

BRITISH NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION



Taw Valley & Exmoor Branch

Reports 2017

Slimbridge, Sunday 15th January 2017

The weather at Slimbridge leading up to the visit had been snow, gales and heavy rain, so it was with some apprehension that we set off. However once we arrived the rain had cleared and then we knew it was going to be a good day as a waxwing was seen in the car park before we had actually got into the reserve.

Despite the bird flu, the place was still open and the only inconvenience was that we had to tread on the sterilising mats ever so often. Flamingoes must be prone to the disease as both types were shut in.

We all went our own way within the reserve but coming across each other from time to time so we could pass on tips on what had been seen and where. From the Martin Smith hide there were excellent views of tufted duck, teal, pintail, shelduck, shoveler and our first Bewick's swan of the day. Into the Robbie Garnett hide and we saw hundreds of lapwing and wigeon plus amongst the greylag geese was a European white fronted goose. In the Knott pool a water rail provide superb photographic opportunities.

Up now into the Holden tower and with our packed lunches spread out before us, we enjoyed views of the cranes, a dejected looking peregrine sitting on a log, fly pasts of acrobatic dunlin and in the distance some barnacle geese.

Retracing our steps and being careful not to tread on one of the multitude of moorhens, we went past the enclosures with birds such as trumpeter swans, Barrow's goldeneye, eider duck and wood duck and on into the Lathbury hide which gave us ruff, snipe, pochard and even a cormorant. As we approached the Van de Bovenkamp hide, we recognised an oncoming birder, what a lovely surprise to see Nigel Marsh again who had moved to Pembroke last Autumn and had made a special journey, involving several changes of buses, a taxi ride and a two night stay at a local bed and breakfast hostelry just to have the chance of meeting up again with the branch members.

On into the Kingfisher hide where there were numerous blue tits, great tits and chaffinches on the feeders but no rats this time. On the water were gadwall and a little grebe, whilst out on the grass were song thrush, mistle thrush and fieldfares.

Time was now pressing on, so we made our way back to the Peng Observatory for the traditional feeding frenzy. Several hundred lapwings were flying around with sun catching them in either the white or dark orientation as they swirled about. All the time more and more birds were arriving as a rainbow appeared behind the leafless trees giving a most picturesque sight. And still the birds flew in, jostling for a prime feeding spot. At 4 pm the man with a wheelbarrow full of corn appeared and the crescendo reached it's peak as some 3000 birds squabbled over the shovelfuls of food he was distributing. There were some 150 Bewick's swans on site having made the 7000 mile flight from Russia but unfortunately nobody had seen the one whooper swan that was reportedly there. As the pandemonium died down we made our way back to the coach with last vestiges of the Winter sun peeping out from under the oncoming dark forbidding rain clouds.

What a cracking day and weren't we lucky with the weather.

“An evening with Nick Baker” 24th February 2017

Nick Baker is an honorary vice president of the BNA who lives in Devon, so it was a great idea to get him to come and talk to us at our annual indoor meeting. Negotiations started in September of last year and in January this year the contract for him to appear was signed. A week or so before his scheduled appearance I managed to get the subject of his talk and this would have included ring ouzels on Dartmoor amongst other things.

On the Tuesday before the talk I received a telephone call to say that he had to go abroad on a photo shoot. What sort of person goes overseas to some exotic location filming instead of coming to Barnstaple on a cold, windy, wintry, dark night to talk to us?

However galloping out of the mists of despair came, ecologist, author, naturalist, TV personality and bird watcher – Mike Dilger- he of BBC's “The One Show” fame.

Well what a scoop he turned out to be. For the first hour he spoke about how he got into wildlife and his experiences of wildlife studying and filming, especially in South America.

He absolutely enthralled, entertained and amused us as he regaled us with tales of his adventures. Had we had pictures to look at, they would have been impossible to see through our tears of laughter.

After a break for tea/coffee and the inevitable raffle, the packed audience heard all about the twelve birds he had selected to highlight in his latest book "Nightingales in November".

We were extremely grateful to him for stepping in at virtually the last minute as he was off to Cardiff that night ready to do a film programme about tortoises.

So "An evening with Nick Baker" turned out to be "An evening with Mike Dilger".

My thanks to all those who contributed in any way whatsoever to the success of the evening.

Many of the natural history items from The One Show, several featuring Mike Dilger, can be seen by logging into bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0lnrz54

Arlington Court grounds. Sunday 19th March 2017

The incessant rain the previous night and first thing that morning meant the early telephone calls were from people excusing themselves from the outing. O ye of little faith, because as the sun began to break through the calls changed to queries about packed lunches and cream teas.

By the time we reached Arlington the jackdaws were enjoying themselves playing on the wind high above the tall oak and beech trees. On the banks of the narrow country lanes were primroses, snowdrops and wood sorrel plus the occasional red campion. There was no sign of the mistle thrush that had been seen nest building in the area although a nuthatch certainly made his presence heard. Past the turning to the church and through a field with lots of fresh molehills with a raven cronking in the distance. Up through a narrow copse with lesser celandines and muscatel plus a robin watching our every move. Down a lane with blackthorn blossom and catkins in the hedgerow and many-zoned polypores on the logs.

Through the woods and over a stream where the trees were so completely covered in moss you could not have determined which way was north. Further along the track the normally gentle trickles of water were now gushing streams as they tumbled their way down the slope. Again the whole area including the fallen trees was covered in a bright yellowy green moss. Ferns were numerous including harts tongue and hard fern. By the raging stream below was a smart phone, either lost or thrown away in disgust as there may not have been any signal. The rare "string of sausages" lichen was found and on the trees ferns were growing out along the branches. In fact in place a yew tree was growing high up on an ancient oak tree.

Round to Tuckers Bridge and then on to the next bridge where a dipper had been seen previously with nesting material in its beak but we couldn't find it.

It was now lunch time as we reached the table and benches overlooking the pond with its teal, mallard and moorhens. We all got out our sandwiches apart from one couple who produced a camping stove and proceeded to heat up their vegetable soup and then brew a fresh cup of tea.

Just as we thought that was going to be the sight of the day a large white bird flew in. It was a great white egret, the first time most of us had seen one in Devon. It then flew up to try and make friends with the herons in the heronry and this enabled us to compare its size with our local grey herons.

There are regularly filled feeders at the bird hide and so you can get good views of marsh tits. But by the time we got there the birds had emptied them all. However we did manage to see great, blue and coal tits, nuthatch and a great spotted woodpecker there plus chaffinches and dunnocks hovering up the leftovers on the ground.

Back up the hill now and finally through an avenue of monkey puzzle trees where we watched in amusement as the rooks tried to perch on such a tricky landing place. At the car park, we remarked on how lucky we had been, not a drop of rain during the four hour walk.

Dawn chorus walk. Sunday 23rd April 2017

When we woke up in what seemed like the early hours of the morning it was really dark outside with no moon or street lights alight. But by the time we were ready to leave home the sky was getting lighter as the morning star and the last sliver of the waning moon hove into view and by the time we had reached our rendezvous point there was a vivid red glow on the horizon.

There was a good attendance for a 6.00 am start as we amalgamated into fewer cars to go to the reserve at Chapel Wood. The site which was donated to the RSPB in 1951 was an ancient Iron Age hill fort and gets its name from the remains of the 13th century Spreacombe Chapel and well which can be found there.

On arrival we were greeted by a song thrush at full throttle, into the woods and we came across a pair of fighting cock pheasants amongst the primroses and bluebells. Up the steps cut into the hillside we paused for breath and listened to a melodious blackbird, the rasping croaking of a triumphant pheasant, the piping of a nuthatch, the descending trill of a willow warbler, the "teacher, teacher" call of a great tit, chiffchaff calling its name, the distant drumming of a greater spotted woodpecker, the scratchy song of a blackcap and the high pitched rattle of a wren. A real dawn chorus as the sun came up. Every small bird that moved seemed to be a blue tit whilst up in the tree canopy were clacking jackdaws some

of whom were cosy up to potential mates. Past a field with a good crop of solar panels and as we descended down the hill there were both traditional tall beech trees and some with twisted and forked trunks. There was no sign of any leaves on the ash trees but the oaks were well into leaf which according to the proverb foretells a good Summer. An impressive horse chestnut was also in full leaf and flower, giving off a much more pleasant scent than that from the wild garlic. Across the valley was a long blackthorn hedge in full flower. So after some two hours it was back to the cars and the song thrush was still going at it full tilt.

After a quick coffee it was off to the reserve where Devon Birds have a licence to run it and ring birds. The warden, Jon Turner, explained that this oasis of woodland surrounded by grazed fields was once a sewage treatment works but was now just a pumping station. Butterflies were now starting to appear as the sun exuded some warmth and were enjoying the flowers on the recently planted fruit trees. A walk around the pond, avoiding the rolled up mist nets in which he had recently caught some 55 swallows in one evening, produced a Canada goose nest and a tawny owl. Out in the adjoining reed beds were reed bunting, sedge and reed warblers, whilst on a nearby scrape was a common sandpiper and a pair of little ringed plovers.

A quick look at the Wrafton pond where there were herring gulls of various ages and a pair of little grebes with their striped young. From the little stone bridge over a tributary to the River Caen we had kingfisher, long tailed tit and a singing dunnock. Down by the River Caen the walk produced shelduck, little egret, pied wagtail, swallow, stock dove and a meadow pipit.

By now it was lunch time, so we visited a well known fish and chip establishment in Braunton and very nice it was too. So another super outing ended and the sun was still shining.

Emsworthy Mire and Bovey Heathfield, Saturday 20th May 2017

Emsworthy Mire gets its name from its boggy bottom and is an expanse of wet woodland and marshy ground fed by its central stream – Becka Brook. It is situated below Saddle Tor on Dartmoor between Hay Tor and Widecombe-in-the-Moor. It is a gently sloping valley with ancient dry stone walls and the ruins of a farm house abandoned in 1870.

Andrew Cooper who was the speaker at our annual indoor meeting in 2014 said it was one of his favourite places in Devon. On arrival it was difficult to see why but as we approached the site we were stunned by the sight of fields and fields and fields (yes I do mean fields) of bluebells. Their blue fading into the blue of the sky above. A photographer's paradise, it is reckoned that with the new red roof of the old farmhouse contrasting with the bluebells and the greens of the surrounding trees it is one of the most photographed buildings on Dartmoor.

Skylarks hovered in the sky as their trembling song filtered down to earth in contrast to a raven that flew over in silence as it couldn't "cronk" as it had a beak full of nesting material. There were vivid patches of yellow from the gorse and the broom and the tiny tormentil flowers looked as if specks of gold had been sprinkled on the close cropped turf.

A green veined white butterfly fluttered by, not knowing which of the flowers to visit first. Typical wetland plants such as marsh marigold, marsh lousewort, water crowfoot and water forget-me-not were seen as we progressed from one boardwalk to another. A kite appeared overhead and despite determined efforts to make it a black kite, it was a red kite.

A redstart was heard and then eventually seen as it flitted in and out of view behaving like a flycatcher. Where the dry stone walls were silhouetted against the sky you could see right through them. Some of the stones were so huge you wondered how they got there in the first place. They have obviously been there some time as they are covered by any amount of mosses and lichens.

As we made our way back to the car park for a picnic lunch, a curlew was heard and then seen doing a display flight.

After lunch it was off to Bovey Heathfield, a 23 hectare site of heathland, standing water and some woodland, situated on the edge of an industrial estate and approached via a narrow gravel track. It had a bronze age barrow and evidence of mediaeval mining. Swallows and house martins swooped low over the heather scooping up insects whilst a brimstone butterfly gave a splash of colour and if you were quick you would have seen a green woodpecker and a yellowhammer.

Off now to our usual place for a cream tea only to find it was closed, so round to the Tourist Information Centre to seek out alternatives and that was closed as well. However the first ones into nearby Arts Centre restaurant were offered a choice of plain or fruit scones with their cream tea. The remainder a few minutes late were told there were no scones left! So they had to make do with a cream cake.

Another interesting day, appreciated especially by those who had not been to the two places before.

Heddon Valley, Sunday 9th July, 2017

On previous trips when it has been an official joint outing between ourselves and the Devon branch of Butterfly Conservation, it has always rained. So this year it was just our branch outing but the butterfly people were cordially invited. This did the trick as the weather was sunny, no wind and just the occasional fluffy white cloud.

The Devon lanes approaching Heddon Valley were a mass of flowers including the creamy white meadow sweet, the pink of rose bay willow herb and the large white trumpet flowers of bindweed. Buzzards perched on the top of telegraph poles were basking in the sun, stonechats were busy hopping from one vantage point to another as a family of goldfinches chattered about. The recently shorn sheep looked very clean and tidy but were a bit of a nuisance when sleeping on the narrow roads.

As we left Hunter's Inn, a couple of silver washed fritillaries flew past at high speed engaged in either a battle or courtship. Up the road towards Trentishoe Church with mature trees on one side of the road and a south facing bracken covered hillside on the other, several butterflies were seen including the dark green fritillary. In the trees a spotted flycatcher was doing what its name implies. Off the road now around the hillside path we now looked down over the bracken and saw several black and orange coloured fritillaries and although this is only one of three main places in the country where they occur in any numbers we could not be sure that they were the rare high brown fritillary.

A hummingbird hawkmoth patrolled a lichen covered stone wall with the tiny flowers of tormentil and lesser stitchwort glistening in the sun. At last it was time for our picnic lunch as we looked out over the Bristol Channel which was like a mill pond, with views of Wales in the distance. Some ravens then put on an aerial display. Walking along the narrow path – part of the Samaritans Way and also The South West Coast Path – with the precipitous cliffs on one side we came across a grayling butterfly. Although not uncommon not many of us had seen one before.

Round the headland and the Heddon River below was flanked by steep hillsides of various shades of green from the many different trees interspersed with the orange of the ripening berries of the mountain ash trees. If you had been quick you would have seen purple hairstreak butterfly as it whizzed from one tree top to another.

Down in the meadows were more fritillaries, small copper, small skipper, ringlets and meadow browns plus a juvenile willow warbler. Back to the cars and it was cream tea time. Following our local navigator we came across a foreigner in a camper van who had wrapped himself around a tight corner. It was going to need a tow truck to extricate him. So after considerable reversing we made our way to a new cream tea venue. It was a super cream tea, lovely scones with lashings of Devonshire cream. Just what you deserved after a successful day in the sun.

Trevor Beer M.B.E.

It is with deep regret to have to inform you that our branch founder Trevor Beer passed away on June 21st. I attended the funeral on Monday on behalf of the BNA and our branch. Our thoughts are with his family at this time.

Hartland Point, 13th August 2017

Our August trip this year took a couple of setbacks before it had even begun.

Firstly because of work being carried out on the Hartland radar dome, the footpath that we intended to use, we discovered a few days beforehand had just been closed. Secondly a few days earlier our normal leader was doing someone a favour by moving a double bed. Having been told it was very heavy a considerable amount of effort was exerted but it was so light that the bed was lifted and pulled back so quickly that he fell over backwards with the bed on top of him. This left him a bit battered and bruised and unable to attend, which was a very rare occurrence over the last 20 years. We wish him a very speedy recovery in time for our September outing.

It was thus decided that we meet at the original destination and drive down to the Hartland Point car park and do a circular walk from there. This was not before several flowers had been identified around the car park.

So off we set and it was not long before someone excitedly spotted a grey seal in the sea below the cliffs nonchalantly floating with its head above the water calmly admiring its surroundings. The mood quickly changed, however, as our eyes drifted inshore to spot a dead young seal on the beach which was providing a meal for some black backed gulls.

Making our way up the track to the Point with swallows swooping everywhere, several gannets were spotted out to sea. Then came the sighting of the day of a few, now increasingly rare, wall butterflies. On reaching the headland, our next surprise sighting of the day was our experienced mountaineer member helping some Italian visitors to climb up the cliff.

Onwards we walked along Blagdon cliff towards the stream outfall with stonechats appearing everywhere. Passing along the edge of some barley fields some interesting wild flowers were identified (known as weeds to the farmer).

A suitable cliff top spot was found for our picnic lunch whilst we enjoyed stunning views of Lundy Island and the Bristol Channel. On resuming our circular walk we spotted a large gathering of swallows over a small area of grassland on the far side of the field. Could they have been feeding on flying ants?

We had been blessed with fine weather for the day and on returning to the car park, the walk was suitably ended with cakes and cream teas.

John Short with thanks to Norman and Julie for the bird and flower lists.

Seaton Wetlands Sunday 10th September 2017

With all the hurricanes the other side of the Atlantic and not very good forecasts for the UK. We wondered what sort of weather we might experience on our trip to the Seaton Wetlands. The area consists of tidal salt marshes, an intertidal lagoon and a freshwater pond all running along side the River Axe from which it is separated by a tramway.

We hardly saw any birds on the way down there but once in the car park we had a great spotted woodpecker and a lone sunflower, presumably an escapee from a bird feeder.

At the Discovery Centre we were shown a lovely harvest mouse which had been bred in captivity. Outside was a tall pole with some strange looking nest boxes on it. Apparently they were a German design of nest boxes for swifts which had been quite successful this year although they were subsequently used by two pairs of great tits. There was also a sand martin nesting "wall" overlooking a pond which had been designed by a leading sand martin nest building expert but unfortunately so far, the sand martins had not read the script. However by the pond was an orange balsam plant which was unusual for this part of the country as it's normally found in the Midlands.

There had been reports of osprey, ruff and spotted redshank having been seen earlier in the day. So off we went to the Island hide. This is approached via a screened walkway and as the hide is in the middle of the lagoon it offers 360 degree views. A pair of swallows obviously liked it as they had nested inside the hide despite people regularly coming and going. The nestlings were soon to fledge and provided photographic opportunities so long as you did not stand directly underneath the nest!

It was such a good place, that we had our picnic lunch there whilst observing shelduck, little grebe, lapwing, little egret, redshank, spotted redshank and common sandpiper but try as we might we could not find the ruff.

Round now to the Tower hide hoping to see the Osprey fishing in the river but he had obviously caught his quota for the day. The black tailed godwits looked resplendent as many were still in their Summer plumage. A strange looking duck posed some identification problems but it was decided that it was a hybrid crossed with a Heinz 57.

Down the road now to the Seaton Marshes hide and all the time the flower list was growing. There several small birds on the feeders with a pheasant hovering anything that was spilt. Greater black backed, black headed and herring gulls were seen out on the river whilst a cormorant caught and swallowed what looked like an eel. However the star of the show was a kingfisher. Not your usual flash of blue, oh no, he was real poser as he perched outside the hide for quite a while enabling everyone to get excellent views.

Looking out of the hide, we could see the distant hills disappearing behind the oncoming rain, so we just made it back to the cars in time.

Had it been a lovely sunny day then we had planned to go round to Otterton to see the beavers on the River Otter. They might not mind getting wet but we do, so another interesting day came to an end.

Westonbirt Arboretum, Sunday 15th October 2017

The National Arboretum at Westonbirt is world famous for it's spectacular Autumn colours. When we arrived, about mid morning by coach, the overflow car park was nearly full and passengers then had to walk about half a mile to get to the entrance. However the coach drop off point was within a few yards of the entrance and as we had pre-booked we shown straight in like royalty past the queuing hordes.

Once inside we went our own individual ways. The 600 acre site is basically laid out as a figure of eight with the entrance, shop, cafe and restaurant etc. at the centre. One half is the arboretum where amongst other things, there is a collection of mature Japanese maples planted in the 1870's by the wealthy landowner Robert Holford. The other half is known as the silk wood which houses native trees and more recently planted maples.

Westonbirt Arboretum was given the status of National Arboretum sixteen years ago and is home to national plant collections of Japanese maple cultivars, maple species, bladdernut, lime species and walnut family.

The glorious Autumnal spectacle of the Arboretum is one of the best natural display of fireworks in the country with the Persian Ironwood changing from yellow to orange to a deep plum colour. The stars of the show were the Japanese maples seemingly setting many parts of the collection ablaze with reds, oranges and yellows. But amongst this kaleidoscope of colours were the small white flowers of the *Eucryphia Lucida*. On the ground were several groups of fungi doing their bit to break down the tree stumps and galloping through the leaf litter was the beautiful pale yellow caterpillar of a pale tussock moth. Did anyone find the Katsura because as it's leaves break down they release the scent of candy floss?

Lunch time saw some of us in the bird hide. The well stocked feeders were patronised by great, blue and coal tits, chaffinches and the occasional nuthatch.

The silk wood area is more open and has several Wellingtonia two of which are over 100 ft. tall. The Monterey

Cypress was interesting because its swirling bark resembled that of our sweet chestnut trees. A pollarded lime was reputed to be over 2000 years old and the oldest tree in Britain.

Having spent the day looking up at the trees we could then get up to canopy level on the STIHL treetop walkway.

There had been so much to see that it was difficult to get around to all of it, like the tree propagation area and the section on trees and climate change. Not surprising really as there are 16,000 numbered specimens representing 3,000 different kinds of trees and shrubs. So for anyone who likes trees, this was tree heaven plus also being a photographers paradise.

A lovely day out in warm, calm Autumnal sunshine. Had we gone the next day we would have had the effects of the remnants of hurricane Ophelia probably producing a technicolour leaf storm.

Annual General Meal, Saturday 11th November 2017

Nearly half of the branch membership attended the evening held at The Thatched Inn at Abbotsham and judging by the clean plates everyone enjoyed the meal.

This was followed by a slide show of photographs taken during our trip to Cornwall earlier in the year. For those who went on the trip it brought back pleasant memories and for those who didn't go, they could see what they missed out on. Thanks to John S and Elizabeth who spent a lot of time pooling their excellent photos and putting them on a memory stick.

A quick account of the state of affairs of the branch was given with a reminder that in two years time a new organiser will have to be found.

There then followed a discussion on potential outings for next year. Although ten members are going to Hungary next April/May, a trip in the UK to East Anglia was agreed upon for next June. Everyone interested will have to help with the logistics of the trip.

Stearth Marshes. Sunday 10th December 2017

Stearth Marshes near Bridgwater have been transformed into one of the UK's newest wetland reserves by the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust and the Environment Agency. It had been necessary to provide the area with better flood defences but it housed badgers, water voles and great crested newts. But by the two organisations working together they have produced some 400 acres of saltmarsh and freshwater wetlands with proper footpaths and signage linking the recently constructed hides whilst still protecting the wildlife.

The weather forecast predicted that the wind would die down during the course of the day and that the snow would stay the Welsh side of the River Severn. Having amalgamated into fewer vehicles at the Barnstaple Leisure Centre we proceeded with some intrepidation along the link road over Exmoor and up the motorway. We arrived right on time to meet Nigel Phillips from the North Somerset Coast who was to be our guide. It was raining and blowing so we made our way to the nearest hide and on the way saw several hares cavorting in the fields. The cock pheasants looked resplendent as they strutted their stuff whereas the linnets flashed by very quickly on the wind.

From the hide we saw a range of ducks - mainly shoveler - and several different waders. The main excitement was that the person compiling the bird list suddenly could not find his pencil. The floor of the hide was scanned, bags were searched, pockets were turned out, nooks and crannies were investigated. Eventually it was found but we are not saying where it was found!

The wind was now dropping so we went to look over the River Parrett and in the adjoining meadows were little egret and grey plover. On now to the next hide where we had our picnic lunch looking out at shelduck and avocets, On the way back to the cars there were stonechat and kestrel.

We now drove round to the RSPB reserve at Greylake to discover they now had bird feeders by the car park which were being patronised by many birds including house sparrows, chaffinches, reed bunting and blue and great tits. Some snipe took off as we walked along the boardwalk to the hide. From the hide we saw lots of shoveler, some wigeon, teal and some more well camouflaged snipe. Three marsh harriers were quartering the reed beds and one came and sat on a post for quite a while, giving everyone marvellous views.

A few flakes of snow looked like a blizzard through the binoculars but hardly anything with the naked eye. The wind had now dropped altogether as a heron flapped lazily by and a long tailed tit put in an appearance.

Time to go home now, to discover that there had been heavy snowfalls in some parts of the country not too far from where had been. So all things considered it had been a good day.