e-Newsletter

November 2024, Issue 14

A warm welcome to our Autumn issue!

As the leaves turn and the days grow shorter, we're excited to bring you a packed edition filled with nature highlights and news. We have exciting news about plans to reintroduce disease-resistant elms in our wonderful parish. We invite you to share your suggestions for suitable planting sites to help us restore these beautiful trees to our landscape. We've got an exclusive scoop from Simon Booker who recently embarked on a thrilling birding adventure in Norfolk to track down a Bearded Tit. Trust us, you won't want to miss the tale of his mad dash! We explain why recording wildlife data is so much more than a numbers game (and blow our own trumpets in the process!) and, in the same vein, include an update on our annual glow-worm survey as well as sharing some fun glow-worm facts. And there's more! You're the first to hear about our upcoming parish-wide survey aimed at gathering feedback on SSWCG. We want to make our events and activities more interesting, fun, and relevant to you, so your input will be invaluable! You can use this link to complete and submit it online. Thank you 😊

Hope for the elms: planting disease-resistant varieties in our Parish

Sadly, the image above hasn't been taken in South Stoke, but it's fair to say the landscape would have looked very similar before being devastated by Dutch Elm Disease, caused by the fungus *Ophiostoma novo-ulm*i.

This fungus was accidentally imported to England from Canada on timber through the docks at Avonmouth and London in the mid-1960s. It spread rapidly, carried by Elm bark beetles *Scolytus scolytus* and *S. multistriatus*, leading to the loss of millions of trees across England during the 1970s.

In South Stoke, hundreds of elms were lost, and long-standing residents remember the dramatic change in the landscape when these majestic trees, with their classic "figure of eight" silhouette, were felled. Less obvious was the collapse of populations of White-letter Hairstreak butterflies and White-spotted Pinion moths, whose caterpillars fed on the old elms.

Some of these old trees still have roots that survive and are sending up new sucker growth. These usually reach about 10 meters before becoming re-infected with Dutch Elm Disease and dying back. Three very noticeable rows of these can be found along the west end of South Bank, along the north side of Ferry Road, and along Grove Lane.

The identification and classification of elms is a complicated process, and some

found in England varies between 3 and 62, depending on whom you ask. The situation is complicated because suckers generally don't produce leaves that can be reliably identified.

There are some surviving mature elm trees in England. A notable example is a mature Wych Elm (*Ulmus glabra* sensu lato) at Crowmarsh, along with several Dutch Elms (*Ulmus x hollandica* 'Major') in Brighton.

Extensive research has been conducted to find replacement elm trees that resemble the English Elm but are resistant to Dutch Elm Disease. Some of the chosen varieties have been more successful than others. The then "Prince" Charles famously planted an avenue of supposedly resistant elms, which ultimately died.

The wildlife group has identified a reliable source for two types of Dutch Elm Disease-resistant trees, one of which has been growing on the Isle of Wight for many years and also supports a population of White-letter Hairstreak butterflies. We will be planting some of these in the parish over the winter.

If anyone has a suitable site for a new elm tree, please let us know!

experts have been studying this for 70 years. The number of elm species

Through the lens: wildlife adventures in Norfolk

With thanks to Simon Booker

Bearded Tit at RSPB Titchwell, Norfolk
Image courtesy of **Simon Booker**

So, I would guess I have to call myself a “local” photographer and I do get a kick out of discovering and finding wildlife that most people either don’t notice or can’t see in the South Oxfordshire area.

However, every now and then, watching the “best of Instagram” fly by gets the better of me, and I feel the need to go on a little trip somewhere to get something a little bit out of the ordinary or unusual.

Many people haven’t even heard of a Bearded Tit or snigger at the name. Interestingly, they’re not actually members of the Tit family but bear a striking similarity to Long Tailed Tits. They can only be found in dense reeds so there are relatively few locations in the UK where they can be spotted.

When I decided it had to be done, family diaries conspired against me so I had one day to go to Norfolk (and back) to see what I could find. After consulting the Paul Rainsden Oracle of ‘all things birding’, and armed with locations and hot tips, I set off to Cley Nature Reserve with a backup plan to go to Titchwell RSPB if I had no luck at Cley.

With a three-and-three-quarter hour drive to Norfolk ahead of me, I got up at 4 o’clock and I managed to get into the area by nine. I was met with a spectacular vista of wilderness and seven-foot-high reeds. I went to a Causeway where the bearded tits

pictures from about 200 yards away and, while not ideal, I was thrilled to see this rarity; one of the joys of birding in Norfolk is the chance to spot wayward migrants or birds blown off course. The Dowitcher, originally from the USA, has been visiting the area for the past two years.

With that, I decided that five hours of patience was enough and I would decamp to another reserve to see if I would get an opportunity at photographing the now mystical Bearded Tits. The drive was stunning passing spectacular Norman Churches and marvellous scenery.

After a 45 minute drive to Titchwell, I got another tip that Bearded Tits had been seen earlier in the day. Sure enough, the usual cluster of birders and photographers were waiting; discernible by their camouflage gear, lenses and scopes.

We had several false alarms with Reed Buntings as we watched the sun go down across the reeds, along with hopes of spotting the Bearded Tit. The impressive list of species included Spoonbills and others passing overhead. Suddenly, I saw a sandy blur dive into the reeds. I spotted it and somehow managed to aim the camera in the same direction. I pressed the shutter button, hoping that 20 frames a second “might” capture something! I quickly checked the camera, but all I had was a blurry bunch of out-of-focus tail feathers. Ugh.

were well known to hang out, but feared the worst as it was foggy with a light breeze and Bearded Tits are known to be passionate for windless days and warm sunshine. But what can you do when you only have 24 hours? You just have to suck it up and get on with it.

“Getting on with it” in that context meant standing and waiting and looking. You start to see ‘ghosts’ after 2 hours, so I had occasional walks or watched the Marsh Harriers gliding and sweeping for their victims including a toad! (see picture). A Sparrowhawk was spotted about 500 yards away roosting. With my 600mm lens, I managed a picture but it wasn’t particularly great.

A stunning little Grebe and a few Egrets gave me some noteworthy pictures to bring home. By 2pm, the fog had cleared and the sun was out but still no success in taking any photographs of Bearded Tits. I saw them “flit” occasionally and dive into the reeds but they are so quick you’d need the reactions of Clint Eastwood to capture one in flight.

I dropped in at one of the large Hides in front of a wetland and there was much commotion due to the presence of a Long Legged Dowitcher amongst the Godwits, Lapwings and other wildfowl. I took some

However, I still went home happy because there is no such thing as a bad day in wildlife photography. Just being there makes everything worthwhile even if I didn’t quite fulfil my dream. The wonderful thing about wildlife photography and fast frame cameras is that when you take the time to scroll through 800 pictures you sometimes find little gems you missed. And guess what…. there was one picture of a male Bearded Tit in reasonable focus, looking over his shoulder. Not only that, but I’d also taken a speculative snap at a little bird flying overhead earlier in the day and after some considerable computer work, it transpired to be an in-flight shot of a male Bearded Tit!

So, no, these aren’t award-winning images, but one focussed picture and a bird in flight wasn’t half bad after 8 hours of waiting. The main result is that it gives me the inspiration to go again and climb the ladder another step. Maybe this time I’ll wait until my app shows good weather with no wind - and perhaps check into a Travelodge the night before.

Godwits
RSPB Titchwell, Norfolk
Images courtesy of [Simon Booker]

Preen
Cley Nature Reserve, Norfolk

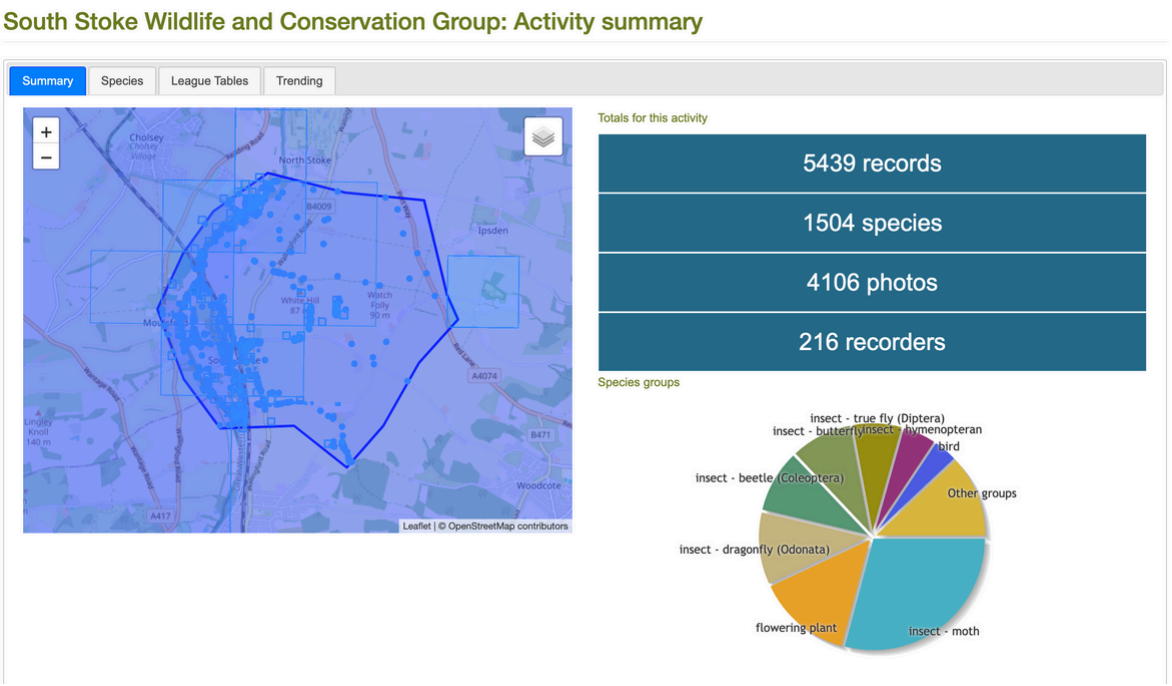
Little Egret
RSPB Titchwell, Norfolk
Images courtesy of [Simon Booker]

Marsh Harrier
Cley Nature Reserve, Norfolk

Counting critters: why gathering wildlife data is more than just a numbers game!

In an age where biodiversity is rapidly declining and ecosystems are under threat, the need for effective wildlife data recording has never been more critical.

Understanding our natural world requires accurate and consistent data to guide conservation efforts, inform policy, and engage communities. The same principle applies at a local level, which is why one of SSWCG's primary goals is to discover and record wildlife in the parish and monitor trends. And, without wanting to blow our own trumpet, we're doing a sterling job! In the last three years, two enthusiastic SSWCG data recorders have entered 2,909 flora and fauna sightings from the parish (relating to nearly 1,000 different species) into the national **iRecord** database, thereby increasing the number of local records by more than 53%. iRecord is a national biodiversity recording scheme run by the UK Centre for Hydrology and Ecology in Wallingford. Over 21 million records have been submitted so far by more than 200,000 "citizen scientists." This number continues to grow rapidly as more people record their wildlife sightings directly onto the database or via the user-friendly iRecord app.



From a broader perspective, here's why recording wildlife data is essential for the health of our ecosystems:

Conservation efforts

Wildlife data is a cornerstone of effective conservation in England. By tracking populations of endangered species, such as the European eel and the native red squirrel, researchers can identify critical areas for protection. ***For instance, the data collected on the population of the Bittern—once on the brink of extinction but most recently spotted locally at Otmoor in June 2024*** (source: Facebook: Birds & Wildlife in Oxfordshire) - has played a pivotal role in its recovery. Conservationists have prioritised wetland habitats, demonstrating how targeted data collection can lead to tangible results.

Image courtesy of **Simon Booker**

Biodiversity monitoring

Recording wildlife data allows us to monitor biodiversity trends across England. This is especially crucial as habitats face pressures from urban development, agriculture, and climate change. The ongoing monitoring of species such as the hedgehog and various butterfly populations helps scientists understand shifts that may indicate larger environmental issues. Such information is vital for developing strategies to protect threatened species and preserve the rich biodiversity of our countryside and urban areas.

Ecosystem health assessment

Wildlife data is essential for assessing the health of ecosystems in England. Certain species, like the otter and the water vole, serve as indicators of environmental quality. A decline in these species often signals broader ecological issues, such as pollution or habitat degradation. By regularly recording data on these indicators, scientists can gauge ecosystem health and respond proactively to threats, fostering a more resilient natural environment.

Informed decision making

For policymakers and resource managers, accurate wildlife data is invaluable. It provides a scientific basis for decisions affecting land use, conservation funding, and species protection regulations. For example, data collected on fish populations in the River Thames has led to more effective management strategies, helping to restore balance in aquatic ecosystems and supporting both biodiversity and local fishing communities.

Community engagement and education

In England, wildlife data collection also presents an opportunity for community involvement through citizen science initiatives. Projects like the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch encourage individuals to record observations of local wildlife, contributing valuable data while fostering a deeper connection to nature. Engaging the public in these efforts raises awareness about conservation issues and empowers individuals to make a difference in their own neighbourhoods and beyond.

In short

Recording wildlife data in England is a powerful tool in our arsenal for protecting the natural world. From guiding conservation efforts to informing policy decisions and engaging communities, the benefits are clear. As stewards of England's rich biodiversity, we all have a role to play in this important work. Whether through supporting organisations that focus on wildlife data collection, such as SSWCG, or participating in citizen science projects, we can contribute to a healthier, more sustainable future for all living things.

Kingfishers uncovered: fascinating facts about nature's dazzling diver!

Images courtesy of Simon Booker

Where and how do kingfishers build nests and when do fledglings leave home?

Kingfishers have a unique approach to nesting! They build their nests by burrowing into the soft earth of riverbanks. The process usually starts with both the male and female kingfisher taking turns to dig a tunnel using their sharp beaks and strong legs. The tunnel can be up to one meter (about 3 feet) deep, sloping slightly upwards to prevent flooding. At the end of the tunnel, they create a small chamber where the female lays her eggs.

Once the eggs hatch, the parents feed the chicks a steady diet of small fish and aquatic insects. The fledglings usually stay in the nest for about 24–27 days before they're ready to leave. When the time comes, they emerge from the nest but remain close by, as the parents continue to feed them for a few days while they perfect their fishing skills and become fully independent.

Mortality rates?

Kingfisher chicks face a high mortality rate, with around 50% of chicks not surviving their first two weeks after leaving the nest. There are several reasons for this:

1. Learning to fish: young kingfishers must quickly learn to hunt successfully, and some struggle to catch enough food in their early days.
2. Predation: predators such as larger birds, foxes, and even other fish may prey on young kingfishers, especially before they've perfected their flying skills.
3. Weather and environmental hazards: heavy rains or sudden flooding can damage nests or make food sources scarce. Pollution and habitat disruption can also pose risks.

Despite these challenges, the high reproductive rate of kingfishers, with each pair raising two or even three broods per year, helps to sustain populations.

Little known facts about kingfishers

Kingfishers have some fascinating lesser-known traits and behaviours! Here are a few surprising facts about them:

1. Extraordinary vision: kingfishers have specialized eyesight with two foveae (high-resolution areas) in each eye, allowing them to judge distances incredibly well. They can also adjust for water refraction, helping them precisely target prey even when it's beneath the water's surface.
2. Not all kingfishers fish: While we often associate them with rivers and fishing, many kingfisher species worldwide don't rely on aquatic habitats. For example, the woodland kingfisher and the kookaburra prefer forests and grasslands, feeding on insects, small reptiles, and even small mammals.

3. Plunge diving technique: kingfishers don't dive headfirst as it might appear; instead, they aim their beak straight down and keep their bodies nearly vertical. This minimises splashing, so they can grab fish swiftly and efficiently with minimal disruption to the water.
4. Colour is an Illusion: kingfishers' vibrant blues and greens aren't due to pigments but to structural colouration. Tiny air pockets in the feathers scatter light, creating those brilliant colours through a process called constructive interference.
5. Cultural symbols: in many cultures, kingfishers symbolise peace, prosperity, and love. Ancient Greeks believed that seeing a kingfisher was a sign of calm seas, and they called it the "halcyon bird." This led to the phrase "halcyon days," describing peaceful, happy times.
6. Fascinating preen glands: kingfishers produce a special oil from preen glands that coats their feathers, helping them stay waterproof during frequent dives. This oil also gives the feathers extra insulation, especially important when they nest in damp riverbanks.
7. Powerful territoriality: kingfishers are quite territorial and will aggressively defend their stretch of river or pond. They often chase away not only other kingfishers but also any bird species that come too close to their feeding areas.
8. Courtship gifts: During courtship, male kingfishers catch and offer fish to the females, often in a delicate "gift-giving" ritual. If the female accepts, this feeding continues throughout the nesting season as part of their bonding and parenting.

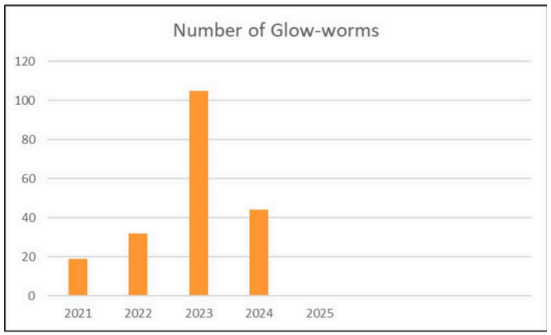
These unique traits make kingfishers not just beautiful, but incredibly well-adapted birds with some unusual, surprising qualities!

Glow-worm annual survey update

We held a fourth annual survey of glow-worms in late July this year. We completed the regular walk that we've done in the last few years ie around South Stoke including Ragwort Field to the south of the village, up South Bank, across the Glebe, down Ferry Road, and along both banks of the railway embankment up to the Bogey Hole.

In terms of results, the location map to the right shows where they were seen, and the graph below shows the number seen this year relative to the last three years.

A decline unfortunately this year, down by about 50% from last year's impressive total, but more in line with previous years.



All glow-worm sightings are submitted to iRecord, which is a website for sharing wildlife observations (biological records). It is operated by the Biological Records Centre (BRC) as part of the work of the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (UKCEH) based in Crowmarsh Gifford. They have a very handy app which anyone can use to record sightings and can be used to identify species from photos in the field; the map showing glow-worm locations above was taken straight out of iRecord https://irecord.org.uk/app

For the best chance to spot glow-worms, it's best to head out after 10pm on a still, warm evening in June or July with a crescent moon – the insects are less likely to glow under a full moon.

So, are glow worms declining as the numbers suggest, or is this just a one-off result? Some studies have suggested that glow-worms have declined by a staggering 75% since 2001 - light pollution, habitat loss and fragmentation and insecticides have all played a part, as well as climate change. However, the number of sightings this year was still encouraging and we can only hope that by preserving our verges and long grassy areas, we will continue to enjoy this fine spectacle in future years.

Some fun facts about glow-worms:

- Latin name, *Lampyris noctiluca,* not actually a worm, but rather a wing-less beetle up to 25 millimetres long
- In the larval stage (of about two years) they are voracious predators turning the slugs and snails they find into a slimy mess. The larvae are armed with hooked jaws that they use to nip at their prey over and over again. Each bite injects a small amount of toxin which slowly starts to dissolve the proteins that make up the slug or snail. This rather gruesome process ends with the glow worm slurping up a 'snail soup'
- Adults, however, do not feed at all; their main purpose is to reproduce.
- A rare ability to glow in the dark, usually see between May and September (but best in June and July) they emit a bright green bioluminescence; but only the wingless female glows strongly, in order to attract the flying males
- The females climb up grass stems and switch on their lights. This glowing, which she can only maintain for a few weeks, acts as beacon to the males who have excellent sight and spend their limited time flying around looking for females. Once they have mated, females turn out their lights, use all of the energy they have left to lay 50 to 100 eggs and then sadly die
- Glow-worms have inspired folklore and literature in the UK, often symbolizing magic and mystery. They are sometimes called "fireflies," although true fireflies are not found in the UK.
- Glow-worms can often be seen in gardens, hedgerows or railway embankments – all of which we have in abundance in South Stoke

These enchanting beetles contribute to the biodiversity of the UK and remind us of the magic of nature!

Help shape the future of SSWCG: share your thoughts in our quick survey!

SSWCG was established three years ago and now seems like the right time to reflect on our progress. We're eager to gauge awareness, assess how we can further enhance our wildlife conservation efforts within the parish, and explore how we can encourage even greater community involvement.

With this in mind, we'd be grateful if you could take just two minutes to complete our **survey**. You can use this **link** to complete and submit an online version. It will shortly be available on the SSWCG website, and we'll also be delivering a hard copy to every household in the village (and collecting them - hopefully! - a week later). Feel free to keep your feedback anonymous if you prefer.

Whether or not you share contact information, your feedback is crucial in shaping the future of SSWCG—what we do, how we do it, and our calendar of fun and educational events.

Please fill out the survey—we'd love to hear from you :-)

And a couple of glorious podcast recommendations to finish!

BBC Countryfile Magazine brings you *The Plodcast* - a weekly escape to the British countryside with fascinating guests and the wonders of the great outdoors.

Enjoy a new escape into the countryside every Tuesday and wind down with Sound Escapes on a Friday.

Pure wildlife joy!

Waterlands from the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust

This podcast takes you on a journey around our incredible wetlands here in the UK – and further afield - revealing their power to shape our future for the better. Join conservationist and wildlife presenter Megan McCubbin as she takes a closer look at the most fascinating habitats. From a humble garden pond to the rush of a river at the heart of a community, these wetlands have had a huge impact on our lives as well as being home to our most beloved wildlife.

Share on social

Visit the SSWCG Website