

Out and about with the Wildlife Group



I joined the PW&HG group at its annual general meeting last year to learn more about the local flora and fauna and its habitats in the parish.

It's been the most amazing fun. The aim of the group is to survey and record the local fauna and flora, to conserve and protect wildlife species, and to disseminate information about the beautiful creatures and wildflowers to be found in the parish. As part of this, it organises field trips for its members.

So far these have included a field trip to hear nightingales (we didn't, but it was fun wandering through the fields by the railway in the pitch dark with the lights of Burgess Hill illuminating the sky like an alien spaceship, and we did hear a couple of the birds clearing their throats before deciding the wind was too chilly to risk full throttle song); a delightful sunny afternoon helping to survey the wildflowers in our three local churchyards (which – particularly in the patches left to God's devices – host some rare and gorgeous species, including wild orchids); two trips to hear nightjars (both, happily, successful in that we were treated to full on churring on Chailey Common and several sightings of these rare and fascinating birds at Kingstanding in Ashdown Forest), and an energetic and illuminating wildflower walk on the Downs (we found not only several species of bee orchid but also numerous round-headed rampion, the emblem flower of East Sussex). Along the way I have seen glow worms, the Beast of Chailey – a shadowy four-legged creature slipping through the undergrowth on the Common in the gathering dusk – and a nuclear bunker and police riot control training centre.

This last, at Kingstanding in Ashdown Forest, was an add-on to the nightjar expedition. The bunker is truly chilling. Converted from a Second World War bunker and radio communications base in the mid-1980s, it is now used as a training centre by East Sussex Police. When we emerged, blinking, from our hour-long tour of what felt like a concrete tomb, it was like coming back from the dead. The surrounding area is equally discombobulating – shattered concrete buildings, burned out and rusting cars, chain link fences decorated with protest banners lifted by the police to provide context for their riot control training, and the ground liberally scattered with rubber bullets and the remains of Molotov cocktails.

However Kingstanding also provides a wonderful haven for all kinds of rare species, including moths, nightjars, and a small herd of bad-tempered Exmoor ponies (themselves a rare species) who do sterling work keeping the undergrowth at bay.

I missed out on the badger survey, but am hoping to join the bat spotting later this month.

The people on the PW&HG committee have immense knowledge about their subjects, which include wildflowers, bats, pond life, birds, badgers and much more. So, if you're not a member, join us. You'll get the chance to see some amazing sights and visit some places you really wouldn't expect – and you might even see some wildlife.

Catherine Jackson
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