

News from East Ham Nature Reserve January 2024

Dates for the next Saturday Green Gym Nature and Heritage Conservation Volunteers work sessions are 30th December and 31st January 10am-1pm. Friends' walks on the same dates at 1.30pm, everyone welcome. Work sessions also every Wednesday 10am-1pm.



It's all a bit muddy, but things are starting to grow and there is a Narcissus in flower already by the gate. This is a good time to catch up with jobs before everything really takes off in spring.

It's also nice to get out and do some exercise in the open air to wear off some of the Christmas excess. Why not put on your boots and woolly hat and come and join us on our Saturday afternoon walk?

News

Our lovely new water butts are in place. The first one is full and the second is half full already. The water trolley is in the shed, although we had to move things around to make room for it.



Plants always find a niche. This is Herb Robert, tiny plants managing to grow on our willow Circle of Life.

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 18th 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, called a drey, in the treetops or hollow tree trunks. They often have to compete with ring-neck parakeets for holes in 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 young trees, gnawing the bark and stripping it off.



red squirrel

Plant of the month

Snowdrop - *Galanthus nivalis*



Snowdrops grow from bulbs, which each produce 2 leaves and a flower. The flowers have 3 petals in the outer whorl and 3 petals, tipped with green, making the smaller whorl in the middle.

The name *Galanthus* comes from the Greek words for milk and flower. They are one of the earliest flowers, in winter and early spring, before the woodland becomes too shady as the trees get their leaves.

Snowdrops are native to Europe, but were probably only introduced to Britain in the 16th century. There are several species of snowdrops. Within the species there are lots of varieties with very small differences between them.

In Greek legend, Persephone, the goddess of spring and nature was forced to live in the underworld during autumn and winter. When she returned each spring she brought snowdrops with her.

Snowdrops contain galantamine, which can be used in the treatment of Alzheimer's disease.

Lovers of snowdrops are called galanthophiles and many are keen collectors of the different varieties. Anglesey Abbey near Cambridge has a huge collection of snowdrops. It's well worth a visit in spring.

<https://www.creativecountryside.com/blog/the-folklore-of-snowdrops>

Job of the month.

Winter tasks have started. Penny and Peter are coppicing some of the many hazel bushes around the site. This means cutting poles and thinner stems of hazel as near to the ground as possible. It looks very destructive, but the bases of the cut stems, known as the hazel stool, will sprout again. It's a crop that traditionally was cut every seven years. With climate change making it grow faster, we find that we can cut about every five years.



Peter coppicing

In the past the coppice wood had many uses. Thinner branches were woven between thicker poles to make portable fences, called hurdles, for animal enclosures. We use them to make fences around the site, although ours are stuck permanently in the ground. The poles were used as supports for tomatoes and beans, thinner sticks were split to make the rings that hold barrels together and very thin bits were used for kindling for fires. Hazel is still used in thatching to make the pegs that hold the thatch in place.



Penny pointing stakes

Our main use of hazel is in hedge laying. We use an axe or billhook to point the end of the thicker poles. Thinner poles, the longer the better, are used to weave along the top to hold the hedge in place. More about hedge laying next month, or why not come and have a go at coppicing and hedge laying? It's quite hard work, but interesting to keep country crafts alive and well in East Ham!

What we have been doing



foxgloves

We have cleared a lot of ivy from the bluebell wood, but we have to stop now because the bluebells are coming through and we don't want to damage them. We have planted seeds of cow parsley to follow the bluebells and some foxgloves by the seat in the middle of the wood.

Frances and her team have been working in the other wood nearest High Street South and have cleared a lot of ground for planting with wildflower seeds in spring.

By removing goosegrass (Sticky Willy) now, it will save a lot of work in spring and summer. Last year it got completely out of hand even though we spent eight weeks clearing barrowloads of it.



cow parsley

Tasks for December

- Coppicing hazel and pointing stakes.
- Laying part of the hedge using the hazel stakes.
- Removing ivy in the woodland.
- Clearing goosegrass before it gets chance to set seed.
- Clearing brambles and digging out grass in the meadows to make spaces to plant flower seeds in spring.
- Clearing ivy off gravestones.
- Making wood piles as habitats for minibeasts.

Please consider becoming a volunteer



Please come along if you can make it. Winter jobs such as coppicing and hedge laying are very interesting and an opportunity to learn new skills. It's also a good way of keeping warm, whilst working off the excess food and drink of the season.

Our work sessions are very relaxed. You can work on something that interests you, at your own pace. You can leave whenever you like and there is no obligation to be there every week. We always stop for tea/coffee, biscuits and chat at 11.30. Some people leave after tea, others stay until 1pm.

Our Saturday walks are an opportunity to get out in our lovely green place and learn something about nature in a very relaxed way. You can get to know our plants and animals and see how things change throughout the year. Tea/coffee, cake and chat afterwards.



Maybe we'll get snow.



Please contact Penny at newhamgg@gmail.com if you have any suggestions of things to put in the newsletter or on the website.

Email newhamgg@gmail.com or phone Frances 078 4597 3156.

Check out the website www.newhamgreengym.org for more information about Green Gym, East Ham Nature Reserve Heritage and Conservation Volunteers.

If you would like to join the Friends of East Ham Nature Reserve and receive a newsletter by email each month please email friendsofelnr@gmail.com

Hedge laying courses at Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park

Our friends at Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park are running two hedge laying courses.

The course details can be read here:

2-day course [Buy your tickets – 2-day Hedge Laying Course – Meet at the Cemetery Park Lodge, Wed 31 Jan 2024 9:30 AM - Thu 1 Feb 2024 3:30 PM \(tickettailor.com\)](#)

1 day course [Buy your tickets – Introduction to Hedge Laying – Meet at the Cemetery Park Lodge, Sun 4 Feb 2024 9:30 AM - 3:30 PM \(tickettailor.com\)](#)

Happy New Year!