

Cam Valley Barn Owl Project 2019

The project has been going now for over 25 years. We currently have 160 potential nest sites on our database of which varying numbers are occupied each year. These consist mainly of nest boxes but also include other sites which have been occupied such as: an old grain silo, a church, an old water tower, house lofts and an old pit winding gear tower. It is a very onerous and time consuming exercise to visit and survey all sites each year and I am not getting any younger. I decided that the time had come to cut back a bit. We piloted a method this year with the aim of reducing time and effort spent on surveying whilst maintaining the project itself as far as possible.

- Instead of trying to get around all the sites in April and May to work out which sites appeared to be occupied we just selected a limited number of sites to get a feel for the level of occupancy and estimate when breeding started.
- In May and June we then selected the sites which we either knew were occupied or were most likely to be. That included all sites which had been occupied in the fairly recent past. We planned to visit all those sites plus a selection of others which were either near to sites previously occupied or sites we thought most likely to become occupied.
- From that we arrived at a list of around 30 sites which we would inspect to see if breeding had taken place and to count the number of chicks (information we are required to submit to Natural England under our licence conditions).
- We supplemented nest inspections with a number of phone calls to site owners who were likely to be aware of any activity that we may have missed.
- The inspections started in June – the time when we expect chicks to be about 6 weeks old and not yet capable of flight. Also both adults are likely to have moved to other roosts as the nest site can get crowded as chicks grow. That enables nests to be inspected very quickly with least disturbance.
- The intention was that inspections would carry on through July and depending on progress made we would have time to take in some extra sites.



Unfortunately, our plans were curtailed when in the middle of July I was found unconscious and was rushed into hospital where I was diagnosed with pneumococcal meningitis. I was told by Doctors that they expected my recovery in hospital to take four or five weeks. Happily however, after two weeks I was deemed to have recovered enough to be discharged although I was advised not to drive for a number of weeks and needed to rest in order to fully recover. Luckily we had completed all but a couple of planned site inspections which could be completed by our licenced team members.



Despite the hiccup we are happy that the method we adopted can be continued in future years. Although it is perhaps likely that a small number of breeding sites may be missed the majority should be identified and the annual return can still be submitted to Natural England to maintain our licence. It is worth remembering that inspecting the nests and counting the chicks is not in itself of benefit to the owls.

Erecting a nest box in a tree with help from a farmer >>>>
HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Keep your eyes open for any Barn owl activity and report it to us. That can include calls or sightings.

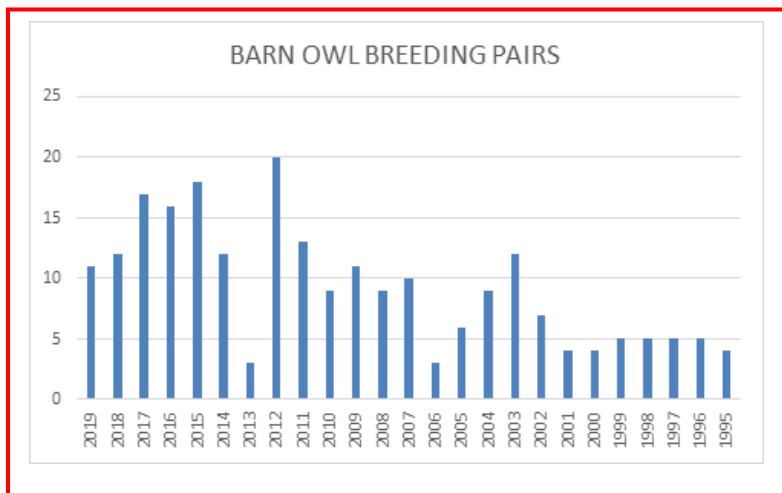


You can see and hear Barn owl calls and compare them with other owls on: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blog/2017/12/owl-calls/> <https://www.british-birdsongs.uk/barn-owl/>. The best time to see them in flight is while they are hunting for food about dawn or dusk between March and October.

They do not build a nest as such but use a variety of nesting places. In our project we have had them nesting in a church, hollow trees, an old grain silo, lofts in houses, an old pit winding gear tower and of course nest boxes either in buildings (especially barns) but also fixed to trees. Wherever they choose they do not bring in nest material such as twigs and leaves. Their main prey is voles and other small mammals. They cannot digest the fur and bones and so cough that up in thumb sized pellets. Many of these are deposited on the floor of the nest chamber and as they decompose a dish shaped hollow is made by the female in the remains. This forms the actual nest and the eggs are laid into it.



Please remember that it is an offence to approach a nest site or to disturb nesting Barn owls.



You can email me at andre.fournier@btinternet.com or phone on 01761 418153.

The chart shows the number of nesting pairs we have identified, year by year, since the project began. The numbers will rise and fall year by year depending mainly upon the weather conditions and the availability of prey (principally Short Tailed Field Voles). The adverse weather and the impact on the vole population has been a significant reason for the reduction

in numbers for the last two years starting in 2018 with “the beast from the east. However, it is clear that the increased availability of nesting opportunities created by our joint efforts with

landowners have resulted in a significant overall increase in the population. The numbers in 2001 & 2006 are not a true reflection of the position. In 2001 there was an outbreak of Foot and Mouth and in 2006 BSE. In both years our work was severely restricted as we could not access farms to check nests. The low number in 2013 reflected the national position when there was an 85% failure of breeding Barn owls across Great Britain which demonstrates the vulnerability of the species.



The average number of chicks counted when they are about 6 weeks old is in the region of 2.5 – 3.0. The number that actually hatch is likely to be about double that but not all survive (again weather and shortage of prey are the main factors).

Photos mainly courtesy of team member Gary Kingman.

Many thanks to our small team of project members and of course the farmers and other site owners.

André Fournier (Project Leader)

Paulton toad patrol

Every year, toads start to migrate back to their original spawning places, generally during late February to March. They choose to do this at dusk, but unfortunately at this time of year, this coincides with the evening rush hour, and so many get squashed by cars. For a range of reasons, toad numbers have fallen by 70 percent over the last 30 years. Toad Patrols exist across the country to help the toads get safely across the roads so that they can breed.

In Paulton, this was done for many years down by the fishing ponds by Purnells Sports Club but it has not been undertaken for the last three or four. A few people have talked about getting it going again, so if you are interested in helping the toads cross the road safely, please could you contact me (Ginny Lake) on 07749 626184 or virginialake105@aol.com, and we will take it from there.

Ginny Lake

Spring bulb, bee and butterfly initiative

This summer, Buglife partnered with the large Dutch bulb supplier, JUB Holland, to help with its B-lines project and to promote pollinator survival, in particular by providing early-season sustenance.

JUB Holland exports bulbs to more than 30 countries and now sees sustainable, environmentally friendly bulb-growing as a priority. The company is contributing a share of all large scale planting proceeds towards the creation of the B-lines network and has developed with Buglife, its Dutch counterpart, NBV, and the Dutch Butterfly Foundation two bee and butterfly friendly special mixtures putting into their mixtures for bees and butterflies a range of bulbs chosen from the top 10 for bees and butterflies respectively. The JUB Holland landscape planting catalogue provides a couple of guide lists for pollen and nectar values of the various bulbs.

Buglife states that bulbs play an important and ever-increasing role in providing food for our

precious pollinators and points out that bulb planting provides early splashes of colour in towns for residents to enjoy. There is, however, also a Climate Change element to the matter. Paul Hetherington of Buglife says ten years ago most pollinators would hibernate through the winter months; today they are active almost year round.

Buglife recently hosted two winter surveys for Radio 4's Today programme, asking for sightings up to 27th December of honey and bumblebees and three species of ladybird, highlighting, on air, the plight of bumblebees in particular. The results of the winter surveys were to be discussed on the 30th December programme of 'Today', guest-edited by Greta Thunberg. Up-to-date knowledge on how bee populations and behaviour are changing is important for estimating future population trends.

Bumblebees evolved in cool, temperate climates. They are found in many parts of the world, but are largely absent from Africa, Western Asia, Australasia and much of Indonesia, and are species-poor in most of South America. This is because they prefer open, flower-rich cool habitats, often with a reliable long annual adverse season - this is usually a cold winter during which they hibernate. If more bumblebees are wakeful in winter, increased availability of winter forage may be an absolute necessity, as a Queen's fat reserves alone will not see her through to Spring if she is not torpid. Matt Shardlow, speaking on the Today programme, informed that the southern limit of bumblebee distribution is moving north but that the northern limit is not, meaning that bumblebees are being squeezed into a smaller climate space. A study of bumblebees in Europe and North America by researchers from the University of Ottawa and the University of Calgary published in the Journal, *Science*, in 2015 found that bumblebees were neither adapting to warmer environments nor moving north despite warmer conditions in the previously colder climates, and that southern species tended to shift to higher elevations. The study estimated that on their southern habitat limits in Europe and North America, they were losing about 9 km per year (c. 5.6 miles) to add to the estimated 300 km (c. 186 miles) already lost up to that time.



Bombus terrestris queen warming up

Bulbs for bees	Nectar	Pollen
Allium sphaerocephalon, moly, giganteum	5	5
Nectaroscordum siculum	5	5
Crocus (botanical and large-flowering)	5	5
Chionodoxa lucillae, sardensis	3	3
Scilla bifolia and siberica	3	3
Muscari ameniacum and 'aucheri varieties'	3	3
Galanthus	3	3
English Bluebells	3	3
Eranthis	3	3
Botanical tulips	2	2

Anemone blanda and nemorosa	1	2
Ornithogalum umbellatum	1	1
Leucojum aestivum	1	1

Bulbs for butterflies	Nectar	Pollen
Allium sphaerocephalon, moly, giganteum	5	5
Nectaroscordum siculum	5	5
Chionodoxa forbesi	3	3
English Bluebells	3	3
Muscari ameniacum and 'aucheri varieties'	3	3

Deborah Porter

The CVWG Wildlife Conservation year 2019

It has been pointed out to me that what we do as a group is not always highlighted in the newsletter. This is what has prompted me to write up an account of the 2019 CVWG conservation year (although I have probably missed some things out!).

In 2019 the group put on a number of popular events ranging from talks on Swifts, Tree sparrows, British Woodlands and Rewilding to visits to woodlands, gardens, a cemetery and a Falconry centre. In addition, we opened with the Somer Valley Walking Festival with a talk on wildlife in the area and led a Nature walk, this time on Haydon Batch – last year we did Shoscombe to Stoney Littleton. On the Nature walk we spotted not only the UK's only true autumn solitary bee, the Ivy Bee, *Colletes hederæ*, but also the largest Hoverfly in the UK, the Belted hoverfly, *Volucella zonaria*, a southern hornet-mimic that is spreading northward.



Volucella zonaria, Haydon Batch 2019
by Diana Walker

Although it was late in the year, there were still some Common Blue and Brown Argus butterflies about, sharing with a few small furrow-bees a sheltered warmer south-facing slope with mats of Mouse-ear Hawkweed. Diana got some good photos of Brown Argus, which are very similar to female Common Blue. We were able to identify them there and then from the photos, where the tell-tale features showed up well. The Brown Argus lacks the inner wing spot on the underside of the forewing, and the dark spots on the upper-sides showed up well.

The vast majority of the CVWG walks were the 23 weekly Botany walks, organised as always by the Flora Project Leader, Helena. The botanical highlight of the year was undoubtedly the discovery of three patches of the Limestone Fern, *Gymnocarpium robertianum*, on the Colliers Way cycle path (NCN 24) at Mells. This species' stronghold in Somerset is the Cheddar Gorge, but it is also found in a few other places in the biological county. Diana's presentation of the CVWG Wildlife Year

included photographs of this exciting find and Helena's article in Newsletter 91 provided a fascinating account of the fern and its history.

Helena and Deborah engaged with the Sustrans ecologist and volunteers again this year, helping with the effort to maintain the role the Colliers Way multi-use route (NCN 24) plays in biodiversity conservation and to increase its potential and function. Deborah's reports of the findings of 2019 surveys by herself and Stephen included the discovery of a very small colony of the Blue Carpenter Bee, *Ceratina cyanea* at Mells, a bee listed in the UK as Red Data Book 3, but now considered as scarce, Nationally Notable. Also at Mells, and more widely distributed, was the Red-tailed Mason bee, *Osmia bicolor*, also scarce, Nationally Notable b. These are now added to the Dingy Skipper, *Erynnis tages* (a UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority species of butterfly), and Common Lizard (also observed on our site visits in 2019), as Target Invertebrate Species for Mells Yard. Mells Yard supports some quality flora-rich habitat in which Birds-foot trefoil and Common Blue butterflies are abundant. This year saw an explosion of Red Bartsia, *Odontites verna*, a partially parasitic plant indicative of low-fertility soils, which appeared to be very sparse last year. Happily, in recognition of its importance, this patch is to have its own bespoke management rather than the more generic management elsewhere on the Colliers Way. The aim is to maintain the good habitat that remains and re-establish habitat that has been subsumed. The management of the route towards Frome in particular that is already being undertaken under Sustrans' guidance should allow species to spread through the countryside more effectively. It will be interesting to see if it acts as a conduit for the spread of Dingy Skipper, Blue Carpenter bee and Red Mason bee.



Viper's Bugloss, Haydon Batch 2019
by D Porter

where it previously occurred. There was also a potential record of Five-spot Burnet moth, *Zygaena trifolii*, ssp. *pallustrella*, which has 'local' status and has not been found in our area before. Changes of the flight times of the Narrow-bordered five-spot Burnet, with which it is very easily confused, put that species firmly into the picture as a contender, so searches for caterpillars and adults will be undertaken in 2020 in an attempt to pin down an identification.

Chris provided records of butterflies and day-flying moths he had recorded on the batch in previous

Another interesting site that Deborah and Helena were involved with this year is Haydon Batch, now in the ownership of Radstock Town Council. In the summer, Deborah did invertebrate surveys and Helena surveyed the botanical interest to help inform the Council about this special piece of land. Deborah has sent off a report of her findings to the Council, with connected recommendations. The most exciting invertebrate find was Small Heath, a UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority species which was present in good numbers and is now considered lost to all other sites in our area



Brown Argus, Haydon Batch 2019
by Diana Walker

years, going back to 2006, including Dingy Skipper in 2018 and Green Hairstreak in 2015. There were good numbers of Common blue and Brown Argus butterflies and the bush crickets, Roesel's bush cricket and Long-winged Conehead were both present, species that not so long ago were not heard of in our area at all but are spreading quite rapidly.

Deborah and Chris will resume invertebrate surveys in Spring 2020.

The Barn Owl project results demonstrate how effective our project is. Numbers vary from year to year in accordance with weather conditions and prey availability but, importantly, the trend has been upward. André, the project leader, has provided a comprehensive report in this newsletter, so I refer you to it!

A valiant team of four, led by Roger, has been managing Goosard Reserve which is no light undertaking, as it is quite fertile! Deborah and Stephen did some invertebrate survey work in the summer and will continue in Spring 2020. The majority of invertebrate species identified were those that require damp, or sheltered or sunny habitats, or a combination of these, and few were of open or dry habitat. The majority were species that can be found in sunny habitats including woodland edge and woodland rides, and in flora-rich habitats of various types; a number were associated with distinctly damp or wet environments. Some were species requiring dead wood or rotting matter. The search for the Red Data Book species of solitary wasp, *Gorytes laticinctus* (formerly found on the site and now considered Nationally Notable due to expansion of its range), did not reveal the wasp, but it could still be present. A couple of interesting aculeate (aculeates are bees, wasps, and ants) species pairs/close communities were noted, one a host/parasite bee pair

and the other a predator/prey wasp and bee community. Three significant species of bee and wasp were found, the bees *Andrena trimmerana*, *Osmia caerulescens* and the wasp, *Crossocerus ovalis*. The first is a thinly spread species and the second is rather localised in Southern Britain. The third has a patchy distribution and uses sandy soil (as does *Gorytes laticinctus*), which is uncommon in the Cam Valley Wildlife Group area but is found on the reserve. Wessex Water, that owns the Goosard Reserve, did some survey work of its own, including for bats, and the various surveys have expanded the Goosard species list. Roger, Peter, Deborah and



Yellow & Black Longhorn, Haydon Batch 2019
by D Porter

Helena have been working with Wessex on an update of the Management Plan for the reserve prior to drawing up a formal agreement between CVWG and the water company. Wessex is also undertaking some of the more hefty conservation work that needs addressing this winter, which is good news for Goosard and the small team that does all the work!

Finally, help and advice on wildlife conservation matters was given to quite a few members and non-members (in about equal measure) who sent in queries and requests via the website and via Phil, who does electronic member communications. People were put in touch with each other about ponds and hedgehogs and names put to insects in photos sent in for identification.

Responses were sent to the many messages received, including queries about how to get involved with our conservation activities. One respondent was very pleased to see a Newsletter article about butterflies and moths (and their caterpillars) members had seen ...so please do contact us if you see something interesting or have photographed it (send information and any photos to camvalleywildlife@gmail.com or Deborah on 01761 435563). Messages were duly sent out to members and relevant project leaders as appropriate. People are usually very appreciative of help and advice given, but one grateful member of the public went further, stressing that he wished the members to be told how very much our help had been appreciated. So there you have it – you have been told!

Deborah Porter

Snakes alive!

I was amazed to learn that if an Anaconda swallows a capybara whole, because of its very slow metabolism, it will have no need to swallow another capybara for the next two and a half years.

Fergus Callander

Have you seen this insect, continued

Tiny French has asked if the CVWG is aware that there is another bee species which has spread like wildfire from the Channel Islands and north through Britain.

Colletes hederæ, the Ivy bee, is a plasterer bee, which he first saw two years ago in the hot dry summer on barren dusty roadsides in Bath. They are locally so numerous that walking through them reminded him of moving through dry ice on a stage. In August he cycled up Claverton Hill, stopping for a rest at the junction of Limekiln Lane. For the first time he saw hundreds of Ivy bees swarming over the dry south-facing meadow where there is a sparse flora such as scabious and marjoram.



If the Ivy bee is so entrenched around Bath they are bound to be in the Cam Valley. He suggests having a look for an example on the dry slopes of Nanny Hurns Lane at Cameley and he is sure there are millions!

People think they are wasps because the newly emerged females are brightly coloured but they quickly dull down. They are, in his experience, non-aggressive and are very late emerging – late August into September. They live in numerous holes in the ground dotted only an inch or two apart.

Someone pointed out to him that the bees were fighting outside St Mary's Church, Bathwick! It was a ball of mating bees. The subsequent wet weather has dampened their ardour but they will be back in 2020! The relentless march of Ivy bees northwards can be traced on the BWARS's (Bees, Wasps and Ants Recording Society) website. They were only named in 1993 so there is plenty to learn about them.

Tiny French

[Note from the CVWG Conservation Coordinator: To answer your query, Tiny, yes, we have had the Ivy bee here for several years now. It has been reported in Radstock, Haydon, Paulton and Shoscombe, but we would love to hear about other locations in our area. Readers please send your sightings to camvalleywildlife@gmail.com or tell Deborah on 01761 435563.]



*Ivy bee nest site,
Shoscombe October 2018*



Ivy bee hedge, Shoscombe. October 2018

A new Treasurer for CVWG

We are pleased to announce that a volunteer for Treasurer, Jim Crouch, has now come forward to take over from Carol Powley, who has done a brilliant job since the group was first set up – a very long stint, we think you will agree! A huge “Thank you” goes to Carol for her dedication and diligence over the years. Thank you, Carol, from all of us. Welcome to your new role, Jim.

Deborah Porter

2019 – a memorable year and life end

On passing by my orchard entrance I beheld a fox lying on its side in the grass with its body and legs violently twitching at intervals and its jaws opening and closing. It convinced me he (yes, it was a ‘boy’) was enduring severe pain.

I refrained from moving in closely in case the reynard misunderstood my intentions so retreated to the telephone to contact the RSPCA. The responder was a helpful gent who promised to summon help which arrived in a well-equipped RSPCA van within forty five minutes.

The patient having been surveyed, the decision was made that painless euthanasia was the only sensible solution. Out came a long blue plastic pipe enabling the fateful chemical shot to be administered in safety by the expert operative.

After a closer scan, disposal of the body proceeded. Many thanks to the RSPCA.

Fergus Callander

CVWG March events update

Talk on Wednesday 18th March

Whales, Dolphins and Seabirds off the South West Coast

by Tom Brereton of Marine Life

Coffee & cake from 7.30 pm, talk 8 pm

Members £2 (non-members £3)

At Swallow

Contact details: Judy on 07460 278311 (phone or text)

Moth trapping on Saturday 21st March. Start time 6.00 pm

Chris Iles will be running moth traps on Haydon Batch from dusk for about three hours, hoping to coincide with the opening of the Sallow blossoms.

Chris will be identifying the moths on site and either releasing them at the end of the evening or taking them home and releasing them at dusk the next evening. Moth trapping events proved to be popular in the past and it should be an interesting evening. All are welcome.

The entrance to Haydon Batch is next to the Haydon Allotments and Haydon Village Hall (Haydon Cue & Social Club), Kilmersdon Rd, Haydon, Radstock, BA3 2DQ.

Contact details: kifill22@hotmail.com or phone 01761 239092.

Notice of Extraordinary Meeting on 15th February

Unfortunately, the AGM business could not be completed on 4th December, so the presentation of the proposed Co-ordinating Team and members' vote will take place at 7.00 pm at Swallow, Old Engine House, Old Pit Road, Midsomer Norton, BA3 4BQ on Wednesday 15th February. The scheduled talk on re-wilding by Stephen Parker of Natural England will take place at the same venue at 7.30 pm.

Directions to Swallow: if coming from Midsomer Norton, go up Silver Street, turn left into Charlton Road, then at the end go left onto A367 towards Radstock. Go past the row of shops on the left: Fosse Way Co-op store & Whitstones fish & chip shop. About 300yards further, just past zebra crossing and past Buildbase on your right, turn left at the sign for 'Sun Chemical: opposite the children's playground/bowling club. This is a single track road – go along, road curves to the right, and just past the bend is the entrance to Swallow (sign on noticeboard at entrance). Go through the gateway and the meeting room is straight ahead on the far left. Plenty of parking. Please note that Satnav may take you astray!

Rent a goat – goat power

A method of fire control which is fast catching on in Spain, California and Australia is to hire a 'mobile' herd of goats to eat off the shrubbery and grasses around a private house, public building or town so forming a fire break to the advancing flames. Furthermore this method resists the fire getting up into the tree canopy which is the area most difficult to control.

Fergus Callander

2018 Avon Bird Report

Copies of the latest edition of the Avon Bird Report, the edition for 2018, are available from the editor, Harvey Rose, at Arncliffe, Coast Road, Walton Bay, Clevedon, BS21 7FW for £11.50 including postage. Cheques should be made out to AOG.



Some don't like it hot

When you hear the Australian news of combusting countryside, spare a thought for the Koala, a marsupial mammal, whose breakfast, lunch and supper includes up to twenty varieties of Eucalyptus including the Koala's favourite, gum, are going up in flames. Furthermore, because the Koala normally snoozes all day in the crotch of a tree branch and eats leaves all night in the canopy the Koala, if not rescued, runs a high risk of being roasted alive.

Fergus Callander

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Next Newsletter: The copy date for the next Newsletter is **15th March 2020**.

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.

To contribute articles, or provide feedback on previous articles, contact the Editor:

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For further information contact Deborah Porter at camvalleywildlife@gmail.com or visit our website: <https://cvwg.org.uk>