



Newsletter

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www.yacwag.org.uk

Can You Get More Involved?

If you are new to YACWAG, a warm welcome! You can find detailed information about our reserves, local wildlife and activities on our excellent website. If you would like to get more involved, please get in touch!

In this issue members both old and new will enjoy reading about the things YACWAG has been doing recently, the promise of projects to come, and hearing about some of the opportunities to get involved with your truly local nature conservation charity.

Trevor has written about his views on 'Wilding', Andrew and Janice share their mouse count at Cobthorn and there is the usual mix of news and events. Please don't hold back - if you read about something and think you could help, don't hesitate to get in touch. YACWAG's strength has always been in its volunteers and we need all the help we can get in order to keep delivering wildlife conservation and information to the local community. We look forward to seeing more of you in the new year.



Faith Moulín

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YACWAG welcomes members' photos, articles, ideas and feedback for the newsletter but the Editor's decision on what to include is final.

Please contact the Editor via contact@yacwag.org.uk.

New Project to Restore Habitat on the Strawberry Line at Congresbury

YACWAG is pleased to announce an exciting new three-phase project on the Strawberry Line in Congresbury which will see the former station platforms cleared of invasive laurel, ivy and bramble, and the reedbed - thought to be one of the largest in North Somerset - restored to provide important habitat. Information boards and nestboxes will be refurbished or new ones put up and habitat made for species like slow worms, newts and glow worms.

Thanks to the support of North Somerset Council and YACWAG volunteer, Steve Rea, pictured right, there will be a number of volunteer work parties to help get Phase 1 started and hopefully many members will want to be involved.



Congresbury station platforms about 12 years ago

Congresbury Station Project – Volunteers Wanted for Phase 1



*Keen gardener?
Interested in local history?
Passionate about our wildlife?*

Over recent years the platforms at Congresbury station have become very overgrown to the point that many people are unaware they are walking or cycling through an old station with such history. Coordinated by Steve Rea, YACWAG member and Congresbury Station project lead, work parties will be running on the following dates:



- **Sunday 22nd January 2023**
- **Sunday 5th February 2023**
- **Saturday 25th February 2023**

All days will start at 10am - please stay as long as you are able.
We are looking for volunteers to help with:

- * Clearing undergrowth (including ivy, young willow, laurel) however protecting established trees and ensuring no disturbance to protected wildlife such as badgers.
- * Erecting new information signs providing more information on the history of the station and local flora and fauna.
- * Replacing or fixing worn or broken nest boxes put up by YACWAG in the station area.
- * Making new habitats in the area for species such as glow worms.

If you are interested please email Steve at: congresburystation@outlook.com

Tools and if required gloves will be provided but please bring your own if you like (no power tools). Do wrap up warm and wear suitable footwear. Light refreshments will be provided but bring your own lunch. Sorry – no dogs or children under 14.

Dormouse Surveying in Cobthorn Reserve

Cobthorn Reserve in Congresbury is the latest reserve to transfer to YACWAG ownership and the aim is for it to be managed especially for the rare Horseshoe Bats which forage there. However, the acquisition of a new reserve also provides the unique opportunity to explore what other creatures may or may not be present.

It is with this in mind that since April 2022 licensed YACWAG volunteers have been monitoring the surrounding hedgerows for the possible presence of Dormice.

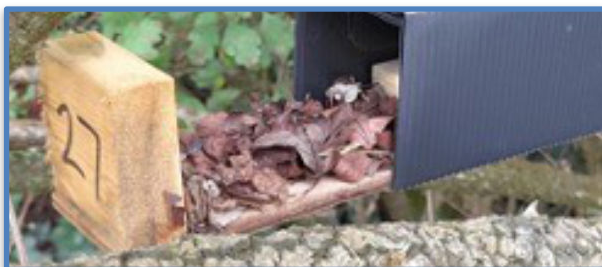
The Hazel Dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*) is an endangered native species of rodent that lives primarily in the woodland canopy, but can also be found in hedgerows. It lives on a diet of nuts, seeds and berries, but will also eat flowers and occasional insects. As an endangered and protected species a specific licence is required to allow their surveying and handling.



*Sleepy dormouse
photographed locally
Photo: Joe McSorley*

Hazel Dormice are known to be present in the mixed deciduous woodland that stretches from the east of Congresbury to Bristol Airport alongside the A370. The ancient hedgerows surrounding two sides of Cobthorn are primarily comprised of Hawthorn, Blackthorn and Field maple, with only occasional other species. In addition, there is not much in the way of direct connectivity between the Cobthorn hedgerows and the neighbouring woodland. Therefore, they may not currently provide 'ideal' habitat for Dormice. Nevertheless, they are close enough to existing known habitat, and diverse enough in terms of food source, for there to be the possibility of some Dormouse presence.

A recognised methodology for checking for the possible presence of Dormice is to place so-called 'Dormouse Tubes' at intervals around the survey site. Dormouse tubes are rectangular plastic tubes which are sealed at one end and provide a safe, dry space for Dormice and other animals to shelter in.



In April 2022, licensed YACWAG volunteers placed 20 Dormouse tubes around the Cobthorn perimeter and have undertaken monthly inspections to check for any evidence of Dormouse activity.

Dormice weave neat, and often spherical nests from stripped bark and green leaves. Such nests differ considerably in appearance from the rather messy and unstructured nests of brown leaves which are made by the more common and non-endangered Wood Mouse (see photo above left of a Wood Mouse nest in a Dormouse tube).

Cobthorn Mice continued

To date, although there has been no evidence of any Dormice, the tubes have been well-used by other creatures, particularly Wood Mice (as evidenced by their messy nests and food caches of berries and seeds), roosting birds (as evidenced by bird poo!) and a range of invertebrates including Woodlice, Earwigs and moths.



The picture on the left is of the 'first' Cobthorn Wood Mouse (a juvenile female) who was discovered relaxing in a dormouse tube as part of the October monthly check. After being weighed, she was safely released back into the hedgerow.

In November the monthly Wood Mouse count jumped dramatically to six adult mice, distributed across four different tubes. Clearly as time goes by, and perhaps as the weather becomes colder, the Wood Mouse population is making further use of the sheltered accommodation available to them.

Although to date no definitive evidence of Dormice has been found around the Cobthorn Reserve, this does not mean that they are not present. It could be that we have just not found them yet.

As is always the case when looking at nature, it is only by continuing to look closely that we actually see what is there....

Andrew and Janice Hunter

YACWAG is very grateful to Andrew and Janice Hunter for their work with dormice, and for the support of Irene Mills and Sarah Dale who helped them obtain their licences during 2022.



IRMGARD OWEN

The late Irmgard Owen of Yatton generously left YACWAG a sizeable bequest in her will. Irmgard enjoyed walking her dog on the Strawberry Line and particularly liked the work YACWAG had done to attract barn owls to the area.

We are very grateful to Mrs Owen for her bequest and will be able to tell you some exciting news about how we are spending it in the next newsletter.

Fabulous Fungi at Littlewood

Thanks to John and Doreen Bailey, YACWAG members were able to learn more about the fabulous fungi at Littlewood Reserve. John and Doreen's fascinating talk is available on YouTube, thanks to Mark Stanford, and can be accessed through the YACWAG website - <https://yacwag.org.uk/library-videos/>

The fungi talk in October was the first managed by our new Zoom team and we are very grateful to Andrew Wilson and Michael Earle for sharing their expertise and helping us with the smooth running of this talk and others in the pipeline. If you have time and would like to join the team running talks, there is a vacancy for a volunteer to liaise with speakers and assist with the event organisation. We would normally hope to be holding between four and six talks a year.

The talk was followed up with a walk in Littlewood in November.



John takes a closer look



John identifies an agaric species



Spotting fungi in the undergrowth



Witches' butter - a jelly fungus

Kenn Moor Orchard

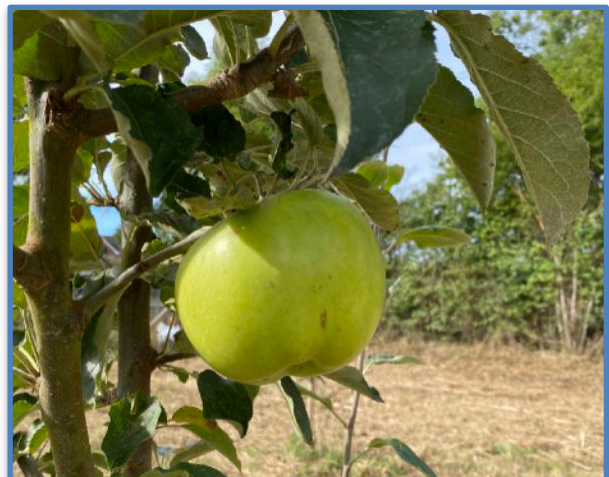


It was fun to have a good old-fashioned work party at Kenn Moor in the orchard to do some long-outstanding jobs. Thanks to those who came along to make a difference!

We are grateful for the help of Andrew Hunt, who was able to give the grass around the fruit trees a late hay cut, and the volunteers made short work of raking it up and making a compost pile with it. We also cleared around the fruit bushes - almost all of which have survived the dry summer unscathed - and applied some mulch to keep the competing grass at bay for a few months.

After the tasks were finished, there was time for the volunteers to have a guided tour of the rest of the reserve, and we were treated to a beautiful, intense, double rainbow over Kenn Moor. It was a pleasure to meet new members and see some old-hands too.

The apple trees all seem to be thriving and it was exciting to see some fruit on some!



Photos above of the workparty, and on the right, a single Warners King apple, making up in size for being the only fruit on the tree!

Nature Reserves - Management or Rewilding?

There has been much written in the last few years about the process of rewilding led by the large scale operation at the Knepp estate in Sussex, itself following an even bigger scheme in the Netherlands. Other major and more modest rewilding projects are now underway in the UK.

Rewilding is the process of leaving land to develop naturally but one difficulty is the lack of suitable grazing animals. The original wild cattle (Aurochs) are long gone and in the Netherlands the public objected to the cattle used in their place being allowed to die naturally and decompose! Nor were large predators such as wolves permitted. So some concession has had to be made to our modern standards.

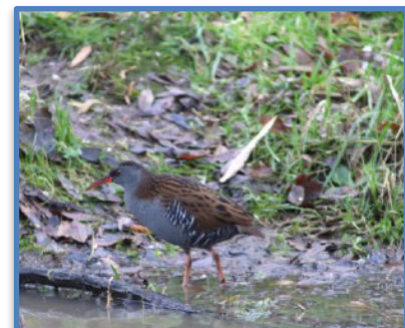


Wolves were not permitted to re-wild

Grazing is an essential part of the Rewilding process otherwise open areas essential for bio diversity would be lost but grazing needs to be light and that poses a difficulty for the thousands of small nature reserves in the UK, including the fields owned and managed by YACWAG. Such reserves generally require some human management plus grazing from time to time otherwise all would revert to scrub, not in itself bad in smallish quantities, and eventually scrub woodland. Dynamic scrub is good for wildlife and biodiversity but when it gets old its value is limited.

The large nature reserves on the Avalon Marshes provide an interesting comparison. Whilst areas of the Natural England reserve at Shapwick Heath are difficult or impossible to manage for historical reasons the adjacent RSPB Ham Wall reserve was built to permit access for management. Most of Shapwick Heath was effectively gifted to what is now Natural England and peat extraction had left large areas inaccessible or only accessible by boat and with difficulty. Highland cattle graze areas that can be managed but the out of bounds areas rely on Roe Deer. At Ham Wall machinery can be used to manage the Reed beds in order to keep the habitat at in prime condition for the specialist reedbed birds, primarily Bitterns and some grazing is practised. Water Buffalo were tried some years ago but they proved difficult to manage!

Constructed and managed reedbeds have rescued the Bittern from probable extinction in the UK and have provided a haven for other wetland birds, Great White Egrets, Marsh Harriers, Bearded Tits and Water Rails to name a few. Without management the reedbeds would dry out and eventually form scrub (yes more scrub) then deciduous woodland. This would be fine if further large reedbeds came into being but it's difficult to see this happening naturally.



Water Rail, which now finds a haven in managed reedbeds

In general, most large nature reserves were acquired and managed to preserve or encourage a particular species or a small group of species. There are no target species in rewilding schemes: the land is left in as natural state as possible and as habitat develops appropriate species will colonise.

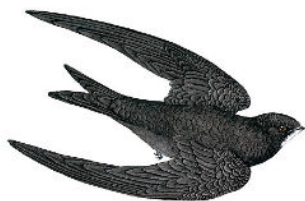
Nearer to home the Belmont Estate at Wraxall is rewilding 150 acres of land with nine Ruby Red Devon cattle (in place of Aurochs) and two pigs (to represent Wild boar). They have exciting plans to acquire more land to re wild and to return the Land Yeo river to more like its original state. This will enhance biodiversity and, by slowing the water flow, reduce the risk of flooding. It will be interesting to see how all of the rewilding schemes develop - the Knepp Estate is doing really well, hopefully others will follow.

Trevor Riddle

Helping Swifts in Yatton and Congresbury

YACWAG is launching a Swift Project in Yatton and Congresbury early next year, aiming to support our local swift population by providing suitable nest sites in Yatton and Congresbury and boosting flying insect populations so that these special summer visitors find plenty of food while they are here.

Swifts are in decline across the UK as well as in our local area, and were added to the UK Red List last year meaning they need urgent conservation action. We will be joining forces with Nailsea Shedders to make and put up specialist swift boxes, and because swifts prefer to nest in colonies we will be seeking suitable locations close to existing nest sites. You can help us find the best areas to focus on by adding any known nest sites in Yatton and Congresbury to www.swiftmapper.org.uk. If you are interested in getting involved in the project, please contact meriel.martin@gmail.com.



During the project we will be helping swifts by increasing the number of flying insects over and around our villages. Look out for more information in the next newsletter.

Swifts have an air of mystery because they are different in some ways from other birds. They are legendary for spending most of their lives in the air, collecting food and nesting material in flight, drinking and bathing without landing and even mating on the wing.

Swifts depend entirely on flying insects. To feed its young, a swift collects airborne prey into a wide-open mouth and stores them until it has a large bulge in its throat. The insects can then be regurgitated for the young. When insects are in short supply the chicks can survive for several days or even weeks by becoming torpid. Chicks can also survive quite cold weather before they get feathers. They have hawk-like feet, with strong toes that can cling on to house walls.

Wellness Wildlife Walks

Thanks to funding from WeSport, via Sport England Together, YACWAG has been running a programme of Wellness Wildlife Walks around Yatton and Congresbury. The programme will end in March 2023.

The walks are open to anyone who feels they would benefit. They are designed to help reduce the negative impact of Covid-19 and the inequalities in physical activity and sports. Those who have been feeling socially isolated are particularly welcome.

The walks are led by an expert ecologist and a community nurse who is available for informal discussions. Walking in natural environments has been shown to have a positive effect on stress relief, reducing blood pressure, reducing feelings of depression or low mood and supporting weight management. It can also help with the management of long-term conditions like arthritis or diabetes.

Please email yacwagwww@gmail.com for more information or to book a place on our next foray, which will be to watch starlings in Somerset.

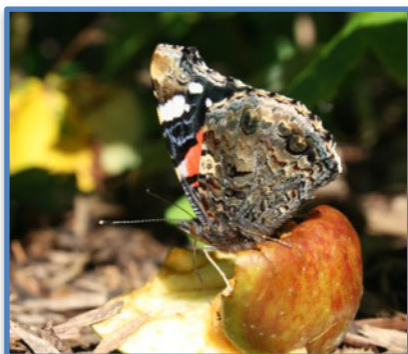
Friday 6th January 15.00-17.30 Somerset Starlings. Ham Wall. Meet Yatton precinct.

A Late Autumn Delight



In over forty years of butterfly watching in Yatton, I have never seen a Brimstone butterfly so late in my garden. They are known to come out of hibernation on warm sunny winter days but this one was a really unseasonal sighting in mid November in what felt like early spring weather. It would be nice to think that it had been bred on our Purging Buckthorn plant which has been very successful in attracting egg-laying Brimstones in the garden.

A more common autumn sight is the Red Admiral butterfly coming to feast on warm late season days on the fallen apples from our Bramley tree. We will be submitting these late sightings to BRERC - www.brerc.org.uk .



Autumn is giving way to winter now, with a daily show of force from a single Fieldfare guarding the fallen apples for itself, chasing off Blackbirds right left and centre.

Tony Moulin

Opportunities to Get More Involved

When I worked for a rural communities charity I was always amused by the headlines that came in regularly from one of the national NGOs, which our Director shortened to 'Ops for Vols'. For me it always conjured up an image of small rodents on the operating table and I almost put that as our title on this page, because that is what we have to offer to our members - great opportunities for volunteers.

YACWAG believes in supporting and developing people and the way we have historically worked is to follow volunteers' interests and help them get training, qualifications and experience in whatever they would like to do for YACWAG. In this way we have recruited people to work with small mammals, with bats, use tools safely, etc.

If you would like to get more involved, please speak to YACWAG about what interests you. However, also consider the adage: 'think not what YACWAG can do for you, think what you can do for YACWAG.' How can you use your skills and experience to keep our small charity thriving? Well, here are one or two of our current needs:

YACWAG is looking to recruit a **Finance and Membership clerk** to maintain the online financial and membership records of the Charity with the help of simple membership software. This person would work closely with the YACWAG Treasurer and Secretary. The work would only average a few hours per week with the busiest times after the month end when draft accounts would be produced and in February and March when most membership renewals are processed. YACWAG would pay an honorarium of £500 per annum for this position. If you are interested in applying for this role please email Chris Moore at secretary@yacwag.org.uk and he will send you a job description and have a chat with you about what's involved.

YACWAG also has at least one vacancy for a **Trustee**. The charity is looking for a local person who would like to contribute to a team that is maintaining and developing the charity's ethos and vision, working to sustain YACWAG's viability in the future and develop momentum. If you would be interested in getting more involved, the Trustees meet three or four times a year and make important decisions about the charity's direction. If you would like to know more please get in touch with Tony Moulin (contact@yacwag.org.uk).



WINDOW WANDERLAND RETURNS

3rd-5th February 2023

theme: *Brilliant British Birds*

For more information see www.windowwanderland.com/yatton-and-congresbury or our Facebook page Yatton and Congresbury Window Wanderland.