

## Annual bird watching bonanza, Sunday 10th January 2021

Due to the most recent lock down restrictions this trip obviously had to be cancelled. Furthermore, because we are now required to stay in our own locality, even a few of us could not go down to see what we were missing.

However, just before Xmas I had reason to go to Dart's Farm and was able to do some bird watching in the area. Although the car park at 10.00 am was packed, nobody else was bird watching although the numerous dog walkers didn't help matters. Down at the hide – well it's a shelter really – the feeders were missing which was a pity because that's always a good place to see some of the smaller birds. However, a chiffchaff pitched up accompanied by a Siberian chiffchaff, so that was a good start. Out on the meadows were Brent geese, mallard, wigeon, teal and curlew. Round now to Goosemoor where there were plenty of redshanks and black headed gulls but the mistle thrush was not in his usual place guarding the mistletoe. The hide at Bowling Green Marsh was closed due to the Covid restrictions and the feeders in the recently established nature garden were either empty or missing.

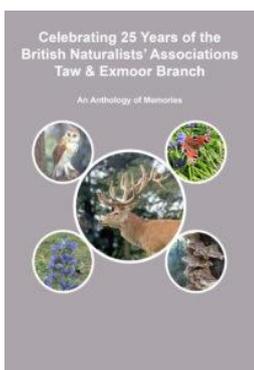


Shelduck by Endymion

Out on the marsh were shoveler, pintail, shelduck, greylag, Canada geese and black tailed godwits. Apart from dunlin and a little egret there was nothing much to be seen from the viewing platform overlooking the River Clyst. Around to the Goat Walk to see quite a few avocets and a couple of red breasted mergansers plus the odd cormorant and grey plover. There were lots of birds too far down the River Exe to positively identify.

### 25th anniversary booklet.

I hope you all enjoy reading this booklet and thanks to all those who contributed articles, poems, photographs and especially to Endymion for collating it and organising the photographs.



25th Anniversary Booklet Cover

## Isley Marsh and the river bank. Feb 2021

Due to the current lock down requirements, we couldn't go as a group outing but as it was only down to Yelland, then it was close enough for people to treat the walk along the riverbank as their daily exercise walk, independently, and report back. To make it more convenient for everyone it was decided that any day from Friday 5th to Tuesday 9th February would be acceptable.

Along the Tarka Trail there had very recently been extensive hedge trimming almost to the point of desecration, so the heavy machinery had probably frightened off the small birds. Similarly there had been close cropping at ground level so besides the gorse bushes the only flowers left were one dandelion and one clump of snowdrops. Several people braved the weather and the mud and sent me their bird lists for which I am grateful. The following account was one I received from John Short

*After several weeks of Covid-19 lock down, it was good to get to get out and about again for a wander along the banks of the River Taw even if it was on my own rather than with other members of our BNA group. Along the Tarka Trail could be heard the uplifting sound of the occasional bird song telling us that our daylight hours were lengthening, and Springtime may be not too far away.*

*The tide was a low one and was rising slowly towards high water, ideal for viewing waders. On reaching the riverbank my first eye-catching moment was the resplendent bright orange bill colour of the oystercatchers. More difficult to spot was a small group of meadow pipits scurrying amongst the small stones on the shoreline. Looking further along the shore there stood four majestic grey herons, unmoving against the incoming tide.*

*It was good to see large flocks of curlew and teal. More spectacular was a flock of over 100 dunlin as they weaved their magic overhead, twisting and turning as of one. Passing the site of the former power station, all that is now left are large spoil heaps interspersed with areas of standing water - a feeling of eeriness descended. With the sky clouding over and with the stillness of the site there did not seem to be a living creature anywhere. At the edge of this site a row of evergreen trees stood tall against the darkening sky. All seemed still and quiet when from out of the canopy came the unmistakable croak of a raven. They are known to nest in these trees so hopefully they will do so again this Spring.*

*Just past these trees is a large pond behind the river bank. The waters were still and as the sun reappeared. The surrounding tall reeds were reflected magnificently around the edges of the pond. In the quietness a moorhen could be heard clucking and fussing amongst the growth. Arriving at the Isley Marsh nature reserve, the usual array of ducks and waders were in residence and yes there amongst the marshy green growth were four spoonbills with their heads nestling down amongst their feathers.*



Oystercatchers by Endymion

## Berry Castle and Darracott Reservoir. March 2021

When these locations were requested it never occurred to anyone that we would still be in lock down. To make sure that everyone who wished to visit these places could still do so, it was decided that under the current restrictions you could, either on your own, or with one other person outside your bubble. So that we didn't all go on the same day, it was suggested that we could go any day a few days before or after the original set date of March 21st. Several members participated in the field trip independently, and kindly sent me their lists of observations which I have amalgamated into a combined list.

Berry Castle is located in Huntshaw Woods in the triangle between Barnstaple, Bideford and Torrington. It is a bronze age hill fort some 2600 years old and currently lies in land belonging to The Clinton Estate. In 2015 all the trees that had appeared within the confines of the original hill fort had been felled to reveal an area some 140 metres by 70 metres. Several of the original stone faced earth ramparts still remain and also some of the deep outer ditches. It is thought that it was used as a meeting place or market place rather than a place with dwellings. There have been several others in the Torridge Valley at Buckland, Higher Kingdon, Hembury Camp, Castle Hill at Beaford and Ten Oaks Wood at Roborough, although not all still exist today.

Just over a mile away towards Torrington is the more modern construction of Darracott Reservoir varying in depth down to 27 feet by the dam and covering some three acres. The fish there include carp, bream, roach, rudd, perch and eels. Depending upon which day you went, the observations were quite interestingly different as one observer was serenaded by chiffchaffs and skylarks, one saw a wren with nest building material, there were pairs of ravens and buzzards whilst others saw many different flowers or were irritated by gnats.

However, I am very grateful for all your varied contributions.



wood anemone and lesser celandine by J

Short

### **Halsdon Nature Reserve 23rd-25th April 2021**

Shortly after gathering at the entrance to the reserve a grey wagtail was spotted in the stream below the nearby old stone bridge. This was a good beginning to our walk around the 142 acres of mixed mature woodland and meadows managed by the Devon Wildlife Trust. As we entered the woodland the sun shone down from a clear blue sky through the emerging leaves. Walking along the broad earth path it was particularly pleasant as the trees shielded us from a keen easterly wind. Either side of us wood anemones and celandines were in abundance whilst we were serenaded by a mixture of bird song. The birds were not easy to spot but the clear notes of several blackcaps were heard along our walk together with the repetitive songs of the thrushes.



Early Purple Orchid by Endymion

This is the time of the year when many “firsts” are spotted and it was not long before we came across an early purple orchid with its spotted leaves and emerging flower head. A good photographic opportunity. Soon the stream we were following adjacent to the path merged into the wider, faster flowing River Torridge. This stretch of the river, which runs alongside the reserve, is a popular haunt for otters. Occasionally the clear waters of the Torridge are slowed down as they ripple over a collection of low stone weirs. It was on one of these larger stones that a dipper was seen bobbing up and down in characteristic manner only to be replaced by a very smart pair of grey wagtails.

Further along the path a kingfisher flashed past making its way upstream. This is an ideal habitat for this bird with many bank-side tree branches hanging low out over the water. Ambling on past an old water mill we emerged into an open meadow with the occasional very mature oak trees. Cuckoo flowers were beginning to appear in the damper areas as we made our way towards the bird hide accompanied by orange tip butterflies deciding on which plant on which to lay its eggs.

Unsurprisingly the bird hide was closed due to the Covid restrictions. Nevertheless sitting on a bench outside to eat our packed lunches we were enjoyed magnificent views of the passing river. A pair of mallards could be seen criss crossing the river sometimes accompanied by some ducklings. Moving on across another meadow and looking up into the riverside trees was a wonderful example of a “witches broom”. Another first for the year was a large red damselfly sunning itself on the vegetation.

Further along, where the sandy riverbanks climb higher above the water was an ideal place for migrating sand martins to nest. One was actually seen entering its nest hole but they were not there in the numbers we had hoped for. Notable throughout our journey was the gorse with its brilliant yellow flowers and its attendant hordes of buzzing insects.



Dog's Mercury by Endymion

Leaving the lower meadows and climbing up the steep path through the woods, past the evergreen dog's mercury was the only clump of daisies seen all day at the entrance to the upper parking area. It only remained for us to polish off a cream tea at a nearby farmhouse where we sat outside on the lawned area watching swallows swooping about above the adjacent meadows.

The above report was compiled by John S. Due to the Covid restrictions we could only have a maximum of six in a group, so some went on the Friday and some on the Sunday.

Lists of our observations were taken as always, and are a combination of the two visits. My thanks to those who did all the note taking. If national members would like a copy emailed to them, please contact our branch Chairman Brian Sims.

### **Field Irish Farm, 23rd May 2021**

It was with great reluctance that we had to cancel the above trip due to a horrendous weather forecast covering the very hours we would have been out there. The only good thing was that we were right in doing so as the rain really hammered down and there would have been no shelter to speak of. We should have gone there last year but again it had to be cancelled due to the Covid lock down restrictions. We can only hope it will be third time lucky as John has already booked it for next year! We certainly don't make a habit of cancelling outings as often, if there is bad weather, there is a hide or some woodland to provide some sort of protection. I think it is only the third time in some 25 years that we have had to cancel an outing.



Lesser Butterfly Orchid

On the previous Saturday some seven BNA branch members attended the peaceful demonstration at Barnstaple to protest against the latest planning application for the former Yelland Power Station site. Did you manage to see us on BBC TV? There is still time to write in and object either on line at [planning@northdevon.gov.uk](mailto:planning@northdevon.gov.uk) or by letter to M/s Jean Watkins, Planning Dept, North Devon District Council, Lynton House, Commercial Road, Barnstaple, EX31 1DG, reference application no 60823 Yelland Quay. Your effort should arrive before the next planning meeting which is on June 6th at Barnstaple Rugby Club.

If you don't know what to put here are a few ideas. They are intending to build hundreds of expensive houses on a flood plain on top of 700 tons of buried asbestos. It is estimated that as it is so large it could take 13-15 years to complete the project with some 64 lorries daily coming along the B3233 to service the work. Once completed the subsequent traffic would mean getting into Barnstaple and possibly Bideford more of a nightmare than it is now. If anyone wants a new property in Yelland there are several developments taking place at the moment.

The site is next to the RSPB Isley Marsh reserve and the adjoining Gaia Trust reserve at Home Farm Marsh. By the time it is completed there won't be any wildlife left. It is also immediately across the river from the first UNESCO biosphere in the country and is exactly in the centre of the extended biosphere area. The council ducked out of a decision at the last planning meeting. There have been about 1000 letters of objection and one of support. A petition with some 6000 signatures I am told counted as one objection.

We can't all be wrong.

In my view the council are set to destroy the very reason why people come to live here.

**N:B: Update - Regarding this disastrous planning application by North Devon Council (NDC) to build a housing estate/café/restaurants etc. on top of 700 tons of buried asbestos on our Tav Estuary, many of us wrote in letters of objection and we are delighted to say that on this occasion, we won the day and the planning application has been thrown out!!! That's a tremendous victory for wildlife.**

### **Challacombe Farm. June 26th 2021**

For over 20 years Challacombe farm has been managed under agri-environment schemes such as Higher Level Stewardship. This has enabled it to balance the needs of conservation, archaeology and landscape but allowing access by the public. The farm, which is part of the Duchy of Cornwall, covers some 750 acres of the Dartmoor National Park and varies in altitude from 1000 to 1700 feet above sea level. This has created a diverse range of habitats supporting a wide selection of wildlife. No chemical spraying or artificial fertilizer is used. The primary object is to facilitate the creation of a habitat rather than the farm providing for livestock.

Arriving under a cloudy sky we parked in an ancient meadow situated below the farmhouse with the clear waters of a Dartmoor stream bubbling alongside. Mature trees dotted the meadow and swallows were swooping under their branches and across the sward towards the stream in their quest for flying insects. A quick stroll along the bank of the stream produced the unusual monkeyflower with its colourful red and yellow flowers.

Carrying on down through the valley under an overcast sky with occasional drizzle we nevertheless considered ourselves to be fortunate as on either side of us the tops of the moors were completely hidden in the Dartmoor mist. Passing one of the artificially created ponds on a day like this, it was obvious we were not going to see much in the way of butterflies, dragonflies etc.. However, yellow iris shone brightly at us and a marsh St John's-wort was identified.

The farm has a wealth of archaeology and beside the ponds was a squarish block of local granite with a hollowed out depression in it. Tin was mined in this area for hundreds of years and this 700 year old block was used as a tin mould. Crossing the stream, we made our way up through a steep wild flower meadow. Swathes of eyebright and yellow rattle greeted us but the star was the greater butterfly orchid. Climbing up over the steep meadow, the mist lifted from the tops of the surrounding moors giving us magnificent views across the valley. Walking over the top of the meadow and down again through further meadows to the valley below we were shown a stream which had been artificially zigzagged down across the slope with planted shrubs and strategically placed boulders to help reduce the speed of the flow of the water and create a semi-boggy "Rhos" pasture.

The farm has good examples of this pasture, with Dartmoor itself having about 20% of the national acreage. It is a boggy habitat made up of purple moor grass interspersed with devil's-bit scabious, orchids, marsh marigolds and many other unusual plants. Amongst these we were able to identify cotton-grass, brooklime, bogbean, bog pimpernel and large standings of heath spotted orchids. This range of plants provide nectar for critically endangered insects such as the bog hoverfly and marsh fritillary butterfly



Bee Orchid. J Short.

Coming out on to a lane a redstart kindly perched on a nearby gate post for all to get good views of it. Apparently there are two or three breeding pairs on the farm. After a bite to eat we had a quick walk alongside the stream up the valley with the moors rising steeply away from us on both sides. Just when we were deciding to call it a day a very smart redpoll appeared atop a nearby bush. A good end to the walk and we hurried back to the cars as very heavy rain began to fall. Off now along the winding lanes for a cream tea at nearby Widecombe in the Moor before driving off Dartmoor in what seemed like a cloud burst. Thanks to Norman and Julie for keeping the bird and flower lists.

John Short.

**N:B** - If you buy anything from Amazon use Amazon Smile (nothing to do with Amazon prime) as they donate a percentage of the sale price to charity, so make sure you say your nominated charity is The British Naturalists' Association. It will cost you nothing extra.

### **BNA Trustees**

The BNA are looking to increase the number of trustees especially from the far flung branches like ourselves. They are going to hold meetings on zoom so it would not involve any travelling. Anyone interested please contact Steven Rutherford by email on "srutherfordmbna@gmail.com"

### **Forest of Dean. June 7th-11th 2021**

Some 14 members of the Taw and Exmoor branch were on this trip which was postponed from last year. So in early June we set off in the anticipation of getting some good views of peregrine falcons, red kites and possibly wild boar. Some avoided the road widening scheme on the link road between Barnstaple and South Molton so we were pleased to arrive at Gordano's for coffee more or less on time although it took some time to work out the correct permutations on the self service drinks machine.



Forest of Dean. S Madden

Having congratulated ourselves on coping with potential traffic jams and technological machines we thought we would treat ourselves to the picturesque route along the Wye Valley to go to the hotel at Whitchurch. However after going along this road for some time we found the road was closed and had to go back quite a way to find a diversion route. Subsequent enquiries revealed that this road had been closed for some five years! We did eventually arrive at the hotel on time ready for our afternoon walk as swifts and a hobby swooped overhead.

Whilst getting ready John S couldn't find his walking shoes although he was convinced he had remembered to bring them. After much searching he found them on John B's feet. Having sorted out the ownership and location of the footwear we set off on a short journey to the Doward Nature Reserve. The first item of note was a rare (to us) white helleborine, down to the former limestone quarry where there were various whitebeam trees (14 different varieties we were told) and rock rose. A holly blue and speckled wood were the only butterflies of the day plus a wood mouse busying itself on a branch nibbling off the leaves. Some went on further to King Arthur's cave and saw a redstart whilst others went to another reserve nearby and had a spotted flycatcher.



Sloe shield bug E Fowler

Back to the hotel with drinks on the lawn and dinner on the terrace. No Devonshire cream but the strawberry and prosecco truffle (spelt trifle on the menu) was very tasty. After a very hot night, where sleep had been a bit difficult we all arrived at breakfast at our allotted time. No muesli but the eggs were rated very highly. This was the day the birders had been waiting for as we were off to the RSPB Nagshead reserve, famed for the chance to see lesser spotted woodpeckers and goshawks. The wild flower meadows had been trashed presumably by the wild boar but a nearby pond had huge shoals of tadpoles with common blue damselflies and broad bodied chasers darting about above it.

Down past an impressive stand of Douglas firs to a hide from which we saw redstarts, spotted flycatcher, tree creeper and a very smart looking chaffinch. Around to the Cannop Ponds and in glorious sunshine we had swooping house martins, grey and pied wagtails, a nesting mute swan, jay, coot, moorhen, little grebe, juvenile great crested grebes and even a lesser black backed gull dropped in for a while. Besides the usual mallard, tufted duck and greylag geese were several mandarin ducks. Along the footpaths we had a beautiful demoiselle plus small white, speckled wood and brimstone butterflies. Dinner at the hotel, again outside on the terrace with swifts flying overhead and a blackbird serenading us.

Before we set off the following morning a lovely bullfinch was seen at the hotel. Today's visit was to Pentwyn Farm which has extensive wild flower meadows supervised by the Gwent Wildlife Trust and their initial use of green hay (this has also been done at the Devon Birds reserve at Godborough). Having navigated down the A40 and around some very narrow lanes we arrived at the farm only to find we couldn't reach the parking area due to a couple of BT vans. They were soon persuaded to move and when we got to the reserve parking area we came across a member of the Gwent Wildlife Trust and he kindly volunteered to show us around.



Group Members at Forest of Dean. J Short.

The meadows produced a stunning panorama of a sea of yellow buttercups swaying in the gentle breeze topped by swathes of red from the sorrel. Amongst the densely populated buttercups were mouse-ear, red and white clover, hogweed, cow parsley, pignut, eyebright, ox-eye daisies, yellow archangel and yellow rattle. But besides the common spotted orchids was the best find – greater butterfly orchids. You would have expected to have hordes of insects and butterflies with all these flowers along with birds preying on them although we did have the occasional small white, common blue and small skipper butterflies plus a single red admiral and a painted lady. There was the odd fly by from a swallow or by a house martin or by a swift, a dashing visit by a magpie, a languid fly over by a buzzard and a tree pipit doing its parachute flight plus blackcaps and robins twittering in the background. To add to the variety was a club tailed dragonfly and azure damselfly plus burnet companion and silver barred moths.

Back to the hotel for replenishment and off to Symonds Yat which was only a few miles away. With great anticipation we drove higher and higher and only had to walk a few hundred yards to the top. Not a peregrine in sight although it was claimed that they had been breeding there for hundreds of years. From the top of Symonds Yat which is 504 feet above sea level you could see the roof and period chimneys of our hotel whilst 21 miles away were the Black Mountains. Several Canada geese were down on the River Wye and six roe deer grazed amongst the sheep. After another good dinner, it was card games before bed.

After some debate the following day it was decided to go to a small reserve known as Dixton Embankment rather than the Fiddlers Elbow Woodland Trust reserve. What a wise decision it turned out to be as it was only a quick trip down the A40 and then turning off suddenly into an unmarked no through road.

The reserve was noted for its orchids and we were not disappointed as there were common spotted orchids as far as the eye could see but furthermore there were bee orchids, pyramidal orchids and common twayblade. Other flowers included bird's-foot-trefoil, cowslip, yellow rattle, tufted vetch, angelica and wild parsnip. Flitting amongst this profusion of flowers were both banded and beautiful demoiselles and then the other stars of the show both male and female white legged damselflies. We criss-crossed the Wales/England border several times in this reserve. Incredibly in such a quiet spot between the A40 and the River Wye there were hardly any birds. In fact the only one seen was a blackbird plus flying over a buzzard, raven and herring gull. Perhaps the partial eclipse of the sun had affected them. There were several dormouse boxes so it was obviously an area where dormice are expected but we did see a cockchafer, slow-worm, mayfly, toad and a rabbit. It was then back to the hotel for a refreshing drink.



white legged damselfly

In the afternoon, we had hoped to go to the Butterfly Zoo which was just across the road from the hotel but it was closed due to the Covid restrictions so we opted for a short boat trip on the River Wye. In the short time we were afloat we clocked up 18 different birds including mandarin ducks, pied and grey wagtails and innumerable mallards and Canada geese. We went past the 700 year old St Dubricius church with a magnificent tulip tree in the grounds and another tree full of mistletoe. There was a shrine in the churchyard to the wife of the person who came from this area and was credited with the establishment of Toronto in Canada.

Our final day had arrived. Some had to go straight home due to other commitments, others were going on elsewhere but the remainder had to decide where to visit on the way home. Should it be the Newport wetlands, Cheddar reservoir, the Chew Valley Lakes or the Somerset Levels. The last one was chosen and it was just as well as the traffic on the M5 in the Bristol area was horrendous.

The other reason for choosing the Somerset Levels was that there had been sightings of a river warbler there. Not the most colourful bird but with an average of one a year appearing in this country, it was worth a detour. After a short walk from the Ham Wall reserve car park we all obtained good views of this most obliging bird as about every ten minutes or so it would pop up from the base of the reeds for all to see. In the meantime there had been superb views of a hunting marsh harrier and a pair of great white egrets. A cuckoo was heard and was probably the only one heard on the entire trip.

It had been an excellent trip with lovely warm weather, a comfortable hotel, good food, good company and some very impressive sightings culminating in a UK lifer for us all although we failed to see any wild boar, goshawks, lesser spotted woodpeckers or red kites.

Our thanks to Elizabeth for organising the hotel, walks and the weather and to those keeping the lists.

Brian Sims



Forest of Dean. Sam.

**Countisbury, Sunday 25th July 2021**

The parish of Countisbury lies on the northernmost coast of Devon within the Exmoor National Park. Jutting out into the Bristol Channel it's steep and rugged coastline offers spectacular views in all directions. Meeting in the car park by the ancient burial site of Barna Barrow a feint sea mist threatened to engulf us. Luckily it was only temporary and pullovers were quickly removed as we set off along the earthen footpath across the coastal heath. All around us the colourful hues of the red bell heather were abundant interspersed with the occasional pinks of cross-leaved heath. Ling was everywhere but had yet to mature to its full pinkish bloom. Meadow pipits flitted around sometimes alighting on top of a shrub.

Rising up to the high part of the peninsular at over 300 ft above sea level we came upon a healthy looking group of Exmoor ponies. There were several herds of these wild animals which are monitored by the Mousie Trust. They are good at conservation grazing, removing scrub and rough grasses and in turn encouraging wildlife and plants.

Looking out over the sea from our vantage point a few fishing boats and pleasure craft could be seen and a small sloop was gliding over the wave-less sea in a light breeze. In the near distance were the colourful rooftops of Lynton and Lynmouth nestling contentedly into the cliff edge landscape.

Descending from the trig point down towards the foreland, beside us the white flowers of stonecrop, the blue of the scabious and the proudly standing pennywort grew out from the adjacent stonewalling. A wheatear appeared atop a nearby standing of gorse. On reaching some level ground it was decided to eat our packed lunches on the clifftop edge whilst drinking in the views of the various sea colours stretching out to the horizon. Far below us gulls cruised amongst the shoreline rocks and a kestrel gave us a flypast.

Fully replenished we made our way back along the cliff edge footpath encountering occasional clumps of tiny sea spurrey and dispersing small flocks of meadow browns. The aroma of the now abundant gorse wafted up our nostrils and a few bathers could be seen like tiny specks on a sandy beach way below us.

Our next goal was the tiny Norman church of Countisbury. Entering the churchyard swallows swooped above the gravestones of the ancient villagers who had walked this same landscape before us. Swallows' nests clung to the walls inside the church porch, one of which held some chicks which were it's second brood. Some of us took the opportunity to spend a little time inside the church to take advantage of its calm and cooling atmosphere.

It was then decided to walk down through a nearby meadow to a pond below. Before reaching the pond we could see it had dried up due to the current heatwave. However, our journey was not wasted as a clump of purple creeping thistle beside the path was found to be alive copulating soldier beetles and amongst them was a rare dark green fritillary butterfly. Further up the path were both ringlet and small copper.

To finish off the day we were invited back to Jane's nearby beautiful house standing in its glorious colourful gardens and surrounded by the green hills and valleys of Exmoor. A live mole was found on some paving in the garden and was relocated to an adjoining field.

Our final task of the day was to give our opinions on the two varieties of cream which came with the cream tea. A very pleasant task as house martins gave an aerial display above us.

Thanks to Norman and Brian for the bird and butterfly lists and especially to Jane for her hospitality.

*John Short.*



Hazel Nuts J Short

### **Meeth 15th August 2021**

Once again we found ourselves visiting the wonderfully diverse Meeth nature reserve, formerly a large site for extracting clay but now owned and run by the Devon Wildlife Trust. Habitats here vary from two large lakes to smaller ponds with adjacent woodlands, bogs and grassland.

On arrival our DWT guide was nowhere to be seen, apparently turning up an hour before schedule and leaving just before we arrived. However, this was not a great problem as most of us knew our way around from previous visits. Driving up through the narrow lane leading to the car park, either side of us the thick lush Devon hedgerows gave us vibrant displays of a variety of wild flowers. Amongst them the orange/yellow of toadflax, the large mauve flower heads of hemp agrimony and pinks of the willowherbs. These flowers gave us a lovely start to the day but with a tinge of sadness as they gave an indication of Summer coming towards its end. It was not long after our group left the car park that a great spotted woodpecker was seen alighting at the top of a tall tree. Shortly after a family of long tailed tits were observed flitting through the nearby woodland.

Meeth reserve is host to 14 species of dragonflies and damselflies but with overcast skies and the occasional shower our hopes of seeing any were not too high. Walking up the wide stony pathways under-laid with clay a few butterflies, mainly gatekeepers, fluttered around the path side shrubbery and a green woodpecker was heard waffling in the distance. Hazelnuts were now making an appearance and the hawthorns were displaying their bright red berries.

Soon it was packed lunch time and we settled down in a favourite spot on wooden benches beside a pond. Our timing was perfect as the heavens decided to open up but we were in a good sheltered spot with overhanging foliage. Purple loosestrife was still growing by the pond edge and shoals of fish darted about just below the surface of the water. The general consensus was that they were roach with their prominent red fins running along their bodies towards their tail fins. A few pieces of bread were thrown into the pond and it made an interesting spectacle to see several of the fish feeding on it, simultaneously attacking from all sides.

With the rain easing off we made our way up to the higher part of the reserve passing numerous spiders' webs among the gorse. The paths were now wetter and clay began clinging to our boots. The raucous call of a jay was heard and a little further on we were greeted by a small group of Exmoor ponies with their characteristic white muzzles. These ponies are moved around the reserve to help with the biodiversity.

Arriving at the top of the rise we paused to take in the breathtaking view of a large lake spreading out below us. A cormorant seemed to be doing likewise as it perched high up on a dying tree beside the lake. It was time to head back now and never too late, a blue damselfly made an appearance before splashing our way back along the lower track through the puddles and wet clay to the car park. Off now for our cream tea on the expansive lawn of an old farmhouse. As we drove down the narrow lane a sparrowhawk flew overhead

before plunging into the top of the lane hedge. Sitting at our outside table underneath a large umbrella the



weather brightened up and a few swallows swooped above us.  
Female banded demoiselle by E Fowler

### **Upcott Grange Farm, Sunday September 26th 2021**

Bumping along the narrow, twisting, up and down lanes of the West Devon countryside, we finally reached our destination. This was Upcott Grange Farm lying close to Roadford reservoir. The owner, Derek Gow, has been gradually rewilding the farm since 2005 with the aim of giving nature a space by a reduction in management and grazing pressure. It is 300 acres of marginal land and farming has ceased only to become a centre for British wildlife. The farm income has now been replaced with money from eco-tourism. Shepherd huts are located around the farm offering opportunities for wildlife watching and photography. Derek also runs a consultancy business, offers writing and photography courses, builds film sets and has supplied animals for several national reintroduction projects.

Chiefly among these are water voles which he breeds in numerous outdoor cages with a male and female in each. A popular part of their diet seems to be apples and various vegetables. Four or five litters are produced each year resulting in around 1000 young. These are carefully sexed before being sent off to carefully selected rewilding sites.

Our enthusiastic guide Karen initially showed us around several outbuildings housing various animals bred to be released into suitable sites around the country. First off was a beaver whose hind quarters could be seen poking out from its bedding. Another shed gave us a better photographic opportunity with three lovely furry polecats on show. In the same shed were to be found smaller animals including a shy harvest mouse and bank voles.



Karen, our guide, talking about rewilding at Upcott Farm, pointing to Beaver dam.

Walking along the farm track from the sheds we passed a pair of cranes, a species that is now successfully breeding on the Somerset Levels. Further along a “clacking” noise could be heard which turned out to be from both black and white storks slapping their beaks together as a form of communication as well as doing a sort of dance to get across their messages. These once indigenous birds are the ones famously depicted with new born babies wrapped in blankets suspended from their beaks.

Moving on and up to a viewing platform and after some intense scrutinising we spotted three lynx in their large enclosure. These were not for release although it was suggested they could be let loose on Exmoor to control the ever increasing deer population as deer are one of their favourite prey.

Passing a pond in which some mallard and moorhen were quietly relaxing and after much debate a red breasted goose was identified. Whilst all eyes were focussed on the birds a sharp eyed member identified great bindweed trailing along the fence with its differing bract formation compared with the normal hedge bindweed.

Our party now moved to an area of the farm from where animals could be seen grazing. These included mouflon sheep, water buffalo, Exmoor ponies and iron age pigs. These animals together keep down excessive scrub growth and rough up the soil surface to hopefully encourage wild flowers and subsequently increase the insect populations. Most impressive of these animals were the large Heck cattle with their varying coat colours and impressive large horns. These wild cattle were brought over from Europe and are the nearest thing to the ancient Auroch breed.



Iron Age Pig

There are two families of beavers on the farm which have built dams, resulting in ponds supporting dragonflies, insects and water voles. Beaver activity has also reduced the water flow preventing flooding further down stream.

Finally we ended up on a raised platform eating our packed lunches with Dartmoor behind us and overlooking the feeding of Scottish wild cats with their thick black tipped tails before moving off for our own cream tea.

### **Red Deer on Exmoor Sunday 10th October 2021**

Just when we all thought our Summer was coming to an end, after an early October battering of wind and rain, the weather changed for the better for our trip to see the annual Exmoor red deer rut. The early mist had cleared as we made our way up across the moor between the hedges sporting the fluffy remains of willowherb. The ever present crows flapped around in the sky above us and a covey of red legged partridges scattered in front of the car. Meeting at our usual venue at Hillhead Cross, it was apparent that the good turnout meant us amalgamating into fewer cars before setting off across Stoke Pero Common.



Red Deer by Helen Cox

Arriving at our first viewing point, two groups of red deer could be seen lazily grazing amongst the heather on the far side of the coombe. The lower group were more easily spotted due to their grassy background and numbered about a dozen hinds and a stag with two atop (his highest points) identifying him to be about five years old. Occasionally the stags would chase a hind within their group but it soon became evident that the rut had not yet started in earnest. Nevertheless we had splendid views of the deer and of Dunkery Beacon on the skyline above the deer with its familiar stone pyramid on top. Ruby red cattle were making the most of some late grazing in an adjacent field and sheep dotted the surrounding landscape whilst an emperor dragonfly swooped amongst the heather beside us.

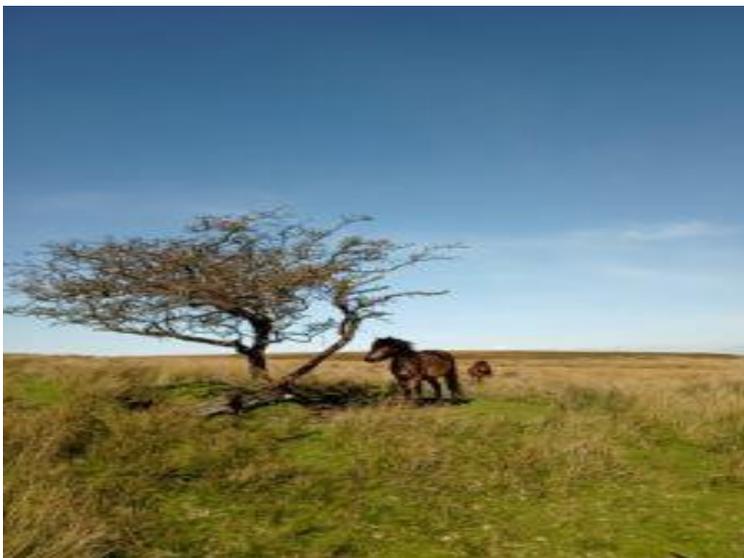
A short drive down to Bagley Combe before setting off to our next vantage point at Alderman's Barrow. It was getting late in the year for wild flowers but the occasional stand of red campion and the ever present tormentil brightened the verges. Surrounding our cars on the grassy roadside was a lovely patch of golden hawkbit. Driving along the lanes we weaved our way between a herd of Highland cattle with their accompanying calves. Exmoor is an ideal environment for these fearsome looking animals with their thick coats and large horns but they are really quite docile.



Highland cattle EB

Arriving at the lay-by overlooking Alderman's Barrow we were afforded splendid views of over a hundred red deer in the valley below us. Amongst them a large stag stood out because of his dark coat. Whilst eating our packed lunches small tortoiseshell and red admiral butterflies fluttered around us. It was pleasant standing on our hilltop some 1500 ft above sea level in a gentle breeze with the sun shining down upon us. Looking out across Porlock Bay over a shipless blue sea excellent views were enjoyed of the Welsh coastline as a buzzard glided overhead.

We decided on a short trip down into the coombe and up the other side to get better views of a group of deer which had broken away from the main herd. This smaller group was dominated by a large stag among the hinds and their young calves, one of which could be seen suckling. At one point this larger stag was seen chasing away a younger, smaller stag to the perimeter of the group. In the foreground was a congregation of some 150 golden plover resting on the sward.



Exmoor Pony EB

One more stop at County gate to get contrasting views with, on one side the Brendon Valley and on the other looking out across the Bristol Channel with a pair of kestrels hovering above the cliff edge. It was then off to Jane's for a lovely cream tea plus banana cake whilst sitting outside in the late afternoon sun. Apparently just after we left, a group of deer walked down the field next to her garden. Our thanks to Jane for locating the deer and the splendid tea.

John S.

## **AGM. Saturday 6th November 2021**

On a cold, wet and windy evening we were glad that this month's event was our AGM (Annual General Meeting) held at The Royal Hotel in Bideford. There were 24 people attending including six members who have recently joined and had not been to the famous Kingsley room before.

To get everyone chatting to their seated neighbour, members participated in a ditloid quiz, which after an initial intake of breath, most people by hook or by crook managed to complete to a greater extent. So well done to you all.

There was a very short report on the state of the branch in which the chairman thanked John S, Julie T, Elizabeth, Sally and Endymion for their contributions to a successful year and was grateful that they were all prepared to carry on in their respective roles of outside trip organiser, indoor speaker evening, five day UK trip organiser and exhibitions, the AGM and the branch web site.

Following this was a slide show of photographs which members had taken over the years. Whilst we could identify most of the flowers, birds, butterflies, dragonflies and insects, we struggled to put names to a lot of the fungi.

Then came the most important part of the evening, when ideas were sought for potential places to visit or things to see in 2022. Several suggestions were put forward including visits to Lundy Island, Braunton Burrows, the River Otter (for beavers) and Seaton Wetlands plus a fungus foray. How many of these John will be able to accommodate in his programme remains to be seen as he already has a trip to the RSPB reserve at Bowling Green Marsh and surrounding areas in January, an indoor meeting in February on "the birds of Lundy" and next year's AGM on November 12th.

Then Elizabeth came up with a suggested location for a five day trip to the Kingcombe Centre in Dorset. By the time we finished the evening she had bookings for all 15 places so would be compiling a waiting list from now on.

Brian Sims

Chairman, secretary, treasurer and general dogsbody.

## **Slimbridge. Sunday 5th December 2021**

Everybody turned up promptly in the dim early morning light to board the coach for our biannual trip to the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust reserve at Slimbridge in Gloucestershire about 2½ hours drive away.

Travelling towards Barnstaple and looking out over the estuary, the early morning mist started to clear revealing the familiar rugged outline of Baggy Point. We normally meet later in the morning so it was nice to see the sun rise up over the distant horizon. Then a quick downpour was followed by a beautiful rainbow. Leaving Barnstaple and looking above the now bare roadside trees, fluffy white clouds dotted the clear blue sky as we travelled eastwards into the circular blazing disc of the sun.

We were the first coach to arrive at this popular and much renowned habitat for birds and wildlife. The Slimbridge Wetlands centre was opened in 1946 by Sir Peter Scott and provides homes for many endangered species and a refuge for many birds which come there to overwinter. The reserve is situated adjacent to the River Severn estuary and consists of a series of ponds, scrapes, wet pastures and reed beds with excellent viewing opportunities from numerous hides.



Black Headed Gull J Short

Leaving the main building we were greeted by a mixture of sound from the many different species of quacking waterfowl. The most magnificent of these were the pure white and healthy looking mute swans with their accompanying cygnets, not yet in their adult plumage. It was nice to see them in such large numbers as they have definitely declined on our local River Torridge where they seem to have been replaced by mallards.



Black Necked Swan J Short

Whilst walking around, there was no escaping the biting north west wind as it blew across the flat landscape of the site as we admired the swirling patterns that it made on the water surfaces.

Although living life in a free environment many of the birds appeared quite tame and it was possible to get quite close to them. One such pond had an interesting mix including tufted duck, smew, coot, mute swan, eider duck, goldeneye and pochard.

Further on and peering out over the grassy wetland from the Martin Smith hide huge numbers of waterfowl could be seen and in the far distance were a pair of cranes. These birds were hatched from eggs imported from Germany and reared in carefully controlled conditions before being released. Some 94 birds have now been released and it is the first time in 400 years that cranes have been living in the wild in the Westcountry. Some can be monitored and tracked as they have been fitted with GPS tags.

On now to the Estuary tower offering wonderful views across the wetlands to the River Severn, whilst eating our packed lunches. A crane gave us a fly past before landing its large body on long slender legs in an almost upright position before settling down and plunging its lengthy beak into the soft pasture to feed.

After an interesting day which included sightings of pink flamingos kept indoors because of the cold weather, roe deer racing across a distant meadow, watching the feeding of the otters, viewing water voles and tiny harvest mice it was off to our final destination and to warm ourselves up whilst watching the “feeding frenzy” from a comfortable indoor venue.

Although the bird numbers seemed to be down on previous years it was still very impressive as hundreds of birds of a variety of species including the much vaunted Bewick’s swans squabbled for food being scattered

amongst them by a warden as he gave us a running commentary. Whilst all this as going on the sky seemed to fill with a mixture of corvids looking for a place to roost for the night.  
Another memorable day.

John S