

Ham Wall. Sunday 12th January 2025

What a joy it was not only to drive in the sunshine but to travel on the pot hole free highway of the recently upgraded North Devon Link Road. However, our joy was short lived as when we got to the M5, the slip road to join the motorway was closed off, which entailed a circuitous detour along some of West Somerset's pot holed roads. Despite this we arrived on time at the large car park at the RSPB's reserve at Ham Wall only to do battle with the most complicated car park ticket machine ever invented.

After a warming drink we set off along the path of the Shapwick Heath reserve and soon came across a large pond with plenty of ducks on it including wigeon, gadwall and tufted duck, plus some coots whilst a kingfisher flashed by and a reed bunting swayed on the reed heads. In the distance a marsh harrier was spotted. On now to the Meath reserve hide where there was absolutely nothing. Those who went in the opposite direction not only had good views of a whiskered otter, who in turn had good views of the BNA members before diving back into the water. At the hide we had panoramic views of more innumerable wigeon plus cormorants and some smart looking pintail. In the far distance a great white egret and a couple of whooper swans but no geese. On the walk back to the car, there was a flock of twittering long tailed tits and fantastic close-up views of a marsh harrier as it hunted over the extensive reed beds. Packed lunches were consumed in a shelter/hide waiting for something exciting to appear but all we got was magpie, blue tit, robin and blackbird.

Time now to get back on the trail but this time in the opposite direction towards Glastonbury. What we hoped was a ring-necked duck turned out to be yet another tufted duck. From a good view point we had great crested grebe in the adjoining lake.



Ham Wall RSPB Nature Reserve EB

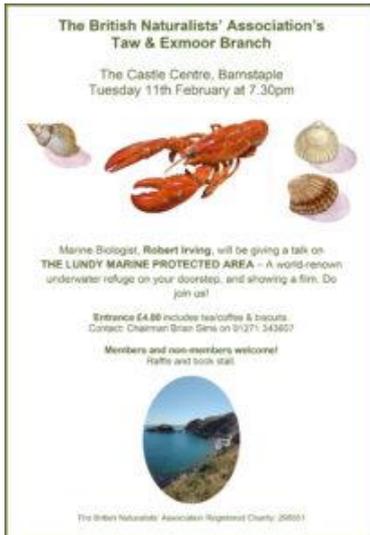
With time to spare before the anticipated arrival of the starlings we took a path only a few inches above the water level alongside, so it was a bit squelchy. There was a little egret in one of the reed beds and a marsh harrier consuming his latest catch. The full moon was now rising in the East as the sun was setting in the West. The photographers took advantage of the sun picking out Glastonbury Tor with a backdrop of dark grey horizon level clouds. We then paddled back to the view point when surprise, surprise we had excellent views of not only one but a pair of bearded tits feeding on the reed heads with their marvellous plumage highlighted in the soft glow of the setting sun.

We now waited for the starlings to arrive, as they eventually did, coming from all directions but because it had been a lovely day they had stayed out feeding longer than usual, so after a quick swirl they disappeared down to roost in the reed beds some distance away. So now it was time for us to disappear as everyone went back to the car and because it had been good turnout, it took 20 minutes to get out of the car park.



Ham Wall RSPB Nature Reserve Sunset EB

Apart from the non-cooperation of the starlings it had still been a super day and in an act of poetic justice the car park ticket machine had a notice on it saying "out of order". B.S



BNA Indoor Meeting Feb EB

Indoor meeting Tuesday 11th February 2025

People kept coming in so at 7.30pm we had to close the doors as there were no seats left! Our indoor speaker finder, Julie T, had obviously found a popular topic. It was all about the UK's first marine protection area which just happens to be near us, off the east coast of Lundy with the speaker being marine biologist Robert Irving.

The variety of marine habitats and species at Lundy is outstanding due to the wide range of environmental conditions which affect them especially in relation to wave exposure, tidal current and the underlying geology. He explained that the area had been the subject of many listings for conservation and protection such as a National Trust reserve, an SSSI, a no take zone, marine conservation zone, OSPAR marine protection area, special area of conservation and a marine nature reserve. Some of which started over 50 years ago but now it is just known as a marine protection area (MPA). Originally it was decreed that there should be just one such area in the UK and it was a race between the Isles of Scilly and Lundy. What clinched it in Lundy's favour was some of the more unusual marine life found off Lundy, such as the number of breeding grey seals, spiny lobsters, cuckoo wrasse, trumpet anemone and the delicate sunset cup coral.

In 2003 a "No take zone" was set up in which all fishing was banned and was the first legally enforceable no fishing area in UK waters. It was a bit like a nature reserve but underwater and extended to about 4 square kilometres. The area was professionally monitored and in the first five years there was an increase in the average size and abundance of the lobsters both within and adjacent to the protected area. Furthermore, there was an increase in the abundance of undersized lobsters which should help replenish the stocks in the surrounding areas.

There are 370 different types of seaweed found around Lundy plus other things such as sea slugs. Robert has been diving in these waters for a good number of years and related how brittle stars (like skinny starfish) tend to gather in groups as they like to be in physical contact with each other often forming what look like carpets on the sea floor. When the tidal flow is strong they still keep in touch with each other and the whole mat is rolled up and swept along the sea floor.

After the interval, he showed us a film about Lundy. This included interviews with people who have varying interests in the creation and effects of creating these protected areas. The general consensus was that they were acceptable if they were properly managed and supervised. We then had the raffle and thanks to those members who donated prizes, it was a quality raffle. After a question and answer session it was time to call it a day and my thanks to all those in whatever way, helped to make it a very successful and enjoyable evening.

Recent sightings:-

There has been a lesser scaup and an eider duck at Skern whist the avocet has been seen at Fremington Pill. The River Mole area has produced bumper numbers including 500 linnets, 600 chaffinches, 15 bramblings and 10 yellow hammers plus red and roe deer and on the river two pairs of goosanders and a pair of dippers. A red kite was seen over Codden Hill, Bishops Tawton. On Sherpa Marsh, two white fronted geese along with a couple of spoonbills.

Otter Estuary Nature Reserve. Sunday March 16th, 2025

The early morning sun beat down on frosted rooftops disguising a biting easterly wind as we left for the River Otter Nature Reserve on the South Devon coast. Roadside hedges occasionally burst forth with the white and yellow colours of blackthorn and gorse plus "lambs tails" which made regular appearances.

Large rookeries were in an advanced state of refurbishment high in the roadside trees. Why did they build alongside a busy road? Was it because of a potential supply of food from road kill, or were they ancient nest sites from long ago. Someone suggested that the higher they build, the better the Summer weather.

Driving down into the estuary car park the English Channel glistened in the bright morning sun. However, nearer the shore the water took on a reddish brown hue. It was thought this may have been the result of a recent large cliff fall of red earth into the sea.



Three Cornered Leek JS

The lower Otter restoration project involved breaching the embankment to create a rare flood plain consisting of salt marsh and mudflats. This resulted in a 55 hectare SSSI. A huge amount of work has been completed with the creation of a new bisecting road, the raising of footpaths, planting of hundreds of trees, the building of several hides and the construction of a new bridge allowing for a circular walk. Even the cricket pitch had to be relocated to a higher position adjacent to the reserve. The mud banks are rich in invertebrates providing food for a wide range of wading birds.

After donning suitable windproof clothing it was not long after setting off that we spotted our first water rail (five in total) of the day where the reeds joined the mud. The reserve was ideal for nature watching with its broad hard earth surface paths close to the wildlife areas. There were frequent gaps in the hedges enabling clear viewing and several well built hides. On one side of the path was a newly planted pussy willow hedge whilst the more mature trees were covered in a mass of lichens.

Redshanks bobbed along the mud surfaces and then a good sighting of a spotted redshank with its slightly longer bill and legs and a prominent white eye-line. Signs of the imminent arrival of Spring showed around us as we passed fast growing swathes of alexanders and a lovely clump of purple violets. A dunnock scurried along the path in front of us before flipping up into a tree and serenading us with its lovely continuous tweet. Maybe the wildlife here are becoming used to the presence of humans as the reserve is also very popular with walkers.

Strolling through this reserve with its large area of mud flats and creeks bordered by older trees it was nice to see several curlews as their numbers have been dwindling over recent years. It was even more of a joy to see its near lookalike, the whimbrel, with its shorter and less curved bill. Looking through the reed beds, behind a clutch of wigeon, a pair of mute swans silently glided down a creek with the outgoing tide. A good days nature watching with some 40 birds recorded in this specific habitat. JS

(Species lists available as always from branch Chairman Brian Sims upon request)

Steps Bridge, Dunsford. Sunday 13th April 2025

The River Teign runs through this reserve, which is run by The Devon Wildlife Trust and is located on the eastern edge of the Dartmoor National Park. The river cuts through a steep sided wooded valley comprising a mixture of tree species many of which are mature oaks. Unfortunately, several of the ash trees have disappeared due to ash die back disease. The ones that have survived seemed to be well out in leaf compared to the oaks. Ash before the oak, then we are in for a soak!



Steps Bridge by EB

As we wandered along the banks of the meandering river the partially leaved trees gave us hope of some good bird sightings. Failing this our senses were being assailed by the varying bird songs of nuthatch, song thrush, wood pigeon, coal tit, robin, great tit, blackbird, blackcap, chaffinch and chiffchaff.

The reserve is noted for its stands of real wild daffodils but the recent spell of very dry weather had put an end to them. However, they were now replaced by carpets of the vivid white flowers of wood anemone in all directions. None more so than in the open glades between the trees. Surprisingly there were no butterflies in these areas.



Wood Anemone by EB

Hazel, which had been coppiced, was the dominant tree in the flat areas beside the river. The resulting wood had been used to create hurdle barriers against humans and animals alongside the parts of the river bank where erosion or slippage had occurred. Previously, soil erosion into the river has had an adverse effect on the salmon spawning. Salmon require a clean stretch of gravel in which to lay their eggs before being fertilised by the males.

We were accompanied by the rippling sound of the sparkling waters as they splashed around stony islands varying in size from small pebbles to large boulders. Occasionally we would come across a sandy cove, the result of rock breakdown over thousands of years.

A sudden flash of movement was a pair of goosanders flying upstream in contrast to three male mallards that drifted effortlessly downstream.



The River Teign by EB

After a leisurely snack beside the river we set off to see a mandarin duck which some of us managed to see. Back now to the cars over a stone bridge with the golden colours of a broom shrub glowing beneath it. Then a wren was seen flitting amongst the tangled roots of a fallen tree.

It was then decided to drive around to the other end of the reserve which was also noted for its daffodils. And there they were! *"A host of golden daffodils dancing in the breeze"*. Well, in reality there were still a lot of them although many had gone over and the wind had dropped.



Fingles Bridge by EB

It was now time to head for the well known Fingle Bridge to have a cream tea alongside the narrow packhorse bridge with its pedestrian safety refuges. Looking up the river through the arches we had glimpses of both dipper and grey wagtail. A lovely day out, super scenery and the forecast rain never materialised. Thanks to Endymion and Brian for the flower and bird lists. JS

Gooseham Mill. Sunday May 18th, 2025

The sun shone down from an azure blue sky as we headed towards the Marsland Nature Reserve at Gooseham Mill on the Devon/Cornwall border. Nearing our destination the flower lined lanes became narrower with their green verges displaying the reds of campions, yellows of buttercups and whites of stitchwort but absent was the blue of bluebells. Greeting us was Kate Langden, a Wildlife Trust woodlands officer, who was to be our guide for the morning. Prior to setting off we all gathered on an old stone bridge under some birch trees with beautiful demoiselles fluttering over the waters below. Here Kate gave us a preamble of this large reserve consisting of 212 hectares of woodland, open glades and meadows. An SSSI, the land was gifted by the Cadbury family (of chocolate renown) and is now managed by the wildlife trusts.



Emerald damselfly by J Flacke

Eighteen species of dragonfly, 34 of butterflies and 500 species of moths have been identified on the reserve. Marsland Water runs down through this picturesque wooded valley before splashing out into the Atlantic Ocean at Marsland Mouth. Trees are coppiced and vegetation thinned out, keeping it low for flowers and insects to flourish.



Beautiful Demoiselle flight by J Flacke

Our main aim of the day was to see some fritillary butterflies. So off we set towards some of the cleared areas. After negotiating a couple of streams and passing an old ash tree covered in tree lungwort we came to our first fern covered glade which was interspersed with blue bells, which we missed earlier on. This reserve is well known for its fritillary butterflies, dramatically increasing the population of the small pearl bordered, which is declining nationally. This year has been earlier than normal for these rare butterflies but it was not long before one was spotted gliding over the bracken tops. Here Kate paused to explain the subtle differences between the two pearl bordered species and their habitat management procedures which included meticulous cutting of the bracken in different areas.

Onwards we walked along the mowed grass paths accompanied by the consistent song of chiffchaffs, to a small pond giving off the unmistakable aroma of water mint. A broad bodied chaser whizzed over clumps of water forget-me-not whilst patrolling its territory.

At the next glade we were rewarded with the sightings of several marsh fritillaries and then a flypast of a brimstone and a speckled yellow moth almost in tandem.



Marsh Fritillary by J Flacke

During our walk back to the cars the notes of a garden warbler reached our ears from deep within the vegetation. A small copper alighted on the ground near its abundant plant food of sorrel and a frog hopper put in an appearance and was duly photographed. We paused again on the old stone bridge under which flowed Marsland Water designating the border between Devon and Cornwall. There was an arrow on top of the stone rampart signifying the exact border. It must have been chiselled out by a Cornishman as it was well over towards the Devon side.

After lunching and thanking our guide we took an energy sapping walk down through the woodland towards the coast and back before retiring to the nearby Rectory Farm tea rooms. Here we sat outside within a lovely enclosed garden eating excellent cream teas. The resident population of birds, mainly house sparrows but including a solitary rook, were on the alert ready to pounce on any uneaten crumbs.

JS

Woodhouse Organic Farm, Sunday June 22nd 2025.

A few miles south of the busy North Devon market town of South Molton lies a 120 acre organic farm nestling on a south facing slope of the beautiful Mole valley. Woodhouse Farm, owned by Brian and Angela Nicholas, is managed with nature in mind under the higher tier agreement with the aim of increasing biodiversity across various habitats and to have a positive impact upon the surrounding landscape. Green hay and seed are harvested and sold to farmers, land owners and community groups to create their own wild flower meadows. Thirty acres of crops are grown to provide seed for the large numbers of wild birds to feed on during the Winter months.

On arrival, Brian, our host and guide for the day, greeted us a cheery smile and looking the part with his hat festooned with an array of pheasant and birds of prey feathers. As we crossed the farmyard the air was full of zigzagging swallows. The adjacent barn had eight of their nests in it. Venturing through the old farm house and out the other side, a red kite glided overhead as we stood beside a small pond which sported a lone water lily.

Onward to the first of many wild flower meadows dotted around the farm. This field, as were several of the others to follow, was an abundance of colour. Prominent amongst the flowers were hawkbits, clovers, plantains, buttercups and yellow rattle.



Flower Meadow at Woodhouse Farm - E Beer

We continued our leisurely walk down over the sloping fields to the winding River Mole down below. As we descended our group passed through Stonehill Copse, an ancient woodland with oak, beech and hazel being the most prominent. One hundred bird nesting boxes have been placed in this wood which have been largely taken up by blue and coal tits. Others have been inhabited by wood mice and hornets. Dormice have also been using dormouse boxes. Winding way down through the trees and waist high bracken we encountered a jet black dor beetle and a bracket fungus. Through the trees could be seen a tree stump which looked as if it was being used as a plucking post for a sparrowhawk as it was covered in pigeon feathers.



Woodland at Woodhouse Farm - E Beer

Emerging out of the woods the land flattened out into another extensive wild flower meadow which was bordered on the far side by the river. In years gone by it was easy to see this lower ground as a water meadow being deliberately flooded to increase its fertility. The object now is to decrease fertility and increase the wild flower diversity. There has been no spraying of any kind on the farm for at least 35 years. Insects are abundant and deer and hares inhabit the fields. Otters pass through along the river and above the waters fly kingfishers, dippers, sand martins and goosanders. Barn, tawny and little owls are present and several species of bat have been recorded on the farm.



Green Capsid Bug on Common Catsear - E Beer

Walking around two large ponds, whilst being serenaded by a blackcap, we encountered a large red damselfly, blue damselflies, emperor dragonfly and some chasers. There have been 14 species of odonata recorded at this site. Skirting around another extensive wild flower meadow someone nearly stepped on a small frog as a pair of mallards flew overhead and a golden ringed dragonfly posed in the hedgerow as we passed a good stand of southern marsh orchids. A packed lunch was consumed as we sat on the river bank and watched some fluttering beautiful demoiselles. Much refreshed we crossed back over this 14 acre meadow to be confronted by a magnificent 225 year old oak tree before our slow climb back up to the farm house where a delicious cream tea awaited us kindly provided by Brian and Angela. A Merlin bird app was left running outside which in the past had recorded the song of a ring ousel which in inspection was coming from the middle of a flock of redwings. A super day out, with none of the forecast rain, in the glorious Devon countryside. Thanks to Endymion for all the lists. JS



BNA Members at Woodhouse Farm - E Beer

Braunton Burrows, 13th July 2025

If the weather forecasters are to be believed our trip today was going to be the last day of the third heatwave we have experienced this year. Arriving at the Burrows car park with the temperature hovering around 30°C it was a relief to find ourselves being fanned a little by a cooling breeze. Nevertheless as there are few sheltering places on this reserve it was decided to restrict our walk to the adjacent scrub and dune grassland area and not venture up over the imposing sand dunes towards the sea. Braunton Burrows, owned by the Christie Estates, is one of the largest sand dune ecosystems in Britain and is at the heart of the UK's first UNESCO biosphere. Today our walk was being led by John and Mary Breeds, probably the most knowledgeable people on this unique habitat.



6 spot burnet moths on viper's bugloss. EB

Our theme today was to discover some of the reserve's wild plant properties commonly seen by us humans as weeds, that have been used in traditional medicine for years. Indeed before the advent of modern medicine, plants were probably the only source of remedies for our ailments.

Before setting off John could not resist showing us a buff tip moth which he had trapped overnight. Later we came across a buff tip moth caterpillar. As we ambled along the hard path there were occasional clumps of meadowsweet with its fragrance filling the air. It is thought to be beneficial for heartburn, joint pain, colds, inflammation and most importantly for flavouring beer. Then there was mugwort with its distinctive smell which could be used as an aid to digestion and has the potential to induce lucid dreaming!

Some of the wildflowers on the Burrows are not often seen elsewhere such as the bright yellow melilot which could be used to treat bruises and sprains. The small purple plant of wild thyme may be used as an antiseptic and a help for sore throats. Self heal is thought to have many uses including an aid in treating inflammation of the bowels as in Crohn's disease. Our common nettle could be used as an antihistamine and a help with arthritis.

Not all plants have a beneficial effect. Ragwort seen growing by the path, with the abundant soldier (bonking) beetles feeding on it, can be lethal to some animals even when dried out and inadvertently fed with hay. Black bryony seen tangled amongst other hedgerow foliage has berries which would be unwise to digest unless used for euthanasia!



Common Blue Butterfly. EB

Having braved the heat for long enough we all took shelter in a small copse for some refreshment and an intake of liquid after which we decided on a further short walk up to some ponds most of which had now dried out to become scrapes. A dragonfly displayed its aerial prowess and larvae could be seen in what was now a small muddy pond. The smell of mint pervaded the air as this plant is known for its pain relief and stress reduction.

It must be noted that there is no medical evidence to back any of these medical claims and they could be harmful and have side effects if not used properly. So after thanking our hosts it was off for some cake and a cooling drink alongside the River Taw. This must have been one of the hottest days for a BNA outing since the walk alongside the Tiverton canal when we all made a desperate dash into the canal side pub for a cooling drink. JS.

Halsdon Nature Reserve, Dolton. 17th August 2025

Once again the sun shone down from a clear blue sky onto our BNA group as we assembled at the Halsdon Nature Reserve. This 57 hectare reserve is owned and managed by the Devon Wildlife Trust. It consists of mixed woodland which slopes down steeply to a wide expanse of water meadows alongside the upper reaches of the River Torridge.



BNA Members at Halsdon Aug 2025 – JS

Before descending through the woods some members took a little refreshment of plump blackberries, now ripening on the brambles around the stony car park. The white trumpet like flowers of the hedge bindweed brightened up the surrounds as many of the Summer wild flowers had now “gone over”.

Passing an old lichen covered seat we entered the woodland where the air temperature dropped somewhat. Now and again a speckled wood butterfly would flutter past and the warning notes of a wren could be heard. Unfortunately, like many other woods the Halsdon Reserve had not avoided the ash die back disease and some of the footpaths were closed to the public for fear of people being hit by falling branches.

As we descended through the woodland the path seemed to become narrower and more uneven until we found ourselves stepping out onto the welcome flatness of a grassy meadow. As our eyes adjusted to the new brightness they took in the sight of small clumps meadowsweet, buttercups and hogweed. A greenfly stubbornly perched atop an exit gatepost seemingly oblivious to our presence.

It was now a level walk through the grassy water meadows towards the bird hide, with the still green woodlands to one side, and the sparkling River Torridge on the other. What a beautiful setting enhanced by clumps of ripe hawthorn berries beside the water and the mew of a buzzard high up in the sky. A large flock of swallows with a few house martins mixed in, zoomed overhead. Then a dragonfly displayed itself nearby. By its size and flight pattern it was thought to be the relatively uncommon migrant hawkler.



Haldson Nature Reserve – JS

Reaching the hide overlooking the river we all found ourselves a comfortable seat whilst we ate our packed lunches and waited for nature to present itself. We were not disappointed as a flock of sand martins flew overhead and a red admiral and a beautiful demoiselle displayed their striking colours. Then what we were all hoping for, a kingfisher flew past just above the water. Soon after another appeared, then another. We thought there were four in all probably all one family.

After this rewarding break we proceeded along the river bank to our next stop where we had good views of the river through the trees. Up on one of these trees climbed a tree creeper and as our eyes followed its movement another small bird was sighted, it was a goldcrest. Soon after another was seen and then more which turned out to be our second bird family of the day. Grey wagtails flipped amongst the stones poking out from the low waters of the river. Next and probably the best sighting of the day was a spotted flycatcher flitting about amongst the foliage on the far side of the river.

Heading back to the cars we passed stands of Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam. These invasive species seem to be an everlasting problem. Hazel nuts lined the path in places and autumnal leaves had started to fall. Our seasons seem to be getting earlier.

An enjoyable day was finished off with a lovely cream tea on the lawns of a nearby old farmhouse. JS

Tarr Steps, Sunday 7th September 2025

Driving up the steep slopes of Exmoor, the willowherb which normally lines the hedges in long stretches either side of the road, was now going over with only an occasional splash of their pink inflorescence showing. With the road levelling out our views stretched out over the moor displaying vast areas of early browning heather, perhaps the result of one of the hottest Summers on record. Now and again we would drop down into a sheltered combe where splashes of their pink flowers still survived. Our ascent up and over the moor gave us a good start to the day with the sighting of a trio of raptors, a buzzard, a hovering kestrel and a fork tailed red kite. Down once more, over the steep sided valley, we reached our destination of Tarr Steps, where its ancient clapper bridge still spans the river Barle. It is a scheduled ancient monument which comes under the jurisdiction of the Exmoor National Park Authority. In recent years these huge stones have occasionally been washed away during periods of heavy rainfall causing the river to flood. Steel cables have been positioned up stream to hold back the debris and thus reduce the damage.



Clapper Bridge at Tarr Steps JS

Now as we moved out of the car park we heard the whooping notes of a nuthatch and then saw it high up on a nearby tree. We then passed the not too common snowberry shrub still displaying its pink flowers alongside its white fruits. Walking along the track running parallel to the river, fallen acorns from the many oak trees told of the forthcoming Autumn which was fast approaching. Also many of the undersides of the leaves were infested with the disc shaped spangle gall caused by the gall wasp larvae. Under the cloudy skies butterflies were scarce although a red admiral and speckled wood put in appearances to brighten our day.



Oak Spangle Galls JS

The waters of the Barle were, to coin a popular phrase used by our politicians, "crystal clear". A grey wagtail, also known locally as "dishwasher", was noted standing on a midstream rock bobbing its long tail up and down. An occasional trout could be seen effortlessly gliding through the water.

Time now for a bite to eat as we settled ourselves on the riverbank. The notes of a marsh tit could be heard coming from the trees behind us. Whilst in the river a crayfish was seen moving close to the riverbank then another dead one with most of its body eaten away leaving a skeleton and a pair of large red claws. This was the invasive signal crayfish from America responsible for the decline of our smaller native white clawed crayfish due to competition and disease.



Some BNA branch members Tarr Steps JS

Picnic over we crossed over a bridge to the other side of the river enjoying a leisurely walk back to the clapper bridge. Several pond skaters were seen manoeuvring about on the water's surface without getting washed away by the current. It was now time to retire to the Tarr Steps Inn where one and all enjoyed a cream tea. At 3.00pm we all had our mobile phones at the ready to receive the scheduled national alarm alert practice. Situated deep in an Exmoor valley, not a peep was heard!! JS

Red Deer on Exmoor Tuesday 21st October 2025

The day began in a blaze of red as the early morning rays of the sun tried to burst through puffy white and grey clouds. Was this going to prove the old saying "red sky in the morning sailors or shepherds warning". Well our group were not going sailing but to the heights of Exmoor to hopefully view this year's red deer rut. As we moved out of the car park a mixed flock of rooks and jackdaws squabbled amongst themselves over the available food on the grass verges.



Red Deer by Judith Flacke

An hour later we found ourselves walking down a stony lane, bordered with decaying vegetation and ferns, towards our first destination. The sight that confronted us was eye popping as there must have been over 300 deer on the adjacent slopes. Those of our party not standing settled down onto their comfortable portable chairs to witness the considerable activity in front of them. This year we seem to have got our timing right as several of the stags were

continually rounding up their groups of hinds. Much roaring and posturing was taking place as one stag would challenge another. Most of the time the smaller or less confident stag would give way to the larger more confident one avoiding contact and possible injury. This was demonstrated when a much larger stag chased away a smaller one for maybe 30 yards or so before the larger one stopped. The smaller one kept running for something like another 150 yards before it came to a hedge and had to stop. Later our group witnessed a confrontation where two more evenly matched stags actually locked antlers. A large stag was observed sitting quietly on his own near the top hedge. Was he spent out or was he the wise one amongst the herd waiting for the others to tire before he joined in the activity?

At this time of the year the deer are in good condition with the stags continually rounding up their hinds and seeing off competitors. Not only do they need physical size and strength but also resort to belling (roaring) to warn off rivals challenges. A stag's antlers are known as his "rights". The first four are brow, bay, tray and surroyal tines, which shows he has his rights. Above this, more tines may appear as a crown to create a really impressive animal.

It was now time to retrace our steps back to the Simonsbath car park Earlier in the day this road was shrouded in mist . This had now cleared as we made our way further up on to the moor to eat our packed lunches whilst overlooking the valley housing Nutscale Reservoir. Along our journey a red kite effortlessly floated on the breeze above us and a kestrel dipped and twisted as it tried to shake off a pursuing crow.



Exmoor by Judith Flacke

During lunch both a buzzard and a raven gave us a fly past. Again the weather seemed to change in an instant as the sky turned grey and we were blasted by a heavy squall. Then, just as suddenly as it came, the rain disappeared and we were rewarded with a rainbow. Now it was off towards Dunkery Beacon past ever flowering gorse to what previously had been a major rutting area. All we saw was a stag and six hinds quietly grazing. In a nearby field was the interesting spectacle of some English longhorn cattle which are now a rare breed.

In came the weather again so we decided to head straight back to Jane's moorland home where we were generously treated to yet another cream tea with a choice of three jams including whortleberry.

Birds seen/heard:-

Herring gull, Wood pigeon, Magpie, Jackdaw, Rook, Meadow pipit, Starling, Dipper, Siskin, Crow, Pheasant, Cormorant, Raven, Red kite, Dunnock, House sparrow, Great tit, Blue tit, Chaffinch, Kestrel, Robin, Buzzard.

Annual General Meal. Saturday 8th November 2025

Once again we held our AGM at The Royal North Devon Golf Club at Westward Ho! There was a choice of two or three courses, with most people opting for the two course version of starter and main or main and dessert. For those who couldn't remember what they had ordered, Sally had produced some name cards with that person's menu choice on them. It worked very well as everyone got what they had ordered. Whilst people were not eating, they were given a couple of sheets of "dingbats" with which to amuse themselves and discuss with their fellow diners.

After the meal we were treated to a slide show comprising of photographs that members had taken on our outings this year. As usual they were all very good.

There then followed a quick report on the state of the branch membership and finances together with a summary of our monthly activities over the last twelve months including our indoor meeting, the five day trip to Dorset and participation at at the Bideford Rotary Club's water festival. I was delighted that the current holders of the various jobs have agreed to carry on for the forthcoming year. John S who organises the outdoor monthly trips, Sally who sorts out the dinner, Jane who arranges the five day trip, Endymion who deals with the web site and publicity, Amanda who has taken on the indoor meeting and should we have to go to an exhibition then Elizabeth is on hand. The answers to the "dingbats" were then announced which produced the usual responses of either joy or dismay. Then came the important part of the evening when members come up with their suggestions for John for next year's monthly outings because it is your branch so we go where you want to go.

This was followed by Jane giving a synopsis of our five day trip next June (8th-12th). We will be staying at The Centurion Hotel in Midsomer Norton telephone number 01761-417711. When you make your booking don't forget to say you are part of the Taw and Exmoor branch of the British Naturalists' Association, BNA and then let Jane know (Tel .01598-741350) that you have booked.

And finally as everyone seemed to enjoy the evening's food and venue it has been booked again for next year's AGM for Saturday November 14th.

Recent sightings in North Devon:

A great skua was seen off Ilfracombe as well as a red throated diver, whimbrel and black redstart In the Summer we went to Woodhouse Farm to see the flower meadows. We hope to go there one Winter as the owner has just reported seeing some 500 finches, mainly chaffinches, goldfinches and linnets, plus yellowhammer, kestrel, sparrowhawk, marsh tit, bullfinch, mistle thrush, firecrest, siskin, song thrush, redwing, starling meadow pipit, dipper, little egret, kingfisher and a common sandpiper. A black redstart was seen at George Nympton and a total 8 red kites were seen at various locations between the A361 near South Molton and Simonsbath. A yellow-browed warbler was discovered in Bideford near Kingsley School, A pair of goosanders were observed on the River Taw by the Ashford lime kiln.

Congratulations are due to Len Sims who was at the dinner and will be 90 at the end of the month. He has been a long time member of the local branch of the BNA and when he was fit enough would be a useful asset on the walks especially the bird orientated ones. He was also an artist and did quite a few pictures for raffle prizes at the indoor meetings.