

# Wildlife Trust Ecology Groups

## Medway Smile Living Landscape



### Winter 2015 Newsletter



#### Introduction

As the year is drawing to a close it's time to take a look back at what the Medway Smile Ecology Group got up to in 2015, and look forward to our plans for 2016. To all those of you who have been involved in surveys, collecting the data we need to assess our management and the success of the Living Landscape project, I'd like to say a huge thank you, the trust both values and relies on your support. On a personal level I'd like to say a huge thank you for the warm welcome I've received in my new role of Biodiversity Information Officer. I've met lots of enthusiastic, knowledgeable and dedicated people, and it's you guys that help make this job so exciting. I'm really looking forward to working with you all next year, and hope to meet many more Ecology Group volunteers in 2016. Paul

#### What we did in 2015

##### Botanical surveys

The Medway Smile botanical season in numbers: **20** volunteers identified **175** plant species in **120** quadrats over **12** reserves, generating in the region of **3500** records – a stunning achievement, well done and a huge thank you to all involved. The field data is currently being input by Tony Witts at Kent and Medway Biological

Records Centre, from where it will be uploaded to our new 'Recorder 6' database and used to monitor changing habitats.



Don, Rob, Heather and Alfred identifying chalk grassland plants at Purple Hill

##### Butterfly transects

Butterfly monitoring continued at Burham Down, Wouldham Common, Bluebell Hill, Darland Banks, and Queendown Warren, and two new transects were set up at the Queendown extension and the Larches, designed to monitor established, restoration and newly created chalk grassland.



Purple Emperor *Apatura iris*, Bluebell Hill 2015 (Photo: R Pennigton). These butterflies are sometimes attracted to car tyres to forage for salt picked up from grit spread on our roads.

Unfortunately 2015 seems to have been an especially poor year for one

of our iconic species, the Adonis blue. Selwyn Denis who has monitored Queendown Warren for many years said it was possibly the worst year for this species that he has known. Butterflies respond quickly to weather conditions, and fingers crossed after a poor season they will bounce back next year. On the up side though Rob Pennigton did find an Adonis blue on the Burham transect, and they have been spotted as far afield as Hollingborne and Harrietsham. There were some particularly special sightings during the season including purple emperor and continental swallowtail.

##### WildWalks

On what was probably one of the hottest days of the year a small group of us set out to trial a 'WildWalk' route. Designed to help members of the public and volunteers increase the value of their wildlife sightings, WildWalks details routes and species to target, outside of reserves and protected areas in the wider countryside. We found a nice selection of chalk grassland plants including yellow wort and black medic, holly blue butterflies, and birds including treecreeper and bullfinch, all valuable records. To find out more and get involved see

<http://www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk/wildlife/ecology-groups/wildwalks>.



## Shield bugs



Rambur's Pied Shieldbug (late instar) on black horehound (Photo: D Watson)

Jonathan Barnard kindly led a guided walk focusing on shield bugs at Darland Banks in July. The participants were fortunate with the weather which was warm and sunny for the duration of the walk. They found several dozen shieldbugs of six species including a large number of Rambur's Pied Shieldbug *Tritomegas sexmaculatus*. This species first colonised the UK in 2011 when it was discovered at two sites in Kent. Most of those found on the day were on black horehound but several early nymphs were also found on white deadnettle, which were too small to have transferred from horehound. These are believed to be the first British record of this species using a host plant other than black horehound.

## Bat walk

A guided bat walk led by Alison Riggs was enjoyed by all who attended, and plenty of common and soprano pipistrelles and Daubenton's bats were seen and heard along the River Medway.

## Farmland bird walk

The weather wasn't so kind to those of us who turned out in the rain at Nashenden for a winter bird walk. We did manage to spot a few farmland birds and some others despite the awful conditions, including skylark, linnet, meadow pipit, goldfinch, green woodpecker, redwing, and Britain's smallest bird, the goldcrest - not surprising given the huge influx into the UK in October. There was no sign of any corn bunting, grey partridge or

yellowhammer, but Kent Wildlife Trust are working on that, advising farmers on conservation in the Medway Smile.

## What's all this fuss about ground beetles?!

You may have heard me mention ground beetles once or twice this year...! They are an excellent tool to monitor habitat quality and management, in pretty much most of the most of the habitat types we manage in Kent.



Smooth ground beetle *Carabus glabratus* (Photo: P Tinsley-Marshall)

There are around 364 species in Britain (a not un-manageable number when considered in the context of the diversity of British birds) and diverse enough to give fine discrimination between good, mediocre and poor quality habitat. They are found in almost all habitat types, and there are numerous characteristic species, including good 'habitat indicators' in most. There is a modern national distribution atlas, and well-defined conservation status and rarity categories, and a rich identification, ecological and behavioural literature. Ground beetles are very easily sampled using standardised methodologies – perfect for assessing trends. Almost all species can ultimately be identified alive, in the field, with no more than a hand lens (many can be recognised with the naked eye), and they are an ideal place to begin studying entomology, which goes beyond the 'compare-with-pictures' approach of most guides to butterflies, moths and dragonflies. In addition to assessing presence, abundance,

species richness and diversity indices, ground beetles allow us to use species status categories, rarity scores, Species Quality Indices, and habitat affinity to assess how our management is working.

## Ecology Groups Field Season 2016

In 2016 the following Ecology Group monitoring projects will be happening in the Medway Smile:

### Chalk grassland botanical surveys

June (possibly also late May and early July) Tuesdays and Thursdays 10am-4pm.

Great for anyone with no prior knowledge of plants as well as those with botanical skills; anyone can turn up to a botanical fieldwork day, help, and go away having both contributed and learnt something. A great way to learn about the diversity of chalk grassland plants. We may also be conducting further fieldwork to support a project to re-introduce the threatened plant dwarf milkwort, and of course counting our beautiful orchids – watch this space.



Common spotted orchid at Peter's Pit (Photo: P Tinsley-Marshall)

### Ground beetles

April – May & Aug – Sep (dates TBA, 10am-4pm)

A new 'Wildlife Study Day' 'Ground beetle ID and ecology for beginners' will be on 16th April, followed by approx. 8 field sessions in April/May and Aug/Sep sampling ground beetles and, with follow up 'lab' sessions with hand lenses and microscopes attempting to ID them. Even if you don't come on the study day you can help out with setting

traps and sampling beetles, and come along to ID sessions.

### *Butterflies*

April – Sept (26 weeks, walking a transect once a week). A significant commitment, some butterfly ID knowledge required, though there are possible opportunities to pair up with existing surveyors to begin learning ID and try it out, to start a new transect or share one with someone else if you're reasonably confident with ID.

### *Breeding bird surveys*

Final details to be determined, (March) April – June (July) (between 3-10 early morning sessions of approx. 2-3 hrs).

Experience of identifying birds by sight and sound is essential, but if you don't yet feel confident check out the NEW Wildlife Study Day *Bird survey techniques, songs and calls, Get more from your bird watching*, and others in the 2016 programme.

### **Wildlife Study Days**

The Wildlife Study Day programme 2016 is almost ready to go to press and will be out in the new year, available from

<http://www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk/discover-learn/wildlife-study-days>

Two NEW study days are in the programme, designed specifically to support Ecology Groups projects:

#### **Ground beetle identification and ecology for beginners**

16<sup>th</sup> April, 10am-4pm, Tyland Barn

#### **Breeding bird survey methods, songs and calls for beginners**

11<sup>th</sup> June, 10am-4pm, Bough Beech Visitor Centre



Sedge warbler (Photo: P Tinsley-Marshall)

There are also a range of other study days that will help you learn the skills to increase the value of your

volunteering, well worth checking out.

### **Future plans**

Looking ahead to future plans, I very much hope that we will soon be able to offer a Wildlife Study Day focusing on hoverflies, to support future Ecology Groups projects.

### *Hoverflies*

Hoverflies are probably the most attractive and accessible group of flies. They are sensitive indicators of ecological conditions and are short lived and fast breeding. This means they show rapid responses to changes in management and their environment, and these responses can be detected and interpreted.



*Volucella inanis* (a wasp mimic), distinguished from the very similar *V. zonaria* (a hornet mimic, see photo in next column) by the dull yellow (rather than chestnut) scutellum (the egg shaped bit in the middle), and the extent of yellow on the underside – not visible in this photo. I think there is enough to be fairly confident in this ID, but I could be (and am often!) wrong. (Photo: H Furse).

There is a wide range of functional diversity in their larvae, reflecting the habitat niches they utilise – some are aphidophageous (feed on aphids), some feed in ants nests or in social bee and wasp nests, and some are herbivorous, saprophageous (feeding at sap runs, rotting wood, rot holes, under bark and other wet situations). Monitoring the community of hoverflies tells important information about the range of niches we are maintaining for these and other species. Modern digital cameras allow identification from photos, and they are easy to find as adults feeding at flowers. A National Recording Scheme, launched in

1976, aims to collate information about their ecology and distribution. All this makes hoverflies an excellent tool for assessing habitat quality and management, and they are especially useful in woodland, carr and wet woodland, as well as wet heaths and bogs, fens and marshes, wet grassland and calcareous grassland.



*Volucella zonaria*, The Larches (Photo: P Tinsley-Marshall)

There is an excellent Facebook group for the hoverflies, administered by Roger Morris, who has authored several hoverfly ID guides and runs the UK hoverfly recording scheme. It is often possible to accurately identify hoverflies from photographs, and this group is used in this was as part of the recording scheme. To check it out search 'UK Hoverflies' on Facebook.

### **Kent Wildlife Trust Ecology Groups on Facebook**

Don't forget we are on Facebook, a great way to keep in touch, share photos and identification tips, search 'Kent Wildlife Trust Ecology Groups' and check out our webpages at

<http://www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk/wildlife/ecology-groups>

### **Want to get involved?**

For any queries or for further details about Ecology Group activities, or to let us know about wildlife you have seen please contact:

Paul Tinsley-Marshall  
Biodiversity Information Officer  
E: [Paul.Tinsley-Marshall@kentwildlife.org.uk](mailto:Paul.Tinsley-Marshall@kentwildlife.org.uk)  
W: <http://www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk>  
Kent Wildlife Trust, Tyland Barn, Sandling Lane, Maidstone, Kent, ME14 3BD.  
Registered Charity No: 239992