



Hi all,

In complete contrast to last year, and with few frosts, January has been very mild, and this has been reflected in the smaller numbers of winter birds visiting the park. Although Redwings and Fieldfares arrived in good numbers last October, in January there were much fewer birds in the Park. On 4<sup>th</sup> January new shoots of wild arum were pushing through the leaf litter in the woodland, and some of the park's cherry trees were covered in blossom. Hoverflies were also in evidence, at least 2 months earlier than normal. The mild weather will undoubtedly encourage birds and other animals to breed earlier, but this can sometimes have an adverse affect on populations if a late cold snap of weather is experienced in early spring.

I recently had the opportunity to talk about the park's birds on local radio, and soon realised that this was an excellent way to promote the park's biodiversity and events associated with it, for on the 8<sup>th</sup> January between 40 and 50 members of the public turned up for the first bird walk of the year. At this time of the year, park staff will be engaged in tidying up the woodland and its paths. Spring is just round the corner and with it another cycle of park maintenance, but sadly, a lot more work and less time bird watching for me!

Mike



## *News from the Supervisor's Trap*



### *Large attendance for January bird walk*

On arriving at the museum in the park on the afternoon of 8<sup>th</sup> January for the year's first bird walk, I was not that optimistic of a good turn out, especially so soon after Christmas. My concerns were soon allayed when the museum's receptionist informed me that she had received several phone calls enquiring if the event was taking place and before I had sat down in the foyer, people started streaming in, many, armed with binoculars, field guides, cameras and rucksacks. Within 5 minutes of the scheduled start, almost 40 members of the public had arrived, which was a bit daunting from a communication point of view. Ann (Taylor) arrived, displaying her usual exuberance, despite hosting 80 girl guides in the museum the evening before. Within minutes introductions were made together with a brief overview of the Landscape group's involvement in the park, before the group was off on a procession of expectation. As we approached the woodland the distinctive call of a buzzard overhead was heard, and good views were had of the bird being mobbed by crows. Despite this, many birds were not in evidence. Nuthatch was vocal in the woodland together with coal tits, great tits and blue tits, but these were high in the canopy and out of sight. The group were shown most of the main nesting sites and then proceeded into the far woodland in the hope of glimpsing sparrowhawk, but this was not forthcoming and a final circuit around the main field taking in the owl box concluded an enjoyable afternoon.

### *Early emergence of Scarlet tiger larvae*

On 16<sup>th</sup> January 1<sup>st</sup> instar larvae were observed feeding on the emerging shoots of *comfrey* on the wild flower bank. This is an early date for the emergence of these hibernating caterpillars (early March is normal).

The Scarlet tiger has benefitted hugely from the cessation of annual mowing at this site, and as a result of changes in the maintenance regimes, has extended its range to other parts of the park where its food plant grows. A species of damp meadows and river banks, the Scarlet tiger forms discrete colonies where suitable food plants occur. As well as *comfrey*, the larvae will feed on *Bugle*, *Bramble* and *Thistles*. The moth in summer is unmistakable and rather exotic in appearance (see below). This 'flash colouration' advertises its distaste to potential predators therefore mortality in adult moths is low. The species declined during the 1980s and 90s partly due to loss of habitat. Here in Stratford Park we have one of the strongest colonies in the Stroud district.

The caterpillars seen on 16<sup>th</sup> January will continue feeding on warm days, and go through 3 more moults before pupating just below the ground at the base of the food plant in May. The moth is on the wing from late June through to August and flies during the day.



Scarlet tiger (adult)

### *Some bird of prey updates*

Firstly, and to our surprise, our Little owl has returned to the park, and has been seen in the walnut tree on the main field. Once again, this is another unusual occurrence. The birds normally arrive in the park during March to breed, and remain until the autumn. Whether their movements have been triggered by the warmer weather or changes to their wintering habitat is unsure. What is alarming is that the owl box has been occupied by squirrels again, and our owl has been jostling with Jackdaws for a hole in the walnut tree. Park staff will remove this box until March, and reinstate it in April before the owls start breeding again.

Sparrowhawk has been very active in the park, and fresh kills are being found daily. The chief prey is woodpigeon and feral pigeon, but other prey has included blackbird, black-headed gull and greenfinch. The female is more in evidence than the smaller male, but both are seen in the park regularly. The severe winds last November dislodged our Buzzard's nest in the woodland so this may influence whether they nest in the park this year. Despite this, Buzzards remain a common sight soaring over the woodland. Tawny owl has been heard in the woodland at night. We are hoping that our Tawny owl box will be used this spring. On the whole, the park's raptor population is healthy.



## *Museum in the Park gets 'the best'*

Readers of this newsletter will be familiar with my ramblings about butterflies and moths, but on 28<sup>th</sup> February the museum in the park will be hosting a talk by Graham Best entitled 'moths & memories' stories and anecdotes from a lifetime in entomology, and is guaranteed to inform and entertain those who attend. Graham Best is a retired scientist, naturalist, entomologist and keen photographer. He is also my friend, and I have joined graham on many field trips in past years and witnessed his wit, enthusiasm and sharp sense of humour. Graham's speciality is breeding the British Lepidoptera. Such an activity can be fraught with successes and failures, and I am sure that Graham will talk about the many successes he has achieved with breeding butterflies and moths. Graham is also an extremely resourceful person, recycling many household items into entomological equipment. In the field he is a very knowledgeable and funny character. I will not meander too much about my experiences with him on field trips, most of which have been in the dead of night in some dense woodland, but leave him to inform and entertain you with his fascinating experiences and stories. Highly recommended, 'moths and memories' a talk by Graham best at the museum in the park, Thursday 23rd February 2.00pm. Tickets £4.00. Visit [www.museuminthepark.org](http://www.museuminthepark.org) for further information.



## *Work starts in Beech plantation*

Landscape group staff has started on the first phase of woodland management for Stratford Park. Working to the schedule outlined in the Stratford Park biodiversity and action plan 2011 – 2020, thinning out of the beech plantation is being undertaken during January and February. The main objective of this is to create a richer ground flora, and introduce species of wild flowers such as Bluebells and Wood Anemone. At present only wild garlic and wood spurge tolerates the darker under storey. Removing the crowns of some of the trees by 5% each year will increase light levels and help wild flowers to flourish. This part of the woodland once improved, would create an ideal habitat for butterflies such as Pearl-bordered fritillary, which could be introduced responsibly over future years. Timber removed will be recycled into the park, or possibly sold. At present there is a small overgrown bog area in the beech wood which will be restored in the future as part of the development of this section of the woodland. In previous years, pre-1980s, this boggy area supported a diverse number of invertebrates and amphibians as well as birds such as Marsh tit. It is fed by natural springs from the adjacent fields. In years of normal precipitation the pond would partly fill with water creating an excellent

micro habitat within the plantation. During the 1980s the pond dried up, but is still damp and boggy. Some of the original dominant aquatic marginal plants have survived, and it is proposed to excavate to a depth nearer to the water table and create sloping banks where bog plants such as Marsh Marigold and Flag Iris can flourish. A path around this will be created providing a corridor into the coniferous part of the woodland. The beech plantation during 1974-5 supported many pairs of Bullfinches. The saplings then, were only 8ft high and provided perfect nest sites for this species. It is an important part of the woodland ecosystem within the park, supporting many species of birds including Sparrowhawk, Buzzard and Tawny Owl. Butterflies in the plantation include Speckled Wood, Gatekeeper and Holly Blue. This phase of the woodland management will be completed before the wild bird nesting season in April.

### *Park loses young swan*

It is with great sadness that we have to report the loss of one of our juvenile swans. Staff arrived at the park on the morning of 28<sup>th</sup> January to find the bird mutilated by the lake. Evidence indicates that the swan was attacked and killed by a dog, but this is not conclusive. It is always sad to see cygnets predated during the nesting season, but even more distressing when a bird survives and matures over a year, only to end its life this way. We now have 2 juvenile swans remaining from an original brood of 5 cygnets in 2011. Hopefully, these will continue to occupy the lake until the territorial parent swans drive them away prior to the new breeding season. Whilst mentioning swans, the park's Mallards have started wandering into the woodland in search of nesting sites, which indicates an early breeding season for them. We have one duck on the lake which is a hybrid, who stands out above the rest of the crowd at feed times. Affectionately named 'Billy' – Billy 'no-mates' by park staff, Billy is always first out of the stream for his morning corn and stands well above his other companions. With such a prominent presence, we hope that Billy never ends up in someone's pot!



Billy 'no mates'

## *Wildlife to see now at Stratford Park*

**BIRDS:** Birds are showing really well in the park this month. Look for Great-spotted woodpecker in good numbers in the large poplars by the woodland fringe. Sparrowhawk is present daily. Recent birds have been seen taking prey in the walled garden and the arboretum. Other birds showing well this month – Nuthatch (orangery area), Buzzard (top fields), Green Woodpecker (woodland), Long-tailed tit (Beech plantation), Kingfisher (stream), Dunnock and Robin (Bowling green shrub beds). Little Owl (Walnut tree on main field and oaks).

**MAMMALS:** Roe deer (Beech Plantation)

### EVENTS

Museum in the Park – 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2.00pm Talk by Graham Best 'Moths & Memories'

Winter wildlife walk led by Fred Miller 14<sup>th</sup> February 11.00am – 12.30pm (7-11 yr olds)

Visit [www.museuminthepark.org](http://www.museuminthepark.org) for further details.

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