



# BRITISH NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION

## Taw Valley & Exmoor Branch

### Reports for 2013

#### Slimbridge, 13th January 2013

After what seems like never ending grey skies and rain there was an unfamiliar object in the pale blue sky radiating light and warmth towards us as we proceeded by coach to the Slimbridge Wildfowl and Wetland Centre.

Once there, we all went our separate ways with instructions to be back in the Peng observatory before the wild bird feeding frenzy at 4.00pm.

In the enclosures were large trumpeter swans contrasting with the pink flamingos whilst the smaller ducks such as the mandarin and wood ducks looked resplendent in their Spring plumage.

From the Fisherman's hut we could see large flocks of teal, wigeon and lapwing all keeping well away from a smart looking fox with its coat almost orange/red in the sunlight. Round at the Zeiss hide, there had been reports of a bittern earlier in the day but extensive perusal of the reeds in front of the hide produced nothing except for a pair of wrens having a "domestic". Then whilst having our picnic lunch one of our sharp eyed members found the bittern some way away up against some reeds. A quick confirmation via the telescope and the hide was alive with excitement as this was the first viewing ever of a bittern for a lot of us.

At the kingfisher hide, there were redpolls in the alder trees, snipe in the fields and blue tits, great tits, chaffinches and goldfinches on the feeders. Any spilt food was soon hoovered up by a large rat. In the "back from the brink" section otters were busy chasing each other around their pond, a shrew was having its lunch but the water voles were obviously having a sleep.

A visit to the hides overlooking the marshland enabled us to get lovely views of some very elegant pintail, some immaculate pochard as well as flocks of dunlin doing their aerobatics in contrast to the slow flapping lapwings. Both a peregrine and a buzzard must have been well fed as the birds took no notice of them.

From the Holden tower, the Severn estuary produced flocks of Canada geese, greylag and white fronted geese.

By now it was time for the feeding frenzy as the birds had been arriving since 3.30pm. If you thought the observatory was full then that was nothing compared to outside as more and more birds kept arriving. So crowded was it that some had difficulty in finding a safe place to land. There were over 100 Bewick's swans (which is the speciality of Slimbridge) and they represented only a small fraction of the birds present. The warden appeared with a wheelbarrow full of grain and there was a mass movement towards him. He gave a commentary whilst feeding them and this was relayed to inside the observatory. The Canada geese pushed to the front followed by the greylags whilst the swans took a more demure approach to it all. Even as he finished still more birds were arriving but it was time for us to get back to the coach after a fantastic day both bird and weather wise.

#### Annual indoor meeting, Friday 22nd February 2013

I was pleasantly surprised at the number of people who turned out on a bitterly cold evening to hear local historian and Dartmoor guide, Paul Rendell, who gave us an illustrated talk on wildlife in Devon.

We are lucky here in Devon to have such a wide range of habitats from farmland to moorland to extensive sandy beaches to rugged cliffs and sparkling rivers. The speaker was able to draw on his experiences in our two National parks as well as our local biosphere to give a wide ranging presentation.

It included the parasitic dodder, coastal thrift and the beautiful greater butterfly orchid whilst the birds included our resident kingfishers, dippers and buzzards as well as Summer migrants such as the cuckoo - for which Dartmoor is still a stronghold - to the Winter migrants like the ring ouzel and the golden plover which shimmer with golden glints when large flocks take off in the sunlight. It was interesting to hear that although red deer are well established on Exmoor, they had been shot to extinction on Dartmoor but have now reappeared there. The pictures of a dormouse produced the usual "oohs" and "aahs" and he was surprised that so many of us had actually seen a dormouse.

At the halfway stage in the proceedings we once again enjoyed an excellent buffet. So my thanks to Sue, Carol and Liz for their sterling work in preparing it and also thanks to those who donated raffle prizes and helped in any way.

*Brian Sims*

## Venford, Dartmoor. 28th April 2013

We knew it was going to be a good outing because as soon as we arrived, we not only heard a cuckoo but saw one as well. As we started out on the walk a song thrush welcomed us from his perch on high as a chiffchaff whizzed into the undergrowth. On the way towards Bench Tor there were lots of wheatears resplendent in their breeding plumage flitting from one yellow flowered gorse bush to another with the occasional meadow pipit and stonechat thrown in for good measure.

Through White Wood and on into The Dart Valley Nature Reserve where the boulders were completely covered in moss with the occasional wood sorrel standing out like snowflakes glistening in the sun. Many of the trees were festooned with hanging lichens or had ferns growing out of their moss covered branches.

The River Dart crashed and sparkled its way along the valley bottom patrolled by a grey heron. In the woods the blue tits were very active whilst swallows and house martins wheeled overhead. A green woodpecker yaffled in the distance but nearby nuthatches were going through their complete repertoire.

Then a flash of orange as a splendid male redstart hove into view soon to be joined by a male pied flycatcher as they alternated between feeding and establishing a territory. Being a mature woodland there were many bracket fungi to be seen but an interesting feature was a holly tree growing some six feet up out of an oak tree.

After a picnic lunch a quick trip around the reservoir produced a pied wagtail, a mallard with several young and a garden warbler. Out on the water a pair of great crested grebes were very busy building a nest but unfortunately when one of them tried it out, it sank without trace.

## Woody Bay. Sunday 19th May 2013

Those who took the scenic route through the Devon lanes to Woody Bay were rewarded by a curtain of light green produced by the tall manicured beech hedges plus swathes of primroses and bluebells on the banks. It was a lovely sunny morning with this year's new born lambs gambolling in the lush green fields which were strewn with golden buttercups. But, curling around a coastal headland was a wispy white mist. Was it smoke from a fire, a low flying cloud or a sea fog?

When we arrived at Woody Bay we found out that it was a sea mist drifting in off the Bristol Channel but luckily being burnt off by the sun, so by the time we started our walk it had disappeared.

Down through the woods the tree canopy was just forming, so shafts of sunlight filtered through to illuminate the fresh green grass below, which was decorated with primroses, greater stitchwort and wood sorrel. Up above the blue tits were very active whilst chiffchaffs called their name and gold crest and coal tit put in appearances.

A clearing enabled us to enjoy views of Lee Abbey and a woodland showing many hues of green leading up to one of the many headlands where there was a stone tower which presumably allowed the occupants of the abbey to enjoy some solace. Whilst we were absorbing this lovely view a mysterious almost luminous green creature alighted on one of our party. Being in no immediate danger we had time to admire and photograph it. It turned out to be a weevil revelling the name *Polydrusus formosus*.

On we went, past a nuthatch nesting hole with its entrance walled up with mud and on to Wringapeak where we could look down on herring gulls, kittiwakes and guillemots vying for precarious nesting ledges on the precipitous cliffs. Razorbills whizzed about while fulmars just glided about on their stiff looking wings.

By now it was lunchtime and we consumed our picnic looking out over the mill pond like Bristol Channel with views of the coastline of South Wales and the mountains beyond, whilst out to the west Lundy could just be picked out through the haze. A smart looking male stonechat popped up on a lovely yellow gorse bush as a lizard scuttled away. Around to Highveer Point above Heddon's Mouth and a scramble up to the Somerset and North Devon Coast Path was rewarded by a peregrine flying by. Skylarks were singing up in the cloudless sky and meadow pipits darted about when a red kite put in an appearance and majestically sailed past.

## Trentishoe Down, North Devon June 2013

This was scheduled to be a joint meeting with The Devon Butterfly Conservation Group, on Sunday 16th June. However due to the heavy rain and high winds it was cancelled and our BNA group provisionally arranged to go on the following Sunday. Unfortunately that was not much better but the forecast for the following day was much better and as it turned out they were right.

The original target species were the high brown and dark green fritillaries as Trentishoe Down is a good site nationally in which to find them.

We were not the only ones to appreciate the sun as several of the buzzards we saw on the way there were sat on the top of the telegraph poles just soaking up the warmth.

On arrival at the site we immediately saw a painted lady and a red admiral. The walk along The Ladies Mile was only gently sloping, an unusual feature for a walk on Exmoor. Chiffchaffs and willow warblers were singing although

there was precious little chance of seeing them now the trees are in full leaf although we did spot a family of wrens flitting about in the undergrowth.

There were plenty of speckled wood butterflies and when we came to a clearing several fritillaries were there but proceeding at high speed in all directions just enjoying the sun which was shining down from an almost cloudless pale blue sky. The flowers provided a colourful backdrop with wide range of colours from the stitchwort, buttercup, tormentil, herb robert, germander speedwell and gorse whilst hanging from the trees were dog rose and honeysuckle.

All this time we had been looking up the south facing bracken covered slopes but back at the car park we could look down over the hillside and were rewarded by the sight of several large fritillaries resting awhile on one thistle before going to another. Some were photographed and although the dark green fritillary could be identified, they were too far away to make positive identifications of the red listed and critically endangered high brown fritillary.

### **Lower Ashmore Farm, South Molton. July 7th 2013**

It isn't surprising as everything the farmer Cyril Cole and his wife Kathleen do is first rate. They lost their cattle and sheep in a foot and mouth contiguous cull in 2001 and decided then to have just permanent pasture partly for silage and grazing and partly for use as wild flower meadows and wildlife habitats. They belong to the Countryside Stewardship scheme and have won the National Silver Lapwing award for farming and conservation. He now has 27 acres of culm grassland (which is rarer than tropical rainforest), 5 acres of new woodland, 6 acres of wildflower meadows and 2 acres of ponds with surrounding trees as well as mature hedges providing wildlife corridors and refuges.

He leads the walk with boundless enthusiasm, explaining how the ground needs to be far less nutrient rich to encourage the wild flowers. He reeled off the names of the flowers of which his pride and joy is the greater butterfly orchid. One part of a field was a sea of pale blue of the cornflower. He pulled up a plant called pignut and showed us how it got its name. In the woods, were unusual trees like weeping beech, single leaved ash, wild service and even a mazzard. The damselflies and dragonflies whizzed about over the ponds avoiding the hungry fish below. Apart from the swooping swallows, the birds were fairly elusive and although he claimed to have a spotted flycatcher nest in his barn, the bird failed to materialise. The speckled wood butterflies were the most numerous and we also saw a couple of day flying moths. Close inspection of a dock leaf revealed not only the dock beetle but its eggs and larva.

As a diversion he told us about a bronze age burial urn complete with bones which he unearthed whilst ploughing one day.

After two and a half hours of walking in the unremitting sun we gladly accepted his invitation to have tea on the lawn but in the shade.

### **Bovey Heathfield *et al.* Sunday August 11th 2013**

Bovey Heathfield is a remnant of lowland heathland which was once much more widespread in the area. Created by Bronze Age farmers, occupied by the Romans, dug by mediaeval tin miners, fought over by Civil War armies and used by WW2 forces for rehearsing battle manoeuvres, it then became a local Tip until about 10 years ago when Devon Wildlife Trust [DWT] rescued it and improved it to such an extent that it is now classed as an SSSI although you still have to drive through an industrial estate to get to it.

On arrival we were greeted by a wide selection of butterflies on a buddleia, including brimstone, painted lady, silver washed fritillary and peacock. Actually on the reserve were a variety of smaller butterflies including a grayling which was actually laying eggs at the time. Lumps of dark mud on sheets of card were a mystery to us but they turned out to have been put there by someone studying potter wasps. Apparently it takes some 25 visits by a wasp to get enough mud with which to build a pot. Three different types of heathers gave the reserve a purple haze with the odd Scots pine and silver birch providing some green contrast, whilst looking down on the reserve were the high granite Dartmoor peaks of Haytor and Shapton standing like sentinels against a pale blue sky.

Off now to Chudleigh Knighton Heath (also an SSSI), another DWT reserve of around 42 hectares where we had our picnic lunch overlooking a very muddy pond with the occasional dragonfly for company. Then the highlight of the day when Andy Bakere from the DWT took us to another part of the reserve to show us the only known colony of narrow headed ants in England (there are some in Scotland and elsewhere in Europe). It's just as well he was there as I think we would still be there now looking for them.

Onwards to Little Bradley Ponds, one of which is an old clay pit and the other was dug to DWT requirements. These provide habitats for a variety of dragonflies including the golden ringed, common darter, keeled skimmer and broad bodied chaser plus common blue and scarce emerald damselflies. The greatest cheer was reserved for an emperor dragonfly which caught a wasp and then proceeded to eat it, giving rise to great photographic opportunities. A heron flapped lazily overhead whilst a female mallard struggled to make headway against the lovely white water lilies and the abundant yellow *nymphoides peltata*.

It had been a lovely day, sunny but not too hot with hardly a breath of wind, lots of butterflies and dragonflies.

## **Creatures of the night. 7th Sept 2013**

The sun was just setting as we arrived at Broadford Farm where John Breeds had kindly set up several moth traps. Our arrival was heralded by a rather sorrowful sounding robin.

On a quick survey to check where all the moth traps were and what had already been caught, our path was guided by angelica and bindweed which acted like streetlights in the ever increasing gloom. Some very attractive chickens were safely shut away for the night to protect them from marauding predators and we were sustained by a warm drink as the pipistrelle bats emerged, sending the bat detector into overdrive.

Some moths which had been trapped previously were passed around for practice identification, including a burnished brass moth that really did look as if it had brass on it, before we set off to inspect the traps under a starlit sky. The bat detector even picked up on the dark bush crickets.

Several moths were seen in each of the traps and they often had very imaginative names. Caddisflies and the occasional crane fly were also in occupation and a small toad was found near one of the traps. Later a moth was passed round to see if we could identify it from a page of photographs of very similar looking moths. The consensus was that it was a pink barred sawfly.

As we returned for another inspection of the traps, there was a large flash which we thought was a light bulb in one of the traps that had blown but it was closely followed by a very loud and close clap of thunder and instant cloud burst. Fairly large steps were very quickly taken to get back to John's farmhouse where we dripped all over the kitchen floor.

Our thanks to John for his help and hospitality as we left him to clear up!

## **Torrington Common. Sunday 6th October 2013**

Torrington Common covers in total some 365 acres on three sides of the town and is protected by the Great Torrington Commons Act of 1889. The Common is run by 15 Conservators and recently they established a tree trail which is just over 2 ½ miles long and includes most of the trees and shrubs that are considered to be native to Britain.

So it came to pass that we set out on this trek in glorious autumnal sunshine. In the distance a sparrow hawk flashed by whereas nearby a smart looking red admiral fluttered about. The rowan trees were well laden with their shiny red berries but the fruits on the elder, blackthorn and ballance were very poor. It was good that the broad leaved and small leaved lime were next to each other so a direct comparison could be made. Down through the woods there were plenty of fungi but not many in a photogenic state. A robin sang its plaintive autumn song as we crossed the bridge and made our way along barmaid's walk (the reason for the name we won't go into here!) Probably because of the recent good weather there were quite a few flowers about which in turn were attracting butterflies including speckled wood, small tortoiseshell, peacock and small copper. A very fresh looking comma was gorging itself on an overripe blackberry. Broom and gorse (not really trees but came under the shrub category) were next to each other so again a comparison could be made. Whilst looking at some of the eight different willows on show, a pair of ravens crouched overhead and in the hedgerow a great tit was heard. It was interesting to see a midland thorn which is not often seen in this part of the world in contrast to the local hornbeam, Devon white beam and mazzard. Close inspection of one of the oaks revealed spangle, artichoke and cherry galls. In all there were some 50 trees plus some shrubs and miscellaneous tree associated specimens such as ivy, guelder rose and honeysuckle.

## **Isley Marsh, 14th December 2013**

The wind had been increasing in strength all morning so by the time we met it was quite blowy. However the crows enjoyed playing in the wind whereas the wood pigeons shot past at some incredible speed and a little dunnock kept his head down in the bramble patch.

When we turned off the Tarka Trail to go to the RSPB reserve at Isley Marsh we were confronted with scenes of devastation as the reeds (which provide both shelter and nesting facilities) had all been cut down, ahead the teasels had been raised to the ground and when we arrived at the viewing point all the trees, shrubs, brambles and vegetation had been decimated. No longer providing shelter for the birds or bird watchers. No one could understand why it had been done unless it was to destroy the habitat so that there was no longer any wildlife which could have caused problems if seeking any planning permissions but even that seemed unlikely as the site is on a flood plain and underground is the asbestos from the demolished power station.

Across the river Taw was a huge flock of golden plover squatting down against the wind, whilst on this side large flocks of lapwings periodically took off and tried to make some headway upwind. The curlews mixed in with some snipe took shelter in the long grass. A flyby of two spoonbills enabled us to compare their shape with the little egrets which would take to the air from time to time. The dunlin were scurrying about as usual but the oystercatchers were relatively static. A couple of greater black backed gulls were hunkered down on a sandbank and a cormorant decided it was better to spend more time underwater than above it. The turnstones were doing what their name implies and the teal swam sedately about in the relative shelter of the gullies now being filled by the incoming tide.

On now past the jetty and former power station site, where an occasional small bird would whiz past on the wind. The pied wagtails with their long tails acting like a sail were being bowled along by the wind as a meadow pipit dashed from the shelter of one grassy clump to another. There were still large gatherings of waders, mainly lapwing and oystercatchers plus the odd grey plover and black tailed godwit. On the adjoining pond a little grebe was practising his diving.

Back along the Tarka Trail and we got back to the cars just as the first drops of the rainstorm fell. What immaculate timing!