



FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

Newsletter 187

Autumn 2012

The European Eel



One dark night, an eel living in the pond at the foot of Bottoms Lane feels an irresistible urge to travel. It may have lived there for up to ten years feeding on crustaceans, insects and small fish but the time has come to move. Over the dew-covered grass the eel slithers to join its river dwelling cousins in the Dee. These eels, some of which may weigh a couple of kilograms or more, will nose their way towards the sea in late summer/early autumn ready to make one of nature's epic migrations; their bodies once yellowish-brown become silver in colour. When they reach the Dee Estuary they will rest for several months to allow further changes to take

place in their bodies. They will need to adapt to the different osmotic pressure encountered in the saline conditions of the sea and to the enormous physical pressures that exist in the depths of the Atlantic Ocean. When they are ready they set off on a journey of three thousand miles to their spawning grounds in the Sargasso Sea between Bermuda and the Leeward islands never to return, once they have bred they will die of exhaustion.

When the eggs hatch the minute larvae, about 10mm long, begin the long journey to the land of their parents. Drifting along in the Gulf Stream/North Atlantic Drift it may take these tiny creatures three years to reach Europe. By the time they reach the Dee Estuary, usually sometime between October and November, they will be about 75mm long, translucent and known as 'glass-eels'. Once in the estuary they become rounder, narrower and shorter, then in spring these 'elvers' make their way up river in huge numbers, a drama repeated in rivers throughout Europe. At a more mature stage, a young eel may slither across the Meadows and find a home in the pond at the foot of Bottoms Lane until one dark night ten years later.....

From the earliest of times the eels' life-cycle was a mystery as nobody had found eggs or very small eels. According to Aristotle eels developed spontaneously from mud, Pliny supposed that eels developed from the hair of horse's tails and for hundreds of years many people held these theories as fact. In 1922, after much painstaking research, the Danish Oceanographer Dr E. J. Schmidt published an account of the life-cycle of the European eel, a story almost as incredible as those of Aristotle and Pliny.

There has been a catastrophic decline in eel numbers over the last sixty years, loss of habitat (ponds and marshy areas) and over-fishing of glass-eels in river estuaries have both been suggested as possible causes. A major cause of the decline in eel numbers may be the accidental introduction from Asia of a parasitic nematode worm. The parasite affects the eels' swim-bladder which is vital for its epic journey to the Sargasso Sea spawning grounds; it could be that adult eels are just not making it to the Sargasso Sea to breed.

Ron Iremonger

Notes from the Chair



Welcome to this Autumn edition of our Newsletter, written as the weather we are having at the start of this season seems not unlike that which we “enjoyed” throughout the Summer. After the recent rains, the river is running very high and the Meadows are reflecting their natural state! However, the recent Big Dee Day - a tidy up campaign of the Dee and its estuary organised by the Council - had some fair weather at the end of September to do some work along the river’s edge in Chester and to also paint the benches on the meadows.

We were also very lucky to have a lovely sunny day for our Barbecue on the Meadows which took place on 1st September. Andy James, one of the Greenspace Rangers, provided the barbecue equipment and a gazebo. A total of twenty people came and took advantage to cook their own food and sit in the sunshine.



Members and guests enjoying the barbecue on the Meadows

Since the last Newsletter, Justin Dyke, the Greenspace Ranger responsible for the meadows, has left and not been directly replaced. However, the committee has met with Amanda Pritchard, who is covering on a part-time basis for the time being and she has been able to update us on a number of issues and hopefully will be able to continue to work with us into the New Year.

One important project we want to look at is the creation of a Management Plan for the Meadows. It is clear that the Council will not have the resources to provide this so we are looking at ways in which we can find the necessary funding. We shall, of course, work closely with the Greenspace Ranger on the development of a plan.

Finally, I must apologise for some confusion about the date of the AGM! In the last Newsletter I said that it will be on Thursday 16th November. It will in fact take place on Friday 16th November and this year will be at St Mary’s Centre. Please see the separate article in this Newsletter for more details.

Rachel Cross

01244 679141 or email rachelm.cross@btinternet.com



August/September

05/08/2012 The prolonged spell of rain had a huge impact on the number of butterflies on the Meadow in the early summer months. However sightings began to pick up with 2 Small Tortoiseshell, 2 Peacock, 4 Small Skipper, 5 Meadow Brown and 20 plus Gatekeeper on land adjacent to the Meadow.

Along Bottoms Lane track 3 Holly Blue butterflies were active in the hedgerow. One of these delightful butterflies was perched on Ivy by the entrance to Bottoms Lane track. This is not surprising as the Holly Blue is the only butterfly to habitually change its larval food plant at this time of year. In the spring the Holly Blue favours the leaves of Holly. By August though, Holly becomes hard and leathery, so the Holly Blue switches to the more palatable offerings of the Ivy. So maybe the name of the butterfly should also change to that of Ivy Blue!

In the centre of the Meadow 2 pairs of Sedge Warbler were still holding territory, along with a reeling Grasshopper Warbler.

12/08/2012 Agitated alarm calls of Swallows centred around the top of a tall Willow on the Meadow. The reason became apparent when a Hobby flew from its perch and headed with great panache across the centre of the Meadow. Hobbies are always a great sight to behold although Swallows & Martins would probably disagree, as they are often on the menu of this agile predator.

19/08/2012 Another Common Sandpiper was observed flying low with stiff shallow wing beats over the river. 6 Willow Warbler were also on the move through Willow on the Handbridge marsh.

14/09/2012 The sun appeared from behind the clouds and with it brought the arrival of House Martins from every direction. At least 100 House Martins and half a dozen Swallows were actively feeding over the Meadow.

The combination of wind and heavy rain probably brought down one of the large oak trees which line the Meadow and gardens of Elizabeth Crescent. The Green Space Ranger is aware of the problem and has appointed tree surgeons to deal with the issue.

23/09/2012 Sightings of Kingfishers have been rare of late so to see one sitting on a branch was a welcome return to our stretch of the river. 2 Water Rails were also calling on the Handbridge Marsh, one of the birds squealing like a piglet.

Earlier in the summer the 37th raft race had been postponed due to a swollen river. The event was almost scuppered for a 2nd time had the torrential rain which hit the region the following day arrived a few hours earlier. Everyone that took part appeared to have a splashing time including those standing on the suspension bridge who received a good drenching from a raft in possession of a water cannon.

27/09/2012 The vandalised notice board by the entrance to Bottoms Lane track also received attention from the Green Space Ranger. In true Kim & Aggie style a drop of WD40 was applied to clean off the black marker pen, however I do believe that pink, furry latex gloves were not worn!

30/09/2012 The Meadow continued to remain very wet under foot, ditches full to the brim and even spilling over in a few areas. A single Snipe was flushed from the waterlogged area.

In between the showers butterflies continued to remain on the wing. A Comma, Red Admiral and Speckled Wood were taking advantage of a sunny sheltered spot by the kissing gate along Bottoms Lane track.

All sightings, observations and photographs welcome.

Andy Ingham
Meadows Log Recorder 01244 677135

Green Space Strategic Review Cheshire West and Chester

Along with other Friends Groups we took part in a consultation regarding Green Spaces in Cheshire West and Chester organised in early July by Groundwork Cheshire, at their offices in Northwich. They carried out a consultation programme that commenced with individual meetings with Cheshire West and Chester directors and other principal internal consultees to seek support and direction on the development of a transformational green space strategy. These meetings raised a number of issues which formed the basis of discussion for consultation with community and Friends groups.

The following key themes provided the basis for the focus group sessions:

- Understanding the value and benefits of green space to the community and visitors.
- Changing from Council-delivered services on green spaces to a mixed set of alternative ways of managing the land and its visitors, suitable for local circumstances.
- How can the Council work more effectively with residents and community groups? How can more people be encouraged to put themselves forward as volunteers, willing to invest some of their time towards caring for their local green spaces?
- Looking at different ways to look after green spaces that are more in tune with the wishes of local people.

Discussions aimed to capture the broad range of viewpoints on this set of issues. The information gathered from these sessions was then compiled into a Consultation Findings Report which was presented for discussion at a Challenge Day held recently. Next steps have been identified as:

- Seeking validation of the consultation findings
- Developing key findings to produce a visionary framework for a green space transformation programme.
- Seeking formal endorsement of the transformation programme.
- Agreeing the scope and timescale for a full green space services review.
- Undertaking a review and produce a robust green space evidence base.
- Producing position statements on current service provision.
- Investigating new ways of working and models of best practice.

This process will continue for some time and once more information and details of their proposals begin to emerge we will report to you again.

Annual General Meeting and Cheshire Night in St Mary's Centre, St Mary's Hill, Chester CH1 2DW Friday 16 November at 7.30 pm

Members seem to have really enjoyed this year's activities so we thought that you might enjoy a social event at our Annual General Meeting. This is our Secretary Tim Finch's brainchild and the committee thought it was a good idea to hold a 'Cheshire Night' when members and guests can sample locally produced food and drink. There will be a wide variety of cheeses, chutneys, ice cream, puddings and a locally brewed ale. We'll also test you with a quiz and woo you with a raffle.

Tickets will cost £5.00 per person and are available from **Ruth Davidson 01244 675694**
Please book early to help us organise the catering.