The Cam Valley Wildlife Group

Newsletter

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A worrying year for Barn Owls

This has been the worst year for Barn Owl breeding that I can remember in the 16 years I have been doing the conservation work.

Owlet production in nests is well down. In many of the traditional, rock steady sites the birds that are still present have gone into moult. They may still breed if conditions improve, albeit very late. This is what happened in 2013.

Lack of food for the owlets is the reason for the reduction in breeding. There is no fresh green grass in the usual grass margins where the owls hunt. These areas provide cover and food for the voles, which in turn are food for the owlets.

Nature needs to heal itself, and quickly, before winter. We need rain before grass growth starts to shut down; the rain in early September should mean we will start to see new growth and more food. The owls are still paired up and the nest boxes will be checked until the end of October to see if any late breeding takes place.

Barn Owls in a tree nest – Gary Kingman

Gary Kingman

Editor's note: Gary's achievements for the Barn Owl Project are impressive. Not only does he check nearly 100 nest sites, but he also negotiates with landowners to take nest boxes, which he builds and puts up himself!

André Fournier

The Cam Valley Wildlife Group's Co-ordinating Committee sadly heard of André Fournier's passing as this Newsletter was going to press. He led the group with vigour and direction for many years, including running the Barn Owl Project. We offer Val our condolences at this difficult time. A fuller appreciation of André's contribution to local wildlife will be included in the next edition.

Turkey Oak – Does its spread threaten our native oak trees

The ecological importance of oak trees native to the UK is well documented, as is the number of species which native oaks support. So, how does the non-native Turkey Oak *Quercus cerris* compare with our native species and what does the future hold for Turkey Oaks in the UK?

Native to South-eastern Europe as well as Turkey and Syria, Turkey Oak was first introduced to England in 1734 and, being an attractive and fast-growing tree, it was widely planted as an ornamental in parklands during the Victorian period. It is useful for towns and cities because it can tolerate poor soils and atmospheric pollution.

It was first recorded growing wild in Britain in 1905 and it is now fully naturalised. It grows particularly well on sandier, acid soils and establishes itself readily in unmanaged grassland, heathland, hedgerows and woodland edges. It is now found across most of lowland southern Britain, spreading into northern counties as well as into Wales and Scotland.

Acorns and buds of Turkey oak, showing their characteristic 'hairy' appearance – Ben Rose

Our native oaks, Pedunculate Oak *Q. robur* and Sessile Oak *Q. petraea,* are white oaks and their acorns ripen within about six months. Turkey Oak is a black oak and its acorns take 14 months to ripen. This extended period of seed maturation allows the acorns of black oaks to accumulate higher levels of tannin than the acorns of white oaks. It is generally considered that tannins have evolved as a defence mechanism in plants because they have a strong deleterious effect on phytophagous insects, and they tend to induce an adverse response when consumed by herbivores. There is evidence indicating that hoarding animals such as squirrels, rats, and Jays prefer to hoard more high-tannin than low-tannin acorns, the reasons behind which appear to relate to the germination speed of the acorns. Acorns of British white oaks start rooting as soon as they fall whereas under certain conditions the acorns of Turkey Oaks remain dormant through winter and germinate during the following spring or summer. It appears that grey squirrels have worked this out and are preferentially stashing the acorns of Turkey Oaks over the native oaks, and this is helping Turkey Oaks spread through the British landscape.

Turkey oaks are also critical in the life-cycle of the tiny Knopper gall wasp, *Andricus quercuscalicis*. This has a two-phase life cycle requiring both the Turkey oak, where it causes inconspicuous galls on the male catkins, but also requiring our native oak, where it lays its eggs on developing acorns resulting in irregular distorted outgrowths from the acorn, which generally ceases to be viable as a result. First observed in England in the 1960s, the wasp has spread rapidly leading to concerns that the reduction in the proportion of viable seed produced by Pedunculate Oaks might affect the future population of our native oaks, although in practice this could be a distraction because other factors also affect the reproductive success of these species.

Knopper Wasp gall - Ben Rose

For whatever reason, Turkey Oak seems to have a competitive advantage over native British oaks because it can establish and reproduce more quickly when suitable opportunities arise. Turkey Oak populations are getting to the stage where the second and third generations of trees are beginning to reproduce in high numbers. Over the next 20 years I expect that we will see an explosion in the number of naturally established Turkey Oaks in Britain, and we may see the species begin to dominate woodlands, hedgerows and copses. This could lead to Turkey Oak displacing Pedunculate and Sessile Oak in British landscapes, and I suspect that in some situations this transition could come about quite rapidly.

In terms of wood production there would be significant disbenefits if Turkey Oak were to replace our native oaks on a large scale because the two native oak species can produce wood for a range of high-value products such as timber, furniture, veneers and barrel-making. However, Turkey oak is of little value as a timber tree, the wood being liable to warping and splitting, either when the tree is felled or during the drying process, making it only suitable for fence posts, railway sleepers, wainscoting (panelling) or firewood.

Woodland managers should be aware that creating more open space will favour the spread of Turkey Oak and so in some situations it would be sensible to delay thinning or clear felling until any mature Turkey Oaks in the vicinity have been removed. Turkey Oak will coppice, so any active removal would need to be coupled with stump removal or poisoning.

The control of Turkey Oak could be justified as a precautionary measure if it is spreading into a landscape that contains vulnerable flora or fauna that have a long association with native oak species. Similarly, where there is native oak woodland it may sometimes be prudent to remove solitary Turkey Oaks. This can sometimes be a difficult decision because solitary specimens can be large and attractive trees, but if these trees are not removed they will produce a constant supply of younger trees. If the aim was to retain a mature individual and prevent it from spreading, any subsequent saplings would need to be identified and removed until the parent tree dies. Planting Turkey Oak in rural landscapes should be avoided (even if the species was planted as part of a historic landscape design).

It is increasingly likely that there will be further rewilding projects in Britain and in my view, there are many situations where Turkey Oak will establish and become a dominant tree species in abandoned or lightly-grazed pastures.

In most circumstances there will be no need to manage Turkey Oak at all. Indeed, it may even become a valuable species for woodland resilience because it is relatively free of disorders at a time when so many other British tree species are suffering as a result of novel pests and diseases. Managers will need to decide if the species requires control in order to achieve the management objectives at their site or if this new member of our plant community should be accepted.

Ben Rose

Nature Notes from Autumn 2024

Each day I make a nature note. This maybe recording something unusual or looking for more information about a species I know well.

11 September 2024 Today I noticed lots of different insects in our garden. There were Ivy Bees on the Persicaria and Dock Bugs on the Choisya. A Green-veined White was visiting flowers and finally on the gravel outside our house a moth to identify. It was a Common Marbled Carpet Moth.

20 September 2024 Whilst in Dorset for a few days we watched Swallows and House Martins near Burton Bradstock. They were feeding up before leaving for Africa. Nearby, the National Trust has planted flowers that will provide more food for migrating birds – Sunflowers, Phacelia and some white flax.

1 October 2024 We saw this Elephant Hawkmoth caterpillar seemingly crossing the road near Leigh-on-Mendip. The caterpillars apparently crawl to the ground to pupate. This explains its rather risky behaviour.

17 October 2024 At Westhay Nature Reserve, the Gadwalls seemed to be pairing up, with lots of chasing about, croaking and whistling. Apparently Gadwalls pair up early, with 80% of females spoken for by November. The "grunt – whistle" is part of the male's courtship display.

7 November 2024 I was wondering what determines the autumn colours we see. There are three colour pigments in leaves. In autumn, as the weather gets colder, chlorophyll (green) is not replaced, so leaves appear more yellow or red. Low temperatures favour carotenes (yellows), but warmer weather anthocyanins (reds).

12 November 2024 A walk in the Axbridge area took us through King's Wood. It is an ancient woodland managed by the National Trust, which has some ancient Small-leaved Limes. As well as a large girth, these trees have trunk cavities and decay holes, making them a haven for many wildlife species.

Veryan Conn

Members' Photos

Solitary Bee House - Zoe Nicholls

Zoe's photograph of a bee house shows us what has been using it – leafcutter bees of the genus *Megachile*. You can see that the nests have been created over a period of time, with the freshest still green and evidence of excavated wood as sawdust caught in the remains of cobwebs on the front of the box.

There are several species of leafcutter bee and we have four of them in our area. Looking at the photograph. I would hazard a guess that the hole could be a 7mm hole and that the species is *Megachile ligniseca*, the largest of the *Megachile* species, larger than a honeybee at 12 – 18 mm body length and the most frequent leafcutter using 'bee hotels'. However, if the hole is smaller it could be Willughby's leafcutter, *M. Willughbiela* (to 15 mm) or one of the smaller species, *M. versicolor* (10-13 mm) or the even smaller *M. centuncularis* (9-12 mm).

The *Megachile* females are relatively easy to tell apart from each other, especially if you have good photographs showing the abdominal hairs below and the view from above. When identifying from photographs, it is wise to rule out *Osmia* species, which are closely related but do not use leaves to construct and seal their nests and have different feet. Further information on leafcutters, including photographs, can be found in Newsletter 87, which is available on our website in the CVWG Newsletter archive

Phil's photo shows several Buff-tip moth caterpillars together on oak. The caterpillars live and feed gregariously on a good range of deciduous trees, often in mixed woodland where the adults can be found flying in June and July, although it can be around in May. The groups of caterpillars can be large enough to defoliate branches entirely. This is quite a widespread species in Britain and fairly common, especially in the southern half. It is one we have caught when doing moth trapping. The well-named moth is very attractive to my mind. At rest it can blend in very well with the background and is known for a remarkable resemblance in particular to a broken silver birch twig when at rest.

Buff-tip caterpillars - Phil Gait

This Clouded Yellow butterfly was recorded by Diana on a butterfly transect survey at Haydon Batch. This very attractive butterfly originates from north Africa and southern Europe. Whilst many remain by the south coast, it can be found all over Britain in open habitats containing its usual food-plants of Clovers, Lucerne and, less often, Bird's-foot Trefoil. While it breeds across the UK, producing up to 3 generations in a year, its larvae and pupae are so susceptible to damp and frosts that they rarely survive winter. In some years it does manage to overwinter in the south of England.

Clouded Yellow Butterfly – Diana Walker

The pale yellow eggs are laid on the upper sides of legume leaves and turn orange before hatching, which takes about a week.

It is a very widespread species in Europe and there are occasional large influxes into the UK of sometimes tens of thousands of individuals, and these years are called 'Clouded Yellow Years'. It arrives in the UK in late May/early June, but larger numbers arrive in July and August, boosting the population of the newly-hatched young of the first wave. It keeps on breeding and adults have been known to emerge as late as December. It will be interesting to see how large the numbers are by October this year. If you have an iRecord account, you can follow their records for this year by using the filter facility on the 'all records' map for the species.

It is a strong flyer and does not stop often, but its distinctive orange-yellow colour can be seen as it passes by, and the dark borders of its upper-wing help to mark it out. The exception is that a few of the females are pale yellow - form helice.

The **Cucumber Spider** is one of the five *Araniella* species in Britain, known collectively as Cucumber Spiders. The most likely of the four is the Common Cucumber Spider, *Araniella cucurbitina*, which is both common and widespread throughout much of England and Wales, although more scattered in the West and less common in Scotland. Less common than that is *Araniella opisthographa* which is also widespread over much of England, but less so; additionally, it is scarcer in Wales and Scotland.

Cucumber Spider - Phil Gait

Of the other two species, with which it can be confused, one is a nationally rare spider found on trees and shrubs and the other, found on trees (especially oak and pine) is nationally scarce. These two latter species have not been shown to occur in our area to my knowledge. The four are recognised readily by the bright apple-green abdomen and their small size with the exception of one, the nationally rare *A. displicata*, whose females can reach 11mm. The other three are between 3.5mm and 6 mm, with males at most reaching the size of the smallest females.

Phil's photo shows nicely the distinctive red spot above the spinnerets and the spider's small orb web. Had it been spun within the margins of a single leaf, the orb web may well have been somewhat compromised. The four species can only reliably be told apart by their genitalia, but we can tell that this a female because the males have a broad black marginal band on the carapace (the shield covering the upper surface) and black annulations around the leg joints.

Deborah Porter

A P(PL)AUSE FOR TREES

Tree felling, oh nothing triggers my heart rate more than a mention or to witness a tree felling. Permission granted. Gone. Trees are a microcosm of biodiverse life; the Oak the world over, in all its various species, harbours more invertebrate and fungal life than any other, the Birch coming second, with Willow close behind. And with all that life comes a healthy, long worked for habitat and health for us too.

It is said that an oak takes 300 years to grow, 300 to live and 300 years to die, and yet they can be felled because in relation to us humans they might be a nuisance.

Here's a fact: the Oak Bracket fungus, *Pseudoinonotus Dryadeus*, emerges at the base of an oak tree. It causes slow rotting of the heart wood, just a natural part of the tree ageing process. It is not sick, it is just getting older. Think of it as a creator of new and invaluable habitats. The gradually hollowing tree supports new, biodiverse life over decades. Maybe one day it will need topping and pruning to make it safe, but felling immediately? Why?

Bracket fungus - Alice Naish

For me taking down a tree is near sacrilege. We tend to look at them in various ways: things of great beauty, an addition to the landscape, or they block the view, drop leaves, cast shade, are in the wrong place or in some cases can be farmed lucratively. All in relation to us humans.

New trees may be planted to replace those felled, but it takes years for a lively habitat to develop in and around newly planted trees.

Topped and pruned tree in New Forest
Alice Naish

Bristol Water is practising something in the Chew Valley to which we should pay attention. In areas of Ash die-back, the trees are being topped not felled; that is, all branches deemed to be dangerous are lopped off and a shapely trunk is left standing to die gracefully over decades, providing a top-class habitat for birds, mammals and most importantly for insects and epiphytes such as mosses and ferns. The tree skeletons will be hammered by woodpeckers, nested in by owls and eaten slowly by a myriad of invertebrates, not to mention providing crevice shelter for the larger flying insects such as moths and butterflies. What's not to like?

Westonbirt Arboretum and the New Forest also practise this different kind of tree attitude while thousands of people wind safely through the forest and arboretum paths every year.

Would it be so hard to pause when you see a bracket fungus on your tree, or an oozing of sap from a branch join , and to think no, I don't need to fell it, I don't need to remove it, it can be left to die over the next 50 -100 years, topped or pruned carefully to remove any danger. Walk through woodlands and forests and note how many trees have fungus, broken branches, wounds and ivy growing up them. They will probably still be there in a hundred years, long past our life spans. The ivy choking myth is another story, not for here....

Trees do not exist in relation to us, they exist. Some may be planted by us or felled by us. Each one absorbs carbon dioxide, reducing pollution and slowing down climate change. Those are awe-inspiring actions, putting us to shame. We, amongst other world countries have pledged to create and preserve a certain habitat interconnectedness for Nature so that 30% of land and sea are safely conserved. Trees are essential in this aim. Remove a tree, the line is broken. Surely trees are some of the most beautiful and essential organisms on Earth.

Alice Naish

News from Somer Valley Rediscovered

Bath and North East Somerset Council has begun a raft of improvements for nature and people at Staddlestones Riverside Park in Radstock and at Waterside Valley in Westfield. This is part of the Somer Valley Rediscovered project that aims to connect residents to their sustainable green spaces.

Alongside earthworks and landscaping at Staddlestones Riverside Park, there will be new picnic benches and seating boulders, a boules court and new footpaths. Children at Norton Hill Primary School have created designs which will be incorporated into a new metal artwork entrance to the park. Nature restoration features including tree planting and hedge laying will be carried out during the next phase of works later in the winter.

Waterside Valley in Westfield has also seen recent improvements to benefit the community and wildlife with the addition of an 800 metre crushed stone path connecting Radstock with the Waterford Park estate in Westfield, replacing a previously waterlogged grass path. New benches and picnic tables have also been installed, with further improvements including interpretation boards planned for the coming months. The work has been delivered in partnership with Westfield Parish Council, which purchased the 13-hectare site in July 2021.

Thank you to our wonderful Somer Valley Rediscovered Volunteers for their unwavering commitment. Many of you will have enjoyed key improvements such as the new path and steps in Midsomer Norton Town Park and the Linden Close entrance to Haydon Batch, making them more accessible and opening up new areas for us all to enjoy and explore. These construction tasks are incredibly hard work and we are in awe of their resilience and teamwork. As well as these more strenuous tasks, the volunteers have done three days of scything in Waterside Valley this September, an important habitat management task to increase the species diversity of this grassland. It's not just the habitat management volunteers we wish to thank, but everyone who has given their time to monitor butterflies and wildflowers as a Nature Watch volunteer and even rivers as part of our Flood Watch initiative with our partner the Bristol Avon Rivers Trust.

Phoebe Webster

Some more Members' Photos

White-tailed Eagle - Andrew Harrison

Andrew was blessed to capture this picture of a White-tailed Eagle fishing at Chew Lake. This spectacular bird, our largest native bird of prey, was hunted to extinction in England by the early 19th century, with the last one being shot in Scotland in 1918.

It has now returned to our skies following successful re-introduction projects in Scotland, which started in 1975, and more recently when birds were released on the Isle of Wight in 2019. They are now frequently seen along the south coast and given the huge distances they fly (up to 100 miles a day) we may see more of them in our area.

Maggie photographed this Jersey Tiger moth in her garden. Once restricted to the far South West and the Channel Islands, it is now regularly seen in our area. The warming climate is likely to be the cause of this northward extension of its range. A quite large (wingspan up to 65mm) day and night flying moth.

This moth has an array of defence mechanisms: it will flash its bright orange (sometimes yellow) hind wings to warn off predators and, as indicated by its colours and patterning, it is foul tasting. It can even confuse bats' echolocation by emitting high-pitched clicking sounds.

Jersey Tiger Moth - Margaret Edwards

Cam Valley Wildlife Group Events Programme

September to December 2025

Please contact Judy on 07460-278311 with any general queries or Diana on 07581-451805

Venue for our talks: Radstock Working Mens' Club, on the first Wednesday of the month during the Winter at 7.30 pm for an 8 pm start. 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 into the club from the car park. Price £3 for Members and £5 for non-members.

Sunday 28th September – Fungi Walk around Haydon Batch and Grove Wood
Meet 2pm in the carpark behind the Que Club (BA3 3QR) to see what fungi we might find. Stout footwear needed as can be muddy. Please contact Diana if you plan attend on 07581-451805.

Wednesday 1st October - Talk: Butterflies and Moths - key indicators of insect population changes by Maurice Avent, Chair of Wiltshire branch of Butterfly Conservation, and owner of a meadow in Bath. At the Radstock Working Men's Club 7.30 pm for an 8 pm start.

Saturday 4th October – Goosard Batch Nature Reserve work morning
Please contact Jim Crouch 01761-410731 or by email: jim.crouch@macegroup.com to let him know who is coming so he can plan activities. Anyone is welcome to attend.

Saturday 11th October – Bat Walk
This walk is on a farm where four species of bat are known to roost. We will walk about the farm first and then down by the Wellow Brook. Further details to follow. Contact: Deborah at camvalleywildlife@gmail.com or on 01761-435563 for further details.

Saturday 1st November– Goosard Batch Nature Reserve work morning
Please contact Jim Crouch 01761-410731 or by email: jim.crouch@macegroup.com to let him know who is coming so he can plan activities. Anyone is welcome to attend.

Wednesday 5th November – An interactive talk: Birds of Prey by Alan Wells from Pitcombe Rock Falconry, near Bruton. He will be bringing some of his birds to the talk. At the Radstock Working Men's Club 7.30 pm for an 8 pm start. Venue details above.

Wednesday 3rd December – AGM and Diana's Photographic Year
At the Radstock Working Men's Club 7.30 pm for an 8 pm start. Venue details above. No charge for this event.

Saturday 6th December – Goosard Batch Nature Reserve work morning
Please contact Jim Crouch 01761-410731 or by email: jim.crouch@macegroup.com to let him know who is coming so he can plan activities. Anyone is welcome to attend.

Insect/invertebrate events
If you would like to attend insect/invertebrate events and/or surveys or if you wish to be notified of upcoming insect/invertebrate walks or surveys please send your details to Deborah via our website contact page or to camvalleywildlife@gmail.com.

Wildlife Photography
Please contact Diana on 07581-451805 or dianawalker4@gmail.com if you would like to accompany her on any of her days out photographing local wildlife.

The next Co-ordinating Team meetings are Tuesday 7th October, 11th November and the 2nd December

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Next Newsletter: The final copy date for the next Newsletter is **15th October 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.

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