



Wildlife News from Rushcliffe December 2023

The start of meteorological winter, December is a month of short days and precious little greenery to brighten the countryside. There is, however, still plenty of birdlife to look out for.

Read our guide 'What to look out for in December' by following this [link](#).

GET CLOSER TO NATURE THROUGH ORGANISED EVENTS

Sat 9th December – Rushcliffe Wildlife WATCH GROUP

11:00 am - 1:00 pm. Meet at Rushcliffe Country Park Visitor Centre.

For young people between 8 and 12 years old who are interested in wildlife-related activities. Meets monthly, on every second Saturday. Charge £3 per session.

WINTER WILDLIFE TALKS PROGRAMME

December 7th The best of Britain: From Ardnamurchan to the Forest of Dean – Tom Mabbett, Naturetrek



In this talk, Tom will cover his favourite wildlife locations across the UK from the “Wild west” of Scotland to his local Forest of Dean. Appreciating what is close to home and on our doorstep has never been more important and Tom will also talk about some local wildlife discoveries and the joy and excitement of finding wildlife on your home patch, including an introduction to camera trapping.

A lifelong fascination with wildlife, a degree in Biology and extensive travel around the world encountering sharks, rays and too many birds and mammals to mention, followed by work at an environmental charity and then as grounds warden at WWT Slimbridge have given Tom a wealth of knowledge and experience which he puts to good use with Naturetrek. Since 2013, Tom has led over 50 of their tours around the world seeking out wildlife ranging from Hawfinches in the UK to Clouded Leopards in Borneo.

The talk will be available online through Zoom, and costs £4 per device (including booking fee). To book, please follow this [link](#) (which also provides details of technical requirements and the remaining talks in the Programme).

SORRY!

Apologies to Simon Young, who we erroneously named as Simon Williams last month in the piece on Wilwell Butterfly numbers.



A WAXWING WINTER?



Described by Birdwords as ‘*The silky-plumaged Waxwing, as well turned out as a Parisian lady leaving a beauty parlour, with its black eye-shadow, hair-dried crest and wings duly waxed*’, its winter is mainly fruit-based, and therefore dependent on good supplies of berries for survival. Breeding across much of the Northern Hemisphere, **Bohemian Waxwings** (left) are known to move to western Europe for the winter. When berry crops in Southern Scandinavia are good, Waxwings will overwinter there; in bad years, they fly further west and can arrive in Britain, sometimes in spectacularly large numbers.

Some years a winter can go by without us seeing one; in others, a “waxwing winter”, we can see many. Last year, early indications were for a good year but sadly that did not happen. This year the omens are once again looking promising: large numbers have been seen in Scotland and along the north-east coast. Bird Guides reports that up to 27th November, only six English counties still await their first birds of the current influx – Hampshire, Wiltshire, Dorset, Worcestershire and Surrey, and that “It remains to be seen how the influx will play out across Britain and Ireland, but the signs so far suggest that it’ll be the best Waxwing winter for several years.”

On 25th November, a post on the Nottinghamshire Birdwatchers’ FaceBook page reported 15-20 waxwings in a garden at Chilwell.

So, over the next few months, keep an eye out for these beautiful birds, and perhaps monitor social media for reported sightings, particularly on Nottinghamshire Birdwatchers’ website and Facebook page. Waxwings can be very mobile, with individual birds and flocks constantly moving from berry-laden trees and bushes in one spot to another, not always close by the first; paradoxically, Rowans and Cotoneasters in supermarket car parks are some of the most-favoured spots.

STORMY WEATHER



Staying with migrating birds, newly-published research describes yet another challenge facing migrating birds: Solar storms.

Paul Simons, writing in The Times says “The sun has been turbulent in recent weeks, creating geomagnetic storms in the Earth’s upper atmosphere and stunning auroras” as evidenced by some of the images published



in recent weeks of fantastic auroras across the UK, as far as southern England (*image: BBC*). He goes on to say "... these storms can spell trouble for migrating birds that use the Earth's magnetic field for navigation. "

For the study, led by Ben Winger at the University of Michigan, researchers looked back at 23 years of data on magnetic storms and the migration of millions of nocturnal birds, and found that up to 17 per cent fewer birds migrate during severe magnetic storms, and those that do have difficulty navigating.

For a more detailed report on the study, on the Scientific American website, click [here](#).

MOTHS

There are around 2,500 species of moths in the UK, with a bewildering array of shapes, sizes and classifications: macro, micro, day-flying, night-flying. Probably the most familiar to us are the larger night-flying moths – the macro-moths.



There are c. 900 species of macro-moths, and they perform important roles in ecosystems as herbivores, pollinators and prey items for many animal species. The latest report by Butterfly Conservation on the state of our larger moths can be found [here](#): it shows that, overall, macro-moths have declined substantially during the past 40 years, although trends vary greatly between species. (*Image: NWT*)

Macro-moth recording is popular among naturalists and, as a result, macro-moths are one of the most comprehensively recorded and monitored invertebrate groups in Britain. One such enthusiastic local recorder is Paul Dulwich, who says

"You can comfortably record over 300 species in a semi-rural setting, or even in some suburban gardens. Some people put out garden traps very regularly, some even daily so that their 'trapping days' may be closer to a hundred or more in contrast to our surveys which may be half a dozen a year. There is also a bit of difference in that 'gardeners' usually have mains access which means they can use high power Mercury vapour traps which can attract around twice as many species per session and more than twice as many moths than our direct current battery field traps which use LED or other low power lamps and are smaller too (we have to carry them about!).

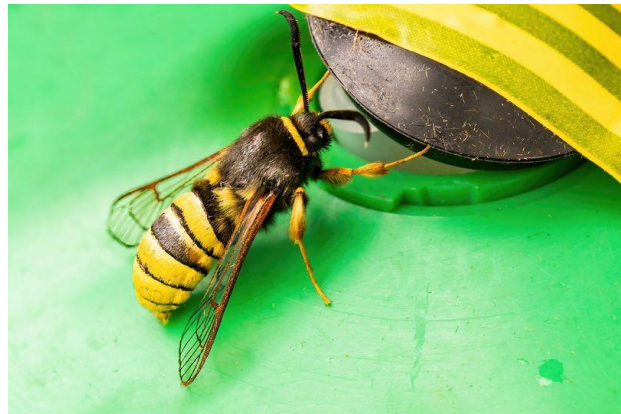
"Add to that the seasonal aspect. Different species are on the wing at different times of year, often for a matter of weeks before they disappear again. Therefore if we wanted to cover all possibilities, including the vagaries of the weather (surveying is best during warm humid overcast nights with no wind, worst on a cool, breezy night with a full moon), you'd probably want to have equipment out say weekly over 40 - 50 weeks over a number of years to iron out the 'weather' effect.



“This is why I am still at it! This is also why we are still adding species to the list. Some will be genuine newcomers, some will be ‘tourists’, just passing by or carried in, but a lot will be there all along, perhaps in sufficiently low population densities to elude the handful of random surveys unless we keep on and on and on. I work on say ten years being enough to have a pretty good idea. You know when you stop adding many more species that you’ve pretty much established what’s there, though after that sort of period you find that new ones appear because they have prospered (example, warming climate has enabled some species with restricted northern range to ‘inch’ northwards) and others disappear in reverse (the same warmer climate has caused some species associated with northern latitudes to retreat). It’s all very fluid.”

With permission from various plot owners, Paul has recorded at Cotgrave Forest since 2019, logging 315 species of macro and micro moths, of which 118 were recorded in 3 or more years. This year Paul recorded 182 species.

Paul has recorded at Wilwell Farm Cutting since 2017; in 2023 he recorded 99 species, including this Yellow-legged Clearwing:



The work that Paul, and many others like him do to record moths on a regular basis, allows clear pictures to emerge over time that can help inform and prioritise future conservation efforts. So, for example, his analyses show 8 species of moth at Wilwell classified on a national basis as ‘Near Threatened’ and 4 as ‘Vulnerable’; at Cotgrave the respective figures are 7 and 6.

In their 2021 Report, Butterfly Conservation say “Despite the enormous challenge of halting moth declines, there are some signs of hope. Given the necessary resources and the determination and skill of conservationists, landowners and volunteers, moths can be saved from the brink of extinction.”

“THE ANSWER’S IN THE SOIL”

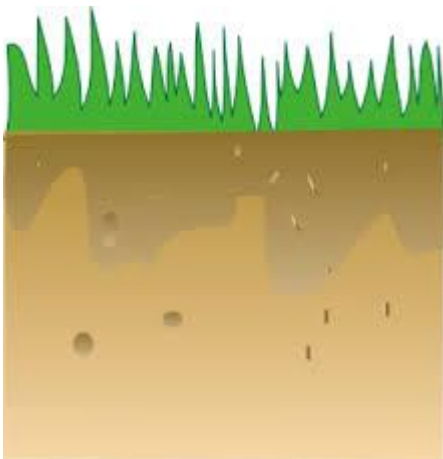
Two articles in local publications this month caught my eye. The first, ‘Wildlife Friendly Farming’ published in Nottinghamshire’s *Made Lifestyle* magazine, is by Erin McDaid, NWT’s Head of Communications and Marketing. Subtitled ‘Wildlife friendly farming is essential to nature’s recovery’ it describes how the Wildlife Trusts are working with the farming industry to help



wildlife. Erin states “How land is managed has a big impact on wildlife and agriculture policy shapes our countryside. For decades this has often been at the expense of wildlife and natural habitats, and The Wildlife Trusts are working with farmers and governments to change this. The recovery of wildlife in the UK depends on a farming policy which enables farmers to create and restore a thriving natural environment alongside domestic food production. “

He goes on to describe the work NWT is doing locally: “One of the key ways we’re working with farmers here in Nottinghamshire is through our Nature Recovery Network in Farmed Landscapes project – a partnership with Severn Trent. The aim is to create new and improve existing habitats within the farmed landscape - whilst recognising that farms must be able to operate commercially to survive.”

The full article can be found [here](#).



People of a certain age (like me) may remember BBC Radio’s *Beyond Our Ken*, the forerunner to the probably better-known *Round the Horne*. Alongside characters such as Fanny Haddock and Hanky Flowerd was Arthur Fallowfield, a (supposed) gardening expert, whose answer to every gardening question began “The answer lies in the soil”. Half a century or more later, what was then a parody is now seen as a fundamental truth.

Two excellent books set in the Lake District provide an excellent picture of the many challenges inherent in changing farming practices to help wildlife, and insights into the truth behind Arthur’s assertion. In *Wild Fell*, Lee Schofield, Site Manager at RSPB Haweswater, says “... healthy soils allow a huge range of fungi, invertebrates and microbes to flourish. This unseen web of life is constantly cycling nutrients and making them available to the plants, boosting their nutritional value to the herbivores.”

He also highlights further benefits of healthy soil, including its ability to absorb more water and so reduce flooding and, most importantly, to the climate. Healthy soil absorbs and stores carbon, poor soil releases carbon.

In *English Pastoral*, James Rebanks takes us through the experiences of three generations of his family at their small hill farm, starting with the traditional farming ways of his grandfather, with small fields, rotation and animal husbandry, and abundant wildlife. His father’s time on the farm was a time of great change as farming moved to a much higher productivity to feed increasing consumer demand, characterised by much larger fields bereft of trees, hedges and flowers,



supporting monoculture facilitated by ever greater use of artificial herbicides, pesticides and fertilisers. Wildlife numbers and diversity plummeted.

As the third generation, he has tried to return to a much more wildlife-friendly approach, which is paying dividends for wildlife. He describes watching with his father a field on one of the 'modern' monoculture farms being ploughed, noting with horror the absence of gulls or crows following the plough. His father said "There must be no worms in those fields. They've all been killed off with slurry." His farm is now a much more diverse landscape, with many wildflowers, insects, birds, etc. And, his farm has good, healthy soil full of worms and much more besides.

Which brings us to the second article referred to earlier. The Winter 2023 edition of Rushcliffe Reports tells us that Rushcliffe Borough Council has highlighted the importance of soil health and its potential benefits, and that "... Councillors have unanimously passed a motion to strengthen policies that protect soil on our land and those of new developments across the Borough."

It is to be hoped that over time more and more of Rushcliffe's soil, particularly in the farmland that accounts for around 88% of its land use, can be better protected, and soil health improved to the mutual benefit of wildlife and people.

RATTLING AROUND GRESHAM MARSH

We regularly publicise forthcoming work parties here and on our website, but don't always look at the types of activities involved, and what they are aimed at achieving. Here Lorna Griffiths tells us about one such work party on Friday 1st December NWT at Gresham Marsh on Wilford Lane (between 10:30 and 13:30).

"The session will involve raking / scarifying an area of grassland, and sowing seed.

We have a long-term vision of enhancing the small meadow alongside Wilford Lane (adjacent to the West Bridgford Medical Centre) as the current sward is dominated by coarse grasses with very few wildflower species. The first stage will involve reducing the vigour of the grasses by introducing yellow rattle.



Yellow rattle is a native annual and is also known as "the meadow maker" due to its ability to weaken grasses, allowing wildflowers to establish and flourish. The seeds require a frost to germinate, hence why we need to get it in the ground before winter. In the spring the plants will grow very quickly, and their developing roots parasitise the roots of plants growing nearby, especially grasses. Once contact is made the yellow rattle draws water and nutrients from the grasses, suppressing the growth by as much as 60%. In the resulting space, other flowers have room to grow. To give the yellow rattle the best chance of survival, the



seeds need to make contact with the soil, so we will undertake heavy raking of the area to be sown, to create open areas to sow the seed. Hopefully, by next summer the meadow will be a sea of yellow and by autumn there will be lots more seed to disperse into the wider meadow. “

BUTTERFLIES IN WINTER

According to Butterfly Conservation, only 2% of British butterflies and moths spend the winter in their adult form. The majority survive as eggs, caterpillars or chrysalises throughout the colder months. Some take shelter inside the stems or seed heads of dead plants, while others may be attached to the stems or rolled up in leaves. There are a few species of butterfly that can overwinter as adults.

To discover more about their strategies for winter survival, click [here](#), and to find out how we can help maximise their chances of survival, click [here](#).



LOOKING AFTER OUR GRASSLAND

Rushcliffe Borough Council have been working hard to maintain areas of species-rich grassland, to the benefit of rare species such as the Grizzled Skipper butterfly! Find out more in the latest Notts Biodiversity Action Group blog post [here](#).

BERRY GOOD NEWS



Great news for wildlife from the Woodland Trust: hedgerows and woodland across the UK are awash with the crimson hues of hawthorn berries, with experts describing this autumn's crop as the biggest they've seen since records began 20 years ago! Their Nature's Calendar recorders have sent in reports of this year's crop being given 4.2 on the fruit scale – deemed as “exceptional”. This takes in dozens of records where hawthorns are judged on the abundance of their berries, also known as haws.

Such a bumper crop is a positive boost for small mammals and migratory birds visiting us for the winter months, such as fieldfares and redwings.

Hedgelink reminds us that if you are planning to trim your hedge(s), do please hold off until late winter for the sake of our animals. Berries and fruits are a lifeline for birds and small mammals during the winter chill, so the earlier you cut, the less food will be available to help wildlife survive through the most hostile time of year.

Visit their [website](#) for more management tips.

Visit our website at www.southnottswildlife.org.uk

Follow us on Facebook at [Southnottswildlife](#)

Email: southnottswildlife@gmail.com



STORY IN NATURE

Do you know any young enthusiasts for nature? The Tree Council is running its annual *Story in Nature* competition, in partnership with The Week Junior Science+Nature, which allows young people aged between 8 and 16 to express their love of trees and nature through writing. Whether a poem or a piece of prose, fiction or non-fiction, they want to know why nature is important to you: by telling nature's story, we can all make a difference – so let's get creative for our planet!

Details and conditions can be found [here](#).

CONNECTING WITH NATURE

Nottinghamshire in general, and Rushcliffe in particular have many wonderful sites to visit and connect with nature, even in the dark days of winter ... or, perhaps, especially in the dark days of winter!

You can find a full list of sites in Rushcliffe [here](#).

Autumn can be a magic time of year to get out and explore nature. The Cotgrave Country Park offers four waymarked routes in the park for you to get out and explore. Check them out [here](#) and plan your next walk.

WORK PARTIES

Our local nature reserves rely on volunteers to help maintain them, and organise regular work parties. Planned parties for December are as follows:

Fri 1st	Skylarks	Gresham Marsh
Sat 2nd	Wilwell Farm Cutting	
Sun 3rd	The Hook Reserve	
Sat 9th	Wilford Claypit	Meadow Park
Sun 10th	Skylarks	Sharphill Wood
	Grizzled Skipper - Grange Farm Normanton on Soar	
Sat 23rd	Springdale Wood	

Details of times, etc. can be found in the Diary section of our website [here](#), so if you have some spare time and energy please feel free to join in – you will be very welcome!

PLEASE NOTE: All of these dates and details are based on the current entries in the Diary. Could work part organisers please let me have planned dates for 2023, as and when they are available, so I can keep the entries as accurate as possible. Thank you.



Nottinghamshire
Wildlife Trust

South Notts Local Group

And finally...

Don't forget that you can find more news, events and items of interest from SNG, Notts Wildlife Trust and other local Friends of Groups etc. by visiting our website at www.southnottswildlife.org.uk

Follow us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/SouthNottsWildlifeGroup.

If you want to contact us please email southnottswildlife@gmail.com

Chris Overton South Notts Local Group 29th November 2023

Unless stated otherwise, images © Chris Overton