

**March 2020**



This greenspace is part of the 26 mile long, 10,000 acre Lee Valley Regional Park, which stretches through Greater London, Essex and Hertfordshire



# Welcome



Musings from the Marshes looks at what has been happening across Leyton and Walthamstow Marshes. It's jammed packed with lots of interesting information about the wildlife, events, projects and people who can be found out on the marshes. Check out our [events](#) and [volunteering](#) pages online and see how you can get involved.



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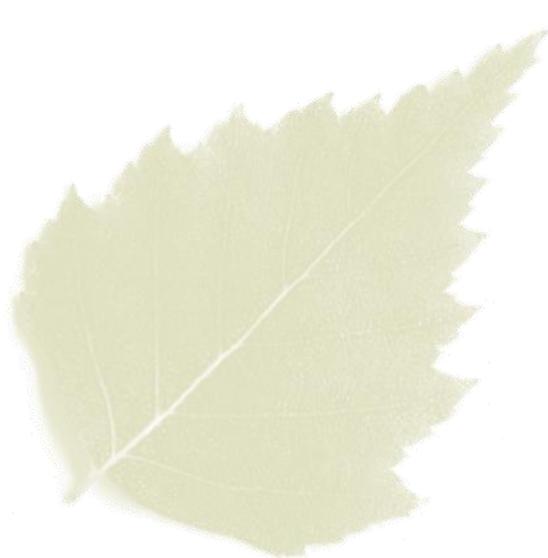
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## Ranger round-up



You might have noticed along Sandy Lane a few months back all of the works that took place along the tow path area. EuNetworks are a fibre network infrastructure company who secured permission through LVRPA, Canal & River Trust and Natural England to lay a series of cables stretching from King's Head Bridge north along the tow path to Horse Shoe Bridge. The tow path areas lie off of the most sensitive areas of the protected nature reserve and it was agreed that the work would not cause any significant damage to the marsh. A clear set of conditions were put in place before any works could begin. Where some vegetation has been removed or damaged we intend to go back in during spring to re-sow with an appropriate mix of meadow seed suitable to the conditions and in keeping with the broader marsh plant communities.



This February we took the decision to close the boardwalk which traverses the South Marsh. Over the past two years we've seen increased flood levels and their impacts to the marsh, its wildlife and visitors. One of the challenges facing the park is how to maintain access during these very wet conditions at the eastern end of the boardwalk. As the wet season progresses, access to the boardwalk at this end has become more restricted. People trying to walk around water logged patches are being forced further out into areas of species rich meadow. The downside to this is that it's causing erosion of the soft wet soils and damaging the important plant communities growing here. We've looked at several options to reduce the impact and we took the decision to temporarily close the boardwalk. We intend to re-open the boardwalk just as soon as the ground dries sufficiently. We'll continue to monitor the situation but this measure may need to be repeated going forward.

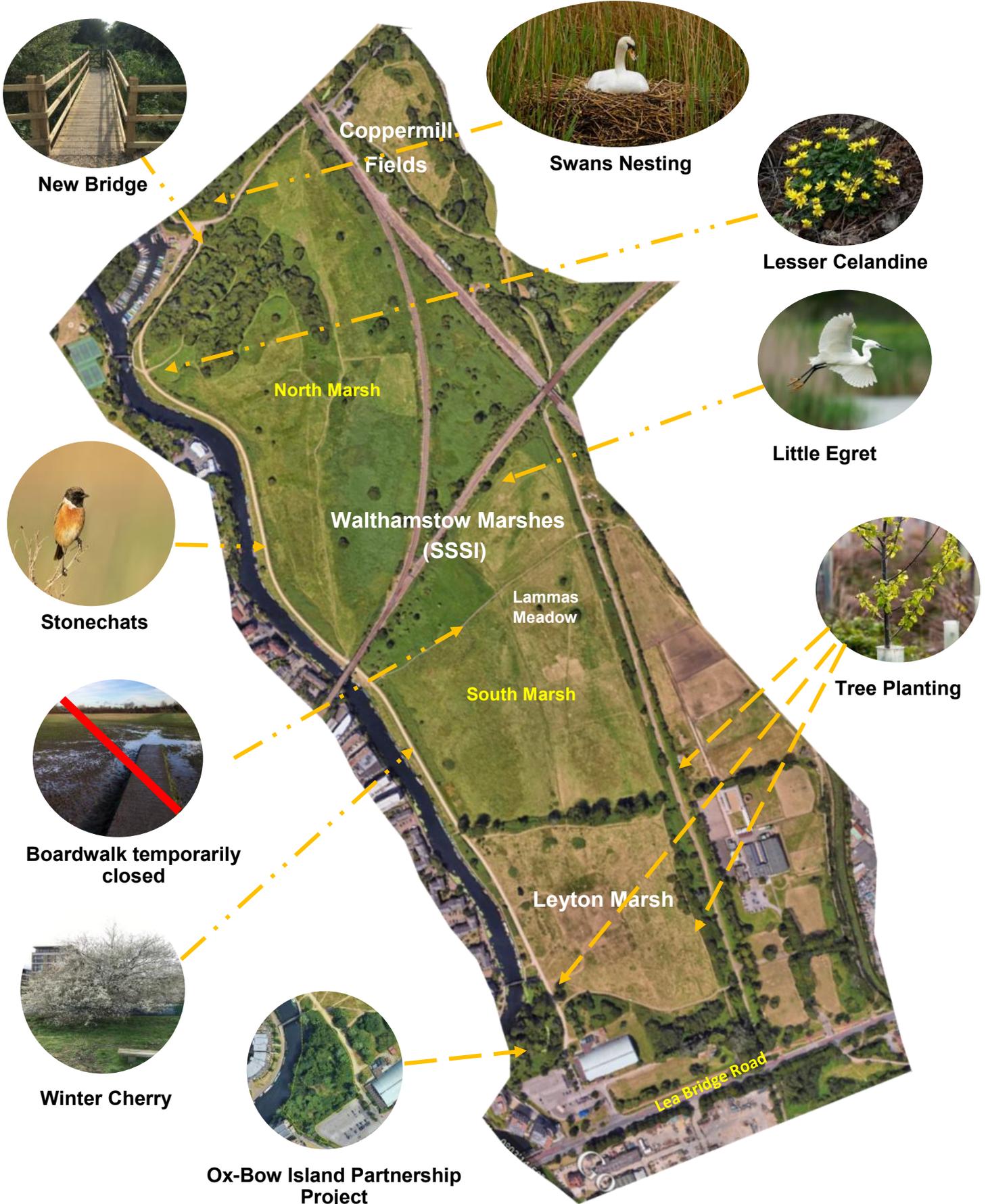
We've begun to replace some of the ageing wooden infrastructure around the marshes this year. If you hadn't realised yet, wood rots fast on wetlands and you do have to keep on top of it. We began in September looking at the wooden footbridge at Horse Shoe Thicket near the marina. The second wooden bridge on the South Marsh was more recently replaced as well. We've also addressed a section of cattle fencing which runs along Leyton Marsh boundary which now includes a new metal field gate and wooden post and rail fencing. This was installed to reduce the amount of damage caused by machinery crossing the marsh to maintain the Bomb Crater Pond and nearby scrape.



Every November, we employ the help of a large digger and trailer to de-silt a 100m section of a 1.2 km long ditch. The works help to maintain the ditch in good ecological condition. The ditch stretches along the western edge of the marshes but is not a natural feature of the marsh. The ditches were dug to help protect the marsh by reducing the number of incursions by people and vehicles on the more sensitive areas. Each year a section of ditch is worked on and all of the spoil is moved to behind the Ice Centre. If we didn't carry out this work each year the vegetation that builds up within the ditches would rot, accumulate and dry out the ditches over time leading to a decline in wildlife that use them. The ditches are of great ecological value for aquatic plants, water voles and dragonflies. They also act as natural wet fences to keep the cattle in.

# Where on the marshes?

Walthamstow Marshes, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), is a stunning mosaic of wetland habitat set in the heart of north east London managed by Lee Valley Regional Park. The site is of great importance locally and regionally with significant recreational, historical and ecological value. Home to meadows, reedbeds, woodland, Water Voles, birdlife and native breed cattle, there's much to see and explore.



# September



## Reedmace pulling

Last November we removed most of the Common Reedmace that had been growing in Bomb Crater Pond. The pond had become clogged with vegetation and needed some work to open it up to the light. This had the expected effect of attracting a wide range of wildlife, especially dragonflies and Flowering Rush. Now it was time to do some follow-up work to keep on top of the re-growing vegetation. Reedmace spreads quickly, not only by seed but by its rhizome root system.

Myself and Honorary Warden Richard Steele got to work fast after squeezing into some cold waders. It was slow progress pulling each plant with its large roots attached. Despite coming close to taking a few falls and with two very sore backs we managed to clear up to 80% of the Reedmace.



Honorary Warden Richard in Bomb Crater Pond



Vegetation being raked into piles at the scrape

## The Scrape

The Scrape has been closely tended to this year with sections cut almost every two weeks. This was to encourage the right conditions for the rare plant Creeping Marshwort to re-establish. Our final cut of the scrape this year included nearly all of the vegetation within it and volunteers were brought in from Grant Thornton to help rake up all of the arisings.

The day turned out to be warm and pleasant and everyone was really keen to learn and get involved. As well raking, a few people helped to flatten out a few bumps in the ground making it easier to mow next year. We also had time to gather seed and translocate plants growing in the scrape to the nearby pond.

The day ended with the group raking some meadow nearby on Leyton Marsh. The day was very productive and a huge

## The Great Reedbed

Each year a different section of the Great Reedbed is cut to improve its condition by removing the vegetation and reducing the amount of thatch that builds up. This prevents the reedbed from drying out and helps to increase the amount of water flowing through it. Reedbeds are quite a rare habitat and provide habitat for several specialist species of wildlife.

This month we were joined by volunteers from the company Verizon Ltd. They helped to rake up all of the vegetation which been cut several days before with the help of the ranger team.

The morning began warm and sunny and the group arrived at Lee Valley Ice Centre in high spirits sporting some dapper white t-shirts. With the help of Assistant Rangers Joe and Matt, we used our large trailer and the smaller ATV to full effect moving loads of reed to specific locations to form habitat refugia. Grass Snakes frequent areas of the marshes and by creating these piles of vegetation we can provide place for them to use. The day went really well with the volunteers working hard and well coordinated. Much of the reed was successfully removed and that which remained was raked into rows making it easier to remove later on.



Volunteers at work raking reed

# October



## Lea Bridge Conservation Volunteers

Another great task was led by LBCV on the marshes this October. They cleared much of the willow growing along the ditch including some stretches that proved difficult to access last year.

Willow is the most abundantly growing tree on the marshes and is commonly associated with river floodplains. So well adapted to wet conditions, it can spread and grow quite quickly. Part of our management for the ditches involves clearing some sections on a rotational basis. If left to grow untouched, the ditches would soon fill quickly with willow, shading out many of the uncommon plants associated with the ditch and their associated wildlife. So, it helps to keep on top of it all.

After LBCV finished cutting and pulling the willow out onto the nearby tow path, it was left a few days to allow any small insects and other creatures to crawl out. Then myself and colleagues came along and chipped all the piles of willow to use later for laying on wet, muddy paths. It takes a bit of time to get through willow pulled from 750m of ditch but leaves a highly satisfying feeling after you finish.



## Rebels in the woods

Fifteen Lee Valley Conservation Volunteers turned out to help us clear two of the ponds at Horse Shoe Thicket this month. They are an eager bunch and were quickly put to work after the morning briefing. The largest of the ponds fills quickly late in the summer with Common Reed and so, needs to be cut back annually. Some of the reed I had cut myself, the day before and most of it needed raking and piling at the back of the fence. Some of the volunteers also got to work on the willow invading the pond. Amongst this rabble were two recently recruited assistant rangers who were quite literally thrown in at the deep end by getting them into waders cut through the reed in the pond. A small party of rebels split from the group and began laying some woodchip on the path nearby, removing some of the sycamore and pollarding trees along the central ride to the wood. A great days work by any standards but still some more to do in January.

## Mink Alert

Honorary Warden Nick Cain and I paid a visit to some of our mink traps this October to check their condition and for any signs of invasive American Mink. It was Nick's first time seeing and checking rafts. I talked him through the procedures and maintenance requirements beforehand. Sure enough, Nick found possible signs of American Mink on his first go.

The rafts help us monitor mink activity in the area which pose a threat to our water vole population. On the rafts are clay pads. Should an animal cross the pad it will leave an imprint and with a bit of experience we can then match the tracks to the animal. This time we found tracks similar in shape and size to American Mink. The tracks tend to be the size of a 50p coin but are similar to other members of the mustelid family, making it tricky sometimes. Soon after our discovery, I set traps for two weeks, checking twice a day. On this occasion, nothing was trapped and we set the rafts back to monitoring mode.



# Ox Bow Island Partnership Project



You may notice some changes to the area around Ox Bow Island in the coming weeks. We've previously shared some of the details of this work in this newsletter, Ranger Drop In Sessions and Ranger walk rounds and explained how we're working with Canal & River Trust and Thames 21 on a five year project to:

- improve the habitat in and around the island
- tackle vandalism, fly tipping, anti-social behaviour and non-native invasive species which are damaging existing habitats
- create new reedbeds
- improve access to the island
- plant native wildflowers, trees and shrubs
- install bat and bird boxes, deadwood piles for insects and reptiles
- set up a trained working group of local volunteers to help look after this wildlife site.

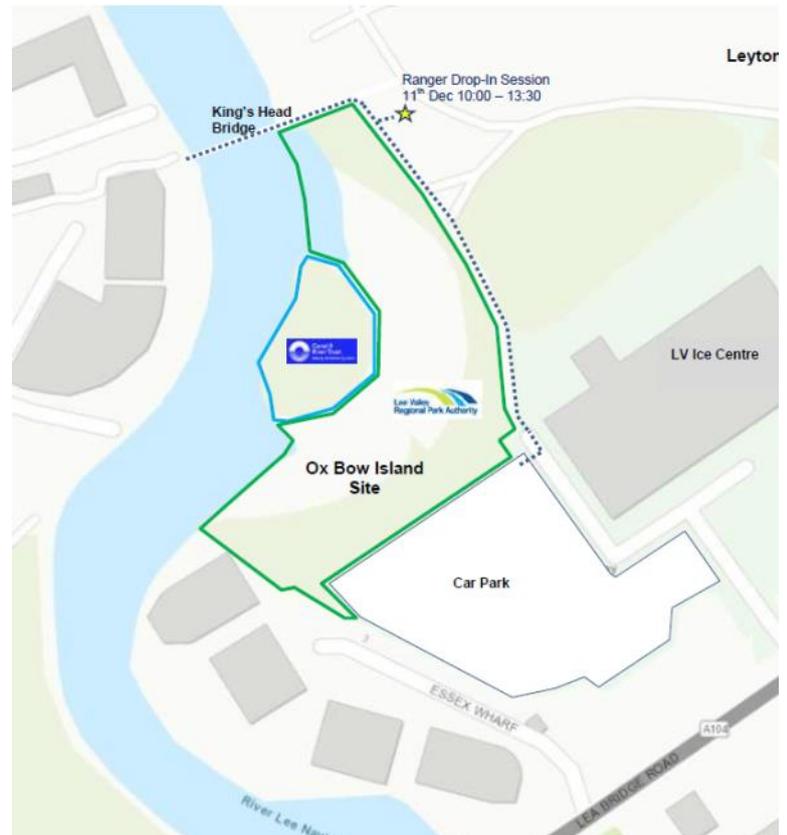
Work began in January 2020 involving tree safety works as well as other works to create better access. This will help more light reach the ground and provide other trees and plants with more water and space enabling them to grow and flourish.

We'll be planting many more trees than we remove. We'll also be enhancing habitats by planting a suitable mix of native trees, shrubs and other plants, including willows, birch and alders over the coming year.

Other parts of the site will be improved, so you may see shrubs cut back and areas landscaped. This is so we can plant the native trees, shrubs and plants, which will attract wildlife and help it thrive. The natural barrier of trees currently screening the car park and Lee Valley Ice Centre will return over the next few seasons as new trees mature.

Future activities, including the removal of old construction fly-tip, the re-profiling of some areas and the installation of a new footpath and bridge, will improve visitor access and discourage anti-social behaviour on site.

Improvements will also be made to the habitat that will help improve the channel's water quality and appearance with a 'living boom', a floating reedbed to stop litter flowing into the channel from the river, which in turn, will help reduce pollution. Work to increase the mix of plants within the waterways will also be carried out.



If you have any questions, please feel free to contact myself ([elawlor@leevalleypark.org.uk](mailto:elawlor@leevalleypark.org.uk)) or Ranger Services Manager Ges Hoddinott ([ghoddinott@leevalleypark.org.uk](mailto:ghoddinott@leevalleypark.org.uk)) on 020 8988 7565

# November



## Jumpy Herefords

Its Monday morning and everyone is back in the office after the busy weekend. I announce to everyone that we need to move the cattle. Usually, a straightforward affair, we drive the cattle from the South Marsh through the corral at A V Roe Arches into the North Marsh where they're released.

Everyone pitched in this time around. We started by removing the panels covering the cattle grid, they weigh a tonne! Natalie, Assistant Ranger, found some lovely big spiders beneath. Some of us weren't so brave and hid behind the trailer well out of way. After all the signage was up, and gates and locks checked, we begun the move.

There was one added complication this time around. Back in October we attempted to re-join two of our newest cattle grazing at the WaterWorks Centre nature reserve with the rest of the herd. The two Herefords were young and nervous and new to the annual routine. During their move, one of them decided to jump the cattle fence and take a tour of the Wildlife Garden. Fortunately, after a bit of patience the it returned without harm.

This time around we changed tactics. Everyone was more patient and Joe kept the trailer out of view until after they were in the corral. Glad to say it went much more easily and they soon re-joined the herd.



Cattle grids up, spiders are out!



BCS with flail head



One plantation on Leyton Marsh

## Tree Planting

Over the last two years we've been making the most of the Woodland Trust's offer of free trees available to community groups and schools for planting locally. Working with various groups we've managed to plant in several hundred young saplings already across the park. This year we received over 300 hundred more trees to plant in including a broad mix of native shrubs and trees.

The areas targeted for planting include Leyton Marsh, the Aqueduct Pathway and Coppermill Fields. Our objective has been to supplement some existing areas where trees are growing, to add greater diversity of species and to enhance their screening effect in certain locations.

Before planting anything, we needed to first prepare the ground. So, in October and November with the help of volunteers and Assistant Rangers we got to work on specific locations and began to clear the ground. This was made so much more easy this year with the recent arrival of new machinery; a flail, for attaching to the front of our BCS motor.

The trees arrived in three large boxes accompanied by bamboo stakes and protective guards. Though I don't like using plastic, on a park like Walthamstow Marshes, they're very exposed and the guards do help protect the saplings when they are young and most vulnerable.

We'll be revisiting the plantations throughout the coming year and hopefully, we'll see large number of them maturity into healthy beautiful trees.



Elder



Rowan



Holly



Hazel



Dog Rose

Some of the species included in planting

## Warden of the Marshes - Richard Steele



At the start of our working day Eamonn drives us up to Horseshoe Thicket to check the mink rafts for signs of activity. American Mink are an invasive species of predator which pose a threat to our native water vole population. Water Voles were once common in Britain but have undergone serious decline throughout the last century due largely to the loss and degradation of their wetland habitats and the spread of mink. At least 27 mink were caught in Hertfordshire and Middlesex in 2017, many in Lee Valley Regional Park as a result of the efforts of the rangers here. There's no new evidence of mink visiting our rafts today however.



Having drawn a blank at the rafts we check that the park's herd of eight Belted Galloway and Hereford cattle remain in fine fettle before heading down Sandy Lane by the banks of the River Lee to our next assignment. Today's work party consists of Eamonn Lawlor, the Ranger responsible for managing the scenic area of wetland and meadow habitat comprising Walthamstow and Leyton Marshes, Nick, another regular volunteer, and me. The marshes are a remnant of the original grassland habitat that would once have covered much of the Lea Valley. They'd have traditionally been managed as Lammas Land, in which a hay cut would have been followed by grazing with livestock. This management is

replicated through cattle grazing across the site. With eight cows hardly sufficient for an area of this size, however, the grazing has to be supplemented with additional cutting which means plenty of exercise for me in the form of forking and raking the hay!

I've been a Conservation Volunteer with Lee Valley Regional Park since July 2018 and became an Honorary Warden of the park from September of that year. Although I have a copy of the detailed description for this role, in practical terms to me this means donning work clothes and stout boots on Wednesday mornings and heading down to the Ranger office just south of Lea Bridge Road to find out what the day has in store.

During all the months I've worked out on the marshes with Eamonn no two days have been the same, which is a good thing of course. Not only are the multitude of tasks undertaken pleasing and varied, but the rhythm of work evolves naturally with the changing of the seasons. Being as we are in early November now, with the weather growing wetter and colder, many late season tasks relate to preparing for the coming year.

For example, completing the last meadow and reedbed cuts and moving the cattle to the north pasture as well as hacking back more of the omnipresent brambles.

Today we use heavy duty loppers to cut large swathes through patches of voracious barb wire bramble and remove choking Bindweed to improve some of our younger trees chances of survival. The day remains cool and overcast after a frosty start but the rain holds off and working keeps us warm. The task takes a good two hours and by the time we break for lunch we can feel the strain in our backs.

During the afternoon, we plant two score or more of slender whips with their roots attached which, if they survive, will grow into tall Rowan, Hazel, Blackthorn and Crab Apple trees. This takes us to past three pm, when having been out since just after nine we decide to call it a day and head back to the yard to unload the tools and tidy up generally. Next week the tasks, and likely the weather will be different again.



An extract from the blog Rich Ramblings written by Richard Steele -

[www.richramblings17876516.wordpress.com](http://www.richramblings17876516.wordpress.com)

Visit us at [visitleevalley.org.uk/walthamstowmarshes](http://visitleevalley.org.uk/walthamstowmarshes)

# January



## Leyton Marsh Meadow

Leyton Marsh will see changes to its grass cutting regime this spring. Currently, an area the size of a football pitch is mown short regularly spring to autumn to provide people with space to picnic, sunbath and play. This does not include the surrounding meadows with longer grasses.



Bee Orchid leaf rosette

The changes will mean reducing the total area mown short by 40% allowing more of the open space to be used by wild plants and insects. A section of short mown grass will continue to be cut for park users to enjoy as well.

Coincidentally, a newly discovered patch of Bee Orchids was found growing on an area of grass typically mown short. The plants will be included in the new extended meadow area. So, there is a good chance we may see them flowering in the near future.



Aerial view of Leyton Marsh showing the existing area of grass cut short for amenity use and the new boundary marked yellow.

## A drone's view

This January after returning from the end of year festive holidays I was amazed to see how much flooding had occurred across the marshes. This got me thinking. I had been itching for sometime to take out our newly procured drone to get a bird's eye view of the marshes. This proved the opportune time. I enlisted my colleague, Dan Townsend, who had been trained to use our drone and with his help we spent a few hours photographing areas of the park. The light was perfect and the wind almost absent. The only down side was it was biting cold and standing around watching the sky was a challenge.

The aerial views of a drone at 400m altitude provides us with a different perspective. In particular, it is increasingly being recognized and used as a tool for monitoring change in the landscape and for identify how wildlife use it. On this occasion, I wanted to get a better understanding of the true extent of surface flooding across the marshes and to monitor changes in the types of vegetation using key areas of the marshes.

We managed to capture some impressive images this time around providing some useful insight into how the marshes flood and I hope to contrast these with similar images taken later in the summer as well. By comparing the two sets of images we will be able to see how the marshes change through the seasons.



Walthamstow Marshes from above



Drone with camera



Horse Shoe Thicket

# February



## First of the early flowering

One of the earliest plant species to flower on the marshes is the Winter Cherry tree. A commonly planted tree, there's one growing along the tow path on the South Marsh. Its flowers often appear quite suddenly and this year, I first noticed it had bloomed most likely a few days before 3 February. This is definitely one of my favourite trees on the marshes; it stands out from everything else early in the year when nothing else has yet flowered.



Winter Cherry tree



Lesser Celandine

At the northern end of the marshes, I was delighted to see this year's first burst of yellow flowering beneath some large plane trees next to the marina. Lesser Celandine tends to create local patches of dark green and yellow. Most of the plants growing out in the open on the marsh itself tend to flower a little bit later and are a signal the oncoming spring.

## Controlling the invasive New Zealand Pigmyweed

It's a Wednesday and the rain has finally stopped. Myself a Honorary Warden Richard decide to use the opportunity to get some much needed work done in the Coppermill Ditch. The ditch is currently infested with a non-native invasive plant called *Crassula helmsii* or New Zealand Pigmyweed. The plant has spread along the top 100m stretch of ditch creating a thick blanket covering and displacing other native plants which would otherwise be growing there. To prevent this invasive plant spreading further we've created a non-intervention zone south where the water flows. This means we allow vegetation in this part of the ditch to grow unimpeded, creating a dense wall or natural barrier. There are pros and cons to this strategy but without any effective natural biocontrol measure available to us we would need to spray the infested section with excessive amounts of herbicide, possibly harming other native vegetation in the process. Myself and Richard get to work, cutting back some reed and coppicing and pollarding the willow. The willows will grow back again and will help maintain shade to discourage *Crassula helmsii* growing beneath and the dense reed will form a natural barrier slowing any movement of the *Crassula*. The sections we cut are done on rotation and keep the trees small enough to managed into the future.



## Bramble Bashing

Bramble is an never ending problem on the marsh. Though it has value for wildlife, providing cover, forage and nesting for birds and mammals in particular, it does spread fast through grassland and reedbed areas. It's ability to compete for space and water makes it a foe in the marsh landscape and with the help of volunteers we've been bashing it back both in the South Reedbed and along the ditches in the North Marsh. Cutting it is the easy part, but raking and removing the cuttings takes time, effort and help. Lee Valley Conservation Volunteers were on hand over two tasks to help remove everything. It's amazing what can get done when you have enough people, who enjoy coming out, coming to these tasks.



# The last page



## Volunteering on the marshes

Whether it's carrying out practical habitat management, monitoring wildlife or running events and guided walks, there's a volunteering opportunity for everyone on the marshes. There are a number of groups who work throughout the year carrying out practical conservation work on the marshes:

### Lee Valley Regional Park Volunteers

For more information on volunteering opportunities and tasks go to [visitleevalley.org.uk/volunteers](http://visitleevalley.org.uk/volunteers) or contact the Rangers on 020 8988 7565

### Lea Bridge Conservation Volunteers (LBCV)

LBCV meet on the first Sunday of every month. Contact: Colin Smith, [lbcv.org.uk](http://lbcv.org.uk)



#### Contact

#### Eamonn Lawlor

[elawlor@leevalleypark.org.uk](mailto:elawlor@leevalleypark.org.uk)

020 8988 7565

WaterWorks Centre, Lammas Road, Leyton,  
London E10 7QB

#### Lee Valley Regional Park Authority

#### Head office:

Myddelton House, Bulls Cross, Enfield,  
Middlesex EN2 9HG

03000 030 610

[visitleevalley.org.uk](http://visitleevalley.org.uk)

Walthamstow Marshes  
Lea Bridge Road  
Leyton E10 7QL

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