

Cockaynes Wood Newsletter No. 22 / 23 October and November 2013

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

Bird (and other) Notes

Bird-wise things have been rather quiet, and observations sparse. Two **Buzzards** appeared to leave a roost in Villa Wood on the morning of 4th November. Good numbers of **Meadow Pipits** and up to 10 **Redpolls** were around during that week, along with 2 **Snipe**, small numbers of **Gadwall**, **Shoveler** and **Tufted Duck**, and double figures of **Mallard**. **Bullfinches** could be heard at the S end of Villa Wood. One of the Sunnymead owl boxes was commandeered by a **Little Owl** at the beginning of October. This **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, pictured at the end of September, carried a ring – whether a locally ringed bird or not, I'm not sure at the moment!



Female Great Spotted Woodpecker by Glyn Evans

So short of bird news am I that I'm tempted to put in a non-avian picture, so here it is -



Grass Snake by Moira Jackson

a fine **Grass Snake** found by Mo in her garden at Sunnymead Farm. Grass Snakes are one of the under-appreciated top predators of the site, and are quite commonly seen, perhaps best seen on a sunny spring day when they first appear from hibernation in sites such as root-plate holes where trees have been over-turned. I've never been quite sure what they feed on but the extent of the newt population, as we now know it, suggests that amphibians may be a significant part of the snakes' diet. Thanks to David, Mo, and Glyn for news and pictures.

Infrastructure Information



We now have an (almost complete!) footbridge spanning the water course between the two main wetland areas. This was made from secondhand, galvanised steel beams which had been loitering for some years in a South Essex nature reserve. Posts and handrail were welded on, and a deck has been fixed made of oak planks, cut and milled by volunteers under the guidance of Alan Brown of Essex Wildlife Trust, who coordinated the operation. Brett Aggregates helped by providing a JCB to prepare the ground and lift the bridge parts into place. The bridge will form part of a footpath following the boundary between Alresford and Elmstead Parishes; it provides an excellent vantage point to view the water on both sides, and creates a path avoiding muddy patches. Bretts have also dredged the nearby scrape to remove large quantities of *Crassula* weed. The scrape edges are now much more suitable for wading birds, and maybe Lapwing and Redshank can be attracted back as breeders. The weed itself seemed pretty well devoid of life. Work had been deferred to November to ensure that any newt species were in hibernation. After 2 days of watching the weed being removed, to make sure it contained no newts, I had seen only one dragonfly larva and one diving beetle emerging from the dredged material. Clearly any newts, by then, were in winter quarters in suitable locations around the site.

The project will be completed by re-aligning fencing to unify the two wetland areas, incidentally removing an obstacle which annually seems to upset the local Mute Swans.

We are hoping to have an official opening in early 2014, when the surfaces have recovered from inevitable tracking by plant used in the construction.

While on the subject of infrastructure, we now have “only” about 15m of the Villa Wood boardwalk left to complete. During November we had two groups of students from Essex University's “V-team” helping us with this heavy, muddy and intensive work, and they gave every impression of having thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Inveterate invertebrate enthusiasts' corner

The fabulous insect below, a **Great Silver Diving Beetle** *Hydrophilus piceus*, was photographed after flying to David Dutton's moth-trap light in October.



Great Silver Diving Beetle by David Dutton

With a gloss finish that car manufacturers can only dream about (I believe it looks silver in the water, hence the name) it's a large and impressive predatory insect, less common than the **Great Diving Beetle** with which it could be confused.

David Scott has provided a valuable list of many insect species he identified on our site in 2013, including several rare species which highlight the importance of Cockaynes as an insect site.



Blue Carpenter-bee Ceratina cyanea photo by Essex Field Club

The bee species above, *Ceratina cyanea*, or the Blue Carpenter Bee, is one of these. The females nest in old bramble stems, and both sexes spend the winter in similar positions. This is the only British example of a “carpenter-bee” species although a much larger relative, the Violet Carpenter-bee, has been reported in the UK recently and may be about to colonise – watch this space!

Work Party News

Next Work Party is **Sunday December 1st** starting at 10.00 a.m. at the former quarry yard, and tasks will include continuing with the boardwalk and footpath maintenance. There will also be a mid month work party on **Wednesday December 11th** - same time, same place. But possibly a different job! And then we have the first work party of the New Year, **Sunday January 5th**, which is traditionally celebrated with baked potatoes, mince pies and other seasonal goodies.

We are also planning a pre-Christmas social at a suitable location for volunteers and friends – we'll keep you posted!

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.