

NEWS AND STORIES FROM ABBEY FIELDS

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April 2023

Mid-February saw the first red-tailed bumblebee of the year at Croft Close Set-aside (CCSA) and by mid-March butterflies were out and about, with 14 brimstones seen on one visit. Soon chiffchaffs were singing and now there are many insects about, often feeding off the newly emerged wildflower blooms.

In this update

Ash make up a large proportion of our trees at Croft Close Set-aside. We currently have many healthy trees but others are suffering from the fatal ash dieback. Find out what the future holds.

Over the past winter we've been working to retain the character and habitats of Long Meadow and CCSA, and to keep this bit of "countryside" open and accessible. This has included trimming back vegetation encroaching on our most recently added red-listed plant species.

As ever, fundraising is a critical part of our activities – we are closing in on our target but we need to keep up our efforts!



Willow on the set-aside, photo by Penny Reeves

Fundraising news

Since our last newsletter we have had a boost to our fundraising and we now expect, if all goes to plan, that we will be able to complete purchase of Croft Close Set-aside by the summer.

In part this is because our fundraising team has been successful with a number of grant applications (more to be announced on this later!). The community has also continued to support us generously.

Importantly the Parish Council has also provided significant financial support which has allowed us to move the purchase forward much earlier than would otherwise have been possible. We thank the Parish Council for this and the recognition that Abbey Fields is a valuable asset for our Community. This support and the grants which we have received complement the generosity of the many within our Community who have also contributed.

However, we have to continue our fundraising efforts to ensure

that we have sufficient funds to complete the purchase and then to maintain both sites going forward. We anticipate much of the annual maintenance can be done by volunteers – and all are welcome to join our work parties. Nevertheless there are some activities, such as major tree work, where professional input is necessary.

We are again running several events over the summer – often as a part of other village-based activities. Please come along, enjoy yourselves and support us! For up to date information see <https://abbeyfields.online/events-calendar> .

Winter visitors to Abbey Fields

This winter has seen a good variety of birds making use of both Long Meadow and CCSA, with some new records for the sites. Before Christmas frozen ground and snow led a snipe to forage along the Brook; a couple of months later a green sandpiper was trying its luck in the same spot.

The deep croak of a raven was a rare delight at the Set-aside; although the resident buzzards didn't think so as they chased the bird away. Until recently ravens were birds of the uplands but they are now extending their range eastwards. Maybe



Male blackcap, photo by Penny Reeves

Morocco.

Goldcrests are rarely seen at Abbey Fields, but appear for a few weeks in autumn as part of a broad seasonal population movement.

As spring arrives, numbers of fieldfares and redwings decline. By mid-March the first chiffchaffs are declaring territories and a yellowhammer's "little-bit-of-bread" song is ringing out across adjacent fields.



Snipe, photo by Penny Reeves

one day they will be a regular sighting?

Blackcaps are now regularly seen in the villages during winter – and were also recorded at Croft Close Set-aside. Most likely these birds have now migrated east typically to Germany to breed, while our summering blackcaps arrive from their winter quarters in Iberia and



Goldcrest, photo by Jon Pavey

The end of the ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*)? – not quite!

It is clear from the situation at CCSA that the current epidemic of ash dieback fungal disease is still very much with us. Known originally as the Chalara fraxinea, the name changed to Hymenoscyphus fraxineus when it was discovered this Chalara had a sex life!

The disease originated in the Far East, but how and when it spread to Europe is unclear. What is known is that the fungus is very uniform genetically, so there were no multiple spread events into Europe.

The first infections were noticed in the UK in 2012, but the disease may already have reached the UK in the early 1990's on imported ash. The prediction is that the disease will eventually kill



Photo by Penny Reeves

most of the ash trees in the UK, although larger ash trees die slowly – up to 10 years. The word 'most' is important – if only 5% survive, there will still be 5 million ash trees left in the UK.

The good news is that there is resistance to the disease in the UK ash population – and knee-jerk felling of diseased ash trees can, in that sense, be counter-productive.

There is an ash breeding programme, based on these resistant trees, at the John Innes Institute in Norwich (Professor James Brown). Unfortunately, tree breeding typically requires long lives and a lot of patience. Even applying tissue culture techniques, seed to grow resistant trees will still not be available before 2030.



Photo by Penny Reeves

But ash in the UK will survive – at least until the arrival of the next problem, the emerald ash borer – on its way from Russia. When it arrives, it needs to be spotted fast! Look out for an iridescent bright green beetle.

Julian Doberski



Image: UK Forest Research

Looking back on winter work parties

With so much bird song in the air, we are clearly in the bird breeding season. At this time of the year we pause much of our habitat management work, focusing in the summer months on trimming back brambles growing across paths and other light touch work.

But we also need to take stock on what has been achieved over the winter as we look ahead.

Probably the most dramatic action has been the 'halo release' around the veteran oak at CCSA. Here we have cut back surrounding vegetation (with a couple of exceptions) to allow more light to fall on the oak. This should encourage new growth from the trunk which in turn helps keep the tree strong.

You too can help by not walking up to the base: instead admire this magnificent tree from the "viewpoint" on the main path. That way we minimise any compaction which can restrict the tree roots from valuable air, water and nutrients. <https://www.kew.org/read-and-watch/tree-gang-kew-old-trees>



Photo by Alison Stuck

We also coppiced one of the largest willows in 'Willow Walk'. Coppicing is a traditional management practice which should promote new, vigorous growth as well as allowing ground flora to flourish. The tree was first coppiced some 15 or more years ago; we will monitor how the affected area responds and use this to inform future maintenance planning.



Photo by Guy Richardson



Photo by Alison Stuck

The bulk of the winter work parties focused on trimming back brambles which were trying to establish in the grass areas. The latter are important habitats particularly for invertebrates and some flora. Whilst having some bramble is good for other species, the intention has been to maintain a reasonable balance.

At Long Meadow we did more extensive bramble clearance over a short length beside the Park Lane hedge. The current intention is to do such clearance on a three- or four-year cycle, allowing fresh bramble to grow up in the meantime, providing habitat for nesting birds as well as supporting invertebrates and quite possibly small mammals.

Last autumn, we cleared vegetation and debris from the dried-out ponds at CCSA. The winter rains have refilled the East Pond; there is some recolonisation with new life though no doubt it may take several years to recover from the drought.

During the coming summer a main activity will be keeping the paths open at CCSA and the Park Lane foot and cycle path free from encroaching vegetation. If you would like to help with this- everyone welcome - please contact sitemanagers@abbeyfields.online .

A new red-list species

Croft Close Set-aside's importance as a refuge for vulnerable flora was recently emphasised by recording another red-listed species.

Red lists are used to identify the threat of extinction to species using the internationally accepted guidelines (<https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/red-lists-in-great-britain/>).

Our excitement at this find was tempered by learning that plantago media or 'hoary plantain', first recorded at the site a couple of years ago, has since been added as "Near Threatened" to the England Red List.

We checked to see whether hoary plantain was still present. It was, but the small colony was overshadowed by bramble and invaded by blackthorn. These threats were cleared back to give this grassland species room to thrive.



Photo by Jon Pavey

Mowing Long Meadow

At the end of March we gave Long Meadow a mow. The aim is to give the emerging wildflowers a head start before the grass shades them out

Timing the mowing is always a challenge. Possibly due to last summer's drought and some cold periods through winter, the grass seemed much slower to start growing this year. The wet but warmish weather towards the end of March provided the prompt, with the grass responding more strongly than the wildflowers.

By the end of April we hope for a gold and blue carpet of buttercups and germander speedwell before the grass shoots up.

We are again planning to cut the meadow for hay in the summer. We hope to sell the hay. But to do this we need to keep the meadow free from dog waste (contaminated hay cannot be used for animal feed).

Please can all dog walkers help by cleaning up after their dog, using the bins on Park Lane.



Photo by Jon Pavey

We thank Brookfield Contracting & Farming for their in-kind contribution to the recent mowing.



Photo by Guy Richardson



Photo by Penny Reeves