



Some Summer Highlights

What a very strange summer we're going through. While much of the world burns, we seem to be having an old-fashioned, pre-global boiling summer of cool and rain, just like the beach holidays of my youth. Perhaps only the unseasonal gale force winds remind us of troubles to come.

Whatever the weather, the Wildlife Group has hosted a variety of events across 'the warmer months' focused on revealing some of the wonders of the nature we live amongst.

In early May, those attending the annual 'Nightingale Walk' were treated to at least two males singing their hearts out to attract mates and reinforce territories. The nightingale is one of our most severely-threatened birds – its population has declined by more than 90% in the last 50 years. Fewer than 5,500 pairs now remain across the country. Their range has also contracted dramatically, so they are now found only in the south and east of England. They prefer bushy, scrubby habitat which is why the railway line is a good place to hear them. Let's hope that this habitat is allowed to remain and we can continue to enjoy their beautiful song for years to come. We're lucky to have them.

Also in May, and still on the subject of birdsong, early birds of the Wildlife Group went on a 'Dawn Chorus Walk'. Starting off (very) early, the intrepid group meandered up through the woods to the top of the Downs. Given the national importance of this area to a huge variety of flora and fauna, it is not surprising that they enjoyed an unsurpassed dawn chorus which (apparently) was well worth the early rise. The promise of bacon sandwiches made the descent much faster.

July saw another annual highlight: nightjars. It is true that you have to leave Plumpton and East Chiltington to experience this exotic bird, but only as far as Chailey (Red House Common to be exact). It's a really exciting experience, looking across the expanse of heathland as darkness descends, when the silence is broken by the first, unmistakable churring calls of the males. And if you're very lucky, you might catch a glimpse of the actual birds, quite kestrel-like, with long pointed wings and tail, hawking for moths in the twilight. A much recommended event.

A bit later in the month we were after more things aerial, this time moths. Using an unprecedented 3 traps, ranging from the homemade (inverted lemonade bottle etc) to near Beachy Head brilliance, we were hopeful of a good haul and as is usually the case, the moths didn't disappoint. The final tally was 440 moths across 92 species. Until you take part, it's hard to imagine the bewildering range of shapes, sizes, patterns and colours the moths come in. The huge ones are the hawk moths, and we trapped 3 types: the Elephant (particularly beautiful), Poplar and Privet (the biggest, with up to a 12cm wingspan). Many moth trappings yield rarities: on this occasion we trapped a Beautiful China-mark, a Festoon and a Bud Moth, all of which have possibly not been recorded in the Plumpton area before. And the names are almost as interesting as the creatures themselves - Black-tipped Ermine, Brussels Lace, Cock's-head Bell, Burnished Brass - and many more. Beyond their intrinsic interest, moths are a crucial part of the ecosystem, pollinating plants and providing an important link in the food chain (it is estimated that Blue Tits alone eat 50 billion caterpillars a year). When their numbers drop it is a sign that the ecosystem is in trouble, so we should do what we can, by things like habitat improvement (re-wilding?) and retention, to maintain their populations.

For me at least, moth identification would be near impossible without the excellent 'Obsidentify' app, which quite reliably identifies wild animals and plants from a quick photo from your mobile. And going back to bird song, another highly recommended app to help with identification is 'Merlin'. Lots of information on the above, plus how to join the Wildlife Group, can be found on our website

<https://plumptonwildlifegroup.weebly.com/>