

NEWS AND STORIES FROM ABBNEY FIELDS

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November 2023

November brings the first taste of colder weather as trees lose their leaves and the reds and golds of autumn give way to more muted winter colours .

As the abundance of natural food sources begins to wane, your bird table will likely begin to get much busier. Watch out for winter visitors such as bramblings, or if you're really lucky you might spot a waxwing.

Waxwings are usually found in Scandinavia and Russia, but every few years large numbers 'irrupt' into the UK. Quite a few have already been spotted this autumn, so keep an eye out - they can turn up anywhere!

In this update

HIGS to become a membership charity. Beautiful berries provide a feast for our eyes and for our wildlife. Bird ringers record migrating goldcrests. New trees ordered to restore the Park Lane avenue. CCSA plant list adds 200th record. Calendars for 2024 now available.



Friends and members

When fundraising to save Abbey Fields for the community started in 2021 two organisations were set up: the formal charity, Histon & Impington Green Spaces, and a Friends group.

The Friends of Histon & Impington Green Spaces had an elected steering committee and were charged with day-to-day activities ranging from running work parties through to supporting the fundraising campaign. It was always intended that the two organisations would eventually merge; this time has come.

Earlier this year the Charity Commission agreed to Histon & Impington Green Spaces changing into a membership charity. Since then, a team has been working to make this happen.

Soon invitations will go out to the Friends and other supporters inviting them to become members of Histon & Impington Green Spaces. You can accept either by responding to the email or, if you prefer, signing up through the website. (Please note, we are not charging any membership fee.)

As a member you will have a voice at our AGM, receive newsletters - like this one - and have discounted entry to ticketed events. Over time, if the members wish, there may be member-only events or other member benefits.



Beautiful berries

Berries festooning our bushes and trees brighten up even a dull winter day and shine out like fairy lights on the sunniest. A feast for our eyes and a feast for the animals which depend on them through the winter.



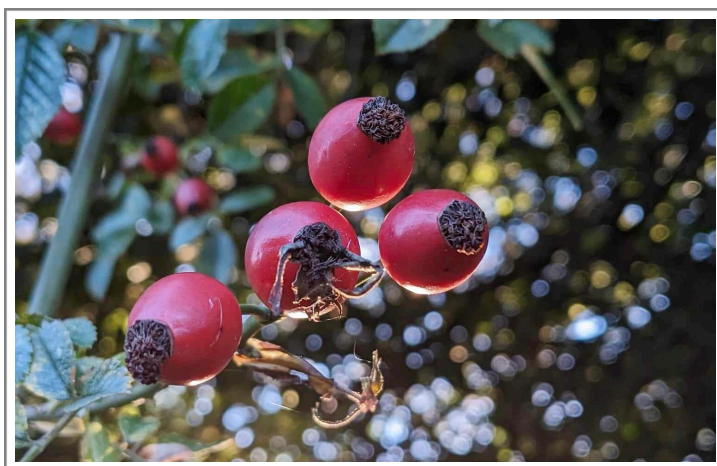
Hawthorn berries; photo by Penny Reeves

Some years many magnificently coloured waxwings turn up: a flock can strip a bush of berries in the twinkle of an eye. They seem particularly drawn to berries in supermarket car parks though!

Perhaps the spindle has the most exotic of our native berries. A shrub characteristic of ancient hedges it bears a Dutch name, bestowed by William Turner 400 years ago. This name refers to the use of young branches to spin raw wool. Spindles can be seen along Gun's Lane at the northern end of the Set-aside.



Spindle berries; photo by Jon Pavey



Rosehips; photo by Isaac Sanders

Famously they are gorged on by winter thrushes. Hawthorn berries are welcome fast food for blackbirds arriving from Europe (generally from northern France to southern Scandinavia) that boost resident populations by about 10%.

These and other hedgerow berries attract flocks of fieldfares and redwings to complement the invertebrates in their diet. Mice and other small animals also feast on these berries.

Holly and mistletoe are the two berries we take to heart for the festive season to adorn our houses. Mistle thrushes are particularly renowned for defending "their" holly tree against all comers.

Mistletoe seems to be thriving in the area, with nearly 350 plants reported across the villages last winter. Its recently growing abundance is put down to a change in behaviour of continental blackcaps. These warblers have taken to wintering in Britain, drawn in large measure by our many garden birdfeeders. But they also like mistletoe berries and are effective spreaders of the plant's seed.



Ivy; photo by Jon Pavey



Mistletoe; photo by Penny Reeves

Probably the most important berry of late winter is the ivy. Autumnal flowers are an important food source for insects, especially bees. In the New Year the berries are a key food source when most other berries have been eaten.

Migrating goldcrests

Although it is rare to come across a goldcrest at Croft Close Set-aside, for the third year on the trot our October bird ringing session picked up migrating birds. Incredibly, these small birds may have come from as far away as western Russia (our breeding birds are sedentary).

The lightest goldcrest at Croft Close this year weighed only 4.3g - barely more than a grape!

Such was the disbelief that birds this small could cross the North Sea, in the past it was thought they travelled on the backs of larger birds: hence the colloquial name of "woodcock pilots". It has to be said, there is no evidence for this.



Photo by Jon Pavey

Restoring the Park Lane avenue

Thanks to a grant from the Histon & Impington Feast Committee in the next few weeks we will be planting two new trees to kick off the restoration of the line of trees on Long Meadow alongside Park Lane.

We have ordered an oak and a small-leaved lime with the aim of having these in the ground and protective surrounds in place before Christmas. We have deliberately chosen relatively small saplings as these should take better than larger specimens and rapidly establish.



Photo by Penny Reeves

Both trees will be planted at the village end of the meadow filling the gap that has now existed for several years.

We are very keen that the existing horse chestnuts remain for as long as possible. Unfortunately, we lost one during November which was suffering from a fungal attack to the roots. Most of the others seem to be in reasonable health at present; the removal of deadwood from the crown of one opposite Melvin Way should extend its life for some years.

Plant surveys at the Set-aside

The 200th record was added to the CCSA plants list in September: creeping jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia*). It's closely related to the popular tall garden plant, yellow loosestrife, but is a prostrate creeping herb fond of wet ground. It was on a clearing in the scrub, made by a work party last autumn, where the ground flora is regenerating nicely.

Our young plant wasn't flowering yet but there is a picture in the gallery [here](#).

The full 'higher plants' list for CCSA now stands at 202 taxa and will be updated on the [website](#).

Another activity last autumn was to clear scrub around the small colony of the England red-listed hoary plantain (*Plantago media*). A quick visit in September showed it has responded well to the treatment and is looking quite lush and we should hope for it to flower and spread next season.

The last 12 months of harsh weather conditions with ultra heat in summer and unusual winter cold seems to have benefited our special annual plants.

In early May the changing forget-me-not (*Myosotis discolor*) colony put on its best display yet with a drift of blue flowers visible from 10m away.

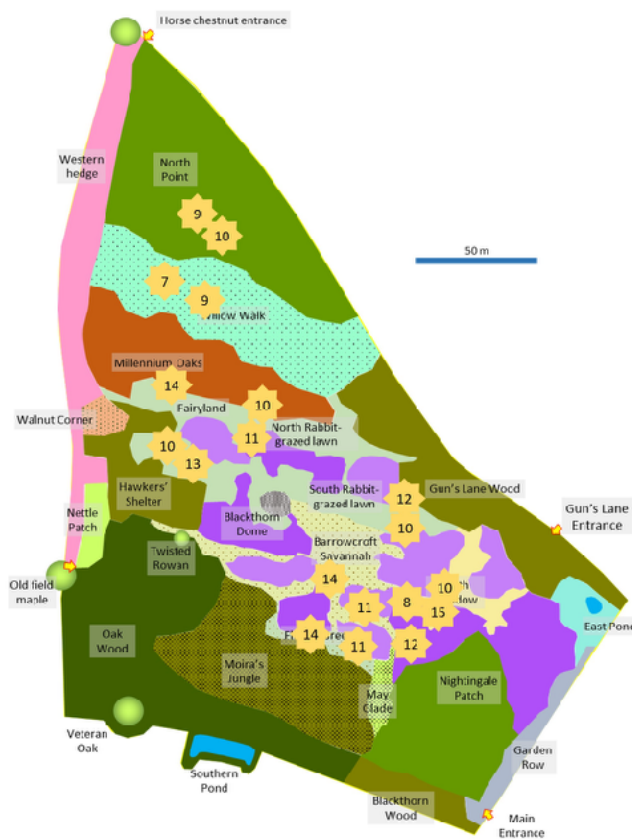


Changing forget-me-not; photo by David Dives

Equally impressive, in late July there was the largest spread yet of common cudweed (*Filago germanica*), a small ground hugging plant that from a distance appears like a grey rug spread on the ground but close up the small dusty yellow flowers can be appreciated.



Common cudweed; photos by David Dives



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Both these plants are of conservation concern: In England common cudweed is red-listed as Vulnerable and changing forget-me-not is Red-listed as Endangered in Cambridgeshire, so it's especially pleasing to see both increasing on our patch.

These were among the flowers identified in this year's surveys of the set-aside's flora (in late July to early September). This excluded brambles, saplings and grasses (which are difficult to identify at this time of year). Typically 11 wildflower species were identified in each of the 19 survey sites (see map), with common mouse-ear the most prevalent species after bramble.

Finally, another plant, blue fleabane (*Erigeron acris*), that increases mostly by seed, and behaves as an annual on the CCSA has shown a noticeable increase this year, again a likely result of recent weather.



Blue fleabane; photo by David Dives

Abbey Fields calendars



Our 2024 calendars are now on sale from Topiary Tree, Tawa Lounge, the St Andrews Centre cafe, Gin House Flowers and Oakington Garden Centre.

You can also order online from our [website](http://www.abbeyfields.online) for local (free) delivery, click and collect or for posting if further afield.

All proceeds go to Histon & Impington Green Spaces, supporting biodiversity in the villages and, in particular, looking after Croft Close Set-aside and Long Meadow for our community's benefit.

We are very grateful to our sponsors: Camel Projects, Oakington Garden Centre, Topiary Tree and The Indian Ocean.

