

Cockaynes Wood Newsletter No. 12 December 2012

A newsletter of recent wildlife sightings and events at Cockaynes Wood and the adjoining countryside.

Bird Notes

A mid winter morning at Cockaynes Wood. You may have to use your ears to detect the bird life. There are mixed flocks of finches (**Siskins, Goldfinches** and **Chaffinches**) in the birches around the edge of the wood, making a constant quiet twittering. Siskins, a dainty yellow-green finch addicted to birch and alder seeds, can be picked out by their two note whistle, either rising or falling in pitch. Male Chaffinches go “pink, pink” (suits their colour). Over the grassland a flock of **Meadow Pipits** (the original “little brown job”) moves in its erratic , tentative sort of way before deciding which corner to drop into and disappear. The pipits’ “jeet, jeet” call is distinctive.. From reeds and clumps of wet scrub, Reed Buntings can be heard with their wistful “tseoo” call. A fine male Reed Bunting photographed (in warmer times) at Sunnymead Farm is pictured below.



Two cold snaps, with all water bodies frozen , in early December, have dampened the water bird activity at Cockaynes but it will probably pick up in the

New Year with duck numbers building up in February and early March. A few **Woodcock** have appeared on the scene, typically lurking on the ground in thick cover and hoping their exquisite camouflage colours will hide them, only at the last minute flying up with a burst of explosive action and picking their way through the trees with amazing agility for such a large bird. Other waders are represented by a few **Snipe** (below – and pictured in Scotland!)) which frequent the sedges where grass meets water and like Woodcock, are really only seen when disturbed.

Thanks to Glyn for bird photos this month and to Dave and Mo for news



Bizarre Lifestyle of the Month

Insects generally get a rather bad press. Tell somebody you're interested in insects and the mental image aroused will probably be from the area of life where insect "pest" meets irritated human: a clothes moth caterpillar has gnawed holes in your favourite sweater; nobody warned you that Scotland was full of midges in August, or the Lake District full of flies. There's no easy way to overcome this sort of blanket dismissal of insects as being either beneath notice or positively harmful. I tend to rely on telling people how weird and wonderful insect lifestyles are, how perfectly they adapt to their chosen niche in life, etc. One of the strangest lifestyles that has come to my notice recently belongs to a parasitic wasp called ***Evagetes pectinipes***. This is not one of those yellow and black striped things with a sting at one end that springs to mind when you say "wasp". (There are literally hundreds of wasp species that are not like the **Common Wasp**). It's one of 4 species of wasp in the genus Pompilidae that specializes in hunting spiders on open ground. Unlike these species, it does not excavate its own

burrow and provision its brood-cell with spiders it has caught itself. Instead it lays its eggs in burrows created by other spider hunting wasp species, so that its larva hatches out first and eats the spider prey stored away by its host. This behaviour is by no means unusual since many of the bee and wasp species found at Cockaynes Wood are parasitic in some way or another..

Evagetes pectinipes was discovered at Cockaynes Wood this year by David Scott and is extremely rare in the UK, so much so that the first Essex record was only in 2007, before which it was only known from sand dunes in Kent.

How would you know that what you are looking at is a spider hunting wasp, I hear you ask? Well, very roughly, if it is small, red and black with an air of perpetual distraction, quivering nervously and making constant short flights to sense the ground for spider activity, it may well be a spider hunting wasp. But sadly you will need a very expert eye to identify one for certain as to the exact species.

The fact that so many species with these parasitic behaviours, each one dependent on another species, can be found in one place, signifies a very rich and well-connected web of interdependent life which we should prize and look after

Correction

Newsletter No. 11 should have been headed November 2012, not October 2012. The Editor has deducted points from himself for this absurdity!

May we take this opportunity

To wish all readers a very happy Christmas and a New Year full of interest and excitement, and to thank all our volunteers for the sterling work they have achieved in 2012.

Work Party News

During the past few weeks we have had work parties from Wivenhoe P3 footpath group, Colchester 6th Form College, Essex University, and other groups as well as our own dedicated team. Tremendous things have been achieved including a brushwood fence round the new pond, to protect it against import of the invasive alien *Crassula*.

The next work party date is **Sunday January 6th 2013 . 10.00-3.30** which will be our New Year celebration with baked potatoes, mince pies etc. and, for anyone who wants to, some light and not too demanding work. There will also be a special work party to carry on with the boardwalk refurbishment on **Tuesday Jan. 22nd**. with the local Conservation Volunteers group. All welcome and for any part of the time. Meeting place is the former quarry yard. Contact number for work party is 077545 20323 (Robin).

This monthly newsletter is available on request to anyone interested. All contributions of wildlife observations will be welcomed by the Editor Robin Cottrill (robin.cottrill@gmail.com) (tel 01206 826418). These can be from the Cockaynes

Wood site or surrounding area (Alresford, Wivenhoe or Elmstead). Please keep me supplied with your wildlife observations!

For those with a particular interest in birds, the excellent website <http://www.wivenhoeforum.co.uk/discussion/1062/birds-of-wivenhoe> will provide recent bird news, discussion and pictures.