



The Cam Valley Wildlife Group

Newsletter



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WINTER 2022

Paulton Toad Patrol 2022

This Spring the patrol managed to complete some sessions of Paulton Toad Patrol despite the various restrictions and it would be great to do a full season next year (not long now!).

The toads are now hibernating but as soon as the weather and temperature are suitable (mild, damp evenings around the beginning of February) they instinctively head en masse for their traditional spawning ponds. In Paulton this is the fishing ponds (currently privately owned) on Bristol Road, on the way to Goosard. Unfortunately this also coincides with rush hour, and annually many toads get killed here and across the country. In the last 30 years, toad numbers have declined by 70 percent, so Toad Patrols aim to collect as many toads as possible and transfer them safely across the roads so that they can breed safely.

Being involved with toad patrol involves being available on suitable evenings, generally for the six weeks between mid Feb until the clocks go forward, approx. between the hours of 6.30 - 8.00pm. Obviously the more people we have, the more toads we can rescue, and ideally we can have groups to spread the time that we each need to be involved.



It does seem a strange time of year and day to be out and about, but I find that it gets me kick-started into the year and being out and about makes Spring come even earlier. Collecting the toads safely becomes quite compulsive (and is also a good way of exercising off any Christmas excess...!).

We would really welcome more patrollers, so if you are interested in taking part, or have any questions, please contact me - virginialake105@aol.com / 07749626184 - thank you.

There is also now a Facebook group - Paulton Toad Patrol - which you can join. You can also message Rozy Gray here, who set up this group last season, and get details of how to fill in the insurance and Health and Safety forms (nothing complicated!).

There is also lots of general information on frogs and toads and on how Toad Patrols work at www.froglife.org.

All the best - we look forward to seeing more patrollers and saving more toads!

Ginny Lake

Mountain chicken

In Montserrat, West Indies, there are strange sounds to be heard like this: whoop! whoop! whoop! which turn out to be the calls of mountain chickens, presumably from the side of a mountain?

Unfortunately mountain chickens are prone to a fungus disease which has reduced their number to between 200 and 300, so they are on the brink of extinction, if not rescued.

'Mountain Chicken' is the local name for a certain breed of frog! Ha! Ha! whoop! whoop!

Source: BBC but about 20 years ago.

Fergus Callander

Members photos

Thorn Apple:

Phil Gait has sent in something I have not seen before, a Thorn Apple, *Datura stramonium*, which gets its name from its large prickly fruit. A casual weed in the UK, it has been an introduced annual weed of cultivated fields, gardens and waste places with a large prickly fruit that gives the plant its name. It is common in France but originates from America (Bruneton, 1999). In the UK it is a sporadic casual weed, particularly evident in hot summers, introduced from several sources including birdseed, wool and soybean waste (Stace, 1997; Hanson & Mason, 1985; Salisbury, 1961).

Livestock normally avoid it, which is just as well as it is poisonous not only to us (hallucinogenic) but also horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, mules and chickens (Weaver & Warwick, 1984; Forsyth, 1968). The main danger to livestock is contamination in feed such as hay and silage, but it has some medicinal uses for us and is thought to halt the growth of certain brain tumours.



'Fruit' – Phil Gait

The usually white large, trumpet-like flowers are produced from July to October. Stace, 1997 informs that the *chalybaea* variant has purple flowers. There may be 50 or more capsules per plant, 600-700 seeds per capsule and around 30,000 seeds per plant and the seeds will continue to ripen even if the plant is cut down unless damaged by frost. The germination rate of seeds is poor and immature seeds are said to germinate more freely than fully mature ones, but buried seeds (8cm depth) in uncultivated land remain highly viable for 30 years, after which time they decline (Toole, 1946). At 34cm deep, 91% of seeds germinated 39 years after burial (Weaver & Warwick, 1984). The capsules and seeds can also remain floating in water for 10 days.

Deborah Porter

Spider's web:

Orb webs will be very familiar to readers, but members of only four of the spider families of British spiders actually make them. The frame of an orb web anchors it to supporting structures and provides an attachment for the radial threads, which radiate from a central hub. These in turn support a spiral that is sticky. This can be because it has glue droplets on it, but sometimes tangled cribellate silk provides the 'stickiness'.

There are seven British species of Orbweb spider and amongst these, several females of species of the genus *Araneus* can be identified by eye. Two of these species are still around in October and even into November, being killed off by the first frosts. The females are large conspicuous spiders with distinctive markings.

The Garden Spider, *Araneus diadematus*, places glue on its web, which appears to be the case in the photograph. The Garden, Cross, or Diadem Spider is the most common of our Orbweb spiders, so it is most likely that this is the maker of the large and magnificent web captured by Yvonne. The front portion of the abdomen almost always has a cross-like pattern of pale or white spots and markings centrally, which gives rise to the popular name of Cross Spider.

The Four-spotted Orbweb spider, *Araneus quadratus*, also places glue on its large orb web, but to see it you will most likely have to visit an area of undisturbed herbaceous vegetation and shrubs, for example rushes and sedges or heather and gorse.

Deborah Porter



Spider's web - Yvonne Hawkins

More members photos



Sunset – Phil Gait



Rainbow – Phil Gait

Nature Notes from February to April 2021

Each day I make a nature note. It could be about something new to me or unusual, but in winter quite a few are about common place things that trigger questions which I then try to answer. For this period, most of my wanderings were quite close to my home in Lower Coleford.

9th February 2021

During really cold weather, I noticed that some wildflowers were affected by frost, but others seemed unchanged. I found out that snowdrops have a natural anti-freeze protein in their leaves. The tips of their leaves are quite hard to break through frozen ground. In addition, their flower petals open when the temperature rises above 10°C and is thus warm enough for bumblebees to fly and pollinate them.



16th March 2021

Near Stoke St Michael, I spotted Old Man's Beard which grew from the ground straight up to a branch about 7 metres above. I couldn't find out how this happens. However, I did find a list of alternative names – Traveller's Joy, Tuzzy-Muzzy, Slipping Ropes, Maiden's Hair and Devil's Guts. The stem used to be smoked, so there are additional names reflecting this – Boy's Bacca, Poor Man's Friend and Shepherd's Delight.



19th March 2021

I found a 22-spot Ladybird in our garden today. I had not realised that these tiny ladybirds are frugivorous, seeking out mildews and moulds. They overwinter in leaf litter or matted vegetation, but are active during mild spells.



4th April 2021

This was a trip to Catcott Lows where we were expected to spend most of our time bird-watching. However, the highlights for me were finding a Snakes-head fritillary flowering on Catcott Heath and watching water creatures in the nearby Pitts.



10th April 2021

We found some Toothwort in Asham Woods today. It was next to a Hazel tree. My wildflower book says that Toothwort is a parasite on the roots of Hazels and other trees. However, it is now considered to be mycoheterotrophic, meaning it lives in close association with a fungus. It is the fungus that is getting its nutrition from the roots of Hazel trees.

25th April 2021

Today I watched a Dark-edged bee fly in our garden. It was hovering over a bare patch of earth with its rear end near or touching the ground. I checked out their nesting habits and found that they parasitise the nests of mining bees. A female will follow a Tawny mining bee around until she finds a nest shaft. She will drop her eggs in or near it and if necessary, will flick them into the shaft. The Bee fly larvae first consume the mining bee larvae's food, before starting on the bee larvae themselves.

Veryan Conn

AGM – 1st December 2021

The AGM evening started with a spot of socialising, giving members a chance to chat. Then we plunged into the AGM 'business', starting with a summary of our activities over the past two years, as we did not hold an AGM last year due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Jim Crouch then presented his Treasurer's report and the accounts, informing the members that donations were about the same for both years, and that although we had less funds coming in, we also had less outgoings. We then moved on to voting in a proposed Coordinating Team of six – Deborah Porter, Diana Walker, Gary Kingman, Jim Crouch, Judy Hampshire, and Peter Watson.

Under *Any other business*, Gary gave an account of the Barn Owl Project activities, which had continued throughout the two years but had been affected by the Covid-19 restrictions and also because André had to step back due to ill health. André has run the Barn Owl Project with a steady hand on the tiller since the group was in its infancy but, sadly, will no longer be able to do this. He has dedicated many, many hours to the project over those years and has provided a wealth of information to members both in our newsletter and on our website. He has presided over a very successful conservation project indeed, bringing Barn Owls back from local extinction to the healthy population we now have in the area. Accounts of the project and reports from recent years can be found on our Barn Owl Project website pages. Gary, who has also been heavily involved in the project for a number of years, has kept the project going. He called for much-needed volunteers to help with various aspects of the project including site visits (which require two people where any ladder-work is required, for example when checking boxes), writing up reports and compiling records for sending to the Barn Owl Trust. Please contact Gary on 07960269022 for further information and to volunteer.

Summary of CVWG activities over the past two years

Carol stepped down as Treasurer in 2020, having done a marvellous job since the group's formation. Carol and André handed over their roles as signatories for the cheques to Jim and Judy, with transfer to the new signatories finally taking place in 2021 after some 'to-ing' and 'fro-ing' with the bank. There was a change in procedure, in part prompted by the difficulties thrown up by the Covid-19 restrictions and in part to make things a little easier – only one of the two signatories' signatures would be required on a cheque. Membership stood at 170 members in 113 households at the end of 2021.

Covid-19 had quite an impact on our activities, causing cancellations and adjustments, but the Botany Project, Barn Owl Project, Insect Project, Goosard Reserve Project and Events Team kept the show on the road as well as they could in the circumstances. The venue we used for indoor events became unavailable, prompting a search for a new one, the Radstock Working Men's Club. Goosard was closed for a time, but lone working resumed in June 2020 and our Events were re-launched in August with a varied programme covering bats; botany; butterflies, moths and other insects, conservation work at Goosard, fungi, otters and wildlife photography.

Botany Walks started a bit late in 2021, and the first two were limited to six participants, due to lockdowns. There were 17 walks and 26 members attended one walk or another (or all of them!). The season ended with a social in Helena's garden. We made slightly fewer records this year, but still added nearly 2,000 records to the BSBI database as a result of our group walks. They will resume in April!

The Newsletter went from strength to strength, with more people contributing than previously, a number of whom had not contributed before. There have been many interesting and informative members' articles and we have received quite a number of compliments, thanks to all those who contributed and otherwise helped to make and distribute it.

The Coordinating Team was still very small at the start of 2020, arguably too small, and had much to do in that year. So we set up a General Committee, suggested by Helena and with Peter driving it forward. Although numbers were restricted due to the Covid-19 restrictions, we were able to meet outdoors, providing a very welcome help for the team, with more people looking at issues, handy meeting notes to refer to, courtesy of Helena, and the team on hand in the general meetings to take decisions then and there where possible.

We reviewed and updated CVWG policies, bringing us completely up-to-date with the exception of the Health and Safety policy. We only have one thing to go on that one, securing replacement independent persons for the safeguarding part of the policy, to replace the Burnetts who have performed this role since 2012.

We also delegated Jim to act on behalf of the group regarding the insurance, taking over from André who had done this for many years.

We set up a Working Party consisting of Deborah, Jim and Peter to progress the matter of the agreement and new Management Plan for Goosard Reserve with Wessex Water and Jim took over the liaising with Wessex from Deborah. When the H&S policy is signed off, we should finally be ready for signing a honed down uncomplicated contract with Wessex Water in which we are officially a Service Provider. It has been a long time coming!

2021 was a quiet year for the Coordinating Team and General Committee.

Many thanks to all who have helped to make the group's activities a success in what were for many people, difficult circumstances in 2020 and 2021!

Deborah Porter

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Next Newsletter: The copy date for the next Newsletter is **15th March 2022**

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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