



The Cam Valley Wildlife Group

# Newsletter



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## First year of butterfly transect surveys at Haydon Batch

Butterfly Conservation has declared a butterfly emergency in the wake of the worst ever results from their annual Big Butterfly Count. This gloomy picture is backed up by initial findings from the other, more systematic, surveys they organise. So, our first set of results from Haydon Batch need to be seen in this context. Hopefully, this year proves atypical, and a better picture of the species and numbers present will emerge over the next few years. The results for 2024 are set out below in Table 1 by species (on page 2).

As would be expected from an area with extensive grassland, the common meadow butterflies were the most abundant (Gatekeeper, Meadow Brown and Marbled White). Other meadow species were also recorded in smaller numbers (Small Heath, Common Blue and Small Skipper). However, another common meadow species, the Ringlet, was only observed once. The Small Heath, which was seen in reasonable numbers, is classified as Vulnerable on the Butterfly Red List and is scarce in the South-West.



*Small Heath at Haydon Batch*



*Dingy Skipper at Haydon Batch*

Dingy Skippers were seen on three occasions, they are also scarce in the South-West and are a Butterfly Conservation High Priority species.

As can be seen from Table 1 there were extremely low numbers seen for what are considered some of our most common species: Red Admiral, Peacock, the 'Cabbage Whites', Holly Blue, Orange Tip and Speckled Wood. Several common species observed in previous years were absent, most notably the

*Image top right - Fungus Flammulina velutipes by Deborah Porter*

Small Tortoiseshell, Comma and Small Copper. No Painted Ladies or Clouded Yellows were seen, but it was a low year for these migratory species.

One rare butterfly that has been seen on Haydon Batch in the past is the White-letter Hairstreak. This species is entirely dependent on Elms as a caterpillar food plant, so went into steep decline with the arrival of Dutch Elm Disease. However, they are clinging on in a few places by using the shoots that still grow from old Elm stumps. So, there is a chance they may still survive at Haydon Batch - we will keep looking.



*White-letter Hairstreak at Haydon Batch*

**Table 1 Species Observed**

| Species            | Total Count for Season | Maximum counted on a single survey |
|--------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Gatekeeper         | 184                    | 86                                 |
| Meadow Brown       | 172                    | 51                                 |
| Marbled White      | 48                     | 23                                 |
| Small Heath        | 45                     | 8                                  |
| Common Blue        | 23                     | 5                                  |
| Small Skipper      | 14                     | 5                                  |
| Brimstone          | 13                     | 4                                  |
| Large White        | 12                     | 4                                  |
| Green-veined White | 8                      | 3                                  |
| Peacock            | 7                      | 2                                  |
| Orange Tip         | 6                      | 3                                  |
| Holly Blue         | 5                      | 3                                  |
| Small White        | 5                      | 1                                  |
| Red Admiral        | 3                      | 3                                  |
| Speckled Wood      | 3                      | 2                                  |
| Dingy Skipper      | 3                      | 1                                  |
| Large Skipper      | 1                      | 1                                  |
| Green Hairstreak   | 1                      | 1                                  |
| Ringlet            | 1                      | 1                                  |

**Frank Loughran and Diana Walker**

**And...**

This year I have been doing Butterfly transects on Haydon Batch with Frank Loughran. As we expect you have heard, butterfly numbers have been very low over most of the country this year. The most



*Meadow Brown butterfly – Diana Walker*

We can help get this information to the appropriate recorders and this would help in the Citizens' Science projects to find out how our Wildlife is coping with the global changes that are taking place at the moment.

common butterflies we have seen on the batch have been the Gatekeeper followed by the Meadow Brown. However, we have to say not as many as were expected.

A regular count of butterflies has not been carried out for many years, and we are planning to carry out these transects over the next few years. Anyone who has an area of interest near where they live can do transects for butterflies (or anything that they are particularly interested in).



*Gatekeeper butterfly – Diana Walker*

This Autumn I have also been taking an interest in the fungi to be found on Haydon Batch.



***Diana Walker***



## Nature Notes from Winter 2023-2024

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

**17<sup>th</sup> December 2023**



We were watching a Dipper from Edford Bridge today and wondering why they bob up and down. I found two theories online. One is that it helps them pinpoint the location of their aquatic prey, by collecting visual information from more than one point. In the other theory, it is a way of communicating with other Dippers, when the noise of the river makes vocal communication very difficult.

**27<sup>th</sup> December 2023**

I found some tiny tubes in some scarves stored in our porch. Looking at them under the microscope, I could see that each tube was made in part of fibres from some of the scarves. So this was the work of Case-bearing Clothes Moths. The larvae feed on wool, fur, feathers and hair. During five instar stages, they carry their portable cases around with them. They do all their feeding during these larval stages.

**19<sup>th</sup> January 2024**

It was cold and frosty day at Westhay Nature Reserve and all the birds seemed to be out getting food while they could. This made them easier to see. There were Bearded Reedlings close to one of the droves. We also saw a Water Rail and a Bittern walking on ice to get between patches of reeds. The Water Rail seemed much more at home on the ice, than a rather hesitant and ungainly Bittern.



**26<sup>th</sup> January 2024**



Chew Valley Reservoir was the starting point for our walk today so we had a look at the bird life before setting off. As well as Mallards, Coots, Canada Geese and Swans, we saw Pochard, Common Gulls and the pair of Goldeneye pictured here.

**18<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

Looking out of our kitchen window, I was surprised to see a male Sparrowhawk. And even more surprised to see what it was doing. It was in the road and standing on top of a Blackbird. Before I could take a photograph, he had flown off taking his prey with him. However, this is a photo of a male Sparrowhawk that I had seen in the area a few weeks earlier.



**27<sup>th</sup> February 2024**



We were at RSPB Arne today and saw Wood Ants, several bodies deep on top of some of the ant hills. Was this normal behaviour? Apparently yes. Ants emerge from hibernation once the temperature is consistently above freezing. They 'swarm' on the surface of the nest in sunny weather to warm themselves and boost the temperature of the nest.

***Veryan Conn***



## Members photos

Diana Walker took some lovely photos of Scottish wildlife on a nocturnal wildlife trip in August with other photographers near Kirkcudbright in Dumfries and Galloway. The party used four hides run by Scottish Wildlife Hides during both the day and the night and food was put out to encourage wildlife visits. There were some long waits, but they were rewarded with a visit by Pine Marten, normally a very elusive creature, one of three mustelids caught on camera, the other two being badger and otter. The otter turned up after midnight! Zoe Niccolls' photo made me smile (see opposite page). I hope it makes readers smile too!



*Pine Martin - Diana Walker*

**Pine Marten** is found across Europe and in West Asia. It was widespread throughout mainland Britain until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although persecution by gamekeepers had already led to its extinction in some English counties by 1800 and rarity in many others. Further, the fur trade and habitat fragmentation took their toll and contributed to the extinction of most populations in England and many in Scotland and Wales within the century. The late 1930s saw Pine Martens in Britain reduced to a relict population in north-west Scotland. There were a few signs of recovery by the 1940s and in 1995 the JNCC (Joint Nature Conservation Committee) estimated the total pre-breeding population was about 3,600

comprising less than 100 in England, about 3,500 in Scotland and less than 50 in Wales, which had a data reliability factor of 2 (good population data and understanding, with improvements in estimates unlikely to result in any changes that were as high as 25%). The Mammal Society says there is a total population now of 3 – 4,000 in Great Britain and probably as many again in Ireland. Today they are categorised by the IUCN (International Union for conservation of Nature) as *Least Concern* globally, in the UK and in Scotland but *Critical* in both England and Wales. The species remains on the UK Red List. Population threats include slow breeding (1 – 5 young per year), living at low densities, road deaths, unselective predator control, habitat loss and climate change. The species' male and female territorial overlap aids reproduction. Between 2015 and 2017, some 51 pine martens were translocated under licence from Scotland to Wales, where there is now a viable population, and there have been unlicensed reintroductions in the New Forest.

The Pine Marten is an arboreal species found in coniferous, deciduous and mixed woodland. It makes its den amongst tree roots, rocks and boulders and in



*Red squirrel - Diana Walker*

tree cavities, but will also nest in an old crow's nest or a squirrel dray. It is an accomplished climber, using its long bushy tail to balance, and chases squirrels for food which are said to be its main diet on the continent. It is known to be a generalist, feeding on small rodents, birds, beetles, carrion, eggs and fungi all year round and feasting on berries in the autumn. It is also known to eat honey. Its prints are easily confused with polecat or mink. Its sweet-smelling blackish droppings which, when fresh, smell like violets that are left in prominent positions including on woodland trails; they are distinctively S-shaped due to the way the marten 'wiggles' when defecating.

*Data and information sources: A Review of British Mammals, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, 1995; Mammal Society online resource; British Mammals, L. Harrison Matthews, 1989 edition; Rewilding Britain website (the recent reintroduction information).*



*Grey Squirrel – Zoe Nicolls*

### **Grey Squirrel**

Following on from Phil Gait's article about problems with Grey Squirrels, Zoe Nicolls has sent in an amusing photo (or perhaps not for some people!) of a grey squirrel in a 'squirrel-proof' bird feeder! Incidentally, there is a school of ecological thought regarding a beneficial impact of Pine Martens from predation of grey squirrels where the greys compete with their red cousins, as the greys are said to be easier for the Pine Marten to catch. Pine Martens can take prey as large as a rabbit and are more at home in the trees than on the ground, so a grey squirrel meal sounds like a good option to me!

### **Otter**

Until at least the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, otter populations in Britain were relatively high, but at the end of the century otter hunting with hounds started as a form of pest control. The effects of this were compounded

by persecution for fishery protection and otter hunting as a leisure activity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, leading to such severe declines that by the end of that century there was a shortage of otters to hunt. Catching wild otters for pelts became widespread and in Shetland led to the development of 'otter-houses' for the trapping of wild otters in that century, which provided valuable income for crofters into the earlier decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The cessation of hunting and reduced game-keeper pressure during First World War provided a reprieve, but intensive hunting with hounds in the '20s and '30s altered the age structure of the population and probably had a negative impact. The publication of Henry Williamson's novel 'Tarka the Otter' in 1927 turned public opinion against otter



*Otter - Diana Walker*



hunting and decadal otter kills had halved by the 1950s. Unfortunately, a catastrophic decline in England, southern Scotland and Wales occurred from 1957/58 due to the combination of hunting, pollution of rivers with organochlorine insecticides and habitat destruction, particularly wetland drainage. By the mid-1970s there were only twelve otters remaining on the Somerset Levels. The decline was particularly bad in 1977-79. Hunting finally ceased after the Otter was declared a protected species in 1978 and recovery started in the 1980s, although there were still declines or failure to recover in places. A necessary re-stocking programme took place in East Anglia between 1983 and 1989. Improvements in water quality and good baseline populations in Scotland resulted in a substantial increase there by the mid-'90s, but organochlorine pesticide residues elsewhere initially worked against recovery and PCB levels in fish in lowlands in particular were thought to be causing reproductive problems. The needs of otters are much better understood today than they used to be and the return of the European Otter to our waterways is now so well established that they have almost completely recolonised Britain and populations are expanding.

Here are a few of the other photos from Diana's Scottish trip, of birds that that you can also see in the CVWG area - Kingfisher, Jay and Tawny Owl.



*Kingfisher – Diana Walker*



*Jay – Diana Walker*



*Tawny owl – Diana Walker*

*Sources for the otter section: A Review of British Mammals, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, 1995; Historic Environment Scotland – Canmore, National Record of the Historic Environment; Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon, North Devon in 100 Objects: 68. The Otter Hunter; Mammal Society online resource.*

**Deborah Porter**



## Curlew Action: saving our largest wader

For our November meeting, CVWG members were treated to a well-illustrated talk by Mike Smart on Saving Curlews. Mike is a trustee of the charity Curlew Action, which was established in 2020 to raise awareness of the plight of curlews worldwide and take action to conserve them.

The curlew is the largest European wader, easily recognised from its very long downturned beak and distinctive call. There are only six species worldwide: two others are considered extinct. In Britain we have two of the six species, the second being the Whimbrel. Curlews are long-lived birds: the oldest ringed bird is known to be 32 years old. With 25% of the world population nesting in Britain (mostly in the north), and another 25% visiting in winter, it is vital that action is taken to conserve curlews, yet they are declining at a terrible rate. There are currently thought to be about 119,000 curlews in Britain, but there are 5,500 fewer each year.

Mike explained the threats and challenges faced by breeding curlews which are resulting in a disastrously small number of chicks. Last year there were 33 nesting pairs in Gloucestershire but only two chicks were successfully raised. Reasons include destruction of nests by agricultural practices; predators, including fox, crow, badger, kites, buzzards, weasel, stoat and raven; disturbance of nests, particularly by dogs; and forestry, particularly in upland areas where there is a drive to plant trees.

Several different projects are carried out by Curlew Action in order to understand curlews and address their failure to breed successfully. Individual birds are tagged and monitored. Drones are used to watch nests with minimal disturbance. Once nests are located, electric fences are erected around them to protect them from some predators. In some cases, eggs are removed from the nest and taken away to be incubated and reared in a safe environment, a process known as headstarting, before being released back into the wild. The plight of curlews is a worldwide issue, so collaboration with curlew conservationists in other countries is vital to reverse the decline of this iconic bird.

More information can be found on the website: <https://www.curlewaction.org/>

**Helena Crouch**

## Ferns to find in winter

CVWG botany walks may have finished for this year, but there are still plenty of plants to study throughout the winter. Although some plant species become dormant and cannot be found in the depths of winter, some of our native ferns are at their most impressive. Perhaps our commonest fern locally is the Hart's-tongue (*Asplenium scolopendrium*). This species is distinctive and unmistakable, but it does not fit the popular idea that ferns are plants with intricately dissected leaves: the fronds of Hart's-tongue are simple, entire, glossy green and strap-shaped.



*Asplenium scolopendrium*

The wintergreen fronds arise from a short stout rootstock and may reach 60cm or more (including the rachis, or leaf stalk). The underside of the frond appears striped with many pairs of twinned sori (spore-bearing structures) arranged either side of the midrib and perpendicular to it. The sori are linear, each about 2cm long, and the pattern of these gives Hart's-tongue its Latin name, because of its resemblance to a giant centipede (*Scolopendra* sp)!



*Asplenium ruta-muraria*

little fern has long narrow fronds, deeply divided into rounded lobes. It is unmistakable because the back of each frond is covered with rusty brown scales, hence its name. Rustyback is very tolerant to desiccation. When dry, the lobes of each frond curl inwards, protecting the green upper surface, and the whole frond curls up, looking withered and dead. When re-wetted, the fronds uncurl.



*Asplenium ceterach*



*Asplenium adiantum-nigrum*

The other local species of *Asplenium* is the Black Spleenwort (*Asplenium adiantum-nigrum*). This species appears to be restricted to more acidic substrates and is found on several brick bridges along the disused railway near Kilmersdon and on walls built from sandstone in the south of our area. It also grows on an old wall in Peasedown St John, and I recently found four plants on the churchyard wall in Paulton.

Although Male Fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*) is frost-sensitive and dies down in winter, the impressive shuttlecocks of Golden Scaly Male-fern (*Dryopteris affinis*) stand through the winter, as do Soft Shield-fern (*Polystichum setiferum*) and Hard Shield-fern (*P. aculeatum*). All of these are reasonably common in woods and lanes around the CVWG area.



During a winter walk around a town or village, it should be possible to see several different species of ferns, without even getting muddy! Even in the centre of Bath, about a dozen different species might be seen and here there is the extra interest of alien species. Maidenhair Fern (*Adiantum capillus-veneris*) has become naturalised on stonework around the city, perhaps most spectacular festooning from the roof of the canal tunnel under Cleveland House. It can also be seen in Wells, on the walls of the Bishop's Palace and its moat and on the fountain in the Market Place. This species is a scarce British native, but plants in urban situations have usually arisen from spores from cultivated plants which, although the same species, may not be of British origin.

Even more exotic are species of *Pteris* and *Cyrtomium* which can be seen in select basements in Bath. Ribbon Fern (*Pteris cretica*) is European in origin, but Spider Brake (*Pteris multifida*) is a native of China and Japan. Both are somewhat tender, but are being found increasingly in southern England, naturalised in sheltered situations such as basements. Fortune's Holly-fern (*Cyrtomium fortunei*) is a frequently grown garden plant and has been spotted in basements in Bath; it also grows on the bank of a cycle path in Midsomer Norton. Ferns are currently enjoying a horticultural resurgence in popularity and many alien hardy species are wintergreen, so look out for ferns in gardens too.

**Helena Crouch**

## Cam Valley Wildlife Group Events Programme

### CAM VALLEY WILDLIFE GROUP – Events programme January to March 2025

Please contact Judy on 07460 278311 or Diana 07581 451805.  
with any general queries or suggestions for future talks or outings.



**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. Price £2 for Members & £3 for non-members.

#### **Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> January 2025 - New Year's Walk**

As last 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 4<sup>th</sup> January 2025 – Goosard Reserve work morning 10.00am to 12.00 noon**

Please contact Jim Crouch 01761 410731 or by email: [jim.crouch@macegroup.com](mailto:jim.crouch@macegroup.com) to let him know who is coming so he can plan activities. Anyone is welcome to attend.

#### **Sunday 26th January 2025 - Trip to WWT Slimbridge Wetland Centre**

Meet at 9.30am at Paulton car park for car share or 11.00am at Slimbridge Wetland Centre.

Further information from Diana 07581 451805

**Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> February 2025 – Goosard Reserve work morning 10.00am to 12.00 noon**

Please contact Jim Crouch 01761 410731 or by email: [jim.crouch@macegroup.com](mailto:jim.crouch@macegroup.com) to let him know who is coming so he can plan activities. Anyone is welcome to attend.

**Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> February 2025 – Talk by Simon Carder**

Simon is a wildlife photographer; he will be showing us his pictures of British wildlife.

7.30pm for 8.00pm start at the Radstock Working Men's Club, there is a bar for hot and cold drinks.

**Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> February – Trip to Ham Wall**

Meet in RSPB car park at 3.00pm to go and watch the starling murmuration. Wear warm clothes and sturdy footwear. Date may change depending on weather conditions.

Further information from Diana 07581 451805.

**Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> March 2025 – Goosard Reserve work morning 10.00am to 12.00 noon**

Please contact Jim Crouch 01761 410731 or by email: [jim.crouch@macegroup.com](mailto:jim.crouch@macegroup.com) to let him know who is coming so he can plan activities. Anyone is welcome to attend.

**Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> March 2025 – Talk on the Somerset Eel Recovery Project**

A member of their team will be coming to talk about their project work.

7.30pm for 8.00pm start at the Radstock Working Men's Club, there is a bar for hot and cold drinks.

## Next Co-ordinating Team meeting dates

The dates for the next meetings are 11<sup>th</sup> February and 8<sup>th</sup> April 2025.

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**Next Newsletter:** The final copy date for the next Newsletter is **15<sup>th</sup> February 2025**

**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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