

Grimsargh Wetlands Newsletter



Spring 2023

Welcome

Welcome to your Spring newsletter. After a Winter that has brought a combination of some very wet weather followed by a spell of freezing conditions, it is good to see the first signs of Spring on the Wetlands. The first Orchids and Primroses are emerging, Hazel catkins are ripening, the first butterflies have been seen in the warming sun and Curlew and Oystercatchers are regularly being seen on the Island Lake. In addition, if you have visited the Wetlands recently, you will have undoubtedly noticed that the geese are back – as numerous and noisy as ever!

The outbreak of avian influenza that affected the Wetlands last Autumn, appears to have eased, for the time being, and you can read an update on the national situation, regarding the outbreak, in this newsletter. A Winter work programme has been possible with regular Volunteer Days and visits by both the Ribble Rivers Trust and the Fylde Rangers allowing us to make good progress with the ever-present problem of invasive willow.

Looking forward to the weeks ahead, we have our traditional Spring Flower Walk scheduled for 18th March and we have a full Spring Volunteer Day work programme – the last chance to complete essential work before the nesting season begins in earnest. You can read all about the Wetlands Winter highlights and our hopes and plans for the Spring in this newsletter. More importantly, do visit the Wetlands when you get the opportunity – it never looks better than in the Spring sunshine!

The Trustees

Avian influenza – An Update

As you will be aware, in common with so many other nature reserves and wetland sites across the country, there were a number of confirmed cases of avian influenza on the Wetlands in the latter part of last year. More recently, there have been no further reports of sick or dead birds on site and this is, of course, good news. Nonetheless, the national situation remains serious with the risk to wild bird populations still classified by Defra, in their latest (January 2023) outbreak assessment document, as ‘Very High’. There is now an increasing body of evidence to suggest that the avian influenza virus can persist in a viable state for, sometimes, very long periods of time, particularly in cold and wet conditions. Clearly this means that on sites, like the Wetlands, where there have been cases of avian influenza in the past, it is likely that infectious material may persist for some time.

As a consequence, the advice not to touch any sick or dead birds and to practice good hand hygiene at all times, particularly after handling bird feeders etc., remains as important as ever.



It is now possible to report any sick or dead birds using Defra’s online reporting facility:

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<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/report-dead-wild-birds>

We would encourage everyone to make use of this facility if you come across sick or dead birds when you are out and about in the countryside.

It is interesting to review Defra's weekly updates of reported, and confirmed, cases of avian influenza in wild birds (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/avian-influenza-in-wild-birds>). Not surprisingly, cases in swans and geese predominant; however, what is perhaps most striking is the number of raptors that fall victim to avian influenza. Buzzards appear to be particularly susceptible to the virus. This is, perhaps, not surprising, given that they predominantly feed on (possibly infected) carrion. Nonetheless, cases in other raptors (e.g. Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Peregrine) and owls (e.g. Tawny Owl, Barn Owl) are also regularly confirmed by Defra.

All these species frequent the Wetlands (Peregrines only infrequently) and it would be really helpful if raptor and owl sightings on the Wetlands are routinely reported. As often said before, the ideal mechanism for reporting local sightings is through the ELOC (East Lancashire Ornithologists' Club) website:

<https://www.eastlancsornithologists.org.uk/>

If you review the records here, you will see that both Trust Chair, David Hindle and former trustee, Geoff Carefoot regularly report their Wetlands sightings here. Another, more informal approach, is to simply report your sightings on our Facebook page. Reporting sightings on the ELOC website is preferable because there is a systematic verification mechanism in place and, ultimately, all these verified records are incorporated into both the local (Lancashire) and national statistics. Only by compiling yearly, national records in this way, will the true impact of the current avian flu outbreak, on wild bird populations, be understood.

Finally, you may have seen reports, in the national media, of avian influenza being associated with unexplained deaths of mammals. In truth, Defra have confirmed only a very small number of such cases - specifically in seals, otters and foxes. Nonetheless, the situation is of sufficient concern that Defra have asked that unusual, or multiple (two or more), deaths of wild animals or wildlife showing unusual behaviour - suggestive of 'nervous disease' - be reported.

Winter Work on the Wetlands.



Volunteers ready for the first work session of 2023.

The easing of the avian influenza situation on the Wetlands has allowed us to undertake a programme of work on the embankments that, at one stage, looked unlikely to happen. As always, it was the scrub and invasive willow that was the focus of our attention. It is worth reiterating why this work is necessary. People often ask – why not just leave it and 'let nature take its course'? Of course, without a programme of planned maintenance, the site would rapidly become unrecognisable and overwhelmed with nothing but scrub and a variety of invasive species leading to a rapid and potentially irreversible loss of biodiversity. The wildflowers – particularly the displays of Primroses and Orchids - would be lost. Furthermore, important nesting sites and raptor hunting areas would soon be lost, leading to a decrease in avian species attracted to, and sustained by, the Wetlands. Maintaining, indeed increasing, the biodiversity of the site is a

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fundamental remit of the Trust and only by having an on-going programme of maintenance and development work will this be achieved.

Over the recent weeks, we have, on our Volunteer Days, focused our attention on the South-facing embankment of the Mere and the base of the Fen. On the Mere embankments, scrub and brambles have been removed to ensure that the beds of Primroses and Early Purple Orchids have a chance to emerge in the weeks to come. In the Fen, we have followed up the work done by contractors and removed more invasive willow. Specifically, we have been focusing our attention on removing willow from the Phragmites reed bed in the south-west corner of the Fen. The reason for doing this is to try and preserve, and hopefully extend, the reed-bed which is such an important habitat for warblers and other birds such as Reed Bunting.



The Fylde Rangers team preparing Wetlands willow for their wreath-making classes.

Our maintenance efforts have been greatly boosted by visits from two of our regular collaborating organisations. On 8th December, a group from the Fylde Ranger Service (responsible for the sand dunes at St. Annes and elsewhere on the Fylde Coast) spent the day with us on the Wetlands. Although their primary goal was to collect supplies of willow suitable for use in their wreath-making classes in the lead-up to Christmas, we were delighted that they spent a great deal of their time strimming willow and scrub on the embankments and in the Fen. This was a tremendous help to us and we are extremely grateful for their efforts which

went a long way in helping with our programme of work.



A member of the Fylde Rangers team strimming scrub on the embankments.

On Thursday 2nd February, we had a visit from the Ribble Rivers Trust. Their interest was also in collecting willow; however, in this case their intended use for the willow was in their on-going ‘natural flood management’ programme of work. The focus of this work is to ameliorate the effects of excessive flow rates and bank erosion on becks, streams and rivers throughout the Ribble Catchment area.



Wetlands willow destined for use in Ribble Rivers Trust flood management projects.

A good example of this is their new Brackenhurst, natural flood management program (<https://ribbletrust.org.uk/brackenhurst-nfm/>) that aims to reduce the risk of flooding as a consequence of extreme changes in flow rate in a local beck. The ‘brash bundles’ used in projects such as this are made up of just the sort

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of willow waste that we generate in such large amounts.

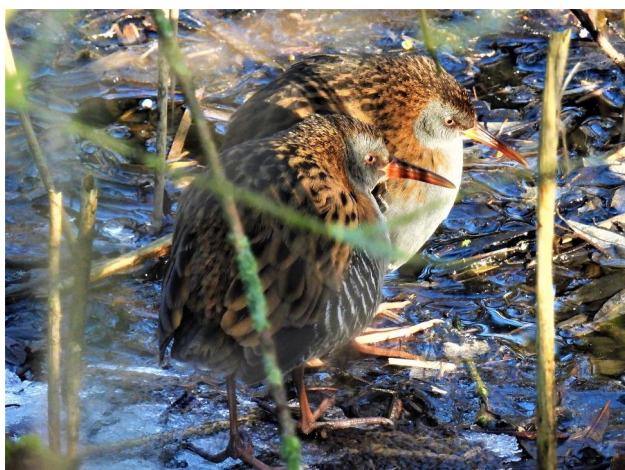
Of course, not all the cut willow has been taken off site. Willow cut by volunteers has predominantly been used to replenish existing wildlife refuges and create additional refuges in the Fen.



Wildlife refuges, prepared from cut willow, in the Fen.

It is difficult to over-estimate the importance of these refuges for a diverse range of wildlife. For example, in addition to providing a safe haven for mammals (ranging from shrews to hedgehogs), numerous insects make use of the willow stacks. It wouldn't be surprising to find that the Small Tortoiseshell butterflies, that have recently (early February!) been reported on the Wetlands, over-wintered deep inside these refuges.

Winter Wetlands Highlights



The elusive Wetlands Water Rail (photograph by Gerry Small).

Possibly the avian highlight of the recent months was the sighting of a pair of Water Rail on the Wetlands during the freezing conditions in January. This really was a tremendous sighting and photographer Gerry Small shared his superb images of the Water Rail on the Wetlands Facebook page. The Water Rail is usually a shy and secretive bird that generally skulks around in dense reed beds and waterside vegetation and, historically, has rarely been seen on the Wetlands. There is no doubt that the harsh winter conditions brought the birds out into the open in their search for food. A member of the same family as Coots and Moorhens, the Water Rail is smaller and slimmer than the Moorhen with a long orange-red bill, a streaked brown back, grey breast and a buff patch under a short raised tail. Finally, although rarely seen, the Water Rail often makes unforgettable, 'piglet-like' squeals that give its presence away.

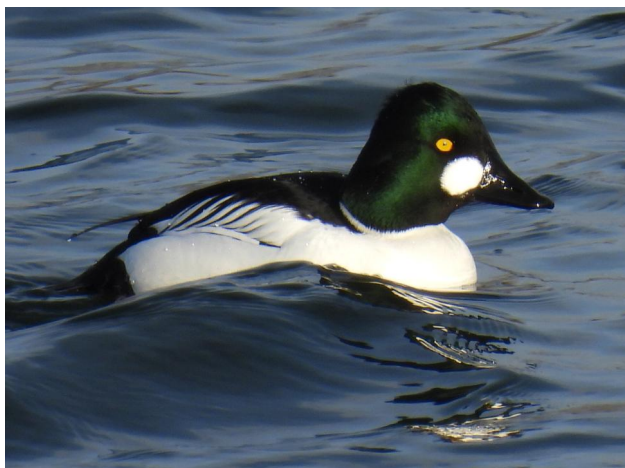
In contrast to the rarely seen Water Rail, the Wetlands is also home to large numbers of Coot and a smaller population of Moorhens. Regular visitors will undoubtedly have seen the numerous Coot on the open water of the Mere. Counts of 30 plus Coot were regularly made throughout the Winter although, in early February, Geoff Carefoot counted 42 Coot along with 11 Moorhen - impressive Wetlands records for each species.

Also on the Mere, throughout the Winter, were good numbers of Little Grebe (sometimes referred to as Dabchick). This small, dumpy grebe has the somewhat frustrating habit of diving at the slightest disturbance – only to re-surface some distance away from its original location. This is another water bird that, even if not seen, often gives away its presence with a highly distinctive and loud 'trilling' call – most pronounced in the summer months.

A very welcome visitor to the Mere was the Goldeneye. Over recent weeks, two or three of these distinctive diving ducks have regularly been seen on the Mere. It is likely that these winter visitors had made the journey from Northern Europe. The male is a black and bright white in colour with a characteristic white face

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spot set against a green-black head colour and just below the characteristic yellow eye. In contrast, the female is grey with a chocolate brown head without a face spot. If you do see small groups of Goldeneye, the male's showy display behaviour can be fascinating to watch.



Male Goldeneye on the Mere (photograph by Gerry Small).

The winter months, when trees have lost their foliage, are also an ideal time for viewing woodland birds such as the Treecreeper, most often seen climbing up (often spiralling around) tree trunks and branches. Likewise, the smallest U.K. birds, the Wren and the Goldcrest are most easily seen when vegetation has died back. Each of these species is present on the Wetlands and our photographers recorded their presence during the winter months.



Wetlands Treecreeper (photograph by Gerry Small).

Finally, it is interesting to note that following commencement of volunteer work in the Fen recently, a pair of Woodcock were flushed. This

Snipe-like bird (although rather larger and more 'barrel-shaped' with a robust-looking bill) is rarely seen; however, the Fen is an ideal habitat for these birds. It is hoped that once the building work adjacent to the eastern embankment of the Fen is completed, the viewing screen there will be an ideal place for the patient visitor to see this woodland bird in the clearing and around the small pool.

Recent Fund-Raising Activity

Trustee and fund-raiser, Andy Small, recently reported that over the course of 2022 more than £4,000 had been raised for the Trust. This is an amazing achievement and is testament to the generosity of the local community and our thanks go to all those people who have donated books, 'bric a brac' and other goods for sale at our regular Farmers' Market and Grimsargh Club stalls.

Funds were boosted by the recent success of our Wetlands 2023 Calendar. Again, Andy Small was pleased to report that the calendar had been more successful than ever and was now sold out! Again, thanks go to all who bought a calendar, our photographers who generously provided their images and all those sponsors and local businesses who supported the printing and production costs of the calendar. As said before, because of the generosity of our sponsors, every penny made from sales goes directly to support our work on the Wetlands.

Notwithstanding the fund-raising success, it is sobering to remember that even before expenses such as the purchase of tools and equipment for volunteers and the hire of contractors, the Trust spends over £4,000 per annum on insurance alone. This emphasises the need for continued fund-raising efforts. As always, paperback books are particularly welcome for our stalls.

Many of you will already be aware of our new fund-raising initiative involving the planting of Snowdrops in memory of loved ones. Over 300 Snowdrops (Snowdrops in leaf - 'in the green') have now been planted along with memory sticks labelled with the names of loved ones.



Planting Snowdrops in the Compound.

The Snowdrops have been planted on either side of the footpath leading up to the main viewing screens in the Compound (the Wetlands access point off Preston Road, just opposite Oban Court) and, at the time of writing, are already coming into bloom.



Wetlands Snowdrops in bloom (photograph by Jayne Woollam).

The sale of every 20 Snowdrops generates £17 for the Wetlands and we thank all those who have bought and/or helped with the planting of the Snowdrops.

Spring Flower Walk

As mentioned at the beginning of this newsletter, we will be holding our traditional Spring Flower Walk at 2 pm (meet at the Compound, opposite Oban Court) on Saturday 18th March. This is an opportunity for you to see areas of the Wetlands not normally open to members of the public. In particular, we hope to

be able to view the beds of spring flowers that the Wetlands is rightly, renowned for.



The orchids are coming! (Photograph by Andy Small).

Fingers crossed, we should be able to see plenty of orchids and other flowers. In order to be able to organise walks that offer the best experience for attendees, it is important that you book in advance on our website:

<https://www.grimsarghwetlands.org/events/events.php>

The walk is expected to last approximately 90 min. and it is important that you dress appropriately (warm, waterproof clothing) and wear appropriate foot-ware for rough and, often, muddy ground. Children must be accompanied by a responsible adult. Dogs are not permitted at this event and you should be aware that there is no on-site parking.

Finally, although we very much hope that the walk will go ahead as planned, you should be aware that the event is dependent upon there being no restrictions in place regarding the ongoing avian influenza outbreak. Also, in the event that the orchids are not at their best in March, we will be incorporating a walk into our scheduled volunteer session on 8th April so that people still get the opportunity to see these beautiful wildflowers.

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Spring Volunteer Day Schedule



Lemon Drizzle Cake for volunteers! (Photograph by Jayne Woollam – cake by Sue Atkinson!).

Work sessions start at 10 o'clock, when we meet at the Compound. Generally, we work until about 2 pm in the afternoon; however, people are free to leave as and when they wish. We are, once again, offering hot drinks and, thanks to the generosity and skills of volunteers Sue Atkinson and Louise Lunt, cakes and pastries are also available! As always, we ask everyone to book onto the volunteer day using our online booking system:

<https://www.grimsarghwetlands.org/events/volunteer-days.php>

If you register as a volunteer, you will be sent email reminders containing detailed information about both the work planned for the day, any tools you should, ideally, bring with you and any special measures in place in relation to avian influenza. The schedule is as follows:

Saturday 11th March
Sunday 26th March
Saturday 8th April
Sunday 23rd April

In addition, we will be having a special Volunteer Day on Bank Holiday Monday 8th May. As you will know, the King's Coronation takes place on Saturday 6th May and the Bank Holiday Monday has been designated 'The Big Help Out Day' (<https://thebighelpout.org.uk/>).

A Gentle Reminder

We have been asked to remind people to only use the designated public access points when visiting the Wetlands. If you visit our website, it is possible to download a site map with the access point clearly indicated:

<https://www.grimsarghwetlands.org/visit/index.php>

In brief, we have an access point, from Preston Road, just across from Oban Court, leading to the Compound viewing screens that overlook the Mere and the Island Lake. We have a second access point to the public footpath, that bisects the Wetlands, via the ginnel from Preston Road, just across from Elston Lane. This access point leads to viewing screens that overlook the Island Lake. The public footpath leads off the Wetlands, via a stile, into the surrounding fields and eventually back, along the old railway embankment, to Preston Road just next to The Plough (see site map on website).

Finally, there is an access point from Preston Road, just by the new pedestrian crossing point opposite the Story Homes Elston Park Development. This access point leads only to the Fen viewing screen.

Membership information

Membership information is available on our website. If you need to update your contact details or have any other queries about membership then you should contact Trust Secretary, Jayne Woollam (jaynewoollam@hotmail.co.uk). Any general queries about the work of the Trust should be sent to grimsarghwetlandstrust@gmail.com.

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Acknowledgements

We thank Jayne Woollam, Andy Small and Gerry Small for allowing the use of their photographs. We are grateful to the Lancashire Environmental Fund for their generous financial support. A full list of our local sponsors can be found on the 2023 Grimsargh Wetlands Calendar and on our website. The Grimsargh Wetlands Trust is a registered charity N° 1174037.

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