



Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group



Annual report 2016

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1. Introduction

1.1 Community Wildlife Groups (CWGs)

Community Wildlife Groups bring people together to survey and conserve threatened local wildlife. They enable nature enthusiasts to make a real contribution to wildlife conservation in their local area and develop their own skills.

The groups are open to anyone who lives or works in each area, and who wants to actively contribute to local wildlife knowledge and conservation. They are for everyone, from experts to complete novices. Enthusiasm is far more important than detailed knowledge and initial training on identification and simple survey methods is provided. There are currently eight CWGs in the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), most developed and supported through a project funded by the Shropshire Hills AONB LEADER programme. For more information on these CWGs, visit the website www.shropscwgs.org.uk

1.2 Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group



The Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group (SACWG) was launched in February 2012, after consulting local groups and organisations. The group covers a broad area around the Stretton Hills. This boundary is not fixed, so activities can be extended according to the location of members and study subjects.

Since 2013 the group has been co-ordinated by a committee, elected from the membership at the Annual Public Meeting. Survey activities are adopted by members at the Annual Public Meeting, on the condition that they meet the following criteria.

Each activity requires a leader, who will be responsible for organising surveyors, ensuring that useful data is collected, distributing survey forms (if necessary), analysing data for the SACWG annual report and submitting records to Shropshire's County Recorders. The survey manager will be responsible for ensuring that any necessary training is provided.

On the Community Wildlife Groups website you will find that the SACWG has its own section, where you will be able to keep updated with survey activities and the latest discoveries.

http://www.shropscwgs.org.uk/?page_id=206

We would like to encourage all members to share their wildlife experiences and photographs. If you have seen something interesting or taken a nice wildlife photograph please let the web manager know by emailing SACWG_Curator@shropscwgs.org.uk. For those of you into social media, find us on Twitter @StrettonsWild or look for the Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group page on Facebook. You can use this to keep up to date with latest news, meet other members and share wildlife news.

*Committee members (bold) and project leaders 2016: **S. Butler (chair), G. Wenman (publicity), H. Hathaway (secretary), J. Arnfield (treasurer & website), A. Perry (annual report), C. Uff, J. Bacon, L. Smith, I. Carter, P. & V. Thorpe, K. Singleton and P. Bienz.***



2. Survey Activities and Results

2.1 Butterflies

Project leader: Heather Hathaway

The aim of the current project is to try and build a better picture of the diversity and numbers of butterflies in the Strettons area and highlight vulnerable colonies that may be threatened if their habitat is lost. The data collected will serve also as a baseline against which we can measure future changes in the butterfly population.

First a general oversight taken from a report written in the **Butterfly Conservation** website, concerning results from The Big Butterfly Count:

“The majority of butterfly species studied as part of the scheme saw their populations fall with some producing their worst numbers since the Big Butterfly Count scheme began.

Widespread species such as the [Gatekeeper](#), [Comma](#) and [Small Copper](#) experienced their worst summers in the project’s history and were down 40%, 46% and 30% respectively compared to last year. The [Small Tortoiseshell](#) saw a 47% drop in numbers and [Peacock](#) slumped by 42% with both species recording their second worst years.

Numbers of the colourful Peacock have now dropped from an average of 3.6 individuals per count in 2013 to just 0.5 per Count in 2016, a six-fold decrease over three years. Participants also saw the lowest number of butterflies per count since the scheme began with an average of just 12 butterflies spotted.

These figures were even lower than those experienced during the cold and wet disaster summer of 2012 – the worst year on record for UK butterflies.

These falls come despite the summer of 2016 being warmer than average and relatively dry – conditions butterflies typically depend upon in order to successfully breed and feed. Reasons why butterflies have struggled despite favourable summer weather conditions are as yet unclear.”

Methodology: This year members of SACWG have had a three pronged effort to record butterflies in the Stretton Area. As before, occasional sightings have been recorded by 6 members and 28 species were identified, the same as last year. This is 28 out of 37 species that can be seen in South Shropshire. Please see summary graph at the end of this section.

Three transects have been carried out during 2016. John Bacon has continued his transect on a garden and meadow site located between Hazler and Ragleth Hills, Tim Oakley a transect taking in part of Ragleth and Heather Hathaway established a slightly changed transect in Batch Valley, All Stretton. A transect involves walking the same route every week between April and September recording butterflies using a proscribed method stated by UKBMS and have been entered into their site.

The third prong of recording was to carry out timed counts of two species, Green Hairstreak and Grayling in Carding Mill Valley during the flight seasons. These were done by Mr and Mrs Peter Howsam. It has to be said that this summer has not been a good year for recording butterflies, due to a lot of weeks of below average temperatures and high winds.

Peter Branson has carried out two in depth studies of Dark Green Fritillary and Purple Hairstreak.

Dark Green Fritillary Survey, Batch Valley June-July 2016

Summation of findings:

Dates	Weather	Individuals recorded
27/6-14/7	Dull/Cool	2 (1 Seen by Steve Butler)
17/7-19/7	Warm/Hot	17 (8 with John Powell)
21/7-23/7	Dull/Warm	3

All other records by Peter Branson

Area of Search

National Trust car park (near cattle grid, valley entrance) SO455 955, to mid-point Jonathan's Hollow, SO447 961

Observations

- 1 The butterfly was seen flying in warm sun-shine only; other species on the site were seen to fly in dull warm weather.
- 2 All individuals seen streamside, engaged in patrolling behaviour, chasing away other butterflies and insects, breaking off to nectar on Spear or Marsh Thistles, (but not Creeping Thistles) for a few seconds.
- 3 Individuals were presumed to be males. Studies suggest females are more secretive. Mating takes place at the base of clumps of bracken where Dog Violets can be found: the caterpillar food plant.
- 4 Warm to hot weather, 24 degrees C plus, starting on 17th July may have triggered emergence from the chrysalis stage (Compare Eriskay, Outer Hebrides 18th July, 2013, when large numbers of Dark Green Fritillary emerged over 2 to 3 days in exceptionally warm weather. Observed by the author).
- 5 Only 2 individuals were seen on 23rd July with one individual looking worn and showing wing damage by birds.
- 6 The relative absence of individuals on 23rd July, with temperatures approximately 22 degrees C and some warm sunshine, suggests the butterflies that emerged from 17th July onwards may have dispersed or been predated.

Conclusion

It is difficult to estimate the size of the breeding colony in Batch Valley. Jeremy Thomas, in "The Butterflies of Britain and Ireland" (2010), says that "sites may be quite small in area and often well separated from the next" and "although Dark Green Fritillaries are generally seen in ones and twos, the better sites support a few hundred adult butterflies"

The best time to visit Batch Valley to search for this butterfly is on fine, warm days from early July onwards.

Site Visits: 27th June to 23rd July: 15 visits



Dark Green Fritillary



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Notes on Purple Hairstreak Site, Nover's Hill GR SO456 954, 2016

Purple Hairstreak are located in a group of oaks which extend for 120 yards from north to south along the east side of Nover's Hill. Other oaks in the locality, show no evidence of colonization. Individuals are active on warm sunny evenings and can be closely observed, and photographed, on boughs of oak trees from the bracken covered hillside above the footpath. The peak flight period is the last week of July and the first week of August.

Methodology

Following relatively random observations in 2015, it was decided to adopt a more systematic approach in 2016. Approaching the site from the south, the trunks of the oaks are below the footpath; further on, the oaks and the footpath are parallel to one another and the lower branches overhand the path and enable closer viewing of the tree canopy from the side of Nover's Hill.

At 16.15 hours the sun is approximately south-south-west of the line of oaks and by 18.15 hours it is to the west. During this 2 hour period, the position of the sun (relative to the earth) changes 30 degrees and as a consequence strikes the line of oaks more directly as it reaches the west.

The aim of the observation was to position the recorder between the sun and the oaks through the 2 hour period (16.15-18.15hours) and record butterfly activity as the sun directly struck the trees. This was achieved by the recorder maintaining 8 successive stations every 15 yards for 15 minutes, either on the footpath or on the hillside, on a south-north axis. At all times, the tree canopy was clearly on view. At the end of each 15 minute observation period, an estimate was made of the number of butterflies seen. The same methodology was continued throughout; that is whether the sun was visible or obscured by cloud.

Results

Counts of Purple Hairstreak on Nover's Hill SO4595:

	27/07/2016	28/07/2016	29/07/2016	30/07/2016	31/07/2016
16.15-16.30	8	1	1	8	0
16.30-16.45	4	2	0	4	1
16.45-17.00	4	3	1	4	0
17.00-17.15	10	0	0	8	1
17.15-17.30	4	2	2	6	0
17.30-17.45	10	3	6	6	8
17.45-18.00	6	3	3	6	6
18.00-18.15	2	1	5	12	2
Total for date	48	15	18	54	18
Temp at end:	18°, sunny	20°, sunny	20°, dull	18°, sunny	18°, mixed

Conclusions

Purple Hairstreak rarely fly during the day. Most of their lives are spent perched in the canopy where they nectar on aphid honeydew. Only in the evenings are they active when males take up territories and launch themselves at passing females or chase away rivals. This limited study confirms that Purple Hairstreak are least likely to fly in dull weather and have a preference for warm sunshine.



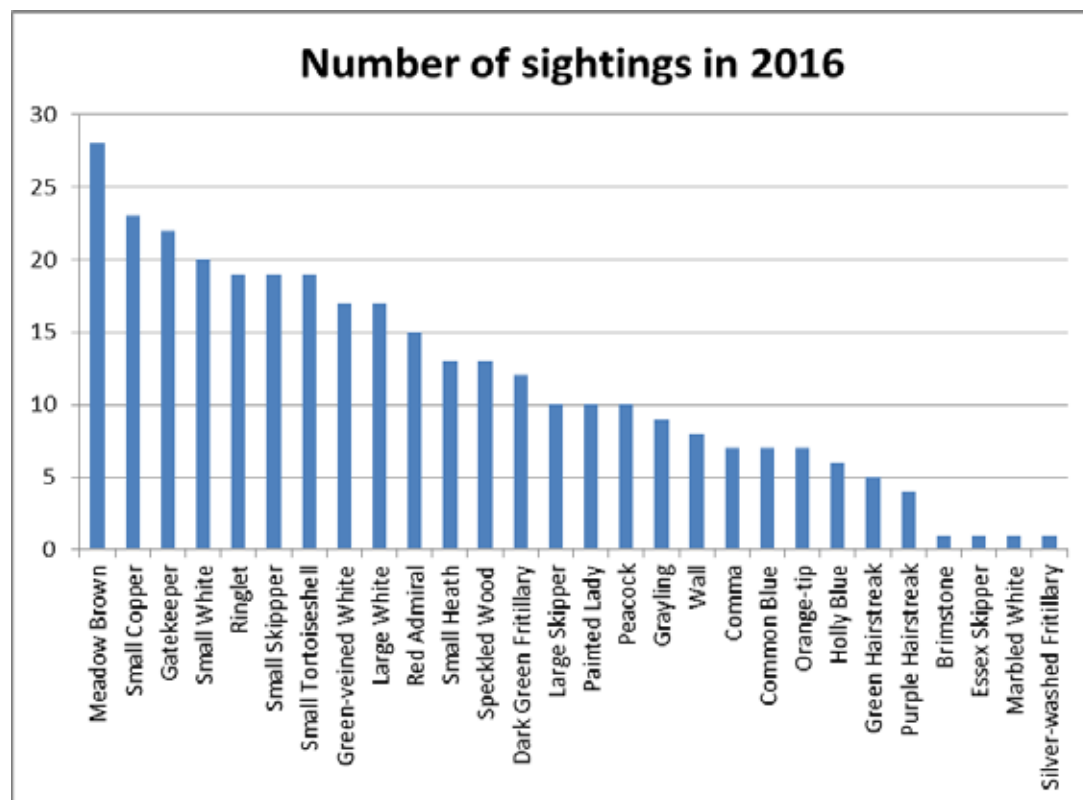
Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group

A relative warm ambient temperature, 20 degrees C in dull conditions saw much less activity than a cooler ambient temperature, 18 degrees C, with clear bright conditions and the sun's rays directly striking the canopy. Also altitude of the canopy, an estimated 1,000 feet above sea level, is of less significance than the amount of warm sunshine.

The study gives no indication of the size of the colony on Nover's Hill. Maximum number of Purple Hairstreak recorded, 54, on 30th July, compare with a similar number, 48, recorded on 6th August, 2015. Of course, individuals will change their position within the canopy and some may have been counted twice. But they also appear to show some fidelity towards specific trees, which are brought to life by the butterfly, as they are both touched by the rays of the sun.

Peter Branson 23/10/16

Summary



This survey was composed from sightings made by Peter Branson, Catherine Wellings, Peter Howsam, John Bacon, Tim Oakley and Heather Hathaway.

2.2 Stretton Wetlands

Update: January 2017

Since 2011 a small planning group has had the aim of developing the Stretton wetlands as part of the Town Plan. The group has worked with the various landowners of a little used marshy area on the edge of Church Stretton (SO451933). A detailed Phase 1 report was carried out in 2012 which made several recommendations including the building of scrapes and improvements to the footpath which crosses through the wetlands.

The 1841 tithe map shows that several fields were called Eel Pool (presumably used for fishing eels) and the Quinny (Town) brook runs along the edge of the area. The Environment Agency maintains the sides of the Quinny brook annually to prevent the flow becoming blocked, and new storm drains were built in 2015 when a new sewerage system was installed. Borehole surveys done in 1961 indicated a layer of peat between 2 to 4 metres thick under a thin level of topsoil in some parts, indicating that some areas may have been natural wetland for many centuries. Walking in certain areas and in the brook can prove somewhat hazardous!

During 2016 with encouragement and advice from SACWG, a small group of expert ecologists and volunteers, coordinated by Isabel Carter, began pursuing the recommendations made by the 2012 survey to investigate the existing biodiversity in more detail. Permission was gained from the landowners for access to their land for specific surveys. Phase 2 habitat surveys were carried out for amphibians, reptiles and flora. In addition careful observations and surveys were gathered for birds, mammals (notably otter and water voles), dragonflies, moths, butterflies and insects. All expertise was provided voluntarily and the small group of volunteers enjoyed exploring the biodiversity. On 23rd July around 20 people took part in a sociable 'bio-day' which included flora, moth, bird and invertebrate surveys.



3 sites have been used to explore the presence of newts with healthy populations of smooth and palmate newts being found in several areas.

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During the year, some exciting finds were made; otter was sighted, two kinds of newts found breeding, egrets, kingfisher and snipe were among numerous birds recorded and no less than three UK notable species were discovered – a micro moth - *Prochoreutis myllerana*, a ground beetle - *Anthracus consputus* and a large frog hopper - *Aphrophora major*.

The findings were collated and a proposal to register the site as a wildlife site was made by Shropshire Wildlife Trust in October 2016. A wildlife site provides some protection from harmful development, but still enables landowners to continue to manage their land, including grazing and does not prevent planning requests and development on adjacent land. It may also improve the possibility of obtaining funding to develop the biodiversity.

We are pleased to announce that as of January 2017 two-thirds of the site (fields 6, 7 and 9 highlighted in green) is now registered as a new wildlife site with Shropshire Wildlife Trust. This covers the areas with most varied vegetation. The search to find proof of water voles will continue during 2017, and if discovered, this may extend the area registered.



Plans for 2017 include on-going monitoring of birds with monthly surveys, regular transects to look for signs of water vole and a major fund-raising effort to make the existing footpath accessible (by building an embankment in the lower areas), to build two new pools and improve access to an existing diverse pool. Pending raising sufficient funds, it is hoped to carry out the work in September 2017.



2.3 Moths in YOUR Garden

Project leaders: Graham Wenman and Mike Shurmer

It was almost the end of May when, for the first time this year, we had more than 30 moths in the trap at home. Not encouraging signs for offering to visit local gardens! Then a hectic couple of months where there never seemed to be time to organise garden trips, so it was mid-July before we ventured out, and trapped at Greenhills - this in connection with the studies of the wetland site off Ludlow Road. Just over 50 moths were trapped (of 37 species) but, during the following day, more species were discovered on the wetlands, one of which was *Prochoreutis myllerana*. This moth was recorded in the 1980s in the Wyre forest but there has only been one Shropshire record since that (2013 at Aston Locks) so this was an extremely interesting



Prochoreutis myllerana

discovery. The moth larvae feed on Skullcap, which grows at the wetlands and a pupa was also found and it hatched out the following day.



Bucculatrix nigrocomella

Our next garden visit was in All Stretton in mid-August when we ran 3 traps. In total we recorded 77 species and we gave up counting the number of moths! *Bucculatrix nigrocomella* was only the 5th Shropshire record. Its caterpillars mine the leaves of ox-eye daisy. Look out for signs of these in your garden. At the end of August we returned to the site in Bagbatch which we had visited 15 months before, with high hopes of some good moths and we were not disappointed. With 60+ species recorded and over 300 individual moths, one new to us was an immigrant moth commonly known as a Rush Veneer, *Nomophila noctuella*. Although these are regularly recorded (if scarcely), this was a first for the Strettons area.

As part of a training session for NT volunteers, a trap was run at Carding Mill in mid-September. Some 20 species (around 70 moths) were caught, all of typical late summer expectations.

Our ability to identify "difficult" species has been much enhanced since Mike has become proficient in the difficult process of identification by use of microscopic genitalia examinations.

A talk on moths was given by Graham Wenman to the Parkinson's Society at the Mayfair Centre in late-September.

Moths and moth larvae, including leaf mining moths were also recorded during the "Joy of Wildlife" day at Rectory Field and Wood when we had hoped for local residents to join in this well advertised event along with local experts.

We still have not managed to "do" a garden site in Little Stretton but would really like to do so this year.

2.4 Estimating the Red Grouse Population on The Long Mynd Project leader: Leo Smith

Introduction and aims

Red Grouse is on the amber list of UK Birds of Conservation Concern (Eaton et al. 2009, 2014). The Long Mynd contains the larger of the two breeding populations of this species in Shropshire.



The National Trust implemented a monitoring programme of Red Grouse on the Long Mynd in 1994, based on dawn counts of calling territorial males in winter. The number of territorial males present has grown steadily since then, and in 2010-11 it was estimated to be 40-59 (Caroline Uff *pers. comm.*).

It was felt this method did not produce a sufficiently accurate population estimate for such a scarce species, or to assess the effectiveness of the Trust's heather management. A new survey method was piloted in 2011, which aimed to map the

territories of males displaying at dusk at the start of the breeding season. This approach produced an estimate of 60-63 territorial males, an improvement on the dawn count methodology. The dusk survey technique was repeated in 2012, when it was adopted by the new Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group, producing an estimate of 63 – 66 territorial males. The method produced excellent results, and it was decided to repeat it annually. The 2013 survey was affected by hard, bad weather, and produced an estimate of 53-54 territorial males. The reduction may have been due to fewer observations as a result of lower activity because of the weather, or a real reduction in the population. However the estimate of 56-58 territorial males in 2014, and 57-59 in 2015, still lower than in 2011 and 2012, suggests the latter.

Methodology

The 2016 survey was undertaken by 63 volunteers. Those participating for the first time attended an indoor briefing session in March, and several of them attended an "on the job" training session during an evening fieldwork survey. Sixty-seven watch points, selected to give a good field of view of a large part of the survey area, were identified and marked on 1-10,000 Ordnance Survey maps. Each participant was allocated a watch point, and sent the relevant survey map and recording sheet. Participants used the map to record the location of all Grouse seen or heard, together with a number for each observation. This number corresponded to data entered on the recording sheet, which included time, the activity seen or heard, and number of individuals.

The project was disrupted by bad weather, and three of the planned surveys had to be cancelled and rearranged. Surveys were undertaken on seven evenings between 31 March and 17 May 2016. The aim was to cover each watchpoint three times, but only 57% (38/67) of them were. Eighteen (27%) watchpoints were covered twice, and 13 were covered only once.

A full description of the analysis is provided in a detailed project report. It follows the territorial mapping method (Bibby et al, 2006), which uses concurrent observations of different birds exhibiting territorial behaviour (display flight or aggression) to estimate the number of territories.

Results

A total of 167 result sheets (117 maps with observations, plus 50 nil counts) were returned for analysis. These maps included 637 different observations of Red Grouse (some of which were concurrent observations of two or more birds). The coverage is summarised in Table 1, and compared with that of

previous years. Coverage was less good than in 2014 and 2015. More importantly, conditions during three of the counts were poor, resulting in very a low number of Grouse, and territorial interactions, being observed then. Observers go to adjacent watchpoints, so this affected specific areas disproportionately, resulting in many watchpoints having only one effective count. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the results on each of the seven Survey dates.

Table 1. Summary of Survey Coverage and Results 2011 - 16

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total Number of Watchpoints	38	60	67	67	67	67
Number of Surveyors	48	67	40	52	62	63
Number of Counts	147	204	122	181	184	167
Average Number of Counts / Watchpoint	3.9	3.4	1.8	2.7	2.7	2.5
Number of Records	818	816	460	865	839	637
Average Records / Count	5.6	4.0	3.8	4.8	4.6	3.8
Counts with no Grouse recorded	12	51	26	44	38	50

Table 2. Summary of Observations of Red Grouse during the 2016 Long Mynd survey.

Watchpoint Number	Survey Dates							Totals		
	March 31	April		May				Counts	Records	Average
		19	21	3	5	12	17			
Total Counts	27	16	28	16	38	26	16	167		
Counts of Zero	15	2	15	1	7	2	8	50		
Total Grouse Records	33	65	42	129	216	140	12		637	
Average Records / Count	1.2	4.1	1.5	8.1	5.7	5.4	0.8			3.8

The mapped observations are summarised in Figure 1. The map shows notional territories, based on those observations which approximately locate a boundary between territories. There is not necessarily any correlation between the size and shape of territories shown on the maps and the area that each Grouse actually occupies. Many of the Grouse recorded could not be assigned to a territory with any degree of certainty.

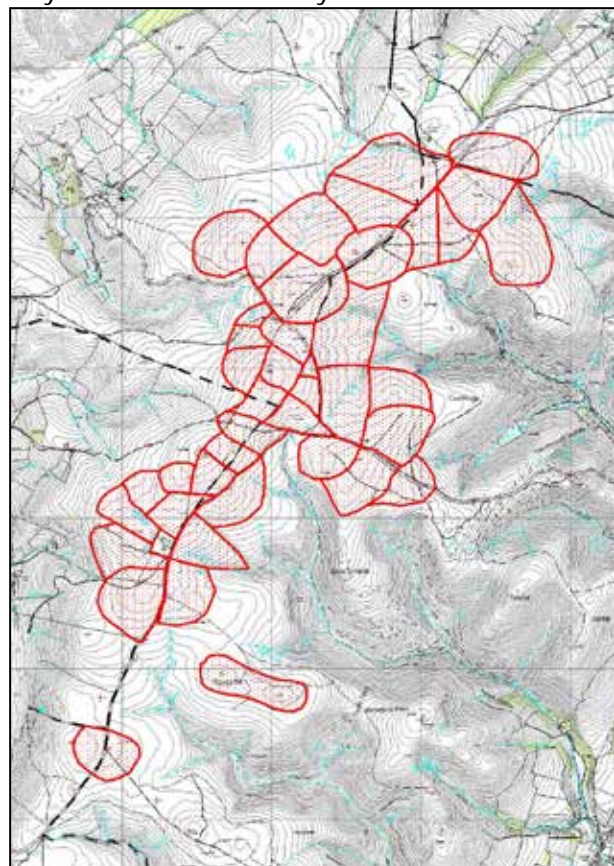
Based on analysis of the survey results, the total population in 2016 is estimated at 42 territorial males. Given the patchy nature of the survey coverage, it is likely that there were more Grouse territories than that.

Several participants had good views of other moorland species.

Comparison with Previous Years

Table 3 provides a comparison of the population estimate for each of the six years of the survey

Figure 1. Territories identified by the 2016 Long Mynd Red Grouse survey.





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Table 3. Estimated Number of Red Grouse (Territorial Males) on the Long Mynd 2011-16

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Population Estimate	60 - 63	63 - 66	52 - 54	56 - 58	57 - 59	42+

Heather Management

Approximately 700 hectares of heather dominated heathland is owned and managed by the National Trust on Long Mynd. Roughly 60% is actively managed by burning or cutting on a long rotation cycle of 16 years. Over the 15 years to 2015, around 195 ha of heather has been cut / burnt in scattered patches. A further 18.6 ha was burnt in the winter of 2015-2016. This aims to add structural diversity to the heathland, whilst maintaining heather as the dominant species.

This practice benefits a range of species, in particular the Red Grouse. The remaining 40% of heathland is left as 'non-intervention' to support less mobile species, which are negatively affected by burning or cutting. The detailed report includes a direct comparison between the territories and the heather management map. In general, most territories have some area of short heather in them. It therefore appears that the heather management has benefited Red Grouse.

Discussion and Conclusions

The level of Red Grouse activity, and the likelihood of them being observed and recorded, depends on good weather conditions, but also on good coverage of all Watch Points. The number of participants, the number of counts, and the weather conditions, all therefore affect the total number and distribution of records, and more importantly, the observations of two male Grouse seen or heard concurrently which are needed to define territory boundaries.

Detailed comparisons cannot be made between the maps produced each year, because they reflect the variations in coverage. More importantly, the methodology does not produce a map of the actual occupied territories, and there is some natural annual rearrangement of territories, as the burning, and further growth of the mature heather, both lead to areas becoming unsuitable habitat.

It is likely that the poor weather conditions in 2016 depressed the level of Grouse activity, so there were not enough observations to separate territories, and some of those shown on the map actually held two or more males. Therefore the population was likely to be higher than the 42 territories identified from analysing the survey results. However, breeding success on the Stiperstones was very poor in 2015, resulting in lower numbers there at the start of 2016 than in 2015. It is likely that the Long Mynd was similarly affected, and population was therefore less than that in 2015.

Participants

Thanks to the participants who carried out the surveys: John Arnfield, Lois Baker, Sam Bishop, Pete & Chrys Bonds, Lesley Brown, Simon Brown, John Burns, Sandy Burton, Jeremy Charlton, Chris Cooke, Judith Darling, Steve Darling, Sylvia Davidson, Malcolm Dixon, Mike Flavell, Bernard & Jane Ford, Greg & Sue Forster, Katy Foxford, Jeremy Freeland, Julian French, Dennis Greig, Helen Griffiths, Richard Halahan, Heather & John Hathaway, Frank Hinde, Pat Holbourn-Williams, David Holmes, Ruth Holmes, Peter & Jane Howsam, Peter Jackson, Abbi Knight, John Knowles, Jaclyn Lake, Lillie Lockwood, Edward Marvin, Helen Mayoh, Anna McCann, Rory McCann, Nigel McDonald, Stephen & Margaret Mitchell, Ron Parnell, Adrian Penney, Ray Philpotts, Kate Price, David Redford, Christopher Skeate, Leo Smith, Tony & Jo Stanley, Geoff Taylor, Lorna Taylor, Mate Vakarcz, Jennifer Vine, Tom Wall, Sandra & Peter Whitlock and Heather Williams.

A more detailed report is available at www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk.

Leo Smith, February 2017

2.5 Strettons Tree Planting Project

Project leaders: Penny Bienz and Steve Butler

After a very successful planting event last year, the enthusiasm continued with bracken bashing throughout the spring and early summer. This occurred both in the newly planted area to protect the young trees and also in the next area for tree planting in the field and orchard area adjacent to Batch Cottage. It was great to be joined by the 2nd Long Mynd Scouts and their wonderful bracken bashing efforts. It was notable that due to previous bracken bashing efforts in the newly planted area that a carpet of bluebells could flourish.

Bluebells coming through!



In May Steve Butler arranged a Pond Dipping event to study the pond and stream habitats in Park Coppice. This will be a recurring event to determine if the tree planting on the surrounding slopes influences the wildlife found in the waters.



In August a Bug Box day was arranged at Womerton Farm. This was a great event with lots of input from local families and visitors. The children thoroughly enjoyed the hammering and drilling and took great pride in their creations. As well as individual boxes two large bug hotels were built, one of which now has pride of place by the barn in Park Coppice.

The 2nd Long Mynd Scouts have also adopted this project for their Community Badge and a bug and dormouse box making day is being arranged in the Scout Hut for February.



Bug Hotel in Park Coppice

This year's planting area is now being prepared. The existing regeneration, including oak, hazel and ash, has been protected by spiral guards and canes and the tree plant order has been organised. This includes a native species mix of over 600 trees. As we speak the fencing is underway and the date for tree planting will be announced for early March.

Steve Butler will be working closely with the National Trust on a Dormouse Project and look at ways to improve connectivity between the existing woodlands, new tree plantings and existing hedgerows.

We will then continue with an ongoing programme of events for the local community, with bracken bashing and pond dipping in the spring and another family day at Womerton Farm where this year will be focusing on bird feeders.

By Dr Penny Bienz



2.6 Swifts in the Strettons 2016

Project leader: John Arnfield

Purpose & Objectives of the Project

The Swift (*Apus apus*) is amber-listed as a bird of conservation concern (due to falling population numbers) and it is thought that the loss of nest sites due to modern building methods and materials has played a key role in its decline. By recording known nest locations, it is possible to monitor whether these sites continue to be used in subsequent years or whether new sites are selected and, importantly, to liaise with residents, builders and planners when works to improve properties is carried out to ensure the preservation of nesting opportunities.

Surveying also indicates where it might be worthwhile installing artificial nest boxes to increase colony size – the birds are sociable and tend to nest within close range of each other.

Swifts are commonly observed in and around the Strettons but there was no formal recording of the locations of nest sites or the number of birds until 2014, when the first “Swifts in the Strettons” was inaugurated by the Stretton Area Community Wildlife Group, under the leadership of Peta Sams. The observations of 2015 and 2016 seek to build on and extend the results of this study. They used the same methodology, involving weekly surveys on foot of appropriate areas and of those for which reports had been received by members of the public.

The location of the nest sites recorded will be passed to Shropshire Council, Church Stretton Civic Society, RSPB swift survey and the county bird recorder for use when proposals for maintenance or modification of buildings occupied by Swifts are filed with planning authorities and to establish the presence of Swift populations in the county.

Results: General Observations of Swifts in the Strettons

The earliest arrivals of the 2016 breeding season were observed in early May, with the first observation being the 3rd of that month, one day earlier than last year. Additional birds arrived during the following week and large groups were common by mid-month.

Counted group sizes reported range from singletons to more than 20 with some larger groups too numerous to count accurately.

“Screaming parties” were reported during June and July throughout the daylight (and twilight) hours. Most of these were close to the Market Square and Church Street. Swift flight activity (even at low levels) was apparently unaffected by the presence of stalls and large numbers of people in the former location on Thursdays (market day).

A total of 40 nest sites was confirmed (i.e. birds were observed entering a consistent location on a building two or more times), which is 18 more than in 2015 and 21 more than in 2014.

The last date of observation of a Swift was 8th August.

Results: Swift Nest Site Locations

In the following account, the term “site” is used for a specific location on a building at which Swift activity was observed. Some buildings possessed multiple sites.

Within Church Stretton and All Stretton, 10 sites were found in which nesting occurred in all three years of the survey so far, 14 at which nesting occurred in 2016 and one other year and 16 in which evidence of breeding is available for only 2016.

In addition, five more were unconfirmed (i.e. only one Swift visit was observed in 2016).

There were 14 sites at which confirmed or unconfirmed nesting was observed in previous years but which were not used in 2016.

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from the confirmed site data.

- Stretton’s Swifts exhibit nest site fidelity. There was only one building with confirmed use in 2015 for which there were no records for 2016. On buildings to which Swifts returned, exact locations exhibited some variation between years.
- Of the four buildings (nine sites) that were used in 2016 but not in 2015, three were in areas of newer (twentieth century) housing rather than in the older town core. Probably, this is due in part to the fact that this area was inadequately surveyed in prior years, especially given that many of the sites apparently have a long history of Swift nesting (according to residents’ observations). No sites were found in post-World War II buildings.
- Evidence of *successful* breeding was as follows:
 - droppings on a lower roof or pavement below nest (eight sites)
 - noise of chicks from within the roof space (five sites) a dead chick found beneath the nest (one site) a Swift egg found beneath a nest, cracked in a manner that suggests emergence of a chick rather than predation (one site).



Figure 1. Swift nest boxes at a residence on Shrewsbury Road

Two of the sites were in nest boxes but show somewhat perplexing evidence of nesting. The boxes were erected beneath the eaves of a residence on Shrewsbury Road (see Figure 1) on 7th May, interest was shown in them on 24th May and they were occupied by 28th May, perhaps assisted by the use of recorded Swift calls at the location. While birds were observed entering and leaving both boxes, and the egg alluded to above was found, there is no evidence that young were fledged from this site. Perhaps the birds that took possession of these sites were inexperienced and failed in their attempt to raise families (which may bode well for next year should they return to the same site.)

There is unconfirmed (but highly probable) evidence of multiple nesting sites in a farmyard site in Little Stretton. Large numbers of birds are observed to congregate at this location prior to dusk (often mixed in with Swallows and House Martins). The Swifts were observed to swoop downwards towards various buildings in the farmyard about 21:15 and not to reappear, suggesting movement to a roosting site. However, access to this site to confirm roosting in late evening was not possible. It seems likely that there may be 5-10 additional nesting locations here, based on the numbers of birds observed flying low over the farmyard that apparently landed at nest sites at dusk.

Nest aspect shows a bias towards the easterly direction: where the nest cavity entrance is apparent, 54% face an easterly direction (see Table 1).

Aspect of nest	Confirmed Site
N	2
NNE	1
NE	2
ENE	1
E	21
ESE	2
S	5
SW	3
WNW	2

Table 1: Nest Aspect for Confirmed Nest Sites (where known)



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Located nest sites show a clustered distribution. The 40 confirmed nest sites in Church Stretton are found in only 16 buildings with 22 addresses. Of the buildings with nest sites, all but five are within 200 m of St Laurence's Church and all but one are within 500m.

All Stretton has a single confirmed building location with confirmed nesting.

Concluding Remarks

There is little reason to believe that the Strettons area Swift population or nest total has changed significantly since 2014. While the number of nest sites found each year has increased, this increase may be attributed to newly discovered sites in areas of Church Stretton with twentieth century housing stock. These areas were not surveyed as intensively in earlier years. Accordingly, it is concluded that the breeding status of Swifts probably has remained unchanged in the Strettons in the three year period since the first "Swifts in the Strettons" survey.

Despite the new nests alluded to above, the core breeding area remains in the older building stock in the area of the Market Square, Church Street and Cunnery Road. Evidence for all of these areas suggests that, while Swifts are faithful to particular *buildings*, they do not always re-use the precise *sites* employed in previous breeding seasons. Whether this represents flexibility on the part of an individual returning adult or whether location shifts denote the returning offspring of birds raised in those buildings must remain a source of speculation.

Acknowledgements

This survey would not have been possible without the efforts of those SACWG members who participated in evening survey walks and contributed casual observations (Steve Baker, Julie Cowley, Brenda Crosby, Nicky Halliburton, Tony Jones, Janet Longstaff, Leo Smith, Graham Wenman and Sandra & Peter Whitlock and to the residents of the Strettons who talked to us about the Swifts with which they shared their houses.

Confidentiality

This version of the "Swifts in the Strettons" results for the SACWG Annual Report has been edited to remove all reference to specific addresses and buildings. A fuller version with such information retained is available for those with a "need to know" (e.g. planning bodies). To request this report, please contact John Arnfield (arnfield.2@osu.edu or 01694 724 170).

John Arnfield

1st January 2017



2.7 Wildlife Sites Botanical Surveys

Project leader: Kate Singleton

In conjunction with Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT)

Wildlife Sites are places which have been shown to have special local nature conservation value. They are the most important places for wildlife outside the legally protected areas, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). Many of them are in private ownership but this year we have mostly surveyed sites that have either open access or a public footpath running across them.

2016 was the final year of surveying under the Wildlife Sites Project, run by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust. However botanical surveying will continue in and around the Strettons Area but is likely to be as part of a Living Landscapes Project and concentrating on identifying linking habitats between Local Wildlife Sites. We will contact the survey group members soon with further details.

Over the past five years the Strettons Botanical Survey Group has provided Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT) with valuable habitat data. This data is used by SWT in a variety of ways, for example, for creating species list and management advice for landowners, targeting follow up visits to sites, and in some cases identifying and subsequently adopting new LWS. Volunteers within the group have gained very useful skills and experience in plant identification and have had the opportunity to join free training courses organised by the SWT.

A Brief Methodology

The surveyors aim to cover the whole of each site as thoroughly as possible. All the vascular plant species observed are recorded using a Shropshire Botanical Society recording card. The frequencies of indicator species are noted and NVC quadrats done where possible. In addition 'site visit cards' provided by SWT are also completed to make an assessment of the habitats and the condition of a site. Any other relevant information is also noted and photos of the site taken. The maps provided by SWT enable the surveyors to check site boundaries and indicate the extent of each habitat by annotating maps. A GPS is used to take precise grid references for NVC quadrats and any rare species.

Other species data is collected where possible, for example butterfly and bird records.

The data gathered from each survey is processed at SWT and a species lists for each site are sent to the landowners and also to the county recorder along with any useful management advice.

Description of Sites Surveyed in 2016

Our first sites of the survey season were woodland Local Wildlife Sites, followed by grasslands and finally the wetlands.

- Castlehill Wood, owned by the Acton Scott Estate, is marked as Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland on the Ancient Woodland Inventory. The canopy is quite mixed with some non-native species such as Larch and Spruce and honorary natives such as Horse Chestnut, Sweet Chestnut and Sycamore also present. A mixed canopy can be good for resilience in a woodland, particularly now as the effects of climate change and new pests and diseases are being felt. The woodland is steeply sloping to the north-west, which means it is more shaded and humid than a south-facing woodland. It has a notable

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amount of Wych Elm and some fine mature Oak trees and is being actively and lightly managed. The best areas of woodland ground flora were found on the upper slopes and included, Sweet Woodruff, Bluebells, Yellow Archangel and Wood Anemone. However, towards the lower slopes (near the road) the soils become wetter with patches of Wood Sedge. There is a noticeable amount of lying and standing deadwood and also yew in the woodland

- Blackpool Coppice is in private ownership with no public access. This wonderful woodland varies from mixed Oak with Hazel understorey to wetter areas of Alder and Willow around the marshy margins of streams and pools. The ground flora is rich and extensive with Town Hall Clock (Moschatel), Wood Anemone, Sweet Woodruff, Bluebell, Yellow Archangel, Wood-sorrel and Sanicle. Interestingly, the locals said the woodland used to be grazed occasionally by cattle, which kept the bramble down in the northern end. The hedgerows surrounding the woodland are very thick and well managed and connected to the west and it would be interesting to know whether Dormice have been recorded in the area.
- Perry Gutter. Occasionally members of the public contact SWT to ask whether an area of land is suitable for tree planting. This is an excellent opportunity to check that any planting will not destroy what would otherwise be an important grassland habitat. At Perry Gutter this was pertinent because the land abuts Hopesay Common; an area of acid grassland and flush communities. Fortunately, the survey concluded the habitat was not of particular botanical interest and so the tree planting could go ahead. We understand that the trees and shrubs have now been planted and the remaining area of grassland will be managed as a meadow with an annual cut and collect followed by aftermath grazing. The margins will be managed for invertebrates on a 3 yearly cutting cycle. The owners are also hoping to spread green hay in the future to encourage species diversity.
- Overbatch lies between two other Local Wildlife sites and also shares a boundary with the Long Mynd SSSI. It is a very special habitat particularly as flower-rich meadows and pasture are essential for the Bilberry Bumble bee which lives on the Long Mynd. The owners have a small herd of Welsh Black which graze the acid grasslands and four hay fields. The group surveyed the acid grassland areas and found, among other species, Bird's-foot and Heath Speedwell. We hope to survey the hay meadows in 2017. A dam across a brook has created a diverse wet flush habitat containing several sedges and wetland species such as Water Horsetail, Ragged Robin and Marsh Valerian. The herd also grazes neighbouring species-rich grassland.



Photograph showing species-rich knoll at Overbatch

- An area of privately owned land east of Church Stretton was surveyed. This land does not have any public access and the owner has agreed to LWS status provided the location is not published. It is a mosaic of west facing acid grassland sloping down to an Alder and Willow-lined stream and flush. The west facing upper slope has incredible anthills covered in Wild Thyme and Heath Speedwell, Heath Bedstraw, Tormentil and changing Forget-me-not. Overall 119 botanical species were recorded of which 18 were Shropshire Axiophytes (good habitat indicator species). The owner has farmed the land without fertilisers for over 50 years and has always kept the anthills because she loves the Green Woodpeckers.



Close inspection of anthill flora

- A species-rich site at Little Belmore was originally surveyed by Caroline Uff in 2015. The purpose of the botanical survey in 2016 was to obtain plant frequencies of indicator species to enable the site to be put forward for LWS status. Little Belmore sits on the boundary of the Long Mynd and is a mixture of upland acid grassland with a species-rich flush flowing along the eastern boundary. The flush has had a series of ponds created within it. Amongst the 28 axiophytes recorded were Heath Spotted-orchid, Yellow Mountain Pansy, Marsh Violet, Bog Bean and White Sedge. The site has never been fertilized and is grazed by sheep on and off from April – November. The owners, who are very keen on wildlife, have agreed to LWS status. Unfortunately Parrot's Feather and New Zealand Pigmy Weed (both invasive non-native species) were recorded in the ponds.



Heath Spotted-orchid and general view at Little Belmore

Our last site of the season was the [Stretton Wetlands](#). A bio-blitz was undertaken of this area of wet, marshy grassland and willow scrub situated to the south of Ludlow Road in Church Stretton. The botanical survey found part of the site to be rush pasture and swamp and there was a notable amount of Skullcap which is the food plant for a nationally scarce micro moth (*Prochoreutis myllerana*). The site is excellent for beetles with 33 species recorded of which 17 were associated with wetland habitats and 8 uncommon in Shropshire and significant at county level. One pool being very important as it is the only known location in Shropshire for the Nationally Notable ground beetle *Anthracus consputus*. In general the habitat is good for invertebrates with 12 species of butterfly, 39 species of moth, 41 species of true bugs and 5 species of both damselfly and ladybird. The habitat supports Palmate and Smooth Newt as well as Common Toad and Common Frog. The landowners have been informed of the results of the survey and also that part of the site meets the criteria for Local Wildlife Site.

Shropshire Wildlife Trust would like to thank everyone involved in the 2016 surveys and looks forward to surveying more sites in 2017 as part of the Living Landscape Project



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2.8 Hedgerow Survey

Project leaders: Peter and Vivian Thorpe

This year has not seen a great deal of activity in hedgerow monitoring for a number of reasons. However, towards the end of the year two enquiries were received from students expressing their interest in participating in survey work. Both will be contacted again in spring.

Further information and training can be provided by Vivienne and Peter Thorpe (vjandp@btinternet.com 01694 771443).

3. Other News

3.1 Proposed Lapwing and Curlew Survey

Both Lapwing and Curlew have suffered a massive contraction in range and population decline in the last 20 years or so. Curlew has been described as the UK's highest bird conservation priority, as we have an estimated 28% of the European breeding population, and 19 – 27% of the world population.

Several Community Wildlife Groups are already carrying out surveys to find out how many there are, where they are, and monitor the population. This is necessary before any conservation measures to try and reverse the decline can be attempted.



Curlew

Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group and Shropshire Ornithological Society are planning to launch such a survey in 2017, in the area east of Church Stretton.

The Aim is find out how many breeding pairs there are in the area, and where they are. It is a different methodology from the Bird Atlas, because it's not necessary to prove breeding, but it is necessary to try and locate and map them all. The results will be used to promote conservation.

Good birdwatching skills are not needed. It is only necessary for helpers to be able to recognise the two main target species. Each helper will take on a tetrad (2x2 kilometre square) which will need to be visited on 3-4 dates; around 1st April, 1st May, 1st June and potentially mid-July.

Anyone interested is welcome at the launch meeting at 7.30pm on Wednesday, 15th March 2017, at the Methodist Church Hall, Watling Street, Church Stretton. The survey methodology will be fully explained, and questions answered. If you want to help, but can't make the meeting, please let Leo Smith know beforehand: leo@leosmith.org.uk Tel. 01694 720296.

3.2 Habitat Enhancements in Batch Valley

Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group have working with the National Trust to improve habitat in the Park Coppice are of Batch Valley, Long Mynd. In addition to the tree planting organized by Penny Bienz (see Section 2.5), Steve Butler has been liaising with National Trust staff on plans to restore two ponds and expose a section of culverted stream. The ponds, which are stream fed, have become filled with silt, and a dam made to create the larger of the ponds is leaking. The smaller pond was re-instated in November 2016 and is now holding water again. Plans for the larger pond and culverted stream are still in preparation, but can hopefully be progressed in 2017.



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4. SACWG Statement of Accounts

Income: SACWG received no income during the accounting period.

Expenditures:

Web hosting fee	15.00
<i>Total expenditures</i>	<i>15.00</i>

Balance Calculation:

Previous balance (10/02/2016)**	644.80+
Income	0.00-
Expenditures	15.00=
New balance (24/01/2017)**	629.80

** Note: both the balances include an amount of £20.18 which represents dedicated funds associated with the Batch Valley Project. Hence SACWG undedicated funds show a balance of £629.80 - £20.18 = £609.62.

John Arnfield
Treasurer, SACWG

5. Acknowledgements

Thanks to all those members of SACWG and the public who supported the full range surveys and activities this year. Printing and copying was provided by the National Trust.