

# LEDBURY NATURALISTS

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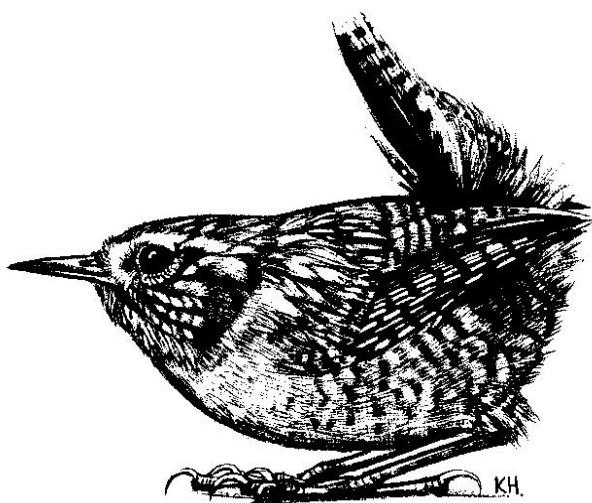
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## SPRING 2016 NEWSLETTER



# **LEDBURY NATURALISTS FIELD CLUB**

## **Wellington Gravel Pits**    2<sup>nd</sup> May 2015

Six members and one guest, led by John Davies, assembled on a cold wet afternoon to see what birds and spring flowers we could find around the gravel pits that form the most extensive area of water in the county.

Our first surprise was the large number of Southern Marsh Orchid plants which were visible from the foot path by the visitor's car park, they will make a tremendous show in a couple of week's time. In this area we noted the song of Chiff Chaff, Blackcap and Willow Warbler.

The view from the hide was somewhat disappointing in that we could only see a few Mute Swans, Mallard, Tufted Duck and Cormorants. Swallows and House Martins were flying far away down the lake. On leaving the hide we saw a Mallard with ducklings and both Coot and Moorhen were calling in the reeds.



Along the footpath we heard Common Whitethroat, Green Wood Pecker, Skylark and Reed Warbler. On a heap of gravel two Wagtails were spotted. One was a Pied Wagtail, the other, a very striking bird through binoculars, was thought to be a Yellow Wagtail, the doubt being caused by a photograph of the bird taken by one of our members showing head characteristics which did not match those in the book. We await the judgment of the experts on this issue.

As we approached the Fisherman's Pool we saw a number of Swifts, this was the first sighting of these birds for most of us this year! Also in this area we noted the song of Garden Warbler, Greenfinch, Wren, Robin, Dunnock, Blue and Great Tit.

All together we noted 28 bird species and listed 24 plants of interest. The afternoon being cold and windy we did not see any butterflies or other insects.

**Brian Willder**

## **Leckhampton Hill. 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2015.**

Sixteen members met on a beautiful Monday afternoon to walk Leckhampton Hill guided by Paul Hackham who is the Warden.

Leckhampton Hill is part of a 158 acre SSSI with biological and geological features. It is listed in the Cotswold District Local Plan as a Key Wildlife Site.

Paul Hackman explained the management and told us that the site, which has been undergrazed for many years, is now grazed by Dexter Cattle all the year round and is slowly improving

Plants found included: Yellow Rattle, Bladder Campion, Rock Rose, Salad Burnett, Horseshoe Vetch, Milkwort, Wood Sage, Yellow-wort, Fairy Flax, Wild Thyme, Catsear, Hop Trefoil, Black Medic, Pyramidal Orchid, Ladies Bedstraw, Quaking Grass, Mouse-eared Hawkweed, Common Spotted Orchid, Wild Strawberry, Musk Orchid, the remains of a Fly Orchid, Large White Helleborine, White Helleborine, Twayblade, Greater Knapweed, Goatsbeard, Pignut, Ox-eye Daisy and Kidney Vetch.



Birds; Blackbird, Blackcap, Wren, Goldfinch, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Chaffinch, Wood Pigeon, Buzzard, Bullfinch, Willow Warbler, Stock Dove, Kestrel, Tree Pipit, Magpie, Chiffchaff, Swift and Jay.

Butterflies. Small Heath, Small Tortoiseshell, Large Skipper, Speckled Wood and Ringlet.

Moths; Burnett Companion, Five-spot Burnett and Chimney Sweeper,

Other items of interest. Pill Woodlouse, Roman Snail and a Whitebeam tree growing Mistletoe.

**Brian Willder**

## **Arnside Knott. 30<sup>th</sup> June 2015.**

Arnside Knott is a large area of species rich limestone pasture, which contains a Butterfly Field and ancient woodland. It is managed by the National Trust.

We were fortunate in having two of the Trust's wardens to conduct us round the site. The sward is maintained by grazing with Highland, Aberdeen Angus and Irish Moiled Cattle. These are native breeds which are able to thrive, albeit slowly, on poor quality pasture with little management.

The afternoon was very sunny and hot and the Butterfly Field was not disappointing! There were myriads of Dark Green Fritillaries, Brimstone, Ringlet, Meadow Brown, Small Heath, Common Blue and Brown Argus butterflies. We were shown Blue Moor-Grass which is the food plant of the Brown Argus caterpillar and we also discovered Alder Buckthorn the food plant of the Brimstone butterfly.

The rich flora of the meadow provided lots of interest and we noted; Broad-leaved Helleborine, Wood Sorrel, Pignut, Rockrose, Quaking Grass, Hawkbit, Common Spotted Orchid, Ladies Bedstraw, Perforated St John's Wort and Slender St John's Wort. One of the wardens lifted a sheet of tin to show us Slow Worms.

The walk from the meadow up to Knott, a steep climb in the heat of the afternoon, was very rewarding with the views south towards Blackpool, the tower was just visible in the haze, and north to the Lake District.

The name Arnside Knott actually refers to the hill with a summit elevation of 159 meters (522 ft) and a Trig Point.

There was a change in the vegetation around the hill with woodland, bracken and heather. In the tightly grazed areas we found Fly Orchid, Woolly Thistle and Heath Speedwell.

Among the trees a family of Spotted Fly Catchers were noticed and Bullfinch, Chiffchaff, Nuthatch, Goldfinch, Great Tit, Green Woodpecker and Tawny Owl were either seen or heard.

On the return we detoured to a steep area where, after some searching, Wall butterflies were found.

**Brian Willder**

This was one of the sites visited by Ledbury Naturalists while on their summer trip to Arnside and Silverdale in Cumbria.

## **Betty Daws Wood.** 5<sup>th</sup> September 2015. Leader Brian Willder

Twelve members gathered at Betty Daws Wood on a lovely September afternoon for a walk to see what we could find. We had been tempted here by the report of one of our members having found a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker on a previous visit.

Betty Daws Wood is part of Dymock Forest and is managed by Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust. The woodland, which is about 130 acres in extent, is classified as semi-natural woodland and is famous for its daffodils on the spring.

The first important find was a significant amount of fungi which was showing. We quickly identified Puffballs, Sulphur Tuft and Penny Bun and after discussion and consulting a ‘quick field guide’ we thought we had Purple Deceiver, an Amanita and a Boletus. Our level of expertise was not good enough to be more precise although pictures were taken and positive identification will be forthcoming!

We noticed the profusion of Small-leaved Lime and Wild Service together with Sessile Oak, which predominate in this the woodland. Along the southern boundary we noted the large wood-bank once part of the ancient landscape.

There are not many flowering plants to record at this time of the year but we found Common Cow-wheat, Betony, Scabious and Herb Robert.

Birds were scarce today, the Nuthatch seemed to dominate the sound scape, but once we had got far enough from the noise of the motorway, we could hear Robin, Blue Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Buzzard. Alas, and in spite of careful listening, no sign of the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was found.



Having completed the circular tour of the wood some of us walked down the central path, still in hope of finding the elusive woodpecker but to no avail, we did however note a few more plants which had ceased to flower. These were Enchanters Nightshade, Herb Bennet, Figwort, St John’s Wort and Pendulous Sedge. We also found a small rose which we thought might be Sweetbriar, this is usually found on lime rich soil but close by we found Spurge-laurel, another plant found on lime rich soil.

**Brian Willder**

## Fungus Foray Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> October.

Cherry Greenway led a joint meeting with the Herefordshire Fungus Survey Group's National Fungus Day event at Queenswood Arboretum, Dinmore Hill, nr. Leominster. OS 202/ 506 514. Unfortunately the ground was very dry and so her list of fungi identified is not as long as usual.

*Amanita citrina* - false deathcap  
*Amanita muscaria* - fly agaric  
*Armillaria mellea* - honey fungus  
*Boletus badius* - bay bolete  
*Clavulina cinerea* - grey coral  
*Clitocybe gibba* - common funnel  
*Clitocybe metachroa*  
*Clitocybe nebularis* - clouded funnel  
*Hypholoma fasciculare* - sulphur tuft  
*Laccaria amethystina* - amethyst deceiver  
*Laccaria laccata* - the deceiver  
*Lepiota cristata* - stinking dapperling  
*Lepiota felina*  
*Lepista flaccida* - tawny funnel  
*Lycoperdon perlatum* - common puffball  
*Mycena galericulata* - common bonnet  
*Mycena pura* - lilac bonnet  
*Russula cyanoxantha* - charcoal burner  
*Russula ochroleuca* - ochre brittlegill  
*Scleroderma verrucosum* - scaly earthball  
*Stereum hirsutum* - hairy curtain crust  
*Trametes versicolor* - turkeytail  
*Xerocomus subtomentosus* - suede bolete



## A Big Thank You

I thought I would use up this small space just to say thank you to all our committee & club officers for the way they use their knowledge, contacts & efforts to put together a stimulating & entertaining program for the year.

Alan Pike, in particular, deserves a special mention for all his hard work and for the way he has dragged us kicking & screaming into the electronic age.

# Field Survey 2016

## Homme House Estate

This year the club was invited by the Finnigan family to survey the Homme House Estate at Much Marcle. It has been the current family home for 15 years and whilst the main business is running a successful wedding venue in the large house and adjoining garden, the owners are very sympathetic to wildlife in the rest of the estate. They were keen for us to record what we could to give a picture of its wildlife potential and to add to the knowledge gained from previous more specialist surveys on the main parkland and ponds.

### **Background**

The estate is situated at SO 655 319 to the east of the Woolhope Dome, south of Marcle church and adjoining the A449 Ledbury to Ross road. The main entrance is along a drive through the parkland from Marcle church. This crosses the only public footpath, part of the Three Choirs Way, at its northern end. There is another private access by a small lodge off the main road towards Ross. There are magnificent views toward the Malvern Hills across the Leadon valley as the land slopes SE. This is an historic site, the estate being created in the fourteenth century and the original house built around 1500 on the top of a Silurian limestone ridge. It has seen many additions and refurbishments over the centuries but is now a Grade 2 listed building with extensive gardens. The rest of the estate consists of about 100 acres of parkland mainly on the deep red sandstone soils and 80 acres of woodland primarily on the thinner soils of the limestone ridge. The historic parkland was surveyed by the Herefordshire Wildlife Trust in 2011 as part of their Parkland Survey for the county. This recorded over 250 ancient, veteran and noble trees which form the main part of the site. It is managed by grazing throughout the summer and taking a crop of hay. There are also two large ponds which were surveyed in 2013 as a guide to future management. Beyond the parkland and ponds to the south is another hay meadow and a fringe of woodland, some of which has ancient origins. Part of the SE border is flooded in winter forming a lake. There is also a new scrape full of water used as a horse jump for equestrian events in the summer.

### **Conducting the Survey**

Volunteers from Ledbury Naturalists' Field Club paid eight visits to the site between March and October in 2015 to carry out the survey. Dormouse tubes were set up in the woodland by volunteers in May and some members ran a moth trap during an equestrian event in August. Moira Jenkins conducted a geological survey especially along the stream bed where there were some rock exposures.

As the main parkland and the ponds had been surveyed recently, the club survey concentrated on the less dramatic part of the estate towards the south beyond the park. This included the meadow managed for hay with the low lying flooded section and horse jump and the parcel of woodland towards the southern edge continuing round the woodland fringe up to the ridge to the west and behind the house. On each date members spent about 3 hours in the afternoon walking around this area recording all flowering plants, grasses, trees, fungi, ferns, birds, insects, and other invertebrates found along the way.

Hilary Ward and Peter Garner supervised the botany, Cherry Greenway identified the fungi, Richard and Phyl King surveyed the scrape and also helped with the invertebrates as did David Taft and Eden Tanner. Michael Bradley and Robin Hemming ran the moth trap and Kate Wollen and Ann Bowker organised the dormice survey. John Davies and many others identified the birds. The club is fortunate to have the support of these experts in their fields,

and great trouble was taken to verify each record to ensure the reliability of the survey as far as possible. However the records are doubtless an underestimate of the species present due to the limited time spent and in some cases due to lack of expertise available. All species found were recorded. Complete illustrated details of the survey can be found in the full report on the web site. (ledburynaturalists.co.uk)

In summary the following numbers of species were noted.

<b>Flowers</b>	<b>Grasses Sedges Rushes</b>	<b>Trees</b>	<b>Fungi and Ferns</b>	<b>Birds</b>	<b>Mammals and other Vertebrates</b>	<b>Insects and Inv. vertebrates</b>
<b>120</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>173</b>

The 120 species of herbaceous plants represented a range of both woodland and meadow species. Whilst there was nothing particularly rare there was a good spread across many families. The woodland at the far end of the estate yielded a typical range such as Bugle, Primrose, Bluebell, Red Campion, Ramsons, Wood Anemone, Yellow Archangel and Foxglove and the rarer Moschatel. There were many Wild Daffodils in March. The meadow beyond the parkland was ablaze with the yellow of Buttercups in June and also had a good range of plants including Cuckoo flower, Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil, both Meadow and Bulbous Buttercup, Red and White Clover and Yellow Rattle. Along the path edges and hedgerows many other species were found such as Greater Celandine, Dame's Violet, Cut-leaved Crane's-bill, Autumn Hawkbit, Oxeye Daisy, Plantains, Sow-thistles, Cow Parsley and Hedge Parsley, Speedwells, Forget-me-nots, Vetches and Violets. A patch of Small Teasel was growing along the path by the big ponds in danger from some strimming. The pond in the horse jump had some large patches of Branched Bur-reed and Gypsywort at its edge and Stonewort floating on the water. The flooded area had a large stand of Yellow Iris and the less desirable Himalayan Balsam was found by the larger ponds and stream.

A fair range of grasses was found, mainly typical of pasture land. The Yorkshire Fog was dominant in the hay meadow in June and there was also Sweet Vernal Grass, Crested Dog's-tail and Meadow Foxtail, though the more delicate varieties such as Quaking grass were not found. There were 3 varieties of Rush by the scrape and 3 sorts of Sedge in the damper parts of the wood.

A total of 9 Fern species were noted including Rusty-back, Scaly Male-fern and Broad Buckler. These were mainly in the woodland and round the back of the house in the old walls and embankment.

As the parkland trees had been surveyed extensively in the County Parkland survey project, the large specimen trees and non-native specimens were ignored and only the ones in the wilder part of the estate noted. The main strip of woodland was dominated by Oak and Ash with some Sycamore and Horse Chestnut. Parts had been planted with Douglas Fir. There was an interesting group of Small-leaved Limes in a circle which may be very old and have spread vegetatively from a common origin, indicating this strip of woodland has ancient ancestry. There were also both Wych and English Elms, Maples, Willow, Poplar, Cherry Laurel, Wild Cherry and Snowberry. There was a very old unusual spiny Apple tree by the path along the top ride. The hedgerows contained Guelder Rose, Elder, Rowan, Blackthorn, Hazel and Spindle with Mistletoe in places.

Later in the year a good range of fungi were found, mainly from the wooded parts of the estate.

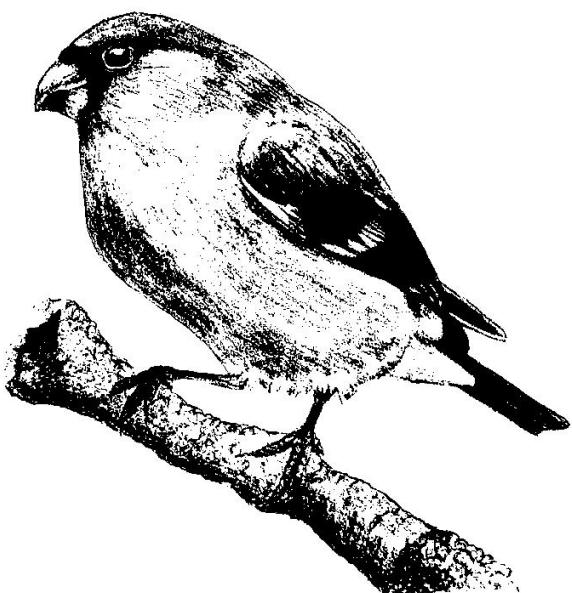
Out of the 64 species identified many were associated with rotting wood such as Honey Fungus and Sulphur Tuft. There was a range of edible ones such as Chicken of the Woods, Oyster Mushroom and Shaggy Parasol as well as Glistening, Shaggy and Magpie Inkcaps. Bracket fungi, a few Rusts, Cup fungi and Puffballs were also represented but only 2 Waxcaps, these being more frequently found in ancient grazed meadows.

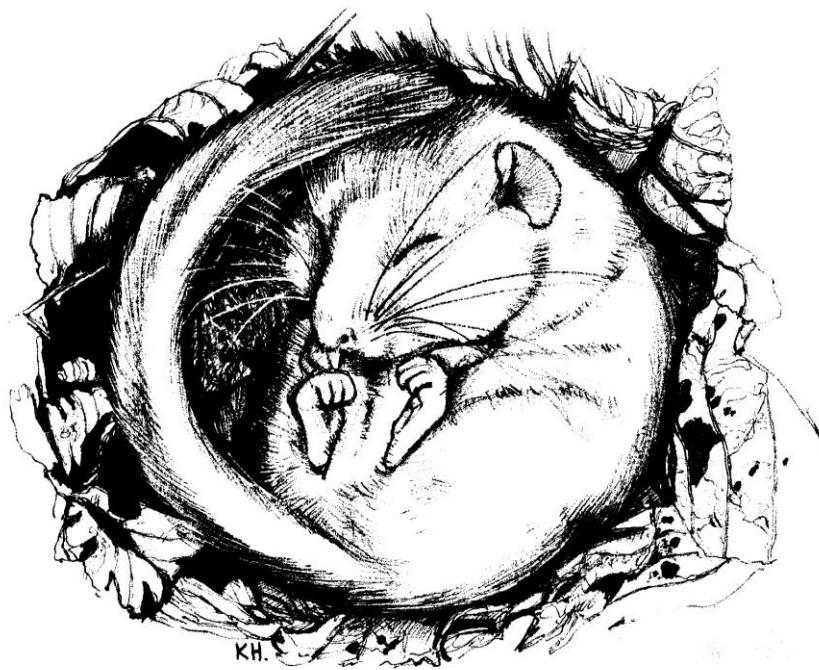
There was a good selection of bird life, 50 species being identified in the short time they were observed. These included many woodland birds such as Bullfinch, Nuthatch, Chaffinch and Goldcrest as well as 4 species of Tits. Both Green and Greater Spotted Woodpeckers were seen and the site has had Lesser Spotted nesting previously but was not seen by the team this year. A Cuckoo was heard calling and a Sparrowhawk and several Buzzards flew overhead. Both Pied and Grey Wagtails were observed and in the wet areas, Heron, Teal, Mallard, Gadwall, Canada Geese and Moorhen were seen.

There was a fleeting sighting of a Kingfisher along the stream, and 17 Mandarin Duck paid a visit to the flooded area in the spring. Spotted Flycatchers were seen round the house and a Barn Owl peeped out of its nest in a hollow in an old Oak tree in the meadow.

A great many invertebrates, mainly moths, were listed reflecting the expertise available and some extra overnight moth trapping. Of the 98 species of Lepidoptera identified many were micro moths, some being identified by their leaf mines. There was also a range of day flying butterflies, particularly in July when the hay meadow and hedgerow had clouds of Meadow Browns as well as some Gatekeepers, Ringlets and Large Whites. Small Copper, Large Skipper, Speckled Wood, Peacock, Holly Blue and Comma butterflies were also seen during the year. There was a selection of flies and midges and beetles including the Cream-spot, 7-spot and Harlequin Ladybirds. Many wasps and mites were identified from the galls they induce on a variety of plants in leaves, stems and flowers buds. Three varieties of Bumble bee were seen and Honey bees as well as a large Hornets' nest in one of the parkland trees. The horse jump scrape attracted more insects in July including the less common Emerald Damselfly and Blacktailed Skimmer. The pond was also host to the Common Frog with much frog spawn in March.

A small survey was arranged to see if there were any dormice on the estate. On 31<sup>st</sup> May 50 dormouse tubes were put up. Twenty five were in the fairly newly coppiced area through the wood on the steep escarpment behind the house down towards the main road and 25 were put in the narrow strip of wood that followed the edge of the property. In autumn 7 nests were found in tubes around SO 649 316 which is near the main road in the newly coppiced area and one nest with a dormouse in it, was found at SO 6494 3153, and one nest in the narrow strip at SO 6559 3135.





Of the other mammals noted, signs of Badgers were seen by the stream and in the woods and there was evidence of Grey Squirrel, Rabbit, Mole and Stoat. Deer slots were seen but not identified.

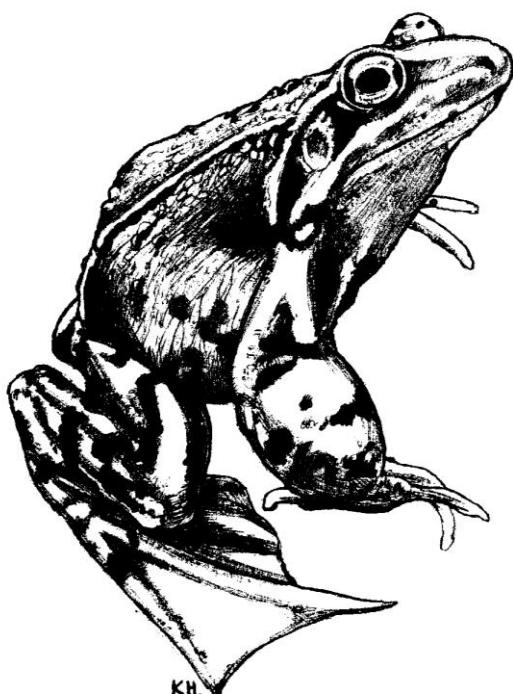
### **Conclusion**

The Homme estate had a good range of habitats as well as its magnificent parkland and veteran trees. This allowed a great variety of plants and animals to thrive there. Though no great rarities were uncovered in this survey there was a pleasing variety of species across many taxa.

The discovery of dormice was good news and showed the continuity of the woodland linked all round by strips of hedgerow and copses which thus make a highway for these creatures as well as other wildlife. The several areas of water also provide another habitat. With continued sympathetic management this beautiful area of Herefordshire will remain a haven for wildlife.

We would like to thank the Finnigan family for allowing us to survey their land and the Forestry Commission for printing the reports. Many thanks are also due to the loyal band of members who turned up every month to record the wildlife. They were Ann Bowker, Bradley, Felicity Burge, Anne Crane, Heather Davies, John Davies, Richard Davies, Caroline and David Evans, Peter Garner, Susanna Grunsell, Andrew and Meg Keeble, Phyl & Richard King, Garth Lowe, Janet Parry, Alan Pike, David Taft, Eden and Wendy Tanner, Hilary Ward, Brian Willder, Kate Woollen and Jean Wynne-Jones.

**Janet Parry**



## Field Survey 2016 - Janet Parry

This year we have been asked by the Woolhope Parish Council to help survey Broadmoor Common which is a Local Nature Reserve. Currently the Herefordshire County Council is trying to divest itself of some of its nature reserves and the parish is negotiating to take it on. Last year there was no management plan in place so there was some confusion from local farmers about a mowing regime. Sally Webster, one of our members and a local resident, has been instrumental in trying to save the area from bad management and to this end, suggested that a comprehensive club survey would be very helpful. There have been other historic surveys of the site but a new one this year would feed into a management plan for the future when the local council takes it over. Hilary Ward and Sally Webster are kindly doing a desk survey of past records and trying to pinpoint special species to look for. The Common has a whole mosaic of different habitats from woodland to meadow and scrub with some very wet areas and ponds, so there is something for everyone. It sounds as though the club can make a valuable contribution.

As Wednesdays seem to be the most popular day, and no-one voted for change, the dates for our surveys will be

**March 23, April 20, May 18, June 15, July 20, August 17, September 14, October 19.**

Put them in your diaries now! I will continue to send out reminders a few days before each date.

We will meet at **2 pm** as this seems to suit most people and will treat the first meeting in March as a general walk round to see the scope of the area and decide how to tackle it. We may try to be a bit more focused this year and build on past data. As the area is open access, not private land, recorders can come up anytime that suits them as well, as long as I get the data.

The meeting point will be the small Car Park at SO 605 363 (Explorer sheet 189). This is at the east end of the common as you come up the hill from Woolhope village. (Turn right just past The Crown pub)

We had a really good team last year and I hope most can contribute again this time though we still need spider and lichen experts. We are keen to have new recruits and you don't have to be an expert to join in. We need lots of pairs of eyes and ears to help. Anyone who enjoys finding things and learning more is welcome.

Anyone wanting to come, please let me know on 01531 640640 or email [janet@jobeys.plus.com](mailto:janet@jobeys.plus.com)



Last year's survey underway at Homme House.

## Coal tits

Over recent years we have not seen any coal tits at our garden feeders but we have been delighted this winter to have four or five at a time on our peanuts. Our garden is a wildlife oasis in the middle of a great swathe of intensive farmland and as the old orchards have been relentlessly removed the number and variety of visiting birds have reduced. Our immediate neighbour had about 100 yards of very overgrown & neglected hedge which he eventually decided to take in hand. It was really cut back and laid properly. While I thought it was a really good idea as our telephone line passes along this hedge-line, there was a very noticeable drop in birds visiting the garden.

Coal tits are supposed to like conifer woodland but there isn't a conifer tree for miles. They are smaller than the other garden tits and always lose out to their bigger cousins. To avoid this competition they have developed a strategy of cashing food in a quieter spot and returning to eat it at leisure. They will dart in to the feeder and only stay just long enough to grab a nut and fly off. These very short visits make them that much more difficult to photograph than the other tits. Having cashed several nuts they then return and eat them well away from the bustle of the feeders.

They rarely use the normal nest boxes. As another strategy to avoid competition they tend to nest in the same type of holes as other tits but much lower down, usually not more than three feet off the ground. They will even nest in holes in the ground made by other animals such as mice. They will use tit-sized nest boxes if they are put close to the ground but they have to be put in quiet concealed places to avoid ground predators.

**Eden Tanner**



## Ledbury Naturalists Garden Survey 2015

This year we had 13 forms returned with some good details of first and last nesting dates etc.

As usual Blackbirds, Robins, Blue Tits and Great Tits were the most common birds in all gardens. The once very common House Sparrow was only present in 8 gardens and of those only 6 gardens had them present all year.

Of the summer visitors first dates were – Chiffchaff on 24th March; Cuckoo seen on a hedge in Putley on 14th April then heard on 16th April (last heard 28<sup>th</sup> June); Swift in April (until August); Swallow in April (until September). Blackcaps were seen all winter in Colwall; Willow Warbler seen on 29 April; Fieldfare on 31st October; Redwing on 25<sup>th</sup> September.

Ravens were seen over half of the gardens and Red Kite flew over 3 gardens mainly in the spring. A Goshawk was seen over a Ledbury garden. Other more unusual sightings include a Grey Wagtail, a pair of Mandarin ducks, Siskins and Lesser redpolls in January and February.

Tree sparrows were recorded from 2 Ledbury gardens which is a very exciting record and one that we need to follow-up (See article later in the newsletter)



Badgers were seen in 3 gardens and a latrine in one. As last year one garden that recorded badgers also reported a hedgehog skin – is the badger responsible or just a co-incidence? Hedgehogs were seen in 4 other gardens.

Muntjac were seen in 2 gardens, less than last year, but I am sure just as common as Muntjac footprints can be seen in all the woods around Ledbury; fox in 1 ; stoat in 1 and a polecat was recorded visiting a rabbit hole.

Interestingly, and most likely due to under recording, Brown Rat was only reported from 6 gardens and squirrels from only 4 ( although 34 were caught in one garden)

Soprano Pipistrelle bats were still flying in early December in Putley.

Frogspawn was seen on 23th Feb with Froglets on 17th July. Grass snakes, Toads and Great-crested Newts were seen in 2 gardens and Slow-worms in 4.

Brimstone and Orange Tip butterflies were seen at the beginning of April. Painted Ladies were seen in 7 gardens; Silver-washed Fritillary in 3.

The more unusual butterflies were Marbled Whites and White-letter Hairstreak in 1 Colwall garden. Hummingbird Hawk moth was seen in 2 gardens. Hoverflies were recorded feeding on Ivy flowers in early autumn, highlighting the importance of Ivy as an important late summer/autumn nectar source.

**Kate Wollen**

## Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*)

As reported above through the Club Garden Survey, this year we have had 2 reports of Tree Sparrows in Ledbury gardens. This small sparrow is rarely seen in Herefordshire now, although a new site has been confirmed near Newent and one was seen in a Lower Eggleton garden one winter 4 years ago.

As a Club we need to confirm these records and get an idea of numbers and if these birds are resident in Ledbury or just visiting.

So please do keep your eyes open and if you think you see one, try to get a photo and send the details to the club. Don't worry if you are not sure if it is a Tree sparrow or a House Sparrow, a photo will confirm this or if you cannot take a photo just send details as soon as possible to the Club and we will follow it up.

The key identification points are the black cheek spot and chestnut brown head.

The following has been taken from the RSPB website-



Smaller than a house sparrow and more active, with its tail almost permanently cocked. It has a **chestnut brown head** and nape (rather than the grey head of a House sparrow), and white cheeks and collar with a contrasting **black cheek spot**. They are shyer than house sparrows in the UK and are not associated with people, although in continental Europe they often nest in buildings just like house sparrows. In the UK they tend to nest in tree holes etc.

The UK tree sparrow population has suffered a severe decline, estimated at 93 per cent between 1970 and 2008. There are now an estimated 200,000 breeding territories. However, recent Breeding Bird Survey data is encouraging, suggesting that numbers may have started to increase, albeit from a very low point.

The tree sparrow is scarcer in the uplands and the far north and west of the UK. The main populations are now found across the Midlands, southern and eastern England. It is almost absent from the South West, Wales and the North West. Look for them all year round in hedgerows and woodland edges.

**Kate Wollen**

## Hedgehog.

Returning home one day in early September, I noticed something different about the flowerbed next to the front door - there was a hedgehog rolled up into a ball at one end. Only a couple of days previously Focus had an article 'The last hedgehog in Herefordshire?' Mentioning that the Herefordshire Wildlife Trust be advised of any sightings, so I phoned them to be told that it was early to see a hedgehog and it might be ill, go back to see if it was in the same place and if so to telephone Hedgehog Rescue. Went back, it had gone. End of story I thought!

Two days later it had returned to exactly the same place and the next week it followed us into the garage and settled down exactly underneath our car where it could not be persuaded out with either end of a walking stick.

We had theatre tickets and needed to drive out, so I lay on the ground and was able to convince my wife that if she backed out the car she would be able to drive over the recumbent form without touching it, which she did. Car outside garage, hedgehog rolled up into a ball, so I picked it up and replaced into the flowerbed. Evidently no worse for its experience, as a neighbour had seen crossing the lawn days later and we ourselves saw it scuttling across the road at 10.30 pm.

Alan Starkey

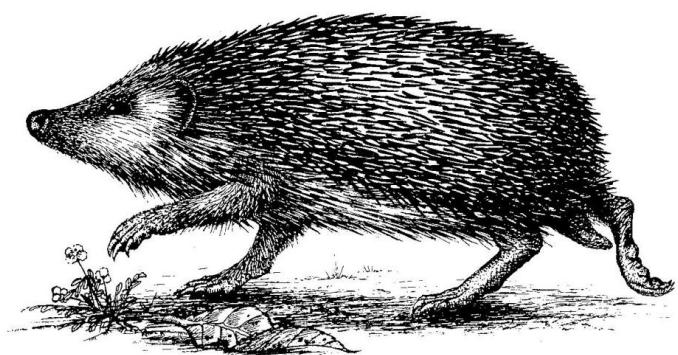
## Advance Notice

Ledbury Naturalists' Chairman, Brian Willder will celebrate his 80th birthday in May. The Club are organising a party in his honour on Friday 20th May to which you are invited. We have been very kindly offered Trehumfrey Farm, near Llangarron as a venue. Many thanks must go to David Jo and Rich Ball for the invitation. Trehumfrey Farm is on the OS map 189, 527 225. Post code: [HR9 6NX](mailto:HR9 6NX).

We aim to gather from 6 pm and will have a short walk around the farm before eating.

We ask you to bring some food and drinks to share, and we also ask you to bring picnic tables and chairs (bring spares if possible), cutlery, plates, glasses etc. We will car share where possible and also offer lifts to those without cars. In the event of rain we will use a barn on the farm. Dress warmly.

If you plan to attend it would be an advantage to the organisers to know numbers, so please confirm attendance either by email to [admin@ledburynaturalists.co.uk](mailto:admin@ledburynaturalists.co.uk) or call Alan Pike tel. 01531 632 585.



# **Ochre Hill 2015**

## JANUARY

Very mild start, up to 17C, and many winter flowering shrubs in full bloom, scenting the garden beautifully. Daffodils 6 inches up and snowdrops out before the middle of the month. I have sat outside enjoying the activity and birdsong, and perfume. We had two male bullfinches, a rare sight these days, and a few sparrows, also rare in my garden. We have the usual rabbits and squirrels, and our camera trap shows regular visits from foxes, at least one, badgers, and a muntjac. A squirrel went down the largest rabbit hole (one of many!) and was chased out by a rabbit. We see many pictures of several rabbits at a time, so there must be quite a large warren under our orchard. We have seen a fox, a badger, and cats with their heads down the hole, and even the muntjac has a look. There was a fall of snow mid-month, but it did not last, blown away by rain and gales, but it remained colder. We had a pied wagtail on the roof, briefly, but no winter visitors yet, and less pheasants than usual. I did see a field full of meadow pipits on the way to Dymock one day. For the RSPB Garden Birdwatch I was lucky enough to record a small mixed flock of goldfinches and crossbills in an ash tree, which were hard to count, but I saw at least a dozen crossbills. The flock stayed most of the day and were very active. I also saw two nuthatches, a wren, two mistle thrushes, and a siskin. Many of the usual visitors were also in the garden – blackbirds, robins, dunnocks, great spotted woodpecker, redwings, long tailed, great and blue tits, the pied wagtail, one song thrush. At one point all were alarmed by a sparrowhawk but returned again.

## FEBRUARY

A cold month, with some snow and sleet. Many birds feeding but no winter visitors. Some interest was being shown in our camera nest box, now re-sited to keep rats out. On 11<sup>th</sup> Feb we saw our first bat, as it had been a lovely day with insects flying about. Dunnocks and sparrows looking at one hedge near the house where dunnocks always nest.

The highlight of the month was on the 12<sup>th</sup>, a dull grey day, about 5C, when a red kite circled overhead, all around the garden and near to the house, quite low. It moved further away for a while, then returned, very low and lovely colours clear to see when so close. Eventually it rose and flew towards Colwall. Later in the month a heron landed on the lawn. Several blue tits and great tits have looked at our camera nest box and a sparrowhawk visits daily. Our first frogspawn appeared on the 25<sup>th</sup>, followed almost daily by several more clumps, all in the smallest of three ponds, so it was a bit overcrowded. I had to cover it with bubble wrap at threat of frost! Some frogs appeared in the larger pond, but no frogspawn.

## MARCH

The largest pond has no frogs, but a pair of ducks have been visiting daily after dark for a swim, before flying down to a larger pond between us and Frith Wood, where they seem to stay, with a few other ducks and coots, better protected from foxes. Three hen pheasants went past, one carrying a dead mouse in its beak. It went into a flowerbed to hide with it, but was frightened off by a male pheasant. On 20<sup>th</sup> we watched the almost total eclipse of the sun,

when it went very cold, and eerie. The birds went very quiet for about an hour and as it passed they became very noisy again. The mallards continued their brief daily visits and many birds feeding, including coal tits, not seen for a while. Also visiting regularly were a pair of rock doves. The frogspawn was hatching before the end of March. In a nearby lane a young badger was walking down the road, about half adult size and a barn owl flew over at the same time – a special moment.

## APRIL

Mainly warm and sunny, with a few cooler days. Sadly there has been no further interest in our camera nest box. Maybe it is in the wrong place but I will leave it another year to find out. There are many other nests around the garden but blue tits seem to be later this year. We had two slow worms in our drive, at Easter. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, we shared a magical hour with a hedgehog. I was sitting on the ground, weeding, near the large pond, when the hedgehog came through the plants to have a drink, on the opposite side, so I watched. We had a cup of tea and sat watching. We took photos while it wandered about amongst the plants, unconcerned by us. Eventually it came out onto the grass and walked past us, closely, stopping to eat grass, or poke its nose down a hole, squeaking occasionally and walking towards us at times. We followed it and lay on the grass to take more photos as it came up to us and eventually it went through the hedge. I suspect it was not a very good sign to see a hedgehog during the day like this, but it was a great pleasure for us. On the way to Bosbury we saw a stoat crossing the road, the closest to us I have seen one. We have five jays in the garden, being very noisy around the feeders, and the stock doves come daily. We occasionally have red legged partridges wandering through also, which are comical to watch!

## MAY

Mainly cool, windy and wet, after a dry April. Wrens and great tits are nesting in the wall of our cider house but don't seem to mind us walking past often. I had to rescue a goldfinch which had flown into our kitchen window. It flew away after a while. We also seem to have a chiff chaff nesting somewhere under the roof edges as I have seen one feeding near there and have heard cheeping noises. Tadpoles developing well and will soon be gone, but I have seen no toads. There are many newts of all types in all ponds, so very hazardous for them. A few damselflies are about and I have heard cockchafers flying over me at night. There are a lot of rats about and people are complaining about them. I have seen a few. Something was digging holes nightly in a container I had planted up, so I moved my camera trap to see what it was and saw a mouse in the night burrowing in to the pot! They have also nibbled through several plant stems. We have seen a red kite again and swallows have been in the garage again, but seem to be nesting elsewhere. Many house martins about also. A cuckoo has been near, but does not stay for long, and came late to the village. It seems to prefer Coddington. I have seen very few butterflies, although I have seen a few Brimstone and orange tip, one small tortoiseshell, and more holly blue than usual.

## JUNE

A cool month, about 12-14C throughout and cold at night, with a persistent NW wind. This has been bad for birds trying to feed young and has damaged a lot of trees and plants. Nothing

is growing as it should be. Heavy rain also at times. The strong drying winds seem to have sucked all moisture out of trees and they have been shedding leaves, which are dead and crumbling. I have not seen any young birds in the garden and suspect a lot of nests have failed. There are rats climbing in the hedges, which have probably had a few nests. A barn owl flew over one evening. I saw the first young birds later in the month, blue tits on feeders and a family of long tailed tits flew past the house. Goldfinches were the next I saw, in the trees. A red kite visited again, circling over us and the same day I saw a pygmy shrew, unfortunately dead, on a path. I have not seen any shrews for a few years now. We have left large areas of grass to grow this month and have again been rewarded by having orchids appearing. Eventually we had four in different places.

## JULY

Young birds began to appear, such as chaffinches and dunnocks, but these seem to be a second attempt and so far none of the early robin nests have produced young. I have seen no young blackbirds at all, in spite of having many in the garden, who usually feed their young on our cherries, now long gone. Swallows and house martins are in smaller numbers than usual and at first I saw only one swift, but I have seen seven now. Butterflies are about, but I only see one of each kind at a time. We have white tailed bumble bees nesting in the roof above our back door, which I watch with fascination. Our large pond has developed a leak, so is only half full, but four frogs seem to be quite happy in it. A heatwave at the end of July at 30C was a surprise, but thunderstorms followed!

## AUGUST

We had to replace our cider house roof which was breaking up. Under it were remains of dozens of wasps nests built over the years and three very active ones. No one was stung and the wasps settled back under the new covering eventually, without too much disturbance. The wrens and great tits had fledged successfully before we did this. Although August was still cool at the end of the month I saw more butterflies, including peacocks, meadow brown, red admiral, small tortoiseshell, comma, gatekeeper, painted lady, and large and small white. Generally it has been a very dry year and trees and plants are showing signs of stress. Vegetables and plants are not ripening or growing, a strange year in the garden. We had a grass snake in the pond, staying in there for about an hour before slinking away through the



undergrowth. It was about two and a half feet long. At night we almost had frost on several occasions. At one time when gardening I found a large hole by a plant with what looked like a large piece of wood in it, which I went to remove, only to find it was a very large toad, perhaps settling down for the winter? Perhaps he had heard about 'El Nino'? A day later I found a very small toad in the middle of the house, so I put it outside.

## SEPTEMBER

Weather slightly better, warm in the day, but cold at night, with more sun. We saw a garden warbler for the first time this year and two nuthatches, regularly. A treecreeper came once and there are always buzzards, sparrowhawks and kestrels nearby.

## OCTOBER

Sky quiet now, so I realise all the swallows and house martins must have gone. I had not seen a swift since early August. Leaves falling fast, due to dryness. Suddenly there are a lot of butterflies about and dragonflies, which I have not seen earlier, or crane flies, which have also appeared in large numbers, briefly. There are several large frogs hiding in flowerbeds now. Although there have been many wasps about they have not been eating any plums, unusually. There are also a lot of hornet nests around us and our neighbours. We had five flying around in the garage one day. On the 12<sup>th</sup> I heard a flock of house martins overhead, probably on their way south from somewhere else, but lovely to hear. Autumn colours were spectacular this year, everywhere. A barn owl flew over again late October, across the valley towards Frith Wood. Redwings arrived on the 14<sup>th</sup> in several flocks of about 30-40. A good crop of holly berries awaiting them. A small flock of starlings stopped in the ash tree, briefly. After the lovely colours, the leaves fell rapidly by the end of the month. We had five pigeon bodies in the garden over a few weeks, plucked completely, but left on the ground. We wondered if there was a goshawk about, or was it a buzzard? Green woodpeckers have been looking for ants nests in the grass, sometimes three at once.

## NOVEMBER

It has been mild for the time of year and I saw a blue tit going in a nest box on the house wall. I also found a dunnock's egg on the grass under a hedge. The yolk was coming out of a small hole. Redwings and fieldfares in the garden daily eating berries and apples. We have mended the leak in the pond, before we get any frogspawn in it – hopefully. Our camera shows many night visits from several each of foxes, badgers, and muntjac, which we were unaware of before! November continued mild and flowers from all seasons were out at once. The garden was unusually colourful and birds and insects unusually active. I picked some irises to take indoors. I saw a grey wagtail outside our back door, walking about close to the house, an unusual sight, as we are not very close to any running water.

## DECEMBER

My daughter had a hedgehog in her garden, in Newent, for three days, which she took to the Vale Wildlife Rescue in Tewkesbury. They told her it was an adult male, underweight and full

of mites, which they could treat, so hopefully it will survive, but very unusual so late in the year. December seems to have been warmer than June and most of the summer, even at night, so no wonder we have had a lot of storms. My Daphne bush is in full bloom as it was at the beginning of the year and smells wonderful! On the 16<sup>th</sup>, we had a newt walking around our kitchen, quite late at night and I found a larger one in a flower pot a few days later, very active in the little water in the pot. We have several wasps flying around in the house. We have had to resort to a cage to try to catch rabbits, which are doing a lot of damage now. It has not been a success, but on 28<sup>th</sup>, we checked it, as we do daily, and in it was a very angry polecat! It must have gone in at night, so we cautiously let it out and it shot straight down the largest rabbit hole, so that may solve our problem. I have not seen a polecat in the village before.

There are many changes taking place with the weather and the natural response to it, which is making gardening success very unpredictable, so next year will be interesting to see. Some of the wildlife seems to be adapting to changes.

**Carolyn Evans**



## **A Walk round Frith Wood with Creative Writing Students from Worcester University.**

Late last summer the club was approached by Dr. Anna Stenning for some wildlife help in taking her students for a field trip round Frith Wood in November. Janet Parry was able to help and the following are two accounts of the expedition.

### **Anna's version**

I was hopeful that the field trip to Frith Woods in Ledbury with my 15, second-year students on the Environmental Writing module – part of a degree programme in Creative and Professional Writing at the University of Worcester – would be inspirational. I have loved these woods since first visiting them when I first moved to this area five years ago, but I underestimated just how much of an embodied, reflective practise writing is; how 'environmental writing' makes little sense in the neutral environment of a classroom. We had been looking at classics of nature writing by writers as diverse as HD Thoreau, Gilbert White, Annie Dillard, Robert Macfarlane and Richard Mabey. Many of the students were new to this type of writing, and had little recent experience of nature study. The writers we were studying probably seemed a little removed from their experiences, and the types of nature they were familiar with.

As the poet and nature writer Edward Thomas wrote in his 1908 work *The South Country* 'Literature sends us to Nature principally for joy, joy of the senses, of the whole frame, of the contemplative mind, and of the soul'. I have experienced this personally, and I knew that my enthusiastic students, despite having some anxieties about trying new things, could gain from writing about direct experiences of nature.

So we met at Ledbury Station in late November 2015. It had been raining for several weeks by then, and I had been worried the paths would be entirely waterlogged, and that there wouldn't be enough to see at this austere time of year. But Janet had kindly walked with me a week earlier and we worked out a possible route through the woods – from the main ride to the top ridge and back via Bradlow Knoll (which I'd never visited before). Janet noted quite a few interesting species of fungi, some small-leaved lime I hadn't noticed before, and pointed out the dormice and bat boxes. On the first part of the route we saw that the bell flower remained in bloom unseasonably late, but the berries of the black bryony and spindle tree shone out brightly from the grey hedge. On the ridge, Janet told me the earthworks indicated the early human occupation of the woods, and we talked about how the limestone ridge had been formed. So I had an idea of what sorts of things I could encourage students to look out for.

I created a quiz for students to work on as they visited the woods – trying to get them to think scientifically and imaginatively about the woods. What they didn't learn on the route they were able to find out the following week from the booklet 'Exploring Frith Wood' to which Ledbury Naturalists had contributed. While I was disappointed at first how few species of trees the students as a whole could identify (perhaps unfairly, given the time of year), they were quickly able to spot many more with Janet's encouragement. With her experience as a teacher, Janet made a great impression on the group. We waded through a fair amount of mud, dodged overhanging branches and nettles, and wheezed up the slopes. But the students were the happiest I've seen them (not just out of relief) by the time we arrived for a photo opportunity at Bradlow Knoll. My friend, the poet Myfanwy Fox, was a very generous back-marker who

took some lovely photographs and helped the stragglers. Afterwards, she shared with me some of her poems of Herefordshire place names.

The following week we produced some 'deep maps' of our experiences of the woods, and these included some thoughtful commentaries on the human, geological and natural histories of Frith Woods, including the macabre associations of the 'Hangman's Hill' and Cut Throat Lane. Given that nature writing can be a rather intimidating and elitist genre, the students have engaged with its ideas with enthusiasm and originality, and their later assignments were informed by this field trip. The trip was also a good basis for moving from classic nature writing to other types of writing about place and environment, and research into setting, in all types of writing, from fiction to poetry.

### **Janet's version**

I was looking forward to meeting Anna's students on their field trip to Frith in November as it was a long time since I had interacted with late teenage students and had missed their cheery optimism. They piled off the train in a chattering mass clutching their phones and eager for new experiences. It soon became clear to me that they were out of their natural environment and rather anxious about this "wild place", however they were up for a new experience and gradually the bravado chat and throwaway remarks subsided and with a bit of help they started to use their eyes and engage with this strange place, and as confidence increased the questions came.

This showed me how very little they knew about the natural world which was quite upsetting to me as it is my normal environment. The seasons, the range of plants and animals that might live in the woods were all revelations to most of them. One stated that he didn't know there was more than one sort of tree but that may have been a "wind up." We soon found a mixture of different shaped leaves and most had heard of Oaks though no one seemed to know where trees came from. Seeds were a revelation but sadly I couldn't find a nice acorn. There were shrieks of delight when someone spotted a sheep in a field – at least they could recognise that! We saw the Malvern Hills in the distance and some liked the look of them and asked if it was possible to get on them and where the gate was to pay for entry! This reflects a wild life experience restricted to town parks. As we got to Bradlow they really enjoyed the view and were warming up to the whole experience. They enjoyed hearing about highway men and hangings so that may have been a little exaggerated!

In the gathering gloom we returned down Church lane and some were visibly relieved to find tarmac, street lights and shops again.

I enjoyed their cheery and optimistic company and thank Anna for organising the trip so efficiently and for having the initiative to think about it in the first place. It was a privilege to be allowed a glimpse into their world and I do hope they will remember the small glimpse they had into mine.



**Janet Parry**

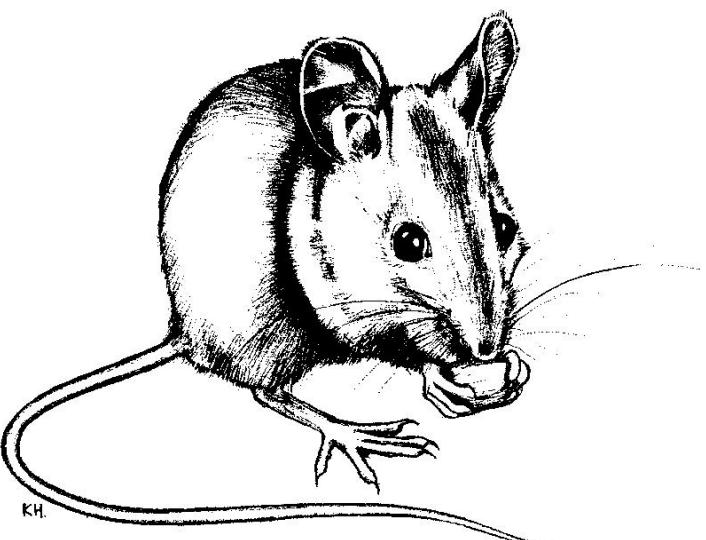
## Anyone want a little job?

The club and its activities do not seem to be widely known about in the town and we would like to raise its profile and attract more members.

The committee has many suggestions but would love someone to take over organising things such as keeping the local press informed of our events and what goes on at meetings in whatever medium is appropriate.

There is no age limit or gender bias but a love of communicating with people would be useful.

If anyone thinks they could help please email [admin@ledburynaturalists.co.uk](mailto:admin@ledburynaturalists.co.uk) or look at the website. We would really value your help.

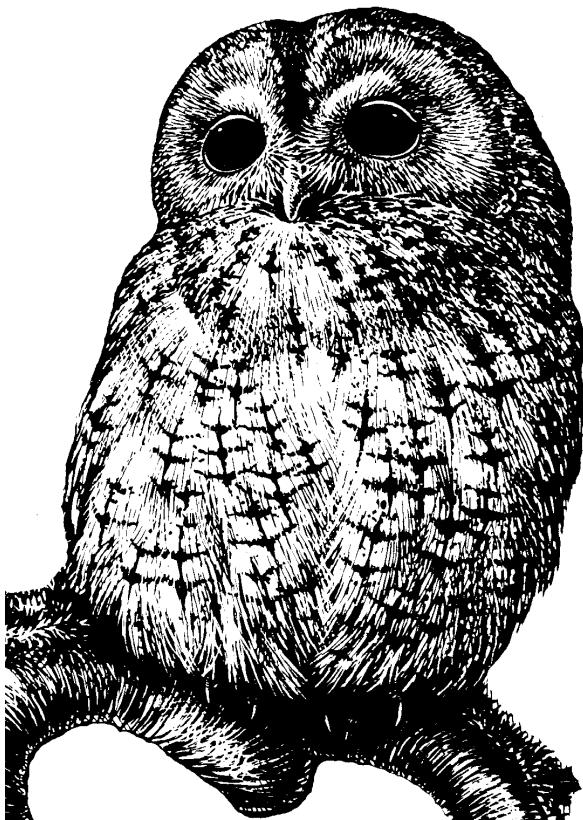


## Tawny Owl

The largest bird hitherto seen in our garden at the edge of the Deer Park estate had been a wood pigeon but on 23rd October we had an unexpected visitor, for sitting on our fence was a tawny owl. I first noticed it at about midday and called into my neighbour as the bird was facing into their kitchen window from a distance of about 6 feet. Looked at it for a while, the birds eyes were shut so I returned home.

There was no movement so at 1pm I phoned Eden for advice keeping my eye on the bird. As I was talking to him, the owl's head turned round and I could feel the two eyes staring at me. It ruffled its feathers and glided away.

My garden survey form will never look more impressive!



Alan Starkey

## **Editor's notes**

Another newsletter is hot off the presses and thanks, on behalf of the club, to all those who have contributed and made it possible. There are the usual names who contribute regularly but we still need more of the small but interesting snippets like Alan Starkey's Hedgehog & Tawny Owl notes. I am sure many members have such small items which could help fill out our newsletter.

Kirsten Hunter, a local wildlife artist and new club member, has given me some drawings to include in this newsletter. Look out for the KH monogram under her drawings. We have copied them as carefully as possible but no matter how hard we try our reproduction and printing process cannot reproduce the stunning detail of the originals.

For the first time, a number of members have opted to receive their newsletter by e-mail. This helps keep down printing and postage costs, and it also introduces the possibility to include colour drawings and photographs. Unfortunately this creates major editorial problems as most photographs cannot be reproduced by our simplistic black & white printing process. Any colour drawings or photographs have to be replaced by similar B & W line drawings in a separate edit. This is all very time consuming and so not as suitable as it may sound at first. None the less we have made a start and the electronic version does contain some colour drawings & photographs.

**Eden Tanner**



## Spreading Bellflower, (*Campanula patula*), Frith Wood Ledbury

Spreading bellflower is a beautiful blue flower, with well-spaced stems and large delicate blue star-like flowers at their tips. It can often be overlooked unless the flowers are showing, as the stems are so dainty they often flop into surrounding vegetation. Unlike many bellflowers, the petals spread widely, hence the name. A biennial, it flowers from July to November.

Like so many of our British wild plants the Spreading Bellflower has declined hugely and now sadly is classified as Endangered, and therefore considered to be facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild.

Key threats are changes in woodland management, such as the cessation of coppicing and other light disturbance, and also the increased use of herbicides on roadsides and railway banks

Typically found on sunny banks and the sides of tracks, lanes or roads, especially in open woodland or on woodland edges. It prefers dry, well-drained, fairly infertile sandy or gravelly soils.

It occurs mainly on the Welsh borders and in the West Midlands. In Herefordshire, the plant grows alongside the main forest track in low numbers in the northern part of Frith Wood just above Ledbury. Managed by the Forestry Commission, work has been undertaken to try to expand the population. In more recent years the wild plant charity, Plantlife, has been helping in management for the plant. Small scale coppicing has taken place over the winter, alongside with clear-felling of conifers adjacent to the main Bellflower areas. The area will be monitored to see if this work has helped the plant. However often rabbits or other animals nibble the flowers off and so constant visits to the site need to be made so that we don't miss any plants.

Does anyone regularly walk in these woods and could help look for the plant from July until November? Even a monthly visit would help. Anyone who can help please can they get contact Kate Wollen either e-mail [kate.wollen@forestry.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:kate.wollen@forestry.gsi.gov.uk) or telephone 07786526280



