

40th Anniversary

In the early days of the Cheshire Conservation Trust (which was how Cheshire Wildlife Trust was originally known), Wirral Group was part of West Group, based in Chester. Sixty members living in Wirral were needed before the Group could become autonomous. That happened at a meeting at Bebington Oval on 7th April 1971.

The original committee consisted of Chairman, Major Frank White, Jane Ratcliffe, Nora MacMillan (universally known as Mrs Mac), Henry Larsen, Graham Taylor, Richard Smith, Margaret Gilmour and David Mills.

The Group manned two caravans each summer weekend, one at Thurstaston Visitor Centre and one at Eastham Country Park and meetings were held at a variety of venues. I well remember passing a queue waiting for our jumble sale at St Mary's Church Hall, Liscard and hearing a woman say, "I wonder whatever it is they do in a Conversation Trust?". We had little base data of species distribution in 1971 – an essential pre-requisite of conservation action. Hence, in the early days outdoor meetings were real recording events. Recording of species now tends to be done by small teams of recorders so new recorders can benefit from working with experienced observers. How little insight some of the general public have into the business of species recording can be glimpsed from the encounter one recorder had on the footpath running from Arrowse Park to Greasby. Workmen had just tarred over a comparative rarity, the delightful broadleaved helleborine orchid at the edge of the path. They couldn't see what the fuss was about, but appreciated that the recorder was dismayed (to put it mildly), apologised and generously offered money so that she could get a replacement from the garden centre!

The information accumulated by our teams of recorders has proved of great value to the Planning Department and Ranger Service. Our records and maps have been incorporated into management plans and used to obtain grants. The current scale of consultations is far greater than would have seemed possible in the 1970s. Tens of thousands of words – technical terms galore – can appear in one document, which demands a thorough understanding of the subject – a far cry from the amateur botanist armed with a plant guide!

Practical work on reserves has also greatly changed but our Reserves Managers have between them contributed many years to the organising and leadership of willing volunteers, without whose regular labours the reserves would be in a much poorer state.

After Wirral became part of Merseyside in 1974, we changed our name to Wirral Wildlife. Fundraising and recruitment have always been vital to the health of the group. In the 1990s there were several charity fairs and other events – like those in Central Park, Wallasey, Arrowse Park and Royden Park – at which we could publicise our cause, but in the last few years these have declined. However Apple Days, unknown in the 1970s, have become an annual celebration. Our Fundraisers' efforts have been unstinting, but opportunities are now more limited.

As the newly-appointed committee left the Oval in April 1971 they could have no idea of how the world of transport would change Wirral, or how enormously life would be changed in the last twenty years by Information Technology. We know that from the very early days they did hope to engage the public in defence of the natural world, and hoped to involve family groups and youngsters in our activities (which ultimately became WATCH groups). They would also have aimed to increase the number of reserves and protected areas; indeed Mrs Mac campaigned in the early days for the purchase of Patrick's Wood, Dibbinsdale. We now own Cleaver Heath and manage 5 other reserves. I guess that they might even be pleasantly surprised by the amount of wildlife still evident in Wirral.

Jim Gilmour, Hon. Secretary

Many thanks to Jim for his article. For reasons of space it has had to be reduced in length but an expanded version of this article can be found on our website newsletter - www.wirralwildlife.co.uk

If you have any memories of the Wirral group, do let us know via email info@wirralwildlife.co.uk or telephone Linda 0151 342 1395. Thank you.

Coppice Cuttings

John Magee, the former Chair of Wirral Countryside Volunteers (WCV) and the previous Honorary Warden of Thornton Wood, started the WCV coppice regime at the 1990 three day Christmas task in Thornton Wood. It was thought that a coppice would add structural diversity to Thornton Wood with the open aspect of the recently cut coppice areas benefiting wildlife.

The first cut of the redundant hazel coppice was difficult as the stems were 10cm thick, heavy and often twisted and fused around each other as well as bearing a crown. We needed one volunteer to push up the stem to prevent the weight of the stem closing the saw cut while another volunteer applied the saw. Fewer than a dozen hedging stakes were obtained, so there was a lot of cutting for little gain of useful products. However, with perseverance we have gained an increasing crop of hedging stakes, bean poles and pea sticks with each proceeding cut.

Three coppice areas were cut in Thornton Wood: Heavy Oak (1990), Quarter Bank (1992) and Lamperloons (2000). Each was left with standards i.e. a scattering of a few large trees, mainly oak, for structural diversity. In 1998 we planted two further coppices at Brick Pit and Back Boiler House at New Ferry Butterfly Park. This time simple coppices were created without standards as we had no room for them. The first coppice harvests have been very good at New Ferry Butterfly Park because there are no shading standards, soils are more fertile and the geotextile mulch matt around the hazel stools used when establishing the coppice are still there, which reduces competition from vigorous brambles. This mulch matt is being removed in sections so that woodland flora can be developed. Ed Samuels has kindly donated two dozen ramsons which are now established and self propagating under the shade of the coppice.

In 2006 the bowsaws were replaced by pruning saws making it easier to get low into the coppice stool. Several volunteers commented that it made sawing a pleasure. We have a short six year cycle which makes the hazel easy to cut as it is only 5cm in diameter at the base, straight and light with little crown to each stem. Hazel coppice loses its value and usefulness as a woodland product if left for ten or more years, as it becomes too thick. It is the small diameter lengths of hazel which are valued for bean poles, pea sticks, heatherings for woven hurdles and hedging laying stakes, which are the major driver for the WCV. In Thornton Wood, it is a 10 to 15 minute walk from the coppice area to the access road and involves crossing Clatter Brook. This journey precludes the extraction of heavier coppice products on any scale. At Quarter Bank this January WCV reduced the crowns of oak standards using an extending pole saw to benefit the ground flora and future hazel and ash underwood crop.

At each crop we have removed some nutrients out of the system and the stools have got larger in diameter. Due to stronger regrowth the bramble has been progressively weaker, especially when it is shaded out as the coppice canopy closes in the fourth year. As to the ground flora of the recently coppiced areas in Thornton Wood, in the spring the carpet of bluebells has become bluer and primroses have started to colonise a corner of Heavy Oak Coppice. In the first two summers following a coppice cut there is the pink purplish hue on the coppice floor of red campion, followed by foxglove and finally willow herb which makes the coppicing all worth while.

Paul Loughnane

News from Royden Park

The drumming of the Great Spotted Woodpeckers is now vibrating around the woodlands at Royden Park. This is their display call, so spring is not far away. Also the Storm Cock, otherwise known as the Mistle Thrush, is singing loud and clear often perched at the top of large trees. They often start singing on New Year's Day, so they really are early birds. The songs of the Song Thrush and Blackbird are becoming evident now and the Green Woodpecker is often seen flying with its undulating flight over Thurstaston Common. Flocks of Greenfinches and Goldfinches often gather in the tops of trees particularly at dusk just before they move to their night roost. The Heron has been a regular visitor to Roodee Mere and other ponds throughout the Park and on the common, cashing in on any fish that died due to the thick ice conditions earlier on in the year.

Moles are busy in the Park and they continue to be active throughout the year. Although seldom seen, the earth mole hills are very evident.

We look forward to Spring now as the snowdrops have emerged in the Walled Garden and by the railway tracks of the miniature railway in Royden Park. Do pay us a visit as soon as you can.

Paul Greenslade, Senior Ranger, Royden Park.

First Record for Wirral

John McGaw has found a bud gall, *Andricus glandulae*, in Royden Park. This is caused by a tiny wasp and is the first record of this in Wirral and Cheshire.

An Apology

In the last issue of The Grebe it was suggested that Margaret Gilmour might be the sole survivor of the founding committee of the Wirral Group of the Cheshire Wildlife Trust. This was incorrect. The youngest committee member, a school sixth-former, was Richard Smith, a keen bird-watcher. Richard, still a member of the Group, has undiminished enthusiasm for ornithology which has led him to play a significant role in both RSPB and CAWOS – and to be the initiator and owner of the first-rate deestuaries.co.uk website, updated daily, and known to bird-watchers world-wide.

Garden Moths

Have you heard of the Garden Moth Scheme? The purpose of the Scheme is to try and find out what is happening to our common garden moths. What do you need to do to take part? You just need to count the numbers of common moths you see, for one night every week from March to November. The list of moths consists of about 200 species, common in your area and those that are difficult to identify are intentionally left out.

As well as sending results to your county's recorder you can also get involved in a nationwide scheme to get standardised data, which can then be used to study the effects of climate change, and changes in habitats, to act as a biodiversity indicator and to plot against garden features such as distance from nearest wood, greenspace etc or presence of pond, log pile etc in garden.

Further details can be found at www.gardenmoths.org.uk

Quiz Answers and Winner

Congratulations go to Maureen Blewitt, who is the winner of the third Wirral Wildlife Prize Quiz. She will receive a gift voucher for £10.

The answers to the questions were as follows:

1. Shrike, 2. Wagtail, 3. Magpie, 4. Ptarmigan, 5. Blackcap, 6. Sandwich Tern, 7. Flycatcher, 8. Comma, 9. Great Crested Newt, 10. Stoat, 11. Pipistrelle, 12. Hornet, 13. Skate, 14. Ladybird, 15. Heswall, 16. Ness, 17. Bebington, 18. Cleaver Heath, 19. Thurstaston, 20. Rock Ferry, 21. Dibbinsdale.

Planning Proposals

There are two major planning proposals that will have an impact on Wirral.

Peel Energy Ltd has plans to construct a tidal energy structure in the Mersey estuary to generate renewable energy. Although they have not indicated their final choice it may well be a barrage system, which will reduce available areas of mud used by feeding birds. The Wildlife Trusts support the need to move towards 'green energy' to meet the Government's ambitious targets, but striving to meet these should not be at a cost to the very wildlife and habitats we are seeking to safeguard from the effects of climate change.

The other proposal is from the National Grid and SP Transmission to run part of an underground power cable from Wirral foreshore, down the length of the peninsula to Connah's Quay. The plans form part of a larger scheme to connect new renewable energy sources in Scotland to the electricity grid in England and Wales through a high voltage subsea cable.

Vacancies on the Committee

We have been very lucky to have had excellent volunteers to organize our Fund Raising and Events programmes. However since the AGM we have had vacancies for these two posts. If you would like to help as the group moves beyond our 40th anniversary, please contact our chairman Stephen Ross on 0151 342 4185 to see what these roles entail.

On the website

An extended version of this Newsletter, with photographs, can be found on our website www.wirralwildlife.co.uk. If you can manage without a paper copy, to save on the use of paper and the cost of postage, please email info@wirralwildlife.co.uk. You will receive an email to let you know when a newsletter has been added to the website and we can also remind you by email of forthcoming events.

Don't forget to check the website regularly for the very latest news updates, which can be found on our blog. If you have any information that might be of interest to other members, please send it to info@wirralwildlife.co.uk or telephone Linda on 0151 342 1395 and we can add it to our blog.

Wirral Wildlife Events Programme - March to July 2011

Friday 11th March

Anne Litherland: "Birkenhead Park". Room B, Heswall Hall, 7.30 p.m.

Designed by Joseph Paxton (later Sir Joseph Paxton) in 1843 and officially opened in 1847, Birkenhead Park is acknowledged to be the first publicly funded park in Britain and its influence was far reaching both in this country and abroad - most notably on Olmsted's design for Central Park, New York. Anne, the park's Senior Ranger will re-acquaint us with its history and ecology. Admission £2.

Friday 8th April

David Nind: "Ten Years at Big Meadow". Room B, Heswall Hall, 7.30 p.m.

David is the secretary of the Friends of Willaston Meadow who manage Big Meadow in Willaston. What started as a community project to celebrate the Millennium in 2000 eventually became an SBI designated site. Admission £2.

Saturday 30th April

Expedition to Thornton Common

Meet at 2 p.m. in Wirral Rugby Club car park on Thornton Common Road (GR: SJ 328 813).

Join members of Wirral Wildlife on a guided walk.

Further details from Paul Loughnane: telephone 0151 645 8937.

Sunday 8th May

Dawn Chorus Walk

Meet at 4.30 a.m. at Cleaver Heath Nature Reserve, Oldfield Road, Heswall.

Booking essential - telephone 0151 342 4249.

Join members of Wirral Wildlife to hear birdsong at its best as returning migrants join our resident birds to claim their territories. This is a (very!) early morning walk through heathland and woodland.

Sunday 8th May

New Ferry Butterfly Park Open Day. 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

If the dawn chorus walk is too early for you, why not visit the Butterfly Park? An ideal event for all the family with art exhibitions and crafts, nature quizzes, pond dipping, woodland crafts, a sculpture trail, face painting and a BBQ.

Admission entirely free. Further details from Paul Loughnane: telephone 0151 645 8937.

Sunday 14th May

Garden Event. 2 to 4 p.m.

Plant sale, bring and buy, raffle and sales table at the home of a Trust member. Admission 50p including refreshments. To find out the address telephone Ruth on 0151 625 5570.

Sunday 5th June

Through Dales and Woods

Start and finish at Cleaver Heath Nature Reserve, Oldfield Road, Heswall. 10 a.m. until 3.30 p.m.

Join members of Wirral Wildlife for this circular walk through some of Wirral's finest countryside, taking in farmland, woodland, heaths and the Dee estuary. No dogs are allowed and strong footwear and a packed lunch are advised.

Further details from Mike Maher: telephone 0151 342 4249.

Saturday 16 July & Sunday 17th July

Royden Park. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

We will be manning the tea bar and have our display boards and sales goods.

Task Days

If you fancy a change from going to the gym, join in with one of our forthcoming work days at Cleaver Heath reserve and New Ferry Butterfly Park. Dates are as follows:

• **Cleaver Heath - Sunday 6th March**. Meet at the reserve on Oldfield Road, Heswall. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Further details and directions from Mike Maher: telephone 0151 342 4249.

• **New Ferry Butterfly Park - Sunday 13th March and Sunday 10th April**. 9.30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Further details and directions from Paul Loughnane: telephone 0151 645 8937.

Stout footwear and waterproofs are recommended, and volunteers should bring a packed lunch if staying for the whole day.