

## Chard Ilminster and District U3A Natural History Group

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### October Natural History Newsletter

Dear All,

Well another month rushes by, dragging us all from the light warm days of summer, to the drab, damp, shorter days of winter.

NB Just a reminder that the names I attach to various subjects are my own attempts at classification and may be wrong. I realise that there are many of you who are more skilled than me at identifying particular groups and I would welcome your corrections where ever necessary.

As I noted in my diary, that last Thursday, our group were planned to go to Westonbirt Arboretum; like most days planned for our abandoned outings, the weather was glorious; but of course you do not have to go far to see what nature is up to. As the summer drifts away it is time to reflect on the joys we have had this year.

For many it has been a time to get out and look at what nature is doing locally, pretty well immune from the dreaded Covid virus.

October has provided a taste of summer but the light has been fading, and nature has responded to the changes. I saw the last swallow at home on the 14th, and a few days later flocks of the winter visitors, redwings, were flying south from their northern breeding grounds.

As ever some creatures have been more common than usual; I have seen more holly blue butterflies but almost no painted lady butterflies throughout.



What a year for wasps.

About six years ago I hardly saw a wasp all summer - no idea why - they just did not appear. But since then they have been increasing year by year to the extent that I had three nests in my roof. As I generally let them be, two seem to have died out naturally but one was still going at the end of October. However the inhabitants do become delinquent later on in the summer (might be taking in too much fermented apple juice - a common problem round here!) when there is nothing for the drones to do but make mischief. In my case, getting into the house, (I assume through the many cracks in the ceiling) and buzzing around and dying in the windows. This splendid photo was sent in by Rhian Anthony.



Throughout this year I have been looking locally, just to let you know what I have seen recently, and in late October right in the centre of Ilminster, by the roadside, was a Shaggy Ink Cap. These are not rare and when young can be eaten, (allegedly) but as they age, the fluffy caps disintegrate into black liquid - hence the name ink cap.



On the very same day a pale tussock moth caterpillar was crawling up the fence just down the road; it is difficult to hide when you are bright yellow with a pink "tail", sitting on the rails of a housing estate. It is about 45mm and is fairly common in the southern half of the British Isles and it feeds on a wide variety of deciduous trees; it is found at this time of year walking on the ground looking for somewhere to pupate.

Most of the common insects are now disappearing for the winter now (an exception is cabbage white butterflies which still produce caterpillars on my cabbages) either as eggs, caterpillars hibernating or pupa, safely hidden in a dry spot until spring.

However you might still see, in hedges and on bushes, shield bugs – these insects over winter as adults, which is quite unusual for an insect. A brown shield bug *Coreus marginatus* – the dock bug, is herbivorous and feeds on a wide variety of plants from different families. While the common name in English refers to its preferred diet of docks and sorrels, adults are known to feed on fruits and in my garden there have been a dozen or more on each raspberry fruit group, easy to see but more difficult to capture on film.



Just occasionally I have ventured into the big wide world outside South Somerset and on Exmoor I found this small innocuous fern, lanceolate spleenwort. It was adjacent to the long distance South West Path near Bossington in west Somerset. It is not a common plant with an irregular distribution in the UK but is more common in SW England and coastal Wales. Many ferns keep their fronds (leaves) over winter and are more visible then. Worth a look.



Normally you can find gorse in flower throughout the year. However there are two species found in South West of England.

Generally, common gorse flowers from January till June and the smaller, slightly more delicate, western gorse, from July till December, giving the impression that “gorse” flowers all through the year.

In the photo western gorse is in flower in the foreground, whereas common gorse is the larger bush, non flowering, behind.

A few years ago the sighting of any egret would have been most unusual but over the last few years several species have colonised the UK. The commonest is the little egret which first bred in Britain in Dorset, in 1996 and now can be found commonly in the South West.

I counted at least 10 in the field adjacent to my house last week feeding in amongst cattle. I had hoped I might have the much rarer cattle egret, a recent breeder on the Somerset Levels, the first in the UK, but sadly it was not.



I recently received an email from Colin Ryall of the Somerset Wildlife Trust.

*“The SWT has recently launched a citizen science project to increase wildlife records at the Somerset Environmental Records Centre. I was wondering whether you would think this would be worth including in your U3An Wildlife Group Newsletter. I have put together an entry.*

*Kind Regards*

*Colin Ryall*

***Are you interested in helping Somerset’s Wildlife? (Click on the link below)***

*The [Great Somerset Wildlife Count](#) is a new community citizen science initiative delivered by Somerset Wildlife Trust in partnership with the Trust's environmental records centre, SERC.”*

This is a very important piece of research and depends on the response of those who are interested in wildlife so on behalf of the U3A I would hope you will contribute.

The following is another passage from the website:-

*Reports of wildlife loss, such as the 2020 Living Planet released by the WWF, continue to highlight the perils our natural world is experiencing. Combined with extreme climatic events as a result of anthropogenic global warming, the species and ecosystems on this planet face unprecedented pressures from a human-caused extinction event. But it's not just the loss of individual species that are a problem, it's also the loss of abundance within a wide range of species and degradation of ecosystems as a whole.*

*Here at SERC, we currently hold over 3 million data records. However, the majority of these are focused on protected or rare species. We have a lack of knowledge about the more common species in Somerset and so are not able to monitor trends in numbers or geographical spread. At the moment, we can't tell what is happening to hedgehogs, blackbirds, bumblebees etc because these species are not focused on and not in areas outside of Somersets best habitats.*

*To try and address this, SERC & SWT will work together quarterly to deliver a seasonal community science survey to monitor abundance levels of common species across Somerset.*

*Each season will focus on a different set of common species (moths, amphibians, pollinators etc) or iconic species such as swifts.*

*The team will develop easy to use spotting sheets, similar to RSPB Big Garden Bird Watch, and invite people across Somerset to take part over a designated weekend, recording their results and sending to SERC.*

*This data over time will enable SERC to monitor abundance trends across Somerset and will support a new Somerset County Council initiative called the 'Somerset State of Nature'. This is a long-term project, ten years plus, and the quarterly surveys will need to be repeated annually for the same species so have needed to be chosen carefully at the outset.*

*Other initiatives will be developed separately, and we have already started to discuss work with some of our specialist groups to monitor trends in more specialist species.*

*Several big projects are happening at the moment, with the government introducing biodiversity net gain into the planning and development system, and the movement to develop Nature Recovery Networks and Strategies as part of the Environment Act.*

*With your help, we can work towards building a better map of the State of Nature in Somerset and beyond, to inform and shape the future of Somerset's environment through these initiatives.*

I hope you will follow this up , with your interest in natural history it will not be difficult for you to make a significant interest in our area.

A further exciting development has come from within the group.

Lewis Bates has set up a Private Group Online on Facebook for the Group.

These are his words as I know nothing about Facebook (I had a bad experience with it a couple of years ago).

*"We can send invite to members using their email addresses.  
Members will be able to connect with each other to arrange a "Meeting of 6" and arrange subject matter.*

*Photograph subjects of which there is a plethora of stuff out there in all seasons  
Do this is combination of other activities.*

- 1. Cycling, many of us have cycles. 6 is good!*
- 2. We can meet and combine exercise and natural history with photography. Walk or cycle locally to gather material for the group.*
- 3. Those who can't use a camera can join in the discussion on Facebook Private Group Natural History Chard with their observations.*
- 4. They can submit their studies or subjects on the page for open discussion.*
- 5. The leader can promote activities.*

*I realise that some members may lack IT skills. But I am sure that many do belong to Facebook.*

*I am familiar with how Facebook groups operate and can organise this if help is needed.  
I created a Natural History Group as an experiment.*

*See link <https://www.facebook.com/groups/253840952624250>"*

I am happy to help / assist / in taking this idea forward but I would be pleased to get some ideas from you all in what we should do next.

Many of you are already involved via the internet with other groups and I would be pleased to learn how they have assisted your life in these unusual times so we can build on the experiences of all.

First thing really, is getting some response from you as who would be interested in taking part - if that is the correct wording. If you will respond to this Newsletter and I will pass your views to Lewis.

As to the future meetings; well the message is much as for the last few months, only perhaps a little more pessimistic. Clearly we are in no way going to start indoor or outdoor meetings in the near future, although it would be good if we could meet before the New Year but giving the specific risks of the age of our group this seems unlikely.

However I am ever optimistic and hope to provide a programme of meetings for 2021 so at least we can plan for a better 2021.

Best wishes, Stay safe

Stuart Musgrove

Leader U3A Chard and Ilminster Natural History Group.

