e-Newsletter

November 2025, Issue 18

Welcome

It's autumn but not that you'd know it with the recent unseasonably warm weather! In this issue, we take a look at how this year's unusual weather patterns - particularly the warmth and dryness - have affected local wildlife. Autumn moths, however, are thriving and we're grateful to John Lindley for a delightful article and and stunning photographs capturing them in all their glory.

We're also thrilled to share some exciting news... John's meticulous fig tree fieldwork on Ficocyba filaria, a newly arrived insect species in the UK, will be featured in the British Journal of Entomology. His observations mark the first recorded sightings of this species in London and its spread north through Oxfordshire and into East Anglia. Congratulations John!

Meanwhile, back at base, we're busy planning for 2026, especially our activity schedule. We'd love to hear your ideas. If there are any walks, talks, events, or places of interest you'd like us to include next year, please do get in touch.

The Autumn Moths of South Stoke

John Lindley

Autumn, with its lower temperatures and longer nights, sees a general decline in the numbers of insects to be seen around the village. However one group, the Moths, defy this trend. An outside light will attract species not seen earlier in the year, and a look at late leaves will reveal the feeding signs of many tiny "Micro Moths".

Our resident Autumn Moths

Most of our moth species spend the summer feeding as caterpillars, which pupate in the Autumn and overwinter in sheltered spots or buried in the soil - they emerge as adults in the spring and repeat their life cycle. But many species adopt an alternative strategy. They overwinter as eggs, which hatch in spring or early summer - the caterpillars pupate in late summer and emerge as adults in the autumn. Some species appear in September, whilst others are more extreme in their strategy, not appearing until November. Many have colouration that blends in with Autumn leaf colours, or bare branches, but some are bright and distinctive looking. The late Autumn species tend to have very hairy bodies, to give them some protection from the cold weather.

The Merveille du Jour, with its green and black markings, is one of our prettiest Autumn Moths - it is well camouflaged when resting on lichen-covered branches.
Image courtesy of John Lindley

The December Moth is actually on the wing in November - it flies on overcast nights when it's not too cold and is protected from the elements by a thick coat of hair.
Image courtesy of John Lindley

Rare and unusual migrants

Autumn is the peak season for the occurence of migrant moth species in the UK. Many common species, such as the Large Yellow Underwing, have their numbers augmented each year by arrivals from continental Europe, but in recent years more rare and spectacular species have become regular arrivals. The large and impressive Convolvulus Hawk-moth is one such species - seen fairly regularly in Southern England in September and October, though I have not yet managed to spot one. However, other even rarer species have turned up in the village over the last couple of years.

The Spiny Hook-tip is a Mediterranean species that has been spreading northwards in recent years. There have only been a handful of records for this late Autumn migrant in the UK.
Image courtesy of John Lindley

Clancy's rustic is an unremarkable looking moth which first appeared in the UK in 2002. Since then it has become a regular but rare Autumn visitor to Southern England.

Image courtesy of John Lindley

Leaf mines show the presence of "Micro Moths"

Spotting adult moths which come to light can be relatively easy, but many moth species are absolutely tiny and are hard to tell apart as adults. With these species, it is often easier to identify them by the feeding signs - usually leaf mines - of their caterpillars, which are often most obvious in Autumn. There are hundreds of these species, but many can be identified by the species of plant they feed on, or by the shape of the mine that they create.

These silvery blotches appear in September on the leaves of London Plane trees and are caused by the Plane Leaf-miner Moth.

Image courtesy of John Lindley

A tiny late Autumn leaf mine, less than 1cm long, caused by the Buckthorn Tuft Moth. As the name suggests, Buckthorn is the only food plant for this Moth.

Image courtesy of John Lindley

The Impact Of The Warm Dry Year On Our Local Wildlife

John Lindley

Spring - warm, dry and settled

The winter of 2024/25 was a relatively benign affair - it started wet and stayed wet in January, but February became a dry and settled month with lots of sunshine. This trend accelerated into March and April, with both months being very dry, sunny and with hardly any late season frosts. This led to a great season for Spring blossom - no cold weather to damage the blooms, and high numbers of pollinating insects. Solitary bees in particular had a good spring, with many species being on the wing several weeks earlier than normal. Spring butterflies were about in large numbers, with many species such as the Orange-tip being seen much earlier than usual. By May, with the continued very dry weather, it started to become apparent that some plants were already suffering from drought stress. Grass growth and flowering were both much reduced. As a result, less pollen was produced and many people had a milder hay fever season than usual. Throughout the Spring, it was very noticeable that there were fewer slugs, snails and earthworms in evidence than in previous years.

Blue Tit feasting on Spring blossom - image courtesy of Simon Booker

Summer - a mixed season for wildlife

The continuation of the warm/hot weather and low rainfall really started to have an impact in June. Voles and mice had poor breeding seasons, leading to low numbers. This in turn led to very poor breeding success for Tawny Owls, and in particular Barn Owls. A group monitoring Barn Owls in Berkshire found that almost 80% of monitored nests failed to rear any offspring. The glow-worm season in South Stoke saw peak numbers 2-3 weeks earlier than in 2024, and the annual survey recorded significantly lower numbers than in previous years. Glow-worm larvae feed on slugs and snails, and with these being in short supply, fewer larvae made it to adulthood. The picture wasn't universally bad however. The summer was great for dragonflies and early summer butterflies, and many migratory birds that feed on insects had very successful breeding seasons, with no periods of bad weather to interfere with food gathering. By late summer however, it was apparent that the prolonged drought was having an impact. Late summer butterflies and moths were significantly reduced in numbers, probably due to poor growth of food plants.

Barn owl - image courtesy of Simon Booker

Autumn - a bountiful season

By early September, some trees had already started to change colour and shed leaves, a typical response to prolonged drought. September however saw a return to more normal temperatures and rainfall levels. Blackberries, sloes and hawthorn produced huge amounts of fruit. Oak trees were smothered in acorns, and beech trees were full of seeds. This was a direct consequence of the settled spring weather. Autumn leaf colour has been outstanding, another consequence of the dry and sunny summer. Flying insects remained abundant, which may account for the relatively late departure of Swallows and House Martins this year. Swifts, which normally leave the UK in early August, were seen in the village on September 7th - a very unusual late sighting. A warm dry spell at the start of October led to a mass emergence of Ladybirds, which was so noticeable that it attracted national news coverage. This period coincided with a spell of southerly winds, which brought many unusual and rare migrant moths to southern parts of the UK. At the time of writing in early November, the weather has flipped back into unseasonably mild conditions. Autumn migrant birds are late arriving, some spring and summer flowers are in bloom, and temperatures are running at record high levels (the data goes back over 350 years!).

Great Tit - image courtesy of Simon Booker

Overall, it's been a mixed year, with some insects doing very well, but with variable results for birds, and very tough growing conditions for most plants.

Climate trends going forward indicate that our winters will grow warmer and wetter, and that summers will be more unpredictable, with increased risk of some summers dominated by heatwaves and drought but also some years with very wet weather. The impact of these changes on our local wildlife remains to be seen, but is likely to be significant.

Biodiversity in Oxfordshire: Emerging Trends & Local Conservation Efforts

Otter - image courtesy of Simon Booker

Oxfordshire's landscapes are undergoing subtle but significant shifts in biodiversity, shaped by climate change, land use, and community-led conservation. From chalk grasslands to ancient woodlands, the county's habitats are responding to pressures and opportunities in ways that reveal both challenges and hope.

One of the most notable trends is the northward expansion of species traditionally found in southern England. The Silver-washed Fritillary butterfly, long at home in Oxfordshire's woodlands, began appearing further north in the 1960s - likely influenced by changing woodland management practices. The Comma butterfly was fairly widespread across Southern England and Wales in the early 19th century, but it underwent a catastrophic population decline in the mid 1800's, probably due to the decline of Hop cultivation (historically the main food plant of the caterpillars). By around 1900, its range was restricted to a handful of locations along the Welsh border. Early in the 20th century it started to dramatically expand its range - this was due to its adaptation to using nettles as a larval foodplant. Since then it has continued to expand its range northward and eastward

Dragonflies and Damselflies are excellent indicators of the impact of climate change. They are strong fliers and so they can easily colonise new sites, and there is a strong link between warm summer temperatures and increased dispersal of adults. The Southern Migrant Hawker is a good example of this trend. SSWCG's own monitoring has focussed on the recent colonisation of a local pond by the Hairy Hawker and the Willow Emerald damselfly.

These shifts suggest that environmental/climate change is already influencing species distribution, with some winners - but also potential losers - as habitats change faster than some species can adapt.

Pollinator populations are also showing mixed signals. While honeybee numbers remain relatively stable due to managed hives, wild pollinators like bumblebees and solitary bees face habitat fragmentation and pesticide exposure. SSWCG has documented efforts to restore wildflower meadows and hedgerows, which are critical for supporting these insects. Our work, and that of neighbouring wildlife groups, highlights the importance of small-scale, community-driven habitat restoration in managing declines.

Birdlife in Oxfordshire partially reflect broader national patterns. Species such as the Red Kite, once rare, have become a common sight thanks to successful reintroduction programs. Many other bird species continue to struggle due to intensive agriculture and loss of nesting sites. Farmland birds like the Skylark and Yellowhammer continue to struggle at a

national level but both species do very well locally. Skylarks in particular benefit from fields being left uncultivated over winter.

Skylark - image courtesy of Simon Booker

Aquatic ecosystems are also evolving. The River Thames and its tributaries are seeing increased sightings of species like otters and Kingfishers. The reasons for the expansion of otter populations across the UK are complex. The ban on otter hunting which came into force in 1981 has had a major impact, and the banning of the use of Organochlorine pesticides like DDT has also been important. Ironically the Otter population along the Thames is boosted by the presence of the introduced/invasive signal crayfish, which is now their major food source. If the crayfish weren't here, the numbers of otters would be much lower.

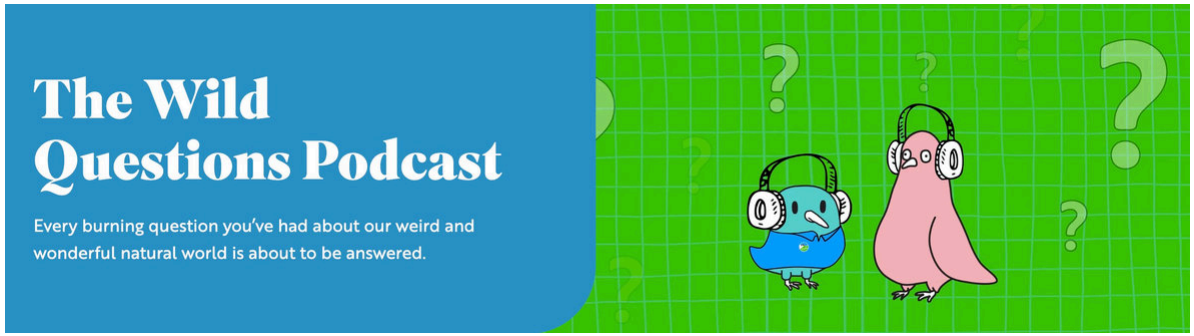
Community involvement is a defining feature of Oxfordshire's biodiversity response. SSWCG exemplifies how local action - through citizen science, habitat restoration, and education - can make a tangible difference. Initiatives, such as bat walks, butterfly counts, and hedgerow planting, not only gather valuable data but also foster a deeper connection between residents and their environment.

Looking ahead, Oxfordshire's biodiversity will depend on adaptive strategies that blend science, policy, and grassroots engagement. As climate change accelerates and land pressures mount, the role of local conservation groups becomes even more vital. By supporting these efforts and staying informed, residents can help ensure that Oxfordshire remains a haven for wildlife in a changing world.

Sources:

- *South Stoke Wildlife and Conservation Group*
- *Wild Oxfordshire – State of Nature Report*
- *Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC)*

And a couple of podcast recommendations to finish:



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