



ELMBRIDGE NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

(formerly Weybridge Natural History and Aquarist Society)

ISSN 1366-9575

No. 331, Spring 2022

ENHS SPRING 2022 PROGRAMME

- Tue 19 Apr Bird walk on Molesey Heath, 10.30am-12.30pm, led by Ben West. Meet by the main gate at the end of Approach Road.
- Wed 18 May Littleheath/Watercut Copse. Meet at 10am, junction of Somerville Road and Heathfield, KT11 2QY. Ancient woodland, riparian habitats.
- Wed 1 Jun Dave Page is leading a healthy walk. Meet at 10am, Long Ditton Cemetery, KT6 5HW, Rectory Lane entrance and later looking at the wildlife of Stokes Field. ENHS members are welcome. See our only population of adder's tongue fern if it is still in leaf.
- Wed 8 Jun Littleworth Common ponds/Ditton Common. Meet at 10am, Thames Ditton & Esher Golf Club/Marquis of Granby, KT10 9AL. Acid grassland and petty whin.

Winter talks start at 8pm and finish by 10pm. Dates and details of future meetings will be circulated by email and/or listed in the next issue. We hope to resume indoor meetings in the Small Hall, Cobham Village Hall, Lushington Drive, Cobham this autumn. However, while restrictions due to Covid-19 persist, indoor meetings will be via Zoom.

Non-members are welcome to all meetings unless otherwise advertised (£3.00 charge, refundable if you join the Society). Refreshments (in-person winter meetings): 50p.

Lorna Sandford

The Committee is very sad to report that Lorna Sandford passed away earlier this year.

Lorna with husband Keith joined the ENHS about 10 years ago. According to Keith, she did not consider herself an expert in any particular field of natural history but was quite knowledgeable about wild flowers, birds and butterflies. ENHS had members who were experts who passed on their knowledge about for example, bats, fungi, insects and trees. She also learnt about the variety and extent of habitats and their management in the Borough.

Lorna enjoyed the social side of ENHS and took over the preparation of refreshments at the indoor meetings until these were curtailed by the pandemic.

Our deepest sympathies go to Keith and the family.

ENHS MEETING NOTES

New Year bird walk, 9 January 2022

Ross and I led this birdwatching walk around the Wey Meadows, this time in the opposite direction from last year. Starting from Weybridge station we went past Brooklands College into the town centre, then along the Wey Meadows access road to Wey Manor Farm, thence via Brooklands fishing lake to Locke King Road. The weather was cold but still and sunny; this and the recent end of the Covid-related ban on meetings in person were no doubt responsible for the good turnout, with 11 members taking part.

An impressive total of 41 species was recorded (see table below). It was not surprising that this was well up on last January when Ross and I did the walk on our own due to Covid restrictions, but this even surpassed the 2020 count by three.

We did well for birds of prey, although sadly didn't see any peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*), which we had spotted quite regularly of late perched atop the pylons which march across the meadows.

However, the highlight of the day was a pair of ravens, mobbing a buzzard high above us – indeed they were so high we would not have been certain of the species except that they were clearly larger than the buzzard!

Common name	Scientific name	Common name	Scientific name
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Coal tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Egyptian goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
Feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia domestica</i>	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	Rose-ringed parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		

Large flocks of redwing and a few mistle thrushes were spotted, but the other winter visitors that were seen regularly last winter, namely fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*) and meadow pipit (*Anthus pratensis*), have not been in evidence this winter. Most of the usual wildfowl have been around, but not teal (*Anas crecca*) – these seem to be more shy than other ducks and we suspect the recent activities of the local angling club around Brooklands lake have scared them away. The latest of these is the installation of a new fence separating the footpath from the lake. It also looks as though they are planning to plant a hedge of (non-native) cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*) behind this fence – something we hope to persuade them against.

LYNN WHITFIELD

The vindication of Arthur Fallowfield, “the answer DOES lie in the soil”, 9 February 2022

Professor Alastair Fitter, who presented this talk, believes that the future of mankind may lie in its treatment of soil. The move towards civilisation, as understood to mean the grouping of people into cities, is having a dramatic effect on the way food is produced. We have been progressing from subsistence farming that just supports families, through the kind of traditional farming that produces a decent surplus for sale, to a world where a huge population of city-dwellers is totally dependent on modern, intensive farming methods in a vast hinterland to keep it alive.

Meanwhile, half a billion people are suffering from actual hunger, a figure expected to rise to one billion by 2030, whilst even more are classed as ‘undernourished’. This, at a time when food production has been rocketing, with many crops doubling their yield in 60 years thanks to intensive farming practices.

How to match supply with demand? Alastair can only see three alternatives:

1. Increase the area under cultivation? This would involve further destruction of forests, with likely effect on the climate soon making much of world agriculture unsustainable – let alone causing a disaster for biodiversity.
2. Increase the intensity of production on the present area? New methods are constantly being tried, but they seem most unlikely to keep up with present demand.
3. Reduce demand? This is the most sensible solution, but unfortunately conflicts somewhat with human nature. Less waste would help, and much of this is caused by poor storage methods.

Alastair provided some stark figures on the world availability of land for cultivation: 149 million square kilometres of the planet are land, but this includes deserts and ice caps. 117 million of these are vegetated, but some are arid and sparse. 85 million are productive, but this includes forests. 56 million are given over to agriculture of all kinds. 15 million are of crops, which is 10% of the land mass.

The world population is now over 7 billion and is set to rise to over 9 billion by 2050. Statistically, this means that an average of 1ha of productive land is currently available to feed five people. Any equality in the future distribution of food would seem to be impossible on this footprint given the projected increase in population, and in those people’s expectations.

Population control is another answer that is probably beyond the wit of man.

To add to our troubles, 'the answer lies in the soil', inasmuch as without soil there will be no food anyway, so that any solution to a food shortage depends a great deal on the continued existence of soil. This is taken for granted, but in fact there is a steady and disturbing loss in progress all over the world.

In natural conditions soil forms at a rate of 4-8mm per annum, and loses around 2mm, so growth is 2-4 times the rate of loss. However, agriculture causes an overall loss of around 4mm per annum. Cultivation is causing the loss of 75 billion tons of soil per annum, which is about 4% of the total, so on a future projection it will all be gone in 250 years. Its natural exhaustion is exacerbated by loss through run-off and dust storms. A terrifying example of the latter was the foolish conversion of the Great Plains of the USA from grassland to wheat cultivation in the late 19th Century, resulting from a poor understanding of the climate and of the rate at which soil is used up.

Here, in the East Anglian fenland, the rich peat exposed by drainage is rapidly being consumed by hungry crops, as clearly demonstrated by the difference in the ground level of the farmland compared with that of the surviving fens. Beyond this, we in Britain are fortunate in having a rich mineral base to our soil from the remnants of the last glaciation.

Soil stores carbon to an even greater degree than vegetation, so its loss makes yet another contribution to climate change, which in turn leads to more soil loss... and so it goes on! On this pessimistic note Alastair ended his talk but kindly stayed online to answer several questions from members at this well-attended and thought-provoking event.

DICK ALDER

The day it rained crabs and frogs, 9 March 2022

The presenter of this talk was Ian Currie, who is editor of 'Weather Eye' magazine and a well known speaker and consultant on all matters meteorological, based in Storrington, Sussex. His talk on this occasion covered practically all kinds of unusual weather phenomena, both here and abroad and over many centuries.

Some of the wonders in the sky that we can experience here are the aurora (northern lights), noctilucence, nacreous cloud, halo around the sun, red rainbow, moon corona and sun pillar.

Ian went into some detail on winds. It seems that the term 'hurricane' only applies to a storm that crosses the Atlantic from Cape Verde Islands to the Caribbean, not just to any very high wind; the equivalent in the Indian Ocean is a cyclone and in the Pacific, a typhoon. A hurricane must have a mean speed of 75mph, but hurricane Gilbert in 1988 averaged 170mph, overturning a twin-engined aeroplane at the airport of Kingston, Jamaica. Such winds are the most danger to life when they cause the sea to invade the land, as is often the case, and associated heavy rain can make matters worse: one area had 600 inches of rain in three days, on top of a sea surge. Our 1987 'hurricane', although not strictly such, did achieve a 75mph average speed and did cause considerable damage and the loss of 19 lives, but was not as terrifying as the storm of November

1703; this monster was witnessed by Daniel Defoe who ‘couldn’t believe half of what he saw’. Windspeeds are thought to have reached 160mph and around 15,000 people died, with many lives lost at sea. The ‘Burns Day’ storm of January 1990 was not as strong as the 1987 one, but took more lives because it occurred throughout the day rather than mostly at night.

Tornadoes are commoner in Britain than anywhere else but usually too mild to be noticed and sometimes just a few yards wide. However, they can be extremely dangerous, with windspeeds to 500mph, and can carry heavy objects some distance. In May 1993 30 sheep were carried 100 yards; in July 1965 it rained rabbits, mice and voles at Wisley Gardens, and in 1983 it rained lobsters and fish on the South Coast.

When storms coincide with high tides it spells trouble for British coastal towns, the worst occasion being in 1953 when an inundation of the Thames Estuary spread far inland and brought about a major evacuation and many deaths. Inexplicably, lightning seems to strike oak and ash more often than other trees, so Ian advises against sheltering under these!

The record British hailstones, said to be the size of grapefruit and very destructive, fell on Horsham in September 1958. Heavy hailstones are a true menace, killing 150 people in Bangladesh in 1986, and elsewhere destroying crops as well as killing animals and birds. The largest ever known fell from around six miles high in America and weighed over 2kg.

British records for rain, heat and drought have frequently been broken. Our wettest winter so far was in 2013, and our wettest summer in 2007 – but this followed a 2006 which was one of the driest and which included, in July, the hottest month on record. Our longest drought lasted 73 days, in London in 1893, with not a drop of rain! Perhaps the most memorable recent summer was that of 1976 when there were 14 days over 90°F and reservoirs dried up. In hot summers on dry ground ‘dust devils’ may form on rapidly rising air; in May 1992 one caused chaos at a car boot sale in Dorking with trestle tables flying and sale goods left hanging in trees!

‘Summer drop’ is the result of trees struggling to evaporate their drawn-up water fast enough, causing the pressure to build up and explode the tubes carrying it, causing the totally unexpected failure of the tree in calm conditions. A cedar was blown apart in 2003 when the temperature was 100°F, so don’t picnic under a tree in such conditions, especially if it’s a cedar or a poplar!

Snow and ice are rich in records, too, but many are from the ‘Little Ice Age’ between 1650 and 1700, when the Thames in London regularly froze over and was the scene of prolonged fairs. Our most recent serious freeze-up, in 1963, was hardly as dramatic but it was the coldest winter since 1814, and the sea froze to some distance from the shore at Herne Bay. Avalanches aren’t usually a great danger in Britain, but one in Lewes in 1836 caused 25-foot drifts in the town and many died. Now we are experiencing earlier springs with flowers appearing much earlier than before, with shorter and milder winters, so who knows what records will be broken in the near future?

You can see Ian’s weather predictions on his website www.frostedearth.co.uk. He kindly offered us free back copies of ‘Weather Eye’ and I have received three from him that I will pass on when we get to meet again. They are a very good read!

DICK ALDER

Members' evening, 13 April 2022

This was again held on Zoom owing to Covid-19 restrictions, and immediately followed this year's AGM, a report of which can be found below.



Lynn Whitfield started off by presenting a few slides summarising some radio tracking work carried out by Surrey Bat Group in August 2021. This was successful in identifying several tree roosts of the rare Bechstein's bat (*Myotis bechsteinii*) (left) in the Chiddingfold Forest area, confirming that colonies last reported there in 2010 – the only known breeding colonies in Surrey – were still present. This is important information as although much of Chiddingfold Forest is a SSSI, the citation does not currently include bats. Hopefully these updated records will enable Bechstein's to be added, and thus have a

better chance of being protected from future development in the area.

Second up was Jo Cameron (Rutherford), who first provided an update on several local toad crossing patrols around Cobham and Esher, especially the Cobham Heathfield quarry site locally known as the Brick Pit, with which she has long been involved.

Jo then described the series of 12 Wildlife & Nature Notes articles she has written for the Cobham Conservation & Heritage Trust quarterly magazine, featuring her stunning illustrations of various wildlife. She has subsequently produced sets of 12 cards from these linocut artworks which are now available to buy, as well as a limited set of original prints.



The collection of twelve cards are available to ENHS members at a special price of just £10. If you would like a set, please email Jo on fineartjo.cameron@virgin.net or call 07906 354569. Further information can be found on www.jcfineart.co.uk



Dick Alder followed with an update on the project to record Elmbridge's interesting trees being carried out by him and Brian Spooner, to include species accounts and historical notes. Dick showed us some photographs of recently recorded impressive specimens such as the Ashley Park oak, shown here. This is a huge old tree visible from the Ashley Park sports field but unfortunately is rather hidden now under a dense growth of ivy. A spin-off from this last year was assistance in the production of a Burwood Park tree trail leaflet for local residents.



Cally Harris had recently photographed many odd-shaped twigs on a mistletoe-covered common lime tree (see below left), which Brian Spooner identified as galls caused by one of the woolly aphids, *Patchiella reaumuri*, sometimes known as the 'lime leaf-nest aphid'. These cause the leaves to be folded together and the internodes to shrink, producing irregular tight coiling of the twigs. These galls are scarce, although Brian has seen them several times in Surrey.

Ross Baker ended the evening with some thermal camera footage filmed on our patio last summer, when he was woken in the night by strange grunting noises!

This turned out to be a male hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*) carefully circling a female in a courtship dance. She was less than impressed, however, and wandered off after a time...

LYNN WHITFIELD

ASIAN HORNET ALERT

Asian hornet (*Vespa velutina*) is a voracious non-native predator of honeybees and other insects. It became established in France in 2004 and has since become widespread in Europe. Every year since 2016 at least one nest has been found in Britain (all in England). It is believed that all of these nests were detected and destroyed before they could produce next year's queens, which would disperse widely and establish new nests after overwintering. There is a continuing risk of queen Asian hornets coming into Britain, either with imported goods or possibly flying across the Channel. For information on how to recognise an Asian hornet and where to send the report, see https://www.nonnativespecies.org/non-native-species/species-alerts/#Species_53. Always try to get a photograph or capture a specimen so that the identification can be confirmed. If you are correct, a team from the National Bee Unit will swing into action to locate the nest and destroy it. Continual vigilance is needed to prevent Asian hornet becoming an out of control pest in Britain, which would have severe consequences for beekeeping.

ANDREW HALSTEAD

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 13 APRIL 2022

Present: Ross Baker (Chairman), Dick Alder, Janet Ripley, Peter Hambrook, Brian Spooner, Lynn Whitfield, Graham Carey, Cally Harris, Jo Cameron (Rutherford), Susan Martin, Alan Forno, Beverley Brock, Marion Cooper, Andrea Davis, Jon Moore, Val Bradfield (taking minutes). 16 members in all.

The meeting opened at 8pm.

1) **Apologies for absence**

Liz Barton, Richard Jewell, Dave Page.

2) **Minutes of last AGM, 14 April 2021**

These were accepted as a true record. Proposed by Graham Carey, seconded by Cally Harris and agreed unanimously.

3) **Matters arising**

Brian reminded the meeting that our archives were now safely stored with Surrey History Centre and are available to view if required.

4) **Committee report**

Ross compiled and presented the 2021-22 report, the text of which is reproduced here:

The 2021-2 year saw us take advantage of the relaxation of Covid-19 regulations to hold an extended range of outdoor meetings, while the majority of our indoor meetings were held over Zoom (courtesy of the Surrey Bat Group account). At one time it looked as though a full return to in-person meetings would be possible over the winter, but unfortunately the advent of the Omicron variant and the introduction of a stringent protocol by our hall hirer led the committee to review that aspiration and return to Zoom.

Financial. The committee waived subscription fees in 2020-1 in response to the total shutdown of our activities, and as our outgoings were minimal after we cancelled our hall booking and allowed our insurance to lapse. Most of our outdoor activities in the year under review were covered by Elmbridge Borough Council's policy as there were no activities to insure, but as the autumn approached and we anticipated the resumption of indoor meetings we recommenced cover. As our Treasurer reports, we have emerged from the pandemic with a healthy bank balance and are able to maintain the subscription rate at the pre-pandemic level.

We were shocked in December to discover that our bank had suddenly implemented draconian monthly and transactional charges on our account – apparently the letter notifying us of these got lost in the post. Fortunately, we were able to speedily transfer our business to a free account provided by Metro Bank and Janet was able to negotiate compensation from HSBC to more than cover the costs of their poor handling of our case.

Summer and autumn walks. Our mid-week summer study walks led by Dave Page were able to resume from May when our first outing was to West End Common and the Ledges, followed by Sixty Acre Wood and Princes Coverts in Claygate. In June we visited Fairmile Common, Brooklands Community Park and Molesey Heath, while July saw us at Hersham Riverside and Black Pond and there was a single August visit to Oxshott Heath. These were all well attended, as members took advantage of the relaxation of rules governing outdoor events, and so it was

decided to extend the walks into the autumn and additional ones were held at West End Common South and Esher ponds in September, Arbrook Common in October and finally Oxshott Heath in November. The committee wishes to thank Dave for leading these additional walks, which were held at a time of year when he was very busy with planned management work on the commons. In addition to the above Dick Alder and Richard Jewell led an evening walk around Byfleet churchyard in June and Ross Baker and Lynn Whitfield led a September bat walk around Broadwater Lake in Burwood Park, for which we must thank Andrea Davis for arranging access. Ross and Lynn also organised a bird walk around Wey Meadows in January and Ben West led another bird walk around Molesey Heath in March. Members also had the opportunity to attend a series of moth trapping events in the Borough organised by Dave Page and Dick Alder.

The winter programme did not begin until November when we were treated to an outstanding talk by Pat Morris about his involvement in the early years of the society. In December Dave Page gave us an update on the Elmbridge Commons and in January Peter Hambrook recounted his expeditions to the Farne Islands. Technology nearly defeated us in February but, after a slight delay, Alastair Fitter was able to deliver his talk on the importance of soil and in March Ian Currie gave a talk entitled *The Day it Rained Crabs and Frogs*, which detailed some bizarre natural phenomena.

We echo the same paragraph from last year's report in saying that next winter will see a return to physical meetings in Cobham Village Hall and Dick Alder will again aim to source a variety of speakers, some from within the Society, some external (paid) speakers and there will be at least one Members' Evening. All of these meetings continue to be an essential part of the Society's structure and are important social occasions for those attending.

The Society, a book to accompany the film of the same name, by Jessica Rinland was published and members were able to obtain copies from Dave Page at a significant discount. Its launch was celebrated with a meal at the Fairmile pub in Cobham in November, which turned out to be the only indoor event of the year.

As usual, Lynn Whitfield has put a lot of effort into the **quarterly Bulletins** but she is reliant on contributions from members and the committee. While thanking those who have contributed articles, she would like to remind all members that their contributions are both welcome and essential. Peter Hambrook continues to run the **website** with back-up provided in an emergency by Graham Carey but more input from members with news and items of interest would be appreciated.

The Committee would like to thank all members for their support throughout another challenging year.

5) **Treasurer's report**

Janet presented the following report on the Society's Income and Expenditure for the year to 28 February 2022.

Owing to the coronavirus, the indoor meetings have been held via Zoom again.

Society income £490.80. The income from subscriptions has increased by £70 from the time that we last collected subscriptions in 2020. Donations from members have also increased by £20 from the 2020 figure. HSBC introduced bank charges on their charity accounts from 18 November 2021. The Society complained about not being notified of these charges. This email

resulted in the December bank charge of £5.80 being refunded along with £50 compensation.

Society expenditure £217.99. As we have not had any indoor meetings at Cobham Village Hall, there have been no hall hire charges this year. The Society paid for only two speakers (March 2021 and February 2022) this year. As the summer outdoor study walks resumed this year, we paid £84 for insurance. This was a slight increase of £5.60 compared to 2020. Due to helpful members, we did not have any mailing costs this year. The domain name cost this year was £18.16, a slight increase of £2.37 compared with last year. We incurred bank charges in December 2021, January 2022 and February 2022.

Conclusion. There was an overall profit of £272.81 during the year. As the Society has a very healthy reserve of £1,045.91 in the bank, I see no need to increase the subscription rates.

It was noted that the HSBC account is now closed. The report was accepted by the members; proposed by Graham Carey, seconded by Peter Hambrook and agreed unanimously.

6) Re-election of Officers and Committee

Nominations were requested to fill the vacant position of Secretary. All other Committee members are available and willing to stand for a further year.

President	Chris Brading
Chairman	Ross Baker
Secretary	<i>Vacant</i>
Treasurer	Janet Ripley
Membership Secretary	Peter Hambrook
Programme Secretary	Dick Alder
Minutes Secretary	Val Bradfield
Outdoor Events	David Page
Honorary scrutineer	Brian Spooner

Ross noted that the Secretary position was still vacant and invited anyone interested in the position to contact him.

The above were voted in *en masse*. Proposed by Jo Cameron, seconded by Marion Cooper and agreed unanimously.

7) Any other business

Dick asked about the return to live meetings as he had to get speakers organised. Ross replied that it is our intention to resume in the autumn. The speakers are provisionally booked, but those who attend in person generally will not conduct Zoom meetings in the event of another lockdown. Dick thanked Ross for taking so much workload from him over the last few years. Brian seconded that vote of thanks.

8) Date of next meeting.

To be advised.

The meeting closed at 8.20 pm.

