

## ECOLOGY IN SOMERSET 2009

### EDITORIAL

Since the unexpected death of Pat Hill-Cottingham in November 2008, the Society's Natural History Committee has been considering how best to take forward the natural history section of the *Proceedings*, currently known as *Ecology in Somerset (EIS)*. Pat was, for many years, co-editor (and more recently sole editor) of *EIS*, just one of the many valuable contributions that she made to the life of the Society.

As members will be aware, recent issues of *EIS* have usually included two or three full-length papers, plus one or two shorter communications and half-a-dozen or so book reviews. We think it has become harder in recent years to attract full-length academic papers, and we are convinced that much material with the potential to appear in *EIS* is either not being published at all – never seeing light of day other than in the 'grey' or ephemeral literature of internal reports and local newsletters – or is appearing 'online' or submitted to other publications, for example national journals or newsletters.

We live in changing (and challenging) times. Everyone is in a hurry these days, and it may seem easier, and quicker, to write something up for a local website or newsletter, aimed directly at the 'target audience', than for a more wide-ranging (peer-reviewed) journal. And having written up something once, there is often little appetite to write it up a second time for publication in a journal. Also, it has to be acknowledged that many periodicals have a much quicker turn-around time than a once-a-year journal like the SANHS *Proceedings*.

It could be argued, perhaps, that *EIS* is too narrowly focused on 'ecology', with quite broad fields of natural history study being presumed to be outside the journal's scope and remit. It hasn't always been like this: historically, the Society's *Proceedings* was a major vehicle for the publication of annual reports, short notes and academic papers on a wide array of topics and taxonomic groups. In particular, 'short communications' and reports used to form an important part of *Proceedings*; but recently these have dropped away, with only Dave and Ted Levy's excellent *Hoverfly Report* still appearing on a regular basis. Yet in this brave new world of Biodiversity Action Plans, Red Lists, county Atlases and national mapping schemes there is a great wealth of species-focused research, survey and monitoring now taking place across the county – and local groups, of course, are at the heart of this work. Three examples: the Somerset Moth Group is working on the production of a new atlas of the county's macro moths; the Somerset Rare Plants Group is preparing a county Rare Plants Register; and the Somerset Ornithological Society is working in partnership with the local British Trust for Ornithology group on a county atlas of breeding and wintering birds.

Our desire is that *EIS* should better reflect (and celebrate) the wide range of natural history activity in the county, with the Society's *Proceedings* becoming a place where groups and individuals are able to put on permanent record annual or occasional accounts of their own taxonomic groups – highlights, new discoveries, first county records, and so on. In time, these reports could become, in effect, county-

level versions of the Wildlife Reports appearing in *British Wildlife*, providing a 'shop window' for local groups to publicise the fruits of their activities, and an opportunity for them to engage with the wider network of natural historians in the county – and in so doing, acting as a stimulus to membership for the groups concerned.

Full-length papers, of course, will remain an important feature of *EIS*, but by including a much wider range of 'short notes' and taxonomic-group reports we hope to broaden the appeal and usefulness of the publication, for members and non-members alike. We deliberated long and hard over the title given to this part of the Society's *Proceedings*. Does *Ecology in Somerset* fairly encompass the full breadth of its intended scope? Or, perhaps, would '*Natural History in Somerset*' or '*Somerset Natural History*' be a more appropriate and all-embracing

title? Does it need a title at all? For the present issue we have left it as *Ecology in Somerset* – but we would be interested to hear what members think.

The Natural History Committee extends heartfelt thanks to all those who so willingly contributed material for the present issue. We trust that you will find the contributions both interesting and informative. You will, of course, find some taxonomic groups missing from these pages – nothing, for example, on fungi, bryophytes, butterflies, mammals, or fish. We expect that short reports on many of these will appear in future issues; for this year, our aim has been merely to set the wagon rolling, in the hope that others will be keen to jump on board in the coming years.

SIMON J. LEACH

On behalf of the Natural History Committee