

FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

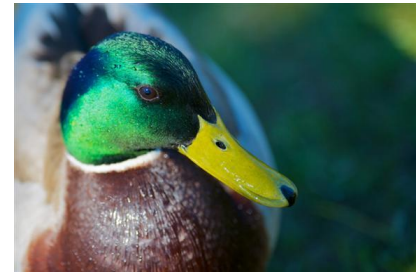
Newsletter 193

Winter 2014

Busy Beaks

The Chester Meadows are alive with busy beaks as birds struggle to obtain sufficient food to survive the lean winter months. Probing here, probing there, turning things over, aha, gulp, down goes another tasty morsel. Long beaks, short beaks, hard beaks, soft beaks, viciously hooked beaks, colourful beaks but not a tooth between them. Modern birds have no teeth.. With a high metabolic rate, birds need to take in large quantities of food rapidly. For this reason and perhaps to lighten the load for more efficient flight, birds have dispensed with the need for teeth. Unable to chew, they swallow food, store it in bulk in a crop and grind this supply in a muscular gizzard with the aid of ingested grit.

A beak is put to use in a wide range of tasks throughout a bird's life being the avian answer to the Swiss Army knife. At the outset, as a chick, a bird uses its beak to break out of its shell, a feat made easier by the presence of an 'egg tooth' or *caruncle*, not a real tooth but a temporary bony prominence on the upper beak mandible. The beak or bill is a light weight bony structure covered with a layer called the *ramphotheca* which grows continuously, wearing off from the tip. In most birds, the *ramphotheca* is horny or hard but in waterfowl it is leathery and in some species, like the sandpiper, it is soft.



The beaks of most birds, such as crows, gulls and thrushes tend to be straight and pointed allowing them to eat a variety of foods. Birds of prey, such as the sparrow hawk and owls, have sharply hooked beaks for ripping flesh from their kill. A fine, slender, often short bill is typical of insect feeders like the swallow and wood warbler. Longer, stronger bills belong to mud probing waders such as curlew, snipe and redshank. There are fish eating species: the heron has a dagger-like beak, the cormorant has a long, strong beak with a hooked tip. The red-breasted merganser, another diving bird, has a serrated bill for grasping slippery fish. Woodpeckers have chisel-like beaks and many ducks have sifting bills.

Beaks are used for many other purposes, preening, removing parasites and nest building. Whether made from mud and saliva (house martin), lichen, cobwebs and feathers (long-tailed tit), or twigs (magpie), plastering, weaving and scaffolding are all accomplished with the beak, that busy, dextrous appendage.

Remember to keep your bird feeders topped up this winter and provide water.

Ron Iremonger

Notes from the Chair



Happy New Year to you all! I hope you have enjoyed a lovely Christmas-time. We will be looking forward to bringing more events to you this coming year, including what has become the annual wildflower walk. Last year's Bat Walk proved very popular, so we may repeat that, hoping to be as lucky as we were last September in having a pleasant and calm evening for our bat-spotting! We will also be thinking about what else we can do and welcome any suggestions.

Last year's objective of having a Management Plan in place did not quite materialise, as the realities of limited resources and funding became evident. However, we were fortunate to have enlisted the help of the Cheshire Wildlife Trust to organise biodiversity surveys on the meadows and will be using all this information to start working closely with Paul Taylor, our Greenspace Ranger to formulate the Plan. The Ranger service itself will continue to operate on a very restricted budget this year but will include basic maintenance such as cattle grazing, tree work, fencing and liaison with other bodies. It is also hoped to bring more community events to the Meadows but which will be sympathetic to the environment and habitat.

It is also that time of the year when Memberships are up for renewal! Included with this Newsletter is a Membership renewal form - it is often easy to put these things aside then they get forgotten, so please complete and return it to us as soon as possible! We can then ensure that you remain on our distribution lists for this Newsletter and keep you informed.

Finally, another reminder that our Committee is still short of complement and we would welcome anyone who can give up a little time every couple of months to help with the work, whether with membership administration or just giving your views at meetings. Please get in touch.

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This photograph recently came to light, showing a small caravan/kiosk on the meadows in the 1960's. It was run by the Joinson family from Handbridge. Does anyone have any memories of it? We'd love to hear!



October, November and December 2013

05/10 The continuing mild weather allowed 6 Small Tortoiseshell, 2 Comma, 2 Speckled Woods, Green Veined White and a pristine Red Admiral to remain on the wing either side of Bottoms lane track.

13/10 It was no surprise to see 25 Redwing above the Meadow as thousands were recorded arriving into the UK the previous day.

19/10 A single Fieldfare flew over the Meadow, the first of the autumn. A Kingfisher was also on the river at the west end river entrance.

22/10 A pair of bats circled round the gate at the lower end of Bottoms Lane track at dusk. It is likely they were both Pipistrelle bats as they were detected near to this area on the September bat walk.

12/11 By far the most interesting report of the autumn was a tantalising glimpse of a mammal surfacing on the river just before sunrise. A Dog walker noticed what may have been the outline of an Otter on the Sandy Lane stretch of river. It quickly became aware it was being observed so dived and only resurfaced some distance further up the river. M

17/11 Stonechats are a regular if not a common winter visitor to the Meadow. Once here, they do have a habit of sticking around for a while. Another one of their habits is perching on top of gorse or bramble making them easy to spot and with a careful approach photograph. See Photo of the female Stonechat, which appears to have made the Meadow its winter home.

23/11 A pair of Raven engaged in aerial acrobatics flew low over the tree lined river bank. Chatting away to each other, they playfully rolled and tumbled over the houses into Boughton. Not far behind and croaking loudly another pair of Raven headed more purposefully in the same direction.

01/12 Climbing up and never down the trunk a pair of Treecreeper weaved their way through the hedgerow at the lower end of Bottoms Lane track.

Perfect conditions have been created to attract Snipe to the Meadow this winter by the farmer cutting a swathe through the marshy area and also the higher than usual rainfall. A remarkable 60 Snipe were counted, the



Pink Feet above the Meadow

highest since the log began many years ago. A further bonus was the discovery of the Common Snipes rarer cousin the Jack Snipe. Not one, but two Jack Snipe were flushed from underfoot. 2 Teal duck also flew from one of the shallow pools on the Meadow.

02/12 Little Grebes have been in short supply this winter so it was a welcome sight to see a single Grebe fishing between the boat houses and the water mound.TD

04/12 Having eaten their way through the bounty of berries in the countryside Redwing and Fieldfare were starting to move in to gardens, with a count of 30 Redwing & 4 Fieldfare in Edinburgh Way .TD

07/12 A skein of Pink footed Geese is a thrilling sight and sound in winter. A flock of 45 made their way up the river. Another flock of similar size or possibly the same group having circled Chester, followed about half an hour later. Pink feet are more associated with Dee estuary and they had possibly flown in land searching for possible fields to feed in.

27/12/2013 At least 1 Jack Snipe remained on the Meadow along with 20 or so Snipe and Teal numbers increasing to the heady heights of three.

Andrew Ingham
Meadows Log Recorder 01244 677135



Female
Stonechat



Recent high water level on the River Dee