

The Friends of Kings Norton Nature Reserve

Newsletter 48 – Spring 2020

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Plugged in?
See page 4



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Editor's note

This Newsletter was largely ready to roll when the Coronavirus restrictions began to come into play. While we were able to hold a very successful 14 March Community Litter Pick (thanks to all who participated!) and met for our regular Tuesday WorkOut on 17 March, by this time external activities were being discouraged, and we realised that events such as the 28 March guided walk, the 2 May Spring Event and planned outings to other reserves would have to be abandoned. Even at that stage we floated the idea of starting a second weekly TWO, the Thursday WorkOut, to give those of us who wanted it safe outside exercise in fresh air. But it was at a meeting that very same evening, 17 March, that I first heard the phrase Protective Social Distancing. By the following week all meetings of more than two people had been forbidden by the Government and our plans to start construction of the barrier across the reservoir that week (see "Wychall Project") had to be put on hold.

A good deal of what you read hereafter about future plans remains, therefore, distinctly up in the air as we wait to see how long the lockdown lasts and what further implications there may be for our activities. Meantime it is very satisfying to see how the Reserve is helping local people to take their daily exercise, while the air is full more of birdsong than traffic noises. May you stay healthy and safe, and may you enjoy what the Reserve can offer in the way of consolation at this difficult and challenging time.

Chair's Report, Spring 2020

The wet and windy weather continues to interrupt our Tuesday schedule and creates extra work to clear fallen trees. The high volume of rain has meant that the paths even with gravel have, in many places, become almost impassable. So, we are looking for a supply of hardcore gravel to repair paths. If anyone knows of a building merchants/construction company who would be willing to donate this, please contact any of the committee members (numbers on the back of this magazine).

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A positive consequence of the storms has been that the Wychall Reservoir project, now under way, is showing results. Reeds have been removed and hurdles have been constructed along the path of the river so that during storm Dennis the reservoir held a great area of water. Though this will recede quite quickly, a reasonable amount should remain, increasing habitat and encouraging wildlife.

Plans are in place for future public activities over the next few months. The communal litter pick on Saturday March 14th starts at Wychall Reservoir at 10.30 am. As we all know, litter is an ongoing problem on the Reserve, particularly in the area bordering both sides of Popes Lane. The council have now agreed, however, that they will now do a regular full clean of Popes Lane verges and pavements every 8-10 weeks. This already shows a great improvement to the area and it is hoped that they will keep to this schedule.

The annual spring event (Dawn Chorus) will be held on Saturday May 2nd. This will follow the usual format of Dawn Chorus Walk, followed by breakfast at a local café and various activities in the morning. The day concludes with the Bat Walk at 8.30 in the evening. A detailed programme will follow when finalised.

The last newsletter noted how convenient it was to have St Nicolas Place as a venue for the AGM, mainly because it is the only facility in the area to have disabled access. As many of you will already know, as the church can no longer fund the maintenance of St Nicolas Place they are putting it up for sale. This is of great concern to many local residents as it is the centre of Kings Norton, and a campaign has been started to try to prevent a sale outside the community. You are therefore encouraged to support this campaign to secure its future and help maintain this much-loved local landmark both for wider community use and to enable the Friends to have a venue that is available to all.

We are currently awaiting the replacement of two benches, to be supplied by the City. One is to replace that "removed" from the cycle path to the left of the Wychall Lane entrance, the other replaces a wooden bench that overlooks Wychall Reservoir which

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should give a good view of the newly revitalised area where many of the reeds have been removed. These will be metal benches so as to be as resistant as possible to vandalism.

Thanks to the people who have been in touch to let us know about various wildlife sightings on the Reserve. These include cormorants on Merecroft, a "murmuration" of starlings over Wychall Reservoir and the discovery of a water rail (sadly deceased) by the Reservoir.

Let's hope for better weather for everyone who uses the Reserve, be they volunteers, dog walkers or casual visitors.

Andrew Nabbs

Fallen Tree

On 3 March we learned that, thanks to Storm Dennis, a tree had fallen across the footpath that leads between Westhill Road and the foot of Meadow Hill Road. It was one of the huge old pines, and clearly much too large for us to deal with, stretching right across the path and well into the horse field. Now professionally cleared, Brian took this picture to show the interestingly lopsided growth rings. Why did it grow like that?



Plugging Away!

The Friends' Committee agreed last October to purchase some £500-worth of wildflower seeds and plant plugs, in the first instance to enhance plant richness at Beaks Hill Triangle. Rather missing the boat for getting seed and sowing it straight away, we concentrated in the first instance on getting plant plugs. I contacted Landlife Wildflowers in Boston Lincs. who assured me that they had supplies of appropriate plants for our area, available at any time, delivery taking between five and seven days. And so I placed an order only to find that delivery would actually

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take between seven and ten days, and that our order wouldn't be dispatched until the very day we had arranged for the planting on 18 February. Oh dear! But it turned out that their nursery was in Nottinghamshire, and that I could collect on 17th. Peter and I had a hugely enjoyable trip: there were massive floods in the Soar Valley, and the nursery (which we should arrange to visit again in May/June to see their flower meadows) was in a village close to Colston Bassett and Cropwell Bishop, which cheese lovers will recognise as being the very heart of Stiltonland. Needless to say we came back loaded with cheese as well as plant plugs!



We were delighted to be joined by Cllr Alex Aitken (he of the white shoes, which did not stay white for long – thanks Alex!) and a couple of colleagues for our planting session on 18 February, and quickly planted the 500 general meadow mixture plugs. The ground was however too wet to plant the ones I had bought for damp areas – they would have been under water! (*These plugs went in some weeks later, when I thought the ground might be getting rather baked, but there were still large areas where the ground was really squishy.*)

I hope these little plugs will flourish. We still have funds in hand to plant more in due course, and we look forward to seeing flower-rich meadows around the Reserve in future.

Amanda Cadman

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The Wychall Project.

Following the progressive silting up of the open water area at Wychall Reservoir adjacent to the cycle way it was decided to explore all avenues to regain an area of open water for wild fowl.

De-Silting:

- A) The City did not have the funds to carry out such work. Having a water area for birds could not be cost justified.
- B) The Environment Agency (EA) at the end of 2017 calculated that even the removal of 20% of the silt would not reduce downstream flood risk. There was therefore no cost case.
- C) The Environment Agency had restricted funds for environmental work such as providing a water area for wild fowl and there were worse environmental areas than Wychall having a call on their funds.
- D) **Contractors.** City approved contractors required £5000 to provide a quotation for de-silting. This was obviously beyond our capacity.

We then came up with the proposal to a) widen the river overflow area, b) have 3 barriers along the outflow stream to slow the water down enabling the silt to be deposited, it being easier to remove silt from the stream than from the open area, c) to have a holding barrier to lift the water in the reservoir above the silt.

Discussions took place with EA engineers resulting in a site visit on 8.6.18 when general approval to our aims and the use of Linar UPVC piling for barriers was achieved.

After further discussions now with the SWWM flood consent section of the EA we were advised that:- "Your proposals have been discussed with colleagues who do have an understanding of what you are trying to achieve, and who have no objections in principle. However due to the area in which the proposed works are to be carried out, and that all the works are deemed to be a regulated flood risk activity, a bespoke permit application must be submitted."

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Our application was submitted on 8.5.19 and we received notification on 3.7.19 that following conversations and a site visit the EA Internal Asset Performance Team had objections to the use of Liniar UPVC piling and use should be made of natural materials and on-site timber. A revised Bespoke Permit Application and the licence fee of £170 were submitted, and our permit was approved on 13.8.19



Our permit allows us to construct 2 barriers across the outflow stream to slow the water to help the silt to drop out and a holding barrier 17 metres from the concrete outflow apron. This holding barrier is not to be more than 0.5m higher than the outflow apron.

We also propose to remove the majority of the reeds from the silt area by cutting them below water level and depositing the reed debris clear of the silt.



Photo 1 shows the river overflow area. It is proposed to remove the silt build-up from the concrete outflow and deposit and firm it into the eroded channel on the right. This process we hope to continue with the remainder of the area which is higher than the outflow until the eroded ditch is level with the outflow.

The two stream barriers have been constructed (see photos 2&3.)

The first 10m of the silted area are to be cleared of reeds by the Environment Agency. The Friends will start around the 17m line where the Holding Barrier is to be constructed.

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Photo 4 shows an area of reeds in the process of being removed.

It is proposed to construct the holding barrier out of site-woven hurdles reinforced with vertical poles. It is hoped to commence this work in the spring.

David Hampson

(Ed: this work has begun since this article was written. The first barrier was destroyed by persons unknown, was reconstructed and has since been washed away in the aftermath of Storm Dennis. This barrier will be reconstructed speedily, and meanwhile work is beginning to create the hurdles that will form the basis of the barrier across the main reservoir area to allow a rise in water level.)

Wildlife sightings

Butterflies, Moths and a Few Other Creatures Encountered During 2019. Bill Edge

January In late afternoon of 27th I heard a small bird in a tree at the Reserve entrance opposite Wychall Park Grove. Luckily, the bird showed itself. Later I was able to identify it as a willow tit. Listening to its song online confirmed this as visually it is very similar to the marsh tit.

February A lady told me that she had seen a comma by the horse fields on 22nd. Two days later I came across another close to the Meadow Hill Road entrance, where the little stream which feeds Merecroft flows under the footpath. Looking over the pool, I could see a little egret and a grey heron perched side by side on a low branch overhanging the pool. On 25th, the lady who had reported seeing the comma spotted a brimstone by the little stream. A little while later, I came across a small tortoiseshell, comma and brimstone at the same place. Over the years I have found this to be an excellent location for observing Spring butterflies. It is a south-facing suntrap sheltered from the wind.

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Walking by Merecroft Pool on 27th, I was intrigued by the sight of a greylag goose being harassed by the two resident swans. It took refuge on the island but the poor thing was chased off by Canada geese.

March During the first three weeks the only butterflies on the wing were commas, brimstones and small tortoiseshells. A stroll on 25th, a sunny day with a chilly breeze, was memorable for the dominant yellow of the Reserve flora. Daffodils, primroses, celandine, sallow catkins and escaped forsythia were a cheering sight. Passing Merecroft Pool my attention was drawn to loud splashes. A large fish, at least eighteen inches in length, was leaping high out of the water, presumably after the tasty flies which swarmed over the surface. Meanwhile, the male swan was chasing the Canada geese away from its nest site. I could also see a little egret busy fishing. Continuing on to Pinehurst, I watched a peacock and a small tortoiseshell sunning themselves, occasionally taking time to chase each other with spectacular aerobatics.

Commas, peacocks and small tortoiseshells were taking advantage of the suntrap by the little stream on 28th. The swans were attending to their nest on Merecroft bank. Cowslips were coming into bloom in Sheila's Meadow. Commas and peacocks gave displays in Waterways Meadow where I also noticed a common quaker moth resting on a tree trunk. On the last day of the month I received reports of commas, peacocks and small whites from other walkers.

April On 1st I decided to walk the full length of the Reserve from Meadow Hill Road entrance to Wychall Road entrance. The only butterflies I saw were small tortoiseshells and peacocks, with a solitary comma in Waterways Meadow which had lost most of a hindwing but still managed to fly, albeit in a wobbly fashion. The highlight of the walk was a small flock of goldfinches squabbling amongst the white blossoms of a blackthorn bush.

I noticed two angle shades moths on the railings in Beaks Hill Road on 9th. I come across this species almost every month of the year and their caterpillars ravage my valerian plants. Three orange tips flew past me on 12th, the first ones of the year.

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A slight weather improvement on 14th prompted me to walk the full Reserve again. Between 11.00 a.m. and 1.00 p.m. I counted thirty-two orange tips, twelve speckled woods, six small whites, six small tortoiseshells, four peacocks and a holly blue. During the walk two great tits divulged their nesting site to me. One was in a split tree trunk by Merecroft Pool and the other between large stones by Popes Lane footbridge. The stones have been deposited there to prevent the collapse of the river bank. It's good that they have multiple uses.

Approximately one hundred yards before the Popes Lane footbridge I disturbed three muntjac deer. It was a heart-stopping experience. They suddenly shot out of the long grass and scattered in different directions. When they stopped, they began calling each to other. They sound just like dogs barking and each one has its own individual voice.

I had a quick look at the Peafields on 19th and was rewarded with the sight of many orange tips, peacocks and large, small and green-veined whites.

At this point, I must confess to having lost my notes for the period to 15th June.

June The 16th was a rather dull day. At 7.30 p.m. the temperature was a rather cool 15°C. However, this did not discourage a hummingbird hawk moth which was hovering over valerian flowers in my garden, just a few hundred yards west of the Reserve. As it sipped the nectar its wings were beating around eighty-five times per second. It was an amazing sight. These moths are very rare in the UK and migrate from Europe so this one may well have visited the Reserve on its travels to my garden.

Whilst strolling through Sheila's Meadow on 22nd I chanced on a red admiral which gave a dazzling red, white and black display when it settled on the trodden path. The following week was an excellent one for butterflies; meadow browns, ringlets and speckled woods were out in abundance all over the Reserve. Many large and small skippers adorned the heads of the meadow grasses while common blues added their beauty. On 27th I saw three painted ladies.

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July Having returned from Torquay in the second week of July, I was pleased to see that painted ladies were still around, together with hedge browns (also known as gatekeepers) which had emerged whilst I was away. A search of the undersides of leaves on 21st revealed eggs of the puss moth and caterpillars of the poplar hawk moth and pale prominent moth.



The week commencing 22nd was extraordinarily hot with my garden thermometer reaching 32.7°C on 25th. The Reserve was alive with butterflies, dragonflies, bees and other insects. Small coppers, usually only seen as singletons, were flying in numbers in all the meadows.

On 23rd I was pleasantly surprised by a marbled white at 4.50p.m. in Pinehurst. It had been several years since I had come across one. Nearby I disturbed a buff arches moth and a small magpie moth. Passing Merecroft dam on 27th I saw several holly blues and a scalloped hazel moth.

August The thistle heads and ragwort flowers in Pinehurst and Waterways Meadow were covered with hedge brown butterflies on 3rd and while I was looking at them a number of blue and green dragonflies zigzagged past me. In Pinehurst, on 8th, the buddleia was providing nectar for peacocks, painted ladies, brimstones and whites. The grasses were full of common blues, small coppers, skippers, ringlets and meadow browns. A few holly blues were flying around the bushes.

A trip to the Peafields on 15th was like a mirror image of Pinehurst on 8th with the addition of dragonflies. In Sheila's Meadow, on 18th, the flower heads of scabious were covered in hedge browns and whites.

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I found an injured hawk moth caterpillar on the pavement in Beaks Hill Road adjacent to the Old Orchard on 22nd. It had clearly fallen from a lime tree. Despite my "tlc" it didn't survive. Painted ladies were still a fairly common butterfly in late August. On 30th I came across an old lady moth in the grass at Waterways Meadow.

Lime trees line both sides of Wychall Road between the railway bridge and the Reserve entrance. On 30th Council workers cut off all the side branches and put them in a shredder. Many fully-grown caterpillars of the lime hawk moth were on the foliage. I rescued one as I walked past but I dread to think how many perished. Another two weeks and the majority would have wandered off somewhere to pupate.



September Thank goodness for the patch of devil's-bit scabious in Sheila's Meadow. This wild flower is a valuable source of autumn nectar for butterflies, bees, hoverflies and assorted insects. A few blossoms of buddleia in Pinehurst survived until the third week of September. During my spot checks I was pleased to see that they were still being visited by painted ladies, red admirals, whites, commas and small tortoiseshells until the last bloom finally shrivelled.

It was lovely to see that speckled woods and holly blues continued to grace the Reserve well into October. I came across a red admiral in November. It was somewhat sorry for itself. I rescued it and it is currently hibernating at my abode awaiting release on a warm Spring day.

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... and other wildlife sightings

While awaiting Bill Edge's wonderful report I wrote around to a number of local birders to ask for any interesting sightings they had had. I told them that I had recently seen four Little Egrets in Kings Norton Park, as well as seeing and hearing a raven over our garden on Wychall Lane (I think it is interested in nesting in the Corsican pines across the road, already firmly occupied by crows for the past several years). It was being mobbed by gulls. Since then I have also seen a goldcrest in our garden.

Adrian Platt replied to my email to say "I haven't made it to the patch as often as I'd have liked in the last couple of months, but here are my highlights at Merecroft Pool:

2 January 5 Grey Herons

12 January 200+ Black-headed Gulls, 3 Cormorant, 3 Grey Heron, 7 Goosander, Green Woodpecker, 5 Grey Herons

8 February 1 Little Egret

16 February 7 Goosander

No Kingfisher nor Water Rail for me as yet this year. Four Little Egrets is very impressive, the most I have seen in KNNR is two. I expect the ones we see are part of the roost at Priory Mill Pool in Yardley Wood (27 were reported in mid-December: <https://twitter.com/JPMKenny85/status/1205907215565180928> & 28 in early-Jan:

<https://twitter.com/PaulFit23313329/status/1213166543900741632>

The juvenile Swan seems to be holding out – I wonder what will happen if the regular adult pair return in the coming weeks?"

A good question ... we will see!

Amanda Cadman

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The Birmingham and Solihull Midweek Conservation Volunteers

Those of you with long memories may recall a day late in 2005 when a group of strangers descended on Kings Norton Nature Reserve. They had been recruited by Phil Evans, via his great friend the late John Phillips, (JP) to help out the regular Tuesday volunteers. They were the Birmingham and Solihull Midweek Conservation Volunteers, formed sometime in the eighties and going strong ever since. Phil's intention was to use us for the jobs which were too arduous, too skilful or (as in most cases) too messy for the regulars. His principal requirement seemed to be the digging of pools. Over the years we constructed 30 or so, mostly in the area behind the reservoir now called Phil's Wetlands, but also in the Pea Fields and Sheila's Meadow. We made footpaths, including the one which gives me the most satisfaction, which goes through the woods along the cycle path to the east of Burmans Drive where we had to negotiate huge poplar roots amongst other difficulties. For many years we were charging for our services, due principally to the cost of running our van, but when we lost the van and found we could manage without it, we dropped the charges and financed our activities from other wealthier organisations. Phil almost always kept us separate from the Friend's work parties, but when he left, Steve Hinton suggested we work with the others, which we have been happily doing ever since, and two of us now serve on the FKNNR Committee.

But we don't just work in Kings Norton! On Thursdays, for more than 20 years, we have worked for Solihull Borough Council (hence our name) on their many nature reserves. Over that time we have worked in every one of their 23 reserves and a few other unclassified areas as well. The work is very varied, ranging from the coppicing at Millison's Wood which a few of you have witnessed on a visit we took a couple of years ago, to the hundreds of metres of boardwalk constructed at Brueton Park wetlands area. Also in Brueton Park can be found a long hedge, planted in memory of Dave Hackett, our leader for many years and a stalwart of conservation, as well as two laid hedges.

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Hedge laying (before and after) by Ian Freake

On Wednesdays we work for a number of organisations. The longest standing is the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, for whom we have worked on 9 reserves in North Worcestershire. One that many of you have seen is Broadmoor Wood near Rubery which we visited last spring to see the bluebells and other flowers. Also not far away is Lion Wood at Portway. Both reserves were totally overgrown when we started there, the former with hazel and bramble, the latter with holly and it has taken many years to restore them. Other areas which we manage include Beacon Wood, Newbourne Wood and Bishops Field, Wolverley. We have lately worked at Woodgate Valley and the Lickeys where we spent the best part of the summer building a long fence. In the wintertime, we lay hedges for the Canal and River Trust, some big, some small. Our current project is a hedge behind the Alexander Stadium, which the CRT hopes to show off in all its splendour for the Commonwealth Games in 2022.

We work from 11.00 to 3.30 and are always happy to see new faces, so if any of you Friends out there fancy a day out exploring somewhere new, get in touch and I will give you details.

Ian Freake

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Rallus aquaticus

We have a dog so he goes out for a walk 3 or 4 times a day. We try to vary the walks both for him and for us as that's much more interesting. New smells for him, and old and sometimes new friends to meet too.

I particularly enjoy looking for changes as we walk round: new growth in the Spring, flowering plants and trees in the Summer, leaves turning colour and finding berries in the Autumn, and keeping my eyes peeled for the Winter visitors to keep my mind off my cold nose!



Over the years I have noticed fewer and fewer 'fag ends' which is very welcome, and there are always 'lost' sweetie wrappers when schools are open, but there are also the oddest things if you happen to be looking ...

One day last October we decided to walk along Wychall Lane towards Wychall Reservoir, but headed through the gate into what I still call the Burmans site, even though it was redeveloped years ago. It was a bright sunny afternoon so the path leading into the site was dry as was the pavement we were walking on. Then I noticed a feathered body on the paving in front of the first unit on the left. There was no blood or signs of damage and it seemed a shame to leave such a lovely thing on the ground until a fox or crow found it.

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I couldn't immediately identify the creature; from the long slender legs and long toes it was obviously a wading bird, but I'd never seen one with barred feathers on the underside of the body.



showed the body to several neighbours but no-one knew quite what it was, so it had to be Dr Google. Now we know – it's a *Rallus aquaticus*, or Water rail to thee and me.

Beautiful: soft grey plumage on the head and neck, with chestnut feathers on the back, and those very distinctive barred feathers on the flanks with a long reddish beak.

The RSPB website describes it as 'Smaller and distinctly slimmer than the moorhen', see here for a description and a recording of its noisy call: <https://tinyurl.com/yb3me8r8> She/he currently resides in my freezer awaiting collection from a taxidermist.

Ruth Croft

The Friends of Kings Norton Nature Reserve

LNR fleeces and baseball caps

A number of us have been wearing our LNR fleeces for a very long time now, and they are getting a bit scruffy. I will order more from our local supplier, Printigo in Stirchley, and I'd be very happy to hear if you would like to be included in the order. Please email me with your size. I expect fleeces with our embroidered logo to cost around £28, and baseball caps £16.

Email: amandacadman@sky.com

Membership Subscriptions

The FKNNR membership year runs from June 1st to May 31st. If you make your annual payment by cash or cheque, and haven't sent it yet, Steph Hyde would be very pleased to receive it: 10 Grenville Road, Shirley, Solihull, B90 2DH.

Many of our members pay by standing order/direct debit. It is an easy way to pay and saves having to remember each year!

If you would like a form or the bank details, please email FKNNR.membership@virginmedia.com.

Thank you

Steph Hyde, Membership Secretary

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Statistics statistics

The Friends are members of Birmingham Open Spaces Forum (BOSF), an umbrella organisation that embraces all 'Friends of Parks, Nature Reserves, allotments and other green spaces across the city.

BOSF have been collecting statistics of volunteer activity that have proved hugely valuable over the years in helping to preserve Ranger Service staff from large cuts to their number, and indeed to ensure that Birmingham continues to maintain its green spaces (unlike some other major cities that have abandoned them).

Val Saunders is the wonderful compiler of statistics for Kings Norton LNR. When she submitted the February figures she learned that over the past year the total number of volunteer hours worked across the city was a staggering 67,478! Based on the Real Living Wage this amounts to £615,200 of volunteer labour given by volunteers to support their city's green spaces over the past year — certainly not to be sneezed at, and we know that the figures for our patch compare very favourably with those for other groups.

Amanda Cadman

The Friends of Kings Norton Nature Reserve



Muntjac prints by Brian Hewitt

Contacts

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Newsletter Production: Amanda Cadman and Peter Cage

Environment Agency Hotline	0800 80 70 60
City Parks Department Call Centre	0121 464 8728
Lickey Hills Rangers	0121 445 6036
WM Police Neighbourhood Team	101
Anti-Social Behaviour Hotline	0121 303 1111, option 5

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