

UPPER CLUN COMMUNITY WILDLIFE GROUP

2014 ANNUAL REPORT SUMMARY



PUTTING MAMMALS ON THE MAP

We began in 2007 with surveys of birds and plants. In 2010, we added butterflies to the list. But we've always had an ambition to branch out into other species groups when the time was right, and with some interesting developments in mammal recording in the county, we invited John Mackintosh, the County Mammal Recorder, to talk to our Annual Public Meeting in November.

Each species group has its challenges: plants don't run away, but there are hundreds of species to learn. The number of birds you need to know is far smaller, but they're not always easy to find or see. Butterflies... well, hats off to anyone who can identify butterflies on the wing! With mammals, there are comparatively few species, most easily identified - the problem is finding them at all, for many mammals are largely nocturnal.

So to record them, you often have to go about it a different way. One of John's categories of evidence for mammal records is 'DoR' - Dead on Road: sadly, the closest many of us get to badgers, foxes, even otters, is finding the victims of traffic accidents. Luckily, there are other field signs which can confirm the presence of species: think of molehills, the maze of footprints on fresh snow, badgers' latrines and snuffle-holes.

John was keen to emphasize that it's not just the more unusual mammals that are of interest - it's important to build a picture of the distribution and density of common, widespread species, such as rabbits and grey squirrels. That way, we're better placed to understand what's happening to their populations, and what effects, good or bad, they may be having on other local wildlife.

Hide'n'Squeak is a Shropshire-based project aimed at encouraging community groups to record mammals, filling the gaps in the mammal map of the county. A second project focuses on **Pine Marten** (*right*), a rare and elusive species that has been recorded just 16 miles from the Shropshire border. Pine Marten has a lot in common with Red Kite: both native species persecuted to near-extinction, but now beginning to recolonize their ancient haunts - let's hope it enjoys similar success! Read more at:

<http://www.mammal.org.uk/currentprojects>



UCCWG MAMMAL RECORDING BEGINS THIS YEAR
YOU'LL RECEIVE A GUIDANCE NOTE AND RECORDING FORM TO GET YOU STARTED

SURVEY SEASON 2014 - BOUNCING BACK!

A much milder winter, followed by the earliest, warmest and driest spring for some years, allowed most bird, plant and butterfly species to make up for a succession of poor breeding seasons

THE BIRD GROUP

The Bird Group continued to monitor the Curlew population, using a combination of surveyors and resident recorders, collecting further records of other target species in the course of this work. We monitored Red Kite nests and Barn Owl boxes*. The Nestbox Scheme recorded nests of small woodland species, with some data submitted to the BTO Nest Record Scheme. We contributed to the forthcoming book *The Birds of Shropshire*, and sent records to the County Bird Recorder. We held two Bird Walks, one in April, and one in May.

**All monitoring of Red Kite and Barn Owl is carried out under licence*

- we received only one record of Lapwing, 3 birds late in the season, almost certainly passing through
- the 8 – 10 Curlew pairs located was the lowest number since our records began; there were some breeding failures, but 3 or 4 pairs are believed to have produced hatched young
- 3 Red Kite nests were found in the Upper Clun, but all failed before or during incubation
- two Barn Owl nests were found at the same site, fledging at least 4 young, and probably more
- 21 potential Dipper nest sites were monitored, and 17 active nests found, all but two in boxes
- nestbox schemes had an average occupancy of 57%, compared with 40% in the last 2 years; the first laying date was nearly 4 weeks earlier than 2013, and productivity matched the previous high of 2010
- Kestrel, Wheatear, Yellow Wagtail and Mandarin Duck were confirmed breeding locally

THE PLANT GROUP

The Plant Group has a core of six proficient botanists, with other occasional participants. Training takes place in various forms throughout the year. Eighteen Local Wildlife Sites were surveyed, mapping habitats and assessing site condition as well as compiling plant lists. Shropshire Wildlife Trust supported surveys with maps, survey cards & landowner information. We helped organize a 'Wildlife Gardening' event at Newcastle in May, and ran a 'Foraging Day' in June. Several work parties took place, including rush cutting at Black Mountain and the Anchor, and scrub clearance and management at Caer Din Bank, Bettws Pool and Cwm Ffrydd.

- we visited 24 Sites altogether over a 15-week period, completing full surveys of 18 of them
- as in previous years, we recorded over 100 different axiophytes, plants indicative of habitat quality
- a record seven prospective Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs) were adopted during 2014
- virtually all the 47 LWSs in the Upper Clun have now been surveyed; 74% are in a reasonably good condition, higher than the county average, although this year only 42% of those surveyed qualified
- since UCCWG began work, 22 extensions or completely new CWSs have been adopted
- species of particular interest included Upright Chickweed, Navelwort & Broad-leaved Helleborine

THE BUTTERFLY GROUP

Dennis Twist carried out surveys of seven sites between mid-May and early July. The flight season of the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary was rather late, and numbers lower at most sites. The warm spring encouraged a very lush growth of grass, rushes and bracken, which may have resulted in habitat loss.

- Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (*SPBF*) was recorded at Barretts West, a regionally-important site, on four dates between June 7th and July 1st; the maximum count was 37 on June 22nd
- SPBF was recorded at one other nearby site, with two, possibly three, butterflies on two dates in June
- it was found at none of the other sites which have held the species previously
- two possible Dark Green Fritillaries were seen at Pant-y-Lidan, with a definite record at Llanfair Hill

OUR REACH IS LONG ...

UCCWG members come from every corner of the Upper Clun, and we recruit a steady stream of new members as people move into the area. The 220 names on our mailing list are already a good proportion of the total population, but local people beyond the formal membership of the group also contribute valuable information. This has enabled us to amass an extensive and detailed record of local wildlife over eight years of survey work.

Forty-nine people altogether participated in fieldwork this year – an impressive total in a sparsely-populated area. Thirty-one contributed bird records, either as surveyors, as resident recorders, or by passing on casual sightings. Eleven nestbox hosts, five of whom also figure above, recorded nest data. Ten botanists, and two dedicated butterfly specialists, spent many hours on concentrated surveys of important sites.

Another group whose support should be acknowledged is the many landowners who allow us access to their land, and without whose co-operation our work would be very much the poorer. A good number of them also figure among the survey contributors above - no-one's better placed to see what's about than a farmer!

... AND OUR MEMBERS ARE KEEN!

The great majority of the group's time is devoted to survey work, but in order to attract new members and refresh contacts with existing ones, we also run walks and other events. The Bird Group held two Bird Walks, one at Lower Short Ditch and one at Clun Castle. The Botany Group held a 'Gardening for Wildlife' event at Newcastle in May, and a 'foraging' expedition to a wildlife site in June. We also got down and dirty on work parties, clearing scrub and cutting rushes to help get Wildlife Sites into good condition at Caer Din, the Anchor, Black Mountain, Cwm Ffrydd and Bettws Pool.

Our annual Public Meeting complete with tea and (delicious!) cake took place in Newcastle in November, and the summer barbeque was held at Brynmawr again this year, thanks to Trevor Wheeler's hospitality.

ONWARDS AND...UPWARDS?

...there's good news, and there's news that'll take a while to digest

The good news: in 2014, a further 11 Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements drawn up between local farmers and Natural England have brought another 2.8 square kilometres of grassland into sympathetic management. Added to over seven square kilometres brought into agreements last year, that represents around ten square kilometres altogether, a substantial area. HLS agreements run for ten years, during which we hope to see an improvement in the quality of these vital farmland habitats.

However, with the ink barely dry on the agreements, HLS is coming to an end, to be replaced by a new Countryside Stewardship Scheme, part of the Common Agricultural Policy for the next seven years. Its aim is to implement the Lawton Report, which recommended joined-up land management to combat the corrosive effects of habitat fragmentation. It's supposed to be simpler than HLS, but will be less well funded.

Unlike HLS, under which it was up to landowners to make individual applications, the new scheme will place more emphasis on targeted areas selected by Natural England. UCCWG has commented on the draft Targeting Statement for the Upper Clun, highlighting the need to include Curlew in the list of species requiring specific management prescriptions, and to target resources on the Wildlife Sites identified by our surveys. Once again, our fieldwork proves its value - if we hadn't accumulated eight years' worth of detailed data, we wouldn't be in a position to contribute to the decision-making that's going to affect our local landscape for years to come.

If you haven't come across the Lawton Report Making Space for Nature, it's a very good read, pithy and wise, and deserves to be more widely known. It's not long, and can be downloaded at:

<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf>



That was *Making Space for Nature's* prescription for Wildlife Sites. Clearly, the more large, protected areas of high-quality habitat there are, the better it is for scarce and threatened species. The 'joined' bit may need a little more unpacking: habitat fragmentation is a hot topic in conservation, but its full implications aren't always obvious, especially where mobile creatures like birds, butterflies and mammals are concerned.

The 'fragments' are often remnants of unimproved habitat left when the surrounding land is taken into cultivation. There's a direct relationship between the size of a fragment and the number of species of any kind it can support - the smaller it is, the fewer species. What's more, that number will diminish over time, as isolated populations are much more vulnerable. Large populations in extensive habitat can withstand episodes of adverse weather, food shortage, disease and predation that can rapidly wipe out smaller, isolated ones.

The dingle highlighted above is a perfect example: the land is too steep and boggy to be worth doing much with, so it's survived, complete with scrub, rushes, Marsh Violets, and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries - in fact, it's a regionally-important site for these rare butterflies. But if the population is to survive, they must be able to move off in search of new areas to feed and colonize. Land to the south and north of their habitat is now managed under HLS agreements, providing a vital corridor that should encourage the butterflies to spread.

That's why the thrust of the group's conservation policy has been to extend Wildlife Sites, and where possible link them together. In the photo above, taken on Mason's Bank, almost everything you see, across Bicton Hill to Rhos Fiddle, and more you can't see, round to Ceri Forest - now comprises SWT reserves and farmland with HLS agreements, linked by further potential Wildlife Sites. There's a long way to go - in many other parts of our area there are far fewer fragments to work with - but it's a huge improvement on where we started in 2007.

The new Countryside Stewardship Scheme is all about joining up the fragments - it's up to us to work with Natural England to make sure it delivers

FOR ALL THE LATEST ON THE WILDLIFE GROUP, DON'T FORGET TO CHECK OUR WEBSITE REGULARLY AT www.shropscwgs.org.uk

You'll find details of the UCCWG committee, endorsed by the Public Meeting, and the full Annual Report 2014 is available to view or download.

Photo credit: **Pine Marten**@Dani Kropivnik under licence <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>

The Group has financial support from the *Community Wildlife Groups in the Shropshire Hills* LEADER Project.

