

November 2021



This greenspace is part of the 26 mile long, 10,000 acre Lee Valley Regional Park, which stretches through Greater London, Essex and Hertfordshire





## Ranger round-up

Welcome to Musings from the Marshes, the newsletter that looks at what has been happening across [Leyton and Walthamstow Marshes](#). It's jammed packed with lots of interesting information about the wildlife, events, projects and people found on the marshes. Check out our [events](#) and [volunteering](#) pages online and see how you can get involved.



### Autumn's webs

As I cycle to work one morning in autumn and look out across the marshes, everything is hidden behind a vale of mist but as I make my way over a bumpy cattle grid and up onto Leyton Marsh, my eyes are suddenly caught by hundreds of shimmering spiders' webs hanging from the tops of the grassy meadows. Now, for me, that's quite a spectacle to behold but what makes it even more special is understanding why it's happening.

So, here's the science bit! Water droplets on a spider's web are an example of dew. Cold air holds less water than warm air, so if the air has absorbed a lot of water during the day, as it cools overnight the water condenses on the web's fibres. The dew also forms into droplets rather than a smooth film which is caused by a phenomenon called Rayleigh Instability. It's also thought that spiders webs are least effective at catching prey when wet and that spiders are also most vulnerable at this time.

### A late season feast

By now, many of the plants on the marshes have already shed their seed and begun to die off. Yet, looking out across to the fields from my truck I can still see one plant in full bloom; Michaelmas Daisy. It's easy to spot with its pale lilac to deep purple flowering heads. It's a perennial herbaceous plant, which flowers late in the season providing nectar for insects at a time when little else is still in flower. It's only fault is that it's a non-native plant in the UK and can become quite invasive, displacing many of our native wildflowering plants. To keep it in check, I try to coincide some of our contractor cuts in August and September when peak flowering tends to occur. For all of those field edges missed, I and volunteers cut some of these areas on rotation by hand. I don't mind admitting, it can be a bit nerve racking walking into these areas at this time of the year. With so many insects hovering around them, I've been seen more than just once running at break-neck speed to escape angry swarms of wasps.



### A washout year

No doubt you've noticed how wet it's been this year. Typically, winter flooding begins receding on the marshes from April and by June most of it has disappeared. It was great to see the marshes staying wetter for longer this year. Usually I'm complaining that there hasn't been enough water but this year it lasted through the summer. One of the highlights for me this year was how well some of our water loving plant species reacted to the damper conditions. Two species which stood out most were Yellow Flag Iris and Purple Loosestrife. Both, typically confined to the ditches, could be seen



growing extensively across the North Marsh adding purples and yellows to an already colourful pallet.

On the flip side though, the almost consistent wet and warm weather proved challenging from a management standpoint. Trying to cut the meadows for hay on time proved near impossible because the ground was always too wet. Don't get me wrong, great for plants and great for insects but it does mean that next year's regrowth in the meadows may not include as wide a range of wildflower species as one would hope for. To much nutrient returning to the ground can be a problem. To understand more about the cycle of hay cutting, click on [The Open University](#) where researchers explain a bit more about managing floodplain meadows and why 'timing' is so important.

# Ranger round-up

A V Roe Arches  
frozen ice



## Moving on

In July we said farewell to volunteer Kerry Farrelly. Kerry joined our team of Honorary Wardens last year balancing weekly Wednesday tasks at Walthamstow Marshes with college work at Capel Manor where she studied countryside management.

Kerry brought a great attitude to tasks and added greatly to the team. She never shied away from anything thrown her way and was keen to learn and always asked questions. Volunteering not only provided her with valuable experiences and skills but also helped her to build confidence.

Over the course of her time at Walthamstow Marshes, Kerry helped repair and build new fencing, plant and care for new trees, monitor and trap invasive mink and learned how to use a range of tools and machinery.

We wish Kerry all the best as she now moves on to a traineeship position she's secured with the RSPB.

## Hedgehog surveying

A survey of hedgehogs is currently underway on Leyton Marsh and The WaterWorks Nature Reserve using a combination of thermal imaging, footprint tunnels and camera traps. The surveying is part of a collaborative project between The Authority, Zoological Society of London, London Hog Watch and the Peoples Trust for Endangered Species. The aim is to learn more about hedgehogs in the Lee Valley Park and to continue to improve their habitat. The first night of surveying revealed three hedgehogs on Leyton Marsh. Long live the hedgehog!



## A raving season

Look back at newspaper articles from this year and you'll find more than just one story about how police had to break up illegal raves in parks, nature reserves and our countryside. This year Walthamstow Marshes has had to deal with its fair share of parties too.

It's one thing to invite a group of friends or family to come together to celebrate an event but when a hundred or more revelers rock up to a nature reserve playing full blown amped-up music, getting drunk or high on drugs, behaving inconsiderately towards other park users and causing damage or disturbance to wildlife, well, a line has been crossed.

We've been keeping a close eye on known hotspots this year and we've been working closely with local law enforcement and Network Rail land sheriffs to keep on top of things. One recent large group of revellers were caught partying at Coppermill Dell, with the help of British Transport Police the event was swiftly shut down, equipment seized and escorted off site. It's been relatively quiet ever since, how about that!

Visit us at [visitleevalley.org.uk/walthamstowmarshes](http://visitleevalley.org.uk/walthamstowmarshes)

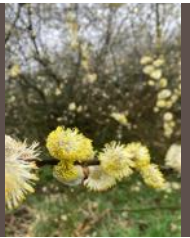


## What's where on the marshes?

Walthamstow Marshes, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), is a stunning mosaic of wetland habitat set in the heart of north east London managed by Lee Valley Regional Park. The site is of great importance locally and regionally with significant recreational, historical and ecological value. Home to meadows, reedbeds, wet woodland, Water Voles, birdlife and native breed cattle, there's much to see and explore.







## A hidden marsh

Horse Shoe Thicket has three ponds and all are quite different from one another. The Old Pond, located nearest the picnic area, has proven to be the most interesting and exciting to work with these few years.

It became a bit of a personal project of mine in 2019 when I learned from a former Ranger that it had importance for several rare and scarce wetland plant species to Walthamstow Marshes. So, I dug a little deeper into the history of the pond and managed to find some old management notes. They described efforts to re-introduce Marsh Bedstraw to a pond at Horse Shoe Thicket dating back to 20 years ago. They also showed drawings of how the pond was initially designed, forming a shallow berm at one end for the purpose of creating marsh-like conditions.

Great, I thought to myself. Now I just had to find what plants were introduced. I had already seen a handful of Cuckoo Flower growing here but with so much reed present, it was impossible to find anything else. The pond had been managed for years by cutting sections of reed on rotation to preserve open water conditions but little attention given to the small marshy area described in the old notes. It had become hidden beneath the dense, invasive reed over time and had been forgotten.

In 2020, I grabbed myself a hand scythe and began cutting. I returned several times over the summer to do this. This would help suppress the reed growth and maybe allow anything hidden in the seedbank or elsewhere to return. Volunteers joined in during the winter as well helping to clear reed from within the pond itself. Bit of a smelly job to be honest and not the most enjoyable of jobs.

So, did it work you ask? Yes. This spring I was greeted to an amazing display of over 300 Cuckoo Flowers *Cardamine pratensis*, a carpet of Marsh Bedstraw *Galium palustre* and the golden yellow flowers of Square-Stalked St.John's-wort *Hypericum tetrapterum*. We plan to keep managing the pond's marsh and hopefully see more of these scarce plants return next year.



The Old Pond at Horse Shoe Thicket



Volunteers getting kitted out for a cold morning's pond task



Cuckoo Flower



Marsh Bedstraw



Square Stalked St.John's-



Volunteers wading the Old Pond





# Managing the marshes



## Monitoring water levels on the marshes

Come wintertime, water levels on the marshes rise by several feet and it's at this time that I and some volunteers get to have some fun. Wading through waist high water might not be for everybody but as you push your way through tall reedbed with the water surrounding you, it can feel like you've stepped into another world.

Our task this winter was to find the deepest part of the marshes and having waded through dense reedbed we'd finally found it. This year's flooding measured 1.2m above ground level in the Great Reedbed. That might not sound like much but that's the highest it's been in the last five years. Throughout the rest of the year we monitor water levels in the ditches with the help of depth gauge boards installed on the South Marsh and North Marsh.

By recording water levels each month, we can compare seasonal and annual variations. This can help us to predict and determine longer term water level trends. It can also provide insight into how the water regime works and therefore aid management of the site.

## Fence repairs

Every year sections of fencing need repairing and replacing. I try to do most repairs in spring when ground is dry enough but also soft enough to dig or bang into. So, this spring, with the help of our volunteer wardens, we got down to business. We concentrated on some of the worst bits first. Fencing is always a tricky job. You can never rely fully on the weather to be on your side and this season we had to contend with very wet ground conditions. With conditions as they were, the tasks quickly became problem solving activities and volunteers seemed to enjoy coming up with solutions. It's also a team building exercise and great for getting people to bond.

This year we installed a new field gate at the entrance to the Water Vole Refuge, an area located between the ditch and the cattle field on the South Marsh. It'll help control cattle movements between fields. Looking back, I'm glad we tackled these repairs this year instead of delaying. I hear the price of wood from abroad has shot through the roof.



## Ditch work

If you'd like to know what the smelliest job I have to do on the marshes is, it's looking after our ditches. No matter if you come out dry or wet, you'll still go home smelling of rotten eggs.

The ditches stretch over half a mile along the outside edge of the marshes protecting them from incursions and providing important habitat for wildlife like water voles, reptiles and amphibians.

To maintain them, I usually employ the help of some volunteers. This May we donned some waders and began pulling as much of the invasive Reedmace as we could get our hands on. Without this intervention, there would be little space for other aquatic plants to grow, some of which need to float on the open water's surface and need plenty of light. We managed to clear nearly 50m on this one occasion and I plan to clear more with some mechanical help in November.





# Managing the marshes



## Coppermill orchid banks

When I cycle to work in the mornings I like to save time by checking a few things along the way. This May, I made sure to check the banks at Coppermill Dell for signs of Bee Orchids. I was hopeful that they would recover from last year's dreadful show. Unfortunately, the hoards of visitors that came to the marshes in 2020 trampled everything preventing anything from growing above a centimetre high.

This year, though, I was glad to find 11 flowering stems. It wasn't the high number's I was hoping for but at least they had returned. I was delighted to see as well, a small patch of fragrant Wild Marjoram growing below a Field Maple tree.

This August myself and some volunteers managed to cut the meadows along the banks getting them ready for next year's growth and hopefully, another year of orchids.

## The Old Pond

The Common Reed regenerates quickly in the Old Pond at Horse Shoe Thicket. In fact, it grows so fast and tall that the pond becomes unrecognisable. A regular supply of sunshine and rain will do that if there's nothing to keep it at bay. If the surrounding fence wasn't present, I suspect most people wouldn't even know it existed.

Glad to say, though, that the area of marsh we've been managing here has improved over 2021. The amount of reed growing on the marsh area was less compared to last year. This suited all of the locally scarce plant species we are trying to conserve here. I'm optimistic that we'll see another good display next year. Working at this time of the summer, the Old Pond can be a bit of a sweat box. So, a great effort was put in by our volunteers Jeff, Rebecca, and Brenda who helped to cut and clear the reed on the day.



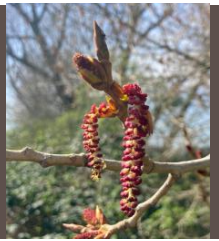
## Insect borders

To help our insects on Walthamstow Marshes we've begun a programme of habitat works which should help provide more space for more insects. Each year, after the fields are cut for hay, the area of grassland and marsh habitat left standing for insects to overwinter in is largely reduced, leaving just the untouched field margins to act as winter refugia. Over the years, some of these field margins have suffered from damage and have been squeezed into smaller, narrower areas by encroaching bramble and widening of paths.

This year, with the help of volunteers, we began cutting back bramble around the outside edges of the meadows. Our aim is to encourage a more diverse range of plant species to grow in these margins, providing habitat for a broader range of insects which need to overwinter locally before returning the next year.







## Life on the marshes



### Walthamstow Cattle

It's been a year of mixed fortunes for our cattle on the marshes. By the end of last year we had increased our herd size and with three of them pregnant and things were looking up for 2021.

Well, it hasn't quite played out that way. Having cattle on site is never straight forward. I've learned to expect the unexpected by now. Unfortunately, this spring, we lost two cattle to health complications. We did everything we could for them with the help of the vet and our farmer but it just wasn't to be. We've got a great farm team at Lee Valley Regional Park. As soon as we see something that isn't right, they are quick to respond and don't leave anything to chance.

Despite the bad news, I'm still feeling hopeful and excited for the future of the herd at Walthamstow Marshes. We currently have nine cattle conservation grazing for us and two of them are pregnant again. It was great to see three new young Herefords join the rest of the herd on the marshes as well earlier this year. They're really big, stocky looking cattle despite their age and they have an appetite to match. They're also quite playful and inquisitive at this age and I'm excited to see them develop.

### A great year for our swans

It's easy to see what catches people's attention the most. If it's cute, fluffy and within viewing distance you're sure to see a crowd gathering. This year, our resident nesting Mute Swans churned out nine cygnets in May. Anybody passing by Coppermill Stream beside Lee Valley Marina, Springfield were sure to see them.

That's two years in a row now that the swans have successfully used the same location to nest. It seems to provide ample protection and safe access to the canal. I'll have to get in there over the winter to cut back some of the willow to ensure access for them next year again.



### Recovery Through Nature Project - the Native Black Poplar

As part of our efforts to conserve the Black Poplar tree in the Lee Valley Park we've been working with Phoenix Future's Trust, a leading national charity for people with drug and alcohol misuse. The charity's Recovery through Nature (RtN) initiative is an evidence based conservation therapy programme. RtN engages teams of service users in a range of practical conservation projects and uses that experience to aid their rehabilitation and recovery. A few years ago, we visited Walthamstow Marshes to locate some suitable trees and to take some cuttings for propagating. Our aim was to replace those trees coming to the end of their lives and to plant some more to increase their numbers on the park.

The most difficult part of the process for me is having the time and resources to care for the plants day-in, day-out, to the point that they're ready for re-planting. Having a group of people to do this for me helps to take that burden off of my shoulders and helps greatly to ensure the project's success.

This September we received over 30 native Black Poplars ready for planting this November. It's been great working with the Phoenix Futures Trust. As well as the benefits to nature, knowing that this collaboration can help promote a person's recovery journey from drug and alcohol misuse adds even greater value to the project.



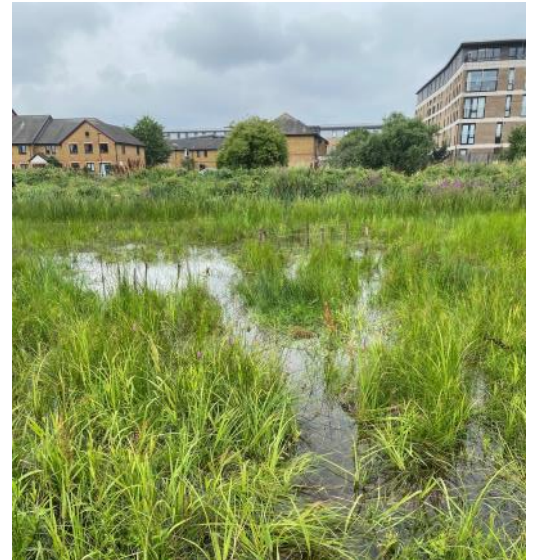




## Lee Valley Park's rare plants

One of Walthamstow Marshes' most iconic plant species is the rare and critically endangered Creeping Marshwort *Helosciadium repens*. Its distribution is restricted to just a handful of sites in England and it was first discovered growing on the marshes on 18 July 2002 by botanical specialist Brian Wurzell. A scrape was dug adjacent to where it was discovered to encourage its growth and expansion. Over several years, with help from the park's staff, it spread successfully, though it remained quite localised. In 2012, there were signs that the plant was struggling and by September of that same year, it had disappeared. Management of the scrape and repeat surveys were carried out over the following five years in the hope it would return but to no avail.

In 2018, I and colleagues met with botanists in Oxfordshire. They had been successfully pioneering new conservation methods for Creeping Marshwort across several of their sites. We met them twice that year along with Natural England to examine their methods and to refine our own plant identification skills. It's quite a tricky plant to distinguish from the more common and widespread, Fool's-Water-cress *Helosciadium nodiflorum*, a plant also found growing on Walthamstow Marshes. We discussed our options and agreed on a plan for Walthamstow Marshes.



The Scrape at Walthamstow Marshes



Flowering Creeping Marshwort

Creeping Marshwort prefers to spread using creeping runners and it can also reproduce by seed. It relies on a short open sward habitat to thrive and enlarge its territory. The use of cattle grazing on site helps to provide this structure but we knew that we needed to help things along by cutting the vegetation by hand as well, almost as short as one's front lawn.

The next two years passed by and though we were creating the right habitat conditions there was no sign of any plants. In September 2020, I decided to do one last check of the scrape before the season came to a close. I spent an hour searching and then, suddenly, I stopped. There was a single flowering stalk poking up from beneath a patch of moss. It looked out of place for that time of year. I looked more closely and checked for several diagnostic characters. I had it! I was sure it was Creeping Marshwort. I took some photos and sent them off to several experts for confirmation. I was right, it was Creeping Marshwort!

Skip forward to today, September 2021. Despite the very wet summer we've had, Creeping Marshwort has reappeared. Four separate patches have been found and up to 20 flowering stalks identified in June. It has been frustrating though. The heavy rains in July and August killed off the flowers but fortunately, the plants themselves survived. To avoid losing more of the plant material I had no choice but take as many cuttings as possible. It wasn't easy, everything was under water and difficult to see. I collected approximately 30 cuttings. I potted them up and kept them moist for over a week. Some plants failed but eventually I began to see regrowth which was reassuring.

The plants are now being cared for by our Ranger team under license from Natural England. Our plan now is to grow on the cuttings to provide more stock to plant in next year on the marshes. The more plants we can get growing in the scrape the more robust this small population will be against possible threats.



Collecting cuttings in June



# You and your dog



One of the best things about Walthamstow Marshes is that it's accessible to all and we would like it to stay that way. People and their dogs have been coming to the park for years to experience the wild open landscape and to escape the hustle and bustle of urban city life. It's also well recognised that there are health and social benefits to owning a dog and walking them in greenspaces like Walthamstow Marshes is something to be valued.

However, the purpose of a nature reserve is also to support, protect and conserve wildlife and wild places. With over 1.8 million visits to Walthamstow Marshes last year, many more dogs accompanied visitors to the park and inevitably, this resulted in more dog related incidents with cattle, horses, wildlife, people and other dogs too.

To reduce the risks going forward and to meet our objectives for Walthamstow Marshes, the authority must try to find the right balance between encouraging access to experience this nature reserve and continuing to protect its wildlife. Dog walking is just one area where finding this balance is difficult.

The bird nesting season is from early March to late August. During this time birds are vulnerable to disturbance. A dog off a lead, simply 'doing what dogs do', nosing and exploring a little further off the beaten track may seem harmless to owners but the unfortunate effects can be to flush birds from their hidden nests and prevent them from settling for several minutes at a time, leaving eggs unattended and exposed. Birds may even abandon their nests if disturbed too often.

Overwintering birds begin arriving in October and leave by March. Natural flooding of the marsh provides safe areas for birds to feed and build up their fat reserves which fuel their return migration to summer nesting grounds. Disturbance from people and dogs can lead to birds burning through too much stored energy leaving them weaker, more vulnerable and unable to breed.

The cattle on Walthamstow Marshes stay between May and December. They help to promote biodiversity through their grazing of vegetation and are a valued sight by visitors to the park. However, their behaviour can be unpredictable, especially when they're with their young and you could get hurt if you get too close. Cattle approached by dogs may feel threatened and will defend themselves putting you and your dog at risk of injury or worse.

Hacking is permitted out on the marshes year round for riders who wish to exercise their horses and enjoy the marshes from a saddle. A series of bridleways restrict riders to certain routes but the potential for encounters between horses and dog walkers is still high along many of the main paths.

Though visitors are most welcome to bring their well behaved dogs with them around most of the nature reserve, we have decided to make some changes. These include introducing a 'dog's on leads' policy for anyone walking their dog through the North Marsh. Signage has been erected at all entrance points to the North Marsh to mark this transition. This will compliment existing restrictions to certain areas of the South Marsh.

Most of the marshes are still accessible to dog walkers. Leyton Marsh and Coppermill Fields still provided plenty of room to walk your dog off the lead but we still ask everyone to be considerate of other users and keep your dog under close control. This May we began engaging visitors to the park, raising awareness of these new measures and to answer any questions. We're grateful for your help and hope you enjoy using the marshes.





# Work on the new Lee Valley Ice Centre underway

Construction works began on the new Lee Valley Ice Centre in August. It's being constructed on the site of the old venue in Lea Bridge Road, Leyton and will be a major new community hub as well as one of the best centres in the UK.

The new centre will include a café, gym, exercise studios and community spaces which will be open to everyone. It will be accompanied by landscape and ecology improvements including new wetland habitats. The venue will provide a place for people to socialise and relax and be a meeting point for visitors to the award winning nearby green space.



Construction is being carried out by Buckingham Group Contracting Ltd (BGCL) and the new centre is due to open in October 2022. We marked the start of demolition in August with an event which saw the unveiling of hoardings that included new community artwork designed by local schoolchildren. The old Lee Valley Ice Centre has now been fully dismantled, and BGCL began laying the foundations for the new centre in October.

Our ambition is to build the most sustainable ice centre in the country, and this will be accompanied through significant environmental enhancements. We will be planting 143 native trees on the site, providing a range of nesting and roosting sites for wildlife. Our landscape enhancements in the surrounding area will include wildflower meadows with a mix of native, locally occurring plants, rich in ecological diversity being prioritised.

A new wetland habitat will be constructed to channel the water from the daily ice scrape and melt from the two ice pads, which will be cleaned and filtered through a small, constructed wetland system. The clean water will be returned to the building for use as grey water to flush toilets. Some of the excess water, along with that collected from the roof, will be discharged into the River Lee Oxbow Lake. The wetlands include planting that can tolerate both periods of drought and standing water and will attract dragonflies, reptiles and amphibians.

The woodland areas will be enhanced by the creation of habitat piles, log piles and the installation of hedgehog shelters as well as both bird and bat boxes.



You can learn about the environmental improvements on our [website](https://www.visitleevalley.org.uk) and [register for updates](https://www.visitleevalley.org.uk) on the construction works. If you have any issues during the build, we have a 24 hour construction helpline on 0800 093 1716 or [LVIC@communitycomms.co.uk](mailto:LVIC@communitycomms.co.uk)





## Get involved!

### Volunteering on the marshes

**Would you like to do something good for the environment and for your local community?** Help us to protect and maintain one of North East London's most valuable natural and cultural treasures. Whether it's carrying out practical habitat management, monitoring wildlife, or helping to run events and guided walks, there's a volunteering opportunity for everyone on the marshes. There are a number of groups who work throughout the year helping us on the marshes:

#### **Lee Valley Regional Park Volunteers**

For more information on volunteering opportunities and tasks go to [visitleevalley.org.uk/volunteers](http://visitleevalley.org.uk/volunteers) or contact the Rangers on 020 8988 7565.

We're looking for people to join our teams of volunteers on Walthamstow Marshes:

- **Honorary Wardens** - you'll be the eyes and ears of the park helping the Ranger Team to patrol, monitor and manage everything special about the marshes. Wednesday tasks with flexibility built in. Full training provided.
- **Litter picking** - help keep the park litter free and clean for all to enjoy. Work on days that suit you.
- **Conservation tasks** - assist at monthly tasks in the conservation of the environment and park infrastructure. Full training provided.
- **Stock checkers** - assist with cattle checks to maintain welfare standards on days that suit. Full training provided.
- **Invasive mink monitoring** - assist in weekly checks of mink rafts and help protect the endangered Water Vole. Full training provided.

#### **Lea Bridge Conservation Volunteers (LBCV)**

LBCV meet on the first Sunday of every month to carry out habitat management tasks. Contact: Colin Smith, [lbcv.org.uk](http://lbcv.org.uk) No experience needed. Full training provided,



#### **Contact**

##### **Eamonn Lawlor**

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