



BRACKNELL DISTRICT URBAN WILDLIFE GROUP

SUMMER NEWSLETTER

2011

– ISSUE 88 –

SWINLEY FOREST FIRES

Nobody could fail to miss the fact that a huge forest fire swept through Swinley Forest in early May. It was reported on radio and television as the largest fire ever to affect Berkshire. Following two months of exceptionally warm weather, underground peat became tinder dry and burst spontaneously into flame. The fire was at its worst on 2/3 May, and crews from at least 8 fire services attended the scene. It was not until 10 May that fire crews declared the area safe and left the scene. Road closures disrupted traffic between Bracknell, Crowthorne and Sandhurst. A large area of Swinley Forest to the west of a line connecting the Lower Star Post, Upper Star Post and Caesars Camp was affected. Fortunately, the area of Swinley Forest to the east was spared. Crowthorne Wood was badly affected. The fire consumed large areas of vegetation at and immediately above ground level. Heather, dry grass, gorse and young pine trees were enveloped by the flames, leaving areas of scorched earth. The taller, mature pine trees, although charred at ground level, escaped the worst. The fire will inevitably have affected nesting birds, reptiles and other wildlife. However, signs of life were soon evident. A churring nightjar, two or three roding woodcock and a bat were observed by Des Sussex at dusk on the first evening Crowthorne Wood was opened again to the public. Most of the ponds important to dragonflies and other wildlife are located in the eastern part of Swinley Forest and were unaffected. The valley to the west of Caesars Camp somehow escaped. Only the ponds and bog in Crowthorne Wood were caught up in the fire. The flames had flashed over the surrounding dry vegetation and the ponds were full where water used by the fire crews to put out the fires had found its way in.

John Ward-Smith

DIARY

WORK PARTIES

For details of the Group's work parties please contact Peter Knipe
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peekay750@hotmail.co.uk

BRACKNELL FOREST NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

(www.bfnathistsoc.org)
South Hill Park, 7.30 pm

23 May

British Spiders
and AGM
by Lawrence Bee

20 June

Wildlife in your Garden
by Marlies Boydell

BBOWT EVENTS

At King Edwards Hall,
North Ascot SL5 8PD
7:45 – 10pm

Please check for details at
www.bbowt.org.uk

Bracknell Forest Borough Council

4 June

Northerams Wood Bio-Blitz.
12 hours non-stop wildlife
recording, 10am – 10 pm
Everyone welcome

Contact: biodiversity@bracknell-forest.gov.uk

NATURE NOTES – APRIL 2011

We are coming towards the end of April with no end in sight for the warm, settled weather. This continues the very dry conditions of March with little or no rain. The dry bracken and grasses on the heathland and in the woods, as in most years, are a fire hazard. But following on from daffodil and blackthorn flowering, the speedy arrival of hawthorn blossom and bluebells is everywhere for our enjoyment. Larges Lane cemetery is full of wildflowers, primroses, wood anemones, wood sorrel, violets, and much more.

Some less common flowers seen this month include Marsh Marigolds, known as Kingcups in my younger days, and Ramsons, or Wild Garlic. The Marsh Marigolds were on a small pond on the southern, sunny, edge of Farley Copse. There was also a clump on the marshy patch downstream of South Lake in South Hill Park, near to where the new boardwalk stretches across a large cleared area of the bog, as part of the restoration work currently under way in South Hill Park. The Ramsons I found beside the path running along Nine Mile Ride in the belt of trees behind housing in Northcroft, Birch Hill. You would not expect this to be growing in the sandy soils of the south side of Bracknell, but rather in woodland on calcareous soils.

I recently had an interesting encounter with a male Roedeer near Wildmoor Heath reserve. It was after 5pm as I was just leaving by the path which brings you out by the roundabout on Rackstraw Road with Abingdon Road, when the deer appeared along the pavement from my right. Being out of his normal surroundings he was alert to any problems he might meet, and safely crossed the end of Abingdon Road, heading along a grassy strip in the direction of College Town. Perhaps the deer had been browsing in gardens nearby. Hopefully it reached somewhere safe without any encounter with vehicles.

The Waxwings were locally in large numbers in Bracknell, when I wrote of them in mid-January. So they continued for quite some while. It was the end of January when numbers started to drop in Bracknell, as the supply of berries came to an end. Elsewhere in Berkshire the birds spread everywhere, nearly always reported from towns. Reading, Wokingham and Newbury have all been seeing good numbers. They have continued to be seen, even if in dwindling numbers, right through till the third week of April, well into their sixth month in this area. By the time of late March, with warm weather and trees coming into leaf, reports were coming in to BerksBirds website of the Waxwings eating buds in the trees and hawking for flying insects. This of course would be their summer feeding strategy back in Scandinavia and other areas where they breed, different from the feasting on berries in winter months. It was a remarkable winter for the influx of Waxwings throughout the country, one of the very best of recent years and we in Berkshire have had our fair share.

Following the spending review in October 2010 the government has stopped the levy on gravel extractions which, among other beneficiaries, has been available for environmental projects through the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund. This will mean a large gap in funding for Wildlife Trusts,

David Lloyd

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THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS
NEWSLETTER ARE NOT NECESSARILY THOSE OF THE
EDITOR OR THE BRACKNELL
DISTRICT URBAN WILDLIFE GROUP

Dragonflies

With the exceptionally warm weather during April, the flight season for damselflies and dragonflies has got off to a very early start this year. On 21 April the first Large Red Damselflies were reported from Wild-moor Heath Nature Reserve and Crowthorne Wood. Also, at Shepherd Meadows, Sandhurst the first Banded Demoiselle was seen taking its maiden flight away from the River Blackwater. The following day David Rowe photographed a newly emerged Broad-bodied Chaser near the Chawridge Bank Nature Reserve in Winkfield. A single mature Downy Emerald and two Four-spotted Chasers were seen on the wing at Swinley Brick Pits on 24 April, and several mature Blue-tailed Damselflies were observed at Felix Farm Trout Fishery on 26 April. Over the UK as a whole several other species – Azure, Common Blue and Red-eyed Damselfly, Hairy Dragonfly, Emperor, Scarce Chaser - had already been recorded before the end of April.

Peter Knipe

Our Chairman, Peter Knipe, spent several weeks in the Royal Berkshire Hospital, Reading. Peter was struck down by pneumonia, together with complications, in the middle of March. Initially, he spent a period in the Intensive Care Unit, followed by periods in respiratory and cardiology wards. He is currently in a rest home in Crowthorne recovering. We wish Peter a full recovery.

Early Purple Orchids

Due to the dry weather during March and April, the flowering season is two or three weeks early this year. The Early Purple Orchids at Bracknell's key site for this species were already at their peak in the middle of April. A total of 118 flowering spikes were counted this year, down a bit on the past few years, but no cause for concern.

John Ward-Smith

BRACKNELL DISTRICT URBAN WILDLIFE GROUP

Bracknell, together with the surrounding villages of Binfield, Warfield, Winkfield, Crowthorne and Sandhurst, is an area subject to substantial development pressures. Yet, if we want it, wild plants and animals can survive and flourish in our gardens, roadsides, parks and open spaces. We believe the presence of this wildlife enhances the quality of our environment.

What do we do?

- discover what wildlife there is and where it is, and how best to encourage it
- press for recognition of its value
- watch out for threats it might face

How do we work?

- by surveying the wildlife in the area covered by Bracknell Forest Borough Council
- by undertaking and advising on practical management of open spaces for the benefit of wildlife
- by running projects on particular plants and animals
- by holding regular open meetings, occasionally indoors but usually at outdoor sites

We are affiliated to the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) and to the Bracknell Council for Voluntary Service (BCVS). We also work with other local conservation groups and have the active support of English Nature and our local wildlife trust: the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT).

FROM THE EDITOR

Please can I have your contributions to the next newsletter by Saturday 23rd July. All articles on our local wildlife and habitats will be very welcome.

Please send to: David Rowe,
34 East Stratton Close, Bracknell, RG12 0XY
Email: david-rowe@sky.com

Moths in Forest Park

Since 25 March I have been running a Skinner Moth Trap in the garden for one night each week. A mercury vapour lamp attracts the moths and they settle for the night on old egg boxes within the trap. Early in the morning I record the catch and photograph any I find particularly interesting, and especially those I can't immediately identify. The moths are then released.

This had proved really fascinating. To date I have identified over 40 different species and on the particularly warm and calm evening of 6 May I found 7 Hawk Moths, including Pine, Lime and Poplar.

Several species are particularly attractive, such as the Pine Beauty, Swallow Prominent and Brindled Beauty. Others are surprisingly cryptic, the Pale Prominent and Buff Tip appearing like twigs. Several others have bright markings, such as the Orange Footman and Brimstone.

As you have probably noticed the common names are usually very descriptive which definitely aids identification. But what also helps are many good books, for example *Field Guide to the Moths of Great Britain and Ireland* by Paul Waring, Martin Townsend and Richard Lewington; *British Moths and Butterflies – A photographic guide* by Chris Manley. Also the internet www.ukmoths.org.uk and www.hantsmoths.org.uk A good local site is www.upperthames-butterflies.org.uk/moth_sightings.html.

I am looking forward to the range of moths changing with the seasons. I may have identified 40 so far but there are hundreds of others out there – so there is lots to look forward to.

David Rowe

Moths illustrated below, clockwise from top left: Lime Hawk Moth, Pine Beauty, Muslin and Buff Tip.

