



Wild About Beds

The Bedfordshire Natural History Society Newsletter

January 2025



Included in the 212th issue:

Tribute to Richard Revels	3	Recorders Update	9
Slow Worms Introduction	5	Tribute to Norman James	10
Mary Anning Exhibition	6	Focus on Heteroptera	11
Focus on Robberflies	7	Talks and events	12

Photograph above: Red Admirals on Buddleia by the late Richard Revels FRPS

The BNHS Registered Charity Number 268659

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: 07703 052808. 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 March 2025** please.

Thank you in anticipation.

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

Note from the Editor

Two great naturalists and BNHS members, Norman Janes and Richard Revels, died in 2024. In this issue we have tributes to Richard from Rosemary Brind and to Norman from John O'Sullivan. This newsletter includes an account by Gwen Hitchcock of the successful translocation of Slow Worms in the south of the county, an introduction by Will George to robberflies and Keith Balmer's exploration into Heteroptera.

We're still looking for a Meteorology Recorder. If this appeals to you, please contact Helen Muir-Howie - details on page 9. As always, we're also looking for articles and photographs for the newsletter. Please send them to me at newsletter@bnhs.org.uk.

Nick



Richard Revels FRES FRPS 1941 – 2024

Rosemary Brind

Richard sadly died, aged 83, on 12th December 2024, in hospital, after a brief illness. Only ten days before, many members had seen and talked with Richard at the BNHS members' evening, where he showed some of his wonderful photographs.

Born on 8th September 1941, Richard was an only child. He attended schools in Biggleswade and when he left, aged 15, he joined his father to work on his County Council smallholding at Top Field Farm. In the early 1980s, they gave up the farm and Richard pursued a profession as a Natural History Photographer, the seeds of which had been sown many years earlier.

In the 1950s, Richard had begun to explore the countryside on his own or with school friends. Each summer he would see webs of Small Tortoiseshell and Peacock butterfly caterpillars on the Stinging Nettles. Some moth caterpillars that are now seldom seen were common then including the 'woolly bear' caterpillars of the Garden Tiger moth. He would take a few caterpillars home and with the help of his grandfather, who had collected and bred butterflies and moths in his younger days, learned how to breed them through to adult insects. The wildlife in the meadows and around the farm fired his interest in wildlife that remained throughout his life.

Richard began to take photographs of butterflies and moths that he was breeding for his collection, learning the basics at an evening class. He entered pictures in photo competitions and sent them to publishers, starting to make a little money from reproduction fees. An agency contacted him in the mid-1970s asking for pictures for their library. Over the years he won many photographic awards, and provided countless photographs for publications, from books to magazines, regularly supplying the RSPB, *British Wildlife*, and others. Meanwhile, his interest in butterflies turned from making a collection of the different species, to finding out why occasionally rare and very different looking forms of a species occurred. He learnt about the basics of inherited genetic forms and tried to breed from any rare abs he caught, across a range of species, for several generations, including getting them through the winter. He had to grow their food plants and provide ideal conditions for all stages of their life, including getting them to pair and egg lay in captivity. That gave him a far better understanding of their environmental needs than almost anyone else at that time!

During the 1960s, he joined the British Entomological and Natural History Society and attended and exhibited at their annual exhibitions. Encouragement and advice from other members helped with his breeding experiments. As a long-term member, Richard was invited to feature in their 150th anniversary publication. His published breeding results in the 1970s led to him being awarded Fellowship of the Royal Entomological Society. His collection of butterflies, described as "quite exceptional", contained a unique series of breeding experiments and was donated to Oxford University Museum in 2024.

The resulting insects from breeding wild larvae would often be parasitoids which Richard would send to Dr Mark Shaw at the National Museums of Scotland for identification. In 1990, he started the long-term monitoring of the Holly Blue, recording the parasitoids that hatched and breeding them through to adults.

The first results were published in *British Wildlife* (August 2006), with one new species of parasitoid added to the British list - the small parasitic wasp *Cotesia inducta*. Some hyperparasitoids also hatched, all of which proves just how little we know about the natural history of even some common insects. He updated this research with a paper in the *Bedfordshire Naturalist* for 2023 and expressed the hope that someone else would continue this study.

Richard joined the Royal Photographic Society in 1983 and was awarded RPS Fellowship in 1984. His photo library rose to over 100,000 photos of all kinds of plants and animals. He travelled widely and prepared talks and articles about his travels.



Richard showed this photo of his Biggleswade garden, taken in July 2023, at the Christmas BNHS members' evening. He often remarked during trips out that he had seen more insects in his garden than in the countryside.

Joining the BNHS in the 1970s, Richard became an active member. He gave talks, led walks and was Recorder for Social Wasps (1994-2002). He was a key driver in developing projects and was delighted with the response to the two-year orchid survey of 2013-2014. He organised and led a citizen science study at Knocking Hoe NNR, researching the flowering and distribution of Autumn Lady's-tresses. Richard generously contributed to the BNHS through taking numerous photographs for publications. He co-authored and took photographs for *Wild Bedfordshire* (2000), *Wild Orchids of Bedfordshire* (2015), and *Bedfordshire - our changing habitats and wildlife* (2020). He also provided photos for the *Flora of Bedfordshire* (2011).

Richard's interests went beyond natural history and photography, and included fishing and even judo. In 1966 he became the first member of Biggleswade Judo Club to achieve 1st Dan (Black Belt)!

Tributes following his death show how respected he was. He was an expert photographer, generous about sharing his techniques and tricks. He had detailed knowledge about natural history and the needs of many different species throughout the different stages of their life cycle. He loved the company of friends and sharing nature walks and holidays far afield. In the words of one of our members, "The Society has really lost a true friend and stalwart for natural history in Bedfordshire.", and from a professional entomologist, "I will remember him as a brilliant and perceptive wildlife photographer, and a kind, helpful and skilled entomologist who contributed much of value to the understanding of British Insects".

He will be greatly missed by all who knew him.

Much of the information here is gleaned from Richard's writings and an obituary will be published in the *Bedfordshire Naturalist* for 2024.

Slow worms from the Luton-Dunstable guided busway – 10 years of monitoring

Gwen Hitchcock (Wildlife Trust BCN)



It's been over 10 years since the Luton-Dunstable Guided busway was built in an attempt to reduce traffic congestion through the towns. It follows the route of an old, abandoned railway line past Blow's Downs nature reserve; unfortunately a number of slow worms were living in this area so they needed to be translocated away to a safe new home before the construction work. The Wildlife Trust's Totternhoe Nature Reserve was suitable alternative habitat, although it had no record of slow worms and so in 2009 ecological consultants began collecting the slow worms from the route in 2009 and moving them there. When just over 900 had come to Totternhoe we decided that was enough as we didn't want to exceed the carrying capacity of the reserve. They were still finding slow worms along the busway though so these were taken to Dallow Downs and Bradger's Hill, two lovely chalk grassland wildlife sites in Luton. Over three years over 1,500 slow worms were moved away from the bus way route to these sites! Although such translocations are fairly common for developers, almost unheard of is the inclusion of long-term monitoring to ensure the new populations are surviving following their move. Luckily in this case funding was secured from the development to allow Wildlife Trust staff and volunteers to monitor the translocated populations for the next ten years, which brings us to now.

The primary aim of the monitoring was to confirm the slow worms were still there, to assess their body condition to ensure they were healthy and to look for breeding. We also expanded our remit to also monitor the resident population at Blow's Downs, adjacent to the Guided Busway route. Slow worms don't usually bask out in the open like other lizards, so we relied on artificial refugia cut from roofing felt to find them. We used a set protocol for laying out the survey tiles and monitored them for a minimum of eight weeks in the spring and eight weeks in autumn. One great thing about reptiles is there's little point going out in the cold and wet to look for them, leading to lots of pleasant survey days in the sun. To cut a long story - filled with lots of statistics and graphs - short the translocations have been successful, with slow worms thriving at all three translocation sites as well as at Blow's Downs. Populations are either stable or increasing, body condition is stable, and breeding is successful at all sites leading to a good mix of age ranges being found. We have evidence from at least two of the sites (Totternhoe and Bradger's Hill) that the slow worms are moving out from the release area, albeit rather slowly. This tallies with other studies which show that slow worms are a rather sedentary species typically moving only short distances.

Many thanks to all those who have helped us with this project over the years.

Mary Anning Rocks at Bedford Museum

Bev Fowlston

Bedfordshire Geology Group (BGG) were very excited about working with The Higgins Bedford in exhibiting the Mary Anning Maquette. This fascinating study of the famous palaeontologist has been touring the country at various museums and other venues, so when it was possible for the miniature statue to come to Bedford we jumped at the chance. BGG member, Diane Sutherland, worked hard with the museum staff to organise the exhibit. She researched the information that is displayed in the cabinet and discovered the amazing fossils that The Higgins Bedford hold in their stores. We couldn't have done it without her tireless work and enthusiasm. She even went to the Jurassic Coast in Lyme Regis to record short videos which are available to view via QR codes in the display.



Left: Visitor admiring the ichthyosaur fossil vertebrae in the bottom of the case.

Right: BGG providing information throughout the exhibit.

One of the main reasons for bringing Mary Anning to Bedfordshire is the geology. Both Dorset and Bedfordshire have the same aged lithologies and similar environments for the deposition of those rocks prevailed. The same creatures can be found as fossils in Bedfordshire that are found on the Jurassic Coast. So a fascinating link between the fossil hunters of the late Georgian/early Victorian eras are found in today's enthusiastic fossil hunters.

Pop along to the museum and discover so many fascinating facts about Mary Anning, from her early life to her troubles establishing herself in the burgeoning science of palaeontology to her later life and early passing. Have a look at the almost complete ichthyosaur skeleton found at Elstow that is so like the ones Mary found.

During the exhibition, which runs from November until March, visitors can explore and discover geology and fossils through several talks and workshops being held at the museum in Castle Lane, Bedford. From hearing about Women in Geology at a talk given by BGG member, Bev Fowlston, to interactive workshops being held during January, February and March. These events are all bookable via the museum. We hope to see you there.

If you want to find out more about your local geology and the rocks beneath your feet or need a speaker to tell you all sorts of fascinating information about the geological world around us, please contact info@bedfordshiregeologygroup.org.uk or visit our website at www.bedfordshiregeologygroup.org.uk

Focus on Robberflies

Will George

This is the first in what I hope will be a series of articles, looking at some of the 'neglected' insects of Bedfordshire, so named because they are in groups that do not tend to receive a lot of attention, and consequently relatively few records are received for them.

The robberflies are members of the family Asilidae, and are adapted to a predatory lifecycle. Typically, they will select a prominent perch, from which they will conduct swift interceptions of passing insects, before returning to consume their unfortunate victim, or to wait for the next opportunity. Some species will happily use a human finger as their perch, allowing a patient naturalist the opportunity to partake in a spot of miniature falconry.

Robberflies have a fairly distinctive body shape, generally being quite long and slender flies, and lacking bright or metallic colouration. They are typically very bristly, including sporting 'moustaches' of erect hairs on the face. They have a short, strong proboscis which they use to inject a potent blend of enzymes into their prey, being used to suck out the digested contents.

Fourteen species have so far been recorded in Bedfordshire out of the 27 found in the UK, with the most common species being the Kite-tailed Robberfly, *Machimus atricapillus*, which takes its name from the distinctive black tab of hair on the underside of the abdomen of the male. Two other species of *Machimus*, *M.cingulatus* and *M.rusticus*, have also been recorded in the county, but only on a handful of occasions each. A more likely confusion species is the Common Awl Robberfly, *Neoitamus cyanurus*, which is also common and widespread in the county, and best recognised by its conspicuously orange tibiae.



A male Kite-tailed Robberfly, showing the black tab of hair close to the tail.

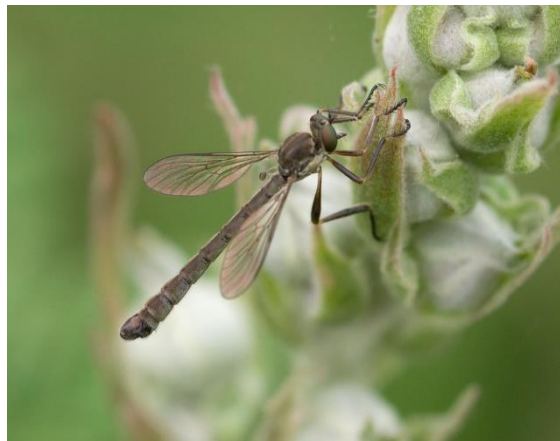
Somewhat daintier in appearance are the *Dioctria* species, of which four have been recorded in Bedfordshire. The similar looking *D.baumhaueri* and *D.rufipes* are the most frequently recorded, although the striking all black *Dioctria atricapilla*, whose males have rich blue eyes, is not an uncommon species. The final species, *Dioctria linearis*, is the smallest of the four, with mostly yellow legs.

More slender still are the two *Leptogaster* species, which are denizens of grassland habitats whose evolution has converged with those of damselflies, to produce their long, thin bodies. *Leptogaster*

cylindrica is the commoner of the two, occurring throughout the county, whilst *Leptogaster guttiventris* was until recently only recorded at The Lodge RSPB, before being found at Barton Hills in 2022.



Dioctria baumhaueri



Leptogaster cylindrica

The remaining four species are rather more solidly built. *Dysmachus trigonus* is a particularly hairy species of heathland habitats, whose males sport an impressive white moustache. *Leptarthrus brevirostris* is a downland species, with a rather hunched appearance, and reddish mid and hind tibiae. *Choerades marginatus* is a dark species of woodlands, enlivened by its bright yellow halteres. Finally is the largest species of all, the charismatic Hornet Robberfly, *Asilus crabroniformis*, thus far only recorded once in the county, back in 1950.



Choerades marginatus



Dysmachus trigonus

For more information on these fascinating flies, see the [website](#) of the Soldierflies and allies recording scheme, and in particular, their excellent [guide to all 27 species](#) found in the UK. The second edition of British Soldierflies and their allies provides full identification keys and species accounts.

All records of any of the species featured above are welcomed, with iRecord being the preferred route, or via email to bugs@bnhs.org.uk.

Recorders

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 Tom will remain a member of BNHS.

Following the retirement of Tom Thomas we have appointed David Carr to the position of Recorder for Spiders and Pseudoscorpions. We thank David for volunteering to take on this role and welcome him to BNHS. David's contact details are on the BNHS website. Please see David's note below.

We are still seeking a Meteorology Recorder or possibly a small team of people around the county to keep a record of each year's weather. This is especially important as our climate is changing and we ought to keep track of these changes.

Please contact me if you would like to volunteer. Helen Muir-Howie (science@bnhs.org.uk)

Note from David Carr, BNHS Spider and Pseudoscorpion recorder

Thank you for accepting me as Spider and Pseudoscorpion recorder for BNHS. After around 20 years as a bird ringer with Rye Meads Ringing Group, I switched to spiders in the late 1980s after attending a Field Study Council introductory course led by the very inspiring arachnologist, the late Frances Murphy. I have been actively involved in Spider recording since then. I would encourage you to submit Spider records via iRecord or directly to me by email. The iRecord administration staff have just (on 9/12/2024) added a Bedfordshire filter to my account and I see there are c. 900 unverified records! Apologies to those who have submitted records via iRecord and not had them verified. Please continue with your patience while I work my way through them.

Bedfordshire Naturalist

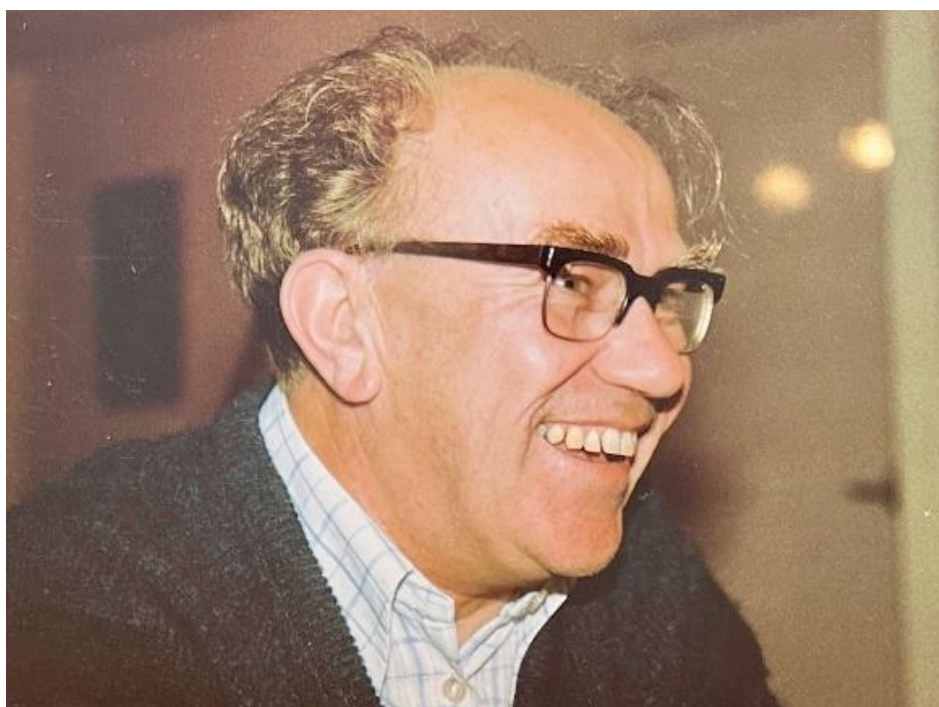
Our annual journal for 2023, Volume 78, was mailed out to members in December and we hope you enjoy reading it and use it as a reference to what to look out for in the year ahead as well. At 216 pages long it is the largest journal ever, a testament to the depth of knowledge and enthusiasm among our Recorders, and the level of support of all the membership who contribute records. Our Recorders will be starting the process of preparing for writing their 2024 reports, so do please send in any outstanding records from 2024 as soon as you can. Thank you to everyone who provided annual reports, specialist articles and photographs and to members of the editorial team for their support. If you would like to submit an article or offer help with editing and proofreading, do contact me at journal@bnhs.org.uk.

The Bedfordshire Bird Report for 2022, Volume 77, was also mailed out to members of the Bird Club at the same time. Work is already underway on writing for the 2023 Bird Report, which we hope to be able to distribute to members by mid-2025. Thanks are due to everyone involved in working extra hard to bring the publication back on track.

Rosemary Brind
BNHS Hon. Editor

Norman Janes 1934 - 2024

John O'Sullivan
BNHS Recorder for Hoverflies



On 14th September 2024, Dr Norman Janes, a prominent member of the Society and its former Recorder for Hoverflies, died at a care home in Norfolk, close to the home of his daughter, Lynne. He was 89 years old, and a widower, his wife Jean having died in 2019. An obituary for Norman will appear in the Society's Journal in due course, but it seems appropriate to mark his passing now, and to say something about his impact in the Recorder's role.

Norman took on county hoverfly recording in 1979 and produced a report for that year, which was followed in due course by seven others, all available in the Society's Journal. He made connections with the earlier records of Brian Laurence from the 1940s, and contributed hundreds of records of his own, including new species for the county. In addition, he made a collection of hoverflies, containing nearly five hundred Bedfordshire specimens. This continues to form an invaluable source of comparative material for identification and taxonomic purposes, and is still of great relevance today.

The collection, plus files of relevant scientific papers, correspondence and other documents were passed by Norman in due course to the succeeding Recorder, Lesley Smart, a professional colleague of his at Rothamsted Experimental Station. In time, Lesley passed these to the current Recorder, John O'Sullivan. When Norman left his house in Luton to move to Norfolk, Lynne kindly added his notebooks to this archive, which it is intended will remain available to the Society into the future. Norman's legacy will live on.

“This week I have mostly been beating Mullein”

Keith Balmer expands his interest into Heteroptera

In order to give my fieldwork purpose, I often focus on learning and recording an unfamiliar insect group, seeking as many of its species as I can find in the county. Over the years I’ve progressed through butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies, crickets and grasshoppers, longhorn beetles, shield bugs, ladybirds, bumblebees, solitary wasps, and scratched the surface of a few other groups. If something doesn’t have six legs then my enthusiasm usually doesn’t engage, but I still report any interesting by-catch discoveries.

During the last three seasons I’ve largely concentrated on Heteroptera. The first two were mostly spent randomly sweeping grasses and herbs, or beating trees onto my trusty cat-litter tray. (Some of you may remember it from my longhorn beetle phase). Everything that didn’t immediately fly away was photographed (using a Panasonic TZ90), subsequently identified if possible, and logged into iRecord, building a record of discoveries and confidence in identification when they were dutifully verified, or occasionally corrected, usually by Maria Justamond, or our own County Recorder Will George.



Above left: A stiltbug, *Metatropis rufescens* found in Maulden Wood.

Above right: *Campylomma verbasci* found after beating almost every Mullein plant at the old station in Willington.

The excellent <https://www.britishbugs.org.uk/> website has been my primary reference for species photographs and information. I wouldn’t have progressed far without it. (Beware though, not all species are illustrated in its Gallery, a pitfall I fell into a couple of times after finding a missing species.) It didn’t take me long to discover that too many species are almost identical, so I still have rather too many photos filed under “*Lygus* sp.”, “*Orthotylus* sp.”, “*Psallus* sp.”, etc. I have found the Google Lens app extremely helpful in suggesting a close identification, and often the right one, saving much time in approaching an ID, but I always check against reliable references before settling on a determination. Will George is now also providing useful fact sheets for the Bedfordshire species with local information and distribution maps of prior records <https://www.flickr.com/photos/runnerwill/collections/72157722482757680/>.

Upgrading my camera gear for year three (second-hand Olympus E-M1 MKIII, Olympus 60mm macro lens and Godox TT350 flash) brought more species within ID range (clearer hairs, spines, punctuation etc.) and fieldwork was now targeted towards filling the many gaps in my taxonomic list, though random searches still contributed useful discoveries. As most bugs are restricted to a few plants it was more often a case of hunting down their hosts, such as Enchanter’s Nightshade for the impressive stiltbug *Metatropis rufescens*

found in Maulden Wood; Campions for *Dicyphus globulifer* on 100 Acres; Rhododendron for *Tupiocoris rhododendri* in Rowney Warren; or Mullein for *Campylomma verbasci*, found only after beating nearly every plant at Willington old station!

I've now reached the minor milestone (major for me) of having had 150 Heteroptera species IDs accepted by the experts, but am still well short of the 400+ on the Bedfordshire list. If of interest to you, my records are visible in iRecord at <https://irecord.org.uk/all-records> (enter "Balmer, Keith" into the Recorder field). It seems that in 2024 I submitted 492 Hemiptera records (which also include some weird and colourful Homoptera by-catch). Amazing how they add up. Now if only I could remember all their scientific names, and the features to use for their identification, which has become so much harder with age! What group will I focus upon in 2025? I'll see what grabs my attention...

BNHS talks programme:

Our talks are usually scheduled for the third Tuesday of the month from September to March. The exception is in December when Maulden Hall is not always available. More details will follow as to the exact dates. The remaining talks for this season are as follows:

Tuesday **21st January** 2025. Wilder Hedgerows for Nature and History with Professor Ian Rotherham. This presentation will take place online **via Zoom** from 8pm.

Tuesday **18th February** 2025. The Great Fen Project with Henry Stanier of the Wildlife Trust BCN. This presentation will take place online **via Zoom** from 8pm.

Tuesday **18th March** 2025. AGM and Recorders Evening at **Maulden Village Hall** from 7.30pm.

BNHS events programme:

Monday **17th February** 2025. Visit to **Tiggywinkles Wildlife Hospital**, Aston Rd, Haddenham, Bucks HP17 8AF

A guided tour of the famous Tiggywinkles Wildlife Hospital has been arranged for BNHS members. The tour will start at 10.30 and last about 2 hours. It will cost £5 per person which will include a small donation to the hospital. BOOKING IS ESSENTIAL. If you would like to join the group please email Mike Bird at council14@bnhs.org.uk with the following information. Places will be allocated on a first come first served basis. Members will need to provide their own transport but car sharing is preferred.

Name, Email address, Telephone, Over 65 years?

Are you able to give a lift to other members?

Field trip organisers urgently need for 2025 – can you help?

We urgently need someone to join a team from BNHS to coordinate a programme of field trips for 2025. 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 consider helping by volunteering for this important role. You can find some information about organising events in the July 2024 issue (210th issue) of Wild About Beds that was emailed to members.