



NEWSLETTER 17 September 2008

Chair's Column

Hello everyone. I am writing this in late August. It's cold, windy and pouring with rain. So much for summer! Valerie and I have just returned from a walking break in Dorset. On our first day the only wildlife we saw on our rain-swept ridge path was a poor bedraggled Magpie moth trying to seek shelter in the nettles. However we did get to see a good sized flock of Cirl Buntings and lots Wall Brown butterflies the following day. The only consolation is this rain keeps Sheepwash nice and full. If you haven't been there yet please find the time for a visit to 'your' pond. We will be starting the next stage of the project soon. It involves the installation of a dipping platform over the shallow end of the pond.

Well, the main news this time round has to be our community orchard. It will be known as Kiln Common Orchard. Funding has been approved and things are very much underway. The project will feature on television in September complete with our very own George Lewis planting the first tree! Well done George. There are more details on page 8.

Our list of project titles really is growing rapidly - it now fills an A4 sheet. It's amazing how much we have achieved in a few short years - thanks to your support. Have a good read of this newsletter and give yourself a gold medal for being a part of a small but increasingly influential local charity.

Happy wildlife hunting! Hope to see you at the AGM.

John Obee



Autumn Beech, Traveller's Joy and Oak Leaves (Photos T & V Marshall)

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From the Editor

The changing seasons bring different tasks for Prestwood Nature. The surveys and recording of summer mostly give way to conservation and work parties in the autumn. Another busy programme is planned. We will welcome you at any or all events.

MEMBERS' NEWS

The last few months have not been the most conducive to new observations, with a predominantly wet summer to rival last year's. Nevertheless, the number of new records, some of them very exciting, shows no sign of letting up. Congratulations to everyone who has got out between the storms and remembered to tell us about what they saw!

It is unusual to be brought one dead bat for identification, but two dead bats since June is notable. (It is notoriously difficult to identify bats to species level without a specimen in hand.) One had been long gone and was already mummified, found by **David Page** in the church of Holy Trinity in Prestwood. By checking the facial and other details this was quite clearly a common pipistrelle. The other bat was recently dead and brought from Stony Green by **Virginia Deradour**. I was at the farm, so I popped it in a plastic bag in my rucksack and it was not for several hours that I got back home to find the bag now contained a writhing mass of maggots! It was not the most pleasant of jobs to examine the body in detail, but it fortunately did not take long to confirm it as a common long-eared bat, the first we have been able to determine for certain in this area, although they are probably numerous. Hedgehogs cannot fly (fortunately), but they are nocturnal. But not the one Val and I saw at midday in Moat Lane happily grubbing about in the gutter. When we returned later there was no squashed carcass, so we must presume the lucky chap survived.



It did not take long for the water plants to return to Boug's Meadow once the stream started to flow this spring, even if they had not appeared for over ten years. In this area, where waters are inclined to dry up from time to time, most water plants have long-lasting seeds capable of remaining dormant in the soil for decades, if not centuries. It was good to see blue water-speedwell, water-cress and reed canary-grass back straight away, although I had

hoped we would also see water forget-me-not. Nevertheless, the water-speedwell brought in a scarce (nationally notable) weevil that galls the seed-pods - Gymnetron villosulum. The galled pods are easy to see, as they are large and globular, whereas normal seed-pods are small, flat and heart-shaped.

High water levels and a developing fauna (frogs produced lots of offspring and I also found young newts, proving they too had been breeding already, and egg-laying dragonflies) at our newly-restored Sheepwash have attracted mallards and coot regularly and **Fiona Grant** saw mandarin duck there at the end of May - probably the same pair that **Ian Waller** saw on the pond on his farm. While we are on birds, **Peter Daltry** again reports ravens flying over on 1 June - sightings of these are getting more frequent, but frustratingly they are usually flying away! I must also report a record from September 2006, that I regrettably lost at the time, of seven marsh tits seen by veteran birdman **John Obee** in Grubbins Plantation, a record accepted by the Bucks Bird Club "fairly rare sightings group". Sorry, John.

John Smith again reported more flowers from his rambles around Great Missenden. The common broomrape appeared again in the field below Angling Spring - this parasite (principally on clovers) does not appear every year, but this spot has recently been a reliable one. He also saw common spotted orchid and pyramidal orchid at new sites in the Broomfield area. Helping to take out the old rabbit-proof fences in Angling Spring Wood at our work-party on 7 June I spotted a clump of lady fern, a plant with very few records around here and a nice addition to the records for the wood. We also joined the North Bucks Bat Group survey of the wood on 22 May, but the only definite record seems to be common pipistrelle, possibly because there are not enough old hollow roosting trees to attract more species - something to note for future management plans. Some of the fields on **Ian Waller's** Hampden Bottom Farm are also developing a more diverse flora - the greater butterfly orchid re-appeared and we added clustered bellflower, first for the farm (it is

having a good year at the Picnic Site too), and pyramidal orchid in two new fields. The same two fields also had glow-worms. Crop-edges had a profusion of round-leaved fluellen in one field, which was replaced by its close relative sharp-leaved fluellen in the neighbouring one. **Christine Hoskins** reports that bee orchids appeared in her meadow for the first time this year, probably because it was the first year for some time without any sheep to eat them off! On 29 May I spotted slender trefoil on the lawn of one of our members in Upper Hollis - only the second existing site for our area at the time, although I found a third at Missenden Abbey a few days later (see separate article below). It was recorded at Holy Trinity churchyard in 1996 and has not been refound: there is a good chance it is still there, but you have to look close to the ground for tiny yellow flowers.

Some very good insect records came our way. Firstly **Peter Daltry** captured a brightly coloured black-and-yellow crane-fly by Longfield Wood, which I identified as *Ctenophora pectinicornis*, a nationally rare species frequenting old woods, where the larvae live in old rotting trees. This is the second notable species of *Ctenophora* we have recorded around here in the last few years - warmer wetter seasons may be suiting them. Not your average dowdy daddy-long-legs, these are welcome additions to our fauna. Even rarer was the "False slender-footed robber-fly" *Leptarthrus vitripennis* that I spotted at Perks Lane Picnic Site on 15 July, on an otherwise disappointing day searching for uncommon butterfly caterpillars. This was the first record for Bucks and only about the eighth time this fly has ever been seen in Britain. It is a slender hairy black fly with orange legs. It had only been seen before on downs south of the Thames. Peter did a stint in one of Ian's fields for his Farm Open Day, introducing families to the wildlife to be seen there. In the process he recorded wasp beetle, cream-spot ladybird, and common cockchafer.

It may have been a poor year for spotting butterflies on the wing (we shall see how poor when we get the results of this year's transect

in the January newsletter), and no-one saw any of the usual green hairstreak at the Picnic Site, but they were obviously around when no-one was looking because **Christine Hoskins** was sufficiently eagle-eyed to spot their caterpillars on the dogwood there. My only success was when I went to the chalk bank at Flowers Bottom, Speen, which was recently demarcated as Open Access. Last year I saw there was a patch of kidney vetch, the food-plant of the increasingly rare small blue. I returned on 5 June this year to see if the butterfly was around and had to wait for a couple of hours before it warmed up enough, with plenty of other butterflies flying already, for the first small blue to reveal itself, right in the middle of the kidney vetch. This is the only site in Prestwood Nature's area for both the plant and the butterfly. The only problem is that we have no say in the management of this meadow and it is owned by some people who keep horses there. Some of the vegetation has already been damaged by herbicide probably put down to kill off ragwort, and very close to the kidney vetch as well. It is a potential Local Wildlife Site and we shall have to hope that the County Wildlife Sites Officer can manage to contact the owners and come to some agreement with them before this important site is ruined. Apart from small blue I also saw dingy skipper there (as also at the Picnic Site), our first record for another plant, hairy rock-cress, the yellow-banded black hoverfly *Chrysotoxum bicinctum* that seems to be turning up on all our good grassland sites nowadays, and an uncommon weevil that feeds on ribwort plantain, *Gymnetron pascuorum* (the second rare member of this genus to be found this year, see above).

Tony Marshall

ACTIVITIES REPORTS

Missenden Abbey and its Surrounds

PN had a joint trip with the Bucks Invertebrates Group (BIG) to the land around Great Missenden parish church on 31 May. We had some sun, but previous rainy weather limited what we could find. We were able to see the brittle bladder fern at its only Bucks site on the church itself and also the white helleborines in

the churchyard below and in the scrub above. One of the BIG members spotted dog's mercury leaves full of little holes, the result of feeding by a tiny weevil *Hermaeophaga mercurialis* that specialises on this plant. Dog's mercury is poisonous (hence the mercury name), so the beetle has little competition but somehow manages to cope with the poisons. In the derelict churchyard above the church, which is good for wildlife, we found another orchid, common twayblade, 2- and 24-spot ladybirds and pied shieldbugs. Appropriately, we also saw the large Mullein Moth caterpillar on a mullein flower-spike.

We crossed the road at Frith Hill to explore Chalkdell Wood, belonging to the Woodland Trust. This shelters the steep banks of a former medieval homestead (possibly the site of the Manor of Missenden itself or a pre-Christian temple) and is also on the hard chalk-rock that was quarried here for building. We found orange, kidney-spot and 22-spot ladybirds here, but not the stag beetles we were searching. The wood seemed too dark and unpromising to stay long and we then returned to the church and into the portion of the old Missenden Abbey Park that lies east of the by-pass.

This grassland has some old trees like the more familiar part of the park by the Misbourne, including specimens of oak, sycamore, horse-chestnut and lime all over 4 metres girth, many hundreds of years old. Here we added further to our ladybird tally with 14-spot, 16-spot, cream-spot, pine and the dreaded harlequin. The trees support rare beetles that need old standing deadwood, like the weevil *Curculio glandium* on oak, *Ischnomera cyanea*, and the chequered beetle *Tillus elongatus*, the last two both nationally notable species. The creviced bark of an old oak trunk yielded a tiny plant-bug *Cyllecoris histrionicus*, the lichen *Platismatia glauca*, and tree slugs still active after all the rain. We also saw the green tortoise beetle *Cassida vibex*, which feeds on knapweed and thistle, and garden chafers, whose control of flight is not the most advanced, so they keep blundering into one. Nettles under a

group of old sycamores provided the perfect home for the plant-bug *Deraeocoris flavilinea*, which feeds on both. This was only seen in this country for the first time in 1996 and in Bucks in 2000, so it is another addition to the increasingly long list of insects colonising this country with the changing climate.

We did not get time to look into Rook Wood on the other side of the park, where there were forestry operations going on in any case, with considerable damage to the ground flora. I had looked there the day before and found a stand of box-trees that might be a native colony - difficult to tell because most bushes of box are garden escapes. There are also remains of a large rectangular ditched settlement here, presumably medieval.

On the 10th June Val and I got permission to survey the grounds of Missenden Abbey itself to follow up some interesting old plant records. Although we could not confirm a second site for brittle bladder fern (the old record may just have been a mistake for the church), we found other ferns - maidenhair spleenwort, soft shield-fern, and our only local site for rustyback (picture p9), still flourishing on the flint walls of the ha-ha. We also found whitlow-grass (not common around here), long-headed poppy, fan-leaved water crowfoot, narrow-fruited water-cress, field madder, slender trefoil, keeled-fruited cornsalad and grey field-speedwell. Even so, 50% of the rarer plants on the old list could not be found, and we only added a few new ones, so there has been a net loss, perhaps because the grounds are kept tidier than before or are more heavily used. It remains an important plant area, however. The old kitchen gardens are now in a ruined state - it would be good if these could be restored to supply fresh local food for the conference centre. One final interesting feature was a good example of chicken-of-the-woods, the large bright yellow bracket-fungus familiar on old cherry trees, here growing on a large yew - another of its traditional hosts. Next time you attend an event here, take time out to look around the natural features as well.

Tony Marshall



Butterfly Walk 26 July 2008

A group of about a dozen turned up, including a couple who had picked the event up from the local paper, on what should have been an ideal warm and sunny day. Unfortunately the weather earlier in the summer had resulted in low emergences and numbers were much sparser than they should have been - normally at this time of year one is seeing hundreds at a time, but this year it was more like a dozen or so. We searched three sites that are part of the regular Butterfly Transect (passing Sue Devlin, one of our regular transect walkers, at one point). We eventually managed to see 11 species, all of them common, but were hard-stretched to achieve even that because the ringlets were very worn and obviously just at the end of their season and the peacocks were only just emerging. Meadow and hedge browns dominated. At least we were able to practice our skills at distinguishing the browns and ringlets, and even take a close look at the difference in the antennal clubs of the Essex and small skippers (the only way to separate them)!

Wildlife Open Gardens 22 June

We owe a big THANK YOU to all our hosts for the afternoon - George & Christine Lewis, Christine & Norman Hoskins, Mr & Mrs Hedley and Sylvia Bennett. These are all special gardens and yet all so different. With "infilling" all the rage, our garden spaces are becoming ever more precious.

SPOTLIGHT ON WREN DAVIS FARM, PRESTWOOD

It was announced this year that Nanfan Wood has qualified as a "Local Wildlife Site" (LWS), which gives some protection in planning matters, as well as management advice. It is on the Wren Davis farm, where it joins two other sites that already have the same designation. This is

therefore an opportune time to take a look at the farm's wildlife areas.

Nanfan Wood used to be part of a continuous wood above the dry valley where Hampden Road runs. Suspended on the steep chalk slope it was a "hanger", from which Hangings Lane and Collings Hanger Farm both took their names. Parts of this wood survive further south as Meadsgarden and Longfield Woods. The Nanfan section became isolated in the late 18th and early 19th centuries when many woods were felled for growing crops. At this time the wood was narrower and what is now the eastern half of the wood was ploughed land. It was owned by the Nanfan family living at Nanfans Grange, and the wood acquired the name of Nanfans. In the first half of the C19th a Mrs Mayhew bought this whole farm and she planted an extension to the wood. In 1840 the tithe map marked the northern part as Clay Markins Wood and the southern part as Stocklands Furze (both after neighbouring fields). The description as "Furze" is interesting, as this was the local name for gorse, indicating that it must have been open woodland with pasture and scattered trees.

Some of this new wood was felled and returned to crops before 1880 (when the earlier name was resumed for the whole wood, Nanfan without the final "s"), but by 1900 it had become a pine plantation. This pine crop was taken off before 1950 and replaced by broadleaf trees, including many wild cherries, and only a few of the original pines are still standing. It was owned by the Liberty family from the Lee (owners of the London shop) after 1950 until about 1980, when it was sold to a Mr Smith of Wycombe who illegally clear-felled the southern end. Its fortunes looked up again when Wren Davis bought it in the 1980s.

The most important parts of the wood for plants and wildlife are the oldest towards the eastern edge, where a permissive path gives a close view and joins up the rights of way that cross through the centre of the wood and along the northern edge. Here are the oldest trees and one often sees roe deer and badger. The eastern edge of the wood is also ancient because

it has always been a major ancient double hedge that marked the discontinued boundary between Hughenden (Brands Fee section) and Great Missenden parishes. This can still be followed by footpath from Hangings Lane to Stony Green. This hedge contains scarce plants like wild service tree, tutsan and orpine.

Another small part of the ancient wood almost adjoins Nanfans Wood at Stony Green. Stonygreen Wood is also part of the Wren Davis farm and has a large old pit from which chalk-rock used to be taken for building, including the floors of the barns at Stony Green farm. This pit is mentioned in the "Memoir" that accompanies the first modern geological map of Britain as the site of an exposure of chalk-rock, which can only be seen at a few places. Below the wood is a beautiful chalk grassland slope known as Chalkpits or Stonygreen Bank, which has unusual plants like sainfoin, small scabious, clustered bellflower and common spotted orchids. This bank was once part of the woodland stretching along the valley, although there is evidence that it also was open pasture woodland, not closed beechwood, and would always have had a good grassland flora. It was cleared somewhere around 1850 and does not seem ever to have been ploughed. This is the second LWS on the farm.



The third LWS is south of there, Meads (sometimes Mays) Garden Field, the chalk slope beneath Meadsgarden Wood. There is no public access, but we are allowed to carry out our butterfly transect through here, and it is one of the best sections for butterflies. It was ploughed land in 1840, but was later allowed to become pasture. Wren Davis used to keep cows here. It has had a large colony of ox-eye daisies (local name dog daisies), cowslips and marjoram for a long time, but careful management in recent years is allowing a good chalk grassland flora to develop, helped by its vicinity to the Perks Lane Picnic Site, from which that

beautiful plant yellow-wort has spread in the last year or two - a cluster of bright yellow flowers tops a stem with smooth grey leaves around it in a cup. This is the only site in Prestwood Nature's area for two plants - large wild thyme and common valerian. Two years ago we saw Duke of Burgundy fritillary butterflies here, whose caterpillars feed on cowslips, but two wet summers may have stopped them colonising for the moment.

There are other notable areas on the farm. The orchard beside Collings Hanger Farm, plus the field south of there, contains the greatest part of a large colony of corky-fruited water-dropwort, a parsley-like plant of dryer cow pasture. This is the only site for it in the whole county and for a large distance beyond that (it is mainly a plant of south Hampshire, Dorset and west Somerset). Three members of the Bucks Rare Plant Group (Tony and Val Marshall and Roger Kemp) carried out a survey of the colony in July and estimated at least 300,000 plants, in the main area at a density of 30 per square metre. It thrives here, but we do not know, if it has always been there, why the colony has not managed to spread any more widely. If it was here in early Victorian times, then it would have been the orchard that was where it survived, because all the other fields around the farm were arable land, not pasture. The orchard was not planted until around 1890, so a few remaining decrepit cherry trees may date back to then. There are also some old apple varieties and new planting ensures that the orchard will survive.

The above fields can only be visited on the farm's popular Open Days, which occur several times a year, but the final field of note, Prestwood Park, has a footpath through its northern end from the church, which enables anyone to see a rare specimen of Lucombe oak, planted about 1850 from cuttings from the original tree that was developed at Lucombe Park, Devon, by hybridising Spanish cork oak with Turkey oak. It has somewhat corky bark and the strange habit of keeping its green leaves throughout the winter and dropping them in spring! It has a Tree Preservation Order, but

PHOTO PAGE



Pyramidal orchid (V.Marshall) p2



Bee Orchid (V.Marshall) p3



Ox-eye daisies in Meads Garden Field (V.Deradour) p6



Sainfoin on Stonygreen Bank (V.Deradour) p6



Common Blue on Marjoram (V.Deradour) p6



Corky-fruited Water Dropwort in Fryer's Field (V.Deradour) p6



Common Spotted Orchid (V.Marshall) p2



Rustyback Fern, Missenden Abbey (T Marshall) p4

it is in little danger under the present ownership, as the farm is maintaining the park-like structure by planting more trees to replace those that have grown old and died. Two arable fields, Lawrence Close and Roberts, were purchased from Knives Farm by the first rector, Thomas Evetts, of Holy Trinity church when it was founded in 1849. They were combined by felling the hedge between them, except for a line of old oaks, and allowing it to return to grassland. Evetts planted other groups of trees that still survive, including Turkey oak, sweet and horse chestnuts, lime and beech. One of the lime trees has mistletoe growing at the top. The parkland, with close groups of trees, was no doubt intended to encourage game, as Evetts was keen on sport shooting. I am sure woodcock, snipe and grey partridge would have been common around here in his day. It became part of Collings Hanger Farm in the late C19th, when the church's finances diminished.

We are lucky that Wren Davis have always used their land sensitively and not intensively, thus preserving these valuable sites while still making a living off the land. Many such sites have long disappeared in other places.

Tony Marshall

PROJECTS

Kiln Common Orchard Gets Funding

Kiln Common is the name we have given to our new orchard off Greenlands Lane. Kiln Common was the centre of the old Prestwood hamlet, with one of its oldest houses, Ladyboys (earlier Cats Croft), on the east side and Hampden Farm on the west side. It was enclosed in the late 18th century and included the brickworks which gave it its name. The allotments are the sole surviving fragment of this common land, so it seems appropriate to preserve the name. Having "Common" in the name also emphasises that it is a community orchard, open to all.

We have just heard that we have been successful in getting lottery funding (Awards For All) so that we shall be up and running in the autumn (see Dates for Your Diary). Anyone will be able to sponsor a tree, possibly to commemorate someone, and we will put up a simple plaque with the date of planting and names of the tree, the sponsor, and, if relevant, the person commemorated. You will also be invited to help plant it.

If you would like to sponsor a fruit tree, a list of the currently available varieties that were known to have been grown locally is available from Tony Marshall (01494 864251 or ecorocker@gmail.com). Make your choice and send a cheque for £30 (£25 for Prestwood Nature members). Just one of each variety will be planted this year to ensure we get a proper mix (certain varieties need certain other types for cross-pollination), but there will be further plantings according to people's selections in future years.

The BBC filmed George Lewis planting a Prestwood Black cherry at the site (generously donated by Bernwode Plants) for a programme on traditional orchards. They also filmed in the Collings Hanger Orchard. There is no news as yet as to when this will be shown.

You can also buy one of the old varieties for your own garden - they are all on dwarf rooting stock. Contact Bernwode Plants on 01844 237415, or at www.bernwodeplants.co.uk.



Sheepwash

The restoration of the Sheepwash has gone well, helped by the wet summer keeping water-levels very high. Apart from amphibians, dragonflies and birds (see Members' News) the pond has also immediately recruited two species of water-boatman and beetles of both water and wet margins. It is remarkable how these creatures immediately locate a new habitat like this. This is especially so for the molluscs - perhaps they came in on the feet of birds that did not clean their wellies. We have wandering pond snail and two types of pea-mussel already. It is possible that they lived in small numbers in the prior marsh, as those currently present are all inhabitants of impoverished water bodies. The pond snail might also have been brought in with plants.

While we may have carried out substantial planting - and these introduced species have established themselves well so far - there are just as many plants that have come back by themselves from seeds long buried in the mud brought up by the excavation. These include many specimens of greater spearwort, two species of water-crowfoot, and celery-leaved buttercup. Many of these grew in the mud well above the water-line, so we made sure they survived by moving some down into the water. The

blackcurrant already there (a native marshland plant) has also survived. In many ways those that have returned of their own accord are more valuable than the ones we planted. We have carried out a complete survey of the flora this summer and we shall monitor the natural change in plant populations (and wildlife) from year to year. It is therefore important that we try to ensure that nothing is introduced that we do not know about and approve - in fact further introductions are now unnecessary: we already have a diverse and flourishing ecology that is self-sustaining.

The Great Missenden and Prestwood Revitalisation Group raised money for further improvements - a dipping platform, path and life-belt. We shall be installing these, the first with the help of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, this October (see Dates for your Diary). We hope to get a good turn-out of helpers as usual.

One of our fears seems at least to have been ungrounded. Even during the drier spells the water-level has remained high, so it is obvious that the lining of the pond is intact. Lack of water over the last decade or more had therefore been caused by too many tree-roots abstracting water and choking up by rotting leaves. Nevertheless, a very dry summer will inevitably lead to lower water-levels and we shall have to keep a close watch on the pond from now on, and regularly take out excess vegetation, which will be an annual requirement. Fortunately, we should be able to sell these plants on for other pond restoration projects and produce an income that can be ploughed back into pond-and equipment-maintenance.



Learning As We Go

Nature conservation is far from an exact science. Working with complex ecological systems, it is often difficult to know how best to intervene. Since PN started five years ago, we have gained some valuable experience, but we still feel that conservation is a journey into the dark, and it is always with trepidation that we initiate new projects. The **Sheepwash** restoration has so far been a huge success, partly because we had excellent professional help (and we could only get that by applying for sufficient grant aid), and partly because we were

bold in our execution of a well-worked-out and radical plan. As conservationists we do not like taking out so many mature trees, and the excavation made it all look like a building-site - I must admit I was at one time thinking "Oh my, what have we done?" But it was a matter of deciding between a scrubbed-over muddy hole (good for a few nesting birds, not much else) and a proper pond with a diverse fauna and flora. If we had just fiddled about at the edges (as we have sometimes) we would have got nowhere.

Looking back, I can see that we started our work at **Boug's Meadow** precipitately. We had a plan, but we did not have major funding in place (we were only successful in raising money for the notice-board), and we did not fully realise the magnitude of the task - starting with a degraded green space and trying to turn it into an environmentally valuable meadow. We should have been bolder and stripped out the entire elder in the copse and taken off the entire turf of the meadow, starting again from scratch as at the Sheepwash. We shall get there eventually, but it continues to be an uphill battle and we could have saved ourselves a lot of anguish.

The same happened at **Sprinters**, our attempt to found a model wildlife garden. We did not realise the extent to which the tough weeds had a hold there and how devastating rabbits can be (we should have known from our experience at Boug's). Fortunately we quickly realised that our low-key approach was not going to work and we have now gone back to the drawing-board: getting professional advice, drawing up a bold plan to transform the garden area and its surrounds, and seeking funding to take this forward. If we are successful in our funding bid, we could be in a position to start the more constructive work with volunteers next spring.

At **Prestwood Picnic Site** many of us have spent many hours year after year manually removing dogwood which grows back even more strongly the following summer. It is a demoralising task - although if we had not been doing it there would have been no open grassland left by now. But one thinks there must be some better way. Grazing would be an obvious option, but that involves a raft of problems - where to get animals, the huge cost of secure fencing, supervision of the animals, and the effects of dog-walkers. Wycombe Rangers, who run the site, are developing a new management plan and we are pressing them to look at more radical solutions. One thing is sure - with the voluntary work we are able to do currently, even assuming that we can get people out there time after time, the reserve is gradually deteriorating. We are only slowing down the rate of

deterioration; we are certainly not stemming the tide. So we have taken the tough decision - this year there are no work sessions planned at this site. There are better ways of spending our time. When we have a new management plan from Wycombe Rangers, we shall gladly see how volunteers can help bring it to fruition.

We have done a lot of pond clear-outs, somewhat indiscriminately, largely in response to pressure from local residents. Some have worked well (although with all ponds one needs to keep up the work from year to year, as their natural tendency is to become marsh, then thicket, then woodland), but others have frankly been a waste of time because either the lining is no longer effective, they are no longer receiving enough water, or they are too shaded. We now take a tough look before considering whether to work on a pond, and in many cases, as with the Sheepwash, it is only worthwhile if one analyses the problems, comes up with a plan for tackling them, gets the resources necessary, and sticks to a bold approach.

We work with *our* time and *other people's* money - both are limited. We need to make sure we use them with maximum efficiency and that means making tough decisions about what is worthwhile and what is not. The PN Council is working towards a more integrated plan for future work, with a business-like decision-making process that weighs potential gains against time and money costs. We have already made a difference, but the destructive forces around us continue and we need to ensure that we make an even bigger difference in future.

Tony Marshall

ALIENS IN PRESTWOOD

by Peter Daltry

Chapter 2 Mice and Rats

The **Harvest mouse** *Micromys minutus* was introduced after the last Ice Age sometime but no-one claims it. It is not known in present day Scotland and is distributed from Yorkshire southwards. Whilst it is known as the harvest mouse it is not entirely dependent on corn to survive. Populations exist in marshy areas and frequently in the long grass in hedgerows. Within the Prestwood area there is potentially suitable habitat on set-aside and field margins. It had not been reported from our area since 1980 until Tony Marshall saw one in Monkton Wood in April this year [see Newsletter 16].



House mouse: more records needed!

Similarly the **House Mouse** *Mus musculus* was also introduced into Britain after the last Ice Age, at least since the pre-Roman Iron Age, and is widely distributed; it can be locally abundant in suitable habitats, which are not always houses. Hayricks and corn-stores used to be favourite hang-outs as well as lofts and behind the kitchen units. One scientist in 1946 counted over 2000 in one haystack! Modern farming methods presumably have changed the population density of the house mouse but in ideal situations the population can double every two months! Evidence suggests the presence of house mice means low or no density of brown rats. Every cloud has a silver-lining. Within the Prestwood area the house mouse is under-recorded but they are out there!

I hate rats! The **Common or Brown Rat** *Rattus norvegicus* was introduced at the start of the 18th century (1728 or thereabouts) in shipping from Russia. It has done remarkably well, prospering particularly in the 19th century and can now be found with few exceptions throughout Britain. It avoids hilly or mountainous areas, perhaps because they are too cold or lacking food supplies, and has not made it to some of the smaller islands. It does well in the countryside feeding on animal food, grain and crops, but not oil-seed rape, and in towns it eats whatever it can find.

There is a much quoted saying that there is the equivalent of one rat per person in the UK and that in urban environments you are never more than 15feet (approx. 4.5m) away from a rat. Within the Prestwood area...yes, we do have them! Look out for road-kills in autumn when they are at their highest population density or worse still, a real live squeaking one.

Another rat is the **Black or Ship Rat** which was introduced before the 13th century, did very well for itself and then had some bad luck; it didn't get on with the Brown Rat. Even

so, it was still the commonest rat in London in 1780 but by 1890 it was almost, but not entirely, extinct on the mainland and remains so today. I can find no records of the black rat within the Prestwood area, but it is likely to have been in the area at its peak in the 19th century.

The **Fat or Edible Dormouse** *Glis glis* was introduced in 1902 to Tring Park. They have since spread at quite a fast pace given their habits. They look like a half-sized grey squirrel but have larger 'bush-baby' eyes with dark rings round them. They actually look like they need a good night's sleep, which is odd given their life-style - they sleep continually from November until May, seven months or more, and during daylight hours June-October! They look cute but have some nasty habits such as chewing through electrical wiring, insulation, and cupboards. They are agricultural pests in their native area in SE Europe. Being larger than mice they leave behind bigger disaster areas in the house and sound like a kangaroo jumping up and down in the loft! They invade houses in autumn prior to hibernation and can do so in largish numbers. A neighbour caught 6 or 7 last year in their house.

Within the Prestwood area they are very common. It's probably their HQ!. If you want to find one go into any local wood, such as Longfield, or to Prestwood picnic site in July at dusk and listen for their agitated "k'cheerff kcheerff" calls. Take a torch if you want a fleeting glimpse of one.

Here is part of a recipe for using edible dormouse, courtesy of Petronius, a friend of Nero. *'Glaze with honey and roll in poppy seeds and grill until tender and nicely browned. You need 2 per person as a starter.'* But take care, they are now granted Red Data Book status by the IUCN in 2007 which probably means life imprisonment if you are caught nibbling one.

[*More aliens in the next edition - Ed.*]

DONATION

Christine Hoskins nominated Prestwood Nature for a donation from Yorkshire Building Society's Small Change Charity Scheme. Prestwood Nature received £50. Thank you Christine and thank you YBS.

DO ONE THING

- Set aside one weekend morning to join a work party - jobs for all sizes and conditions
- Tell us what you have seen in Prestwood and the local area, whether it's common or rare
- Join us on a field trip or one of our surveys
- Write something for the Newsletter
- Send us a photo
- Tell a friend about us
- Let us know where you think we are going wrong
- Tell us of a site where you think we ought to get involved
- Come to the AGM
- Recycle this newsletter or share it with a friend
- Offer to join the Prestwood Nature Council
- Sponsor a fruit tree
- Build a compost heap
- Enjoy the place you live in and protect its treasures.



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Prestwood Nature
Registered Charity No. 1114685

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

September

7 Sunday 2.30-5pm **Orchard & farming memorabilia** John Parker, who until recently had spent all his life in Prestwood, will be opening his garden for a display of old equipment and photos. Refreshments. High Holborn Farm, Little Kimble (off lane north from B4009 by the railway bridge in village; OS map ref. SP8208).

13 Saturday 10am-1pm **Clearance at Brickpits Pond** by footpath off Nairdwood Lane, Prestwood, opposite Honor Road. This is a joint event with Chiltern Society Volunteers.

October

3 Friday 10.30am-3.30pm **Chilterns Woodland Project Workshop on Caring for Broad-leaved Woodland.**

Inisfree Farm, Great Missenden. £30 per person: 01844 355503.

4-5 Saturday and Sunday, 10am onwards - as long as it takes **Building the Dipping Platform at the Sheepwash** Honor End Lane. Drop in any time - we need plenty of hands. Work directed by Paul Forrest-Jameson from British Trust for Conservation Volunteers. Funding from the Great Missenden & Prestwood Revitalisation Group.

12 Sunday 2-4pm **Fungus Foray in Angling Spring Wood** Last year was a poor year for fungi but we still found a good number here. Meet at the gate on Martinsend Lane.

12 Sunday 10.30am-4.30pm **Open Day at Priestfield Arboretum**, Stony Lane, Little Kingshill.

19 Sunday 2-4pm **Apple Day at Collings Hanger Farm** This was a great event last year, lots of fun for families, and PN will have a display about its new orchard.

November

1 Saturday 10am-1pm **Planting at Kiln Common Orchard** Entrance by gate from Greenlands Lane.

4 Tuesday 7.30-10pm **Annual Meeting (and AGM)** Prestwood Village Hall. (See separate papers.) Wildlife art display, turkey, new projects, members' contributions. The BIG event of the year!

15 Saturday 10am-1pm **Continued clearance at Boug's Meadow** Great Missenden, by Link Road car park.

30 Sunday 10am-1pm **Laying the path at Sheepwash** Honor End Lane, Prestwood.

December

13 Saturday 10am-1pm **Angling Spring Wood** Fence removal and scrub clearance.

January 2009

11 Sunday 10am-1pm **Longdown Bank**, continued ash clearance Meet promptly at 10am at Hampden Bottom Farm to be transported to this remote site.

February

7 Saturday 10am-1pm **Angling Spring Wood** Fence removal and scrub clearance.

March

8 Sunday 10am-1pm **Sprinters Wildlife Garden** Depending on whether we have been able to get funding for major weed-clearance over the winter, this will be another attempt to start laying the garden. Honor End Lane, Sprinters Leisure Centre car park. Details next edition.

21 Saturday 10am-1pm **Continued clearance at Boug's Meadow** Great Missenden, by Link Road car park.

April

5 Sunday 10am-1pm **Kiln Common Orchard** Greenlands Lane, Prestwood. Further planting and other work.

NB Sometimes there are late changes due to circumstances beyond our control. If you have e-mail make sure you provide your address to Jenny Smith for regular updates on all our events.

Prestwood Nature Newsletter is printed entirely on recycled paper. It is published 3 times a year.

Thanks again to David Page for printing, and to Jenny Smith for distribution.