Magpie Digest Summer 2024

Welcome to this summer 2024 edition of the Magpie Digest which contains a selection of articles that have appeared on the Society website over the last six months. The Digest begins with a summary of our Chair Matt Andrew's address to the Society's AGM, held on 12 March, and the winning photos from the 2024 Photo Competition. Other reports comprise (pp. 3-14) a selection of Society early summer walks, as well as (pp. 15-20) the formation of a new MKNHS Plant Group, which was set up in April, and has since held 2 field visits, with another planned for 11 August.

If you have any comments, or would like to contribute, please get in touch.

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of the Magpie Digest and wish you all the very best for a wildlife-rich summer and autumn!

Linda Murphy

Our Chair speaks – Matt Andrew's 2024 AGM address

In his address to the members, Matt Andrew thanked many of the people who had contributed to the vitality and success of the Society over the past year. The Society currently has 100 members.

Matt noted that

- Over the past twelve months, the Society has been able to meet its stated aims: to provide a meeting place for people with Natural History interests; to encourage the study and preservation of our flora and fauna; and to provide a forum for Natural History debate.
- The Society hosts wildlife walks and talks throughout the twelve months of the year, including meeting on a weekly basis The varied programme of activities provides value for money for the £25 annual subscription.

Matt said that with the death of Colin Docketty, a big hole had been left in the Society's activity agenda. Colin had left a legacy for the Society in the form of a huge library of natural history books which his family kindly donated to the Society. These will be available in forthcoming book sales. Many of these publications were specialised and rare and the books will be offered for sale with all the proceeds helping to bolster the Society's funds.

Succession: Matt emphasised the need for continued involvement and contributions by Members in the many practical tasks needed to run the Society, such as being on the Committee. He put out a general call to all and asked Members to think over the coming weeks and months, how they might contribute.

The 2024 Photo Competition

This year's annual MKNHS Photo Competition took place in January 2024, with the results decided by popular vote at the Society's meeting in the Cruck Barn.

There were five categories; Birds; Plants & Fungi; Insects; Other Animals; Astronomy, Landscapes, Minerals etc. After selection of the best two photos in each category, the overall winners were chosen by members from among these 10 photos across all categories. As usual, the standard was very high. Congratulations to Paul Lund (Winner of the Shield), Justin Long and Susan Hayward for their exceptional photos.

The 3 winning entries are shown below.

1. Brimstone Butterfly in Bancroft – Paul Lund

Taken without High speed flash or IR lightbeams, just guess focus, point and shoot.

2nd prize: Robin's Head – Justin Long

3rd prize: Frogs – Susan Hayward

MKNHS Pilch Field visit – Tuesday 30 April 2024 – Report

A group of about 20 visited Pilch Field SSSI on a cool but dry evening – not entirely dry underfoot, but dry enough once we navigated our way past the ponds near the entrance. Jenny and Di were well prepared and carrying bundles of sticks to mark areas where less common plants were found. Pilch Field is an amazing Site of Special Scientific Interest, well-managed these days by BBOWT, comprising old ploughland left as pasturage about 200 years ago after the Enclosure of the open field agriculture of 'Ridge and furrow', in the Parish of Singleborough. Its damp areas of fen vegetation are treacherous and we avoided them – though the wonderful show of Marsh marigolds was in the middle of the western swampy part of the big field.

There was plenty to see in the larger field, with only a couple of members venturing into Little Pilch. Cowslips and Green-winged orchids are in profusion on the ridges; bugle too. The furrows are much damper and full of Hard rush with some sedges seen. The cool April weather has delayed grass growth this year, and Adder's tongue fern was easily spotted. Often 1 square metre of this atypical fern was seen (Jenny noted at least 10 areas of $1m^2$) and one of $2m^2$ as we walked back. No sign of Moonwort so far this year though.

Adder's tongue fern (Photo ©Bob Phillips)

Hoary plantain Plantago media, distinguished by its 'crinkly' pleated leaves (Photo © Janice Robertson)

Twayblade (Photo © Bob Phillips)

Yellow rattle was plentiful, and beginning to flower, but much of it stunted. Meadowsweet was much in evidence, but will not be in flower for another few weeks; likewise Marsh thistle.

Towards the end of the visit we had a great treat finding 2 Twayblade orchids …in bud… just before we turned back towards dusk, having had to abandon going into Little Pilch. Jenny had never seen twayblade orchid in Pilch in 30 years of visiting. They were near the site where Early Marsh orchids are sometimes found in June-July, though none seen last year…

A list of plants and birds observed is available.

Report prepared by Jenny Mercer and others

NORTH BUCKS WAY & HAZELEY WOOD – Visit Report - Tues 14 May

About twenty MKNHS members met on Tuesday evening 14th May at Oakhill next to Hazeley Academy for exploration of a section of North Bucks Way and Hazeley Wood.

NORTH BUCKS WAY

North Bucks Way is a long-distance walking route, 34 miles from Pulpit Hill on the Chilterns to the Great Ouse at Old Wolverton. It reaches MK from Whaddon and joins the Oakhill Lane section just south of Oxley Mead. From there it heads north to Calverton Lane, passing Hazeley Wood just south of Whitehouse.

Wildlife Corridors of Milton Keynes

In 1994 a report was published of a survey initiated by Milton Keynes Council, supported by: The Parks Trust, Buckinghamshire County Council, The New Towns Commission and English Nature: it was *The Wildlife Corridors of Milton Keynes*. This was the basis for an MK Council Planning policy for protection of the biodiversity of a designated network of wildlife corridors throughout the MK urban area. This remains in force in 2024. Wildlife Corridors in MK have the same status as designated Local Wildlife Sites. Unfortunately, when outline plans for Whitehouse were approved 20 years ago, the planning policies at that time did not stop development cutting across North Bucks Way. Until the last decade only one road crossed it, the Shenley Road to Whaddon. There are now five roads crossing it. The last of these to be constructed was a northwards extension of V2 Snelshall Street from Oakhill roundabout, by Hazeley Academy, across the North Bucks Way to join Barrosa Way; but this road was anticipated in the original 1970 Plan for Milton Keynes. North Bucks Way remains an important wildlife corridor, running from the south of MK for much of the way up its west side.

Hedges as nature reserves

Hedges *'are our biggest nature reserve'* says Robert Wolton in a very readable new book published in March 2024: *Hedges* (British Wildlife Collection / Bloomsbury, 2024). In one 85-metre long farm hedge in Devon he found 2,070 species:125 plants, mosses & liverworts; 80 fungi and lichens; 50 vertebrate animals (amphibians, reptiles, birds & mammals);1,718 insects; and 97 other invertebrates.

North Bucks Way has substantial hedges on both sides for long sections of its route through MK, so it was interesting to find what wildlife could be heard and seen on a Tuesday evening. This route has added wildlife interest because much of it is beyond the western edge of MK's housing and other development, until Whitehouse.

Wildlife of this section of North Bucks Way

Harry Appleyard kept ahead of the group to hear what birds were about. One that was particularly pleasing to hear was a Willow Warbler with its sweet descending song. On our return journey Harry saw a Tawny Owl take off from trees in the outer hedge, but most of the group missed this. There were field signs of mammal movement across North Bucks Way, possibly Badger or Fox, maybe Muntjac deer.

Spindle Ermine micro-moth caterpillars in their web - Yponomeuta cagnagella (Photo © Martin Ferns)

On the east side of the path several parts of the hedge were covered in webs containing numerous caterpillars. Janice Robertson instantly recognised the shrub they were on as Spindle *Euonymus europaeus* and that the caterpillars were of the Spindle Ermine micro-moth *Yponomeuta cagnagella*. Spindle is a relatively unobtrusive shrub except late in the year when its pink flowers with orange seeds are on show. Its slender, green and rectangular twigs are distinctive at any time but its oval-lanceolate leaves do not stand out. Spindle is a foodplant of other moths such as the: Magpie, Small Eggar, Ruby Tiger, and others, and of the Holly

Evening is not the best time of day to see a full range of butterflies, but North Bucks Way has habitats of benefit to a good range of them and is one of the areas where Wood White *Leptidea sinapis* butterfly was last seen in MK. There are also likely to be a good range of beetles, bees and other invertebrates to be found here, including grasshoppers and bush-crickets along some sections.

There are plenty of other trees and shrubs within the hedgerows, but mainly smaller ones of: Field Maple, Silver Birch, Hazel, Hawthorn, Dogwood, Elder and Blackthorn. There were a few Oak and other larger trees such as diseased Ash. There were also groups of Elm, but climbing only to the height at which it succumbs to the fungus *Ophiostoma novo-ulmi* or its relative *Ophiostoma ulmi*, which are spread by elm bark beetles, with the main vector the Large Elm Bark beetle *Scolytus scolytus.* There are some larger Elms elsewhere in Milton Keynes that have so far survived to grow tall, such as a group at the southern edge of Stanton Wood and a clump alongside the access roadway to Manor Farm, Old Wolverton. Elm is a foodplant for more than sixty Lepidoptera, mainly moths but including White-lettered Hairstreak *Satyrium w-album*.

Path-side flora was extensive but unexceptional and what we saw is in the North Bucks Way plant list here. There will be more to be found: we had limited time to linger and later in summer other flora will emerge.

HAZELEY WOOD

On this evening visit we spent much time exploring North Bucks Way before we reached the new Hazeley Wood roundabout. Here, efforts have been made to provide for Great-crested Newt with new ponds and a connecting tunnel under the new road to sustain movement along North Bucks Way. But Pipistrelle bats, that had used the continuity of hedges along this route, now have too large a gap without hedgerows. The new roundabout stands on what was once the broadest grassland of Hazeley Wood, a good site for butterflies. Beyond, the rest of Hazeley Wood remains largely untouched except for newt barriers remaining for the time being. Much of the Wood has been less accessible during road construction and now seems much less visited.

Hazeley Wood is 33 years old. It was planted by Milton Keynes Development Corporation in 1991 on a former arable field. The field had been permanent pasture, converted in the 1970s to growing wheat and barley. This had led to a poorer soil structure on this characteristically wet and slow-draining heavy neutral clay soil. In April 1992 The Parks Trust was formed and inherited responsibility for Hazeley Wood, with some of the staff who had been involved in planning and planting of Hazeley Wood.

Tree species planting and management

The woodland was planted in seven compartments, only two of which are large (a plan of the wood can be found here). Just three main tree species were planted. Half of these were Pedunculate Oak *Quercus robur*, the others were Hornbeam *Carpinus betula* and Silver Birch *Betula pendula* in equal proportions. Hornbeam was to be a 'nurse' tree that would reduce the formation of 'epicormic' side shoots on the Oaks, and as a sacrificial species to take most of the damage from Grey Squirrel – which was evident from the stripped bark of many Hornbeam and the good condition of the Oak. Since 1991 planned tree thinning has left most of the Oak, with numbers of Hornbeam reduced over time, others coppiced. Silver Birch is relatively short-lived; so tall straight Oaks are the main tree, ultimately as useable timber. The original plan was to carry out a 5-year thinning cycle of the trees, with the first thinning in 2007. The second thinning was delayed until around 2016, after which it will be on approximately a 10-year cycle.

Original woodland field layer flora

The original aim was to establish a woodland field layer of native shade-tolerant flora which would not otherwise reach there from surrounding areas. Seeding was done in 2000, but only in Compartment 1, the most northerly. The woodland seed-mix was of 11 wildflower species, only four of which were found a year later: Garlic Mustard *Allaria petiolata,* Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, Primrose *Primula vulgaris,* Upright Hedge Parsley *Torilis japonica*, which can still be seen there. The open rides and grassed areas were seeded with five species of wildflowers and seven grasses. It was expected that many other plants would arrive by natural colonisation, but native shrubs were planted along the south-east ride: Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, Hazel *Corylus avellana,* Guelder-rose *Viburnum opulus*, Dogwood *Cornus sanguinea*, and Wild Privet *Ligustrum vulgare*.

Wildlife of Hazeley Wood

We strode up the pipeline ride between Compartments 3 and 2 to find a tall straight Silver Birch beside a gap leading to a muddy path through Compartment 2. Here we could see slender trees with squirrel-damaged Hornbeam and relatively straight Silver Birch, among which were numerous Pedunculate Oak. But other trees and shrubs not planted within the Wood had found their way there: Field Maple, Hazel and Ash, with some Bramble and Rose.

Dronefly *Eristalis tenax*
(Photo©Julian Lambley)

We emerged from Compartment 2 onto the other main ride through the Wood that is divided by an old hedge that predates the creation of this Wood. This has a few substantial,

older trees, mainly Pedunculate Oak and Ash, with thick stems of ancient Hawthorn between them. A few of us had a brief sighting of a deer quietly getting out of sight as we walked up this ride to the north-western edge of the Wood. Through the outer hedge we could see nearby houses in Whitehouse.

Wolf's milk slime mould *Lycogala epidendrum (Photo ©Julian Lambley)*

Nursery web spider *Pisaura Mirabilis (Photo ©Julian Lambley)*

Our route then took us right around Compartment 1 to the small car-park off H4 Dansteed Way. On our way we could see how dense the Wood had become at its edges, which is just as well because this Compartment is used as a training area by MK Field Archery Club. The vigorous shrubs and trees included a few cultivar species that seem to have found their own way there, including ornamental Cherry identified as *Prunus serrula* Tibetan Cherry tree. These woodland edges were overlooked by a substantial and magnificent old *Quercus Robur* in the outer hedgerow.

Botanical survey 2001

In 2001 The Parks Trust commissioned Dr Joanna Francis to carry out a Botanical Survey of all vascular plants in Hazeley Wood. This was to study flora including grasses that had naturally colonised the Wood and its grasslands, and to review establishment of the seeds that had been spread. The study found 144 vascular plants, which were: 4 tree species,18 shrubs, 90 forbs, 32 grasses, sedges & rushes. Of the 32 species originally introduced 26 had established in the open areas and only four in the woodland field layers, although Bluebell seedlings were found in more than half of the survey quadrants.

MKNHS Hazeley Wood Study Group (HWSG 1992-2015)

In 1992 The Parks Trust's ecologist, Mike Street, invited MK Natural History Society to set up the Hazeley Wood Study Group (HWSG) to carry out surveys of this new woodland's development, its flora and other wildlife. More than 30 MKNHS members got involved in these surveys in 1993, 1994 & 1995. The Society carried out a more substantial survey in 2006/7 and a report of this was published in 2008. Over 30 members contributed to 20 study groups, covering everything from flora to mosses and fungi; more than a dozen different orders of insects; birds, mammals & bats; and measurements of tree height and girth. Attempts were made to study changes over time. The 2006 survey found that substantial changes had taken place in the flora since 1993. Species that had arrived included Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* and Field Maple *Acer campestre*. Tree height and girth had grown considerably. A few of those on Tuesday's visit had taken part in the 2006 surveys, as had Colin Docketty.

Further information about Hazeley Wood

The 2006 survey of Hazeley Wood by MKNHS is available on the MKNHS website here. This contains full information on survey methods, maps and lists and tables of species found, ranging from mosses and fungi to flora, birds, bats and other mammals, and a range of insects and other invertebrates.

A Plant Species List for the walk is available.

Mike LeRoy

REPORT OF VISIT TO RAMMAMERE HEATH & KING'S WOOD – 18 MAY 2024

Led by Charles Kessler & Mike LeRoy

On Saturday 18th May eight of us met at Stockgrove car-park to explore areas north of Brickhill Road, away from the crowds in Rushmere Country Park. The group included keen plant explorers and a bird expert. Before we crossed the road from the car-park we heard a Cuckoo calling from King's Wood. As soon as we had crossed the road we were in a very shallow grassy valley (Jenny Mercer explained it is indicative of glaciation) we noticed surprisingly fresh-looking – for mid-May – Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* in an open area of Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* with woodland beyond them. Those we saw later under woodland tree canopy were largely over, but those in more open ground were still looking good; but will these ones be gradually engulfed by bracken?

May was a good time to visit King's Wood, because one of this woodland's specialities was coming into flower. We may be used to seeing Lily-of-the-valley *Convallaria majalis* in gardens but not in woods. It is a rare plant in Buckinghamshire but is found in King's Wood on the Bucks/Beds County border and in the south of Bucks at Black Park, because these sites have the right soil and growing conditions. Some of King's Wood is on the sandy soils of the county border beyond the Brickhills. These are part of a substantial National Nature Reserve, protected for its distinctive and historic habitats of heathland and Semi-Natural Ancient Woodland.

Lily-of-the-valley *Convallaria majalis* (Photo © Charles Kessler)

Charles Kessler had planned a varied figure-of-eight route that took us first to the hilltop heathland of Rammamere Heath. The heath had many clumps of 'Ling' which is a colloquial name for Heather – although it is also the name of a species of fish, so this is another reason for using its scientific name *Calluna vulgaris*. The core area of Rammamere Heath is managed by a stylish flock of Manx Loaghtan sheep, which have elegant, curved horns and their rams have impressive double horns.

From the heathland we passed the edge of Bragenham Wood, then alongside a massive boundary wood bank and ditch at the edge of King's Wood. This is unlike other woodlands in the MK area because its lower parts are on well-drained sands and upper areas are on boulder clay. The range of trees we saw lower down is different from those in our wet, clay, hilltop Ancient Woodlands of MK. In King's Wood we saw Small-leaved Lime *Tilia cordata* which is thought to have been one of the earlier trees to spread in Britain following the last ice-age but declined after 3000 BC largely from human activity. It is native to much of Europe but is now uncommon in British woods. Another lime is widely planted in parklands and as avenues in Britain: this is the hybrid of Small and Large-leaved Lime *Tilia x europaea*.

In some parts of King's Wood, we saw Sessile Oak *Quercus petraea* (which has almost stalkless acorns but leaves with long stalks, *petioles*) and in other parts of the wood the oak we are more used to, the Pedunculate Oak *Quercus robur* (which has acorns on long stalks and leaves almost stalkless). The form of these trees tends to differ, with the Sessile Oak having more ascending branches and narrower crown. There were also Hornbeam *Carpinus betulus,* and numerous Silver Birch *Betula pendula* some of which were exceptionally large; Downy Birch *Betula pubescens* is also present but we didn't notice any. Mature Scots Pine *Pinus sylvestris* are also scattered through the wood and several other conifer species. There were signs of Grey Squirrel damage to oak tree flowers, but few were in view.

The handout included over 40 plant species that Charles Kessler had seen a couple of days before, most of which we found. Richard Schmidt provided a further list of flora we saw as a group on Saturday that were not on the list attached to our handout, so there are 55 species in the attached Plant Species List, which doesn't include very common species such as Nettles.

Yellow Archangel Lamiastrum galeobdolon (Photo © Charles Kessler)

Wood Sage Teucrium scorodonia (Photo © Richard Schmidt)

Some time was spent checking the difference between Common Sorrel *Rumex acetosa* and Sheep's Sorrel *Rumex acetosella*. Another plant of interest, added by Richard Schmidt, was Wood Sage *Teucrium scorodonia* and is said to be 'characteristic of dry open woods & grassy places on heathy soils and scarce in Buckinghamshire' according to Roy Maycock & Aaron Woods in *A Checklist of the Plants of Buckinghamshire* published by MKNHS in 2005.

There was much debate about some young tree suckers at the west edge of King's Wood, which were of the Poplar *Populus* genus (of the Willow *Salix* family). Were they the Aspen *Populus tremula* species or were they Grey Poplar *Populus x canescens,* a hybrid between Aspen and White Poplar *Populus alba*? The leaf shape was Aspen-like, with their more rounded (orbicular) leaves with undulating (undulate) edges compared to the more jagged toothed (serrate) edges and more heart-shaped (cordate) leaves of White Poplar or Grey Poplar. But the petioles (the stalk of a leaf) were only slightly flattened: this flatness makes leaves of Aspen unstable, so they flutter from side to side in the wind in a distinctive way. There are other features to compare such as the dense, matted hairiness (tomentose) of the underside of young Grey Poplar leaves and un-hairy (glabrous) or sparsely-hairy underside of Aspen leaves. But Grey Poplar leaf undersides become much less hairy later on and hybrids tend to be variable. Perhaps these young trees require closer examination on our next visit?'

Although trees and other flowering plants were a main focus of interest, we also saw a huge European Hornet *Vespa crabro* fly past us and later a queen Hornet dropped to the ground close to us (definitely not an invasive Asian Hornet *Vespa velutina*). Birds heard and seen included: Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Great Spotted Woodpecker and the delightful descending song of a Willow Warbler, but most of the group seemed to be looking rather than listening. There are many other areas of these woodlands and heath that are well worth exploring when we next make a return visit here.

A Plant Species List is available.

Mike LeRoy & Charles Kessler

MKNHS Visit to How Hill, Norfolk – 24-27 May 2024

MKNHS members in the field, How Hill (Photo © Paul Manchester)

Twelve members made their way to this delightful bit of Norfolk. The society has been to How Hill in the past and was Paul's 5th visit, having also been with the Wildlife Sound Recording Society. All rooms are now ensuite – and the food was excellent, with no problem catering for vegetarians and gluten free.

How Hill is 'The Environmental Study Centre for the Broads' with accommodation, large formal gardens, woodland, a secret garden, reed beds and a boat to explore the river Ant, the reeds and a nearby broad. It is a special place, being an Arts and Crafts house designed and built by an architect for his family in the early 1900s. It has extensive formal gardens and access on foot and by boat to wetlands and waters managed by the Broads Authority. The Ordnance Survey map shows the Broads area outlined like a leaf in the surrounding landscape, following the waterways as boundaries, unlike most conservation areas.

The weekend may well be remembered for the rain nearly all day on the Saturday, which did not dampen enthusiasm in the slightest. Members made the most of the opportunities to appreciate the local habitat and observe the wildlife. We used the centre's Robinson moth trap each night and had a respectable catch, considering the weather. Evenings were spent sociably, enjoying the wonderful view from the conservatory window of How Hill, or walking in the grounds or in the vicinity.

Barn Owl (photo © Julian Lambley)

Swallowtail (Photo©Paul Lund)

On Saturday morning we took the boat along the river to Barton Broad. We enjoyed the trip, despite the almost constant rain. The weather was a bit better for the rest of our time there and we explored the surrounding nature reserve in small groups. A first for Paul was hearing a Bittern booming. Some claimed to be able to hear it indoors, but Paul's hearing aids are not that good!

After breakfast on the bank holiday Monday some of us some of us stopped to walk and observe at Lakenheath Fen, including a bittern in flight and a stonechat, the first Alison had knowingly seen, while others went to Hickling Broad where they saw Swallowtail butterflies and Marsh harriers, before heading home.

The group were very grateful to the staff at How Hill who saw that we were made comfortable, and to Paul for all the work he put in organising and enabling the weekend to happen. The general consensus was that another weekend in the same place would be well attended.

A list of the 26 moth species trapped during the weekend can be found here

Paul Lund and Alison Peace

North Loughton Valley Park 11 June 2024 – Trip report

Above: Loughton Brook (Photo: Joe Clinch)

North Loughton Valley Park is managed by the Parks Trust and forms one of many parks along the Loughton Brook valley which provides a green corridor that stretches from Tattenhoe in the south west of the city to New Bradwell in the north where it joins the Great Ouse.

This section of the valley consists of four main habitats all heavily influenced by the development of Milton Keynes: the Brook itself and its surrounding wetlands; thickets of Blackthorn, Wild Plum, Hawthorn, and Elder; mown grass and managed meadows lined by trees and bushes; and an area of rough grass, and scrub which makes up the wet/dry balancing lakes that control the risk of flooding in New Bradwell and beyond. There is no evidence of habitats that predate the development of Milton Keynes other than the Brook itself. A fifth habitat is outside the Park on the east bank of Grafton Street where it cuts through the Boulder Clay and Jurassic Cornbrash (limestone) sub strata and is an important habitat for wildlife in its own right.

The focus of the walk was the observation, identification, and recording of flowering plants, birds, and invertebrate species. A handout listed species seen at this location on previous visits and distributed to the 23 participants. The evening was dry with a mix of sunshine and cloud.

The Habitats

The route started from the Bancroft Park car park. Our first stop was to add Yellow Vetchling to the plant list. The dense area of trees and shrubs offered cover to birds in song and also a good view of an adult Great Spotted Woodpecker and juvenile. The boggy area near the edge of the Brook included Meadowsweet, Water Mint, and Great Willowherb. Crossing the Brook took us to the mown and managed meadow grass of the eastern slope of the valley with its backing of trees and bushes. The managed meadows of grasses, Meadow Buttercup, Red Clover, semi parasitic Yellow Rattle, and Ox-eye Daisy were in flower interspersed by occasional Ribwort Plantain, Goats-beard and Pyramidal Orchid. The route moves uphill away from the brook through a copse where somewhat to our surprise Water Figwort was coming into flower.

On this visit we by-passed the wet/dry balancing lake with its substantial broad earth dam since it had recently been rough mown but on our return journey we had a good view of a Buzzard launching off from one of the metal and concrete structures. Along the path edges at the foot of shrubs and hedges, Hedge Bedstraw, Black Medick, Imperforate St. John's-wort, Common Vetch, Yarrow, Herb Robert, and Bristly Ox-tongue were amongst the plants identified.

Meadows and trees, N Loughton Valley, 11.06.24 (Photo: Joe Clinch)

A Redway bridge took us over Grafton Street with good views of the Grand Union Canal aqueduct to one side and looking down on the west facing bank that we were to visit on the other. The Redway below the bank was our longest stop. A stretch of about 150 metres has been planted as a flower-rich habitat to attract pollinators including Birdsfoot Trefoil, Common Vetch, Germander Speedwell, Cut-leaved Cranesbill, Goats-beard, Ribwort Plantain, and Bee Orchid. Unfortunately, the Bee Orchids and Fox and Cubs on the land between the Redway and Grafton Street seen on the recce for the visit some 5 days earlier had been mown in the interim.

Our return route followed that of the outward one. It concluded with a short stop at the stone outline of the Bancroft Roman Villa. This was built in the late Third Century replacing an earlier Iron Age farm settlement and demolished in the Fifth Century AD. Interpretation Boards explain the history of the site.

A full Species list for the visit is available. Unsurprisingly for an evening event there were few invertebrates seen – but there was one Common Frog.

Thanks

North Loughton Valley Park is yet another location where we have to thank the early planners of Milton Keynes for creating habitats for wildlife that have grown in biodiversity over the past 50 years, and the Parks Trust for its management of them.

My personal thanks to Paul Lund for accompanying me on the recce, acting as co-leader, and for the Invertebrate List; Anne Champion for the Plant List; and Harry Appleyard for the Bird List.

Joe Clinch, Leader

Launch of the MKNHS Plant Group (What's that Plant – and Why?)

Photo © Joe Clinch: Pyramidal Orchid Anacamptis pyramidalis

The purpose of the Group

The MKNHS Plant Group will launch its activities this summer. Its aim is to stimulate interest in plants and particularly to improve the level of plant identification skills within the Society by sharing knowledge, skills and resources.

Who is the Plant Group for and what kind of activities will it organise?

The Group is open to all those members of the Society who support its purpose and who are able to give more time to the activity than is usually possible through the Summer Programme events which it will complement. Activities will centre on field work at different habitats where we will practice our identification skills at the species level initially concentrating on flowering plants (and, where we can, grasses, rushes, sedges and trees) and listing species observed in a systematic way. Improving identification skills will rely heavily on the sharing of knowledge between participants.

Over time, we hope to build up knowledge of local sites including the possibility of working with partner wildlife organisations. We also hope that participants will also enjoy the pleasure of observing plants in their natural setting, and of having a better understanding of their role in the local ecology.

Activities in 2024

Three field events are planned for 2024 each in a different habitat (all on Sunday morning from 10.30 to 12.30):

1. Shenley Wood 28th April: Ancient Woodland habitat

2. Stonepit Field 2nd June: Meadow, limestone scrape, and hedgerow habitat

3. Location and date still to be decided but will be in July or August, with a different habitat to the above

(Full details will be posted on the Society website).

2024 will be a pilot year, which the Planning Team will review in the autumn.

What resources will participants need

Those participating in events should bring a flower identification field guide: the Society website has an excellent summary of these (See Society Website: Reference then Identification Guides, then scroll to Flowering Plant). A hand lens (ideally x10 magnification)

will also be needed for some species – we hope to have some to lend. Members will be welcome to bring an identification App but at species level we shall concentrate on the botanical features that are needed for greater identification certainty. (Some suggestions of Apps can be found here, with members' comments on their usefulness and limitations.)

Communication
Information about the Group including Planned Events will be publicised on the Society website with short Side Bar reminders about upcoming events as for other Society activities. For those that register an interest, email will be used for circulation of event specific information prior to it and for emergency announcements**.** An informal Plant WhatsApp group will also be established for those that opt to join (and thereby agree to share their mobile telephone number).

How do Society members register their interest in the Group?
Members can register an interest by sending an email to joeclinch@btinternet.com or contacting Jenny Mercer on 07772437930 or jenny.mercer@hotmail.co.uk.

How are activities being planned and organised?
A Planning Team has been taking forward the work to establish the Group. Charles Kessler leads the Group and chairs the Planning Team: other members are currently: Jenny Mercer, Di Parsons, Carla Boswell (secretary of the Team), and Joe Clinch.

MKNHS PLANT GROUP: SHENLEY WOOD REPORT – 28 APRIL 2024

What's that plant – and why?

Twelve Society members (and one Parks Trust volunteer) braved a decidedly cold, damp, and sunless morning for two hours at Shenley Wood for the inaugural event of the newly formed Plant Group. Because of the wet and boggy conditions all our observations and identifications were made from the triangular route hard-core path in the east of the Wood or off the route into the Wood from the car park.

Shenley Wood is designated as Ancient Woodland and also as a 'County Wildlife Site'. It is owned and managed by the Parks Trust. The surface geology is mostly glacial boulder clay and drainage is poor despite some ditches. Pedunculate Oak (*Quercus robur*) and Ash

(*Fraxinus excelsior*) were the dominant mature tree species observed with an understory of Hazel (*Corylus avellana*), Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*), Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Bramble (*Rubus 'fruiticosus'*) and Rose (*Rosa species*). Bluebell (*Hyacynthoides non-scripta*) was the dominant ground species of the wooded areas but the path edges and small clearings offered more light and here we were able to identify many more species:

Wood Anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*), Bugle (*Ajuga reptans*), Greater Stitchwort (*Stellaria holostea*), Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), and Lesser Celandine (*Ficaria verna*) as might have been expected but also Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) in profusion (not yet in flower), Pendulous Sedge (Carex pendula), Wood Sedge (*Carex sylvatica*) , Bush Vetch (*Vica sepium*), Common Figwort not yet in flower(*Scrophularia nodosa*) – or was it Water Figwort (*Scrophularia auriculata*)? , Lords and Ladies (*Arum maculatum*) , and more.

Bugle *Ajuga reptans (left) Bush Vetch Vica sepium (right) (Photos © Bob Phillips)*

We had hoped to find Early Purple Orchid in flower (*Orchis mascula*) but the orchid leaves that we did find could have been either Common Spotted Orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*) or Early Purple Orchid. One of the key indicators of Ancient Woodland is Dog's Mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*) but none was identified in this section of the Wood (though it had been seen in other parts, on the recce). There was a plentiful supply of specimens on the ground of canopy-emerging leaves and flowers of the Pedunculate Oak – perhaps the combined work of grey squirrels and strong winds the previous night. With the benefit of a hand lens we were able to identify the small dark female flowers as well as the more familiar male yellow catkins.

Along the short walk between the car park and entry to the Wood we identified several shrubs, bushes, and plants on the route. Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*), Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*), and Guelder Rose (*Viburnum opulus*) were close together and Wayfaring Tree (*Viburnum lantana*) nearby with all but the Dogwood showing their white blossom. This offered the opportunity for examination of the essential differences of leaf form, florescence, and stem colour. At the edge of the car park, Sticky Mouse-ear (*Cerastium glomeratum*) was new to many of us: a hand lens allowed us to view the glandular hairs on the stem and leaves.

Close-up of Sticky Mouse-ear to show glandular hairs on a stem (Photo © Bob Phillips)

A full list of species observed and identified is being prepared with comments and notes where necessary. This list including some of its queries will be input to a more formal Record of Listings which aims to be compatible with the requirements of BMERC in most respects although it is not anticipated that Group members will be able to acquire the skills necessary to submit formal records without further external training support.

In what way was this event different to the evening walks of the Society's Summer Programme? Certainly, there was much more time for detailed examination of the plants we saw, checking field guides for distinguishing features, and sharing this knowledge with each other. Planning Team members were on hand to guide participants to planned stopping places and in practice we broke into a number of smaller groups in order to follow up particular interests. We also found that for some plants identification proved uncertain especially when not yet in flower and in these instances, we decided to list them as such. We also decided to list only those species that we observed either at the recce or the event itself, and to rely on our own identification skills. This was to avoid the temptation of assuming that because a plant had been seen before in Shenley Wood that was what it must be (e.g. the Figwort and Orchid species). We concluded with a welcome offer of tea or coffee.

Report prepared by the Planning Team (Charles Kesser, Jenny Mercer, Di Parsons, Carla Boswell, and Joe Clinch), with special thanks to Janice Robertson for her local knowledge and joining us on the recce, Bob Philips for his photographs, and Richard Schmidt for sharing his field notes with us.

MKNHS Plant Group 2nd June 2024 Stonepit Field Trip Report

One of the plentiful Ox-eye daisies in Stonepit Field (Photo © Bob Phillips)

MKNHS Plant Group: 'What's that plant – and why?

The Plant Group's second event took place in warm sunshine – a real contrast to the damp cold first event at Shenley Wood. Some 15 members participated each of whom had received a Briefing Note in advance. We split into two teams for our field work one led by Jenny and the other by Joe. Each team kept its own list of species observed and later merged into a Consolidated List.

The location and its habitats

Stonepit Field is well known to many Society members but first a brief history for those who may be new. It is managed by the Parks Trust. It was farmland until 1993 when it was sown with wild flower seed, and the planting of sapling shrubs and trees all appropriate to the underlying Cornbrash (a Jurassic limestone), and lime rich soil. It is an excellent example of how much biodiversity can be created with human intervention in just 30 years. Flower rich meadows in turn attract a wide range of invertebrate species some of which are monitored by Parks Trust volunteers among them Society members (and few of us were lucky enough to see a single Small Blue butterfly one the Parks' Trust target species for this location).

There are five main habitats: flower rich meadow grassland; limestone scrape and its banks; shrub and small tree managed open strips that divide the meadow into smaller areas; two ponds added in 2007 as part of the Oakridge Park housing development over-flow drainage system, and their banks where the earth was disturbed; and a narrow band of woodland along the eastern boundary planted in the late 1960s by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation.

We concentrated mainly on the first three of these habitats each team covering much the same ground but in a different order to maximise the sharing of knowledge within the team, and at a practical level to minimise the risk of damage to the plant sensitive areas under-foot.

The flowering plants of the area

An impressive 80 species were listed during the morning including trees, shrubs and grasses but with the main focus being on those that require close examination for correct identification. In this category fell two families in particular:

Asteraceae (Daisies often called Composites in the past): Thistle, Cat's Ear, Sow-thistle, Hawkbit, Hawk's-beard, and Hawkweed species

Fabaceae (called Peas in the past): Vetches, Vetchlings, Tares, Medicks, and Clovers

The Habitats and their species

Even with the aid of photographs we were unable to verify the abundant Hawk's-beard species in the meadow area – Beaked, Rough or Smooth? This is the most plant diverse of the three habitats with Ox-eye Daisy, Salad Burnet, the semi parasitic Yellow Rattle, Ribwort Plantain, Meadow and Bulbous Buttercup, and Red Clover being widely distributed. More scattered were Common Vetch, Grass Vetchling, Black Medick, Goat's-beard, Meadow and Cut-leaved Cranesbill, Common Mouse-ear, Pyramidal and Bee Orchid, and the symbiotic Common Broomrape. Less time was available for examination of Grasses but Quaking, Meadow Brome, and Crested Dog's-tail were listed.

Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera*

Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*

(Photos © Bob Phillips)

The species diversity on the scrape is more limited but includes some which are less common in Milton Keynes: Common Bird's-foot Trefoil, Horseshoe Vetch, Common Rock-rose, Bee Orchid, Cat's Ear, Mouse-eared Hawkweed, a Thyme species, Globularia (a non-native plant and located by Martin Kincaid), and remarkably for the habitat Pendulous Sedge perhaps thriving over a spring?

The tree and shrub edges comprise the third of the habitats often on bare ground and well shaded. Hedge Bedstraw, Lady's Bedstraw, Kidney Vetch, Bush Vetch, Wild Liquorice (a vetch), Perforate St. John's Wort, Marjoram, Wild Carrot, Red Campion, Cleavers, and Bladder Campion were identified here. Above the disturbed ground over the southern pond were Creeping Thistle, Teasel, Hogweed, Prickly Sow-thistle, and Gorse.

Want to know more?

There is a Consolidated List of Plants Observed and Photo Album on the Plant Group's webpage. The photographs are linked to the species observed and several of them demonstrate identification features which are useful in the field when trying to differentiate between similar but different species. Our thanks to Bob Phillips for the photographs, to Anne Champion and Richard Schmidt for compiling the team listings,

Co-leaders for the Event: Joe Clinch and Jenny Mercer
June 2024