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Newsletter

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YACWAG's 20th anniversary



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AND DON'T MISS YACWAG's
20th anniversary Events Diary

YACWAG's 20th AGM

at Middlecombe Nursery,
Wrinton Road,
Congresbury, thanks to the
North family.

WEDNESDAY 15TH MAY

7pm for refreshments and
merchandise, 7.30 for AGM
business, and afterwards a talk
and tour by Nigel North.
Hope to see you there!

Activities coming up for all
ages - but sorry, no dogs.

NATURE IS YOUR NEIGHBOUR

Enjoy a day in YACWAG's Stowey
Reserve learning about the wildlife
that can be found there. Includes
children's activities, guided walks,
chances to see wild animals and
learn about them, including dipping
for wildlife in the rhynes.

Bring a picnic!

Bank Holiday Monday 6th May

starting at 8am with a Bird Walk
with Trevor Riddle and ending at
8.30pm with a Bat Walk led by Chris
Barrington, with loads in between!

FAMILY BAT WALK

For all ages, a walk up Cadbury Hill
in the dark, learning about bats from
a licensed ecologist, using a bat
detector to hear and identify bats
from their calls. You could even
hear the strange alien calls of the
rare Lesser Horseshoe Bats as they
fly over the hill to their feeding
grounds. Steep and rough ground.

Friday 10th May 8.15pm

Henley Lane Car Park (not the
cricket club car park). Wear warm
clothes and bring a torch.

Kingston Seymour Bird Walk

Rhynes, Rivers and M5 Underpass Walk, Kingston Seymour.

Fourteen members and friends were met by guides Roland and Franky Griffin on a gloriously sunny, calm and unseasonably warm morning. Two singing chiffchaffs were equally unseasonal.

Roland explained the farming history of the fields we walked through and also the drainage arrangements of the rhynes. There weren't too many birds but a flock of starlings carried a few redwings and fieldfares with it. A reed bunting was singing and as we approached the River Yeo a couple of small parties of teal flew ahead of us.

We moved on and saw the hatch where the Yatton Little River, which carries water from west side of Yatton, drains into the Yeo before crossing under the motorway to Phipps Bridge. There were more bird footprints than birds here - the heron prints were dinosaur-like. From here we could see a herd of 79 mute swans in an adjacent field.

We returned by a different route and made our way back to the village where our hosts kindly invited everyone back for coffee and home made nibbles in the garden in the still sunny and warm weather. Our thanks go to Roland and Franky for providing such an interesting and enjoyable morning.

Trevor Riddle



*Photos thanks to
Andrew Hunter*

Mike Keighley

It was sad to hear of the death of long-standing member Mike Keighley as a result of dementia. Mike had retired to Yatton after a career in the Royal Navy (rising to the rank of Lt Commander serving on aircraft carriers) and Chief Mechanical Engineer for the British Water Authority.

When he moved to Yatton after his retirement he became involved with the Ashton Court miniature railway and also joined YACWAG. Mike assisted in leading guided walks and at the Barn Owl Watches, where his mighty but very stable telescope was in demand from visitors. Mike also helped with Strawberry Line bird surveys. His hearing was somewhat impaired, no doubt as a result of his time spent in ships' engine rooms, but he made up for this with very keen eyesight. As a model engineer, Mike was obviously a very practical man and he made large owl nesting boxes from scrap wood, expertly constructed.

The photo below shows YACWAG members on a May early morning bird walk along the Strawberry Line in 2014. Mike is second from the right.





Bat Mapping Again

This year the Bat Mapping Project aims to revisit some of the survey transects which have been carried out over the last two years. We are particularly interested in records of Greater Horseshoe Bats, but this year we have decided to take a wider approach and will collect all bat data in Yatton and Congresbury and surrounding parishes. We will be producing a map and you can get a taste of what this would look like and how this presentation of data can help us understand how bats use our landscape at a meeting on 15th April. (Please see Events Calendar with this newsletter.)

Preparation work has been going on for the new season and we are now looking for volunteers to help. Anyone who has been involved before in recording, or anyone who would like to get involved for the first time, please get in touch and come along to the Bat Recorders Meeting on 15th April. If your name is registered with Win Lowman as someone interested in bats, you will receive information about all the bat events coming up during the spring and summer.

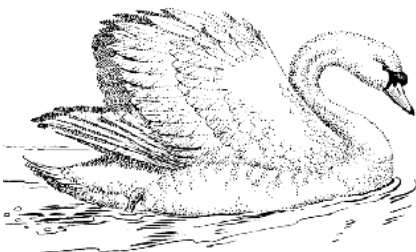
We are looking for volunteers to help with data processing as well as those going out collecting data. A lot of data processing and analysis will take place in the autumn and winter but new recruits would be very welcome as a very large amount of data has been collected over the past two years. Training will be given.

This work is important. The data we have collected since 2004 has been very important in the development of North Somerset's Supplementary Planning Technical Guidance on bats. This document helps guide development in the most sensitive areas. Our job now is to get the most comprehensive coverage we can and build up a fuller picture of bat movement and a clearer picture of bat behaviour. This will hopefully enable us to safeguard some of their key habitat.

Another really important way you can help bats is online shopping! There are costs for YACWAG in storing data and purchasing specific software to validate the data and produce maps. We would like to encourage people interested in helping bats to participate in our Give As You Live scheme to help us raise funds. This is really simple. Every time you book a train ticket online, or a holiday, hotel, flight, etc, with just one extra click onto the Give As You Live website you can get a percentage donation for YACWAG. Big stores like Amazon, Ebay, John Lewis, Currys, PC World, Marks & Spencer, etc. are all in the scheme. Please feel free to ring 01934 834282 to discuss this.

The programme this year will give opportunities for volunteers to get training, use our equipment and enjoy walks, on their own or in groups, listening to bats. There will also be the chance to see bats at close quarters when bat box checks are carried out by licensed bat workers. Make sure you register for your place on the programme!

Tony Moulin



GOOD NEWS FOR SWANS

YACWAG Trustee Richard Croucher sadly found a second dead swan under power lines recently. He rang Western Power Distribution and they will be fitting bird deflector discs. A good example of the kind of conservation action that anyone can take.

Trevor's 20 YACWAG Memories

Trevor Riddle reflects on the past 20 years of YACWAG and shares his twenty most memorable wildlife encounters

1, Strawberry Line, Yatton, 2000.

Tony and I were on some (now forgotten) mission when we spotted a bird in a young Alder tree by the path. I said it was Reed Bunting but Tony disagreed and he was right. It was a Wryneck, a small brown member of the Woodpecker family and a rare passage migrant. It had been grounded by bad weather and stayed for a few days enabling lots of twitchers (and some ordinary people) to come and see it.

2, Congresbury Moor and Strawberry Line, 2002.

YACWAG had arranged a traditional haymaking event on Congresbury Moor and Mike Keighley and I were leading guided walks around the YACWAG Reserve fields when we came across a Reed Warbler feeding a juvenile Cuckoo close to the Strawberry Line. This is the only time that I have ever witnessed this and yes, the Reed Warbler was perching on the young Cuckoo's head to feed it. Mike stayed 'on site' while I went to collect the next Group and they too had wonderful views of the Reed Warbler feeding the Cuckoo.

3, Yatton, 2003.

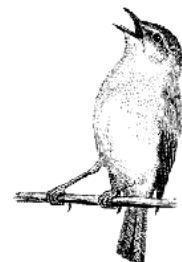
This was rather different from the previous two personal sightings, as I had called to see Tony on some YACWAG business. Tony informed me that Mike Wallington had just called with some bird news. He said it would be best if Mike told me directly so when I went home I telephoned Mike and he reported seeing a Barn Owl over the Congresbury Moor Reserve. This was the first sighting and almost certainly the first Barn Owl in Yatton for probably 25 years.

4, Strawberry Line, Yatton, 2005.

A Water Rail was wintering in an area near to the big pond at the top of Chescombe Road and showed at very close range in the late afternoon. I pointed this out to Tony who subsequently told our English Nature representative. When Tony showed him the bird he said in a surprised voice, 'It is!'

5, Strawberry Line & Congresbury Moor, 2006.

On a spring visit I heard a Grasshopper Warbler reeling (singing) and after a couple of days the bird moved on to the Congresbury Moor Reserve. This species is the ultimate skulking little brown job and we couldn't determine if it found a mate and nested. It was certainly present for long enough. The late Richard Hunt told me that after the railway closed there were several Grasshopper Warblers nesting along the course of the line, the conditions at that time obviously suiting them.



6, Congresbury Moor, 2006.

Following a warm late summer a roost of young Swallows developed in reeds around Binhay rhyne just off the Strawberry Line. This provided quite a spectacle in the evenings as over 500 birds congregated and suddenly dropped into the reeds to roost. These were young birds from first broods presumably enjoying outdoor roosting in the fine weather.

7, Strawberry Line, Yatton, 2006.

The first Cetti's Warbler arrived in the UK in the 1960's and they gradually moved north. They require reeds and wet scrub habitat and the Strawberry Line provides this. The first one I saw was in 2006. There are now around 3-4 breeding pairs on the YACWAG managed stretch of the line and the population is increasing. It's still just about our rarest breeding bird but it continues to increase in numbers. Unlike most warbler species, Cetti's are year-round residents, rarely seen but with an explosive song.

8, Yatton railway station, 2006.

This memory involves a dead bird! I received a phone call early on a December evening from YACWAG member Madeleine Foster. She had discovered an unusual bird, unfortunately dead. Her description was black, with a white rump, a hooked beak and about Blackbird size. I set out with a torch following directions and found the bird quite easily in the car park; fortunately there was no one about. As I had suspected, it was a Leach's Storm Petrel. There had been a week of westerly gales and a number of these seabirds were being blown inland, in which circumstances they don't survive for very long.

The next day I was meeting Tony along with our grazier, the late Andrew Sheppy, so I took the bird to show them. With no hesitation Andrew said, 'Ah *Oceanodroma leucorhoa*. I think that you will find that it has a small lobe between its third and fourth toes.' He was right; we were gobsmacked!

9, Strawberry Line, Congresbury Station site, 2007.

YACWAG was erecting some nestboxes and John Croxton was with me. John shouted that there was an unusual raptor going over. He generally had his binoculars round his neck when he was working so he passed them to me. It was an Osprey heading north on Spring passage from Africa, probably going to Scotland and it appeared to be following the course of the Strawberry Line, heading towards Clevedon and the Severn Estuary.

10, Wemberham Lane, Yatton, 2010.

By about 2010 Peregrine Falcons had begun to appear perched on electricity pylons to the south of Yatton. Peregrines had reached a very low ebb after DDT pesticide use in the 1960s and 70s and I never thought the time would come when I could see them so close to home. They use the pylons as look-outs and feeding perches. They are seen more often in winter but do appear at other times. Calm bright days at either end of the day are favoured, but they can turn up at any time.



11, The Wood Kilns, Yatton, 2010.

At last not a bird! Arriving home I found 10 year old Tom from next door telling me that he had found a slow worm in the road. He was holding it carefully in his hand and asked if he should put it under some shelter in his back garden. I agreed, was pleased that he was so interested, and in 16 years here, I have never seen a slow worm before, nor since.



12, Kenn Moor, 2010.

Hobbies nest around Kenn Moor in some years and watching the site (from 600 metres away), John Croxton and I saw the male Hobby repeatedly stoop vertically, like a Peregrine, at a passing Buzzard. All the time the Hobby was giving its shrieking call. We have spent many hours looking at, or more often for, Hobbies at this site and have never witnessed any remotely similar behaviour again.

13, St Mary's Churchyard, Yatton. 2010.

It was time to inspect and repair the YACWAG nestboxes so I had made a preliminary visit to see if any replacement boxes were needed. I parked my bike under a Yew tree and when I came back I saw that there was a Robin perched on the handlebars. Except that it wasn't a Robin it was a Black Redstart! That was undoubtedly the rarest bird that ever perched on my bicycle!

14, Littlewood, 2011.



There was a nestbox maintenance party in Littlewood. Alan Walker, John Croxton and I were getting towards the end of the job but we were having difficulty with one box. This required a lot of hammering and noisy discussion. After a full five minutes of all this, a Woodcock flushed less than ten metres from us.

15, Littlewood, 2014.

This is the story of three nests in one Owl box in one season. We knew that Tawny Owls had fledged young from the Section 2 box quite early on and we then discovered Stock Doves breeding in it in mid summer. But I was surprised, to put it mildly, when the warden phoned me in September to say that he could hear Barn Owls in the box. John brought the ladder, I met him at Littlewood and (under licence) we opened up the box. There were five healthy Barn Owlets in there. Chris Sperring from the Hawk and Owl Trust was almost as surprised as me and he visited a couple of weeks later and ringed the Owlets with a few YACWAG volunteers looking on. All of the young fledged around the end of October.



Trevor with one of the Littlewood barn owls ringed by Chris Sperring of the Hawk and Owl Trust in 2014.

16, The Wood Kilns, Yatton, 2015.

I discovered a juvenile Common Lizard in the corner of our back garden. Never seen one before or since. We are close to the old Clevedon railway so maybe there is a colony there.

17, Claverham Drove, 2016.

I had arranged to meet member, David Lumkin, then recently retired, for a trip to Littlewood. We met on our bikes at Claverham Drove and stopped at the Blackditch for a scan around. There was a Stonechat as I had hoped and a rather odd looking bird on the water about 250 metres away. As it came closer we realised that it was an Otter! And it eventually came very close and was quite unconcerned. This was David's first scan of the Blackditch; I estimate that I had looked over the bridge around 1,500 times and yes, it was the only time that I have ever seen an Otter there.



18, Wemberham Lane, Yatton, 2017.



This is my (very) local patch and in autumn 2017 I noticed some small Starling flocks in the area and one afternoon discovered a few hundred roosting in Stowell's reed bed. Numbers gradually built up, the birds gathering on the nearby pylons before coming to roost. Higgy came with his camera and got some nice pictures and by then I estimated there were 3,500 Starlings attracting the attention of the local Sparrowhawk and on one occasion a Peregrine. On some evenings there was an impressive murmuration - not the million birds on the Somerset

Levels, but standing in the lane we were right in the middle of it. (Photo: Higgy)

19. Claverham, 2018,

Member Dave Playle reported big numbers of Bramblings in his garden and kindly invited Jill and myself to visit and see birds. I was delighted to watch a dozen Bramblings, the most I had seen for years, but Dave apologised for the 'small' numbers; there had been 26 earlier in the morning and 51(!) a week earlier. If 51 isn't a record count for Avon it is the biggest for a very long time and surely the highest for a garden. (Photo: Higgy - brambling in his own garden)



20, Kenn Moor, 2018.

Great White Egrets have colonised the UK recently and first nested in 2014 on the Somerset Levels. They have been successful and after a couple of reports from members from Nailsea Moor I spotted the first for me in Yatton parish feeding in a field by Kenn Moor Road. It seems likely that Great Whites will continue to increase and become a fairly common sight locally, as are the Little Egrets.



Bob tree dressing 2016

YACWAGger Profile

Bob Lowman

This edition features one of YACWAG's founder-members who still has a key role in the group's success twenty years on. Bob has managed the YACWAG website, looked after the tools and equipment, put up bird and bat boxes, maintained the resource inventory, counted volunteer hours and been an all-round reliable backroom boy for YACWAG, always there when you need him!

Bob can't remember a time when he wasn't interested in wildlife. He was brought up in Kent and learnt about nature from his mum, who taught him the names of birds on the family Sunday afternoon walks around the local lanes. Like most boys of his age and time, he and his friends would climb trees and enjoy being out in the countryside. He recalls vividly his disappointment when his mum, shaking with fear, told the boys she had seen a grass snake eating a frog. They dashed out to see it but didn't find it and it is still something he would like to see!

What do you like most about your involvement in YACWAG?

I enjoy working with young people and have been an Expedition Assessor for the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme for over 25 years. I particularly enjoy sharing the knowledge I have picked up through YACWAG. I like to share the magic of moths by taking a moth trap on expeditions, or to show the young people a bat detector. It is now rare for young people to know much about nature. It is very rare for them to know the song of a skylark when we hear one - some hear nothing, they are just not tuned in to nature.

I have been sorry to see local D of E groups for students with Special Needs close. Both schemes at Ravenswood and Baytree School had to close when the leaders retired. The lack of younger volunteers is a huge concern over the whole range of voluntary work placements, with it becoming commonplace for community groups to struggle as the original committee members reach their seventies and eighties and no-one steps forward to run the group.

Is that a concern for YACWAG?

Yes, I think it is. In another 20 years there may be no YACWAG as we know it. While the nature reserves are there, nature will use them, and from that point of view YACWAG's work will continue, but I am concerned there will be no-one committed to the administration of the charity. That work isn't glamorous, and sometimes not even interesting, but it is essential if YACWAG is going to carry on.

What would you like to see YACWAG doing more of?

We have done our best to reach young people through the various youth organisations and schools, but I would like us to be able to run a club or group for children who are interested in wildlife locally.

It is good to see a new generation of schoolchildren so concerned about threats to the environment that they are prepared to go on strike. But in a few years, will they get involved practically to help wildlife? We need to reach these young people now and try to get them involved. We all need to fight for nature. I like to see an owl fly past as much as the next person - but can people see the link between that owl and all the work that goes on behind the scenes to provide the habitat for it? We need to help them understand that.

What are your favourite YACWAG activities?

I enjoy moth trapping. It has been very interesting to learn to identify a few moths and know their names. I have also enjoyed learning about bats and how to use the new technology. I have been less involved in work parties in recent years but I like making a contribution to that work by maintaining the tool store.



Bob with Nigel Milbourne checking bat boxes



Bob with Tony and Daniel launching the YACWAG Batmapping Project

How has YACWAG changed in 20 years?

There is less emphasis on physical work now the volunteers are older but I don't think YACWAG has changed much at all really, apart from its ageing committee! It is still a friendly organisation with good opportunities for socialising and getting involved. Anyone is invited to join in and some people get a lot out of being involved.

What will happen to YACWAG in the next 20 years?

Young people must be our priority. Knowledge of nature is declining and one of YACWAG's key aims as a charity is education in nature conservation. We need to reach out to those children who are interested in wildlife.

Please contact the Editor via the website if you have a story or photo to share with members.

Join our Facebook group!

Keep your eyes open for Win's informative emails.

www.yacwag.org.uk

Birdwatch at St Andrew's School, Congresbury

The RSPB's Big Schools' Birdwatch, the educational version of the Big Garden Birdwatch, celebrated its 19th birthday in January and St Andrew's Primary in Congresbury, supported by YACWAG, participated for probably the twelfth time. It's designed for teachers to take part in with their classes and can be carried out anytime during the first half of the spring term.

This year, prior to the actual Birdwatch, YACWAG led a whole school assembly in which Trevor introduced the children to Robin, Dunnock and Great Tit. Garden bird food such as mealworms, fat balls and seed were on display and the song of each bird was played. A few giggles were heard when Trevor said that the Great Tit sang, "Teacher-teacher."

During the Birdwatch itself it was a joy to see the children's enthusiasm as they bounded out onto the playground, keen to find a pair of binoculars. Each class was guided by Trevor, John, Natalie and Sue as they spent about ten minutes outside. A total of 19 species was recorded and the data generated will enable the RSPB to track broad trends across these more common species. Much more important however, as research increasingly demonstrates a link between disconnection from nature and poorer mental health, is that the children were in the fresh air and engaged with their local wildlife. If children grow up without experiencing or enjoying the natural world surely they are less likely to protect it in the future?

Later in the morning, an enthusiastic crowd gathered as each of the school's ten tit boxes were cleaned, revealing six nests from last summer. The children's' interest and excitement is plain to see in the photo above.



Trevor Riddle and Clive Nunn also put up a splendid new insect house at St Andrew's School. Parents had collected vouchers from Tesco to purchase the house for the school conservation area. Trevor and Clive were pleased to be able to help site the structure in a sunny south-facing position where it will stand the most chance of being used by bees.

Photo left (by Trevor Riddle) shows Clive Nunn with the insect house.



New Bat Project

Thanks to Tim Clark and Samuel Olney, YACWAG has been able to re-locate ten of its bat boxes to Cadbury Hill. Bat boxes which had been erected on the nature reserve in the early 1990s had mostly rotted away. Tim and Samuel will put the YACWAG boxes up and monitor them during the year to give us an insight into the bat species on the Hill.

This work links with a larger bat box project in Kings Wood. Those members who have registered an interest in bat work (let Win know if you haven't already) will have an opportunity to join in the bat box checks next year to find out what species use them.

Photo shows Tim and Samuel collecting the bat boxes from Tony Moulin.



Wear Your Support on Your Sleeve - or somewhere like that!

YACWAG is offering members the chance, in this, our 20th year, to support the charity by purchasing special garments with our logo on. In line with our Environmental Policy, this year we are offering fair trade, organic cotton clothing that will do less harm to the environment and the people involved in manufacturing textiles.

An attractive range of sweatshirts, hooded sweatshirts, polo shirts and tee shirts will be available in various colours and sizes. Caps made of 100% recycled materials are also on offer to keep the sun out of your eyes on those midsummer YACWAG 20th anniversary walks.

The YACWAG logo will be embroidered on the new range of clothing and will feature the words 'Nature As Your Neighbour - Since 1999'. Not only will your purchase provide you with top-quality ethical clothing to feel good in, but you will be carrying a (small) advertisement for YACWAG and showing your support. YACWAG will make a small surplus on each order which will be put towards our work.

Please consider supporting YACWAG this way and place your orders with Win or via email through the YACWAG website. A price list will be available shortly.

www.yacwag.org.uk