

"CONNECTING WITH NATURE"

HISTON & IMPINGTON GREEN SPACES

– NEWSLETTER –

Spring butterflies | Veteran oak | WI Wood | Photography competition | Mapping mistletoe | Flora surveys | Yellow rattle | Guided walks | Members' afternoon

March 2024

In this update:

At last Spring is here, the blackthorn and cherry blossoms are showing off their best - and butterflies are already flying around the meadow and gardens, as many have reported on the H&I Wildlife Facebook Group.

We report on good news for the veteran oak and field maple on Croft Close Set-aside and some very successful work in the WI (Histon) Wood.

There's interesting news on potential plans for increasing wildflowers on Long Meadow as well as reporting back on the mistletoe survey carried out earlier this year.

There's also news on the 2024 Photography Competition launch plus information on more guided walks and a link to the successful Members' Afternoon event.

Spring Butterflies

Spring is almost upon us, and as these warmer temperatures and sunnier days are starting to appear, the allure of a home chrysalis just doesn't have the same ring it did back in October!

The emergence of wildlife in Cambridgeshire brings quite an array of butterflies and, with a fine-tuned antenna, they can be spotted appearing from now and flitting right into the late summertime.

The classic Peacock butterfly, with its red wings and purple spots, returns in mid-February, to add a dash of scarlet to your back-garden.

However, Peacock butterflies are not to be confused with Small Tortoiseshells, which also first appear in February, but tend to be slightly smaller and host a canvas of black spots rather than blue.

Both these species of butterfly are beautiful and until relatively recently were not of concern to conservationists. Currently the Peacock seems to be doing just fine but Small Tortoiseshell numbers have dropped appreciably in recent years. Follow this [link](#) for more information.

Unfortunately, many of our beautiful butterflies have declined



Brimstone butterfly; photo by Jon Pavey

since the 1970s, but there is a hint that targeted conservation can work - which is very welcome.

For example, since 1945 the UK has lost 98% of its meadows but butterfly conservationists are working to turn this around to benefit grassland species.

There are many ways conservationists collect data for butterflies and it usually isn't as complicated as you may think, furthermore, you may be able to help them out!

One way of collecting data on butterflies is by walking a transect. Typically, the same route is walked weekly in a set period between 1st April and 29th September.

Alternatively, even casual records are valuable. With the iRecord Butterflies app on your phone you can take a photo and work out the exact species, from your back garden or on a countryside walk. Moreover, the data can then be sent to a wider, national, database which enables butterfly conservationists to track species' numbers.

So, don't hesitate to cruise with these elusive creatures this summer, even if it's from the comfort of your back garden!

Our thanks to Arwen, an IVC student, for this article.

Clean bill of health for veteran oak

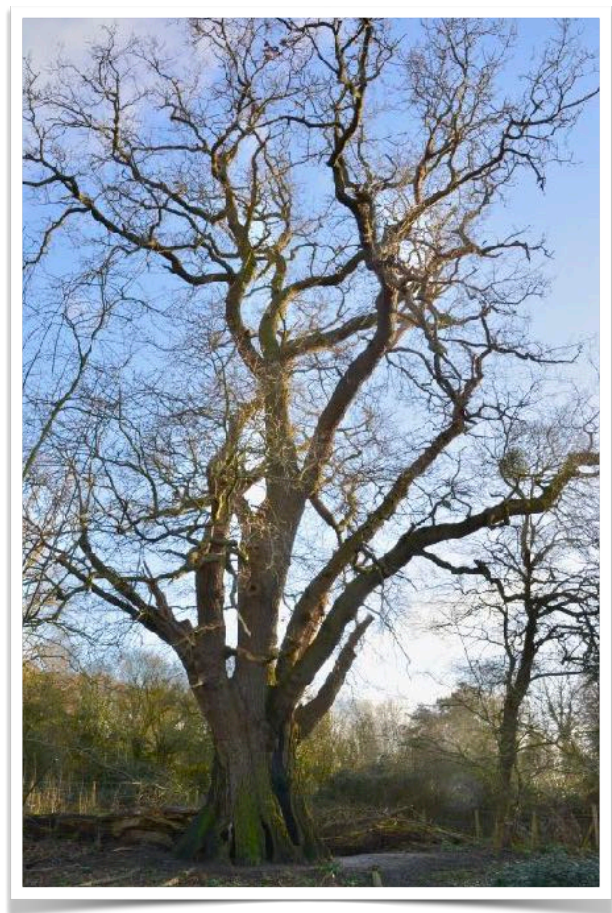
The veteran oak at Croft Close Set-aside was recently reinspected by ancient tree specialist, Reg Harris.

Thankfully he concluded that the tree was doing well and no tree work was either required or desirable. He did, however, note that despite the halo release and creation of the dead hedge barrier, there still was trampling of the roots.

He was particularly concerned by bare earth immediately adjacent to the trunk. This suggests that beneficial nutrients expected to accumulate in this zone are being lost and that important, very fine (near invisible), roots in this zone are damaged.

He recommended we give the oak some "tree time". In other words, that for about five years we dissuade people from approaching the oak, but rather to take in its great splendour from the viewing point on the Southern Boundary Path.

We hope all agree that looking after this tree for future generations is an important responsibility and very worthwhile. So please come to marvel at this impressive specimen, **but do not approach closer than the main path from the Croft Close entrance.**



The veteran oak; photo by Guy Richardson

Reg also inspected our veteran field maple. Whilst no tree work is required here either, he was concerned about the apparent poor condition on the northeast side of the canopy. This may well be due to trampling of its roots.

We have taken two immediate measures. Firstly, to reinforce the low dead hedges around the base of the tree and secondly to divert the much-used path that runs on the north side away from the root zone.

Hopefully this will allow the tree in this sector to thrive again, and to be less vulnerable to future summer droughts.

If you want to learn about the care of ancient trees, you may find this [paper](#) and [video](#) of interest.



The veteran field maple; photo by Jon Pavey

Helping care for the WI Wood



The WI Wood, also known as Histon Wood, sits south of the Busway opposite the Community Orchard.

The wood was created to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Cambridge Federation of Women's Institutes. Through coffee mornings and other fundraising, within a year the WI raised the funds to plant 8,000 saplings, with £1 buying four trees.

Some 8,000 saplings were planted, many on a cold, wet December day in 1993 on what were then known as Small Field and Clutch Field, part of the County Farm Estates. Some 200 volunteers turned out, from various WIs in the county, scouts and others. The young saplings were tended by the farmer Norman Unwin.

Since then the wood has thrived and is enjoyed by many; it is home to breeding warblers and small heath butterflies among other wildlife. In recent years, however, alien evergreen oak saplings have started appearing, possibly



Photos on this page by Jon Pavey

brought by jays from mature trees in the Station Road area. Whilst magnificent trees in their own right, they have the potential to dominate and eventually kill the original trees planted.

To combat this, the Parish Council with Histon & Impington Green Spaces (HIGS) support organised two sessions this winter to remove the evergreen oak saplings.

Thirty volunteers removed 1,325 saplings, 70% of which were likely to be under five years old. A couple of older saplings were over 5m tall.



Volunteers and bags of arisings; photos by Alison Stuck

Further sessions will be arranged to remove the remaining saplings. To avoid disturbing nesting birds, these will be after the summer, once the autumnal leaves have dropped - so there is no confusion on what to remove!

Thanks again to everyone who turned out to help with this task.

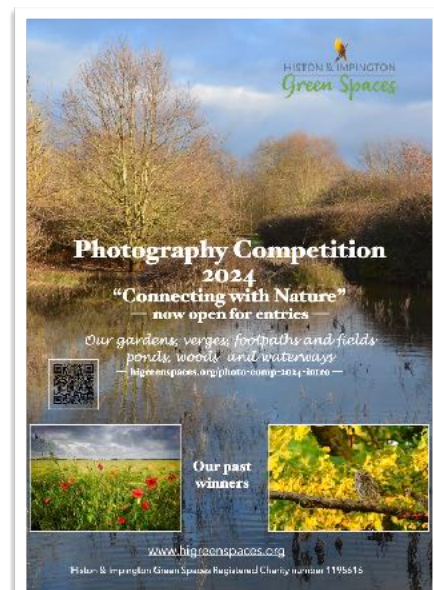
Photography Competition

Our 2024 photography competition is now open for entries.

This year's theme is "Connecting with Nature". Maybe you have a picture capturing what inspires or fascinates you and others? Or one that simply illustrates in one shot your feelings for our natural world.

As in previous years, the winning photographs will feature in our calendar which will be on sale in the autumn.

Why advertise the competition now? Past entries have been rich in summer and early autumn photographs but less so in winter and spring. We match photographs to the season, so maybe now is the moment to look back at your pictures from the past few months.



Mapping Mistletoe

Over the past two winters we have invited people to get out and about over the Christmas holidays, and while doing so note where there are mistletoe plants in the villages.

We have now created an interactive map showing the results: <https://www.higreenspaces.org/mistletoe-map>.

Click on any dot to find out how many mistletoe plants there are on the tree and what species of tree it is. You can zoom in and out for more detail.

We have also produced a map showing the location of bird nest boxes that were bought under a Natural England grant. This allows you to find out which boxes have been occupied and when.

We are hoping to create additional maps, building on the Connecting with Nature theme of our Members' Afternoon.



Photos by Jon Pavey

Flora surveys



We will soon start this year's programme of flora surveys at Long Meadow and Croft Close Set-aside.

These generally take around 1½ to 2 hours and are suitable for anyone with an interest in wildflowers, whatever your identification abilities!

The surveys are done in small groups allowing us to compare notes and learn from each other.

If interested in coming along drop us a line at hello@higreenspaces.org and look out for publicity on our events calendar page <https://abbeyfields.online/events-calendar>.

Yellow rattle at Long Meadow

This year we are considering sowing a few small plots scattered across Long Meadow with yellow rattle as a pilot test. This semi-parasitic plant is recommended for improving hay meadows by the BCN Wildlife Trust as well as other conservation organisations such as Plantlife.

(Plantlife refer to yellow rattle as “the meadow maker”
<https://meadows.plantlife.org.uk/making-meadows/yellow-rattle/>)

The yellow rattle reduces the vigour of the coarse grasses so allowing the wildflowers to thrive more. Of course, it is not straightforward and there are questions on its efficacy in our situation. Hence the pilot. (If anyone has direct experience of yellow rattle in meadows we would be pleased to hear from them.)

We would monitor the impact of the yellow rattle over a few years before deciding whether to extend the pilot to a larger part of the meadow.



Guided walks



Photos on this page by Jon Pavey

We have a series of guided walks at both Croft Close Set-aside and Long Meadow starting in late April with several bird walks. These are aimed at hearing a range of bird song - from the ever present robin to hopefully willow warblers, lesser whitethroats and more.

As we move into summer we will have some tree ID and ecology walks and some flora walks.

We will also have some general walks aimed at enjoying the serenity of the Set-aside, including our “Walking stick walks” aimed at those less sure of foot who would enjoy a gentle walk at a suitable pace.

For details see our calendar at <https://abbeyfields.online/events-calendar>.

Members' Afternoon and AGM



Around 60 people came along to HIGS' Members' afternoon in mid-March. In addition to holding the charity's AGM, there was an interactive session with a "Connecting with Nature" theme. Further details can be found here <https://abbeyfields.online/events/members-afternoon-20240316>

Members' Afternoon in Saint Andrew's Centre; Photo by Arnold Fertig



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