

'Green' is often used as shorthand for 'environmental', but at the time of writing, the colour is more literal than metaphorical, as leaves unfurl and the trees burst into their full foliage. It follows on from a sequence of springtime blossom – blackthorn, magnolia, cherry and, as we slide into May, hawthorn or may blossom. This year, blossom has made headlines in the newspapers, with reports of “blossom tourists” descending on the leafier streets of London – in Notting Hill for instance – and influencers and content creators posing and modelling spring fashions in front of a confection of cherry bloom. And now, apparently, there's 'wisteria hysteria'! All a bit silly, perhaps, but a demonstration of our appreciation nature in season. We don't offer hysteria in Earley, but in our various green spaces, we can offer the opportunity to enjoy the signs of spring in their natural setting.

Edwin A.R. Trout

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Photo: Edwin Trout

New Growth



Photo: Edwin Trout

People's Emergency Briefing

“The UK faces a growing climate and nature emergency. Yet most people have never been fully briefed on what it means for our lives, our economy and our future. A new film from the National Emergency Briefing sets out the risks facing the nation - and the credible, positive responses available - in a clear and accessible account designed for screenings in communities across the UK.” Screenings in Wokingham 15 May, at the Oakwood Centre, Woodley 29 May and Mill at Sonning 18 August. Interactive map: <https://www.nebriefing.org/screening-map> and more information at <https://www.nebriefing.org/the-film>

Committee News

Announcements from the EEG committee

EEG Committee

We are pleased to acknowledge that the Group has received a grant from Earley Town Council to cover the printing of the three issues of our newsletter in 2026.

We welcome Nick and Mary Bather who have been co-opted onto the EEG committee. Nick attended his first meeting on 31st March, along with Steve Vale of the Loddon Valley Ramblers (who are proposing to signpost the Lower Earley Green Corridor).

The Laurel Park Orchard Wassail Report by Bob Collis

On 8th of February, fruit tree sponsors for Laurel Park Orchard and members of the EEG members went a-wassailing.

The word wassail is derived from the Anglo-Saxon "wes hal" meaning "be whole", or "good health". A pagan tradition, wassailing is traditionally held in the early spring at farms and orchards to encourage a good harvest of fruit. This often involves cider drinking, dancing, and sometimes a fire is lit to represent the return of the sun after winter (although no fires were involved in this case).

Jean Hackett, who was instrumental in setting up the orchard, gave a brief history of the Laurel Park Orchard before the wassailing got under way.

Continued on p.3, left hand column

EEG's Award for Community Service

The Oakwood Centre, Woodley, was the setting for an inspiring awards ceremony on Tuesday 10th March: the Mayor of Wokingham Borough's Awards for Community Service. Announced each year, these are open to individuals and community groups who live, study or promote services in the borough.

This year, the Mayor is Cllr Carol Jewell and she had this to say of the latest awards: "One of the greatest privileges of being Borough Mayor is meeting people who quietly keep our communities strong. The nominations this year share remarkable dedication, compassion and perseverance. Many of these residents give their time without expecting anything in return, so it is an honour to recognise them. Their actions make a real difference, and remind us of the power of community spirit."

We are delighted to report that among the nine recipients this year was Bob Collis, Chair of the Earley Environmental Group. His citation commended him for his "remarkable leadership in protecting and enhancing local green spaces." It continues with the statement: "His advocacy for Swallows Meadow has been instrumental in encouraging partnership between the University of Reading and local residents", and concludes thus: "Through his tireless efforts, access to the meadow has been improved and he has inspired countless residents and volunteers to also get involved in conservation projects."



Wokingham Borough Council website

After the award winners had collected their certificate and lapel badge – and some, like Bob, had given an acceptance speech, the evening concluded with photographs and a buffet.

EEG member Elizabeth Trout was also among the recipients, as a representative of the charity ABC to Read. For details of all nine awards please visit the WBC website:

<https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/news/2026/borough-mayor-celebrates-community-champions>

Planning Policy

See left for details of local planning initiatives

Orchard Wassail cont.

Beginning with the process in 2013, sponsorship was raised for the original trees, which were planted in February 2016. Despite several incidents of vandalism and the need to replace some trees, the orchard has flourished.

To encourage a bumper harvest, the wassailers then sprinkled cider on the trees and read poems. Pans were banged with sticks to ward off evil spirits. This was all followed by cider and apple cake. Thank you to Charlotte Allchin and Jean for organising the event.



Linda and Tim Chambers Wassailing their walnut tree

On 16th of February many of us were back for a pruning session. Led by Matt Knight and colleagues from Freely Fruity, orchard sponsors and EEG members pruned the apple trees to take out old wood and stimulate new growth, creating an open centre within the trees to allow more light into the canopy to ripen the fruit.

We are grateful to all the Laurel Park sponsors and to those that came along to help. Two most delightful events.

Green Corridor Network

Bob Collis, Grahame Hawker and Chris Kaine

The Earley Green Corridor Network was first proposed in 2022 through the EEG's strategy document "Making Space for Nature in Earley". This was followed two years later with a summary document which included sketch maps for each corridor. The strategy shows how Earley's green spaces and green links can be combined to create a series of linear corridors that can be protected and enhanced as a comprehensive body of ecological sites and natural habitats. The EEG has gained support for the network from many of Earley's residents and local councillors. Earley Town Council has shown its support through the inclusion of the green corridor network in its Interim Earley Green Infrastructure Action Plan (2022) as the "hub of all Green Infrastructure policies". In addition, the University of Reading has given the network its in-principle support, as one of the green corridors includes the Whiteknights Campus.

Berkshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy

In January this year, the Berkshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (Berks LNRS) was published. This document, which has been adopted by Wokingham Borough Council and the other five Berkshire Local Unitary Authorities, includes the Earley Green Corridor Network as a case study on how to develop an urban wildlife corridor. Many of the green areas sitting within the Earley Green Corridor Network have been designated in the Berks LNRS as of importance to biodiversity within Berkshire and as areas where potential measures to protect biodiversity may be required.

The Hall Farm Development

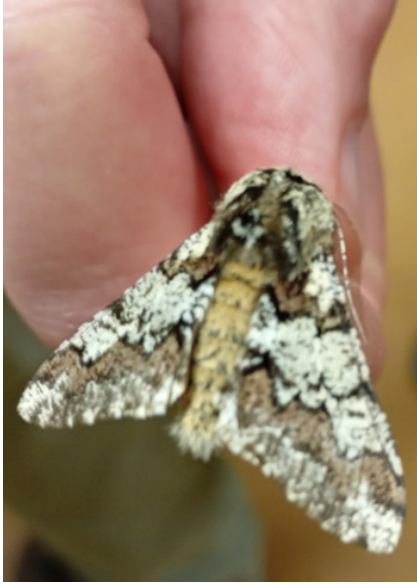
The Lower Earley Green Corridor, which runs along the southern edge of Lower Earley, forms a green 'buffer' between the Lower Earley residential area and the proposed development at Hall Farm. Green spaces in both the Lower Earley Green Corridor and the country park which forms a key element of the Hall Farm development proposed to the south of Earley are included on the Berks LNRS Habitat Map for the protection for wildlife. Together, they could form a continuous green or wildlife route along the River Loddon and connecting to Dinton Pastures. In the longer term, the Lower Earley Green Corridor would ideally be declared a Local Nature Reserve, further supporting Local Plan and the Berks LNRS policies.

Recognition of the Earley Green Corridor Network by Wokingham Borough Council would provide an opportunity to take the Earley Green Corridor Network forward, in line with the aims and goals outlined in the Berks LNRS and the green policies within the Wokingham Local Plan. This would not need any new legislation or substantial investment in costs or resources, as the green spaces are already there. They now need to be joined up.

Collaboration between landowners, residents and other stakeholders will be essential in generating the sense of community engagement now needed to take the green corridors forward. Your support in taking forward our proposals would be an important part of this. This could include writing to your local councillor or contacting the EEG about taking the corridors forward or forming neighbourhood/corridor groups to see how you can help preserve our green spaces and support our local wildlife.

EEG Talks

Reports of recent EEG talks and announcements of those to come



Oak Beauty

Demise of butterflies

The latest report from the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme – a citizen science project that has been running for more than 40 years – paints a bleak picture of the fortunes of 59 species of British butterfly. As many as 33 native species are described as fighting an “increasingly urgent battle” for survival. Some species have seen abundance fall by up to 90%. The Small Tortoiseshell has declined by 87% since 1976 and the rarer Pearl-bordered Fritillary has fallen 70% in the past 50 years.



Seasonal Blackthorn

Why Moths Matter: A talk by Tim Blackburn Report by Edwin Trout

Maybe he was preaching to the converted, but it didn't seem so when Professor Blackburn started his talk at the Maiden Place Community Centre on 10th March. At the end of the evening, however, and in a testament to the speaker's presentation, there was a discernable buzz of enthusiasm.

Tim introduced himself with an account of how he had arrived in his present position and with his interest in the evening's subject. His PhD, attained in the 1980s, was in Life History Theory, an aspect of evolution. An early job at Silwood Park led to the study of large-scale pollinators, then a visit to New Zealand with a colleague to study extinctions. There he was struck by how much in New Zealand has been transplanted from Europe and so became interested in the broader subject of invasion biology: “that things are here because we have brought them here”. Shortly after his present appointment at UCL, he inherited from a departing colleague the responsibility for running the university's ecology field course near Pitlochry in Scotland. There he encountered moth traps for the first time and was “smitten” with moths.

After a couple of years he realised he didn't have to wait for the annual course in Scotland – he could get his own trap! But living in the urban environment of London, with its concentration of concrete and electric lighting, and dwelling in a upper floor flat in Camden with no garden, didn't engender confidence in success. But he tried and was blown away by the diversity of insects visiting his trap: Elephant Hawk Moth, Marveille de Jour, Lime Hawk Moth, Pale Prominent, Swallow Tailed Moth, Angle Shades Moth and Leopard Moth. But others were rare: his non-native Jackfruit Borer is the only one ever recorded in the UK. Tim told us he has seen examples of 450 different species in his trap since 2018.

Diversity

He turned to his broader theme – of why we should be interested. Moths represent huge diversity, he said. With 160,000 species, moths account for 1 in 10 of all known organisms. They have been in existence for perhaps 300m years, for longer than the earliest fossil remains of 200m years ago. The caddis flies are their closest relative: a sister taxa, the two having diverged about 300m years ago and evolved for the same length of time. However, the moths have been more successful, vastly more numerous than the 1,400 species of caddis fly. In the UK there are 2,500 species, in contrast to the 56 species of butterfly officially claimed as resident (or perhaps, less formally, around 70 species?)

Traditionally, British moths have been categorised as macro (900 species) and micro (1600 species). This is now seen as a false distinction, with several macro species appearing in other categories: Swifts, Clearwings (such as the Hornet Moth), Burnets and Goats. But there are about 800 true macro moths. Tim described them colourfully as “the entry drug”, with micro moths appealing to those already hooked. Interestingly, butterflies are actually just one group of macro moth, with 20,000 species worldwide (and up to 70 in the UK).

cont.

Why so many? How have they been so successful? Initially they were small, probably leaf miners with chewing mouthparts. Then caterpillars started to feed outside the host plants and eventually moths developed their characteristic feeding tube through which to drink from flowering plants. This happened at time of great diversification among flowers, the two developments stimulating mutual expansion.

Pollinators

Moths are great pollinators, as is now recognised. Tim mentioned the Pollinator Monitoring Scheme, but acknowledged that no one monitors in the dark, and moths of course fly at night. That moths are important is asserted by the 2025 study, 'Negative effects of urbanisation in diurnal and nocturnal ... networks'. This place bees' pollination principally in the spring, with moths making an increasing contribution later in the year. Some species, such as the White Clover, depend on pollination by moths. There are, as it happens, about 200 species of day-flying moths (such as the Six Spot Burnet and the Mother Shipton), more than there are butterflies.

Moths undergo a lifecycle of distinct stages: egg, caterpillar, pupae and adult. They feed mainly as caterpillars; many adults never feed. In feeding they efficiently turn plants into animal matter, something benefits other species, including humans. The prickly pear cactus was introduced into Queensland, Australia, where it proliferated and overran 24m hectares of countryside. The Cactus Moth was subsequently released, bringing the growth of prickly pears back down to manageable levels.

But its not just humans who benefit: caterpillars are a source of food for many birds, such as the Robin and the Great Tit. Great and Blue Tits each as much as 2bn caterpillars per day in the UK, when summer is at its height. More caterpillars lead to larger broods, which, conversely, crash in times of dearth. Tim showed an example of a wasp dismembering a Box Tree Moth, discarding the wings and eating the body. Indeed, there are parasitic predators for every species of moth.

Environmental indicators

As with many others, moths are good environmental indicators. As climate changes some species expand. In the UK an example is Clancy's Rustic, first seen in 2002 (and now in Earley, according to an interjection from the floor). The Dark Crimson Underwing is one that has expanded from its indigenous territory, the New Forest. And the Dingy Footman, which crashed 40 years ago, when acid rain was destroying the lichen on which it feeds, has rebounded since the Clean Air Acts were passed and has grown 6000%. On the other hand, the Garden Tiger declined 90% between 1967 and 2016. Overall, British moths have declined 33% since 1970, which itself was hardly the high water mark of their incidence. The decline, if measured since 1930, might be more in the order of 70%.

Tim ended his exposition with the comment that moths are a great way to enthuse people about nature, showing a charming photograph of friend reacting spontaneously to the realisation that a wonderfully camouflaged Buff Tip was a moth and not a twig!

What can I do to help?

- Create (or allow) varied habitats in your garden
 - Stop killing things! Cut the use of pesticides, insecticides and fungicides
 - Grow native rather than alien species
 - Leave lawns to grow for longer before mowing
 - Reduce light pollution
- and remember your choices have an impact on nature.

His final slide was of two recently discovered moths, including the Prays Peregrina, both first recorded recently in London. There is still much to discover!

Ten minutes of discussion addressed a number of questions. How do they navigate at night? (They use the moon for orientation, and their eyesight is good. They are sensitive to certain wavelengths, including ultra violet.) Do they have other senses? (They are very sensitive to smell, using their antennae. The feathered antennae are found on males, who can detect microscopic quantities of female pheromone.) What distance to they fly? (It varies, but some migrate hundreds of miles, such as those who arrive with the Saharan dust.) And in discussing the damage caused to carpets, Tim jokingly said you are allowed to hate the Clothes Moth. His wife chases around the house to kill them, with Tim occasionally interjecting: "not that one!"

After questions, we went outside to look at Tim's moth trap. Many moths are visually unremarkable at this time of year, he warned us: "50 shades of beige". Sure enough, one was a common Quaker. But eventually he found an Oak Beauty, the subject of the accompanying photograph (*at the head of this article, p.5*).

Garden Surveys

Sightings in Earley's gardens.

Garden Surveys

Our garden surveyors Gillian and Margaret continue to record the wildlife in their gardens each month.

Gillian spots squirrels daily and saw a bat flitting over her back garden early in March.

Margaret has noted a number of insects, not just the conspicuous Brimstone and Peacock butterflies in the warm sun, and the smaller Orange Tip and Holly Blue, but several species of beetle. In January there was the Red Lily Beetle on the daffodil leaves; and in February and March the Seven-spot ladybird. Also in March was the Bee Fly on the violets and forget me nots and in April the Lavender Beetle on – you guessed it – the lavender. Moreover, there was a German Wasp queen and a Bufftailed Bumblebee.

March saw both frogs and frog spawn.

Of the birds visiting or passing over the garden, the routinely spotted Red Kite has been supplemented by the Sparrowhawk and Buzzard (as many as six a day over Highwood), and the lumbering flight of a Heron in March and Little Egret in April.

Commenting on bird behaviour, Margaret notes much drinking and bathing in the bird bath, particularly by the Dunnock, Goldfinch, Wren and Robin, Jay and Starling. On 1st April, the Jay was fighting with two crows on the neighbours' chimney stack, sending dry moss everywhere. "What a battle!", Margaret comments.

Early Bird Results from the Earley Garden Survey

For more than 14 years, starting in 2011, Earley residents Gillian Cartwright and Margaret Holmes have been keeping monthly records of the wildlife they see in their gardens. Kay Martin, Sue Wilder and Suzy Weston have, at various times, also recorded sightings in their gardens. Their combined records include the birds, butterflies, insects, reptiles and flowers observed at varying times and days each month. The surveys give us a snapshot of the change in the ecology of Earley's gardens over the period. Gillian's and Margaret's observations are regularly included in the EEG's Newsletters, with sightings from them both included in our December 2025 Newsletter. On paper pro-formas they recorded the number of species seen during each survey. Sightings recorded over the 12 years between 2011 and 2024 have now been input by members of Earley Town Council's Wednesday Volunteers on to spreadsheets which have then been compiled to form a complete database by volunteer Chris Morrison. A simple analysis of the records for birds over that period is given here. Whilst only two gardens were surveyed throughout this period and we are relying on Gillian and Margaret to consistently recognise and record the birds they see, these surveys represent an interesting snapshot of the change in bird numbers that might be seen in Earley's gardens.

Of almost 12,000 observations recorded over the period almost 10,000 were of birds. The highest numbers of species recorded were blue tits, starlings and great tits, followed by wood pigeons, long-tailed tits and magpies. Looking across the 10 years with full years of data (2012 to 2023), the most substantial increases were of starlings, red kites, magpies, blue tits and house sparrows; although house sparrow started with a small number in 2012. Of these, the number of starlings increased in the last 4 years, and red kites have gradually increased in number to now become a familiar sight in our area. The most substantial decreases were for long-tailed tits, dunnocks, jays, collared doves, blackbirds and coal tits. Blackbirds have gradually decreased in number over the period, whereas the decrease in long-tailed tits has seen alternate rises and falls over recent years.

According to the RSPB's website, there has been a serious gradual decline in the number of many species of wild birds. This includes common garden birds, such as song thrushes and house sparrows, and the RSPB's Garden Bird Watch 2024 found that the numbers of starlings recorded have fallen by over 80% over the last four and half decades. Broadly in line with this, the garden surveys recorded few song thrushes and house sparrows. The surveys seem, however, to have bucked the downward trend for starlings, with a steady increase recorded.

The RSPB sees species such as the blue tit, nuthatch and great spotted woodpecker as its least conservation concern. Whilst the garden surveys findings are aligned with the RSPB's view on blue tits, few nuthatches and great spotted woodpeckers were recorded during the survey. As for blackbirds, the British Trust for Ornithology has stated on its website that it is concerned that the Usutu virus, which can be fatal to blackbirds, appears to be spreading across south-east England; and this may well have been reflected in the garden surveys. We must all do more to help encourage and protect our garden birds, otherwise the downward trend will continue.

Cont.

Maiden Erlegh

Sightings in and around Maiden Erlegh Nature Reserve.

Seen on the Reserve

Greylag Goose

Among the Canada geese arriving on Maiden Erlegh Lake on 12 April was a single visiting Greylag. By the end of the month there were four.

Seasonal Ducks

Some of the Shovelers that spend the winter on Maiden Erlegh Lake were still there on 28 March, but appear to have left in April. In their place, a pair of Tufted Ducks arrived in mid April.

Great Crested Grebe

Just one sighting so far, in March, of a single grebe. Pairs have nested by the bigger island in previous years, but this one seems to have been passing through.

Little Egret

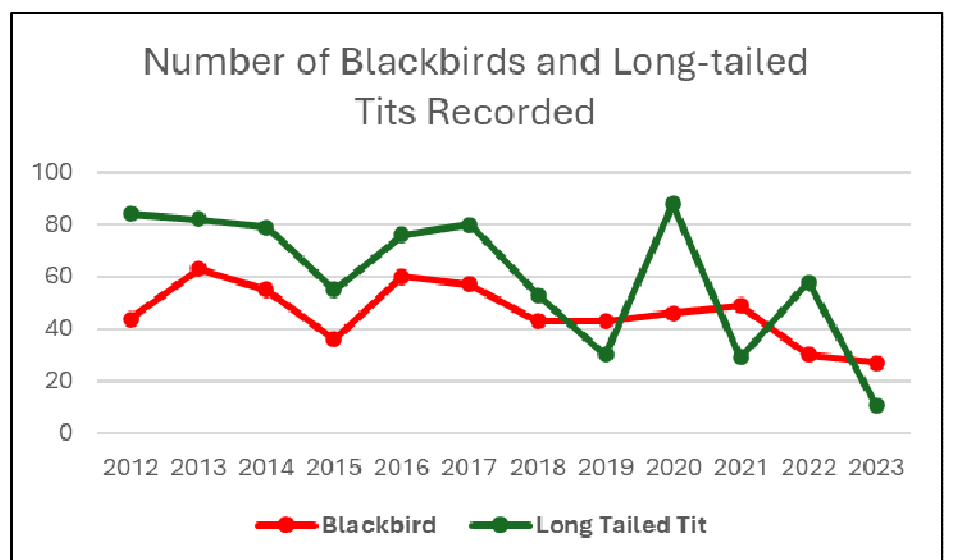
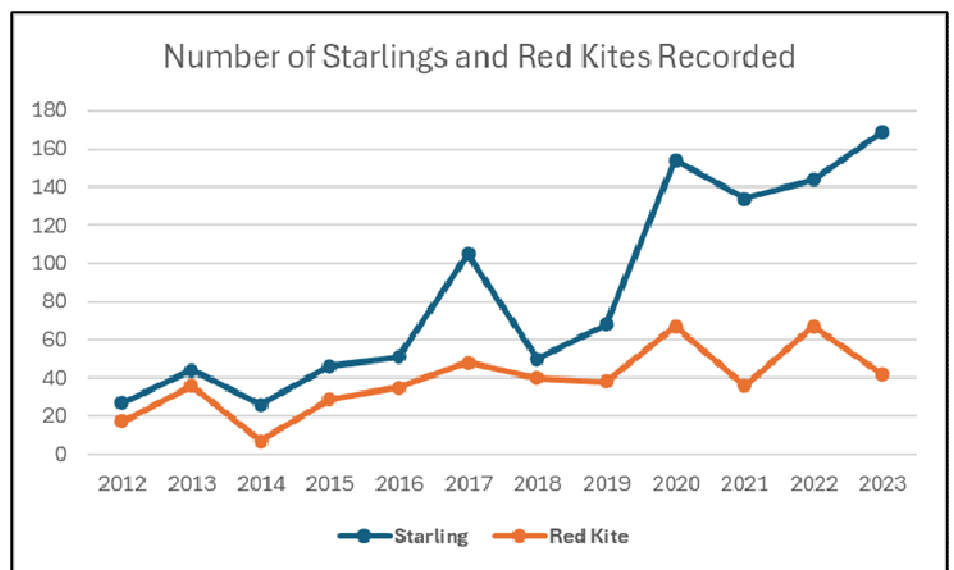
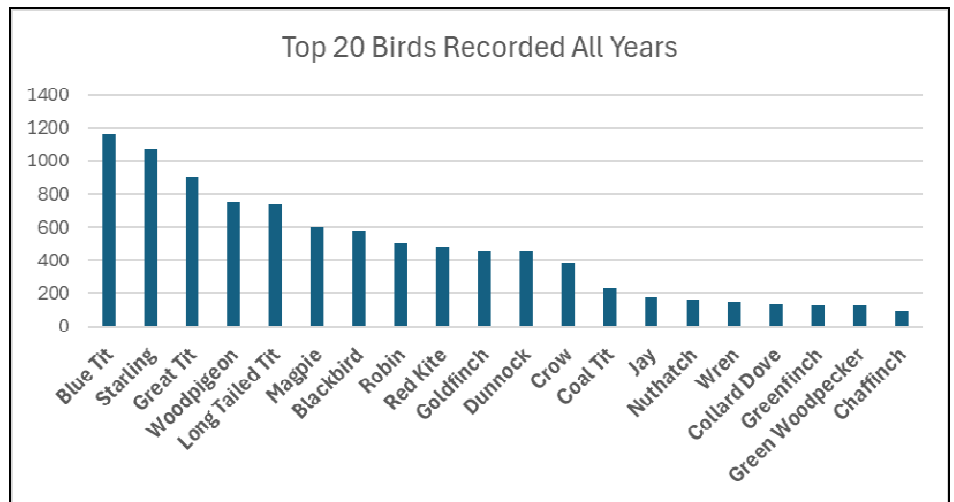
The Little Egret is an occasional visitor and has been reported on a couple of occasions over the winter.



Stoat or weasel?

John Booth reports that an acquaintance had seen something that might have been a stoat or weasel – long, thin and reddish, and not a rat – on the Lakeside side of Maiden Erlegh Lake. Has anyone identified anything like this in this area - or elsewhere in Earley?

Early Bird Results cont.



Thank you to the recorders who have diligently set down their observations over so many years, and to the Wednesday Volunteers who created the database from which the garden survey observations have been taken.

EEG Programme

We list events from the Group's programme of activities

2026 Programme Walks and Talks

Please see the EEG website and public notice boards for further details and updates.

Saturday 9 May

Reading Walks Festival: The Herbs & Redhatch Copse

A 2-mile stroll around the footpaths of Earley from Chalfont Park: 10.30 am to 12.30 pm. Booking is essential through readingwalksfestival.org. Charges apply

Saturday 16 May

Reading University Community Festival. Whiteknights campus: 12.00-5.00 pm

Thursday 11 June

Guest speaker: Yuan Yang, MP for Earley. Details nearer the time.

Friday 24 July

Broodbank Bug hunt

Finding and identify mini beasts with Alan Broodbank. This event is aimed at youngsters. To book: nature@earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk

Contributors to this issue

Charlotte Allchin
John Booth
Gillian Cartwright
Bob Collis
Margaret Holmes
Edwin Trout

Contributions from members are very welcome, whether in the form of articles photographs, notes, weblinks or simply ideas. The more we receive, the better able we are to reflect the Group in our coverage.

A Moon Walk Whiteknights, Tuesday 3rd March

I'd remembered there was supposed to be a 'Moon Walk' that night and thought I should go. No idea what it was, but I hadn't been to the EEG for a while. So, committed in my own mind, I assumed I'd simply turn up that evening. But where and when was the rendezvous? I checked the website and realized to my dismay that it was at 6 pm and I couldn't possibly get back from work before 6.20, let alone get over to the university gate at the top of Eastern Avenue. "Don't wait for me", I emailed Charlotte, "I'll see if I can find you". That might have been a tad optimistic, but the event details mentioned the route would take in Whiteknights Lake, so in heading out from the Earley side I'd have a 50:50 chance of intercepting them.

Train – home – car – campus. I left the car park on foot and crossed the Friends Bridge, following the lakeside edge below Wessex Hall. There, in the gloaming, was a small group of eight or nine soaking up the crepuscular atmosphere. I'd found them. Clouds were scattered across the sky and sadly, for a moon walk, there was no moon! So, armed as some of the party were with bat detectors, and standing still on the path, we listened to the clicks and squeaks of Pipistrelles. Black shadows flitted by in the darkness. Someone found a toad crawling in the wayside.

Then as the clouds blew over and the celestial angles tilted, a silvery light announced the emerging moon and prompted comments from some on the calming effects of moonlight. All was peaceful, the water birds quacking and honking from time to time and only the occasional passer by. There was a certain charm in standing still in the moonlight. We walked on slowly, pausing on the bridge to watch the coots and moorhens.

Then, as the moon slid behind another cloud and the spell was broken, we headed off for a drink and a chat at the bar in Park House. But nature wasn't quite done with us; as we walked, one of the group spotted a newt crossing the footpath. We stopped and watched its lumbering passage across the asphalt to sanctuary in the grass beyond. A simple sighting otherwise so easily missed.

Charlotte is planning to arrange more Moon walks in future. Why don't you give them a go?

Edwin A.R. Trout

EEG Newsletter

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