

Grimpsargh Wetlands Newsletter



Spring 2025

Welcome

You cannot fail to have noticed that there is currently great concern about the renewed spread of avian influenza ('bird flu') across the UK. Although most instances of the disease have been identified in the eastern part of the country, in recent weeks, increasing numbers of cases have been reported in the north-west. You can read more about the current situation in this newsletter.

DON'T RISK SPREADING BIRD FLU!

Keep to the footpath, with **dogs on leads**

Do not **pick up or touch** dead or sick wild birds

Do not touch wild bird feathers or surfaces contaminated with wild bird droppings

If you keep poultry or other birds, wash your hands, clean and disinfect your footwear before tending to your birds

If you find any dead wild birds, please report online.

www.gov.uk/guidance/report-dead-wild-birds

Or call the Defra helpline on 03459 33 55 77

APHA may collect some dead birds for surveillance testing. Otherwise, birds can be disposed of safely, if necessary, by the local authority on public land or by the landowner/manager. www.gov.uk/guidance/removing-and-disposing-of-dead-wild-birds

Animal & Plant Health Agency

It is important that we all follow both national and any local guidelines aimed at preventing the continued spread of this disease. The hope is that warmer, brighter weather, as we head into spring, will help suppress further spread. After the weather we've experienced this winter, we

could certainly all do with some warm spring sunshine! We don't wish to discourage anyone from visiting the Wetlands, but please do follow the guidelines as outlined on the poster. In the coming weeks, the annual spring migration of birds from over-wintering grounds to summer breeding sites will be well underway. In this context, we can look forward to the wonderful sights and sounds of the spring passage of whimbrel, when they stop off at the Wetlands, and we encourage you all to make the most of this, all to brief, spectacle.

The Trustees

Detailed Assessment of the Current Avian Influenza Outbreak

With the confirmation (for the first time this winter) of the HPAI H5N1 variant of the virus in poultry, along with its detection in wild birds, together with the continued detection of HPAI H5N5 in wild birds, there are at least two different strains of the virus currently circulating in the UK. As a consequence, Defra considers that the wild bird risk is now **very high**, with further cases expected to be detected in the coming weeks.

In response to escalating number of cases of avian influenza, and the continued heightened risk levels, an 'avian influenza prevention zone (AIPZ)' has been declared (as of 24th January 2025) covering the whole of England. The AIPZ measures apply to bird keepers, irrespective of whether they have pet birds, commercial flocks or just a few birds in a backyard flock. Regarding wild birds, the following should be reported to Defra using the online reporting

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facility (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/report-dead-wild-birds>):

- 1 or more dead birds of prey (including owls)
- 1 or more dead swans, geese or ducks
- 1 or more dead gulls
- 5 or more dead wild birds of other species

If you feed wild birds in your garden, please keep feeders and water baths clean as advised by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO):

<https://www.bto.org/how-you-can-help/providing-birds/feeding-garden-birds>

This will help to stop avian influenza and other diseases spreading between birds. Always thoroughly wash your hands with soap and warm water after handling feeders etc. You may be aware of a recent case of a ‘spillover’ infection of a person who acquired the virus on a farm, where they had close and prolonged contact with a large number of infected birds. Guidance from UKHSA (the UK Health Security Agency) is that the risk to the general public, from avian flu, remains very low.

The same cannot be said for a number of other non-avian species and frequent ‘spillover’ into terrestrial and marine mammals has been confirmed. Most notably, mammal-to-mammal transmission of the virus has been seen in European fur farms, South American marine mammals and, extensively, in US dairy cattle. In the UK, small numbers of species such as otter, fox, seal, dolphin and porpoise have been confirmed as infected with avian influenza. Clearly, the spread of the virus in non-avian species is a concerning development.

U3A on the Wetlands

On a rather cold and damp day, in early December, a group from the Longridge branch of the *University of the Third Age* (U3A) visited the Wetlands as part of their walk between Grimsargh and Longridge.



U3A visitors on the Wetlands.

During the course of their guided walk, the group were treated to excellent views of large numbers of Lapwing along with impressive numbers of Cormorant and a nice little group of Tufted Duck. The damp conditions also provided great opportunities to see a variety of fungi (the highlights being abundant Yellow Brain and Jelly Ear fungi on dead and decaying branches).

The group was particularly interested in the history of the site, its role in supplying water to the local community and the, long-gone, Red Scar Courtaulds factory. In addition, they were fascinated to be reminded of the nearby Longridge/Whittingham railway. Indeed, a number of people well remembered the days of waiting for trains to pass at Grimsargh’s level crossing! Of course, today, the old railway embankment, behind *The Plough*, forms part of the public footpath around the Wetlands.

We were delighted to receive donations totalling nearly £70 from the U3A group and we are most grateful for their generosity and support.

Winter Guided Walk

On another cold and foggy December day we held our, now traditional, ‘after all the mince pies’ winter guided walk. This was an opportunity for members of the public to indulge in a little gentle exercise along with some great bird-watching opportunities - despite the murky conditions.



Visitors on our winter guided walk.

Not surprisingly, there was a large winter population of Mallard (over 70) to be seen. Perhaps more surprising, for the time of year, was the presence of a pair of Shelduck on the Island Lake. Good numbers of Lapwing were present (around 170) and these were seen being ‘spooked’ by a hunting Sparrowhawk. A group of Snipe were seen (at least 15) on the small island of the Island Lake. Other highlights included a pair of Reed Bunting among the Phragmites reed beds, a small party of Goldfinch and a surprisingly small number of Coot – often so plentiful on the Mere.

Again, as with the U3A guided walk, numerous jelly fungi were seen as we walked around the site – not surprising given the dank conditions. We are grateful that so many people choose to spend a few hours of their Christmas holidays on the Wetlands and we are particularly thankful to those who made donations at the end of the walk.

Visits by the Ribble Rivers Trust and the Fylde Rangers

We were delighted that, once again, two of our closest partner organisations spent time working on the Wetlands over the winter months. Both the Ribble Rivers Trust (ribbletrust.org.uk/) and the Fylde Rangers (www.facebook.com/FyldeRangerService/) are regular visitors and are a tremendous help to us with our winter maintenance work. Both groups can make good use of willow – something, you are undoubtedly aware, we have more than enough

of. Both groups were interested in using willow for their, ever popular, wreath-making classes and other community projects.



A member of the Ribble Rivers Trust preparing willow bundles.

You will perhaps recall that, in the past, the Ribble Rivers Trust team have used willow bundles in their various environmental projects aimed at mitigating erosion of banks on local streams and becks. Sadly, that work has fallen victim to funding shortfalls and cuts that are being experienced by so many charitable and other organisations.



An ‘on the spot’ wreath-making demonstration.

As you will have seen, if you have visited the Wetlands in recent weeks, a great deal of work has been done by these groups over the winter. In addition to cutting back invasive willow, they have also been able to undertake other maintenance activities that are not possible during our regular volunteer sessions and we are tremendously thankful for their continued collaboration and support.

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A member of the Fylde Ranger team strimming scrub around the Island Lake.

It is worth mentioning, once again, that if you are involved with any group that can utilise willow, we are always more than happy to accommodate you for a day's willow cutting! If you would like to enquire about organising such an 'Away Day' for your group, please don't hesitate to contact us at grimsarghwetlandstrust@gmail.com.

Lapwing Records



Lapwing on the Island Lake

This winter, there have been some remarkable counts of Lapwing on the Wetlands. This is heartening news - given the dramatic decline of this, once familiar but now red-listed, wader. Trustee, Geoff Carefoot takes up the story.

"Grimsargh Wetlands is a notable roost site for Lapwing but the numbers present on-site in recent weeks have been far and away above our average. Local birder, and Wetlands volunteer,

Mark Breaks counted a phenomenal 980 birds present on the 17th January.

The normal number at that time of year is usually in the region of 150 birds, which roost on the islands and bathe and preen in the shallows, but they rarely find sufficient food here and tend to disperse to local pasture where they seek out invertebrates.

Why the influx? In January, there are many Lapwing still on the coastal mudflats and coastal pasture and it is too early for them to start their journeys inland. The cold and icy spell may have had a bearing on their numbers and it's likely that they are birds from another inland site which abandoned their roost to join our regular 'resident' population. Whatever the cause, it is an indication of the importance of Grimsargh Wetlands as a temporary sanctuary for Lapwing, whose numbers have plummeted in the last 30 years.

If you get a chance, call in at the Wetlands' main viewing screens to view these boldly marked birds. Often dozing, they erupt in a blizzard of black and white wings if they feel threatened by a passing sparrowhawk or peregrine falcon, circulating with many soft contact calls before deciding to settle again."

Other Recent Avian Visitors

Many of you will be aware that over the past 20 years, or so, there has been, and continues to be, a dramatic increase in the prevalence of egrets across the UK. Once an unusual sight, they are now familiar to many of us. At first, it was the Little Egret that became a regular at so many coastal and wetland sites. These days, Great White Egret, Cattle Egret and Spoonbills are becoming increasingly common.

Grimsargh Wetlands is somewhat unusual in that egrets are rarely seen. In the past, there have been brief visits by Little Egret and Great White Egret but, in general, they are rarely recorded here. We have to 'make do' with the

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familiar sight of Grey Heron fishing in the shallows of the Island Lake.

In the middle of January, a Little Egret did appear on the Island Lake and stayed for a few days and fished alongside the resident herons. Why we attract so few egret to the site isn't particularly clear, there are obviously plenty of fishing opportunities as evidenced by the success of the resident herons.



A Little Egret on the Island Lake.

Other welcome arrivals at the Wetlands, included a pair of Oystercatchers, quite possibly the same pair that nested on the small island of the Island Lake last year. They arrived at the beginning of February and, at the time of writing, are still present.

Finally, another welcome record was the sighting of a small group (7) of Siskin. Typically, they were high up in Alder trees where they search for seeds. The Siskin is a close relative of the, perhaps more familiar, Greenfinch. Both are members of the finch family, although the Greenfinch is slightly larger with a heavier build. Yellow-green with black streaks, the Siskin specialises in feeding on tree seed, their small pointed bill being ideal for extracting seeds from the cones of pine, birch, spruce and alder. During the warmer months they eat insects to supplement their diet. Due to the loss of much of their woodland habitat in the UK, they occasionally search for food in garden bird feeders.

Curlew and Whimbrel Roosts

Curlew typically spend the winter on our coasts and estuaries where they feed on tidal mudflats, marshes and surrounding farmland (the Ribble and Lune estuaries are internationally recognised winter haunts of Curlew and other waders). During the spring, the UK breeding population moves inland to summer breeding grounds (locally, the Bowland Fells). It is this spring migration, between the coast and the fells, that makes Grimsargh Wetlands an ideal 'stop-over' point for birds to rest and roost as they move inland. The roost is transient and it is only during early March that very large numbers of roosting birds are recorded.

At the time of writing (mid February), numbers of Curlew are beginning to increase (nearly 100 recorded on 13th February). The roost is likely to reach its peak around the second week of March (last year, over 400 birds were reported roosting here on the night of 11th March, 2024). These numbers will soon fall as the flights inland decline. Clearly, now is the time to see, and hear, large numbers of this wader. Of course timing is everything and the best opportunities for witnessing large numbers of Curlew are at dusk. Visiting during the middle of the day is likely to result in seeing only a handful of birds.



Whimbrel on the Island Lake at dusk.

Just as the numbers of Curlew roosting on the Wetlands will be diminishing, the numbers of the, rather similar looking, Whimbrel will begin to increase. We are fortunate that the Wetlands

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is one of the key 'stop-over' sites, in Lancashire, for late-spring migrating Whimbrel and the latter weeks of April are the key times to observe Whimbrel roosting on the Wetlands. Again, dusk, is without doubt, the best time to see large numbers.

Artificial Sand Martin Nesting Bank



The Sand Martin Nesting Bank at Brockholes.

Over the winter months, trustee Geoff Carefoot has been hard at work on an exciting new project for the Wetlands. The initial work on the project is nearing completion and Geoff shares an account of the project here.

"We regularly attract small numbers of Sand Martins to Grimsargh Wetlands in spring and summer which hunt for insects in flight over the lake.

Sand Martins usually nest in burrows in steep sand or soil banks near fresh water. Unfortunately, at Grimsargh, all our embankments are of sloped masonry. Sand Martins can however be attracted to artificial banking if these are close to water, substantially high to avoid terrestrial predators or flooding and have a local food source.

The trustees looked into purchasing a prefabricated example but this proved to be eye-watering expensive so the decision was made to try to manufacture one ourselves over the winter period. This seemed feasible, even more-so in autumn when our fencing contractors

salvaged a considerable quantity of usable fencing rails from our old fence. This timber was removed and power-washed to remove algae and slime, but the problem, with six months of rain, has been to get the timber to sufficiently dry out prior to construction.



Recycling timber, from the old footpath fence, for the construction of the nesting bank (photograph by Geoff Carefoot).



Nesting bank component assembly line (photograph by Geoff Carefoot).

In the meantime, 20 holes have been drilled for access tunnels and 20 x 1metre lengths of drainage pipes have been readied to attach to 20 nest boxes which have been constructed with sliding lids so that nestlings can be accessed to

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be ringed by qualified ringers should we be successful.



Sand Martin nest boxes (photograph by Geoff Carefoot).

The pipes will be filled with sand for the birds to excavate as they do in natural sand banks, the artificial burrows will be contained in the timber-clad frame.

We hope to have most self-made panels, the frame, nesting burrows, roof and rear access doors ready for assembly before the end of February as Sand Martins are one of the earliest arrivals back from Africa.

We hope, provisionally, to erect and complete the artificial bank on our scheduled volunteer session on Sunday 2nd of March and as usual ‘many hands make light work!’”

Spring Guided Walk

We plan to hold a ‘Spring Guided Walk’ at 10 am on Saturday 19th April (the Easter weekend) and we have our fingers crossed for good weather on the day and plenty of spring wild flowers in bloom! If you wish to attend the guided walk, please use the online booking system on our website to book your place and see the latest information regarding the arrangements for the day. Strong boots will be essential!

Spring Volunteer Days

Our proposed work schedule is as follows:

Sunday 2nd March
Saturday 15th March
Sunday 30th March
Sunday 6th April
Saturday 26th April

Work sessions start at 10 am, when we meet at the Compound. Generally, we work until about 2 pm in the afternoon; however, people are free to leave as and when they wish. As always, we ask everyone to book onto the volunteer days using our online booking system. If you register as a volunteer, you will be sent email reminders containing detailed information about both the work planned for the day and any tools you should, ideally, bring with you.

Fund-raising Update

As you know, we had a stall at the Grimsargh Farmers’ Market in the months leading up to Christmas. We are delighted to say that, overall, over £800 was raised from the sale of our calendars, greetings cards and stock donated by *Animal Crackers*. The sum also includes donations from collection tubs and sales of calendars and cards at the village store, Grimsargh and Blue Moon Computers, Longridge.

We are tremendously grateful to all the people who have purchased items from the stall or the shops. Remember, all the proceeds go directly to supporting the work of Grimsargh Wetlands Trust. We are indebted to Lindsay at *Animal Crackers* for her on-going and extremely generous support of the Wetlands. We are also particularly grateful to Ron and Jayne Woollam for giving up their Saturday mornings in order to run the Farmers’ Market stall for us. Thanks also go to Grimsargh Village Store, The Plough, and Blue Moon Computers, Longridge for their efforts – which are greatly appreciated.

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Legacy Planning

Many people choose to leave a gift, to a charity of their choice, in their Will. A legacy to Grimsargh Wetlands Trust will provide a lasting gift, helping to safeguard the future of Grimsargh Wetlands and ensuring that generations to come will continue to enjoy our wonderful nature reserve. We have many ambitious and exciting ideas for future projects and legacy income can provide us with the funds to develop these projects. Please consider leaving something to Grimsargh Wetlands Trust when you write, or update, your Will.

Celebrating and commemorating the life of a loved one, with a gift in their memory, is also a fitting tribute that helps support our work for Grimsargh Wetlands.

Remember, it is now possible to make a donation to Grimsargh Wetlands Trust, via PayPal, by scanning the following QR code with your phone:



We're always incredibly grateful to receive donations large or small.

A Reminder – Visiting the Wetlands

If you intend to visit the Wetlands on your own, we have an access point ('what3words' location - newsstand.lunch.bucked), from Preston Road, just across from Oban Court, leading to the Compound viewing screens. We also have an access point to the public footpath, that bisects the Wetlands, via the ginnel from Preston Road, just opposite Elston Lane (what3words – organist.stirs.bonfires). Finally, there is an access point from Preston Road, just by the new pedestrian crossing point opposite the Elston

Park Development (what3words - doted.budding.gravitate). This access point leads to the Fen viewing screen. We do ask that visitors only use these designated public access points. The public footpath across the Wetlands is very popular with dog-walkers and we ask that dogs are kept on leads at all times.

Membership information

Membership information is available on our website. If you need to update your contact details or have any other queries about membership then you should contact Trust Secretary, Jayne Woollam (jaynewoollam@hotmail.co.uk). Any general queries about the work of the Trust should be sent to grimsarghwetlandstrust@gmail.com. Remember, it is now possible to pay your subscriptions using *Paypal*.

Acknowledgements

We thank Groff Carefoot for allowing the use of his photographs. We are grateful to the Lancashire Environmental Fund and the Harold and Alice Bridges Trust for their generous financial support. A full list of our local sponsors can be found on our website. Grimsargh Wetlands Trust is a registered charity N° 1174037.

LANCASHIRE ENVIRONMENTAL FUND

