



Wildlife by the brook

Author?

At the time of writing, wet snow is falling over Farnborough, and spring feels a long way off. Along the brook, you can still see winter wildlife, but the days are getting just that bit longer, and signs of spring are beginning to appear.

End of winter ...



You might still see flocks of **siskins** feeding in the alder trees by the brook. They are busy little birds with forked tails and streaky yellow-green plumage. They live in woodlands in the summer, but like feed in waterside trees in winter, and Cove Brook's alders are ideal for them.

Confusingly, busy flocks of little birds bobbing up from grass are more likely to be **linnets**. They too have forked tails, but are brown on top. Their flight is especially bouncy, and they feed on weed seeds.



Redwings are winter visitors from Scandinavia, and should still be around locally until March or April. They look like small song thrushes but move around in groups. You can see them feeding on grass and berries, or sheltering in trees, and they sometimes come into gardens. Close up, you can see their eye stripes and a red patch under the wing.

...beginning of spring

One of the most evocative sounds of early spring must be the echoey drumming of the **great spotted woodpecker**. You might hear this in January and February anywhere along Cove Brook Greenway, but the likeliest area is the more wooded southern end, off Hazel Avenue. Males and females make the noise by drumming on hollow wood with their beaks at great speed, for a few seconds at a time.



The piercing song of the **chiffchaff** – something like *chiff chaff, chiff chaff, chaff chiff chiff!* – would be monotonous if it wasn't a very hope-inducing sign of spring, from around mid-March.

Once you have located the sound, it is sometimes possible to spot the singer a few metres up in a tree - a tiny buff brown bird with a pointy warbler beak and eye stripe. Any ormous **bumble bees**

that you see at this time of year are queen bees emerging from hibernation. They mated last summer and are now looking for somewhere to lay eggs and raise their first brood of small worker bees. The queens feed on nectar from early flowers like **goat willow** (sallow) catkins. Another nectar source you might see along the greenway path is **coltsfoot**, with its hoof-shaped leaves and scaly stems that open into a dandelion-like yellow flower. Coltsfoot is easily dismissed as a waste-ground weed, but it has a long history as a herbal remedy for coughs and other ailments. (Don't try this at home! It also contains toxins.)



Inside this newsletter we take a closer look at two other very characteristic species of Cove Brook. **Moorhens** will be working on their nests and rearing their young d contr versially we're putting the case for that old adversary, the **stinging nettle**.

CHAIRMAN'S CHATTER- *Hilda Anscombe*

This winter we spent Christmas and New Year with my daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter in Winston-Salem in North Carolina USA. Whilst there we took their dog, Clyde, for walks down their greenway – the Muddy Creek Greenway. The three-mile path is fairly straight and is tarmac. People use it to cycle, jog and walk their dogs. But North Carolina dogs have to be on a lead at all times, except in areas called 'dog runs'. The dog run on the greenway is a fenced field about half the size of Blunden Green. It has a mains water supply so that dogs can get a drink, and it is double gated so that dogs cannot escape accidentally when one gate is opened. Most people bring their dogs by car to the dog run.



The estate where my daughter lives is adjacent to Muddy Creek. There are no fences between the houses, which are all well set back, and on higher ground than the creek. We were intrigued to find a little library at the side of the Greenway where locals exchange books they have read.

Muddy Creek is about twice the width of Cove Brook and its banks are about 12ft deep, but it still overflows by several feet after heavy rainfall. When we were there the area was having unusually cold weather, with overnight temperatures of -10 C. Daytime temperatures still below freezing, and the creek, though still fast flowing, iced over.

By contrast, when we were there in September a couple of years ago, Muddy Creek Greenway was a mass of flowers. It's also a great place for seeing all sorts of birds. If we had stayed a little longer this year, we might have seen the wild turkeys that frequent the waterside meadows in spring.

COVE POTTERY

Did you know that Cove was once at the heart of a pottery industry that supplied London and beyond with essential wares? You can find out more about this fascinating, centuries old but little-known aspect of local history at our next meeting, on Tuesday 13th February (half term week). Charlie Fraser-Fleming will be talking about local pottery making and how to spot the real local article among any bits of old crockery you might turn up in your garden. See back page for more details.



Redware bowl © North East Hampshire Historical & Archaeological Society

WILDLIFE CLOSE UP MOORHENS

In spring Cove Brook usually has several pairs of moorhens, making nests and raising families. They are greenish brown and black, with white under the tail and a red-and-yellow beak and face 'shield'. They are often confused with coots, but coots are all-black with a pure white beak and shield. Coots prefer open water, whereas moorhens like the cover provided by bankside plants. They have an awkward, jerky way of moving, but are actually efficient walkers and swimmers, with all-purpose, long-toed feet that mean they can also wade over soft mud. They build a nest out of plant material, sometimes as a floating raft, sometimes hidden in vegetation on the ground, or in a tree. They eat plants, insects and worms. Baby moorhens are black balls of fluff that speed through the water as they follow their parents. If conditions are right, the parents will raise another brood or two, and their older brothers and sisters help with the childcare.



WORK PARTIES – *Paul Sanders*



11th November and 9th December

These were our two end of year litter picks. On both occasions fifteen people turned up to help and we cleared litter from the brook and surrounding areas from the Hawley Road to beyond the Five Arches Bridge. Over eighty sacks of rubbish were collected and loaded onto RBC trucks. We recycled all glass and plastic bottles and cans where we could and nearly a third of everything collected was sent for recycling. Later on in the evening of the December task, Blue Planet II revealed it is estimated there are now one million plastic objects in each square mile of sea. Hopefully we have helped in a small way to stop that amount increasing.

13th January 2018

Nine of us spent a couple of hours trying to improve the view of the brook between Blunden Hall footbridge and Glebe road. Firstly we cut down the unsightly dead nettles near the bridge then opened up the narrow area where the path diverges from the pavement. This area was overgrown and rubbish had been accumulating there for years.

But the main task was to cut the bramble behind the railings alongside Glebe road. This was to allow a view of the brook from the pavement, but  in here to extract the vast amount of litter thrown in amongst it. We will return there in February to further tidy up.

STINGING NETTLES

Stinging nettles don't have many friends, but it is human activity that makes them flourish. Like many pesky weeds, they have evolved to make the most of conditions which people now supply in abundance. Nettles love nitrogen and phosphates, found in compost, manure and ashes, so garden waste dumps and bonfire sites are a sure way to encourage them. Along Cove Brook they may still benefit from sludge left on the banks after dredging. They also like damp. Nettles sting because their sharp, hollow hairs  ject irritating chemicals into the skin.

On the good side, nettles are food plants for peacock, comma, red admiral and tortoiseshell butterfly caterpillars, and they provide cover for birds such as house sparrows.



That's all very well, you say, but what about people? Young nettles are nutritious for us too. They are a traditional pick-me-up in the spring, rich in vitamins A and C, and also iron and calcium. They have long been used as medicines, and for food. Cooking destroys the sting, so they can be used as a spinach-like veg, or made into tea, soup or a kind of pesto. Nettle cordial is delicious and easy to make: for a recipe, see www.eatweeds.co.uk/nettle-cordial-recipe. Like any plants for eating, they should be taken from a site that isn't likely to have been contaminated by dogs or anything else, and older plants coming into flower should be avoided.

Still not convinced? Nettles are related to flax and hemp, and their fibers can be extracted to make a fine, silky textile. Nettle cloth was made in 19th-century Scotland and 20th-century Germany. It is harder to extract than cotton, but finer and more breathable.

And if you don't want to wear or eat or drink nettles, or take them as medicine, you can always return all that goodness to the ground. Nettles steeped in water make a liquid plant food, and the rotted remains will be fine for the compost heap.



Cove Brook

GREENWAY GROUP



VOLUNTEERS WELCOME!

Volunteering with Cove Brook Greenway Group is fun and makes a worthwhile contribution to the local community. Whether you're litter picking, cutting back brambles, removing saplings or managing a bonfire you'll have the satisfaction of seeing a job well done. The Group often receives compliments from passers by and those who use the Greenway. We meet on the second Saturday of every month at one of our regular locations for our work parties. These locations are all close to free parking for your bike or car.

As well as getting friendly conversation, fresh air and free refreshments, you'll be amazed at how many steps you do to contribute to those 10,000 a day! All equipment is provided although you may like to bring your own gloves. Stout, preferably waterproof footwear is essential and, as we 'work' in all weathers, you need to dress accordingly. Children are very welcome but must be accompanied by a responsible adult if under 16. If you can spare up to two hours on an occasional Saturday morning you'll be made very welcome.

Alternatively if you're not interested in helping with practical tasks we'd be delighted to welcome you as a volunteer committee member/general helper with our quiz, talks evenings and other events. Our meetings are informal and friendly.

We hope you'll want to come and give volunteering a try.

CONTACT DETAILS



www.covebrookgreenwaygroup.co.uk



covebrookgg@yahoo.co.uk



Find us on Facebook



07510 881939 Please leave a message and someone will get back to you as soon as possible.

TALKS, MEETINGS AND EVENTS

Tuesday 2 February	7.30pm	OPEN MEETING Cove Pottery A talk by Charlie Fraser-Fleming of North East Hampshire Historical and Archaeological Society. Find out about Cove's little-known past as a major producer of pottery. Followed by refreshments, raffle and time to talk. At: Blunden Hall, Blunden Road, Cove, GU14 8QP
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WORK PARTIES

Work parties are usually on the second Saturday of the month. Volunteers are welcome. Children must be accompanied by a responsible adult. We provide gloves, tools and refreshments. Please dress for rough ground and brambles.

Sat 10th February	10 am	BROOK BANKS Tidying up brook banks at Glebe Road. Meet at: Blunden Hall, Blunden Road GU14 8QP
Sat 10th March	10 am	BIRCHBROOK RESERVE To clear up fallen trees and tidy up after hedge laying. Meet at: Birchbrook Reserve, opposite allotments off Birchett Road, near Houseman Road footbridge or a short walk north from Blunden Hall.
Sat 14th April	10 am	RUSHMOOR SPRING CLEAN The first major cleanup of the year. Meet at: footbridge at Curly Bridge end of Cheyne Way

