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Breeding Success for Barn Owls

In our 25th year, our flagship Barn Owls have done very well.

Chris Sperring MBE of the Hawk and Owl Trust comes to Congresbury Moor every year to ring the Barn Owls breeding on YACWAG's reserve. This is done under a special licence from the BTO. Chris told us that on his ringing travels throughout the West Country this year it had been a poor breeding picture, with small brood sizes and many failed attempts to breed at all.

It was therefore a great boost to find a brood of five owlets in one of our boxes. All five were healthy and well-fed. Our fields may look scruffy in the summer when most farmland is cut for silage or hay, but the abundance of small mammals in the long grass enables the owls to thrive.



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The photo above shows Amy, Tony and Emily with Chris Sperring, holding four of the owlets before they were returned to their nest.

Both photos: Jon Thobroe

Voles Abound!

Given the record wet winter and early Spring I was expecting Barn Owls to be having a hard time finding food, but vole runs on our Reserves indicated that good numbers were present and subsequent observations of the adults hunting on Congresbury Moor confirmed that prey was easy to find.

Congresbury Moor is generally the most successful site for breeding Barn Owls and with five young fledged this year it continued in the same vein. When Chris Sperring ringed the Owlets his previous best brood this season was three - although he has ringed four near Blagdon subsequently. The habitat on Congresbury Moor is obviously very suitable for field voles and hence Kestrels (four young fledged) and Barn Owls.

Our boxes at the Stowey Reserve are more difficult to monitor without causing disturbance but at least one Barn Owlet has fledged. Over at Kingston Seymour on YACWAG member Roland Griffin's land we found two freshly dead Owlets. It seems likely that one or both of the adults has died (Barn Owls are accident prone). The site is quite near the M5 and Chris had seen a dead Owl by the side of the motorway around the same time.

The two YACWAG boxes at Wemberham held a roosting adult this year: they are likely to be productive in years with a general high population of small mammals. We don't have a box at Cobthorn Reserve but a Barn Owl has been seen hunting over the fields there on several occasions.

The total of Barn Owls fledged on YACWAG Reserves is now 84 with a further 18 in boxes monitored by us on members' and friends' property, so the century mark has been passed. Kestrels seem to be considered 'the 'poor relation' but they have undergone a marked decline and in some ways are more in need of conservation than Owls. The four fledged at Meakers on Congresbury Moor brings the overall number to 52.

The principal reasons for these successes are the habitat management and the provision of nest boxes.



A huddle of Kestrel chicks before they fledged.

Photo: Julian Stokes

Trevor Riddle

A Mesmerising Experience Watching Barn Owls Hunting on Congresbury Moor

One evening in July, I had the most captivating experience watching Barn Owls on Congresbury Moor. I joined a *Barn Owl Watch* led by Trevor Riddle for YACWAG members and observed the parent owls hunting and bringing voles to their hungry owlets. It was mesmerising to witness their graceful flights and the nurturing care they provided to their young.

Being so close to nature and seeing these beautiful creatures thriving was a truly wonderful and unforgettable experience. We are so fortunate in our community to have incredible nature right on our doorstep, waiting to be enjoyed and appreciated by all.

Carol Tennant



Photo by Mark Savage

The Strawberry Line Wild Flower Bank at Yatton

Over the years the Internal Drainage Board (IDB) - who are responsible for drainage in this area - had frequently cleared and deepened a ditch alongside the Strawberry Line at Yatton. It was only a short section of the ditch created about 160 years ago to drain the railway track, but it was on the IDB schedule. Their contractor used a heavy machine to excavate the ditch, which held a low level of water at the bottom. The machine damaged the surface of the cycle path and the excavated clay was piled up in a bund along the margin which over time had made any management of the vegetation very difficult. The IDB no longer considers it necessary to maintain the ditch here.

YACWAG approached North Somerset Council, the landowner, for their help. The section of Strawberry Line affected by the IDB had, ironically, regularly flooded after heavy rain. It could be seen that the path itself was the low point and to cure the ponds and puddles would require some landscaping. As a result the council asked the IDB to remove the bund they had created and this work was carried out last autumn. Thanks to National Grid funding coming via North Somerset Council, YACWAG's contractor then skilfully made a gentle slope to take water away from the path. At the first sign of heavy rain his work passed the test. The water could drain away and that section of path is now the least puddled on the whole of the Strawberry Line.

The group of volunteers led by Steve Rea carried out initial work to cut bramble and sowed a local wildflower and grass seed mix among existing patches of flowers, as a result of which an attractive bank of wild flowers appeared this spring and summer. So far it has been mainly wild carrot, greater willow-herb, with some tufted vetch, red clover, knapweed and oxeye daisy. Next year, who knows?



The area will be strimmed in the early autumn and the arisings raked off to provide the conditions that wild flowers need.

An Exciting New Project on the Horizon - Please Fill in the Questionnaire

Celebrate YACWAG's 25th anniversary with us by reflecting on our impactful journey and the positive changes we've made for nature and our community.

By simply filling out a short survey, you'll play a crucial role in shaping an exciting oral history project that captures memories, attitudes and personal feelings about nature. This project will culminate in a public film showcasing these shared experiences. We're also eager to understand how Covid-19 influenced your relationship with nature. Your insights will help us develop meaningful community activities. Rest assured, your responses will remain anonymous and personal information will not be stored.

Join us in this celebration and help us create something memorable! Link to fill out the survey is <https://forms.gle/4rasfAk6S9iF1fZPA>.

25 Years of YACWAG

As well as the proposal to capture YACWAG's work over the last quarter-century in a film, backed up with a series of events, other plans are afoot to celebrate this important milestone. If you would like to be involved and help us plan events and publications to mark the occasion, please get in touch via email to contact@yacwag.org.uk.



Ambassadors for Nature

I expect most readers will be wondering what has happened to all our butterflies this year. They are no longer abundant even in their better years let alone this year, which according to Butterfly Conservation is the worst year since it started its Big Butterfly Count in 2010.

Extreme weather events are to blame which have disturbed natural rhythms and added to a backcloth of an 80 percent decline in butterflies since the early 1970s. Our wet spring coupled with a cool and damp early summer has significantly reduced the mating opportunities for most species. Using my garden sightings as a barometer I have particularly noticed the absence of Green Veined White and Ringlet, both of which suffered in the drought conditions of 2020. Some species have fared better, like the Holly Blue for example, and the Orange Tip did make a show early in the year together with good numbers of Brimstone. In July it was an occasional Large White that graced the Verbena and one has to consider these are often migrants and not necessarily of local origin.

On YACWAG reserves it is the grassland species that have suffered. The Common Blue has been very scarce and numbers of Marbled White were much reduced. The presence of other species was noted by only single sightings of Large and Small Skippers. Recently however I have been heartened by good numbers of Gatekeepers appearing in our garden with a total of four Gatekeepers at once. The current weather conditions - dry and sunny - mean that this species may well succeed where others have failed this year.

Cherish these wonderful ambassadors for nature while you can throughout August and hopefully into September. Butterflies are an important indicator species in monitoring the health of nature - and that includes us. If this year's sharp decline in insects isn't a wake-up call to all those able to do more to tackle the climate crisis, then the consequences are unthinkable. YACWAG will continue to do its utmost through the management of its own land and will continue to lobby decision-makers locally.



Text and photos of Gatekeeper butterflies by Tony Moulin

Become a Hedgerow Hero!

Following a visit by the Avon and Bristol Hedgerow Heroes Project Officer from CPRE (the countryside charity), YACWAG has been offered the chance to train eight of its volunteers in hedge laying.

The training session will be carried out in one day (probably on 3rd or 10th December) at our Cobthorn Reserve and will be led by a professional trainer provided and paid for by CPRE.

Hedge-laying is a traditional form of hedge management which involves using a billhook to split stems down to the rootstock so the split stems can be laid down at an angle of 45 degrees and woven among hazel stakes. This promotes new growth at the base of the hedge and keeps it bushy and dense to provide cover for wildlife.

The idea is to equip a team of volunteers with hedge-laying skills, knowledge and experience who will then be keen to use their new skills on YACWAG reserves when necessary in the future.

YACWAG will provide the tools you need on the day. If this is something that appeals to you and you have a generally good level of fitness, please **book your place by the end of October via yacwag@gmail.com**.



*Joe and Elizabeth hedge laying on Cadbury Hill
January 2016*



*Graham at Kenn Moor Reserve
January 2014*

YACWAG's Jubilee Wood, St Andrew's School, Congresbury

In 2012 YACWAG planted 60 trees in Yatton and 60 in Congresbury to mark the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. In Yatton North Somerset Council's Tree Officer helped us find the locations on publicly owned land, which was a condition of the Big Tree Plant grant. In Congresbury we worked with the primary school to plant 60 trees on their playing field. We dubbed this 'Jubilee Wood'. It followed a planting of trees initiated by the then headteacher Richard Baker, in 1998. This planting was subsequently referred to as 'Baker's Wood'. It had been noticed how the children were naturally drawn to play in among the trees in Baker's Wood and the headteacher in 2012 was very positive about reducing the areas of mown grass to provide another natural play area. He requested more evergreen trees in the new planting, as this would provide comparative study opportunities for the school.

It is encouraging to see that most of the trees have survived and they are doing their work to support nature and store carbon. However, Jubilee Wood has been neglected and it is now time for a concerted effort to look after the trees and re-create an area that will be more useful to the school.

With this in mind YACWAG has offered a volunteer work party at the school in the autumn. If you would like to help, please let us know via yacwag@gmail.com.



JUBILEE WOOD St Andrew's School

Left: 2012, pupils staking the first trees

Below left: 2016, Sue Lovesey checking the health of a Scots Pine



Below: 2018, Tony Moulin and Sue staking another Scots Pine



Photo above: March 2024 Sue Lovesey and Faith Moulin marvel at how the Bhutan Pine has grown!

An Alternative 90 Minutes - Birding on Sunday 14th July at 9pm

It's a fine summer's evening; with the prospect of rain tomorrow and with little interest in the football final I grab my binoculars and set out for a brief walk around Congresbury and along the Yeo. It will be quieter out than usual, confirmed as the front rooms of houses I pass are bathed in a green glow from the TVs.

As I step outside six Swifts feed overhead. I know I've only got a couple more weeks to enjoy this aerial mastery before their fleeting summer visit comes to an end.

An unusual high pitched call of a wader is heard flying directly overhead - confirmed by the Merlin app as a Green Sandpiper. A first for my garden list 'flyovers'.

The weir bridge is closed so a longer route down Park Road takes me into fields and down towards the river. A Grey Heron perches in a tree and watches as a Lesser Black-backed gull pads the ground in a field looking for food.

A Green Woodpecker is heard, its rasping call breaking the stillness of the evening. This is countered by a Song Thrush's melodic song echoing from a tree across the field near Urchinwood.



*Green Woodpecker.
Photo by Natasha Pester*

A Barn Owl hunts by the Yeo near Millennium Green. It dives into the grass then flies off towards Cobthorn and King's Wood - perhaps to feed itself or growing young. Distant cheers erupt from houses around the village as the England team scores, sadly no glory for them this time, but it's a wildlife win for me this evening.

Steve Rea

Can You Help With the 2024 North Somerset Bat Survey?



The scheme run by Bat Conservation Research Lab is an exciting citizen science project that requires volunteer help. Bat detectors are sited around North Somerset and the data collected electronically for six nights before being analysed back at the lab.

In 2022 166,651 recordings were made of 16 different bat species with 80 1 km squares being surveyed. This year there are still some squares in the Yatton and Congresbury area needing surveyors. One of the highest priority squares needing a surveyor is up near Chestnut Park in Yatton. The information collected will help inform North Somerset Council when making planning decisions so is very important. The recording devices can be collected from Yatton Library. More information on what is involved is available from the North Somerset Bat Survey website:

<https://www.batconservationresearchlab.co.uk/north-somerset-bat-survey>

and you can see available squares and book a square at:

<https://app.bto.org/booking/square/request-square.jsp?s=SWWMP>

Big River Watch

There is another exciting citizen science project on rivers and it is quick and easy to take part.

Between Friday 6th and Thursday 12th September the Rivers Trust is asking for volunteers to spend 15 minutes watching a river and then share what they see in the free Big River Watch app.

The data will help build a better understanding of the health of our rivers and support the fight for their restoration. You can download the app ‘Big River Watch’ from the app store. Find out more from

www.riverstrust.org/take-action/the-big-river-watch

Nature On Our Doorstep in Congresbury

Since April YACWAG has been working with Congresbury Youth Partnership to open the eyes of young people to nature on their doorstep. The project has been funded by the UK Social Prosperity Fund via North Somerset Council and led by Amanda Boyd.

A bioblitz day was held on Congresbury Millennium Green at the beginning of August with indoor activities in Congresbury Youth Club. Children were able to investigate composting and art education with Garden Organic, dissect owl pellets from YACWAG barn owl nests, capture and identify insects with Higgy, decorate and eat biscuits and create wonderful art work with Mandi.



Photos thanks to Congresbury Youth Partnership

Roving with Rainbows

“Rainbows welcomes all girls from 4 to 7 years to laugh, learn and have fun in a creative safe space.” (www.girlguiding.org.uk) and I, together with 1st Congresbury Rainbows certainly did that on Cadbury Hill, one sunny Tuesday evening in July.

A Flower Foray on the slope up from the car park had the girls enthusiastically searching for eight different flowering plants to tick off on a sheet, as well as something natural to exactly match a shade of green taken from a paint colour chart. Red Bartsia, the most prolific flower, was one that I'd not come across before and matching all the shades of green was definitely a challenge!

A brief rest on two benches at the top preceded further excited searching on the way down, both for creatures to look at more closely in bug pots and for the five reptile mats that Graham and I had put down a week earlier. Brambles, nettles and long grass had already started to conceal them so I was thankful to have recorded their exact locations on *what3words*! I wasn't really expecting any reptiles to have taken shelter but was hoping for something alive for the girls to see. We were not disappointed! On top of the second mat was a cricket, under the third a toad and under the fourth a huge ant's nest – a maze of tunnels with hundreds of ants moving larvae and tiny bits of foliage around. Close examination of the bug pots revealed another cricket, a grasshopper, two different beetles, several ants and a couple of woodlice, all of which, after close examination, were released safely.



A diversion to look at the Wellingtonia (similar to California's Giant Redwoods) had the girls feeling its soft bark and thinking about the animals that might make use of it. They also guessed wildly at the tree's age - and mine; in case you're wondering, the tree was already 101 years old when I was born!

An enjoyable evening ended with all fourteen girls happily linking hands around the Wellingtonia before returning to the car park.

Text and photo by Sue Lovesey

Grasshopper Walk

Six children as well as 15 adults went to Stowey Reserve with Fred Giles in early August. With insects in short supply, the grasshoppers and crickets were not as numerous but the star of the show was a beautiful Roesel's Cricket, closely examined and admired. Several different species were seen and identified.

Fred is part of ROAM, the Recorders of Avalon Marshes and we are grateful to him for his time.



Feedback Please!

We love to hear from you about how we are doing. The newsletter aims to keep you informed and you can learn about the background to our work through our website. Let us know what we could be doing better.

We have loads of vacancies for one-off and regular tasks and if you have a skill or time to share, please do consider offering to help YACWAG. One opportunity is to write the odd account of local wildlife, or share how you have become involved with YACWAG. Photos are also very welcome.

We are now issuing a newsletter about every two months and we try to cover most of our activities, as well as promoting projects, events and activities to take part in on our own patch, either run by our Education and Events team, or by our nature partners.

Local Agenda 21, a concept around sustainable development emerging from the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 inspired Tony and me. Awareness started to spread around 'global warming' and people became more aware of the need to support nature in their gardens. Councils started appointing biodiversity officers and drawing up Biodiversity Action Plans. English Nature and local councils were better funded. The catch phrase became '*Think Globally, Act Locally*' and that is just as relevant today. The more engaged our members are in our work, the more we will be able to achieve for wildlife on our patch. Don't put it off, please get in touch.

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