

FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

Newsletter 190

Late Spring 2013

The Cuckoo

'Svmer is icumen in,
Lhude sing cuccu.'

c1250



The cuckoo is known as the bird that lays its eggs in other birds' nests and leaves the host species to rear their young. Fifty different species are known to have been targeted by the cuckoo but three species, dunnock, meadow pipit and reed warbler account for 80% of the total. Data collected by the British Trust for Ornithology indicate that cuckoo numbers have declined by about 60% in the last 30 years. What are the reasons for this decline?

One possible reason has been the decline in number of songbirds, meadow pipit and reed warbler numbers have declined by 40% during the same period. Modern intensive farming practices are thought to be responsible for these losses. The present policy of encouraging wildlife friendly farming may help to arrest this alarming trend. Hairy moth caterpillars such as those of the garden tiger moth are a favourite food item of the cuckoo chick but garden tiger numbers have declined at the same rate as cuckoo numbers.

The cuckoo migrates to East Africa to avoid our winters, there have been serious drought conditions over there for a number of years; it could be that the deteriorating climate in its overwintering area has also been responsible for the decline of the cuckoo. Indeed, the cuckoo can be considered an African bird as it only spends about three months in the British Isles.

The song of the cuckoo with which we are familiar, 'cuckoo', is made by the male bird, the female makes a bubbling sound. To the poet Wordsworth, the cuckoo was the 'wandering voice', heard but not seen; this need not be the case as in early spring if you can mimic the call of the male cuckoo it is a simple matter to attract him overhead as he is fiercely territorial. I first attracted a cuckoo in the early seventies showing off my repertoire of bird calls to a friend. Hearing a cuckoo, I returned its call soon to find him settle in a nearby tree 'cuckooing' furiously, his appearance in flight is hawk-like.

The female bird spends many hours each day watching the host species build its nest. Before laying she spends several hours lying quietly on a tree branch allowing an egg to pass along her oviduct so it is ready for immediate delivery when she visits the victim's nest. At the chosen moment she glides to the nest, clings to the rim, picks up one of the host's eggs in her bill and lays her own egg with a visible shudder. She flies off with the stolen egg and swallows it nearby. She often produces her bubbling call after laying, the whole process taking just ten seconds. The hen bird will lay up to 25 eggs in a season, one in each host species nest. Once the young cuckoo has learnt to feed itself it sets off for Africa sometimes as late as September, a journey the parent birds made in back in July.

Ron Iremonger

Notes from the Chair



I have to begin this Newsletter with the sad news that Tim Finch, our Secretary, passed away on the 25th April after a short illness. Tim's knowledge and enthusiasm will be greatly missed by us all. On behalf of Friends of the Meadows I should like to extend our condolences to his family and friends.

On the meadows, as last year, we experienced another cold, wet April, but Spring is beginning to make its mark as the sun is showing its face.

We have a few more events in the planning for this year, the next being a Floral Walk, which last year proved to be very popular. This year it will be held on Sunday 9th June. See the separate item for more details.

We have been continuing to work closely with the Greenspace Ranger on the management of the meadows. The council have made some new staff appointments, so we may soon have a new face looking after "our patch". In the meantime, Amanda Pritchard has been covering the meadows along with the rest of her duties and provides us with regular reports. We are still keen to move forward with the proposed Management Plan and will need to work closely with the Greenspace Ranger on this, so we will be progressing what we can over the year.

In the meantime, we are advised of a number of matters, including the return of cattle to graze; the suspension of tree work until the end of the bird nesting season; and fencing repairs are also on the "To Do" list.

An initiative being progressed by a partnership of local organisations is Big Dee Day – The Invasion, focusing on identifying and removing invasive plant species, notably Himalayan Balsam. We don't think we have any significant problem along the meadows, but Andy and I would be willing to go on a walk on Saturday 29th June to see what we might find (and pull the balsam if we find any!) Please get in touch if you'd like to join us.

Rachel Cross

01244 679141 or email rachelm.cross@btinternet.com

A Message from our Ranger

Back in February, Andy Ingham, Richard Smart and myself spent a morning doing some cutting back on the terraces leading down from Elizabeth Crescent. I just want to extend a huge thanks to them both for their time and effort on that bright, chilly day.

Amanda Pritchard





March and April 2013

02/03 2 Raven flew over Anne's Way possibly having paid a visit to Chester Cathedral their ancestral home. TD

09/03/2013 Curlew will occasionally fly over the Meadow but rarely do they land on the Meadow so a report of a Curlew bubbling away on the Meadow is a very rare treat indeed.

10/03/2013 A Jack Snipe was flushed from the centre of the Meadow. In typical Jack Snipe behaviour it waited until the last possible moment before taking to the air and dropping back into cover a short distance away. Water Rail are normally seen on the Handbridge Marsh not on the Meadow, but one flew from the centre of the Meadow to a ditch bordering the back gardens of Lower Park Road. Nearby a small vole probably a Bank Vole was observed swimming in one of the many frogspawn filled ditches.

24/03 On the river a Great crested Grebe loafed around by the landing stage while above a flock of 120 Pink footed Geese headed noisily up river.

25/03 A splash of water in one of the ditches and the alarm call of a Wren drew attention to a Weasel on the hunt. The Weasel our smallest carnivore was again seen bounding across the Meadow on the 30/03 close to the riverside bench. TG

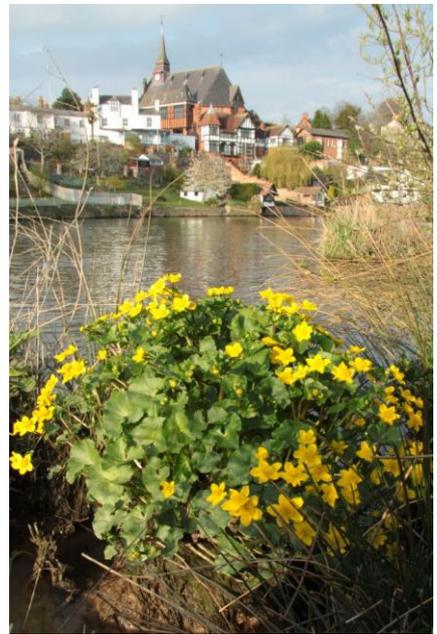
07/04/2013 2 Chiffchaff were the first warblers to arrive back on the meadow with 1 singing along Bottoms Lane track and the other below Andrews Crescent. The yellow flowers of Lesser Celandine brought a much needed splash colour to the base of the hedgerow.



Chiffchaff singing on Bottoms Lane

13/04 Winter was still clinging on in the form of 6 Redwing in the hedgerow, while at the same time, summer visitors continued to arrive with 2 singing Willow Warbler. Further up the river, at the far end of the Handbridge marsh, a stunning male Redstart darted in and out of the hedgerow catching flies. Out of hibernation and taking advantage of a rare bit of sunshine were 3 Small Tortoiseshell butterflies.

14/04/2013 At the eastern end of the Meadow a Common Sandpiper flew from the embankment, over the river to continue feeding along the Sandy Lane shoreline.



Marsh Marigold on the Meadows

16/04 A handsome male Wheatear paused to feed on Chadderton's Meadow and the first Swallow of the spring drifted lazily over the Meadow. Nearby blue & pink flowers of Lungwort were in evidence along the path on Water Co Land.

18/04/2013 Where only 1 Wheatear had been seen on the 16th an exceptional count of 9, yes nine Wheatears were feeding in the evening sunshine on Chadderton's Meadow.

20/04/2013 A singing Sedge Warbler, the first of the spring, remained well hidden in the centre of the Meadow and a Common Whitethroat briefly popped out of a Gorse bush before disappearing around the back of the same bush. The first Comma butterfly of the spring flew purposefully over Bottoms Lane track. The first Lesser Whitethroat reported was single bird rattling away in the copse at the lower end of the Pinfold lane track.

23/04/2013 Lesser Redpolls continued to visit Nyger seed put out in a garden in Anne's Way. They were also joined by a Mealy type Redpoll.TD

24/04/201 The first 2 returning House Martins this spring were observed feeding above the Meadow.TD

25/04/2013 Sand Martins are usually one of the first migrants to pass through the Meadow and Swifts one of the last, so it was somewhat surprising to see both appear for the first time on the same day- 2 Swifts drifted over Andrews Crescent and a single Sand Martin catching insects over the Meadow.

The amazing spring passage of Wheatear continued with 1 on Chadderton's Meadow and another on the Meadow itself.

Andy Ingham

Meadows Log Recorder 01244 677135

Wildflower Walk

Sunday 9th June 2013 Start time 2pm

Meeting Point - Bottoms Lane entrance

You are invited to join us for a leisurely stroll through the Meadows with expert botanist Jack Swan. Jack will again help us to identify the array of wildflowers which exist on and around the Meadow. If the walk last year is anything to go by we'll be guaranteed to have an enjoyable and informative time. This is a free event.

For further information call Andy on 01244 677135