

ONGAR WILDLIFE SOCIETY

An Occasional Newsletter

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Number 16

It was a lovely warm sunny day for OWLS AGM held in June. Following the business of the AGM, thirty-seven members spent a very social three hours or so in the shade of the trees in Anne and Rob's garden. A picnic of sandwiches, fruit and a delicious selection of home-made cakes was enjoyed by everyone. I think we were all too lazy and too hot to go for a walk, so we just relaxed and chatted. At the end of the afternoon with only a few members still present we saw a Lime Hawk-moth, *Mimas tiliae*, (pictured below) settled on the brickwork by the back door of Repentance Cottage. These moths have a flight period from late April to July and fly on warm nights. They have a distribution throughout Europe, in mountains, woods, parks and old gardens.



At the AGM the Officers and Committee were re-elected. Keith Snow, as well as being elected as Vice Chairman, will be responsible jointly with the Chairman, Alan Brett, for the OWLS programme, so if you have any ideas for speakers or for outings, please contact Alan, Keith or any other member of the Committee. Also if you have just a little spare time and would like to join the Committee we would like to hear from you as there is space for another member. (See at the end of the Newsletter for names of Committee members and phone numbers).

WAKEHURST PLACE COACH TRIP

In July a coach full of members and friends went to Wakehurst Place, Nr. Ardingley, West Sussex. The Wakehurst Place house and estate is owned by The National Trust, but the grounds consisting of gardens, woodland and lakes are managed and funded by the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew. Some people walked as far as the Wetland Conservation Area where there were many Damselflies, but there was not time to include the nearby Loder Valley Nature Reserve (still part of the Wakehurst Estate).

In the wildflower meadows and in the woodland areas was an abundance of the Common Spotted Orchid, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*. "The Slips" contained these Orchids and other wild flowers, some quite rare: the practice of late summer mowing after the seeds of the wild flowers have fallen, has enabled the various species to multiply. In the Himalayan garden giant Himalayan lilies, *Cardiocrinum*, and Japanese *Iris ensata* can be seen in July, and the Water Garden had many species of Astilbe. In the Southern Hemisphere Garden the beds still contain many specimens that were introduced as far back as 1903 when Gerald Loder (later Lord Wakehurst of Ardingly) acquired Wakehurst Place.

Also at Wakehurst is housed the Millennium Seed Bank where virtually all of the UK's native plants are stored. Within the vaults of the Seed Bank are over one and a half billion seeds from all over the world, representing 30,000 wild plant species. This is where our native plants are saved and safely stored ensuring that future generations will always be able to enjoy the beauty of the flowers, wild and cultivated, common or rare, from past centuries. It will save our plants from the threat of extinction and make them available for use in the future. OWLS members enjoyed a film and an inter-active exhibition about this amazing project, and were able to see some examples of the types of plants being saved for the future.

At the end of the day everyone agreed that Wakehurst was a fantastic place to visit with such a wide variety of flora and fauna to see.

Tanya Welford

WILDLIFE WEEK-END

By Alan Brett

I often find that when you would like to do both, events clash, but on this occasion they all dovetailed really nicely to form a very varied and interesting week-end. It started on Friday with a Vole Course led by Darren Tansley at Essex Wildlife Trusts head office, Abbots Hall. This was well attended (approximately 15 people) by professionals, FWAG, Hanningfield Reservoir employees, university students and amateurs alike. Like most courses of this nature the day was split into two with the morning session spent inside learning about vole characteristics, habitat, etc., and of course the rapid decline in number as a result of American Mink being released or escaping into our countryside. I would just like to outline some of the points to remind us:

Telling voles apart from brown rats: Rats have less hair on the tail and feet, the tail of a rat is equal to or longer than the body. Vole tails are hairy and half the length of the body. The vole's face is flatter. When swimming rats do not have the buoyancy of a vole so are a lot lower in the water, possibly just their head showing. Interestingly voles do not have any other adaptations for life in the water i.e. webbed feet or tail variations. European water voles spend less time in the water, making their homes in woodland.

Field Signs:

Latrines: Water voles use one area. The droppings of voles have rounded ends like tictacs, approximately 6 mm. to 8 mm. long. They are brown or green made up of

fibrous material and virtually odourless. Rat droppings are pointed, slimy and foul smelling.

Feeding stations: An important sign of vole presence are the piles of vegetation chopped up into lengths of about 75mm. to 100 mm. These generally have a 45° angle at one or both ends. Field voles also leave feeding piles but these are shorter and made up of smaller vegetation.

Burrows: Vole burrows that are on the higher part of the bank have a cropped area surrounding them giving rise to the term “Vole Lawn”. This is usually a pregnant or lactating vole feeding within easy reach of the burrow. The other burrows tend to be along the waters edge with some under the surface as bolt holes. It was this that kept them safe until the mink colonised our rivers as the female mink is perfectly capable of following a vole into their burrow system with devastating consequences for the inhabitants.

The afternoon session had us put the theory into practice by looking for vole signs on the ponds at Abbots Hall. The first pond, the one next to the office, had no signs. Voles had been present in the past but so had mink. One particularly cheeky mink had also been seen in the office kitchen! We walked out to a larger pond with a bird watching hide hopefully to observe voles going about their normal routines. As we stepped into the hide I am sure I saw a bird of prey out of the corner of my eye. This was confirmed as a Marsh Harrier, possibly why no voles were out on the water. Although it was a little disappointing not to see a vole this proved to be an excellent place to study the field signs, with latrines, droppings, feeding stations and burrows very evident. On our return to the office a good discussion and question and answer session ensued. I don't think I will go into any more detail, suffice to say there will probably be an evening talk for OWLS on this subject in the future.

Saturday morning was OWLS' **Dawn Chorus Walk**: I was very happy to see this event so well attended: led by the ever-enthusiastic Tony Harbott we set out along the footpaths of Ongar Park Wood picking out various bird song as we moved through the woodland. Carole Bailey's comment “I bird watch with my ears” emphasizes the importance of knowing bird song as you generally hear the bird before being able to locate its position to see it, especially in the woodland canopy. Tony informed us that the Woodpecker's call was known as *yaffle*, which made me think back to a programme called “Bagpuss” where the carved wooden book-end of a Woodpecker was known as Profession Yaffle – thanks for clearing that one up! That morning we heard the Blue Tit, Great Tit, Blackbird, Thrush, Robin, Wren, Greater Spotted Woodpecker, Green Woodpecker, Pheasant, Blackcap and Chiffchaff. I often think of bringing my own dogs on these walks but didn't on this occasion. We were accompanied by Jeanne Francis's well behaved dog and as a result added another species to our list when a bird gave an alarm call because of the dog's presence. Having been at the wood for 4.30 a.m. I made it into work at 8.00 a.m. with minutes to spare, excellent timing and a thoroughly enjoyable walk.

I missed the opportunity to do the Bluebell walk in the afternoon but had the bat walk to look forward to at dusk. This was led by Paul Hewitt from Country Care and two bat experts. We met at the beautiful old church in Lambourne End where we were given a brief talk on bats, what we would be doing in the evening and the ubiquitous

health and safety talk. We left the church and stood around the spire with a hope of seeing bats leave for their evening feeding session. Probably the cold which could have lead to us hearing fewer birds in the morning played a part in the bats not deciding to fly: if it's cold fewer insects are available and the bats have to decide whether to expend the energy needed for flight with the possibility of little or no reward. Undaunted it was decided that the woodland (Great Wood) would probably be more productive as it was likely to be a few degrees warmer. This was the same woodland where the bluebell walk had taken place earlier in the day, so I had the chance to do the bluebell walk, albeit by torchlight with the added bonus of hearing and seeing various bat species. By hearing I mean via the electronic bat detectors which convert the ultrasound used by the bat to echo locate into sound we can hear. Unlike the birds you don't have to learn the 'song' to be able to identify species. The ultrasound emitted by the bats is given a reference number on the scale of frequencies. With our expert's equipment it was possible to detect noise on all frequencies so they were able to instruct us to tune our less sophisticated units to the relevant setting. We saw and heard Common Pipistrelles and Soprano Pipistrelles. Again there is a potential OWL's visit, and you do not have to get up early for this one!

My week-end was completed by visiting the Lambourne End Centre Open Day where Keith Snow was showing the children and adults pond dipping and helping them to identify what they caught. This activity was well attended and all seemed to take great pleasure in finding out the names of the species before them, such as Caddisflies larvae, Damselfly and Dragonfly larvae, and of course Mosquito larvae. I claim to have only done the caving to see what it felt like to be a ferret underground. I have no excuses for climbing the rock wall, ropes course, archery and canoeing, only it was fun. We have in mind perhaps a more sedate visit to the Centre for OWLS in the future.

OWLS WEBSITE

OWLS plan to set up a website in the near future which will be masterminded by Russell Ball, assisted by members of the Committee. The website will initially provide basic information such as how to contact and join OWLS, what the Society aims to achieve, the venue, dates and particulars of future meetings, and details of walks and visits. At a later date it may be thought valuable to add other items to the site including résumés of the talks, walks and visits; photographs of wildlife encountered in the local area; and details of wildlife activities and interests of members.

Although the initial setting up of the website will be carried out by a few OWLS' members, we would very much like to invite others to contribute in any way they feel able. The website will provide us with an opportunity to let the wider world know of the existence of OWLS. It will also encourage enthusiasts outside the Ongar area to learn of our activities and promote the exchange of ideas and information.

SCORPION FOUND IN THE ONGAR AREA

The European yellow-tailed scorpion, *Euscorpis flavicaudis*, is found on only rare occasions in Britain. It was first recorded at Sheerness in the 1860's, and has since

been located in several sites in southern England. For the first time in April this year a single specimen was found in stables in the Hatfield Heath/Sawbridgeworth area, just north of Ongar.

A rather small scorpion, no longer than 5 cm, its body is dark brown and it has pale brown legs and a yellow tail (sting). It shelters in crevices in walls and feeds on insects and other small invertebrates. The sting is mildly dangerous to humans but is unlikely to be fatal. But, if you find one, handle it with care.

It is thought that yellow-tailed scorpions migrate to this country aboard ships from continental Europe. Despite the typical British weather, some of the scorpions survive well, emphasising how adaptable these creatures can be. With global climate changes they may become more common in the future.

The finding of this scorpion must not be confused with past reports of scorpions in and around Ongar Railway Station. Regrettably the story of these scorpions was a hoax!

Keith Snow

FOUND A DEAD BIRD?

Have you found a dead bird either at your home or in the countryside? What can be done with it? Can it be used for science or monitoring purposes?

The answer is yes. The Centre for Ecology & Hydrology in the Lancaster Environmental Centre runs a programme for the monitoring of pesticide levels in birds. The programme is called the Predatory Bird Monitoring Scheme. The programme refers to core species, defined to be the Barn Owl, Kestrel, Sparrowhawk, Tawny Owl and Buzzard. Non-core species appear to receive a slightly reduced examination.

In June Anne found a Sparrowhawk, which had killed itself by flying into a window. The Sparrowhawk was in good condition, making the accident even more tragic. The carcass was stored temporarily in a freezer. The Centre was informed and a box and packaging materials were despatched to us. The Sparrowhawk was duly posted to the Centre.

Four months later (the birds are clearly examined in batches) a full report has arrived, as expected, with a full analysis of the bird. There are at least sixty measurements and assessments in the single page report. Fortunately, an attached sheet explains the numbers in the report. Typical measurements include body weight, wing and sternum lengths, weight of individual feathers from wings and a range of assessments of the condition of organs including liver, kidney, heart and lungs, for example¹. Some measurements do require the further explanation. The report is probably about as exhaustive as one would get from a comprehensive medical examination at a surgery. Tissue from the bird is retained for subsequent testing for pesticides.

The thorough examination of the bird made the whole exercise rewarding. The programme proved itself to be worthy of continuing and enthusiastic support.

The contact details for the programme are as follows:

Project: Lee Walker, Predatory Bird Monitoring Scheme, Centre for Ecology
and Hydrology, Lancaster Environmental Centre, Library Avenue,
Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4AP.

Telephone: 01524 595830

Email leew@ceh.ac.uk website www.ceh.ac.uk

¹Liver condition is assessed, but with condition normal our bird had clearly not been drinking shorts at the Oak!

Rob Brooks

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