



The Cam Valley Wildlife Group Newsletter



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Box Tree moth (*Cydalima perspectalis*)

The image of a Box Tree moth was taken on the evening of 1st October but was gone again by daybreak on the 2nd. Tony French was able to identify it because of pictures and an article by Paul Wilkins in the 2020 Bath Natural History Society magazine (pages 32-35). He doesn't have Box plants in his tiny garden but moth-eaten examples are all around the Quarry Rock Gardens and the centre of Bath.



Tony noticed Helena Crouch's moth trap count didn't include any Box Tree moths recorded in the previous newsletter, however Helena has a long, well-illustrated article in Bath Natural History Society 2020 magazine which is called 'Ferns of Bath, past and present' (pages 53-65). Tony lives near the University of Bath on Claverton Down (it used to be a 13 mile bike ride from Clutton when he lived in the CVWG area). He says that one can be a towny if that's what grabs you and using Helena's article one can wander all around the city looking out for ferns and other wild life. He does.

Culling Magpies ('Six for Gold' by Phil Gait in the Autumn newsletter, pages 7-8) requested responses. This is Tony's response: *Having done BBSs (Breeding Bird Surveys) all over Bath, in the CVWG area and Burrington Combe for decades until a hit-and-run driver broke his back at Farmborough, he found that Magpie numbers fluctuated year on year, but the average remains the same. Anything humans do to alter this is bound to fail, so forget it.*

He says it reminds him of the gamekeeper at Newton Park in the early 1970s who boasted he shot 80 foxes a year, every year, so obviously it kept him in a job. But foxes just fill the gaps left by their dead mates, the same for magpies.

Tony French

Nature notes from December 2021 to February 2022

Each day I make a nature note. Here are some favourites from last winter.

17th December 2021

Sometimes wildlife comes into your home. This Twenty-plume Moth turned up in our bath. Its scientific name, *Alucita hexadactyla*, suits it better than the English one. Hexadactyla means 'six fingered' and each wing is made up of 6 plumes. Its larvae feed on honeysuckle leaves and buds.



22nd January 2022



A walk along the sea wall at Keyhaven and lots of birds to see. As well as these Brent Geese, we saw two Peregrines, huge numbers of Grey Plover and many more waders and ducks, including Snipe and Pintail.

25th January 2022

Walked along the towpath by Caen Hill locks, Devizes. Some of the water storage ponds had booms across the surface. One boom had a Black-headed Gull standing on it and a Moorhen walking along it. When the Moorhen got near the gull, it hesitated, stepped back, before striding purposefully towards the gull. The gull stood its ground, so the moorhen tried twice more, before giving up. It then got into the water, swam around the gull and climbed back on to the boom.

30th January 2022

Walking on a lane near Bruton, we saw a fungus growing out of a wrapped bale of silage. It's *Schizophyllum commune* or Split Gill fungus. Formerly a fungus of dead and sickly trees, it has taken a liking to silage. It started doing this in Ireland in the 1990s, but the habit is spreading. This fungus is also noted for its complex mating system, which involves over 28,000 different sexes.



19th February 2022

The day after Storm Eunice and we were disentangling an Elder that had collapsed on to our fence and hedge. I had a look at the mosses and lichens that were growing on twigs from the tree top. I noticed one small patch of an unusual lichen, with a fringe of bristles around the orange apothecia. The only match I could find was the very rare *Teloschistes chrysophthalmos* (Golden-eye Lichen), so I contacted Helena who knew a lichen expert. A few days later, it was confirmed and I was rooting round other twigs from the Elder to see if there was any more of it.



Veryan Conn

21st February 2022

While we ate a picnic at the former Midford Station, we heard a thunder-like rumble accompanied by loud cracking coming from the steep wooden bank between us and the Midford Brook. Walking back on the other side of the valley, we saw a recently fallen tree with roots pulled out of the ground. Sadly a steep bank and sodden ground had just enabled Storm Eunice to claim another victim three days on.

Six for Gold - response

It can indeed be distressing to hear the impact of predators on vocal species, but predation, mostly unseen and unheard by us humans, is a natural and necessary element that is essential in maintaining the balance of nature and healthy ecosystems. However, how do we know when the balance has been skewed 'too far'? It is widely accepted that we are now faced globally with what is now described as an ecological emergency, at local level councils are putting in place action plans in response and action is needed at all levels. To address the matter of magpies, though, we might want to look to what various UK organisations think.

The RSPB states, "*The factors that normally limit magpie populations are lack of nesting territories and high mortality of young birds*" and that "*the relatively stable population since 1990 suggests that magpies have reached an ecological equilibrium*" and,

"To find out why songbirds are in trouble, the RSPB has undertaken intensive research on species such as the skylark and song thrush. To discover whether magpies could be to blame for the decline, the RSPB commissioned the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) to analyse its 35 years of bird monitoring records.

The study found that songbird numbers were no different in places where there were many magpies from where there are few. It found no evidence that increased numbers of magpies have caused declines in songbirds and confirms that populations of prey species are not determined by the numbers of their predators. Availability of food and suitable nesting sites are probably the main factors limiting songbird populations." The study the RSPB refers to is "*The effects of Magpie predation on songbird populations*" - Baillie, S.R., Gooch, S. & Birkhead, T., edited by Andrews, J. & Carter, S.P., published by BTO/JNCC, January 1993.

The *Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust* has done some research on predation of artificial songbird nests containing wax-filled eggs. This study found that magpies were the main predators of the artificial nests but that the impact varied, and that although predation later in the breeding season was lower overall, nests in a magpie breeding territory were more likely to be predated at that time. It put the general predation reduction down to greater plant growth hiding nests more effectively and contended that the quality of hedgerow nesting habitat is very important. It also noted that although removal of breeding pairs at this time to protect songbird nests may have some immediate protective impact, the vacated territory may be taken over by other magpies with similar behaviour.

Predatory behaviour may vary between individuals and breeding pairs are territorial. The study the Trust refers to is “Predation of artificial nests in UK farmland by magpies (*Pica pica*): interacting environmental, temporal, and social factors influence a nest’s risk - Lucy A. Capstick, Rufus B. Sage & Joah R. Madden (2018)”, published in the *European Journal of Wildlife Research*, 2019. The Trust informs, “*Until 2019, magpies could be killed for the conservation of other wild birds, however the supporting evidence for that practice has been questioned and the future of the General Licence in England is under review.*”ⁱ

On the quality of hedgerows in the UK, the *Wildlife Trusts* have this to say:

“Tens of thousands of hedgerows were removed from the mid-20th century onwards as a result of grants aimed at increasing agricultural efficiency. Many remaining hedges have been savagely trimmed, neglected or affected by drifting agricultural chemicals that are sprayed. The best way to manage hedges for wildlife is to lay them – left unmanaged they turn into lines of trees, while hard annual trimming results in thin, gappy hedges that support little but the occasional dunnock or whitethroat.”

There is some protection in place for hedges in the UKⁱⁱ but the main threats to songbird populations include industrial farming methods, the loss of habitats to development and the use of pesticides, including in arboriculture and gardens. A range of human activities, often for our own pleasure but sometimes with the best of intentions, come with some significant negative impacts and risk to songbirds and lead to sometimes emotive discussions on topics such as nest-box provision, walking in wild spaces, dogs in wild spaces and farmland, cats in scarce habitats and bird feeding (see ‘Feed the Birds?’, Frank Loughran, CVWG Newsletter 103).

Regarding the impact of grey squirrels on trees with reference solely to carbon sequestration initiatives, it must be very disappointing and frustrating to have trees planted with good intent damaged or lost. Although there has been much in the press about the use of trees for carbon capture and both politicians and big business have been quick to jump on this, evidence that other types of habitat in the UK and elsewhere sequester just as much or more carbon has been coming forward, including opportunities to deliver benefits within a shorter time-frame and of arguably greater overall ecological benefit with lower risk of delivery failure.

The *Six for Gold* article highlights one of the risks associated with tree-planting as the go-to method. These risks are becoming more widely appreciated and include, storm, fire, commercial management, felling for various other reasons, predation, pollution, loss of replaced habitat (itself sometimes specialised and often of unrecognised or unquantified value) and disease, particularly problematic for mono-crops. That is not to, in any way, fail to applaud the importance of individual actions in the face of an ongoing global extinction event and UK climate uncertainties. Unfortunately,

there is presently not enough emphasis on how well planted trees survive, how diverse the resulting woodland is and the amount of carbon storage in the resulting habitat as a whole. Elsewhere in the world experiments with natural tree/woodland/forest regeneration, some seeded by small initial plantings, are showing good results. Planted trees (as opposed to seeded ones) have weaker root systems, so are more prone to falling in high winds, and do not deliver the benefits of the naturally more rich and diverse woodland habitat that develops through natural succession, which delivers both higher carbon sequestration and value to wildlife.

Recognition of the significant contribution of a range of other natural and man-made habitats (including permanent pasture and soils) to sequestration has been slow and has largely not been brought to the attention of the wider public. This in part due to lack of sufficient research, over-emphasis on poorly conducted or inaccurately publicised scientific investigation and the cherry-picking of details (e.g. comparison of carbon concentration at shallow levels in pastureland without attention to those at deeper levels). There is too much greenwash and unreliable information being spread about.

Without very careful consideration of the known facts and significantly boosting research funding, levels of carbon offsetting claimed will continue to be overestimated and a proportion of tree-planting harmful to nature or otherwise inappropriate will continue to take place. One example of a different approach delivering a better benefit to investment ratio is in the Sahel, where farmer-managed natural regeneration practice (FMNR), in Niger in particular, is delivering climate as well as crop and social benefits where expensive tree-planting programmes have failed.

What opportunities are we in the UK taking, or not taking? According to the State of the UK's Woods and Trees 2021 report, woodland cover is going up gradually but the wildlife in woodlands is declining, much of the increased woodland cover in the past 100 years has been of non-native trees, trees face significant pressures (from mammal grazing to pollution) and we do not have systematic woodland and tree monitoring.

Taking a look at our local countryside suggests that our hedgerow and mature farmland trees are still in decline and wildlife value is relatively poor. There is relevant research being done and various initiatives proposed, such as the Woodland Trust's Hedges and Edges proposal for Wales ("to support farmers in retaining and increasing tree and hedge cover on their land"). However, there is an urgent need to speed things up and adopt flexible responses to emerging evidence, enabling appropriate decision-making but also bearing in mind the Precautionary Principle of the Rio Earth Summit 1992 (note the year!), the summit to which the Conference of the Parties (COP) relates: lack of scientific certainty should not be used as an excuse for Governmental inaction through failure to fund.

ⁱ <https://www.gwct.org.uk/wildlife/research/birds/songbirds/predation-of-artificial-songbird-nests-by-magpies-on-uk-farmland/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/countryside-hedgerows-regulation-and-management>

Deborah Porter

Members' photos

Sunset on the Somerset Levels by Maggie Edwards



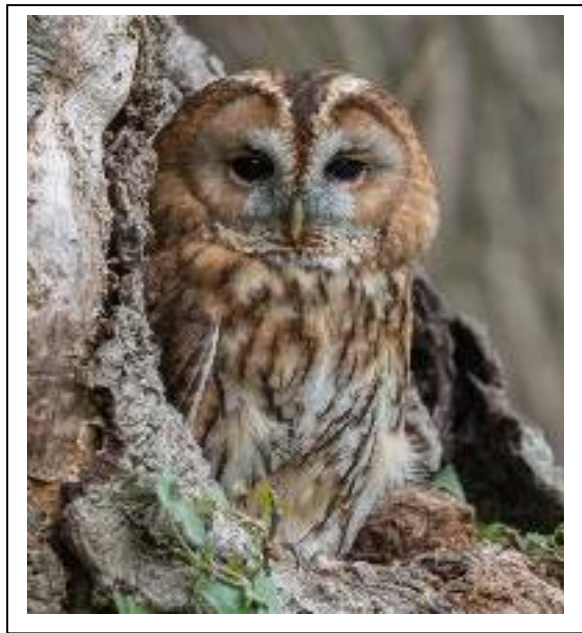
More Members' photos

Correction.

In the last edition, I referred to the broad ante-humeral stripes as an obvious diagnostic feature visible in the photographs. They are on the top and *front* of the thorax of the Southern Hawker dragonflies, not the *back* as stated!

Owls – Diana Walker

These photos were taken at a photographic workshop to photograph British Owls that Diana attended in May last year, but were not included in Members' photos at the time. The four photos are of Barn, Tawny, Little and Long-eared Owls, which belong to two families. The Barn Owl is in the family *Tytonidae*, whereas the others are in the family *Strigidae*, or true owls.



Owls have been around for millions of years and have marvellous adaptations including the structure and position of eyes and ears, which lead to interesting abilities and behaviours and a proportionally very large skull. Their forward-looking large eyes and wide faces are part of their appeal. If you have ever handled an owl, you will be immediately struck by its extremely soft silkiness and by the fragility of the small and light body within a deceptively more substantial-looking creature.

Distinct remains of owls date back to about fifty-five million years ago, in the Eocene period, but there is also a 60-million-year-old leg bone assigned to an owl (ref: the Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum in Frankfurt, Germany). The Tawny Owl is found in the genus *Strix*, which dates back to the Early Miocene (about 23 to 16 million years ago) and the Barn Owl's genus, *Tyto*, and the Little Owl's genus, *Athene*, date back to the late Miocene (11.6 – 5.3 million years ago). Long-eared Owls are less ancient, their genus *Asio* originating in the late Pliocene (3.6 – 2.5 million years ago). As would be expected, there was some evolutionary pressure leading to owls as we know them today, but the basic body design of an owl has not really changed since the Miocene period.

The eyes of an owl are huge for their skull size and its head is disproportionately large. Its big eyes let in more light. If our eyes and skull were proportioned like this, our heads would be the size of barrels! An unusually large cornea and a large convex lens maximises the light reaching the retina at the back of the eye, which is packed with light-sensitive rods for good low-light vision. An owl's eye is also an odd shape which combines with its size to prevent the eyes moving at all within the skull. The owl, instead, swivels its head so that it can look directly behind, and some owls can move their heads round three-quarters of a circle in each direction. They can even look directly upward, which looks rather strange! In order to be able to do all that, owls have 14 neck vertebrae (humans have 7) and a special bone at the base of the skull.

The ears of owls cannot be seen as they are well hidden by feathers although tufts, that aid camouflage and communicate mood, can give the impression of ears, as in the Long-eared Owl. The distinctive discs of feathers on the face funnel sound to the ears. In strictly nocturnal species such as the Tawny Owl the ears are different in both size and position - the right ear is normally higher on the head than the left and also larger, by as much as 50%. This allows the owl to work out where the sound is coming from by being nearer to one ear than the other and of different noise quality in the two ears (due to their different sizes) leading to a superior 3-D sound image, and particularly useful when its prey is moving. Head-weaving allows very accurate sound location and moving flaps of skin called *opercula* and stubby feathers to the front and rear of the ear-openings takes that accuracy to within one degree. The *stapes*, a single complex bone that connects the eardrum and the inner ear, amplifies the sound a whopping sixty-five times, allowing soft sounds to be heard well.

High frequency sounds, such as those coming from prey, can be zoned in on narrowly immediately in front of the bird's head whilst lower frequency sounds are not pinpointed this way, which gets around the fact that owls cannot see well close up due to their light-maximising eye adaptations. This varied sound information enables owls to judge well both the direction and distance of their prey. Unsurprisingly, the hearing centre in the brain of an owl is much larger than in diurnal birds of the same size. For example, the Barn Owl has roughly 97,000 neurons whereas the crow, at twice its size, only has about 27,000ⁱⁱⁱ. Both the Barn Owl and Long-eared Owl can hunt in absolute darkness using their hearing alone.

Along with super-hearing comes silent flight. The silence of owls in flight is down to their feathers. The outer primary feathers have comb-like serrated leading edges, which break down air turbulence into micro-turbulences, and a downy upper surface that reduces the noise from feathers moving against one another - the angle of air flow is altered, the sound is muffled and the aerodynamics improved. The soft fringes of the secondary feathers reduce turbulence behind the wings and the fringed trailing feathers reduce trailing edge noise. The rest of the wing and the legs are covered with downy feathers, which absorb remaining noise that could be detected by the owl's prey. More detail on the mechanics of owl flight can be found in a Royal Society publication^{iv} and there are some interesting close-ups by Chris Wren in *The Secret of Owl Feathers*, 17 February 2021 on the Natural History of Northumbria's website.

The Tawny Owl is the owl that gave rise to the "twit twoo" of many stories, often a combination of the female's "ke-wick" call followed by a male's territorial hoot, a drawn out "hoohoo". The male also makes the "ke-wick" call. The haunting call of this owl is in stark contrast to the shriek of the male Barn Owl, often emitted to attract a female, that has led to the nickname of 'screech owl'. Territorial calls, as in many animals, serve to keep unwanted visitors away and reduce the chance of an aggressive, and potentially damaging, encounter. Their absence for a period of days, however, will alert others to the opportunity to grab a vacated territory. In general, day-flying owls are less vocal than night-flying ones as sound is so much more important in darkness, where visual displays and contacts are of little use. The Little Owl, although sometimes observed during the day, is essentially a night-time species and is quite vocal. However, the most nocturnal British Owl, the Long-eared Owl is rarely heard by people, and seems to restrict its calling to the breeding season, in early spring.

For comprehensive and very readable information about owls and their adaptations The World Owl Trust website^v is well worth a look, as is the Owl Research Institute's website.

Dog Sick Slime Mould, *Mucilago crustacea* - Phil Gait, October 2022



Phil Gait reports that he sees this aptly-named slime mould every year in a small part of a field in Coleford, but that he hasn't seen it anywhere else. It is considered widespread and fairly frequent in the UK. The *iNaturalist* website shows the largest number of observations peak in October and November and has published records in our area from High Littleton, Priston and Cameley. As this slime mould forms a pale mass on a support of damp grass that usually disappears as quickly as it appears, perhaps this is not surprising.

It is thought that the plasmodial organism migrates to the surface to fruit when food supplies are dwindling and that depletion of nutrients triggers spore formation. The fruiting

body is initially yellow to white, becoming paler with time. The cortex then hardens and turns black within 24 hours and a black-looking mature spore mass form. This stage is sometimes mistaken for insect eggs and is quite easy to miss. This slime mould is sometimes confused with other yellow or white species that grow on wood. One of these, *Fuligo septica*, the Scrambled Egg Slime, is somewhat confusingly also named the Dog Vomit Slime Mould!



Biology:

Slime moulds were once thought to be fungi, but are now placed in a different Kingdom, the Protozoa (a grouping of single-celled organisms, but not *all* the single-celled organisms); they share some similarities with both fungi and single-celled animals. This slime mould is one of the *Myxogastria*, a class of *plasmodial* slime moulds that go through several phases on the way to forming the organism Phil has photographed.

The single-celled amoeboid individuals are initially spread out when food is abundant, seeking out nutrients and dividing to make more single celled amoebae, but if conditions are adverse, they can encyst and wait it out. If two mobile cells of the same type meet, they can reproduce by fusing to form a *zygote* which then forms, through division, a *plasmodium*, which is a massive multi-nucleate single cell that changes shape allowing it to move, engulfing pieces of organic material as it does so, including bacteria and fungal spores. It grows with the available food until it forms a fruiting body such as the one in the photo. Internal or environmental conditions trigger spore formation (Hoppe and Kutschera 2015; Kutschera and Hoppe 2019). The spores of slime moulds can survive for many years before germinating, mainly in response to the right moisture and temperature. When they germinate, they produce the amoeboids (*Myxamoebae*) that start the cycle again. Material for this account has been taken from the RHS website^{vi}, Wikipedia, NatureSpot, iNaturalist, and Hoppe and Kutschera 2022^{vii}.

i. *The Complete Owl*, Michael Leach, 1992

ii. <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/pdf/10.1098/rsfs.2016.0078>

iii. <https://www.owls.org/owl-educational-visits/owl-information>

iv. <https://www.rhs.org.uk/biodiversity/slime-moulds-on-lawns>

v. *Phenotypic plasticity in plasmodial slime moulds and molecular phylogeny of terrestrial vs. aquatic species* – T. Hoppe & U. Kutschera. Published in *Theory in Biosciences* (2022) 141:313–319 © The Author(s) 2022.

Madder, *Sherardia arvensis* – Maggie Edwards, September 2022

The Field Madder is an annual plant that is the only species in the genus, *Sherardia* and is native to the UK, where it is widespread but local. It is also widespread in Europe and many other places in the world and has become naturalised in more still. It is also known as the Blue Field Madder but has pale pink to lilac flowers.



However, the colour Madder blue is a lilac-grey colour and that is thought to be the origin of this name. The roots can be used to make a red dye, but it is an inferior dye to that of the Common Madder, *Rubia tinctorum*.

It can be found in arable fields, waste ground, quarries, verges, hedgebanks, pasture, grassland and lawns. With its trailing habit, square stems and whorls of oval-pointed leaves, it looks similar to bedstraws, which are in the same family, *Rubiaceae*. The hairiness of its leaves is varied and they can be quite bristly. It is a host plant for two hawkmoths in the UK, the Death's-head Hawkmoth and the Bedstraw Hawkmoth.

Thanks goes to Helena for her identification of this plant.

Deborah Porter

AGM and project reports 2022

The 2022 AGM started off with meeting each other, chatting and catching up, eating mince pies and viewing wildlife photograph albums followed by the AGM business - news about our year; reports from the Project Leaders of the Insect, Flora, Barn Owl, Goosard Reserve, and Butterfly, Dragonfly & Damselfly projects – Deborah, Helena, Gary, Peter and Diana; reports from the Membership Secretary and the Treasurer; a members' matters and discussion slot; changes to the Constitution; and a vote on the proposed Coordinating Team for 2023. This was rounded off by a wonderful slide and video show of wild and captive animals in 2022 by Diana.

CVWG 2022 Round-up

This year was busier than last for the Coordinating Team and we have settled in to a more regular pattern of meetings, at about 8 – 10 weeks apart. The General Committee, which had done its work well but was now no longer needed, was disbanded. The Coordinating Team is now our only Committee. This year we have updated two policies, the *Data Protection Policy* to bring it in line with

the post-Brexit UK regulations (right to have data removed upon reaching 18, and to be informed if it is hacked) and the *Health & Safety, and Welfare of Children and Vulnerable People at CVWG Events Policy*. Our policies are available on our website and by request. CVWG continues to work with other groups and organisations and to promote wildlife-related activities in our area by various means.

In order to raise the profile of the Group and attract new members we bought a new gazebo at the end of the year and have new stalls materials, including a CVWG banner! Diana organised the purchases, designed the banner and put in a lot of work in a short space of time to get our new-look stall up and running. We have display boards packed with information about the Group's work supported with some great photos, and are carrying back copies of newsletters on the stall to be taken away by people who are interested. The increased print-run has also decreased our printing costs too, so that's very much a win-win! We hope to have some (non-sticky) car stickers in the New Year too. The stall gave us an opportunity to get useful feedback on CVWG recording forms that Diana has drawn up. The new forms will be given out on the stalls to anyone who wants one and posted on our website.

The Butterfly recording form has already been used for two records late in the year, Red Admiral and Brimstone. Otter records are presently being collected by Gary, but he is very busy with the Barn Owl work and is also much in demand for talks, so we need someone to collate any records that come in for the moment – not an onerous job at all, but helpful. We have done one stall so far, which brought in a new member and met with much interest. We intend to do as many stalls as we can in 2023 *but* we won't make enough impact without some volunteers to help man stalls at village fetes and so on...so we very much hope that some of you will be contacting Diana to volunteer! We would be very grateful for anyone who can send us contact details for people organising village fetes and so on and news of events that we might be able to have a stall at.

The Newsletter continues to be popular thanks to the varied contributions from members, from personal observations and photos to the airing of wildlife conservation talking-points. The Newsletter Team of Liz, Phil, Barb and all the contributors have combined to deliver a good quality newsletter with, we hope, something for all.

We had a varied offer of events this year including wildlife walks, weekly botany walks, moth events, surveys, talks and visits. Some of our events are well-attended, but others attract only 4 or 5 people. We suspect that more publicity, such as some write-ups in local publications or announcements of upcoming events in different places would be very useful! Years ago, we had someone doing just this and we are now looking for a volunteer to take this on again. It will involve only as much work as a volunteer wishes to put in – every little bit helps. If you know of a local notice board that you can post talks/events flyers on, please let us know at the email address below or on 01761 435563. We are also looking for events suggestions, so if you have heard about a good speaker for a talk or have an idea for an event that we could do, please let us know by contacting Judy (details on the Events programme) or by mailing camvalleywildlife@gmail.com

The projects are ticking along nicely in the main and we are presently looking for someone who would like to process any data we receive on the Otter Recording Forms. The project reports are set out below.

Many thanks go to the following people:

Susan and Kevin Burnett for stepping into the roles of 'Independent Persons', an important part of the safeguarding of Children and Vulnerable People;
the six-person Coordinating Team;
Jim and Helena for providing a very pleasant committee meeting place with drinks and home-baked snacks to keep us all going;
Judy (Events Programme);
Helena (Botany Walks Programme and flora recording);
Diana (Membership Secretary);
Jim (Treasurer and Insurance);
Phil (member communications);
Liz, Phil and Barb (newsletter);
Deborah (website and blog);
Diana for all the work she put in on the new stall;
Gary (Barn Owl Project) and Chris Sperring of the Hawk and Owl Trust for his help to Gary and ongoing support with the project;
Peter, Ginny and Kirsteen for many hours of work at Goosard Reserve; the volunteers who have also helped at Goosard including Jim's work colleagues;
Deborah (Insect Project) and Neale Mellersh, County Moth Recorder, for his help with moth trap choice and purchase;
Chris Iles for his many years as Butterfly, Dragonfly and Damselfly Project Leader;
Andre Fournier for the considerable work he put into the Barn Owl project from its start all the way back in 1994;
and all those others who have helped with the work of the group and spreading the word about our events and those of other local organisations.

Membership Secretary's Report

The membership totals are unclear right now as there are 20 households still to pay, but we have 120 members in 111 households on the books. This year we lost five households and gained seven (12 members), but we think that our household membership numbers are going down on average and we need to boost the membership. The revamped stall with new materials should help, but we could really do with someone to publicise our events.



Treasurer's Report

We had more money coming in last year, in large part due to the good donation level and the substantial support from Wessex Water for the equipment we purchased for Goosard Batch work. Jim is hoping that our subscription total this year can beat last year's, but is aware that the current economic situation might act against this. We are not breaking even on talks, however with the strong income we have ended up with slightly higher positive balance this year. We have been thinking about the question of whether or not our membership fee of £5.00 is too little and may have to consider the pros and cons when the economic situation improves. We would welcome member's opinions. One of our costs is our public liability insurance cover, which is in place and insures against various harms that volunteers at CVWG events, both members and non-members, may do accidentally to people or property.

Changes to the Constitution

The minor changes to clauses 6.1 and 8.3 published in the Autumn 2022 newsletter were agreed. It was suggested that to specify (in clause 3.1) that the Coordinating Team is a Committee might be sensible, though not strictly necessary. The vote on changing clause 3.1 did not meet the two-thirds required, so it will remain as it is.

Approval of the Coordinating Team

Members present were invited to come forward if they wished to join this committee, which is responsible for the smooth running of the group, policy-making, plans and strategies, and resolving problems. They were also reminded that you don't have to be a member of the committee to take part in its decisions in person – you just need to be at the meeting! This is what Helena does, which allows her to be there when she thinks she can make a contribution and suits her very well. The only difference is that if we were to vote, for example on a controversial matter, she would not get a vote – the chances of there being such a vote are remote in practice!

The proposed members were Jim Crouch (Treasurer), Judy Hampshire, Gary Kingman, Deborah Porter, Diana Walker and Peter Watson. A vote was taken and the proposed committee approved.

CVWG Projects 2022

Flora Project Report by Helena Crouch

In 2022, we held a full programme of 22 weekly botany walks. Altogether 33 members attended one or more walks. I was very grateful to Peter Watson and Emma Britton for their support throughout, and particularly for stepping in to lead for two weeks when I had Covid. We made over 2,500 records during those walks, which have all been sent to the Local Record Centres (BRERC and SERC) and to the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland.

CVWG Botany Walks have now run for 25 years, so we are now often re-visiting our former haunts, yet we still make new discoveries. This year we recorded White Ramping-fumitory (*Fumaria capreolata*) new to the Cam Valley area, indeed in its most easterly site in Somerset. We have now recorded over 1,000 species in our area.

Perhaps our favourite walk (even though we didn't visit the pub!) was along lanes near Tucker's Grave, where the raised lane banks support species-rich calcareous grassland. On a walk at Wellow, we were pleased to find many plants of Broad-leaved Spurge (*Euphorbia platyphyllos*) and both

Sharp-leaved and Round-leaved Fluellen (*Kickxia elatine* and *K. spuria*) in the arable field where they have been known for many years.

Our records contribute to the BSBI's Distribution Database, which is used by the agencies to inform conservation work. On a local scale, I also get involved in work to conserve and enhance biodiversity. This year I have been helping to advise a residents' group on the management of Fortescue Meadows, Norton St Philip, for the benefit of biodiversity. I did a survey, finding a Nationally Scarce grass, French Oat-grass (*Gaudinia fragilis*), new to the Cam Valley area in the process. I also led a guided walk for them, showing the residents some impressive Bee Orchids, Pyramidal Orchids and other plants in the species-rich grassland which has developed around the ponds and ditches created to collect storm-flow.

I also promote an interest in the flora of the local area by giving talks. This year I did a talk for Timsbury Gardening Club on the 'Flora of the Cam & Wellow Valleys'. I have previously given a similar talk to Kilmersdon Gardeners, Mendip Gardening Club and Carlingcott Gardening Club. For High Littleton & Hallatrow Conservation Group, I gave a talk on 'Beautiful Burial Grounds for Biodiversity' based on churchyard surveys which I have been doing with Somerset Botany Group. Botany walks will resume in April, every Wednesday evening until the end of August. We meet at 7.00 pm each week, so the walks are only about an hour to begin with, getting longer as the evenings get lighter, then shorter again. All are welcome. I am also always happy to receive records from individuals at any time, so please get in touch if you find an interesting plant.

Goosard Reserve Project

Goosard Reserve is off the Bristol Road out of Paulton, past Purnell's Sports Club, on the right-hand side just before Goosard Bridge, situated between the Paulton Water Recycling centre (Sewage Works) and Cam Brook, adjacent to Paulton Basin. It is a Regionally Important Geological and Geomorphological Site (RIGS) owned by Wessex Water and managed by us in accordance with an agreed management plan and contract with them, signed this year. The site comprises mainly spoil from two collieries, so it supports different vegetation than in the surrounding area. Wessex Water has paid for much-needed equipment, including a new mower and brush-cutter/trimmer and is soon to provide a new notice-board. Over the last year or two it has put in new fencing and cut back some large shrubs and trees.

Our three workday 'regulars' use a variety of techniques to produce differing habitats and promote biodiversity, including partial cuts of various areas on various rotations of up to 10 years. We control of overhanging trees and shrubs to allow light in to the area beneath. Many of the areas require time-consuming hand cutting and the digging out of persistent brambles, saplings and suckers. Our summer botany walks showed that this management is promoting more variety in the ground vegetation, *but* it is a great deal of work for just three (retired) people. Although we do have a few other volunteers on occasion, we need more. To deliver the management according to the agreed plan and schedule has meant that there have been about four times as many visits as the 10 scheduled ones this year.

You can help in various ways, such as volunteering for an hour or two now and again; encouraging a business to provide volunteers to us as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility strategy; or seeing if someone you know would like to volunteer (which also boosts a CV and looks good on a university place application!). With willing helpers, the wildlife future of the reserve is bright.

Barn Owl Project

Gary has been involved with working on the Barn Owl Project for ten years now, and is now running it. The year got off to a poor start, but it was a good year. We had 17 breeding pairs, which is up by five on last year. There were 59 chicks. Chris Sperring of the Hawk and Owl Trust has been really helpful and is on hand to help with any problems or queries Gary has. He has sorted out a ringing licence, so we will now be ringing chicks for the first time, which will help with monitoring. Barn Owl Project reports are posted in the newsletter and on our website.

Insect Project

The Insect Project has had an injection of energy with the purchase of a new moth trap, along with an up-to-date identification guide, so we are now all set for moth trapping events in 2023. Thanks go to Deborah and to Neale Mellersh, whose help was greatly appreciated and whose excellent talk on the moths of Radstock coincided happily with the purchase of the trap. We gave it a trial run at Gary's, unfortunately on the only cold night in a run of mild ones, and it is working perfectly. Because so much insect work is weather-dependent, please do consider joining the email list of people who are contacted to alert them to both pre-planned and ad-hoc insect events (usually surveys/walks) by mailing us at camvalleywildlife@gmail.com or phoning Deborah on 01761 435563.

Butterfly, Dragonfly and Damselfly Project

Diana took over as Leader of this project this year from Chris Iles. This project also involves a mix of planned and ad hoc events. For event information, contact camvalleywildlife@gmail.com.

Cam Valley Wildlife Group AGM 7th December 2022

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Next Newsletter: The copy date for the next Newsletter is **1st March 2023**

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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