

NEWS AND STORIES FROM ABBEY FIELDS

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February 2023

This winter has produced some splendid light days to be treasured, especially the hoar frosts decorating the landscape and the blanket of snow which remained far longer than in recent winters.

Not so good for getting around and not so good for our wildlife. Frozen ground brought a snipe to the Brook at Long Meadow and the bark has been stripped from some trees and saplings at Croft Close Set-aside – perhaps as no more appealing food was available.

But spring is just around the corner with a few invertebrates already venturing out – not long until the first butterfly!

In this update

We commemorated the Abbey Fields project with a tree planting in January. Look out for some early flowering trees, notably elms and cherry plum, and for fieldfares before they depart northwards. And before they are hidden by emerging spring leaves, see if you can spot some of our 350-odd mistletoe plants.



Photos by Amy Murrell

Commemorative tree planting

In January we welcomed Caroline Chivers and some of the younger members of our community to help plant an oak sapling on Long Meadow. In time we hope this will be a magnificent replacement for the sycamore which used to dominate the meadow, as well as a symbolic link to Croft Close Set-aside where the oak sapling first grew, and the veteran oak there, and a much-loved reminder of the beginnings of Abbey Fields as a place for the community and wildlife.

Full details are on our website:
<https://abbeyfields.online/tree-planting-report>



Photo by Guy Richardson

Year of the rabbit

In the last few weeks many, particularly in Asia, will have been celebrating the start of the Year of the Rabbit. Horoscopes are laden with predictions for the coming year.

At Abbey Fields we are hoping that our rabbits [<https://www.mammal.org.uk/species-hub/full-species-hub/discover-mammals/species-rabbit/>] will continue industriously managing the grass areas at Croft Close Set-aside.

Their impact is most noticeable in the shaved grass areas at the centre of the site. Here the top soil is normally well-drained and the bramble patches provide safe bolt holes should a predator - buzzard, fox or dog - appear suddenly.

Clearly the rabbits also feed in the longer grass too, here also shaping the habitat by keeping brambles somewhat at bay. This long tussocky grass is home to many small creatures. Some butterflies like the gatekeeper [<https://butterfly-conservation.org/butterflies/gatekeeper>] choose taller grassy vegetation close to brambles (a favourite nectar source) to lay their eggs, with the caterpillars feeding on bents, fescues and meadow grasses.



Photo by Penny Reeves

The heavily rabbit-grazed area is full of low mounds. These are domes above ant nests, most likely those of the yellow meadow ant [<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-explorer/invertebrates/ants/yellow-meadow-ant>]. Such ants are very particular about temperature: at Croft Close the rabbits seem to be creating very favourable conditions.

The ants, of course, are the main food of green woodpeckers. So when you next see a green woodpecker at the Set-aside, you can thank the rabbits!



Photo by Jon Pavey



Photo by Penny Reeves

Early flowering trees

Start your spring with some early flowering trees!

There are two medium sized Elms in the north-west corner of Long Meadow where the brookside path disappears into the boundary woods. Last year they flowered during the first week of March. The flowers don't have petals but do have colour - stigmas like purple pips, and stamens like pink bottle-brushes, all bunched into a tiny tassel-like ball.

These are Huntingdon elms (*Ulmus x vejeta*), a cultivated variety said to have originated in Hinchingsbrooke Park, Huntingdon, 1747, and marketed to become fashionable and widely planted. Every large estate would have several alongside the limes and horse-chestnuts. It turned out to be resistant to Dutch elm disease and there are fully mature specimens around, including in Histon.



Photo by David Dives

All elms are non-native going back certainly as far as the Romans who brought the first ones to Britain. There are many ancient varieties and a few of these are to be found across the Abbey Fields.

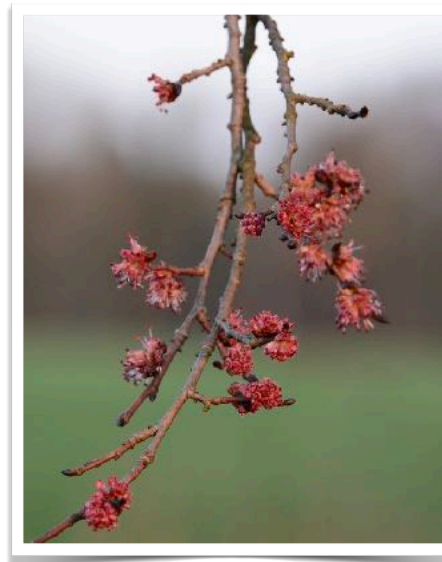


Photo by Guy Richardson

Another early flowering tree is the cherry plum (*Prunus cerasifera*), easily mistaken for blackthorn with very similar white flowers, cherry plum is the first *Prunus* species to flower, and so easy to find in late February/early March. Its identity is easily confirmed by the glossy green new shoots and leaves appearing with the flowers.

Arriving here via horticulture from SE Asia it's been grown in Britain for 200 years. The first record in the wild was from Bodmin, 1906, and it has now become widely naturalised in England's hedgerows and woodlands. There's one in Long Meadow under the horse-chestnuts towards the west end and last year there were some seen on the Croft Close set-aside. Why not have a look?



Photo by David Dives

Late winter fieldfares

Over the next month or so our wintering fieldfares will depart to their breeding areas in Scandinavia and Finland.

These beautiful multi-coloured thrushes can be seen spread out across grassy fields or perched high in trees such as the Spinney at the west end of Long Meadow. They can form small groups or flocks of several hundred birds.

At this time of the year you may be lucky enough to hear them sing, together as a choir with a subdued mellow tune, each "voice" surprisingly quiet unlike, say, the much smaller robin.

Like the robin, fieldfares can be short-lived, with a typical lifespan of two years; however, the oldest known wild bird lived nearly 15 years

[<https://www.bto.org/understanding-birds/birdfacts/fieldfare>].



Fieldfare
Photo by Guy Richardson



Redwing
Photo by Penny Reeves

Often a flock of fieldfares will include a fellow winter visitor: the redwing. These are readily told apart [<https://www.bto.org/develop-your-skills/bird-identification/videos/bto-bird-id-redwing-and-fieldfare>], with the redwing looking like a song thrush with eye-stripe and red flanks.

Mistletoe survey



Photo by Penny Reeves

One of the suggested Christmas activities on the Abbey Fields website [<https://abbeyfields.online/christmas-activities>] was to help survey the mistletoe in our villages.

A few years ago there was a scare that mistletoe was in decline; perhaps people had stopped looking out for it as its current conservation status is "least concern".

Our suggestion has prompted more people to notice a plant which, as it turns out, is relatively abundant in the villages. We are still collating records but already we have noted over 60 trees holding mistletoe and at least 340 individual plants.

Thank you to all who sent records to sitemanagers@abbeyfields.online. If anyone has any records they have yet to submit – it is not too late!

Fundraising update

At the end of January we were on the cusp of achieving 80% of our £500,000 fundraising target, with the prospect of some appreciable additions in the near future. It is looking very positive, but our fundraising efforts still need to continue, both to complete the purchase of Croft Close Set-aside and to fund ongoing and future management and maintenance of Abbey Fields. Our Christmas activities made a significant contribution – and we hope many of you are enjoying the splendid photographs in our calendar. We are already putting together ideas for the next one – again inviting interested photographers to provide the pictures.

We are lucky enough to have **Duncan Mackay** give a talk on 28th February on The Nature of Cambridge. This follows the recent publication of a book of the same name, presenting the conclusions of a three-year citizen-science survey across the city – extending into south Impington. The rich diversity of city wildlife is quite an eye-opener.

The talk is being given in the old Infant School, now home to Cambridgeshire Music. Tickets are available at <https://abbeyfields.online/events/talk-on-the-nature-of-cambridge-by-duncan-mackay>

