

Marshalls Heath Nature Reserve, Wheathampstead

Steve Chilton visited on **23 May 2009** and writes:

Marshalls Heath may be one of Hertfordshire's smallest nature reserves but it always has something to delight.



Brimstone and Large White butterflies were numerous especially around the tangle of wild and naturalised flowers close to the residential area.

Dr John Murray, the reserve Warden, drew my attention to the elusive and flighty Common Blue butterfly.



They invariably alighted on the opposite side of the drainage ditch to me but I eventually managed to photograph them with wings both closed and open.



A pair of Blue Tits are nesting in the post of the old metal gate in the centre of the reserve.

There is constant activity as the birds take food in and faecal sacks of out of the tiny nesting chamber.

The strange landscape of the heath is the result of unusually large ant hills created by Yellow Hill Ants.





There seems to be an ever changing assortment of wild flowers decorating the ant hills. On this visit I found Greater Stitchwort (photograph left), Common Sorrell, Germander Speedwell, Salad Burnet and For-get-me-not.

Elsewhere on the reserve were White Dead-nettle, Garlic Mustard, Cow Parsley and a Columbine like flower that may have been a garden escape. In the woods I found a single Wood Avens (photograph right).



In the middle of the heath was the strangest looking Foxglove. It has an aberration called *peloria*. An explosion of colour but it didn't look at all normal.



The reserve runs either side Marshalls Heath Lane in Wheathampstead. It lies about a mile west of the village just north of the Lower Luton Road opposite the "Cherry Trees" restaurant. Grid Reference: TL 161 150 (centre of reserve). Wheathampstead Parish Council own the reserve, which is only 3.6 hectares, and consists of a small fragment of acid grass heath dominated by secondary woodland and scrub, but it is remarkable for its very high biodiversity, more than **1,300 species of plant and animal** having been recorded there in recent years, including more than 40 species now on national lists of threatened species. It is listed as one of only five key sites in Hertfordshire for butterflies and moths in Butterfly Conservation's Regional Action Plan for the Thames region. For more information see

www.wheathampstead.net/mh/intro.htm .