Friends of Farnham Park

Newsletter Spring 2017

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WELCOME

To our spring newsletter. After an on-and-off winter, spring is definitely on its way, with the clocks about to change, and quite a few wild flowers popping up in the Park – see the next page for David's musings on what he has spotted recently.

A couple of other articles on things to spot in the Park, Robin has quite a lot to say about trees in this issue.

We hope you enjoy it, and enjoy being out and about in the Park as the weather improves.

This beautiful old oak is sadly no longer vertical – see Robin's report on the back page for the tale of its demise.

EVENTS PROGRAMME 2017

Thanks to Sally Hall for putting together another enticing programme of talks this year, and in particular, look out for our 'Fist Full of Feathers' event in August, which should be fascinating.

Tuesday 4th. April: Geology of Farnham Park An illustrated talk by June Chatfield. June is a well-known and highly respected author and local expert on Natural History and has been involved in the gallery redevelopment project at Haslemere Museum.

Tuesday 30th. May: Rowhill Field Centre An illustrated talk by Roy Champion. Roy is the chairman of Rowhill Field Centre.

Thursday 27th. July: BBQ 7.00pm at Farnham Cricket Club

June/July tbd – guided walk in the Park

Wednesday 23rd. August: A Fist Full of Feathers. Simon Wilson will display and fly his collection of birds, including Barn Owls, hawks and kestrel. 5.00pm at the Top (Rangers House) carpark

Tuesday 17th. October: Raptors of the UK. An illustrated talk by Mary Braddock. Mary is a member of the RSPB and gives talks on 'Nature in the UK and Europe.'

Note: all indoor talks take place at the Rowhill Centre (Cranmore Lane), 7pm refreshments for 7:30pm start. The Centre now has a hearing loop should anyone need it.

Events are free to FoFP members, £3 to non-members. Walks normally meet at Park Lodge/main car park.

SIGNS OF LIFE IN THE PARK

Despite the cold, wet and windy February, the wild flowers in the Park are coming on apace! I saw the first primroses, in the woody area of Shady Nook, during the last week of January.
Since then, they are springing up along the banks of the Nadder, especially at the northern end.
Daffodils are also becoming abundant, especially along the Avenue, and there is one plant which has survived the falling tree beside YoYo pond, although I fear that the others have been squashed!
Snow Drops are also very abundant this year. They appear in the most unexpected places – I saw a couple close to a bench by Phoebe's Copse, and again there are loads of them along the Avenue.
Although not strictly wild flowers, there are an awful lot of Crocuses in the Park.
There is a lovely clump close to the Nutshell Lane entrance, and the odd plant can be seen throughout the Park – the Avenue again is well populated.
There is a large, flowering, clump of Violets on the Nadder bank close to the bridge in Shady Nook, and there are several, not yet in flower, throughout the Park. The spiky leaves of Bluebells are beginning to appear, but it is some time before we will be able to enjoy their beautiful blue (sometimes white) blooms.
I saw a Dandelion in White Bottom this morning and there have been some in the grassland above Carron Pond for a week or so.
On the down side, the leaves of Himalayan Balsam are beginning to appear. I had hoped that the frost would have put paid to them, but no such luck!
Hazel and Pussy Willow catkins have been very much in evidence for a couple of weeks, but no sign yet of any leaves appearing!

When I walked up from Farnham Park Drive to Nutshell Lane, there were a few Lesser Celandines in flower. When I walked back, about 3 hours later, there were loads of them. Similarly, when I walked from Nutshell to Oasthouse Lane, I didn't see any daisies. However, when walking back, again, there were loads of them - amazing what a few hours of sunshine will do! No doubt about it – SPRING IS ON THE WAY!

David Havenhand (7th March 2017)

WEASELY DISTINGUISHED?

Last year when Alan and I were packing up after our monthly Riverfly survey on the Nadder a movement caught my eye and I turned to see a weasel running along the path. Another was seen earlier this year and it occurred to me that as they are present on the park it would be interesting to find out more about these elusive creatures. The weasel, Latin name *Mustela nivalis*, is a member of the family Mustelidae, with a UK population of nearly half a million and related to stoats, badgers, ferrets, mink and otters. They are the smallest predatory mammal in Europe. The male (dog) is around 23cm with a 6cm tail and weighs about 150g while the female (bitch) is smaller at 18cm plus 5cm for the tail and weighs less than 100g. They are smaller than the similar stoat and do not have its black tip to the tail.
Their habitats are quite varied but include the grassland and woodland found on the park. Their food is largely mice and voles which comprising 60-80 % but they will also eat shrews, rats, birds and eggs which make them unpopular with gamekeepers and chicken farmers. Their long, thin shape allows them to enter the burrows of their prey but it also increases heat loss from the body so they need to eat about one third of their bodyweight each day to survive. They are active day and night and have large hunting areas travelling 2km or more in search of food. Their hunting technique is to corner and grab their prey then wrap their body around it before killing it with a bite to the back of the neck. They will take prey up to 4 times their size and possibly larger - there is a story of a buzzard picking up a weasel for a meal and ending up back on the ground as the weasel's meal! It will kill even when not hungry and cache the food for later especially in winter and there is a record from Greenland of one cache containing 150 lemmings.
The female produces one or sometimes two litters of 3 to 6 kittens (if the parents are dog and bitch why are the babies kittens and not pups?) which are weaned at 4 to 5 weeks and independent at 3 to 4 months and may breed in their first year if sufficient prey is available. Their lifespan in the wild is usually one to three years but can survive up to 10 in captivity although trying to catch them is not a good idea as they have very sharp teeth and like their skunk cousins can emit an evil smelling discharge – you have been warned!

Richard Burgess

LIFE IN DEAD WOOD

Jelly ear fungus

Fungi are not plants! The fungi are a kingdom of living organisms alongside other kingdoms such as the animals and plants. The most easily identifiable kinds of fungi produce their spores in large fruit bodies which we know as mushrooms, toadstools or brackets. Farnham Park's veteran trees and associated dead and decaying wood provide a niche habitat on which a huge range of organisms depend on. Decay is not a disease, it is a normal consequence of aging and injury in trees which releases mineral nutrients that have been locked up in their wood and provides habitats for other species. Hollowing in trees is a perfectly natural occurrence, and is a co-evolutionary relationship between the tree, fungi, bacteria and other micro-organisms. Depending on the species the two can often co-exist for centuries even millennia. So branches left where they fall, scattered brush wood, piles of chippings and log stacks may look 'untidy', but they are a vital part of the park's ecosystem.

'Chicken of the woods'

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT.

Trees, as with all living organisms, are striving for success as a species - "Survival of the form that will leave the most copies of itself in successive generations." in Darwinian terms. If consideration of form was purely structural i.e. to create a form where its mechanics were incredibly strong and able to withstand extreme external stresses from the wind, trees would form a very thick trunk with small branches low to the ground. This however, would not be to the advantage of the species in competing with its neighbours. Biological success is paramount to the success of any species and the ability to out compete other species in order to reproduce is more important than ensuring there is zero risk of structural failure. So trees achieve a balance between achieving a form that can withstand storms and economising on some of that structural strength to achieve growth and height in order to compete for the light. Within this strategy there are varying limits of structural tolerance for different trees. Some such as oak put more emphasis on longevity in order to further their cause, producing seed for centuries. While some grow fast, reproduce easily and tolerate a higher risk of mechanical failure such as willow or poplar. Each to their own.

Robin Crowther

RECORDING MAMMALS IN THE PARK

As our readers will have seen from articles in previous newsletters, a number of surveys are carried out regularly in the Park, including birds, butterflies, moths, dragonflies, great crested newts and other amphibians. A detailed plant list was updated in 2015. Another focus of interest is mammals, like Richard's weasel on the previous page. There is an ongoing project to map mammals across Surrey, so if you spot anything in or around the Park (or elsewhere on your travels in the county), it would be great if you could report your sighting to recorder@surreymammals.co.uk , giving the species, date and location – if possible a OS grid reference, or a detailed description of the place in the Park.

RANGER'S REPORT SPRING 2017

The felling of a mature beech tree along the Avenue this winter was a dramatic and painful sight. Its impressive trunk and huge crown creating a rush of air as it crashed to the ground, dead branches flying high into the air. It would have been planted sometime after the First World War but had succumbed to a fungus which attacks the underside of its roots, making it particularly unstable. We don't take decisions like this lightly and felling is always the last option we consider for tree safety management. Unfortunately, given the location in probably the most frequented part of the park and the consideration of the continuity of a historic avenue, it meant felling and replanting was the most sensible option. A poorly lime and dead elm were also removed along the avenue and replanted with a red twigged lime (*Tilia platyphyllos* 'Rubra'). The trees were donated by Scottish and Southern Energy to part compensate for scrub clearance they undertook under the overhead power lines in the autumn. An extra tree was planted at the Bell's piece end of the Avenue to extend the line.

We also sadly lost another veteran oak tree near to YoYo pond which succumbed to the rain and high winds. Probably over 300 years old, this fine specimen had a thin layer of live wood inside the bark while the inside of the trunk consisted of soft pulp. Old trees decay naturally from the inside and many of our veterans are hollow but still retain much strength acting like a cardboard tube. Unfortunately, the decay in this tree was particularly aggressive and combined with the weight of a large crown, the stress on the base of the trunk was too much for it to cope with. This highlights how important it is for us to be pro-active in managing our veteran tree population as their stately presence defines the Park. We continue to reduce the weight and 'sail effect' of large canopies on vulnerable trees by careful pruning to try and avoid this kind of occurrence but we could always do more. Budgets are tight with all our other responsibilities and grants form an important project funding stream. We have recently applied for a considerable grant from a local land fill tax which could make a big difference to several of our vulnerable oaks. Fingers crossed.

The Spigot Mortar emplacement by bear lane entrance was accidentally discovered about twenty years ago when a mower caught its blades on the metal pin protruding from the ground. This formed part of a 'stop line' of defensive structures during WWII to obstruct the enemy advance. The spigot mortar was an anti-tank defence structure and located on the south side of Farnham Castle (a centre of camouflage research during the war) and would have been manned by the home guard. The top surface of two of the ammunition lockers have graffiti which appears to have been drawn when the concrete was still wet at the time. It was excavated and recorded by David Graham at the time of discovery and is a fine example of its type. The surrounding trench was backfilled after excavation and has since become part obscured by vegetation. It would be nice to make more of an interesting part of the parks history, but we must protect the integrity of the structure while not providing a hazard to the public. We have completed an application to Historic England to have it registered as a monument of national importance which will help in any future funding bid for interpretation works. We are awaiting the recommendation -watch this space.

Thanks as always to the Park volunteers who have put up with some pretty awful weather on Wednesday tasks this winter. Though we are buoyed as ever, by delicious home-made cakes plus good 'craic' as the Irish say. The hedge-laying is always impressive, this year is no exception, there has been a lot of woodchip shovelled and raked without much complaint (more to come!), much scrub cleared, litter removed and generally keeping things in order when no one else is around. With spring on its way, it's a time to get out in the Park and enjoy all that has been put in to it.

Robin Crowther

[Spigot mortar photograph courtesy of David Graham]