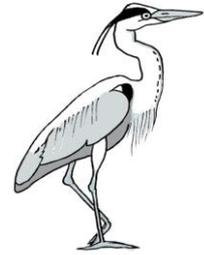




# Weir Wood News



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The Newsletter of the Friends of Weir Wood Society: no 104

Spring 2024



## **Chairman's Notes**

Welcome to our Spring newsletter.

### New Format

We hope you like the new style format. As reported at the AGM, the Committee has taken the view that with nearly all members receiving the Newsletter by e-mail, the time was now right to move to a document which can be read easily on laptops, tablets, phones etc. It also allows us to operate outside the constraints of 4 sides of A4 and to include colour photos. We hope too that you like our new style bird sightings report, the aim of which is to focus on key themes each month, seasonal visitors and rarities. We will continue to tweak the Newsletter as we go along, and if you have any suggestions for improvement please let us know.

### Work Parties

We were pleased to welcome two new volunteers after Christmas. If you would like to join our Tuesday work party, you would be most welcome. Please contact [work@weirwood.me.uk](mailto:work@weirwood.me.uk) for more information. For the past three months the Work Parties have been focused on clearing dead wood. We cut back a lot of willow growth around the reserve last year and we have been systematically burning the various piles of cuttings. We have also had to deal with a number of fallen trees - the result of high winds and waterlogged ground. The ESCC Rangers have created a new raised wooden walkway above an area of very boggy ground in the Study Area.

Finally, we have made some modifications and improvements to our new design of tern raft which we trialled last year – the aim of which is to try and make it “goose proof”. We hope to have this new raft in place soon, before the terns arrive.

### Fly Tipping

For two successive Tuesdays in February, some of the Work Party focussed on removing fly tipped rubbish from within the reserve boundaries. We were able to remove significant amounts of rubbish which required four trips to the tip. However in the case of larger items such as the dismantled garden building dumped in the car park and the air conditioning unit dumped in Legsheath Lane, we have to rely on the local authority to arrange for removal. Like many other rural spots in Sussex we have experienced a gradual increase in fly tipping in recent years and it is always disheartening when this happens. We are hoping that the newly introduced restrictions on the use of Civic Amenity Sites in West Sussex does not lead to a further increase in the illegal disposal of waste. Time will tell. Please let us know if you see fly-tipped rubbish around the reserve, so we can act accordingly.

### Blackland Farm Outdoor Centre

At the time of writing, the future of the Blacklands site is still uncertain. Blacklands has been a good neighbour to us and we use their services for our annual grass cutting programme. We understand that although the ownership will change, the site will continue to be used for outdoor / leisure activities for young people. If true, this is very good news and we will look to maintain good relations with our new neighbours.

### Website

In the last Newsletter we reported on the problems with our Website. We are pleased to report that the Website is now up and running again with the Recent Sightings feature restored. However the Website is still not operating at 100% functionality and further work is underway to restore it. We hope you will continue to bear with us during this time.

### **Dates for your Diary:**

**27 April 2024 – Members’ Spring Walk** – We are hoping the bluebells will be at their best for the walk. Meet at the hide car park for 9.00am for a quick look over the water and chat before leaving the hide car park at 9:15am prompt.

We will start by going into our woodland study area for the woodland flowers and bluebells, plus we hope to see and hear some spring birds, hopefully also having a quick look into a box or two at some nesting birds, before returning back to the car park for a short break. (Bring a flask)

The second part of the walk will be over to Whillet’s to have a look at the meadows, pond and reed bed, returning back to the car park for around 12:45pm.

No need to book, just turn up. Please wear stout walking shoes or boots as the paths are likely to be wet/muddy and are uneven in places.

**21 July 2024 – Open Day** – details to follow in our Summer Newsletter

## **AGM Report**

Our AGM went very well. It was again only open to members & family/friends, but there was a good turn out with around 30 attending. The full minutes of our 2024 AGM meeting are enclosed with this email and will also be available to view on our website once it is fully functional.

### Summary of the main business:

The 2023 AGM minutes were approved with no matters arising.

With the exception of Shaun Taylor, all current Office Holders and Committee members were re-elected. The Chairman explained that due to ill-health, Shaun had decided to step down from the Committee after many years of dedicated service. The Chairman thanked Shaun for his support and the meeting recorded its appreciation with a round of applause. It was noted that Shaun would still be taking a keen interest in the Friends and its activities.

The Chairman, Membership Secretary and Website Editor had no major changes to report in their speeches and mainly gave updates and thanked various people for work carried out.

The Treasurer presented and explained various aspects of the audited accounts which were all agreed and accepted by the membership. Doug Roberts was re-elected as our auditor for 2024.

There were no other questions or any other business raised at the end of the formal business.

We followed our AGM with a talk by our guest speaker Lydia Baxter – Wilder Ouse Project Officer. Lydia gave us a very interesting and informative talk about this exciting new project which seeks to bring people together to help restore nature / biodiversity across the Ouse River Catchment.

She mentioned that the project was being taken forward under the auspices of the Sussex Wildlife Trust and was a successor project to the Sussex Flow initiative. Lydia took us through the key elements of this project which when delivered will provide nature based solutions to the impacts of climate change and reverse the decline of important wildlife and natural resources in the catchment area.

The talk was very well received by the audience and there were a number of questions from members. Our thanks to Lydia for a very interesting, informative and entertaining talk. You can find more about this initiative at: [Wilder Ouse | Sussex Wildlife Trust](#)

## Large Nest Box Report

In our last newsletter we touched on the repair work to our existing large nest boxes and the installation of two new Kestrel boxes. Our nest box team have spent January and February getting these boxes ready for this year's nesting season. An inspection in mid-March has shown that we already have a Tawny Owl sitting on 3 eggs in one of the boxes and a Barn Owl roosting in another, which is great news.

### 2023 Large Nest Box Report - Summary

There are 35 large nest boxes located on the reserve of which 29 had at least 1 nest last year. The 6 boxes that produced no nest records have all had a successful nest at some time in the past. 4 boxes had a large hornet nest in the summer; each box had earlier had a bird occupant.

By far the most populous bird occupying our boxes was Stock Dove. Last year there were 21 successful nest attempts and 21 failed attempts – 34 young birds left the successful nests. It was a mixed picture for Mandarin Duck with 2 failed and 3 successful nest attempts. 24 ducklings left the nests, down considerably on last year's figure of 44. For Jackdaw we had 1 successful and 1 unsuccessful attempt with only 1 youngster leaving the nest.

The success story last year concerned owls. Tawny Owl had 2 successful nest attempts and Barn Owl 1 successful nest attempt (no failed nest attempts for either). 4 Tawny and 4 Barn Owl chicks left the nests. We haven't had breeding Barn Owl on the reserve for some time, so this is an encouraging development and may be the result of increasing numbers of field vole in our meadows. Fingers crossed for 2024!



**Barn Owl chicks – June 2023**  
**Photo by John Edwards**

## Working with Southern Water

During 2023, we established a useful line of communication with Southern Water's Environment team and in particular with their then newly appointed Environment Strategy Manager. We were able to put Weir Wood "back on the map" with Southern Water and we hosted a number of visits from Southern Water staff at which we were

able to showcase the work the Friends had carried out to improve the habitat around the reservoir.

We think that we made a favourable impression and the Environment Team at Southern Water have with our help, suggested ways in which we can work together to improve the habitat further. A tentative first draft action plan has been produced, and whilst it is still very early days, this is an encouraging development in our relationship with Southern Water.

### **Crassula Control**

Members will be aware of the presence of *Crassula helmsii* in both in the reservoir and Whilletts pool. Crassula, which is known by many names including New Zealand Pygmyweed and Australian Swamp Stonecrop, was introduced to this country as an oxygenating plant for garden ponds. Unfortunately it took a liking to our environment and is now classified as a Non Native Invasive Species (NNIS). It forms large floating mats of vegetation which chokes other plants and is very difficult to control – it can regrow from tiny fragments of plant.

Along with a number of other sites in England, Weir Wood was selected to be part of a trial conducted by Centre for Agriculture and Biosciences International (CABI) which would see the introduction of a gall producing mite which restricts the growth of this plant and prevents it from germinating. Mites were introduced at Weir Wood in 2022. We have learned recently that whilst the trial was successful in some locations, it failed at Weir Wood. We understand that it is believed that the mites died off as the result of fluctuating water levels at Weir Wood, with the plants being underwater for some of the trial period and then dried out in the extreme heat in July 2022.

This is disappointing news and we await to discover whether there will be any further trials and whether Weir Wood will be included.

You can find out more at: [Finding a biocontrol agent for Crassula - CABI.org](https://www.cabi.org/UK/en/pests-diseases/crassula-helmsii/)



***Crassula Helmsii***

## **Ashdown Forest – Bigger, Better, More Joined Up**

Members who attended our AGM last year, heard James Adler CEO of the Ashdown Forest give an inspiring presentation on the “Weald to Waves” project which will create a large wildlife corridor from West to East Sussex and which will incorporate Weir Wood.

The Ashdown Forest has developed its own smaller scale plan which looked to both improve the habitat / bio diversity of the Forest and to encourage and create wildlife corridors to the adjacent countryside. This includes Weir Wood. Members may well have attended the series of talks about this project given before Christmas by Mark Infield in the towns and villages bordering the Forest.

The Forest drew up a project plan (which had the support of Southern Water and the Friends in respect of Weir Wood) and sought funding from the Government to kick start this project. We were advised in January that the Forest had not been successful with its bid, but we understand that all is not lost and that another funding bid will be made in the future. This is an exciting project and one which the Friends Committee will continue to support.

In respect of Weald to Waves, sadly, James is no longer with us, but his vision and those of the other founding participants in this project lives on and you can find out more at [www.wealdtowaves.co.uk](http://www.wealdtowaves.co.uk)

## **The Flowers of Weir Wood**

This is a new feature which aims to show that Weir Wood is not just about the birds! The Friends Committee have spent an increasing amount of time in recent years improving the habitat for wild flora and this is bearing fruit (or flower?). Each issue we will focus on a particular flower / plant that grows on the reserve and tell you a bit more about it. It may not be rare, but it will still be a flower / plant of interest.

Our focus this issue is on a not uncommon plant, but one which has an interesting story. Members enjoy our lovely display of bluebells each year on our Spring Walk, but just beyond our bluebell woods lies an area of wet ground known as an Alder Carr. A month before the bluebells flower, **Marsh Marigolds** (*Caltha palustris*) also known as Kingcup, come into flower in this wetland. This is a lovely looking flower and a member of the *Ranunculaceae* family which includes Buttercups. Its bright yellow petals are set off perfectly by its glossy dark green leaves. It provides a spectacular dash of Spring colour to an otherwise gloomy spot on the reserve and provides an early source of pollen and nectar to a range of insects including hoverflies and bees.

The Marsh Marigold is recognised as an anti-inflammatory and has been used to treat a range of ailments including skin inflammation and gastrointestinal issues. Having said that, all the guides caution against eating any part of the plant. The flowers can be used to make a yellow dye.

In Norse mythology the Marsh Marigold was associated with Freya, the goddess of love and fertility. In Mediaeval Christianity the plant was known as “Mary’s gold” and

was used in church festivals to honour the Virgin Mary. It was said to have bloomed at around the time of the Feast of the Annunciation (25<sup>th</sup> March).



**Marsh Marigold at Weir Wood**

## **Bird Sightings Report**

### **January**

The weather for January started damp and mild, followed by a cold snap, before returning to damp and mild weather at the month end. The water level in the reservoir remained very high.

As usual there was plenty of action on the feeders near the hide, with the regular tits, finches and other small birds coming and going. However the main action was to be found on the water.

A larger than usual number of winter ducks were seen this month including, **Teal**, **Tufted Duck** (30+), **Pochard**, **Gadwall**, **Wigeon** (20+) and **Mallard**. Pochard numbers grew throughout the month with 11 seen on the 4<sup>th</sup>, increasing to 39 on the 31<sup>st</sup>.

The 2 **Goosanders** that had been seen before Christmas were still around in January and Goosanders were seen most days of the month – mainly 2 drake and 2 red-heads. 7 Goosanders (2 drake, 5 red-heads) were seen on the 24<sup>th</sup>. Goosander has not been a regular visitor to the reserve in recent times, so it is pleasing to note their return. Let's hope it becomes a regular winter haunt for them.

Gulls continue to make the reservoir a winter roost with 1950 **Black-headed Gulls** roosting at the Dam End on the 6<sup>th</sup> increasing to 2250 on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. An adult **Caspian Gull** was spotted with the Black-headed Gulls on the 18<sup>th</sup>. 134 **Common Gulls** were counted roosting on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

A rarity for the reserve was a **Greater Scaup** seen on the 8<sup>th</sup>. Sadly it didn't hang around and was gone by the following morning. Another rarity was a **Bittern** seen on

the 19<sup>th</sup>. A **Waxwing** was spotted flying over on the 29<sup>th</sup> and a **Goldeneye** was spotted on the 19<sup>th</sup>. A **Goshawk** was spotted on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

**Kingfishers** were seen throughout the month as were **Fieldfare**, **Redwing**, **Siskin and Redpoll**. 2 **Water Rail** were heard throughout the month in Whilletts reed bed.

The monthly Wetland Bird Survey took place on the 14<sup>th</sup>. The highlight was a sighting of a **Red-breasted Merganser**. This is a bird which is not often seen inland and is a rare sighting for Weir Wood, indeed one has not been seen on the reserve for many years. Disappointingly the Survey recorded only 25 **Great Crested Grebes** across the reserve. The decline in numbers is now quite marked; it used to be the case that 100+ Grebes could be seen on the reserve at this time of the year in the not too distant past. Long-standing members will know that the once large numbers of Grebe were instrumental in Weir Wood gaining SSSI status.

Towards the end of the month **Grey Heron** and **Cormorant** numbers started to increase as they returned to their nesting sites at the west end of the reservoir. 21 Grey Heron were recorded on the 29<sup>th</sup>. 2 **Little Egrets** have been seen hanging around in this area and in Whilletts all month and 4 were spotted on the 19<sup>th</sup>. It would be a first if they were to breed here, but this is considered unlikely. A **Great White Egret** has been seen four times during the month.



**Greater Scaup**  
Photo by Alastair Gray



**Red-breasted Merganser**  
Photo by Bob Johnson

## February

February was a very wet month (the wettest on record for some areas) and it rained most days. Consequently the water level in the reservoir remained very high.

The main items to note in the month were the steady decline in the number of winter ducks and the increase in number of **Grey Herons** and **Cormorants**.

In respect of the winter ducks, 41 **Pochard**, 15 **Tufted Ducks** and 13 **Wigeon** were recorded on the 1<sup>st</sup>. Numbers slowly dwindled during the month so that on the 27<sup>th</sup> only 3 **Tufted** were recorded and on the 28<sup>th</sup> only 3 **Pochard** and no **Wigeon** were recorded respectively. **Coot** numbers also fell during this period. However 2 **Pintail**

were seen on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 4 sometimes 5 **Goosander** were seen consistently throughout the month (7 on 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>) although only 2 were seen on the 28<sup>th</sup>. 11 **Teal** were recorded on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Grey Heron** numbers increased with 23 seen on the 7<sup>th</sup>, 31 on the 11<sup>th</sup> (WeBS) 36 on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 40 nesting from the Heronry Survey on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Similarly 32 **Cormorants** were seen on the 11<sup>th</sup> rising to 43 on the 17<sup>th</sup>. 11 nesting Cormorants were recorded as part of the Heronry Survey on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. The 2 **Little Egrets** were still present, 2 being seen on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 1 on the 27<sup>th</sup>.

**Great Crested Grebe** numbers showed small fluctuations with 8-9 being the norm with 16 being recorded on the 11<sup>th</sup> during the WeBS. **Water Rail** were present in Whilletts reed bed throughout the month with 2 heard (but not seen) on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>.

The first **Osprey** of the year (a fly over) was recorded in the early hours of the 25<sup>th</sup>.

4 **Mistle Thrushes** were seen on the 7<sup>th</sup>. The winter thrushes – **Fieldfare** and **Redwing** - were seen throughout the month although in decreasing numbers. 4 **Common Snipe** were flushed by the Work Party on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 6 again on the 20<sup>th</sup>. 1 **Red Kite** was seen on the 28<sup>th</sup>. A **Green Woodpecker** was recorded on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 2 **Ravens** were seen flying over on the 17<sup>th</sup>.

There was the usual activity at the feeders with **Siskin** and **Lesser Redpoll** being spotted in the adjacent trees. **Siskins** were seen in large numbers (30) on the 11<sup>th</sup> in nearby Alder Trees and **Lesser Redpoll** (30) at the Dam End on the same date.

## March

It continued to rain persistently for most of the month although it was dryer than February (not difficult!). The month ended with cool and unsettled weather with a blustery wind. The water level in the reservoir remained high and a large part of the second meadow at Whilletts remained so wet underfoot that frogspawn was found in the large puddles in the field.

This is the month when we start to welcome the return of our regular summer visitors. 7 **Chiffchaff** were recorded on the 11<sup>th</sup> and then seen and heard regularly for the rest of the month. A **Blackcap** was first seen and heard on the 26<sup>th</sup> with 4 seen on the 27<sup>th</sup> and then heard regularly thereafter. 2 **Sandwich Terns** were seen flying over on the 19<sup>th</sup>. The first **Swallow** of the year was seen on the 24<sup>th</sup>, 2 more were seen on the 27<sup>th</sup> and then 3 more were recorded on the 29<sup>th</sup>. The first **Common Redstart** of the year was recorded on the 31<sup>st</sup>.

The 14<sup>th</sup> appeared to be a good day, with one each of **Little Ringed Plover** (seen again on the 24<sup>th</sup>) , **Common Redshank** and **Dunlin** (also seen on the 11<sup>th</sup>) all seen at the Dam End.

A **Raven** was seen on the 14<sup>th</sup> and a **Water Rail** was heard in Whilletts reed bed on the 4<sup>th</sup> and intermittently throughout the month until the 27<sup>th</sup>. **Common Snipe** were seen in ones and twos on the 11<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>. **Kingfishers** were regularly reported throughout the month.

It was a quieter month on the water. **Great Crested Grebe** were seen throughout the month; often performing their courtship rituals. **Mandarin Duck** also began to show regularly with 7 seen on the 10<sup>th</sup> and then 10 seen on the 28<sup>th</sup>. They are starting to pair up and hopefully they will use one of our large nest boxes. **Goosander** left during the month with the last one seen on the 19<sup>th</sup>. **Pochard** numbers continued to decrease with just 3 seen on the 5<sup>th</sup>. There was one male hanging around for a while and he was last seen on 20<sup>th</sup>. A solitary **Black-headed Gull** has been on the tern rafts since the 24<sup>th</sup>. A **Common Gull** was spotted on the 31<sup>st</sup>.

The feeders near the hide remained as busy as usual with all the usual suspects – tits and finches - coming down to feed. A pair of **Nuthatch** have set up their nest in the concrete nest box just behind the hide. Also on the smaller bird front, 6 **Bullfinches** were seen on the 20<sup>th</sup> in the Blackthorn bushes in Whilletts and a **Firecrest** was seen at the Dam End on the 28<sup>th</sup>.

A Heronry Census was carried out during the month. What follows are just the highlights. We intend to do a fuller report on the 2024 Heron and Cormorant nesting season in the next newsletter.

In respect of **Grey Heron**, numbers had built up such that by the beginning of the month 47 nests were detected – our highest yet – beating last year’s total of 45. Weir Wood remains the largest heronry in Sussex. No young had been detected by the end of the month, but the nests are quite deep so young are not visible until they are a few weeks old. At the time of writing (April) there are 9 nests with 12 young – but more of this in the next issue .....

In respect of **Cormorant** there were 16 nests detected by the 11<sup>th</sup> rising to 20 on the 24<sup>th</sup> with 1 nest holding 2 chicks. This nest had been occupied by a breeding pair back on the 27<sup>th</sup> January. Cormorant nest numbers are down slightly on last year (25 nests) but it is still early and more nests may yet be built.

1 **Little Egret** was seen in the vicinity of the heronry at the beginning of the month. It was seen again on the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> but not thereafter.

**Ospreys** were seen on the 24<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>. Hopefully these sightings will increase further as we move into April and May. **Tawny** and **Barn Owl** were both seen during a large nest box check on the 5<sup>th</sup>, with Barn Owl seen again on the 14<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and the 31<sup>st</sup>. **Red Kites** were seen on most days during the month, mostly at the Dam End.

The sighting of the month had to be a male **Ring Ouzel**, first seen by a member on the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup> at the Dam End. It continued to hang around every day for

the rest of the month enabling birders and public alike to get a good sighting of the rarest of our thrushes.



**Ring Ouzel at Weir Wood**  
**Photos by Bob Stokes and Martin Jeffree**

The Report above just gives a “flavour” and a detailed list of sightings can be found on our website at: [www.weirwood.me.uk](http://www.weirwood.me.uk) – click on the “Recent Sightings” link. Remember to check our Facebook page too for regular sightings and photos.

### **And Finally .....**

We couldn't let this Newsletter close without including a photo (taken by Richard Allan) of this lovely Snake's Head Fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*) which emerged in early March in Whilletts Meadows. We were given some seeds by a member about 6 years ago which we duly scattered. A couple of these plants appeared briefly for the first time last year, only to be munched promptly by deer! Thankfully they have emerged again this year in the same spot and in greater numbers. We have taken measures to protect them from munching. They like wet meadows so fingers crossed they will continue to thrive and spread; they really are a most attractive plant.



## Useful Information:

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