# **Bexley wildlife**

## Bexley species spotlight - Non native species

### Part 1 -

Joseph Johnson

The term 'Invasive species' has become well known in recent years due to the addition of various non-native species in ecosystems all over the world, which have caused major problems to many species of flora and fauna. Britain's cooler climate restricts many species from doing the damage they have done in tropical areas of the globe, such as Florida and parts of Australia, but Great Britain has a surprising amount of non-native flora and fauna, many of which are now flourishing here in Bexley. Below we explore some of these, where they can be found, and what damage they do to our indigenous wildlife.

### Fauna:

### Common Pheasant Phasianus colchicus



Pheasants are a species introduced for game-hunting purposes. Although they have inhabited the British countryside for centuries, they are actually native to Asia. These beautifully coloured, stocky, terrestrial birds have colonised many areas of our countryside and , in recent years, have spread further into urban areas. There are several sites in and around Bexley where they can be found, including along the Thames marshes (both at Erith and Crayford) and along

the river Cray, particularly at Crayford Rough. They also turn up in various random spots in Bexley, such as on the playing fields at Bexleyheath Academy, where I recently saw an adult male of the species.

Pheasants are very noticeable birds and anyone who has spent any time driving through the countryside would have seen the majestic males strutting there stuff. They are, of course, beautiful creatures, but they do cause harm to our eco system.

They are very effective predators and their large, squat shape enables them to catch and feed on many of Bexley's ground-dwelling species, including the common lizard. Bexley has a very important common lizard population, but their number are declining.

It is uncertain how large the pheasant population in Bexley will become, but with so much development going on in the area it is most likely that their population will not become out of control, which is good news for Bexley's reptiles!

#### Marsh frog Pelophylax ridibundus



Marsh frogs are not a well known invasive species to the general public, but wildlife watchers like myself cannot fail to notice these very loud amphibians wherever they are present in large numbers. These animals are large (they are in fact Europe largest amphibian), boisterous and loud and can be found at a small number of sites in Bexley. However, it is expected that their number could increase quite rapidly.

Marsh frogs are native to mainland

central and Eastern Europe right the way across to East and Central Asia. They turned up here in the UK purely by accident when some were released into a garden pond (as pets) many years ago around the Romney marsh area of Kent. Since then, their population has spread in both area and size.

Whilst Marsh frogs do not seem to have a huge effect on our local native species, like all amphibians they will eat anything they can fit into their mouths (other smaller amphibians included) and use up other species' vital resources. A research project is underway to study the relationship between Marsh and native Common Frog distribution.

The world amphibian population has massively decreased in recent years due to the spread of fungal disease, which has wiped out huge numbers. Therefore, the addition of these foreign intruders could potentially help spread diseases to our already decreasing native amphibian populations, in turn causing there numbers to plummet.

Marsh frogs do not seem to have a huge range in Bexley as of yet, but with many suitable habitats for them all over the borough it is anticipated that they will spread to many sites, reachable through the borough's wildlife corridors. As of now, the marsh frog population can be found mainly on the rivers Cray and Shuttle, particularly at Thames Road wetland (on the Cray) and Sidcup golf course (on the Shuttle). Those are all very important sites for our native amphibians.

#### Terrapins



Terrapins are not an animal associated with the UK. Most people probably would not believe that these animals can actually survive in our rather harsh winter climate. However, that is not the case, as many of these species originate from the northern parts of the USA and Southern Canada where they endure even colder temperatures. Many terrapin species are commonly sold in the pet trade and a lot of those species reach sizes far too large to keep in your average home aquaria, and therefore require outdoor ponds. The sale

of these species as tiny hatchlings often results in them being released into the wild once they are too large to keep at home. Consequently many turtle/terrapin species can be found at hundreds of areas across Great Britain, including at least four sites here in Bexley.

The most common turtle species released as pets are Red-Eared Terrapins and Yellow Bellied Terrapins, but there are many other species that have been found living in our rivers and lakes, including: River Cooters; various Map turtle species; and even Common Snapping turtles. Whilst those species are quite easy to keep as pets, they simply get too large to keep indoors. For example, the shell of the Red-Eared Terrapin can grow up to 16 inches in length. Pet store owners should do more to encourage customers who want to purchase turtles as pets to go for species such as Common Musk or Reeves turtles as they are far easier to keep.

The effect that terrapins have on native fauna is often said to be very serious, but actually many of the species released in to the wild here are vegetarian once adult, except for the common snapping turtle which will eat just about anything that wanders past them! Nevertheless, even the commonly released turtle species here will prey on amphibians and invertebrates and use up vital resources essential for our native fauna. Sites that most definitely hold released terrapins are the well known Danson Park lake (where I have seen two individuals: a yellow bellied terrapin and a red eared terrapin, both adult), the Glade at Lamorbey Park, Pine Pond at Lesnes Abbey Wood and Foots Cray Meadows. There has also been one in the river Cray at Hall Place. However, there could potentially be other sites that harbour these animals too.

#### Ring neck parakeets Psittacula krameri



Ring neck parakeets were one of the species that first got me hooked on wildlife and bird watching. As a youngster growing up in Bexley/Greenwich first seeing these spectacularly coloured, beautiful animals was so exciting. I still remember the first time I ever got my first close up view of these birds on a low branch in Bostall woods. Ring neck parakeets have a huge natural range stretching in an almost perfect line across southern central Asia right the way across central Africa. No one seems to know the exact story of how they have flourished here in the UK. There are all manner of different theories on that, including one involving a certain Jimi Hendrix (google it!). Whether that tale is true or not will never be known, but we do know that these birds have taken to our climate and environment amazingly well and seem to be spreading in both numbers and range.

People are curious as to how these so called 'exotic/tropical parrots' can survive in our rather changeable, cool climate. However, despite their bright colouration and exotic appearance, these birds thrive across many cooler parts of Asia and Africa, including the Himalayas and the highlands of east Africa. This makes them perfectly suited to our cool climate too. Ring-neck Parakeets are well loved by many people here in their new home, but they have also got their enemies. Research has recently proven that they are not as destructive as first thought, but they do use woodpecker holes for breeding (usually used by our three woodpecker species and nuthatches) and take up useful resources for our native birds, many of which are threatened and/or declining. At the moment, ring neck parakeets do not seem to be affecting our wildlife massively, although with the population rising and the groups getting far larger, they could well start causing adverse effects on our wildlife. We will just have to wait and see.

Bexley's ring necked parakeets are now one of our most common birds. Rarely do we go five minutes without seeing a group of parakeets flying over our gardens, making as much noise as they possibly can! In fact, they take a daily stop in my own back garden to feed on a peanut bird feeder. They are usually on their way to Bexley's biggest roost – a group of Poplars by Danson lake, where thousands upon thousands of them huddle together every night. Whether you love them or hate them, ring neck parakeets are here to stay and are truly a part of Bexley's bio diverse wildlife.

Currently there is no action plan to eradicate any of the above species from Bexley.

### Flora:

## Himalayan balsam



Himalayan balsam is a large and quite beautiful flowering plant species originally from Asia. This species is easy to grow and is present in many parts of the world. Himalayan balsam thrives along water courses which in turn helps it to spread to new areas.

Himalayan balsam causes many problems here in Bexley. This species is an aggressive pollinator and is a factor in decreasing the spread of our indigenous plant species. It tends to spread very quickly and can grow over many of our other native species, in turn out-competing them. Another problem that Himalayan balsam causes is erosion along the banks of river systems. It has mini-exploding pods which help the species spread, and it is so effective that even removing them can help spread the species. Because of this extremely effective way of spreading, the

Himalayan balsam can be found along the banks of a huge number of waterways across the UK, including in Bexley.

Himalayan balsam is quite well spread within Bexley borough, being found along the banks of the River Shuttle and Cray. There is also an infestation around Danson Lake in Danson Park. However, there has been some intensive volunteer work to remove it from these sites, particularly at Danson Park where it now appears to have been eradicated.

## Giant hogweed

Giant hogweed is one of the country's most well known invasive plant species. This towering and rather beautiful plant, like Himalayan balsam, can be found on a few sites here in Bexley particularly along the banks of the Rivers Cray and Wansunt. The plant is well known for its ability to cause severe itchiness, through toxic chemicals in the plants' sap. Because of the standing height of this plant it out-competes native plant species causing them to decrease.

Giant hogweed also unfortunately can hybridise with our native and far less harmful common hogweed. Giant hogweed has spread massively across both the United Kingdom, mainland Europe and North America where it is also not a native species. The same can be said for the giant hogweed in Bexley. The River Cray corridor is one area which contains this species, including at Upper College Farm and adjacent to Thames Road Wetland.



### Floating pennywort



Floating pennywort is a relative newcomer to our list of non-native species. However, the plant's effects are just as devastating. Rivers can be littered with this plant, helping to degrade the biodiversity. The plant grows rapidly and chokes up the entire waterway.

Thankfully this plant is not as widespread as many of our other invasive species, but is a problem in the lake on Sidcup golf course and in many of the dykes within

Thamesmead. This is bad news because the lake fflows into the River Shuttle, and if this plant were to establish itself on the Shuttle it could cause devastating effects on our habitat and spread rapidly. Therefore, recently, there have been efforts by volunteers to eradicate this species from the lake.

All of the fantastic wildlife photographs were taken by 'Bexley Wildlife' contributor Donna Zimmer.

Thanks for reading, I hope you enjoyed reading through my latest 'spotlight' on Bexley's invasive wildlife.

Joe Johnson.