

Three Owls Newsletter

Report by Nigel Fowler



Winter 2020 / 2021

The year 2020...

Well, what a strange year 2020 has turned out to be! We would never have guessed there could have been a virus in modern ages that could have caused so much trauma to lives and livelihoods as that we have experienced – and of course it's not over yet, though hopefully light at the end of the tunnel with the vaccines coming online.

Early on in the pandemic, when being asked for advice by a number of wildlife rescues, I was upbeat and said that if we were in lockdown, fewer casualties would be admitted, and perhaps many of those projects which had stalled could have been completed whilst it was 'quiet'. How wrong I was as most sanctuaries reported being busier than ever, as with people being stuck at home, they were inadvertently interfering in the lives of young birds and animals, who were simply doing as they should in growing up – but people were finding them and picking them up with their flightless or pre-wild states, not realising of the damage such actions were doing. Further issues transpired later on, when an influx of damaged and deformed birds and wildlife were admitted where people had kept them in unsuitable conditions and given them the wrong diets. Sadly many of these then had to be put to sleep, rather than getting them back to the wild had they been admitted straight away.

This is a bumper issue covering both 2019 and 2020, as during the pandemic life was simply too busy to get one written. Now during the Christmas break it is an ideal time to get the task completed. I hope you enjoy my efforts as much as I enjoy writing it, I'll try and keep it upbeat to bring us all some much-needed cheer....

So, to start in **January 2019** we had a live Christmas Tree appeal in order to save anyone's unwanted trees from going to waste. This appeal produced a further five trees which have now been planted down on our nature reserve where they will provide both food and shelter for the myriad of birds and animals to which the reserve is their home.



We also announced John Thorpe's amazing total for his sponsored bike ride to Blackpool the previous year; at an amazing £1156.78. Well Done to him indeed, and Thanks to everyone who supported him.

We were thrilled to hear again from Knitting Nanna's in Rochdale during **February** who again had voted to support our charity, and donated a further £100; wonderful news and especially appreciated at a lean time of the year.

David reported from the Three Owls Meadow Reserve that the hives were experiencing a lot of activity – which surprised him for February. Looking around to see where on earth they could be collecting pollen at this time of year, he noted both snowdrops and crocuses as possible sources. He also saw a Barn Owl hunting during the day, and wondered if one of the adults may have been sitting on an early clutch of eggs?

It was at the start of **March** when I was having a walk around the Home Reserve just before 8am, observing the male Greater Spotted Woodpeckers hammering away, when I heard a sound that I just couldn't place...

The description I gave to it was even more puzzling to the noise; I likened it to volcanic springs bubbling to the surface. Well, I was pretty sure we didn't have any of those, so went over to the ponds to investigate further...

I was surprised and delighted therefore to find a number of frogs spawning – something which clearly happens each year, though I have never seen nor heard it in person before.

The photo shows a number of clumps of frogspawn – let's hope they became tadpoles before the ducks found and gobbled them up!

Also in March it was the 24th anniversary of the passing of the founder of Three Owls; Mrs Eileen Watkinson MBE, and 57 years in total since she started it all off – with a baby sparrow.

I was down at her graveside on the Home Reserve before work, thinking of all that she had achieved over the years – against the odds. Of the seventeen years we worked side-by-side from starting here myself in 1978.

Also all that we have achieved since she passed – and continue to achieve on a daily basis not only on our six nature reserves in the UK, but also around the world with the highly varied amount of work that the charity does

As ever, the support of the public enables us to continue our much-needed work, and last week we received a lovely bequest from the family of a local lady who had been a regular visitor and supporter, followed by news last weekend of a legacy to come later on in the year. Thank you so much to each and every one of you, not only on behalf of all 'our' birds, but for ALL the wild birds around us.

As I was writing this article, a call has come in from another Sanctuary needing advice on a casualty they have just admitted, and as I've always said; Knowledge is best when shared.

Later in the month we played host to 25,000 honey bees in a hive. The bees collect the pollen, and also help pollinate the Reserve, so is a win-win situation for all.

Andrew (our beekeeper) informs me that although the hive currently houses that amazing figure of bees, by mid-summer there will be around 60,000 in number, as they are hatching at the rate of one every seven minutes! Thank goodness we don't have a colony of bee-eaters living here...



On 23rd March, we heard the cries of our first newly-hatched heron chick from our tree-top heronry.

It was at the start of **April** when the trustees held an onsite meeting at Old Beech Wood nature reserve to inspect all the work undertaken in the previous 24 months, and to plan the next schedule of works; We have thinned out over 50% of the invasive Rhododendron plants which were strangling off the other plants and growth on the forest floor. Already nature is forging forth with new growth on the previously barren land.

Also on the same day, I visited Three Owls Wood to release two pheasants which had been nursed back to health by our colleagues at Meltham Wildlife Rescue near Holmfirth.



I was pleased to receive a further cheque from [Easyfundraising.org.uk](https://www.easyfundraising.org.uk) for all those penny donations you all made at Christmas; another £23.47 to the kitty, which is covers the cost of another three sacks of bird food and a box of fat balls. Thank you all.

On 16th we had our first hedgehog release of the year at Three Owls Wood in Tarleton. These have been nursed back to health by Sue at Rochdale Hedgehog Rescue, and do really well on this huge nature reserve for returning back to the wild.

On 21st I noticed the first of the swallows were flying above the Home Reserve following their long migration back from North Africa. Quite incredible how these little acrobats of the skies can cover these thousands of miles twice a year and come right back to the property where they were hatched out.

It was on 17th **May** that I had to seek assistance to identify the culprit of a strange noise on the Home Reserve...

It was after work when I was walking on the reserve that I heard a loud buzzing. Although the reserve is jam-packed full of insects at this time of year, as both trees and plants are laden with flowers, and the floor itself a carpet of bluebells and wild garlic.... this was somehow different.



Tracing the source of the noise (we are not hosting any hives at present), I eventually came across one of the re-enforced squirrel-proof nesting boxes had been taken over by the bees and was very much an active hive. Concerned that the box was way-too-small to support a colony of honey bees, I immediately contacted Andrew our bee expert who agreed to come over early the following morning.

Dressed in his full bee-keeping suit, I left him with a ladder to do whatever was needed to assist them, but was amazed to find him back in the office just a few minutes later? "You can't possibly have finished yet – is there a problem?" I enquired of him.

Clearly excited by the find, Andrew explained (much to my embarrassment) that these were not honey bees, but a much rarer Tree Bumble Bee – which for him was a wonderful find as he hadn't seen ANY this far north before; previously Northampton had been the furthest North for this breed that he was aware of. They originally inhabited France, but with the recent warmer climes, had hopped over the Channel and were working their way up the British countryside. Thankfully they happily share the environment with our native bees and there doesn't seem to be any conflict; with our own bees in decline, the countryside needs all the help it can get with pollination for all our plants, bushes and trees.



Into **June** now, and David reported from the Meadow Reserve at Banks that he had photographed a very fine White Ermine Moth; wonderful news given all the recent news regarding the declining insect populations due to use of insecticides on farming crops.

Swiftly into **July**, and we can read the report from John Thorpe in regaling his 30th Annual Bike Ride from Manchester to Blackpool;

REPORT OF THE MANCHESTER TO BLACKPOOL BIKE RIDE 2019 BY JOHN THORPE (REGISTERED IDIOT OF THIS PARISH!)

"Well, good readers, it is that time of year again, when I put pen to paper, or finger to keyboard in this case, to impart the exciting goings on which occurred during the bike ride, which of course I took part in yesterday, Sunday the 7th of July. This was my thirtieth consecutive ride (did I mention this more than a dozen times earlier?!), and I was looking forward to a decent time and a trouble free journey to celebrate my amazing feat. On both counts I was to be disappointed, but more of that later. As always I had gone over my trusty steed with a fine tooth comb in the day or so beforehand, and checked, as far as anyone can, that everything was in order. I came to the conclusion that, as always, the bike was probably in better condition than I was, and left it at that!

While assembling the tools and spare inner tubes I was going to take with me I tried to plan for the worst, as always, hoping, of course, that the worst wouldn't happen. I figured that probably the worst would be potential punctures, and took the repair kit, levers, some tools and three replacement inner tubes - make a mental note of this, it's important later, as we shall see. Sandwiches and provisions were all ready the night before, and the rabbits, as they always are, were not impressed that I had to put them back in their home early, to give me a good night's sleep.

I set the alarm for 4.30 and got up not long after this to feed the rabbits and tortoises, before last minute checks, my breakfast, and departure at 6.00am, for the journey to The Piazza at Salford Quays in Manchester, the start point for the ride. I did this in an hour and ten minutes, and was in time to see my old friend Rick, 'The Voice of the Ride' in his subtly coloured yellow suit. We had a few words and got another cyclist to take a snap of us, as we have done nearly every year. He's been doing the job ever since I did my first ride way back in 1989, when thousands of us charged hell for leather out of Albert Square near the Town Hall in Manchester like a somewhat chaotic version of a lemming migration! How I survived that I'll never know. Rick has had a few health problems of his own, including a broken leg and chest problems, but like the trooper he is, was practising his wit and humorous observations in the midst of a throng of cyclists. Such priceless gems as "We've been informed by the Meteorological Office that there will be meteorology all day today for those with an interest in such things!" Well you get the idea!

As we were talking, the driver of an articulated truck wandered up looking a bit perplexed and said that he wanted to bring it into the Piazza to effect a delivery to one of the media companies there. Rick pointed out that there might be a slight problem of flattening many of the assembled throng, and there was a deep and meaningful discussion about how no one had told him that the event would be on and he had to speak to someone in authority. Hopefully he got sorted out, but I fancy he had to wait quite a while before the space was free!

At 7.30 am promptly we assembled at the start line, and to sound of a starting gun and a car horn, wielded by Rick, we were off, through the leafy tree lined streets of Salford. As you may have gathered, the last remark was by way of a humorous exaggeration! The weather was good and mild but there were still a few clouds around and it wasn't anywhere near as warm as it would later become. Unlike many people I love the heat, and always ride better than when it's wet and cold, so I was hoping for better things in the afternoon. The ride passed without incident as we wound our way through Leigh, Atherton, Hindley Green, Westhoughton, Aspull and Haigh Hall, where, as I always do, I spent half an hour refreshing myself with some food, drink and a stretch of the legs. I got there at 9.30 and stopped at 9.35 until 10.05. You may wonder why I try to be so precise about this, and the answer is simple. from past experience I know that if I stop for much longer I will get lazy and want to rest too much-I need to be very firm with myself because I know how fundamentally lazy I am!

I parked the bike against a collection of metal beer barrels (these had no connection whatsoever to me I can assure you!) and was in the vicinity of the portaloos, where a fairly long line of people had built up. I'm quite fortunate in that I seem to have a bladder built for endurance, and once, while on a flight back from Galapagos, across the Atlantic, didn't get up to go the loo for the whole distance! I bet that's a record that hasn't been beaten in a long time. Back to the portaloos anyway, I noticed one lady emerge from one of them wearing a cycling top which had the Heinz Beans logo (as on the cans) on it, and thought it was perhaps an ill omen where portaloos are concerned!

We wound our way up Chorley and Leyland, and somewhere along the route in this area, on a hill, I felt what every cyclist dreads while on a long ride, miles away from home, the unmistakable feel of a deflated tyre. I got off and found that the culprit was the back tyre. This is always a pain, since it involves messing about with the chain and cogs, and, muttering a few unrepeatable phrases from the 'Cyclists Book of Quips, Merry Phrases and Foul Rants', I set about replacing the inner tube with a new one. Now under normal circumstances this would not be a particularly difficult task, but as I was to learn, this was not to be the case this time! I got out the three tyre levers which I'd brought with me, which are hard plastic rather than metal, as the rims on the wheels are an alloy, which is damaged easily. I tried one after the other and each one snapped under tension! The tyre itself is very tight and resists being removed, and I now found myself miles from nowhere, with a flat tyre and no way of getting the damn tyre off! Thinking outside the box, I searched the tools I had and found the Allen keys used for loosening Allen bolts (unsurprisingly!).

This would not normally be a good idea but needs must and I had no choice. After a lot of messing about, I managed to remove the tyre and take out the tube. Ironically the tyre was one which I'd bought deliberately because I was assured that it was very puncture resistant! It's called a Gatorskin, and all I can say is that the gator must have had very soft skin! Given that beneath it, I'd deliberately installed a puncture deflecting layer over the inner tube, it was rotten luck that this happened, but I consoled myself with the fact that out of all the rides I'd done (did I mention that this was thirty?!), I'd had very few punctures, so probably couldn't complain too much. I reassembled the bike and pressed on. Within five minutes I had another puncture on the front tyre!, and had to go through the same procedure again! As you can imagine, dear reader, my patience, not to mention my confidence, was wearing a bit thin by now, and apart from the mental stress, there was the time I was losing to consider. I replaced the inner tube and carried on, to have another puncture ten minutes later, again on the back wheel! This was one of those situations where you actually feel that something is trying to tell you something-perhaps that you should have stayed in bed with a cup of coffee and a good book!

I fitted the new inner tube and pumped up both tyres as hard as I could safely go, hoping that this would be the end of it, but obviously fearing the worst, with a long way to go before the finish line. I must say that even though two people did enquire if I was OK during the puncture episodes, there were probably a couple of hundred riders who rode past without bothering to find out. Perhaps that says a lot about the way people think nowadays, but unfortunately one day they may need help themselves, and will be pretty disgusted when others ignore them. What goes round comes round as they say. I got to the docks at Preston at 1.20 and had half an hour break here, trying to relax a bit, and taking the opportunity to mend one of the other inner tubes just in case it was needed! Of course I was well behind schedule compared to previous years, and knew that my friend Les was waiting for me in Blackpool with my other friend Jon, who lives there. I'd told them that, all being well I would finish between one and two o'clock and we'd have time for a drink and something to eat before visiting a second hand book and record shop of Jon's acquaintance. I called Les to let him know and said I'd be there as soon as I could, wondering all the time whether that might be eight o'clock in the evening at the rate I was going!

Back on the bike at 1.50 pm I negotiated the lanes which wound through some lovely country villages and farms on the way to Kirkham, Freckleton and Warton, and was doing really well, when near a pub out in the country, a Marshall stepped out to inform us that the road ahead was closed by police following an accident, and we have to take a detour! Now obviously I felt sorry for those involved in the accident, but it did seem at this point that every obstacle you could imagine was being put in my path, and I turned left down another lane trying to remember the Marshall's words " Look for the windmill pub and turn right."

The lanes were lovely in their own right, but I must admit I was more concerned with making up time than noticing the fields of drying hay basking in the, by now, hot Summer sun. We seemed to ride for miles before we found the aforementioned pub, and at one point I did begin to wonder if the windmill in question was somewhere north of Rotterdam! At this point we turned right onto another road and eventually got back onto the original route, but it had been a costly detour, time wise. Those who don't cycle probably won't fully understand the feeling of doubt and apprehension when you are feeling every movement of a tyre against the road, and mistaking the rough surface motion with a deflating tyre, but it can be pretty stressful. Thankfully in spite of all the bumps and rough stretches, the inner tubes held for the rest of the way, but I couldn't afford to relax until I was at least a short distance from the finish. If worst came to worst I would push the bike across the line or carry it, as I did one year when I got a flat in sight of the finish!

I reached Warton and then we turned onto the coastal road which runs through Lytham St. Annes and eventually Blackpool. At the top of a steep hill, where we turn right onto the main road, a couple of Marshalls, a man and woman, were parked to direct cyclists. I stopped for a brief chat, and she joyfully announced that it was only ten miles to the finish. "Is that real miles or country miles?" I enquired, and she was adamant that it really was. I was a bit dubious about this, and as we pulled up to some traffic light a little way down the road, one of the other Marshalls told us it was definitely 12.3 miles from there. Amazing how the distance gets longer the further you travel isn't it?! The old White Windmill eventually came into view once again on the massive greens area, and the onshore wind was thankfully relatively mild this year, unlike some when it is so strong that it blows you back faster than you can pedal forwards - that would have really 'put the tin hat on things'!

I must admit I was feeling a bit tired at this point, partly due to stress regarding the punctures, and the last couple of miles seemed to take forever, but eventually the finish line was in sight, and I could see the crowds, which had obviously thinned a bit over the course of the day and had got fed up of waiting for stragglers like me! It's funny how a little bit of positive encouragement can lift your spirits, and I finally crossed the line (there are those who'll contend that I did that years ago!) to a round of rapturous (or rupturous depending on your point of view!) applause from several hardy souls who'd braved the sun and forsaken the allure of candy floss and fish and chips. Apart from the completion certificate and bottle of water, we got a heart shaped metal medal on a ribbon this year, which was rather nice and will fill me with pride every time I wear it to a dinner party!

I gathered myself together, drank my water, and made my way along the Promenade to where Les and Jon were waiting opposite the amusement park. After the obligatory shaking of hands, slapping of backs and such comments as 'My God you look like death!' we adjourned to a local hostelry for drinks, and my purely medicinal Guinness.

It's the iron content you know, otherwise I wouldn't touch the stuff! The sun was glorious and it was lovely to just sit and watch everyone else expending energy while I relaxed. On the way back to the car Jon pushed the bike for me, and after visiting the loo, I asked him if he'd pretended to be a rider to elicit sympathy from passers-by. He thought for a moment and then said "Well I told them about the hardships of the open road and the sheer guts and dedication needed to overcome them, but that's just the kind of person I am!" I'm not sure whether he was kidding or not but I wouldn't put it past him! The distance covered on the day was 78.3 miles in all, and when you do the calculations, if I hadn't had the punctures but had only taken the normal breaks, I would have been in Blackpool for about 2.15pm, which wouldn't have been too bad. I also managed to get up to 31 mph on the downhill section which I've written about in previous reports, and hope they don't come after me for the extra 1 mph! Anyway I can console myself with the fact that even though it didn't go as planned; I still overcame the problems and pushed on to the end. As Nigel put when I told him about the events "It's only obstinate people like us who'd carry on after three punctures, a lot of them would have thrown the bike in the nearest hedge and adjourned to the pub!" Probably about right.

I've checked with Bike events regarding the numbers taking part, and they feel there were probably a few under 3,500. Interesting I thought there were more because I had seen numbers on riders which were in the 6000's, but they tell me that they are still using up numbers ordered from years ago when there were more entries, and this can be confusing for the casual observer. At any rate 3,500 is still pretty respectable, and they all deserve a great deal of respect for their efforts.

I hope you've enjoyed this little tale of adversity and triumph, and thank all of you for being a Three Owls supporter. We couldn't do what we do without your help, and if you can support my humble efforts with your sponsorship, I and the birds would much appreciate it. I'll gird my loins ready for next year, and probably gird my tyres as well, they obviously need it!"



Also in July, David reported that the swallows had successfully hatched out their chicks in the stable roof, as could be seen by the discarded egg shells down below. With the quantity of flies within Three Owls Wood, it must be almost breakfast in bed! Certainly those chicks will not go short, and should be in fine fettle to make their journey south in the next couple of months time.



The description on the phone said that there was "A strange duck in the garden at tea-time; could I help in any way?" I asked for a photo, which arrived minutes later via whatsapp to show the following...

It's not of course a duck - always look for signs of webbed feet - but a nestling wood pigeon. They are often mistaken due to the seemingly very long beak when young.



Alas, when nature designed these birds, they nested on the floor in the woods in a dimple or hoof-print and only a couple of twigs if anything formed the actual nest. Now, with the way humans have encroached on 'their' lives, we often see them in gardens and parks, and sadly as casualties on our roads.

They fly low across the roads just as they would through the woods and fields - alas coming into conflict with modern traffic as in general trees don't move!

When moving into nesting in trees, the poor quality nests were carried across and unfortunately this does mean that on occasion the chicks do come out too soon.

The one pictured above was indeed too early, and had most likely been sitting on the very edge of the nest and simply taken a tumble in the recent hot weather. With the finder unable to find the nest to return and many cats stalking around, on this occasion it did have to come into care - though on many occasions such young birds have been able to stay where found and people simply keep an eye on them to keep predators away. Mum and Dad pigeon will feed just twice a day; first thing in the morning, and last thing at night.

In **August** David reported with a beautiful photo of an Elephant Hawk Moth whilst mowing at Three Owls Wood.





In **September** we celebrated from yet another successful year with the Barn Owl boxes at a number of secret locations in the North West. In addition to the boxes supplied, we also rent a plot of land which we nurture as barn owl habitat and this has proved dividends in supporting and increasing the local barn owl population. We give special thanks to Andy Roe of Flavourfresh Salads for their kind support with this particular site where the photo was taken.

In **October** of that year I ran an article on the website giving people a run-down on what to look for in regard to canker in wild birds. This is a foul-smelling white substance which usually starts in the crop, then spreads up the throat and into the mouth. Untreated, it can be highly contagious to other birds and often proves fatal for the infected bird as they starve due to being unable to eat or drink. The photo shows a magpie with a mild form of canker, though people often think it is a pigeon-only disease, most birds are susceptible to it.



One of the worst spreaders of this disease, is unclean drinking water and mouldy feeding areas/containers – hence the need to change drinking water daily, and disinfect both feeding and drinking vessels weekly.

In **November** we took a Red-legged Partridge to Three Owls Wood for release. Jennifer accompanied me on this release, and kindly held the partridge for this photo, as he was off like a rocket once released!



We also remembered all the animals especially on this years' Remembrance Day; those who gave up their lives for us in the various Wars, and recalled those who were recognised for their work with the Dickin Medal.

It was in **December** that I helped my latest group of schoolchildren with their nature projects. I often get asked by schoolchildren doing projects, about what has been the rarest / biggest / furthest away etc etc bird that we have helped? Usually I can recall the rarest to date being a Bluethroat; blown across from Eastern Europe by a spell of exceptionally strong prevailing easterly winds. They are a little more common nowadays, but I recall having to look it up to be sure at the time.

I also get calls for assistance from other areas around the globe, and was pleased recently to be able to assist a lady from Dohar who had found a Nightjar on her balcony one morning unable to fly and somewhat battered by the weather. Messages were relayed by her relative in the UK, and a plan of diet and recuperation set up. Alas, I do not know the outcome this time – only a small number of the thousands of people we help share the final outcome, but that feedback we do get is gratefully received, and we can use those results to refine our advice to help even more people in the future. We have admitted a number of these nocturnal birds over the years, with good results for returning them to the wild.

One other that comes to mind was the Bald Ibis brought from Blackpool. The local zoo assured us it was not theirs, and we exhausted all the private collectors we could find.



With only around 1000 birds left in the wild throughout the world, we were besieged by the press and ended up with a car-park full of TV crew camped outside in their vans. To their dismay – some 5 days later the zoo did admit the bird WAS theirs, and sent someone to collect it. I decided then that a job under such intense media scrutiny would never be for me – quite how these politicians cope I don't know? Give me birds and wildlife any day!

2020

We welcomed the New Year in at the start of **January** 2020; we could never have thought what a year it would become. I had been ill with a virus for just over three weeks that month with what we now know were classic Covid symptoms – but with no tests for such at the time. I carried on working throughout and thankfully came out the other side, but it was not a good place to be.

David was pleased to receive twelve Yew Trees for planting at Three Owls Wood in Tarleton; I am amazed on each visit as to just how much this reserve has now grown up from what simply used to be a horse field nine years ago.



I was honoured to hear that Knitting Nanna's have continued their much valued support of Three Owls this year, and was thrilled to receive a cheque for £150 later on in the month. With the feed bill looming, this could not have come at a better time.

In **February** we were plagued with email issues, however thankfully it was a quiet time of year, and we could get by with using WhatsApp and SMS until we were back online again.

This year on 5th **March** was the 25th Anniversary since Three Owls founder; Mrs Eileen Watkinson passed away. She was a remarkable lady, with infinite patience for those with a genuine interest, and she deserves great credit for preparing me to carry on her great work to this day and looking forward well into the future.

Having worked on a one-to-one basis with her since 1978, I have been privileged to glean most of my wild bird knowledge from her; which I use each and every day even now to help save and enhance the lives of those birds living around us. My evenings and weekends are often taken up discussing different scenarios and treatments with both other sanctuaries and vets, as well as taking calls and emails from the general public. Only this week I have been giving guidance regarding pigeons, swans, geese, gulls, and kingfishers - and who knows what the next enquiry will bring.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the expansion of Three Owls; from the single site we operated from in Rochdale to now operating over six sites in the north-west of England. Last weekend saw me assisting at Meltham Wildlife Rescue in West Yorkshire, then transporting five specialist birds up to Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue for ongoing care and rehabilitation prior to release on our two reserves at Wigton.

Whilst at Meltham I was talking to a young volunteer chopping up the lettuce leaves and remarked "that was one of the first jobs that I did when I started at Three Owls, way back in 1978". She was hopefully inspired as to where I am now from that small beginning!

Mrs Watkinson would rightly be so proud that so much of her life's investment in Three Owls continues to this day, her vision of creating Three Owls Wood has not only come to fruition, but now we have SIX fully operational reserves – each providing habitat and protection to birds and wildlife in very specific ways. Amalgamating our own hospitals with those at Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue in Cumbria alongside where we have two of our reserves has not only assisted the birds we had in our care at that time, but through ongoing co-operation between the two charities this ensures that an even wider area of birds can be assisted, and has allowed our charity to give an even wider arm of support to many more organisations than had previously been possible. This support comes in many forms such as both verbal and physical support, assisting with releases, and on occasion financial support for established organisations run along similar lines to how Three Owls originally was.



So, a toast to Mrs Watkinson for all her hard work and devotion; for founding the Three Owls and getting it all off the ground back in 1962, and for laying such strong foundations. Quite rightly she was awarded the MBE in 1992 for this achievement in her work with the birds; an honour which she openly shared with all the workers at the Sanctuary. Her forward-thinking ensured that come what may, Three Owls has been able to continue to help and support those wild birds in distress who need our help, and we are now further able to give onward assistance in providing secure reserve facilities for those birds who need an assisted release when returned to the wild.



With Lockdown rapidly approaching, we ensured as much as possible this month, that the organisations we work closely with, were as well-supported as possible to get them through the expected difficult times. We received a plea for any financial assistance possible during the first Lockdown from Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue who were facing a shortfall of £11,000 per month with all their charity shops having to close. At an emergency meeting, our trustees were able to approve an emergency grant of £33,000 to cover them for the three months we were expecting the lockdown to take. This gave their charity some breathing space not to dig into their own emergency reserves, when at that point the rest of the year was so uncertain, and enabled them to be self-supportive for the rest of the year.

At the start of **April**, we reminded people who were stuck at home not to interfere with any young birds or animals they found growing up in their gardens. With the unusually fine Spring, many people would be sat out in their gardens, and of course Mother Nature would carry on regardless. Many Rescue Sanctuaries adopted Covid precautions to enable them to still accept casualties in a safe manner, but alas this did not prevent some people (mostly well-intentioned) taking in and keeping birds far longer and in unsuitable conditions – with the outcome that many sadly died without ever being given the chance of return to the wild.

On a happier note we celebrated further arrivals of heron chicks on the Home Reserve heronry, and on a recent trek to Three Owls Wood for a remote supported-release of birds nursed back to health, I was thrilled to see a pair of moorhens were very much at home on one of the ponds there. By the way they were acting, I am sure there will be a little flotilla of chicks in the very near future! It should be noted that these are truly wild birds i.e. not having been released onto the reserve, but simply Mother Nature appreciating the facilities we have created over the last nine years on this site, and moving in of their own accord to set up home.



Also viewed on this visit was one of the buzzards soaring overhead, a myriad of song-birds busy collecting nesting materials, and a number of pheasants strolling around the grounds. I didn't see the hares on this visit, though they may well be tending to their young if they have bred again this year.

Throughout the pandemic we have been able to continue with our lifesaving work despite Covid restrictions. We were currently still all in Lockdown, which meant only journeys where a threat to life were being undertaken. This does mean the essential vet trips can go ahead, and where birds need remote releases to prevent captive deterioration; this can also be undertaken - though instead of being able to take volunteers/supporters along to watch and learn, each release is a sole journey for now and all socialising is put on hold.

One such urgent journey in April was to move a Red Kite from our colleagues at Meltham Wildlife Rescue and transport it along with a Barn Owl to the hospitals alongside our two nature reserves at Wigton where the staff at Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue would take over their care and prepare them for release back to the wild.

Both birds had been under a supported care plan from us, and were at the stage now where they needed to go to the larger hospitals to progress further. On the same journey I was able to take approx 2 months-worth of foodstuffs to support Knoxwood in their work - all kindly donated by the public and collected and stored at the Home Reserve site ready for our next journey North.

The Red Kite is still on the Red List as an endangered species having been hunted to the point of near-extinction in the UK and by the 1960's there were only 20 pairs left. Thankfully due to conservation and an intensive breeding programme the numbers have recovered somewhat, though there is still a fair way to go before they become commonplace throughout the UK once more.



I knew from having nursed Red Kites at the Home Reserve hospitals around fifteen years ago, that they do not tolerate people well, and so only took a quick photo whilst it was in the carrier so it did not panic and crash around. I did well to recall the strength in its beak and talons; those poor voles etc would not get a 2nd chance! Fingers crossed for a continued recovery; it had been found tangled-up in a tree, and was absolutely exhausted and very underweight; and needed further specialist care in specific housing requirements - hence why the move was necessary.

It was **May** when I wrote an article to state I was wrong...!

I don't mind being wrong at times - it's sometimes the best way to learn...

I had thought that in Lockdown, it would be a quiet time at the various sanctuaries as people wouldn't be able to go out and find birds/wildlife in distress...wrong!

In actual fact more people have been spending time in their gardens and the countryside as they haven't been at work, and consequently have come into contact (and indeed conflict) with Mother Nature more than ever before. The fine weather during April has exacerbated this and whilst wildlife has appreciated the lack of vehicles on the roads, they have found peoples gardens are not the places of safety as in previous years, and there has been a huge increase in cat attacks of young birds, and children pulling nests of birds from trees and bushes - often more by

curiosity than maliciously - but nevertheless the young birds/animals have ended up as orphans being taken to local wildlife rescues who all inform me they are already approaching capacity a full month earlier than normal. This is a worrying trend, and one hopes that with better education by the rescue centres we can quash this before it gets any worse. Of course matters are further complicated by social-distancing at the sanctuaries, which means that interaction between rescuer and sanctuary is somewhat limited.

So, enjoy your gardens and walks by all means - but please remember to respect that Mother Nature ISN'T on lockdown and she needs to get on with this years' breeding season with as little interruption as possible. Although each rescue will always do it's very best; mother and father bird almost always do a far better job, and natural food is much better than what the sanctuaries can provide.

That same month I received a reply from Her Majesty the Queen in reply to a letter I had written to her some weeks previously. With the pandemic being in full-flow, I really didn't think she would have had the time to reply now – yet here it was, a personal reply for which I was very appreciative. I had written following the death of a very good friend Mrs Mary Clegg of 99 years old, who had only 12 months previously assisted me to write her detailed life's story to be read out at the funeral (you can find a copy online). As the story was intertwined with the work of Three Owls, and Mary being of the same era as The Queen, I thought she may have been interested to read it, and enclosed a newsletter too, knowing she was aware of our work through the successes of Mrs Watkinson with her own MBE.

David reported from the Three Owls Wood at Tarleton to happily confirm that the Marsh Orchid's were back – and in much greater numbers this year too.



David has also commissioned a Bird Survey at Three Owls Wood as follows;

Bird survey carried out on Three Owls Reserve Tarleton Moss (SD436214)

The breeding bird survey was carried out at 6am to 7.30am on Sunday 17th May 2020 in overcast but warm conditions. The main criterion for potential breeding was singing males in suitable habitat. The status of each species is for the moss and is based on the Lancashire Bird Report and local knowledge.



Observations

Common Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*)-Common breeding resident enhanced by commercial raised birds:

12 males found plus 2 females and predated eggs also discovered.

Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) – Common breeding resident:

Pair in adjacent field.

Wood Pigeon (*Columba palumbus*) – Common Breeding resident:

Over 40 individuals found.

Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) – Non breeding:

Feeding visitor to the reserve.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*- Local breeder:

Single individual seen carrying prey no evidence of breeding.

Eurasian Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*)- Local breeder:

Recent colonisation visits the reserve and breeds in adjacent copse.

Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*)- Common Local breeder:

Young being fed.

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)- Common breeder:

1 feeding young in nest box.**Common Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*)- Uncommon breeder:**

3 singing males heard.

European Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*)- Common breeder:

Several small flocks totalling 27 birds plus a minimum of 7 singing individuals.

Blue Tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*Common)- Common breeder:

One pair seen plus 3 others calling.

Great Tit (*Parus major*)- Common breeder:

5 individual sing males observed.

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)-Common breeder migrant:

15 individuals feeding over reserve.

Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*)- uncommon breeder migrant:

1 calling from adjacent copse.

Common Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*)-uncommon breeder migrant:

2 individuals calling.

Eurasian Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*)- Common breeder migrant:

7 males singing and alarming.

Common Whitethroat (*Curruca communis*)- common breeder migrant:

4 singing and displaying males plus a pair on territory.

Eurasian Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)- common breeder:

Over 10 males singing.

Common Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)- common breeder:

Birds feeding on reserve no evidence of breeding.

European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*)-Common breeder resident:

2 singing males.

Mistle Thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*)- uncommon breeding resident:

1 seen feed in adjacent field and flying into reserve hedge,

Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*)- common breeding resident:

2 individual pairs seen.

Eurasian Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)-common breeding resident:

Numerous males seen on reserve (maxima 20).

Proposed future surveys include one night time visit and a repeat full survey on mid-June.

Report compiled by Rob Yates 17/05/2020

Into **June** now, and David sighted both Elephant Hawk caterpillars and the Elephant Hawk Moth on the Meadow Reserve. (previously seen at Three Owls Wood).



A Bird Survey was undertaken at Three Owls Meadow Reserve – and I was amazed at the quantities for such a small reserve;

Bird survey carried out on Three Owls Meadow, Shore Road, Banks SD399219

The breeding bird survey was carried out at 6.30am to 8.30am on Sunday 31stth May 2020 in clear, but warm conditions. The main criterion for potential breeding was singing males in suitable habitat. The status of each species is for the area and is based on the Lancashire Bird Report and local knowledge.

Observations

Wood Pigeon (*Columba palumbus*) – Common breeding resident:

Breed activity observed.

Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) - Common breeding resident:

Breed activity observed on periphery of reserve.

Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*) - Common Local breeder:

Young being fed and at least 3 pairs observed.

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)- Common breeder:

Approx. 20 individuals seen in suitable habitat.

Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla alba yarrellii*) – Common breeder:

A pair flew along adjacent service road and called from suitable habitat.

Common Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) - Uncommon breeder:

Singing males heard.

Greenfinch– Common breeder –

Minimum of 3 singing males in the area.

Linnet (*Linaria cannabina*) – Common breeder:

Large flock of up to 40 birds plus 4 singing males in suitable habitat.

European Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*)- Common breeder:

Several small flocks totalling 15 birds plus a minimum of 5 singing individuals.

Blue Tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*)- Common breeder:

4 pairs seen plus 1 family party observed feeding.

Great Tit (*Parus major*)- Common breeder:

3 individual sing males observed plus numerous contacts.

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)-Common breeder migrant:

5 individuals feeding over reserve plus nests observed on periphery of area.

Common Whitethroat (*Curruca communis*)- common breeder migrant:

3 singing and displaying males with 2 pairs on territory carrying food.

Eurasian Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)- common breeder:

Over 4 males singing.

Common Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)- common breeder:

Few birds feeding on reserve no evidence of breeding.

European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*)-Common breeder resident:

3 singing males.

Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*)- common breeding resident:

2 individual seen feeding.

Eurasian Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)-common breeding resident:

Numerous males seen on reserve (maxima 10).

Corn Bunting (*Emberiza calandra*) – uncommon declining local breeder:

Single male singing on fence of reserve.

Report compiled by Rob Yates 01/06/2020v1

Towards the end of June we had a Flora Survey carried out at Three Owls Wood. David writes; So grateful to Sue Bowden and Marion Chappell for our wild flower survey last week. These Field Scabious were perhaps the most beautiful wild flowers we found. Though I liked the Wild Carrot (it smells like carrot!) and the fragrant Ladies Bedstraw too. We have lots of wild Angelica that will be statuesque in about a month.



Flora of Three Owls Wood, Tarleton

Scientific Name	Common Name	23/6/20
<i>Acer campestre</i>	Field Maple	X
<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Yarrow	X
<i>Aegopodium podagraria</i>	Ground Elder	X
<i>Alopecurus geniculatus</i>	Marsh Foxtail	X
<i>Angelica sylvestris</i>	Wild Angelica	X
<i>Arrhenatherum elatior</i>	False Oat-grass	X
<i>Betula pubescens</i>	Downy Birch	X
<i>Brassica napus var oleifera</i>	Oil-seed Rape	X
<i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i>	Shepherd's Purse	X
<i>Carex otrubae</i>	False Fox Sedge	X
<i>Centaurea nigra</i>	Common Knapweed	X
<i>Centranthus ruber</i>	Red Valerian	X
<i>Cerastium fontanum</i>	Common Mouse-ear	X
<i>Chenopodium album</i>	Fat Hen	X
<i>Cichorium intybus</i>	Chicory	X
<i>Cirsium arvense</i>	Creeping Thistle	X
<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	Spear Thistle	X
<i>Corylus avellana</i>	Hazel	X
<i>Crataegus monogyna</i>	Hawthorn	X
<i>Dactylis glomerata</i>	Cocksfoot	X
<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>	Northern Marsh Orchid	X
<i>Daucus carota</i>	Wild Carrot	X
<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>	Foxglove	X
<i>Dipsacus fullonum</i>	Teasel	X
<i>Epilobium hirsutum</i>	Great Willowherb	X
<i>Epilobium montanum</i>	Broad-leaved Willowherb	X
<i>Epilobium parviflorum</i>	Hoary Willowherb	X
<i>Equisetum arvense</i>	Field Horsetail	X
<i>Ervilia hirsuta</i>	Hairy Tare	X
<i>Ervum tetraspermum</i>	Smooth Tare	X
<i>Euonymus europaeus</i>	Spindle	X
<i>Festuca rubra</i>	Red Fescue	X
<i>Galium alba</i>	Hedge Bedstraw	X
<i>Galium aparine</i>	Claviers	X
<i>Galium vete</i>	Ladies' Bedstraw	X
<i>Geranium dissectum</i>	Cut-leaved Crane's-bill	X
<i>Geranium molle</i>	Dove's-foot Crane's-bill	X
<i>Glyceria fluitans</i>	Floating Sweet-grass	X
<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>	Hogweed	X
<i>Holcus lanatus</i>	Yorkshire Fog	X
<i>Jacobaea vulgaris</i>	Common Ragwort	X
<i>Juncus effusus</i>	Soft Rush	X
<i>Juncus inflexus</i>	Hard Rush	X
<i>Knautia arvensis</i>	Field Scabious	X
<i>Lamium purpureum</i>	Red Dead-nettle	X
<i>Lapsana communis</i>	Nettlewort	X
<i>Lathyrus pratensis</i>	Meadow Vetchling	X
<i>Lemna minor</i>	Common Duckweed	X
<i>Leucanthemum vulgare</i>	Ox-eye Daisy	X
<i>Lonicera periclymenum</i>	Honeysuckle	X
<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	Bird's-foot Trefoil	X
<i>Malus pumila</i>	Apple	X
<i>Malva moschata</i>	Musk Mallow	X
<i>Papaver rhoeas</i>	Common Poppy	X
<i>Persicaria maculosa</i>	Redshank	X
<i>Phalaris arundinacea</i>	Reed Canary Grass	X
<i>Phleum pratense</i>	Timothy	X
<i>Pilosella aurantiaca</i>	Fox and Cubs	X
<i>Pinus sylvestris</i>	Scots Pine	X
<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>	Ribwort Plantain	X
<i>Prunus avium</i>	Wild Cherry	X
<i>Prunus spinosa</i>	Blackthorn	X
<i>Quercus robur</i>	Pedunculate Oak	X
<i>Ranunculus acris</i>	Meadow Buttercup	X
<i>Ranunculus repens</i>	Creeping Buttercup	X
<i>Raphanus raphanistrum</i>	Wild Radish	X
<i>Rhianthus minor</i>	Yellow Rattle	X
<i>Rubus fruticosus agg.</i>	Blackberry	X
<i>Rumex acetosa</i>	Common Sorrel	X
<i>Rumex crispus</i>	Curled Dock	X
<i>Rumex obtusifolius</i>	Broad-leaved Dock	X
<i>Salix alba</i>	White Willow	X
<i>Salix caprea</i>	Goat Willow	X
<i>Senecio vulgaris</i>	Groundsel	X
<i>Silene dioica</i>	Red Campion	X
<i>Sonchus asper</i>	Prickly Sowthistle	X
<i>Sonchus oleraceus</i>	Smooth Sowthistle	X
<i>Sorbus aucuparia</i>	Rowan	X
<i>Stachys sylvatica</i>	Hedge Woundwort	X
<i>Stellaria media</i>	Common Chickweed	X
<i>Taraxacum egg.</i>	Dandelion	X
<i>Taxus baccata</i>	Yew	X
<i>Trifolium repens</i>	White Clover	X
<i>Ulmaria filipendula</i>	Meadowsweet	X
<i>Urtica dioica</i>	Common Nettle	X
<i>Veronica arvensis</i>	Wall Speedwell	X
<i>Viburnum opulus</i>	Guelder-rose	X
<i>Vicia cracca</i>	Tufted Vetch	X
<i>Vicia sativa</i>	Common Vetch	X
<i>Vicia sepium</i>	Bush Vetch	X

Into **July** now and huge thanks to Edward – our Volunteer of the Month who has been battling this month with the pernicious Himalayan Balsam. This is an introduced weed that spreads rapidly with the help of explosive seed capsules. It was threatening our Banks Meadow reserve. As you can see Ed has been doing sterling work. He has helped on and off since the age of ten -thanks Ed!



Later in the month I had a further journey north today with lots of precious cargo;

Quite apart from the wonderful supplies of food we have received in donations over the past month, we had some VIP's in the form of six nestling birds needing further care at the hospitals alongside our Reserves at Wigton.

The van was already fully loaded with the foodstuffs (this saves the charity between £2-3k each time), and the birds we were relocating were a Sparrowhawk chick, a Kestrel chick, two Tawny Owlets, a Little Owllet (not pictured), and a Grey Heron chick (not pictured).



My grateful thanks go to both Meltham Wildlife Rescue, and Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue each for their parts in saving these precious birds lives.

During August we had a Bat Survey conducted on the Three Owls Meadow Reserve at Banks;

Report on bats at Three Owls Meadow Reserve, Marsh Road, Banks, PR9 8DX on 15th August, 2020.

Thanks to an invite from Dr David Unwin, I did a bat survey on 15.8.2020 over land adjoining Shore Farm and Flavourfresh Salads' greenhouses, in company with Rob Yates and his wife Janet. The land is about 2 acres in extent and is comprised of rough grazing land with tall ruderal plants, with ditches and with a moderately sized hedgerow on the western boundary. The weather was ideal, calm, dry and reasonably warm, with a temperature of 18°C at 21.00 hrs. The survey was commenced at 20.48pm and finished at 22.07pm. According to Dr Unwin a bat survey had been done some 7 years previously and, amongst other species, a species thought possibly to be whiskered bats (*Myotis mystacinus*) had been observed. This species are not that common in West Lancashire. For the survey I used a Batlogger bat detector (Elekon, Switzerland) and the data was analysed using Elekon's software, Bat Explorer.

Results of survey.

Species	No recordings of individuals	Total no of calls
Soprano pipistrelle	1	18
Common pipistrelle	46	697
Whiskered/Brandt's	8	178
Brown long-eared	2	35

Explanation of table. It should be noted that this is not an exact statement of the bats that occur on the land. It is simply a snapshot of what was observed on that particular night. When a bat is flying it is constantly emitted a series of high frequency calls so that a single individual in the case of the soprano pipistrelle was recorded emitting 18 separate calls and so on for the other species.

Soprano pipistrelles (*Pipistrellus pygmaeus*) aren't common in this area. The table states whiskered/Brandt's *Myotis mystacinus*/ *Brandtii*) because the two species are impossible to separate by their call and so they have been regarded as a single species. In fact, it is more likely that they are whiskered bats because of the habitat types to be found during the survey. Brandt's bats are more closely affiliated with true woodland. Brown Long-eared Bats (*Plecotus auritus*) are rarely recorded on bat recorders since their signals are extremely quiet and the observer needs to be within 5 metres of so of the animal, so it is likely that there were

more of this species flying over the area, and I did see some bats that didn't register on the recorder, which were almost certainly this species.

Summary. Since this land is situated in a landscape that is principally comprised of land intensively managed for agriculture, it is evident from the results of this brief survey that this small plot is "punching above its weight" in terms of providing foraging opportunities for bats. Since all British bats feed on insects, then there must be plenty of insect prey present. It is especially interesting and gratifying to record whiskered/Brandt's bats. I have been working on bats in this general area for 35 years and I do not record these species very frequently and most of those recordings haven't been close to Shore Farm. It is wonderful to see the hard work of local people and Flavourfresh Salads Ltd being rewarded in this way. If only more companies were so wildlife friendly. I will try to keep a close eye on what happens in the future.

Charlie Liggett C.Biol., M.I. Biol.

Merseyside and West Lancashire Bat Group

Into **September** now, and we have just released a bouquet of pheasants onto the reserve at Three Owls Wood. As you will all know, if you give teenagers freedom, they won't all stay in camera-range; hence why there are only two pheasants in the photo!



THE 2020 MANCHESTER TO BLACKPOOL BIKE RIDE

BY JOHN THORPE.

It's safe to say that so far 2020 has been an extraordinary year, for all the wrong reasons, and one which has tested the patience of the British public as never before. Peoples' lives have been disrupted beyond belief, in my opinion, for much darker reasons than most people would believe, but that is something the reader must seek out for themselves, and my purpose here is to recount the event which I thought would not actually take place due to 'circumstances beyond my control'. The official Manchester to Blackpool Bike Ride was scheduled to take place in July, but was postponed until September and then cancelled amid concerns for 'safety'. Don't get me going on that subject please! For this reason it was very difficult to prepare a piece for the Three Owls website as in normal years, since we could not be sure that the event would occur, and I apologise to my readers for this.

When I knew for a fact that the official event was not going ahead, I had a stark choice, either to abandon it for this year, my 31st consecutive participation in the 60 mile test of life, limb and groin, or to go it alone for the sheer hell of it and of course for the benefit of Three Owls. I chose the latter, and then had to work out a course of action, finally plumping for Sunday the 20th so as to give subscribers, and others the chance to find out about it and decide whether or not to participate. I have already written of my little motorbike reccie of the route prior to the event, and hoped that, on the day, I could find my way reasonably well. You would imagine that after thirty years this would be second nature, but don't forget that we see the route, which isn't always the same, once a year, and have Marshalls, signs and all the infrastructure of the organisers to allow us to concentrate on the riding and not the navigation.

As usual, I went over the bike from stem to stern, and it was while greasing the axles that a thought occurred to me. Since this doesn't happen very often I paid attention to it and suddenly realised that because the ride was now setting off early in the morning in September, it would not be light, as it would be in July, and I would be riding in the dark for at least an hour and a half. Now I'm not afraid of the dark by any means, but I confess to being distinctly 'windy' about being on the roads in the dark. It's dangerous enough in broad daylight, when you can actually see the potholes, broken glass whacking great cracks in the road surface that delight in buckling wheels and jolting tender parts of the anatomy!

There is actually a Manchester to Blackpool Night Ride, and I know a few people who've been on it and say it's really exciting. I'm sure they're right, but I'd be a bit concerned about having a puncture or mechanical fault and not being able to see well enough to fix it! Perhaps they have special floodlight units patrolling the route to aid stricken riders! Anyway, my thoughts turned to lighting, and whether or not I had sufficient for safety's sake. The addition of a small but powerful torch strapped to the handlebars, coupled with my existing wind up headlight and rear light promised to be sufficient, and I hoped for the best.

With military precision I assembled my provisions, tools, spare inner tubes etc etc, and on the Saturday night even went so far as to put my porridge in a pan in the fridge to save time in the morning!

The alarm was set for 4.00am, and I had an early night, much to the disgust of my two rabbits, who are used to being up until at least midnight! The alarm went off on Sunday morning and I sprung eagerly out of bed (if you'll believe that you'll believe anything!). The animals had to be fed, in the dark, much to their surprise, and I made last minute checks of the tyres, lights and anything could fall off, work loose or explode!

I left the house at 5.00am sharp and set off, with not a little trepidation, for Manchester, hoping that I didn't get a puncture on the way. Thankfully the day was fine and not too cold, and there was almost no traffic around. It's an odd feeling in a sense, to be absolutely alone in a venture like this, and the sense of personal responsibility is sobering without the back up of the event organisation. A bit like a trapeze act in one sense, the same actions with or without the safety net, but with potentially very different results!

When I reached Manchester I headed for Deansgate, which has been blocked off, I believe as part of a grand scheme to make a one way system around the city. From several people I've spoken to, including Nigel, the difficulties in navigating around the city are horrendous, and I try to avoid it now unless absolutely necessary. I skirted the barriers and carried on down towards the Old Trafford football ground , encountering a rather surprised fox along the way, who lolloped like a huge hare from the bushes to my left to the centre barrier and sat watching me as I passed with a shocked expression!

Reaching the football stadium I paused to take a couple of pictures, just to prove I'd actually been there, and set off on what I could remember of our usual route. Now you have to remember, dear reader, that we normally set off in daylight, with lovely Marshalls at every roundabout and junction to avoid any chance of riders getting lost. There were no Marshalls this time, and without labouring the point, I got lost and wasted the best part of an hour trying to find the road to Boothstown! Following the golden rule that anyone you ask for directions is either a stranger to the area, doesn't speak English or hasn't a clue about the area they live in, I drew a blank four times before finding a shop where a very helpful young man directed me back to the Trafford Centre and a road sign which I'd missed when I first passed it!

As you can imagine, by this time, my nerves and confidence were a bit strained, and I was very glad to be on a road I recognised at last. Leigh, Atherton, Aspull and Haigh Hall were now the targets, and thankfully as the sun came up I could dispense with the lights, which had served their purpose well. I got to Haigh Hall at 9.15 and had a twenty minute break. It was very tempting to rest for longer, but given that I'd already wasted an hour, it was perhaps better to move on. The Covid-19 parking sign amused me no end. Not only do we

supposedly have a virus that can count how many people are in a room, can leave people alone up until 10.00 o'clock and then go ballistic at the stroke of ten, but now owns a car! Clearly the pandemic business is paying dividends - for some.

The day was shaping up nicely, and the sun lifted my spirits, as it never fails to do. I sometimes wonder if I have reptile ancestry, as I seem to come to life in the sun! Given that I had barely been on the bike in the intervening twelve months, the legs seemed to remember what they were supposed to do and I settled into an easy pedalling routine. The miles clocked up as Standish, Coppull, Whittle-le-Woods and Bamber Bridge came and went, and the last two were a deviation from the normal route, since I decided to make up a bit of time by taking a slightly more direct route. I got into Preston and looked for the signs for the docks area, which seemed to be thin on the ground. I eventually found one and gratefully followed it, only to find that the signs ran out! There does seem to be a feeling in this country that as long as we put one sign up, people will inherently know the way when they come to a road junction!

More by luck than judgement I arrived at the docks, and gratefully got off the bike to find a waiting ice cream van. Now my body is a temple (albeit ruined and full of monkeys!) but on this occasion I gave in to temptation and ordered a large cone with a flake and every variety of sticky sauce I could think of - I'd be lying if I said it didn't taste really good! I had a twenty five minute break and then pressed on, going north. I had the intention of going to Kirkham, then Freckleton and round the coast road to Lytham and Blackpool, and stopped to ask a couple of other riders for directions to Kirkham. I knew exactly where I was, you understand, but was just getting a second opinion! They directed me down a long and delightful country road, looking for a post office and a signpost to the elusive Kirkham. After what seemed like hours, but thankfully wasn't, I found the post office and the sign, and set off full of new found confidence. Eventually the road joined another and I inspected the signpost opposite, only to find that it pointed to Kirkham being down the road I had just travelled on! At this point I gave up the idea of finding the lost city of Kirkham, which had undoubtedly been transported to another dimension, and altered my route to take in some of the beautiful little Fylde villages. We used to use this route years ago on the official ride, and I've always regretted that they changed the route.

The sun was now well and truly up and the fields were vivid green with a stunning blue sky above. At times like this, my mind turns to the England between the wars, when cycling was incredibly popular and we still had so much of the traditional countryside left. There are still places like the Fylde, where it's possible to imagine what it was like, and to experience the exhilaration of the open road and the sun on your back. In one of the villages, where I stopped for a quick drink from my water bottle, I watched two Wood Pigeons on the pavement opposite me. One flapped and jumped up, as if about to take off, but came to the earth again, only to do the same rather awkward motion again two or three times. At this point I was wondering if it was injured, and what, if anything I could

do if it was, when the other bird did exactly the same thing. Shortly after, they both took off and flew to a nearby bush. Obviously they weren't injured, and the only explanation I could think of was that they were performing a courtship dance, albeit one I hadn't witnessed before. Nigel informs me that it's the equivalent of Mrs Woodpigeon saying 'jump' and her partner saying 'How high?'

The bike and I rolled on through Woodplumpton, Inskip and Crossmoor, and it was as I rounded a bend that I felt the ominous repeated rumbling sound from the back wheel that every cyclist dreads- yes, the tell tale sound of a puncture. I had taken several spares inner tubes just in case, and thankfully it didn't take too long to accomplish the switch. To be fair, one puncture in a trip of this length isn't bad, and after the luck I had last year with them it was getting off distinctly lightly!

Elswick was next, another lovely little place, and I thought, as I passed through, how different it would look in the depths of Winter, with ice and snow. There are compensations to living in these places but also difficulties at times. I was very conscious of time now, since I had my friends Les and Jon waiting for me in Blackpool and I was annoyed at running late. Thankfully, a local informed me that the main road to Blackpool was just beyond Great Eccleston, and I carried on through the beautiful square there. It really is stunning and like a chocolate box image of an old village. I believe the village has a long history and a very close knit community, and I can easily understand why anyone would chose to live there, Blackpool now beckoned, and I was making good time, even though the traffic was quite heavy in places. I pulled in for a drink stop and saw, approaching in the distance, two horse drawn racing 'sulkies'. I just managed to get the tablet out in time to grab a couple of photos as they trotted by, followed by a long line of slow moving cars! Eventually there was a sign for Blackpool, which I naturally followed ,and then found myself on a road to Thornton Cleveleys and Fleetwood! Obviously Fleetwood was just a bit too far north, but I reasoned that I'd be able to pick up the road to Blackpool at Thornton. I'd gone out of my way again, inadvertently and finally got into Blackpool, looking for the South Shore. It seemed to be a day for unfortunate signage related incidents, since when I followed one for the South Shore it led me through a housing estate! I joined the Squires Gate Drive and after negotiating a seemingly endless array of traffic lights (is Blackpool the traffic light capital of the UK?!), all on red, I joined the seafront and finally met up with Les Horton and Jon Chaston, who'd been waiting for me so long they'd both celebrated birthdays and grown luxuriant beards, as well as exchanging their entire life stories!

It was four o'clock, the weather was glorious on the seafront and I was surprised to find that I actually felt great after eleven hours in the saddle. A passing holidaymaker obliged by taking the picture of the three of us with the Sunday newspaper (proof of the date!)and we found a little cafe and indulged in a meal with some of the best tasting tea I've had for a long time. I'm not sure what the iron content of tea is without Googling it, but I had a

craving for tea which lasted until the next day. I only realised how much this kind of effort takes out of the body in terms of iron after I went to a blood donors session a couple of years ago, shortly after the ride, and was turned down due to the lack of iron in my blood sample. Ever since, I've made sure that I replenish the iron, usually with medicinal doses of Guinness, but tea will do at a pinch!

In spite of the 'scenic detours' (appalling navigational errors!) I'm happy with the fact that I survived Manchester in the dark, and that I did make it under my own steam. What it did show was that we often take for granted the contribution that others make, for example the people who staff the event every year, and it's a great reality check to take sole responsibility for making the trip.

I should take this opportunity to thank my friend Les Horton, former Chair of the Romany Society, for his valiant efforts in meeting me in Blackpool, providing the chippy tea and running me home afterwards. Not that I couldn't have cycled back but one doesn't like to brag too much, it makes others feel inferior! Thanks also to Jon Chaston for waiting for me with Les. The sun and the passing girls must have been hell but someone had to do it! Jon was going to cycle to Preston, meet me there and come back to Blackpool but he didn't want to make me feel inferior!

This is my 31st consecutive trip, albeit an unofficial one, and I hope you've enjoyed my tale of the journey, warts and all. The total distance travelled was 89.6 miles. If you feel moved to support our fund raising efforts this year, we would be very grateful for your help, and I live in hopes that the event will take place in 2021.

Please send any sponsorship monies you can spare via the Donate button on this Website; Nigel informs me we have just passed the £200 mark so far, which is very humbling for my sole efforts this year. Whether we can get anywhere near the £1370 of previous years is yet to be seen, but you can be assured that Three Owls will be very grateful for ANY amount we can send their way, to assist them in their much-needed work with the birds. We will keep the fund running until the end of this year.

John Thorpe



Still in September, David reported on our new Rewilding Project being run at Three Owls Wood;

I have been very excited by the rewilding project at Knepp in Sussex where storks are nesting again for the first time in hundreds of years. The idea is that we add larger herbivores into our reserves to boost the diversity of plant, insect and ultimately bird life. Our plan is Winter only grazing of part of the Three Owls Wood to leave the ground more open for a flush of Spring wildflowers. So we now have 20 new helpers, rare breed sheep, Lonks, who will spend the winter munching through the undergrowth. A bonus is fuel saving as now less mowing of the rides!



Into **October** now and David was back at Three Owls Wood for his final mows of the year;

While mowing round Three Owls Wood today i was surprised to find five incredibly hairy caterpillars despite the cold. Perhaps their fur coats helped? I had no idea what it was so turned to Twitter Within just 20 minutes the answer from @gmtord - a Ruby Tiger Moth!



As it happens I took this photo of an adult Ruby Tiger last year on the reserve, so I knew we had them. Thanks Twitter

Following yet another related enquiry, I put an article onto the website regarding treating birds with broken necks, the responses received have been very positive;

I have often repeated during my info sessions with colleagues; "Knowledge is best when shared", and it is lovely to hear back especially from other rescue sanctuaries about their successes when using methods new (to them) which have proved lifesaving for Three Owls casualties admitted in the past.



The photo with this article shows a pigeon with a broken neck; so many times we had previously been told there was "nothing that could be done", and the bird was painlessly put to sleep. However back in the 1990's I tried a new method with a juvenile blackbird following a heavy collision; and this was to prove a game-changer and saved huge numbers of such injured birds we admitted ever since.

With Three Owls now spending even more time assisting other rescues both in the UK and abroad, it is lovely to hear back from these Rescues of their successes in order to further enhance the advice we can share with others.

“What’s wrong with it” is probably the most common question I am asked when presented with a poorly bird, and no less so than in the month of November when we deal with all the casualties of the fireworks.

Often these days, rather than either a phone call or turning up in person, we receive either photos or videos by email or WhatsApp along with a description of the casualty condition/symptoms. A short video clip can often reveal much more about the situation, and has the benefit of being able to see how the casualty is able to move or not as sometimes the case may be.



The wood pigeon in this article was reported as being unable to fly, however we were able to see it had clearly sustained a head injury by way of the blown pupils.

Given time and hospital care, such injuries can be successfully treated and the birds can again be returned to the wild.

At the end of November we made our final trip of the year to Knoxwood with supplies and casualties, and as can be seen in the photo in this report, we have been blessed with your ongoing support in what has been an incredibly difficult year for us all.



The van has been well-loaded with donated food for our journeys upcountry to our most northerly reserves where one of our hospitals and many resident birds relocated to - now over a decade ago. Each journey also usually includes a number of casualties which need ongoing hospital care not afforded by our other sites.

Social Distancing and Covid precautions have been added to our already strict procedures, in order to protect our colleagues at Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue who manage our Cumbrian reserves for us. Alas, due to various lockdowns this year, I have been unable to visit the Southport reserves, so have left the reporting of these to David as he is our local Trustee to these sites.

Finally, in December I ran an article regarding the types of food you could safely put out for birds this winter. Again it has been well-received, with people not previously realising that a wrong choice could cost a bird its life;

With winter now truly upon us once more, thought should be given to your choice of bird food - if you are able to help out in this way at this time of year. There are a few points to note;

If feeding peanuts, do not give whole nuts as these can stick in throats and choke a bird. They can also clog-up a crop causing a condition called sourcrop, where the food goes off in the crop; is unable to be digested and poisons the bird you were trying to help. If you do choose this type of food, use a feeder where the bird has to peck at the nut to release it in bits, or feed half-nuts, or grind/smash them up yourself.

If feeding seeds, then either do so from a feeder and change the seeds once a week if not consumed during that period. If feeding on an open table, then only put out as much as can be consumed in an hour, and if possible feed twice-a-day.

Fatballs are ideal for all of our resident garden winter birds and most of those who choose to visit us. Please DO NOT use the netted type, to avoid the injuries caused to the chaffinch in the photo in this article. If yours ARE netted, then remove them from the nets before putting the balls out for the birds. These can either be suspended in hanging feeders, or if you have larger birds visiting such as crows/magpies etc or even pheasants, then put on the floor / tables whole which will help reduce the number of birds flying off with a complete ball - though the larger corvids will still manage it. For the smaller birds you can crumble these up on the feeding table.



Mealworms (both live and dried); only put out on the ground/table as much as would be eaten in an hour. If you choose to use a feeder, then be mindful that if they get damp, will quickly go to mush. As with the seed feeders, the containers need emptying and thoroughly cleaning out each week to prevent mould and disease setting in.

Remember that it is important to provide clean, fresh drinking water at least daily - more often if below freezing during the day. If you struggle to stop the water freezing, a small rubber ball bobbing in the bowl can sometimes help - but please never add any chemicals or salt to the water as you can end up poisoning both wildlife and pets through such actions.

Thank you for supporting the birds and wildlife around us.



Official Opening of Three Owls Oldham



Mayoress, Mayor (of Oldham), Robert Minnitt
Mrs Eileen Watkinson (1962)

Official Opening of Three Owls Rochdale



Mrs Watkinson is in the centre,
Percy Edwards is centre far right. (1970)



Mrs Watkinson



Dr. David J. Unwin and Nigel Fowler

Three Owls Bird Sanctuary and Reserve

(Affiliated to the Jean Sainsbury Animal Welfare Trust)

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Registered Charity No: 298352



ALL I NEED IS A BIT OF
UNDERSTANDING.

Trustees:

Dr David J Unwin FRCGP MbChB (1974 to present day)

Nigel S Fowler (1978 to present day)

Stewart M F Jennings BA, Vet MB, MRCVS (1979 to present day)