

Centre News



Report from David Tilbury, Trustee - October 2008

Offwell Woodland & Wildlife Trust

End of an era

Supporters of the Centre will appreciate that funding has been something of a roller coaster ride for the past few years. With increased scrambling for lottery and other funding by many large organisations, competition for money from the Olympics and the fact that the Forestry Commission have had to substantially reduce their financial support, it has become quite apparent that we are unlikely to be able to continue to find funding to employ 4 staff at the Centre, year-in year-out. It therefore made sense to reduce staff to more manageable levels to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Centre. The principal change is that Steve Lawson and Barbie Corker formally left the Trust's employment at the end of August. Steve has worked for the Centre for 22 years and it is very much down to his vision, enthusiasm and hard work, that we have this unique wildlife reserve today. We wish them well with their future plans.

Whilst Mike Manvill has now retired from his role as Leading Hand, the really good news is that Mike has agreed to continue as a Volunteer. Mike's detailed and skilful knowledge of the reserve is invaluable to us.

What of our future plans? We are now 9 months into the two year HLF scheme led by Lucy Morton and this is really pointing the way into what can be achieved with volunteers. We have had armies of people from as far away as Torquay to clear rhododendron, work on paths, coppicing and generally maintain the Centre. Dougal Syers who has been associated with the Centre for 17 years is now looking after day to day enquiries, maintaining and developing the web-site as well as ensuring that we make full use of the Q3Rangers as outlined in June 2008 Centre News.

In 2009 we are planning to increase primary school visits as well as maintaining our programme for older students.

I see the Centre as very much a community asset, if we are to continue to improve habitats to encourage biodiversity, increase our educational programme as well as ensuring the financial robustness of the Trust, we need people of all abilities to come forward to help, either by becoming involved with OELink's activities, fundraising or perhaps by offering a particular skill they may have to the Trust.

We have welcomed several visitors to the Centre during this period. Neil Parish, the MEP for the South West came on a fact-finding tour. He said that he was 'impressed by the innovative use of technology' and emphasised that 'the practical education which children gained by visiting the Centre was really important. There is no substitute'.



Neil Parish MEP meets a Golden-ringed Dragonfly.

We were also pleased to welcome our local County Councillor Barry Nicholson, who has been a staunch supporter for a number of years. He was interested to see the habitat improvements taking place and presented the Trust with a cheque for £7000 from his Community Fund.



Action for Biodiversity

Project Officer: Lucy Morton



On the trail of the Greater Horseshoe bat

By Lizzie Hinchcliffe

On Tuesday 8th July we carried out a 'Bat Survey' – this was part of the two year 'Action for Biodiversity' Heritage Lottery Funded project at the Woodland Education Centre. It was run in conjunction with a three year funded project at the East Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to survey the rare Greater Horseshoe bat.

The Woodland Education Centre's Community Officer Lucy Morton organised the evening and we were delighted to welcome Pete Youngman (AONB Project Officer) and Dr Fiona Mathews - a lecturer in Mammalian Biology at the university of Exeter and licensed bat worker - to the centre to carry out the survey.

Greater Horseshoe Bats are known to hibernate at Beer Quarry caves during the winter months. However, little is known about the location of the bats throughout the spring and summer and one of the aims of the project is to investigate where the bats go to feed and raise their young. We were hoping to track them down at Offwell!

A limited number of volunteers were needed to help with setting up the nets and walking around the centre with the bat detectors. We started at about 8:30pm, putting up mist nets next to Dragonfly pond and the lake. A harp trap was also put up behind the pond. It started to get dark at around 9:30pm and so we gathered in the log cabin and Fiona explained about using the bat detectors. I was using a bat detector that records all the bat calls as well as letting you tune in to a particular frequency, and so Fiona could analyse the results later on.



A small group of us walked around the site with the bat detectors to give us the best chance of recording all the bat activity at the Centre. Fiona and Pete checked the nets regularly – this is important so as to avoid causing the bats stress. I didn't know what we would find so it was great to hear that a soprano pipistrelle had been caught in the mist net by the lake. Fiona carefully extracted the bat and explained how to identify different bat species.

We caught two more bats – a brown long-eared in the mist net and a Daubentons in the harp trap. These are not rare bats but it demonstrates the variety of bat life at the Centre. It was really wonderful to see the bats up close and have the benefit of Fiona's knowledge and experience of these fascinating animals. The bat detectors were picking up lots of calls throughout the evening. Fiona had described the unique sound of the Greater Horseshoe and we tried tuning in to the correct frequency but we only heard the calls of other bats.

Fiona has recently contacted the Centre with the results of the survey. Unfortunately, there was no Greater Horseshoe call recorded this time. However, a Leisler's bat call was recorded and this is very exciting as it is the first record of this species in Devon. Maybe next time we shall find the elusive Greater Horseshoe bat!

The 'Bat Survey' was just one of the really interesting things I've done since volunteering at The Woodland Education Centre. I began volunteering in the spring when the clearing of the new Dormouse Trail was in progress. There was a lot of coppicing, clearing and burning up but the area is now looking really good. Lucy and I did some pruning along the path recently and found typical dormouse evidence – a hazelnut with a very round hole in one side – so hopefully the dormice are benefitting from all the hard work that was put in earlier in the year.

In addition to clearing the Dormouse area, we have done a lot of work to clear the rhododendron that was growing next to the leat by the track leading to the log cabin. A contractor, Terry Coombs, did the cutting, and the volunteers dragged it away and burnt it up – sometimes on very hot days! The amount of light that now comes through the trees is quite a transformation and hopefully new plants will be colonising the area soon.

I really enjoy being a volunteer at The Woodland Education Centre - it is a fantastic opportunity to make a real difference to a local project where I can see the benefit that the conservation work has on the wildlife and natural habitats.