



Park Life No 32 Summer 2025 Contents

Introduction: P1
Around the Park: P2
Watford Miniature Railway: P4
Definitely not Cassiobury!: P6
Butterflies abound as birdsong declines: P9
The Nectar Pot: P10
Gallery: P12

Introduction

Welcome to the Summer 2025 and 32nd edition of Park Life. Our park is particularly inviting in summer, offering space for picnics, play, and peaceful nature walks, and as usual our magazine celebrates the wildlife, plants, and people that make the park such a treasured part of Watford's community. Rudi Newman presents the fascinating story of our railway; starting as an idea in a WW2 factory, through the commitment of enthusiasts it has now delighted generations of families for over 65 years. Libby Gower and Peter Fewell describe what nature has been offering us, in one way or another, for even longer. While in dramatic contrast Annemarie van Doorn gives us a fascinating glimpse of a "sister" nature reserve in Australia where some of the challenges are at first glance similar to ours – invasive species, seasonal flooding, dealing with visitors – but take a rather more dramatic form. In "Around the Park" we catch up with current work and life in the park, and the beautiful photos of Raffi Katz and Anna Brooks illustrate what Cassiobury has to offer.

Enjoy the park!
Alec Thomas (ed), July 2025

AROUND THE PARK

Volunteering

This June the Friends helped celebrate Great Big Green Week by participating in the Watford High Street festival. Our membership and awareness stall had a good range of games and activities – all designed to generate chats about FoCP’s work in the park. A huge thank you to everyone who supported us on the day, or generously donated tombola prizes, including some donated by ASDA.



At the end of last year, we were delighted to receive a £1,000 donation from Veolia to equip our conservation teams, particularly our new wetlands group, with essential tools. Our latest addition is a battery powered brush cutter (see photo). With so much overgrowth to manage, this powerful tool will help us tackle larger harder-to-reach areas, reducing reliance on manual labour. Its use will be a big step forward in maintaining the wetlands reserve.

After partial suspension during the bird-nesting season FoCP and Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) volunteers have been hard at work in the nature reserve, with particular efforts being made to clear meadow areas. One of the latter areas is in front of the bird-hide – the photo offers a glimpse of this recently cut area through a viewing window, above which you can see our new, very useful bird ID chart.



To find out more about FoCP volunteer opportunities (including committee work) please contact Robert Barnes, the FOCP Secretary, by emailing him at secretary@friendsofcassioburypark.org.uk. For HMWT activities see their website.



Over recent years a great deal of effort has gone into restoring the old watercress beds as a wetlands nature reserve. To celebrate the success of the project the site was recently visited by Elected Mayor of Watford Peter Taylor, and representatives of parties involved in the restoration, including FoCP and Grondon Waste Management which funded part of the project, including the creation of very attractive and useful interpretation boards (see photo).

The FoCP AGM was held on 14th May, when members received updates on the past 12 month's activities; elected a new committee; and heard about plans for the future of the park and nature reserve; followed by an opportunity to socialise over a glass of wine. We also marked the end of our Chairman, Peter Jenkins', term of office, and thanked him for his



valuable contribution over the last seven years. As an indication of our thanks Peter received a set of bowls turned using Cassiobury wood by Tim Pettigrew – our resident wood-turner. The photograph shows the “three chairs” - Peter on the left, his predecessor John Cox in the middle and our new chair Steve Jakeman on the right.

During the last three months Community Connection Projects (CCP), who carry out river conservation and maintenance around the park, have installed an interpretation board in the



bird hide; regularly removed invasive Himalayan Balsam and Orange Balsam from the nature reserve; continued river-bank repairs upstream of the Crowfoot bridge, using brush bundles; translocated sedges; and removed a tree blocking the bird-hide path. We also continued riverfly monitoring at two sites on the Gade. In the wetlands we removed algae using nets; placed straw bales in the water to reduce algae growth; and extended a dead hedge to create a barrier at the southern end. We also continued removing Signal Crayfish.

Beyond the nature reserve we removed ragwort and oak saplings from around the Cedar of Lebanon; blocked areas with brush to discourage antisocial behaviour at the back of Parkside drive; and installed two new wooden benches on the Lime Walk.

An example of the many groups that enjoy our park is “Mums of Steel” – an exercise group that gets mums and babies to enjoy the benefits of exercise together.

Alec Thomas, Robert Barnes, Alex Popple. April 2025



A Park Icon: the Watford Miniature Railway

Of all Cassiobury Park's amenities a key part of childhood in Watford is the miniature railway. Enjoyed by generations, what is particularly delightful is how after sixty-five years it continues to perform its original task – having passengers leave a little bit happier than when they arrived.

During World War Two Charlie Reed and George Webb met at Scammells lorry factory in Watford. The idea of a miniature railway was discussed, but little



happened until c.1949 when Charlie was given some locomotive wheel castings to settle a debt. A small portable line was subsequently built which toured events for several years and proved very popular. Looking to establish a permanent site, Blackpool Pleasure Beach and Rickmansworth Aquadrome were briefly used around 1952-3, together with a line at

Clissold Park in Stoke Newington (c.1956-62), but Charlie also continued to look locally, and in October 1958 he approached the 'Parks & Recreation Grounds Committee' of Watford Borough Council, proposing a 350-yard line near Cassiobury Park's paddling pool. Several locations were suggested, but they finally agreed on "the triangular piece of land bordered by the River Gade". A three-year license was granted on 6th Apr 1959 and, opening shortly thereafter, the Watford Miniature Railway was born.

The first route was a simple out-and-back track c.150 yards long forming two sides of a triangle. At one end was a ticket hut while for decoration a false 'bridge' and semaphore signal were installed.

Proving very successful, the 1960 season saw over 15,000 tickets sold. Council-led expansion was envisioned (including a model nursery-story village), but this didn't happen, and vandalism and flooding made Charlie reticent about expansion. Even today the line occasionally floods, with dramatic effect. The line nonetheless developed, forming a semi-oval circuit a third of a mile long by 1963, with a dedicated station on a spur track separate from the main circuit.



When Charlie retired in 1968 George Webb took over operations. However challenges arose: the high water-table rotted the track's wooden sleepers, while in 1971 the Water Board undertook a major drainage operation, with track by the river having to be temporarily removed, and the line having to run a reduced service, with rails being damaged when the Board's digger ran over them! Volunteers were vital in helping keep the line running, particularly Jeff Price. Joining the WMR in 1969, he



became a senior driver and when George retired (having resisted offers to sell the railway for demolition) in May 1979 Jeff became the line's third owner .

By the 1970s the Council's stance on Park maintenance had changed. Gone was creating a manicured vista akin to a stately house garden, with instead a greater emphasis on encouraging wildlife. The railway originally crossed a patch of regularly-mown grass, but as the area was left to nature trees grew to maturity in the centre of the circuit;

although visitors probably assume, incorrectly, that the trees are older than the track..

Long-term developments began - replacing wooden sleepers with steel, widening curves, and erecting a third shed. The locomotive fleet also expanded, from a single diesel in George's time to four steam engines and numerous diesels by the mid-1990s. Interestingly, *Chiltern Shuttle* (built 1946) once belonged to the owner of the *Flying Scotsman*, while *Marri* (built 1993) was built specifically for the WMR and has never run anywhere else.

A new portable line was also built (once even visiting the Glastonbury Music Festival!), while the Cassiobury one carried c.45,000 passengers annually, and continued developing. In 1985 the paddling pool was replaced and its former site became a new station, linked via a level crossing to a longer loop route made by modifying the previous circuit. Although completed in 1991 there were issues about the layout, notably an error in the planning application site drawing which had placed part of the new station outside of the leased ground. This led to having a temporary terminus from 1987, meaning for a short while the station had two turntables! Further modifications meant that by 1994 the line was at its longest at 1,110 yards.

Over the 1990s special services were run to support local charities such as on bonfire night, and Santa Specials at Christmas, while growing passenger numbers (alongside increasing park footfall) led to more engines – notably current stalwarts *Conway Castle* (built 1972), and *Nikki Louise* (built 1988).

Jeff, WMR's longest-serving operator, retired in 2017, with WMR's future taken into the hands of long-time visitor Charles O'Mahoney, Director of *Southern Miniature Railways Ltd*, whose first service commenced on 1st July. Since then there have been further changes including the reintroduction of steam in 2018, and the WMR still keeps running today – once even when snow stopped main line trains! The line's 60th anniversary was celebrated with great spectacle, and plans are being developed to secure the long-term future of the railway and reflect its historical significance.

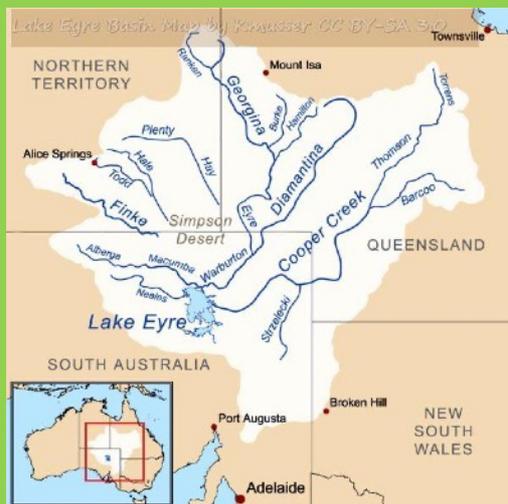
The history of the WMR is much longer than some might expect, with a legacy of happy days in the Park and the joys of a trip on its little trains. The Watford Miniature Railway will no doubt develop in the future and continue to bring joy to those that ride its rails. Long may it continue.

If you have found this interesting, a detailed history of the line, locomotives and people can be found in the book “Steaming to Sixty: Watford Miniature Railway” (available online or at the WMR), and do come for a ride!

Dr Rudi Newman, July 2025

Definitely not Cassiobury!

Kalamurina Wildlife Sanctuary is the largest of the Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC) sanctuaries, located in the arid zone (annual rainfall approx 150 mm/6ins) of north-eastern South Australia and is



approximately 667,000 ha (6,670 km² / 2,600m²) - around the size of Devon.

Kalamurina was established in 2007 and protects a unique desert wilderness. Together with Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre National Park and the Munga-Thirri-Simpson Desert Reserves, it comprises a protected area larger than Tasmania. Kalamurina habitats include extensive dune-fields, ephemeral lakes, clay pans (subsoil with high clay content relatively impermeable to water), floodplains, and gibber plains (the latter are covered with closely packed, interlocking rock fragments, often described as gibbers). The Warburton River which passes through the sanctuary only flows

every 3-5 years, but when it does the landscape completely transforms. It really is a boom or bust environment, where a dry barren landscape can quickly become one filled with wildflowers, water and birdlife.

Despite its size, Kalamurina has only two staff to manage the property, but due to both our remote location and extreme climate has average visitor numbers of less than 200 (including campers, tour groups, volunteers, contractors, and visiting AWC Staff). The 13-hr drive from the nearest large city (Adelaide), very hot summers (consecutive days over 45C are common) and unsealed roads that become impassable after only 10mm (0.4in) of rain make Kalamurina a challenging place to visit!

Luke and I both have conservation backgrounds, working in the field for around 30 years, and managing Kalamurina for four years. Luke has spent most of his career as a ranger for both government and Aboriginal organisations; I have worked as an ecologist for both private, and like Luke for government and Aboriginal organisations. Kalamurina protects the habitats of rare and threatened desert specialist species such as the desert Dusky Hopping Mouse, and the marsupial Crest-tailed Mulgaras

and Kultarrs. Many of the small mammals found at Kalamurina have experienced severe declines in their range and population since European colonisation. When the river floods or there is plentiful rainfall, the sanctuary also supports many migratory and breeding bird species. Monitoring the ecological health at Kalamurina is carried out through dedicated fauna surveys. These consist of annual bird and track surveys as well as, every 3-5 years, intensive trapping surveys for small mammals and reptiles (weather dependent). In addition to the surveys conducted by AWC, we also support science projects by external researchers. The metrics for the surveys are reported in the Sanctuary Ecohealth Report which in turn guides our land management practices (<https://www.australianwildlife.org/reports/ecohealth-report/kalamurina-2023-ecohealth-report-and-scorecard>)



Due to the lack of vegetation we have almost no weeds and little fire risk, so our land management work focuses on feral animal control. The target species are camels, pigs, rabbits, cats and foxes. Our control methods include aerial culls of camels and pigs, undertaken by Luke shooting from a helicopter; trapping (pigs, cats); opportunistic ground-shooting (all species),

targeted poisoning (pigs), and biological control (rabbits). Branded cattle are removed - a joint effort with neighbouring cattle stations.

Our visitor season runs during the winter months of May to September. We have only a small campground, and visits are by prior arrangement only, so we don't have issues associated with littering or other misbehaviour. Most of the behaviour problems out here come from camels that like to damage our fences and allow neighbouring cattle in! One of our priorities is managing the safety of those visitors who do come, as emergency medical and lost persons situations have both occurred. We maintain our own airstrip and hold large stocks of medical supplies and safety equipment. In an emergency we have access to the Royal Flying Doctor Service, which also provides general medical advice, offering an exceptional service. The professional and personal challenges we face are associated with the extreme remoteness and the resulting access issues. This year a major flood has left us cut off for four months (and counting!). On previous occasions our son has had to go to school in Adelaide by helicopter or plane - not a cheap exercise! Our closest shopping centre is a 9-hour drive, but if the road is open every 2-4 weeks a truck brings supplies to within an hour's drive. So it's important to always

have supplies to last approximately three months, and when we do go to town we have a very long shopping list!

We are often asked what a regular day looks like - the answer is no day is the same and our work program includes a diverse array of jobs such as fencing repairs, feral animal control, infrastructure maintenance, guiding tours, plumbing, planting native species and gathering data for report purposes. We can say there is no time to be bored! Perhaps you can come visit us one day?

Dr Annmarie van Doorn, July 2025



Butterflies Abound as Birdsong Declines.

Mid-July and the weather scarcely relents, having at time of writing delivered three official heat-waves. Rain occurs just about often enough to keep things going, but grass is parched and in seed. Ponds are drying up and I wonder what wildlife finds to drink. Water in the bird bath quickly evaporates. The mature trees still appear



healthy as roots run deep, but the seasons are accelerating as flowers give way to seeds and fruit ahead of time. Today I noticed mature oaks with a multitude of small round acorns in their cups but not growing acorn shaped. Rowan trees have wonderful strongly coloured clusters of berries, but hawthorn shrubs fared less well in April in terms of pollination, and birds will miss their red berries when Autumn comes around. My own garden has produced fruit in unexpected places - an old neglected blackcurrant bush with two branches loaded with currants - and raspberry canes sown by birds close to my compost bins produced a steady supply of berries. As I write in mid-July two bowlfuls of blackberries ripened suddenly (almost the size of cultivated ones). Look out for these in the park on the arching brambles, which stopped flowering long ago, perhaps depriving butterflies of nectar, although Commas can feed on overripe blackberries.

With the help of watering, many of you will have raised flowering plants. Lavender, which can thrive in drier soil, was exceptional this June, with nectar and pollen attracting Small Whites, Buff tailed bees, Honey bees and Hover flies. Flowering *Buddleja davidii* shrubs, which hang over garden fences into the park, have good strong cones of purple or small white flowers which readily attract butterflies. Small and Large whites flutter around them at present and are really abundant, but are not popular with Brassica growers when the caterpillars start munching through their crops! This upturn in butterfly numbers reverses the situation last Summer when poor weather caused many species to crash. If in doubt about how to tell the two

Whites apart wait until they flock and then the size comparison is easier! In June I watched a pair of small Wall butterflies (orange wings with a brown border) locked in a spiral 'dance' which literally continued for three days! This was perplexing to watch as their energy must have been seriously depleted. Some research suggests that butterfly mating rituals involve the male flying around above and close to the female (which will look identical) in order to release pheromone scent to attract her for copulation.



Young Kingfisher

Now to the birdsong - currently I'm hearing Song Thrush night and morning, Wood Pigeon in the

evenings, the 'caw' of Crows, and 'chak' of Jackdaws. From deep in the hawthorn hedge around the Peace Garden I heard the 'wheet' 'wheet' of Chiff Chaffs, which change their call later in the season, perhaps in advance of return migration. The 'yaffle' of Green Woodpecker might be a female and juvenile staying in touch.

Little Robin or Blackbird song now but the occasional Wren still bursts forth.

Compare this to Mid-June when fledging had happened but birds were still territorial and there was more birdsong to enjoy. I took a shady walk down the wooded path behind Gade Avenue to the river to find a change of atmosphere - scents of fungus and decaying leaves, in fact a very different habitat to the park's grassland. Birds were certainly around but in a discreet fashion - with summer moulting and feather re-growth proceeding after the hard work of feeding young. I came to a damp area beneath a large tree with a divided trunk and noticed a



Emperor Dragonfly

huge patch of Equisetum (Horsetails). This primitive plant likes waste ground and wetter conditions. It does not have true leaves but chlorophyll filled stems, divided into segments which children enjoy pulling apart rather like Lego. On reaching Crowfoot Bridge we have a different habitat again of tall marginal growth along the River Gade, and a new seat to sit and quietly observe. the flow of the water, cool and relaxing; the' Cruk 'sound of a Moorhen; a small flock of Long -tailed Tits passing through the Crack Willow; a burst of Wren song behind and Seagulls overhead; Blue and Black Banded Demoiselle damsel flies hatching into the sunshine from water dwelling nymphs. Wonders to enjoy by a river, maybe even a Kingfisher!

Elizabeth Gower 16th July 2025



Rowan Berries

The Nectar Pot

The weather for summer 2025 is in complete contrast to 2024. This year it has been all change, with many butterfly species along with bees and other pollinating insects doing much better than last year. Ladybirds have been seen in much greater numbers. Although the dry weather has suited pollinating insects it has played havoc with wild flowers, especially in dry exposed areas, and with the recently planted trees in Whippendell Woods.

Wildflowers and planted Trees

Although stunted by the dry conditions, a few of the Yellow Rattle plants sowed last autumn did flower and hopefully will have produced seed. Some Birds-Foot Trefoil survived and flowered, as did a small patch of Ox-Eye daisy and a few Knapweed, although they looked stunted. The 3,000 trees planted earlier in the year are also facing the same problem. A casual inspection revealed that the Oaks are still doing well, but some of the protective tubular sleeves contained nothing showing signs of growth. Maybe we can organise a more formal survey in the Autumn to establish how different species are coping. This would also be an enjoyable exercise in tree leaf identification. Rick Vickers and I will also assess the wildflower areas for potential sowing during the autumn.

Butterflies, the Lime Walk and the Purple Emperor “restaurant”

This is turning out to be a good year for Butterflies, and pollinating insects generally, with species emerging much earlier than usual. The first Large Skipper was reported by the local branch of Butterfly Conservation at the end of April - they don't normally appear before mid-May. However the dry conditions mean they're more likely to be confined to areas near the river where moisture and flowers are to be found. The Large Skipper seems to have done even better than the Essex and Small Skipper – although all our resident Skipper species have been seen this year, but with Small and Essex flight periods being reduced because of the heat, possibly through grass drying out and inhibiting the development of caterpillars feeding on it . Once the Meadow Brown and Ringlets got going they became numerous both in the park and Whippendell Woods, and it's a bumper year for white butterflies; with Large, Small and Green-Veined Whites seen everywhere!. On 15th June we had our first sighting of a White Admiral in Whippendell Woods and also the first sightings of Silver-Washed Fritillary. The White Admiral has tended to emerge early in recent years but it was an unusually early start for the Silver-Washed Fritillary. However a bounce-back of the latter species was expected due to the abundance of Dog Violets brought about by recent tree-felling and also because the female of this species lays her eggs in the bark of trees near violets. The trees that escaped the tree felling became the ideal spot to lay.

On 19th June we only got a brief glimpse of a Purple Emperor in Whippendell which turned out to be the first sighting in Hertfordshire this year!

On another walk I was relieved I didn't step on a newly emerging Purple Hairstreak Butterfly – see photo with its crumpled emerging wings!

On Saturday 21st June we made an attempt to tempt Purple Emperors down from the heights of the trees on the Lime Walk. Although we could see them on high none came down to a table of delicacies we had set up. We did however get interest from



a Red Admiral which obviously liked our fox poo (see photo).

Despite the heat on the butterfly walk on 29th June we saw a number of species including Gatekeepers which were just emerging around that time; White Admiral, including one at “Camilla Oak” by Strawberry Fields the only one seen there this year so far. Silver-Washed Fritillary were of

course out in good numbers including the 3rd mating pair (see photo) we had seen that weekend. Other species included Meadow Brown, Ringlet, and Marbled White. Purple Emperor along the Lime Avenue, Purple Hairstreak, Brimstone, Peacock, Comma, Red Admiral, Large Skipper, Essex Skipper and Speckled Wood. A good result considering the hot weather.

All of this year’s butterfly observations will be available early next year in our final report which Rick Vickers has already started. If you do have butterfly sightings to report please log them onto Herts and Middlesex Butterfly Conservations news page where you can also view this year’s sightings. We do have two more butterfly walks



planned for this season but not at Cassiobury Park. The first is at Merry Hill, Bushey, on the 4th August to look for Brown Hairstreak Butterflies, and at Croxley Moor over the autumn equinox weekend (20/21 Sept) to look for Small Copper. All welcome on our walks.

Peter Fewell, July 2025

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

and at:

<https://www.watford.gov.uk/cassiobury-park-3>

Enjoy the Park!

FRIENDS OF CASSIOBURY PARK: Park Life No 32 Summer 2025
