



Wild About Beds

Autumn 2020

Greater Dodder plants beside the river Ivel

by Richard Revels

One bonus of looking for butterfly larvae on Stinging Nettles this year in early August has been discovering several patches of Greater Dodder *Cuscuta europaea* on the Stinging Nettles beside the river Ivel at Biggleswade, where it had not been previously been recorded. This Stinging Nettle parasite was found growing in several places over a distance of about 100-150m one evening when I was checking the nettles for webs of Small Tortoiseshell butterfly larvae.

This discovery has triggered searches of the nettles along the banks of the river Ivel by several BNHS members including local ecologist Richard Lawrence, who has now searched many miles of the Ivel riverbank, but so far other searches have not revealed any more Greater Dodder colonies this year.



Greater Dodder is a parasitic plant that entwines Stinging Nettles usually on river banks, with very few records away from the Great Ouse. Finding several patches of this plant beside the river Ivel at Biggleswade shows that there are probably unrecorded colonies elsewhere in the county. Photo by Richard Revels

In the past some Greater Dodder had been recorded about five miles downstream near Girtford bridge, Sandy, but none have been seen this year.

If any BNHS members discover any Dodder plants entwining around Stinging Nettles please report it our plant recorder John Wakely.

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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 Maulden; the Christmas Members' Evening is held in 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 **Kath Hindley**, Honorary Membership Secretary, Tel: 01525 841256, email [membership\(at\)bnhs.org.uk](mailto:membership(at)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 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 December 2020** please.

Thank you in anticipation.

The next Wild About Beds will be published in **December 2020**. Please note that any views are independent of the Bedfordshire Natural History Society and BedsLife.

BNHS 2020 Conference cancellation

I regret to inform you all that the Conference steering group have reluctantly come to the conclusion that this years BNHS Conference on Freshwater Life, which was scheduled for 14 November, will have to be cancelled. Clearly 110 people in a confined space is still unlikely to be safe at that time.

We hope to rearrange for November 2021 and that the excellent lineup of speakers we had assembled will still all be available then.

All good wishes to all and keep safe.

Alan Outen



Use the newsletter code NL419 for
10% discount on **microscopy** equipment

From the Chair

by *Graham Bellam*

Here we are six months into Covid-19, I hope you have all been faring well and have been able to enjoy wildlife in your gardens or local open spaces. All our planned for events, walks and talks have been cancelled. The last Council meeting and other business have been carried out using Zoom meetings, which have taken IT upgrades and a bit of getting used to, but does mean time is saved driving to and back from meetings.

However, our members have been busy. In this issue you can read what several members have been up to over the summer. Betty Cooke has been recording wildlife in her garden with a first for the County, while Ann De Winter has been out with Merv walking their local footpaths and searching out our wild orchids... they found hundreds! Richard Revels has been looking for parasitoids in butterfly caterpillars that feed on nettles and has continued the nettle link by finding a colony of Greater Dodder in Biggleswade...all is explained in his article.

Thanks to Julia Powell and Sheila Brooke there have been several guided walks for limited numbers of members to comply with covid-19 safety guidelines. Details of what they are planning are also in this newsletter. Do keep an eye on the newsgroup and website for details of walks. We also hope to begin some talks using Zoom meetings over the autumn and winter ...do give them a try..but a real shame that friends and acquaintances cannot meet up yet to enjoy a hot drink and biscuit and listen to our usual range of talks.

I hope you find the newsletter an interesting read.

Our usual printing route for those who usually receive the newsletter as hard copy is still not available, and for those of you with email addresses you will be sent your copy electronically. The newsletter is available on the BNHS website also. Those without emails will be sent a hard copy printed, most likely, on a home printer, not the quality you are used to. If you can move to receiving the newsletter by email do let me know.

The Website has had the facility to pay online for the new BNHS book *Bedfordshire-our changing habitats and wildlife* added. This was done in tandem with a new membership database that now allows joining the society and membership renewal to be done online. This has been at the top of the Christmas list to Santa for several years for our Treasurer and Membership Officer. Well done to everyone involved.

Lastly but not least many thanks to Heather Webb for putting the newsletter together and making it work. Thanks Heather.

Voluntary officer vacancies

There are still two important vacancies coming up to help the Society function. Further details were advertised in the last Newsletter and appear on the Website. One is the Honorary Secretary who makes council meetings run smoothly by taking minutes, organising meetings, and sending out papers. The second is our Webmaster who maintains and develops our website which is the hub for information about the society and what is going on.

Do consider helping your society...you can find out more by having a chat with the Chair by initially emailing Graham Bellamy at [chairman\(at\)bnhs.org.uk](mailto:chairman(at)bnhs.org.uk) and /or talking with Betty Cooke for the Hon. Secretary vacancy by emailing Betty at [secretary\(at\)bnhs.org.uk](mailto:secretary(at)bnhs.org.uk) and the current Webmaster at [webmaster\(at\)bnhs.org.uk](mailto:webmaster(at)bnhs.org.uk)



Please note: to reduce the risk of email spam being sent to contributors and others, '(at)' appears in email addresses in place of '@' in this newsletter. -Ed.

Barton's Beautiful Orchids

by Ann and Mervyn de Winter

As with many other people during lockdown and beyond, Merv and I have been walking around our local area, discovering footpaths new to us and exploring ones we haven't been on for a long time.

We've been enjoying the wildlife and it has been amazing to discover so much flora and fauna within a very short distance of our house. As we came to June, we could see there were a large number of wild orchids on our route, and knowing that BNHS is keen to have records, we decided to start counting the numbers of the species we found.

We concentrated on two areas: a route from Barton-Le-Clay towards Sharpenhoe and a route along a footpath which starts at the edge of Barton going along the bottom of the A6 towards Streatley.

The majority of orchids found on our first route were along a double hedge roughly 400m long. The footpath actually goes through the middle of the two hedges, but the landowner hasn't cut the branches/nettles/brambles so walkers go either side of the hedge where there is a wide strip of grass. We went either side of the hedge and then I would come back down the middle to complete the count. Obviously, it had to be me as Merv might have scratched his camera poor soul – so it was me that was scratched and stung instead! It was worth it for the high count of orchids – many of which were actually under the hedge which involved some crawling around to find them all.

We did this route several times, but to give you an idea of numbers as the height of flowering, one day we counted 238 pyramidal orchids, 35 common spotted and one bee orchid.

Our next route took us along the path at the bottom of the A6 cutting, counting as we went. After doing this, we had the somewhat spontaneous idea of walking up the footpath towards Streatley to count further as we could see there were many orchids along the top of the slope. Braving the fumes and huge amounts of litter, we saw there were many plants along this route. I was particularly pleased to find a single white helleborine in a small patch of wood. The count for the whole of this stretch was 129 pyramidal, 323 common spotted, 19 common twayblades, six bee orchids and the one white helleborine.

An interesting find was in a small woodland planted in 2004. It shows how long since we had been this way as it was an arable field when I kept my horse nearby and last rode around the perimeter. There were a few pyramidal and common spotted, but I found one which looked different – many photos were taken and sent to our local expert who thought it was possibly a southern marsh/early marsh hybrid – what excitement!

We have some beautiful countryside in Bedfordshire, and it has been a joy to explore. We also saw a good variety of other wild flowers; and found orchids in other locations on our walk too. Now they have disappeared, hopefully to set seed for next year – or possibly years in the future. Undertaking this count added interest to our walks as well as really enjoying the sight of so many beautiful flowers.

A pyramidal orchid also popped up on the grass verge outside our house – which I managed to save from the Council contractor's strimmer – but that's another story!

Hoopoe hopes everyone has had a good summer despite the current restrictions; certainly it's been strange for him without quite so many twitchers out there.

Stay safe everybody!



Peacock butterfly summer
story and photos by Richard Revels



A peacock butterfly on Buddleia flower

The Peacock butterfly *Inachis io* made a welcome return to decent numbers this summer in Bedfordshire and one day about 25 were nectaring on various Buddleia and other flowers in my garden. Although the warmer summer weather may have played a part in this return to better numbers this year, probably the scarcity of the parasitoid Tachinid fly *Sturmia bella* is the main reason. This parasitic fly that was first recorded in Britain in the late 1990s and rapidly spread across much of lowland UK, often takes a heavy toll of the Vanessid family of butterfly larvae with sometimes over 95% of larvae being affected and killed. This parasitoid is thought to be the main reason why the Small Tortoiseshell butterfly has become so scarce during

the past two decades. One or more of the various other parasitic flies and wasps have always been a control of most Lepidoptera species numbers.

The females of this parasitic fly lay their eggs on the leaves of stinging nettles close to where larvae of their host Vanessid species butterfly are feeding, and the butterfly larvae devour the eggs as well as the nettle leaves. Once eaten the parasitoid larva hatches and develops inside the butterfly larva, usually emerging as a maggot looking grub when the butterfly larva prepares to change to pupa, or soon after the pupa is formed.

This year during lockdown I walked over Biggleswade Common and I found a single batch of almost full grown Small Tortoiseshell larvae that I boxed up and took home to breed through to adults, and about three weeks later I also found a batch of Peacock larvae feeding on a nearby nettle patch on the common. Again I brought the larvae home to breed through to adults. For the first time in many years none of these butterfly caterpillars produced larvae of *S. bella*, however one Small Tortoiseshell larva did produce some 'cotton-wool' looking cocoons of another common parasitoid *Cotesia vanessae* that has also been recorded affecting several other closely related species.

A week or so later I visited the disused gravel working area near Willington, and saw over 30 webs of Peacock larvae feeding on the nettles mostly beside the Elstow Brook, that joins the Great Ouse near Willington. I took home about 30 of the larvae from two different webs and was delighted that these larvae were also free from the *S. bella* parasitoid. To see if this was occurring in different areas of Bedfordshire I contacted Pat and Charles Baker who live in the south of the county in Studham, to see if they could breed through some Peacock larvae from their area, which they did, and again they were free from the *S. bella* parasitoid, although one larva did produce some 'cotton wool' looking cocoons, that are typical of *Cotesia* wasp cocoons, but as they have not yet produced any adult parasitoids I cannot confirm which of many *Cotesia* species they are. The county butterfly recorder Keith Balmer was informed of my findings in mid summer and he collected some Peacock larvae that he bred through and there were also free of parasitoids.



Around 25 Peacock butterflies were in my garden in mid-July, a welcome return to some numbers this year due mainly to the larvae not being affected by the Tachinid parasitoid fly *Sturmia bella*



Peacock butterfly larvae on Stinging Nettle leaf. Despite these larvae looking healthy, they may be carrying the larva of a parasitoid

So as expected there were more Peacock and Small Tortoiseshell butterflies seen in Bedfordshire than for many years.

The Peacock butterfly is normally single brooded with fresh adults emerging in July or early August when they feed on flowers before hibernating to over winter. So I was surprised to find a web of about two dozen mature Peacock larvae near Royston in Hertfordshire, in early September. This rare 2nd brood has now produced several *S. bella* larvae that rapidly turn to pupa at the time of writing, as well as cocoons of a *Cotesia* wasp, and 3 pupae of probably another common parasitoid *Phryxe vulgaris*. All these parasitoids and the pupa and the remains of the host larvae will be sent to Dr Mark Shaw, one of Britain's leading specialists in parasitoids of Lepidoptera, for his records and positive identification.

This summer's good showing of Peacock and Small Tortoiseshell butterflies maybe a 'one off' when the parasitoids were not around in numbers when their host larvae were in good numbers. What will happen in 2021 will be very interesting.



This parasitoid fly was first recorded in Britain in the late 1990s and rapidly spread over much of lowland UK.



This Small Tortoiseshell larva spun up to change to pupa, but before that happened two parasitoid larvae made an exit, leaving a slime trail that soon dries.

Some wildlife benefits from cultivating your garden 'weeds' story and photos by Betty Cooke

I expect that most if not all of you will be allowing weeds, aka native wildflowers, to have a place in your gardens in order that more wildlife can stay there and breed. Although most adult insects will be happy to take food from any plant, wherever it has originated, in the early stages, like human children, they are much more finicky about their food choices, and some can be solely dependent upon a single species of native plant.

My garden 'weeds', some left purposefully to feed particular insects, produced a Dock-bug orgy involving eleven adults on one Dock plant, Cinnabar caterpillars that quickly demolished the Ragwort, and beautiful larvae of the Toadflax Brocade moth on rampant Purple Toadflax.

Bristly Ox-tongue left self-seeded by the patio door attracted numerous hoverflies. Stone Parsley appeared in the mini-meadow, standing tall above the seeding grasses and now with the stems and seeds turning a beautiful burgundy, provided food for several insects. Devil's-bit Scabious and Knapweed have been alive with all kinds of bees, bugs and flies. Recently for a few weeks the Ivy Bees have been feeding on Golden Rod, but now they are gorging on the flowering Ivy that climbs



Stone Parsley *Sison amomum*



Enchanter's Nightshade *Circaea lutetiana*

up the Crab Apple tree. In the 'woody' area by the apple trees are two patches of Enchanter's Nightshade, which I continue to search hoping to find the stiltbug that feeds on their leaves.

A final sweep before the cut of the mini-meadow revealed at least ten Bishop's Mitre Shieldbugs, two Field Damselbugs, a Pine Ladybird, and numerous assorted plant-hoppers, spiders and flies.

Some of the insects that have been new to me this year in my wild garden included a Dotted Bee-fly, which is amazingly a new record for Bedfordshire! Sawflies *Athalia cordata*, *Athalia circularis* and *Arge cyanocrocea*, were all new to me and the garden, and I believe also to TL 13. While also new to me and the garden were the Vestal Cuckoo Bee, a plant bug *Nysius senecionis*, the Ichneumon *Diplazon laetatorius*, and a tiny Bark-fly *Graphopsocus cruciatus*. Thanks to County Recorders and other enthusiasts for their help with ID.

In this pandemic year our gardens have given us huge health benefits, but as new building work takes over more of the countryside, our gardens become ever more important both as wildlife refuges, and as stepping-stones that help facilitate movement of species between isolated conservation areas. Our garden 'weeds' can play a prominent part in keeping our wildlife safe.



The Hornet Mimic Hoverfly *Volucella zonaria*



Ivy Bee *Colletes hederarum*

Wild Orchids of Bedfordshire has sold out
by Rosemary Brind, Honorary Editor, BNHS

The Society published *Wild Orchids of Bedfordshire* in April 2015, authored by Richard Revels, Chris Boon and Graham Bellamy. The project was a great success and received excellent reviews at the time:

"This is a superb production, beautifully printed, perfectly pitched, well presented and thoroughly reliable. This is English local botany at its very best." (from review in *British Wildlife*, August 2015)

We are delighted that, five years later, the book is officially sold out, with the last two copies sold in June; the print-run was 750 copies. The publication was a break-even project for the society. Charitable grants and the support of Subscribers made a significant difference to the pricing of the book. Profits from sales enabled the society to give grants to both the Biodiversity Recording and Monitoring Centre (BRMC) in support of their work maintaining biological records for the county, and to the Wildlife Trust for ongoing conservation of orchids at Totternhoe Knolls. Articles about the work of the BRMC and annual updates on orchid records and the Totternhoe orchid project, have been published in the *Bedfordshire Naturalist*.

Summer 2020 Lowlights

by Julia Powell

Unfortunately, all of our scheduled meetings and talks had to be cancelled because of the pandemic.

In March, the AGM with the usual Recordors reports did not happen, probably for the first time in the Society's history. The Society's business part of the meeting was carried out via email. The planned-for full programme of talks and walks will roll over until we are able to meet safely again.

Once we were allowed to meet in groups of six, Julia Powell and Sheila Brooke worked hard on how we could resume our summer meetings in a safe way and produced a risk assessment for each visit.

With a limited number of people having to book before each walk, a good number of people still turned out in support although none of the meetings was oversubscribed.

Meetings that have gone ahead or have been rescheduled:

July

Visit to Wadelows NR behind Poplars Garden Centre

This private NR, not visited during lockdown by anyone apart from family, was opened up for a group of 12 people who met widely spread out at the distant end of the car park on a very grey day. Once through the gates, everyone rapidly dispersed to discover the various habitats within this nature reserve. Although groups of only 2-3 people formed, word soon got round about the Southern Marsh hybrid orchid and Emperor moth caterpillar among the many varied sightings of the day. Thanks to our two leaders, John Pitts and Sheila Brooke.



The Southern Marsh hybrid orchid caused a great deal of excitement. Photo by Julia Powell



Six-spot Burnet *Zygaena filipendulae* at Astral Lake Park. Photo by Julia Powell

Visit to Astral Lake Park and Stanbridge Meadows

A slightly smaller group assembled for this visit on another grey day. This time individuals were given staggered times at which to connect with Rory for directions about sights to be seen around this varied site although John Curd was also on hand to aid Dragonfly identification. There was a small murmuration of starlings near the car park. Stanbridge Meadows was a stunning display of flowers not seen at its best due to the overcast day. Thanks to Rory and John.



A socially-distanced visit to Centenary Wood. Photo by Julia Powell

Evening walk at Centenary Wood

A small group of members were joined by Guy and Jane Lambourne who have been working part of the area for hazel coppice and we were shown the fruits of their endeavours on the way round. Steve Halton gave us an overview of the wood which was established in 1988 to mark the centenary of the County Council. A nice way to spend the evening although we did not see the insects at their best due to the lateness of the day. Thanks to Steve and the Lambournes.

August

Walk round Pegsdon

Despite a threatening forecast, the weather largely remained dry and there was a lot for this small group to see. With Graham present there was a strong botanical flavour to the walk although good close up views of a range of chalk grassland butterflies were had as they roosted on grass stems. Thanks Graham and Sheila.

September

Meander 'round Duck End Nature Reserve

The planned small mammal trapping was not able to be carried out due to the stringency of Covid-19 precautions. However a limited number of people met later in the morning for a meander around this site with the aim of spotting Willow Emerald Damselflies. This was seen by some together with Southern Hawker and a mating pair of Migrant Hawkers. Thanks to David and Rory.

Scheduled meeting:

At the time of writing the joint meeting for a walk with a geology focus on Sept 19 at Harrold had not taken place.



Southern Hawker *Aeshna cyanea*. Photo by Sheila Brooke

Current situation:

Notice of the walks is circulated via the Newsgroup and Facebook. Places must be booked with Julia Powell. JuliaCPowell800(at)gmail.com or on 01582 661328

Numbers are limited to 12 people including two leaders.

There is an updated Risk Assessment which has been circulated to everyone attending one of the walks.

Contact details for all attendees are recorded so if Track and Trace is enacted during the 21 day period after a walk people can be contacted.

Future:

Outdoor meetings:

It is proposed that these arrangements continue until Christmas when the situation may be clearer(!). We will try to arrange 2 walks per month for September, October and November.

If any members wish to organise walks for a group of six, Sheila or Julia would love to hear from you and will help out.

Possible Venues for Walks This Autumn/Winter:

- Woburn Park
- Rushmere/Stockgrove Country Park
- Marston Vale/Millennium Country Park
- Priory Country Park
- Barton Hills
- Fancott Wood

Indoor meetings:

As there is yet no sign that any indoor meetings will be allowed to take place, a small group of members is exploring the possibility of having Zoom meetings hosted by a BNHS member. Should this be successful, the first meeting is likely to take place on the third Tuesday evening of the month starting in October.

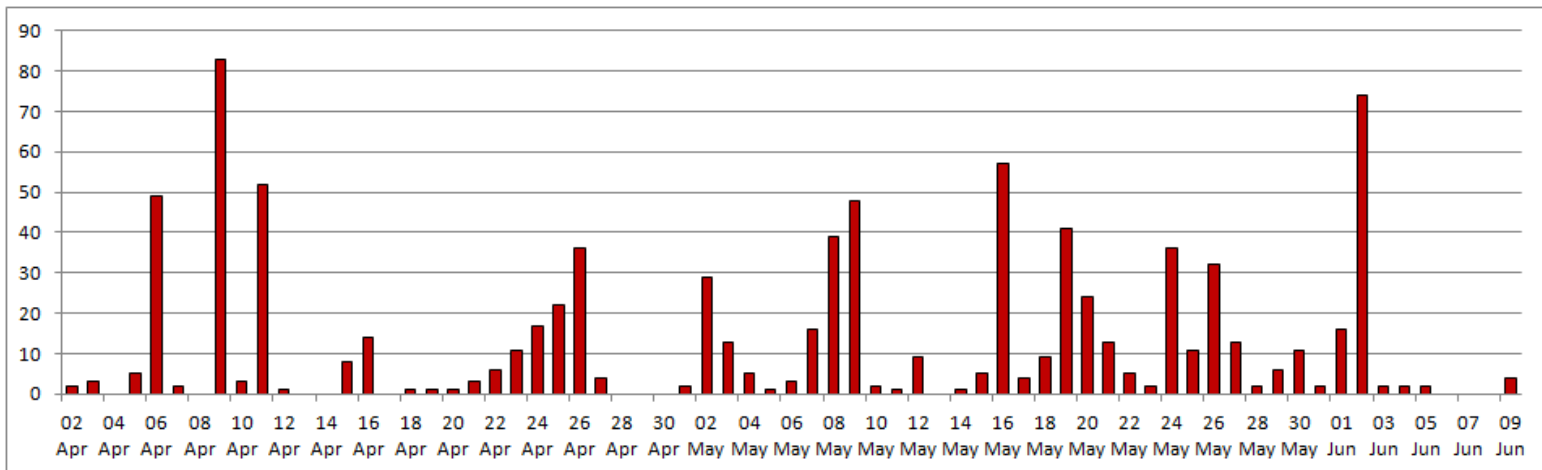


Willow Emerald Damselfly *Chacolestes viridis*. Photo by Sheila Brooke

Bats: a conversation from the BNHS Newsgroup

Bob: I've continued to record bats every night with a recording detector at the loft window. So far, I've recorded seven species (of 11 known to be in this area): Common and Soprano Pipistrelles, Noctule, Leisler's Bat (probably), Serotine, Brown Long-eared Bat and last night one of the *Myotis* species (probably Natterer's Bat or Daubenton's Bat but impossible to tell for certain).

Bat numbers are enormously variable. There's some correlation with temperature and weather conditions. Number (all species) are:



Graham: That's fascinating Bob..was this number of species a surprise for you? (it surprises me..but then my detector does not readily differentiate bats). Good to know they are there...does 'numbers' equal separate passes by the loft window, so that 80 could be a few very active local bats??

Bob: Yes, I was surprised particularly by the Brown Long-eared and the *Myotis* because the environment is very open around the house. Those species are in the park nearby, but I wasn't expecting them to fly over the house in the open. There were usually only two or three species at most on any one night, and it's taken a lot of recording time to get to seven. And yes, the numbers are number of files containing bats, which equates to bat passes. Eighty could be just one manic bat, but it's probably quite a few.



A 'manic bat'..?