

BRITISH NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION

Hertfordshire Branch

BULLETIN No.141

**Unlocking nature - a special edition to mark the
pandemic**



Ancient pathway near Flamstead

April 2021

Photo: Andrew Harris



Melanohalea lacinuatula at Ayot Green

Saturday 21st March 2020 – see page 5

Photo: Paula Shipway



Early morning light filters over an old meadow
in the parish of Flamstead – see page 7

Photo: Andrew Harris

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EDITOR'S BIT

This is a bulletin with a difference! The last one (no. 140), covering a period up to early-March 2020, closed on the sad note that it was the last field meeting before the programme was brought to a halt due to the restrictions imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic. This special edition covers the twelve months and more since the first national lockdown in March 2020 as cases of Covid-19 soared and the world faced dark times.

Many sought consolation and hope in the natural world and this bulletin has an upbeat note, thanks to the contributors of the following articles who have shown how the natural world can be an inspiration in so many ways.

Let us hope that the lessons of the pandemic will be heeded and our wildlife and world is appreciated better in the years ahead.

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WALKS DURING THE PANDEMIC

AYOT GREEN; THE MEETING THAT ALMOST WAS

21st March 2020

The first few cases of Corvid 19 had been confirmed in England and in the midst of anxious thoughts of what was to come I had a relaxing day at the beginning of the week exploring the area around Ayot Green in preparation for this meeting. In the following days there was a slow realisation that BNA meetings should be cancelled although Government guidelines were that it was acceptable for up to 3 people to walk together. Despite the decision to cancel BNA meetings I decided to spend the day following my planned route and was joined by one other BNA member, William, who I knew would be very keen to be out and about. This is a short account of our walk with a mention of some of our finds.



We set off across the Green and I pointed out an interesting lichen that I had noticed in amongst the grass under a young Oak tree, *Cladonia rangiformis* (left), and I spent a few minutes attempting to photograph it. Close-by we noticed that Field Woodrush *Luzula campestris* was coming into flower and that the filigree leaves of Pignut *Conopodium majus* were starting to show. Field Woodrush is one of the first plants that I learned to recognize

on a BNA meeting, and it has remained one of my favourites. It is always a joy to see the first of the spring flowers and these included Ivy-leaved Speedwell, *Veronica hederifolia* and Garlic Mustard, *Alliaria petiolata*.

We examined a few more trees on the Green and I was pleased to be able to point out another interesting lichen, *Melanohalea lacinatula*, growing on the branch of an Oak tree. It is one of the so-called camouflage lichens and is moving into our region. It is a foliose lichen with leaf-like lobes which in this species are irregularly incised and overlap so is quite distinctive.

Following an old track roughly northwards towards the Ayot Greenway Path, we disturbed a muntjac deer on the edge of an adjoining field then noted two more lichens on the trunk of an old elder bush, *Caloplaca phlogina* and *Rinodina pityrea*. Curiously these two very often grow together and the *Caloplaca* is easier to spot as the fruiting bodies are a bright yellow with a deeper yellow central disc but the *Rinodina* is grey and only seldom fertile, so we were lucky to see a fruiting body.

In a small area of woodland close to the old railway line we were pleased to see that Bluebells were starting to come into flower and they convinced us that Spring was well and truly underway. There was a dead mouse lying on the path, it was large and with a closer examination we could see the distinctive yellow collar that helped to confirmed that it was a Yellow-necked Mouse.

Close to the railway line we came across a Tawny Mining Bee in flight that frustratingly couldn't be photographed so we moved on and crossed the old railway line. Along the edge of Saul's Wood there is a row of particularly fine old Hornbeam trees and I had a good hunt for lichens. Surprisingly there were very few, but I spotted a small thallus of *Dendographa decolorans* which is one of the old forest species.

Approaching Ayot St. Peter William remembered that there was a record for Leopard's Bane, *Doronicum pardalianches*, growing close-by and we found that it was well established under a hedge close to St. Peter's Church. In the churchyard we noted Barren Strawberry, *Potentilla sterilis* in flower and watched a swarm of gnats dancing in the warm sunshine. Leaving the village, we paused in the sunshine on a hedge bank that was sheltered from the chilly wind and ate our lunch. We puzzled over why the farmer had apparently marked the footpath by ploughing along its length which encouraged walkers to stray off the intended route.

We followed the footpath around the perimeter of Ayot Place, and I made a note of a lichenicolous fungus, *Paranectria oropensis* growing on its host *Lecanora expallens*. We joined the Ayot Greenway path for half a mile or so then turned southwest down a narrow lane towards the River Lea. The lane had steep banks which provided shelter and the base of a veteran Hornbeam tree provided a good habitat for two more lichens, *Enterographa crassa* and

Opegrapha vermicellifera. We also noted a drift of Wood Melick, *Melica uniflora*, with a solitary flower spike.

Further along the path towards Brocket Hall we encountered a small but beautiful patch of Wood anemone, *Anemone nemorosa* coming into flower and close to the Hall grounds there was a reminder of the fierce storms that swept through earlier in the year as a mature Beech tree had been toppled and lay across the path.

We crossed over the golf course and made our way up the slope back to where we had parked our cars agreeing that we had had a good day and hoped that it would not be too long before BNA Meetings could resume.

William made a note of birds during the day as follows:

Robin, Carrion Crow, Jackdaw, Wood Pigeon, Magpie, Red Kite, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Blackbird, Buzzard, Chiffchaff, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Long-tailed Tit, Ring-necked Parakeet, Skylark, Pheasant, Coal Tit, Jay, Coot, Mistlethrush, Green Woodpecker, Kestrel.

Paula Shipway

AN AUGUST WALK WEST OF FLAMSTEAD

Only a hint of dawn light shows through the darkness as I leave the last cottages of Trowley Bottom behind.



The bridleway I am following feels as though it was made by someone with a purpose. Deviating little, it follows a base contour of the dry valley. Large fields on the rising slopes have seen barley ripen and the harvester come. Now, in the wake, of the clattering harrow, the broken soil is a warm umber. A ribbon of bleached grass, bordering the

bridleway, shows dimly as a spectral thread and, here and there, clumps of Mugwort, have a ghostly aura with their silvery forms etched in dawn light.

The bridleway joins a lane and now white-capped Yarrow, stems stiff as lamp standards, illuminates the way. The light is getting stronger and the detail of the verge is revealed. It is rather a ruderal and rank, but I give it a sidelong look with a sneaking affection. Despised, but having their own magnetism in late summer, are the many shaded docks: green-orange, blushing-red and nutmeg brown, their brush-like forms contrasting with the rigid umbels of Hogweed and the fine haze of bleached grasses. Could you find such a harmonious combination of colour and texture in a designed garden?!!

Crossing a road, another lane continues and divides the shady banks of Babies Wood from the open expanses of Beechwood Park. The mossy trunk of a wayside Ash looks mottled with white splashes, these are *Pertusaria amara*. Be foolhardy, rub your fingers across it and suck them and you will be rewarded by a bitter taste, a gift that keeps on giving! Soon, I take an ascending path through the wood. This becomes a pleasant green lane climbing the shoulder of the valley. Looking through the lacework of Hawthorn and Field Maple lining the edges, a gently undulating landscape unfolds, spreading away towards Jockey End. A distant brow is close-cropped and dotted with sheep, spotlighted in a pool of morning sunshine.

A spreading beech tree shepherds the lane towards Newlands Wood, where the fluted form of a large hornbeam arches upwards and the banks on either side are cloaked with a velvet carpet of the moss *Mnium hornum*. Dappled sunlight now filters through the trees, completing a harmonious scene



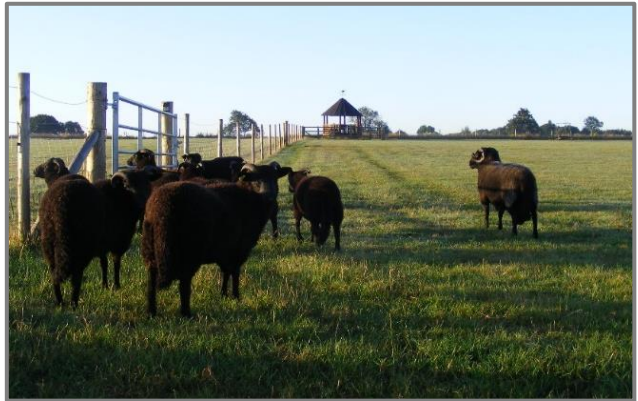
Beyond the wood, and through a gate I enter a different enchantment. This meadow is one of my favourite places and bordered by woods has a glade-like ambience. The grassland is rich with plants: A sprinkling of Bird's-foot-trefoil, Red Clover and Ribwort, scatterings of Sorrel and Knapweed and

smatterings of Common Centaury and Agrimony. Among the grasses are Common Bent, Sweet Vernal-grass and Crested Dog's-tail. In the spring there is a clump of Wild Daffodils and Ramsons on the edges. Often the raucous call of a Jay can be heard from the trees, maybe the piercing call of a Nuthatch, though at this time of the year the birds are largely quiet.

Reluctantly leaving this grassland oasis, I take a rough track towards Little Woodend, an attractive old building, part half-timbered, all different angles and chimneys and variously sized windows. There is quite a menagerie in the paddocks beyond and as I approach, some dumpy Guineafowl invariably split up and get separated by a fence. A racquet ensues as they frantically try to regroup and this sets off the donkey baying. Then sometimes the sheep think it is feeding time and start baaing also setting the donkey off. It is still early, not much after 6am when I reach this point, so I move on as swiftly as possible, hoping the people in the cottages were not having a restful lie-in!

*The deci-belles,
hungry sheep,
vocal for their
breakfast.*

*Photo:
Andrew Harris*



Now the path bisects a large arable field, the outline of Yewtree Spring looms up ahead. It is well named because there is a veteran Yew tree in the wood and another nearby in a hedgerow. I emerge into a cultivated landscape again and soon have a view of Trowley Bottom in its valley. A steep descent through a corner sown with wildflowers, past a surprise 'cairn' of flints (Perhaps created by frustrated 'lock-downers' yearning for the Lake District) and back to the bridleway at the bottom of the valley where I began. I am just in time for my breakfast.

Andrew Harris

LOCKDOWN NATURAL HISTORY EXPERIENCES

“DRY” FAIRY RINGS AT BAYFORDBURY

April 2020

I used to think that grass is more luxurious in fairy rings and was puzzled when I saw a few “dry” rings at Bayfordbury on 16 April 2020. I am grateful to Claudi Soler who explained me what was going on and directed me towards *Fungi* (Collins New Naturalist Library, book 96) for further information.

While some fungi, like *Agaricus* species, stimulate grass growth, others, like Fairy Ring Champignon (*Marasmius oreades*), damage and might kill the grass. The mycelium of *Marasmius oreades* is so tight that the water cannot penetrate,



and the grass dries out. So, it was not surprising to see these “dry” rings after the spell of dry weather which we had in April. The grass is greener on the inside of the circle because the fungus decays there producing nutrients which the grass utilises. The rings on the image are from the lawn near the lake. I saw a few more rings in the Rough Hills, in one of the recently mown grasslands.

Alla Mashanova



NATURAL HISTORY DURING LOCKDOWN

20th July 2020 – (Based on an article submitted for the National BNA newsletter)



Chaenotheca hispidula

Photo: Paula Shipway

During the lockdown period I was very disappointed not to be able to meet up with Hertfordshire BNA members and I decided to concentrate on recording lichens during my daily exercise. I explored 'out of the way' paths within a few miles from home that I had not found before and was excited to come across a new pin lichen for Buckinghamshire on the base of an Ash tree. The stalked fruiting bodies on *Chaenotheca hispidula* are just 0.5mm – 1mm high and surprisingly colourful. I also added a considerable number of mostly common species to my spreadsheet.

I spent a lot of time in our garden too and following an exchange of emails with Andrew who commented on the defence strategy of Brimstone Butterfly caterpillars I went to check our newly planted Buckthorn hedging which is their usual food plant, I was surprised to find resting caterpillars carefully aligned on the mid-rib veins on the leaves. We had planted Buckthorn in early February in the hope of attracting Brimstone butterflies but were not expecting success after just a few weeks.

Looking to see what else I could find on the Buckthorn I noticed orange blisters on some of the leaves and through a hand lens on the underside noticed little orange 'crowns'. These were not so welcome as I later realised after identifying *Puccinia coronata*, Crown Rust, which can have a devastating effect on Oat crops. Nevertheless, it was interesting to learn something new!



Puccinia coronata Crown Rust

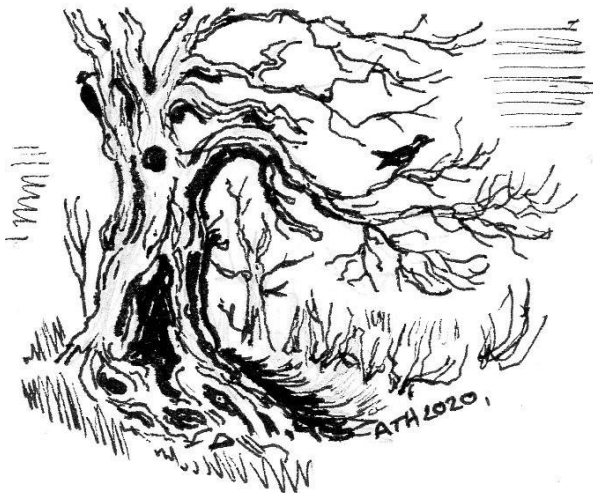
Photo: Paula Shipway

I exchanged emails with other members of the Herts Branch and knew that they were keeping busy too. William was clearly having a lot of fun after purchasing a moth trap so David and I bought one too. As total beginners we have a lot to learn! We have been enjoying ourselves and are constantly amazed at the number and variety of species that have been attracted by our light. Between the 20th May and 25th July, we recorded 157 species. My favourite changes every few days but despite the range of beautifully marked and colourful species the White Satin, in its bridal gown and black and white stripy socks remains close to the top of the list.



I feel fortunate to have a deep interest in natural history and the lockdown period has provided an excellent opportunity to observe and learn.

Paula Shipway





OUR LIVES UNLOCKED

The wonder of the world,
The beauty and the power,
The shape of things,
Their colours, lights and shades,
These I saw,
Look ye also while life lasts.



BB (Denys Watkins-Pitchford).

It is now at least 65 years since Janet and I first attended a BNA ramble. Few members had motorised transport and attendance was largely determined by the availability of public transport. We recall a Sunday meeting, one of the first we attended, to Stanmore Common and Hilfield Park Reservoir, which was then in the final stages of being filled. Ken and Mary Honnor arrived in their tiny three-wheel Reliant (?) minicar, and Bryan Sage on a newly acquired Francis Barnett motorcycle. Rambles in those days were usually planned to finish at a tea-shop, on this occasion in Elstree. From there we had to walk a further ten miles to St. Albans to get buses back home to Ware. Getting to and from rambles was of itself an adventure.

Sadly, the results of necessary encounters with the health service, and increasing age, have prevented us from attending rambles and enjoying the fellowship of so many good friends for some years. Our limitations have, however, heightened our awareness of our love of the beauty of the natural world, and our need to immerse ourselves in it.

Soon after each Christmas we start looking to welcome signposts of the coming spring. Last year, 2020, started well. In January we rejoiced when hedgerows and woodland edges were again lit with Hazel catkins, golden and heavy with pollen. We were excited as we watched our beloved countryside begin the slow awakening from its winter slumber.

Warm days in February found hungry bumblebees attending kaleidoscopes of Crocuses, Snowdrops, and Winter Aconites in Tewin Churchyard. By the 5th of the month Blackthorn was coming into flower. Two weeks later we were dazzled by unusual abundance of its bridal-white blossom. By the end of the month



Dog's Mercury, and Sweet Violets were in flower, and Peacock and Brimstone butterflies seen. A warm day, the first of March, St. David's Day and the beginning of the meteorological spring, was full of promise. Blackbirds were singing most beautifully. By the 4th the star-like flowers of Lesser Celandines were blooming along the verges at Tewin Hill. Embraced by the unfolding season, we were flourishing through contact with the natural world. The first Frog and Toad spawn appeared in our garden pond on the 12th. The entry in my journal for that day includes "the coronavirus is spreading rapidly". Then on 23rd March came lock-down. On the 24th I wrote "the coronavirus has necessitated a lock-down across Britain, and we are likely to be confined to



home for weeks if not months". Was coronavirus to steal our enjoyment and the benefits of spring?

April, the warmest on record, was summer-like throughout. Our garden offered some compensation. Cowslips flowered, Tawny-mining Bees excavated nest cavities in our lawn, and Buzzards and Red Kites soared overhead. Suffocated by the lock-down, we made several short evening drives to Tewin and back. The Swallows were back nesting in the stables at Tewin Hill Farm, and we heard Cuckoos for the first time for several years. Yet we yearned to be out of the car, breathing and feeling the spring, enjoying fresh colours and spring flowers and welcoming back the summer birds.

Our desire to be out in the countryside was intensified by reading Patrick Barkham's book *Wild Child*. In it he deplores the damage caused to children by their loss of freedom to roam, and removal indoors. Throughout our lives our physical, mental and spiritual health benefits enormously from our exposure to the natural world. It increases longevity and immunity to disease. It makes us happier, better our perspectives, and inspires our creativity. We have ever been part of it, are bonded to it, and we all need it.

Then, on 2nd May, the Chief Medical Officer said what just we needed to hear. He advised that members of the same household driving out and taking walks in isolation were not increasing risks of infection. That evening we commenced twice weekly walks. Despite a "blip" on 11th/12th May, the coldest May night on record, we enjoyed above average warm dry sunny weather that was to extend through May into June. It was the hottest and driest spring on record with the temperature peaking at 28°C (82°F) on 20th May.



Just four miles from our Digswell home, on the eastern boundary of the Parish of Tewin, is found a small semi-natural ancient woodland of about 11 acres. Left unmanaged for many years, it's richness and stability support my long-held view that some sites high in wildlife interest are being damaged by excessive and unnecessary intervention. The evidence of Red Wood is that nature best heals its wounds if left to do so naturally. It is a real treasure which proved to be our salvation.

Red Wood is a fine example of Hertfordshire's oak-coppiced Hornbeam woodlands. It has a wood-bank along its western boundary, and a rich flora. Carpeted and perfumed with Bluebells by early May, other plants indicative of such woodlands which abound there include Dog's Mercury, Early Dog Violet, Wood Anemone and Yellow Archangel. Rare in Hertfordshire, Berberis or Barberry, and Summer Snowflake, persist in the woodland edge. It is important for hole-nesting birds, which include Tawny Owl, Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers. Treecreeper, Jackdaw, Starling, and Great and Blue Tits. Buzzards and Sparrowhawks also nest there. It is a delight on sunny days to stand in the wood and wonder at the huge numbers and variety of active insects.



A level smooth-surfaced bridle way along the western edge of the wood continues by a species rich ancient hedgerow to Bacon's Green. The half-mile walk, there and back, suited us perfectly. The fine panoramic views across rolling countryside to Tewin Hill and Bramfield Park Wood are perfection. Along the way the woodland margins and bank-sides are full of interest. Rich in insects and flowers, there is a small patch of Spring Beauty which is rather scarce in our county.

So, it was here. on 2nd May, 2020, that we commenced our regular walks. Embraced by a beautiful silence, unbroken by traffic noise, we enjoyed listening to Chiffchaffs, Garden Warblers and Blackcaps. We heard Cuckoos away in Bramfield Park Wood. St Mark's flies swarmed, and Orange-tip butterflies mated and laid eggs on the abundance of Jack-by-the Hedge. We examined and marvelled at the patterns and colours of mining bees, and others, as never before.

A male Firecrest made a brief appearance on 14th June.

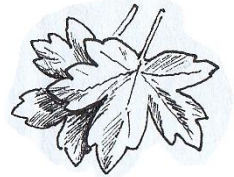
Instead of the expected White-letter Hairstreaks, two Purple Hairstreaks were about a magnificent Wych Elm on 5th July. These had probably strayed from the adjacent oaks. Tawny Owls called.



Homeward bound after each visit, we diverted to Tewin Hill Farm to say goodnight to the Swallows. Later, on 18th September, we bid an emotional farewell to the remaining birds gathered on wires prior to departure. "Safe journey. See you next year,"

Time moved us into one of the wettest autumns on record. October 3rd was the wettest day in Britain since records began in 1891. Over 1¼ inches of rain, half of the month's average and enough to fill Loch Ness, fell across the UK in a single day. As a result, the autumn colours at Red Wood were magnificent. Eventually the burnished gold leaves drifted down from Field Maples and Oaks. Bared branches, revealed in silhouette, pointed skywards as though prayerfully thankful for the fulfilment of another annual cycle in their lives. By 30th November the air was exquisitely perfumed with the scent of damp woodland soils and leaf litter. Woodpigeons fed on ivy berries, and Fieldfares, Redwings and Blackbirds on Holly. The latter still bearing a few flowers.

Another surge in the coronavirus epidemic necessitated a reimposition of lock-downs that were not to be significantly eased until April 12th. With the Chief Medical Officer's comment of 2nd May in mind, we continued visiting Red Wood.



The darkest night, 11th December, after which the evenings start lengthening again, came and went. On Christmas Eve catkins were again evident on Hazels, and the first Snowdrops and Winter Heliotrope in flower in Digswell. We had received our first coronavirus vaccination on 17th December with the second following three weeks later.

Then we passed into another New Year, 2021. By mid-January Hazel catkins were filling with pollen. On 28th February throngs of bees attended the first Blackthorn blossoms along the lanes around Red Wood. In and around the wood Lesser Celandines and Dog's Mercury were again in full flower, Bluebell spikes proudly evident and Treecreepers, Robins and tits in full song. Frogs returned to spawn in our garden pond on 14th March and Toads two weeks

later on the 29th. Unaffected by the coronavirus, the hopes and promises of another spring were being fulfilled. Excited, uplifted and inspired, we immersed ourselves in it.

April, in contrast to last year, proved to be the coldest and frostiest, and one of the driest on record. As I write the unseasonable cold northerly weather has persisted into May. We welcomed the first Swallows back at Tewin Hill Farm on 18th April, and are still awaiting the arrival of the majority of the summer birds.

The expressed wisdom of the Chief Medical Officer a year earlier had enabled us to unlock our lives to the considerable benefit of our mental and spiritual health.

Tom Gladwin.
May, 2021.



Is this Hazel at Bacon's Green the oldest in Hertfordshire?

Photographed 28.02.2021

Photo: Tom Gladwin

A BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY – BUT A VERY PLEASANT ONE – IN THE FOREST OF DEAN.

Anybody who knows me will know that I look after the woodlands owned by Welwyn Hatfield Council. These include two of Hertfordshire's largest and most important woodland Sites of Special Scientific Interest – Northaw Great Wood and Sherrardspark Wood – as well as interesting places such as Mardley Heath and the small woods 'encapsulated' within the residential areas of Hatfield. I spend a lot of my time in woods, thinking about woods and trees, planning management and working with contractors and volunteers who work in the woods.

My sister, who lives in the Cotswolds, suggested that we 'got away' for a break from 2020, perhaps not very far but far enough to make a change from daily routine. So where did we go for our short break? The Forest of Dean, of course! Now, for some, this might certainly seem to be a busman's holiday but all those who love trees will understand that tree people never tire of looking at them. We not only admire their beauty, variety and colours, but are filled with awe at the size, structure and longevity of our largest specimens, whether these are specially promoted ones or those we happen across in a woodland walk. And we are always nosy about how other people look after them, so it didn't matter a bit that I was having a holiday in more woodlands. We spent three days at the end of September based at the very hospitable and historic Speech House Hotel located in the centre of the Forest, not far from Cinderford. And we walked every day in various parts of the Forest. The weather wasn't always very kind but it didn't matter.

We had walking-scale maps but, on our first day, steady rain was forecast so we decided to use the 'Sculpture Trail' leaflet and waymarks to guide us round a 5-6 mile route. It wouldn't matter if the leaflet got soggy and we would keep our proper map dry. We followed forest paths (some of them quite steep) and former tramways through mixed forest and oak woodland within the Beechenhurst Inclosure. There were 16 sculptures to find and wonder at – several were decidedly underwhelming (to us, anyway!) but others much more meaningful and appropriate to their woodland setting. Given the pretty grim weather, it wasn't surprising that we met few other people. Occasionally however, we would meet a couple at a sculpture – and

would agree that we didn't understand it either!

The rain didn't stop us admiring fine stands of oak trees, the rich golds and browns of the bracken contrasting with the deep greens of pine and spruce. Birds kept under cover and were heard rather than seen, but they *were* there: Blue and Coal Tits, Goldcrests, Robins and Chaffinches, a couple of Treecreepers, a great-spotted woodpecker and then a pair of Ravens croaking overhead.



Perhaps the most remarkable feature of our walk was the occurrence of (literally) hundreds of Dor Beetles *Geotrupes stercorarius* wandering about on the forest tracks, many of them sadly trodden on. They were everywhere that first day. My sister's initial impressed reaction to their amazing

iridescent purple under-surface wore pretty thin after the first 100 or so beetles that we saw. . . .

On our second day the sun shone and it was nice and warm. We drove eastwards to Soudley Ponds Nature Reserve and walked from a car park at Sutton Bottom. The series of ponds were created and landscaped for private fishing by the estate's owner sometime after 1836. Now looked after by the Forestry Commission, they are a really delightful place to visit and there are good circular routes around them. Probably much busier at weekends, for us the walk was lovely and peaceful. We had several very good views of a pair of Kingfishers doing flypasts up and down the valley and also close views of several Grey Wagtails feeding in side streams and spillways of the ponds – a new bird for my sister. Pairs of Mandarin ducks were feeding with Mallard and Moorhens – and there were the usual Robins, Blue Tits and Coal Tits in the trees. I also found quite a few fungi, but as I had completely forgotten to take a field guide with me on the holiday, I didn't make a big thing of fungi. My sister is interested but not *that* interested! But looking for fungi yielded another sign of the variety of wildlife here – several hazel nut shells with tell-

tale round holes created by a Dormouse.

After some time spent at the Dean Heritage Centre (and some money spent to help support the museum and café), we drove on to New Fancy viewpoint near Cannop. From this 'eminence' (originally a spoil heap of the New Fancy coal mine), there is a tremendous all-round view of the Forest rolling away to the horizon – as far as the eye could see were trees of various kinds and no signs of habitation. It seemed a good location to see birds of prey - and I am pretty certain that I spotted a Goshawk. It was a long way away but it was doing the Goshawk 'flap-flap-flap-glide' thing, and I watched it for quite a while and willed it to come our way. But it didn't. I later found out it *was* a well-known place for Goshawks, so perhaps I was right.

We followed a circular walk around the viewpoint's car park. There was a lot of heathy grassland with birch trees and clumps of gorse – good for fungi, I hoped! Sure enough we found Brown Birch Boletes *Leccinum scabrum*, Blackening Waxcaps *Hygrocybe nigricans*, Bearded Milkcaps *Lactarius pubescens*, Birch Knights *Tricoloma fulvum*, Poison Pies *Hebeloma crustuliniforme* and Red-cracking Boletes *Xerocomus cisalpinus* / *chrysenteron*. It was a very satisfying end to a lovely day in the Forest.

On our third morning we walked southwestwards directly from the front door of the hotel.

A large area of grass
verge turned over by
Wild Boar



The first thing we came to on the opposite side of the road was a large area of rotavated grass verge. Not machinery - but the excavations of wild boar!

The damage looked quite fresh – and so close to the hotel. Perhaps if we had got up early that morning, we might have seen them. We had in fact spotted frequent signs of boar along many of the roads we had driven along, including on verges and banks within settlements, as well as the grassy edges of paths and trails in the forest

The second things I spotted were two exceptionally fine oak trees, so I went to have a closer look. At the base of the largest oak I was absolutely amazed to find a plaque that said “1861 – Albert Prince Consort. Pansanger Oak from a tree in Pansanger Park planted by Queen Elizabeth”. I never knew that Hertfordshire had this arboreal connection with the Forest of Dean. The Prince Consort Oak has strikingly similar form to its parent tree – a trunk tapering evenly from the base to the crown. The second oak was grown from an acorn of the Prince Consort Oak and planted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1957. I felt vaguely aggrieved that they hadn’t spelled ‘Panshanger’ correctly but, apart from that, it was a lovely discovery.

From these magnificent oaks we followed the Gloucestershire Way through the somewhat sepulchral and silent conifers of Russell’s Enclosure to the south end of Cannop Ponds. These ponds were constructed in the 1820s to power a waterwheel at Parkend ironworks but are now managed as a visitor attraction by the Forestry Commission. They are more ‘tame’ than those at Soudley and are situated close to a busy road, making them also rather a noisy location. But their woodland setting is very beautiful with good opportunities for photography of trees, water and reflections. The southernmost pond is a fishing lake but still, of course, attractive to waterbirds. On the day of our walk, there was a small flock of Tufted Ducks, several pairs of Coots, Moorhens and Dabchicks, some Mallards and a pair of Mute Swans. A little further on we also spotted an immature Heron trying to be inconspicuous down in the spillway of the upper lake.

From the lakes, we had originally intended to follow a cycle trail along another former railway line, but we found that different users were not segregated. There were far more cyclists than pedestrians and very few of them used (or even had bells) so we found it un-nerving to have bikes regularly coming up from behind without warning. After more scrutiny of the map, we decided to go ‘off-piste’ through the forest to find our way to the Beechenhurst Forest Centre. It was thankfully much quieter - we could stop

and look or listen without risk of collision with a bike! There was a greater variety of trees to admire including some colourful beech and we added a Nuthatch and Long-tailed Tits to the bird-list.

After a late lunch of soup and bowls of chips, we returned to the hotel to collect the car and started our return journey to my sister's home in the Cotswolds. It had been a lovely autumnal busman's holiday. If you like trees, woods and forested landscape, I can thoroughly recommend the Dean and the Speech House Hotel.

Chris James

WILDLIFE RECORDING

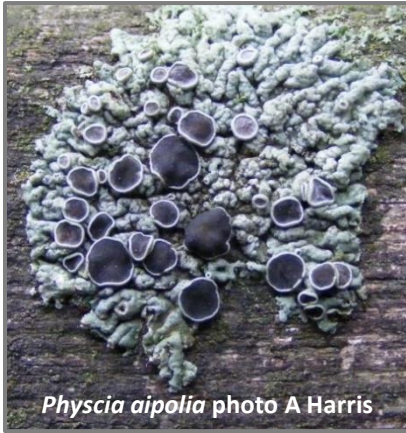
LICHEN HUNTING IN A YEAR OF LOCKDOWNS

My lichen hunting trips were very local this year! All my records came from around Flamstead, though sometimes I was more intrepid and wandered into the exotic lands of Redbourn parish. I largely found the 'usual suspects' though it was always good to be out looking at lichens and interesting to note how things have changed over the years.

Though I found Scripturewort *Graphis scripta* for the first time in the parish this year, it has probably been around for a long time as it is usually a species of longstanding habitats and I discovered it at the base of a hedgerow tree along an ancient green lane. In contrast, finding the 'Fanfare of Trumpets' *Ramalina fastigiata* at the beginning of this millennium would have been a cause of great excitement, now they are everywhere, but I still find them attractive. I am often picking fallen specimens on my walks and they went well with various mosses when I created my miniature Easter garden in April.

Fences and gates had the most interesting arrays of lichens. Species included *Lecanora saligna* and *Buellia badia*. The latter naturally occurs on stone and was not thought to be particularly common in our area, but now that lichenologists pay more attention to treated timber, it is often found among the specialist assemblages colonising the wood as it weathers.

At one stage, when lichens were recovering and reappearing following the decline of sulphur dioxide pollution, *Physcia aipolia* (William's favourite



Physcia aipolia photo A Harris

lichen) was appearing everywhere on twigs it is interesting that with the increasing effects of nitrogen-based pollutant such ammonia, *Physcia aipolia* has largely disappeared from this habitat, but can now be found on weathered timber.

Similar changes have been apparent in my garden over the years and I took the opportunity, this year, to collate the records and recording for my own garden. Gardens are good places to study lichens;

differences can be observed over time and gardens have a good variety of features e.g. I had such diverse substrates as slates, brick walls, troughs and different shrubs to look at. Secretly, though my real motivation was to find more species than the 86 recorded at the local church, so I could make some sarcastic comments to the vicar. My haul over the preceding twelve months was 78 so not quite there, however my all-time total currently stands at 86!

The rarest of these *Ochrolechia arborea*, despite having a near-miss when I was pruning some time ago, continues to thrive and expand on an old cherry tree. It was about the sixth UK record of this nationally rare, internationally near-threatened lichen when Paula and Mark found it in 2017. It was certainly near-threatened when I cut back the cherry tree from my wildflower meadow. A bearded lichen *Usnea subfloridana* is also thriving on the acidic bark of the cherry. The best feature, though, is a garden seat whose weathered timbers support 30 different lichens, so no sitting down!



The garden seat

Looking further afield, if you were to be a bit creative with the county boundary you could include *Ramonia interjectum* in this report. Paula found the minute fruits of this Nationally Scarce lichen on an Ash tree while having a coffee break during one of her walks. The location was actually in Buckinghamshire and is the second county record for VC24, so perhaps more coffee breaks in Hertfordshire are called for.

Nearer again to Flamstead, I had one lichen recording afternoon with Paula before the autumn lockdown, with at least one socially distanced foot within the parish, as our chosen site at Ballingdon Bottom was Dean Lane, an ancient trackway marking the parish boundary. We were looking in particular at the veteran oak pollards along it. Often the lichens on these old trees turns out to be rather disappointing, but here there was the hint of a relic community associated with ancient trees and woodland with *Cladonia parasitica*, *Dendrographa decolorans* and *Chaenotheca trichialis*. The last is a delight to look at under the hand lens looking like dark long-stemmed goblets with chocolate powder frothing on the top.

As usual there were the usual bemused looks from walkers passing by, but perhaps pushing your head close up against a hole in a tree might prove an alternative to wearing face masks.

Andrew Harris

Old oak pollards,
Dean Lane,
Ballingdon
Bottom

Photo: Andrew
Harris



MOTHING THROUGH COVID

Or how to get Nature to come to you when you cannot get to Nature.

Before 2020 I had accumulated a garden moth list of 59 species, achieved from several years of casual observations. These were moths found while cutting hedges, disturbed from plants, caught whilst day flying, or caterpillars observed on plants.

Then in early 2020, like all of us, I was looking at the prospect of not being able to get out into the countryside to look for and see plants and animals. What to do? For several years at least one friend had been urging me to get a moth trap for the garden. I bit the bullet and looked for one. It appeared I was not alone; others had seen the signs and decent moth traps had all but gone. I did find one supplier with a single Robinson MV (mercury vapour) left, so bought it quickly. Here was the best option in the pack for a naturalist; if you cannot go to wildlife persuade it to come to you.

About moth traps. There are many types out there (you can look online on this subject; I recommend the Anglian Lepidopterist Supplies [ALS] site). I would say though that it pays to have a decent one, and Robinson moth traps really are good. All types work, even a standard bulb and sheet will get you moths, but the best catches are from the best traps.

Once you have a trap you need some reference material. There are a range of books available at all the natural history bookshops online and plenty of advice from county websites on all aspects of mothing. Here in Herts. I recommend the Hertfordshire and Middlesex Moth Group website, run by the county recorder Colin Plant with Andrew Wood. Highly recommended too, is the Norfolk Moths website, which has fabulous resources (most useful is Flying Tonight, with details of what is about and loads of photographs). The ALS site has links to many resources.

Moth traps bring in a range of by-catch too. You will get flies, wasps, bees, bugs, and beetles in there. So, lots to look at if you have the inclination. Whilst trapping I have been joined by a frog, a tawny owl, a badger, and a newt in the garden. Dan Asaw has joined me a few times and helped with the beetles.

Wasps can be a problem as they eat moths. When wasps are about, never turn the trap on till after dusk to avoid them.

Not all moths go into a trap, in fact some species do not come to light and others come but will not enter the trap. Many people turn a trap on and leave it till morning, I much prefer to work it regularly. I check every twenty minutes; looking at the outside of the trap, the house wall, fences either side, the surrounding vegetation and behind flowerpots. I have found a great number of moth species I would not have added to the garden list by doing this, often interesting ones. For moths, like Clearwings, that do not come to a trap you can purchase pheromones (see ALS site).

On 9th April I turned on my trap for the first time. It does seem daunting when you do the first night, but the more you do the more familiar you become with the catch. I never ran the trap for more than a few hours for a long time, so I could process the catch progressively without being over loaded. An MV trap puts out a lot of light, its bright and I did not want to annoy the neighbours either; in September I purchased a second trap, when more were available, a Robinson twin-actinic which is as good but not as bright so can run all night without lighting up the neighbourhood.

That first night produced nine moths of five species. I ran the trap on another thirteen nights that month and ended up with 126 moths of fourteen species. It does become quite addictive once you are going, you never know what will turn up which is exciting. I ended the year with the stats in the table below (see following page). I still have three months to go before completing a full year, the first three months of 2021. There are no months of the year without moths, even in winter there are species on the wing like Winter Moth, March Moth and Spring Usher. I have added two to the garden list in Feb.

If you do decide to trap collect the data. Join the Herts Moth Group by mailing Colin Plant for his newsletters. Keep the data – counts, dates, locations etc. All this information is useful. It adds to the county database, it gets sent through to national databases. It helps with analysis of population trends, phenology, climate change trends, migration patterns. It really is all useful. I added a county first, two seconds, two fourths, a fifth and sixth record; just imagine what you might find. Nothing is good mental exercise and useful science that can be done one yard from your back door. Try it, you might like it. I know

three people I have persuaded to get a trap and they all enjoyed the result. I have also purchased a generator so I can trap in the field, but not yet had the chance to go anywhere. If you want to talk about any aspect of mothing, I am happy to exchange mails or come to a BNA meeting that I am at for a chat.

GARDEN

2020 First year with trap.		
First trapping date	09/04/2020	
Total Moths recorded 2020	6569	
Total Species recorded 2020	429	
Garden List total by year end	440	
Largest Month - Moth Count	1083	August
Commonest moth species 2020	592	Common Wainscot
No. species with one record only	126	
County Firsts	1	
County Seconds	2	
No. days trap run	142	
Highest day count, moths	389	11/08/2020
Lowest day count	0	3 days Dec
Highest day count, species	76	16/07/2020



Crescent Dart. 1st Herts.



Heath Rustic. 2nd Herts



Elephant Hawkmoth



Jersey Tiger.



Oak Eggar



Pine Hawkmoth



Merveille du Jour



Dewick's Plusia



Leopard Moth.

Photos: William Bishop

COVID COLEOPTERA

This year has resulted in a great deal of change for all of us, and the county's coleoptera recorders are no different. With the loss of our resident beetle guru, Trevor, we have all seemed somewhat at a loss, but I guess it's now time for me to pull up my trousers!

For me, the start of the beetle year began with a humungous pile of manure! After moving to a new house in Knebworth, I first noticed this 10ft pile of dung on a 'romantic walk' in February with my fiancé along Spinney Lane. Within two hours of getting home, my wellies were on and nets were out. I practically dived into the steaming heap like an Olympic diver! However, despite my best efforts and searching for just under an hour, the pile yielded nothing but uncomfortable amounts of the Lesser Earwig *Labia minor* and a single rove beetle *Oxytelus sculptus*.

Undeterred, I decided to switch tack and went hammer-and-tongs under a mature Oak with my sweep net. In the blissful afternoon sun I was rewarded with a variety of treasures, beginning with specimens of ubiquitous Scraptiidae (false flower beetles): *Anaspis regimbarti*, *A. maculata* and *A.*

frontalis. These were followed by a common longhorn beetle *Grammoptera ruficornis* and the gloriously green weevil *Polydrusus cervinus*. In with Hertfordshire's 'usual suspects' were two weevils of note: the widespread but by no means common *Anthonomus pedicularius*, which was probably blown off the nearby hawthorn bushes; the uncommon



Analgyptus mysticus at Saul's Wood, Ayot (Photo: Dan Asaw)

Curculio venosus, one of the Acorn weevils - a first for me - much smaller and darker than its auburn-coloured relatives. Whilst diving out of the way of some dogwalkers in an attempt to maintain social-distancing, I happened on a spectacular example of the Hertfordshire-rare *Orchesia undulata* on an oak log (TL24111922)!

Throughout lockdown William Bishop was my go-to beetle companion. Our socially-distanced meet ups were few and far between but began with a trip to Ayot, meeting at St Peter's church on 16th May. As the heat of the midday sun begun to fade, William managed to spot an example of the dung beetle *Aphodius prodromus* on a less than savoury dog turd at the entrance of Saul's Wood (TL21491456). Saul's Wood yielded a variety of Coleopterans including two different species of Mycetophagidae (the hairy fungus beetles): the nationally scarce *Mycetophagus quadriguttatus* and the much more regularly encountered *M. quadripustulatus*, both found at the bottom of a tree in a fungal bracket by William. We also encountered the cryptic ladybirds *Rhizobius litura* and *R. chrysomeloides* whilst sweeping yet more hawthorn.

Whilst digging in a fallen pine log, I managed to find a cluster of the Tenebrionid *Pycnomerus fuliginosus*, a 'darkling' beetle introduced from Australia! Despite not being native, it is a rather smart-looking beetle with its shield like pronotum.

The beetle of the day however was another lifer for me: the spectacular longhorn beetle *Anaglyptus mysticus* (Red Data Book 'nationally notable category B') swept from flowering hawthorn.

A trip on my own to Hertford Heath on 24th May yielded a few notable finds. The Hertfordshire-rare Broom Leaf Beetle *Gonioctena olivacea* was found in great numbers on every broom plant swept. I also encountered a dead specimen of the Bupestrid *Agrilus sulcicollis*, a jewel beetle, in an ants' nest, of all places.

At the beginning of August, I managed to make a break for 'The Lizard' in Cornwall, being one of the few that actually attended their planned summer holiday. Unbeknownst to me, the heat wave had begun and William started to find all manner of things in his newly-acquired moth trap: the Sexton (burying) beetles *Nicrophorus vespillo* and *N. humator* and a recently-arrived

ground beetle *Polistichus connexus*, which seems to have been found all over the south of the UK in moth traps when the night temperature rises above 23°C. Until earlier in 2019, this beetle was restricted to the south coast of UK but was first found in Hertfordshire by Simon Knott on 26th August 2019. Initially, I was annoyed that I had missed my chance to see this beetle but, luckily for me, more returned later in the month. An excited phone call from William and a late-night drive allowed me to finally see this incredible beetle!

Other notable finds from William's moth trap included a ground beetle *Brachinus crepitans* on 15th April, a burying beetle *Necrodes littoralis* on 28th April, a false ladybird *Endomychus coccineus* and 2 more *Polistichus connexus* on 8th August, the Hertfordshire-rare weevil *Brachypera zoilus* on 19th October, another burying beetle *Nicrophorus investigator* on 21st October. The rare weevil was last seen in the county in 2014 at Croxley Common Moor by David Murray.



From left to right:
Brachypera zoilus, *Endomychus coccineus* and *Polistichus connexus*.
(Photos: William Bishop)

Summer seemed to slip away from me, but a socially-distanced Hertfordshire invertebrate project meeting arranged at Heartwood Forest by Orthoptera recorder Ian Carle on the 25th August 2020 gave me a break from the joys of lockdown. I swept the darkling beetle *Lagria hirta* off Old Man's Beard and various species were swept from long grass either side of the open tracks

including a Malachite beetle *Cordylepherus viridis*, one of the larger ‘true’ weevils *Larinus carlinae* and a leaf beetle *Cryptocephalus fulvus*. My highlight, however, was a beetle that had evaded me for years. Despite my place of residence being surrounded by its food plant, I had never before seen the Hazel Nut Weevil *Curculio nucum*. During lunch, Ian had pointed out a hazel tree and I had my sights set! My first sweep gave me exactly what I had been waiting for and I was finally able to tick off one of the UK’s most **commonly** found weevils on hazel, four years after actively searching for it.

A chance meeting on 5th September with fellow Coleopterist Dave Murray, his son Connel and rising coleopterist Emily Hobson at Panshanger Park, Hertford yielded a few gems. These included the recently-arrived seed beetle *Bruchidius imbricornis*, the Mint Leaf Beetle *Chrysolina herbaea* (swept off mint!) the Lesser Thorn-tipped Longhorn beetle *Pogonocherus hispidus* and the cryptically- coloured Cramp Ball fungus weevil *Platyrhinus resinosus*. This was found along with five specimens of *Biphyllus lunatus* in a Cramp Ball (also known as King Alfred’s cake fungus) *Daldinia concentrica*.

I wasn’t the only one out and about though. Another county coleopterist, Stuart Warrington, made several good finds this year: the shining fungus beetle *Scaphidium quadrimaculatum* was found in Sherrardsparkwood, Welwyn Garden City on 24th April; the Red Data Book 3-listed leaf-rolling weevil, *Byctiscus populi* turned up at Danemead, near Broxbourne on 16th June; a fungus-feeding beetle associated with old trees *Diaperis boleti* was collected at Panshanger Park on 4th September, Hertford. On the same day, the remains of the clerid *Opilo mollis* was also found here, a new species for the site. It hunts smaller bark beetles under the surface of tree bark and, as Stuart found only the elytra, we are lucky it has unmistakable pattern and colouring allowing us to get a definite identification!

Dan Asaw



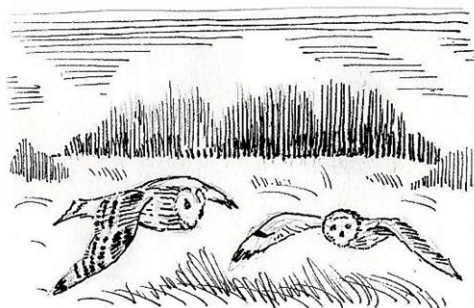
BIRDS ON BNA MEETINGS AND IN HERTS 2020

We had an extremely limited number of branch meetings this year due to the COVID-19 virus, and this reduced the variety of birds we saw. Some of the more interesting birds are noted in the following account. In January at Bayfordbury, Mandarins on the pond were rather fine. The meeting in February where we met at Turnford but crossed to Essex gave us the opportunity to see a range of birds, including Goosanders, Kingfishers, Smew (a redhead), Water Rail, Snipe, Goldeneye, Cattle Egrets and for one lucky member a Bittern. At South Mimms on 22nd Feb we saw mostly woodland birds, including Siskins. At Weston on 7th March, we crossed farmland and saw Corn Buntings and Yellowhammers. We saw Greenfinches at most meetings, this is a bird which has suffered a severe decline in numbers but appears to be increasing slightly which is good news: the bad news is Chaffinches seem to be declining.



In Hertfordshire over all in 2020, the highlight for most birders was a Red-necked Phalarope at Wilstone Reservoir on 24th May. A rare vagrant and the 8th record.

Some rarer bird records may not appear till the Bird Report next October as there was a reluctance to broadcast details. Turtle Doves and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers are becoming increasingly rare in the county, while Great White Egrets are getting more frequent. This year saw a lot of Crossbills, many of which are still about at the time of writing, check out any pines near you. Winter in N Herts often brings Hen Harriers, Merlins, Short-eared Owls and other raptors so if you are around the Baldock/Royston area keep a watch on the fields.



Short-eared Owls

A.H. 2016

William Bishop

2021 NEW YEAR PLANT HUNT



This year, BSBI New Year Plant Hunt was held between 1st and 4th January. As we were in the middle of the pandemic restrictions it was impossible to participate as a group. So, individual members of BNA carried their own hunts. Many thanks to William, Julie and Ruth who sent me their lists. Every one of us “hunted” locally adhering to the rules. I regret that I did not make

more detailed notes about the weather and the general mood at that time to make this report more emotional, but I do remember that it felt good just to be out and recording something.

My analysis is based on five lists. An extra list comes from me because I went out on two days. I recorded in St Albans while William, Julie and Ruth recorded in the countryside. Between us we recorded 53 species. William was the absolute winner with 33 species in his list. This was not surprising as William is always good at spotting species and covered a large area during his walk. The smallest number of species was seven and the mean was 20 species. For comparison, the national average was 18 species per list (https://bsbi.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/BSBI-New-Year-Plant-Hunt-2021-FINAL.pdf).

On the species frequency, one species (*Poa annua* Annual Meadow-grass) was present in all five lists, eight species were present in four lists (*Bellis perennis* Daisy, *Capsella bursa-pastoris* Shepherd’s Purse, *Lamium album* White Dead-nettle, *Lamium purpureum* Red Dead-nettle, *Senecio vulgaris* Groundsel, *Sonchus oleraceus* Smooth Sow-thistle, *Stellaria media* Common Chickweed, *Taraxacum agg.* Dandelion), five species in three lists (*Anthriscus sylvestris* Cow Parsley, *Crepis capillaris* Smooth Hawksbeard, *Euphorbia peplus* Petty Spurge, *Senecio jacobaea* Common Ragwort, *Veronica persica*

Common Field Speedwell), nine species in two lists and 30 species in just one list (Figure 1). In BSBI report, *Poa annua* came in the fourth place after *Bellis perennis*, *Senecio vulgaris* and *Taraxacum agg.* which we had in the second place. Our other second place species were among the top ten in the BSBI list apart from *Stellaria media* which came 14th in the BSBI list.

Some notable species included fast spreading aliens *Conyza bonariensis* Argentine fleabane, *C. sumatrensis* Guernsey Fleabane, *Senecio inaequalis* Narrow-leaved Ragwort and already well-naturalised *Galinsoga parviflora* Gallant-soldier.

Writing this note made me think about what we see in January and I am looking forward to the next year's plant hunt with a new eye. Something positive from the challenging time...

Thanks, William, Julie, and Ruth for this unexpected experience!

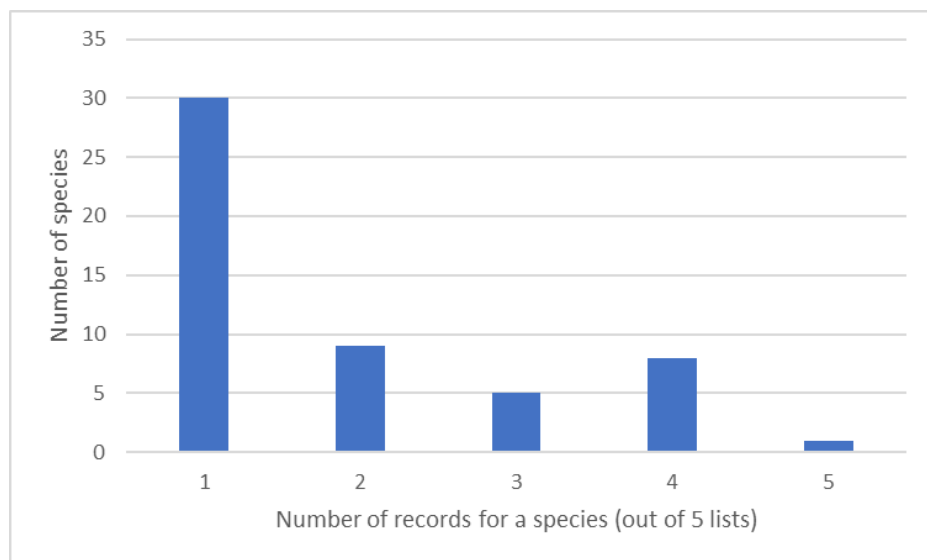


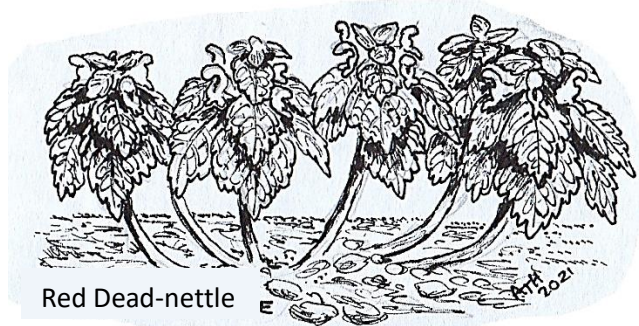
Figure 1. Species presence in our five lists.

Table 1. Species list with the number of counts in the lists.

Latin name	English name	Count
<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Yarrow	2
<i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>	Cow Parsley	3
<i>Bellis perennis</i>	Daisy	4
<i>Campanula poscharskyana</i>	Trailing Bellflower	1
<i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i>	Shepherd's -purse	4
<i>Cardamine hirsuta</i>	Hairy Bittercress	2
<i>Centranthus ruber</i>	Red Valerian	2
<i>Cerastium fontanum</i>	Common Mouse-ear	1
<i>Conyza bonariensis</i>	Argentine Fleabane	1
<i>Conyza sumatrensis</i>	Guernsey Fleabane	1
<i>Crepis biennis</i>	Rough Hawksbeard	1
<i>Crepis capillaris</i>	Smooth Hawksbeard	3
<i>Crepis vesicaria</i>	Beaked Hawk's-beard	1
<i>Cymbalaria muralis</i>	Ivy-leaved Toadflax	1
<i>Euphorbia helioscopia</i>	Sun Spurge	1
<i>Euphorbia peplus</i>	Petty Spurge	3
<i>Ficaria verna</i>	Lesser Celandine	1
<i>Galanthus elwesii</i>	Greater Snowdrop	1
<i>Galingsoga parviflora</i>	Galant-soldier	1
<i>Hedera helix</i>	Ivy	1
<i>Helleborus foetidus</i>	Stinking Hellebore	1
<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>	Hogweed	1
<i>Hordeum murinum</i>	Wall Barley	1
<i>Hypochaeris radicata</i>	Cat's-ear	1
<i>Knautia arvensis</i>	Field Scabious	1
<i>Lamium album</i>	White Dead-nettle	4
<i>Lamium purpureum</i>	Red Dead-nettle	4
<i>Lapsana communis</i>	Nipplewort	2
<i>Leucanthemum vulgare</i>	Ox-eye Daisy	1
<i>Mahonia aquifolium</i>	Oregon-grape	1
<i>Mercurialis annua</i>	Annual Mercury	1

<i>Myosotis arvensis</i>	Field Forgetmenot	1
<i>Parietaria judaica</i>	Pellitory-of-the-wall	1
<i>Pentaglottis sempervirens</i>	Green Alkanet	2
<i>Poa annua</i>	Annual Meadow-grass	5
<i>Primula vulgaris</i>	Primrose	1
<i>Rubus fruticosus agg.</i>	Bramble	2
<i>Senecio inaequidens</i>	Narrow-leaved Ragwort	1
<i>Senecio jacobaea</i>	Common Ragwort	3
<i>Senecio squalidus</i>	Oxford Ragwort	1
<i>Senecio vulgaris</i>	Groundsel	4
<i>Sherardia arvensis</i>	Field Madder	1
<i>Sonchus oleraceus</i>	Smooth Sow-thistle	4
<i>Stellaria media</i>	Common Chickweed	4
<i>Taraxacum agg.</i>	Dandelion	4
<i>Torilis japonica</i>	Hedge Parsley	1
<i>Tripleurospermum inodorum</i>	Scentless Mayweed	2
<i>Ulex europaeus</i>	Gorse	2
<i>Urtica urens</i>	Small Nettle	2
<i>Veronica persica</i>	Common Field Speedwell	3
<i>Viburnum tinus</i>	Laurustinus	1
<i>Vinca major</i>	Greater Periwinkle	1
<i>Viola arvensis</i>	Field Pansy	1

Alla Mashanova



SITE BASED NATURAL HISTORY

HITCHIN COMMUNITY ORCHARD

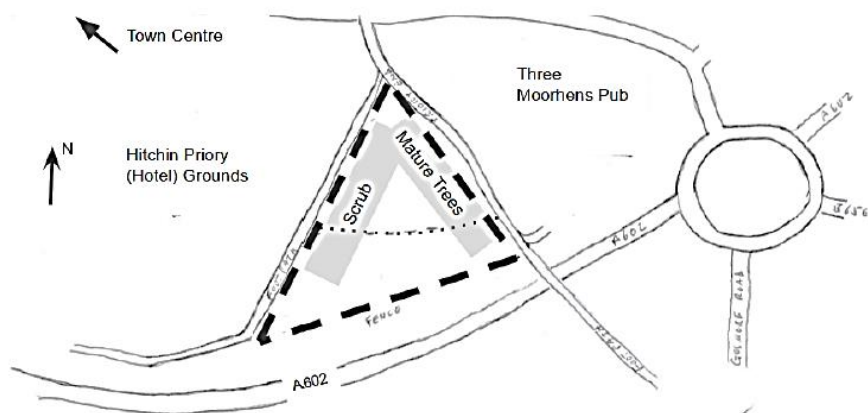
(aka Maisie's Meadow & Jazz's Orchard)



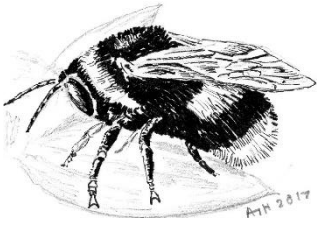
There is a small field near where I live in Hitchin and over the last couple of years I have found it a great place to learn about insects, how to identify, photograph and record them, how to take delight in them and how they interact with other insects and their habitats.

A couple of years ago I attended one or two BNA field meetings and William Bishop suggested that buying a sweep net and a copy of "Brock" (A Comprehensive Guide to Insects of Britain & Ireland) would be helpful, and I did just that. Although I can't make many BNA meetings, I can now often be seen "sweeping" bits of Hitchin and a birthday present to myself of an Olympus "Tough" camera, which is very small and easy to use for macro photography, has helped too.

Covid “lock down”, though terrible for many, gave me increased opportunities to search for invertebrates. One particular local “happy place” for me is a triangular-shaped field I refer to as “Hitchin Community Orchard (HCO)”, which is the name I started to use on “IRecord”, (my favoured website to send records to) but I am probably the only person to use HCO as the name of this field. I suspect the field looks a little unprepossessing to most people’s eyes, bordered by a noisy road and is a 1.5 acre patch on the edge of Hitchin but has proved a particularly good “learning ground” for me. The field is associated with Hitchin Priory hotel, but is cut off from their grounds by a footpath and bounded by roads on the other two sides, thus the land appears to have no commercial value and has been neglected. The site is light soil with a line of mature trees to the east (mostly Common Limes and Horse Chestnut), a line of scrub to the north including hawthorn and dogwood, and open and very sandy to the south, making it a sunny site.



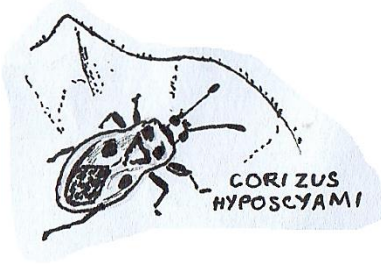
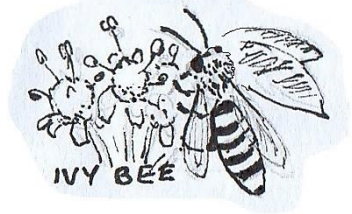
In 2018 local resident Steve MacSweeney, with permission from the hotel, organised that the northern “Maisie’s Meadow” area was rotavated, rolled and sown with wildflower mix to replace long grass, molehills and ant hills. 2019 saw the meadow with much Yellow Rattle and then in 2020 Ox Eye Daisy was spectacularly dominant. Steve organises cutting of the meadow in autumn and has planted the remaining area (“Jazz’s Orchard”) with 70 fruit trees. Maisie and Jazz being two dogs fondly remembered by Steve. It will be interesting to see how this area develops.



The whole area attracts a large variety of insects, in the spring hundreds of Buff-tailed Bumble bees are attracted by large quantities of Ground Ivy in the southern area and in September Ivy bees can be seen searching the sandy ground for nesting

sites. The quantity of Ivy bees is staggering: difficult to estimate numbers but I would say tens of thousands. This bee species was only recognised 1993, first spotted in the UK in 2001 and now thrives in massive numbers

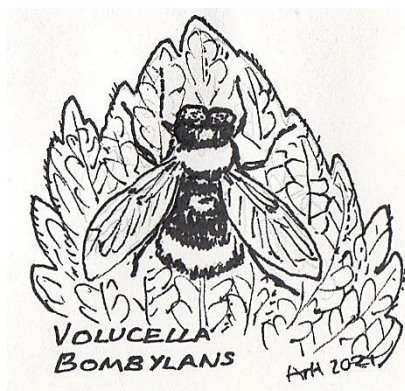
close to my home. This perhaps is the most dramatic example I have of a dynamic population shift, but I have come to realise population dynamics of insects is much more prevalent than I thought.



My journey into discovering insects was helped by reading a “bugs” web page on the Herts Natural History society by Joe Gray (recorder of terrestrial heteroptera for Herts) plus some emailed help from Joe. I find that the feedback from IRecord for bug sightings is very motivating too: the ‘bugs’ records are often reviewed within a

day and there are wonderful people giving their time for free which makes this happen. Many thanks to them! Armed with my background “bug” knowledge I can now expect (but not guarantee) to find many of the easier-to-identify bugs on the HCO site: Red Legged, Crucifer, Hawthorn and Gorse shieldbugs for instance. An unusual bug I found in 2020 was an *Arocatus* species and there are various learning points connected with this sighting. Firstly, so many insects are really difficult to identify and this bug was such an example: there are two *Arocatus* species which are hard to separate (however both bugs are uncommon). To be honest when I saw it in the field I thought it was the fairly common *Corizus hyoscyami* (“Cinnamon bug”) and only realised when reviewing photos later that something about it “was different”. At the time of writing this, the IRecord record is “awaiting review”, and maybe that’s the way it will stay?

Another insect group, as already mentioned, prevalent at HCO are wasps and bees, but not just the sheer quantity, but there is variety too. For example I have seen Blood bees (*Sphecodes species*): another case where getting to species level is beyond my skill set. I do now have Stephen Falk's field guide to bees, but I find this a challenge to use as the names for parts of a bee stick in my head for a few seconds only. Nevertheless I learn that Blood bees are clepto-parasites of other bees, indicating that the HCO site has other bees I was not otherwise aware of. Nomad bees (*Nomada species*) are also to be found, with a similar story: they are also clepto-parasites but tricky to identify at species level. At this point I might mention social media: there is a Facebook group devoted to bees, wasps and ants who are a very helpful community for identification, but I tend to only ask for help occasionally, as I think there is a danger of the site being overloaded with "what's this then?" questions. I did ask for help with identifying the wasp *Astata boops* (which looks somewhat like a Blood bee), and is evidently one of the easier wasps to identify. Learning points for me include: that it likes sandy habitats (which HCO is), it preys on bugs, and in the UK its distribution is in the South East: so many insect species have a "south easterly" distribution, may be caused by a combination of climate change and the proximity to main-land Europe. I only saw *Astata boops* once or twice, but Field Digger wasps (*Mellinus arvensis*), were relatively common and I managed to capture a photo of one holding its prey: a fly about as big as itself (although I see my IRecord entry for this is "awaiting review", so maybe my identification is suspect).

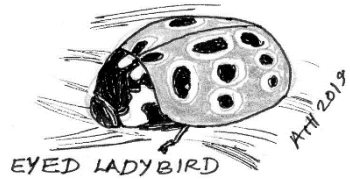


The flies are an insect group I have not spent so much time on, it being rather a daunting category. I have learnt a bit about hoverflies: I observed the bee mimic hoverfly *Volucella bombylans* fairly often and in spring there are *Syrphus* species with absolutely stunning golden thoraxes, but again my skills don't allow me to get to species level. At the Northern entrance to the field is a Horse Chestnut which has various gooey "sap

runs" and in May the biggest run turns white with fermenting yeasts and attracts what I reckon might well be a *Brachyopa* species of hoverfly which

specialises in this habitat, but yet again my observational skills were not good enough to get this accepted on IRecord. Maybe better photos will help in 2021.

The final group to mention are beetles: again difficult for a beginner, but some easier to identify species were there to be found: stunning ladybirds such as the Orange Ladybird and Britain's biggest, Eyed Ladybird made an appearance. This latter surprised me as I thought they were only found in Pine trees, of which there are none in HCO. I also found a Two-spot Ladybird which are now rare in Hertfordshire. The biggest beetle, at nearly 3cm long, which I spotted was a lovely Violet Ground Beetle, but again two similar species mean I cannot be sure it was a *Carabus violaceus*. A particularly interesting beetle was a humble Seven-spot Ladybird (*Coccinella septempunctata*), but the special thing about it was that it was standing guard over the cocoon of its parasite: the wasp *Dinocampus coccinellae*. I have seen afflicted beetles referred to as "Zombie Ladybird Guardians"! And a bit of research adds to the interest as I found is that these wasps also may be parasitised by another wasp, *Gelis Agilis*, which is an example of hyperparasitism.



So Hitchin Community Orchard has given me wonderful things to spot, taught me about insect distributions and how they change, and how the south east seems to be favoured with more than its fair share of insects compared to the rest of the UK. I now know a bit about how "sandiness" and "sap runs" attract certain species and how parasitism is very frequent. I am crossing my fingers that developers leave this patch of land well alone and I look forward to more exciting finds in 2021.

Phil Baron



READ ANY GOOD BOOKS LATELY?

For years I read no books other than field guides. Even now, reading during the day I consider to be a guilty pleasure – and not one in which I've ever indulged. I have always preferred to pursue more physical activities – walking or biking while observing and photographing the flora and fauna wherever I happened to be. Reading is reserved for those few minutes at night between wakefulness and sleep and at various times during the nocturnal hours. This means that getting to the end of a book is usually a very long process...

However, funnily enough, I am able to read through some books much more quickly than others! Here is one but it might help if you are already something of an orchid obsessive or orchidiot as Dunn likes to call them.

***Orchid Summer* by Jon Dunn Published by Bloomsbury Publishing in 2018**



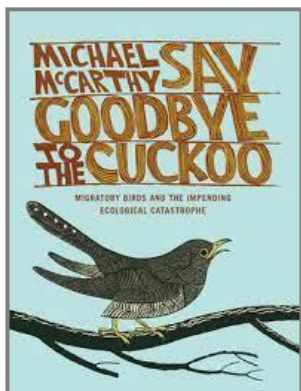
I devoured this book, taking in the fluidity of the prose, the subtlety of the descriptions. No need of illustrations – indeed there are none! You can picture the glorious colours of the more exuberant flowers and almost inhale their delicate perfumes off the page! Or react as he did to the *'wraithlike emergent flower spikes (of ghost orchid) the few drooping flowers hanging downwards like dripping church candle wax, faintly washed with ivory and pale pink...variously described as having a scent like fermenting bananas or, more appositely given their corpse-like pallor, as possessing a foetid aroma. There is something of the churchyard about them, something slightly unwholesome and yet, simultaneously compelling.'*

The author set out to find and photograph every one of the 52 [orchid species in Britain](#) *'in the course of one frantic, glorious, kaleidoscopic flowering season'*. Amazingly he succeeds except for the elusive, rarely seen ghost orchid which he finally sees as a dried specimen in a herbarium. But it is the anecdotes and wry humour that make the story (as that is what it is) come alive and the encounters he has with other like-minded, fanatical people. In

one of his anecdotes Dunn equates the gathering of neotropical male orchid bees in clearings where they form leks – engaging in competitive displays and courtship rituals, to entice female bees – to his student days on a Friday night after a day of orchid hunting when he donned his best clothes and a splash of aftershave in optimistic preparation for a spot of lekking of his own. *‘Little had I known that I was simply mimicking the behaviour of neotropical orchid bees’.*

I was so enthralled by *Orchid Summer* that I read it through again. I’ve never read a book from cover to cover twice before. Easily my best read of the year. Robert Macfarlane called it *‘Wonderful’*.

***Say Goodbye to the Cuckoo* by Michael McCarthy Published by John Murray
2009**



I would like to see *Say Goodbye to the Cuckoo* by Michael McCarthy included in the national school curriculum: everyone should read this book. When it first came out, I bought ten copies and gave them to friends and family. It’s not just about cuckoos...McCarthy has a very readable style and I defy anyone not to be emotionally moved by the message of the book. He describes how, in April and May, one of the greatest natural events of the year happens of which most people are completely unaware. But if it happened on

one day, at one time and in one place, people would rush outside and watch. The sky would darken from horizon to horizon. It would be the sight of millions of swallows, martins, swifts, warblers, wheatears, cuckoos, nightingales, nightjars, pipits, terns, flycatchers and other species pouring into Britain from Africa on their spring migration as they return to breed. Of course it doesn’t happen all at once or in one place but covers the whole of Britain starting from the south and lasting for over ten weeks. Dungeness in Kent and Portland in Dorset are good places to watch them arrive. It is a thrilling sight to see swallows skimming a few feet high over the ground as they come in from over the sea and catch their first insects.

For thousands of years, the Great Arrival, as McCarthy calls it, has been

celebrated. The thrill at hearing the first cuckoo each year, the first mellow, unmistakable notes of a nightingale or that sound of summer - the purr-purr of the turtle dove. I can't resist quoting Mike Cocker who described the call as laying down *'on the unconscious mind like a soothing, pastel shade. It is some of the most evocative mood music of the countryside and I think of it as the colour of ripened grain made audible.'* Touche. McCarthy describes watching swifts in a friend's garden with unconfined delight: *'The first pass came suddenly at 8.30. Two birds appeared out of nowhere and dived screaming past the tops of the poplar trees at the end of the garden before pulling up steeply and parting and I found myself shouting YES! With Jeremy exclaiming FABULOUS!... We were cheering like school boys watching jet fighters.'*

The swift is his symbol of what has always been. He quotes poet Ted Hughes:

*'They've made it again,
Which means the globe's still working, the Creation's
Still waking refreshed, our summer's
Still all to come —'*

But it's not working anymore. There are many possible explanations: global warming, which causes many insects to emerge before the migrants arrive; a general decline in insects, water extraction, degradation of habitat, pollution, human dominance... The swallows didn't return to nest under a nearby bridge 20 years ago, the martins didn't return to our road 25 years ago, the swifts no longer swoop over the garden and the flycatchers haven't nested in the garden since 1976.

Say Goodbye to the Cuckoo is a moving plea by an impassioned expert to create awareness of what is happening to our birds and, by definition, the planet. McCarthy quotes a birder: *'People don't listen to their parents who used to see thousands of skylarks. They see twenty. Their children will see one. And each generation grows up to see the natural world and thinks that is how it is.'* Americans call this the *'shifting baseline syndrome.'*

Michael McCarthy's *Say Goodbye to the Cuckoo* combines an exploration of the crisis that temperate-zone migrant birds are now facing with a celebration of Europe's migratory birds - their beauty, their haunts, their

symbolic and cultural value in our civilization and traditions. He has since written another acclaimed best-seller – *The Moth Snowstorm*, another ‘heartbreaking account of ecological impoverishment’.

The world has moved on since *Say Goodbye* was first published and global warming is now taken more seriously across the globe. Attempts are being made to ‘rewild’ parts of Britain (and elsewhere in the world) viz *Wilding* by Isabella Tree but is it too little too late?

And a book in lighter vein - a totally implausible but fun tale about a disillusioned school teacher who suddenly quits her job when her pupils make fun of her once too often: she goes off to pursue her dream of finding the golden beetle of New Caledonia. Her father once showed her a picture of this beetle in a book of ‘magical creatures’. No specimens exist of this possibly mythical beetle. Does she find it? You will have to read Rachel Joyce’s **Miss Benton’s Beetle** to find out.

June Crew May 2021





Autumn colours in the oak woodland of Beechenhurst Inclosure

Taken 23.09.2020 - see page 18

Photo: Chris James



‘One of the serene ponds at Soudley, Forest of Dean

Taken 24.09.2020 - see page 18

Photo: Chris James



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