

Ecology in Somerset: editorial

Natural History Committee

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ECOLOGY IN SOMERSET 2020

EDITORIAL

It's been a long year. In one way or another, all of us have been touched and troubled by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a year when our usual lives were put on hold, when stuff kept happening while everything came to a standstill. A year when even the simplest pleasures—walking down the street, sitting on a bench in the local park, meeting a friend for a walk or a cuppa, watching a game of village cricket—could no longer be taken for granted. A year of anxiety, illness, and grief. A year of graphs. A year when obscure or newly-minted words and phrases became so familiar, so quickly, that we soon struggled to recall a time when they weren't on our lips: before 2020, how many of us had in our lexicon words such as *lockdown*, *furlough* and *unmute*, or phrases like *R value*, *elbow bumps*, *social distancing* and *the rule of six*? Who would have thought that in August we'd find ourselves *eating out to help out*? It was a year when many old words, harmless everyday words, were purloined by the pandemic: *spike*, *wave* and *surge* now carry a much sharper sense of foreboding than before. Did we ever imagine that we'd be washing our hands quite so frequently, or that such scrupulous hygiene would be implemented to the hummed strains of *Happy Birthday* or *God Save the Queen*? For a while it seemed that things were heading in the right direction; in the summer our optimism got the better of us and we began to talk of the pandemic in the past tense. Yet even while we planned for a 'normal' Christmas, didn't we already suspect that the New Year would be anything *but* normal, that we weren't through it yet, not by a long chalk, and that there would probably be worse to come?

Yes, it's been grim, and there's no denying that; but, as we noted in last year's editorial, there would be consolations too. Some of these are highlighted in the recent flurry of nature writing inspired by lockdown experiences. It began in the autumn with *The Consolation of Nature: Spring in the Time of Coronavirus*, by Michael McCarthy, Jeremy Mynott and Peter Marren, and continued more recently with Steven Lovatt's lyrical *Birdsong in a Time of Silence*, and (our very own) Stephen Moss's *Skylarks with Rosie: a Somerset Spring*—the last two published in March this year. All three books wrestle with the paradox that confinement can also be a liberation, of sorts—that, as our horizons close in, so we begin to see more rather

than less. We pay closer attention to the *humdrum* and discover it to be anything but; we start to notice things we'd otherwise have overlooked. Before the pandemic we were gazing so far ahead, and rushing around at such a pace, that we'd oftentimes miss what was in front of our noses. As Adrian Bell, the Suffolk farmer and writer—and *The Times*'s first crossword setter—put it in the 1930s, when explaining the advantages of walking, or a pony and trap, over the internal combustion engine:

One's radius both contracts and expands. That is to say, while the circumference of miles at one's disposal is halved, their content is more than doubled. For quiet peace is like a magnifying glass; regions one has passed over as familiar suddenly enlarge with innumerable details and become a feast of contemplation.

The Cherry Tree (1932)

We've been at it too, as you'll see from the various reports in the pages that follow. David Reid's piece about his garden in the latest SANHS Newsletter shows how much you can discover even when you have to stay rooted, more or less, to the spot. And several reports highlight some of the interesting or unusual things turning up close to people's homes—like the Sea Pearlwort (*Sagina maritima*) on a road verge in Taunton; or the spider *Ero aphana*—a first record for Somerset—found by Francis Farr-Cox under a dustbin lid in his back garden; or the Fuchsia gall caused by the gall mite *Aculops fuchsiae*, noticed for the first time in the north of the county by Dee Holladay in her garden in Clevedon. Chris Iles reports that a disproportionate number of dragonfly records in 2020 were from people's gardens rather than from the wider countryside. And many 'first flowerings' were from people's home plots, too: the earliest record of flowering Field Wood-rush (*Luzula campestris*), for instance, was from a member's lawn in Minehead.

Another feature of lockdown was that it gave SANHS members and friends an opportunity, perhaps, to have a go at something new. David Hawkins, a member of the Somerset Rare Plants Group, decided to take a closer look at plant galls on his local patch in Bristol, and he was rewarded with several first records for Somerset including, amazingly, a midge gall on Wayfaring-tree (*Viburnum lantana*) only previously recorded in Britain in Surrey and Oxfordshire. Graham Lavender, another Rare Plants Group

member, in the extreme west of the county, continued to pursue his passion for dandelions (*Taraxacum* spp) and collected several ‘firsts’, one of which was an Irish species not only new to Somerset but to Britain too!

We hope you find these reports of interest, and that you’ll be able to discern something of the excitement that lies behind so many of the records being reported on; taken together, the articles certainly demonstrate the wide range of biological recording that continued to take place—despite the various lockdowns and travel restrictions we were living under. Our thanks to all the authors who kindly (and speedily) contributed material for this edition of *Ecology in Somerset*, and to everyone

who assisted in an editorial capacity. As always, your input is much appreciated. Thanks also to those who so willingly supplied photos to illustrate the articles.

We are still waiting patiently for a resumption of our programme of field meetings, and trust it won’t be too long before we can all meet again. In the meantime, here’s a taste of what some of us got up to during a difficult but surprisingly productive year. A year to forget, in one sense, but a memorable one all the same. It’ll take more than a pandemic to stop us, you know.

The Natural History Committee
25 May 2021