

FRIENDS OF THE RIVER ARROW NATURE RESERVE

RESERVE MATTERS

ISSUE 4

SPRING 2008

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Editor's Comment

Spring is an exciting season in the natural world. Green shoots are springing up everywhere and the early flowers are starting to bloom. One of the earliest is the celandine, featured on the cover of this issue. The humble celandine is given a special feature in this newsletter.

One of the other great things to experience on the reserve in spring is the early morning bird song. Also in this newsletter is an article on the thrush, one of the most tuneful of songbirds.

And finally we showcase the butterbur, another plant that features widely on the reserve.

This is your newsletter and we would welcome any contributions. These could be observations made on the reserve or photos taken, or even a poem.

Best wishes

Stephen Godfrey

Dates for Your Diary

WORKING PARTY DATES

Saturday 19th April

Saturday 17th May

Saturday 21st June

GUIDED WALK WITH THE VOLUNTEER WARDENS

Sunday 18th May at 2.30

24 Hour Nature Watch

Martin German of Alcester Grammar School in association with other schools in the area, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and the Friends of the River Arrow Nature Reserve is planning a 24 hour nature watch in June this year.

Pupils will record plants and animals found on the reserve and monitor activity on the reserve over a 24 hour period. A temporary lab will be set up to assist with the project.

It is hoped that this will give information on creatures such as snakes, bats and moths.

We will publish a summary of the results in the next newsletter.

Watch this space!

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The Lesser Celandine

I always think that the celandine is the first sign of spring. Those star-shaped yellow flowers also inspired Wordsworth to wax lyrical as you will see below.

The lesser celandine, (*Ranunculus ficaria*, syn. *Ficaria grandiflora* Robert *Ficaria verna* Huds.) is a low-growing, hairless perennial plant, with fleshy dark green, heart-shaped leaves.

According to Gilbert White, a diarist writing around 1800 in the Hampshire village of Selborne, the plants came out on February 21st, but it is more commonly reported to flower from March until May, and is sometimes called the "spring messenger" as a consequence. The flowers are yellow, turning white as they age. *Ranunculus ficaria* exists in both diploid ($2n=16$) and tetraploid ($2n=32$) forms which are very similar in appearance. However, the tetraploid type prefer more shady locations and frequently develops bulbils at the base of the stalk. These two variants are sometimes referred to as distinct sub-species, *R. ficaria ficaria* and *R. ficaria bulbifer* respectively. The plant is found throughout Europe and west Asia and is now introduced in North America. It prefers bare, damp ground and in the UK it is often a persistent garden weed.

The plant used to be known as Pilewort, as it was used to treat haemorrhoids. Supposedly the knobby tubers of the plant resemble piles, and according to the Doctrine of signatures this resemblance suggests that pilewort could be used to cure piles. The German vernacular Scharbockskraut (Scurvywort) derives from the use of the early leaves, which are high in vitamin C, against scurvy.

The poet William Wordsworth was very fond of the flower and it inspired him to write three poems including the following from his ode to the celandine:

I have seen thee, high and low,

Thirty years or more, and yet

T'was a face I did not know.

Upon Wordsworth's death it was proposed that a celandine be carved on his memorial plaque inside the church of Saint Oswald at Grasmere, but unfortunately the Greater celandine *Chelidonium majus* was mistakenly used.

C. S. Lewis mentions celandines in a key passage of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when Aslan comes to Narnia and the whole wood passes "in a few hours or so from January to May". The kids notice "wonderful things happening. Coming suddenly round a corner into a glade of silver birch trees Edmund saw the ground covered in all directions with little yellow flowers - celandines"^[1]. In latin 'celandine' can be translated as swallow, or when the swallows come home. The flower is present when the swallows return in the spring.

Stephen Godfrey



The Lesser Celandine
In the Nature Reserve

TO THE SMALL CELANDINE

PANSIES, lilies, kingcups, daisies,
Let them live upon their praises;
Long as there's a sun that sets,
Primroses will have their glory;
Long as there are violets,
They will have a place in story:
There's a flower that shall be mine,
'Tis the little Celandine.

Eyes of some men travel far
For the finding of a star;
Up and down the heavens they go,
Men that keep a mighty rout!
I'm as great as they, I trow,
Since the day I found thee out,
Little Flower!--I'll make a stir,
Like a sage astronomer.

Modest, yet withal an Elf
Bold, and lavish of thyself;
Since we needs must first have met
I have seen thee, high and low,
Thirty years or more, and yet
'Twas a face I did not know;
Thou hast now, go where I may,
Fifty greetings in a day.

Ere a leaf is on a bush,
In the time before the thrush
Has a thought about her nest,
Thou wilt come with half a call,
Spreading out thy glossy breast
Like a careless Prodigal;
Telling tales about the sun,
When we've little warmth, or none.

Comfort have thou of thy merit,
Kindly, unassuming Spirit!
Careless of thy neighbourhood,
Thou dost show thy pleasant face
On the moor, and in the wood,
In the lane;--there's not a place,
Howsoever mean it be,
But 'tis good enough for thee.

Ill befall the yellow flowers,
Children of the flaring hours!
Buttercups, that will be seen,
Whether we will see or no;
Others, too, of lofty mien;
They have done as worldlings do,
Taken praise that should be thine,
Little, humble Celandine!

Prophet of delight and mirth,
Ill-requited upon earth;
Herald of a mighty band,
Of a joyous train ensuing,
Serving at my heart's command,
Tasks that are no tasks renewing,
I will sing, as doth behove,
Hymns in praise of what I love!

William Wordsworth 1803.

Song Thrush (*Turdos philomelos*)

One of the most tuneful birds to be seen in the Reserve is the song thrush. It is widespread but declining in numbers and can be distinguished from its related species the mistle thrush by size. The song thrush is smaller than the mistle thrush and it has a pale orange underwing area which is white in the mistle thrush. They can be seen in woods, hedgerows, parks and gardens across the UK. Song thrushes tend to be solitary and establish a breeding territory in the late winter or early spring. These birds are sensitive to hard winter weather and during periods of severe weather many birds move southwards, even as far as north-west France and northern Spain. They eat worms, snails and fruit. They usually live for 3-4 years but some have been known to live a lot longer. Mortality is high with only 20% of fledglings and 60% of adults surviving to breed the following spring. Long term monitoring carried out by the British Trust for Ornithology showed that the population has been in major decline since 1970. This decline has been most pronounced on farmland, where the population has decreased by about 70%. The decline according to the BTO appears to be caused by a combination of lack of food and lack of nesting sites, both brought about by the intensive farming methods so widely practiced in the UK today. Some people suggest that increases in the numbers of magpies and sparrowhawks may be causing song thrushes and other songbirds to decline. There is evidence to suggest that this is not true. The proportion of thrush nests which are subject to predation has actually fallen during the last 30 years, and changes in the number of breeding thrushes on 250 individual study farms across lowland Britain are not related to changes in hawk or magpie numbers on the same farms. So thrushes are just as likely to have declined on farms which have lost hawks or magpies. (Source: British Trust for Ornithology).

They have accrued some odd superstitions over the years, like the one which suggests that they dispose of their old legs and acquire new ones when they are about 10 years old; and that they are deaf. Has anybody heard of these stories before?



The Song Thrush - Photographed on the Reserve
by Rita Godfrey

Song thrushes have often been the subject of poems. I rather like the one by Thomas Hardy.

The Darkling Thrush

I leant upon a coppice gate
When frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy
His wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon the earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy unlimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy goodnight air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

I am sure we have all wondered at some point why the birds sound so cheerful when the weather is miserable, but doesn't it lift the spirits to hear a bird singing so happily?

Rita Godfrey

The Butterbur plant (*Petasites hybridus*)

With Spring rapidly approaching I am very pleased to see new life in the form of leaves and flowers springing up around the Reserve. One of the species on the Reserve that flowers early is the Butterbur. Its flowering spikes appear between March-May with pink-red flower heads. It is a perennial that likes to live in damp ground often beside rivers. On our Reserve it can be found along the side of the river banks in the wooded area.



In the summer after the flowers have gone, it has heart-shaped leaves up to 1m across. In times gone by these leaves were used in England for wrapping up pats of butter and hence its name the Butterbur.

Preparations of the butterbur plant have been used as natural remedies for health problems such as fevers and headaches. Also a team of Swiss researchers have found that the extract of Butterbur is as effective as antihistamine for treating hay fever, without the sedative effects found with many of the pharmaceuticals available. Obviously I am not suggesting that you try this at home but I would recommend

have a wander down to the Reserve to have a peak at these very interesting plants.

Sarah Johnson

WORD SEARCH

Flowers Found at the Reserve

C	E	M	A	D	C	T	P	A	B	N	R	G	Y	K
T	I	A	E	U	O	A	N	U	H	O	E	A	A	C
C	H	L	C	A	R	V	T	I	W	M	V	R	R	O
Y	E	K	R	S	D	T	E	I	P	M	O	L	R	D
R	O	L	L	A	E	O	L	S	D	O	L	I	O	R
O	G	E	A	R	G	L	W	O	E	C	C	C	W	U
C	Y	O	C	N	O	R	U	B	R	E	T	T	U	B
I	O	U	D	W	D	C	H	I	C	K	W	E	E	D
H	P	W	H	N	O	I	L	E	D	N	A	D	D	E
C	C	E	S	S	G	N	N	Y	S	I	A	D	R	E
S	R	U	D	L	O	R	B	E	D	S	T	R	A	W
B	Y	R	C	M	I	D	E	E	W	G	O	H	T	D
E	I	D	M	K	O	P	S	A	T	E	E	W	S	N
B	E	O	A	O	O	O	S	R	T	O	O	F	U	I
O	C	O	W	L	R	O	H	E	D	G	E	N	M	B

WORDS TO FIND:

BEDSTRAW, BINDWEED, BIRDS, BURDOCK, BUTTERBUR,
BUTTERCUP, CELANDINE, CHICKWEED, CHICORY, CLO-
VER, COMMON, COMMON, COW, COWSLIPS, CUCKOO,
CUCKOO, DAISY, DANDELION, DOG, DOVES, FOOT, FOOT,
GARLIC, GARLIC, GREAT, HEDGE, HOGWEED, LADYS,
MEADOW, MUSTARD, PARSLEY, PINT, PINT, RED, ROSE,
SWEET, WILLOWHERB, WOOD, YARROW