

Magpie Digest July 2023

Welcome to this summer edition of the Magpie Digest which contains a selection of articles that have appeared on the Society website over the last six months. They include Tony Wood's regular summary of wildlife seen in Milton Keynes, this time during the winter; news from members Julie Lane and Harry Appleyard; news of the discovery of new moss species at Pitstone by Frances Higgs and others; an article by our Chairman, Matt Andrews; notes on flowering plants to look out for in the spring/early summer prepared by Mike LeRoy and reports from some of the Society summer excursions. Sadly, two long-time members of the Society passed away during this time, Joan Lancaster and Dave Roberts. Tributes to both are reprinted here.

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of the Magpie Digest. If you have any feedback or want to suggest something you'd like to see in the next edition, let us know.

Linda Murphy

Milton Keynes wildlife summary: Winter 2022-23 – Tony Wood



Otter at Wolverton Mill in January (Photo©Julian Lambley)

Winter locally was generally mild with East Anglia having the third warmest November on record. In December, however, we experienced icy weather for half the month, similar to January. In March we suffered one day of snow which changed to rain and created floods. Varied weather conditions throughout – so how did it affect our wildlife locally?

Mammals: There were records received for otters at a variety of sites around Milton Keynes including one photographed walking on ice during December at Willen Lake.

Other sites during winter where otters were recorded included the Floodplain Forest, Caldecotte, Stony Stratford Reserve, Linford Lakes Reserve, Stony Stratford Mill and Loughton Brook. A Chinese Water Deer was noted at Magna Park.

Insects – The first butterfly recorded in 2023 was a brimstone observed in a member's garden at Stony Stratford. One interesting record was from a lady living in Wolverton who discovered a caterpillar in a cauliflower she purchased in February from a supermarket. She placed it in a jar and fed it cabbage until it changed into a chrysalis. Mid-March it emerged as a moth, dark brown with black spots. Any ideas?

Plants – The first signs of spring were records of snowdrops early February beside Little Linford Wood and at the same site in March there were signs of primrose and celandine in flower. At the end of March cowslips were noted at Caldecotte.

Birds – Throughout the UK birds have been affected with the avian flu and the RSPB have reported that over 200 million birds, and at least 60 species, have died from the infection. There have been reports of three mute swans found dead at Caldecotte Lake and several geese at Furzton.

There was a large murmuration of starlings performing over the 'Mutual Fields' at New Bradwell from mid-February to mid-March at 5 pm to 6 pm, and enjoyed by many of my neighbours

Whilst there has been an understandable lack of items to report on insects and plants during the winter months there has been an abundance of sightings of unusual bird species locally. Here are a few:

November – Floodplain Forest: pair of Egyptian goose, Willen Lake a pintail duck and two ringneck parrakeet, Linford Lake Reserve a long-tailed duck, and Tattenhoe Park a great northern diver in flight.

December – Linford Lakes Reserve: a bittern; Flood Plain Forest: great white egret, goosander, and pintail duck; Tongwell Lake: a short-eared owl, and 8 goosander; Emerson Valley: a willow warbler and 2 chiffchaff; Willen Lakes: a hawfinch and black swan; Mount Farm: Mediterranean Gull; Furzton Lake: a Caspian Gull; Linford Manor: 2 ring-necked parrakeets – and the highlight, a Siberian chiffchaff at Tattenhoe.

January – Floodplain Forest: a little owl, great white egret, goosander, 17 snipe, and a garganey; Willen Lake a Mediterranean gull and woodcock Furzton Lake and Blue Lagoon a Caspian gull and Magna Park a peregrine falcon.

February – Floodplain Forest : a Caspian Gull, peregrine falcon, little owl, great white egret, pintail duck and oystercatcher; Linford Lakes Reserve: a barnacle goose; Furzton: Cetti's warbler; Little Linford Wood: 5 marsh tits: and Tattenhoe: 2 common cranes in flight.

March – Linford Lakes Reserve: goldeneye, a ruddy duck and a shelduck; Caldecotte: scaup and a pair of mandarin ducks; Howe Park Wood: a Firecrest; Tattenhoe Park: a chiffchaff and stonechat, and at Willen Lake: sand martin.

Just outside the Milton Keynes boundary two waxwings were photographed at Cranfield and a wheatear was recorded at Great Brickhill during March.

The sounds and signs of spring are now upon us so, as a task, try and observe the 6 most common bumble bees locally. They are buff-tailed, white-tailed, red-tailed, early, common carder and, the once rare but now very common, tree bumble bee. But as usual, look out for all forms of wildlife and observe, record but most of all, enjoy.

Tony Wood, April 2023

Winter in the Fells – Julie Lane



All photos © Julie Lane

I have been here for nearly six months now and I still have to pinch myself that I am actually living in this beautiful, dramatic part of the country.

As I am writing the cold weather has returned and the snow is falling outside. But overall we haven't had a bad winter up here: one wet windy couple of weeks and that lovely cold icy period before Christmas with snow on the tops.

I walk nearly every day either down in the valley and along the Lowther river or up onto the fell behind where half an hours trek up hill on good paths and you reach the wonderful view down along Ullswater to the mountains at the end, the highest being Helvellyn. Looking north you can also see my favourite local mountain Blencathra with its twin peaks and east across to Cross fell and the Pennines.

Autumn saw the beautiful colours in the local woods which are a mix of parkland trees of lime, beech and oak and the native woodlands of ash, oak, scots pine and hazel with alders and willow along the rivers. The woods are full of roe deer which are regularly seen as well as the beautiful red squirrels. We seem to be on a dividing line here where red squirrels predominate but there are the occasional greys around which are shot by the local ranger – sad but necessary.

I completely missed the salmon going up the river to spawn but did see them as they came back down afterwards, sad fungal-covered monsters lurking in the side eddies of the river waiting to die. But they had accomplished their mission and hopefully the tiny fry up in the headwaters will continue their lineage for many years to come.

When the rains came Haweswater reservoir gradually filled up and during one particularly torrential storm it topped the dam and the river below became a raging torrent for a few days. The local dippers must retreat to the side streams when this happens.



The valley is full of geese in the winter, mainly noisy greylags flying around in the fields near the river but occasionally the pink footed geese fly overhead in their V shaped skeins calling out with that lovely wild musical song. Let's hope most escape the bird flu which is in the local poultry flocks up here and has been seen in the wild birds at Ullswater recently.

The other sound of winter is the local jackdaw roost which is huge! Every evening they congregate in black clouds of noise cackling settling in nearby trees until they dive down en masse into the conifer belt just above the village. Then all goes quiet for the night until early the next morning when they are up and off to the local fields to forage for breakfast.

The snow when it came was so exhilarating – not enough to make travelling impossible but enough to entice me up onto the fells behind to crunch through the icy crust and breathe in the cold crisp air. The jagged outlines of the distant mountain were breathtaking in the silence of the morning and when the local fell ponies came over for a nose rub I was in heaven!

One of the moorland ponds was fascinating in that it had iced over just after a very wet spell when the ponds were brim full, however as the snow and ice lay there for a few days the level in the pond slowly dropped causing the ice to sink almost two meters and crack along the fault lines.



Spring is not far away now the snowdrops are up and over and it's the turn of wild daffodils and pungent wild garlic now.

Best wishes to all my MKNHS friends.

Julie Lane, March 2023

Spurn: The Adventure Continues! – Harry Appleyard



Spurn Lighthouse view © Harry Appleyard

It's been a few months since I finished my Practical Conservation Traineeship at the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's Spurn National Nature Reserve. I came to the area determined to use my newly-gained conservation skills and knowledge back home in Bucks but I soon fell in love with the area and admittedly was not prepared to leave it so suddenly in October 2022! Fortunately though, with thanks to the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, I have been able to return in 2023 to lead some of their Bespoke Birding Tours across the Spurn area.

Spurn's Bespoke Birding Tours are tailored for small groups of up to 6 people, spending the day on the lookout for the many birds the area has to offer while providing guidance and tips on their identification, by sight and sound. With reserve transport for part of the route, the entire length of the Spurn area is covered, including the Spurn peninsula and its neighbouring reserve, Kilnsea Wetlands, from 9.30am to 4.30pm. You can find out more about them, including upcoming dates for the autumn tours here: <https://www.ywt.org.uk/bespoke-birding-tours>

My first set of the tours this year took place around mid-April, with a mixture of winter stragglers and newly arrived spring migrants spotted across the area. Dark-bellied Brent Geese, one of Spurn's familiar winter visitors, were very slow to leave this year, with them still being present past mid-May. They gather here in the hundreds every year, mainly between September and early May, spending a lot of time feeding around the mudflats of the Humber estuary before heading back to their breeding grounds in Siberia. A lone Fieldfare was seen feeding near the southern tip of the reserve and a late wintering flock of 7 Pink-footed Geese were seen landing at Well Field, near the northern edge of the reserve on 18th April's tour.

As a few remnants of winter lingered, small numbers of Yellow Wagtails and Sand Martins were a sign of warmer times ahead, while some of the remaining Bar-tailed Godwits around the wetlands were gathering their stunning fiery breeding plumage. By early May, many of the familiar summer migrants had returned. Common Whitethroats were singing across much of the Spurn area, while a few Wheatears were still dropping in on passing visits.



Brent Geese at Kilnsea Wetlands -19.04.2023 © Harry Appleyard

Whinchats seemed thin on the ground this spring, so it was good to point out a couple in the last week of May, one at Parade Ground near the southern tip of the Peninsula and another by Well Field at the northeast corner of the reserve.



*(left) Gadwall x Wigeon with male Garganey, Kilnsea Wetlands – 30.05.2023 © Harry Appleyard
(right) Great Snipe, Spurn – 31.05.2023 © Harry Appleyard*

A photogenic oddity in the later tours of the season was a suspected Gadwall x Wigeon hybrid at Kilnsea Wetlands, seen side-by-side with a male Garganey on spring passage on 30th May. All other birds on 31st May were overshadowed by the arrival of Spurn's 6th Great Snipe, which was spotted landing in Clubleys Meadow by Jacob Spinks, a short distance from the Spurn Discovery Centre. A rare vagrant for Britain more likely to be found in northwestern Europe, it soon attracted a crowd. There couldn't have been a much better end to a birding tour with it still being on show in the late afternoon, favouring a small pool where it continued to delight countless more birders from the local area and further afield to 3rd June.

Not quite of the same calibre as the Great Snipe but mid-way through my last spring tour on 15th June I spotted my own rarest Spurn bird, a Nuthatch! It was given away by calls as it flew over Burrow Pit at the north end of the reserve, mobbed by 2 Meadow Pipits as it made its way south. Though they are a familiar sight in many of our landlocked woodlands, they have so far generated less than 25 records in the Spurn area, making them an even rarer visitor than some of the more exotic migrants like Hoopoe and European Bee-eater! It was re-located shortly afterwards by two others at the Warren Cottage but not seen to leave.

Some of Spurn's other inhabitants took the spotlight throughout the season. It was a productive year for the Green Hairstreak butterfly, which are plentiful across the Spurn peninsula but a few were also present further north near Kilnsea Wetlands this year. Several species of odonata were on the wing on the warm sunny afternoon of 16th May, including a male Red-veined Darter which was the first recorded at Spurn since 2021. Initially looking like a very early Ruddy Darter at first glance, its suspiciously blueish lower eyes were apparent in a low fly-past and its identity was quickly confirmed by Adam Hutt and Tim Jones, who also noted the subtle reddish-veins in the wings from my images. It is believed to be both a resident and migratory species here, with this one possibly being a recent arrival from continental Europe.



Male Red-veined Darter, Spurn 16.05.2023 © Harry Appleyard

This spring certainly didn't disappoint, with a wide variety of both Spurn's regular and scarcer species being on show. You can never quite fully predict what you will find on these tours, so there's always a thrill in pointing out a species that has just arrived or is not often found there. It's always a pleasure to talk about the area, the changing landscape and the conservation work in its many forms being undertaken to maintain it. Again, many thanks to Yorkshire Wildlife Trust for bringing me back to this amazing little part of the world and the Spurn Bird Observatory for their hospitality and local knowledge.

Harry Appleyard, July 2023

Four moss species new to Pitsford identified by MKNHS member Frances Higgs and fellow bryologist Rachel Carter

The July edition of the BCN Wildlife Trust's e-newsletter contains an interesting story item about the identification of 4 moss species new to Pitsford Water Nature Reserve in Northamptonshire during a survey day in May

The two bryologists, Frances Higgs and Rachel Carter, discovered these four species new to the site: *Hypnum jutlandicum*, *Polytrichum juniperinum*, *Thuidium tamariscinum* and *Pleurozium schreberi*. The last of these hadn't been recorded in Northamptonshire since 1899! Many of you will know Frances as a long-standing MKNHS member.

The Whaup – the what?! What’s in a name – Matt Andrews

In my youth, way back in the early seventies, my birdwatching exploits took place mainly within the parish boundaries of the little village of Flamstead, not too far from St. Albans. I was a lucky lad as the bird life around the village was prolific and it wasn’t difficult to see many different birds on a day’s walking, perhaps taking in five or six miles of strolling across the fields and through the woods which thankfully, are still present to this day.

I would delight at the abundance of some species and bemoan the absence of others... Sparrowhawks were very rare, Buzzard, Raven and Kite non-existent, whereas Tree Sparrows were abundant as were Yellowhammers and Skylarks with House Martins nesting under many old and newer eaves, not something seen there today sadly. Some of the older villagers used to refer to these birds by their familiar country names; so for instance, Tree Sparrows were Hill Sparrows (the scientific name of *Passer Montanus* gives a clue to this name), Skylarks were sometimes Laverocks whilst Fieldfare were Jack Birds or even Felties.



Hill Sparrow (Photo © Matt Andrews)

Wood Owls and White Owls were there; Wood, Brown or Tawny Owls nested regularly in the old chestnut trees bordering the churchyard as well as some of the tall beeches in one of the local woods whilst White or Barn Owls were in a very few of the old farmyard barns.

Most of the old villagers were former egg collectors so would tell me where they had collected clutches of Butcher Bird eggs (Red-backed Shrike) amongst the furze and hawthorns near to Trowley Bottom, the

next village along, whilst several pairs of Cobweb Birds (Spotted Flycatchers) nested back then within the village itself. How to locate difficult-to-find nests of Nettle Creepers (Whitethroats) or Titlarks (Meadow Pipits) was explained to me, as well as locating the commoner birds’ nests of species such as Dishwashers (Pied Wagtails), Ray’s Wagtails (Yellow Wagtails), Scribblers or Scribbler Larks (Yellowhammers – from their egg markings) and Ebbs or Common Buntings (Corn Buntings) who nested only upon the ground in the corn fields there and required careful and prolonged watching to find their little nests.

Bottle Tits or Oven Tits (Long-tailed Tits) were clearly named from their beautifully constructed nests but Least Willow Wrens (Chiffchaff or Willow Warblers) were more well-known through their size and habits. Nested in the same Beeches as the Tawny Owls, there was even a pair of Yaffles or Rain Birds (Green Woodpeckers) – named after their familiar yelping calls and perhaps the clarity of those calls prior to rain showers.

Older publications gave regional country names and there is a wonderful collection of these in a copy of Reverend J.C. Atkinson’s *British Birds and Nests*, which an uncle gave to me when I was around eight years old. Some as mentioned, stem from descriptions of the nests or eggs whilst others refer to size comparisons, plumages, habits and songs; Night Warbler you will not be surprised to learn is the older term for both Reed and Sedge Warblers whilst the Dunnock or Hedge Sparrow, the latter name not often used these days, was also known as Shuffle-wing from the female’s habit of surreptitiously doing just this when advertising herself to a male who may not actually be the father of her current clutch of eggs!

Many of you will undoubtedly know of the Norfolk Plover or the Thick-knee – the Stone Curlew – as well as Johnny Frenchman – the Red-legged Partridge – from their origins and distribution in this country. But who would guess that the Holm Screech was a Mistle Thrush

(in early literature spelled as Missel Thrush) or that the Mavis or Thristle was the Song Thrush! The Tinkershere was the Guillemot whilst the Curlew was the Whaup, presumably from its brief alarm calls – what wonderfully evocative names!



The Whaup (Photo © Matt Andrews)



The Tinkershere (Photo © Matt Andrews)

Some of the older names are now making a resurgence too. The Northern Wheatear is a name once used in Victorian times (along with Fallow Smack, Clodhopper, Fallow Finch and Chackbird) and is now the modern name for the same bird. The Northern Fulmar is another such name making a comeback as opposed to simply the Fulmar whilst the Victorians' Barn Swallow is the currently accepted name for the Swallow.

But it is the Snake-Bird or Emmet-hunter – the Wryneck – or the Fern Owl, Jar Owl, Evechur or Goatsucker – the Nightjar – which stir the boyish imagination in me still of ornithological treasures now largely lost to us or rarer yet than they were. The origins of many names are steeped in the history of our countryside. The Goatsucker name, incidentally, referred to the Nightjar's believed habit of creeping up upon sleeping goats and using its extraordinarily wide gape, latching onto and then sucking the milk from their teats and of course, causing it to go sour in the process! They were often killed because of this!

Even modern names have historically interesting backgrounds; Barnacle Geese were so named because it was thought even until the mid-nineteenth century that they overwintered at the bottom of the sea and that the black, white and grey Goose Barnacles often found attached to washed up driftwood were in fact the geese hibernating in a larval form prior to hatching out into the adult birds. This was actually believed by several eminent naturalists including the great Gilbert White of Selborne fame no less, who also recorded that Swallows hibernated in winter at the bottom of ponds – because they were seen skimming across the water surface prior to disappearing in late Autumn.

The origins and explanations behind these old names give a fascinating insight into the thinking of our ancestors and their beliefs about the habits of species which they couldn't possibly have known about other than through their own observations. In many ways it is a credit to their detailed observations which gave us these older names and, although we think now that we have the definitive names, family orders and species nomenclature readily available in the myriad publications available to us, who can possibly say what these same birds will be known as in another century?

We should remember too that similar such names exist for many insects, plants, mammals and fishes and that a whole history of observation and recording from as far back as the fifteenth century awaits examination, much of which is as relevant today as it was when it originated from the naturalists of old. I like to think that by referring to many of the older records and publications still available, understanding what they are referring to with regards to habitat, habits and perceived abundance, then applying just a few of the older

and wiser methodologies to maintaining our countryside, it may be possible to reverse some of these species' declines and assist too in the preservation of habitat and especially breeding success.

It is not only our modern more scientific approaches to species management which can assist in these recoveries; look at the success birds such as Nightingale and Turtle Dove are experiencing at re-wilding projects like as those at Knepp in Sussex and Wild Ken Hill in Norfolk, sensitive habitat management from far back re-establishing a naturally controllable balance between managed farmland and nature.



The Muir Fowl (Photo © Matt Andrews)

Muir Fowl (Red Grouse) are now managed so intensely on shooting estates to the almost total exclusion of other moorland species that their habitat is now often described as 'moorland desert'! If these fragile moorland ecosystems are kept in such parlous states, it is entirely possible that the very grouse they are designed to cater for may well die out due to the lack of the bio-diversity so essential for maintaining a balanced environment...no variety, no heather! This wasn't the case even only fifty years ago when the moors were more sympathetically maintained.

It was through a 19th-century publication where I first understood how Turtle Doves nested in small, loose colonies and that their breeding success depended upon such relationships. I can recall clearly finding groups of up to ten pairs nesting close to one another, never singly, in the woods around Flamstead during the 1970s, but failed to connect this behaviour to breeding success as our early naturalists with their quaint beliefs in hibernating Barnacle Geese and Swallows had done. The RSPB were unaware of this when I contacted them about their own Turtle Dove management schemes some years back. They drew comparisons to the Passenger Pigeons of North America who eventually fell to extinction, with the last lonely bird being Martha who was kept in Cincinnati Zoo until she died in 1914 after the last known males had died in 1910. They had ceased breeding several years before because of their inability to nest alone; there being a finite number of pairs required for successful reproduction in the tiny and sparsely separated colonies, they were forced to try and breed in – with extinction being the inevitable result!

I leave you with the thought that whilst Cushats (Wood Pigeons), Harry Redcaps (Goldfinches), Aberdervines (Siskins) and Cobblers-Awl Ducks (Avocets) are still in a relatively stable position with some species such as Buff-backed Herons (Cattle Egrets) and Mire Drums (Bitterns) actually increasing in numbers, it is a sobering fact that the majority of familiar British bird species are now in decline. The Wrekin Dove (Turtle Dove) and Solan Goose (Gannet) as well as the poor old Bonxie (Great Skua) are having a very hard time here now through both habitat loss and change, shooting pressures and latterly, Avian Influenza ... all brought about by modern, intensive land-management practices in one way or other.

We know so much about our birds that it is a travesty that we are seeing such huge declines now. Perhaps we can find more clues to assisting their recovery in historical natural history literature where our forebears gave names to species reflecting their close observations and association with the countryside. May the Yeoring, Black Bonnet, Sheep-Stare and Lint-White continue to thrive as they did over 150 years ago and indeed, only 30 years back too!

Matt Andrews, February 2023

Joan Lancaster



Photo with Joan and Wally 5th and 6th from the left, taken on the occasion of Dorothy Hood's 90th birthday celebrations in 2001. For those who remember the people standing in the photo, from left to right they are Kent Fox, Bernard Frewin, Jean Kent, Margaret Wickham, Wally Lancaster, Joan Lancaster, Frances Higgs, John Prince, Audrey Prince, George Higgs, John Wickham. Dorothy is sitting down.

Joan Lancaster died in mid-March 2023, just a month short of her 90th birthday. She was a member of Milton Keynes Natural History Society for many years, along with her husband Wally who died in 2009. As her daughter Ann has said: "The Natural History Society has been a big part of Mum & Dad's lives and they made lots of good friends there".

Joan and Wally were very active members of the Society and were very good friends with near neighbours Margaret and John Wickham. They generally travelled together to meetings and were known as the 'Bletchley 4' in some quarters! They were regulars at indoor and outdoor meetings and events such as moth trapping, recording or trips further afield. They were also always very caring and concerned for the well-being of other members. From 1992 to 1999 Joan was Treasurer of the Society. In later years, Joan and her good friend Margaret would often be Roy Maycock's assistants, helping him collect plant specimens on society outings. She continued to be an active member until about three years ago when she moved down to Dorset to be nearer to her daughter and other family there.

Her particular natural history interests were in birds and wild flowers and she contributed a lot of time and effort to the plant surveys carried out by the Society at the newly established Hazeley Wood as part of a wider monitoring programme. She and Wally led plenty of walks on the summer programme for the Society over the years, and a particular favourite was to Sewell cutting, a great place to see orchids and other chalk grassland flowers. By coincidence there will be a walk to Sewell cutting on the summer programme this year on 23rd May.

Apart from admiring the orchids, those who knew Joan may pause a moment to remember her there, "a lovely lady", a kind and generous person who enjoyed a joke and was always ready to help others. It's a great privilege to have known both Joan and Wally and we send our sincere condolences to her family.

Linda Murphy and Martin Kincaid

Dave Roberts



We recently received news of the death of Dave Roberts in early April. Dave was an active member of the Society for many years. A plain-speaking Scotsman with a big laugh and sense of humour to match, Dave was a member of the committee for some time and Chairman of the Society from 1996-98. He and his wife Chris spent many hours mothing in a variety of locations with George and Frances Higgs. They also joined members of the Society on a trip to Israel in the days when groups of members took off to foreign parts as well as exploring local wildlife sites.

Although Dave has not been to Society meetings in recent years, he has kept up with the news and changes via Chris who continues to come to meetings whenever possible. Dave spent a lot of time at the Thornborough and Coombs Woodland reserve and was very fond of the place, so his family have decided to donate in his memory to support the reserve. His death was totally unexpected despite the health problems that he had developed and we send our sincere condolences to Chris and the rest of the family.

Linda Murphy April 2023

May Wildflowers in Milton Keynes – Mike LeRoy

This is the third in a series of articles about flowering plants that can be found in the Milton Keynes area in spring and early summer.

Which spring flowers can you expect to see during May?

Spring flowers in May in woodlands, hedges and beside paths

[AWI stands for Ancient Woodland Indicator]

First, a cautionary note:

When you are examining or photographing flowers, especially less common ones, please avoid creating a trampled path, because this makes them more vulnerable. If you must get close, please reach them by an indirect, more concealed route. Better still, consider making do by taking your photo from further away. Last week, in one of our Ancient Woodlands, a

heavily trampled off-path route was created through vegetation, which has drawn excessive attention to a small and declining number of an uncommon flower, putting them at risk.

Herb Paris *Paris quadrifolia* (AWI)

Herb Paris is a strange-looking almost ethereal plant. Mostly, it has four (occasionally 3 or 5) broad leaves, almost diamond-shaped, slightly-rounded but pointed and dark-green. All the leaves are towards the top of a slender, hairless stalk and lie flat. In the centre of the leaves a spike holds an unobtrusive, small, single, greenish flower which looks more like a double whorl of pointed leaves. It has eight slender long pale-yellow stamens, at the centre of which is the ovary, a small purple bauble. 'Is that it?' you think, when looking at such an understated flower: yes, but that is its mystery. It is largely found in Ancient Woodlands, in MK in Linford Wood in particular. It is a 'shy' plant, often partially hidden in the underwood and at edges of woodland rides and there is a delay before the flower shows above the leaves. Paris in the name is not about France but from the Latin '*par*' meaning equal, which is probably to describe its symmetry. It is in the Lily family (*Liliaceae*) which has other one-offs, including Lily-of-the Valley, Snakeshead Fritillary, Butcher's Broom, and Grape-Hyacinth *Muscari neglectum*; this or its garden-escape version *Muscari armeniacum*, has also been on show in MK grasslands through April into May.



Yellow Archangel (Photo © Ian Saunders
Stoke Wood, Stoke Goldington 24 May 2018)

Yellow Archangel *Lamiastrum galeobdolon* (AWI)

Think of a white Dead-nettle and imagine it with yellow flowers, but the Yellow Archangel is a far less common Dead-nettle and is mostly found in Ancient Woodlands. The leaves are oval and pointed, with coarse teeth. There are several flowers with each pair of leaves up the stem, each flower is hooded and with a lower lip. They are bright yellow, with slight red or orange streaks on the lip. The plant's presence can tend to indicate old woodland banks or ditches. I know only a couple of patches of this in Linford Wood, and they are next to the wood's boundary banks and ditches. You may also find it in Howe Park and Shenley Wood. One potential confusion is a garden-escape which is very similar but with variegated leaves: *Lamiastrum galeobdolon* ssp. *argentatum* (if you know heraldry terminology you may recognise that argent = silver, which is the colour of the streaks on the leaves). I have seen a few of this sub-species on the west bank of the Loughton Brook, in Bancroft valley. It is well worth submitting records of either of these plants, with their exact location. [To know how and where to submit a record of this, you can check the MKNHS website Reference section and click on Recording.]

Herb-Robert *Geranium robertianum* (AWI)

Herb-Robert comes into flower usually in late April or early May, but the leaves emerge well before that and sometimes remain through the winter. Although it is an Ancient Woodland Indicator it is also common more widely by hedges, in woods and on disturbed ground. It is in the Geranium family (*Geraniaceae*) and the leaves have a strong mousy smell when you get close. It is one of the Crane's-bills, so-called because the shape of the seed-head is like the beak, narrow head and long neck of a Crane. Its stem tends to be dark red and hairy. Its flower has five pink petals which have a smooth edge all around. The anthers in the flower are orange or purple. Who was Robert? Probably 'Robin Goodfellow' aka Puck, the mischief-making house goblin of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. A different account is that it used to be called St Robert, or St Robert's Wort, after an 11th Century monk who used it medicinally.

Lords-and-Ladies *Arum maculatum*

Here's another strange, one-off plant. You have probably been seeing its large shiny green leaves ever since January, beside paths and in woodlands, sometimes in dense clumps. Lords-and-Ladies has three distinct stages, so you may not realise that they are one and the same plant. A single, broad, large and pointed, shiny, arrow-shaped leaf springs upwards from ground-level, and some plants have dark streaks on these leaves. The leaf remains without flower for months until late April and early May when a paler leaf-like structure called the 'spathe' emerges and, within it, its purple 'spadix'. This is stage two, followed by a third stage in July or August, when a cluster of orange-red berries emerge on a spike, from which the spathe and spadix have gone. This flower emits a slight odour that attracts insect pollinators: birds also carry its seeds away. It is a common plant in damp and well-drained shady places and usually numerous where you find it. An old name for it is Cuckoo-pint, but it has many other names, mostly innuendoes. It looks poisonous and it is.

Bugle *Ajuga reptans*

There are quite a few plants that look a little like Bugle: bluey-purple with quite small leaves, so this one needs careful attention to several of its features. Some people assume that identifying flowering plants is all about the flower, but other parts of a plant are just as necessary for identification. With Bugle, try starting at ground level. Here, its lowest leaves (known as 'basal' leaves) are in a circle ('rosette') around the base of the plant, and these lower ones are larger and have long stalks. The leaves up the stem are in opposite pairs and are smaller than the basal leaves and tend to be dark-green. None of the leaves have toothed edges. When the plant first emerges, it is scrunched up before the stem stretches fully and the pairs of leaves become spaced out from each other. The stem is distinctive, so feel it. It is square and is hairy on only two opposite sides. The flowers are grouped in stages on the upper sections of the stem. Beneath each group are small leaf-lookalikes called 'bracts' which tend to be more purple-green than the leaves further down. The flowering parts ('corolla') are usually powder-blue-purple, but occasionally these are pink or white: their colour has no significance. The shape of the flower is of connected lips, with a tiny top one, two-lobed side ones and a lower lip which is longer. Because this plant spreads through runners, it tends to be in clumps. It is usually in damp and shady grassland or in damp woods or by hedgerows. If you check each of the features above you will be able to avoid any confusion with other plants such as Self-heal, the Woundworts, or the Dead-nettles.

May Spring flowers of grasslands, waysides & grid-road verges

Common Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*

If you don't know this plant, it is worth getting to know as you can find it in some meadows and other grasslands in MK, including on some grid-road verges. It is popular with bumblebees and other pollinators, and a sign of good grassland management to benefit wildlife. In this instance, the colour of the flower is significant to distinguish it from other species. The flowers are a rich, deep yellow and often with a tinge of red or orange, which is why some people call it 'eggs & bacon'. The plant is low down because its habit is creeping, with its stalks lying down, and the stems are solid. But there are other Bird's-foot Trefoils, including a taller one, Greater Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus pedunculatus*, with longer narrower leaves; and a variety in some commercial seed-mixes *Lotus corniculatus* var *sativus* which stands up more but has a hollow stem and lacks the red or orange tinge to the flower. So look at a good identification book to check for these similar species.

Bird Cherry *Prunus padus*

Although Bird Cherry *Prunus padus* is an indigenous shrub or small tree, it is native mainly in northern Britain, but has been widely planted in towns and cities further south, including Milton Keynes. Perhaps it is popular because its long white clusters of flowers follow, in late April or early May, the other white-flowering spring shrubs of March and April such as Cherry Plum *Prunus cerasifera* and Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*. The shape of the Bird Cherry's white flower clusters remind me of the general shape of the mauve flower clusters of *Buddleia davidii*, but the proper description of such clusters is 'raceme' and these ones either droop or stick out sideways. The leaves of Bird Cherry are elliptical and have fine saw-teeth. Its black cherries emerge in July, but don't try them, they are bitter. Our member, Alan Birkett, suggests that this is why 'bird' is in its name as birds do eat these. [See Alan's *Field Guide to the Trees of Britain and Europe* which has several photos of every tree, showing more of their features than most other tree guides.]

Lesser Stitchwort *Stellaria graminea*

Lesser Stitchwort *Stellaria graminea* tends to flower in May, which is later than Greater Stitchwort *Stellaria holostea*. Lesser Stitchwort tends to prefer more open woods, grasslands and rough grass area. It is the smaller of the two, but a critical feature to look for is that the five petals of the flower divide well over halfway down. Take care not to confuse this with other five-petalled white flowers such as Chickweeds or Mouse-ears which are also in the Campion family (*Caryophyllaceae*). This is where a good field guide is needed so you can see illustrations of these similar plants and compare the descriptions of their features. Just comparing photos is more likely to confuse you. If you search the MKNHS website under Reference and click on Identification Guides, then on Plants, you will find several recommended field guides to flowering plants.

The following should also come into flower in MK during May, in grasslands or beside paths and some in woodlands:

Ragged-Robin *Lychnis flos-cuculi*

Red Clover *Trifolium pratense*

Lady's-mantle species. *Alchemilla vulgaris* agg.

Self-heal *Prunella vulgaris*.

Mike LeRoy 4th May 2023

A selection of reports from Society Summer walks

Society's visit to Pilch Field 2.5.2023 – Jenny Mercer



Pilch Field (Photo © Jenny Mercer)

The photo above shows the ridge and furrow of these unimproved Pilch fields pastures. When Singleborough parish enclosed these fields the old pattern of ploughing remained as a “footprint” of the former landscape.

Plants which prefer the better drainage on ridges include Green-winged orchids and Cowslips, which are out just now [early May].



Green-winged orchid (Photo © Martine Harvey); Adder's tongue (Photo © Bob Phillips)

Soon Pignut and Birds-foot trefoil, Salad burnet and a ton of other plants will appear. Hundreds of Common spotted orchids will appear too within the next few weeks, and in July the spiny restharrow with pink sweet pea-like flowers appear. August and September bring a profusion of blue scabious especially in Little Pilch – the smaller field to the north-east of the larger field, accessed through a big gate. In the damper furrows and on edges of ridges, the unusual Adder's-tongue fern is showing well plus Lady's smock/Cuckoo flower. It will soon disappear.

In the significantly wet areas there are marshy areas where the quite tall Marsh valerian is beginning to show well, and there are Marsh marigolds too, with Bugle and Creeping jenny. Marsh valerian is unusual in having male and female flowers on separate plants. It is the original source of the drug Vallium.

It is also a good site for birds, such as Snipe, which overwinter in Little Pilch. I saw a Short-eared owl last autumn on the highest ridge of the bigger field. And in Little Pilch last Tuesday evening many of us were treated to several sightings of hares and 3 roe deer as we entered the field slowly, and watched carefully.

Butterflies and moths are in good numbers too.

Enjoy visiting this 30 acre BBOWT reserve, which needs volunteers to keep it free from the threatening scrub incursions of hawthorn, blackthorn and bramble. Aylesbury Vale Conservation Volunteers have done good work recently . If interested, offer your services, and there is a BBOWT contact – Leo Keedy. The old overgrown pond area is to be dug out in 2023. Superb news.

Remember, no dogs on this Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is best as cattle graze from 1st June until 31st October.

There are great satellite images on Google maps. Just input Pilch Field SSSI and then select 'layers' then satellite image. Amazingly, you can even see the superb ant hills, and some impression of the ridge and furrow areas.

Jenny Mercer, May 2023

Society Walk at Sewell Railway Cutting, Beds – 23rd May 2023

This was a visit to the nearest area of chalk grassland to Milton Keynes, the Sewell Railway Cutting. A short-lived railway line operated here, between Leighton Buzzard and Dunstable. One of our late members, Wally Lancaster, had been a train driver here in the 1950s and he always enjoyed revisiting the site to enjoy its flora and fauna. Wally and his wife Joan, who passed away very recently, were stalwarts of the Society for many years so it was nice to remember them.

It was a clear, sunny night and a good number turned out. A short walk from French's Avenue brought us to the start of the railway cutting and immediately we could see a variety of chalk grassland flora including Common Twayblade (abundant), Chalk Milkwort and Kidney Vetch. One plant which we had not seen in the past was Star-of-Bethlehem, but we found numerous clumps low down on the banks. It was interesting to note that those in shade were already closing whilst those flowers in full sun remained open. On previous visits, we had noted how scrubby the embankments were but happily, work has been undertaken to remove much of the scrub creating much more open, sunny areas for flora and insect life. However, it was probably a bird that stole the show. A male Corn Bunting was holding a territory in a hedge and gave great views as he sang his jingling song! Sadly, turtle doves, which we heard here in the past, were not heard and are now probably absent from this area but we were able to enjoy Swallows and Swifts soaring overhead. A female Kestrel perched up on our return leg.



Male Corn Bunting singing © Julian Lambley

We eventually made our way to the 'bottom' of the nature reserve where it intersects with part of the Icknield Way. Here we were able to look across to the chalk cliffs of Totterhoe Quarry. We watched rabbits enjoying the evening sunshine and a Roe Deer was spotted. Invertebrates were a little disappointing as the temperature dropped quickly, but Green Carpet moths were emerging and Tim Arnold captured a specimen of *Agonopterix heracliana*. Towards the end of the walk, Martin Kincaid managed to pot a specimen of the iridescent 'long-horned moth' *Adela reaumurella*. This was a female – the antennae of the male are about two and half times its body length! The only other insect of note was a Greater Bloody-nosed Beetle. When handled, this beetle did indeed have a 'nose bleed', or to be more accurate, emitted reflex blood from its mouth, a defence strategy which provokes most predators to drop it. A single Red Admiral was the only butterfly.

We returned to our meeting point at around 9pm and a few of us then went on to The White Lion, Chalk Hill, just down the road from some refreshment.

Martin Kincaid, May 2023

Stonepit Field Site Visit, Tuesday 6th June 2023

The evening of the visit was decidedly cool and dull with a fresh breeze – not ideal conditions for flowering plants and invertebrates which were the main focus of the planned evening. There was a surprisingly good turnout given the conditions with over 20 members and visitors, and once again we were able to enjoy the remarkable biodiversity of this site. In a brief introduction, Joe reminded the group of its history. The tree-lined south-eastern border had been planted by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation in c. 1970. The main meadow areas including the limestone scrape were developed from 1993 onwards by the Parks Trust on previous farmland thus providing a habitat for calcareous loving meadow flowers, grasses, trees and shrubs: an exemplar of how an uncommon biodiverse habitat can be created. The balancing ponds were added in 2007, associated with Oakridge Park housing development.

Based on three separate recce visits to the site and listings from previous visits, a Checklist of species that might be observed that evening was distributed to members. The aim was to identify as many as possible of the species listed and to add to it any new sightings for the draft cumulative list for the site which Mike LeRoy had initiated in 2019. To manage the number of participants in this underfoot plant sensitive area, the group was split into two. Highlights are summarised in this short report.

Meadow areas

These cover much of the site interspersed with paths, 'hedges', and clumps of trees and shrubs. There is a rich mix of grasses and flowering plants which included the semi-parasitic Yellow Rattle; Salad Burnet; Common Vetch; Meadow Buttercup; Bulbous Buttercup; Ox-eye Daisy; Beaked Hawksbeard; Goats beard; Meadow Cranesbill; and Red Clover. Common Broomrape, a parasitic species which was abundant and widely distributed in 2022, had virtually disappeared with only a few specimens found in just one area. Pyramidal Orchid was a welcome addition to the meadow species list. Charles Kessler was able to identify eight species of grass on the checklist for us including the delicate Quaking Grass.



Pyramidal Orchid and Quaking Grass; Birdsfoot trefoil at Stonepit Field (Photos © Joe Clinch);

Limestone scrape area and its edges

The species of the scrape area proper had clearly suffered from the dry weather of last summer and the cool spring particularly the Bee Orchids which were few in number and stunted with yellow-brown deformed leaves. Scrape edges have fared better and here the Bee Orchids were healthy although fewer in number. Birds-foot Trefoil, Horseshoe Vetch, Kidney Vetch, and Common Rockrose were also doing well here. Amongst species new to the area this year are Selfheal; a Thyme species; and Common Blue Daisy (*globularia vulgaris*) commonly called Globularia. The latter is not a native British wildflower. It is found in continental Europe in rocky calcareous habitats. How it arrived is a mystery.



Common Blue Daisy Globularia vulgaris (Photo © Julian Lambley)

Tree/shrub margins, rough ground and pond areas

Six spring white-flowered trees above the scrape were seen in close proximity, albeit for the first two named the flowering season was already over: Whitebeam; Wayfaring Tree; Guelder Rose; Dogwood; Hawthorn; and Common Elder. Flowers at the edge of the tree/shrub areas included Hedge Bedstraw; Red Campion; Marjoram; and new to the list Wild Liquorice (see photo below, taken several days after the visit); Bush Vetch; and Bladder Campion. The Yellow Irises in full flower made a splendid display at the pond edges. Much of

the Gorse on the banks above the pond has died back; the reasons for this are unknown but may again be the drought of last summer.



Wild Liquorice *Astragalus glycyphyllos* (Photo © Joe Clinch); Muntjac (Photo © Harry Appleyard)

Birds, Mammals, Amphibians and Reptiles

Harry Appleyard again undertook the task of bird identification at the site. As he puts it, it was 'a fairly drab and dreary evening for June, so unsurprisingly there weren't as many birds as on previous visits but there were still several species keen to have their voices heard, the loudest of the bunch being a Song Thrush which seemed to be mimicking an Oyster Catcher... Singles of Blackcap and Chiffchaff were heard singing, while overhead trios of House Martins, Swifts and Little Egrets were seen, the latter flying over the ponds throughout the evening.' A Red Kite flying over is new to the list for the site which now stands at 40 species. A Muntjac showed itself to Harry before disappearing into the woodland area. A Hedgehog carcass on the scrape was examined by Martin Kincaid – probably a Badger kill. Common Frog and a dead Grass Snake found by Julian Lambley completed our vertebrate sightings.

Invertebrates

The cool dull conditions were not good for finding invertebrates, with no Butterflies, Damselflies, or Dragonflies seen. But two new moth species were identified: Drab Looper; and Shark Moth. There were also three insects at various stages of development new to the list: a Longhorn Beetle; Common Pill Woodlouse; and Field Grasshopper plus one spider – the Flower Crab Spider. These sightings were the result of active collection by Simon Bunker, Paul Lund and Martin Kincaid.

Overview

This is an important site for observing calcareous loving plants and the invertebrate species that depend on them. Our evening visits are a snapshot in time of its biodiversity and it is encouraging that we continue to add to our knowledge of how diverse it is.

Joe Clinch, June 2023