MILTON KEYNES NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Magpie Digest Summer 2025

Hello and welcome to the July 2025 edition of Magpie Digest. I am privileged to be editing this newsletter for the first time and would like to thank Linda Murphy for doing so in previous years and Martin Ferns and Linda for continuing to co-ordinate publication.

This issue begins with a short summary of AGM matters followed by the results of this year's exciting and hard-fought photographic competition! Other news comprises a selection of the walks that have taken place in the first half of the year with reports chosen to reflect the changing seasons and landscapes. Additionally, there is an interesting perspective on life in the Brickhills entitled 'Swift Action' and a book review of Jon Stokes' new field guide to trees and shrubs from Princeton Press.

Thank you to all our readers for the continued support offered to the Society. Please don't hesitate to get in touch if you would like to contribute to the Magpie or make any comments. We would be delighted to publish any letters of general interest in our next edition.

Joan Hughes

AGM – 18th March 2025

The Chairman, Matt Andrews, thanked the Committee for their contributions throughout the year, as well as Society members for their continued support. He encouraged members to take whatever opportunities were available e.g. through workshops, to learn more about identification and recording of flora and fauna, an important aspect of the Society's function.

Several members of the Committee stepped down this year and were thanked for their hard work and service to the Society. Changes to Committee membership are noted below:

	Outgoing Officer	Incoming Officer
Treasurer	Linda Murphy	Richard Schmidt
Secretary	Mervyn Dobbin	Jagoda Zajac
Committee Member	Paul Lund	Julie Cuthbert

Committee members re-elected to serve for one more year are: Matt Andrews (Chairman), Martine Harvey, Di Parsons, Charles Kessler, Bob Phillips, Mervyn Dobbin.

Registered membership of the society as of 31st December 2024 was 112.

2025 Photo Competition

This year's MKNHS Photo Competition concluded in February with the winners decided by popular vote. Many thanks to all those who took part - as usual the standard was very impressive. Thanks also to all those members who showed their appreciation by voting.

The five photographic categories were Birds; Plants & Fungi; Insects; Other Animals; Habitats. Following a first round of votes for the best two photographs in each category, the overall winners were chosen from the final group. Congratulations go to Bob Phillips (Winner of the Ron Arnold Shield), Julian Lambley and Janice Robertson. These three winning entries are reproduced below.

Red-Backed Shrike – Bob Phillips - 1st Prize and Winner of the Shield

Goosander take-off – Julian Lambley - 2nd Prize

Merveille du jour – Janice Robertson - 3rd Prize

Summer Leys Nature Reserve – Saturday, 4th January 2025 – Visit Report

This visit was the Society's first outdoor event of its 2025 Spring Programme. The reserve was planned and developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s and is managed by BCN Wildlife Trust. It covers 47 hectares of former gravel workings in the Nene Valley and is designated a SSSI and SPA. The site consists of several habitats: a large reed-, tree- and grass-edged lake with a scrape inlet and several islands (the water level is managed); rough grazing adjacent to the lake; a small area of preserved meadow; two other managed meadow areas; two ponds; hedges; and strips of woodland.

Sixteen members and two visitors participated. The weather was cold with a light wind, reasonable visibility, and some sunshine: water levels were still high and mostly icebound after three days of below freezing temperatures. The main focus of the event was wetland and woodland birds. This report consists of a brief description of the habitats and birds observed.

Lake habitat

The open water was mainly on the opposite side from the three water-facing hides but we were able to view most of the commoner ducks: Mallard, Gadwall, Shoveller, Teal, Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Pochard, plus a single male Goldeneye. Cormorant, Mute Swan, Coot, Moorhen, Great Crested Grebe, Grey Heron, Great White Egret, and Little Egret could be seen at distance as could five species of gull: Greater Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed, Herring Common and Black-headed. Not surprisingly only two wader species were seen: a large flock of Lapwings (well over 100) and six Snipe in flight put up from the rough grass at the edge of the ice as we entered the screen hide where we could also watch a Green Woodpecker looking for food on the frozen ground.

Snipe in flight (Photo©Julian Lambley)

Wooded edges and open area habitat

The perimeter path goes through a covered area of semi mature deciduous trees. Among less common birds seen or heard here were Tree Creeper, Redwing and Siskin. Looking northward outside the Reserve, Buzzard and Kestrel were identified on a distant electricity pylon. The feeder hide is a feature of the reserve. Various seed grains and animal fat balls are put out daily and attract a wide range of birds: three common tit species (Great, Blue and Long-tailed); three common finch species (Chaffinch, Goldfinch and Greenfinch), Reed Bunting, and Grey Wagtail. Bullfinch was added to the list further along the path.

The bird of the moment at Summer Leys was a single Glossy Ibis which had been around since October and had been seen before our arrival on the far side on the water meadows at the edge of the Nene and outside the reserve boundary. The Society group did not find it, but did benefit from

being nearer the area of the lake that was not frozen. This added Pintail and Goosander to the duck sightings. It also confirmed the complete absence of both Canada Goose and Greylag from our list!

Pintail on ice (Photo©Julian Lambley)

Overall, it was a very satisfactory visit with many of the hoped-for winter birds present – certainly a case of 38 eyes being better than 2!

The species check list (available on request) is the product of several participants: Martin Ferns, Peter Barnes, and Tim Arnold. Thank you to them and Justin Lambley for the photographs. Thanks too to all the attendees for their active involvement and contribution making this a rewarding and enjoyable visit.

Joe Clinch, Leader

Plant Group: Howe Park Wood – Sunday, 23rd February 2025 – Visit Report

A cool, dry and very windy day greeted 20 participants for the first Event of the MKNHS Plant Group's 2025 Programme, 6 for the first time. A major theme of the Event was Winter Tree identification. Howe Park Wood was selected as the venue mainly to reflect its importance as an Ancient Semi Natural Woodland – one of only three in Milton Keynes – and as a designated SSSI. The facilities of the Visitor Centre were an added bonus for a winter visit. The Wood and the post-1980 landscaped areas that surround it are owned and managed by the Parks Trust.

All photos in this report courtesy of Julian Lambley

After the usual safety guidance, Carla Boswell gave a brief introduction to the Parks Trust's active management of the Wood to maintain and enhance its habitats and biodiversity. The Group was then given an introduction to winter tree identification by Society member Alan Birkett and author of a

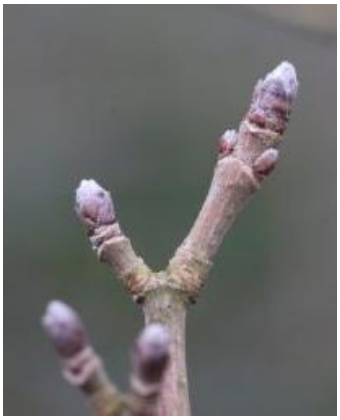
Field Guide to the Trees of Britain and Europe, one of the resources that had been highlighted for Group members in advance of the field trip. The Field Studies Council ***Winter Trees: a photographic guide to common trees and shrubs*** was another resource that had been highlighted in advance together with two handouts on the day kindly provided by the Parks Trust's ***Tree ID Guide*** booklet and an A4 sheet, ***Winter Tree ID***.

For the field work, participants were divided into two groups each covering the same circular route but in different directions. The route covered the two main habitats: the Wood itself and the mixed landscaped area developed since the 1980s that surrounds the Wood.

Plants of the Ancient Semi Natural Woodland habitat

The route took us along three boundaries of the Wood (roughly east, west and north), and along the central 'ride' through the Wood itself– the widened main ride with drainage ditches on either side for much of the way. The ride and ditches supported a diverse group of herbaceous plants, some not normally associated with woodland, doubtless influenced by the higher light level. These included Herb Robert (Geranium robertianum), Cleavers (Galium aparine), Hogweed (Heracleum spondylium) and Creeping Buttercup (Ranunculas repens). There were also expected woodland species: Bugle (Ajuga reptana), Primrose ((Primula vulgaris), Lords and Ladies (Arum maculatum), Vetch sp. (Vicia sp.), Violet species (Viola sp.) and Goldilocks Buttercup (Ranunculus auricomus) an uncommon plant in Milton Keynes. As seen from the ride, ground cover was a mix of Bluebells (Hyancinthoides non-scripta) and on wetter ground Pendulous Sedge (Carex pendula) both Ancient Woodland indicators. A single Fern species, Male-Fern (Dryopteris filix-mas), was listed. Brambles (Rubus fruticosus agg), and Rose sp. (Rosa sp.) thrive as a scrub layer. Coppiced Hazel (Corylus avellana), Blackthorn (Prunus spinosa) (a vital food source for the uncommon Black Hairstreak butterfly caterpillars) and Honeysuckle (Lonicera periclymenum) made up the understorey. Towering above them were mature canopy trees: Ash (Fraxinus excelsior), Hornbeam (Carpinus betulus), Pedunculate Oak (Quercus robur), and Field Maple (Acer campestre). Crab Apple (Malus sylvestra) is also an infrequent canopy tree, in particular the ancient broad trunk of the named tree 'Edna'! (one group taking the muddy route into the wood, the other group peering into the wood from the outside path). Aspen (Populus tremula) was identified in the woodland infrequently but one planted outside the wood provided an

excellent hands-on experience in winter tree identification from its easily accessible buds, distinctive bark, and dead leaves.



Field Maple (Acer campestre) - identified by the reddish-brown buds with white hairy tips, as well as opposite pairs of lateral buds.

Plants of the Mixed Landscaped Areas of meadow, mown grass, hedges, shrubs, trees and ponds surrounding the Woodland

All of this area has been the subject of landscaping and planting since the early 1980s with just a few mature trees retained including two fine Pedunculate Oaks near the meadow area and a surprising mature Elm (Ulmus spp.) probably Common Elm. The more recently planted trees mirror many of the species found in the woodland: for example, plantings of Ash, Hornbeam, Aspen, and Pedunculate Oak. The parkland area includes specimen trees: we listed Common Walnut (Juglans regia), Apple sp. (Malus sp.), and an Oak probably the non-native Pin Oak (Quercus palistri). Trees and shrubs listed in the hedges include: Spindle (Euonymous europaeus), a Dogwood species (Cornus sp.), Elder (Sambucus nigra), Gorse (Ulex europaeus) in flower, Cherry Plum (Prunus cerasifera) in flower, and Cherry Laurel (Prunus laurocerasus).

Cherry Plum - one of the first to flower in early spring. The green twigs are another indicator.

There are also native trees not observed by us in the Woodland including Alder (Alnus glutinosa), Silver Birch (Betula pendula), Holly (Ilex aquifolium), Scots Pine (Pinus sylvestrus), and three species of Willow near the ponds: Crack (Salex fragilis), Goat (Salix caprea), and Grey (Salix cinerea).

The seedhead of Reed Canary Grass

In the pond area we also listed Reed Canary-grass (Phalaris arundinacea) and Reedmace (Typha latifolia) using the dead seed heads in each case for identification.

For completeness we should also mention four species other than vascular plants observed during the field trip: two fungi being King Alfred's Cakes (Daldinia concentrica), usually hosted by Ash trees, and Scarlet Elf Cap (Sarcosphya austriaca); and two mosses being Common Smoothcap (Atricum undulatum) and Common Tamarisk (Thuidium tamariscinum).

What did we learn from this Event?

Winter tree and herbaceous plant identification was new for many of us taking part including the two Co-Leaders: it requires a different set of knowledge and skills from the usual growing period of flowers, foliage and fruit.

Deciduous winter tree identification relies on careful examination of such characteristics as bud size, shape, colour, and position on the twig some being alternate and some opposite, and some being flat against the twig (adpressed) and some more erect. Twigs themselves also vary in their colour and their overall appearance (for example the upturned twigs on mature Ash trees and the weeping twigs of the mature Silver Birch). Bark is another useful indicator in terms of its colour, its texture, and its changes with growth. Dead leaves can also be valuable where there is certainty that the dead leaf comes from the tree being examined. This is particularly useful for those trees, such as Hornbeam and Oak, which hold on to some of their dead leaves through winter (marcescence). For herbaceous plants, the emerging fresh leaves are the main identification feature, but for a few of the mainly larger plants dead stems and sometimes seedheads are available.

A Consolidated List of Plants Observed is available on request. Our thanks to Alan Birkett; Field Listers Anne Champion and Janice Robertson; photographers Jagoda Zajac and Julian Lambley; The Parks Trust for the handouts; and to all the other participants for making this an enjoyable and we hope instructive experience.

Joe Clinch and Richard Schmidt Co-leaders

Walton Lake and Environs – Sunday, 30th March 2025 – Visit Report

A somewhat hastily arranged walk was attended by thirteen MKNHS members in glorious early spring weather. It was the first day of British Summer Time and the warm sunshine was ample reward for a lost hour of sleep.

Main photo: Black Mulberry, Open University (Photo © Martin Kincaid)

Setting off from the Walton Lake car park, we first stopped to look at a carpet of Common Dog Violets – for some the first they had seen this spring. We walked clockwise around the lake, Charles pointing out the differences between Cherry Plum and Blackthorn – the latter just beginning to flower. Martin mentioned that this site supports a very large population of Grass Snakes and had indeed been a receptor site for some translocated snakes in the early 2000s. Sure enough, a sub-adult grass snake was found beneath a refuge and everyone enjoyed a close look at this reptile. It was carefully replaced where it had been basking.

Grass snake, sub-adult (Photo © Derek Taylor)

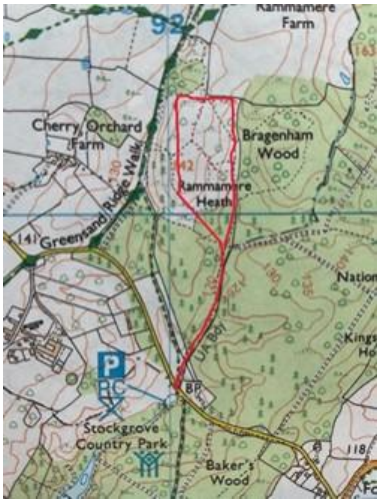
We then went to look at the small group of Black Poplars on a bend in the river but surprisingly, the male catkins had not yet appeared. Usually, these trees are in flower by mid-March but they appear to be very late in 2025. We did however find some flowering Cowslips nearby. An old woodpecker hole in one of the poplars is currently home to a swarm of Honey Bees. Martin also pointed out a section of riverbank where Kingfishers nest in some years, although these striking birds were quite elusive today. Turning back on ourselves, we followed the course of the River Ouzel and then took a detour to visit the grounds of the Open University, specifically to visit the specimen Black Mulberry tree. This very old mulberry has been well propped to extend its life. For some members, this was their first encounter with this lovely tree. We also spotted some Mistletoe growing in nearby poplars.

The warm conditions tempted out a variety of insect life, especially butterflies. As well as the expected Brimstones, Commas and Peacocks we saw our first Orange Tip of the year. 7-spot Ladybirds were plentiful, Bee-flies were busy visiting the flowers of Ground Ivy and a variety of bumblebee queens were also foraging.

On our way back to the car park we paused to look at a group of mature elm trees now coming into leaf and also saw a Red Kite swooping low in an adjacent field. We walked through the reedbed, along the recently repaired boardwalk. We all noted the incredibly low water levels – not good news for the various amphibians which breed at this location. Returning to the car park, we noticed a number of tiny bees foraging around Germander Speedwell. The tiny burrows of some of these bees could also be seen. Although a positive identification of these bees was not possible, they might well have been Hawthorn Mining Bee *Andrena chrysosceles.*

Martin Kincaid

Plant Group: Rammamere Heath – Sunday 11th May 2025 – Visit Report



Photos: General view of the heath with heather, gorse and birch and Map of the area showing our route in red.

Co-leaders: Charles Kessler and Di Parsons

The objective of this visit was to observe heathland plants, heath being an unusual and limited habitat for Milton Keynes. On a bright, sunny spring day we headed north from the car park on the Heath and Reach to Great Brickhill road. This took us alongside the medieval wood bank and ditch separating King's Wood from Rammamere Heath and, indeed, the counties of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. We then moved onto the heath itself, walked along the crest and turned east to the border of Bragenham Wood whence we returned south to our start.

The heath is part of the King's and Baker's Woods and Heaths SSSI, and adjoins King's Wood and Rushmere NNR and Rushmere Country Park; it is owned by Tarmac and managed in cooperation with Greensand Trust and BCNWT.

Approach to the heath

On our way to the heath we were able to observe many of the classic heathland plants, notably Heather (Ling), with its tiny leaves pressed close to its stems, and Gorse and Broom, two yellow-flowering shrubby legumes, the former being heavily armoured with spines and the latter more woody.

The heath itself

Once on the heath we were able to appreciate the typical heathland vegetation dominated by heather and wavy hair grass, with isolated gorse and birch trees as in the main photo above.

Heaths are man-made and are formed after woodland has been cleared on poor soil, in this case on acid, sandy soil. If undisturbed, heathland naturally develops back into woodland as trees move back in and gradually enrich the soil. However, in practice, heathlands became part of the farming system, providing grazing for livestock, heather for thatch, bracken for bedding, gorse for bread ovens and broom for fuel. Constant disturbance, including fire, results in a landscape that is now valued scenically and for its unique wildlife. Archaeological evidence shows some heaths to date from the Bronze Age, some 3,000 years ago. Historical sources give the name Heath and Reach as far back as 1276, suggesting the great age of local heaths.

We observed on the heath many birch seedlings and bracken and if these are not kept in check the heath will disappear. A small herd of Manx sheep and human volunteer action help maintain the heathland vegetation.

A mosaic of soils

Leaving the heath at its north-east corner, we passed down into a valley area adjoining Bragenham and King's Woods with more clayey and damp soil and correspondingly different flora. Below the Oak, Hazel and occasional Holly, we were lucky to find Moschatel, Yellow Archangel, Bluebell and Lily-of-the-Valley. Leaving the site gave a fine view of Hawthorn in flower and Bluebell in an area which will become dominated by bracken as the season progresses.

Hawthorn in flower and bluebell

A consolidated list of plants observed during the visit is available on request. Thanks to Anne Champion and Janice Robertson for the list of plants, and to Julian Lambley and Jagoda Zajac for the photographs

Charles Kessler

Stony Stratford Nature Reserve – Tuesday, 13th May 2025 – Visit Report

The evening visit to the Reserve was the first since 17th May 2022. It took place after an exceptionally sunny and dry March and April, and for our visit the sunshine continued. Some 25 members and 1 visitor participated.

The event started with a brief history of the Reserve which was established in 1979, initially managed by BBOWT, before the Parks Trust took over ownership and management in the early 1990s. A Species Checklist including habitat areas for plants was distributed to participants, based on the 2022 visit report and the recce undertaken with Jenny Mercer. The Leader thanked Jenny and the three members who had agreed to list species during the event: Martin Ferns; Plants, Mervyn Dobbin; Birds and Linda Murphy; Invertebrates.

Plant Species and their Habitats

The circular route from the car park was anti-clockwise and our first stopping point was at the edge of one of the ponds where we were able to see Yellow Iris at the bankside just coming into flower and Water Plantain growing within the water (thank you Charles Kessler for providing the correct

identification). The route then followed the woodland strip along the periphery of the Reserve and parallel to the noisy A5. At the entry to this woodland, we stopped to look down from a bridge to a dried-up watercourse where the distinctive leaves of Gypsywort were showing well. Our next pause was at the site once occupied by the now demolished east side hide. Celery-leaved Buttercup was an interesting addition to the plants listed in 2022 as was Annual Wall Rocket. There was no sign of the 2022 listed Nettle-leaved Bellflower.

Celery-Leaved Buttercup (Photo©Bob Phillips)

The next stop was at the Meadow Strip in the shadow of the A5 viaduct over the Ouse floodplain. The planting is a legacy of the time when the reserve was managed by BBOWT and is a good example of how meadow biodiversity can be achieved through intervention in a comparatively short period of time. Amongst the plants in flower were Bulbous and Meadow Buttercup, Common Vetch, Meadow Cranesbill, Common Bird's-foot Trefoil, Cow Parsley and one of the small, difficult to identify Speedwell species with Great Knapweed, Lady's Bedstraw, and Yellow Rattle to flower soon. There was no sign of Ragged Robin seen previously perhaps because of the unusually dry conditions.

The bank of the River Ouse offered another change in habitat but before moving off many members had good views of newly emerged Mayflies flying back and forth over the water. The river is lined with trees and shrubs including Willow sp. such as Goat, Crack and the commercially grown Cricket Bat Willow. Shrubs included Spindle which was infested by Ermine Moth caterpillars stripping its leaves. This is a widespread problem this year with Bird Cherry also being infested in this way with many of the younger specimens likely to die. A few herbaceous plants were in flower including a White Comfrey sp., White Dead Nettle, Yellow Iris plus some unidentified Sedge species. Other species had to be identified by leaves alone for example, Meadowsweet, Greater Burdock, and Great Willow Herb. Hemlock and Water Figwort, identification was based on dead plant stems and seed heads from last year.

Ermine moth caterpillars (Photo©Julian Lambley)

After leaving the riverside we followed the long strip of woodland parallel to Queen Eleanor Street. This brought a surprise sighting by Julian Lambley – Three-cornered Garlic not previously listed here. This is a non-native invasive species which we have reported to the Parks Trust which, as owner of the land, is responsible for preventing the species from spreading. It is not recorded in 'Milton Keynes More Than Concrete Cows', published in 2000 and in 'A Checklist of the Plants of Buckinghamshire', published by the Society in 2005 and authored by Roy Maycock and Aaron Woods, it is described as 'Very Rare'. Its spread northwards has clearly been fairly rapid.

Three Cornered Garlic (Photo©Julian Lambley)

Our circular route ended with the small meadow to the side of the entrance road. This is the only part of the reserve that has survived the gravel extraction of the early 1970s and was still in use as a horse paddock up to about 1980. This makes it important in its own right but also as the habitat for Meadow Saxifrage which we found in flower in several small patches competing with the surrounding grasses, Meadow Buttercup, Cow Parsley. and Red Clover: it is found in only one other location in Milton Keynes. Hidden away to the side of the grass path we were also able to identify Field Wood-Rush but we were unable to find Bush Vetch and Yellow Rattle which had been listed in flower in 2022.

Other Species

During the tour round the site several bird species were added to the 2022 list including four species of Warbler: Garden, Cetti's, Reed, and Sedge. Absent on this visit were Common Tern, Oyster Catcher, Coot, Moorhen, and Cuckoo. Two Lapwings were the only potential island nesting birds seen and these were busy mobbing a threatening Fox. The island itself is overgrown so less attractive to pebble surface ground nesters and the Tern platform has been removed. It seems likely that this reduction of species is the result of predation with otters, foxes, crows, and raptors all known to be in the vicinity. Just four species of Invertebrates were seen, not unsurprising for an evening visit. A species checklist is available on request.

Joe Clinch, Visit Leader

Salcey Forest Visit – Tuesday, 20th May 2025 – Visit Report

Salcey Forest is an ancient woodland, once part of a royal hunting ground in medieval times. The forest provided timber for ship building in the Napoleonic Wars and was later used as a training ground for troops in WWII. It is now managed by Forestry England with a focus on environmental protection and outdoor recreation.

It is home to a wide variety of species of flora and fauna. This includes 'The Druids' a number of ancient oaks, i.e. over 400 years old, some of which are now fallen providing habitat for saproxylic (deadwood) invertebrates, with a few remaining standing.

Fourteen members of the Society visited the SSSI within Salcey Forest on a warm and sunny evening. The walk took us roughly north from the Horse Box car park (SP 81030 50882) along one of the main tracks through the forest. Towards the end of the out-bound walk the group took a narrower grass path to visit the magnificent Queen Hive Oak (SP 80947 51450). This grass path revealed a number of different species from the main track, suggesting that with more time to delve deeper into the wood an even greater number of species may have been revealed. Nonetheless, even the relatively straight-forward walk up and down the main track saw the identification of a great variety of wildlife.

A species list is available on request created from the group visit supported by reconnaissance visits by the walk leaders on 4th and 16th May. The reconnaissance visits covered slightly more ground and therefore include a few species not seen on the main walk.

Spindle (Euonymus europaeus)

The Queen Hive Oak (Quercus robur)

Common Swift moth (Korscheltellus lupulina)

Black Cloak Tortrix Moth (Notocelia cynosbatella)

All photos in the Salcey Forest report courtesy of ©Julian Lambley.

Wildlife News from the Brickhills: Swift Action - June 2025 - Julie Cuthbert

I am busy building Swift boxes at the moment. We have an RSPB box which we purchased and erected last year. It has been quite an active station for our local birds already. First, we had a Great Tit roosting in it through the winter. Once he left in spring, some Blue Tits showed interest and busily cleaned out his droppings. Surprisingly they didn't stay long but the House Sparrows moved in and nested instead (maybe the House Sparrows kicked the Blue Tits out?). They may not have been our target bird but we were still pleased as they are a very much declining species too. Just before they fledged, we saw some Swifts swooping above the fields and woodland high in the sky catching insects by our house. They were hunting amongst a family group of Swallows which have nested locally every season since we have lived here. Much to our excitement the Swifts also circuited our house and flew past our box several times. According to Rob, they were definitely prospecting our nest box for next year!

So now the race is on to provide more boxes for the following season in the hope that another one of our wishes comes true and we have Swifts breeding beneath our eaves. I remember having House Martins nesting on our modern estate house during the early '70s. My family very much enjoyed having the privilege of seeing these birds returning from Africa to our house each year. I don't remember anyone else on the estate having these amazing mud-built fairy-sized huts glued to their gables but I do remember it breaking my heart to hear neighbours reporting how they had bashed the nests down to destroy and deter their breeding attempts. They were a common sight back then but are now Red-listed and protected by the 1981 Wildlife and Country Act. We will be erecting some House Martin simulated nests we purchased to try to encourage these birds next year too.

Rob took me to see a rare wading bird at Caldecotte Lake during May. It was a beautiful little female Red-necked Phalarope that was stopping off on her way to breeding grounds in the Arctic region. The female has the brightest plumage, which is unusual for birds, and their roles are reversed. The males incubate the eggs and rear the chicks while the females look for another male to breed with before heading off on migration to wintering grounds as far away as the Pacific Ocean off South America where they spend the winter out at sea.

Red-necked Phalarope (f) – Phalaropus lobatus

Julie Cuthbert

College Wood Visit – Sunday, 1st June 2025 – Visit Report

College Wood is a remnant of the old Whaddon Chase royal hunting forest, granted to the Giffard family in 1242 and a private hunting chase until 1840. It covered about 2,200 acres and included Shenley and Howe Park woods which we are familiar with from previous visits. The wood is located in Great Horwood parish, whose lord of the manor at one stage was New College, Oxford; hence the name College Wood. Horwood is Anglo Saxon for muddy wood, which if you come here at most times of the year is a fair description of the place.

The ancient status of the wood is indicated by plants such as Bluebell, Dog's Mercury and Yellow Archangel. The whole wood was subject to a 1950-60's felling and planting regime by the Forestry Commission, the planted species including Norway Spruce, Larch, Western Red Cedar, Oak, Beech and Scots Pine. The wood extends to 52 Ha and is owned by the Woodland Trust, who purchased it in 1999 when the small College Copse, by the car park, was planted.

The woodland was once a SSSI for its invertebrate records but was unfortunately de-notified. Butterfly species such as the Wood White, White Admiral and Purple Hairstreak are present on the site. The Wood White is a rediscovery, having last been seen in the 1980's and thought to be extinct. These species may be responding to increasing light levels in the woodland, particularly along the rides which have been opened up. This, and removal of conifers, is the principal management activity undertaken in the wood, which aims to restore this damaged ancient woodland.

There is a lot of Ash in the wood, probably derived from natural regeneration. Much of the Ash is very dense and thin-stemmed, and Ash dieback is widespread and noticeable. Ash dieback is caused by the fungus *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus,* of eastern Asian origin. Spores are dispersed by wind. The disease was first confirmed in the UK in February 2012 in a consignment of infected Ash plants sent from a nursery in The Netherlands to a nursery in Buckinghamshire; however, there is evidence that it first entered Great Britain some time before 2006.

Because of the dramatic impact on the landscape caused by the loss of Elms in the '70s to Dutch Elm Disease, also caused by a fungus (*Ophiostoma novo-ulmi*) and in this case spread by Elm Bark Beetles, there is a fear that Ash could also disappear from the landscape. Elm in Britain reproduces largely asexually by suckers, which limits new genetic diversity, and there appears to be no genetic resistance to the disease. On the other hand, ash reproduces sexually and not all trees die of the infection – some appear to have genetic factors which give them tolerance of, or resistance to, the disease. The disease appears to be more severe on moist sites with high Ash density, as at College Wood. Ash in hedgerows, enjoying better air circulation and more sunlight, appears less affected. Breeding tolerant Ash is an active research area.

The prevailing management approach to the disease is to fell trees that pose a danger from falling trunks or branches but otherwise to leave dead or dying trees for wildlife.

The visit was originally planned for June 27, but was postponed owing to bad weather. In the event, we had a day of sunny intervals and a group of 12 participants. From the car park we started along the main entrance ride and made a circular route along cleared rides. More of the ancient woodland flora can be observed from a footpath that runs along much of the perimeter of the wood; however, the going is rough and was not so suitable for our group.

We found much of natural history interest to look at, photograph and comment on. Stand-outs amongst the plants included plentiful Ragged Robin, and Common Spotted Orchid, just coming into flower. Ash dieback much in evidence but good to see oaks, which look like they were suppressed by

the canopy prior to ride clearance, now able to develop. Numerous Beautiful Demoiselle adults and Drinker Moth caterpillars. And among the birds, Garden Warbler and Blackcap singing, and a Sparrow Hawk was viewed by three of us as it sped along a ride.

Being extensive, located close to Milton Keynes but relatively unfrequented, and demonstrating a planted ancient woodland in recovery, makes the site well worth visiting. It would be a great success if the management initiated leads it to recover SSSI status.

Beautiful Demoiselle (m) (*Calopteryx virgo)*

Beautiful Demoiselle (f)

Hairy Dragonfly (*Brachytron pratense)*

Black and red froghopper (Cercopis vulnerata)

Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta)*

Longhorn Beetle (Stenocorus meridianus)

Invertebrate photos © Janice Robertson

Spotted Orchid (Photo©Charles Kessler)

A full species list is available on request. Thanks to Martin Kincaid for organization, directing the car parking and invertebrate list and to Janice Robertson for the invertebrate list and invertebrate photos. Thanks also to Forest Research, Woodland Trust and Gt Horwood Parish websites for information.

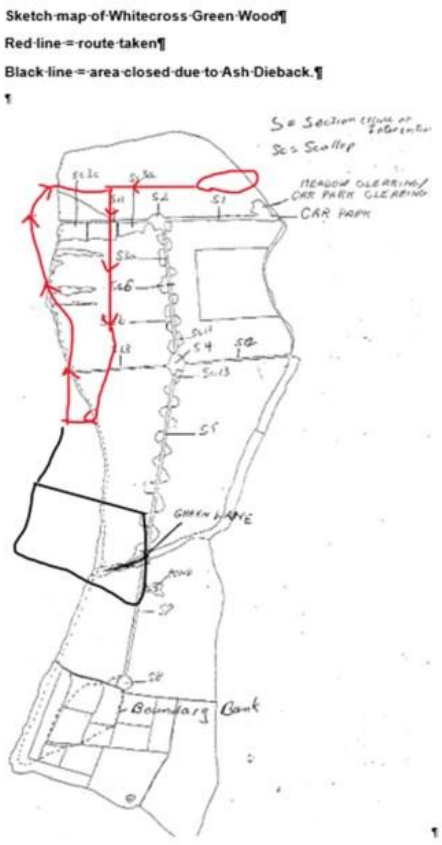
Charles Kessler

Whitecross Green Wood Visit – Saturday, 5th July 2025 – Visit Report

Whitecross Green Wood is a BBOWT reserve on the Bucks/Oxon Border. It is classed as an ancient woodland as it has been wooded since before 1600. During the 1960s, the owner felled a proportion of the trees and planted conifers. In the 1970s the wood was acquired by BBOWT, who have been gradually removing conifers and managing the wood to support the populations of Black and Brown Hairstreak. Whitecross Green Wood is a remnant of the Royal Hunting Forest of Bernwood, along with other woodlands in the area such as Rushbeds Wood, which were encompassed by the Bernwood Project set up about 10 years ago and now forms part of the landscape scale programme 'Reconnecting Bernwood, Otmoor and the Ray.'

Three of us set off on our walk around the wood. The afternoon was somewhat overcast with a strong, gusty wind, but mild and very warm during the sunny intervals. The oak trees (ladened with acorns) provided good shelter during one or two brief showers! Although conifers are very much in evidence in some parts of the wood, we noted a mix of other species such as willow, aspen, silver birch, blackthorn (in abundance), and field maple, along with ash trees showing signs of ash dieback. In fact, as a result, one area at the top end of the wood has been closed by BBOWT due to fears for public safety.

Wide ride at Whitecross Green Wood (photo © Linda Murphy)



We followed a circular route around the wood, following wide rides, turning left at the first intersection, then continuing straight on until we reached the green lane beyond the second intersection. Turning right along the green lane, we then turned right again and returned along the boundary path to the ride which leads back to the car park. The rides are managed like hay meadows with a cut taken off after mid-July (apart from some paths for visitors cut in the late spring). On the way round we talked about how the wood is being managed and the types of work done through the winter.

There were carpets of Black Knapweed and Betony, plenty of Meadow Vetchling and Bird's-foot Trefoil along main rides, interspersed with Common Spotted Orchids all nestled in tall grasses of a variety of species such as Wood Small-reed, Yorkshire Fog and Sweet Vernal Grass. Although not yet obvious, Devil's Bit Scabious grows along some ride edges. The vegetation was felt to be still relatively green compared with many places, perhaps due to the fact that it is normally an extremely wet wood during the winter. Ditches are now dry but held plenty of Pond Sedge and we also found a very lush, tall stand of Common Centaury, quite a contrast to the tiny specimens found at Stonepit Field!

Common Centaury 5.07.25 (photo © Linda Murphy)

Birds were pretty quiet, which isn't surprising at this time of year. We noted Red Kite, Chiffchaff and Blackcap during the afternoon, plus plenty of Chaffinch and other contact calls. Ravens have taken to breeding in the conifers on one edge of the wood, but none were in evidence during our visit. However, we have to admit to looking down rather than up most of the time!

Brown Argus (Photo © Julian Lambley)

Common Blue on Bird's-foot Trefoil (Photo © Julian Lambley)

Despite the wind and cloud, there were plenty of butterflies and dragonflies on the wing and we realised that the dragonflies were actually hunting the butterflies. We were admiring the Marbled Whites fluttering by when one was grabbed by an Emperor dragonfly. We found it in the grass and watched before it flew off leaving the butterfly wings behind!

Emperor Dragonfly dining on Marbled White (Photo © Julian Lambley)

We then noticed other dragonflies obviously going after butterflies. Apart from the Marbled Whites we were very pleased to find a Silver-washed Fritillary sunning itself on the path, Common Blue and Brown Argus among the multitude of Ringlets and Meadow Browns and a Small Copper among the clouds of Skippers just as we arrived back at the car park!

A full list of the species identified is available on request.

Linda Murphy

Book Review

Wild Guides 'Trees of Britain and Ireland' by Jon Stokes (Princeton Press 2025 @ £20)

Wild Guides 'Trees of Britain and Ireland' by Jon Stokes is a new field guide to trees and shrubs. This book lives up to the usual clarity of Princeton Press's other Wild Guides. For many species it shows several photos of the tree, its leaves, buds, flowers, fruit and twigs in a full page of photos. Mention is made of similar species, enabling a cross-check and there is a distribution map and a box listing associated species.

The book is portable. Its binding is strong and flexible, and it has front and rear flaps: the front flap is a key to colour codes used in the book; the rear flap is a readily useable short index to species, and both serve to mark a place in the book. There is also a comprehensive index in the last pages of the book.

Jon Stokes provides wise guidance about doing tree identification. His one-step ID covers tree species that are easy to identify at particular seasons. Five of these are broadleaves that can be identified readily at any time of year, and a further four evergreens. Other trees can be easily identified: in winter (4), spring (6), summer (8), autumn (7) using seasonal features. But his advice is that there are only a few species that can be identified reliably from bark at any time of year. There are shorter visual keys to 113 'naturally occurring' trees & shrubs native to Britain or Ireland and another 190 common non-native species or subspecies. If you want to sort out the numerous micro-species of Whitebeam, he covers 42 of these as well as 62 Elms.

The heart of the field guide is sections for Broadleaf trees and for Conifers, organised by families, with many photos and much information to enable you to ID to species. There are also extensive keys using specific features: for broadleaves: flowers, leaves, fruit, and winter twigs. Finally, there are two more sections: Widespread introduced trees & shrubs (23 species) and park, street & garden trees & shrubs (23 species). Earlier in the field guide are introductory pages that set the scene: How does a tree work? Life cycle of a tree, Tree shapes, Tree habitats, History of our treescape, Trees as characters, the fascination of old trees. None of this is dull. It is valuable background clearly written and accessible.

Jon Stokes has provided us with a remarkably useful and portable field guide to trees and more, with background about each of them. I do not expect to see tree field guides as useful as this for years to come. But do also use Alan Birkett's online Tree Guide alongside this: https://www.treeguideuk.co.uk/tree-guide-book/

Mike LeRoy **May 2025**