



The friends of
**WESTCOMBE
WOODLANDS**

ISSUE 14

Newsletter

Winter 2020 / Spring 2021

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One of the visitors to the Woodlands during lockdown!



This photo of a Sparrowhawk was taken by one of our neighbours in Seren Park, Jamie Jemmeson, in mid-February. As he mentioned to the Woodland, *"This was a case of right time, right place."* Sparrowhawks breed in woodland areas, and are able to hunt in confined spaces like gardens.

Chairman's Message

The Westcombe Woodlands have perhaps weathered the past year better than those of us who are Friends and volunteers and enjoyed in the past the monthly work sessions and the Open Days. We have had to forego those pleasures during the lockdown. But hopefully, those days of enjoying both being in and working in the woodlands are again approaching with the loosening of the restrictions.

The first monthly volunteer morning will be on Saturday, April 3rd. Although that is Easter Saturday it is thought that most of our supporters will be at home at that time and it would be so good to see as many of you as possible between 10 am and 1 pm on that day. There will be work for everyone to do (including children), but we would be happy to see some of you who might not wish to work but simply to visit the Woodlands. Although some of the volunteers may be assigned to work at the Lasseter Place section of the woods, it is best if all who attend initially sign in at the main entrance at the end of the Seren Park Car Park.

Some things may be a little different. We are suggesting that you bring your own Thermoses and cups for hot drinks at elevenses. And it might be sensible for you to bring your own gloves and tools rather than use those in the shed. We will also be taking contact details for all those who attend, just in case (God forbid) the virus rears its head again.

The Woodlands has not been left entirely to their own devices in the last 12 months. The fruit trees in the glade have been pruned recently and the pond cleared. Some substantial tree felling work has had to be done at the border between the Woodlands and Seren Park. The bird survey took place at the end of January as part of the RSPB initiative. Eleven separate species were seen in the allotted hour which was down on last year. The total included 2 great spotted woodpeckers, 2 wrens, 2 robins, 1 goldcrest, 3 stock doves and 2 great tits. Those participating in the survey had the experience of seeing a sparrow hawk being mobbed by a large number of ► pigeons and a crow, before turning the tables on them.



Chariman's Message (Cont.)

Local residents regularly hear owls hooting from the Woodlands, although sadly a dead owl was recently found in the garden of one of the houses in Maze Hill backing on to the woodlands.

One new development in 2021 is that on Wednesday May 19th, Wednesday June 23rd and Wednesday July 21st we are going to have a late afternoon/early evening opening of the woodlands, between 4 pm and 8 pm. There will be work available for those keen to earn their refreshment, but for others who want to experience the woodlands in high summer at a lovely time of the day, they will be welcome simply to enjoy the environment.

We have improved our membership organisation and are keen to recruit new Friends, so do spread the word. Our new membership leaflets will be available at the volunteering sessions and at the summer week-day openings.

I hope that the last 12 months have not been too difficult for you. I and the Committee of the Friends much look forward to welcoming you back to a unique place.

Tim Barnes

CHAIRMAN – MARCH 2021



Primroses
Late Winter - March 2021



Thistle flowers
June 2020



Apiary Update Spring 2021

Last season ended successfully with a similar crop of honey as last season around 60lbs. Thanks to Rich Sylvester's pop-up stall in the Seren Park Gardens car park all of the crop was sold, providing some income to the FoWW bank account.

At the end of last season unfortunately we lost one hive when it became a 'drone laying hive'. This is when the queen stops laying and the worker bees step in to 'help'. Unfortunately, eggs laid by worker bees only produce male (drone) bees and eventually the hive dies out.

Another hive succumbed to the winter conditions and has died out leaving us with only one surviving hive as we go into Spring. Some new bees are on order which should be with us in April. They will start a new colony and become a full-size colony by the end of the season. There is always the possibility that our existing hive will expand rapidly as the swarming season approaches which will give us the opportunity to split the colony and make up another hive. This will bring us back to the strength of last season. So we start this season on an optimistic note and we are ever hopeful we will end the season with a good crop of honey.



In Focus: Holly Trees

The Westcombe Woodlands is fortunate to have plenty of native holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) trees onsite. The more eagle-eyed of you will have noticed a large, no doubt garden escape or even deliberately planted variegated variety near The Glade.



Although there are well over 400 different species, the common holly tree appears all over Europe, ranging from sea-level to an altitude of over 6,000 feet in mountainous regions. As a tree, these slow growing plants can live for over 300 years and reach a height of 80-90 feet tall.

It's one of the easiest trees to identify in Britain, whether you are looking at its dark, spiny, glossy leaves that remain green all year round, or its bright red berries in the Winter months.

Its dense foliage provides good shelter for birds to nest, and its leaf litter is a good place for hedgehogs and other small mammals. Flowers are a good source of nectar for bees, and the holly blue butterfly's caterpillars are fond of holly and ivy plants. This butterfly is also one of the earliest butterflies to emerge in Spring.

Holly wood is dense, hard and with a fine grain. It is also extremely pale in colour and is used in cabinet making, engineering and also commonly used to make walking sticks.

The photo above shows the beautiful bright red berries and the bright, glossy leaves of a holly tree in the woodland.



WOOD ANTS *FORMICA RUFA*

These small creatures are nearly always overlooked, not only in Westcombe Woodlands, but throughout Britain. They only seem to be noticed when food is around, or they bite you. We have these ants in our woodland, and given the opportunity with an undisturbed area and vegetation, they are quick to build their nests.

They are a key species in the development of our woodland, performing tasks such as the removal of aphids which can cause plants to grow poorly, they keep soil fresh with their tunnels, they are a source of food for other animals such as birds and even badgers, some birds have been known to disturb their nests which result in them being sprayed with the ants' formic acid resulting in lice and mites being repelled and finally they are even known to distribute seeds of plants. Their capabilities seem endless!

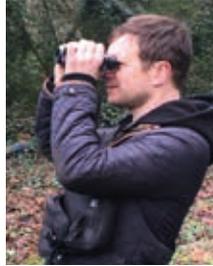
An interesting fact is that while "worker" and male ants live for normally only several weeks, queen ants can live for 20 years!





RSPB Garden Birdwatch 2021

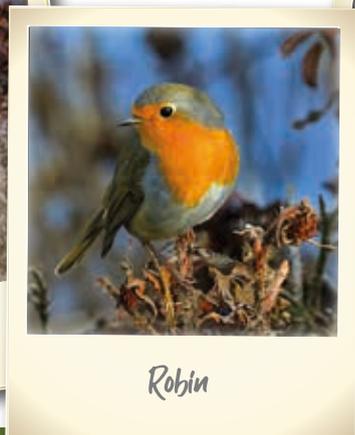
This year, we participated again in the annual RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch, but, due to COVID-19 restrictions, had to limit the participants to two. Joe Beale, our local naturalist, accompanied Nigel Duncan on the morning of Sunday 31 January and they spent an hour in The Glade observing the birds that showed themselves or sang.



It was a beautiful morning, cloudy and chilly but bright and dry. The pond is full to brimming over and much of the ground in the Glade is thoroughly waterlogged. The high point for me was towards the end of the hour when a sparrowhawk flew over, hotly mobbed by a carrion crow and several feral pigeons. It was clearly becoming irritated because at one point it dramatically changed direction and flew directly at its tormentors. The pigeons scattered, but the crow persisted and they flew off towards the north until they disappeared from sight.

It was good to see the sparrowhawk. This year has been our best for sparrowhawks for some time. When we have been working in the Glade we have often heard a pair calling to each other, with one or another of them flying fast over the Glade, usually from the south to the north. There seems to be a reasonable chance that they might have bred successfully in 2020. Joe mentioned that he was coming down the path from One Tree Hill in the park when he saw a pair of sparrowhawks flying with a youngster. They headed off in the direction of the Woodlands, which suggests that this may have been where they nested. One of the great advantages of the dense and inaccessible nature of parts of the Woodlands is that it provides sites for nesting, but of course, means that we cannot be sure that it is actually happening.

NIGEL DUNCAN



The 11 bird species we recorded between 10.15 and 11.15 for the Big Garden Birdwatch were:

WOODPIGEONS	2
STOCK DOVES	3
GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKERS	2
WRENS	2
ROBINS	2
BLUE TITS	3
GREAT TITS	2
GOLDCREST	1
JAY	1
MAGPIE	1
CARRION CROWS	2

This was a smaller number of species than the 18 spotted last year. We thought that we might have heard a firecrest, but it never showed itself, so cannot be included. It is to be hoped that next year's count shows a return to the larger numbers we have been recording recently. We also saw mammals: 1 Fox and at least 1 Grey Squirrel.

Over-flying birds are not eligible for the RSPB count, but in addition we saw:

HERRING GULL	1
BLACK-HEADED GULL	1
FERAL PIGEONS	10+
RING-NECKED PARAKEETS	2
GOLDFINCHES	2
SPARROWHAWK (MOBBED BY A CROW!)	1



Clearing the pond

Every year the reeds and rushes around the edge of the pond spread towards the centre, and if they were left, would completely choke the pond and it would eventually disappear altogether.



Miriam pulling out bullrushes

One of our trustees, Miriam Molony, and her daughter Alice joined Nigel Duncan on a clear afternoon on 18 February to undertake the task. Miriam and Alice took turns in climbing into armpit-high waders to do the hard work. All the plants they pulled out were laid along the side of the pond so that all the little creatures who might have been among the roots can slip back into the water.



Alice in a cleared pond





Bee Pollinator Project

The project aims to improve the natural water supply by harvesting rainwater to feed into our existing pond.



At present, there is a shallow ditch running in front of a hedge of native species. The project will entail digging a much deeper ditch and lining it with pond liner then refilling it with soil. The length of the trench will then be covered with wildflower meadow turf on top of a layer of low nutrient soil.

A simple water-harvesting device, operating throughout the year, will feed into the trench and ultimately drain into the pond. The water harvesting device will be a tarpaulin suspended in each corner with a channel feeding a sunken water butt. The overflow will feed the trench and then drain into the pond.

The pollinators (wild bees, hoverflies, butterflies and moths and honey bees) will benefit from the improved foraging opportunities from the wildflower meadow and hopefully will establish colonies within the woodlands. The pond will provide a more reliable breeding ground for wildlife. The Friends of the Woodlands have applied for a grant to assist with this work to the London Bee Keepers Pollinator Fund. We hope to start work soon. One of the key factors governing the time scale will be the optimum time to lay the meadow turf.





Volunteer Dates

The website (www.westcombewoodlands.uk) continues to be regularly updated with summaries of the activities. Mindful of recent government legislation, we plan to cautiously re-start our ever-popular monthly events. In addition to these, we are opening the gate to people who would like to just appreciate the woodlands of late afternoon and early evenings in May, June and July. The times and dates are listed below for reference, but please do check our website and Facebook page for any changes due to the current Coronavirus situation.

Monthly volunteer mornings, from 10:00 am until 1:00 pm.

- Saturday 3rd April
- Sunday 2nd May
- Saturday 5th June
- Sunday 4th July
- Saturday 7th August

Mid-week late afternoon/early evening open woodland with volunteer work optional, from 4:00 pm until 8:00 pm.

- Wednesday 19th May
- Wednesday 23rd June
- Wednesday 21st July



Lieve Reckers

WELCOME TO OUR NEW COMMITTEE MEMBER

Lieve Reckers was born in Belgium but moved to London straight after her university studies. Greenwich became her new home in the 1980s, and in 1992 she moved into the Maze Hill cul-de-sac.

After working in the City for 30 years, mainly for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, she took early retirement in 2010 and became a Westcombe Woodlands volunteer in 2011. Her interests include writing, photography and travel, often for long stretches and in rather basic conditions. She is also a very keen hiker and cyclist and takes a great interest in environmental matters.

CANCELLATION

The Friends of Westcombe Woodlands' Annual Bluebell Open Day normally takes place at the end of April or early May. We are disappointed to say that once again this event has been cancelled due to the ongoing pandemic. We are very much hopeful that our Autumn Apple Day will take place, news to be announced.