

Notes from the Nature Reserve

Green Gym Conservation Volunteers at East Ham Nature Reserve January 2016

Dates for Saturday sessions are 30th January, 27th February and 26th March 10am-1pm. Please come along if you can make it.

It's all a bit muddy, but things are already starting to grow. This is a good time to catch up with jobs before everything really takes off in spring. It's also nice to get out and do some exercise in the open air, so why not put on your boots and woolly hat and come and join us?



Penny pointing a stake with an axe

We have started on the major task of laying the next section of hedge. So far we have removed the horizontal branches and used them to make stakes. This is a good way to practise your axe or billhook skills. It is also very hard work, but good for developing arm muscles.

The idea of laying a hedge is to make an animal-proof barrier, with no gaps at the bottom. We don't need it to stop animals, but a thick hedge right down to the ground is a good corridor for small animals. It provides nesting sites for birds, as well as nuts and berries for food.

Our hedge is laid in South of England style. There are other styles, which are slightly different, but the end result is very similar.

The trunks of the hawthorn bushes, or upright branches of hazel, are cut part way through, leaving a section uncut. The bit that is left is used as a hinge to lay the bush flat or at an angle to the ground. Once laying down, the separate branches are woven together to "make the hedge". The process of cutting and weaving together is called "pleaching".

After "making the hedge", stakes are pushed through the middle and hammered into the ground. The tops of the stakes are held together with thin, flexible hazel branches, called "weavers". You can see the result on this picture, taken just after the first section hedge was laid last year.

If you look at the section we did last year, most of the cut trunks are regenerating by sprouting new shoots from ground level. All of the laid branches are growing new shoots along their length. New shoots are easy to weave in or cut to maintain the hedge at 4-5ft (1.2-1.5m), rather than having to keep the tall hedge under control.



Frances with MP Stephen Timms

Animal of the month

Brown-lipped banded snail - *Cepaea nemoralis*



These snails come in 3 colours, yellow, pink or brown.

Some have no bands, others have up to 5 brown bands on their shells. Sometimes the bands spread to form a single wide dark band.

The snail does not make the brown lip until it has completed its shell.

They are common on gravestones, where they rasp away the limestone with their radula, or tongue. They use the calcium from limestone to make the shell.

The banded pattern and colouring act as camouflage. Different colours and patterns are more common depending on the habitat. For instance, yellow with 5 bands is difficult to see in grass.

You will often find piles of broken snail shells near flat stones. They have been broken open by thrushes. They hit them on the stone, which is called a thrush's anvil.

Plant of the month

It was holly last month, so guess what!

Ivy - *Hedera helix*

The ivy we spend so much time clearing from paths and trees is the juvenile form of the plant. It roots into the ground and also puts out short aerial roots, which cling to trees and gravestones so it can climb.

Some ivy will mature on the ground, but usually, when it reaches a certain height, such as the top of a grave stone, or into the branches of a tree, it becomes adult. The leaves change their form to a more "leaf-like" shape. The stems become woody and grow upwards like a bush. They do not have aerial roots. If a cutting from an adult plant is rooted, it will grow as a bush.

The adult plant produces round clusters of flowers in autumn. They smell bad and are pollinated by flies. These are followed by berries which turn through purple to black.

These berries are an important food source for birds, when other food is scarce in winter, although they are poisonous to humans.



Ivy flowers



Ivy berries



Please contact us if you have any suggestions of things to put in the newsletter or on the website. Email newhamgg@gmail.com Phone Judi 020 8470 7680 or Frances 078 4597 3156. Check out the website www.newhamgreengym.org for more information about Green Gym, East Ham Nature Reserve Conservation Volunteers.