

Chairman's report 2023

The past year has been another very busy and successful year for the Friends of Halsey Field.

We have enjoyed working with the Countryside and Rights of way Service (CROWS), and last October their volunteers joined us for one of our work parties when we were widening the main central footpath, curbing the spread of Dogwood and cutting back the scrub in the Eastern part of the reserve. This meant that 26 people were working on the field that morning and they managed to cut back an enormous amount of scrub, which set us on a very good footing for the rest of our winter work parties. Since then, we have held monthly work parties, and the site now has a good balance of scrub cover and mown grassy areas, leaving plenty of room for wildflowers, but also giving good cover for nesting birds. We have managed to open up some glades and scallops amongst the scrub, making sheltered sunny spots, ideal for insects to feed and breed and we have also planted some more home grown chalk loving plug plants and seeds, such as Bird's-foot Trefoil, Wild Marjoram and Kidney Vetch, to help the spread of these valuable nectar producing wildflowers. Cowslips are now spreading across the site – the first sign this year that the management is working well.

CROWS have also supported us by arranging three of our supporters, (Paul Moran, Barry Watson and Mike R) to attend Lantra training courses, in order to be able to use our newly acquired power tools on site.

The Friends are very pleased that CROWS have arranged for the Halsey Field Management plan to be updated and last summer a Rapid Grassland Assessment (RGA) was conducted by Frankie Downes, a Land Management Project Officer for HCC, who has taken on the task of updating the plan. She is of the opinion that this is a very interesting site with a mosaic of habitats. The new plan will aim to increase the number of desirable plant species on the field and the results of the RGA will provide a yardstick for those in the future. The action plan (designated a "Green Space Action Plan") will also include proposals for the upper field and the surrounding woodland on the North and East Sides. We look forward to hearing her presentation about this after the formal proceedings.

Events

Our **Early Morning Bird** walk was held last **Sunday on 23rd April** and was led by Matt Morton and his brother who are both superb birders. The event was well attended, and highlights included several sightings of Yellowhammer, which means this species is again using Halsey Field as a nesting site, many Blackbirds serenading us as we walked round the field, a stunning Blackcap singing to us from the top of a bush, many Green Woodpeckers calling frequently, and a Nuthatch obviously feeding a family in a tree hole high up in the canopy in Warners End wood. Altogether we saw 28 species, quite a few less than the

record number of 40 species that we saw last year. Unfortunately, there was no sign of Whitethroat or Lesser Whitethroat and Matt is of the opinion that the cold weather is responsible for these migrants putting in a late appearance in Britain this spring. He has very kindly offered to lead another early morning bird walk in about three weeks' time once he returns from his trip to Canada.

The Green Community Grant has enabled the purchase of a Robinson's moth trap and generator and on **1st July 2022**, a successful **moth survey** led by Ian Bennell was held on Halsey Field, when we found 46 species, 10 of which were new to Halsey Field. The following survey which we held in September coincided with a full moon and very low temperatures and we had to finish early because of lack of moths. However, we are hoping for better results in 2023 when we aim to hold at least three more moth evenings.

On **31st July** we took part in the **Big Butterfly Count** on Halsey Field, and we managed to spot 10 species of butterfly in fifteen minutes, and 3 species of day flying moths. It was very good to see healthy numbers of Common Blue and Gatekeeper this year; also, a Painted Lady and some Six Spot Burnet moths. It is probable that some of the species we usually see on our butterfly count, such as the Marbled White and the Ringlet had finished their adult phase by this time, probably due to the excessively hot weather this summer, although they had been seen in good numbers earlier in the year.

The Friends of the Field had an extremely pleasant **barbeque** on **Saturday 20th August**. The weather was perfect, and everyone contributed to the catering, so the hosts could relax.

Butterflies

A butterfly transect was again walked weekly throughout the spring and summer months, during which all 25 of our usual species put in an appearance. We were pleased to see several Small Heath, a relatively new species to Halsey Field, early last summer. Many butterflies are emerging into their adult stage earlier than they used to, but the hot summer weather has meant that many have also finished their flight season earlier than usual. It is noticeable that although we see the same species on Halsey Field each year, the numbers of some, such as the Meadow Brown and the Marbled White, have declined over the past few years.

Owls

Thanks to the Green Community grant, we have also been able to purchase a replacement Barn Owl box and this was erected in November by Peter Simpson and John Fisher. However, Later in November, I was contacted by Liam Edwards who expressed some concern that the box was too low in the tree. Liam runs his own Wildlife Monitoring group in the area and does some work for the Box Moor Trust, and he very kindly offered to raise the box to a safer level with his pulley system, and to monitor the box for us. This was completed in plenty of time for the owls to find the box before the spring months.

The Tawny Owl box has been put up in Warners End wood. We will be monitoring this box with interest, as Tawnies are often reluctant to use a new box, but there are quite a few Tawny owls in the neighbourhood, so we're hoping for the best.

Mammals and reptiles

We have been able to buy a wildlife monitoring camera with our grant money and have so far recorded Munjac deer and Badgers on the site.

We have also bought some corrugated reptile refugia squares in order to monitor for small mammals, slow worms etc.

Community involvement

We are extremely pleased that our links with young people have been developed further recently. The Cub Scouts made 10 new tit nest boxes and one Tawny owl box for the site, as part of their environmental studies project, and on Saturday 21st January a group of them came to Halsey Field with a Scout leader and their parents put up the boxes. Some of the new boxes were used to replace old nest boxes which were in a poor state of repair, whilst new sites were chosen for five of the new boxes. All the old intact boxes contained nests, and one box, which the birds had used for nesting last spring, was now occupied by some overwintering mice. This nest box project was a real community effort, with Mencap providing the nest box kits, Neal from the Osborne Property group coordinating the making and delivery of the kits, the Cub Scouts making the boxes and Matt Moreton, a local bird expert, helping the Scouts to put them up.

Unfortunately, some rough sleepers have sawn down some of the trees to build shelters in the area where we put up the nest boxes and one of the boxes has been damaged. The incident was reported to the police and to Herts Count Council. However, the rest of the boxes seem to be still intact, and we think the damage to the box was more accidental than intentional.

After the Halsey Field leaflet for adults was received so enthusiastically, the Committee were keen that there should be a **leaflet for children**, and it was thought that the best people to write this would be the children themselves. George St. school in the Old Town was approached and agreed that some of their pupils might like this task, so a small group of pupils visited Halsey Field in July and subsequently produced the design for a leaflet of excellent quality, which has now been printed.

Three of our committee members manned a Friends of Halsey Field stall at the **Dacorum Climate Action Network meeting** on 3rd November, which was very useful in terms of networking with other Hemel groups. During the meeting, a member of staff from Hobbs Hill

School showed an interest in our Children's leaflet even though it had not yet been printed, so they have been the first to receive some copies. It is very good to know that schools are likely to use our leaflet, and by doing so increase their knowledge of and enthusiasm for the natural world. **We are now in the process of designing an eye-catching poster for future CAN meetings and similar events.**

This year we are looking forward to working further with CROWS to put the new management plan into action, as well as organising events and monitoring sessions so that local people can continue to enjoy the site and we can gauge the success of our management.

All this activity would be impossible without a team of committed volunteers and committee members, who give valuable advice, help with the management during work parties, lead our moth evenings and bird walks, and also kindly donate to the Halsey Field Funds, so I'd like to sincerely thank you for all your help and support.

Christine Ridley (Chairman)