Spring Bulletin
April 2024

Welcome to our Spring Newsletter.

At last the sun is shining, sometimes, and it's possible to venture outdoors without a coat. The park is full of woodpeckers drumming, parakeets screeching and songbirds singing. We've also heard reports of birds arriving from Africa, Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs. Keep your eyes peeled and tune-in next time you visiit. We have lots of events coming so read on and we hope to see you at one of our events soon. Enjoy the park!

Forthcoming Events

We look forward to seeing you at one of our events. If you're planning to attend, please wear footwear suitable for uneven and muddy ground.

More details about the Basalm Bashing event overleaf:

Spring is a good time to look for flowers in areas that will be in dense shade later in the year. Adjacent to the railway woodland is a small patch of Wood Anemone with delicate white flowers and dissected leaves. A little further along spot the white star shaped flowers of Greater Stitchwort with narrow grass-like leaves. Both plants can be damaged by trampling so are best observed from the well-used paths.

This woodland area is where I once flushed out a Woodcock – a strangely beautiful nocturnal bird that is declining nationally. They have been spotted at night feeding in the fields by the River Rea and also in some of the larger local wooded gardens. It is said that when threatened an adult Woodcock can pick up a chick between its legs and fly it to safety! Fact or fiction? The one-time nature diarist of the Guardian, William Condry claims to have twice observed this.

Wood Anenome (l) Greater Stitchwort (c) credit: Brian Ecott; Woodcock (r)

Basalm Bashing - an opportunity for you to help!

Himalayan balsam is an invasive, non-native, annual plant which is so successful at growing in the UK that it has now become a real problem.

It can crowd or shade out other (native) plants, is preferentially pollinated by insects and produces lots of seeds which are propelled up to 4m in all directions and germinate very easily. However, it is non-toxic and loosely-rooted so it is also very easy for you to join in the fight to get rid of it. No tools necessary.

Balsam Bashing is best done between end of May and the end of July, before the plants set seed.

Image credit: Tony Atkin / Himalayan Balsam in Flower

Continued overleaf

Balsalm Bashing continued

To pull up the plant, grab the stem as near to the ground as you can and pull gently to ensure you draw the root out. If the stem snaps off, you should check the rooted fragment left in the ground and pull it out if possible or if not, break it off as near to the ground as you can so it will not be able to grow up again.

Wear gardening gloves, long-sleeve tops and trousers as balsam is often found amongst nettles. Wellingtons are great for boggy areas, which the plants prefer. Every bit of bashing you do makes a big difference – pulling up just 10 plants will stop 3000 seeds being produced – and up to 3000 plants growing next year.

In Highbury Park, we will be Balsam Bashing on Sunday 16th June, and on Friday 5th July.

Both days will start at from 10am and go on until we are too tired or 3.30pm at the latest. You can arrive at any time, so please come and help for an hour if you have time. All volunteers welcome. If you don't feel able to participate in the Bashing, you could always help by bringing cakes or refreshments for the volunteers.

A word of warning: the Balsam does like to grow near water. Please be very careful near the water. Children are welcome and will be allocated areas well away from ponds or streams.

We will post more details about the volunteering opportunity nearer the time, so keep an eye on announcements, via social media, the website, the park noticeboard or our newsletter.

Laurel at Highbury

The University of Birmingham Conservation Volunteers came to Highbury Park on Sunday 17th March to help clear the dense laurel that had built up around Henburys Pond. Laurel is originally a Mediterranean plant that is now widespread in the UK, where it enjoys the damper conditions. As an evergreen, it is popular for hedges and ornamentation. It is a large shrub that can easily crowd out other plants and colonise large areas. Henburys Pond is in the South East of the park, near the allotments.

Over the years there seems to be a reduction in aquatic species in the Henburys Pond. Although the reasons are not known for sure, it is known that a large amount of laurel leaves can poison a pond. To help the pond recover, the volunteers cut down many of the laurel trees growing over the water. The result is a much clearer vista of the pond and improved footpaths for the many people who like to wander to that corner of the park. The laurel will grow back, but it will be a few years before it reaches the same height and density. Many thanks to the Conservation Volunteers, their help has really made a difference.

Highbury's History:
Joseph Chamberlain's Library

Joseph Chamberlain left Highbury to his eldest son Austen after his death in July 1914, and by the end of that year the house was left empty. The hasty departure of the family lay in its proposed use as a military hospital for troops wounded during WW1.

Highbury, The Library

As a result of its new use, as well as the pressures of holding public office during war time, Austen gave the house and surrounding grounds to the city of Birmingham in 1917. A Trust was then formed in 1919 to oversee the use of the house and grounds. Following the closure of the military hospital in 1932, the Trust arranged for the restoration of Joseph's library by the city's Museum and Art Gallery.

The restoration and re-opening of the library was celebrated by Joseph's family, who returned to Highbury for the first time since 1914. By the beginning of WW2 Highbury had already become a home for aged women and the library-museum was again closed. It was from this library that Joseph, aided by his personal assistant Mr Wilson, wrote many of his political speeches and from where he orchestrated his famous tariff reform campaign. The library-museum is again open to the public and can be visited during regular open days. Dates and times can be found www.chamberlainhighburytrust.co.uk.

Gail Pittaway March 2024.

With thanks to 'The House where the Weather was made - A biography of Chamberlain's Highbury' by Peter Marsh with Justine Pick 2019.

Winter Tree Identification Walk 16 March 2024

After the rain cleared the park looked glorious in the Spring sunshine as 29 of us assembled for a joint event between Highbury Park Friends and Birmingham Tree People.

The morning was led by Mac, of Birmingham Tree People, who shared his expertise with good humour. We started in the car park and after two hours had only progressed a few hundred yards down the main drive because there was so much to discuss about all the trees en route.

How can we identify trees in winter? By their buds is one way. Are the buds spaced opposite each other (maples) or alternating (beech)? What colour are the buds? Ash, we learned, is the only tree with black buds, but the ash keys (fruits) were still hanging off the tree, so that helped too. What shape are the buds? Beech tree buds are long and thin. Oak trees and Prunus (flowering cherries) are the only trees where the buds are bunched together, and we

Winter Tree Identification continued

had no difficulty identifying the Common Oak. The Red Oak we noted by the size of last year's large leaves lying on the ground beneath the trunk. Next came pine trees and observing both needles and bark helped. We counted the number of needles grouped together (two) to ascertain that the tree near the car park was a Black Pine but the one behind it was a Scots Pine because although the needles were the same, the tree trunk was a reddish colour towards the top. The bark on the Sweet Chestnut trees possesses a distinctive twisted pattern.

Lastly, the shape of some trees was also a give-away. One of the most distinctive trees at Highbury is the Silver Pendent Lime tree, planted as a specimen tree near the Henburys; also noteworthy was the towering form of the Metasequoia near the Henburys wall.

Some trees were more difficult to identify but we learned good pointers in terms of assessing buds, bark, shape and dead leaves for winter identification. We also realised how lucky we are to have such a fantastic selection of trees at Highbury. A huge thank you to Birmingham Tree People for sharing their expertise with us. It was a fascinating morning.

Early blossom

Three Cheers for the Bins!

We are delighted to let you know we have two new bins installed on the main path through the park. The bins were donated by Mike Hinton, Parks Manager, and Highbury Park Friends has paid for the installation. It's great to see that the bins are already being well used. Thanks to Mike for his help.

Advice for Dog Owners

Highbury Community News

The regular monthly Monday Open Days at Highbury Hall, organised by Chamberlain Highbury Trust are continuing throughout 2024. Open on the first Monday of the month from 10am - 3pm it is a great opportunity to explore the former home of Joseph Chamberlain and to find out more about the Trust's work and plans, both for the building and the former Estate. Guided tours take place throughout the day and last about an hour. Groups are welcome. Hot and cold drinks and cakes also available until 2pm

If you are interested in volunteering with Highbury Park Friends please email: info@highburyparkfriends.org.uk

Contributors to our Spring Bulletin - Anne Gilbert, Sarah Tomlinson, John Grayland, Sarah Hill-Daniel, Ellen Pisolkar and Gail Pittaway

Our next issue is out : July 2024

Don't forget to follow Highbury Park Friends on Social Media!

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