



Hi All,

Well, it's been a fantastic month for Stratford Park. Last month's Stroud Festival of Nature was a spectacular success eclipsing last year's attendance numbers. It was great to see so many organizations and individuals coming together with a common interest in wildlife. The weather was also kind on the day, with the sun cascading down through the arboretum projecting shafts of light on everyone. Steve Roberts must be congratulated for pulling off the best festival so far, and visitors going through the museum doors topped 1200! It was particularly pleasing for me to represent the Landscape Group with a marquee which proved very popular. Staff from head office at Coventry put great effort into helping me with the displays, as well as staff from our Bristol branch. This really cemented the company's commitment to the park and its continuing development. I must also thank Paul James for allowing me the flexibility to work on the festival during what is a busy period for staff in the park.

This must surely have been a fitting prelude to the achievement of a gold award for Stroud in Bloom where Stratford Park once again made a significant contribution to the overall points

awarded. Never before, have I felt more proud to be associated with the park and to see such a growing community spirit. These successes have turned around a difficult summer for me and my focus and commitment has never been stronger for the park and its development. With autumn now upon us, another wave of wildlife will arrive in the park with the winter visitors from Scandinavia, Redwings and Fieldfares. As the leaves fall, birds are more in evidence and easier spotted. Autumn moths provide a challenge with their rustic colours and the last butterflies have hibernated for winter. The park continues to provide inspiration at what is undoubtedly the most beautiful season in Stratford Park. Enjoy the park this autumn.

Mike

News from the Supervisor's Trap



Ravens in Stratford Park

A total of 4 Ravens have taken up residency in the park. The birds first sighted on September 16th have been making daily appearances over the park, and are roosting at night in the arboretum.

Ravens are the largest members of the crow family *Corvids*, and normally found in more rugged upland habitats. As breeding birds, the Forest of Dean is the nearest locality for these birds. Ravens will sometimes wander from normal breeding areas, and it is possible that our birds have strayed from their normal breeding area. The very large size distinguishes them from their smaller relative the Carrion Crow, and the call is unmistakable. The birds are being mobbed by other crows and Jackdaws. This is the first time that Ravens have been recorded in Stratford Park, and a new species to the park's bird list.

Raven



Heart of England in Bloom *(Stratford Park contributes to another high score for Biodiversity)*

We are delighted to report that Stroud in bloom won a coveted gold award this year. This is a fantastic achievement considering the summer we have had. I recently received the judges marking sheet from Malcolm Tarling (Stroud in Bloom chairman) and was pleased to note that once again 9 out of 10 points was awarded for biodiversity and conservation, and although the points are not exclusive to Stratford Park, we are aware that it played a significant part in achieving this score. Developing the biodiversity here in the park is a commitment ongoing by myself the Landscape Group and Stroud District Council, and this is reflected in these points. To quote the judges – ‘*Areas of achievement*’ *Stratford Park again, its biodiversity, constant maintenance and amazing events*’. ‘*The jewel that is Stratford Park, somehow or another it seems to tick almost every part of the marking sheet*’. We must be doing something right! I feel immensely proud of our achievements in the park, and as I mentioned in a previous newsletter, it will be good to get 10 out of 10 next year for conservation and biodiversity. I was recently elected to the committee of Stroud in Bloom. I feel that this is a natural extension to the work I am doing in the park, and I look forward to working with Malcolm, Linda and the bloom team in the future.



(Staff from The Landscape Group and Stroud Town Council with members of Stroud in Bloom and Rozelle Jachowicz (Public Spaces Officer SDC) with the Stroud in Bloom gold award in Stratford Park)





Autumn butterflies in Stratford Park

Many of us associate butterflies with sunny days in summer, and for the majority of our species, most are on the wing during these months. As the autumn arrives and the days become shorter and cooler most of our butterflies will be in different stages of development, either in the caterpillar or egg stage, and will complete their growth into adults next spring. A few species hibernate through the winter months in the adult stage. These butterflies namely Small tortoiseshell, Peacock and Comma are still on the wing in October and can be seen flying on sunny days well into November. Another species of the same family – the Red Admiral is unable to survive through our winters but may still be seen on the wing into late autumn.

These butterflies will be getting sustenance mainly from ivy blossom which is an extremely important plant for late flying insects. Late flowering plants in the orangery and throughout the park will also provide nectar. Those who receive this newsletter will know that we are creating new habitats for butterflies throughout the park, and planting nectar rich flowers in the beds. The caterpillars of all of the butterflies mentioned, feed on stinging nettles and during the spring, the larval nests can be found in the park on the wildflower bank and around the perimeter fields. Stinging nettle is regarded as a troublesome weed, but within the ecosystem it is one of the most important plants for invertebrates.

We have a large clump of ivy growing on the wall in the works compound which attracts hundreds of hoverflies, bees and butterflies, and on 6th October a total of 6 Commas were seen imbibing on the blossom. The butterfly is cryptically marked above, but gets its name from the small white comma mark on its underside. When at rest the wings have serrated fringes which when closed, look like a dead leaf. This affords the butterfly excellent protection from predators. As soon as the cold weather arrives, these butterflies will hibernate in our buildings, hollow trees and in walls appearing next spring to produce a new generation. Its worth walking around the park this month on a sunny day to spot butterflies. Look for ivy growing in the sunshine and on walls.



(Comma on buddleia Photo: Mike McCrea)

Childhood memories of a Park keeper

For several years I have considered a small feature within the pages of this newsletter which starts my journey in the park as a boy. I have then considered it irrelevant and not related to biodiversity, and therefore aborted it. In a somewhat cathartic way and as a request to the continual pressure from my sister to write this, I am going to 'borrow' a few pages to tell 'my story' with Stratford Park. Where did it all start? Well, as a child I grew up only 100 yards from the park, and like most schoolboys, collecting bird's eggs was the norm. In the 1960s collecting bird's eggs was still not illegal for all but a few protected species, so Sunday afternoons was my 'egging day'.



(The past – the start of the 'egging years')

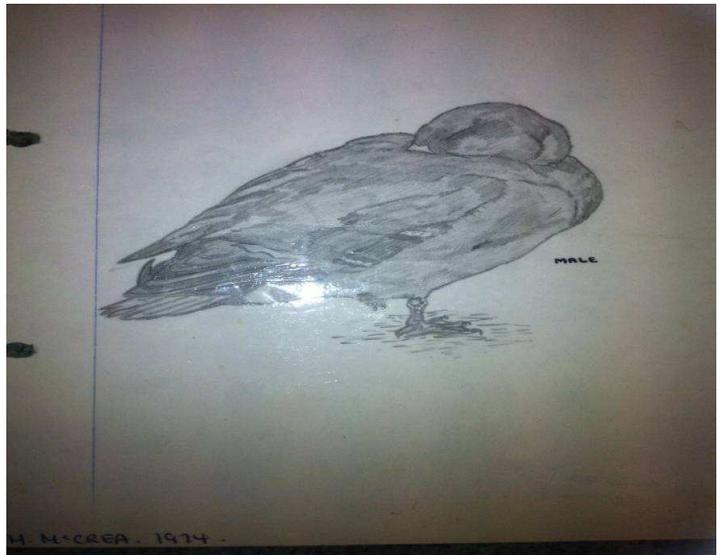
Up until 1973 the park used to have a stand of massive elm trees mainly around the top perimeters, but also one or two on the main field, and these would provide great places for not only egging but climbing too. The rotten cavities which were succumbing to Dutch elm disease were good nest holes for starlings and jackdaws, and the higher branches great for Carrion crows nests. Squeezing your hand in to reach the eggs was the easy part, getting your hand out again with the eggs was much harder. Then there was the problem of transporting your clutch down to the floor without breaking them. Solution – 'put them in your mouth' releasing your hands to do the climb down. This appeared a great idea, but you learnt very quickly not to drop from the lower branches to the floor with eggs in your mouth, because the impact usually left you with a mouthful of yolk and shell! In the early 70s there were more birds in the park, and there seemed to be a nest in every bush or hedge. Spotted flycatchers, Grey wagtail and Bullfinch all fell prey to my quest for the ultimate egg collection, a quest which feels abhorrent now. Nevertheless, the more difficult and concealed the nest, the more ingenious I would be in procuring the eggs. There used to be a small island on the lake, and one year a little grebe had built its nest there. How do I get to the eggs? A visit to the Stratford road allotments gave me the answer for there were many old washing tubs, and one could be used for a boat!

I nicked this and took it to the park. After checking it for leaks, and my mate keeping a lookout, I squeezed into the tub and carefully got in. Due to the weight, the tub was within 3 inches of the water level, but I managed to navigate across the lake using a cricket bat as an oar. Reaching the island and feeling quite cocky about my achievement, I reached into the grebe's nest, but there were no eggs. Damn! Suddenly I heard a yell – 'oi!! I had been spotted by the local bobby who was approaching rapidly. My mate proved his loyalty by running off, leaving me to row back to land on my own. I never did reach the bank dry, for in my panic I capsized the tub and went straight into the water. I was more worried about the hiding I would get from my parents for getting my clothes wet, than the policeman. The winter of 1973 was very cold and one morning whilst birding around the lake, I found a dead tufted duck perfectly frozen. What a find, I'll take this home! I sat it on top of my bedroom cupboard. 'Who needs a taxidermist!' The next morning

I awoke to a terrible stench in my room. The bird had thawed. I cut off the wings and placed these in borax to dry, then cut off the head and took it into the bathroom where I put it in acid. As a result of this, I had a gleaming skull and a pair of wings for my wall.

The woodland was a great place to play 'war', and along the edge of the field were many box hedges which still remain today. These became gun pillboxes and the adjacent badger sets became our dug outs. There used to be a large compost area by the walled garden, and we would pretend to be shot and fall off the wall into the compost. On daring nights, we climbed down into the coal cellar below the mansion house. The mansion was occupied by monks then. Summer days were always spent in the outdoor pool, and a game of hide and seek made up Saturday afternoons. Usually, about 8 of us would meet in the park and one boy would be chosen to be 'on it'. The others would then disperse into the park and hide. 5 minutes later the hunt would start. Every time one of us was captured, they in turn would help to catch the rest. The rules were that you must never leave the boundaries of the park, but you could go anywhere else. It usually took hours to round up the whole gang, and the last one left needed to be very clever in hiding. Many times whilst making a hasty retreat from the gang, I would wade through the river to avoid capture, even though this meant a good hiding when I got home. As my 2 younger sisters got older, I would take them for walks in the woodland, but there was always another motive for this. They made good bearers for the things I collected and took home, owl pellets, eggs, wings and skulls of dead birds. On returning home, I would dissect the owl pellets and show my sisters what the owls had been feeding on. Advancing through my teenage years, my bedroom became a menagerie of wildlife artefacts from the park, wings on the wall, boxes of skulls, insects and other specimens. The smell was awful, and potential girlfriends made a hasty exit whenever I introduced them to my room. This led to an extended bout of celibacy which I later re-addressed!!

It was around 1973-4 that I started studying the birds and insects more seriously, and I was meticulous in my record keeping documenting in great detail the anatomical features of a bird or butterfly. I would visit the park several times a week and sketch the wildfowl, which in those days included many species that have long disappeared from the lake – Pochard, Teal and Pintail duck. The lake was crystal clear. You could see the bottom clearly and a multitude of aquatic life was evident. In spring there occurred thousands of toads and frogs, so many that their spawn filled every part of the lake. Sticklebacks and minnows were numerous.



(Drawing of Mallard by Stratford Park lake circa 1974)

By 1976 I had become a very serious young naturalist studying in detail the wild birds and butterflies of the park. Despite being drawn away by the normal things that young men did, girls and going to the pub, I maintained my interest in nature and the park, and continued keeping notes and records of the park's birds. I still have those notebooks today. Into the 1980s and I found myself taking my own young children to the park. As they got older, a game of cricket on the fields was always great fun on a Sunday afternoon. I had noticed during this decade that many of the birds were declining. My records were showing declines in such species as Nuthatch, Coal tit and spotted flycatcher. In 1975 the beech plantation trees were about 2 metres high, and Bullfinches used to nest there.

By 1983 they had disappeared. Changes in the infrastructure of the lake in the 1980s also had a massive impact on the wildlife, and all of those creatures that I saw so commonly 10 years earlier had gone. The 1980s were my prolific years for studying birds and bugs, and the park played an important part in my field work. At this stage I think it would be prudent not to document my earlier 'courting days' in the park! Advancing through that decade saw much change in the park. Previous to this in the 1970s there was no leisure centre. Only around 1974 did this appear. The putting green extended over the area which now occupies the leisure centre. 25p gave you a round on the green. During the 1980s when visiting the park, I used to watch the grounds men working, preparing the green and tending to the flowers, and although I had chosen a path in the swimming pool and construction industry, I often thought how nice it would be to work in the park. In fact on one occasion I even prepared a portfolio of my work to present to George Ham who was then the head man at the park.

So again, we advance through the 80s and into the 1990s and into self employment. I ran my own business during this period working on large landscaping and construction projects, but continued with my fieldwork, especially Lepidoptera. Apart from a 2 year period as a contracts manager for a construction company in Swindon, the 1990s and early 2000s saw me flat out working all over the country, and only during this time did I lapse my work at the park.

The floods of 2007 were devastating to many businesses, and mine was no exception to this. Inclement weather, sometimes intolerable customers and the business environment made me sit back and take stock of my direction in life. However, despite the foregoing reasons, my work was challenging and very rewarding at times, especially when looking at the end product. From initially deciding to leave self employment in December 2007, it took my wife another 9 months to finally persuade me to take the plunge into 'mainstream employment', a thought which at that time seemed rather daunting.

The next phase is probably the most unbelievable and coincidental chapter in my life since first climbing those elms in the park as a boy. In January 2008 I embarked on one more, large project which would be 'my last'. Having completed this in June, I finally made that important move and ceased self employment, albeit with a fantastic portfolio, a portfolio which was to be instrumental in me coming to the park. I had a few months of R&R, and spent most of the summer birding and recording moths. I then put my CV together and registered this with an agency.

In no time at all, jobs were coming my way, then, in November 2008 an e-mail arrived – ‘contract supervisor required for busy grounds maintenance company based at Thornbury’. ‘This looks interesting!’ I confirmed an interest in the position, and the agency duly arranged an interview. It was with some trepidation that I set out for an interview on a cold damp December morning. I had researched the company ‘Wyevale’ on the internet, and seen that they covered a wide area in the South-West. It was Colin (Lennox) now in business development that met and interviewed me. Having gone through the usual introductions and formalities, I showed him my portfolio and he was to say the least, suitably impressed. He then said ‘the job is at Stratford Park’, do you know where it is?’ ‘Stratford Park’, I said. ‘Are you joking’!! I couldn’t believe this. ‘We will let you know in due course’. Immediately I knew I had to have this job. The salary ‘meagre by my previous earnings’ was not important, but to have a job working in the park would take me in ‘full circle’. Needless to say, I got the job and the rest as they say, is history. Almost 4 years into the job, I can honestly say that I feel blessed to be in a position to work with so many different and interesting people, and to work on the biodiversity of the park. To be studying the wildlife here has been the culmination of a childhood dream. Working with such organizations as the Museum in the Park, Stroud Nature and various schools is a huge bonus. My role at Stratford Park is never taken for granted, and I never lose sight of the fact that the main reason we are here is to provide good quality grounds maintenance, but being able to achieve my ambitions is hugely rewarding. Working for a company that also aspires to environmental commitment and biodiversity development makes the journey even more pleasurable.

Looking back at those early boyhood days collecting bird’s eggs in the park, who would have thought that now in 2012 I would be sat here writing this and realising my lifetime ambition. Nature has always provided me with a moral compass throughout my life, and I would like to feel that it has also instilled good qualities in me as a person. I no longer collect birds eggs, climb trees or race through the park, those days are gone although the memories remain indelibly stamped in my mind, but the years ahead, I hope will allow me to inform and educate more people about the huge natural asset that is – Stratford Park.



To conclude, I suppose if I had to thank anyone in my life for putting me on my ‘wildlife trajectory’ it would be my mum, who took me along the lanes in my pushchair in 1960 as an infant, and showed me the beauty of nature, and is no doubt responsible for me writing this now.

(The present – Festival of Nature 2012)

Wildlife to see now in Stratford Park

BIRDS: Raven 4 birds are currently in the park. These can be seen most days calling from the tops of the large conifers in the arboretum. Sparrowhawk (still present. Kills are being found daily). Little owl (on the main field, but due to leave its territory soon), Goldcrest (an influx is evident this month. Birds can be spotted below the mansion house in the Yews and Cedars). Mallard / Mandarin duck (A hybridised female is present on the lake), Common Buzzard (Over the main fields most days). Kestrel (over the top fields). At 10th October no evidence yet of Redwing or Fieldfare indicating that this winter may be mild. Last year birds arrived in mid-September. Nuthatch (Quite common this month around the orangery) Mixed gulls (on the top fields). Green woodpecker (wildflower bank and top field most mornings).

BUTTERFLIES: Comma, Small tortoiseshell, Peacock, Small white, large white and Red admiral. (All can be seen at ivy blossom on sunny days below the mansion house and by the service compound)

EVENTS

Autumn walk in Stratford Park. Join museum staff for a walk around the arboretum. All ages welcome. Meet at the museum 2pm Sunday 14th October.

Fungi, Forage and Folklore. Join expert John Roberts and explore the world of fungio and find out about wild food and conservation. Organised by Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust. Contact community wildlife officer Ellen Winter on 07739 297309 or email Ellen.winter@gloucestershirewildlifetrust.co.uk

CONTACT: Mike McCrea email MMccrea@thelandscapegroup.co.uk mike@media-maker.com Tel: 07833091294

USEFUL LINKS: www.thelandscapegroup.co.uk www.museuminthepark.org.uk www.stroudnature.co.uk www.theaes.org www.butterflyconservation.org

