



## **Friends of Easter Craiglockhart Hill Spring 2024 e-Newsletter**

**Welcome to the Spring edition of the Friends of Easter Craiglockhart Hill e-newsletter, reporting on activities over the winter around the Local Nature Reserve (LNR).**

As well as updates on work done by the volunteer squad, there are articles from users of the woods, pond and hill, about wildflowers and birds and of course, an update on the swan saga.



### **Chairperson's thanks**

First of all, thanks to the staff and children of the Little Monkeys nursery on Craiglockhart Terrace who have donated and planted 1000 snowdrop bulbs. The children have really enjoyed planting them and we will enjoy them year after year.

Welcome also to our new trustee Daniela Polic. Dani is a regular at our work squad sessions and brings a wealth of knowledge and enthusiasm to FECH. Thanks Dani for taking on this role.

Thank you also to Dan Rayner, our community engagement worker, who left the post at the end of November 2023 after the best part of 2 years, as the funding had ended. He did a sterling job in supporting the work of the Friends, and has left a legacy of volunteers and an engaged community to show the success of his endeavours. As he says in his piece below, he is still around as a volunteer giving welcome help and

support.

Finally, thanks to all the people who answered the 'call to arms' in the last newsletter. We had a great response and have covered many of the tasks we had asked for help with. We now have people looking out for invasive species, picking up litter, updating our signage, keeping our social media up to date, nurturing and planting out our trees and wildflowers, creating this newsletter, organising our community events and helping to run our volunteering sessions. There's too many of you to mention individually but thanks to you all.

The hill looks and sounds wonderful in the spring and I would like to thank you all for caring about this local nature reserve and keeping it healthy for all the animals and plants who live here and for the people who enjoy it.

(JH)



Bullfinch (FB)

## **Farewell from Dan Rayner**

As the funding for my post as community engagement worker for Friends of Easter Craiglockhart Hill (FECH) ran out at the end of November, I'd like to thank everyone in the FECH membership and wider community for making me feel so welcome and supported in the role during my time, from providing important information about wildlife and safety issues in the Reserve to a simple friendly hello whilst out and about.

I've really have enjoyed every aspect of working at Friends of Easter Craiglockhart Hill (except picking up poo bags!) and take great pride in some of the things we have achieved during my tenure, re-establishing the now thriving volunteer sessions and events such as the Easter Egg Hunt, Swan Countdown, Snowdrop Split and our hugely successful Plant Sale and Fungi Walks. I appreciated the satisfying feeling of pride that comes with keeping the place clean and healthy for wildlife to thrive, and with supporting volunteers to make improvements and new features for people to enjoy.

I have enjoyed keeping you all up to date with everything that's going on around the hill via our newsletter, conversing with such an enthusiastic and engaged following on social media, and getting to know lots of you in person. It has been an absolute pleasure.

I am still around, albeit in a reduced and voluntary capacity, helping to organise volunteer groups, planning activities and events, and helping to bed in the lovely volunteers who have taken on some of my former duties.

I'd love to be able to devote more time to making Easter Craiglockhart Hill healthier, happier, safer, and even more beautiful than it already is, so if more funding becomes available, I'll be back! Meantime, I'll still be around as a volunteer, so whether I'm out with a litter picker and rubbish bag, or with a group of volunteers, please do come and say hi!

(DR)

## **DATES FOR YOUR DIARY**

**SUNDAY 31ST MARCH 2024 11am**

**Easter Egg Hunt** at the Craiglockhart Terrace entrance to the Nature Reserve.

Come and help us track down the chocolate Easter Eggs hidden in the woods. Bring a container for your eggs and under 12s, please bring an adult.

**SUNDAY 9TH JUNE 2024 2-4PM**  
**FECH Community Plant Sale** at the Craiglockhart Terrace entrance

After the success of our first plant sale in 2023, a second sale is planned to raise funds for the enhancement of the Easter Craiglockhart Hill and woods, supporting the work of the volunteers.

For sale, there will be indoor and outdoor plants and seedlings, flowers, fruit and vegetables.

Donations of plants for sale welcome-

please contact [friends@eastercraiglockharthill.org](mailto:friends@eastercraiglockharthill.org)

you can bring them in the week before the sale or even on the morning.

Please come to buy plants and bring your friends!



Volunteers hard at work this winter. (EJ)

### **Nurturing trees and wildflowers on the hill- volunteer work over the winter**

In Autumn 2023, FECH used funds raised at the May plant sale to buy bulbs and wildflower plugs. Our volunteers planted hundreds of native bluebells, plus wild primroses, greater stitchwort and dog violets along the Meadowspot Path. Fingers crossed for a lovely display of colour here in coming years!

We were glad to welcome back the Lothian Conservation Volunteers last October. They helped rake the wildflower meadows after the Council's autumn cut. Many thanks to all for a hard but enjoyable day's work.

Before cutting, work squad volunteers had harvested seeds from the

meadow wildflowers, including yellow rattle, wild carrot and bird's foot trefoil – all brilliant for pollinators. Some seeds were sown straight onto the raked meadow. Others, like red campion and sea campion, have been grown on for planting elsewhere on the hill this spring.

During winter, our volunteers planted a range of young native trees. Small clusters filled gaps left by fallen trees and elsewhere, they were planted to increase the diversity of trees, for example along our boundaries. We also cared for the trees planted in previous years, mulching and checking guards. Path edges were maintained, to protect new and existing growth and to help keep paths clear.

And finally, many visitors will have noticed a huge increase in the number of snowdrops in the lower woods this year. Thank you to everyone who turned out to rescue the bulbs from a local development and then sort and replant 1,500 in one afternoon!

(EJ)

### **Musings of a Dog Owner**

From a dog owner's perspective, isn't it fantastic to have Easter Craiglockhart Hill on our doorstep. It attracts dog walkers from all directions, enjoying the "in the city" country experience.

Not only do we enjoy nature when we walk around the hill, but it could compete favourably to be crowned the most sociable hill in the city. Whatever time of day you visit (though in fairness I don't think I've been up to the top on a dark winter's night) there is always another dog to "check-out" and play with, and almost without exception, other walkers who are open to a (human to human) chat. They say that these short casual conversations are incredibly good for people's mental health so what better way is there to exercise your dog and care for your own wellbeing at the same time.

Many dogs are inclined to duck and dive in the undergrowth and are by nature, curious and at times greedy. As a dog owner, I'm hugely appreciative of the litter picking/general volunteers team and the work that

they do – we really don't realise how lucky we are to be protected from the danger that litter brings to animals. We in turn should do our bit, clean up behind our dogs and ensure that our dogs remember their manners when they meet other hill users. It's lovely to see the forest schools using the woodlands, as well as other walkers, but I know I need to keep my boy (dog) Fudge from making a beeline for the children's packed lunch boxes with hungry eyes.

Winter can get muddy up the hill – there's no denying that. After watching the film Barbie recently, as I trampled through the mud up the zig zag path, I did dream of walking through a perfect field of lush grass (pink of course!), with a wash and dry facility for our pets at each entrance to the hillside. Momentarily I thought how lovely that would be - but then I remembered that this is Scotland, we are hardy and as they say, there is no such thing as bad weather, just the wrong clothes. So let's just keep putting the boots on (us and our dogs if so inclined) and make the best of it for now, knowing that Spring and warmer drier weather is just round the corner.

(EC)



Fudge



*Editor's note: For future newsletters, I would welcome further short articles about dog and dog-owners' experience of walking round the woods, hill and pond and photos! (NH)*

## **Signs of Spring**

It's early February and I know that Spring has come now that there are flecks of purple in Craiglockhart Woods. Before the elder buds slowly unstitch themselves, revealing the green leaves inside, the mauve bud scales swell and add flecks of colour to the grey woods around them. Although they look beautiful, the aroma of the leaves wards away flies because it contains poisons, so people used to use this to their advantage and put bread and cakes out to cool under the leaves. Despite elder leaves' toxicity, the flowers provide nectar for a range of insects and the berries are loved by birds, mice, and voles.

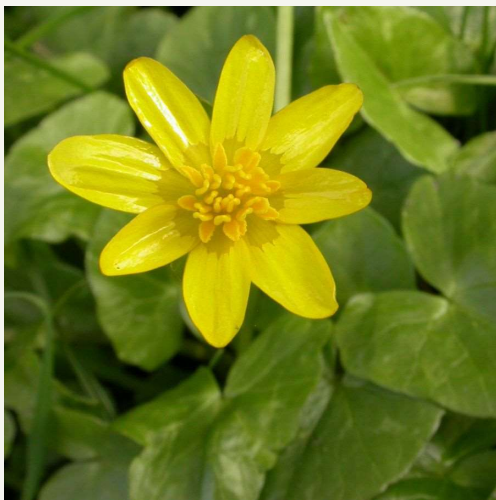
As February drifts into March, the woodland floor around Craiglockhart Hill starts to glisten like melting butter- the lesser celandines are flowering. These star-shaped yellow flowers get their unusual name from the Greek word "chelidon", meaning "swallow" because, just like the bird which migrates here from Africa each Spring, they are a sign of warmer weather ahead. However, lesser celandines normally flower a little earlier than the swallows' arrival, normally from January to April. Flowering so early in the year means that celandines are a vital source of nectar for queen bumblebees and other insects as they emerge from hibernation. (photo below)

There is a bank just before the meadow on Craiglockhart Hill which has the special name of "Primrose Bank" because in March it is carpeted in these flowers. The "prim" comes from "prime", or "foremost", in Latin, and "rose" simply means "flower" in this case. "Prim" could just as easily refer to the immaculate appearance of these flowers, with their dapper pale or deep yellow petals and neatly crimped leaves. Not only do they look stunning to us, but primroses are also an important source of nectar for small tortoiseshell butterflies and are a food plant for many moths.

Like celandines, lady's-smock is another flower on Craiglockhart Hill which is linked to migrating birds. These pale lilac flowers bloom in April

and May which is the time of year that cuckoos arrive in the UK, so it is no surprise that they are also known as “cuckooflower”. These delicate plants thrive in damp areas and flourish in the reed bed by Craiglockhart Pond. Lady’s-smock is the main food plant of orange-tip butterflies, so look out for these insects emerging in the April or May sunshine amongst Craiglockhart Hill’s swathes of cuckooflower. (photo below)

(EB)



*Editor's note: The primroses on 'Primrose Bank' were bought with the proceeds of 'metals for petals' sale of scrap metal cleared from the*

*reserve and from donations- a good example of FECH nudging nature to establish a colony of plants which should be on the hill.*

### **Swan Saga update**

Last June, Brigid, the resident female swan on Craiglockhart Pond, gave birth to 5 cygnets, fathered by Tullius. These cygnets have now all moved on.

Tullius was sadly found dead on 25<sup>th</sup> November 2023, possibly due to sepsis as he had had a right legged limp. However, DEFRA have not released a definite cause of his death except to say it was not avian flu. Tullius spent 11 months on Craiglockhart Pond and fathered those 5 cygnets. His genes will pass down the years and he will be missed by many.

Currently Brigid is still alone. There was a brief visit from a swan in mid-February 2024, and, shortly afterwards, Brigid appeared to be making preparations to build a nest. But all this has so far come to nothing.

Unless a suitable suitor arrives on the pond soon, there will be no eggs or cygnets this year (or indeed, cygnet countdown competition)! Watch this Space!!!

(WG)

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Brigid, Tullius and one of the cygnets November  
2023. (WG)

### **Waterbirds on the Pond**

During February the bird life continued to gather and flourish on the pond. Brigid the lonely swan has for company a Gaggle of Garrulous Geese [Canada] squabbling and chasing around, a Covert of Coots also chasing one another across the water like pond-skaters with their big blue feet, a Raft of Mallards [some of them pairing up already], a Paddling of Mergansers, a Sord of Tufted Ducks and a Colony of raucous Black-headed seagulls, as well as a small fleet of Moorhens,

generally keeping out of harm's way!

During December/January a couple of Herons, on fishing expeditions, frequented the pond. Also spotted were a pair of Little Grebes.

(WG)



On the pond March 2024 (NH)

### **Birds in the wood and on the hill**

Brian Loebell & Frank Brown (two keen photographers) have reported the following birds around our Local Nature Reserve and provided some excellent photos.

In the woodland and on the top of the hill, there have been sightings of Blue Tits, Long-tailed Tits (the noisiest and moving in small flocks), Coal Tits, Great Tits amongst the bushes/shrubs as well as Chaffinches, Goldcrests, Nuthatches, Robins, Wrens, Dunnocks and Treecreepers. Quite a wide selection! Nuthatches and Treecreepers were seen moving between the large trees on the path next to the golf course on the way up to the Hill Top. Woodpeckers are usually found in this section as well.

A Sparrowhawk has been seen around the woods and Kestrel and Buzzard were spotted over the Hill Top area. The Tawny Owls are still frequenting the tall trees of the lower Craiglockhart Woods.

(WG)



Wren (FB)



Tree creeper (BL)



## Goldcrest (BL)

### Up on the Hill

One of the best things about walking up to Easter Craiglockhart Hill from Craiglea Place is the variety of ecosystems you pass through as you go. And as the ecology and landscape changes, so does your mood and this provides a great range and variety of responses. Of course, you might just charge straight up the hill and back with a couple of dogs and maybe a podcast talking in your ears and not really be very aware of what you are passing through. We all do that or something similar from time to time - some do that all the time and why not? It's great exercise and you get a fab view from the top while you check your pedometer and heart rate. But sometimes at least, it is really great to slow down and be aware of where you are wandering.

From the top of the hill, I can see across to the old Craiglockhart Hospital (now Napier University). It makes me think of Wilfred Owen - undergoing treatment there for shell shock in 1918- finding the birdsong, the blossom, the sometimes soft, sometimes bracing air which soothed him. Ironically, it helped him recover so well, he was able to return to the Front in France where he died a week before the end of the war. But knowing he and Siegfried Sassoon were there makes me feel privileged to be able to walk here now.

The woods are beautiful for stopping and listening to wrens, robins, tits of all sorts and finches too. I've seen foxes dashing through, slightly surprised to see that you are there as well. But when it's very windy, I keep clear of the woods and get up into the open on top of the hill where, in spite of the gale, a kestrel may be found hanging magically in the air.

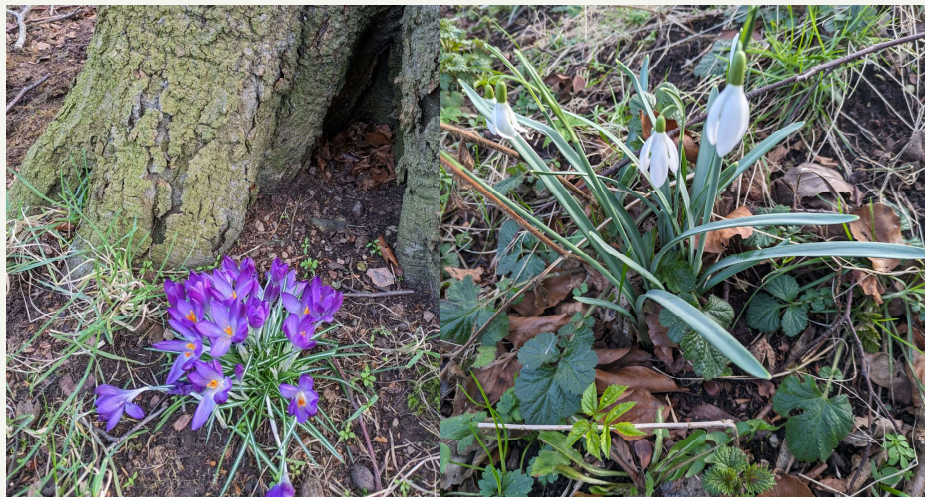
It's a joy to see the snowdrops, crocuses and other early spring flowers but unfortunately the few-flowered wild leek, *Allium paradoxum*, has spread much more of late on the hill, in the woods and at the pond level. I'm not the only person concerned that this non-native invasive plant is choking such plants as snowdrops, primroses and even wild garlic (*Ramsons*, *Allium ursinum*). The "Hill Squad" are trying to control it but it seems it is not straightforward to do so successfully, eg by digging it up. There is a trial of clearing an area underway at present but meantime, feel



free to pick some for yourself to turn into pesto or  
soup. (HL)



Few flowered wild leek (EB)



## Future Newsletters- call for contributors

This is my first time as editor of the FECH Newsletter. I am grateful for all the people who have contributed and would welcome any future contributions, especially from different users of the reserve.

Contact [friends@eastercraiglockharthill.org](mailto:friends@eastercraiglockharthill.org)

(NH)

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