



Weir Wood News

The Newsletter of the Friends of Weir Wood Society no 112

Spring 2026



Chairman's Notes

Welcome to our Spring newsletter. At last after an exceptionally dreary January and February, spring has arrived. The recent sunshine and warmth has perked everything up and early wild flowers are appearing across the reserve. These include Lesser Celandine, Wood Anemone, Early Dog Violet and Cuckoo Flower all of which add a lovely splash of colour around the place.

Work Parties

We were hampered in January and February by the constant wet weather and consequent conditions underfoot which made it very difficult (and in some cases impossible) to carry out some proposed tasks. However, as well as installing the new sand martin bank (see below), we completed our schedule of hedge cutting before the nesting season and carried out a number of regular winter routine housekeeping

/ habitat management tasks around the reserve. Nest box surveys kicked off at the end of February and will now continue through to the summer. Reptile surveys started in mid March and will continue into the autumn.

Towards the end of March we planted 50 Snakes-head Fritillary plants “in the green” in the second meadow at Whillets. These have been planted next to the handful of established fritillaries there and we hope that in time we will have a good patch of these attractive flowers. It is unlikely that we will see any flowering from the new plants this year but they should be well established by this time next year. Browsing deer continue to be a menace so we have protected our new plants with a wood and mesh cage so they get off to a good start.

Website

Work goes on behind the scenes to improve the functionality of the website and we are pleased with the progress so far. If you have any suggestions for improvement or if there features you would like to see added, please let us know and we will look into it.

Water Levels

Not surprisingly given the wet winter, the reservoir continues to be pretty much 100% full. It may appeal to the diving ducks and grebes but not much else. There are no muddy margins and shallow edges for the herons to hunt and we see adult herons having to fly away to get food for the youngsters in the heronry. Visitors to the dam end in February and March will have noticed maintenance work underway around the control tower. This apparently involved the temporary lowering of the water level but at the time of writing it appears to have made only a marginal difference at the west end of the reservoir.

Pipeline to Ardingly Reservoir

As reported at the AGM, it has all gone a bit quiet on the news front regarding this item. There is perhaps no longer any urgency given the exceptionally wet winter and the fact that Ardingly Reservoir is now full. It always appeared to us to be a very expensive and complex short term solution given what might have been involved. Interestingly there is a suggestion on the MP for Mid Sussex’s website that South East Water might be looking at a permanent underground link between Ardingly and Weir Wood. This would be in line with plans we have heard about to create a “national grid” for water and for Weir Wood to be connected to this grid one day. We will watch out for further news. In the meantime it would appear that the possibility of an overland pipeline has gone away for the time being.

Sand Martin Bank

(Please refer to the winter newsletter for the background to this item.)

Construction of the artificial sand martin bank was completed in late January. The location for the bank was confirmed and the support posts were installed in January too. In early February the bank was transported to its resting place and secured to

the posts. At the same time a skirt was installed around the supports to deter mink from disturbing any nesting birds. Vegetation which partly obscured the bank was cleared so that it can be seen easily from the Legsheath Lane car park.



The finished item



Final location

Photos: Martin Jeffree

We set up a “play back” system near the bank in March in order to attract our target species. Sand Martins have been seen flying over the reservoir in March, here’s hoping

Our friends at the East Grinstead RSPB Local Group (joint funders of this project) have put together a short film about this project which you can view here: [Weir Wood Reservoir Sand Martin Nest Bank - The Plan - East Grinstead Local Group](#)

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (LSW) Survey

Members who are also members of the Sussex Ornithological Society (SOS) will know that this year SOS is organising a county wide survey of LSWs. For the first time SOS will be deploying Passive Acoustic Monitors (PAM) at selected sites across Sussex. These monitors detect and record bird sounds and recordings can then be analysed for evidence of LSWs. There is more about this project on the SOS website at www.sos.org.uk/news/sos-survey-of-lesser-spotted-woodpeckers-2026/

We were pleased to learn that one of the sites selected for the survey is on our reserve. We have long believed that there are LSWs present on the reserve as we have ideal habitat for this species. Two LSWs were seen fleetingly on the reserve in 2024. We do however have a number of Great Spotted Woodpeckers on the reserve and these will compete with its smaller cousin.

The PAM was deployed at a suitable location in February and an analysis of the recordings showed that sadly there were no LSWs present during the recording period. It is suspected that although the habitat is fine, it may be just too small an area for this species. However a negative result, although disappointing for us, is still useful to the survey as a whole when estimating the LSW population across Sussex. Interestingly, subsequent acoustic monitoring in woodland near to the reservoir has shown that there are LSWs in the area.

Annual General Meeting 2026

We held a successful and well attended Annual General Meeting at the Forest Row Community Centre on Friday 13th March. After the conclusion of the meeting's formal business, we received an excellent presentation from Mark Mallalieu on Goshawks and Honey-buzzards in Sussex. This was a particularly interesting and well-received presentation. Everyone present including the experienced birders in the audience will have learned something new about these two fascinating species which can be seen in the skies above Weir Wood. The minutes of the AGM are attached with this newsletter.

Membership Renewal 2026

Many thanks to our members who have renewed for another year. Thank you also for your generous donations to our funds.

It is still not too late to renew. If your membership subscription is due, you will have received an e-mail reminder from the Membership Secretary accompanying this newsletter. Many thanks in advance for your continued support, it is much appreciated.

Dates for your Diary:

26th April 2026 - Members Spring Walk 2026

This will take place on the morning of **Sunday 26th April 2026** and will follow the usual format. 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** sharp.

We will start by going into our woodland study area for the woodland flowers and bluebells (hopefully!), plus we hope to see and hear some spring birds, before returning back to the car park for a short break. (Bring a drink).

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 could be wet/muddy (depending on rainfall) and are uneven in places.

7th June 2026 – Meet the Birds of Weir Wood

Join us in the Legsheath Lane / Hide car park on **Sunday 7th June** from **9.00am** until **midday** where members of the Committee will be on hand with telescopes and binoculars to help you identify the birds in the air and on the water. Hopefully we may have some terns on the rafts by then and who knows, perhaps some nesting sand martins. Please feel free to bring along family members; children and grandchildren are welcome. You can stay for as little or as long as you like. We will have a board set up to record all the morning's sightings as they happen. If you are new to birding, this a good opportunity to get to grips with the species that live on and around the reservoir.

2nd August 2026 – Summer Half Day Event

This will be a repeat of last year's summer event. The focus will again be on the wildflowers (and butterflies) in Whillets meadows. There will be guided walks around the meadows led by members of the Committee. We hope to be able to arrange some pond dipping too and to have some local honey for sale from our resident apiarist. The date, time and final programme will be confirmed in the summer newsletter.

31st October 2026 – Members Autumn Walk

This will be our usual afternoon walk. More details will follow in our summer newsletter.

Reptile Survey Report – 2025

[Background note for new members: we have a number of "refugia tins" dotted around the reserve. These are pieces of corrugated metal or felt (typically 2m x 1m) placed on the grass. Grass snakes hide underneath and as the sun warms the tin, so the snakes warm up before they emerge and start to hunt. It is not only the snakes that use the tins, we also find they are used by lizards, slowworms, toads, frogs, newts and a variety of small rodents (voles, shrews and mice). As far as we are aware, there are no adders on the reserve. We do not have the habitat for them.]

During the spring, summer and autumn months, members of the Work Party carry out a weekly check under the tins and record their findings. Here is a high-level report of the findings for 2025:

This year's survey started on 25th March and finished on 14th October. The weather in 2025 was much drier than in 2024 when the wet summer had a significant impact on results, with some survey days being a complete wash out due to heavy rain and many of the tins being under water / waterlogged until June.

The first **Grass Snake** was recorded on 1st April (2024: 30th April) and the last recording was on the 7th October (2024: 15th October). Two grass snakes were recorded on 15th April whereas it was mid May last year before two were recorded.

Four snakes were recorded on 20th May whereas it was mid June last year before numbers started to pick up. Four to six snakes were recorded weekly throughout June, July and August, a significant improvement on last year. The peak count was eight snakes on the 22nd July (2024: seven on 18th June). Like last year numbers fell away gradually in September to a single sighting on 7th October. 88 sightings were recorded in 2025 up from 76 in 2024. We are still a long way off from 2021 when there were 152 snake sightings.

In respect of the **Common Lizard**, there were 12 recorded sightings during the year down from 16 the year before. The first was recorded on 15th April (2024:11th June). Thereafter they were seen sporadically in ones and twos until late September. A notable exception was 19th August when three lizards were recorded.

2024 was a very poor year for **Slowworms** on the reserve with just one record, in August. With much dryer weather last year and a warmer spring and summer we hoped that sightings might improve. Sadly it was not to be and no Slowworms were recorded last year. Hopefully this is not an established trend.

History of Iron Works at Weir Wood

As many members will know the Sussex Weald was once the centre of a busy iron production industry and the area around Weir Wood was no exception. A Chalybeate Spring rises in the field behind the car park in Legsheath Lane and flows into the reservoir through the reserve in an area we know as “the iron bog”. The “bog” is noticeable by its bright orange colour and its depth; anyone foolish enough to enter the bog will quickly sink up to their chest!

We are asked from time to time about the making of iron at Weir Wood and with this newsletter we have attached (as a separate document) a short paper written by Derek Washington in 2011 on the history of iron making at Weir Wood. As some members will recall, Derek was the Friends Website Editor. We hope that you find it an interesting read. Many of the sites referred to are now underwater all year round!

The Flowers of Weir Wood – Cuckooflower

This edition's featured flower is a classic spring sight. It loves damp ground so it is no surprise that it is found across the reserve and flourishes there. We are referring to the Cuckooflower (*Cardamine pratensis*) also known depending where you live, as Lady's Smock, Milk Maids or Mayflower. The Cuckooflower name is thought to derive from the fact that the plant comes into flower at the same time as the arrival of the Cuckoo.

As its flower shape suggests, it is a member of the *Brassicaceae* or *Cruciferae* (Cabbage) family and it is related to Wallflowers, Honesty, Bitter-cress and other flowering members of this large family. Like the wallflower and other brassicas/crucifers its flowers are attractive to butterflies and are an important source of nectar early in the year. This plant is particularly associated with the Orange-tip Butterfly (*Anthocharis cardamines*). This is an early flying butterfly which is on the wing when the Cuckooflower is in flower. Orange-tips will also nectar from the

flowers of other early flowering crucifers such as Garlic Mustard (aka Jack-by-the-hedge).

After the gloom of winter, it is one of our favourite things to see good numbers of both male and female Orange-tips flit from one Cuckooflower to another around the reserve from late March onwards. It is a sure sign that spring has arrived and that summer is not far away.



Orange-tip Butterfly on Cuckooflower – Weir Wood April 2023
Photo: Richard Allan

Bird Sightings Report

January

The month started out very cold with hard overnight frosts. However this soon gave way to milder, wetter weather and it's fair to say that apart from the odd day, the theme of the month was rain and lots of it.

The first part of the month was all about ducks. At the west end on the 1st, 32 **Pochards**, 27 **Mallards**, 11 **Teal**, 15 **Wigeon**, 9 **Gadwall**, 6 **Mandarin Ducks**, and 5 **Tufted Ducks** were all recorded. A few days later on the 4th, the reservoir at the west end was largely frozen and 45 Tufted Ducks, 34 Teal and 15 Pochards were counted. On the 5th there were 52 Teal and 33 Tufted Ducks together with 2 **Shovelers**. 51 Mallards were counted on the 6th. Thereafter numbers slowly decreased as the month progressed and most duck species continued to be seen, but in single figures.

Two **Goosanders** were seen at the west end at the beginning of the month and then again at the end of the month on the 31st.

The usual raptors were about during the month. As reported previously **Goshawks** are now a regular sight at Weir Wood with a pair being spotted on and off during the

month. A **White-tailed Eagle** was seen flying over early on the 16th and a **Peregrine** was seen on the 24th and 30th.

Common Snipe are regulars in the reserve in the winter often lurking at the water's edge at Pintail Point. They are sometimes flushed by the Tuesday work party and numbers usually range between three and four, however seven were seen at Pintail on the 30th.

January is the month when the heronry comes to life. On the 24th 23 **Grey Herons** were counted at the west end and 27 active nests were established on the 27th although there were possibly more where herons had not yet taken up residence. 28 herons were seen on the 30th and 33 on the 30th. A **Great White Egret** was seen sporadically during the month as was a **Little Egret**.

Great Crested Grebes were seen most days at both ends of the reservoir; for example 25 were recorded at the dam end on the 1st. Thereafter they tended to be seen in high single figures. **Little Grebes** were also regulars too, mostly seen at the west end with four recorded on the 3rd, thereafter they were seen in ones and twos throughout the month.

Water Rails (at least two) were regularly heard in Whillets reed bed with two seen on the 16th. Another Water Rail was seen and heard regularly in the water's edge vegetation to the left of the hide.

The 3rd was clearly a good day for winter thrushes with 74 **Fieldfare** and c100 **Redwing** seen.

We mentioned in the last newsletter how the two "set aside" fields (one on the left hand side along Legsheath Lane, the other on the north bank) were proving very productive from a birding perspective. January was no exception. For example on the 1st the field on the north bank produced 50 **Chaffinches**, 25 **Goldfinches**, 8 **Redpolls**, 3 **Linnets**, 3 **Reed Buntings**, 3 **Yellowhammers** and perhaps most pleasingly, 2 **Bramblings**. On the 3rd the Legsheath Lane field produced lots of Chaffinches and Goldfinches together with 4 Yellowhammers and 3 Bramblings. Both fields produced good numbers of finches and buntings throughout the month.



Reed Bunting at Weir Wood
Photo: Ian Hodgson

The usual characters were present at the feeders including our resident **Marsh Tits**. **Kingfishers** were seen on and off during the month but they are not fans of the muddy water in the reservoir caused by the heavy rain.

In other notable sightings, 3 **Bullfinches** were seen at the Dam End on the 18th. A flock of 27 **Lapwings** flew over the west end on the 4th and the following day a total of 270 Lapwings were counted flying over in groups of varying sizes.

Most of the action this month was at the west end and it was relatively quiet at the dam end with nothing out of the ordinary seen. **Black-headed Gulls** were most populous here with 180 counted on the 1st.

February

Rain and lots of it continued to be the overwhelming weather theme for the month. The sun was a rare visitor. However we had two warm and sunny days at the end of the month when a lot of butterflies put in an appearance. The wet weather didn't stop the birds from singing though.

Starting with the ducks there were **Pochards, Wigeon, Teal, Tufted Duck** and **Mallard** present in small but varying numbers throughout the month. **Mandarin Ducks** started to appear more regularly as the month progressed with 11 seen on the 19th and 17 on the 20th. Five **Gadwall** were recorded on the 23rd. The stand out duck sighting for the month was the three **Pintails** seen at the west end on the 23rd and 24th.

February was the month for **Goshawks** it would appear. A male and female were seen on the 1st, thereafter one or other was seen on most days, their presence

betrayed by panicking pigeons and corvids. Our other regular raptors were present on most days and interestingly five **Red Kites** were seen perched on the rocks to the north of the reservoir.

Activity increased at the heronry with **Grey Herons** in the 20-30s seen on most days. A **Little Egret** was seen on the 12th, one was in the heronry on the 26th and two were seen on the 27th. A **Great White Egret** was seen at the west end on the 5th and 19th.

Greylag and **Canada Geese** were ever present in varying numbers, joined by **Egyptian Geese** as the month progressed. **Great Crested Grebes** were ever present too, joined occasionally by **Little Grebes** with two of the latter seen on the 12th.

All the “usual suspects” continued to be present at the feeders.

The “set aside / stubble fields” mentioned last month continued to deliver. Sightings here included 18 **Redpolls** on the 4th, 119 **Linnets** on the 15th and 80 on the 23rd. These fields are good habitat for **Woodlarks** and two were first seen on the 11th. The Tuesday work party certainly enjoyed seeing and hearing these lovely songsters throughout the month.

Nothing of note to report on the gull front, although a **Common Gull** was seen on the 17th and 20th.

Mention must be made again of the **Water Rail** which made its home close to the hide. These are generally pretty elusive birds, more heard than seen as a rule. This specimen was often seen popping out into the open in front of the hide and on the 23rd was seen pecking around under the feeders.

Other sightings of interest included a **Curlew** (flyover) at the dam end on the 19th, seven **Snipe** on the 15th, three **Crossbills** at the west end (flyover) and perhaps the sighting of the month, a **Hawfinch** by the picnic area on the 11th.

A **Chiffchaff** was seen in front of the hide on the 8th and regularly thereafter. We believe this has wintered over as the scrub next to the reservoir will be relatively warm and is home to a good number of insects. However in a sure sign that spring is just around the corner, one was heard singing in the sailing club car park on the 28th.



Chiffchaff at Weir Wood
Photo: Richard Allan

Finally, two **Sand Martins** (the first of the year for us) were seen at the dam end on the 26th. Always great to see the first of the hirundines return and hopefully the first of many.

March

March started as February ended; wet gloomy days interspersed with warm, sunny spring like days. A variable pattern of weather was then established through to the end of the month although there was thankfully less rain after two wet months.

March is the month when we say goodbye to our winter visitors such as Redwing and Fieldfare and welcome back our summer visitors such as the Chiffchaff and Blackcap, although with our warmer winters, small numbers of the latter two species are increasingly “wintering over” in this country. See the February Chiffchaff sighting above for example.

Turning first to our summer arrivals, two **Sandwich Terns** and one **Little Ringed Plover** were seen at the dam end on the 4th. Our first **Swallow** was recorded at the west end on the 28th and one was then seen at the dam end on the 30th. A singing **Blackcap** was reported at the dam end on the 14th. Thereafter they were seen and heard on most days at either end of the reservoir. **Chiffchaffs** sang throughout the month.

After the first arrivals at the end of last month, **Sand Martin** sightings increased during the month, the birds seen mostly in small numbers. The exception being on the 24th when the work party counted at least 20 flying low over the water mid reservoir.

Winter thrush numbers fell away from 31 **Fieldfare** seen at west end on the 7th and 20+ **Redwing** seen on the 10th, to ones and twos towards the end of the month as both species headed north.

The ducks seen in February were ever present, but in declining numbers as the month progressed. The exceptions were five **Shovelers** seen at the west end on the 19th and 12 **Wigeon** seen at the dam end on the 23rd. **Mandarin Ducks** were more evident during the month with 11 seen at the west end on the 24th.

There continued to be lots activity around the **Grey Heron** and **Cormorant** nests. **Little Egrets** in ones and two were occasionally seen in this area. A **Great White Egret** was seen at the dam end on the 7th and at the west end on the 31st.

Great Crested Grebes were ever present at both ends of the reservoir. They are starting to pair up, with the “weed dance” seen at the dam end on the 5th and at the west end on the 23rd.

Also on the water, **Canada Geese** and **Egyptian Geese** were seen on most days. **Greylag Geese** sightings were far less frequent; the maximum count was seven on the 24th.

Herring Gulls and **Black-headed Gulls** were seen regularly along with both **Great** and **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**. As members will know, the latter two species are not good news as they have in previous years predated both Black-headed Gull and Common Tern chicks on the rafts. Other gull sightings included a **Little Gull** at the dam end on the 10th, two **Common Gulls** and one **Caspian Gull** on the 12th and one **Kittiwake** at the dam end on the 20th.

As with the past two months, **Goshawks** were the stand out bird on the raptor front, with three seen at the dam end on the 2nd. Goshawks were seen regularly throughout the month in ones, or less frequently, twos. The work party were able to hear the distinctive cry of this bird from woodland next to reservoir on and off during the day on the 31st. Our regular raptors were present during the month, joined by a **Peregrine** on the 31st and unusually, a **Marsh Harrier** flying over the dam end on the same day. Another notable raptor sighting was 20 **Buzzards** seen at the dam end on the 2nd.

The **Water Rail** continued to be seen under the feeders by the hide but was gone by the end of the month. **Woodlarks** were seen and heard at the dam end on the 7th and at the west end on the 10th, 17th, 22nd, 23rd and 31st.

There were still plenty of passerines on the “set aside / stubble fields” with 50 **Linnets** recorded there on the 15th.

Other sightings of interest in the month included an **Oystercatcher** at the dam end on the 7th, a **Dunlin** at the dam end on the 20th and a **Common Snipe** on Pintail Point on the 28th. The work party flushed a **Jack Snipe** in Whillets on the 17th.



Great White Egret at Weir Wood
Photo: David Williams

The Report above just provides some of the highlights and a detailed list of sightings can be found on our website at: www.weirwood.me.uk/sightings/. Remember to check our Facebook page too for regular sightings and photos.

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