

Gift to Nature Newsletter

ISSUE 5: WINTER 2009



Gift to
Nature

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Saving Resources
Page 1

§

Conservation
Project Update
Page 1&2

§

Tree Anoraks
Page 2

§

Green Mum
Page 3

§

The White Owls of
the Night
Page 3

§

Mini Mammals
Page 4

§

Trolls at the Nursery
Page 4

§

Watching Windfalls
Page 5

WELCOME

Welcome to the Winter Newsletter, and what a beautiful winter we have had. Coming in to work each morning is a pleasure, looking out over the white fields and the frost-capped trees. Up close, if you get a chance to take a walk (well wrapped up) you get the spiders' webs dripping with mini icicles and that satisfying crunch of frozen leaves underfoot. We look forward to an interesting spring too, after a series of dull mild winters with little frosts we can't wait to see what wonders this cold snap will deliver in the coming months. Plants which have laid inactive waiting for a proper frost to shake them out of their dormancy will likely be decorating our verges in the coming months.

THINKING OF THE ENVIRONMENT

We are aiming to send as many of our Newsletters by email as we can in future, so that valuable resources are saved for you and us. This leaves more money to spend on our wildlife projects. We will still post to those without email of course. If we do not have your email address, or it has changed recently, please contact Sam or Lin, our Administrator at lin@gifttonature.org.uk (Our phone number is on page 5)

CONSERVATION PROJECT UPDATES

A summary on the progress of a few of our conservation sites and projects.

Parkhurst - Red Squirrels

The Red Squirrel keeps on going right through the winter, as they do not hibernate. During the autumn the squirrels put on a little bit of extra body weight, but not enough to allow them to hibernate. Even if the weather is really bad the squirrels still have to go out in search of food. Squirrels are most active first thing in the morning and this is the best time to spot them. Tree seeds see them through the winter months, such as pine seeds, beech nuts, acorns and hazel nuts. Red Squirrels are very resourceful, eating whatever is available such as fungi, flowers, berries and shoots.

Give Bees a Chance - the life of the Bumble Bee

Mid summer, between late July and mid September, sees both males and young queens hatch. The males leave the colony almost immediately, with no intention of returning, whilst the queens feed in the nest for a week, constantly eating to create a healthy fat reserve - these are the only Bumble Bees who will survive the winter, albeit in hibernation. With the onset of Autumn, the first sharp drop in temperature will kill the original queen along with the rest of the colony - the worker bees. The new queens will now be in hibernation until the weather warms sufficiently and will then establish new colonies the following spring. In partnership with the Isle of Wight Festival we are planning a number of projects through 2009 to investigate why bee numbers are declining and we will promote conservation projects to try and protect the future of our bees.

Ventnor Wall Lizards

The Wall Lizard will hibernate from November until March but on any sunny day they will emerge to bask on warm surfaces and catch a meal. Although there is little evidence, it is thought that Wall Lizards spend the winter quite deep underground, below the soil freezing point because they are not able to cope with very low temperatures. They may need to bury down to at least 24cm to be able to survive cold snaps like the one we had this winter. When they start to emerge from hibernation mid-spring look out for combats between males, fighting over the females.

Totland - One Horse Field

One Horse Field has a healthy population of Slow Worms, some of which have been translocated from nearby housing development land. We have put in a variety of Hibernacula for the Slow Worms. They should all be well into their hibernation period now, in the habitats we have provided or elsewhere buried underground. Some Slow Worms like warm compost heaps, so watch out when you are turning your compost pile. Look after your Slow Worms, they are the gardener's friend as they eat slugs and other invertebrates and are completely harmless to humans. Slow Worms hibernate from mid to late October to late February or early March depending on the weather. During hibernation the Slow Worm's metabolic rate slows down and a state of deep sleep is attained. Whilst hibernating they survive on stored reserves of fat that they have accumulated during the summer

Elm Tree Project

We have only 50 disease resistant Elms left this year. We import these trees from France where they have undergone over 20 years of testing to confirm resilience to the disease. These will grow to full maturity, unlike the native English Elm which succumbs to the disease when it reaches about 10-20 years old. The Elms are best planted in clumps, if you are interested in purchasing these trees please contact Paul Creer, we ask for a donation of £6 for a tree which goes towards buying more next year.

Tree Anoraks

Contributed by Rowan Adams of the Island 2000 Trust

In winter many trees are best spotted when their 'bones' become visible. One of the most distinctive is Oak, with its zigzagging branches. Some others have brightly coloured bark on young stems, and you can spot them a long way off. Many Willows also seem to start glowing as the new season starts in late winter. Which leads us on to the early flowerers, not just 'pussy willow' catkins, but yellow Hazel in woods and hedges, and the purple haze of Alders as their catkins swell - there are long woods beside the Medina between Newport and Blackwater. Then there are the flowers of wind-resistant blackthorn, a cool scatter of bluish-white in the hedges, even along the Military Road.

Green Mum

Contributed by Suzie Mundell of the Island 2000 Trust

It's a winter wonderland out there. Don't hibernate indoors this winter - we've had so many dry sunny days already and there is so much to see and do if you venture outside with the family. Remember, there is no such thing as the wrong weather, only the wrong clothes. Wear plenty of layers, wellies and waterproofs, take a flask of hot drink and some snacks and get the whole family outside.



We went tracking in the forest yesterday with my seven year old son's animal tracking kit. It's not hard to put a kit together; you'll need a few clear plastic pots with lids and clear plastic bags to put specimens in, plain stickers to label your finds, a notebook and pencil to record data and sketch your discoveries, a magnifying glass is useful too.

In just a short walk the children found plenty to interest them and fill their specimen pots including a pine cone nibbled by squirrels (and one that hadn't been nibbled for comparison), woodlice, a centipede, a variety of mosses and different shaped leaves. We rubbed pine needles in our fingers to see if we could smell Christmas and we peered long and hard at the ground whilst walking trying to spot animal tracks (only dog).

Winter can be a magical time outdoors with beautiful scrunchy frosty mornings, iced-over streams and puddles, plenty of wind for kite-flying, jumping in puddles and squelching in mud when it rains, and maybe even some snow if we wish really hard. So don't wait for spring to arrive, get outside and experience the wider world in winter.

The White Owls of the Night

Contributed by Paul Creer of ARC Environmental Consultants and the Badger Action Group

Barn Owls are largely nocturnal bird, although they can be seen in the day during the nesting season particularly when feeding chicks. Look out for them in the mornings and evenings when they are collecting extra food for their chicks between April and August.

Barn Owls can struggle to find food in extreme weather. They are intrinsically reliant on the abundance of small mammals like voles, particularly when chicks are in the nest, owls can suffer fatalities if small mammals suffer a population decline at nesting time.

Barn Owls can be seen at potentially every time of the year along roadsides, when driving at night, perched on fence posts. Driving from Whitwell to Ryde I saw a Badger padding along the road at Arreton, a Barn Owl on a post along the Downs Road and when I got out of my car at Ryde I heard a Little Owl calling. All in the space of 30 minutes. On my return journey at about 11.30 I spotted two Barn Owls. So drive slowly at night and encourage your passengers to keep their eyes peeled for wildlife along the side of the road.

(Photo credit: Flickr user "sugarmonster")



Mini-mammals

(Contributed by Tracy Underwood of Arc Environmental Consultants)

A general knowledge question for you: What is the smallest British mammal? Answer: *Sorex minutus*. None the wiser?? Well, in every day terms that's a Pygmy Shrew, one of 5 types of British shrew. Its body is only 40-60mm long, although add on to that a tail length of almost its body length again. Weighing in at 2.5 to 6 grams that's the equivalent - at most - of a 10p piece.

Pygmy Shrews are out and about both in the day and at night, presumably because when you need to eat the equivalent of 125% of your body weight in a day you haven't time to rest on your laurels! Spiders and insects make up a shrew's main diet, and in turn shrews are often on the menu for owls, foxes, and weasels. Cats are another predator, although they apparently never eat the body due to a foul taste produced from a shrew's scent glands. Sadly people's litter can prove fatal too - shrews can easily become trapped in discarded drink bottles and cans, as their natural inquisitiveness leads them to investigate.

You're most likely to hear a Pygmy Shrew before you spot it amongst the undergrowth or verges, shrieking and squabbling as it proclaims its territory. Unless it is the breeding season, Shrews are solitary creatures, and strongly defend their 'patch' which can be anything up to a range of 2000 square metres.

They produce 2 litters of up to 7 young in the summer months, and the young leave the nest after just 22 days. No time to waste, when your life span might only be a year!



Like some other shrews, the Pygmy Shrew has red-tipped teeth (though you'd be lucky to gain such a close-up view to see this!), due to iron deposits in the enamel which harden the teeth against the constant wear and tear. This protection is essential because, unlike a rodent, a shrew's teeth do not re-grow, and a shrew that is unable to eat is very soon a deceased shrew.

Pygmy shrews are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Trolls inspire the Nursery

Last year staff from West Wight Nursery were so taken with Gift to Nature's installations along the Troll Trail that they asked us to work with them on enhancements to their new nature garden. Island 2000's inventor-in-residence Daniel Roberts constructed some amazing large-scale musical instruments and a solar-powered hand washing basin, while the Gift to Nature team set about producing and installing some simple interpretation panels, enlarge-a-logs (our fantastic outdoor magnifier points) and hand-crafted seating. The nursery have been really pleased with the results, and the team here were pleased to watch the new interpretation being used as soon as it was installed.

Even High Sheriff Alan Titchmarsh couldn't resist being delighted by "the largest wooden xylophone I've ever seen - and played".

Watching Windfalls and Whiskered Bats.

Contributed by Lin Watterson (Gift to Nature Administrator)

We are very lucky to have a house which was built about 30 years ago in a very ancient orchard next to a traditional Island pan-tiled house. This is owned by a couple who love wild life as much as we do. Over the last 23 years we have sipped coffee or something stronger and counted the rare and dumpy little Whiskered Bats, which have safely roosted there. With other groups of Bat Watchers we have laughed at the Serotines leaving from a neighbouring thatch which we refer to as Wellington Bombers compared with the Spitfire like swoops and swirls of Whiskered Bats and Pipistrelles.

We have confounded the experts including Northants' Phil Richardson by having Long Eared Bats in a newish house. A mistake in cutting fascia boards allowed an entry hole and they warmed up by flying up and down inside our roof! He also came face to face with roosting Whiskered Bats, confirming our bat

detector results!

Well our backs and necks have put paid to bat watching so this year I have been watching windfalls in the orchard.

Does this sound like watching paint dry? Let me explain!

Early autumn apples and pears falling to the ground, immediately provide food for the obvious: birds and insects such as Wasps and Woodlice.



You have to get up early in Merstone to beat the woodlice to your soft fruit!

Less obvious are the varieties of butterflies which love a sweet rotting apple. Peacocks and Red Admirals, even in such a poor butterfly year as 2008, have been feeding themselves on the part fermented fruit. I am sure that they fly off in a drunken stupor sometimes!

The treat of the year however was in the terrible cold spot in January, when flocks of Fieldfares, pulled in by lack of food on farmland, began to arrive. Normally the apples not taken away and eaten would have been composted but there they still lay, on the coldest days I can remember. It looked like a bird peace treaty! We counted 45 Fieldfares, aggressive and watchful birds, which squabbled amongst themselves. So clever that my photo shows but ignored the 8 blackbirds 2 Mistle Thrushes, a song thrush and various Starlings. Maybe they didn't understand the local accent? It makes me think that next year I will leave even more of my garden produce for the wildlife, to sustain them through the winter. We already leave all the seed heads on shrubs and flowers until Easter. We will never win the prize for the best kept garden but tidiness probably does not save the lives of wild life.

(Photo: Misty Merstone Lin Watterson)

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