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# Common Knowledge

## Events galore

In the next four months there will be an unprecedented number of events on and around the Common. Most of these will be brought to you by the Friends of Streatham Common, with a little help from *their* friends. Make sure you don't miss them by putting the following dates in your diary now.

☛ 13th April - **Kite Day** from 11.00 am –5.00 pm.

☛ 20th April - **Easter Egg Hunt** in the Rookery from 1.00 pm, organised by the Park Rangers.

☛ 23rd April **Annual General Meeting of Streatham Common's Management Advisory Committee** at 7.30 pm in Immanuel Church (at the foot of the Common).

☛ 10th May - **Annual Bird Box and Bird Song Survey** from 9.00 am –11.00 am, starting at the café.

☛ 14th May - **Annual General Meeting of the Friends of Streatham Common** at 7.30 pm in Immanuel Church (at the foot of the Common).

☛ 18th May - **Bat Walk** starting at 8.30 pm by the café and led by an expert with a bat detector.

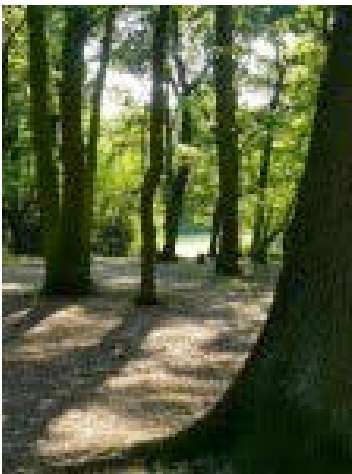
☛ 5th July - **Streatham Spectacular**. Free music and family activities on the Common from 1.00 pm to 7.00 pm. A Streatham Festival event.

☛ 6th July - **Shakespeare in the Park**: Theatre Set-Up present *All's Well That Ends Well* starting at 4.00 pm in the Rookery. Part of the Streatham Festival.

## Embracing the Common

With the considerable aid of a £49,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, an organisation with a particular mission to help develop the skills and interests of “young adults”, has started a project centred on the natural history of Streatham Common. By end of the project, in 18 months time, the aim is to have produced a booklet and to have mounted multimedia exhibitions on the natural and recreational history of the Common, as well as to have created a website from which material about the Common can be downloaded.

Embrace Cooperation Ltd, a London based non-profit making company, has the general aim of supporting young adults into education and employment, especially via placements in work or on projects such as this one. In this case the aim is to in-



volve ten or so local youngsters, who must be aged 15 and over and may well come from deprived backgrounds. They will gain an introduction to environmental conservation skills as well as to tree, plant and bird identifi-

cation. They will also learn how to take oral histories from local people and to research into Lambeth’s archives. And they will gain media experience in producing the website, booklet and exhibitions.

The project is led by John Cannell, who has a background in nature conservation. He sees three overall aims for the project. The first is to make the young adults involved in the project more employable. The second is to raise lasting awareness of the environmental importance of the

Common, working in conjunction with local community groups, not least the Friends of Streatham Common. And the third is to increase the active involvement of local people, especially from ethnic minorities, both in conservation of the Common and in the events held on it.

One of the first practical outcomes of the project was a bird identification walk held on March 29th. Others will be advertised in due course and local residents will be welcome to join in.

Anyone interested in volunteering to help with the project or simply requiring more information can contact John by email ([john.embrace@gmail.com](mailto:john.embrace@gmail.com)) or by telephone (0208 6701221 or 07984662996)♦

## Coming and going

We’d like to say a big thank you to Sheila Derrick, who has served as treasurer for Friends of Streatham Common for a total of seven of the past ten years, divided into three separate stints. Our new treasurer is Nick Cattermole, who is a qualified accountant, employed as Finance Director of the Royal College of Art. He was a Lambeth Councillor for 15 years until he retired in 2006. So hello and a big welcome to Nick ♦

**We would like to thank Henry Hughes and Hughes, Solicitors, for their generous support of the Friends’ annual Christmas Party.**

They are to be found in the Beehive Coffee Tavern (more prosaically known as 496 High Road, Streatham), a listed 19th century building whose construction was financed by the temperance movement to provide an alternative to the pub next door.

# Are bats about?

Mention bats around here and it's not unusual for the response to be that we used to see them far more often than we do now. Fair enough: bat numbers in London have been on the decline. How many and which species do we still have on the Common? We don't know the answers, although the forthcoming bat walk arranged by the Friends (see box opposite) should provide some answers.

Sixteen species of bats can be found in the UK although only some of these occur with reasonable frequency in London. Some species, such as Daubenton's bat, are only found where there is a body of water, such as in South Norwood Country Park or at the London Wetland Centre in Barnes (which has a series of excellent bat walks over the summer). Others prefer woodland or parkland, so might be found on Streatham Common.

One of the most likely bats to be found in our area is the tiny pipistrelle. In fact, there are three different pipistrelles, the common pipistrelle, the soprano pipistrelle and the very rare Nathusius' pipistrelle. These bats are usually seen at dusk as they leave their roosts, which are traditionally in houses, in search of the 3000 or so insects that they eat every night.

Another species that might be in the area is the much larger noctule bat, which has up to double the wingspan and five times the weight of a pipistrelle. Noctules are often the first bats to appear at dusk, starting their search for moths, beetles and mayflies. They roost in old woodpecker holes or rot holes in trees.

A third, but less likely possibility, is that we have serotine bats in the area, as there are in Beddington Park and on Wimbledon Common. This is another quite large species that preys on moths and beetles.



With a practised eye, one can tell pipistrelles from the other two species by their size, but to be certain of the species that one is looking at, and to distinguish one type of pipistrelle from another, there is no substitute for a bat detector. This device enables one to listen in to bat calls, which are too high pitched to be detected by most human ears, and to distinguish each species by its call.

Three years ago, the Friends of Streatham Common purchased a number of bat boxes that have been mounted on suitable trees in the hope of making certain that there are sufficient roosting sites for local bats. These boxes can be distinguished from the bird boxes that were put up at the same time, and often on the same tree, by having a rectangular entrance near the bottom of the box rather than a round one near the top. Birds take to boxes rapidly – about a third of the bird boxes were occupied in their first year and two pairs of birds 'illegally' opted to nest in a bat box. Bats need much more time and it can be several years before boxes have residents, which may reveal their presence by droppings and chittering noises♦

**Come and have your say about how the Common should be run at the Annual General Meeting of the Streatham Common Management Advisory Committee.**

**23rd April, 7.30 pm, Immanuel Church - at the foot of the Common.**

## Suggestion box feedback

The Rookery café not only offers refreshment but also the chance to drop comments about the Common into the 'Friends' suggestions box. All comments are collected and discussed at Friends committee meetings and at the last meeting it was thought it would be a good idea to provide feedback in *Common Knowledge*. So this is the first of what we hope might become a regular feature airing one concern from a recent clearance of the suggestion box.

This issue's comment raises the problem of unauthorized vehicle access to the Common. Almost every year we have at least one occasion when travellers arrive and set up camp. Eventually, (after some police and council persuasion), they move on, leaving behind piles of debris both unsightly and expensive to have removed. In addition, every now and then cars drive across the Common, rather than going around it, especially when confronted with the barriers near the car park.

The suggestion is that we should press for a permanent barrier around the Common to prevent these incursions happening.



*Drivers frustrated by this barrier sometimes remove the tree trunks positioned along the Common's edge and drive over the grass. A dim driver, in a stolen car, tried to ram the barrier - still not repaired - over the Christmas holidays.*

### ***Friends of Streatham Common Annual General Meeting***

***On 14th May, at 7.30 pm in  
Immanuel Church - at the foot  
of the Common***

***Find out more about the  
Friends and how you can be  
involved.***

Mitcham Common is mentioned as an example of the use of ditches and mounds to create such a barrier.

The idea of increasing the Common's security through some kind of perimeter barrier is proposed quite regularly and it almost always results in fierce argument! Those in favour of a barrier system (including Lambeth Parks) support it as the only way to avoid illegal incursions, claiming it would prevent fly tipping and save the significant cost of rubbish removal.

Those against argue that 'fencing in the Common' would spoil its natural quality and aspect as an area of open land. They also feel that barriers would not necessarily achieve the beneficial results claimed.

Obviously there are ways of creating barriers other than fencing (for example the 'Mitcham solution' or fallen tree trunks, as used in the area opposite our Common's car park) but these have still been felt, by some, to be too visually intrusive.

It would be really useful to have the views of *Common Knowledge* readers on this issue. What side of the fence (or other barrier) do you think the Friends should come down on? Please email the Friends at [friendsofstreathamcommon@googlemail.com](mailto:friendsofstreathamcommon@googlemail.com) to let us know what you think.

*Gordon Richardson - Chair of the Friends*



If this copy has an inserted yellow membership form, it means you have not yet renewed your membership of Friends for 2008. Please do so now or this will be the last issue you receive.



## Sex and sparrows

As you probably know, sparrows have been in steep decline in London. Some of us can recall when central London parks were full of them, often hoping to share one's lunchtime sandwich. Now they are just about never to be seen in these parks, and still we don't really know why. The bird in question is the house sparrow but is not the only British sparrow. There is a close relative called the tree sparrow and also a bird often called a hedge sparrow, which is not a true sparrow at all. It is more properly known as a dunnock and is blessed with a very risqué sex life.

House sparrows are still fairly frequent in our area but seldom on the Common itself; as their name implies, they prefer houses and their gardens. Especially in spring-time, house sparrows often chirp from rooftops in the streets around the Common. They tend to stick to a small territory and only become more mobile when they have youngsters to feed. House sparrows are gregarious birds and use a communal roosting – and sometimes nesting - site, typically in a dense shrub or bush. There may be alternate roosting sites in one area, which is why one can sometimes have a dozen birds in one's garden some evenings and none on others.

One place you might find house sparrows on the Common is opposite the first couple

of houses on Streatham Common South, because they sometimes hang out in the houses' bushes and pop over to the Common for a dust bath or if anyone has put some food out there. Alternatively, for the few weeks that the Common's cow parsley is in flower, you might see house sparrows feeding on the insects that the flowers attract. One place I have seen this is on the Norbury Grove side of Covington Way.

The closely related tree sparrow has become a really scarce bird in the UK and is now never found on the Common. However, with a very tall ladder and an extremely powerful telescope you would just about be able to see what is probably the greatest concentration of tree sparrows in southern England! This is the Beddington sewage farm, recycling centre, gravel extraction and landfill site, where over 100 bird boxes and several seed feeders have kept tree sparrows numbers up.

And now for the dunnock, a bird which is often present both on the Common and in gardens, although frequently overlooked as it is both secretive and, except at close quarters, rather drab – in contrast to its sex life.

*A dunnock or hedge sparrow*



The sex life of dunnocks revolves around the territories they hold in the breeding season. True there are some territories that have just a single male and female who cooperate in rearing their offspring.

<http://www.freewebs.com/streathamfriends/> Don't forget to check our new web site for 'stop press' news about the Common and for recent photographs

However, a male with a good territory can sometimes mate with two or even three females, thus being able to father more offspring than were he monogamous. More frequently, it is the female that mates with two males, whose territories then merge, ensuring a double territorial guard and, from the female point of view, providing double the amount of paternal care available to her offspring. But it is not so easy for the female to copulate with two males, because one of the two will be dominant and will spend much of his time trying to see off the other, meaning the female has to sneak a quick liaison with the weaker male when she can.

Along with this competition for access to the female, each male will try and ensure that he is the father of any offspring by a

rather bizarre pre-copulation act during which the female crouches low in front of the male, lifts up her tail and quivers, in response to which the male pecks at her vent, which then swells up and pumps out any sperm that have been left there from her previous mating.

If you want to see dunnocks, look in your garden or on the Common for sparrow-sized birds that are on the ground and dash under cover as you approach. They may look drab from a distance, but closer up you will see that both male and female have an elegant blue-grey head and breast with a streaky brown back and sides. As ground feeders, they are at risk from cats, so put garden food for them under bushes rather than out in the open. During the spring, males sing rather sweetly from bushes at about head height. Local dunnocks are spared one problem, which is that out in the countryside their nests are the favourite target of cuckoos, which lay their eggs in other birds' nests♦

### Advertisements

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*This new path, which has appeared on Streatham Common North, is especially for school children traipsing to the bus stop. Strong opposition by the Friends and MAC to the intended tarmac surface resulted in the much more acceptable surface called 'hogging' 6seen here.*