FRIENDS OF ASTON'S EYOT

Winter/Spring 2024 Newsletter

This winter seems to have been relentless with endless rain, swollen rivers, burst banks and waterlogged paths. But is that just a little hint of Spring on the horizon? The birds are getting more active and vocal, tentative blossoms are appearing, and I swear I even felt a touch of warm sun peeping through.

The volunteers have been very busy over the winter and any visitors to the nature reserve can't fail to have seen the pond project! Ruth brings us up to date with progress and Susie tells us what all those Christmas trees were about!

Also in the background, one of our committee team, Ash, has been quietly and doggedly working on upgrading the website. If you haven't visited it for a while then perhaps it's worth a look! https://friendsofastonseyot.org/

We hope you enjoy this bi-annual newsletter and if there's anything you'd like to see or hear about in the next one, then please let us know!

Charlie Ellis

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Compiled and edited by Charlotte Ellis with contributions from Anthony Cheke, Ruth Ashcroft, Susie Jakobsson

POND UPDATE—MARCH 2024

A very wet winter has at least had the advantage of filling the new ponds quickly! They are now all overflowing, and already water boatmen and water beetles have been seen on warmer days.

Some adjustment of levels proved necessary – having started with very uneven ground (a legacy of past bottle digging here), the filled-in hollows compacted down further, and needed back-filling. The surrounds have had nearly all the nettle roots dug out, and now these areas and the pond edges are being sown with a variety of water edge, hedgerow and meadow flowers and grasses. Many thanks to all who helped with this!

Ruth Ashcroft

Please help us ensure dogs are kept out of the pond areas to help protect emerging wildlife there !

SCYTHING ISN'T JUST FOR THE GRIM REAPER...

If you've ever joined an Aston's Eyot work party you may have had a scythe thrust into your hand and been pointed to the nearest patch of nettles.

This ancient farming technique is considered ideal for nature reserves as it allows for greater control and can be selective in its application rather than the heavy-handedness of a mower.

But you wouldn't be alone in not having much experience of how to get the best results. So we're very excited that in the summer we'll be bringing in an expert scyther to show us the ropes, the best techniques and how to care for these tools.

We will be hosting this **all-day scything course on 21st July 2024**. There are limited places so if you're interested in learning this age-old practice and then putting it into practice in the nature reserve then please let us know. info@friendsofastonseyot.org

Charlie Ellis

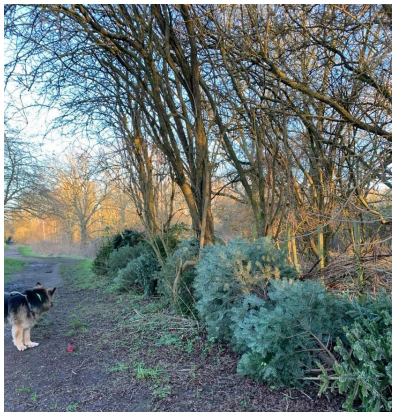
BADGERS AND MUNTJACS—ANNUAL SURVEY

On 3 February a team did our annual badger-hole count on Aston's Eyot and the Kidneys, finding 56 active holes, and a further 23 inactive but relatively recent. As usual there are three main sets on Aston's Eyot, with a fourth active one on the edge of Meadow Lane rec, burrowing under the scrapyard. These account for 37 of the active holes; the others are mostly single-hole outliers scattered all over. Unusually we found no bedding material; we normally find bundles of dry grass etc. around hole entrances, indicating active 'nesting', i.e. a female with cubs. The absence could indicate a poor (or very late) cubbing season, or possibly a cohort of more efficient badgers that haven't dropped any bedding. The number of holes does not give much indication of total badger numbers, which we reckon to be around 20 - i.e. about double the number actually caught by the local badger group doing vaccinations in the summer.

As we have people spread all over the area to avoid double counting, we also score all the muntjacs we see - 12 on the day. Muntjacs are territorial like birds, and looking at the pattern, and also other recent sightings, we reckon there are 8, possibly 9, territories on the Eyot, an unusually high density. There are fewer roe deer, which also range more widely, swimming over into Christ Church meadow and also using Long Meadow, the field between the Cherwell and the sports ground.

Anthony Cheke

A PRACTICAL USE FOR YOUR OLD CHRISTMAS TREE



You may have noticed that Christmas arrived on the Eyot – in January.

As you know, we ask visitors to keep to the main paths which allows the wildlife to have safe areas away from people and dogs. During the winter, these safe areas are much more open and accessible, with the deer and badger tracks being visible. The deer find it harder to hide as they search for food, and we are aware that visitors sometimes use these tracks and end up in the safe – conservation – areas.

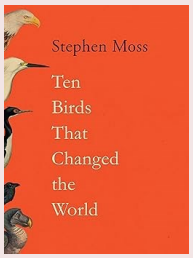
To help reduce this footfall, we used Christmas trees to create dead hedging; making an obvious organic 'fence' which blocks off paths, but still allowing the wildlife to have access. As the trees shed their needles they will leave a great skeleton for brambles and other greenery to grow up through, thus creating more substantial fencing in coming years. In the next few weeks they will be staked to provide a little more support than they currently have.

These were Christmas trees which were left at the drop off point at Jackdaw Lane, and it was quite an effort to drag them all down onto the Eyot – many thanks to everyone we persuaded to help us! We'll see how this fencing works throughout 2024, and may add to it next year. In the meantime, enjoy the scent as you walk past!

Susie Jakobsson

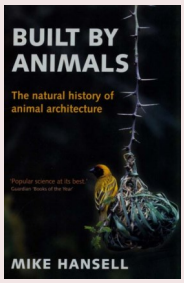
Spring Reading List

Please try and support local bookshops or libraries when seeking these out!



Ten birds that changed the world, Stephen Moss

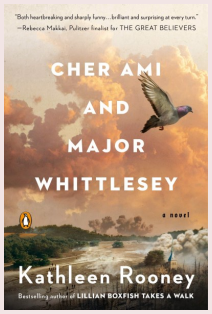
The gripping story of the long and eventful relationship between birds and humanity told through ten birds.



Built by Animals—the natural history of animal architecture, Mike Hansell

A range of fascinating examples of animal builders and what that tells us about evolution, animal intelligence and whether we are indeed alone in the animal kingdom in possessing a sense of beauty

Cher Ami and Major Whittelsey, A novel, Kathleen Rooney



An unexpectedly well-realised piece of historical fiction set in the 1st World War exploring the events and their consequences for a soldier and a messenger pigeon. It will change the way you see these humble birds!

Charlie Ellis

DATES FOR THE DIARY

•March Work Party

Sunday 24th March *2-4pm*

We've adjusted the date for this one to avoid a clash with Easter so a week earlier than normal. 2-4pm Meet at Jackdaw Lane bridge. The work party will be followed by cake and tea!

As with all our work parties, older children are welcome but must be accompanied by a responsible adult.

• Scything Course

Sunday 21st July

Space is limited so please reach out if you are interested in attending this all-day course.

SPRING CLEANING SERVICE

Each winter we do a check of the many bird nest boxes around the nature reserve . This involves getting up a ladder and opening up the boxes to be greeted with... sometimes a beautiful cosy nest, sometimes a party of woodlice, sometimes a stinky smelly mess of slugs and unidentified matter. We make a record of what we find and then the next part is sticking your hand in to pull it all out... These are mostly used by Blue Tits and Great Tits for both nesting in the spring and roosting in the winter.
We clean them out, repair any damages, check to see if there are signs of how successful the clutch has been and leave them all tidy ahead of the spring

Charlie Ellis

OXCLEAN LITTER PICK

Thanks to everyone who came and helped with the OXCLEAN litter pick—part of a city-wide initiative. Much less was collected than in previous years due to those who do daily picks on their regular walks, but still a very worthwhile effort!

THANK YOU FOR BEING A FRIEND OF ASTON'S EYOT

Access to Aston's Eyot is free. But, maintaining it and restoring habitats needs funds, all of which we must raise ourselves.

The Friends of Aston's Eyot is the charity which looks after the eyot. We are a passionate and committed group of local residents. Your membership allows us to continue our work in the nature reserve and make it the unique oasis of wildlife that we all enjoy.

If you haven't renewed for this year or if you are yet to provide details for us to be able to claim Giftaid on your membership, then please do reach out!

Also make sure to look out for email updates coming from Susie Jakobsson and be sure she's on your 'safe' email list!

Charlotte Ellis

FOAE MERCHANDISE RESEARCH

We are always looking for new ways to build the Aston's Eyot community and gain valuable funding and support from those who enjoy using the nature reserve. We're conducting research to see if there is any interest in producing Aston's Eyot branded merchandise that would be available for purchase from our website.
We're interested to know what you think!
We think these would make wonderful gifts as well as showing off your support for the nature reserve!
Please TAKE OUR SURVEY !!!

FANCY BECOMING A WILDFLOWER CHAMP?

If you enjoy walking on the Eyot looking at the wildflowers and the creatures which benefit from them, and would like to help increase the diversity, then you could become a Wildflower Champion.

You'll have your own patch to take pride in, and you can spend as much or as little time on it as suits you. If you have lots of time and energy, you can dig out nettle roots. Or if you only have 10 minutes a week to spare, you can hand pull nettles (it's much more satisfying than it sounds!) You'd be surprised how soon your efforts show even with just 10 mins once a week; you might uncover ground ivy, forget-me-nots, yellow rattle or buttercups - all of which are really useful for insects.

We still need nettles to provide cover for the deer and other mammals which call the Eyot their home, as well as the vanessid group of butterflies - red admiral, peacock, small tortoiseshell, and comma. And a host of moth species who find nettle leave nutritious so we'll never clear them all. But having some nettle free patches helps increase the diversity of the eco-system.

If you're interested, then please do let us know and we can find you a nice little patch to call your own. Or if you have an interest in wildflowers and would like to help us identify and monitor the range we have, we'd love to hear from you!

Susie Jakobsson

Help us protect and maintain the wildness and diversity of Aston's Eyot— please don't pick flowers!

FRIENDS OF ASTON'S EYOT

We love to hear from Friends of Aston's Eyot—please reach out to us and send us your photos, sightings and musings to info@friendsofastonseyot.org or find us on Facebook.com/friendsofastonseyot