

# Ruscombe Village Pond

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## Text for information board

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Alex Cruickshank MSc MCIEEM, Ecologist and Conservation Manager,  
Sundew Ecology.

[www.SundewEcology.co.uk](http://www.SundewEcology.co.uk)

[alex@SundewEcology.co.uk](mailto:alex@SundewEcology.co.uk)

07717291572

### **The ponds**

Ruscombe has two village ponds. Both have been here longer than the nearby clay pits which were dug for the brickworks where Ruscombe Business Park now sits.

Village ponds would have been vital for watering livestock – both those wandering on the village greens and those being driven through the village along a nearby drove road. Ponds may also have had a practical use – for soaking cart wheels or preparing fibres from linen and flax before weaving.

Now, the ponds are rich in wildlife. The Newt Pond, near the main crossroads is designated a 'Local Wildlife Site' because of the presence of rare Great Crested Newts and during the summer they are vibrant with dragonflies and water birds.

### **Gypsywort**

A member of the mint family with jagged edges to its leaves, Gypsywort grows tall beside ponds and rivers. Its tiny white flowers attract lots of insects, but it has little scent and so is not used in cooking. It does, however, produce a dark dye historically used to colour silk and wool.

The plant's name is thought to come from the idea that fortune tellers would darken their skin with the dye to make themselves resemble 'Egyptians'.

### **Common Darter Dragonfly**

One of our commonest dragonfly species, they can be seen flying over the pond from June until November.

Common Darters vary in colour, from yellow to bright rusty-red. Like all dragonflies, they spend most of their life, up to five years, under the water as flightless nymphs, hunting prey and growing until they are ready to emerge as adults.

They then crawl up a plant stem to transform into an adult. You may see them pairing up – the male clasping the female while she dips her abdomen into the water to lay eggs.

### **New Zealand Pigmy Weed**

As its name suggests, this small plant is originally from far away. Because of its ability to spread quickly and stop other plants from growing, it has been banned from sale in the UK since 2014.

Somehow it has found its way to the North Pond in Ruscombe, and now forms dense mats all round the pond. There is no effective way to get rid of it, so we must be careful not to allow it to spread into other waterbodies. Even a tiny fragment can grow into a new plant, so make sure you don't take any away with you!

### **Greater Reedmace**

A familiar sight in many ponds and lakes, Reedmace is so called because the brown, sausage-like cluster of female flowers at the top resemble a mace.

Breaking open this 'sausage' releases thousands of fluffy seeds, which float on the wind to find another pond. Historically these have been used for stuffing mattresses.

Lots of wildlife lives amongst the stems, leaves and roots of the Reedmace which provide shelter from the weather and from predators.

### **Moorhen**

This chicken-sized black waterbird is distinguished from the similar Coot by having a red bill and forehead – the Coot's is white.

Moorhens eat all sorts of food including insects, snails, berries and small fish. Their flicking tail indicates to potential predators that they are alert and aware of the predator's presence.

A nest may contain up to 20 eggs, some of which have been sneakily laid by different females, hoping that the incubating mother won't notice and will look after them as her own. The older chicks often help out with childcare, feeding the younger chicks and protecting them from predators.

### **Chiffchaff**

The scrubby vegetation around a pond is important for wildlife. The small, dense trees provide protection and a food supply for birds like the Chiffchaff, a small greenish bird with the distinctive two-note 'chiff-chaff-chiff-chaff' song.

In the winter, many Chiffchaffs migrate to warmer places including Africa but, as our climate changes, more remain in the UK throughout the year with an increase of 85% overwintering since the 1980s. They are one of the first sounds of spring, often heard in February.

Chiffchaffs eat insects and spiders and make a dome-shaped nest close to the ground in dense vegetation.

### **Great Crested Newt**

Like other amphibians, the Great Crested Newt lays its eggs in water, but it spends most of the year on dry land.

Our largest newt, they are black and warty, and protected by law against disturbance and damage to where they live.

During the breeding season, males develop a long wavy crest along their body and tail. The female lays individual eggs on an underwater leaf before curling it over to protect the egg. Most newts then leave the pond and spend the summer and autumn foraging amongst the undergrowth around a pond before hibernating over winter.