

WILDLIFE NEWS

SEPTEMBER 2021



Although the Grey Wagtail is a fairly common sight alongside streams, it has been seen in the centre of High Wycombe and recently one has visited the Editor's garden several times.

Issue 96 Contents include:

Editorial	62
Sheepridge update	63
Proposed film studio complex in Little Marlow	
The future of Gomm Valley	
The Holywell Mead wetland area	64
A tourist attraction with wildlife interest	66
The garden arms race	67
Reported wildlife sightings	68
Garden tweets, squeaks and feats	70
An unusual beehive	71
Friendly rivalry update	72
Wanted - Contributions for the next newsletter	

Wycombe Wildlife News is published 3 times a year to promote the Group and wildlife issues, and to inform members and the public of its activities.

Edited and produced by Roger Wilding.
Proof reading by Frances Wilding.

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Views expressed in this newsletter are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Group.

For the purposes of management of the Group, membership information is held on computer.

This is the fifth WWG newsletter to be published since Covid 19 arrived on the scene.

Along with the many problems the pandemic has caused has been how best to keep our Group ticking over so that it is in a position to bounce back when those involved feel it is safe to do so.

Wycombe Wildlife Group is a registered charity No.1075175 with the following objects:

To conserve the environment, mainly using volunteers, for the benefit of the public.

To educate the public in the principles and practice of conservation.

Within and around Wycombe District the Group :

Surveys wildlife habitats and their associated flora and fauna, giving those taking part plenty of opportunities to increase their knowledge and identification skills.

Resources permitting, helps manage local wildlife sites by undertaking practical conservation work and provides advice to schools, other bodies and individuals on all aspects of wildlife.

Stimulates public interest in wildlife and its conservation, organising walks, talks and other activities covering a wide range of wildlife topics.

Provides advice on and encourages wildlife gardening.

Co-operates with other groups with similar aims.

In the last issue I mentioned our hope that we would be able to arrange an AGM which we had been unable to do at the normal time in 2020 or 2021. We had thought that it might be a good idea to arrange a daytime meeting in a location to which some of our older members could get to using public transport.

With the number of Covid cases still high, however, we have decided that it would be in our members' best interests to delay holding an AGM a bit longer. The income and expenditure accounts for the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 were finalised in time for an AGM at the normal time and, as it is no longer necessary for our income and expenditure accounts to be independently inspected, a copy is being circulated to members with this newsletter. As we did last year, we would like members to read the document and raise any related issues or queries with us as soon as possible, as we will need to submit the income and expenditure data to the Charity Commission in plenty of time to meet the deadline.

Members of the WWG Executive Committee and Programme Planning Committee have been asked for their views on when and in what form we could restart some of our activities such as indoor meetings and outdoor activities. The views we have received suggest that there is little appetite for indoor meetings yet. Restarting indoor meetings would of course involve greater risks than outdoor activities such as walks. As well as introducing additional health and safety measures at indoor events, we would need to find speakers who would be happy to give talks at our meetings. Restarting outdoor activities involves far fewer risks, so this might be a good way to start getting back to normal, making sure that the walks arranged include some short ones. We appreciate that many of our members would not want to walk WWG's 20 mile Round Wycombe Walk, although some might like to walk one or more of its component sections described in the guide to the walk on the Group's website.

We would very much appreciate the views of individual members on possible future Group activities and would welcome any offers of help to arrange or even lead some of these. We have a vacancy for the role of Programme Secretary as Inge Beck has decided that she is too busy to continue in that role. She did a wonderful job as Programme Secretary and it will be a hard act to follow. As I have pointed out for the last few years, I think our Group would benefit from a change of Chairman, as I have occupied this post for far too many years.

Roger

Sheepridge update

In the May newsletter I referred to monies held in our restricted funds which had been donated specifically for the “bees at Sheepridge”. Although we had managed to use previous donations to purchase suitable wildflower species which we planted on the banks within what used to be a nature reserve managed by WWG, we felt we needed to liaise with the Parish Council before undertaking any further planting because of the reduced suitable space available. Even when the nature reserve was first created, it was made clear that the amount of ground required for burials would increase over time and the extent of the nature reserve would reduce. The area required for cemetery use has increased considerably in recent times but the pond, which WWG created and relined at a later date, and the woodland area are still present. We are hoping to learn more about the Parish Council’s plans for meeting the future burial requirements soon so that we can assess the scope for making best use of some remaining donated funds in ways that will support local bees. Wild Marlow, a similar but more active version of WWG, that operates in the Marlow and Little Marlow areas, has expressed an interest in supporting WWG with local bee-friendly planting when we have heard more from the Little Marlow Parish Council about their plans for the future of the cemetery.

Proposed film studio complex in Little Marlow

WWG members Peter and Wendy Osborn alerted me to a consultation with Marlow and Little Marlow residents about a proposed development of a new permanent film studio complex on the former gravel pits around Westthorpe Park which is east of the A404 and south of the A4155 Marlow to Bourne End road. As this land was part of the area designated for use as a countryside park in the Local Plan for the former Wycombe District Council, which had been approved by the Central Government planning inspector, I do not see how this proposal could have reached the consultation stage. The proposed development would have an adverse effect on the leisure activities of not only the residents of Marlow and Little Marlow, from where there are direct footpath links to the area concerned, but would also affect those from further afield who enjoy the walks around the area from Spade Oak and its nature reserve and from the Thames Path. The proposed development would also have an adverse effect on the views over the area in question from the view point on Winter Hill. I would hope this undesirable development scheme is dropped before it reaches the planning application stage, but, if it does get that far, I am sure there will be lots of objections to these most undesirable proposals.

The future of Gomm Valley

The decision of Aviva to sack the company they had appointed to develop Gomm Valley has created an uncertain future for this site which had been approved for housing development. Apparently Aviva did not wish to be associated with a development for which there was a large public opposition to, so they have sold the land to Taylor Wimpey, a development company that is far more likely to ignore the views of the public. Although our Group initially opposed any development of Gomm Valley, we worked with the former Wycombe District Council and the developers to meet their requirements whilst achieving as many biodiversity gains as possible. These included buffer zones around the hedges and woodland, the creation of additional chalk grasslands and the provision of public rights of way through the site.

Aviva’s decision will not affect the Ashwells development which is on Council owned land, but we will have to wait and see what Taylor Wimpey decide to do with the land they have purchased. They already owned the part of Gomm Valley to the rear of the existing business park but showed no interest in developing that area in isolation.

The Holywell Mead wetland area

The fenced off area of land below the waterfall on Holywell Mead is an excellent species rich wetland habitat which was created several years ago as a funded Revive the Wye project. The area is occasionally flooded and remains damp most of the time. There are a couple of scrapes which retain the wet conditions for longer periods.

Before the wetland habitat was created this area was usually very muddy as a result of the public walking on the wet grassland. In the early days of WWG an attempt was made to create a Fritillary meadow on the site by planting bulbs. The planting was successful and resulted in a good show of Fritillaries but the area was mown before the flowers had died back and produced seeds which would have increased the bulb population after a few years. A few Fritillary flowers appeared occasionally for a few years and the site remained a strip of wet grassland until it was fenced off and the present wetland habitat created. A beach was created at the foot of the waterfall and the large boulders which had been there for many years were left in the shallow water. Many years ago these boulders provided shelter for the native White-clawed Crayfish which were once a common sight here.

Although the wetland area is fenced off to avoid damage to the site's ground flora, the beach area is unfenced so that it can be used as a safe place for children to play in the water. A good range of interesting plants were introduced into the fenced off area but there are many thugs such as nettles, docks, thistles, and tree seedlings that are controlled to prevent them crowding or shading out the more interesting species. This year the worst thug was Cleavers and, although there were numerous tree seedlings around the site, the ground was damp enough to pull them out by hand. Apart from the tree seedlings, which if left would soon allow the site to develop into woodland, most of the thugs are controlled rather than exterminated. Although Ground-Elder bears attractive white flowers, the species is spreading rapidly at the eastern

end of the site and it is likely to require some attention in the near future. Unfortunately this species is very deep rooted and difficult to control.

Marsh-marigold is probably the showiest species in the wetland, and although it is one of the furthest plants from the fence it can easily be seen when in flower. Water Mint and Water Forget-me-not are widespread on the site and provide a good show over a long period of time.

Wild Angelica, Hemp-agrimony, Great Willowherb, Yellow-loosestrife, Bittersweet, Purple-loosestrife and Water Figwort are all fairly tall plants and can be spotted easily. Some of the smaller colourful plants such as Ragged-Robin, Square-stemmed St John's-wort, Greater Bird's-foot-Trefoil, Common Fleabane, Water Avens and Yellow Iris stand out because of their bright colours. Gypsywort, which often gets mistaken for a nettle, is easily recognised when its white flowers are visible. There are a few other low-growing plants that cannot be seen from outside the fence and which perhaps could be encouraged to spread to other easier to see parts of the site. These include Skullcap, Yellow Pimpernel and Branched Bur-reed.

If walking through Holywell Mead allow time to take a look at this site and enjoy some of the species mentioned in this article. The timing and length of the flowering period can be affected by the ground conditions which can vary as a result of both the weather and fluctuating water levels below the waterfall and along the Back stream. The peak-flowering time on the site this year was early September, later than most years.

When there are few people near the waterfall, you may see one or more Grey Wagtails moving around from one rock to another.

Roger

Holywell Mead wetland plants still flowering in early September 2021

In early September the following 18 plant species in the wetland area were still bearing flowers:-

Bittersweet	<i>Solanum dulcamera</i>
Branched Bur-reed	<i>Sparganium erectum</i>
Broad-leaved Willowherb	<i>Epilobium montanum</i>
Common Fleabane	<i>Pulicaria dysenterica</i>
Great Willowherb	<i>Epilobium hirsutum</i>
Greater Bird's-foot-Trefoil	<i>Lotus pedunculatus</i>
Gypsywort	<i>Lycopus europaeus</i>
Hemp-agrimony	<i>Eupatorium cannabinum</i>
Hogweed	<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>
Purple-loosestrife	<i>Lythrum salicaria</i>
Ragged-Robin	<i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i>
Scullcap	<i>Scutellaria galericulata</i>
Square-stalked St John's-wort	<i>Hypericum tetrapterum</i>
Water Avens	<i>Geum rivale</i>
Water Forget-me-not	<i>Myosotis scorpioides</i>
Water Mint	<i>Mentha aquatica</i>
Wild Angelica	<i>Angelica sylvestris</i>
Yellow Loosestrife	<i>Lysimachia vulgaris</i>



Top right: Wild Angelica
 Bottom left: Water Mint
 Bottom middle: Ragged-Robin
 Bottom right: Common Fleabane

If there is enough member support, we could arrange for our programme to include a series of short walks along the Wye during 2022 to look at the flora, other wildlife and features resulting from its past history. These walks would aim to follow the river's course where possible from Bourne End to West Wycombe in easy stages at a pace to suit the abilities of those taking part. The whole route is well served by buses and we would recommend that participants use this method of getting to the start and back from the end of each walk.

Roger

A tourist attraction with wildlife interest

The Chiltern Open Air Museum near Chalfont St Giles provides an opportunity to see a selection of local buildings saved from demolition and expertly reconstructed. These include cottages, farm buildings, a replica iron age house, a High Wycombe furniture factory and the toll house that for many years was a roadside feature in London Road. There are ponds around the site, some within gardens that have been created around the cottages: these support a range of aquatic plants, dragonflies and damselflies.



There are some interesting old trees around the site, including a very old Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) and an Aylesbury Prune (*Prunus insititia*) which is an old variety of Damson originating from wild seedlings found growing in the Vale of Aylesbury.



The real wildlife gem is at the far end of the site and is shown on the map of the museum layout as the Hidden Meadow.



It is worth seeking out this unspoilt area of calcareous grassland and enjoying the wide range of wildflowers growing there. There are no footpaths through the meadow but this probably helps to keep visitor numbers down and avoids excessive trampling of the vegetation. Walking around the meadow during a recent family visit to the Museum, we noticed several large sheets of corrugated metal, three of which, when carefully lifted up, revealed the expected slow-worms: some of these were quite large specimens. Thinking we had seen the highlight of the Hidden Meadow, we turned to retrace our steps back to the Museum when we spotted two Peregrine Falcons using an electricity pylon as an observation and launching site for looking for and taking their prey.

Roger

The Garden Arms Race

Every government has a duty to safeguard the welfare of the vulnerable. It was with that in mind that I set myself to assist those whose margin of safety between the energy gained from available resources and the energy expended during the winter months was of the narrowest. I am referring to the smaller birds which inhabit our garden. This I was at first able to achieve by putting out food for them on a bird table.

This served well enough until it was discovered by grey squirrels, which would clear the table in a sitting. I clearly needed an alternative means of delivery that was accessible to the birds but not to the squirrels. I therefore bought myself a cylindrical wire hopper of a type that has become familiar, and hung it in a tree opposite the kitchen window. This proved to be no deterrent. The squirrel (there was one particular individual who rose to every challenge – I shall call him Macnab) simply grasped the top of the feeder with his hind feet and hung head first to reach the opening at the bottom. A knock on the window caused him to leap to the ground and scurry away, but he would be back. To make access more difficult, I stretched a narrow wire from the house to the fence and hung the feeder from it. This proved to be no obstacle. Macnab nimbled across the wire and resumed his attack on the feeder. I needed to put an impassable obstacle in his path. I thought I had found the solution: old compact discs, attached to the wire on either side of the feeder, would block his advance, and if he tried to climb over them, would spin and throw him off balance. That was the theory, and indeed, when he first encountered the obstacle, Macnab withdrew to give the matter thought. But he was soon back, and by a means I could not discover, circumvented the obstacle and again attacked the feeder.

Clearly something more was needed. We had two redundant hanging baskets, semi-spheres made of curved bars. By binding them together I could make a cage and hang the feeder inside it; the gaps between the wires were sufficient to admit small birds but not, I believed, a squirrel. I was wrong. The morning after the device was hung, my wife called me to the window. There was Macnab, comfortably ensconced within the cage, tucking into the bird seed. Not to be so easily thwarted, I set to work to reduce the gaps between the bars by attaching wires in a sort of macramé network. For a few days Macnab appeared to accept defeat, and then I was again called to the window to find him in his former position. He had managed to force the wires apart sufficiently to gain access. I hurried outside, where I had him at my mercy as he could not make a quick exit. I could have taken him to a distant wood and released him there, but it seemed unsporting, besides being an admission of defeat. I let him go. The time had come to throw money at the problem. I went out and bought a commercially designed feeding station, consisting of an eight foot pole with arms at the top to hold the feeders, which I positioned on the lawn. I hoped that the metal pole might provide insufficient traction for a squirrel to climb it, but it proved no problem for Macnab. I could have bought a cone-shaped metal guard, which could be attached to the pole, but it cost almost as much as the feeding station itself. It happened that we had a redundant metal lamp shade of the same shape, a ready substitute and much cheaper.

The tricky bit was fixing it to the pole, but I devised something that I thought would serve. Macnab soon discovered that he could tip it to one side and then skip over it. It took me several more attempts before I found a means to fix it firmly in position. For the first time, Macnab seemed truly nonplussed. He studied the problem carefully, viewed the feeder from various angles, and then climbed to the roof of the nearby extension, and, with a stupendous leap, reached the top of the feeder. This time the solution was easy; I simply moved the feeding station further from the extension. Macnab did not give up. Again and again he ascended the pole and tried to reach around the offending barrier, but repeatedly he lost his grip. Days and weeks went past. And then, one morning, there he was once more helping himself to the food destined for the birds. After careful watch, we saw how it was done. Many attempts were required. Bird dropping falling on the upper surface of the cone had hardened, providing just sufficient purchase to enable Macnab, once in a while, to reach the pole above the barrier. We decided to let him have a feed before sending him on his way. His persistence seemed worthy of a reward, and besides, he provided us and our guests with a source of entertainment.

The following season there was no sign of Macnab. Other squirrels there were, but none with the enterprise and drive of my old adversary. It was a relief to feel the problem was solved, but to tell the truth, I missed the little blighter!

John Hoar

Reported wildlife sightings

May 6 - Great Tits in Deeds Grove garden have babies.

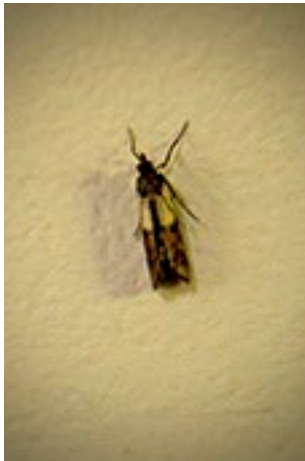
May 8 - 1st Swifts over Deeds Grove garden.

May 13 - 1st baby Starlings in a Deeds Grove garden.

May 25 - Young Grey Wagtail in bird bath in Deeds Grove garden.

June 2 - Hedgehogs regularly visiting Flackwell Heath garden for their nightly feed and drink.

Early June - Indian Meal Moths (*Plodia interpunctella*) seen in Deeds Grove house. These 7-10 mm long micro moths almost certainly arrived via a sack of bird food.



June 6 and 7 - Male Stag Beetle seen flying around a Flackwell Heath garden between 9.45 and 10.15pm.

July - Regular sightings of Scarlet Tiger moths in a Downley garden.

July 8 - Around half a dozen young House Sparrows with their parents in a Downley garden. They were difficult to count as they were jumping around changing places continually. They then flew off and haven't been seen since.

July 16 - Dead White Admiral butterfly found in a Deeds Grove garden. How this rare species, which inhabits woodland where honeysuckle grows, came to be where it was found we will never know. There are trees in the garden but only a small quantity of wild honeysuckle.



upperside



underside

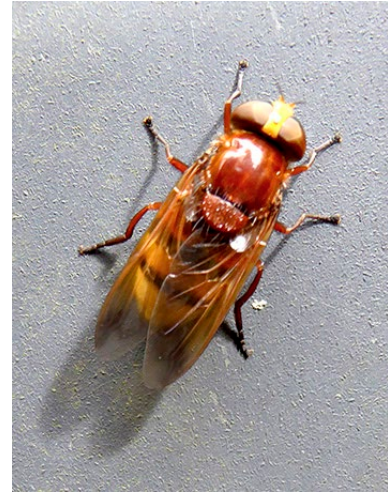
July 22 - First Silver Y moth seen for a long time by a Downley member but it was in his house and dead.

July 23 - Box Tree Moth, a relatively new species to the UK, seen in a Carver Hill garden. The caterpillars of this moth can completely defoliate Box plants.



August - several visits to a Deeds Grove garden by a Grey Wagtail

August 6 - *Volucella zonaria* hoverfly (right) seen in a Tylers Green garden. This harmless insect resembles a hornet, which helps to deter predators.



August 10 - Painted Lady seen in a Downley garden.

August 16 - A *Volucella zonaria* seen on Penn Common.

August 16 - Five Elephant Hawkmoth caterpillars found on a Fuchsia in a Tylers Green garden.



August 25 - Dark Brown Bush Cricket seen in a Downley garden.

Mid September - Frances found 4 pupae hanging from Blackcurrant stems in the garden, and being interested to know what they would turn out as, she nipped off one of the leaves and put it on a sunny windowsill and waited.



The pupa soon split and, as Frances expected from the shape of the case, it turned out to be one of the Vanessid butterflies - a Comma, absolutely perfect. When its wings had dried off, she let it out to enjoy the garden, which was still in bloom.



September 23 - Mixed flock of 19 Swallows and House Martins over Penn Pond.

Garden tweets, squeaks and feats

Since Spring, the Blue Tits have had a change in their fortunes. I'm pleased to say that there are huge numbers of them around this Summer.

13th May - We had our first baby Starlings. One was doing the splits - one claw on one bean pole and one claw on the next. Fully fledged and flying well, the garden will not have a moment's peace and quiet for 3 weeks, then the second brood will come and take over.

14th May - The Great Tits have babies now. Their nest is somewhere at the top of the garden, but I cannot find it.

19th May onwards - Starling "takeover". Everywhere the harassed parents fly, there is a trail of squawking youngsters following. Young Starlings are lined up on the seat of the garden bench looking down between the slats seeing their parents having baths, not knowing how to get to the saucers of water placed beneath. (They do work it out fairly quickly. Young Starlings are very "switched on".)

7th July - I was eating my porridge and looking out of the window, when a large brown shape hurtled out of the sky and landed on the doorstep, with one of our young Starlings in its talons. She sat there for quarter of an hour mantling her kill. She was a female Sparrowhawk, larger in size than the male and brownish in colour, whereas males are greyish. She would have found her meal well stuffed, with our bird food!

Mid July - I am afraid I disturbed a Fox fast asleep under one of our conifers. Not knowing it was there I inadvertently got too close to it, and it shot out from its comfy bed and fled. It was soon back, however, and has cubs which are very playful. The youngsters stole some bunting from a neighbouring garden and proceeded to play with it, dragging it through hedges and over flower beds. We had an even closer encounter a few days later - a beautiful adult came down the garden to the patio and then stood staring through the window while we having our lunch - it was so close I could see its whiskers. The Fox came again that evening to eat some chicken bits. It sat down like a good dog to eat its dinner.



Late July - The young Cherry trees have dreadful blackfly on their shoot tips, so bad that their leaves were all curled up. I decided to cut the worst tips off, and put them in the green waste bin. I went the next morning to finish the job I had begun and, to my horror, dozens of Ladybird larvae had crawled out and were sitting all over the bin. I had to rescue each one individually and put them all on the clean Cherry tree leaves where they clung until they hatched out as adults. I had certainly done my good deed for the day as I had rescued well over a hundred.

Late August - A young female Sparrowhawk has visited, sitting in one of our golden Leyland Cypress trees. She looks slightly fluffy and immature and has stayed still for some time, eying up the garden for future potential bounty, before flying away.

5th September - A Chiff Chaff is bathing in the bird bath near the house. It is incredibly slim and dainty. Since then we have had 3 Chiff Chaffs all interacting with one another. I am sure that they are siblings.

Frances

An unusual beehive



We always have plenty of bees in our garden but this is the first year we have had resident Honey Bees. Having heard and then seen a large swarm of bees come into our garden, we waited until they had decided where to land, with the intention of telephoning the swarm helpline so that someone could come and collect the swarm. Unfortunately the swarm landed high up on the outer branches of one of our tall conifer trees where it would have been impossible to place a ladder safely to reach it. The following day the swarm had gone but we saw lots of bees on the outside of an unoccupied starling box on another tree which could be accessed using a ladder.

Having phoned the swarm help-line, two beekeepers called and decided the only way they could collect the swarm was to remove the nest box from the tree. The bees then became very angry and both beekeepers were stung even though they were fully covered with protective kit. The reason for this unusual aggression became clear when the nest box had been removed from the tree and opened up. Instead of being occupied by a new swarm, the nest box contained honeycomb and honey, showing that it had been used as a hive for some time. The bees in the swarm we saw probably came from the bird box hive because of a lack of sufficient space. The beekeepers said that they had never come across a situation such as this before and that we would have to either put up with the bees continuing to use their bird box hive or treat it as a pest control situation. The last thing we wanted was to have the bees treated as pests, and we opted to have the bird box put back on the tree where it has remained since, guarded by lots of bees on the outside of the box. We are able to visit the garden shed next to the tree and carry out gardening tasks around the tree without the bees taking any notice of us: they just carry on pollinating our garden plants without needing to fly for long distances to collect their pollen. We were told to expect the bees to swarm again as the bird box will again become too crowded, but it hasn't happened yet as far as we know.

We had seen Tree Bumblebees using the bird box on two occasions in the past, but never before has the box been inhabited by Honey Bees.

Roger

Friendly rivalry update

In the last newsletter I said that it looked as if I would beat Harry Wheate in the number of orchids appearing in our respective gardens this year, unless there were other members with more. I did beat Harry with my final total of Common Spotted Orchids, but I then received an email from WWG member Graham Giles saying that if this was a competition, could he enter. I explained that it was not a competition, but said that if it was, I would certainly declare him to be the winner, as he had 6 different species of orchid in his garden.

Wanted - Contributions for the next newsletter

The next WWG newsletter is due to be issued in January 2022. Although I have managed to obtain enough material to issue this and the previous last four newsletters during the Covid19 pandemic, it is getting increasingly difficult to come up with sufficient interesting and relevant new content, particularly whilst our Group is not arranging indoor meetings. Reports on such meetings were one of the main features of our past newsletters, providing a permanent record of those events as well as being of interest to members unable to attend.

I am grateful to those who have managed to provide me with items that I have been able to include in the recent newsletters, and hope that more members will be able to contribute to the contents of future newsletters.

Roger

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Joining Wycombe Wildlife Group

To join our Group, please complete a copy of the form on the right and send to

The Membership Secretary,
15 Cherrywood Gardens,
Flackwell Heath, HP10 9AX

Subscription £6 per annum, if paid
by Standing Order, or £7 per annum,
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Please enrol me as a member of Wycombe Wildlife Group

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NEW standing order instruction:

Account to be debited (your account details)

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Account name

Beneficiary bank and payee details

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Sort Code: 402417 Account number: 92116685

Account name: Wycombe Wildlife Group

Payment details

Amount of payment: £6.00 Six pounds

Frequency: Annually

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