



# PARK LIFE

Issue 2  
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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE TOWN PARK USERS GROUP

## A RENAISSANCE FOR PARKS?

Only 18% of British Parks are assessed as being in good condition by the authorities which run them. But that figure is poised to rise – thanks to a new focus on the amenities and a big injection of cash.

The regenerative potential of properly managed green spaces is now recognised by government at every level. Just as the fashion was for indoor leisure centres in the 1980s, and for countryside parks in the 1990s, the urban park is about to have its time in the sun.

Alan Barber, of the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management, says: "Experience shows that if you keep a park to high standards and ensure it offers lots of attractions, then it automatically moderates public behaviour."

The seedlings of recovery are being watered by a veritable deluge of money from the heritage lottery fund, which since 1997 has poured £190m into restoring 320 historic parks and open spaces – including £6.9m for Saltwell Park in Gateshead, £6.6m for Glasgow Green and £3.4m for Albert Park in Middlesbrough.

There is now even a full-time body, the Urban Parks Forum (UPF), set up in 1999 to promote good practice in everything from putting on Punch and Judy shows to graffiti control. It was a survey by the forum, covering more than 400 larger local authorities, which found that only 18% of parks were rated good, 69% fair and 13% poor. Individual features and facilities within the parks are being lost at an alarming rate. It is perhaps not surprising to discover a direct link between the decline in condition of parks stock and the erosion of revenue and capital spending.

"Our parks are a testament to at least 20 years of inadequate resources and under investment and a process of polarisation is apparent, with good parks getting better and poor parks continuing to

decline. A cycle of decline prevails and without a new approach, without additional resources, without investment, innovation and commitment at the highest level, it will be almost impossible to reverse," the UPF concludes.

**Andrew Tomlins writes:** Vyvyan Veal, Warden at Parndon Wood Nature Reserve, is retiring at the end of March after some 28 years with the Council. What's that got to do with the Town Park, you ask? Well, a very significant part of Vyvyan's role was to look after the wild areas all over the town including, in the Town Park, Marshgate Spring and May Meads Marsh, areas along the river (now designated as parts of the Harlow Marsh Local Nature Reserve).

In effect, Vyvyan has been the council's one and only Nature Conservation officer. At the recent Harlow Biodiversity Partnership meeting it was indicated that the council intend to continue to have a post to look after Parndon Wood.

However, at a time of budget savings in the Parks and Landscape department, we need to keep an eye on the council to make sure that, whatever the name of the post, the role covers not just looking after the flagship area of Parndon Wood itself but also all the other wild areas, several of the best of which are in the Town Park.

There's easily enough work for two full-time posts, but maintaining one will be an achievement.

So why should this post be saved when other jobs are being cut? The value of keeping the natural areas of the town in a favourable condition for wildlife should be justification enough – Harlow really would be bottom of the pile without such an officer.

But, furthermore, this post is particularly effective, considering the volunteer effort that can be generated – something equivalent to two full time posts of work that wouldn't otherwise get

## Pets Corner News

PETS CORNER recently purchased a 16-month-old Essex sow called Fergy, after her bloodline "duchess". She is due to arrive at Pets Corner in March hopefully "in pig". This is something of a coup for Pets Corner, given the recent history of the breed.

The Essex Pig was first bred in the mid-nineteenth century as a hardy outdoor animal, tolerant of the wet conditions found in and around the Essex marshes. By the 1940's, there were more than 1000 members of the Essex Pig Society across Britain.

However, the introduction of factory farming methods in the 1960's saw the breed decline dramatically, to the point where, in the 1970's, it was believed to have become extinct.

By sheer chance, however, a small herd of pedigree Essex pigs was discovered in Northumberland in the mid-1990's, and efforts were begun to bring the animal back from the brink of extinction with the formation of the Essex Pig Society 1997.

Pets Corner is proud to be doing all it can to help secure the future of a species believed to be more endangered than the Giant Panda.



LAMBING: At the time of writing (Feb. 12), halfway through the lambing season, the quality of new lambs has been the best for many years. Birth-weights have been higher than normal, with one ewe producing triplets with a combined weight of 42lbs!

done, and also the potential for generating funds through grant applications to bodies like English Nature that only such an officer would be able to pursue – the value of these could easily exceed what the post cost.

# - A Twitcher's Trail -

Among the park's many attractions is its rich diversity of birdlife. Here, local ornithologist Tom Wheeler describes some of the species you may be lucky enough to spot on a leisurely stroll from Netteswell Cross to the River Stort

**Begin your trail in the car park, near the Greyhound pub.** Walk up the steps and over the bridge onto the "pitch and putt" course where, in Spring, *Yellow Wagtails* can be seen.

Continue over the course to the Edinburgh Way underpass. Emerging from the underpass look to the right, where you will see an area of marsh and copse known as Marshgate Spring. In Winter, *Siskins* and *Redpolls* can be seen feeding in the tops of the *ulmus* trees, often accompanied by *Goldfinches*. Here, *Woodcock* have been found in the copse, with *Snipe* feeding along the ditches. The open area of reed and sedge attracts *Reed* and *Sedge Warblers* and the odd pair of *Reed Bunting*. *Water-rail* have been heard, and in November 1979 six *Bearded Tits* were recorded.

Pass over the zig-zag bridge, turn right, and check out the small pond where *Moorhens* nest and *Kingfishers* may be seen. The nearby ditch area, with its various aquatic growth, again attracts *Reed* and *Sedge Warblers* in the Spring, as well as *Reed Bunting*. The ivy-covered tree on the right as you enter the field, has held roosting *Tawny Owl*.

Arriving where the footpath turns left, continue on the grass, following the course of the ditch, until you come to Maymeads Marsh, an area created to attract aquatic birds, with its own purpose-built hide. Before entering the hide, check out the old, broken willow trees for *Tree Sparrows*, a now rapidly declining species.



Once inside the hide, view the area with a keen eye and some patience as, over the seasons, many species have been recorded here (my own personal tally is 83). Look out for *Moorhen*, *Coot* and *Mallard*, *Little Grebe*, *Canada Goose* and *Tufted Duck*. When first constructed, *Little Ringed Plover* nested on one of the gravel islands in the marsh.

If the water level is low during August and September, passage waders such as *Greenshank*, *Green Sandpiper*, *Wood Sandpiper* and *Common Sandpiper*, may be seen. In the Winter of 1985, *Bitten* was recorded here, while in the Winter of 1978/9 three *Short-eared Owls* were observed in the area.

Leaving the hide, proceed towards the River Stort. The field between Maymeads Marsh and the river often floods in Winter and is a good place to spot feeding *Snipe*. Hawthorns growing in the vicinity supply *Fieldfares* and *Redwings* with winter berries, while *Kestrel* and *Sparrowhawk* may be seen hunting for prey over the field.

In September 1982, a juvenile *Hobby* was observed in this area.

Arriving at the river, turn left along the towpath. Look out for *Kingfishers* and the occasional *Common Tern* from the breeding ground at Ryemeads. The wooded area on the opposite bank of the river holds *Nuthatch* and *Tree-creeper*, with perhaps a *Green* or *Greater-spotted Woodpecker*. In the winter months, this is a particularly good area for mixed *Tit* flocks.

The area around the Moorhen marina can be worth a look in hard, frosty weather. I have seen *Great Crested Grebe* and *Goldeneye* in such conditions.

Return via the zig-zag bridge and the underpass, to the lane running alongside the Marshgate Farm depot. *Swallows* nest in the old barn here.

Cross the lane into the Spurriers area, checking the stream for *Grey Wagtail* in Spring and Autumn. Continue past the bandstand, through the Rose Garden, and into the Water Gardens, with its resident flock of *Mallard*. In hard winter weather, this is often a good place to see *Kingfishers* and perhaps *Water-rail*. *Black-headed Gulls* will fish for sticklebacks in the pond, while *Goldcrests* are known to nest in the nearby low-growing conifers.

Return to your starting point and perhaps some refreshment in Spurriers Café or The Greyhound pub.

For both the serious and occasional ornithologist alike, the Town Park generally offers very good birdwatching opportunities, with at least 92 species recorded.

## other events:.....

**A RARE** Buttoned Snout Moth has been discovered overwintering in Crack Willow trees in Burnt Mill Lane, according to a report by Butterfly Conservation. The moth, a National Biodiversity Action Plan species, produces larvae which feed on the wild hops that drape the trees.

**FORTHCOMING EVENTS** in the Town Park include: a Fun Fair between March 26 and April 6; a Circus, April 15-20; and the Cancer Research Charity's "Run For Life" on May 19.

**PLANS FOR** a Town Show-style Golden Jubilee celebration on the Showground

and at the Bandstand on September 1 are already underway. Expect more information in forthcoming newsletters.

**THE NEXT** Town Park Users Group meeting will be held on 9<sup>th</sup> May, 7.30pm, at the Leah Manning Centre. All welcome.

## Editorial Note:

Park Life is a quarterly newsletter published by the Town Park Users Group.

Anybody wishing to submit articles, features, letters or graphical material should send them to:

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or by email to:

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