

NATURAL HISTORY REPORTS

VASCULAR PLANTS 2010

The arrival of new alien species within the county of Somerset is inevitable, but the discovery of new native taxa is unusual and always a matter of great excitement. In 2010, as in 2009, nearly all taxa new to the county were aliens ('neophytes'), which nowadays are mostly garden escapes. There has been a long tradition of interest amongst botanists in these opportunist plants, and there will always be new species turning up in the wild as a result of human activities, changes in modes of transport and horticultural fashions.

Amongst the aliens, two noteworthy additions to our flora in 2010 were *Urtica membranacea* (Membranous Nettle) (Fig. 1), found at the edge of a pavement in Nailsea, and *Galium murale* (Small Goosegrass), discovered on the pavement of the Royal Crescent in Bath. These species are both Mediterranean winter annuals. *U. membranacea* was first recorded in Britain in Warwick in 2006 (Boucher and Partridge 2006); *G. murale* formerly occurred as an infrequent wool alien, but has suddenly cropped up again in the last few years, first in Cornwall and then in Eastbourne, Sussex (Nicolle 2008). Both species are likely to have arrived recently as stowaway weeds of Mediterranean container plants (eg palms, olives or figs), following an increasing preference for such dramatic plants. Changes in the fern flora of Bath have been described previously by Crouch and Rumsey (2010); but no sooner had that paper been finished than another new alien fern, *Pteris tremula* (Tender Brake) (Fig. 2), was found growing from stonework in the Royal Crescent, in this case illustrating not so much a change in horticultural fashion but rather a reduction in



Fig. 1 *Urtica membranacea* in Nailsea

atmospheric SO₂ pollution, which has led to there being more suitable substrates upon which fern species can become established.

The aquatic *Potamogeton obtusifolius* (Blunt-leaved Pondweed) was first found in Somerset in 1973, at Norton Fitzwarren in VC5. Since then it has been recorded at three other locations in VC5 but was hitherto unknown in VC6. In August 2010



Fig. 2 *Pteris tremula* in the Royal Crescent, Bath

this species was discovered at Ham Wall National Nature Reserve near Glastonbury: a new vice-county record for this native taxon. Submerged aquatic plants are not found unless searched for, so it is difficult to say whether this species is a new arrival or was previously overlooked because of its rarity. One native taxon was added to the county's flora this year: *Festuca arenaria* subsp. *arenaria* (Rush-leaved Fescue), found in 2009 at Berrow Dunes and confirmed as this taxon in 2010 from specimens collected by Liz McDonnell. This subspecies has a very confused nomenclatural history, so it is difficult to know whether some former records were for this subspecies or for *F. arenaria* subsp. *oraria*. The record at Berrow is the first for this taxon as it is now understood.

Almost more exciting than finding a new species for the county is the rediscovery of a species thought to have been lost. *Persicaria minor* (Small Waterpepper), which is listed as Vulnerable on the GB Red List (Cheffings and Farrell 2005), was considered extinct in Somerset for many years after it was last seen in 1960, at Meare. In 2003, it was found at Clatworthy Reservoir: the first record for VC5 since 1938. In 2010, 50 years after the last record for VC6, it was discovered in a recently made ditch across a damp meadow on Tealham Moor. An annual, this species has almost certainly reappeared from long-buried seed as a result of conservation management on this site.

Unless stated otherwise, records included in this report were made in 2010 and fall into one of the following categories:

- A taxon recorded for the first time in the wild in Somerset (Watsonian vice-counties 5 (South Somerset) and 6 (North Somerset)), ie a *new county record*

- A taxon recorded for the first time in the wild in one of the vice-counties, either VC5 or VC6, ie a *new vice-county record*
- Other records of particular interest, for example second or third vice-county records, species re-found after a long absence, or newly discovered populations of nationally rare or threatened species.

Within each category, records are listed alphabetically by 'taxon', which may be a species, microspecies, subspecies, variety or cultivar. Both native and introduced species are included, with more recently introduced taxa ('neophytes') being distinguished by an asterisk before the name. Nomenclature follows the 3rd edition of the *New Flora of the British Isles* (Stace 2010) for all taxa included in that work. The vice-county is given for each record; the boundary between VC5 and VC6 follows the River Parrett/River Yeo/A303.

The names of contributors not printed in full are abbreviated as follows:

RSC	Robert Cropper
HJC	Helena Crouch
EJMcD	Liz McDonnell
JPM	John Martin
SJP	Stephen Parker
JP	John Poingdestre
FJR	Fred Rumsey
AJS	Alan Silverside
AS	Alastair Stevenson
SRPG	Somerset Rare Plants Group

New county records

**Chamaecyparis pisifera* (Sawara Cypress) – Great Elm (ST746490), 28 May, seven short wide trees in rocky woodland on north side of Mells Stream, outside garden fence but in area with relic features of having been a garden, HJC and Gill Read (det. Clare and Mark A.R. Kitchen), VC6.

Festuca arenaria subsp. *arenaria* (Rush-leaved Fescue) – Berrow Dunes (ST2951), 25 Jun 2009, at edge of golf course, beside reedbed, EJMcD (det. A. Copping), VC6. The first record for this taxon as it is now understood.

**Galium murale* (Small Goosegrass) – Bath (ST744654), 2 May, one plant growing on pavement of Royal Crescent at top of steps to a basement, FJR, VC6.

**Knautia macedonica* (Macedonian Scabious) – Hinton Blewett (ST598566), 11 Jun 2009, one

big plant in flower and fruit on verge at start of Hollow Marsh Lane, JPM, VC6.

**Nothofagus dombeyi* (Dombey's Beech) – Monkham Wood (SS9838), 26 Apr, a few trees near road, Caroline Giddens, VC5.

**Pilosella caespitosa* (Yellow Fox-and-cubs) – Leighwoods (ST559729), 19 Jun, patch in flower on verge near the botanic gardens, visible as verge uncut this year, JPM, VC6.

**Pilosella flagellaris* subsp. *flagellaris* (Spreading Mouse-ear-hawkweed) – Ashton Vale, Bristol (ST567719), 19 May 2009, widespread and obviously long naturalised on former railway yard, Rupert J. Higgins, VC6.

**Pteris tremula* (Tender Brake) – Bath (ST74446543), 10 Sep, three plants in stonework at top of basement of 20A Royal Crescent and one at base of steps, HJC, VC6. (Fig. 2)

**Sarracenia flava* (Trumpets) – Westhay Moor (ST45334393), 15 Jul, three plants on peat at edge of wide channel, HJC and SJP (det. FJR), VC6. First seen here by RSC in 2008, growing with *S. purpurea*, but too small to be named with certainty until this year.

**Urtica membranacea* (Membranous Nettle) – Nailsea (ST47447080), 6 Apr, 100+ plants in flower at edge of paving along base of wall of bike shop next to public car park, Pam Millman (det. FJR), VC6. (Fig. 1)

New vice-county records

**Cerinth major* (Greater Honeywort) – Dunster (SS9944), 27 Apr 2009, roadside, spreading in Sea Lane, AS, VC5.

Potamogeton obtusifolius (Blunt-leaved Pondweed) – Ham Wall (ST46334013), 17 Aug, James McGill (conf. Nigel Holmes), VC6.

Other interesting Somerset records

Armeria maritima (Thrift) – Bath (ST744627), 25 Jun, 13 clumps in flower on central reservation of Wellsway, HJC and Jennifer M. Crouch, VC6. First inland record for VC6.

Carex x deserta (*C. binervis x laevigata*) – Luccombe (ST91874377), 12 Jul, beside a stream at the edge of a wood where it meets the moor above Holt Ball, Jeanne Webb (conf. Arthur Chater and Mike Porter), VC5. Second



Fig. 3 *Coeloglossum viride* on White Sheet Down

record for VC5 and Somerset.

Coeloglossum viride (Frog Orchid) – White Sheet Down (ST801351), 17 Jun, 28 plants along small embankment between tumuli, HJC and FJR, and Priddy (ST510521), 19 Jun, four plants, RSC, VC6. First records for these sites since Roe (1981) and Green *et al.* (1997) respectively. The population on White Sheet Down (now in Wiltshire but still in VC6) is the largest in VC6. (Fig. 3)

**Corydalis solida* (Bird-in-a-bush) – Worminster (ST57994387), 13 Apr, naturalised in copse opposite Churchill House, JP, VC6. Fourth record for VC6, and the first since 1987.

**Euphorbia oblongata* (Balkan Spurge) – Westonzoyland (ST364342), 12 Jun, eight plants on west side of lane, JP, VC6. Second record for VC6.

Euphrasia arctica – Shapwick Heath (ST417406), 21 Jun 2008, many plants scattered in herb-rich meadow at Canada Farm, HJC (det. AJS), and Shapwick Heath (ST41124062), 13 Jul, in species-rich margin of Brickyard Farm Meadow, HJC, EJMcD and SJP (det. AJS), VC6. First records for Somerset since 1993.

Euphrasia confusa x *micrantha* – Weir Water Valley (SS82194642), 18 Jul, in acid grassland near Robber's Bridge, SRPG (det. AJS), VC5. First record for Somerset since 1997.

Euphrasia officinalis subsp. *anglica* (English Eyebright) – Cheddar Gorge (ST486533), 11 Jul, many plants in grassland S of road, above track, HJC and FJR (det. FJR), VC6. First record for VC6 since 1992.

Marrubium vulgare (White Horehound) – Wavering Down (ST401559), 29 Jun, four plants, Anne Cole, Anne Lees and Mike Tanner, and Cross Plain (ST41475495), 25 Jul, one small plant on disturbed ground by rabbit burrow, RSC, VC6. First records for these 1km squares since Green *et al.* (1997). This species is Nationally Scarce and declining, with only two other sites currently known in VC6.

Orobancha elatior (Knapweed Broomrape) – Hellenge Hill (ST34955729), 11 Jul, two plants amongst *Centaurea scabiosa*, ten paces apart, near gate in southwest part of donkey-grazed field, SRPG, VC6. First record since 1989 at the only known extant site in Somerset.

Parentucellia viscosa (Yellow Bartsia) – Royal Portbury Dock (ST5076), 30 Jul 2008, c. 400 plants in an area of very short rabbit-grazed turf on Bradley Road, Phil Quinn, VC6. NB: this record is on private land with no unauthorised access. Third record for Somerset, and second for VC6; last seen in 1956 between Berrow and Brean.

Persicaria minor (Small Water-pepper) – Tealham Moor (ST41434573), 11 Sep, six plants in flower within 1m stretch of shallow ditch (grip) across SWT meadow, RSC, VC6. First record for VC6 since 1960.

Platanthera bifolia (Lesser Butterfly-orchid) – near Priddy (ST509521), 19 Jun, 40+ spikes in rocky grassland, RSC, VC6. First record for this 10km square since Green *et al.* (1997). This is a UKBAP species, listed as Vulnerable on the GB Red List (Cheffings and Farrell 2005) and is scarce in VC6.

Sanguisorba officinalis (Great Burnet) – Portbury Wharf Nature Reserve (ST48437666), 17 Aug, one plant amongst *Juncus* at edge of large circular scrape in field, Bristol Naturalists' Society, VC6. Second record for VC6 since 1976. Regarded as a probable casual in VC6.

Scandix pecten-veneris (Shepherd's-needle) – Cary Fitzpaine (ST545277, ST545276), 25 Apr, frequent in two small fields with failed oilseed

rape crops, and Cary Fitzpaine (ST544274) abundant in headland alongside E of A37 in field S of above fields, JP, VC6. First records for VC6 since 1995.

**Senecio inaequidens* (Narrow-leaved Ragwort) – Westonzoyland (ST364340), 12 Jun, one plant in flower in pallet yard, and Westonzoyland Airfield (ST364341), 12 Jun, c. 50 plants on roadside and rubble mounds, JP, VC6. Second and third records for VC6.

Symphytum tuberosum (Tuberous Comfrey) – Dunster (SS9943), 31 Mar 2009, dump area, and Horner (SS8945), 18 Apr 2009, a few in dumping area, AS, VC5. Second and third records for VC5 and first records for VC5 since 1950.

Tephrosia integrifolia subsp. *integrifolia* (Field Fleawort) – White Sheet Hill (ST801350), 12 Jun 2008, four plants, RSC, and 17 Jun 2010, two plants on gently sloping south-facing grassland at top of White Sheet Hill, just below tumulus, HJC and FJR, VC6. First records since 1988 at the only known site in 'Somerset'. This species is absent from VC5; this is the only site in VC6. It was not included in Green *et al.* (1997), which covered modern administrative Somerset, because the parish of Kilminster, including White Sheet Down, was lost to Wiltshire in 1896; however it remains a part of VC6 and these plants are just within the boundary.

Trifolium ornithopodioides (Bird's-foot Clover) – Vivary Park, Taunton (ST228240), 20 May 2009, several plants growing with *Trifolium campestre* and *T. micranthum* in heavily trampled turf around base of two lime trees, S.J. Leach, VC5; still there 25 May 2010. Apparently the first inland record for VC5.

**Zantedeschia aethiopica* (Alta-lily) – Bleadon (ST33985669), 11 Jul, one clump in ditch on west side of road, SRPG, VC6. Second record for VC6.

The Botanical Society of the British Isles vice-county recorders in Somerset are: Stephen Parker and Paul Green in VC5, and Helena Crouch and Rob Randall in VC6. There is also an active recording group, the Somerset Rare Plants Group (SRPG), which holds an annual programme of field meetings, winter talks and identification workshops. The vice-county recorders and the SRPG are presently undertaking a major project to compile a detailed inventory of the county's rare, scarce and

threatened vascular plants. Further information on the SRPG and the list of species included in the Somerset Rare Plant Register can be found at www.somersetrareplantsgroup.org.uk.

We would be delighted to receive records for possible inclusion in future reports; these should be submitted to one of the 'receiving recorders', as follows:



References

- Boucher, A., and Partridge, J., 2006. '*Urtica membranacea*, an annual nettle, in Warwick: a first British record?', *BSBI News*, 103, 29–30.
- Cheffings, C.M., and Farrell, L. (eds), 2005. 'The vascular plant red data list for Great Britain', *Species Status*, 7, 1–116, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough.
- Crouch, H.J., and Rumsey, F., 2010. 'Changes in the fern flora of the city of Bath', *SANH*, 153, 233–46.
- Green, P.R., Green, I.P., and Crouch, G.A., 1997. *The Atlas Flora of Somerset*, Wayford and Yeovil: privately published.
- Nicolle, D.J., 2008. '*Galium murale* – a foothold in Eastbourne?', *BSBI News*, 109, 57–8.
- Roe, R.G.B., 1981. *The Flora of Somerset*, Taunton, Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society.
- Stace, C., 2010. *New Flora of the British Isles*, (3rd edn), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

HELENA J. CROUCH

ADDITIONS TO THE LIST OF SOMERSET BEETLES 2010

This note gives details of beetles newly added to the Somerset list in 2010, including one older record, and is intended as the first of a series of updates to the list originally published by Duff (1993) and the additions and amendments to that list subsequently produced by Duff and Boyce (2010).

Most of the following records were made by one of us, either Dave Boyce (DCB) or James McGill (JAM), but for additional records we are grateful to Keith Alexander (KNA), Andrew Duff (AGD), and Mark Telfer (MGT). It should be noted that records listed here are largely unchecked and, unless explicitly confirmed by an authority, have yet to be authenticated.

The format of the list is the same as that adopted by Duff (1993) and Duff and Boyce (2010): for each record we give 10km square, site name, date(s) and recorder's initials. The emboldened Red Data Book and Nationally Scarce categories given in square brackets after the species names are explained below. They are taken from the national Coleoptera review prepared by Hyman and Parsons (1992; 1994).

- **RDB2** – Red Data Book Category 2 – Vulnerable. Taxa which are known from 15 or fewer 10km squares of the GB National Grid and which are decreasing and will become

endangered in the near future if the causal factors continue operating.

- **Na** – Nationally Scarce, Category A. Taxa which are thought to occur in 16 to 30 10km squares of the GB National Grid.
- **Nb** – Nationally Scarce, Category B. Taxa which are thought to occur in between 30 and 100 10km squares of the GB National Grid.

Order COLEOPTERA

Perigona nigriceps (Dejean)

ST 22: Thurlbear, vi vii 2010 (JAM conf MGT)

Euconnus fimetarius (Chaudoir)

ST 22: Thurlbear, vi vii 2010 (JAM conf DCB)

Scydmaenus rufus Müller, P.W.J. and Kunze [**RDB2**]

ST 13: Dowsborough, vii 2010 (JAM)

ST 22: Thurlbear, vi 2010 (JAM conf DCB)

Dalotia coriaria (Kraatz)

ST 14: Alfoxton Wd., x 2010 (JAM)

ST 32: Fivehead Wd., x 2010 (JAM)

Mniusa incrassata (Mulsant and Rey)

ST 13: Crowcombe Park, ix 2010 (DCB)

Hypomedon debilicornis (Wollaston)
ST 22: Thurlbear, vii 2010 (JAM conf DCB)

Gabronthus thermarum (Aubé)
ST 22: Thurlbear, vi 2010 (JAM)

Quedius aetolicus Kraatz [Na]
ST 13: Crowcombe Park, ix 2010 (DCB)

Quedius scitus (Gravenhorst) [Nb]
ST 13: Nettlecombe Park, iii 2010 (DCB)

Phacophallus pallidipennis (Motschulsky)
ST 22: Thurlbear, vi ix 2010 (JAM conf DCB)

Trachys scrobiculatus Kiesenwetter [Na]
ST 76: Tucking Mill, v vi, 2010 (MGT)

Athous campyloides Newman [Nb]
ST 31: Ashill, vi 2010 (JAM conf DCB)

Laricobius erichsonii Rosenhauer
ST 54: King's Castle Wd., vii 2010 (KNAA)

Ernobius angusticollis (Ratzeburg)
ST 40: Chedington Wds., vii 2010 (JAM)

Anitys rubens (Hoffmann, J. J.) [Nb]
ST 13: Nettlecombe Park, iii 2010 (DCB)

Rhizophagus picipes (Olivier) [Na]
SS 82: Dibble Wd., ix 2010 (JAM)

Silvanus unidentatus (Olivier)
ST 13: Crowcombe Park, ix 2010 (DCB)

Paramecosoma melanocephalum (Herbst)
SS 82: Brewer's Castle, iv 2010 (JAM conf DCB)

Ephisemus reitteri (Casey)
ST 50: Sutton Bingham res., viii 2010 (MGT)

Holoparamesus caularum (Aubé)
ST 22: Thurlbear, vi 2010 (JAM)
ST 76: Newton St Loe, ix 2010 (MGT)

Notoxus numidicus (Lucas)
ST 25: Berrow, v 1965 (R. Clarke det D. Telnov; Telnov, 2010)

Omonadus formicarius (Goeze)
ST 22: Thurlbear, vi 2010 (JAM)

Vanonus brevicornis (Perris) [RDB2]
ST 22: West Sedge Moor, vii 2010 (JAM)

Obrium brunneum (Fabricius)
ST 40: Chedington Wds., vii 2010 (JAM)

Rose Flea Beetle *Luperomorpha xanthodera* (Fairmaire)
ST 45: Cheddar, vi 2010 (AGD)

Exapion fuscirostre (Fabricius)
ST 03: Willett Hill, v 2010 (JAM conf DCB)

Squamapion flavimanum (Gyllenhal) [Na]
ST 76: Tucking Mill, v, vii, viii 2010 (MGT)

Ceutorhynchus turbatus Schultze
ST 04: Blue Anchor, v 2010 (JAM)

Trichosirocalus thalhammeri (Schultze)
ST 24: Wall Common, ix 2010 (JAM)

Taphrorychus bicolor (Herbst) [Na]
ST 13: Crowcombe Park, vi 2010 (DCB)

With the addition of the above species, the list of Somerset beetles stands at 2454 species of Coleoptera and three species of Strepsiptera recorded in the last two centuries, plus 74 species of subfossil Coleoptera.

References

- Duff, A.G., 1993. *Beetles of Somerset: their status and distribution*, Taunton, Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society.
- Duff, A.G., and Boyce, D., 2010. 'Additions and corrections to the list of Somerset beetles', *SANH*, 153, 247–62.
- Hyman, P.S., and Parsons, M., 1992. *A Review of the Scarce and Threatened Coleoptera of Great Britain*, Part 1, Peterborough, Joint Nature Conservation Committee.
- Hyman, P.S., and Parsons, M., 1994. *A Review of the Scarce and Threatened Coleoptera of Great Britain*, Part 2, Peterborough, Joint Nature Conservation Committee.
- Telnov, D., 2010. 'Ant-like flower beetles (Coleoptera: Anthicidae) of the UK, Ireland and Channel Isles', *British Journal of Entomology and Natural History* 23, 99–117.

DAVE BOYCE AND JAMES MCGILL

HOVERFLY REPORT 2010

This was a strange year for hoverflies, in our experience, with periods of hot weather, when none were found, then periods when they were unbelievably abundant – as at Otterhead Lakes in late July. On the whole, results were average with just one or two really exciting records. A total of 39 surveys were made at 16 sites, including our study areas at Pink Wood, Aller Marshes and Long Sutton, which are all conveniently close to where we live in Yeovil. The SWT reserves (or nature trails) at Bickham Wood, Great Breech Wood, Ringdown and Otterhead Lakes were also visited during the year. A total of 79 species were recorded, which included one, *Platycheirus sticticus*, new to the county, taken by sweeping ‘umbelliferae’ (eg *Angelica sylvestris*) at Otterhead Lakes nature trail. We are grateful to Barrie Widden, Janet Boyd and Tony Smith for records and Somerset Environmental Records Centre for updates. The following records, encompassing 22 species, were the most interesting for the year.

Chrysotoxum cautum – Ashington Wood 22 May.
Dasyrphus tricolor – Bickham Wood 30 June.
Epistrophe diaphana – Long Sutton 28 June.

Nationally scarce and restricted in its distribution (mainly central southern England).

Ischyrosyrphus laternarius – Pink Wood 17 August.
Melangyna labiatarum – Bickham Wood 30 June;
 Otterhead Lakes 29 August.

Parasyrphus punctulatus – Bickham Wood 21 April.
Platycheirus occultus – Little Norton 24 July. 4th county record.

Platycheirus sticticus – Otterhead Lakes 21 July. 1st county record for this nationally scarce and local species.

Sphaerophoria batava – Long Sutton 17 July;
 Milborne Port Wood 27 July. 5th and 6th county records.

Sphaerophoria rueppelli – Ashington 11 September. 3rd county record for this nationally scarce species.

Cheilosia albitarsis – Pink Wood 2 July. An unusually late record.

Cheilosia antiqua – Bickham Wood 2 July. Scarce.

Cheilosia ranunculi – Bickham Wood 18 May.

Cheilosia scutellata – Penn Wood 11 August.

Cheilosia soror – Great Breech Wood 31 August.

Cheilosia urbana – Pink Wood 2 July. 6th county record.

Helophilus hybridus – Aller Marshes 28 June.



Fig. 1 *Volucella zonaria* (photo: Aidan Houlders)

Neoscia obliqua – Little Norton 24 July. Nationally scarce.

Sericomia lappona – Bickham Wood 4 May.

Sphegina verecunda – Pink Wood 24 August. A scarce and highly localized species nationally, but seemingly quite well distributed and locally common in Somerset.

Volucella inflata – Knowle Hill Wood 11 July.

Volucella zonaria – Princes Street, Yeovil, three dead in closed-down shop window (now a tattoo parlour) 2 August; a hornet mimic, and one of our largest hoverflies (Fig. 1). It appears to be extending its range, formerly restricted to south-east England, but since the 1940s spreading west and north and now occurring widely northwards to the Midlands.

Additional 2009 records

We have also received the following 2009 video/photographic records from Ian Stapp, mainly from Nunnery Copse and Moreton Wood (both Chew Valley Lake). These records, encompassing twelve species, are additional to those given in last year's report in *Ecology in Somerset*.

Chrysotoxum cautum – Keynsham 25 July.

Dasyrphus pinastri – Nunnery Copse 7 June.

Epistrophe diaphana – Moreton Wood 28 May.

Melangyna labiatarum – Nunnery Copse 28 April.

Platycheirus splendidus – Nunnery Copse 13 April.

Pyrophaena rosarum – Nunnery Copse 3 August.

Scæva selenitica – Nunnery Copse 7 June. Scarce both in the county and nationally.

Xanthogramma citrofasciatum – Drayton 10 May.

Helophilus hybridus – Moreton Wood 30 May.

Tropidia scita – Moreton Wood 8 July.

Volucella inanitis – Moreton Wood 11 July. Rare in the county, and very sparsely distributed

nationally (mainly south-east England).

Volucella zonaria – Moreton Wood 9 July.

E.T. & D.A. LEVY

TOAD PATROLS IN SOMERSET

Following brief mention of toad patrols in last year's report (*SANH* 153, 272), we thought SANHS members might be interested to learn more of this aspect of the county's Reptile and Amphibian Group's activities.

February is the month that Common Toads (*Bufo bufo*) begin to migrate from their winter hibernation sites to their breeding ponds. Toads display a deep loyalty to their breeding pools and many migration routes will have been used by toads for generations. Therefore when the temperature reaches around 5°C and the weather is damp, the toads emerge in large numbers under cover of darkness to follow a very well-trodden route. The migration season lasts throughout March, and sometimes into April, stopping temporarily if conditions become too cold and dry with the result that the toads tend to move toward their breeding ponds in a series of 'waves'.

Unfortunately for toads, the landscape has all too often changed over the years, and frequently there are now roads crossing their migration routes. Despite such an inhospitable barrier the toads press on regardless, with many getting squashed by cars. But in Somerset, as in many other counties, there is a hardy bunch of people who eschew the comforts of the hearth and the television to venture out on dark, wet nights armed with a torch and a bucket to help the toads across the roads and ensure that they are able to continue their journey back to their breeding pools.

The national amphibian conservation charity 'Froglife' keeps a register of toad patrols showing that there are currently eight crossings in the county registered as 'active', plus a further two in the North Somerset administrative district. 'Active' means that there are patrollers manning the crossing and submitting records of toad numbers to the organisation. There are also a number of patrols that have been active in the past but are now no longer so – presumably because people's circumstances have changed rather than those of the toads!



Fig. 1 Toad crossing sign at Rumwell, near Taunton (photo: Simon Leach)

If a crossing is registered with 'Froglife' and is shown to involve a significant number of toads, the local authority can be approached to install toad crossing signs on the road which can be displayed between January and April (Fig. 1).

The principle of toad patrolling is very simple, but its contribution to the conservation of this declining amphibian species is probably considerable. It can also give a useful insight into population fluctuations. The crossing that has been active for the longest time in the county is that at Hawkridge reservoir in the Quantock AONB which has been expertly co-ordinated by Sheila Cook. Although she and her volunteer team have patrolled the crossing since long before 2000, it was only in 2000 that they began to keep records of the number of toads they assist (Fig. 2). The figures suggest that during this time the population at this site has expanded considerably. The apparent decrease in 2003 reflects a lack of recording, while those of 2009–10 may possibly be explained by the cold dry conditions slowing the migration which may have

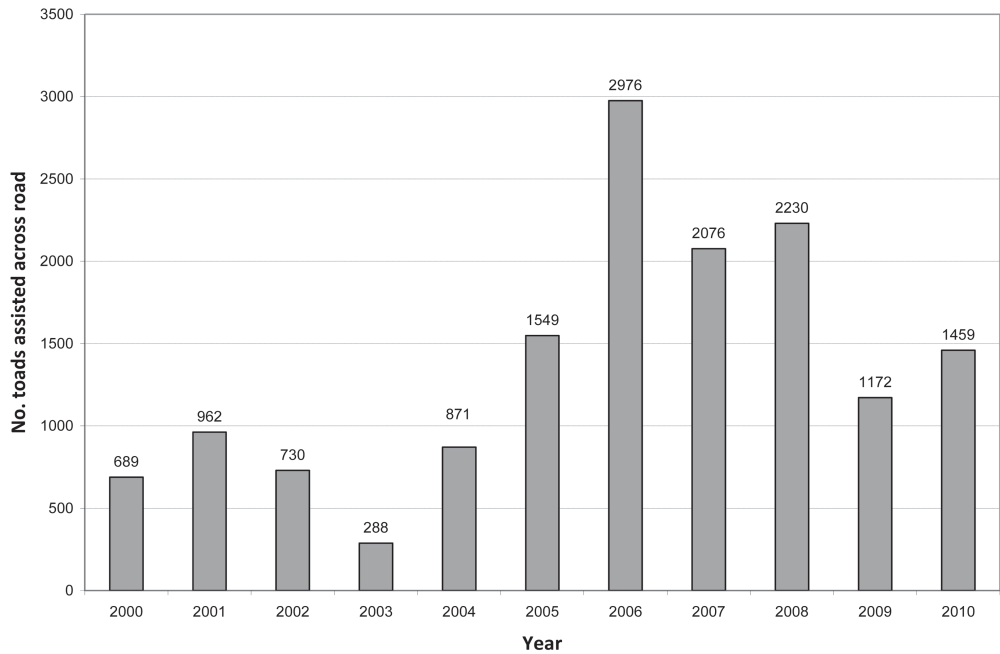


Fig. 2 Numbers of toads assisted across the road at the Hawkridge reservoir toad crossing, 2000–2010

resulted in toads moving throughout the night after patrollers had left the site – the 2011 figures will be interesting.

The first hour or two after dusk usually appear to be the most crucial for toad patrollers to be ‘on duty’, with large numbers of toads emerging during this time. This suggests that they may be moving up from their underground retreats during the day and waiting concealed in the entrances for darkness to fall, before emerging. Unfortunately traffic also tends to be much

heavier in the late afternoon and early evening than later in the night.

Along with the traffic, at many sites there is the added hazard of drains collecting water from the road surface. Toads drop down these and, with little chance of climbing back out, can drown in them. Sites with kerbstones add to this hazard as the toads, confronted with a vertical kerb, will often travel along the bottom of the kerb, effectively being funnelled into the drains.

TABLE 1: NUMBERS OF AMPHIBIANS RESCUED OR ‘KILLED ON ROAD’ AT THE CASTLE CARY TOAD CROSSING, 2007–9

		Toads	Frogs	Newts
2007	Rescued from road	1162	17	12
	Rescued from drains	114	3	12
	Killed on road	204	0	1
	Total rescued	1276	20	24
2008	Rescued from road	1021	25	26
	Rescued from drains	39	0	8
	Killed on road	140	0	6
	Total rescued	1060	25	34
2009	Rescued from road	874	36	33
	Rescued from drains	32	3	11
	Killed on road	121	2	5
	Total rescued	906	39	44

Dave Boyer, co-ordinator of the Castle Cary toad patrol, has kept statistics for the last few years showing not only the number of toads, frogs and newts helped across the road, but also the number killed on the road and the number fished out of the drains (Table 1).

Despite the efforts of volunteers throughout the county, there are still many ‘unmanned’ toad crossings where we can only speculate on the mortality caused by the traffic and the effects this may be having on population size. If any SANHS members know of sites where toads cross a road

during their migration, the Reptile and Amphibians Group for Somerset (RAGS) would be keen to hear about them. Of course it would be even better if you would be willing to co-ordinate a crossing close to your home, and RAGS can help with support and advice. Alternatively, if you would like to volunteer as a patroller in 2012, do contact me at

JOHN DICKSON
Reptiles and Amphibians Group for Somerset

SOMERSET BIRDS 2009

For many observers the bird of the year was the male Little Bittern, with its strange barking call, that frequented RSPB Ham Wall Reserve for much of the spring (Fig. 1). In the light of events, fast forwarding to 2010 is irresistible. In May of that year it became clear that what, in all likelihood, was the same returning male had found a female. Successful breeding subsequently occurred for the first time in Somerset, an event some predicted after the male’s long stay in 2009. Breeding records for the UK as a whole are few indeed. There was a short breeding sequence in Yorkshire in the late 20th century, but this petered out and this charismatic small heron remains very rare indeed in Britain.

Somerset is fast gaining a reputation as the heron county *par excellence*, and Little Bittern seems unlikely to remain the only rare heron to breed for



Fig. 1 Little Bittern (photo: Jeff Hazell)

the first time in the county. It might be useful to summarise the status of all our herons and indulge in a little speculation.

- Grey Heron – Somerset remains one of the best counties to see this, the commonest heron, and populations remain stable. The biggest heronry, at Swell Wood, held 90 occupied nests in 2009. It is a familiar bird to the most casual observer, and for many, a symbol of Somerset itself.
- Great Bittern – 2009 may well turn out to be the year this species gained a significant foothold in Somerset, due in no small part to the management work done by the RSPB within the Avalon Marshes. Booming was heard during the spring, and six females were discovered feeding young. 2010 also proved to be an excellent year for this species, but more of this in the next Report.
- Great White Egret (Fig. 2) – Only 30 years ago the status of this magnificent heron was causing concern throughout Europe, but its fortunes have revived. Still classified as a very rare visitor to Somerset, sightings are increasingly frequent and courtship activity has been observed. Breeding in the near future is by no means out of the question, particularly as, at the time of writing, six individuals are known to be roaming the county.
- Little Egret – It seems strange to reflect that as recently as 1980 this was a species considered by the British Birds Rarities Committee. It was, then, a genuinely rare bird in Somerset and, indeed, Britain. Times have changed to such a degree that Little Egrets can now be encountered on the smallest patches of water, even in town



Fig. 2 Great White Egret (photo: James Packer)

centres. There are breeding colonies on at least four sites in Somerset, with year on year increases in population.

- Cattle Egret (Fig. 3) – This formerly very rare heron bred in Somerset in 2008, and probably did so again in 2009 (Fig. 3). Breeding took place after a large influx in 2007–8, and although some momentum appears to have been lost (probably due to severe weather) Cattle Egret has proved an aggressive coloniser in many parts of the world and it seems likely that it will, given time, become a regular breeder in our county. It now ranges across most of the globe, having found its way even to the remotest islands.
- Purple Heron – This secretive reed-bed breeder is relatively common just across the Channel and breeding in the UK has long been predicted. A pair finally did so in Kent in 2010. Reed-bed habitat within the Avalon Marshes seems ideal and this heron is recorded most years, especially in late spring. Breeding seems at least possible in the near future.

Although not strictly herons, three other long-legged water-loving birds are worthy of mention: Glossy Ibis, Spoonbill and Common Crane. Up to four Glossy Ibis roamed the Levels in 2009, and some courtship activity was observed. It remains a very rare bird, but the likelihood of breeding cannot be dismissed. This is also true of Spoonbill, which has looked a potential colonist in East Anglia for some time. Efforts to reintroduce Common Cranes in Somerset have made an encouraging start, amid considerable publicity and local interest.

It is not fanciful to suggest that any European heron, even the rare Squacco, could be added to Somerset's breeding list in the coming years. All the conservation organisations, whose extensive work



Fig. 3 Cattle Egret (photo: Jeff Hazell)

on habitat development is now bearing fruit, are to be congratulated for creating and (just as importantly) maintaining suitable conditions for such a wide range of species.

Hérons apart, 2009 was an unremarkable year for rarities. Perhaps the highlight was a juvenile Spotted Crake at Greylake RSPB Reserve from late August until mid-September. Though normally a skulking and difficult-to-see species, this particular bird often showed well, and attracted many visitors from Somerset and further afield. Surprisingly aggressive at times, it once pursued and harried a Grass Snake. Greylake also hosted a Green-winged Teal in November, one of four Somerset records perhaps involving the same male. Other rare or uncommon wildfowl noted were Ring-necked and Ferruginous Duck, White-fronted and Pink-footed Geese, Whooper and Bewick's Swans, the latter now declining as a wintering species in the county. A Common Scoter, not considered fully fit, spent a week on the Huntspill River in early spring, while a Velvet Scoter, rare in Somerset, was seen flying south at Berrow on 18 November. Smew and Red-breasted Merganser, neither common, were also recorded in 2009.

On the coast, there were regular sightings of Red-throated Diver off Minehead, with smaller numbers of Black-throated and Great Northern Divers also noted. Regular watching by a few dedicated individuals has completely changed the status of divers in Somerset, though they are mostly restricted to the seas around Minehead. A juvenile Great Northern also wintered at Cheddar Reservoir, but was far from easy to locate at times, despite its size. Five European Storm-Petrels, and four Leach's Petrels were also seen – the latter, as is usual, during

stormy conditions. Two of the Leach's were inland at Cheddar, and one of these, not untypically, was found dead. Cheddar reservoir did well for rare grebes too, with both Slavonian and Black-necked recorded. Little Auks are rare on the west coast of Britain; three were seen in November, and two Puffins, probably even rarer, were also noted.

It was a good year for the scarcer gulls. Mediterranean Gulls are increasing generally, and there were records for most months, both on the coast and at inland waters. Torr reservoir, in the east of the county, is intensively watched by Bruce Taylor, a gull enthusiast. This year he was rewarded with the third Somerset record of Caspian Gull, several Yellow-legged Gulls, another species increasingly encountered, and continued sightings of a Ring-billed Gull first seen in 2008. Elsewhere there were five records of Iceland Gull, some of which may refer to the same bird, and two sightings of the larger but quite similar Glaucous Gull – an excellent run of records for these 'white winged' northern migrants.

Red Kites were seen throughout the county in increasing numbers, particularly in spring, and it is surely only a matter of time before successful breeding takes place. It seems that many of the birds passing through Somerset are probably from the burgeoning Welsh population, or else from reintroduction sites in southern England. The majority now seen bear no wing tags. During a small passage through Berrow in May, a much rarer Black Kite was seen, and another flew low over Walton Heath in mid-June. Ospreys passed through in small numbers in both spring and autumn. Ospreys continue to do well in Scotland, and there is now a small English (and even Welsh) breeding population. In time, the Avalon Marshes may prove attractive to a breeding pair.

Four Hoopoes were seen, including two together in the west of the county, and seven Wrynecks, usual autumn numbers, were recorded from a wide scattering of sites. A Golden Oriole was heard near Bruton on 31 May. This species has bred in Somerset, though not recently. Red-backed Shrikes no longer breed regularly in Britain, let alone Somerset, and records here are now less than annual. Most refer to autumn juveniles, and the bird seen on King's Sedge Moor in late September was no exception. Woodchat Shrike was also recorded for the fourth consecutive year, with two records: an adult male on Tealham Moor in spring, and a juvenile near Westbury-sub-Mendip in September. At least four Great Grey Shrikes wintered in the county, continuing a good

series for this handsome predatory songbird.

Autumn passage produced a single Richard's Pipit at Berrow in October and two Yellow-browed Warblers. This was not a 'Waxwing year' so the brief sighting of a single bird on Queen's Sedge Moor in March was notable this far west. Male Blue-headed Wagtails frequented Greylake RSPB Reserve and Tealham Moor in spring. The latter appeared to pair with a Yellow Wagtail, not an unusual occurrence. 2009 was a particularly good year for wintering Water Pipits, with the Huntspill Sea Wall area especially favoured. Up to six were seen in the first-winter period, and four in the second. Hawfinches remained in evidence early in the year, following a small influx in late 2008. Up to five birds were in and around Bruton, a traditional site, with odd birds seen elsewhere. Along the coast, Lapland and Snow Buntings appeared in their usual small numbers. Two Snow Buntings were also seen on highest Exmoor, Dunkery Beacon, during November.

Breeding species enjoyed mixed fortunes, but there were some notable successes. Though scarce and rarely seen, it has long been assumed that Goshawks breed regularly in Somerset. Proof has been wanting but, in 2009, a pair at an undisclosed site raised at least two young to provide confirmation. A pair of Marsh Harriers also bred on the Avalon Marshes and it remains a puzzle why this species does not do so more regularly. Goosander bred on the Exe for the first time, though there were no records from the Barle. Three Long-eared Owl families were located, and this secretive owl may be faring better than supposed. There was a single Marsh Warbler record in May. This species was once a Somerset speciality, but has not bred for many years and is now rarely recorded in Britain.

On the debit side, severe weather in February had a catastrophic effect on Dartford Warblers, a species always very vulnerable to such events. Heavy snowfalls in 2010, in January, November and December, can only have exacerbated matters, though recent searches reveal that one or two have survived. Fortunately Dartfords are prolific breeders, and given more clement conditions have the capacity to recover quite quickly. Stonechats, Goldcrests and, to a lesser extent, Cetti's Warblers also suffer in prolonged freezing weather and records for 2009 reflected this.

Away from Exmoor and the Levels Cuckoos continue to decline, and their familiar song is now a distant memory in some lowland villages. Nightjars too appear to have been checked by cool and wet conditions in late spring. Turtle Dove, Willow Tit

and Ring Ouzel seem to be extinct as breeding species in Somerset, and this mirrors a decline elsewhere in Britain.

To finish on a positive note, however, some species are doing well. Increasing in numbers are two warbler species, Blackcap and Reed Warbler. Blackcap now seems at home even in quite small bushy gardens. It is, of course, also a regular winter visitor, although these birds are known to come from eastern Europe. Reed Warblers quickly colonise even small newly established areas of *Phragmites* and are expanding their British range northwards. Firecrests and Bearded Tits still maintain small, but probably

stable, breeding populations. Our herons, though, are undoubtedly the success story of recent years.

A summary like this can only give a flavour of our birdlife in 2009. A much more comprehensive picture can be gained by purchasing *Somerset Birds 2009*. Copies can be obtained by visiting the Somerset Ornithological Society website, www.somersetbirds.net, which also has details of membership, and many other useful features including up-to-date news of sightings and events.

BRIAN HILL
Somerset Ornithological Society