



Newsletter September 2021

www.californiagardenersclub.co.uk



Talk via Zoom, 6th September 2021 'The Wildlife of the Thames Valley Basin' given by Des Sussex

A very positive aspect of our club is that we are not only interested in gardening but in the natural world too. This was one of those talks that enlightened us about the special nature in our very own area.

Des works for Natural England, the government agency that champions the conservation of wildlife throughout England. His talk focussed on the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA). An SPA is a site of international importance for protecting the rarer habitats of bird species that without intervention would be in danger of being eradicated. They are protected under law. Many of the SPAs in this country are coastal, since they relate to birds and there are numerous nesting sites along our coastline which need protection.

What is our SPA?

The Thames Basin SPA is a network of lowland heath and woodland sites covering 8,200 hectares across Surrey, Berkshire and Hampshire and 11 different local planning authorities. Within it are the 13 individual sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSI). This is the heathland habitat of three species of rare ground-nesting birds: the woodlark, the Dartford warbler and the nightjar, all of international importance. Since they all nest on the ground, they are very susceptible to disturbance from informal recreational use. Data showed during the 1990's that they were in decline and under threat.

The 13 sites have a real mix of aspects, including MOD land, country parks, nature parks, golf clubs, Blackbushe Airport, Crown Estate land and open heaths. Each landowner has their own special requirements that have to be balanced with those of nature. For example, the MOD at Sandhurst needed to build a practice Camp Bastion to train troops before being deployed to Afghanistan. The Lookout in Bracknell is very busy, as are other publicly accessible sites. Other issues include illegal motorcycling at some sites which endangers the delicate habitat. These different sites are managed by diverse groups which in itself creates challenges.

What about new housing?

There is also pressure on land and risk to wildlife from the government policy and need to build new homes. An increased population is likely to lead to an

Things to note

1. Our next meeting is on the 4th October. A talk about 'Brownsea Island History' by Tony Westen. **This will be in the hall.**
2. **Trading Hut** – Now open.
3. **Member's articles.** See in newsletter for more details.

increase in people visiting the SSIs which has been shown to be detrimental. A strategy has been agreed for when planning applications are considered:

- 400 metre buffer zone between new residential housing and the SSI
- From 400 metres to 5 kilometres, development might be possible but only if developers can prove that their proposals can avoid any significant adverse effect on the SPA.
- A financial contribution from the developer is required to aid the SPA. The money is used for visitor management, such as wardens, signage, education etc. Also for the creation of Suitable Accessible Green Spaces (SANGS). These are green spaces which the public can access, reducing pressure on the SSIs. Over 65 have now been created, such as Rooks Nest and the TRL site in Crowthorne. It is preferable for people to visit these rather than the protected heaths.
- Air quality mitigation might also be required.
- The levy on developers also pays for wardens who encourage responsible behaviour, for example asking dog owners to keep their dogs on leads.

What about our special birds?



The nightjar migrates from Africa, arriving in May. It's distinctive 'churring' sound is heard at dawn and dusk. If you have ever heard it, you will know that it really is a most charismatic sound. About the size of a dove, they sit on a nest on the ground during the day, motionless and well camouflaged. Recent data shows that the number of their nesting territories has risen a little. There were 404 nesting pairs in 2020.

Woodlarks are our lyrical heathland songbird. Their sweet song can be heard in early Spring, even as early as February. They are resident here throughout the year but are very vulnerable to bad winter weather. They forage and nest on the ground, preferring bare ground in between patches of heather. This makes their nests susceptible to disturbance, since they choose the kinds of ground where visitors might walk. Once the adults are flushed, the nest is at risk, since it then becomes obvious to predators where it is situated. Woodlark numbers have been in decline in recent years. However, 167 nesting pairs were recorded in 2020.



A recent success story has been the conservation of the Dartford warbler in the UK. However, they too are susceptible to bad weather. This is because the numbers of the insects that they feed on decrease in numbers in a harsh winter. They do not migrate and rely on a good supply of insects all year round. 711 nesting pairs were recorded in 2020.

The habitat needs careful management in order for these birds to thrive. The structure of the heathland is important and it cannot just be left to its own devices. New saplings need clearing or trees would take over. Grazing, using cattle, goats, ponies and red deer at Pirbright Ranges, is used to control scrub and grasses. Gorse needs to be prevented from growing into great thickets which would smother the heather which itself when mature presents a fire risk which is hard to control. Fires are especially disastrous in spring and early summer when not only nests are destroyed but also the insects on which the birds feed. The heather can grow back quite quickly but the damage for the birds is harder to overcome. Rhododendrons are encroaching in some areas and smothering the delicate habitat.

What other wildlife and nature features in our SPA?

Des gave us an insight into some of the other special birds that also feature in our heathlands:

- Cuckoo
- Hobby (a small falcon)
- Tree pipit
- Redstart
- Stonechat
- Green woodpecker
- Linnet
- Yellowhammer (very rare)
- Reed bunting

In addition, every species of native reptiles are to be found including grass snakes, adders and lizards. The rare sand lizard has been re-introduced. Silver-studded blue butterflies, grayling butterflies, green tiger beetles and emperor moths feature. All of these are heathland specialists.

In the wetland areas, we have peat bogs, marsh club moss, sedges, cotton grasses, sundew fly trap plants, keel skimmers, special dragonflies and damselflies, raft spiders and wasp spiders. Also orchids including bee orchids are at home in our SPA.

Should we protect these birds?

A debate arose at the end about whether we should just allow nature to take over naturally. Des explained that without management, the heaths would mostly return to thick woodland with only the wildlife that can live in that sort of habitat. In addition, there are no wild boar to eat the bracken which along with the rogue rhododendrons and gorse, would take over completely in the understorey. The diversity that has been created over eons would be lost which would seem a great pity. 84% of heathland has been lost in the past two centuries. Natural England is trying to preserve the nature that we have for all of us to enjoy.

Julia Goodall Publicity Secretary

Virtual Autumn Show results

Well done to all those who entered the Virtual Autumn Show. The standard was very good and you made it difficult for the judge to do her job. The first, second and third for all the classes are listed below. Note that the judge decided, in the fuchsia class, to split the class into 'mixed' and 'same' as there were so many of them.

See below:

Five tomatoes



1st
Chris Spinks



2nd
Girish Gala



3rd
Lynn Potts

Four Potatoes



1st
Dick Hawes



2nd
Margaret Wade



3rd
Gwen Harvey

Three Types of Vegetable



1st
Margaret Wade



2nd
Gwen Harvey



3rd
Dave Spinks

Two Cucumbers



1st
Margaret Wade



2nd
Dave Spinks



3rd
Hermione Lewis

Vase of three Dahlias



1st
Inge Salter



2nd
Ian Gillott



3rd
Gwen Harvey

Six Fuchsia Florets

'Same'



1st
Mary Ede



2nd
Stuart Slocombe



3rd
John Hall

Six Fuchsia Florets

'Mixed'



1st
Chris Spinks



2nd
Gwen Harvey



3rd
Margaret Wade

Vase of Mixed Flowers



1st
Sylvia Hawes



2nd
Inge Salter



3rd
Gwen Harvey

How to give wildlife a helping hand

An award-winning gardener Jane Moore knows a thing or two about gardening for wildlife. Here she shares her tips for making your autumn garden a haven for the birds and the bees!

Spread some fallen leaves directly onto your shrub borders and flower beds where they can rot down slowly over the winter. This creates a rich, dense mulch that is brilliant for your soil, and also provides food and shelter for lots of invertebrates which, in turn, will be brilliant prey for hungry blackbirds and thrushes.

Don't be too hasty to cut things back. Leave herbaceous stems, grasses and climbers untouched to provide overwintering shelter for insects and cover for small birds to creep about. Birds will also harvest any late seeds and berries, such as those from ivy, as the winter deepens. You might even find a hedgehog hibernating under a pile of grass stems.

Lots of creatures hibernate during the winter months and compost heaps are a favourite spot. Plastic bins are nice and dry - but do make sure there is access at the base to allow creatures in. Open bins can get rather wet in autumn rains so remember to cover the top. A piece of old carpet will do and will keep it dry and insulated. This is brilliant for the wildlife, and good for the compost too, as it will rot down more quickly if it can build up some heat. Try not to disturb the heap through the winter months, instead start another heap if you need to - you can never have too many compost heaps!

Birds don't hibernate, which makes winter a particularly challenging time for them to stay alive. The cold takes a huge toll on small birds like robins and wrens, both garden favourites of mine. It's so easy to give them a helping hand.

It's also a good idea to clean out your nest boxes now to give birds somewhere to shelter on cold nights. This is the perfect time to put up a new box too, as the birds can become accustomed to the box before spring so they are more likely to use it for rearing their young.

Talking of new life, autumn is the best time to clean out your pond ready for next season's tadpoles, especially if it's getting choked with plant life or full of leaves. There are creatures living in the pond all year round but autumn and early winter are the quietest time to do any work on it. The key thing is to leave the debris on the side of the pond for a day or so to allow any creatures hiding in it to crawl back in to the pond.

Topical Tip –September 20221



September is an ideal time to plant biennials such as wallflowers and Sweet Williams.

Thanks to some excellent plant-breeding, a new breed of wallflowers have become available. These F1 hybrids are compact and more free-flowering than the open-pollinated types. (Available as module plants from Woolmans)

Planting Sweet Williams now will provide a succession of cut flowers from late May until early July. They are quite happy planted in open-ground and require little attention where they are over-wintered. (Available as module plants from Parkers.)

Ian Gillott

Member's email

WHAT IS – WHAT3WORDS

Over 100 emergency services in the UK are now using an app called 'WHAT3WORDS' to identify exactly where you are. This app is also being used by emergency services abroad. Using three words it can locate any position in the world down to three square metres.

Normally you would use a string of numbers normally found on an Ordnance survey map to locate a place but what3words greatly simplifies this. As an example 10 Downing Street is 'slur.this.shark'. The California Ratepayers Hall is 'packet.gifts.factories'.

Our chairman once used what3words to give a friend the location of a very difficult place to find in Spain. It worked superbly well.

There have been some criticism of the system and it is important for you to do your research before downloading the app to your phone, tablet, ipad etc. but there are also some very positive comments and it is certainly worth looking at.

Club Facebook Group

Don't forget our Facebook group! It is a private group which means that only club members can join and post. You can join it at: www.facebook.com/groups/207934410581605/

You will need to first read and agree to the group guidelines. We really would like more members in this group to make it a lively forum. We are looking for gardening related posts and club news.

Julia Goodall Publicity Officer

RHS card

Our club has a RHS Card.

It enables two people to gain entry to all RHS gardens throughout the country (this includes RHS Bridgewater from Sept).

Presentation of this card will give you and your friend a 30% discount on the entry fee.

You can borrow the card by contacting Chris Spinks (number at the end of newsletter) and arranging to pick it up. **(As Chris will be away 20th to 24th Sept. incl. please contact Jayne on 07967639808)**

Free membership this year

Big thank you to all those members who decided to pay their £5 membership fee this year even though it is a free year. We, the committee, appreciate this demonstration of your support. I must also go further and say thank you to a few who have made voluntary donations on top of their subs. Very kind of you. If you would like to pay your voluntary subs at the Trading Hut then Stuart will be willing to take your details etc.

The clubs bank details are: Sort Code: 40-47-09, Account number: 71301608 (don't forget to give your name as the reference).

Monthly talks

This is a call to all members:

If you have any ideas/requests for the subjects of the monthly talks, please let us know. Either reply to this email or give Hermione a ring (number below).

Member's email

TOMATO BLIGHT

Enthusiastic gardener and member of our Club, Gwen Harvey, like many others, lost her crop of tomatoes on her allotment due to Tomato Blight. Everyone of her fellow allotment holders lost their crop too and, with a heavy hearts, they gathered up the blackened stems and ruined fruit and burnt it all.

Later Gwen and her Under Gardener Alec, came home and set about watering their garden. The next day they noticed that the stems of the tomato plants had begun to turn black. They had unwittingly spread Blight from the allotment on to the healthy tomato plants in their garden presumably from spores on their clothing.

The lesson is if you encounter Tomato Blight wash your hands and change your clothes before watering or brushing up against any healthy plants. Luckily Gwen was able to pick the tomatoes in her garden before they were affected and is ripening them on her window sill.

Ironically my plants have produced a good crop although we were away for ten weeks and they have been totally unattended and Gwen and Alec are our next door neighbours!!

Sylvia Hawes

Member's email



We have had a bumper crop of cherry tomatoes, propagated from last year's seeds.

Girish Gala

Chairman: Dick Hawes 0118 979 3730	Hon. Treasurer: Peter Radband 07976 640989	Programmes: Hermione Lewis 0118 989 1671	Committee Member:
Deputy Chairman: Ian Gillott 0118 9892649	Trading Hut: Stuart Slocombe 0118 9734531	Membership: Jayne Male 07967639808	Co-opted Member: Marise Radband 01344 774310
Hon. Secretary: Chris Spinks 0118 978 1432	Show Secretaries: Daryl & Katie Phillips 07980 160169	Publicity: Julia Goodall	Table Competition Linda Garrett

