



# Western Vole



## NEWSLETTER No 32 – AUTUMN 2016

*(NB. To enlarge the images on this e-newsletter use the page zoom function)*

### **Lord's Hill Restoration**

*First week in July and another good turnout of voles set about removing the birch saplings, brambles and gorse from the Lord's Hill area of Rushmere. As shown below the heather has already made a recovery since the pine forested area was felled in 2013 This task was undertaken in preparation for a short walk in the recently added extension to the National Nature Reserve, arranged for the visiting dignitaries at the scheduled launch on the 12<sup>th</sup> July. (Details about the NNR extension to include Rushmere Country Park were covered in the previous summer issue of the newsletter).*



*The dense conifer plantation had covered Lords Hill for about 70 years until contractors removed them as part of a conservation plan to restore the area to its original heathland. Initially the volunteers had several tasks to gradually remove and burn the large amount of brash left behind. Many new flowers and plants have already begun to appear which includes the unwanted 3B's (birch, brambles & bracken) which the volunteers have regularly removed. As expected however the heather began to return, the seeds of which have laid dormant just waiting for the right conditions. Heather seeds can lie dormant for many years, even in the areas that have been overgrown for 50+ years. They will still germinate once they are exposed to daylight and - if the area stays open - grow into new plants, as seen in the above picture where the heather is already about a foot high.*

### **NNR Launch at Rushmere**

*As mentioned above the official launch of the recently extended Nation Nature Reserve to include Rushmere Country Park took place on the 12<sup>th</sup> July. Fortunately a marquee was provided, in case of rain. Just as the opening welcome speech was about to take place, the heavens opened with a heavy rain shower. However this didn't prevent the procedure taking place with speeches from the heads of; Natural England, Tarmac, GST Chairman and the Chairmen from Central Bedfordshire Council and the Wildlife Trust. After which the rain cleared and these dignitaries then official declared the NNR open by cutting a ribbon at the entrance to the Nightjar Valley, pictured below.*





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*John Torlesse, Manager of the Essex, Herts, Beds, Cambs & Northants Team, Natural England cut the ribbon at the entrance gate to Nightjar Valley. After the above ceremony, GST staff Phil Irving and Bob Hook led separate walks around Lord's Hill to show off the recent conservation work carried out by our volunteers the previous week, as pictured below. This was followed by a splendid buffet provided by the GST Catering staff.*







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## *The Wavendon Heath Ponds*

*In mid-July the mid-week volunteers returned to the Wavendon Ponds which are in a part of the Bedford Estate, off Longslade Lane, Woburn. The western voles have helped conserve this important piece of wetland for many years. Our role at the site has been the removal of encroaching bracken and rhododendrons. However the regular annual visit to remove the bracken has resulted in an increase of grass which now threatens the existence of the sphagnum moss. This year's task was to cut and rack away the purple moor grass and try to improve the declining pond water level.*

*The site includes several habitats including three ponds representing areas of acidic mire and supporting plant communities uncommon throughout eastern England. The ponds have the status of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and cover an area of 11.66 acres.*

*The three ponds and adjacent wet flushes support a carpet of bog moss *Sphagnum* spp. and rushes including soft rush and sharp-flowered rush. Purple moor-grass and heath bedstraw grow on the drier margins. Most of the species associated with this habitat are uncommon or rare in Bedfordshire, hence the SSSI status.*

*The importance of this site centres on the three ponds artificially created by dams across a small valley and fed by a wet flush on the hill slope. They represent a habitat characteristic of the Bedfordshire Greensand but now uncommon due to agricultural changes and afforestation. It is generally believed, though not documented, that the ponds were created by Mary the 11<sup>th</sup> Duchess of Bedford (1866 – 1937), known as the 'Flying Duchess', in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Read all about the amazing Flying Duchess at the end of this article).*

*Unfortunately the lower of the three ponds, pictured below, developed a leak several years ago.*



*Shown left is Ranger Gary 'supervising' volunteers Liz and Jenny digging out small areas of soil which will soon fill with water to revitalise the failing pond.*

*Pictured right, is one of several holes dug in previous years which have slowly expanded to help retain the pond and the bog moss *Sphagnum* spp. and rushes.*







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*The following photograph will be of interest to those that have worked at the ponds, it is believed to have been taken about 1920 and shows the ponds and the island as they were originally. The roof and chimneys of Longslade Cottage are just visible in the centre of the picture. The photo was kindly provided by volunteer Peter Boon who lives nearby in Woburn Sands.*

*Peter explained that the photo was sent to him by a local historian, who had scanned the image from an old postcard. The reference to Woburn Sands Woods is more relevant than the term Wavendon Heath. That term goes back to the days before Woburn Sands was created. The ecclesiastical parish of Woburn Sands was laid out in 1865, which took in parts of both Aspley Guise and Wavendon.*



*The image below is a more recent photo of the almost dried up ponds, as we know them today.*





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## ***A Memory of the Wavendon 'Duck Ponds'***

*I'm sure you will also find the following article interesting which was produced by Peter and appeared in the autumn 2011 Voles Newsletter.*

*As a regular Wednesday volunteer with the western group, I'm always interested to read the Voles Newsletter. The article on Wavendon Heath Ponds, which appears in the last edition (Summer 2011), struck a particular chord with me. I grew up amid the pine trees at the top of Aspley Heath and often visited the three ponds during my boyhood and after. I have a bit of anecdotal information about these ponds which you might find interesting.*

*I've gleaned much of it from my grandparents who were long-term residents of Aspley Heath. Although there appears to be no official records to confirm that the ponds were created by Mary the 11th Duchess of Bedford, it was always my grandparents' understanding that they owed their origin to this lady. What's more, my grandparents and my mother (who also grew up on the Heath) invariably referred to the ponds as 'the three duck ponds'. The story goes that when the ponds contained viable amounts of water, the Duchess introduced some ducks but for some reason these birds never took to this environment, flew away and were never replaced. Thereafter, the ponds were neglected and Mother Nature gradually asserted herself.*

*During the 1950s, when I was a lad, my mates and I used to ride our bikes down to the ponds and play games there. In those days there was usually a trickle of water flowing over the small concrete causeways that separated the ponds at their various levels. It was always our aim to try and get out to the island in the middle of the bottom pond, but the water was usually too deep – it would invariably come over the top of our wellington boots! Today, of course, the ponds are heavily silted, although the concrete causeways are still visible. As recently as the 1970s and early 80s when I occasionally brought my children to this part of the woods – by now I was married and living at Toddington – there was still plenty of water to be seen. And, incidentally, when speaking of the ponds to my children I continued to use my grandparents' terminology – 'duck ponds'*

*I'm not certain when they were created but my guess is around the time of the First World War. I once saw, at a local history group exhibition, a photo taken in the 1920s of what I'm sure was the ponds area. What struck me was that the surroundings were much more 'open' than they are today. I assume that's because the pine trees were still small and the rhododendrons were less invasive. If I'm right about the timing, I wonder if the Canadian Forest Corps had anything to do with the project. During the First World War a contingent of these troops was stationed locally (I'm told there was another group at Ampthill) and the soldiers certainly mixed with the local residents but that's another story!*

*Peter Boon  
Western Volunteer*

**Editors Note:** *If you would like to read more about the Canadian Forest Corps in Woburn Sands follow this link: <http://www.mkheritage.co.uk/wsc/docs/1917%20Canadians.html>*





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### *Not just a Flying Duchess*

*From flying to fishing and ice skating to aviation, Mary Duchess of Bedford excelled at everything she did. Mary Russell, Duchess of Bedford, was a truly formidable woman. She spent most of her time pursuing her great passions in life. Although she was known for her achievements in aviation, she worked for decades, nursing the sick, at the cottage hospital she established near her home.*

*In the 1890s she had nothing to do with the running of the Woburn estate or the household so she was looking for something to do. She started a cottage hospital in a house on Leighton Street in Woburn which had a small number of rooms and beds. Then in 1903 she actually built the cottage hospital, which is down on Leighton Street, called Maryland (until recently, the Maryland College). As the 20th century wore on she registered it as a hospital for the wounded from the First World War. She employed Bridon Glendenning who was a very competent surgeon to run the hospital for her. He encouraged her to train in radiography and radiology. She also started to work in the radiotherapy field, using radiotherapy to actually cure people rather than just take photos. She didn't expect her staff to do anything in hospital that she wouldn't do herself. So she'd be up at 5.45 in the morning scrubbing floors and getting the operating theatres ready for the surgeons. She became a very accomplished theatre nurse and in some cases did minor operations herself. So she really was very qualified in that field and it was all funded by her husband the Duke.*



*She was 61 when she started to fly, pictured left. She'd been taken up for a short flight and so enjoyed it she decided it was a hobby she'd like to take up. So she got herself a pilot, Flight Lt. Barnard, and they had a number of close calls on their flights. He was the one that she did the record breaking flights to India in August 1929 and South Africa in April 1930 with. She then employed Flight Lt. Preston, he was the pilot who plotted the course for her last flight. She had done 199 hours and four minutes and she had to do another 56 minutes of flying to reach her 200 hours of flying time. She wanted to do that because she was worried they would not renew her pilot's licence because of her deafness and because she was, by then, 71.*

*In March 1937, aged 71, she went on her last flight in her de Havilland Gipsy Moth over towards Cambridgeshire and didn't come back. When she took off the weather was good but then a snow storm came up. When she hadn't returned after an hour and a half the Duke was very concerned and contacted the chief of Bedfordshire police who put out calls to neighbouring constabularies. But nothing was ever seen of her. The feeling is that she had flown out over the sea by mistake and ran out of fuel and went down into the North Sea off Great Yarmouth; parts of her aircraft were found but her body was never recovered. The Duchess was a keen naturalist, collector and watcher of birds, and took an interest in bird migration. Between 1909 and 1914 she spent much time on Fair Isle. Her journal, *A Bird-watcher's Diary*, was privately published in 1938 after her death.*





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## *Rushmere Summer Fayre & Fun Dog Show*

*This year's summer fayre took place on Sunday the 14<sup>th</sup> August, and probably had the largest number of visitors so far, all the car parks and lower meadow were full. As usual there were about a dozen volunteers on hand to help this annual event to be a great success. Once again the fun dog show was most popular as shown below.*



*The GST Games Arcade consisted of five separate games, aimed mainly at the children. Three of these had been made and painted by the volunteers themselves last year, these are the Tin Can Alley, Ball in the Flowerpot and the Reindeer Hoopla. The Hook a Fish in a paddling pool game was purchased and the golf target was marked up by the staff. It was the volunteers who operated these games on the day, giving out sweets to the children as prizes, as pictured below.*







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### ***Rammamere Heath Restoration***

*End of August and another heathland restoration task on Rammamere Heath, this time on the newer Tarmac owned area opposite the Stockgrove entrance. A fine sunny morning saw 23 of the Wednesday volunteers getting stuck into the job of pulling out the intrusive birch saplings. The image below shows the voles hard at it, notice the new heather in the foreground that has recently returned as a result of previous restoration work on the site.*



*The surprisingly large amount of birch removed was stacked beneath several of the pine trees, one such pile is shown below, with Liz throwing herself into the job !!*







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### ***A Rangers work is never done!***

*(It's not all swanning around in Landrovers, lording it over the volunteers!)*



*Volunteering isn't something everyone decides to do when they visit home but then not everyone has a brother who is a Ranger for the Greensands trust. The Ranger in question, Gary Peach has been working for the Greensand Trust for 5 years and I love to hear him tell tales of work and what he has been up to. So whilst I was home in August I decided to volunteer my services to him and help out for a week to see first-hand what it's like to shadow a ranger.*

*Firstly let me tell you that the area the Trust looks after is huge! From woods to meadows and all in between. The area ranges from Tiddenfoot Waterside Park in Linslade to Rushmere Country Park near Leighton Buzzard and Apsley Woods in Woburn. All of this area needs to be managed and looked after. Whilst volunteering with Gary we did a range of tasks.*

*On the first day we did some measuring of the areas by Vimy Road for planting wild flowers which the volunteers had been clearing and looking after. We then went up to Linslade Wood to clear a fallen tree which had covered one of the path-ways. Followed by an afternoon of checking the throw lines at Tiddenfoot Lake whilst also doing a litter pick. A lot of walking and physical work.*



*In total I volunteered for four days and it was great to be outside and felt really rewarding. Driving around with Gary I noticed that he had a lot of land to cover and that also a lot of the local people knew who he was and that they had a lot of respect for him and his role. We continued to do lots of jobs around the Leighton Buzzard area from path clearing in woods for walkers, cyclists and horse riders and general maintenance of walk ways and the countryside. One of the tasks Gary does that is not so fulfilling is pulling shopping trolleys, litter and dumped belongings from the River Ouzel. It's unbelievable that people do this and that time has to be taken to clear up others mess but it's thanks to Gary, wardens and volunteers like him that they do clear up these areas so the rest of us can enjoy them. When fishing out a trolley on the day I was with him it was lovely to see two young boys with their dad asking about what Gary was doing and why the trolley was there. Once Gary had pulled it out they cheered him and said 'Well done trolley man!' which made the job more enjoyable. It was great experience to volunteer for the Trust, and obviously great to do it with my brother. If you fancy joining in and volunteering for the Trust I can guarantee you will meet a great team of people and be helping keep these lovely places beautiful.*





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### *Sandhouse Nature Reserve*

*The Midweek Voles have worked at the Nature Reserve for many years to clear hawthorn, cut & rake the meadow area and remove larger trees and scrub from around the pond edge. This has allowed more light in and improved the ground cover vegetation. The recent task took place at the nature reserve in mid-September, this image is of Alan cutting the grass (not driving an off-road mobility scooter!)*



*I thought you might like to know more about this little known site.*

*It was in March 1948 that the then Luton Rural District Council granted planning permission for the “winning of sand” (lovely turn of phrase I thought!) at Sandhouse Lane, Heath & Reach. The sand quarry which then finally ceased working in the 1960s was later used for dumping asphalt, and then left for a period of restoration. The Greensand Trust produced the Sandhouse Lane Quarry Management Plan in September 1998 which acknowledged that sand extraction had long since ceased and that the site was currently ‘unmanaged’. The proposed management plan was accepted by Lafarge Aggregates, the owners, who have tasked the Greensand Trust since 1999 with the sites management as a nature reserve.*

*There is another site adjacent to the reserve (pictured below), also owned by Lafarge Aggregates, which was used as an asphalt coating plant. The earliest reference was in 1966 which requested planning permission for 6 months to supply coated road materials for the M1 road building. There*



*were several renewals of permission over the years to extend working the site, the last record was for its expiry on the 31 May 1997. This required that all plant, buildings and machinery were to be removed within 6 months. At its peak the plant used 1,000 tonnes of asphaltting sand per week; crushed stone was brought in from other quarries for the coating process. The site has been landscaped and left to allow restoration; nature is beginning to take hold once more, as shown left, photo taken in 2010. Several hollows have been created by Lafarge Aggregates to form ponds, reedmace and pond life has started to*

*appear but the remaining site currently resembles a ‘lunar landscape’. The entire area is very stony with much broken asphalt and several tar springs have appeared. The soil is low in nutrients which only attracts certain hardier plant types. It is hoped that in the future this site will become an extension to the Nature Reserve.*





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*There are two ponds in the Nature Reserve, the larger one is about 3 to 4 times the size of the smaller one, and both are now mature with considerable reed growth. Great crested newts have been caught in the ponds also frogs and other pond life flourish. On the 30th of May 2006 a rare freshly emerged Downy Emerald Dragonfly (*Cordulia aenea*) was found at the Nature Reserve, this was the first confirmed record of this species in Bedfordshire in over 50 years!*

*On the eastern side of the ponds the meadow supports many species of grasses and wild flowers including common spotted orchids and pyramidal orchids also wild strawberries appear in early summer. Several branches of a large hawthorn bush nearby contain lichen, which only grows in areas of clean pollution free air. At the southern end of the large pond, amongst the shrubs, broad leafed helleborine orchids have also been seen in previous years.*

*Along the western side of the large pond, the area is of poor nutritional soil made up mainly of asphalt deposits. This area known as the Lichen Heath is only suitable for certain hardy types of plants, lichen and mosses, closer to the pond bank bee orchids occasionally appear in early summer.*

*The ponds are clay based which retains the water on a perched (high) water table that is dependent upon rainfall; there are no springs or streams to feed the ponds. During dry weather they dry out completely, hence there are no fish present in the ponds; however this does not seem to adversely affect the plant or pond life. (Examples of this at the large pond are shown below)*



**May 2005**



**September 2009**

*Despite being only a few hundred yards south of the A5 Flying Fox roundabout, the nature reserve is a quiet and tranquil place seldom visited by the general public although there is easy access from Sandhouse Lane, parking is on the road side by the kissing gate entrance. The volunteers perform an annual conservation task at the nature reserve each September.*





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### **Heath Wood Conservation**

*The end of September saw the midweek volunteers tackling a bit more 'Rhodi' bashing at the Heath Wood site. The task included removing the rhododendron regrowth and cutting back some of the older larger shrubs, all of the brash had to be burnt as shown below.*



*However this time the latest GST toy was put to good use as Ranger Matt kept the fire burning bright with a portable blower.*



*Happy volunteering folks.*

**Tony Harding**

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