

*Knolls Wood Survey*

*2016*

# Knolls Wood Survey 2016

by

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Knolls Wood is a unique environment and like no other mixed woodland that I have experienced in my long career as an artist and naturalist. It's a pretty wood with its array of specimen trees including Redwoods and Monkey Puzzle trees. There are many other specimen non-native trees that add an extra beauty and exotic appearance to the woods. The Sweet Chestnut, Oak, Beech, Sycamores and Birch blend in well with the showy trees towering over them.

## **Plants.**

With so many tall, straight and evenly spaced trees, the forest floor receives quite a bit of light, which would probably account for the excess of Holly in the wood. So many young saplings are not struggling for light and so take a firm hold that much easier and proliferate. However, the many ground plants such as Bluebells, Snowdrops, Wild Garlic, Yellow Archangel, Cuckoo Pint aka Lords & Ladies Pintle, Cow Parsley and Red Campion also benefit from the open canopy. Many other plants welcome the extra light such as Foxgloves and Stinging Nettles, which are a pain to us but very beneficial to insects. The White Dead-Nettle, a mimic of the Stinging Nettle also thrives in the wood, most often along the woodland edge where it can get full and dappled sunlight. It is often seen amongst Stinging Nettle groups, but is totally harmless as it does not sting and in fact it belongs to the Mint family.

The dominant shrubs in Knolls Wood are of course the Rhododendrons (native of Asia) and the English Laurel or Cherry Laurel. These vigorous plants will take over and need to be managed wherever they grow. It is evident that Knolls Wood has been carefully managed to avoid any one dominant species taking over the entire forest. Thankfully the volunteers that attend the 'tidy-up or work-party' days help to keep the cost down of such activities and build a bond with the woodland.

## **Squirrels & Cats – Friends or Foe?**

Knolls Wood is not a particularly large wood and is mostly surrounded by human habitation. This has an impact on the wildlife within Knolls Wood because where there are people their predator pets (Cats & Dogs) are present also. For us they are our friends, but to wildlife they are a threat. Cats most definitely have more impact on the wildlife than dogs, especially at night when they are hunting rodents and occasionally bats. During the day many birds are taken and fledglings are at the

greater risk. Some amphibians and small reptiles are also killed by cats. However, it's not just cats in the area that have an impact on the native wildlife of the woodland. Grey Squirrels and Magpies also predate on small birds and their eggs. There are many pairs of Grey Squirrels in the area and in some instances, too many. I have personally recorded the squirrels eating and destroying the new growth on trees and discarding a significant amount, which in turn falls to the ground from high up in the tree canopy. One thing in the squirrels favour is that they do bury many acorns and chestnuts amongst the leaf-litter on the woodland floor as a winter larder, but invariably can't keep track of them all so they start to germinate in the spring. This duty is of course not strictly just left to the squirrels to pay their dues. Jays also perform the same task with an identical outcome. Often a very shy woodland bird, Jays will venture into people's gardens and perform the task. I have heard Jays in Knolls Wood busying them-selves in readiness for the coming of winter and in the spring when they have young birds to feed.

### **Owls or lack of.**

On the subject of encouraging Tawny Owls to breed in the nest box provided for them at the entrance to Knolls Wood from Sandy Lane, unfortunately its bad news for them. The 'neighbours from hell' have moved into the box! I observed a family of Grey Squirrels nesting in the box and judging by the extensive rustling sounds coming from the box and the horrified look by the female as I set up my camera close by, one can only assume they have young in the desirable Tawny Owl real estate. The local owls will not occupy the nest box if it's already taken, especially by an angry female squirrel. It looks like a new positioning of the nest box would be the best possible answer to the problem. I did not find any evidence of owl activity, especially in the form of regurgitated pellets and their droppings, sometimes referred to as 'White-wash'. Also I didn't find any evidence of rodent activity on my excursions in the wood, but that's not to say there aren't any there.

I did observe a lot of nuts that fell to the ground, including the Monkey Puzzle nuts, were quickly picked up by squirrels and either eaten or cached, which in turn deprived the already hard pressed native rodents of food and in turn, the owls of their natural food. Tawny owls will of course eat other prey species such as birds, bats, the occasional baby rabbit and insects. Tawny's are also highly territorial and will not venture too far outside of their territory. For Knolls Wood, it would be ideal for a young pair to take up residence and I think the way to encourage them would be to have a choice of nest boxes within the wood and to keep the squirrel population to a reasonable level.

## **Control of Plant, Animal & Bird Species.**

The woodland plants are kept in check by the work parties and a tidy-up of invasive species are controlled. This should be the same for non-native animal and bird species as well, but only performed under strict guidance and humanely by licenced professional individuals. It will not be long before the Indian Ring-Necked Parakeet will take permanent residence in the area as reports of a female parakeet has been seen in Southcott Village in Linslade for some time. This would not be good for Knolls Wood as they are highly destructive and a very aggressive species. I know the control of animal and bird species is not a popular subject, but to keep a small wood such as Knolls Wood healthy, a balance has to be considered, whether its invasive non-native plants or invasive non-animal and bird species.

## **Bees.**

Because of the nature of the sandy soil in the wood, we are fortunate to have some special insects that live in the woodland. I have observed many Bumblebee species and most notably two that have nests in the soil. I watch and tried to photograph a Red-Tailed Bumblebee digging into the sandy soil through the leaf litter. I suspect she was looking for a possible new nest site. Last summer I observed and photographed a large nest hole of what appeared to be a species of White-Tailed Bumblebee, possibly *Bombus terrestris*. There were several worker bees fanning the debris away from the nest entrance and were not disturbed by my presence. The unfortunate thing was that the nest was so close to the footpath it was in danger of caving in from clumsy human feet or over excited dogs (another hazard for the local wildlife). As I was trying to photograph the worker bees performing their duties, a big excitable dog came charging in to investigate what I was up to then ran off to its' owner for more fun times.

Another observation I made and an easily recognisable sign in the wood is the Mining Bee (*Andrena* sp.). We have about 100 different species of mining bee in Britain, so it's hard to tell exactly which species we have in the wood. They live in tiny burrows as they are a solitary species and leave a little mound of excavated soil with a hole just large enough for them to fit into and work their way down to the chambers and stock with pollen. Once they've filled the chambers they lay an egg on each pollen store for the young larvae to feed on. I also observed and photographed a parasitic fly wait for a mining bee to disappear down the hole of her burrow and then laid eggs (or an egg) in the burrow entrance and set about closing up the hole with the bee inside. I suspect her offspring larvae will have live food to feast on once hatched. This is not a species of bee parasite I am familiar with but fascinating none the less!

## **Other Insects.**

I found an interesting pair of beetles on a felled tree that was rotting away, that I have not seen before. They were Black Snail Beetles which had curiously elongated heads, obviously meant for getting into snail shells and devouring the contents within. These were not very big so I would imagine their prey would not be too big as well. Other more glamorous insects I noticed within the wood were Orange-tip Butterflies, Brimstone Butterflies, Holly Blue, Comma Butterfly, Speckled Wood Butterfly and the fearsome looking Hornets. Hornets in fact are not as aggressive as common wasps but can give a painful sting if provoked and will protect a nest vigorously. Best advice is to leave them alone if you find a nest in the woods. They are not to be trifled with and are protected by law. Their natural habitat is the woodland, where they predate on woodland bees and occasionally honey bees. Their diet also includes other large insect prey. Wasps are not their favourite food, but will tackle them when hungry enough and if local bees are in short supply.

An unwelcome insect in Knolls Wood is the Gall Wasp (*Andricus quercuscalicis*). This tiny wasp is responsible for the distorted knobbly galls of green acorns. It lives inside the gall it has created and in turn stops the acorn from developing properly. Not a good sign for the Oak tree and wildlife that rely on the acorn harvest for the winter.

## **Birds.**

Knolls Wood has a good mix of garden and woodland bird species with most of the common birds known and including the Tree Creeper and Nuthatch. Here is a checklist of most of the birds I have seen whilst conducting my surveys: Wood Pigeon, Blackbird, Carrion Crow, Magpie, Jays, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Goldcrest, Robin, Wren, Green Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Chaffinch, Bullfinch, Goldfinch, and Greenfinch. Other species have been recorded in the past, but I did not encounter any of those as some are seasonal migrants such as Fieldfare and Redwing. Sparrowhawks have also been recorded previously, but I found no evidence of any at the time of conducting my survey.

## **Mammals**

Red Fox and Indian Muntjac Deer were the only other mammalian species I found evidence for, besides the Grey Squirrel.

Pathways and sandy areas are a great place to find tracks and if you look carefully they reveal what species of animal has passed through. Dog tracks are everywhere and it can be difficult to distinguish Fox tracks from them but with practice it is possible. Fox's outer toes are behind the inner toes (at the front), whereas domestic dogs outer toes are not entirely behind the inner toes and so you can see the imprint

is slightly different. Obviously size of footprint has a bearing as to the owner as well and also shape. Dogs come in all shapes and sizes and so do their prints. It's hard to tell if Red Foxes are living in the wood but I imagine some of the residents may know if they see or hear foxes calling at night from the wood.

All my surveys were carried out during the day. A night survey would reveal quite a different story, but it's much harder to conduct and would require a 'hide' of some sort and set at different locations over several weeks to get some good results.

Muntjac foot-prints are all over Knolls Wood and are easily recognisable. They appear as a two pointed indentation in the mud or sand, very distinctive and easy to spot. Muntjac can be destructive animals to a woodland environment, as can most deer if not kept in check, but from the evidence I have seen in Knolls Wood, I would say they are not a major problem. I suspect a lot of animals visit the area rather than live in the wood. There is a lot of human and canine activity in and around the wood and most likely it disturbs them enough to keep them out of sight. They are a nocturnal animal and it would be interesting to know if anyone living on the boundary of the wood can hear the males 'barking' at night. I suspect the Golf course is a safer environment for them.

I was not fortunate enough to see any bats on my surveys and once again, a late evening or night survey would hopefully reveal some results.

### **Conclusion of Knolls Wood Survey.**

On the whole, Knolls Wood is in pretty good shape and well managed. It has a healthy balance for the needs of people and most wildlife, with the exception of the few species mentioned in the survey. Evidence of the control of invasive plants is a good sign of woodland management and Knolls Wood definitely benefits from such activities. It's good to see that wood and branch piles are left in the wood for animals and insects to use and for fungi to grow on. Hats off to Friends of Knolls Wood, The Greensand Trust and all the volunteers that make it possible!

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Artist, Author & Naturalist.

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## **For reference,**

I have compiled a list of the flora and fauna (including their Latin names), that I have observed in the wood and others mentioned in the survey. No doubt the list could be extended with further visits to Knolls Wood and more species found.

### **Trees**

Redwoods (*Sequoia* sp.)

Monkey Puzzle (*Araucaria araucana*)

Sweet Chestnut (*Castania sativa*)

Oak (*Quercus robur*)

Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*)

Sycamores (*Acer pseudoplatanus*)

Birch (*Betula pendula*).

### **Plants**

Holly (*Llex aquifolium*)

Bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*)

Snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*)

Wild Garlic (*Allium ursinum*)

Yellow Archangel (*Galeobdolon luteum*)

Cuckoo Pint (*Arum maculatum*) aka Lords & Ladies Pintle

Foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*)

Red Campion (*Silene dioica*)

Stinging Nettles (*Urtica dioica*)

White Dead-Nettle (*Lamium album*)

Rhododendrons (*Ericacia* sp.)

English Laurel or Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*)

Cow Parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*)

Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*)

## **Birds**

Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*)

Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*)

Magpie (*Pica pica*)

Ring-Necked Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*)

Tree Creeper (*Certhia familiaris*)

Nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*)

Wood Pigeon (*Columba palumbus*)

Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)

Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*)

Blue Tit (*Parus caeruleus*)

Great Tit (*Parus major*)

Goldcrest (*Regulus reulus*)

Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*)

Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)

Green Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*)

Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopus major*)

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*)

Bullfinch (*pyrrhula pyrrhula*)

Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*)

Greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*)

Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*)

Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*)

Sparrowhawk (*Accipter nisus*)

## **Insects**

Red-Tailed Bumblebee (*Bombus lapidaries*)

White-Tailed Bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*)

Mining Bee (*Andrena* sp.)

Black Snail Beetles (*Silpha atrata*)

Orange-tip Butterfly (*Anthocharis cardamines*)

Brimstone Butterfly (*Gonepteryx rhamni*)

Holly Blue Butterfly (*Celastrina argiolus*)

Speckled Wood Butterfly (*Pararge aegeria*)

Comma Butterfly (*Polygonia c-album*)

Hornet (*Vespa crabro*)

Common wasps (*Vespula vulgaris* & *Vespula germanica*)

Gall Wasp (*Andricus quercuscalicis*)

## **Mammals**

Grey Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)

Indian Muntjac ( *Muntiacus muntjak*)

## **Special Acknowledgements:**

My sincere thanks to Mike Crawley FRPS, for helping me identify the correct names for the two plant species: Yellow Archangel (*Galeobdolon luteum*) and English Laurel or Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*).



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