

HBIC Recorders Forum 2011 – by Becky Coneybeer (HBIC Ecologist)

The 2011 HBIC recorders forum was held on the 5th March, at Littleton Village Hall, with an attendance of around 70. The forum started off with a longer-than-usual introduction by HBIC manager, Nicky Court. Before introducing the theme of the day, she described the challenging times HBIC faces as Hampshire local authorities, which still provide essential funding, announce their budget cuts. However, HBIC remains one of the UK's few record centres that still has the capacity for survey, and it plays an increasingly important role in the Big Society ethos by involving the local community in biological recording. Nicky then went on to introduce the 'urban' theme of the forum, revealing that 40% of all HBIC's notable and protected species records come from within 1km of urban areas, perhaps unsurprisingly as over 80% of the population of Hampshire live in towns and cities, and highlighting the importance of this as these are the area where most planning applications are submitted. Churchyards, village greens, parks and other urban green spaces still provide valuable habitat for wildlife, as well as being precious to local communities. Therefore, with increasing pressure from housing needs, it is ever more important to safeguard them and keep on sending in those species records!

So first up, Andy Barker (Butterfly Conservation & Sparsholt College) presented a talk on 'Garden Wildlife Recording', where he focused on his 12 year history of species recording in his own garden in Chandler's Ford, near Eastleigh. He has so far recorded over 1120 different taxa! He gave some tips on how to record garden wildlife, how to build up your recording skills, and how to make your records count - by either sending your records to relevant species groups or taking part in national and local schemes.

Next, Rachel Hardy (Biodiversity Officer, Eastleigh Borough Council) gave a talk on 'Revising the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) for the Eastleigh Borough'. Eastleigh's current BAP expires in 2012 and so they are updating it with the latest species and habitat data. It will also incorporate information from the Habitat Opportunity Mapping developed by HBIC, which will help identify new priority areas and extend existing ones for targeted conservation management. She stressed the importance of species records, the majority of which are submitted by local people, and how they are essential to justifying the need for conservation measures to be taken in these areas.

Stephanie West (Sparsholt College) gave an entertaining presentation about 'Bats in the Urban Environment'. Bats are found in urban areas, despite initially thinking these areas are totally unsuitable, as the three main things they require roosting, feeding and commuting opportunities – in abundance. Bats can often be found roosting in modern buildings as they often provide warm and sheltered roosts that bats require year-round. Gardens, allotments and other green spaces play a huge part in providing the invertebrate populations on which the bats feed. Also, lines of trees along roads and rivers in towns and cities provide routes which lead bats out to richer food sources in the suburban and rural areas. Stephanie listed the usual threats that come with urban situations, for example inappropriate street lighting (disturbing bat behaviour) and garden loss, but these issues can be addressed in well designed future developments. And everyone can do their bit to help to help bats – if you have a garden build a small pond, or put out a window box out to attract insects.

Jonathan Cox (Jonathan Cox Associates) rounded off the morning with a talk on the 'Solent Recreation and Disturbance project: Winter Bird Survey', carried out in 2009. The Solent coastline is internationally important for wintering birds (such as dunlin, brent geese and godwits). Much of this coastline is already over developed and there is pressure for more development in the area. The project sought to investigate the

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effects of human disturbance on bird behaviour. Its findings revealed that the greatest levels of disturbance were caused by raptors, gunshots and bait-diggers, and overall birds at busier sites were disturbed less frequently (the likely reason being the birds had habituated to usual events of walkers and cyclists etc). However, the study revealed that birds using the roosting areas at high tides were found to be especially vulnerable to disturbance events, and therefore conservation efforts need to be concentrated particularly in these areas.

Following lunch, Keith Betton (Hampshire Ornithological Society and HBIC's new county recorder for birds) made a presentation on the 'Return of the Urban Vulture' – and although the Red Kite doesn't naturally spring to mind as an urban species, there are certainly many historical records of red kites existing in urban areas of Hampshire. Red kites – primarily scavenging feeders - were persecuted to extinction in Hampshire back in the late 1800s, but since their re-introduction in the Chilterns, they have been steadily spreading back into the county. It is becoming common for people to start feeding them as this can produce spectacular shows of feeding frenzies, a popular sight for local people; however there is evidence that this kind of feeding can lead to malnutrition in the birds. The general advice is not to feed them, but if you do, there is advice– see www.zsl.org for more information.

Martin Rand (Botanical Society of the British Isles) gave an intriguing talk titled 'Greener Shade of Brown – Human Occupation Sites in the New Forest'. Martin described various sites across the forest that have had past human use, first looking at the peat, marl and gravel pits which, in the long-term, have actually enhanced the forest's native bog, mire and acid grassland communities and the rare species that inhabit them. Then Martin focussed on areas used during the second World War, where often chalk rubble (some say acquired from bomb sites in Southampton) was brought in to lay roads and airstrips. When most of this was removed following the war, the calcareous soil left behind has given rise to many species one would rather expect to find on a chalk downland! The moral of the story was left to be mulled over by the attendees of the forum: are human incursions on 'natural' vegetation an immoral alteration to what is already there? Or can they lead to a more varied landscape, albeit with species that historically shouldn't be there, which we can all enjoy? You decide!

Lindsay McCulloch finished off the day with an overview of 'Southampton's Green Grid'. The city council's Green Space Strategy has been adopted and includes the proposal to establish a green grid – designed to safeguard and value the existing network of green spaces in the city (such as Greenways, road verges etc). The plan is also to extend and enhance what the city already has - for example, introducing 'green roofs and walls' and planting more trees in the streets. Densely built urban areas can have what is called the 'heat' island effect – but not only will more trees and greenery help reduce the inner-city temperature, they will also reduce levels of particulate pollution in the city's atmosphere and provide a more aesthetically pleasing place to be for the city's residents and visitors. Lindsay commented that there is a need for more records and monitoring work to discover trends for flora and fauna that will inform the development of Southampton's Green Grid.

Many thanks to all the speakers for informing, entertaining and enthusing us all and to Nicky Court and Andy Barker for Chairing.

Next year's forum will be held on **Saturday 3rd March 2012** at **Littleton Village Hall**. We look forward to seeing you there.

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