

Annual indoor meeting, Friday 15th February 2019

Now that we no longer have the top predators like wolves, bears or lynx roaming the countryside you would think that it was safe to venture outdoors. However, our speaker, illustrator and naturalist John Walters, showed us that lower down the pecking order, nature was still raw in tooth and claw. Everything is either hunter or hunted.

You would think solitary bees would be difficult to find and track down their holes containing their eggs but even they are not safe from marauding interlopers. He showed us a video of an adder eating a whole clutch of meadow pipits just before they were due to fledge. The last one still alive and kicking as it was being swallowed. Interestingly there were no signs of any bulges along the adders body.

Apparently some moths such as the mottled umber and the winter moth come out in the late Autumn/early Winter to mate and lay their eggs. The females look more like beetles than moths and don't fly but are sought out by the flying males. These eggs hatch out in the Spring and he showed us pictures of oak trees completely stripped bare by thousands and thousands of these voracious caterpillars. All is not lost however as the trees produce another crop of leaves and the caterpillars are taken by birds to feed their young. The moths too get their comeuppance as he showed us his video that had been shown recently on the BBC's Winterwatch programme of a woodlouse eating one of these moths whilst it was mating. So strong was the urge to mate that it didn't seem to realise that it was being eaten alive at the same time.

There is still a cuddly side to nature as he explained how he managed to get some superb shots of roosting long tailed tits, who it seems not only use the same tree but nearly always the same twig on which to roost. He had seen up to eighteen all huddled together.

He also showed us some excellent examples of camouflage in nature with shots of snipe in long grass, nightjars nesting on the ground surrounded by matching leaves and young skylarks that are covered in green hairs to blend in with their nesting area. Butterflies and moths too can blend in with their surroundings, witness the comma butterfly that even when it's picture was two feet wide on the screen it was difficult to pick out.

He too comes under attack as he often has to lie on the ground to get some of his fantastic photographs and then when he gets home he has to remove all the ticks he has acquired. What did please us was that he often went to places that we have visited on more than one occasion with our monthly outings such as Vennford reservoir, Bovey Heath, Torrington Common and the only place in England to see the narrow headed ant.

A most enthralling and entertaining evening and my thanks to all those in whatever way contributed to the success it was.

Velator Quay, Sunday, March 10th 2019

The wind, it blew and blew and blew. Even so this did not deter a good number of hardy BNA members from turning up to view the bird life of the rivers Taw and Caen.

To make us grit our teeth even more, a heavy shower descended on us almost horizontally from the sky just as we were about to move off. Amazingly this was the last rain of the day as we made our way along the bank of the River Caen towards the pond by the Tarka Trail.

Just before arriving at the pond the sweet musical notes of a dunnoek were heard and after much searching with binoculars and several pairs of eyes it was spotted in a bush by the side of the Tarka Trail not eight feet away which gave some good photographic opportunities.

The first of our group to arrive at the pond spotted a brown rat scurrying along the hand rail of the viewing platform This did not deter our party and as we sheltered from the relentless wind we seemed to spend an unusually long time at this location. It was just as, well as we had some good sightings here which include a sand martin, Siberian chiffchaff and a little grebe which posed for the cameras for quite some time not ten yards away on the edge of a reed bed. A Cetti's warbler was also heard.

The snipe is a bird usually nearly trodden on in wet, marshy ground before suddenly rising up unexpectedly and flying away from you in a zig-zag fashion. So it was wonderful surprise to see a wisp circling above us over the pond.

A short walk along the Trail to Chivenor Aerodrome and then back to the cars for a drink and refreshments. It was disappointing not to see a kingfisher although one was heard.

After refreshments, we drove out along the toll road towards the White House for views over Horsey Island. The main challenge, when standing on the top of the bank was not to get blown over. A cormorant spotted flying into the wind seemed to be making very slow eadway.

Surprisingly the most interesting sighting at this venue was below our feet as an eagle eyed member identified the young leaves of an early purple orchid and Autumn Lady's tresses virtually at the same spot, reminding us that this was not just a bird outing even in early March.

Surviving a short hail storm we had a brisk walk along the beach and back through the sand dunes and scrub to head home with all the cobwebs blown away.



Dawn chorus walk – Sunday 7th April 2019

Our dawn chorus walk this year was in the National Nature Reserve of Horner Woods. It is an ancient oak woodland which is owned and managed by the National Trust. The extensive area of woodland has within it a tree which is over 500 years old. 15 of the 17 bat species found in the UK including the lesser horseshoe and barbastelle can be found here.

We set off from the Horner car park in the chilly atmosphere of a sunless sky preparing for a walk in the bracing Exmoor air. A dipper flew out from beneath the old stone bridge at the entrance to the woods, beating a hasty passage up stream. Entering the woods the light faded somewhat and even though there were not, as yet, many leaves on the trees it was difficult to spot the birds which were often silhouetted amongst the branches. Some of our branch members identified the birds from their songs. We hoped the sun would come out later.

Walking up through the woods we followed the bubbling stream of Horner Water which was seemingly trying to drown out the birdsong. Several large clusters of wood sorrel were encountered, some growing out of the soil and some in amongst the mosses and lichens. Throughout the reserve of almost entirely deciduous trees, the woodland was covered in mosses and lichens, an indication of a relatively clean atmosphere. There are at least 330 species of lichen found here, including a rather striking dog lichen.

The woods are home to a good population of red deer although none were spotted. A little further on we had more sightings of dippers and a good view of a marsh tit. The drumming and yaffling of greater spotted and green woodpeckers were heard along with the call of nuthatch. On arrival at the water splash clearing we sat down for some elevenses before the steep ascent up over the hill through open moorland. The day remained cold. Views at the top were spectacular as we looked down to the wooded valley through which we had walked. It was in this open moorland where we had our best sightings of the native Exmoor ponies. Onwards and into the ancient woodland again in the hope of spotting the early arrivals of redstarts and pied flycatchers. Disappointingly none were seen - we were clearly a week or so too early. So back to the cars and onwards for some refreshment at The Ship Inn at Porlock Weir where we enjoyed a roast lunch in front of an open log fire.

The afternoon consisted of a planned walk to Chetsford Water, a well known rugged coombe on Exmoor. The day remained overcast and we remained hopeful that perhaps the sun would come out now. We followed the stream down to the junction where it met Embercombe Water. A picturesque walk which gave us a stonechat, skylark and sand martin. Finally, back to the cars where we proceeded to disperse after an energy sapping day in the Exmoor National park. On arrival home the sun came out!



Dog Lichen at Horner Woods, Exmoor

Steps Bridge, Dunsford. Sunday May 19th

It promised to be a fine day as we all gathered in the car park at Steps Bridge on the eastern edge of Dartmoor. Our walk took us through the wooded banks of the picturesque river Teign through the Dunsford Nature Reserve, owned by the National Trust. The reserve is well known for its magnificent display of wild daffodils in early Spring. We were too late to witness this display, but instead, we were treated to swathes of bluebells offset by the red of the red campion and the whites of stitchwort and wild garlic.

Before entering the woods we ambled down to the old stone bridge to peer out over at the sparkling clear waters of the river Teign. As we gazed at the water bursting over the rocks and boulders, deposited there over many centuries, the odd mayfly was seen wafting about in the air currents. Leaving the roadway into the woods our first surprise was the sight of a large beetle on the path ahead of us some three cms in length. It had a shiny bluish/black body and was identified as an oil beetle.

Moving further into the woodland of predominantly oak, ash and birch the quietness was only disturbed by the moving waters of the Teign amid a mixture of bird song. Most of the trees were now in full leaf. Therefore, many of the birds were heard rather than seen. The notable exceptions were the song and mistle thrushes both of which were seen in full voice.

Further along the river a dipper was spotted bobbing up and down on a boulder. Otters frequent this river and although it was not the best time of the day to spot one, it was agreed that their spraint was evident when viewed through binocular on a mid stream boulder. Ideally it would have been better if we could have accessed in order to make a clearer identification and to perhaps evidence fish bones or beetle elytra. (Elytra being the front wing cases of beetles which are hardened and indigestible)

Occasionally we came across open glades where the trees had been cleared to witness butterflies and damselflies dancing over the wild flower displays. Eventually we came across a suitable spot on the river bank where we sat for a while to contemplate our beautiful surroundings, whilst eating our packed lunches. Here we were treated to a busy brimstone on the opposite bank and a fly past of a red breasted merganser. Suitably refreshed we carried on up through the mixed deciduous woodland before making a loop and heading back towards Steps Bridge. Adjacent to the path we came across the interesting sight of broomrape, a plant which is parasitic on the roots of the broom which was growing alongside it. Throughout the wood we encountered large colonies of wood ants. They all seemed to be rushing about aimlessly carrying bits of leaves and twigs often larger than themselves. No doubt they were all working

together for a common cause.

Changing our footwear, the only task left for us was to head for the nearby popular Fingle Bridge, where many of our members polished off a cream tea whilst looking at the old stone bridge and the ever flowing river Teign.



Fingle Bridge. Taken by John Short at Dunsford Field Trip



Oil Beetle. Taken by John Short at Dunsford Field Trip[/caption]

Dunsdon National Nature Reserve, Sunday 23rd June 2019

With the forecast of heavy rain and possible thunderstorms looming over us, our outing this month was around one of the rare culm grassland reserves of North Devon, managed by the Devon Wildlife Trust. The reserve has recently been expanded to 90 hectares and is a mixture of wet heath, meadow and boggy grassland dominated by purple moor grass and rushes. It is poor land - not suited for cultivation and has hardly ever been fertilized. For this reason it is home to some unusual plant life suited to these conditions. We were delighted to have Steve Threkeld, an experienced hands on DWT manager to guide us around. Our grassy car park had a bright patch of yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*) in one corner which gave us a sense of anticipation as to what else we might find. Adjacent to the car park were several ash trees and before we set off Steve pointed out several cases of ash dieback, a fungal disease which can eventually kill the trees. It can be seen at the tips of branches leading to the yellowing and dying of the leaves. The younger saplings seem to be particularly susceptible. It is estimated that over 90% of our ash trees could be lost!

Moving out of the car park we walked down a board walk surrounded by tree growth which had developed from original culm grassland over the last 40 odd years. It had thick undergrowth but nevertheless, adjacent to the board walk, we were treated to a magnificent and varied display of ferns and a good stand of remote sedge. Entering the meadow at the end of the board walk we soon came across our first orchids. These were the heath spotted (*Dactylorhiza maculata*) and lesser butterfly orchids (*Platanthera bifolia*) both of which have a symbiotic relationship with a specific mycorrhiza fungus present in the soil beneath them. The lesser butterfly orchid has relatively few flowers in the reserve at present but there are plans to increase their

numbers. To achieve this, the sticky pollen will be transferred between the plants using a cocktail stick. The orchids then have to be protected from the fifteen cattle which will eventually lightly graze the area and the Winter swaling which takes place every three years.

Our hopes of seeing the rare marsh fritillary butterfly (*Euphydryas aurinia*) were quashed by the damp overcast conditions although there was plenty of evidence of its host plant devil's bit scabious. We walked towards the old Bude canal aqueduct identifying some interesting plants along the way including whorled caraway (*Carum verticillatum*), three lobed crowfoot (*Ranunculus tripartitus*) and marsh valerian (*Valeriana dioica*). By the time we reached the canal the rain was beginning to fall steadily and it was decided to head back to the cars for a packed lunch.

Suitably replenished and with the rain easing off, we decided to take a walk around an adjacent field which only a few years ago had a high phosphate content because it was farmed for its silage. However, the DWT have turned it into a wild flower meadow which already has southern marsh orchid (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa*), eyebright (*Euphrasia officinalis*) and common cat's-ear (*Hypochaeris radicata*) amongst its numerous species. Several burnet moths were seen flying over this meadow. This was not a good day for the bird watchers, although we learnt that in the twilight it is known that barn owls glide silently over the reserve, hunting for short tailed voles. As our group had braved dampish weather and spent a large part of the day trudging around damp, uneven ground we decided to reward ourselves with a cream tea at a nearby log cabin café.



During this field tip we visited Godborough Nature Reserve and Cornborough Estate. The 36 acre nature reserve at Godborough is situated on the outskirts of Bideford, North Devon. Created in the late 1990's it is an undulating reserve of natural grassland, new and mature woodland with a series of connecting ponds. Owned and managed by Devon Birds, thousands of new trees have been planted, supplementing the existing mature trees. The varied tree species provides mix woodland and a valuable habitat for a wide range of birds. Throughout the year the grassland is managed by cutting, along with controlled grazing by sheep and Exmoor ponies, encouraging the growth of wild flowers.

To start the day, we walked up through a meadow of mature natural grassland to the highest point in the reserve. From here we could see most of the reserve and Philip Marlow of Devon Birds gave us a history of the site and its development to the present day.



Philip Marlow, Devon Birds

With this background we set off down the slope on a typically hot July day towards the cool relief of our first area of woodland. The far side of this wood encompasses the site of an ancient castle and some earthworks thought to be of Saxon origin. Here could be found some mature trees and the law dictates that this area is not to be interfered with by man although fresh badger setts were found. Moving down through the eerie silence of these ancient earthworks, signs of Dutch elm disease was noted.

Emerging from the wood into the sunshine we found ourselves in the completely contrasting habitat of 4 or 5 connecting ponds. These have been dug out by Devon Birds members and are filled with water from the surrounding natural undulations. Maintenance is an ongoing battle and at present the ponds are dominated by reeds and water plantain. Some time was spent here watching different species of damselflies and dragonflies patrolling their patches. Butterflies were fluttering about and a moorhen was spotted disappearing into the reeds where they have been known to nest.



Water Plantain at Godborough

A short visit then followed to an adjoining newly planted area of woodland to see specimens of the rarer whitebeam and wild service trees plus hornbeam and field maple. Finally, a walk up to a newly created wild flower meadow. This project was begun last year by heavily grazing off the existing sward. Due to the hard nature of the ground only a minimum of cultivation had been carried out and this was followed by the spreading of green hay containing wild flower seeds. Sheep were then allowed to trample and graze the area with the undigested flower seeds passing through the sheep and emerging gift wrapped in their own fertiliser package. This reserve is a good example of how farming and wildlife can co-exist. To date, 220 species of flowers have been identified, 20 butterflies, 9 dragonflies and

damselflies, 30 different grasses plus foxes, badgers, stoats, bank voles, grass snakes, slow-worms, bats and innumerable birds.

Following a packed lunch, it was off to the nearby privately owned Cornborough estate. Parking in front of the impressive newly refurbished house we were greeted by a breath-taking panorama. Looking down beyond the cascading lawns was the most magnificent display of wild flowers that could ever be imagined. This glorious meadow has been painstakingly created by the owner, John Lomas.



Flower Meadow at Cornborough Estate

Wandering through the grass paths between the flowers every colour possible seemed to be in the mix. As we slowly wandered around enjoying the beauty of the meadow and the glorious weather, a buzzard could be heard mewling overhead. Walking around to the other side of the house we were confronted with a picture postcard view of meadows tumbling down to the sea.



Cornborough Estate - coastal view

A short walk through the grassland and it was back to one of our member's nearby home for a cream tea with home made scones and jams. The perfect end to a perfect day.

Torrington Commons, Sunday 18th August 2019

As the name suggests, Torrington Commons is an area of countryside adjacent to the town which allows free access to the public. The 365 acres includes around 20 miles of footpaths, ancient woodland, flower meadows and a golf course all administered by an elected "Committee of Conservators".



Torrington Commons.

The designated walk on the common includes over 60 species of trees and shrubs considered to be native to Britain. These are all numbered on adjacent identification posts. Some of these trees are indigenous and some have been propagated over the last 20 years or so.

We set off from the “free” car park armed with our tree identification guides and packed lunches. Our route went down along an earth path, passing vibrant displays of rosebay willowherb, then around into an open meadow bordered by a row of magnificent huge beech trees alongside the cemetery. On the far side of this meadow was a row of recently planted native trees including black poplar, wych elm, bird cherry, broad and small leaved lime and smooth leaved elm. Large ripe blackberries were now appearing on the brambles which provided a quick snack for some members!



Rosebay Willowherb.

We continued down the steep path, through the woods to the stream below. Crossing the wooden bridge there was a good example of an alder tree growing in its natural habitat beside water. Our journey now roughly followed the line of the stream. Dappled sunlight filtered through the trees, alternating with the odd light shower. Puffball fungi were encountered along the way and there was a lovely aroma arising from the clumps of meadowsweet.

The appearance of butterflies seemed to coincide with the appearance of the sun. Perhaps the most striking of these being the silver washed fritillary. From this uplifting sight, further along the path came the sad sight of a dead mole attracting several green-bottle flies but still displaying its silky fur coat. Walking along the various pathways of the common it was interesting to note some of the names carved into blocks of granite, such as Roman Road, Rice Point path and Barmaid's Walk.



Red Admiral Butterfly.

Emerging from the woods we came out into a large flower meadow. It was now time for a lunch break so we all sat down on a convenient bench opposite a pond where a kingfisher had been spotted the previous day. Along-side the pond was a rare display of marjoram. Re-invigorated we set off to the far end of the meadow where we saw fine examples of guelder-rose, spindle, wild service tree and whitebeam.

Back through the meadow, we just made it into the woods before a heavy shower. We crossed the stream with a steady climb up over the hill to the car park. Adjacent to the car park on a grassy field of the commons, we took the opportunity to view a full scale replica of the mayflower ship being built by local charity volunteers to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the boat's passage to America with the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620. Following this we sailed off to consume a cream tea at a nearby farmhouse. To increase our appetite we were held up by a large herd of cows crossing the farm lane on the way to being milked.

Tarka Trail - Bideford station to the "iron bridge", Sunday September 15th 2019

At the end of Bideford's ancient 14th century longbridge, and up over a set of wide stone steps, is the former Bideford railway station. This was the starting point for our September walk along the old railtrack route towards the "iron bridge".



Bideford Town and Longbridge

Trains have long since stopped running along this route which is now tarmac and renamed the Tarka Trail, after Henry Williamson's well known fictional novel "Tarka the Otter", which was based around this area. There are still a few static railway carriages here incorporating a small museum and cafe.

Alongside the platform, buddleia was still in flower giving us a wonderful display of butterflies, fluttering around it. Before setting off a brown rat made a brief appearance before scurrying back into the bordering foliage. Our aim on this outing was a round trip, a level walk to the old iron bridge. We set off in glorious

Autumn sunshine leaving the railway station with the River Torridge alongside us. Either side of us buddleia and swathes of old man's beard, interspersed with bright red rose hips, grew in profusion. The air was full of the unmistakable autumnal "woody" aroma.



Buddleia flower - heavily sweet scented.

One or two crab apple trees were passed with a good crop of fruit hanging from their branches. The buddleia seemed to be everywhere, their scent not only attracting butterflies but also a large array of insects. One sharp eyed member identified a hornet hoverfly. Continuing along the path we occasionally passed clumps of brightly coloured orange/yellow French toadflax and the large white flowers of hedge bindweed trailing itself along the supporting foliage.



Hedge Bindweed.

Turning off the track and down a wooden boardwalk towards the river we entered the completely new habitat of a saltmarsh. This area supports a variety of unusual plants varying from the tall reeds above head height to the smaller dominant plants of scurvy grass as the ground sloped further out towards the river. In between we found the beautiful sea aster and growths of sea spurrey and glasswort. Twice every 24 hours the tide comes in running up the muddy gullies and covering the saltmarsh with salt water to which the plants have had to adapt.

Back onto the Tarka Trail, a stop for lunch at a convenient bench whilst being watched by a grey squirrel. Onwards again between mixed woodland on one side, and the river on the other. Nearing the iron bridge we drew closer to the river. A fresh breeze sprang up as it followed the pathway of the river up through the valley.



Grey Squirrel.

It was now the chance of the bird lovers amongst us to take in the magnificent scenery up and down the river at low tide. With large sandbanks exposed, and the occasional broken tree and driftwood stuck in the sand, bird spotting opportunities looked promising. Perched upon a driftwood branch, a kingfisher with its colours glittering in the sunshine was spotted. It then proceeded to give us a display by successfully diving in for a fish for its lunch.

A few members diverted from the trail and walked along a country road to a bend in the River Yeo, a tributary to the Torridge. It was worth it, because a green sandpiper was spotted and an almost perfect specimen of a dead female southern hawker dragonfly was found. Finally we headed back to the Bideford railway station for a cream tea.

Fungus foray at RHS Rosemoor, Sunday 6th October 2019

It seemed like Summer was reluctant to disappear as we gathered in the sunshine at the Rosemoor Royal Horticultural Society gardens, nestling in a Devon valley not far from Torrington. The only clue to Autumn coming was from the surrounding trees with their striking hues of gold, yellow and red and their abundance of fruit. We were joined today by our local fungi expert, John Willetts, who gave us a brief introductory talk and showed us some examples of chanterelle, parasol and yellow stainer fungi before setting off from the overflow car park.

Alongside the path, in the adjacent grass and in amongst the immature trees and shrubs, pink and meadow waxcaps, birch boletus and yellow stainer fungi were spotted. These fungi would not necessarily have any symbiotic relationship with their nearby trees as they may have been transported to the site in a compost. The usual question came up as to which fungi were edible and which were not. The reply from our knowledgeable expert was *"All were edible but some you only eat once!"*

Once our good turnout of potential fungi foragers had passed through the entrance turnstiles and into the gardens, we headed to our designated wooded area to do our survey. Walking through the gardens one could not be but amazed at the numerous varieties of trees, shrubs and flowers in all their colourful glory in this, the first week in October. Red admiral and large white butterflies were seen taking advantage of this spectacle.

Once inside the woodland of mixed evergreen and deciduous trees of varying ages it was not long before we came across the false death cap with its characteristic potato smell. Foraging our way through ferns, fallen branches, tree stumps and logs (many of which had been left to decay naturally) our guide pointed out some of the characteristics of the various fungi. One of which was the yellow russula whose gills crumbled between your fingers. The youngest member of our group produced a rotting branch with a fungal growth on it. The striking feature of this was that each growth consisted of an individual micro fungus and not part of the same mycelium. An unusual find. Another tree branch was shown with a green staining along its length. This colouring had been left behind by the previous growth of the green elf cup fungus.



Hedgehog puffball



Micro Fungus (not from one strand of mycelium)



Wood showing the green staining left behind from previous growth of the green elf cup fungus



Death Cap Fungus

Emerging from the bottom of the woods we came out to a wonderful spectacle of a large pond partially covered in water lilies, some of which were still in flower. Around its border trees were abundant in their fruits as a moorhen skipped over the foliage on the surface of the pond. Nothing to do now but head up to the restaurant for a roast dinner. No doubt we could have found more fungi outside of the wooded area in the gardens themselves but this was "apple day" at Rosemoor which had drawn in a large crowd and we had been favoured with free entry so long as we did our forage in the woods. As we left the car park the "cronking" ravens were still flying about.

Annual General Meeting and Meal Evening. Saturday 10th November 2019

This year our AGM was held at The Royal Hotel in Bideford. In 1688 John Davie, a prominent tobacco merchant, ordered the building of a good home which he named Colonial House. Parts of this house have been remarkably well preserved and are now at the heart of The Royal Hotel. Our AGM meeting was held in the fantastic Kingsley room which features original pine panelling and magnificent ornate ceiling. It was well attended (including Julie B and Val with their new hips) and everyone arrived in good time. After an enjoyable meal there was a quick resume on the healthy state of the branch. All those who had been allocated jobs last year, had done exceptionally well and as a result were unanimously reappointed. So thank you and well done.

We then had a short film show covering our five day trip to The Brecons in South Wales earlier this year. I hope members recognised Richard's photograph of the red kite which was featured on the back cover of the latest publication by the British Naturalists' Association. Endymion then produced a photo quiz for us but I think she credited us with more knowledge than we actually had, although I am hoping members that attended all got the last photograph right! (Picture of our Branch Chairman) Then came the most important part of the evening, when suggestions were put forward for ideas for next year's outings. After eliminating

whale watching off Patagonia, John S ended up with enough ideas to enable him to produce another interesting programme. So watch this space!

Elizabeth then suggested a trip to The Forest of Dean area for next year's five day trip in early June. The idea seemed very appealing so it was agreed - that is what we will do. As before make your booking with the hotel but let Elizabeth know as well. Finally, thanks to Sally for organising the evening.

Annual bird watching bonanza, Sunday December 8th 2019

It was a typical December day as our group gathered in the car park at Dart's Farm in the south-east of Devon, for our last trip of the year. The "Farm" has now become a nationally recognised shopping centre. Family owned, it started by selling the produce from a small shed alongside the growing area, which now grows around 50 different crops throughout the year - harvested fresh on a daily basis.

Our first walk was around the large field, where partially harvested winter greens were growing, which seemed to be providing excellent habitat and food for some small flocks of birds and a kestrel. A strong wind was blowing which gave this "Wind hoverer" a chance to show off aerial skills by appearing to effortlessly hold position whilst hunting overhead. (Wind hover being an old country name for the kestrel.)

The farm is surrounded by the wetlands of the Exe estuary providing a specialised habitat - the Dart family have provided a bird hide/shelter and a few fishing ponds. It was good to see a small flock of greenfinches around the hide and on the adjacent bird feeders. We made our way the short distance to the Goosemoor wetlands area, where a little grebe was spotted scurrying across the water and occasionally diving. Every time we visit we observe a mistle thrush atop the same tall tree with clumps of mistletoe at the apex. This year we were blessed with a pair of "storm cocks" guarding the berries in the teeth of the strong winds.

Walking further along the road we arrived at the "Lookout" as the new hide is now called overlooking the RSPB reserve of Bowling Green Marsh. This was perfect timing as we were protected from a violent downpour whilst eating our packed lunches. The usual masses of ducks, geese and waders were spread out before us along with a small cluster of common gulls. Despite some hard searching there was no sign of the bittern which had been seen there earlier in the week.



Next stop was the viewing platform overlooking the River Clyst, only a short distance from the previous hide but en route we saw a goldcrest hopping around in the hedge. The viewing platform gave us good views of the avocets feeding on the mud flats with their curved beaks doing their typical side to side swishing movement. The viewing area also gave us a chance to look out over the wide estuary. One of our members, with his telescope, found a distant pair of black swans.



Onwards from the viewing platform, it was only a short distance to the "Goat Walk" where the incoming tide was rushing in and up along the River Exe - A pair of red breasted mergansers were seen out in the middle of the river. As it was nearly high tide we hurried back to the "Lookout" where we were hoping to see birds coming in from the now covered mud flats, to roost. The safety of this area for roosting was open to question by a pile of feathers on a mud bank in the centre of the reserve. Was the fox we had seen earlier the culprit, or maybe a peregrine? Whilst contemplating this, a sparrowhawk took off from his observation post chasing a much larger bird. After a lot of ducking and twisting the chase was unsuccessful. Finally, for a perfect end to our field trip, we had the sighting of the day. A long billed dowitcher, a vagrant to this country, and it gave us splendid views as it fed almost directly in front of the hide.