SOMERSET INVERTEBRATES GROUP

Apart from the usual programme of field meetings in a number of sites where invertebrate information is required, 1993 saw the start of a series of workshops (free to those attending) designed to help naturalists in getting to grips with the, often daunting, task of identification of invertebrate species. It is always easier to become acquainted with the smaller taxa (in terms of numbers of species) so the first workshop at Chancellor's Farm on Mendip introduced twenty-one guinea pigs to aquatic and terrestrial molluscs. We quickly realised the room was too small for this number if all were to have the necessary access to binocular microscopes and specimens, so future workshops were restricted to the first ten or so replying, repeat workshops being held when necessary. Since then, we have explored basic introductions to 'all invertebrates except insects', 'insects' and 'bugs'. Participants go home with a collection of useful hand-out sheets. You do not have to be a member of SIG to attend; we would like to see anyone interested.

Now we have reached these heady days of compulsory environmental assessments, the dearth of good general 'invertebrateologists' has become only too apparent and the Invertebrates Group (SIG) is endeavouring to help mitigate the problem. There are just too many invertebrates! Often they are ignored in spite of their importance in the food chains. Time and dedication are required. The majority of naturalists develop skills in one or two taxa so that the ideal situation is to have a group of specialists working together in any habitat. However, the workshops do provide the basis for building up an ability to cope, in general terms, with the wide range of invertebrates by introducing short cuts to identification based on the experience of those who know! Identification keys rely on a logical progression via a series of alternative characteristics to arrive at a name. This has distinct disadvantages in that a mistake leads one along the wrong path. Much better is a list of diagnostic features, easily recognisable, alongside a good drawing. To this end SIG is accumulating a collection of Aids to Identification, based on Somerset species, housed at the Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) to which members and others interested can refer. Quite often, just two or three characters will confirm the identity of a specimen.

Such workshops require an inordinate amount of careful preparation – overhead-projector transparencies, slides, collection of specimens, and equipment with which to examine them – according to the whims of the tutor. However, once the material has been produced, it is available for further use. SIG hopes that other groups wishing to learn more will contact the Honorary Secretary, Pat Hill-Cottingham, Mill House, 18 High Lane, Shapwick, Bridgwater, TA7 9NB, to arrange for workshops in their own locality. A spin-off from such a workshop can be identification of species from a sample provided. For example the results of identification of animals in a sample of ditch water from Catcott North Reserve and leaf litter from Catcott Heath Reserve (SWT) gave extra information to the Managers and were published in the SWT Newsletter for May 1995. If you have a sample you wish identified, let SIG know!

SIG is grateful to the tutors for the workshops and to its members for their support. It also wishes to thank the Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT) for supporting its education programme financially and for the use of the workroom at Chancellor's Farm, and also to Strode College, Street, for lending us valuable equipment so readily.

Since 1963, Britain has been invaded by aliens from down-under. These are the New Zealand terrestrial flatworm *Artioposthia triangulata* and the Australian version *Geoplana sanguinea*. These animals are free-living Platyhelminthes, carnivores which consume earthworms, leaving infertile soil behind. So far, they have been found only in gardens, presumably introduced with pot plants from garden centres, but they are a serious pest. Luckily we have only one of the twenty or so New Zealand species but this one is big – up to 17 cm – and by secreting enzymes, reduces earthworms to soup which it then sucks up. SIG would like to know of any suspicious flat, unsegmented, brown, purplish or reddish, slimy creatures you find. Keep them live in soil and deliver to my address above or contact the Somerset Environmental Records Centre. Do not try to kill them. The Australian species has some powers of regeneration and they are easier to identify alive and whole since damaged ones lyse into soup! Further information is given in a leaflet published by the Royal Horticultural Society and available from Dr D.V. Alford, ADAS, Cambridge, Government Buildings, Brooklands Avenue, Cambridge.

PAT HILL-COTTINGHAM