



SPRING 2019

LEDBURY NATURALISTS
NEWSLETTER

Ledbury Naturalists Field Club Chairman's Report 2018

On the whole I think we have had another very successful year. We have had a varied and interesting program which I cannot go into extensively here but I would personally like to pick out one or two highlights for special mention.

Our summer trips away continue to be very popular and this year's visit to North Devon was as enjoyable as ever thanks to committee members, Kate Wollen & Mike Bradley who did all the organising.

A new idea instigated this year, was the trip to Slimbridge, aimed at our less active members. This was conceived, organised & executed by our Secretary Alan Pike. The visit proved very successful & we hope to repeat the idea with a different venue this year.

We have welcomed a number of new members but we have sadly had to say goodbye to some very old friends of the club, Dudley Brooke & Michael Harper were both founder members and their strengths & achievements are widely known within the club. Keith Mason was also a great supporter and as a member of HOC he contributed to our bird knowledge on outdoor visits, gave us a number of winter talks on birding trips to Shetland and other far-away places and contributed a number of articles to the newsletter over the years. We can be very proud that all three, who gave so much to local natural history, were members of our club. One of the club's main aims is to stimulate and encourage local natural history interest and they all set an example which we much strive to live up to.

I was particularly pleased when Brian Willder was elected as President at our AGM and thanks to Alan Pike for arranging the evening and banishing the older ideas that used to make AGM's potentially heavy going.

I have to thank Janet Parry for her work in organising and coordinating our summer field surveys which she has now done for about 20 years. Janet has drawn together an impressive band of local experts and helpers for the monthly site visits, collated the findings, and produced valuable, comprehensive reports. All those who attend have found the visits absolutely delightful and have learned a great deal. The summer survey has not been shelved altogether but potential coordinators have so far been rather intimidated by the task. If anyone fancies a challenge please let us know.

The conservation working party continues their weekly meetings in Queenswood, ably lead by Kate Wollen and as if that not enough she also heads a new group who have taken on a survey of the Ledbury swifts and their ongoing conservation. This has been a very steep learning curve but good progress has been made.

In the future we face all the same challenges as many other clubs, falling membership (So far we are just about maintaining numbers), difficulty in attracting younger members & reluctance of people to take on organisation roles etc. All these challenges must be continually addressed by the committee, I think ours is strong and I would like to personally thank them all for their efforts. The average age is actually falling so it is possible to buck the trend! Lots of ideas do come up at committee meetings and discussions can get quite heated on occasions. This is no bad thing, it shows we are thinking. We are always open to ideas. So if you have anything you would like us to consider or comments good or bad, please let me, or one of the committee know.

Financially we have always bumbled along without much concern thanks to the tight control exercised by our treasurer Alan Starkey. This happy situation was recently given a reality check when we were faced with unexpectedly high requests for expenses from visiting speakers. This is something we are going to have to address as more and more potential speakers come to expect significant fees. We have always tried to keep membership costs as low as possible but this will come under review at the next committee meeting.

As in previous years the same names are 'Mentioned in Dispatches'. As Chairman I can't emphasise enough how much we rely on their contribution and how difficult they would be to replace.

So let's all look forward to the coming year with optimism & enthusiasm!

Eden Tanner



Ledbury Nats' on a visit to Adhithana, at Coddington

Meeting Report 13/04/2018

Tales of the Undirected

by Malcolm Penny

Malcolm Penny was for 25 years, a scriptwriter for the famous Anglia TV Survival programmes which ran for 40 years and so had travelled the world with natural history film teams and had many interesting experiences and really knew what went into making the programmes. He was lucky to be in the right place when Peter Scott wanted a scriptwriter with a zoology degree to go to Patagonia and film penguins.

Since then he has travelled all over the world from Antarctica to Africa and was full of amusing anecdotes about the filming and its problems. Most of the programmes had the theme of “conflict” and ranged from the manatees of the Everglades who prefer to sit in the warm water outflow from a power station to going upstream to feed, to Northern Spotted Owls losing their habitat in North America due to logging and timber being sold to Japan because their trees are protected! Another interesting story was the trouble in Israel’s Golan Heights where antelope were eating all the crops but orthodox Jews are not allowed to kill them so they were helped out by the local Arabs who liked antelope stew.

This was the last indoor meeting of the year and yet another excellent talk. Thank you to all who worked hard to organise such a good programme this year.

Janet Parry



Northern Spotted Owl

Photo: John Hutchinson

MICHAEL WITHINGTON HARPER

President Ledbury Naturalists' Field Club 1998 - 2018

Michael Harper died peacefully on 1st October 2018 after a period of declining health. His last years were cruelly afflicted by gradually worsening dementia but he was looked after at home by his devoted wife, Sheila, until shortly before his death.

He was a truly great all round field naturalist of the old school, and although especially a Lepidopterist, his interests and knowledge covered all aspects of the natural world. He did a great deal for nature conservation in Herefordshire, was at one time a great supporter and a trustee of the Herefordshire Wildlife Trust, and was responsible for the creation and maintenance of nature reserves in Queen's Wood, Dymock, still called the 'Michael Harper Reserves'. Without his persistent efforts, with the then reluctant Forestry Commission, it seems unlikely that Haugh Wood would have become an SSSI and probably its Wood Whites and Pearl-bordered Fritillaries would no longer still occur there.

He trained as a doctor at Charing Cross Medical School and came to Ledbury as a General Practitioner in 1966. He left General Practice in disgust in 1992 because he felt the Government was going in the wrong direction with the NHS. After retirement as a full time GP, he worked as a doctor in Newfoundland and Labrador, and did locum work both locally and in various places in Scotland, until finally stopping work aged sixty.

In 1966 various people were thinking of starting a Natural History Society in Ledbury and Michael became part of this group with the result that the Ledbury Naturalists' Field Club was founded on 23rd February 1967. Michael was one of the founding members and served on the committee from the club's inception.

In the early 70's the club became involved with the Forestry Commission and their plans for several of their woods in the Ledbury area. Initially Frith Wood was the focus of the club's attempts to influence FC policy on felling, replanting, etc. but Michael subsequently became involved in a long struggle to maintain and enhance the biodiversity of the FC complex of woods in the Dymock/Kempley area known as Queen's Wood. His efforts slowly changed local FC policy towards incorporating more nature reserves within the wood and 7 areas were set aside as reserves. In 2003 the Forestry Commission acknowledged his work by naming these reserves 'The Michael Harper Reserves' and they appear as such on maps of the area.

He was very keen on the club doing conservation work on the ground as well as recording and surveying, so he started the Ledbury Naturalists' conservation work parties in 1980. Initially they met on Sundays and covered a range of sites including Dog Hill Wood, Conigree Wood, Birchend Castle Frome, Vine's End and other sites. Following retirement, the workday switched to Thursdays and the main work site became Queen's Wood with occasional forays to Vine's End, Dead Woman's Thorn etc.

His interest in micro-moths and their requirements led him to design new types of dead wood habitats and the old and new 'wigwams' of cut timber (known as eco-heaps) constructed by the conservation work parties over the years, stand as tribute to him.

Michael also played a full part in the various surveys carried out by the club, where his expertise was invaluable and came on the summer trips and other visits organised by the club.

Following the death of the 1st President of the club, Major Hervey-Bathurst, in 1997, Michael became the 2nd President in 1998, a position he felt very honoured to hold.

He remained an active member of the club for as long as his health permitted and still visited the conservation work parties to keep an eye on them even though he could not actively participate.

The passing of this kindly and generous man is a great loss to the club and he will be missed by his many friends.

Michael Bradley



Meeting Report 16/03/2018

Our not so Common Swifts

by Peta Sams of the Shropshire Swifts Group

Swifts were once a common sight in England and Ledbury had its share. Sadly the general population has declined by 40% in the last 20 years and continues to drop by 3% a year, so the species is heading for the red endangered list. The cause is the usual loss of nest sites as holes in buildings and old barns disappear and new builds are well sealed. Also the serious drop in insect populations world-wide following more intensive agriculture and use of pesticides is reducing their main food supply.

The birds are summer migrants only being with us for 12 weeks in summer and spending most of their lives migrating to and from Africa. Once they fledge, they live in the air and do not land until they return to breed, eating, sleeping and mating on the wing.

Peta told us of the many initiatives taken by the Shropshire Swifts group to counteract the decline. One is to provide alternative nest sites by making nest boxes which can be incorporated into new build houses either as part of the outer wall or as external additions. They have also been put in church towers and other high rise buildings. This started in Ludlow and Shrewsbury but is now nationwide with examples such as 900 swift boxes being incorporated into 2,500 new houses in Aylesbury. This all good news but much more needs to be done. There is a swift awareness week 16 - 23 June this year so look out for events.

On Saturday morning, Peta lead a group of Ledbury residents round town looking for potential nesting sites in town where boxes could be installed to help increase the local population.

Janet Parry

Editor's Note

After this meeting a number of 'Nats' members formed The Ledbury Swift Group, under the chairmanship of Kate Wollen. We raised funds & had installed a number of swift nest boxes on the Barrett-Browning Building. We also spent a number of summer evenings surveying round the town for nest sites. These evenings proved very interesting and we all learned a great deal about swift ecology & got to know each other socially.

The report of this work is available on the website and plans are in place to continue the work when the swifts return this summer. We would welcome anyone interested in joining in with the survey work. Please contact one of the committee if interested.



House Sparrows

This is probably a bird that we all know well and our villages have a scattering of them, very noisy at times but is one species that is almost exclusively associated with humans. They are never found living in the wilder countryside, only making excursions there for food at certain times of the year.

It may come as a surprise that the species is red listed even though it is a common bird in the UK. They have a colonial habit and are often found in large numbers but surveys have shown overall they have suffered a 71% decline since the 1970's. Various reasons have been put forward, rurally it was thought the availability of winter seed was one but then a recent decline has occurred in urban areas.

Over the last twenty years national population trends have shown fluctuations but remain stable overall, but some small rises have been noticed in a few rural gardens. In the West Midlands results from garden feeding surveys show that the average number of sparrows feeding at once is now 6.5, not as high as 2004 when it was 7.7 but has been creeping up from 2016 when it was only 5.7.

Studies have shown that whereas rural communities stay quite close to their nesting sites and rarely wander, some urban colonies mix at good feeding areas and after the breeding season in late summer and early autumn sometimes use a communal roost nearby. Numbers increase at feeders at this time of year when all the juveniles join the flock and if there are mixed flocks may go off with another colony. Once a young bird has paired with another colony member they usually stay with that group. The adults eventually return faithfully to their breeding areas usually by the end of October.

Natural nest sites are numerous, besides using the eaves and facias in houses, often dense creeper and tree holes provide a site and occasionally the nest is built on a swallows nest. The nest when free standing is a large domed ball loosely woven of grass or straw containing feathers but is often hidden away. In boxes a similar structure is made with more material added between broods.

In our three villages there does seem to be a good scattering of colonies but at a farm in Suckley the owner has noticed numbers seem to be less now there is no corn planted. At another house in Alfrick a good group of birds upped sticks and left even though the interested owner had put up a long row of boxes which they did use. There were still feeders in the garden so it was not lack of food.

Enjoy the sparrow if you have them, they have never graced our garden but lower down our lane there has been a colony for a long time. An unofficial survey around Malvern indicated elevation may come into play as the higher one went their presence soon vanished. Continuous all year feeding may ensure they stay with you, but no promises!

Garth Lowe 2018



Book Review

“It’s a bit woo-woo,” said one friend. “Too hippy-dippy for me,” remarked another. And indeed in *The Hidden Life Of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben, a German forest ranger, has written a classic of anthropomorphism in which trees portray every aspect of human beings short of dancing the can-can. In the chapter *Street Kids* he writes “to let lindens, oaks, or beeches bring up a redwood would be like leaving human children in the care of mice, kangaroos, or humpback whales. It just doesn’t work, and the little Americans have had to fend for themselves. No mother to nurse them or keep a strict eye out to make sure the little ones didn’t grow too quickly.”

But if you can read beyond the sentimentalising, this is a hugely rewarding book written from many decades practical forestry experience underpinned with serious scientific research, and delving into every facet of a tree’s life and interconnectedness with it’s environment. He ends with a chapter on the parlous state of woodlands around the world today, stressing the huge range of benefits they can bring to our lives if we are not simply “concerned about trees purely for commercial reasons.”

I loved this book and warmly echo the views of Dr Suzanne Simard, a Canadian professor of forest ecology, that “Peter highlights these ground-breaking discoveries in his engaging narrative . . . He highlights the peculiar traits of these gentle, sessile creatures . . . in a manner that elicits an aha! moment with each chapter . . . making us think more deeply about the inner workings of trees and forests.”

John Burns



‘The Old Man of Moccas’, an oak in Moccas Park, reputed to be about 800 years old!

Book Review

I frequently discover interesting stories in the *Big Issue*, and a recent instance was from a column by its founder Lord Bird. He brought the poet John Clare to my attention for which I am grateful, so much that I want to share my discovery with you. The more widely read among us may already be aware of his poetry but for those that are not let me give you a very brief biography. Born in 1793, the son of a farm labourer in Helpston, John Clare himself became a farm labourer for a time and then took up poetry. His poems are rooted in the countryside he worked and reveal a talent for close observation. He wrote many volumes of poetry and I was tempted to reproduce his poignant poem on the badger but decided it was too sad, especially in view of their continuing persecution. Instead, I offer as an example of Clare's work: his poem the *Wood Anemone*

The wood anemone through dead oak leaves
And in the thickest woods now blooms anew,
And where the green briar and the bramble weaves
Thick clumps o'green, anemones thicker grew,
And weeping flowers in thousands pearled in dew
People the woods and brakes, hid hollows there,
White, yellow and purple-hued the wide wood through.
What pretty drooping weeping flowers they are:
The clipt-frilled leaves, the slender stalk they bear
On which the drooping flower hangs weeping dew,
How beautiful through April time and May
The woods look, filled with wild anemone;
And every little spinney now looks gay
With flowers mid brushwood and the huge oak tree.

John Clare (1793-1864)

For a contemporary written example of close observation I suggest you read John Lewis-Stempel's recent book *The Wood: the life and times of Cockshutt wood*. The wood is on the Welsh border and Lewis-Stempel managed it by traditional methods over four years. His book reports the last year, in diary form, and takes the reader on a journey through the seasons in the wood. The book is a mix of observation, anecdote and historical information that is a pleasure to read. I especially liked his habit of sitting in an old plastic garden chair near the pond, watching wildlife going about its business. A good read and thoroughly recommended.

The Wood: the life and times of Cockshutt wood by John Lewis-Stempel 2018

Alan Pike, March 2019



Butterflies and Moths in Winter. – David Taft

This may seem a strange title, but it is not misleading. I am sure that many of you will have found a Peacock, Comma or Small Tortoiseshell butterfly in your house on an early spring warm sunny day. It will be fluttering against the windows wanting to be let out. These three species regularly hibernate during winter, often using outbuildings and sometimes finding their way into the house. The Brimstone also hibernates but I have never found one indoors or in outbuildings.

The Small Tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*) regularly wintered in my garage, sometimes being there for nearly six months from late September before disappearing in March. Although there was only one or two it was nice to see them. But, during recent summers Small Tortoiseshells have been becoming increasingly scarce as they are being parasitized by a fly. Consequently I was disappointed but not surprised in the winter of 2017 when I could not find any in the garage. As summer 2018 was poor for sightings of this butterfly I was again not expecting any in the winter. However, to my surprise I found four in the back of my wood-store which is next to the garage. I should perhaps add that this does not have a door only a doorway to allow air to circulate.

The Small Tortoiseshells (*Aglais urticae*) are all at the back of this structure furthest from the doorway and resting upside down in the angle between the wall and ceiling; a similar position to how I have previously found them in the garage. But, to my further surprise one of them is snuggled in with four Herald (*Scoliopteryx libatrix*) moths, upside down on some cardboard. There are two more Heralds just out of shot, making six in total. Heralds have been regular winter hibernators in the wood-store, and whilst the cardboard will have changed they are always clustered together in exactly the same spot regardless. In winter of 2003/4 there were seventeen in this spot all together. I wonder how they do it as it is black as pitch until I put a light on to check on them.

So has the Small Tortoiseshell been accepted as an honorary Herald, they must be friends as they are actually touching. In previous years the Heralds have

disappeared before the end of February although they are still there as of the 17th February 2019. It is thought the Herald received its name as it reappears from hibernation so early in the year as to be a herald of spring. A nice story whether or not it is true. I must point out to those who thought moths were dull that the Herald is very bright and attractive and also quite common and widespread.

To make them easier to see I have flipped the picture over; they are all upside down hanging on to the underside of the cardboard.



A Small Tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*) and four Herald (*Scoliopteryx libatrix*) moths hibernating on cardboard in the wood-store.

Queen's Wood Conservation Work Parties

Jan - Dec 2018

As in the past, the Ledbury Naturalists work party met weekly in Queen's Wood to carry out conservation work during the autumn and winter and surveys during the late spring/summer.

The January work parties focussed on a reserve not worked on for several years with clearing of overgrown coppice and re-furbishment of old eco-heaps. A morning trip to Siege Wood, Woolhope was made in mid-January to assist with scrub clearance for the Wood White butterfly as part of a Butterfly Conservation project to enhance habitat for this butterfly. Work continued on clearing overgrown coppice until the end of February when we then moved on to creating a scallop in a woodland ride adjacent to another reserve area within Queen's Wood. This occupied us until mid-March when we finished for the spring/summer. Time was also found to clean out the dormouse boxes and to clear encroaching scrub from a floristically rich ride.

The Dormouse boxes were checked monthly and although dormice were present for summer and autumn, numbers were lower than previously recorded as, unusually, no breeding occurred in the boxes. The dormice found in the autumn were all well fed ready for hibernation indicating plenty of food available within the reserves. Camera traps were positioned adjacent to a couple of the boxes and interesting footage of dormice and other mice was obtained. Butterfly and moth surveys were also undertaken in various parts of the wood and species were recorded in some of the clearfell and reserve areas that had not been recorded for many years, hopefully indicating that our work is having a positive effect.

We restarted in October on the scallop area and then coppiced an adjacent area, enclosing this with a brash fence built from the coppice in order to keep out deer grazing the re-growth. The Herefordshire Wildlife Trust work party assisted with this for a day in November. The coppice area was expanded again in December with new enclosures being created with brash fences to protect them.

In November another trip was made to Siege Wood to work on the Wood White project and the work party assisted with clearing brash and building brash hedges for the DYFRA daffodil project at the Kempley end of the wood.

The annual dinner was again held at the Wellington Inn and enjoyed by those able to attend.

Numbers of volunteers have increased this year and more has been achieved. Any member who wishes to attend will be most welcome. All tools are provided if needed.

For Further Details of the Reserves and Work parties, please contact:

Kate Wollen 07786 526280

Michael Bradley 07710 505492

The Summer Heat, Drought and Butterflies. – David Taft

After the horrible spring the summer developed into a hot dry period that saw grassland and wild flowers on the hills become prematurely brown and parched like the onset of an early autumn. I must mention that my garden remained rather greener being on the spring line in Upper Colwall, and rarely dries out completely.

I record the butterflies in my garden for a scheme run by Butterfly Conservation and I also walk a weekly transect at a local nature reserve as part of another national recording schemes, which aims to monitor butterfly populations all over the country over a period of now 20 or so years and still ongoing. My butterfly colleagues and I were concerned as to the effect this drought might have on late summer butterflies. We need not have worried, although we now worry about 2019.

The brown butterflies of mid-summer and late summer were much as usual. But three species did very well; namely the Small Copper, Common Blue and Brown Argus. I would like to discuss the latter two species which are related, of similar size and both grassland species. The 2nd brood of Common Blues flew from the 3rd week of July to the 1st week of September and was one of the best years I have recorded and they made several appearances in my garden after a few poor years. The males are a brilliant sky blue but the females are brown with a blue suffusion towards the base of the wings and body.



A male Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*) on Wild Marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*).



Female Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*) on Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*).

But, excitingly I also had several visits from Brown Argus butterflies which despite their name are closely related. The Brown Argus is a species that has been increasing and spreading in recent years. This good news follows the changes in the caterpillar's diet, which was formerly a specialist feeding almost exclusively on Common Rockrose (*Helianthemum nummularium*). Now it is eating Dove's-foot Crane's-bill (*Geranium molle*) and Common Stork's-bill (*Erodium cicutarium*), two plants which have done well recently having benefited from farming set-aside practices. I had several specimens appear in my garden during July and August which were the first I had ever recorded.



A male Brown Argus (*Aricia agestis*) on Wild Marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*).

Both these butterfly species sometimes rest with their wings folded over their back rather than flat. When in this position the undersides of the wings show and the two species are almost indistinguishable, although experts can identify differences in the arrangement of the spots. I wait till they open their wings to confirm my identification which is usually only a second or two



The male Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*) showing the underside of the wings and blue suffusion on the wing bases and body.



A male Brown Argus (*Aricia agestis*) showing the underside of the wings on Wild Marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*).

Field Survey Report 2018

Coddington Court - Adhithana

by Janet Parry

In 2018 it was brought to the club's notice that the Buddhist Community in Coddington had been doing a great deal of work to encourage wildlife on their new site which had been an arable farm for many years previously. An innovative wet system had been installed to deal with the sewerage and a meadow and new woodland planted. A request was made to conduct our annual survey there through the year and this was received with enthusiasm as the Buddhists were very keen to know what wildlife had been attracted to the grounds

Background

Since ceasing to be the family home of the Poore family in 1980, Coddington Court had been the headquarters of an oil exploration company and the headquarters of Autism West Midlands. Both these organisations added many more buildings to the site. It was unoccupied for 3 years until bought by the Triratna Buddhist Order in September 2012 as their headquarters and re named Adhithana. Since then, many changes have been made both to the buildings and to the land. A beautiful formal garden is being developed near the main house but in the fields beyond, wild life is being encouraged in many ways. There are no public footpaths through the site but the community is very welcoming.

Coddington Court is situated at SO 724 430 at an elevation of 110 metres with the land sloping towards the west. It covers 23 acres. The soil is derived from glacial till so is quite deep clay with many stones but fertile.

When the Community moved in, the sewerage system was totally inadequate, overflowing and polluting and the solids collection chamber had to be emptied twice a day by tankers. In 2013 Jay and Clara Abrahams of Biologic Designs, were asked to design and install a Wetland Ecosystem Treatment (WET) where the liquid sewerage is run through a soil based system where the roots of plants host bacteria which live on the organic material in the water, thus cleansing it. This involved digging 7 "swales" which are bank and ditch systems, one below the other running along the contours as the land dips gently down. It is gravity fed with no pump from the collection chamber at the top which now only needs emptying twice a year. The banks are planted with moisture loving plants and others at the margins and in the water, so there are roots at varying levels to process the run off. The water gets steadily purer as it progresses down the series. It has been running for 6 years and the banks and ponds are well established and working well. The water in the bottom pond is now clean enough to swim in.

The banks are mainly planted with Willow and Dogwood which makes a dense thicket in the summer and the stems are cut and sold at the end of the season. The banks between the ponds are mowed to allow access and are self-mulching. Marginal plants such as Purple Loosestrife and many reeds and sedges were planted nearer the water and some water plants in the swales. Some fruit trees have been planted at the sides and it is hoped to install some bees to take advantage of the abundant blossom in the summer.

The system is self-maintaining and needs very little management though Bulrush has appeared in the lower swale and is currently being removed as it is very invasive. Eventually, the upper swales may need digging out occasionally.

The adjacent meadow had been an arable field for years and it was seeded in May 2013 with a wild flower and grass mix. It is mowed once a year and the hay sold locally. It is now well established and self-perpetuating.

A strip of 3 acres of woodland has been planted along the south and west margins of the site. This has a range of native broadleaved trees which vary according to the soil conditions. It will form a good screen and link up several small stretches of hedge and woodland in the area improving connectivity for wildlife.

Conducting the Survey

Volunteers from Ledbury Naturalists' Field Club paid eight visits to the site between March and October in 2018. The survey concentrated on the wilder sections of the site, rather than the formal garden though the pond alongside the drive, which had been revived during the alterations, was included. Moira Jenkins conducted a geological survey of the area.

On each date members spent about 3 hours in the afternoon walking around the site. All flowering plants, grasses, trees, fungi, ferns, birds, insects, and other invertebrates found along the way were recorded. There was an extra birdwatching evening on May 18th and a club visit on August 18th when the Abrahams followed up a talk they had given to the club in the winter with a site visit to the swales to see them in action. Robin Hemming and friends ran moth traps over the night of July 6th. Sanghadeva, the groundsman from the community, has added some observations of his own.

Hilary Ward supervised the botany, David Taft tackled the invertebrates, Robin Hemming identified the moths from the traps and Cherry Greenway identified the fungi. Peter Garner, County Botanical Recorder, joined our team on several outings. 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. Unfortunately no moss or lichen experts were available this year. **Complete details of the survey with illustrations can be found on the clubs website.**

In summary the following numbers of species were noted.

Herbaceous Plants	Grasses Sedges Rushes	Trees	Fungi and Ferns	Birds	Mammals and other Vertebrates	Insects and other Invertebrates
209	37	46	46	46	14	412

Discussion

Despite being arable fields only 8 years ago, the site now hosts a great variety of wildlife. The herbaceous plants set to grow round and in the swales have all thrived and others have joined them. The diversity of plants seemed to increase down the sequence of ponds as the water became purer. In March the Marsh Marigold made a brave display but the cold spring delayed the growth of the other plants. In May all the vegetation shot up and started to obscure the water. As the season progressed the Yellow and Purple Loosestrife, Branched Bur-reed and flowering Rush added to the diversity. Later in the summer the Water Lilies and Bog Bean were covering the water of the lower swales. A mixture of sedges and rushes such as Great Tussock Sedge, Cyperus Sedge and Pendulous Sedge were thriving throughout the system. On the banks the Water Forget-me-not, Creeping Jenny, Water mint and Ragged Robin were well established among many. In the water itself was Frogbit, and both Curled and Broad Leaved Pondweed. The many Willows that had been planted grew prolifically during the year making the paths through the swales almost impenetrable in the summer.

The wildflower meadow was developing well with a profusion of blossom in June and July. There was much Knapweed, Tufted Vetch, Ladies Bedstraw, Bird's-foot-trefoil and Yellow Rattle in the mix which was a magnet for many insects. There was also a good mix of grasses such as Yorkshire Fog, 3 species of Bent, Sweet Vernal grass and Crested Dog's-tail. The edge of the site was bounded by hedgerows which still harboured well established woodland edge plants such as Primroses, Violets and an extensive strip of Bluebells. One plant of False Ox-slip was found in the new woodland and one spike of a Green Winged Orchid popped up in May. In August a Broad leaved Helleborine appeared by the path along the old hedge. Five species of Fern were found including Hart's-tongue and Soft Shield-fern and Bracken was spreading amongst the new trees.

Of the 46 species of trees identified many were planted by a contractor in a strip along the SW boundary. These included many Alders and Willow in the damp lower sections and more Silver Birches higher up. There were other interesting trees in the mix such as Hornbeam, Norway Maple, Dogwood, Alder Buckthorn and Bird Cherry as well as a few English and Wyche Elms, Pedunculate Oak and Beech There was some Gorse and both Field and Dog Roses. All were growing well and making an interesting habitat for other species. Hedgerows included Hawthorn, Spindle, Wild Service, Blackthorn and Field Maple showing an older origin.

The site was not optimum for fungi but 33 species were identified including several rusts. More common fungi were both Shaggy and Glistening Inkcaps, and Artist's and Southern Brackets. Occasional species were the spectacular Lurid Bolete, Resin Bracket, and *Spinellus fusiger*, a pin mould on *Mycena* fungus. The wood chips spread on the paths between the swales yielded some interesting finds which Cherry Greenway and the Herefordshire Fungus Recorder were unable to identify. One very unusual specimen has been sent to the mycology department at Kew and identification is awaited.



Early afternoons are not the best times for spotting birds, however 46 species were identified over the year. These included most of the common tits and both Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Mistle and Song Thrushes. By the swales a Sedge Warbler was heard and a Reed Bunting seen. Mallards were busy eating frog spawn in March. There was a House Martin's nest on one of the buildings and a Kestrel and Sparrowhawk had been spotted. On the extra birding trip in May, a Cuckoo was singing and Swifts were flying over from the nest boxes in Coddington church to skim the site for insects. No doubt here are many more species not recorded due to timing of visits.

An impressive list of 412 species of invertebrates was identified, 154 of which were moths attracted to the traps on moth night. Some of the same species were also recorded in the day time. Robin Hemming sent the following comment:

“Of the micromoths; *Oecogonia deauretella* was a second county record. *Coleophora frischella* can really only be identified by microscopic examination so as you would expect, there are very few records in this area (VC 36). *Aphelia viburnana* the Bilberry Tortrix is only known from the high ground in the extreme west of the county so an excellent lowland record. *Eucosma obumbratana* has surprisingly few

VC 36 records but was present in high numbers in the meadow. It feeds on Sow thistle. *Calamotropha paludella* is a relatively new species to VC 36 feeding on reeds so probably a local resident. Most of the macromoths were regulars but it was very nice to see Blackneck, an uncommon species feeding off the abundant Tufted Vetch, Waved Black off bracket fungi, plus Double Lobed, a scarce wet meadow species. Obscure Wainscot is about the 5th Hereford record and an expanding species thought to be doing well precisely because of the type of filtration system at Adhistana. *Phragmites* – Common Reed, is extremely limited in Herefordshire. All in all a very interesting selection of moths reflecting such a young habitat.”

During the daytime visits, a range of butterflies were recorded including Orange tip, Ringlet, Holly and Common Blues, Large, Essex and Small Skippers, Speckled Wood, Comma, Gatekeeper and Large, Green-veined and Small Whites as well as day flying moths. There were 33 species of Diptera (flies) including Hoverflies, Dung flies, Sawflies and Crane flies. The Coleoptera (beetles) were also well represented with 63 species being identified. These ranged from 5 varieties of Ladybird to Rove beetles, Soldier Beetles, and many Weevils amongst the throng. There were Whirligig, Great diving, Sulcate diving beetles and Cherry-stone beetles in the swales. The list of Hymenoptera included 11 species of bee, hornet, wasps, gall wasps and ants, and the Acari included 11 species of gall mite.

The water in the swales attracted many dragonflies and damselflies in the summer, both adult and larval forms being found. During the pond dipping exercise, the Kings identified 30 aquatic species all noted in Appendix 2. They concentrated on the lowest swale as access to the others was difficult due to the prolific vegetation. The lesser Water-boatman, Common Pondskater and Back-swimmer were found in both nymph and adult stages showing breeding and indicative of high water quality. The swale above was lacking in caddisfly, dragonfly and damselfly larvae which indicates the water quality was lower than in the bottom swale. A selection of other invertebrates such as snails, leech, bloodworm, fleas, mites and shrimps were also identified.



Of the vertebrates, Stickleback were found in the pond by the drive. Frogs bred in the lower swales and toad spawn also appeared. Great Crested Newts were identified as well as juveniles of Smooth or Palmate Newt. An adult male grass snake also appeared. Mammals were not systematically recorded but 11 species were noted. A hedgehog raised a family in the courtyard garden and could be seen suckling its young. Three species of bats including the Lesser Horseshoe were picked up on the moth night. Moles, rabbits, Roe deer and Muntjac had all been seen and no doubt there is a whole host of unrecorded mice and voles resident in the fields and hedges.

Conclusion

What a difference 8 years makes! Two arable fields with a hedgerow fringe have now been transformed into a wildlife friendly zone. The swales of the innovative WET system have developed well and provide a great habitat for many plants, aquatic invertebrates and flying insects especially moths. The meadow also flowers profusely and attracts many insects and subsequently birds, and the new woodland is developing well and will, in time, add another ecological niche to the mix. It also provides much needed continuity between adjoining hedges and small parcels of woodland. The community is to be congratulated on its far sighted approach to creating this wildlife haven which will mature further and be an asset to the neighbourhood and a wonderfully peaceful spot for contemplation.

We would like to thank the Adhithana community for allowing us to wander over their land and making us so welcome and all the team who regularly came in all weathers to contribute to the data collection. They were

Clara and Ben Abrahams, Michael Bradley, Felicity Burge, Valerie Cooper, Anne Crane, John Davies, Heather Davies, Richard Davies, Caroline and David Evans, Peter Garner, Cherry Greenway, Robin and Christine Hemming, Moira Jenkins, Richard and Phyl King, Garth Lowe, Janet Parry, David Taft, Eden and Wendy Tanner, Hilary Ward, Sally Webster, Kate Woollen plus several occasional visitors from local wildlife clubs.



This is the last survey I shall organise as I have decided to retire after 20 years. I have written an article for the 2018 issue of The Flycatcher (HWT journal) which tries to summarise all the places we have visited and what a huge number of records we have made, hopefully contributing to the knowledge of the natural history of the county as well as having a great time!

BIRD BOX DIARY 2018

I had given up hope of the box being used as there had been no interest at all through the bad spring weather, although other boxes had been used. However, on 27th April I saw two blue tits in a yew bush near the box and, as one flew away, the other flew towards the box with something in its beak. I went indoors to check the camera and saw it in the box, with coarse nest material scattered over the base of the box and the bird fluttering into each corner. It flew out, but not for long. It returned with another beak full and its partner chirping from outside, then both were in the box. I was pleased, but wondered if this was a second attempt since other nests have failed due to bad weather, with little food available. It seemed late to start but I hoped they would continue.

There was little or no activity until 2nd May, when the bird was in and out all day in spite of heavy rain all day. The nest was developing well. She stayed in the box that night and has done so every night since.

7th May Quite a lot of fluffy material has been brought in, but not arranged in any way. Unlike previous years nothing has been removed and brought back in, so with warmer weather and the late start these birds seem more organized and determined to speed up the process!

9th May A lot of feathers and fluffy material has come in over the last few days and the bird is in the box at night from about 7pm.

10th May Nest looking very comfortable and two blue tits in the bush outside. I checked at 8pm and the female was in as usual, but very active and moving around in circles. She has eggs – I think I saw two but she was turning them and settling on them before turning them again so I

11th May I clearly saw five eggs. She sat on them most of the day and the male came in and fed her.

12th May Six eggs today and male feeding female more often. She does go out for short periods.

21st May She has been sitting on the six eggs most of the time, going out to feed occasionally. She turns the eggs regularly, and turns herself when she is sitting on them. She is very attentive and frequently checks the eggs, tucking more fluff around them if needed.

25th May Three eggs have hatched in the night. Unfortunately, the weather changed yesterday to wet again. It is still warm but today and several days to come are forecast to be wetter with heavy showers and thunder storms, so I do hope they can find food for these chicks.

As I write the male has just brought in a large grub of some kind, white and fat, larger than the chicks are at present! The female took it and tried to feed it to the hungry chicks, one took it but struggled, so she took it back, chattering as if to say to the male ‘can’t you find something smaller?’ then she flew out with it, presumably to eat it herself.

26th May Fourth egg hatched about 7.30am, we saw part of the shell being taken out of the nest. Both birds feeding but some grubs too big for small gapes, so mother ate those.

28th May Fifth egg hatched. Both parents feeding and finding plenty.

29th May All seem hatched now – hard to see through wriggling chicks but all seem to have grown and are looking less pink. Weekend of heavy showers and thunderstorms did not prevent parents finding food, which had been a worry, but it is 25 deg. C, so that may help. Because of late Spring all is happening late, but in a rush.

30th May It is hard to see how many chicks are in the nest. Mother is in and out, and when she is out, they all huddle together so I cannot define separate bodies! When she returns, she blocks the view and so far, I have only seen four gapes, possibly briefly a fifth. I am thinking the first four are getting all the food and hoping the later two to hatch are getting some food. Both parents are quite vigilant and caring, so hopefully all are getting a share.



1st June I know now why we only see four gapes. This morning when the mother left the nest, I saw two eggs which have not hatched as I had thought. They were hidden under the confusion of writhing chicks for the last few days, so I had assumed they must have hatched. I presume now they are infertile and do not expect them to hatch. The other four chicks are doing well.

2nd June This morning we could only see two gapes clearly, and two eggs. We were out all day, and checked again about 10pm. There was an odd and ominous shape lying at the edge of the box, pinkish but undefinable.

3rd June The odd shape had gone, but only two chicks in the nest, so I have no idea what has happened, or when. Both parents bringing in food, and the two chicks look healthy, so far.

5th June Still two chicks feeding well.

6th June Chicks moving about 7am, but at lunchtime I checked – no parents about for some time, and two chicks lying motionless by unhatched eggs. As I watched, a fly came in and crawled over them, they did not move. I think they have died. Parents have been in less and less with food last day or so, so I don't know if they had trouble finding enough food, or if they knew the chicks were weakening. They have not grown much in eleven days hatched, so another sad year for our camera box. I hope the other nests around have been more successful. There are a few families of tits in the trees now.

Carolyn Evans

The 'Beast from the East' and its effect on garden wildlife. – David Taft

The sudden severe weather at the start of March made a dramatic difference to the wildlife in my garden. The week before there were signs of spring being just round the corner but now snow and ice turned the garden back into the depths of winter.

The numbers of birds suddenly increased and many seemed to stay near the food supply I provided and not want to explore anywhere else. Most noticeable was the sudden increase in Blackbirds. Throughout the winter I usually see somewhere between 5 and 10. They will be feeding on the lawn for their natural food of I presume worms and suchlike, and also on the patio where they find mixed birdseed I put down daily. One even found a liking for sunflower hearts and learnt that if it stood on the 'squirrel baffle' which prevented squirrels from climbing the bird table pole, it could reach a hanging feeder that contained its favourite seeds.



The Blackbirds suddenly doubled in numbers with 20 to 25 becoming a regular sight. I assume the new birds were migrating birds perhaps heading for northern climes whether that was in either Britain or as far away as Scandinavia. I spotted a strange looking Blackbird that when viewed through binoculars turned into a Fieldfare. Now

this had me excited as I rarely see Fieldfares. I live high on the Malvern Hills almost surrounded by woodland and Fieldfares are a bird that as their name suggests like being in fields. If during the winter I walk a mile downhill to the sheep and cattle pastures in Colwall I can guarantee to see Fieldfares. The following day my flock of Blackbirds was back again with 10 or more Fieldfares and by the 5th and 6th March the Fieldfares outnumbered the Blackbirds and I managed to count at least forty. By now I was buying cheap 2nd grade apples for these hungry birds and they were spending all the daylight hours on the patio and lawn eating apples and grain.



I assume that when they roosted at night my blackbirds had shared their knowledge of a good place to feed with the other thrushes in the roost, and so more would appear in my garden the next day. Obviously the cold and snow burying a lot of natural food meant the Fieldfares overcame their unease at feeding next to woodland rather than being in the open centre of a field. When spring returned they disappeared as suddenly as they had appeared. But, this remarkable occurrence allowed me to see more Fieldfares (over forty) in one glance of my garden than I had seen in the entire previous 30 years.

Before the bad weather I had seen one of my local Muntjac wandering through the garden as they do from time to time. However, with the arrival of the cold weather he reappeared. He looked as well fed as he had when last I saw him, but obviously the cold and finding his normal food hidden under snow meant he was looking for new places to eat. Initially he appeared on the patio and started eating bird seed. My picture shows a pheasant in the background and I have a theory that these unrelated creatures do pick up signals from each other, as both animals come from eastern Asia and have been introduced to our shores. I cannot ever remember seeing the Muntjac in the garden without a pheasant in view nearby. So there was the Muntjac eating birdseed with his friend the pheasant and a couple of Blackbirds



A day or two later he was there again except that by now there were apples on the menu. Oh! He did like apple! He was so excited by these that he bit into a rather large apple and it became stuck on his teeth. Muntjac bucks (and females for that matter) have exaggerated upper canine teeth which develop into quite noticeable fangs known as tusks and these are used for fighting rivals along with their small antlers. I think that the apple was stuck on at least one of these tusks although the size of the apple meant I could not get a clear view. Of course, he may have been

practising for 'red nose day'. Anyway after a shake of the head the apple dropped to the ground and was quickly eaten.

To allay any worries you may have when looking at this picture, the pheasant is just out of shot behind the Blackbirds.



OCHRE HILL 2018

January

4th Snow still lying from last year, but the year began wet, mild, about 10 degrees C by night! We have had two storms 'Dylan' and 'Eleanor' and rivers are running high.

Birds are active in the garden, with blackbirds, fieldfares and redwings busily eating rotting apples I had thrown out. The feeders busy with blue and great tits, and about 12 long tailed tits, also about are wrens, robins, dunnocks and more house sparrows than I have seen for many years. A mole was active by the summerhouse.

11th Has been quite Spring like, but fog rolling up and down the valley today and only 3C. I have noticed an increase in birdsong and have seen several pairs of blue tits, and a pair on nuthatches dominate the feeders daily. A pied wagtail has been on the roof and today a grey wagtail was there, his beautiful yellow colour showing up in the sun. Two large rabbits were running about, being chased by my dog, then chased down the hill by a cat. I did not see them after that. I checked for branches damaged by the earlier snow and some were broken, but I also noticed a few bees about when the sun shone.

21st It has been 2-5C for a while, with rain, some snow and a few frosty nights, but today about an inch of snow lay by morning and continued for some hours, turning to rain, so felt miserable. Birds busy feeding, but no winter visitors yet.

31st I have worked a little in the garden, but weather not inspiring and the pond is full of blanket weed! I took part in the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch, but saw very little, although there have been many sightings of crossbills and hawfinch nearby.

February

6th A cold spell, 3-4C by day and -3 by night, colder is forecast. Large snowflakes falling today but not settling. Few birds about, but a sparrow hawk is an almost daily visitor which may explain lack of birds. Whist working on the ponds I saw water boatmen quite active.

I heard from a South African friend who had seen a program 'Safari Live' from the Kruger National Park which is like our 'Springwatch', and they have noticed a lack of many insects, causing a knock on effect to many birds, mostly migratory such as our swallows and swifts, so there are many less birds. I found this rather worrying.

9th More snow showers today. I found a very small dead field mouse on the path, about 30mm long. Pairs of buzzards flying over low all day.

12th Snow, sleet and penetrating cold. Snow frozen on ground, and still few birds.

24th We spent a few days in Gower and it has been milder. We were able to explore the nature reserve at Oxwich and visit the Penllergare Estate, which is a lovely wooded valley now under restoration. The original house has gone, and there is much development around it, but parts of the old garden are still there, and the beautiful valley. It is a haven for wildlife.

28th The 'Beast from the East' has struck! It has been below freezing by day, and -8-10C by night and penetrating cold. Storm 'Emma' is coming tomorrow, so we expect blizzards all week. A few birds feeding, but they will struggle.

March

2nd We are cut off with heavy snow falls. It is dry and powdery so building up well, drifting around the village. We had to dig about 2 feet of snow away from both our doors before we could get out at all. I have knocked snow off trees and bushes where possible, but some damage has been done. The whole of Europe has been affected, I have put apples out for birds, but fieldfares and blackbirds, fluffed also up to twice their usual size cannot eat them before they are buried by more snow.



Our milkman did not get through – the first time this has happened. Supermarkets are getting low on food and Hereford is low on oil, as it has stopped tankers travelling down Callow Hill.

4th Still a lot of lying snow but a thaw beginning. I watched birds for a while, as I could not do much else, and was delighted to see a small flock of bramblings, and also one of greenfinches. Several goldfinches also on feeders, and a rock dove. The remaining snow is now very slippery, so I stay indoors. A few green shoots can be seen – probably bulbs, but a cheering sight, and pink catkins on a hazel tree showing up against the white snow.

5th 9C and snow going fast, but still heaps where it had drifted. I have been in the garden, and saw two blue tits going in and out of a nest box frequently. Violets, primroses and budding daffodils are all on display.

8th Chaffinches feeding today on the grass, and a sparrow hawk landed on a feeder pole. Later blackbirds and thrushes enjoying apples.

10th A large clump of frogspawn in the top small pond today – about 2 weeks later than usual.

17th After a mild week we have more snow today, and it feels below freezing. It was 14C yesterday! A flock of starlings landed in an ash tree in our orchard. More snow from Siberia is forecast, so I have put bubblewrap over the rather exposed frogspawn.

April

3rd We have been to Cornwall for a week, had very reasonable weather and visited four gardens in sunshine, so a real boost to morale. Where we stayed the entrance was along an avenue of ancient Holm Oaks, quite a sight.

On our return home, the frogspawn had hatched, and it is wet. Ravens and buzzards arguing overhead a lot.

6th Long-tailed tits flitting through hedges, looking for nest sites, and I heard the first muntjac for a while. Quite a few bumble bees around now, and I saw two large newts in the big pond.



8th Heard my first chiff chaff, and saw a swallow today. Blue tits are nesting in the bird box by the summerhouse and great tits are in the roof.

9th As I fed my two fish I saw about a dozen newts, all about 3 inches long. Blue tits in nest box seem to have young hatched since yesterday, and are in and out feeding. It is 14C again, but raining a lot.

13th Thick fog and rain – the wettest March since 1947, and April looking as if it will break records also. Farmers are unable to plant their crops, and calves being born indoors. A few swallows about now, but not much food – caterpillars will have been washed off trees and no food for young birds.

15th Sunshine at last and a yellow brimstone butterfly! A fox and a hedgehog were caught by our wildlife camera. I disturbed a large toad in a flowerbed, who seemed still to be hibernating, so I put it back where it had been. A male pied flycatcher was hopping from bush to bush in our orchard. I was looking for snakeshead fritillaries, and the bird seemed to be at both ends of the garden, so I thought there could be two. I have not seen these for many years. I did find 6 fritillaries, some where they were last year, now forming larger clumps. I found some that rabbits had nipped the flowers off also.



27th After 27C a week ago, it is now 11C and more snow forecast. Damson and blackthorn now flowering, late, as are leaves and blossom on oaks and other trees. Blue tits now in two other nest boxes. The summerhouse nest box is now quiet and I would hope they have fledged, but it seems more likely not enough food was available for the young. I have not seen any young birds.

Early afternoon I became aware that blue tits were using our camera box and I was pleased to see some nest material coming in. It is very late, so I wondered if they had had an earlier brood that had failed.

30th 2C at 7am, but we have been lucky and missed the snow that has fallen further east. We still have a cold NE wind and frost tonight. Blue tits are not nest building in the cold.

In London, and around Slough/Bracknell, where we used to live, there has been a plague of toxic caterpillars causing illness and allergy. They are Oak Processionary Moth caterpillars, with white hairs, and they march in formation – sound very nasty!

Later when raking out some rotting leaves I saw something very small, but bright orange in the leaves, which moved. I rescued it and saw that it was a tiny lizard, about an inch and a half long. I put it into some leaves where it would not be disturbed, but have no idea what it was. It was a very striking colour. It scuttled off to hide.

May

2nd Frost yesterday followed by 13C, heavy rain and wind overnight and today, very gloomy. We have seen a lot of slow worms so far, the bird in our camera box has been very active. She stayed in overnight.

3rd Heard swifts today but did not see any.

7th A glorious Bank Holiday weekend has brought the garden to life – it has been up to 27C for several days. Orange tip, holly blue and brimstone butterflies about. Our son in Hereford has two hedgehogs visiting his garden nightly – he has left gaps under his fences so they can move freely through gardens.



A cockchafer beetle was crawling up me as I was weeding, I have seen a few this year, more than recent years. There are swallows flying low and looking in our garage for nest sites. The blue tit has been in the box overnight for several nights now and another has started building in another box down the hill.

9th A frog was croaking inside an urn water feature, which echoed and sounded very strange! Saw more cockchafers and bats in the evening. I also saw two swifts. Many hornets are about and dive bombing us in some areas. This is not aggression, but just that we are between them and their destination. I have not found any nests yet, but there must be one or more nearby. Not many bees other than bumblebees.

10th A red kite flew over this morning and, in a nearby field, I saw a kestrel and a sparrowhawk.

20th First cuckoo heard and three swifts seen today. Swallows building a nest in the garage. The pond has a lot of blanket weed, but I have seen one frog and a lot of newts. Friends have lost three hives of bees to a virus and others are saying the same, which will have serious consequences. Blue tits are building in the nest box by our summerhouse – the third this year. I suspect the previous broods have failed. Our laburnum tree is humming with bumble bees.

25th Heavy rain and storms washing all insects off trees, so not much food for the nesting birds now. Nuthatches regularly visit feeders and in the heavy rain a male bullfinch also came to feeders.

29th In the evening I saw about 15-20 swifts circling overhead feeding, so I just watched and enjoyed them.

June

5th Swallows seem settled in the garage nest and quieter now. Many humming bird hawk moths have appeared in the garden, especially on phuopsis, herbs, and the wild flowers in the grass we let grow for this purpose. I also saw a comma, small and darker than usual, but unmistakable shape. A few speckled wood butterflies also about.

12th Blue tits have fledged from several nests and one seems to have ten young, all well so far. A pied wagtail is regularly on the roof. A family of goldfinches being fed in a holly bush and three nuthatches being fed on top of a telegraph pole. Tadpoles developing fast and will soon leave the pond. Speckled wood and meadow brown butterflies all about and a red admiral disappeared into the roof under the guttering. Many bats about now.

We have about 40 orchids in our wild flower area now, a lovely sight.

28th It has been very hot, 28-30C, so it is getting very dry. Swifts and swallows about daily and house martins, but less than usual. Our long grass is alive with butterflies – whites, large

and small, ringlets, meadow browns and a few small tortoiseshell. A few frogs and toads walking around the garden at night and a family of foxes playing in the field below.

July

23rd The heatwave has continued. Up to 31C and the garden is suffering from drought. Grass is mainly brown and trees and shrubs are drooping. Many plants appear to have died. Birds are still active, 8 swifts daily, sometimes more, but high up, maybe more insects higher up. Butterflies before mentioned have increased in the heat and I have seen quite a few peacock butterflies, more than for a few years.



August

7th Heatwave shows no sign of changing and in Europe they have temperatures up to 48C, and wildfires everywhere, including Canada. We have had several in the UK also, Staffordshire Moorlands and Malvern Hills amongst them. Our pond now has duckweed and I am daily trying to remove it. In the rest of the garden I have begun to cut plants right back to try to save them and some are responding well, but a lot have died, including some shrubs. Birds have been eating white mulberries and a sparrow hawk took a blackbird who was feeding on them.

We have very little fruit in the orchard – no plums and few damsons, not helped by a tree splitting in half due to drought. There are apples coming, but all are very small and pears are small and few. Plants are going to seed early and butterflies are now few. I have seen a comma a painted lady and several gatekeepers recently.

18th A little cooler. 20C and a few showers, so grass greening up a little. I saw a weasel running across a nearby lane. Swallows still about, but the swifts have gone and only a few house martins about.

I found a small very dry toad in our hall and put it outside in a damp place, where it seemed to recover, I don't know how it got indoors, or how long it had been there. A newt which looked as if it had been dead for a while in the pond was being eaten by water boatmen.

Larger wildlife, such as foxes, muntjacs and badgers seem to have abandoned our hill for over a year now and there are less rabbits. There are three new houses being built on the hill and the disruption has a direct correlation with this lack of wildlife it seems. A large retaining wall has cut off a popular route for these animals coming up from the village and many trees and hedges have been removed.

26th Weather has been fine one day and wet the next for a while, but rainfall still not much. Down to 5C tonight'. Many trees showing early autumn colour, due to earlier drought. We have several large and active wasp's nests hampering garden activity. They are using old mole runs in the flowerbeds. A very large newt was hiding under a stepping stone where I was working and several frogs also in flowerbeds. I found a small grass snake about 8 inches long by our compost heap, the first for a few years. Swallow numbers have increased a lot, and a frenzy of feeding overhead, some lining up on overhead cables and our cherry tree.

Apple orchards all around us are being dug up over several weeks and left to die, before harvest, which is a sad sight and will deprive the birds of even more food. Some of these are quite old trees, but some have only been planted about five years. Some trees are now being chipped, and burned.

September

3rd It is warmer again, 25C. Lovely warm evenings to sit out and enjoy the bats and the hornets seem particularly active at night. We had one in the house and it took us a while to lure it out again! Butterflies are now scarce, but more frogs about. Our son still has his two hedgehogs and I have seen a few badgers nearby, but not on our hill.

4th About 2-300 swallows in our trees today. I spent a lot of time just enjoying the spectacle, as they were all around us, and very noisy. I took a lot of photos!

17th Swallows down to about 20-30 and after that day I have not seen large numbers, so assume they have left. A few house martins still here. There are hurricanes and typhoons around the world and the remains of Hurricane Helene has hit us. We had a very large toad, the size of my fist, in our porch, trying to climb up my son's trousers, so we encouraged it outside! My daughter has had a stag beetle larva in her garden, in Cwmbran. I have not seen a stag beetle since I was a child.

19th First autumn storm 'Ali' has arrived. We have gales but no rain. Many leaves now falling.

22nd Second storm 'Bronagh' has arrived and passed, leaving more leaves down, and most of the apples also.

October

4th Have been indoors while storms and rain pass, but it is still warm, 23C, and many plants now starting to grow again, as well as weeds. Swallows and house martins seem to have all gone now and a lot of blue tits have appeared. I have seen one peacock, several red admiral butterflies and a speckled wood in the last few days. Wasps and hornets are enjoying the fallen pears, which is becoming quite a hazard for us. Moles and rabbits have become active also.

8th After a couple of cold nights it is now up to 21C again. I saw a flock of redwings fly over looking for berries, which are numerous on our holly trees. There are several large green dragonflies about also, which seems quite late.

10th I have heard reports of swarms of ladybirds elsewhere, but until today had not seen any. However, by lunchtime our windows were swarming with them, and landing all over me also. Most, but not all were harlequin beetles, of all sizes and patterns and a lot found their way into the house.

12th Storm 'Callum' has arrived, more gales and rain, but still warm.

17th Hereford and Wales have floods after a lot of rain, but it has calmed down now and we are enjoying some beautiful sunsets. Small flocks of redwings and starlings fly over daily and I have heard of but not seen fieldfares about. It is a good year for fungi in our garden with quite a variety on display.

27th After a sharp frost we had sleet showers, then large snowflakes falling, which I have never seen in October before. Many blue and great tits about, and nuthatches are regularly feeding. More house sparrows in the hedge than for some years and pied wagtails on the roof.

Several coal tits on feeders and now flocks of fieldfares and redwings, often on the grass eating apples I have thrown out and the many on the ground after the gales that I could not rescue. Mistle thrushes and blackbirds are feasting on a pink berried Rowan tree outside the kitchen window which has been a pleasure to watch.

November

2nd Cooler nights, but mild days, more fieldfares about. Sparrows seem particularly to like *Pyracantha* berries. Our neighbor has unfortunately cut down more trees, about 8 now, but it has improved our view across the valley,

The fields where the orchards were removed have now been planted with some sort of grain crop, so our outlook has changed considerably and will attract different wild visitors next season.

4th This morning I saw a fox. It looked like a black dog at first, but I soon realized it was a fox, but it was very dark, not quite black, but possibly melanistic. It had an almost black tail. It ambled up the garden then went through a flowerbed into another neighbour's garden. It looked large and healthy. It was the first fox I have seen for a few years, although I have found droppings in the garden.

5th Today we saw three herons flying over, presumably a family, screeching to each other as they flew. Where there are still leaves on trees the autumn colour has become very intense the last few days and it is looking beautiful all around. Frith Wood looks particularly lovely as the sun catches the golden leaves.

17th A large muntjac came into the garden this afternoon, following the same route as the fox had. I have cowslips and primroses flowering now, many summer flowers also and violets. I have picked a bunch of roses.

20th Very cold today, with icy showers. A pied wagtail is still on the roof regularly and small flocks of goldfinch, coal tits, blue and great tits all on feeders. A lot of wood pigeons, rock doves and jackdaws on the ground feeding, but only one pheasant at a time. I have seen three males recently and only one female. There are also a few greenfinches now.

21st Slight snow shower this morning.

December

6th Quite wet and windy recently but still mainly mild. A few frosts. All sorts of flowers in the garden – roses, *campanula*, *scabious*, *fuschia*, marigolds, pinks, buds on azaleas and other shrubs, *viburnum* and *daphne* in flower and smelling lovely! Still many wasps about, some indoors.

12th A sparrow hawk flew over the hedge from a neighbour's bird table, almost hitting me in the face.

18th Wet and windy, 11C but miserable. Blackbirds are eating apples and berries off bushes, but nothing else about.

27th December has continued mainly mild, 10-12C even at night times, but a slight frost to start Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Not much sun but gloomy and dry for about three weeks now. I checked our camera trap and was pleased to see almost nightly visits from muntjacs and foxes. I think there are two foxes, one is the dark one I saw recently in the day, and the other is paler. Both seem large and healthy, and could explain why there seem to be less rabbits about. There are rabbits around and moles have become active in the vegetable

garden. Pied wagtails are still on the roof daily and there is a lot of birdsong around. I have seen quite a few flocks of starlings flying over, and nearby, some over 100 birds, so more than in recent years.

31st Still mild, and gloomy. Cowslips, primroses, snowdrops, hellebores, marigolds, winter aconites, scabious, campanula and others all in flower, and Daphne and Sarcococca smelling lovely around the house. Reports of daffodils flowering in Devon also. Many blue tits in the garden as well as others, and interest being shown in several nest boxes. A great spotted woodpecker was on the cherry tree, which has many dead branches now. Several nuthatches on feeders. We now have seven hen and five cock pheasants regularly, more than recent years. Have spent two days pruning and weeding, as nothing has stopped growing! It feels pleasant, but mustn't get too enthusiastic as winter has only just begun.....!

Carolyn Evans

Starlings over Aberystwyth Pier



During the winter over 60,000 starlings roost every night on this pier. Other trips to see mumerations at Newport Wetlands and Ham Wall in Somerset have met with modest success but at Aberystwyth they are very predictable and you can get up close, so close in fact that you will likely have to wash your hat & coat to get rid of all the droppings!!

Eden Tanner.