

West Oxfordshire Field Club

www.thefieldclub.org.uk



Newsletter No. 104 Autumn 2016

EDITORIAL

One of the few advantages of the perpetual traffic jams ringing Oxford is that they afford the driver time to observe the wildflowers on the verges. While the borders of our busiest roads will never rival the deep country lanes of the West Country, the coastal banks of Cornwall with their white three-cornered garlick, red champions and bluebells or the narrow single-track roads of the Cotswolds in their variety of species, they do support a remarkable succession of wildflowers through the year – and through the years. One of the glories of the Cotswold country is the abundance of moon daisies in summer and, in shorter vegetation, the meadow cranesbill. Along the very edges of the roads, especially in drier situations, are the little mats of bastard toadflax, and its pale flowers standing out in dim light. What is that they like about the dusty road edge? Yellow flowers tend to catch the eye – the primrose spangled banks of the Quantock hills and Exmoor, followed by carpets of cowslips, the daffodil-decked roadsides and field edges of south Gloucestershire, and the bold dandelions that would surely have been cultivated in gardens were they not such aggressive weeds.

Some roads seem to have their own special assemblages of species. I have watched a section of the A34 near Yarnton transform over the years from a bank of horsetails to unexpected stands of Michaelmas daisies, and now the ubiquitous moon daisies and other tall wildflowers. Where the southern Oxford ring road meets the A34, brassy sowthistles, wild chicory and golden stands of ragwort have made a splendid show. And at the Redhill junction, I spotted what looked very much like alsike clover. For once, I wished the traffic was moving even slower so I could get a closer look. In spring, Oxfordshire abounds with cow parsley – or lady's lace as it is often called. As summer lengthens and the verges grow taller, bigger and bolder relatives take its place – hogweed, wild carrot and Alexanders. And now autumn is upon us, hips, haws and berries gleam like jewels among the fading vegetation, and the individual yellow flowers of ageing sowthistle and hawkbit and the white of champions appear like stars in long grass.

A conservation-minded friend remarked that now the county council is cutting the verges

less frequently we shall see a much greater variety of wildflowers. Not always. The roadsides around my village have changed from flower-rich banks to a waist-high mixture of stinging nettles and brambles. Heaven help any pedestrian who needs to jump out of the way in a hurry if a careless car comes speeding around the (now much more obscured) corner. I wonder if anyone has been recording roadside assemblages to study the effect on them. With the decline of field-side refuges, hedgerows and roadside verges have become increasingly important in supporting pollinators for our crops.

According to State of Nature 2016 report, the UK has lost more of its biodiversity over the long term than the global average, and ranks as one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. Yet public spending on biodiversity as a percentage of GDP fell by 32% between 2009 and 2015.

While the swallows and martins may have departed our shores, the local birds are starting to come into the garden more often. I was delighted to see a greenfinch – the first since *** took them out. Parties of long-tailed tits are ranging round the village, and plovers, sandpipers and even the occasional osprey are taking advantage of the local gravel pit lakes on their migration.

A strange movement on the lawn caught my eye one day earlier in the summer. At first it looked like a thrush slamming a snail on a stone – but I have had no thrushes this year. Then I saw it was a blackbird pulverising a large slug on the grass, exasperated jerks of its head flicking the animal across the grass then stomping to cleaner sections of grass to repeat the procedure. It took about fifteen

minutes to clear enough slime off it for the bird to consider it suitable for its offspring, and finally it flew off, slug in beak. It was hard to imagine a young blackbird being able to swallow such a large morsel, let alone cope with such a noxious diet.

As usual, the garden has been host to a wide variety of bees – many solitary bees and bumblebees. Some large bumblebees even made a nest behind one of my soffits – I hadn't thought of them as high rise nesters. Crescent-shaped nibbles on the leaves of certain plants revealed the presence of leaf-cutter bees, who glue pieces of leaf together with their saliva to build their nests. In late summer, the rasping of wasp jaws on the fence is a common sound as they gather shavings to expand their nests. It's been a poor summer for garden butterflies -I haven't seen any painted ladies, red admirals or commas, or silver moths. In fact, not a single annoying moth around a lamp of a night. But there are still silhouettes of late hawker dragonflies fluttering past my closed blinds as I sit at the computer.

Now the Club is about to settle into its round of winter talks, the usual fungus foray led by Peter Creed, four days birding on the North Norfolk coast, and the social delights of the Christmas Party and the January Members' Night. Then, by late March, the first outings to look for early spring flowers such as Star-of-Bethlehem and Pasque Flower.

We are grateful to those members and other friends of the Club are willing to give up their time to plan and lead our walks. Our thanks, also, to the good ladies of Shilton for our splendid summer party.

Jill Bailey

YOUR NEWSLETTER

I am really grateful to all those who contributed to this newsletter, most of you without having to be prompted. It's great to have this record of the club's activities to look back on the years to come, and to encourage potential new members to join us.

Please can you let me have your reports of walks and other Club outings newsletter, by the first week of April 2016 for the Spring

newsletter, and any April reports as soon as possible afterwards. My e-mail address is j.bailey@ecofeatures.co.uk. E-mailed flora and fauna lists in a single column, not in a table or spaced with tabs, please. If this is not convenient, please post handwritten or printed reports to the address given on your programme.

Jill Bailey (Newsletter Editor)

REPORTS OF FIELD MEETINGS

Dawn Chorus at Minster Lovell and Crawley 1 May 2016

Six members turned up in the darkness just before 4.00 a.m. for this walk. It was clear, frosty and still, with a magical sunrise later on during which, from the Minster Lovell water meadows, the Crawley Mill chimney stack and buildings remained dark and were silhouetted against the brightening sky beyond. As we were assembling, a pheasant and a tawny owl called, but it wasn't until we had reached the ruins and river some twenty minutes or so later that other birds tentatively began to call and sing. The resident jackdaws and mallards and a distant skylark being the first of these. As is usual, once the song thrushes had started to sing the dawn chorus really took off with other species such as blackbirds and robins joining in.

Whilst walking through the grove of conifers after crossing the wooden river foot-bridge, we heard the high-pitched song of a goldcrest and the repeating song of a chiffchaff, and as we started to cross the meadow beyond, a tawny owl flew out of the trees, over the hedge into the next field and

out of sight. The Maggots Grove rookery was already busy when we reached it, with young birds perched adjacent to the nests and adult birds toing and froing, calling to their young as they did so. On climbing the path through the wood, we didn't hear or see the expected resident marsh tits, but after crossing Dry Lane, we picked up the usual common whitethroat and yellowhammer, and one bird that we usually see near the ruins, the barn owl, on this occasion being continually harassed by a carrion crow. Several blackcaps and a willow warbler sang as we walked along the bridle path towards Crawley Mill, where several young lambs in a small paddock became the centre of attention for 5 minutes or so.

As we made our way through Crawley, a grey wagtail flitted here and there over the water near the bridge and 4 treecreepers moved ahead of us through the willow trees that line the roadside brook. Further on, quite a number of species that frequent gardens were also noted. A long length of new dry-

stone walling on one side of Farm Lane was admired as we made our way out of the village, as was the misty sunlit view back across the valley towards the mill on the opposite side. Towards the end of our circular route, the distinct repeated “ooo-ue” notes of a stock dove’s song greeted us from

the line of old and gnarled black poplar trees over towards the river where a colony have nested in tree holes for many years. It had been an ideal dawn chorus walk - good weather, dry paths and a variety of bird species singing and calling almost on cue, and a final total of 41.

List of bird species logged, with the time the first of each was encountered:

03.57: Pheasant
 03.58: Tawny owl
 04.20: Carrion crow
 04.20: Jackdaw
 04.20: Skylark
 04.23: Mallard
 04.33: Moorhen
 04.34: Robin
 04.39: Song thrush
 04.39: Blackbird
 04.40: Red-legged partridge
 04.41: Rook
 04.50: Wood pigeon
 04.53: Wren
 05.00: Great tit
 05.00: Goldcrest
 05.10: Green woodpecker
 05.15: Chaffinch
 05.20: Chiffchaff
 05.20: Blue tit
 05.21: Jay

05.35: Common whitethroat
 05.35: Yellowhammer
 05.37: Barn owl
 05.45: Blackcap
 05.50: Willow warbler
 05.55: Goldfinch
 06.00: Starling
 06.00: House sparrow
 06.01: Dunnock
 06.03: Feral duck
 06.06: Great spotted woodpecker
 06.08: Grey wagtail
 06.11: House martin
 06.12: Collared dove
 06.13: Treecreeper
 06.15: Greenfinch
 06.20: Mistle thrush
 06.31: Magpie
 06.50: Stock dove
 07.00: Feral pigeon

David Rolfe

Walk in Bernwood Meadow 5 June 2016

Peter Creed led a walk over Bernwood meadow, a traditional haymeadow and a treasure trove of wild flowers and butterflies. The ancient hedgerows are carefully managed, and the meadow cut for hay between July and August, as was the old tradition. The ancient ridge-and-furrow system means that the area has both damp furrows and dryer ridges, which support different communities of plants. 139 species of plants were recorded on the day, but, as is the Club’s custom, only those in flower then are listed below. The full list is available from the editor for those who are interested.



Broad-bodied Chaser



Five spot Burnet Moth larva (L)



Lucky Moth larva (above)

List of plant species in flower:

Meadow Foxtail
Green-winged Orchid
Barren Brome
Sweet Vernal-grass
Cow Parsley
Common Daisy
False Brome
Quaking Grass
Slender Brome
White Bryony
Cuckooflower
Glaucous sedge
Hairy Sedge
False Fox Sedg
Remote Sedge
Bottle Sedge
Sweet Chestnut
Common Mouse-ear
Sticky Mouse-ear
Dogwood
Hawthorn
Smooth Hawksbeard
Crested Dogstail
Common Spotted Orchid
Early Marsh Orchid

Narrow Buckler Fern
Field Horsetail
Eyebright
Sheep's Fescue
Cleavers
Marsh Bedstraw
Cut-leaved Cranesbill
Herb Robert
Herb Bennet
Ground Ivy
Plicate Sweet-grass
Hogweed
Yorkshire Fog
Bluebell
Cat's-ear
Meadow Vetchling
Grass Vetchling
Ox-eye Daisy
Fairy Flax
Perennial Ryegrass
Honeysuckle
Birdsfoot Trefoil
Field Wood-rush
Pineappleweed
Black Medick

Field Forget-me-not
Green Alkanet
Annual Meadow-grass
Smooth Meadow-grass
Rough Meadow-grass
Tormentil
Creeping Cinquefoil
Barren Strawberry
Meadow Buttercup
Lesser Spearwort
Creeping Buttercup
Yellow Rattle
Dog Rose
Bramble
Common Sorrel
Corn Sow-thistle
Wild Service Tree
Lesser Stitchwort
Dandelion
Goatsbeard
Lesser Trefoil
Red Clover
White Clover

Plant list by Brenda Betteridge, pictures by Mary Elford

Moth morning 18 June 2016



13 people came to Ken and Brenda Betteridge's home near Worsham for this annual Field Club event. Dr Marc Botham, butterfly and moth ecologist, and I had set up two moth traps in the garden and two in the adjacent former quarry on the previous evening. It was a warm, calm night and Ken kindly covered the traps at the break of day to prevent all the moths escaping as our arrival time was not until 9 a.m..

It had been a poor year for moths, so we were pleased to record 77 macro and micro moths. 3 Eyed Hawkmoths were the stars of the show. Our thanks to Marc for sharing his impressive knowledge and to Ken and Brenda for their hospitality. Refreshments were enjoyed and Ken showed members the Bee orchids that were flowering well and in a good number in the quarry.



Eyed Hawkmoths

Moth species:

Painted Neb
 Purple Bar
 Snout
 Flame
 Garden Pebble
 Gold Spot
 Knapweed Conch
 Small Square-spot
 Marbled Orchard Tortrix
 Broken-barred Carpet
 Small Fan-foot
 Rustic Shoulder-knot
 Lychnis
 Brimstone Moth
 Pale Prominent
 Shark
 Green Pug
 Burnished Brass
 Elephant Hawk-moth
 Green Arches
 Red Piercer
 Cinerous Pearl
 White Ermine
 Vine's Rustic
 Timothy Tortrix
 Eyed Hawk-moth
 Common Carpet

Rough-winged Conch
 Cinnabar
 Bright-line Brown-eye
 Buff Ermine
 Plum Tortrix
 Light Brocade
 Shoulder-striped Wainscot
 Poplar Hawk-moth
 Grey Pug
 Common Wave
 White-point
 Diamond-back Moth
 Tawny Marbled Minor
 Twin-barred Knot-horn
 Large Yellow Underwing
 Netted Pug
 Clouded Border
 Barred Fruit-tree Tortrix
 Heart & Club
 Triple-blotched Bell
 Wakely's Dowd
 Olive Pearl
 Mottled Beauty
 Common Grey
 Sloe Pug
 Lobster Moth
 Mottled Rustic

Common Wainscot
 Treble Lines
 Yellow-spot Twist
 Double-square Spot
 Light Emerald
 Marbled Minor
 Shears
 Setaceous Hebrew Character
 Silver-ground Carpet
 Large Nutmeg
 Meadow Grey
 Small Magpie
 Common Yellow Conch
 Garden Grass-veneer
 Clouded Silver
 Heart & Dart
 Turnip Moth
 Green Carpet
 Brown Rustic
 Silver Y
 Spectacle
 Common Marble
 Common Pug

Mary Elford

Glow worm walk at Swinford 21 July 2016

When John and I did our recce of this walk a few days earlier, it was a beautiful July evening. After a gentle stroll around Swinbrook, listening to bats on the bat detector as it got dark, we went to the churchyard where the female glow worms were on good form. Including some seen on the nearby verges, we saw 17 glow worms, the most I have ever seen in the few years I have been going there. It was looking good for the Club's visit in a few days' time. Unfortunately the warm, sunny weather broke on the day of our visit and the rain got heavier as we went for our walk, which was much quicker than usual. A few more members joined us at the pub while we waited for it to get dark, and by the time we arrived at the churchyard it had stopped raining. We found just four glow worms, all in the churchyard and none in the verges. Still, it was encouraging that there had been so many a few days before.

Sue Morton

Report on Upton Lane, Burford 4 August 2016

This is a lovely, quiet, narrow lane for a walk (even if it is on tarmac). Six of us walked for a couple of hours on a glorious night, the views across the fields are beautiful and it is a superb walk at any time.

We always see hares on this walk in the lower field, and often see roe deer a well.

Plant species:

Field speedwell	White clover	Scarlet pimpernel
Yarrow	Rosebay willowherb	Pineapple mayweed
Greater knapweed	Burdock	Mugwort
Woody nightshade	St John's wort	Wild basil
Herb Robert	Lady's bedstraw	Old man's beard
Meadow cranesbill	White campion	Lesser knapweed
Field scabious	Ox-eye daisy	Bird's-foot trefoil
Horseradish	Field poppy	White deadnettle
Woundwort	Field forget-me-not	Black bryony
Red bartsia	Lesser bindweed	Meadow vetchling

Bird species:

Kestrel	Green woodpecker (H)
Collared dove	Red kite
Swifts (x3)	Cormorant
Buzzard (x3)	Blackbird (M 1)

Mammal species:

Hare (x2)
Roe deer (x2)

Tony Florey and Alison Weaver

Oven Bottom and Aston Upthorpe Downs 14 August

A party of eight members enjoyed a 7 km walk through open access chalk downland designated under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The area is part of the North Wessex Downs between Wantage and Reading. The main object was to see late summer butterflies but as usual, there were many surprises. The first kilometre was over a neglected bridle path and yielded few butterflies, only single individuals of Large White, Meadow Brown and Speckled Wood. Just before the first increase in gradient we spotted much chicory in flower. This beautiful flower is often seen on roadside verges in this area. A little higher up there was plenty of wild carrot and a few Globe Thistles in flower.



Chicory

After about 45 minutes we reached a junction with Grim's Ditch, an ancient track close to The Ridgeway. Here there is an almost dried-out dew pond. At its edge is a very tall specimen of Purging Buckthorn and plenty of White Bryony. We then turned right onto Grim's Ditch where we saw a few Common Toadflax coming into flower and a pair of mating Meadow Browns, one of which had several red parasitic mites clinging to its head.

Corn Buntings are usually present in this area, but alas, not on this day and we had only seen a single Red Kite.



Meadow Browns plus red mites

We arrived at Oven Bottom at about 12.15 and decided to have lunch near the entrance to this small SSSI. Already the numbers of butterflies to be seen had increased enormously. There were tens of Common Blue, Chalkhill Blue and Brown Argus. This is the best site I know of for the latter.



Common Blue male

The more observant members found Harvestmen crawling in the grass. Although not strictly spiders, they do belong to an order within the arachnids. The species seen was the Saddleback Harvestman. A few weeks earlier, an Elephant Hawk moth caterpillar was found here by a friend of mine, but there were none on this occasion.



Rousel's Bush Cricket female

However, we did find two Rousel's Bush Crickets, one of which was captured in a wide-

necked jar for closer observation. This species is slowly moving northwards due to global warming. One butterfly that is much scarcer than usual at most sites this year is the Small Copper, but we saw a total of three at Oven Bottom, including a mating pair. Another butterfly doing relatively well here is the Small Heath. We saw about five.

After spending 45 minutes at Oven Bottom we walked back to the Dew pond and then turned right to the top of the valley and then walked down what local butterfly enthusiasts call Juniper Valley. This is grazed by sheep and the resulting short grass means that there are plenty of chalk downland flowering plants for butterflies. However, the weather was now cooler and we saw few. We then returned via West Hagbourne for tea and cakes after our much-enjoyed four hour stroll.



Common blues mating

Malcolm Brownsword

Hook Norton Geology Walk 11 September 2016

Lesley Dunlop of the Oxfordshire Geology Trust led about 15 of us over this fascinating SSSI. This must be the rockiest walk we have been on! Large rocks have fallen down from the cutting to the floor, making it a real obstacle course. But it was worth it as Lesley pointed out the various formations of rock and strata at this very important geological site.

The cutting exposes Jurassic oolitic limestone rich in fossils, and stained red by iron oxide. Around Hook Norton veins of iron compounds run up to 10m thick. The iron content was probably not high enough to be worth

extracting until the 19th century. Formerly used by the Great Western Railway, loads of iron ore were transported from Hook Norton to the Midland and Wales for smelting.

Managed by BBOWT, the SSSI has a wealth of wild flowers and insects, with banks of limestone grasslands mingled with scrubby areas and patches of woodland. The retaining walls contain a wealth of mosses and lichen species.

Tony Florey

Beaten by the Weather

Unusually, we lost two of our trips to the weather this summer. The joint excursion with the RSPB to Greenham Common for nightjars was called off at the last minute because of high winds and heavy rain, and further bad weather led to only the leader turning up for the trip to the Birds of Prey Centre at Newent.

MEMBERS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Pond dipping at Farmoor reservoir with the Ashmolean Natural History Society 21 May 2016

We saw this event advertised in the Oxford mail and joined the walk on what turned out to be a very enjoyable but very wet day.

Dr Pascale Nicolet was very enthusiastic and happy to share her knowledge. She took us round the Shrike Meadow area and Pink Hill, dipping perhaps 8 to 10 ponds. We saw fascinating insects and plants – especially the great diving beetle, quite an inch and a half long, plus newts, tadpoles, damsel fly larvae, freshwater shrimps, etc. and plenty of water plants.

Some of the ponds had originally been filled with the scraped mud and polluted extracts from the reservoir, containing heavy metals, and then refilled naturally. As the water for the reservoirs is extracted from the Thames, in winter the water has nitrites in it from farmers' fertilisers. One pond, however, was nitrate-free. It was replenished by an aquifer.

We saw and heard several cuckoos, plus the usual birds lately arrived, including Cetti's warblers. We saw a few lady's smock – the first we had seen.

On the drive back over the central causeway a young great crested grebe was resting right in the middle of the road. It was too young to fly, but had propelled itself along on its 'elbows' – which were bloody. A driver coming towards us picked it up and put it over the retaining wall, which the bird couldn't get over. Off it went like a rocket into the water. Then we saw another that was netted by a fisherman, admiring its scallop-edged feet and its wonderful ruff.

We felt we had done something unusual, only for the fisherman to say "Oh, we see these all the time".

Alison Weaver and Tony Florey