

ECOLOGY IN SOMERSET 2010

EDITORIAL

Following favourable comment on the content of last year's *Ecology in Somerset*, we have drawn together another 'mixed bag' of material for this year's issue which we hope members will find both enjoyable and informative.

We are pleased to be able to include, for the first time in some years, a full-length *geological* paper – specifically, an account of three fossil nautiloids found in the Ilminster area. A paper such as this helps to remind us that natural history is as much about past environments – even those of 180 million years ago – as it is about the 'here and now'. This has also been a recurring theme of our field trips and winter lectures, which in the last year have included interesting and inspiring geological presentations by Derek Briggs and Graham Rix.

We have been able to include two other full-length papers this year, one on bumblebee foraging in the Somerset Levels, the other on 'first flowering dates' in the Taunton area. Both relate to matters of current concern: the first being the widespread decline of bumblebee populations in lowland England – and the possible consequences of this for the pollination of both crop and wild plants – and the second being the effect that our changing climate may be having on the timing of seasonal biological events. In part, the latter paper celebrates the life and work of Walter Watson – a former member of this Society, for many years its botanical recorder, and a bryologist and lichenologist of considerable repute. He was also a cricket enthusiast and long-time supporter of Somerset County Cricket Club; and, if my own

experience is anything to go by, it must have been hard for him to stay focused on his botanical recording in the thick of a busy cricket season.

Aside from these papers our aim, as last year, has been to include shorter communications and 'reports' covering a wide range of taxonomic groups, not only to demonstrate the great wealth of natural history activity in the county but also to enable recorders and others to put some of their more important discoveries on permanent record. We hope that, whatever your particular bent, you will find something here to interest you: a rare weevil, perhaps; or a nettle previously unrecorded in the county; or the extraordinary array of herons, egrets and bitterns to be seen on the Somerset Levels; or the difficult business of toads crossing roads as they return to their breeding ponds; or maybe the curious story of how DNA fingerprinting is helping us to better understand the origins and importance of the county's Black Poplars.

Unfortunately, this year we have had to leave out several contributions due to lack of space. It is a tricky balancing act – on the one hand we are always on the hunt for material, but the more successful we are at tracking down potential authors the greater the risk that some will end up disappointed. For this issue, we were particularly sorry not to be able to include a lengthy paper by John Burrell on the impacts of weather on butterfly populations. We hope there may be room for something on this topic in a future issue; but, in the meantime, members will be interested to know that the results of John's detailed and painstaking work have been published as a report, available from the local branch of Butterfly Conservation.

Once again, the Natural History Committee would like to thank all those who have contributed to this issue of *Ecology in Somerset*, as well as those who have given up their time to referee and edit the various submissions. It sometimes feels that the average age of natural historians is older than it should be (and getting older by the day), and we are therefore especially pleased this year to be publishing contributions from several people who – unlike the editorial committee – are still on the right side of 40! We are thus persuaded that the study of the county's natural history, in all its various guises, remains in good health. It seems to us that any organism daring to set foot (or root) in the county will quickly find itself confronted by a naturalist of

one sort or another; and large numbers of us continue to delight in keeping track of what's going on – and why – in the natural world. *Ecology in Somerset* is, in large measure, an acknowledgement of this insatiable curiosity.

As last year, you will notice that many taxonomic groups are missing from these pages – nothing yet on fungi, lichens, bryophytes, plant galls, leaf miners, mammals, fish, flies, bugs, millipedes, and so on – despite the fact that we know of people actively working on many of these groups. We look forward to including short reports on some of these in future issues.

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On behalf of the Natural History Committee