

## Cockaynes Wood Newsletter No. 27 March 2014

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

### **Bird Notes**

Signs of spring? Did we ever really have a winter? A pair of **Tawny Owls** at Sunnymead Farm already had 2 eggs by February 22<sup>nd</sup> and at the time of writing have 5, due to start hatching during the last weekend in March. Up to 10 **Shelducks** have been in the wetland area since at least February 27<sup>th</sup>, with couples investigating some of the large rabbit burrows they use for nesting. My first **Chiffchaff** was on March 8<sup>th</sup>, and a week or so later they seemed to be everywhere around the site. Many of these will be onwards-moving migrants but some always stay to nest.



*Chiffchaff by Glyn Evans*

More exotic was the male **Golden Pheasant** seen at Sunnymead on March 13<sup>th</sup>. This is an enigmatic bird with a small, and declining, feral population in Brecklands. What it is doing round here is anyone's guess! Also noteworthy is the **Water Rail** heard at Sunnymead on 22<sup>nd</sup> March. We suspected a pair of these secretive birds to be present last spring but they are very elusive and difficult to track.

Ducks have generally not been as numerous as usual, with up to 4 **Tufted**, 6 **Teal** and small numbers of **Mallard** and **Gadwall**. 1 or 2 **Snipe** and a **Green Sandpiper** have

been seen occasionally. More **Marsh Harrier** sightings continue with males on 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> March. A lone **Great Crested Grebe** was on the fishing lakes on 4<sup>th</sup> March and later dates – will he/she attract a mate? So far waders have been in short supply with odd sightings of **Lapwing**, **Redshank** and **Oystercatcher** – but there's still time for more to appear.



*Drake Teal by Glyn Evans.*

Thanks to David, Mo and Glyn for their records and pictures.

### **More signs of spring**

Brimstone butterflies could be seen as early as March 5<sup>th</sup> enjoying the sunshine along the south edge of Cockaynes Wood. This is often one of the earliest butterflies to be seen as it over winters as an adult and responds quickly to warm early spring days.



*Brimstone by Mo Jackson*

Some of the “**solitary bee**“ species were also very early risers this year. A series of sunny and mild days in March brought out large numbers of several bee species including a sizeable colony in the remains of the old sand heap (where the marquee goes on our Open Days!). In this context “solitary” simply means that there is no Queen and that each female bee is fertile. These species can still be seen in large numbers nesting in dispersed colonies. At this time of year the main pollen/nectar source seems to be the “willow palm” that is plentiful in certain places around our site.



*Minotaur beetle*

There is other insect activity to be seen, such as the excavations of **Minotaur Beetles** in bare sandy ground along the S edge of Cockaynes Wood. This is a large dung beetle feeding (both as adult and larva) on rabbit dung, which it drags back to a burrow in which its larva shelters. It is (probably!) possible to confuse the Minotaur's burrows with those of the **Green Tiger Beetle** larva, which is a carnivore and uses its burrow entrance as a pitfall trap for the unwary.

Other good signs of spring include a gathering of **Common Frogs** croaking away in the stream, audible from the new bridge. Remarkably few observations of frogs or toads seem to be made here and I'd like to hear from anyone who sees or hears one. Completing the round-up of reptiles/amphibians, both **Common Lizards** and an unidentified small snake were spotted during one of our recent work parties along the edge of Cockaynes Wood.

## **Coming Events**

We will be running **Bluebell Walks** at 2.30 p.m. on Saturday May 3<sup>rd</sup>, with one walk starting from the Cockaynes Lane end of the footpath into Cockaynes Wood, and the other starting from the former quarry yard which we use as a car park. This can be reached via the track just north of the railway bridge on Alresford Road, Wivenhoe (entrance will be signposted).

We'll also be putting on a special event for **National Insect Week** on Saturday June 28<sup>th</sup> – programme to be decided and announced but will include some fascinating stuff.

**Colchester Natural History Society** will visit from 9.45 a.m. on Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> July and while this is not open to the general public our volunteers and helpers are welcome to attend.

Our **Open Day** this year will be on Sunday July 6<sup>th</sup> with the usual guided walks and other attractions.

Any offers of help with these events will be most gratefully received.

## **Work Party News**

Work has now been finished on re-routing fences around the new bridge; this will solve a long-running problem of swan families getting stuck in the fencing while trying to navigate from one pond to another. We also have a new bench made and installed by Essex Wildlife staff and volunteers; this has already been tried and approved. The boardwalk in Villa Wood is now only about 6m short of completion!

Next Work Party is **Sunday April 6<sup>th</sup> 2014** meeting at 10.00 a.m. at the former quarry yard.

Other upcoming dates are: **Wednesday April 23rd**  
**Sunday May 11<sup>th</sup>**  
**Wednesday May 14<sup>th</sup>**

New volunteers are always welcome. Please remember you don't have to have any special expertise to join us, or to stay for the whole session. If you have any queries about the work parties please phone Robin on 01206 826418.

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](mailto: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.