

Nightingale News

For the Friends of Nightingale Garden

December 2022

Flight of birds?

We have decided to have a bird-focus for 2023 – and for this newsletter too.

We hope you will help us start this off by making and attaching a bird to the decorations we will install in the polytunnel. You can do this after Sunday 18 December and we will take them down on 3 January. Our own little aviary for the festive season. See the website for more details.

We have a new volunteer, Doug, who has many years' experience working for the RSPB and has always been a keen ornithologist (NOT a twitcher). It is fantastic having him in our group and learning from him about the birds that visit the garden (see his article on page 2).

Doug has been growing a cotoneaster tree in his little tree nursery, which we will soon plant at Nightingale for its flowers, Autumn colour and berries for birds. We will put it next to the purple crab apple and redcurrant bushes so that side of

the garden, which is a bit wild, can become even more of a bird pantry.

In Spring, we would like to have an early morning bird walk to survey the birds in the garden and park – details to follow in subsequent newsletters.

We would like to think of other ways to support and enjoy the birds we have in the garden.

Let us know if you have any good ideas - especially if you can help us with them. The photo above is a wooden bird painted by Francesca Luisi.



Xmas tree has moved and is waiting for decorations



In 2020, two local residents donated a living Xmas tree to the garden. We were a bit stuck for space so planted it by a Swedish whitebeam tree, so we could decorate it for Xmas. They came often to the garden to water the tree and the other volunteers did too. But

during this year's drought it started to lose a lot of leaves and generally looked very unhappy.

In late October, David dug it up and moved it to what we hope is a better location in front of the new garden shelter. We have already underplanted it with Spring bulbs (see photo) to naturalise in the grass. We aim to keep it well watered but, if you are passing, do say some kind things to it to make it feel happier.

And you might like to hang a decoration on it but not anything chocolate, because it isn't good for visiting dogs, or anything that might be a choke hazard for small children. The squirrels quickly enjoy anything that looks like bird food – but we like squirrels too.

First impressions by a 'wild' volunteer

By Doug Radford

I 'discovered' Nightingale Garden when I attended the moth event in August and was so impressed by the friendly welcome that I wanted to be involved.

In addition to some basic gardening skills such as knowing which end of a fork to stick in the ground, I've studied wildlife in its various forms all my life, and so I naturally started to record what I've seen in and around the garden during the work parties and social events that I've attended.

Nightingale Recreation Ground is well placed to host all sorts of wildlife, being surrounded by mature suburban gardens on the southern edge of Cambridge, but also less than 400m from the nearest open farmland. Most of the birds I've encountered so far have been much as expected in a suburban environment, supplemented by additional species that reflect some local features. Thus the dozen House Martins feeding over the trees in late August probably came from the colony that nests on the large building opposite Outpatients at Addenbrooke's.

Being mainly big and black, the most obvious birds are members of the crow family. I've seen up to 24 Jackdaws systematically working their way across the grass looking for small insects, along with a couple of Carrion Crows and Rooks, and Magpie and Jay have been present on almost every visit.

Watch out for robins too

From about 17 December, the wooden robins with famous Robin names will fly back to the garden for the festive season. Probably in different locations to last year – if we can remember where they were. How many will you find?

Typical garden birds such as Blue and Great Tits, Goldfinches and Greenfinches frequent the margins of the site, so it was no surprise to see a Sparrowhawk circling overhead on two occasions, but two Buzzards on 2 October were less anticipated.

Buzzards have become really common in Cambridgeshire in recent decades, so these may have been young birds exploring the land around their natal area.



The one genuine surprise so far has been a Brambling that dropped in for a few minutes, also on 2 October. This was a young bird rather similar to a female Chaffinch, but the spots on its flanks confirm its identity (see photo above).

With the approach of winter and the arrival of thrushes from northern Europe, I'm looking forward to seeing what comes to feast on the berries of the whitebeams along the edge of the garden. Maybe we will even see some Waxwings?



Bird nestbox making



In late October 2022, Julian and Rebecca helped out at a Friends of Logan's Meadow community bird-box making event. This was organised by

our friend Ben Grieg from On the Verge, with lots

of kits made by Paul Waldman's team from the YMCA wood-skills project. They learned a lot from this pilot event and would like to do something similar at Nightingale in February. Doug says around Valentine's Day is a good time to do this. The project is currently at the research stage. More details will be in the next newsletter.

On the day, it would be great to have some extra volunteers to help people nail and screw the boxes together. But we will make some illustrated instructions too.

Autumn gardening

For what seems like months, our gardening sessions have involved a lot of cutting back or division of herbaceous plants. We like doing this. It is very social and also feels quite creative sculpting new shapes from sage, lavender, hyssop etc – and finding new plants under their skirts. It also makes enormous mounds of material for composting too, which keeps Julian awake at night.

We can make new plants and can find new homes for them – including by giving them away to passing garden users.

This cheeky oak tree (see photo), planted as an acorn by a squirrel, has survived at least two years' of weeding. It is growing surprisingly strongly in only about 10 cm of soil. And now we are also enjoying its Autumn colours.



Minibeast Mansion garden



The little 'fence garden' next to the Minibeast Mansion has been a delight this year. The star plants have been the purple Salvia Amistad (see photo), raised from cuttings. This is

much more frost-tender than some other salvias but we are going to see if the spot is sheltered

enough to allow them to survive the Winter. We have a couple more cuttings in reserve to replace the plants if necessary.

The new ground cover plants in the path and ones behind the brick edging are starting to take and we are looking forward to seeing it looking more verdant in the Spring.

On a very misty morning in November, Anne photographed a handsome spider's web too (see photo to left). These little observations give the garden volunteers a lot of pleasure – even if the gardening is a bit cold and damp at this time of year.

Willow harvesting

As soon as the leaves start to fall off the willow, we can begin to harvest it - usually until about April. Rebecca and Emma have already done a couple of cuts, including to make it less 'hairy' for the November Martinmas event (see page 6). Julia and gang used some of it to make the fantastic whale lantern, combined with some dried willow from last year.

On 14 and 16 November, during garden sessions, several garden volunteers had fun learning how to make random willow balls. We have made several of these (and nests) for the garden over the past few years. We found two willow nests in the club hut, made some years ago, and Samantha bound them together to top the new grapevine wigwam (see photo), to which she and Clare tied in some small willow hoops to strengthen it.

Jennie and Rebecca also made about 35 wreaths for the community event at St James' church on 3 December. Phew!

We love the fact that our willow gives so much pleasure while it is growing but also natural products for the garden. Insects like it too.



In the garden: painting, ramp and repairs



Community gardening isn't all planting trees and dead-heading flowers. There is always a list of things that need to be constructed, protected, repaired and re-painted.

In November, in very damp weather, Rebecca re-painted the Council picnic bench with a new tin of Garden Shades paint – intending it to be olive green but it seems very pale to us. We have decided to postpone the re-painting of other furniture (and Rosie the horse) until the Spring/Summer, when the paint might dry in more reasonable times.

Julian has been making an accessibility ramp for the garden shelter and Peggy has already planted a little garden in front of it (see photo to left).

Julian used some leftover decking to re-make our pallet shelves (see photo to right).

Over the next few months, he will use some of the leftover larch featherboard to add a couple of extra layers to the sides and back of the garden shelter. To make it a bit more weatherproof and give the neighbours behind us some more privacy.



Better-produce project – or perhaps mainly feeding caterpillars

In late Summer, we planted in the raised oak beds some very healthy-looking kale plants – of several varieties – and covered them in butterfly netting. Their brothers and sisters are doing very well in a local allotment and keeping Julian and Rebecca full of dietary iron.

But, at Nightingale, we soon noticed a white



butterfly flying inside the netting - maybe there were holes or a loose fold. Anyway, its progeny had a delicious early Autumn stripping all the kale leaves (see photo to left), despite us trying to remove dozens of fat green

caterpillars from the leaves. We didn't want to spray, so just stayed patient, waiting for the young insects to complete their lifecycle.

By late October, the kale plants were making new leaves (see photo above right) and we hope to get a crop from them this Winter season. For a while, we had lots of white fly instead - it isn't easy growing produce!

In late October and mid-November, we also transplanted some rocket and oriental leaves including some chop suey greens. These do very well in a local allotment, providing good leaves for stir fries into the Summer – and very pretty chrysanthemum-like flowers too.

Litter

We seem to be getting more litter in the garden than previously, including a lot of food wrappers. It might just be blowing out of the bins or more people using the covered areas, but, if it looks safe, please help us by dropping it in one of the



In November we harvested our tiny bed of potatoes – and several volunteers went away with a handful to try.

In late November we transplanted some growing garlic plants and some more oriental veg. We still had some good-looking lettuce too (see photo below). It is nice to see all the colours of green in the little beds.

On a Sunday in November, Betty and Annie harvested some good-looking white- and dwarf red Jerusalem artichokes. These are small rewards for the garden volunteers' work and we have been giving them away



to anyone in the garden at the time too. They are an easy crop but have a digestive and cultivation reputation that puts some people off!

two Council bins in the garden, which are emptied reasonably regularly by Council staff.

If the bins look full, it is best to put your own refuse in the ones in the park, which are emptied every day.

Recent get togethers: Martinmas



On 19 November, Julia, Eli and some local families organised a very successful second event for Martinmas. With stories, songs, music and a

huge white whale leading a lantern walk around the green area. We were very lucky with the weather too.

Julia recruited a fantastic group of volunteers to set-up, perform and clear-up. Many thanks to them all.



Get togethers coming up

As part of the preparation for Julian and Rebecca leaving the garden co-ordinator roles, we are pausing events in the garden for the next few weeks. This is to give us time to review with the Council how we do them and make sure we have a robust process.

Since 2020, the garden has become even more popular, with people coming to it from all over the City and county. Not just for daytime

informal leisure but also more individuals and groups interested in hiring it.

The Winter is a tough time to organise events anyway. We seem to be glued to weather forecasts and the garden can get very muddy with high footfall. Keep an eye on the website and Facebook page for events in 2023 and in the January newsletter. Friends get notifications by e-mail too and you can join for free – see the website for details and a form

About the Friends

This newsletter is produced by Nightingale Gardeners, a constituted group run by volunteers, for the Friends of Nightingale Garden. Join for £10, or as much as you can afford, annually (see the website for details). This helps support the garden for expenses like insurance, tools and plants.

One-off donations are also very gratefully received: Nightingale Gardeners, Lloyds Bank; Sort code: 30 65 65 Account number: 631 76568. You can donate via the garden website: nightingalegarden.org.uk (or use the QR code to the left).

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