



XLEDBURY NATURALISTS
NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2018

Annual Report 2017- Our 50th Anniversary

This time last year I took over from Brian Willder's long tenure as chairman with the club in good heart but facing the challenges of rapidly changing attitudes and priorities of society, not to mention a very important anniversary to celebrate! We are lucky to have a strong committee who continue to work hard at bringing us up to date and keeping us entertained with our summer visits and winter meetings and looking back they came up with some excellent ideas.

Alan Pike & Janet Parry went through the clubs' archives and wrote an article for the *Ledbury Reporter* on the history of the club and in October they gave a talk on the History of Ledbury Naturalists the first 50 years, to *Ledbury & District Civic Society*. For our Anniversary Public Lecture and reception in April, we were lucky to have local mammal expert and long term friend of the club, Johnny Birks, to give a talk which was fascinating and well attended. Thank you to all those who helped and provided the refreshments.

In June we had a celebratory summer picnic at Siege Wood, courtesy of Mark O'Brian and Liz Vice. On a very hot afternoon we sat around to consume a splendid 'Bring and Share' lunch and chat. This was followed by a leisurely walk around the woodlands with plenty of plants, butterflies and other insects to keep us interested. It was a shame Alan Pike, who drove the idea and did most of the organisation, was away and could not share a very pleasant day.

Also in June we used our regular attendance at Ledbury Community Day to 'plug' our anniversary and to help keep the club in the public eye. Chris Harris, who set up our website, produced a pop-up banner which looked good and helped project the right image. The stars, as usual, were the grass snakes and slow worms brought along by Nigel Hand and they helped to generate considerable interest in our stand.



We started our regular meetings in January with a talk from one of our members, Steve Betts, who told us all about the history, restoration & management of Ast Wood. This was followed up in September when we visited the wood for our family day. There were 25 members present including 6 youngsters, a successful exercise which we will be repeating this year.

In February Denise Foster told us all about the Herefordshire Woodland Bat Project.

The outdoor program started with a walk in Eastnor Park led by Cherry Greenway followed in May by a chilly spring walk on Midsummer Hill, Malvern Hills led by Jo Hackmann to see the bluebells that were also blue with the cold.

Later in May we visited Great Doward, led by local resident and naturalist, Ian Draycott, who skilfully led us round a bewildering maze of footpaths to all the sites of interest. Also in May members helped Kate Wollen with a Forestry Commission survey in Haugh Wood looking for Wood White butterflies (good numbers), Drab Looper moths (moderate numbers) and Pearl-bordered Fritillaries (very small numbers.) In July we met first at Rushall to help search for Spreading Bellflower led by Paul Rutter from plantlife and later we had a farm visit to The Leen, Pembridge, where Tony Norman showed us around the family farm and wildlife meadow.

Our outdoor meetings concluded with a visit to Moccas Park NNR where the reserve manager Bob Silverwood gave an interesting talk on the park and wood before we were let loose to explore on our own. This was attended by our largest group in recent times when 34 members and friends turned out.

The 2017/18 winter season started with a talk by Jay Abrahams on his work setting up eco-friendly water treatment systems. Some time ago he talked about the scheme he set up for the Westons factory at Much Marcle and we later visited the site in the following summer. He currently has a project at the Buddhist Centre in Coddington and we may be able to visit later in the year.



*'The Old Man of Moccas'
No, The Tree!*

Our last meeting of the year was the pre-Christmas Members Social Evening. Following a fine buffet provided on the 'Bring & Share' basis again, we divided into informal teams to participate in a natural history quiz. This proved a little more challenging than the quizmaster intended but a good relaxed time was had by all. The prize for the best team name went to 'The Ledbury Gnats'. After the meeting had finished one member said how nice it had been to sit and talk with others that he had never spoken to before! This, of course, validated the whole idea of the evening and no doubt we shall try to repeat the format again.

A number of our other meetings have been written up in the text of the newsletter so I will not duplicate them in this report.

It just remains to thank all the committee and helpers, especially the 'TwoAlans' who make it all happen.

Dudley Brook.



It is sad to report that just as we were going into print we heard of the death of one of our past chairmen, Dudley Brook, aged 93. Dudley was a founder member of Ledbury Naturalists Field Club and was chairman for a number of years before he moved to Malvern. He had worked as a farmer in Gloucestershire and later taught at Bredon School.

After he retired he set up a small print business in Malvern and led guided tours of the town.

He was chairman of Malvern Civic Society for a number of years and later became their President.

We first met Dudley when we came to Ledbury and joined Lednats. He was always very kind, helpful and encouraging to everyone. I am sure all of us who knew him will remember that smile which never hidden for long.

He had deep love of nature and over the years he amassed a considerable depth of knowledge which he was always happy to share. Nature was also a big factor in driving his love of drawing and painting at which he became very accomplished. In the days of the black and white newsletter I often had to find line drawings to illustrate the various articles. This was not always easy but if I was short of a specific drawing a phone call to Dudley always led to a selection arriving in the post a day or two later for me to use as I wished. One of his articles from the 2002 newsletter is included below.

He always remained interested in Lednats and last year came to Johnny Birks' talk and it was lovely too meet him again at the December Social Evening where he took part in the quiz.

Goodbye from us all Dudley, thanks for everything.

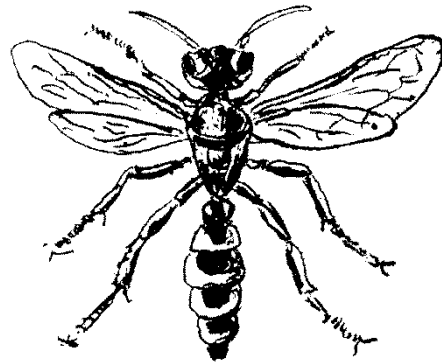
Eden Tanner

Diligent Diggers

One day, in late Summer last year, I had a 'phone call from a lady living in Malvern to tell me she had some strange little mounds of red sand in a corner of the garden and wondered what could have made them. I went along to investigate.

I had often seen on the Malverns little heaps of soil on bare patches of ground near paths and in each case a small hole by them, about the same diameter as a pencil. I had dug down at each hole to find the creature responsible for this excavation but found nothing. Later I happened to read about Digger Wasps. I found a whole book about them in a second-hand bookshop. Remarkable creatures! I realised that the holes were dug by this kind of insect and why they did it.

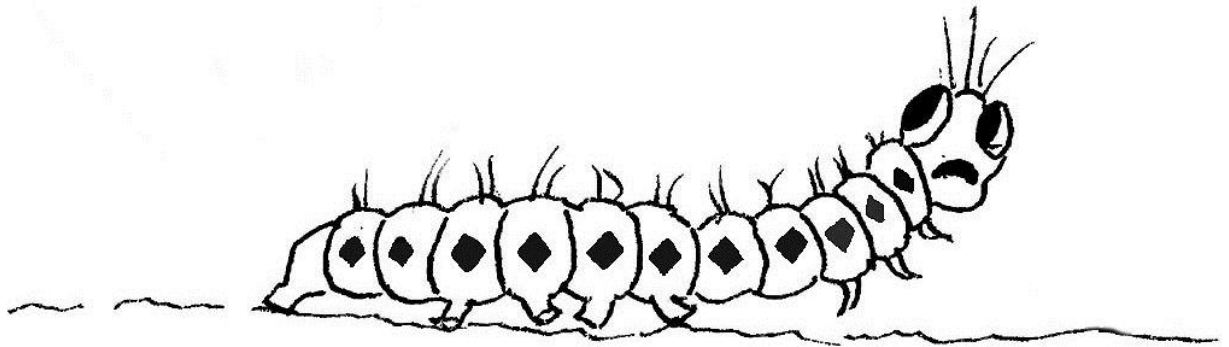
They belong to the order Hymenoptera, which includes bees, common wasps, hornets, gall wasps etc. and to the sub-order Apocrita, but not to the family Vespoidea which are the social wasps we know so well, the Diggers belong to several super-families. All the different Diggers share a way of feeding their larvae that is by seeking out the larva of another insect for its food.



The Digger is so called because it digs a hole in sand or mortar, then flies off to look for a suitable diet for its offspring. When it stings the victim in just the right place injects exactly the right amount of venom so that the larva is not killed but is only paralysed. The luckless creature is then dragged back to the hole, safely bedded in and on it laid the Digger's egg. Remember that the larva is not dead but remains alive until it is all but consumed as fresh, juicy meals by the newly hatched digger baby which, by now, is ready to pupate. The adult takes no more interest in its egg and what follows.

Once I had learned this, it was not long before I made observations, which I would otherwise not have done. One day on hard sand in dunes near Southport, my eye caught a movement of something bright green. It was a lifeless looking caterpillar being dragged along by a long-legged insect half its size. This was none other than a Digger wasp with its paralysed prey, heading for its already prepared hole. Then, on the Clent Hills, I spied some excavations from holes and was lucky to see a digger emerging from its underground chamber.

Return with me to the Malvern garden where I was directed to a corner close to a hedge bottom. There were the little heaps of red sand, remarkably enough on ordinary brownish garden soil. Buzzing around were a number of insects, which I watched for more than half an hour. I saw them disappear and re-emerge from the holes and actually saw one arrive carrying a fly. But where did the red sand come from? I turned the soil over nearby the site and found what must have been sand left there by the builder which had been covered over by the garden soil. Did the digger wasps sense in some way that this suitable medium was hidden under the loose garden soil? Well, nothing surprises me when finding out the wonders of nature.



The digger variety that uses as host a caterpillar, has to locate the nerve ganglion in each segment of the caterpillar in order to render it completely inert so has an insight into the very anatomy of its victim. This insight is not taught or learned by experience but is conveyed from generation to generation by the message in the genes. Researchers have also found that the wasp sets aside, when it is excavating, a suitable sized piece of stone to effectively cover the hole to leave it totally camouflaged and safe. Obviously it is not always successful in this.

The diggers who use beetles and other insects as food, have to wrestle with the victim in order to find the right soft spot in the abdomen in which to inject the sting. Others using flies have to return with a replenishment fly from time to time as one fly is not enough to last the grub up to pupation. They therefore have to be smart enough to remember where the covered hole is. It has been found that by slightly altering the position of small feature in the surrounding mini-landscape, the wasp can be unable to find its hungry offspring. There is also a member of this super-family, which digs holes in mortar in walls. It is known as the masonry bee.

Dudley Brook

Bromsberrow Estate - Management for Wildlife

Rosie Willder 17/03/17

The 18th Century estate at Bromsberrow was one of the first to take advantage of the government introduced agri-environment schemes to modify the land management and farm in a way more conducive to wildlife. It now has 1140 acres which includes woodland, parkland, arable and pasture. The far sighted owner recruited Rosie with her environmental expertise to help and advise.

Rosie explained how she had extensively surveyed the land to find the characteristics of each area to spot wildlife opportunities and make appropriate suggestions. This has resulted in the planting of new woodland with some open glades and leaving field margins of 6 meters which are now rich in flowers and insects. The wonderful oak drive also has large margins so the lower limbs of the oaks can be retained and the trees be left in their natural shape rather than having lower limbs removed for ease of tractor movement. New trees have been planted in the parkland to replace some ageing ones. Hedgerows are now cut in a 3 year cycle to an A shape and are left taller and so have become thicker and better barriers as well as a haven for birds. New ponds have been excavated, old orchards rejuvenated and a drinks business established from the fruit. Some of the species rich grasslands have been enhanced with more flower seeds which did not always work due to over deep drilling, but green hay from flowery meadows has proved more reliable. The less species rich fields are used for arable crops.

The various grant schemes have been going for 17 years now and the results of changes are being monitored to record changes to wildlife. Botanical transects every year have shown a big increase in species especially in the field margins, also pitfall traps have yielded an increase in invertebrates. The breeding bird survey has been carried out in later years and found 42 species, several of which are endangered, such as Yellow Hammer and Skylark.



The estate is now in a much healthier and sustainable state and hopefully with a sympathetic owner and good management, will continue to develop along wild life friendly lines for the foreseeable future.

Janet Parry

Ledbury Naturalists Public Meeting Friday 7th April 2017

Johnny Birks, a noted local mammal expert, told a fascinating story of the trials, tribulations and emerging success of our small carnivores to an audience of some 75 members and visitors. He highlighted in particular the resurgence of polecats and pine martens in the country, and in the county. His talk was the final winter event of Ledbury Naturalists' Field Club, to celebrate 50 years of its existence. Although the club has not suffered the same fate as these iconic animals it is in the process of resurgence with a healthy membership and a forward-looking outlook. More than ever we need people of all interests to join the fight to save our wildlife in the face of uncertain environmental and political pressures. The more of us who value and celebrate what we see around us the better.

Johnny's talk took the audience on a journey of historical persecutions culminating in their nadir in the post war period since when the decline has halted and a modest recovery has begun. One potentially exciting consequence of the increase in pine marten populations was their negative effect on grey squirrels, which if confirmed, would be good news for foresters in their battle against these invasive animals. More red squirrels and pine martens and fewer grey squirrels would indeed be something to savour.

Johnny concluded by comparing our situation compared to mainland Europe where we have only 13% of our landscape forested compared to an average of 46% in Europe. The lack of large tracts of forest means that larger carnivores are unlikely to be re-introduced, with the likelihood that deer populations, including our four introduced species, will continue to rampage through the woodland we have. It is not easy being a mammal ecologist trying to balance the many competing interests in, and of, our wildlife. The controversy over predatory animals, and their place in our countryside, is set to continue.

Alan Pike

Alan Pike (Secretary),
Dudley Brooke (Founder
Member & Past Chairman),
Janet Parry (Field
Secretary), Alan Starkey
(Treasurer), Brian Willder
(Past Chairman), Eden
Tanner (Chairman), Johnny
Birks (Local Mammal
Expert).



Joint meeting with Worcestershire Naturalists' Eastnor Park. 22nd April 2017. Leader Cherry Greenway.

Eleven members assembled at 10.00 am on a beautiful spring morning to walk up through the Park to the Lodge with the purpose of finding the Mistletoe Oak, one of only eleven known in Britain. Of course we also looked out for, and noted, spring flowers and new arrivals.

A bird list quickly began to grow with nuthatch, chaffinch, chiff chaff and blackcap all found in the carpark. We noted that the wild cherry, may blossom and wayfaring tree were beginning to flower. On the verge we found ground ivy, wavy bittercress, thyme-leaved speedwell, wild garlic, dog's mercury, green alkanet, wild arum, bugle and red dead-nettle. More birds were noted, jackdaw, carrion crow, raven, buzzard, blackbird, robin, goldfinch and wren.

We were delighted with an opportunity to view, through our binoculars, a male redstart, in full sunlight, calling from the top of one of the oak trees by the road. We were then conscious of more redstarts calling and counted eight other birds. We concluded that we had come upon an influx of males all trying to establish territories. In this area we also heard willow warbler and saw swallows and house martins – a first, this year, for many of the party!

Upon reaching the Mistletoe Oak Cherry Greenway explained its significance. There are only eleven such trees in the British Isles, eight of which are in Herefordshire. There is one Gloucestershire, one in Monmouthshire and one in Berkshire (Windsor Great Park).

Continuing our walk into the bottom of the valley we noted buzzard, kestrel, jay and linnets. We found some dried horse mushrooms and noted early bulbous buttercups just starting to flower. As we looked across the valley we were impressed by the great drifts of dandelion and further up the hillside the bluebells were just starting to create a lovely blue haze.

Towards the lakes the ground flora changed and smell of sweet vernal grass, caused by the trampling of walkers was present, ribwort plantain was pushing up its flowering spikes and ladies smock was flowering along the lake margin. Coltsfoot flowers were also present but the flowers were finished. The lake was lacking in obvious interest with only a pair of mallard to be seen but as we crossed the bridge a whitethroat presented itself, loudly singing, for all to see.

Other birds noted during the walk were stock dove, wood pigeon, blue tit, great tit, green wood pecker, great spotted wood pecker, song thrush and three mistle thrush, probably this year's juveniles.

Brian Willder.

Evening meeting at Woodbines, Checkley, 22nd June 2017

Fifteen members enjoyed a perfect summer evening with Mr. and Mrs. Bob Hall in Checkley. We looked round their wildflower meadow which was originally an old orchard but now boasts a wide range of grassland flowers including Common Spotted Orchids, Hypericums, Clovers, Bird's-foot Trefoil, Knapweed, Yellow Rattle and Quaking Grass as well as many other species. The insects were enjoying the warm late sunshine and providing much food for the birds.

We then walked round Checkley Common which, like many other old commons, was getting rather overgrown with trees and bracken. However, there was a great deal of Agrimony in places making a good show and a few more orchids though reduced numbers from past years. It would be good to do a plant survey to establish what is there and have a management plan before the area gets downgraded.

We were treated to a glass of wine from the local Checkley vineyard to round off a delightful evening and we hoped the local residents of Checkley will be able to keep their common in good shape for many years to come.



Janet Parry



An unidentified moth larva found in the orchard

Members' Night 17th November 2017

If you did not attend Members' night slide-show Friday evening (and more than usual did not) you missed a rare treat. The committee had decided to apply more structure to the evening, and to give us an opportunity to showcase the range of field activities we organize. The general consensus was that the new format went well.

Eden Tanner began with a compilation of photographs, from various participants, of the visit to Dorset in early July. Our visit included tours of Arne RSPB Reserve, Durlston NNR and the Herpetological Society site, and the photographs depicted the broad array of fauna and flora in that area.



Janet Parry then reviewed the latest wildlife survey at Dales Hall, Castlemorton Common and showed the seasonal diversity of the location.

Kate Wollen made an impassioned plea for more help with the Conservation work at Queenswood with the enticing prospect of seeing hibernating dormice as a bonus.

Alan Pike briefly reported on the Summer visits especially the family day at Ast Wood, the farm visit to The Leys at Pembridge and the summer picnic at Siege Wood.

The much-travelled Alan Parry showed a variety of interesting photographs from visits to Finland, Bulgaria and Spain.



Family Day at Astwood

David Tafts' contributions are always endearingly engaging and this year's was no exception as he shared photographs of visitors to his garden, including badgers with a penchant for bird food. He also showed photographs of various galls, which answered at least some of my own questions about things I have seen but not recognized.

Phyl King gave a brilliant photo-essay of the redevelopment of a pond in her garden and the consequent blooming of the wildlife therein. Quite inspirational for those of us with more modest ponds.

Dennis Beetlestone showed photographs taken on a holiday in Madagascar, lucky chap. Quite exotic and lovely to see a family of ring-tailed lemurs.

Hilary Ward had been on holiday in Crete and showed us photographs of lots of beautiful plants including a whole range of orchids.

Last, but not least, Jo Hackmann reported a very interesting video experiment with her iPhone. These were remarkably good quality and something I shall be trying out in spring. Great idea, Jo.

This was an excellent evening so a big thank you to all who contributed. Surely this format will become a regular feature of our programme.

Alan Pike

Current Club Officers

President: Michael Harper
Chairman: Eden Tanner
Vice-Chairman Michael Bradley
Hon Secretary: Alan Pike
Hon Treasurer: Alan Starkey
Survey Secretary: Janet Parry

If you have any ideas for speakers for the winter program or places to visit during the summer please contact one of the committee members or e-mail

admin@ledburynaturalists.co.

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Understanding Ancient Trees by Charles Watkins 19/01/2018

Members were entertained wonderfully by Professor Watkins of Nottingham University and a local resident and old boy of Ledbury Grammar School. Using pictures of works of art through the centuries, he showed how trees have been depicted in the landscape and how they have been managed, planted and cropped. Starting with the Romans and progressing through the middle ages to more recent times we were shown examples of planting style, the introduction of Lombardy Poplars, interpretation of foliage, coppicing and many pollards particularly of willows, a favourite with artists.

Works by Claude, Gainsborough and Constable were well represented contrasting with modern works such as an impressive Elder by David Hockney. Examples of how the English landscape has changed over the centuries was well illustrated as well as the importance of timber to the economy of the country and the lives of everyone as it was the only source of fuel and building material. Pictures of woodsmen sawing huge oaks by hand and children gathering faggots reminded us of how life has changed. It was fascinating to compare our own knowledge and observation of natural history with that seen in previous ages by other more artistic eyes.

Janet Parry



'Boat building Near Flatford Mill' - John Constable

Should Pine Martens be introduced to the Forest of Dean?

Andrew Stringer

16/02/2018

Andrew gave a very comprehensive and thought provoking illustrated talk about a scheme to reintroduce Pine Martens to the Forest of Dean and Lower Wye Valley. They are an endemic species for our country and were reduced to a tiny population in the Highlands of Scotland by indiscriminate killing of any predators by gamekeepers in Victorian times. In more enlightened times and with a much better understanding of ecology and how one species depends on another, they are not now seen as a pest and can live alongside the many other carnivores in a balanced population. Pine martens have been successfully introduced to mid Wales and are now thriving there without a problem. In fact there has been a big reduction in and even eradication of grey squirrels where Pine Martens are now living, allowing red squirrels to re-establish.

Andrew is coordinating a very comprehensive feasibility study in the forest area to ensure a new population would thrive and not be a problem for other species or humans as after the accidental release of wild boar, locals are rather wary! So far all signs are positive and even the gamekeepers are mainly on board. As they are nocturnal and live at low density the chance of seeing one is slim. But maybe we can look forward to having Pine Martens about again if translocation from a group in Scotland can begin next year.

The talk stimulated a great many interesting questions and members felt they had learnt a great deal from the evening and thanked Andrew for sharing his expertise.

Janet Parry



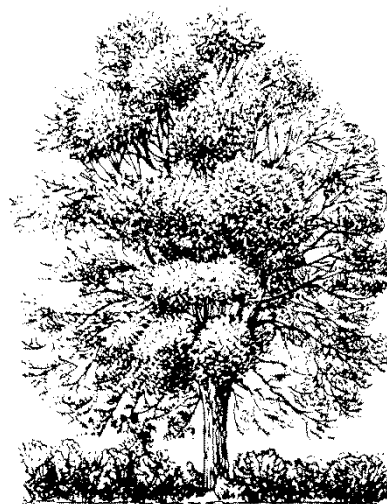
Ash Dieback Monitoring Project, Ledbury Parish

Many of you will have heard about Ash dieback, or Chalara (*Chalara fraxinea*, *Hymenoscyphus pseudoalbidus*.) This is the latest and most virulent version of a fungal disease that affects ash trees, initially causing dieback of leaves and young shoots and eventually killing the whole tree. There is great concern about the potential effects of this disease on the ash population of the UK, many people fearing that it will be decimated in much the same way as the population of English Elm has been drastically reduced by Dutch Elm Disease. Ash is one of the most prevalent trees in Herefordshire, both in woodland and as a hedgerow and field tree, so significant losses will have a major impact on landscape, ecology and livelihoods.

Tree Wardens have been requested by the Tree Council to start monitoring and surveying ash trees in their parishes, so last year Ledbury Parish TW I gathered together a small 'Ash survey team' of nine adults and two children. We trained ourselves up, many thanks to Steve Betts for his field sessions, and set about our initial survey.

We divided the parish up into 1km squares. Each volunteer surveyor was allocated one or more square and asked to select 10 trees in each square, or block of squares where access was limited. Each tree selected was photographed, located with a 10 figure OS grid reference and a description recorded on a pro forma. We aimed to start with a small but representative selection. Despite our small number we managed to record in excess of our initial target of 100 trees and these covered a good cross section of the parish in every quarter where there is access by road or public footpath. These locations contained a variety of terrain and landscape features including woods, hedgerows, farmland, pasture, riverside and small lanes, and also included parts of the town itself.

This initial survey was carried out in early September while the trees were still in full leaf. General feedback is that we all felt the trees seemed in remarkably good health. This was encouraging given the devastation the disease has caused in some parts of the country. However, we know that Chalara is present in the parish and some of the trees that were recorded may be showing early signs, but at present these are quite mild. It remains to be seen how this develops over time.



Each of the trees recorded will be surveyed and photographed again every year for at least the next five years. This should start to build a picture of the spread of the disease, which trees are affected, how quickly and how badly, and which trees, if any, remain relatively unaffected and are possibly showing signs of resistance. Ash is genetically diverse (and as we know seeds prolifically); we do not know yet how the disease will progress here and any trees that show resistance will be vital in re-establishing a healthy ash population.

We are being asked to prepare for the worst case scenario and to start planning now to replace the trees that may be lost, especially where those trees are an important part of the landscape. This will mean giving thought to which species may be an appropriate replacement both ecologically and visually. It is equally important that we don't give up on our ash trees and start cutting them down willy-nilly. The Ancient Tree Forum in particular has emphasised the importance of this, and especially, that we continue to value and protect veteran ash trees, including the many old pollards in the county.



It is worth mentioning here that the latest advice on managing these lovely old trees is to NOT re-pollard them because it is the young growth, or regrowth in this case, that is particularly susceptible to Chalara infection. These ongoing management issues will entail liaising with landowners in the parish to offer support and advice.

Anyone who is interested in this project is very welcome to get involved. We can always add more trees to our database this year so more surveyors will be welcome, as will any advice or expertise that you may be able to offer. Contact me, Anne Crane on 07854 316227, or email annecrane59@gmail.com.

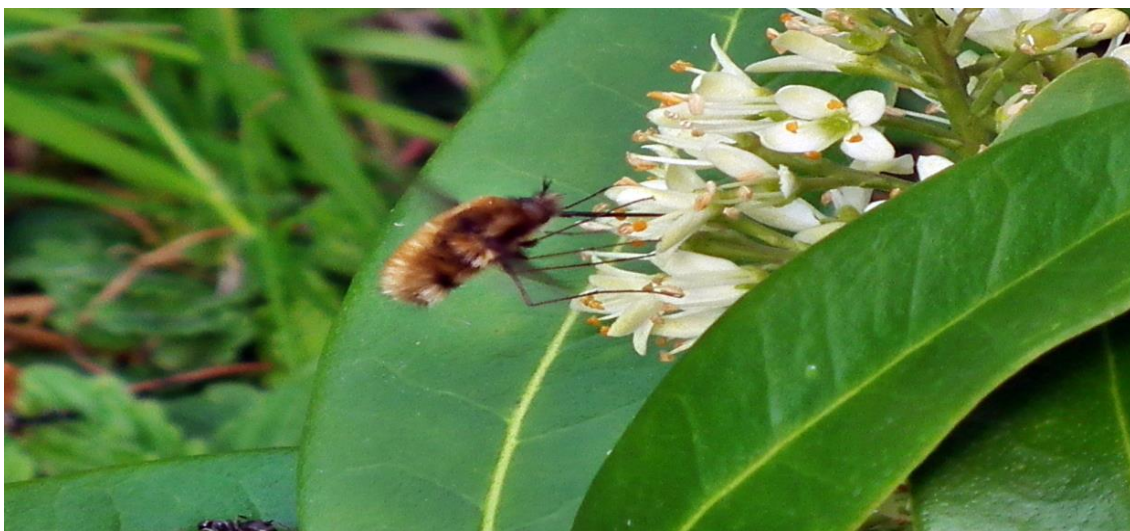
Anne Crane

Bee-flies

These delightful insects are true flies and not bees, having only one pair of visible wings, whereas bees have two pairs of wings. Along with emerging queen Bumblebees these flies are one of the most noticeable harbingers of spring, appearing as early as March although they carry on flying all the way into June.

They often visit gardens to obtain nectar from many garden plants and in my experience seem to have a particular penchant for Grape Hyacinths (*Muscari*). They mimic bumblebees in appearance and are about ½ inch long and generally brown in appearance. They hatch from a pupa in spring and are most commonly seen in April and May and can naturally be found in woodland clearings and on hedge banks where they often feed on Primroses and Violets.

The picture below shows how they hold onto flowers with their long legs whilst sipping nectar and yet often still flap their wings, giving the impression that they are hovering whilst feeding. This individual is feeding on the flowers of a Skimmia bush in my garden, which attracts many insects when it flowers in late March and through April. You can also see the proboscis emerging from the head like a stiff drinking straw to suck-up the nectar. Unlike butterflies which can roll up their proboscis when in flight, the Bee-fly cannot do so, and so it flies with its proboscis sticking out before it, as if carrying a lance in to battle. To me this seems to be a potentially hazardous thing to do, but Bee-flies do not seem accident prone.



Dark-edged Bee-fly (*Bombylius major*) feeding on the nectar of a garden Skimmia, using its long legs to hold on, while its wings are a ‘blur’ of rapid motion. 24th April 2014

Although there are several species of Bee-fly, the only one that is common and widespread is the Large (or Greater) Bee-fly (*Bombylius major*). In more

modern literature, this is now being referred to as the Dark-edged Bee-fly as it not really any larger than some other Bee-fly species, but when at rest clearly has a 'Dark-edge' to the front of its wings, as can be clearly seen in the picture below of a specimen on a Primrose.



Dark-edged Bee-fly (*Bombylius major*) feeding on the nectar of a Primrose on 26th March 2017.

I took the picture of this Dark-edged Bee-fly on the primrose in 2017 as it seemed to be a good year for the insect with lots flying in March, and my patch of Primroses had grown into an impressive carpet and I thought it would be nice to photograph the Bee-flies on a native wild flower.

When looking over the pictures at a later date I realised that one Bee-fly was different to the others and I identified it as a Dotted Bee-Fly (*Bombylius discolor*). The picture below shows one of these specimens, with scattered dots visible on the wings, which are the reason for its name. It is similar in size to the previous species, but also has a noticeably dark rear to its abdomen which appears almost black. This was an exciting discovery because as recently as 2011 this Bee-fly was still described as rare and confined to southern England. However, in the last few years it has been observed more frequently and also recorded spreading into the Midlands; all this being attributed to the changing climate.

Sadly these otherwise delightful insects have a dark secret, as they are parasites. When the females are ready to lay their eggs, they will fly over the ground searching for the underground nests of solitary mining bees. Here their eggs are laid, and in due course the larvae become a parasite of the bees nest and offspring.



Dotted Bee-Fly (*Bombylius discolor*) feeding on the same patch of Primroses on 26th March 2017.

However, watching them lay their eggs is fascinating, as they do not land but whilst hovering in mid-air, flick their eggs towards the entrance hole of the bees nest. It must be a very hit and miss affair, but seems to work. I was fortunate to observe this happening on a sunny day in April, on the rough grass bank between my front door and gate. The female was flying perhaps about 6 inches (15 – 20mm) above the ground and then paused in mid-flight, and appeared to convulse with a sudden downward movement of the abdomen. I watched this being repeated for some minutes, but it sadly proved impossible to capture with my camera. I must investigate which species of solitary mining bees are nesting in the bank.

So when you start to notice the first spring flowers and insects, look carefully at any brown Bumblebees as they may be a Bee-fly and they may even be the ‘new’ Dotted Bee-fly.

David Taft

Garden Survey

The Cuckoo was first heard in Putley on the 19th April, just a few days later than last year. A Chiffchaff was heard on the 24th March and a Swift was seen in Ledbury on the 1st May. A Barn owl was only recorded from 1 survey in Leddington, with Little Owl from 2 gardens.

A family of Pied Wagtails were seen enjoying a garden waterfall and Marsh tits were recorded enjoying a garden bird feeder. Juvenile peregrines were seen overhead in Colwall. Two Mute Swans were seen flying overhead.

Muntjac were only recorded in one garden this year, although judging by the amount seen in local woods we cannot assume that the population is in decline.

Some mammal highlights seen, were a dormouse in 1 garden, a stoat in another and a bat roost in a loft over the summer. Badgers were seen almost nightly in a garden in Colwall and a hedgehog in 1 garden after a gap of 18 years. Also back after not being seen for 27 years was a common lizard in a porch in Colwall. Grass Snake eggs hatched again in a compost heap in Coddington.

Silver-washed Fritillary butterflies were recorded in three gardens and a White-letter Hairstreak in one. Harlequin Ladybirds have been hibernating throughout a cottage in Coddington, reflecting their general spread in this area.

Kate Wollen

Summer Trip 2018

Plans are well in hand for this year's trip which will be to North Devon. We will travel on the Monday 11th June and return to Ledbury on the afternoon of Wednesday the 13th of June. On Monday afternoon we will visit the extensive dune system at Braunton Burrows. On Tuesday we are planning a trip to Lundy Island which should be very interesting but don't forget your seasick pills! There is also a planned visit to a good butterfly site on Wednesday morning before we return on Wednesday afternoon.

If you are interested please make sure Kate Wollen or Michael Bradley know as soon as possible as numbers for accommodation & the boat trip have to be finalised very soon.

Book Review Corner

Alan Pike

Time for a little innovation, and what better place to make a start than the bookshelf? For this edition I will make my selection but in future issues it is open house. Tell us about your favourite nature-related books, or, better still, write a review.

Call me old-fashioned, a Luddite even, but I love the feel and look of a book. There is great pleasure to be had in handling and browsing the pages before settling down to read it. My first selections fulfil my simple pleasures in spades, and I hope you will be convinced enough to at least search them out and judge for yourself.

Lost Words by Robert Macfarlane & Jackie Morris was written in response to the decision to remove words such as acorn, blackberry, bluebell, conker and kingfisher from the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*, in favour of words like broadband. *Lost Words* brings back the words in ‘spells’ and beautiful artwork making for a lavish book that is both engaging and inspiring. It is designed for children, but anyone who loves books will cherish it. It is large format making it a bit unwieldy but allows the artist, Jackie Morris, space for her brilliant artwork. Robert Macfarlane is a Cambridge academic who must have a higher profile than most of his colleagues through his imaginative writing about nature and the natural environment. Have a look at this clip:



<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/education-42243879/lost-words-as-children-stay-indoors>

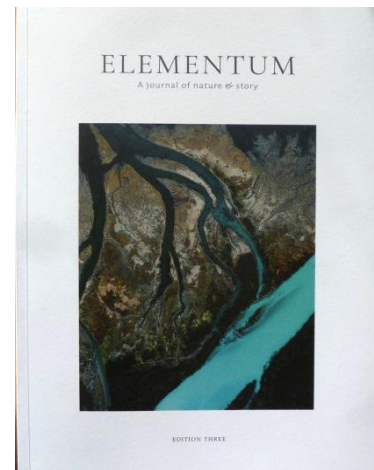
Lost Words has also captured the imagination of many as this article in the Guardian shows:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/10/the-lost-words-campaign-delivers-nature-spellbook-to-scottish-schools>

ISBN-10: 0241253586. Hamish Hamilton, 2017

The second book that has brought me great pleasure is *Elementum*. It is actually a biannually published journal, and the theme of edition 3 is roots, in the broadest sense. It has been lovingly produced and is a joy to read. The website at:

<https://www.elementumjournal.com/in-print> will provide details of the stories within.



Both of these books are stocked by Ledbury Books & Maps. Go take a look; I vouch that if you are a booklover you will not leave without one of them.



Wild Kingdom by Stephen Morris a naturalist, broadcaster, television producer and advocate for Avalon Marshes near Glastonbury is a review of the state of our wildlife, presented by major habitat type. It is both depressing and happily uplifting as the narrative records the losses but also the successes of conservation efforts. I had all but forgotten about the debacle of giving tax breaks to the likes of Terry Wogan to invest in spruce plantations in the Flow country in Sutherland. Remember that? It seems almost impossible to conceive nowadays until one remembers David Cameron's hare-brained and wilful scheme to sell off our forests to private owners. We do have short memories. This book is just the thing to buy for the beginner, like my daughter who has suddenly woken up to the joys of woodlands and nature in general. A good read and a good reminder of what yet needs to be done.

ISBN 978 0 099 58163 5 Vintage Books 2016.

And before I leave you I want to mention *Few and Far Between*, on the Trail of Britain's Rarest Animals by Charlie Elder. This is one man's mission to find and see some of our rarest species. He writes in the first person and the narrative is light-hearted. I have not read it all yet but as soon as I finish reading Robert Macfarlane's *Wild Places* I will turn to this and report back in due course.



ISBN 978 1 4729 0519 2 Bloomsbury 2015.

Childhood Haunts and Pink-footed Geese

At last we have time to visit some of the areas which are of interest to us and so last Autumn we spent a long weekend near Martin Mere, the WWT reserve in Lancashire.

The reasons were two-fold, firstly we haven't visited Martin Mere since shortly after it opened in the 1970's and secondly it is within a stone's throw of the village where Eden spent his early childhood.

Since things have changed somewhat since the early 1950s I carried out a certain amount of research before we left and we were able to cover several interesting sites with ease.

Our first port of call was Mere Sands Wood Nature Reserve in Rufford where Eden lived and remembers red squirrels in this area, however, inclement weather kept them hidden so whilst the site was well worth a visit and a provided a pleasant stretch of the legs after the long journey up we didn't stay too long as there were many other gems to explore.

Martin Mere was to be the focus of our visit so we spent the rest of the day at the site getting to know the hides and best view points. We were not disappointed and were able to view the many thousands of visiting pink-footed geese.

After spending the night at a Premier Inn near Ormskirk, very good value and central for this sort of excursion, we set off for the National Trust Woodlands near Formby in search of the red squirrels once more. This site proved more fruitful and we were able to watch many squirrels as they romped around the pine woodland. They are truly enchanting. We were visiting on a Friday so it was reasonably quiet but, as this is clearly a very busy site probably due to its close proximity to Liverpool, it is best visited in the week rather than weekends.



We then carried on to Marshside, a RSPB reserve just north of Southport, this is a fantastic wetland site providing great viewing of the many ducks and waders present and also little, cattle and greater egrets. We also returned the following day, the weather was vile but we had plenty of company as a long

billed dowitcher had arrived and was causing great interest amongst the twitchers of East Lancashire.

The weather over the weekend was slightly challenging so we opted to spend more time at Martin Mere and missed out on visiting a few other sites we had earmarked – now pencilled in for next year along with Blackpool illuminations which we thought would probably be better viewed without a 50mph gale.



Pink-footed geese at Martin Mere

Martin Mere did not disappoint, we were able to stay late in the day to watch the geese arriving and visit early in the morning to see them leave, amongst a volley of shots from the local wildfowlers in the surrounding fields! The dowitcher also pitched up at the reserve and provided a better view. We were also treated to a close view of four Marsh Harriers and were able to watch them quartering the site at close range – they are truly distinctive and meant we were easily able to identify a bird we saw earlier this year at Seaton Wetlands on our annual foray to Sidmouth and the Exe estuary.

We spent a very enjoyable weekend but like every other site I feel we only scratched the surface of this interesting area and we are definitely planning another trip this Autumn – we might even get to Blackpool!



Wendy Tanner

Scarlet Tiger Moth (*Callimorpha dominula*)

This beautiful day-flying moth has, during the last couple of years, been increasingly reported in and around the Malvern Hills where I live. Hopefully, many of you will soon see this delightful moth if you have not already, and so I thought it was worthwhile writing a little about them to hopefully enhance your appreciation when you come across them.



Scarlet Tiger Moth (*Callimorpha dominula*) on Green Alkanet (*Pentaglottis sempervirens*) on 11th June 2017 by the Wyche Cutting.

The moth appears from late May, through June and into July and is often seen associated with Green Alkanet (*Pentaglottis sempervirens*) as shown in the photograph. The moth, once mainly found only in south and south-west England, has recently been spreading increasingly into the Midlands. The photographed specimen was part of a group of 30 or more on a patch of Green Alkanet and Stinging Nettles, near the Wyche Primary School where they attracted quite an audience.

The caterpillars feed on comfrey, nettles and a range of plants including the introduced Green Alkanet which has also been spreading north from southern England. When I moved to the Malverns in 1990 Green Alkanet was hardly seen on the hills, but now it is widespread on banks, verges and waste ground and is competing successfully with our native flora.

Although the moth has appeared more recently than the plant, it has certainly become widely noticed over the last few years. It has a wingspan of 2 inches or so (60mm), and bright colours, with the red colouring of the underwing giving it the 'scarlet' epithet. It often appears in considerable numbers where Green Alkanet is present.

Later in the summer its caterpillars can also be found in considerable numbers on its food plant. They are hairy and brightly coloured, predominantly yellow and black, and have been known to eat all the leaves of Green Alkanet, leaving just a skeleton. They hibernate during the winter and finish growing the following spring, before finally pupating and emerging as an adult moth from late May onwards.



Scarlet Tiger Moth (*Callimorpha dominula*) caterpillar nearly fully grown found on Stinging Nettle leaves on the 4th April.

I have been fortunate to find the caterpillars feeding in my garden over the last four or five years, like the one pictured. But, only in the last two years has the occasional adult moth been seen in flight during June. So, look out for Green Alkanet and you stand a real chance of spotting both this adult moth and its caterpillars. This reminds me that I should add some Green Alkanet to my wild flower patch.

David Taft

Field Survey 2018 - Janet Parry

This year we are going to survey the grounds at Coddington Court, now the Buddhist centre Adhithana. The community is working hard to make the estate as eco-friendly and natural as possible having installed an extensive reed bed lagoon system for the sewerage, planted 3 acres of woodland and seeded a flower meadow so far. There are several large deep ponds as well as the reed bed lagoons and the original veteran trees and other wild areas are being managed and cared for. They are also developing more formal areas of garden near the main house. The whole site is maturing well and has some potentially interesting corners. The community are very interested to know what wildlife is being attracted to the site. They have many visitors from all over the world, many of whom are town dwellers, unfamiliar with the natural world and our survey could be used to raise awareness of the wonders of our countryside.

As Thursday afternoons seemed to work last year and most people can make it, I propose to continue using the **2nd Thursday in the month** apart from March and June which will be a week different due to calendar clashes. Hence the dates for this year will be

March 15, April 12, May 10, June 7, July 12, August 9, September 13, October 11.

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. The Buddhists are happy for any member to come anytime they wish on other days. Dogs are welcome.

Coddington Court is on OS Explorer map 190 at SO 724 430. It is immediately south of Mayfield Farm and marked as "school" on the map as it once was! From Ledbury, go north under railway bridge and fork right to Wellington Heath. At top of hill keep right at junction with tree then turn left on Raycombe Lane. Keep going for 1.5 miles, going right at a triangle. The site entrance is soon on the left. From Malvern, go to Colwall and along Mill lane following signs to Coddington Vineyard. Pass the church, turn right at T junction then left in about a mile at next letterbox. Pass 4 houses and the site is on the right. Please park carefully in the Car Park near the entrance. There is a good website with further information if you wish to look it up.

Thank you to all who turned out last year and I hope you will be able to join in again this year. We still need spider and lichen experts if anybody knows any. 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 new wanting to come, please let me know on 01531 640640 or email janet@jobeys.plus.com

Field Survey Report 2017

Dales Hall Castlemorton

by Janet Parry

The club was introduced to Dales Hall during a summer outing in 2014. Members were well entertained by the owners, Tim and Rosemary Cameron, and enjoyed seeing their delightful smallholding on the east of the Malvern range. When Peter Garner, county botanical recorder and club member, was tasked with writing a book in 2017 titled, "The Nature of the Malverns" the club was asked if it could contribute by adding data for this area by carrying out the annual survey there. The Camerons kindly consented to our monthly visits and helped as much as possible.

Background

Dales Hall is situated at SO 768 390 on the east side of the Malvern Hills at the NW corner of Castlemorton Common, and adjacent to Shadybank Common to the North. It is in the Malvern Hills AONB and subject to the rules of the Malvern Hills Trust. (formerly Conservators). The Camerons have lived and farmed there for 36 years with many rural enterprises but always following a wildlife friendly regime. The farm is currently in the government's Higher Level Stewardship scheme. They farm 42 acres which was originally owned by Eastnor Estate. This includes a flowery hay meadow, "The Wonderment", both ancient and newly planted woodland, an old orchard, some pasture and steep bracken covered hillsides. The whole site slopes to the east with wonderful views of the Severn Valley and the Cotswolds beyond. It is all well drained though the lower area is more marshy. The Camerons have planted several areas of new woodland which are now 30 years old. They also have commoners rights and used to graze sheep on the adjacent commons.

Dales Hall is situated just to the east of the Major East Malverns Fault Line which runs behind the Wonderment. To the west are the Precambrian rocks of the Malverns ridge, which in this area were erupted from volcanoes. In the Dales Hall area, there are scree deposits formed when rocks from the hills above were frost shattered, moved down the slope and were deposited on top of the red Triassic mudstones of the Severn valley. The site has no public foot paths through it, though several paths pass by giving access to the Malvern Hills which rise steeply to the west. There is an historic farm house of great age and complexity and an extensive garden which adjoins the woodland but was not included in the survey apart from some interest around the small pond.

Over the years management techniques have changed but there has always been an eco-friendly approach to the land. The hay meadow had soft fruit grown in strips at one end in the 80s but was later sown with grass seed and is now managed by late mowing which has benefited the flora. The woodland is over-stood coppice and was felled in 1914 to make gun carriages for WW1, but has

since regrown. In 1988/9 areas of new mixed woodland were planted on the steeper sections and which are now maturing. The lower field, Baregains, has always been pasture and, as its name suggests, was never very productive for other crops. A marshy area at the bottom of the lower field was planted with Alders which thrive there and have taken up a lot of the moisture.

Part of the steeper land to the north is Bracken covered like the adjoining common and not productive and only used for grazing. The old orchard has been left and now has many very mature trees many of which have lost branches and fallen but continue to flower and fruit well



Conducting the Survey

Club members paid eight visits to the site between March and October in 2017 to carry out the survey. Moira Jenkins conducted a geological survey of the area. All flowering plants, grasses, trees, fungi, ferns, birds, insects, and other invertebrates found along the way were recorded. Visits at other times by members and friends have added more species to the records and the Camerons helped with bird records.

Hilary Ward supervised the botany and Michael Bradley and David Taft tackled the invertebrates. 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 in on the club 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
153	32	38	47	43	6	130

Discussion

The varying habitats yielded a good range of species. Of the 153 flowering plants identified, the most densely populated area was the hay meadow. Here there was abundant Yellow Rattle, Pignut, Ox-eye Daisy and Meadow

Vetchling as well as many Common-spotted Orchid flowers widely distributed in May. There were also several patches of Broadleaved Heleborine, about 15 to 20 spikes in all. It was very pleasing to find this quite rare plant blooming well. There was a range of other plants such as Burnet Saxifrage, Red Campion, Musk Mallow, Goat's Beard, Ladies Bedstraw, 3 Stitchworts, 3 Clovers and 5 Speedwells, mainly in the meadow. The old orchard was grazed but had a range of common flowers and a few Harebells in summer.

In the old woodland the floor was carpeted with a wonderful show of Bluebells in April and then Ramsons in May as well as having typical woodland plants such as Golden Saxifrage, Woodruff, Wood Anemone and some Wood Spurge. The marshy area in the lower part of the farm had Wild Angelica, Meadowsweet and a little Ragged Robin as well as commoner Marsh Thistles.

A range of 19 grasses were identified, mainly in the meadow including Sweet Vernal Grass, Yorkshire Fog and Crested Dog's-tail. Surprisingly, no Quaking Grass was found as this is often in ancient undisturbed grassland. Damper patches yielded 4 types of Rush and one Woodrush as well as 8 species of Sedge. These were distributed in the woodland and damper areas of the farm.

There were 9 species of Fern including many patches of Adder's-tongue in the meadow early in the year showing its undisturbed status as do the Orchids and Helleborines. A Rustyback fern was found on the garden wall and the woodland had Scaly Male-fern, Broad Buckler-fern, Male-fern, Hart's-tongue and Hard Shield-fern, whilst Bracken abounded on the steeper hillsides by the common.



There were 38 varieties of trees and shrubs. The ancient woodland, once coppiced and now regrown was mainly Oak and Ash with some Silver Birch but there was a stand of Small-leaved Limes again indicating an ancient woodland. The newer woods were planted with Oak, Ash, Cherry and Birch as mixed woodland with the intention of using the wood for fuel and in other enterprises on the farm and they had grown well in the 30 years since they were planted. Hedgerows also contained a good mixture of Blackthorn, Field Maple, Hawthorn, Spindle, Holly, Hazel, Wild Service, Dogwood and 3 species of Rose. There was a magnificent ancient Oak tree at the top of Baregains pasture and another of great age by a path to the north. They would have been part of the common before it was cultivated and escaped being used for timber. Hopefully they will survive many more years.

There were not a great many fungi to be found in the autumn as it had been rather dry and cool. However, 34 were identified, mainly in the woodland.

They included the unusual *Abortiporus biennis* found round the base of the old Small-leaved Lime stools. This is rarely found in the county. Others included Honey Fungus, Yellow Fieldcap, Field mushroom and Parasols as well as a selection of rusts and galls such as the Alder Tongue fungus on Alder catkins, A slime mould graphically called “Cat Sick” was also seen in October. It had been thought that the garden lawn was a good site for waxcaps but none appeared during the survey.

Of the 130 invertebrates identified, 57 were Lepidoptera and included a good selection of butterflies enjoying the profuse flowers in the meadow. They included Small Tortoiseshell, Orange tip, Ringlet, both Dark Green and Silver-washed Fritillaries, Holly and Common Blues, Brimstone, Small Copper, Peacock and Marbled Whites flying above the flowers in the summer. There was also a range of moths amongst the vegetation during the day including the Hummingbird Hawkmoth. There were doubtless many more night flying insects but no moth traps were run this year. Hoverflies, aphids and midges, beetles, grasshoppers and sheildbugs were also represented.

Six species of bee were noted and a few wasps, one of which, *Dolichovespula sylvestris*, a tree wasp, was on nearly every Helleborine flower. This wasp is an important pollinator for the species. There were 4 species from the dragonfly family by the pond. Many galls were found mainly on leaves of trees including the unusually shaped Red Nail Gall on Dogwood.



Afternoons, which were survey times, were not the best time for bird spotting. However, 43 species were noted and the list was supplemented by the Camerons who were in a better position to notice them. The list included common woodland birds such as Nuthatch, Green and Greater-spotted Woodpeckers, Rook, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Goldcrest, Whitethroat and Wren. Raptors such as Sparrowhawks and a Peregrine had been seen as well as a pair of Red Kites which seem to be in the area now. There were 4 species of tit, House Martins, Swallows, Spotted Flycatchers and Pied Wagtails near the house with pond visits from Mallards and Heron. A Woodcock was heard calling in the lower meadow and Cuckoos sang in May.

The survey did not actively look for vertebrates but the pond had frogs and an unidentified newt, probably palmate. Signs of badgers, rabbits and moles were frequently encountered and a Muntjac deer was heard calling as well as leaving

droppings and hoof prints. The Camerons noted that there were many bats flying in the summer but the species had not been identified.

Conclusion

Dales Hall is a delightful place and a haven for wildlife with a good range of habitats from meadow to ancient woodland. There are plenty of wild and undisturbed corners with rotting wood and wild vegetation all inter-connected by thick hedgerows allowing easy movement of species. The management over the last 30 years has enhanced the environment for wildlife so now there are abundant flowering plants supporting insect life and on up the food chain to birds and mammals. Hopefully this smallholding in its historic landscape, will continue to enhance the environment and add to the special ethos of the Malvern hills for years to come.

We would like to thank Tim and Rosemary Cameron 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 Ann Bowker, Michael Bradley, Anne Crane, John Davies, Caroline and David Evans, Peter Garner, Cherry Greenway, Moira Jenkins, Garth Lowe, Janet Parry, Alan Pike, David Taft, Eden and Wendy Tanner, Hilary Ward, Sally Webster and Kate Woollen.



AROUND OCHRE HILL 2017

January

8.1.17 First week as winter should be – cold, bright and sunny. Around freezing by day and -6C at night. I kept birds well fed and watered & there have been large flocks of fieldfares eating all the left over apples, accompanied by a lot of blackbirds & redwings. A flock of about 20 long tailed tits visit daily & several small flocks of finches. Regular visitors are chaffinches, goldfinches, greenfinches & so far one female bullfinch. Several house sparrows are in the hedges, which is good, as we have not had these for many years. We had five robins at one time & many dunnocks, blue & great tits, & a few coal tits. Today I noticed a pair of great spotted woodpeckers, who have been drumming throughout December & a pair of nuthatches, & blackcaps coming to feeders. There is always a wren to be seen, probably one of many, as they use the bird boxes in the winter. There is one pied wagtail & a friend has a grey wagtail, nearby. Squirrels are very active & several pheasants, including 3 males. Bulbs are growing well & snowdrops in flower & a few primroses.

9.1.17 Saw a female lesser redpoll today.

10.1.17 A female and two male bullfinches in a hawthorn tree today – I have not seen this many together for several years.

15.1.17 A layer of snow has been and gone & mild today. A few aconites in flower & wonderful scents from Sarcococca, Viburnum & Daphne bushes all over the garden. Very uplifting! A heron flew over yesterday. I have put cayenne pepper amongst the bird food on the bird table to deter the squirrels & it does seem to help.

22.1.17 Blackbirds fighting over the apples quite ferociously. A willow tit appeared today & muntjacs are coming regularly – they like apples also.

28.1.17 I have been doing the 'Big Garden Birdwatch': the day started cold and gloomy, with few birds, but they did come eventually & the highlight was as I went to shut the gate, a red kite flew over, swooping & circling over the hill for several minutes, a thrilling sight. I also saw honey bees on aconites and the Daphne bush.



February

6.2.17 A few siskins have come recently & one redpoll, but I have not seen waxwings, which seem to be all over the country! We have no berries left, so maybe that is why. A blue tit went into one of our new nest boxes, but no interest in our camera box yet. Rain & colder weather forecast for later.

12.2.17 Bitterly cold for few days, East wind straight from Russia, snow in Spain & Greek Islands! Very unusual, affecting crops of vegetables etc. destined for us, so not good news. Overnight we have had a covering of snow, now turning to sleet, so more food out for the birds.

18.2.17 Foggy, & 11deg.C today. Song thrush building up repertoire to compete with other birds now singing all around, making spring seem not too far away. We sat at dusk watching bird boxes & saw two great tits going into one by our summerhouse. They stayed in for a while.

20.2.17 Warm air from Carribean making today a good gardening day, so have been out all day, clearing up. Birds very active & I saw a red admiral butterfly. There were a few bats out last night as well as a tawny owl. One male bullfinch & a pair of ravens in the garden today.

22.2.17 First frogspawn in top small pond today, a large clump. Mild at 13deg C but storm 'Doris' due overnight, with gales, and snow in the north.

24.2.17 More frogspawn & three frogs nearby. Storm Doris has passed, causing havoc, with a few branches down, snow elsewhere but not here. Large pond is full of blanketweed, which I have never had there before – seems early in the year for this problem.

28.2.17 Grey wagtail on the roof again, looking beautiful in the sunshine. There seem to be several around the village. A sparrowhawk landed in a tree to rest, which I studied with binoculars. It had attracted my attention as it looked a little larger than a mistle thrush, had a grey back and very white front, no bar markings & yellow feet. I did wonder if it was another bird of prey I did not know. It flew down the hill with its tail fanned out, having bars on that, but only white flecks on its wings – perhaps a young bird?

March

7.3.17 Camera box still not occupied. Small flocks of siskins & redpolls about. I found a complete set of feathers from a male pheasant under a magnolia tree but no body & wondered what may have done this. There have been two similar piles in the woods recently also. Surely a fox would take the bird, feathers & all, so it must be a bird of prey? As I walked across the garden a sparrowhawk flew over my shoulder, causing a draught on my face & snatched a blue tit out of a tree right in front of me.

14.3.17 Heard my first chiff chaff today & a Californian Quail, as last year. We also have a few red legged partridges feeding & being noisy in the valley. Several yellow brimstone butterflies about also.

18.3.17 Wild daffodils in the orchard flowering well & many multi-coloured primroses, which have cross bred with garden plants! All very colourful. A few wood anemones also out & 11 snakes head fritillaries, as well as a couple of stems where flowers had been nipped off – pheasants, or rabbits? These seem to have come on their own, but I don't know where from. Dog's mercury is also in flower. Three pied wagtails on the roof now & daily chiff chaff calls, The sparrowhawk is unfortunately a regular visitor at present.

20.3.17 Large toad in the vegetable garden today.

24.3.17 Cold with rain & hail showers, but the Californian Quail is heard daily & the red legged partridges entertaining us with their comical activities. A green woodpecker is often on the grass & the frogspawn has all hatched now. Tadpoles very active. Long tailed tits are nesting in the hedge near at the back of the house, as I see a pair daily near the small ponds there.

28.3.17 Found a few more fritillaries today, red and white ones now looking lovely & more to open yet. Summerhouse nest box has blue tits now feeding young, but the one downhill

from that has been pecked regularly by a great spotted woodpecker, although it seems not to have been used. Great tits and wrens are nesting in the summerhouse roof & a robin in the holly bush next to it, so it is an area we are not spending too much time near, to avoid disturbing them all. I saw an orange tip butterfly on 26th & many brimstones. Newts are very active in the large pond. A red kite flew over in the afternoon, coming from the Coddington direction.

29.3.17 The red kite appeared over the garden twice today.

April

20.4.17 April so far mainly warm and dry, and birds very active. Several chiff chaffs are now calling, with song thrush and blackbirds singing beautifully. Blue tits have been very busy feeding in summerhouse nest box, but all is quiet now, so I hope they have fledged and not been attacked, or failed – it seems quite early to be finding enough food for young. I had seen a blue tit collecting aphids from an elder bush nearby, but it would need a lot to feed a brood. I cannot see any nearby. I saw my first swallow here on 18th, but had seen some on Bromyard Downs before, and house martins elsewhere.

There are many orange tip and holly blue butterflies around now and wasps in the summerhouse roof! We have so many tadpoles that we are now giving them small bits of dog food. It has been about 11-16deg C for a while and dry. Some ground is beginning to crack.

21.4.17 Two sparrowhawks overhead – one cheeped, which attracted the other, then they both circled and flew away. A blue tit flew out of the apparently deserted nest box by the summerhouse, but did not return.

24.4.17 After lovely weather a change is on the way, with snow, hail and thunder forecast! I was in the drive, alerted by agitated blackbird noises in the hedge. I thought a cat was after them and went to assist. To my horror after a lot of scuffling deep in the holly hedge a sparrowhawk, quite large, struggled out at ground level clutching a female blackbird which it seemed to have taken off her nest. I could do nothing and about a dozen other blackbirds pursued it across and through the trees, to no avail. It had struggled to take flight from the ground and I was left distressed, thinking she probably had eggs or young to feed in the nest. She had put up quite a fight inside the holly hedge, assisted by the other birds.

26.4.17 A pair of pied wagtails on cider house roof today. There are several swallows overhead now, looking in our garage, where they usually nest.

29.4.17 Heard first cuckoo this morning, in the distance. Lunchtime a red kite spent at least 15 minutes quartering over the garden and next door, swooping to the ground there. I had a good place to watch it from, the sun showing up all its colours and markings beautifully. Yesterday I saw two nuthatches going in and out of the nest box the woodpecker had previously been attacking. It has not done so for some time, so I think the nuthatches began nesting in it after that had happened. All seems well.

May

25.5.17 May has been variable, with some warm days, cold nights and generally very dry. One week we had heavy rain, thunder and hail storms. These did a lot of damage in the garden, with hostas shredded and seedlings destroyed. Blue tits have fledged from the summerhouse nest box, it seems a second brood, so I am still not sure what happened to the first ones. It looks as if the nuthatches have fledged also. There was no interest in our camera box this year at all. I have grown giant echiums this year and they are covered with butterflies, painted lady, small white, and ringlet. Bees are enjoying them also. The orchids in

the grass, which we leave uncut for about six weeks, are just showing colour. There are over 30 this year. There are swallows nesting in the garage and quite a few are flying with house martins around the valley. The fields full of buttercups at the bottom of our garden. I have seen three swifts so far. There are more shrews and voles than I have seen in recent years and goldfinches are nesting near the cider house.

27.5.17 Wonderful sunrise awoke me at 5am, glowing red all round our bedroom. Rain and storms moving north soon arrived and as it began a beautiful rainbow glowed against the dark backdrop of the advancing wall of rain. It had passed by the time I woke again, a little later and the birds were all out active and singing. I saw a large green dragonfly and two nymphs on an iris in the pond. Saw 4 swifts last night.

June

1.6.17 27degC to end May, but only 24degC today and a little fresher! Sat and watched many bats during the evening and a large one flew past very close to my face. As I turned to look at it, a barn owl was gliding low and silently over the garden, about 8 feet off the ground and very close to us. As it got dark we came in and by the back door I stepped on something soft and rubbery, thinking it was the dog's toy ball, but on close inspection it was a very large toad. I thought the dog may have picked it up and dropped it there. Luckily I had not put much weight on it and it seemed alright, and after a short time ambled off to hide behind a flowerpot.



2.6.17 Only 18C today and during our first coffee break a red kite flew over, pursued by three crows until out of sight. Kites are being seen in the village much more now and they are nesting at Eastnor and Petty France, which is probably the ones that we see, as well as in the Malvern Hills. I have seen a lot of painted lady butterflies recently.

18.6.17 Very hot, 30C now, and for a while. Many horse flies about and many complaining about bites. Apart from those mentioned, there are not many butterflies about, generally. Our wild flower area, where the grass is uncut, is looking very colourful and full of bees and other insects, but not butterflies. Hedges and trees are full of fledglings and plenty of food for them. Our swallows seem to have fledged, with three young, but still return often to the garage. 5 swifts around now, presumably a young family from the Church tower, where they usually nest. Several frogs in our small pond, watching us from under a lily leaf.

19.6.17 I saw a small tortoiseshell and several meadow brown butterflies today. Possibly a speckled wood also, but too fast to be sure! A family of goldcrests were in the top of an oak tree.

21.6.17 34C today, overtaking 1976 as hottest June day! Goldcrests in oak tree again, calling to each other and a sparrowhawk about again.

29.6.17 Much cooler (17-19C) after heatwave and some much needed rain. Plants and shrubs and trees all need rain now and many wilting a lot. More ringlet and small tortoiseshell butterflies about now. I found a nest with two eggs in it, whilst gardening, and left that area. I think it was a wren's nest. There was a bird in it later. I saw a red kite again later, as I was trying to deal with the blanket weed in the large pond.

July

7.7.17 Hot again and still mainly dry. Flying ants here and attacking the players at Wimbledon! We have cut the grass in the wild flower areas. The top part we will keep cut now, but let the lower parts grow again, with paths through. The orchids should have had time to seed by now.

After the hot weather there are suddenly a lot of butterflies, ringlet, small tortoiseshell, meadow brown and a few commas, a red admiral, yellow brimstone, and several high brown fritillaries. They are quite large and beautiful. Also there are many ladybirds, mainly 7 spot, but all types, including harlequin and many larvae and all stages between. They seem to be living in harmony, at this stage. I have not seen so many for many years.



I have seen hedgehog droppings, but no hedgehogs yet. There is a large toad living in a small pebble pond by the back door – possibly the one I stepped on!

9.7.17 I watched a hummingbird hawk moth on valerian flowers as I was watering pots and enjoyed the aerial ballet show!

22.7.17 Now cooler and about an inch of rain. Many butterflies now and bats and dragonflies. Regularly see 6 swifts now and a lot of swallows, but not now returning to the garage. We have found a few large toads in damp undergrowth and a pygmy shrew.

August

24.8.17 Generally a cool month, with rain at times, but not really enough to help the plants. Butterflies less now and although I have many buddleias in the garden and other plants to attract them, I have not seen any peacock butterflies this year. Several slow worms have appeared and frogs and toads of all sizes. One night we heard owl noises and saw a tawny owl calling in a pear tree. Two others were responding and one joined the first, then they flew down the garden, still calling. Then another sound, which we recognised as the short eared owls from last year. There seemed to be some conflict in the trees at the bottom of the hill,

then all went quiet. I have heard short eared owls earlier, down the lane. The swifts seem to have gone.

25.8.17 A hot sunny day and having coffee in the garden after lunch, a large bat flew over us to the mulberry tree. At first I thought it was a bird, but it flew back to the house, flattened itself against the brickwork and disappeared into the roof! Why did it come out in the daylight? It seemed quite healthy.

September

5.9.17 Mild and damp. We have visited several gardens and seen several places with swallows still nesting, according to garden owners, a third brood. Our own are again in and out of the garage, so I wonder if they still have young? I have seen a coal tit behaving as if it is feeding young, across our drive, daily. It seems late in the year for this behaviour. Numbers of small tortoiseshell and red admiral butterflies have increased recently and a few painted lady and comma also. I found an elephant hawk moth caterpillar crawling across paving, so moved it to a safer place, away from feet! We have a large wasps nest in an old mole run in a flowerbed near the back door. Our dog has been stung three times, as she keeps throwing her ball into the area.

19.9.17 September has suddenly become autumnal. Cool days and cooler nights and a lot of rain, delaying fruit harvesting. Plums and damsons have not grown much this year – too dry, but a feast for the butterflies. Less swallows and house martins now.

October

9.10.17 September continued cool and often wet and October so far the same. It feels quite pleasant, but one night I had to protect plants because of frost threat. There are many ladybirds flying about and congregating near windows, indoors and out and any crevices in the walls. Green woodpeckers are busy on the grass looking for ants nests and pied wagtails on the roof. Two nuthatches, many blue, great and coal tits on feeders and flocks of goldfinches were seen in the trees. No swallows seen for a while, but several frogs and toads in flowerbeds. Ravens were seen and heard regularly, often being chased by crows and rooks.

17.10.17 Today we have the remains of Hurricane Ophelia, from the Azores, so it is 23C, and very windy! It has been downgraded to a tropical storm, with Ireland bearing the brunt and we just have the wind, but no rain. The sun has been a very orange red colour, as the storm has brought Sahara sand with it, which I have seen before. It looks very eerie. Exactly 30 years to the day after the great storm of 1987, when I remember seeing the old oaks blown down in Windsor Great Park, as well as many around our home, at that time near Windsor. It was a sad sight.

25.10.17 We have just had storm 'Brian', but it came and went quickly. It is mild, 20C, and only 14C at night, causing plants to think it is spring, and bursting into bloom again. It is very colourful and autumn leaves are lovely also. We have had a 2 inch long hornet inside our wood burning stove, staring angrily at us through the glass and buzzing relentlessly, upsetting the dog! We did not like to try to rescue it, so hoped it will find a way out! It seemed



to appear after storm 'Ophelia' and seems to have gone today. Luckily we did not need to light the fire. Several pied wagtails on the roof now and an increase in numbers of blue and great tits, and house sparrows.

Quite a large flock of redwings, 40-5- birds has been flying over daily and the berries are disappearing fast. There have not been many holly berries this year.

28.10.17 Three adult starlings were squabbling on the feeders today – a very unusual sight here. They stayed a while. There are no holly berries left now, as redwings have stripped them all.

November

20.11.17 Mainly mild, with a couple of brief frosty spells, not enough to stop my geraniums flowering! Large flocks of fieldfares and redwings about daily, I hear them flying over and they are enjoying our left over apples. Mistle thrushes are claiming territory at the top of hawthorn trees, where there are large bunches of mistletoe. Still red admiral and small tortoiseshell butterflies to be seen and bumble bees, as there are still plenty of flowers out for them, and daisies in the grass.

24.11.17 Cold frosty night, followed by bright sunny day, about 10C. Garden is alive with all sorts of birds.

December

11.12.17 Early December mild so far, allowing me to do last gardening jobs for the year, but yesterday we had about 10 inches of snow. It fell quietly and quickly in the night and was wet and heavy. It continued most of the day, but when it stopped I went out to knock it off plants and shrubs before the very icy night set in and caused even more damage. Many had been bent to the ground, but I think they will recover. Some branches had broken under the weight and a damson tree had split in half. Otherwise it was beautiful and very silent all around – even the dog's bark was muffled by the snow! I have put out a lot of bird food, apples and fat balls and some on the cider house roof, which is a big flattish area for them to find.

18.12.17 Still small areas covered in snow and it is now dirty and disruptive, so we will be pleased to see it go. It has been a large volume to get rid of, as it has been milder and quite wet, but it still lingers. The garden has mainly recovered. Time will tell if the freezing snow did any damage. I have seen a willow tit again and a kestrel has been hovering overhead.

20.12.17 It has been mild, and feeling quite spring like, so I did some weeding and watered plants in the greenhouse. I had a look around the garden, picked an iris to enjoy indoors and have a delphinium coming into flower, as well as several penstemons and erodium. Bulbs are coming up fast.

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