



# Wild About Beds

Summer 2012

## Bedfordshire Midwife Toads to feature in new David Attenborough series

by Helen Muir-Howie

In March I received an email from a production company asking if I knew of a suitable location to film midwife toads for a new TV series to be presented by Sir David Attenborough. I sent a couple of suggestions and asked if I could view the script beforehand as there is a lot of misinformation about these toads. This was agreed and I was then asked if I could provide some midwife toads and their tadpoles for filming. The first session took place at Oxford University's Natural History Museum in May and was about the work of Paul Kammerer, an Austrian biologist who used midwife toads to try to prove the Lamarck theory of evolution by acquired characteristics. For the second session the film crew wanted a location near Oxford



Our own Helen Muir-Howie meets Sir David

and west of Bedford so that it would be easier for Sir David to get home afterwards. Luckily I have midwife toad records from all over the country, so was able to find them a High Wycombe garden whose owners are great fans of Sir David and were delighted to have us descend on them at short notice. The weather was very kind to us and we spent a lovely evening eating pizza and filming the toads in a more natural setting.

The series is due to be screened this autumn on Eden (Sky and Virgin Media) and will be called 'Nature's Curiosities'.

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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](http://www.bedsbionet.org.uk)

## Issue 163 - June 2012

### 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, Linlade, Leighton Buzzard, LU7 2TR. Tel: 01525 378245, [www.bnhs.org.uk](http://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](http://www.bedsbionet.org.uk).

#### Editor: Heather Webb

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Email: [newsletter@bnhs.org.uk](mailto: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 2012** please. **Thank you in anticipation.**

The next Wild About Beds will be published in **September 2012**. Please note that any views are independent of the Bedfordshire Natural History Society

### Bedfordshire's Steve Cham wins national conservation award

The 2011 Marsh Award for Insect Conservation was given to Steve Cham for his outstanding and exemplary contribution to Insect Conservation.

Steve Cham has had a lifetime fascination for Natural History with his interest in Entomology nurtured while working at Rothamsted Experimental Station during the early part of his career. Having moved on he continued his interest and personal research as a volunteer. He has been a member of the British Dragonfly Society (BDS) since its formation in 1983 and has published a number of papers in its journal. Steve became national co-ordinator for the Dragonfly Recording Network (DRN) after the scheme was transferred from the BRC. He was quick to see the benefits to conservation of providing Odonata data to the NBN and the DRN dataset was used as a pilot during the development of the gateway. Steve has also been an active member of the Dragonfly Conservation Group of the BDS for over a decade and has been involved in a number of conservation initiatives that benefit these insects. Steve is author of several books on Dragonflies including the *Dragonflies of Bedfordshire* and a two volume field guide to the larvae and exuviae of British Dragonflies. He is also co-author of *Dragonflies of Hampshire*. Steve lectures on his favourite subject and is the leader on various courses. His photographs have been used widely. Steve is currently involved on the working party for the next national atlas of British Dragonflies.

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## Flora of Bedfordshire wins The President's Award

The President's Award is given annually by the President of the Wildflower Society Sir Ghilleain Price and President of the Botanical Society of the British Isles Ian Bonner, to 'acknowledge the most useful contribution to the understanding of flowering plants and ferns of the British Isles through a book, major paper, discovery or outstanding exhibit.'

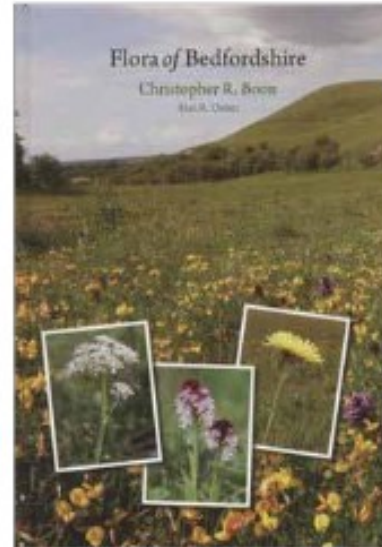
This year's President's Award has been awarded to our very own Chris Boon for the *Flora of Bedfordshire*! Chris will receive this very prestigious award at the Wildflower Society annual general meeting in September.

Praise for the *Flora of Bedfordshire*:

'Everyone concerned in the book's production, including the 208 people who submitted records, can be justly proud...highly recommendable.' - *New Journal of Botany*

'Like the first *Flora of Bedfordshire* this is another valuable addition to the botany of Great Britain.' - John Swindells, *Wild Flower Magazine*

'...attractively illustrated with photographic images, mainly by Richard Revels, some newly discovered Victorian paintings by local flower artist Caroline Gaye, and ancient herbarium sheets. The layout is first class.' - *British Wildlife*



## The BNHS Young People's Working Group

We exist to help the BNHS find more, younger members and involve them in all our societies activities.

We deliver assemblies to schools, hire out a 'nature table' and come up with ideas to try and involve young people.

We are currently appealing to parents and grandparents of those who attend field meetings to bring along their youngsters in an attempt to increase, in the longer term, the membership of the society. None of us are getting any younger! This might be just one way to increase attendance at outdoor meetings.

Our group consists of just four of us and sadly we are all busy and cannot be everywhere at once, we need all BNHS members to consider how to make our activities as family friendly as possible. We welcome ideas and would love more input to our little sub group – please join us if you can!

### **WANTED!**

Nature table custodian: a tidy-minded person to take care of our nature table in a box!

Job description:

- Keep the nature table box in storage for the group, ready for use.
- Coordinate and keep track of box movements with group members.
- Occasionally deliver/collect the box to host groups as requested by group
- Sort, repair and replace items e.g. when appropriate.
- Make requests for replacement items from members.
- Update box inventory regularly.
- Create new labels and update item labels when appropriate.
- Replenish hand gel and warning notices when appropriate.

### New disease threat to sweet chestnut trees found in orchards

*from the Forestry Commission*

The Forestry Commission and the Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera) are working to eradicate outbreaks of a serious new disease affecting sweet chestnut trees in southern and central England.

Chestnut blight, caused by the fungus *Cryphonectria parasitica* has been confirmed by Forestry Commission scientists in two small areas of European sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) in orchards in Warwickshire and East Sussex, planted within the past seven years for nut production. They are the first findings of the disease in Britain, although it has spread throughout much of Europe since it was first discovered in Italy in the 1930s. The most obvious symptoms of sweet chestnut blight are wilting and die-back of tree shoots; young trees with this infection normally die back to the root collar, and might re-sprout before becoming re-infected. Other symptoms, such as stem cankers and the presence of fruiting bodies, are described on Forestry Commission's website (below).

Dr John Morgan, Head of the Forestry Commission's Plant Health Service, said: "It is very disappointing to discover this disease has been introduced into these orchards in England. It represents a serious threat to our sweet chestnut woodlands, so we are taking steps to eradicate it before it spreads into woodland trees or other plantations.

"We are working with colleagues in Fera to investigate the source of the two confirmed outbreaks, and will follow up other importations of sweet chestnut trees from the same source. Surveys are being carried out in nearby sweet chestnut woodlands for the disease where these are at risk from infection."

Martin Ward, Head of the Fera Policy Programme, said: "This is a significant finding, the first of its type in the UK. We are working with the Forestry Commission and the devolved plant health authorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to follow up certain consignments of sweet chestnut plants which have arrived from the supplying nursery in France.

"There is no reason to believe that diseased plants have been introduced intentionally, and we are liaising with our counterparts in France, where the plants were sourced, to investigate this situation.

"In the meantime we would ask growers to be observant for symptoms of sweet chestnut blight on imported plants, and to report any suspicion to the appropriate authorities. We will be considering whether any changes to the EU requirements on this disease are necessary as a result of this finding, and will pursue this with the European Commission."

The Government recently launched the Tree Health & Plant Biosecurity Action Plan to ensure that the UK's defences against tree pests and diseases are as robust as possible.

Dr David Slawson, who is leading on the stakeholder engagement elements in this plan, added: "Once again this news demonstrates the need for all of us involved in the supply and management of trees and woodland to be constantly vigilant for signs of pests and diseases in our trees, to take the greatest possible care when importing plants from abroad, and to take preventative 'biosecurity' measures when visiting or working in infected woodland."

The UK companies which received the French plants, and the growers of the affected trees, are cooperating with the plant health authorities. Where infection is suspected or has been confirmed, Plant Health Notices are served, requiring uprooting of the trees and burning on site in the effort to eradicate the disease.

A guide to recognising the disease and its symptoms on sweet chestnut is in preparation, and images of the disease symptoms will be available at the website below. Reports of suspected sightings of chestnut blight can be made to the contacts below.

Further information about the disease is available from the Forestry Commission's website at [www.forestry.gov.uk/chestnutblight](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/chestnutblight).

Reporting disease symptoms: reports of symptoms in orchards must be made to Fera's Plant Health & Seeds Inspectorate; e-mail: [planthealth.info@fera.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:planthealth.info@fera.gsi.gov.uk); tel: 01904 465625; [www.fera.defra.gov.uk/plants/plantHealth/whatToDoIf.cfm](http://www.fera.defra.gov.uk/plants/plantHealth/whatToDoIf.cfm).

## The Two-bird Switch Exposed

by Tim Sharrock

I have come across the infamous 'two-bird switch' twice in my life.



Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*. Photo by Maggie Smith

The first occasion was when I was still at school, in Kent, in 1954. Every day on the way to school and when returning in the evening, I counted all the birds that I saw in the park between my school and home. On one May afternoon, I found a Caspian Tern fishing over the park lake. I took notes and then rushed to a telephone to alert a couple of fellow birdwatchers, including the local recorder. Some 40 minutes later, the three of us were watching a Common Tern fishing over the lake, and there was no sign of a 'Caspian Tern.' In those days, any tern was unusual inland, and this was, indeed, the first record of a Common Tern at this particular lake. You can imagine how I felt. And what my companions thought.

Luckily for me, the Caspian Tern reappeared the next day, being refound by a fourth observer (who had not heard about my observation) and was watched for some time by him and later by one of my companions from the day before, the local recorder. If that Caspian Tern had moved on and had not stayed for two days, my reputation would have been destroyed, since nobody would have believed this two-bird switch.

The second occasion came 11 years later and involved a very famous ornithologist and multiple two-bird switches at Cape Clear Bird Observatory. Professor MFM (Maury) Meiklejohn, who was then one of the 'Ten Rare Men' (a member of the British Birds Rarities Committee), was staying on the island. In the course of one month, there were five instances of the two-bird switch.

First, I found a Woodlark on a tiny area of burnt heather; but when he went to look for it, there was a moulting Skylark, with a very short tail, on the same burnt patch. It took three more visits to that burnt area before he saw the Woodlark and I saw the Skylark.



Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*. Photo by Len Blumin

Apart from Oystercatchers, Common Snipe and Curlews, all waders are rare on the island, so finding a Common Redshank on the only small lough was a highlight; but when the area was revisited the only wader at the lough was a Spotted Redshank, the first record for the island.

Then, MFMM found a Green Sandpiper at one of the island's three bogs, and the next day there was a Wood Sandpiper at the adjacent bog.

In a period rather short on migrant landbirds, a Pied Flycatcher on a dead twig in one of the gardens was one day's highlight, but observers who went to look for it found a Spotted Flycatcher on the same twig.

Later that month, a Long-eared Owl was seen perched on a post. Yes, you've guessed it: the next bird to be seen perched on that post was a Short-eared Owl.

Of the ten birds involved in these five two-bird switches in September 1965, all but one (the Green Sandpiper) were eventually seen by all the observers involved, so there really were two birds in every case, not mere excuses for misidentifications. This extraordinary run of coincidences seems unlikely ever to be repeated, but the next time that some poor birder's claimed rarity is replaced by a commoner but similar bird, do remember that genuine two-bird switches *do* sometimes occur.

## Huddling Slugs

by Peter Topley

If the recent spell of cold and wet weather has made you want to huddle up to someone close to you for warmth, think of the humble slug. Of course the wet weather always seems to see more of these active invertebrates, who are mostly justifiably regarded as pests, but to those of us who are interested in these molluscs they provide interesting subjects for study, often as close as your back garden. Two closely related and very similar species of slug found in the UK, the Yellow Slug *Limacus flavus* and the introduced *L. maculatus* (see figure) both form large packed aggregations in sheltered locations, for example under logs and stones. This type of aggregation, involving frequent close contact between individuals, is different from an aggregated distribution where animals are found together, for example under the same log, due to environmental and other factors. *Limacus flavus* is strongly nocturnal but can be found together in their daytime resting sites with large areas of their flanks in contact. The reason for them doing this is a physiological one, since the resulting reduction on surface area probably helps in water conservation and temperature regulation. Both species of slug can form close 'huddles' with each other. Research in the 1980s (Cook 1981) concluded that huddling enables slugs to make greater use of daytime resting sites and to maintain their occupation even when sharing the site with more aggressive species such as the large 'Leopard slug' *Limax maximus*. It has also been found that *L. flavus* uses chemical signals to head for shelters where there are other members of the same species, rather than go to an individual shelter.

### Reference

Cook, A. (1981) A comparative study of aggregation in pulmonate slugs (Genus *Limax*). *J. Animal Ecol.*, 50, 703-714.



A huddle of *Limacus maculatus*

## Living Record

by Keith Balmer, BNHS webmaster

Oh no, not another way to enter records! That was my first thought when I heard about Living Record a few months ago, but I gave it a try anyway and was pleasantly surprised by what I found. In fact I'm such a convert that my casual records for 2012 for moths, dragonflies, butterflies, beetles, birds, mammals, bees wasps & ants, hoverflies, reptiles, amphibians and grasshoppers from my notebook have all gone into the system. (I still need to convert my photos into records and they'll get the same treatment).

Living Record is a web-based record entry system using a combination of Google maps and an online database for storage. All you need is a web browser and an internet connection. Records are entered by first clicking on aerial photos to define a location and then details of the observations are attached to it. Locations can be reused for repeat visits.

Using the maps and filters I can see where I've been and what I've seen, and just as usefully, the gaps where I haven't yet been or seen. The distribution maps allow the records of other users to be pooled and plotted together, so the more people that use the system the more complete a picture we get. If data are entered more or less when things are observed then we get a real-time picture of the progressing season and recording effort can be focused on the gaps. If, for example, you take a look at the dragonfly records for Dorset (the system works for all of England, Scotland and Wales) you'll see how useful pooled data can be.

It's no use having a system that only allows records to be input of course, so Living Record allows users to extract their own records as neatly formatted spreadsheets for safekeeping and for sending on to County Recorders. The system also contains a verification system that allows County Recorders to inspect, accept, query or reject records and download them themselves if they wish to do so.

The developer, Adrian Bicker, expects most County Recorders to continue to use their existing databases

for long-term storage, with Living Record providing a stream of well-formatted data containing all the information needed for a record. Data entry using aerial photos should increase the accuracy of locational information, and the use of standard checklists of species names removes the opportunity for inventive spellings. All of these should aid the task of verifying and collating records.

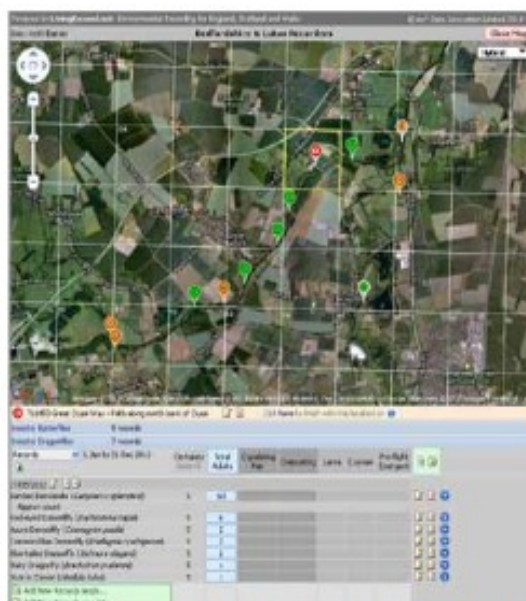
We now have a BNHS-branded version of Living Record linked into our [www.bnhs.org.uk](http://www.bnhs.org.uk) website and I have written a few more notes there. I encourage you to take a look and have a play. There's even a checklist of Harry Potter Dragons to experiment with!

### Getting started

- Go to [www.bnhs.org.uk](http://www.bnhs.org.uk), sign up and log in.
  - Via Options ->Subjects tick the group(s) you wish to record. Use "Dragons (for training)" as a group for experiments.
  - Enter data via Records -> Enter Records
1. Click on the map to define a location. Drag the marker and choose its grid size.
  2. Click on the marker to describe the location, e.g. The Area/Site name. Other descriptive information can be optionally provided. Press Add.
  3. Select the Subject group to record, e.g. Dragons (for training).
  4. Click on Add New Records singly.
  5. Fill in the details of a sighting and click Add. Repeat for more sightings at this location.
  6. Close the Add Record dialog when you are done. Click elsewhere on the map to define other locations or Close Map to go back to the main screen.
  7. Existing location markers can be re-used for future sightings – just click on the marker and you'll skip straight to step 3.
- Via Excel Download ->Extract to Excel you can download your records as a spreadsheet.
  - Via Distribution Maps you can show 1km or 10km distribution maps for one, or all, species in a taxonomic group. You can also get abundance maps for individual species. (Have a look at Dorset's dragonfly data to see what's possible using a lot of records).
  - Have a play, there's lots more things to explore. Stick to entering records of Dragons until you are ready for real data.



1km square butterfly distribution from seven recorders, showing species list for TL0749



My Great Ouse dragonfly survey locations, showing records for TL1453.

## Endocrines or predation (Part I)

*B Roy Bates*

Because of the dramatic decline of all species of fish in the Great Ouse and in many other rivers throughout the country, two years ago I decided to monitor the invertebrates of the river. With so many rivers in such a serious state there must be a common factor, lack of food through whatever reason would appear to be the obvious place to start. My own experience of working for nearly 17 years in the leisure fishing industry and actually fishing three or four times a week tells me that there is something gravely wrong with our waterways. The hatching flylife is nowhere near that of 20 years or even 10 years ago. At certain times during the day you could hardly see across the river to the other bank. During these periods the skies would be filled with Sand Martins, House Martins and Swallows. In their hundreds they would skim across the water taking their fill. It was an amazing spectacle to watch. On one occasion whilst fishing, there were so many of these birds I accidentally knocked two of them into the water when casting out. Another time a Hobby dashed low over the water taking a swallow not two yards from where I was fishing. I once wrote that when fishing it was impossible to count the number of banded demoiselle that were flying.

Sadly these days are long gone. The loss of our fish stocks is most definitely not caused, as some so-called 'experts' and fishermen in the angling world would have us believe, by the introduction of Otters. Otters were reintroduced in general sometime after the decline of many rivers, for example the Hampshire Avon and Dorset Stour. As with most predators they have a prey preference size, with Otters this is around 30cm in length. Of course they take both larger and smaller prey and in general anything that is edible.

A couple of years back, whilst walking the banks of the River Ouse I came across an Otter's 'couch' in which were the remains of: Signal Crayfish, two baby rabbits, two moles and fish bones and scales of a Chub of around two lbs in weight. They are very diverse predators. They have not caused the demise of populations of fish such as Bleak or Gudgeon for example. In fact the Barbel by many 'experts' is credited with a river's decline if it has been introduced in recent years. Small populations of Roach, Dace, Bream, Chub, Bleak, Gudgeon, in fact anything with fins the Barbel is credited to their decrease in numbers.

All that I can say to this, to my mind a ridiculous allegation, is that a river's fish composition is made up of fish zones. For example, the more obvious are the Bream zone, a fish of still or slow moving water and the Barbel zone, a fish of fast water. They do at times of course overlap. Most fish species eat different foods at different levels. For instance Barbel are bottom feeders, Bleak are surface feeders, while Roach are mainly mid-water to surface feeders.

When looking at predators as a reason for a river's collapse the more feasible ones are the Cormorant and the Signal Crayfish. Both of these creatures have a devastating impact on fisheries. The Signal Crayfish is responsible for the extinction of our native White-clawed Crayfish in Bedfordshire and many other counties throughout Britain. They are in direct competition for food with fish and eat all forms of aquatic life, invertebrates and crustaceans. When surveying the river it is very noticeable the absence or near absence of the slower moving creatures like leeches and snails. The Environmental Monitoring Officer, Nathan Hall of the Environment Agency confirms my findings with their own survey work. They also eat fish eggs and young fish, in fact a friend of mine, a lecturer on fisheries management at Shuttleworth College, found that every single crayfish that he trapped had DNA samples of fish present inside their stomachs.

Cormorants have another tremendous impact on our fish stocks. Prior to around 1979 there were not any inland breeding Cormorants in the country with the indigenous race 'carbo' breeding along the north Atlantic coasts. The race 'sinensis' bred in central and southern Europe in trees, often by fresh water. These species now live and breed together in their thousands inland around suitable fresh water sites. When the Cormorant was given protection under the 1981 Wildlife Act it was intended for the race carbo and not the continental race. Prior to the Act a bounty was paid for the tail of each bird such was considered the damage that they did. Their prey preference size of fish is 4-5 ounces, they will eat larger fish to perhaps over a pound and any fish that they cannot swallow will usually die. They each eat approximately 365-550lb of fish per year. There is not one site on the Ouse that could accommodate one of these birds. They have helped enormously to deplete our rivers, lakes and ponds beyond recognition.

*Part II of this article will address the endocrine issue and will appear in issue 164 of Wild About Beds - Ed.*



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## Neglected Insects in Beds- an update

by Alan R. Outen

As many of you will know a couple of years back I started an initiative to try and stimulate more interest and increase the recording of Neglected Insects in Beds. In addition to my own fieldwork and that of others I have been collating the existing published records for the following groups:

- Diptera - two-winged flies (with the exception of hoverflies - already well recorded in the County by John O'Sullivan and others)
  - 'Homopteran Bugs' especially Auchenorrhyncha (the 'froghoppers')
  - Trichoptera - Caddisflies
  - Ephemeroptera - Mayflies
  - Plecoptera - Stoneflies
  - Psocoptera - Barkflies & Booklice
  - Collembola - Springtails (although technically no longer regarded strictly as insects).
- } These 3 groups are collectively known as Riverflies

I welcome records from members of BNHS and others but note that identification of most of these insects is not as easy as popular field guides would often lead one to believe! For most species in these groups specialist identification is required. However all of these groups have the advantage of National Recording Schemes (at least in part) from which identification help is often available enabling us to obtain the records for the County and also feed them into the National Schemes. As I have indicated previously (Muntjac 158, Spring 2011) there are also many excellent Forum websites available to help in identification of some of these groups. I ensure that wherever possible I retain a voucher specimen of any new species for the County (as well as others that are not readily identifiable) in support of my photographs. Please bear in mind however that in most cases I am not personally able to identify specimens or photographs of species from these groups!

Already our knowledge of all these groups in the county is significantly increased with many species added to the county lists including several national rarities. The Diptera and Trichoptera are making especially good progress. The number of caddisflies recorded for the county is now 50 species (a quarter of those recorded for Britain) most of these being from specimens collected from moth traps around the county, with Tony Lawrence having 26 species from his Eaton Ford garden trap while I have 25 species recorded for my own garden trap.

In the course of my fieldwork searching for insects in the above groups I do inevitably encounter many beetles, hymenopterans (including bees, wasps and sawflies etc.) and also spiders, for many of which I have also managed to get identifications. I am of course keeping a record of these finds as well (some of them again very interesting records) but am not specifically researching these groups further.

I am still hoping that through the Scientific Committee we can call a meeting for all those generally interested in Entomology in Bedfordshire in order to discuss the way forward. Without compromising any existing activities or groups with the BNHS would like to set up an informal 'Invertebrate Group' of interested individuals. (I have discussed this with John O'Sullivan as Chairman of Scientific Committee whilst at Ian Dawson's suggestion I have expanded the group from Insects to cover all Invertebrates). The objective would be to exchange ideas and discuss problems as well as meeting up in the field. I and others, also regularly send out images of some of our interesting finds so if you are interested you can be added to this mailing group. In addition a number of us who are retired (or otherwise available) have been regularly meeting up in the field during the week over the past two years and if anyone would be interested in joining us please let me know at alanouten@virginmedia.com or 14 Fairfax Close, Clifton, Shefford, Beds. SG17 5RH and I will keep you informed. If there is sufficient demand it might be possible to organise some weekend field excursions as well.

### References

- Outen A.R. (2011) Neglected Insects in Bedfordshire. Muntjac 158 pp 3-4  
Outen A.R. (2011) Insects on the net. Muntjac 158 pp 7-10

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## Remembering Oliver Pike 50 years on

by Rory Morrissey

Oliver Pike was a naturalist, author, photographer and pioneer of wildlife films who was active mainly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He took his camera into the field and obtained images of wildlife in their natural surroundings. He was one of the first professional wildlife photographers and made his living from his photographs, films, books and lectures. He lived in Leighton Buzzard from 1922 until his death in 1963 and was the first President of the Bedfordshire Natural History Society and Field Club in 1946, when it was revived after the Second World War.



Oliver Pike in 1905. Photo courtesy the Pike family

His films were ground-breaking, both in terms of the techniques employed and the material shown – including the first ever film of the Cuckoo laying an egg in the nest of another bird, which was released in 1922. (This is usually attributed to the ornithologist and producer, Edgar Chance, but it was Pike, not credited on the film itself, who took the shots.) Oliver Pike made his first films of birds in 1907, mainly around the rugged coasts of Britain. He showed them in London under the title “In Birdland” - these were the first wildlife films ever to be shown in public cinemas. He made over 50 films in total, many of them for British Instructional Films in the “Secrets of Nature” series. Several of these films were made in his back garden in Leighton Buzzard – in Bedfordshire – and nearby.

I first became interested in his work a couple of years ago and hope to celebrate it with an exhibition in the Autumn of 2013, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. I have been helped by many members of the BNHS already, but if there is anyone out there with further material I should be grateful to receive it\*.

There are some fascinating things in Oliver Pike's books, many of which were written at “The Bungalow” in Leighton Buzzard. He wrote about the local fauna, particularly birds, and his books tell us much about the wide range of species that was common in the area in his days, but which today have disappeared, or at least become very scarce. There are some species that he rarely saw and which are now common, but the telling point is that there was so much more abundant wildlife about in the first half of the last century.

His book *The Nightingale: its Story and Song* describes a local wood where in the 1930s there were two dozen Nightingale pairs. As far as I can find out, the last Nightingale that sang in this area was recorded in 1993. In 1943's *Nature and Camera* Pike also mentions Blackcaps, Sedge Warblers, Grasshopper Warblers and many other small birds being present. Most of these, he says, succeeded in rearing their families, but he tells how the arrival of a pair of Grey Squirrels led within three years to only one in a dozen pairs of birds managing to successfully rear their young.

Pike spent many thousands of hours in hides, or just hidden, observing the wildlife that he loved. His knowledge came from observation and a keen mind, but he also enlisted the help of others to find the creatures that interested him, including gamekeepers and the local poachers. A fascinating story is related in *The Great Winding Road* where a poacher takes him to see a Weasel catch a Lapwing at night. The Weasel at first approaches carefully and picks out his prey, then launches into a mad, leaping dance that bewitches the hapless bird, until the Weasel finally strikes.

Writing of his garden, he says that he had “thirty-five different species of bird nesting in it, or within a dozen yards of it”. It was a big garden, just over an acre, sitting on the southern edge of Leighton Buzzard, surrounded by orchards, fields, woods and quarries. Frank Gribble, a long-standing BNHS member, recalls visiting the place in the 1960s with Henry Key, the first Secretary of the BNHS (private correspondence). He noted that a hobby was nesting in the garden. Nowadays the area is quite changed and it is difficult to believe that any wildlife lives there.

The garden was a haven for mammals too. At various times he had Foxes, Badgers and an Otter that came regularly. The Otter came at first to plunder some trout that he had been filming in a huge glass tank,



Baby rabbits in the garden. Photo by Oliver Pike

but which had been released into the pond. The Otter returned in response to food offered, became quite tame and was given the name "Bobbie". Two orphaned Badgers were brought to the Pikes and they had little choice but to hand rear them. They were allowed into the house, where they caused mayhem for some time, but eventually they returned to the wild.

Oliver Pike was involved in early wildlife conservation, and was active in protecting them from exploitation and destruction in the wild. He took part in the relocation of English and Scottish Red Kites to Wales and the introduction of additional birds from Spanish eggs. He argued against egg collecting and any destruction of birds and their nests, for example the annual St Stephen's Day massacre of Wrens, and particularly the use of feathers in the ladies' hat trade.

Amazingly, Bedfordshire libraries have only one of his books (*The Nightingale*) in stock. He wrote dozens, including books for children and several about his filming and photography techniques. The style of the children's' *Birdland* books is rather dated, but the information is first rate. Regarding photographing birds, he was very careful not to disturb them – this is what he says in the first chapter of *The Nightingale*.

Many bird photographers, in their anxiety to obtain photographs, do not seem to study the birds themselves; clumsy hides are built, the camera is placed too close to the nest, and the surroundings are cut away to such an extent that it is practically impossible, when their task is finished, to cover the nest over, to hide it from the numerous enemies which are always on the lookout for young birds. I have heard of numbers of instances of bird photographers causing rare birds to desert their eggs or young, simply because they did not know the habits of their subjects well enough to know how to go to work. When a photographer has finished with the nest, (s)he should be able to replace the branches or other cover, so that anyone passing the spot would not know that any disturbance had taken place.



In later years, Oliver Pike with his cine camera. Photo courtesy the Pike family

A DVD is available with three of Oliver Pike's films: *The Cuckoo*, *The Nightingale* and *The White Owl*. The DVD is called *Secrets of Nature* and was published by the British Film Institute in July 2010. The last is the only film on which Oliver Pike is credited. It is about the Barn Owl, an amusing story that may not be to everyone's taste but contains some amazing footage, taken in his garden and in the surrounding area, notably in the churchyard at Great Billington. One of his fans is David Attenborough, who has said that Oliver Pike's films enthralled him as a child and helped to propel him in his wildlife career.

As for Oliver Pike's books, they can be found fairly easily on the internet, but unfortunately not in our libraries. I suggest that we could all learn a lot from Oliver Pike, and hope that in 2013 we shall be able to celebrate his life.

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British Film Institute, 2010. *Secrets of Nature* DVD, sleeve and insert notes by Bryony Dixon  
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### Field meeting to Strumpshaw Fen, Norfolk 24<sup>th</sup> June 2012

By David Anderson

This joint meeting of the BNHS, the Beds Bird Club and the British Dragonfly Society took place on one of those unfortunate days as far as dragonfly watching was concerned. The temperature was just 13°C and overcast, but 16 hardy souls assembled for the meeting. We started in the RSPB Reserve Reception area and were immediately rewarded with good views of two Otters, a fly-past pair of Bearded Tits and distant views of several Marsh Harriers. On leaving Reception we made our way out into the meadows and dykes, but very soon the rain came in increasing force with the most spectacular displays of rolling thunder and strong winds; not in any way dragonfly watching conditions! In the afternoon in only light rain we did find a few Azure, Blue-tailed and Large Red Damselflies and one each of Four-spotted Chaser, Scarce Chaser and Black-tailed Skimmers, but that was our total, with none of the hoped for Norfolk Chasers or Swallowtail Butterflies. We did see a few piles of Chinese Water Deer droppings, but that was about all.

We will just have to go again another day, or another year, for Strumpshaw Fen is a great site.



Photos by Warwick Davies

### Upcoming events

**14 Jul** Morning looking for interesting butterflies in West Wood, Souldrop, a Forest Enterprise ancient woodland. Park and meet at 10.30 am at the entrance to West Wood, off the A6 at Souldrop, SP990626. The meeting will finish around 1.30 pm. Leader: Tony Smith. This is a joint meeting with Butterfly Conservation.

**12 Aug** Demonstration of bird ringing at Millennium Country Park, Marston Vale Forest Centre, Marston Moretaine. Meet at 7.00 am sharp at the main park gate SP998412. Note that the gate will be locked after we enter. A chance to observe various birds in the hand as rings are fitted. Weather dependent: call Don Green on 01582 867258 if in doubt. The meeting will finish by 11.00 am. Leader: Mark Fitzpatrick.

**22 Aug** Nature walk and pond dipping at Priory Country Park, Bedford. Suitable for young families. Park and meet at 10.30 am by the visitor centre, TL072492. The meeting will finish at 1.00 pm. Leader: Sheila Brooke.

**3-5 Sept** The meeting **Hedgerow Futures 2012** has been called to bring together hedgerow researchers and managers to consider a range of themes, including biodiversity, connectivity, ecosystem services, sustainability, management and relationship with people. The event will be held at the Staffordshire University Science Centre in Stoke-on-Trent. Booking and programme details are available at [www.hedgelink.org.uk/hedgerow-futures-conference-2012.htm](http://www.hedgelink.org.uk/hedgerow-futures-conference-2012.htm).

**8 Sept** Small mammal trapping at Flitwick Moor SSSI. Meet at 8.30 am in the car park at the end of Folly Lane, next to Folly Farm, off Maulden Road TL046354. Leader: Richard Lawrence. This is a joint meeting with the Flit Vale Wildlife Group.