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Guildford Environmental Forum

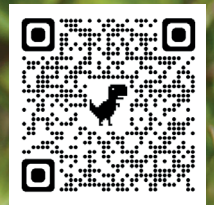
newsletter

October 2024 - December 2024

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*Hurts (a local name
for whortleberries/
bilberries) on
Holmbury Hill,
photographed by
Raymond Smith*

The Benefits of Wood Piles

by R.E.J. Seymour

WOOD PILES similar to those shown in the photograph to the right have numerous ecological benefits whether on common land or in back gardens. With increasing ash dieback, more timber is available to construct wood piles which will eventually decompose, but much depends on the type and size of logs and branches.

Recently on Chitty's Common, a SCC arboriculturalist talking with local residents estimated that up to 500 ash trees will be cut on the common over the next few years, and it is hoped that the trunks and branches can be cut into manageable lengths so that wood piles can be made.

Wood piles provide a microclimate, shelter and food for a variety of wildlife and add to local biodiversity. They mimic natural conditions when trees die and fall to the ground, where they start to decay returning nutrients to the



soil. They also provide nesting sites for birds and a site for a wide range of fungi such as saprotrophic fungus which breaks down wood, with some consuming cellulose in the timber.

Wood piles do not last forever, and on Chitty's Common local volunteers are able to add to them when the need arises. Whilst there are numerous benefits, one disadvantage is that under very dry conditions, such as the severe drought of 1976, they do represent a fire hazard. In addition they should not be made too close to existing water courses as they could potentially block streams, causing additional flooding.

A very wide range of animals are attracted to wood piles, including invertebrates, insects, amphibians, reptiles and small mammals like hedgehogs, with some using them for overwintering and hibernation purposes.



Many authorities suggest that wood piles are ideal food sources, offering a range of bugs and insects for other animals higher up the food chain. Stag beetles are attracted to log piles, especially if part of it is buried where their eggs can be laid, and the larvae live off old decaying wood, especially oak, often for up to seven years before they emerge as stag beetles.

The south-east of England is seen as a thriving area for stag beetles in comparison with other parts of the country. The photograph above of a male stag beetle was taken on Chitty's Common during the early summer this year.

Given the numerous benefits of wood piles, they should be part of the management strategy when we are striving to conserve our valuable woodlands. A useful video to watch about wood piles if you're interested in learning more is "[How to build a wildlife log pile](#)" by the RHS, which you can find on YouTube.

Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,
I paused and said, 'I will turn back from here.
No, I will go on farther—and we shall see.'
The hard snow held me, save where now and then
One foot went through. The view was all in lines
Straight up and down of tall slim trees
Too much alike to mark or name a place by
So as to say for certain I was here
Or somewhere else: I was just far from home.
A small bird flew before me. He was careful
To put a tree between us when he lighted,
And say no word to tell me who he was
Who was so foolish as to think what he thought.
He thought that I was after him for a feather—
The white one in his tail; like one who takes
Everything said as personal to himself.
One flight out sideways would have undeceived him.
And then there was a pile of wood for which
I forgot him and let his little fear
Carry him off the way I might have gone,
Without so much as wishing him good-night.
He went behind it to make his last stand.
It was a cord of maple, cut and split
And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.
And not another like it could I see.
No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it.
And it was older sure than this year's cutting,
Or even last year's or the year's before.
The wood was gray and the bark warping off it
And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.
What held it though on one side was a tree
Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,
These latter about to fall. I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

The Wood-Pile by Robert Frost



The Mount Volunteers: An Update from August 2024

by Frances Rollin

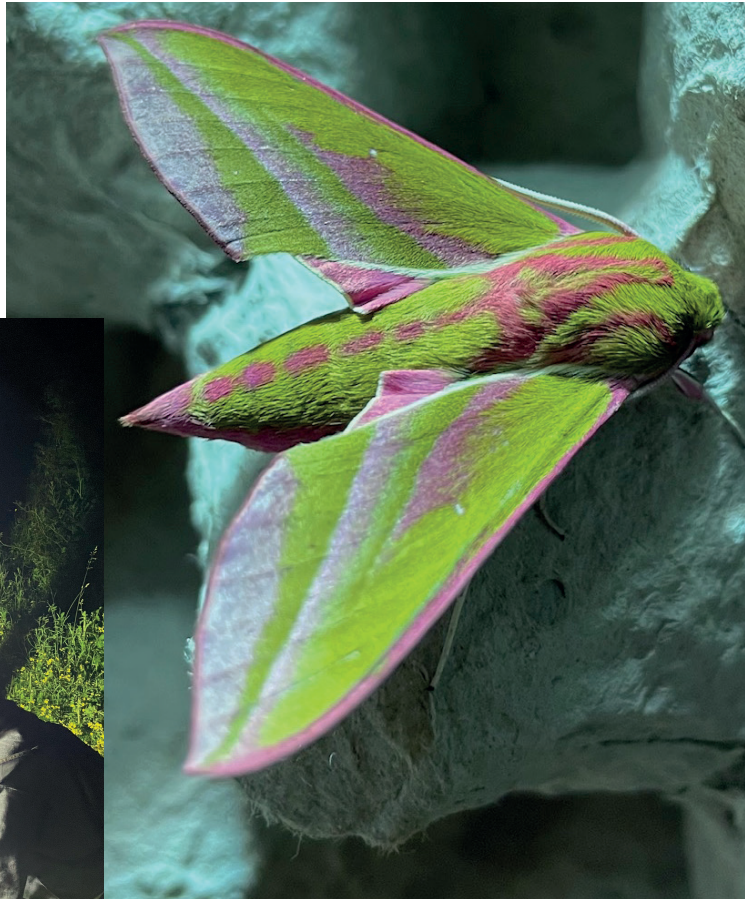


THE MOUNT Volunteers has been running now for over 2 years. Real progress can be seen in our field, with a significant reduction in scrub and an increase in biodiversity. The orchids on the Mount have been particularly impressive this year, with 3 different varieties being spotted. On Sunday 16 June we celebrated the results of our endeavours with an evening of drinks and nibbles including homemade elderflower champagne.

On Sunday 7 July, we held our annual botanical survey of the plants in our field. Another impressive list of chalk grassland specialist species was recorded using informal quick quadrat surveys. Common eyebright, common centaury, yellow wort and fairy flax were spotted, amongst others. As well as many pyramidal orchids, a rare white version was spotted. In the areas very recently cleared of scrub by volunteers, it was possible to see how valuable our work is, with a profusion of flowers in these spots. It was good to see the kidney vetch that we have planted succeeding in the scrapes dug last year. We hope to see an increase in small blue butterflies as a result. Despite the showery weather, we all enjoyed the survey and the scones afterwards.



On the evening of Monday 8 July, moth expert Paul Wheeler took a group of us up to our field to carry out a moth survey. Chalk downland is one of the best habitats for moths in the UK - nearly 100 species were found (including some nationally rare species). Some highlights were the red underwing, the rhubarb-and-custard moth and the large and small elephant hawk moths.



We are looking forward to starting our practical scrub clearance sessions in October. The dates for digs are 10 November and 8 December, each at 10am-1pm. Drop us an email if you would like to join us: mountvolunteers@gmail.com.



Guildford Borough Council Responds to New Proposals for the National Planning Policy Framework

by Raymond Smith

GUILDFORD BOROUGH Council has responded to the new government's proposed changes to the National Planning Policy Framework. The changes by the government are part of their aim to address the national housing crisis.

GBC are supportive in principle of the government's aims but spell out the problems faced in Guildford. They point to the constraints on their ability to provide more new housing due to the amount of the land in the area that is highly protected. Most obviously this is the green belt, but also the Surrey Hills National Landscape (formerly the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area and, policies aside, the physical problems of flooding.

Constraints are recognised within the proposed NPPF as a reason why the housing targets, set on the basis of population predictions, may be reduced below the amount calculated as needed. These constraints have to be "hard" and local planners

will need to provide evidence to the Planning Inspectorate on the constraints. The most difficult aspect is that councils must consider removing land from the green belt, which rather undermines the point of having it. The erosion of the green belt has been part of national-level thinking for some years although this government, like its predecessor, declares its support in principle for it.

One big risk of the NPPF has been that if a planning authority does not have sufficient housing sites designated within their local plan, or the plan goes out of date, developers can strong-arm buildings onto sites that are inappropriate, most obviously in the green belt. As GBC put it (more diplomatically), "We are concerned that the proposed new local housing need figure of 1,102dpa, whilst clearly placing a significant challenge for us in terms of plan-making, will result in a form of 'cliff-edge' that will put the borough at risk of potentially inappropriate speculative development during the period that we are seeking to update our



*The heart of Guildford,
seen from the Mount,
photographed by Raymond Smith*



*The heart of Guildford,
with Pewley Meadows in the background,
photographed by Ollie Craig*

plan. We would thus ask that the government consider a suitable transition period between the validity of our current local plan housing requirement and the coming into effect of the proposed standard method figure.”

One valuable change in the proposed NPPF is that where developers seek consent under the presumption in favour of sustainable development they will have to meet the high standards expected of all other development. This might reduce the harm caused by some inappropriate applications.

GBC are also looking for more clarity on the meaning of “grey belt”, and in particular for large developments that landowners might propose in the green belt on the basis of an inadequate five year land supply. GBC propose that this should only be allowed if the housing can contribute to meeting the need within the five year period.

This is a valuable point for GBC to make. However, “grey belt” is something of a confusing concept anyway, primarily because it is not a “belt”, it would almost by definition consist of isolated sites whereas the green belt is normally a ring of undeveloped “open” land that surrounds an urban area. Essentially, “grey belt” refers to land that has been called previously developed land in the NPPF. This has generally been known as brownfield land. Brownfield land of course occurs in all areas, but in the existing NPPF where brownfield land occurs in the green belt it can be redeveloped with new housing provided that the new buildings do not make more of an impact on the openness of the green belt than the existing buildings. Under the new proposed version more of a previously developed site in the green belt could be built on.

For GBC’s response, see: <https://www.guildford.gov.uk/article/24408/Latest-planning-policy-news>

For the NPPF proposals, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system#chapter-5--brownfield-grey-belt-and-the-green-belt>

For a short history of the green belt, my 2015 article in History Today is at: <https://www.historytoday.com/green-belt>



Autumn Arrives!

at the Unstead Community Reserve

Unstead is a small wetland reserve in the River Wey Valley, currently being restored by the Unstead Nature Community Group in conjunction with the Thames Water Biodiversity team. They have their own monthly newsletter, which you can receive by becoming a member on their website! Here is an excerpt from their September 2024 issue.

LITTLE DID I know how quickly summer would leave us when I put together last month's newsletter. Even though the signs were there I don't think any of us expected the weather to change so swiftly at the start of September. Thankfully, we have had a few warmer days but the signs of autumn are almost everywhere you look on the reserve.

The marginal plants on the new wetland are going to seed and the trees in the distance are starting to show autumnal shades. Fruits and berries are ripening in the hedgerows and on the trees in the works field. Opposite top to bottom, left to right, Guelder-Rose (*Viburnum opulus*), Rose hips, Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*), and although the bottom centre fruit looks like Cherry it is in fact a species of native Crab Apple. Next, Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and finally below Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) with its "Sloes".



Another sign of autumn is the appearance of Ivy flowers shown opposite. Not everyone's favourite plant, ivy uses trees and walls for support, allowing it to reach upwards to the light. Although a climbing plant, ivy is not parasitic. It has a separate root system and absorbs its own nutrients and water, so contrary to popular belief ivy does not damage trees.

The ivy flowers are a rich source of nectar and pollen for butterflies, bees, hoverflies, moths and wasps, which all need the extra boost before hibernation.

One particular species of solitary bee has even been given the name "ivy bee" (*colletes hederæ*) seen opposite top right and bottom left. These were first recorded in the UK in 2001 and now thanks to ivy they are slowly spreading north. This species feeds mainly on the nectar of ivy flowers and is seen in autumn when the flowers are in full bloom.

The flowers are followed by the clusters of black fruits which are a vital source of winter food for birds such as wood pigeons, blackbirds and redwings. With its dense cover of dark evergreen leaves ivy also provides safe roosting sites for bats and birds and home for numerous hibernating insects. All in all ivy is brilliant for nature so please think twice before removing it!



View over the new wetland

Report from GEF's Annual General Meeting, Held on 12 June 2024

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by Janice Bennett

ALASTAIR ATKINSON, Chair of GEF, welcomed members to the 2024 AGM, which was held at Zero's new premises on the High Street in Guildford, and outlined the programme for the evening. He went on to remind members about the ways in which GEF worked to achieve its aims by campaigning and engaging members through events and practical projects aiming to improve Guildford's biodiversity.

Campaigning

GEF was continuing to work with Guildford Borough Council to formulate its climate strategy but it was slow progress. It was also helping to arrange the environmental hustings which would take place shortly before the general election.

Membership Activities

GEF's quarterly newsletter, designed by Isabel Davies and coordinated with help from Sam Warner, was full of interesting articles on a diverse range of topics and the latest news on the environmental front. Sarah Davis continued to organise a large number of events and talks in conjunction with Zero Carbon Guildford.

Biodiversity Projects

Helen Harris presented an illustrated report highlighting the huge range of work taking place at the two GEF biodiversity projects.

The Mount

This volunteer-led group now had over 60 local people involved who had taken part in 7 practical conservation sessions over the winter months making good progress on clearing scrub, continuing the process of turning the site back to chalk grassland habitat. Several different surveys had taken place and a programme of events would be held over the summer.

They were now working independently of Guildford Borough Council, using an £8,625 grant from Your Fund Surrey to purchase a storage shed, tools, first aid training and kit and an information board which would include beautiful original artwork

depicting 30 different chalk grassland species. Corporate support had also been provided by Stevens and Bolton, Credit Agricole and Fitzpatrick Woolmer.

The objective over the coming year was to designate the Mount as a Local Nature Reserve and incorporate it into the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.



Rosamund Community Garden

This project had gone from strength to strength over the previous year. It had even featured on Countryfile on 21 April! A new innovation had been conservation grazing on Pewley Meadows and Rosamund Field, in conjunction with Surrey Wildlife Trust and Bug Life, of cows and Wiltshire-Boray sheep which would have a beneficial effect on several key species of fauna and flora.

The Hub project was now nearly complete, the pond had been finished and there was a new gate, sign and fruitcage. A large number of events had taken place, ranging from the annual apple pressing to willow weaving, laughter yoga and a Christmas wreath workshop.

£5,000 of funding had been received from Councillor Fiona Davidson for several enhancements to the project. In addition, Ringway had laid an accessible path into the garden and there had also been several corporate days. Other organisations involved included the Duke of Edinburgh scheme with six families attending the garden regularly and several other youth projects.

Financial Report

Janice Bennett started her report by paying tribute to Adrian Thompson, the previous Treasurer, who had given her invaluable help and guidance during the past year as she gradually took over the Treasurer's role.

The number of GEF members at June 2024 stood at around 320, which was a little lower than last year, although still much higher than six years ago.

- General Fund income from all sources had remained strong over the course of the year
- General Fund expenditure in the current year was similar to the previous year
- The Executive Committee had agreed to a £3,000 donation from the General Fund reserve to enable the completion of the Rosamund Hub. This had led to the General Fund reserve reducing compared to the previous year, but it remained healthy at almost £3,500 which is over 12 months expenditure.
- The Rosamund Garden had had a very busy year as shown through the movement of the different funds, but all the finances remained sound at the year's end.
- The Mount received a generous donation of £8,625 from Councillors Angela Goodwin and Colin Cross at Surrey County Council. Most of this had been spent by the year end on enhancements to the project.

Overall, GEF's finances ended the year in good shape despite the pressures of the cost-of-living crisis and they are well placed to continue the good work over the coming year.

Elections of the Executive Committee

Alastair thanked Richard Seymour and Keith Chesterton, both of whom had decided to step down from the Committee, for their valuable contribution over many years. He also welcomed Sam Warner who was standing for election to the Committee.

The new Executive Committee are:

Alastair Atkinson – Chair/Climate Crisis Chair

Helen Harris – Biodiversity/Rosamund Chair

Janice Bennett – Treasurer & Membership Officer

Sam Warner – Communications Officer

Sunethra Mendis

James Sinclair

Alastair also thanked the following for their hard work during the previous year:

Isabel Davies – Newsletter Editor

Sarah Davis – Events Officer

The Future of GEF

In concluding the meeting, Alastair told members that discussions were underway with Zero Carbon Guildford about a merger between the two groups. Zero was now a thriving organisation with a large membership. They were a natural fit with GEF as they concentrated on climate change policies and GEF on biodiversity. Both could benefit from the others' skills and use their publicity channels for mutual benefit. Several members expressed their support for going down this route. More information about it would be given to members soon.

Alastair concluded the meeting by taking questions and thanking all those involved in GEF and members for their support during the past year.



EVENTS

All the forum's events are open to the public!

Saturday 16 November 10 AM - 5 PM

The Shalford Energy Showcase

Learn more about how to power your home with renewable energy, reduce pollution and save money. Find out about solar panels, batteries and heat pumps from suppliers who have worked in the area, talk to the Community Energy team about investing in local energy projects, discover local council schemes to insulate your house, book an energy survey for your house, find out about grants available, and more.

Location: Shalford Village Hall GU4 8BQ



Thursday 28 November 7:30 PM
Sustainable & Ethical Beekeeping

Honeybees are marvellous creatures. They've been around for millions of years and provide the vital service of pollinating many of the plants that provide us with food. We look at some of the ethical concerns raised by both beekeepers and non-beekeepers and how beekeeping can be practised in a sustainable way.

Location: Zero Carbon Guildford
168 High Street, Guildford, GU1 3HW
More info: www.zerocarbondguildford.org

Saturday 30 November 1 - 2:30 PM
Community Water Lab: 6 months on

It's been 6 months since we opened our Community Water Testing Lab. We'll go through our data, share what we've learned in that time and explain how our data feeds into a larger national picture. We'll also discuss our collaboration with external partners, share any insights and of course we'll leave plenty of time for questions.

Location: Zero Carbon Guildford
168 High Street, Guildford, GU1 3HW
More info: www.zerocarbondguildford.org

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Guildford Environmental Forum aims to improve the environment in and around Guildford for wildlife and for people and to build a sustainable future. Join us in our work around the town and have this newsletter posted or emailed to you four times a year. Forum membership is only £10 per year or £15 for a couple, while for age 21-25 it's £5 and for under 21s it's free. New members are warmly welcomed! Please contact Janice Bennett with any queries.



Please send all newsletter submissions for our winter edition (articles or photographs) to Isabel Davies by December 1st at the latest!