

# Centre News

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



Centre Director's Report - July 2006

## "Its Just So Cool!"

"It's just so cool!" said one youngster. "Yes" said another. "It's as cool as my Nintendo." These were two comments from enthusiastic pupils who had just used the Centre's new electronic guides in one of their activities. "Its brilliant!" said one teacher. "It adds a whole new dimension" offered another.

These comments were made during trials of the first phase of an exclusive, revolutionary electronic outdoor guide system now being tested at the Woodland Education Centre. Q3 Rangers are a hand-held computer system developed for hire by schools and the public. The Rangers deliver information using sounds and spoken word, images, video, maps, diagrams and text. The devices know where the user is at all times so that this information can be presented at appropriate points entirely automatically, courtesy of an on-board global positioning satellite system.

Users can also access a wealth of information at any point, simply by tapping on a button. This includes general interest information on the area, as well as wildlife information specific to the Centre. For instance, you can access topics such as a pictorial guide to 50 of the most common wildflowers at the Centre, together with user-friendly guides and information on butterflies, birds and other wildlife you might see or hear at the Centre. You cannot always have an expert in tow to tell you interesting facts at certain points and make sure that you don't get lost on a visit to the Centre. However, with a Q3 Ranger in your hand, you will have the next best thing.



A school uses a Q3 Ranger to navigate to the Centre.

The Rangers will provide directions to the Centre from Offwell Village Hall car park. Trials have proved conclusively that someone who has never visited the area before can easily find their way to and around the Centre using one of the Rangers. This includes confirmed technophobes! In producing the Rangers, the emphasis has been on ease of use and simplicity. If you are capable of using a television remote control to channel hop, then you will have no problem using one of the Rangers.

The Rangers have been developed for two different user groups. One set of content is currently being refined for educational users, while another is being produced for recreational users who wish to enjoy the Centre.

The intention is to form a partnership with ORSA (Offwell Rural Services Association) the community group which runs Offwell Village Shop. The shop will provide a venue for hiring and returning the Rangers, in return for a share of the income. Rangers will be available for hire from Offwell Village Shop later on in the year. However, members of OELink will have a chance to try out a guide for free through the OELink-organised event on September 23rd. The number of people who can be accommodated is limited, so don't miss out and remember to book well in advance.

The trials have been very revealing and have thrown up some considerable surprises. The educational guides have so far been developed for use by teachers or adults leading a group. What has become very



Screen shot of the Information Content Page on a Ranger.

apparent over the trials is that they are also suitable for use by children in the group. Pupils as young as 5 and 6 have taken to it like a duck to water, queuing to find out information on their particular special specimen. What is even more surprising is the rapt attention which pupils pay to what the Q3 Rangers say, listening quietly, while absorbing and remembering information which would have been in one ear and out of the other if imparted by a human source!



*A Grass Snake surfaces in Dragonfly Pond.*

Surely this is a view of the natural world and food chains at work which they would be most unlikely to see at school!

Butterflies have also been very much on our minds this summer. 'Butterfly Conservation' had asked for an updated record of the 'Dingy Skipper' at the Centre. (No, this is not a grubby yacht helmsman, but a rather nondescript-looking butterfly!) Rosemary Tilbury, an OELink member who contributes bird records for the Centre every month, was able to confirm that this butterfly is still present at the Centre, after spotting one by the Wetland spillway.

Rosemary's sharp eyes have also recently sighted two White Admirals and a High Brown Fritillary at the Centre. Both butterflies were recorded at the Centre in the past in an OELink survey, but this is the first time they have been seen for many years. The High Brown Fritillary is a national Biodiversity Action Plan species with only about 50 colonies still recorded in England and Wales.



*Pupils identify and find out about their own animal discoveries*

The value of the Rangers for such activities is that it allows non-specialists to take educational activities using all of the Trust's decades of experience and accrued resources to deliver quality controlled, critically important content themselves. What has also been surprising in the trials is the enthusiastic response of people of the older generation who might be expected to shy away from such new technology. By and large, they have embraced it whole-heartedly with the common query "When can we have one?"

The purchase of hardware and associated costs incurred in producing Rangers for the Centre has been made possible by a contribution of £5,000 from Offwell Environment Link, the Centre's community support group. Without this contribution, the trials and the forthcoming launch of the Centre's new electronic system would still have been on the drawing board. The donation and the encouragement of Offwell Environment Link have been immensely valuable and are very much appreciated.

With such exciting projects on the go, it would be easy to overlook the wildlife of the reserve upon which all of these activities are based.

A group of pupils doing pond studies in Dragonfly Pond were recently treated to ringside seats for a show put on by a Grass Snake. This was hunting frogs in the pond as they pond dipped.



*Claire Mountjoy with an educational group at the Centre.*

Last but not least, the Trust welcomes Claire Mountjoy, a trained teacher with extensive experience of working outdoors, who has been helping with educational groups this summer.

The Centre is a Forestry Commission site managed in partnership with the Offwell Woodland & Wildlife Trust, Reg. Charity 1000198