newsletter 29
summer 2019

Brandis Corner Wildlife Group

Undertaking projects and promoting public awareness
in order to protect and benefit existing wildlife and habitats

www.bcwildlifegroup.co.uk Email: bcwildlifegroup@gmail.com

West Country Buzz

Bumblebees are having a hard time but help is at hand.
Dr. Cathy Horsley puts us in the picture.

Photo: Paul Clarke

Dr. Cathy Horsley

The bumblebee is perhaps our most recognisable and loved insect, but some species are in danger of extinction if action is not taken now to save their habitat and food plants. The Bumblebee Conservation Trust is doing just that and our guest speaker for April, Dr. Cathy Horsley, came to tell us how.

Cathy started with an introduction to the Trust and explained that its aims are to raise public awareness of how vital bumblebees are, to apply the research done by the Trust in the field and to gain influence with landowners on the management of their land.

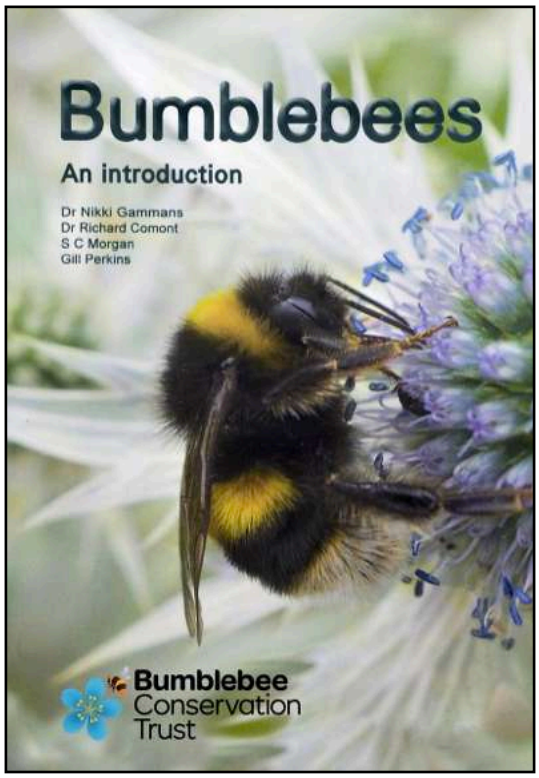
Bumblebees are in the order *Hymenoptera* and are of the genus *Bombus*. There are 24 species in Britain plus one that is about to be reintroduced. Only 8 of these are common, the rest being rare. Differences between species are in the colour patterns of the thorax and abdomen. There are two types: the social bumblebee and the cuckoo bumblebee. Social bees live in a colony with a queen ruling and workers looking after her offspring. The cuckoo bumblebee will invade a nest, kill the queen and use the workers to raise her own young instead.

Bumblebees are found mainly in the northern hemisphere as they are cold adapted, i.e. they can make their own heat by 'shivering'. This means that they have the advantage over many other insects in that they can fly in the cold and rain. However, they can be vulnerable to an extended cold snap as they cannot store food.

White-tailed bumblebee carying pollen. Picture: Bumblebee Conservation Trust

Cathy then described the lifecycle of the social bumblebee. Up to 400 individuals live in nests which last for just a year (honey bee hives on the other hand survive for several years because, unlike bumblebees, they make honey to keep them going through the winter).

1. The queen emerges from hibernation in early spring.
2. She builds up reserves by visiting early nectar-rich flowers (e.g. willow, crocus, daffodil).
3. The queen then looks for a nest site in, for example, an old mammal burrow, tussocks of grass or dry stone walls.
4. Once she has collected enough pollen, she will lay and raise her first batch of eggs which develop into female workers; these feed and nurture the colony.
5. Towards the end of summer the queen produces male offspring along with new queens which leave the nest to find a mate.
6. At the end of summer the nest dies off and only new, fertilised queens will survive the winter by hibernating in burrows made in north facing banks, hedgerow bases or perhaps pots of soil left by gardeners.



This is the first book written by Bumblebee Conservation Trust staff. It is aimed at bee-loving beginners and covers bumblebee evolution, ID, ecology, lifecycle, gardening tips and more.

Solitary bees can be aerial nesting (these are the ones that will use your bee hotel) or ground nesting (these will dig a tunnel with chambers).

Cathy went on to explain why bees are declining. It is basically because of modern farming practices and intensification. 95% of wildflower meadows have been lost since WW2 and hedgerows removed to accommodate large machinery. This has led to habitat fragmentation where any remaining wildflower meadows are surrounded by rye grass of no value to bees. Some bees can travel far enough to find more pockets of forage but others, such as the carder bee, can only fly a few hundred metres. Late emerging bees such as the shrill carder bee come out of hibernation in late June when the hay meadows and, therefore, their food sources, are cut.

Other factors include an increased use of pesticides, various diseases, increases in urbanisation and climate change which affects the distribution of these cool climate insects (e.g. the great yellow bumblebee has been pushed into the far north-west of Scotland). As a result, 7 of our bumblebee species are so threatened that they have had biodiversity action plans set up for them. 9 other species are in decline and 2 have become extinct since the 20th century.

However, there is much the ordinary person can do to help, particularly in gardens. Bees need a continuous food supply from early spring to late autumn and we can make sure we have something in flower for most of the year. We can provide hibernation and nesting sites simply by leaving a patch of bare earth where solitary bees can burrow or allow a corner to become overgrown with tussocks of grass.

Cathy then gave a brief overview of the *West Country Buzz* project (partly funded by Natural England as part of DEFRA's National Pollinator Strategy) on the North Devon coast. This is still home to some of our rarer bumblebees. Cathy is focusing on the brown-banded and moss carder bees. (They are very difficult to tell apart - just a few black hairs to tell the difference!) She is also carrying out surveys in the areas where these bees have been seen in the last 20 years. Research results show that the best strategy is to attempt to create corridors by linking up fragments of suitable surviving habitat.

Brown-banded carder bee.
Photo: Ray Reeves

Photos from Bumblebee Conservation Trust website

Moss carder bee.
Photo: Dorothy Breckenridge

Cathy outlined some examples where this strategy is working including the establishment of strips of land saved for a late cut. The National Trust is a very big landowner in Devon so it has been important to establish a working relationship with NT on habitat improvement. For example, at Baggy Point red Devon cattle have been used to trample down bracken and coarse grass to allow wild flowers to come through.

A key method of getting farmers 'on board' is to provide a compensation scheme for loss of earnings when they manage their land for wildlife. The *West Country Buzz* project is gradually getting the message out through open farm days where neighbouring farmers can learn from each other and provide walks and talks for the public. The project also relies heavily on volunteers to undertake bee walks, surveying and monitoring.

Judging by the number of questions this fascinating presentation generated, there was a huge amount of interest from the 53-strong audience. Visit the Trust's website (**bumblebeeconservation.org**) for more information on bumblebees and how you can help attract bees to your garden or even volunteer to help in surveys.

Sheila Dearing.

This report is one of the many resources available to all on the Trust's website. The website is well-designed, informative and interesting to navigate. It is well worth a look!

Samantha Pickering tells us of the unexpected hazards bats face in our homes.

Samantha Pickering is dedicated to caring for bats. She never knows what each new day will bring, but around 150 bats of all ages find their way every year to her North Devon Bat Care rescue and rehabilitation facility near Barnstaple. In May she came to talk to us about her work, bringing three of her charges with her.

Before highlighting the dangers bats face every day and what we can do to help safeguard them, Samantha spent a little time reminding us why bats are important, asking the question, 'What do bats do for us?'

She reminded us that bats are Nature's pest control. Each pipistrelle, for example, eats around 3,000 midges per night. Watching them emerging from our properties at dusk, hawking around in spectacular flight and coming back just before dawn is one of the great free entertainment shows available to us. Bats are pollinators and seed dispersers for important plants all around the world.

By using echolocation techniques copied from bats, humans learned how to fly and land planes safely. Echolocation-dependent devices now also help blind people find their way.

Medicines have been developed using saliva from vampire bats. The unfortunately-named anticoagulant drug Draculin is used to help stroke and heart attack victims. Research into bat torpor, the state of reduced temperature, breathing and heart rate in and around hibernation time, hopes to teach astronauts techniques which will allow them to travel further into space without losing their ability to function.

Vampire bats also have a survival technique we humans hope to emulate. Bats in a roost make sure each member has had food each night. If any bats are short of food for

any reason - injury or illness, for example - other bats in the roost will supply extra for them, a selfless act which ensures most of the roost survives.

The stars of the show meeting their public. Top to bottom: Bear, the soprano pipstrelle, Stubbs, the brown long-eared bat and Nico, the noctule bat. All are permanent residents at the North Devon Bat Care facility as they cannot be safely released back into the wild. They all received appearance 'money' from Samantha in the form of their favourite meal treat.

Healthy bats can live for up to 35 years. The UK has 17 bat species at the present time - plus 1. That 'plus 1' is destined to disappear as there is only one male greater mouse-eared bat thought to be left alive. When it dies it will join the 90% of our bats lost in the last 100 years.

Samantha continued her talk by posing the question, 'Why would bats be in our houses in the first place?'

The answer to that is because they have lost many of their traditional roosting places like old trees, caves and stone walls. Many have been removed or blocked up for health and safety reasons. In addition, many of our houses have crevices and voids in their structure that are similar to those found in the wild. A gap of only 15mm x 20mm (just over $^{1}/_{2}$" x $^{3}/_{4}$") is enough for a number of bat species to squeeze through. Our roof spaces are often ideal for bats: warm in summer for maternity roosts and cool in winter for hibernation.

So what are the unexpected dangers bats face once they have moved into our homes?

There are a number of hazards, particularly in our lofts. Uncovered water tanks, buckets or other water-retentive containers are common hazards. These will attract all sorts of wildlife including bats looking to drink. Once in the hazard they cannot get out because of the smooth, slippery sides which they cannot grip. Bats can swim for a short while but they eventually succumb and drown. Even dry tanks can trap them and they can starve. The solution is simple. Cover all water tanks and containers and lay dry, unused tanks on their sides so the bats can escape easily.

Modern roofing felt, known as Breathable Roofing Membrane (BRM), degrades as bats roost against it and this can lead to entanglement. The bat damage stops the membrane from working properly - it may also change the microclimate in the loft - and may invalidate any warranty. Old-fashioned roof membrane is better for bats.

Roofing insulation is another hazard. Insulation sprayed onto the underside of roof tiles can be toxic to bats whilst it is being installed. If used right up to the edges it also

stops air circulating in the loft and can trap bats either inside or out. Young bats can also crawl underneath rolled fibreglass insulation and it can then be difficult for mothers to find them again so they die of starvation or dehydration.

Chemical wood treatments applied to loft beams and trusses are also dangerous to bats clinging to them. Some of the chemical can be ingested as the bats fastidiously groom themselves. Bats go to different buildings throughout the year and might even do the same circuit year after year. Encountering chemical treatments could eventually kill the whole cohort.

Possibly the most difficult situation to deal with involves fly paper. Some people hang sticky fly paper in their roof spaces. Bats can detect freshly-caught flies still active on fly paper and will go to investigate a possible easy meal. Young bats stuck on the paper will call for help with the result that the adult bat coming to their aid gets stuck too. It is highly unlikely either will be able to get free, especially if the wings have spread and are sticking to the adhesive surface. If you come across this situation it is essential that you DO NOT TRY TO PULL THE BATS OFF THE PAPER. If you do it is highly likely that the wings will rip and delicate bones will be broken. Instead, wearing gloves to protect yourself against a frightened bat which might bite, cut the paper around the bat and put the casualty into a small container. Be very gentle as you handle it and give it access to a small milk bottle lid of water if you can, then CALL FOR HELP.

Bat caught on fly paper in a loft. Photo: Bat Conservation Trust

In our area, your nearest source of help is Mark and Amanda at Shebbear on 07852 623759.

For any other injured bats, or bats found on the ground outside in daylight, gently use a cloth to put the casualty (and the cloth) into a small ice-cream container, again with a small quantity of drinking water, and put pencil-sized holes (no bigger) in the lid to allow air to enter.

Bats may also roost in cavity walls, often gaining access at or near the top where the wall terminates in the roof space. If cavity wall insulation is installed at the wrong time it may trap bats roosting further down the cavity. Expanding foam insulation can block the gaps the bats need to use. Either way, cavity wall insulation robs bats of much needed roosting sites.

Just outside the loft it is common practice nowadays to replace original wooden fascias and soffits with close fitting uPVC as it is easier for the householder to maintain and keep clean. But access for bats is rarely included and the bats can find themselves trapped or excluded again. Just a small gap next to the wall is all that is needed. The bats can land on the wall below the gap and climb up through the gap into the roof space again.

When extensions and conservatories are being considered it is essential to have an ecological assessment undertaken when applying for planning consent if bats are suspected at your property. You may be committing a criminal offence if you fail to do so. Disturbance or injury to bats during construction is also an offence. You should

know if you have bats in your property. If you have not seen them flying around then look for their droppings (essentially insect remains which turn to dust when you squeeze them - very good garden fertiliser!) in your loft, on the tops of window frames or on garage floors.

Despite the potential for this talk to be full of negative warnings, Samantha's presentation was lively, interesting and very engaging. Her passion for bats and their welfare was obvious and infectious! She saved the best until last, of course, when she introduced three of her inpatients to the audience. Bear, the soprano pipistrelle, Stubbs, the brown long-eared bat and Nico the noctule were all big hits with the 46-strong crowd. All three bats have injuries which mean they can never be safely reintroduced to the wild so they will see out their days enjoying Samantha's loving attention.

At the end of the talk Samantha paid a warm tribute to our own BCWG member Helen Sinnett, who was in the audience. Helen, herself a licenced bat handler, has encouraged and advised Samantha over the years on all matters relating to bat welfare.

Nico the noctule, who was very lively, climbs up Samantha's fleece jacket.

And after a well-earned cuppa, Samantha left, not to go home, but to rescue a bat which had been caught and injured by a cat in Umberleigh. She never knows what each new day will bring…

Paul Clarke.

Useful information

North Devon Bat Care was set up to help with injured bats found around the county:
www.northdevonbatcare.co.uk 07896 338346.

The Bat Conservation Trust was set up to help give free advice to homeowners to help them learn more about bats and how we can live side-by-side with any bats in our homes:
www.bats.org.uk 0345 1300 228.

Bat Conservation Trust

Wildlife, Wine and Words

A celebration of British fauna and flora through poetry and prose

For many centuries, authors and poets have celebrated the magic, beauty and drama of our native wildlife. The *Wildlife, Wine and Words* evening gives you the opportunity to pick your own favourite examples, or simply to settle back and enjoy the power of words capturing the wonders of our birds, animals and plant-life.

You can contribute in one of three ways…

1. Submit a favourite poem or extract of your own to Julian (email: junipom@btinternet.com) and read it on the night. Julian will also put together some images to go on the big screen which will accompany your reading.
2. Choose a favourite poem or extract and submit it to Julian. However, if you would rather not read it out loud on the evening, someone else will do this on your behalf.
3. Simply turn up on the night (armed with your own selection of food and drink) and enjoy other people's selections and the beautiful images which will accompany them.

There is no pressure on anyone to take an active role. However, we hope that many of you will think of writings which will have inspired you over the years. ***Please would you be kind enough to submit your contributions by 15th July to allow time for the programme of readings to be prepared?***

It would help if…

- You include a few words explaining why your choice means so much to you.
- Contributions are just a few minutes long, perhaps a whole poem or a brief extract from a favourite book.

Don't forget…

- Children's stories are definitely welcome. Indeed, they are often the very reason why many of us love wildlife in the first place.
- Poems written by members are also welcome.

We hope this will provide an entertaining and inspirational evening with something for nature lovers of all ages.

Ivan...

lets his mind run wild!

'Rewilding'

There has been a lot of discussion recently about successfully re-introducing extinct species. Grizzly bears in Hyde Park, woolly rhinoceros in Jersey, even Batman and Spiderman are rumoured to have escaped into the wild.

In Devon, a Milkman has put in an appearance although Coalman is fast disappearing. Breadman survives in remote districts and Tallyman only in captivity, ready for release to the highest bidder. And someone said Dangerman was spotted on the A30.

Topman is hanging on in some urban spaces and He-man never left the pub, whereas Herman tends to stay on the continent. Youngman, although outdated, occasionally crops up on football pitches and Spaceman is out there somewhere.

All of which has nothing to do with the topic of rewilding. A strange term, not found naturally in any dictionary, indeed even wilding is scarce. Dig a little deeper, however, and you will find a fascinating subject and if you so desire, the chance to join a project called 'rewilding Britain' – check out the website at **www.rewildingbritain.org.uk** for details.

One of the most successful reinstatement projects falling under the heading of rewilding is the River Wandle in South London. I recall in my younger angling days that this was a prime example of how mankind had polluted a clear chalk stream over successive generations so that by around 1960 it was nothing more than a running sore, an open sewer and in severe danger of being lost as a wildlife habitat – the most common thing found living there probably being toxic bacteria.

Now look at it! The Wandle Trust has worked magic as evidenced by the following extract from their success story:

> *"The Trust has been putting back features that harboured life in the river, which had been pulled out by overzealous engineers. It runs community cleanups every month, enlisting local people to remove the junk dumped in the water. It has been creating passages through the weirs to enable eels to migrate upstream. Children in local schools have been raising trout to restock the river.*
>
> *The children's involvement has encouraged them to see the Wandle as part of their landscape and to start playing in it once more. The project is rewilding children as well as the natural world. And it provides a valuable wildlife corridor right into the heart of the city."*

To me that exemplifies what bringing back nature is all about. Call it rewilding if you like or use any other term that fits, but what it does do is raise the spirits, gives hope for the future and creates a whole new meaning of the term 'superhero'.

Here in the South West rewilding has taken a slightly different turn with the emphasis being on bringing back species either extinct or so depleted their existence has been precarious. This is not a concept unfamiliar to me. Many years ago, when still a precocious child, I was involved in a single-handed attempt to bring back the Dodo.

I knew this was a bird that effectively had been clobbered into oblivion, yet I was convinced some had been able to escape and firmly believed they had mated and eggs had been laid. Most of the adults I knew had little or no experience of handling exotic creatures. They could tell a chicken from a calf but show them a newly hatched sparrow and they were stumped.

This gave me an idea. I had a Kodak Brownie camera and reckoned if I could take a photograph of a Dodo chick and then refuse, on conservation grounds, to reveal my source, the world would be a better, enlightened place. (I was always an optimist with idealistic tendencies).

One sunny weekend I set out, camera in hand and a supply of six-inch nails and a hammer in a cloth shopping bag. The self-same bag I had used once before to capture a corncrake. The nails would be banged into a tree to help me climb up to the potential nest site of the Dodo. They may have been ground-nesting birds once but had learnt the hard way that it was best to nest in a thorny tree.

Deep into the forest I went, following trails only I knew (at least I supposed this to be true never having encountered another human being on my intrepid escapades) until I arrived at the foot of the biggest, thorniest specimen of hawthorn in the known world.

The nest I was after was a platform of spiky twigs, arranged randomly, but cleverly intertwined to provide a stable resting place for the two large eggs that had recently hatched. The parent birds were too busy gathering food for the hungry pair to notice me. Besides, I was only going to photograph their offspring and what proud parent would resist such attention?

Hammering and clambering and sacrificing not a little blood to the thorns I managed to gain a vantage point only a few feet from the chicks. The light was dappled, poor in intensity and ideal for securing grainy images to tantalise any doubters about the authenticity of my photographic evidence. The roll film, which only permitted 12 exposures, was soon exhausted and I commenced my precarious descent.

The wait was interminable as I had to rely on being taken on a journey of about 12 miles to a well-known chemist outlet to deliver my film which was then sent to who-knows-where, only to be returned a week later in a shiny cardboard pack transformed into a set of indistinct black and white images complete with the exposed film as proof that they were mine.

The cost escapes me now, but was more than I generally got as pocket money, so I had to wait another week before taking outright ownership in lieu of the shilling I normally earned for undertaking a plethora of unnecessary tasks such as dusting. Whoever heard of a boy doing the dusting; such are the indignities of fame.

The photographs were spectacular. All my mates scoffed, of course, but then they had never seen a Dodo so what did they know. My parents were impressed, if not a little puzzled, by the subject matter. And my school teacher? She laughed and showed the headmaster, who kindly acknowledged my attempts at being a naturalist by putting one of the pictures on the wall in his study and confiscated the rest.

Why? I was only charging sixpence for each shot, well worth it I say; how many people had ever seen a Dodo let alone photograph one?

Fame and fortune evaded me, my place in history was denied and I never got my photos back.

Dodos (AKA Pigeon Squabs)
Courtesy of lafervet.com

Working Groups at Dunsland 2019

Join the NT Rangers, meet new people and help maintain this beautiful area. If you would like to play your part, work parties will usually be meeting on the **first Tuesday of every month** to carry out maintenance and practical habitat management tasks at Dunsland over the coming year.

The table below shows all of the remaining 2019 events. For more information, and to confirm your attendance in advance, please email Gregg Wilson, NT Ranger for Torridge, at **gregg.wilson@nationaltrust.org.uk** or contact him on 01237 441976.

Surveying wildlife at Dunsland

Should you see any interesting wildlife when visiting Dunsland, NT would really like to know. The Trust is also actively recruiting wildlife monitors for this and other sites.

If you could spare the time to help with species recording at Dunsland or any other NT site please contact Gregg or look out for opportunities at **www.nationaltrust.org.uk/find-an-opportunity**

Meet in main car park at 9:30am on each work day. 3pm finish.
Sturdy boots, waterproofs and packed lunch required.

Date	Task	Description	Difficulty
2 July	Laurel clearance	Join the team to help clear invasive Laurel from around Dunsland. We will be focusing on sensitive areas, such as those near stock.	Moderate to Strenuous
6 August	Summer orchard pruning	Hone your skills and enjoy this lovely location while pruning apple and pear trees within the orchard.	Easy
10 September	Dunsland Mystery Day (If you don't like surprises, then drop me a line)	Throughout the year we find extra jobs that need doing, which we haven't included in the programme. Whatever we are doing just join in, have fun and help us maintain this beautiful place.	Easy to Moderate
1 October	Apple pressing and tasting	Join the fun as we harvest, press and taste the delights of Dunsland orchard. Why not bring a bottle to take some home!	Easy
16 November (Saturday event)	Winter orchard management	Hone your rural skills while enjoying the delights of Dunsland. Join us as we prune, mulch, plant and guard trees in this lovely orchard. You'll even get your own tree to plant at home! ☺ **Booking essential.**	Easy

Please be aware that activities may change at short notice to help us achieve more targeted conservation work. Should you wish to confirm an activity please contact the Rangers office on 01237 441976 or email Gregg Wilson at gregg.wilson@nationaltrust.org.uk.

2019 Indoor Meetings

Bradford & Cookbury Village Hall.

Sat 26 October, 6.30pm–10pm – Wildlife, Wine and Words Evening hosted by Julian Pomroy.

Sat 30 November, 2pm – Extraordinary General Meeting.

The End of the Road

Following the announcements made at the end of the 'Bats' meeting on 11th May and the email that went out to all members on 12th May, the deadline of 31st May passed with no volunteers for the Officers and Committee posts.

We had contact verbally and by email from at least 10 members and we thank you all for the kind, appreciative and understanding comments made.

The situation we have means that we now need to plan the shutting down of the Group by the November 30th meeting, which will not now be an AGM but an Extraordinary General Meeting.

Your Committee will be meeting later this month to evolve an action plan which will involve disposal of our financial and physical assets, closure of the website and communication to the various bodies with which we are in contact.

We will be doing this with mixed feelings as we are proud of what we have achieved over the last 10 years. It will not be easy saying 'goodbye'.

We hope and believe our members will give their full support to the last two meetings already scheduled: **Wildlife, Wine and Words on October 26th** being run by Julian Pomroy and the **Final Meeting on 30th November.**

If these dates are not yet on your calendar, please add them now.

We have yet to plan the final meeting but already we know it will be something of a party in celebration of 10 years of success since 2009. We hope to be able to give you some details of this by early July.

Our final newsletter, number 30, will be a colourful, valedictory edition which will look back over the years, reminding us of the fun we have had and the great speakers we have enjoyed listening to. It will be an apt souvenir for all members.

In the meantime, enjoy the summer and we thank you in advance for your support for the autumn meetings mentioned above.

With our very best wishes.

BCWG Committee.

June Green (Chair) 01409 221050 Barrie Lewis (Secretary) 01409 220026
Sandra Holland (Assistant Secretary) Terri Clarke (Treasurer) Sheila Dearing Julian Pomroy

Contact can also be made via the website or by email.

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