



# Bracknell Forest Natural History Society

A society for everyone interested in nature and its conservation

## MEMBERS' NEWSLETTER – Spring 2021

This first quarter of the year is all about looking forward to Spring! Much has been happening, and there is a good chance that things may change for the better pretty soon – so that we can at least resume our outdoor programme. **It looks like our trip to Waltham Place on 27th April will be going ahead and we should be able to organise some outdoor, socially distanced Walks.** And we are of course looking forward to organising the **'Grand Opening' for Nightingale Triangle** in the woodland - when the plinth will be unveiled, and we can all meet up for the long awaited celebrations. Spring is such a short time away and there is much to do in preparation for better days ahead.



If you have a garden you must have seen plenty of activity already, and remember that gardens are highly important as wildlife refuges. **We can make a difference by encouraging creatures great and small to make their homes with us by providing them with good habitats and safe nesting places.** It's a good time to think back to our Southhill Park talk about 'Urban Wildlife', when Professor Mark Fellowes of Reading University came to speak about studies on wildlife in our area. He gave us plenty of tips and information, while stressing the importance of our actions. As a result, for instance, I moved some bird boxes and have resited some feeding stations... with great results.



### Local Bird Sightings (from Members)

Small flock of Bramblings at Jennets Park  
Flock of Redwings in North Bracknell  
Greater Spotted Woodpeckers drumming at Bill Hill and in South Hill Park  
At least five Mistle Thrushes in Swinley Park  
Song Thrush alongside Gormoor Brook in Church Hill estate  
Gang of Siskins at Harmans Water  
Nest box surveying by Blue Tits at Harmans Water

From the various locations of the sightings it's clear that there is plenty to see in the Bracknell Forest area. **We have an amazing selection of walkways and green places which are easily accessed from most neighbourhoods.** From my own walking expeditions through these dark times I have found many alternative routes and places that I hardly knew existed. It's clear to see that many more people now frequent our green spaces.

Please stay safe and well, and keep in touch with information and sightings. It's always good to receive messages - we are easily contacted through email, our Facebook page or by telephone. We appreciate your continued support for the Society and look forward to meeting up again soon.

With best wishes to you all. **Gill Cheetham, Chairman – February 2021**

### In this edition of the Newsletter we are covering the following:

Wild Garden Awards Winner	Page 2
Findings from BFC's Wildlife Surveys	Page 2
'Bumble Aware' 2021	Page 3
Nightingale Triangle update	Page 3
Bracknell's Peregrines	Page 4
PlantLife's Road Verge Campaign	Page 4
Waltham Place Visit Invitation	Page 5
Bracknell Climate Action Group	Page 5
Survey for TB in Road-Killed Badgers	Page 5

**The Long Read** (from BBC website) – Contraceptives for Grey Squirrels Pages 6-7

## WILD GARDEN AWARDS: The Winner!

Towards the end of the year, [Bracknell Forest Nature Partnership](#) presented three Gold, twelve Silver and two Bronze Awards to residents for their wildlife friendly gardens and allotments. The Judges were impressed by the range of entries submitted and the enthusiasm of residents in encouraging wildlife to these spaces.



The gardens were self-scored using a checklist and verified by three Judges. Gardens scored points in four categories: food (e.g. feeders, native plants), shelter (e.g. mature trees, log piles, hedgerows), water (e.g. pond or bird bath) and wildlife-friendly management (e.g. peat-free compost, organic gardening). The winning garden is owned by **Helen Best** (pictured), which was unusual in having two wildlife ponds, and it also scored well for a range of other wildlife features.

If you are thinking of 're-wilding' your garden this year, the [Year of the Garden](#) webpage still has interesting fact sheets with ideas on how to help garden wildlife such as bumblebees, wildflowers and swifts.

## Findings from Bracknell Forest Council's 2020 Wildlife Surveys

Thanks to the BFC for giving us this insight into a series of Wildlife Surveys which have been conducted across the Borough, revealing some of the following key highlights:



### Butterflies

Dark Green Fritillaries (pictured), Silver Washed Fritillaries and Purple Hairstreaks have been recorded at [Ambarrow Court](#). Silver Studded Blues have been recorded in our heathlands and there's evidence of Purple Emperor butterflies at Lily Hill Park.



### Reptiles

Surveys have been carried out at our heathlands including [Englemere Pond](#), [Caesar's Camp](#) and [Wildmoor Heath](#), where we've recorded a total of 36 Adders (pictured), 28 Grass Snakes, 25 Glow Worms and 32 Common Lizards.



### Birds

A breeding pair of Peregrine Falcons has been recorded at the industrial estate off Mill Lane in Bracknell.



### Wildflowers

The re-sown wildflower areas at [Cabbage Hill](#) in Warfield are establishing well.

The Yellow Rattle (pictured) recorded at [South Hill Park](#) (11 species per metre squared on average) will help to suppress grass growth and encourage wildflowers to flourish.

There has been a decline in the number of orchids at [Wykery Copse](#), but recent habitat improvement work carried out by the Bracknell Conservation Volunteers should help resolve this.

## 'Bumblebee Aware' 2021



Our thanks to **Adrian Doble** from the Bumblebee Conservation Trust for this article. Adrian grows bee-friendly flowers on the Trust's allotments, performs monthly surveys of bees in the Chilterns, represents the BCT at various events, writes a monthly article "Bumblebee Aware" for [www.cookham.com](http://www.cookham.com), and seizes every opportunity to explain how individuals and organisations can become involved in the Bumblebee Aware project. He also works within WildCookham to improve habitats for local wildlife.

Winter was a dark time for bumblebees. They spent most of their time sleeping in hibernation mode, living off their store of body fat, quietly maturing the eggs inside their ovaries, and waiting to be woken up by warmer weather. When we visited the 3.5 kilometer BeeWalk route in the Chilterns on Christmas Day there was not a single flower to be seen and (therefore) no bees. That same week we saw local bumbles on Mahonia in two local gardens even though the temperature was only 7C. This is clear evidence of the importance of the plants like **Winter-flowering clematis** in our parks and gardens.



How do these queens who hold the seeds of future generations know where to find food in winter? They have to rely on the memories that they have built up since leaving their nest for the first time last year. They have to learn to find and identify rewarding plants, how to collect pollen and nectar from a range of flower shapes - and how to find their way home...

The sense of smell plays a major role in the lives of bees. The long jointed antennae that are borne on the head allow bees to pick up on odours that are too faint for us to detect. It has been shown that bees produce a wide range of chemical "pheromones" that are used to communicate within the colony.

During the Summer, when the queen is laying eggs within the nest and while workers are out foraging, the queen produces a chemical that keeps the family working harmoniously, but there comes a time when she stops making this pheromone. This signals the end of her dominance and a switch from the colony producing only female workers to one where males and then new queens are created. Pheromones are also produced by males who paint them on bushes to attract newly emerged queens.



Many of us are struggling to find mental stimulation in these days of restriction. One way out is to begin a new project such as entering the world of the bumblebee. There are interesting facts to learn about these beautiful endangered insects, plants to grow for their benefit, observations to make, survey walks to plan, nest sites to create, and an important cause to become involved in.

Visit the Bumblebee Conservation Trust website:  
[www.BumblebeeConservation.org](http://www.BumblebeeConservation.org)

## Our Woodland Restoration Project

Nightingale Triangle has become a casualty of the Covid19 restrictions. Right now we're not allowed to hold our monthly Saturday work parties and the Bracknell Conservation Volunteers were not be able to make their scheduled working visit in early February. However, the woodland is looking good, despite some irresponsible vandalism which occurred over Christmas. Thankfully this was quickly rectified. Bird nesting time will soon coincide with our work times and the woodland will again be left to its own devices for the Summer. This doesn't stop the flowering season or the habitat sites having residents.



Visit Nightingale Triangle in the Spring if you are able –  
you'll find it delightful!



## News from the Berkshire Ornithological Club about Bracknell's Peregrines

(From their January Newsletter)

Just recently, with a visit to Bracknell town centre, you could crank the numbers of Peregrines in the vicinity back up to five, because a pair that have bred in the Bracknell area have moved into the town centre with a juvenile - or as we now think, the juvenile has moved into the town centre together with the parents.

The juvenile is interesting on two counts. Firstly, it is still dependent on the parents for food; on Sunday 25th October both adults were hunting the abundant town centre Feral Pigeons at the same time, while the juvenile was just tagging on behind. Secondly, it sports a very unusually pale plumage pattern with a lot of pale feathers on the head and an overall very pale buff to the body feathers, with not the densest dark streaking that we've seen.



Photo courtesy of Wikipedia

The adult female has an orange colour ring on her left leg. For us she has proved a bit camera shy and has not offered a good opportunity yet for a clear image of the alphanumeric code on the ring. Yet! We do so want to know where she has come from!

One final comment is that, since our visit earlier, on 15th October, the juvenile has sustained some noticeable damage to its right-wing secondaries, with even the greater wing coverts affected as well. Life is a steep learning curve for all juveniles, and whatever the event was that caused the damage, we hope that there won't be any more for this gorgeous young bird.

For lots of pics of the Bracknell Peregrines, visit:

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/zbd0SA3Ke6bT9RqTA>

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/J8Rxop5Y4YUdLba87>



**UPDATE – from Dr Kate Petty,  
Road Verge Campaign Manager,  
Plantlife**

With many mowers kept away during the Spring lockdown, swiftly followed by our call for **#NoMowMay**, lots of road verges were allowed the chance to burst into flower. This delightful show of the botanical potential of verges on our doorsteps inspired and encouraged many more people to lobby your Councils to change verge management regimes for the better.



We're now in touch with over 30 Councils which are actively working to review, trial, or fully implement more wildflower-friendly verge management, and the show of public support last year for letting verge wild flowers bloom is spurring them on. It's also been brilliant this year to virtually meet so many enthusiastic volunteer groups campaigning hard to restore and enhance verges and greenspace in their local areas, and we look forward to meeting more this year. During 2021 we'll also be bringing in exciting

resources to help you know what positive progress your Councils are making, what's happening in your local area - and to provide you with our advice and top tips on making a difference.

Another boost to verges was recently announced as **Highways England brought out their new low fertility topsoil policy which will create species-rich grassland verges along new major road schemes**. It's fantastic to see our best practice management being translated into changing behaviours and actions on the ground.

Finally, we want to say a huge thank you, because as a result of the public's incredible generosity, our recent Road Verge Appeal has raised over £65,500. The whole team has been absolutely blown away, and it's been wonderful to receive so many notes and letters along with your donations... hearing of your verge connections to and memories of verge habitats.

We're busy drawing up plans for next season and beyond and can't wait to get to work on them.

**DON'T FORGET THIS DATE FOR YOUR DIARY!**

## *Invitation – 'Signs of Spring'*

Waltham Place's Summer season commences at the end of May, when Garden Visits and other highly anticipated events will re-commence. **We have been invited to a super-special exclusive BFNHS preview of what is to come, entitled 'Signs of Spring' - to be held at Waltham Place just for us – during the morning of Tuesday 27th April 2021.**

Places will be limited to 15 people (visitors will be divided into groups of five), although if take-up is as high as we are expecting, a second Visit will be organised in early May. The cost will be **£7.50 per person**. We'll be in touch with more details shortly.

**WALTHAM PLACE Church Hill, White Waltham, Berks SL6 3JH 01628 825517**



**To find out more about Waltham Place** (it's only 15 minutes' drive from Bracknell, in the general direction of Maidenhead) take a look at their Newsletter (on their website) for a weekly nature diary, news of events and details of fresh produce for sale – the address is: [www.walthamplace.com](http://www.walthamplace.com)

**Or you can sign up to receive the Newsletter directly** by emailing [education@walthamplace.com](mailto:education@walthamplace.com) – we really recommend this, it's always an intuitive and informative read.

## **Bracknell Climate Action Group** **Hope for a sustainable future**

We have been contacted by this new local action group, to ascertain if any of our Members would be interested in joining them, and participating in their activities. Here are the details:

**We are a group of Bracknell Forest residents who are engaging with the Council to help create an ambitious, measurable and concrete Climate Action Plan for our community. We want to transform our Borough into a fairer and more sustainable place for future generations.**

**Are you interested in getting involved? You can... Join our core group and / or sign up to be kept informed. Please indicate which of these options you would prefer, via e-mail to: [bracknellclimateactiongroup@outlook.com](mailto:bracknellclimateactiongroup@outlook.com)**



## **SURVEY FOR TUBERCULOSIS (TB) IN ROAD-KILLED BADGERS**

The Government's Animal and Plant Health Agency is organising a far-reaching strategy to try to eradicate bovine TB in England. Starting shortly, their aim is to collect a significant number of fresh, found-dead badger carcasses, which will then be examined and tested for TB. Depending on where they are found, the Southern Edge Area (which includes Bucks, Berks, Oxfordshire, Hampshire and East Sussex) will be classified as High Risk, Low Risk or the Edge Area between the two. These Risk Areas will determine the disease control measures needed for both cattle and wildlife. The APHA is looking for volunteers to help collect badger carcasses if they are spotted by the roadside or in the countryside, using a collection kit containing everything needed to do the job. The bagged carcasses will then be collected from your house or premises by a specialist courier.

**Once we receive the full information on this project, we will send it on to our Members, who can make their own decision as to whether or not they would like to take part in carcass collection. We hope to have the details within the next few weeks.**

# THE LONG READ

Taken from the BBC Website, this is a very interesting article about the control of Grey Squirrels, love them or hate them... we have plenty in this area, let's hope that this proposal goes ahead. Gill

The UK government has given its support to a project to use oral contraceptives to control grey squirrel populations.

Environment Minister Lord Goldsmith says the damage they and other invasive species do to the UK's woodlands costs the UK economy £1.8 billion a year. This bizarre-sounding plan is to lure grey squirrels into feeding boxes only they can access with little pots containing hazelnut spread. These would be spiked with an oral contraceptive.



Lord Goldsmith says the damage from squirrels also threatens the effectiveness of government efforts to tackle climate change by planting tens of thousands of acres of new woodlands.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) told BBC News: "We hope advances in science can safely help our nature to thrive, including through the humane control of invasive species."

A partnership of conservation and forestry organisations called the UK Squirrel Accord (UKSA) is behind the proposal. It says grey squirrels, which were first introduced from North America in the late 19th century, cause huge damage to woodlands by stripping bark from trees aged between 10 and 50 years - the younger trees in a forest. They particularly target broad-leaved varieties including oak, which are ecologically important because they support so many other species.

It is estimated the UK is home to some three million of these invasive rodents. They have displaced the native red squirrel across most of the UK.

Lord Goldsmith says the government supports the plan as well as a longer-term effort to breed infertility into female grey squirrels to reduce their numbers. Invasive non-native species such as grey squirrels threaten our native biodiversity, he argues. When regulating grey squirrels with oral contraceptive was first proposed in 2017, **the government's Animal and Plant Health Agency said it thought it could reduce their numbers by as much as 90%.**



The project also has royal approval. Prince Charles was instrumental in founding the UK Squirrel Accord with the objective of "managing the negative impacts of invasive grey squirrels in the UK". He has written of the importance of protecting Britain's remaining red squirrels.

**"These charming and intelligent creatures never fail to delight"**, he wrote recently in his capacity as patron of the Red Squirrel Survival Trust, describing red squirrels as the "symbol and benchmark" of healthy woods.

Jason Gilchrist, an ecologist from Edinburgh Napier University, has written in defence of the grey squirrel but he says he supports the oral contraceptive plan. He acknowledges there is a need to manage grey squirrel populations. **"It is better than the alternative - a shotgun"**, he told BBC News.

It is the same argument the UKSA makes: dosing the animals with contraceptives provides a humane alternative to culling them. The Royal Forestry Society, a member of the Squirrel Accord,

recently called for just such a cull. Simon Lloyd, its Chief Executive, says efforts to tackle global warming and improve biodiversity will be undermined unless grey squirrel numbers can be reduced. **New trees will not survive to "deliver the carbon capture or biodiversity objectives if grey squirrels cannot be controlled"**, he told *The Daily Telegraph*.

The UKSA has been experimenting with ways to deliver oral contraceptives to squirrels for more than three years now. Last year, it tested special feeding stations designed so only grey squirrels can gain access in woodland in East Yorkshire. Instead of contraceptives, the hazelnut paste bait was dosed with a dye that, when ingested, causes squirrel hair to fluoresce under UV light.

The researchers found that more than 90% of the grey squirrel population being studied visited the traps. **They concluded that it was possible to deliver repeat doses of a contraceptive to the majority of grey squirrels in a wood.**



**This is your Newsletter, so if you have anything you would like to be included in our next issue – planned for May - please send it to your Editor Gill Cheetham:**  
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