

## **Stear Marshes, 22nd January, 2023**

Our first outing of 2023 saw us venturing out of Devon and into the adjoining county of Somerset. We ventured into the lowland abutting the Bristol Channel, this area is known as Steart Marshes.

Skirting the snow covered heights of Exmoor reminded us that we were still in the midst of Winter. The most common bird encountered on our journey was the magpie, some as a single bird and some as pairs lingering near the traffic hoping for a roadkill to feed upon.

Stear Marshes, situated on the north Somerset coast between the River Parrett and Bridgwater Bay, is managed by the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust. Completed in 2014 by WWT and the Environment Agency this wetland reserve provides a buffer for nearby housing from rising sea levels. In turn it provides a habitat for wildlife such as otters, owls, waders, wildfowl, water voles and other small mammals. Water levels are managed to ensure the mud is full of invertebrates for the birds to feed on.

These salt marshes lock away thousands of tons of carbon every year providing a long term and sustainable solution in the fight against climate change. Numerous water channels and creeks act as an important nursery for fish.

Donning our warm Winter clothes we set off along the well prepared tracks towards one of the numerous hides dotted around the reserve, Either side of us were small ponds covered in a thin layer of ice. A kestrel was spotted sitting atop a hedge and a flock of wigeon were seen in the distance as a great tit chirped nearby. Alongside the path were newly planted hedges around four to five feet high which will be layered to thicken them out to provide shelter for small birds and mammals. Evidence of this was seen further the path.

Nearer the hide a flock of lapwing graced the skies with their seemingly energy sapping flight. A marsh harrier was seen above the distant skyline and a stoat zipped across the path.

Sitting in the relative warmth of a newly constructed hide, fingers and toes were given the opportunity to thaw out. Looking out over some teasel growing on top of the protective bank we were rewarded with wigeon, pintail, shoveler and avocet. On very high tides the river will flow over the top of these banks creating a salt marsh environment. This will in turn, encourage plants such as glasswort and sea aster. Various ground levels have been created which it is hoped will create a diverse array of species.

Moving on to another hide we decided to eat our packed lunches. Whilst doing so we had the sighting of the day of a hen harrier. It was then decided to drive up to the top most car park and then walk up to the tall hide at the very tip of the peninsula. On the way a merlin was seen sitting on top of a telegraph pole and obligingly stayed long enough for photographs to be taken. Whilst walking up the pebbly channel side path the misty outline of the Hinkley Point nuclear power plant could be seen in the distance. Cattle and sheep graze these salt water lagoons so as to enhance the flavour of their meat.

We arrived at the northernmost hide under slate skies with the murky heights of the Brecon Beacons looming across the Channel. Whilst in the hide, the weather changed, lighting up the white washed houses of Burnham-on-sea across the bay. Pleased with our day's sightings we made our way back to the cars in the face of blazing sun.

JS

Coming next.....

The British Naturalists' Association's  
Taw & Exmoor Branch  
Indoor Meeting will be at:

The Castle Centre, Barnstaple  
Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> February at 7.30 pm



*Discovering Britain's Big Cats -*  
An illustrated talk by Rick Minter, followed by  
discussion and any witness reports

Rick is author of BIG CATS, & podcaster with Big Cat  
Conversations.

Entrance £4.00 includes tea/coffee & biscuits.

For further information contact:  
Branch Chairman Brian Sims on 01271 343607

**Members and non-members welcome!**  
Raffle, sale of new bird boxes and book stall.

The British Naturalists' Association Registered Charity: 295511

### **Annual indoor meeting, 22nd February 2023**

Our Annual Indoor Meeting was held on 22nd February in the Castle Centre, Barnstaple, North Devon at 7.30pm. We were delighted to welcome our guest speaker Rick Minter, expert on Big Cats and author of "Big Cats - Facing Britain's Wild Predators". Rick gave a fascinating insight into how these predators are surviving in the UK. He talked about sightings, people's reactions and attitudes towards the cats and projected colourful photographs throughout his talk, helping us to recognise the tracks and signs that big cats in the wild may leave as an indicator of their presence. Rick's research continues and he is always pleased to hear from anyone who has witnessed sightings of big cats. You can listen to other people's experiences from his many podcasts which can be found on his website at [bigcatconversations.com](http://bigcatconversations.com). You can also contact him at [rick@bigcatconversations.com](mailto:rick@bigcatconversations.com).

It was a fascinating evening and very well attended - so well that the tea, coffee and biscuits almost ran out! The raffle went down well and we still have plenty of nest boxes for sale at only £12.00 a box. Speak to our branch chairman Brian Sims on 01271 343607 if you would like one.

[caption id="attachment\_752" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Rick Minter, Ellie and Duke the dog.[/caption]

### **The lower reaches of the River Torridge, Sunday March 12th 2023**

For our early Spring walk we all gathered on the roadside between Northam and Appledore at a spot called “Bloody Corner”. Here there is an old lichen encrusted slate stone in a wall behind protective metal bars. It bears an inscription stating that near this spot an invading Viking force led by King Hubba the Dane was defeated by King Alfred the Great.



It was from this spot that we wound our way down the narrow lane towards the banks of the River Torridge. It was not long before a flock of redwing were spotted on the far side of an adjacent meadow. These birds will have arrived here last Autumn from their breeding grounds in Iceland and Scandinavia and will soon be departing once more. Lesser celandines decorated the edges of our path. These early Spring wild flowers are members of the buttercup family and are aptly named as the “Spring Messenger”.

Other early flowers were now emerging such as red dead nettle and the white flower heads of the abundant alexanders. A path side wild rose was sending out it’s tender young yellow leaves. It was nice to see the elusive jay in all it’s vibrant colours. Other birds were now pairing up as displayed by two wrens scuttling through a nearby hedge.

Leaving the lane and over a stile into a riverside field we followed the edge of a tree lined stream flowing down into the river. Goldfinches flitted amongst the branches and we stopped to listen to the clear notes of a

song thrush which stayed annoyingly hidden. Down the opposite bank of the stream a few linnets flew overhead. A few years ago a white swallow was seen in this area which attracted several curious birdwatchers.

We skirted a natural marshy basin protected by the river bank. A notice read of water birds nesting in this location. The local owner of this site has, on more than one occasion, unsuccessfully tried to get planning permission to turn it into a marina surrounded by accommodation and supporting boat servicing buildings. Due to local opposition, permission has so far been refused.



Walking through the ever in flower gorse and up on to the river bank we were confronted by a ships graveyard of rotting wooden hulks.. Amongst these were a pair of lovely looking shelducks feeding on the now exposed mud as the tide receded. Some of our group were now getting peckish so we stopped a little further on to eat our packed lunches on a slipway leading down on to a shingly beach. Not far away several teal swam up and down in the muddy waters of the river. Lunches consumed we proceeded to walk along the beach as the first drops of rain were felt. This decided us to take a shorter route up through a steep field alongside National Trust woodland.

Great tits and green finches could be heard proclaiming their presence and bittercress was seen emerging from the base of a hedge. Zigzagging this field was the unusual sight of a man with a metal detector and spade. He was looking for evidence of the aforementioned battle which took place in this area several hundred years ago as stated in the Anglo Saxon Chronicles. Passing clumps of snowdrops we made our way back to the cars having avoided the heavy rain that was forecast for later in the afternoon.

JS

**Horner Wood and Chetsford Water, 22rd April, 2023**



[caption id="attachment\_782" align="aligncenter" width="225"] Redstart taken by Raymond Turner[/caption]

As we slowly wound our way up the western slopes of Exmoor the question on our minds was the hoped for arrival of early Spring migrants. Were we too early because of our late Spring or were we too late to spot them amongst the emerging leaf canopy.

Our first destination was Horner Wood which consists of over 800 acres of predominately ancient oak woodland. It is part of the Holnicote Estate which is owned and managed by the National Trust. It is home to fifteen of the UK's bat species and is a haven for mosses, fungi and lichens.

Several clumps of golden yellow primroses lined the hedgerows and before our arrival a murder of crows arose from an adjacent field. A short stop before the woods saw us looking at a herd of some twenty red deer many of which were "in calf".

Descending through a beautiful steep sided Exmoor valley along a narrow winding lane we arrived at our destination beside a stream which a little further on gushed across the road before continuing its journey to the sea. After a quick cup of coffee we began our steep climb up the path through the woods to the summit about 1000 feet above sea level. The songs of blackbird and chiffchaff accompanied us as a great tit flitted amongst the catkins of a birch tree, either looking for food or nesting material. A green woodpecker was heard "yaffling" in the distance.

[caption id="attachment\_766" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



BNA Field Trip (Horner Wood walk) JS[/caption]

At the top of our climb we paused for a rest so as to enjoy the magnificent vista before us. Looking out over the tree tops and through steep sided wooded valleys we could see the Bristol Channel in the distance. Behind us a siskin flew out from a fir tree and a raven flew overhead as a mixed flock of swallows and

house martins graced the blue skies.

Any confusion over bird song identification could be sorted out as some of our group had the Merlin Bird Song app on their mobile phones.

Moving along we entered into another area of ancient oak woodland where the tree trunks and branches were covered in mosses, lichens and polyploidy ferns. Then to our delight, a redstart was spotted, which was one of our target species, followed by another and then several more. For some of us this made their day but little did we know what was to come.

Back down over the hill now to eat our packed lunches to the accompaniment of a blackcap and the bubbling of the nearby stream before moving on to Chetsford Water. More red deer were seen and then a very new Exmoor pony foal.

[caption id="attachment\_765" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Horner Wood by John Short[/caption]

As we approached Chetsford a hen harrier was flying gracefully over the combe. Down we walked through the narrow valley alongside a stream, which we subsequently crossed, down to its junction with Embercombe Water. Blackthorn trees, which were in full bloom, were beginning to show their young green leaves. Suddenly a bird similar in size and colouring to a blackbird with a white crescent on its chest, appeared. Yes it was a male ring ousel then joined by a female. This was a “lifer” for several of the party. This was followed by a spotted flycatcher and a whinchat amongst the bright yellow gorse.

Coming down from this high excitement we gathered around our mobile phones at 3.00pm to listen to the Government’s emergency alert system. Nothing happened, although, some twenty minutes later some of appliances burst into life but in the meantime we had all heard our first cuckoo of the year.

The day was forecast to be very wet but not a drop of rain fell on us as we had blue sky and hazy cloud all day. Buoyed by our very successful day we celebrated by enjoying a very nice cream tea in the nearby village of Exford.

Yes, it was a day to remember! JS

**Hunter’s Inn at Heddon’s Mouth, 21st May 2023**

[caption id="attachment\_776" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Heddon's Mouth Beach (EB)[/caption]

We arrived in the car park of Hunter's Inn to the clear notes of a song thrush and the melodic tune of a blackcap. Our aim was a walk alongside the clear waters of the River Heddon which had tumbled down from the heights of Exmoor before gushing out into the Bristol Channel.

Skirting the Inn we set off under a clear blue sky and after passing over a couple of old stone bridges we found ourselves on the hard surface of a path adjoining the river. Since recent rains had been followed by warmer, Summer days, there was no shortage of wild flowers surrounding us. Bluebells were still abundant but just beginning to "go over". Interesting names of these flowers include cuckoo's boots, lady's nightcap and witch's thimbles. It is the time of year when we may find many different flower colours bunched against the green background of the grasses. Together with the bluebells we could see the blues of speedwell, the whites of stitchwort and cow parsley, the reds of valerian and campion and the yellows of buttercups and archangels.

Making our way down the valley, steep cliffs rose sharply upwards on either side of us topped by rocky outcrops, A buzzard soared effortlessly in the blue sky above their summit whilst far below a lone heron stood silently in the waters of the Heddon ready to dart it's beak below the surface in search of a fish. Midges, seemingly in their tens of thousands, swarmed above the surface of the river.

[caption id="attachment\_777" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



(EB)[/caption]

Woodmouse who joined us for our packed lunch!

Our hope for the day was to see some rare fritillaries. The population of the high brown fritillary has declined over 90% since the 1970's largely due to the ending of wood coppicing. It is a fast flier. The dark green fritillary, like the high brown has the violet as the food plant for their caterpillars, however it prefers a meadow environment and although we were a little early to see both of these species on the wing, we also failed to find caterpillars. Dark green fritillaries are on the wing in July/August. In August soon after the eggs are laid, the caterpillars hatch. They eat their eggshell and go straight into hibernation until the following Spring. A few fritillaries were seen flying around but apart from the pearl bordered, the rest were too quick to be identified. A pair of orange tip butterflies were photographed in what was some sort of courtship arrangement.

The Heddon Valley is owned by the National Trust and is an SSSI. At various points the Trust have erected wooden information posts with the names of the flowers that may be seen in the vicinity. An insect hotel was amusingly called the "critter castle".

[caption id="attachment\_769" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Critter Castle / Insect Box (EB)[/caption]

As we neared the sea there were clumps of thrift and bladder campion. We found an ideal spot to sit and have our packed lunches looking out over the blue sea. Some razorbills disappeared behind the rocky outcrops and the steep cliffs were dotted with patches of gorse and heather. Grey wagtails paraded up and down the river.

After "drinking in" the beautiful surroundings it was time to make our way back up the other side of the river to the now modernised Victorian Hunter's Inn for our cream tea which we enjoyed on the lawns by a copper beech tree and a couple of wellingtonia. A recently created pond produced a large red damselfly, a beautiful demoiselle plus a moorhen and lots of tadpoles.

Before heading home some of the party visited the nearby Trentishoe church to see the bats hanging down from inside the church roof. A full species list, as always, is available from our Branch Chairman, Brian Sims. JS

### **Braunton Burrows, Sunday 25th June 2023**

Braunton Burrows sits in the heart of the North Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. North Devon and Exmoor is home to Britain's first new-style Biosphere Reserve which is recognised by UNESCO as an area of international importance because of its biodiversity, including rare plants, and consists of over 3,000 hectares. Braunton Burrows is a very important part of this. Owned and managed by Christie Devon Estates, Braunton Burrows affords one of the largest sand dune systems in the British Isles comprising nearly 1000 hectares.



[caption id="attachment\_790" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Branton Burrows EB[/caption]

Popularly chosen by branch members at our last AGM, when together we chose venues, for the then forthcoming programme, we returned to Branton Burrows for our mid summer walk with our leaders John Breeds, who together with his wife Mary afforded an expert knowledge of the flora, fauna and history of the burrows.

Before setting off, John who had set up a moth trap the previous evening showed us some of the captured specimens before setting them free. They included burnished gold, peach blossom, golden Y, heart and dart, buff arches, large yellow underwing, peppered moth, the well disguised buff tip and the very impressive huge privet hawkmoth.

[caption id="attachment\_789" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



John Short and BNA Members with Peppered Moth

EB[/caption]

Setting off along the stony path through the stable back dunes we had lush growth on either side of us. Here we found common nettles around which fluttered a red admiral seemingly looking for a good plant on which to lay its eggs. The more robust the plant, the better chance of survival the emerging caterpillars will have. Serenading us along our way was a blackcap and a pigeon could be heard cooing in the distance. Various insects were pointed out to us such as the dark bush cricket and the well camouflaged green bush cricket. The tall fennel plant, yet to flower, still gave off its strong smell and had a taste equally as strong. We passed good stands of tufted vetch and the trumpet like flowers of the hedge bindweed before emerging into more open scrubland where we walked among swathes of lady's bedstraw, viper's bugloss, restharrow, eyebright, the rare yellow bartsia and the much anticipated orchids, both pyramidal and southern marsh. Elsewhere on

the burrows the aptly named bee orchid can normally be found but this year many have been eaten by the grazing cattle.

Walking on towards the sea the terrain became more sandy around the ever shifting dunes. Evidence could be seen of the rabbit population with their droppings and burrows, from which the area gets its name. Marram grass with its long roots which help to stabilise the sand was now sporting tall spikes from which dangled clusters of spikelets. The area is a prime example of nature's biodiversity with over 25 species of snail to be found here and an abundance of insect life including the leaf beetle which can change its colour.

Flitting ahead of us was a juvenile wheatear, its name having nothing to do with wheat or ears but is a polite euphemism for "white arse" referring to its vivid white rump when in flight. Time for lunch sitting on a sandy bank with a skylark singing to us and being refreshed with a few drops of rain. Later and after getting a glimpse of the sea from a high dune we descended into a more protected slack and soon afterwards arrived at a small pond where we sat amongst numerous flowers to admire an emperor dragonfly, four spotted chaser and broad bodied chaser zooming over its surface.



[caption id="attachment\_785" align="aligncenter" width="225"] Bee on Viper's Bugloss JF[/caption]

A trek back to the car park and then off for a cup of tea and a cake. Whilst sitting on a bench overlooking the receding tide of the river Taw. A lonely heron stood motionless on a sandbank as the cool riverside breeze fanned us and a swift darted overhead.

### **Home Farm Marsh, Yelland. 16th July 2023**

We are now in July and gone are the blazing hot days of a few weeks ago. Instead a fresh breeze blew steadily across the flat landscape of Home Farm Marsh, our destination for the day. Situated beside the Taw/Torridge estuary, this 200 acre farm was purchased by the Gaia Trust, a registered charity, in 2002, with an ambition to farm sustainably alongside nature by creating habitats which in turn encourage wildlife. Ponds and scrapes have been dug out to encourage waders and arable fields are managed to provide food and cover for a range of birds, mammals and invertebrates.

Passing along the earth track between fields of ripening barley, dark clouds scudded across the sky occasionally showing glimpses of the blue sky beyond. Crossing on to the tarmac surface of the Tarka Trail, it was encouraging to see the variety of wild flowers either side of us, having survived the hot weather of recent weeks. A funnel spider was seen patiently sitting in the bottom of its well constructed web. Seven spot and five spot ladybirds were observed on the same plant and a soldier beetle (*Rhagonycha Fulva*) also known as "the hogweed bonking beetle", stumbled across the white inflorescence of a nearby hedge parsley plant.

[caption id="attachment\_795" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Red Admiral EB[/caption]

After dodging cyclists and runners we now left the trail to follow a path across pastureland towards the estuary. Various butterflies fluttered around us and a swallow swooped overhead as we made our way to the bird hide.

Looking out over the deliberately flooded grassland, a mute swan seemed to have the ponds all to itself apart from a few distant mallards. Swifts streaked through the air above the ponds as swallows skimmed the surface. An owl box had been erected nearby and when viewed from another hide a pair of young barn owls could just be seen inside.

Walking further along our earthy track, meadow brown and gatekeeper butterflies were in abundance. A couple of guelder rose shrubs were sporting their drooping red berries. It is a plant which has a preference for growing in damp conditions.

[caption id="attachment\_796" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Speckled Wood EB[/caption]

Finally reaching the estuary to settle down comfortably and eat our packed lunches, an unexpected drama occurred as one of our members momentarily lost his balance and took a tumble scraping his forehead on what was the only bit of concrete within half a mile. Fortunately nurse Sharon was on hand to administer some TLC and a plaster. The tide was out exposing a wide expanse of golden sand. Looking out over an upturned fibreglass boat covered in seaweed, a great black-backed gull circled around before settling itself down on the sand. As we absorbed magnificent views across the estuary of the distant Baggy Point, and the high dunes of Braunton Burrows on the skyline, an overhead skylark serenaded us.

Suitably refreshed we made our way along the bank adjacent to a tamarisk hedge. This shrub is resistant to the salt air so grows well in this location. It has been coppiced, thus providing a dense shelter for

wildlife. Reaching the end of the marsh, we passed through a gap in the hedge to find ourselves on the estuary beach showing clumps of pinkish/blue sea lavender. Up over the bank to view Saltpill pond and there it was, standing alone, tall and majestic with its yellow bill and long slender white neck. Yes, our sighting of the day, a great white egret and keeping it company in the nearby trees a few grey herons and a couple of little egrets.

Onwards now to a nearby cafe for well earned drink and nice piece of cake.

### **Bossington, Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> August 2023**

[caption id="attachment\_799" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Bossington Cafe J Short[/caption]

For our August trip we journeyed out of Devon across the heights of Exmoor and into the neighbouring county of Somerset, to the picturesque coastal hamlet of Bossington nestling below the hills along the curve of Porlock Bay. Descending down narrow lanes and passing idyllic cottages the road leveled out into the National Trust car park. Shortly after our arrival four buzzards were seen soaring high above the surrounding hill tops.

Suitably clad and with packed lunches safely tucked away in our backpacks, we slowly made our way towards the sea. A narrow water channel, adorned with the bright blue colours of the forget-me-nots, ran alongside our pathway. This stream originating from the heights of Exmoor, was crystal clear. Several groups of pond skaters were seen scuttling across the surface of the water. What was thought to be a small elver moving with the current quickly swam out of sight. A green woodpecker was seen and heard, and butterflies occasionally kept us company.

Through a creaking wooden swing gate, we were soon walking on the pebble ridge which stretched in a curve along Porlock Bay. A couple of grey wagtails searched for food on the pebbled beach as oystercatchers and a little egret made their way along the shoreline.

It was now time for refreshment as we settled down beside a circular, concrete WWII turret with what would have given 180 degree views out to sea and along the shoreline. These were now obscured by the increased height of the pebble ridge caused by the repeated pounding of the sea over the years. Further along stood the remains of an old abandoned lime kiln giving us a glimpse of past activity in this seemingly isolated spot.

On our way again under threatening clouds, we passed through a narrow path with ripening sloes on either side of us, to join the track along the landward side of the ridge as a linnet and some wheatears put in an appearance.

The ridge protects the vast area of salt marsh behind it, which in turn is criss-crossed by several narrow, muddy channels. When the tide rises the area can be flooded with sea water and the salinity is then reduced as the fresh water mixes in as it flows down from the hills. This gives rise to a group of plants which have adapted to survive these conditions.

Close to the ridge grew isolated pockets of the unmistakable rock samphire and in contrast with the lovely greens and yellows of this plant, were the white flowers of sea campion and clumps of the bright yellow bird's-foot trefoil. Well into the salt marsh, the most conspicuous flower was the sea aster. Growing in loose clusters they displayed striking yellow disc centres surrounded by purple rays.

[caption id="attachment\_800" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Sea Aster J Short[/caption]

Walking across a well constructed boardwalk we made our way back alongside crops of ripe barley to a cafe where several cream teas were consumed and we were pleased to have ended our walk having avoided the rain. Those that took the coastal route home had breathtaking sea views obscured by the drizzly rain. JS

### **Calstock Nature Reserve. Sunday 10th September 2023**

Last month's trip saw us heading across the Devon border into neighbouring Somerset. This month we headed in the opposite direction just over the border into Cornwall to the picturesque village of Calstock. The village lies on the banks of the River Tamar, which largely separates the two counties and is famous for its magnificent viaduct.

[caption id="attachment\_804" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Viaduct Calstock by J Flacke[/caption]

Our destination was the recently created riverside wetland, lying adjacent to the village, which has transformed the valley landscape. Gone are the fields of damp pasture and wire fences and in their place lie muddy creeks and shallow pools fringed with reeds. Water from the Tamar has been allowed in to act as an

overspill, thus protecting the low lying properties in Calstock from flooding. It is now a 14 hectare wetland sanctuary for wildlife.

Strolling along the raised earth bank following the winding river eastwards from the viaduct, a female stonechat perched atop some reeds which are now beginning to colonise the reserve. Lining the inside of the embankment were swathes of docks amongst which fed an assortment of beetles and the odd cricket.

[caption id="attachment\_805" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Speckled Bush Cricket by J Flacke[/caption]

Looking across the marsh a flock of teal were feeding on the exposed mudflats. Some of the males were just starting to show their new plumage. Among the ducks, two common sandpipers were seen displaying - the familiar white feather gap in their plumage and their bobbing movement. Pied wagtails scurried over the mud's surface as swallows flew overhead still enjoying our late Indian Summer with no thoughts of migration.

Approaching a newly constructed wooden bridge spanning a gap where the embankment had been breached to create this intertidal habitat, a water rail could be heard shortly followed by the sound of a moorhen. Leaning on the bridge hand rail with the incoming tide rushing into the marsh below were shoals of small fish disturbing the water's surface. No doubt these will have provided a meal for the little egret waiting patiently on the far side.

[caption id="attachment\_803" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Dock Beetles Mating by J Flacke[/caption]

Bringing a splash of colour to the salt marsh, small clumps of purple loosestrife showed up markedly. Against this background and close to a stand of sea aster we settled down on top of a grassy bank to eat our packed lunches before exiting the reserve and continuing our circular walk up a sharp uphill climb through mixed woodland. With this sudden change of habitat, the air around us became much cooler and further reminders of the approaching Autumn appeared in the form of the ripened fruits of hawthorn, rose and blackberry.

Nearing the top of the climb we became aware of the area's history surrounding us as tall chimneys could be glimpsed through the trees, remnants of the mining for copper, tin and arsenic, long since abandoned. Looking down at the Tamar far below us, still winding its way in from the sea, the views were breath taking.

Wild Arum also known as Lords and Ladies, showed their bright red clusters of fruits now the leaves had withered and gone. We carried on down the narrow winding lanes to Calstock where we enjoyed an ice cream in the shade of a parasol as boaters, kayakers, swimmers and paddle boarders enjoyed the late Summer sunshine. Muscovy ducks waddled among the visitors. JS

### **Exmoor red deer rut, Tuesday 24th October 2023**

It is the time of the year when the nights draw in, the air has that nip in it and when all manner of insects seek a warmer environment indoors whilst trying to avoid cobwebs which seem to become more abundant. Outside, Autumn has begun its senescence with flora peacefully receding having achieved its objective to ensure new growth in the following year. Unlike their surroundings, the red deer stags of Exmoor, having built themselves up on Summer nourishment, suddenly spring into life with the onset of the rutting season.

[caption id="attachment\_810" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Red Deer on Exmoor by J Flacke[/caption]

This year we headed for a different, less well known location. A charm of goldfinches swooped over the tops of the roadside hedges as we made our way up the moorland slopes and soon we found ourselves looking down on the sparkling waters of the River Barle far below us as it twisted its way through the surrounding hills. On arrival at our destination we were greeted by a loud, continuous chattering of starlings perched in a nearby tree. It is known that there are enough of these birds in this area to form a murmuration.

A short walk down a stony farm lane and we found ourselves looking at up to 100 deer. These seemed to form three main groups. Two of these groups were hinds with their dominant stag and a third group in a field further up consisting mainly of stags. Occasionally one of these would venture down to the lower field only to encounter the large resident stag putting himself between the interloper and the females. The size of the resident stag with his four points atop accompanied with his loud roar was enough to make the newcomer think twice and beat a hasty retreat. Sometimes this routine will see two stags walking together in parallel sizing each other up. This may be enough to deter the smaller animal. So it is only occasionally that we see a pair of more evenly matched stags interlocking antlers for the right to breed with the females.

The red deer is our largest mammal and their numbers are increasing. It is thought there are now over 3000 on Exmoor forming the highest density in the UK. After the rut, males and females form separate groups for much of the year until the following year's rut. Younger stags stay with the females until about two years of age when they will join the older stags. Calves are usually born June/July time. Antlers are shed at the back end of the Winter. New antlers will begin to grow. At first they are soft or in "velvet". Around August time these sensitive antlers become itchy and the stags look for trees or shrubs to rub the velvet off leaving the hard bone horn which is then ready for action in the coming rut.

So it was now onwards to other locations on the moor, driving through avenues of beech trees, now beginning to shed their leaves. At one location a large stag with his hinds, seen silhouetted on top of a hill, appeared to be caught in a pincer movement, as two younger stags approached on either side of him. Again common sense prevailed as they both did an about turn and retreated.

[caption id="attachment\_811" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



Exmoor Sign by J Flacke[/caption]

At a further spot, modern technology made its appearance as a drone hovered into sight, maybe not a good thing for deer trying to find a quiet spot for other things. It was now time for some refreshment as Jane had invited us back to her lovely Exmoor home for a cream tea and cakes. As we drove towards the Bristol Channel coast, Wales showed up crystal clear in the afternoon sunlight and to finish off the day we had a red kite hovering overhead.

### **AGM, 11th November 2023**

This year the AGM was held at The Royal North Devon Golf Club at Westward Ho!

As an experiment members were given the choice of selecting two courses from a starter, main course or dessert. This enabled those who would like to attend but who can't eat a heavy meal in the evening. To occupy people when there was a course, which they were not eating, all participants were given a 30 question natural history quiz and a page of dingbats to solve. The prizes for the most correct answers were not awarded as there had been too much "horse trading" of answers going on during the course of the evening!

During the year branch members have taken lots of photographs and selected ones were put on a flash drive to be shown at the dinner. On the practice run all worked perfectly well but on the evening they refused to cooperate so we had to make do with a quick look at the thumb nail pictures. We then had a quick resume of the year. John S had taken us to some perennial favourites such as Horner Wood, Braunton Burrows and Bowling Green Marsh as well as some new places like Bossington and Calstock. Julie T organised the annual indoor meeting where we had a presentation on "Britain's Big Cats". This turned out to be very appropriate as all through the year there have been reports in the media of various big cat sightings. In June we had our five day trip. This year Elizabeth F took us to Cornwall and we visited lots of places from our base in Lostwithiel. Having organised these trips for a good number of years she decided it was time to retire gracefully and was presented with a little owl memento for all her excellent efforts. Around to tonight's dinner which Sally B has efficiently organised. Endymion keeps the web site up to date and deals with publicity/press releases. She is also the national young naturalist officer, so if you are looking for an unusual present for your grandchildren, nephews or nieces then enroll them as a Young Naturalist for only £7 p.a.. Endymion can give you all the details as to what they regularly receive.

My thanks to all the above and I am pleased to announce that John, Julie, Sally and Endymion are happy to carry on for another year. So we just need someone to organise the five day trip in June 2025. The treasurer reported that we have nearly £1800 in the bank account. You may wonder why we need this but it covers stationery, postage, exhibition fees and equipment, leaders on walks where they belong to an organisation



other than the BNA and the hire of the annual speaker and hall in case we don't take enough entrance money on the door.

We then came to the most important part of the evening where members suggest to John possible monthly outings for next year (except for February and November). Nobody was allowed home until he had something for each month. Details were then circulated describing the five day trip to Dorset next year on June 10th to 14th, where we shall hope to see a variety of birds, flowers, butterflies and reptiles. I have provisionally reserved 20 places at The Kingston Country Courtyard near Wareham. Tel 01929 481066 but each individual must make their own booking and say it is part of my reservation. I have booked on a bed and breakfast basis @ £103 per night per person except for the first night which also includes dinner @ £128. On other nights we can decide where to go, as we have done in the past, when we are there.

Please let me know when you have booked because nearer the time I shall be sending details of the various places we can visit such as Arne, Studland and Brownsea Island. There was general satisfaction about the meal, service and location this evening, so we have booked the AGM again for next year on Saturday 9th November 2024.

Brian Sims, Branch Chairman.

### **Annual Birdwatching Bonanza. Sunday, 10th December 2023**

As the great Atlantic swell funnelled into the narrower English Channel, it sped up before branching off into the various estuaries around the adjoining coastline. One of these estuaries belonged to the River Exe which flowed up to our destination for the day, Bowling Green Marsh, situated on its eastern bank on the outskirts of the Devon town of Topsham. Renowned for its number and variety of birds, this is marked down in our BNA calendar for a regular visit.



Wigeon

First we started our journey half a mile to the north at Dart's Farm on the flood plain of the River Clyst, a tributary of the Exe. Here, as the heavy rain showers eased, we splashed our way through the puddles along the narrow muddy footpath leading to the farm's open backed bird hide. Peering out through the large droplets of water dripping down from its roof a large flock of brent geese were seen feeding and squabbling on the marshy surrounds. Various birds flew over and around us including a pair of mute swans with their ungainly descent into a pond before majestically gliding off over its still waters. Then suddenly in front of us, the blue streak of a kingfisher before it settled in a nearby tree. Now we could observe the wonderfully vivid colours of the Kingfisher - The Halcyon bird of Greek mythology.

In the stillness, the "ticking" sound of a great spotted woodpecker was heard and it was then seen atop an adjacent tree before flying off in its typical undulating fashion. After a short walk from the windy heights of Dart's Farm we descended to Goosemoor where teal were swimming in the calm waters of the Clyst. A small flock of redwings passed through and then there was the annual sighting of a mistle thrush guarding the berries on several large clumps of mistletoe.

The sun was now making an appearance and the patches of blue sky grew ever larger as we made our way to the bird hide at Bowling Green Marsh. Here we consumed our packed lunches accompanied by the loud whistling sounds emanating from a large flock of wigeon. The resident lesser black backed gull, "Psycho", was again present bullying his way around amongst the smaller birds.

Further down the lane we made our way out to the viewing platform overlooking the Clyst. Here a flock of dunlin were seen scurrying over the far side muddy banks as a few avocets paddled around with their long legs enabling them to feed in waters too deep for most other waders.

Back along the track a goldfinch perched in the hedge with its feathers glinting in the sun and then there was the sighting of an overwintering blackcap. Down to the blustery Goat Walk, and the estuary, where its waters seemed to be nearing the high tide mark. A short stay here before heading back as three turnstones flew in to start feeding on the slipway.

Arriving back at the hide we were confronted by a huge flock of avocets which had probably been feeding on the exposed mud in the estuary. Later these birds became spooked, rising en masse into the air before settling down again, some back onto the same grassy island fringed with reeds, and some into the water. Was the cause of all this disturbance due to a marsh harrier, which had been spotted earlier quartering the far side of the marsh, blending in with the golden brown of the distant trees? It was now time to head homewards as a single cloud turned gold by the late afternoon sun was reflected in the waters of the reserve.

JS