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# Grimsargh Wetlands Newsletter



## Winter 2023

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### Welcome

Welcome to your Winter newsletter. We've had a busy time on the Wetlands over the past few weeks with volunteers and contractors carrying out essential maintenance work across the site. It is worth remembering that without this work, the Wetlands would rapidly be lost to scrub and rank vegetation and the, all important, biodiversity of the site would be lost. You can read about the work already carried out and our planned winter work programme in this newsletter.

The importance of ensuring the biodiversity of the site is illustrated by the findings of the recently published 'State of Nature Report' (summarized in this newsletter) that highlights the alarming loss of wildlife and habitats across the UK. On a more positive note, the report also emphasises the importance of volunteer-led conservation projects across the country in combatting the ongoing decline in species and habitat.

We hope you enjoy reading your newsletter and would like to take this opportunity to thank all our volunteers and supporters for their hard work throughout the year. We wish you all seasonal best wishes. Finally, we will be holding a 'Winter Guided Walk' on the Saturday between Christmas and New Year (Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> December). This represents an ideal opportunity, between the festivities, to get out into the countryside and enjoy nature and we look forward to seeing you then!

The Trustees

### State of Nature Report

The recent 'State of Nature' report ([stateofnature.org.uk](http://stateofnature.org.uk)) was published and widely reported on in September. This comprehensive review documents the decline of the UK's wildlife over the past 50 years and paints a devastating picture of neglect and loss. One of the most eye-catching headlines was a 43% decline in the abundance of birds over the last 50 years. To put it bluntly, nearly one in six of species surveyed are at risk of being lost from the UK and we continue to be regarded as one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. The reasons for these declines are closely linked to human activity, both past and present; however, the good news is that wildlife conservation efforts can make a real difference and may slow or even reverse some of these declines.

The report also highlights the importance of access to nature in improving human health and well-being along with the power of volunteers who bring so much enthusiasm and commitment to a diverse range of conservation projects across the country. These observations tie in with findings of the recently launched 'People's Plan for Nature' ([peoplesplanfornature.org](http://peoplesplanfornature.org)) which shows that many people in the UK feel committed to protecting and restoring nature. The fundamental importance of our interactions with nature are also reflected in the government's recently published 'Environmental Improvement Plan 2023' with its aspiration that 'everyone should live within a 15 minute walk of a green or blue space'.

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In light of all this, we are lucky, in Grimsargh, to have a local nature reserve within easy access of all who live in the village and in the surrounding local communities. Grimsargh Wetlands not only provides a sanctuary for local wildlife but also provides the opportunity for all members of the community to engage with and appreciate nature.



Red-listed Whimbrel on the Wetlands during their spring migration (photograph by Geoff Carefoot).

Just to put the conservation importance of Grimsargh Wetlands into context, it is notable that the Wetlands is home to a numbers of birds on the so called 'red list'. This is a listing of birds that breed or overwinter in the UK that are of the greatest conservation concern. At 70 species, the Red list is now longer than ever before, and is almost double the length of that in the first review in 1996.

Lapwing Curlew, Whimbrel, and Black-tailed Godwit are all red-listed waders that can be seen on the Wetlands – sometimes in significant numbers. Without doubt, one of the most important factors in the decline of these waders is the loss of habitat and the continued 'wader-friendly' management of the Wetlands is a key element in their success here.

### *Avian influenza ('bird flu') update*

For the first time in over two years it is possible to report some good news about the ongoing outbreak of avian influenza. The latest risk assessment, published by DEFRA (November

2023), suggests that the number of 'found-dead' wild bird cases in the U.K. has fallen greatly since its peak in the summer. Indeed, across Europe, cases appear to be falling week on week.

There are, inevitably, a number of caveats in relation to these promising observations. It is anticipated that wild bird cases may begin to increase again, with the ongoing arrival of migratory birds across the country. In this context, the presence of avian influenza in wild birds in northern and eastern Europe is of concern because many migratory ducks, geese and swans fly from or through Eastern Europe and the Baltics on their journey here. Also of concern is the detection of an emerging strain of avian influenza that has not been detected in this country for some years. This now appears to be spreading from the far north of Europe and the Arctic into north-western Europe, including the U.K.

Overall, the wild bird risk level across the country is now classed as 'medium'. This is notwithstanding the unpredictability of the risk associated with the inward winter migration of wild birds. It remains important that we all continue to be vigilant regarding the spread of avian influenza when visiting the Wetlands and elsewhere in the countryside.

### DON'T RISK SPREADING BIRD FLU!

Keep to the footpath, with **dogs on leads**

Do not **pick up or touch** dead or sick wild birds

Do not touch wild bird feathers or surfaces contaminated with wild bird droppings

If you keep poultry or other birds, wash your hands, clean and disinfect your footwear before tending to your birds

**If you find any dead wild birds, please report online.**



[www.gov.uk/guidance/report-dead-wild-birds](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/report-dead-wild-birds)

Or call the Defra helpline on 03459 33 55 77

APHA may collect some dead birds for surveillance testing. Otherwise, birds can be disposed of safely, if necessary, by the local authority on public land or by the landowner/manager. [www.gov.uk/guidance/removing-and-disposing-of-dead-wild-birds](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/removing-and-disposing-of-dead-wild-birds)



Animal & Plant Health Agency

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### *Autumnal Guided Walk*



Trust Chair, David Hindle introduces visitors to the Wetlands at the start of the guided walk.

On Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> October, trustees led an enthusiastic group of visitors on an 'Autumnal Guided Walk' around the Wetlands. The highlights of the walk being a fleeting glimpse of a Kingfisher as it streaked across the Mere and the unexpected view of over 50 Snipe being flushed from vegetation on the Island Lake by a hunting Sparrowhawk. Overall, more than 20 different species of bird were recorded during the walk. In addition to seeing this abundance of birdlife, visitors were also treated to views of late-flying Red Admiral butterflies and Migrant Hawker dragonflies making the most of the unseasonably warm weather. Visitors were also able to enjoy the sight of a profusion of berries on trees and hedgerows across the Wetlands. It was particularly gratifying to see that so many of the saplings, planted by volunteers over the last five years, are now showing impressive displays of berries. These berries provide a welcome food source for birds, especially visiting winter thrushes such as the Redwing and Fieldfare.

### *Visit by the Ribble Rivers Trust*

On Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> October a group from the Ribble Rivers Trust (RRT) spent the day working on the Wetlands. As previously mentioned in our newsletters, RRT is one of our most important partner organisations. The invasive willow that is so problematic for us is

ideal for use in RRT's flood management and other projects.

On this occasion, the bundled willow, cut from the embankments of the Island lake, was earmarked for use in the prevention of bankside erosion at Bashall Brook.



RRT volunteers removing willow bundles from the Island Lake.

We are tremendously grateful to RRT for their continued support and are particularly pleased that, once again, our 'waste' willow will be put to good use in other local conservation projects. Overall, the day was a great success with two full trailer loads of willow and other brash being removed from the site.



Just some of the willow cut and bundled by RRT volunteers.

### *Visit by Friends of Avenham and Miller Parks*

We were delighted to receive a request for some of our willow from another local volunteer group. The Friends of Avenham and Miller Parks needed a supply of freshly cut willow for



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the repair and maintenance of their willow archways in Avenham park.



Representatives from Friends of Avenham and Miller Parks collecting willow bundles for use in their willow archways project (photograph by Jayne Woollam).



A magnificent willow archway in Avenham Park, Preston – now incorporating Wetlands willow! (photograph used by permission of Friends of Avenham and Miller Parks).

This is yet another example of how our waste willow can be recycled and we were pleased to be able to help with this wonderful city parks project.

## Maintenance Update

Our regular contractors, Wilkinson Landscaping ([www.wilkinsonlandscaping.co.uk](http://www.wilkinsonlandscaping.co.uk)), have been working on the Wetlands for several days during October and November. As always, their visits result in dramatic changes, with the embankments being given their ‘autumnal haircut’ and the base of the Fen receiving particular attention.



The newly mown embankment of the Fen.

As readers will know, the Fen has always been particularly problematic for us, with willow continuing to infiltrate into the Phragmites reed bed in the south-west corner of the Fen. Many volunteer hours have been spent removing willow from the Fen, yet the larger willow encroaching into the reed bed have remained an on-going problem.



Removal of willow from the Fen reed bed.

Fortunately, these larger willows were no match for the Wilkinson contractors with their heavy

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machinery and large numbers were removed 'roots and all' from around and within the reed bed. As any of you who have visited the Wetlands in recent days will have seen for yourselves, work done by the contractors has made a dramatic difference to the Fen.

Removing these larger willow will have several benefits. It should make it easier for us to keep any remaining smaller willow under control using brush cutters/trimmers. More importantly, it should give the reed bed a chance to develop thereby providing a wonderful habitat for wildlife.

There is no doubt, that keeping invasive willow at bay will always be an issue, especially in the Fen; however, establishing the right blend of contractor work and volunteer efforts should go a long way to promoting a much more wildlife-friendly habitat - be it for hunting Barn Owl, a variety of summer warblers or the more elusive Water Rail that is known to favour well established reed beds.

Finally, it is likely that other contractors will be on site in the coming weeks. Regular readers will know that, in common with so many other woodland sites, we have a number of ash trees that have succumbed to ash die-back disease. This is a national problem, with a forecast that 80% or more of ash trees across the country may be lost, causing dramatic changes to woodland landscapes. In the case of the Wetlands, the priority is the removal of dead trees that raise concerns in relation to the public footpath and surrounding properties. It will be these issues that contractors are expected to address over the winter months.

### *Invasive Crassula on the Wetlands*

Those of you who visit the Wetlands regularly may have noticed that some of the exposed mud around the Island Lake appears to be covered by a fine green carpet of plant material. Like just about every other Wetland site across the UK, Grimsargh Wetlands is susceptible to *Crassula helmsii* (also known as New Zealand

Pigmyweed or Australian Swamp Stonecrop). This is a non-native, invasive aquatic plant that is now banned from sale in this country (it was originally introduced into the UK as a decorative garden pond plant). It is a highly adaptable plant, growing just below the water surface and in the margins. If it covers exposed mud it can cause problems for feeding wading birds.



Crassula on the Island Lake (photograph by Geoff Carefoot).

In truth, there is little that can be done to eliminate this invasive species; however, it is possible to manage it. In our case, the fluctuating levels of water in the Island Lake do help. Flooding the lake in winter and reducing water levels in summer should help suppress the growth and spread of the weed. Sadly, it is unlikely that this strategy will be as effective as it is at those coastal Wetland sites that are able to flood areas with salt water. In the future, it is possible that 'biological control' may be a possibility with a number of sites currently trialling the use of a Crassula Mite (*Aculus crassulae*) to selectively inhibit the growth and spread of this highly invasive aquatic weed.

### *Update on the Trust*

There have recently been some significant changes at the Trust. Over the summer, Phil Atkinson stepped down from his role as trustee. Phil has been a trustee since the inception of the Trust in 2017. So often the 'quiet voice of reason', Phil's sage advice and tireless work on



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the site, on guided walks and at fund-raising events will be greatly missed by all at the Trust and we are indebted to him for all he has contributed to the success of the Wetlands. We wish him well in his 'retirement'.

It is worth mentioning the Phil's wife, Sue has long been one of our most loyal volunteers, baking cakes (including the legendary lemon drizzle cake!) that so often sustain volunteers through arduous work sessions. We are delighted that Sue will continue baking for the volunteer days and we thank her for her efforts that are so greatly appreciated by hungry volunteers!



Geoff Carefoot taking a break from work on the Wetlands.

In other news, we are delighted that, following a change in his personal circumstances, Geoff Carefoot has been able to return to his role as trustee. Regular readers of the newsletter will know that Geoff was involved in so many of the projects that have transformed the site in recent years. The construction of viewing screens, the re-profiling of the islands in the Island Lake and the construction of tern rafts were all 'master-minded' by Geoff and we look forward to Geoff's renewed input into the ongoing development of the Wetlands.

We are delighted that Geoff is also the driving force behind the recently introduced 'Species Spotlight' feature on our Facebook page, where his knowledge and photographic skills are brought to the fore in highlighting the Wetlands birdlife.

On another note, it is worth saying something about the finances of the Trust. As always, Treasurer to the Trust, Lesley Walker provided a breakdown of the Trust's 2022 income and expenditure at the recent Annual General Meeting for members. As a charity, the Trust relies on donations, fund-raising activities, sponsorship and membership fees for its income. Competitively awarded grants (from organisations such as the Lancashire Environmental Fund) support specific projects; however, the routine maintenance of the site and the Trust's on-going costs are not generally eligible for grant-supported funding and therefore have to be met from donations and fund-raising activities.

It is sobering to note that our most significant on-going cost is site insurance at nearly £4000 (and rising) per annum. Regular maintenance by local contractors costs in the region of £2000 per annum. Purchase and up-keep of tools and other essential equipment for volunteers is another significant expense (over £1500 in 2022).

In support of these outgoings, our fund-raising and sales generated a little over £4000 in 2022. Donations, gifts and membership fees raised nearly £2000, although there was an additional one-off donation of £5000 in 2022 that has been 'ear-marked' to support a future Wetlands project. Of course, with the recent loss of our chief fund-raiser, Andy Small, we will need to re-evaluate our future fund-raising strategies. The importance of income from these activities is abundantly clear from the above breakdown of the Trust's financial commitments.

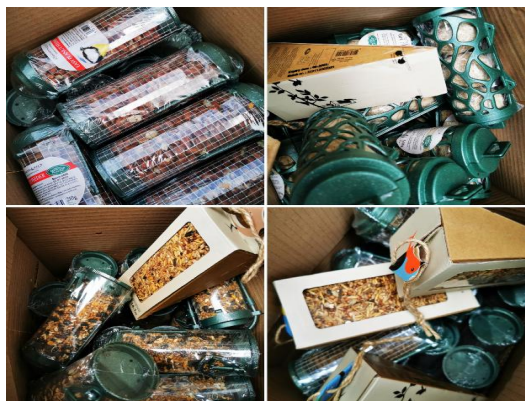
We are tremendously grateful to all in the local community who support the Wetlands, be it through donations, sponsorship or membership fees. Without your generous support, it simply would not be possible to maintain and develop the Wetlands.

Of course, there are many ways of supporting the Wetlands. This is illustrated by the recent generosity of one of our local sponsors.

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AnimalCrackers ([www.animalcrackers.co.uk](http://www.animalcrackers.co.uk)), based at Red Scar, donated a large quantity of bird food and feeders for use on the Wetlands and for distribution to our volunteers and guided walk visitors for use in their own gardens.



Just small selection of the bird feeders donated by AnimalCrackers (photograph by Hannah McGivern).

This wonderful donation will make a real difference to local birdlife as we head into the winter months and we greatly appreciate the generosity of all at AnimalCrackers.

### *Volunteer Days and Winter Guided Walk*



Volunteers ready to get started on our first autumn volunteers session.

Our autumn volunteer days have been tremendously successful, with old and new faces regularly turning out to work on the Wetlands in, sometimes, less than ideal weather. Our winter volunteer dates, for January and February 2024, are listed here:

Sunday 7th January  
Saturday 20th January  
Sunday 4th February  
Saturday 17th February

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 the online booking system on our website ([www.grimsarghwetlands.org](http://www.grimsarghwetlands.org)). 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.

As mentioned at the start of the newsletter, we plan to hold a 'Winter Guided Walk' at 10 am on Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> December and we have our fingers crossed for good weather on the day. If you wish to attend the guided walk, please use the online booking system on our website to book your place and see the latest information regarding the arrangements for the day. Do remember to 'dress for the weather' - warm clothing and strong boots will be essential!

### *A Reminder – Visiting the Wetlands*

If you intend to visit the Wetlands on your own, we have an access point ('what3words' location - [newsstand.lunch.bucked](https://www.what3words.com/location/newsstand.lunch.bucked)), from Preston Road, just across from Oban Court, leading to the Compound viewing screens that overlook the Mere and the Island Lake. 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](https://www.what3words.com/location/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

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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 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.

### *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](mailto:jaynewoollam@hotmail.co.uk)). Any general queries about the work of the Trust should be sent to [grimsarghwetlandstrust@gmail.com](mailto:grimsarghwetlandstrust@gmail.com).

### *Acknowledgements*

We thank Geoff Carefoot, Jayne Woollam, Hannah McGivern and the 'Friends of Avenham and Miller Parks' 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.

**LANCASHIRE ENVIRONMENTAL FUND**