

Undergrowth

Issue No 3. Winter 2004-5

The Newsletter of Foxglove Covert Local Nature Reserve

So, that's the festivities over until next year. I hope everyone had a great Christmas and New Year.

We have had to increase this issue to 6 pages because of the amount of news we need to tell people about. As always happens, the extra two pages came along just as we were putting the finishing touches to the original pages. I hope this doesn't become a habit!

In this issue we have a report from our man in Mauritius, Richard Brown, who is working on the conservation of the endangered Pink Pigeon. Richard has been one of our ringers at Foxglove for some time.

We also have a report on our AGM which was held on 12 January. It was good to see so many people there, especially as AGMs are not always the most interesting of events.

Please look at the report on the Open Day because the date has changed from 4 June to 28 May and you'll need to alter your diary.

The recent gales did a large amount of damage to the Reserve (see report on page 2) but this doesn't seem to have deterred the Spring which seems to be well on its way. Catkins are already visible, the snowdrops are out and there's a general increase in bird activity and sound. Perhaps we'll have another bumper year in 2005.



Foxglove Covert Website

It has been a long time coming but finally we have got the website up and running. Anyone who wishes to have a look should go to:

<http://usite.army.mod.uk/foxglovecovert/>

The site consists of some 40 pages and visitors can navigate around the site by using the red buttons found on the left hand side of each page. The aim has been to give as much information about the site to anyone who happens to come across it. To do this we have a large number of pages which are devoted to the list of species which have been recorded at foxglove.

The species have been divided up into vertebrates, invertebrates and plants. Although we know that our current lists contain some inaccuracies due, in part, to the way in which we have recorded sightings in the past, we hope to have a more complete and accurate listing of species in the future. The only list which we can guarantee to be 100% accurate is the birds.

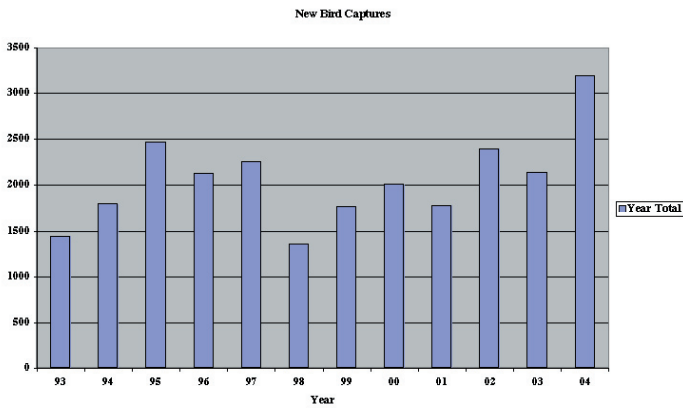
While the species list occupy about half of the pages we also have other pages which cover our Friend and Volunteer groups, our courses and the facilities available at the Centre. There is also a contacts page complete with a map and an events page which lists some of our coming attractions.

The site has one fairly glaring omission - links to other sites. There are several reasons for this, not least the difficulty of preparing a list of sites which people might find useful. These could be similar sites in the local area, "national" sites like the BTO, English Nature, etc. or sites which people have found useful in the past. If anyone has already got such a list we would be delighted to add them to a new page.

We should stress that this is our first attempt and we would welcome any comments or suggestions for ways in which we could improve the pages or add new ones. It is our intention to keep the site as up-to-date as possible but, like everything else, there may be times when we fall a bit behind.

A Great Year for Bird Ringing

2004 has been an amazing year for bird ringing in Foxglove with a record number of new bird captures. If we were to see a graph of the annual totals since 1993 it would look like this:



Here we can see that the total new bird captures last year, at 3193, was 50% up on 2003 and 30% up on our previous best year of 1995. A similar picture emerges with recaptures, which is, again, the highest we have ever achieved. This increase can only be partially explained by the increase in the number of bird ringers working at Foxglove. After all, if the birds weren't there, it wouldn't make any difference if we had one ringer or ten.

A far more likely explanation is that our efforts to improve the habitats within the Reserve are beginning to bear fruit. Our programme of coppicing different blocks of the Reserve is now well established and this can only improve the habitat for all our resident species, drawing in greater numbers from all the surrounding areas.

What species have contributed most to this bumper year? In our last issue we mentioned our success with Bramblings but other species have also broken their previous best records:

Moorhen	previous best 3 in 1997, 8 in 2004
Kingfisher	previous best 4 in 2002, 10 in 2004
Blackcap	previous best 67 in 2003, 90 in 2004
Chaffinch	previous best 427 in 1995, 569 in 2004
Greenfinch	previous best 390 in 1995, 466 in 2004
Bullfinch	previous best 121 in 1993, 143 in 2004

However, other species have shown a decline in captures, most notably the Willow Warbler which has shown a steady decline from a high of 335 in 1993 to just 124 in 2004. This is more or less in line with the results reported from other parts of the country which show a similar worrying downward trend.

January Storms

The storms in the middle of January caused a large amount of damage at Foxglove with an estimated 150 trees uprooted. Most of the damage was in the larch

trees on the eastern end of the woodland walk, the north side of the lake and the middle section of the conifers on the western side of the reserve. We were lucky to lose only a few deciduous trees - notably a large sycamore beside the Risedale Beck and a holly above the lake. The scene below was taken on the west side of the Reserve and shows the damage to our shelter belt on the west of the Reserve.



Our immediate problem was to try to clear some of the fallen trees and to do this we declared the weekend of 23-24 January as a working weekend. As many people as possible were asked to come and help out. In the event, some 17 people, young and old, turned up on each day and the amount of effort which they put into the clear up was enormous - the equivalent to 33 man days over the weekend. As a result, the scene has been transformed from one of devastation into something much closer to the Foxglove we all know and love.

The Management Group would like to place on record their thanks to everyone who was there and who produced such a splendid result in such a short period of time..

From Our Man in Mauritius

Foxglove the Pink Pigeon

When my old university course advisor sent me an e-mail out of the blue inviting me to volunteer for the Mauritius Wildlife Foundation I thought that it would be rude to say no. The fact that I would be working with endangered birds and spending my weekends in a beach house within thirty seconds walk of the turquoise Indian Ocean had nothing to do with my decision.

The forests of Southwest Mauritius rank as the area

of highest conservation priority in Africa and related islands for threatened birds. It is here that I now find myself, living in a tin shed within the Black River gorges National Park. The area is home to several species of endangered endemic passerine, the rarest parakeet in the world, the Echo Parakeet, the endemic Mauritian Kestrel, and the critically endangered Pink Pigeon.

The wild Pink Pigeon population had been reduced to nine known individuals in 1990, this was primarily due to habitat degradation and depredation on nests and adult pigeons by introduced mammals. Since this time a release scheme for captive bred birds and intensive management have led to an increase in numbers to nearer 400 individuals comprising five subpopulations. However, each subpopulation is constantly threatened by predators, disease, and cyclonic events. So here I am, the sole pigeon worker looking after the Combo subpopulation and armed with nothing but a machete and an extra large bottle of mosquito repellent. Luckily, volunteering and bird ringing at Foxglove have prepared me well.

The 5 am alarm is leisurely compared to a Foxglove CES session. I thus spring into action and begin my morning nest hunt. When nesting, the Pink Pigeon divides the brooding between the sexes; the male spends the day on the nest, the female the evening and night. The change over can be identified by a combination of wing clapping and calls, an event which can lead you to the nest. Sadly the Combo forest lacks the beautifully maintained paths of Foxglove so several hours of hacking with a machete may be required. The pulli are ringed in the nest with a single colour ring. Later the fledglings are trapped and given a unique combination of two colour rings and one metal ID ring. Virtually all of the Pink Pigeons remaining in the wild can thus be easily identified. Each pigeon is also named to make discussion and correspondence more convenient. I thus regularly see Miss Piggy, Batfink, and Mr. Blobby in the course of a day.

The remainder of the day comprises a hopper watch. The pigeons rely heavily on supplementary food in a habitat where many native feeding areas are degraded. It is thus possible to assess which pairs are showing a breeding pattern, that is to say the male feeding late and the female feeding in the middle of the day. I thus know which territories to do a nest hunt in. Volunteering at Foxglove has made me an expert hopper filler. I do however have to report that Mauritian grain packers have developed the same ability as their British counterparts in being able to

guarantee that the correct corner of the sack to open is always the last one of the four you try.

The pigeons are handled regularly to facilitate disease screening and to take biometric details. This is also when unringed birds are given their unique rings and names. This week I handled my first unringed bird, a healthy juvenile who received a black ring on the left tarsus and a red ring below its identification (6A00251) on the right. The name was obvious, 'Foxglove' to remind me of the great times I had ringing and working on our brilliant Nature Reserve.

Foxglove should hopefully mature into a stunning pigeon with bright chestnut red rump and tail, pink body, brown wings, and a red and yellow bill. With a bit of luck Foxglove will go on to establish a territory and stop the Pink Pigeon going the way of that other famous Mauritian bird, the Dodo.

Christmas Buffet Supper

We held this annual event on 30 December and it was good to see so many members of our Friends, volunteers and ringers enjoying themselves. The buffet, provided by those who came, was excellent with a huge variety of food and drink.

There was a quiz, thoughtfully devised by David and Jane Elliott, who were probably based in the dungeons of the Tower of London in a previous existence. This was won by team 3 which was composed entirely of sad swots. See below.



Having tortured our brains the final insult heaped on our heads was to model an animal whose name each team had drawn from a hat. The results were judged by Winifred and a large and shameless box of chocolates was awarded to the team who produced a rather elegant lion.

100 Club

The last draw of the year took place at the buffet supper and Gillian Mckenzie and Pat Anderson both walked away with a prize of £25 each. Our congratulations to them both.

Could we take this opportunity to remind everyone that their current membership of the 100 Club will expire in March and urge them to renew. The annual fee is just £10 and this can be paid by contacting Jane Elliott on 01325 469518.

Friends Group

Our Friends group continues to grow and we have now added another eight names to our list of members. This means that we have now reached a total of 33 members.

Our new members are:

Joyce Chatham	Poole
Elizabeth Dickenson	Darlington
Lydia Dickenson	Skeeby
Nigel Hall (2)	Aldbrough St John
Pamela Layton	Richmond
Ann Luxmore	Richmond
Geoffrey Mackley (2)	Bedale
Ian Walker (2)	Great Layton

A suggestion was made at the AGM that we should hold a Friends' meeting so that we can discuss any issues which we may have and to see whether there are any specific ideas for events which the Friends would like to be involved with. We have already thought that a barbecue might get a good response and we are currently looking for a suitable date. This would be an event for Friends and their families and that might be a good opportunity to look at other ideas at the same time.

Annual General Meeting

We held our Annual General Meeting on 12 January in Lizzie's Bar where we had a good turnout of 19 people. We were very pleased to see so many of our Friends and other groups present.

2004 has been a very busy year on the Reserve and we had a number of reports from members of the Management Group on their areas of responsibility. The most important of these was from Mark Hewitt who, as CLO, has been involved with just about

everything which has happened. David Elliott also reported on our fund-raising efforts and our involvement in the local community which is such an important part of our function as a Local Nature Reserve.

Mark Conroy, our chairman, proposed a vote of thanks to Tony Crease, who couldn't be present, for all the effort he has put in to helping the Reserve both as the leader of the Ringing Group and also behind the scenes. The work which Tony does may often be unseen by the rest of us but his contribution to the ongoing success of the Reserve is unsurpassed.

A copy of the Reserve's Annual Report has been included with this issue.

Unlike many events involving the Management Group this meeting ended before daybreak!

2005 Open Day

We are continuing to plan at a good rate for our 2005 Open Day. However, we have to report one small difficulty. We have asked William Hague to open the event and he can manage any Saturday except 4 June. After much discussion the Management Group has decided to swap the dates of the Open Day with that of the Birdsong Supper. The calendar will now look like this:

28 May	Open Day
4 June	Birdsong Supper

Please note the new dates in your diary.

The day will start at 10 am and William Hague will perform the opening ceremony at 11 am. The day will finish at 4.30 pm. Some of the attractions which we are hoping to feature on the day include:

Official opening of the new bird watching hide
Beekeeping demonstration
Bird ringing
Guided walks
A variety of rural crafts
Taxidermy
A large range of children's activities (suggestions for this category would be particularly welcome)

The Open Day will be an all-ticket affair and we will have to restrict the numbers on the day to 250 because we don't feel the Reserve will be able to cope with any more people. If you want to come along,

please register your name and the number in your party with Mark Hewitt as soon as possible. Tickets will be allocated on a first come, first served basis.

Finally, if anyone is will to help with any aspect of the organisation on the day, Mark will be only too pleased to add your name to his list.

Adopt-a-Box Scheme

At Foxglove we have over 100 nest boxes and we have set up a scheme which will allow people to sponsor them. The scheme will start immediately so that we can include this season's nesting activity. It is a fairly simple scheme and will work like this:

We have divided all the boxes into two types, Standard which are the familiar boxes with round or square hole entrances or the open fronted type and Special which are the larger ones for birds like Owls and Kestrels. (As you would expect, we have far more Standard boxes than Specials.) Anyone can apply to sponsor as many boxes as they wish for as long as they wish. The cost of the boxes is:

Standard	£2 per year
Special	£4 per year

When you sponsor boxes we will allocate the next available box numbers and send you a certificate for each box which will include the box number, a map showing where the box is located and a photograph of the box. This will allow you to positively identify "your" box.

As part of our normal bird ringing effort, all the boxes will be inspected and any young birds, and adults if we catch them, will be ringed. Once all the boxes have been checked we will send the sponsor a letter telling them how successful each of their boxes has been. Of course, bird nesting is a natural process and we have no control over who nests where. It is quite likely that a number of boxes will not be used every year but we will still let the sponsor know the results.

At the end of the sponsorship period each sponsor will be offered the opportunity to renew their existing sponsorship or change their boxes for new ones. Sponsors can also increase the number of boxes they sponsor at any time by completing another application form.

Sponsorship of boxes can be seen as an ideal gift for

birthdays, Christmas or other special events. If you want to sponsor a box for someone else, please fill in the application form in their name. If you want to include a greeting, just let us know the wording and we'll include a small card when we send out the certificate.

To get everyone started we have included a temporary application form with this edition and we will have extra copies on display in the Field Centre. So let's see if we can't get all 100 plus boxes up and running before the birds start using them in the spring.

If anyone has any questions or observations about the scheme, please ring me on 01748 850966 or e-mail sam.hackett@btinternet.com.

Blue Tit Record?

Last weekend we caught a Blue Tit which was first ringed at Foxglove in 1998 and recaptured it in January 2001 before it reappeared on Sunday. The question is where has it been? Has it always been here and we just haven't caught it or has it been away from Foxglove for the last 4 years? Anyway, 7 is a very good age for a Blue Tit, especially as most don't survive their first winter.

Later this year we hope to publish some more interesting ringing records. At the moment we have data which goes back to 1999 on one system and a huge amount of data going back from 1999 to 1992 on an older system which is incompatible with the newer one. We are hoping to get everything converted to the new system to give us access to everything we have done for the past 14 years. So, if you don't like statistics - keep your head down!

Dates for Your Diary

As an experiment we are including a copy of our Forecast of Events with this issue. This is a list which we use at the Centre as a sort of aide memoir so that we don't, for example, make any double bookings. Because we are familiar with what is going on we need little more than the title to identify each event. One of the problems is that it constantly changes as new events are added and some are cancelled. On the other hand it has the virtue, unlike, say, the Courses leaflet, of listing events in chronological order. We would like to know whether you find it useful or not. So, if you have any comments about it, please let us know.

In the meantime, here are some highlights.

9 February. Drawing from Nature course. Starting at 2 pm and ending at 4.30 pm for six successive Wednesdays.

10 February. Watercolours for Beginners course. Starting at 10 am and ending at 12.30 pm for six successive Thursdays.

19 March. Botanical Illustration course. Starting at 10 am and finishing at 4 pm on three successive Saturdays.

16 April. Trees Within the Landscape course. Discover the place with trees occupy in the English landscape, 9.30 am to 4 pm.

21 April. Bird Identification course. Come and hone your skills in identifying common birds. 7 pm to 9 pm on 5 successive Thursdays.

30 April. An Introduction to the Web of Life taster course. 9.30 am to 4 pm.

Competition Corner

A disappointing result from the competition in the last issue - no entries, right or wrong! We put it down to over-indulgence at Christmas as we are quite sure that everyone who was still on their feet would have found the plant FUMITORY from the clues.

In this issue we have tried something different, a crossword. The usual £5 book token to the first entry drawn from my hat on 28 February. Send your named entries to Sam Hackett at the Reserve address.

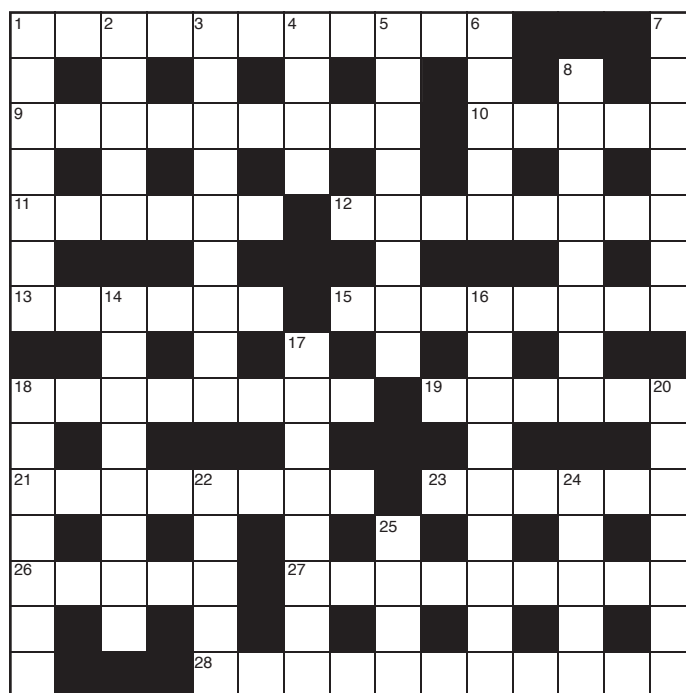
Across

1. A little policeman's butterfly? (5,6)
9. Pine for the mountains? (6,3)
10. Loves small rodents (5)
11. Tree found in Dublin, Denbigh or Douglas (6)
12. Class of mammals without front teeth, like anteaters (8)
13. Birds in big boots? (6)
15. A drug used to make a heavenly body? (8)
18. A plover will bring down a stag (8)
19. A scooter with only one duck? (6)

21. Dick's pipit (8)
23. Hedgehogs have them inside and out (6)
26. The – Birds. Title of a book by Colleen McCullough (5)
27. Yellow variety of papaver (9)
28. Syrup trees? (5,6)

Down

1. Gulp the bird? (7)
2. A tree you'll find in a Kansas penitentiary (5)
3. Orange led to an owl (4, 5)
4. Ornamental fish gone bad, we hear (4)
5. Where the beautiful birds come from (8)
6. "The – himself is hoarse" Macbeth, Act 1 (5)
7. A plain re-introduction to Salisbury? (7)
8. A plant to keep biters at bay (8)
14. House Martin species (8)
16. Molluscs having a distinct brain (9)
17. Bearded babbler? (8)
18. What the hair of the dog is made of (7)
20. So, acres of round windows (7)
22. Roman lamb (5)
24. Pertaining to a node (5)
25. Fruit to slice thinly, we hear (4)



And finally . . .

Why do seagulls fly over the sea?
Because if they flew over the bay they'd be bagels.
With thanks to Thomas Morris, aged 8.

Undergrowth is published four times a year. Articles for inclusion in future issues should be sent to the editor, Sam Hackett, at : sam.hackett@btinternet.com tel: 01748 850966 or Tony Crease at tonycrease@aol.com tel: 01677 427 925.

Any opinions included are those of the individual writers and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foxglove Covert Management Group or the policy of the Ministry of Defence.