

FRIENDS OF THE RIVER ARROW NATURE RESERVE

RESERVE MATTERS

ISSUE 6

WINTER/SPRING 2009



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Editor's Comment

This year winter has felt like winter with frequent frosts and snow. This is very hard on birds and other wildlife but arguably this is nature's way of ensuring survival of only the fittest.

There is a now lot of early spring activity on the reserve. There have been many sightings of woodpeckers, spotted and green, and many other birds are beginning to pair up ready for raising families. In this issue we have an article on woodpeckers.

The arrow-shaped leaves and strange horn-like flowers of the cuckoo pint are appearing, and there is an article on this unusual plant later in the newsletter. As you can see there a lot to see on the reserve at this time of the year.

Best wishes

Stephen Godfrey - Volunteer Warden

COVER PICTURE - These catkins were photographed on the alder trees on the riverbank. They are very abundant this year.

New Website and Forum

The Group of Friends has launched a new website <http://riverarrow.org.uk>. This is still under construction but please take a look and see what you think. The River Arrow Nature Reserve also now has an online community. This is a place where you can communicate with other visitors to the reserve and the people who work on the reserve.

What you will find there:

- Idea sharing for what can be done to help the reserve.
- Photos and videos from on and around the reserve taken by the public.
- Find out what been happening on the reserve.
- An opportunity to get involved with the reserve.

Interested? If you would like to visit the forum please point your web browser to <http://riverarrow.org.uk> and click forum at the bottom of the menu on the left. If you want to join this online community you will need to register. To do this click the `register` tab at the top of the page on the forum.

Need more help? If you do you can email the webmaster, Stephen Johnson at admin@riverarrow.org.uk.

Dates for Your Diary

WORKING PARTY DATES

Working Parties meet at 10.00 at the Main entrance, all are welcome but children under 18 yrs must be accompanied by an adult.

Saturday 18th April
Saturday 16th May
Saturday 20th June

BATS - An Illustrated Talk - Wednesday 13th May, Alcester Grammar School Sports Hall, 7.30 p.m.

GUIDED WALK - Sunday 17th May - Guided Walk around the reserve, everyone welcome, your chance to meet the committee! (PLEASE NOTE - WWT ask us to charge all walkers £2.00!!)

24 HOUR NATURE WATCH AND BAT WALK - date to be confirmed, late June.

THE AGM

The AGM was held on Wednesday 26th November 2008 at the Sports Hall of Alcester Grammar School. The School kindly provided the room at no charge. Mr Martin German and the students gave short presentations on the results of the 24 Hour Nature Watch last June, and outlined plans for the event this year. Members of the Group of Friends were invited to the evening bat watch and moth-trapping, which was much enjoyed by all. It is hoped that a similar invitation will be made this year. The accounts were presented and accepted. The main item of expenditure was a bat detector which proved it's worth at the nature watch. It is also planned to hold future bat walks on the reserve using the detector. The committee was re-elected without any changes.

WORKING PARTIES

This winter volunteers have planted another 38 trees on the reserve, with wild cherry, alder, and hawthorn. We are as ever grateful to those who have collected litter and kept the place looking tidy. Working parties are held on the third Saturday of each month. If the weather is bad please call me first to check that it is still on. Anyone is welcome to attend, even if you are not able to do very much physical work. We meet inside the main entrance at 10.00.

BATS

There are at least two species of bats living on the reserve. So we have arranged for Neil Beamsley, an ecologist with Warwickshire County Council to give us an illustrated talk at our next open meeting on the bats of Warwickshire. Please give us your support at what should be a most interesting talk. The meeting will be at The Sports Hall, Alcester Grammar School on Wednesday 13th May at 7.30pm, admission £1 for members, £2 non-members, children under 16 free of charge. We hope to see you there.

Who's Who in the Friends?

You are welcome to contact any of the members of the committee if you have any queries. If you have any matters to report about the reserve please contact one of the Volunteer Wardens.

The Committee

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The Volunteer Wardens

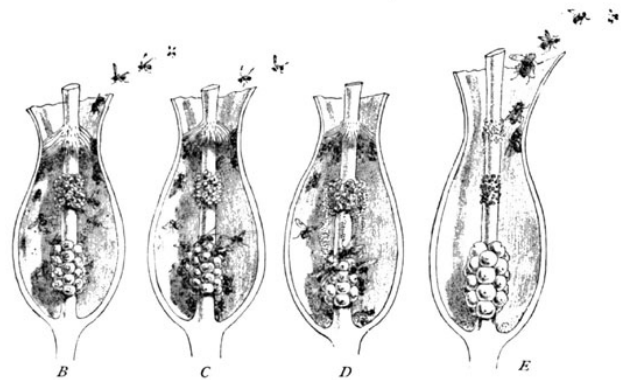
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WHAT DO YOU CALL IT?



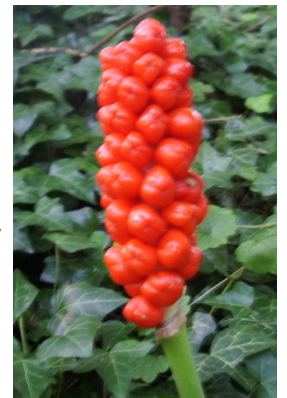
One of the earliest spring flowers on the reserve is *arum maculatum*, commonly known in these parts as cuckoo pint or lords and ladies. However around the country many different and amusing names have been used for this striking and unusual plant. These include sweet-hearts, Adam and Eve, jack-in-the-pulpit, wild arum and - more rudely! - willy-lily, one of many local names with sexual allusions. I have always known it as cuckoo pint (short "i" sound as in "lint") and that is the name I will use here. The horn-shaped flowers start to appear in late March with a lime green sheaf and a purple spadix in the centre. The plant traps insects in the lower part of the flower as shown in the diagram. The flowers produce a pungent smell which attracts carrion-feeding flies. The insects, crawling downwards in search of nectar, brush against the pollen-bearing stamens.

Downwards pointing hairs act like a valve, the flies get past but can't escape until their fertilisation work is done, and the hairs wither away. Many insects die in this process, since they are unable to escape, but this is not a carnivorous plant: the deaths are merely incidental to the plant's reproductive cycle. After fertilisation a cluster of green berries forms which turns to bright orange later in the year. These are attractive but poisonous, producing a burning sensation in the mouth (this is not from personal experience!).



As usual, in the past country folk have found uses for the parts of the plant. The root of the cuckoo pint, when roasted well, is edible and when ground was once traded under the name of Portland Sago. It was used like salop or salep (a working class drink popular before the introduction of tea or coffee). It was also used as a substitute for arrowroot.

Stephen Godfrey



(Some information was from English Nature and Wikipedia).

Woodpeckers on the Reserve

The River Arrow Nature Reserve supports two of the three British woodpeckers.

The commonest is the **Great Spotted Woodpecker**.

This distinctive black and white bird with small patches of crimson red (see picture) is about 23cm in length, slightly larger than a starling. The back is mainly black, but with large white shoulder patches and the breast is mainly white extending to a crimson patch under the tail.

Adult birds have a black crown, but juveniles have a red crown. The male has a distinctive red spot at the back of the neck.

In early Spring, the great spotted woodpecker often gives itself away by drumming on branches and hollow trees. The drumming involves about 8 to 10 sharp taps on resonant wood over the course of about one second. It is usually repeated at intervals for a few minutes. It also makes a short, sharp rather raucous call, which sounds like 'tchick'.

This woodpecker rarely feeds on the ground, preferring to lever seeds from cones high in conifers, but it will feed on insects and grubs, collecting them from holes in wood with a long sticky tongue. Of course, in winter it is often seen at bird feeding stations in gardens where peanuts and sunflower seeds are favourite meals.

Unfortunately, during the breeding season it is also a nest robber, carrying off the young of small hole nesting birds such as tits. Sometimes they will attack nest boxes, widening the hole to gain access to the young birds inside.

There is at least one pair on the reserve in the older trees around the pond area and possibly a second pair at the end by the old railway bridge.

The **Green Woodpecker** is seen quite frequently on the reserve, but is not known to nest there. This woodpecker, about 30 cm in length and larger than the great spotted, has a greenish back and pale grey-green underparts, yellowish rump and lower back, (especially noticeable in the breeding season) and a crimson crown.

In Spring the unmistakable laughing call can be heard from some distance. It is often described as 'yaffle, yaffle, yaffle' and this gives the bird its country name of Yaffle.

Green Woodpeckers feed in trees searching for insects, spiders and grubs on and under the bark, again catching its prey on an extremely long, sticky tongue, but the bird is most often seen on short to medium length grass in parks, on commons and open spaces in woodland searching for ants. This is particularly common in the summer months and in the last few years a pair of them have been seen regularly on the reserve, hunting in the slightly shorter grass at the side of the pathways in the North meadow.

Both woodpeckers have been seen regularly on the reserve in late Winter and early Spring 2009. If you see a medium sized bird, larger than a starling and shorter than a magpie, flying quite swiftly with a deeply undulating flight it is usually a woodpecker.

Listen for the characteristic drumming sounds and the much repeated 'yaffle' calls.

The third British woodpecker, the **lesser spotted woodpecker**, is similar to the great spotted but appears to be a barred black and white bird, although the male has a red crown, and it is much smaller being only around 15cm in length, about the size of a sparrow.

It is uncommon in the Alcester area nowadays, although I have heard of their presence in Cold Comfort Woods. It has not been seen on the reserve recently to the best of my knowledge, but one is always possible.



Great Spotted Woodpecker
(taken on the reserve).
By Kind Permission - Jack Lindsey