Sandnats

WEASEL *Mustela nivalis* © Andy Purcell

ANNUAL REPORT

THE BULLETIN OF THE SANDWELL VALLEY NATURALISTS' CLUB

VOL. 26 NO.2 March 2004

SANDNATS

Volume 26 No. 2
MARCH 2004

ANNUAL REPORT

Sandwell Valley Naturalists' Club (SANDNATS) was formed in 1975. Its members work to conserve the Valley's wildlife, help others to enjoy it, and liaise with Sandwell Council about the management of the Valley.

OFFICERS

- PRESIDENT - John Shrimpton
- VICE-PRESIDENTS - Freda Briden, Peter Shirley
- CHAIR - Tony Wood
- TREASURER - Frances Hudson
- SECRETARY (Acting: May 2003) Margaret Shuker (0121 357 1067)
- MEMBERSHIP - Marian Brevitt 165 Queslett Road, Great Barr, Birmingham, B43 6DS
- BULLETIN EDITOR – Mike Bloxham. (0121 553 3070)
- PRESS OFFICER - Tony Wood
- COMMITTEE MEMBERS Sheila Hadley, Arthur Stevenson and Bill Moodie.
- HON AUDITORS Peter Shirley & Arthur Stevenson

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The Editor thanks Andy Purcell for the continuing excellence of his photography as shown on the covers of this bulletin.

MEMBERSHIP

If you wish to enrol as a member please send the following details:
NAME, ADDRESS, PHONE No, STAMP ADDRESSED REPLY ENVELOPE
To: Marian Brevitt, 165 Queslett Road, Great Barr, Birmingham, B43 6DS
CHEQUE / P.O. MADE PAYABLE TO **SVNC** FOR:
Adult membership .. £12, Family membership .. £18, Student / Senior citizen .. £8

Events Programme 2004

NB ** Please note the change of date for Dawn Chorus Day.

March 3rd 7.00 p.m.	**Prompt - Annual General Meeting -**	members' slides.	R.S.P.B. Centre
April 3rd (Saturday)	**Woodgate Valley** Country Park	Chris Parry.	Halesowen
****May 8th** (Sunday)	**International Dawn Chorus Day** As last year – several events during the day	Colin Horne & Sandnats.	R.S.P.B. Centre
June 2nd 7.00 p.m.	**Warrens Hall SINC** (Site of Importance for Nature Conservation)	Mike Poulton.	Rowley Regis
July 7th 7.00 p.m.	**Golf Course Wood & Wild Flower Meadow.**	Mike Bloxham.	Sandwell Valley
August 14th (Sat.)	**Hartlebury Common** Mixed heathland,	Dave Scott.	Halsowen
September 4th (Sat.) 2.00pm.	**River Walk**	Sandwell Valley	R.S.P.B. Centre
October 6th 7.00 p.m.	**British Wildlife in Close-up**	Andy Purcell.	R.S.P.B. Centre
November 3rd 7.00 p.m.	**Edgbaston Park & Winterbourne**	Mike Poulton.	R.S.P.B. Centre
December 1st 7.00 p.m.	**Christmas Social**		R.S.P.B. Centre

An annual outing and the John Little biennial fungus foray will be arranged during the Summer

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This Bulletin is published in July, November and March.
The March issue is the Club's Annual Report

Items for the next issue (Volume 27 No.1)
should be sent by June1st. to the Editor
Mike Bloxham, 1 St Johns Close, Sandwell Valley Estate, West Bromwich
Or Email: mike@1stjohnsclose.freeserve.co.uk

Published by the Sandwell Valley Naturalists' Club.

EDITORIAL

Again a winter seems to be passing with insignificant cold spells and a good deal of mild wet weather. Much could have altered by the time you read this, but arguments on the topic of global warming don't seem likely to go away during 2004. The bulletin has mentioned plenty of 'firsts' during its lifetime and should prove a fertile field for anyone researching first bird arrivals, first plant flowerings etc. Amongst its firsts would also appear to be the harvest mouse survey. SANDNATS mammal group, with Janet Granger and Paul Essex in the forefront, have been putting long hours into this project and have been awarded a certificate of merit by the Wildlife Trust for Birmingham & the Black Country. Unfortunately they have as yet been unable to recapture any of the released mice and it seems that this could well pose a national problem for those engaged in this work. Possibly all perished or maybe the recording methodology needs reviewing. What has been the fate of the animals? Were some recorded as prey of local owls? Many such questions and difficulties lie ahead and the team is very keen to hear from any workers who might provide insight on these matters and join them as this season approaches. There is an exciting prospect for significant and original scientific research here.

Issues surrounding the bulletin such as the desired number per year and the costs of printing and production will not go away. My own view is that at present the volume of material generated by club activities and personal contributions does not justify more than two parts per year (March and August). A decision to change to a two bulletin regime might, I believe present members with a more substantial read (*vide* the latest issues which have plenty of interest and run to around 30 pages) and also cut costs. The concept of having the entire bulletin (cover and contents) printed by one agency is also worth examination.

I extend thanks to all who have helped in the production and writing of this annual report, apologising in advance for any errors or omissions.

Chairman's Report

Here we are into 2004 ! It only seems like last year that I was writing the chairman's report for the year 2000.

The indoor meetings started with reports of two trips abroad- the first by Mike Bennett who took us to Tanzania, then in February we went to Florida with Pete and Dot. The annual dinner was at The Black Eagle- the same venue as in 2002 and all who attended had a very enjoyable evening.

The AGM in March saw some changes in the make- up of the committee. Pete and Dot Shirley decided it was time to stand down as the bulletin editors, Mike Bloxham took on the task both of doing the bulletin and also still doing the job of secretary, because at the meeting no one was prepared to take on the

secretary's job. The bulletin editor's job has now gone full circle as Mike was the first editor of the bulletin quite a few years back. Since the AGM, Margaret Shuker has agreed to act as secretary until the forthcoming AGM. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dot and Pete for all the hard work that they have put in over the years in producing the bulletin to such a high standard and Margaret for stepping into the breach and doing a good job. I hope she will take it on at the AGM if nominated. Unfortunately it was agreed that membership fees had to rise in 2004. This was to take into account changes in the hire charge for the RSPB centre and insurance costs etc. and was the first increase we have had to make in years. April and November saw us making two excursions to Upton Warren. The first was well attended with 15 members being present and 43 bird species seen. The later one only saw 4 members present with 35 species recorded, amongst them female long -tailed duck, only the second record for the reserve. International Dawn Chorus Day at the RSPB reserve was an all day event with members going on the various walks arranged by the RSPB and SANDNATS. In July members enjoyed a sunny afternoon tea party at Marian's garden in Great Barr. I was not able to attend any of the other outdoor meetings due to holidays and working shifts. October saw Bill Moodie lecture on the history of fungus recording at Edgbaston SSSI, in November Dr Malcolm Smart gave us a talk on volcanic craters and to round off the year's meetings, Chris and Brenda Bird organised a quiz at the Christmas Social which was enjoyed by all.

A. Wood

Treasurer's Report on Club Finances for the Year to 31st December 2003

Our income over expenditure for the year totalled £103, a much lower figure than in the previous year as we received no income from the Wildlife Trust re- Sot's Hole. We were undoubtedly kept in the black by the success of Marian Brevitt's Garden Party, which raised £151 and our thanks go to her for organising this event.
Hopefully, with the increase in subscriptions as from 1st January 2004 we should be able to hold our heads above water for the coming year, but any ideas or suggestions for raising further funds would be greatly appreciated by the committee.

Frances Hudson (Hon. Treasurer).

The Sandwell Valley Naturalists' Club
Statement of Income and Expenditure for the year to 31st December 2003

		31. 12. 03		31. 12. 02
INCOME				
Membership		249. 00		250
Donations		31. 00		-
Garden Party		151. 00		-
Sundry Receipts-				
Refreshments	24. 04		13	
Sale of nuts, seeds, cards & plants	10. 00		30	
Sale of 'Flora' Books	10. 00		6	
Sales of 'Wildlife of Sandwell Valley'	8. 50		-	
Collection for Roy Croucher	-		44	
		52. 54		93
Annual Dinner		210. 65		275
Wildlife Trust payment for Sot's Hole		-		1850
Severn- Trent Water – net dividends		32. 48		44
Bank interest- net		10. 79		4
Sale of 'Birds of Sandwell Valley'		135. 00		201
Sundry sales at Sandwell Show		68. 85		14
		941. 31		**2731**
EXPENDITURE				
Room Rental		150. 00		105
Printing, Stationery & Postage		190. 90		96
BTCV- membership	25. 00		25	
Insurance	166. 25		140	
		191. 25		165
Wildlife Trust Subs		28. 50		28
Annual Dinner		212. 65		275
Presentation to Roy Croucher		-		50
Donations to:				
Paul Essex (Harvest Mouse Traps)	-		50	
Water Aid (lieu of Lecturer's exp.)	25. 00		25	
Upton Warren Reserve (2 visits)	40. 00		-	
		65. 00		75
		838. 30		**794**
EXCESS OF INCOME OVER EXPENDITURE FOR THE YEAR TO 31ST DECEMBER 2003		**£ 103. 01**		**£ 1937**

We have prepared this Statement of Income and Expenditure for the year ended 31st December 2003 from books and records maintained, information supplied and explanations given and certify that it is in accordance therewith.

Mr. Peter Shirley

Joint Auditors

Mr. Arthur Stevenson

The Sandwell Valley Naturalists' Club

CASH ACCOUNT

Balances at 31st December 2002 :	
Yorkshire Bank Current Account	2414. 55
Yorkshire Bank Monthly Premium Account	3000. 00
	5414. 55
Add: Excess of Income for the year	103. 01
	£ 5517. 56

REPRESENTED BY:

Yorkshire Bank Current Account	2773. 84
Add: Cash unpresented at 31st December 2003	16.00
	2789. 84
Less: unpresented cheques and reserve not required at 31st December 2003	280. 89
	2508. 95
Yorkshire Bank Monthly Premium Account	3008. 61
	£ 5517. 56

NOTES:

(1) Book account as at 31st December 2003
'Birds of the Sandwell Valley'

Cost of 1000 copies			3250. 00
Complimentary, display & damaged copies.	57 at cost	185. 25	
Sales	357	2175. 75	
Stock in Hand	586 at cost	1904. 50	
	1000		
Profit on sales to date		…….	1015. 50
		£ 4265. 50	**£ 4265. 50**

(2) The Club held 95 Severn Trent ordinary shares at 31st December 2003.
Market Value at 12th January 2004 being **£ 685. 90** (642. 67).

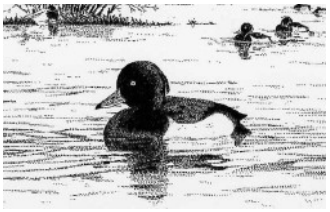
Meeting Reports for 2003

The transitional factor with regard to the posts of Secretary and Bulletin Editor has caused some difficulties with regard to a consistent recording of club events during 2003. I am therefore converting some reports given in newsletters to the more permanent record provided by the bulletin and apologise for a degree of repetition you will notice in three items. All field meetings ought to have received some bulletin coverage as the 2003 cycle ends and we are especially indebted to Bill Moodie and Malcolm Smart for sending accounts of information imparted during their particular indoor lectures. Although independent reports can often convey the atmosphere of indoor meetings very well, they often fall short with regard to accuracy of detail during such meetings. The bulletin will therefore maintain the practice of asking for accounts of this sort when the level of lecture content requires it. The accounts of William Withering's life and of some of the world's best known volcanoes are most welcome. Some section reports also contain additional information about field meetings.

Upton Warren Reserve (April 5th, 2003)

15 members had a most enjoyable afternoon of ornithology under the authoritative leadership of the Warden, Arthur Jacobs and his wife. The day was warm and sunny and we saw Peregrine on one of the smaller radio masts. The pools provided some wonderful sightings of shelduck, whilst Cormorant, Ruff, Green Sandpiper, Redshank, Curlew and Little Ringed Plover were also showing well. Plenty was seen and Tony Wood (who gives additional details in his Chairman's report) is to be thanked for organisation of the event.

M.Bloxham.

'TUFTED DUCK'  BY TERRY PARKER

International Dawn Chorus Day (May 4th, 2003)

The weather looked unpromising but the threat of rain diminished and after the initial parties returned, the day unfolded with morning invertebrate studies (enjoyed by a small but keen group of youngsters) and afternoon botany & ornithology with Colin Horne & Mike Poulton (SANDNATS). Some 19 people turned up for this foray and enjoyed a gentle scramble around the reserve where many spring flowers were showing well. A kingfisher appeared along the Tame to the delight of all and a Pike was seen by a sluice gate in the river. A variety of plants, including umbels, was studied. Many saw the club display boards during the course of an encouraging and informative day.

M.Bloxham.

Priory Woods (June 4th, 2003)- see also the Annual Botany Report by Mike Poulton

16 members came on this visit to view the consequences of the woodland management of 2000 when thinning of Sycamore cover and removal of much Rhododendron had taken place. We were joined for the evening by Joe Miskin, the new Wildspace Officer for Sandwell. There was an abundance of wildlife and we were able to see the Herons in force on Ice House Lake together with a fine display of spring flowers. The grasses and sedges were of particular interest. Pendulous Sedge is now flourishing in the wood as is Wood Sedge (*Carex sylvatica*). Mike Poulton was pleased to see Remote Sedge- a new record for Priory Wood and a further good find for the evening was Three- nerved Sandwort, growing in North Priory Wood.

The areas cleared of Rhododendron did not at present have a particularly varied flora. Opinion was that the residual inhibiting effect of the roots was supressing much seed development. Rosebay Willowherb was doing well and a host of Ash seedlings were also in evidence. The general consensus was that removal of some freshly regenerating Rhododendron growth on the well-cleared portion of the wood (the M5 end) ought to be assiduously pursued so the process of ground flora re-colonisation would not be hampered but continually encouraged . Any residual management money could be used in attempting to make inroads into at least some of the sprouting brash at the North East end (between the old piggeries & Cascade Lake) which was not properly removed & burnt in 2000-2001. Pete Shirley recorded the following galls on site.

HOST	GALL-CAUSER
Acer pseudoplatanus	*Aculodes cephaloneus* (Nalepa) (= *Artacris, = Aceria*) (mite)
Alnus glutinosa	*Eriophyes laevis* Nalepa (= *Phytopus*) (mite)
Fraxinus	*Psyllopsis fraxini* (L.) (*psyllid*)
Rosa	*Phragmidium* sp.(fungus)
Salix	*Pontania gallarum* (Hartig) (sawfly)
Ulmus	*Eriosoma ulmi* (L.) (mite)
Urtica	*Puccinia urticata* Kern (= *P. caricina*) (fungus)

M.Bloxham

Lower Dartmouth Meadows (Blackstonia Field) after scrub clearance (July 2nd, 2003).

A select band made its way along the Tame Valley towpath to examine the area which, during the previous year, had witnessed possibly the most radical clearance programme carried out on any Valley conservation site to date. We arrived to see heaps of dried hawthorns- roots, trunks & whole branches as they had been left all those months ago. The site itself was showing a good coverage

of regenerating vegetation with the former dominants beginning to stake a claim again. A small number of blackstonia plants (characterising the site) were in evidence and larger plants such as goatsbeard, black medick, black knapweed, ox- eye daisy and bristly ox-tongue were recovering old territory. Of smaller ones, birds-foot trefoil was abundant with self –heal widely distributed and occasional sightings of fairy flax pleased the discerning eye. There were signs that hawthorn was not completely defeated and a number of tender shoots warned of what would happen if things were left too long again. A reasonably systematic search for bee orchids took place and after half an hour, when but two plants had come to light, Ron Skeldon took the plaudits by finding an additional specimen. This was a considerable disappointment to everyone and the decision to monitor the site on at least a yearly basis seemed justified, for the Club may well be in a position to produce useful evaluation data for those who plan to manage this (and similar overgrown sites) in the future.

Although the day was fairly well advanced, the number of insects seen was a disappointment. Nonetheless, sightings included a common blue butterfly asleep, a number of blackneck moths (fairly local insects) and a burnet companion- now much more regularly seen in the Valley. Andy Mabbett indulged in a great deal of photography during the visit.

HAWTHORN  DOWN BUT NOT OUT!!

The final stage of the walk saw us joined by Mike Poulton who corrected some earlier misidentifications as the shades of evening drew in. The nicest prize fell to Pete Shirley who found the spectacular pouch gall Tetraneura ulmi on wych elm near the canal junction. This is nationally scarce and may also appear only in suitable years, other specimens having been found elsewhere during 2003.

M.Bloxham

Fungus Foray to Edgbaston Nature Reserve, 6th September, 2003

Fourteen members bravely turned up in atrocious weather conditions, to search for fungi in the nature reserve and in Winterbourne Gardens. In spite of the torrential rain that day, and due to the dry conditions up to that time, very few fungi were recorded.

. Between spells in the garden shelters, avoiding the worst of the rain, thunder and lightning, members were enchanted by the Great Pool and its bird life, and by the gardens with their interesting plants.

The only fungi spotted were:- *Panaeolus foenisecii, Polyporus squamosus* ,

Trametes versicolor, *Stereum hirsutum*, and *Auricularia mesenterica.*
In spite of the bad weather, members enjoyed the foray, and expressed a wish for a return visit sometime in the future.

WTMoodie

Fungus Evening at the RSPB. A Notable Birmingham Mycologist & his times. October 1st 2003.

WILLIAM WITHERING OF EDGBASTON HALL, PHYSICIAN, BOTANIST, and MYCOLOGIST

William Withering (1741-1799) was famous as the Physician who discovered the medical properties of Digitalis purpurea, the foxglove, for treating heart problems. His paper, published in 1785, was called "An account of the foxglove and some of its medical uses" .He is also well known to mycologists as the first to explain fairy rings, caused by *Marasmius oreades*, the fairy ring champignon.
He was a competent botanist, only later in life developing a special interest in fungi and was the author of "A natural arrangement of British Plants", an extremely successful book. Three editions were published in his lifetime, followed by four further editions edited by his son, (also William) and finishing up with a final fourteenth edition, appearing one hundred years after the first..
William Withering was born in 1741 in Wellington in Shropshire. Little is known about his early life, other than his having private tuition from a local clergyman. His father was an apothecary, and his uncle a physician in Lichfield.

EDINBURGH

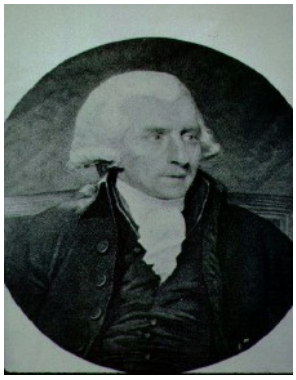
At the age of 21, he travelled to Edinburgh to study medicine at the University there. One of his professors was John Hope, who was professor of Materia Medica and Botany. Hope was also the King's Botanist and Superintendant of the Royal Botanic Garden. He was responsible for moving the garden from its first site in the Waverley Station (it wasn't there then) to a new site in Leith Walk.
We might have expected that Hope would be influential in arousing Withering's interest in Botany, particularly as he encouraged his students to go out into the field and study the Scottish Flora, and even presented a gold medal every year to the student with the best herbarium. However he had a poor reputation as a lecturer, and in a letter home, Withering claimed that "he had formed disagreeable ideas of the botany, and that the gold medal would not make it attractive."
In the long vacation of 1763, he made his way home by sailing from Leith, the port of Edinburgh, to London, and then by the Holyhead coach home to Wellington. He travelled back to Edinburgh on horseback, and on the way visited a Mr. James Bolton, and was shown an extensive collection of natural history objects (Bolton was a mill owner, and a noted early mycologist.)

Withering Graduated MD in 1766, then took the customary 'grand tour', and carried out medical studies in Paris.

STAFFORD

On returning to England, he investigated several prospects, and then took up a medical practice in Stafford. He was soon appointed physician to the Staffordshire Hospital. During the period in Stafford, he married Helena Cookes, who was the daughter of the Stafford Town Clerk. It was while he was in Stafford, with the encouragement of his wife, that his pursuit of botany really started, and he carried out studies on the flowering plants, which were to result in the appearance, in 1776 of the first edition of the "Natural Arrangement"

The book was a considerable improvement over previous books on flowering plants for a number of reasons. It was written in English, in very clear language. Withering was an acute observer, and this is reflected in his descriptions of plants and his detailed notes. The book was not just a translation of Linnaeus although the classification did of course, follow Linnaeus. There was also a very good general introduction to the study of botany.

A PORTRAIT OF  WILLIAM WITHERING

BIRMINGHAM

Withering felt that he might have better prospects in a larger town, and in 1775 the family moved to Birmingham. He soon became established, living in the Old Square, and having his practice in Temple Row. The General Hospital, in Summer Lane, (sited where Centro Headquarters are today), had been opened in 1779, and Withering was appointed physician there in 1780.

In 1786, Withering obtained the lease on Edgbaston Hall for a period of 14 years. The estate was ideal for his botanical studies and was, and still is, remarkable for the number of fungi which grow there. Withering worked on the second edition of the Arrangement and published the first two volumes covering flowering plants in 1787.

He was troubled with ill health – tuberculosis, and his condition became worse as time went on. It was partly due to this that the third volume was not published till five years after the others, in 1792. This volume covered the fungi and other

cryptogams. The fungus part of the arrangement was a massive improvement over previous floras. It was written in clear English showing a scientific style well ahead of its time. It did not cling rigidly to the genera and species of Linnaeus but incorporated the work of other continental authors, and yet was clearly based on the personal observations of the author. Many of the records are from Edgbaston Park. Edgbaston Hall is still there, the headquarters of the Edgbaston Golf Club, and the area of the Edgbaston Park round two sides of the Great Pool is leased the Birmingham Natural History Society as a nature reserve, and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

In spite of his poor health, Withering led a very full life. In addition to his professional life as physician, and his botanical work, he was a member of the famous Lunar Society of Birmingham, with associates such as James Watt, Matthew Boulton, Henry Cavendish, Joseph Priestly, Josiah Wedgewood, and others. He indulged in other pursuits, including breeding cattle, and studying chemistry and archaeology. It is also said that he kept a pet monkey in the hall.

A third Edition of the Arrangement was published in 1796. Withering's enthusiasm for the fungi was maintained, for in 1798 he wrote to Dr. Adam Afzelius:- "Should my health be restored, I intend, when the new edition is published, to publish the Methodus Agaricarum, in Latin, with coloured plates of all the species which have not been well figured before. The drawings for the work are mostly finished, but as the whole will depend on the restoration of my health, I do not talk of it at present"

The lease on Edgbaston Hall ran out in 1799. Withering decided not to renew it and purchased a house which he thought would be better for his health, in a less exposed situation, at Sparkbrook. The house, the Larches, had been recently built, and was near the site of Joseph Priestly's house, Fairhill, which had been burned down in the riots of 1791.However, on the 6th of October of the same year, 1799, shortly after moving to his new house, Withering died. He was interred in the parish Church of St. Bartholomew, Edgbaston, where later, a splendid memorial was erected.

Unfortunately, the projected Agaric Flora was never published, and, in spite of appeals over the years, the drawings have never been found. From the marked up 3rd Edition of the arrangement in the Central Library Birmingham, we can tell that Withering had painted 76 species of Fungi. If they had been published, Withering as a mycologist would be much better known today than he actually is.

Withering used 9 out of the 10 Linnaean genera, with several additional genera, none of which was of Withering's own creation.

Withering's genera:- *Merulius* (with folds underneath), *Agaricus* (with gills), *Fistulina* (with tubes), Boletus (with pores) *Hydnum* (with spines, hedge-hogged) *Helvella, Auricularia, Peziza, Nidularia Phallus, Clavaria, Tuber, Lycoperdon, Reticularia, Sphaeria, Trichia and Mucor.,*

Withering 's association of fairy rings with fungal growth, was based on his observations in EdgbastonPark.

Withering's genus *Agaricus* is not the same as our genus of the same name. His *Agaricus,* covers all the gilled fungi, but was split in sub-genera, which coincide with many of our present genera, though a multitude of new genera have been added as new species have been discovered, or by the splitting of older genera..

The area visited by Sandnats on the 6th of September, 2003, covered Winterbourne, the University Botanic Garden, and the Edgbaston Pool Nature Reserve. All this was of course part of the Edgbaston Hall estate, where Withering collected, and many of his collecting sites can more or less be identified. He lists Edgbaston Park for many species of fungi. *Clitocybe fragrans* was growing under Spanish Chestnut trees. He also records collections from:- the slope of the boat house field; the Pool Dam; the rookery; near the bridge which feeds the large pool; the cherry orchard; the garden field; on the milking bank; under a large oak near the second stew (*Russula aurata*); facing the cottage by the park gate; and, by the tail of the pool.

Winterbourne was built for industrialist John Sutton Nettlefold in 1904, and the gardens were originally laid out by his wife on the principles of Gertrude Jekyll. The house now belongs to the University of Birmingham, and the gardens are well worth a visit, especially when the weather is good.

Access to the Nature Reserve is achieved by passing through the garden. The reserve covers two sides of the pool and is a National Nature Reserve. It is leased to the Birmingham Natural History Society from the Edgbaston Golf Club, which occupies Edgbaston Hall, and the remainder of the estate. Unfortunately the golf course is out of bounds to visitors to the reserve, so it is not possible to investigate the woods and grassland nearest to Priory Road where the fish ponds were situated.

W. T. Moodie.

The 'Malcolm on Fire' Story as reported by the Lecturer (Wednesday, November 5th 2003).

In the first part of his talk on volcanoes, Malcolm explained the theory behind volcanic phenomena and why they occur, a relatively new branch of geology known as "Plate Tectonics" which also explains, among numerous other natural occurrences, the mechanisms of earthquakes, mountain building and the distribution of ancient fossils. Most visible volcanoes lie on "subduction zones" where one plate of the earth's crust is converging on and sliding under another plate, but some like Hawaii and Yellowstone are the result of "hot spots" - plumes of hot liquid rock at fixed points within the earth's upper mantle (the layer beneath the crust).

After showing us aerial photographs of the first 2 volcanoes he ever saw, Mount Fuji in Japan and Diamond Head in Hawaii, Malcolm took us on a photographic

tour of various volcanic areas around the world, showing the different expressions of volcanism.The first stop was around the Rotorua area in New Zealand's North Island (in 1972) where several large volcanoes (Ngauruhoe, Tongariro and Ruapehu) composed of layers of ash and lava ("stratovolcanoes") are visible. We visited the top of Mount Tarawera, a volcano with an elongated crater which last erupted in 1886. In the nearby thermal area we saw, boiling water pools, boiling mud pools and silica terraces where bacteria living in the hot springs give the rocks vibrant green, red and other colours. Objects in the streams become "petrified" with a coating of silica. Wells drilled into the rocks produce steam to power a "geothermal" power station.

On the Island of Hawaii we saw a picture of the world's largest volcano, Mauno Loa (a "shield volcano" created totally from lava flows). We then took a helicopter ride over the adjacent volcano Kilauea which was erupting lava when the picture were taken in 1988 as it has been ever since. Passing by several calderas ranging from dormant to actively smoking, we flew past one filled with a lake of liquid lava, then followed the lava stream down to the coast where we saw the sea boiling as liquid lava flowed into it. On the ground we looked in detail at lava flows, saw the place where lava had recently flowed across a road and visited an extinct "lava tube" where hot lava once flowed beneath the surface of a congealing lava flow.

Passing on to the Island of Java in Indonesia, we visited several active volcanoes forming part of a vast "Island Arc". The first, Gunong Papandayan (last major eruption 1942, these pictures taken 1986-1990), has boiling springs and "fumaroles" (vents) producing sulphur vapour and sulphur dioxide gas. Simple devices such planks of wood and even a coconut are used by local people to trap and harvest condensing sulphur. Telaga Bodas is a nearby crater containing a sulphuric acid lake with black (iron sulphide) mud pools on its side. Gunong Semeru has been erupting almost continuously since 1967. When Malcolm's pictures were taken in 1988, it was having Geyser-like eruptions of steam and rocks at 40 minute intervals. There have since been major eruptions including pyroclastic flows (avalanches of super-hot gas and ash) which have killed many people. Gunong Merapi is another volcano with an acid crater lake. Lakeside fumaroles produce vast amounts of sulphur vapour which (when photographed in 1988) was subject to large scale manual harvesting. Teams of local workers collected the sulphur and carried it down the mountain.

Yellowstone in the USA state of Wyoming is a vast thermal area overlying a massive magma chamber. The last volcanic eruption there occurred about 600,000 years ago, but the current array of boiling water and mud pools, together with the famous "Old Faithful" geyser prove it is still very active.

The last stop on Malcolm's world tour was in the vicinity of La Paz in Bolivia, high in the Andes mountain chain. A plate of ocean crust has been plunging beneath the continental crust of South America nearby, crumpling and thickening the continental plate and creating a high plateau ("the Altiplano") dissected by volcanoes. These pictures taken at altitudes up to 5600m high show the scenery created by this form of "subduction".

To finish, Malcolm took us out of this world to show us pictures taken by spacecraft of volcanoes on Mars (Olympus Mons - the largest volcano known form anywhere in the solar system) and Io (a moon of Jupiter).

The Christmas Social (Wednesday December 3rd 2003).

A reasonably mild evening saw a substantial gathering of members and friends for this event. The refreshments were most acceptable and after enjoying them we adjourned for 'afters' at the hands of our quizmasters, Brenda and Chris Bird. They had not been lacking industry in preparation of this intellectual challenge and immediately presented each victim with a pen and five typed sheets for answers. Round one 'odd one out' presented mild difficulties but left us feeling reasonably confident. Round two 'who am I?' had the opposite effect and we struggled to solve riddles concealing the target organisms. Round three involved slide recognition and we all did pretty well on that (relief all round). The next task involved knowledge of literature & wildlife characters and the writer of the report failed abysmally here (managed to get 'Eeyore' the donkey and felt in sympathy with him at this juncture –' life is a box of thistles and I've been dealt all the tough & prickly ones'*ED*).

'True or false' was a relief to all, with a fifty –fifty chance of getting the right answer and 'music' was a very nice round with beautifully recorded classical extracts involving animals. Round seven required us to name organisms after listening to their descriptions in identification literature. Most members made good progress here (thank goodness!). Darkness was suddenly upon us again as we were shown slides taken at different places in the Valley and asked to name the location concerned. The audience got hardly any of these correct and accused the quizmasters of putting the slides the wrong way round in the projector. Typical!

The penultimate round involved units of measurement and numbers connected with wildlife. This turned out to be tricky, but the height of horses and the

number of blackbirds in pies gave most of us two points. The whole thing came to an appropriate conclusion with festive questions. The last one handed a large advantage to anyone who could name Father Christmas's reindeers. Marian Brevitt, having sung the song hundreds of times, was still unable to harvest the eight points (much to her disgust!) and the same applied to most of us as the tension of the final question scrambled the brains.
Because the Bird family had taken such great pains in setting up this event, a sparkling evening had been enjoyed by all. It was good to see Michelle Jeavons (15) win the separate picture caption event, but we have to report that a visitor, Jane Hardwick (a botanist and colleague of Mike Poulton) had the distinction of winning the grand first prize. Her erudition put the rest of the membership (who had stirred up mischief and offered all sorts of routine excuses for failure) to shame! We do hope she will soon become a member of the club.

Faunal , Floral and Other Reports

We are again able to publish a fairly complete set of reports and notes for 2003. Unfortunately Bill Moodie was unable to spend much time in the Valley this year and therefore we cannot present a report on fungi. We are fortunate to have his related contributions on this topic in this bulletin.

Weather and Travel Notes for 2003 by Bob and Cath Mansell

Weather facts and figures recorded in the garden (Holly Lane ,Smethwick) and elsewhere. Temperatures recorded in Fahrenheit.

January

January 1st: Wednesday -49° max temp. Mild. A three mile walk into Oldbury along the main road saw the following in flower: wild radish, shepherd's purse, groundsel, daisy, red dead nettle, common field speedwell, common chickweed buttercup, dandelion, gorse, & broom. Was this indicative of things to come?
January 3rd We woke up to a mixture of sleet & snow which continued until early afternoon (max temp. 35°). Night temp. min. was 30°.
January 7th The night temperature fell to 23°. Blue daytime skies and a cold S.E.wind saw a max. temperature of 35°F. Moscow went down to 13° and we thought it was cold here!
January 12th Day temp. 35°max. The night temp. went up to 48°.
The temperatures hovered in the mid 40s until January 27th then rose to 54° with plenty of sunshine. Hazel and green alkanet were seen in flower during a canal towpath ride. By the end of the month it was back down to 35° max with some snow in the evening.

February

February 1st 42° max. & 34° min. Lots of sunshine.

February 5th. 2 hours of snow in the morning, after a night with temperatures ranging from 29° to 35°. The temperature next day soared to 48°- cow parsley, dog's mercury and hairy bittercress were all seen in flower.

February 13th 33°max.was warm enough for coltsfoot, greater periwinkle and oregon grape to show on a 20 mile towpath cycle ride along the Walsall canal with Cath. The night temperature fell to 25°.

February 23rd This day saw recently rising temperatures reach 52°and the first rain for 12 days.

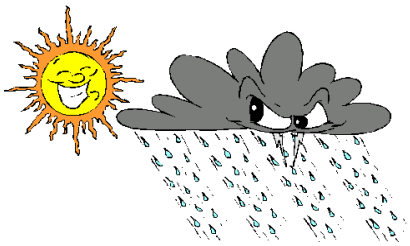
March

March 1st 50°max.on a bright day with some cloud. Cath spotted stinking hellebore on our cycle ride along the Minworth canal. Are things getting warmer? The flowers we are seeing must give some indication.

March 3rd Listened to the regional weather forecast telling me to expect a mild sunny day, so I decided to ride towards the Clee Hills. The day was overcast, breezy and not mild (at 45°), but I did see my first skylark of the year at Alveley and a dead badger by the roadside.

March 24thThe temperature was up to 60° and a super cycle ride to the foothills of the Clee Hills saw two skylarks and sweet violet in flower.

March 25th 60° again with a 50mile ride along the Teme Valley and more dead badgers- clear blue skies. With temperatures peaking at 61° on the 27th we saw ivy leafed toadflax, alexanders and grape hyacinth in the Shrewsbury area. The month had been generally sunny and damp.



April

April 1st 48° max and 37° min. A showery, breezy start to the month. A ride round Chillington Hall on the 4th saw butterbur flowering in quantity, enjoying the 60° temperature. Some over-wintering redwing were still present and the sighting of a holly blue butterfly was a first for the year.

April 8th gave us a first sighting of swallows at Drakes Broughton and an expedition on the 15th into South Warwickshire was enjoyed under hazy sunshine at a temperature of 73°. The warm spell persisted until the 19th after which more uncertain weather saw the month out.

May

May 1st 60°max.and 40°min. Sunshine and showers saw in the new month.
May 5th provided a sunny morning at 62° and an afternoon hailstorm. The following day saw hail in the morning. Eleven days of mixed weather followed with temperatures around 60° accompanied by showers and the odd thunderstorm in the evenings.
May 29th was warm at 76° and this heralded a hot end to the month with 81° on the 31st.

June

June commenced with a visit to Holland. During 10 days of cycling the weather was very similar to that in England, varying from cool & showery to hot & sunny. 50 eider ducks were seen at Breezland.
June 13th Back in England we encountered a hot spell with daytime temperatures from 70° to 80°. More cycling and hedgerows full of flowers.
June 27th saw drizzly rain on and off during the whole day. Generally a warm month, night-time temperatures not dipping below 50°.

July

July 1st The month started with temperatures around 62° and with short heavy showers. Similar temperatures on the 3rd found us on a 25 mile Walsall and Rushall Canal ride. Cath spotted 58 species of wildflower. The water in places contained stretches of water lily some 100 yards in length.
July 9th 78° max. 66° at night.
July 10th . Cath and myself went on the train to Barmouth for a week's walking with the temperature in the high 80's. Highlights included juvenile ringed plover in woods by the Mawddach estuary, a lost juvenile red- breasted merganser near a large patch of monkey musk in the river Wnion close to the middle of Dolgellau and common sundew in boggy ground by Arthog falls.
July 20th to the end of the month saw day temperatures from 65°- 75° with sunshine and showers.

August

August 1st.The month came in with a damp showery morning and temperatures ranging from 52° to 70°. A hot spell, with day temperatures regularly in the eighties followed, as we based ourselves in Tenbury Wells for a few days of cycling.
August 9th Temperatures were 89° max. and 70° min. under blue skies in Sandwell. This was a day when Kent saw 101°- the hottest ever in Britain. This heat wave lasted from Aug.3rd to Aug.11thand dry warm weather persisted until August 27th.
August 28th was a rainy day- damp and drizzly throughout, with temperatures

ranging from 50°- 60°. The end of the month allowed good views of Mars on clear nights, but statistics revealed rainfall 77% down on normal values.

September

September 1st 68° max- a night time minimum of 50°.
On September 4th Cath and myself left for a fortnight's walking holiday on the Greek Island of Samos.
They were suffering from forest fires there (in common with so many Mediterranean areas this year).
The temperatures at Holly Lane rose to a maximum of 77° and a minimum of 50°. The 23rd of the month saw some abatement of temperatures, but statistics showed that we had experienced the sunniest seven months since 1770. It had been exceptionally wet in Moscow and the wettest summer on the East coast of N. America for 40 years

October

October 1st 62° max. Sunny periods – breezy from the South West with temperatures dropping to 47° at night. The 4th saw light rain for most of the day and the night temperature fell to 34°.
October 9th. It became warm again with temperatures rising to 66°. The warm bright conditions stayed for some three days accompanied by 2 nuthatches in the garden. Where did they come from? The end of the month saw temperatures falling- a final day at 47° producing an inch of rainfall.

November

November 1st Daytime temperature 48°max in sunshine turning to rain in mid-evening with a night min. of 41°. The 6th was cloudy, dull and damp all day, yet with a temperature of 55° max. A mild spell followed, ending on the 17th with a truly miserable damp day with day and night temperatures constant on 49°.
November 23rd saw the first night frost at 30°. The night of the 26th was close to freezing also, with heavy rain. At the end of the month the daytime temperature was 43° and the night, 39°.

December

December 1st Rainy (half an inch recorded) and cold, with temperatures 44° max.and 41° min.
Cold nights at 29° followed on December 7th and 8th,with foggy mornings becoming frequent.
December 21st was bright with a cold wind and a 28° frost at night.
Christmas Day temperatures were 48°max.and 45° min- not unusual for our current run of Christmas days. Temperatures dipped towards the end of the month with frost on the night of the 27th and snow flurries on the 28th and 30th.
December 31st saw the year ending with a bright morning slowly clouding over, followed by increasing rain and wind by nightfall (35°max and 32° min).

Although 2003 had been a pretty hot year, 1990 still holds the record in that respect. 2003 was merely the sunniest year since 1995 (probably to the surprise of many) and was the ninth driest year since 1903. So where does that put global warming theories? Actually I have found that the gravitational pull is increasing, because it is becoming harder to climb the hills on my bicycle!

Bob & Cath Mansell

Mammal Report

ORDER: INSECTIVORA (Insectivores)

Scientific Name	Common Name	Type of Record
Erinaceus europaeus	Hedgehog.	RC & S
Talpa europaea	Mole.	Mole hills
Sorex araneus	Common Shrew.	DS, S & LT

ORDER: CHIROPTERA (Bats)

Nyctalus noctula	Noctule.	S
Pipistrellus pipistrellus	Pipistrelle.	S

ORDER: LAGOMORPHA (Hares & rabbits)

Oryctolagus cuniculus	Rabbit.	S

ORDER: RODENTIA (Rodents)

Apodemus sylvaticus	Wood mouse.	S,CC & LT
Arvicola terrestris	Water vole.	S & F
Clethrionomys glareolus	Bank vole.	S & LT
Microtus agrestis	Field vole.	S, CC & LT
Micromys minutus	Harvest mouse.	CB Possible nest to be confirmed.
Mus musculus	House mouse.	S
Rattus norvegicus	Brown rat.	RC & S

Scirius carolinensis	Grey squirrel.	RC & S

ORDER: CARNIVORA (Carnivores)

**Lutra lutra*	Otter.	S
Mustela erminea	Stoat.	S
Mustela nivalis	Weasel.	S
Vulpes vulpes	Red Fox.	RC & S

ORDER: ARTIODACTYLA(Goats, Deer & Sheep)

**Muntiacus reevesi*	Muntjac.	S

Key to Mammal recording method:

* New Record
CC. Cat Capture
CB. Captive Breeding & Release Programme
DS. Dead Specimen
F. Feeding evidence
LT. Live Trap
RC. Road Casualty
S. Sighting

The 2003 records were compiled from the RSPB Daily Sightings Log and observations by Park Farm Rangers. Other observations and records are drawn from Paul Essex & Janet Grangers' extensive live trapping and Harvest mouse release program, together with other contributions from Sandnats members, my own observations, sightings and road causality records in and around the Valley survey area.

Comments

We have a two new additions to our mammal sighting list, those of Britain's smallest resident deer, Muntjac Muntiacus reevesi and Britain's largest aquatic carnivore, the European Otter *Lutra lutra* .

The muntjac

Whether the same muntjac or not, a few days before the Valley sighting, Sheila Hadley had a report of a small deer standing for over half an hour in the corner of the Boulton Road School playing fields. She was pretty disappointed because no one told her it was out there and she did not see it herself while most of the rest of the school did!

Although this record is a couple of miles out of our survey area, the nearby railway embankment would have provided an ideal access corridor into the Valley where it was later to be seen. The sighting was near the Newton Road bridge,

only a few hundred yards from this same railway which arcs round to the East of the Valley from Boulton Road, through Handsworth Park to Hampstead, North through Ray Hall and on to Bescot, often following the path of the River Tame.

The otter

Patti & I watched a five minute long video of an otter trying to drag a very large Koi Carp which it had stolen from a local house owner's canal side garden fish pond. This last fish was the biggest- all the others had been systematically stolen over the past few nights. It was easily filmed because the koi was too large to pass through the otters getaway hole in the garden fence and the gills of the fish got firmly wedged. The otter returned on a couple of occasions to gorge on more of his quarry. After plundering all the fish from this pool, the otter then moved a few gardens further along the canal and found yet another fully stocked aquatic 'supermarket' -in fact the pool owners had to close their bedroom windows at night to get some sleep because of the otter's splashing antics! Apparently the house owners don't have this problem any more because he's eaten all their fish!

Although these events were not actually quite in the Valley survey area, otters are well known to be long distance travellers covering seven to ten miles in a night. I felt that this sighting, in the Rushall canal not far from our Bee Orchid field at the rear of Dartmouth High School, was important enough to mention, because it confirms that the quality of our local waterways has significantly improved over the last few years. An unconfirmed sighting of an otter swimming in the River Tame section near the RSPB reserve suggests that they may indeed already be active in the Valley proper. The film of the 'garden pool thief' was lent to me by Jeff McBride of Walsall Countryside Services.

Other Mammal News

Paul & Janet's Harvest mouse release program now has 480 releases to their credit and I think they must be congratulated for all their hard work. Unfortunately as yet no recaptures, although possible nesting evidence has been found this year. Their full harvest mouse release project report can be found following my report.

Noctule and pipistrelle bat populations seem to be remaining stable with many sightings around the Park farm buildings. Various bat species were seen in flight on our monthly meetings throughout the summer but none was positively identified.

The RSPB centre sightings throughout the year included, red fox, weasel, hedgehog, water vole, muntjac and (tentatively) otter. Unfortunately they included another possible American mink sighting. Readers are reminded that weasels may have been active over a considerable period here because Nick recorded one with a single youngster on June 10th 2001 (by the centre) and further RSPB sightings of them were recorded in the 2003 log on 30th April, 14th June and Sept 11th.

As usual unfortunate road casualty victims and cat captures helped to swell our records. Throughout the year I recorded the bodies of red fox, grey squirrel and brown rat on the valleys roadside verges.

The Valley's rabbit population appears to be increasing rapidly with more records of sightings in the Hill Top, Forge Mill Farm, Dartmouth Golf Course and Sot's Hole. Alas, there are still no sightings of hare.
Many thanks to all who have contributed records.

AMPHIBIA (frogs, toads & newts)

Family: SALAMANDRIDAE (Newts & salamanders)
Triturus vulgaris Smooth newt

Family: BUFONIDAE (Toads)
Bufo bufo Common toad

Family: RANIDAE (Frogs)
Rana temporaria Common frog

The winter & spring of 2003 was yet another warm and wet one, All of the Valley pools and streams remained full with high rainfall and above average temperatures ideal for the amphibian spring breeding season.

Again for our fourth year, both frogs and toads were well recorded and found to be active often throughout the winter, all three species of the above amphibians (at all stages of their reproduction cycles) being recorded throughout the year. Sadly I only received a couple of smooth newt records from others.

Unfortunately, again no great crested newt (*Triturus triturus*) adult or larvae records were received and so I cannot really comment on their Valley status.

REPTILIA (Reptiles)
Red-eared turtles (*Chrysemys scripta elegans*) have again been reported but I am still awaiting further details and species confirmation.
Another unconfirmed sighting was of a 'green'? grass snake. Neil at the RSPB centre is trying to confirm this record's origin for us.
No other records of reptile sightings were received but none was anticipated.

AJPurcell.

The Harvest Mouse Reintroduction Project
A summary of all Harvest Mice releases up to November 2003.

Site one: **Marigold Marsh**
50 released June 2000, TOTAL 50.

Site two: **Ray Hall.**
79 released 22nd July ,2000.
54 released 9th September, 2000.
10 released 1st October, 2000.
17 released 1st August, 2001. TOTAL 160.

Site three **35 acre meadow**
60 released 10th May, 2001.
50 released 5th April, 2003.
25 released 6th April, 2003.
35 released 29th June, 2003.
20 released 5th July, 2003.
15 released 6th July, 2003.
15 released 25th August, 2003, TOTAL 220.

Site four **Forge Mill Farm.**
50 released 29th June, 2002. TOTAL 50.

In all, 480 Harvest Mice were released from June 2000, to August 2003.

Sites three and four are only divided by a railway line and site one is close enough to allow mice to reach site four. However they differ considerably, allowing four comparative studies.

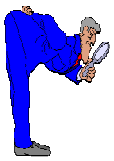
Events

Saturday 2nd October 03**:** Janet Granger and Paul Essex went over to the 35 acre meadow to set a total of 25 Longworth traps and four soot markers (made with kitchen foil sooted by holding a lit candle under it). These were stuck onto card with double- sided tape and covered with a plastic roof.

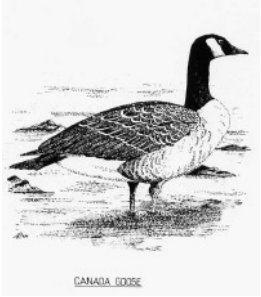
Sunday 26th October 03: we went to Forge Mill Farm to meet any others who might have been interested in retrieving the traps, to see what (if anything) had been caught. 5 Traps had been set on the Forge Mill Farm side of the railway- two sets of two (one at ground level and one raised on canes up to 18 inches high) with the odd trap positioned by some bramble. The remaining 20 traps were on the 35 Acre Meadow, set in pairs.24 Traps were on loan from Jackie Underhill and were collected by Janet Granger, after a mad dash down the Motorway on the Friday evening!
There was a good turn out of people (10 in all) plus one small dog and we were pleased to welcome them all. The day's catch was poor, with a third of the traps

containing long- tailed field mice (*Apodemus sylvaticus*)- they were even in two traps up to 18 inches from ground level with no easy way up and may well have jumped. We were obviously hoping to have captured harvest mice.
We had one dead common shrew *Sorex araneus*, despite having baited all traps with a mix of food, even to suit insectivores. Unfortunately shrews are highly strung and are prone to death by shock. Sometimes during the summer months they can be found dead on paths with no visible injury- this can be caused by fighting over mates.
No short- tailed voles (*Microtus agrestis*) were caught. Some people call these field voles, but true field voles (*Microtus arvalis*) are not actually native to mainland Britain, the two species differing mainly in shape of the molars (teeth) and also slightly in body dimensions, and soles of feet.
We did however find a globular nest amongst some wind blown dead thistle stalks. This was taken away by Claire Wilmer (a young woman with the group who had previously worked on analysis of small mammal hairs). Hopefully she would also be able to check the weaving of the grass, as harvest mice chew the stems longitudinally in order to plait them together and keep elasticity. We would welcome her return, with other experienced workers, to join Tim Moughin (County Mammal Recorder) in carrying out some extensive future monitoring of the 35 acre meadow, as this could be a prime site for the elusive harvest mouse.
Sara Carvalho (EcoRecord & the Birmingham and Black Country Mammal Group) said she would keep us informed on the results of the nest analysis. Tim Moughtin suggested that we borrowed one of his special markers to record foot-prints because our sooty markers had recorded only smudgy footprints and con-densation marks and proved useless. Following this, a discussion on alternative methods of monitoring took place.
On our return journey to the car park just behind the Crematorium in Forge Lane a young rabbit was seen. There was also a good view of a pair of Stonechats near the entrance to the 35 acre meadow (spotted by Mike Poulton).
The group saw a need for involvement of additional expertise in the monitoring of small mammals. Paul Essex is always be prepared to do monitoring exercises and add to his considerable existing knowledge, but welcomes additional input from individuals or organizations able to progress this important survey.
Please note we are hoping to run a similar open day, probably in July 2004. This time there will be significant differences, but more about that later.

Paul Essex and Janet Granger.



PLEASE DO EVERYTHING YOU CAN TO SUPPORT THIS IMPORTANT PROJECT - WE MUST REDOUBLE EFFORTS TO UNCOVER MORE ABOUT THE FATE OF THE RELEASED MICE.
ED.& SANDNATS COMMITTEE

CANADA GOOSE 

BY T.PARKER

Sandwell valley Bird report. October to December 2003

October

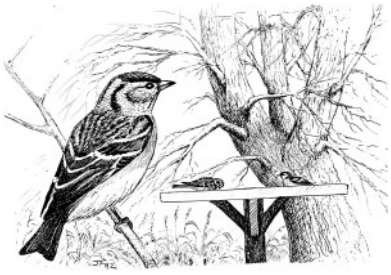
Thirteen snipe were counted at Forge Mill Lake on the 1st, when two dunlins were also present. Stonechats were to be seen around Swan Pool during the early part of the month, with two there on the 6th and three on the island on the 10th.

A pair of gadwall was noted at Ice House Lake on the 6th and was still there at the year's end. On the 7th, over twenty meadow pipits were on Swan pool Meadow. The following day, the first goosander of the winter had returned to Forge Mill Lake.

A late whinchat was seen at Forge Mill Farm on the 13th, whilst returning redwings and fieldfares were noted over the next few days. More than one hundred wigeon were counted at Forge Mill Lake on the 17th. A single brambling was around the RSPB reserve on the 19th and again on the 23rd.

November

A barn owl was seen in the horse paddocks on the 5th and the following day a tawny owl was in the vicinity of Hill Top Golf course. A long-tailed duck was at Swan Pool on the 8th – the first one seen in the Valley for several years. On the same day, at 8.50 in the morning, four whooper swans flew over Swan Pool in the direction of Forge Mill Lake but were not seen again. The 21st saw a shelduck on Forge Mill Lake. Goosander numbers gradually built up during the month to a peak of 29 at Forge Mill Lake on the 30th when in excess of one hundred and twenty wigeon were also present. Also on the 30th two tawny owls were seen near Forge Mill Lake.

BRAMBLING 
BY JOHN FORTEY

December

A single brambling made several visits to the RSPB feeding station on the reserve, being observed there on the 2nd and again on the 6th. Two stonechats were seen near Swan Pool on the 7th.

The 13th saw the goosander flock peak at sixty on Forge Mill Lake although the birds move freely around, with several regularly at Ice House Lake and twenty-nine noted at Dartmouth Park on the 8th.

On the 10th a female goldeneye arrived at Forge Mill Lake and stayed for several days. Other sightings at the same location were sixty -three teal on the 13th, seventy- two wigeon on the 14th and fifty-three lapwings on the 16th.

A water pipit was in the RSPB marsh on the 13th, being regularly seen at the same location into January.

Paul Smith

Thanks to the staff at the RSPB reserve and the contributors to their log book. Thanks also to Sandwell Valley Countryside Rangers for their observations.

AT THIS POINT I AM APPEALING FOR AUTHORS TO PRODUCE (OR ATTEMPT TO GET SOMEONE ELSE TO PROVIDE) ART WORK TO ACCOMPANY ARTICLES. THIS BULLETIN CONTAINS HARDLY ANY ORIGINAL WORK– MOST OF IT IS COPIED FROM THE STOCK OF FINE WORK PRODUCED FOR PAST BULLETINS. ED

Botany Report 2003

John Shripton undertook a snowdrop *Galanthus nivalis* count early in 2003, which rewarded him with a total of 17 separate sightings. He reports 7 clumps from Johnny's Wood, an increase of two from the previous year. 9 clumps from various parts of Priory Wood and one along the hedgerow in Camp Lane. My early Spring outing was to All Saints churchyard to see the display of crocus flowers naturalised on and around old graves. Many of the plants have formed large patches. They are mainly cultivars of crocus vernus, i.e. 'king of the whites', 'pickwick', 'little dorritt' and 'remembrance'. The other crocus species growing here include C.'dutch yellow' and *C. tommasinianus*, which can be found in both dark and pale purple colour, forms. This species seeds along paths and into the open grassland.

To see crocuses at their best, a bright sunny day should be chosen during February or early March, as the flowers do not open in dull weather. Snowdrops are also frequent on graves in the churchyard and some clumps are quite large but they have mainly stayed where originally planted with only the occasional patch seeded into the surrounding grassland.

The RSPB Reserve was the venue for the May meeting of Sandnats. This was an opportunity to observe both bird and plant life to be found here during the spring and we were rewarded on both counts. The meeting started well with sightings of kingfisher and little ringed plover and both common vetch *Vicia sativa ssp. segetalis* and bush vetch *Vicia sepium* were to be seen in flower. Several plants of virginia stock *Malcolmia maritime* were noted in the raised bed near the centre along with a corn salad *Valerianella* sp. species which unfortunately could not be named at the time due to lack of ripe seed which is necessary for positive identification. On a future visit towards the end of the month the plant had gone. Disappointment was short lived when nearby a large patch of fine-leaved vetch *Vicia tenuifolia* was detected in full flower. This is a showy member of the pea family, similar to, and often mistaken for the much commoner tufted vetch *Vicia cracca* but flowering starts earlier and the plant tends to scramble more than *V cracca.*

Early June saw Sandnats in Priory Wood observing the rhododendron *rhododendron ponticum* plantation two years on from the clearance undertaken by Roy Croucher. It was noted that strong re-growth was already taking place and unless roots were removed in the near future the work would prove to be futile. The long-established rhododendron plantation has further depleted the poor acidic soil in this area. As one would expect, other species found here are few, however, good patches of rose-bay willow-herb *Chamerion angustifolia*, american willow-herb *Epilobium ciliatum* and broad-leaved willow-herb *Epilobium montanum* were thriving in the open areas and in some places there was an abundance of ash *Fraxinus excelsior* seedlings. The occasional male fern *Dryopteris filix-mas* was also noted but there was little else to be found. New for this part of the Valley was three-veined sandwort *Moheringia trinerva*, a solitary patch was noted alongside the path. We were also intrigued by a cut-leaved variety of ivy *Hedera helix* scrambling up a nearby tree. Ivy is Europe's sole representative of the Araliaceae family, a large tropical and sub-tropical family of flowering plants and is happy growing in deep shade where it scrambles across the woodland floor or up any nearby trees. Our walk took us around nearby Ice-house and Cascade Lakes and the following *Carex* species were observed, remote sedge *C remota*, wood sedge *C sylvatica*, greater pond-sedge *C riparia* and pendulous sedge *C pendula,* the latter often planted in gardens and quite at home in dry as well as moist soils. Both yellow water-lily *Nuphar lutea* and fringed water-lily *Nymphoides peltata* were flowering well in Cascade Lake which also contains a large patch of water iris *Iris laevigata*, which was introduced several years ago and has now formed a large stand.

During the middle of June an exciting bee orchid *Ophrys apifera* discovery was made from Ray Hall Sewage Works. A colony of more than 200 plants were found by Paul Essex, Janet Granger and myself, growing along the path and on the two plateaus of the site along with the other Ray Hall speciality grass

vetchling. *Lathyrus nissolia* It will be interesting to see if Ray Hall is to become an established site for bee orchids. (see report in previous bulletin). In the context of orchids, John Shrimpton reported 108 unspecified orchid spikes in the wildflower meadow by the pylons and reckons these have recently been spreading rapidly.

During early July an attractive patch of 'white flowered' common knapweed *Centaurea nigra* was discovered growing in the butterfly meadow in the RSPB Reserve. This is an interesting 'sport', from the usual colour of pinky-purple. White flowered forms of many species are occasionally found and this particular plant 'stood out' at the side of the path, attracting many insect visitors as I observed it on a warm and sunny morning. Crown vetch *Securigera varia* continues to thrive near to the Centre. Large patches can be seen alongside the path and particularly abundant between the Centre and the marsh area. In the marsh during one of my recording sessions, common meadow-rue *Thalictrum flavum* was re-found. This species was first discovered when the site was recorded in 1994. A small patch still clings on (although suffering slightly in the dry conditions of the 2003 summer), amongst rank vegetation in front of the marsh. It is a declining species throughout the British Isles and is absent from the rest of the Valley.

HYMALAYAN  BALSAM

Members of Sandnats met Mike Bloxham at Sot's Hole for the August meeting. Descending into the woodland, stands of Japanese knotweed *Fallopia japonica* and himalayan balsam *Impatiens glandulifera* were discussed and it was agreed that both were well established despite chemical sprayings of knotweed and hand pulling of balsam in recent years. It was also noted that there was no sign of any weedkilling having taken place during the current year. From the woodland we climbed the bank to the edge of farmer Brown's field, which is now part of the 'Millennium Forest'. In small clearings around planted trees, annuals, bugloss *Anchusa arvensis* and field pansy *Viola arvensis,* along with perennials, mouse-ear hawkweed *Pilosella officinarum* and sheep's sorrel *Rumex acetosella* were noted but they are disappearing as taller herbs and grasses become established. The discovery of *Lactuca virosa* has been described in the previous bulletin (Dec.2003). Nearby our observations detected many skeletal remains of common

ragwort *Senecio jacobae* An abundance of cinnabar moth caterpillars this summer had stripped the leaves from all the plants in the area. Individuals were found feeding on nearby sheep's sorrel in a vain attempt to satisfy their hunger.

The remaining part of the summer was spent finalising the botanical recording of the RSPB Reserve. The first records of plants to be found on the Reserve had been made by Andy Warren, the Reserve Warden back in 1985. He stated that 'some species had still to be identified, including all of the aquatics'. Eight years later, in 1993, a survey was carried out by Cath Mansell, Les Goodby, Mike Mountford and myself, in which 260 taxa were listed.

The Reserve, although small, contains a variety of different habitats and is undoubtedly more species-rich than any other part of the Valley. A summary reveals the following:-

- In 1985 a total of 185 taxa were recorded
- In 1993 a total of 260 taxa were recorded.
- The 2002-3 survey has provided 289 taxa,.
- 89 species recorded in 2002-3 were <u>not</u> found during 1993.
- 58 species recorded in 1993 have <u>not</u> been found during the present survey.

Notable species encountered during the survey

- Common Meadow-rue *Thalictrum flavum* - A nationally declining species occuring nowhere else in Sandwell Valley. Only one patch was found which was suffering slightly in the dry conditions of 2003. This species can only be described as 'hanging on' as it has not spread any further into the reserve since the 1993 survey.

- Hoary Mustard *Hirschfeldia incana* is an alien plant that is becoming well established on waste ground in our area although it still remains uncommon elsewhere.

- Crown Vetch *Securigera varia* has really taken off since its introduction with the grass seed mixture put down in the early years of the reserve. During the summer months it can be seen flowering profusely all through the grassland between the centre and the marsh.

- A large patch of Fine-leaved Vetch *Vicia tenuifolia* was discovered growing

alongside the path near the visitors centre during the present survey. This is an uncommon attractive member of the pea family not unlike Tufted Vetch.

 Dense-flowered Mullein *Verbascum densiflora* occurred during 2002 but had disappeared in 2003. This is an uncommon biennial species that produces vast quantities of long-lived dust-like seed and could occur again in the future.

 An unusual 'white-flowered' form of Black Knapweed *Centaurea nigra* was discovered in the meadow during 2003.

 Brown Sedge *Carex disticha* is locally abundant in the marsh but is absent from the rest of Sandwell Valley and is uncommon elsewhere in Birmingham and the Black Country.

 Shaggy Soldier *Galinsoga quadriradiata*, a South American annual first recorded in Britain in 1909 and on the increase in Birmingham and the Black Country.

 Green-field Speedwell *Veronica agrestis,* an uncommon annual of disturbed ground.

 Small Toadflax *Chaenorhinum minus,* uncommon annual here- usually found on old railways & arable land.

Work on a proposed 'Flora for Birmingham and the Black Country' intensified as we concluded the seventh year of recording work. The majority of the central and southwest parts of the region are now surveyed, but some parts of Birmingham and eastern parts of the survey area still need to be looked at. If anyone is interested in getting involved in this fascinating, unique survey, please get in touch with or Sara Carvalho at EcoRecord, c/o Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country.

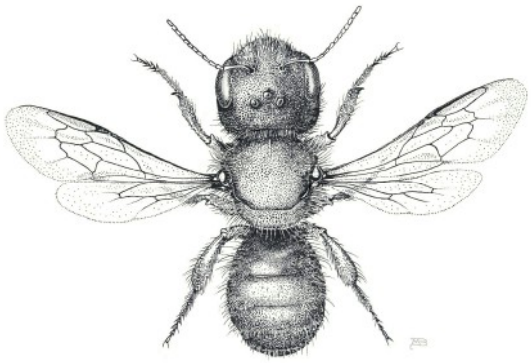
Sandwell Valley new botanical records 2003
Asteraceae *Centaurea nigra'alba'*- black knapweed (white flowered form) / RSPB butterfly meadow / SP0392 / July / native / one
Asteraceae *Lactuca virosa* – great lettuce / above Sot's Hole at edge of Farmer Brown's Field / SP0192 / 06-8 / native? / one / MP

Mike Poulton

Entomology Report
The year provided a valuable opportunity to survey part of the Eastwood Road

site (Hamstead) for invertebrates and the outcome was a list of 144 insect species. Included was the 'blue mason bee' (*Osmia caerulescens*) which had the distinction of being the 126th aculeate species to be recorded from the Sandwell Valley survey area. Aculeates are distinguished from other Hymenoptera by having a sting (in females) instead of an ovipositor that inserts eggs into a host and are also the only insect group containing representatives with highly evolved characteristics enabling social living. This *Osmia* is one of the solitary bees in the group, very closely related to the red wall - mining bee *Osmia rufa* (the subject of many anguished phone calls to the Wildlife Trust from those who think it will damage the house). The genus uses all sorts of nesting cavities and members have powerful jaws for moving material. *Osmia caerulescens* is a distinctive wasp, being smaller than *rufa* and much darker, the abdomen having characteristic dark bluish reflections in the female. According to Edward Saunders (1896), it prefers old timber (such as posts), but will also nest in earth banks and old walls. Reputedly widespread and common, this bee is quite likely to be overlooked and there are few Staffordshire records for it. I am indebted to Mr. George Else (Hymenoptera Department BMNH) for confirming the identification.

BLUE MASON BEE (X 5)



Eastwood Road also provided us with *Anacampis populella*, our 553rd lepidopteran species. Two nice variants of this common species were caught on tree trunks. I was fortunate to have this species identified by Dr K.Bland (co-author of the new Gelechid key) whilst attending a dipterists' meeting in Edinburgh. Some more micro moths still await determination. In all, 2003 was a mixed year for lepidoptera, a sad event being the apparent loss of our marbled white butterfly colony near the RSPB centre. This was the second year with no sightings in spite of the fact that many observers were looking out for it. The return of the small copper in some numbers was a definite cause for rejoicing. Scarce for several years, it was spotted three times in early June, appearing again

in late August, with a good showing in September (the RSPB log recording a number on the 16th).
Valley dragonflies appear to have maintained numbers with black tailed skimmer, emperor and four *Aeshna* species recorded, the migrant hawker (*Aeshna mixta*) being very frequent. The broad -bodied chaser also maintained its numbers with sightings from many pools. A very pleasing feature was the presence of banded demoiselle by the river in June & July. This beautiful creature seems now to be a fixture and a further testament to the improvement of the waters of the Tame during recent times. For much of this data, I am indebted to the staff at the RSPB reserve who consistently record very diverse observations and also (with untiring energy and enthusiasm) encourage local people and their children to take an interest in all aspect of natural history.
M.Bloxham.

RUNNING IN THE BACKGROUND…….

AND NOW..SOME FINAL THOUGHTS AS WE LEAVE 2003……ED

Nature conservation rarely hits the headlines, and is not often uppermost in people's minds (SVNC members excepted of course). Even so it is recognised in public policy making at all levels, legislated for and resourced, even if we do not think any of these things are done well enough, or with sufficient understanding and commitment. In the last year or so some background changes have been taking place which may help to generate more support for our beleaguered biodiversity.

First there is new Regional Planning Guidance. This covers the six counties in the West Midlands Region, is developed by the local authorities and amended and confirmed by the Government. Once agreed planners have to take account of the guidance in preparing local plans and dealing with planning applications. There is a section on the natural environment which includes policies on nature conservation and, for the first time in such a document "Greenery, Urban Green-space and Public Spaces". This requires, amongst other things, that "local authorities should identify urban areas in need of more greenspace" and that they should do this inter alia by "ensuring adequate protection is given to key features, such as parks, linear walkways, rivers valleys, canals and public open spaces". The guidance also has a section called "Protecting, managing and enhancing the Region's Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Resources". This includes information about, and targets for the restoration of, priority habitats, such as woodland, heathland and wetland.

Secondly, the nature conservation organisations in the Region (under the auspices of the West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership – www.wmbp.org) are preparing a

Regional Biodiversity Strategy, linked to Regional Planning Guidance and other initiatives. In relation to nature conservation this identifies what is important, what needs to be done to protect, improve and manage it, and how people in different sectors and organisations can contribute to looking after wildlife.

Thirdly, the four Black Country boroughs (Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton) are promoting the concept of a Black Country Urban Heritage Park. This is not a superpark situated in one place, but a strategic approach to the management of all parks, nature reserves, open spaces and the canal system throughout the four boroughs. It is a recognition of the importance of the Black Country's natural heritage, the need for people to be able to enjoy formal and informal open spaces, and the advantages of managing the spaces as an interconnected whole, rather than as lots of separate sites. There are some risks to nature in the ideas being put forward (we may see the return of demands for a giant fountain in the Sandwell Valley or a laser display on the Rowley Hills) but there are great opportunities as well.

Fourthly, Sandwell continues to develop its six town councils, including one for West Bromwich. These are public meetings to address issues important to people in their locality. Cradley people can address things in Cradley, and West Bromwich people can address things in West Bromwich. They do not have quite the power and influence over decision-making and spending as Birmingham appears to be giving to its constituency-based committees, but they are a step in the direction of devolving power to local communities.

Members of SVNC could do worse than involve themselves in West Bromwich Town Council meetings when items affecting the Sandwell Valley are being discussed, or suggesting such items for discussion. With the requirements of Regional Planning Guidance to support them, the Council's support for the Black Country Urban Heritage Park to justify action, and the Regional Biodiversity Strategy to inform and guide such action, they might be able to progress nature conservation in the Valley and surrounding areas as never before.
PRShirley.