

Centre News

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Centre Director's Report - October 2006

"A National Treasure"

The Offwell Woodland & Wildlife Trust's website (www.offwell.info) based on the Woodland Education Centre, is to be permanently archived by the British Library. Inclusion of the Trust's website in this national archive clearly demonstrates the value of its content, while its millions of users around the world are further testament to its practicality and user-friendliness.

The British Library is a founding member of the UK Web Archiving Consortium. This is the national effort to archive selective representative websites. The aim is to preserve aspects of the country's documentary heritage so that they will remain available to future generations.

The website represents years of work and it now contains well over 90,000 key words and topics about the natural world. The main umbrella website comprises more than 50 different individual websites devoted to particular topics. Many of these if printed out, are the equivalent of a small book in their own right. This is perhaps quite appropriate, given the involvement of the British Library!

There is an emphasis on British countryside and in particular on East Devon. The website includes a wide range of information on the Centre, as well as on topics such as farming, wildlife and ecology.



Dr Barbara Corker, the Education Officer, works on the website.

The Centre is a wonderful place to quietly observe the changing of the seasons. Recent rainfall has spurred on the annual, autumnal burgeoning of fungi at the



Earthballs - the spore-producing fruiting bodies of a fungus.

Centre. Distinctive fungal fruiting bodies ranging from earthballs, to stinkhorns are beginning to pop up all over the place. This augurs well for the upcoming Fungus Foray in October, organized by Offwell Environment Link, the Centre's community support group. This is a good chance to indulge in a fungal treasure hunt, improve your prowess in fungus recognition and have all your questions answered by a real expert with decades of experience. Your sharp-eyed discoveries will also help to add to knowledge of the different species of fungi found at the Centre.

The glorious Indian Summer we have been enjoying has been really good for dragonflies. The large, dramatic, blueish males of the later-flying species such as Southern and Migrant Hawkers are much in evidence at the moment. They can be seen patrolling the pond and lake margins at the Centre waiting for suitable females, or jinking and swerving above the tracks as they catch and eat insects on the wing. Their time is short and as temperatures drop below freezing it will be left to the eggs/larvae to carry on the life cycle and ensure the return of adults next year.

It has obviously also been a very good breeding season for Swallows. One evening recently, a cloud of Swallows containing literally hundreds of individuals, performed concerted aerobatics across the Offwell Valley, passing backwards and forwards above the valley for over an hour. This itself gives a valuable insight into the sheer number of insects which must be flying around unseen in the air above us. There must be staggering numbers to support such a number of Swallows all fattening up for their return journey to warmer climes.

The Centre has recently hosted a training event for East Devon District Council's Water Vole Project. This project is aimed at encouraging the return of the Water Vole to the River Axe catchment. The project is promoting this by encouraging the provision of suitable aquatic habitat for Water Voles, as well as by controlling Mink in the catchment area. There are currently no confirmed records of wild Water Voles in Devon, although they are certainly present in surrounding water catchments in Somerset and Dorset. There is one confirmed colony at the top of the Axe catchment in Dorset.

The training event was organized to demonstrate the setting up of rafts to monitor aquatic mammals in a particular locality. These rafts have been developed by the Game Conservancy Trust and use a clay pan to record the footprints of animals climbing onto the rafts. A raft has been set up at the Centre, which should give a fascinating extra insight into the aquatic mammals occurring at the Centre.



Mervyn Newman, Water Vole Project Officer, sets up the raft.

With the aquatic habitats in mind, it seems appropriate to mention that Colwell Wood Landfill site, upstream of the Centre, continues to cause concern. It is regrettable that the window of opportunity for carrying out remedial stabilizing work on the site over the dryer summer period has not been seized. No such work has been done and so we enter the winter with eyes turned upstream, waiting for heavy rains to bring down the next load of debris.

The winter conservation work programme at the Centre is currently being planned. This will help to maintain the ponds, lake and wetlands for dragonflies and other invertebrates, not to mention Water Voles if they should happen to be in the vicinity! The work programme will also tackle some of the many tasks needed to maintain and enhance other habitats at the Centre.

Much of the practical work is quiet and behind the scenes, particularly as most of it has to be done in the winter to avoid impacting on breeding seasons. It would be easy to overlook its importance. Without it, the paths at the Centre would soon become overgrown and totally impassable, the wild flower areas would rapidly disappear, rhododendron would begin to spread once more and the aquatic habitats would become silted up and choked with vegetation.



Management keeps the rare Ruddy Darter breeding at the Centre.

Fundraising continues, with project applications being submitted for grants which will enable all of this vital conservation work to take place, along with improvements to other facilities at the Centre. Several OELink volunteers have been contributing their time to great effect to help with this lengthy and time-consuming process. One such application has already been submitted to the Hanson Environment Fund and others are in the pipeline. Such tangible help is very much appreciated. It makes it possible for the Trust to submit more applications for Centre funding than time and the pressure of work would otherwise allow.

The new electronic guide system which is being developed for the Centre is now in the final stages of refinement. A dozen people tried out a number of different-sized devices (purchased with funds donated by OELink) at a recent OELink event at the Centre. This generated extremely valuable feedback about how people interact with the devices (called 'Rangers') as well as a number of new ideas. Now that the system functioning has been proven, all that remains is to develop further content and interactive material on the Rangers. The production of the content is by far the most time-consuming part of the whole process (as with the production of films or documentaries for television) but once developed it will add value to the Centre's activities indefinitely. A 'Nature Treasure Trail' will be the next development, joining the 'Guided Walk' and 'Free Ranger' options.