



Stratford Park Biodiversity Newsletter
January 2019

(Stratford Park woodland 2010 Photo: Mike McCrea)

Hi All,

Firstly, I would like to wish all the recipients of this newsletter and work colleagues in the park a happy New Year. This month sees me entering my 11th year of service in the park; 'where did those 10 years go'? And during this time the contract has been facilitated by three companies through various mergers. With committed environmental policies in place, the park could not be in better hands than with the present company, but with ever increasing financial constraints and changes in local government policy, the future beyond our present two-year extension remains to be seen. Both our client SDC and the general public have been extremely pleased with the service and extra value we have brought to the park, and if I could have documented all the praise we have received for our work and commitment, it would fill many pages. Despite the present financial situation, we have lots of exciting projects ahead which I will be reporting through this newsletter. As a small team, we look forward to new challenges and delivering a first class service to our client and the public as well as continuing our work to improving the biodiversity of the park during 2019.

Mike

New funding provides cash for woodland and lake work

The New Year has started with some great news about funding for the continuation of the woodland and lake work. Stroud Valleys Project has secured £20,000 from the Peoples Postcode Lottery Fund to provide much needed cash to continue important maintenance to the woodland and further development of the lake. The funding will provide a team of volunteers for a year to carry out valuable maintenance work to the woodland and lake.

Although there is a Biodiversity and Landscape Management Plan in place, due to financial restraints, no work was carried out in the woodland during 2018. This has had an impact on the woodland paths, some of which have become impassable through scrub encroachment. The funding will help in clearing and making safe main accesses through the woodland. During 2017 we restored the top path of the woodland, extending up to the beech woodland area. This is part of a recently designated nature trail which loops through the beech wood and down to the stream. The section of path by the stream is precipitous and slippery, and is always a problem when I am leading bird walks through the woodland. The proposal here is to grade the path level, placing timber edging and as with the other paths, lay a membrane and fill with wood chippings. With this section completed, the woodland will have a complete and safe access all round. The woodland also needs some thinning to allow more light in, so the beech woodland area will have further thinning this year and in the summer, blue bells and wood anemones will be planted.

I have also proposed the planting of willow trees along the edge of the stream as these are important trees for Lepidoptera, providing the first source of nectar for spring moths emerging from hibernation and bees.

Two interpretation boards have also been suggested one within the green corridors to the north of the park and another by the woodland, both to inform the public of the wildlife there. All of the work will be carried out by park staff, Stroud Valleys Project volunteers and members of the Stroud Model Railway Engineers Group.

The lake will also be covered in the funding with proposals to create a reed bed to one corner, provide more water lilies and to create a possible seating area at the far end of the lake. These are ideas presently being discussed. In the coming weeks I will be meeting with SVP and SDC to discuss these proposals further and to plan a schedule of work. Since we have been managing the woodland and improving the access, it is being used more widely by the public. In previous years the biodiversity value of the woodland has been overlooked and understated, for instance, within the woodland we have had breeding buzzards and sparrowhawks, summer visiting willow warblers, roe deer and white-letter hairstreak butterflies. On the shallow section of stream which runs through the park, we have dippers and kingfishers as well as nesting grey wagtail. Managing the woodland will ensure that these species continue to thrive. The next stage of woodland work is provisionally scheduled to start in February and I will keep everyone updated through this newsletter.

Museum in the Park nominated for Civic Trust Award

The pavilion and Walled Garden at the Museum in the Park has been shortlisted for a Civic Trust Award. The Stroud News & Journal said “a £480,000 project saw the derelict area outside the museum completely transformed”. More than 2,000 schoolchildren now use the museum’s facilities every year. Walled Garden and Pavilion architect Rachel Emous-Austin said “We’re absolutely delighted to have made the regional shortlist, particularly when you see some of the projects we’re up against, some of whom were on the RIBA Stirling Prize shortlist, like Tate St Ives.” “What’s wonderful is we seem to be enriching people’s experience of the pavilion and garden and its increased footfall to the museum. We’ve improved the space and created something really attractive, and its bringing people in.” Rachel further said “It was very much a community project, and we made illustrated books of planting and landscaping techniques to help museum volunteers transform the area themselves.”

Kevin Ward Museum Development Manager said “It’s a great achievement and recognises the hard work of many people”. The Walled Garden is one of 147 projects out of 240 nationally selected for the next round of judging. The national Civic Trust Awards shortlist is announced later this month, with winners revealed in March. As grounds maintenance contractors for the park, we had some involvement in the preliminary stages of the Walled Garden transformation and assisted in the beginning with clearance work. The museum also commissioned my self to do an ecology report prior to the work being started. The end result has been nothing short of stunning from the herbaceous beds, to the wildflower area and the vegetable area and the pavilion is an excellent facility for holding the annual school visits and nature events.



(The Walled Garden resplendent last summer Photo: Mike McCrea)

Disappearance of the Common Starling From Stratford Park and national decline

Once a ubiquitous bird of Britain's gardens the Common Starling disappeared from Stratford Park during the late 1970's and has since become one of the fastest declining species in the UK. Ornithologists have been carrying out extensive research to understand what is causing such a rapid decline. Anyone witnessing the amazing shape changes and co-ordination of a starling murmuration will no doubt be left in awe. On a winter evening with the sun setting a few small black dots begin to fly into reed beds, over farmland and urban cities. More and more come in from left, right and centre, until thousands of starlings come together as one. A murmuration can be breathtaking. With so many thousands of birds swirling through the winter sky above you, it's easy to be fooled into thinking the species is doing well. Sadly, this couldn't be further from the truth. Present research has shown that Britain's breeding population of Common Starlings has crashed by 51% which is a staggering statistic, and put in a clearer perspective, it shows that over half of the UK's starlings have disappeared since the 1960s. Starlings were once a common bird in Stratford Park primarily nesting in cavities in the large Elms which once circled the park. They also nested along the riverside in decaying alders and other hollow branches. These birds gathered together in autumn and winter to forage in the adjacent fields. In 1972 there was a rare occurrence of an albino starling which remained on the fields for two years. Between 1969 – 1975 many starlings nested under the eaves of houses in the new housing development adjacent to the park, called Mathews Way, however, their unsightly trails of faeces on brickwork underneath their nesting sites resulted in the local council removing the traditional soffit and eaves boards on the houses and replaced these with PVC systems. This change in roof design also had a huge impact on nesting house sparrows that also use the same nesting sites as starlings.

Back to the murmurations – many of the starlings we see in winter are birds that have travelled here to escape the freezing weather in Northern and Eastern Europe. In those countries starlings are also declining so we are seeing fewer birds arriving each year. It means that the large winter gatherings we have been seeing are getting smaller. On my local patch (Frampton-on-Severn) I am seeing 50% less birds flocking in winter. The RSPB Centre for Conservation Science has been trying to discover what is driving starling declines in the UK. The thing is, despite it happening all over the country, no one seems to know exactly what is causing the decline and the same can be said for the starlings that disappeared from the park in the mid-1970s.

Research has revealed that most of our resident starlings are breeding successfully albeit in smaller numbers. This means that the problem may be occurring away from the species' breeding grounds. Two questions are raised, 'just where are starlings going when they're not breeding? And what problems do they face when they get there?' Looking at different breeding populations around Europe, some are doing well and increasing, but others like here in Britain, are declining. Without going into too much depth about the possible causes for starling decline, the most feasible ones would point to changes in the European habitat for over-wintering birds,

predation of young birds by Eurasian Sparrowhawks and domestic cats and changes in agricultural practices and chemical applications.



(Starlings flocking over Gloucester Photo: Mike McCrea)

Research from other scientists has shown that pollutants, including anti-depressants from our sewage systems and flame retardants, badly affect starlings but it's less clear whether wild starlings are exposed to them. What all this research from the RSPB and from others, shows is that it's likely that the starling's shocking decline is caused by a combination of factors which require further research. I have been trying to assess the correlations between the decline nationally of starlings, and of their disappearance from the park during the 1970s but find it difficult to equate any factors. Being mainly hole-nesting birds, squirrel predation can be ruled out in the park, so that's the first one to eliminate, Secondly loss of habitat? Well, those elm trees were felled in 1972 and many alders removed from the stream in the 1980s, so that would account for some loss of nesting sites. Those that nested in the elm trees fed their chicks almost exclusively on leatherjackets (Cockchafer larva) taken from the adjacent fields. This form of food still accounts for a large proportion of food for starlings chicks as shown in the photo below of an adult starling taking a leatherjacket to a nest next to my own house. So, could changing agriculture be affecting the number of cockchafer grubs available to starling chicks in spring? It appears coincidental too that the construction of the present leisure centre in 1975 coincided with the disappearance of starlings from the park. Previous to this, the area was an important place for foraging starlings. A startling fact is that I have not seen a single starling in Stratford Park in over 30 years, but some still appear in the adjacent fields, where are they nesting? Certainly not the park. For all the research that the RSPB and other scientists are doing to try

and understand the huge decline of this once common bird, numbers continue to plummet, but is that not the case with many other once common wild birds? I would be interested to know if any of our *idverde* colleagues based in Somerset have noticed any decline in their areas as this is one of the best counties to see murmurations in winter. So next time you're watching that Common Starling murmuration and balletic aerial dance above your head, remember that those birds are in trouble, and scientists are trying to find out what's wrong before it's too late.



(Adult starling taking leatherjacket to nest site Photo: Mike McCrea)

RSPB Big Garden Bird Watch 2019

The Royal Society for the protection of Birds (RSPB) is launching its annual Big Garden Birdwatch 26th – 29th January. The BGBW is the world's largest wildlife survey and more than half a million are expected to take part this January. The event has also received high exposure on national television. The RSPB asks participants to record the number of birds seen in their garden for one hour. Results are sent back to the RSPB, providing a vital snapshot of UK nature. The RSPB provides a recording pack free of charge which is available from their website www.rspb.org.uk as a company that works predominantly within parks and other green spaces,

I would urge all of our contractors to join in and submit their observations. As with other wildlife, birds are disappearing at an alarming rate (at least 12 species have disappeared completely from Stratford Park within 3 decades), so it's crucial that the RSPB receives as much information as possible about our garden birds.



10 years of service to Stratford Park

This month sees me enter my 11th year of service in Stratford Park. I can hardly believe that the decade has flown by so fast. Of course, my association with the park goes way back to my childhood where I did everything that naughty boys did back then; collected bird's eggs (I hope the park's birds forgive me now), sneaked into the outdoor swimming pool at night and on several occasions sneaked down the mansion house coal chute when the monks lived there in the early 1970s. Oh, I was no angel back then as my sisters, who often joined me on my park forays will confirm. Even during bringing up children and taking them to the park, there was always a common thread for me, the wildlife. I kept notes and records of all the butterflies and birds and even to this day, still have sketches taken in the park when I was 17. How surprising then that I ended up working in the park, and even better, working on its biodiversity. Life is so unpredictable. If I had not decided to stop building swimming pools in 2008, I wouldn't be writing this newsletter today.

During the 10 years I have been working here, it has been generally enjoyable. Yes, there have been lots of highs and some lows along the way but you learn to deal with these and hopefully learn from them. What is unique about Stratford Park is not only working in a beautiful environment but to work with such a diverse network of colleagues both past and present. All of them share a passion for the park. I have seen our tenure here progress through 3 different companies during the 10 years through various mergers so I have worn 3 different sets of work clothes during this time. Thankfully, the present company uniform is much more subtle than the garish sky blue kit we wore with the Landscape Group. I have seen staff come and go, and also many client officers. I am fortunate in having an exceptional line manager (Paul James) who has supported me through good and bad times, and I can state with all sincerity that the team I work

with now, are the best I've worked with in the park, all polite, hard working and committed (so if any higher idverde managers are picking this up, you can rest assured that you have great staff here). When the Stratford Park Biodiversity & Landscape Action Plan was introduced in 2011, it provided a platform for further development. Fortunately, I had the knowledge to facilitate this and by changing some of our maintenance regimes and monitoring the wildlife, we have been able to re-establish wildlife that had disappeared from the park. It has also opened up opportunities for us to work with volunteers such as Stroud Valleys Project and forge strong links with the Museum in the Park. With the latter, I have been running wildlife events in the park and introduced the public to a natural world they never knew existed here. From this has also come opportunities for me to do public talks to promote the park, its wildlife and my company. The list of benefits associated with the role is great, but perhaps not the salary! I always recall at my interview for the role, my interviewer said "You won't get rich in horticulture, but the job is yours if you want it". Well, he was correct about that but job satisfaction can often outweigh that, and for this I am blessed.

My role has expanded so much through the increasing demand for health & safety that at times it can be perplexing, but as a company that has high priority with H&S, it is an important part of the job. I have had some great opportunities to use my construction skills in the park, and have been entrusted on many projects to deliver new work for our client SDC. Not only does this bring in valuable additional income for the company but offers SDC a much cheaper alternative to develop the park without engaging expensive external contractors. I am also pleased that this newsletter is so well received not only by the client, but the general public and other park stakeholders. I hope it provides a monthly snapshot of the wildlife we are seeing and monitoring and of all the development work we carry out. So, here I am entering my 11th year working in the park. Any regrets? – None.

(Below wearing the Wyevale strip 2009)



Museum celebrates Giant Snowdrop Company

The Museum in the Park is celebrating the story of the Giant Snowdrop Company – a business based in Hyde, near Stroud, from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s.

As winter begins to lift its heavy blanket from the earth, Snowdrops are often the first sign of spring – the first indicator of new life beginning in the soil.

From 1st January to 31st March 2019 the Museum in the Park is celebrating the story of the Giant Snowdrop Company. There will be a small display in the museum's reception area telling the story of this local company whose importance is nationally recognised as having laid the foundations for the current popularity and availability of snowdrops. By collecting, propagating and offering bulbs for sale by mail order Brigadier and Mrs Mathias with Herbert Ransom made available to a wide group of ordinary gardeners what had previously been accessible only to a small group dedicated Galanthophiles. The museum will be able to share some of their catalogues with information from the then national experts about the leading varieties sold; letters from key people and collectors of the time, as well as medals won at the Royal Horticultural Society shows. In addition, in the Walled Garden behind the museum there is a collection of snowdrop varieties connected with the Giant Snowdrop Company, from the scented Galanthus 5. Arnott – the original giant snowdrop – to snowdrops collectively known as the 'Hyde Four' named after family members as well as many other notable varieties.

On 28th February at 2pm there is a talk by Jane Kilpatrick and Jennifer Harmer – the authors of the 2018 book 'The Galanthophiles – 160 years of Snowdrop Devotees' – booking is essential (cost £5.00) contact 01453 763394 to book.

Note: This exhibition would not have been possible without the generous support of the following people: Quentin Mathias, Jane Kilpatrick, Jennifer Harmer, Sally Ann Berryman, Alan Ransom, Ann Taylor and Caroline Dicker.

(Varieties of snowdrops growing in the Walled Garden Photo: courtesy of Museum in the Park)





National Nest Box Week 14th - 21st February 2018



National Nest Box Week is an established part of the ornithological calendar, running for a week from 14th February each year. National Nest Box Week provides a welcome focus on nesting birds and encourages everyone to put up nest boxes in their local area in order to support the conservation of our breeding birds. National Nest Box Week was developed by the BTO and Britain's leading bird care specialist Jacobi Jayne. It takes place at a time when tradition has it that small birds pair up ahead of the breeding season.

Anyone can take part whether you're a person or family with space for a bird box in your garden, a member of a local wildlife group, even better, why not put up a box on all our contracts. The BTO is asking people to put up bird boxes between 14th and 21st February, but, you can put up nest boxes at any time of the year.

Natural nest sites for birds such as holes in trees or old buildings are disappearing fast as gardens are 'tidied up' and old houses are repaired. Taking part in NNBW gives us a chance to contribute to bird conservation as well as giving us the pleasure of observing breeding birds that are attracted to our nest boxes.

Here in the park, we are certainly making a big contribution and have already started our annual cleaning and bird box repairs. This month we have gone through all of the park's bird boxes and given them a thorough clean out. Many had suffered from bad weather, squirrels and even woodpeckers, and these have all been repaired. As usual, there are a few unfortunate discoveries – an un-hatched clutch of eggs, single eggs and in some cases dead fledglings. Last year was not a good one for small birds due to the Beast from the East and the summer heat wave, but in general most of the boxes were occupied by blue, great and coal tits and a few Nuthatches. In between our core works we will be making more boxes and these will be placed out during NNBW. We also intend to make one more little owl box.



(Nest box maintenance this month)



(Nuthatch box receives a new front)



Wildlife to see now in Stratford Park

BIRDS: This month has seen a lot of bird activity as birds move in from Scandinavia. Large numbers of redwings and finches started arriving on 2nd January. Numbers of blackbirds has also soared. On the lake large flocks of black-headed gulls have been gathering and kingfisher has been seen by the lake. A kestrel was over the park on 31st December 2018. Pheasants have been seen in the woodland and both green and great-spotted woodpeckers have been active in the woodland. Nuthatches continue to show in good numbers and common buzzard is regular over the park. An influx of pied wagtails arrived at the park in late December and was mainly concentrated around the play area. Grey wagtails have been by the lake and regularly feeding along the new graded banks. Two ravens were in the park on New Years Day.

CONTACT: Mike McCrea Tel: 07833091294 E-Mail: mike.mccrea@idverde.co.uk
michaelmccrea2@outlook.com

USEFUL LINKS: www.idverde.co.uk www.museuminthepark.org.uk
www.stroudvalleysproject.co.uk www.stroudnature.co.uk www.birdhols.com www.thebto.org
www.theaes.org www.butterflyconservation.co.uk www.therspb.org.uk



(Black-headed gull on main field Photo: Mike McCrea)