Wild About Beds

Winter 2022

Is it just my squirrels?

by John Pitts

In my garden there is a drain manhole cover itself covered by a wooden frame filled with river pebbles slightly bigger than a squashed walnut. Recently I have noticed that these pebbles were vanishing or being moved well outside the frame and I wondered what creature or event was causing this disturbance. Today the answer was revealed! A Grey Squirrel sitting on the pebbles with a single pebble clutched between his paws while he tried to nibble it as if it were a large Hazel nut! The Squirrel then bounced off to the bottom of my garden looking as if to bury it for later. Has anybody else observed such behaviour?

Grey squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis*. Photo by John Pitts

In this 201st issue:

Contents

Contents

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.

BedsLife

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

Editor: Heather Webb
The Wildlife Trust, Priory Country Park, Barkers Lane Bedford MK41 9DJ.
Email: newsletter(at)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 March 2022** please. **Thank you in anticipation.**

The next Wild About Beds will be published in **March 2022**. Please note that any views are independent of the Bedfordshire Natural History Society and BedsLife.

Legacies to the BNHS

At the BNHS Council meeting of June 2021 it was suggested that further details of the two major legacies donated to the BNHS should be made available to members. In addition we occasionally receive smaller amounts bequeathed to the Society. For example in 2020 we received a donation from the estate of Wally Champkin. As the current Honorary Treasurer and Honorary Journal Editor we have researched the matter and can now provide the following information:

Mr Theed-Pearse died in Canada in May 1971. By 1972 the sum of £409.24 was first recorded in the Treasurer's Reports and more distribution payments followed through until 1975 when the value from the legacy had grown to £4568.

These amounts were first kept in deposit accounts before being moved into Bonds such as the City of Nottingham and the City of Peterborough Bonds.

Our second benefactor was Mrs Betty Chambers who died in 2000. Our accounts for 2001 show a legacy of £23,600, and those of 2002 suggest a small final payment.

The funds from these two legacies have been invested in the Charifund of M&G Investments. Most, if not all, were placed in an Accumulation Fund which steadily grows by re-investing the dividends. In September 2021 Council took the decision to agree to re-distribute the units held by dividing them equally; 50% of which remain in the Accumulation Fund and the other 50% to be placed into an Income Fund which generates a dividend payment at the same rate. The benefit of this move being that the payments are automatically paid quarterly into the BNHS current account. All investments can rise and fall but fortunately

Notes from the chair

by Graham Bellamy

Happy Christmas to everyone, and here`s to looking forward to a kinder New Year all round.

What a year! Covid, Climate Change and COP26. There is so much to worry about in the world that we can be forgiven for feeling anxious or even downright fed-up. However, some of the best parts of 2021 for me was being able to book onto some of the BNHS walks, ably organised by Julia Powell and Sheila Brooke, and get out and about and meet fellow BNHS members for a catch up. I`ve found the evening talks through Zoom all most enjoyable as well with 30 to 40 or more members joining. Thanks also to Andy Banthorpe for sorting the nine mini-presentations of 2021 highlights for fifty or so members who joined via Zoom for the BNHS members evening. Well done, it does make a difference.

BNHS business has continued via zoom meetings, and we have had a surprising amount of work to progress it seems. You will have received your emails from Kath, our Membership Secretary, asking for you to renew your membership which I hope you continue to find easy with the new membermojo system, I managed mine without a hitch.

BNHS-only members will have received an email about a change to receiving copies of the Bedfordshire Naturalist and the Bedfordshire Bird Report after this year's mailing. Rising costs of production and postage compared to membership fees, mean that from next year (2022): BNHS-only members will receive the Bedfordshire Naturalist, which will in addition contain a summary Bird Report; members of the Bird Club will receive the full Bedfordshire Bird Report; joint members will continue to receive both publications. If BNHS-only or BirdClub-only members wish to receive both publications as part of your 2022 membership, please pay the additional £6.00 to become a joint member of BNHS and Bird Club.

Council is very pleased firstly, to thanks Heather Webb for so ably editing the last 50 editions of *Wild About Beds* (WAB). A really good job Heather thank you and well done. Thanks also to those who have provided copy for those 50 editions to make WAB an enjoyable and informative read for members.

And secondly, to announce our new WAB editor. After the plea for a new editor in the 200th issue I am delighted to say that member, Nick Hammond, has offered to become editor. Thanks very much Nick. Please support Nick by keeping the flow of articles and snippets on Bedfordshire wildlife coming in for the newsletter.

We have news of two new County Recorders to report. Peter Nash has agreed to be recorder for Birds and Will George the recorder for Heteroptera. Heteroptera are a suborder of bugs (Order Hemiptera) that include the Shieldbugs. Perhaps Will can introduce readers to them in a future WAB! Thanks for becoming County Recorders.

It`s important to record our wildlife and its response to changes in habitat and the climate and help conservationists assess the health of our wildlife habitats. An example of this is the recently announced new UK Red List for birds in the UK. Birds entering the Red List are of highest conservation concern. There are now 70 birds on the Red List; and recently added are the Swift, House Martin and Greenfinch based on breeding decline and other factors; although the Greenfinch has declined severely due to disease. Data supporting these findings are largely provided by volunteers and are invaluable. We hope to report in the next WAB about an initiative to ask for Flora Guardians to regularly report on the health of a selection of our rare and declining plants in Bedfordshire...watch this space....and have a very Happy Christmas.

Legacies to the BNHS cont'

the Charifund has shown a steady increase year on year even through the financial challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The regular payments from the Income Fund will assist with the costs arising from the production and postage of our Journals helping us to maintain the level of quality we currently enjoy in our full-colour annual publications.

Michael Bird and Rosemary Brind, October 2021

Deer of Medieval Bedfordshire

by Nigel Willits

The bones of deer (Cervidae) were found during archaeological excavations in Bedford Town's historic core between 1967 and 1977. Dig sites were grouped into three locations, two north of the River Great Ouse and one south:

1. Bedford Castle – the area around Castle Mound, from the Embankment north to Mill Street;
2. Midland Road – including the area now covered by the Harpur Centre;
3. St. John Street – including the surrounding district south of the river.

Animal bones were a common find in all three areas, in contexts dating from the 9th to 15th centuries C.E. In most cases, they were associated with domestic refuse and frequently bore the marks of butchery, indicating consumption by humans. The majority came from domesticated species of mammal, particularly cattle, sheep and pig. Birds were another quite numerous category, ranging in size from sparrow to swan, but they were not identified to species.

Red deer *Cervus elaphus*. Photo by Bernard Ruelle

Deer were represented among the assemblage of bones in comparatively small numbers, suggesting that venison was eaten only occasionally by the urban population of the time. It is notable that most of the cervid remains were found at the Bedford Castle site, from the period c.1100-1225 C.E. This reflects the higher social status of its occupants: the de Beauchamp family, Lords of Bedford. Three species of deer were identified from the castle: Red (*Cervus elaphus*), Roe (*Capreolus capreolus*) and Fallow (*Dama dama*); in the respective proportions 2:5:26. This was in fact the only one of the sites from where *C. elaphus* bones were identified. It seems this species was harder to obtain in the town's rural hinterland than the other two. Importation from further afield cannot be ruled out entirely, although given the difficulties of long-distance travel in those days and the lack of refrigeration, a local source would seem most likely.

Roe deer *Capreolus capreolus*. Photo by Nathalie Hausser

Red deer is a native species of course, having migrated into Britain from mainland Europe around 11,000 years ago, after the last glaciation but before the land-bridge was drowned by rising sea-levels. It is said their numbers declined from the Neolithic period onwards (4000 – 2500 B.C.E.) as ancient woodland was cleared for agriculture and they became increasingly restricted to the wilder parts of the country. Such wilder parts would have included the royal hunting forests established by William the Conqueror and his successors. These were not 'forests' in the narrow modern sense of woodland with more or less continuous tree cover, but rather contained mosaics of heath, grassland and wetlands, as well as actual woods. At their greatest extent in the middle of the 12th century C.E., they encompassed some 25% of the country. One swathe seems to have covered parts of Huntingdonshire, Northamptonshire, Buckinghamshire and north-western Bedfordshire.

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.

The Norman royal forests enjoyed a high degree of protection initially, being the exclusive hunting preserve of the King and his favoured noblemen, with the penalty of mutilation or death for those who took game without permission. No doubt our other native cervid, the Roe deer, would have flourished under those conditions. However, during the reign of King John (1199-1216 C.E.), his troublesome barons succeeded in prising some of the forest out of his royal clutches. Then his successor, the young Henry III, was persuaded to sign the Charter of the Forest in 1217, under clause 11 of which “Any archbishop, bishop, earl or baron whatever who passes through our forest shall be allowed to take one or two beasts under the supervision of the forester, if he is to hand; but if not, let him have the horn blown, lest he seem to be doing it furtively.” Over the following centuries, more and more of the monarch’s hunting grounds were disafforested (i.e. removed from under the jurisdiction of Forest Law) and indeed deforested (cleared of trees). Resultant over-hunting and loss of habitat caused Roe deer to decline steeply, only recovering somewhat in both population and distribution with strategic reintroductions during Victorian times, an increase of woodland planting from the 20th century and greater protection. They are still largely absent in the wild from Bedfordshire however, as are Red deer, apart from odd individuals that turn up from time to time.

As mentioned above, King Henry’s Charter of the Forest reduced the punishment meted out to poachers. Clause 10 stated that "No one shall henceforth lose life or limb because of our venison, but if anyone has been arrested and convicted of taking venison he shall be fined heavily if he has the means; and if he has not the means, he shall lie in our prison for a year and a day; and if after a year and a day he can find pledges he may leave prison; but if not, he shall abjure the realm of England." Despite such harsh treatment, it is tempting to think that the couple of bone fragments of Roe and Fallow unearthed at the Midland Road site might represent nefarious activity. That area seems to have been quite low status in the early medieval period and perhaps someone there was desperate enough to risk smuggling a deer or two into town.

Fallow deer *Dama dama*. Photo by Corine Bliek

Unlike the other species, Fallow deer were not native to Britain, but introduced originally from the western Mediterranean by the Romans and kept within enclosures known as ‘vivaria’. According to genetic studies, that stock became extinct after the empire withdrew from Britannia in the 5th century C.E. The Normans then reintroduced them after the 1066 conquest, using an eastern Mediterranean strain. Initially, they were kept in parks as rare exotica but gradually the population increased and they became an important source of venison for aristocratic tables. Given their dominance of the Bedford Castle assemblage, it seems safe to assume that there was at least one managed deer-park herd somewhere convenient. Escapes and releases since medieval times have seen the species become widely established in the wild across the country, including a herd that still thrives today in the north-east of Bedfordshire.

Cervid bones were unearthed too in the St. John’s area of Bedford south of the river, but not identified to species. It is worth noting that they were found only at the level of medieval occupation and not in later post-medieval layers. This may reflect declining deer populations in the wild, as described above, in the absence of royal protection and the decrease of woodland cover. It was certainly a sharp contrast to the situation today, when Bedfordshire is teeming with deer, albeit invasive non-native species. Reeve’s Muntjac (*Muntiacus reevesi*) is now ubiquitous throughout the county (including my garden!), as confirmed by the British Deer Society’s national survey of 2016. While some folk may see them as a welcome addition to our fauna, research has shown they can

Reeve’s Muntjac *Muntiacus reevesi*. Photo by Peter O’Connor

Don’t forget! This issue of Wild About Beds is available online! Visit www.bnhs.org.uk to check it out!

Chinese Water Deer Hydropotes inermis. Photo by Mark Seton

have negative impacts. For instance, their browsing habits inhibit the regrowth of coppiced trees and ground vegetation in woodland. That in turn reduces the habitat's suitability for birds such Common Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*), which has declined by 92% since 1970. Chinese Water Deer (*Hydropotes inermis*) seem to be spreading more widely in the county now too. Both these non-native cervids were from East Asia originally and held captive in places such as Woburn Park and Whipsnade Zoo, from where they have infiltrated many parts of southern Britain since the early 20th century. In the absence of large predators, there is little to prevent their proliferation, unless Eurasian Lynx (*Lynx lynx*) are reintroduced to check their numbers!

Sources:

Anderson, David. Mammals 2019. *Bedfordshire Naturalist* 74 Part 1, 2019 (BNHS 2021).

Baker, David et al. Excavations in Bedford 1967-1977. *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal* Vol. 13, 1979. British Deer Society. www.bds.org.uk

Rothwell, Harry (ed.), *English Historical Documents*, Vol. 3, 1189-1327 . London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1975. Forests and Chases: Henry III's Charter of the Forest (ox.ac.uk)

County gems – a few recollections from Bedfordshire in 2021

story and photos (except where attributed otherwise) by Peter Sutton

The county of Bedfordshire continues to provide some fascinating wildlife stories, from traditional havens that are known for their long-standing interest, to sites that reveal the dynamic changes that are occurring as a result of changing land use and a warming climate.

A male Minnow *Phoxinus phoxinus*

The Flit Valley is a reasonable place to begin, and each spring plays host to that surprising hidden secret, the male Minnow *Phoxinus phoxinus*. The Minnow is commonly depicted as an uninteresting brown fish in the majority of books in which it is illustrated, and yet the males in full breeding attire could arguably be described as one of the most beautiful fish in the British Isles.

Later in the year, in June, the river plays host to a remarkable number of Scarlet Tiger Moths as they begin to fly at dusk on warm summer nights in their flamboyant and colourful display. In addition, green jewels were seen on the riverside leaves of water mint for the first time this year. These Mint Beetles *Chrysolina herbacea*, appear to be attempting to gain a foothold in the county, as they have done in Hertfordshire.

Mint Beetle *Chrysolina herbacea*

Other new arrivals were observed at Redborne Upper School near Ampthill, which has a story to tell regarding the fauna to be found in its grounds. The school fosters interest in natural history by virtue of its sandy soils which host an impressive collection of hymenopteran residents. This includes ground-nesting bees such as the

Hairy Mining Bee *Dasypoda hirtipes* and wasps such as the Bee Wolf *Philanthus triangulum*, which appear in sequence through spring and summer. Several species of ruby-tailed wasp are also present and the gaudy *Hedychrum nobile* can be seen, without difficulty, on the sandy slopes by the school paths.

Ruby-tailed wasp *Hedychrum nobile*

Man-made features facilitate the observation of natural history at the school and include 'Bee Hotels', mixed flower beds and a very large sand bank. On these features, two species of bug that may be new to the county were observed in April: *Rhaglius alboacuminatus* and *Rhyparochromus vulgaris*.

Rhaglius alboacuminatus (L) and *Rhyparochromus vulgaris* (R)

Further along the Flit Valley, the Maulden Wood complex provides habitat for the county's woodland butterflies including the Purple Hairstreak *Favonius quercus*, White Admiral *Limenitis camilla*, Silver-washed Fritillary *Argynnis paphia*, and that most elusive of prizes, the Purple Emperor *Apatura iris*. Among the species of butterfly observed, a female Silver-washed Fritillary was seen by the author laying eggs in moss on the trunk of a tree in July, but it was perhaps too late in the season and the Purple Emperor was not observed. However, thirteen year old Lucy Moore from Flitwick has done a fantastic job of illustrating this butterfly, which has been superimposed onto a Maulden woodland ride in anticipation of what might hopefully be encountered next year!

Purple Emperor butterfly *Apatura Iris.* Photo by Lucy Moore (13 yrs)

Finally, Totternhoe Knolls is likely to feature in any list of essential sites for the Bedfordshire naturalist to visit. This classic chalk downland habitat is noted for its rare orchids, including the Frog and Man Orchids, and its colony of the Duke of Burgundy *Hamearis lucina* butterfly that can be found among the Cowslips in April and May.

However, it was another iconic woodland species, the Stag Beetle *Lucanus cervus*, at its only known locality in Bedfordshire that lured the author to wander the site in the warm evenings of June this year. Sure enough, as dusk fell on one particularly balmy night, the characteristic whirring of Britain's largest terrestrial beetle in flight was heard, and this magnificent species was captured on film.

Acknowledgement: sincere thanks to Caroline Thould for superimposing Lucy Moore's Purple Emperor on to the Maulden Wood ride.

Bedfordshire's dying rivers

by Roy Bates

I became the fish recorder for Bedfordshire Natural History Society in 2000, recording captures by anglers, sightings by members and Environment Agency (EA) fish survey reports from rivers throughout Bedfordshire. I soon realised with increasing concern the serious decline in fish stocks throughout our rivers, mainly the Great Ouse, Ivel and Ouzel, in particular a stretch of the Great Ouse between Newport Pagnell and Bedford, although above and below these towns the river is in a similar state. Once classified by the EA as a Class A river, the Great Ouse declined to Class D by 2009. E is the lowest grade, indicating the extremely low fish stocks of a polluted river (the EA no longer uses this sytem).

The EA surveys show that both the density (number of fish) and the standing crop (biomass or weight) of fish declined year after year, suggesting that all species of fish, for one reason or another, have difficulty in spawning or surviving. This is more of a proble for the gravel spawners such as barbel, chub and gudgeon. In the early part of the century barbel and chub were by far the dominant species and were caught by anglers and recorded in EA surveys at extraordinarily large weights. This was especially true for barbel for which, for 68 years, the English record stood at 14lb 6 oz. In 2006 a fish of over 20lb was caught from Adam's Mill, a stretch of the Great Ouse. Many club members have broken this old record, some many times. Also during this period of large fish, the 'silver fish' population declined at an alarming rate with roach, dace and even bleak difficult to catch in any numbers. I believe this is improving in favoured areas. Unfortunately as larger and older fish naturally expire, and there are very few young born, what there is left is being preyed upon by major predators such as otter and mink, so the future of our rivers in Bedfordshire looks very grim indeed.

Interestingly I have not found a fish carcase now for a great number of years, with otter spraint in the main made up of signal crayfish and swan mussels.

For fish to grow to these extreme, previously unheard of weights, there must be a very good reason. Logically there must either be an abundance of food in the river or, as I suspected at the time (2009), very few fish to gorge on any available food in the form of invertebrate life. Of course a significant decline of invertebrates including molluscs, fly and other insect larvae (often in the river for the first 2–3 years of their life) and crustacea would go towards explaining the overall decline of the fish community structure. With this in mind I approached the local scientific committee in January 2010 requesting a number of nets and sample trays in order to survey the rivers' invertebrate communities. The committee agreed and the equipment duly arrived.

The sampling method used is practiced by the EA and other environmental groups, and is used generally as a pollution indicator. The survey method is called kick sampling and involves wading out to the desired area, placing the net in front of your feet and kicking the river bed for one minute as you walk slowly downstream. Generally this is carried out for a total of five minutes in the same area but from five individual sites. After each kick sample the net is gently emptied into a white sampling tray that has previously been filled with water and where the number of individual species is counted. Each species has a score count, *e.g.* damselfly nyphs have a score of 8 while a flatworm records 3.5. These values increase as numbers of individual species counted become greater. The values for the individual species are then added up to give an overall tally. The higher the count, the cleaner and better oxygenated the water. Obviously the more diverse invertebrate life together with good counts of high scoring species, the better the river and inevitably its fish composition.

For my sampling site, I chose upstream of Harrold Bridge. As a member of the Angling Club I know the water intimately with its numerous shallows and easy access. Once a month from April – October 2011 I took samples.

The numbers I found were in my opinion very low, in fact so low that I question whether there is sufficient food in the river to support a good number or diversity of fish.

There are several reasons for my negative remarks. Although a decent number of different species was recorded, there were not any species recorded in multiple numbers. For example, the freshwater shrimp and water louse, which are fairly large creatures, were extremely low in numbers. Usually these would be

high numbers and would be included in the staple diet of many species of fish. I recall a video that the late John Wilson made many years ago on fishing on the Great Ouse at Harrold and Odell. The film began with John scooping up a handful of gravel which was simply alive with shrimp to demonstrate the richness of the Great Ouse foodwise. Not anymore. I would be lucky to collect five or six shrimp in a sample, and water louse would appear to be nonexistent. I found very noticeable too the very low numbers, if any, of the slower moving invertebrates such as leeches, flatworms and snails, again, all in a fish's diet. During my sampling a huge number of signal crayfish were captured, many from weedy areas where of course most invertebrates live their lives. American signal crayfish arrived in the UK in 1976 and have all but wiped out our native crayfish. It devours many invertebrates and grows and reproduces rapidly. I have personally trapped over 11,000 near Harrold in the past six years.

In recent years the EA, in order to try to redress the balance, have stocked the river with barbel (ca. 46,000 year-old fish) and other fish, in between Newport Pagnell and Bedford. Around 8000–9000 were added in my area of Odell and Harrold. That is 16,000–18,000 in a distance of perhaps two miles. Some of these fish would now be 3–4lb fish. Very few, if any, appear to have survivied; nobody is catching them. A recent policy involved adding 20,000 3-week old barbel in five different areas. It is hoped that these may reach adulthood.

In my view the real problem for the fish is lack of food. The fly life is depleted enormously; evening hatches where years ago you could hardly see across the river, are very low now. Many hatched flies such as banded demoiselles used to fly in clouds, so many that they were impossible to count as the males chased the females. Now you might see three or four flying together, showing the shortage of larvae in the river.

This lack of invertebrate life, of course, is not only detrimental to fish species but impacts heavily on birds, such as house martins, sand martins and swallows. Years ago these birds would have been feeding over the water in their hundreds. The bat population would also be affected.

And so in conclusion for this sad story of fish decline in the Great Ouse and other rivers in the county, I must denounce public enemy number one as the American signal crayfish. While this creature survives, I am very much afraid that the fish species cannot. A final nail in the coffin: they also eat the fishes' eggs.

Autumn Highlights 2021

by Julia Powell

Flitwick Moor Fungi 19/9/2021

The meeting was led by Alan Outen, with significant assistance from Kerry and Claudi, Steve and Margaret from the Beds and Herts Fungi group. 25 people attended – from the BNHS, Friends of Flitwick Moor and of course, the Beds and Herts Fungi Group. As you will see the total species count was 64. Whilst this is indeed lower than we normally hope for it is nonetheless the best total for any of the three forays by the Fungi group to that date. I have certainly never seen the site so dry at this time of year and the cotton grass clearing, normally very productive was extremely disappointing. The weather was variable: it felt cold when we started, we had a few light showers but nothing of note and it cleared up until we were all back at the cars at lunchtime when there was a heavy shower. Just three people continued into the afternoon.

Eriocampa ovata Alder Sawfly larvae which several people saw and which I was delighted was new for me (as found by Simon Horsnall). They were quite plentiful in different sizes on an Alder in the Cotton Grass clearing. I collected just two and they soon moulted to the final instar and have now pupated in soil/ I will try to rear them through though it will not be until next May that the adults are likely to appear. (Both larval stages shown above.) Alan Outen

Priory Country Park 22/9/2021

Only a small group of seven people gathered although the weather was quite sunny and warm for the time of year. Sheila Brooke took us on a quiet meander towards the further edge of the park. There were numerous dragonflies and damselflies especially Common Darters. The path was tricky to find at times but we all managed to eventually meet up to return to our cars together.

Photo by Julia Powell

The Lodge 13/10/2021

There was a very good turnout for a lovely walk led by Betty Cooke round The Lodge despite a couple of people dropping out due to illness. Sixteen of us, including a new member and a guest, gathered in the car park to see what we could find with an emphasis on autumn fungi. A fine selection of fungi was seen and photographed including the Bird's Nest Fungus which I have missed until now although I could not get a photo as it was the other side of a gate.

Earth Star, family Geastraceae. Photo by Julia Powell

Photographing fungi at The Lodge. Photo by Julia Powell

Totternhoe 12/11/2021

This visit to the Butterfly Banks at Totternhoe was a follow up to what was originally an extra talk slotted in after the main programme had been confirmed. But the speaker for the regular slot was unable to give his presentation and the arrangements for the Butterfly Banks talk were not without complications. However Gwen Hitchcock stepped in very ably, both to present Ryan Clark's talk, as he had left the Wildlife Trust the week before and also to show off the Butterfly Banks on the ground at Totternhoe. There are four two metre high banks, each in the shape of a giant capital E and each has a different orientation to the sun and is surrounded by a bare area. A lot of time was spent discussing what was hoped to be revealed about the preference of the various butterfly species using the site with regard to the microclimates generated by the banks. We will arrange follow up visits as the project progresses.

The E-shaped butterfly bank. Photo by Julia Powell

Don't forget! This issue of Wild About Beds is available online! Visit www.bnhs.org.uk to check it out!

Lost bog plants in Beds

by John Wakely

Bedfordshire has lost most of its former bogs and heaths over the last 100 years. Consequently, plants characteristic of these habitats are less frequent than formerly or have become extinct. Having learned the bulk of my critical botany in the county I have had limited opportunity to study plants in these habitats.

On a last-minute trip to east Dartmoor at the end of June I spotted an interesting looking area whilst on a scenic drive. Amazingly the ponies and sheep had not decimated the vegetation and on closer examination it proved to be a botanical paradise, comprising sphagnum bog with a mosaic of drier areas. I was able to slip back early the following morning and spend a couple of hours botanising.

Sedges and rushes represented a large percentage of the flowering plants. *Carex binervis* (Green-ribbed Sedge) was abundant as it is on many other parts of the Moor. It is superficially similar to *Carex flacca* (Glaucous Sedge) but has nuts with a split beak and a flap on the outside of the leaf sheath opposite the ligule. In Bedfordshire it has only been recorded from the Wavendon Heath area. *Carex panicea* (Carnation Sedge) was common. It is a small plant with leaves that are glaucous (grey-green) on the upper surface and 'full' nuts which spread almost at right angles to the stem. It is not particularly demanding in its requirements and is found at several wet sites in Bedfordshire. *Carex nigra* (Common Sedge) was found occasionally. It is identified by having two stigmas, stomata on the upper side of the leaf, and glumes which are mostly black. It is uncommon in Beds. *Carex demissa* (Common Yellow-sedge) was abundant where there was little competition. The plants were small and almost prostrate, recognised by two yellow-green spiky globose female spikes some distance apart. The species is extinct in Beds. *Juncus bulbosu*s (Bulbous Rush) with plants only a few cm tall, was common. A few plants grow at Duck End NR and it has also been recorded from Wavendon Heath, as has *Juncus squarrosus* (Heath Rush) which is common on Dartmoor. I have been unable to re-find the latter species there and the county status must be uncertain.

Erica tetralix (Cross-leaved Heath) was found occasionally. It is extinct in the county apart from an accidental introduction with planted pines on Maulden Heath. That population did not persist, probably because the species requires wetter conditions. The attractive yellow spikes of *Narthecium ossifragum* (Bog Asphodel) and the diminutive *Drosera rotundifilia* (Round-leaved Sundew) were frequent amongst the sphagnum. Neither have been seen in Beds for a very long time. The distinctive leaves of *Anagallis tenella* (Bog pimpernel) were plentiful, with the odd plant just coming into flower. In the county we have just the one tiny population at Duck End NR. The leaves of *Menyanthes trifolium* (Bogbean) are also distinctive and occurred in standing water. The only current Beds populations have been introduced. The striking heads of Cotton Grass were frequent. In this case the species was *Eriophorum vaginatum* (Hare's-tail Cottongrass) which has a single spikelet and narrow leaves, differing from the population of *E.angustifolium* (Common Cottongrass) at Flitwick Moor, which has multiple hanging spikelets.

Danthonium decumbens (Heath Grass) is a distinctive species which was moderately frequent. Unfortunately, I have not been allowed access to the only county site near Woburn from which it has been recorded since 2000. *Trichophorum germanicum* (Deergrass) and *Eleocharis uniglumis* (Slender Spike-rush), both now extinct in Beds, were species I had not previously seen. *Dactylorrhiza maculata* (Heath Spotted-orchid) has been identified at several county sites in recent years, but not in the numbers present at my hot spot on Dartmoor.

Having spent a happy hour or two in this special bog, I returned to the car as the sun was warming everything up. The site of three basking adders in prime condition within a few minutes – one with a red-brown background colour, one silvery white and one almost olive green – capped the day. The journey home took a mere eight hours – the traffic reminiscent of the Exeter bypass of my childhood!

Hoopoe would like to wish everyone a happy New Year.
Stay safe, everyone!

Don't forget! This issue of Wild About Beds is available online! Visit www.bnhs.org.uk to check it out!

BNHS Officers and Recorders

OFFICERS

Hon Chairman - GRAHAM BELLAMY
3 Marquis Hill, Shillington, SG5 3HD
Email: chairman(at)bnhs.org.uK

Joint Hon Secretary - ANN DE WINTER
Email: secretary(at)bnhs.org.uk
Joint Hon Secretary - SUE RAVEN

Hon Treasurer - MICHAEL BIRD
32 Abbey Walk
Heath & Reach
Leighton Buzzard
LU7 0BJ
Tel: 01525 237146
Email: treasurer(at)bnhs.org.uk

Hon Journal Editor - ROSEMARY BRIND
21 Waterloo Road, Bedford, MK40 3PQ
Tel: 01234 402709
Email: journal(at)bnhs.org.uk

Hon Membership Secretary - KATHRYN HINDLEY
9 Brownshill
Maulden
MK45 2BT
Email: membership(at)bnhs.org.uk

Hon Scientific Secretary - MICHAEL ROBERTS
12 The Rally, Arlesey, SG15 6UJ
Tel: 01462 622420
Email: science(at)bnhs.org.uk

Hon Chairman Beds Bird Club - RICHARD BASHFORD
6 Brook Road, Eaton Ford, St Neots, PE19 7AX
Tel: 07742 616025
Email: chairbbc(at)bnhs.org.uk

Hon Editor Wild About Beds: - NICK HAMMOND
Email: newsletter(at)bnhs.org.uk

RECORDERS

BIRDS: PETER NASH
5 Coopers Close
Sandy
Bedfordshire
SG19 1NQ
Mobile: 07753 411786
Email: recorder(at)bedsbirdclub.org.uk

BUGS: HETEROPTERA: WILL GEORGE
Check website

BUTTERFLIES: KEITH BALMER
6 Salcombe Close, Bedford, MK40 3BA
Tel: 01234 304741
Email: butterflies(at)bnhs.org.uk

CRUSTACEA: GRAHAM BELLAMY
3 Marquis Hill, Shillington, SG5 3HD
Tel: 01462 711371
Email: crustacea(at)bnhs.org.uk

DRAGONFLIES: RORY MORRISEY
25 Alwins Field, Leighton Buzzard, LU7 2UF
Tel: 01525 372477
Email: dragonflies(at)bnhs.org.uk

FISH: ROY BATES
19 Midway, Pavenham Park, Pavenham,
MK43 7PJ
Tel: 01234 822603
Email: fish(at)bnhs.org.uk

FLOWERING PLANTS, FERNS AND FERN ALLIES: JOHN WAKELY
Swan House, Dodford, Northampton, NN7 4SX
Tel: 01327 560028
Email: flora(at)bnhs.org.uk

GEOLOGY AND PALAEONTOLOGY: BEV FOWLSTON
Email: geology(at)bnhs.org.uk

Don't forget! This issue of Wild About Beds is available online! Visit www.bnhs.org.uk to check it out!

RECORDERS CONT'

HOVERFLIES: JOHN O'SULLIVAN
14 East Hatley, Sandy, SG19 3JA
Tel: 01767 650688
Email: hoverflies(at)bnhs.org.uk

HYMENOPTERA Ants, Wasps and Solitary Bees: REBECCA (BEX) CARTWRIGHT
14 Stratford Road, Sandy, Bedfordshire, SG19 2AB
Email: aculeates(at)bnhs.org.uk

HYMENOPTERA: Bumblebees: COLIN CARPENTER
Clova Cottage, 8 Mill Lane, Clophill, MK45 4BX
Tel: 01525 860391, mobile 07751 356094
Email: bumblebees(at)bnhs.org.uk

HYMENOPTERA: Sawflies: ANDREW GREEN
65 Renhold Road, Wilden, MK44 2PX
Tel: 01234 772555
Email: sawflies(at)bnhs.org.uk

LACEWINGS AND ALLIES (Alderflies, Lacewings, Scorpionflies, Snakeflies: MELISSA BANTHORPE
32 Long Close, Lower Stondon, SG16 6JS
Tel: 01462 850753, mobile 07885 159380
Email: lacewings(at)bnhs.org.uk

LICHENS: MARTIN BUTLER
4 The Meadows, Flitwick, Bedford, MK45 1XQ
Tel: 07521 854683
Email: lichens(at)bnhs.org.uk

MAMMALS (BATS): BOB CORNES
30 Park Street, Ampthill, MK45 2LR
Tel: 01525 403951
Email: bats(at)bnhs.org.uk

GRASSHOPPERS AND CRICKETS: PETER SUTTON
Email: grasshoppers(at)bnhs.org.uk

MOLLUSCS: PETER TOPLEY
The Rectory, 8 Rectory Close, Clifton, SG17 5EL
Tel: 01462 615499
Email: molluscs(at)bnhs.org.uk

MOTHS – MACRO AND MICRO: ANDY & MELISSA BANTHORPE
32 Long Close, Lower Stondon, SG16 6JS
Tel: 01462 850753, Mobile 07885 159380
Email: moths(at)bnhs.org.uk

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS: HELEN MUIR-HOWIE
Vivarium, 19 Molivers Lane, Bromham, MK43 8JT
Tel: 01234 306524
Email: herps(at)bnhs.org.uk

WEEVILS: WILF POWELL
18 Staveley Road, Dunstable, LU6 3QQ
Tel: 01582 661328
Email: weevils(at)bnhs.org.uk

MAMMALS: DAVID ANDERSON
88 Eastmoor Park, Harpenden, AL5 1BP
Tel: 01582 712604
Email: mammals(at)bnhs.org.uk

METEOROLOGY: ANGELA BUCKNALL
17 East Hills, Cranfield, MK43 0EA
Tel: 01234 750421
Email: weather(at)bnhs.org.uk

Don't forget! This issue of Wild About Beds is available online! Visit www.bnhs.org.uk to check it out!

Winter Programme 2022

Please ignore the request for help at Swiss Garden in the February half-term. The wrong dates were given to us by staff there and we will not be having a stall at this time.

The society endeavours to ensure that we follow best practice and the latest government and NHS guidelines.

You are requested to book a place in advance for all meetings except zoom talks until further notice. Extremes of weather are occurring more frequently and the situation with Covid-19 is very unstable. So please check your emails for any messages on the morning of each scheduled event.

All attendees do so at their own risk and with due regard for others present that may be more vulnerable than themselves.

Do not attend if you feel unwell or if you have been in contact in the last 7 days with others that are unwell.

SATURDAY JANUARY 8th CLOPHILL 10:30am (family friendly)

Walk in Maulden Wood to identify winter twigs on trees, especially Sessile Oak and Wild Service trees. Set on the Greensand Ridge, Maulden Wood is a beautiful, varied woodland located near Clophill. The woodland contains one of the largest and most important remnants of ancient woodland in Bedfordshire. Meet in the lay-by at top of Deadman's Hill on A6, TL072394, MK43 3QT. Please book with Julia Powell. JuliaCPowell800(at)gmail.com 01582 661328

Leader: Colin Carpenter

Due to uncertainty about further Covid-19 precautions as yet unknown, the featured talks will be via Zoom. Please keep an eye on your emails or the newsgroup for last minute information. The Zoom links will be sent out via the members email before each talk. There is no need to book for the talks but it is essential that you do not share the link to prevent the talk being hijacked by an inappropriate group

TUESDAY 18th JANUARY 8pm

A Zoom talk "A Natter About Bedfordshire Natterjacks" by Graham Rowe who is a Senior Lecturer in Molecular Ecology at the University of Derby and the primary author of the third edition (2017) of *Introduction to Molecular Ecology* published by Oxford University Press. Graham was born in Luton and lived in Bedfordshire until higher education drew him away in 1990. While still in Luton, Graham was the group leader of the South Bedfordshire RSPB Members' Group and the local Young Ornithologists' Club members' group. Graham has studied or worked in five different British universities; during a decade spent at the University of Sussex he researched the evolutionary history and conservation genetics of Natterjack Toads. As a very young man Graham was interviewed by the great Bedfordshire naturalist John Dony for a job at the Wardown Park Museum, Luton, so his life could have turned out very different.

A Natter About Bedfordshire Natterjacks:

This talk will discuss the history and conservation of the Natterjack Toad in Britain. The introduced population of Natterjacks present at the RSPB Headquarters at Sandy, Bedfordshire, will be discussed in the context of the postglacial recolonisation routes reveal by a decade of molecular genetic research. No prior knowledge of genetics necessary! The details of the zoom link will be sent out nearer the time by our Chairman, Graham Bellamy.

TUESDAY 15th FEBRUARY 8pm

Zoom talk to be confirmed.

TUESDAY 15th MARCH

AGM and RECORDERS REPORTS. Further details to follow.