

WYCOMBE and SOUTH BUCKS  
**WILDLIFE NEWS**  
MAY 2023



**Issue 101**  
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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. Illustrations by Frances Wilding.

Photograph of the Wall-rue ferns was taken by the late Maurice Young. The others were taken by Roger Wilding.

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

**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.

The start of the 2023/24 financial year marked a welcome return to business as usual for Wycombe Wildlife Group with indoor members' meetings being held at St Thomas Church Hall in Holtspur and at our new venue Hughenden Valley Village Hall. The cost of hiring both of these venues is about the same, where Friday evening bookings are usually possible. The facilities available at both halls are similar, and both have good parking facilities. Attendance levels at our meetings is gradually improving, although the number of members attending our AGM was very low.

Our activities will continue to follow our normal pattern of having indoor meetings from September to April, with an AGM in May, and outdoor events from the Spring to Autumn. We decided not to arrange a meeting in January 2023 on the basis that in most years it is not a time of year that people, including speakers, want to leave their warm homes, and we are likely to continue with this policy. We have a small Programme Planning Committee which meets as required to discuss ideas for future activities, and if anyone would like to help with ideas for activities, talk subjects and possible speakers, please contact me.

Roger

## **2023 AGM**

Wycombe Wildlife Group's 2023 AGM took place at Hughenden Valley Village Hall on Friday 19th May. After the formal business of accepting the minutes of the last AGM, the Vice Chairman's report and the Financial Statement for the last financial year, the existing Executive Committee members were re-elected for the coming year, together with member Jeff Herschel who offered to stand for election.

This formal part of the meeting was followed by a roundup of wildlife news and an opportunity for members to mention any actions they take which could be considered to contribute towards the Group's charitable aim of conserving the environment, mainly using volunteers, for the benefit of the public. These and other ways in which we could continue to meet this charitable aim will be discussed further at the next meeting of the Executive Committee. After a break for refreshments, Julie Hopton led a bat detecting session outside the village hall and along the paths through the adjoining grassland and scrub.

### **Cover photograph Fritillaries in the wildlife garden**

Although it is impossible to create a fritillary meadow in a garden to match those by the Thames at North Meadow, Cricklade or in Iffley Meadow, Oxford, it is not difficult to create a small colony of these attractive flowers which, when established, will provide a good show each April. Fritillary bulbs can be purchased and planted in cultivated soil as well as in grassland but the bulbs must not be disturbed from when their shoots appear until they have produced seed and died back. Once established, the number of flowers will increase each year as a result of the seed dispersal, although it takes some time for a seed to develop into a bulb.

## Circular walk around The Rye and Holywell Mead led by Frances Wilding

Having decided to include a February walk in the events programme, we chose the morning of Wednesday 8th February and decided to make it a walk around The Rye and Holywell Mead. Having had some very cold and wet weather, as well as some warm days, earlier in the year, we were pleased that the morning we had chosen for the walk was sunny, although there was an early frost.



We had decided on the waterfall at the Holywell Mead end of The Rye Dyke as the meeting place for the walk, as we felt this would be the most convenient location to cater for participants coming from different directions. This arrangement worked well as two of the five participants came from Bourne End and Wooburn Green, one from near Saunderton, and Frances and I walked down from our home. Unfortunately two local members, who were planning to attend, had to drop out due to one feeling unwell.

Although this event had been planned as a bird walk, like most WWG walks it also covered other wildlife and habitat related issues. Our walk followed The Rye side of The Dyke until we reached the boathouse cafe where we turned right to get to the Pann Mill garden. Here we admired the Winter Aconites which were at their best, along with a good show of Sweet Violets, Crocuses, Snowdrops, Daphne and Winter Honeysuckle. We looked at the wall on The Rye side

of the Pann Mill garden where we were pleased to find a Wall-rue, a native species of fern which had survived the regular cleaning of the wall. We also spotted a very small Pellitory-of-the-wall, a plant in the Nettle family, which had also survived and we hoped it would also get a chance to recolonise its former habitat before it is cleared of vegetation regrowth again.

Despite these deviations from the main theme of the walk, we did record the following bird species that were either seen or heard:-

5 Little Grebes

Lots of Coots

1 Mute Swan

2 Mistle Thrushes seen and 2 heard singing in the trees, where there was a good supply of Mistletoe berries

Several Moorhens

3 male and one female Tufted Duck

Numerous other male and female ducks

Song Thrush (heard)

Black-headed Gulls (which had lost the black colouring on their heads, as is normal over winter)

Cormorant swimming on The Dyke and diving for food

Stock Dove calling

Great Tits, Coal Tits and Blue Tits all calling

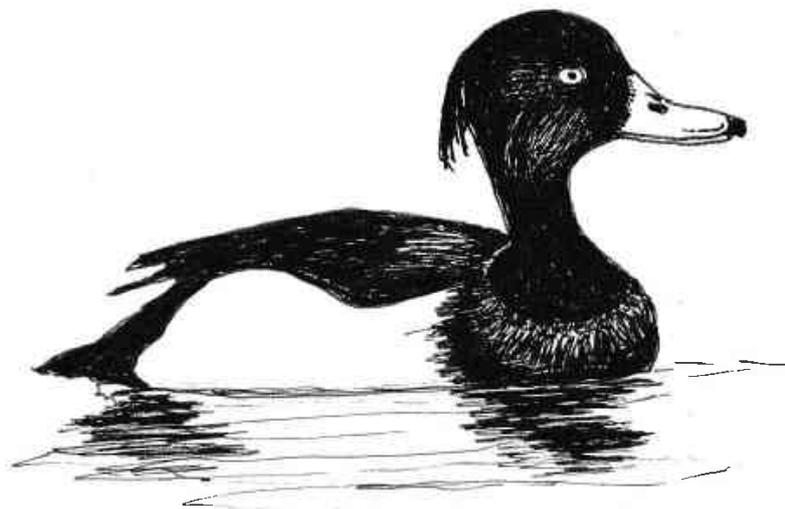


We were disappointed not to see a Little Egret, Heron or Kingfisher, species which are now regularly seen whilst walking around The Rye, but as on many walks and surveys, the species you expect to see do not turn up.

One non member who had attended a recent WWG talk came along and enjoyed the walk. He was very interested to learn about the history of The Rye and Holywell Mead and its watercourses and former mills. We walked as far as Wye Dean where we pointed out the springs in the river and lake, the pipe that takes Wycombe's sewage to Little Marlow for treatment, and the location where the treated water comes back into the Wye.

I am sure all those who came on the walk felt it was a morning well spent.

Roger



## The natural history of a leaf

This was the subject of an excellent talk by Martin Woolner at our Holtspur venue on Friday 10th February. Martin has given us a number of talks in the past and they have all been very interesting and informative, often illustrated by live specimens or high magnification photographs. On this occasion a single leaf was all Martin needed to supplement the photographs and other illustrations used in his presentation.

It is easy to regard a leaf as merely something that appears on a plant, usually early in the year, and then falls and rots, or is swept up, towards the end of the year or in early Spring. Martin's talk made it clear, however, that there is a lot more interest in a leaf than we could have imagined. His talk covered the various types of leaves and the needs they meet, not only for the benefit of their host plant, but for other organisms that feed on, live on or make use of leaves.

Martin started by pointing out that fossil evidence shows that plants have been in existence from around 470 million years ago, and that around 90 million years ago plants were starting to support other forms of life.

There is a lot of variation in the design of a leaf. There are 40 different leaf shapes and around 14 different leaf edges. Smooth leaf edges are more common in warmer regions and leaves with serrated edges are more common in colder regions. We were informed that a leaf is a natural solar panel and that the leaves on a single Oak tree, which number around 200,000, provide around 10 to 18% of the natural 8,000 sq m solar panel the tree provides.



Individual plant leaves vary in length, the longest being those on *Raphia regalis* which are around 25 inches long. The longest plant leaves in the UK are those of *Gunnera* species, although these plants are native to Brazil. The smallest leaves are those of *Wolffia* duckweeds which are only around 1mm in diameter. Although some seaweeds develop long structures, they are algae and not plants.



A leaf is a complicated ecosystem supporting its own wildlife. It can be rolled up by insects to provide a home or to protect eggs, and many plants host plant galls, most of which are the home of minute insects. An Oak tree may support some 40 different galls. Although galls can be found on many parts of a host plant, the leaf is used by many species.

Some insects, such as ants, cut leaves into small pieces and carry them back to their nest to provide a food supply for the colony, and some bee species take small pieces of leaf back to the homes they have created to provide a food source for their young as they develop into adults.

Even when dead leaves have fallen to the ground, they support wildlife, providing shelter and often they become the host of various species of fungi: even conifer needles may host fungi.

Leaves are an important food supply for animals, from large mammals such as Elephants to *Acrotrichis* spp., the smallest beetles in the UK. All parts of a plant can be eaten by wildlife but the leaves are the most digestible. Many caterpillars tend to confine their eating to the leaf edges, and some insects only eat the softer parts of a leaf. Some insects even use a resource management system, eating different parts of a plant at different times. Leaf mines, which are found on leaves, occur when a caterpillar, which has hatched from an egg laid on the surface of a leaf, tunnels into the leaf to feed.

Some plant species have developed ways of preventing insects and other wildlife from eating them by making themselves distasteful or by developing hairs or thorns.

Our thanks go to Martin for such an interesting and informative talk and to everyone who attended this meeting: it was encouraging to have the highest attendance level since we restarted our post Covid events programme.

### **Green Hellebore walk on 4th March**

I usually put this walk in the events programme each year, as I like to see if this rare plant is present at its usual location in the West Wycombe Hill woods and, if it is, to estimate the number of blooms. I have a plant growing in my garden that I purchased many years ago from a Royal Horticultural Society flower show but, for the first time since I bought it, it failed to appear at its usual flowering period in the first week of March this year and did not appear later, so I suspect I may have lost it.

This walk has never been well supported in earlier years, so I was very pleased when several people turned up this year. I took along a photo of the plant that I taken in the past and was pleased that, when we reached the location where the plants are normally found, one of the others was the first to spot one in flower. It soon became clear, however, that I had chosen too early a date for the walk on this occasion.

I offered to show the others a second site where I had seen this species many years ago on a walk led by the late Maurice Young, but none of the others were interested in doing this. As Peter Osborn was familiar with the West Wycombe woods, he offered to walk back with the others to the car park while I checked out the other site. I did locate the area of woodland where Maurice and I saw the Green Hellebore, but there was no trace of any of these plants there and I suspect they are no longer growing there. As the area of woodland where they were seen in the past is private, I did not stray from the public right of way which passes through it.

## Endangered butterfly species

We were pleased to welcome Nick Bowles from Butterfly Conservation as the speaker at our members meeting held at Hughenden Valley Village Hall on Friday 10th March 2023. It was a bitterly cold evening but the snowfalls on the previous few days had cleared away and the driving conditions were back to normal.

Nick started his talk by pointing out that this country is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world and said that we do not do enough to save our wildlife. Our butterflies have suffered an 80% decrease, the worst sufferers being habitat specialists. We were told that Black Hairstreak butterfly numbers have actually increased, but this species is only found in our area, and around 60 colonies will be threatened by proposed developments. The East West Rail link and the Oxford to Cambridge corridor, along with proposed associated business and housing development, will have a serious impact on this species.

Although the White Admiral is still surviving, it is not a species which is easy to spot. Moor End Common and Penn Wood are good local sites to look for it. The Wood White, which flies low down and requires wide woodland rides where the edges are not mown, is still fairly common in our area. The Dark Green Fritillary is also fairly common locally and makes frequent stops to feed. The caterpillars are around longer than the adults and need to be warm to survive. A third of the UK population of the Duke of Burgundy butterfly is found in our area. For this species to thrive, it needs some human intervention to provide small clearings within areas of scrub where primroses and cowslips grow.



Nick pointed out that moths as well as our butterflies are suffering, numbers in southern Britain having reduced by a third. Having brought this serious situation to our attention, Nick went on to tell us about some of the valuable work that is being done to improve habitats for butterflies and moths. He pointed out that lots of people, both adults and children, are involved in carrying out tasks aimed at preserving butterfly numbers. Particular mention was made of the habitat creation tasks being undertaken by the Chiltern Rangers and Forest Schools with funding provided by Butterfly Conservation. Restoring a field for butterfly use usually requires the existing soil to be scraped off and replaced by poor soil and then grazed by sheep. This will result in a habitat suitable for introducing plant species such as Kidney Vetch, Horseshoe Vetch and Dark Mullein which will provide a suitable habitat for many of our butterfly species.

We were interested to learn that the Downland Plume (*Oxyptilus pilosellae*), a daylight flying species of Plume moth which had been declared extinct, had been recorded locally in recent years. The larval food plant of this moth is Mouse-ear Hawkweed (*Pilosella officinarum*) and thought to be restricted to one of its many variants.

Our thanks go to Nick for his informative talk. In his presentation Nick used some material from Butterfly Conservation's report "The State of the UK's Butterflies 2022". Copies of this report can be viewed on or downloaded from Butterfly Conservation's website [butterfly-conservation.org](http://butterfly-conservation.org).

## Talk on The Burren by Dr Brenda Harold

We were pleased to welcome back Dr Brenda Harold as the speaker at our members meeting at St Thomas Church Hall, Holtspur on Friday 21st April. We had an excellent talk by Brenda in 2017 entitled Flower Power which covered topics such as how plants defend themselves against animals and even eat them. On this occasion the subject of Brenda's talk was the Burren, a large area of limestone pavement on the west coast of Ireland.

Brenda told us that she has visited The Burren on four occasions, first as a student, later as a plant expert on a guided tour and her last visit was with a friend. She added that the area had hardly changed since her first visit in the 1960s.

The Burren, a Gaelic word for a rocky place, is one of the largest areas of limestone pavement in Europe and its surface rock is up to 800 metres thick in places. Limestone formed in the Carboniferous period 300 million years ago and originally would have been on the seabed.

Most of the surface rocks in The Burren are flat and this makes it easy to walk on. Although the surface appears to be a bare lunar landscape and there is very little surface water, a rich ground flora grows in the grykes. The Burren gets a lot of rain and has a mild climate: it does not suffer from drought in the summer and the rocks absorb heat. Attempts by Neolithic farmers to grow crops failed, but the land has been used for grazing cattle, sheep and goats for centuries.

Some plants, associated with much higher altitudes, such as Mountain Avens, Spring Gentian and Teesdale Violet can be found at sea level in The Burren. Mountain everlasting, which is only common in northern Scotland, can also be found. Other plant species found here include Early Purple Orchid, Bloody Crane's bill, Burnet Rose, Wild Thyme, Bird's foot Trefoil, Hoary Rockrose, Common Lousewort, Common Butterwort, Greater Butterwort, and Fairy Foxglove. The Dense-flowered Orchid, a Mediterranean species, can be found here and the area attracts both limestone and acid loving plants.

As well as its natural history, The Burren also contains other interesting sites. Brenda showed us photographs of a tomb dating from 300BC and a tower house nearly 100ft high with an entrance high up the building, a ladder being used to access the building. The ladder could be removed when the building was under attack. Plants such as Navelwort and Ivy-leaved Toadflax often grow on the walls of such structures.

The Burren's location on the coast of Galway Bay makes it easy to visit the Aran Islands which stretch across the mouth of the bay. Babington's Leek grows on the islands but not on the mainland. Spring Gentian and Irish Marsh Orchids can be found here, and it is not unusual to find Mediterranean species growing alongside alpine species. The islands have achieved international fame for the sweaters produced there and exported around the world.

It was clear that The Burren is a location with a huge amount of wildlife, scenic and historical interest, and we were very grateful to Brenda for giving us such an interesting talk.

Roger

## Bluebell walk in Sands on 22nd April

Until a few years ago, bluebell walks were usually arranged in early May but, in the last few years, the flowers have been at their best in the last week of April. With the unseasonal weather we experienced earlier this year it was difficult to judge what would be the best time to arrange this year's bluebell walk. Having set aside Saturdays 22nd and 29th April as the two most convenient weekend dates for this year's walk and, having had a gut feeling that the flowering period would be early this year, I fixed the date of our bluebell walk as 22nd April. As this date got nearer, I kept looking at the bluebells in our garden and kept an eye on those I saw in the wild and was beginning to think I had chosen the wrong date this year. Having passed by the roadside woods between Marlow and Henley on 21st April, I was pleased to see a carpet of blue and ceased to worry.

As advertised in our events programme I delayed the decision as to which of the two woods in Sands we should visit until the start of the walk when we could take into account the wishes of the participants. As only Peter Bailey and I turned up for the walk, we were both happy to visit both High Barbers Wood and Sands Wood where there had been good bluebell displays last year. We visited High Barbers Wood first and although we found plenty of bluebells in flower, they had not developed sufficiently to provide a good display. We walked on through Sunters Wood and followed the public footpath which follows the edge of Hellbottom Wood to get to Sands Bank Local Nature Reserve and entered the eastern end of Sands Wood where the Bluebells grow. We were pleased to find that there were lots of bluebells in flower and that the flowering was sufficiently advanced to provide a spectacular display, although a few more days later they would have been at their best. This would have pleased the Secretary of the Sands Residents Association, who had contacted me a few weeks before to discuss the dates of our respective bluebell walks this year, and decided to hold their walk a week later.

Peter, who had not visited that part of Sands Wood was most impressed and said he would add that walk to his list of local exercise routes.

There are plenty of interesting walks in the Sands area and I have been planning to add a Sands Round Walk to our website for some time to join the Round Wycombe Walk. I have planned the route of the walk which will cover Desborough Castle, Castlefield Wood, Rowliiff Wood, Five Acre Wood, Round Wood, High Barbers Wood, Sunters Wood, Sands Bank Local Nature Reserve (including Sands Wood), the Chapel Lane follies including the Pepperpots Bridge and St Crispins mock church, Gilletts Lane and Desborough Recreation Ground, passing former mill sites and improved chalk streams, and back to Desborough Castle via Fryers Lane.

The biggest problem with walks in the Sands area is the difficulty of finding somewhere to park if using a car, a problem not just on days when there is a football match at Adams Park. I find the most reliable way of getting to Sands and back is on foot or using the 32 bus service which runs every 20 minutes between Micklefield and Booker (Asda) via Dashwood Avenue, Mill End Road, New Road, and Bookerhill Road. Hopefully I will find some time in the Winter months to complete this task.

## **Finings Wood Community Group commences its fundraising activities to purchase this wood for the benefit of the Lane End public**

Those who attended our 2022 AGM will recall a short presentation given by two members of Lane End Conservation Group who attended the meeting and told us about plans to try to raise sufficient money to purchase Finings Wood at Lane End for the benefit of the public. This wood has now been put on the market for offers over £600,000 and there is a risk that it could be purchased by a company that would then sell small parcels of the woodland to individual buyers who would be able to fence off the areas they had purchased and use them for whatever purpose they wished. Finings Wood Community Group has been formed to co-ordinate action to try to raise sufficient funds to enable the wood to be purchased and used to meet needs suggested by local organisations and residents.

On Sunday 23rd April, the Community Group arranged two sponsored walks to commence their fundraising efforts. The longest of these was around 7 miles long, starting and finishing at the Lane End Village hall and passing through a part of Finings Wood and an adjoining privately owned wood and incorporating some of the most scenic footpaths between Lane End, Moor End, Fingest, Cadmore End and Wheeler End. The highlight of the walk, which I remembered from when I walked the Chiltern Way, was the view looking down on the village of Fingest with Cobstone Mill on the hillside above the nearby village of Turville.

After an easy stroll along the wildflower-rich roadside verge east of Fingest, the most challenging section of the walk followed where the public footpath ascends from the Fingest Valley through Hanger Wood to Cadmore End. Crossing two bridges over the M40 motorway enabled Cadmore End and Wheeler End Commons to be incorporated in the walk, providing an opportunity to admire the well-managed ponds there whilst taking advantage of one of the benches that have been placed there, for a last rest before completing the walk. The offer of a free cup of tea and an opportunity to purchase a cheeseburger from the barbecue at the end of the walk was very welcome.

I was very impressed with the way the event had been organised, with the route being clearly signed and volunteers stationed at locations where it was considered walkers might experience problems with the route or where it was necessary to cross a road. I was surprised to see two donkeys at one of the woodland locations but their owners pointed out that donkeys enjoy woodland walks just as much as dogs. A shorter walk was available so that families with young children would also be able to take part and a number of dogs seemed very happy to support the event.

I understand that the organisers considered that this fundraising activity was a success, but clearly the amount raised and the funds already in the bank is only the start of the process of raising the money needed to purchase Finings Wood. I was told that getting grants to manage the wood once it is purchased is likely to be easier than getting the financial support needed for the initial purchase of the wood.

We wish the Finings Wood Community Group all the best in their efforts to raise the necessary funds to be able to purchase the wood which, if successful, will I am sure complement and benefit the local countryside and its wildlife as well as provide opportunities for local leisure activities.

Roger

**Wildlife sightings reported  
Mid January 2023 to end of May 2023**

16/17 January	Male Fox barking in tree belt at rear of Deeds Grove garden
18 January	Female Greenfinch looking for nest site in Deeds Grove garden
23 January	Male Tawny Owl calling for about a week at rear of Deeds Grove garden
24 January	2 Male Tawny Owls calling at rear of Deeds Grove garden
26 January	Blackbird singing in Deeds Grove garden Dunnocks singing and courting in Deeds Grove garden
2 February	Greenfinch “wheezing” and Great Tit “sawing” in Deeds Grove garden
15 February	2 hares chasing each other over fields between West Wycombe and Princes Risborough
17 March	Chaffinch singing in Deeds Grove garden
21 March	Brimstone butterfly in Flackwell Heath garden
22 March	Brimstone butterfly in Carver Hill Road garden
12 April	Morel ( <i>Morchella esculenta</i> ), a fairly uncommon edible fungus, appeared on the front lawn of a house in Hughenden Valley but was eaten by some animal overnight.
12 April	Mistle Thrush, Goldcrest and Nuthatch singing on The Rye
13 April	Small Tortoiseshell in Deeds Grove garden
1 May	Blue Tits, Great Tits, Robins and Blackbirds in Deeds Grove garden all have young
15 May	4 baby Robins in Deeds Grove garden
17 May	White-tailed Eagle seen flying over Tylers Green Common in the late afternoon
20 May	Goldcrests heard in Deeds Grove garden



