



Park Life No 29 Autumn 2024

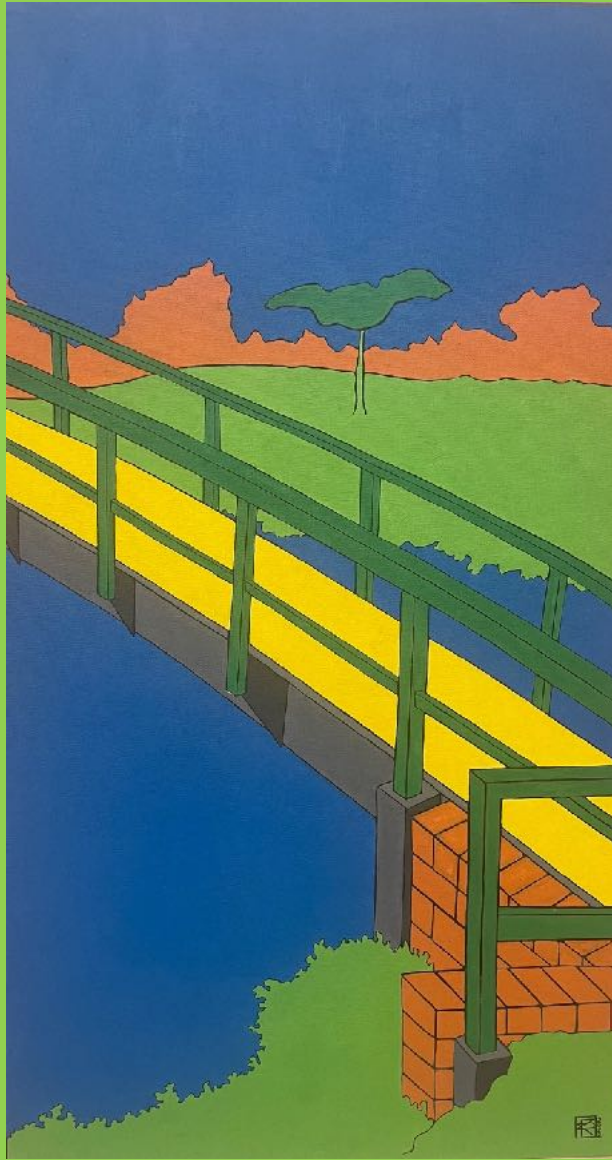
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Introduction

Welcome to the Autumn 2024 and 29th edition of Park Life. After a very mixed Summer in terms of weather, but a varied one as far as events are concerned – a recent one being Oktoberfest early in the month – our park is now settling down for the Winter. But this doesn't of course mean that FoCP will reduce our level of activities. Indeed, in our "Around the Park" section you'll read about plans for even more working parties. You'll also read that such has been FoCP's success we've decided to become an official charity, and invite you to consider (and hopefully approve) our new constitution over a glass of wine on 13th Nov. Unfortunately, we don't have nature notes from Elizabeth Gower in this edition, although she plans to resume contributing in the future. However as usual Peter Fewell brings us up to date with butterfly life in the park, and the attempts to make it an even more useful habitat. Peter Jenkins offers another episode in the saga of the Wetlands restoration – recently set back by being too wet! However in this edition we also describe how the visitor experience of the nature reserve will be enhanced by the new information boards recently put in position, and how cyclists will find our park an even more welcoming place by its inclusion in Watford's new "Green Loop" cycle route. As usual the beautiful photos of Anna Brooks and Raffi Katz illustrate what Cassiobury has to offer. And a special thanks to local artist Fran Kershaw for permission to re-produce her images of the Meadow Bridge (below) and, later in the magazine, the Bandstand.

Alec Thomas (ed), October 2024



Around the park and volunteering

Our dedicated conservation and litter pickers have been making a real difference in the park, even braving the recent rain and floods.



Over the past few months, we've been focusing on the restoration of meadow habitats. A major element of this work was the raking up of grass that had been cut by machine, and which we then used to create straw piles which provide good hibernation opportunities for the coming winter.

We're thrilled to see new faces joining our conservation group, but we still need more volunteers, especially to help manage our wetlands. If you're interested, please get in touch!

Anna Daniels, the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust officer whose "beat" covered our park has been promoted to another role within HMWT, so congratulations to Anna and welcome to her replacement, Sam Henderson, whom we look forward to working with.

Due to persistent wet conditions, accessing the new wetlands area remains difficult.

However now that it's been created, it's crucial we maintain this vital habitat. We're currently working with our new team leader, Stewart Weir; Stewart is an FoCP member who has volunteered for the role of leading wetland working parties; receiving training in H&S etc. In collaboration with WBC and Community Connections, we're developing a plan to make the site safe for volunteers, so Stewart can begin our conservation activity. For more information on the Wetlands see Peter Jenkins' article below). Elsewhere in the park volunteers cleared ground for placing the meadow-friendly Yellow Rattle plant (see Peter Fewell's Nectar Pot article below).



Preparing the ground for planting Yellow Rattle



Hanging the Feeders

In early November we'll hang the bird-feeders near the bird-hide; with volunteers topping up the feeders every 48 hrs until the Spring, at a cost of approximately £260. While providing support for birds during the lean winter months, observing life around the feeders is also a popular activity with park visitors. In recent years, we've been fortunate to have generous members who have sponsored this valuable work directly by paying for the feed. If you'd like to make a specific donation to help

support our bird-feeding please let us know (secretary@friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk).



As you know Whippendell Woods lost many trees due to Ash Dieback disease. Watford Council aim to replace these with over 3000 saplings in the areas shown on the map. This will be a significant task which may create some volunteering opportunities; stay tuned for more information as the details firm up.



Presently FoCP runs working parties and litter-picking on the 3rd Saturday of every month. HMWT also run regular weekday work parties in the park and Whippendell. To find out more about these and other FoCP volunteer opportunities (including committee work) please contact Robert Barnes, the FOCP Secretary, by emailing him at secretary@friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk.



Over the last three months Community Connection Projects (CCP), which carries out ecological work around the park, have been working in the new wetlands, removing blanket weed from the ponds, and then adding barley straw to the water; this straw discharges chemicals to reduce the algal growth. CCP also continued to remove thistle and nettles around the old watercress bed edges, and created a gap in the reed bed to open a view into the wetlands from the path across the river. Elsewhere in the reserve, upstream of the Water Crowfoot bridge

(see <https://friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk/the-park/the-bridges/> for information on park bridges) Crack Willow was coppiced to allow more light to reach marginal river plants; and in the northern reserve the boardwalk netting was repaired and the wood coated with linseed oil, a natural preservative.

In the wider park CCP removed areas of Ragwort prior to hay-cutting; blocked areas prone to antisocial behaviour with brash and holly; and worked on the Peace Garden pond and Dove outline.



Orange balsam is a non-native invasive species originally from the USA. Similar to Himalayan Balsam it spreads rapidly and can out-compete native river plants. Over the last few years it has increasingly been found along the park's river corridor. From June to September it can be identified by its orange flowers, and this year CCP cleared over 5000 plants by the Meadow bridge, and other areas of the park. If you see it in the park, please report it to the Park Manager at the Hub.

Finally we'd like to draw your attention to the new information boards that have been recently installed around our nature reserve – these tell visitors what they may see in their immediate vicinity, and give QR links to further information.

Robert Barnes, Alec Thomas, Alex Popple. October 2024



Wetlands Project Update

Starting in 2017, thought was given to the possibility of re-developing the neglected and silted-up watercress beds as an attractive wildlife area, as they were for a few years after the commercial use of the beds ceased. Championed by FoCP, Heritage Lottery funding got the project started, until Watford Council provided full support as part of its green strategy. However, for various reasons that it would take many pages to describe, it took until the autumn of 2023 for the beds to be cleared. Now, thanks largely to the weather, we have an excess of water in the wetlands - cutting off access to the cleared watercress beds and flooding the path across the meadow. The flooding is partially attributed to the groundwater levels being very high, given the exceptional amount of rain we've had this year. However, the increased flow of water from river into the channel under the new Scrape Bridge,

opposite the railway (see FoCP website for information on Park bridges - <https://friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk/the-park/the-bridges/>) has also contributed to the excessive water level, and although some wooden barriers have been placed under the bridge a proper sluice may be needed for full control of the flow out of the river. One of the most frustrating consequences of the flooding is the subsequent lack of access to the raised viewing area, created with material excavated from the beds, on the south of the wetlands area. The plan was that a path would leave the main canal-side footpath from just south of the bird hide, and then cross the meadow to the viewing platform. However, currently this route requires waders, and unless something dramatic happens to water levels a boardwalk up to the viewing platform will be required. The platform will also require a screen to avoid visitors disturbing the wildlife. The Friends have had such a screen designed, and working with WBC, aim to have it built, along with an access boardwalk, once the water levels reduce. In the meantime visitors can get a good view of the new wetlands area from the path on the other side of the river, and see the birds it has already attracted; including Grey Wagtail, Heron, Mandarin Duck, Little Egret and Egyptian Goose.



Old watercress beds redeveloped as wetlands pools.

Peter Jenkins Oct 2024

The Nectar Pot

Despite it being the worst Big Butterfly Count year on record there have been a few encouraging observations. One is of Brown Hairstreak which hadn't been recorded in Hertfordshire on the wing this century until the 28th July! Rick Vickers was officially the first to spot it at Merry Hill, Bushey with me a close second. More on Brown Hairstreaks can be found at www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk on the news page

and newsletter section. Back in Cassiobury one Small Copper was seen on the 11th August, the only one seen by us in the Park this year, although this species bounced back at other sites, such as Croxley Moor where Rick and I recorded 48 on 21st September. Small Copper persisted into October at their hotspots in Hertfordshire and more info can be found on the “Herts and Middx Butterfly Conservation” website. The Gatekeeper butterfly had a relatively good year in Cassiobury as well as at Merry Hill. Rick is currently working on a follow-up to last year’s “Butterflies of Cassiobury Park and Whippendell Woods” report. This will include sightings from Cassiobury Park and Whippendell Woods and also the surrounding area, including Merry Hill and Croxley Moor.



Willow Emerald Damselfly

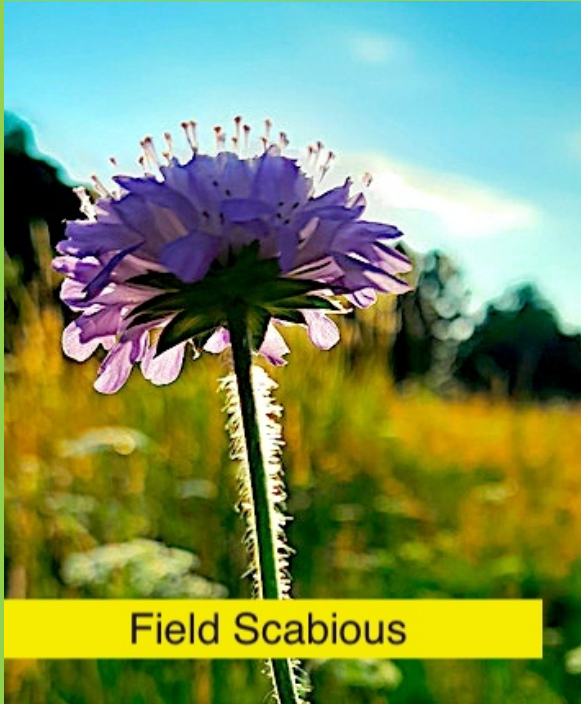
Another new species has arrived in Watford! The Willow Emerald Damselfly. Previously regarded as a rare UK migrant, it started to colonise Suffolk and East Anglia in 2009, subsequently spreading as far as north Yorkshire and the Welsh border, so it’s no surprise they’ve made it to Watford. Similar in appearance to the Emerald Damselfly but with pale wing spots and no blue markings. The photo (of a female) which was taken by Rick along the River Colne near Riverside Road on the 1st September. Another likely spotting was made in our own Nature Reserve on 9th October. So look out for this species – they lay their eggs in branches of Willow and other trees that overhang slow moving

water. Common Darter and Southern Hawker dragonflies can, like the Willow Emerald damselfly, persist into November with a male Common Darter and a female Southern Hawker recently spotted near the bandstand. More info on dragonflies can be found at <https://british-dragonflies.org.uk> .



Female Southern Hawker Dragonfly

As regular readers will know, over the last few years attempts have been made in our park to encourage wildflower species that benefit butterflies and bees. Recent observations have shown that five Field Scabious plug plants are surviving – more than we were expecting, so we’ll now plant more to hopefully provide a good nectar source. The Birds-Foot Trefoil that survived flowered all season and fingers crossed will reappear next spring, feeding bees and butterflies such as the Small and Essex Skipper, and the Common Blue caterpillars need this plant to survive. A recent venture – on 10th



Field Scabious

October – was the planting of Yellow Rattle seed. Yellow Rattle is what is known as an hemiparasite – by such plants weakening dominant grassland plants the vegetation becomes less dense, and more light reaches the ground. This open structure is characteristic of meadows and supports a wide variety of light-loving plant species, which can then thrive in the newly available spaces. Over time, this process helps sustain a butterfly-friendly open meadow landscape. However getting access to bare earth to plant the Rattle was harder than expected in turf that has probably been untouched for many decades, but we did manage to sow the seed; this needed to be done in Autumn before the first frosts. It is the cool winter temperatures that stimulate the seeds to emerge in spring, flowering from June

onwards. We shall monitor the Rattle's progress and to give an update next summer. Also in mid-October a few more Birds-Foot Trefoils went in, along with a couple of Wild Marjoram, although we don't yet know if the latter will successfully flourish in this area, but if it does take hold the flowers will certainly benefit a wide range of pollinating insects.

Peter Fewell. Oct 2024

Forthcoming Events

Green Loop: Our park will soon contain a lengthy section of the Green Loop Cycle Route, a project by Watford Borough Council that has been working with Spokes, Watford Cycle Hub and the Friends of Cassiobury Park. It will see a new signed and marked cycle route (see map) pass through Cassiobury park, visit the town hall, Waterfields Recreation Ground, Oxhey Activity Park, Riverside Recreation Ground, King George V Playing Fields and the Ebury Way. The signage will be installed and the route launched in November. Road layout improvements will be made with Hertfordshire County Council once funding and approvals are in place. The Green Loop will be formally launched on 18 November 2024, but Guided Rides will take place on Sunday 17th. If you wish to join one of these rides please join the “Spokes” cycling group at 10.15 am at the Town Hall, or the Watford Cycle Hub team at the Watford Cycle Hub.



Social evening and changes to FoCP constitution:

With the increase in size and revenues of FoCP, we are required by the Charity Commission to change our constitution. This will help us secure funding and support for our work, but this process requires the consent of members, and we are therefore holding a special meeting to consider and hopefully approve the changes. This will take place on Wednesday 13th Nov at 7.30pm at St Luke’s Church, Langley Way. As well as considering the new constitution, participants will get an update on recent FoCP activities and be offered wine, beer, soft drinks, and nibbles (crisps, peanuts etc). This will be an excellent opportunity to help FoCP by approving the new constitution; ask questions about FoCP and Park activities; and enjoy a chat over a drink. If you intend to come please let our secretary know, so that we can better plan our hospitality: secretary@friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk.



Photo Gallery: life around the park

Photographs by Raffi Katz: author of “Cassiobury Walks”







If you have enjoyed Park Life, then continue to follow the Friends of the Park on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and on our website:

www.facebook.com/FriendsOfCassioburyPark

www.instagram.com/friendsofcassioburypark

www.twitter.com/cassioburyFOCP

www.friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk

Information about Park events at:
www.watford.gov.uk/cassiobury

www.watfordbigevents.co.uk

Enjoy the Park!

FRIENDS OF CASSIOBURY PARK: Park Life No 29, Autumn 2024
