



Wild About Beds

Spring 2022



Harvest mouse *Micromys minutus*.
Photo by Helen Haden

In this 202nd issue:

Contents

Notes from the Chair	3
Flora Guardians	3
National Harvest Mouse Survey	5
The Humble Hedgerow	6

Contents

Identification of Frogs in South Bedfordshire	8
Winter Highlights	10
Confirmed Meetings 2022	12

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.

Editor: Nick Hammond

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

Email: [newsletter\(at\)bnhs.org.uk](mailto: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 June 2022** please.

Thank you in anticipation.

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

Notes from the Chair

Graham Bellamy

2022 promises much with the hope that we really are emerging from Covid and are able to live with it in a normal way. Like many others I managed to catch Covid and having avoided it for a couple of years and felt strangely irresponsible for getting it...it's the fast life I lead I expect.

The value of nature and access to wild space has been important to keeping an even keel. The BNHS team who organise our visits, walks and talks deserve our thanks. They organised twenty-two events in 2021, running a booking in system to make sure we abided by the Covid guidance throughout the year. For seventeen of the outdoor meetings the number of attendees was in double figures with twenty-eight for the visit to Dunstable Downs. In all over eighty members took part in the outdoor meetings. We also ran seven talks or events via Zoom meetings including our Christmas members evening and attendance was good with usually between forty and fifty joining the talks. Well done.

We hope that outdoor meetings will continue over the spring and summer, please look out for emails with joining details. The meetings team are always happy to receive suggestions for new places to visit. I look forward to meeting members again and catching up.

Our AGM will have come and gone as you read this. Thanks to everyone who makes the BNHS work.

Also, thanks for the work the editorial team puts in to produce the Bedfordshire Naturalist and the Bedfordshire Bird Report, which you will have received in the post. I hope you have enjoyed reading them, they are an important record of the natural history of our county.

Our paper tells me that there is gaining momentum for having a GCSE in natural history. It seems universities are concerned that students lack the basics of species recognition and of terminology and a basic understanding of how ecosystems work. Also, there is concern that having biodiversity targets nationally and locally is meaningless if there is little understanding about biodiversity and how wildlife works. Sounds good to me.

Spring has definitely arrived, and Frogs are busy spawning in our small garden pond. Cherry Plum has been in full blossom and the first Blackthorn flowers are also starting. On a brief walk in the sunshine, we really enjoyed a road verge and ditch bank full of Lesser Celandine in flower, elsewhere a flock of Starlings, hidden amongst scrub, chuckled, whizzed and whistled and the churchyard Rooks have almost repaired their nests blown around by the succession of storms and all looks hopeful and back to normal.

Thanks to Nick Hammond for editing this his first WAB, I hope you enjoy the read.

I wish you all happy wildlife encounters over the spring and summer.

Flora Guardians

John Wakely, Sue Raven and Graham Bellamy

The idea of a scheme to encourage people (Flora Guardians) to monitor populations of rare plants in the county has been around for some time. Flora Guardianship has worked to good effect in other Counties, enabling timely conservation action to protect declining species. Now that the survey work for the Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI) Atlas 2020 project is finished the Flora Group has more time to progress the idea.

This summer, members of the Flora Group and other volunteers plan to make a start by monitoring around 30 species of plant such as Pasque Flower and Greater Broomrape, that are rare or declining in



Photo by Sue Raven

Greater Broomrape, one of the species to be monitored.

Bedfordshire. Some of these plants are already monitored, ranging from detailed studies of Musk and Man Orchids at Totternhoe by the Wildlife Trust to a casual annual check by naturalists to see if a rare plant is still present. We hope that a bit of support and co-ordination will enable the number of rare plants monitored to increase and the data to be collected and retained.

We have produced a simple recording form and guidance that will help us collect the information we need. How many plants are there? Where are they? Are numbers increasing, decreasing or stable? Do the plants flower and do they set seed, or do they get eaten most years and fail to set seed? Are there seedlings present, or just long-lived plants that are slowly dwindling leading to local extinction?

We think Flora Guardians can make a difference. John Wakely, our recorder for flowering plants, wrote an article on rare plants in Bedfordshire in the Bedfordshire Naturalist 2019, with notes on locations and population trends where known. We plan to begin with looking at around thirty or so of these in the pilot years to test our recording forms, recruit Flora Guardians to “adopt” a species or a location when the plant still occurs in several places and find out what support is needed for Flora Guardian volunteers. We plan to work with the Record Centre to store and interpret the information collected. We need to identify where there is a real threat to losing a species in order to initiate action.

This will require the involvement of volunteers. Funding will enable the involvement of staff from the Wildlife Trust, Record Centre and Greensand Trust to work together to co-ordinate, train and develop a recording database. There is a possibility of some Natural England funding to kick-start the initiative this coming year that we are exploring.

This summer’s experience will enable us to refine monitoring methods so that we collect the most meaningful information to provide valuable baseline data and inspire more people to get involved. It will also help inform the Heritage Lottery funded project – “Chalkscapes” working on the North Chilterns chalky sites, one of the important delivery elements is conservation of rare and protected species.

If you want more information or are keen to be involved, do contact John Wakely.

flora@bnhs.org.uk

The National Harvest Mouse Survey

Ken Winder

By the end of March 2022, the national Harvest Mouse survey will be over and the Mammal Society will be busy crunching the results to ascertain the present status of the Harvest Mouse within the UK. The survey was instigated by the Mammal Society because the present understanding is that Harvest Mice are declining within the UK and recently they have been included on the red list of British mammals. The problem though is that making assessments of Harvest Mice is very difficult. They are difficult to trap, unlike other small mammals and evidence of their presence often relies on finding their nests. This nest survey therefore hopes to give a better estimate of the present distribution of the Harvest Mouse and to set a baseline for future surveys.

In Bedfordshire, we also have a similar problem of understanding the status of the Harvest Mouse within the county. The extensive 1976-79 survey carried out by Derek Rands indicated that, at that time, the Harvest Mice was widespread across the whole county. Since then, however, records have been very sparse. From 1992 until the present, there are only around 100 Harvest Mouse records, these being a mixture of finding nests, skulls in owl pellets and a few live animals. Even with nests, apart from the odd organised search (such as at Sandy Smith reserve), most of these have been random finds during grass & scrub cutting on reserves. So, at present, we do not really know a great deal about the distribution of Harvest Mice in Bedfordshire.

The Bedfordshire Mammal group therefore decided to carry out a survey of Harvest Mouse nests as part of the national survey. Members of the group, BNHS members and a few other individuals began the search in October last year. Our first group survey was at Sandy Smith reserve, which we also used as a training day. This proved to be very successful day with the 18 volunteers finding 14 nests. Subsequently we have had group surveys at Flitton, Rectory Wood (Marston Thrift), Felmersham & Flitwick. These have also been very successful, with between 7 and 13 searching the chosen areas. Between 8 to 10 nests were found on each occasion. Additionally, several individuals have been scouring the county looking for nests in as many new locations as possible in order to increase our understanding of Harvest Mouse distribution. During all of these surveys we also made notes on habitats, specific vegetation in which nests were found, nest sizes and the height of nests above ground, all of which will give a better understanding of Harvest Mouse requirements.

The Mammal Society has decided to record nests at the tetrad level, to give more definition to the survey, rather than the 10 square km blocks of previous surveys. Tetrads cover the whole of the UK. Each tetrad is a square with 2km sides and each has its own reference number. In Bedfordshire we have 381 tetrads. Surveying all of these would be extremely difficult in the 6 months of the survey plus many do not have any suitable habitat, so we have tried to look at the most suitable of these across a wide area of the county. The results of our survey have been very impressive. Up until March 5th we have surveyed 58 tetrads & located nests in 35 of these. The majority of these nests have been in the central area of the county with a few in the north and to date, none in the south, as the following chart indicates.

Area	10km ² blocks in area	No. of tetrads in area	No. surveyed in area	No. containing nests
South	SP82,SP91,SP92,TL01, TL02, TL11,TL12.TL21	83	5	0
Central	SP93,SP94,TL03,TL04, TL13,TL14,TL23.TL24	161	41	27
North	SP95,SP96,TL05,TL06, TL15,TL16,TL25	137	12	8

This could be simply due to where the most search effort has taken place rather than the lack of Harvest Mice though suitable habitat for the mice, *i.e.* areas of long grass, will be a major factor. Whatever the



Photos by Ken Winder

reason, the results of our survey will have greatly increased our knowledge of the distribution of Harvest Mice, not only in our county but also within the country. Hopefully, we will have surveyed several more tetrads by the end of March when the national survey ends
My thanks go to everyone who has contributed to this survey & spent many hours searching the vegetation for these rather beautiful nests. My personal thanks also go to Ann de Winter for organising the group surveys.



Hedgerow at Sharpenhoe Clappers

The Humble Hedgerow

Niamh Lynch

From as early as the twelfth century, England's 'green and pleasant land' began to be enclosed, divided into neat parcels by hedges, to be tamed, managed and cultivated. Ever since, the hedgerow has been a permanent feature of the British landscape, cutting across the land, snaking unto yonder.

As woodland turned to farmland and wilderness faded into distant memory, hedges provided a much-needed refuge for displaced flora and fauna, the last remnant of a wilder past. One such species, forced to retreat to the hedge's heavenly depths, was the hazel dormouse. Fueled in the spring by a diet of hawthorn petals and caterpillars, and in the autumn by hazelnuts and blackberries, the dormouse is entirely dependent on the flora of the hedgerow for food. Not only that, the talons of the blackthorn and claws of the hawthorn ward off potential predators and shelter their young. Curled-up in woven orbs, nestled amongst the spiky branches, the dormouse can enter its deep winter slumber without fear of becoming someone else's dinner. Before the wilderness was cleared for farmland, the trees and shrubs upon which the dormouse relies were in plentiful supply but now they exist almost exclusively in the hedgerow. Without the hedgerow's hibernation bounty and boughs, the dormouse would no longer be able to reproduce or forage, let alone survive the long winters.

As the centuries rolled on and human populations swelled, not even the hedge could survive. Torn out indiscriminately, they were regarded as little more than obstacles, preventing thousands of hungry human mouths being fed. The dawn of the Second World War saw a concerted move towards self-sufficiency.

Desperate government ministers offered farmers financial incentives to remove hedges in a fanatic attempt to claim every square-inch of cultivable land. This continued throughout the rest of the century and into the next as the United Kingdom's population neared, and then surpassed, sixty million. The human population explosion has brought about the plummeting of native animal populations, bringing the biodiversity crisis upon us. Since the nineteen-nineties the hazel dormouse population has been slashed by at least fifty-two percent. Small remnant populations remain scattered across the country - from the Lake District's fells to Herefordshire's hills. Isolated from potential mates and with dwindling food sources, reproduction rates are falling rapidly. If nothing changes, this can only spell one thing for the hazel dormouse - extinction. Their plight is not unique. Eighty percent of woodland birds, fifty percent of mammals and thirty percent of our butterflies rely on the humble hedgerow - they too are at risk. In many areas they are our last Eden; miniature forms of complex, wild habitats long ago destroyed, standing stolid beside barren, desertified fields. Nature is a complex web of delicate relationships, fine tipping points and global interconnections. If any more hedgerows are lost in the United Kingdom, scales will be tipped out of balance. The consequences will be devastating, and the ripple effects felt not only in Britain, but throughout the world.

Identification of non-native water frogs (*Pelophylax* sp.) in South Bedfordshire

David J Clemens & Lloyd G Rose, Reptile & Amphibian Group

Non-native water frogs were observed at a private site multiple times in the county during 2009 along the River Lea approximately 7 km south of central Luton. During this investigation conducted by Helen Muir Howie (County amphibian & reptile recorder), Susan Phillips (then secretary of Bedfordshire Reptile and Amphibian Group) and her husband Marcus Phillips, a single tadpole was netted by Susan Phillips, which was not positively identified at the time. It was hoped that Julia Wycherley would visit the site to record the male advertisement call as a means of identifying the species in line with previous studies (Wycherley et al, 2003). Sadly, Julia passed away during 2009 and was never able to attend the site to investigate further. Since 2009 records of water frogs at the site declined and no further site visits were planned. During 2021, records at the site came to the attention of BNHS, prompting the authors to survey the site with the intention of identifying the county's mystery frog. This primary survey was undertaken on 6 June 2021 between 9am and 12pm, conditions were sunny, with occasional cloudy spells and a temperature of 20°C.



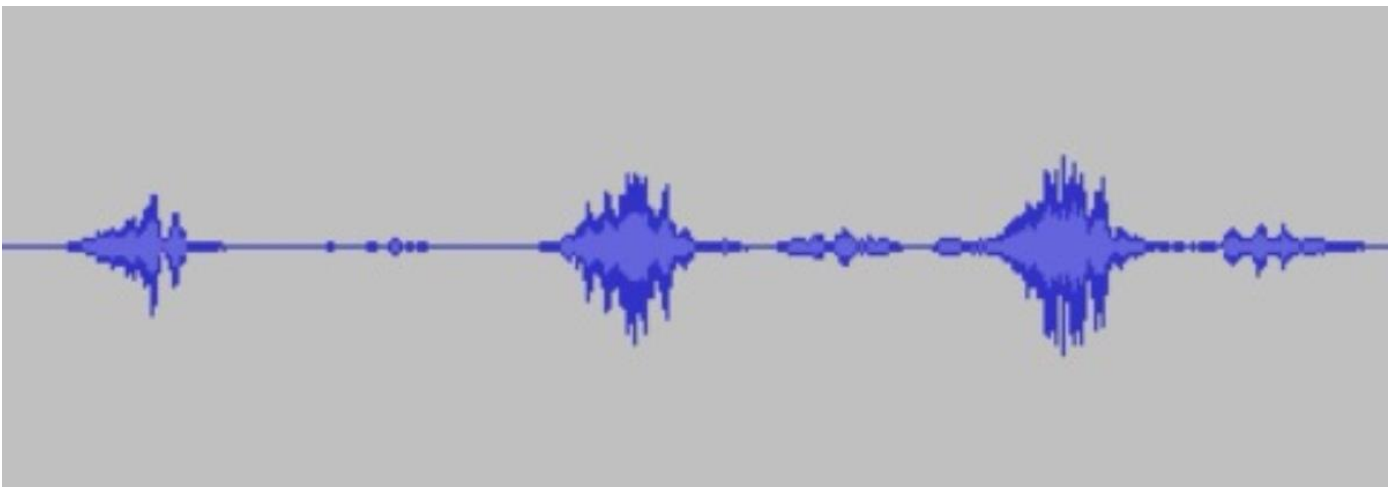
Habitat of Pelophylax sp

An initial survey of the site identified the most suitable body of water for the genus (Figure 1), and within 30 minutes an adult male (Figure 2) approximately 15 cm in length was observed in the water, having been disturbed by footfall. Shortly after this another adult male was seen approximately 5 metres away, and 5 juveniles were observed in the reed bed.



Male Pelophylax sp. at a South Bedfordshire site

Pre-recorded calls from the Froglife ‘Dragonfinder’ app were used in a call and response experiment. Calls from both pool frogs (*Pelophylax lessonae*) & marsh frogs (*Pelophylax ridibundus*) were played and yielded responses from the frogs onsite. The response calls were recorded by DC and forwarded to our colleague Steven Allain who very kindly used the footage to produce an oscillogram (Figure 3). Comparison between the oscillogram from DC footage against Wycherley et al. (2013) shows that the call is consistent with marsh frogs (*Pelophylax ridibundus*).



Oscillogram of male advertisement call of Pelophylax sp. at South Bedfordshire site from DC’s own footage.

A single specimen was netted by DC and was swabbed for chytrid screening, as non-native *Pelophylax sp.* are a known asymptomatic vector of *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis*, the causal agent of Chytridiomycosis

(Wilkinson & Buckley, 2012). A buccal swab was also taken for DNA testing if deemed necessary to help determine the country of origin. Due to the backlog of work in laboratories used as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, results from swabbing will be delayed but will be freely available once returned. Metatarsal tubercle of the specimen removed from the site also correlates with the diagnostic criteria of *P. ridibundus* (Ovenden, 1978), as does hind limb length, which extends beyond the rostrum (Beebee, 2013). The captured specimen was not released back into the wild in accordance with legislation on release of non-native species and remains in the care of DC in an outdoor enclosure.

Further surveys will be conducted to ascertain the point of release of this population, with Luton Hoo approximately 4 km north of the site, making an interesting place to start if permission is obtained to survey. There is evidence of Marsh frogs in the River Lea in Hertfordshire (Inns, 2011), and it is plausible that these represent the same population further downstream. We are hoping to survey the area for the rest of the season if permissions are granted, if you would like to get involved with surveying with us, please do not hesitate to get in touch at the BedsRAG website or social media accounts.

Acknowledgments

We wish to extend our thanks to Helen Muir Howie, David Anderson & Alan Coates for their assistance in gaining access to the site, and for always being patient with our requests for more information. Susan & Marcus Phillips, Steven Allain for his constant guidance, Lloyd Rose for agreeing to come and survey on his birthday (resulting in very wet wellington boots due to misjudging water depth), and finally to Julia Wycherley for leaving behind a legacy of excellent data facilitating the identification of Bedfordshire's Marsh frogs through their song.

References

- Beebee, T. (2013). *Amphibians and reptiles*. Pelagic Publishing Ltd. pp.126-127
- Inns, H. (2011). *Britain's reptiles and amphibians*. Princeton University Press. pp.93-111.
- Ovenden, D. (1978). *Reptiles and Amphibians of Britain and Europe*. Collins, pp.86, 87.
- Wilkinson, J.W. and Buckley, J. (2012). Amphibian conservation in Britain. *FrogLog*, **101**, 12-13.
- Wycherley, J., Doran, S. and Beebee, T.J. (2003). Tracing aliens: Identification of introduced water frogs in Britain by male advertisement call characteristics. *Herpetological Journal*, **13(1)**, 43-50.

Winter Highlights 2021 – 2022

December 26th 2021 Woburn The traditional Society Boxing Day walk went ahead this year despite some setbacks on the way. Our leader for many years, Mary Sheridan, was unable to join us, having still not fully recovered from a fall earlier in the year but she was present in spirit. There had been several days of lengthy periods of rain and more was forecast for the day but 14 determined souls met in Woburn car park suitably attired. Fortunately, there are some long stretches of solid paths as the ground elsewhere had standing water virtually everywhere else and there was quite a stream to negotiate at one point. The very fungus seen from the road a couple of years ago did not put in an appearance this year and there were not many birds in evidence during the first part of the walk. Once we were well into the park, we had good views of the Fallow Deer including a good number of white ones and the stags were still carrying their resplendent antlers. As we approached the lake, three male Goosanders were present and there were large numbers of Canada Geese and Widgeon on the banks. Two Mandarin ducks were seen before the group left the park. A good walk with only a little light rain and very soggy underfoot.

Julia Powell



January 8th 2022 Maulden Wood. Fifteen of us braved intermittent rain to learn how to identify winter trees in Maulden Wood. Colin Carpenter, our guide and tutor, came armed with a bunch of twigs from our common trees and shrubs (see photo above). He talked about those and we noted the various buds, their colour and shape and also the colour of the twig bark. We set off down the main ride to try to put our newfound knowledge to the test. It wasn't a walk in the park! It is actually quite tricky and we may need another lesson or two to perfect our skills but we all enjoyed the fresh air, the company and the chance to amble through Maulden Wood. We reached the majestic Wild Service Tree before heading back to the cars, only slightly damp. Thanks, Colin, we'll do it again sometime!

February 10th 2022 Rushmere Country Park We ended up with a group of twenty people gathered for a walk in Rushmere Country Park where Bob Hook had promised us a visit to some of the Champion trees growing in the area. First to be seen was a Holly tree, Champion in both county and country. Then on our way to the original entrance to the estate, we passed a huge Scots Pine – 9 metres girth and Giant Sequoia trees marked the line of the drive to where the main house would have been. We then moved through different compartments looking at the current heathland restoration at different stages and with different objectives. We learnt a new word from Judy – as Bob showed us a young Oak tree that had not dropped its leaves for winter although they had died back due to a process called *marcescence*. We were shown a very old apple tree too, carefully propped up, with three cuttings close by and fenced off for protection. It would seem that the variety of apple was unknown and has been named Rushmere Embroidered. It is possibly a survivor of an orchard from a nearby house long since demolished. We ended in the area under the heronry near one of the lakes where the public are not allowed. The herons had already started nest building and those present ignored us completely. We returned by coming down the path from the Big Chair where Bob took a brief rest on a bench made from some bushes that had been cleared away, reflecting on the opportunity of seeing the fruits of his labours without having to write a report or decide on a management plan! Many thanks, Bob.

Julia Powell

March 12th 2022 The Higgins, Bedford

The BNHS was invited to have a stand at The Higgins for their Science Day event, an early start in the year for advertising the Society. Staff at The Higgins had set up a gazebo in the courtyard for us with tables and chairs so we could set out our wares. Eight Society members bravely agreed in advance to volunteer

despite the uncertainties of the weather at this time of year. Fortunately, we were sheltered from the wind, the sun shone and we only had a few spits of rain. There was a steady trickle of young families coming to see us and a new quiz, matching photos of mature specimens with younger versions, engaged both adults and children alike. The artifacts on display, picked to illustrate the theme of “Growth” were also popular and some older children tackled the multiple-choice quiz. It was pleasing to see that a lot of children had a good knowledge of nature appropriate to their age and that were being strongly encouraged by their parents. There was plenty of time for Society members to catch up with recent news, take a comfort break and enjoy the cakes, coffee and pizza at the Museum café. Thank you to everyone who volunteered and to the staff at The Higgins who looked after us so well.

Julia Powell

Confirmed dates for 2022 meetings

Please check your emails closer to the advertised date for details of future meetings. Information will be sent to members a few days before each one so you can book your place.

TUESDAY APRIL 19th 9:30am Blows Downs

Walk on Blows Downs with a chance to see spring migrants as this is a hot spot for birds on passage. We will also be on the lookout for early spring butterflies on the chalk grassland slopes with their abundant flora and there will be an opportunity to visit the extensions to the County Wildlife Sites at The Paddocks and the Hayfield. Park at the end of Half Moon Lane, Dunstable with consideration for residents, TL02972150, LU5 4AB. Leader: Mike Bird and others.

TUESDAY MAY 3rd 7pm Woburn estate.

An evening walk with David Alderman, looking at tree planting on the estate. Details to be confirmed.

MONDAY MAY 16th Ivinghoe Beacon Hills 10:30am

A walk at Ivinghoe Beacon for the Duke of Burgundy butterfly. If the weather is good, there could be Duke, Green Hairstreak, Common Blue, Holly Blue, Brown Argus butterflies. The first 15 minutes' walk is rough and steep. Meet in the Beacon Road car park, SP978146. Leader: Richard Harrington.

SATURDAY JUNE 4th Clifton. The nature table will be at Clifton Village Jubilee celebrations. Volunteers for the stand required. Details to be confirmed.

SATURDAY JUNE 4th Bradgers Hill 10:30. A chance to see the facilities at the centre and join with the Wildlife Trust on walks around the site. Details to be confirmed.

SATURDAY JUNE 11th, FLITWICK 10am-4pm

Visit Flitwick Moor SSSI for the Invertebrate Day joint meeting with Flit Vale Wildlife Trust Local Group and BIG, recording invertebrates and other wildlife. Bring a packed lunch if you want to stay all day. Meet in car park at end of Folly Lane, off Maulden Road by Folly Farm, MK45 5BZ, TL045354.

