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# Hertfordshire Natural History Society Management Committee Report for the year April 2022-March 2023

## Aim and purposes

Hertfordshire Natural History Society promotes the study and recording of the flora and fauna of Hertfordshire and encourages a wider interest in natural history, including the conservation of wildlife, habitats and geological features, for the purpose of environmental protection or improvement.

## Achievements and performance

The lifting of Government restrictions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2022 allowed the Society's outdoor and indoor activities to return to normal after a cautious start. The Autumn Meeting and AGM in October was the first 'face-to-face' conference since February 2020 and attracted more than 40 members. The Gerald Salisbury Memorial Lecture in February 2023 then drew a capacity audience of 90 at Welwyn Civic Centre. Numbers for the Herts Bird Conference in March at Affinity Water's offices in Hatfield also reached capacity. In the field, the specialist groups for flora, bryophytes and invertebrates resumed their annual programmes of meetings. The county-wide survey of mammals, amphibians and reptiles made welcome progress and the new survey of dragonflies and damselflies launched into a successful first season. There was, however, one notable setback with the apparent loss of Hertfordshire's last breeding colony of Tree Sparrows at Tyttenhanger. For 30 years, Herts Bird Club volunteers provided supplementary feeding, nestboxes and other support for the birds, but in recent years the colony had become increasingly unsustainable. The national spread of avian 'flu presented a general threat to wildfowl and birds of prey, prompting the Society to publish website advice for those encountering dead or sick birds.

## Wildlife recording

Most wildlife records collected and collated by the Society and its network of county recorders are submitted electronically. This facilitates data sharing. Most of the three million plus records collected by the Hertfordshire Environmental Records Centre (HERC) since 2013 have been submitted through the Society.

We encourage volunteers and professionals to collect and submit wildlife records through our own websites, or using national schemes such as BTO Birdtrack, the

Mammal Society and iRecord. The Society currently maintains website recording portals for birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles, and dragonflies. Further opportunities for information and image sharing are enabled through Facebook, Twitter and Flickr. Records can also be submitted to the relevant county recorder by email or on paper.

## Surveys and projects

**Dragonfly and damselfly atlas survey** The six-year survey, which is the second to be carried out in the county, launched after two years of Covid-related delay and accumulated 2,500 records in its first year. Thirty different species were located, all but one of which are recorded on tetrad (2km-square) maps published on the website. This is already seven more species than were recorded during the whole of the first survey between 2000 and 2005. An undoubted highlight was the discovery of Scarce Blue-tailed Damselflies for the first time in Hertfordshire since 1948. At least four individuals were found at King's Meads with evidence of attempted breeding, and the species was, again, found there early in the 2023 season. The survey



*Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly at Kingsmead (photo Barry Reed).*

aims to map all species present in the county and record evidence of breeding and assess flight periods, abundance and habitat preferences. Records can be submitted via iRecord or using the HNHS website, which also provides advice on identification and how to find evidence of potential breeding.

**Mammals, amphibians and reptile atlas (Herts MARA)** After undertaking an analysis of the records collected since the start of the atlas survey in 2015, the team MARA decided to extend the collection period to the end of 2024. A full decade of records will allow for more comprehensive coverage of the county, not least hard-to-record species such as many small mammals and bats. These groups take many hours to survey, requiring traps to be set over an extended period of time in appropriate locations and surveyors to have appropriate licences. We are also still in need of ad hoc records, and continue to welcome those submitted via iRecord or the HNHS mammal and amphibian record page. We are also in need of volunteers to train to undertake small mammal trapping at a number of locations across the county, so if this is of interest, please contact the team. Plans for later summer in 2023 included mini-blitz events in the north-east and centre of the county, combining small mammal trapping and bat surveys. Continuing thanks go to all those who have submitted records to date and to the project organisers: Ian Flack, Chantal Helm, Jenny Jones and Dave Willis.

**Herts Invertebrate Project** Six meetings took place in 2022, starting with Wilbury Hill in April where the highlight was actually a Green-winged Orchid. Amongst the recording highlights of our May trip to Aldbury Nowers were *Lasioglossum xanthopus*, a nationally notable bee, and *Asiraca clavicornis*, a nationally notable bug that seems to be expanding its range. In June we went to Blagrove Common where we found the leafhopper *Evacanthus acuminatus*, a county first. July saw a few people head to Hexton Chalk Pit for a Friday evening meeting. Hot dry weather meant our August meeting at Purwell Ninesprings was relatively quiet as was our final trip of the year to Thorley Wash in September. We were, however, pleased to add Short-winged Conehead *Conocephalus dorsalis* to the site list.

**Monitoring at Heartwood Forest** Extensive wildlife monitoring has continued at Heartwood, building on records summarized in more detail in the 2022 *Hertfordshire Naturalist* and in February's Gerald Salisbury Memorial Lecture given by Brian Legg and Tim Wright (see below). Over 350 species of moths have now been recorded now across the site. Most have been observed on foot, but use of light trapping and pheromone traps is expected to increase the species count. A recent downward trend in butterfly records (following a marked increase between 2010 and 2019) was reversed. Sightings on weekly butterfly walks returned to at least the level in 2020.

Annual breeding bird surveys in April and June located 58 species and a total of 1,700 individuals.

These included two Cuckoos, plus a Reed Warbler and large numbers of Willow Warblers near the wetland area. There were good numbers of open-area birds such as Whitethroats, Skylarks and Meadow Pipits. Monthly bird surveys also continued. Nest site visits in June confirmed two Barn Owl broods at the Arboretum and Valley nestboxes. By October, all birds from this first brood had safely fledged, but no second broods were present. Three Kestrels had fledged from the 'Hammonds Lane' box and a Mandarin Duck laid an impressive 11 eggs in the Barn Owl box there.

The hot, dry summer may have helped explain lower numbers of small mammals caught during annual monitoring using live trapping in October. Wood Mice still dominated the survey, although the number of Field Voles increased slightly. The decline in Bank Voles continued. Just one Common Lizard was recorded (on an exceptionally mild New Year's Day) near Langley Wood. Investigations continue to discover where the Barbastelle bats often detected at Heartwood have their roost. Timed data from static detectors during the summer indicated that they are coming from the northeast and that their roost may be to the west of Welwyn Garden City.

The flora group continued to monitor species in the 10x10m plots along transects in Farfield and Hilltop as well as recording around the wetland area. The latter is of interest for the rapid spread of Common Water-crowfoot *Ranunculus aquatilis*, a Hertfordshire rarity. Management of encroaching scrub and of the highly invasive New Zealand Pygmyweed *Crassula helmsii* will be essential to maintaining the habitat.

Annual measurements of sapling growth and survival have provided valuable data for different species in areas across the site, but a new sampling protocol will now be developed with an emphasis on carbon storage, based on tree volume. This will involve fewer, but larger, plots. Fixed-point photography records will continue to illustrate the development of the woodland.

Thanks go to all the species group recorders in the Heartwood Monitoring Group who kept their activities going through the pandemic and during the exceptionally dry and hot summer months of 2022.

**Tree Sparrow Recovery Project** As anticipated a year ago the last Tree Sparrow colony in Hertfordshire has sadly gone. A pair clung on until March 2022 and a single bird was recorded on 15 April 2022 at their breeding site at Tyttenhanger Gravel Pits on the edge of St Albans. No records have been received since, save for a possible sighting at nearby on 1 September. The colony's demise comes after more than 30 years support and monitoring by volunteers and the Herts Bird Club. The programme of feeding and nest monitoring helped to sustain the population for



many years, but factors seemingly beyond its control eventually saw the population collapse. Reasons for the loss (and the demise of other colonies in southeastern England) are somewhat speculative, but undoubtedly found among the multiple factors that have seen so much birdlife decline in the past 50 years. Climate change and the use of pesticides in intensive farming probably have the biggest part to play, not least because of their effect on insect food so critical to Tree Sparrow fledglings. Other, localised influences such as increasing human disturbance may have contributed. The Tree Sparrow is an inherently sensitive species with a high mortality rate – meaning that populations of fewer than 50 birds will always be vulnerable to sudden crashes.

In the faint hope that birds may still visit the Tyttenhanger area, the support project is continuing until at least the end of 2023. The support of Urban & Civic plc (who retain a development interest in the area) is gratefully acknowledged, along with the efforts of Richard Geary to top-up feeders, carry out ringing sessions and monitor nest boxes. Volunteer efforts over many years to maintain the Tree Sparrow population also deserve warm thanks. Much data was collected through the electronic loggers, giving insight into the daily routines and behaviour of the Tree Sparrows and it is hoped the information will be of use to others trying to support populations elsewhere. Another 'positive' from the project has been the relationships established with land-managers in the Tyttenhanger area. The Tyttenhanger Estate (represented by Savills), Tarmac Ltd, Willows Activity Farm, Albans Lakes Fishery, Barhale (at Tyttenhanger House), J. Day Stoneworks and others have been instrumental in providing access and cooperation. It is hoped these productive relationships can continue, since Tyttenhanger – rich in wildlife – faces an uncertain future. Hertsmere Borough Council is expected to persist with efforts to earmark parts of the site and surrounding land for housing development. HNHS, with other conservation groups, believes the creation of a large, managed nature reserve will be the best way help to ensure that Tyttenhanger's varied habitats are protected and enhanced for the future benefit of wildlife and people.

**The Herts Flora Group** Six well-attended field meetings took place between April and September 2022. Freed (temporarily!) from routine 'square-bashing' for local or national plant atlases (see below), the meetings focused on updating records for some of the most botanically significant sites in the county including Harpenden Common, Croxley Common Moor and Bricket Wood Common. One event at Heartwood in June also formed part of a national programme of field meetings offered by the Botanical Society of Britain

and Ireland (BSBI), and we greatly appreciate the involvement of Brian Legg who described management and wildlife monitoring initiatives at different habitats at Heartwood including the now established and impressive arboretum. Also in June, the county plant recorders supported by Stephen Moss, a former weed scientist at Rothamsted, held a grass identification workshop at Bayfordbury for Flora Group members as well staff and volunteers of the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust. Throughout the year recorders contributed to final scrutiny of records for inclusion in a new Plant Atlas for Britain and Ireland, scheduled to be launched under the auspices of BSBI in March 2023.

## Publications

*Transactions of the Hertfordshire Natural History Society 2022, Volume 54*

**Part 1: *The Hertfordshire Naturalist 2022*** was published in October 2022. This was the last issue to be edited by Judy England who has moved away from the county. Grateful thanks go to her and her editorial team.

**Part 2: *The Hertfordshire Bird Report 2021*** was published in November 2022. Thanks, again, go to the editor, Clifford Smout, and his team with congratulations for, once more, completing their report by the autumn following the recording year.

## Events

### Wildfest 2022 – St Albans

The HNHS contributed a stall selling county wildlife atlases and providing other, free materials about the Society and Hertfordshire wildlife at this successful family-focused outdoor event in July 2022. It was organised in Verulamium Park by the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust with many of the county's specialist flora and fauna groups also taking part.



*Our stall at Wildfest 2022 (photo Tim Hill).*



### Autumn Meeting and Annual General Meeting

More than 40 members attended the Society's first 'face-to-face' conference since Covid restrictions were lifted. Edward Darling, Chief Executive of the Redlist Revival campaign, spoke about work on his own farm in North Hertfordshire to encourage biodiversity and protect rare species. This informed the action he was taking to persuade other landowners to measure their impact using comparison data derived from biological recording. This included development of 'The Life Map' for communicating environmental protection data related to United Nations goals for sustainable development. In a further presentation on the part landholders can play in conservation, Howard Craft, Manager of Berkhamsted Golf Club and Tim Hill, Conservation Manager at the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust, described collaborative efforts to demonstrate how golf courses can be managed to the benefit of golfers and wildlife. Tim noted that courses cover more than 2 per cent of Hertfordshire land compared with just 0.38 per cent managed by the Trust as designated nature reserves. The conference was also given an update by Roy Woodward on progress with the new county dragonfly atlas survey. We are grateful to Alister Leggatt and Affinity Water for hosting the conference at their Hatfield offices.

### Gerald Salisbury Memorial Lecture

Prof Brian Legg and Tim Wright of the Heartwood Monitoring Group (see report for 2022-23 above) gave a well-received lecture in February on the evolution of Hertfordshire's 'new' forest since 2008. A capacity audience of 90 at Welwyn Civic Centre heard about the volunteer effort organised by the Woodland Trust that has seen 600,000 native trees and shrubs planted on former arable land near Sandridge. Systematic recording over 14 years has revealed changing flora and fauna as the saplings grow and unplanted areas have morphed into wildflower meadows and grasslands. Butterflies at Heartwood range from the Small Blue to the Purple Emperor. Grassland areas are a stronghold for Skylarks and summer-visiting Willow Warblers, by no means common in Hertfordshire, nest in the new woodland. Four areas of ancient woodland on the 347-hectare site are home to native Bluebells and may house a winter roost of Barbastelle bats. The lecture was jointly organised by the HNHS and Welwyn Natural History Society.

### Herts Bird Club/British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Conference

National declines in breeding populations of wading birds and local concerns about dwindling winter wildfowl numbers featured at the Bird Conference held in March. An audience of more



*The Herts Bird Club/BTO Conference was well attended (photo Tim Hill).*



*The speakers at this year's conference, left to right: Paul Noyes, Josh Kalms, Mike Ilett and Graham Knight (photo Tim Hill).*

than 80 learned from Project Officer Paul Noyes about the BTO's contribution to halting an alarming reduction in breeding numbers of Curlews and other internationally-important wading bird populations. They also heard from Josh Kalms of the Hertfordshire & Middlesex Wildlife Trust about the bird life of Stocker's Lake near Rickmansworth. This included signs of 'short-stopping' where fewer winter wildfowl cross from the continent because open water there no longer freezes so often, giving the birds less need to fly to Britain. Mike Ilett, co-author of *Birds of Hertfordshire* (1995) also referred to the impact of 'short-stopping' in a review of changing county records since survey work for the atlas was completed ten years ago. Species affected include Gadwall, Goldeneye, Goosander and Smew. Hertfordshire records also reflect the loss of summer-visiting Turtle Doves. Confirmed breeding by Lesser-spotted Woodpecker has further reduced and the county has lost its last colony of Tree Sparrows (see above). However, some species ranging from breeding Ravens to Ring-necked Parakeets have increased in numbers. Graham Knight's annual update on Herts bird records reported highlights from more than 17,000 records received from 425 observers in 2022. These covered 196 species



including Green-winged Teal, White-tailed Eagle, Stone Curlew, Glossy Ibis, Hoopoe and a good year for breeding Peregrine Falcons. Thanks go to HNHS Events Organiser, Tim Hill, to conference hosts Affinity Water and to all involved in running the Society's events during the year.

#### The HNHS Awards for 2022

The Society's Trevor James Award, recognising an outstanding Hertfordshire naturalist, was presented at the 2022 AGM to ecology consultant Jenny Jones who has been county recorder for mammals, amphibians and reptiles for more than 20 years. The award honours her expert work with bats, badgers and other vertebrates and her commitment to training recorders and developing biological recording in Hertfordshire. Jenny compiled the distribution maps and organised recording 'blitzes' for the first county survey of mammals, amphibians and reptiles published in 2001. Her fieldwork, provided early evidence that Barbastelle bats are not as locally rare as once supposed. She also exposed a dramatic decline in the number of Water Voles, paving the way for the current reintroduction programme.

The 1875 Award for an outstanding contribution to natural history in Hertfordshire went to Brenda Harold in recognition of her dedication to teaching and training aspiring botanists, ecologists and land managers. A former Deputy Head of Biological Sciences at Brunel University, her voluntary involvement with the Hertfordshire Local Wildlife Sites survey team for nearly 20 years helped to improve the quality of its recording. It also made her realise that many amateur botanists would benefit from formal training in the principles of plant biology

and identification. Her 'Identiplant' course was trialled in Hertfordshire before gaining national recognition as a route to take flora enthusiasts on the road to becoming competent botanists and recorders.

#### Financial review

Following a decision taken by the management committee in 2020 the Society's accounts are published separately at a time nearer to the Annual General Meeting, rather than in the *Hertfordshire Naturalist*.

#### Volunteers

The Society is managed and run entirely by volunteers. We are grateful to all our volunteers for their continuing hard work, not least the county recorders, the editors of our two journals and those moderating and updating the websites.

#### Members' news

We learned with sadness of the deaths of Nigel Agar, voluntary warden of Hexton Chalk Pit and two other nature reserves in north Hertfordshire, and of David Nellist, the county's first designated spider recorder (from 1977 to 1995) and a past President of the British Arachnological Society. Obituaries are included in this volume. We are also very sorry to record the death of Herts wildlife artist Ernest Leahy. Ernie was a generous contributor of illustrations to the *Herts Bird Report* and donator of pictures to raise money at HNHS conferences. He was largely self-taught and worked mainly in watercolours. His sketches often featured birds and wildlife seen near his home in Redbourn or along the Ver Valley. One of his specialties was composite paintings showing a



Jenny Jones (photo David Utting).



Brenda Harold (photo David Utting).

central scene, such as Verulamium Lake, surrounded by smaller studies of the wildlife to be found there. He exhibited his work annually at the Birdfair at Rutland Water as well as events across Hertfordshire. As a knowledgeable birdwatcher, he also took part in British Trust for Ornithology surveys and was a committee member of the Ver Valley Society.

Our sympathy goes to his wife, Jan, and his children and grandchildren. We are, in addition, grateful to the family of David Leigh, whose death was reported in last year's *Hertfordshire Naturalist*, for a donation of

proceeds from a sale of his geology and other natural history books.

### Structure, governance and management

The Society is a registered charity, governed by a formal constitution last amended in 2007. The Trustees of the Society and other members of the Management Committee are elected each year at the Annual General Meeting in October or November. In October 2022, 14 members of the Society's Management Committee were elected at the AGM,

13 of whom also serve as trustees (see table below). The MC welcomed Stuart Warrington as Editor of the *Hertfordshire Naturalist* in place of Judy England who has moved away from Hertfordshire. The journal could not be in more experienced hands since Stuart (now retired) edited the journal for many years until work commitments obliged him to stop in 2016.

During the year the Committee met five times, in May, July, September, November and February. Membership of the Society remained stable at around 500.



*Fieldfares feeding on fallen apples (Ernest Leahy).*

### Members of the Management Committee (elected in 2021 and 2022)

\* MC members who are also HNHS Trustees.

Role	2020/21	2021/22
Chair	Peter Tallantire*	Peter Tallantire*
Treasurer	Dan Fletcher*	Dan Fletcher*
Secretary and Registrar	David Utting*	David Utting*
Membership Secretary	Martin Ketcher*	Martin Ketcher*
Chair of Recorders' Committee	Veronica Edmonds Brown*	Veronica Edmonds Brown*
Editor, <i>Hertfordshire Naturalist</i>	Judy England	Stuart Warrington*
Events	Tim Hill*	Tim Hill*
Herts Bird Club	Rupert Evershed*	Rupert Evershed*
Herts Bird Club	Jack Fearnside	Jack Fearnside
Herts Bird Club	Alan Gardiner*	
Recording	Agneta Burton*	Agneta Burton*
Recording	Ian Carle*	Ian Carle*
Recording	Alex Waechter*	Alex Waechter*
Special projects	Chantal Helm*	Chantal Helm*
Special projects	Chris James*	Chris James*

**Administrative information:** The Society's registered address is 250 Sandridge Road, St Albans, AL1 4AL.

### HNHS Management Committee

Draft dated July 2023 for presentation at the Society's AGM