



Newsletter

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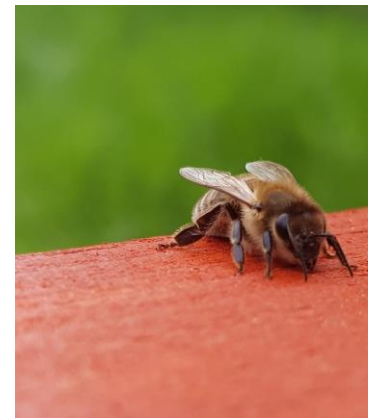
A Mendip beekeeper – a first season's view

I have always enjoyed the natural world, and from a young boy, have been fascinated with the social insects in particular. With a move from the city to the Somerset countryside eight years ago I started toying with the idea of progressing my 'entomological' interests further by taking up the craft of beekeeping. I had entertained this notion for a long time but it was never practical given that I lived in built-up areas, had no garden and work commitments.

Early in the year, the kick start I needed came from my wife mentioning that one of our neighbours (who was already aware of my prevarication on this subject) had spotted that the Mendip Beekeeping Association (MBKA) was soon to be running a series of lectures for beginners at a nearby church hall. As I could find no further excuses, I decided to sign up. The course was very informative and enjoyable, and I soon discovered that the beekeeping community is full of very friendly and helpful people. As the saying goes 'one bee is no bee'; the same is true for the beginner beekeeper – if you are to make a go of the craft you need the help and support of your association and I have never found this to be short-coming.

One consideration you need to make very early on is where you will site your hives. Given that I have a young boy, an old dog and a wife (that I need to keep onside), siting a fledgling apiary in my own garden was never going to be a viable option. Very fortunately for me, living in (one of the best) Mendip villages surrounded by woods and fields I was lucky enough to have an obliging, neighbouring farmer who was happy for me to site my hives in a quiet and secluded spot on their land. As well as receiving a percentage of the honey crop, my bees return the favour through pollinating the flowers and raspberry bushes in his beautiful garden (allowing him to produce some very delicious jam).

Whilst the advice is often to start off slowly, take further courses, visit apiaries and shadow experienced beekeepers before you take the plunge – in my case I decided the only way I was going to get into this hobby seriously is if I went 'all-in' from the get go. You are encouraged to maintain two hives (for contingency purposes) when you start out and the initial outlay for all the equipment you need can be considerable. A single, self-assembly ('rock bottom') hive can start from as little as £180; a starter kit (which includes a self-assembly hive, basic veil, jacket, hive tool and smoker) costs around £450; and you can pay up to £500 (and more) for just a single 'top-of the range' pre-assembled hive. Unless you are getting bees from another club member, then you can expect to pay around £250 for a queen and small colony (called a 'nucleus' in the trade). Be warned, when you start adding in hive stands, honey extracting equipment, spares, jars etc. your costs will rise. Despite going for the budget (self-assembly) options every time, I estimate that my initial outlay to date has been around £1,500 just to get started. However, you can get started on a more modest budget so don't let that put you off! That said it has been more than worth it.



Apis mellifera carnica

Having put in an order for a 'Carniolan' (*Apis mellifera carnica*) queen and retinue of bees, from a well-established bee breeder based in the South West, I had an impatient wait through spring until I got the call

to come and collect them. As I had never been that close to a hive before it was an unusual and slightly disconcerting experience to have a buzzing box of around 40,000 bees (well) secured in the back of my car. With the help of one of my new beekeeping colleagues, I donned my bee suit for the first time and transferred the frames of bees to their new home. I was now (in name at least) a beekeeper... albeit with no practical experience.

In the summer months, beekeeping requires that you carry out regular weekly inspections of your hives in order to: optimise honey production; check the queen is present and laying; ensure your bees are well and are not diseased; and to control swarming. Bees use swarming as a way of increasing their numbers by effectively doubling the colony - the old queen flies off with approximately half of the bees to establish a new nest, leaving a new queen, the brood and the remaining bees behind in the old hive to carry on. Whilst this is desirable for the bees, unfortunately not so for the beekeeper as the swarming bees take a large portion of the honey crop away with them as well!



Bees alighting with pollen

Swarm control necessitates that you check your hives on a weekly basis, and for a working man like me this meant that I had to do my beekeeping at weekends. Fortunately, we had a lovely hot summer this year and I was always able to open up my hive of a weekend (when it is raining you really don't want to expose your girls to the elements as it is not fair on them, and understandably makes them grumpy). Like all animal husbandry, beekeeping does require commitment, so planning and being realistic about what you can achieve is essential for your own enjoyment as well as the welfare of the bees.

With ongoing support from my colleagues (and family) I started learning the ropes, from building up the confidence to undertake inspections on my own, to undertaking more advanced manipulations such as splitting my colony into two hives to control swarming. Unfortunately the queen 'failed' in my second hive but I was still able to harvest around 4kg of pure, delicious Mendip honey at the end of summer. Although my main interest is simply in sitting and observing my bees going about their business, I cannot deny the satisfaction that I felt in seeing my (and chiefly my girls) endeavours for the season realised in very modest honey harvest.

Beekeeping is primarily a spring to autumn endeavour in this country, as after harvesting your last honey crop, treating for disease, feeding and making preparations to help the hive over winter, you tend to leave the bees to their own devices until the spring (with the occasional check just to make sure your hives haven't been blown over by gales or attacked by woodpeckers).

On reflection, I am glad that I decided to take up the hobby and heartily recommend it to anyone who enjoys nature and working at a craft. With the days now getting darker towards Christmas my thoughts are turning towards next season, and assuming my bees survive the winter, I can't wait to see them again buzzing out on their first flights next spring.



The season's bounty with labels featuring art work from my 5 year old son

Dr R Stokes

Working with other groups - 1

Regular readers may remember we reported that in 2016 our Barn Owl Conservation Team had the pleasure of working with Secret World Wildlife Rescue <https://www.secretworld.org/>. They had contacted

us to see if we could help with the rehabilitation of young Barn owls reared from rescued chicks. We soon identified two very suitable sites each with very wildlife friendly and co-operative owners. The process involved building a seven metre aviary to house them for two weeks while they acclimatised to their new surroundings. Secret World provided a four week supply of dead mice and day old chicks which the site owners kept in their freezer and put a daily supply into the aviary. After two weeks the aviary door was opened to allow the owls to fly free but food was put on top of the aviary for another two weeks. We released four Barn owls from one site one at another.

In 2018 we had the pleasure of releasing another recovered Barn owl. In 2017 Secret World discussed with us the possibility of releasing a pair of recovered otters in our area. The site requirements are quite extensive and so make sites difficult to find:

1. It must be alongside a stretch of river
2. The river must be undisturbed and free from walkers.
3. The site should not be close to fishing areas
4. It should not be near to a main road
5. It should not be easily visible from nearby lanes.
6. It should be on private land.



We managed to find two potential sites that fitted the bill and after discussion with Secret World Release Manager and the site owner we settled on one. However on carrying out a survey we found there was already evidence of otter activity, spraint on a stone and a footprint in the mud. After seeking advice from the Otter Trust (<http://www.theottertrust.org/>) we decided it was better to just release a single male otter. If there was already a pair on the river then a second pair would likely cause a territorial battle. If we only released one then it would move on in search of its own territory.

We then helped build a large pen along the riverside. We added electric fence inside (to keep the otter in) and on the outside (to keep other creatures out). A large tank was brought in and filled with water for the otter. Large pipes were placed in the pen for the otter to explore. Finally the otter (named Drift) was brought in along with a temporary wooden holt. The site owner was given a food supply of trout and day old chicks to keep in his freezer and to place in the pen each morning. After two weeks the pen was dismantled enough for the otter to be free. Food was still put out for another two weeks.

A number of trail cameras had been put in place to try and capture images of the otter after release. Pretty soon single otter was caught on film swimming past in the river. A few days later a pair of otters floated past. We cannot be sure but it seems very likely that Drift was still around and had found a lady friend! Also caught on camera were: a Roe deer crossing the river, a fox stealing one of the trout, a heron swallowing one of the trout and a Tawny owl bathing in the river.

We are continuing our relationship with Secret World and discussing the possibility of other species – see Working with other Groups 2 article in this issue.

In late 2017 I was contacted by the organiser of Wild Woodbury Conservation Group (<https://www.wild-woodbury.org/>). This is a relatively new group (formed in 2016) based in Devon not far from Exmouth. Although small they are very active as can be seen from their targets shown on their website. They wanted to start a Barn Owl Conservation project. Their leader Tony contacted The Barn Owl Trust (<https://www.barnowltrust.org.uk/>) based near Newton Abbot in Devon. They are mainly active in Devon, Cornwall and Dorset. They organise an annual 'State of UK Barn Owl Population report' to which CVWG is an active contributor.

I also act as one of their contact points in Somerset. The Barn Owl Trust suggested Tony contact Cam Valley Wildlife Group. As a result of our conversations it was apparent that we had much in common but also many differences and there seemed an obvious advantage in our networking. We had lengthy discussions about Barn owl conservation and how it could work in their area. As a result they now have two nest boxes which they have put up. Our discussions have continued and Tony and colleagues are planning to pay several visits through the Barn owl season and come out with us to learn how we operate. I am intending to arrange some reciprocal visits.

I am sure that there is much for both parties to learn by networking with groups of similar interests and exploring how we can be of mutual help and support.

André Fournier

01761 418153

Working with other groups - 2

Cubs and Brownies - can you help?

Over the last few years I have had the pleasure of working briefly with local Scout Cubs groups. This has included giving presentations on a number of wildlife related topics including: Creatures of the Night; Birds of Prey; Owls & Bats; How to Watch Birds. With Carol Powley we have also twice led Cub groups on local Bat and Owl watches at local sites.

This year I was approached by Paulton Cubs group to help them find and implement a wildlife project. They settled for a Kestrel Project. I started by giving them a presentation on kestrels, other falcons and some other birds of prey they may come across. I also gave them plans for nest boxes. The Cub Leaders obtained the materials and supervised the building of four nest boxes. I have a number of potential sites for them and will help them erect them. The project will help them towards their Environmental Conservation Badges and their DIY activity badge.



High Littleton Cubs heard about the project and they have asked me to help next year with a parallel project. The intention is that the two projects will then be linked together for ongoing monitoring.



I have discussed the project with Secret World. They do get a few kestrels brought in for recuperation and then need to find suitable sites for their release. The sites with Cubs boxes would be very useful in that respect. They will be in areas of suitable habitat and will contain nest boxes. Hopefully that may be another step in enthusing the Cubs and in helping Secret World and the recovered kestrels.

I have been extremely impressed with the enthusiasm of all the Cubs for wildlife and the Kestrel Project. Several of them showed wildlife knowledge far beyond what I would have expected from them at their age (8-10 years old).

Besides the cubs getting benefit from the exercises so too could CVWG. We are somewhat lacking in the younger element. If their enthusiasm is fired by such talks and projects perhaps it will encourage an increase in membership of families with young children. That could benefit the Cubs, CVWG and the wildlife in the area. I would like to explore expanding this to other Cub groups as well as to Brownie groups in the area. If I



can find a small number of volunteers to help and to widen the range of knowledge available then I would like to publicise CVWG and its potential benefits to groups and see what is forthcoming.



I would love to hear from any of you who feel able to contribute to that in any way, either in helping with them on wildlife related projects or in giving presentations. Please give me a ring for more information without any commitment.

André Fournier
01761 418153

When did you last see a hedgehog?

André (Fournier) recently remarked, “I have lost count of the number of times that people have said to me that they haven’t seen a hedgehog for years”. Maybe that is not surprising given that the number of hedgehogs in the British countryside is believed to have halved since 2000, with the population falling by about a third in cities and towns. Higher speed limits and less street lighting have meant that more are dying in the countryside, with about 100,000 killed on the roads each year.



Hedgehogs are predominantly a woodland edge species that can thrive in the mosaic of hedges, fields and woodlands that characterise the British countryside. However they can be just as happy in both rural and urban habitats.

In urban and suburban areas gardens provide hedgehogs with a plentiful supply of food, both natural and supplementary, as well as many potential nest sites for breeding, resting and hibernation. So gardens provide everything hedgehogs need especially where several of them are linked together and some areas are left wild.



For these reasons urban and suburban areas have become a stronghold for hedgehogs in recent years and this is apparent in some of our villages. Last year one of our members had at least eight hedgehogs visiting their garden and enjoying food put out under the security lights, which did not bother them at all while providing great viewing. This year they estimate they have seen five or six.

One downside to hedgehogs in urban areas is that they tend to suffer from heavy traffic with obvious consequences for hedgehogs. In Paulton two sites have been identified which are particular black spots for hedgehog road deaths,

The Government is considering introducing Highway Hazard notices similar to deer in road kill hotspots to alert drivers to hedgehogs crossing the road. B&NES highways department has been approached on the

possibility of putting signs up but because they are not official approved road signs they are unable to sanction their use. They can however be put up on private property facing the road.

We are monitoring the situation to see if the Government do approve the signs and if so we can approach BANES again. The alternative is to put signs up in appropriate places in gardens. The Hedgehog Preservation Society does sell them but with postage they cost about £14 each. We are therefore investigating making some ourselves from metal sheeting.

There are bound to be a number of hedgehog road kill sites around our area. It will be useful now if we can start to gather information on where they are and where people are seeing living hedgehogs and signs of hedgehogs. We already have volunteers to collect information in Priston Village and are hoping that more volunteers for local data collection will come forward.

What would really help with this initiative is a volunteer or volunteers to co-ordinate the work for the group. We can of course provide help and guidance. If you would like to consider this please get in touch with Deborah to discuss further.

You can let us know of any hedgehogs you have seen or offers of help by sending details (place and numbers) to camvalleywildlife@gmail.com or, for now, phoning Deborah on 01761 435563 (you may need a little patience re the telephone, though – a dodgy answerphone means that you may have to ring back later!).

Deborah Porter

CVWG AGM 2018

The CVWG Annual General meeting on 5th December started off with mulled wine, juice and festive foods, followed by a short AGM 'business' slot comprising the end-of-year round-up, thanks to all the volunteers who contribute to the running of the group and to its activities, approval of the group accounts and a vote to appoint the members of the Co-ordination Team for the next year (see the AGM notes below).

With the business part out of the way, it was time for the illustrated talks. The first was an entertaining wildlife photography talk by Josh Harris, a local young member now a student at Cambridge University. His enthusiastic and informative presentation was very well received and we were treated to some wonderful photographs. His presentation covered his experiences of developing wildlife photography and filming skills from his childhood days photographing deer and hares in the local fields right through to his more recent filming of seabirds on Lundy and his aspirations to eventually use his skills in a career. He has produced two films so far, which are well worth a look. They can be viewed on his website at <https://www.joshuaharriswildlife.co.uk>, through which he is also promoting his 2019



Photo of seal by Josh Harris – not to be reproduced without permission.

calendar in order to earn money to upgrade equipment and fund further trips. The second presentation was Diana Walker's customary account of her wildlife year, which included many photographs of wildlife taken on Cam Valley Wildlife Group events throughout the year. Josh and Diana were thanked for their presentations, which went down well.

December 2018 Cam Valley Wildlife Group AGM notes

Item 1. End-of-year round-up

Over 2018, group volunteers and project leaders have worked with and advised individuals and organisations in the local area, including farmers, landowners, land managers, Sustrans volunteers, Secret World, Paulton cubs, members of the public and our own members, including a local student keen on some 'real world' experience. We are presently considering expanding work with Cub and Brownie groups and are looking into hedgehog monitoring and protection, following concern from members of the public about hedgehog road death hotspots. Helena and André have given several talks to local groups in their areas of expertise. The group has put in place a new Data Protection Policy and procedures to ensure compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations.

Item 2. Events and projects

Events continue to be well attended and we have a remarkably good range of events and projects for such a small group. The inclement weather early in the year and the desiccation of the countryside in an extremely hot summer had a significant impact on Barn Owls, with both site occupancy and nesting pair numbers down on last year. It also presented monitoring difficulties. André has recently been contacted by yet another local group wishing to visit our area to learn from our Barn Owl Project successes, which is a testament to the success of this project. Helena reports that 35 different members attended at least one of the 23 botany walks and the number of species recorded is now at 900 plant species. As a group, we have made 57,500 records. That is a brilliant contribution to the BSBI's Atlas 2020 project. Deborah reports that insect records have been received and that she will be collating them in 2019. Monitoring and recording of insects in particular on Sustrans routes will continue this year.

Item 3. Membership

We have 114 households and a total membership of 217. The number of households joining this year was five, slightly up on last year's four.

Item 4. Website and Facebook

The website continues to be 'tweaked' and developed slowly. It had an average of eight visits per day in 2018 and messages continue to be regularly received and processed by the website administrator. We have 18 blog followers, six more than last year. We use the blog to send out messages such as news and event reminders. Most of the links clicked on our site by visitors are links to our own material held within a Dropbox outside the site - it's good to know that people are interested in exploring further than the page! Some of the 'clicks' were to our Facebook page, which has now been discontinued. Anyone interested in reviving the Facebook page should contact camvalleywildlife@gmail.com.

Item 5. Volunteers for the coming year

Phil will be continuing as the Members and Contacts communications coordinator.

Liz, Maggie and Barb remain as our Newsletter editor, proof-reader and administrator respectively.

Diana is carrying on as Membership Secretary and Carol as Treasurer.

Judy, Helena and Diana will continue to organise the Events programme and Deborah is remaining

as the website administrator and conservation co-ordinator.

Our project leaders, André, Helena, Deborah, Roger, Chris and Wendy, remain unchanged.

Thanks went to all the group volunteers who had worked to benefit members, the public and the wildlife of the Cam Valley Wildlife group this year.

Item 6. Receiving the accounts for 2018

Carol supplied copies of the accounts, which were read and approved by the members present.

Item 7. Voting in the Coordinating Team for the coming year

A proposed Co-ordinating Team comprising Deborah Porter, Carol Powley, Judy Hampshire and Diana Walker was approved by the members present.

Thus ended the business of the AGM.

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Next Newsletter: The copy date for the next Newsletter is **15th March 2019.**

This Newsletter is published four times a year by Cam Valley Wildlife Group, an independent, volunteer-run wildlife group, covering Midsomer Norton, Radstock and surrounding villages.

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