

Centre News

The Woodland Education Centre, Offwell, Honiton, Devon EX14 9SW. Tel 01404 831373



Centre Director's Report - June 2008

Summer Visitors

Offwell Woodland & Wildlife Trust

People of all ages and occupations have been beating a path to the Woodland Education Centre over the past three months. In addition to the schools and educational groups which are always much in evidence at this time of year, the Centre has also recently hosted visits from Mark Williams, the Chief Executive of East Devon District Council and Hugo Swire, our local MP. Neil Parish, the MEP for the South West is also to come on a fact-finding tour to the Centre in August.

Mark Williams visited the Centre in response to a 5000 name petition which was organized by OELink and recently presented to him by Gill Graham, the Secretary of OELink. Mr Williams spent several hours at the Centre in order to familiarise himself with the issues behind the petition, chief of which was the need for adequate financial support from the council.



Gill Graham hands the petition to the EDDC Chief Executive.

While East Devon District Council has supported the Centre in the past with a total sum of £9,000, it has not provided any financial support in recent years.

Core funding continues to be an issue because despite successes with project funding for the Centre, it is an on-going battle to secure the essential funding for the staff who actually carry out the work on the ground to make all the project outcomes happen. It is a rare project grant (such as the Trust's HLF funded 'Action for Biodiversity' project) which actually incorporates funding for staff to deliver the project outcomes. Many grants specifically exclude such costs. This means that most projects actually cost the Trust considerable sums of money which cannot be recovered from the grants.

One of the Trust's responses to this on-going problem of staff funding has been the adoption of the hand-held, GPS-guided Q3 Ranger computer system. This enables any approved group leader, whether a teacher, parent or volunteer to deliver expert educational activities based on the Centre's habitats, without the need for Trust staff involvement. This technology has the potential to revolutionize outdoor education countrywide and is now being used very successfully by just about every single school group visiting the Centre. Hugo Swire was introduced to Q3 Rangers at the Wildlife Discovery Day held at the Centre in May.

Of course it is all too easy to get bogged down in the day to day challenges involved in trying to run an education centre in modern Britain. So it's refreshing to actually walk around the Centre and to see the flash of an iridescent kingfisher over the lake and to marvel at the wonderful display of wildflowers, including orchids. It is an apt reminder of the remarkable diversity of habitats which have been restored at the Centre from this once derelict site.

In just half an hour the casual walker can experience a exceptional variety of habitats. At this time of year, a short walk from the log cabin takes in two ponds alive with egg-laying damselflies and the leat where Beautiful Demoiselle damselflies and Golden-ringed Dragonflies can be seen sunbathing on adjacent vegetation or hunting for suitable prey. A glance up at nearby conifers may reveal Britain's smallest bird, the Goldcrest. Look further up into the sky and don't be surprised if you see Ravens and Buzzards or the nimble aerobatics of a Sparrowhawk.

A westerly walk up the hill through the conifers takes you into a glade of Ash trees and Harts-tongue Fern, whilst adjacent to this is an old coppiced oak glade. Walking east from the leat you come across the wet woodland and then along a wildflower ride to the heathland, where a whole variety of different butterfly species can be seen on warm, sunny days. A sharp left from the heathland leads you back along the track past Kingfisher Pond where you can now look into the Wetland and admire the luxuriant swamp vegetation before strolling back to the log cabin.

Such a walk only scratches the surface of all that the Centre offers the keen naturalist and long may it continue!

Action for Biodiversity

Project Officer: Lucy Morton



The summer seems to have come and gone, it's chilly and windy and although rain is always good for the allotment and garden, it's not so good for insects that are keen to fly and find a mate!

The last 3 months have been busy for the Action for Biodiversity project. Most of the woodland management work has stopped for the breeding season, although the rhododendron cutting has continued. The rhododendron is not used by birds for nesting and so apart from the disturbance caused by the chainsaw, there is definitely more gain than loss in carrying on the work through the summer.

The regular volunteers, including Mike, Lizzie, Mike and Peter have been coming in and spending long, hot days burning up all the cut rhododendron which can't be used in the cabin's wood burning stove and moving endless amounts of usable logs up onto the track. This is really hard work, so a big thank you to all of them. I'd also like to thank Kimmo Evans, the Communications Officer with the East Devon AONB who came and did sterling work for a morning with a work experience student from Woodroffe School. The positive effects of working together in a team round a bonfire, getting the job done can never be overestimated.

An official Launch day for the project was held on Saturday 10th May and we were blessed with a beautiful sunny day. There were guided walks looking at butterflies and dragonflies, pond dipping activities and woodland walks. There was also the chance to see some of the beautiful moths which had been caught the previous night. The highlight was undoubtedly a Poplar Hawkmoth which is a stunning insect and makes you realise why this group of insects is so fascinating.



Poplar Hawkmoth

Hugo Swire, the MP for East Devon attended with his family. He opened the new Dormouse Trail, cleared and created by volunteers, which leads visitors through the hazel coppice area with all the spring flowers and at the moment, the majestic foxgloves on display. It was a really successful day and I'd like to thank everyone involved for making it so enjoyable.



Hugo Swire MP cuts the tape to open the new trail.

One of the aims of the Action for Biodiversity project is to recruit young volunteers, aged 16 - 22yrs old. As an incentive to giving up their time and energy, they are given the opportunity to gain a John Muir Award which is an educational initiative of the John Muir Trust.

The award is a good addition to a CV and it challenges young people to discover a wild place, explore it, do something towards conserving it and then to share their experiences with others.

In order to deliver successful awards I needed to attend a Leader training session and this I did in April, travelling up to Snowdonia and spending a very enjoyable 2 days in the hills learning how to enthuse young people and get them involved in their local natural environment. Successful participants in the award scheme receive a certificate to show their achievement. The award is not just for youngsters. It is for enthusiastic people of all ages. For more information just visit www.johnmuiraward.org

Throughout the summer holidays there will be **Free Family Discovery Days** every Wednesday. Activities will include pond and stream dipping and woodland exploration. Booking is essential as numbers are limited. For more information visit www.offwell.info or ring Lucy Morton on 01404 831881.