Bealeswood Common

News and wildlife seen in November 2025

We are now a Local Nature Reserve! (DB)

Early in November we received the exciting news that this Common was awarded Local Nature Reserve status by Waverley Borough Council (WBC). Historically, the Common has been grazed and sheep and donkeys are remembered "managing" the habitats. However, the exceptional biodiversity of the site was recognised in surveys by the Surrey Botanical Society and Surrey Wildlife Trust leading to its award as a Site of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI).

Since the early 2000s villagers have been observing and recording various plants, animals and fungi and during lockdown in 2020 the Bealeswood Wildlife Recording Group (BWRG) was born. By the year end of 2024 some 848 different species/taxa had been identified and recorded (see www.dockenfieldpc.org.uk/wildlife).

BWRG at its first (socially distanced!) meeting in the hot summer of 2020. Left to right: Vicky Keller (WBC Warden), Alan Cox, Philippa Hall, Pauline Cox, Alex Potts, Dan Bosence, Colin Hall, Christina Rasmussen and Steve Luckett.

Given this extraordinary biodiversity it was proposed by BWRG that WBC might apply for Local Nature Reserve (LNR) status. This would give it additional protection into the future in this densely populated area of the UK with its depleted wildlife. Our ambitions were taken up by our warden Vicky Keller guided the application through the many committees in WBC. Finally, on the 4th November this year WBCs Executive Committee approved the application following detailed, sometimes impassioned, support from our councillors, including Steve Williams (Director of Housing and Environment).

Mysteries of a Bountiful Harvest (AT)

It has been impossible not to notice that this autumn we have seen an abundance of acorns, hawthorn berries, sloe berries, apples and more. It has also been hard to miss the ubiquitous chatter about this being a 'mast year" so I thought I should try and better understand what is so special about this year's autumn woodland harvest.

What exactly is a mast year? It is a year in which certain tree species produce a significantly higher number of seeds, nuts and fruits than they usually do. A “mast” is a bumper crop and so we get the term mast year. Which particular species might be included in a definitive mast year list is hard to pin down; oak and beech always seem to be included and are perhaps most commonly associated with mast years; hazel and chestnut trees are frequently mentioned and occasionally ash, cedar, hawthorn, blackthorn and apple trees.
How often do mast years occur? It is hard to be more specific than every few years because opinions on this vary enormously and because mast years are not regular events. Perhaps it is more informative to note that 2020 was the last substantial mast year for oak trees, but that 2022 was also a mast year, on a more modest scale.

Why do they occur? The jury is definitely still out on this question but a commonly accepted theory is known as the “predator satiation hypothesis”. By having lean years, a species can control the number of its predators and then by periodically producing a glut it can ensure that sufficient acorns/ beech nuts etc will survive and grow into young trees. Producing a bumper harvest drains a tree of its resources and can lead to stunted growth and/or root dieback so such harvests have to be the exception not the norm.

What impact does climate change have on mast harvests? Ordinarily weather and climate are thought to play a part, for example warm dry springs will enhance the pollination process as will the absence of a late frost. It is known that in some species extreme weather is a stressor and this can increase seed production. As things stand scientific research does not conclusively support the hypothesis that this year’s bumper harvest is as a result of recent extreme weather events, however, the question of whether and /or how climate change is impacting mast harvests is of real importance and much work is being done to provide answers. As things stand it seems reasonable and logical to suggest that it is likely that climate change is having an impact and studies are already producing data to suggest so e.g. beech

trees have been recorded as showing signs of decreased synchronised nut production.

Why do tree species act in unison in a mast year? Possibly one of the most curious features of a mast harvest is that a species will synchronise its nut or seed production and no-one knows how this happens. The geographical boundaries of a mast harvest can be enormous; oak trees from Scotland to Cornwall are all producing vast quantities of acorns this year as are the oaks on Bealeswood Common. There is much interest in the vast underground mycorrhizal networks that connect trees with one another and allow them to communicate warning signals of droughts, disease or pests. It is suggested that trees may use these fungal communication pathways to synchronize harvest production. This remains a theory and for the time being, therefore, we can say that why we have mast years remains one of nature's best kept secrets. A secret to keep us all marvelling at the wonders of nature whilst busily raking acorns off our lawns!

Birds (AC, PC)

There are now scattered records of our winter visitors; overflying Redwing, Fieldfare and the occasional Brambling. The latter is exciting as we have not seen one grounded here for years so overflying is the next best thing. They are a species that tracks beech mast, so neighbouring Alice Holt forest has good sites. Blue Tits are busy feeding amongst lichens, small flocks of Starlings are flying over to their roosts, and first-winter Pied Wagtails feed on the sheep feed (mangelwurzels) along Innum's Way from the Lower Common below).

Blue Tit on lichen

Pied Wagtail on mangelwurzels

Fungi (AA, AC)

November with its early unseasonably warm weather has brought an extended fungi season, with many of the generally earlier Waxcaps emerging during the first week of November. The beautiful deep red of the Scarlet waxcap

(Hygrocybe coccinea) Fig.1 and the bright lemon yellow of the Golden Waxcap (Hygrocybe chlorophane) Fig 2 adorning the grassland on the Main Common. The Glutinous Waxcap (Hygrocybe glutinipes) and the Butter waxcaps (Hygrocybe ceracea) are back this year and we have a lovely new species the Persistent Waxcap (Hygrocybe acutoconica) Fig 3 with its yellow and red multicoloured cap popping through the green sward.

The woodland floors still have a few regulars hanging on, with Clouded Funnels (Clitocybe nebularis) back and a late showing of spectacular Shaggy Parasol Mushrooms (Chlorophyllum rhacodes) Fig 4 have popped up on the compost heap but some notable regulars are missing, I haven't seen a single Amethyst Deceiver (Laccaria amethystine) yet . Common earthballs have appeared at last, Earthballs in general have been conspicuous by their absence until a few showed in mid-November.

Chemical Knights (Tricholoma stiparophyllum) and Bitter Oysterling (Panellus stipticus) Fig 5 are back in profusion, and we have ten species new to Bealeswood so far this November including a rather lovely little Milkcap, the Currey Milkcap (Lactarius camphoratus) Fig 6 and a Rosy Brittlegill (Fig 7).

Fig. 1 Scarlet Waxcap Fig 2 Golden Waxcapp Fig 3 Persistant Waxcap (photos AC)

Fig 4 Shaggy Parasol (AA) Fig 5 Bitter Oysterling (AA)

Fig. 6 Curry Milkcap (AA)

Fig 7 Rosy Brittlegill (AC)

November photos of Bealeswood from Alex Potts

Two celebrating our autumn colours, a queen Bufftailed bumblebee and a Tree Creeper

Nature's Seasons Calendar 2026- Once again Alan Cox has produced a calendar highlighting the diverse nature to be found in the Surrey-Hampshire borders. Copies can be purchased (£9 each) at the Frensham Village Shop or delivery within Dockenfield, and nearby, by contacting Alan Cox (alanfjcox@gmail.com). All money raised will go to the Frensham Churches Charity.

New Year's Day Plant Hunt. Every New Year's Day botanists around the country venture out in all weathers to try and find how many wildflowers are in bloom. Join Alison and me on this Citizen Science project at 10.00 am outside the Bluebell on January 1st to see how many we can find around the Common and down to Frensham Mill. Last year I was amazed to find 18! Contact Dan at dwjbosence@btinternet.com if you want to join us (in case of unlikely cancellation).

Bealeswood Wildlife Recording Group (BWRG)

Amanda Adolph, Dan & Alison Bosence, Alan & Pauline Cox, Philippa & Colin Hall, Alex Potts, Roger & Jill Trout, and Anne Tutt