
Grimsargh Wetlands Newsletter



Autumn 2023

Welcome

There can be no one reading this newsletter who was not shocked and saddened by the untimely death of our friend and colleague, Andy Small.

For many, Andy was the most recognisable face of the Wetlands. He was so often seen guiding school children around the site, working alone in his beloved Fen, sat at his regular book stall in the village or simply taking in the evening view across the Island Lake after a hard day at work.



Andy leading visitors around the Wetlands

This newsletter, of course, contains tributes to Andy along with an appreciation of his immense contribution to making the Wetlands what it is today.

Notwithstanding this saddest of news, plenty has been happening on the Wetlands over the summer months. You can read about the summer highlights, along with a look forward to the autumn's volunteer programme and other activities, in this newsletter.

The Trustees

Avian influenza update

It is all too easy to think that the outbreak of avian influenza ('bird flu'), that has devastated wild bird population over the last two years, is over. Sadly, this is not the case, the latest (July 2023) assessment from DEFRA is that the risk to wild bird populations remains high and with the annual autumn migratory influx of birds now only weeks away, prospects for the coming months are not good. Sadly, it does appear that the disease is now effectively endemic in the UK wild bird population – it is here to stay.

Review of the information made available by DEFRA does contain some interesting observations. Firstly, over the recent months, vast numbers of gulls, especially black-headed gulls, have succumbed to the disease. This contrasts with the winter months when geese, swans and other waterfowl made up the majority of cases. Presumably, the current observations are tied in with the fact that gulls gather in large breeding colonies over the spring and early summer. Unfortunately, where these gull colonies have been affected, the disease also appears to spread to terns that often share breeding sites with the gulls.

The other key feature of DEFRA's latest data is the loss of large numbers of seabirds to avian

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influenza. You will undoubtedly have heard of the recent (July 2023) problems, locally, on both the Sefton and Fylde Coasts. Here, large numbers of dead guillemots have regularly washed up on the shorelines along with numbers of other seabirds ranging from puffins to storm petrels. Although the cause of death is generally suspected to be avian influenza, the situation may well have been exacerbated by other well publicised problems including the so-called 'marine heatwave' and the continued release of sewage into the sea.

Occurrences of avian influenza on our local coasts are particularly bad news given the number of birds that regularly 'commute' between the coast and inland locations such as Grimsargh Wetlands.



Given the situation, we should all continue to be vigilant when out and about. Do not pick up dead or sick birds and avoid contact with waste/droppings. At home, always thoroughly wash your hands after filling bird feeders. Don't bring the feeders into the house when cleaning them; do the cleaning outside, using separate utensils. Wear gloves when cleaning feeders and bird tables and always wash your hands when you've finished.

An Avocet Summer

You will perhaps recall that, in the last newsletter, the arrival of a pair of avocets was recorded in the early weeks of April. The pair stayed throughout the summer months and, amazingly, managed to successfully raise two youngsters – a first for the Wetlands. Fortunately for us, Geoff Carefoot maintained a

detailed record of their breeding success and takes up their story here.



The avocets arrived in early April (photograph by Geoff Carefoot).

"A pair of these most elegant and enigmatic waders arrived on April 6th. These are birds which frequent coastal lagoons in the breeding season, with the nearest colonies being on the Ribble marshes and at Conder Green, where management of reserves has encouraged this species in the north-west."

On the Wetlands, we have seen pairs 'prospecting' for nest sites in the past. We briefly had a pair present in April 2019 and 2 pairs very briefly in April and May of 2020.

The re-profiling of the islands, on the Island Lake, seemed to have suited our visiting pair and the lowering water level, due to the dry weather of the early summer, gave them ample opportunities to feed with their characteristic side-to-side sieving technique using their elegant upturned bills.

By April 19th they were settled enough to be seen mating and on May 1st one 'disappeared'! This bird was subsequently located on a rudimentary nest on the exposed gravels on the 'blind' side of the small island as viewed from the main screens. Even with its distinct black on white plumage it wasn't easy to see from other public vantage points.

The off-duty bird (both had spells at incubation) was often close and would 'defend' the sitting bird from other birds venturing too close.



One of the newly hatched chicks overseen by adult (photograph by Geoff Carefoot).

On May 29th One adult led two chicks, tiny, fluffy grey miniatures with tiny upturned bills, into view round the side of the islet which had retained its island nature being still surrounded by water, offering some security. On June 4th another 3 adults arrived for a brief stay, being late prospectors or early 'failed breeders' from elsewhere.



The growing chicks as seen in early June (photograph by Geoff Carefoot).

The chicks grew rapidly, constantly feeding and often in tandem, both adults resolutely protected the chicks by tackling any bird that approached too closely be they wagtails, jackdaws or mute swans! They became almost indistinguishable from their parents in size, but exhibited more subtle, less distinct, pied plumage. They had become a welcome addition to the birdlife of the island lake.... and suddenly they were gone,

departing for the coast sometime over the weekend of 8th-9th July.



The avocet family in early July - the youngsters are the two birds on the left (photograph by Geoff Carefoot).

Having been successful in their breeding attempt it is hoped that they might return next year and, as they often breed communally, bring their offspring or others with them."

The avocets were not the only waders to have breeding success this year. Only a small distance away from where the avocets nested, oystercatchers also nested and, ultimately, a single chick appeared to successfully fledge.



Oystercatcher (bottom left) with two, well hidden, chicks close to the avocet family (photograph by Geoff Carefoot).

The success of these waders is, of course, wonderful news and the re-profiling of the islands that was completed a couple of years ago is, no doubt, a significant factor in this success. Nonetheless, the reality is that predation of wader chicks remains a significant problem. There was, for example, no evidence that any lapwing chicks were successfully fledged this year.

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Oystercatcher with well developed chick (photograph by Geoff Carefoot).

This is not an issue unique to Grimsargh, with many nature reserves suffering exactly the same problems. In this context, it is worth mentioning that we are in close contact with a number of other local reserves regarding the issue of avian and mammalian predation and any steps that it may be possible to take to reduce the problem.

Summer Highlights

Following the hot and dry weather of May and June, July was distinctly wet if not downright waterlogged. Indeed, it was widely reported that Preston received a record-breaking three times the expected July rainfall. The contrast in weather is illustrated by the following two examples. The prolonged hot spell was ideal for the insect life of the Wetlands, as evidenced by the many wonderful 'macro' images of insects regularly seen on our Facebook page. Butterflies, hoverflies, bees, damselflies and dragonflies all flourished in the good weather.

Once the wetter, cooler weather returned, the insects all but (temporarily) disappeared. One weekend, in late July, was particularly stormy and wet with many areas receiving 'a month's rainfall' over the course of that one weekend. Events like this often result in unexpected movements of birds and so it proved in this case. On the morning of Monday 24th July, visitors were treated to the spectacle of six little egret arriving and feeding among the newly flooded vegetation of the islands of the Island Lake. Although the numbers of little egret in the UK have dramatically increased over the last

10-15 years, it remains an unusually rare species at Grimsargh. To see so many of them, even if only for a short time, was an unprecedented, but welcome, sight.



Little egret feeding in newly flooded areas of the Island Lake (photograph by Gerry Small).

Grimsargh Field Day

Grimsargh Field Day took place, in glorious weather, on Saturday 24th June. As always, the day started with the parade from the Village Hall to the park. Grimsargh Wetlands was represented in the parade by two unexpected guests. In recognition of the 70th anniversary of their conquest of Everest, 'Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay' took part in the parade, shaking collection boxes for the Wetlands, as they 'roped' their way along the parade route.



The Everest heroes along with Lord Horam (Patron to the Trust) awaiting the start of the parade.

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Given the sweltering conditions on the day, this was a real feat of endurance for the explorers, clad in their 1950's cold weather gear!

After the parade, we had our stall on the park and we were busy all afternoon with people taking part in our raffle and games. Alongside these fund-raising activities there were plenty of opportunities for people to talk with volunteers and trustees about the work we do on the Wetlands.



Lesley Walker (Treasurer) and David Hindle (Chair) on duty at the Wetlands stall.

The day was a great success, with over £90 raised in support of the Wetlands and a number of new volunteers and supporters recruited. We thank all who supported us and helped out with the parade and the stall.

Andy Small

Trust Secretary, Jayne Woollam has provided the following heart-felt tribute to Andy.

“Although I had not known him well, I had been aware of Andy for several years before we were both appointed, by Grimsargh Parish Council, to become trustees of the newly formed (March 2017) Grimsargh Wetlands Trust. I recall on the night of our interviews, how I was struck by Andy’s radiance. Andy was this big, smiling chap whose sheer joy for nature shone through. He loved wildlife, had a passion for conservation and a real commitment to the site.

From its inception, Andy brought real commitment, drive and energy to the Trust. He was always looking ahead. He had a clear vision for the site, galvanising others, including myself, to share this vision. His enthusiasm never wavered and from the very beginning, he was always looking for funding to improve the site.

I clearly recall one wet September evening that year. Andy appeared on my doorstep and simply said “Jayne, we need to get a grant from the LEF (Lancashire Environmental Fund). I will help you but I want you to apply for it.” His enthusiasm was infectious, the result being that we applied for the grant and the Trust was awarded £30,000. Andy did so much to help secure this. Indeed, the LEF was so impressed by our plans for the site, we were awarded an additional £20,000. This funding has transformed the site. Pathways, screens, ramps, and community boards were soon erected, dramatically improving public access to, and enjoyment of, Grimsargh Wetlands.



Andy’s stall at the Farmers’ Market (photograph by Hannah McGivern).

His knowledge of wildlife was extensive. By contrast, I knew very little. However, he said to me, “Jayne, I want you to lead on one of the guided walks; I know you can do it!” He was always trying to encourage and develop people, especially children.

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Andy setting up the Wetlands stall, Grimsargh Field Day, 2022.

He had a natural connection with children, speaking to them at their level, engaging with them and encouraging their love of wildlife and nature. Andy was quietly spoken; he had a shy smile, an infectious smile. However, in meetings when he spoke, we listened - his instincts were invariably right. He was a "one-off", a character, a kind person.

I will miss him."

Others have provided their own special memories of Andy. Former Grimsargh Parish Councillor, Eileen Murray who, along with others, played such an important role in securing the future of the Wetlands site, recalls:

"I first met Andy back during the preparations for the Grimsargh celebrations of the 2012 Preston Guild. He came forward to offer to take a group to Brockholes and give a guided tour. I remember very well being completely enthralled – not only with his extensive knowledge and enthusiasm for the flora and fauna, but also the delightful, animated way he engaged with all of us in the group – especially the children.

He was one of those the Parish Council approached directly to assist in the early stages of the Wetlands project, helping to determine what would need to be done, if the old disused reservoirs were acquired from United Utilities. Spending time with Andy walking around the site was time very well spent – as he pointed out

so many things I would have never noticed. When we started to set up the charity to run it, we sincerely hoped that Andy would come forward to be one of the trustees and were so delighted when he did. His passion for the role was shown again and again in his dedication to the physical maintenance activities and also his tireless fundraising work. Such an unassuming and lovely man, who will be so greatly missed in our village."

Former Chair of Grimsargh Parish Council, Lindsay Philipson also remembers Andy:

"I had never met Andy until I moved to the village in 2014, although I had seen him many times in the local paper over the years with his son Cameron, with reports of his charity fundraising successes.

When the Parish Council formally took ownership of The Wetlands in early 2017, after 7 long years of negotiations came to an end, we knew that we then had to get the right people to form the Board of Trustees. We had aspirations for the land that went well beyond day to day management of what is difficult, sometimes dangerous terrain; terribly neglected, overgrown, and lacking the public accessibility that the village so desperately wanted.

A group who not only had project management skills, financial acumen, health and safety knowledge, and boundless enthusiasm to overcome the setbacks that were inevitable, but also had a love of the piece of land that is the 'lung of the village'.

We were thrilled when Andy stepped forward; he not only knew the site inside out but his fundraising experience proved invaluable. Rain or shine, he led parties of volunteers as they brought order back to the overgrown habitats. Nature walks, orchid spotting, and Andy was there enthusing the children. Book and bric-a-brac selling every Saturday, even socially distanced during lockdown. Stalls at Christmas fairs, stalls at Field Day. He never missed an opportunity to help raise funds and broaden

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awareness of The Wetlands. And today it is a very different place than it was in 2017.

Thanks for everything Andy - I shall miss your cheery wave as you buzzed around the village in your familiar silver grey car; Grimsargh has lost a true gem."

Finally, regular readers will be aware of our long-standing collaboration with colleagues working on the Fylde Sand Dunes Project and will be interested in the following tribute from Grimsargh resident Geoff Willets:

"Being a local lad and regular visitor to the Wetlands along with being the Senior Officer for Fylde Councils Coast & Conservation Ranger Service, it quickly became apparent back in 2019 that we could be of benefit to each other and so I approached Andy to see what we could do to help. Full of enthusiasm as always, Andy jumped at the chance of some help and so we arranged for my team to come down to the Wetlands and remove some of the White Poplar which we then used for Christmas Wreath making events and we've been doing this annually ever since.



Andy and Geoff 'willow popping' on the Fen.

Andy was always welcoming and made the team feel at home, he even supplied a lovely chilli and rice lunch one year for us which was greatly appreciated by the team on a cold November day!

On a personal note, I grew up with Andy and considered him a good friend and he will be greatly missed by all of us."

Autumn Volunteer Programme

As a prelude to our autumn volunteer work programme, we will be holding a meeting for all existing and potential volunteers on Wednesday 6th September at 7pm in Grimsargh Village Hall.

Since we first started our regular volunteer days in the autumn of 2017, so much has changed in the village. There are many new residents in the various new housing developments in and around the village and we are particularly keen for them to learn about the Wetlands and the opportunities there are for contributing to the development of the reserve. This meeting is an excellent opportunity for people to find out, from trustees and existing volunteers, about the Wetlands, the proposed autumn and winter work programme and the different ways in which all members of the community can contribute to this wonderful asset.

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Volunteers on a particularly wet 'summer evening' work session (photograph by Jayne Woollam).

Our proposed autumn work schedule is as follows:

Saturday September 16th
Sunday October 8th – 'Autumnal Guided Walk'
Saturday October 21st
Sunday November 5th
Saturday November 18th
Sunday December 3rd



Just a small selection of some of the hand tools, for use by volunteers, recently purchased using your donations and gifts.

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. As always, we ask everyone to book onto the volunteer day using our online booking system (<https://www.grimsarhwetlands.org/events/vol>

[unteeer-days.php](https://www.grimsarhwetlands.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 that may be in place in relation, for example, to avian influenza.

You will see from our schedule that we also plan to hold an 'Autumnal Guided Walk' around the Wetlands on Saturday October 8th. More details to follow nearer the time.

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

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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 grimsarghwetlandtrust@gmail.com.

Acknowledgements

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