

Magpie Digest January 2023

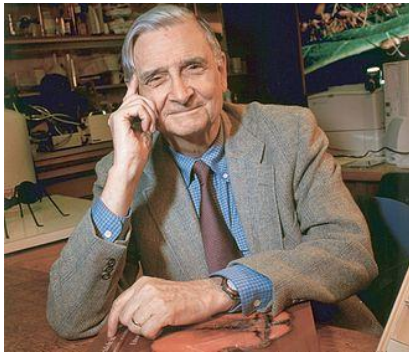
Very best wishes for the year ahead and welcome to the latest edition of our Magpie Digest! Apologies for the long gap since our last edition in December 2021. You may have heard that our Magpie Editor, Julie Lane, has moved to the Lake District. As result she has had to resign from the committee and give up her work on the Magpie and membership of the website group. The Society owes a tremendous amount to Julie who has put an enormous amount of effort into many aspects of its activity over the years. She served on the committee for a number of years and as Chair of the Society, in 2017 and 2018 she oversaw and contributed to planning and delivery of events and activities to mark the 50th anniversary of its founding in 1967 and our contribution to the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the founding of Milton Keynes in 1968. She was the driving force behind the development and improvement of our website, but always concerned that this should not remove communication with members who don't access the internet and that information should also be sent out by post, including this digest of articles from the website News pages. Apart from all that we were very sad to lose a good friend, keen naturalist and enthusiast for the wildlife of MK!

However, Julie continues to support the Society from afar with articles for the website (see below) and has recently been able to join Society meetings at the Cruck Barn through the wonders of technology! After more Covid disruption earlier in the year, the Society finally returned to indoor meetings at the Cruck Barn after an absence of two and a half years! Maybe you have been able to join us? It has been lovely to meet again in person, but we are aware that some are still concerned about vulnerability to infection, and others like Julie have moved away. As a result, we have been experimenting with hybrid meetings where some people join us in the Cruck Barn on Zoom, and hear/see the talk as it is presented in the Cruck Barn. It's taken a lot of time and effort by Paul Lund and Tim Arnold to sort out the technology. Meanwhile, our summer programme was able to run as normal this year, and Sunday walks ran throughout the year, thanks to Colin Docketty, who was even able to lay on an Otter appearance on one occasion! (See below).

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of the Magpie Digest. If you have any feedback or want to suggest something you'd like to see in the next edition, let us know, by phone, post or in person.

Contact details?? Add my phone number/address of Cruck Barn? Not sure letter will reach us. They didn't receive the cheque I posted to the CDC in Sept....

Edward O Wilson, Naturalist 1929-2021



On Boxing Day 2021, a great naturalist came to the end of his days aged 92. He was Edward Osborne Wilson. He was often known simply as EO Wilson.

EO was not just a scientist. He was: a biologist, a botanist, an ecologist, an entomologist, a close observer of life with plenty of fieldwork skills. Some compared him to Charles Darwin because of his ability as a synthesiser and as a close observer of living things. His respect for Darwin is evident from his introduction to his compilation of Darwin's writings in *From So Simple a Beginning: Darwin's Four Great Books* (2005).

EO was also an assiduous writer who wrote science in ways that anyone can understand, but also an environmentalist alerting others to the loss of species. He wrote more than 35 books and was still writing them through his eighties. Here is a selection of them. Most are readily available second-hand:

- *The Theory of Island Biogeography* (1967) with Robert H MacArthur
- *The Insect Societies* (1971)
- *Biophilia* (1984)
- *The Ants* (1990) with Bert Hölldobler
- *The Diversity of Life* (1992)
- *Journey to The Ants: a story of scientific exploration'* (1994) with Bert Hölldobler
- *Naturalist* (1994, new edition 2006) his autobiography
- *In Search of Nature* (1996)
- *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998)
- *The Future of Life* (2002)
- *The Creation: an appeal to save life on earth* (2006).

In his 80s EO wrote a trilogy of books:

- *The Social Conquest of Earth* (2012)
- *The Meaning of Human Existence* (2014)
- *Half-Earth* (2016).

EO carried out field studies in: New Guinea, the South Pacific, the Amazon and Florida Keys, though he cut his entomological teeth as a child in Alabama where he discovered all 42

species of ants and produced a report about them, then told the authorities about the arrival of the invasive fire ant.

EO was brilliant at identifying insects, at observing them and understanding their behaviour. One reason he concentrated on ants was because at age seven he blinded himself in a fishing accident. But he retained his vision in the other eye and this led to him focusing on little things as he lost his stereoscopic vision but could still see fine details on insects. His book *The Ants* written jointly with Bert Hölldobler led the field in understanding the complex world of social insects.

EO worked on studies of how new species evolved. He was also a clever and deep-thinking scientist, and developed several new theories not just about insects but also about ecology and the future.

While a Director of WWF, EO met Tom Loveday who worked for WWF. They both went on explorations to major wildlife areas such as the Brazilian rain forests and began to realise the scale at which species were being lost. In the 1970s they discussed the need for new terminology to describe what they were studying and came up with the term 'Biological Diversity' which they later abbreviated to 'Biodiversity'.

EO's book *The Diversity of Life* (1992) shows the immense span of his understanding of the origins of life, its evolution, and the amazing range of living things in our own times. EO also developed controversial ideas about Sociobiology and human nature, so controversial that a protester poured a jug of ice-cold water over his head when he was a speaker at a major scientific conference. Less controversial were EO's ideas about Biophilia, how we as humans feel an intimate connection with nature and animals.

EO was involved in launching the *Encyclopaedia of Life* to create a global database of all the 1.9 million species recognised by science and information about each of them. EO set up an experiment in the Amazon known as the Biological Dynamics of Forest Fragments Project, which increased understanding of how habitat fragmentation was accelerating the loss of species. He said: "Destroying a tropical rainforest for profit is like burning all the paintings of the Louvre to cook dinner."

EO became increasingly disturbed about climate change caused by humankind and our burning of fuels and consumption of materials. About this he said: "Only in the last moment in history has the delusion arisen that people can flourish apart from the rest of the living world."

He also became more and more troubled by the extinction of species and said: "The one process now going on that will take millions of years to correct is the loss of genetic and species diversity by the destruction of natural habitats. This is the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us."

Mike LeRoy

January 2022

Wildlife around Milton Keynes May to October 2022



PHoto: Clouded Yellow butterfly at Magna Park, July 2022 (© Graham Lynham)

It was certainly a summer to remember with this area of the country suffering with the temperatures achieving 40C, the driest on record, and the driest July since 1911.

So how did it affect the wildlife locally?

It would appear from the records submitted to our website that it did not deter members of our Society from venturing forth around Milton Keynes and enjoying the wildlife.

Mammals – In May a fox suffering with mange was regularly seen in the streets of New Bradwell and a month later accompanied by 3 cubs. A further sighting of this fox was with a dead magpie in its jaws. Otters this summer were recorded in Willen Lake, Linford Lakes Reserve and Caldecotte Lake. An unusual record was one seen in a Bletchley Garden. Surveys continued for dormice in Little Linford Wood and Linford Lakes Reserve both by using boxes and footprint tunnels to identify footprints. Both recorded only woodmice using the tunnels, However, during the October Box survey in Little Linford Wood a single Brown Long-eared Bat was discovered. In July a Chinese water deer and a brown hare were seen in Magna Park.

Reptiles – The Parks Trust have been carrying out two reptile surveys using mats or corrugated iron placed on the ground. The Railway Triangle at Blue Bridge has been checked for several years and always been successful, and has continued to be so this year. In June as many as 9 slow worms were recorded during a single visit. The new site is at `Joan`s Piece` beside the canal at New Bradwell and has been quiet this year with only one toad observed in June.

Plants – The vegetation has probably been affected by the long hot and dry conditions this summer. However, members of our Society have been recording different orchid species.

Early purple orchids have been noted during May in Linford Wood, Shenley Wood, and Little Linford Wood, common spotted orchid in Little Linford Wood. In June bee orchids were recorded in Emerson Valley, beside Teardrop Lake, and on the embankment beside the V6 Grafton Street. Just outside the MK area a southern marsh orchid was observed near Great Brickhill in July

Insects – Butterflies were well recorded this year, particularly the painted lady. Other unusual species included the white admiral, black hairstreak, and dingy skipper in June, and silver-washed fritillary, purple emperor, purple hairstreak and the clouded yellow in July.

Dragonflies and damselflies were well recorded with white-legged dragonflies seen in May, emperor dragonfly in June, and willow emerald damselfly in July.

Moths – October ended with several unusual moths. Top of the list was a Crimson Speckled moth from southern Europe or Africa that appeared in a member's garden in Wolverton and appears to be a first sighting in Bucks. This is a rare migrant to the UK with most annual records coming from the south coast.

Autumn 2022 has been relatively good for moths {especially migrants} with the unseasonal warm weather in late September and October a major factor. The Hummingbird Hawk Moth is reasoned to have had its best ever year in the UK according to Butterfly Conservation. Martin Kincaid has seen more in his home garden in Oldbrook this year and several were still visiting valerian flowers in mid-October. The spectacular Cliften Nonpareil continues to increase locally. Ayla Webb caught one at home in Newport Pagnell in September and two were recorded at Linford Lakes Nature Reserve. Martin also recorded his first ever Cypress Pug at home on 22nd August and his second on 15th September. The beautiful Merveille du Jour is one of the joys of autumn mothing and Andy Harding and Martin both caught this species at locations including Old Stratford, Little Linford Wood and Linford Lakes. However, I have had a box tree moth in my moth trap regularly from July to October, a new moth for my records. It is worrying to learn it was introduced from South-east Asia and the larvae are considered a pest, feeding on various species of box tree.

Birds – During May at the Floodplain Forest reserve two avocet were recorded together with a shelduck. At Willen Lakes the first swift was observed, a cuckoo heard, and a ring-necked parrakeet flew past. At Linford Lakes Reserve common tern and a wood sandpiper were recorded. In June sand martins were observed entering Linford Lakes Reserve's 'sand castle' built by the volunteers; also two Egyptian geese were noted at the same site. During the same month, ruddy shelduck and redstart were recorded at the Floodplain Forest together with a special red-backed shrike. At Willen Lake a Caspian gull was recorded in July, and another ring-necked parrakeet reported in a garden in Stony Stratford. During August at the Floodplain Forest Reserve a marsh harrier and a redstart were recorded and at Willen Lakes a black-tailed godwit was seen. Two peregrines were noted in September at the Floodplain Forest, and garganey and a rock pipit at Willen Lake. Also, a mandarin duck was observed at Furzton Lake during the same month. October attracted marsh tit and raven at Little Linford Wood; stonechat at Willen Lakes; brambling, fieldfare, redwing, and hawfinch at Tattenhoe; and red-crested pochard at Linford Lakes Reserve.

Winter will soon be with us but don't let that deter you from wrapping up and reporting your sightings through the Society's website. As usual I ask you to watch and record – but most of all, enjoy!

Tony Wood
November 2022

Otter seen on the MKNHS Sunday morning walk to Ashland in November



Otter (Photos © Julian Lambley)

[A message from Julie Lane](#)

Hello to all my lovely MKNHS friends

I have now been up in my new home the Lake District for a couple of months and am absolutely loving exploring the area around my temporary rented home in the beautiful village of Askham near the Lowther estate which is just south-west of Penrith. It's good to have a new cast of wildlife characters to get to know and I have been getting out and walking as much as I can before the winter weather sets in.



Looking towards Ullswater from Askham Fell

From my home I can go up onto the fell where wild ponies, sheep and shorthorn cattle roam and across to Pooley Bridge. Up here I have already seen a large flock of golden plover and am on the lookout for the hen harrier which also haunts this moorland. The short grass is ideal for waxcaps at this time of the year.



Askham bridge over the Lowther river

I can also go down to the beautiful Lowther river with its backdrop of stunning autumn colours. This river is a salmon river but I have yet to see one of these amazing fish but I did hear a high-pitched calling one early morning and looking down into the river below I saw a young otter making its way upstream calling to its mum – it may well have been lost or rejected so it might not have been a happy ending but it was good to see nonetheless. I have seen dippers, kingfishers and goosanders on the river and one evening watched a female sparrowhawk pluck a woodpigeon she had killed – she knew I was watching her but it was too heavy for her to take off so she tolerated my presence. Red squirrels abound locally but I have also seen a couple of greys which is not good news.

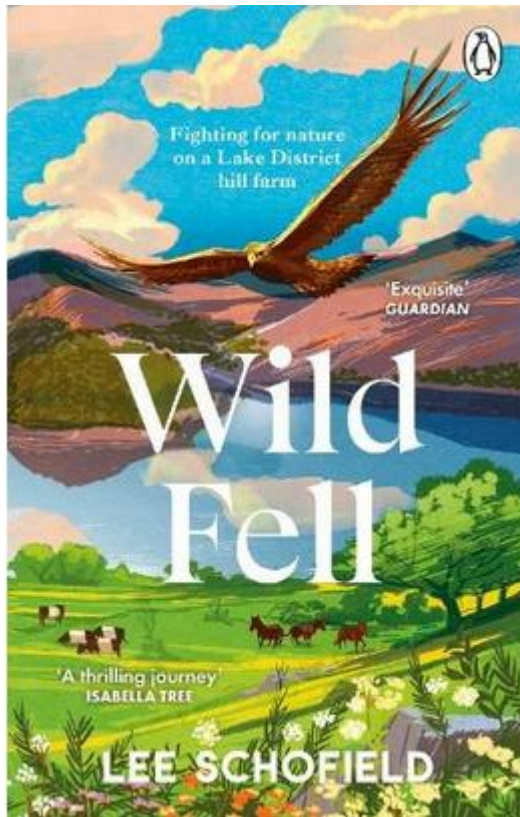
I am sure as the year progresses I will add to my list of sightings and learn more about the natural history of my new surroundings. I will keep in touch and hope to see you all again when I am down visiting Milton Keynes in the future.

Julie

**Askham, Cumbria
5 November 2022**

[Wild Fell by Lee Scofield: Book review by Julie Lane](#)

Wild Fell: Fighting for nature on a Lake District hill farm
by Lee Schofield (Penguin/Doubleday, 2022)



I thought you might be interested to read the following book which gives an insight into the natural history of the area where I now live.

Lee is my son-in-law's colleague and they both work at the RSPB's Haweswater Reserve. Lee came to their wedding a couple of years ago and played the guitar and sang wonderfully which was a great treat. He is a humble modest man but very likeable and extremely knowledgeable about the wildlife of the Lake District. His book is brave, poignant and ultimately hopeful.

I grew up visiting the Lake District regularly for holidays but over the years the pressures on this beautiful place have increased exponentially. Overgrazing of the fells, pollution of the lakes and also the huge numbers of tourists who visit every year have resulted in a degraded landscape with very little wildlife.

This book is an appeal and a justification for change by a man who really knows his subject. He has been working with others to trial and refine ways to run a viable upland farm in a manner that enriches the landscape in Haweswater and allows nature to creep back slowly but surely. He describes how by planting trees, re-wetting peat bogs and re-wiggling rivers they are slowly making progress. It is understandably not easy for other land managers such as farmers who have lived in the area for generations to accept these changes as a necessary movement towards a healthier more sustainable and ultimately more productive

landscape. But Lee looks into the pressures they have faced and the confusing and changing political landscape they have had to contend with and is always broad minded in his writing.

This book has a serious message but is also a fascinating and enjoyable read about the wildlife to be found and the characters who work in this corner of the Lake District. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it, and alongside James Rebanks' two books *A Shepherd's Life* and *English Pastoral*, I think you get a very balanced view of the pressures and challenges of farming in this beautiful corner of our country as well as a lot of background as to how we have got ourselves into our present nature-depleted state.

Julie Lane
November 2022

Visiting Pilch Field on a sunny May afternoon

An early May Visit on a sunny Sunday afternoon had extensive stands of Green-winged Orchid *Anacamptis morio* and Cowslip *Primula veris*.



Green-winged orchid, from above, showing characteristic fine, green, parallel lines (Photo © Jenny Mercer)

The deep purple of the orchids and strong yellow of the Cowslips showed along the **ridges** of this unimproved grassland with the adjacent damper **furrows**, in particular – showing sedges and Adders Tongue *Ophioglossum vulgatum*, with some pink Cuckooflower *Cardamine pratensis* (also known as Ladies-smock).



Adders Tongue (Photo © Jenny Mercer)

This year, the Marsh Valerian *Valeriana dioica*, with its presentation of male and female flowers on separate plants, was a highlight. They seem to be expanding in any damper areas, especially along the damp slopes to the north west of the highest part of the large field.



Marsh Valerian flowers (Photo©Jenny Mercer)

Above: female – pink/ whitish, showing very clearly rounded form of the inflorescence

Below: male – pure white and flattish



Below that slope the large marshy area had glorious stands of King Cup, May flower or Marsh Marigold – alternative names for *Caltha palustris* – more than I've ever seen there. Do visit, as every month has its treasures.

Jenny Mercer
9 May 2022

Mothing night 16th July 2022 – an annual memorial event for George Higgs and Gordon Redford

A joint MKNHS and Bucks Invertebrate Group meeting at College Wood, Nash

All photos © Andy Harding

A period of warm weather suggested good conditions for plenty of moths, even if we could have done with a little more cloud cover. MKNHS members provided more traps than any recent years, with seven. Unfortunately this year's date was not convenient for a couple of south Bucks regulars, but Martin Albertini, our County Moth Recorder, again made the long journey north.

We used Ayla Webb's large Robinson trap as the gathering point with camping seats suitably arranged to view whatever arrived on the white sheet surrounding it. The guesses for the first macro-moth to arrive were all wide of the mark, with that honour going to the beautiful July Highflyer, or is it Highflyer?!



July Highflyer

The moths piled in and those which could be easily caught were passed round the audience. The more attractive species in terms of pattern or colour are always welcomed, such as Iron Prominent, Ruby Tiger and Peppered Moth. The latter is consistently the pale form nowadays. We wonder whether more dark (melanic) forms were here 100 years ago, at the height of industrial activity belching smoke to coat tree trunks with black dust! The picture below of both light and dark forms was taken at Howe Park Wood in 2019 (the only dark form individual I have seen in the UK).



Peppered Moths, Melanic and Normal forms

A Small Fan-Footed Wave, not a striking moth at all, drew plenty of interest in the features which enable us to identify it. Indeed this common species outdid the much scarcer Lesser Cream Wave. A much smaller micro-moth, *Acleris emargana*, displayed its violin shape: small is often beautiful.

Another real star was not a moth attracted to the light above the trap, but one attracted to a 'sugaring solution' in which treacle and alcohol are vital ingredients and painted on to four nearby tree trunks. A Copper Underwing, probably Svensson's Copper Underwing, was the early arrival, followed by a couple of others and the beautiful Herald.

A tour of the traps more distant from our gathering point revealed Hornets in two widely-separated traps, an interesting insect species, but not at all welcome in our moth traps. In three different traps we found Box-tree Moths, a giant micro-moth, and a new species for College Wood, in its inexorable march northwards, destroying any hedges of Box in its wake.



Box-tree Moth

And so it continued until just before midnight when the generator which was powering three main traps decided to go to sleep and, despite much valiant effort, refused to awake. There were plenty of moths in the traps, so calling an end to the communal event was not a problem. Tim Arnold, Ayla Webb, Rachel Redford (how appropriate was it that Rachel was running her dad's trap here), and I agreed to cover our traps and return early doors the next morning to identify the contents. Linda Murphy processed the catch in her small actinic at this point, so she didn't need to make her long journey again in the morning: how very sensible!

Nearly everybody left at this point, but Tim had so much gear to power very distant traps that he was still on site close to 1am. Martin Albertini was running two traps at the other end of the wood powered by his own generator. After Tim's departure I enjoyed a period of personal mindfulness standing alone in the pitch black, until I decided I was better off going to take a look at the large catch attracted to Martin's lights and help him pack up, so I could secure the site at 1.40am.

What a great night!

.....and it didn't end there. All the trappers noted above, plus Martin Kincaid, were on station on time in the morning and began to work through the traps. Scarcity can be of a species or of an unusual form, as illustrated by this buff form of Poplar Hawk-moth.



'Buff form' of Poplar Hawk-moth

Both identification and photography are much easier in daylight, so species such as this rather subtle Olive (that's its name) and the more gaudy Black Arches and Privet Hawk-moth could be enjoyed by us all, as well as the local dog-walkers and their dogs! Spreading the word about the wonderful world of moths is what it's all about! That is just what George and Gordon would have wanted.



Olive moth



Black Arches



Privet Hawk-moth

A very long species list is available, following meticulous collation of all the trap results. This includes the all-time list for College Wood, as well as the species seen on 16 July, identifying the 8 species we saw which were new to College Wood.

Thanks to everyone who came to the mothing night and to the Woodland Trust, in the shape of James Stevenson, for again allowing us access to the wood for this special event.

Andy Harding
July 2022

[Life as a Practical Conservation Trainee at Spurn](#)

In October 2021, I was given the chance to join the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust as a Practical Conservation Trainee at Spurn National Nature Reserve. With my boots firmly in the ground as a watcher of my local patch in Milton Keynes, recording birds, odonata and carrying out yearly butterfly transects, the idea of travelling 200 miles to spend most of a year in a totally new environment was initially very daunting but after some lengthy consideration, I decided it was an opportunity that was too good to miss for my career aspirations.

Spurn is located at the tip of the east Yorkshire coast, about 45 minutes' drive from the city of Hull. One of the country's most renowned sites for birding, it delivers scarcities and rarities on a regular basis. The sea and the Reserve's habitats are closely monitored by a dedicated band of local birders and recorders. Located just outside the reserve is the Spurn Bird Observatory, working in association with The Yorkshire Wildlife Trust for a wide variety of projects across Spurn and its neighbouring reserve Kilnsea Wetlands.

While it may be as close to the sea as you can get, Spurn's traineeships are tailored to develop highly transferrable knowledge and practical skills that can be taken to a wide variety of landscapes. Whether you are already familiar with coastal areas or coming from a more inland setting, it's an ideal place to kickstart a career in conservation. Trainees are quickly given hands-on experience with a variety of tasks including livestock management, site maintenance and use of reserve vehicles.

Some of Spurn's livestock include Hebridean Sheep and the popular Highland Cattle, which are frequently checked and moved across the site between autumn and early spring. Their grazing helps to prepare the reserve's wildflower meadows for spring and summer, protecting root systems which could be damaged by machinery and supporting ground-nesting bird species including Meadow Pipits and Skylarks.



Snow Bunting, Spurn 10 January 2022 (Photo © Harry Appleyard)

A large portion of the autumn and winter work involves site maintenance, trimming vegetation near the footpaths and increasing access to the Reserve's features. There is also

the Population Control of Brown-tailed Moths, a species that has had a strong foothold on the Reserve for many years. With their highly irritant hairs they are rarely eaten by birds, prevent the growth of berries and present a health risk to the general public as their caterpillars emerge in early spring. Thought to have arrived from Lincolnshire, the parasitic wasps that typically prey on the species are unfortunately yet to colonise the area, meaning controlled human intervention is currently the best way forward on this SSSI.

A more exclusive task for Spurn over the past few months has been Eelgrass Restoration. Now present in just a small portion of the Humber after a significant decline many years ago, the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's Marine Team have been hard at work to get this unique species. Some of the rainier days of the autumn were spent making Sea Grass bags, small sacks of Hessian with the tiny seeds and sediment wrapped inside, ready to be planted at the edge of the Humber at low tide.

The everchanging washover is a good place to practise off-road driving. Once holding a road connecting the northern half of the reserve to the southern half, it is now only accessible by the Spurn reserve team and the RNLI, based at The Point. On some days it can be largely flat and smooth with a thin layer of shingle, on others it can be more rocky but negotiable with the Reserve's 4x4 vehicle.

A more recent task has been installing electric fencing on the Reserve's thinnest section of beach, the washover, protecting Ringed Plovers and Oystercatchers from ground-based predators and preventing human disturbance. Carrying out beach patrols in this area has been a good way of interacting with visitors, raising awareness of ground-nesting shorebirds, talking about other recent finds on-site with the bonus of possibly seeing a seal, porpoise or even a dolphin!



Green Hairstreak, Spurn 30 April 2022 (Photo © Harry Appleyard)

As I write this in early June, just over halfway through the traineeship, I can happily say this was one of the best decisions I've ever made. It's already given me so much knowledge and new skills that I never initially saw myself gaining! With thanks to on-site LANTRA training and practice with Spurn's Reserve team, I recently passed my Brushcutter training, meaning I and the other volunteers who participated will be gaining a license for using them across other parks and reserves nationally.

It's also been a massive eyeopener to the everyday running of a nature reserve throughout the year in so many ways – seeing how tasks are co-ordinated around weather and tide times, how events are planned and promoted and the interactions between regional teams within The Yorkshire Wildlife Trust. It's an access-all-areas opportunity, so trainees are at the forefront of the fieldwork and behind-the-scenes projects at the Reserve and heavily integrated with the rest of the team. There's also the opportunity to partake in external training hosted by The Yorkshire Wildlife Trust at other Reserves in the county.

On days off you are free to your own devices but there is so much to explore and do across Spurn and its neighbouring reserve, Kilnsea Wetlands. For birding the possibilities are nearly endless here, with scarcities and rarities being found on a near daily basis especially around the peaks of spring and autumn migration. Some of my favourite "firsts" from here have included Brown Shrike, Red-backed Shrike, Temminck's Stint, Glaucous Gull, Red-rumped Swallow, and just days after I started in October, Britain's 10th Two-barred Greenish Warbler which lingered for several days by the Discovery Centre.

I cannot thank the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust enough for giving me this amazing opportunity. It's been well worth while for gaining confidence in travelling further afield and working in new and exciting parts of the country. The ride isn't over yet though and I can't wait to see what the next few months bring!

Harry Appleyard
July 2022

Natural History Museum at Tring: MKNHS Behind the Scenes Tour, 25 July 2022

Following a fascinating talk in the spring by Dr Alex Bond, Principal Curator and Curator in Charge of Birds at the Natural History Museum in Tring, a 'Behind the Scenes' tour was arranged for MKNHS which proved to be equally fascinating.

After an introduction by Senior Curator, Hein Van Grouw, we divided into two groups for the tour which covered the different collections. Each was introduced by a member of staff working in that area and we could not fail to be impressed by their enthusiasm and knowledge. Each collection includes bird species from all areas of the world and many thousands of specimens. Researchers from all over the world visit Tring every week to make use of these vast collections alongside the library containing all past and current publications on birds. We saw and heard about so many interesting aspects of the work and research carried out that it's only possible to give a few personal highlights here!

In the area where bird skeletons are prepared for the skeleton collection, we saw how teams of beetles and larvae are deployed to clean up the bones in an environmentally friendly fashion. Some species prefer fresh meat, others are willing to clean up older, drier specimens. Large birds have to be put into the 'beetle cabinets' in sections as they can't fit in whole. Apparently they aren't put back together after they've been cleaned up. Researchers are generally interested in specific bones to examine adaptations or changes over time or in different habitats rather than whole skeletons, so the bones from each specimen go into an individual box, which also takes up a lot less space!

The spirit collection didn't involve any ghosts, but a huge collection of jars of all sizes containing whole bird specimens preserved in alcohol/spirit (not the technical name!) We walked past shelves of waders and other water birds. The jar for a mute swan was quite a contrast to that for a Temminck's Stint! If researchers want to examine a specimen, it is taken out of the jar for a period, but mustn't dry out. Many specimens in each of the collections were collected in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The bird skin collection contains thousands of specimens arranged by species/sub-species, by country and region, stored on trays in cabinets with magnetic seals. These days no chemical pest controls are used. They ensure strict cleanliness and check for pests in the area around the cabinets but there are no 'moth balls' or similar in these cabinets. The bird skins are basically stuffed birds and the majority were prepared in the field, often just using whatever was available as the stuffing, such as dry grass and leaves. You could only marvel at the skill of those who did this work. The most impressive aspect of these skins for me was the freshness of the colours of the plumage, despite the age of the specimens.

We were treated to a viewing of some of their most valuable items, whether due to their cultural or historical significance or extinct status, including skins brought back by Captain Cook from New Zealand, skins of the Passenger Pigeon, a North American bird exterminated as an agricultural pest in the 19th century, and finches collected by Charles Darwin in the Galapagos islands, as well as finches collected in the Amazon Basin by Alfred Russel Wallace, who collaborated with Darwin on the theory of evolution by natural selection. These skins are regularly used by researchers and most of the major books on bird identification have drawn on this collection.



Specimens brought back by Captain Cook from New Zealand (Photo © Peter Barnes)



Above: One of Darwin's finches (Photo © Peter Barnes)

Below: Finches collected by Wallace in the Amazon Basin (Photo © Peter Barnes)



Passenger Pigeon skins (Photo © Peter Barnes)

The egg collection comprises around 300,000 clutches and is growing every year. Since it became illegal to hold collections of birds' eggs, as well as to collect them, the museum has been offered collections every week, if not every day. Often these have been found in attics by people clearing out after an elderly relative has died. The museum only accepts collections of complete clutches which are documented with species, date and location where the clutch was taken. All others are rejected.



A tray of Dunlin eggs (Photo © Peter Barnes)

The clutches are being used for a range of research projects covering issues not dreamt of when many of the clutches were collected. This is made possible by the huge amount of data available from them stretching back over more than two centuries. For example, research on changes in species' egg laying dates over time in relation to climate and the drivers for variation in egg colouration. We were shown the collection of peregrine eggs used in the study which identified the effects of DDT accumulating in these birds through the food chain.

I think everyone on the tour found it both enjoyable and very informative. We were impressed by the size, scope and quality of the collections, the variety and volume of research drawing on them, and the evident passion of everyone we met for the work they are doing. If you get the chance to do the tour in the future, it's highly recommended!

Linda Murphy
July 2022

[Trip to Skokholm in July 2022](#)



The island of Skokholm from the mainland (Photo © Ann Jones)

I'm ashamed to say that when Kenny (Cramer) opened up his invitation to non ringers to spend a week on Skokholm, Pembrokeshire, I knew very little about the [island](#). I had visited Skomer (not far away but much bigger) very many years ago and was delighted by the colours of the bluebells, thrift and the gulls nesting among them. I signed up to go, then started planning the week's food as the island is off grid, so you need to take food, but the system of communal cooking and eating for those who wanted to, kindly planned by Helen, one of the ringers, and the very well-planned kitchen made it straightforward. Skokholm is a bird observatory, so there are a number of research projects taking place and it has a magnificent natural history library and resource room.

We had a week on the island; and as many do, I left a bit of my heart there. It's small – just over a mile long, and beautiful. If you have walked along the Pembrokeshire coast, then the geology of red sandstone and volcanic rock on Skokholm might be familiar, and, aligned with the lichen (including the orangey lichen in the photo below of a young stonechat, made for lovely colours.



Stonechat (Photo © Ann Jones)

As a non-ringer my interest was the wildlife and photography, although the ringing was always an opportunity to learn and see birds close up. Being off grid there are no showers but the sun shone most of the time giving plenty of hot water from the solar panels. I guess the stars of the island must be the *puffins*. In 2021 11,245 [puffins were counted](#) and it feels as though much of the island is covered with puffins – very attractive and at times seemingly comical birds. In one area, Crab Bay, they're very used to people and will often come right up and jump onto you if you sit still and pull at your shoelaces or steal your lens cap, but I didn't take the risk of letting them touch bare skin. Those beaks!



Grooming Puffin (Photo © Ann Jones)

I was also hoping to photograph choughs. What magical birds! There was a family group of 4 that were often seen on Skokholm, sometimes joined by birds from elsewhere, but they were hard to photograph. The very dark colouring plus the fact that they move around very quickly made it challenging, although often easy to find as they are sociable and noisy. Ravens also live on Skokholm and I have to say I am very fond of ravens but I didn't get to see any of these ravens very close up. Like many crows they hang around in family groups.

Other 'daytime' seabird colonies included razorbills, guillemots and fulmars. (There are no gannet colonies on Skokholm but plenty of gannets fly past).



Chough in Campion (Photo © Ann Jones)

Greater blacked back gulls, lesser black backed gulls and herring gulls nest on the island. The lesser backs harass you as you walk through their colony but they don't attack. Some greater black backed gulls do torment the puffins, waiting near the burrow entrance and sometimes managing to catch one or a puffling or at least steal the catch that has been brought in for the young. They also tormented and attacked the Manx shearwaters as they flew into their island burrows at night. The number of corpses in the morning showed that coming in at night didn't make them safe. From my bed I could hear both the sound of the shearwaters (quite difficult to describe, but mesmerising) and the gulls – who don't necessarily roost at night. The estimated number of shearwaters in 2018 in an article by Perrins and colleagues (Latin name, oddly, *puffinus puffinus*!) was 90,000 . I didn't get to see these properly as I'm afraid I prioritised sleep over the night walks to visit and ring shearwaters.

The final stars of the island are the storm petrels: again I didn't see these as you need to be up after dark. It is very hard to know what the population of nesting birds is: one of the [wardens' blogs](#) comments on how they try to monitor and count the storm petrels: quite challenging. The amazing wardens post [a blog](#) each day, and it is well worth reading. Each night there is a roll call where everyone comes together to note and discuss what has been seen that day.

In terms of some smaller non-sea birds, Skokholm is full of wheatears, and there is an ongoing research MSc project by Ian Beggs who tweets about the project at @fatsnipe. I was really happy to see so many as they are a bit of a novelty in MK, and generally only seen on migration. Stonechats were less common but there was at least one pair. I had never thought of wrens as island birds, but they are; and ferreting around amongst seaweed, plants and stones etc must expose many insects. Other small nesting birds include (but are not limited to) many meadow pipits, some skykarks, wagtails and various warblers such as the sedge warbler. Swallows were nesting in one of the buildings and were amazingly successful, with two broods – I think 15 young altogether.



Wheatear (Photo © Ann Jones)

There are few mammals on Skokholm. Rats have been successfully kept out, though mice live there and are being studied. Rabbits were introduced centuries ago and there is still a good population, including some darker coloured ones, as different kinds were introduced at various times. The hide in front of the lighthouse where the wardens live, is a great place to sit and seawatch. I was not fortunate enough to see a dolphin when I was looking, although common dolphins are often seen, but I did see porpoises. The classic book about the island, which is a great read, is *Lockley's Dream Island*. R.M.Lockley, ornithologist and naturalist lived on Skokholm from 1927 until forced to move by the war. His account of island life is delightful.

It is definitely a trip and island that will stay with me and thanks of course to Kenny for not only organising the trip but also giving me a lift so I could get there!

Ann Jones
September 2022

MKNHS members beat the Pembrokeshire weather to enjoy their visit

Eight members of the Society visited Pembrokeshire at the invitation of Pembrokeshire U3A Natural History Group. The group was set up by MKNHS member and former MKNHS chair Steve Brady, now living in Pembrokeshire, to whom many thanks are due.

Steve has put together a report on the visit, reproduced here:

Despite appalling weather on their visit to Tŷ Canol Wood on the Friday morning, a group of eight visitors from Milton Keynes Natural History Society, of which our Group Organiser was Secretary and Chairman for many years, enjoyed a successful and interesting visit to Pembrokeshire from 29th September to 2nd October. The visit was part of the U3A's national celebrations of its 30th Anniversary, involving local U3Aers hosting some of our visitors in their homes.

On the wet and windy morning of Friday 30th September, our visitors plus a few hardy local U3Aers explored Tŷ Canol Wood. Mostly we were sheltered by the ancient oak trees from the worst of the elements and the magic of this very special place shone through regardless.



Amongst the finds were splendid fly agaric mushrooms such as the one below.



After enjoying our unique Celtic Rain Forest our gallant band returned through torrential rain and gales to drive to the ancient Pentre Ifan dolmen. Thence over the top of the Preselis to the *Tafarn Sinc* inn at Rosebush. Here we were all made most welcome, and wet apparel dried before the log burner whilst we warmed ourselves up with coffee and hot toddies. We stayed for an excellent meal of fine Pembrokeshire produce.

Next day dawned bright and mostly sunny. In the morning we gathered at Dr Beynon's Bug Farm near St. David's, where we were treated to a fascinating introductory talk about the Farm, its history and its important role in local education and conservation by Sarah, the eponymous Dr Beynon. We then enjoyed the amazing range of exotic tropical arthropods kept in their zoo, after which the braver spirits got to handle a few choice specimens.



Lunch followed at the Grub Kitchen, the UK's first full-time edible insect restaurant. Again, the bolder ones amongst us got to try said edible insects, such as the Crunchy Crickets in the photo above, which those who did enjoyed. There remained time to explore the plots of local wildflowers, Nature-friendly crops and species-rich grasslands on the site – which our Group will hopefully visit next summer (entomophagy optional!) – before we headed a few miles up the coast to Abercastle.

Here our resident seal experts Pete and Carol Hall enthralled us with their knowledge of grey seal biology and natural history, based on their years of working as volunteers at a local seal rescue centre, before taking us round the coast to see the pups displayed before us on their birthing beaches. A slightly older pup came to see us in return.





A quick detour was made to see the Neolithic Carreg Samson dolmen, with a sighting of Pembrokeshire choughs thrown in to make our visitors' natural history experience complete. After which what all concerned agreed had been a highly successful visit was rounded off with a splendid repast, none of which was insectile, at the *Ship Inn* in the lovely village of Solva.



Whilst staying with Jennifer Huggett in Castle Morris, one of our visitors, Linda Murphy, set up a moth trap. On the Friday night she recorded 16 Lunar Underwings and one each of the Beaded Chestnut and the Pinion-streaked Snout. On Saturday night she trapped no less than 42 Lunar Underwings, two each of the Yellow-line Quaker and the Beaded Chestnut plus one each of the Large Yellow Underwing and the Square-spot Rustic. A fine haul this late in the season, and one which may inspire local members to start moth-trapping and recording.

On behalf of the Natural History Group of Pembrokeshire U3A and at the request of Milton Keynes Natural History Society on their behalf too I should like to thank all local U3Aers who helped make this 30th Anniversary event the great success it proved to be, notably Pat Lewis and Jennifer Huggett for accommodating some of our visitors in their homes and Pete and Carol Hall, Geoff and Rowena Winterman and Mary Bartlett for turning out to welcome them. Our Chair, Jan Manning, had hoped to join us at the *Ship* but sadly was unwell.

Steve Brady
October 2022