about local wildlife and the Society that day. Thanks to all the members who came along to help and to support the event.

During the Festival our weekly Tuesday walk at Willen Lake was opened to the public and, as already mentioned, we had a superb evening.

The Society Committee also decided that this was a good time to update the Society's Display Boards to present our current activities. The new display was on show for the first time at the Nature Day held at Howe Park Wood, which opened the Milton Keynes Festival of Nature, and we will be using it at events in future along with the photographic exhibition. The exhibition and up-grading of the display boards involved the Society in quite a bit of extra expense and our Treasurer, Joe Clinch, put together a successful bid to the Milton Keynes Community Foundation which will cover some of the cost. We aim to raise the rest through some fund-raising activities in the autumn. All this means we are well-prepared as we go into our own 50th anniversary year in 2018! – *Linda Murphy*

Plight of a Bumblebee – Life and Death Under a Garden Shed

After many years of service the shed at the bottom of my garden reached a degree of rot that meant it had to go. I decided to replace it with a lovely arbour seat which arrived, was duly painted and all ready to erect. However, on wandering down to my garden pond one morning I noticed buff-tailed bumblebees flying in and out under the rotten base of the shed. To cut a long story short I decided that my arbour would have to be put in storage for the summer and the bees were welcome to stay until they had deserted their nest in the autumn.

Having made the decision I was a bit worried when, one damp morning, I saw a rather subdued queen bee sitting on the side of the shed above the nest. On consulting the Society experts I was informed this was a vestal bumblebee, a cuckoo bee, which enters the nest of the buff-tails, kills the queen, fights with the workers and lays her eggs in the nest.



Buff-tail Bumblebee on the shed (Julie Lane).

Plight of a Bumblebee cont.

This results in the worker buff-tails caring for her brood instead of their own. I felt rather sad to think of my lovely bees being invaded by this imposter and I must admit to feeling some animosity toward the cuckoo bee queen.

However, one sunny morning a week or two later I saw a large queen bee on my patio buzzing in a strange way without taking off. On closer inspection I was quite shocked to see that this bee had damaged wings, in fact they were just short stumps. It was the cuckoo queen, maybe or maybe not the same individual and I can only assume she had entered the nest of the buff-tails and been attacked resulting in the damage to her wings (their bodies are armour plated to survive the onslaught).

It made me reassess my opinion of this rather beautiful queen. It must be a tough fate to have to enter the nest of your enemy and fight workers and queen just to pass on your genes to the next generation. Predators and parasites sometimes get a bad press and I myself struggle with the cruelty of their actions, but they do not choose to be born in that role. As for my queen, I have seen her ambling around my garden for the past few days feeding on the clover and thyme. She is now welcome as part of the complex web of life that exists even in my small urban garden. – *Julie Lane*



Vestal Bumblebee on thyme (Julie Lane).

I Spy a Species

As we are a Natural History society we are really keen to know about all the flora and fauna of Milton Keynes. One of the best ways to achieve this is by recording species you see. To help in this endeavour a dedicated group of people has put together some resources you can use to help you record.

Never done recording before and don't know where to start or what to record? No problem! You can start by recording some of the more common species that you may see very frequently such as hedgehogs, grey squirrels, blackbirds, robins, and any plants or other animals you are familiar with.

All records are extremely useful, even of the common species, as it gives us an indication if populations of these species are changing. Once you are comfortable or gain a particular interest in a group of flora or fauna then you can use the online resources to identify the books that can help you get more details for the group of your choice!

All records we want to go to the Bucks and Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre (BMERC) so if you are making records on paper be sure to send them there. Alternatively, those of you with smartphones can get the "iRecord" app to make the records digitally and send them via the app. All written plant records should go to Roy Maycock or electronically amcveigh@btinternet.com.

So please take a look at some of the resources online under the "Reference" heading under "Recording" and get recording! – *Lewis Dickinson*

Groan Corner

These corks from Paul!

Q - What do frogs wear on their feet?

A - Open toad sandals!

A duck was about to cross the road when suddenly a chicken runs up and says, "Don't do it – you'll never hear the end of it!"

Help with Ecological Surveying at Westbury Farm, Shenley

Westbury Farm is one of MK's best kept secrets! Situated to the west of Shenley Wood it is a magnificent Grade II listed, 17th century farmhouse. It is one of the oldest houses in Milton Keynes and a major part of our local history.

Westbury Farm is now home to the Westbury Farm Arts Trust and its studios are used by many local artists including wildlife artist Kate Wyatt. The Trust has recently been awarded funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to research, document and publicise the history of the building and grounds and, as part of this, its staff and artists also wish to record the flora and fauna it supports. The grounds are sensitively managed and a variety of habitats including an old orchard (with some seriously ancient apple trees!), wildflower areas, an overgrown moat and ponds and scrub. The house itself, along with its outbuildings and barns, must also support a wealth of species. Besides great crested newts and roosting bats there are likely to be other rare and declining species present.

The Trust is inviting any naturalists interested in recording here, provided that we provide them with records of what is found. Linda Murphy and Martin Kincaid recently met key staff and we agreed to focus recording effort initially on the following taxa:

- Trees
- Birds (over-wintering and breeding)
- Bats
- Terrestrial Mammals
- Moths
- Grasshoppers and Crickets

However, if anyone is interested in recording any other groups they would be very welcome.

There will be two main recording windows, Autumn 2017 and Spring 2018 with a final report due to be compiled in June 2018. The Arts Trust is offering access to MKNHS members. As the site is secure and there is a resident caretaker, equipment can be safely left overnight.

If you are interested in helping out with this project, please let Linda or Martin know.

– *Martin Kincaid*



Westbury Arts Centre

Wild About Wildlife

In MKNHS we are interested in hearing about all your nature experiences. As such we are looking for more of you to write pieces for the news on the website and articles for the Magpie.

Wildlife writing for the Society doesn't have to be as extensive as you see in some of the published magazines (for example BBC Wildlife). It can simply be a photograph or two followed by a short paragraph. For a recent example look at Martin Kincaid's "A New Dragonfly Species in MK" piece further in the Magpie, also in the "Recent Sightings" section of the website. If you do want to write a longer article for The Magpie then feel free.

Be home or away, a plant that has captivated your gaze to witnessing magnificent birds of prey get their catch, we want to hear your experiences of nature! – *Lewis Dickinson*

Wildlife Around the Area

Following the mild first three months of the year we experienced a dry, hot spring through to at least mid-July; several days exceeded 30 degrees Celsius, the warmest spell since 1976.

So, what was reported locally. Well, our `Recent Sightings` section of the Society`s website certainly encouraged members to record and share their wildlife sightings, and so, if you were unable to use this system, many of those items included are listed below.

Birds: No sooner had I sent in details for the previous Society`s `Magpie` magazine than the migrants arrived. In the last few days of March Common Terns arrived at Willen Lake, with three Sandwich Terns being recorded at the same site a day later. The first Swallow noted was near Kingsmead Wood on the last day of March with Sand Martins mentioned in the previous `Magpie` at Willen on the 20th March. Other birds reported at local sites during April included a Great White Egret, 2 Pintails, a Hobby and 2 Arctic Terns at Willen Lakes, and the first report of a Cuckoo on the 8th day, a Grasshopper Warbler, an Osprey and a pair of Shelduck at Great Linford Reserve. In addition other notable bird sightings during April included a Redstart at Tongwell, a Marsh Harrier and Ring-necked Parakeet both flying over Bletchley, 7 Waxwings feeding at Stony Stratford, and a Ring Ouzel at Tattenhoe, and a Ruff at the Floodplain meadows at Old Wolverton. The first Swifts reported were at Tattenhoe on the 26th and Stony Stratford on the 28th.

During May a Black Tern, a Grey Plover and the resident Black Swan were observed at Willen Lake, a Black-necked Grebe and a Whinchat at Great Linford Reserve, a Raven at Haversham, and a Redstart at the Blue Lagoon. On the river at Olney a female Goosander was seen with 9 young.

June was a quiet month for the birds as they were mainly nesting.

However, there was confirmation that the Oystercatchers reared three young at the Stony Stratford Reserve and two owl boxes locally attracted Barn Owls to breed with 5 young reared at Great Linford Reserve and 3 young at the Floodplain meadows reserve at Old Wolverton.

INSECTS - Butterflies: Among the many reports unusual ones included 5 Duke of Burgundy at Tattenhoe and Purple Emperor at Howe Park Wood, Oakhill Wood, and Little Linford Wood. Silver-washed Fritillaries were reported at several sites locally and a lone Wood White was confirmed at Little Linford Wood.

Moths: In June, there were two reports from members of Hummingbird Hawk Moths in their gardens at Stony Stratford and Woburn Sands. The following is from our ace moth enthusiast Gordon Redford: -

“A combination of fine, warm weather and the use of a Robinson trap with a high powered lamp running off the mains at Linford Lakes Nature Reserve has resulted in an exceptional mothing season so far in terms of number of moths and new species.

At Linford Lakes, where I have been recording for 6 years almost exclusively with battery operated low powered lamps, the total number of species recorded at the end of 2016 was 400. The fact that number 401, Dotted Chestnut (*Conistra rubiginea*) appeared on April 1st should perhaps have alerted me to something special. A further five macro-moths have been added to the list to date: Alder Moth (*Acronicta alni*), Blotched Emerald (*Comibaena bajularia*), Bordered Sallow (*Pyrrhia umbra*), Kent Black Arches (*Meganola albula*) and the Olive (*Ipimorpha subtusa*). I have yet to feed in the data of the new micro-moths. The numbers of moths recorded so far this year are already in excess of any of the previous year`s totals.

Moths cont.

In June, I managed to set the traps for twenty of the thirty days there and 4,677 moths were recorded. The grand total of moths recorded last year for the whole season, March to October, was 5,109. The year 2017 is set to be the best yet at Linford Lakes”.

Dragonflies and Damselflies: At the Recorders` Seminar at Aston Clinton in April Alan Nelson, the County Recorder for Odonata, asked the audience to look out for Beautiful Damselflies this year as they were moving into this area. We were fortunate to find several, both male and female, with Banded Damselflies in Little Linford Wood in June

Mammals: Earlier this year Lewis Dickinson and Martin Kincaid set up a group to survey the mammals at the Great Linford Reserve. They have been involved with collecting and identifying faecal droppings, trail cameras at night, inspecting beneath numbered mats, the use of Longworth traps for small mammals, and recently installing rafts in ditches and ponds to attract water voles. Apples are placed on the rafts (a favourite of Water Voles) with ink mats to collect their footprints. If you wish to join the group contact Martin Kincaid. Otters have again been reported from the Great Linford Reserve and their fresh spraints have been found in several areas around the lake. Water Shrew are also being found at the same reserve and recently also at the Floodplain meadows, Manor Farm, Old Wolverton.

– Tony Wood

Plants:

On the whole the good weather has been good for plants and, except for a couple of Tuesday evenings when it rained, some useful records have been made. The Early-purple Orchids (*Orchis mascula*) put on a good display in Linford Wood. Also there was Midland Hawthorn (*Crataegus laevigata*), a plant typical of woodland about here, but not often seen in South Bucks woods.

The walk at Stanton Low was new for the Society with (for me) the most important plants found by the canal and in the old churchyard. Hemlock Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*) was of particular interest. This time more common in the south of the county and with only about three sites in the north – all by the canal.

Old Linslade churchyard is one of the four sites along the greensand ridge in Bucks where Meadow Saxifrage (*Saxifraga granulata*) grows – so good to see it at its best. Outside the base of the churchyard wall was masses of Common Liverwort (*Marchantia polymorpha* ssp. *ruderalis*) with both male and female “umbrellas” in profusion. Of the three subspecies of this plant the one we saw was at its typical habitat – a good find said Frances. The Scavenge Hunt at the Blue Lagoon gave members of the Society the opportunity to find (and collect!) bits of a few well-known plants rather than just walking past them. Animals were seen – but not collected!

Not involving Society members, there have been surveys in some tetrads e.g. at Cublington, Mursley, and Newton Longville. The former was disappointing as a long-known valley fen seems to be drying out but at Newton Longville, only the third known site in North Bucks, Grey Sedge (*Carex divulsa*) was a good find. John and Margaret Wickham will know it well as it is abundant in the lane close to their house!
– Roy Maycock

Upcoming Events

SILPHIDAE BEETLE RECORDING WORKSHOP 9TH-10TH SEPTEMBER 10AM-4PM

Silphid beetles (also known as Carrion beetles) display fascinating behaviours and are also very important recyclers. They are a small family of beetles which makes them an ideal group for beginners.

For more info, look at the MKNHS website:
<http://mknhs.org.uk/silphidae-beetle-recording-workshop-9-10-september-2017/>

A New Dragonfly Species in MK



On Thursday 27th July Martin Kincaid spotted a dragonfly at Linford Lakes Nature Reserve which turned out to be a Scarce Chaser *Libellula fulva*. This species, once restricted to East Anglia, has undergone a period of range expansion in recent years and has been found across Northants. This however is the first record for this species in Milton Keynes. Similar to the more common Black-Tailed Skimmer, this species can be told apart by the blue tinted eyes and slightly thicker abdomen.

– *Martin Kincaid*