

Nature's Calendar and wildlife recording



We all await the first signs of Spring and welcome the first bluebells or bumblebees, the first house martin back to its nest under our eaves or chiffchaff singing, or the first frog spawn in our pond. We might not be so welcoming of the raucous arguments between rooks squabbling over nest sites or nest material outside the bedroom window (although most people seem to find that quite entertaining too). The study of the variation in the dates of such events is called phenology and Nature's Calendar is a national project that tries to plot the regional and national changes in a representative selection of events. The information for this project is submitted by people up and down the country, with the data then analysed by scientists, so that the overall project is dubbed 'citizen science'. There are many such citizen science projects (even one with yours truly as an author!). This mass accumulation of information gives us data that it is not possible to acquire in any other way and can give us basic data on the populations or distribution of species but can also be used to track the longer-term changes in distribution, behaviour, or population structure. It can alert us to changes that may be favourable to some species, and a warning of potential or current problems for other species and their environment (such as a growing asynchrony through, for example, climate change, of a flower and its pollinators, or a bird or bat and its insect prey).

Nature's Calendar is perhaps the most basic broad-brush citizen science project that uses information that you can easily provide. All it asks is that you submit via a website the first date that you note any of a range of natural features through the year (mainly Spring). The list of features are all things that most people can identify and we would encourage you all to contribute to this project. They cover a broad range of species and events, including (depending on the species) the first leaf break, bud burst or flowering of a range of plants, the first or last records of many bird species or events in their breeding cycle (such as the first signs of nest building or feeding of young), and the first appearance after winter hibernation of amphibian species and other features of their life cycle. You can find out more about the project and what data is requested and how to submit records on the web site <https://naturescalendar.woodlandtrust.org.uk/>.

If you don't fancy submitting the data yourself, we may be able to do that for you, but would need a date and locality for your observations.

As said there is a huge variety of such 'citizen science' projects that rely on voluntary contribution on a large scale. For example, the National Bat Monitoring Programme uses a range of techniques to track the changes in population and distribution in bat species around the country and to act as indicators of environmental change. Some of these techniques require special training, but some can be done by anybody, such as sitting in your garden with a gin and tonic on a couple of summer evenings and counting the number of bats emerging from your house (or somebody else's house).

And there are over 30 recording schemes for all sorts of groups of wildlife in Sussex. They collect essential information for effective conservation of our wildlife. They submit data to the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre (SxBRC) and produce various kinds of atlases and distribution data. Once a year there is a gathering of these recorders and other field workers at the Sussex Biodiversity Recorders' Seminar, a fascinating day of reports on activities around Sussex and elsewhere. It is in February in Haywards Heath:

<https://sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/what-we-do/sussex-biodiversity-records-centre/sussex-biological-recorders-seminar-2018>).

Sometimes we organise particular surveys for particular groups locally around the parishes, but we would also encourage the noting of other more casual records. We are willing to pass on records to SxBRC, but the records will need the minimum information of locality, date and name of observer. And we may have to come back to you for further information to confirm the identification. Actually, we would also be interested to hear from anybody with a bit of spare time and willing to enter some of our records into a pretty simple recording process.

Tony Hutson