

# WATCHTREE NEWS

## Watchtree NATURE RESERVE

### CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

The future of WNR Ltd lies with our many Friends of Watchtree and volunteers and, even longer term, with the children that Tim, our Nature Reserve Manager, is bringing to the Nature Reserve on school visits. They will be the future directors, members and volunteers.



We have become a registered charity to further secure our future and we now aim to develop a membership scheme. We hope this will enable us to attract new board members or people willing to be co-opted onto the board to give short but intensive contributions to our development. We aim to have this in place by the end of the year.

Over the next two months we shall be looking for another member of staff on a two year contract. The work will involve, amongst a range of duties, increasing our weekend and evening opening times, developing the 'Watchtree Wheelers' project, developing the membership scheme and other aspects of people involvement in Watchtree. A key element of the work will be to increase our volunteer warden force to help with these additional open days.

Running WNR Ltd demands many skills as is demonstrated by the present nine Board members, who's wide range and pooling of skills has got us so far in such a short period of time. However, we need to widen our 'skills pool' and perhaps as you read this you might think "I have a skill that Watchtree could use". If you feel a desire to contribute please discuss it with us. Skills in administration, IT, fund raising, public access and nature conservation would all be welcomed. You might have practical skills and be willing to do public demonstrations to add to our site attractions or indeed skills to organise an events programme or fund raising events for some of our special projects. Developing an events/ demonstrations programme of countryside and nature conservation work would greatly enhance our open days. Finally there is a wealth of wildlife to survey, monitor and observe.

Welcome to the Spring 2009 edition of Watchtree News, the newsletter that gives you all the latest news and developments from Cumbria's most fascinating nature reserve.

This edition gives readers an opportunity to see what projects we are currently developing, in particular, focusing on our grasslands as we look to create new opportunities for endangered wildlife, most notably the Marsh Fritillary butterfly. Spring is a time of optimism and change, both for the wildlife and also our visitors and as the range of habitats develop and mature, so new species should, hopefully, establish at Watchtree...we may see Yellowhammers and Whitethroats at Watchtree during 2009!. Global warming has already had an effect on wildlife behaviour. As new species, some not seen in Cumbria just a few years ago, spread generally northwards – The Emperor and Ruddy darter dragonflies are just two examples.

The opportunities for visitors have now been boosted by the creation of a dedicated cycle track which we hope to officially open during the Summer. Watch this space.

### CYCLE TRACK UPDATE



Following Watchtree's successful Big Lottery/ITV Border 'Peoples Millions' funding application last November, work has begun on installing a new dedicated cycle track. The new track will enable persons using specially adapted cycles access to designated parts of the nature reserve and, in the process getting close to nature and the great outdoors. The benefits of cycling, and cycling in a nature reserve no less, go far beyond just the physical benefits as the smiling faces, increased confidence and general well-being of participants is evident for all to see.

A range of bikes will be available including; Trikes, Side-by-side 'Freedriders', Recumbents, hand-cycles and conventional step-over cycles – meaning that all persons, regardless of disability, can gain access to nature through cycling.

Until the new cycle track is completely installed, persons wishing to use the various cycles will have access to an introductory area close to the visitor centre which is ideal for improving confidence and developing new cycle skills, not to mention getting fitter! It is hoped that in the near future the cycle centre ('Watchtree Wheelers') will be run on a community basis with various stakeholders and trained cycle leaders leading sessions. In the meantime, cycles are available for use on Fridays



– Watchtree Wheelers day – by appointment with the Nature Reserve Manager, contact details at the bottom of this page.

Parts of the new cycle track will actually be integrated within the old Second World War airfield runways, currently partially covered in tussocky grasses and thus unsuitable for passing cycles. Our regular volunteers have recently removed the vast majority of tussocks ready for contractors to put the finishing touches to the runway and thus bring a wartime airfield back into productive use. Where once Hurricanes and Typhoons prepared airmen for duty, now Trikes and Hand-cycles carry those wishing to get fit and explore a fantastic nature reserve.

In addition to our regular volunteer work party, initial work to install the cycleway has been undertaken by volunteers and students from Wigton Youth Station and Caldew School whilst members of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV Carlisle branch) helped with much of the new crushed stone path adjacent to the 'old' hide.

The cycle path is expected to be complete by late April with an official opening ceremony during May.

# HABITAT NEWS

## GRASSLAND RESTORATION

A significant feature of Watchtree is the grasslands. The aim is to restore wild flower meadows that have a range of grasses, herbs and flowers and are alive with insects, birds and animals. The birds have responded well and, to our many visitors, the singing Skylarks and Curlews in spring are the most audible and visual success. The flowers and grasses have not been so successful and really illustrate just what a challenge it is to restore these plant communities to sites like Watchtree.



Scabious flower

Our meadows have two problems that have to be overcome. On the burials areas the soil and subsoil was churned up, turned over, compacted and generally disturbed to such an extent that we were basically starting from a point of, for arguments sake, some 5 to 7,000 years ago. The fields that were not used for burials pose a different problem. They had been in quite intensive agricultural use for several decades and the challenge here is reducing the level of nutrients and restoring the soil to a situation that existed some sixty to a hundred years ago.

What we have discovered since Watchtree was restored is that the badly disturbed soils have no structure and, being essentially clay soil, have compacted and the drainage has been impeded, especially at the root zone level. Consequently only a few species have adapted to these wet conditions. Moreover, in dry weather the ground sets like concrete to make hostile conditions for many plants and animals. On the former agricultural soils the problem is more to do with high levels of plant nutrients, especially phosphorous and nitrogen, which enable the more competitive plants to out-compete the rest.

Wild flower meadows are known to thrive in less fertile situations, although this is not the full picture as many other factors come into play.

Over the next few years we shall try to manage the situation. This will involve ploughing up and re-sowing some areas, working on the drainage, trying out various means of reducing phosphorous and nitrates and generally experimenting with speeding up a process that some experts forecast could take over 100 years. We also aim to create habitat for the Marsh Fritillary butterfly and to do that we need to establish its food plant, the late summer, blue flowered Devil's-bit Scabious. We shall also be ploughing out the one agricultural grassland field remaining on the site and re-sowing it with a suitable wild flower mix and extending the habitat for the Dingy Skipper butterfly on site. On the remaining meadows we shall persevere with taking an annual

hay crop and aftermath grazing with no fertilizer inputs and will just have to be patient.

This is what makes Watchtree such compulsive visiting and watching. It will be an ever-changing environment for many years to come and every year there is something new or just a little different.

## RINGED PLOVER BREEDING MATS

Ringed Plovers are small wading birds, breeding on shingle shorelines around the coast of the UK but also increasingly at inland sites. Grey in colour with a noticeable dark stripe across the head. This small wader blends perfectly into background shingle and loose stones.

Ringed Plovers have previously bred at Watchtree Nature Reserve, most notably during the first few years following site restoration after the foot and mouth episode. Why then did Ringed Plovers initially breed at Watchtree and then a few years later decide to move on? Perhaps the reason is that following site restoration after foot and mouth burials, loose stones covered parts of the site due to the breaking up of former runways and also the laying of new service tracks. These conditions - added to the fact that Watchtree is in places quite exposed and 'open', meant that passing Ringed Plovers discovered an accidentally created breeding habitat. For a number of years Ringed Plovers returned to breed - an indication that the habitat remained suitable for this species. Over time however, surrounding vegetation began to grow and the once barren environment changed as annual weeds then grasses and eventually tussock grasses, rushes and tall herbs took its place - a process known as natural succession. In the absence of management (cutting, grazing etc) vegetation will continue to grow and in the case of the Ringed Plover, deter breeding due to unsuitable habitat.



Ringed Plover

How then do we encourage Ringed Plovers to return and breed at Watchtree? Essentially we need to create those conditions that Ringed Plovers discovered in the early years - plenty of loose stones with sparse surrounding vegetation. To do this a number of areas in the constructed wetlands (a previous breeding area) have been covered in loose stones which lie on top of geotextile matting in order to prevent vegetation emerging beneath. Three small such areas have recently been created by Watchtree's volunteers and let's hope that Ringed Plovers once again breed at Watchtree - thanks to the efforts and commitment of our regular volunteers!

## NEW HEDGEROW AND FEEDING AREA

Thanks to young people from Caldew School and also our regular volunteers, a new hedgerow has been created near to the visitor centre. Consisting largely of Hawthorn with clumps of willow (cuttings from previously coppiced areas at Watchtree) this new hedgerow should in years to come attract breeding and wintering bird species, small mammals, numerous invertebrates and much more.

In addition, a number of small trees, two small Rowans - one yellow berried 'Joseph Rock' and



Hedgerow planting

another red berried native 'Sorbus Aucuparia' - will provide additional food sources in the form of plump berries for visiting birds and mammals during the Autumn. Additional bird feeding areas will also be a feature and thus create a new attraction for wildlife and visitors alike. Once complete, this area will also be close to the visitor centre and therefore within easy walking distance for those less able to walk the longer distances.

## YOUNG PERSON'S POND - IMPORTANT WINTER HABITAT

Despite already writing an article about this small, seemingly insignificant pond (Watchtree News Autumn/Winter 2008) this unique water body has not only demonstrated the importance of water as a wildlife haven but that even such a small creation can provide opportunities for a great diversity of species - even in the winter months. Situated within a six year old plantation and less than fifty metres from a semi-natural woodland, the young pond is also surrounded by dense, tussocky grass with abundant Rush clumps. An important consideration when originally designing the pond was where to place the soil, large boulders and bricks excavated during construction. It was decided to create a series of small soil piles, situated on each side of the pond which would help to screen the pond from strong winds and in so doing create ideal conditions for damselflies and dragonflies.

# THE JOHN MUIR AWARD

To provide additional habitat for amphibians, particularly newts, large stones and also logs (pieces of wood from woodland management), were placed at the base of the soil banks to provide a refuge for foraging newts during the day and also hibernating newts during the winter. Both Smooth and Great-crested newts have already been discovered in the pond itself whilst a Palmate, in close proximity to two Frogs, was recently discovered under a large piece of concrete in one of the soil banks.

The young persons pond, created entirely by young people from Caldey School, has therefore demonstrated the importance of creating a well designed pond and habitat for species year round– no matter how small it may be. Come spring and summer, this small water body should once again thrive with the sounds and movements of aquatic wildlife.

## GRASSLAND DEMONSTRATION PLOTS

Visitors to Watchtree may have noticed a recently ploughed and re-seeded area opposite the main entrance area and pondered why the rest of this field has not had the same treatment! This 100m x 20m plot is a grassland demonstration area designed to show visitors what is happening to the corresponding grasslands across the rest of the reserve. The seed mixes sown should determine which seeds germinate and succeed and which don't fare quite so well – informing management as to the nature of our soils and what the possibilities are for future grassland experimentation. Our current grasslands (meadows) are in places quite species-rich but in others are dominated by damp loving grasses (Tufted- hair grass *Deschampsia cespitosa*) and this variation is dictated by nutrient levels, pH, drainage and previous land use.

The demonstration strip has been divided into five 'test' areas as follows; Area 1. Wild bird food crop (sown April/May 2009) consisting of Triticale, White Millet, Fodder beet and Quinoa, all designed to bring in the birds! Area 2. Tussock grass mix. Area 3. Wild pollen and nectar mix. Area 4. Meadow mix designed for clay soils (like Watchtree's) and Area 5. Area to be left fallow to determine which seeds blow in and establish naturally. A small plot has also been sown with Devil's-bit scabious seeds and pot grown plants to determine if these species can survive at Watchtree



Established by the John Muir Trust in 1997, the John Muir Award was set up to promote educational, social and personal development through exploration of wild places and involvement in conservation. The ethos of the award includes; being open to all, focused on wild places, fun, adventurous and encouraging personal responsibility for wild places.

Three groups have so far started the John Muir Award whilst undertaking conservation tasks at Watchtree Nature Reserve though it must be emphasised that there is a lot more to the award than simply practical conservation. John Muir himself was passionate about wild places and whilst passion for nature and wild places cannot be taught, it might be expected that spending quality time in the outdoors – simply listening to many sounds of woodland on a calm day for example – might itself instil a sense of appreciation and greater understanding. These are virtues that John Muir himself would no doubt endorse. It is hoped therefore that participants develop a greater understanding of 'their' wild place' and take their findings to other wild places – even back to their local patch.

The award itself is broken down in four main sections; Discover, Explore, Conserve and Share. How groups tackle each section is a matter of choice and usually depends on the age, gender and group status, an example is as follows;

- DISCOVER:** Discover Watchtree on the website and investigate the sites history and purpose, Discover Watchtree on Ordnance Survey maps, Google Maps, Google Earth, old maps etc. Find out about Watchtree through the local press or adverts in papers etc.
- EXPLORE:** Walk around the nature reserve, ideally at different times of the day and during different seasons (take notes, collect leaves, take photos etc. Many participants keep a unique John Muir booklet!), Explore Watchtree by Orienteering, pond dipping or mini-beast hunts.
- CONSERVE:** Undertake a practical conservation project for example planting a hedge, planting trees, constructing a path, installing a fence, creating a new pond.
- SHARE:** Create a visual display in a library, community centre or school. Produce a video presentation of the group's experiences, findings and experiences throughout the participation during the John Muir Award. Keep a scrapbook throughout the award and show others e.g. school children and/or teachers. Produce a 'John Muir' information display highlighting Muir's life, achievements and landmarks.

To get involved in the John Muir Award at Watchtree contact Tim Lawrence, Nature Reserve Manager on 01228 712539 or email: [wnr@watchtree.co.uk](mailto:wnr@watchtree.co.uk). Participation is free. For more information on the John Muir Award check out the website: [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org) to discover more about John Muir.



## NEW DVD

Our new 'Young persons DVD' will soon be available for viewing here at Watchtree and also on our website. Featuring 'Silus' the Mallard and 'Felicity' the Fox, the new DVD focus's on the many activities currently available for school groups and young people in addition to focusing on the rich history of the Watchtree site. Teachers and other persons working with young children should contact the Nature Reserve Manager for more information and to receive a copy.

## WATCHTREE CALENDAR 2010 PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPETITION

Due to the success of this year's Watchtree Calendar, budding photographers can now submit photos for the 2010 edition. All photographs must be taken at Watchtree. In addition to the wealth of wildlife currently on show, photographs might also feature trees, landscapes (the sunsets at Watchtree are a feature of our Thursday evening walks at 7pm!), wind turbines and anything else that reflects the habitats and landscapes at Watchtree.

Photographs can be submitted by email (jpegs) or via CD at the site office. All entries to be submitted no later than August 2009. Contact Tim on 01228 712539 or email [wnr@watchtree.co.uk](mailto:wnr@watchtree.co.uk) for more information.

# WILDLIFE NOTES



Following the short and generally colder days of winter, wildlife tends to flourish with the onset of warmer temperatures and increasingly longer days of spring. Invertebrates (animals with an external skeleton) are often the first creatures to respond to increases in temperatures - many invertebrates having spent the short, dark days of winter as overwintering larvae or even as dormant adults. Due to their generally small size, the bewildering number and range of invertebrates don't seem to generate the same interest or enthusiasm in the same way that say a brightly coloured bird or seemingly cute mammal does. This is a shame for closer investigation reveals, arguably, some of the most ingenious and beautiful creatures on earth!

Spiders (invertebrates though not insects!) may not be everyone's favourite creature but magnification reveals not only amazing colours but those features that make spiders such awesome predators; venomous fangs, strangely arranged eyes (six or eight eyes) and highly specialised behaviour - enabling them catch other invertebrates by almost any means. Wolf spiders (Family; Lycosidae), are active again in woodland clearings and grassy areas, many being ground-running hunters and therefore have no need to spin webs in which to entangle their prey. Wolf spiders also have a noticeably large pair of eyes - an important asset when actively searching for prey amongst grasses. Another species found recently, this time under a log was the wood louse spider (Family; Dysderidae). This species feeds mostly at night and has noticeably large jaws which are specially adapted for feeding on wood lice.

Migratory birds are beginning to make the long journey back to breeding grounds. Chiffchaffs, one of the many Warblers species that breed at Watchtree, were amongst the first of this family to return having 'over-wintered' in Africa. This small woodland bird is notoriously difficult to see but thanks to its repetitive 'chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff' song, bird watchers will always know of its whereabouts. Wheatears have also been sighted briefly at Watchtree recently though this species breeds in upland areas such as those of the Lakeland fells. This is a distinctive bird with a black cheek and white rump and is often seen hopping along the ground searching for invertebrates. Visitors at a recent guided walk were fortunate to see a Great Spotted woodpecker at close range 'drumming' on the bark of a nearby tree with its bill...it was difficult not to think that the bird must have developed a headache though the reason for the repetitive drumming during spring is to attract a mate. On a quiet day the sound of Woodpeckers drumming can be heard over a mile away!

In and around the many ponds and wetlands there is a changing of the guards as different species of wildfowl and wading birds either leave Watchtree for breeding grounds further north or are returning from warmer climates. The wintering Goldeneye, Teal and Snipe which delighted visitors during the winter are all on the move whilst Little Grebe, Mallard, Oystercatcher and Curlew have all returned or are likely to return in the next few weeks of spring. The colourful, bold and often amusing Oystercatcher is a firm favourite with visitors to Watchtree. Nesting in all those

places that people frequent; car-parks, runways, footpaths and flower beds...Where they choose to nest in 2009 is anyone's guess and maybe their prospective choice is worthy of a flutter or two!

It is reassuring to see our established pair of Mute Swans preparing to breed again this year...the fifth year in succession that this pair has bred at Watchtree. If the pair breeds again during 2009, look out for them directly in front of the 'old hide' as last year they made a huge nest amongst a patch of reeds. Across the runway the varied habitats surrounding the 'new' hide; scrub, hedgerow, wet grassland, reedbed and specially made Ringed plover nesting mats will hopefully attract additional species of bird during 2009. Yellowhammers, a bird of hedgerow and Gorse scrub, has not previously bred at Watchtree but there appears to be a good chance that with the many miles of new hedgerows now maturing and creating breeding opportunities, this classic hedgerow bird will colonise Watchtree from adjacent areas.

The many ditches and small water bodies throughout Watchtree provide optimum habitat for a great many aquatic species - many actively returning to their aquatic breeding sites following their winter hibernation. Toads returning to breed in Pond Wood were greeted with what appears to have been an Otter as dozens of dead Toads lay in the shallow margins, all having been bitten, mainly on the hind leg. This is the third year in succession, at almost exactly the same time each year, that this unusual behaviour has taken place - evidence, if it be needed, that this supreme predator is highly intelligent and instinctively knows where food is.

The three species of newt that breed at Watchtree; Palmate, Smooth and Great-crested have been seen in recent weeks whilst a male Smooth newt was recently seen 'displaying' - vibrating his tail and releasing glandular secretions close to a nearby female, hoping she would approach and thus allow the male to release a sperm capsule (spermatophore) which the female then collects in her cloaca before fertilisation takes place...the next generation of newts are evidently on the way!

Finally, as its spring (March 25th as this article is being written) it would be rude not to mention the Brown hare. This charismatic mammal is currently displaying the 'March madness' with small groups running to and fro under the spring sunshine. Two tiny baby Hares were also discovered huddled together in a form near to the visitor centre.



## DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

WEEKLY VOLUNTEER WORK PARTIES  
EVERY WEDNESDAY 10.30am ONWARDS.  
NEW VOLUNTEERS WELCOME.

### MAY

**THURSDAY 7TH, 14TH, 21ST & 28TH.**

EVENING WALKS AT 7pm

**SATURDAY 2ND**

WATCHTREE VOLUNTEERS

10.30am - 1pm

**MONDAY 4TH**

DAWN CHORUS 4am - 6am

**SATURDAY 30TH**

OPEN DAY 10.30am - 4pm

**SUNDAY 31ST**

OPEN DAY 10.30am - 4pm

### JUNE

**THURSDAY 4TH, 11TH, 18TH & 25TH**

EVENING WALKS AT 7pm

**SATURDAY 6TH**

WATCHTREE VOLUNTEERS

10.30am - 1pm

**SATURDAY 27TH**

OPEN DAY 10.30am - 4pm

**SUNDAY 28TH**

OPEN DAY 10.30am - 4pm

### JULY

**THURSDAY 2ND, 9TH, 16TH,  
23RD & 30TH**

EVENING WALKS AT 7pm

**SATURDAY 4TH**

WATCHTREE VOLUNTEERS

10.30am - 1pm

**SUNDAY 26TH**

OPEN DAY 10.30am - 4pm

### AUGUST

**THURSDAY 6TH, 13TH, 20TH & 27TH**

EVENING WALKS AT 7pm

**SATURDAY 1ST**

WATCHTREE VOLUNTEERS

10.30am - 1pm

**SATURDAY 29TH**

OPEN DAY 10.30am - 4pm

**SUNDAY 30TH**

OPEN DAY 10.30am - 4pm

**MONDAY 31ST**

OPEN DAY 10.30am - 4pm

### SEPTEMBER

**THURSDAY 3RD**

EVENING WALK - 7pm

**SATURDAY 5TH**

WATCHTREE VOLUNTEERS 10.30am - 1pm

**SATURDAY 26TH**

OPEN DAY 10.30am - 4pm

**SUNDAY 27TH**

OPEN DAY 10.30am - 4pm

### OCTOBER

**SATURDAY 3RD**

WATCHTREE VOLUNTEERS 10.30am - 1pm

**SATURDAY 31ST**

OPEN DAY 10.30am - 4pm

### NOVEMBER

**SUNDAY 1ST**

OPEN DAY 10.30am - 4pm

**SATURDAY 7TH**

WATCHTREE VOLUNTEERS 10.30am - 1pm

**SATURDAY 28TH**

OPEN DAY 10.30am - 3pm

**SUNDAY 29TH**

OPEN DAY 10.30AM - 3PM