



FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

Newsletter 179

Spring 2011

Goldfinch

(*Carduelis carduelis*)

Teasel is left standing in my garden over winter to provide food for local goldfinches. Their preferred food is small seed from thistles and teasels, their long, fine beaks enable them to extract seed that is unavailable to many other birds. Goldfinches will also visit the bird table in winter being particularly fond of niger seed from southern Asia.



Carduus is a genus of plants that includes the wetted and musk thistles and it is from this genus that goldfinches get their scientific name *C. carduelis*. Whilst the UK breeding population is in excess of 300,000 pairs, only about 100,000 individuals over-winter here, many birds migrating as far south as Spain choosing to avoid the cold weather.

The goldfinches partiality for thistles led it to it associated with Christ's Passion. When the goldfinch appears in paintings with the Madonna and Christ Child it represents the future Crucifixion of Jesus; one of the most famous paintings is 'Madonna del Cardellino' or 'Madonna of the Goldfinch' by the Italian Renaissance artist Raphael in which

John the Baptist offers the goldfinch to Christ warning him of his fate; following a 10 year restoration, completed in 2008, this painting has been returned to the Uffizi gallery in Florence.

The goldfinch's bright red face, striking yellow, black and white markings make it one of the most colourful of our native birds. Sadly, the goldfinch's visual beauty together with its tinkling song made it so attractive that it has had a long history as a popular cage-bird. Vivaldi composed 'Il Gardellino', a concerto in D major for flute that imitates the song of the goldfinch. Goldfinch males were sometimes crossed with Canary females to produce male hybrids with beautiful singing voices, often exhibiting the best attributes of both species.

The goldfinch also breeds throughout Europe, North Africa, western and central Asia; like our native birds they are resident in the milder parts of their range but migrate from colder regions. Either from escapes or deliberate releases this attractive bird has found its way to many other parts of the world and has colonised south eastern Australia and New Zealand.

Ron Iremonger

Chairman's Page



Unfortunately I have to start with the sad news of David Eglin's death; he was a committee member until the last Annual General Meeting and he will be sadly missed. Many thanks to Richard Cain for writing the short obituary below.

Ron Iremonger continues to provide our front page article and my continued thanks once again go to him for his support. Coincidentally just after I received his article a pair of goldfinches started to feed at our bird table in the front garden and have now become regular visitors.

Details of our events this year are included below and more details will be included in future newsletters including the date for the wine tasting in September. I hope that as many as possible of you will support us again this year.

Annual subscriptions have been received at a pleasing rate but there are still quite a number who have not renewed their membership. If you have not sent in your renewal and have lost the form please contact Clive Gregory on 01244 680242 and he will be happy to send you another copy.

For this edition of the newsletter I was really pleased to receive an interesting article from James Holroyd about his bees and this is included as our centre spread. I understand that the bees have survived the winter and I hope we will hear more about his progress with bee keeping in the future. I expect that the bees are enjoying the recent warm weather; I certainly have, but my umbrella and waterproof jacket are still in the hall in anticipation of April showers!

Peter Hadfield 01244 341378 or peter.j.hadfield@gmail.com

David Eglin FoM Committee Member 2001- 2010 Died February 2011

David joined the committee in 2001 after gentle persuasion by the then Chair, Adele Edwards. During his time on the committee David, despite living in the Colwyn Bay area, always made an active contribution at committee meetings and was a prominent volunteer at FoM events. On a personal level, David had a strong love of Wagner and was secretary of the Wagner Society as well as being interested in local politics and travelling. Despite being past normal retirement age, David loyally continued to practice as a qualified accountant in support of his long standing clients thus demonstrating his commitment to others. David was liked and respected by all who knew him and he will be sadly missed. Our thoughts and sympathies are with his children, family and friends.

Richard Cain

Important Dates for your Diary

Friends of the Meadows 2011 Events

**Saturday 14 May
Dawn Chorus/Bird Song Event
Meet at Bottoms Lane Entrance
at 05.00
(more information on the next page)**

**Saturday 18 June
Garden Party**

**Sunday 03 July
Butterfly Walk**

**September (date to be confirmed)
Wine Tasting**

**Thursday 17 November
Annual General Meeting**

Dawn Chorus Walk on the Meadow

**Saturday 14 May 2011 meet at 05.00 at the Bottoms Lane entrance to the Meadows
(Yes that really is 5 o'clock in the morning)**

In the early hours of the morning a wildlife spectacular will be taking place all over Britain including Chester. You are invited to experience the magic of sunrise on the Meadow and witness a free concert provided by nature.

With a little bit of luck we will hope to hear up to 8 species of visiting warbler. These will include the fluty warble of the Blackcap, the metronomic sound of the Chiffchaff, the silvery slide down the scale of the Willow Warbler and the machine gun rattle of the Lesser Whitethroat. These will be supported by a resident cast including the loud trilling song of the Wren, the mellow sound of the Blackbird and the drumming of the Great Spotted Woodpecker.

We will then take a short walk around the Meadow & hopefully see some of the birds we have just heard. There is also the possibility of finding something unusual at this time of year. In the last couple of years Osprey, Wheatear, Whinchat and Yellow Wagtails have all paused here before continuing on their migration.

For further details of the dawn chorus call Andy Ingham on 01244 677135.

Are You Interested in Sailing in Chester?



Chester Sailing and Canoeing Club was formed in 1956 as a joint club to cater for both canoeing and sailing on the River Dee. Our sailing activities are based at the dinghy park on Sandy Lane which contains a training room, changing rooms with showers and toilets and an official's box for monitoring and controlling the racing.

Racing is carried out on Sunday mornings throughout the year except for a short break during January. There is also racing on Tuesday evenings and cruising on Thursday evenings between April and early September. The main classes of dinghy sailed are Enterprises, Lasers, GP14, Comets and Toppers; there is also a Handicap fleet of various classes. The Club runs a successful and expanding sail training programme for both juniors and adults. Many of our courses this year are already full but there are still some places on Junior Stage 2, Stage 4 and Start Racing courses. A few places also remain on our adult courses and if you would like more information on either the 2011 junior or adult courses please contact Kath Simpson by e-mail at cscsailtraining@talktalk.net. There is a waiting list for our Junior Stage 1 Start to Sail course for 2012 if you would like to register your interest. If you are interested in trying out sailing, taster sessions can be arranged when our experienced sailors will take you for a ride in our dinghies.

For further information on our sailing and canoeing activities please visit our websites www.chestersailingclub.com and www.chestercanoecub.org.uk.

BEES BY THE DEE

Well over a year ago now my neighbour, Dave, and I decided that we would start to keep bees. The news that bees were in decline was an incentive, but more so was the hope of enjoying some of our very own Chester honey. Accordingly we enrolled on a ten week evening course at Reaseheath College, starting in January last year. There we learnt all the theory necessary for a beginner: the life cycle of the bee, its diseases, how to deal with swarms and much more. At the same time we purchased a hive each in flat pack form, together with the frames on which the Queen would lay her eggs and the workers store their honey. It was an exciting time, but there was also a certain feeling of trepidation. We knew the theory but were far from confident about handling the bees. In fact, we had never ever touched any.

In May, Dave made contact with a beekeeper willing to sell us a colony each. With our hives in position in our respective gardens we drove over to Nantwich to take collection of the bees in small nucs (nucleus boxes) and returned to insert the frames gingerly into our hives. In full bee regalia and waving a generous amount of smoke, we managed to move the frames without upsetting the bees, which settled quite calmly into their new home. We couldn't spot the Queen but hoped that she hadn't scampered off. Without her, of course, the colony would be doomed, for no eggs would be laid and no young produced. As instructed, we gave our new tenants some sugar solution in a special feeder and left them for a week.



At our local bee keepers' association we were given the support of colleagues with years of experience. They arranged practical summer meetings at their apiaries, where various ways of managing bees were discussed. Our confidence was greatly lifted by their encouragement, and our appetites rewarded with a magnificent spread served after the inspection of their hives. We were happy and so were our bees. They were buzzing busily in the hive, flying off in numbers to collect nectar and pollen. Then one afternoon my family heard a persistent loud droning noise, not unlike that of a small aeroplane, and a black cloud hovered low over the lawn. It did not take more than a few seconds for me to realise that my bees had spurned the home I had given them and were taking off in a swarm. After a short while they gathered in a tight ball high up in a neighbour's Scots pine, well out of reach of a ladder.

A colleague in Vicars Cross, who turned out to be the swarm officer for Cheshire, came to my rescue, putting out an inverted box with a few frames covered with honey. The swarm sent out scouts to inspect our offering but clearly decided they had found something better for they all departed some hours later, never to be seen here again. Later I met a man from Christleton, a one-time bee keeper, who still had an empty hive in his garden. This had recently been taken over by squatter bees. Could it have been my swarm, I wondered?

When a colony is at full strength it numbers up to 50,000 bees. Not all the colony leaves when there is a swarm so a good proportion of my bees had opted to stay on – and they had a Queen! Over the following months they multiplied and by the end of the summer were looking strong and healthy. In August, as the workers returned from foraging, their backs were covered with a white powder. Local experts explained that this was almost certainly from the balsam growing on the far river bank; possibly as far up as Heron Bridge, for bees can fly up to three to four miles on a round trip.

Even though the colony had built up, there was no possibility of harvesting any honey, since the bees needed all they had found plus over twenty kilos of sugar solution to get them through the winter. Their greatest enemy after damp (and disease) is lack of food, apparently.



On the rare occasions when the sun shone in January and the temperature rose, the workers came out dragging with them the bodies of dead companions who had probably succumbed to age rather than cold or disease. The average life of a worker bee is only six to eight weeks, though longer in winter, but the colony will reduce down to ten thousand during this period. The males, the drones, really do contribute nothing except to mate with the Queen, so are all pushed out of the hive in autumn, with only the workers, the females, remaining. It may come as no surprise to some readers that it is the females who do the work - and they wear themselves out in the process.

All beekeepers are now awaiting the better weather in late February or early March to see whether our colonies have successfully survived this very inclement winter. Will the bees be flying out in numbers? And will there be honey at the end of the summer? Only a few weeks now before the answer to the first question becomes clear!

James Holroyd



January 2011

Birds

01/01 4 Pochard continued to loaf around on the river below Deva Terrace. Apparently they do their feeding by night & take a break during daylight hours.

02/01 3 Goldeneye including 2 males, one a very handsome individual took flight from the river along Sandy Lane. 8 Tufted Duck & 13 Coot joined them.

07/01 A Great Crested Grebe still showing its juvenile head pattern was also on the river bordering the Meadow. VG.

A Great Spotted Woodpecker drumming on a dead tree on Dukes land. This became a regular sound all month.

29/01 A Kingfisher was again fishing along the Sandy Lane section of the river. However, it became a little more elusive after this date. 30 Greenfinch were also in the hedgerow at the lower end of Bottoms Lane track.

Flora

By the end of the month the bulbs planted last year at the entrance to Bottoms Lane track began to surface. They will hopefully put on a colourful show in the months ahead and even top last year's impressive display.

29/01 Catkins along Bottoms Lane track were also a reminder spring was just around the corner.

February

Birds

12/02 A very quiet month on the meadow, the best of the action being around the kissing gate entrance to the Water Company land. A Redwing & Fieldfare both fed here along the muddy edges of the field. They were joined by small numbers of Greenfinch, Chaffinch & Reed Bunting.

17/02 Things certainly livened up when a Goshawk flew above Queens Park. It was mobbed by 2 very brave Herring Gulls. TD. This is the first recorded sighting in the Log of this large powerful raptor. A further internet sighting of a Goshawk above the Dukes Drive suggests this raptor may well be moving away from its more familiar woodland habitat.

Animals

A garden in Cross Hey had frogspawn, but no reports were received of any on the Meadow this month.

Flora/Operations

26/02 A couple of trees including the ageing Black Poplar at the lower end of Bottoms Lane track suffered heavily in the recent high winds. Large branches were ripped from the stem of both trees. Willow was also cut back along the river & is still to be removed at the time of writing.

March

Birds

05/03 Just beyond where the horses graze, a small finch sized bird with undulating flight alighted at the top of an Alder tree. It turned to reveal the white horizontal lines on its back identifying it as a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. The last recorded sighting was of a bird in the avenue of Willow on 04/06/2007.

A male Peregrine Falcon was again on the Lead Shot Tower surveying the city & the Meadow for its next meal.

11/03 All the head banging of the Great Spotted Woodpecker appears to have finally paid off. 2 birds were observed in trees along Bottoms Lane track.

A Skylark flew off the Meadow chirruping away. Let's hope it stays to add its voice to the birdsong on the Meadow this year.

13/03 A Woodcock was again flushed from a ditch on the Meadow. It headed off towards a steep sided garden on the far side of the river to continue with its sleep.

14/03 A stunning male Siskin serenaded a drabber female below Andrews Crescent. She was more interested though in gorging herself on the Alder seed than the virtuoso performance of the male.

19/03 A Chiffchaff flitted through the trees and announced its arrival on Bottoms Lane track.

24/03 A flock of 10 Sand Martin flew high above the river towards the Meadow. They did not stop to feed and continued with their migration.

A pair of Mandarin Duck flew along the river by the Reuben & Joan Wesley seat. If last year is anything to go by they will be frequent visitors here before finding a quieter section of the river to breed. So keep a look out for them as you walk along the river bank.

26/03 Meadow Pipits have been seen in good numbers in March, but by their very nature difficult to count. A flock preening in a single Hawthorn bush on the Meadow made the task easier. 27 were counted in total.

Insects

12/03 Further evidence of spring was provided with a large Queen Buff tailed Bumblebee by one of the fish spawning areas along the river.

19/03 A Peacock Butterfly the first of the spring flew strongly along Cross Hey.

30/03 3 Small Tortoiseshell butterflies also out of hibernation patrolled the Meadow.

Animals

12/03 A Weasel crossed the path on Water Co land disappearing out of sight into a ditch. It's amazing how quickly these little creatures vanish into the undergrowth.

Frog spawn was finally discovered in a number of ditches on the Meadow. A couple of very large leeches (Horse Leech?) were found on some of the frogspawn.



Flora

13/03 Lesser Celandine flowers opened in the warm afternoon sunshine underneath the hedgerow of Bottoms Lane track.

19/03 Blackthorn in the hedgerow on Bottoms Lane track finally burst open to reveal the lovely white petals (see picture).

Log Recorder. 01244 677135 Andy Ingham Meadows

Photographic Competition

Friends of the Meadows and their families and friends are invited to enter the FoM 2011 Photographic Competition, which will be judged in October with prizes being awarded at the Annual General Meeting in November.

The theme is the Meadows through the Seasons and your picture must have been taken in 2011. Views of the Meadows or photographs of anything that you can see or find on the Meadows will be accepted. Entries will be accepted either in digital format or printed (minimum size 6in x 4in).

There are two categories for entries:

Juniors who should be 16 or under in 2011 or Adults (over 16)

CHESTER CROQUET CLUB

Summer's coming, make the most of it!

Welcome for New Members and Learners



After another long and chilly winter now's the time to look forward to warmer days and longer evenings. Why not try your hand at croquet as an interesting and enjoyable outdoor leisure activity for the summer months? Perhaps you have played garden croquet with family or friends and would like to learn more about the game. Perhaps you have just retired and would like to try something new. Or perhaps you would like to take part in a sport which involves challenge and skill and which can be played on equal terms by men and women of all ages but which does not require the strength and stamina of more strenuous sports.

Once again Chester Croquet Club is welcoming new members and visitors of all standards from absolute beginners to more experienced players. The club meets in the pleasant surroundings of Westminster Park off Hough Green in Chester and coaching and games are provided to suit all abilities.

This year the club is offering two free *taster sessions for golf croquet* at 2.00 pm on Sunday afternoons on 8 and 15 May. These sessions are ideal for people who have not played croquet before and who would like to give it a try and learn more about the game. The club is also offering a more comprehensive *introductory course for association croquet* at 6.30 pm on Wednesday evenings for six weeks from 4 May to 8 June. This course is aimed at people who may have played some croquet before, perhaps golf croquet or garden croquet, and who would like to develop their skills and tactics for association croquet.

All equipment is provided by the club and the only requirement is that players must wear flat-soled shoes.

If you are interested in joining the taster sessions for golf croquet, please contact Mollie McBride on 01244 675108 or Pat Clare on 0151 3362606. For more information or to enrol on the introductory course for association croquet, please contact the Club Secretary Janet Davies on 01244 350370.

Come and join in and make the most of the Summer