

Railway Land Wildlife Trust No 61



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Editorial

This Newsletter marks the end of an incredibly busy eight months for the Trust. Our energy has been focussed on raising money, appealing for grant funding, running our second River Festival, the sponsored five day River Walk, and celebrating with the JMB the completion of their Leighside Pond Project. It is significant that these events involved many young people from in and around Lewes. The River Walk - which included participants travelling to France for the final day's events – marked the culmination of the four-year project, NC4All. Firm friendships have been established and the participants have made significant progress. Not only have they developed fixed-point photography and computer skills, but by working together so intensively, they have developed their social skills and self-confidence too.

Our efforts to fund-raise from within the community, through the sponsorship of the River Walk, have raised in excess of £10,000, and together with the sums generated by our appeal via Lewes News, we can add another £9,000. Because we reclaim gift aid on your donations we know that the combined total for this year stands at £20,000+. What is really heartening is that our membership has now reached 250.

Money-raising isn't everything – our core business is to care for the Reserve – and volunteers are led by Jon Gunson and Dan Ross, our Ranger. New benches and repaired paths; dredged ditches and reseeded meadows; surveys of birds insects and plants continue to affirm the primary

purposes of the Trust. Thank you all for your continued support.
Pat Rigg

My particular thanks to Liz Owen in Ringmer, who has volunteered to deliver the newsletters thus saving us postage costs.

Minders Work Programme

We still meet by the Railway Lane gate at 1.30 on the first Sunday of every month: all welcome. (Bring wellies - tools provided).

Jon Gunson

Membership Matters

Reminder ○ If this dot is red, it indicates that according to my records you have not renewed already for 2008. A Membership 'renewal' form is enclosed with this newsletter for you to use.

If I have made a mistake please email me on rigg@patspur.demon.co.uk or ring me on 01273-474505.

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Two new benches on the Heart of Reeds

In early May I met up with Beryl Wilkins, her son David and granddaughter Pippa on the Railway Land. Beryl had donated £400 to buy two benches for the Reserve, in memory of her late husband Christopher George Wilkins.

Beryl was delighted with the positioning of the benches, and we were very pleased that Dan Ross was able to source them so promptly. They have been placed strategically where members of the public can rest and enjoy different views of the Heart of Reeds and hopefully catch sight of both of our 'shy' birds, the kingfisher and water rail. Thank you to the Wilkins family!



Phillipa, Beryl and David enjoy the sunshine on one of the two benches.

Jon Gunson Reflects

I suppose there are some people who think there is something a little staid, perhaps rather soppy, about birdwatching - and it is true, there is quite an *Ahhhh*...factor in a nest full of baby blue tits. We have also, of course, our moments of comedy and high drama.

A few days back I was walking through the meadow west of the railway line when I saw one of our committee members taking part in the current bird survey. Shoulders hunched, binoculars at the ready, alert in every fibre of her being, she entered the tunnel under the railway. And as she did so an impossibly magnificent little bird leapt up immediately behind her, and flew away over the field, fast, straight, and low, like a very small cruise missile dressed by Gianni Versace. Leonie tells me that the day before it was *she* who had seen the kingfisher, and her friend who had missed it.

There are strange birds in that meadow, anyway. I recently saw a heron in the far corner, and walked a few paces before thinking, hang on, why is its back a sort of russet brown when it ought to be grey? And then of course the young fox, who had been sitting back on his haunches, yawned, and trotted away. And yes, I *have* bought myself a new pair of glasses, but consider that my mistake was caused in part by the posse of baby rabbits who were bouncing around the cub as if they were auditioning for the Teletubbies.

Walking the dogs by the river, I saw a peregrine stoop on a woodpigeon. According to the books I read when a boy, a "bounced" fighter pilot should beware of breaking to the left, as this is the instinctive, predictable reaction that can take one into a stream of bullets or cannon shells. The tactical situation was different here; knowing that a pigeon has a good chance of outrunning him in level flight, the falcon will try to drive him towards the cliff, then cut the inevitable corner, and...goodnight, sweet prince. The pigeon was flying north along the cliff, and he hadn't read the same books as me. He flinched left, and it saved his life. I last saw him heading towards Malling, as the peregrine sauntered back. I don't suppose he went hungry for long....Certainly the sparrowhawk that passed over my garden last week did not. He plunged sideways into one of the white poplars by the Cockshut,

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and went off with dinner in his talons. I was rather upset by this, to be honest, as I thought he had taken one of the spotted flycatchers I'd been watching. Not that the hawk shouldn't take his dinner where he can, you understand, but the flycatchers are about to head off to Africa for the winter, and it seemed sad that one of them would have to make that long journey all alone. They had kept their heads down, though, and I suppose it was some poor finch that bought it.

Has anyone else noticed how many house martins have been around this year? The Meadow Minders were working at the Leighside pond this Sunday, and the sky above was full of them. Memo to self: put up more nestboxes.

Preliminary Report on Railway Land Bird Survey

This report was written by Michael Hawkins in February this year, and has been updated by Liz Williams who is leading the Bird Survey Team. We hope to have a regular piece from the team in future newsletters.

Since last autumn (2007) a group of volunteers has been routinely counting the birds seen on the Railway Land Nature Reserve. Visits of about two hours have been made early in the morning roughly every fortnight with more frequent visits during the breeding season. A total of 66 species has been spotted so far. This compares with 64 seen over a whole year by an observer in the 1980s: it is expected that this will be surpassed when a full year's observations have been made. Combining the two lists produces a site total of 86 species to date. This excludes anecdotal evidence received of sightings or hearings of a few other species, such as redshank, barn owl, nightingale and yellowhammer,

even though these would not be unexpected given the habitats on the Reserve. Unfortunately the 1980s list does not include the numbers seen of each species so study of trends is not possible.

Species seen in both the 1980s and in 2007-08 (48): these naturally are mostly the common species to be expected in such a locale. Such include grey heron, mallard, kestrel, moorhen, black-headed and herring gulls, pied wagtail, swallow, meadow pipit, house sparrow, and the obvious pigeons, thrushes (including mistle), tits (including long-tailed), crows, warblers (willow warbler, chiffchaff, blackcap and both common whitethroat and lesser whitethroat) and finches (including goldfinch), as well as other common passerines such as starling, dunnock, robin and wren. Worth specific comment are other rather less obvious species: there are sightings spanning the two decades of water rail, kingfisher, green and great spotted woodpecker, grey wagtail, the wintering thrushes redwing and fieldfare, goldcrest, linnet, tree creeper and bullfinch. As far as birds of prey are concerned, the only one besides kestrel to be seen in both periods is the sparrowhawk, which already appears to have begun its revival in the area twenty years ago.



Sparrowhawk: photo courtesy of Fred Heath

Species seen in the 1980s but not so far in 2007-08 (16): these can be roughly divided into ‘surprise omissions’ (that is species which one would now expect to record,) and rarities (which one would not usually expect to record but might if one were lucky). These categories are inevitably a little arbitrary but in the first one might include lapwing (given the large wintering flock on Lewes Brooks), snipe (again common at Lewes Brooks), tawny owl (though no survey has taken place at night), cuckoo, coal tit (a real surprise omission this), spotted flycatcher, skylark, coot (which were quite common on the Lewes Brooks this year) and nuthatch (which can be seen locally in Lewes). The second category include rarities such as serin and twite and in between are species not easy to see like jack snipe, woodcock, lesser spotted woodpecker and siskin

Finally the summer visitors recorded in the 1980s but not yet in 2007-08 are cuckoo, swift, house and sand martins and spotted flycatcher.

New species seen in 2007-08 but not in the 1980s (20): this is probably the most interesting aspect. To a trifling extent it reflects the decision (e.g. the inclusion of mute swan and common sandpiper) to extend the survey to include the adjacent river and cliffs, but more significant are those changes which seem to be the result of either global warming (the appearance of little egret) or improved habitat through the declining use of pesticides: the latter particularly affects birds of prey, such as peregrine, and carrion feeders, such as raven, both of which have been added to the site list. Other interesting additions, though mostly in small numbers, are little grebe, cormorant, Canada goose, great black-backed gull, common gull, stock dove, stonechat, garden warbler, jay, and reed bunting.

The new habitat, the Heart of Reeds, has attracted large numbers of reed warblers, a few sedge warblers, and provided a home for the elusive water rail.



Mallards: photo courtesy of Fred Heath

Frequency of sightings in 2007-08: the most common species are obviously those one would expect. The most abundant, unsurprisingly given the large colony on the cliffs, is jackdaw. Counts in double figures have usually or always recorded for black-headed and herring gulls, woodpigeon, blackbird, blue tit, magpie and carrion crow, and sometimes for mute swan, Canada goose, collared dove, robin, great and long-tailed tits, chaffinch and house sparrow. Other species always or almost always recorded, though in smaller numbers, are grey heron, mallard, moorhen, wren, dunnock, song thrush, goldfinch and greenfinch. At the other end of the scale there have been only one or two recordings of little grebe, little egret, sparrowhawk, kestrel, peregrine falcon (two together), water rail, stock dove, meadow pipit, stonechat, redwing, fieldfare, goldcrest, jay and bullfinch, and only a few more of cormorant, green and great spotted woodpecker, pied and grey wagtail, mistle thrush and raven. The beginning of our year’s survey included the autumn migration and there were sightings of swallow, chiffchaff, common and lesser whitethroats, and willow, garden and reed warblers. There was only one sighting of a wintering chiffchaff. In spring the whitethroats and warblers returned, as well as migrant chiffchaffs, swifts, house martins and a few swallows.

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Our Second River Festival

The 163 children from Wallands, Rodmell, Meeching Valley, Western Road and Polegate primary schools thoroughly enjoyed the workshops offered. Thankfully the rain held off until midday when we were joined by the massed walkers - from France, Lewes's St Nicholas Centre, the **Cosmofil** Challenge group and the salsa band from Priory School. The event was pronounced a huge success by the schools taking part, and Chris Ient, Dave Sykes and I were truly grateful to the RLWT volunteers who assisted with the logistics of running such a mammoth event – Neil Merchant, Jean Gould, Tessa George, Mike Boice. Caroline Kenward, Liz Lee, Graham Shuttleworth, Steve Francis, Jessica Miles and Ruth O'Keefe. Linda, the Park Warden, also helped us in the absence of Dan our Ranger.



A dramatic photo taken by Peter Cripps of the Sussex Express - of us all 'inside' the marked out area of the Linklater Pavilion.

The Festival cost us £1875 to put on, but we have been re-imbursed from the European Union 'Interreg' budget of the NC4All project. We know the experience we provided for the children was well worth the effort and will provide a positive link for another generation with the Reserve and the work of the Trust.



We had employed a number of professional workshop leaders - Brillo the Clown taught Circus skills; Ollie Heath ran Drumming and Body Percussion; Christine Hall and Wenda made banners; Sara Holmes taught the children to do Willow Weaving; Richard Osmond's Hi Tech Wild Trek trailer was supported by members of the Sussex Ouse Conservation Society; Steve Wood led a River Poetry workshop and Don Fuller of the RSPB set up scopes in the signal box.

From the RLWT, Liz Williams, Jenifer Barton and Leonie Mercer ran a seed identifying workshop; Dave Sykes made shelters and Jane McIntosh & Stephanie Newland helped the children create a natural art collage. These voluntary contributions kept down overall costs, and were a demonstration of the commitment of the Trust to providing quality educational experiences on the Reserve.



Norman Baker wows the crowd with his French and ability to balance on his soap box!

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We are really grateful to **Richard Green** who provided a cherry-picker hoist so that **Peter Cripps**, the Sussex Express photographer could take the dramatic aerial shot of us all inside the proposed Linklater Pavilion ‘footprint’; and finally, to **Elephant Graphics** of Barcombe who have donated a large print of the photo for us to use as publicity for the Pavilion. Pat Rigg



The JMB are treated to a trip with the South Downs Ranger, Mark Hayward – a reward for all their hard work.

More pictures of our recent events

The opening of the JMB’s Leighside Project:



Kaddie Lee Preston helps Declan, Amy, Beth and Christie open the JMB Leighside Pond Project – and what a surprise...it was raining!



The body percussion workshop entralls the children, and at this stage, the skies are blue. Vigorous drumming kept the clouds at bay!



Members of the present JMB, plus past members Becca and Louise, with Carla Butler, Chair of LDC and Baroness Kay Andrews, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. The JMB commissioned a 15 minute film ‘Young Impact’ about their work since 1996, all paid for out of a Lottery Grant of £23,000.



Proud banner makers show off their craft.



The Hi- Tech trailer enabled close inspection of creatures from the dipping pond area.



The seed quiz with its washing line of exhibits.



A patchwork made of collected natural things, glitter glue and paper.



I was anxious about recognising Mr Brillo when he arrived, but needn't have worried!



The Lewes participants entered to deafening cheers and whoops accompanied by the Priory School Salsa Band.



John Parry arrives with the massed walkers – looking unsurprisingly - the slightly worse for wear.....



*.....it was **Day 4** of his walk!.*



Some of our French friends make their way towards Newhaven.



Cosmofil – led by Babette Kundrat - a group who walked and talked in French. They also sang for us all at the magnificent Reception organised by **Jean Cash** (red pinny) at Newhaven Fort, marking the end of the Ouse Valley Section.



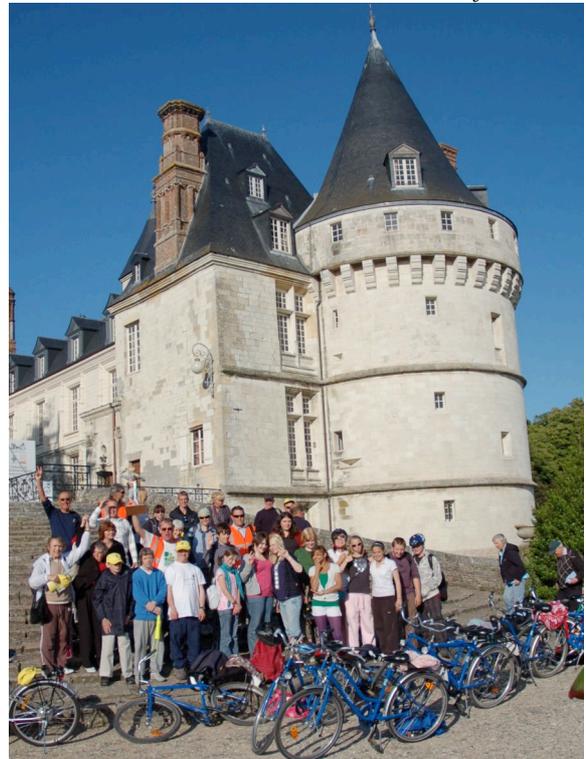
Speeches and a wonderful tea of homemade scones and cakes rounded off a wonderfully exhausting week. The following morning the walkers went by ferry to Dieppe and cycled to the Parc Guy Weber, completing their adventure at the chateau at Mesnieres.



These adapted tricycles ensured everyone could enjoy the Avenue Verte experience. **Special mention must go to Paul Green** who gave up a week's holiday, masterminded the logistics for the participants and provided the essential back-up for the entire walk, ensuring all safety issues were covered.



Miles leads Mike.... he's Miles Ahead of course!



Chairman's Corner

Flushed with the success and enthusiasm of the river festival and sponsored walk, it has been a particularly bitter blow to receive such a bad response to the tendering process. Three contractors pulled out at the last minute, two produced costs well beyond our target and only one got anywhere near our £750,000 target but still well beyond it.

The whole building and planning system requires us to spend money, to reach a point of knowing what we are really dealing with. Thanks to the incredible support and generosity of local people, we have paid the following to reach our current position:

Mackellar Schwerdt architects	£30,584
Planning supervisor	£5,453
Mechanical and Electrical consultants	£12,762
Structural engineer	£8,482
Lewes District Council planning permission and building regulations	£1,728
VAT on all of the above	£14,364
TOTAL	£82,098

This has provided us with a superb set of plans which we own, permission to build at once if we find the remaining money, and a whole load of experience in fund raising. But that's it - there is no more in the pot and we have paid all our debts and we will not spend a penny more until we have a viable plan. We still have the support of our founding sponsors of £400,000.

So where do we go from here?

We have two plans that have swung into operation – one will involve a re-tendering process at no charge and the other is a bid to the European Union building on our work in the 'Nature Corridors for All' project. Both approaches will peak in mid January and we have given ourselves until the end of

January 2009 to either make it happen or to abandon the project. The latter will be very hard indeed given all the work of the last 3 years and all we can say is that if we reach that sorry state, we all **know** that we have done everything possible to try and make the Linklater Pavilion a living reality. It will be a very sad reflection of our times if this proves to be the case - but we have not yet given up and my thanks, as always, goes to the fantastic team that are working on the project.

We will keep you fully posted and I promise that we are doing everything in our power to move things along.
John Parry

Another reminder why we need the Linklater Pavilion....

3rd Sept 2008

Dear John,

As I'm sure you remember, in early June, we offered to run a fun day for children on the Railway Land to help raise money for the Linklater Building. We have a huge collection of fossils and simply love arranging dinosaur & local fossil activities, such as finding shark teeth etc in sand, stencilling, painting, hands on experience with all the fossils / dinosaur remains we find in the Lewes area.

We walked the land and chose one or two spots but as there is no shelter anywhere from the challenges of the weather, we are at our wits end this year to fix a firm date. The long range forecast has been abysmal for each progressing month and we cannot find anywhere indoors we can hire at a cost we can afford in order to raise money for the Railway Land scheme without bankrupting ourselves!!

We now think, regretfully, we have to put our planned event on hold until Spring next year. We so love working with children and as you know from the past, local dinosaur remains and fossils catch many a youngster and their parents' imagination and enthusiasm.

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We so hope you find enough sponsorship to complete the Linklater Building as we are sure many wildlife earth science enthusiasts like ourselves would like to share their knowledge in a dedicated building and your Railway Land site in Lewes would be such a fantastic place to do it.

We will keep in touch and hope for better weather in 2009 - could it be any worse?

Best wishes

Pat and Derek Martin

Ranger Report

As we head into the Autumn, it is time to get to work on the Railway Land! Autumn is the busiest season for habitat management. As the wildlife on the site retreats to escape the cold and rain, I get to work with my volunteers, and we set about our annual scrub clearing, pond management, tree works and woodland glade creation. This autumn we have a number of projects taking place.

The proposed Reedbed management includes the removal of willow saplings from the islands, sluice maintenance, reed cutting where they have overgrown into water channels, and research into water level control.



Several other ditches will be re-profiled and dredged removing excess silt and bramble, along a similar specification to last years work, continuing the maintenance programme.

On the Meadows the ditch dredging spoil which resulted from last winters work, will

be “root harrowed” (broken up), and seeded (on 30th September we hope) with a wildflower and grass mix. We are delighted that half the cost of this seed has been funded by **Responsible Travel**. [Ed - see Newsletter No 60] This work is highly weather dependant, and may need to be delayed until the spring, if the ground is waterlogged.

Our proposed seed mix EM8 contains species able to tolerate a fluctuating water table and periods of being waterlogged. Periodic flooding, either seasonally by the winter rains or deliberate as in traditional water meadows, creates grassland of a particular character and species composition. Flood meadow soils spend part of the year waterlogged but drain and become drier for much of the growing season. The water table usually remains in reach of deeper rooting plants throughout the year. The wild flowers in this mix include:

Achillea millefolium, **Yarrow**
Centaurea nigra, **Common Knapweed**
Filipendula ulmaria, **Meadowsweet**
Galium verum, **Lady’s Bedstraw**
Leucanthemum vulgare, **Oxeye Daisy**
Lotus pedunculatus, **Greater Birdsfoot Trefoil**
Lychnis flos-cuculi, **Ragged Robin**
Plantago lanceolata, **Ribwort Plantain**
Primula veris, **Cowslip**
Prunella vulgaris, **Selfheal**
Ranunculus acris, **Meadow Buttercup**
Rhinanthus minor, **Yellow Rattle**
Rumex acetosa, **Common Sorrel**
Sanguisorba officinalis, **Great Burnet**
Silaum silaus, **Pepper-saxifrage**
Stachys officinalis, **Betony**
Vicia cracca, **Tufted Vetch**

In the Woodland the programme of work includes Leighside Pond tree maintenance, thinning of Hazel coppice, pollarding of the Winterbourne crack willow on our rotational programme and site tree inspection. Finally, on the Old Sidings we will undertake scrub clearance from banks and other areas and coppice the Buddleia in selected locations.

Daniel Ross

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Heart of Reeds Plant Survey Year 4

The vegetation on the Heart of Reeds is changing very rapidly. The reeds that were planted in the first year have established very successfully and are spreading out into the channels and high up the steep banks, at an amazing pace. They are home to Reed Warblers and Sedge Warblers in the summer, and to Moorhen, Mallard, as well as the rare Water Rail, throughout the year. Kingfishers, Heron and Little Egrets pay occasional visits. Tall teasel heads, nettles and red spikes of dock flowers contrast with the blue green of the reeds, while dragonflies and damselflies zoom overhead.

To keep track of the very dynamic changes since the Heart of Reeds was made four years ago, we have been making an annual survey of the flora of the area. This year we have again surveyed a 25 m long strip of vegetation next to the tarmac path, using 1m square quadrats and recording all species present according to their frequency.

Early bare earth colonisers like Scarlet Pimpernel, Goosefoots and Shepherd's Purse have now disappeared, unable to compete with larger more vigorously growing species. However, we are now seeing another and possibly limiting factor: dead and dried out stems of the previous year's tall plants like Thistles, Docks and Bristly Ox-tongue are forming a dense mat which has almost certainly contributed to the loss of some of last year's species. One low growing survivor is Ground Ivy, which was abundant in most of our quadrats, spreading among the roots of the larger species, with good sized leaves but failing to flower in the reduced light conditions. Silverweed and Creeping Buttercup were also found in most quadrats but like the Ground Ivy neither of these had flowered by late June. The Buttercups were more plentiful near the path margins where

limited strimming had been carried out in order to keep the path clear. The other main beneficiaries of the strimming were grasses, mainly Meadow Grasses, *Poa sp.*, forming quite a dense sward, into which species like Creeping Cinquefoil would be likely to spread from the denser areas where they are struggling to maintain a foothold.

The taller species this year were dominated by Common Nettle and Docks, both broad leaved and curled. Surprisingly there were very few Bristly Ox-tongue plants in the survey area, a real change from last year when they were abundant, flowered and produced quantities of seed. Grasses were mainly Meadow Grass, with just a few clumps of Yorkshire Fog. Other species found growing among the Nettles and Docks were Hedge Woundwort, Water Figwort, Cut-leaved Cranesbill, Broad-leaved Willowherb, Creeping Thistle and Mugwort. These tended to be either single plants or small clumps.

Climbers and scramblers usually do well where there are tall plants for support but the only species well represented in the survey area was Goosegrass. Hedge Bindweed and Blackberry species seemed to be beginning to make an impact and there was also a single plant of Meadow Vetchling which has the terminal leaflets of its compound leaves replaced by coiling tendrils for anchorage. The latter flowered and produced pea-like seed pods so perhaps we shall see more of it next year.

Generally there seems to be less diversity in the vegetation around the Heart of Reeds this year. In walking the area as a whole we found a few new species but others either had disappeared or become less frequent. The new species included Black Horehound, Long stalked Geranium, White Campion, Rosebay Willowherb and Hedge Mustard, and there was a white variety of the more usually pink Musk Mallow. Two new woody species appeared above the reeds: Willow (probably Goat) and Poplar

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(probably Railway). A policy decision will need to be made about these since so far the only woody species found and removed has been non-native Buddleia, and allowing the native woody newcomers to colonise would start the succession to scrub and woodland.

As well as the species which had disappeared from the survey strip we found none of the following in the general area: Amaranthus, Spear-leaved Atriplex, Hairy Bittercress, Treacle Mustard, Sun Spurge, Prickly Lettuce, Henbit Dead-nettle, Red Dead-nettle, Annual Mercury, Hawkweed Ox-tongue, Groundsel, Black Nightshade and Sow Thistle. All of these were represented in previous surveys.

Some visitors to the Reserve are concerned at the dominance of Nettles and Docks, which are not aesthetically pleasing. However, nettles are important food plants for caterpillars of Red Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell and Painted Lady butterflies whilst Docks provide for the Small Copper butterfly larvae. Also, although the vegetation may look unkempt, it provides an abundance of seeds which are important in the winter diet of small birds.

Jenifer Barton, Leonie Mercer & Liz Williams

**Continuation of Report on
Railway Land Bird Survey from
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Omissions: there are a number of species which more or less surprisingly have not appeared on either list. Apart from the incidental sightings recorded at the beginning of this article and not included in this discussion, an immediate wish-list might include teal, lesser black-backed gulls, merlin, short-eared and little owls, and brambling. Perhaps one day one will also be able to add bittern, wigeon,

shoveler, hen harrier, golden plover, green sandpiper, water pipit, ring ouzel, marsh tit, wheatear, black and common redstarts, grasshopper and Cetti's warblers, and redpoll.

Michael Hawkins & Liz Williams

We hope to use our findings from the bird survey to help us improve the habitats to increase bird numbers and to attract more species. If anyone would like to help, either with our early morning bird counts or making surveys at other times of day, we should like to hear from them.

News of any sightings of unusual birds would also be very welcome.

Please contact Liz Williams, tel. 01273 472239, email EWILL47223@aol.com

We are grateful to Lucy Williams for this fine print of a Heron.



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