

Grimsargh Wetlands Newsletter

Summer 2023



Welcome

Welcome to your summer newsletter. The recent weeks on the Wetlands have been very busy with the local wildlife, along with visiting migratory birds, taking full advantage of the warming days. Likewise, it has been heartening to see so many members of the local community visiting the Wetlands, both individually and at our organised events. You can read all about our wildlife highlights and recent visitor events along with our plans for the summer months in this newsletter.

It is difficult to under-estimate what a valuable asset the Wetlands is. Many of you will be aware of the recent concerns about the loss of biodiversity in the UK. Over the last 50 years, there has been an estimated 70% decline in the UK's biodiversity and wildlife populations. For example, it is estimated that some 73 million birds have been lost from the UK since 1970. Shamefully, this makes the UK one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, placing the UK last among the G7 group of nations and, globally, in the bottom 10% of nations.

In the context of these stark statistics we are all extremely lucky and privileged to have a local nature reserve, Grimsargh Wetlands, that provides such an important sanctuary for wildlife where all members of the local community can appreciate and engage with nature. We encourage you all to make the most of the Wetlands – there can be nothing better than a stroll around the Wetlands on a warm summer evening and we look forward to seeing you!

The Trustees

Visit by Lancashire Dotcom Walkers

On Tuesday, 14th March, we were particularly pleased to welcome a group from the Lancashire Dotcom Walkers (you can check out their Facebook page to find out more about their regular walks around Lancashire) to the first of this year's guided walk events. It was certainly a day when you needed to be 'dressed for the weather'; nonetheless, the seasoned walkers had no complaints about the rather damp and dreary conditions.



David Hindle welcomes the walkers to the Wetlands (photograph courtesy of Lancashire Dotcom Walkers).

After a brief introduction from David Hindle (Trust Chair), trustees led the walkers around the site. The walk was something of a revelation for a number of the visitors who had been completely unaware of the existence of such a significant local nature reserve literally 'on their doorstep'. Along with early spring wildflowers and an abundance of birdlife, the rather damp weather did provide the opportunity to see a range of fungi that would otherwise have been missed. Many of the group were particularly interested in the history of the site and the role the former reservoirs played in the supply of

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water to the local community and industry. Indeed, many remembered the former Courtaulds Red Scar works that relied on water supplied from Grimsargh.

We are particularly grateful to Kevan Thompson, one of our regular volunteers, who as a member of the walking group, set up the visit for his colleagues. At the end of the walk we were delighted that the group made a very generous donation towards the work of the Trust.

Spring Wildflower Walk



Visitors on the wildflower walk (photograph by Jayne Woollam).

On Saturday 18th March we held our traditional spring wildflower walk. Nearly 40 members of the public took part in a guided walk around the Wetlands. It was a particular pleasure to welcome a group from the Grimsargh branch of the Women's Institute. After a brief introductory talk on the history of the site, groups of visitors were led around the site by trustees and volunteers. We were fortunate that Primroses, Lesser Celandine, Coltsfoot and other early wildflowers were showing well. As is often the case, we were a little early (the walk is traditionally timed to coincide with the weekend of Mothering Sunday) to see the Early Purple Orchids at their best; nonetheless, there was plenty of evidence of orchids emerging (more of which later). In addition to the flowers, visitors were pleased to see the

Wetlands birdlife, the highlights being the Lapwings and Oystercatchers along with numerous ducks and geese. Visitors were also fortunate to see the, often shy, Roe Deer on the embankments.

With the, often unpredictable, spring weather behaving, the walk was enjoyed by all and, at the conclusion of the walk, we were particularly grateful to receive a number of donations, including an extremely generous gift of £50 from the Women's Institute.

Alston Lane Primary School Wetlands Field Trip

On Wednesday 26th April, a very special group of visitors spent the morning exploring the Wetlands. Children from the reception class at Alston Lane Primary School undertook their first field trip to the Wetlands.



The Wetlands field trip group (photograph courtesy of Alston Lane Primary School).

The event, organised and led by trustee, Andy Small was a great success with the children delighted to see so much local wildlife on such a fine spring morning. Inevitably, it was the Wetlands birdlife that stole the show although there was also plenty of evidence of the Wetlands insect life on one of the first really warm days of the year. The children clearly enjoyed their visit (if not the stinging nettles!) and, by all accounts, were buzzing with excitement for days after their visit. We look

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forward to welcoming other classes from the school in the coming weeks.

The Big Help Out

Our spring programme of volunteer days culminated on Monday 8th of May with our participation in 'The Big Help Out'. Nationally, the event (<https://thebighelpout.org.uk/>) was supported by over 6 million volunteers who participated in a wide range of community-led volunteer-based events.

We were particularly pleased to be joined by an enthusiastic group from 1st Grimsargh Scouts at our 'Big Help Out' volunteer session. Fortunately, the promised heavy rain did not materialise and, although a little damp, the scouts successfully tackled a number of important tasks.



The scouts take a break from their work on the footpaths (photograph by Jayne Woollam).

Trustees Andy Small and Phil Atkinson led groups cutting back nettles on the public footpath and clearing cut willow in the Fen. The willow was put to good use with several new wildlife refuges being created in the Fen. Another group, led by trustee, Jayne Woollam were on 'weeding and raking' duties around the main viewing screens and pathway. Everyone had the opportunity to take time out to view the Wetlands wildlife with trustee Steve Whittam on hand to point out the newly-hatched Coot

chicks and the numerous goslings along with the other birdlife.



Newly created wildlife refuges on the Fen.

The session ended with everyone enjoying 'Coronation Cakes' specially baked for the occasion by volunteer, Sue Atkinson.



'Limited edition', Coronation Cakes (photograph by Jayne Woollam).

Overall, a great deal was achieved in the session and the old saying 'many hands make light work' really did sum up the success of the morning's work. We are tremendously grateful to the scouts for their work on the Wetlands and we look forward to seeing them all again!

Spring Wildlife Highlights

The Spring Curlew Roost

In the early days of March, Trust Chair, David Hindle recorded some remarkable numbers of

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Curlew roosting on the islands of the 'Island Lake'. Amazingly, at the peak of the roost, in excess of 400 birds were regularly recorded roosting overnight. These observations are notable for several reasons. Firstly, it shows the value of visiting the Wetlands at dawn or dusk. For example, in as little as 20 min at dawn, the overnight roost regularly dispersed leaving only a handful of birds on the Wetlands during the hours of daylight. Of course, these large roosts do not persist and, after only a few days, numbers dropped dramatically as more birds left for summer breeding sites, typically in upland areas of rough grassland or on heather moorland. Indeed, it is to be hoped that numbers of Curlew on the Wetlands do stay relatively low over the coming months as any build-up over the summer is likely to be a sign of failure to breed.

Of course the other remarkable aspect of the Wetlands Curlew roost relates to the 'red-listed' status of the bird in the UK. Red-listing is indicative of a species with the highest conservation priority and in need of urgent support. The UK breeding population of Curlew (estimated to be around 50-60,000 breeding pairs) is of international importance, yet this breeding population continues to decline. In this context, the numbers using the Wetlands as a spring roosting site is of both local and, indeed, national significance.

Finally, in order to better understand changes in Curlew population numbers, it is important that the size of the Wetlands roost continues to be monitored in the coming years.

Spring Passage Migrants

Of course, just as numbers of Curlew on the Wetlands are diminishing, the numbers of the rather similar looking Whimbrel begin to increase. The Whimbrel is a typical 'passage migrant' with large numbers moving across the UK to distant breeding grounds often in Iceland or Scandinavia. We are fortunate that the Wetlands is one of the key 'stop-over' sites in Lancashire for late-spring migrating Whimbrel.

As usual, county-wide counts of Whimbrel were undertaken by volunteers at the end of April/early May when the migration is judged to be at its peak. This year, a peak Whimbrel roost of 147 was recorded on the Wetlands on 30th April. This is up on last year's corresponding count (68) and, again, emphasises the local significance of the Wetlands as a 'stop-over' site for this migratory wader. Finally, we should thank the volunteers who undertake these counts each year. As it happens, one of this year's census dates coincided with some atrocious, wet and windy weather; nonetheless, the recorders turned out and the count was successfully completed.

Visiting Sea Duck

Perhaps the most unexpected recent visitor to the Wetlands was first picked up by Geoff Carefoot on 31st March. Geoff identified a drake Common Scoter on the Mere. The Common Scoter is a sea duck usually seen in large groups off the coast, at long-range, and was certainly 'a long way from home' when it appeared, for just a few days, on the Wetlands. The drake is black, although the wing tips are generally paler/dusky in colour, with a prominent tail and a very distinctive gold/yellow patch on top of the bill.



Common Scoter (photograph by Gerry Small).

The presence of the unexpected visitor on the Mere did allow some outstanding close-up views of this red-listed sea duck. Photographer Gerry Small took full advantage of the Scoter's

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presence and managed some impressive close-up images of a bird that is so often only seen as a distant dot bobbing around in a rough sea.

Familiar Visitors

A pair of Avocet arrived on the Wetlands in early April and have stayed with us for some time. These elegant waders have been making full use of the shallow waters of the Island Lake and can regularly be seen prospecting for food items in the shallow waters with characteristic, regular sideswipes of their upwardly curved bills. Other visiting waders include small numbers of Common Sandpiper, Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank and Little-ringed Plover.

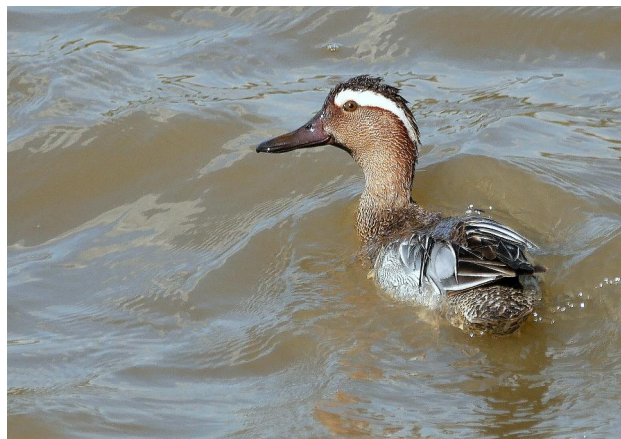
Aside from the waders, there were some other very welcome visitors on the Wetlands. A pair of Great Crested Grebe were seen on the Wetlands at the end of March. These grebes are certainly not unusual on wetland sites, what is perhaps more unusual is that we so rarely see them at Grimsargh. The grebes do appear to be a pair and a number of observers have recorded them indulging in 'pair-bonding' behaviour although, as far as we are aware, no one witnessed them performing their full-blown 'courtship dance'. Nonetheless, we have our fingers crossed that they have managed to find a secluded nesting spot on the Mere.



'Pair-bonding' Great Crested Grebe (photograph by Geoff Carefoot).

Finally, a most welcome returning visitor was the Garganey. You may recall that, last year,

there was much excitement when a splendid male Garganey visited the Wetlands. This spring, we were delighted that, at one point, there were up to three Garganey (two drakes and a duck) on the Island lake.



Drake Garganey (photograph by Geoff Carefoot).

Record Number of Mediterranean Gulls

At the end of March, a record number of 15 Mediterranean Gulls was recorded on the Wetlands. These gulls were present, along with the large numbers of Black-headed Gulls, on the islands of the Island Lake. Although rather similar in appearance, seeing the gulls side by side, when in summer breeding plumage, does highlight the key differences. The Mediterranean Gull is slightly larger than the Black-headed Gull, with a full all-black 'hood', white wing-tips and a bright red bill. In contrast, the Black-headed Gull has a less extensive, dark chocolate coloured hood, black wing-tips and a duller bill.

Nationally, the numbers of Mediterranean Gulls have increased over recent years and there is now a small, but significant, UK breeding population. A note of concern is that the Black-headed Gull colonies, that Mediterranean Gulls so often associate with, do appear to be particularly susceptible to avian influenza.

It's Not All About Birds!

With all the avian highlights, it is easy to forget that there is a lot more going on in the spring.

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As already mentioned, our Spring Wildflower Walk revealed that there were large numbers of Early Purple Orchids emerging along the southern embankment of the Mere. Just weeks later, the orchids were in full bloom and what a magnificent display it was. There were more orchids than ever (trustee Andy Small counted over 800) and, most remarkably, the orchids were spread all along the embankment meaning that, for the first time, substantial numbers of orchids were easily seen from the main viewing screens in the Compound.



Orchids on the embankment of the Mere.

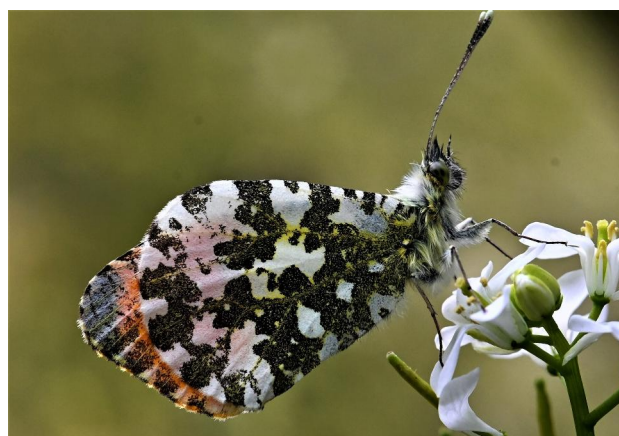
We have no doubt that one of the main reasons why the display of orchids was so extensive was, in no small part, due to the work done to clear scrub from the embankments over the winter months. As hoped, removal of the scrub gave the orchids the best possible opportunities to flourish. It was notable that in those areas of the embankments where scrub had not been fully cleared, the emergence and blooming of the orchids was much poorer. Hopefully, we will be able to continue a similar programme of scrub clearance next winter.

In addition to a 'bumper crop' of orchids, other wild flowers have flourished on the Wetlands. For example, large numbers of Wood Anemones and Cowslips were seen on the embankments of the Fen. In the base of the Fen there was a much improved showing of marsh flowers and this probably reflects our recent efforts to improve retention of water in the Fen. In this context, the on-going programme to remove invasive willow is of key importance. The willow is a relentless consumer of water and its presence is one of the

main reasons why the base of the Fen dries out so quickly during the drier months. Retaining more water in the Fen is also beneficial for Amphibia, with frogs, toads and newts all clearly benefiting from the wetter conditions.

Spring is also the time when insect activity really switches on. Some of the most visible/colourful signs of this activity are the butterflies and damselflies. Sadly, as with avian populations, the butterfly (and moth) populations of the UK are in real crisis. The latest (2022) report on 'The state of the UK's butterflies' revealed that 80% of butterfly species have been in 'precipitous' decline since the 1970s. This is yet another indicator of the decline in biodiversity affecting the UK.

Of course, the appearance of butterflies is very much weather-dependent with the warm, sunny days of spring giving the best opportunities to see butterflies 'on the wing' nonetheless the anecdotal evidence is that there really are fewer butterflies around than you would expect. Fortunately it's not all bad news. On the Wetlands, one easily recognisable early butterfly is the Orange-tip. As the name implies, the males have large bright orange tips on their, otherwise, white forewings. In contrast, the females have grey-black forewing tips. Both sexes have a mottled, 'mossy grey' pattern on the underside of their hindwings.



Wetlands Orange-tip butterfly (photograph by Gerry Small).

Happily, over the spring, plenty of Orange-tips have been seen on the Wetlands. It is even more pleasing to report an abundance of Holly Blue

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butterflies on the Wetlands during recent weeks. The Holly Blue is the first of the 'blue butterflies' to emerge in the spring. Often seen around Holly (or later in the summer, around Ivy) this butterfly has, over recent years, expanded its range across northern England and the Wetlands is, perhaps, now benefiting from this on-going expansion.



Large Red Damselfly (photograph by Gerry Small).

In addition to butterflies, the emergence of damselflies is another welcome indicator of warmer days. Typically, the first damselfly to appear, usually towards the end of April, is the Large Red Damselfly. Photographer Gerry Small was able to capture a superb image of one of the first of these damselflies to appear on the Wetlands this year. It won't be long before the 'blue' damselflies' (e.g. the Common Blue Damselfly and the Blue-tailed Damselfly) emerge and out-number these much less abundant red damselflies. Finally, by the time you read this newsletter, there should be plenty of the early summer dragonflies (the larger cousins of the diminutive damselflies) on the Wetlands.

Summer Events

We currently have no volunteer days scheduled for the summer months. However, work still needs to be done on site particularly keeping the viewing screens and the footpaths clear. Registered volunteers will be emailed when specific help is needed, perhaps for just a couple of hours in the evenings.

As always, the Trust will have stalls at upcoming local community events – Grimsargh Field Day on Saturday 24th June and Longridge Show on Saturday 8th July. As always, volunteers are more than welcome to come along and help out with our stalls. These events represent a wonderful opportunity for anyone to find out more about the Wetlands and the work of Grimsargh Wetlands Trust. They also provide an opportunity to meet trustees and volunteers and talk about opportunities for volunteer work or membership of the Trust. So, if you are there, do come along and say hello.

We also have our Annual General Meeting scheduled for 7.30pm, Wednesday 20th September, 2023, at Grimsargh Village Hall. Members will be circulated with further details in the lead-up to the meeting.

A Reminder – Visiting the Wetlands

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 (if you use the popular 'what3words' app, the location of the Compound access point is *newsstand.lunch.bucked*). We have an access point to the public footpath, that bisects the Wetlands, via the ginnel from Preston Road, just opposite from Elston Lane (what3words - *organist.stirs.bonfires*). 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 (what3words - *doted.budding.gravitate*). This access point leads only to the Fen viewing screen.

We do ask that visitors only use these designated public access points when visiting the Wetlands. The public footpath across the

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Wetlands is very popular with dog-walkers and we respectfully ask that all dogs are kept on leads. In addition to protecting the Wetlands wildlife, this measure is particularly important in the context of the ongoing national avian influenza ('bird flu') outbreak.

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.

Acknowledgements

We thank Jayne Woollam, Geoff Carefoot, Gerry Small, Alston Lane Primary School and Lancashire Dotcom Walkers 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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