

Celebrating the wildlife of Hertfordshire and Middlesex

wildlifematters

Winter 2025



**Herts &
Middlesex**
Wildlife Trust



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Welcome



It's been a busy few months...

Our wildlife continues to face serious threats, from the proposed Planning and Infrastructure Bill to the growing impacts of climate change. Species are declining at alarming rates, and our natural world is under pressure like never before.

But amidst the challenges, we have been busy standing up for nature.

Alongside Wildlife Trust colleagues across the country, we have been responding to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, contacting and meeting with local MPs, attending Westminster Chalk Stream sessions, and making sure nature has a voice. A huge thank you to everyone who has supported this work. While it is encouraging that some amendments were made in July, the Bill still falls short, and we will continue to push for stronger protections for wildlife – find out more on page 6.

This autumn, as my not-so-little ones flew the nest, I've reflected on how lucky my family has been to grow up surrounded by nature and beauty. That's why our Wilder Communities project is so close to my heart. From community events to school visits and youth engagement, our team have been busy helping more people connect with the nature around them, increasing access and awareness to this essential resource. You can read more about this on page 22.

I want to share a change in our team. We've recently said a fond farewell and thank you to Chloë Edwards, who has been our Director of Nature Recovery for the past four years. I'm also thrilled to welcome Fiona Mahon into the role. Fiona brings a wealth of experience, having held senior positions with Cheshire Wildlife Trust, the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts, the National Trust, and RSPB Cymru. She has led climate and sustainability teams in local government and brings expertise in ecology, project management, and environmental planning. We are delighted to have Fiona on board.

Finally, I was blown away by all the responses to my letter in May inviting you to increase your monthly gift – it is so appreciated. Thank you to all of you for your continued and vital support in helping to protect and restore nature.

With thanks and best wishes,

Laura Burrows
Chief Executive

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Ver Valley west © Tim Hill

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Ground beetle, *Carabus nemoralis* (c) Ian Carle

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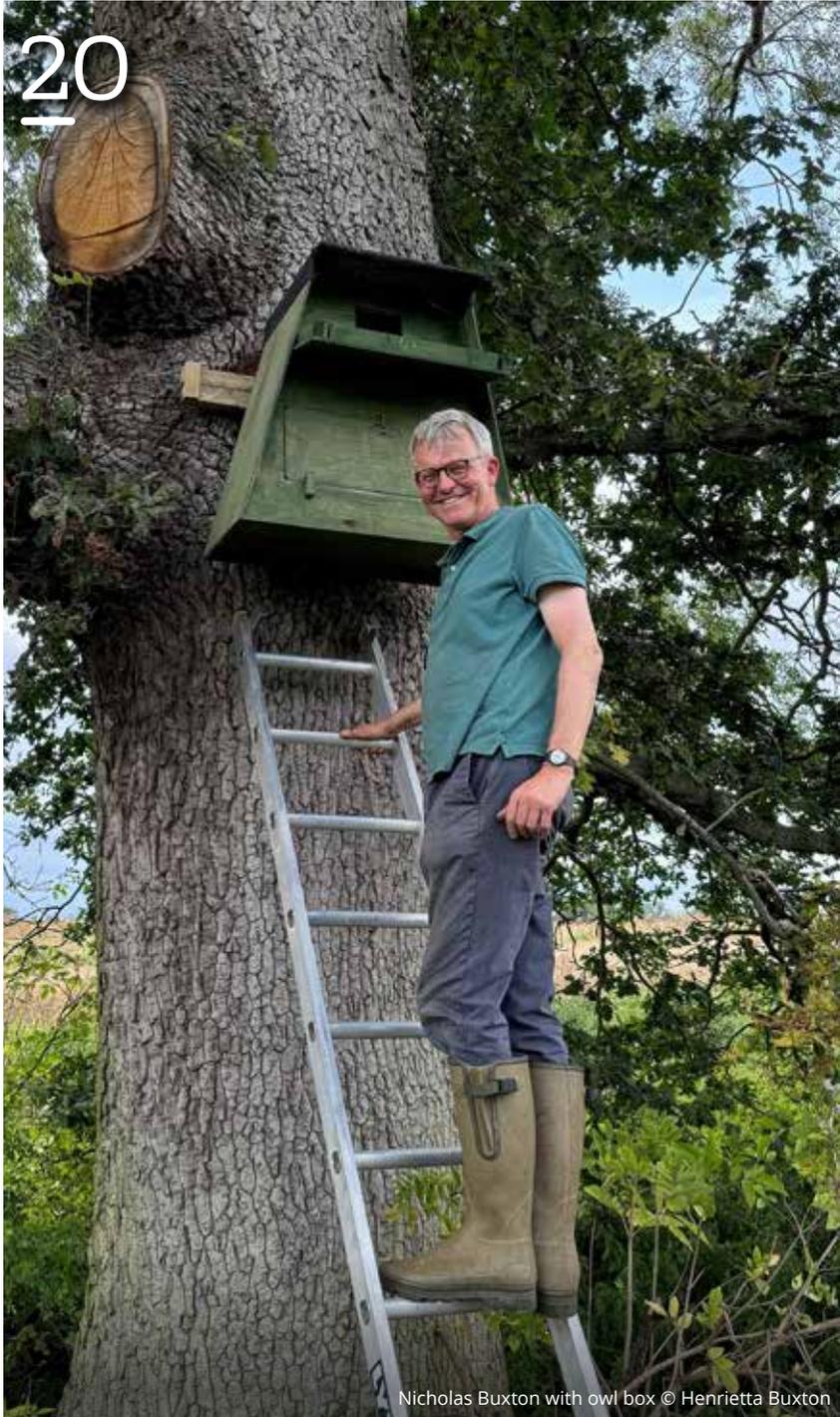
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Nicholas Buxton with owl box © Henrietta Buxton

Did you know we have a members' webpage?

Visit hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/mymembership to find frequently asked questions and how to manage your membership. You can also discover more about our local conservation projects and campaigns, as well as upcoming events so that you can explore your beautiful local wildlife.

Cover: Fly Agaric © Jon Hawkins

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Join an event



Discover wildlife



Donate



Do



Take Action



Enjoy free of charge



Make your voice heard - #DefendNature

All details correct at time of printing.

Herts and Middlesex Wild News



Water Vole reintroduction © Michael Barrett

Water Voles are back on the Upper River Lea!

In early September, the Trust reintroduced 100 Water Voles to a stretch of the Upper River Lea, near Wheathampstead, in collaboration with the Ayot Estate and Verulam Angling Club, and supported by volunteers. It marks the species' return to the river after more than 20 years.

This takes us another step closer to our goal of seeing Water Voles thriving on all of Hertfordshire's rivers by 2030.

The project has been funded by GSK as part of the Projects for Nature Platform and the Government's Species Survival Fund.

hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/news/water-voles-return

Hertfordshire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy

We are proud to be playing a leading role in shaping landscape-scale work for nature's recovery. Our team have been instrumental in helping develop Hertfordshire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), working in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council and many others. The public consultation closed in early September and the emerging Strategy marks a crucial step in identifying priorities, both habitats and species, for nature's recovery. The LNRS will guide work to make habitats bigger, better, and more joined up, not just for wildlife, but for people too, and at the same time tackle environmental challenges like pollution and the impacts of climate change. The LNRS is expected to launch later this year. Learn more at bit.ly/476yit8



© Gascoyne Estates



Tubular Water Dropwort © Dan Townsend

A rare find

This summer our Reserves team were overjoyed to find a rare plant, Tubular Water Dropwort, at Rye Meads Nature Reserve, near Hoddesdon, after it was last recorded on the site in 2018.

Tubular Water Dropwort is one of 1,524 species listed as a Herts Species of Conservation Concern.

Ian Carle, Nature Reserves Manager said: "Tubular Water Dropwort is a perennial, lowland plant which grows in areas of wetland and appears most frequently in ancient habitats, such as traditionally managed meadows like the one at Rye Meads. Although it had not been recorded at the nature reserve for the past seven years, we looked for it amongst the dense vegetation of the wetland meadow that we managed to get cut last year. We were rewarded with finding around 130 plants, which is an incredible find, given its rarity."

hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/news/rare-plants-found-herts-nature-reserve

Worldwide celebration, local impact

On 28 September, we celebrated World Rivers Day by putting six of our local projects on the map. From improving climate resilience to creating habitat for wildlife, and from connecting people and communities to inspiring curiosity, you can read more here at bit.ly/4gYGL61

Broadwater Lake Update

At the time of writing, Broadwater Lake SSSI in the Colne Valley remains under potential threat from the proposed development of a new Watersports Facility and Activity Centre. Following a prolonged period of uncertainty, we have now been informed that Hillingdon Council's planning consultants (Quod) intend to submit a revised planning application in the near future.

We understand the proposals have changed significantly. Once the detailed plans are publicly available on the Council's planning portal, we will be taking the necessary time to review them in full to understand the implications of what is now being proposed on this nationally important site, and what that could mean for the wildlife that depends on it. We will share our views as soon as we're in a position to do so, so please keep an eye on our campaign page and our social media for the latest updates at ow.ly/lfs650S9Lew



Broadwater Lake © Tim Hill

AGM – Coming together for nature's recovery

Thank you to everyone able to attend our AGM at the end of September. As Laura Burrows, our CEO's, first, it was a great opportunity for her, and the rest of us, to meet so many of our supporters in person. In addition to Laura sharing the year's highlights and, Peter Tallantire, Chair of Trustees presenting a financial review, Sarah Perry, River Catchment Co-ordinator, and Kate Sheard, Wilder Communities Officer gave fascinating talks about all the amazing work being achieved in our area through the Government's Species Survival Fund.

Please share your photos and videos

We'd love to see your photos and videos of local wildlife, and, with your consent, possibly use them to contribute towards the work of the Trust.



Michael Barrett © Josh Kalms

Michael Barrett, a keen photographer, recently joined us on the Water Vole reintroduction on the Upper River Lea, and has supported our media work with some fabulous images.

Michael said, "Photography is my window on nature. It started off as a way of cataloguing nature and it turned into a love. Photography makes you observe what animals are doing – and that helps with your fieldcraft too.

"We've got to preserve everything. Anything that anyone can do will help - promoting what we should all be cherishing."

If you have photos or videos of local wildlife and are willing to share them with us and our audiences to help restore nature, please email media@hmwt.org

Improving our reserves

Recent surveys at Blagrove Common Nature Reserve, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, showed that some of the rare wetland plants that should thrive here were missing – and the site was drying out.

To help nature recover, we've carried out essential work to restore the wetland, protect wildlife, and make the site more resilient to climate change. As a result, parts of the reserve may look a little messy right now but please be assured that the project holds long-term benefits for this special place.

Strategic Changes to our Nature Reserves

In our last issue of Wildlife Matters (Summer 2025), we announced that we would be stepping away from seven of our nature reserves, 3% of our land holdings, to enable us to refocus our efforts and limited resources elsewhere.

The Trust is in discussions with local authorities and neighbouring residents regarding the future of these sites and remains fully committed to ensuring they will all continue to enable wildlife to thrive within them.

You can find out more and get the latest updates at hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/strategic-changes-nature-reserves

Do you follow us on social media?

Did you know our social media platforms enable you to keep up-to-date with news clippings, volunteer shout-outs, events and a whole lot more?

If you're not already following us, please do!

-  **Facebook** @hertswildlifetrust
-  **Instagram** @hertswildlifetrust
-  **X** @HMWTBadger
-  **TikTok** @hertswildlifetrust



UK NEWS



Concerns of risk to wildlife if planning laws weakened

Over this year, The Wildlife Trusts and other environmental organisations have become increasingly concerned about the risks to wildlife posed by potentially destructive rollbacks in environmental safeguards. In what felt like a twin attack on measures to help protect and restore wildlife in England, the UK Government has been considering big changes with new legislation related to the planning system. This includes a new Planning and Infrastructure Bill and a relaxing of Biodiversity Net Gain – a requirement on developers to leave nature in a better state than it was before.

Despite the Government promising a 'win-win' for development and the environment in the run up to the General Election, early readings of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill looked to strip away environmental protections and remove requirements for developers to avoid harming nature – breaking that promise. As concerns mounted, The Wildlife Trusts called on you, our supporters, to lend your voice. In what became our Broken Promises campaign, over 30,000 of you emailed your MP to ask for parts of the Bill to be withdrawn as environmentally unsafe and to request that the UK Government

stopped issuing incorrect statements about nature protections being a blocker to house building.

Thanks to your support, we have seen progress, with amendments to the Bill published by Ministers in mid-July that go a significant way to addressing our concerns. These amendments add new environmental safeguards to the proposed law and were published alongside a policy statement from the UK Government recognising nature protections are not a barrier to growth.

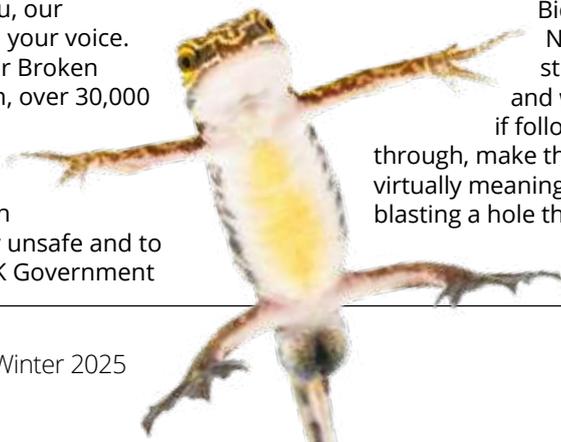
However, this does not mean the risk to wildlife has completely disappeared and so we will continue to work with parliamentary peers on the Bill, pressing for further assurances. We will also continue to stress to Government that fiddling with planning protections will not produce the economic results they want. Nature is not a 'blocker' - it is the source of our security and prosperity.

In addition, proposals to weaken Biodiversity Net Gain still exist and would, if followed through, make this policy virtually meaningless – blasting a hole through one of the most

important tools we have to halt nature loss. The proposal is to make small development sites exempt from the rules, which new research by eftec has shown could lead to 97% of planning applications escaping any Biodiversity Net Gain requirement.

Lots of evidence shows that investing in and avoiding harm to nature does more than just boost its recovery – multiple co-benefits exist including solutions to flooding and drought, improved health and well-being and making financial savings through supply chains. The same research from eftec also suggests that the proposed changes to Biodiversity Net Gain represent a potential loss of funding for nature's recovery equivalent to around £250 million a year. It makes no sense to deregulate and pull the rug from under investors in the green economy – and this is a case we will continue to make with politicians.

To keep up-to-date with the latest news around planning and development, in context of the environment take a look at The Wildlife Trusts' blogs on the subject: [wildlifetrusts.org/blog/category/planning-and-development](https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/blog/category/planning-and-development)



UK UPDATE

Ban bottom trawling in protected seas now

Bottom trawling is destroying our seabed – and it's still happening inside Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). This industrial fishing method drags heavy gear across the seafloor, smashing fragile habitats, releasing stored carbon and killing marine life on a massive scale. Then, of what's caught, over three quarters is simply thrown away.

Thanks to Ocean, Sir David Attenborough's latest BBC documentary, the public can now see the destruction caused. But the reality is worse: MPAs, meant to protect the seabed, are being trawled without repercussion. Out of sight cannot mean out of mind. The UK Government's recently launched consultation looking at banning bottom trawling in 41 offshore MPAs.

This is a crucial step – but only if swift action follows.

Partial or delayed protections won't save our seas. The Wildlife Trusts are calling for an immediate ban on bottom trawling in all seabed-protecting MPAs. We must protect entire areas, not just fragments, and finally stop industrial-scale damage in waters meant to be safe for nature.

Marine life can recover. Seabed habitats store carbon, support wildlife, and help secure sustainable fisheries. But only if we act now. In the words of Sir David Attenborough, *"If we save the sea, we save our world."*

Join us in telling Minister Hardy to ban bottom trawling in MPAs. The future of our seas depends on it.

wtru.st/Ban-Bottom-Trawling

Once common species, like Tree Sparrows are now red-listed



A decade of nature-friendly farming brings wildlife back

Rare birds, bees and butterflies are returning to farms across England thanks to a decade of nature-friendly farming. The Jordans Farm Partnership – a collaboration between The Wildlife Trusts, Jordans Cereals and LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming) – has supported 27 farms since 2015 to create tailored conservation plans.

From planting hedgerows and wildflower margins to restoring ponds and improving habitat links, farmers have transformed their land for wildlife. Over half have reported sightings of new or

returning species – many of them rare or endangered.

Red-listed birds like the Tree Sparrow, Nightingale and Goshawk have reappeared, alongside the rare Meadow Clary plant, found in just 26 UK sites. Other highlights include breeding Stone Curlew in Hampshire, Scarce Emerald Damselfly in Suffolk and Brown Hare in Leicestershire.

This inspiring partnership shows what's possible when farming works hand-in-hand with nature – creating healthier landscapes for wildlife, farmers and future generations.

UK HIGHLIGHTS

Discover how The Wildlife Trusts are helping wildlife across the UK



1 Once in a lifetime

When Peter McEvoy first stepped foot on 90-acres of farmland in County Fermanagh, he knew it was a special place: the last remnants of species-rich grassland and centuries-old woodland in Northern Ireland. Ulster Wildlife is now the proud new owner of Fedian Nature Reserve, brimming with wildflower meadows, bird-friendly hedgerows and ancient woodlands.

wtru.st/Safeguarding-nature



2 Cuckoo, cuckoo

Two Cuckoos, named Arthur and Ashok, have been fitted with lightweight satellite tags to track their remarkable trans-Saharan migration. The Cuckoos from Suffolk Wildlife Trust's Worlingham Marshes nature reserve will join over 100 others in the British Trust for Ornithology's long-running Cuckoo Tracking Project, to help understand the Cuckoo population decline. wtru.st/Cuckoos-tagged

3 Pine Marten kits born

Devon and Somerset Wildlife Trusts are among those celebrating the birth of wild Pine Martens in a pioneering reintroduction project in the South-west of England. Recorded on site, exclusive footage shows the first kits born into the wild in Devon for more than a century. wtru.st/Pine-marten-kits

**Your
Wild**
WINTER

Tim Hill, the Trust's Conservation Manager looks deep into the reedbed for one of our most elusive birds, the Bittern. He also gives some great ideas for going wild this winter with family and friends of all ages.



Snowdrops at Aldbury Nowers © Josh Kubale



Peering Bittern at Amwell © Tim Hill

The Brumal Bittern

“Deep in the reed swamp something is stirring. Invisible at first, then a large yellow eye blinks. The toes of a bony green foot stretch out and a dagger-like beak snaps! A low grrrrr can just be heard above the swish of the windblown reeds...”

This isn't the opening alien arrival scene from a 1960s American science-fiction 'B' movie but my first experience of watching a Bittern on an early winter's morning from the hide at the Trust's Amwell Nature Reserve. I wrote this originally back in

2005 to celebrate seeing a Bittern at the completion of a project to restore, enhance and create reedbeds, part of a national project to try to prevent Bitterns from becoming extinct. As a result of that work, from a low of just 11 in 1997, numbers have risen to 283 booming (singing) males in 2025. It was a long time coming after all the work to create suitable habitat but finally, Amwell had its first boomer in 2024. This winter sees the publication of Hertfordshire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) which will

prioritise conservation work for the next 10 years across the county. Trust staff have been central in shaping the LNRS and reedbeds are a priority habitat with Bittern a flagship species.

Mid-winter is the perfect time to wrap up warm and go in search of a Bittern for a 'brumal' experience, something that is characteristic of winter. They're never easy to see, given their almost perfectly camouflaged buff, brown and black feathering and their usual habit of skulking in reedbeds - an eye or a foot is sometimes all you'll spot.



Patience and a bit of luck is needed for a view of a whole Bittern! Amwell or the huge reedbed at Marsworth Reservoir, one of the four reservoirs that make up our Tring Reservoirs Nature Reserve, are the best locations for trying to see this elusive bird. Binoculars are a must and a telescope will help greatly at Marsworth. Their chosen habitat and the fact that they were formerly common in Norfolk and Suffolk gave rise to a number of local names, including 'bogblutter' and 'bull of the bog' (given because of the males' deep foghorn-like booming territorial 'song'). Long ago the Bittern was common and hunted for the table and it was also called the 'butterbump' in the Norfolk Broads because, when cooked, apparently a large amount of fat is produced! Bitterns are beautiful birds and their elusive behaviour is charismatic to me, they certainly don't give themselves up easily. If you're lucky enough to spot one why not come up with your own name for it and please feel free to share it with us, here at the Trust, by emailing media@hmwt.org



Enjoy free of charge

Experience the wonders of winter in your local green places

See this:

Be calmed by the mist rising gently off lakes just after dawn on sunny winter mornings.

Hear this:

Enjoy the 'crudge, crudge, crudge' of walking through newly laid snow.

Smell this:

Savour the comforting resinous scent of a Christmas tree, or a sprig of Rosemary.

Feel this:

The sting of cold air on your skin - that sharp, crisp bite that wakes you up instantly.



Black Poplar (c) Henrietta Buxton

Ways for you to experience and enjoy winter

The Poplar Choice

Nicholas Buxton, the High Sheriff of Hertfordshire has chosen as his theme, 'Nurture through Nature' (read more about that on page 20). As a legacy to this theme the Trust is working in collaboration with Nicholas to increase the number of our rarest native tree, the Black Poplar by growing new trees from cuttings and then planting them out into suitable wetland locations. Native Black Poplars, *Populus nigra subsp. betulifolia*, are one of our most majestic landscape trees. They are native to Hertfordshire, but are rare here too, and found in the wetlands and along the chalk streams and rivers of our county. Through this

collaboration, we're looking to establish at least 100 trees, hopefully more, and here's how you can help:

- Do you know of a permanently wet site in a suitable location that has room for a large tree?
- Might the landowner agree to plant one there?
- And would you keep an eye on it until it is established?

If yes, and you would like to care for a tree until it's large enough to plant out, please email Black.poplars2025@gmail.com



A Winter Saunterland

Henry David Thoreau, the American naturalist, essayist, poet, and philosopher once wrote, 'I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of walking, that is, of taking walks—who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*, which word is beautifully derived "from idle people who roved about the country in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going *à la Sainte Terre*," to the Holy Land, until the children exclaimed, "There goes a *Sainte-Terrer*," a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander.' Dependent on donning suitable warm coats, hats, gloves and boots, winter is a wonderful season for sauntering slowly through your local park or countryside - whether a walk for your own wellbeing or an adventure with friends and family. As you do, I suggest following the advice of one of the world's greatest botanists, Carl Linnaeus, and founder of the modern system of naming organisms, who said, "Find wonder in everything, even the most commonplace." Being mindful of what we notice in nature is good for us. Why not photograph or make a reel of the wonders you find and tag us on social media?



Check out our Winter Events Programme

Let's glow-up your winter with a variety of events to add seasonal cheer, from winter walks to

staying warm and cosy with online talks, you can keep an eye on what we've got coming up at hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/events

Skeleton Trees

I do love February. Finally the days begin to lengthen slightly and the first hint of spring appears in the form of Snowdrops littering our barren woodland floors like wind-blown confetti. In the past some of our most eminent botanists did not acknowledge Snowdrops as being a part of our flora due to their being an introduced species, which originated from cultivation as a garden plant. Whatever their origins, it's hard not to appreciate their beauty as they nod sleepily in the crisp late winter sunlight. Early emerging bumblebees certainly aren't fussy and gladly make the most of the nectar which these flowers provide. Looking up from the woodland floor, February is a great month to get to grips with the sometimes-tricky task of identifying trees in their naked, skeletal state. Take a trip to one of the Trust's woodland nature reserves such as Old Park Wood, Balls Wood or Fir and Pond Woods and you'll have the opportunity to discover most of the typical Hertfordshire and Middlesex trees.

Identifying trees in winter is an interesting challenge – a study of overall form or silhouette, nature of the bark and buds on twigs provides most of the pointers you will need. Nature enthusiasts may like to try their hand at bark rubbing too. If you really struggle, you can always cheat and have a look at the dead leaves lying under the tree!



FIND OUT MORE

Online

Turn your study into a family affair by downloading our Autumn tree and leaf detective Spotter Sheet at bit.ly/4nBwEH2



Teeing Up Conservation: A Golf Club's Commitment to Nature's Recovery

Back in August, Debbie Bigg, the Trust's Communication Officer visited Berkhamsted Golf Club to find out how, with advice from Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, they and their Trustee Company are managing their land to protect priority habitats for the benefit of their members, the local community and wildlife.



Debbie Bigg

Despite living locally for all of my life, I hadn't ventured to Berkhamsted Common before and it seems I have been missing out. For those who don't know it, this is a place of natural beauty, with an interesting history. It was the WWI main camp and training camp for The Inns of Court Officers Training Corps ('Corps'), nicknamed 'The Devil's Own' - the trenches that were dug by trainees can still be seen today. The Common has been home to Berkhamsted Golf Club since it was formed in 1890, and to footpaths, bridleways and a drover's road,

which would have been used to drive livestock from one place to another.

The site has huge ecological value – a priority habitat of acid grassland and lowland heathland, featuring woodland, veteran trees and several thriving ponds. With 97% of this habitat having disappeared from Hertfordshire over the last century, the need to protect the remaining 3% is vital - and over 80% of that exists on this site. Reassuringly, there is a 12-year relationship between Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, the golf



© Berkhamsted Golf Club

club and its Trustee Company, which was created in 1923 when they bought the 500-acre site and is managed by members and volunteers. The golf club covers roughly a third of this land with the Trustees responsible for the management of the wider site.

Since 2013, Tim Hill, the Trust's Conservation Manager has been advising the golf club and the Trustees, who as custodians of the site have an exemplary commitment to its protection. That relationship has resulted in surveys, an ecology report, conservation management plans for the woodland, the golf course, and ponds, funding bids and agreements, all of which are having a positive outcome for nature, wildlife – and golfers.

Rod Maclean, a Trustee Director and a member of the golf club is clearly committed to following the Trust's management plan, and with advice from Tim and funding from Natural England, he is ambitious for what can be achieved and to make it as attractive an amenity as possible for the general public too, for example, Rod organises walks for the public to share their conservation story. Rod says, "Most people come here to play golf but we are going to greater efforts to encourage our membership to understand what we've got and how we're looking after it."



Trees have been cleared selectively to generate space and increase light, helping a wider variety of species such as Heather to thrive. This has also provided a more attractive area for local people, dog walkers, and horse riders to enjoy. Conservation grazing was suggested by the Trust in the management plan to increase biodiversity, reducing the amount of bracken, and, enabling priority plants, like Heather, to thrive.



© Berkhamsted Golf Club



A herd of Devon Red cattle are making a considerable difference on the Common, and by wearing GPS collars, technology is being used to manage their range. The cattle are also displacing diesel-powered machinery, making for a more sustainable option.

Heather is a feature that golfers both value and expect to see, adding beauty to the landscape as well as a practical element to play. At Berkhamsted there is an ancient seedbank of Heather within the site. However, Gorse can be a significant competitor, its vigorous growth often overshadows Heather, suppressing regeneration. From a playing perspective, Gorse is also far more penal, frequently swallowing golf balls, whereas a wayward shot into Heather is still recoverable.

Looking back to the origins of inland golf, once the early coastal sand-based links courses had established the game, the sandy, free-draining heathlands of Surrey became the next great centres of course development. Classic venues such as Sunningdale and Wentworth showcased Heather as an iconic and defining feature. Although Berkhamsted lies in Hertfordshire, its landscape and ecology share many of these same heathland qualities, with sandy soils and the potential for strong Heather presence forming part of its unique character.

Dan Blesovsky, General Manager, recognises how important the habitat of the Club is to its 600+ body of members. He says, "The course is designed around natural contours and although there were limited

earthworks created by traditional means, we don't have any sand-filled bunkers – that sets us apart. Our strapline 'Golf as nature intended...' really seems to resonate with our members."

I have to say, that resonates with me too. In simple terms, what we have within a mile or so of Berkhamsted High Street is a 500-acre nature reserve, where golf is played on part of it. Wouldn't it be great if that same commitment to habitat management and wildlife became par for the course on every golf course on our patch?!



DID YOU KNOW? Golf courses cover five times the area that traditionally designated nature

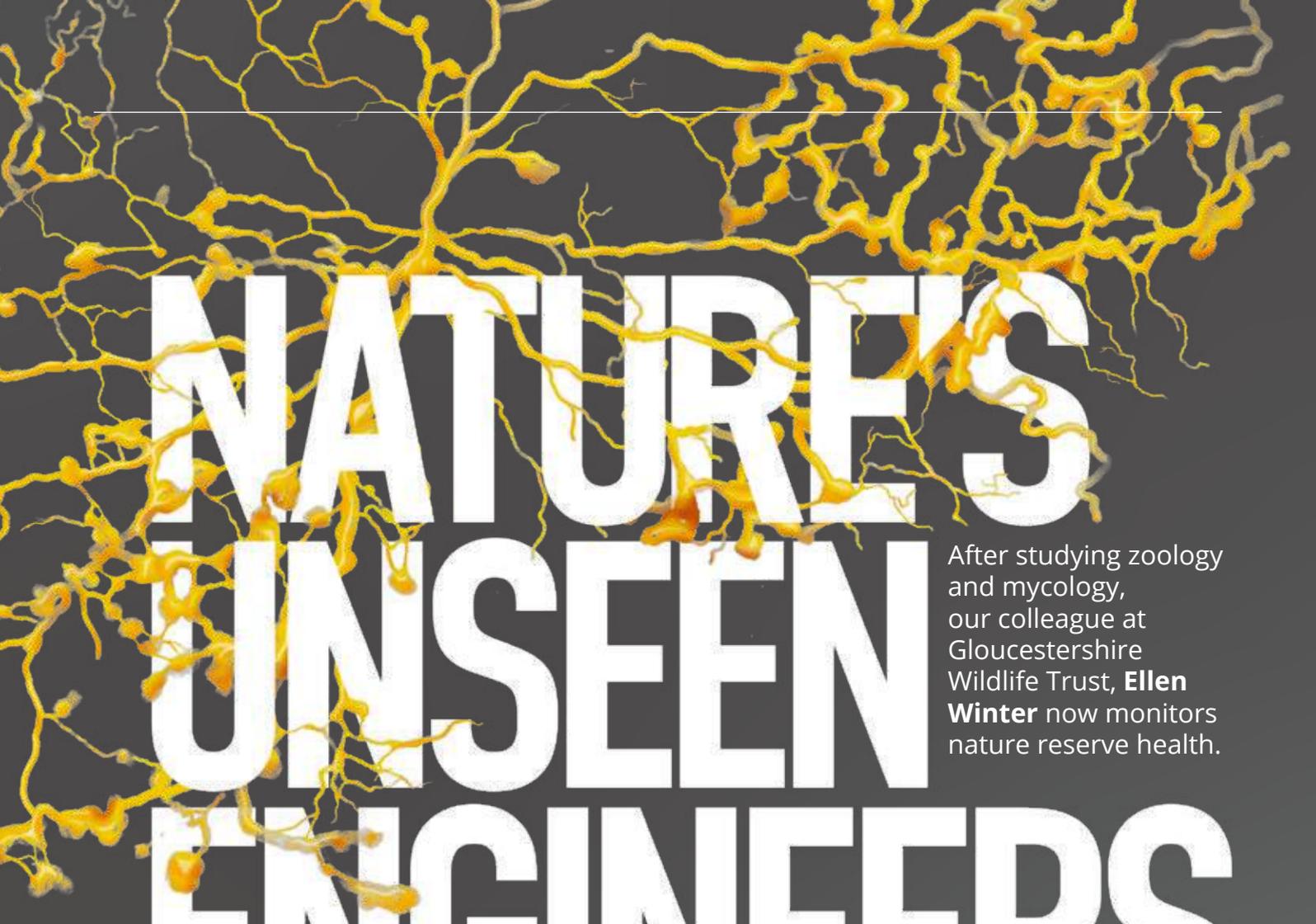
reserves do in Hertfordshire, with 3500 hectares versus 700 hectares respectively. With well-informed advice and sensitive management, golf courses have the ability to contribute hugely to nature's recovery.



FIND OUT MORE

Online

To discuss how the Trust's Consultancy Services could help your club, organisation or business manage its land for the benefit of wildlife, thereby creating funding opportunities, please email tim.hill@hmwt.org



NATURE'S UNSEEN ENGINEERS

After studying zoology and mycology, our colleague at Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, **Ellen Winter** now monitors nature reserve health.



How fungi shape
our world

If all fungi vanished overnight, first you might notice a shortage of tea, coffee, chocolate, wine or simply mushrooms on toast! Some would be grateful for no athlete's foot or dry rot, but fungi themselves are largely invisible. Over 15,000 species of fungi have been recorded in the UK. But less than a third are visible to the naked eye. We see products and effects, but we rarely notice the living beast.

The mushrooms and toadstools we see are fruitbodies, like apples. We rarely see the body of the fungus – the 'apple' tree. Years past, my walk to primary school took me along suburban verges lavished with eye-catching mushrooms. I was fascinated by bright white Lawyers' Wigs, spongy yellow boletes bruising blue when poked and translucent parasols appearing one day and gone the next, but fungi themselves hide all around – and inside – us!

Closer to humans than plants

One reason fungi are largely invisible to us is the way they eat. Fungal structure consists of mycelium, a microscopic tangle of thread-like hyphae, or single celled fungi like yeasts. Both live and feed inside material such as soil, wood, intestinal tract or petrol. Basically, anywhere they can get carbohydrates. Like animals, fungi absorb food from their environment, but animals digest and absorb nutrients internally, while fungi digest and absorb their food externally.

Only in 1969 were Fungi confirmed as separate from Plants – despite fungi being more closely related to animals. Fungi grow their structure from material more like our fingernails than plant cellulose.

Fungi change the world

More recently, we've started to unravel the unseen ways that fungi modify the world. Fungi influence ecosystems through decomposition and soil structure. One recently recognised influence is the mutually beneficial relationship between plant roots and soil fungi.

Closer than hand in glove, mycorrhizal partnerships are so globally vital that if all fungi vanished overnight, 80% of plant species would immediately struggle to survive. These plants trade sugars from photosynthesis for water and essential minerals provided by soil fungal partners.

The increased harvesting power provided by mycorrhizal fungi helps crops and wild plants cope with extreme conditions, such as this year's drought. Ongoing research suggests plants can also biochemically communicate threats such as insect attacks to surrounding plants purely via soil fungal networks – sometimes called the 'wood wide web'.

The unseen cost

Being invisible comes at a cost. While 95% of approximately 6,640 global mammal species have been documented, only about 6.3% of an estimated 2.5 million fungal species have been named. And people don't love and protect what they don't know.

Even in the UK, one of the ecologically best documented countries in the world, fungi are under-recorded, and mushrooms are often casually picked or destroyed – something we've mostly learnt not to do with wildflowers.

The fungal kingdom is so understudied that UK firsts still turn up annually and keen novices can record rarities. Beginners are encouraged and there's always something new, even for experts. Fruitbodies are not just found in autumn and winter, but can be found all year-round. So, if you spot an interesting mushroom or you'd like to learn from others, contact your Wildlife Trust who should be able to point you towards your local fungus group.



FIND OUT MORE

Online

Learn more about the different species of fungi on our Wildlife Explorer webpages at [hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/wildlife-explorer/fungi](https://www.hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/wildlife-explorer/fungi)



Autumn Wonders at Astonbury Wood

Fungi, feathers, and falling leaves: there's a seasonal spectacle waiting to be discovered in this hidden woodland gem of a nature reserve. So, pull on your wellies and wrap up warm to experience its golden beauty with a peaceful walk and let nature work its magic on you!

The walk



You can enjoy this walk as part of a visit to The Three Horseshoes pub (Hooks Cross, Watton at Stone SG14 3RY) – please note the car park is reserved for their customers. From there, this is a self-guided circular walk of approximately 1.5 miles, with mostly flat terrain. Please take care when crossing the A602 to Astonbury Wood.

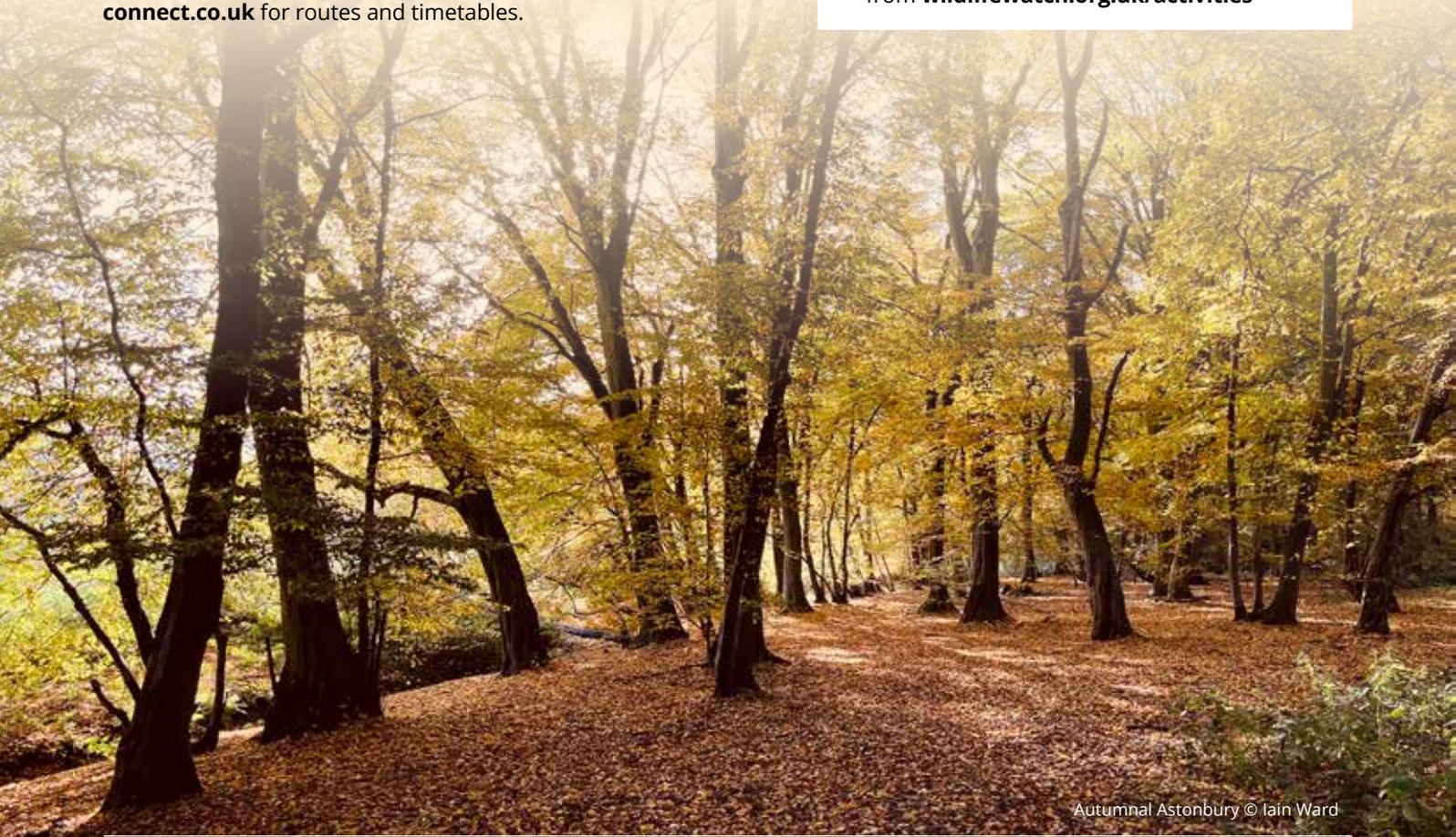


There is no dedicated parking for the nature reserve and it is not permitted for the public or site visitors to park anywhere along Aston Bury Lane (private driveway to Astonbury Manor). There are a number of bus routes that run nearby – see centrebus.info and central-connect.co.uk for routes and timetables.

Get the most out of your autumn walk



- We recommend wearing appropriate clothing and footwear for the weather (paths get muddy, so wellies are recommended!)
- Take binoculars if you have them
- Bring ID guides for fungi and birds – or use our Wildlife Explorer webpages at hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/wildlife-explorer
- We also have lots of Spotter Sheets for the young and young of heart that you can use as you explore the woods – download them from wildlifewatch.org.uk/activities



Autumnal Astonbury © Iain Ward

What you can expect

Astonbury Wood comes alive at this time of year with some of nature's most enchanting displays. Tucked away near Stevenage, this tranquil nature reserve is a hotspot for autumn wildlife - especially fungi. In fact, an astonishing 750 species of fungi have been recorded here, making it one of the richest fungal sites in the county.

Fascinating fungi

Autumn's cooler, wetter climate creates ideal conditions for fungi to thrive. Wander the woodland paths and you'll find mushrooms of all shapes and colours: bracket fungi climbing up tree trunks, puffballs releasing tiny spores like smoke signals, and delicate, parachute-shaped fungi clinging to fallen logs. Every step reveals something new - you'll be amazed at what you can discover.



Nuthatch © Tim Hill



Birds amongst the branches

With leaves falling, there's another bonus: it becomes easier to spot birds. Bring your binoculars and keep an eye out for secretive species like Nuthatch, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Treecreeper. These birds often blend into their surroundings, but bare branches make them more visible. Redwing, a migratory thrush species, can also be seen moving in noisy flocks, feeding on autumn berries.



DID YOU KNOW? Ivy is one of the last plants to flower in the year. Its nectar-rich blooms

are a lifeline for insects in autumn, and later, its berries feed birds like Blackcap, Blackbird, and thrushes.

Astonbury Wood in autumn is a reminder of how much life thrives in the quieter months. From fungi on the ground to birds in the canopy, it's a celebration of seasonal change.

A blaze of colour

While fungi steal the show, autumn's golden leaves are a close runner-up. The woodland canopy transforms into a fiery palette of russet, amber, and crimson. It's the perfect season for photography: sunlight filters through the branches, casting dramatic shadows and illuminating the forest floor in a warm, golden glow.

DID YOU KNOW? The vibrant colours of autumn leaves appear because shorter days reduce sunlight, triggering the breakdown of green chlorophyll. This reveals the reds, oranges and yellows that were always there - just hidden.

Fruits of the forest

Astonbury Wood offers an autumnal feast for wildlife. In the western part of the wood, you'll find fruit-laden trees like Hawthorn, Blackthorn, Elder and Crab Apple. Ivy and nettles are still flowering too, providing vital nectar for late-season pollinators like bees and hoverflies. On warmer days, you might even spot a butterfly - such as the distinctive Comma - enjoying one last flutter before winter sets in.



FIND OUT MORE

Online

Plan your visit and discover more at hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/nature-reserves/astonbury-wood

Find out more about our Big Give appeal on page 24.

Seven ancient woodlands, including Astonbury Wood, and local communities in the region are benefitting from the Trust's *Ancient Astonbury and Wilder Woodlands* project, thanks to National Lottery players and The National Lottery Heritage Fund.



Weird and Wonderful Wildlife Leaf Litter Dwellers

Ever wondered what's going on under those fallen autumn leaves? As with many unexpected places in nature there's a fascinating world of creatures to be found if you're prepared to take a closer look. Ian Carle, our Reserves Manager lifts some leaves and does just that!

Broadly speaking the animals that live in leaf litter can be divided into two types, those that feed on leaves and then those that feed on the things that feed on the leaves!

Leaf eaters

Perhaps the most familiar group to feed on fallen leaves are the earthworms. Surface dwelling earthworms, also known as epigeic worms, feed on leaves at the surface of the soil, whereas others will draw them down to their burrows to feed.

Woodlice are probably the next most well-known group of creatures helping to break down leaves, such as the recognisable Common Shiny Woodlouse which seeks out decaying plant matter with its sense of smell. Millipedes also have a part to play –

the Club-tailed Millipede can be found in amongst leaf litter in the autumn before retreating down into the soil when the weather gets colder. The Pill Millipede is fairly common in our area - it looks a little like a woodlouse and can curl into a ball when it feels threatened.

Contrary to popular opinion most slug and snail species are gardeners' friends, for example, the large black slug *Arion ater* is much more likely to feast on decaying plant matter than tuck into live plants. Snails such as Garlic Snail and Short-toothed Herald Snail feed on leaf litter rather than living flora too.

Common Shiny Woodlouse

Pill Millipede

Ground beetle, *Carabus problematicus*

Pseudoscorpion

Predators

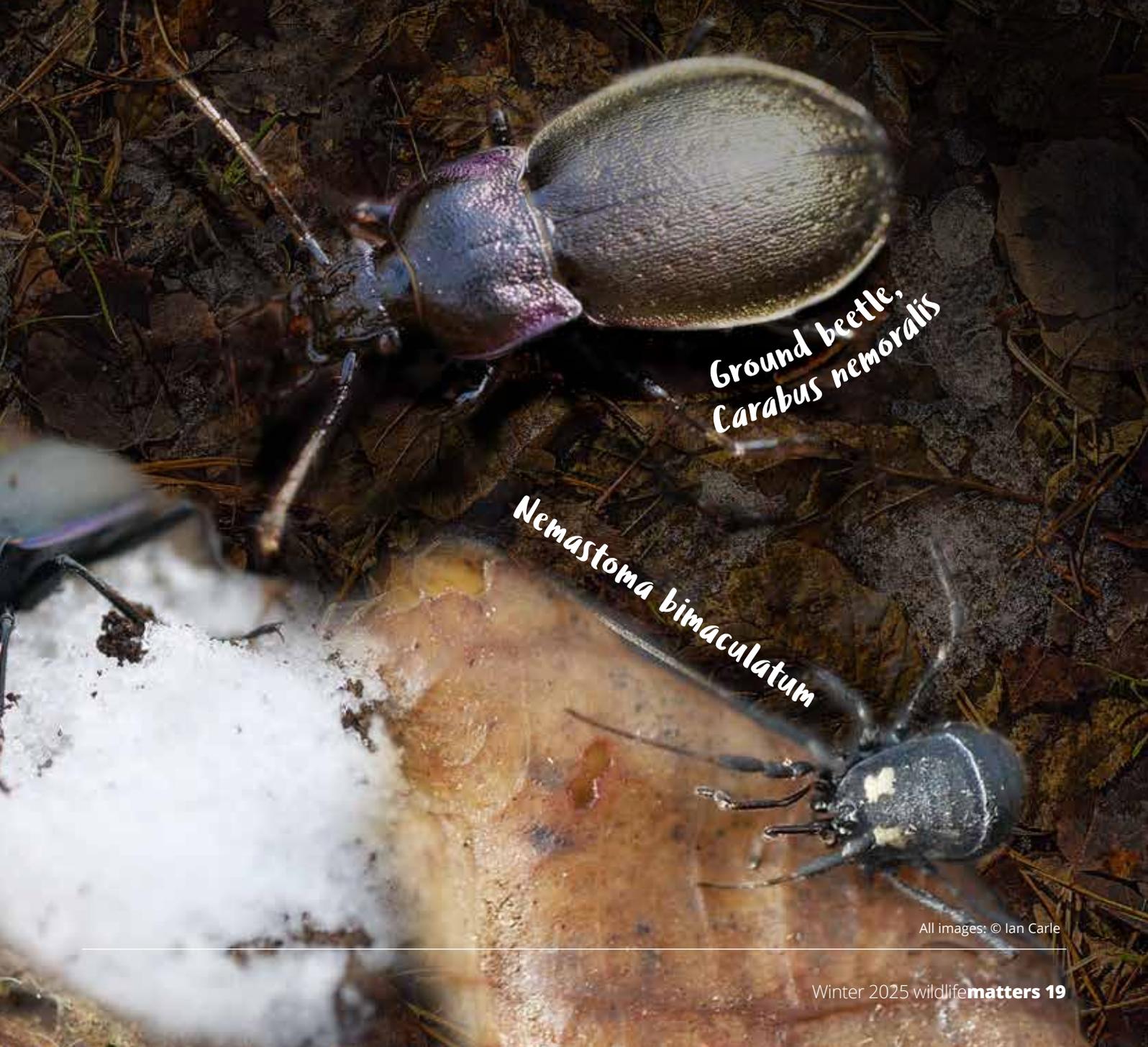
Pseudoscorpions are aggressive hunters in leaf litter. These tiny arachnids, that look like scorpions but without a stinging tail, catch their prey, chew it and then their digestive juices transform it into soup which the pseudoscorpion sucks in to its mouth.

Pseudoscorpions are closely related to two other species groups that can be found hunting in the leaf litter - harvestmen and spiders. Harvestmen look similar to spiders although there is a simple way to tell them apart - harvestman heads are fused to their bodies, whereas spiders have two obvious sections. Keep your eyes peeled for harvestmen such as

Lophopilio palpinalis and the tiny but spectacular *Megabunus diadema*.

Ground beetles and rove beetles will hunt in amongst leaf litter. Rove beetles such as the Devil's Coach Horse are very fast moving and hunt invertebrates such as worms, slugs, spiders and woodlice. The Black Clock Beetle and Violet Ground Beetle also prey on slugs within leaf litter.

As you can see it's not just Hedgehogs that make use of the leaves in Autumn! Read our 'One Quick Win' tip on page 22 to find out how by making a small leaf pile in your garden or community space you can support these creatures and others.



Ground beetle,
Carabus nemoralis

Nemastoma bimaculatum

All images: © Ian Carle

Nurture through Nature

We speak with Nicholas Buxton about his role as High Sheriff of Hertfordshire, his hopes for how nature can inspire local communities, and his own personal connection to the natural world.



Yellowhammer © Henrietta Buxton



Nicholas Buxton with owl box
© Henrietta Buxton

What is the role of the High Sheriff of Hertfordshire?

The role is a year-long, non-political, and independent appointment that provides support for the Royal Family, the Judiciary, the Police, and the emergency services without drawing on public funds. The High Sheriff champions those who support the charity and voluntary sectors and actively encourages crime prevention. As one of the oldest institutions in our legal and civic traditions, dating back over a thousand years, its duties have evolved over time. Yet its core purpose remains the same: to uphold justice, support the rule of law, and foster stronger community ties.

Why 'Nurture through Nature'?

Nature is my passion, a lifelong interest borne from growing up on a family farm near Ware in East Hertfordshire, where I am so lucky to live and work. The changing seasons are vital to farming life, but also to my own sense of well-being. I look forward to the first Cuckoo calls in April, the honeybees in summer, the changing colours of autumn trees and the nodding Snowdrops in January.

What are you hoping to achieve with it?

In today's fast-paced world, many of us are suffering - physically, mentally, and emotionally. Rates of cardiovascular disease are high, antidepressant use is widespread, and physical activity is often minimal.

At the same time, we've become increasingly disconnected from the natural world, with many of us guilty of spending too much time on our screens and devices, disregarding the sounds and textures of nature. Yet even short bursts, such as a walk in the park, tending an allotment, or hearing birdsong, can trigger physiological and psychological pathways that are proven to help people recover more quickly from stress. The smell of soil, the colour of leaves or the sounds of birdsong are restorative.

I am coming across many charities that are using nature to bring comfort and healing. Whether they are working with older people, those with special needs, the care-experienced, or ex-offenders, it's all about connections and people learning from each other's experiences. The more I can bring these charities together to build strength and resilience in hard times, the better.

How does nature benefit you?

As a farmer, I count myself incredibly privileged to work closely with nature, planning my days and weeks according to the vagaries of the British weather and the passing seasons. There's a time to sow and a time to harvest. The rhythm of the year is built into my life.

Do you have any examples of how you are helping nature's recovery?

I'm particularly proud of the work over the last three years to restore the River Ash. Under Sarah Perry, the Trust's River Catchment Coordinator's management, a vast amount of re-wiggling, bed raising with gravel, and new in-stream woody debris



Barn Owls © Henrietta Buxton



Nicholas' top tips to connect with nature for wellbeing:

1. Watch the flight of birds. The dart of a Kingfisher, the flopping wing beat of a crowd of Lapwings, the razor-sharp acrobatics of the Swift, or a tight formation of a flight of Teal. There is fascination in nature's many forms.
2. Go for an early walk while the dew lingers on the grass and before the busyness of the day has begun.
3. Get your hands dirty. We should all 'eat a peck of dirt' before we die!

You can also read about Nicholas' Black Poplar project in collaboration with the Trust in the Your Wild Winter feature on pages 8-11.

has recreated the variety that was eliminated when the river was dredged in the 1970s.

On a smaller scale, we have built and installed over a dozen Barn Owl boxes on the farm. In most years, we record several broods. It's a joy to see fledglings learning to hunt the grass margins.

wilder

COMMUNITIES



Celebrating a Wilder Summer

Even as the leaves fall, we're still feeling the warmth of summer – and what a wonderful one it was for nature and community in Hertfordshire and Middlesex! Our Wilder Communities Officers, Amy (based in Watford) and

Kate (covering Ware, Hertford, Welwyn and Hatfield), had a jam-packed programme encouraging people to connect with and care for the natural world around them.

From festivals and river days to school grounds and pond pledges, here are just a few of the highlights from a season of action, learning, and celebration.



Lea Ellis, Engagement Officer

Help Us Spread the Word

With so much going on in the world, it's easy to feel disconnected or overwhelmed. But the good news is that change starts close to home - often right outside our front doors.

Many of the people who could benefit most from engaging with nature may not be reading this article. That's why we're asking you to help us spread the word. Talk to your neighbours, share our events, invite someone to volunteer with you, take a friend on your next walk and pass on this magazine to a friend!

Together, we can create a wilder, healthier community for all.



Nature, Pride and Community

In August, Amy attended Herts Pride at Cassiobury Park in Watford, bringing the message of nature connection to this vibrant community event. Our stall attracted lots of people and gave us an opportunity to highlight the invaluable benefits of engaging with nature, share stories and spark curiosity. We'll be back next year!



Amy Trotter



Wading in

I (Lea) was fortunate enough to have a day out with a Volunteer Work Party helping with important river management on the River Mimram and learning new skills. It was my first-time wearing waders but hopefully not the last!

We are always on the lookout for more volunteers to help at all our events. Whether it's river days, tree planting or community engagement, there's something for everyone. No experience required - just a willingness to get involved and make a difference.

hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/volunteering



Lea Ellis © Heidi Mansell



Kate Sheard also helped out on the River Mimram



Wilder Schools and Community Gardens



© Paul Harris 2020VISION

Our Wilder Schools Programme continues and we want to bring all the benefits of the programme to other groups and communities in our local area, helping them to create wildlife-friendly areas for wellbeing and environmental sustainability. Led by volunteer Wilder Schools Champions, the initiative, which started with primary and secondary schools is now open to colleges, Educational Support Centres and community groups too.

Please do get in touch if you have a garden, small patch of land or community area that could be transformed into a haven for people and wildlife - it doesn't have to cost the earth! For a small (optional) donation you can book a visit here wildersupport@hmwt.org



Children looking at invertebrates © Ross Hoddinott 2020VISION

One Quick Win for you!

One of the easiest and most beneficial ways to use fallen leaves is to create a small pile in a quiet corner of your garden to support local wildlife. This cosy, sheltered spot can offer vital protection for many creatures over the winter months, including Hedgehogs, Toads, and caterpillars. Leaf litter also serves as a valuable food source for fungi and invertebrates. You don't need a large space, a small, Hedgehog-sized pile will be just fine!

You can find out more about leaf litter dwellers in our Weird and Wonderful Wildlife article on page 18.



© Debbie Biggs



SWIRE CHARITABLE TRUST

SPECIES SURVIVAL FUND

Funded by UK Government Heritage Fund



Our Wild Supporters

Find out how people continue to be champions for wildlife in Hertfordshire and Middlesex

Plant SOS!

A huge thank you to Michelle Allmark-West, who, with the help of her friends Claire Toms and Claire Rainsford, has raised an amazing £1068 for the Trust. She did this by reviving unsellable plants kindly donated by Waitrose, Harpenden and by propagating many of her own - reducing waste and giving the plants a second chance. We are truly grateful for this fantastic support.



Protect Local Woodlands

Woodlands are vital for wildlife, but many species are in decline due to a lack of management. When neglected, woods become dark and lifeless - but with the right care, they can flourish and come alive with light and birdsong.

Caring for them also means ongoing maintenance to ensure people can continue to enjoy these special places. We have launched an appeal to raise the money needed to keep them in good condition for people and for nature.



FIND OUT MORE

Online

Find out more at:
hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/protectwoodlands



Great Spotted Woodpecker © Peter Cairns 2020Vision



Going Wild Together



We were delighted to collaborate with Burston Garden Centre to raise awareness of conservation efforts across the area and to highlight how everyone can play a role in protecting local wildlife.

As part of this collaboration Burston Garden Centre generously supported the work of the Trust by donating 50p for every £10 spent on selected wildlife and bird care products throughout September and a team from Trust was in-store to meet customers during over the 20-21 September weekend.

Thank you for helping nature thrive!



BlueTit © Joshua Copping

Business News

Thank you to all our Business Members who have confirmed their membership renewals this Autumn including Saba UK. It's wonderful to have this vital support for another year and we look forward to continuing to work with all our Business Members.



FIND OUT MORE

Online

Discover how your business can make a real difference for local nature — explore our membership options and benefits online: hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/corporate



Mountain Warehouse Discount

As a Wildlife Trust supporter, you are invited to take up a 20% discount* with our partners, Mountain Warehouse by entering the code CC2025242 online. We can also provide a flier to present instore to claim you discount – please contact fundraising@hmwt.org for further information.

*This discount is offered by Mountain Warehouse to supporters and friends of Wildlife Trusts throughout the UK. Members of Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust are invited to take up the discount but they are not offered as exclusive benefits to members of Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust.

In Remembrance

We would like to thank David Christopher Beckwith and Margaret Ethel Browning for kindly leaving a gift to the Trust in their Will.

We would also like to thank the friends and family of John Rowley, a long-term supporter, volunteer and Volunteer Warden of Fir and Pond Woods Nature Reserve, who donated to the Trust in his memory. Thank you also to the family of Chris Bartram for their donation in memory.

Life in a *Teasel Head*

Our colleagues at Cheshire Wildlife Trust, Julie Gould, Wilder Childhood Officer, and Becky Williams, Wild Network Officer, share their passion for the magical world of winter seed heads and the wildlife they welcome.

Two years ago, Julie shook a Teasel head, *Dipsacus fullonum*, over a patch of her garden, releasing the small brown seeds. This plant soon grew to seven feet tall, displaying fresh, bright green foliage. In the summer, the conical-shaped seed head was densely packed with lilac flowers, providing a rich nectar and pollen source for pollinators, such as bumblebees and a variety of our resident butterflies.

The magic of the Teasel doesn't end with summer. In winter, its sculptural seed heads become striking silhouettes, and more importantly, they provide a rich food source for wildlife.

One of Julie's fondest wildlife memories is from her kitchen window, where she spotted a charm of Goldfinches balancing on swaying Teasel seed heads. Their long, needle-like beaks root around for the small seeds. On frosty mornings, the seed heads

sparkled silver in the low light – a truly enchanting sight.

Teasels are just one example of how leaving plants standing throughout winter can benefit wildlife. From the warmth of your house, watch birds such as House Sparrows feeding on flowerheads like rudbeckia.

Consider delaying the cutting of your herbaceous borders until early spring and leaving the leaf piles intact. This is a unique habitat that provides cover for ground-foraging birds, such as Dunnocks, as well as hibernating Frogs and Hedgehogs. Hollow plant stems are a vital over-wintering home for invertebrates such as ladybirds, earwigs, and butterfly and moth caterpillar larvae. Uncut Ivy and hedgerows also offer protection and food to a plethora of wildlife. This winter, resist the urge to tidy too much. A wilder garden is better for both wildlife and our own enjoyment too.

Here are Becky's favourite seed heads to be left in the garden through winter:





Echinacea

Echinacea purpurea

Their spiky seed heads stand tall through winter, offering shelter for insects and a vital food source for hungry finches and other seed-loving birds.



Honesty

Lunaria annua

These papery silver seed pods are a winter must have. Beautiful and sculptural, providing shelter for insects and lingering seeds when food is scarce.



Miscanthus

Miscanthus sinensis

Rustling in the wind, its dense growth offers hiding spots for birds, mammals and insects, plus nutritious seeds through the long winter months.



Ivy

Hedera helix

The garden's unsung hero! Its evergreen leaves shelter nesting robins in spring, while fruits and seeds provide a vital food source for other birds in winter.



Rudbeckia

Rudbeckia hirta

Resist the urge to tidy! These bright summer blooms leave behind crispy, black seed heads that feed birds and shelter insects, standing elegantly through the winter.



Knapweed

Centaurea nigra

Thistle-like and wild, knapweed bursts with nectar rich purple blooms in summer. By autumn, its fluffy seed heads feed goldfinches and flutter across meadows.



Sea Holly

Eryngium

A prickly, garden ghost. Spiky, thistle-like Sea Hollies that thrive in dry spots. Loved by pollinators in summer and birds in winter.



Sedum

Sedum anglicum

Easily Becky's favourite winter plant, sedum's tall flower heads offer late autumn nectar for bees, shelter for overwintering insects and look stunning covered in frost.



Give the Gift of Wildlife this Festive Season

With Christmas on the way, are you struggling to find a meaningful gift for a friend or family member who loves wildlife? Our wildlife sponsorship packs and gift memberships make perfect presents for someone special.

Wildlife Sponsorships There are eight sponsorship packs to choose from - including Barn Owl, Hedgehog, Water Vole and Peregrine Falcon. Each pack contains a certificate, fact cards, a beautiful photo of your sponsored local species and more.

Gift Membership Treat someone special to a gift membership and watch them unwrap a whole year of wildness. With individual, joint and family memberships available, there's something for all your loved ones.



FIND OUT MORE

Online

For further information and to explore the full range of wildlife gifts online, please visit hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/shop



Take on our festive nature challenge at wildlifetrusts.org/12dayswild

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