

1907
1917

1940



2000

1990

1980

1970

1960

Southampton Natural History Society

Historical Articles

Introduction

When the Committee first suggested a publication to celebrate the first hundred years of Southampton Natural History Society, and I agreed to try to produce something, I had envisaged something very different—a proper history of the Society with a scientific survey of how the wildlife of Southampton and District had changed over the century. As you can see, what emerged is very different, but I hope you will enjoy it. Unfortunately, the early documentation of the Society is too incomplete to provide a full history.

Anthea and Vernon Jones did a wonderful job at the County Records Office finding press reports of the very first three meetings (reproduced here in full) and reports of the meetings from 1909 to 1917. What a pity we don't have the lantern slides, case of beetles or stereographic photographs shown at the very first meeting.

But for the 1920s there was nothing at all to draw on and for the 1930s there are minutes of annual meetings (who proposed whom for chairman, thanks to speakers, financial reports). Things improved in the 1940s (from the point of view of this booklet!) when the Society wanted to keep in touch during the War.

Luckily in 1958 Brigadier Venning wrote a piece in the *Southern Evening Echo* to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Society and this has been reproduced in full, followed by the Brigadier's obituary. You will see that the Brigadier had not managed to find all the reports that Anthea and Vernon had found.

From 1956 to 1962 the Society produced an annual list of Records with very little in the way of annotation and no articles. In 1963 the reports were expanded into a foolscap Annual Report which also contained descriptions of indoor meetings, field meetings and other activities. In 1974 the report went A4. In 1979 there was a big increase in quality as the report became an A5 booklet. Unfortunately, production was too expensive to include much other than reports of meetings and records. But in 1985 a decision was taken not to publish every record the Society received, allowing more room for members' articles and identification papers. I have included here as many as I could squeeze in.

What follows, therefore, is a very unsystematic trawl through the annual reports and newsletters of the Society. I haven't tried to follow trends in abundance of species or make any scientific deductions. I simply sat down with the boxes of reports and glanced through them. It took me much longer than it should have because it was so fascinating. I felt for previous secretaries, appealing for articles, previous membership secretaries asking people to pay their subs, and most of all for meetings secretaries saying how wonderful an event had been and what a pity it was that so few members had attended!

I stopped and read the interesting and the quirky and I hoped that, if I found it fascinating, you would too. If any theme unites all the pieces repeated here it the relation of what members saw around them to what was happening to the planet. For a hundred years the Society truly has been acting locally, but thinking globally.

Jan Schubert
Secretary

From Southampton Times & Hampshire Gazette

Saturday October 12th 1907

At the Crabniton School on Wednesday evening, a very enjoyable gathering of those interested in natural history took place. Tea was provided at 6.30 by the generosity of Mr. R. Beck. A pleasant time was afterwards spent examining the various objects of interest brought, which included some very fine cases of beetles, part of Mr. Beck's collection, also a series of lantern slides of butterflies and moths., diagrams, and drawings of microscopic and botanical objects, microscopes and slides, and stereographic photographs of natural objects. The next meeting will be eagerly anticipated, and it was felt by those present that this is but a beginning of a society that will prove of great assistance to all lovers of nature in the town and district.

Saturday November 23rd 1907

The second meeting of the Natural History Society took place on Wednesday at the Crabniton School. The principal feature of the evening was a lecture on "Butterflies" by Mr Hayward. The lecturer dealt especially with British butterflies, prefacing his remarks with a short description of the various stages in the life history of the butterfly and the peculiarities of each stage. A collection of British butterflies was exhibited, and these, together with some very fine drawings, made the lecture extremely interesting and instructive. Many valuable hints on collecting and preserving butterflies were given by Mr Hayward, who also gave some curious and humorous reminiscences of his life as an entomologist. A free discussion followed, in which many questions of difficulty raised by members were elucidated by Mr Hayward and Mr R. Beck.

Saturday December 21st 1907

The third meeting of the Natural History Society was held on Wednesday at the Crabniton School, when a lantern lecture on "Insects" was delivered by Mr R. Jeffery. The first part of the lecture was devoted to a consideration of insect life in general, and the latter part dealt mainly with butterflies and moths. Many interesting facts about the insect world were given; among them their commercial importance

and their protective mimicry of nature were mentioned. The lecture was illustrated throughout by 70 or 80 beautifully coloured lantern slides, made and coloured by Mr Jeffery. Mr R. Beck, in proposing a vote of thanks to the lecturer, made reference to the really excellent slides of butterflies and moths shown, noting especially the fact that all the photographs had been taken without shadow. The meeting throughout was a most interesting and instructive one.

From Southampton Times & Hampshire Express

January 2nd 1909

The fortnightly meeting of the SNHS was held on Wednesday at the Friends Meeting House, Ordnance Road when an interesting lecture on "Spiders" was given by Mr A. E. A. Hayward. The classification of spiders, their anatomy and habits were clearly described by the lecturer, whose remarks were illustrated throughout by original and well executed drawings. In the discussion which followed various questions of difficulty, raised by members, were replied to. A collection of beautifully coloured drawings of spiders, brought by Mr R. Beck, and a series of microscope slides, added materially to the success of the meeting.

January 16th 1909

The fortnightly meeting of the SNHS was held on Wednesday at the Friends Meeting House, Ordnance Road when an interesting lecture on "The Anatomy of a Dicotyledonous Stem" was given by Mr F. C. Richardson. The lecturer dealt with, in the first place, the cells and cell changes generally, and then with the special cell structure of the wood, bast and cambium, and their functions in the economy of plant life, were explained and illustrated by means of diagrams and microscopic slides. Several of the slides were exhibited under a fine binocular microscope brought by Mr H. Ashby.

March 13th 1909

At the Bitterne Park Congregational Mutual Improvement Society on Monday, Mr R. Beck gave a lecture which was most fully appreciated. Mr Beck is evidently an enthusiastic student of Nature and finds much pleasure in imparting to others the knowledge of "Insect Life" he possesses. He succeeded in arousing and retaining the interest of his listeners in a marked degree, and many remained to inspect a large and varied collection of beetles, moths, butterflies etc, which was on view. The President (the Rev. T.C. Evans) on behalf of the members, thanked the lecturer for his splendid services.

January 13th 1917

At the January meeting of the SNHS, a paper was given by Miss Sinopisky on "Birds, Beasts and Flowers in English verse". The lecturer showed how close were

the relations of primitive and savage man with Nature: his very existence depended upon his understanding of Nature's ways. As man became civilised, and his intellect and emotions took a wider range, Nature became interwoven with art, literature and religion. A number of extracts from our most famous writers were read with rare elocutionary skill and taste in illustration of this fascinating theme, which was so highly appreciated by the assembled members that Miss Sinopisky was asked to deal with it again at the annual meeting to be held on Feb 1st.

February 10th 1917

The February meeting of the SNHS, being the Annual General Meeting, attracted a good assemblage of members and friends, notwithstanding the inclemency of the weather. Some very interesting exhibits were on view, including a number of beetles and insects, all last season's captures, many of them of great beauty and exquisitely mounted, shown by the Hon. Secretary, Mr E. Hayward, under a microscope specially adapted by himself; a series of herbarium specimens of local "alien" plants—that is, plants found growing wild here, but not true natives of Britain—shown by the President Mr J. F. Rayner FRHS; corals by Miss M. Moore, a Vice-President; stereoscopes and a large collection of slides of natural history, Mr E. L. Veal; several microscopes with slides of natural history subjects etc. After a pleasurable time spent in discussing the exhibits, the President said a few words of greeting, and the Hon. Secretary submitted his report for 1916, which was of a very encouraging nature, all things considered. A series of excellent lectures had been given during the last past twelve-month, and some very enjoyable rambles, in describing which the report was specially enthusiastic. Particulars were given of the successful second season of the Wild Flower Exhibition held in the Art Gallery of the Central Free Library, the chief labours and responsibilities of which had fallen on Mr Rayner, with valuable assistance from Miss Boswell, B.Sc., Mr Veal, Mr Crook and Mr Hayward. In the course of searches for specimens for the stands many plants new to the district had been found, and 40 additions had been made to the Millbrook list, bringing the total number recorded up to the present for that prolific patch of ground up to 233. Their President was writing a series of popular botanical articles in the "Southampton Times", which it was believed, had further contributed to awaken interest in the wholesome and delightful pursuits of the countryside. The report concluded with an eloquent vindication of the Society's work, the healing and stimulating effect of which was especially needed in these troublesome times. A paper entitled "Dame Nature Depicted" was then read by Miss H. S. Sinopysky. On a previous occasion Miss Synopysky had dealt, with great charm of treatment, with Nature among the poets, and the subject this now was the depicting and appreciation, to pictures by Turner, whose "Fighting Temeraire" was the most glorious sunset that had ever been painted; Lucy Kemp Welch, whose "New Forest Ponies" had endeared her to all nature-lovers, and to

Hampshire people in particular; Holman Hunt, who sacrificed health and fortune to study nature in Palestine; Joseph Farquason, the most renowned painter of snow that we had; Fischer, the painter of Indian jungle life; Grenze, whose gentle art was not without reference to nature; Millet, whose pure and simple genius and command of colour were illustrated by many reproductions in colour and monochrome of these and other masters.

March 10th 1917

At the last meeting of the SNHS, which took place, as usual, in a room of the Friends Meeting House, Ordnance Road, Miss M. Moore (Vice-President) gave a lecture entitled "Rambles of a Geologist". Miss Moore described, in a very interesting and instructive manner, the features of different geological ages, their formation, their effect on scenery and vegetation and their fossils, from visits to Long-mynd in Shropshire, where the earliest known fossil animal, the Trilobite, was found; Lyme Regis, where the monster fish-reptile, the Ichthyosaurus, was discovered by a girl, the daughter of a local mechanic; Portland Island and Chesil Beach, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. The lecture was illustrated by original drawings and a fine collection of fossils. After a brief discussion Miss Moore was accorded a hearty vote of thanks.

April 14th 1917

The members assembled at the monthly meeting of the SNHS were delighted with a paper read by Mrs Balls on "The Natural Beauties of Southampton" which described in very eloquent language the natural advantages of our town, with its two rivers, its fine trees and its abundant flowers. In the course of the discussion which followed, Mr Rayner referred to the Wild Flower Exhibition, held during the two previous seasons, and soon, he hoped, to be opened again, of which a large number of species, all collected in the district, were shown, than at any similar exhibition in any part of Britain. Mr Hayward mentioned, as evidence of the abundance of insect life in the locality, that in the course of one ramble he had captured 90 species of spiders and 80 of beetles. Mr Cater and others referred to various "beauty spots" in the district. A vote of thanks was carried by acclamation, and it was generally felt that this tribute to Southampton, composed as it was with true feeling and fine literary merit, ought to receive the wider publicity of print.

September 15th 1917

At the last meeting of the SNHS which took place, as usual in a room at the F.M.H. Mr E. Hayward gave a pleasing address on the insects and plants seen in the course of the society's excursion along the canal from Eastleigh to Shawford, last summer, illustrating his remarks with a series of large coloured diagrams and figures, his own work.

October 13th 1917

At the last meeting of the SNHS which took place, as usual in a room at the F.M.H. a lecture was given by Mr C. T. Hirst (Hythe) on "Our Birds". After a prefatory remark on the tentative nature of all attempts at the classification of living creatures, in which, however, the ornithologist had an advantage over the botanist, inasmuch as the mass he had to deal with was comparatively small, the lecturer pointed out that the total number of birds found in the British Isles were only 360, of which 140 were resident all the year round, 60 summer migrants which breed here, about 50 winter visitors and occasional and capricious species to the number of 110. Of these, he could only speak that night, on a few from the first two classes. A good working classification of birds, founded chiefly on their habits, divides them into six orders: Accipitres or Birds of Prey, Passeres or Perching birds, Scansores of Climbers, Gallanae or Scratchers and Game Birds, Grallae or waders and Natatores or Swimming Birds.

Leading members of these orders were then passed in review, the lecturer recounting many interesting particulars of their structures and habits, largely from personal observation, with occasional allusion to their place in ancient history, etc.

Of the first order, or Birds of Prey, he described the Golden Eagle, now extinct as a breeding bird in these islands, and spoke of the Buzzard, and the Marsh and Hen Harriers, the latter being formerly denizens of the New Forest; but all the larger hawks of this district had been exterminated. The Kestrel and Sparrow-hawk were still fairly common, and the characteristic flight of the former was clearly depicted. It did little harm to game, and instead of being persecuted by keepers as it is, it should be rigorously protected; the same defence could not be made for the dashing little Sparrow-hawk, which often preyed on newly-hatched chickens, though they were not his principal food. The noble Peregrine Falcon was still found in the South of England. Mr Hirst then gave many interesting details concerning the Owls, which belong to this order, and also of the Red-backed Shrike, usually included among birds of prey.

The order Passeres (from passer, Latin for sparrow) included most of the common kinds of our woods and hedgerows, typical members of which were dealt with, such as the House Sparrow, the Hedge Sparrow, the Grasshopper Warbler, the Nightjar with its whirring note, the well known Swallow, Swift, Martin and Sand-Martin; the Goldfinch or Bullfinch were also referred to as exceptions to the general rule that our sweetest songsters are sober-coated.

The Scansores or climbers included the conspicuous and highly coloured Woodpeckers, which excavated holes in the hardest trees, but notwithstanding the hard work involved, never used the same nest again, which, however, was

subsequently taken possession of by Starlings. Of the Scratchers, mostly game birds, the Red Grouse claimed special mention from the fact that it was only to be found in the British Isles, and might therefore be regarded as our true national bird. Of the waders, a typical species was the common Snipe and of the same order was the Redshank, which regularly nests in the Dibden Marshes. Of the Swimmers, the lecturer could only, in the time at his disposal, refer to the Great Crested Grebe.

Mr Hirst concluded with some remarks on the fascinating and mysterious subject of bird migration, which, notwithstanding the work of a multitude of observers, was still far from being fully understood. The routes of many species were, however, fairly well known, and the distances travelled were in some cases amazing, the Terns, for instance, covering well over 20,000 miles in the course of the year. But it was difficult to understand why closely allied species—to take, for example, the Thrush family—should differ so widely in their migratory habits. Our common Blackbird, Song-thrush, and Dipper changed their location but a few miles at most. While the Ring Ouzel, differing little from the Blackbird, except that it inhabits wilder country and has a white patch on its breast, was returning to us from Asia and Africa, the Redwing and Fieldfare were leaving us for their breeding places in Northern Europe. The paths of migration were not always North and South; sometimes they were East and West; but it seemed to be proved that all birds breed in the most northerly portion of their range. With some further facts and reflections on this vexed question the lecturer concluded, and after replying to a number of queries, was cordially thanked by the members assembled.

November 10th 1917

At the last meeting of the SNHS, a lecture was given by Mr J. F. Rayner F.R.H.S., M.B.Myc.S., on “Recently-found Plants of this District”. One result of the Wild Flower Exhibition was that the countryside was being systematically investigated for specimens, and many interesting plants, not hitherto noticed in the District, had been discovered.

Among these was a distinct kind of Water Buttercup (*Ranunculus circinatus*), with only submerged leaves, which were stiff and all on one level, the Slender Bird’s-foot Trefoil, the Wood-Pea, the rare Deptford Pink, the still rare Cut-leaved Sage (hitherto recorded only for two places in Surrey), the Corn Caraway, the Round-leaved Hare’s ear, with oval leaves pierced by the stem, *Achillea nobilis*, an elegant foreign ally of our Millfoil which has lodgement at Millbrook, two uncommon forms of that large family, the Hawkweeds, the Hawkweed Pieris, which botanically differs from the true Hawkweeds in the pappus or parachute of the seed being white and feathery, whereas in the Hawkweeds it is brown and hairlike, the Great Bladderwort, an aquatic insect-eating plant, described in books as growing six inches to a foot long, but now found in examples six feet in length and much branched, the curious

and very beautiful Herb Paris, with green flowers as well as leaves, usually with the parts in fours (leaves, petals, sepals etc.) but sometimes in fives, of which a dense colony 12 yards long and eight yards wide was found at Timsbury, several fresh varieties of grasses, and many others, including some abnormal of “monstrous” forms, the most remarkable of which was, perhaps, a Field Convolvulus with cut or lobed flowers, found by Mr G. W. Willis, near Basingstoke. Mr Rayner showed in all, about 50 sheets of dried specimens in illustration of his remarks. — Mr E. L. Veal exhibited acorns of the Turkey Oak (*Quercus cerris*), with large, spiny caps, and of the Red American Oak (*Q. rubra*), very small and flattish, the nuts pointed, the cups with close, neat scales.

[In 2008 Phillip Budd provided an update for this list of plants.

A Water Buttercup (*Ranunculus circinatus*) is Fan-leaved Water Crowfoot: Now very rare, or extinct, in Test and Avon valleys. The most recent record is from Fishlake Meadows, Romsey.

Slender Birdsfoot Trefoil (*Lotus glaber*): Quite common around Southampton still (perhaps increased), very common on Peartree Green.

Wood-pea is probably Bitter Vetchling (*Lathyrus linifolius*): Is still frequent in clayey grassland or woodland rides especially north of Southampton.

Deptford Pink (*Dianthus armeria*): Very rare, except possibly in Avon Forest on Dorset border, also recently seen at Morn Hill east of Winchester.

Cut-leaved Sage is probably Cut-leaved Germander (*Teucrium botrys*): Micheldever Spoil Heaps is nearest site to Southampton and holds the largest colony in Britain.

Corn Caraway is now called Corn Parsley (*Petroselinum segetum*): Has declined in Hampshire, mainly in north of county but recently seen near Botley.

Round-leaved Hare’s-ear (*Bupleurum rotundifolium*): An extinct cornfield weed that occasionally still appears as a compost casual but not recently.

Achillea nobilis: A rare garden escape related to Yarrow and not recently recorded.

Two Hawkweeds (‘Pieris’) are probably Bristly Ox-tongue (*Picris echioides*) that is common in dry grassland, bare places and shingle especially close to the sea, and Hawkweed Ox-tongue (*Picris hieracioides*) that is very common in ‘weedy’ places and rough grassland around Southampton and probably increasing.

Great Bladderwort (*Utricularia australis*): Rare but probably still present in private ponds/lakes at Stoneham Park and at Chilworth.

Herb Paris (*Paris quadrifolia*): The nearest site to Southampton is still the woodland near Timsbury Manor, north of Romsey.

Field Convolvulus is Field Bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis*): Very common in dry places but not seen with lobed flowers recently.]

Wartime

During the First World War, the Society seemed to carry on as if nothing was happening. However, it was different during the Second World War. The Society continued to meet at the beginning of the War:

“Owing to the outbreak of war and the imposition of Black out regulations, the routine and activities of the Society were very much hampered. It was found necessary to hold the meetings on Saturday afternoons, and many of our prospective Lecturers were unable to visit us owing to shortage of Petrol and the difficulties of travelling from a distance.” (Annual Report for 1939-1940)

But by the middle of 1940, the Society could no longer meet:

“At the Annual Meeting of the Society held on October 5th, it was decided to suspend meetings until such time as difficulties of gathering together become less. A number of our members are scattered, and it was felt that an occasional Newsletter, perhaps each season, would help us keep in touch and maintain the reality of our Society. After thirty three years it would be a great pity if we ceased to function, so we ask all our members to enable us to produce a useful and attractive little paper.” (Autumn 1940 Occasional Newsletter 1)

There were eight of these Occasional Newsletters. Member contributed articles from different parts of the country where they were stationed. Very few actually mentioned the war—probably members were happy to read about “Hampshire Hedges in Winter” or “Nature Notes from Cornwall” and forget the War for a few hours. However, from our point of view the articles which do mention the War are more interesting. Two are reproduced in full.

Nature and the War

E. F. Harmer

Autumn 1940

What our animal and other friends think of the behaviour of man is problematical, but judging by their actions, they are very disturbed. During a sharp burst of gunfire, with planes overhead, large numbers of birds were seen hurrying away from the disturbance, and gave us the first indication of the direction from which the noise of bursting came. These birds were flying high up, and may have been migrating; I hope they found their destination to their liking.

The conditions in Northern France during the spring leave plenty of room for speculation, but it would be quite safe to assume that, as in the last war, where, in the fighting zones, orchards and farms were destroyed, the land and growing

crops were neglected, and the tillers fled to safety. Be this as it may, the following unusual observations have been made recently.

Butterflies. There was, in the early summer, a veritable plague of cabbage whites; they swarmed on the land in vast numbers. In Palmerston Park, Southampton, the wings of these insects covered the ground like a fall of snow, the sparrows biting out the insects for food, and the wings falling to the ground. My observer was so astonished at these wings littering the ground that he went over to the spot under the trees and carefully looked to see what was going on.

[Mr Harmer added to this observation in a Nature Note in the next newsletter: *In the last Newsletter I mentioned that the plague of white butterflies probably came from the derelict fields of Northern France. I have had confirmation of this since. During the summer I had a lift to town by a motorist who was engaged in the evacuation of troops from France, and he said that on one occasion on the return journey, on the rigging of the ship there were many hundreds of white butterflies resting after their flight, and obviously getting a free lift.*]

Jays. As the warm weather advanced and fruit began to ripen, from our vantage point we noticed about half a dozen jays flying from a southerly direction and making for the orchard. They later passed on northwards. This was repeated on two or three occasions with varying numbers. I was particularly interested in this, because, although we are usually troubled with jays destroying the fruit, they are such shy birds that they are seldom seen except in the early morning; but we able to confirm them by a good pair of glasses.

Wagtails. This spot is about two miles or more from the usual haunts of these attractive birds and they are only seen here on very rare occasions, but lately (September) several have been in the garden, and have been seen drinking at the bird bath from time to time.

Owls. On several occasions lately large tawny owls have been seen flying about in the daytime, on the outside edge of the woods, apparently very disturbed. One sat on the garden fence for quite a long time, then flew into an apple tree, and finally disappeared into a Scotch fir. At night, they have been, on occasion, very noisy.

In this connection, several people mentioned the noise of falling fragments of shell cases in the trees, but as near-by greenhouses and windows were not broken, I think the firing of guns in the district causes a concussion that vigorously shakes the trees, resulting in a rustling sound, and this is what is heard. I have since confirmed this; in fact, the whole woods seem to shake at times, and no doubt disturb the animal life.

Rabbits. Owing to a very greatly reduced amount of traffic on a bye-road near here, several rabbits can be seen playing on the road. Sometimes one rabbit will sit in the centre of the road, evidently listening, because long before the approach of a car, they will all scurry to safety.

Dogs and Cats. It is very amusing to see how as soon as the air raid sirens go, our two cats will make the shortest way to the shelter. On mentioning this to others, I have been informed that many dogs will do this, too. In fact, according to the morning papers, one dog was found quite safe, while his owners had been trapped in the falling building.

I do not see that any special intelligence can be claimed by these animals, because, in our own case, the animals know they are sure of a little petting when we go the shelter and the noise gives them the idea.

Bees. We have had a wonderful crop of every kind of fruit this year, and this seems surprising, because many stocks of bees were killed in the unusually heavy frost last winter. I believe, however, that in some parts of the county they have not been so fortunate. Is it possible that a hard frost helps the following season?

Herb Gathering in Wartime **A. J. W. Ingram** **Summer 1945**

The exigencies of war, depleting the imports of medicinal herbs from abroad, have concentrated the attention of those responsible for medical supplies upon the possibilities of our native field and hedgerow plants. Women's Institutes, schools, children's clubs and similar bodies have been instrumental in gathering large quantities of herbs and seeds for the benefit of hospitals and general medical needs. I was able to help and superintend local efforts to gather Foxglove leaves and Wood Sage for the Herb Committee, and also gave a talk, aided by a good armful of locally gathered plants, on the medicinal value of some of our common wild flowers and herbs. While not laying claim to any expert herbalist knowledge of the properties of plants, I was able, by the aid of some ordinary botanical experience, to classify and indicate broadly, the nature and uses of some of our local herbs.

We can safely say that our present medical knowledge is based upon the researches and experiments of the old herbalists, and they in their turn culled some information from the primitive "Medicine Man." While, no doubt, a lot of magic was employed with their use, and a lot of faith mixed in with the decoctions by those who swallowed them, yet not perhaps very different from the pathetic faith that so many today place in a bottle of coloured liquid without knowing the nature of the

contents. It is wonderful how many effective herbal extractions are used in modern medical practice. We owe to the native Indians of America the knowledge of the value of quinine, cocaine and cascara among many other remedies.

Our grandmothers knew the value of the Labiates: Mint, Horehound, Balm, Rosemary, Skull-Cap, Salvias, etc., all containing essential oils, and not one of the family is injurious in any way. The tonic value of the Gentians are well known and our native Centaury and Bog Bean are helping to supply the deficiency of Yellow Gentian from abroad. Foxglove, Henbane and Belladonna provide the medical faculty with a powerful aid in heart trouble. The root of Common Dandelion is a valuable remedy for atonic dyspepsia. An infusion of Woodsage stimulates the liver, also the twigs of Common Broom. Coltsfoot and Horehound are valuable in chest complaints. Meadow Saffron, or Colchicum is used in cases of rheumatism; it has also been discovered in the John Innes Horticultural Institution at Merton that weak solution of colibicine, the active principle of colchicum, stimulates plant growth, and will probably be useful in afforestation schemes, and horticulture generally. Already in Sweden experiments are being carried out and are likely to have a practical result in increased timber supply.

Apart from their medicinal properties, our native plants are also used in toilet preparations. Elder-flower water is useful in cases of sunburn; Rosemary is invaluable as a hair tonic, as well as Chamomile. Recently I read an article by Edith Gray Wheelwright, an authority on Herbs, that in the West country the Common Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) is gathered, and an infusion of a handful of mature stems boiled in a pot of water for a few minutes, increases the lustre and growth of the hair. We all know that a crushed leaf of Common Dock is an antidote to nettle stings, and how wonderfully Nature seems to arrange that the two grow usually in close proximity to each other. It is not so well known that Plantain leaves "Plantago major" will allay the irritation of insect bites.

Our civilisation seems to have put us out of touch with Nature, and the resources of the plant world by which we are surrounded. We look down on the Australian aborigine, and yet, it is said that he know the locality and property (medical, food and economic) of every plant in his environment. Surely we ought to combine some of this primitive knowledge to the advantage of our general culture.

Half a Century of Soton Natural History Study
Brigadier F. E. W. Venning
Southern Evening Echo

Towards the end of 1907 half a dozen Southampton men and women assembled at Sandi Hayes, the home of Mr. Richard Beck, and resolved to meet once a fortnight to study natural history. By the beginning of 1908 they had established “The Southampton Natural History Society” with Mr. Beck as president, a vice-president, Mr. Herbert Ashby, and an honorary secretary, Mr. Edward Hayward.

Part 1, 1907–1932

The first recorded Minutes on April, 8 1908, show that ten members were present bringing objects of interest for examination and discussion and to hear a talk on Coleoptera by the president illustrated by drawings by Miss Beck. At this meeting two new members were enrolled, one of whom, Mr. G. Donohoe, is an active vice-president of the society today.

Meetings took place regularly once a fortnight with exhibits brought by members and talks on many subjects including insects, spiders, pond life and occasionally flowers. Illustrations by “camera lucida” and photomicrographs and a lecture on radium by Mr. Ashby bespeak a lively and up-to-date society. Geology came into the record in 1909 for the first time and at the second annual meeting at the Friends’ Meeting House in Ordnance-road—still the usual meeting place of the society in 1958—over 40 members were present “in spite of inclement weather having prevented some members from attending.” In those early years of the society lectures or talks on quite a variety of subjects interesting to all sorts of nature-lovers were given: “Evolution”, “Woodlands, Heaths and Hedges”, “The Life of the Bee”, “The Anatomy of Dicotyledons”, “Common Objects of the Seashore”, “Birds of the New Forest” and many more, but unfortunately no detailed record of what was said was preserved.

The minutes of the meetings were apt to be somewhat terse, though on occasion a trifle unexpected, as: “*Mr. Green, whose lecture on primitive rock formations opened up with a Deep and Sincere Tribute to God, whose Devine Wisdom and Eternal love led him to Create a World as Beautiful as the one upon which it is our privilege to dwell ... The paper from and educational pointer of view Lacked nothing, in fact, it must have Fanned into a Flame, any smouldering Ideas concerning Geology lurking in the minds of those present.*” (Capitals and spelling as in the original!) Mr. Green was elected president in January, 1911 and again in 1912, and gave a number of interesting talks on geological topics including “Crystals,” “The Coal Measures” and “Corals” and another geological talk, this one not given by the

president was on “The Age of Reptiles in Hampshire.” There were also lectures on “Diatoms,” “The Migration of Birds” and “Hydras.”

In January, 1913, the new president was that well-known botanist Mr. J. F. Rayner, and he continued as president until January, 1932, being re-elected annually. The last meeting recorded in 1913 was on September 11, when the president spoke on “Fungi.” After that date there are no more reports for 1913 although the minute book for that year is only half full and there are now no records to be found from September, 1913 until January, 1922. All these records seem to have been lost since it is believed that meetings continued to be held in spite of the intervention of the First World War.

In February, 1922, an increase of 30 members was announced. The meeting was addressed by Miss Mary Spencer of the Roman Catholic Training College, on the subject “Biology and the Struggle for Existence” and Mr. Rayner reported that he had been advised by his doctor to give up active botanical collecting which he feared would put a stop to the usual summer wild flower exhibition in the Central Library. A committee was at once appointed to carry on this work and on May 4 the president was able to announce that the exhibition would be opened on May 31 by the Mayoress and that the Mayor “hoped to be present.” There were 184 wild flowers shown.

“Foraging Ants,” “Bird Song,” “Colour in Insect Life,” “Benjamin Franklin” and rather surprisingly a “Life of the Poet Shelley,” a talk on “Limestone and Scenery” by Miss K. C. Boswell, a vice-president of the society, one by Dr. Enid Moore on “Germs and the Housekeeper” and another by the same speaker on “Potato Problems,” a lecture on “Humming Birds” and one on “Amethystine Quartz and Granite” give a fair sample of the variety of subjects in addition to the president’s own subject, botany, that occupied the evenings during the decade 1922 to 1932.

On December 4, 1924, a Mr. and Mrs. Ingram were elected members and in September, 1929, Mr. Hayward, on account of ill-health, resigned his appointment as honorary secretary after 20 years’ service, and Mr. Ingram was chosen to succeed him—a happy choice as appeared during the time of the Second World War. During the meeting on November 7 an illuminated address was presented to Mr. Hayward and after this ceremony Mr. James Blackhall spoke about “The Structure of the Universe.” In January, 1932, Mr. Rayner, having expressed his inability to attend further meetings Mr. Blackhall was elected president.

Part 2, 1932–1958

Not unnaturally, with Mr. James Blackhall as its president, the Southampton Natural History Society now heard more frequent lectures on astronomy, including an account of his visit to Canada to see an eclipse of the sun on August 3, 1932, and

a visit to Greece to see a total eclipse on June 19, 1936. He also spoke on “Meteors and Shooting Stars” and “The Mysteries of Space” and many other interesting astronomical facts but his lectures were by no means confined to that branch of science; he was keenly interested in bird-life and often spoke about it. During this period, and indeed before 1932 during Mr. Rayner’s presidency, the subject matter of many, if not most, of the lectures were reported in the Press, thereby preserving at least a summary of what was said; and very good lectures they were, given by many well-known experts on their own pet subjects and occasionally taking the audience into far distant lands.

Miss Loader of University College (as it then was) gave an interesting talk on “Ferns and Mosses”; Mr. Purefoy FitzGerald, a very learned botanist, explained the mechanism for the “Fertilization of Flowers”; Mr. Glenn, of University College, spoke on “Fossil Plants” and Mr. Hobby gave an account of “The Oxford University Borneo Expedition 1932” which he accompanied as an entomologist. It is impossible to mention all the speakers who, during the course of the years, delighted their audiences with various glimpses into natural history. Miss Boswell was a frequent speaker, as also was Mr. Marples, a well-known ornithologist and author of a book on “Sea Swallows.” Other talks concerned “Instinct and Intelligence,” “Neuroptera,” “Our Birds” and “Diatoms” and an address entitled “Among the Trees of Britain and the Empire” by Mr. St. Barbe Baker [Richard St. Barbe Baker, 1889-1982 was the famous ‘Man of the Trees’.] Excellently illustrated by colour slides it could hardly fail to enthral an audience who live beside the New Forest. Lectures carried the society in word-pictures and with slides to Finland, Australia, New Zealand, “Off the Track in France” and “A Valley in Corinthia.”

In October 1940 the difficulties of competing against black-out and air-raid warnings put a temporary stop to these happy gatherings, a stoppage that lasted to 1946. In this crisis Mr. and Mrs. Ingram undertook, and very successfully carried out the task of editing and distributing to members a half-yearly newsletter with the object of keeping members in touch with one another. There are eight of these letters, contributed to by James Blackhall, Miss Boswell, Mr. E. F. Harmer, Mr. Rayner and others, but the major part of the work was done by the two editors, Mr. and Mrs. Ingram. They seem to have achieved their purpose for at a meeting in 1947 it was recorded that there were 57 members.

In March 1947, the death of Mr. J. F. Rayner for so many years the society’s president was announced and a letter of condolence was sent to his daughter. Mr. Rayner was 93 when he died. Another sad blow struck the Society in the very next year, 1948, when the president, Mr. James Blackhall, also passed away—a kindly man and a gentle spirit with an abiding love of nature, an honoured friend and much respected president. To fill the vacancy I was elected president.

During the next ten years some changes were introduced into the activities of the society. In the first place it was decided for reasons of economy to issue half-yearly programmes instead of sending out separate notices for each meeting. It was also decided to restrict the indoor meetings and lectures to the cold months and to hold as many outdoor expeditions as possible in the summer season.

There had been very few records of outdoor study in the past history of the society since the days of Mr. Beck. the next step was to induce all members, or as many as possible, to take a personal interest in a natural history investigation and to this end a "Wild Life Survey" of a definite small area was proposed and enthusiastically adopted. Members were asked to visit the area once or twice a month throughout the year and to make records of all they found whether animals including reptiles, birds and insects or plants including flowers, trees, ferns, mosses or fungi. One year was devoted to a piece of woodland, another to an area of moorland, bog and forest and a third year by certain of the Society's leading naturalists to yet another area.

Scientific reports

First-class scientific reports were drawn up by two of the Society's leading members Mr. D. Knowlton and Mr. R. P. Bowman, the former of whom also contributed a three-year study of the status of the Dartford Warbler in the New Forest. Unfortunately in a society whose annual subscription is only five shillings a year it has not been possible to find money for the printing of these valuable reports.

In the last five years the society has also taken part in the mapping scheme for the distribution of plants undertaken by the Botanical Society of the British Isles and have in fact contributed fairly comprehensive lists of the plants to be found in more than five of the ten kilometre squares which are the basic areas of the scheme.

At the same time the quality of the cold weather lectures has not been neglected in any way.

Mr. Oliver Hook will be showing colour films and talking about "The Kenya National Park" on January 6, and, as has been the custom of the Southampton Natural History Society throughout its half century of existence, to all its meetings visitors are cordially invited.

Death of Soldier and Naturalist *Southern Evening Echo* 31 August 1970

Brigadier Francis Esmond Venning, president of Southampton Natural History Society has died at his home, Butts Ash, Hythe, aged 88. The brigadier had been president of the society for more than 20 years. He was an expert on ferns and often provided Kew Gardens with specimens. He was also a council member of

the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Naturalist Trust, a past council member of the Hampshire Field Club, and a member of the British Botanical Society and the British Trust for Ornithology. He was born in Ceylon, the son of Mr. Alfred Reid Venning, who served in the colonial service in Malaya before returning to retire in Berkshire. Brigadier Venning was educated at Bath College and Sandown, and served in the Indian Army until 1933 when he retired to live at Hythe. He met his late wife, Mrs. Edith Lucy Venning, the daughter of a Salcombe doctor, while he was at Sandhurst, and she followed him out to Ceylon where they married. Mrs. Venning died in November 1967, shortly after they had celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary. While serving in the Indian Army, Brigadier Venning was Brigade Commander of the Peshawar brigade on the North West Frontier. He commanded the New Forest Home Guard during the Second World War. Hewleaves one son, Lt. Col. Ralph Venning and two daughters, Mrs. Molly Hudson, wife of Brigadier J. C. Hudson of Fordingbridge and Mrs. Ursula Bastin, wife of the late General G. Bastin of Beaulieu.

The 1960s

In May 1963, the Society organised “The Wild Life in Hampshire” Exhibition as part of the first National Nature Week” organised by the Council for Nature.

“Our resources were limited and the difficulties and problems at first seemed insurmountable, but one by one were overcome.” (from the 1963 report)

The event, which lasted for five days, was held in Marlands Hall. Many other societies were invited to take part: the Forestry Commission, the Wildfowl Trust, the RSPCA, the Southampton and District Aquarists, the Botany Department of Southampton University, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Naturalists’ Trust, Southampton Weather Bureau and Shell-Mex. As well as displays, there were talks every evening, which were so popular that each had to be given twice. During the day, and despite a heatwave, there were film shows with natural history films from the British Transport Film Unit, and the Ramblers’ Association helped to organise three nature rambles.

“Despite the forebodings of some members, who thought the project much too ambitious, the exhibition turned out to be a tremendous success. Over 6000 people attended in five days, including over 2000 in organised parties from school throughout the county. It was given excellent coverage by the Press. Much to our surprise, instead of being in debt, we made a profit of around £120, and were able to donate £25 to the World Wild Life Fund.”

Throughout the 1960s the Society had an active Junior section and in August 1967 Richard Carpenter attended a conference in Oxford on “Youth and the Wild Life Crisis” He reported that “*Our prime object now must be to preserve the most*

valuable habitats remaining and to ensure the conservation of their animal and plant life.” In 1967 the Junior section even had a four-day youth hostel holiday to survey West Sussex and East Hampshire. Who could contemplate organising such a holiday now, even if we had enough younger members? They found “*a burying beetle on a very decayed vole which had been trapped in a bottle*”. Their “*most surprising bird of the four days*” was a green parrot—presumably a Ring-Necked Parakeet.

1970 was “European Conservation Year”. Hazel Bidmead wrote a long article for the 1969 Annual Report. It is still relevant forty years later.

European Conservation Year 1970
Hazel A. Bidmead
1969 Annual Report

The emphasis of E.C.Y. is on our total environment in all its aspects; man is destroying it at a frightening rate, and during this year we must stop short, take stock, and determine what we can do to improve and safeguard it for future generations. With the tremendous growth in population man needs more houses, more power stations, more factories and roads, and with these comes inevitably the problem of disposal of sewage and other wastes. We are an increasingly affluent society, with shorter working hours, and we, quite rightly, want to enjoy fully the advantages of technical advancement and increased leisure. But to what end? We must ensure that with our cars, more and better detergents, heating and recreation demands—to name but a few—we do not destroy the very environment we seek.

Pollution is the greatest menace we face: pollution of the air by fumes, from oil, petrol, etc., smoke, cigarettes; pollution of our rivers, canals, lakes and the very seas around us, by effluents that poison them so that nothing can live in their noxious waters; poisoning of insects, birds and mammals by weed killers, fertilisers and pesticides; pollution of the countryside by litter; pollution by noise.

Agriculture must be more economic, farming more intensive, so hedges are grubbed out and small copses felled, thus destroying most important ecological environments for mammals, birds and insects, and in their absence as shelter belts comes soil erosion. To provide more badly needed timber, marginal land unfit for agriculture, is blanketed with quick growing softwoods. Roadside verges are sprayed rather than cut, to save time and labour, so gone are the beautiful wayside flowers. There is no end to the abuses of his environment by man.

He has awoken to the dangers—hence E.C.Y.—and he is taking stock, but ACTION MUST FOLLOW. Nationally, governments can legislate for good

planning—housing estates which are aesthetically pleasing, with landscaped surroundings and plenty of trees; roads which avoid sensitive areas; compulsory lessening of pollution; provision of country parks and nature reserves. Industry can take measures to control pollution, remove or screen eyesores; many firms have spare waste land available which could well be made into recreation or wildlife conservation areas. The Forestry Commission can plant more hardwoods to break the monotony of the conifer forests and can leave more areas of unspoilt natural growth to act as havens for wildlife, as has been the practice in the New Forest. National bodies like the Nature Conservancy and Civic Trust can be more alert to threatened areas. On a local level the amenity bodies, especially the County Trusts backed by Natural History Societies must be more and more on the look out for abuses of the environment.

This is where this Society can play an important part. Wildlife is at the mercy of modern development and of course the areas of wilderness in our environment are the special concern of our Society. Conservation to us is vital, if for no other reason than a selfish one. What would be a Dawn Chorus without the birds, a Deer Foray without deer, or an expedition to see the flowers and butterflies of the chalk when the downland has been sprayed into a desert? We, as a Society, have supported the Hampshire Naturalists' Trust and other conservation bodies, but we must now do even more. Our job is to co-operate in surveys, record what we see, warden or work together as a conservation corps, as well as to 'spread the gospel' by education and influencing the folk around us to become conservation minded. Comparatively few of our members are concerned in active recording or conservation work. It would be nice to see every member taking part in one or other of the various survey projects which are afoot.

This brings us to the individual. Each one of us contributes to, and affects, the environment as each one of us is affected by it, so what about us taking stock of ourselves and our daily lives and decide what we can do individually to help improve the world around us. It is all too easy to leave things for other people—'It's not really my business'—and to say conservation is the Trust's job, litter is the responsibility of the local authority or the Keep Britain Tidy League, the Government must do something about detergents, or plastics or whatever.

Here are a few ideas: Have you a garden, however small? Then leave an area of tangle—you can afford one wild corner—as cover for birds or insects; provide food and water for the birds in winter; put up a nestbox; plant honeysuckle, berried or flowering shrubs for food and nesting sites—wildlife abhors serried rows of annuals, tidiness and too well pruned shrubs. You will be rewarded by rich song on spring mornings and butterflies on your flowering shrubs. Most important of all, read the small print on pesticide containers, do not over-use, and shun the killers

like D.D.T.—there are harmless substitutes just as potent. Be abstemious in the use of detergents so that sewage is not overloaded – remember that whatever we put down the drain or on the land eventually arrives in the rivers and the sea. Be ever more careful not to leave litter. And that decrepit old garden shed, perhaps a rusty corrugated eyesore; why not replace it or smother it in honeysuckle or quick growing creeper?

As naturalists, we are the people to set an example in the countryside around us, where we seek the wildlife which gives us joy. We need to take ever more care not to create disturbance—let the birds nest in peace and plants remain untrampled, although it comes hard when we badly want to see a rare breeding species or a rare plant. We can tactfully persuade visitors to the countryside to abstain from picking the flowers they see, something we should never do ourselves, and remind them that it is against the law to dig up a plant. By keeping to the Country Code ourselves we can hope that others will copy us.

Echo snippets

June 16th 1967

“Members of Southampton Natural History Society met at the Cowherds Inn, Southampton for a moth studying evening. Led by the Rev. D. Aggasiz they started by examining the moth trap set up the previous evening in the Zoo near the lion’s cage, by permission of Mr. and Mrs. J. Chipperfield. The lion was friendly and very interested in the unusual proceedings.”

December 16th 1967

“Schools help to stamp out wild flowers: [Mrs Yule] deplored the custom in some schools of encouraging children to pick orchids and other rare flowers. A stand of about 50 bee orchids disappeared entirely because of this, since the children scored more points for rare flowers, and bee orchid is a plant which may die if it is picked.”

April 21st 1968

“Jay’s distress mars field excursion: The meeting was somewhat marred by distressing cries of a jay which was tangled in ivy. A young member from the Gilkicker group [it was a joint meeting with SNHS] climbed the tree to free it, no easy task because the tree was dead and pretty rotten, but the bird was caught and found to have fishing line entwined around its wings and legs. However, it escaped as it was being brought down to the ground and fluttered away but must soon have become entangled again because it was not long before its cries of distress were heard again. Unfortunately it was not possible to recapture it and put it out of its misery.”

My Nature Reserve
John Wright
1985 Annual Report

I have discovered my own nature reserve; it measures 3 yards by 50 and has high brick walls on two sides. There is a factory entrance at one end while at the other, a shingle beach gives access to the River Itchen which is tidal at this point. It is within a few minutes walk from my place of work, and during the last year I have spent many enjoyable lunch hours recording the plants that grow there and the birds and insects that visit them.

The flowers of an old buddleia attract large numbers of butterflies which quickly return when disturbed, displaying their splendid colours. The caterpillars of some of them feed on the lush stinging nettles covering the ground below the walls; I have found those of both peacock and small tortoiseshell butterflies. Other insects, including soldier beetle, prefer the flower heads of such plants as yellow ragwort.

Later in the year blackbirds squabbled over elderberries and blackberries that hang from one end of the wall. In November I saw four goldfinches feeding on the fluffy seed heads of creeping thistle and a pied wagtail strutting about on the shingle.

Sea-beet grows near the water's edge, together with sea aster, its fleshy leaves so much thicker than those of its near relative, michaelmas daisy. Like the Canadian golden-rod, this plant likes the drier ground and both are probably escapes from the gardens of houses which stood here some thirty years ago.

Where many of the plants came from has provided much food for thought. For example, I did not expect to find maidenhair spleenwort or red poppies, nor the orange poppy, quite different from the others, growing very vigorously nearer to the water. I wondered if the seeds of this one had been brought by the tide; it will be interesting to see if it appears again next year.

I have been amazed how willowherb and bittersweet manage to find sufficient nutrients to grow in the cracks where the pointing has fallen out of the brickwork. Somehow their roots are able to penetrate the soft mortar and support the plants while they flower and set seed for another season.

Throughout the year this small scrap of derelict ground has been transformed by the beauty and adaptability of the wildlife attracted to it. In high summer, on 26th July I recorded thirty seven species of flowering plants and even in early December common mallow, ragwort and fool's parsley were still in flower. I think it is truly remarkable that only 150 square yards of waste land, within a mile and a quarter of the Civic Centre, should provide a haven for such a wealth of species.

Frosty Observations
John Wright
1986 Annual Report

When mid January suddenly turned from a mild bleating lamb into a howling Siberian wolf, with 3 to 4 inches of snow, and about 7 days of constant frost, temperatures fell to the lowest we have known for a century.

In my centrally-heated house, I thought of the world outside. How do insect larvae manage to exist in the block of ice that used to be the garden pond? Most of the birds and small animals have never experienced this weather in their short lives, and overnight their territory is blotted out under a blanket of snow. How do plants exist, unable to move, when in a matter of a few hours they are condemned to a deep freeze? Yet they do manage, most of them.

Except for half a dozen dead redwings I found last year, when the weather was almost as bad, I've found no other birds starved or frozen to death, and a lot more birds come to my bird table. I found Forest ponies deep in Busketts Wood, eating Holly and Blackberry leaves, a prickly dinner but I suppose "needs must". And scraping away the snow with their front feet to find some grass. Moles were also active, large heaps of fresh dark soil on top of the snow, indicated that worms were also not very far from the rock-hard surface of the ground.

In the garden under the old apple tree, a swarm of midges was flying but what they find to eat is a mystery. I was hoping this cold snap might get rid of the Black fly, but it doesn't look as though this has affected the insects! Deciduous trees and shrubs don't raise their sap until the temperature rises, so they don't suffer from burst pipes, and need a plumber.

When the thaw came, I found a Dandelion fully out in bloom: it had a very short stem—in fact hardly a stem at all—just the flower head in the middle of a rosette of leaves flat on the ground. I also found Sweet Violets and Field-speedwell in bloom, all very low-growing plants, that had found a way in their evolution of mastering the cold, by shrinking down in size during the winter, and so getting some protection from the snow. While some Nettles and a Mallow plant that had been green and 12 inches high the week before, were now a blackened heap, cut down by the frost.

Hibernation, growing a winter coat, or spending part of their lives as larvae, pupae or even an egg, are other ways they have found of perpetuating their kind during adverse weather conditions.

While we humans huddle round the fire.

Thoughts from the Country
Peter Orchard
1987 Annual Report

It was June 1986 that we moved from the suburbs of Southampton to the Test Valley to complete a long-cherished ambition to live in the countryside. Having lived in a village on the edge of the New Forest when I was at school, the desire to move back to a rural home stirred again when my interest in natural history was revived some ten years ago.

I had often walked in the countryside in the intervening years and had, I thought, observed the changes that were occurring in our agricultural methods and the effects they were having on our wildlife but it was not until we actually moved in to the heart of a farming community that the full extent of the destruction really struck me.

It is not difficult to walk along the local footpaths (where they are still visible) and hardly see a bird. The Skylark can usually be heard singing above most of the fields in Spring and a small number of lapwings still manage to nest in selected fields but Corn Buntings in this particular area are never seen and Stone Curlew, Corncrake and Quail are, as in most parts of Britain now, extinct.

Apart from along the few remaining hedgerows there are no flowers to be seen, all poisoned by herbicides and consequently the numbers of insects, particularly butterflies are very low.

I am sure all of you are well aware of this gloomy picture and it is of course just one aspect of the serious threats the human being seems intent inflicting on this Earth and its creatures. I do not write these notes for the Annual Report to record this state of affairs for future generations, but more to highlight an area of hope for the future.

Until thirty years ago a railway ran along the Test Valley from Romsey to Andover. During the hundred years or so of its active life it constituted a scar through an otherwise idyllic scene of pasture and water meadows, probably full of wild flowers and singing birds.

It fell into disuse after the Dr Beeching revamp of the railway network in the early 1960s and most of the railway features, the track, signalling systems and so on were removed and the course of the line was left virtually unattended. being unmanaged for a time, Nature soon established itself and whilst the fields surrounding it were sprayed, drained and cultivated or heavily grazed, the wildlife of the unaffected areas re-established itself.

A couple of years ago the old railway track was improved to enable easy walking and became the Test Way. In doing this the Council were most successful in not adversely affecting the plants that had colonised the area and now many people enjoy a walk through countryside that is virtually unique in this part of Hampshire.

In thirty years a complete reversal has taken place. The once pleasant pastures are now green deserts and the one-time eyesore is now a delight to behold.

To my mind this must hold great hope for the future. We know that, given a fair chance, Nature can look after itself and with thoughtful management it can be helped to the benefit of a wide range of creatures, including mankind.

As we approach a new era in farming with over-capacity resulting in over-production of many crops, pressure is building to find alternative uses for land. Surely the time has come for the policy makers to listen to the voice of sense and reason and to shift from the use of land solely for financial profit to use land for the social and physical well being of people, animals and plants alike.

My hope is that, in ten years time when I look back over the Society's Annual Reports and see how things were in 1987, that I can say that, as we approach the start of a new century, the lessons were learned and the twenty first century heralds a new era for all life on Earth.

Unfortunately it is unlikely to happen with today's attitudes, it is up to all of us who care to keep putting our viewpoint and wishes in front of the politicians, especially by being active members of conservation organisations.

The Amphibian Year—Some Questions **Paul Jutkiewicz** **1989 Annual Report**

As a teacher of A-level Biology in pursuit of PhD research, I have had perhaps more than average contact with amphibians over the past few years. In my research I specialize in newts, Crested and Smooth Newts to be precise, but I'm not averse to stretching a point and have had dealings with a variety of species. So what have I learned in the past year? Only that one discovery leads to a hundred questions! Allow me to illustrate.

After a short summer break in France, which included not a few visits to local ponds (I have a very understanding wife and tolerant children!) I returned to continue my nocturnal observations of the newts in Southampton Common's Boating Lake. Now, I'd already had more than a fleeting glimpse of that colourful, speedy

denizen of French ponds, the Pool frog/Edible Frog (*Rana esculenta*). I'd seen and caught European Pond Tortoises (*Emys orbicularis*), Marbled Newts (*Triturus marmoratus*), Midwife Toads (*Alites obstetricans*) and others but the agility of the edible frog had always left me wanting. On my first evening home, what did I see in the Boating Lake! Sticking out of the water's edge was the pointed nose, bold mottling and bright green dorsal strip of a large frog: the edible frog which had so eluded me in France. After a walk round the lake and a return home for a net I found Monsieur Grenouille still in waiting. The battle ensued and although I had to join him in his watery domain, I won. He is now the proud owner of his very own tank in the Southampton Common Studies Centre (and eats like a king!). But did this foreigner get here? We may never know ... unless of course you know someone who's been to France recently and ... Oh no I didn't!

Then we have the ponds at Allbrook. Now they're interesting. Some seem so tainted with a cocktail of chemicals that they should support negligible life, yet they're known to provide a wealth of fish species for the local anglers. Another question: how do the fish cope? Who knows? But there's more. A splendid find last year in at least one of the small ponds was the Crested Newt (*Triturus cristatus*). The doubtful pond was congested and overgrown, had a variety of rubbish in it and was rapidly decreasing in size during the dry spell. Why this pond and not others nearby? It was certainly a good breeding site. There were larvae galore, to say nothing of what I took to be Smooth Newt larvae (*T. vulgaris*). And then there was the next discovery: a wonderful specimen of a neotonous (Smooth?) Newt—a 'Peter Pan' of newts. Rather like the Mexican Axolotl, newt tadpoles occasionally retain their larval characteristics yet grow to adult size. They are fully aquatic depending on their external gills for respiration. This one was a classic. It sported large, plumulous, crimson gills which contrasted dramatically with its cream body. He (she?) was still quite small (being possibly last year's offspring) but has been growing steadily in an aquarium at home on a diet of Daphnia and tubifex worms. A number of careful searches have revealed no more examples of neoteny. Why just the one species? Why just the one specimen? Well, there are two possible cause for the condition: insufficient iodine in the water or a thyroid disorder. Perhaps it was the latter. Inherited? Will we see more? Who can say?

'So what other discoveries added to your head-aches?' I hear you cry. 'The rest of the newts at Allbrook' is the answer. As the aquatic period for our two smaller newts (Smooth and Palmate) is relatively short (maybe from March to July), I was rather surprised at my next find. On October 28th, I pulled out two male Palmate Newts (*T. helveticus*) both in full breeding condition (broad hind-foot webbing and truncated tail with filament). Why were they still there? Maybe the female I caught next had something to do with it! Why no sign of Smooth Newts? Is this

pond so unique as to support only Crested and Palmates? Hmm ... intriguing. Watch this space.

Any more? You bet. Why did the University pond get frogs breeding so much earlier last year than those at Southampton Common lakes? There's less than a mile between them. Why are there so few spawning frogs and toads in the Boating lake yet so many in the Ornamental Lake just a few hundred yards away? Male frogs indiscriminately try to mate with female toads but the reverse is uncommon. Why? Is it only temperature that instigates the arrival of frogs at our ponds before the toads (with a margin of overlap)? Why were there so many more toads around the Ornamental Lake last season than frogs? (Maximum toad count: 976. maximum frog count: 143). If toads were so much more numerous, why were only frog tadpoles caught later on in the season and more newly metamorphosed frogs seen than toads?

But what of newts? Why were Boating Lake newts sighted around the northern and southern ends in 1988 but predominantly along the western edge in 1989? Do newts have territories? Why do Smooth and Crested Newts have colourful bellies when most of their activities occur at night? Is there a reason for the fringed toe-webbing of male Smooth Newts? Crested and Smooth Newts have unique belly patterns (spots) like human finger prints. Are the patterns of related newts similar, denoting degree of relatedness? Are the spots on the tails of Crested Newt larvae genetically determined? Why do the newts in the University gardens 'stray' from pond to pond throughout the season?

As I said at the beginning, every discovery leads to more questions. The research goes on. Have I whetted anyone's appetite? I hope so. All these questions and many, many more arise from the enthusiast's field work. There's nothing complex about the style of research. A pair of wellies, note-book and torch and rain-proofs are the prerequisites. This year's season is already upon us, so come on let's join forces. There a lot of work to do out there. Get busy!

My Experience with Otters
Chris Boulton
1989 Annual Report

When people say to me "I've never seen an otter", I realise how fortunate I have been to have sighted them so many times.

In the mid-1940s, I used to see these fascinating creatures quite often on the rivers Itchen, Hamble and Meon. I have seen them hunting above Botley Mill in mid-afternoon, but most sightings were made very early in the morning, in late afternoon

or after dark with a spotlight. I found, in every instance except one, that their travels were upstream in the evening and downstream in the morning.

When swimming, all that is visible is the nose, eyes, ears and the face fur. In other words, they swim very low in the water. I was once given a dead otter which I examined and then skinned. I was intrigued by the perfect way nature had developed this creature for its way of life. Its feet are slightly webbed, its coat consists of three layers. Firstly, there are coarse guard hairs, then a second, denser coat and next to its thick, tough skin, a deep velvet-like undercoat which is perfectly waterproof and insulating. The teeth were very much like a cat's, the eyes were small for the size of this creature and the nose was quite large, with a slight flap which can be closed. The most important adaptation seemed to be the whiskers: these were very thick, long and tapered. Nerves at the base of these whiskers were very large and said by experts to be its main means of following fish by registering turbulence in murky or dark water.

An otter's body is perfectly streamlined and finished off by a very thick, tapered muscular tail, which helps it to turn quickly when hunting its prey. I have, when my hearing was acute, located a feeding otter by hearing the crunching bones and watched it feed very much like a cat by holding its head sideways, using its molar teeth. I think that the half-open mouth slightly amplified the crunching sound.

I have watched several bitches with cubs and there were always three youngsters except once on Avington Lake where a female was carrying a single cub. I was near enough to hear it squeak as she saw me and turned back. It was probably nipped by the mother in her anxiety. I have never heard a dog otter whistle as they are said to do as a mating call.

Otters totally ignore a spotlight and by this means I have seen them catch fish and eels, which are always eaten ashore. *Lutra* which means "wanderer", will eat river creatures of all kinds, from shrimp and crayfish to coarse and game fish and waterfowl. They are very partial to duck. One winter's night around 1950 and about 100 yards below Mansbridge, I heard a frantic quacking and flapping and there, in the spotlight beam, a Mallard drake was struggling for its life in mid-stream. An otter had grabbed it by one leg but failed to get a better grip, thereby losing its meal, for the frantic bird flew upstream and landed on the bank above me. I could see by my light that its leg was hanging off, so I gave it a sharp crack with my stick to put it out of pain. The otter had lost a meal, but I had gained one!

People say that otters are shy creatures: I do not agree. I have seen an otter fishing at Woodmill under a street lamp with traffic noise and people shouting and skylarking on the road alongside. Creatures ignore sounds that they regard as harmless. Otters are only sedentary when with cubs, at other times they would move from, say, the

Itchen to the upper Hamble and Meon by following tributary streams and short cuts over land. I heard of two killed by traffic at Horton Heath where the map shows that two branch streams nearly meet, one from the Itchen and the other from the Hamble. This happened about forty years ago.

Bird-Table Traumas
Brian Smith
1993 Annual Report

Having done several odd jobs around the house, I decided it was time to sit and have a coffee in my favourite chair (the one where I can watch the bird table). On the table were sparrows (8), blue tit (1), starlings (3), robin (1) and around it on the lawn were songthrush (1), a pair of blackbirds and a dunnock and watching all this from a garden fence was a woodpigeon.

After a short time, the woodpigeon dropped down onto the lawn and cautiously made its way to the table. It then spread its wings and flew onto the table. As the pigeon appeared, the small birds flew into a nearby laurel bush not knowing whether the pigeon was friend or foe (pigeon or hawk). This in turn frightened the pigeon and it flew back to the garden fence. After a short time, all the small birds were back feeding on the table. The pigeon again dropped down onto the lawn, cautiously made its way to the table, spread its wings, landed on the table, frightened all the small birds into the laurel and yes, you guessed it, flew straight back to the fence.

I watched this happen five times, each time the pigeon frightening the small birds and itself and finishing back on the fence to start all over again. Finally the pigeon realised that IT was the cause of all the panic and stayed on the table to feed, joined soon after by all the smaller birds. Coffee finished and the cabaret over, it was back to work (honest).

Conservation by Cooperation: A Way Forward
Greg Alexander
1994 Annual Report

Pick up any wildlife magazines or listen to a conservation lecture and the word DECLINE can always be read or heard. Whether it is yet another planning application or natural disaster, DECLINE always seems to be the key word. Much worse are the “disasters” controlled and driven by Man, often in the name of progress or cost cutting. The perpetrators of these disasters use language like

“Centralisation” or “Prestige development complex”, though what they really mean is yet another field or wildlife habitat is going to be developed.

In my rather short time as an active ornithologist in Southampton I have seen many of my favourite places disappear. I am sure the readers of this article feel the same. If we multiply everybody’s favourite place by the number of people involved, the seriousness of the word DECLINE can be realised.

Pressure on open space, farmland and other undeveloped areas will continue to increase in the years ahead. Even with more awareness and the thousands of active conservationists and organisations, development pressure will continue into the next century and beyond. I believe that the only way forward is for conservation by cooperation. Without a planned future, Britain will only have famous nature reserves which will be in danger of becoming “Theme Park” areas. Can you imagine for example, places like Tregaron and Loch Garten complete with Burger Bar and virtual reality courtship displays by threatened birds of prey?

Most of the breeding and behaviour studies I have undertaken amongst common wild birds have been in small areas such as NURSLING and SHIRLEY in Southampton. Areas like these need as much protection as the larger, more “famous” sites such as Twyford Down or the New Forest. Whilst I do not wish to claim any great feats of conservation, I have at times been able to temporarily stop or advise on matters regarding birds. One such scheme was during the Spring of 1994 in Southampton Docks. In an area being developed, a pair of Oystercatchers were found breeding. As the bulldozers and earth-movers approached, the birds were pointed out. After meetings with the owners and developers, the area was left alone. The pair were allowed to complete their breeding and the local Oystercatcher population was increased by two. The owners were only too happy to leave the birds alone; indeed they became quite proud and protective towards them. This is what I mean by Conservation by Cooperation.

Whether it be putting up nest boxes for Blue Tits or Barn Owls, protecting Badger setts or Toad migration routes, we can help and steer things to a positive conclusion.

Before we put pen to paper to our MP or newspaper regarding conservation matters, I think direct, polite and educated approaches are always worthwhile. It is surprising how many farmers, land-owners or even builders will reply “Gosh, I didn’t realise” or “How interesting, what can I do to help?”

This note is not meant to be a conservation sermon, just a few examples of how individuals can often help small otherwise unprotected areas from the dreaded “DECLINE”.

Wayside Weeds in Southampton
Mary Smith
1995 Annual Report

Forget for a moment the City's commons and greens and innumerable open spaces and consider the wealth of wayside flowers in the suburban streets, the descendents of the hedgerow flora of yore. The lanes—Cutbush, Midanbury, Highfield, Weston, Orchard, etc—are only a few that still exist in name. many of the old village roads have been drastically altered, widened, paved, fenced, walled, and yet the old flowers reassert themselves with surprising vigour. Where remnants of Hawthorn hedges remain in the City, the attendant ground cover is still to be found, especially in Spring before the trees come into full leaf. Lesser Celandines and Garlic Mustard have long graced a small hedge in Whitworth Crescent, to be followed by Cow Parsley in May. Ground-ivy still straggles beside the original path by the Miller's Pond.

Even where garden walls have replaced hedges, reeds and rushes frequently sprout from the pavement edge. Look out for *Luzula pilosa* (Hairy Wood-rush), *Juncus conglomeratus* (Compact Rush) (Chessel Avenue), *Carex divulsa* (Grey Sedge) (Highfield Lane). For years there was a splendid clump of *Carex pendula* (Pendulous sedge) growing beside a wall in Spring Road, but reminding us that nearby there was wetter ground off Freemantle's Common. At the bottom of Chessel Avenue, opposite a Bramble hedge which was grubbed up only last year, there is a bank with Common Rush under Sallow. (Was there an estate pond hereabouts at the foot of the hill?) Herb-Robert grows well here, as elsewhere on walls in Bitterne, and violets are plentiful.

The first wayside weed that springs to mind is the dandelion, one of a large number of composite flowers that cheer our paths with their yellow flowers. But it is not the first to bloom in Spring, that is the virtue of Groundsel, which can be found in flower throughout the year. May and August are the high season for dandelion. Coltsfoot is another early bloomer, though it usually prefers open waste ground to hedgerow. Sometime Sticky Groundsel and Heath Groundsel turn up by the way, but the real colonizers are the ragworts—first Oxford Ragwort, ubiquitous on walls and in pavements, and later Common Ragwort. Come August, Canadian Fleabane will be everywhere, not as showy as the ragworts, and very invasive. Yet another member of the daisy family is Prickly Lettuce, which appears to be spreading very rapidly throughout suburbia. Daisies occasionally creep under fences from garden lawns, but a more colourful composite is Knapweed with its purple flowers. This is a real survivor. There used to be a quickset hedge by Bitterne School, and although the site has been drastically re-arranged, the old inhabitants have found

themselves a new bank and moved in along with Sow-thistles, Common Chickweed and Goosegrass.

Occasionally, seeds long dormant spring to life when sites are cleared for building. the re-alignment of Cutbush Lane saw a flowering of *Lycopsis arvensis* (Bugloss) in the new hedgerow-verge for the first year or two, though I have not seen it there since. Likewise, Green Alkanet (*Pentaglottis sempervirens*) appeared in my garden, and is now flourishing by neighbouring hedges. Borage is another of the same family which is very quick to colonize pathways—it lines allotment paths at Chessel Bay. Even more surprising is, I find, the presence of plants such as Great Willowherb ('Codlins-and-cream'), flowering in dry, stony places well away from damp ditches with which we usually associate them. I have seen several this dry Summer, in full bloom.

Some old roads through what was once open countryside still have banks of Gorse, as for example the Bursledon Road, and although 'furze' was removed from Freemantle's Common nearly seventy years ago, it still survives along the line of the old Roman Road. It was here that until road-works destroyed the site, wild Golden-rod grew, and that reminds me of another kind of wayside which this flower likes—railway embankments. Like 'Fireweed' (Rosebay Willowherb) it follows the line out into the countryside and back into the City.

Many years ago (who else remembers?) there was a series of cigarette-cards entitled "Strugglers", the struggles of wayside plants, among others, to establish a 'toehold' and survive the competition for living-space. Greater Plantain is one; as its name shows, it follows the sole of Man's feet, and with its large, wide leaves flat on the ground, it can stake-out its claim quickly and easily. Goosegrass struggles upwards, into the Hawthorn hedges, while Common Chickweed, knotgrass, Hedge Mustard and Ivy-leaved Speedwell, all of which set vast quantities of seed, can fill a 'grass' verge before grass appears in early Spring. These have not very showy flowers but they do very well. Yarrow again is a tough struggler, sending down strong and very long roots to enable it to survive months of drought. 1976 was the year of the Yarrow, when all else disappeared from the roadsides.

Waiting at a bus-stop in Woodmill Lane, I once counted over two dozen flowering plant species on a short length of bank. I am continuously amazed and delighted with the 'weeds' that contrive to live along our town-no-longer-country roads, some regulars like violets, ragworts, Traveller's-joy and Sow-thistles, some adventitious like Melilot (once so common), Slender St John's-wort and Musk Mallow.

Long may they flourish!

Thoughts on the City's Greenways
Audrey Wylie
1996 Annual Report

Southampton is blessed with a network of Greenways which are the envy of many other cities. They act as the lungs of our city and a recreational resource for its inhabitants, most of whom have a Greenway within easy reach of their doorstep, offering a respite from the frenetic pace of modern living.

Most of our Greenways follow the course of a stream, creating havens for wildlife and vital links for migrant birds as they set off on long journeys to distant lands or reach our shores at the end of an exhausting flight when energy levels are running low. For these reasons alone our Greenways are precious and here to be cherished and cared for, and it is heartening to know that there are many groups in the community whose members give up their spare time for this purpose.

Litter collection may not spring to mind as being important, but a wildlife area which has been cleared of rubbish offers not only a scenically more pleasing appearance, but reduces the risk of injuries to wildlife. A good example of the value of this simple but practical task is Chessel Bay where regular litter clearing sessions are held to counter the enormous build up of plastic, cans, bottles and miscellaneous marine garbage which litters the shore line and is a hazard to birds such as Curlews, Oystercatchers and Redshanks which feed at the water's edge at the turn of the tide.

Litter clearing is also carried out by the local groups at Shirley Pond, Tanner's Brook, Mill Mead Coppice and Sholing Valley. Some of these groups also carry out practical woodland maintenance tasks in co-operation with the City Council, and the Friends of Shirley Valley have restored Shirley Pond to near its former glory for nesting Swans, Mallards and Moorhen. Assistance is always welcomed by these groups.

Most of these Greenways have interesting historic links with the past, another reason for their preservation in a rapidly-changing world. My local Lordsdale Greenway has links stretching back to the 11th century when the Domesdy Book contained references to a mill, meadow land a fishery at Shirley. The mill was powered by water from Shirley Ponds, fed by Tanner's Brook and the Holly Brook, and to this day Shirley Pond is still the focal point of the southern end of the Lordsdale Greenway.

Two ponds at Shirley were mentioned in the 1465 Deeds of the manor, but John Randall's map of 1778 shows four ponds, stretching from Shirley Mill towards the present Dale Road. However, by 1840 when the Millbrook Tithes Map was produced,

only the pond nearest to the mill remained, the other three having either partially or entirely silted up and become overgrown with vegetation. By 1861, the second pond appeared to have been restored and this is the present Shirley Pond which would have been a reserve of water for the main pond which was drained and filled in by the Corporation in 1963. In May of that year, the Southern Evening Echo published an article on Shirley Ponds, with an illustration of Lake Cottage which stood between the two ponds in a picturesque setting of flowering shrubs and trees. Unfortunately, the cottage was by then in a seriously deteriorating condition and the occupants were due to move out after a Demolition Order had been made.

Many stories concern Shirley Pond, mainly from its heyday in the 19th century, when the hard Winters at that time led to it being frequently frozen over, when fairs could be held on it. Ice blocks were also cut from the pond and stored in the ice house at the rear of the adjacent Ice House pub.

Shirley Ponds have not been without their dramas, two suicides there were recorded in early parish records and the last inhabitants of Lake Cottage recounted the story of the rather eccentric Mr William Brown Baker who lived there in the 19th century and was reputed to have gone to bed each night in his coffin. The last recorded story was of a World War II night raid in 1940, when about twenty people were sheltering in the cottage. It was thought that three bombs fell into the lake and the following morning many eels were found floating on the top, which were collected in buckets by the workmen building the tank traps. The tank traps, or concrete blocks also known as dragon's teeth, still remain, spanning the Greenway from the pond to Winchester Road, are a reminder of the very real threat of invasion at that time. As far as I know, they are the only tank traps surviving in Southampton, and though now mostly overgrown with Ivy, are still in quite good condition and will hopefully remain as a reminder of yet another phase in the colourful history of this locality.

Requiem for a Tree
Madge Goodall
1996 Annual Report

Sadly on 18 November 1996, during the night, our Bramley apple tree, aged 50 years, succumbed to Honey Fungus and the elements after a severe gale. Our sympathies go to all the wildlife that has been dependent on it in some ways over the years.

Apart from having produced hundred-weights of apples in its time, supplying ourselves and our friends, the fruit has been enjoyed by Blackbirds and Thrushes

and in severe weather their relatives Fieldfares and Redwings. It has also attracted Red Admirals and Speckled Woods, not to mention the slugs for the hedgehogs and other species such as Slow-worms. The indentation round the stalks made a retreat or hibernaculum for earwigs and ladybirds, while Wood Mice and Yellow-necked Mice had a nibble at those in store and Squirrels made off with the best fallers.

In the Spring the blossom and ‘tiny leaves’ were a joy to behold, the pink buds often being attacked by weevils. At least four species of bumble bee and many other insects pollinated the flowers. Eyed Hawk-moth larvae occasionally attacked its leaves and the aphids provided food for snake-flies, hoverflies and ladybirds. In Autumn, the falling leaves became leaf litter for invertebrates—springtails, spiders, harvestmen, beetles—and worms—and rotting down, enriched the soil for Wood Anemones, Autumn Crocus, Snowdrops and other bulbs growing beneath its canopy. Bare of leaves, its beautiful shape silhouetted against the sky was revealed in Winter.

Moreover, throughout the year the Bramley provided shelter, roosting and perching places for over twenty-five species of birds.

- The Great Spotted Woodpecker and very occasionally the Lesser Spotted, the nuthatch and Treecreeper enjoyed the beetles and spiders in its bark. Being near the bird table, the tree provided a quick retreat and look-out post in time of danger. The bird box was a nesting site for numerous families of tits.
- The Great Spotted Woodpecker enjoyed drumming on the box which amplified the sound. No doubt his ladyfriend found this irresistible and others of his kind were left in no doubt as to its territory.
- Long-tailed Tits, Marsh Tits, Goldcrests, Bullfinches, Greenfinches, Blackcaps, Fieldfares and Redwings to name but a few, have been sighted in its branches.
- Lichens (Both foliose and crustose types) were appearing on the trunk and the common moss *Hypnum cupressiforme* also graced the bole. The cracks in the bark made niches for small insects, spiders and harvestmen. Some of the cracks were filled with cheeses to attract Nuthatches and tits. They also provided a vice for the Nuthatch to crack seeds, for example from the Yew berries.

Around the tree’s torn-up roots we discovered grubs of cockchafer-type beetles. Because of the Honey Fungus, the main trunk and branches have been burnt and some reserved for our friends the wood-carvers. The brushwood is making a dead hedge in our woodland area to keep out the deer and make shelter for small mammals, eventually rotting down to provide nutrients for new plants, a good example of recycling!

To us, the demise of our Bramley is a sad loss but, on the credit side, there is more light to make way for more plants and the newly planted shrubbery of indigenous species will also benefit.

“Sic transit gloria mundi.”

Changes in Our Flora
Mary Smith
2000 Annual Report

“Send for a very big dockleaf: giant stinging-nettles are growing to 11 feet.”

So ran a headline in *The Independent*, calling attention to the new menace of *Urtica dioica*, and Plantlife’s report on the changes and losses in our native flora. The more I read, the more I saw in my mind’s eye what is happening in the City, at Mansbridge, or at Alder Moor, or at Sholing.

Stinging-nettles in some Wiltshire river valleys now reach eleven feet—over double the text-book height of five feet—and these giants are spreading because, like a number of coarse ‘weeds’, they are benefitting from the enrichment of the soil by nitrogen-based fertilisers used in intensive farming, and nitrogen pollution on roads. Hogweed, Cow Parsley, Goose-grass and some coarse grasses are also doing well, whereas many once-common wild flowers are in serious decline, crowded out from a soil now much too rich for them.

Those who remember Mansbridge before clearance for development, and the widening and canalization of Monks Brook, will recognize the changes. Then Nettles were not a great nuisance, and Himalayan Balsam was largely confined to the stream-sides. Now they rampage widely, and tower over walkers on the pathways. How Stinging-nettles are opportunists was illustrated in the hot summer of 1976, when the River Itchen ran very low, and Nettles invaded newly-exposed mud. Their colony is still there, and while most of the original water-plants survive in places, they are not so plentiful as before.

One of the villains in the spread of nitrogen is the dog (or should I say the dog-walker?). Open up a field as a recreation ground and within a few years the field edge will have lost much of its varied flora, but nettles, Hogweed and Goose-grass will be abundant. Look, for example, at Coxford Copse.

All is not lost, however, for some authorities are alive to the problems of our diminishing flora, and some farmers are now happy to reduce their use of herbicides and to foster the natural riches of their land. The latest report on the sorry state of England’s parkland—much of it is very poor quality—means the naming and shaming of local authorities, and some no doubt will receive a welcome prod in the right direction.

PS. Has anyone else noticed the absence or scarcity of Bitter Vetch, *Lathyrus montanus*, which used to be abundant in hedges, etc. when recording for the flora began in the sixties?

Avocet Breeding in Hampshire—The First Record
Andy Collins
Annual Report 2002

A rather uneventful couple of hours birding in the Warsash area on May 4th 2002 improved markedly when I came across three Avocets on a lagoon. Things rapidly became even more interesting when I realised that the bird sitting very still on an island was perhaps not just ‘tired’! Final proof of my suspicions came when a second Avocet flew onto the island and replaced the sitting bird followed by careful ‘settling in’. I concluded that this must be Hampshire’s first ever Avocet nest. The role of the third bird was unclear and remained so after the two non-sitting birds flew off south together. I left the area after an hour during which the sitting bird had remained rather still, with head tucked in, but remaining alert and looking up occasionally.

Clark and Eyre (1993) describe Avocet as a scarce passage migrant and winter visitor to Hampshire. The 2000 Hampshire Bird Report notes that approximately forty individuals were recorded in 2000 and contrasts this relatively low number with Dorset, where, for example, 800 now regularly winter in Poole Harbour. Given this, a breeding attempt in Hampshire, rather than Dorset, seemed fairly remarkable.

Avocets had been reported in the Warsash area for some time and mating was noted at the very end of April. Incubation is described by Cramp and Simmons (1983) as taking 23–25 days. I therefore speculated that, if incubation were to be successful, the first young would appear around the third week of May. I was anxious to see how things were going and decided to visit regularly in the early mornings during this period. Fortunately the area was very quiet at this time of day with only small numbers of dog walkers and one or two local birders. The area could be observed without disturbance and it was possible to note the very interesting nesting behaviour of this exciting species. I spent a total of about 19 hours at the nest site over the course of May and this account is a summary of my observations. Most of my observations relate to the incubation period, which was, as would be expected, relatively uneventful most of the time. However, there were some relatively dramatic moments, and, during early morning visits there were often opportunities to observe other wildlife in the area.

It was not possible to see how many eggs were being incubated because of the vegetation surrounding the nest scrape, but also because incubation was virtually continuous with a sitting bird always present. Both adults incubate and frequently ‘exchange’, with one adult replacing the other. This is termed nest relief. During the course of my observations I noted eight exchanges, suggesting they were taking

place about every two hours. Avocet behaviour is highly ritualised and elaborate. Nest relief usually occurred when the second adult flew onto the nesting island and approached the sitting bird. The standing bird would then start picking up small pieces of vegetation near the nest and start throwing them to its sides ('throwing sticks'). After a minute or so the sitting bird would stand and be instantly replaced by the second bird. It was often possible to distinguish the larger and more contrasting black and white male from the female, but I didn't gain much idea about how much time each spent incubating. One curious feature of the nesting was that neither adult spent very much time feeding at the lagoon and would invariably fly off to Titchfield Haven to feed. This might reflect poor numbers of invertebrates in the lagoon or inappropriate depths, but it is curious that this was selected as a nest site.

Interactions with other species were also of interest. On the same small island two to three pairs of Lapwing and one pair of Redshank were nesting (Lapwing within 2 metres or so) and although there were a number of minor aggressive incidents the situation was well tolerated by both species. Mostly this involved chasing by a standing Avocet when a Lapwing strayed too close to the site. However, Cramp and Simmons (1983) note that the presence of other species may help in the defence of a common breeding ground. In contrast, Oystercatcher were not tolerated at all and frequently the sitting bird would become very distressed and start calling and 'head-bobbing' when Oystercatcher were nearby. Possibly the noise and/or the black and white plumage were the reason for the distress caused by this species! However, a fox in the area would cause far more distress than anything else, as I will describe shortly.

At the beginning of the incubation a third Avocet was present but this disappeared in early May. On the 17th of May two Avocets flew onto the island to join the sitting bird. It seemed that at least the third bird (a large and particularly white adult) was new and I was surprised to see it apparently prospecting for a nest site on the western end of the nesting island (this involved gently moving vegetation around and sitting in the cleared area). After 20 minutes or so the two adults left to the south together. I considered that this was a second pair and they were indeed prospecting for a nest site and that the 'resident' adult was still away feeding at this time. The following day (18th) saw the most dramatic incident of the incubation period. When I arrived at 7.40am an Avocet was incubating as normal but at 8.25 two birds flew in and onto the island. The 'large white' adult began scrape making again tossing vegetation around (but in several areas). All was relatively calm until a Fox appeared at the back of the lagoon. The Fox took no interest in the island but the three Avocets were highly alarmed and the sitting bird was provoked to leave the nest and vigorously attack the two other Avocets. The chase period took about 10 minutes with the nest exposed the whole time. Previously I had not seen

the nest left for more than 10 seconds. However, incubation resumed at 8.45 and the two other adults remained at the end of the island. Confusingly, two more Avocets flew in at 8.55, giving a total of five Avocets on the island. Three of these flew off at 8.56 and the remaining standing bird relieved the incubating adult. The 21st of May was also interesting. At 6.10am there were three Avocets on the island in addition to the incubating bird. On the western end of the island the female of the second pair adopted a distinctive posture with head held flat against the water. The male of the pair spent 2 minutes making preening actions and probing within the water on either side of the female, brushing against the female as he moved around repeatedly. Mating quickly followed after which the two 'ran on' together for a short distance. At this point it seemed that there would soon be a second nest at the site.

By the 22nd of May I was certainly expecting to start seeing Avocet chicks and I was delighted to see Hampshire's first Avocet chick at 6.40am on that day. The female was still incubating with the chick wandering freely on the island and the male in attendance. The chick was grey and white with a fairly stout straight bill. I noted nest relief that day and also the female was seen brooding the chick. By the 25th there were four chicks present on an island closer to the bank, presumably having been moved by the adults. This flatter island possibly had more mud for feeding. The second pair was by this time occupying the original island but had apparently not settled for nesting.

For various reasons I was not able to continue Avocet watching much beyond the end of May. My understanding is that the second pair was not successful, but the original pair reared two of the four young. As was widely reported there was an 'incident' at the nest site which appeared to prompt the adults to move their two remaining (unfledged) young by (remarkably) walking for several miles down the beach. They were found when they reached Titchfield Haven and the wardens carried the two young (in full view of the adults) into the reserve where they presumably fledged.

Given the numbers of Avocet now wintering nearby it seems likely that this exciting species will attempt to nest again in the near future. The success of this pair demonstrates the resilience of the species given various pressures, including disturbance, predation, lack of food and fluctuating water levels. It will be interesting to see if Avocets return to the area in summer 2003. Let's hope so.

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The Natural History of Southampton
John Poland
Annual Report 2002

Southampton, I would argue, is perhaps one of the finest UK cities for wildlife and perhaps fortunate in the fact it has many 'greenways' interwoven with the city and surrounded by diverse countryside. Several habitat types are present within the city, albeit in small quantity and many sadly fragmented. Mature woodland, river corridors, acid and calcareous grassland, even heathland, all exist in the city's greenways.

One of the most valuable areas for wildlife is Southampton Common. Botanically the site is of local interest with Southern Marsh, Bee Orchid and Autumn Lady's Tresses. The rare spring fungus *Amanita eliae* has also occurred in recent years. White Admiral butterflies used to breed and it is hoped managing 'cascading' honeysuckle will encourage them to return to their former haunts. White-letter Hairstreaks still occur on the remaining Elm trees (also at many other sites in the city). The adjacent cemetery boasts a locally impressive list of butterflies: Marbled Whites, Ringlet and even occasional Silver-studded Blues (see coloured pages) have been recorded in recent years. The unvegetated and seemingly barren boating lake supports the uncommon Freshwater Periwinkle (an indicator of good water quality) and one of Hampshire's largest colonies of Great Crested Newts. Sadly, Bog Bush-cricket and Variable Damselfly have died out from the nearby fishing lake with no chance of natural re-colonisation.

The River Itchen is an important feature within the city landscape and the dramatic partial transition from chalk stream to tidal river occurs at Woodmill. Here the appearance of brackish-water invertebrates and the estuarine seaweed *Fucus ceranoides* indicates the increase in salinity. The Itchen provides territory to Otters, which have been observed as far down river as Northam Bridge, probably feeding on abundant Grey Mullet and Eels. Even the managed parklands of Riverside are not totally devoid of wildlife, as the neatly kept greens by Woodmill provide excellent 'airspace' foraging for Serotine bats.

Peartree Green, near Woolston, is a flora-rich area of disturbed calcareous grassland partially formed of imported chalk. Colonies of Pyramidal and Bee Orchids occur, with Marbled Whites and a small population of Brown Argus. Kidney and Horseshoe Vetch have been introduced, creating an artificial chalk downland habitat. These vetches are foodplants of Small and Chalkhill Blues and could even sustain a population, should any vagrants appear by chance.

However, it is not just greenways and public open spaces which are of interest to the urban naturalist; brownfield sites are equally worthy of investigation. A tiny area adjacent to Mayflower Park has a thriving colony of the much declined Mouse-tail and the adjacent park contains scattered plants of the locally scarce Early Meadow-grass.

Some species are not confined to individual sites and rely on the whole 'city ecosystem' in order to maintain viable populations. Southampton supports a substantial population of the extraordinary Stag Beetle, its prolonged larval stage probably reliant on old tree roots in private gardens. Another declining species, the Buttoned Snout moth, is also thriving in Southampton, its larvae feeding on garden hop plants.

Casual observations have given rise to some recent unusual records. Downy Emerald dragonfly has been found at a pond in Shirley and flightless Wood Crickets have appeared at Jurd's Lake, Woolston—a species more or less confined to the New Forest. Neither of these species is usually associated with urban settings.

Recording on our own doorstep is a vital part of maintaining the variety of flora and fauna present in our city. Sympathetic management cannot occur if we do not know what is already there.

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