

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work review and report to Whixall Parish Council for its meeting to be held on 8 October 2025

Goodbye Graham and thank you

Councillors will be aware that Graham Turnbull has not been fit enough to join in the work parties on the Marlot during this summer.

He has now decided to step back from the MCG, which means that there are now just three members to carry on looking after our nature reserve for the local and wider community.

We three are an autonomous bunch, but Martin Spenser will act as the first point of contact on Marlot issues and matters arising.

Work programme

We have worked through the summer months with the usual maintenance tasks and will continue to do so, whilst also identifying any specific matters which may require urgent attention. Some fallen trees, for instance, or broken branches can be handled by our team of volunteers, but larger trees which have been damaged by storms and left in a dangerous condition will have to be dealt with by professionals. This is the case with the weeping willow in the front meadow, a main branch of which has cracked under the strain of heavy foliage, buffeted by high winds on Saturday night, 6th September. The tree has been cordoned off and the MCG will make themselves available to assist where possible, once the professionals are on site, but in the meantime the urgent action taken by the Parish Council to address the matter is much appreciated.

Squirrels

On 17th June, Tim Lamb pointed out that several trees had been stripped of their bark. He suspected squirrel damage and this was confirmed on the same day, when Natural England's Woodland Management Officer called in to the site. Tim then carried out a brief, but not exhaustive, survey and counted 17 birch and oak trees which had been quite badly damaged. If our young trees are attacked in those quantities each year, then the broadleaf woodland on site will not survive. We hope that positive counter-measures will be approved to protect the nature reserve.

Barn Owl box

The recent bad weather also brought down the Barn owl box installed in March 2021. We are hoping to be able to clean it out and repair it ready to be re-installed during one of our task days.

Ditch management

The team has completed the clearance of the main ditch in the front meadow. This is a laborious and unpleasant task and was done ahead of schedule, because of clogging caused by vegetation growing in the ditch and overhanging from the banks. The same issue has been identified further downstream, but the landowner has confirmed that he will be dealing with it.

We have now commenced ditch clearance on the pond side, caused mainly by sticks and dead branches. However, there is tree-root ingress into the channel from bank-side willow and alder trees and this will need to be monitored to prevent future blockages.

In addition to the main ditch, there are flood relief ditches on the western and northern boundaries. These are very overgrown and may require mechanical attention in the future.

Brash clearance

Alan Lomas has kindly allowed the use of his wood-chipper to deal with some of the arisings from tree and shrub clearance, which would otherwise have created enormous amounts of waste material. The remainder, mainly larger, pieces are used for log borders, barrier fencing and dead hedging.

Shopping list

The MCG will be looking to replace or supplement some of the Parish Council's worn out hand tools and equipment. At present, machinery is being serviced where appropriate and there is no perceived immediate need for replacements, unless the Council gives some thought to a wood-chipper, which has proved invaluable.

Wildlife

Whilst moving around the reserve during the summer, the following butterfly species were casually noted:- Peacock, Red Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell, Painted Lady, Comma, Gatekeeper, Meadow Brown, Speckled Wood, Small Copper, Common Blue, Brimstone, Orange Tip, Large White, Small White, Green-veined White (there may have been others). Also seen:- Large Red Damselfly, Common Blue Damselfly, White-legged Damselfly, Banded Demoiselle, Emperor Dragonfly, Common Darter Dragonfly

Flowers

Clearly, insects are attracted by the proliferation of flowers on site, although the density of Meadow-sweet and Rosebay Willowherb may swamp other less robust species. This year, for instance, saw only a few spikes of Common Spotted Orchid, but the dry conditions probably contributed to this. Also, there was less Bird's-Foot Trefoil than in previous years. The Devil's-Bit Scabious flowers are now seeding, so we shall soon commence the autumn clearance of the front meadow.

Autumn and winter work

Most task days will be spent cutting back the vegetation in the meadow areas, which we would hope to burn on site. The work is necessary in the absence of winter grazing and includes cutting back large quantities of re-generated willow growth. Probably after that, we shall need to replace both Council brushcutters and the chainsaw!

What happened to our ponds?

The team has been prevented from working in the pond area; this is now seriously overgrown, resulting from previous flooding, which brought in nutrients from polluted water. Some ponds were re-profiled with large machinery 5 years ago and this exercise may have to be repeated. It remains to be seen whether our key species, the Great Crested Newt, will survive on site, where it was once seen in large numbers.

Pilfering

It is disappointing to note unauthorised removal of items from site, such as cut timber and wildflowers. As I understand it, the status of any nature reserve requires that there should be no kind of interference, beyond the general management needed to preserve it as such.

Martin Spenser

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