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Newsletter

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Churchill Academy makes boxes for YACWAG

YACWAG's bird group leader, Trevor Riddle, was very pleased to hear from Mark Barham at Churchill Academy that students were busy working on making nesting boxes for tawny owls.

Some of the boxes in use on YACWAG reserves had fallen into decay and needed replacing so Trevor was delighted to take delivery of four new tawny owl boxes made at Churchill. Two of them have been placed in Littlewood, our small woodland reserve on Kenn Moor, where we hope they will provide a new luxury home for the resident tawny owls.



Photo above shows Churchill Academy students with their nesting boxes.

Photo far right, thanks to Jill Riddle, shows one of the new boxes in situ.

Photo right, by the late Ted Harris, a tawny owl chick in one of the old boxes



Bird News

It was a fairly quiet late summer and autumn for our local birds but there were a few sightings of hobbies in the Congresbury area suggesting that they may have nested nearby. Perhaps I can persuade some of our Congresbury members to spend some time gazing skywards next summer and early autumn.



The barn owls on the Stowey Reserve fledged two owlets in a year that was poor nationally for the species, bringing the YACWAG running total to 60 owlets to date. Tawny owls produced at least three young on Cadbury Hill. I was delighted that pupils at Churchill Academy have presented YACWAG with four new tawny owl boxes, particularly as some of our existing boxes (including one made by the school several years ago) were almost life expired. A new nesting box has been erected in St Mary's Churchyard to replace one put up by the Hawk and Owl Trust some years ago which had fallen into disrepair. Although it has not yet been adopted by tawny owls, they are often heard calling from the churchyard.

And continuing the Tawny Owl theme, the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) is running a Tawny Owl calling survey which you can do from the comfort of your own home. Details are on the BTO website.

Not-so-Common Dormice

Dormice are nocturnal and rarely seen. They were once kept as pets by country folk who would find them when cutting firewood but, like so much of our native wildlife, dormice have become rare and not many people have been lucky enough to see one. Their numbers have plummeted in recent years due to changes in the way their woodland habitat is managed - or left unmanaged - but locally they are holding on, and perhaps even increasing, as a result of management work carried out by the owners of Kings Wood, Congresbury. YACWAGger Sarah Dale, who has a licence to handle dormice, has been monitoring dormice on the site for a few years and in 2017 and 2018 has been able to involve volunteers in her monitoring expeditions. In summer when they are most active, dormice live in woodland shrubs and bushes but they also spend time up in the trees. They make their nests from strips of bark, especially bark from honeysuckle, which are woven in with dry leaves, moss and grass. Wooden nest boxes provide a snug and secure place to make their nests and the boxes can then be opened under licence to monitor the dormouse population in a given area.



Photo: Philip Yates



Photo: Philip Yates

Philip Yates has been a YACWAG member for about six years. He had taken part a few times in dormouse monitoring walks on Cadbury Hill but this October he was able to join in one of Sarah Dale's walks in Cleeve Hill Wood to monitor the dormice there. Because he understood that dormice might actually be seen there, he decided to take his camera. Philip struck lucky. When one of the boxes was approached, two young dormice came out of the opening and scuffled up the branch. 'They just sat there and watched us for a while,' he said. 'I had never seen a dormouse before and now I have photographic evidence.'

YACWAGger Profile - Sarah Dale



Sarah is passionate about wildlife and helping people appreciate and conserve it. She has helped YACWAG by conducting surveys of protected species over a number of years, including surveying our reserves, Cadbury Hill and the Strawberry Line for amphibians and reptiles. Sarah surveyed for dormice on Cadbury Hill for six years and involved volunteers and local young people's groups in monitoring the boxes and tubes. YACWAG surveys at Cleeve Hill Wood in 2017 and 2018 have found dormice. Sarah has also led bat walks and was a group leader in Congresbury for the YACWAG Batmapping project enabling local people to get more involved. This year Sarah was presented with the Chairman's Award.

When did you become interested in wildlife?

I was born in Epping in Essex. I can't remember not being interested in wildlife, growing up exploring Epping Forest. My father used to tell me stories about the badgers who lived in the 'Magic Field' behind our house and I loved the Brambly Hedge books. I have never lost my childhood fascination with nature. My childhood neighbour had been living in the same house for over 50 years and knew every hedgerow, tree and field. I idolised her.

I originally aspired to be a farm vet and work outdoors with animals so I spent much of my school summer holidays volunteering for the PDSA and on local farms. I didn't know then that a job as a Professional Ecologist existed. Due to fierce competition I missed out on a place on a veterinary course and went to study Zoology at Nottingham University. It was one of the best things ever to happen to me! After a Masters degree and a year of travelling and volunteering with wildlife (lions, penguins, forest elephants and weta) I landed a job as a Junior Ecologist at an engineering company in Bristol. After meeting my partner Richard, a transport planner who also loves the outdoors, we wanted to move in together but wanted a garden. After a wide search we found a flat in Yatton in 2010. I hadn't heard of YACWAG before moving so was delighted to discover that there was a 200-strong voluntary wildlife group.

YACWAGger profile - Sarah Dale continues

What do you like about YACWAG?

I have been involved in lots of volunteer projects and also worked for Avon Wildlife Trust. The strength of YACWAG is the local focus of the group. Local knowledge can often be lost in conservation but it is more likely that you can influence positive change on a local scale. It is much easier to get people interested and involved if they have some feeling of ownership. I think we have a responsibility to protect nature but also a right to access and enjoy the natural world. YACWAG enables this for so many people.



Sarah leading volunteers in newt surveys

Since I started working with YACWAG many people have come along with a limited level of knowledge but a keen interest and have ended up becoming local experts and running projects for YACWAG. It is an absolute inspiration about what local community groups can achieve. It is also a pleasure to spend time with lovely people who have an enthusiasm for wildlife. That can get lost in the daily churn of work. Seeing people's faces when they first see a bat or dormouse or grass snake is truly priceless.

How would you like to see YACWAG develop?

Since I've been a member of YACWAG, the range of interests and opportunities to get involved in phenomenal. I have seen an increase in the number of younger members. I love leading family bat walks on Cadbury Hill where we get lots of children excited about bat detecting. I would like to see YACWAG continue to grow membership, especially expanding membership among families and young adults. In my opinion, everyone in the Yatton and Congresbury area should be a member! I would also like to see connections grow between YACWAG and other local wildlife groups. Every village should have a YACWAG! There is a real challenge about how to engage with local developments and land use change, including farming. The new potential nature reserve at Cobthorn Way will be a first step for YACWAG.

My own personal aspiration is to be an excellent 'patch' ecologist, knowing every hedgerow, tree and field as my neighbour did when I was a child. I think this fits very well with YACWAG's ambitions and purpose which is why being a YACWAG member is so important to me.

YACWAGger profile - Sarah Dale continues

What could YACWAG do better?

What is a strength can also be a weakness. YACWAG's informality and organic growth means that things work when people make them happen but if sometimes people don't come forward then there are fewer volunteer opportunities that year or that season.

When I go to other places and talk to other volunteers about YACWAG, they are green with envy. YACWAG is great because it is so inclusive and anyone can join in and grow their own skills. I love it!

Costain Volunteer Day

Costain, an engineering company with a site at the Market Inn Industrial Estate, Yatton, approached YACWAG to offer volunteers under their employee volunteering scheme. The employees get a day free from work each year to help charitable work in the local community. In early October YACWAG arranged for eight Costain staff to be tutored by Malcolm Dowling, a champion hedge-layer, from Claverham. YACWAG met the costs of the day and in glorious sunshine the workers learnt a new skill and left YACWAG with a traditionally maintained hedge on its Congresbury Moor reserve.





Hedgelaying appears brutal. Traditional hand tools are used, mainly billhooks, small axes and bow saws. Malcolm also uses a chain saw to help with the difficult sections. Many stems are removed and the ones that are left are cut almost all the way through near the base and, leaving a hinge of bark, bent over to an angle of around 45 degrees. This rough treatment encourages the tree to work hard to put up new shoots in the following seasons and as a result the hedge grows thickly and vigorously at the bottom. This used to make for a good strong stock-proof hedge. YACWAG likes the method because the base of the hedges provides good cover for small mammals, amphibians and birds as well as sheltering invertebrates.



Photos left and above: Faith Moulin

Malcolm Dowling with the Costain volunteers on Congresbury Moor

Join a winter work party



What better way to get fit, to meet other YACWAG members, to see YACWAG's nature reserves and lend a very welcome helping hand, than to attend a winter work party? A variety of tasks is available to volunteers who come along. No prior knowledge or skill is required and tools and training will be provided. To make it simpler for the organisers, please let us know you are planning to come. You will be very welcome. Two work parties are planned in November - **Monday 19th November and Wednesday 28th November from 1.30-3.00pm.** Others will involve

clearing up after hedge laying at Stowey Reserve once the hedge has been laid. Please look out for Win's email on this opportunity to 'put something back' into the local environment.

Christmas Bird Survey

YACWAG has organised a Christmas Bird Survey every year since 2006! The survey is informal and fun. All you need to do is keep a note of which birds visit your garden between Christmas Eve and 2nd January. So far the blackbird has always come out top - it is the bird seen in most gardens every single one of the previous 12 years. Will this year be an exception? YACWAG would like all our members to take part if possible. What is more, all forms returned will be entered in a Prize Draw!

A survey form can be downloaded from the YACWAG website or picked up at either of the village libraries.

For help with bird identification try looking at www.bto.org or www.rspb.org.uk.



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Photo thanks to Higgy

Stay In Touch

Please get in touch if you have a story or photo to share with fellow-members.

Join the YACWAG Facebook group.

Come to an event or workparty.

Keep up with YACWAG on www.yacwag.org.uk.

Membership renewal due 1st March 2018.

