



Weir Wood News

The Newsletter of the Friends of Weir Wood Society no 110

Autumn 2025



Chairman's Notes

Welcome to our autumn newsletter and we hope that you have enjoyed the summer months. The lack of rain this year and general evaporation over the summer meant that water levels in the reservoir fell slightly to reveal some mud! What a change from last year. Consequently as you will see from the sightings report, some interesting waders were spotted at the west end in the last quarter. The resultant dry ground also meant that we were able to get on with some jobs that we have had to put off in the last couple of years.

Work Party News

With the nesting season over and wildflowers dying back in August, we have, with the help of the Rangers and other contactors, been able to get to grips with some of the larger conservation tasks around the reserve. We go into a bit more detail about this below.

We have also continued with the important day to day tasks around the reserve. With the dry conditions this year we were able to cut some “rides” through the reeds in Whillets reed bed to provide viewing points and at the same time we removed young willow growing in the reed bed. If not controlled, willow will eventually dry out the reed bed and not in a good way!

Our regular wildlife surveys continued throughout the summer and into September.

We were pleased to welcome two new volunteers to the work party team during the last quarter.

Hedge Cutting

With the help of the Rangers we have completed our programme of hedge cutting for the year. In particular we have lowered the hedges at: the viewing area in the car park at the west end, the Millennium Picnic Site, Meadow Pond and the road in front of Whillets Pool.

There is one very large hedge on Pintail Point where we had to engage a specialist contractor to carry out the work. This hedge had not been cut for five years and was close to 15 feet tall. We tried to cut it last year, but the high water table (caused by the reservoir being full) and the generally wet weather last year meant that the contractor’s vehicle sank in the soft ground and we had to abandon our plans. Ground conditions have been more favourable this year and our contractor was able to reduce the height of the hedge significantly. It looked a bit severe once completed as evidenced by the photos below, but it has already started to grow back nicely and will still provide excellent habitat for nesting birds next year.



**Cut hedges at Pintail Point
Photos: Bob Johnson**

Whillets Island

The island situated in Whillets Pool next to reed bed was created many years ago with the intention of attracting nesting Little Ringed Plovers. For a number of reasons this did not come to pass, but the island still attracted birds typically ducks and geese which were safe from predators such as foxes and badgers.

Vegetation on the island grows quickly especially willow and bramble and needs management if the island is not to become completely overgrown. The island is only accessible when water levels are low and this was not a problem all the time water was extracted from the reservoir. Now that the reservoir is kept full, we have to rely on a very dry summer to access the island and cut back the vegetation. The last time we were able to access the island was in 2022 when water levels were lowered to facilitate a repair to the dam wall.

This year thanks to the dry weather, we had a window of opportunity at the end of August and we seized it. We spent two days on the island clearing the “jungle” that had grown in the past three years, taking care to preserve a range of beneficial plants such as Figwort, Purple Loosestrife and Wild Rose. The island looks a bit bare at the moment but it will soon green up and hopefully we will see some birds on it again before long.

We were just in time as the heavy rain in early September meant that the island was quickly “out of bounds” again.



**Whillets Island after clearance works
Photo: Bob Johnson**

Grass Cutting

Our grass cutting programme was severely curtailed last year due the wet weather in the autumn which followed on from a generally damp summer. We look to cut our meadows in rotation in the autumn once the wild flowers have gone over and have set seed. This year although the weather was a little unsettled in the first part of September, dry ground conditions meant that we could carry out our planned cutting.

We started with the large meadow on the north bank of the reservoir opposite the sailing club. This a good area for wild flowers but it requires regular cutting to control the bramble and Creeping Thistle which although beneficial to wildlife, will crowd out all the other plant life if not managed.

We were also able to cut the meadows at Whillets. They missed out last year because of the damp ground conditions and consequently the grass came back more strongly this year and in places out competed the wildflowers. With the grass now cut, we will be able to selectively reseed areas of the meadows with Yellow Rattle. This is a plant that parasitizes grass and reduces its density thus giving the wild flowers a chance to flourish. All being well we should be able to see the results of our labours next summer.



North Bank meadow after grass cutting
Photo: Bob Johnson

Glade Pond

In our last newsletter we mentioned the pond we have created in the new glade area in the third meadow at Whillets. We have high hopes for this pond which given its location, will we believe, attract both dragonflies and damselflies. As you can see from the photos below the area looks a bit bare at the moment but it is starting to revegetate nicely. The photos were taken in August and it encouraging to see some water in the pond in spite of the very dry summer.



New Glade Pond
Photos: John Edwards

Bird Feeders

We will be putting the bird feeders out again at the end of October as the cold weather starts to arrive and the natural foods in the wild come to an end. They will stay in place over the winter months and the early part of the spring. We take them down again during April when natural food sources become available again.

Membership Renewal 2025

Thank you to all members who have renewed their membership since the last newsletter, it is much appreciated. For those who have yet to renew, you will have received a final reminder e-mail from the Membership Secretary with this newsletter. Subscriptions are due again on the 1st January 2026 and we will send out a reminder with our winter newsletter.

Dates for your Diary:

Members Autumn Walk (Birds and Fungi) – 1st November 2025

This will be the usual afternoon walk, heading into the Study Area and onto Pintail Bank to look for fungi. We will then walk over to Whillets Meadows and to the reed bed to observe Reed Buntings coming in to roost.

Meet in the Hide car park at the west end of the reservoir at **1.30pm**. We aim to finish by 4.00pm. Stout footwear recommended or wellies if we have had a

prolonged spell of wet weather. If weather conditions force us to cancel we will let you know by e-mail and through our Facebook page.

Annual General Meeting – 13th March 2026

Our 29th Annual General Meeting will be held on Friday 13th March 2026. We will be in the Forest Row Community Centre with a 7.15pm start time as usual. We are very pleased to announce that Mark Mallalieu OBE has agreed to be our guest speaker after the AGM. He will talk about the Honey Buzzards and Goshawks of Sussex. Both species are seen at Weir Wood so this is bound to be an interesting talk. Mark will be known to many members not least for his sterling work as the (recently retired) editor of the excellent annual bird report produced by the Sussex Ornithological Society.

Further details will follow in the winter newsletter.

Weir Wood Sports and Leisure – Launch Event 19th July 2025

As we reported in the last newsletter, the Friends were invited to the launch event of the new leisure activities at the dam end of the reservoir. In spite of the somewhat indifferent weather, we managed to miss the worst of the showers and our stall was well attended by members of the public. We were able to sign up some new members and there was a lot of interest shown in the wildlife in and around the reservoir. We had set up some spotting scopes which proved to be very popular too.

Our stall was also visited by the local MP and we were able to discuss with her the lack of activity at the water treatment works and the high water levels in the reservoir. She gave us a nice “shout out” on her social media account during the day.

All in all it was a very worthwhile event which helped raise our profile locally.



The Friends Stall
Photo: Ian Hodgson



Spotting Scopes
Photo: Ian Hodgson

Members “Summer Event” (Wildflower Meadows) – Sunday 3rd August 2025

Forty seven members came along to our new style “open” morning event held in Whillets meadows. The morning had two focus points: *ad hoc* guided tours of the meadows with the emphasis on plant life, and pond dipping at meadow pond. Both proved to be very popular and we received positive feedback from members both on the day and afterwards. The pond dipping was as usual a hit with children and adults alike.

Our resident apiarist was also on site and attendees were able to buy some of his delicious local honey.

Sadly it was a bit cloudy on the day, meaning that there were few butterflies on the wing and not many dragonflies about save for a few Southern and Brown Hawkers. Possibly the star attraction was a large female Wasp Spider sitting at the centre of her orb web in the first meadow. She had been spotted earlier in the week by the work party and thankfully she was still *in situ* at the weekend.

This spider is a fairly recent arrival from the continent and is now reasonably common in southern England as our climate continues to warm. The first specimen

in England was recorded in Rye in 1922. Whillets meadows provide excellent habitat as this spider likes rough grassland which is damp or wet in winter. Its main food is crickets and grasshoppers which we have in abundance in the meadows. A count in Whillets the week after our event found 14 of these spiders in total.

We will probably run this event again next summer with the Committee looking to make further improvements to the running arrangements in order to enhance the member experience.



Wasp Spider in Whillets – Aug 2025
Photo: Ian Hodgson

The Flowers of Weir Wood – Hemp-agrimony

Our feature flower this quarter is Hemp-agrimony (*Eupatorium cannabinum*). This is a common plant which you will have seen growing locally from July onwards typically along road side ditches. This a plant which likes wet ground so surprisingly it grows in only one place in the reserve – a small clump at the edge of Whillets reed bed – and it is a recent arrival. Now that the plant is established here, we very much hope that that it will spread, as it is a plant that is nectar rich and attracts bees, butterflies (especially Small Tortoiseshell and Red Admiral) and moths.

The plant is also known by its old country names of “Raspberries and Cream” due to the colour of its flowers and “Holy Rope” because it was thought to have been used to make the rope that bound Jesus (hemp was used for rope making in the past). The plant is also less well known as “Ague Weed” as it was believed to relieve and prevent fevers.

Despite what its Latin name might suggest, the plant is not related to the cannabis family and is in fact a member of the *Asteraceae* (daisy) family. Its common name

comes from the resemblance of its leaves to Hemp. According to the Wildlife Trusts, the freshly cut stems of Hemp-agrimony produce an aromatic and pleasant smell.



Hemp-agrimony at Weir Wood
Photo: John Edwards

Bird Sightings Report

July

The weather for July generally continued warm and dry although there were a few showery days towards the end of the month.

The action at the beginning of the month centred on the rafts at the west end where breeding **Common Terns** and **Black-headed Gulls** were in residence. On the 2nd three fledged Black-headed Gulls were noted together with another pair of freshly hatched chicks. Four Common Tern chicks were seen on that day also and again on the 9th with one fledged. Four Black-headed Gull chicks were seen on the 9th with three fledged.

10 adult Common Terns were seen on the 3rd and it was believed that the fourth pair from this group were trying to breed for the third time. It was considered likely that the chicks from the third pair would hatch soon. The terns were seen flying around the rafts regularly during the month with a maximum count of 10 again on the 10th.

Unfortunately things took a turn for the worse on the 13th when the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) recorded no chicks on the rafts. The suspected culprit was a **Great Black-backed Gull** which had been seen hanging around the rafts. Nine adult Common Terns were recorded at the west end on the 19th and there was no sign of

any youngsters. It is estimated that just one Common Tern chick and three Black-headed Gull chicks survived this year. Nature red in tooth and claw

That said, Black-headed Gull numbers overall remained encouraging with counts of 100+ being recorded regularly at the dam end during the month. 138 were counted on the 27th. In other gull news, a **Mediterranean Gull** was spotted on the 23rd and two recently fledged **Lesser Black-backed Gull** chicks together with two adults were seen on the rafts on the 30th.

More successful breeding news concerned **Great Crested Grebes**. Ten chicks were recorded on the 2nd and the 3rd and these all appeared to have survived. Although we no longer see Great Crested Grebes in the numbers of the past, they were recorded in 20s and 30s at both ends of the reservoir throughout the month.

Staying with the water birds, **Mallard** and **Mandarin** were ever present ducks and they were joined by a **Tufted Duck** seen on the 3rd, 6th and 21st and by a **Teal** seen on the 13th with two seen on the 23rd.

Grey Heron and **Little Egret** were seen throughout the month with a **Great White Egret** seen on the 6th.

Common Sandpipers were seen regularly on the “beach” at the dam wall in varying numbers together with **Little Ringed Plovers** in ones and twos. Notable wader sightings at the dam end were a **Wood Sandpiper** on the 17th and a **Ringed Plover** on the same day. Two **Curlews** flew over on the 18th. A **Common Redshank** and a **Dunlin** in summer plumage were seen here on the 19th. The month concluded with a flyover of 11 **Golden Plover** on the 30th.

With lack of rainfall and evaporation, waders began to appear at the west end of the reservoir from the middle of the month as falling water levels exposed the muddy margins. This was most noticeable at the “narrows” at the far west end of the reservoir. A **Lapwing** was seen on the 15th and sporadically thereafter. A **Green Sandpiper** and **Ringed Plover** were both seen at the west end on the 17th along with 3 Common Sandpipers. A Green Sandpiper was seen again on the 22nd along with a **Black-tailed Godwit**. Later that day the work party counted 11 **Common Sandpipers** in the narrows.

The usual raptors were present throughout the month. Highlights were **Hobby**, seen on the 17th, 28th and 30th and **Honey Buzzard**, seen on the 13th and 28th with two seen at the dam end on the 26th. A **Tawny Owl** appeared in broad daylight in Whillets on the 15th.

Kingfishers were ever present as were **Reed Warblers** in the reed bed. Other regulars were **Swallows**, **House Martins** and to a lesser extent, **Swifts**. Six **Sand Martins** were seen on the 15th.

Other sightings of interest in the month were a **Yellowhammer** in Whillets on the 6th with two seen at the west end on the 13th, two **Willow Warblers** also on the same day, three **Greenfinches** in Whillets on the 25th, a **Sedge Warbler** at the dam end on the 27th and three **Spotted Flycatchers** in Whillets on the 27th.

August

There was very little change in the weather during the month. There were the occasional cloudy days and a little rain, but the overall theme was “warm and dry”.

With breeding activity now over, bird sightings during the month followed July’s pattern to a large extent with the last month’s “cast of characters” continuing to be seen at the dam and west ends. As the month progressed some early autumn migrants were noted.

The month got off to a great start with six **Common Crossbills** seen flying over the lay by at the west end on the 1st. Three more were seen at the dam end on the 19th.

Sedge Warbler sightings increased in August with one seen at the dam end on the 6th and again on the 19th and 25th. One was seen at Whillets on the 17th and again on the 31st where one was seen in the reed bed.

The first returning **Ospreys** were recorded during month. The sightings were all early morning at the dam end on the 7th, 24th and 27th. Other migrant sightings were a **Whinchat** at the dam end on the 19th and **Wheatear** with individuals seen on or around the dam wall on the 20th, 23rd, 27th and 30th.

A **Goshawk** was seen on the 18th and was the first one recorded for some time, while a juvenile was spotted on the 20th. A **Honey Buzzard** was seen at the dam end on the 3rd and a distant specimen was picked out at the same location on the 20th.

Greylag and **Canada Geese** were seen in large and fluctuating numbers during the month with a maximum count of 61 Greylags on the 3rd and 110 Canadas on the 23rd. **Black-headed Gulls** continued to be present in large numbers with a count of 301 during the WeBS on the 11th. **Starlings** also started to be seen in numbers with 46 seen at the dam end on the 6th. Mixed flocks of tits were noted later in the month. **Common Tern** numbers fell with just four recorded during the WeBS on the 11th. However two **Black Terns** were seen at the dam end on the 29th.

Great Crested Grebe numbers remained steady with 46 counted on the 11th.

Other sightings of interest were an **Oystercatcher** at the dam end on the 7th, a **Lesser Whitethroat** at the dam end on the 7th and again in Whillets on the 21st, two **Greenshanks** at the dam end on the 20th (one was heard calling on the 17th), a juvenile **Redstart** on the north bank path on the 23rd and finally a **Common Snipe** at the west end on the 24th.

The highlight of the month was undoubtedly a **Grasshopper Warbler** seen in the bushes at the dam end on the 27th and (assuming it is the same bird) again on the 29th. At almost the same time a **Sedge Warbler** was seen in Whillets on the 28th. The Grasshopper Warbler is an increasingly uncommon bird these days at Weir Wood so these were very pleasing sightings.

September

A change in the weather at last and some welcome rain (for gardeners) at the beginning of the month as Atlantic weather systems took over from the high pressure systems that sat over or to the east of the UK for most of the summer. However the good weather soon returned and warm and sunny conditions persisted for most of the rest of the month.

September sightings had migration as an underlying theme. As members will know Weir Wood is a good place to see raptors, with **Buzzard**, **Kestrel**, **Sparrowhawk**, **Red Kite** and increasingly **Goshawk** all regular sightings throughout the year. They are joined in the summer by **Hobby** and **Honey Buzzard** and briefly in spring and summer by **Osprey** on passage.

There were just two **Hobby** sightings at the dam end during the month, on the 10th and 13th. A Hobby was also seen at the west end on the 29th. A **Honey Buzzard** was seen just the once, a particularly good sighting of a juvenile at the west end on the 18th captured nicely by Steve Webb.



Juvenile Honey Buzzard (and corvid) at Weir Wood – Sep 2025
Photo: Steve Webb

Ospreys were seen at the dam end on the 6th and 19th with two being seen at the west end on 17th. Alastair Gray was on hand to record one of the two birds sitting in a Willow. A single bird was seen at the west end on the 18th.

An immature female **Peregrine Falcon** was spotted at the west end on the 29th. On the 30th a female Peregrine flew over the work party in Whillets meadows and a female was seen at the west end later on the same day. We assume that this may have been the same bird.



Osprey at Weir Wood – Sep 2025
Photo: Alastair Gray

Waders continued to be present with **Common Sandpipers** seen most days at the dam end. There were infrequent sightings at the west end of this bird in ones and twos but three were seen on the 29th. Four **Green Sandpipers** were seen at the west end during the WeBS on the 7th. Other wader sightings included four **Lapwings** at the west end on the 11th, a **Ringed Plover** at the dam end on the 27th and a **Bar-tailed Godwit** at the dam End on the 24th. The best wader sighting was without doubt that of a **Wood Sandpiper** at the west end on the 2nd.

September is the month when we see hirundines congregating in large numbers. For example 250+ **Swallows** were seen at the Dam end on 2nd and 200+ on the 28th. 50+ **House Martins** were seen at the same location on the 16th rising to c700 on the 28th. **Sand Martins** were seen less frequently but were ever present in small numbers.

Encouraging numbers of **Great Crested Grebes** were recorded in the month, with 42 seen across the reservoir during the WeBS on 7th. Sightings of 30 to 40 at a time were made throughout the month at both ends of the reservoir with a peak count of 51 at the dam end on the 29th. A **Little Grebe** was seen regularly at the west end.

Mandarin Ducks appear to be doing well with 31 seen on the 17th and 26 on the 24th both at the west end. Winter ducks started to arrive to join our ever present **Mallards**. A **Teal** was recorded during the WeBS on the 7th with numbers rising as the month progressed with 11 counted on the 24th, 12 on the 26th and 16 on the 29th, all at the west end. A **Gadwall** was seen at the dam end on the 19th and two were seen at the west end on the 22nd. The first **Wigeon** of the autumn was seen at the west end on the 22nd and two **Shovelers** were seen, again at the west end, on the 26th.

Black-headed Gulls were seen frequently and in large numbers, 200+ were counted at the dam end on the 2nd and 119 were counted during the WeBS on the 7th. There were 67 at the west end on the 22nd. **Herring, Great Black-backed and Lesser**

Black-backed Gulls were regulars during the month. Unusually perhaps, a **Kittiwake** was spotted with the other gulls at the dam end on the 17th.

Little Egrets were ever present and a **Great White Egret** was seen at the west end on the 24th and 26th. Two **Common Snipe** were spotted on Pintail Point on the 13th, 27th and 30th with three seen on the 17th.

There was just one **Wheatear** sighting this month, on the dam wall on the 2nd. Other sightings of note were: a **Spotted Flycatcher** at the dam end on the 2nd, a **Lesser Whitethroat** at the dam end on the 19th, two **Woodlarks** in Whillets on the 28th and **Crossbill** flyovers – five at the dam end on the 13th, two in Whillets on the 24th and twelve at the west end on the 30th. We have mentioned previously that **Ravens** are now established and two were seen on the 21st and again on the 30th.

And finally a sure sign that autumn has arrived, a **Water Rail** was heard squealing in Whillets reed bed on the 28th and again on the 30th.

The report above just gives a “flavour” of what was about and a full list of sightings can be found on our website at: www.weirwood.me.uk – click on the “Recent Sightings” link. Sightings and photos are also posted regularly to our Facebook page.

And finally

Compared with last year, it has been a pretty decent year for butterflies and moths. We were particularly pleased to find a Jersey Tiger Moth on a bush near the old sailing club premises at the dam end in August. This is quite a rare moth in this part of the country (it is usually found further west), although there has been a reported influx this year with a number of our members reporting finding them in their moth traps. It is an attractive species with a lovely orange underwing.



Jersey Tiger Moth at Weir Wood – August 2025
Photo: John Edwards

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