



## SPELTHORNE NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



[www.snhs.org.uk](http://www.snhs.org.uk)

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Newsletter: Liz and Roger Whitaker, The Hollies, Middle Hill, Egham, Surrey, TW20 0JG  
**Winter 2023/2024**

Dear Member

Welcome to the Winter newsletter. Thanks to Peter Clifford for his contributions to the newsletter.

### Future events

**Saturday March 2nd Spring Social Evening 7.30pm**  
**Annual Spring Social Evening Including Buffet, Raffle & Illustrated Talk by**  
**Dr David Jones, Dept of Entomology, Natural History Museum, London**

**Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> March 8:15pm. Derek Stimpson from the British Deer Society**

**Wednesday April 10<sup>th</sup> 8:15pm. Ben West of "Where the wild things are" will talk to us and give an 'overview of the various habitat types found in Surrey and the fungi that might be found there'**

**Wednesday April 17<sup>th</sup> 10 am FIELD VISIT**  
**Cabrera Trust Riverside walk for spring flowers with Marion Rider**  
Meet at the Corner of Cabrera Ave and Beechmont Ave, GU25 4EY.

**Wednesday May 8<sup>th</sup> pm. Society AGM** and members photos. Annual project progress update from the **River Thames Scheme**

### Previous events

**Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> October** Andrew Wood County recorder for Butterflies for Herts and Middx Wildlife Trust gave a talk on **How Butterflies and Moths are Changing in and around the London area**

Andrew started by explaining that the Herts and Middx Branch is a volunteer-run group for the Butterfly Conservation UK. There are 38 Butterflies and 1,765 moths in the branch area, being one of the most populated species areas for butterflies and moths in the UK. Some 3,500 people contribute to the records but only 1,300 are members.

A slide was shown of a recently seen migrant butterfly **Red Admiral**. Andrew went onto explain how Butterflies and Moths are faring in the Herts and Middx area. **The Cabbage White butterfly** is doing well in numbers, the **Holly Blue** is now a truly urban butterfly but while the distribution has increased, the abundance has stayed the same. **Brown Argus** is one of the success stories as a result from set-aside farming, the distribution and abundance has gone up aided by the increase in vegetation of Stork's-bill and Cranes-bill growing on this land. There has been increase in distribution of the **Ringlet** but the abundance is falling as its preference for damp grassland has been affected by drought. **Marbled White**, a beautiful butterfly that likes limestone areas but can be seen on general grassland during June and July and is successfully spreading around London. **Silver-washed Fritillary** in 2003 was found in Herts and is spreading to Surrey and London gardens. So is adapting from woodlands to urban areas, possibly due to climate change. **Brown Hairstreak** is a success story as it was very rare but is now well distributed in West London including Sunbury. Unfortunately the distribution of the **Small Skipper and Essex Skipper** is down, as is their abundance and cannot be said why. The **Wall Butterfly** is also in decline and has not been seen in this area for 20 years but can still be seen at Beachy Head but not inland.

The Ringlet is a widespread butterfly extending its range in the UK in recent years being widespread on damp grassland. The Gatekeeper, Marbled White and Holly Blue have undergone urban expansion. This may be due to urban parks becoming more like nature reserves with less spraying of insecticides. You can see more varieties of butterflies in urban settings now than 50 years ago.

Andrew then continued his talk with moths. The **Hummingbird Hawk-moth** there have been quite a few around this year and it may over-winter. The **Silver Y** is a very common moth and easy to see in the daytime and is the equivalent of the Red Admiral of the moth world. The **Jersey Tiger** used to be found in only in the Channel Islands before a colony was found in SE London and now within Herts. It is active by day and night. **Scarlet Tiger** is confined to chalk areas and found in Herts. **Garden Tiger** used to be common in gardens but has gone down in numbers. This could be due to the mild February of 2023 leading to a die-off in the following cold March. **Stout Dart** was well distributed in the 1970's but is now in decline as is the **Spinach** moth. The **Red Green Carpet** is now common and well distributed over much of the UK, which is good news for this moth. The **Clifden Nonpareil** has spread across Herts and was rare but is now more common. The **Light Brown Apple Moth** is well distributed and going up in numbers. The **Box-tree Moth** which is an urban moth found in London which can damage Box Hedges and the number of these moths are going up as is the **Gypsy Moth** the caterpillars of which can defoliate a tree. **Oak tree processionary moth** can infest oak trees, eating (defoliating) the leaves, weakening the tree and leaving it vulnerable to other threats. Defra have tried to eradicate it but it seems cannot control it.

Dungeness is an important area for rare moths. New resident moths from across the Channel have become well established at Dungeness. Large numbers of moths can now be found here.

The **Small Ranunculus** once thought to be extinct, came back, but is now in decline.

**Red-necked footman** seems to be in terminal decline. **Black-spotted chestnut** is now increasing in numbers.

Andrew concluded this well-illustrated talk by saying that in Herts, growth in moth numbers now seems more dynamic than butterflies.

Questions

1/ At Hounslow Heath the **Grayling butterfly** was once common, it has now retreated to the coast and has disappeared inland. They have been seen at Hutchison's Bank Local Nature Reserve near New Addington. Possibly someone has been releasing them there.

2/ In terms of international co-ordination of butterflies, there is a problem that in Europe and USA they have different names for the rare species, there is no convention for same names. For example, the Camberwell Beauty is called the Mourning Cloak in the USA.

3/ Reporting of Butterflies can be done by phone, Butterfly Conservation App, iRecord Butterflies app and can be downloaded or send a letter to the Verifier with date of sighting.

4/ The **Purple Emperor butterfly** is doing well and can be found in any woodland. It likes dog mess, dead rabbits etc. St Albans is a good place to see them. However, the **White Admiral** is in decline.

4/ Can you send to the SNHS County Recorder, Richard Robinson, details of moth or butterfly sightings.

**Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> November** A talk by Anthony Beasley from the **Laleham Bird Ringing group.**  
**The Importance of Bird Ringing at Queen Mary Reservoir in investigating bird migration.**

Thames Water Authority kindly allow the use of a Pumping Station for their base. The area is split into two halves. To the west are solar panels and to the east a wide fallow area. Further west is a wet area with reclaimed gravel pits used by Brett Aggregates. Along the Ashford Road you find long pits, now reed beds and willow scrub. Bretts have constructed three new net sites. On the east side there are also nets along the river Ash. There is a Blackberry and Buddleja area and old woodland up to Shepperton Studios, as well as the reservoir, so this is a big area with a good variety of habitats.

There are 9 active ringers at present, called the "Horsham Ringing Group" although nowhere near Horsham but moved to Kempton Park and in 1969 to Queen Mary Reservoir and worked there ever since.

The banks used to be wooded here with Yellowhammers, Tree Sparrows and Corn Buntings. Now this has all changed, the farmland birds have gone. Now there are more migrant birds. The top species now is the Blackcap with a huge resident population. TWA and Bretts support the group. The group consists of volunteer amateurs, buying their own rings. The British Trust for Ornithology issues the licence, sets the standards and supplies the equipment. In 2021 900,000 birds were ringed, mostly Blue Tits. The birds fly into the net are caught, measured, weighed and a small metal ring attached. The rings have a reference code that enables that particular bird to be identified if it is caught again. BTO have issued a booklet last month which explains the procedures. Over 17,000 Blue Tits have been ringed, one was subsequently found in Shropshire, others about 50 kilometres away, but many get killed. Ringing gives us an idea of the survival rate, where they go, their lifespan and if as a species whether they are under pressure. 5800 Great Tits were ringed, 160 Coal Tits and 4,500 Long Tailed Tits, one which turned up at WWT Slimbridge. As they fly about in flocks it is easy to catch a large number also Dunnocks over 4,000 ringed, Wrens, 4,600, Robins 7,000, one turned up in Selsea another in Southampton. Jays, Carrion Crows, Nuthatches do not move far. There are about 3,300 ringers in the UK. Bird of Prey also caught. Two pairs of Sparrow Hawks and two pairs of Buzzards have been ringed.

There is a Cormorant colony on the gravel pits with 50 nests here.

Duck traps have been used with 30 ducks caught over a five-year period. A Tufted Duck was traced to St James's Park and another in Northern Russia, so you don't know where they will end up. Many Wood Pigeons have been ringed. Kingfishers have been found to travel 125 kilometres, so can travel some distance. There were also Green Woodpeckers, Reed Buntings. Bearded Tits and Cetti's Warblers. Some 4,300 Goldcrests have been ringed, one found from Holland. Firecrests, one from Belgium, one from Isle of Man. Sand martins one was found in Aberdeen, one in Senegal. With House martins hardly any are caught now. Swifts have been caught on the bank with nets. Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps have also been caught. Chiffchaffs traced to Portugal and one in Gibraltar. In 2021 a Chiffchaff was caught with a ring from the Czech Republic and another from Ireland.

Bird ringing is carried out extensively at Dungeness Bird Observatory, Kent and birds from Laleham turn up there. Willow warblers caught at Laleham, some from Dungeness.

There were 7,800 Blackcaps ringed at Laleham, Garden Warbler 1,900 found along the River Ash, Whitethroat 3,900 ringed. The Lesser Whitethroat has declined, a few years ago it was 150 per annum,

now in 2023 down to 20. They do an east-west migration, the only birds to do it. Had one Grasshopper Warbler and a few Sedge Warblers and Reed Warblers. The site has changed over the year as the reed bed has become more wooded and these birds have gone down in numbers. Bretts have helped cut back the woodland to put back the reedbeds so the numbers may increase again. Blackbirds come in to overwinter from Germany. Greenfinches are in decline, 25 years ago would catch 300 a year. Chaffinches are also in decline but Goldfinches are up in numbers. Bullfinches have not been seen for 5 years. There has only been one Fieldfare and they are difficult to catch. Redwings come in from Spain and France As a result of ringing, some birds have been shown to be long-lived including Chaffinches, Whitethroats, Dunnock and Long Tailed Tits. All information is put on computer.

#### The Ringing Year

During January, time is spent doing various jobs and catching the odd bird. In February, Tits are looking for breeding sites so there is an influx of birds. In March the Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps, April Sedge Warblers, Blackcaps, Willow Warblers and Whitethroats move in. May is nest box time with the ringing of Blue Tits and Long- Tailed Tits. In June there are the first broods of Grebe, Whitethroats and Warblers. In July juvenile birds disperse throughout the site. In August, Double brood takes place but the failure rate for a 2<sup>nd</sup> brood is usually high. For September 191 Reed Warblers from the reed pits were ringed and was a site record. Cetti's Warbler has colonised the site over the past 3 years. In October it is Finch time with Meadow Pipits and Lesser Redpolls. In November Goldcrests, Chaffinches, Linnets, Goldfinches and the Lesser Redpoll. This year 2,600 birds were ringed and was down on previous years.

#### Recovery

Anthony concluded this well illustrated talk by saying that birds are moving around the UK all the time, so we have to work every week and volunteers need to be there. He showed a picture of a mist net being put up early in the morning.

#### Questions

Bird flu has not affected us but have to wash bird bags and carry out other hygiene duties.

Can a bird get stuck or hurt in the nets? Not particularly, there is a way to get the birds out without injuring them. It is the most difficult part of the job and done as quickly as possible.

If a ringed dead bird is found, where to send it? Send it to the Natural History Museum.

Have Waxwings been caught at Laleham? No

Can the public come and watch? Yes, anytime.

How long does it take for news of a bird found abroad and ringed at Laleham, come back to you?

Can take years, but is generally faster now.

What is the effect of the new conveyor at the Queen Mary Site?

Should have no impact at all. The pit is now being filled in but should get willow and reed beds growing there. Should get Gadwall coming there and the area is very safe for birds.

Who counts the reservoir birds? This is carried out by the London Natural History Society. The overwintering birds are now fewer possibly due to climate change but can get 1000 Tufted Ducks.

#### **Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> November -FIELD VISIT Kempton Nature Reserve for Birds and GNH.**

14 people returned for an autumn revisit to Kempton Nature Reserve. This was an autumn revisit to this site. The day was sunny with a gentle breeze and with continuation of mild weather, the trees were still in their golden autumn colours.

Bearded Tits and Marsh Harriers have been seen here at the Kempton Nature Reserve. We made our way to the first hide, the South Hide, where we had a view across the site were able to see Cormorants, Pochards, a Heron, Tufted Ducks and Swans and also had a good view of a Kingfisher fishing at the water's edge not far from the hide.

The recent weather had been mild and wet and it was a real pleasure to find a good number of mushrooms and species scattered throughout the site. Species identified were The Yellow Club (*Clavulinopsis helvola*), The Scurfy Deceiver (*Laccaria proxima*), The Yellowing Knight (*Tricholoma sp. poss scalpturatum*), The Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), Wrinkled Peach (*Rhodotus palmatus*) and a *Clytocybe sp.*. A Common Century (*Centaurium erythraea*) was seen still in flower growing in the middle of the path.

We walked onto the 2nd hide where we could hear a Woodpecker chatting away in the undergrowth then suddenly appeared flying past us with a flash bright green and red. We continued onto the boardwalk where we stopped amongst the reeds in hope of hearing a Bearded Tit or seeing one but were not successful on this occasion but we did hear a Long-tailed Tit and saw a Speckled Wood Butterfly. At the 3rd hide the wind had got stronger and there was more movement on the water, Pochard, Tufted Duck, Coot, Moorhen, Little Grebe, Gadwall, Swans and Herring Gulls were seen and a flock of Lapwings settled on the far bank.

On our way back to the car it was a pleasure to see how the newly dug pond near the entrance had developed since our last visit in the summer. An invigorating morning's walk.

**Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> December Christmas Social Evening**, refreshments and a raffle with members photos. Our **President Phil Cribb** gave a short talk on the **Flowers of Greece**.

#### **“Spring in the Peloponnese”**

The Peloponnese is the southern part of mainland Greece, now separated by the Corinth canal. It is generally mountainous, with the Taygetos range rising to 2400 m, and is in the Mediterranean zone, with wet, mild winters and hot, dry summers. The most typical plant is the olive tree, and the region is dominated by drought-tolerant trees, scrub and geophytes. The olive has an attractive scented flower as well as its fruit. There is generally growth over the winter and flowering in spring. This occurs later at higher altitudes, with firs, junipers and finally alpine pastures at the summits.

One special feature of the Peloponnese is the presence of abundant flora at the ancient sites, now that spraying of herbicides has largely been stopped. This allows historic and botanical interests to be combined. Examples are Olympia, with orchids on the running tracks and many plants on the Hill of Zeus, Epidaurus and Mistras, where the nettle tree butterfly may be seen.

Phil showed pictures of many plants from the Monemvasia peninsula in the south-east. These included fragrant shrubs, such as the tree heath, which is related to South African species and the mastic bush. Also the rockrose, white and yellow asphodels, which are very tall, cyclamen and wild tulips. The crown marigold is common and is dimorphic, with pale and deep yellow varieties. Also the pink hawkbeard and crown anemone, which is believed to have been transported from the Middle East in Holy Land soil brought by returning crusaders.

Mani in the south-west is a rocky area. Plants include the fritillaria, widow iris (with tubers) and spring-flowering iris. There are many olive groves with orchids. Phil showed the Italian orchid, the sawfly orchid, a number of bee orchids, noting especially the beautiful mirror of Venus orchid. From Messene, Phil showed the oriental tongue orchid and green woodcock orchid, as well as the southern festoon butterfly and mining bees that live in the ancient columns, as well as miniature bees which are parasitic on them. There have been dramatic extremes of climate in recent years, including 50C temperatures and flash floods. However, the area remains very beautiful, with carpets of soapwort and poppies.

#### **Questions**

It was asked whether burning should be done there for conservation. Phil replied that burns are natural, but 50C temperatures are not, so some recent fires have been damaging. What is the best time of year to

visit? Phil recommends from the start of April through May. Flowers are seen later at higher elevations, such as on Mount Parnassus near Delphi. In terms of activities at ancient sites relating to conservation, Phil reported that plants were abundant in the 1970s but were severely reduced by spraying (with the aim of reducing supposed damage to masonry) from the 1980s until it was stopped about 2020 on the understanding that it was not helping. Since that time, abundant orchids have reappeared at sites like the stadium at Delphi.

After Christmas snacks, Phil's talk was followed by 3 short slide presentations by members.

**1. Richard Robinson on "SNHS Data Recording"**

Richard described the information needed in order to record a sighting. The scientific name, number of individuals and other details are requested, along with location (ideally a grid reference or what3words), date and possibly time, and the observer and the identifier (if different). This should be emailed to [recorder@snhsociety.org.uk](mailto:recorder@snhsociety.org.uk) or passed to Richard at a meeting. A summary of the database can be accessed from the website.

**2. John Maxen on "Moths Seen in 2023"**

John showed a series of photographs of moths that he had found in his moth trap in 2023. He observed a total of 239 species, with 124 macromoths (24 new to his garden) and 115 micromoths (23 new to his garden). The most unusual was The Geometrician, only the third U.K. record since 1903, native to southern Europe and North Africa.

**3. Eric Sloan on "Galapagos and Ecuador Cloud Forest Trip"**

Eric showed pictures of the giant tortoises and described how the shape of the shell related to their feeding habits. Species with domed shells are ground-feeding, whereas species that have to stretch their necks upwards to eat prickly pears have evolved shells with a distinctive elevation of the shell above the head. The prickly pears have also evolved to be spicier in areas with populations of these tortoises. He also showed nests of the blue-footed booby. He also visited the Mashpi Cloud Forest Reserve on the mainland. His photos were of birds, particularly several species of tanager, the glass frog, agouti, tayra and iguana.

Peter Clifford

**2024**

**Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> January 2024 Talk by Mike Waite**, Director of Research and Monitoring, Surrey Wildlife Trust, talked to us about the **Spiders of Surrey**.

Mike started by saying that his interest in spiders was quite recent as part of his general interest in wildlife. His talk would include an introduction, spider identification, studying spiders and Surrey's spiders with a picture of a Jumping Spider found in sphagnum bogs.

What is a spider? Spiders are arthropods that have eight limbs, chelicerae with fangs generally able to inject venom, and spinnerets that extrude silk. They are in the class Arachnida. Ticks are not spiders. Spiders are of great ecological significance. Photos including the *Thanatus artica* from Norway, the Whelk-shell Jumper from Dungeness and the Kent Water Spider, the only aquatic spider found in the UK were shown. Niche separation that is the process by which competing species use the environment differently in a way that helps them to coexist. The wolf spider can be found in a wide range of habitats and includes genus *Pardosa*, *Trochosa*, *Xerolycosa*, *Pirata*, and *Arctosa* each found a different habitat. Spiders in the Food Chain- Spiders are carnivorous. Spiders are predators and can be prey. Spider-hunting wasps are found in heathlands, gardens, fields and the edge of woods use spiders as food for their offspring. Spiders

have camouflaged bodies and are the chameleons of the invertebrate world. Mike showed photos of several spiders including the Long-legged sac spider.

#### Life History of Spiders

There is nothing complicated about the spider reproduction. Males are not so long-lived as the females. There are many different families of spiders from *Atypidae* to *Linyphiidae*, 21 altogether. Slide shown of an *Erisidae*, Ladybird Spider with a bright coloured body. The *Linyphiidae* account for 20% of spiders.

#### Spider Anatomy

Dorsal and ventral diagrams were shown of spiders. The anatomy of spiders includes many characteristics including bodies divided into two sections or segments, eight jointed legs, no wings or antennae, palps and an exoskeleton. The males have larger palps.

Eye Arrangement- different families have different eye arrangements, between 8 and 6 eyes and have good eyesight.

Slides were shown of *salticidae* or Jumping spiders, *Thomisidae* or Crab spiders and *Lycosidae* or Wolf spiders.

#### Spider Web Architecture

There are 3 types of web 1/ Orb web 2/ Sheet web and 3/Purse web which blends in perfectly with its surroundings. You can tell the type of spider by its web. A picture was shown of the various webs and one sparkling with the Autumn morning dew.

#### Recording Spiders

You will need a spy pot insect pooter, a hand lens, collecting pots and ruler. You can also use a net as a sweeping beater and also a book for identification. (See books below).

#### Surrey and Spiders

A map of the County was shown. Surrey is one of the best areas in the UK for spiders with a wide variety of habitat types - heathland, wetlands and woodlands. Surrey is the most wooded county in England. Surrey has the highest diversity of spiders in the UK, with more than 418 species recorded, with Chobham Common as the most diverse site in the UK. There are several species that are unique to Surrey.

#### Spiders of Heathland

These spiders like sandy, bare ground and heather and gorse. The Great Fox Spider is very rare and only found in Surrey and Dorset and was thought to be extinct. The rare Ladybird Spider is found in the New Forest. Penny Long-eared sac spider. *Diplocephalus melanogaster* is found on Box Hill.

#### Climate Change Indicators

*Episiman maculipes* was only found in Devon and is now moving North and the Southeast.

The Wasp Spider has spread over the southeast and north. It could be climate change or just blown there. New species are found in the UK all the time.

#### Top 20 Spiders in Surrey

Mike gave his top 20 and here is some of those he listed;

Fine Web Spider found at Chobham Common, Raft Spider found in Staines, Labyrinth Spider, Green Huntsman (rare found in Camberley), Lynx Spiders found at Chobham Common, Triangle Spider found at Box Hill and has triangle shaped webs. Green Crab Spider, Flower Crab Spider, Heather Crab Spider, Crab spiders have been found at Ash link Splash Meadow. *Salticidae*, the Jumping spiders. The Zebra Jumping Spider is a common jumping spider found across the UK in urban areas. "v" marked jumping spider, Common Sun Jumping Spider, Fencepost Jumping Spider was rare but has now spread

everywhere, Strawberry Spider, Four Spotted Orb-weaver Spider, Horned Orb-weaver spider and the Striped Stretch Spider (rare).

Mike concluded this well-illustrated and interesting talk with the Great Fox-Spider which is Red-listed as 'Critically Endangered' and was feared to be extinct in the UK as it had only ever been found at a few sites in Dorset and Surrey, and hadn't been seen since 2020. Now found on an MOD training area in Surrey and was reported on the BBC Autumnwatch programme and in newspapers. Spiders actually became news in the media!

#### Recommended Books

*Britain's Spiders, A Field Guide* – Lawrence Bee

*Spiders of Britain and Northern Europe (Collins Field Guide)* – Michael Roberts

**Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> February** A talk by **Professor David Morritt**, Professor of Marine Biology, Department of Biological Sciences, Royal Holloway University of London. Mike will talk about **The Invasive Chinese Mitten Crab, *Eriocheir sinensis*; the River Thames and Beyond**

David explained that research into the Chinese Mitten Crab has been carried out at Royal Holloway and the Natural History Museum. The talk would be divided into the Animal, Life Cycle, Problem, History and Recording.

#### The Animal.

Distinctive features of the crab are the "furry" mittens on the claws and the crab is large, (a slide was shown of it stretching across the full size of a dinner plate). On the underside, the abdomen is where the eggs are in the female and the ovaries are the real delicacy to eat. The male crab has a narrower abdomen. In China the Mitten Crab is held in high regard as a high-priced delicacy to eat, with a slide of the variety of cutlery used to eat them. As food they are worth \$1.25billion annually.

#### Life Cycle

The Chinese Mitten Crab is semelparous, that is they only breed once in their lifetime and then they die, although this theory has been questioned with some having second and third broods. This may be due to the male sperm storage capability that can lead to 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> broods. They have a catadromous life-cycle, that is, they spend most of their life in fresh water and return to the sea to spawn in saltwater. During their fourth or fifth year in late summer or autumn, the crabs move downstream and attain sexual maturity. After mating, the females go out to sea. They return to brackish water in the spring to hatch their eggs. After development as larvae, the juvenile crabs gradually move upstream into fresh water, thus completing the life cycle. Their reproductive biology, the larval development can be seen by use of an electron microscope. The downstream migration leads to the spawning of eggs then an upstream migration, as above, with an overall duration of up to 5 years.

#### Problems

These crabs are listed by the IUCN as the worst, invasive alien species. The crabs are tough and can survive moving from freshwater to the sea and being out of water for a long time. They can damage fishing gear, block water abstraction intakes, adversely affect local biota feeding on invertebrates and eggs, erode river banks causing the banks to collapse and can carry the crayfish plague.

The crabs were first recorded in the UK in 1935, in the Thames, then Thurrock in 1976, (the dry summer of 1976 resulting drought and low river water led to them spreading). Between 1986 and 93 they were caught in small numbers, now there are millions in the Thames. They have spread west to Sutton Courtenay in Oxfordshire. It is thought the crabs first came to the UK as larvae from China, sucked into ships with ballast water, then in the London Docks pumps discharged the ballast water out with the crabs.



Attempts to eradicate the crabs has been ineffective. In Germany in 1936 on the River Weser, 220 tonnes of crabs were caught but failed to get rid of them. The River Medway as well as the Thames is also inhabited by the crabs. On the Thames, Lots Road Power Station caught many crabs before it was decommissioned and also the same at West Thurrock Power Station with a massive increase in crabs by 1992 before it too closed down. It seems crab numbers took off in the 1990's. In China the crabs can migrate 1300 kilometres, river to the sea, in Germany, the River Elbe, 750 kilometres and the Thames 82 Kilometres.

#### Research on the Species

Students have been researching crab migration at Walton on Thames. There has been found to be a huge disparity of sexes being caught with more females. Possibly the males migrate earlier than the females. There could also be a lunar period involved with peak numbers at a full moon. Elver traps, from London Zoo for Eel research, were used to catch the crabs at Allington Lock on the River Medway and 8119 were caught between March and August 2012. Both the Medway and the Thames are affected.

#### Prey Preference

In the laboratory students carried out research into prey eating preference by juvenile crabs, size 12mm to 30mm, using snails *Gammarus zaddachi*, *Theodoxus fluviatilis* and *Radix peregra*. Tests were made to see which snail as food provided the most energy. The crab had a novel method for eating their prey by breaking open the shell and eating inside by pulling the flesh out. Fish eggs were also fed to the crabs including Trout, Zebra fish, Lumpfish and Pacific Salmon. As a result, we know the crabs will eat invertebrate and fish eggs under lab. conditions.

#### Plastic Pollution

A further research project, Environment Agency and Marine Management Organisation(MMO)funded into fyke fishing nets, in the Thames at Erith, (2012-13), found that the nets often had plastic rubbish in them with 8,490 items of litter over a 3 month period from September to December 2012. Litter seemed to be more common in the vicinity of sewage sites. There was evidence of subsurface transport of rubbish and changed the way of looking at this research. It was found that 100% of Mitten Crabs had plastic in their gut and 90% had balls of fibre in their stomach. From this the Mitten Crab can be used to illustrate the plastic problem. These crabs when they are moulting, they seem to have a natural way of getting rid of the plastic from their bodies. (Once caught these crabs being aliens cannot be returned to the wild).

#### Recording

A leaflet was shown on how to identify the Mitten Crab, they should not be confused with the Shore Crab. The public can record sightings of the crab on [www.mittencrabs.org.uk](http://www.mittencrabs.org.uk). A map of the UK was shown where the Mitten Crab had reached and included the Kent Coast, the Thames and the Wash. There have been 1,100 new verified records since 2011. (See National Biodiversity Network).

#### Questions

Are the crabs eaten by fish? Small crabs are food for fish and Herons, Great Crested Grebe and possibly Cormorants eat them. Mink also eat the crabs.

The crabs are in the River Colne

Getting rid of them is a real problem, maybe best if disease wiped them out. Putting them in a freezer is possibly the most humane way to kill them. It may be that people are fishing them from the Thames illegally.

The best time to see them is when the mature crabs are migrating in the summer/autumn at Bushy Park. How has China coped with them? Large birds eat them like Herons.

The ratio of female to male eggs is probably one to one

David had eaten one once, as they are a delicacy in China, but he was not keen on it as a meal.

After the talk a live Mitten Crab in a fishtank was shown and taken out and handled by David.

### **What to look out for during the Winter and Spring Months**

As the days get longer it will be possible to get out and see wintering birds and birdsong from Robins, Wrens, Blackbirds and Song Thrushes and large groups of Waders and Wildfowl which gather on the Thames and coastal estuaries. The dawn chorus has already started. Spring flowers including Snowdrops, Celandines and Catkins come out, while Bluebells start to break the surface and many plants generally come into bud. You may hear the screech of foxes at night. In March, there is the start of movement of bird populations, more birdsong with the increasing dawn chorus and it may be possible to see Chiffchaffs, Wheatears and Sand Martins arriving from abroad, while waders and wildfowl will now be on the move to leave the UK and fly north. It may be possible to see the first sight of butterflies, including the Small Tortoiseshell, Comma, Peacock and the Yellow Brimstone.

### **WILDLIFE RECORDING IN SPELTHORNE**

Martin is no longer receiving wildlife records, Richard Robinson has now taken on that role as the society would still like to receive any records that our members have of the wildlife they see or find within the Borough to add to the Societies database. Also any records that are made on Society visits to other areas, these records are passed to the local Natural History Society or to the Local County Recorders as appropriate.

All records are wanted, but they need to have a minimum of information for them to be valuable.

WHO - Who made the original observation and the name of the person who made the identification if different from the original observer.

WHAT - An unambiguous name for the specimen, preferably the scientific binomial if possible.

WHERE - A reasonably accurate location. preferably as a minimum 6 figure map reference.

WHEN - The date of the original observation.

Any other information that seems appropriate such as the Sex, Stage, i.e. larvae, Quantity etc., if appropriate, can be added. A spreadsheet can be provided for those that find them useful, phone and it can be emailed to you. (See **Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> December** Christmas Social Evening, above with Richard Robinson's comments).

Please pass your records to Richard Robinson in whatever format is convenient to yourself.

**Email** : [recorder@snhsociety.org.uk](mailto:recorder@snhsociety.org.uk) if possible, Royal Mail or just a phone call. More information can be found on <https://www.snhsociety.org.uk/recording/>. Thank you

### **Ash Link Local Nature Reserve**

Ash Link is now formally recognised as a Local Nature Reserve. (Local Nature Reserves are a statutory designation made under Section 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949).

### **Work Group**

The Society's nature conservation working group "The Friends of Ash Link Local Nature Reserve" (FOAL) has continued to meet and carry out works including tree planting and pond clearance.

The next newsletter will be out during Spring early summer 2024.

