



BBONT

READING URBAN WILDLIFE GROUP

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NEWSLETTER NO. 3

June 1986

The last few months have been exciting and eventful ones, as the articles in this newsletter demonstrate. We have received quite a lot of publicity, and now seem to be quite well known, largely due to the phenomenal success of Foxwatch (see below), but also boosted by periodic appearances in the Chronicle and Evening Post, and not least the help and support of other local conservation groups such as BeC (Berkshire Conservation Volunteers), the staff at Dinton Pastures Country Park, and others. We now have a mailing list in Reading of over 140 (we also exchange newsletters with many other urban wildlife groups), and a growing 'paid up' membership.

This issue gives details of all the walks and other events so far arranged for this summer. Hope to see you at one or other of them! There may well be others before the next newsletter goes out, so for the latest information or further details ring the RUWG number given above.

Deborah Elton

FOXWATCH UPDATE

Early in March the Urban Wildlife Group launched its first public survey, to be known as "Reading Foxwatch". The method was based on the experiences of other groups and on the professional attempts of Drs. Harris and Macdonald in Bristol, Oxford, London and Leicester. A press release was prepared and publicity in the two local newspapers and Radio 210 coincided with the launch. The form for recording sightings was printed in both newspapers and followed up with posters and displays in libraries and public places. Likely nocturnal citizens such as police, ambulance crews, taxi drivers, dairy and railway workers were also spoken to in an attempt to gain maximum coverage. What we needed was a record of where and when foxes are regularly seen in the Borough, what they are doing, and what people think of them.

The survey so far has proved highly successful. Over 200 records have been entered on a computer program which can sort on habitats, times, earths, map references etc. Obviously a low cost survey of this type is bound to under record - by about 50% against systematic surveys according to Leicester's experience. But nonetheless, valuable information has already been obtained and the results to date were given to a public meeting at the Central Library on April 24th.

Most of the records, 39%, were from gardens, with roads forming the next largest group. Wasteland, school grounds and parkland made up a further 18%. Reading foxes certainly seem quite brazen, appearing in daylight in the grounds of the Salvation Army Hostel next to the IDR. They are also

streetwise, with only four reports of dead animals by the side of the road. Without doubt Reading's premier fox watching site is Northcourt Avenue, near the University. There are several earths nearby, and some gardens are used nightly by one or more animals. Another popular venue is Tippings Lane with nine foxes seen at one time, responding to regular handouts by an ardent fox fan. Southcote and Berkeley Avenue have their concentrations of sightings, and town centre foxes appear to use canal banks and railway embankments to reach the suburbs.

Sixteen earths have so far been located, but this year's figures are not yet available - when cubs emerge the dens are more obvious, with trampled vegetation etc., and further press releases were issued to coincide with this. An attempt to estimate numbers of active earths will be made.

Most people are happy with their urban foxes but a few complaints about chicken killing, dustbin rifling or harassment of household pets were received. It seems that at least one fox has become particularly aggressive to a dog living in his territory. This may well be an attempt to establish dominance, and overcome a natural fear of people.

Thanks to all who have sent in records - please keep on watching and form filling! Our map of the town is looking very spotty already but we need as much information as possible to get an accurate picture.

Paula Cox

RECENT EVENTS

About 50 people came to the public meeting at the Library on 24th April and heard about Foxwatch, the habitat survey and our other activities. Considerable interest was shown in our displays and literature, and a number of new members joined.

The following week about 20 people came on the walk around Sandford Copse to see the Loddon Lilies at this Site of Special Scientific Interest. Some went on to visit Sandford Mill itself, at the invitation of the owner, Mrs Seal, while others looked at Sandford Fen, an interesting area of scrub and wetland resulting from gravel extraction in the 60's and now rich in bird and plant life.

P.S. Fox forms are available at Dinton Pastures, or you can just write a letter giving details of date, time, location, what the fox(es) was/were doing etc.

REPORT FROM WOODLEY AND EARLEY BRANCH

It's all happening in Woodley and Earley - at least as far as urban wildlife activists are concerned. Back in April we celebrated the public unveiling of our newly made banner at the Woodley shopping centre, where a hard day selling plants, bat boxes and BBONT goodies brought in £112. Flushed with success we now have further sales planned for 13th September and next May.

Meanwhile, on the wildlife gardening front, the Maiden Erlegh site is taking shape. The hedge that was planted at the beginning of the year is now in leaf, and the next step is the creation of a butterfly area.

Evidence of the group's growing role comes from the number of sites where our involvement is being sought. Council plans for High Wood now seem to be more sympathetic to conservation, and we are currently studying these in detail. We are also in the process of surveying two sites - one near Bulmershe College, the other at Alder Moors, with a view to presenting management plans to the relevant authorities who, we hope, have the resources ready to put words in actions.

All in all, more and more people are becoming sympathetic to the aims of conservation, and so through these and other activities, we are trying to ensure that developments in Woodley and Earley respect this concern.

If you live in the Woodley or Earley area, and would like to get involved, come along to our next meeting (see Diary) or give Anne Booth a ring on 868260 who will add you to our local 'grapevine'. Whether you want to help with our current activities, or have some idea in mind of your own that we can pick up, you'll be most welcome.

But it's not all hard work - on Saturday 5th July we are holding a Veggie Barbecue, open to all RUWG members. Bring a bottle and some (vegetarian) food, and have a good mingle! See Diary for details.

Paul Morrison

Calling all Wildlife Gardeners

Do you read the group's wildlife gardening article in the Reading Chronicle? If not, why not? It's on the family page in the first issue each month, and we are looking for writers and artists to contribute. So how about it - see your work in print - perhaps the first step to a new career?? Ring Paul Morrison on 342143 for more details.

BUSINESS MATTERS

Meetings ...

are now held monthly, generally on a Wednesday, at 7.30 pm in the Council for Environmental Education's Library (Room L16) at the University of Reading School of Education, London Road (entrance from Acacia Rd, near the bottom of Redlands Rd). We are most grateful to CEE for letting us use their premises. An additional attraction for some is the proximity of the Turk's Head pub! All are welcome. See Diary for next dates.

Money ...

Congratulations and thanks to John Baines who ran on our behalf in the Reading half-marathon on April 5th, and raised over £50 in sponsorship. Many thanks also to the sponsors! Thanks also to the Woodley and Earley members who made over £50 profit at the plant sale in April.

We are thus keeping abreast of our running expenses and periodically contributing any surplus to BBONT funds. However, we would urge all those who can afford the £1 subscription for the newsletter and who are not already BBONT members (who are automatically entitled to membership of the RUWG), and who haven't yet paid, to do so, as BBONT cannot afford for us to make a loss! All cheques etc. should be made payable to BBONT (Reading Urban Wildlife Group). Thank you!

Publicity ...

Our next priority must be to obtain and prepare some display boards to take to events, libraries etc., produce a general publicity leaflet and posters to advertise ourselves. Help with any of these would be very welcome.

Newsletter ...

The next newsletter will appear in mid September and will be edited by Fiona Kyte. Please send her any contributions - articles, letters, news of other events etc. by 1st September at the latest, at 5 Warwick Road, Reading (tel 871717). In the meantime Barbara James has kindly put our mailing list on to computer and printed out address labels - so please let us know of any changes, additions or deletions for next time before September.

This issue was put together in a hurry by Deborah, who apologises in advance for any mistakes and omissions, and the rather small print! Illustrations courtesy of Charlotte Deason-Barrow.

SNIPPETS

Want to know how to manage an urban nature area? (Don't we all!) The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers are running a two day course in West London, the weekend of 21st June. It is cheap and looks very good! If you are interested please contact Deborah (tel 665432) soon.

FREE GIFTS!

The publishers Longman have recently brought out a new set of pocket-sized Nature Guides, and presented us with two free sets for publicising them. So here goes: titles so far published are Garden Birds, Conifers, Deciduous Trees, Beetles, Clouds and Weather (all of Britain and Europe). Still to come are: Butterflies and Moths, Rocks, Berries, and Flowers of Field and Meadow. All are priced at £1.95. We have been asked to use the books as prizes, although some of the titles may be of use to our team of habitat surveyors this summer!



'Devil's Dip'

WILDLIFE GARDEN

at the Reading Centre for the Unemployed, East St.

Our scheme to develop this old clay pit in Circuit Lane, Southcote, presently much abused by dumping, as a nature area is now all set to go ahead. Following a meeting with the Recreation Department (who own the land), and approval in principle of our ideas, a general information leaflet was produced and distributed. This was followed up by a public meeting in Southcote last month which was well attended. Most people were strongly in favour of the idea, though there was much discussion about fencing, how to prevent dumping, and the safety or otherwise of ponds. A short site visit helped to clarify ideas.

We will be meeting the Council again this week, to report back. The plan is for the Cleaner Reading Campaign task force to remove the rubbish, and help with fencing, pond digging etc. as required, while a locally-based group will look after the site on a day-to-day basis, decide what is to happen, and do some of the practical work. BEC have kindly agreed to help by putting in steps (see Diary).

This is very much a joint project with Reading Borough Council who own the site and will be contributing funds and resources towards it. It is therefore doubly important that it is successful - and the signs so far are encouraging! Anyone who would like to get involved in this project is very welcome to come to the next meeting on 17th June.

SURVEYORS BACK ON THE BEAT!

The Reading Habitat Survey resumed in earnest last month, as several new volunteers were 'inducted' into the gentle art of locating, describing and assessing Reading's open spaces and wildlife habitats. We now have a team of ten or so surveyors scouring the town for signs of (non-human) life. If you have some spare time and would be interested in helping it is not too late - please contact Anne (tel 868260) or Deborah (tel 665432).

ACTION COUNTRYSIDE NEEDS YOUR HELP!

During the long, hot (rainy) days of August, Dinton Pastures and California Country Parks annually become the spawning grounds of several hundred children, all out to glean some knowledge about the countryside.

Action Countryside is one of many play-schemes which have been developed to introduce children in an exciting and interesting way, to an awareness and appreciation of the countryside, with the emphasis on informality and having fun.

Each year the staff at Dinton Pastures organise a month of activities, such as mammal trapping, minibeast trails, competitions - in fact the list can be pretty endless, providing the activity bears some resemblance to the countryside. The success of the scheme depends very much on the help and enthusiasm from volunteers, either to run activities or as helpers, and will 100+ children per session we need it! This year we are looking for some new volunteers, with an interest in working with children in the countryside.

If any RUWG members feel at all enthusiastic and energetic enough to help us in this worthwhile scheme please contact Charlotte Deason-Barrow at Dinton Pastures (tel 342016) as soon as possible for further details.

Some of you already know that a wildlife garden has been established in East Street, as a project of the Reading Centre of the Unemployed. A group of unemployed people have worked hard since September on this small site to clear and plan and plant, construct a bird table, make signs and learn a lot about native plants, soil structure, birds and butterflies in particular. The site is quite rich in plants already and we have just sown a meadow too.

We note down everything we do and see on the site and have just discovered there is a local fox, as well as our birds and butterflies and woodlice.

The site is completely open to anyone and visitors are welcome if they don't walk on the meadow, leave litter or put trifle on the bird table. (We have our problems!) We work on the site between 1 and 3 o'clock on Thursdays, as well as at other times, and more people are very welcome to join us. So if you're not in paid work and fancy being involved come to the RCU, 4-6 East St., Reading, Thursdays 1-3 pm, or ring Liz on 867955. Any spare native plants that can tolerate dry conditions are also welcome.

Liz Hodgson

CONSERVE READING ON WEDNESDAYS (CROW)

is a recently formed offshoot of the Berkshire Conservation Volunteers who do practical conservation work on alternate Wednesdays, at a variety of sites around Reading. Transport is provided and you can go all day or just for the afternoon if you prefer - all you need is old clothes, strong boots or wellies, a waterproof (just in case!) and sandwiches if you are going all day. Even the tea is provided!

So if you are 16 to 70 years old, and free on a Wednesday, why not join CROW for a day out in the country, doing something practical for nature conservation? The next two tasks are on 18th June and 2nd July. For further details contact Malcolm Chandler (tel 427107) or Sue Wilson (tel 668636).



DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Wednesday 11th June 7.30 pm
General (business) meeting at CEE offices,
University of Reading, London Road site.
(Entrance from Acacia Rd, off Redlands Rd.)

Tuesday 17th June 7.30 pm
Devil's Dip - open meeting at Southcote Youth
and Community Centre, Coronation Square, to
discuss and plan management.

Monday 16th June 7.15 pm
Botanical excursion around Woodley airfield,
led by John Ackroyd (University Botany Dept.)
This area is of considerable interest and has
several curiosities as well as a good range
of common plants. A must for all surveyors
and others who would like to brush up on
their wild flowers! Meet at car park on
Mohawk Way (not far from Sandford Lane).

Wednesday 18th June 7.30 pm
Walk around Whiteknights Park (University of
Reading), led by members of Botany and
Zoology Depts. Meet at PBZ building (huge),
nearest access is from Shinfield Rd entrance.

Saturday 5th July 6.30 pm onwards
Vegetarian barbecue at Paul and Julia's, 66
Old Bath Rd, Charvil (tel 342143 for
directions). Bring food and drink to share.
Children welcome!

Wednesday 9th July 7.30 pm
General meeting at CEE offices (details as
for 11 June).

Monday 14th July 7.45 pm
Earley and Woodley group meeting at 70 Culver
Lane, Earley.

Sunday 20th July 11.00 am
Pond dipping, mainly for children, at Rushey
Way Pond, Rushey Way, Lower Earley. Space is
limited, so ring Ginni Darbyshire (663807) if
you are planning to come.

Sunday 3rd August 2.00 pm
Waterways walk, along the Kennet from
Waterloo Meadows towards Fobney Meadows.
Meet at entrance on Elgar Road. Children
very welcome.

To be confirmed:
Walk around Curtis Wood, Tilehurst, led by
Friends of Curtis Wood who have recently
taken on the management of the woodland.

Other groups' events to which visitors are
welcome:

Wednesday 27th August 7.00 pm
Reading and District Natural History Society
excursion to look at Reading trees. Meet at
King's Meadow Road.

Saturday 30th August 2.00 pm
R&DNHS excursion to Twyford Gravel Pits.
Meet at King's Meadow Road.

Sunday 21st September 2 - 6 pm.
Open day at the Plant Science Botanic Garden,
University of Reading, Whiteknights. In aid
of BBONT and WWF. Plants for sale,
refreshments.

