



FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

Newsletter 196

Late Summer 2014

The Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*)

Skylarks are the very voice of the British spring. Male skylarks can be spotted rising almost vertically and effortlessly hovering and singing from a great height before parachuting back down to earth. They have a beautiful song that radiates through the air as the bird itself hangs suspended somewhere overhead. Long, complicated, beautiful song-flights can last for up to an hour before descending.

Ralph Vaughan Williams worked on *The Lark Ascending* prior to the outbreak of the Great War, inspired by George Meredith's poem of the same name. The composer included this portion of Meredith's poem on the flyleaf of the published work:

*He rises and begins to round,
He drops the silver chain of sound,
Of many links without a break,
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake.
For singing till his heaven fills,
'Tis love of earth that he instils,
And ever winging up and up,
Our valley is his golden cup
And he the wine which overflows
to lift us with him as he goes.
Till lost on his aerial rings
In light, and then the fancy sings*



The skylark's song gave brief relief of torment to the trench soldiers of World War I; a sound of home, a sound of freedom. Hebridean crofter Donald MacDonald served during The Great War and wrote "In a heavy bombardment with death and desolation around you, your heart pounding like a piston, thinking the next shell would be yours, you thought the end of the world had come and when the shelling stopped, the brave little skylark rose high above us with her sweet song of hope and courage, you felt there is a God."

Once seen on the Chester Meadows, it will now be a rare sight. They breed on meadows, salt marshes, heaths and farmland but in recent times the Skylark population has plummeted so that today the population is about one-third what it was 30 years ago. This decline is most likely caused by the move to winter sowing of cereals, which deters late-season nesting attempts. Also the use of pesticides kills the insects needed to feed the young. Consequently, it is on the Red List as a bird of high conservation concern. However, wildlife-friendly practices are being promoted to help the skylark and other farmland birds, such as leaving winter stubble and providing field margins.

Many other poets have been inspired by the skylark. It is the blithe spirit of Shelley and the ethereal minstrel of Wordsworth, whose poem's first stanza depicts the joyous mood of the bird that for a short time can take relief from the cares of the earthly world:

*Ethereal minstrel! pilgrim of the sky!
Dost thou despise the earth where cares abound?
Or, while the wings aspire, are heart and eye
Both with thy nest upon the dewy ground?
Thy nest which thou canst drop into at will,
Those quivering wings composed, that music still!*

Rachel Cross

Notes from the Chair



Since the last newsletter we had our pond (or ditch) dipping event on the Meadows on 13th July which was well attended with fifteen people enjoying good weather on the day and even finding a rare beetle! Pauline Macey has written a review which we've included in this Newsletter

Our next event will be an afternoon's stroll on 10th August taking in the Duke's Drive and returning back along the meadows. See the panel below for more information. Other planned events for this year are another Bat Walk (after last year's success) and a Meadows BBQ (hoping for better weather than last year!) Details will also be posted on the local Notice Boards.

An important development for us is that following the recent redundancies in the Greenspace Team, Paul Taylor, the Ranger responsible for the meadows, remains with us. We look forward to continuing our relationship and developing the Management Plan for the Meadows. There is, however, very little budget for more than essential maintenance but we are grateful for volunteers who help with this work. Recently, a team from Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust's Aqua House in Boughton, have worked to repair damaged fencing and steps. The team of six from Aqua House, led by Drug and Alcohol Practitioner Manny Buckle, have been volunteering with the Rangers since September 2013 and have learnt new skills whilst helping with fencing, coppicing, tree thinning, step building and hedge cutting. The photo shows the team renovating steps near Bottoms Lane entrance.



In the last newsletter I mentioned that most of the old willows have had to be felled. We are putting together some proposals for re-planting to replace them and hopefully re-create the willow grove for future generations to enjoy. If all goes well, the work can commence in late Autumn.

A recent event on the river was the annual Raft Race which was enjoyed by many people. I walked from the Groves over a swaying Suspension Bridge onto the Meadows to watch the competitors salvaging the remains of their rafts from the river. There were many vehicles and stalls there; the cattle being safely penned in the far corner. It served as a reminder that the Meadows are there to be enjoyed by all but must be done so considerately and with sympathy to this lovely area which is our heritage.

Enjoy the rest of the Summer and I hope to see you at some of our next events!

Rachel Cross

01244 679141 or email rachelm.cross@btinternet.com

Meadows and Duke's Drive Walk

Sunday 10th August at midday

A gentle stroll along the Duke's Drive and returning via Heronbridge along the Meadows riverside. Bring your own lunch and weather permitting, we'll stop for lunch by the river.

Meet at Duke's Drive Entrance (car park at Overleigh Roundabout)

For more details, phone Rachel on 01244 679141



June July 2014

01/06/2014 The irate call of a Water Rail was heard from the marshy area of the Meadow. The reason for the commotion became clear when a Grey Heron flew from the vicinity. The Heron appeared to leave empty handed but it is possible the Water Rail had young nearby. Water Rail are rare breeders in Cheshire and a first for the Meadow if proven.

16/06 2014 2 male Goosanders fishing under the Old Dee Bridge was an unusual sight at this time of year.TD. They remained in residence here until at least the 14/07/2014. Their extended stay is probably due to them both having completed a moult and unable to fly. During this period they have gorged themselves on Eels and entertained the tourists with their antics.

7 spikes of the Common Spotted Orchid were counted on the Meadow but already showing signs of being nibbled by the cattle.TD

14/06/2014 Large Skipper butterflies were notable last year by their absence but at least 6 emerged for the first time this summer, hinting at some sort of recovery. They shared the grasses with a plentiful supply of Meadow Browns & Green Veined White.

20/06/2014 A Little Egret paid a brief visit to the Weir. The Egret had probably travelled up river from the inner Dee estuary. This is the 2nd record of a Little Egret at this location in recent years.

30/06/2014 Butterflies often favour sheltered sunny sites. Either side of Bottoms Lane track hedgerow fits the bill nicely. Ringlet was recorded for the first time last year on the Meadows side of Bottoms lane track. This year 2 Ringlets were observed on the other side of the track. Two Dragonflies were also present, a probable Brown Hawker and a Common Darter (see photographs)



Brown Hawker



Common Darter

10/07/2014 Land bordering the meadow was awash with wild flowers. Betony, Great Burnet & Meadow Sweet all jostled for space.

12/07/2014 Banded Demoiselle Damselflies have been relatively common if a little thinly distributed. Individuals were noted along Bottom Lane track hedgerow, Barnfield Meadow and also near the landing stage. The male shown on the next page was photographed at the lower end of Barnfield Meadow.



13/07/2014 Invert day on the Meadow was well attended and led by local ecologist Andy Harmer. A huge variety of ditch life was caught in the nets. These included Fish, Water Scorpion, Ramshorn Snail and array of Beetles, both large and small.(See photo).



14/07/2014 A possible but unconfirmed sighting of a Small Heath butterfly on United Utilities land The tiny butterfly escaped before a positive ID was made. RS

16/07/2014 Ring necked Parakeets are familiar to the south of England and have been spreading north gradually. A report of a single bird flying and calling by County Hall is the 2nd record in recent years. Nearby a Common Tern was also noted fishing by the weir. Common Terns were once regular visitors to Chester but sightings are now scarce following the abandonment of their Shotton nesting site.

Andy Ingham Meadows Log Recorder 01244 677135

Reporting Anti-Social Behaviour on the Meadows

Although the Meadows is a peaceful place enjoyed by many, unfortunately from time to time there are instances of anti-social behaviour.

If you see any issues of unsocial behaviour and any breach of bylaw and law you need to call **101** and report it to the police. If it's an emergency call **999**.

If it's an animal issue contact the Ranger 0151 327 5145 unless it could be seen as a police issue, eg. a dog attack.

The Ranger works closely with the police to target unsocial behaviour on the site but reports will only be prioritised if they come directly from the public.