



Three Owls Newsletter Spring 2015

Report by Nigel Fowler

If only we had a pound for....

The number of people who visit our website! Back in January 2014 we were celebrating the fact during the previous year over a quarter of a million people had visited the website - quite an increase from our previous annual total of 70,000.

However, that was just the start of things to come....

On 16th February 2014, and just over 2 years since its launch, the new website clocked up 500,000 (half a million) visits, and on 29th September that same year, we welcomed our One Millionth visitor to the site.

Onwards and upwards as they say, and with current traffic flows, I am expecting to pass the 2 million mark around the time of the websites' third anniversary on 1st March 2015.

The website is jam-packed full of information and used as a reference point by a huge number of people. It is (I am told) something of a 24-hour encyclopaedia and greatly liked as people the world over can visit it at any time of the night or day; whether it be to get the latest Three Owls News, find their local sanctuary for a recently rescued injured bird, or simply to seek an answer to a bird-related query they have come across.

It has now overtaken the Advice Helpline as the first point of call for assistance, and since recording new messages of advice for both Landline and Helpline answerphones; there has been a real surge online - which is great as the advice on there can answer around 90% of people's queries, freeing the Advice Helpline for those urgent casualty-specific emergency calls

Looking back....

It was in **January** 2014 that we received several reports about birds making their nests already, seemingly convinced by the very mild weather that Spring was just around the corner. On the Home Reserve too, the herons were busy with their raucous displays and the eventual mating rituals. The youngsters are always expected around Easter-time.

Just as with the rest of the country, the reserves were each suffering with very wet weather, and this was hampering efforts to get the annual maintenance work done especially at the Home Reserve, where the different species of nesting birds occupy it for a full nine months of every year.

In **February** we were noting the new daffodils on the Reserve, whilst checking out damage from an overnight storm. There were many boughs down, but the majority were from the dead trees, which had been left to stand to provide food for the birds as they rotted down. Being inflexible, they had broken up and in some cases come down altogether. There was just the one live self-seeded sycamore whose topmost branches have split, which will need to come down - but it was of no great value at around 10 years old, and the smaller trees around it would thrive in the extra sunlight.

Thankfully all the fences had remained intact - as did all the conifer and fir trees, many of which are fully mature and very tall.



We gave out a huge 'Thanks' to a number of kindly supporters who rang/texted/ emailed to check we were alright. As ever in bad weather; you cannot stop it, but you can prepare for it - and all was well.

I was pleased to hear just how many songbirds there were on the reserve that morning; enjoying the calm after the storm and basking in the sunshine while they could.

Certainly the feeders near the office were taking a hammering - remember that with all the wet weather, many worms would not be available to feed from, and it was still too cold for any flies just then. I did therefore remind people to keep up with the seed/peanut/fat ball feeders for at least another month, by which time I hoped we would have encountered drier calmer weather.

In **March** we reminisced about the Three Owls founder; Mrs Eileen Watkinson. 2014 was the 19th anniversary of her passing - I still can't believe how quickly that time has passed. She founded Three Owls back in 1962 when she lived in Oldham (the name Three Owls comes from the Oldham Coat of Arms), and she literally filled her huge Victorian house and garden with birds, and with the support of Oldham Council had several aviaries in Alexandra Park opposite. Space rapidly ran out, and she relocated to Rochdale in December 1969. Her work with the birds was officially recognised in 1992, and she was awarded the MBE.

Sadly, after a long battle with illness, she passed away and was buried on the Home Reserve, amongst all the birds and animals she had cared for over the years.

I was lucky enough to have worked with her on a one-to-one basis from 1978 to 1995, and she taught me all she knew in wild bird care, much of which she had gained from working with the birds, but also information she had gleaned from many sources around the world.

I am sure she would be very pleased with how Three Owls has coped with adversity since the hospitals closed on the Rochdale site in 2010, and how much further the charity has come as a whole in setting up a network of nature reserves in the north-west, including her very own dream of Three Owls Wood at our most westerly site in Tarleton.

I also had a number of meetings at the different reserves that month; David Unwin and I were checking the young trees at Three Owls Wood, and were impressed by the survival rate despite the recent poor weather conditions. We also looked at ground conditions for the suggested upgraded mower, and found it to have been a good recommendation.

The following weekend I was up at our Field Reserve in Wigton near Carlisle, where we were shown around this new reserve by George Scott - the founder of Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue Trust - who manages and maintains the reserve for us.

Get-togethers from different animal welfare charities are always a good idea to share information on animal care; I've always said "knowledge is best used when it is shared!"

The picture shows Knoxwood's founder George Scott alongside part of the new **Three Owls Field Reserve** at Wigton.

It was right at the end of March when I was celebrating hearing the 'Early Birds'! I noted in my diary; "On my early morning walk around the Home Reserve today, I was thrilled to hear the chattering of newly hatched heron babies in the treetops above.

These nests are now very well hidden, so it's not at all easy to see the babies at this stage, but a quick reccy around found four freshly vacated heron eggshells, so I would reckon there are at least four possibly five in that one nest."



Mid **April** saw us doing our first mow of the year at Three Owls Wood; we have to keep the grass short around the young trees to stop the voles nibbling at the bark and killing the young trees. The grass had grown to over a foot tall in places, and the new mower was certainly put through its paces - but came out in flying colours. Certainly I am glad it's a sit-on job and not a push one for those 7½ acres to manage!

Birds were in abundance once again, from the usual pheasants, shelducks, snipe, and grouse, to the songbirds such as blackbirds, thrushes, wrens and robins, not forgetting the kestrel and buzzard.

It was important to get this mow done now, as it was the entire woodland to do on this visit, then for the rest of the baby season, it'll purely be between the trees and leaving the pathways and rides untouched for those birds which nest in those areas.

The new wildflower meadow is now fully installed, and will soon be springing to life as it is currently bare seeded soil.



On 20th April we had a Newsflash from David regarding our new Fourth Reserve;

“After over 5 years of negotiations it’s now very likely that Flavourfresh Salads of Southport are permitting us to develop a **Meadow Reserve** just outside the village of Banks. The site is at present used by Barn Owls, Lapwings, Oystercatchers and rare Whiskered Bats. We are hoping to improve it with hedging, a few trees (alders and white willows - as the site is very exposed and windy) and a small pond. Weather permitting I plan to plant the first trees tomorrow, as hoping this would come to fruition I planted some trees in containers last year.

Thank you Flavourfresh Salads.”

Only the following day, I was able to update on our new Fifth Reserve finally coming to fruition;

Our latest acquisition; the **Three Owls Watermeadow Reserve** is now up and running.

As featured in our Spring 2014 Newsletter, this new reserve will have features recreated into it which previously existed but were lost to farming by the former owners.

In a joint venture with Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue Trust (who will manage the land on our behalf), we will reinstate the watermeadow feature - itself a very important wildlife habitat, also reform a large sandbank which used to provide habitat to flocks of sand martins each year.

This 6.25 acre reserve will also provide specialist release facilities in order to get some of our rarer birds and wildlife back into the wild where they belong.

This weekend has been a very busy one with over 12kg of seeds of wild flowers and grasses being sown on this site. This is in addition to over 60 trees and shrubs already planted in the hedges to date. It has been a major investment for Three Owls, and one we are all very excited to bring forth to reality.



At the start of **May** we had another day spent mowing at Three Owls Wood at Tarleton; David had briefed me earlier in the week that the grass was growing quickly and some of the trees were now in bloom.

There was a much reduced visible amount of wildlife - to be expected - as we now have birds on eggs, and wildlife with young. Consequently, a much more sedate mowing style was adopted, as I only wanted to mow the grass and not the wildlife! Whereas last time I mowed the entire site in 5 hours, today my 5 hours only saw me complete 3 of the 4 areas; David, Nigel and Stewart. Eileen I had to leave unmown, as I noted a drove of leverets sheltering in the grass there - this grass is very fine, and little troubled by the voles, so to leave it to the next mow in about 3 weeks time is no great issue, and the leverets will be mobile by then and whizzing around the reserve.

(Those of you who are keeping up with the work at Three Owls Wood will know that we named each of the four areas of trees after the trustees of Three Owls; David, Nigel & Stewart being current trustees, and Eileen who was the Three Owls founding trustee.)

It is clearly going to be a good ladybird year in 2014, and I was grateful that the huge swarms of horseflies were not in a biting mood. There were vole-holes a plenty; no wonder the barn owl is back in residence, and the kestrels and buzzard were never far away. The robin was ever inquisitive, and followed me all over the reserve as I mowed. I must try and get a photo of him on a future visit.

Most of the pheasants are now sitting on eggs; an added hazard as they will not move from the nest, instead relying on camouflage and keeping still, so a keen eye had to be on watch at all times - not just for mowing, but also for simply walking on the reserve.

By mid-May the entire floor of the woodland part of the Home Reserve, was a carpet of wild garlic, interspersed with the occasional bluebell.

The baby herons were now all standing up in the nests, their raucous voices making something of a din in an otherwise peaceful reserve. Soon they too would be taking to the skies, and if the mild weather continued, another clutch of eggs should take their place!

I was also thrilled to see the swallows had finally returned from North Africa, and they were busy feeding up on the plentiful supply of flies now whizzing around the skies.



By the end of May, there were baby birds in abundance leaving the nest! One day I was watching a knot of sparrows, all vying for mum and dad's attention to get the next beakful of food. The following day I saw two families of blackbirds on the lawn; poor mum and dad worn to a frazzle as for each worm they pulled up from the grass, was met by four or five open beaks, all swearing blind they hadn't been fed for hours!

We then saw the first of this year's baby herons leave the nest; they were practicing their flight on the local playing fields adjacent to the reserve, and no doubt keeping an eye out for any frogs in the longer grass.

The majority of the bird boxes were occupied, and each of the tit family's parent birds were hard at work, in trying to keep all those youngsters fed.

I noted at that point that this has proved to be a good insect year - and this is helping a great deal in providing fresh nutrition-rich food for those ever-gaping mouths. This will help greatly in producing 'good quality' young birds which should then go on to do well.

I have received a number of calls recently from people finding baby owls out of the nest - it is very rare that they are actually in trouble, so please do get in touch before you move one away from where you find it (unless it's in the road!). They will naturally be playing dead by lying flat on their faces in order not to attract a predators attention.

The website was getting a huge number of visits just then, as we entered the busiest part of the baby bird season. If callers found the Advice Helpline was busy, the answerphone would direct you to the website, and you would usually find it will provide you with the answer you were seeking in around 90% of cases.

At the start of **June**, I took a small window of opportunity to visit family & friends in Europe - taking of course our Advice Helpline with me!

It was certainly talking points amongst our many friends as to how wide a variation of topics, the calls for assistance actually cover.... and over how wide an area too - this week alone we handled calls from as far north as Edinburgh all the way south to the Isle of Wight!

There has been a noticeable drop in voice calls this year - clearly defined by a huge increase in traffic through this very website, as more and more people contact us for assistance online, rather than voice calls; This is not a problem, as the Advice Helpline is designed to handle all forms of communication - no matter where in the world I may be. So long as I have a phone signal, and it's safe and legal to do so, I will be here to help you to save birds lives around the world. Evenings and weekends are indeed very busy times on the Advice Helpline; so if you do end up receiving the voicemail message - please do listen to the detailed

information it gives out, and check our website too where possible, as those two sources of help WILL in fact solve 90% of all queries raised. If you do however leave a message, we will return your call as soon as we can.

I do find it incredibly satisfying just how important our Website has become to so many people. Not simply as a news item to keep up with the ongoing work of the charity, but as a huge volume of reference material; which I am regularly told has had a direct influence on saving birds' lives.

June is usually our busiest month due to the number of baby birds emerging from nests - and finding the big wide world is full of hazards and predators. At this point our website visitor counter was just over 691,000 and I fully expected it to pass the 3/4 million visit mark in the very near future - quite incredible when you think the site only launched in March 2012.

Still in the first week of June, we received two very different but equally important calls for assistance;

I received a call regarding a young owlet found in a farmyard in Lancashire earlier in the week, and gave appropriate advice for it to be relocated to its parents care. Sadly for some reason, and despite all my instructions being carefully followed, the parents did not return for next three nights, and so earlier this evening to prevent any further deterioration we admitted this beautiful young Short-Eared Owlet, who is in need of feeding up and rehabilitation, before she can be returned back to the wild later this year.

The Short Eared Owl is on the Amber List and is a species of European Conservation Concern. This young owlet will remain with us in Rochdale for a few more days to stabilize, then will be transferred up to one of our reserves at Wigton, where she will be in the care of our colleagues at Knoxwood Wildlife Rescue, who will ensure her safe return to full fitness back in the wild.



The second call of the week was early one morning from staff at Rochdale Town Hall; upon turning in for work they had found a Peregrine Falcon cowering at the front steps, and were unsure as to what to do for the best. Calls to the RSPCA had proved fruitless and Town Hall staff were very concerned about the bird's welfare, as the town centre would quickly fill up with people.

I arranged for it to be immediately collected and liaised with Judith Smith; one of the county's Bird Recorder's, who (once I had confirmed it was an unfledged chick and not an injured adult) made arrangements for it to be admitted to the care of Ian Middleton at Wild Wings Bird of Prey Centre at Glazebury. Ian has 25 years of experience with birds of prey, and his centre has purpose-built facilities for Peregrines.

The bird will remain in Ian's care for as long as it takes to get it flying well, then will be returned to its parents and siblings at Rochdale Town Hall; who will readily accept it back for up to a fortnight from today.



Should I stay or should I go?

To round off the week, we had a battle of nerves outside the office at Rochdale! This was the dilemma facing just one of the nestboxes full of baby blue-tits yesterday. This particular box is opposite the office window, and I noticed mum and dad stopped feeding the young around 8am in the morning, in an attempt to entice them out.

However, despite much popping of heads over the next couple of hours, no-one actually ventured out, and so the minute-by-minute feeds were restarted and continued throughout the day.

By 7.30am the following day however, all youngsters were out of the box safely, and happily whizzing about the old sycamore tree the box is on; cheerily picking off the greenfly from the underside of the leaves.

I was more than a little concerned at their day of departure, knowing we had a succession of storms forecast for today - but I need not have worried, as mum and dad took their huge brood off to the safety of one of the mature conifers during the worst of the bad weather. Now sunny and bright again, they are all back in the sycamore.

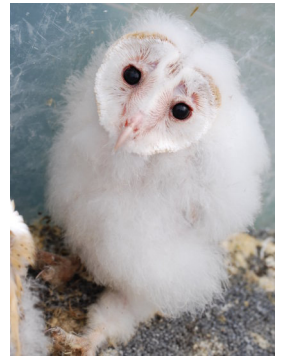
The next 'box-load of babies' are due to depart in the next 4 days, so fingers crossed that they do just as well.

Mid-June brought us a newsflash from David, from one of the barn owl nesting boxes we have sited in Southport;



Great excitement! At least one owlet has been seen at one of our special barn owl nest boxes obtained from www.barnowltrust.org.uk. Two years ago we put up three boxes in secret locations and at last our reward - Angry hissing !! As the quarrelsome youngsters squabble in the box waiting for Mum or Dad. I saw one of the adults make a kill the other night - a large water vole, there was quite a struggle but the exhausted owl won in the end!

At the Three Owls Wood site a pair of Oyster Catchers has at least one chick that is getting a lot of earth worms. The new Meadow Reserve site in Banks had a rare visitor this evening; a Marsh Harrier, flapping slowly by as it was mobbed by some very irate lapwings.



Still in mid-June, a marathon mowing session took place over two days; such was the amount of growth in the past month, it was not possible to do a full mow in a single day.

On day one, I have to admit thinking I wouldn't get to see much wildlife, as the grass was so thick, lush, and long, that mowing was reduced to a crawl, with very careful scrutinising of what was ahead; in order to ensure that no wildlife or nesting birds were inadvertently mown too.

I was therefore thrilled to see - within an hour of starting - one of the resident barn owls quartering up and down the field alongside the reserve. By virtue that this was around 10 o'clock in the morning, I judged to mean that he/she obviously had some very hungry mouths to feed back at 'home'. This too gave further impetus to the work I was undertaking, as by keeping the grass short to protect the trees from being nibbled, also would give the barn owl extra flight paths to aid its family's welfare.

Other birds and wildlife sighted on day one were; Marsh Harrier, Buzzard, Kestrel, Sparrowhawk, Swallows, Swifts, Pheasants (plus chicks), Hare, Grouse, Blackbirds, and loads a vole-holes!

On Day Two in addition to these I could add a pair of oystercatchers, the wren, and the robin.

My grateful thanks to John Thorpe who accompanied me on the 2nd day, who (whilst I was mowing), resecured all of the loose tree-stakes; no mean job on 3000 trees! It was good to meet up with David too, who called by to speak to us both.

Move on a few days, and I posted the following report online, the story speaks for itself;

Nature or Nurture - a Blackbird decides

It was early in April this year, that I received an email regarding an injured female blackbird in a couple's garden.

I drew upon my 36 years of experience at Three Owls to give the most appropriate advice possible, and will let rescuer Gill take over now, and tell you the full story... of Mrs B...

Mrs B moved in with us about 8 years ago. As a fledgling blackbird she had flown into a window and stunned herself. We put her in a shoe box until she recovered. From that day she adopted us as her 'parents' and has never left.

She has raised many successful broods over the years with her mate, Mr B. She also developed a unique communication with us: signalling what food she wants and where to put it, and when the birdbath needs a top up. But she also shares our tea-break ritual, or simply calls for attention when we sit in the conservatory, fluffing out her feathers to look cute, and making 'popping' sounds. She regularly clocks us in and out, calling out as we arrive, and swooping into the back garden ahead of us with a 'chuck chuck' noise, to pose for us. She is especially attached to my husband, following him round the garden like a small puppy, and loves playing 'hide and seek' from inside the conifers, 'popping' to us and then poking her head out triumphantly when we say 'Where are you, Mrs B?'

Mrs B has had brushes with 'death from the sky' before, but always came back fighting. After one skirmish with a sparrowhawk, one of her wing feathers had grown back white, distinguishing her from the other blackbirds visiting her well-patrolled territory.

So we worried early in April this year when she didn't show one day. Next morning she was on the lawn, hunched up into a ball, oblivious to a cat about to pounce on her. I ran out and found she had been savaged. All her tail feathers had gone, her rump was macerated flesh, and she was holding one wing out as if in pain. She was limping, and evidently in shock. She refused food offered, but pecked up a small worm and ate it, and drank a lot of water, while Mr B watched her from a distance.

I felt so helpless, I didn't know what to do: intervene and separate her from Mr B, or let nature take its course? She needed expert help, but where to get it?

I had viewed web pages for bird sanctuaries before, looking for opportunities to get involved, so I knew the Three Owls Sanctuary website. Within an hour of sending an e-mail I had a reply from Nigel, advising me to pop her in a box on a towel, and keep her warm and quiet (in the dark) for 3 hours to help bring her through the shock quickly, by forcing her to sleep. If she was then perky, he said, she could be let out again, and should still be able to fly without a tail; she would just adapt to angle her wings to steer until her tail fully re-grew, which would take about 3 weeks.

I tried all that day and failed to get hold of her. The pouring rain didn't help, and I feared for her waterproofing, as well as her vulnerability. She seemed to have a death wish.

My husband came home and she limped into view to show him. Yet despite her pitiful state, she was still mobile enough to dart away under twigs where we couldn't reach her. It felt as if she was saying goodbye.

Mr B stayed close by singing (diversion tactics?), and swooping in to warn her of danger. She reacted by diving for cover with him. By now we knew her attacker was a sparrowhawk, which whooshed over our heads several times while we tried to catch her. It had taken a smaller kill on the bird table, and consequently many of our regular birds were not feeding in the garden.

After a sleepless night, I mailed Nigel next morning to ask how to handle her without causing her further trauma. She was moving slightly better now, but her legs looked misaligned, and there was a swelling on one side of her breast. Nigel mailed there was a chance she had a wound under one of her wings, or a broken rib that was leaking some air. He advised that the sparrowhawk needs a flight path in/out of the garden, and we should try hanging a towel on a line in the way of this flight path, to make it awkward to get in the garden. He reassured me that if Mrs B did not want our intervention, this 'distant' support would be very helpful to her. He recommended a special bread-mix feed at www.threeowls.co.uk which I could make for her, and

reassured me that if she had broken ribs, they would mend on their own in 8-10 days, and that cuts would usually heal at that time of year without getting infected.

This advice was immeasurably helpful. There is a fine line between helping a wounded bird, and letting it help itself.

Now I had something to do, setting up a washing line with towels, while Mrs B watched me, and making the bread-mix, without harassing her further. I don't think she ever tried the special feed before she went to ground that day, though. Mr B was calling her desperately, but she just disappeared. Was she taken? Did she die? Or what happened to her?

The weeks went by and we grieved for her. She had left an enormous hole in our lives. Friends, family and acquaintances all know about Mrs B, and everyone felt for us. Yet there was always a lingering hope she might reappear.

Mr B kept a strong, vocal guard over their territory, and even started to communicate with us just like Mrs B. There were heart-stopping moments when he 'popped' a 'hello' at me as I opened the door, and sometimes responded to my question, 'Where are you?' by poking his head out of a conifer. Younger females came visiting, and though he never chased them away, it was clear he wasn't interested.

Then at the end of May, about eight weeks after she disappeared, I heard a blackbird calling urgently: 'Pink! Pink! Pink! Pink!' I looked outside and a mature female bird was sitting on top of a conifer, impatiently flapping her wings and tail, calling as if her life depended on it. Minutes later, Mr B appeared, perched on top of the adjacent conifer, and a strange cooing noise started between them. I was watching a reconciliation. Then he started to sing to her. I knew at that moment Mrs B had come back to us, fully feathered and feisty as ever!

At times we doubted ourselves. Were we wanting to believe it was her? But three weeks later there is no doubt left. She has a trace of the distinctive white feather, and is very clearly reclaiming her territory: feeding, roosting and nesting sites. The two love birds wasted no time in setting up a nest in their favourite spot, and recently fledged three young blackbirds.

Mr B showed Mrs B the ground feeder on the patio, coaxing her into the cage to collect food for the chicks. They bickered over a grape until Mrs B finally accepted it wasn't suitable, and petulantly dropped it over the wall. Naturally the parents are always too busy at this time of year for socialising with us, and so we must wait for the young birds to become independent. Then Mrs B will surely start to 'talk' to us

again, showing off her beautiful plumage, joining us for tea, playing games with us, and telling us off if we transgress.

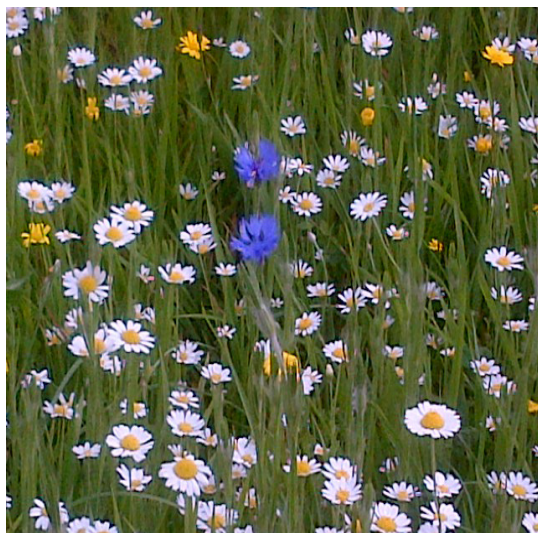
And meantime, that tea towel is still hanging on the washing line, and the sparrowhawk has never reappeared - or not yet. And whilst I can never adequately express what it meant to have contact with an expert like Nigel, who cared enough to advise and support us through this, I hope this tale of Mrs B's plight will encourage others to pluck up the courage and get in touch with the Three Owls. They will take your problem seriously. The worst part is the helplessness, and the fear of doing the wrong thing. Any strategy needs revising as the crisis deepens, and Nigel was there for us all the way, even though he didn't know us, nor how much Mrs B meant to us, and had enough of his own work to do. We are deeply indebted and will stay in touch with the Three Owls.

Thank you from the heart!

Gill

19 June 2014

The end of June saw the first of the wildflowers in bloom at our new wildflower meadow within the Three Owls Wood reserve.



Barn owl hunting in new meadow reserve

With advice from The Barn Owl Trust we knew to let the meadow grow 'tussocky' as this was better for the field voles. Here is proof their advice has paid off; A local barn owl hunting at 8 pm on the new Meadow Reserve.



On **July** 13th I was going to do a day mowing at Three Owls Wood, and was met by a wonderful sea of blue wildflowers here in their splendour - what a truly wonderful welcome on a very warm early Saturday morning.

I was surprised to find at 7am, the temperature was already at 20 degrees C, but I had set-aside the full day for mowing, so taking a peaked cap for protection should it be too hot, I had set off for Tarleton.

It's about an 80 minute drive from the Home Reserve to Three Owls Wood, and at that time of day, nice and quiet on the roads.

Having seen David's earlier report, I was looking forward to seeing the Wood for this latest mow; but the Wood itself was greatly overshadowed this time by this wonderful sea of shimmering blue, which really drew your eye, even from afar.



Of course being a true wild-flower meadow, it is constantly in flux and has already changed from a sea of yellow, to white, and now to blue - who knows what the main colour will be this time next week? The bees and other insects have already moved in; showing just how important this reserve is for a wildlife habitat.

The amount of growth on the trees over the past 4 weeks was also amazing; over half of the trees now tower above me - quite incredible considering the short amount of time they have been in. Already, some are starting to bear fruit, and we are only in July!

I didn't see the barn owl this time, but did see the kestrel, buzzard, robin, blackbird, hares, pair of shelduck, pair of pheasants with 2 chicks, two English partridges, flock of swallows.... and even a weasel!

Hot! I'll say it was - I had to message David by noon, to ask for some sun-tan lotion to cool my burning skin on my arms! - it can be deceptive if there's a bit of a breeze, as to just how hot it is - the thermometer at the Wood was reading 32 degrees!

Anyway, a full mow round the trees was done, and I finally left there around 6pm. There'll be another tree-only mow in a month's time, then for the final mow of the year about 5 weeks after that, we should be able to mow the entire reserve, as all the birds will by then have stopped nesting.

Well, I have heard tonight that John Thorpe has successfully completed his 25th Sponsored Bike Ride from Manchester to Blackpool, despite suffering with a damaged knee; I do hope you will all be able to help us further by digging deep to support him (and Three Owls); we have a £525 record to beat! (Already £140 in sponsorship has come in).

Report on the Manchester to Blackpool Charity Bike Ride

Twenty five years of pedalling!

By John Thorpe.

Once again dear supporters, it is my pleasure to pen what I hope will be an amusing and accurate account of Sunday the 13th's events along the highways and byways of Greater Manchester (how I hate that title!) and Lancashire. This being my twenty-fifth consecutive ride, it was a matter of honour to complete it, and the only potential 'spanner in the works' was my left knee, which decided quite unilaterally to swell up, presumably with fluid over the cap, about two weeks before the event. I was, to say the least, somewhat perturbed, and feared that it might either seize up altogether or become really painful, not at all what you want with sixty miles of pedalling in the offing!

Tempting though it was to visit the medic and have the fluid drained off, I decided to wait until after the event in case any treatment made it temporarily worse, and left me unable to ride at all. Thankfully it didn't get any worse in the run up to the big day, and I decided to go ahead and take the consequences. Those medical personnel, including no doubt Dr. Unwin, who are questioning my sanity at this point, are absolutely right, and all I can say in my defence is that when I have made a commitment I don't like to let anyone down.

At any rate the trusty thirteen year old bike was thoroughly serviced a couple of days beforehand (unlike it's rider) and with some trepidation I retired to bed on Saturday night, after putting our two rabbits to bed with an assurance that they would actually see their Dad again! I left home at 5.10am with the sun barely in evidence but with an unpleasant drizzle very much in evidence. Thankfully the ride to Manchester was uneventful and I even managed to find a whole series of traffic lights on green! Reaching the Old Trafford football ground I quickly sought out my old mate, The Voice of the Ride, with his red suit on, and got a handy photographer to take a shot of us together for posterity.



There were only a few minutes to fix my 25 Years sign to the bike, gird my loins, gather my knee and thoughts together, and we were off and on the way to Blackpool. My knee was clad in a rather fetching support bandage, more for sympathy than anything else, and as we streamed over the start line at 6.30am, I cut a fine figure of athletic prowess, with gritted teeth (specially provided by the organisers!) and a look of dogged determination. We sallied forth to tackle the wet and slightly windy Mancunian roads, full of wet and slightly windy Mancunians!

The route, as in previous years, took us through the leafy, tranquil suburbs to Boothstown (in my defence, I did partake of a Guinness on Saturday night.....purely for the iron you understand!) and to Leigh then north to Atherton, and north west up to Haigh Hall, one of my favourite stops en route. There was little traffic, perhaps just as well in view of some of the insane riding techniques employed by riders. The organisers' pleas to observe the normal rules of the road fall on deaf ears every year, and some of the favourite techniques involve running red lights and riding in a wall right across the road. Both will get you killed eventually but are spiffing fun while your luck holds!

As usual, there were plenty of poor unfortunate souls crouched over upturned bikes, mending early punctures or administering the last rites to a broken derailleur, and one always feels immensely sorry for them. Punctures are a bit like flu, in spite of all precautions, they can randomly strike at any time! I've been very fortunate over the years, and have had very few, but it never does to be complacent.

Against all expectations, my knee was holding out quite well, and not causing any real pain or impeding movement, but I had decided before the ride to take it easy and steady, and not to provoke a failure before the end. With this in mind I wasn't keeping up my usual 20 mph pace (I did say I'd had a drink prior to the ride so you might take the speed estimate with a pinch of salt!), and contented myself with keeping the pedals moving.

A little way before Atherton, a lady route marshal, sitting beneath a large golf umbrella on a traffic island, called out encouragingly "It's all downhill from here!" We rounded a corner to be faced with a hill resembling K2, and at the top, I turned to an equally out of breath fellow rider and exclaimed, "If I had the ruddy energy I'd go back and lodge a complaint under the Trades Description Act!" He grunted, which I took to be agreement.

The rain stopped a little before we reached Haigh Hall at 8.55am, and humidity took over as the temperature climbed. I took a twenty five minute break, cramming in all the food and liquid that I could, along with several hundred others. It really is a lovely place, but sadly there's never sufficient time to fully appreciate it, since we had to press on towards Chorley and Preston. The roads had a bit more traffic on them by now, and tempers flared as drivers, frustrated by riders blocking the road, sounded horns and revved engines. There were also examples of arrogant driving, and it strikes me as sad that people can't just enjoy the fact that they're fit enough to be out and about - there are many who would give a lot just to be able to ride a bike or drive a car.

Every year there are odd and whacky bike designs to brighten the trip, and although I didn't personally see anything like the very high framed bike of a couple of years ago, there were several recumbents, where the rider lies back and pedals, and three very odd designs, the name of which I still don't know. Imagine a large scooter design with footrests set into slots in the base and the chain connected at the rear to the back wheel. The rider stands with feet on the rests, grips the vertical handlebars, and like a gym exercise machine, strides back and forth, powering the machine forward. They probably cost an absolute fortune, and no doubt save a lot of posterior ache, but might be a bit uncomfortable over a long trip with leg or back strain coming into play.

Undoubtedly the least controllable machine I saw was a home built chopper design with long extended front forks and a wheel which looked far too small. The rider looked as though he was having trouble keeping it in a straight line, and certainly had more guts than I to ride it all the way to Blackpool! It did remind me that everyone who takes part takes a huge leap of faith when they leave home, and set off on the road, and they all deserve enormous respect for doing so.

As we worked our way up north to Chorley, and then onto the endlessly long carriageway which leads into Preston, the wind was getting up, and was naturally right in our faces. From previous years, you know what trouble I have with wind(they're making up their own jokes at this point no doubt!), and the knee gave a few twinges as I put my head down and pressed on, looking forward to getting to the end. A quick glance at my watch told me I wasn't going to be finishing in record time this year, but I abandoned this idea when the knee took on the appearance of a small bald headed man. I've since named him Cecil and have welcomed him into the family!

I rolled into the docks area of Preston at 11.25am, and had a twenty minute break to refuel and rest 'Cecil' before the final push for the Fylde coast and the finish in Blackpool. Gulls, cormorants and a few terns kept me company on and above the waters of the docks, and I was a welcome rest. All good things must end of course, and it was soon time to move off again into the country, and hope that the wind didn't get any stronger (stop it, stop it!). I got into conversation with one lad who'd done the ride four times, and was very impressed with my twenty five outings. I must admit it made me feel quite old and experienced at the same time- a consequence of being around long enough I suppose.

There really is some beautiful countryside round this area, for those unfamiliar with it, and some pretty villages and out of the way places, well worth a detour if you're going to Blackpool by car. You will of course have the advantage of not having a

tight schedule to keep to, and can dawdle a little-the best way to see anywhere. In previous years our route ran through Inskip, Singleton and other villages, but for the past few rides we have cut across west to Kirkham and Warton. Personally I much prefer the former route and the finish in Stanley Park.

As we came through the village of Treales, at the gate of a roadside farm stood a young farmer, holding a baby up to see the passing cyclists. Obviously trying to lift our spirits he called out, "Not far to go now!" Something of an underestimate I thought, since we had to go through Kirkham, Warton, Lytham and a few miles up the coast to Blackpool!

The day was warming up now, and as we pressed on up the coast, the sun shone down brilliantly, idyllic except for the freshening onshore wind. To be honest the wind is always strong here, but in some years nearly gale force-it wasn't so bad this year, but strong enough to make pedalling an effort. The long suffering knee grumbled a bit at this point, but I could hardly blame it, and just hoped that it would keep going to the finish. I'm sure it's a delusion brought about by fatigue, but I swear I saw a sign which said four miles to go, followed by one which said five miles to go!

This year we didn't turn off the main road to swing by Fairhaven Lake, and thus missed out some of the windiest, sand drifted sections. After a couple of strategic dismounts to stretch the legs, we came to the Promenade section, cordoned off from traffic for the day. Applause and encouraging shouts reached our ears, and strangely encouraged riders to sit up a bit straighter and 'dig in' to look fresher than they really were. Come to think about it, I didn't see the route marshal this year with his cheery, "Dig in lads, dig in". Possibly someone actually dug him in on his roundabout!

I crossed the finish line at 2.05pm, collected my small bottle of water and miniscule malt loaf (well the recession has struck everywhere, we used to get a full sized loaf years ago) without dismounting or stopping-you try it after sixty miles! - and pushed my way to the rest area near the Glitter Ball. There were, as usual, what seemed like thousands of riders and their friends and supporters in various states of exhaustion or jubilation, prone or standing, and I was grateful to get to the transport tent without maiming anyone! The 2.30 coach set off half an hour late due to waiting for the lorry carrying the bikes, and after a restful ride we arrived back in Manchester at around

4.00pm. I passed the time by regaling the lad next to me with tales of previous rides (it being his first) and he was so enthralled that I only had to wake him up twice!

I believe there were around 7,600 entrants this year, and it certainly seemed like it on the road. Apart from some lunatic riding, I only saw the aftermath of one serious incident, as an ambulance car sped past us, sirens and lights on full, and a short time later saw two riders with prone bikes, sitting on the verge having their helmets examined by the paramedics. I make no comment other than to say it's all in your fertile imaginations! My total ride time, including breaks, was 7hrs 35mins, (6 hrs 50mins excluding breaks,) with an average speed of ten miles per hour. Pretty slow I admit, but I still made it, and thank everyone for their continuing support.

Please do now show your support to the work of Three Owls - I've done my bit.... over to you! (Cheque/P.O./cash to the office address at Rochdale, or donate online via the website button) - Many thanks.

John Thorpe July 20, 2014

Raining Birds and Frogs!

We've all heard the phrase "raining cats and dogs", but more recently the weather at the Home Reserve in Rochdale has been "raining birds and frogs!"

Such has been the intensity of the rain coming down, that some of this years young magpies have been caught out, and I have found them grounded on the floor in and around the reserve - fine in our protected environment, but they could have got into trouble elsewhere.

An hour to dry out however, and 'flight-mode' returns, and they are back in the tree-tops.

Why the frogs....? Well, why indeed; it was only after a particularly heavy shower, that we found literally thousands of tiny frogs had appeared all

over the place. Now whether they had actually come down with the rain, or up from the ground we could not be sure?

The photo with this article shows just how small they were, compared to a sycamore seed.



On the evening of 23rd **August** we had a **Hedgehog release night at the Wood**; we had been waiting for weeks for the correct conditions - not too dry was the most important thing according to Sue Lewis from Rochdale Hedgehog Rescue. This summer has been exceptionally hard on wildlife this year, as the prolonged dry weather has led to a shortage of worms and beetles - meaning less natural food available for hedgehogs and birds alike.

Sue has released thousands of rehabilitated hogs. Here are two boys and two girls just about to trundle off into the darkness! They came to her too small to hibernate last autumn but are now raring to go - we wished them luck as we heard them snorting and sniffing in the undergrowth.



In **September** we had some extra occasions to thank you all for your support;

The first was to John Thorpe for his sterling efforts in this years' Manchester to Blackpool Sponsored Bike Ride; this being his 25th consecutive ride, and for his unstinting efforts to support the work of Three Owls Bird Sanctuary & Reserve. In addition to this; a HUGE thank you to everyone who sponsored John on this milestone event. Not only did he manage to equal his previous record of £525, but surpassed it and achieved a total this year of a wonderful £592.00 So, let's all give John a round of applause, and each and every one of you a hearty pat on the back for your wonderful support.

It is through your combined efforts that the work of Three Owls reaches far and wide; I have been doing a lot of long-distance owl rehabilitation work in Romania of late, which we will look at in detail later.

Later in the month I was thrilled to receive our latest Gift Aid cheque from HMRC; a whopping £8230.58 which is a very, very welcome amount - especially at this lean time of year. This is directly thanks to YOU our loyal supporters, who, by gift aiding your donations, ensure that we receive an extra 28p in the pound from the taxman for each of your generous gifts.

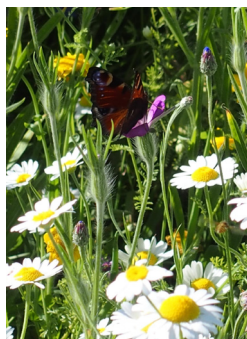
So, once again, a HUGE thanks to you all for your continued support, and I speak on behalf of literally THOUSANDS of wild birds which we help both directly and indirectly on an ongoing basis.

At the end of September, David was sorry to have to mow down the last of the flowers in our wild flower meadow, but if he didn't, the stronger grasses would take over, and the seeds for next year's show would have already fallen to the ground. Interestingly he reported that it smelt very perfumed and herby as he cut up and down- quite unlike the smell of cutting a lawn.

The marsh harrier flew by twice to see if any voles were trying to run for it! They fly rather like a barn owl -flap, flap, flap, and glide ..., then repeat.

Next came the buzzards, FIVE in total!! then a sparrow hawk just as he scared up a huge hare - so big, at first he thought it was a fox

We hope you all like this peacock butterfly, snapped in the meadow at the height of Summer!



On 29th September 2014 we welcomed our one millionth visitor to our website. This new website was launched on 1st March 2012, and we celebrated half a million visits only in mid-February 2014 after just under two years. Yet here we were again just 7½ months later and a further 500,000 visits to pass the One Million mark today. It really is quite incredible.

We have certainly amassed quite a following, and it is very rewarding to get feedback from all around the globe as to how advice given out from the Website, email, text, or via the Helpline, has been put to good use in saving, enhancing, and preserving wild birds lives.

Thank you to each and every one of you for your continued support; you have ALL shared in this wonderful milestone, and just think of the tens of thousands of birds who have benefited over this time.

It was during September, when I became puzzled and somewhat alarmed by a large increase in the number of calls to the Advice Helpline; the majority from the south of England, and all about pigeons or doves. Always keen to assist where I can, I had helped out in each case, but as the callers became increasingly frustrated that we were 'miles away' from where they were living, and where they had expected physical assistance to be given, I started to enquire as to where they had got our number.

Alas it turned out that Pigeon & Dove Rescue, having previously asked if they could add our number to their rescue database, had actually put it at the top of each of their web pages, and whilst it did say to “ring Three Owls Helpline if you find a sick or injured pigeon or dove”, it did mean that people were under the impression that they were phoning P&D Rescue and after several particularly abusive calls, I asked for their site initially to be amended, then after continued abusive calls we had our number removed altogether. It wasn’t a decision I took lightly, as I want Three Owls to be able to assist as many people as possible, in order to help support the wild birds around us.

I also updated the office answerphone at the same time, as it had been the same message for the past three years, and the recording was getting somewhat faint. Now, the office number hasn’t been publicised by us since 2010 when operations at Rochdale changed and I am only sporadically in the office. However, running a search on the internet found it is still very widely used on a huge number of other people’s websites. With the new message recorded, which now directs people firstly to the website and email, the number of visitors to the website has absolutely gone through the roof!

As I send this newsletter off to the printers, we have this week passed the two millionth mark for number of visits to the site - that’s a million visits in five months; incredible!!

On 8th **October**, O2 upgraded our handset for a sparkly new one - and at a far better rate than the old contract. However, I did have to get used to an all touchscreen phone; something I have tried to steer clear of in the past (I did like my buttons!!)

It has at least been a good time to thin down the contacts that evening - we’re back now in the 700’s; a much more manageable number than the 1200+ we had accumulated over the past 2 years. Hopefully we won’t wear this handset out too quickly. Alas, we have lost the detailed data recording facility we had with our old Blackberry - they call such upgrades “progress”!!

Mid-October saw me completing the mowing of Three Owls Wood ready for the winter season. Although the grass is still growing, it has slowed greatly, and we can now give the mowing a rest until Spring.

The kestrel was keeping watch as I mowed up and down, and three buzzards flapped lazily around and about, keeping watch when I had finished on one part of the site, so they could keep an eye out for any tasty snacks!

All the pheasants were back in residence - clearly very pleased by the extra cover the young woodland now provides. The hares too were fairly whizzing about, and I was discussing later with David how the natural balance of the site must be correct, as there is no sign of an imbalance of breeds/species, but a definite constant throughout the 7.5 acres.

There was no sign of the hedgehogs released earlier in the year (which was good as they are nocturnal animals); I suspect they will be under one of the sheds by now, and if not yet in hibernation, will appreciate the dried cut grass to line their winter nests.

A flock of goldfinches were busy feeding on some thistles, but I've not yet mastered the camera on the Advice Helpline handset for distant shots, so we've had to make do with a young tree with its autumn foliage (on the exposed side of the Wood, as you can see from the lean!)



Oh Dear!

A stormy end to October; those were the exact words which ran through my mind upon seeing the devastation to the fence at the Home Reserve last weekend.

The storm which hit us on the Sunday was pretty strong, but I hadn't expected any significant damage to have occurred. Certainly there was very little tree damage, all the solid fences and gates were unscathed, yet the mesh fence and its 3" square posts were simply snapped off at their bases and scattered like a pack of cards. I can only think there must have been some kind of eddy of wind swirling around just there.

Anyway, a huge thank you to Len for volunteering to come and help me replace all the posts, and rebuild the fence today - we polished it off in just 5 hours; testament to our well-practiced aviary-building techniques! We hope for a little less of this extreme weather in the future!



November is the very best time for planting a new hedge - so here is a beauty on the Northern boundary of our new meadow reserve in Banks near Southport. It's a mixed wildlife hedge Hawthorn, blackthorn, dog rose, field maple and hazel and is about 100 meters long.



At the start of **December**, David was thrilled to report that the new wildlife pond digging at Three Owls Wood was finally underway, thanks to a generous gift from a Tarleton based charity. It is to be sited in a clearing in the wood. The pond will be about thirty by fifty feet. Over the course of the next few days the pond grew and grew. The process was to take off the soil, dig down to the clay -then spread a two foot layer over the bottom of the pond.



Our new water feature will really improve the habitat at the Three Owls Wood.

Hedge update; 200 meters more wildlife hedge in existence than a week ago! We had a Home Reserve Maintenance day just before Christmas; Well, waiting for a dry sunny windless day just wasn't going to produce anything, but we did manage a mainly rain-free day, and there was very little wind despite the forecast saying otherwise!

Our main concern was a large sycamore which had died off three years ago, right on the boundary fence-line. Although it appeared fairly stable, with the amount of rain we had encountered lately, there was a growing risk of something going awry.

Despite its size, our Arboriculturist - Mark - managed to precisely bring it down, where he skilfully sliced it up into usable logs. The brash has been carefully stacked to provide shelter for a myriad of birds and animals during the winter months. Mark also attended to one tree which was completely down and resting atop one of the headstones in our graveyard, and another which had partially blown down and was leaning against two other trees.

Rather him than me - my tree climbing days are long gone!

My huge thanks to all the volunteers who came and helped out with all the moving of the logs and brash - it was very much appreciated.

I am sure that the wildlife within the reserve will also appreciate all the new feeding, hiding and nesting places thus created by today's work.

The tussocky grass in the Meadow Reserve must support a lot of field voles writes David, we saw two caught by a barn owl in broad daylight this week. Despite the early season he may well have a mate on the nest nearby as we have seen him on six occasions this week alone and he always flies off with his prey in the same direction. Those voles must live nervy lives - a kestrel and two cats hunt regularly in the reserve. Presumably they must reproduce pretty fast too!! While I'm on a special thank-you to Flavourfresh Salads and particularly to Len Wright, Mick Fradsham and the amazing Andy Roe for making this very special reserve possible!!

It was back in July when I received my first email from two sisters; Minerva and Irina in Romania. They had rescued an injured tawny owl the previous winter, and had nursed it back to almost full health. They were initially enquiring regarding a local rescue centre, as their search had drawn a blank, save for Milvus; a bird rescue group who could only assist short term, and stressed they could not keep it, and it would have to be put down if it couldn't quickly return to the wild as they didn't have the room - they were not a sanctuary. My searches too drew a blank, and it was frustrating not to be able to produce a sanctuary for them, as is the norm in this and many other countries.

Their vet had x-rayed the wing for them, and revealed a problem; which he thought was a gunshot wound, prior to the dog attack which was from where they rescued it. Irina had previous experience with treating injured Eurasian Jays and an *Athene noctua* (Little Owl to you and me).

The ladies were extremely anxious to do their very best for the owl, (named Boo-Whoo) and over the coming weeks we adjusted the birds diet to a near natural one, and organized a 'safe-house' for it to live in at an abandoned farm-stead. We exchanged numerous emails and phone calls to perfect the care for that owl, and it took to flying free in the barn very quickly, returning completely to the wild shortly afterwards.

This was a very touching long-distance rehabilitation, both Minerva and Irina overcame the language barrier extremely well (put me to shame!), and their unstinting devotion to doing their absolute best for the bird shone out a mile.

My personal apologies for a late issue of Three Owls Newsletter this year; alas my own health had something of a tumble in November 2014 when I was diagnosed with LADA Diabetes, caused (I am told) by the unrelenting stress put upon me from my employers. It is taking some adjusting to, as being a chronic illness it does mean a complete lifestyle change and multiple daily insulin injections - my huge thanks to friends and family for their support; it has certainly kept me going through some difficult days.

Nigel

Three Owls Bird Sanctuary and Reserve

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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)

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