



Weir Wood News

The Newsletter of the Friends of Weir Wood Society no 106

Autumn 2024



Chairman's Notes

Welcome to our Autumn newsletter.

What dreadful weather we have had over the past three months. Apart from the odd interlude it has generally been cool and much wetter than in recent years. It was not until early July that the meadows in Whillets dried out. Water levels in the reservoir barely moved and "Martin's Island" at the west end which usually appears every summer, only put in a fleeting appearance this year. Our changing and unpredictable climate has definitely had an impact on the flora and fauna on the reserve with everything being much later this year. The only thing which appears to like our damp conditions is bramble which has grown like topsy this summer. Whilst this is a plant that is generally good for butterflies and insects etc it can get out of hand quickly if not controlled.

As we hint at below (and we will report in further detail in our winter newsletter) it has not been a good year for butterflies on the reserve, with disappointingly low numbers recorded. If cool damp summers are to become the norm, one has to be concerned for the future of butterflies and moths on the reserve.

Still, it hasn't been all doom and gloom

Work Parties

The work parties have been busy over the summer, although there were a few summer jobs we could not do this year (mainly in reed bed) as the result of high water levels. We have continued to carry out our regular survey work and the results of this will be reported in the next newsletter.

Hopefully you will have noticed that we have filled the larger potholes in the west end car park. Short of resurfacing the whole car park, regular maintenance by the Friends remains the best option. We last repaired the car park two years ago. The car park remains the responsibility of Forest Row Parish Council.

We have also recently substantially lowered the hedges by the hide and in front of the Millennium Picnic Site. There are now unimpeded views of the reservoir from both sites.

We have also give the hide its regular coat of green Cuprinol and tried as much as possible to cover up some of the graffiti on the inside. We used anti-graffiti paint inside last time, so our nocturnal visitors have taken to carving the graffiti into the wooden surfaces. You can't win!

During the summer, contractors from UK Power Networks carried out some tree felling in the third meadow at Whillets to protect the overhead power cables which pass across the reserve. This spurred us on to clear away some adjacent poor quality / part dead willow trees which were making this part of the reserve rather dark and damp. With the help of the East Sussex Rangers we have made a new clearing / glade which given its location will we hope attract wildflowers, butterflies, dragonflies and a host of other insects. It is an area where we occasionally see Silver Washed Fritillary and we hope that our work has improved the habitat for this striking butterfly.

Finally, you may have noticed the damage to the boundary fence on Legsheath Lane near the heronry. A car appears to have crashed through the fence and into a tree on the bank. As far as we know no one was hurt and the car was removed quickly. We have taped off the area and notified Southern Water who are responsible for repairing the fence. We await developments

Website

The website now has increased functionality since the update in the last newsletter, with the sightings page updated on a regular basis again. However it is taking us a little longer than anticipated to bring it back up to full working order, but we are making progress. We hope that you will continue to bear with us and we apologise for any inconvenience caused.

New Logo

The Committee decided recently to adopt a logo to give the Friends a consistent look across our webpages and other documents. You can see the logo at the top of this newsletter and it will start to appear gradually on our other publications.



Painting the Hide 1
Photo: Ian Hodgson



Painting the Hide 2
Photo: Ian Hodgson



New Glade – Whillets 3rd Meadow
Photo: John Edwards



Car Park Infill Works
Photo: John Edwards

Dates for your Diary:

2 November 2024 – Autumn Walk

Our annual afternoon walk will take place on Saturday 2nd November starting at 13.00, meet in the hide car park. We will follow our usual format – walking through the Study Area to Pintail Point looking at fungi and other things of interest and then on to Whillets meadows where if the weather is kind we may be able to offer some bird ringing. Further details on our website and Facebook page.

Our **AGM** will be held in March 2025. The date will be determined by venue and speaker availability. We are likely to be in the Forest Row Community Hall as usual. Details to follow in the winter newsletter.

The Committee is currently reviewing our events programme for 2025. It is possible that there will be changes next year. We will update you further in due course.

Open Day – Report

Our annual Open Day held on 21 July 2024 was adjudged by all who attended as a successful day. Over 60 members and visitors dropped by during the day to enjoy the usual range of events.

As ever the Bird Ringing and Pond Dipping were the most popular, appealing to a wide range of ages. The new guided tours of the wild flower meadows were very well received and will be repeated next year. The display of moths trapped locally the night before attracted a lot of interest too.

Thank you to everyone who came along to support us and to the Friends who organised and helped out behind the scenes to make the day a success.

A full report of the day has been circulated to members and it can also be found on our website [Open-Day-Report-21-July-24.pdf \(weirwood.me.uk\)](https://weirwood.me.uk/Open-Day-Report-21-July-24.pdf).

Small Nest Boxes Survey Report – 2024

The Friends currently maintain and monitor 109 small nest boxes in the reserve at the west end of the reservoir. Here are the results from this year’s nesting season (with 2023 results shown for comparison purposes):

The following table shows how the nest boxes were used

	2024	2023
Full nests used by birds	61	49
Unfinished nests by birds	16	8
Used by bees	0	2
Used by mice	2	10
Not used	30	44
Total small boxes	109	113

The next table shows how the 61 boxes above were used by birds this year

Species	Boxes Used		Total Birds Fledged		Birds Found Dead In Box		Cold Eggs Found In Box	
	2024	2023	2024	2023	2024	2023	2024	2023
Blue Tit	35	30	130	161	55	20	9	5
Great Tit	23	16	97	80	0	4	12	9
Nuthatch	1	1	2	4	0	0	1	0
Treecreeper	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Marsh Tit	1	1	6	6	1	0	0	0
Wren	0	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	61	49	235	251	56	24	23	14

Commentary:

The cold wet weather in the spring had an adverse effect on the number of insects and caterpillars. Adult Blue Tits primarily feed their chicks with insects and normally rely on plentiful numbers of caterpillars. Lack of food was the probable reason for the high mortality rate seen in the Blue Tits for this year and the reduced number of fledged birds compared to 2023. Great Tits seem to have fared much better. More pleasing was another successful brood of 6 fledged Marsh Tits. Nuthatch successfully fledged young, total unknown but at least 2 young were seen. Treecreeper nest had eggs, but no fledging confirmed.

History of the Weir Wood Heronry

In our last newsletter we promised to give a very brief history for newer members of what is now the largest heronry in Sussex:

Grey Herons originally tried to nest in Admirals Wood at the reservoir in 1982, but there were no further breeding attempts thereafter, even though adult herons were present there during the breeding season in subsequent years. The change came in 1998 when the herons decided to attempt nesting at the present heronry location in the tall trees near Whillets Bridge. Five nests were created that year which produced nine young and herons have continued nesting there to this day.

Before 2010 the heronry nests were not individually mapped and monitored, this probably meant the nests were under recorded, particularly in respect of precise chick information. Nests are now mapped in the early spring so each nest can be easily individually monitored.

The initial increase in chick numbers after 2010 will be partially due to the improved non-invasive recording technique rather than a sudden significant improvement in actual breeding success. This mapped recording method was made possible by the unusually open aspect of the heronry location of the site at that time. Since 2014 there has been increasing young willow growth and earlier leaf emergence which has made viewing the nests beyond May difficult and became impossible beyond 2018 as growth height increased, which will have a bearing on proven nest numbers in later years.

In 2017 we had our first Cormorants nesting within the heronry, and every year since they have been increasing and, in some instances taking over Heron nests. We continue to monitor this development.

Bug Life

We are fortunate to have among our regular Tuesday volunteers a member who is passionate about the insect world. We have a number of habitats on the reserve and our member is regularly out and about in the summer tapping trees and bushes for insects which fall into his net. We thought we would share with you just a few photos of some of the interesting things he has found (we'll spare you their Latin names ☺!)



Birch Shield Bug



Red-headed Cardinal Beetle



Swollen-thigh Beetle



Lesser Hornet Hoverfly

All photos: Mike Funnell

Smile Please – You’re on Camera

We have installed two trailcams on the reserve which we move location on a regular basis often in response to track a particular species e.g. American Mink. We review the images captured regularly and perhaps unsurprisingly the most numerous species photographed are Fallow Deer, Fox and Badger. As well as the occasional trespasser (!), we also record Roe and Muntjac deer in very small numbers. It has become clear that numbers of Fallow Deer have increased on the reserve year on year. This is a pattern repeated locally such as on the Ashdown Forest.

The Flowers of Weir Wood – Bur-marigold

The third in our series features a flower that as far as we are aware only grows in one place on the reserve. It is a not uncommon flower in England, but it is easy to miss. It is a flower which likes damp conditions and unsurprisingly is found on the edges of Whillets reed bed. We have two of the species in the reserve: Trifid Bur-

marigold (*Bidens tripartita*) and Nodding Bur-marigold (*Bidens cernua*). They look similar in the wild but are easy to distinguish given the drooping flower heads of the Nodding Bur-marigold and the darker almost purple stem of Trifid Bur-marigold. Both are members of the wider Aster (daisy) family as their flowers would suggest.

Apparently bur-marigolds were used in herbal medicine in days gone by to treat a range of ailments including: gout, colitis, fluid retention and hair loss.

The plants were once known as Nodding Beggarticks (*B.cernua*) and Three-lobed Beggarticks (*B.tripartita*). The small black seeds of both plants have burs on them and will stick to clothing apparently making them look like ticks found on beggars' clothing. Not surprisingly these old names have fallen into disuse!



Nodding Bur-marigold



Trifid Bur-marigold

Google Images

Bird Sightings Report

July

The weather for July was definitely a tale of two halves. The first half of the month was a continuation of June's weather; wet most days and cold for the time of year. Then half way through the month, summer arrived with sunshine most days and temperatures regularly in the 70s and 80s degrees Fahrenheit.

On the raptor front, Common Buzzards were seen regularly throughout the month and a little less frequently, Sparrowhawks, Red Kites and Kestrels. There was just one sighting of an Osprey – briefly on the 7th. Similarly there was only one sighting of a Hobby on the 17th. We usually expect to see more Hobbies about, it may be linked

to the late appearance of many dragonflies this year. A Peregrine was seen on the 14th and again on the 31st when it was scaring the gulls.

With a couple of exceptions most of the wader action during the month happened at the Dam End along the reservoir side of the dam wall. Common Sandpipers were seen on most days, mostly in 2s and 3s, but 6 were seen on the 23rd. A Green Sandpiper was seen on the 23rd and a Wood Sandpiper on the 18th.

Other notable sightings were a Whimbrel and Greenshank, both seen on the 28th. A Redshank was spotted on the "beach" at the bottom of the dam on the 17th following the clearance of the vegetation on the side of the dam wall. It was seen again on the 18th.

A Little Egret was seen on the 2nd and 9th with a Great Egret seen on the 14th. 7 Lapwings were seen on the 14th and 18 on the 18th.

Common Terns were seen in 1s and 2s throughout the month. However 2 were spotted nesting on the pontoon at the Dam End on the 8th. Nesting activity was seen again at the same place on the 15th and a family of 5 (including 3 juveniles) dropped on the same day. On the 24th a Common Tern was spotted bringing fish to the pontoon suggesting that nesting had been successful and that chicks had hatched. This is encouraging news given the predation on the tern rafts in June.

In other seabird news, a Little Gull was seen on the 18th and a Yellow-legged Gull was seen on the 23rd. Great Black-backed Gulls now appear to be regular visitors to the reservoir and are seen on most days. 2 Lesser Black-backed Gulls were seen on the 17th. Perhaps the most interesting gull story concerns the increase in the number of Black-headed Gulls. At the beginning of the month the numbers were in the 50s and 60s. However numbers grew steadily, so that by the 14th 115 were recorded, by the 17th 172 were recorded, reaching a peak on the 28th when 255 were recorded. It is good to see such numbers as this bird was badly affected by avian flu in recent years.

Great Crested Grebe numbers remained broadly stable throughout the month - in the range of 14 to 37, although 41 were recorded during the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) on the 22nd. It was particularly pleasing to note that 4 nests were located on the 14th with a sitting female in each. There are probably more around the reservoir but the nests are generally well hidden and can be tricky to locate.

Goose numbers increased during the month with 47 Greylags seen on the 1st and 99 Canadas seen on the 31st. The unusual Bar-Headed / Barnacle hybrid goose was seen during the WeBS on the 22nd.

2 Gadwall were recorded on the 14th and unusually, 4 Common Scoter were seen on the 31st but they were gone by the next day.

Swallows, Swifts, House Martins and Sand Martins continued to be seen regularly, but not in any great numbers. 12 Swifts were seen on the 7th.

Common Whitethroat, Garden Warbler and Chiffchaff were seen and heard in Whilleys meadows throughout the month as was Bullfinch which was more often heard than seen. Notable small bird sightings were Yellowhammer on the 2nd, Lesser Whitethroat on the 23rd, Sedge Warbler on the 28th and Linnet on the 29th. The first returning Wheatear was seen on the 28th also.

Many years ago, the Friends built an artificial kingfisher bank on the north side of the reservoir, opposite the hide. Year after year it has been resolutely ignored by kingfishers! Until this year when a pair of Kingfishers was seen this month regularly flying to and from a gap in the vegetation close to the entry of the bank. Fingers crossed they will have a successful nest.

A Raven was seen flying over on the 14th with 2 being seen on the 17th and 23rd respectively. It is suspected that they live in the high oak woodland to the north west of the reservoir. Mandarin Duck continued to be seen on most days.

August

The weather remained hot and often quite humid until the middle of the month. Thereafter apart from the odd damp day, it continued to be warm and generally pleasant until the end of the month. Water levels fell enough to expose the top of "Martins Island" at the west end (which pleased the Cormorants), but not enough to expose any mud which might attract waders.

August is traditionally a "quiet" month on the bird front, but we still had a reasonable selection of sightings all things considered, with a couple of rarities for Weir Wood thrown in.

It was quiet in terms of Osprey sightings. One was seen taking a fish on the 5th and a juvenile was seen flying over the reservoir on the 25th. Common Buzzard, Red Kite, Kestrel and Sparrowhawk were seen regularly throughout the month. A juvenile Goshawk was seen at the west end on the 6th, a juvenile Hobby was seen on the 16th and 25th and a Peregrine was seen at the dam end on the 19th harassing the Black-headed gulls. Ravens were seen or heard on most days.

Black-headed Gull numbers remained high. 158 were counted at the dam end on the 19th during the WeBS and c400 were counted on the 24th. Ones and twos of Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed and Herring Gull were seen circling over the reservoir on most days. Ditto for Common Tern. More interestingly perhaps, 2 Black Terns were reported on the 20th and a juvenile Arctic Tern was seen on the 25th.

With little exposed mud, waders were seen mostly at the dam end. Common Sandpipers featured at the dam end on most days, numbers generally between 5 to 7. However 1 was seen on the tern rafts on the 4th and 2 were seen in the same location on the 16th. Otherwise wader sightings tended to be sporadic: Green Sandpiper – 6th, Redshank – 6th, Dunlin – 14th, Greenshank – 14th and Ringed Plover – 16th and 24th. Lapwings were seen early in the month, 6 on the 1st and 9 on the 6th. A Little Egret was seen on and off throughout the month.

Geese numbers increased during the month. 25 Greylag Geese were recorded on the 6th, rising to 106 on the 12th, 159 on the 19th (WeBS) and 145 on the 20th. They make quite a noise! Canada Geese were also plentiful with 113 counted on the 12th. 8 Egyptian Geese were seen at the Dam end on the 18th.

Mallard and Mandarin Duck were seen on the water throughout the month as were Coot. Otherwise it was pretty quiet with a Tufted Duck seen on the 18th, 2 Teal seen on the 1st and 2 Shoveler seen on the 12th, 14th and 15th.

Great Crested Grebe news has been encouraging with reasonable numbers recorded both at the west and dam ends. Chicks have hatched, with 2 chicks seen at the west and dam ends respectively. Adult grebe numbers have remained constant with 40 recorded on the 1st, 36 on the 8th, 52 on the 14th and 34 on the 19th. A Little Grebe was also seen on the 12th.

It was quiet on the hirundine front. A Swift was seen on the 1st. Singles of Sand Martin were seen on the 12th, 13th and 18th. 4 House Martins were seen on the 1st, 1 was seen on the 6th and 7 on the 18th. 20 Swallows were recorded on the 12th.

Goldfinches were seen in flocks during the month, with 39 seen on the 12th, 60 on the 18th and 80 on the 19th (WeBS).

In other sightings, Common Whitethroat were seen on the 5th (7) and the 19th (10). A Lesser Whitethroat was seen on the 26th in Whillets. There was a rare sighting of a Grasshopper Warbler at the Dam end on the 14th. A Sedge Warbler was seen in front of the hide on the 14th and another was seen at the Dam end on the 18th. 4 Bullfinches were seen on the 5th.

The 1st was a good day for wagtails with 40 Pied, 2 Grey and 2 Yellow Wagtails all seen on the dam wall. Another dam wall "regular" was a juvenile Wheatear. One was seen at this location on the 1st, 14th and 19th.

As with July, Kingfishers were a regular feature at the West end in August, often sitting obligingly on a dead tree at the water's edge for us all to admire.

September

After the all too brief appearance of summer last month, normal service resumed in September. After a very wet and windy start, a cold north westerly breeze blew until the middle of the month and then we had a week of summer. The month then closed out with cool and exceptionally wet weather.

September's sightings were dominated by the arrival of a juvenile Osprey early in the month (first reported on the 4th). It hung around until the end of the month and was seen on most days. It proved to be a popular attraction – evidenced by the cars in the west end car park during the month. We watched the bird's early clumsy attempts to catch a fish and its progress so it was soon grabbing bream from the water and taking fish up to its favourite tree for a tasty meal!

In other raptor sightings, a Marsh Harrier flew over on the 17th, a Hobby was seen on the same day and a Goshawk was seen chasing pigeons on the 22nd. 2

Sparrowhawks were seen on the 28th and 2 Red Kites on the 22nd. Common Buzzards were seen throughout the month.

Our Osprey has been a much photographed bird. By way of an example here is a lovely photo taken by Rachel Banham and shared on our Facebook page:



© Rachel Banham

A feature of the month has been the movement of hirundines. A late Swift was seen on the 3rd. Sand Martins were reported sporadically with 150 seen on the 4th, the last sighting was on the 7th. Over 1000 House Martins were reported on the 29th. Swallows were seen regularly usually in groups of 10 or so.

It was relatively quiet on the duck front with only Mallards being a regular feature. 3 Tufted Ducks were seen on the 4th and they were seen on and off throughout the month. A Teal was reported on the 4th and 2 Shoveler on the 7th. In a rare sighting, a juvenile Garganey was reported on the north bank on the 4th. Canada, Greylag and Egyptian Geese continued to be ever present.

Great Crested Grebes were seen in reasonable numbers at both ends of the reservoir with 4 chicks surviving. One Little Grebe was seen on the 18th rising to 5 on the 22nd during the WeBS. Common Sandpipers (usually in 2-3s) were seen at the dam end most days. One was seen on a tern raft at the west end on the 4th. A Green Sandpiper was seen at the west end on the 3rd. One off sightings included Whimbrel (17th and 21st), Dunlin (18th), Oystercatcher (18th) 23 Golden Plover flying over (21st), 6 Spoonbills flying over (28th) and 3 Common Snipe (29th).

Black-headed Gulls continued to be seen in their 100s at the dam end during the month. Herring, Great Black-backed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls were seen regularly in 1s and 2s. Grey Herons are a fixture at the reserve and joining them, a Little Egret was seen on the 24th. A Black Tern was seen on the 4th and 7th and in a

very rare inland sighting, a Long-tailed Skua was reported at the west end on the 25th.

Jays were very much in evidence as the month progressed – there are a lot of Oak trees at the reserve and plenty of acorns to bury! Ravens were seen and heard on most days. Regular sightings in the month included Kingfisher and Marsh Tit. Wheatears popped up from time to time on the dam wall. Amongst the rarer sightings were: Lesser Whitethroat (3rd and 19th), Whinchat (4th), 2 Spotted Flycatchers (7th), and a Wryneck (7th).

Meadow Pipits started to appear in numbers, with 12 reported on the 16th and 22 on the 18th. 3 Reed Buntings were reported at Whillets reed bed on the 22nd. The reserve's first winter thrushes of the autumn were 9 Redwing seen on the 29th.

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

And finally

As many of you will know it's been a disappointing year for butterflies in the UK thanks to the unseasonal weather and it's been no exception on the reserve. A summary of our 2024 butterfly surveys will appear in the Winter newsletter. We've had some nice sightings but all in single / low numbers. We thought we would conclude this newsletter with some photos of our favourite butterfly sightings on the reserve this year:



Painted Lady
Photo: Richard Allan



Small Copper
Photo: Richard Allan



Brown Hairstreak
Photo: Alastair Gray



Small Heath
Photo: Richard Allan

We also recorded Purple Emperor (in the car park at the Open Day) and Purple Hairstreak (at the Dam End) during the summer. Sadly we were unable to photograph either of them. Next year perhaps!

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