

Centre News

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Centre Director's Report - April 2004



Spring, Schools & Scorpions

Spring has arrived at the Centre with a flourish. The cherry trees by the lake, planted back in the early days of the Centre, have put on an extra showy display of blossom this year. The soft, fuzzy, pale golden-yellow catkins of the male willow trees are adding their bit to the spring show, while white petals from the cherries drift down like snow on the water.

Beneath the water, the new 2004 crop of frog and toad tadpoles are beginning their dangerous journey to adulthood. This year's toad spawning season was a pleasingly crowded one, following a couple of years with noticeably fewer toads in evidence. Excursions to the lake after dark in late March, revealed carpets of toads lolling on the water surface or frantically trying to make their mark with any female in reach, undeterred by the bright gaze of the spotlight. It has also been a particularly good year for Palmate newts with good numbers in Dragonfly Pond which is by the Centre's log cabin.



This male toad (right) has laid claim to a female.

The large numbers of amphibians returning to spawn this spring provides a useful reminder that populations fluctuate naturally and that not all observed declines are the result of human iniquities.

For a brief period during the recent spawning season, frogs and toads became the most common subject of e-mailed queries received via the website. One individual even asked if signs could be put up, to point toads away from the road and its cars, and towards a more suitable breeding area. A serious enquiry or a joke? Answering e-mails can sometimes require a great deal of tact!

Enquiries from students, organisations and individuals from around the world are usually received every day, covering an astonishing variety of wildlife, conservation and education topics. All are answered in as short a turn around time as possible.

The Trust's website continues to go from strength to strength. One three month period between January and March last year saw well over a million hits recorded on the website. Just last month, in March, over three-quarters of a million hits were received in this single month. This is a new record and provides vindication for all the effort which goes into adding to and constantly updating the website.

Recent additions to the website have included an article contributed by an OEL member on making and putting out bat boxes in Wales, as well as the text of a speech given by Devon County Councillor, Des Shadrick, at a Biodiversity conference in Christowe. If you would like a copy of 'Centre News' in colour, this is also published on the website so you can print out your own colour version if you wish.

Another new addition which is in the pipeline is an outline of the geology at the Centre. This will be a 'taster' introduction to the much larger section planned for the future when funds become available.



Geologist, Clive Nicholas examines chert at the Centre.

The taster section is being written by Clive Nicholas, a very experienced geologist, who kindly volunteered his expertise to get the project under way. Clive has already visited the Centre and given the Trust some fascinating insights into the ancient history of the area. It will be published on the Trust's website in the near future.

A new 'Woodland Webcam' already in place on the website, is currently helping to boost visitor numbers. The webcam is adjacent to a badger sett which hopefully contains badger cubs. These should begin to come out to play around the end of April or in early May. If so, some good views should be available. The webcam runs every night and sometimes in the day, when deer may also be seen. Webcam operating times are published on the website (www.offwell.info).

The number of hits and visitors to the website is analysed using specialist software. This makes it possible to monitor how the website is being used. Typically the 'Wetland Survey', the 'Tree Picture Galleries', 'Seed Dispersal' and 'Frog Metamorphosis' are the most popular topics together with the section on sampling techniques.

While individual users cannot be traced, it is possible to identify some of the organisations using the website. In March '04, of those that could be identified, the biggest single user of the website was Hertfordshire Council, closely followed by the Bradford Education Centre. Of the agricultural colleges that visit, the website was most popular with the Dorset college of Kingston Maurward.

In the same period, users from 109 different countries accessed the site. The largest number of hits outside of the UK were received from the Education Department of the State of Ohio, the Californian State University and Western Australia Museum. In addition to this nearly 2000 people made the website a 'favourite place' so that they could readily return.

With the change of seasons, the focus of attention now has to turn away from fundraising and the website, to the spring and summer fieldwork season at the Centre.

Schools are already carrying out practical fieldwork at the Centre. A-level groups have visited to learn about biological sampling, with several more booked in. The calendar is rapidly being filled up with bookings from Primary schools and group visits.

Our regular GCSE visitors from further afield, Gable Hall School, in Essex, recently came to study methods of sampling invertebrates in woodlands. They found many fascinating creatures at the Centre, including the tiny pseudoscorpion below. These small arachnids are only about 8mm or .3 inch long. Unlike true scorpions they do not have a poisonous sting. They frequent the leaf litter where they predate on other small invertebrates. Who says that exotic creatures are only found abroad!



A pseudoscorpion from the leaf litter in the Wet Woodland.

The seemingly endless saga of ColwellWood landfill site continues. This landfill site is upstream of the Centre. Since 1999, the Trust has repeatedly raised concerns with the Environment Agency who are responsible for the monitoring of the site. Despite this monitoring, the stream sides adjacent to the tip are moving significantly. This movement, together with the erosion of the stream bed, has been exacerbated by the various works which have been carried out by the landfill site operator. The Agency continue to monitor.



Students from Gable Hall School, Essex, look at biodiversity.