

Welcome to our first edition of the new Magpie Digest. This publication is composed of a selection of the articles sent in by our members to the Society's website over the past 4 months. Partly thanks to Covid and also the enthusiasm and encouragement of our new website team we have had a wonderful number and variety of contributions which we hope will continue to flow in our post Covid world. As editor I have not been able to use all the articles published on the website as the cost of printing them all would be too high but I have tried to select shortish articles which I feel translate best to the printed page and cater for a broad range of interests from plants to insects to birds etc. I have not included all photos submitted with the original articles and might very occasionally edit out some text but I hope you feel that I have got the balance about right. I am open to thoughts and comments about this publication. Enjoy!

Julie Lane

Stag-gered! - Matt Andrews

In late May and then throughout June and into the first few weeks of July, we are privileged to enjoy the emergence and spectacular appearance of male Stag Beetles (*Lucanus Cervus*). Happily for us, one of the best places in the UK to see these wonderful insects is Totternhoe in Bedfordshire, just a few miles south of Milton Keynes, the topography of which means one can see them both flying and settled without too much difficulty.

Totternhoe Knolls is located on the north-east side of Totternhoe village, and the woodland spilling down from the Knolls meets the beetles' requirements with undisturbed dells and hollows full of dead trees and rotted oak stumps, home to the inch-and-a-half long, curved beetle larvae. Emergence into the adult state takes between four and seven years. Dependent upon available nourishment for the larval stage,



the adult male beetle may be anything from one to three inches long, possessing 'antlers' (the male beetle's jaw appendages) upwards of half-an-inch to over an inch long. And yes, they can pinch unwary fingers to draw blood, which I can attest to from my first ever Stag Beetle

encounter in southern France, despite literature assuring you to the contrary. So, best not to touch!

With their wing cases stuck outwards and upwards at ninety degrees to their body line, sepia wings frantically buzzing and legs akimbo with those spectacular jaws jutting out to the front, these insects present a unique sight and sound on balmy June evenings. The Elm hedge lining the opposite side of the road makes ideal landing spots and with care, you can hear the male beetles rustling about in the crisp bunches of Elm leaves.

Female beetles are difficult to find but by wandering – carefully! – with a good torch, along the rather busy Castle Hill Road from the ideal starting point of the Cross Keys pub, a great refreshment spot in better times, from around 9.45pm through until 10.30pm, you should both see (and hear) male Stag Beetles flying like miniature lunar-landers above you along the tree-line right down to head-height!

Enjoying the sight and sound of Europe's largest beetle has become a much looked-forward to experience every summer and really is to be recommended as something not to be missed.

New Wildflower Habitats at Stanton Low – Martin Kincaid

For those of you who know and enjoy Stonepit Field at Great Linford, in particular the species-rich limestone scrape which gives the site its name, you may also like to visit Stanton Low this summer.

Two new scrapes have been created at Stanton Low using a similar seed mix to that used at Stonepit over 20 years ago – and already wildlife is flourishing. There are several hollows near the canal which are the relics of the nineteenth century limestone quarrying which took place here. Early in 2019, the topsoil was removed and subsequently Parks Trust staff and volunteers sowed the seed mix. Dominant in the seed mix is kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria* which is the larval foodplant of Small Blue butterfly. The butterfly should be able to make the short hop across from Stonepit and colonise this new habitat. You will also find Common Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, Salad Burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, Field Poppy *Papaver rhoeas* and Sainfoin *Onobrychis viciifolia* in these hollows. Also of note is Viper's Bugloss *Echium vulgare*, a plant which is cropping up more and more in Milton Keynes of late.

When Helen and I visited one evening recently, we saw plenty of Small Tortoiseshell, Meadow Brown, Ringlet and Marbled White butterflies and a fantastic number of bumblebees enjoying these nectar rich plants. Spoil from the two scrapes was mounded up close by and these mounds are now covered in thistles and teasels, which are another great resource for pollinating insects. The scrubby grassland surrounding the scrapes now regularly hosts breeding Grasshopper Warblers as well as the more abundant Common Whitethroat. Lesser Whitethroat has also been present.

I thoroughly recommend a visit to this new habitat. If visiting by car, park in the large car park off Wolverton Road near Asda (SP837417). From here, follow the mown path alongside the canal until you reach the two scrapes. There are seats and picnic tables right next to the scrapes.

[A glowing Covid story - Julie Lane](#)

A friend of mine, Michele Pudsey, who lives in Newton Blossomville has regularly seen glow worms (*Lampyrus noctiluca*) along a local country road. This year she recorded 12 on one evening including two mating glow worms. This road is very quiet and the verge is wonderful for all sorts of wild flowers but as Michele says the fact that the council haven't been out cutting the verges this year has probably been to the advantage of the glow worms (and all the other wildlife that live there). She has submitted this sighting and the attached photos to The UK Glow Worm Survey www.glowworms.org.uk which is a site dedicated to all things to do with glow worms.



Now is the time to look out for these fascinating insects so if you are out in the evenings in the countryside keep an eye out for that telltale green glow. If you want to find out more about them check out the site mentioned above and don't forget to submit your sightings. (Records can also be submitted via iRecord.)

[A peregrine in Aylesbury – Sue Hetherington](#)

On Sunday 21/6/20 afternoon Andrew and I very cautiously ventured out from pandemic purdah! I wanted to see what was happening with the County Hall peregrines and I saw this juvenile two sets of windows down from the breeding platform. It was very vocal, occasionally flying in pursuit of the adult. I only have patchy information about this year's Aylesbury story – essential building work enabled the County bird recorder a sneak peek in early May when one tiny chick and 3 eggs were briefly glimpsed (a longer look of course being prohibited by law because peregrines are category 1 protected) There was a recent report of a faller being found by the nearby railway yard, taken to Tiggywinkles Wildlife Hospital at Haddenham, then placed back on the roof of County Hall. I don't know if that's the one in the photograph nor do I know what happened about the rest of the clutch of eggs. A piece of information did pop up on Twitter a while back to say that an Aylesbury ringed bird



from 4 years ago (identified from the lettering on the orange darvic ring on its leg) was paired but non-breeding on a building in Kettering.

In case there are any more ‘urban peregrine’ fans out there, I have a little more Buckinghamshire news. There are now FOUR such sites in Bucks – Aylesbury and the MK Dons stadium and also the parish churches at each of High Wycombe and Marlow. The latter two are also young pairs and not believed to be breeding yet. Now the pandemic infection rates are falling a little, I may cautiously attempt to venture out to see if I can observe anything at these sites.

Cuckoo ringing at Linford Lakes – Martin Kincaid and Kenny Kramer

2020 has been a fabulous year for European Cuckoo in Milton Keynes and Bucks. At the time of writing, the number of calling cuckoos in our county is well over one hundred, and no doubt other records will come to light. Quite why the cuckoo has had such a successful year, set against many years of decline, is as yet unknown.

Local bird ringer and friend of MKNHS, Kenny Cramer, was aware that there were a number of male birds calling at Linford Lakes Nature Reserve this year and was determined to try and get some of them ringed. Even he could not have anticipated how successful he would be! What follows is Kenny’s own entertaining account of trapping and ringing cuckoos in early June:

“After successfully catching and ringing two new cuckoos in mid-May (our first since 2017), we decided to try our luck with a few sessions specifically aimed at cuckoos.

On Monday evening, a single 60’ net was set in the same position on the bund which had proved successful in the past. For this I chose to use a 45mm gauge net to reduce the chances of these larger birds bouncing out as they frequently do with standard 16mm nets used for catching small passerines. With Colin the decoy (a stuffed cuckoo!) in position, I retreated to the edge of the bund where I set up camp. I was joined by Martin Kincaid on this occasion (at an appropriate social distance of course) and it wasn’t long before we were being treated to incredible sights and sounds of as many as four cuckoos singing and occasionally squabbling in the tree tops above us.

The first net round produced nothing but the frustratingly familiar sight of a cuckoo perched on top of one of the net poles and another flying overhead. We waited patiently for another few minutes, enjoying the strange grunting and chuckling sounds the male cuckoos make between songs. I spotted one bird flying low towards the net and went to investigate. This time we were successful and our third cuckoo of 2020 was in the bag! Despite at least 3 other birds being present, the only other captures were two blackbirds and eventually we decided we had had enough mozzie bites for one evening and furled the net.

I returned early Tuesday morning and quickly had the net open. There seemed to be less activity in general but it wasn't too long before another new cuckoo was being ringed. This was followed by a re-trap of the first cuckoo we had ringed back in May.

I packed up the net and headed back to the car with various schemes and plans drifting in my head. I decided that it was time to dust off "the beast" (this is a rig consisting of 8m poles with nets being raised/lowered on a system of pulleys) and enlisted Sarah's help to get it set up on Tuesday evening. I chose a position on the boundary path near which had been successful in the past and this time used two nets facing each other with Colin in the middle, one net on standard poles, and one net raised up on the beast. Once everything was set, we switched on the magical mix of cuckoo noises and hid by the car.

We hadn't heard much cuckoo song while setting up, so I was utterly gobsmacked to return to the nets to find not one but **three** cuckoos in the nets (2 in the standard net, and 1 in the beast). I got them safely extracted and into bags while still in somewhat of a state of shock and disbelief. One of the birds turned out to be a re-trap of the same bird we had caught in May, and another posed an interesting aging challenge."



Since writing this Kenny has caught and ringed a further three cuckoos bringing the total for this year to nine!

[The George Higgs Willen Collection – postscript from Frances Higgs \(June 2020\)](#)

Sue Hetherington's article in the Magpie April 2020, mentioning her interest in seeing George's moth collection, has prompted me to add more information.

Years ago it was known that George was making a collection of Lepidoptera solely from the Parish of Willen. He was asked if he would consider leaving it to Aylesbury Museum in his Will as a One Parish Collection would be a unique acquisition. This was duly granted and carried out after his death in 2012.



Our County Recorder for Moths, Martin Albertini, undertook the transfer of specimens from the original cabinet to the stackable Hill's Units required for the Museum. As the transfer was made an Acquisition Number had to be added to

the data on each pin. Entomological pins become very fine for tiny specimens, so it was specialised and delicate work. Martin carried it out with great dexterity and just one micro moth crumbled. In all, 1889 specimens were handled. It was not a job that I could have done. My sole input was cutting up sheets of numbers and handing over the correct ones for the specimens as they were transferred. Two brass plates were suitably inscribed to be fixed to each cabinet.

Nothing stands still in the natural world and already several new species are in our county. George made his collection between 1967 and 2012. It remains a snapshot of Lepidoptera in Willen at that time.

Dormice in Linford Wood – Joyce Taylor-Moore

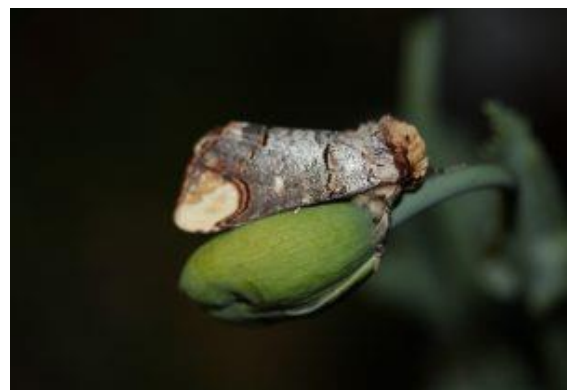
With great perseverance (or, in his own words, being an awkward old ***) John Prince has rediscovered dormice in Little Linford Wood after an absence of over four years. The 300+ nest boxes and more recent footprint tunnels have yielded nothing but John, with great energy and technical expertise from the local organisation Rambling Salamander, has found a dormouse high in the oak canopy on the first outing of his infrared camera trap. This has great implications for other projects where dormice appear to have dwindled away. John may have rewritten what we know about dormice – again!



A moth with stickability: the Buff-tip – Andy Harding

During the fairly recent spell of unseasonably warm weather with clear blue sunny skies every day, a Buff-tip moth was with us for a few days exhibiting what I think is very odd behaviour.

Around 10pm on May 24th, my wife Mairi and I went outside to look for a couple of hedgehogs which had recently appeared in our garden and to check the walls and fence next to my moth trap. Mairi noticed a large moth fly in and alight on



the unopened bud of an ornamental Poppy about 3m from the light of the moth trap. I was surprised it had not flown to the trap so photographed it with flash.

I was even more surprised to see it still on the bud at around 5.30 am the next morning. The sun was continuously on the bud and moth for at least the next seven hours. Thereafter it was in shade until the last couple of hours of sunshine on that day. The night time temperature was ideal for moths to take flight, and the attractions of the moth trap were still available, but the next morning (May 26th) it was still there! So I took a photo showing its exposed position and another of the bud starting to open.



With only a very small adjustment of position it remained on the Poppy head until it was fully in flower:



And still remained when the petals started to fall. When all petals had disappeared, it finally left the seed head...on the night of May 28th/29th to the fence adjacent to the moth trap! It then never moved until the night of May 30th/ 31st when it finally disappeared.



The Buff-tip is an exclusively nocturnal species and generally such species abhor direct sunlight, but this moth was in direct sunlight for much of several days. That, and its unwillingness to fly on a series of warm nights seems extremely peculiar.

My knowledge of moth behaviour is very weak, so I have no likely explanation, but Buff-tip is notable for its confidence in the effectiveness of its well- camouflaged appearance, so that it does tend sit in very exposed situations around moth traps, rather than hiding away.....but for four days on the poppy head and two days on the fence!!! Moths are so great! Get a moth trap, or put out a sheet with a light behind it on a warm sultry evening, while enjoying a glass of vino.

[The Secret Bee Bush – Ann and Mark Strutton](#)

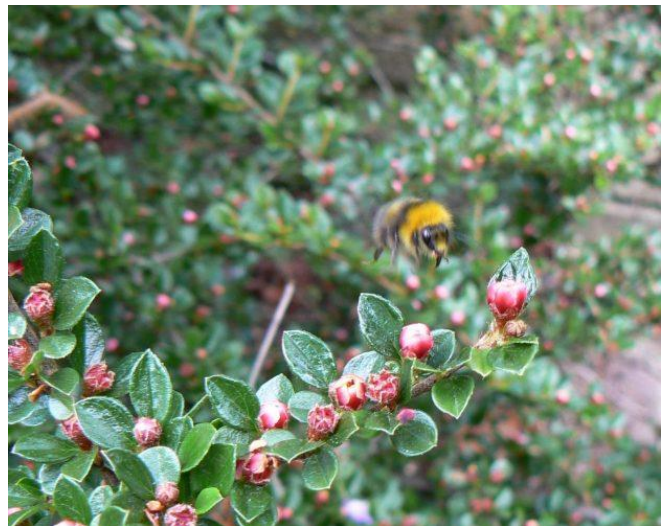
One of the joys of late spring in our garden is the blooming of the *Cotoneaster horizontalis*. This plant produces small pink flowers which, unless you inspect closely just seem to be buds that never open.

Even on a day like today, when the air temperature is around 10 C, the plant is alive with bees. On a hot day, their humming is almost louder than the traffic on the M1. All cotoneasters

are good for nectar but this species is the best. This plant is not more than 2 feet in height but about 5 feet across and, in a quick count today, there were at least two dozen bees on it. The majority were the workers of the tree bumble bee, *Bombus hypnorum* and the spring bumble bee, *Bombus pratensis*. Also present, a single honey bee – well it is a cold day.

The small flowers of the plant are well suited to the short tongued bumble bees. It is well known that bees do not bother to visit a flower that has been recently visited by another individual bee. I read in Dave Goulson's book, *A Sting in the Tail*, that it has been shown, by clever research which involved washing the feet of bees, that each bee leaves a smelly footprint on the flower which can be detected by another bee. The smell declines over time so the insect can determine when the flower was last visited. Different plants refill their nectaries at different rates, borage being a notable plant that refills very quickly, in about two minutes, compared with comfrey which takes upwards of forty minutes. So out I go with my stopwatch and observe a single flower. I took three readings all under ten minutes, the average time between visits being 6 minutes. Considering that this single plant must be covered in thousands of flowers, it explains why it is such a good nectar source.

Our plant is one of a large family of cotoneasters which originate in India, Tibet or China. *Horizontalis* is the one that is most recognisable and has acquired a common name, the Fishbone or Herringbone cotoneaster. Originally found in China, it was brought to the west in the 19th century by that saviour of deer, Pere David. Considered by some to be too invasive, our plant arrived by chance about 20 years ago and established itself on the edge of our north-facing patio where, apart from when we trip over it, it has become most welcome.



As the year progresses, other species make the most of this shrub. This week, when the song thrush chicks fledged, their parent took them right under the branches into its heart to hunt for snails. Throughout the rest of the year, the wren is most active in it and the dunnock uses it as a hidey hole to escape from the aggressive robin. We often see glimpses of bank voles rushing into cover under it and frogs and toads live under it as well. Occasionally, a grass snake makes an appearance. On one memorable occasion, many years ago, a mink appeared from under it.

Once the berries form in the autumn, it becomes of great interest to other species. In the past, this would have been blackbirds, thrushes, sometimes redwings in the depths of winter but these days, the resident wood pigeon gobbles them up quite early in the autumn, a bird so fat it seems to waddle.

Spring on Bury Common – Ann Jones

Bury Common or Bury Field is an ancient common in Newport Pagnell, and is my main local ‘patch’. It is a large area of common land (first mentioned in 1276), and it is just five minutes walk from my house. It has been a regular part of my life for around thirty years now. Bury Common is mainly open pasture and was grazed for many years, but there have been no cattle there for a few years now. What is usually called the lower meadow borders the river Ouse and has recently been managed for restoration to meadow, which has included planting yellow rattle. Although not a massively diverse habitat, the common includes a river bank, floodplain, pasture, hedgerows and small copses, and is next to grazed paddocks (sheep and horses) where there is a permissive riverside path, and is also next to a small patch of woodland.

It’s a good place to walk at any time of year and I walk there with Teo our dog for an hour or so most mornings and evenings. As it is a 5-minute walk, I can still spend quite a bit of time here even in lockdown and it feels like a real blessing. For me the first signs of spring are the larks which are heard more regularly once February arrives, although this year, there seemed to be less activity, perhaps because February was so wet. I’m pleased to say that larks are doing really well on the common now, even though it is well used by dog walkers. At the moment, with traffic reduced during lockdown, the common is often full of lark song with little other sound to disturb it. I’m not sure how they are successful on what can be quite a busy area, but they manage it and there is at least one field fenced off (though a dog could get through the wire fence easily enough).



Of the other various small farmland birds, I love seeing and hearing the meadow pipit which I still associate with wilder upland places. Small flocks are present on the common and active in the early spring. Another of my favourites is the reed bunting which is also present in reasonable numbers through the year. But my biggest favourite is the lapwing, perhaps because of its persistence and its haunting cry. It also reminds me of the area I grew up in in North Wales, by the coast where lapwings and curlews were numerous. At the moment there is just one pair on the common, which is nesting in a field abutting the lower meadow. (There were two one year, but there are never that many). Ground nesting birds have a difficult time anywhere – but here there is just this one pair, and they are close to the rookery, so a tricky place to be successful. The spring aerial display was wonderful, and this morning another walker on the common told me they had seen two chicks. That’s great news and I will be looking out for them.

As far as I can tell, some of the traditional farmland birds are here in relatively small numbers: small flocks of linnets, greenfinch, chaffinch (I don’t see many of these) and larger flocks of

goldfinch. I am told by a local birder that there is a pair of bullfinches in the hedgerow between the main and lower common but have not been fortunate enough to see them yet. At this time of year, more and more migrants are appearing. Swallows turned up about 10 days ago – unfortunately not that many and sand martins have returned around the same time. Today I spotted some house martins.

The boundary between one of the upper fields that used to be an arable field, and the lower meadow is quite a rich area, especially where there are brambles along the boundary wire fence and where there is a very small copse at the end near an ash tree. Many birds use the fence and the posts as perches. A highlight for me a week ago was seeing a whitethroat here.

The river bank provides a different habitat. There is a pair of mandarin ducks currently though I have only seen the female and am still hoping for an appearance by the male. The paddocks where the horses graze is next to the river, and walking the river path is delightful. Yesterday was a very good day as I heard my first cuckoo: it seemed to be in the Lathbury area (about half a mile away) but we usually have at least one calling on the common, and have had two in the past. I then heard the call of another favourite bird of mine, the ‘cronk’ of the raven. Isn’t it wonderful that these birds are now seen much more frequently in the east of the country? I imagine the ravens that I hear on the common (but don’t usually see) are birds looking for new territories. I would be delighted if a pair decided to nest here.

The final highlight of yesterday morning’s walk was the little owl. We have a pair here that frequent the area near the paddocks, usually roosting in the same willow tree, but I hadn’t seen one for a while. The habitat must be nearly perfect for them. There is a fence running between the first paddock and the second, with a number of old willow trees along the fence. A further fence runs along the upper edge of the paddocks (at a right angle to the first fence) with a hedge behind and more willows, and a third wooden fence borders the path by the river. There are further fences between the paddocks. The owls often perch on one of the fences, and when disturbed or when they have had enough, there is always a willow to retreat to, and they are very well camouflaged in the willow. I imagine that the paddocks with the horse manure are rich in earthworms, whilst behind the paddocks there is an area of rough grass which usually has a good population of voles.

Sad News

During lock-down we received the very sad news that Peter Kent, a former member of the Society, former Chairman and long-serving committee member, died on Easter Sunday and his wife Jean died a few weeks later. There may not be many members now who remember Peter and Jean, who were very active in the Society during the 1980s and 90s. Apart from being Chairman for 4 years from 1989-1993, Peter will be particularly remembered for planning and organising a number of successful trips for Society members to Crete, Turkey, Israel, Texas and South Africa and also several in the UK.