



# Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre

Newsletter—4th Edition

Autumn 2020

**As summer drew to a close, we found ourselves in the midst of a busy few weeks, trying to fit in as much of the sunny outdoors as possible before the cold season set in.**

In this issue, we have lots of autumnal information about flora, fauna and fungi! There's also advice on how you can be wildlife-friendly in winter and what you might see (or hear) on an autumn walk.

As we all continue operating under coronavirus precautions, we're finding different ways to get involved with our local natural environment. We've had a team day and some on-site training within the team, making sure to follow social distancing guidelines and with a good supply of hand gel. The team is also taking advantage of online training, conferences and events.

Two members of the team presented in BBOWT's series of online seminars, [Wild Parishes](#): Fiona outlined how BMERC supports community engagement, while Rhiannon discussed her community pollinator project, Bucks Buzzing.

While some groups are finding ways to organise outdoor conservation sessions, there are still lots of ways to contribute and get involved from home. We have included a lot of great resources and projects at the end of this issue. You can also find more information about local conservation groups on the BMERC website, or visit our News & Events page for updates. We hope you enjoy this issue and your feedback continues to be very welcome!

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Photos: Fiona Everingham



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Would you like to write for our next issue? For more information, email [erc@buckinghamshire.gov.uk](mailto:erc@buckinghamshire.gov.uk)



# Survival of Ancient Acid Grasslands

Tony F. Marshall

**Humans have been radically manipulating their environment ever since they first farmed and settled. Nowhere in Britain can one find a habitat exactly as it would have been before the Neolithic. Even the wildest places bear the mark of man.**

Of course all places have their history. It may be a natural history determined by climate changes, cataclysmic events, evolution and migration of species continually adapting and re-adapting to ecologies in permanent flux. Such changes are gradual or, if sudden and radical, occurring rarely, giving time for biological readjustment. It may also be a human history, where change is increasingly widespread, radical, immediate and rapid. This history exceeds the pace of natural evolution and causes local or universal extinctions, unless species can move into locations. The first field clearances forced grassland species into raised bunds between ploughed strips or into pasture with intense grazing pressure. Woodland management forced shade species to take refuge in hedgerows, themselves an entirely new habitat created by farmers for their own purposes. On the other hand, some previously rare annual plants suddenly found scope for expanding populations in cultivated land.

Grassland is hardly a natural habitat at all. Grass-dominated habitats in ancient times would seldom have been as extensive as our modern fields. They would have been glades among trees, or part of scrubland in expanses of marshland or on unproductive soils, too thin or too acid for many trees. Our famous Chiltern chalk downlands were creations for sheep-farming, most since ploughed, others invaded by woodland, a few valuable survivors mostly thanks to rabbit grazing and, latterly (and ironically), maintained by scrub-bashing conservationists.

The Chilterns once had other grasslands on acid plateau soils, composed of common bent, hair-grasses and heath-grass, with patches of Heather and Bracken, and flowers such as Tormentil, Heath Bedstraw, Heath Violet, Mouse-ear Hawkweed, Stag's-horn Club-moss and Harebell, or scrub of Gorse, Birch, Willow and Rowan. Damper areas were dominated by rushes. This vegetation was, no

doubt, originally present as strips and glades over patches of very wet or acid ground, but they were developed into extensive systems as common-land, an essential part of medieval economic survival, where cottagers could graze the odd goat or cow, and gather basic natural products for bedding, fencing, building material and food.

From being one of the commonest habitats of the Chilterns in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, these commons were gradually whittled away by agricultural enclosure in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Survivors were usually built on or used as allotments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What acid grassland survives is now mostly playing-fields or improved grass for recreation. A whole ecology disappeared - the Heath Violet and Stag's-horn Club-moss became extinct and other once common plants infrequent or rare. Heathlands in other, more extensively acid, areas of Bucks - in the south on the Reading Beds around Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common, and in the far north on the Greensands, have similarly been depleted and unspoiled natural grassland is a threatened habitat.

These damp acid grasslands supported an important array of fungi, many of them also now rare. Where the turf was short from grazing and not fertilised, a dense mat of moss formed, which, in its turn was colonised by a special group of fungi called waxcaps *Hygrocybe* species.<sup>1</sup> These are strongly linked to moss, perhaps obtaining nutrients from decaying fronds. Their ecology is imperfectly known, but they only occur in numbers where the fertility is low, the soil is damp much of the year, the turf is short and



Pink (or ballerina) Waxcap, Fibrous Waxcap. Photos: Tony Marshall

<sup>1</sup> Some *Hygrocybe* species have recently been split off under new genera, but I have kept the old designation here as the one with which people are familiar and is still used in most guide-books.



mossy, and larger plants are not allowed to invade. It takes centuries for a particularly rich assemblage of waxcaps to develop, so that they are limited to areas where management has maintained such conditions uninterrupted for a very long time.

Because the continuity of such conditions is quite rare, waxcaps themselves are also rare, although a few species are tolerant of a slightly wider range of conditions, like parrot *H. psittacina*, blackening *H. conica* and snowy *H. virginea*, and are therefore more frequently encountered. The level of rainfall and occurrence of acid rocks is highest in the Atlantic fringe, so that waxcaps are more common in the west and north of Britain, more common, indeed, than anywhere else in Europe or most of the rest of the world. Habitats with a great variety of waxcaps - "waxcap grasslands" - are conventionally graded by the numbers of different species present.<sup>2</sup> 4 to 8 species is "locally important", 9-16 "regionally important", 17-21 "nationally important" and 22 or more "internationally important". In any one year only some of the species present (roughly two-thirds on average) will make their appearance above ground as fruit bodies (all fungi will happily survive indefinitely as subterranean mycelia if the soil is undisturbed), so that counts are based on searches over a number of years. Although waxcaps are the most specialised in such conditions and the most spectacular (many are very brightly coloured), some other types of fungi are also strongly associated with waxcap grasslands, especially pinkgills *Entoloma* species, and many clubs (*Clavariaceae*, *Geoglossaceae*). Bonnets and mosscaps are regular companions, but can also be found in a wider range of grasslands.



From left: Nitrous Waxcap, Citrine Waxcap, Crimson Waxcap. Photos: Tony Marshall.



In Buckinghamshire there are some fragmentary survivals, by accident rather than design, such as the heaths beneath the pylons of the electricity sub-station at Mop End, or the outfield of cricket pitches, as at Great Hampden, Penn Street and Great Kingshill. One of the commonest locations to find such heathland relics is in churchyards. Old churchyards have had centuries to develop a stable ecosystem. In early days they were grazed, and latterly they have been cut regularly for presentational purposes. As long as fertiliser has never been applied, and cuttings are removed to prevent the build-up of nutrients, there is a good chance that there will be a suitably mossy turf. The last proviso is the crucial one - in most of the churchyards I have visited where suitable conditions might have been expected they have been spoiled by leaving cuttings *in situ*. Oddly, two of the best churchyards I know are both relatively new churches (C19<sup>th</sup>), Holy Trinity, Prestwood and Holy Trinity, Penn Street. The Prestwood churchyard has had 23 species of waxcap recorded - "internationally important".<sup>3</sup> Another Victorian churchyard is Christ Church, Holmer Green, currently being assessed, but known to support several waxcaps. These churches just had the good fortune to have been built on farmland that had only been used as pasture and never cultivated.

Many of our local waxcaps are sufficiently rare to be Globally Red-listed as Vulnerable. These are Citrine *H. citrinovirens*, Crimson *H. punicea*, Fibrous *H. intermedia*, Garlic *H. helobia*, Nitrous *H. nitrata*, Pink *H. calyptriformis*, Toasted *H. colemanniana*, and Yellowfoot *H. flavipes*.

<sup>2</sup> Shelley Evans, 2004, *Waxcap-grasslands - an assessment of English sites* English Nature Research Reports 555.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Marshall, 2017, Survival of a waxcap grassland: Holy Trinity Churchyard Nature Reserve. **British Wildlife** June, 335-340.



## If you want to live and thrive, let the spider run alive (Spanish proverb)

*Bill Parker, Buckinghamshire County Recorder & SRS Area Organiser*

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**Take a walk out early on an autumn day and you're almost certain to see spiders' webs festooned from bushes and other tall vegetation or lying horizontally on shorter grass like laced doilies.** The outside walls of our houses and the frames around doors and windows will be home to many other species and I am sure we are all familiar with those to be found indoors. Yet, despite their abundance and widespread distribution, very few of us are spending any time identifying and recording the spider fauna in the county, not to mention the harvestmen and pseudoscorpions.

There are about 670 different species of spider recorded in Great Britain – not dissimilar to the British bird list and far fewer than the number of moths – so studying spiders is not that daunting a project! Admittedly, the amateur naturalist or casual observer has not been well-served with ID/field guides until recently, but the publication of WILDGuides Britain's Spiders (Bee, Oxford and Smith) in 2017 prompted a renewed interest and an updated edition was published in September 2020.

There are also some excellent identification resources on the internet including [arachno.piwigo.com](http://arachno.piwigo.com) and [araneae.nmbe.ch](http://araneae.nmbe.ch)

Not all spiders can be identified to species in the field and many require close examination of the genitalia using a hand lens or under a microscope for a positive identification, but most can be assigned to family or genus. However, there are >120 species which require no more than a good eye, a bit of patience and knowledge of the important ID criteria to reveal their identity. The number and arrangement of the eyes (all UK spiders have 6 or 8 eyes), the shape of the abdomen, the appearance of the spinnerets and the shape of the web all help to narrow down the options, as do the habitat and the spiders place in its surroundings. Garden spider (*Araneus diadematus*), walnut orbweb spider (*Nuctenea umbratica*), nursery web spider (*Pisaura mirabilis*), daddy long-legs spider (*Pholcus phalangioides*) and wasp spider (*Argiope bruennichi*) are all examples of spiders that can safely be identified in the field.

Although the majority of the 280 species of money spiders (*Linyphiidae*) in the UK require a microscope and good eyesight, a few are large enough and sufficiently distinctive to be identified reliably.

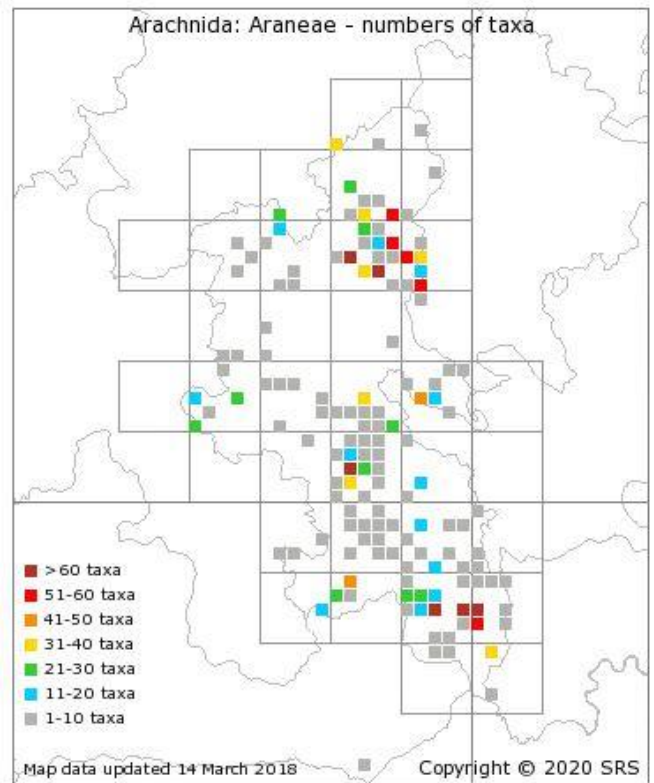
Spiders are very poorly recorded in the county with just under 5,000 records entered into the national Spider Recording Scheme (SRS) and a similar number in the BMERC database. The accompanying map illustrates just how poorly we understand the distribution of spiders in the county.





The most productive times of year are May-June and September-October, but spiders are present all year round and it could be argued that now is as good a time as any to start looking, when the number of species to be found is lower.

It is hoped to organise a spider identification workshop for Buckinghamshire recorders at some stage in 2021 – government restrictions permitting – but in the meantime, it would be good to add to the number of county records in [SRS](#) and the BMERC database. I am happy to help with IDs; a good quality photo will suffice in most cases although I may occasionally request a specimen. If you have any existing records, it would be good to receive those too!



Above: Nursery Web spider. Photo by Bill Parker.

Spiders are an extraordinarily diverse and fascinating group of invertebrates and unlike many other faunal groups, there are large parts of the county where you could be making new discoveries!

If you would like to contact Bill about spiders, email:

[membership@britishspiders.co.uk](mailto:membership@britishspiders.co.uk)

[billjoparker@btinternet.com](mailto:billjoparker@btinternet.com)

or find Bill on Twitter: [@baltibillbucks](https://twitter.com/baltibillbucks)



## What on earth is that?

*The BMERC Team*

Can you identify these species found in Buckinghamshire and/or Milton Keynes from these close-up photos?



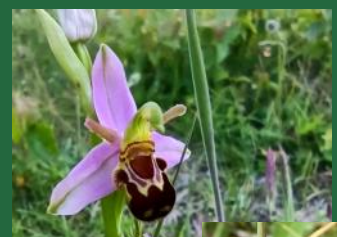
Answers will appear in our next issue.

### Answers from last issue:

- 1) Cinnabar caterpillar (*Tyria jacobaeae*)

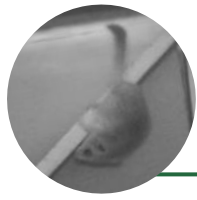


- 2) Bee orchid (*Orphrys apifera*)



- 3) Did you spot the Great Green Bush Cricket?





## Finding Dormice in North Buckinghamshire

*Joyce Moore, North Bucks Dormouse Group*

**In 1998 41 hazel dormice were re-introduced to Little Linford Wood in the far north of Buckinghamshire in a species recovery programme administered by the People's Trust for Endangered Species and run by local volunteers spearheaded by the indomitable John Prince.**

For sixteen years they thrived until, for reasons unknown but with many theories, they spread out into the surrounding hedgerows forming a stronghold alongside the M1. Dormice like motorways in general, with their free-draining, deer-free embankments of thick scrub. Fast forward to 2020 and the advent of "Smart Motorways" and the M1 habitat has changed vastly. The majority of trees have been felled and the embankments scraped clean of vegetation to enable new infrastructure. Not surprisingly, with the M1 hedges now isolated, the dormice have largely disappeared which has left the North Bucks Dormouse Group with the unenviable task of establishing where they are or whether they have died out.

The long-established method to check for dormice is via nest boxes checked monthly from May to October. Found dormice are weighed, sexed and checked for breeding condition. We still have these in place, having been advised to monitor them for three years to accurately assess the impact of the motorway work. Only one dormouse has been found this way in 2020 along with a few wood mice and a rather angry weasel.

We have further extended our monitoring with footprint tunnels. These are sections of square drainpipe containing cartridge paper with an inky doormat painted with carbon and olive oil at each



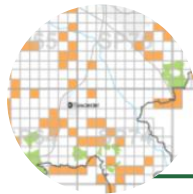
end. Dormice have very distinctive footprints with triangular pads distinguishing them from other rodents and utterly different to the unique grass snake print seen this June. When footprint tunnels were placed alongside nest boxes this May almost every one showed dormouse footprints compared to the one dormouse found in a nest. While this tells us nothing about the dormice involved (or the single energetic dormouse covering a 700 metre hedge) it was a relief to find them. Extending into the margin of a wood we found large numbers of footprints where dormice have not used nest boxes in five years.

Project founder John Prince has always maintained that dormice must still exist high in the canopy of Little Linford Wood despite no signs of them since 2015. With expertise from a professional photographer in the group he devised a suspended box containing bait and a camera trap hauled high into an oak on the edge of the wood. Dormice are very agile and have extremely good grip meaning they can climb ropes other rodents cannot manage. The very first time the camera images were viewed, there was a dormouse. Possibly pregnant, she climbed in multiple times over the course of one night. This exciting find has yet to be repeated elsewhere in the wood but it is satisfying to know that they are still there.

North Bucks Dormouse Group is always looking for new volunteers throughout the monitoring season of May to October. For more information please contact Joyce Moore at [joycetm@uwclub.net](mailto:joycetm@uwclub.net).

Images from top: Dormouse in baited camera box; weighing a dormouse along the M1 hedge; Grass snake print and dormouse prints from footprint tunnels.





## Recording in the Gaps

*Rosalind Johnston & Julia Carey*

**As a Local Record Centre we often get asked questions from keen local volunteers about what they can record, and where. It's rarely an easy question to answer as there are wealth of possible answers which relate to how and why the question is being asked.**

In this edition we sought to think a little outside the metaphorical box (or square) both in how we might work, and where, so maybe for the purists perhaps not ideal but for everyone else we have sought to work over the hallowed "edges" with another LRC. This extended article contains information from both BMERC and Northamptonshire Biodiversity Record Centre (NBRC).

### **Rosalind Johnston, Centre Manager, NBRC:**

Our aim – as with all local environmental record centres, is to grow a living, quality, usable database of ecological information that is as complete as we can make it. Working together as a whole recording community, is the only way we can build the data needed to inform decision making and protection for our local ecosystems.

To this aim, we are running a collaborative 'look out for... badgers' survey in partnership with the [Northamptonshire Badger Group](#), with whom we share all the received records at full resolution to support their work. Since Brockwatch disbanded, we know very little about current badger activity in this region and we hope that by joining forces we can fill this information gap. We are looking for your badger setts and sightings with a particular aim of generating records in the south of the Northamptonshire. Our '[look out for ...badgers](#)' recording form automatically blurs your records to 10k, so full details are only visible to ourselves and the Northants Badger Group.

Watch tips on what to look for in this [YouTube](#) video from the group. The group are also interested in any volunteers, particularly in this region, who may be able to help in rescue and reporting.

Photo: Jon Bowen

### **Julia Carey, Manager, BMERC:**

BMERC also has a paucity of badger records, and in fact pretty much all mammals. Those who have had the misfortune to stand near me for too long in the last five years may have heard this! Unfortunately, my own recording is often a litany of nasty happenings as I record road kill as well as live animals seen. So, if viewed on a map my data forms rather sad ribbons across landscapes often devoid of other information. However, odd as it seems it's all useful stuff.

We have recently received quite a few incoming sets of mammal data which has really helped. Milton Keynes Natural History Society a while ago most kindly sent us a batch of itinerant records resulting from members sightings. The North Bucks Dormouse Group, BBOWT, Bucks Mammal Group, and various other local interest groups do the same, as do some national schemes like the PTES Big Hedgehog Map, but even with this they are still greatly under recorded. Appreciably as a small brown blob whizzes across the lawn in front of you very few of us could accurately identify it, but I'm sure badgers, hares, rabbits, muntjac, moles (via fresh molehills as an allowed proxy), foxes and hedgehogs as well others species are all regularly seen and identified somewhere. If so, please let us have your Bucks and MK records; it would be good to fill in the gaps.

Our ideal way to receive records is via the online [iRecord](#) system which stores and allows the sharing of data. Existing local or national interest groups can also be a great way of managing information. And if you are one of many of us who do like a paper recording sheet then several versions are available to download from the [BMERC website](#) at or can be ordered from us as a posted copy.



**Rosalind Johnston:**

The badger survey is one of several we run in response to analysis of local taxonomic gaps. As part of our National Lottery Heritage Funded WILDside project, as ran over the last three years, we launched online seasonal 'look out for...' surveys of under-recorded species. Starting with [bee-fly](#), we not only gained much needed records for dark edged bee-fly as intended, but surprisingly also for rare dotted bee-fly as added to our monitoring form, now in its third year. We have also run Wildlife BCN joint surveys for [river mammals](#) and [swifts](#). The records submitted are used to inform wider monitoring, local conservation action, and passed on to regional county environmental record centres.

As well as encouraging wider taxonomic submissions, we are also using feedback mapping to show the under-recorded regions of our county and encourage recorders to record in the unexplored grid squares for which we have no data. Last year we shared the 1km<sup>2</sup> in our county that have no records, inspiring and motivating our recorders to 'put dots on the map'. In just one year, their submitted species discoveries have reduced the total number of these 'gaps' by over 100 squares.

Our latest map shows where we still need species records to gain complete coverage. As you can see from zooming in on [the 2020 map](#), there are many such grid squares yet to be filled in the southwest and the border areas of our county, many of which are on public rights of way.

We hope members of the Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes recording community can be a part of this drive. All records count and everyone can contribute. Our [recording handbook](#) is a great resource for anyone starting out.

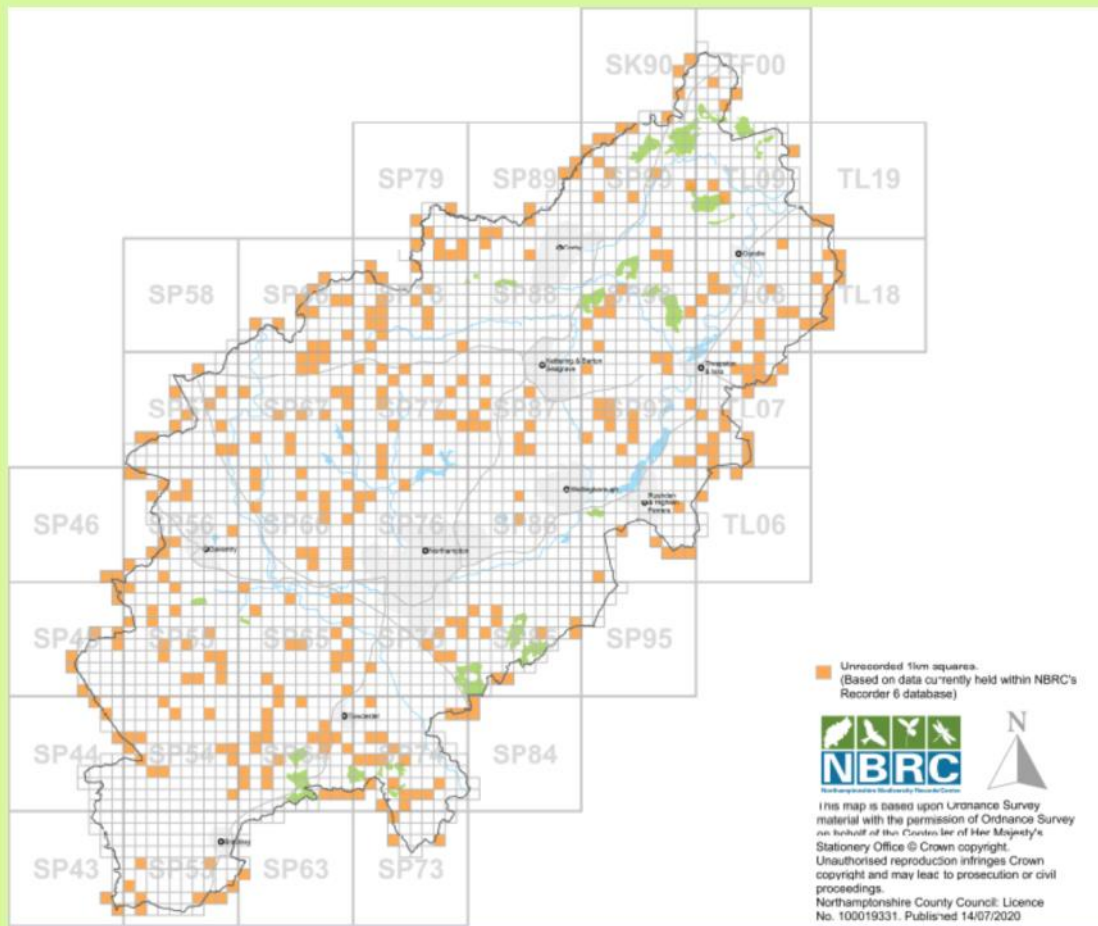
All live surveys can be found on [the NBRC website](#) and please feel free to get touch with us by email: [nbrc@northantsbrc.org.uk](mailto:nbrc@northantsbrc.org.uk).

**Julia Carey:**

As Rosalind mentions, the square by square approach is a well know and fruitful way of managing recording efforts. Buckinghamshire & MK shares something like 85 individual 1km squares with Northants, so by adding mammal records on both sides of the boundary you will be really Recording in the Gaps.

# 2020 GAPS IN THE MAPS

In just one year, thanks to your recording effort we have >100 fewer 'unrecorded' 1km squares in the county! Inspired to help us get them all? Use the online map to zoom in on your area & target the remaining squares in your recording activity this year. <https://bit.ly/2OgapNBRC>



Please record safely and legally. Check you have right of access / landowner permissions.





## Let's get sleepy! How to help wildlife prepare for the cold season

*Claudia Bernardini, Environmental Project Officer*

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**It is that time of the year again, when days get shorter and nights get colder. For our wildlife this is also a critical time. While some animals remain active during the winter, others will go into hibernation or torpor and only emerge in the following spring.**

Hibernation is a state of inactivity and decreased metabolism that some animals have developed in order to conserve energy during the cold season when resources are scarce. Torpor is a similar state but generally doesn't last as long as hibernation. In the UK the only mammals that truly hibernate are hedgehogs, bats and dormice.

When preparing to hibernate, hedgehogs look for a place to nest, under hedges and roots of trees or in old rabbit burrows. However, more often hedgehogs turn to domestic gardens and build a messy-looking hideout in a pile of leaves, an overgrown corner of the garden, in the waste pile or compost heaps, or underneath timber buildings and sheds. Hedgehogs then lower their body temperature from 35°C down to 10°C or less. They also lower their heart rate

drastically as well as their respiration and will spend the next few months, usually between November and March, in their nest, almost immobile. They will wake up often but, unless disturbed, they won't leave the nest.

All 17 species of British bat hibernate, usually between November and April. Most bats hibernate in cavities of old gnarly trees, but many will also find their way into the rooves of old and abandoned buildings.

Dormice in Britain can hibernate for as long as six months, between October and May. Like hedgehogs and bats, they also reduce their vital functions to the minimum. Sadly for dormice, hibernation often comes with high mortality rates. As they hibernate at ground level, often amongst leaf litter, under logs piles and at the base of hedgerows, they are more vulnerable to predators and disturbance. While dormant, their bodies will lose up to 30% of their fat reserves making it crucial for them to stock up with enough fat beforehand.

Badgers and squirrels will be less active in winter and will go through cycles of torpor. If weather conditions are bad they will stay in their setts, in underground dens or in 'dreys' (squirrels' nests in tree tops) for a few days without food.

Cold-blooded animals (ectotherms) such as reptiles and amphibians rely on external heat to regulate their body temperature, therefore in cold climates these animals go into torpor in the winter months. Frogs, toads and newts will hide under rocks, logs, leaf litter or compost heaps, or lay buried at the bottom



of ponds. They will drop their body temperatures, breathing and heart rates until early spring. Although they stay dormant during the coldest months, they also take advantage of milder weather conditions to come out and feed. Snakes usually find dry natural shelter in tree roots, fallen trees, abandoned burrows and in compost heaps. Slow worms might burrow more underground.

Some insects such as ladybirds, some bumblebees and butterflies also hibernate when food is scarce.

It is common misconception that animals never wake up during hibernation. On the contrary, they will emerge from their sleep to get rid of waste, to stretch and occasionally to eat food reserves. However, if woken up during their sleep they become more vulnerable to predators. Hibernation is a critical and often dangerous time for many.

#### **Here are ideas to help wildlife safely through winter:**

**Help wildlife before hibernation by providing extra food.** To increase their chances of survival, wild animals will eat as much as possible in the summer and autumn trying to accumulate enough body fat to get them through the winter. By leaving out some food they will have the chance to fatten up before the big sleep. In order to access this extra nourishment, garden dwellers need a way in: is your garden accessible to wildlife? You can replace solid fences with hedges or make your fence more permeable to animals by cutting a 'hedgehog hole'.

The hedgehogs' natural diet is mostly based on beetles, caterpillars, worms and slugs, all scarce in the autumn and winter. Hedgehogs will appreciate meat-based cat or dog food, mealworms and specially made hedgehog foods. Always leave clean water out in the garden, but not milk or bread.

Bats eat insects, so make sure that your garden has a good supply. Choose plants that will attract more insects and avoid using pesticides. Adding a water feature, such as a pond, to your garden will also attract insects. Some flies start life in water as aquatic larvae and they are bats' favourite treats. A pond will also provide food for amphibians and reptiles.

**Provide shelter.** Hibernating wildlife is dependent on hiding places for the winter. Creating hibernacula, refuges and other shelters in the garden can provide a safe place to hide. Research has indicated that rising temperatures are bringing animals out of hibernation

earlier in the year and with more frequent breaks in the winter. This is causing them to use their energy when there are no food resources available. With such irregular weather patterns, domestic gardens become more important for wildlife's winter sheltering and foraging.

Hedgehogs like to nest in warm spots under the garden shed, in the compost heap or simply in a messy corner of the garden under large piles of leaves. Always remember to check for the presence of small mammals before setting fire to piles of leaves or digging into your compost heap.

If you are lucky enough to have reptiles and amphibians in your garden, then you can help by providing good hibernacula for the cold months. You can easily build a hibernaculum with wood, tree roots, rubble, compost and mulch. Put all those materials together in a natural ('messy') pile, leaving nooks and crannies and cover the top with turf and/or other vegetation from the area. Position the hibernacula on marginal habitats between open spaces and overgrown areas with both sunny and shaded areas.

Finally, if you have a pond make sure that if you need to clear any vegetation that you do it at this time of the year and leave log piles and leaf litter in its proximity. If the pond freezes over in the winter make a small hole with some heat to avoid smashing the ice. If you don't have a pond this is the best time to get one established ([see our June issue](#)).

For hibernating insects a bug hotel is an easy way to provide a safe place in the garden. Alternatively, simply pile up logs, stones and old bricks in a sunny corner of your garden, that should do the trick.

One last reminder, don't forget to send records of your garden residents to [BMERC](#)!



A pile of logs makes a perfect hibernaculum.





## Surveying in the time of Coronavirus

*Fiona Everingham, Local Wildlife Site (LWS) Surveyor*

**Ordinarily I emerge in spring slightly stiff from my winter hibernation with very rusty identification skills. The first few site visits find me gazing quizzically at common species, scratching my head trying to recall vegetative features.** By the time the season is fully underway all cobwebs have been swept away and firing on all cylinders I am ready to rip through the countryside, clipboard in hand. This year was going to be very different and all plans for woodland spring surveys were scrapped and a new plan had to emerge. April and May found me stuck in front of a computer gazing longingly at the Goldilocks surveying conditions outside, not too hot, not too cold...

So what to do? There is only so much 'house-keeping' a person can do as lockdown stretched into weeks and then months.

Our team had to adapt quickly to the new normal. In our splendid isolation WhatsApp helped us keep in contact. Weekly Teams lunchtime get-togethers introduced us to the interior of each other's houses and showcased our culinary expertise or lack of it.

Online training courses to the rescue! A huge thank you to our friends at the Field Studies Council and the team at Chalk, Cherries & Chairs. I now understand and use iRecord and can tell my Small from my Large Whites. Unfortunately, I remain largely incapable of distinguishing 'little brown jobs' by song alone! More work needed on my part, maybe this winter...

This plethora of online training sparked an interest in the BMERC team for some in-house remote training. A plan was hatched and a date set. It wasn't perhaps as slick as we might have liked - we discovered just how difficult it is to show others a grass specimen ensuring it is in focus by vaguely wafting it in front of your computer! But we certainly learned a lot and this winter may try and produce short training videos.

Finally, in early June I was released into the wild. It was a baptism of fire in many ways as the temperatures rose and I was running to cover as much ground as possible before everything was fried to a crisp. Easy access sites where no human interaction was necessary were the priority, resulting in a lot of time spent in churchyards and tramping public footpaths.



Eventually the need for human contact became so strong that I had to offer another training event just to meet my fellow team members! A quick walkover of the chosen site on Friday showed an excellent display, Monday revealed a mown lawn... A quick call back to base and Julia's local knowledge came up trumps with another site within walking distance. We may have inadvertently strayed into another county but who cares! We spent a pleasant morning looking at ligules, sepals and petals and just revelling in the freedom of being outside with other people – socially-distanced of course.

Despite all the constraints I have visited nearly 30 sites covering an area of over 300 ha. This winter will see me writing site reports, recommending management, assessing sites against our LWS selection criteria and deciding which ones to put forward as possible LWS for consideration by our esteemed selection panel.

I've also managed to work on the ground with some parish councils and community groups. Another 'thank you' is owed to BBOWT for their excellent 'Wild Parishes' webinar which I contributed to in August and that allowed us to reach out to a really wide audience.

What has fallen by the wayside? The biggest loser has been community engagement and we've been unable to get groups of children out and engaging with nature as we've done in past years. The other big casualty has been the orchard survey which relies so heavily on knocking on doors and talking to local people. Oh and I've really missed out on my tea and cake stops...





## Great Crested Newt District Licensing Scheme

*Natalie White, Senior Ecology Advisor, Buckinghamshire Council*

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### **Natural England has recently (April 2020) approved Buckinghamshire Council to authorise development that impacts on Great Crested Newts (GCN) through an Organisational License.**

The decline of GCN has led to this species being afforded the highest level of statutory protection in the UK and a material consideration in the planning process. Current legislation protects GCN from killing, injury and disturbance, and protects their habitat (ponds and terrestrial habitat) against damage, destruction and obstruction.

Nationally, there are currently three different ways that development activities that are affected by the legislation that protects GCN are licensed. One of these routes is through District Licensing. In Buckinghamshire, developers opt to pay into the scheme operated by NatureSpace to compensate for the impacts of their development on GCN.

Buckinghamshire Council (BC) currently holds two separate licences; one that covers former Aylesbury Vale District Council planning applications, and one that covers applications made to the Minerals and Waste planning team (the latter allows development such as waste facilities, mineral extractions, schools, and road schemes to be eligible). Currently only development within the former AVDC political boundary can be covered by District Licensing. This is because this area has already been subjected to detailed survey and assessment regarding GCN habitat. However, survey work is due to be undertaken to enable the scheme to be expanded across more of the county.

#### Key advantages for development in Buckinghamshire - how district licensing works

BC is able to authorise individual developers under its Organisational Licence, rather than the standard approach of developers applying to Natural England for a licence following planning consent. Unlike the standard approach to licensing, surveys are not required for use of the district licensing scheme. This makes it an attractive option for developers as there are no delays due to seasonal constraints. Nor are there the delays associated with waiting for planning

permission to be granted; or for NE to approve the licence; or (in most cases) for on-site mitigation/compensation works to be undertaken.

The contribution that a developer pays in to the scheme is based on several factors including: the Impact Risk Map, which has been derived through survey and assessment of newt habitat within the area covered by the licence; a metric which calculates site-specific impacts; and the scale (size) of the development. Generally speaking the greater the likely impact on GCN the higher the payment.

#### Key responsibilities – who does what?

- **Buckinghamshire Council** is the **Licensee** responsible for authorising individual developments. This is done via appropriate planning conditions.
- **Natural England** remains the licensing authority.
- **NatureSpace** is the Delivery Partner and is responsible for operating the scheme, monitoring and reporting.
- **The Newt Conservation Partnership** (NCP) is the Conservation Partner and is responsible for delivery of the compensation scheme.

#### Great crested newt conservation under the district licensing scheme

The developer payments fund large-scale and long-term habitat creation that is delivered, managed and monitored by the NCP. NatureSpace has now raised over £1,000,000 of developer contributed funds toward the creation and restoration of GCN habitat. NatureSpace and NCP aim to achieve an 8:1 creation of ponds to loss ratio. The minimum ration under the wider South Midlands District Licensing Scheme is 4:1. Developers are encouraged to apply best practice principles to protect GCN, and if the development falls within a high risk 'red zone' certain mitigation measures are secured by planning condition.

To date the NCP has created nearly 100 ponds in the name of GCN conservation.





## Lindengate—Using Nature to Nurture

*Charlie Powell, Co-Founder & General Manager, Lindengate Mental Health Charity*

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**Lindengate Mental Health Charity is located at a stunning five-acre site in Buckinghamshire, where nature breathes new life into anyone who is struggling with their wellbeing. The garden lends itself to supporting people in recovery from a range of common mental health needs.**

In creating Lindengate, we were able to plan the gardens, with wildlife and conservation in mind and ensure that we had the right habitat to encourage a large number new species to join us.

We now have a variety of areas across Lindengate that are perfect for a wide range of wildlife, including a natural puddle pond, home to a pair of mallards and moorhens, wildflower meadows, and natural hedgerows, all planted up with native species. There are many wild spaces where the habitat has been left to evolve naturally alongside the more formal areas such as a cottage garden, alpine border, sensory garden and extensive kitchen gardens.

We have become increasingly recognised by leading conservation groups in the UK, as our work in supporting them to protect species, such as the Marsh Fritillary Butterfly, Black Poplar and Elm has grown and we are regularly invited to attend various conservation group meetings in an advisory level.

We have been working closely with Butterfly Conservation, to grow 2,500 Cowslips to support a project to increase the Duke of Burgundy Butterfly as part of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. We are also growing food plants for other Butterfly Conservation projects, such as Horseshoe Vetch for a number of the Blues, Dark Mullein for the Striped Lychnis moth, and Tufted Vetch for the Wood White, all of which are suffering a decline in numbers.

After nearly 6 years, Lindengate has grown from a neglected piece of land overgrown with many of the plant world's thugs, to a nature rich and biodiverse environment. This offers not only those we support, but also our many volunteers an opportunity to be nurtured as much as to nurture. There are not many people who spend time here who do not go away feeling more balanced and calm within themselves and indeed much happier. Helping something that has become so vulnerable is also a very strong element that supports people's wellbeing.

With all our areas across Lindengate, from the natural pond, to a log wind break, we have ensured that the perfect habitat has been created and the success from this can be seen in the abundant and diverse wildlife that has appeared. Our latest project



is the development of a 1.25 acre nature reserve which will be specifically a place where young people can benefit from learning about and experiencing nature in a supportive community, gaining much needed work and life skills.

All of this would not be possible without an amazing team and fantastic volunteers, who work extremely hard to maintain the gardens and have built up a strong community, ensuring they get as much out of Lindengate as they put in.

With the current COVID-19 crisis and restrictions in place since March 2020, after an initial 6 week lockdown period, we were able to launch our Rest and Reflect programme, supporting all NHS Key & Essential Workers to come and take time to relax in



Photographs courtesy of Lindengate.

our tranquil and therapeutic gardens. With the easing of restrictions, we have been able to offer this to anyone who has been struggling with the effects of COVID-19 and have welcomed more than 1000 people through our gates since the middle of June.

We are passionate about helping people to find wellbeing resilience through nature-based interventions and are constantly looking at ways in which we can further enrich our own environment to better achieve this. We are also keen to continue to look for opportunities to increase the positive impact we can have on the wellbeing of wildlife havens in other places. Our ethos of “if you nurture nature, it will nurture you” is so true and we have every intention of instilling a sense of this amongst the young people who are now more frequently coming to join the Lindengate community.

If you would like to experience a piece of Lindengate, please do come and explore the Gardens during one of our Rest and Reflect sessions, the details of which can be found on [our website](#) or email: [info@lindengate.org.uk](mailto:info@lindengate.org.uk)

*Note: This year's Bioblitz at Lindengate had to be cancelled due to COVID-19 but should it proceed in 2021, recorders will be welcomed to get involved!*



## Mammal Monitoring on the River Ouse in Buckingham

*Joanne Makin, Ecology Officer, Buckinghamshire Council*

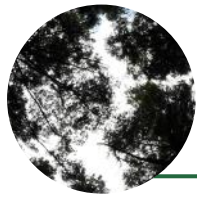
**The River Great Ouse within Buckingham Town was surveyed for its potential to support water voles earlier in Spring this year as part of the 'Water Vole Project' four-year annual monitoring by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust.**

With support from the River Warden Scheme in Buckingham, Buckinghamshire Council and the Bucks Mammal Group suitable locations for mammal monitoring rafts have been identified along the river within Heartlands Park. These will be set up and monitored by trained volunteers for signs to search for signs of mammals using the river such as water voles, otters and mink.

Water voles are an endangered and declining mammal species - we hope to find signs of water voles in the centre of Buckingham. We may also identify the presence of otters, and if no water voles are found then we may discover that mink are the reason for their absence. Training for volunteers is planned for November 2020 - if you are interested in volunteering or being part of the project please contact Ruth at [ruth.coxon@tcv.org.uk](mailto:ruth.coxon@tcv.org.uk).

You can also find information on [The Conservation Volunteers website](#) or visit the [Bucks Mammal Group's Facebook Group](#).





## Lockdown: A Recorder's View

*Sue Hetherington*

**I am based in the small village of Gawcott, just outside Buckingham. When Boris Johnson told me on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 that life for at least the next three weeks was limited to essentials only and I was to stay at home, only emerging for a daily exercise walk, I never quite shook off the feeling that I had stumbled into a crazy disaster movie.**

Of course, all clubs and societies closed their meetings, and in fact have been unable to open to this very day. However, by an amazing bit of good fortune, one group of volunteers I belong to (Vale Countryside Volunteers) had an IT savvy member who set up a Zoom meeting from the very start. This was such a blessing, we were still able to chat to friends, albeit virtually, and feel we were still part of a group, not isolated.

Gradually, many of the clubs and societies I belong to also offered meetings by Zoom. Whilst this is far from ideal, missing as it does people who are unable to access the internet, it has played a significant positive role. Many of the clubs and societies who have used it are going to have to think carefully what to do when the pandemic is over – obviously, meeting face to face is the best way to “meet” but there are definite plusses to the ability to meet from the comfort of your own home, and indeed, it offers

new advantages for those people who are located at a distance from the meeting venue.

During the lockdown, I explored my local patch in depths I'd

never had the time—or inclination, to be honest—for previously. And I was amazed by what was out there: hares in the field just the other side of my road and an active badger sett no more than ten minutes walk away. Another mammalian family of animals that took up quite a bit of my time was bats. I've promised the team at BMERC that I'll share more of that story for the Winter Newsletter so look out for that. It will tell you how you can get involved and help with the project called “Bats in Churches”.

Meanwhile, we have a long winter to get safely through. Thank goodness nature is still there to comfort and support us with all the delights it brings in winter. My badgers are less active now and the bats will hibernate entirely but I shall redouble my efforts to finally get my first sighting of the mammalian species that eludes me – otters!



Sue's badgers.



## Team Day Out!

*Emma Foster, Environment Team Graduate*

**As time slowly drifts by and home working becomes the 'normal', a day out in the fresh air with familiar faces was well needed.** In early September, the Environment Team at Buckinghamshire Council (which includes BMERC, archaeologists, ecologists and heritage officers) got together for the first time since March for a fabulous (and socially-distanced) team day out. The day included two workshops about the natural environment and the history of Langley Park.

We got quite creative, learning new skills provided by Black Country Park education team, whittling away logs to a somewhat mushroom shape and beating up

leaves with hammers to create some Hapa Zome, a type of Japanese art.



Tim from the Country Parks team was full of knowledge about Langley Park. From a medieval deer park to an extravagant garden influenced by landscape designer Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, Langley Park has been subjected to many noble people for centuries.

Currently both parks are open to the public to get close to nature and history. What a wonderful day out!



## What to look for in autumn

Fiona Everingham

**For some, autumn can be a depressing time, a season of decay and dampness, but as the floral kingdom fades, we can shift our attention elsewhere.**

Winter visitors are beginning to arrive, many of the birds we see in our gardens will be visitors as large numbers of Blackbirds, Thrushes, Robins and others arrive from the continent. Keep an ear open for flocks of geese arriving from the frozen north; can you tell your Greylag from your Brent just by call? Soon they will be followed by Redwing, Fieldfare and if you are lucky you may see the startlingly coloured Waxwing. Autumn is also the perfect time to seek out a Starling murmuration: one of nature's truly spectacular sights!

Are you missing the soporific buzz of bees on a balmy summer evening? Fear not, while most flowers have disappeared Ivy is in bloom and the doughty Ivy Bee (*Colletes herdera*, below) is making the most of this last burst of nectar and should be around for a bit longer.



Photos: Neil Fletcher

Galls are also a good thing to look out for in autumn, such as this Gall on Red Valerian (above) caused by the Psyllid, *Trioza cetranthi*. We need more records for both these species so keep your eyes peeled.

A wander through the woods to admire the autumn foliage should also reward with a myriad of fungi bursting into life after the recent rains. There may be no organised fungus forays this year but there are still loads of online resources to help you out.

Thinking ahead, now is the time to harvest Sloes for your Christmas Sloe Gin and if your winter needs a boost of vitamin-C perhaps transform some lovely Rose-hips into a deliciously sweet syrup? Given the bumper crop of acorns consider gathering some, potting them up and seeing how many you can nurture into seedlings—mouse and slug predation allowing! Failing that there is always acorn coffee...

## 2021 Chesham Wildlife Charity Calendar

The 2021 Chesham Wildlife Charity Calendar has launched and is now available. The calendar includes around 80 photos taken locally by the Facebook Group, Chesham Wildlife Members.

The calendar is on sale at OrbitPress, 11 Market Square, Chesham, HP5 1HG, priced at £9.00. A copy can also be posted out for £10.99. Please contact Matt Kirby at [matt.kirby@btinternet.com](mailto:matt.kirby@btinternet.com) if you would like to purchase a copy.

All proceeds support two local charities: The Chesham Museum and The Arctic One Foundation.







## What have we been up to in lockdown?

With temperatures climbing into the low 30's, Fiona's already difficult survey season got that little bit more tricky as everything shrivelled up and died! There was considerable head scratching when trying to identify crispy brown specimens... followed by excessive ice-cream consumption.



Julia is working to support a new Local Nature Recovery Strategy, one of only 5 pilot schemes nationally. Julia also delivered a male Bucks Juniper (propagated under a species recovery project) to Lindengate who have most kindly agreed to care for it until the Chiltern Society can add it to its harem on Whiteleaf Hill. Julia has also been wondering if vegetables can be arty (see photo of pumpkin shavings).



Rhiannon attended Forest School with [Chiltern Rangers](#) to help plant a wildflower meadow at a school in High Wycombe.



Emma has been learning how to create a herbarium on the Taxon family *Fabaceae* and *Poaceae* with the help of colleagues and online resources, learning about the processes required to identify the species, preserve the species and record the information collected, to produce a representation of what the species characteristics are today. On the more unusual side she's learnt how to stitch on flowers and grasses to paper, which was unexpectedly difficult. While prepared with a lot of tin cans and books, the floor space was something was lacking in the end...



Neil had been looking out for *Convolvulus* Hawkmoth for a few weeks now, and finally the wait is over, this one came to the moth trap on 8th September. The moth trap is located close to a patch of *Nicotiana*, which has produced 3 previous records from the garden, 2 in 2016 and 1 in 2018.



Surveys for the Ancient Trees project in South Bucks have finally resumed and Claudia has been busy contacting landowners and surveying private properties. The hunt for ancient trees continues...

Although we missed the Great Crested Newt survey season this year, the pond project is gradually taking shape. Together with Protected Species Officer Sam and BBOWT's Project Officer Marcus a monitoring scheme is emerging and it will involve volunteers and landowners. Watch this space!



## Resources Round-Up

We've included a lot of links to projects and more information in this issue. Here's a quick round up of those links, plus other projects, ways to get involved or genera interest:

**British Spider and Harvestman Recording Scheme**  
[srs.britishspiders.org.uk](http://srs.britishspiders.org.uk)

**Northamptonshire Badger Group**  
[www.northamptonshirebadgers.co.uk](http://www.northamptonshirebadgers.co.uk)

**NBRC 'Look out for... badgers' project**  
[northantsbrc.org.uk/Wildside/LookOutForBadgers](http://northantsbrc.org.uk/Wildside/LookOutForBadgers)

**NBRC Wildlife Recording Handbook**  
[northantsbrc.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/RecordingHandbook.pdf](http://northantsbrc.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/RecordingHandbook.pdf)

**iRecord (online recording)** [brc.ac.uk/irecord](http://brc.ac.uk/irecord)

**Lindengate Mental Health Charity** [lindengate.org.uk](http://lindengate.org.uk)

**The Conservation Volunteers** [www.tcv.org.uk](http://www.tcv.org.uk)

**NatureSpace** [naturespaceuk.com](http://naturespaceuk.com)

**Buckinghamshire Mammal Group**  
[www.facebook.com/groups/bucksmammals](http://www.facebook.com/groups/bucksmammals)

**BBOWT Wild Parishes Webinars**  
[www.bbowt.org.uk/wildparishes](http://www.bbowt.org.uk/wildparishes)

**Useful links for helping wildlife through winter:**  
Amphibian & Reptile Conservation: [arc-trust.org](http://arc-trust.org)  
Bat Conservation Trust: [www.bats.org.uk](http://www.bats.org.uk)  
People's Trust for Endangered Species: [ptes.org](http://ptes.org)  
Hedgehog Street: [www.hedgehogstreet.org](http://www.hedgehogstreet.org)

**RHS Cellar Slug Hunt**  
[www.rhs.org.uk/sluggsurvey](http://www.rhs.org.uk/sluggsurvey)

**Buckinghamshire Heritage Portal**  
[heritageportal.buckinghamshire.gov.uk](http://heritageportal.buckinghamshire.gov.uk)

**Bucks Buzzing**  
[www.bucksmknep.co.uk/bucks-buzzing](http://www.bucksmknep.co.uk/bucks-buzzing)

**Milton Keynes Natural History Society Webinars**  
[mknhs.org.uk/upcoming-zoom-meetings/](http://mknhs.org.uk/upcoming-zoom-meetings/)

**Chiltern Rangers** [chilternrangers.co.uk](http://chilternrangers.co.uk)

**FSC Biolinks Online Courses & Events**  
[www.field-studies-council.org/biolinks-courses](http://www.field-studies-council.org/biolinks-courses)  
Upcoming highlights: Adding value to biological records; Conservation of the European Eel.

**Earthworm Society Compost Survey**  
[www.earthwormsoc.org.uk/compostsurvey](http://www.earthwormsoc.org.uk/compostsurvey)

**'Rarest fern in Europe' discovered in Ireland**  
[www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/04/rarest-fern-europe-discovered-ireland](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/04/rarest-fern-europe-discovered-ireland)



## Final Thoughts

We hope you have enjoyed this issue, which has been our largest to date. Thank you to our excellent guest authors: Bill, Charlie, Joanne, Joyce, Natalie, Rosalind, Sue and Tony.

We really appreciate the feedback we've received on the newsletter so far and we welcome your comments—good or bad!

Our next newsletter will be our Winter issue in January. If you have a suggestion for an article or would like to contribute to the next issue, please contact us by 1 December for more information.

*Best wishes from the BMERC Team,  
Claudia, Emma, Fiona, Julia, Neil & Rhiannon*



### **Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre**

Buckinghamshire Council, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor, Walton Street Offices, Walton Street, Aylesbury HP20 1UY  
erc@buckinghamshire.gov.uk • 01296 382431 • [www.bucksmkerc.org.uk](http://www.bucksmkerc.org.uk)