



The Cam Valley Wildlife Group Newsletter

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SUMMER 2020



From the editor...

It has again been decided that this edition of the newsletter will only be distributed electronically and will not be printed and mailed this month. Please do forward it to any friends who might be expecting the newsletter in the post.

Liz Brimmell

Cam Valley Barn Owl Project and Covid-19 in 2020

Regular readers of our newsletter may remember that in 2019 we made a decision to cut back on the project work. The reasons behind that were:

1. The project has been running for over 25 years
2. As project leader I was not getting any younger
3. The work involved was extremely time consuming and onerous

Since the project started we have added 208 potential nest sites to our database. These mainly consisted of nest boxes we had erected in barns, other buildings and trees. There was also a wide variety of other potential sites we had discovered some of which were occupied while others were not. These included hollow trees, houses, a church, an old pit winding gear tower, a clock tower, a house chimney, an old rusty grain silo and an old water tower. Of these 57 have over the years fallen out of use and they were mainly boxes erected in trees and, being open to the rain, have rotted away.



That means we still have 151 current sites needing to be checked for use each year. That involves an initial visit to inspect from the ground for signs of occupancy, white splashes, coughed up pellets or feathers and to speak with the site owners to see if they have any news or any concerns. Where it seems that a site may be occupied there can be several return visits needed to establish that it is. When established there will be several more visits to watch the site and find proof of breeding (usually spotting the male hunting and returning to the nest with prey - field voles mainly. That is then followed by return visits to listen for chicks and try to count how many by their 'snoring' noises and eventually to watch and count the chicks emerging. I estimate that will require around 70 – 90 visits on top of the initial inspection of 151, so around 230 visits in total.

We spent some time considering and debating how we might cut back on the workload whilst maintaining some continuity of the figures from year to year. We realised that in recent years the number of sites actually occupied usually lay between 10 and 20 and that around 120 had never been occupied. We decided that in 2019 we would not visit all 151 sites in April and May to try to ascertain which were occupied. Instead we would identify which of the sites we had come to expect would be occupied, plus those that had been occupied in recent years or seemed most likely to become newly occupied. We would then start to inspect those from June and through July by when we may have time to take in some extra sites. By June the young would usually be about six weeks old.



That is the best time to inspect the nest and count the chicks as both adults would usually have moved out to their own roost sites and return in the evening to bring food for the growing chicks. We would trial this far less onerous method in 2019 to see if it was a reasonable method to carry forward in future years.

We issued a newsletter to all site owners informing them of our intentions and asking them to help by advising us of any activity they witnessed and to tell us if they knew whether their site was occupied or not.

As I mentioned in an earlier article, our plans were curtailed on 12.7.19 when I was struck down by pneumococcal meningitis and spent 14 days in RUH Bath, five unconscious in intensive care. Although then I realised I was in no condition to pick up on the Barn owl work and was told that I should not drive for several weeks. Luckily we had completed all but a couple of planned site inspections which could be completed by our licenced team members.

We found 11 sites occupied in 2019 compared with 12 in 2018 – so more or less the same as 2018 when we carried out the full survey.

Despite the hiccup we were happy that the method we adopted could 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.

So what about 2020???

Our initial intention was to follow the plan we developed in 2019. But then along came Covid-19. In early March the early indications were that it need not impact much on our survey work if we carried out site visits individually. Clearly we would not be able to car share but a site visit carried out by a single team member need not involve contact with site owners - just a phone call to arrange a site visit followed by another telling them what we found.

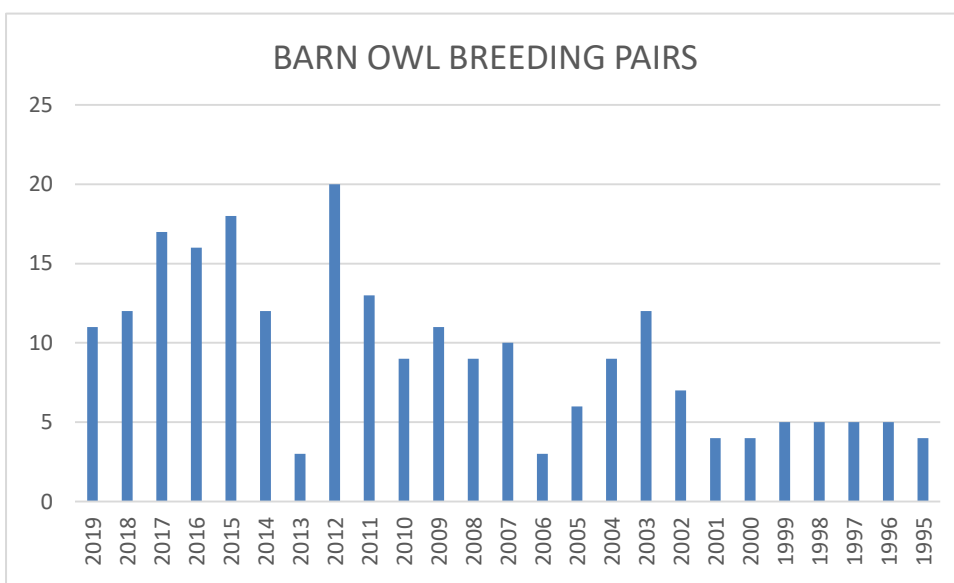
However, the seriousness of the pandemic soon ruled even that out and I realised that we would have to put the project on hold for 2020 at least. Being over age 70 and having spent 4 spells in intensive care with asthma, pneumonia and meningitis, I am classed as extremely vulnerable. As a result of lockdown, with others over age 70 (several on the team) I was advised together with my wife not to leave the house, unless essential, for 4 months.

A further note was issued to site owners advising them of the position that regrettably we had to suspend the surveying for this year and reminding them to let us know if they knew whether their site was occupied or not.

Younger members of the team who are also covered under the licence, Gary, Wendy and Jamie did find it possible to visit sites remote from the site owner premises and as I write information is still coming in. The information we have gathered will not be as extensive as in the 2019 trial but indications are that the number of breeding pairs may well have increased at least slightly. We also know that we have (at least) two sites which have become occupied for the first time. The owner of one of them has deployed a trail camera in the barn and sent to me pictures of a male passing food to a female and also to a chick.

It is worth remembering that inspecting the nests and counting the chicks does not in itself benefit the owls. What has benefited them is the number of additional potential nest sites that the project has made available to them. As can be seen from the chart below, even though numbers have reduced slightly in the last couple of years the number of nesting pairs found in our area has still trebled since the project began.

It should be born in mind that the size of the Barn owl population is highly dependent on the health of the vole population (their main food source). The vole population can rise and fall quite dramatically from year to year. Wet weather can cause the vole population to crash which in turn results in a reduction in Barn owl population. (Owl images by Gary Kingman.)



My unwelcome guests

Having forked out £140 to have two of my chimneys unblocked which have been the springtime residences of my unwelcome guests, the jackdaws, I was desperate not to have to perform an encore, so I've issued a notice to the jackdaws to quit my chimneys and go to perch in the huge ash trees nearby (not mine)!

However, they are crafty birds who, when I appear, peep out from behind the chimney pots causing me to adopt drastic tactics by banging on a frying pan with a stick. They now flee at the sight of me without a sound from the frying pan. I think they've got the message!

Fergus Callander

An unusual nest box

A rather unusual nesting place! Four baby Great tits crammed between the forked trunk of an ash tree.



Phil Gait

The impact of a good photograph(er)

Many of you will no doubt know CVWG member Gary Kingman. He is often seen at events and is active in conservation work. In particular he is a licenced member of our Barn owl project team. If in any doubt... then he is the chap with the camera around his neck.

You have probably seen his amazing photographs of Barn owls taken while carrying out the survey work and on other occasions. You will see some of his Barn owl photos elsewhere in the edition. What you may have seen less frequently are some of his photos of other wildlife taken while out surveying for Barn owl; out on his early morning walks; or any other outing in the countryside. So here are some of them for you to enjoy!



Badgers in the garden



Great Crested Grebe



Great White Egret



Roe deer



Otter



Heron



Great Spotted woodpecker



Great Spotted woodpecker



Woodpeckers



Little owl



March hares



Baby Nuthatch's first flight



Slow worm

André Fournier

A malady we hope to conquer

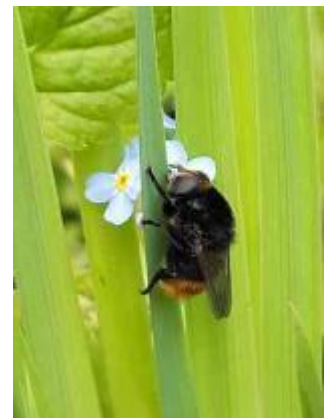
A microbe has been discovered that prevents some mosquitoes from developing malaria so interrupting the passage on to humans. The great hope and challenge is to vaccinate all the mosquitoes in the wide world and so terminate the slaughter this disease inflicts, which makes Covid-19 look puny.

Fergus Callander

Members' photographs

From time to time, members send in photographs they have taken of wildlife. One of those we recently received is a wonderful photo of an amazingly convincing bee-mimic, the Narcissus Bulb fly, taken by Maggie Edwards. At first glance you think it is a Red-tailed bumblebee worker, especially if you see it side-on as Maggie has... but it is trying to fool predators and it is really a hoverfly, *Merodon equestris*.

Maggie's photo is good enough to show the antennae, which in hoverflies each consists of three segments of different types, with an *arista* coming off the top or the end of the last segment (the thin wispy bit coming off the top of the expanded last segment in this fly). Bumblebees have linear antennae that are plain black, made of 12 (workers and queens) or 13 (males) segments, with the 'flagellar' segments often held at an angle to the basal segments.



*Narcissus bulb fly –
Maggie Edwards*

A key difference between flies and bees is that flies have two wings where bees have four, but this is not always easy to spot as bees' wings are pinned together in flight with a line of small hooks, giving the impression of two wings, and are held above the body at rest like the fly in Maggie's photo. The second set of wings in flies is reduced to a pair of tiny structures close to the body called halteres. It is these which give fly the incredible flight control we often see.

This bulb fly takes mimicry very seriously, and is also found in various forms that mimic other bumblebees, including a black thorax with a yellow, grey or orange tail, a tawny-and-black haired thorax with a buff tail and a tawny thorax and abdomen with or without a black band part way down (on tergite 3).

Phil Gait has sent through a photo of some Harlequin ladybird larvae sporting some striking bright orange markings and the distinctive set of four orange spines towards the rear. This invader is out-competing native ladybirds for food. Unfortunately, when it has finished with aphids, it turns to eating the eggs and larvae of native ladybirds, and even those of moths and butterflies. The adults have over 100 different colour patterns, some of which can cause confusion with our native 7-spot ladybird, which has variations in its own pattern. I have even seen a small Harlequin that looks rather like a 2-spot ladybird.



Ladybird larvae – Phil Gait



Rob Ladd has sent through a photo taken by Trish Ladd - a male *Oedemera nobilis*, the aptly-named Swollen-thighed flower beetle or Thick-legged beetle, among other names such as the False Oil beetle. This beetle feeds on pollen and nectar from a variety of flowers and pollinates a range of open-structured flowers. Only the males have the swollen thighs. Its larvae feed and develop in plant stems, notably *Cirsium* species such as the Spear thistle.

Flower beetle - Trish Ladd

And finally, another photo from Maggie, this time of a stunning day-flying moth, the Scarlet Tiger, *Callimorpha dominula*. Its caterpillars feed on a range of herbaceous plants, comfrey especially. It is one of the few Tiger moths that have developed mouthparts as adults, enabling it to feed on nectar. It is locally common in southern and South West England as well as south Wales and North West England and we are lucky enough to have what appears to be a good population of this moth in our area. It is very colourful in flight, catching the eye with its red and black hind wings. I have most often seen it flying in the late afternoon.



Scarlet Tiger – Maggie Edwards

Thank you to Maggie, Phil, Rob and Trish.

It would be nice to make this a regular feature, so please send your photos to Phil Gait at p.gait@tiscali.co.uk or to camvalleywildlife@gmail.com, making sure to give permission to use any personal details you are happy with being printed (e.g. name).

Deborah Porter

CVWG Botany walks 2000 - 2019

For the last 21 years I have led weekly botanical walks for Cam Valley Wildlife Group. Hopefully these provide an element of education in plant identification, a better appreciation of our surrounding vegetation and habitats, companionship, a modicum of exercise, and enjoyment. Since 2000 we have had over 450 Wednesday evening walks and a total of 248 people have attended at least one of these. Seven CVWG members have been regular attendees for twenty years; a few others have participated for almost as long. It was thus heart-breaking to find that with the arrival of Covid-19 our walks for 2020 were cancelled, but I am treating this year as a sabbatical and they will return!

CVWG Botany Walks have another very important function: on every walk we record every species we find and all our records are sent to the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland and to the local record centres. Our regular walks were initiated when CVWG became involved in the BSBI's Atlas 2000 project for which we contributed over 3000 records, adding some spots to the maps in the "New Atlas of the British & Irish Flora" which was published in 2002. Our records made in the last twenty years (2000-2019) will all contribute to the BSBI's new Atlas 2020.

Since 2000, we have made over 54,000 records on CVWG walks in our local area. Figure 1 shows a map of the density of records made in each 2km x 2km square (tetrad) in the whole of (old)

Somerset. (Note that we record in 1km x 1km squares, but this map shows tetrads for clarity). The dark region in the NE of the county is our CVWG recording area, illustrating our considerable contribution to plant recording in Somerset.

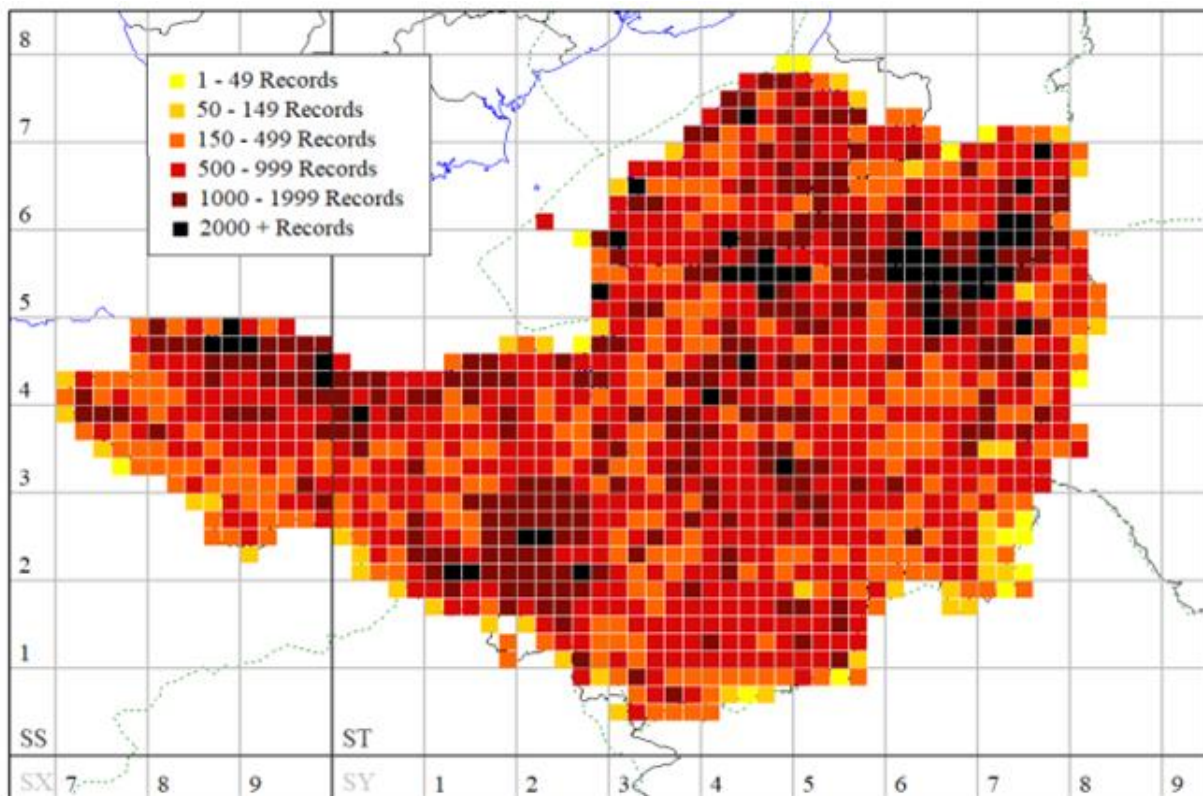


Figure 1: Density of plant records per tetrad (2 x 2 km square) in Somerset since 2000

In the last 20 years almost 1000 species have been recorded in the CVWG area (the catchments of the Cam Brook and Wellow Brook). I input all of our records to a database using the mapping programme MapMate, which has many facilities for analysis and mapping of data. Our records will not only contribute to the flora atlas of Britain and Ireland, but also to the next atlas of Somerset. Our records for some species are already used in the Somerset Rare Plant Register, an ongoing project (see somersetrareplantsgroup.org.uk). They also appear as spots on distribution maps in any talks I give, or indeed in talks and publications by other Somerset botanists.

A further aim of the CVWG flora project has always been to produce a local publication on the flora of the Cam and Wellow Valleys: the records and observations made and understanding we have gained on our weekly walks will be the foundation of this. To that end, I regularly examine and use maps of species distributions within our CVWG study area.

Some species are ubiquitous – over the years we have made an awful lot of records of nettle (see Figure 2). Fifteen other species have also been recorded in every 1km square in our area: Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), Elder (*Sambucus nigra*), Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), Hazel (*Corylus avellana*), Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.), Cleavers (*Galium aparine*), Creeping Buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*), Dandelion (*Taraxacum* agg.), Herb-Robert (*Geranium robertianum*), Hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*), Ivy (*Hedera helix*), Ribwort Plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), Tufted Vetch (*Vicia sepium*), Wood Avens (*Geum urbanum*) and the grass, Cock's-foot (*Dactylus glomerata*). These all grow as weeds in my garden!

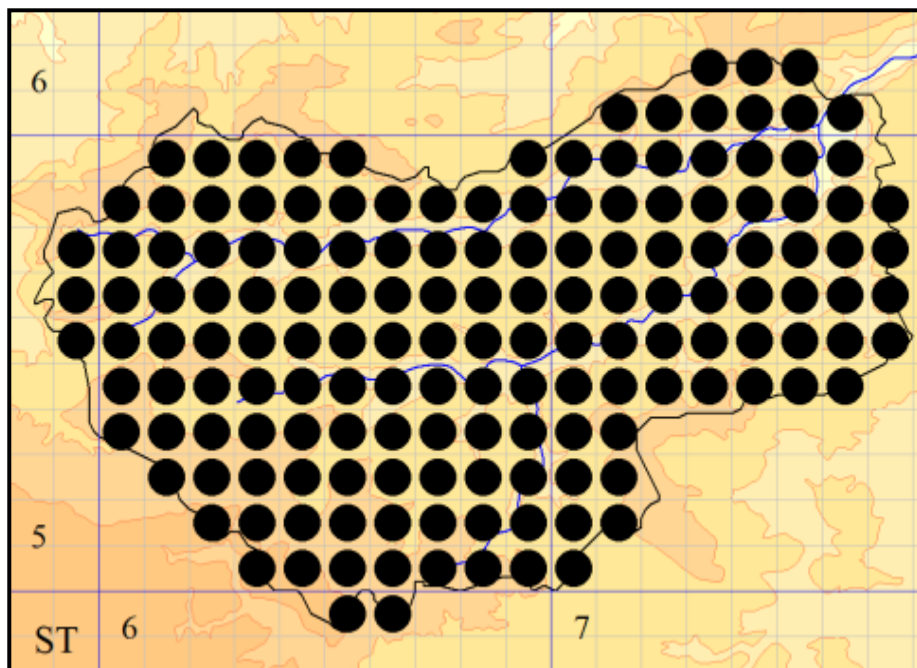


Figure 2: Distribution of Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) in the CVWG area

Many species are rare, with only one or a few sites, but some have more interesting distribution maps. Spiked Star-of-Bethlehem or Bath Asparagus (*Ornithogalum pyrenaicum*) (photo by Helena Crouch), is a

Nationally Scarce plant found in greatest numbers in the vicinity of Bath. It is restricted to the east of the CVWG area (see Figure 3), probably because of the geology.

Several grassland species are similarly restricted to the Oolitic limestone in the north-east of our area, for example Milkwort (*Polygala vulgaris*) (photo by Helena Crouch).

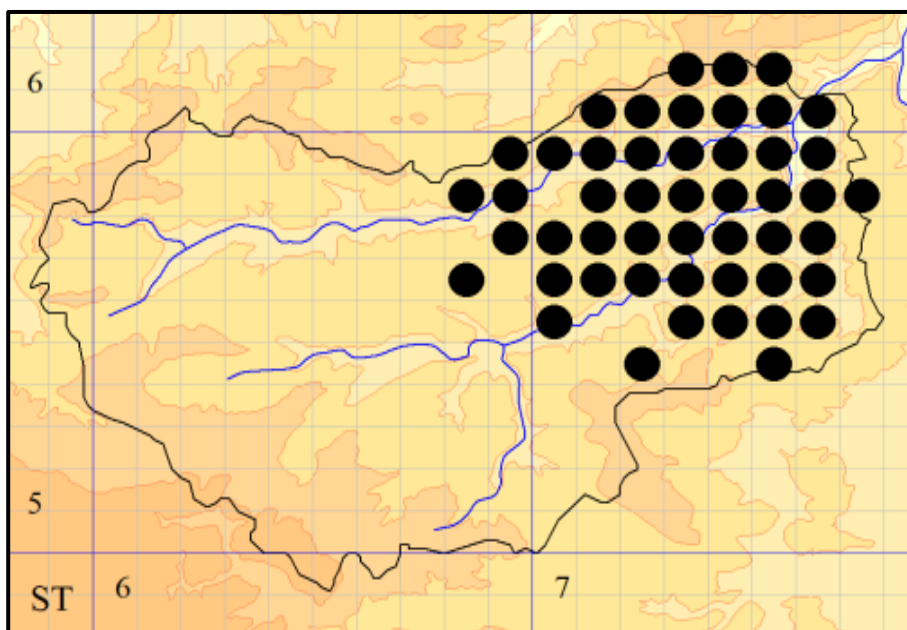


Figure 3: Distribution of Bath Asparagus (*Ornithogalum pyrenaicum*) in the CVWG area

We have often noted that it is wetter in the west part of the CVWG area, and this is reflected in the distribution maps of several woodland ferns, for example the Scaly Male-fern (*Dryopteris affinis*) (photo by Helena Crouch), see Figure 4.

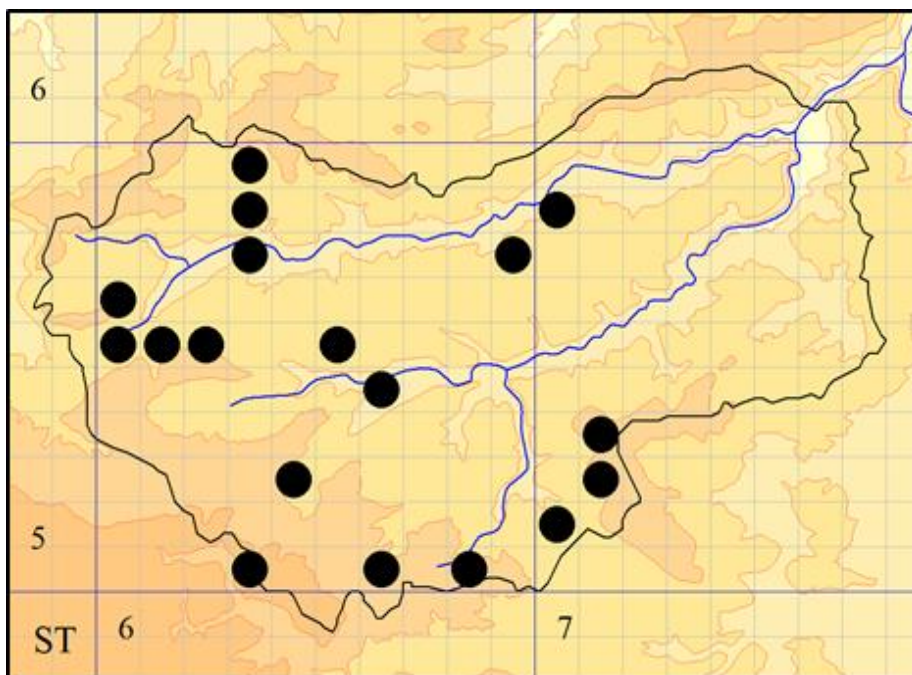


Figure 4: Distribution of Scaly Male-fern (*Dryopteris affinis*) in the CVWG area



Other species have distributions clearly correlated with the streams: sadly, the most dramatic map showing this is that of the invasive alien, Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) (photo by Fred Rumsey), see Figure 5.

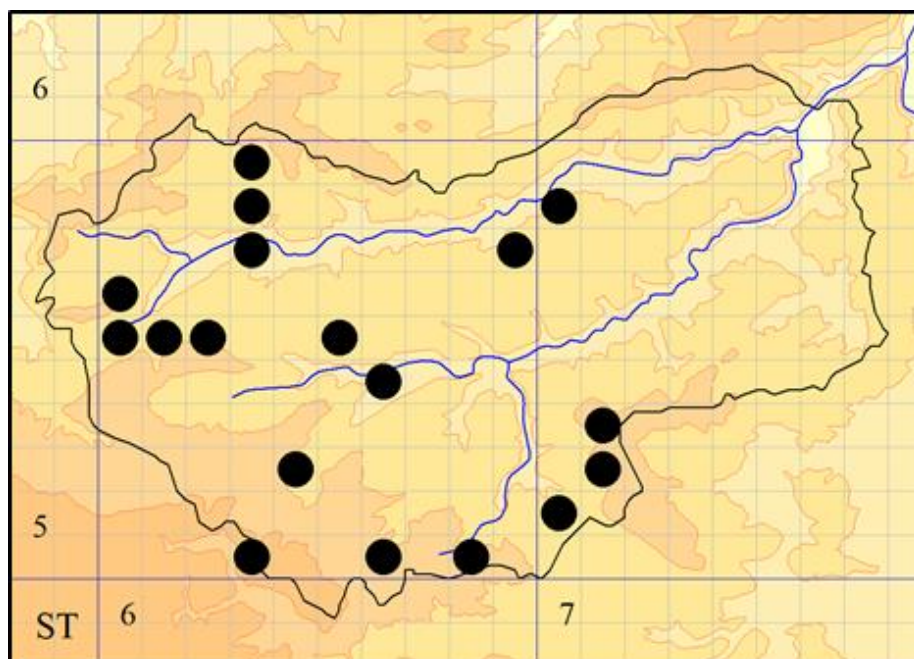


Figure 5: Distribution of Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) in the CVWG area

Geology, hydrology, the varied land-use, climate and soils all contribute to the relatively rich flora of this small area. Hopefully next year we will be able to resume our weekly botany walks and continue to discover and record the flora of the Cam and Wellow Valleys.

Helena Crouch

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Next Newsletter: The copy date for the next Newsletter is **15th September 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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