



Registered charity no. 1076362

Newsletter

New Record for YACWAG

The nice-looking insect below, photographed by Higgy, is a horsefly. Not just any horsefly - and interestingly, not one that feeds on horses - or humans. This particular species lives in saltmarshes, a dwindling habitat locally and nationally. The adult insect feeds on the nectar of flowers like creeping thistle, providing another good reason to leave the thistles in our fields alone! The larvae feed on the aquatic larvae of invertebrates like mosquitoes, beetles and hoverflies and live on the damp muddy margins of local rhynes. The Saltmarsh Horsefly is part of a rich, balanced, wetland eco-system such as is found on coastal and floodplain grazing marsh - the designation

given by Natural England to Congresbury Moor where Higgy photographed this rare insect.



© Somerset Wildlife Photography

The discovery of the Saltmarsh Horsefly alive and well in our fields shows the heritage of YACWAG's land. Our small part of North Somerset has not been studied as closely as the Somerset Levels and it is very good to find out what wildlife living with us 'as our neighbour' goes unnoticed and unrecorded.

Doubtless this species has been thriving on Congresbury Moor for centuries, and now, thanks to Higgy's enthusiasm, photographic skills and diligence, it has been recorded on our land - the first record for Bristol, Avon and Somerset. And not just one fly! Hundreds of them! YACWAG's volunteers continue to put this area on the map.

Saltmarsh Horsefly (*Atylotus latistriatus*)

For more details about Higgy's summer of discovery please see page 6.

The State of Butterflies

Every five years or so Butterfly Conservation publishes a 'state of the nation' assessment of the UK's butterflies. Data from 2015 has just been published along with a ten-year analysis of trends from the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme, which uses data collected by tens of thousands of volunteers.

The key finding is that there is evidence of serious, longterm and ongoing decline of UK butterflies. Both habitat specialists and wider countryside species decreased significantly in abundance and occurrence. The Wall and Small Heath now rank among the most severely declining UK butterflies. Destruction and deterioration of habitats as a result of agricultural intensification and changing woodland management are still considered prime causes of longterm decline of the butterflies that are habitat specialists. The factors for decline of wider countryside species are not well understood – but some threatened species have had their decline halted as landscape conservation projects have proved successful.

Of all the UK insects, butterflies are the most studied and they provide vital insights into the state of wider biodiversity and the ecosystem that depends on it. Restoring butterflies to gardens and countryside is likely to bring substantial benefits to other species as well.

The report is relevant to YACWAG's work. To help us with the management of our fields we use butterflies as an indicator of how well we are doing. We can't do anything about weather patterns and we have to be mindful that making efforts with the management of our small landholding may not turn the tide for butterflies unless there is wider support from larger-scale landowners such as councils, farmers and Government agencies.

We can plant a buddleia in our garden (or increase the wild flowers in YACWAG's fields), but the Small Tortoiseshells are in decline and we (apparently) can't stop the Internal Drainage Board, the Environment Agency, the Highways Department etc from cutting the nettles on which their caterpillars feed.



Marbled White butterfly on YACWAG's reserve



Small Tortoiseshell

If only YACWAG (and other similar landowners) had more land we might be able to make a difference. If only more roadside verges were left untouched, if only public open space was allowed to have long grass for a few months... if only, if only.....

But we CAN do things on our own patch that will help butterflies. We can stop using pesticides in our gardens; we can plant wild caterpillar foodplants (or tolerate them if we think they are 'weeds'). YACWAG members can support our work by spreading the message that 'nature is our neighbour'. Many people nowadays don't 'get it' but we can keep banging on about the importance of our local environment until more of them do.

Tony Moulin

Bird News

It was a slow start for our summer birds with the unusually cold weather in March and early April and Blackcaps in particular were slow to arrive at their Strawberry Line territories. However by the time of our mid April count there were five males singing along the line as well as 11 Chiffchaffs and a couple of passage Willow Warblers. Cetti's Warblers are resident and seem to have survived the 'beast from the east' successfully with four males holding territory on the Yatton-Congresbury section of the Line and another six between Congresbury and Mendip Spring Golf Club. The conditions on the Line must suit them well. Whitethroats (five) and three Sedge Warblers were singing by early May with 16 singing Reed Warblers by the middle of the month. The late surveys often turn up a (presumably) late arriving Reed Warbler in a new territory and this year was no exception, with another singing from the railway yard near Yatton station in early July.

Bullfinches were recorded regularly; there were three Long Tailed Tit families and Lesser Whitethroats were heard occasionally. Kestrels reared young in one of our owl boxes; the Barn Owls themselves were present but hadn't nested by the end of June. There was a couple of interesting Hobby sightings in early July.

Part of the old Clevedon railway is viewable from the new Chestnut Park estate and this held a pair of Linnets, unusual as a breeding bird locally. Whitethroat and Reed Bunting were seen and House Martins were making a nest on one of the new houses.

The main interest from the Littlewood surveys was a pair of Green Woodpeckers. We didn't locate a nest but there must have been one nearby as they were seen or heard on every visit and they were very noisy. Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Treecreepers were also present and may have bred.

It has been a poor season for Cuckoos. One was heard but not often seen around Mendip Spring Golf Club and there were a couple of very early morning reports of calling around the periphery of Yatton.

Lapwings built nests on maize fields in Kingston Seymour, were disturbed but laid again. The crop grows quickly so the outcome is rarely observed but as they were on the same sites last year one hopes that they fledged some young.

A juvenile Tawny Owl was calling near to the fishing pond in Wemberham Lane and may have come from a local nest. Wemberham Lane itself provided singing Skylark, Lesser Whitethroat, Sedge Warbler and Reed Warbler and the raptors Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Hobby and Peregrine were all seen there.

Trevor Riddle

Admin Matters

The last year of YACWAG's life has been very intensive in terms of administration. A lot of the skills needed to make YACWAG effective are not related to nature conservation at all, but are nonetheless essential for the administration and organisation of our activities. We are very grateful to Roger Lawrence for sharing his skills to support our work. A huge workload was generated by the new data protection legislation (GDPR) and Win, Viv and Juley worked hard to ensure YACWAG remained within the law. If any of you reading this have not returned the necessary forms you will understand why you may no longer be on our regular email mailing list. Please contact Win if this is the case.

Claiming Gift Aid was another huge piece of administrative work as new accounting systems were put into place. This resulted in a large claim and HMRC rewarded us with a Gift Aid payment of £622.12 which included Gift Aid claimed on eligible members' subscriptions and donations, as well as this year including the additional Gift Aid of more than £200 on the donation from St Andrew's School, raised through a sponsored walk.

At our AGM Trevor Riddle was presented with a small gift in recognition of his 19 years' service on the YACWAG Executive Committee. Trevor was the longest serving Trustee to retire and his work for YACWAG has been a huge part of the charity's success. Trevor will continue with his bird surveys and walks and the co-ordination of the work needed on our barn owl boxes.

We also said goodbye to Christopher O'Neill and welcomed Chris Hammond. Richard Croucher was elected as Vice Chair – a new position created through a change to our Constitution.

YACWAG Chair's Award this year was made to Sarah Dale. Sarah is a dedicated YACWAG member who is a professional ecologist. She has raised the profile of YACWAG through working with landowners and engaging and inspiring volunteers on dormice surveys, reptile and amphibian surveys and bat walks. She has also been involved with our bat work, leading a group in 2017 to survey Greater Horseshoe Bats in Congressbury.



Tony with Trevor at AGM

Claverham is Top for Bats

The Claverham bat walks carried out by YACWAG as part of the National Bat Monitoring Programme have been running for 12 years. The walks are carried out to a strict protocol and the results can be compared with over 800 other sites in the UK to give an indication of population trends. The aim is to count the numbers of pipistrelle, noctule and serotine bats.

The tall hedges, cattle-grazed fields and dark skies all create a good habitat for bats in Claverham and the numbers of bats since 2006 have remained high, but the 2017 figures were exceptional. The site is 8th best for common pipistrelle, 52nd best for soprano pipistrelle, 33rd best for noctule and the best site for serotine in the South West. In national terms Claverham is 33rd best for common pipistrelle, 461st for soprano pipistrelle, 171st best for noctule and (wait for the drum roll) the very best site in the country out of 868 surveyed since 1998.

The bat monitoring walks are open to all and are a fascinating way to get an insight into bat behaviour and how to take part in a citizen science project using a bat detector. Two walks as part of the National Bat Monitoring Programme for Daubenton's bat will be held in Congresbury in August with walks along the banks of the Yeo. For more information please see the email Win will be sending out to members.

Yatton School Fete



YACWAG presented the 'Very Hungry Caterpillar' to children and adults attending the Yatton Schools Carnival in June, sharing information about the ecology and life cycles of butterflies and moths. Thanks to Higgy for making a splendid, informative, interactive display which we will hope to use on future occasions as well.

Don't Neglect Your Doorstep!

I hope that you are all enjoying your summer and, although the weather is hot and dry for the garden, I hope you have been able to get out and about enjoying more wildlife.

My garden has certainly taken a back seat this summer other than the basic watering to stop things from frying completely. Unfortunately, this weather will probably have adverse effect on some of our butterfly and moth species which, although now flying in good numbers, will struggle to find living food plants to lay their eggs on and for the following caterpillars to feed on.

With the opportunity in front of me and having missed a whole summer last year due to injury, I decided that this year I would get out not only on our reserves to survey butterflies and insects but also into our wider local countryside to find a few of our rarer species. Before I knew it we were well into June but I did just manage to catch the very end of the flying season of the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary when a visit to Priddy Pools on the Mendips presented me with just two faded and very tatty specimens but still a tick in the box!

July was suddenly upon us so a drastic decision had to be made and I cleared my diary for the following two weeks and set about an insect finding mission that will never be forgotten. My first trip out was to Shapwick Moor on the Somerset Levels after White Admiral - a species that not so long ago flew in Goblin Combe and I believe King's Wood in Congresbury. On arrival I was promptly told by a local, 'You're too late sonny, they only fly in the mornings!' Now that's not a great start but another local kindly showed me a track full of honeysuckle that was in turn full of the most beautiful butterflies I have seen for a very long time. To make the day even better I also managed to record my first Scarce Chaser dragonfly along the banks of the South Drain.



Red-eyed Damselfly

The next morning I was up at 6am and on my way down to Bentley Wood in Wiltshire after the magnificent Purple Emperor, sadly long extinct in Somerset. Although visible in the tree tops, 'His Majesty' never came down to feed but I did manage to find a colony of Purple Hairstreak feeding on bramble which again was a first and afforded some rare close up pictures. I seemed to be attracting attention as a 'Forest local' (who turned out to be an old gamekeeper for the forest when it belonged 'the big house') approached me in the wood and invited me back to his 'private reserve' to take some pictures. This 'reserve' turned out to be six acres right in the middle of the forest sitting behind his home - the old gamekeepers cottage. This amazing chap had turned his six acres into the most wonderful habitat with wildflower meadows and two lakes right in the middle of the forest. I was so fortunate to be able to add yet another first in the shape of some beautiful Red-eyed Damselflies.

Back on home soil, I was back up to Priddy Pools and photographing my next new species: the elusive and extremely rare Black Darter dragonfly. As far as I'm aware this is the only place in Somerset where you can see this stunning dragonfly. A couple of freshly emerged Dark Green Fritillaries added to a lovely day until we skipped over to Blagdon Lake for an hour and I managed another first in the form of a few Ruddy Darter dragonflies. This summer was getting better and better by the hour!



Dark Green Fritillary



Grayling

Now on a complete high from the catalogue of successful 'new species' sightings, I ventured to Sand Point in Weston-super-Mare after the Grayling - a butterfly of rocky places that is becoming quite rare. I was very pleased to spot one within five minutes of being on the Point and spent a good hour photographing one after another. Mixing in Common Blue and Small Copper butterflies made this a fabulous morning even if fully exposed to the boiling sun.

I found myself wondering what else was on my list: Marsh Fritillary, Small Blue? No, a little late for both, Chalkhill Blue? A little early. Black-tailed Skimmer? Oh no, I had managed to get a first at Priddy Pools. White-letter Hairstreak? Now that's something I hadn't photographed before but where was I going to find an elm tree supporting a big enough colony? After a post on social media I was provided with full details of where to find this tiny and secretive butterfly, so it was off to Snuff Mills in Bristol that I ventured next. White-letter Hairstreak: tick. Dipper: tick and a very welcome bonus. And what a stunning location in the heart of Bristol, a wooded river valley full of wildlife and plenty of history if you like that sort of thing. The gardens around the old mill house are beautifully tended by volunteers and worth a visit.

This was turning into a crazy couple of weeks and then, when I was on social media posting up my new finds for others to enjoy, I came across a post that sent me straight back to 2015! This post was of a rare horsefly found in Kenn by a chap outside his workplace; it was actually a Golden Horsefly, *Atylotus fulvus*. I immediately realised that this was very similar to a horsefly that I had photographed on July 1st 2015 but hadn't yet managed to identify. This was amazing as there was only a handful of records for Somerset so a real find and best of all mine was found on a YACWAG reserve! I literally dropped what I was doing there and then, grabbed my cameras and shot off to Congresbury Moor to see if I could rediscover any of these flies as according to my record the time was right. This really was like looking for a needle in a haystack and without being able to get access to New Croft I had to settle for sorting through thistles that were growing on the banks of the drainage ditch that bordered the reserve. The local farmer came past in his tractor and gave me that hard 'Paddington Bear' stare that said 'what the hell are you doing crawling around in among the thistles you nutta!' I suddenly froze in disbelief as there on one of the thistles right in front of me was a horsefly and to the naked eye the rare species that I was looking for. When I say I snapped about 400 pictures of this insect I kid you not as I wanted to be sure we had every single angle covered for identification purposes. However I had this niggle inside that this fly was somehow different to the insect that I had photographed back in 2015.

Although in a rush to get my pictures home I did stop off at the river Yeo and photographed Banded Demoiselle and plenty of Scarce Chaser dragonflies that I later discovered had never been recorded there before!

On returning to my office I fired up Google and from my research it was obvious that the horsefly I had just photographed was in fact a different species from the rare Golden Horsefly. Even better it was much rarer and in fact marked 'Nationally Scarce' with only 95 national records and zero records for the Avon/Bristol/Somerset areas! This horsefly was a nectar feeder called: *Atylotus latistriatus* (Saltmarsh Horsefly), a specialist of rare saltmarsh mainly found on the east and far south coasts of Britain and certainly not here in North Somerset!

On Cloud Nine with my new find I contacted Tony and Faith and a date was set for us and Richard Croucher to get into New Croft and see if we could find any other of these amazing flies. This was extremely exciting and I lay awake the night before in anticipation, sure that we would find more but in small numbers I presumed. The following morning we all set foot into New Croft, a wonderful reserve managed by YACWAG as a beautiful wildflower hay meadow. We recorded a host of insects including the Essex Skipper butterfly but it wasn't long

until we found our first horsefly and it was our target species of *Atylotus latistriatus*! As we walked deeper into the reserve and got our eye in we recorded easily over 100 of these fabulous insects. Tony informed us that New Croft was actually created as an enclosure for hay even before the Enclosure Acts of the 19th century and that it used to be saltmarsh grazing land many centuries ago. It would seem that the lack of intensive management has enabled a colony of this very rare insect to hang on and now thrive. On checking the two neighbouring fields we found the horsefly present in both. On the opposite side of the drainage ditch we found none in the field which had been extensively grazed and although thistles were present the grass was very short. The field next to it had thistles among long grass and other wild flowers and again we found the species. Maybe the way the fields are managed by cutting or grazing has either a negative or positive impact on this insect. A really interesting theory and something that will need some careful research to ensure we maintain habitat for this rare insect.



Tony and Richard taking a closer look at the horsefly

While walking back through New Croft we also discovered a mating pair of small and almost black Craneflies which following later research seem to also be a saltmarsh species and again fairly rare.

It's amazing how rich an area we are blessed to live in with super butterflies, moths and other insects, yet so many people walk past not giving a single thought for these incredibly valuable indicator species. A short drive will find you a huge range of now rare butterflies including Chalkhill Blue, Small Blue, Large Blue and Fritillaries such as Dark Green and the now rare Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary. Yet what is right on our own doorstep is possibly the most exciting and it is time to take notice of insects as they are so important in the bigger picture of conservation. I am now planning to get into YACWAG's reserves over the next few weeks to survey and record what other insects we have using our land. You never know we might even find further rare species thanks to the huge amount of work that many of you have helped with over the years to maintain the historic character of land owned by YACWAG. Although access is strictly limited into our reserves for very good reason, if learning about insects and butterflies interests you and you feel you could assist with valuable surveying work please do contact me. Much work can be done from paths near to our reserves, so during the rest of this summer get out there and don't only look for the big attractive things, spare a thought for the insects on the brambles and thistles - you never know they may actually be even more exciting.

Higgy

Sustainability in Action



Yeo Valley Children's Centre is still making good use of the project supported by YACWAG. It was very pleasing this year to see the raised beds full of produce and the bug house looking cared-for. The sign provides a great advertisement that the Centre considers the importance of the environment in its work with young people.



Photos by Sue Lovesey

Love Congresbury 2018

YACWAG's aim 'to advance education in natural history and nature conservation' is made so much easier when there is a positive relationship with local schools and, for more than a decade now, YACWAG was welcomed into St Andrew's Primary School in Congresbury by the late Headteacher, Neil Tuttiett.

When Neil died last August many, from both the school and the community at large, were very shocked and wished for something to remember him by. So the organisers of *Love Congresbury* stepped in. This annual weekend event usually involves volunteers in a variety of different projects around the village but this year the focus was on just one – to build a sensory garden to honour Neil. YACWAG was invited to engage the children in building bug houses, while the adults were occupied with the heavier construction of the garden itself.



At the event, which took place over the weekend of 16th and 17th June in the school grounds, at least 15 children made in excess of 40 bug houses of two different designs. Children queued to hammer in the 40 or so nails needed to assemble each of Higgy's bug box kits and, although a lack of concentration sometimes resulted in the wood rather than the nail being hit, Graham Lovesey's fingers remained intact! These bug houses, looking like mini beach huts, are now hanging in the sensory garden. Those of the second design, to be hung in warm, sunny spots elsewhere in the grounds, were less complicated but Sue Lovesey still welcomed the help of an enthusiastic young assistant when queues formed at her table too!

YACWAG looks forward to its continuing relationship with St Andrew's School and would like to thank *Love Congresbury* for the opportunity to repay in part Neil's openness and welcome. We also welcomed the opportunity to have conversations with youngsters about the wildlife that might use their insect homes and their importance for biodiversity.

View from the Chair

From my discussions with members I am aware that it is the aspiration of many YACWAG supporters that we should acquire more land. It is one of the core reasons for YACWAG's existence - 'to create and maintain nature reserves'. Land prices have shot up since we bought our last field nine years ago and, although we have a Land Acquisition Policy, it is harder to obtain grants and the price of land that would be suitable for development takes it out of our reach. YACWAG wants to continue to set aside money so that if opportunities to purchase land at a fair price do arise we can act. This means having a good reserve in the bank.

If you are making a will, please do consider making YACWAG a beneficiary as a way of supporting future land purchase. If you own land in the two parishes perhaps you might even consider bequeathing it to us in the way that Harry Hailes left us his share of the field at the back of his house in Claverham Close.

We are very grateful for all the support that our members do give to YACWAG and you can be assured that as volunteers your Executive Committee works hard to keep administrative costs down and maximise the amount spent directly on our charitable objects. We believe that, with the help of supportive local farmers, we will be able to continue to work for wildlife by maintaining our nature reserves, but with the uncertainty about UK agri-environmental grant schemes after Brexit, we are likely to have less money at our disposal when our Higher Level Stewardship grant finishes in two years' time. This would particularly impact on our conservation management of the Yatton – Congresbury section of the Strawberry Line within Biddle Street SSSI, on which we spend approximately £1800 a year. It might mean fewer payments to contractors and a need to let nature take its course unless we can find the funding needed for ongoing management of the ditches and margins. We are investigating other forms of agri-environmental schemes which support particular outcomes, for example managing wider landscapes for the Greater Horseshoe bat, but in the meantime we will be seeking funding from local utility companies who have a community fund for environmental benefit.

Tony Moulin, Chairperson

