

News from East Ham Nature Reserve February 2024

Dates for the next Saturday Green Gym Nature and Heritage Conservation Volunteers work sessions are 27th January and 24th February 10am-1pm. Work sessions also every Wednesday 10am-1pm.

According to tradition, especially in Sussex, Valentine's Day is the day that birds choose their mates and is known as the Birds' Wedding Day.



News



We have had some new nest boxes put on the trees. Two each of the three designs of bird box and four of the bat boxes. We hope that the different designs of box will attract different birds.

Gristwood and Toms, who do tree work for the Council kindly offered to put them up for nothing as an exercise for their apprentices. This is how they did it!

We have two bat detectors, so we hope to be able to find bats around our nest boxes, although it may be some time before they take up residence.



Animal of the month

Wren - *Troglodytes troglodytes*



- You are much more likely to hear wrens than see them. They have incredibly loud voices for such small birds.
- They are hard to spot, often looking like brown mice running through the undergrowth, but you can sometimes spot them perching in bushes. They are easy to identify by their tails which point upwards.
- Surprisingly, they are probably the commonest bird that breeds in the UK. Their main food is insects and spiders.
- Wrens are the third smallest British bird after goldcrest and firecrest.

- The male works hard courting his females, sometimes building up to 6 nests to tempt them. We hope they will use our new diamond shaped, open front nest boxes.
- Wrens may use communal roosts in the winter to keep warm, so the nest boxes are good for that as well.

Plant of the month

Goosegrass - *Galium aparine*

- This plant has many names including sticky weed, sticky willy and cleavers.
- Fun for children because the leaves have hooked hairs like Velcro so you can stick them to people's clothes.
- Plants have square stems with leaves in whorls around the stem, which can grow to over a metre and can cover quite large bushes. Tiny white flowers produce green sticky seeds.
- Goosegrass belongs to the coffee family and its seeds can be roasted to make a coffee substitute. The leaves and stem can be eaten and were used as a vegetable in medieval times. Cooking stops them being sticky! Maybe if everyone ate it we could control the rampant growth at the nature reserve.



- Several caterpillars feed on goosegrass, including the giant caterpillars of hummingbird hawk-moth.
- It is used to treat ailments from kidney and urinary disorders to itchy skin conditions like eczema. It is thought to be cleansing if drunk as a tea. My dog eats young goosegrass, so maybe she thinks it is good for her.
- The roots, which are tiny can be used to produce a red dye, but you would need a lot of them. Apparently if birds eat the roots in quantity it turns their bones red.

Job of the month.

Hedgelaying



We started laying the hedge that forms the boundary between the old churchyard and the extended area which is now the nature reserve, in 2015. This is a section that we laid in 2016. It is interesting that the hawthorn has only just come onto leaf in this picture. This year some of the bushes are already showing small leaves, probably because of the warm weather we have had. This restricts the time we can work on it because, once it has a good number of leaves the sap pours out if the wood is cut, so we have to stop.

The idea of laying a hedge is to encourage growth right down to ground level. By bringing branches down towards the horizontal, it encourages side shoots to grow, which thicken the hedge. A well-laid hedge is stockproof, so farm animals cannot easily get through it. We do it to make the hedge denser to provide shelter, food and nesting sites for small mammals and birds. It is also easier for us to manage because we can weave in and trim shoots to keep it tidy.

For information on hedgelaying see Volunteering on Wednesday sessions on the front page of our website www.newhamgreengym.org

What we have been doing



Still clearing ivy and goosegrass. I have just spotted someone selling 50 seeds of goosegrass on eBay for £2.99, so maybe there is money to be made!

We have coppiced several hazels. The stumps are a bit untidy, but we will go back and tidy them up once we have used the hazel stakes and thinner branches for laying the hedge.

Did you know that an area of coppice around agricultural land was known as a shaw in medieval times? Comes into place names like Shaw

Cross and Shaw Brook.

Tasks for February

- 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 ivy off gravestones.
- Making wood piles and dead hedges as habitats for minibeasts.

Please consider becoming a volunteer



The nature reserve is magical in frosty weather. Photo by Frances, longest serving volunteer.

Please come along if you can make it. Winter jobs such as coppicing, hedge laying and making dead hedges are very interesting and an opportunity to learn new skills. 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.



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 friendsofehr@gmail.com