

WATCHTREE NEWS

Watchtree NATURE RESERVE

Welcome to the 2008 Spring/summer edition of Watchtree News, the newsletter that gives you all the latest news and developments from Cumbria's most fascinating nature reserve.

Since the last edition an amazing amount of work, including over 600 hours of voluntary work, has taken place, including; the construction of a brand new 'split level' bird hide, creation of a species-rich herb and grass bank by hydro-seeding (more of this later), concrete 'peckering' and planting of Bird's-foot Trefoil plugs to benefit butterflies and other invertebrates, creation of shallow waterbodies or 'scrapes' to benefit birds including Lapwing, Curlew and Oystercatcher and a new pond constructed by students from Caldew School. The students have also participated in the John Muir Award, and in doing so have not only developed a greater awareness of the environment but have also gained a Nationally recognised certificate; handy for students only a year away from leaving school!

Spring and summer are probably the best times to visit this unique nature reserve; the bubbling call of the Curlew as it glides down towards its nest site, a Brown Hare leveret taking its first tentative steps away from its form, and if your really fortunate, and patient, you might even catch a glimpse of a Great Crested Newt moving stealthily along the bottom of a clear water ditch.



WILDLIFE FRIENDLY LAND MANAGEMENT AT WATCHTREE

With the main habitats at Watchtree; woodland, wetland, hedgerow, grassland and scrub, well on the way towards maturity, a number of smaller, though no less important habitat creation projects have recently been progressed at Watchtree. These smaller projects are designed to compliment existing habitats and in some situations, are designed to benefit a particular range of species. Importantly, a number of the projects have been completed by members of the local community, including students and volunteers – ensuring 'sustainability' and 'ownership' are the heart of everything we do.

New pond creation: Trees, specifically Pines, planted in this area have previously suffered from waterlogging and rather than allowing them to wilt and die, a decision was made to create a new wetland feature – in the process adding a new wetland in the future woodland and yet another potential home for some of our resident amphibians, including the protected Great Crested Newt. The new pond has been dug out completely by hand, often in atrocious conditions, with students from Caldew School who are also participating in the John Muir Award as part of the project. The new pond was designed to benefit a great many species by offering a range of depths, gradual slopes and a small island.

Wader nesting areas: During the early years following Foot and Mouth and subsequent

ecological restoration, certain ground nesting wading birds found the 'open' and sparsely vegetated conditions at Watchtree very much to their liking. These 'early successional' conditions, with abundant bare ground and sparse vegetation, favoured breeding Ringed Plovers and Oystercatchers amongst others. As establishment of grassland and scrub has developed, so the 'open' conditions favoured by the likes of Ringed Plovers have disappeared. In an effort to re-create ideal habitat, loose stones, representing 'shingle' have been laid down in an attempt to encourage these species, and other ground nesting birds. Visitors in the 'old' hide will be able to see two such areas whilst other 'shingle strips' have been created adjacent to the concrete runways.



Shallow scrape: To encourage breeding and wintering wader species, a shallow 'scrape' has been constructed at the southern end of the reserve. The installation of a simple u-bend pipe allows water levels to be raised and lowered

as desired and thereby create the optimum conditions for waders and their chicks. The new scrape is also within easy viewing of the new hide.



Hydroseeding: A site restoration technique commonly used to provide rapid revegetation of motorway embankments and former waste management sites, has been applied to a recently created earth bank at Watchtree – the aim being to create a wildflower and grass mix specifically designed to attract butterflies and other invertebrates. The seed mix also contains Bird's-foot trefoil, the larval food plant for one of Watchtree's rarest butterflies, the Dingy Skipper, and it is hoped that this new habitat will encourage this particular species to establish at this new butterfly haven. To compliment the hydroseeding, concrete (actually former airfield runways) have been peckered - the voids filled with Bird'-foot trefoil plugs in a further attempt to entice Dingy Skippers and other butterflies.

WILDLIFE NOTES

A Black Tern was the undoubted wildlife highlight during spring. This unusual Tern, with a darker plumage than most other Terns, spent one afternoon swooping down for insects on one of the large lagoons.



A Black Tern was seen recently at Watchtree

An Otter was reputed to have been on the reserve during early spring and wasted no time helping itself to some of the many amphibious creatures within the wetlands. Amphibians returning to the water from their winter refuges were targeted as, numerous Toads in particular were discovered with a partially bitten hind leg one early spring morning. Students from Penrith Beaconside Infants School were fortunate to discover a male Smooth Newt in one of their nets whilst pond dipping. The male is easily recognisable with an orange belly with dark spots; in addition males have a distinctive crest along their back. Under nearby logs, female Palmate Newts were discovered taking refuge during the day.

Breeding and passage migrant birds create possibly the most noticeable wildlife change at this time of year. Chiffchaffs, one of many warbler species that over-winter in Africa, returned to their woodland home during the middle of March.

This small, fidgety warbler more than makes up for its small size by producing a loud, piercing and repetitive song: "chiff, chaff, chiff, chaff, chiff chaff". The almost identical Willow Warbler, arrived a week or two later and even for the ardent bird watcher is only distinguishable from the Chiffchaff by its melodic song which rises quickly before slowly dying away. Both these birds dominate the sound waves throughout our extensive semi natural woodlands.

Other woodland birds seen and heard recently include; Jay, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Redpoll, Willow Tit and Lesser Whitethroat no less.

Many ground nesting birds are, at the time of writing (27th April) incubating eggs. Each species will choose a nest site affording it the greatest protection from predators; Oystercatcher eggs, a shade of olive - brown closely resemble small pebbles in shape and therefore this species nests in close proximity to similarly shaped loose stones and shingle. Curlews prefer longer grass swards, as much to conceal themselves as their eggs, being the UK's largest wader and therefore easily noticeable to a watching crow or fox.

The Grey Partridge, A UK Biodiversity Action plan species no less, have been particularly quiet of late though within recent weeks two have been sighted on a regular basis, hopefully preparing to breed and raise the next generation of what are beautiful, yet sometimes secretive birds.

Any visitor to Watchtree cannot fail to be amazed at the sheer number of Skylarks. Early mornings are the best time to appreciate the sound and sight of so many Skylarks holding territory in their grassland kingdoms.

Everyone is eagerly anticipating the arrival of Sand Martins and hopefully this year we shall see our first ever breeding pair in the dedicated Sand Martin breeding colony. Judging by the numbers of Swallows seen recently, there is clearly enough air borne food over the wetlands to keep both species busy so we keep our fingers crossed during the next few weeks.

Wheatear, Meadow Pipit, Stonechat and Linnet are other notable species often encountered during spring and visitors wanting to catch a glimpse of Wheatears in particular should hurry before they head off to breed in predominantly upland areas.

The Brown Hare, like the Grey Partridge, a Biodiversity Action Plan species, appears very stable throughout Watchtree. Surveys during the previous two seasons reveal consistent numbers throughout the reserve though some areas, particularly areas of scrub and rank grassland, appear the most productive. Unfortunately, these habitats are not always viewed favourably in the wider countryside, many areas being ploughed or 'improved' and worse still, converted to other uses such as housing.

Our small mammal population also favours unkempt habitats with plenty of cover. Volunteers are constantly amazed by the sheer numbers found nesting in tree tubes. The Field Vole is undoubtedly the most common species, closely followed by Shrews, Common and Pygmy, and finally, nearer to woodland habitats, the Wood Mouse. Small mammal traps, in which the creatures are trapped in a safe environment complete with bedding, food and water, have revealed similar results to the 'tree guard' tests.



EXTRAORDINARY SHREW

Despite being the UK's most numerous mammal, the Common Shrew is rarely seen and fewer still have ever seen the immaculate and beautiful nests created by these tiny creatures. Weighing less than twelve grammes and with a body length of less than eight centimetres, Shrews actually need to eat about 80 – 90% of their own body weight per day. Shrews are both carnivorous and insectivorous and therefore feed on a wide range of foods, including; insects, worms, spiders and carrion. Since our volunteers have found so many nests within tree guards it seemed logical, almost respectful, to determine the materials used to construct their amazing nest.

Materials identified in a Shrew nest discovered at Watchtree, include, Artificial; plastic bags

(supermarket type), chocolate rapper (Blue Ribband and Kit Kat), black bin liner, green bin liner, anonymous wrapper, cello tape and various other unidentified objects.

Vegetation; Hawthorn leaves, mosses, Reed Canary Grass, Birch leaves, various twigs, unidentified grasses and Cherry tree leaves!



WORK PLACEMENT

During the spring and early part of summer Gareth Tate, a work placement student from the University of Cumbria will be regular face at Watchtree. Studying Countryside Management, Gareth will not only bring a fresh perspective to Watchtree, but In addition, will gain new skills and experiences during his ten week spell at the reserve. So far, Gareth has been pleasantly surprised at the wealth of wildlife found on the reserve and is now looking forward to working with school groups and supporting guided walks and open days.

NEW BIRD HIDE

At the time of writing, our new elevated 'split level' bird hide is virtually complete. Providing stunning views towards the northern Lakeland Fells, together with 'bird watcher friendly' views across reedbeds, wetlands and meadows, the new hide will allow managed public access to this ecologically sensitive part of the reserve.

The new hide was expertly built by Northern Construction and Security Ltd with funding from Cumbria Waste Management Environment Trust, Defra and Bowness, Thursby and Caldbeck Neighbourhood Forum.

To blend in with local landscape features and compliment nearby wildlife habitats the new hide is finished with a subtle 'annalised' green varnish, whilst beneath the lower platform, our Great

Crested Newt neighbours now have a new home in the form of refugia consisting of timber, rubble and soil, all of which would otherwise have been thrown away!

The new hide will be an exceptional community asset and in just few weeks time will be open to all those hoping for the ultimate wildlife experience. The new hide will provide unique opportunities for the occasional wildlife observer, keen ornithologist or school party.

Visit Watchtree during on Thursday evenings at 7pm (April-September) or during themed weekend days throughout year (see 'What's On' section in our website: www.watchtree.co.uk). Alternatively, contact the Nature Reserve Manager for group/school visits, details at bottom of page.



WATCHTREE RINGING GROUP

Watchtree Ringing Group contributes to the National Nest Recording scheme run by the British Trust for Ornithology. By finding and recording the nests of breeding birds we gain a fascinating insight into the habitats and success of breeding birds on the site and across the British Isles.

We found 59 nests of 22 species that laid 332 eggs, of which 195 hatched and 182 nestlings left the nest. Predators and the weather were the main cause of nest losses. Last year a stoat discovered that a nest box held a meal and again this year but, by tying a plastic bag round the tree to prevent it climbing to the box the nests of 3 Bluetit, 1 Great Tit and 1 Spotted Flycatcher were saved. A fox, crows and a Kestrel were other suspected predators of ground nesting birds. All three Lapwing nests or nestlings were taken as was the first Coot nest. A nest of Swallow chicks died after a very wet cold night and the second brood of eggs was deserted but another pair fledged chicks from two of their three nest attempts, the second brood was taken by a predator. A nest of

3 Skylark chicks was flooded out one very wet Thursday night. The Coot and Little Grebes also suffered from the weather.

Willow Warblers, Stonechats and Skylarks were a special project with the aim of colour ringing the chicks. Many of the adult Willow Warblers had been caught and colour ringed on arrival. We found four nests and ringed 16 chicks; the adults at two nests were both colour ringed and the males at two of the others, another male was seen carrying food to an undiscovered nest. Several males seemed unable to attract females and just sang their hearts out to no avail. The males arrive about two weeks earlier than females. The females may have encountered a problem on migration; severe weather is the usual cause.

A Willow Warbler builds a domed nest on the ground well hidden under long grass usually under the edge of a bush, bramble or dead branches.

The Skylarks were equally allusive and Doug Welch put in an incredible effort trying to locate

NEST RECORDING 2007

them. There was a lot of activity but only 7 nests were found and 10 chicks ringed, although Liz who does the breeding bird survey thought there were fewer singing males than in previous years. We suspect breeding success was quite low. The Stonechats reared two broods and 9 chicks were colour ringed.

Our Mute Swans produced 7 young of which 4 are known to have fledged in October. The male lost his colour ring during the winter but the BTO metal ring was read to confirm that he was our male. The most unusual nest was the Pied Wagtail; it chose a nest site in a small plastic junction pipe on top of a pallet of similar pipes behind our blue hut. They fledged 5 chicks. Our most special bird the Spotted Flycatcher fledged 4 chicks from a nest box in Pond Wood, the first to succeed since 2004. The most notable new breeding bird was Reed Bunting and at least 3 pairs were present, although the only nest found was in the Reed Bed area. Two Blackbirds and four Song Thrushes fledged young after early losses.

BUDDING ARTISTS PRODUCE WILDLIFE MASTERPIECE

The next generation of Monet's and Picasso's have been busy designing some new interpretation panels, soon to be situated in our 'old' bird hide. The artists - students from Thursby Junior School, have produced some stunning hand drawn images highlighting a selection of birds and flowers visitors are likely to see through the hide windows. Two panels; one depicting a spring/summer scene and the other an autumn/winter scene will provide visitors with a quick reference guide to some of the more common species on the lake. The quality of the work has been above expectations and everyone associated with Watchtree is eagerly awaiting the installation of the new panels.

If your school or educational establishment wishes to become involved with environmental and academic projects (science, geography, art, local studies, John Muir Award, Duke of Edinburgh Award, orienteering etc) please contact the Nature Reserve Manager on 01228 712539 or email: wnr@watchtree.co.uk.



WESTHOUSE VOLUNTEERS GET WOODY

Westhouse is a voluntary organisation providing a range of community - based, high quality support services to people with learning difficulties living in West Cumbria and Carlisle. The group is well used to 'hand's on' practical work, having a major horticultural input at nearby Allerby Community Gardens, and recently the group have helped out with woodland management at Watchtree. With over 70,000 trees and shrubs planted at Watchtree, and with it tree guards!, all voluntary contributions are welcome.

Our volunteer work parties meet every Wednesday at 10:30am and also the first Saturday of the month, again at 10:30am. If your group wishes to volunteer outside these times please contact the Nature Reserve Manager to arrange a meeting.

FOCUS ON DIRECTORS

www.watchtree.co.uk REVAMPED

Users of our website www.watchtree.co.uk will now have the chance to send a 'blog' and begin debates and discussions about Watchtree and general wildlife matters. The website is also full of useful information including; site history and description, downloadable surveys and newsletters, education section including lesson plans and fun things for kids in addition to a regularly updated 'What's on' section, notice board and image show on the home page.



ANNE MACKAY
Director of Watchtree Nature Reserve Ltd

Although I was born in Buckinghamshire my childhood was spent shuttling between North Wales and Scotland for my father was in the R.A.F.

I graduated from Edinburgh College of Arts after 5 exhilarating years studying sculpture and learning to work with a wide range of materials and processes. Marriage brought me to Cumbria. First to Oughterby, a small hamlet near Great Orton and its abandoned airfield. There, on the old runways, we learner drivers honed our driving skills.

Next came a move into town where, for the next five years I was involved in bringing up children, writing and illustrating children's books, assorted design work, exhibitions, sculpture and so forth. Eventually I joined Carlisle College as an art lecturer and was ultimately promoted to Head of Art – the position I held till taking early retirement.

When my last child left home I moved back to the countryside and it now amazes me to realize that I have lived in Thurstonefield for over 20 years!

I've always been keenly interested in wildlife matters and have, for many years, been a regular volunteer on various reserves in the area. So, when it was decided to create a nature reserve on the Watchtree burial site, I was eager to become involved.

It is highly satisfying to be part of a team working towards a common goal and to see the site develop and improve year on year. And, nowadays it amazes me to think that where I once drove a Mini Cooper with L plates – I now drive a quad bike and trailer!



BILL KNOWLES
Hon Treasurer and Director

My wife Patsy and I moved back to family roots near Carlisle over ten years ago. We are presently at the point of retiring from the B&B business we set up at the end of Hadrian's Wall in Bowness-on-Solway but we are moving only a few hundred yards further into the village - 25 yards nearer the pub!

Born and brought up in St Helens Lancashire - hence a rugby player & supporter of both codes, then university in Yorkshire - more Wars of the Roses; marriage in Carlisle - 38 years - phew!

My career took me to Bathgate, Scotland, to Kent, back north to Rochdale, across to Yorkshire, onto the Vale of Glamorgan (S Wales) and then Bath where we brought up our son and daughter before escaping back up North in the mid 90's to join Rickerby's HQ in Carlisle.

My business career in purchasing and materials management involved travel to Europe, Far East & USA and ended up as commercial director and MD of a number of UK companies. I am a Fellow of Chartered Management Institute and Member of the Institute of Business consultants.

During all this time I had maintained a keen interest in how communities could help themselves by building social companies to earn trading income rather than relying on government grants and local authority funding. The chance to practice what I preached came when I left Rickerby with the agricultural turmoil of FMD and set up an environmental management consultancy with local Solway bird expert Dr Roy Armstrong. A two page briefing paper to MAFF/Defra on the post FMD alternative use of the Great Orton burial site as a nature reserve led to my involvement with the local community action group. Roy Armstrong's nature reserve designs became the blueprint of the magnificent natural resource we have today.

Along with most of the current board I was involved in arguing and winning over some of the more sceptical senior civil servants. After twelve months negotiation we all signed the current Land Management Agreement giving local people the power and resources to manage the above ground habitat and conservation activities at Watchtree.

Currently I am a founder member of a consultancy co-operative helping groups and organisations to become more financially sustainable plus finance director of an internet business. As a director of Allerdale Citizens Advice Bureau and two other companies plus a member of a number of voluntary local committees my time is at a bit of a premium!

What I do hope, is that in the role as Treasurer, my management experience has helped the Watchtree board navigate some of the legal, strategic and financial hurdles which we have met on our journey so far. Our next strategic aim is to become a registered charity company to better sustain and improve the site and its invaluable natural assets for future generations to come. My personal aim is to somehow retire and see new blood helping achieve for Watchtree what we all set out to do at the outset with the Great Orton FMD burial site – continue to make something good come from something which was so bad!

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

5, 12, 19 & 26 JUNE
THURSDAY EVENING WALKS AT 7pm

3 JUNE
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AT 7pm

7 JUNE
NATIONAL MOTH EVENING AT 7pm

15 JUNE
OPEN DAY 10.30am – 4pm
DRAGONFLY WALK AT 10.30am

3, 10, 17, 14, 31 JULY
THURSDAY EVENING WALKS AT 7pm

20 JULY
OPEN DAY 10.00am – 4pm
MEADOW FLOWERS & GRASSES
WALK AT 10.30am

7, 14, 21, 28 AUGUST
THURSDAY EVENING WALKS AT 7pm

7 AUGUST
BAT WALK AT 7pm

24 AUGUST
OPEN DAY 10.30am – 4pm

14 SEPTEMBER
OPEN DAY 10.30am – 4pm

21 SEPTEMBER
SPIDER SAFARI AT 10.30am

9 OCTOBER
SOCIAL EVENING AT 7pm

19 OCTOBER
OPEN DAY 10.30am – 4pm