

The Friends of King Norton Nature Reserve

Newsletter 7 – Winter 2005/6



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Chairman's Notes

Catkins have been fully out since before Christmas on Camp Lane, snowdrops and primroses are well in evidence in our garden. There are even some rather crazy daffodil buds just outside the window, not to mention enthusiastic birdsong way before daybreak, and on a good day it seems that spring cannot be far away. Certainly the year has well and truly turned, and I do hope that one of your New Year Resolutions, like mine, is to spend more time out on KNNR Working Parties. We have had some really jolly days both at Merecroft and at Wychall over the past couple of months, where our efforts show – I think you will agree – hugely positive results.

As we enjoy the working party achievements, it is also worth noting some things that we are setting up for the future:

- our 5-year management plan has been agreed;
- we have started putting together a 20-year strategic plan;
- we are developing our communications;
- we have formed a link with a group of conservation volunteers for regular help.

There is something on all these items on the management update page.

Congratulations to our Secretary

Phil Evans, who works tirelessly for KNNR and for the wider local environment, has just been elected Chairman of the Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country. Without his driving force, both on site and administratively, we would not have achieved anything like as much as we have by this stage. We owe him a huge debt of gratitude. So congratulations indeed for this recognition of his efforts on the wider scene.

Thanking Phil has put me in mind of others who are deserving. Warmest thanks are due to everyone who has helped with the working parties over the past months. I should also like to thank Rea Valley Ranger Chris Mansell and our Community Wardens Adrian and Paul for all they do to support the Friends' work. Thanks, too, to Paul Adams, who has volunteered to edit this Newsletter, and to Peter Cage who is developing a web site for the Friends.

A welcome thief!

Finally, someone rang the other evening to tell me, in accusing tones, "Your kingfishers are eating my fish!" In fact he was thrilled to see the kingfisher in his garden (in Hazelbank), and thought it was well worth the loss of a fish or two. Next time perhaps he will get a photo of it, sitting on top of the decoy heron he'd placed by the pond ... In the meantime, here is a delightful drawing sent in by one of our youngsters, Andrew Elliott, whose sister writes about it later in the newsletter.



- Amanda Cadman.

The Friends of King Norton Nature Reserve

Wildlife Watch: observations reported on or about KNNR over the past three months.

Interesting bird sightings

There have been numerous reports of interesting bird sightings this winter, especially of finches. Goldfinches and Greenfinches are seen regularly throughout the reserve, but this year our local gardens have hosted Brambling and Siskin. A small flock of some 14 Siskin and 4 Redpoll were observed in the Alder along the cycle path on 14th December. Although sightings of members of the Thrush species are lower this year than last, there have been several reported observations of a pair of Blackcap that appear to be over-wintering in the area.

Kingfishers and Grey Wagtails have been seen at both sites. Instances, either by sound or sight, of Green Woodpeckers and Nuthatches are now very frequent and these species are a welcome addition to the number of ever-present Gt. Spotted Woodpeckers, several pairs of which breed locally. The previously reported sightings of Kestrel and Sparrow Hawk continue and have been supplemented with the occasional views of a Buzzard circling over Wychall Lane. A Tawny Owl is regularly heard on Westhill Road.

Wildfowl visitors

Notable wildfowl observations to supplement the ever-present Mallards and Canada Geese comprise 2 Mute Swans at Merecroft during December following the appearance of the Cygnet at Wychall in November, pictured here. The number of Teal seen at Wychall this winter has been as high as 20.



Black Headed Gulls continue to congregate at Wychall, with 55 recorded in early January in the company of 3 Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

Other newcomers

The large numbers of Magpies and Carrion Crows on the Reserve continue to be noted by many, who have also commented on up to 5 Jays at any one time. These observations are occasionally eclipsed by the sight and sound of a pair of Ravens, which appear to come in from the Gay Hill direction. Such incursions do upset the local crows, resulting in several aerial duels. The Worcestershire direction may well have been the approach for our latest residents – a pair of Pheasants, now residing in the grassland areas north of Merecroft Pool. Is this down to habitat improvement? Or have they had a helping hand to arrive in Kings Norton? Does anyone know?



One disappointment is that a recent survey by the City in conjunction with the flood alleviation measures at Wychall Reservoir failed to find any Water Vole activity. We must see if the future development of the site can reverse this position. A Muntjac Deer is regularly seen on the cycle path at dawn and has also been observed in the Pinehurst Meadow. Foxes have been noticed on several occasions right across the reserve – but in early December another one was reported dead just off Wychall Lane.



Finally, previous comment on Grey Squirrels seems to have raised the curiosity of one of our members, for whom a walk over the Christmas period produced in a count of 15! They must like the living here in Kings Norton. - **Phil**

The Friends of King Norton Nature Reserve

A trip worth repeating: *Ryton Gardens and Brandon Marsh Nature Reserve.*

On a beautiful Indian Summer day in October, a group of KNNR members waited on the Green, watching a cloud of black smoke materialise into our coach! The new brake pads bedded-in as we got on our way to Coventry.

First stop Ryton Gardens

This is the home of the Henry Doubleday Research Association and the place to go for information about organic gardening and food production. Our guide was very knowledgeable and informative and ready to answer any question, of which there were quite a few . . . especially about compost making for some reason! He showed us many of the themed gardens, explaining the thinking behind the planting schemes and the landscaping. Lots of the ideas could easily and usefully be incorporated into any garden to encourage wildlife and beneficial insects and avoid the use of chemical controls. The party then divided between the shop, which had a very wide selection of seeds, etc., and the 'Vegetable Kingdom' exhibition. Then, after lunch, some in the posh restaurant, others munching sandwiches in the coach, we moved on to Brandon Marsh Nature Reserve.

Brandon Marsh Nature Reserve

This land is owned and still used by an aggregate firm extracting sand and gravel, but 200 acres is leased to The Wildlife Trust and is now a nature reserve and SSSI. Support for the Nature Reserve comes from various sources and has enabled the Reserve to be maintained and improved over time. We were taken on a tour of the area by some of the long time members, who were able to describe the development of the site from its initial founding and tell us how it is managed today.



It is a simply lovely place, with many beautiful pools, some very large. There are 5 hides so that visitors can watch the many species of water birds from close quarters. There were vast reed beds, which I think made Phil a little jealous, but our guides assured us that the ones planted by our reservoir will grow in time. The aggregate company maintains the paved roads so that access is possible for anyone, though the woodland walks were strictly for the more able. It would be a great place for a family to visit, as they organise lots of different activities for children and adults throughout the year.

As a one-time Coventry resident, I knew Ryton and Brandon Marshes many years ago, as they were first being developed. The change in both over the years is incredible and gives perspective to our changes to KNNR and the apparently slow rate of progress.

Many thanks, Phil, for organising the trip. It was disappointing that more members could not participate, but for those who did, it was a most interesting and enjoyable day – and the sun never stopped shining. - **Shirley Bakewell.**



Clearly there is a long way to go in developing our own reserve, and there is plenty of advice and examples to inspire us. Here you can see the construction of a dead hedge.

The Friends of King Norton Nature Reserve

The Benefits of an Untidy Garden

On the 27th December, my brother and I were writing thank you letters when . . . “Mum, there’s a pheasant in the garden”. Out of our kitchen window we could see a beautiful male pheasant followed closely by a female pheasant. Had they escaped a Boxing Day shoot?



Every day since then, the two pheasants have been eating the leftovers from the birdfeeders. We think they are roosting in the ivy-covered trees at the bottom of our garden. When they are frightened they use the dense thick grasses, nettles and bracken for cover. It’s thanks to this untidy patch that they feel happy to feed here.

So please keep your untidy patches, as they are a haven for wildlife.

By Rosie Human, aged 10; picture by Jamie, aged 8

Remember the Kingfisher?

The Kingfisher comes to Kings Norton park daily. He fishes and flies across the stream from bridge to bridge. It’s amazing how he likes to live there because of the litter surrounding his home, but of course, that’s where the working parties step in.

The Kingfisher, we have found, is smaller than people think. It is tiny and blue with very distinctive colours, but is hard to find because of its very quick movement. We found the Kingfisher in the Christmas holidays. It seems to be out and about early in the morning and at dusk. It doesn’t seem to mind children racing about on bikes, making noise. It just goes on with his fishing. We think it is a worthwhile spot and it is very lovely to be able to see it.

By Rosie Elliott.

As the Elliott family and Amanda’s caller have found, the winter period is a good time to see Kingfishers. We have had numerous other reports of birds being seen along the River Rea, Merecroft Pool and Wychall Reservoir, as well as around local garden pools. They are usually difficult to spot if they are perched motionless, watching the water for small fish or aquatic insects; more often spotted when they fly fast and low over the water.



Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*)

since their numbers are affected by pollution and by a shortage of food during icy conditions. Whilst considered ‘common’ in England, it is a species of European Conservation Concern and included in the “amber list” with unfavourable conservation status in Europe. So England is lucky.

One of our objectives is to provide additional water channels and nesting sites within our local nature reserve so that we can see more of this bird.

So watch out for that flash of blue! - **Phil**

Urban Environmental

The Friends of King Norton Nature Reserve

Agony – a shared and balanced response

Our Secretary's reflections on meetings with Council officials

Kings Norton Local Nature Reserve is a fact, but will it result in an improvement in the local environment? We are all well aware of the deterioration of local facilities if regular maintenance is not carried out or if antisocial activities go unchecked, as the photographs below illustrate. You can see



the impact of arson, graffiti, a dumped car that damaged a fence and community dumping, directly or washed down by floods.

Who clears up?

The current method of dealing with local problems appears to require a joint approach between the local community and the Local Authority – but is this fair? FKNNR Committee members are often asked why we do certain activities rather than forcing the City to do the jobs that, in theory, our Council Taxes should be paying for.

The reality is that the City cannot finance everything its citizens want and our elected politicians inevitably have to prioritise resources. This leaves areas uncovered and if the Community wants a job done it has to be prepared to pitch in and do it.

Striking a balance

I think the essence of protecting and enhancing the local environment for people and wildlife is a reasonable sharing of the work and responsibility. Is the balance right? Are there some tasks (like the fence in Popes Lane!) where the City ought to be doing more? The answer will only come through dialogue with the City and through our active engagement in the Management Committee process. This requires input from the 'Friends' so please continue to comment – your voice does matter.

Motorbikes

Discussions with the local Police and the City's Leisure & Culture Department have resulted in new signs being erected along the River Rea cycle route. These say that the riding of motorbikes (inc those miniature versions) is prohibited. Please report any violations to the Police (Sgt Clive Bates) at Kings Heath. - **Phil**

Health Warning

Someone has regularly been putting down chopped up bread, and sometimes whole slices of white bread, which attract squirrels and crows. No doubt this feeding is well meant, but white bread is not very nourishing and surely attracts rats and becomes a health hazard if left lying around. See the notices page for a healthier alternative.

The Friends of King Norton Nature Reserve

Management Update

5-year Management Plan

The LNR Management Committee met on 7 December and ratified the Management Plan. This sets out what needs to be done over the next five years in order for the LNR to be "managed for wildlife and used responsibly as a resource for the local community and educational establishments". Further 5-year Plans will follow this. The Committee is currently setting Annual Work Plans, against which the achievements of volunteers (eg scrub and litter clearance, tree-planting, education, community outreach) and professional contractors (eg mowing, dredging, tree-felling) can be measured.

The Committee recognises the need for a detailed survey of the site to establish a sound baseline. This was done some years ago for Merecroft, but not Wychall. A full survey is therefore an urgency.

20-year Strategic Plan

The Management Committee also welcomed a proposal from the Friends to put together a longer term, 20-year, Strategic Plan. A small group from the Friends' Committee has been involved in developing this Plan. It is not yet in any final form, but we expect it to set out clear long-term priorities for the development of flora and fauna in each area of our LNR in line with the aim quoted above. It will also look at the LNR in the wider context of its place on the Rea Valley corridor.

Working Parties' Progress

As I said in my front-page notes, our recent efforts have achieved hugely positive results. We could achieve even more with more people coming on our workdays, even for an hour or so. The work is varied and interesting and the workers, of all ages (normal range 7 – 75 I think), thoroughly enjoy the company and exercise, not to mention getting pretty mucky as we develop our environmental skills.

We have been lucky enough recently to come to the notice of the Birmingham and Solihull Mid-Week Conservation Volunteers. This is a group of (mainly retired) people that works across the conurbation for the joy of fresh air, exercise, companionship and environmental work. They are highly skilled people, whose presence, currently on Pinehurst meadow, is making a real difference, for which we are extremely grateful. They have promised to join us on two days each month, and I am sure that we will learn a great deal from them in our joint working parties.

Whilst clearing brambles by Merecroft recently I found a silver-plate presentation cigarette box, filthy and slightly damaged. Well, I have cleaned it up and have now found its owner, who still lives on Wychall Lane. He is delighted that it has been found, lost to a burglary two years ago. - ***Amanda***

Education

Every child at King's Norton and Wychall Primary schools has received a leaflet, including membership form, to take home; and both schools have begun to publicise Working Party days in their Newsletters, as has St Thomas Aquinas. One of our members helped to run a Forest School at Kings Norton Primary in the Autumn, and took the opportunity to spread the word about the KNNR.

Kings Norton Library has agreed to host a display board for FKNNR for 3 months from February. We're trying to inspire all sections of the community to get involved in our activities. - ***Meredith***

Membership

Membership numbers continue to rise, with the Friends growing from 121 to 135 members since the last issue of the newsletter. A further request for members to renew their subscriptions will go out shortly to those who joined from November 1 2004 to 31 April 2005. There were very few households that did not renew in response to the last request for the previous six months so I feel confident that we will again retain most of our existing membership this time round. - ***Jil***

The Friends of King Norton Nature Reserve

Notices

Wild Bird Food Account

The FKNNR now has an account with CJ WildBird Foods. Buy your seed from them on our account and the LNR benefits. You can obtain details from our Secretary, who will coordinate the orders.

Come and join our working parties:

Weekdays: February 9 & 24 March 9
Weekends: February 18/19 March 11/12

There is more detail on the back page.

FKNNR Committee Meetings

The next 3 will be in mid-April, July and October

If you have any ideas or comments to share with the committee, then preferably email them to the address in the footer, or contact a committee member.

Help us uncover the history of our Reserve

The Friends' committee is very keen to record as much as possible of the history of Wychall, Merecroft and our part of the Rea Valley. If you have lived here for many years we should like to pick your brains about how you remember things. Living on Wychall Lane where the traffic is so heavy and so lethally fast, I find it hard to believe that not so long ago the Lane only went as far as the golf course! We are also attempting to build up a detailed photographic record of the site, so if you have any pics, Phil would love to see them and, if possible, take copies for our archive.

Help us stay in touch with you

We have been working on the Friends' communications, hence the website development, newsletter editor and library display. Another avenue is our being able to send out small bites of information by email – reminders about workdays, etc. If you would be happy to hear from us by email, please send us a 'hello' using our address at the foot of the page. We will keep email addresses to ourselves and use them only for our own communications. You may need to add us to your address book to avoid our being filtered out as junk mail!

Tools wanted

The Friends would appreciate extra garden or workshop tools in order to keep the working parties fully equipped. If you know of house/garden shed clearance items that may be of use in improving the LNR or which we could use to maintain

Evening Talks

Arranged by the Rea Valley Conservation Group Meetings are at the Friends' Meeting House, Watford Road, Cotteridge at 7.30 pm.

Friday 10th February Madagascar Wildlife – Phil Evans.
Friday 10th March Louisa Ryland – Birmingham financier and philanthropist – Don Hazzard.
Friday 7th April Rea Valley flood prevention – Norma Boyd.
Friday 12th May Rea Valley walks – Cyril Ashmore.
Friday 9th June T.B.A.

The Friends of King Norton Nature Reserve

Working Party Details

Thursday 9 February 2006 & Tuesday 21 February (between 10.30 a.m. and 3 p.m.)
Merecroft Pool & Meadows. "Hawthorn Hedges for Chirpy Chaffinches".

We shall continue the process to rejuvenate the 'right of way' between the bottom of Meadow Hill Road and Westhill Road by removing bramble. A dead hedge is being constructed and a new hedge will be planted in Pinehurst Meadow. Bird & bat boxes will be installed. A project financed by the membership for the membership with the assistance of CSV Environment.

Saturday & Sunday 18 & 19 February (between 10.30 a.m. and 3 p.m.)
"Worthwhile Wychall Wanderings". Wychall Reservoir, cycle route and Meadows clean-up & litter pick AND the tidying up of Scrub areas with the removal of crack willow.

We shall undertake our usual methodical clean-up activities but those who would prefer to clear scrub and create a dead hedge will be instructed on how to do so (tools and equipment provided). The exercise will involve the length of the path from Popes Lane through the Meadows to Camp Lane. A project financed by the membership for the membership with the assistance of CSV Environment.

A grand prize draw/raffle will be held on the Sunday. Any possible prizes (unwanted Xmas presents?) to Alan Bakewell (603 1127) please.

Thursday 9 March 2006 (between 10.30 a.m. and 3 p.m.)
Merecroft Pool & Meadows. Bramble clearance and coppicing of willow.

We shall continue the process of rejuvenating the former wet grassland area between the pool dam and the public right of way. Bird & bat boxes will be installed. In addition willow in the meadows will be coppiced under the supervision of the River Rea Ranger. A project financed by the membership for the membership.

Saturday & Sunday 11 & 12 March 2006 (between 10.30 a.m. and 3 p.m.)
"Merecroft Mystique and Manure". Merecroft Pool and Meadows clean-up & litter pick AND the tidying up of Scrub areas with the removal of Sycamore.

We shall undertake our usual methodical clean-up activities and those who would prefer to clear scrub and plant some small trees will be instructed on how to do so. The exercise will involve the length of the pool and areas north of the dam. Meet at the entrance to the public footpath at the junction of Wychall Lane and Meadow Hill Road.

The FKNNR Honorary Officers, Committee Members and Advisors

Chairman	Amanda Cadman	0121 624 3865
Vice Chairman	David Barraclough	0121 458 2244
Treasurer	David Human	0121 458 1300
Secretary	Phil Evans	0121 628 6769
Membership Secretary	Jil Bromley	0121 244 7483
Newsletter Editor	Paul Adams	0121 451 3003
Education	Meredith Andrea & Nicola Human	0121 451 3243 0121 458 1300
Committee Members	Jon Anson, Suzanne Ashley, Alan Bakewell, Peter Cage, David Hampson, Brian Hewitt & John Smith.	
River Rea Ranger	Chris Mansell	0121 447 7106
<i>Environmental Agency Hotline</i>		<i>0800 807060</i>
<i>Anti-social behaviour Hotline</i>		<i>0121 303 1111</i>