

Pond Report July 2003

Dan Merrett, Community Wildlife Officer for Buckinghamshire from BBOWT (Bucks, Berks and Oxon Wildlife Trust), gave a fascinating talk to 16 of us on the ponds on Cholesbury Common.



The duck pond has been known by a number of names in the past – Pallett's, Butcher's, Fairy Pond.

Holy Well, however, is the one at the end of the churchyard inside the fort.

The situation of the duck pond is typical of village ponds in that it is found near a road and by a road junction. It is likely that it has been managed in one way or another for all of its life. Cattle used to visit it and, in the early twentieth century, there were no trees around it and people used to drive through it.

75% of ponds disappeared during the 20th century, largely because of housing development and changes to agricultural working practices. This means that garden ponds are even more important than they used to be for the wildlife in the area, as they provide stepping stones between the larger expanses of water. And it is not just the ponds themselves that are important but the surroundings in which they are situated, since these strongly determine what kinds of wildlife are found in each pond. The duck pond is particularly well situated with rougher areas surrounding it and then woodland within 100m. Hedgehogs and amphibians have sufficient cover to be able to come to the pond for a drink without laying themselves open to danger.

Over the last 5 years the thinking on what makes an ideal wildlife pond has changed. It used to be advised that 2/3 open water, 1/3 vegetation and a variety of depths over the area of the pond were the ideal characteristics. It is now recognised that, in reality, ponds are found in a wide variety of successional states and wildlife just adapts to the changes. So a "muddy" pond just has different wildlife from an "ideal" pond. A wide diversity of ponds is now encouraged.

The first thing Dan emphasised is that wildlife in a pond that dries out does not die. Much of it just burrows into the mud and can survive for months. A lot of beetles and amphibians are mobile so they can move to other ponds or wet places, to follow the conditions. The drawdown zone at the side of the pond (where mud exposed as water levels drop through the year) is very important for wildlife because it provides a muddy edge. For instance, the southern hawker dragonfly lays its eggs in such mud.

The duck pond is gradually silting up but it has probably not been dredged for 30-40 years and 50cm range between high and low water levels is completely normal. It is partly the unusual weather conditions that are making the pond appear to be in a worse condition than it is. This has been the warmest June for 15 – 20 years and the driest since 1976. Dredging has an enormous impact on wildlife and just reducing the amount of silt would not necessarily increase the amount of water visible. It was suggested that any dredging should be small-scale and done by hand (wheelbarrows and shovels). The back and middle of the pond were suggested as the places most likely to benefit the wildlife. Dan said 5m x 5m x 1/2m equates to 2,500 buckets full of mud, so advised us not to take the decision lightly! If anyone can remember it being dredged could they let me know, please?

It is the region below the water level which is most important for wildlife. So, for instance, the willow stump growing in the middle of the pond provides very useful cover for any submerged wildlife trying to avoid predators, especially in the absence of submerged plants. Any management which is carried out should try to minimise disturbance and sudden changes. So it is better to do a small amount each year than to leave it for 5 years and then do a large amount of vegetation removal. It is likewise better to remove boughs from the surrounding trees than to remove whole trees.

A pond this size can support 2 ducks as long as the family they raise move away to other areas. Ducks often dominate garden ponds because they are so much smaller. It is a positive feature of the duck pond since ducks are often the first introduction children get to wildlife and looking after it. Feeding the ducks is acceptable so long as any leftovers are taken away since they could encourage rats and large aquatic wildlife.

The submerged starwort growing at the back of the pond is a clear indicator of good water quality. The greater spearwort has buttercup-like flowers but has long thin leaves rather than deeply lobed. Also found in the duck pond or round the edge are celery leaved buttercup, hairy willowherb, water forget-me-not, water mint, woody nightshade and yellow flag iris. The tubers of the latter spread rapidly so they need to be controlled. The tall reeds with feathery tops (*Glyceria Maxima*, or reed sweet-grass) have narrow leaves which newts like to lay their eggs around. There is also giant sweetgrass and other variegated ones. The plant commonly identified as “bulrush” is not truly the bulrush plant. It is actually called reedmace and is very rampant, spreading by seeds and tubers. A nineteenth century artist is responsible for confusing everyone by calling his painting “Moses among the bulrushes” whilst actually showing reedmace!

If the pond were to be left to its own devices for 10 years or so, the reeds and irises would invade and the open areas would fill with fallen vegetation. Autumn is the best time of year for removing any vegetation because the eggs and young are more susceptible in the summer. Frogs and newts overwinter in the mud at the bottom of ponds so it is better to do it before it starts getting really cold.

We walked across the road to the dew pond on the other side of the cricket pitch to see and hear about a different kind of pond.



In the past, when ponds were used for animals to drink from, the skill was to locate a dew pond where there would be sufficient runoff from the surrounding terrain.

In this dew pond, which is temporary because it has no standing water in the summer, one of the most interesting, and plentiful, plants is the water purslane. It is a creeping plant with very small, spoon-shaped leaves found on the margins of the wet area and in the muddy

places, thriving in light shade. It is rare in Buckinghamshire and this is one of very few places where it is found. There are a couple of water crowfoot plants which have 5 white petals with a yellow centre. Again, this is a marginal plant, preferring muddy places to being submerged.

The rushes, which are very plentiful in the dew pond, provide the kind of light shade favoured by the water purslane. If they start to dominate and shade out the purslane, some of the tussocks could be cut down to ground level in August and removed, to try to return to the present conditions of open areas with semi-shaded patches among the rushes. Dan advised us how to tell the difference between rushes and sedges:

“Sedges have edges, rushes are round” (referring to the stems)

Because the dew pond has such unusual flora Dan thought it quite possible that there might also be some unusual fauna. He said that if we ever were to consider major works in this area that we should arrange for a proper survey before doing anything else.

In the 2 hours the Dan was with us, we learnt an enormous amount about what is in the ponds and how we could best manage them. It was very gratifying to find that both ponds have their strengths and that the differences are worth preserving.

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