



The Cam Valley Wildlife Group Newsletter



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WINTER 2023

Barn Owl Report 2023



During the year there were weather-related issues that affected the owls. Spring was too wet. Barn Owls' feathers are designed to cut down noise for stealth, but not to keep out the wet, so prey delivery from males to the incubating females was down. Bad weather and cold winds also held back the normal availability of the owls' small mammal prey and vole numbers

were down. The result was that the owl brood sizes were reduced. But all in all the results for the year were not that bad, with 14 pairs breeding and 45 chicks surviving, an average of 3 chicks per pair.

The results have been sent to the Hawk and Owl Trust, and they are pleased with the monitoring done.

Barn Owl monitoring is now over for the year but we will be starting up again in early February. I am always looking for volunteers to help with the project, so if you think you might want to join the team or want to know more, please contact me on 07960269022, through the Cam Valley Wildlife website or via camvalleywildlife@gmail.com.



Gary Kingman
November 2023

Image top right: Flammulina vellutipes – Deborah Porter

Stockhill Wood walk

On Sunday 15th October Diana Walker led a photographic walk to Stockhill Wood on a lovely day looking for Fly Agaric fungi to photograph. Here are some of the images of our successful afternoon.



The Fly Agaric, *Amanita muscaria*, is typically found with birch trees. It is one of the easiest species of mushroom to recognise and is therefore one of the mushrooms whose properties have been well documented, stretching back for centuries. In medieval times it was used for the stupefaction of flies by breaking the cap into a dish of milk. It is considered likely that the Samis' use of the (dried) mushroom for its intoxicating and hallucinogenic effects came about due to observing the effect of these mushrooms on reindeer, which seem rather partial to them. It was also useful to the Sami for rounding up a wandering herd by scattering pieces of the mushroom on the ground!

The bright scarlet cap with white gills and distinctive white pyramidal warts grows to between 8 and 20cm across, but the warts can wash off in the rain and the colour can fade. The stem measures 80 – 180mm by 10 - 20mm and is also white, often with remnants from the volval base still attached and usually a white ring at the apex of the stem that often becomes yellowed by the cap pigment as it washes off. All Amanitas have a *volva* at the base of the stem, which ranges from large and bag-like to just a rim on the 'bulb'. The Fly Agaric's volva is bulb-like.

The mushroom first grows below ground and swells to produce a white 'egg' before emerging above ground and developing some red on its 'button' top; at this stage its volva is intact and about equal to the cap in size. As it grows upward its cap changes through hemispherical to flat. When ripe it drops its white spores, which contain genetic material from the parent mushroom and some nutrients which it uses to grow into a structure that develops a hypha. Hyphae come together to form a branched mycelium that cannot reproduce on its own. When two compatible mycelia meet, a hypha in one mycelium will 'donate' its genes to a hypha of the other, where the two sets of genes will remain while the mycelium continues to grow. When the mycelium has enough energy and conditions are right, fruiting is triggered and bodies called *primordia* develop. Some of these then develop into mushrooms, as the fungus concentrates its efforts on the most promising ones. Some of the other primordia may produce mushrooms in a second or third flush.

Diana Walker

Bee Diary 2023

Having started bee keeping five years ago I have certainly had my ups and downs over the years and this season has been my worst in terms of the honey harvest – with only three jars produced – and not to a saleable quality! However, this season has also been one of the most interesting as this was the first year that I have been involved in a capture of a swarm.

Swarms are the way in which bee colonies reproduce and is the process where a single colony will split into two or more separate colonies. The current queen will leave the hive with a large proportion of the flying worker bees to look for a new nest site, leaving behind the old nest that is well stocked with eggs, brood and queen cells containing virgin queens. These virgin queens will emerge to do battle for sole control of the old colony or may swarm themselves to create what is known as a cast swarm.

The swarm does not fly far initially and will typically come to rest on a nearby tree trunk or branch only a few meters from the hive. A few score scout bees will be sent to find suitable new nest locations, while the remaining bees cluster around the queen to keep her safe – for she is the only reproductive female, and if she perishes it will spell the end of the colony. The swarm will then move to a new temporary location before settling on the final nest site. This whole process is relatively quick, taking no more than a few days in total to complete.

The capture of swarms is very important to beekeepers, as this is one of the primary ways that we can acquire new colonies. The other methods include purchasing queens (to

introduce to an existing colony) or small 'nucleus' colonies from bee breeding companies; rearing new queens yourself (definitely an activity for the professional!) or splitting your own colonies, which in essence is a recreation of the natural swarm process that I described previously.

I had the opportunity earlier this year to help a fellow beekeeper in the village, who was keen to get back into the hobby after a period of absence, capture a swarm to start off her new colony. If you belong to a beekeeper's club, you can sign-up to be notified if swarms get spotted by the wider public, or in this case, I got a tip off from a pest-controller friend-of-a-friend who knew I was on the look for a swarm.



The swarm was spotted in a local farm orchard, and very conveniently was attached to the trunk of a small bush. Whilst no expert, and this being my first

swarm collection – I was still relatively confident in a successful result – as swarms tend to be more docile than you may think (and my bee suit is pretty bee-tight!). We were able to brush the bulk of the cluster into a cardboard box, that was then flipped over onto a white bed sheet and propped up so the bees could get into the box. The idea is that the queen will hopefully be in the box, or if she isn't will quickly head into it as she is naturally attracted to first dark entrance space in sight. Luckily for us she ended up in the box, and almost 'magically' the remaining bees could be seen 'running' into the box, following her in attracted by her scent. We left the box as long as we could, to get as many of the bees inside as possible, before calling it quits as the sun was starting to go down. The final steps in the operation included sealing up the box; covering the whole thing with a plastic bag; loading it into the car; a short (and nervous) drive to the new site; and then tipping the colony into the hive.

In the end, unfortunately, the colony was unable to establish itself, despite the feeding and loving care provided by its new owner.

Despite the setbacks this season, having been able to successfully capture a swarm (even if it didn't ultimately survive) has given my beekeeping confidence a real boost. The experience has reminded me why this is such a great hobby (even with no honey!) – and I look forward to a new season in 2024... assuming my bees make it through the winter of course, otherwise I too will be on the hunt for swarms!

Russell Stokes

Cam Valley Wildlife Group – events programme

January to March 2024

Please contact Judy on 07460 278311 with any general queries.

Venue for our talks: Radstock Working Men's Club, which has a large hall, with a large screen. A bar is available in the main part of the club, serving hot and cold drinks. **Please park in the town car park next door** (behind the library). There is a side entrance to the club from the car park.

Monday 1st January 2024 - New Year's Walk

This year, we will join Helena for an urban walk in Midsomer Norton, taking part in the **New Year Plant Hunt** organised each year by the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland. This will be a circular walk exploring the High Street, Town Park, Greenway and Wellow Brook Walk, aiming to find as many plant species as possible in flower, in a maximum of three hours. Stout shoes/boots and waterproofs are advisable.

Meet at 1.00pm by the entrance to South Road car park, Midsomer Norton (ST665541)

For further details contact Helena (01761) 410731 or 07773037001

Saturday 6th January 2023 – GOOSARD work morning.

First Saturday of each month

Please phone Jim Crouch on 07399926107 (in the evening) to confirm attendance.

All welcome.

Sunday 28th January Trip to Slimbridge - Meet at 9.30am at Paulton car park for car share or 11.00am at Slimbridge

For further information from Diana 07581 451805

Saturday 3rd February 2024 – GOOSARD work morning

Details as January

Wednesday 7th February 2024 – Talk

Damon Bridge, Conservation Officer for RSPB in Somerset.

He will be talking about their work, particularly on the Levels

7.30pm for 8.00pm start. Bar with hot/cold drinks at Radstock Working Men's Club.

Saturday 10th February – Trip to Ham Wall

Meet in RSPB car park at 3.00pm to go and watch the starling murmurations, wear warm clothes.

Date may change depending on weather conditions.

Contact Diana for further information: or car share 07581 451805

Wednesday 20th March – World Rewilding Day

Wednesday 2nd March 2024 – Talk – speaker tbc

Saturday 2nd March – GOOSARD work morning

Details as January

Members' photos

Phil reports that he and his partner first spotted this group of three of these uncommon orchids last year in their woods, but the deer had eaten the flowers before they opened. Phil notes that they have a problem with deer eating individual or small clumps of flowers which they have planted such as Yellow rattle and Bluebells, thereby stopping their spread. This year they protected them and were rewarded with these magnificent spikes, photographed on 21st July.

Helena Crouch has seen Broad-leaved Helleborine in both Lypeate and Edford Wood, about a mile from Phil, and there are some old records within a mile or two as well, at Hurdlestone Wood, Leigh Wood and Packsaddle Bridge Fields.

This medium to tall plant can be up to 80cm tall. This long-lived species prefers shaded woodland environments and woodland margins, but is also found in hedge-banks and even beside car parks in some cities, which include Wells. There are several other similar species, varieties and hybrids in the UK, so identification can sometimes be tricky.

Each plant has between 15 and 50 flowers with usually green or greenish-yellow sepals, pale pinkish violet to purplish red petals and a 9 – 10 mm lip. The lip's lower part is brownish-red inside with an oval to heart-shaped tip that is greenish-white, pink or purplish and curves under giving the lip a rounded appearance. They are pollinated by social wasps, including the Common Wasp, *Vespula vulgaris*, drawn to the sweet intoxicating nectar they produce. However, they may be able to self-fertilise.



They are connected with a range of fungi and are still partially dependent on these when mature. Helena Crouch informs that recent research has shown that the relationship between orchids and fungi is not symbiotic, as some sources suggest, and does not benefit the fungus. The orchids are heavily dependent on their associations with fungi by gaining much of their nitrogen and some of their carbon via the fungi. Broad-leaved helleborine has been shown to

be associated with ectomycorrhizal fungi, which themselves have a symbiotic relationship with the roots of other plants. Thus, the helleborine will use the fungus to obtain nutrients from a tree in a rather one-sided relationship! Helena covered this in her recent talk on the plants of the Cam and Wellow Valleys.

Grass Snake – Phil Gait

Phil and partner have not seen a grass snake in their garden for well over 25 years, but saw this one in early September in the late afternoon on their steps, where it may have been seeking warmth and appeared to be trying to hide when spotted. This attractive very timid snake can grow to well over a metre in length and it is rare these days to see it in a garden. They are known to play dead when cornered and to emit a bad-smelling substance if handled too much.

They have not seen signs of adults or siblings, but note that they have a large compost heap in the garden. This would provide a good source of rotting vegetation in which females could lay their eggs in June or July. This is Britain's only egg-laying snake. Another garden feature that attracts this snake is a pond, to which they occasionally come to hunt amphibians, particularly in rural or semi-urban environments. Snakes are declining across the UK due largely to loss of habitat and habitat connectivity - gardens help to provide the corridors they need between areas of suitable habitat.

The Grass Snake is native to England and Wales, but not to Ireland. Its northern limit is generally considered to be the England-Scotland border, but it can be found in Scotland and even occasionally breeds there. It is protected in Great Britain by law from deliberate killing, injury or sale.



Chlorophyllum species – Phil Gait

On 28th October, Phil photographed what appears to be a Shaggy Parasol, *Chlorophyllum rachodes*. This quite large, common, edible mushroom with lovely shaggy scales that grows to up to about 15cm in height and 15cm cap size (across). It is found in shady places such as woods and hedgerows. They can be confused with other mushrooms. These include species of the genus *Amanita*, which can be deadly and thought to be responsible for about 95% of the worldwide mushroom poisoning deaths. Other possible confusions are with The Prince, *Agaricus augustus*, which is also edible and larger, and the Parasol, *Macrolepita procera*, an even larger mushroom with average mushroom height of 40 cm and average cap width of 30 cm.

Shaggy Parasol mushrooms must be cooked, but can still cause gastric upsets in some people.

Mushrooms and other fungi gain their sustenance from plant and animal material, which they biosynthesize using enzymes. Enzymes are proteins that generally increase the speed of a reaction without being consumed in the process. The enzymes in fungi are important for breaking down plant material, for growth and development and for protecting the fungus from host defence mechanisms and toxic substances. They are very important elements of ecosystems and some of them have health benefits to humans, including the encouragement of beneficial bacteria in our guts and medicinal properties. Much research into fungi is being undertaken into the use of



fungi in a wide range of products and processes, including as 'green' alternatives.

Ivy Bee nest site – Phil Gait

Phil Gait reports a patch of a field in Coleford that is never well covered in vegetation and that seems to be increasing in area over the years – well over a square metre now. He had not really looked at it until recently and has sent in a photo, taken on 11th October this year. It is a nesting aggregation made by a number of individual solitary bees. The date is the essential clue to which species has made this – the Ivy Bee, *Colletes hederæ*.

Deborah Porter



Bart Detectives wanted

Molly Boyce, one of Bristol Avon Rivers Trust's (BART's) project assistants, is leading an exciting project called 'BART Detectives' along the Cam, Wellow and Midford brooks and thought that our group may be interested in this. The project will involve volunteers from local communities to conduct long term water quality monitoring of key sections of the Cam, Wellow and Midford brooks. Molly says that the detectives will have an important role to play in filling the gaps in water quality monitoring and that BART hopes to bring people closer to their rivers and empower communities with a sense of ownership, which they hope will create a legacy.

They intend to develop a survey better suited to the Cam, Wellow and Midford brooks and the impacts acting upon them and will supply easy-to-use source testing kits (temperature, total dissolved solids, turbidity, and phosphate) and survey forms for sampling once a month at an allocated site. BART will work with 20 local volunteers to train them to deliver the monitoring programme, and the results will be displayed on an interactive map online.



Dipper by John Hansford

If you would like to be involved or for more information, please contact Molly at molly@bristolavonriverstrust.org.

Deborah Porter

Nextdoor Nature Somer Valley

The Avon Wildlife Trust has contacted us about a campaign that they hope will bring nature-focused dreams into reality in the Midsomer Norton, Radstock, Peasdown St John and Paulton areas, and have sent the message below.

Nextdoor Nature is a national campaign by The Wildlife Trusts as part of Team Wilder's community-led action for nature's recovery. The scale of change is great: we need thousands of people to take action. Team Wilder is about empowering and resourcing people to visibly take actions that bring about nature's recovery. The project aims to raise understanding about the urgent need for change, and to recognise individuals and communities' own roles in making that change happen.

Making a difference
The natural world needs all kinds of help to thrive. To help us focus, we have identified three priority areas for our organisation to work on.

Nature's recovery
Protecting, creating and connecting wilder landscapes where wildlife and people thrive
Inspiring and resourcing people to take action for wildlife

Empowering people
Inspiring and Resourcing

Nature-based solutions
Unlocking Nature to tackle the climate crisis

by 2030 we want to see:
30% of land and sea managed for the benefit of wildlife

by 2030 we want to see:
1 in 4 people taking action for wildlife

by 2030 we want to see:
1,000 hectares of habitat restored to provide nature-based solutions

If you, or your community, would like to make space for nature and people, reach out. Whether you have a project on the go, are hoping to set something up, want to share something you love about your local area, to tell us about exciting wildlife you've spotted, or just want to be involved somehow, we want to hear from you!

For more information, see the launch post at:

<https://www.avonwildlifetrust.org.uk/blog/george-cook/next-door-nature-somer-valley-project-has-launched>,

or contact Rhea - email: Rhea.warner@avonwildlifetrust.org.uk or Tel: 07421226080.

Deborah Porter

Appeal for Volunteers

Website and Social Media Assistance: We are looking for someone with a passion for communication to load new content and lead regular maintenance for our website and guide us in the world of social media. Deborah has been carrying out the maintenance for many years, but it's not her forte nor always appropriate for her to carry it out. There is also the CVWG email which needs monitoring and emails distributing to the relevant group members. This is not an arduous role but the Co-ordinating Team are aware the website is often the first point of contact and we would like to commit to it being kept up to date.

Goosard Batch Nature Reserve Project Leader: After three years leading the workdays and co-ordination with Wessex Water of works on the Batch Peter Watson is stepping back from the lead role. We have helped maintain this unique Nature Reserve on our patch for over twenty-five years and are looking for a new project leader. As Peter said when he stood down at the recent AGM, we have a new signboard coming with our Group all over it, and we wouldn't want to let go of this fantastic local space at this time!

Please contact Jim Crouch on 07399926107 (in the evening) to discuss.

Next Co-ordinating Team meeting dates

The next meetings are on Tuesday 13th February and 19th March. All members are welcome to attend. Please ring Judy on 07460 278311 for details.

Deborah Porter

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Next Newsletter: The final copy date for the next Newsletter is **15th February 2024**

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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