



NEWSLETTER

Lots to Look Forward to in the New Year with NATURE AS YOUR NEIGHBOUR!

Secretary: Win Lowman
winlowman@hotmail.co.uk
01934 833596

www.yacwag.org.uk

www.yacwagstreasuredtree.s.webs.com

Join our Facebook (closed)
group - YACWAG



Hawk moth caterpillar



Poplar hawk moth



Oil beetle

Winter's not over yet, but after a particularly grey couple of months we need to look forward to some fair weather pursuits in YACWAG territory. Some exciting events are planned, and we would love to see new members (and not-so-new members!) at these. Please get involved if you can!

Keep an eye on the website for events coming up, and if you are interested in some of our 'specialist' groups, including Otters, Birds (including bird box maintenance), Small Mammals, Dormice, Bats, Trees and Butterflies and Moths (read more about that inside) please make sure you register your interest with Win Lowman to make sure you don't miss out on opportunities to join in at short notice. These days we often have to watch the weather forecast and fit things in at the drop of a hat. We also have a list of members who occasionally help us with conservation tasks on our reserves. This is becoming more important as YACWAG's founder members get older! If you could help, even just once a year, with practical tasks, that would be appreciated. The spin-off is getting to know our reserves - and while there we almost always see something interesting.

YACWAG is joining in with Yatton Horticultural Society's Garden Trail on Sunday 26th June when at least a couple of YACWAG members will be opening their wildlife-friendly gardens to help people understand what can be done even on a small scale. If you would be prepared to open yours, please let Win know. There will also be an open day on at least one of our reserves (more about that later) and local walks and talks, bat work, bird surveys, dormouse hunts, etc. Please join us!

THANKS TO ALL WHO VOTED FOR YACWAG IN THE NORTH SOMERSET MERCURY AWARDS. YACWAG WON THE AWARD FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HERO!



YACWAGger Profile - Sue Lovesey

Sue has been a Trustee of YACWAG since 2006. She is an enthusiastic all-round reliable back-room volunteer at YACWAG events and is especially interested in helping with children's and young people's activities. She is one of the named contacts on YACWAG's Environmental Education Fund and has recently been working in a small group reviewing our risk assessments. Sue likes to be active and enjoys conservation workparties and other outdoor activities.



I have always been interested in wildlife. I was brought up in a 1930s suburban 'semi' with a large garden. My mum didn't work outside the home; she loved the garden and was always pointing out the birds and butterflies to me. I have fond memories of her Observers Book of British Birds and I loved the Ladybird books on nature: 'What to Look For in Spring', etc.

My grammar school was an old stately home set in wonderful grounds and I walked there through another large park. I was very fortunate to have always been in green, leafy spaces close to the natural world until I came to college in Bristol. I remember when I went home on the train, after my first term, feeling uplifted to see trees and open countryside again as we left the city behind.

I moved to Congresbury almost 30 years ago. I became a member of Avon Wildlife Trust and in time my children joined the Congresbury Wildlife Watch Group where I met a network of local people interested in the environment. When YACWAG started up we joined as a family and my husband Graham and I are now life members. I have specially enjoyed doing physical work on our reserves as there is such a huge variety of different tasks; as well as general scrub clearance I have participated in hedge-laying, scything, pond digging and making bonfires. I also help with otter surveys on Congresbury Moor.

A big part of my volunteering for YACWAG is liaising in Congresbury with young people's groups. I worked at St Andrews School for 17 years and got to know Trevor Riddle through helping with the annual RSPB Big Schools' Birdwatch there. In 2012 I was involved in tree-planting for the Jubilee Wood in the school grounds. I have been a pack assistant with Congresbury Cubs for more than 20 years which has been a good link as the Cubs have made owl, tit and dormouse boxes and have been involved in YACWAG activities on Cadbury Hill as well as pond-dipping. YACWAG has a tradition of helping the Congresbury Youth Partnership with its summer holiday activities and I have been doing that for the past four years with Win Lowman. I was also pleased to get involved with YACWAG's project at the Congresbury Children's Centre which has made the grounds more wildlife-friendly.

These days there is a greater understanding that nature is good for people's general well-being, both physical and mental, and YACWAG has an important opportunity to help people reconnect with nature – especially children. 'Nature as Your Neighbour' is a concept I would like to see YACWAG develop, so children can see nature on their way to school and adults on their way to work. Encouraging wildlife gardening could help people understand the importance of their own gardens to the wildlife around us. I enjoy some of the nature programmes on television – I am especially enjoying The Hunt for example – but that is no substitute for learning about wildlife out there on our own patch, and doing something to support it.

What the Doctor Ordered.... Higgy shares some foxy goings-on

It's the 23rd November and I've just had a really interesting meeting with Gill Brown who is looking at starting an extremely exciting pollinator project. I'm feeling alive with ideas and thoughts of what Gill is proposing and the difference that this project could make for the benefit of nature if she can get the right people involved. The sun is out and I'm also throwing ideas around my mind for another couple of projects that I am currently working on for YACWAG. All of this is a very welcome relief in what is turning out to be a long recovery from my recent hip replacement.

Choosing to travel back across Kenn Moor on my way home, I negotiate the twisting lanes out of the West End of Nailsea, having to stop to give way to other vehicles who are speeding along with drivers oblivious to the beauty that surrounds them or maybe just living in a world much more important and stressful than mine! It's been said recently that nature is a healer and should be prescribed on the NHS to tackle work related stress and illness. I ponder this as I turn right towards Brockley - nature and my wildlife trips are certainly helping me both mentally and physically in my slow recovery, and I think Tim, my good wildlife photography and GP friend from Bridgwater, who strongly believes in this theory, may have a point.

Having negotiated the strange road island at the right-hand turn towards Claverham, I pass the newly rebuilt barn on my left. It was a pile of old stone for so long but now sits proudly in its overgrown plot, although seemingly still unused. I pull into the gateway opposite and muddy water splashes up to add to the dirty used look that my car acquires from my wildlife adventures at this time of the year. It's here in this field just outside Claverham that I have watched and photographed Lapwing and filmed Starling murmurations in the past. I always stop here for a look but today there are just a handful of Black-headed gulls that don't even bother to look up at me.

I move off down the road past the turning to Claverham Drove and take in the barn on my left that housed a Little Owl for so long, but now it has been completely re-developed and the Little Owl is long gone! This stirs an emotion as I think of all the current planning applications around our local villages and the wildlife that will suffer if they go ahead - it makes me shudder to even consider the horror of this for our local wildlife.

Turning around I turn left into Claverham Drove, up over the railway bridge looking for the young female Kestrel that often sits on the telegraph pole here. Today she's absent but unknown to me she will give me the ultimate reward for perseverance in only a few days' time!

On the sharp left-hand bend I add another layer of mud to my dull paintwork as I bump to a stop in the entrance of the rough lane that leads out towards the Old Kenn. Here you can often see large flocks of birds foraging on the muddy ground or birds of prey such as Sparrowhawk and Peregrine. In summer the occasional Hobby can be seen swooping down to chase the dancing dragonflies of high summer. The fields here are affectionately called the 'Swan Fields' due to the large number of Mute Swans that overwinter on them, quite a spectacle and one worth taking the time to see at this time of year. You never know what can turn up here and it's in this very spot four years ago that I recorded the first sighting of Bewicks Swan on Kenn Moor, a real thrill. Today however it's quiet with little to see but ten minutes scanning with binoculars is somehow therapeutic this morning and the late season sun could only brighten the lowest mood.

Littlewood Reserve is next on my list and this really is a magical place that YACWAG have turned into a superb nature reserve. I always stop here when out on the moors and recently I have noticed that a fox can often be seen foraging at the bottom of the drove beside it. I park up the truck so as not to cause an obstruction and scan with my binoculars - and there she is once again, right at the bottom of the drove a beautiful and well-conditioned fox! I'm sure she's a vixen and she's just pouncing and playing in the sun without, it seems, a care in the world! What a sight! And a chance to maybe get a little closer and observe her in her natural surroundings. It amazes me how special this moment feels having imagined it for so long. I have observed countless 'city' foxes prior to an early shift or during night shifts while working in Bristol but these animals are different: brazen, fearless, unkempt and mangy. I remember one morning when I parked my truck in the St Pauls area of Bristol and four foxes passed within a few feet of me but it felt more like a passing group of 'hoodies' not the wonderful animal that I am looking at now!



Carefully so as not to disturb her I slip through the gate and check the wind; it's blowing left to right but slightly back towards me, perfect! This is simple fieldcraft but so important if not to disturb wildlife. When I check the wind direction I automatically check the sun and more importantly my shadow, this is especially important with butterflies and insects that will vanish the moment that the warmth of the sun disappears behind your shadow with the resulting failure to secure a picture or decent view. I'm wearing drab clothing, brown trousers and an army green coloured top, perfect for disguising obvious movements and concealing me against the hedgerow that I'm using as cover while creeping forward. My camera is on with settings already programmed in - and of course lens cap off.

This isn't a race - it's one foot placed carefully and slowly in front of the last. The wind is in the right direction and there is plenty of cover so noise is my only enemy. A stop every ten steps or so shows the vixen fully engaged in her game and oblivious to my careful approach. I don't want to get too close as this would be unfair. Disturbing your subject should always be avoided but I want to get close enough for a record shot and better view and hopefully she will never know I was there.



Half way down the drove a tree has fallen and has been cut to clear the path but still crosses the ditch that it fell across and no doubt is offering a bridge to my new vixen friend. I can imagine her crossing the log with her claws scratching against the thickly fissured bark. But for now this is base camp and cover for me to crouch behind and get my picture. Even more importantly I can spend some time just watching and enjoying this amazing creature without disturbing her. 'Click, Click' I get my shot for the record but the sound of the camera shutter alerts her and she looks up. Her look is inquisitive and she takes ten steps towards me, what a treat! I stay still and low - a sudden movement would disturb her, but right now she is focused only on me and approaches me slowly obviously intrigued.

I can now clearly see her; she's fit and well fed, her coat glows orange in the late morning sun and her brown eyes are alert and bright, reflecting the light from this beautiful morning. How could anyone not be enthralled by this moment, nothing else comes close, man and beast together here in North Somerset on this fine November morning. I'm excited but calm and she approaches nearer, now within twenty to thirty feet of me. I can see the reflections in her crystal clear eyes that are locked onto me. Although a magical moment it is at this time that sense must prevail as I don't want her considering humans as part of her world and she needs some fear to keep her safe from people who may not appreciate her as much as I do. It's now that I stand and break the deadlock. I hope the sudden movement will spook her and make her turn away but she stands her ground for a moment, eyes fixed on me, almost as if there is a chemistry between us, or a point in time when we were meant to meet like this, a mutual appreciation of each other. How magical this experience is. The moment lapses and she slowly turns away; there's no panic or alarm as she casually makes her way back down the path, a quick glance over her shoulder, an acknowledgement from her to me and me to her, then she slips away into the undergrowth and is gone.

It is now as I make my way back up the path still slightly trembling from this fabulous experience that I remember my hip, the pain having subsided during this magical moment, maybe those experts are right and we do all need some nature and wildlife medicine once in a while.....

'Higgy'

If you would like to enjoy more of Higgy's superb photos and wildlife sightings, take a look at his websites:

<http://higgysgardenproject.blogspot.co.uk>

<http://www.somersetwildlifephotography.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/SomersetWildlifePhotography>

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/higgy50/>



Common Blue Butterfly - Higgy

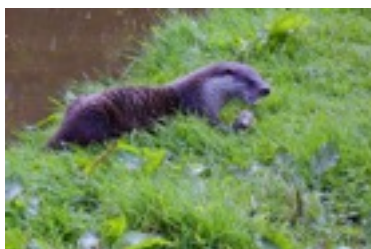


Photo: Higgy

YACWAG Otter Report 2015

2015 was undoubtedly a good year for otters. On a crisp, cold, morning between Christmas and the New Year I found impressions of tiny otter footprints in the frost on a wooden bridge near the Land Yeo, which I cross every morning on my daily dog walk. A distinctive footprint in the mud under the bridge confirmed that the mother was 'Wonky Toe', an otter I first caught on a borrowed trail camera in February 2013, initially on her own, and later with two small cubs which she reared successfully. Claire Shellis (who first noticed the unusual footprint) and I have tracked the progress of the new cubs, and they have both survived their first year. Another female otter on the Land Yeo, which we assume to be from the earlier litter, was seen with two cubs in late spring. Unfortunately one was killed in a collision on a minor road, but the second has been seen with its mother several times since then.

Usually it is very difficult to identify individual animals from their tracks, so we have been hugely privileged to gain an insight into the life of one remarkable otter. As she is getting on a bit now, I wondered if we had reached the end of her story, but on December 9th, on an early walk before rushing off to Plymouth for my daughter's 21st birthday, I noticed an otter print amongst the usual dog tracks on the river bank. I snapped a quick record shot, but it wasn't until I showed the picture to my husband before lunch that I recognised the distinctive wonky toe...



Wonky toe otter footprint

Photo: Gill Brown

Sadly for our surveyors on the YACWAG reserves there have been no otter signs there this year, and nothing from the Congresbury Yeo since April. This doesn't mean otters aren't present on the moors, they almost certainly are, but with a huge network of rhyes and a lack of obvious sprainting points, their traces are hard to find.

There have been more reported sightings this year than at any time since the otter group was first set up in January 2012. On Easter Sunday morning the congregation at a sunrise service watched as an otter swam across a bay in Backwell Lake, and there has been a steady stream of reports from dog walkers, birders and anglers since then. It's almost fair to say that, in this area, where there is water there are otters, but the hot spot for sightings is definitely the Kenn. Fortunately the anglers there have been reporting record bags, and those I have spoken to are very happy that otters have returned to the river.

Gill Brown

Winter Bird Report by Trevor Riddle

November and December 2015 have been generally quiet for birds, partly because of the record warm temperatures; birds don't need to come south when it is so mild.



Great spotted woodpecker
Photo: Higgy

We did have a run of Woodcock sightings in early December, starting off with one in the field adjacent to Stowey reserve, one on Congresbury Moor and a third in Littlewood. None have been seen subsequently so these were presumed passage birds.

Littlewood has Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Treecreepers in residence and I spotted a couple of Chiffchaffs on one visit. A small flock of Goldfinches feeding on Alder seeds has a handful of Siskins with it. Nearby a large flock of 400 Fieldfares - maybe the only flock - and 200 Redwings has been roaming Kenn Moor with an even bigger group of Starlings. 60 Mute Swans were feeding on the Moor and there were several Stonechats.

A Barn Owl was at Congresbury Moor, but vole numbers seem to have fallen quickly and in fact the remains of two Barn Owls, which perhaps died due to starvation, have been found near Clevedon. One of these birds was ringed in Derbyshire in August 2011. Up to 20 Snipe have been roosting in the Congresbury Moor fields and a Kingfisher there brightened up a dull day. A Cettis Warbler was singing along the Strawberry Line on new year's day with a Song Thrush nearby. Incredibly this was the first I had seen there since the summer - normally they are singing on mild mornings in December so it is a bit worrying. However a party of four Bullfinches was encouraging and a Water Rail has been heard calling occasionally.

Away from the Reserves, a pair of Peregrines were together on a pylon in mid December raising my hopes (almost certain to be unfulfilled) of a pair setting up territory. The male was back subsequently but the recent high winds make pylon perching unattractive even to Peregrines.

TREE DRESSING DAY IN YATTON AND CONGRESBURY 2015

In October we started planning how to decorate trees in Yatton and Congresbury to remind people that trees are good for us and for the many birds, animals and insects which depend on them. 2014's knitted scarves were a hard act to follow! We hope that the 18 different animals made into bunting and hanging from trees in Claverham, Yatton and Congresbury made an impression! Jill Riddle's huge knitted owl presided wisely over the display at Yatton Library.



Believe it or not we managed to involve 55 people in the project including YACWAG members and Congresbury Beavers and Cubs - thanks to everyone who helped. We all enjoyed it – and have some ideas for next year – watch this space!

Sue Lovesey and Win Lowman

The History of YACWAG Part 6



In both 2002 and 2003 YACWAG held Field Days. This initiative, promoted by Common Ground, aimed to get local people out into fields appreciating that they weren't just empty spaces but held our history and nature. An exhibition was enjoyed by 200 people in Claverham Village Hall with displays of corn dollies, agricultural implements, food and drink made from the fields and many games and activities.



Gerald Harris of Kingston Seymour organised some local farmers and heritage enthusiasts to bring their vintage equipment and demonstrate hay-making the old way. Both years the hay-making took place in New Croft in glorious sunshine and hundreds of people turned out to enjoy the spectacle.

In October 2003 YACWAG organised a community bulb-planting for *Make A Difference Day* at North End roundabout and nearby verges. Residents were able to collect over 1000 free bulbs from Cadbury Garden Centre and come and plant them, along with four ornamental crab apple trees, to enhance the bare verge at the entrance to Yatton. About the same time the Yatton stone was put on the roundabout, and later YACWAG members worked under the supervision of a professional stone mason, Sam Powell, to repair the old stone wall between the verge and the lay-by.

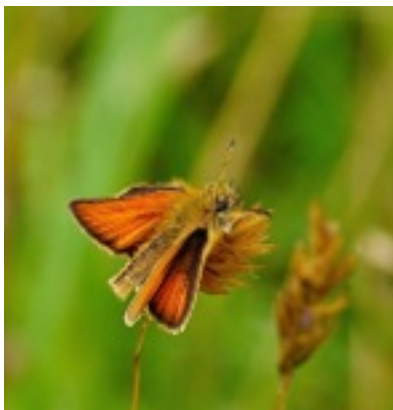


Moths and Butterflies 2015/2016



2015 was a fantastic year for moths and in particular for the moth trapping sessions in my garden for YACWAG members. They were well attended and it's great for people to get so close to these amazing insects and help identify them. We recorded many new species in my garden in 2015 and our garden species list is now up around 200! I think the star of the year for us was the Small Elephant Hawk Moth pictured top left. It is a distinct species from the Elephant Hawk Moth which is more usually seen around here. They are usually found on the Mendips.

National Moth Night proved very successful with a good number of members taking to the Strawberry Line after dark to look at wine ropes. These traps had been put out prior to the walk and attracted a good variety of different moths. The most exciting find of this session was a Red Underwing which unfortunately seem to be scarce locally now.



Moths took up a lot of my time last year but I also spent as much time as I could hunting down butterflies, mainly locally but also managing a trip to Bentley Woods to see and photograph the impressive Purple Emperor! Tony Moulin led a superb butterfly walk in the summer on our Congresbury Moor reserve and we saw lots of different butterflies as well as other insects. The highlight of the walk was an Essex Skipper, photo left, which hadn't been recorded on this reserve until a few years ago. Interestingly I also recorded Essex Skipper in my garden for the first time in 2015!

Recently I met with Tony Moulin and James Brine to talk about the formation of a YACWAG Moth and Butterfly group. This will include all insect types. The group will be launched in the Spring and a programme of events will be organised, such as moth trapping in gardens and also on our reserves, plus a re-run of the Strawberry Line wine roping and, weather permitting, some butterfly walks.

National Moth Night is on 9th-11th June this year and the theme is Hawk Moths! The group will be running an event or events for this initiative so please note the date in your diaries and get on the new Moth and Butterfly Group list by contacting Win in the first instance. This will give you assurance that you will hear about anything lepidopteran going on. - some events may be at short notice to catch any glimmer of good weather.

On 26th June we will be teaming up with Yatton and District Horticultural Society to open some wildlife gardens alongside more traditional ones. We hope to include moth trapping and will encourage visitors to see what they could attract into their own gardens.

Looking forward to the summer!

Higgy