

# Notes from the Nature Reserve

Green Gym Conservation Volunteers at East Ham Nature Reserve Winter 2017/2018

This newsletter is a bit late, but with the weather turning cold it still feels like winter even if the calendar says it is nearly spring. The plants are starting to flower and the cow parsley is starting to grow. Active Newham supplied lots of bulbs, so there are more snowdrops this year. Later on there will be ramsons, wild garlic, good for foragers. You can use it to make pesto. Since the new paths were laid we have had many more visitors than usual and the place feels much more inviting. There is also less litter generally. Keeping the place tidy really does make a difference.



The new paths have now joined up, so there are accessible routes from the churchyard through the woodland and meadow areas. We hope to have corporate volunteers, organised by Active Newham, this summer. The idea is to extend the paths right down to the A13, but it is going to be a very long barrow to the far side. We are trying to work out how we can make it easier.

## Animal of the month

### Grey squirrel - *Sciurus carolinensis*



grey squirrel

- Grey squirrels are very cute, but not very good for the plants and animals at the nature reserve. They were introduced in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in several parts of the country and have now spread to everywhere except the Isle of Wight, Lake District and Scotland.
- Because grey squirrels are larger than the native red squirrels, they can compete for food and put on more fat, so they survive winter better than the native animals. They don't hibernate, but they do slow down and sleep a lot in winter.
- Grey squirrels carry the Parapox virus, which does not affect them but causes a fatal infection in red squirrels.

- Grey squirrels build a large, untidy looking nest, or drey, in the treetops or hollow tree trunks. The drey is usually lined with moss, thistle-down, dried grass, and feathers. They have 2-6 young twice a year.
- They are mainly herbivorous, eating acorns and hazel nuts, berries, fungi and even bark, buds and shoots. They always beat us to the hazelnuts, getting them as soon as they are ripe. They will also eat insects, smaller rodents, bird eggs and nestlings, which is bad news for our other animals.
- Grey squirrels are also causing quite a lot of damage to our trees, gnawing the bark and stripping it off.



## Plant of the month

### Blackthorn - *Prunus spinosa*



Comma butterfly on blackthorn flowers

- The hard wood is used for walking sticks and Irish shillelaghs.
- These dense, spiny bushes are very valuable for wildlife. The flowers are good source of nectar and pollen for bees early in the year. The foliage is food for several species of moths and butterflies. The bushes provide cover and nesting sites for birds.

- The clue is in the name. This bush or small tree is in the plum family and it is very prickly.
- It is one of the first plants to flower in spring, starting late February, or early March. White flowers appear before the leaves. A spell of cold weather when winter should have finished and the blackthorn is in flower is called a 'blackthorn winter'.
- Humans value blackthorn mainly for its fruits, called sloes. They are used for preserves, sloe and apple jelly is good, and for sloe gin. They are also eaten by birds and other animals.



sloes

We have been doing winter tasks whilst the weather is cold and things are not growing so quickly. It is a chance to clear areas that have not been touched for years. In the bit down by the pines we have cleared graves and taken ivy off trees to open it up and make it more accessible, although still very bumpy.

Peter and Penny have laid the next bit of hedge, behind the church and it is already sprouting new growth. We have a problem because the hazels have grown too big to use for poles and weavers to finish the last bit of the hedge. The next task is, therefore, to coppice (cut down) the hazel trees so that they will sprout new poles that we can use.



This generates an enormous amount of small wood and tree trunks, so we make 'dead hedges' to contain it. Before we start we have to cut and point stakes and hammer them into the ground in two lines about two feet apart. Wood is stacked between the posts to make a useful habitat for fungi, insects and small animals. New member Abdul soon sorted out bashing in the posts, then graduated to pointing them with an axe. Here he is with Kairen and one of our dead hedges. It's a good way of tidying up and making a place for wildlife at the same time.

Please contact us if you have any suggestions of things to put in the newsletter or on the website. Email [newhamgg@gmail.com](mailto:newhamgg@gmail.com) Phone Judi 020 8470 7680 or Frances 078 4597 3156. Check out the website [www.newhamgreengym.org](http://www.newhamgreengym.org) for more informat