



Muntjac

Spring 2010

What's in a name?

Many people will know that one of the old country names for a Blackbird was Merle. It may be that there are some clues to the origins of the name in the fact that the modern French name for the species is 'Merle noir'.

The French name for a Ring Ouzel is 'Merle à plastron', and if you care to look up plastron in an English dictionary you will find it is a breast plate worn under chain mail. It's also the front panel of the tunic of a uniform, usually of a different colour than the rest – how appropriate for a species whose most distinctive mark is a white crescent on its breast.



In March, Ring Ouzels will be moving through the county on their spring migration. They will head north towards Scotland and northern England. While they tend to favour coastal areas they can be seen here in Bedfordshire. The best places to find them are open grassy areas, where they feed on insects, earthworms and pretty much anything else that takes their fancy!

Would a Ring Ouzel by any other name sound as sweet?

Ring ouzel *Turdus torquatus*. Photo by Andreas Trepte www.photonatur.de

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Wild About Beds is the newsletter of:



The Bedfordshire Natural History Society
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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, The Muntjac, 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, Linlade, 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.

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Your comments/notes on anything that you have observed in the field, on the road or in a past Muntjac 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 June 2010** please.

Thank you in anticipation.

The next Muntjac will be published in **June 2010**. Please note that any views are independent of the Bedfordshire Natural History Society

2010: the International Year of Biodiversity

The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity. Celebrations and events around the world will highlight the loss of biodiversity, which, as a result of human activities, is estimated to be as high as 1000 times the natural rate, and is expected to rise further as a result of the impacts of climate change. The impact of biodiversity loss to the essential services that sustain human life is on a scale similar to the impact of climate change, an order of magnitude greater than the current financial crisis.

In October 2010 governments will set new targets and steps needed to address biodiversity loss for the decade ahead. It has been widely acknowledged that the original targets set after the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 have not been met.

During 2010 organisations in the UK and around the world will be working extra hard to help people understand why biodiversity is important for our health and wealth, to enjoy it and learn how to preserve it.

For information on how to get involved, or to find out about UK events during the International Year of Biodiversity 2010, log on to www.biodiversityislife.net.



From the Editor's desk

Now that March has arrived we're hopefully coming to the end of this cold, snowy winter. My garden is alive with the sound of birds celebrating the sun and staking out their territories for the breeding season. The ewes at Knocking Hoe are pregnant and the Wildlife Trust is expecting a bumper crop of lambs later this month. And in spite of the weather conspiring against me I did eventually get most of my pruning done. Sure, the daffodils are late but we'd miss them terribly if they were blooming under the snow!

As nature enthusiasts we tend to associate with other nature enthusiasts. I believe our joy is enhanced when we can share it with those like us. I'm sure this is why there are things like classic car shows and beer festivals, where fans can get together and commune with those who speak their language. Okay, maybe the beer festivals enjoy wider participation but you get my point...

But what about those who don't 'speak our language'? I don't know how many times I've heard conservationists and naturalists moan about 'preaching to the choir'. Many of us have worked hard to organise events and talks, only to have the same old crowd show up. It's not a bad thing by any means, but one gets the feeling that it would be nice to have some new people with which to share one's enthusiasm.

In the last few weeks I've had the enormous pleasure of doing just this. The Wildlife Trust recently held an event for horse owners, about how naturalising pasture and letting the herbs grow is actually good for horse health. Aside from the Wildlife Trust staff I didn't recognise a single face in the standing-room-only crowd. It was a great example of naturalist and equestrian interests colliding. Twice in the last week I've talked with knitters and spinners about conservation grazing and heritage breed livestock. And both groups were really and truly interested in where their fibre comes from and how their crafts can help local conservation efforts.

There are loads of opportunities to reach out to new people, to share our love of wildlife and inspire new naturalists. Many of us are already doing this. To them I say 'well done, keep at it!' And to those who haven't yet, might I suggest that an English spring is a fine time to start.

The Luton Bat Project - putting Luton on the map

by Jude Hirstwood

You have only to look at maps of bat records in the county for the last twenty years to see that Luton is under represented.

In Summer 2009, we had found a brown long eared bat roost at Wardown Museum. The Luton Cultural Services Trust (LCST) were very interested in the roost as a potential display. Shortly afterwards we were approached by Luton Parks Department to see if we would be interested in putting up a large number of bat boxes in Luton Parks. We saw this as an ideal opportunity to develop a community based project in Luton centred on the Kent bat box design, which has proved so successful in community based projects in Bedford, as it is simple to build. In October we met with LCST who offered to help with the organisation and publicity for the project.

Luton Parks Department is also chipping in several hundred pounds for the purchase of commercially produced boxes and will help us install and monitor them. We have just heard that our bid to the Awards for All scheme has been provisionally accepted (subject to examining our accounts).

The Cunning Plan

1. Target groups such as schools, scouts and other interest groups young or older
2. Give them wood, they build Kent boxes and in return we offer them bat talks/walks/training and a chance to get involved in surveys
3. Boxes go into parks or other appropriate spaces such as school grounds (LCST is offering to advertise



You can make out Bedford and the Greensand Ridge quite easily but Luton is hardly noticeable.

this to groups and run some events from the museum)

4. Carry out systematic surveys in Luton.

How can you help?

We are going to need help:

- Helping out at walks (*Do you know a group who might be interested in a walk?*) and surveys in the Luton area on foot and by car
- Putting us in touch with groups (or individuals) that might want to get involved in building boxes (allotment groups, retired folk who want to get up to mischief)
- Cutting kits for us and/or helping other groups put them together (*Do you know any bored carpenters who want a new project?*)
- Joining the co-ordinating group to help with running the project.

We have fifteen months in which to spend the money, which takes us through into next season.



Illustration by Joan Childs

Off the scale!

by Chris Malumphy

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Having collected scale insects (Hemiptera: Coccoidea) in Britain for many years I would be the first to admit that it can become a little tedious and appear unrewarding. The majority of scale species are small with cryptic habits. They are hidden away in bark crevices, under bud scales, in leaf sheaths or on roots; they are often dull brown or grey and camouflaged against the bark; and there are only a relatively small number of species in Britain in comparison to continental Europe. Scale insects often occur at such low densities or have such a strong clumped distribution that a large number of the same host plants have to be carefully examined before anything is found. A successful collecting trip in Britain means finding about 10-12 species or finding something new.



Cabbage Whitefly *Aleyrodes proletella*

Having relocated with my employer to Yorkshire from Luton in 1997, I rarely get the opportunity to collect in Bedfordshire. I was fortunate, therefore, to have a morning free in Beds on Sunday August 16, 2009. It happened to be a glorious sunny day and I decided to explore Heath and Reach and the surrounding area. The reason I selected this area was for the relatively high concentration of protected areas that include a range of habitats: heathland, lakes and ancient semi-natural broadleaved woodland. This variety is partially due to the unusual mixture of sandy and clay soils. This proved to be an outstanding area for insects and I found seven species of scale insect new for the county in a few hours.

I was particularly pleased with one of the first scales I found, the Boreal Ensign Scale (*Newsteadia floccosa*) amongst the roots of mosses, sedges and birch trees in Heath Wood, Rushmere. Although the adult females are barely 2 mm in length, they are adorned with large semicircular wax plates and look amazing under a microscope (beauty is in the eye of the beholder). It belongs to a primitive family of scales and all nymphal stages and adults are mobile although they move in a slow, ponderous manner. Not surprisingly, Boreal Ensign Scale is rarely recorded in the UK, but who in their right mind looks at moss roots for scale insects on a sunny August day? Two new additions to the fauna of Beds were actually found living on the same oak tree in Heath Wood: the Oak Soft Scale (*Parthenolecanium rufulum*) and Golden Pit scale (*Asterodiaspis variolosa*); both of these species occasionally occur in large numbers and damage



Oak Pitt Scale *Asterolecanium minus*

their host, causing drying out, cracking and dieback of apical twigs. Such minor damage, however, is insignificant to a mature oak tree.

I specifically wanted to find Blueberry Armoured Scale (*Diaspidiotus bavaricus*) and visited Stockwood County Park to examine heather plants for the scale. Consistent with my good luck on the day I found the scale on the first plant I examined. This is another example of a highly cryptic scale insect that is very rarely recorded in Britain. I have found it in most places where its main host plant, Common Heather or Ling, occurs.

I also found two scale species that produce highly conspicuous white cottony ovisacs on the undersides of foliage: the native Viburnum Scale (*Lichtensia viburni*) on Viburnum at Aspley Heath; and the introduced and naturalised Cottony Camellia Scale (*Pulvinaria floccifera*) on Holly at Heath Wood (Alan Outen sent me a photo of Cottony Camellia Scale on holly taken in his garden in 1999 but no voucher specimens were retained). The latter species has become more widespread, abundant and found on a wider range of host plants in Britain in recent years. It excretes copious quantities of honeydew which serves as a medium for the growth of black sooty moulds which causes leaf drop and dieback, particularly of Rhododendrons.

Finally, on the way home I stopped at Woburn for lunch and found the Yellow Plum Scale (*Diaspidiotus ostreaeformis*) smothering the bark of some ancient apple trees. The latter is a destructive pest of fruit trees on the continent, and may well become more important in the UK with climate change.

I was also fortunate to collect four species of whitefly (Hemiptera: Aleyrodidae). The Viburnum Whitefly (*Aleurotuba jelenkii*) was introduced to Britain in about the 1930s and has become one of the most abundant whitefly species outdoors throughout England. I found it on Viburnum at Aspley Heath, Hockliffe and Woburn. A second introduced species, Norway Maple Whitefly (*Aleurochiton aceris*) was first confirmed in Britain in 1978. It feeds exclusively on Norway maple and its puparia exhibit distinct dimorphism: the summer puparia have a pale cuticle, whereas the mature overwintering puparia are dark, heavily sclerotised and often secrete a dense coating of white wax on the dorsal surface. It was present in large numbers on several roadside trees in Old Linslade. The Honeysuckle Whitefly (*Aleyrodes lonicerae*) was present on honeysuckle in Heath Wood and Stockwood County Park. It is polyphagous and an occasional pest of strawberries. Finally the Cabbage Whitefly *Aleyrodes proletella* was found on Brassica in Heath and Reach and on Greater Celandine and thistles in Aspley Heath. This is the well known pest of Brassicas found in most allotments in England and Wales during the summer.

In total, I collected 17 species of scale insect and 4 species of whitefly in and around Heath and Reach in half a day. This is a personal record in terms of the number of species of scale insect found outdoors in a single day in Britain. It would suggest that this may also be a very rich area for other groups of insects, as well as a beautiful place to visit. Collecting scale insects in such wonderful surroundings is not so tedious or unrewarding after all.

I would be very happy to receive samples of scale insects or whiteflies (preferable still attached to host plant material in plastic containers) for identification. The photos were taken by David Crossley of the Food and Environment Research Agency.



Top: Viburnum Whitefly *Aleurotuba jelenkii*
Bottom: Norway Maple Whitefly *Aleurochiton aceris*

Bedfordshire's dragonflies 2009

VC30

by David Anderson

For Bedfordshire in 2009 it was pretty much a standard year, with all the usual species, but with the excitement of one vagrant species being seen in small numbers. The season started on April 20, as always with a Large Red Damselfly and the last sighting was on November 15, again as always with a Common Darter, but also with a Southern Hawker. After this time the weather deteriorated with cold nights and stormy wet days, so putting an end to the season. The first and last dates in 2008 were April 24 and December 1 but in 2008 the last Southern Hawker was as early as October 20 and in the previous seven years the latest Southern Hawker was only November 4! Up until mid November 2009, the weather had been unusually mild and warm, allowing a third species; Migrant Hawker to also be recorded.

In addition to the regular 21 breeding species the vagrant Red-veined Darter was reported on May 25 at one site and then on June 14 again at the same site but also at other site, both in very low numbers. At one of these sites, just one pair were seen in Cop. and Ovipositing. The interesting detail is that Red-veined Darters were seen at both these sites in 2007 and recorded as Ovipositing at one of these sites in 2006, so it is probable that these dragonflies were locally bred.



Common darters *Symptetrum striolatum* sunning themselves on a fence post. Photo by Judith Knight

Our least recorded species was Downy Emerald with just six records, but seen in Cop. and with a maximum number of only 10 together. This species has a very restricted distribution in Bedfordshire and a short flight period of only 20 days. The next rarest species was Scarce Chaser with 10 records, then Emerald Damselfly with 22 records and Small Red-eyed Damselfly with 26 records.

For the year we received records from 88 people and so far a total of 1986 records.

One lucky observer found 30 Common Darters sunning themselves on one fence post on September 11, which must be some sort of record!

iBats surveys – help needed

by Bob Comes

BNHS Bat Recorder

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The iBatsUK survey is part of an international programme (www.ibats.org.uk) to assess bat population levels. In this country, it has subsumed the Bats and Roadside Mammals recording scheme which collects data on population levels of a range of bat and other mammal species. The results feed in to the population trends published by the Tracking Mammals Partnership (see www.jncc.gov.uk/pdf/TMP_TMP_update_2008.pdf for the most recent report, and www.jncc.gov.uk/page-4316 for the TMP website). The surveys are carried out by evening car transects – slowly driving a 25 mile route along minor roads while the passenger records sightings of mammals, both living and dead. A GPS unit records locations and the route, and a time-expansion bat detector linked to a digital recorder detects and stores the calls of bats encountered along the route.

Although the processing of the recordings and identification of bats from their calls requires training (which the Bat Group can provide), carrying out the surveys themselves needs no specialist skills or knowledge other than driving, operating a GPS unit, and identification of a few familiar mammal species such as fox, badger and rabbit.

We included the cost of the equipment need for iBats surveys in our application for funding to the National Lottery Fund's Awards for All scheme. As I write, we have provisionally been granted the funding for a Bats in Luton project. If all goes well, we shall be starting this project in the spring, and carrying out some iBats surveys will be part of it.

If anyone would like to take part in these surveys, particularly in the Luton area, please contact me. The surveys should be fascinating, and they will produce records of bats and other mammals over a large area. Teams of two or three people (driver and navigator/recorder) are needed, and the more volunteers we get, the more recording we can do.

Magic carpets – part 2....

by Sue Raven

In Muntjac last year, Don Green reported on Flitwick Carpets' kind donation of surplus carpet tiles to the Greensand Trust to use for surveying reptiles. John Tomlin, the BNHS member who made this possible, duly delivered the tiles to the Trust office shortly after.

The impetus behind this work was a project the Trust is currently running called 'The Heathlands of the Greensand Ridge', funded by Natural England's Countdown 2010 Biodiversity Action Fund. As part of the project we want to find out more about the reptiles using the county's heathland and acid grassland sites – from large well known sites to small roadside nature reserves.

Being cold-blooded, reptiles and amphibians need to bask to warm up and they are therefore attracted to surfaces that retain heat. The dark underside of a carpet tile, placed in a suitable sunny location, is therefore potentially attractive to them – and is also much lighter and therefore more portable than the squares of roofing felt or corrugated metal sheets that are more traditionally used for surveying reptiles and amphibians.

Our survey work last summer and autumn produced a total of 25 records of reptiles and amphibians from six sites, which were sent to Helen Muir-Howie, our county recorder. The majority of these records were of slow worms, however, we also found common lizards, smooth newts, frogs and toads. Interestingly though only just over half of these records were from carpet tiles! By going out surveying in appropriate weather conditions, we also observed individuals under logs, on piles of wood chippings and fence posts, and on corrugated sheets put out many years ago at one of the sites, but not checked regularly in recent years.

From this small sample it is difficult to draw any conclusions but it does seem as though the tiles are most appealing to slow worms and amphibians. We found no records of snakes and only one common lizard under a tile. Most of the tiles are still in reasonable shape and so will be usable again this year – and we also have our eye on some unwanted sheets of corrugated metal so will be experimenting with these too. By starting our surveys earlier we will be able to cover the spring period which is a good time for observing reptiles, so hopefully there will be more records to report this year to increase our knowledge of reptiles using these sites.

Once again, our thanks to Graham Archer and John Tomlin of Flitwick Carpets for their help in making this work possible.



Tuck in!

Slow Food UK is part of the worldwide International Year of Biodiversity 2010 (IYB2010) celebrations. At the UK IYB2010 launch in November, Slow Food pledged to encourage the public to 'seek out a rare British food crop or breed, like Scottish Beremeal or Manx Loaghtan lamb and "support biodiversity by eating it"'.

A living river?

by Roy Bates

There has been a very marked decline in the fish stocks of the Great Ouse and to many of the country's other rivers over the past ten years or more. For instance the Great Ouse National River Classification during this period between Newport Pagnell and Bedford has declined from class A to its present status of class D (Environment Agency Temporal Survey). Because the decline in fisheries and angling is not visible to the casual observer, only the angler and the aquatic biologist are aware of the seriousness of this trend. Failure to halt the slide will result in the river(s) becoming unproductive and no longer viable as fisheries, with detrimental consequences for wildlife. Many species of fish would appear not to be spawning and have many year classes absent from their populations. Many birds for example rely on a ready supply of freshwater fish. With this supply reduced or unstable the number of fish-eating birds like kingfishers, grebes, herons and even cormorants will plummet.



The River Great Ouse at Sharnbrook. Photo by John Comant

Nobody it appears has the answer to the poor recruitment and consequently the decline of our river(s). I am sure that there are many reasons, including the effects of agricultural pesticides (herbicides, insecticides and fungicides). Pesticides are generally highly toxic and can be persistent. They can cause damage either directly to animals and plants or indirectly to the food chain. Even tiny quantities of pesticides can wipe out river insects and other food for fish and birds. Similarly other chemicals can cause male fish to develop female characteristics, thus preventing spawning. These chemicals can be hormones (e.g., the women's birth control pill) released unintentionally into the environment. They can also be hormone-like compounds called xenoestrogens. Xenoestrogens are structurally similar to female hormones and can have feminising effects on fish and amphibians.

During this year, between April and October and for future years I intend to monitor the invertebrate life of the Great Ouse around the Bedford area. I will work mainly at Odell, Harrold and Radwell as these have easy access and shallow areas of water. The aquatic life is of course the natural food of the fish and any lack of it can cause a dramatic collapse of the fish populations. The surveys will be done using the biological pollution monitoring scheme. This sounds very complicated but

in fact is very easy and quite interesting. The method involves a five minute 'kick sample', which means simply holding a net downstream in front of you and kicking slowly into the riverbed towards the net. The samples are taken from the same area, although not in one go. They could, say, be ten half-minute samples or five people kicking for one minute each. The collected animals are then identified. Each species is represented by a number reflecting its ecological value. The total value of all the animals gives a final score. The higher the total the better the water quality, e.g., a stonefly nymph scores 9, a Rat-tailed Maggot scores 1. Using this method the food availability can easily be seen, together with changes in water quality which may allow any sources of pollution to be pinpointed.

I will be looking for a number of volunteers to participate in the survey. Should any member be interested please contact me, preferably after 9.00 pm, on 01234 822603.

Editor's note: if you'd like to learn more about xenoestrogens and their effects on wildlife — and if you can find a copy — the 1993 BBC documentary 'Assault on the Male' is a good primer on the subject.

The Great Nut Hunt Mark II

by David Anderson

Back in 1993 the Bedfordshire Dormouse Group took part in the National Great Nut Hunt to search for Hazel Nuts that had been opened in the special way that dormice use. Sixteen years later, the Peoples Trust for Endangered Species (PTES) organized another Nut Hunt to recheck the original positive sites to see if Dormice were increasing or decreasing. So it was that the Bedfordshire Dormouse Group again assembled at Studham Common on November 7, 2009. We were 20 people in all, made up of members of the Bedfordshire Dormouse Group and a greater number of helpers from Milton Keynes and the Friends of Studham Common. The meeting started with an explanation of the signs to look for on hazel nuts, how to separate nuts opened by mice, voles, squirrels and birds and the places to look for the nuts. This was greatly helped by having a reference collection of opened nuts, as the difference between the species is not large and 'in-hand' material is by far the best teacher. Our coverage of the 1993 site list was restricted by several pheasant shoots going on during the morning, but we still managed to visit 10 different sites. People were split up into small groups and sent off with site maps to visit their allocated locations.

Some hours later when we had all returned to the meeting point, there was much discussion on examining the gather harvest and deciding on the originators of the handiwork. Unfortunately only three nuts were considered to be opened by dormice, but they had come from a location, not previously listed as an active site.

Sites & Results

Possible Active Dormice Site: Heath Wood

No dormouse open nuts found: Fareless Wood, Long Grove Wood, Chequers Lane, Whipsnade Heath (south section) and Triangular Copse by Zoo fence.

No Access: Mansgrove Wood, Studham Golf Course, Masons Plantation, Studham Wood, Church Grove, Linney Head and Long Wood.

Number of opened nuts by species :

Dormouse: 3
Bank Vole: 5
Wood Mouse: 20
Squirrel: 365

A Red Kite was seen flying over Dedmansey Wood.

The three possible dormouse nuts have now been sent off to the PTES for their examination and determination. We await the results with confidence!

Many thanks to all who helped with the survey, both leading up to and on the day of the event.

News Flash! The three nibbled nuts found in Heath Wood have all been confirmed as dormouse nuts!

The M1: not just for cars anymore

From the BedsBirds message board...

On Thurs morning I was able to record a Mallard flying parallel with me at a height of maybe 10-12 metres due south along the M1 between junctions 10 and 9 at a consistent speed over one mile of 62 mph (as per the speedo of my Yaris)

Andy Grimsey

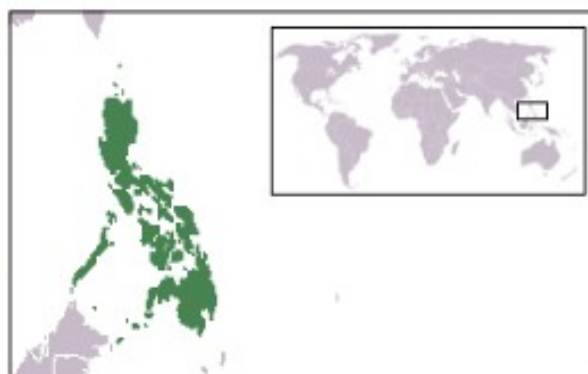
Andy, What I find most amazing about that, is that you managed to get up to 62 mph on that stretch of motorway...

John Pitts



The Global Naturalist: The Philippines
by Genevieve Broad, Suffolk Biodiversity Partnership
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From 1998 to 2003, I worked as a marine ecologist with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) Philippines where the focus of my work was to encourage sustainable fishing practices in coastal communities. How could I ever have imagined that this rich and rewarding experience would lead to the discovery of a new species of bird?



In my final year with VSO, a Filipino colleague and I worked on a WWF Philippines humpback whale photo identification project in the Babuyan Islands. Knowing that Calayan had last been visited by scientists in 1903, and then only briefly, Carl and I were intrigued by the heavily forested slopes and could only imagine the fauna and flora they might contain. It also became clear that the community had a strong desire to protect local resources during a time of development and change.

This led to my return the following year to take part in an innovative wildlife survey. The team of 7 Filipino researchers, one British birdwatcher and I aimed to document some of the species present on the islands so that sound conservation and food security decisions could be made. The survey results showed that these remote islands hold an extremely rich diversity of life which is only just beginning to be understood.



The Calayan Rail is typically seen skulking in scrubby vegetation near streams. This is one of the first photos taken of the species, in a dry stream bed surrounded by patchy forest near a large clearing. Photo by Carmela Española.

The Calayan rail (*Gallirallus calayanensis*) was unknown to science before the expedition's arrival on Calayan Island, northern Philippines, in 2004. In the same family as the moorhen (Rallidae), the species is highly distinctive with bright red beak and legs which contrast strikingly with their dark brown plumage. The birds are weak fliers, making short distance flights close to the ground. Known to local people as 'piding', the species is endemic to this tiny island, lying 70 km north of Luzon, in the Babuyan Islands. It is locally widespread on the island with an estimated 250 pairs. The Okinawa Rail *Gallirallus okinawae* from Japan is the most similar species.

On 11 May 2004, Carmela Española was surveying along a dry stream bed only half a kilometre from the camp when she saw a small group of unfamiliar dark brown birds with orange-red bills and legs skulking in the undergrowth. She made extensive notes, took photographs, and recorded their loud, harsh, rasping calls. Incredibly, these records later

showed that the species was not only new to her, but also new to science. Other team members recorded sightings of adults and juveniles on several occasions over the following days. The young have olive coloured plumage with a more orangey bill and legs than the adults.

The record was verified by Birdlife International and the formal description published in the Oriental Bird Club's journal Forktail (20:1-7). The Calayan Rail is now classified as 'Vulnerable' in the IUCN Red List. Although not thought to be under immediate threat, the planned development of roads across the centre of the island may lead to the loss of habitat and the introduction of cats and rats. Such alien predators have been the cause of the majority of flightless rail extinctions.

We recorded many other species of interest: Philippine duck (vulnerable), Ryuku flying fox (endangered), Philippine crocodile (critically endangered), the Philippine warty hog (endemic, vulnerable) and Varanus monitor lizard (endemic, threatened). A report is available on request.

The Calayan community's concern for their environment and natural resources prompted further action.

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Following the expedition, we set up Isla Biodiversity Conservation, an organisation which supports Filipino island communities in their efforts to conserve natural resources. Several further visits have been made to Calayan by Isla, undertaking ecological research, and providing environmental education materials. The expedition's co-leader, Carl Oliveros, has just begun a PhD on avian DNA at Kansas University.

Further information:

Birdlife International 'Remarkable rail discovered just in time' > http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2004/08/calayan_rail.html

Birdlife Species Fact sheet > <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/species/index.html?action=SpcHTMDetails.asp&sid=31539&m=0>

IUCN Red list > <http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/150767/0>



Calayan Rail juvenile. Photo by Gen Broad

Funding and resources for the expedition were supplied by the Rufford Foundation, The Oriental Bird Club and Idea Wild.

In Focus: The Great Nut Hunt, Nov 9, 2009 at Studham Common

Photos by Pam Rumfitt



'We can see from the hallmarks that it was made only last year; it's not actually an antique at all. I'm afraid many people fall for this particular ruse. Can you tell me how you acquired this nut?'

'I found it under a hedgerow'

'Ah, see, there's the issue: no provenance.'



It was all anxiety for the first-timers as they made their way to the starting line for this year's London Marathon...



'We don't need your life story, sir. Just name, rank and serial number will do.'



Despite their best efforts and arguing for hours, the judges simply could not agree which of the X Factor contestants should go through to the next round.

Nature Nuggets

Remember the **Priory Park otter** featured on the cover of the last Muntjac? Well he stuck around for Christmas! Mike Watts reports seeing the otter on December 26. 'We saw him run across the ice, duck into the water under the wooden boards where the ice left a hole and...out with a fish so fast, and scamper back across the ice.'

Many of you will already be making use of web sites such as Multimap, Streetmap and the Ordnance Survey's Get-a-map to help with recording and verification of records. While these sites are great for checking locations against grid references, the **Grab a Grid Reference** site developed by Keith Balmer, Butterfly recorder for Bedfordshire, is fantastic for getting accurate grid references for your records. The site has both regular maps and satellite images, both zoomable, and will display a set of squares representing different levels of grid reference resolutions for any given location you click on. Although set up by Keith for use in Bedfordshire, it works across the OS grid for Great Britain. The site can be found at <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/keith.balmer/BNHS/focuson/getagridref/html/index.htm>. It can also be found on the BNHS web site: www.bnhs.org.uk

The **Opal Grants Scheme** aims to help natural history societies and recording schemes grow and flourish. They are awarding grants in 2010 and 2011 to support and enhance the day-to-day operation of societies and schemes, as well as for projects that develop these groups' activities or expand their outreach into the wider community. You can now apply for grants between £1000 and £4000; this year's theme is 'Extending Your Reach - inspiring a new generation of nature enthusiasts'. Check out the [OPAL website](#) for complete details.

Upcoming events

Apr 10 Maulden: Small mammal trapping event at Duck End Nature Reserve, led by Richard Lawrence. Meet at 10.00 am at Duck End NR, Moor Lane, Maulden, TL051377.

Apr 21: The Floodplain Meadows Partnership is holding a one-day conference at the Open University campus, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes. **Floodplain Meadows: a Threatened Habitat** will feature speakers from across Europe on species-rich floodplain meadows: research, management policy and restoration. Contact Michelle Duke (m.duke@open.ac.uk) for a registration form.

Apr 25 Pegsdon: Morning birdwatching walk over Pegsdon Hills for spring migrants, led by Jon Palmer. Park and meet at 8.00 am in the car park of the Live and Let Live Inn, Pegsdon, TL121303.

May 9 Maulden: Annual Dawn Chorus in Maulden Wood, led by Pete Marshall, and followed by a hot fried breakfast! *Price is £3.00, please order by May 2* with John Adams; call 01234 381532. Meet at 4.15 am in the lay-by at the top of Deadman's Hill on the A6, Maulden, TL073394.

Jun 1-4: The 10th edition of **Green Week, the biggest annual conference on European environment policy**, will take place as usual in Brussels. This year's theme is biodiversity. Over some 30 sessions, the conference will address the state of biodiversity and nature in Europe and the world, the benefits they bring, current pressures and possible solutions to current rates of loss. Green Week is open to the public and participation is free of charge. More information will be available shortly on the [Green Week website](#).

Jul 1: Gheel, Belgium will be the site of the **European Youth Perspective Conference on Biodiversity**. 150 people aged 18-30 from all over the continent will gather during five days to learn about, discuss and share knowledge and experience on biodiversity conservation. Full details are available on the [conference website](#).

Sept 13-16: The **International Association for Landscape Ecology** invites you to their **17th Annual UK Meeting**, to be held in Brighton & Hove. The event will bring together scientists from the many fields in landscape ecology with policy makers, planners and practitioners. For details check out the [IALE website](#) or contact conference2010@iale.org.uk.