

# Magpie Digest

December 2021



Welcome to the winter edition of our Magpie Digest and apologies for it being so late. It has been another strange year with Covid dominating our lives; plans made and cancelled, travel restricted, most of us struggling to carry on with some sense of normality in a very unpredictable world. I would like to say that nature has remained a constant in all of this, and in many ways it has, but with climate change starting to affect the seasons that we and our wildlife rely on even that is not a stable part of our lives. In this part of the country we experience very little rain, which presents its own challenges, but it does mean that we are lucky enough to have many lovely days to venture out and make the most of our beautiful countryside and wildlife.

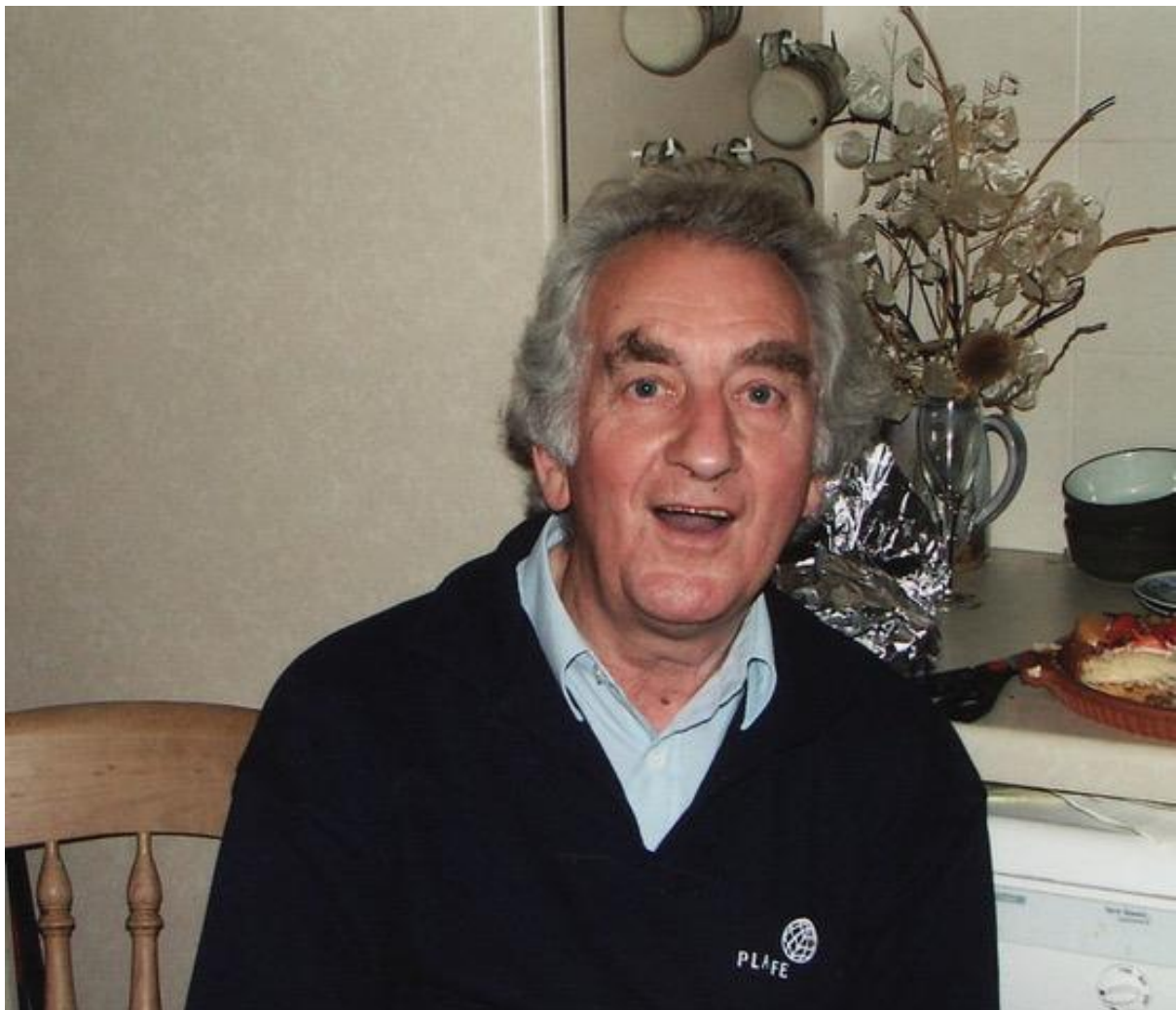
Our committee and many other members have worked very hard this year to continue to provide a full programme of talks and walks and I think they have done a wonderful job enabling us to keep the Society up and running efficiently and us all to stay in touch with each other. I would like to thank everyone personally for all the hard work involved.

Sadly this year has seen the loss of two very great friends to the Society and to many of us personally. In the summer we lost Gordon Redford and just recently Mary Sarre both of whom were truly special people. There are tributes to them on our website. We were also very sad to hear of the death of Audrey Prince and Rex Harvey. We send our love and condolences to their families.

We wish you all a Happy Festive season and hope that 2022 brings happier times and lots of wonderful wildlife encounters.

Julie Lane

## Roy's Reminiscences – Roy Maycock, MKNHS President



Privet was the first plant whose name I remembered. I was in a pushchair at the time on the way to visit my Grandma and had to pass a privet hedge. My father was there and was able to break a twig for her. Next I remember daisies and it was, as before, my father who picked several and made a daisy chain – again for my Grandma!

Then there is a long gap before I remember the name of another plant. In my teens I attended a youth club with a brilliant leader. In the summer he occasionally set us a 'scavenger hunt' which meant going outside to find various items and one year this included the plant Oxford Ragwort. At the time

I was in the sixth form at school doing Biology as an A level so not knowing a plant was unacceptable. I was told what it was and still remember it! I kept in touch with my Biology teacher and she became a close friend until she died. She too was keen on the native flora and that set me going – I learnt the names of flowering plants and their latin names from her. There was a small pond in the school grounds which we sometimes visited and one plant that grew there was *Cardamine pratensis* (cuckoo flower). I was told “learn the latin name and that will never change” – how untrue! – but that one has not changed. More recently there have been huge changes as DNA has uncovered true relationships between plants but that was not the case when I started at Durham university in 1952 – not so long ago!

Going to Durham was the biggest change in my life so far, especially taking Botany with a Professor who was a taxonomist who encouraged me greatly. One day in my first term, in the Science library, one journal took my eye, published by the BSBI (now the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland). I joined the society and am still a member 68 years later with 34 of those years as the Bucks County Recorder.

In the last term of my third year at Durham I was lucky to be introduced to a person studying for a doctorate. I offered to help and spent many hours sat in grassy fields in Upper Teesdale acting as a scribe - I learnt a lot.

National service for the next two years in the RAF. Looking back they were probably the most different and ‘sort of’ enjoyable years of my life. After ‘square bashing’ came a course to be a nursing attendant and then for a few months I working in a sick quarters before returning to the camp where I had done my course. This was brilliant as it was here that I learnt how to teach ‘RAF fashion’ and this skill I used for all my following years spent teaching in schools (my actual university teacher training course was hardly of any use!). De-mob from the RAF was on August bank holiday which meant I had the rest of the month to get used to ‘civy street’ before in early September I started as a teacher of Biology at the Royal Latin School, Buckingham which became my ‘proper’ job for the next 30 years including time spent as Head of Science. Having retired early I spent the next year looking for another job before finding one with the local Wildlife Trust (BBOWT). The job involved teaching new graduates how to do field work as part of a new government scheme. The scheme came to an end a year later but the Trust kept me on for a few more years but then what next?

At this point the BSBI thought up a national project which involved selecting and surveying 10% of the best churchyards for each county. But how to select the best 10%? Buckinghamshire had 260 churchyards and all of these had to be visited at least twice to find the best 10%!!

The Natural History Society summer outings were ideal for this project and I suggested visiting a few including one at Wing. We visited on the same evening as the bell ringers practise and one ringer was sent down from the tower to find out what we were doing. Satisfied he went back up and ringing resumed! The next problem was what to do with all the lists of plants I had made? I knew one of the members of staff at Buckingham University and having mentioned my dilemma to him we got together and drew up a plan for using the data. After lots of writing and producing graphs etc it finally morphed into a dissertation worth a Master of Science Degree at Durham University. Since then I have been asked to supply lists of plants in Buckinghamshire churchyards on several occasions but one day in 2020 I had two requests in a single day!

In 1989 I met a 13 year old lad called Aaron Woods who was already a competent botanist. We became good friends and for the next ten years we surveyed lots of sites together in Buckinghamshire and elsewhere especially Oxfordshire churchyards. We had holidays together in the UK and with other botanists abroad but in 1999 he moved to London and later Herefordshire but we still keep in close contact.

Up until that date the only published "Flora of Buckinghamshire" was by G.C. Druce in 1926! To fill this gap we decided we could produce not a complete flora but "A checklist of all the plants of Buckinghamshire" including Milton Keynes and Slough. The Society published it for us in 2005.

What have I done for the Society over the years – quite a lot I like to think! At the start there were only four of us and numbers increased slowly at first with every single member on the committee! As the membership expanded we had to move our meeting place several times to locations that could accommodate us but now our numbers are more stable the Cruck Barn at the City Discovery Centre is ideal.

Over time I had many roles within the committee starting as Secretary, then Chairman for 2 years, Treasurer for 8 years and now President since 1992. I was most pleased to accept the office but I know I don't do as much as I used to. One of my duties as President is to say something at the end of the indoor talks and I am always waiting in slight trepidation for inspiration from the speaker which nearly always has been provided! The tables were turned at our 50 Anniversary event when I was so pleased to be presented with the badger picture, a reminder of all the time I spent writing up Bernard Frewin's reports of his hours spent monitoring translocated badgers in the field. I was also delighted to become an honorary member of the Society.

I hope that now my active botanising days are behind me there will be other botanists and much recording of flora within the Society in the years to come.

## **Spring 2021 Wildlife in the local area – Tony Woods**

During the first three months of this year we, and of course our wildlife, have experienced a vast change in weather conditions. In January there was another “Beast from the East” causing floods locally and just a sprinkle of snow. In February “Storm Darcy” was followed by warm weather; March gave us clear blue skies and long periods of frosty nights; ending with April being recorded the driest and frostiest for 50 years.

**Mammals** – Otters were reported at Shenley Brook End, Linford Lakes Reserve and Simpson and in March three Roe Deer were observed near Little Linford Wood. There was also a report from a non-member that whilst travelling around the local country roads in April she counted over 20 roadkill Badgers. The Mammal Survey Group, under the direction of Carla Boswell from the Parks Trust, installed over 50 footprint tunnels around Linford Lakes Reserve to investigate the possibility of Dormice on the site. Carla took a walk around Furzton Lake and Tattenhoe Brook mid-May in the evening and recorded four species of bat; Common Pipistrelle, Soprano Pipistrelle, Noctule and Daubenton`s. Whilst checking mammal nest boxes at Little Linford Wood at the end of March, I found a single Brown Long-eared Bat. Normally they are not discovered in the boxes at that wood until May. Finally, a mink was observed at Caldecotte in April.

**Butterflies and Moths-** Whilst the warm, sunny days were ideal for butterflies, with Brimstone as early as February, the cold nights deterred the moths, although a Red-green Carpet Moth was reported by Andy Harding in February, a species not usually recorded until March. Owing to the continuous stretch of frosty nights in April, for the first time for many years I did not record any moths in my garden during that month.

**Birds-** During the first four months of this year there was a multitude of observations locally submitted to the Society`s website. Migrants such as warblers, hirundinidae and waders. For that reason, I will restrict this account to the more unusual species reported locally.

During **January** Great White Egrets and an Iceland Gull visited the Forest Floodplain, Caspian Gull and a Peregrine at Willen Lake, a Dartford Warbler at Hazeley Wood, a Black Redstart at Newport Pagnell, Common Crossbill and an Iceland Gull in flight over Tattenhoe, and a Great Northern Diver and Pink-footed Goose at Caldecotte.

**February** species included a Mandarin Duck at Willen, a possible juvenile Marsh Harrier at Linford Lakes Reserve, two Whooper Swans in flight at Gayhurst, a Caspian Gull at Caldecotte, and two Ring-necked Parakeets at Wolverton.

Unusual birds recorded locally in **March** included a Mediterranean Gull at the Forest Floodplain and Willen, an Osprey also at Willen, and a Brent Goose at Linford Lakes Reserve.

**April** produced a Siberian Chiffchaff and a Kittiwake in flight at Tattenhoe, a Hoopoe near Willen Lake, another Marsh Harrier at Linford Lakes Reserve, and a surprising Spoonbill seen in flight over Wymbush Industrial Site in Milton Keynes.

During 2019 six White-tailed Sea Eagles were released on the Isle of Wight, three remained around that area, one hit overhead cables and died, one disappeared, and one took flight. This last one was monitored with a tracking device and in 17 months covered 4900 kms. It was confirmed that during March this year that it visited Linford Lakes Reserve. Now that is a major tick!!!!

### **Gordon Redford and George Higgs Memorial Moth night at College Wood (July 29<sup>th</sup>) – Andy Harding**



Gordon had organised this event annually in memory of his moth mentor, George, on the Saturday closest to George's birthday, and was expected to do so again. Sadly that was not to be. After some deliberation, it was decided to go ahead and to remember both of these pillars of the local mothing community.

The result was so fitting. The largest number of traps ever...13; the largest number of attendees....over 30; and almost certainly the largest number of moth species.

The most important attendees were, of course, Frances Higgs, who had travelled up from Somerset, and Rachel and Stewart Redford, Gordon's

daughter and son. The southern contingent was impressive with 5 trappers marshalled by Martin Albertini and Dave Wilton, with Peter Hall travelling from Herefordshire. So well thought of were both Gordon and George.

It was a hugely enjoyable if poignant night, but it almost didn't happen. Car access is essential to bring traps and generators any distance into the wood. The padlock on the entry gate had been successfully opened by the key provided by the Woodland Trust a week earlier for a recce, but in addition to that padlock another combination padlock was now securing it ... and we didn't have the combination. The local farmer was contacted and he phoned his wife to obtain it! He warned us it was temperamental, but after my failure to open it, Linda Murphy's magic hands did the trick. Phew!

The next issue was the grassy turning circle, where we have previously set up a mercury vapour lamp above a sheet, was now rocklike hardcore. So we settled for a Robinson trap around which people could gather as the moths arrived. It was a little painful on the knees, but a most effective way of catching, potting and passing round moths for all to see. This trap and another one 50 metres away are powered by a generator which Gordon always operated. Thanks to the combined efforts of David Webb, Martin Kincaid and Martin Albertini, after a period of intermittent performance, all worked perfectly.

And so to the moths. There were clouds of them and even more small flies, which got into the throat of everyone who inspected the other traps. Among the most numerous moths were Clouded Border and, surprisingly, Coronet, an always beautiful, but also very variable species. The one here is so unusual that we considered several other possibilities before becoming satisfied with its identity.

The superb Peach Blossom is not rare, but has a known disdain for light traps, so several in perfect condition were a delight. Black Arches is a guaranteed crowd-pleaser at this time of year, as is July Highflyer. Elephant Hawk-moths are having a wonderful year, so a few of those were guaranteed, but Pine Hawk-moth is much less reliable, so one in the central trap was a bonus.

There will be much poring over many photos of micros and a few dissections before the final list can be validated. That may be a few weeks, so that is not attached here. I will make it available when it is complete, and, of course, a copy will also go to the Woodland Trust, who have always kindly given us access to the wood for this event, which this year, by a combination of excellent weather and many motivated individuals, was something of a very

fitting triumph. And, of course, somebody must have sent that huge quantity of moths.

### *Postscript*

It is also so nice to see these beautiful insects in daylight, so very early the next morning Ayla Webb and I opened up the central trap and a small actinic with just 6 egg boxes inside. Given the number of moths and their activity levels, all hope of accurate counting soon vanished and we simply concentrated on new species to add to the event total. Among these was an Oak Nycteoline. This species is probably the most variable on the British list and since Ayla and I had only seen 3 between us previously it was no surprise that we hadn't seen one resembling this one: its unusual shape gave it away. Not the most exciting moth for the non-afficionado!

Having packed away the last of the equipment we were just about to get into the car when a Purple Emperor decided to inspect us, flashing purple in the sunlight as it did so. A first for Ayla. Not a moth, but what could be a more stunning present from her moth mentor, Gordon.

## **Glistening webs – Julie Lane**



This morning was one of those mornings when you wake up to a misty fog and feel like staying tucked up in bed (a heavy cold makes this idea even more appealing!). But our dog needs to be walked so I set off to a world of magic. The local field is cloaked in a blanket of silken spider's web. In the past I have seen this gossamer bathed in the morning sun which sets it afire in rainbow colours – one of the most beautiful sights in nature.

I met a man with a dog who says I don't like spiders ugh! – how sad. I meet another man who says yes the webs are amazing but watch out for the false



widow spider! Human beings have such a deep ingrained fear of these creatures.

I wander up to the Barn field above Olney where the whole place is adorned with dew-covered silken web. This phenomenon allows me to see the different structures of the webs in great clarity. There are the classic orb webs strung across gaps between the bushes with large beads of dew weighing them down. There are the hammocks of funnel web spiders nearer to the ground with their occupants hiding down the funnels waiting to pounce. But also the dew highlights the incredible cloaking of the bushes and ground with what I think are the webs of what we call money spiders. I remember reading a beautiful article by John Lister-Kaye in which he describes these tiny beings climbing up the stalks of grasses in their billions, lifting their abdomens and releasing their silken lines from their spinnerets – when the weight of this arc of silk becomes greater than their own weight they are whisked up into the atmosphere to be dispersed by the winds to other realms.

As I walk through the field and down to the river Ouse I marvel at the sheer volume of silk and number of spiders that are revealed on this Autumn morning. How on earth does any other insect avoid being tangled and consumed. It makes me wonder if nature has timed this glut of spiders to perfection. Spiders are most evident in the Autumn although there are many around in the summer. Is it possible that the insect world is allowed to get on with its living and reproducing in relative peace earlier on in the season but later on when they are coming to the end of their reproductive lives the spiders and other predators like wasps use this bonanza of protein to reproduce and produce their own progeny – wouldn't that be neat!! Some of us are not spider fans but if these predators didn't exist in such huge numbers we might be overrun by other insects. Perhaps it's all part of the wonderful balance that has evolved over the millennia.

Disclaimer 😊 Any comments made in this article comes from my own rather sparse knowledge and musings so may not be factually correct!

## **Book Reviews**

Below is a list of books which were reviewed at the MKNHS book review evening on 9th November.

2 of the reviews had to be left out or cut short due to lack of time. These are available as links:

Ian Saunders' review of *Ghosts of Gondwana*, by George Gibbs

Mike LeRoy's review of *Swifts and Us*, by Sarah Gibson

1. **Julie Lane**

*The Seabird's Cry: the Lives and Loves of Puffins, Gannets and Other Ocean Voyagers* – Adam Nicholson (2018: William Collins)

[Winner of the Wainwright Prize 2018; USA title: 'The Seabird's Cry: the Lives and Loves of the Planet's Great Ocean Voyagers']

2. **Charles Kessler**

*English Pastoral: An Inheritance* – James Reebanks  
(2020: Allen Lane/Penguin Books)

3. **Sue Weatherhead**

*Butterflies* (British Wildlife Collection, Number 10) – Martin Warren  
(2021: Bloomsbury)

4. **Tim Arnold**

*Much Ado About Mothing: A year intoxicated by Britain's rare and remarkable moths* –

James Lowen  
(2021: Bloomsbury)

5. **Mary Sarre**

*The Consolation of Nature: Spring in the time of the Coronavirus* –

Michael McCarthy,  
Jeremy Mynott and Peter Marren  
(2020: Hodder)

*A Claxton Diary: Further Field Notes from a Small Planet* – Mark Cocker  
(2019: Jonathan Cape)

6. **Ian Saunders**

*Beasts Before Us: The untold story of mammal origins and evolution* –  
Elsa Panciroli

(2021: Bloomsbury Sigma publishing)

*Ghosts of Gondwana: The history of life in New Zealand* – George Gibbs  
(Fully revised edition, 2016: Pott and Burton)

7. **Colin Docketty**

*A Kaleidoscope of Butterflies: a celebration of Britain's 59 species* –  
Jonathan Bradley

(2020: Merlin Unwin Books, Ludlow)

8. **Mike LeRoy**

*Swifts and Us: The Life of the Bird that Sleeps in the Sky* – Sarah Gibson  
(2021: William Collins)

(All photos © Julie Lane apart from the Peach Blossom moth © Andy Harding)