



Newsletter Spring 2024

CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

The winter of 2023 / 2024 will be remembered for being particularly wet; apart from the occasional cold spell it has usually been mild, but always, it seems to me, wet! This has not prevented a few waterproof-clad members from attending some of the arranged outings to nature reserves that the Society has put on over the last few months. The most recently created of these reserves is the Lower Otter Estuary, where we were able to see the new lagoons and reed beds that are expected to become home to whole new populations of wintering wildlife in years to come. The starling murmuration that we witnessed at Ham Wall in January was a delight to hear and behold, with the spectacle brought to an end as we scurried back to our cars before rain set in for the evening. An outing to the Exminster Marshes followed, where the lagoons were full, not only of the recent rains, but also of wildfowl. To see good numbers of curlews, lapwings and Brent geese on the marshes made one appreciate that, with successful habitat creation and maintenance, birds can thrive again in areas that had previously seen their decline.



**Members of MDW with others watching starling murmuration at Ham Wall
(photo by Peter Bowers)**

We have expanded the number and variety of outings this year, so that there should be something for every wildlife enthusiast. With attendance being free for members, this is a valuable part of your membership and I do encourage you to have a look at the Events calendar on the website. If you haven't come on one before, please give it a try this year; you'll find everyone is welcoming and there's always an experienced leader on hand to explain what there is to see. Exact dates and times are announced by email nearer the time: sometimes, late changes cannot be avoided.

This is my last 'Chairman's Notes' as I am reaching the end of my tenure as Chair. If approved by members at the AGM, then my successor will be Stephen Powles, ably supported by Vice Chair Liz Redfern. Stephen will be well-known to you as our indoor events organiser, but in order for him to take on the role of Chairman as well, he will be sharing some of the workload with Liz. Please give them both every encouragement as they settle into their roles. It has been a pleasure to work with the committee over the last four years and I wish the Society every success for the future, knowing that it will be in safe hands.

Peter Bowers

FEATURES

When you never have a camera!

Shelia and I, with our daughter Dawn, had a short break in the Lake District during the second week of last October.

After meeting my cousin for a leisurely lunch in Ambleside we moved the car to the largest car park and walked 200 yards to visit "The House on the Bridge" which we had heard was now open to the public. However, we found that it was only open for four hours on Thursdays and unfortunately we were there on a Tuesday!



House on the Bridge Ambleside
(photo by M. Randle)

The house and small footbridges to the car park cross a fast flowing crystal clear stream about 18 inches deep known as the Stock Beck. It was a very busy day with lots of traffic and tourists. As we crossed the footbridge Dawn yelled out "OTTER" and we were all able to watch it swim about three feet beneath us, keeping just under the surface. We could see it using its tail for propulsion and four very pink paws for steering in the rapid water. For all three of us it was our closest and best sighting of an otter.

We walked 20 yards downstream to the next bridge and saw some beautiful large trout and then a dipper, which was swimming underwater and easily seen in the clear water.

Who needs remote wilderness to have a great wildlife experience?

Peter Richardson

The Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*) - A mystery solved

One of my favourite butterflies is the painted lady, not just because of its beauty but also for its amazing lifestyle. The only other British member of the *Vanessa* genus is the red admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*) which has similarities and is equally as beautiful but can't compete with the amazing migratory behaviour of the painted lady. Both are in the family Nymphalidae, along with some of our other strikingly attractive butterflies such as the tortoiseshells, peacock, purple emperor and fritillaries, etc. The painted lady is slightly smaller than the red admiral with a wingspan on average 64mm (male) and 68mm (female) compared to the red admiral with 68mm (male) 74mm (female). However, there is a huge difference in the age to which the adult butterflies live with an average of about two weeks for the painted lady and up to nine months in the case of the red admiral.

The Nymphalidae are the world's largest family of butterflies with more than 6,000 species distributed throughout most of the world. The forelegs in both sexes are vestigial and useless for walking. In the male, there are typically only two tarsal joints whilst the female has four which is helpful in identifying the sex. These diminished front legs also have a brush-like appearance resulting in the family's common name, the "brush-footed



Painted Lady showing the diminished brush like forelegs folded up against the thorax either side of the proboscis. (photo by M Randle)

butterflies". The middle leg and hind leg are normal in both sexes and both tibia and tarsus may have spines. In contrast to the colourful upper wings of this family the under wings are often dull and in some species look like dead leaves, or are much paler, producing an effect that helps the butterflies blend into their surroundings.

Genus - *Vanessa*

So, to return to the painted lady: it is one of the most familiar and numerous butterflies in the world. *Vanessa cardui* is found in most climates and all continents except

South America and Antarctica. Butterflies very similar in appearance to the painted lady can also be found throughout the world as listed below:

Vanessa kershawi - Australia

Vanessa virginiensis - North America

Vanessa annabella - Western North America

Vanessa altissima - South America (Ecuador and Peru)

Vanessa carye - mountains of Colombia Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Southern Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina (Patagonia)

Vanessa braziliensis - South America Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay and northern Argentina

Although they all have *slight* differences in markings and colour they are all recognisable at first sight as painted ladies. I have mentioned these variations only to illustrate the widespread nature of this butterfly.

Species – *Cardui*

The species name, *cardui*, is indicative of the preferred host plant for its larvae, namely thistles which are a sub family of the Asteraceae family. In fact in some places it is also known as the thistle butterfly. According to "HOSTS" (a database of the world's lepidopteran host plants) it uses over 300 recorded plants so it's not surprising that this versatility has resulted in such a successful butterfly. Generally the painted lady feeds on those plants which are producing the most nectar and will lay its eggs close to these plants. They have also been observed drinking the honeydew of aphids.



Flowers of the Asteraceae family favoured as host plants by painted ladies in the UK
(photos by M Randle)

Mating and life cycle

Because of their unique migratory behaviour (which I will deal with later) they are always on the move so there is no need for male butterflies to become aggressive or particularly territorial. Once they have found a suitable breeding location the males will perch where females are most likely to appear and from which they will actively patrol until they find a receptive female. They then perform a courtship ritual when they fly in circles around one another before retreating together to the top of a tree where they will mate overnight and then separate. The males are polygamous so will breed with multiple females throughout their lives.

The female then oviposits up to as many as 100 eggs on her chosen food plant. This will normally be a member of the Asteraceae family and preferably some type of thistle. The eggs are tiny, fragile and pale green in colour. Typically the larva emerges from the egg in four to five days but in lower temperatures, hatching might be delayed by a few days. Once the larvae hatch they immediately start feeding on the leaves of the host

plant. They rarely leave their feeding spot throughout their growth cycle which consists of five instars. When the caterpillar has reached the last instar, which may take up to 14 days, it will pupate. The pupa stage lasts between seven and ten days before the adult butterfly emerges. Shortly before doing so the pupa case will become clear and the folded wings of the butterfly will be visible. The whole life cycle from mating to emergence of the adult butterfly is around a month but can vary depending on weather.



Egg

Larva

Pupa

(Photos by Harald Süpfle courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

As the adults have such a relatively short life they will now have to get on with creating the next generation. For those that arrived in the late spring, maybe somewhere in the south of England or Wales, it will probably be early July when the new generation is ready to move to fresh pastures to start breeding. Painted ladies, in a good year, can be found in high numbers and go as far north as the Orkneys and Shetland. They have even been found as far as Iceland



Upper wing

(photos by M Randle) **Under wing**

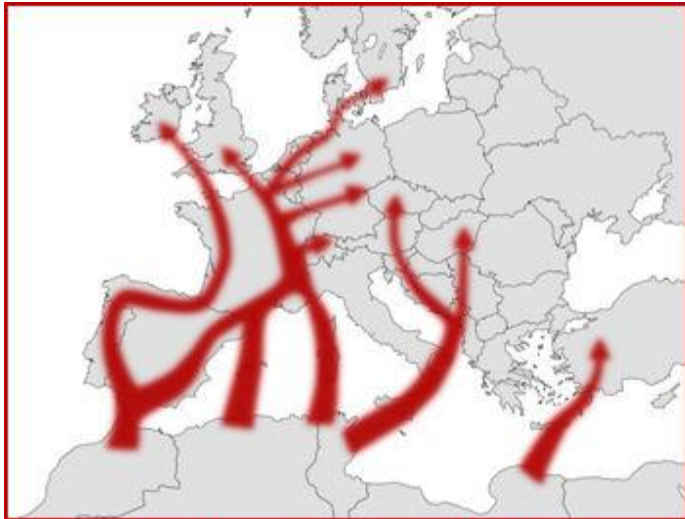
Having looked at a number of UK records it would seem most likely that when the painted ladies first arrive in the British Isles from France, some will settle and breed in

the south whilst others continue northwards, spreading out as they go, and settling to breed in their chosen locations. Their offspring will then move on northwards to be replaced by the new generations from the south of England which will settle to breed before they all join up in the autumn for a mass return journey to their winter quarters.

Migration

Without doubt it is this that makes the painted lady unique. Whilst many other butterflies migrate none of them, not even the North American monarch, can compare.

Until 2009 it was believed that the painted ladies arriving here from mainland Europe did not return at the end of the summer but just died out after the last generation had completed their cycle. Probably this belief was due to the fact that no one had ever



Painted lady spring migration between North Africa and Europe
(By Sémhur C/O Wikimedia Commons)

seen them flying back, as when they arrive they are flying at heights of about 6' to 12' and are seen by many. However, it is now known that they also fly in at high altitudes. Painted lady migrations occur in various ways from broad fronts 100 miles across, to bands of a few metres wide but many miles long, and linear streams, with butterflies passing one behind the other for hours at a time.

Research. The project established exactly what did happen to painted ladies each autumn. During that year more than 60,000 public sightings of the butterfly were collected across Europe. These included radar images tracking butterfly movements across southern England with 10,000 British observers taking part.

In 2009, which just happened to be one of those years when they arrived in their millions, one of the largest citizen science projects ever conducted, was carried out by scientists from Butterfly Conservation, the University of York, the NERC Centre for Ecology & Hydrology and Rothamsted

The following is an extract from the full report as referred to by Butterfly Conservation on their website:

"Scientists discovered that the painted lady did indeed migrate south each autumn but made this return journey at high altitude out of view of butterfly observers on the ground. Radar records revealed that painted ladies fly at an average altitude of over 500 metres on their southbound trip and can clock up speeds of 30 mph by selecting favourable conditions. The findings also revealed that the species undertakes a phenomenal 9,000 mile round trip from tropical Africa to the Arctic Circle, almost double the length of the famous migrations undertaken by the monarchs

The whole journey is not undertaken by individual butterflies but is a series of steps by up to six successive generations so painted ladies returning to Africa in the autumn are several generations removed from their ancestors who left Africa earlier in the year."

Richard Fox, Surveys Manager at Butterfly Conservation, was one of the report authors. He said: *"The extent of the annual journey undertaken by the painted lady butterfly is astonishing. This tiny creature weighing less than a gram with a brain the size of a*

pinhead and no opportunity to learn from older, experienced individuals, undertakes an epic intercontinental migration in order to find plants for its caterpillars to eat. Once thought to be blindly led, at the mercy of the wind, into an evolutionary dead-end in the lethal British winter, this amazing combination of mass-participation citizen science and cutting edge technology has shown painted ladies to be sophisticated travellers. We are extremely grateful to the many thousands of members of the public who reported painted lady sightings and contributed to this extraordinary discovery."

Radar in Hampshire operated by Rothamsted Research revealed that around 11 million high-flying painted ladies entered the UK in spring 2009 with 26 million departing in the autumn.

The full report, published in July 2012 will give an idea of its extent and can be accessed at : <https://nsojournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1600-0587.2012.07738.x>

The story doesn't end there though. Whilst it was now known that painted ladies



Northern slopes of Atlas Mountains Algeria
(Photo by Farid Ait Chaala c/o Wikimedia commons)

migrated back to North Africa it was not known exactly where they then spent the winter months. For some time it was believed that they remained to the north of the Sahara, in Morocco and Algeria. This included negotiating the Atlas Mountains, a series of ranges spanning North Africa which are around 1,600 miles long and with a maximum height of 13,671 ft.

However, there were indications that by no means all of them remained to the north of the Sahara and that considerable numbers were probably moving

further south, so in 2014, with the aid of a grant from the National Geographic Society, Gerard Talavera of the Botanical Institute of Barcelona and his mentor, Roger Vila trekked across Africa's midsection to try and solve the long-standing mystery of where painted ladies spend the winter. This semi arid region is known as the Sahel and forms a transitional zone between the arid Sahara to the north and the belt of humid savannas to the south. Talavera and Vila were rewarded by finding vast swarms of painted ladies overwintering in the warmer climes, as many as 20,000 butterflies per hectare. They were located in the countries of Chad, Benin and Niger. Chemical signatures in their wings revealed that they made the trip in a single generation. It was believed that the Guera Mountains in central Chad were likely to be a breeding hot spot for painted ladies from Europe. Following this, during the months of December and January each year between 2017 and 2020 an international team of fieldworkers, including scientists from 12 countries led by Gerard Talavera, conducted seven field expeditions across the Afro-tropics. The object was to test the reliability of previously predicted breeding probability maps. The expeditions spanned a wide longitudinal range from West to East Africa.

With no knowledge of the food plants used by the adults and caterpillars in Africa, the team could only go on their analysis-based suspicion that the subtropics were a likely

bet. They focused on open spaces as in Europe, painted ladies are seldom found within woodlands.



**Map showing the Sahara with the Sahel region below
(Public domain photo courtesy of Wikimedia commons)**

It turned out that the reasoning behind focusing on the subtropics was sound, with nearly 2,000 adult butterflies and more than 2,700 caterpillars located from Ivory Coast in the west to Ethiopia in the east. Sightings revealed that painted ladies take up residence in semi-arid savannahs on their arrival between September and November. When these areas become drier the butterflies move south to more humid savannahs and highlands between December and February. During these months, the warmer weather seems to allow the butterflies to breed rapidly, producing between three and five generations in sub-Saharan Africa before surviving adults move north towards Europe in February.



**The regions of sub tropical Africa in which painted ladies were found
breeding between the months of December to February**

To round up on the most recent expedition, the report concluded with the following paragraph:

"This comprehensive understanding of the painted lady butterfly's life cycle contributes to conservation efforts, pest management, and ecosystem monitoring related to climate change. It's fascinating how these butterflies adapt to such a wide ecological niche, making their journey truly exceptional!"

All of this research has still not answered the question; why are there such large variations in the numbers seen annually? Some evidence suggests that global climatic events, such as el Nino may be the cause of large-scale migrations.

In the 2018/19 winter it is believed that unusually heavy rains may have been the cause of the extraordinarily large migration observed in Israel at the end of March. This was estimated to be at least a billion individual butterflies. In eastern Ukraine from May 15th 2019 numbers began to grow and it was possible to observe hundreds of this species in the Kharkiv region including in the city streets.

Based on experimental data, the painted lady's migration pattern in northern Europe does not, apparently, follow a strict north-west heading. The range of headings suggests that migrating butterflies may adjust their migratory patterns in response to local topographical features and weather, such as strong wind patterns. Laboratory raised painted lady butterflies of the autumn generation were able to distinguish a southern orientation for a return migration path provided that they had a view of the sun. When they were isolated from the sun they were unable to orient themselves in a specific direction. This suggests that *Vanessa cardui* requires a direct view of the sky, implying the use of a solar compass to orient its migratory direction and maintain a straight flight path.



Host plants used by painted ladies in sub Saharan Africa

1

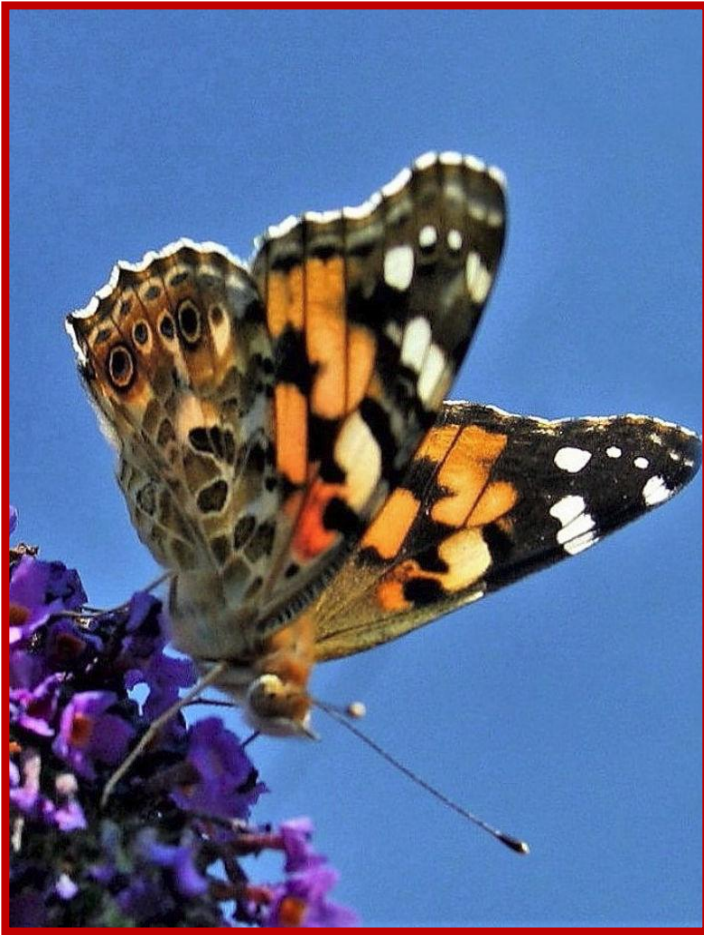
2

3

4

5

1. *Cirsium vulgare* – photo by Dominicus Johannes Bergsma (Wiki commons)
2. *Pseudoconyza viscosa* - photo by D'Arcy – (Kew)
3. *Zornia glochidiata* - photo by Roger & Aloson Heath – (Kew)
4. *Echinops giganteus* - photo by Dwergenpaartje (Wiki commons)
5. *Carduus keniensis* - photo by Didier Trécherel (Wiki commons)



I think that just about concludes my article about this amazing butterfly. It has ended up rather more lengthy than I originally intended but the more I researched the more absorbing it became and it was difficult to know where to draw the line. I hope I have done it justice.

The reports relating to the painted lady's sub-Saharan travels can be found at the following websites.

<https://www.natureasia.com/en/nmiddleeast/article/10.1038/nmiddleeast.2023.28>

<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2218280120>

One of the researchers, Roger Vila, was involved in the production of a YouTube video entitled "Vanessa's Odyssey". It is only seven minutes long and worth watching. This is the link to it:

[Vanessa's Odyssey, Tribute to the butterfly Vanessa cardui and her incredible journey \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vanessa's Odyssey)

Finally, the above photo was one I took in August 2003 whilst on holiday in Norfolk. I recall that they were very prolific on that holiday and seemed to be everywhere we went. I wonder now whether 2003 was a peak migration year but haven't been able to confirm it.

Malcolm Randle

EVENTS and MEETINGS

Visit to Knowstone Moor – 10th June 2023

The weather was not really conducive to the finding of our target species being a bit overcast and with the threat of rain later. Thankfully, the rain held off until we had finished our exploration of the moor.



Marsh fritillary
Pearl bordered fritillary
(photos taken by Liz Rogers at Knowstone Moor in June 2022)

The main targets on the day were butterflies and day-flying moths. Others were looking for various plants and lichens. It was a bit slow to start, with just a few small heaths until we found the species that we were really looking for – a marsh fritillary. Eventually we found a total of three together with four small pearl-bordered fritillaries plus 15 more small heaths and the ubiquitous meadow brown.

The group also did well with the finding of day-flying moths with two chimney sweeper, two common heath, four lead belle and a clouded buff.

It was very quiet birdwise as it usually is in June. We were, however, entertained by the song of a skylark.

Ray Jones

A visit to Bowling Green Marsh and Exminster Marshes - 19th October 2023

The weather forecast was for light rain showers but when I arrived it was continuous rain. However, by the time that the group assembled the rain had eased and it was not until we got near the RSPB hide at Bowling Green that we had a light shower.

The visit started with a walk from the car park at Holman Way down to the Quay. Did you know that the road from Holman Way to the quay used to be a railway line branching off from Topsham Station for goods unloaded from ships using the Quay?

There was little to see at the Quay except for the Exe being very brown and in full spate. We also saw very little during the stroll along the Goat Walk due to the state of the river. This was offset by the spectacle of hundreds of cyclamen over the wall in the Topsham Trust Gardens.

On arrival at Bowling Green there was the usual winter gathering of many wildfowl including pintail, shoveler, wigeon and teal together with a mass of waders consisting mainly of black-tailed godwit and redshank but also including a few greenshank, three avocets and a knot. As we were about to leave Paul heard a whimbrel calling which then settled in clear view for everyone to see.



Whimbrels landing at Exminster marshes
(photo by M Randle 2012)

In the afternoon a smaller group gathered at Exminster Marshes for the walk to the Exeter Canal. Seen along the way were a pair of stonechat, two marsh harriers and three swallows. A water rail was also heard.

Despite the lateness of the season a small number of dragonflies were seen at both venues including southern hawker and common darter.

Ray Jones

Recent Wildlife Highlights - John Walters - 23rd October 2023

Long standing members will know that talks by John are always popular and filled with great illustrations. He delivered as anticipated when he spoke at the October 23 meeting.

John started his professional life with a graphic design degree and then largely taught himself about wildlife and ecology over the years. He regularly draws and paints in the field, quickly capturing the natural world, mainly using watercolours. The many photographs and illustrations he showed demonstrated his patience whilst waiting in some extreme weather and difficult locations for the perfect shot.

He reflected on his past year, which included travelling around the UK, the Spanish Picos de Europa and regular visits to his son who lives in Vienna and illustrated it with some interesting sightings. There are too many to mention all of them, but they included:

- 15km south of Vienna in a quarry, a wallcreeper which normally lives in the Alps and overwinters there. It has a long bill and uses it to find grubs that other birds can't reach;
- Scotland at Easter time with the female woolly haggis moth;
- Oldbury Power Station – sightings of an Alpine swift, normally found in the Pyrenees and blown there with a storm. It is bigger than our normal swift. He also saw one roosting in a church tower at Teignmouth.
- Common seal resting on his kayak at Topsham
- Brook lampreys – near Sidmouth
- Bolt Head – glow worm walk
- Sea daffodils (rare in the UK) in the sand dunes near Santander
- Blue fin tuna off Start Point
- Leach's storm petrel – off St Kilda

His knowledge and skill are well recognised and he was recently involved in the David Attenborough, Wild Isles series. He was responsible for identifying the locations for the snail shelled bee, mating stags and starling roost on Bodmin Moor.



John Walters
(Photo from his website)

It seems that John travels continuously and no flora or fauna are safe from his powers of observation – he clearly sees things that most of us would miss.

Liz Redfern

Butterflies and Bouquets, Dr David Jenner - November 23rd 2023

We were delighted to welcome Dr David Jenner to Cherith Hall for our penultimate meeting of 2023 when he gave MDW a comprehensive illustrated talk entitled "Butterflies and Bouquets", which covered the full range of British butterflies and orchids.

David's photographs were of excellent quality and the talk was enhanced with slides of history and explanation. He divided the British butterflies into families, with advice on habitat and larval foodplant, and discussed the pathway through their life cycle.

The whites included large, small, green veined and orange tip, and the browns were beautifully illustrated with meadow brown, gatekeeper, wall brown, speckled wood and marbled white which, somewhat confusedly, is also a brown!

This fascinating talk showed how rich and colourful the various fritillary butterflies are, especially the marsh, small and pearl bordered, together with the much larger silver washed fritillary.

David went to purple emperor woodland to photograph both male and female adults. They meet and pair high in the forest canopy, but David knew how to tempt them down to the under storey so he could take photographs in focus at close quarters. In recent years the rewilding sanctuary at the Knepp Estate in West Sussex has attracted huge numbers of purple emperor to breed successfully.

David had also made trips to locate and photograph all of our five different hairstreaks, including our two target species in Devon, the brown and white letter hairstreaks.

Another trip took him to Scotland to photograph the thriving British colony of the glorious but elusive chequered skipper. An attempt to reintroduce this butterfly to one of its old haunts in Northamptonshire has so far met with limited success.



Sketch by Gavin



Brown hairstreak
(photo by Gavin Haig)



Chequered skippers
(photo by David Jenner)



**A selection of other butterflies mentioned in David Jenner's talk
(photos by Malcolm Randle)**

**Wall brown
Marsh fritillary
Green-veined whites**

**Speckled Wood
Marbled white
Dark green fritillary**

**Silver washed fritillaries
Gatekeeper
Meadow brown**



Sketch by Gavin

The second half of the evening's talk, which was entitled "Bouquets", covered the whole range of remarkable British orchids.

Wet areas are ideal for marsh orchids to flourish and chalk hillsides or banks were the chosen habitat for bee and pyramidal orchids. Dawlish Warren provides magnificent displays of autumn lady's tresses which appear in all their twisted glory in September. David illustrated the remainder of his orchid presentation with photographs of our rarer orchids, which depend on fungal co-existence for their survival



**A selection of the orchids mentioned in David Jenner's talk
(Photos by Keith Hann)**

**Early purple
Early marsh**

**Southern marsh
Bee**

**Burnt
Pyramidal**

Altogether it was an amazing study of our much loved orchids of outstanding natural beauty.

Gavin Haig

"Reflections" -21 December 2023

Once again MDW Reflections evening was an excellent opportunity for members to share their wildlife stories with the group.

First up was Kevin Keatley who took us around his meadow and habitat restoration project. An accomplished wildlife photographer, Kevin was able to use his stunning images to illustrate how he is turning his "patch" into a wildlife refuge rich in biodiversity. A meadow teeming with lady's smock and the orange tip butterflies whose caterpillars depend on it, a reptile refuge with lizards galore, spawning toads making the most of his deep pond and a roe buck "pruning" his saplings, were just some of the wildlife that made an appearance.



Orange tip on lady's smock

"Impressions of Bystock" is a delightful film created by Rog and Liz Hamling celebrating the wonderful diversity of wildlife found on the Devon Wildlife Trust reserve. Again, with superb photography, we saw beautifully composed scenic images with dragonflies and damselflies (Bystock has 24 of the 48 species breeding in the UK) birds, including a wonderful image of a kingfisher (Bystock has a bird list of 74 species) and fungi. We also learnt that the reserve has 13 of the 17 species of bat breeding in the UK. The reserve is well worth a visit!

Gavin Haig was on next sharing with us his passion for butterflies and moths. Some were relatively common, some were less so, and others were decidedly exotic (the talk living up to its title of "Some Usual, Some Unusual"). Gavin's pride and joy, with good reason, is the Hospital Wildlife Garden that he inspired in Tiverton. We were shown its resident hedgehogs, brimstone butterflies and the alder buckthorn on which their caterpillars feed, and a team of Blundell's School students who, on a community day, had been tasked with tidying up the garden.

Then it was over to Tidcombe Fen with Colin Williams who started by giving us an overview of the habitat, much of which is dominated by tussock sedge and lesser pond sedge. Careful management is required to achieve the maximum biodiversity on the site. Grazing with traditional breeds of cattle is a key management tool. A survey in the autumn revealed the presence of hazel dormice (detected by finding their characteristically chewed hazel nuts) but failed to find the eggs of brown hairstreak butterflies or the nests of harvest mice. The large housing development close to the site is of concern.

Last year I showed a fascinating film captured in 2020 of a rabbit that buried her five



Tidcombe fen

young kits under my vegetable patch. She would dig them out once every 24hrs to feed them before reinterring them. I never thought I would see, let alone film, the behaviour again. This Reflections I was able to show a similar film of a rabbit doing the same in a steep grassy bank immediately behind a friends' house two miles away from where I live. On this occasion, I was able to start filming soon after the kits were born and follow them through to dispersal. Within a few days the doe repeated the performance!

After the traditional mulled wine and mince pies, Paul Pratley once again shared with us some of his very accomplished sound recordings. Wildlife sound recording is a challenging pastime requiring an understanding of both one's subject and the relatively sophisticated equipment required to capture a quality recording. This year Paul posed the question, "Do Birds have Dialects?". His answer came in the form of a series of sound recordings (with accompanying sonograms) of singing wrens from the Scilly Isles, Skokholm, the Isle of Man and Orkney. The conclusion was that wrens definitely do have dialects!

The finale was a beautifully filmed and skilfully edited contribution from David Hennings. Titled "Australian Sightings", David gave us an absorbing account of some of the wildlife he came across on a recent visit to western Australia and Tasmania. Using daylight footage of what is normally a crepuscular animal, we saw how a platypus uses its enormous paddle like feet to propel itself through the water and its multisensory bill to locate prey items. A 3m carpet python slithering across the patio seemed as unconcerned about David as he did about it!! For me the highlight was the appearance a Tasmanian Devil. Once common, these rather ungainly, thick set and grumpy corgi-sized creatures are now confined to a small fraction of their former range.

Many thanks to all of the contributors, for their hard work preparing their presentations and keeping us so well entertained.

Stephen Powles
(Photos by Stephen)

The Dennis Pickering Photo Competition 2023 and Ten Years of Winners.

Dennis Pickering was a founder member of the Mid-Devon Natural History Society, now Mid Devon Wildlife. He was renowned for his photography and the innovative ways he presented it to audiences, long before there was whizzy tech to use for such purposes. When he died and left a legacy to the Society, members decided in 2012 to start a photographic competition (to be judged by members), and to purchase a shield on which the name of the winner would be engraved each year. Here we are at the start of the next decade of competitions, and it seemed a good time to not only congratulate the 2023 winner, but also to look back at all the ten winners of the competition since the beginning.

But first, at MDW's "Reflections" meeting on 21 December 2023, the results of the 2023 competition were announced. We again had a wonderfully diverse collection of photos submitted, 29 in all. The top four photos illustrate this diversity perfectly, being of a delicate fungus, a flying bird, an exotic moth and stunning scenery. The outright winner was MARK RADFORD, with his cleverly composed shot of porcelain mushrooms.



Winner—Porcelain Mushrooms – Mark Radford

DAVID WHALEY was runner-up with his striking northern lapwing in flight; and two photographers tied in third place: MALCOLM RANDLE with his stunning view of Bystock Pool, and GAVIN HAIG with his exotic moon moth in a Bampton garden.



Runner up: Northern lapwing David Whaley



Joint 3rd Bystock Pool Malcolm Randle Joint 3rd Daytime Moon Gavin Haig

Since the announcement of the results of the 2023 Dennis Pickering Competition, we have had the winner's shield engraved with Mark's name. The shield will be presented to him at the first live meeting of MDW in February 2024. Many congratulations to all these talented photographers! Now, members can get going on taking photos to enter for the next Dennis Pickering Photographic Competition in 2024.

Looking back at the DPC archives, all the winning photographs are available to see in the Society's newsletters, which are on the website www.mdw.org.uk. They are of a wonderful array of wildlife: insects, frogs, birds, mammals and scenery. Here they are all together in one place. Our star photographer by far is Malcolm Randle, who has won the competition four times, and been in the top three in most other years. We also highlight Adam Lake's superb photograph of a young mute swan on the Tiverton canal, which went on to win the Young Bird Photographer of the Year in 2020 (see Newsletter, Autumn 2020). Congratulations to all our winners over the years for your talents, and your insights into our wildlife. Let's keep it going for another 10 years!



2013. Malcolm Randle.



2014. Liz Rogers.



2015. The late Ralph Hopper.



2016. Malcolm Randle.



2017. Malcolm Randle.



2018. Stephen Powles.



2019. Adam Lake.



2020. Malcolm Randle.



2021. Adam Lake.



2022. David Whaley.

Liz Rogers

Joined Up Farming -a talk by Andrew Hughes of Backwood Farm

At the February meeting, Andrew Hughes gave a fascinating and thought-provoking presentation about farming in the UK. He has worked in the farming industry – both arable and with livestock - for most of his life, both in the UK and in Australia. When he took over running the family farm in Hampshire, he set about making it both more efficient and more wildlife-friendly. Having sold the farm in 2014, he moved to Backwood Farm near Bickleigh to develop a nature reserve.

Andrew then talked about the various ways in which farms can be managed more efficiently, using the technologies available. By testing the soil across a whole field, fertilisers can be targeted to the areas that need them in order to reduce wastage and pollution whilst at the same time producing a more even crop. The benefits of 'Zero-tillage' were explained: to replace traditional ploughing which is quite damaging to the environment and soil structures. Zero-tillage encourages worms to bury down deeper into soil, which helps plants put their roots down further and grow stronger, resulting in higher crop yields. Farm vehicles using on-board computers can ensure that resources are used efficiently, with no over-sowing.

With regard to improving the habitat for wildlife on farms, Andrew had several suggestions. In-field management could be small patches in arable fields left unsown for ground-nesting birds, long and narrow bare strips for insects, hares and partridges and grass buffer strips for birds and rodents. Woodland can be coppiced and thinned to benefit birds, butterflies, wildflowers and dormice. In-field native trees are a valuable resource for birds and insects, whilst the creation of ponds brings in dragonflies and numerous aquatic species. Bird and bat boxes can be put up to encourage more wildlife onto the farm. All of these measures can enhance the biodiversity on farms, which is beneficial for crop pollination, well-being and wildlife.

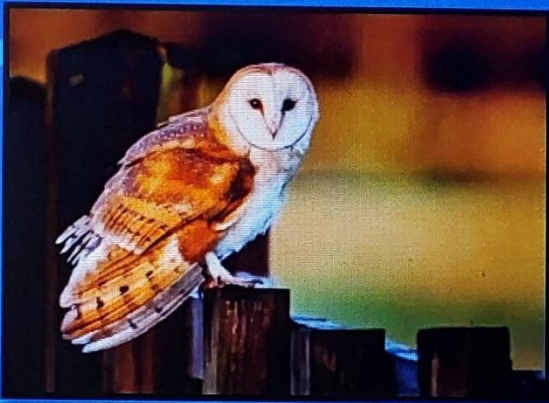
Moving on to the main theme of his talk, the issues faced by farmers and the countryside today are not being addressed in a joined-up way. There are three main problems to resolve:

- The UK needs to be more self-sufficient in food production. Because we presently import 40% of our food, we are over-exposed to outside influences and are 'off-shoring' our environmental responsibilities (e.g. animal feed, such as soya, grown overseas can result in destruction of rain forest).

- Farming needs to substantially reduce the greenhouse gases that it produces. With an increasing global population, less meat needs to be consumed and more crops grown reducing emissions and farming practices need to change. Biodiversity in the countryside has suffered greatly over a short period of time and this trend must be reversed. However, large-scale tree planting is not the answer.

Field Margin Management

Grass buffer strips



One of the many slides used by Andrew in his presentation
(screen shot made by Malcolm Randle during talk)

He continued by saying that the first priority of UK farmers must be food production. Farming can be done in ways that sequester more carbon in the soil and improve biodiversity in the countryside. The problem at the moment is that food prices are too low, resulting in people buying cheaper imports. In order to adopt appropriate farming techniques, which will sequester more carbon and benefit wildlife, farmers need to have both the knowledge and the financial means to do so. The farming subsidy system could take a joined-up approach to address all of the problems at once; however, the consumer must also be prepared to pay more for UK produced food.

At Backwood Farm, he has created wild-flower meadows and a large wildlife-friendly garden which some members visited last year. They will be open to the public under the National Garden Scheme on 6 and 7 July 2024 – please see the NGS website for further details.

Peter Bowers

