

**Ecology in Somerset 2019: editorial**

*The Natural History Committee*

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# ECOLOGY IN SOMERSET 2019

## EDITORIAL

The end of 2019 seems a long time ago, suddenly. We'd endured another year of seemingly endless negotiations about Brexit, a year of political upheaval that culminated in a general election and a claim that withdrawal from Europe would soon be 'done'. Political discourse had become 'sloganized', the Brexit debate exposing deep fault-lines in society and bringing progress in many other policy areas—like the environment—to a standstill. Globally, the climate continued to warm, and as temperatures rose so the repercussions became ever clearer. In Australia, parts of New South Wales were in the midst of their worst wildfire season in history, while large parts of the Amazon rainforest had also recently been ablaze. There were forest-fires, for the second year running, in California; plus, unbelievably, tundra fires and a heatwave in northern Russia. There were hurricanes in the Bahamas, floods and landslips in Europe, locust swarms in Africa... And so the list goes on.

Closer to home, in 2019 the UK had its warmest February on record and then, at the end of that month, the warmest winter's day on record. It was fittingly in February, too, that our District and County Councils in Somerset declared a climate emergency, followed in May by the UK Parliament passing a motion declaring a UK-wide environment and climate emergency. Globally, it was the hottest June since records began; then, on 25<sup>th</sup> July, the UK had its hottest summer's day on record.

At the start of 2020, the issues of climate change, pollution, habitat loss and extinction of species hadn't gone away, but within weeks they had become eclipsed by the Coronavirus pandemic which over the next few months would affect all of us in one way or another. Within SANHS, we have had to cope with a spring, and now a summer, of field meetings cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown. Yet, while acknowledging how difficult this year has been for so many people, the curtailing of day-to-day activities did produce a few unexpected consolations. As others have observed, naturalists seem peculiarly well-placed to deal with the trials and tribulations of social isolation, and even those of us forced to 'shield' have found much of interest in our immediate surroundings—in our gardens, local streets, parks, etc. We have discovered things about our local wildlife that would doubtless have escaped our attention had we not been forced by

COVID-19 to stop leading such busy lives. In the media, much was made of this fresh awareness of nature, with people phoning radio stations and writing letters to newspapers about the birdsong they'd never noticed before, the wild flowers growing in their gardens that they'd previously ignored or dismissed as 'weeds', and the huge variety of insects—bees, butterflies, shield bugs, hoverflies—that these flowers were attracting. Various national societies quickly came up with plans for projects to feed on this new-found enthusiasm, to engage with a new audience and to encourage us to carry on observing the natural world on our doorsteps.

The ordinary, the humdrum, had suddenly become *extraordinary*. In Taunton, at the height of lockdown, one of us came across some plants of Herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*) and Ivy-leaved Toadflax (*Cymbalaria muralis*) with their names written next to them in blackboard chalk. This, it turns out, was part of a national campaign to use 'botanical graffiti' to make people aware of the plants growing in urban places. What a delight it was to discover that, despite—or maybe because of—the grimness of COVID-19, such everyday plants as these mattered enough to somebody that they were inspired to name them in this way. Here was a visible sign, if one were needed, that during lockdown people had begun to really *value* nature again; and that common-or-garden urban 'weeds' were just as worthy of celebration as their more exotic country cousins.

How appropriate, also, that in February this year it was announced that plans were afoot to create a new GCSE in Natural History, to be taught in schools starting in 2022. And one wonders what role naturalists (and natural history societies like ours) might have in developing the syllabus for such a course, and in helping to deliver the learning resources needed to make it a success. Who knows? Perhaps in years to come our own Pat Hill-Cottingham Fund could be used, in part, to support natural history studies in secondary schools in Somerset.

In the present issue of *Ecology in Somerset*, which covers the calendar year 2019, we have reports on a wide range of subjects and taxonomic groups. There are the usual annual reports for vascular plants, first flowering dates, butterflies, spiders and plant galls; plus reports summarising new county/vice-county records for beetles from 2014 onwards, and for bryophytes from 2018 onwards. The bird report, as ever, is for the year *before* last—so this time for 2018 rather than 2019. There is also another short paper detailing further

records of Dandelions (*Taraxacum* spp) in Somerset in 2019. It should be noted that reports cover the entire historic county of Somerset, including the whole of the vice-counties of South Somerset (VC5) and North Somerset (VC6), with the exception of birds which covers modern administrative Somerset only.

In the last year or two there have been numerous books published of relevance to naturalists in Somerset. In the celebrated ‘New Naturalist’ series there have been volumes on *Gulls* (Coulson, 2019), *Garden Birds* (Toms, 2019), and *Uplands and Birds* (Newton, 2020), while in the ‘British Wildlife Collection’ recent titles have included *Rocky Shores* (Archer-Thomson and Cremona, 2019) and *Woodland Flowers* (Kirby, 2020). Amongst west-country authors, there has been the charming and thought-provoking *Dancing with Bees* (2019) by Dorset-based Brigit Strawbridge Howard, *The Accidental Countryside* (2020) by Somerset’s own Stephen Moss, and *Greenery* (2020), a heart-felt and lyrical account of spring and the *meaning* of spring by Tim Dee, the last with plenty of references to Somerset, given that the author is based in Bristol and has family in Minehead. If there’s room, we hope to include reviews of several of the above titles in future issues of *SANH*.

Also published, in February 2020, was David Ballance’s *Avifaunas, Atlases & Authors*. David is a member of our Natural History Committee, and this book is the culmination of many years’ research; he has touched on aspects of this work at SANHS meetings, and we would remind members that David is uniquely well qualified to write such a book, having himself authored or co-authored several accounts of the birds of Somerset, including *The Birds of Somerset* (1968, with Eileen Palmer), *A History of the Birds of Somerset* (2006), the *Somerset Atlas of breeding and wintering birds, 2007-2012* (2014, with Rob Grimmond, Stephen

Moss, Julian Thomas and Eve Tigwell), and *The Birds of Exmoor and the Quantocks* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2016, with Brian Gibbs and Roger Butcher).

We should highlight, too, the publication of the magnificent *Atlas of Britain & Ireland’s Larger Moths* (2019): a truly amazing volume packed with detailed accounts—distribution maps, flight periods, trends, conservation status, photos—of more than 850 species. The Somerset Moth Group contributed much to this project, not least to the database of 25 million records on which the distribution maps and charts are based.

Our thanks to all those authors who, despite lockdown, were able to contribute material for this edition of *Ecology in Somerset*, and to all those who helped in an editorial capacity. Your input is much appreciated. We would also like to note here that two weeks ago, on 9<sup>th</sup> August, Philip Radford celebrated his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Philip is no longer actively involved in our committee, and only rarely is he now able to attend our winter talks or summer field meetings. But his enthusiasm and sense of curiosity about the natural world—and his wisdom too—continue to inspire us in what we do. We send Philip, as we do all our members, good wishes for the coming year.

We trust it won’t be too long before we can resume our programme of lectures and field meetings. As we’ve found out, natural history can be done on one’s own, but how much more fun it is when done in the company of others.

The Natural History Committee  
23<sup>rd</sup> August 2020

<sup>1</sup> See <https://morethanweeds.co.uk/> and <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/01/not-just-weeds-how-rebel-botanists-are-using-graffiti-to-name-forgotten-flora-aoe>