



# The Cam Valley Wildlife Group

# Newsletter

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## Exciting things are happening at Goosard Batch Nature Reserve

That's right! Wessex Water, owners of this lovely little Reserve, have brightened it up by coppicing some ancient hazel coppice stools, removing some dodgy overhanging shrubby bushes, laying a section of blackthorn scrub into a hedge and generally letting in light to the footpaths and their margins. There has also been some new fencing, some fencing repairs and some new signage. Some points of access to dangerous slopes have been closed off. There is to be a new display board at the Reserve entrance with a map showing public access areas, information about highlights of the wildlife and details of CVWG's involvement in the management of the Reserve!

So what is our involvement? Well, after more than 20 years of managing the Reserve on a casual basis, we now have a legal agreement with WW to manage the site to an agreed Management Plan lasting until 2026. Because of this WW have agreed to pay for us to buy a new mower, a brush cutter/trimmer, we haven't had one until now, and various other tools! Some of these are already in use to the great relief of those of us who have been struggling with defective or unsuitable tools!

Over the winter we have cut back more scrub and overhanging branches and the extra light has produced a greater range of biodiversity which is plain to see! Putting modesty aside for a moment, it's great to receive lots of positive comments and praise for our work from locals passing by! If you would like to come and look around your comments, good or bad, would be welcomed too!

Well, it's all looking good then isn't it? Not really! We only have three regular volunteers, all retired persons. The group programme as set out includes a two hour work morning on the last Saturday of each month, which is 11 if you discount December. In the last 12 months there have been 35 working visits to the reserve and 145.5 hours of work carried out! That is 131.5 hours by the three regulars, and 14 by others.

### **Come on CVWG members! We need some help here!**

What do we need help with exactly? Well, at this time of year we are busy mowing and strimming to keep the footpaths clear. Also, we spend lots of time with secateurs or loppers, going along the path margins and some of the other areas, individually cutting bramble and scrub plants as they appear, before they overwhelm the whole area! Winter is the time when a half or a third of most areas are clear cut and raked to allow fresh growth. This is done on a strict rotation! We also cut back scrub and bushes along the paths so that the growth of these the following year doesn't restrict access.

The 'gang of three' regulars all enjoy our time working at Goosard, making the most of the flowers, birds, butterflies and seeing satisfying results of efforts made!

**Come and enjoy it too! Please!**

**Peter Watson**

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## Members' photos

### Copper Beech

Finding this mystery seedling in his garden, Phil Gait took a photo and sent it in. Helena came to identification rescue, informing that it is a seedling with very distinctive cotyledons – a Copper Beech.

Copper beech is a long-lived cultivated variety much loved, and loathed, for its foliage. It is commonly used as a hedging plant that has the advantage of keeping its leaves in winter if clipped, providing a screened shelter for birds in winter.



*Copper Beech seedling – Phil Gait*

The British Biological Records Centre database of insects and their food plants lists it as a host to only three insects - a moth, a true fly and a true bug. These are the Buff-tip moth, *Phalera bucephala*; the Gall midge, *Phegomyia fagicola* (Kieffer); and *Cryptococcus fagisuga* Lindinger, known as the Beech Scale or the Woolly Beech Scale. This contrasts markedly with the 200 or so species of beetles, moths, flies, bugs and gall mites listed for the Common beech.

The Woodland Trust informs that the seeds are eaten by mice, voles, squirrels and birds; holes are used by birds for nesting; and a range of mosses, lichens and fungi use the bark.

### Mullein moth attack

The Mullein moth has an attractive caterpillar seen from May to July, but a group of them can strip a Great Mullein plant, which usually recovers and goes on to flower. A few other macro-moths also eat Great Mullein, including The Cinnabar, and it is also used by various beetles and a fly. The plant is found in open habitats and gardens and has a wide distribution. It is more common in the south. You may also see Mullein moth damage on buddleia and figwort.



*Great Mullein – Phil Gait*

### Small Tortoiseshell caterpillars



*Small Tortoiseshell caterpillars – Phil Gait*

This bunch of Small Tortoiseshell caterpillars is a good sight to see, especially in the light of a worrying decline in the abundance of this attractive, familiar, butterfly. The cause is unknown and numbers do fluctuate naturally. Theories include the increase of a particular parasitic fly due to global warming that has a life cycle that is more synchronous with this particular butterfly than other butterfly hosts.

The Small Tortoiseshell is one of a number of butterflies seen in gardens and is still widespread. It has two broods, with caterpillars about in May and June and then again in July and August. To deter predators, the group of caterpillars will all jerk about from side to side, regurgitate green fluid and, if necessary, curl up and drop to the ground.

### Pink and White Valerian

Red Valerian is a non-native garden plant that is considered to be a good source of nectar from May to October for bees, moths such as the Hummingbird Hawk-moth, and butterflies such as the Small Tortoiseshell shown in Maggie's photo. It is said to be a useful part of planting schemes to benefit bats. The white variety may be just as useful as a wildlife resource, but whether or not it matches the red is unclear. If anyone out there has any personal observations or information on the wildlife value of the white form, please do send them in!



*White Valerian – Maggie Edwards*



*Pink Valerian – Maggie Edwards*

## Early Purple Orchid

The Early Purple Orchid, with its glossy dark green rosette of leaves with dark blotches, can be found in Spring in a variety of habitats throughout the UK, usually from April to June, often appearing when the bluebells are in flower. Once a common plant, it has sadly declined in abundance, largely due to urban development and modern farming methods.



*Early purple orchids – Phil Gait*

Sometimes the flowers are not the more classic magenta colour, but pink or occasionally white. Its scent is somewhat like Lily-of-the-valley tinged with blackcurrant, but as the flowers fade the scent becomes unpleasant. Phil's photo shows it in a woodland setting alongside Lesser celandine and bluebells.

## Stag beetles

The Rhinoceros Beetle, *Sinodendron cylindricum*, is one of three stag beetles found in the UK along with the Stag beetle and the Lesser Stag beetle. The Rhinoceros beetle is reliant on woodland, as it generally uses fallen trees, rotting stumps and rotting branches on living trees. It has been observed boring into undamaged birch and Horse chestnut. The female excavates a branched tunnel with many egg-laying chambers packed with wood



*Dead wood – Deborah Porter*



*Male Rhinoceros beetle – Deborah Porter*

dust whilst the male guards the entrance to the tunnel being created. When the eggs hatch, the larvae feed in the tunnels, living for up to three years and construct their pupal chambers close to the surface. The adult beetle only lives until autumn. The adult feeds on tree sap. Its status in the UK is unknown, but it is the most widely distributed of the three species. Threats include loss and exploitation of forest and woodland habitats and changes to the proportions of tree species, the main reasons for its decline in the Palaearctic realm.



*Male Lesser Stag beetle – Deborah Porter*

Providing rotten wood in the garden can provide opportunities to see both the Rhinoceros beetle and the Lesser Stag beetle if you are lucky, both of which have now been photographed in my Radstock garden. They are known to be active both day and night and can sometimes be found basking on logs or trunks. On 22nd May, two male Rhinoceros beetles flew up from standing dead wood (shown in the photograph) in the late afternoon, one of which flew straight into my husband's head and promptly dropped down to cling on to his black trousers. A second smaller one also settled on his trousers. They were potted, identified and then released a bit later. Both of them, instead of flying away, flew to my dark trousers, where I photographed them! I was also lucky enough

to photograph a male Lesser Stag beetle in the garden again this year, on 8th June, clinging to a wild carrot stem.

**Deborah Porter**

## Nature notes from July and August 2021

Each day I make a nature note. It could be about something new to me or unusual. Many of my sightings at this time of year are insects, often new to me and sometimes very strange.

### 17<sup>th</sup> July 2021

Wool Carder bees move fast and rarely stop, so I've only just realised that they are in our garden again. I read that they guard hairy plants, from which the females can gather 'wool' for their nest. Our visitors don't seem to distinguish between *Stachys byzantina* (Lamb's Ear) and *Stachys officinalis* and guard our Betony plants with great vigour.

### 18<sup>th</sup> July 2021

I rang my son, a nature reserve warden, about an extraordinary looking insect, with a bizarre name, in our garden today. His response was to ask if it was a *Gasteruption jaculator*. He too had seen one. It's a parasitic wasp. It seeks solitary bees' nests, into which it can bore its outsized white-tipped ovipositor, before laying its eggs onto the bee larva.



**25<sup>th</sup> July 2021**



We were up in North Wales to meet our first granddaughter and entertain her older siblings. However we also managed to go to Marl Hall Woods Nature Reserve. On a previous visit we had found the remnants of Spiked Speedwell in a patch of limestone grassland on top of a cliff. It is described in my flower book as 'the handsomest of our native speedwells' so we were keen to see it in flower.

**1<sup>st</sup> August 2021**



Back in our garden, I found an adult female Roesel's Bush cricket on some Black Knapweed in our grassy wildflower patch. It's the second one this year, but the first was on a stone wall and moved off before I got my camera.

**16<sup>th</sup> August 2021**



We went to Brean Down today. We were pleased to spot some Chalkhill Blue Butterflies and White Rock-rose. I first encountered White Rock-rose, when my son was working at Berry Head in Devon. This is the first time we had been to Brean Down during its flowering season.



20<sup>th</sup> August 2021

The Purple Loosestrife in our bog bed is flowering. Charles Darwin thoroughly studied its flowers. He was intrigued because it is '[tristylous](#)'. Each flower has two sets of stamens, one longer than the other. In some plants the pistil is longer than both sets of stamens. In other plants it is between them or in the third group it is shorter than them both. We have two different 'morphs' in our garden, even though we started off with a single plant.

**Veryan Conn**

## More Members' photos



*Toadflax – Maggie Edwards*



*Hoverfly (*Helophilus pendulus*) – Frank Loughran*



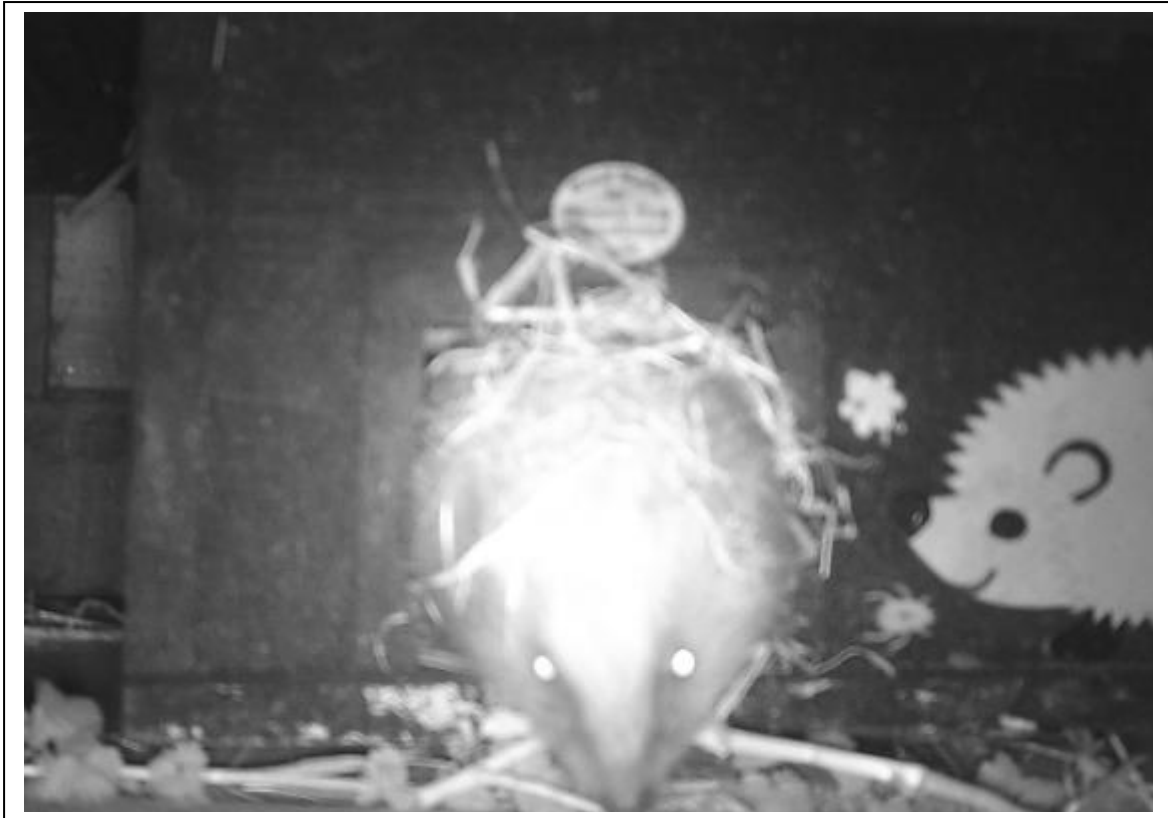
*Fern – Maggie Edwards*



*Hedgehog – Frank Loughran*

## Hedgehogs in our garden

I hadn't seen any hedgehogs last time I wrote in the middle of March. I had the camera set up by the houses. It was the day after emailing the last article that I was lucky enough to get to see a hedgehog coming out from its hibernation and covered in hay and straw from its nest.



*Zoe Nicholls*



## Feed the birds?

For several months last summer and autumn, we stopped feeding the birds in our garden. We did have concerns about feeding stations spreading disease and distracting birds from their more natural diet. It would be good to say we did this because of such concerns or to undertake a bit of citizen science. However, the truth is we stopped because there were suddenly far too many rats near the house and around the neighbourhood. And then there were the squirrels that ate most of the food we provided and cracked every 'squirrel proof' feeder we bought.

We hoped our garden would provide alternative food sources: we leave seed heads on over winter, there is a pond, and piles of rotting wood and vegetation for the bugs.

We tried to note any changes in visiting bird numbers. Our findings are strictly anecdotal; much sounder academic research will be presented later. Some changes were obvious: the almost daily visits by a Nuthatch stopped completely and Coal tits, another regular visitor, were rarely seen. The Chaffinches which fed on the ground on seeds dropped from the feeders disappeared. The occasional visits from Marsh tits also stopped. Not surprisingly, we saw fewer Sparrowhawks.



There was some increased feeding on seed heads, most notably from Goldfinches on Teasels, but also tits and House sparrows on Verbena, Evening Primrose, Sea Holly, Globe Thistle and Perennial Sunflower.

We started feeding again in the winter. The first time we put up a seed feeder the Nuthatch returned. Coal tits and Sparrowhawks numbers steadily increased. We have not seen any Marsh tits yet and very few Chaffinches – but there could be many explanations for their absence.

Nearly two-thirds of UK households feed the birds. £250 million is spent annually on 150,000 tonnes of bird food. Richard Broughton and his colleagues<sup>1</sup> have calculated that this provides enough food to feed the entire populations of the ten commonest feeder-using species all year round, three times over, even if they ate nothing else. They warn that '...bird feeding in Britain has become a vast experiment with our wildlife, where we input huge food resources without fully understanding the consequences'.

One of the first signs that there may be downsides to our bird feeding habits came in 2005 when trichomonosis disease was first detected in the Greenfinch population. It is spread by a parasite passed on through contaminated bird tables, feeders and water bowls. The disease caused a 66% decline in the Greenfinch population<sup>2</sup>, which has only recently started to recover. Contaminated bird feeders are now also implicated in a decline in Chaffinch numbers.

Beyond the impact of these diseases, there is little evidence that garden bird feeding has reduced the numbers of any common garden bird species. In research by the British Trust for Ornithology, that examined data on garden bird feeding across a 40-year period, Kate Plummer and her

colleagues<sup>3&4</sup> found a large increase in species diversity visiting garden feeders. This was driven not just by the easy availability of garden feeders but also by the lack of natural food on farmland. Plummer contends that gardens have become an important winter refuge for farmland birds as the availability of their natural food sources has declined with intensive agriculture.

They also found that initial fears that dominant species would monopolise birdfeeders was unfounded, because the sheer number of available feeders in gardens reduced this risk – there were more than enough to go round.

Other research<sup>1&5</sup> has looked to see whether the huge increase in feeding has had an impact beyond the garden. Although causality has not been established it seems likely that the boost given to dominant species from garden feeding has meant that when they return to their more natural woodland habitats they out compete subordinate species (that rarely visit feeders) for both food and nest sites. For example, the last 25 years have seen a 143% increase in Great Spotted woodpeckers but a 73% decline in the smaller, subordinate Lesser Spotted woodpecker. Over the same period there has been a 40% increase in Great tits but declines of 87% in Willow tits and 53% in Marsh tits.

On balance the research suggests that garden feeding has had a beneficial and sometimes vital role in boosting and even aiding the survival of many species. However, what Broughton called this 'vast experiment with our wildlife' does have downsides in terms of both spreading disease and putting species that do not visit garden bird feeders at risk.

Finally, is it worth asking why we feed the birds? How much of it is it for their benefit and how much for ours? I am as guilty as the next feeder of wanting to see them in my garden. However, as Broughton<sup>1</sup> suggests, perhaps some of that annual £250 million spent on bird food could be better deployed if a modest proportion of us stopped or reduced direct feeding, and instead donated the money to conservation organisations for restoring habitats - that could be a positive change.

### **Frank Loughran**

#### *References*

1. Broughton, Richard K.; Shutt, Jack D.; Lees, Alexander (2022) *Rethinking bird feeding: are we putting extra pressure on some struggling woodland birds?* *British Birds*, 115 (1).
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3. Plummer, K.E., Risely, K., Toms, M.P. et al. (2019). *The composition of British bird communities is associated with long-term garden bird feeding.* *Nature Communications*, 10.
4. Plummer, K. (2022). *Should we feed garden birds?* *Bird Table*, 109.
5. Lees, Alexander (2022) *Feeding birds in our gardens is a joy – but it may be harming weaker species.* Also in the *Guardian*, 25 August 2020.

## **Do you fancy joining in?**

Everyone will be aware that we have a number of ongoing projects and occasional events. CVWG has a small co-ordinating team that meets from time to time to review what's going on and plan what's coming up. These meetings are available for anyone to join, sadly over the duration of the pandemic we've not had these regularly nor advised you all of when they are!

We are getting back into the swing of things now, and this is to alert and invite you to attend our next co-ordination meeting which is on Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2022, from 19.30hrs/7.30pm, to share your ideas and thoughts on what we do and how we do it. We usually hold it at a team member's house, but if we get lots of interest we may look for an alternative location.

Please get in touch with Judy or me if you'd like to join in as we'd really like to see you and hear your views.

Also I'm sure you'll agree with me that all projects are more fun (and less hard work!) the more people we have turn up to help! It would be great, where you feel able and willing, to see more folks at events like Goosard Work Days and Barn Owl Box Making sessions. Get in touch with the project leaders and they will talk to you about what they are up to, where and when. Or drop a line to anyone on the co-ordinating team and they will happily discuss what's going on and how you can help.

And don't forget to check out our events schedule on the website.

### ***Jim Crouch***

This is a list of members of the Co-ordinating Team. **Care should be taken not to infringe Data Protection Policy in passing details to others.** Please note that the full list of members who contribute to the running of CVWG, including those people with particular responsibilities such as project leaders are displayed on the project pages of our website - <https://cvwg.org.uk>

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*Dyer's greenwood – Phil Gait*

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**Next Newsletter:** The copy date for the next Newsletter is **15<sup>th</sup> September 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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