



# FRIENDS OF THE MEADOWS

## Welcome

Summer is upon us although at the time of writing it feels very much like we've skipped through to Autumn. Let's hope we get some of those lovely sunny and warm days back that we enjoyed in May.

The Botany Walks this year have also been affected by the rainy weather. The last one will be in August, so please come along and support Julie! Details are in this Newsletter. We're also going to do the Duke's Drive walk again as that proved popular last year with favourable weather! I'll be leading once again.

About this time last year we were awaiting confirmation of continued cattle grazing on the Meadows, but that never happened and the situation this year remains the same. Finding a new farmer to commit to grazing cattle has proved difficult, but effort progress as best they can. Read Amanda's Meadow Management article inside for more details.

Enjoy reading the rest of this newsletter. If anyone wants to contribute articles, long or short, please get in touch!

**Rachel Cross, Chair**



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# Meadows Management

**Amanda Pritchard, Countryside Ranger,** reviews some of the recent work

Some sections of the riverbank are showing signs of erosion – probably a result of high tides and flow over the past few years. Although it is a natural part of a river's life, we are in touch with Natural England to discuss options and determine the best way forward and any practical solutions that we may adopt to help address this.

With the much appreciated time and effort of our regular volunteers and Cheshire Wildlife Trust, we have made repairs to the fencing, weeded the hedge on Bottoms Lane (laid over the winter) and most recently spent a morning "Balsam bashing" on the Earl's Eye.

Himalayan balsam - the pink-flowered, invasive non-native annual plant smothers riverside habitats and out-competes native species. Our aim is to "bash" it before it finishes flowering to help stop the seed spreading in future years. Balsam is pulled up at the root, then crushed to prevent it re-shooting. We are downstream of areas where the balsam has taken hold, so unfortunately this is an ongoing battle.

It has been noticed that new *desire lines* across the Meadow are developing. Many ground nesting birds breed on the Meadows during Spring and early Summer, therefore I'd ask people to be careful and watchful where they walk, particularly at that those times of the year. As always, please keep dogs under control to avoid disturbing these species.



*In 2013, a "balsam bash" had a couple of the local horses come along to help!*

Another issue is dog poo being left on the ground. I have reported this to the Dog Warden team and will also contact CW&C's Community Safety Wardens about potential campaigns/visits. Friends of the Meadows are looking into the feasibility of the "Pink Poo Campaign" supported by CW&C, so we will advise any developments in due course. If you would be interested in getting involved – please let the Friends know.

Our grazier's tenancy expired last year, so I am trying to source a new grazier with suitable breeds for this public open space. If anyone knows farmers that may be interested – please do get in touch!

**Thanks, Amanda**

# Examining the life around us *by Gill McEvoy*

I'm bending over a patch of nettles, studying pointed leaves, fat purple cushions of flower, hairy stems, trying not to wobble and fall into them.



Become aware that there is more going on here than the flowers, stems etc: a whole roundabout of little shiny black beetles are busy circling the stem; a dusky-pink click beetle is exploring the leaf's surface, his striped antennae waving about as if he wants to catch my attention. As soon as I supply it he draws in his elegant feelers, and prepares to drop. I know this because this is what click beetles do. But it has never occurred to me before that the reason they do so is not to damage their feelers in the fall.

Why has this thought never entered my mind until now? Have I not "thrust my hand deep enough into life" as Goethe says? Not looked with my "skin and the small hairs on the back of my neck" (Sheenagh Pugh, 'Do you think we'll ever get to see Earth, sir?', from "Earth Studies")? I suddenly feel guilty of taking

things for granted, knowing facts about click beetles as presented in books of entomology, but not thinking beyond them. Facts are facts, but observations, questions are better.

Day getting very hot. Feel too languid to walk far today so plonk myself down on a bench.



Watch a hoverfly hanging under the branches of a tree, its wings whirring – what a lot of energy it must take to remain there!

Put a lens over the flower of a buttercup, notice where a snail has made a visit, bright silver encrusting one pair of petals.



Then spot a tiny moth fluttering quickly by. Gold sparkles from its wings; it settles on a stem of grass. I creep towards it with my lens but of course it flies off before I get close.

Sit back on the bench again, rejoicing in the earthy smell of warm grass. Spot a holly blue and write this short poem:

*In the tall grass  
the butterfly flickers.  
Fragment of sky.*



*Gill McEvoy received The Michael Marks Award in 2015, for "The First Telling". It consisted of a financial prize plus the chance to be Harvard University's Poet-in-Residence at their Centre for Hellenic Studies, Nafplio, Greece*



# Events coming up on the Meadows

## Saturday 30th July 2016 – The Dee Mile Swim

One of the oldest river races in the UK is 94 years old this year! This is a classical race of the modern era, with a history which is very nearly continuous, going back to the first time it was held 1922.

The race has several idiosyncrasies. It starts at the Red House pub and the distance is actually a mile and a quarter. The swimmers go downstream to finish at the Suspension Bridge. The race retains its ancient "Dee Mile Champion" title for the fastest swimmer, who must also live within five miles of The Cross in the centre of Chester and swim without a wetsuit.



The event will set up on the Meadows from midday, with swimmers arriving between 2 to 4pm before walking down to a floating pontoon then starting the race soon after 5pm.

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## Tuesday 9th August 2016 - Botany Walk with Julie Rose

Join Julie for the last of this summer's Botany Walks on the Meadows. This time, Julie will lead you on a plant hunt on the river banks opposite Deva Terrace.

Meet up at 7pm by the riverside entrance (the white gate) Bring a handlens if you have one to explore different families of plants to help everyone, improve our ID skills.

You may need weatherproof footwear and clothing or maybe insect repellent!

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## Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> August 2016 – Duke's Drive and Meadows Walk



Join Rachel and Friends of Duke's Drive for another walk along the Duke's Drive to Eccleston then return along the riverside meadows to Handbridge.

We'll meet by the Dukes Drive Entrance gates at Overleigh Roundabout at 2pm. Home by teatime!

The picture on the left shows last year's walk stopping off at the old WWII bomb crater at Heronbridge.

# Botany Notes

## *Julie Rose talks Grassland*

Species rich old “unimproved” grassland is sadly one of our rarest habitats now in the UK. We have lost 97% of it, just in the last century. They take time, centuries, to develop as new species’ seeds arrive, as they do in our gardens. Grasslands change naturally in our climate to scrub and then forest with glades as hawthorn, bramble and then tree seeds are spread. Grazing or mowing kills the young tree seedlings – old grasslands in this country need to be managed. Grasslands have mainly been destroyed by modern intensive agricultural methods such as ploughing, re-sowing, and using fertiliser and herbicide. Neglect and allowing scrub and tree growth destroys others. Modern agricultural grass species such Perennial ryegrass grow faster, responds faster to fertiliser and, ardent ecologists do have to admit, are more productive. Modern grasses overgrow and kill off any slower growing forbs that may survive in the seed bank.

Our Meadows are not this rare old grassland, but is classed as “semi-improved” because farmers in the last century tried to make it more productive. We know this because of the drainage ditches, presence of perennial rye grass and written notes. Part of the management over the last 30 years has



*Photo from Trip Advisor*

been to try to reverse this by stopping any fertiliser or herbicide use and increased mowing and grazing. Seed banks from native species can survive for 50 years. We can but hope that some species such as bryony, which is found down near Handbridge Marsh, may appear. We still have a few orchids spikes, several sedge, grass and flower species. Nothing exceptional, except for Wood Club-Rush, but enough to support our very interesting invertebrate flora, especially in the ditches and down on the riverbank in the exclosures.

Invasive species such as garden escapes threaten our native habitats by growing densely and stopping anything else growing. Himalayan balsam is a seasonal example. Green Alkanet, which someone has planted at the top of Bottoms Lane, is a year round problem. The clue here is the scientific name *Pentaglottis sempervirens* Always green, unfortunately. Pets disturb and kill wildlife struggling to make a living

in the short breeding season, or survive the winter, discarded garden waste acts as fertiliser.

Of course, it's not just humans to blame. The Meadows, as is most of Cheshire, lies on sandstone which is neutral to mildly acidic, and therefore less species rich than calcareous grassland. The alluvial gley soil is not the warmest of mediums. We are also at the bottom of a long and winding catchment and we get nutrient rich silt

deposited during floods, just like the River Nile. The River Dee flow is very much regulated nowadays by the dams Llyn Celyn, Llyn Brenig and at Bala, and only floods in exceptional circumstances.

When all's said and done, we are lucky to have this semi-wild space to visit and relax in. May it not be changed by development.

Julie Rose

During the Botany evening on 12th July we looked at the grasses and plants on Barnfield before going over to the pond and beyond.

Around here the UK BAP species Tubular Waterdropwort (*Oenanthe fistulosa*) was found.



This perennial wildflower plant was reported in the 1980's from the whole Site of Biological Importance (SBI, now referred to as a Local Wildlife Site) of the Meadows and Handbridge Marsh, with no indication of where it was. It hasn't been seen since, it doesn't cope with competition, so the mowing last year may well have allowed some germinating seeds to thrive.

Tubular Water-dropwort has declined since the 1950s in the UK because of drainage, eutrophication, weed control and conversion from pasture to arable land.

It is classed as Vulnerable in the UK and it is a Priority Species for conservation in both Wales and England. **JR**

Phone 101

## Anti-social Behaviour on the Meadows

We recently received some complaints about rowdy behaviour of some youths congregating around the new bench opposite Deva Terrace. Unfortunately, this behaviour does happen, although hopefully rarely. However, we would encourage people who witness any such behaviour to report it to the Police by phoning **101**. Other examples of anti-social behavior include causing damage, excessive noise or loud music.

There are also bye-laws in force on the Meadows that prohibit cycling or camping and in these cases, please call the Council at **0300 123 7026**, which can also be used if you see anyone deliberately littering. Of course, if it's an emergency, call **999**



## April to July 2016

### 21<sup>st</sup> April

The first reeling Grasshopper Warbler of the spring was heard by Rob on his early morning dog walk. A poor spring followed for Groppers with the only other record on the 23/06 (Jon).

Later in the day, while out botanizing, Julie came across the first Orange Tip of the spring.

### 25th April

The only migrating Whinchat of the year paused briefly on the Meadow before continuing on with its journey.

### 7<sup>th</sup> May

Swifts arrived late this spring and in small numbers. Five were in the sky above Handbridge.

### 4th June

A good selection of Butterflies on the Meadow included 4 Common Blue Butterflies and 3 Large Skippers. In the ditches a solitary Azure Damselfly weaved its way through the vegetation.

### 7th June

The distinctive call of a WOOD WARBLER was heard by Kevin Feeney (CWT) and the volunteers while carrying out maintenance on the riverside fencing. This is the first Wood Warbler to be recorded on the Meadow.

Three Banded Demoiselle Damselflies were active in the Willow Carr enclosure next to the ferry landing stage (see *photo*).



### 12<sup>th</sup> June

The possibility of a record count of Large Skipper ended suddenly when the heavens opened. 13 Large Skipper, a Painted Lady & the first Meadow Brown of the year were noted before a mad dash for cover was required.

A single Common Blue Damselfly was also in the centre of the Meadow.

### 14th June

A Common Tern probably from the Shotton Ternery flew over the Old Dee Bridge.

### 18th June

On land bordering the Meadow were 3 freshly emerged Ringlet butterflies. Nearby Bullfinch continued to be vocal on

Bottoms lane track and also gardens bordering the Meadow. (see photo)



### 19th June

5 Common Spotted Orchids appeared in their usual location, & a further spike in a cut & baled section of the Meadow. Birdsfoot Trefoil was also growing in profusion in the same cut & baled area - testament to good habitat management.

### 1st July

A warm sunny day triggered the hatching of Narrow Bordered 5 Spot Burnet Moths. Also in evidence on the Meadow were Silver Y Moths. Silver Ys made the news recently with their appearance in large numbers at the Euro Cup final.

## Messing about on the River

A few photos of the recent Raft Race, courtesy of Handbridge Life on Facebook



The Chester Raft Race is an annual charity event taking place every July on the River Dee and is organised by the Rotary Club of Chester.

The photo above shows UK Fly-board Champion Jay St John with a spectacular display of fly-boarding right out of 007.



The rafts race against the clock over an approximate 400 metre course starting on The Meadows to a finish on the north bank of the river by Recorder's Steps to the Walls and just above the weir.

