

One of the special things about spring is the increased activities of our local birds. Read Ray Reedman’s fascinating article on birdsong (pages 2 & 3), and be sure to join his Dawn Chorus walk on Saturday, April 27th (details on page 7).

Such sad news: We were all shocked to learn of the death in February of Sue Smith, one of the most active members of EEG. She will be hugely missed for her energetic contribution in many ways, particularly including improvement work in the Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve, and, not least, for her lively personality. Read about Sue on page 4, and how the Group have decided to honour her.

Educating young people to appreciate the environment: One member of EEG, much concerned that the very young should be educated into an appreciation of their local environment through Outdoor Learning, is Charlotte Allchin. Read about the ‘Forest School’ – inspired way on pages 5 & 6.

Items of special interest:

<i>The voices of spring</i>	2/3
<i>Sue Smith, 1955-2019</i>	4
<i>2020 Calendar</i>	4
<i>EE Junior group</i>	5
<i>Playing the ‘Forest School’ -inspired way</i>	5/6
<i>News from Beyond Earley</i>	6
<i>Wildlife Sightings and Garden Surveys</i>	6
<i>Forthcoming Events</i>	7
<i>Bits and Pieces</i>	7/8

The voices of spring

There has always been something about birdsong that strikes a chord with us humans. We respond to the sound of some of them with instinctive pleasure, and poets have celebrated the best of them with many a well-chosen word. The sound of a Skylark takes me back to the age of eight, to the wonder that I shared with my seven-year-old sister as the bird towered to a speck in the firmament. I am sure that many of us have similar memories, spiritual highlights that sustain us through the tougher times of life.

As a birder, I am challenged to remember all the different songs as each new spring comes around and find it useful to do a bit of revision as more and more birds break into song. In fact, most birds need to remember their song from the previous year, because bird biology is a bit different from ours. The part of the brain that produces song shuts down outside the breeding season and is re-awakened appropriately by external stimuli, such as daylight length. The Chaffinch, for example, seems to remember a few notes at first and then gets better as his brain regains its capacity to remember the full song. Young birds have to learn the song, of course, and they do so as their father sings in the vicinity of the nest. There have been examples of birds picking up chunks of song from another species nesting close by. Because song is imitated in that way, there are dialects within the same species: last April, I struggled at first with the Sorrento version of a Common Whitethroat's song.

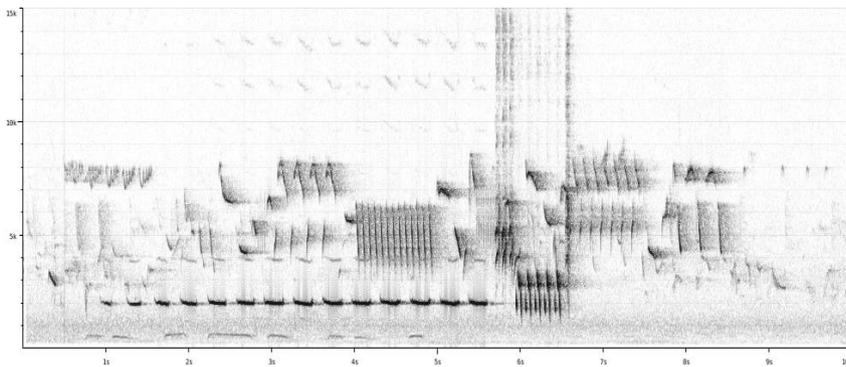
You may have noticed that 'spring' song comes very early to some birds like Robins, Song Thrushes and Blue Tits. Robins set up new territory in the autumn and may sing well after dark, especially where street lamps prolong their day. Song Thrushes too establish their rights to a territory and can sing well before Christmas. Others resident species join in a bit later. Birdsong comes to a peak in later April into May, because incoming migrants swell the numbers.



So that leads me on to why birds sing at all. First there is the matter of territory: a nesting family needs a patch which is their own, and song marks its boundaries, a keep-out signal to others of its species. A Robin may share space with a Blackbird, because the two species do not have exactly the same diet, but another Robin is a no-no, a potential stealer of mates or of grubs. At the same time the song needs to attract a mate: its strength and quality hold messages about his suitability as a potential partner. In short, bird song is about showing off, though for such as the Bullfinch and the Reed Bunting, the voice is less important than the flashy plumage. By contrast, Garden Warblers and Nightingales are rather plain, but the male has a complex and delightful song, which is usually delivered in deep cover. By the way, one or two females sing too, the Wren being one, but such is the exception outside the tropics.



A good many composers have tried to capture the essence of birdsong: it is easy enough with a Cuckoo or a Quail, but accurate imitation of more complex song has challenged the genius of such as Mozart and Elgar. Part of the problem stems from the way songbirds make their noise. While we have a larynx set in the single pipe of the trachea, the songbird has a twin structure, the syrinx, set in the bronchi, which doubles the capacity to make notes. Furthermore, while the human voice produces controlled sound as we exhale, birds can produce notes on both inhalation and exhalation. In short, birdsong is produced by a very complex instrument, so it is almost impossible to produce a meaningful representation of birdsong on a conventional stave. The best representation is a sonogram. Look closely at the Nightingale's here and you can see that birdsong has a very different structure indeed.



As for the word descriptions found in many field guides, I find that almost every author has his own rendering and that it often takes a lot of words to describe a song well.

A lot of us have a pocket alternative these days. The

Collins Bird Guide app can be loaded onto a mobile phone for a modest sum: it has lots of pictures and words, but there are sound tracks for most birds – very handy when you need to confirm a song. There is even one app that can identify the bird for you by sampling the song

The ideal way is to locate the songster and get a good view of the bird singing. That takes some time and a bit of luck, but I found that technique to be very rewarding when I encountered an Australian dawn chorus for the first time: within a week or so I had pinned down most local species and had even found a few nests. Much depends on how hard you work on the skill. On the other hand you can always set the alarm, get up before dawn, even pack a breakfast picnic, and just go out to listen and absorb the beauty of a new May morning. It's worth a whole packet of pills and you don't need any knowledge at all to do that.

Ray Reedman, March 2019

(Illustrated are Garden Warbler, Reed Bunting and Song Thrush)



Sue Smith, 1955 – 2019

It is with great sorrow that I have to report the death of Sue Smith in February this year. Sue had joined EEG after she retired from the NHS (as a physiotherapist) in 2015, and had quickly become involved in the practical conservation work done under Grahame's supervision on Wednesday mornings. She had a wicked eye for detail, and made many apposite comments about both the workers and the tasks they were performing; that kept us all on our toes, and at times in fits of giggles.

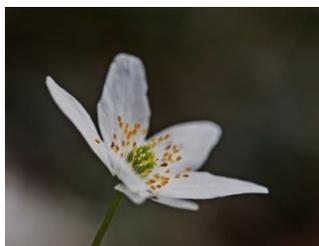
Due to her love of photography, Sue soon added publicity for EEG activities on Facebook to her responsibilities, and began publishing photos from the Wednesday sessions. This in turn led to several new recruits joining the existing group, which she christened the Earley Conservation Volunteers, and means that Grahame now has to find tasks suitable for 10 – 12 people, instead of 6 at the most!

In addition, Sue helped Charlotte Allchin establish and run a Junior EEG, helped cheerfully on the EEG stall at the Green Fair, as well as at other events such as the Royal Berkshire Show and, as if this weren't enough, did some gardening for an elderly resident, and gave advice on family history. She was a real character, and is already much missed.

To commemorate Sue's life and efforts for EEG, the group plans to publish a calendar in 2020 using some of Sue's photos, and there are also plans to plant a tree on the Maiden Erlegh reserve in her memory.

Jean Hackett

EEG's 2020 Calendar



Keen amateur photographers are encouraged to contribute to the EEG's 2020 calendar. It will feature photographs celebrating the natural environment in the Earley area and especially the Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve. This year's calendar will be dedicated to the memory of Sue Smith, who championed the EEG for many years and who sadly passed away earlier this year. Photos can be taken specifically for the calendar or have been taken in previous years. Scenes of the woods and lake, as well as pictures of the trees, plants, animals and insects found in Earley, will be welcome.

Any monies raised from the sale of the calendar would be used to support the EEG's activities. The copyright of all selected images would remain with the photographer, but by providing the image for the calendar the photographer would grant perpetual licence to the EEG to feature the image in any of its publications. All images used will be credited to the photographer. The deadline for the submission of images is 30th June 2019. Photographs should ideally be submitted in JPEG format and no larger than 5MB in file-size. Please send your photos with your name, photo titles and contact email address to **Bob Collis** at: EEGphotocalendar@earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk.

The Earley Environmental Junior Group:

The Group has decided to buy a trail camera to lend out to different families in the group. This is in memory of Sue, as she was part of our starting group and was well liked by all the children and their grown-ups. For information on the Group, phone Charlotte on 07771 605825.

Playing the 'Forest School'-inspired way

If you pass through Maiden Erlegh Reserve on a Thursday morning, you will most likely see a small crowd of waterproof-clothing-clad pre-schoolers enjoying time in a very beautiful outside space and thoroughly engrossed in what they are doing. They are the Erlegh Elfs, and this is the fifth year that they have been at the reserve!

I am passionate about getting everyone into the outdoors, but believe that it is particularly important for the very young and developing child to develop a relationship with nature. Research shows that those children who do not have a bond with the outdoors and a desire to be outside in nature by the age of twelve are unlikely to develop that bond in later life.

As a child, I was able to play outside freely for the majority of the time that I was not at school. It saddens me that one in ten children has not visited a green space in the past year, many cannot identify even the most common trees or birds, and that many nature-related words are being removed from the Oxford English Dictionary as lacking relevance in our modern lives.

The two groups that I lead in Reading are good-quality Forest School-inspired Outdoor Play groups. There is an inclination to call anything that happens outside 'Forest School' but, as an established Forest School Leader at an FSA-recognised setting and a trainer for Outdoor Learning Practitioners, I am acutely aware of the importance of recognising the clear



differences between the different areas of Outdoor Learning. Forest School is a long-term holistic approach in which learners of all ages (often mixed) engage with a natural wooded environment through which they learn about nature, flora and fauna, build structures, climb, light and manage fires, cook and have the chance to develop a variety of other skills over repeated sessions and throughout the year in all weathers. They learn to cope in challenging environments, often through engaging in team work and in so doing develop social skills, resilience, perseverance and positive self-esteem.

In Forest School, children are also able to use natural resources in imaginative and appropriate ways as they seek to improvise in creative games and self-initiated projects. The sessions are

facilitated by trained leaders who use observation and reflection to recognise where the learner needs support, resources or guidance, and ensure that these needs are met so that the learners can achieve in many different ways.

Very often, the absence of interference means that they create or discover something thoroughly unexpected by the leader! Children learn to assess risks for themselves, as they are using the woodland in such a variety of ways; they are developing skills that they take into their everyday lives with them.

There is a register of recognised Forest School Providers on the Forest School Association website for those who are interested in joining a Forest School. Borrowing from the Forest School principles wherever possible in the play groups creates an environment from which the children and adults learn a great deal, and nurtures a close community feeling. We are a drop-in group, which means that families can come along when they are able to, and we run only during term time. Both groups rely very much on the support of other people who share the sites with the children and allow the wonderful play and exploration of nature to happen. For this I feel very grateful, as these are precious sites in such an urban area and must be carefully preserved for all their users.

Charlotte Allchin



NEWS FROM BEYOND EARLEY

The consequences of climate change: potentially dangerous encounters between polar bears and people, a growing problem in a warming Arctic. Recently, unable to hunt for seals due to ice not forming, more than 50 polar bears converged on the village of Belushya Guba in the Russian archipelago of Novaya Zemlya—pawing through garbage, roaming down streets, and breaking into homes and businesses.

EARLEY WILDLIFE SIGHTINGS AND GARDEN SURVEYS

Margaret: 22 Jan Wren, not seen for many months, so welcome!

Gilllian: 24 Feb Brimstone butterfly seen over back garden, in battle with Red Admiral.

LOCAL FORTHCOMING EVENTS April 2019 – September 2019

Saturday April 27th 5.30am -7.30am Dawn Chorus walk. Come along and listen to the birdsong with local expert Ray Reedman. Meet at the Interpretation Centre, Instow Road.

Tuesday May 7th 7.30pm -9.30pm Bumblebees. A talk by Reading University PhD student Robin McArthur. Function Room, Maiden Place Community Centre, off Kilnsea Drive.

Saturday June 1st 11am Dragonfly walk. Led by Mike Turton. Come and learn about these complex and beautiful creatures. Meet at the Interpretation Centre, Instow Road.

Thursday July 25th 10.00am-12.30pm & 1.30pm-4pm Big Bug Hunt. Maiden Erleigh Reserve. Pre registration needed. Please contact erleghelfins@gmail.com. Meet at the Interpretation Centre, Instow Road.

Saturday August 3rd 10am-3pm Green Fair. This annual event provides the opportunity to find out about local green organizations. Maiden Erleigh Reserve, off Beech Lane.

Friday September 6th 7pm Bat walk & talk. Led by Rose-Ann Movsovic. Meet at the Interpretation Centre, Instow Road. 30 spaces only, so pre booking required.

Bits and Pieces

Don't forget: the Earley Environmental Group has a **Facebook** presence. We will be using this in addition to the main website and the newsletter as a way of keeping everyone up to date with our activities, and to let you know about upcoming events. Members are also welcome to post news stories or any photographs relevant to the group. Search for 'Earley Environmental Group' and we should pop up. Look forward to seeing you on there. **Mel Orros**

EASI (Earley Adopt-a-Street Initiative) would like more volunteers.

Help keep your street clear of litter. Everything provided. Contact Brian Hackett by phone (986 1115) or by e-mail: brianh@talk21.com. Peter Soul has resigned from the co-ordination task because of health problems, so the group needs some help in organisation. Please check with Brian on requirements and possible splitting of tasks. Can you offer active **help to EEG?** If so, phone 0118 962 0004, or go to the website <http://www.earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk>. We would welcome more member involvement. If you have no expertise and would like to get involved, you may be able to give practical help or maybe you have graphic design skills, computer skills, any other skills to offer. At the moment 'the few' help to keep EEG going.

EEG committee members can be found on www.earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk under Contacts.

For **Wildlife Survey Forms**, go to the website, or phone Earley Town Council on 0118 986 8995.

Comments or contributions to the newsletter to: sheila.crowson@ntlworld.com, or 2 Reeds Avenue, Earley, RG6 5SR. We would welcome short contributions from members to the newsletter.

If you know someone who would like to join **EEG**, **membership forms** are available from Earley Town Council, 0118 986 8995, on the website under Downloads , or send an e-mail to the Membership Secretary, Liz Wild at liz@helva.plus.com. **Please inform Liz if you intend to change e-mail or address** at 50 Kenton Rd, Earley RG6 7LG, or e-mail her.

Erlegh Elfins: A pre-school playgroup on Thursdays at the Interpretation Centre in Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve runs from 10am to 11:30 am, with a focus on outdoor play and exploration of the natural environment. For more information, please contact erleghelfins@gmail.com or Charlotte on 07771 605825. There is a limit on numbers to ensure safe play. Child-minders are welcome. Adults are responsible for the children they bring with them, so a ratio of 2:1 is recommended. A charge of £1.50 per child applies.

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