



ELMBRIDGE NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

(formerly Weybridge Natural History and Aquarist Society)

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ENHS AUTUMN/EARLY WINTER 2022 PROGRAMME

- Wed 24 Aug Oxshott Heath. Meet at 10, Sandy Lane Car Park, close to A244 junction. Wet and dry heath and mixed woodland.
- Wed 14 Sept Evening stroll and dine at The Inn on the Lake, Silvermere, off Byfleet Road, Cobham. Meet at 7.15pm at the end of the car park nearest the road. Quite a lot to see before we dine at 8pm. Please let Dick or Lynn know that you are coming and if you are bringing anyone with you.
- Wed 12 Oct 'Two major projects on the North Downs: Langley Vale Woods and Shere Woodlands'. Talk by David Hatcher. David is involved in both of these Surrey projects that are of considerable wildlife interest.
- Wed 9 Nov Members' evening. Please let Dick or Lynn know well in advance of any offerings, short or long.
- Weds 14 Dec 'The Biology of Christmas'. Talk by Dr Jane McLauchlin. (Note that this will be in the upstairs room.) Plus any seasonal items you bring along!

Winter talks start at 8pm and finish by 10pm. These will again be held in the Small Hall (unless otherwise specified), Cobham Village Hall, Lushington Drive, Cobham. Dates and details of future meetings will be circulated by email and/or listed in the next issue.

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.

Book launch of *The Society*

On the evening of 15 June 2022 Jessica Rinland's book *The Society*, based on her film of our activities on the Esher Commons, was launched in public. There a small gathering of friends and supporters at Tender Books shop, an art book dealer in Cecil Court, off Charing Cross Road, including Dave Page and Dick Alder from ENHS. There was no formal ceremony, but the shop window was decorated with copies of the book, and we all gathered outside to raise a glass of wine, or two, to its success.

Copies of the book are still available from Dave or Dick, and we hope that Jessica will be able to show her film in its finished form early next year.

ENHS MEETING NOTES

Bird walks on Molesey Heath

Ben West led a birdwatching walk on Molesey Heath on 6 March 2022, but as the weather was rather cold and thus fewer birds than expected were singing, we repeated the walk on 19 April. In spite of the inclement weather, 15 hardy souls attended the first walk – one more than attended the second in fact, when the weather was pleasantly warm and sunny. The species sighted (or heard singing) are listed in the table below.

Common name	Scientific name	06-Mar	19-Apr	Common name	Scientific name	06-Mar	19-Apr
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		x	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	x	
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		x	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	x	x
Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	x	x	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	x	
Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	x	x	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		x
Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		x	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	x	x
Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	x		Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	x	x
Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	x	x	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	x	x
Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		x	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	x	x
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	x	x	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		x
Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		x	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	x	x
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		x	Reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		x
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	x	x	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	x	x
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	x	x	Rose-ringed parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	x	x
Feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia domestica</i>	x		Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		x
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	x	x	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		x
Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	x		Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	x	x
Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>	x	x	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	x	x
Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	x	x	Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>		x
Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	x	x	Wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	x	x
Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	x		Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	x	x
House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	x	x				

The totals for the two dates did not differ hugely, with 29 and 35 respectively, but several species were heard singing on the second date that were absent on the first, including whitethroat, reed warbler, linnet, Cetti's warbler and blackcap.

Ben mentioned that kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) and water rail (*Rallus aquaticus*) can often be seen along the river, and he has also seen little grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) nesting here. A nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*) was holding a territory along the edge of some willow scrub last year, and hobby (*Falco subbuteo*) can also be spotted on occasion.

Other flora and fauna spotted during the March walk included the distinctive eggs of the brown hairstreak butterfly (*Thecla betulae*) on blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) twigs, and a display of the early-flowering coltsfoot (*Tussilago farfara*). And a personal bonus – Ben pointed out the identifying features of stock dove to Ross and me, and we realised we had had a pair in our garden for some weeks now!

Thanks to Ben for providing expert assistance, especially in identifying birds from song, and for sharing his deep knowledge of the site.

LYNN WHITFIELD

Summer study walks, 2022

Littleheath and Watercut Copse, Cobham, 18 May

This was the first of Dave Page's walks of the year, and proved just as interesting as usual.

We took the footpath from Somerville Road, through the secondary woodland that was last thinned in 2003 but is still quite open. Quite a lot of time was spent discussing the pathside vegetation, and some satisfactory identifications were forthcoming: hairy wood-rush (*Luzula pilosa*), wood sedge (*Carex sylvestris*), wood millet (*Milium effusum*) and wood melick (*Melica uniflora*). Ferns noted were hart's-tongue (*Asplenium scolopendrium*), male (*Dryopteris filix-mas*), broad buckler (*Dryopteris austriaca*) and soft shield (*Polystichum setiferum*).

At the small pond near Heathfield a downy emerald dragonfly (*Cordulia aenea*) was patrolling, whilst other insects were being found near the edge. Paul Wheeler was able to identify two leaf-mining moth larvae: *Phyllonorycter tenerella* on hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) and *Eriocrania salopiella* on birch (*Betula* sp.). Another moth larva, seen feeding on the outside of a birch leaf, was identified as the winter moth (*Operophtera brumata*); those of us who were on Dave's Spring walks last year will remember that it was seen in plague numbers then, but not so this year.

An insect that has almost reached pest status now is the alder-leaf beetle (*Agelastica alni*), present here - as almost everywhere locally - after pulling back from extinction in 2003. Other beetles on view here were harlequin ladybird (*Harmonia axyridis*) and 14-spot ladybird (*Propylea 14-punctata*). A distinctive crane-fly with rings on its wings was later identified by Paul as *Epiphragma ocellare*.

The lake was fringed in parts with yellow-flag (*Iris pseudacorus*) in full bloom, but the pendulous sedge (*Carex pendula*) flower was just a little past its best for attracting the site's rare micro-moth *Micropterix mansuetella*. We were able to make out the shapes of some huge carp (*Cyprinus carpio*) a little way out from the bank. Paul was able to name two of the insects seen at the waterside; the common alderfly (*Sialis lutarea*), several of which were on the wing, and hoverflies that proved to be *Myathropa florea* and *Platycheirus scutatus* (agg).

Time being short, we only made a quick diversion to Watercut Copse, coppiced ancient woodland in which a dense mass of bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) was going to seed. A young magpie (*Pica pica*) sat on a low branch within feet of us, vainly hoping not to be noticed! Other birds very much in evidence today by their song were song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*), blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*) and chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*).

The large patch of wood anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*) on the corner by the level crossing was looking healthy, although past its flowering time; as was the long stand of butterbur (*Petasites hybridus*) further along the path. On exiting onto Hawkhurst Dave spent some time searching amongst minuscule plants in the road verges, finally locating what seemed to be common whitlow grass (*Erophila verna*).

The Cemetery and Stokes Field, Long Ditton, 1 June

We began at the cemetery, where Dave wanted to show us a recently created natural burial area of long grass sown with wildflower seed, currently exhibiting oxeye daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*) and ragged-robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*), but with other flowers likely to follow soon.

Beyond the cemetery lie the three former fields that comprise the local nature reserve known as

Stokes Field, now nearly all lost to scrub woodland, although a few strips of meadow are maintained. Some of the English oaks (*Quercus robur*) that once lined the fields have survived; two good examples were measured as around 3.75m in girth and are perhaps 200 years old. Sadly, the ash trees (*Fraxinus excelsior*) in and around the woodland are suffering badly from ash die-back (*Chalara fraxinea*). The fields were purchased by Elmbridge Borough Council from the Lovelace Estate, which had erected tennis courts on the edge of one field. These are now grassed over and the artificial substrate is producing a flora of its own, at present mostly in leaf except for oxeye daisies and meadow vetchling (*Lathyrus pratensis*).

Small ponds lie at either end of the largest remaining stretch of meadow, one of them quite full of water but green and barren. A slender ash tree near this pond was hosting tiers of dryad's saddle (*Polyporus squamosus*) fungus. The other pond, although very shallow, was alive with the invertebrates that a family was busy netting from the provided platform, including tadpoles of the common frog (*Rana temporaria*), a great pond snail (*Lymnaea stagnalis*) and the nymph of a mayfly (*Ephemera* sp.).

This meadow itself is much overrun with great willowherb (*Epilobium hirsutum*), to Dave's regret as it tends to mask other plants such as the rare adder's tongue fern (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*) that just about manages to cling on here. Meadow buttercup (*Ranunculus acris*) was flowering meanwhile, and a host of little straw dot (*Rivula sericealis*) moths was disturbed as we passed through.

The eastern side of the reserve is bordered by a ditch and bank that marks the ancient border of Long Ditton and Thames Ditton, running for an extraordinary 1.5 miles in a straight line. Along its edge is another strip of meadow, gradually being lost to blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), although some of this is kept as the food plant of the brown hairstreak butterfly (*Thecla betulae*), which is known to breed here.

Finally, there was time for a diversion onto the adjacent ex-nursery land at the top of One Tree Hill that is currently owned by the developers Taylor Wimpey. There is now no trace of the lone oak that was until recently a landmark here, but from its site we could see aircraft landing at Heathrow. The nursery once specialised in growing roses, many of which were still blooming deep within recent scrub. A surprising number of grass vetchling (*Lathyrus nissolia*) were flowering amongst the remaining patches of grass.

Our way back took us through dense blackthorn and bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.) where Simon spotted a weasel (*Mustela nivalis*) crossing the path before we reached Goat Lane.

Ditton Common and Littleworth Common, 8 June

The old Ditton Common has been broken up over the years by roads and the railway, and now exists as four separate areas. Three of these are occupied by Thames Ditton & Esher Golf Club, but ownership by Elmbridge Borough Council ensures that public access is retained, whilst the golf club's management is obliged to maintain the acid grassland habitat.

The day's walk took us onto the two larger areas of golf course, where the most cherished plant is the rare petty whin (*Genista anglica*) that survives in a dozen clumps, and which we were fortunate to see in flower. Wavy hair-grass (*Deschampsia flexuosa*) dominates the patches of wild vegetation between fairways, but heath bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*) was creating a white blanket in places today. Many of the flowers of cat's-ear (*Hypochaeris radicata*) were harbouring large shaggy bees (*Panurgis banksianus*), curled up and dozing as they awaited the return of sunshine.

The weather was bright enough to lure out three butterflies; a red admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*)

seeking common nettles (*Urtica dioica*) on which to lay eggs; a small copper (*Lycaena phlaeas*) whose foodplant, sheep's sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*) is abundant here, whilst a speckled wood (*Pararge aegeria*), danced in the shade of the trees. Most of the trees surrounding the site are English oaks (*Quercus robur*), and many of them had larval nests of the oak processionary moth (*Thaumetopoea processionea*), although only one tree appeared to be seriously defoliated. Three small moths were disturbed, a straw dot (*Rivula sericealis*), a small magpie (*Anania hortulata*) and a species of 'grass veneer', *Crambus perllella*.



Oak processionary moth caterpillar nest on an oak on Ditton Common.
(Photograph: Ross Baker.)

Dave managed to spot a small common lizard (*Lacerta vivipara*) basking in the wooded edge, and Lynn noticed witch's butter fungus (*Exidia glandulosa*) on a dead, attached oak branch. The dominant birdsong on this site was that of the chiffchaff.

Across the old Portsmouth Road, Littleworth Common is a large site with fairly recent woodland cover apart from the area immediately adjacent to the road. Here, two ponds have been created within the last 20 years in damp grassland, and these ponds were the focus of our attention on this visit.

The area surrounding the eastern pond is rich in damp-loving plants, forever threatened by invasive seedlings of grey sallow (*Salix cinerea*) and - perhaps surprisingly - English oak. However, an annual 'cut and collect' regime ensures that this area stays open. Amongst the plant species seen today were the reed *Juncus conglomeratus*, remote sedge (*Carex remota*), greater bird's-foot trefoil (*Lotus pedunculatus*) and yellow flag (*Iris pseudacorus*). The pond itself was partly covered with lesser reedmace (*Typha angustifolia*) and, regrettably, fringed with the invasive New Zealand pygmyweed (*Crassula helmsii*). Dave's dead-hedging efforts seem to have been successful in keeping dogs out of the pond, whilst not hindering the dispersal of the many small common frogs and common toads that we had to avoid squashing underfoot.



Poplar leaf beetle on Littleworth Common.
(Photograph: Ross Baker.)

The star insect find of the day was a single poplar leaf beetle (*Chrysomela populi*) on a seedling willow. Our first meadow brown (*Jurtina maniola*) butterfly of the year was roused from the grasses, and it was good to see a very fresh small tortoiseshell (*Aglais urtica*) flying. Many moths were disturbed as we passed; those identified were three straw dot, two heart & dart (*Agrotis exclamations*) and a silver-Y (*Autographa gamma*). An emperor dragonfly (*Anax imperator*) was hunting over the pond, whilst a few common blue damselflies (*Enallagma cyathigerum*) fluttered around the surrounding area.

As we watched, a whitethroat flew to a willow bush and began to sing, whilst we heard the distant notes of a song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) in the woodland beyond.

Fairmile Common, Cobham, 6 July

As in previous years, our main target here was the silver-studded blue (*Plebejus argus*) butterfly that has for many years had its nearest colony to London on this site. Dave puts a lot of effort into keeping its presence here possible in the face of many obstacles, the butterfly's requirements being very particular and its reluctance to fly far a barrier to its spreading to new sites. However, despite its isolation it has continued to occur in good numbers. This year we arrived too late for the main emergence but were still able to see two males and two females in flight. To keep the site viable Dave is constantly weeding the old Flying Circle and its surrounds, taking measures to support the ants (*Lasius* sp.) which the silver-studded blue larvae rely upon for protection, and to encourage the growth of the young bell heather (*Erica cinerea*) on which they feed at night. The latest threat to their survival has been an incursion by a motorcycle rider who has churned up the Flying Circle, not causing critical damage this time but one hopes that there will be no return visits. Another ongoing threat is posed by people bent on taking the remaining rabbits, the only grazing animals available to keep the vegetation anything like ideal.

Dave mentioned that Paul Wheeler and fellow entomologist Bob Arnfield had joined him on a visit to the site in April at which they had successfully used pheromone lures to attract male emperor moths (*Saturnia pavonia*).

Our other target for the day, reached by somewhat of a route march, was a pond on the edge of

Spa Bottom that had been cleared of fallen trees and debris over the past winter. It has yet to develop a fauna and flora, and its shallow water has been muddied by dogs, although measures will be taken to discourage them.

Although the weather wasn't ideal a few insects were recorded, identification being greatly assisted by Jo's excellent photographs. The little bees gathering pollen on composite flowers were clearly the large shaggy bee (*Panurgis banksianus*), as seen at Ditton Common, whilst the distribution of pollen on the underside of another small bee suggested that it was the patchwork leaf-cutter bee (*Megachile centuncularis*). A jewel wasp was photographed haunting the burrows of a potential victim, but these beautiful creatures are nigh-impossible to identify to species. A shiny black beetle with a distinctively shaped thorax seems likely to have been the dark snail beetle (*Silpha atrata*). A 'grass veneer' moth that was disturbed en route to Spa Bottom proved to be *Agriphila tristella*, a common enough species and previously found on other Elmbridge sites, but not Fairmile.

Molesey Heath, 13 July

Despite the fact that the dreaded heatwave was already upon us, nine members gathered for this slightly shortened walk. It was sad to remember that a year ago we were so pleased to see Richard Daborn making it to this event after his long, enforced period of covid isolation. Today, we mourned his recent passing.

A clockwise tour took us firstly beside the Dead River, on which a good deal of fool's water-cress (*Apium nodiflorum*) was growing, along with a little bit of water-plantain (*Alisma plantago-aquatica*), above which the banks were decorated with the flowers of purple-loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*). A red admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*) butterfly was basking with open wings at the water's edge. However, as we approached the River Mole we were disappointed to see that the dreaded alien floating pennywort (*Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*) had returned to occupy more than half the width of both waterways, despite the noble efforts of volunteers to remove it last year.

A few other plants had managed to find a space on the Mole and its banks, notably the yellow water-lily (*Nuphar lutea*) and water mint (*Mentha aquatica*), the latter attracting a host of butterflies to its flowers, including peacock (*Aglais io*), meadow brown (*Maniola jurtina*), green-veined white (*Pieris napi*) and large white (*Pieris brassicae*), whilst a brown hawker dragonfly (*Aeshna grandis*) circled overhead.

Yet more butterflies were recorded as we progressed to the steps to the higher level of the old tip; Dick identified a small skipper (*Thymelicus sylvestris*) below the steps, Dave an Essex skipper (*Thymelicus lineola*) above them, and somehow Brian managed to spot the green pupa of a green-veined white, tightly attached to a green stem of a *Brassica* sp.

A kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) was observed to hover briefly by the river before we made our way back via the main path above the river, with a view across to the top of Island Barn Reservoir. Where the path dropped down to the lower level, our new moth-trapping site was pointed out. It is marked by a surprisingly large white willow (*Salix alba*), on which Brian was able to identify three leaf galls, the most impressive being a rosette gall (*Rabdophaga rosarea*), the others the bean-like galls of *Pontanea proxima* and *Eriophyes tetanothrix*.

It was distressing to see how early the horse chestnut leaf-miner moth (*Cameraria ohridella*) had devastated the three trees beside the main track, near the entrance. Nearby, a green spider with its egg sac was photographed on a hop (*Humulus lupulus*) leaf; probably *Araniella curcubitiana*, but perhaps its lookalike *A. opisthograptis*?

Black Pond, 20 July

The Elmbridge Council team and volunteers had been busy over the winter removing some mature Turkey oaks (*Quercus cerris*) from the western side of Horseshoe Clump, and rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) from the area north of Black Pond, although bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) remains a perennial problem in places on the common and is in urgent need of spraying where possible.

Today we made a clockwise circuit of Black Pond via the Fiveways, taking in a path below Longy Down that has a base of concrete-rich rubble. This encourages a slightly unusual flora along its edges that includes marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*) and hoary ragwort (*Senecio erucifolius*), along with the more expected ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*), wood sage (*Teucrium scorodonia*), perforate St John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) - or possibly a hybrid - and scentless mayweed (*Matricaria perforata*), some flowers of the latter being remarkably contorted.

We lingered here for a little entomology, with Dave spotting the first cinnabar moth (*Tyria jacobaea*) larvae that anyone had seen this year, whilst several gatekeeper butterflies (*Pyronia tithonus*) patrolled the path edge. Photographs were taken of wasps on various flowers, one of which was clearly a bee-wolf (*Philanthus triangulum*), the burrows of which we had noticed earlier. Afterwards, Dave identified *Cerceris rybyensis* and *Cerceris ruficornis*. A rather odd-looking fly with a strongly recurved abdomen proved to be the ferruginous bee-grabber (*Sicus ferrugineus*).

Dave pointed out the old nest of the ravens (*Corvus corax*) in a Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*): the pair has relocated to another pine this year after an adjacent tree fell. Meanwhile, Ross caught sight of one of the Dartford warblers (*Sylvia undata*) that have nested here this year.

Our furthest target was the pair of small ponds in the damper ground below the belt of trees planted 20 years ago to shelter the common from the Esher By-pass. These two are thought to be relics of World War 2, but their purpose remains unknown. Given the present weather conditions their very low water level was unsurprising, but otherwise they seemed to be in quite satisfactory condition. The easterly pond was fairly bare, and Dave has now erected a dead hedge around it to



Large skipper near Black Pond.
(Photograph: Ross Baker.)

protect it from dogs. Our finding a brown china-mark moth (*Elophila nymphaeata*) suggests that there is at least enough water weed to support a colony. The westerly pond had an almost-complete covering of floating club-rush (*Eleogiton fluitans*), above which a southern hawker dragonfly (*Aeshna cyanea*) was circling. There have been credible recent reports of the uncommon golden-ringed dragonfly (*Cordulegaster boltonii*) being seen here.

En route back to Black Pond, there was a brief halt to photograph a large skipper butterfly (*Ochlodes sylvanus*), obligingly posing with open wings, before we gathered on the southern side of the pond to view the small show of cottongrass (*Eriophorum* sp.), marsh pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*) and marsh St John's wort (*Hypericum elodes*). A downy emerald dragonfly (*Cordulia aenea*) flew close to the bank and a black-tailed skimmer (*Orthetrum cancellatum*) settled long enough to be photographed, although both must have been at risk from the hobby (*Falco subbuteo*) that suddenly swooped over our heads. A grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*) was fishing on the far side of the pond, the only other birds on the water being a few coot (*Fulica atra*) and mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*).



Damage caused by dogs to the banks of Black Pond. (Photograph: Dick Alder.)

The ongoing damage caused by dogs to the banks of the pond is amply demonstrated at the southern end of the dam, where a former boardwalk now sits isolated as an island in a sea of mud which is difficult to navigate.

DICK ALDER

