Earthworms, fungi, otters and seals (among others)

The 30th Sussex Biological Records Seminar on 16 February at Oathall Community College was attended by about 250 people (including me) and was a fascinating day of formal talks, informative demonstrations and stalls, as well as informal chats in the tea and lunch breaks (fuelled by special anniversary cupcakes).

Tony Whitbread (recently retired Director of Sussex Wildlife Trust) gave a rousing introductory talk, delighting in the way that the Seminar has grown from 40 people to the large number today (and many had to be turned away because of the hall's limited capacity). He expressed sadness at the losses of some of our species and outrage that so little is being done to halt the declines. He emphasised how important recording was - unless we know what we have we will be unaware of what we are losing and can't assess the impact of change.

There followed a wonderful variety of talks and space does not allow me to describe them all so I will concentrate on what were highlights for me. The seals of Chichester Harbour are being monitored and research is taking place on how they use the harbour and surrounding waters. We also learned where it was best to see them (from the public footpath on Thorney Island) without disturbing them.

The fungi of Lullington Heath are being investigated currently and finds so far have included the wonderfully colourful (and often rare) waxcaps as well as large fairy rings which must be very old indeed. The rare and interesting nail fungus *Poronia punctata* (no, not the one that infects some people toenails!) has also been found. It grows only on the dung of ponies that graze on healthy grassland that has not been agriculturally improved and that have been treated with benign veterinary products (i.e ponies used for conservation grazing of sensitive sites). It must have been once common before the widespread use of artificial fertilisers, chemical worming products etc. It gets its name from the fact that it looks like the head of a broad-headed nail.

My own recording activities are mainly plant-based, particularly mosses and liverworts (collectively known as bryophytes) so I enjoyed especially a talk on the history of bryophyte recording dating from 1721, including descriptions of the early bryologists. Current recording emphasis is to collect information for the Sussex Atlas Project. For this we aim to record at least 40 species for each 2 x 2 km square in the county. It is slow progress but we are doing well with some better-bryophyte-blessed squares having 100 or more species recorded to date. It is a struggle

sometimes to find 40 though if woods and streams (where most species like to live) are scarce in a particular square. But I digress.

A particularly heartening and positive talk was about how otters are back in Sussex, confirmed as breeding here after a long absence. We were treated to a detailed and graphic description of how to distinguish between signs of otter and mink as well as to lovely video footage of swimming otters. The final talk of the day was from the chair of the Earthworm Society of Britain (did you know of its existence?) and the challenges of setting up a new recording scheme. We have 29 species of earthworms in the UK but very little is known about their distribution. We learnt that there are four groups of these animals: composters, surface-dwellers, earth-dwellers and deep burrowers (I am avoiding the unfamiliar technical terms used to describe these!). All are really important contributors to healthy soil and well-functioning ecosystems. So records are needed to build up a picture of their status, how they are faring and what conservation measures may be needed. If you want to know more about them visit: www.earthwormsoc.org.uk.

And if you would like to find out more about the seminar and read the current copy of *Adastra 2018* magazine, visit www.sxbrc.org.uk. Even better, if you would like to get involved in recording there is lots of advice available there and lots of organisms to get involved with. Help put Plumpton and its species on the map! It would be good, too, if more Plumpton and East Chiltington people could attend next year's seminar. But make sure you book early.

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