

Ashlawn Cutting Nature Reserve, Conservation Report for year 2014

A report of some of the work done by volunteers of Warwickshire Wildlife Trust – Rugby and Butterfly Conservation – Warwickshire

Phil Parr, WWT - Rugby Conservation Officer, & Butterfly Conservation Rugby Area Liaison Officer, 8-3-2015

Hours Worked by volunteers

Hours worked 2014 – Total **2672.5** by **1215** volunteers input

This comprises 1864.5 hours by 407 Volunteers for The Rugby Local Group, College group, & WWT Nature Force teams Plus 336 hours by 140 youngsters from Rugby School directed by Warden Cyril Cleaver & Diana Forbes-Powney.

Also added 472 hours & 39 visits for work involving surveys and hours for administration & tool maintenance.

A tremendous effort. Many thanks to everyone involved.

Ashlawn's year

January:

Grasslands Work continued to finish grassland management south of Ashlawn Bridge with the cutting of areas near the ancient oak and Christmas Hedge (F3e), while others were coppicing and clearing brash.

Further north we were greatly helped by two visits from the Trusts Nature-force teams. These dedicated volunteers visit Warwickshire's reserves to lend a much needed helping hand. The two visits to Ashlawn gave us 43 volunteers and they did an amazing 301 hours of help. They cut the glade areas of Section 9 south of Pytchley Bridge and around Pytchley Marsh and Jolly's Field. Many thanks to you all.

February:

First Butterflies. We saw our first on 4th February, 3 Brimstone's, as we worked clearing brash and hedging on Section 3 south of Ashlawn Bridge. The warm morning sun must have coaxed them from their hibernation slumbers but it was unlikely that they would have found any much needed nectar on which to feed and replenish lost sugars & fats for survival in any further cold weather.

Station Pools

As work continued on other parts of the reserve we also turned our attention to these pools. Reedmace and other vegetation had encroached on the open water so there was very little open water left.

Chris Worman, Rugby Borough Council (RBC)'s Parks and Open Spaces manager, came to the rescue again and arranged for contractor Dave Whitlock to dig out the reeds, silt, and overgrown Willows, we agreed to clear up afterwards.

It also gave the opportunity to restore Path Pool which used to be an important frog spawning site.

The work was completed just in time as the first frogs appeared on 27th February, Thanks Chris & Dave.



Clearing Station Pools 10-2-14.



One of the cleared Station Pools 11-2-14



Restored Path Pool 11-2-14



Ashln Bridge flood, Sunbathing Frogs, 27-2-14



Ashln Bridge flood, First Frogs, 27-2-14



Ashln 9w, Grassland management 2-2-14

March:

Frogs spawning: First 2 arrived on sunny 20th February at the path-side pool/drain south of Pytchley Bridge, then more were seen at Pytchley Bridge (N) path flood on 27th.

The weather warmed up after some cold days and on the 4th March and it was good to see to find 24 clumps of spawn at Pytchley Marsh south. Over 200 frogs were seen in the marsh on 7th and by 13th there were over 150 clumps of spawn. There may well have been many more but access to count was difficult. By the 20th spawning on the reserves many pools had finished and total count was 529 frogs seen and 688 clumps of spawn set. The amount of spawn set was greater than 2013 (609)

Warwickshire College: We also had help from lads from the college students on 12th and they set to with our guidance creating a glade towards Ashlawn Bridge (E7). They came to help again on other occasions during the spring. The plan is to allow this glade to revert to woodland, in doing so it will provide different habitats suited to smaller birds. Birds seen include Linnet, Grey Wagtail, & Yellow Hammer.

Jolly's Hedge

We wanted to open up the Jolly's Field area to the Station Grasslands area of the reserve and to do this best we decided we needed to lay the scrub and some of the trees as a hedge. To achieve this in a reasonable timescale we needed more than volunteer effort and for work to be done with a chainsaw. Expert Steve Boswell was called in and funding from NIA (Nature Improvement Area via WWT) enabled about half of the length to be laid in the country style. This is a quicker and less costly method not requiring stakes and bindings, but produces a pleasing result. Steve worked very hard and did an excellent job. We hope that next year (2015) we can find funding for the job to be completed.



Ashln F1629e, First violets looking stunning 29-3-14



Ashlawn D14e, Steve Boswell works on Jolly's Hedge 11-3-14



Ashln E1535 Muntjac & Blackbird 13-3-14



Ashln E7e, Scallops, Peter & Steve
dead-hedge brash 5-3-14.



Ashln D14, Coltsfoot in drain below
Jolly's Hedge Steve 11-3-14

April: Restorative Justice: We had hoped for input to our conservation efforts by lads under court orders restorative justice scheme but it fell apart as they couldn't be persuaded to do the work. Steve turned up on several occasions to find they didn't or wouldn't do anything when their supervisor got them there. A missed opportunity for them.



Ashln E11w, Marsh Marigold 1-4-14



Peacock, 8-4-14



Ashln D14e, Comma on warm dead leaves 1-4-13,



Ashln D14e, HLW, C Vetch 9-4-14,

By the 10th of the month at least 8 species of butterfly were on the wing. Greatest number was the Peacock with 45 seen, followed by 26 Brimstone, and 5 Orange-tip. Good news also was to see some recovery by Small Tortoiseshell and 8 were seen on this date.

Common Poppy seed provided by Chris at RBC was sown in many places along the reserve to commemorate the sacrifices of the brave men of the First World War including the old station platform, Tower bank, the Healthy Living Walk on Jolly's Field, Section E9, Shortcut Glade, and further south, but disappointingly it didn't appear later in the year. Maybe the seed needs to be frosted before it germinates so hopes are high for next year.



Ashln E1437, Spring View, 9-4-14



Ashln E, Green Alkanet shows in several places, 21-4-14, Ashln D1442 Lady's-Smock, ditch-drain, 9-4-14



May:

On the 2nd I had a good view of a young grass snake on grassland towards top of bank F3E near Xmas Hedge where we found the plant Adder's-tongue Fern last year. No Adder's-tongue this year that I could see but grass snake more than made up for it. I have not seen one on the reserve for years, but a pity it didn't hang around to have its picture taken.

On the 16th we were pleased to meet the managers of Rainsbrook Crematorium to offer our advice on habitat work around the pit pool just above the reserve. They would also be happy to see a hedge laid along the boundary between our two sites



Red Campion on HLW, 21-4-14



Ashln D1442 stunning Red Campion, HLW 15-5-14



Ashln F, May blossom south from bridge 16-5-14



Ashln D14e, L, White & Brimstone on Bluebell, 3-5-14. Ashln D14e Tidying near newly laid hedge & Cowslips on HLW 11-5-14



June:

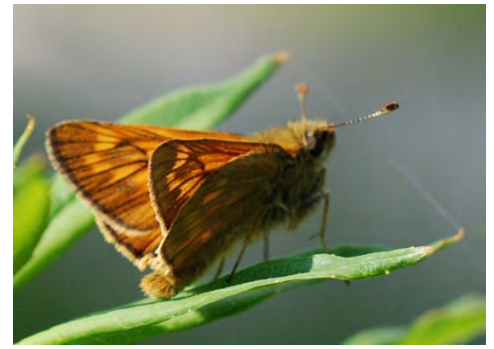
Guided Walk: held on sunny 29th June attracted 10 people, the Cutting was at its best as can be seen from the pictures

We saw more species and much greater numbers of dragonfly this year, a direct result of opening up Pytchley Marsh and clearing Station Pools. They love the newly cleared Path Pool (D15) and 16 Smooth Newts were counted in it on 6-6-14.

Species seen on the reserve included, Brown Hawker, Southern Hawker, Migrant Hawker, Common Darter, and Ruddy Darter



Ashln F3e Marbled White & C. Blue roset for night 19-6-14



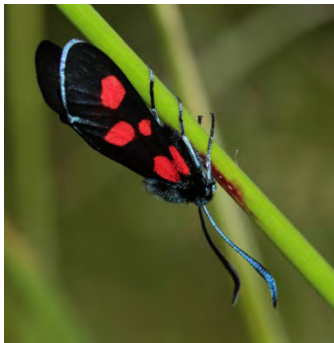
Ashln E9w Large Skipper 22-6-14



Guided Walk. Ken & Val admire Meadow Cranesbill 29-6-14,

Soldier Beetle, 29-6-14, K Monk

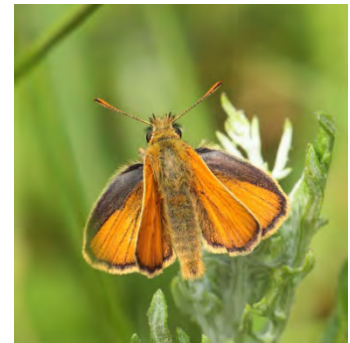
Latticed Heath moth, 29-6-14, K Monk,



N. B. Five-spot Burnet moth,



Shaded Broad-bar moth,



& Small Skipper butterfly, all images Tony Penycate, 29-6-14



Ashln D14e, Reservoir Pond, male Broad-bodied Chaser, 9-6-14, & female at F1628, 8-6-14..



Ashln D15w, Path Pool, Smooth Newts, 9-6-14

July:

We were visited on a sunny day by judges from the Heart of England in Bloom competition and were able to give them a full account of all that we were doing to manage the reserve and the input needed to keep it in good shape. They could also see something of the profusion of wild flowers that grow in the well managed grassland.

We were pleased to receive more plug plants and seeds supplied by the Trust, these included Tufted Vetch, Mugwort, Hedge Bedstraw, Agrimony, Cowslip, and Common Vetch. They were planted around the Healthy Living Walk and Jolly's Meadow. Some of the Bird's-foot Trefoil, & Ladies Bedstraw were planted south of Ashlawn Bridge.

We didn't want Hedge bedstraw south of Ashlawn Bridge as it can be quite dominating and has appeared already below Section 5. Yellow rattle seed was used on a number of places but mostly to try to suppress False Brome on F3e.



Ashln F5w, Masses of St. John's Wort 6-7-14.



Ashln D14w, Station Grassland, Tufted Vetch & Clover 11-7-14



Ashln F3e, Summer grassland cut, Gerry & Ken raking after Steve has cut. 17-7-14

August:



Ashln F3w, Areas cut by 18-8-13



Ashln F3w, Result of Steve & Ken's mornings work 21-8-13



Ashln F, Bank Vole, Late Aug. (picture Mark Johnson)

September:

Grass Snakes: On the 1st Sept we had a visit by 3 key members of the Warwickshire Amphibians and Reptiles Team (WART). They are as keen as we are to find out how many Grass Snakes still visit the reserve. I was fortunate enough to see one early in the year south of Ashlawn Bridge but my sightings are very rare indeed. We are told they do still appear at Springhill Farm on the nearby polo fields.

We walked the length of the reserve and placed a number of mats of felt or corrugated material as places they may seek to hide under, and we will periodically check. Unfortunately the rest of the autumn was very dry, the underside of the mats didn't become moist, and so attract them. We will continue to check in the coming spring.

As we continued with grassland management we created of heaps of the arisings to compost in warm spots as hibernicums.

Please record any local records of Grass Snake or other reptiles on -

<http://groups.arguk.org/wart/?tab=getProfileGalleryTab>



Ashln F5w, Comma, 22-9-14.



Ashln F1628e WART reptile team Natalie, Paul & Camille, 1-9-14.



Ashln D14e, Jolly's Walk, Purple Loosestrife 1-9-14.



Ashln F3e, Field Grasshopper 14-9-14

5th Sept. We were very pleased to meet Sustrans Wildlife Champion volunteers led by Ecologist Bernie Higgins. They had travelled from various parts of the country to attend a day to learn more about best management practice and chosen Ashlawn as one of the sites to look at. We were able to describe our aims and the way we try to achieve them and what the reserve has to offer. They seemed very impressed. It would be brilliant if one or two Sustrans members came to help manage their routes locally



Ashln D14w, Station Grassland Nature Force cut 18-9-14

18th Sept We were very pleased to have the much needed help of the Trusts Nature-Force on 2 consecutive days to cut and clear the Station Grasslands and Tower Bank, the weather stayed fine and with our members helping 150 hours of work was done by 23 willing volunteers. Thank you to all of you. The vegetation was very lush again this year so had to be raked and carried after the cutting

October:

In early October we had the pleasure of welcoming back Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh HSS - Rugby branch for part of their annual Sewa Day, a day across the world, where 1000's of people volunteer their time to make communities a better place.

We all met up in the small car park at Ashlawn Cutting, where we were treated to some tasty snacks before heading down to the 'cutting' to start the task for the day, to rake off and clear the grassland area by the bridge and push back the scrub to open up the grassland.

All the volunteers were soon hard at work and it was great to see the youngsters enthusiastically fully engaged and learning as they went. In all a total of 63 hours were donated on the day.

A huge thank-you to all the volunteers that came and helped with cutting the grassland



SEWA Day 5-10-14 Help, clearing Bramble from Gorse bushes, even the youngsters.



SEWA Team photo

Rugby in Bloom - Ashlawn

The reserve was entered into the Rugby in Bloom competition and we are pleased that we again were awarded a Gold Award in the Environmental Category – 'well done' to everybody, especially Steve who produced a document to present to the judges showing pictures of the various groups doing the conservation work .



Rugby in Bloom Award shield & certificate

News release - Heart of England Environmental Award

Special environmental award for blooming marvellous Rugby volunteers

In the 50th year of the National 'In Bloom' competition, Rugby celebrated with a special award given to Ashlawn Cutting Nature Reserve to mark the effort of the local volunteers who manage the site for wildlife.

They had already won a Gold award for the 7th year in a row in the Rugby in Bloom competition. They so impressed the judges from Heart of England in Bloom, that they were awarded a further one off discretionary award by the Heart of England in Bloom judges to recognise their efforts for the environment. This further judge's discretionary award cemented that the cutting really is the rich green vein of Rugby.

Rugby Wildlife Group, in close partnership with Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and Rugby Borough Council has been managing the embankments and its rich mix of habitats of the disused Great Central main line for decades. Tackling scrub to uncover and maintain pockets of the limestone grassland so important for rare butterfly and invertebrates is a task the volunteers undertake with vigour. Clearing the several ponds and the station pools along the track helps the

local amphibian population and other tasks like hedge laying and wildflower planting make the site visually pleasing as well as a haven for wildlife. This has been further enhanced in recent years by the creation of a Healthy Living Walk and the opening up of Pytchley Marsh to breathe fresh life into it.

Ashlawn Cutting Nature reserve is a wonderful resource for the local community and it is not only an important recreational asset, allowing people to travel from the town centre out to the countryside and beyond, it is also a place where local people can take positive action for wildlife conservation.

Karl Curtis Reserves Manager for the Trust said: "Ashlawn Cutting is a very special and inspiring reserve not just for wildlife but for the dedicated volunteers who lead on the management. The effort of the group and working in partnership with the Trust and Rugby Borough Council highlights that local people can make a difference to their community green spaces, but also do something exceptionally positive for wildlife conservation. The award celebrates and recognises this ongoing achievement and we know places rich in wildlife have a positive impact on people's wellbeing too so this is a real benefit to the people of Rugby."



Ashln F5w, Heart of England presentation, 16-10-14. Warden Cyril being presented with the awards by Chris Worman, RBC Parks Manager. Pictures, S. Cheshire

Steve Batt Chairman of the local Rugby Group said 'I am particularly delighted to receive this award for Cyril our Warden and Phil our Conservation Officer who have been looking after the Cutting for decades and are an inspiration to us all, with their boundless energy'

Chris Worman, Parks & Grounds Manager at Rugby Borough Council said, "Working with such dedicated volunteers is key to managing areas like Ashlawn Cutting, and this award is recognition of all their hard work.



Ashln F5w, Phil & Jan raking & clearing, 16-10-14
Pictures, S. Cheshire



Jan,



Phil



& Steve

26-10-14 At today's workparty on Ashlawn six of us continued to cut and clear section F3e grassland south of Ashlawn Bridge, Steve as ever forging ahead with the brush cutter, and the rest of us were enjoying clearing what he had cut, chatting as we worked and wondering why more people don't come to join us.

The weather was cloudy but continuing very mild considering we are nearly into November, and we were amazed to find a couple of **Grass Vetchling back in flower** on a patch we had cut and cleared in the summer (21st August), another with a seed pod developed, and several others as well developed plants.

We normally find this in flower in late June & early July, the flowers only last a few days.

An uncommon and lovely delicate plant whose leaves look exactly like grass.

We also disturbed a fresh looking **Roselle's Cricket**, a very late date for this species, some lovely yellow frogs, and a toad.



Ashln F5w, Steve H grafting, 5-10-14.



Ashln E7 Survey team,
Dipti, Kay, & Phil, 13-10-14



Ashln F3, Frog not pleased
being disturbed 26-10-14



Ashln D14e, Jolly's Walk,
Hawthorn Berries 2-11-14

November:

On the 20th we were very pleased to have another visit from the Trusts Nature-Force team of very able volunteers. They meet at Brandon, jump into the minibus and head for a reserve within the county that need's their help. On this occasion they helped us make great progress cutting our Section 9 grasslands south of the Pythley Bridge and extending, tidying and dead hedging the woodland glade Section 7 nearer the Ashlawn Bridge. Thanks very much all of you, we are most grateful for your help.



Ashln E7e, Nature Force team
have a well-earned lunch break, 20-11-14.



14 Ashln E9w, Section 9 Cyril & Malcolm
raking grassland in the rain after cut 23-11-14.



Ashln E6w, a Liverwort, a
spore-producing plant on a log, 23-11-14

Ashlawn fungi

The autumn is often the best time to find fungi and a number of visits were made to see what was showing towards the end of 2014.

The ground was quite warm but perhaps a bit too dry to encourage a lot to show, however local expert David Champion did come up with a few most interesting examples.



Lilac Bonnet - *Mycena pura*
11-11-14
All pictures D Champion.



Ashln E, Velvet Shank
Flammulina velutipes, 21-12-14



Ashln D14e Hare'sfoot Inkcap
Coprinus Lagopus on woodchip
14-10 -14



Ashln D12e, Amethyst deceiver
Laccaria amethysta, 20-11-14

December: We were pleased to locate 4 Hornbeam trees on the reserve.

Our small habitat management team were still hard at it and even decided to do an extra session on grassland Christmas Eve to complete the planned work south of Ashlawn Bridge.



Ashln F5, Walk on a winters morning 30-2-14



Ashln E11w, Frost on mossy trunk 30-12-14



Ashln E6w Hornbeam seeds 8-12-14



Ashln D1442, Frosted Path Pool 30-12-14



Ashln D14e, Frosted Gorse 30-12-14

Habitat management work on Ashlawn Nature Reserve.

Grasslands Work on the reserves grasslands went very well this autumn.

We cut and raked off the grassland to keep the nutrient base of the soils low to encourage wild flowers and to restrain woody species such as Hawthorn, Ash, & Bramble from taking over.

We planned and achieved getting all this work done by Christmas. We can now concentrate on woodland and hedge management.

The weather this year was on our side and there were only one or two occasions when it was too wet.

It takes a lot to stop us.

Fortunately we had done most of the work before Steve, our chief brushcutter operator damaged his arm elsewhere.

Gerry stepped into the breach and soon got the hang of things, while Margaret, Jan, Cyril, David, Ken, Phil and others tried to keep up with the raking and carrying. We are most grateful that Gerry was able to do this, Thanks Gerry.

The quality of the grasslands structure has shown a definite improvement over the last few years and wild flower numbers increased as a result of all this effort.

Wetlands We are really pleased with the wetlands recent reclamations and this year have seen many more species as a result as reported above.

Jolly's Walk the Heathy Living Walk is now into its 2nd summer and enjoyed by many walkers. Red Campion, Purple Loosestrife, Spiny Rest Harrow, and Selfheal are among the plants doing really well. Strangely Foxglove isn't taking well at all despite doing well in nearby gardens.

Invasive plants:

It seems we may have won the battle to eliminate Himalayan Balsam that was establishing by the running drains in sections E & F, but we are still trying to find a way to control **Wood False Brome** *Brachypodium sylvaticum* from invading and out competing native plants on some of our best grassland on F3e south of Ashlawn Bridge. It is a European species most commonly found in forests and woodlands, preferring the shaded canopy, but may grow in open areas, but regarded as a noxious weed in parts of USA. It's only good quality is that it is a food plant of one or two skipper butterfly species.

Digging out the clumps can get rid of the bigger clumps but as it has established quite well and seeded is appearing over a wider area. We hope that seeding with the semi parasitic plant **Yellow Rattle** will sap its vigour and bring it under control but some studies have shown that Rattle is less keen to attach to the coarser grasses.

We have seeded a lot more Rattle to supplement the few plants already growing and this year may see if it is going to be an effective remedy.

Interestingly in Oregon State they recommend - Mow any time in June and the plants should not re-sprout and produce seed that year. (Mow in May and false-brome re-sprouts. Mow after July, you will spread false brome everywhere you go.) They even have bike & boot washing stations to prevent seed spread.

Another plant causing concern is **Mellilot**, a member of the same family as clover, but given the right conditions can completely dominate grassland as we have seen at Fenny Compton.

It sets vast amounts of seed that is carrying along the reserves pathways. Cutting or pulling out before this stage is the key to control.

The plant is loved by bees and has medicinal properties used for circulatory problems

You can steep Mellilot in your bath to drive away melancholy or hang it up in your wardrobe to repel moths

Dried Mellilot and bedstraw added to animal and human bedding will repel insects, and perhaps even kill them.

Ashlawn: Other species of note spotted in 2014

Grass Snake about 300mm long, (perhaps a relative youngster) top of bank near Christmas Hedge (Ancient Oak) F3e. The first I've seen on the reserve for years.

It wriggled away too quickly for me to get a pic. P. Parr 2-5-14

Tree Creeper behind west trackside pool just south of Pytchley Bridge P. Parr E11 31-1-14

Marsh Tit in Cyril's garden having come from the Cutting. C. Cleaver 8-11-14 E8e

Raven seen & heard flying above Section E near Pytchley Bridge on 2-9-14 & 3-9-14, P. Parr

Nuthatch Steve Batt pointed out a pair calling. Section E, 2-2-14

Kingfisher A pair seen several times by a dog walker at stream below F4w, 20-11-14.

Grey Wagtail on Pytchley Marsh. S. Batt 19 Jan 14

Silver-washed Fritillary glimpsed by Jonathan Bowley at south end of F3w on 7 June 2014

Roe Deer seen by Ray Moyle in Clifton Road by bridge early morning (outside the WWT reserve) January.

Hornbeam 4 trees on lower part of the bank – (2 quite small) E6w 8-12-14 (SP 51570 73382 & SP51589 72389)

These aquatic plants were noted on Reservoir Pond and some of the other pools. Not all of them are desirable.

Ivy-leaved Duckweed

Rigid Hornwort

Nuttles Waterweed by Natalie from the Wart team, 2-9-14

Pink Water Speedwell by Jon Bowley – he said a good record (12 or more.) 26-6-14

Least Duckweed by Jon Bowley – he said bad news, will smother and exclude light below.

Greater Spearwort by Jon Bowley

The Rugby School group under the direction of Warden Cyril Cleaver, and Diana and Colin continued to do sterling work on the reserve on Thursday afternoons in the spring, but we understand staffing problems at the school have meant they couldn't continue later in the year. Thanks for the work done to date.

Great Central Walk Footpath & Cycle route through the reserve:

Most recreational walkers and cyclists turn back when they are faced with the bad spots. The area north of Pytchley Bridge is the worst and all but impassable for much of the year as it remains flooded for months and the muddy areas before it put people off, so they don't get from the built-up area of the town to the countryside. In three places along the walk there is still a slight leak from the sewer that runs under the old track bed. We have raised this issue many times, Severn Trent came and looked, dug up a bit, but still the problem remains. Would you let your dog loose in these pools if you knew?

Improving the path is an ongoing task though outside what the Trust can do and requires considerable funding as improving the cuttings drainage is key.

We are very grateful for the support of RBC Parks and Open Spaces Department lead by Chris Worman for help received during the year. We would have struggled with some of the large projects without this support.

I take this opportunity to thank all the work party volunteers for their sterling efforts.

Phil Parr. Conservation Officer, Rugby Group of WWT. www.rugbywildlife.info <http://www.warwickshire-butterflies.org.uk/>