



e-Newsletter

May 2025, Issue 16

Welcome

In this edition, we're heading up the tower at St Andrew's to give you a behind-the-scenes look at the newly installed swift boxes - and the dedicated effort that made it all possible. We're also investigating the hidden environmental risks of pet flea treatments on our waterways and sharing top tips for staying tick-free while exploring the beautiful Oxfordshire countryside.

And on the subject of swifts, back in March/April 2024, we installed 15 new swift nest boxes around the village to support our local swift population. Building on this success, we now have ten more boxes ready to be installed in May 2025 - and we're looking for suitable homes! **If you're interested in having a swift box, we'd love to hear from you.** Please email us: contact@southstokewildlife.org and we'll arrange a quick site survey.

It's been a lively few weeks with our pond dipping and dawn chorus walk; both fully booked and great fun. We've had some lovely feedback, and the good news is, there are plenty more events to come. Next up is a follow on to last year's very successful ***Butterflies at Lardon Chase Walk***, led by butterfly and invertebrate expert John Lindley, on Sunday 18th May at 10am. You can book the walk [here](#).

In addition, we're holding a moth recording session, a dragonfly walk, an evening with the inimitable Simon Booker of stokerpix.com, a glow worm survey and regular wildflower and invertebrate walks! You can check out the full line-up on our [website](#) or, at the bottom of this newsletter. Sign up [here](#) to express your interest and we'll make sure you're first to hear all the details of the events you're interested in. We look forward to welcoming you!



Swifts at St Andrew's - A New Home in the Tower

Paul Jenkins



In 2024, SSWCG launched an exciting project to help boost the swift population in our parish by providing new nesting sites. As part of this effort, fourteen nest boxes were carefully installed at selected locations last year.

While researching the project, I came across a fascinating book called ***Swifts in a Tower***, which chronicles the swift colony at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. Inspired by this, I got in touch with Harwell Swifts; an organisation with a wealth of experience installing swift boxes in church towers. This sparked a conversation with Robert Small, our Tower Captain of 26 years standing, and the idea took flight.



Robert embraced the proposal with typical zeal. With the wholehearted support of Liz Dowding and Amanda Smithdale, the engagement of the PCC and the enthusiasm of Rev'd Ben Phillips - who had overseen the installation of swift boxes in a previous diocese - the project was set in motion. Robert's guidance and practical knowledge was invaluable at every stage of the process but he is very keen to stress just how crucial the PCC's support has been throughout.

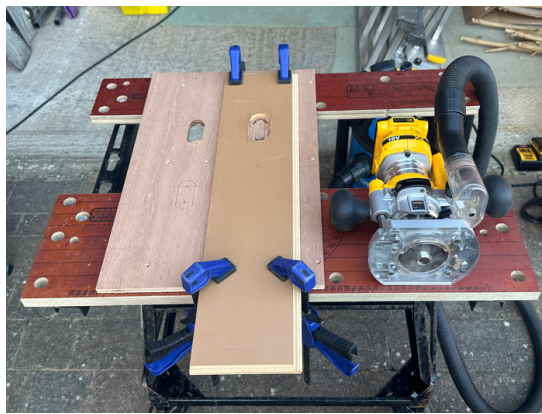
We invited Jerry from Harwell Swifts to visit St Andrew's, and he kindly agreed to design, build, and install the swift boxes, working closely with Robert and me throughout the process. The first step was to carry out site surveys to assess suitability and determine the best location for the boxes - and this proved to be quite a challenge!

Jerry initially favoured installing the boxes in either the north or eastern tower windows. However, the north window was ruled out as it's too close to Manor Farm, leaving the swifts without the long, clear approach flight they need to swoop directly into their nesting spots. The east window, Jerry's top choice, is also popular with the local sparrowhawks; so that was a non-starter! The south window was counted out on the basis of too much light, heat and flight path issues, which left the west window as the most viable option.

Fortunately, the west window turned out to be ideal; it offers the swifts a good, clear flight path thanks to the sloping ground below and, as an added bonus, it's visible from The Street. With luck, passers-by will one day be treated to the wonderful sight of swifts darting in and out of the tower.

Having established which window was to be used, a key design requirement was to position the boxes near the top of the west tower window, ensuring Robert's existing antipigeon measures were left undisturbed!

Jerry created detailed design drawings, followed by a cardboard prototype which was fitted and adjusted on site. With the final measurements in hand, Jerry returned to his workshop to build the boxes themselves.



We're delighted to report that St Andrew's Church now has two beautifully crafted, fourcompartment swift boxes installed in the tower window. Huge thanks go to Jerry and Susan Pride from Harwell Swifts for their incredible generosity; their time, expertise, and craftsmanship have been invaluable to the success of this project. And thanks of course to Robert Small for his energy and support throughout and to Nikki Cheetham who facilitated an SSWCG donation from the Keith Ewart Charitable fund which paid for the materials.



The hidden impact of flea treatments on nature

Ian Haslam



Many of us love walking our dogs near rivers, ponds, and lakes; it's a joy to watch them splash and play. But what many don't realise is that even these small adventures can have unintended, serious consequences for the plants and animals that live in and around the water.

Dogs can pollute the water through routine flea treatments, excrement and just allowing them to splash around in it can muddy the water and disturb aquatic plant growth. Wildlife might also be disturbed, especially during sensitive breeding times and we all need to be careful when tramping near the edges which can cause erosion and damage the banks.

The biggest concern, however, is the pollution from flea treatments, particularly those containing imidacloprid (a neonicotinoid) and fipronil. These chemicals can harm a wide range of aquatic life, including:

- Insect larvae such as mayflies, dragonflies, and caddis larvae
- Freshwater shrimp which are especially sensitive to pollution
- Fish, birds, and mammals that rely on clean water ecosystems

These chemicals don't just impact individual species; they disrupt entire food webs and ecosystems. Alarmingly, between 2016 and 2018, the Environment Agency found widespread contamination from these two chemicals in nearly 4,000 water samples from twenty English rivers. To put it in perspective: it is estimated that just one monthly flea treatment for a large dog contains enough imidacloprid to kill an estimated 25 million bees.

A recent study from the University of Sussex found that blue tits and great tits, who often line their nests with animal fur, had nests contaminated with flea treatment chemicals. Every sampled nest contained fipronil, and nearly 90% contained imidacloprid and permethrin - three insecticides so potent they have been banned for agricultural use in the UK and EU, but which can be bought by anyone for use on pets.

In the study, nest mortality correlated closely with drug concentration - eggs failed to hatch and chicks expired after hatching - at a time when almost half of all UK bird species are in a state of serious decline. *'The simplest explanation is that eggs and chicks are getting a sufficient dose of pesticide from the nest lining to kill'* the report concluded.

Are there safer alternatives? Unfortunately, many flea collars and oral tablets generally

contain many of the same harmful chemicals as spot-on treatments. Alternative chemical treatments are either potent toxins or essential oils with no proven efficacy. Oral treatments (pills) are absorbed into the bloodstream rather than sitting on the skin, so they are less likely to contaminate the environment through direct contact with wildlife or by washing off but, they tend to be more expensive and still raise concerns.

There is no easy solution, but regularly checking your pet's fur and bedding and routine grooming is probably the most cost effective and efficient route to managing fleas. Common soap and water will kill adult fleas if done regularly. In addition, combing your animal's fur with a fine-tooth flea comb and then dunking any beasties into a container of soapy water will get rid of them. Also, consider whether your dog needs year round treatment or seasonal as required.

How you can help when walking near rivers and ponds:

- Keep dogs out of water to avoid pollution and disturbance
- Pick up after your dog to prevent chemical and bacterial pollution
- Stay back from riverbanks to protect them from erosion
- Avoid disturbing wildlife hidden in reeds and along the shore

Everyone - people, pets, and wildlife - should be able to enjoy our beautiful countryside. With a few small actions, we can help protect these precious ecosystems for future generations.

<https://www.sussex.ac.uk/broadcast/read/66973>

[Songbirds being killed by pesticides found in pet fur treatments - The Guardian](#)



Into the woods? Watch out for ticks!



As spring and summer lure us into Oxfordshire's riverside meadows and lush woodlands, it's worth remembering that we're not the only ones enjoying the great outdoors. Ticks - tiny, blood-sucking arachnids - are also out in force and some carry a potentially serious bacterial infection: ***Lyme disease***.

What are ticks?

Ticks are small, spider-like creatures that feed on the blood of mammals, birds and sometimes reptiles and amphibians. In the UK, the most common species is *Ixodes ricinus*, also known as the sheep tick or castor bean tick. They're typically found in grassy or wooded areas and are most active from April to July, though mild winters have extended their season in recent years.

What Is Lyme Disease?

Lyme disease is caused by the bacterium *Borrelia burgdorferi*, transmitted through the bite of an infected tick. Not all ticks carry the bacteria - only about 5% do - but it's still important to be aware. Early symptoms can include a circular, bullseye-shaped rash (known as erythema migrans), fatigue, fever, headaches, and muscle or joint pain. If left untreated, the infection can spread to the nervous system, joints, and heart which, in a very small number of cases, can lead to long-term complications.



A tick on the arm of an SSWCG member!

Are we really at risk in Oxfordshire?

Oxfordshire's mix of ancient woodlands, riverside paths, nature reserves and grazing land provides good habitats for ticks. Local conservation areas like Wytham Woods, Shotover Country Park, and the Chilterns are popular with walkers - and ticks. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has identified southern England, including Oxfordshire, as having a higher prevalence of infected ticks .[The Guardian](#)

How to protect yourself

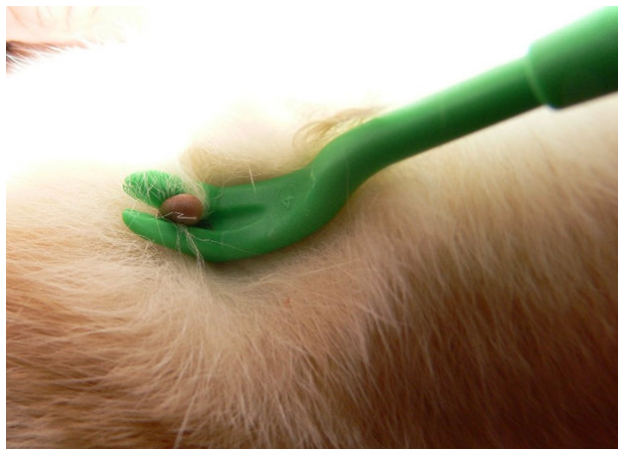
- Cover up: wear long sleeves and trousers tucked into socks when walking through tall grass or undergrowth
- Stay on paths: avoid brushing against vegetation where ticks may be waiting
- Check for ticks: after outdoor activities, thoroughly check yourself, children and pets for ticks, especially in warm, moist areas like armpits, groin and behind the knees
- Remove ticks promptly: use a tick remover or, fine-tipped tweezers, to grasp the tick as close to the skin's surface as possible and pull upward with steady, even pressure. Clean the bite area and your hands and apply disinfectant

What to do if you're bitten

If you find a tick attached to your skin, remove it promptly. Monitor the bite site for several weeks. If you develop a rash or flu-like symptoms, dial 111 or contact your GP. Early treatment with antibiotics is very effective in preventing more serious complications.

Ticks and pets

Dogs and cats can also be bitten by ticks and may bring them into your home. Regularly check your pets after they've been outdoors and keep a tick remover to hand!



Ticks are a natural part of our countryside's ecosystem and while they can, in a minority of cases pose health risks (most tick bites do NOT transmit Lyme disease), with a few simple precautions, you can continue to enjoy our beautiful countryside without worrying.

Further information:

[UK Health Security Agency](#)

[Natural History Museum](#)

[Mapping parts of Britain at risk from tick borne virus](#)

[NICE](#)

[Tick Surveillance Scheme](#)



Pond dipping and the Dawn chorus walk

A record 28 adults and children turned up for the pond dipping event on a glorious Sunday morning. In excess of 80 species were scooped up, identified and will be loaded onto the iRecord database. Thank you to all our Citizen Science participants!



And we had a record 22 people register for the **Dawn Chorus Walk** (despite the anti-social early start!). The walk was led by local birder Paul Rainsden and Simon Booker. Our thanks to both (and also to Paul and Lynn Jenkins for the reviving coffee at the end!). Simon has created a wonderful gallery of pictures which you can view [here](#) and also a fabulous [video](#)



Events calendar - please join us!

Whether you're ready to sign up for an event or just want to stay informed, it's quick and easy. Simply fill in the [form](#) and we'll keep you updated with all the latest news.

NB: Please note, event dates may need to change depending on seasonal conditions, but if you've signed up, you'll be the first to know!

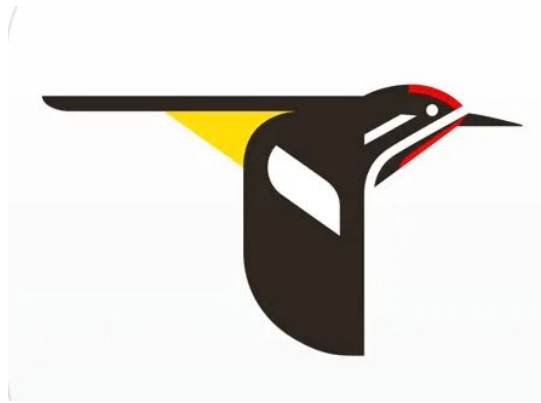


Events Calendar: April - August 2025

Event	Date	Details
Springtime Pond Dipping	Sunday 27th April 10.00-12.30 FULLY BOOKED	A repeat of our very successful pond dipping event at a private wildlife pond in South Stoke. Fun for all the family: nets, trays and jars provided and a microscope set up on site. Last time we identified in excess of 120 species!
Dawn chorus walk	Saturday 3rd May, 05.45-07.45 FULLY BOOKED	Led by Simon Booker and local birder Paul Rainsden
Bluebell walk Nuffield	Saturday May 10th, 10.30am CANCELLED	A family friendly walk through the stunning bluebell woods at Nuffield. Cancelled due to earlier flowering than anticipated
Butterflies at Lardon Chase	Sunday 18th May. Meet in the Lardon Chase car park at 10am	Circular walk on Lardon Chase with butterfly expert John Lindley. Please note: steep in places and strong footwear (walking boots) recommended
Moth recording at The Park, South Stoke	Sunday 1st June, 8.30am-10.30am	Join us to spot, identify and record the moths of South Stoke
Dragonfly walk	Sunday 15th June, 9am-11am	Always popular. Led by John Lindley. Family friendly event
An evening with Simon Booker	Sunday July 6th, 6.30pm, South Stoke Village Hall	We warmly invite you to a talk and Q&A with Simon Booker from Stokerpix
Glow worm walk and survey	Saturday July 26th. Meet outside the Perch & Pike at 9.45pm	Venture out to spot glow worms under the light of the waxing crescent moon!
Wildflower and invertebrate walks	Full summer of walks. Dates and meeting points detailed below	This year as well as recording the wild flowers we see, we're going to be searching for specific rare species!



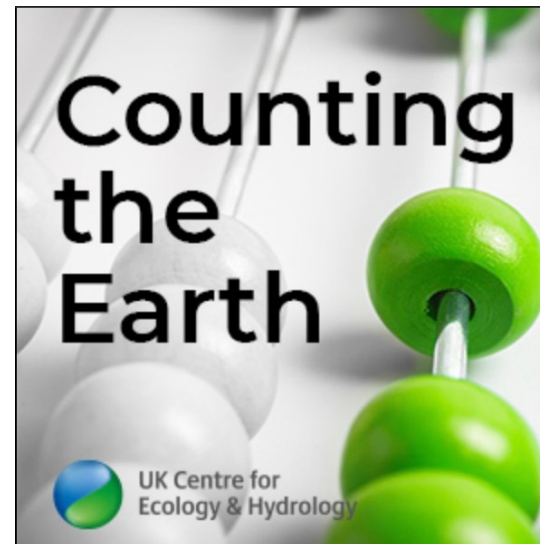
And a couple of recommendations to finish:



Merlin bird id

What's that bird? Ask Merlin—the world's leading app for birds. Just like magic, Merlin Bird ID will help you solve the mystery. Merlin Bird ID helps you identify birds you see and hear. Merlin is unlike any other bird app—it's powered by eBird, the world's largest database of bird sightings, sounds, and photos. Whether you're curious about a bird you've seen once or you're hoping to identify every bird you can find, the answers are waiting for you with this free app from the renowned Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Counting the Earth 'explores the numbers behind nature and picks apart the jargon and misinformation surrounding climate, the environment and biodiversity. Each month, they start with a number and investigate what it really means. From net zero to hedgerows, worms to water, Sue Nelson and Alice hope explore and aren't afraid to get their feet muddy in the quest for facts'.



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