



Wild About Beds

Summer 2013

The Higgins Bedford reopens!

The much anticipated opening of The Higgins Bedford took place on the longest day of the year, Friday 21 June, spanning across 17 hours.

The Higgins Bedford brings together an internationally renowned art collection with a brand new visitor experience of national significance that does justice to the stories behind the people, places and collections associated with the former Cecil Higgins Art Gallery and Bedford Museum. The £5.8 million project also features a hugely expanded floorspace for exhibitions, state-of-the-art modern facilities and the latest technology to enable people of all ages to enjoy the displays.



Photo courtesy Higgins Bedford

The transformed art gallery and museum is located in the historic buildings of Castle Brewery and the adjoining Victorian family home, both built by the Higgins family in the mid-19th Century. The house was built in 1846 by Cecil Higgins' Grandfather, local brewer, Charles Higgins and remained within the family for several decades. Cecil Higgins became sole heir of the Higgins estate and used his inheritance to build a collection of decorative arts which, in his own words, he could leave 'for the benefit, interest and education of the inhabitants of, and visitors to Bedford'. He left the house to the Borough of Bedford, to display his collection.

In this 167th issue:

Contents

Share your expertise!	2
Help wanted at this summer's events	3
Orchid mania!	3
Latest news on the Nature Table	4

Contents

Searching for Swineshead's Barbastelles	5
Sharnbrook Mill Water Meadows trip	7
Looking for a new BNHS Secretary	8
Upcoming events	8

Wild About Beds is the newsletter of:



The Bedfordshire Natural History Society
www.bnhs.org.uk
Registered charity number 268659



BedsLife
www.bedsbionet.org.uk

The BNHS

The BNHS was formed in 1946, its main function to record the fauna and flora of the county. It has over twenty active Recorders who cover many branches of natural history study and whose annual reports are published in the *Bedfordshire Naturalist* journal.

Members receive a quarterly newsletter, Wild About Beds, and programmes of meetings. These meetings include field meetings to Bedfordshire sites and occasionally farther afield. During the winter months, there are illustrated lectures normally held in Elstow, Haynes, Toddington and Maulden.

The Society depends on annual subscriptions which are devoted to its working, as all offices are honorary. Membership is open to anyone, whether resident in the county or not. If you would like to join the Society, please contact **Mary Sheridan**, Honorary Membership Secretary, 28 Chestnut Hill, Linslade, Leighton Buzzard, LU7 2TR. Tel: 01525 378245, www.bnhs.org.uk.

BedsLife

BedsLife - Bedfordshire & Luton Biodiversity Partnership is a consortium of government and non-governmental agencies dedicated to promoting the maintenance and enhancement of Bedfordshire's biodiversity. The Partnership oversees the implementation and monitoring of the Bedfordshire and Luton Biodiversity Action Plan, which can be found online at www.bedsbionet.org.uk.

Editor: Heather Webb

The Wildlife Trust, Priory Country Park, Barkers Lane Bedford MK41 9DJ.

Email: newsletter@bnhs.org.uk.

Your comments/notes on anything that you have observed in the field, on the road or in a past Wild About Beds issue are welcome/essential for continuity. Please do send articles to me either as an attachment via email or through the post. Pictures are always welcome; material required by **15 September 2013** please.

Thank you in anticipation.

The next Wild About Beds will be published in **September 2013**. Please note that any views are independent of the Bedfordshire Natural History Society and BedsLife.

BNHS is getting older

...well our members are, and we are nothing without members!

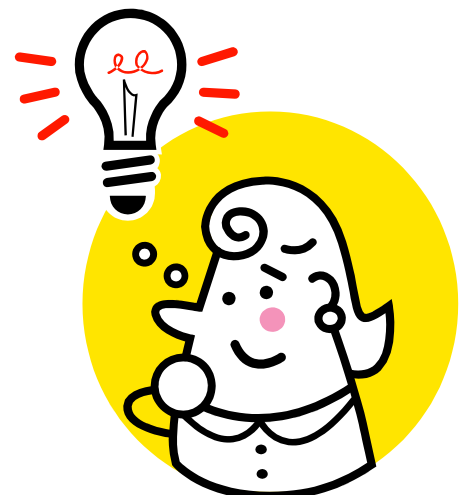
We have to do more to raise our profile as an organisation and recruit more members.

We are holding a special meeting to discuss this on **Monday 16 September at 7.30pm, venue TBC**.

Please do let us know if you can come along and how you feel you can help or contribute.

So, please email chairman@bnhs.org.uk or telephone 01525 402307

- *Have you any experience of promotion or recruitment?*
- *Are you an expert on advertising?*
- *Do you have any ideas or thoughts to share?*



BNHS events 2013

by David Withers

We have been looking for a number of opportunities to increase the awareness of our society around Bedfordshire. We particularly want to encourage the younger generations to get to know us and how they might get involved. As a contribution towards this we will be participating in some locally organised events which are well patronised by families. We are currently planned to be on show at the following:

Kempston Fun Day August Bank Holiday Saturday 24 August 2013 10am to 5pm at Addison Howard Park, Bedford Road, Kempston, Bedford MK42 8PN

Woodworks Saturday 7 September 2013 (11am-6.30pm) and Sunday 8 September 2013 (11am-5pm) at The Forest Centre & Millenium Country Park, Station Road, Marston Moretaine, Beds MK43 0PR

Our displays will have interest for all ages including a Nature Table, possibly some live exhibits and new Presentation Boards displaying a range of the BNHS activities.

We also intend to be on show at the Bromham Apple Day and the Rushmere Christmas Fair: dates not yet finalised.

We are fortunate to have a small nucleus of supporters who have offered to help out at these events, but we really do not have enough people to cover these days comfortably. So, do you think you might be able to help us at either of these events? It does not have to be all day — morning, or afternoon, or for a few hours during the day. Your support would be greatly appreciated and you will be making a positive contribution to the future success of the Society. Perhaps you could let me know if you are interested by email at chairman@bnhs.org.uk or by telephone 01525 402307. I look forward to hearing from you.

Orchid fever sweeps Bedfordshire

by Graham Bellamy

What a month June has been so far!. The late spring has concentrated the orchid flowering period into the last few weeks.. with more to come. So far over 750 site records have been sent by the Adnoto recording system via the BNHS web site involving well over 50 different people. Well done everyone. It does seem to be a spectacular year with over 1000 Common Spotted Orchids recorded on Whipsnade Down, hundreds of Bee Orchid in the new burial ground in Lower Sundon and good numbers of Fragrant Orchid on Barton hills. Pyramid Orchid are just coming out so do go and visit your local countryside as well as well-known sites to record orchids for the forthcoming BNHS publication for the County.

A close eye is being kept on some of our rarer orchids to try and find out how many there are and if they are being pollinated and setting seed. You may find markers by or even small wire cages on some plants to enable progress to be followed and to prevent them being eaten by rabbits or accidentally trodden upon. The Man Orchids at Totternhoe do seem to be pollinated to a small extent, at least in the plants in the open, the plants in the shade appearing not to attract pollinators. The Burnt Orchid looks like it is unable to attract an effective pollinator at all, although observations continue.

Other orchids appear to be much more relaxed and the good old Twayblade is much less inhibited it seems!

Have a look on the grass around road verges, out of town shops and along country footpaths and riverbanks...you never know what may be found.



Common spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*.
Photo by Waen Jones

Nature Table Update

by Julia Powell

I would like to express my thanks to friends and family for the contributions made so far and there are some items still to be collected. However, by far the most important donation is the gift from Nancy Dawson of virtually her whole collection of natural history artefacts going back to the 1970s. As many of you know, Nancy is a delightful lady who has reached the grand age of 80 but still has a tremendous zest for life and nature. She has always been interested in passing her own considerable knowledge and enthusiasm to others and amassed a huge collection of bones, bodies and fossils amongst a miscellany of other objects.

Sheila Brooke and I spent a very entertaining afternoon at her house emptying the furniture in her grandson's bedroom of the many boxes in her collection. The boxes themselves tell their own story and filled the back of my little Yaris. Sheila was nearly reduced to walking home!

All the material obtained so far has been catalogued and there is enough material to have 3 sets for the schools' Nature Tables and also a small collection for display on the show stand anywhere the BNHS chooses to participate. However review of the inventory shows there are some biases and gaps. None of the material needs to be in pristine condition as it will be handled by children.

Birds will be starting to moult soon so could I ask members to collect any **colourful feathers**. If you know which birds they are from, could you please label them to prevent having to ask someone from the bird club to help.

There are numerous bones from small mammals of which, I believe, some have been dissected from **bird pellets**. However there are no intact pellets. A never ending supply of these would be useful to put on show and also to allow students from senior schools to dissect for themselves.

If you find any **dead insects** such as beetles, butterflies (or just their wings) and interesting moths, could we have them to add to the collection together with cast skins, dragonfly exuvia etc.

We have plenty of **hare bones but no pelt** unlike collections from the other mammals.

There is only one **plaster cast of a footprint**. These are ideal for the school children and may be the only evidence easily seen of the animal that made it: more please.

This may seem a little premature, but before the next newsletter is published, most birds and small mammals will have abandoned their nests for this year. The **nests** we have are quite robust but it is always useful to have a further supply as they disintegrate over time with handling.

Insect nests are fascinating and will also start to become empty by the end of the summer. The wasp nest we have is very fragile and it would be nice to have another, from someone's loft or shed, or some bumblebee nests.

There are only a couple of items representing reptiles and amphibians. **Sloughed skin, bones and egg cases** would be of interest.

Plant material is also very much under represented. **Seed cases and plant galls** would be very welcome as will anything that shows distinctive signs of being eaten or used as a home by a specific creature.

There are some lichen covered branches but I have no idea what Lichens they are or how common. More are welcome but I definitely need help with identification.

Many thanks for everything that has been given already. Any contribution no matter how small will be welcome. Please contact me, Wilf Powell or Sheila Brooke on:

Julia Powell	JuliaCPowell800@gmail.com	Tel 01582 661328
Wilf Powell	W.Powell4@ntlworld.com	
Sheila Brooke	Brooke.se@btinternet.com	

Searching for Barbastelles in Swineshead Wood

by Jude Hirstwood

Every year the Bedfordshire Bat Group makes a wish list for the season. For several years now, top of the list has been “catch and radiotrack another female barbastelle”. This year we were extra keen as we had just bought a new radiotracking receiver to replace one of our antique elephantine ones, which was amazingly light by comparison. Add to this Iain Hysom saying yet again “Swineshead Wood is likely to be a fabulous place for bats and you have a Venn Diagram of possibility.

We had also got the loan of a £2000 harp trap and an ultrasonic lure from the Bat Conservation Trust for the season, and Aidan Matthews has made a harp trap which cost only £100. All we needed was some decent weather.

Bob Cornes did an initial recce for the wood, came home and straight away organised an initial survey. The weather was not on our side – and two harp traps and several mist nets yielded only two soprano pipistrelles. But walking round the wood with some villagers it became clear this was a very interesting wood. Barbastelles were heard soon after sunset – a very good indication that there was a roost nearby. A week later saw Bob and Dave Odell return to the wood and the place was heaving with barbastelles.

The Bat Workers' Manual says you shouldn't trap or tag in late June/ early July because the mothers are giving birth, so it was all hands to the pumps to beat this deadline. Bob knew just where he wanted to mist net, but the wind had other ideas and he had to find a more sheltered spot- all of ten yards from where we had parked the car.

While the nets were being set up I wandered down the lane and got the most wonderful sighting of a badger, who being downwind took precisely no notice of me and trudged on his way sedately before skittishly skipping along into the wood.



A Barbastelle in the hand is better than...?
Photo by Andrew Palmer



Barbastelle roost. Photo by Bob Cornes

Barely had I caught my breath than I heard barbastelles – several of them – and no sooner had I reported this on the radio, than there was a call “Barbastelle in the net!”. Any-one who has ever come out with us knows that most nights all we catch is our death of cold, but tonight the woodland was feeling sorry for us. In the course of ten minutes we caught four barbastelles, each of which was removed almost as soon as it hit the net. Normally we check nets every ten minutes, but this time we could sit in our seats eating cake and hear bats flying into the net with our bat detectors.

Having an experienced team, these bats were processed in record time; the species was confirmed, the bats weighed (in a plastic transparent CD case), their sex and state of pregnancy determined and their forearm length measured. The lone male was released as males attend to be solitary roosters, whereas females roost in groups. Bob then played eenie meeny miny mo with the remaining three. One had a slight tear in the wing (quite common in the wild, and bats wings heal amazingly quickly), one was a bit heavy and he thought she might just be pregnant) but one was just right.

The next stage was to attract a tiny radio tag weighing 350 micrograms. (Tags may be no more than 5% of the bat's weight and our lady weighted 8.5 grams) glued to the back of the bat This is done by using colostomy glue. Last

year Bob tagged a Natterer's at Flitwick Moor and the glue failed to set properly with the result that the bat shrugged off its tag in a nearby field and went merrily on its way. Bob was extremely lucky to find the tag and deactivated it (Tags cost £130 a time). He had new glue which came all the way from America. (It is quite difficult to get the right type of glue in the UK) The fur on the bat's back was trimmed and the tag affixed. Once the glue was dry she was released and flew off into the night.

It was at this point that we discovered a snag about Swineshead Wood and its environs: all the roads ran in valleys and so it was very hard to get a signal and there is a ridge of higher ground with practically no high vantage points. As it turned out she did not seem to travel far and covered much the same ground every night. The area she apparently covered was much smaller than that travelled by other bats we had tagged, possibly suggesting she was a young bat (born last year) still finding her way around. Older bats usually have larger foraging areas which they patrol on a regular basis.



Weighing a bat is a delicate job.
Photo by Jude Hirstwood

However, what we lost in the swings of feeding grounds, we more than made up on the roundabouts of tree roosts. It is not known precisely why bats change roosts as often as they do – to deter predators, to minimise parasites, to get away from the smell of urine, or just because they can. Finding the roost is, in theory, dead easy. Return to the wood during the day and work out where the beep from the radio tag is coming from. The trouble is that sound echoes round the woodland and it can be very difficult to locate a roost precisely. Then there is the vexed question of where exactly on the tree she and her buddies were emerging from. Our bat was all too good at sneaking off unseen. We initially nicknamed her Scarlet in homage to the Scarlet Pimpernel, but her brilliance at remaining undetected made us think of renaming her Stealth. We did initially think of naming her after the wood, but “swine” didn't seem right somehow)

We were lucky to be joined by bat enthusiast Daniel Hargreaves (some of you non bat group members will know him from a talk he did for the BNHS (He has just finished filming with David Attenborough and won last year's prestigious Pete Best Award for contributions to the bat world). He arrived with jeep full of film equipment and spent two nights sleeping in his jeep overnight and going out before dawn to watch for the bats' return. There is something truly bizarre about sitting in a wood, in the darkening, slapping at midges while watching an iPad relay footage as it happens.

When bats return from a night's foraging, if you are lucky you see something called dawn swarming. Groups of bats circles round trees for a while before entering the roost to sleep. It is thought that this is so the colony knows where to settle. Whatever the reason, this is truly spectacular. Daniel has film of this and when he has edited it, I will be putting a link on the Bedfordshire Bat Group website blog and on our Facebook page. In all in the fourteen days she used seven roosts, returning to one of them after a gap of several days. This is the most roosts we have ever located in one tagging session.

This behaviour allowed us to identify two roost exit points. This is very difficult with barbastelles as they tend to roost high in the canopy. Barbastelle like splits in trees and gaps underneath bark and are often to be found in dead limbs, or sometimes in dead trees. They avoid the woodpecker holes used by many bats and they are very unobtrusive as they emerge, giving very quiet echolocation calls and keeping in the dark below the leaf canopy.

The tag lasted a very impressive, not to say exhausting, fourteen days and over 20 people came out to help us watching emergence and/or radiotracking. By the end of the fortnight we were exhausted.



Barbastelle roost. Photo by Bob Cornes

A couple of nights later and we were already planning our next tagging attempt once the closed season has passed. We have several possible targets, but immediate top of the list is to have another attempt at finding Natterer's roosts in Flitwick Moor. Once again it will be all hands to the pumps. If you would like to get involved, contact Bob at bats@bnhs.org.uk.

This project was carried out under Natural England licence and with the permission of Natural England (Swineshead Wood is an SSSI) and The Woodland Trust who own the wood.

Field trip: Sharnbrook Mill water meadows, 12 June 2013

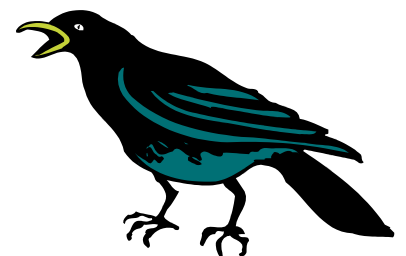
Text and photos by John Pitts

Members strolled through the water meadows and along the River Great Ouse in search of Odonata. Although the weather was not ideal there were clouds of Banded Demoiselles and Common Blue Damselflies. We also found two Scarce Chasers, and solitary examples of Hairy and Emperor Dragonflies along with a good range of other interesting invertebrates and birds (including a distant Hobby, a Kestrel, a Mistle Thrush, a number of Swifts, House Martins and a Kingfisher).



Got something to crow about? Don't keep it to yourself!

Wild About Beds is keen to hear from you. We'd love to hear about the species you've seen, the amazing habitats you've visited or even send in your nature questions and we'll try to get them answered for you. Please email contributions to newsletter@bnhs.org.uk.



Vacancy on BNHS Council for the position of Honorary Secretary

by Boo Matthews

Are you interested in wildlife in the county of Bedfordshire?

Good at English and grammar?

Have access to a PC?

Would like to join the Council of Bedfordshire Natural History Society?

Then here is the role for you.

It is a great opportunity to positively support the local flora and fauna

I am currently the Honorary Secretary for the Society but have given Council notice that I wish to stand down at the next AGM (March 2014).

The role includes

- Preparing Agendas and circulating to Council before each meeting (approx 6 per year)
- Taking the minutes at the meetings, circulating and keeping paper copies for County Archive
- Booking meeting rooms for Council, Scientific & Recorders Meetings
- Circulating minutes received from Council Members representing BNHS on other committees
- Dealing with correspondence – mostly electronic
- Preparation for AGM including an annual report from Council
- Liaising with the Charity Commission plus responsibility for the annual CC Return

I have thoroughly enjoyed the years I have been involved but feel it is time for 'new blood' and someone with fresh eyes to take over. So, if you are interested please do not hesitate to contact me for all the advice, enthusiasm and information I can pass on?

Upcoming events

11 Aug Bird ringing demonstration by kind agreement with Beeston Wildlife Group. An opportunity to see a variety of birds in the hand. Hopefully includes a moth ID session. Meet at 8.00 am at Cos Lodge, Beeston, near Biggleswade TL171479. Finish around noon. Weather dependent: please call Don Green 01582 867258 if in doubt. Leader: Derek Guar.

17 Aug Kensworth Quarry and Dunstable Downs with the Geology Group for fossils on the scrape at Kensworth Quarry NR, also good for grasshoppers, crickets and other insects. Afternoon across Dunstable Downs towards the Five Barrows to describe the geology and landscape. Park and meet at 10.30 am at the Cemex quarry visitors car park TL012197, turning off Isle of Wight Lane. Leader: Janet Munro.

21 Aug Nature walk and pond dipping at Priory Country Park, Bedford. Suitable for young families. Park and meet at 10.30 am at the Priory Country Park visitor centre TL072493. Finish at 1.00 pm. Leader: Sheila Brooke.

31 Aug Small mammal trapping at Duck End NR, Maulden. Meet and park at 10.30 am at Duck End NR, Moor Lane, Maulden TL051374. Suitable for youth group and families. Leader: Richard Lawrence.

