



# NEWSLETTER AUTUMN / WINTER 2023



Welcome to Sandnats Autumn / Winter  
Newsletter



Grey Phalarope- An unusual visitor to Dartmouth Park - photo by Andy Purcell

If you are inspired by what you read in this newsletter,  
please send lively articles (300-500 words) for future editions to:

Mike Bloxham [mikebloxham@talktalk.net](mailto:mikebloxham@talktalk.net)

Photos and shorter “nuggets” are also welcome.

The deadline for the Spring edition is Friday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2024.

## The President

*Peter Shirley*

### Is the Green Belt Outdated?

Whether or not to build on green belt land is a continuing controversy which bubbles away beneath the surface of the wider issue of the country's desperate need for new houses. In recent months Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has come under pressure to allow development on green belt land. At the same time the Labour leader, Keir Starmer, has said that to do so will contribute to provision of affordable housing. Their comments have resulted in the usual knee-jerk reaction from those who think the green belt should be sacrosanct.

The same thing happened when Tony Juniper, the Chair of Natural England, also said that building homes on green belt land should be seen as part of the answer to the housing crisis, and that this can and should be combined with protection and improvements for green spaces, wildlife and nature.

So, what is the green belt? The idea may go back to a tree belt around 7th Century Medina, and Elizabeth I imposed one around London to help stop the spread of the plague. In 1875 Octavia Hill, one of the founders of the National Trust, coined the term for areas surrounding towns and cities which should remain broadly rural. It was enshrined in planning policies after the second world war. Now there is a designated green belt surrounding the West Midlands County, as well as cutting through it between Birmingham and Coventry in the area called the Meriden gap.

Although linked to land-use, the designation is about locality, and is nothing to do with the quality of the land. Common misconceptions that green belt land must be more attractive, better for wildlife and have greater amenity value than areas within conurbations, especially so-called brownfield sites, are simply mistaken. People need access to wildlife-rich open spaces close to where they live, and a network of such places provides inter-connected habitats where the wildlife can rest, nest and feed. Much green belt land is inaccessible to the public and a desert for wildlife.

Perhaps the old idea of green belt is now outdated, and no longer (if it ever was) fit for purpose. Planning applications should be considered on their merits, and not be rejected out of hand if they encroach on the green belt. The true test of their acceptability is the impact or contribution they will make to the natural environment and local amenity within the communities of which they are a part.

The Sandwell Valley, of course, is both mainly green belt and of high quality for both people and wildlife. Various developments have been fought off over the years and long may this be so, whatever planning reforms appear.

Peter Shirley 30/11/23

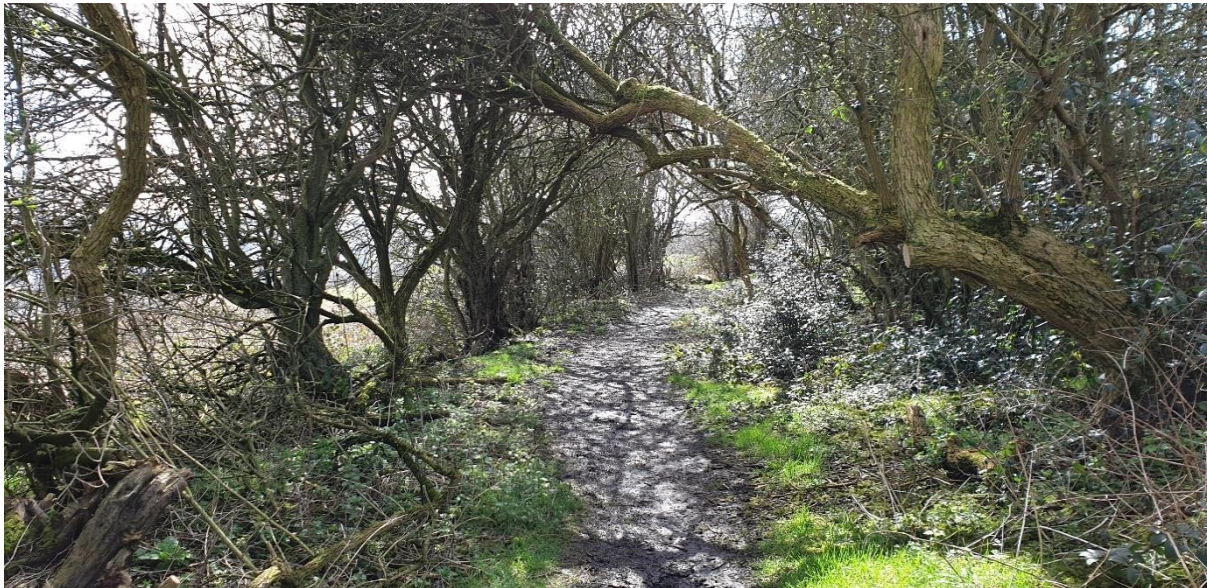
## Portway Hill Butterfly Walk

*Report & Photos by Mike Poulton*

The June Sandnats butterfly walk on Portway Hill, held jointly with Friends of Rowley Hills, coincided nicely with it being one of the peak months of the year to see butterflies on the wing. Weather conditions on the day were quite favourable with a mix of sunshine and cloud and feeling quite humid.

18 members and Friends gathered in St Brades Close at 11am and following a briefing on the route we would be taking and some of the butterflies and day-flying moths we were expecting to see, we headed onto the site, picking up the track behind gardens in St Brades Close and passing through land subjected to a wildfire in July 2022, now in recovery with extensive regrowth.

Joining the main PROW, on reaching the double-hedgerow known locally as 'Church Walk' we headed along the shorter section of this ancient walkway to a point where the now up for sale Grade II Listed Old Portway Farmhouse, came into view.



**'Church Walk'**

From here we retraced our steps along Church Walk and headed towards the highest section of the Portway Hill site where Lye Cross Colliery stood until the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This top section of the site includes a meadow enclosed on two sides by old hedgerow and now infested by hawthorn scrub, which over the past few years has seen extensive clearance work carried out by the Friends of Rowley Hills group. As a result, this meadow is now one of the prime locations for many of the butterflies we were looking out for today. From research, it appears that this meadow was never a part of the extensive quarrying and mining operations that went on during the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.



Following the track around the perimeter of the meadow we then made our way back downhill, heading towards the Wildlife Trust owned land where a short break was taken, giving the group the opportunity to take a close-up look at the Black Country Global Geosite 23 dolerite intrusion.



**Black Country Global Geosite 23 - Portway Hill - Blue Rock Quarry Dolerite Intrusion**

Suitably refreshed we then made our way around the lower open parts of the site before heading up the recently reopened path, leading us through the old canyon where quarrying of the dolerite first began. This brought us out onto the highest part of Bury Hill Park, with fine views towards Sutton Coldfield and the centre of Birmingham.

From here it was a short walk back to our start point.

Summarising the fauna and flora of today's visit, we saw Marbled Whites and Ringlets, both butterflies now nearing the peak of their season on the wing. Other butterflies recorded were, Small Heath, Meadow Brown, Speckled Wood, Small Skipper, Red Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell, and Common Blue. Day-flying moths encountered were, Latticed Heath, Burnet Companion, Silver Y, 6-Spot Burnet, and 5-Spot Burnet. Additionally, one of our



party, Matt Hadlington, demonstrated the effectiveness of pheromones at luring certain species of moth. After placing his Six-belted Clearwing Moth pheromone among patches of the caterpillars' food plant Bird's-foot Trefoil, several of the moths appeared as if from nowhere.

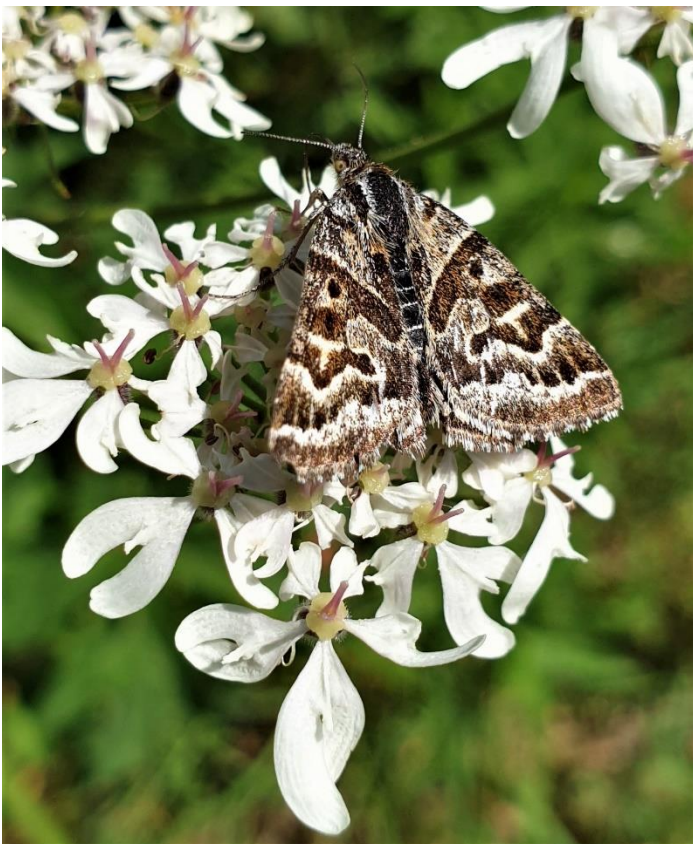
In addition to the butterflies and day-flying moths seen today, some of the site's many plants were now at their flowering best. A small selection recorded on this visit were, Great lettuce, Bird's-foot Trefoil, Lesser Stitchwort, Musk-mallow, Peach-leaved Bellflower, Mouse-ear Hawkweed, Tall Mouse-ear Hawkweed, Lucerne, Reflexed Stonecrop, Field Scabious, Meadow Vetchling, Foxglove, Yellow Oat-grass, and both Bee and Pyramidal Orchids.



Marbled White *Melanargia galathea*



Six-belted Clearwing *Bembecia ichneumoniformis* attracted to pheromone lure



Mother Shipton *Euclidia mi*





**Pyramidal Orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis***



**Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera***



## Sandwell Valley Dam Walk

Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> August 2023

Mike Bloxham.

Photos by Mick Shillam

Visit to the new sites around the completed river Tame dam with Andy Purcell and Mike Poulton



Following the reorganisation of this meeting from an earlier date, members were very pleased to meet on a pleasant sunny afternoon at the RSPB Centre for a short introduction regarding the coming walk by Andy Purcell. They made their way to the completely transformed target area lying between the railway and the river Tame with aroused curiosity.

All were fascinated to see the full extent of the sluice gate complex for the first time, before settling down for a close look at the

ecological consequences of the recent activity and the extent to which nature had managed to lead its own recovery programme on this unsightly scar in the landscape.



We all examined the new tree plantings that inevitably seem to follow as ecological sticking plaster on so many similar sites and witnessed the consequences of a lack of follow up, where little additional attention had been given to the welfare of the saplings. Plenty of valuable compensatory measures on the river course below the dam -mentioned in previous discussions- had not come to fruition and the opportunity to put in a small wider river section with an island is now probably lost.

Fortunately, nature had indeed thrown a renewed floral cloak over the site and members got to work discovering more about it. It is probable that a seed mixture had been applied, but currently we have little information on this. In any case, surprisingly



abundant growth had taken place and received plenty of attention for a considerable period before we finally packed in and returned to base.

Whilst the resultant species counts were not remarkable in any way, the refreshed site may well provide valuable open habitat in the future and any temptation to plant additional trees should be strenuously resisted!



The species noted included.....

#### Sandwell Valley Botanical Records - Dam area 19th August 2023

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*Achillea millefolium* (Yarrow), *Artemisia vulgaris* (Mugwort), *Atriplex prostrata* (Spear-leaved Orache),

*Centaurea nigra* (Common Knapweed), *Centaurea erythraea* (Common Centaury),

*Cerastium fontanum* (Common Mouse-ear), *Chenopodium album* (Fat Hen),  
*Chrysanthemum segetum* (Corn Marigold), *Cichorium intybus* (Chicory), *Cirsium arvense* (Creeping Thistle), *Cirsium vulgare* (Spear Thistle),

*Conyza Canadensis* (Canadian Fleabane), *Cynosurus cristatus* (Crested Dog's-tail), *Cytisus scoparius* (Broom),

*Daucus carota* (Wild Carrot), *Dipsacus fullonum* (Teasel), *Epilobium hirsutum* (Great Willowherb),

*Galeopsis tetrahit* (Common Hemp - Nettle), *Geranium pyrenaicum* (Hedge cranesbill),

*Hordeum murinum* (Wall Barley), *Hypericum maculatum* (Imperforate St John's Wort),

*Impatiens glandulifera* (Himalayan Balsam), *Lactuca serriola* (Prickly Lettuce), *Lathyrus pratensis* (Meadow Vetchling),

*Lolium perenne* (Perennial Rye - Grass), *Lotus corniculatus* (Common Bird's - foot Trefoil),

*Lythrum salicaria* (Purple Loosetrife), *Malva moschata* (Musk mallow- common and white variety),

*Matricaria discoidea* (Pineapple Mayweed), *Medicago lupulina* (Black Medick), *Melilotus officianalis* (Ribbed Melilot),

*Odonites vernus* (Red Bartsia), *Persicaria lapatifolia* (Pale Persicaria), *Plantago lanceolata* (Ribwort Plantain),

*Potentilla reptans* (Creeping Cinqufoil), *Ranunculus acris* (Meadow Buttercup), *Rhinanthus minor* (Yellow - rattle),

*Rumex obtusifolius* (Broad - leaved Dock), *Sanguisorba minor* (Salad Burnet), *Scrophularia auriculata* (Water Figwort),

*Senecio vulgaris* (Groundsel), *Silene latifolia* (White Campion), *Sinapsis arvensis* (Charlock),

*Solanum dulcamara* (Woody Nightshade), *Sonchus asper* (Prickly Sowthistle), *Sonchus oleraceus* (Smooth Sowthistle),

*Tanacetum vulgare* (Tansy), *Trifolium campestre* (Hop Trefoil), *Tripleurospermum inodorum* (Scentless Mayweed),

*Tussilago farfara* (Coltsfoot), *Ulex europaeus* (Gorse), *Vicia cracca* (Tufted Vetch),

*Vicia hirsuta* (Hairy Tare), *Vicia sativa* (Common Vetch), *Vicia tetrasperma* (Smooth Tare).



Also spotted was this Field Grasshopper, *Chorthippus brunneus* (photograph by Andy Purcell).



## River Tame Walk

*John Watson*

*Photos by Mick Shillam*

*Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> September 2023*

Walk route community carpark Hamstead Hill walking upstream back towards the new sluice gates.

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Weather conditions warm and sunny with a humid gentle breeze.

Temperature around 30 °C

The group met in the Community car park at 2pm. Chris had intended to cross the Hamstead Hill Road and walk downstream but this route took us into open countryside with little shade, so we were relieved when we set off in the opposite direction walking upstream from the community car park towards the new sluice gates near forge mill pond. A less trodden route but one that offered shade from the intense heat.

We walked across park land and through a housing estate before coming to a wooded area which had once been part of Hamstead Hall grounds. There we stood and admired a beautiful Lime tree.



Chris spoke of the old Hamstead Hall that was demolished in 1936. I decided to investigate the history a little and found a quote about another Lime tree that stood in the grounds in 1818 and the conservation efforts to preserve it.

Charles Pye (1777-1864) Author of "A Description of Modern Birmingham" in 1818 wrote a description of this beautiful house and grounds and about one Lime tree he says "from a solid rock there arises a lime tree, of unusual magnitude, whose branches spreading in a horizontal direction became so heavy, and injured the trunk to such a degree that in order to preserve the body, it not only became necessary to lop off the principle branches, but to bind it together with iron in different ways, by hooping of it and passing a bar of iron through it in the same manner as buildings are frequently done" he further adds "At the height of three feet, it girths twenty-three feet and rises to seventy feet" . . . but I digress, back to the walk.



Through the wood and down to the river. The narrow path overgrown in places and overhung with trees. Blessed shade! At first, we had the sweet perfume of Himalayan balsam, taller than a man in places. The river was low and clear, but debris tangled 6 or 7 feet higher bore witness to the river in flood, a solitary swan patrolled the river. Alongside the single-track large crack willow, their trunks ripped and splintered, lay on the ground and strewn across the river. At the base of one such tree we found a (busy or buzzy) wasp nest - which we decided we wouldn't poke.

The group which had inevitably split, came back together to hear of a good find by Mick Shillam - a Hairy snail - *Trochulus hispida* (I'm led to believe the first sighting in the valley). Finally, the path opened up to reveal the new EA flood protection dam. Having admired it for a moment we turned and re-traced our steps back to the carpark.



Chris and Brenda then invited us back their house for refreshments. How lovely to sit in the shade and enjoy a cup of tea! But there was more! a full buffet awaited us in the kitchen and included a rather excellent cheese board full of exotic cheeses.

We settled down and discussed the walk and put the world to rights.

Many thanks to Chris and Brenda for a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon.



## Update - The Dam used for the first time!

*Jenni Wilding*

Photos by Andy Purcell



The first real test for the new dam happened on 20<sup>th</sup> October, when the penstock flood regulators were called into action due to recent heavy rainfall. Andy had to fly his drone backwards to keep rain off the lenses, but managed to capture these aerial shots. see below for a ground-based photo.



## Lightwood House

*Chris & Brenda Bird*

*Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> September*

Photo by Chris Bird

Sandnats were invited to put on a display at Lightwoods House Bearwood. On a very hot day Val, Chris and Brenda set up our stall in one of the ground floor rooms. Unfortunately, due to the hot weather not many people turned up, but those that did were very impressed by our stall. The staff and volunteers were very friendly and helpful, inviting us back for future events. On the day we raised £14.00 and a lot of interest and goodwill.





## West Bromwich Manor House

*Jenni Wilding*

*Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> October*

Aerial Photo by Andy Purcell

Other photos by Mark Andrew and Evie

Several of us took part in a Bioblitz event at West Bromwich Manor. This is a Grade I listed medieval domestic building built by Richard de Marnham around 1270 as the centre of his agricultural estate in West Bromwich. Over the years it has had a variety of residents, from Charles I to tenements for local people, and also a posh pub. It is now a heritage visitor attraction looked after by Sandwell Museums Trust.

Our survey included a pool which is part of where there used to be a moat. One of the highlights here was a Water Scorpion which was admired by all.





Other invertebrate highlights included *Zicronia caerulea*, the Blue Shieldbug, *Nuctenea umbratica*, the Walnut Orb-weaver Spider, and *Sympetrum striolatum*, the Common Darter Dragonfly.





## Wildlife of Regional Heathlands - Andy Purcell

Report by Mike Bloxham

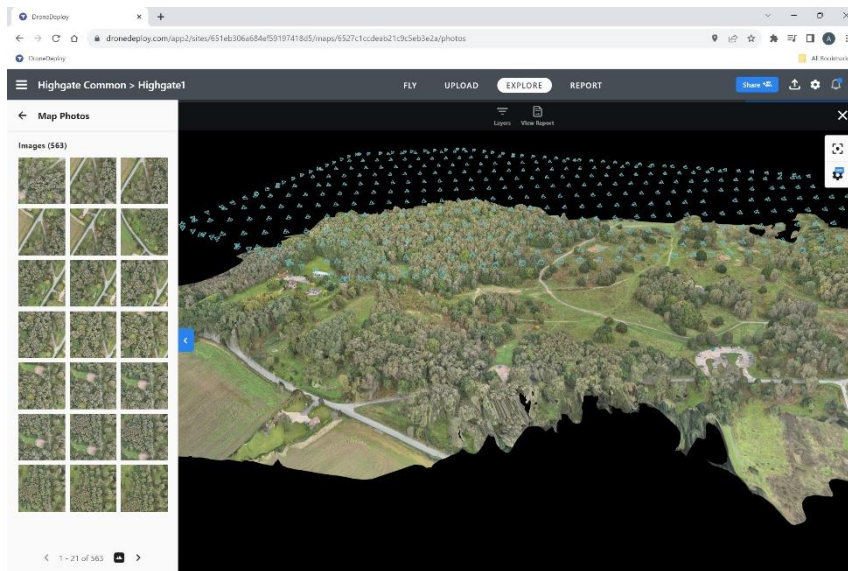
1<sup>st</sup> November 2023

We were fortunate in that 21 members turned out for a fascinating evening at the RSPB centre. Andy was to demonstrate the immense value of overhead photography by drone, as well as the perfection of invertebrate photography by stacking, where a whole series of photos of an insect - separated in height by fractions of a millimetre - could be amalgamated to produce a single perfect image with no indistinct areas.



Bee-wolf, with Honey-bee Prey

Much of the drone work was carried out on local heathlands with Andy explaining how exactly overlapping images could be stitched together to provide a working picture of the heathland beneath. So accurate was the process that areas of heather could be readily recognised, and the areas involved could be exactly calculated. Colour matching could also indicate the nature and extent of other vegetation (sometimes undesirable) intruding into conservation areas.



The stacked images presented delighted the audience and one (the jewel Chrysid wasp *Hedychrum nobile*) was left up on screen during the drinks break for closer inspection.

The evening had another feature of great significance. It was Mike West's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and a magnificent cake to mark the occasion

had been brought along by Ann. Most members will know of Mike's remarkable record of service on a number of British wildlife sites - his meticulous records providing material of importance for many future scientists. Together with Ann and their lifelong friends Bob and Liz Normand, they have inspired and instructed a generation of ornithologists.

## New Invertebrate Records

Some new species found in the Valley this year include a parasitic wasp, which is fairly new to Britain; *Orionis coxator* which was attracted to light while moth trapping near park Farm on 10<sup>th</sup> October. (Photo by Mike Bloxham)



A L-Album Wainscot moth, *Mythimna l-album*, which was found by Tony Wood in his moth trap (Photo by Andy Purcell).



A Western Conifer Seed Bug, *Leptoglossus occidentalis* from a garden across the road from Old Church. (Photo by Andy Purcell)





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## Thank you

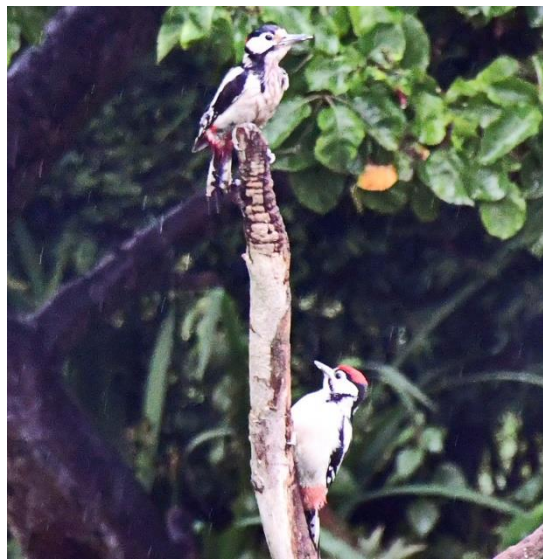
Thank you to everyone who contributed articles and photos for this bumper Autumn /Winter issue. If possible, please send articles in Word format (pictures can be included). Please try to include species lists in your article if you wish them to be included in the newsletter.

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please send lively articles (300-500 words) for future editions to:  
Mike Bloxham.

Photos and shorter “nuggets” are also welcome.  
We are only as good as **you**, our readers.  
The deadline for the Spring edition is Friday 8th March.

Do check out Sandnats’ website:  
<http://sandnats.org.uk/>



Greater spotted Woodpeckers in Mike Bloxham’s Garden in June.

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