



Wild About Beds

The Bedfordshire Natural History Society Newsletter
October 2024



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Photograph above: Hornet Mimic Hoverfly *Volucella zonaria*, a species which is moving northwards, as the climate warms. Photograph by Nicholas Hammond.

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www.bnhs.org.uk

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, or by Zoom; 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 **Lisa King**, Honorary Membership Secretary, Tel: 01525 841256, email membership@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@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 December 2024** please.

Thank you in anticipation.

The next Wild About Beds will be published in **January 2025**. Please note that any views are independent of the Bedfordshire Natural History Society and BedsLife.

Note from the Editor

In all sorts of ways we have had a strange year. The weather has been wetter than for many years and in September parts of Bedfordshire that don't usually flood were under water. If we needed a reminder that climate change is happening, this was it. It will be interesting to see what effects the excessive rain has had when BNHS Recorders produce their reports for the year. If you fancy becoming a Recorder there are two vacancies – Arachnids and Meteorology (see page 5).

This newsletter has several stories about mammals. This is because our mammal enthusiasts send in material, but we would welcome items and photographs about other subjects. Please send them to me at newsletter@bnhs.org.uk.

Nick



Greater White-Toothed shrew by Ruth Carden

Citizen scientists' vital role in investigation into spread of non-native shrew

When Jeff, a cat belonging to a Mammal Society supporter in Sunderland, brought in a Greater White-toothed Shrew in 2021, it was the first evidence that this species was present in Britain. Since they were discovered in Ireland in 2007 they have displaced native small mammals and appear to have had an impact on habitats and biodiversity. Mammalogists are concerned that the same might happen here. Most at risk is Britain's smallest mammal, the Pygmy Shrew, which has declined dramatically in Ireland.

The Mammal Society's 'Searching for Shrews' project, launched in 2022, has involved a nationwide search for signs of Greater White-toothed Shrews by local mammal groups and volunteers. The project aims to identify where in the country the species is present and to monitor the presence and abundance of native small mammals, in order to gain early warning signs of any impact which the species may have on ecosystems. The Mammal Society has produced a new map of confirmed sightings of Greater White-toothed Shrew sightings showing the extent of two known populations in County Durham and Nottinghamshire. It is a common species in

mainland Europe and North Africa, but no one knows how the original members of the species reached Ireland and then Britain.

Since shrews are difficult to survey, the project (in partnership with Barn Owl Trust) encourages volunteer citizen scientists to analyse barn owl pellets collected from sites all around the UK. Owls regurgitate the indigestible fur and bone of their prey, making it easy for volunteers to find and identify the jawbones and skulls of the small mammals which they consume. All three of our native shrew species (Pygmy Shrew, Common Shrew, and Water Shrew) have red-tipped teeth due to iron deposited in the enamel, but, as its name suggests, the Greater White-toothed Shrew does not.



Pygmy Shrew and Greater White-toothed Shrew jaws by David Tosh

So far, more than 500 volunteers around the UK have signed up to help with the project by dissecting pellets in their spare time (using guide resources provided by the Mammal Society). Already, more than 350 pellets have been analysed by volunteers (including classes of schoolchildren in England, Scotland and Wales), resulting in around 2,500 records of small mammals amongst the prey animals in the pellets.

GWTS have so far been confirmed to be present in two locations – County Durham and Nottinghamshire - and intensive surveying has been undertaken around these sites to track the extent of this population and to allow the rate of expansion of their territory to be monitored over time. Surveying in these areas has involved intensive owl pellet analysis, small mammal trapping, and some bio-acoustic monitoring. GWTS emit sounds that are different from those made by native small mammals, and the analysis of sound recordings taken in hedgerows and areas of long grass could become an important survey technique to identify if they are present where owls

are less active or pellets cannot be obtained.

In sites where Greater White-toothed Shrews have been recorded, there have not yet been signs of native small mammals being displaced, but it is unknown at this stage how long they have been present in these landscapes. Ongoing monitoring is essential to ascertain the impact (if any) that they have on the ecosystem.

In one site in an open area in suburban Sunderland, Greater White-toothed Shrews were by far the most common prey animal found in the owl pellets. This is an extraordinary result, as Field Voles are usually the most common. This suggests that regardless of their impact on other species in the ecosystem, this non-native species has become prevalent in areas where it has become established.

To help in the search for the Greater White-toothed Shrew, anyone can volunteer to carry out owl pellet dissection with the Mammal Society's 'Searching for Shrews' project. Volunteers receive sanitized pellets alongside guides and resources with identification charts for the different mammals that could be found in the owl pellets. In addition, citizen scientists are recommended to send in barn owl pellets for the project if they have access to any, but should not disturb roosts to obtain them.

- <https://mammal.org.uk/current-research/searching-for-shrews>

New Bedfordshire Badger Group

Ken Winder

Chairman of the Beds Mammal Group

On 18th August I had a very constructive meeting with the new Bedfordshire Badger Group. The group was formed at the request of the Badger Trust who wanted an organisation in Beds, that was solely involved with badgers, as opposed to our Mammal Group which looks after everything that isn't a bat. Yesterday's was also the first meeting of the members of the group so much of the discussion was about how the group would function. At the meeting I told them about all the work on badgers in Beds that has taken place in the last 50 years or so and presented them with some of the data that had been accumulated over that period.

The Mammal Group will still continue with its own work on badgers but we will now be in a position whereby we can exchange information with the new group to enhance our understanding as to the situation of badgers within the county. At present there are only eight members of the new group, with the following people as officers of the group: Nicola Ainsworth – Chair, Nikki Cartlidge – Secretary, and Ian Ainsworth – Treasurer.

They certainly would like to increase their numbers so if anyone is interested in joining this group, please contact them at bedsbadgergroup@gmail.com They intend to charge a small annual fee for membership of around £10 (though this has still to be verified).



Flooding of the Finger Lakes Nature Area at Priory CP, Bedford, 27th September 2024. Bedfordshire not only had its wettest September since records began, but the Met Office said that our county had its wettest calendar month ever recorded in a series going back to 1836. Photograph by Rosemary Brind.

Two Recorders needed

Tom Thomas, BNHS Spiders and Harvestmen Recorder, has had to retire from the position due to poor health. Tom was in this role twice. He was first appointed in 1973 and continued until 1986. He then took on the role again from 2014. We would like to thank Tom for his work and we wish him well for the future. We are pleased that he will remain a member of BNHS.

The position of Meteorology Recorder is still vacant. As we have a few people who have weather stations and keep their own notes, I wonder if they would all send in their notes that could be compiled into a report of the year. The weather has been quite dramatic this year so we should keep a note of it. The drama of the weather is shown in the photograph above of the flooded Finger Lakes at Priory Park, Bedford.

Helen Muir-Howie

Hon Scientific Secretary and Reptile & Amphibian Recorder



Brother John took BNHS members on a tour of the grounds of the Monastery of Christ Our Saviour and Turvey Abbey on 10th August 2024. Photograph by Rosemary Brind.

Dates for your diary

Please note there is a change to previous programme

Unfortunately, our scheduled speaker for the October indoor meeting in Maulden Village Hall is unwell and he had to cancel his appointment. In his place we have brought forward our November speaker, Vince Lea, to take that slot in October. This has now left the November meeting as still to be finalised.

Tuesday 15th October Vince Lea of the Countryside Regeneration Trust will talk about the Mink Eradication Project to include the plans for activities in Bedfordshire. Maulden Village Hall. 8pm.

Tuesday 19th November Currently to be finalised. This talk may have to take place online via Zoom. Final details will be circulated by email.

Tuesday 3rd December Members' evening where participants can share photos, news and activities from across the county and perhaps beyond. Please bring some festive fare to share. Maulden Village Hall at 8pm.

Tuesday 21st January 2025 Wilder Hedgerows for Nature and History with Professor Ian Rotherham. This presentation will take place online via Zoom.

Tuesday 18th February 2025 The Great Fen Project with Henry Stanier of the Wildlife Trust BCN. This presentation will take place online via Zoom.

Tuesday 18th March 2025 AGM and Recorders Evening at Maulden Village Hall.

Boxing Day Walk at Woburn

THURSDAY 26th DECEMBER, WOBURN 9:30am

Boxing Day Walk through Woburn Park. Please book with Julia Powell on JuliaCPowell800@gmail.com or 01582 661328. Meet at the Woburn Village car park, opposite the church in Park Street, postcode MK17 9PG, Grid Ref SP950331. Leader: Julia Powell.

FIELD TRIP ORGANISERS URGENTLY NEEDED FOR 2025 - PLEASE CAN YOU HELP?

We urgently need someone, or several people, to coordinate a programme of field trips for 2025, so if you think you might be able to help, please contact Mike Robinson at bnhsevents@bnhs.org.uk to find out more.

If you enjoy our field trips, exploring different parts of the county and meeting up with other members, please do consider helping the Society by volunteering for this important role. You can find some information about organising events in the July issue (210th issue) of *Wild about Beds* that was emailed to members. You will join the team of Mike Bird who kindly stepped up to arrange the indoor meetings, Mike Robinson who is emailing out information about meetings that have been arranged and Julia Powell who is continuing to organise attendance at outside events.

Fox in the box

Red Foxes are a common sight in Luton, but less expected was one in the penalty area during the first half of the match between Luton Town and Oxford United on the evening of 1 October. Cheered on by enthusiastic support, it sprinted across the six-yard box at the Kenilworth Road end before heading to an exit in the Bobbers Stand. Given the result (from a Luton perspective, a disappointing 2-2 draw after leading 2-0) it was the highlight of the night for many fans. The fox was my best wildlife record at Kenilworth Road since a Barn Owl flying across the pitch during a match against Forest Green Rovers some years ago.

Terence Illott

Two ideas about deer

First of all, David Anderson (Mammal Recorder for BNHS) sent me a draft of his 2023 mammal report and in this he refers to the numbers of Fallow Deer which may exist in Bedfordshire. Possibly as many as 400. As these deer are usually found in groups or large herds and are easily visible, we could try to get a better idea of the actual numbers. Between now and the end of the year, please try to visit places where you know or think you know that Fallow Deer are present and count the numbers you see. Please then send these to David via Adnoto and/or myself at jkwinder@btinternet.com.

The second idea came from Stephen Plummer. During the autumn he has found large herds of Chinese Water Deer in the Lidlington area. His thought was that one early evening, several of us could survey various parts of the area to come up with the number of deer present. If you would like to take part in this, please let me know. I will fix up a date with Stephen towards the end of September or early October. Same email as above.

Ken Winder

Chair of Beds Mammal Group

Small mammal trapping at Duck End Nature Reserve, Maulden

7 September 2024 – Leader: Dr Sue Raven

A group of fifteen from the BNHS and the Beds Mammal Group (including one very enthusiastic youngster!) joined Sue at this lovely local nature reserve on a September Saturday morning. Twenty traps had been put out the previous Wednesday by Sue, Ann and Ken, and then re-baited and set on Friday evening. We were all very keen to see what species may be in the traps. Only two of the traps were empty, all the others had occupants. All animals were carefully removed from the traps, weighed and sexed. The highlight of the morning was a lovely Water Shrew, and we were delighted to see this rarely-seen mammal. Hopefully, Sue regarded the bites suffered a fair exchange for such an exciting find. There were six Wood Mice, (two in one trap), ten Bank Voles, with one each of Water Shrew, Short-tailed (Field) Vole and Common Shrew.



The group - in anticipation.



Bank Vole



Short-tailed (Field) Vole



Water Shrew

After the excitement of seeing what was in the traps, we went for a walk round the reserve with Rory (County Dragonfly Recorder) to see if we could find some dragonflies and damselflies. The sun had come out and it was a little warmer so we were pleased to see a few species: Southern Hawker, Migrant Hawker, Common Darter, Ruddy Darter, Azure damselfly and Willow Emerald damselfly.



Willow Emerald damselfly



Ruddy Darter dragonfly

Other Invertebrates seen at Duck End Nature Reserve:

Roesel's Bush Cricket
 Dark Bush Cricket
Helophilus pendulus (hoverfly)
Eristalis tenax (Common Drone Fly)
Volucella zonaria (Hornet Mimic Hoverfly)
 Common Carder Bee

Garden Spider
 Long-winged Cone-head
Metellina sp spider
 Speckled Wood butterfly
 Green-veined White butterfly
 Snout moth



Dark Bush Cricket



Hornet Mimic Hoverfly



Roesel's Bush Cricket

There were also a couple of Common Lizards amongst the brash by one of the ponds.



Common Lizard

Thanks to Sue for sharing her expertise and enthusiasm and to Merv and Rory for the photos.