

HADDENHAM CONSERVATION SOCIETY

WINTER 2023

The Committee for 2023/24 is:

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John Burgess	749441
Sheila Dickerson	749443
Susan Everitt	740352
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Wendy Lanman	741138
Robert Norman	740473
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All numbers are 01353

Please feel free to get in touch with any committee member with questions or information you might have. If you have any specific records of flora and fauna send them to Sheila Dickerson on hadconsoc@gmail.com

Send articles or photos for the newsletter to Sally on hadconsoc@gmail.com

HCS website:
www.hcs.tinaboneuk.co.uk

Membership information

Subscription rates
1 Jan to 31 Dec 2024
Individual: £10 Family: £15
If you wish to join the Society, please contact Krisztina Lakatos on krisztinalakatos@yahoo.com.
The membership will entitle you to receive our regular newsletter and will give you free entry to the seven winter talks, a saving of £3.00 per person per session.

Oh Dear, Oh Dear – or Muntjac Menace!

Contributed by Barbara Grafton



The UK's deer population is at its highest level for 1,000 years, with up to two million in the countryside and semi-urban areas (doubled since 1999). Up to 350,000 are culled annually, with more shot for food or sport, yet their populations continue to increase.

Of our six deer species, only red and roe are true natives. Fallow deer arrived with the Romans, and then again with the Normans in the 11th century. The three Asiatic species – sika, Chinese water deer and Reeves' muntjac (*Muntiacus reevesi*) – were introduced in the 19th century.

All sika in England, Scotland and Ireland are probably descended from one stag and three hinds imported from Japan in 1860 to Viscount Powerscourt's Eire deer park. Chinese water deer escaped from Whipsnade Zoo in 1929, and from deer parks, and are now widespread in Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk, especially in the fenlands. Reeves' muntjac – also called Chinese muntjac, barking deer or rib-faced deer – were brought from China to Woburn in 1838 by the 11th Duke of Bedford. Eleven from the resulting herd were deliberately released in local woods in 1901. Since the 1960s they have spread throughout southern, central and eastern England. Their population in 1995 was c.50,000; by 2018 this had tripled. As the Mammal Society map on page 2 shows, they are less common in Wales and Northern Ireland. They have yet to spread much in Scotland although captives have escaped, and others been released for game shooting. The Scottish government has a zero-tolerance policy towards their presence in the wild.

Pretty cute

The smallest UK deer species, adults are 90cm-1.15m tall, and 40-50cm to the shoulder. Adult males (bucks) weigh 10-18kg, and females (does) 9-16kg, about the weight of a cocker spaniel. They appear 'hunched', with their rumps held higher than their shoulders.



Reeves' muntjac deer distribution (in green), taken from 'Britain's Mammals 2018: The Mammal Society's Guide to their Population and Conservation Status.'



A bright russet or chestnut colour for most of the year, with white on the chin, throat and beneath the tail, their coats turn grey-brown in winter. They have prettily marked faces, the bucks with V-shaped black stripes on light cheeks, and the does with a dark kite-shaped forehead patch. Fawns up to two months old have spotted coats. Bucks have large scent-marking glands below the eyes, small backward-facing antlers and protruding upper canine tusks which are used for fighting and feeding. Does have much smaller fangs inside their mouths.

Hideaways

Muntjac are active day and night, mostly at dawn, dusk and the middle of the day. They favour dense deciduous and coniferous woodland, scrubland, overgrown gardens, orchards, cemeteries and railway embankments. They are shy and generally dislike open spaces, but are increasingly common in urban gardens and parks. Bucks defend small territories by scent-marking vegetation and by aggression towards other bucks, while does' territories overlap those of several bucks and does.

A noisy noise

Muntjac certainly live up to their name barking deer. The bark of the bucks, used to signal to does and rivals, or to ward off threats, is extremely loud, yappy and repetitive. You can hear and see it in this recording: rb.gy/5gooxd

Does in season make eerie scream-barks: rb.gy/5evqre and communicate with their fawns with whistles and squeaks. When alarmed, both sexes bolt, jumping with their tails raised, often producing loud screams.



Unbrowsed woodland in South-east England just after removal of deer fence



The same woodland 18 months later after heavy deer browsing



The same woodland six years later after continued heavy deer browsing
All images by Jamie Cordery, Forestry Commission t.ly/0hqsX

Prolific parents

The breeding season or 'rut' varies for each deer species. Red, fallow and sika rut in the autumn, with bucks engaging in roaring, groaning, antler clashing, and often-violent battles. Roe deer mostly rut mid-July to mid-August, and Chinese water deer late November-early December. However, the muntjac has no defined rut. Does can breed at seven months of age, and bucks father fawns with several different does. A single fawn (twins are rare) will be born after seven months' gestation, and within days does will mate again. Usually, a doe will have two fawns a year over a typical lifespan of 10-13 years (16-19 years in captivity).

There are few natural controls to this population growth. The red fox is their major predator, shown in one study to have killed 47% of fawns up to the age of two months. Fawns born in winter can fall prey to harsh weather and food shortages.

Voracious vegetarians

Muntjac outnumber all other deer species in Cambridgeshire, competing directly with, and displacing, the native roe. Their large population means it is possible to study their impacts where other deer are rare or absent.

Muntjac eat a varied diet of brambles, ivy, ferns, fungi, leaves, shoots, seeds, herbs, flowers, nuts and seasonal fruits, and the males use their tusks to strip bark and uproot young trees. Grasses are eaten when other foods are scarce. Muntjac were first reported in Monks Wood National Nature Reserve, an ancient woodland near Woodwalton, Huntingdon, in the early 1970s. By 1985, they had severely compromised hazel, field maple and ash coppice regrowth, causing the end of all commercial coppicing by 1995.

As the three images (*left*) show, deer can exhaust a wood in a few years. Muntjac graze heavily on the ground layers of undergrowth. This alters habitats, reduces biodiversity, and threatens the survival of plants such as primroses, bluebells,

oxlip, dog's mercury, honeysuckle, and common spotted orchid. The loss of honeysuckle and bramble in Monk's Wood led to a steep decline in the spectacular white admiral butterfly (*below*), which are woodland-specific and a priority species for conservation efforts, and to more growth of some grass and sedge species less attractive to muntjac.

This has increased the numbers of butterflies such as skippers, speckled wood, meadow brown, and wall brown which use grasses for egg-laying. Maybe not sufficient compensation for the loss of the white admiral.

Muntjac do not just damage natural and commercial woodlands, soft fruit nurseries, agricultural crops, wild plants and invertebrates. In 2011 the British Trust for Ornithology studied 11 bird species dependent on low dense vegetation in woodland and scrub. Significant population declines for five were associated with deer browsing. The greatest decline was in two species of conservation concern, the amber listed nightingale and the red listed willow tit. Muntjac were found to have a particularly severe impact on song thrush and willow warbler.



Road and rail hazards

In addition to considerable environmental harm, muntjac account for a high percentage of reported deer vehicle collisions (DVC). Data are very hard to come by, but a 2003-2010 Highways Agency study estimated there were 40,000-74,000 all-species DVC annually in the UK, resulting in 400-1,000 seriously injured people and 10-20 fatalities. The costs of these DVC run into many millions annually, let alone the cost in human and animal suffering. By the way, it is preferable for motorists to hit a deer than to swerve to avoid it as that could cause an impact with another vehicle, embankment, tree or pole.

Deer are also a problem for the railways, with a train-deer collision every month on average on the East Coast route. Deterrents such as deer whistles on trains are mostly ineffective at scaring them off train tracks, and high fencing is extremely expensive to install and maintain. In 2023, LNER's Innovation Team and Network Rail successfully trialled an AI-powered Automated Deer Deterrent System (ADDS) on the East Coast route. Using sensors to detect deer movements and activate sound and visual alarms, the system successfully diverted 50 deer a week from the tracks. From May until December, only one train-deer collision was recorded, and the system will now be rolled out more extensively.

Humans 0 – Muntjac 1

All six wild deer species in the UK require costly management to limit their numbers and protect habitat, but only the Reeves' muntjac is on the E.U. list of Invasive Aliens of Union Concern and subject to the extremely strict [Invasive Species \(Enforcement and Permitting\) Order 2019](#). This prohibits the release of muntjac into the wild anywhere in England and Wales without a licence; the import of live muntjac into the UK; captive breeding; and the sale of live muntjac. It also specifies conditions for their housing and transportation.

Muntjac's secretive habits mean they often form a large population before becoming noticeable. In Cambridgeshire, they are so well-established that total eradication is impossible. Barrier and electric fencing, the use of tree guards and, particularly, culling by shooting (there is no closed season) have reduced their impact in individual woods, but they remain a serious problem.

You may love seeing or hearing muntjac, but we are not keen. They appear in our garden quite regularly, and one or more destroyed an entire strip of crocuses on our lawn in a single night, about 100 flowers. They also love the taste of our roses. In a garden, deterrents such as diesel-soaked cloths don't look pretty but can be effective, as can security lights (at the risk of annoying your neighbours) and some commercial liquid and pellet formulations. We have not tried them, but unwashed human hair, pelleted lion dung, scented soap, human urine, peppermint oil, garlic and rosemary have all been suggested as potential deterrents, although no controlled trials have been undertaken.

The muntjac saga demonstrates very clearly the dangers of even small releases of alien species. A landowner's desire to have a novelty mammal on his country estate, along with other intentional releases and escapes over the last century, has led to an irreversible and hugely expensive invasion.

Guides to all our deer species are available here: rb.gy/s5ja7t

Images:

Muntjac barking rb.gy/lygoosk

Muntjac distribution map rb.gy/6obqa0

Doe with fawn rb.gy/s4zvin

Damaged woodland - Credit on image

White admiral rb.gy/fb67f9

Three deer in road rb.gy/8utfx7

Winter Thoughts in the Gallery Garden

Contributed by Ann Biggs

First visitors as storms pass over, blue tits dart in, snatching sunflower seeds from a hanging feeder. Watching, a nervous dunnock potters beneath in winter greenery, with an eye to 'bullyboy' jackdaws waiting on a high chimney.

Subsong from a juvenile robin, quietly practising, stops as the sparrow gang arrive, who, in turn, hurry away as a fat pigeon tries to squeeze his bulk under the bird table roof.

Two collared doves, all loved up, perch on my sign as the pigeon gives up the struggle, dropping to a ground feeder now filled with seed. Alighting precariously, the doves slide down the roof, elegantly inserting slim bodies finally to feed.

Goldfinches, yellow in a glimpse of sun, arrive at the party to see a hanging squirrel dominating the feeder, reigning alone apart from the grounded pigeon, while the finches crossly chatter from the alder catkins.

A family of long-tailed tits, with one tiny coal tit, ignore the squirrel, squabbling over the fat balls in a flurry of feathers and endless tails.

Sparrows by Ann Biggs



During January and February, the Arts Centre and Café will open 10am-4pm on Thursday, Friday and Saturday only, while exciting new ventures are planned for the Centre. Opening as normal in March, we look forward to seeing you all again for a prosperous 2024.

Meanwhile, breasting the carpark wall, speeds a yellow-eyed fury, a sparrowhawk, snatching at the smaller birds who evade capture, leaving a sulking hawk with angry eyes, screaming with frustration and hunger.

Then rain, a feature of our winter, arrives, driving the feeding birds to shelter and all is quiet.

Let's hope this is no portent of future seasons here and in the wider world.

News from Guppy's Pond

Contributed by Wendy Lanman

As I write the pond is freezing over. It has been thawing on the surface over the ice formed a few days ago, so it will end up quite thick by the end of next week as the temperature plummets. The waterfowl usually keep an area open when this happens by taking turns swimming in the same place while the rest of the flock gather around the edge and watch on. The ducks are reluctant to fly when it is really cold and I guess that they need to keep the warmth held by their feathers close to their body. Taking to the air would blow the warmth away. They are quite comical when they walk on the ice, slipping and slithering as they go.

The water level has dropped over the last week from where it was, lapping over the edge of our gardens. The swans enjoy this as it makes it easy for them to climb out and add grass and other plants to their diet – we don't

blame them and our precious plants can be replaced if they don't survive the chomping and being stomped on.

We have had quite a few ducks on the pond at last, but whether they are local or wild ones resting after flying over it is difficult to say. The swans come and go, coots and moorhens are getting busy for the breeding season, but no other sightings to report.

As for garden birds, all the usual ones are about but we haven't seen any thrushes. However, we did have the delight of watching two young buzzards chase some pigeons just above our garden while calling out the whole time. We didn't see them catch anything but as soon as they had gone a whole cloud of little birds flew over, relieved that the threat had disappeared.

We have seen water and pigmy shrews in the garden so they must have suitable habitats here and I'm hoping that keeping our founding cats in from dusk to dawn will help them survive.

I have searched for orchid leaves in the lawn but have found none. I shall have to accept that we have now entered that orchid-less phase and hope it doesn't last too long before they show up again.

So not an awful lot to report this time. Spring will soon be here, and things will liven up.

Water, Water, Everywhere

Contributed by John Burgess

It was one of those days around Christmas and New Year when everything seemed to be in a state of flux. Manic activities centring around family meals, followed by days of relative inactivity, every day seemed like a Sunday.

Rachel had a call from a friend suggesting a dog walk. This was to be from the bottom of the village to encapsulate Nine Acre Wood. As I was currently unoccupied, the weather was in a relative state of calm, even sunny, and remarkably without precipitation, I also attended.

The overbearing theme of the excursion was the terrific amount of rain we had experienced recently. Having struck off along Aldreth Causeway looking towards the willows of Aldreth ponds, it was all in a state of flood. Normally there are three distinct ponds becoming progressively deeper the closer they are to the river. Today it was just one long sheet of water, from the drove at the bottom, along all the pollard willows to the road at the top, punctuated only by barren willow stems breaking the surface.



The canal, although gravity fed, was flowing quickly, more the colour of oxtail soup than gin clear. The water level was just below the tunnel under the road bridge and was making its way rapidly towards the river. Needless to say the dogs were kept on a tight leash to prevent any impromptu swimming/being swept away.

The route would normally follow along the drove, but as any marginally low-lying areas were up to our necks in slub, we took a higher path along the canal bank. This proved to be marginally cleaner, although rather more challenging on account of the vegetation. Soon after we passed the first set of trees, we were able to return to the original Causeway drove.

About halfway to the river the drain intersects the drove at ninety degrees, then travels both under the causeway and its parallel canal. This water is eventually pumped into the river via Haddenham pumping station. The pumps must have been earning their keep, as once again the flow was rapid and with a high colour to the water. Having paused for a moment, the reality of the Fens' fragile existence, the subsequent low level of the land and its crucial drainage system became very apparent.

Notwithstanding the quality of the drainage system, several of the surrounding fields had standing water, hardly surprising really when you consider the amount of rain that had fallen recently. It was a more common feature of my youth, fewer fields had been drained and although it was less wet, water hung around for that much longer.

We progressed to the Old West River but before turning left along the bank, we made a brief diversion to stand upon the top of High Bridge. The resulting vista was really quite impressive. The river had extended over the surrounding washland and halfway up the retaining banks, making an absolutely massive river.

When you consider the area this new volume of water was covering, both towards Ely and conversely towards Bedford, coupled with the floodplain of the Old and New Bedford rivers towards Denver, the mind struggled to formulate a picture. It's comparable to looking at the stars in the night sky, then trying to comprehend the universe – way beyond anything my grey matter can possibly process.

As we surveyed this impressive watery landscape, a little egret flew over from Cottenham Fen, changing parish to alight on the Haddenham side bank. Standing at the edge of the water, the pure white bird was motionless. I wasn't so sure that its fishing trip would be fruitful. I also wonder how they manage to maintain their perfect plumage. It seemed such a contrast, set against the current muddy quagmire.

We strolled along the Fen side of the bank in order not to disturb his endeavours while a northerly wind bit hard at our ears. Fortunately, the wood was only a short distance away.

We entered the corner of the wood to a silent and calm world. Although the season has stripped the trees of their clothes, the massed spindly limbs blocked the wind completely. Everything appeared dormant, a carpet of leaf litter covered the path, the edge lined with a fine trace of greenery. There is still splendour and majesty

within this winter world: the shape and structure of the individual trees, the texture of their bark all leads to an immersive experience.

I did wonder if the wind and rain would result in some of the weaker trees toppling over. Some trees are at a jaunty angle and were it not for their neighbours they would certainly have a close encounter with terra firma. Although having said that, they are secure (and monitored). This impromptu falling is a natural process; the fallen timber provides safe refuge for all manner of vertebrates and invertebrates; certainly not something to be tidied up and cleared away.

Upon leaving the wood we continued along Church Fen drove, walking directly into the teeth of the north wind. Unfortunately, the fickle sun had now disappeared behind the grey. We picked our way around the mud and puddles eventually returning to the bottom of Aldreth.

If it hadn't been for the call, I wouldn't have gone out, but I thoroughly enjoyed the walk. The moral of the story – get out there! You don't know what you are missing; your efforts will be repaid many times over.

NB. This route is approximately 3km (2 miles) long and will take about one hour to complete.

Dealing with Muddy Puddles

Contributed by Jez Reeve

Muddy puddles can be great fun if you are under five years old and you have a new pair of colourful wellies to try out, but we are not all five years old! In Fairchild's Meadow the path at the bottom of the Wildflower Field often becomes extremely difficult to walk on due to the mixture of rain and clay. The top of the field is sandier, but at the Hinton Hedges Road end it is predominantly clay. And what rains we have had! The entrance by the kissing gate was so flooded that people had started using the further entrance, crossing the railway-sleeper bridge to get onto the track around the Meadows. Then a dead tree, itself swamped by ivy, fell into the stream causing the bridge to disappear under water.

Fortunately, we had a man with a chainsaw and some trusty locals to help clear the tree away one Saturday morning in December. Inevitably all the bits of branches and tree had to be put somewhere in order not to further block the path. First, we shoved them into the undergrowth at the side of the path and then I had a lightbulb moment. Remembering the Bronze Age trackways that had been uncovered at Flag Fen, I started laying the smaller pieces in the greasy puddles that had formed on the path. It felt good selecting the bits that were the right length and consistency, until the puddles were becoming passable without slipping. There was a moment that I could have been in any time or space, making a strong connection with our Bronze Age predecessors. Then Tim said, "Let's put some wood chip over this".

In memoriam



A happy band of fellows assembled at the new playing fields in Newtown Road to plant a hornbeam in memory of Paul Mason. Paul was a founding member of the Society, chairman, and friend to its members. The tree was chosen by Wendy and Sheila, and ably planted by a very friendly J D Garden and Landscaping team. An aftercare regime is in place to nurture its progress.



Of course, we had dumped piles of wood chip at each entrance to the fields in the autumn for this very purpose! That's what it was there for. Still the activity joined me to the past and nature in an unbreakable way that morning.

Get in touch if you would like to be on a callout list for these sorts of repairs and environmental maintenance. jez@jrworks.co.uk

HCS Facebook

Contributed by Rachel Burgess

Wildlife sightings reported around Haddenham, Aldreth and Wilburton over the months of October, November and December from the HCS Facebook page. Please join the Facebook group and share sightings and photographs for us all to enjoy. If you are unsure of what you might have seen, ask on the page and it's likely another member will be able to assist with identification.

200+ golden plover, yellow-legged gull & a Caspian gull
 26 October Dam Bank & Long Drove SS
 3 ravens 26 October Stretham TS
 Smooth newt 17 November Aldreth JB
 Short-eared owl 27 November Aldreth SS
 Brambling & two little egrets 6 December Aldreth SS
 Red admiral 9 December Aldreth SS
 Common lizard 16 December Aldreth RB
 Peregrine, lapwing flock, around 100 whooper swans
 17 December Long Drove SS
 Bumblebee 25 December Aldreth SS



Short-eared owl. © Simon Stirrup



Female
smooth newt.
Laura
Burgess

On the Road

Contributed by Andrea Chambers

Sadly, much of the wildlife we see whilst driving is already dead – roadkill 'I Spy' was one of our car games when the kids were little. My ghoulish offspring would happily reel off the corpse statistics to whichever poor relative we were driving to see – 3 badgers, 6 rabbits, a cat(!), 2 hedgehogs and what may or may not have been a weasel. Cue Granny blanching.

Roadkill can also take the now fashionable foraging habit to a new, omnivorous level – if you are sure it's fresh and it's not been too badly mangled you can pick it up and take it home to eat (although it's officially only legal to pick up game birds like pheasants from the road if someone else has hit them).

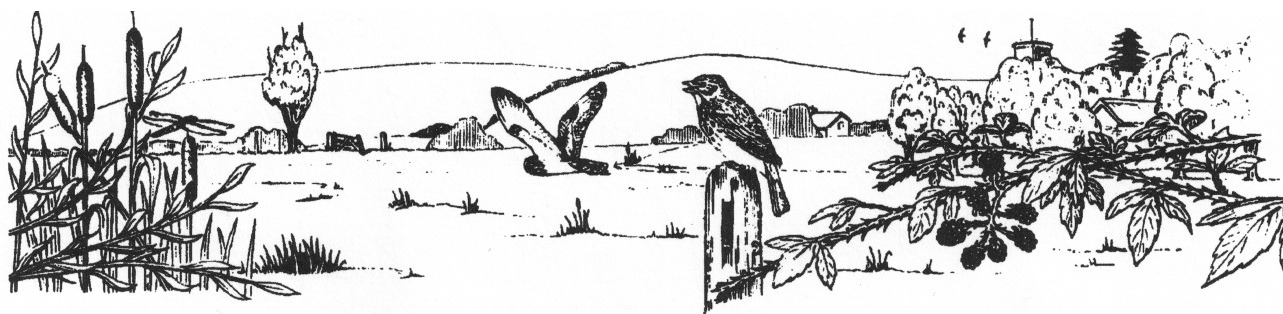
If you don't feel you can deal with the faff and gore of gutting and plucking and prefer your meat wrapped in greased paper, please give a thought to any friends who fly fish as they often have a list of feathers and fur they are on the lookout for to make flies. Also spare a thought for your local taxidermist* or a wildlife organisation who may be interested in your finding, especially if it's unusual or tagged.

All that said, it's far more of a treat, and far more in line with the spirit of a conservation group, to witness live animals on a journey. Driving home from work along the Welland Bank I'd often encounter an owl flying with me at car window height at dusk. My most exciting moment was my first ever view of a live badger. It was ambling down the middle of a quiet lane in the evening with zero inclination to give way to me or my car, so I just slowed right down to a stop and watched until it turned off the road into the hedgerow in its own good time. During Covid lockdowns I nearly came off my bicycle swerving round a sand lizard scuttling along on the Aldreth road.

Earlier this year my daughter Meg caught sight of two barn owls down on the fen road beyond Aldreth and, like my badger, they didn't seem interested in moving out of the way of her vehicle. Maybe they were happy absorbing the radiating warmth of the road, or maybe, as someone suggested when I posted the pictures on the HCS Facebook, they were simply hunting along the grass verge and were a bit dazzled by her headlights. Whatever the reason, it was an unusual and quite magical moment – the barn owls were lucky she was eagle-eyed, driving slowly enough to stop and take a photo or two, happy to enjoy the moment as opposed to a wild creature being a mere thump, bump or statistic on a car journey. We often hear people curse the slower pace of life in a village but the slower you go the more you see...even on the roads.

**Tracy Scott at Enchanted Hill is always looking for interesting things to practise her taxidermy on.
 07881454991enchantedtaxidermist@gmail.com*





WINTER TALKS

Indoor meetings are held at the Arkenstall Centre, Haddenham on the second Tuesday of each month at 8.00 pm. There will be no talk in January.

Members free. Non-members welcome for a nominal fee. All are welcome to stay for a (free) drink and a chat after each talk

13 February

Mammals in Your Garden

Peter Pilbeam tells us about the mammals we might find in our garden.

12 March

Growing Palms and Ferns in the Fens

Wayne Hollingworth, worldwide expert on tropical plants and trees, will illustrate how the effects of climate change may facilitate this.

9 April

The Great Fen Project

Henry Stanier, Monitoring and Research Officer, brings us up to date on the 50-year project – the achievements so far and what they aim to accomplish.

14 May

Beekeeping

Dr Paul Scofield of the Cambridge Beekeepers Association gives us an insight into this fascinating and precious insect.

Bring and Buy Plant Sale??

We hope to hold our annual plant and cake stall on the last Saturday in April. But we desperately need new volunteers to help organise it. The stall proceeds pay for our speaker programme, which means that if there isn't a stall there may not be any Talks in 2025! It's only once a year, so not a huge commitment!

If you are prepared to help, please phone Wendy Lanman on 07528 735954 to find out more.