



Newsletter

25
years

Registered charity no 1076362



www.yacwag.org.uk

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

I thought I would put the forthcoming events on the front page where everyone can find them. This is also a reminder that our events are always on the Calendar on the YACWAG website. You will find it under News and can link it to your personal calendar via Google so you get alerts. Trevor's monthly bird news can be found on the website as a blog and there is a wealth of information about local wildlife and our reserves.

Saturday 2nd March 10-12 Preparing for hedge planting, Cobthorn Reserve. See p.2.

Saturday 9th March 10-3 Eco-Fair, Nailsea Methodist Church. YACWAG stall.

Sunday 10th March 10-12 Hedge planting, Cobthorn Reserve. See p.2.

Sunday 10th March 7.30 for 8pm General Knowledge Quiz at the Plough Inn, Congresbury - a fundraiser for YACWAG - lighthearted, £1 per person to enter. Organise a team or come and join with others to make one up on the night. Raffle prizes welcome.

Saturday 16th March 9.30-11.30 Spring Bird Walk on Cadbury Hill. Meet in the car park at the end of Henley Lane, Yatton Booking essential. birds@yacwag.org.uk.

Saturday 20th April 9-10.30 Spring Bird Song Walk at Cobthorn Reserve. A chance to learn the songs of resident birds proclaiming their nesting territories. Booking essential. birds@yacwag.org.uk.

Bank Holiday Monday 6th May 7-9am. Congresbury Moor including YACWAG's Reserve. Meet at the Mosaic Seat on the Strawberry Line (access from Chescombe Road Yatton). Finishing with optional post-walk breakfast in the Strawberry Line Cafe at Yatton Station. Booking essential birds@yacwag.org.uk.

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PHOTOS, ARTICLES AND ANYTHING ELSE OF INTEREST are always welcome for the YACWAG newsletter, and your feedback is appreciated. Please contact the editor at yacwag@gmail.com.

Trees for Climate Planted at Cobthorn

The weather was good for YACWAG's planting session at Cobthorn Paddocks in January. 42 standard trees were planted by 24 volunteers, ranging in age from 8 to 80.



Photos by Sue Lovesey and Sam Roberts.



The trees were grant aided by a Forest of Avon 'Trees for Climate' grant and are all native species selected for their likelihood of surviving climate change. They will help YACWAG create a landscape that is favourable for the horseshoe bats roosting nearby, with small fields grazed by cattle, tall hedges and scattered trees. A big thank you to all the volunteers who came to help and for the work of Andrew Hunt and his son Sam who constructed the tree guards and fencing for the project.

A new hedge is to be planted in March, restoring an old field boundary across the field and re-creating two smaller fields. The hedge plants are coming from the Woodland Trust free of charge and will comprise native species with blossom and fruit including hazel, elder, crab apple, dog rose, blackthorn, holly, hawthorn, goat willow and downy birch.

PLEASE HELP US PLANT HEDGING! all welcome

Saturday 2nd March 10-12 Cobthorn Reserve

Sunday 10th March 10-12 Cobthorn Reserve

for more information: contact@yacwag.org.uk



YACWAG's Third Window Wanderland

The wet weather in mid February was certainly not favourable to an evening walking trail, however the standard of displays this year was a great celebration of Nature as Our Neighbour.

Over 50 businesses, the railway station, schools, shops, individual houses and community organisations took part.

The event was grant aided by Yatton and Congresbury Parish Councils.

Photo right thanks to Julie Thompson



Above: The Chairperson's own celebration window.



Ziggy's Delicatessen

No room here for all the wonderful displays but a full photographic record will soon be available on the YACWAG website.

Thank you to everyone who took part!

YACWAGger Profile - Graham Lovesey

Now YACWAG has so many new members it seems the right time to re-introduce the regular spotlight on a particular YACWAG volunteer. This will help readers get to know the names of key people within YACWAG and find out a bit about what they do.

Graham Lovesey and his wife Sue have been involved with YACWAG since its beginning in 1999. Sue Lovesey's profile can be found in the January 2016 newsletter – back issues of newsletters can be found on the YACWAG website under 'News and Blog'.



Graham has recently taken on a new role as warden of Cobthorn Reserve, which is conveniently situated close to his home. He has been fully involved in the setting up of the reserve with all that entails and stepped naturally into the role after several years as warden of Congresbury Moor Reserve. Reserve wardens work with the Land Management sub-committee to ensure that YACWAG's land is secure and poses no risk to members, the public and neighbouring landowners. They regularly check and report on infrastructure issues as well as wildlife present.

Have you had a lifelong interest in nature?

No, not at all. Nature and wildlife was not part of my upbringing. We had a large garden when I was a child but the only wildlife I remember noticing were sparrows trying to avoid the cats. My parents weren't great gardeners and we didn't go out as a family looking at wildlife. My only memorable green space was the local sports pitches where I played football.

What brought about your interest?

When I was 17 I met Sue and her family background was very different. Her family were into gardening and I was made aware of nature every time I visited them; it was a new world to me. In 1976 Sue and I got married. We lived in Birmingham, Leeds, Bristol and then Backwell, getting closer to the countryside each time. Almost 38 years ago we came further from the town environment to Congresbury – very far from my roots, but we now have new ones.

When and how did you get involved with YACWAG?

I was on the fringe to start with as I was busy working and often away but Sue was involved with the fore-runner to YACWAG, the Wildlife Watch group, with our own children. By the time YACWAG began in 1999 my work had changed and with more spare time I gradually became involved in many different areas of YACWAG's work. In those old days the emphasis was mainly on clearance and bonfires and I used to go to those weekend work parties. Over recent years I have become more involved and learned new skills including hedge-laying, 'proper' tree planting, website management, as well as shepherding escaped sheep and Dexter cows. I go out with Trevor on bird counts and join other guided walks and talks. I enjoy the opportunity to expand my own skills and knowledge but it is also good in retirement to have the chance to use my own particular skills in the YACWAG environment. I have found it fascinating to understand how the planning system can mitigate for loss of wildlife habitat, what it takes to make a blank pasture suitable for Greater Horseshoe Bats and learn how to write planning

objectives effectively. I also organise general knowledge quizzes for YACWAG at the Plough Inn in Congresbury, picking up this longstanding fundraising activity after Covid forced a break.

What gives you hope for the future of YACWAG?

Younger members are coming on board. That is our future. We are now communicating better with schools and community organisations. I think newer members have found an organisation that is able to make a difference in their community. They have found that in a neighbourhood setting a small impact makes a huge difference. Making that difference and being involved as a volunteer affects people's well-being and outlook. I have seen several people who have joined YACWAG saying 'I know nothing' and over years developed into experts.

How do you see YACWAG evolving?

How the organisation grows really depends on its objectives. I think we will be getting more land because of the requirement for developers to mitigate/improve on the loss of habitat. Owning land requires more people to be involved and although a specialist is needed to work with machinery, other tasks still need volunteers.

I think it's important to hold Open Days and walks for new members and to hold work parties like the recent tree planting event so local people can get to know the land and meet other YACWAG members.

I also think YACWAG needs to blow its own trumpet more. We are all doing great work!

Graham Lovesey

Hedgehog Signs for Local Hotspots



Some of you will have seen the flimsy yellow signs warning drivers of hedgehogs in Yatton, three of which were put up by North Somerset Council last autumn on routes thought to be hotspots for hedgehogs. They quickly broke in strong winds. This action had followed the campaign of local resident Julia Wallis who has a great love for hedgehogs. Julia had raised money to pay for approved hedgehog signs but it turned out to be much more complicated than she expected.

The Department for Transport has now announced changes to the law which will help protect crossing routes for hedgehogs and other small animals on rural roads. There will now be a simpler process and this should help North Somerset Council put up more permanent signage to protect hedgehogs. Previously the council was obliged to apply individually to the DfT for every sign but the reduction in bureaucracy should make it more likely that the council will act for hedgehog safety.

Hedgehog numbers have dropped by up to 70 percent since 2000 and many untimely deaths are due to road traffic accidents. It is hoped that more signs in the right places could make motorists more aware and therefore more cautious, and so help local hedgehogs get across our busy roads.

Starting the Year with Local Schools

The new year was not a quiet one for those YACWAG volunteers who once again busied themselves supporting school activities in both villages.

In Yatton, resuming after the Covid hiatus, volunteers from YACWAG's Education and Events sub committee led the *Nature Detectives* module of the schools' Learning College. Pupils are presented with a range of activities from which they select one option to study every Tuesday morning for four weeks. We were delighted that eight infants and seven juniors chose ours!

In the first week Tony, Faith and Meriel led a session on Owls, part of which involved the children dissecting Barn Owl pellets collected from YACWAG nest boxes. This was a big hit all round, with one little boy telling his mum that his "day had been really good" and going into detail about finding baby shrew bones. Some children took pellets home and continued their investigations well into the evening!

The theme of Week 2 was Bats. Amanda' and Sue L shared bat facts followed by calculating the wingspans of several of our native bats and showing how bat detectors work. Youngsters made batty bopper headbands and listened to bat detector recordings whilst wearing them. Both infant and junior sessions ended with a quiz.

Week 3's topic was Birds with Trevor's information illustrated by Jon's beautiful photos. The making of pine cone bird feeders to take home was enjoyed, and not as messy as Sue L. had feared! The infants made a bird collage, enthusiastically gluing pictures of our local birds onto their usual habitat – garden, woodland, hedgerow or water and the juniors played Bird Bingo.

In week 4 Meriel and Amy found out what Nature as Our Neighbour meant to the children and shared information about local species. As Wildlife Window Wanderland was coming up during half-term the children were shown techniques for creating a window display to celebrate nature.

In Congresbury Trevor, Jon and Sue L took their binoculars and scopes into St Andrew's Primary School to continue the tradition of supporting youngsters and staff with the RSPB Big Schools' Birdwatch. Over the course of an hour 16 species were recorded which is a big decrease on the 26 recorded back in 2009, despite the planting of Jubilee Wood in 2012 to enhance the habitat of the school grounds.

More positive results however, came from the inspection and cleaning of the on-site nestboxes, with seven out of 10 containing nests from last spring and summer. We have no way of knowing how many blue tits fledged successfully from these nests but I hope it was a significant number.

I find interactions with children, such as those above, uplifting. Over the years I have noticed an increase both in youngsters' awareness of the natural world and their enthusiasm for it. This increased knowledge, alongside their innate curiosity, leads them into wanting to learn more; YACWAG aims to continue to facilitate this. If you would like to be involved in our educational work please get in touch via contact@yacwag.org.uk.

Sue Lovesey

Are Swifts the Canaries in Our Coal Mine?

Over half of the world's human population lives in urban areas, many people having little access to the natural environment in their daily lives. My guess is that modern urban lifestyles are partly to blame for the mental health crisis in the UK. Nearly a third of our adult population is on psycho-active drugs at any one time. Our own government says that spending time outdoors is good for our health and good for our state of mind. It does make me wonder what is so bad about our lives? Could it be, in part, because of our increasingly indoor lives?

The Natural Environment White Paper (2011) acknowledged that we all need a connection with nature and aspired '*for every child to be able to experience and learn in the natural environment.*' This is not so easy if you live in the middle of a large city but swifts have always frequented our towns and cities. They are as much associated with the urban as the rural environment and the sound of them screaming overhead is an icon of summer in towns and cities as well as villages. Edward Mayer, the founder of Swift Conservation says, 'If you have swifts in your town or village, the environment is OK; you are OK.'



Photo: Jon Thobroe

Swifts are really amazing. There are 45 million year-old fossil swifts exactly like today's birds. They are our longest-distance flying land bird. Except they don't land! They have very short legs and are unable to perch like other birds, so they spend years on the wing. It is three years from the time they hatch until they are ready to make their own nest and they will have been flying the whole time, including annual round trips from Africa to northern Europe with the rest of their colony. They are very strong and resilient: they can fly through snow, fog, sandstorms, driving rain and we don't really understand how they do it.

Sadly, I have to come to the part where I explain how vulnerable these fascinating birds are. Blue tits have about 16 chicks in a year. There is a high wastage. Swifts have just one or two chicks a year so to make up for that they live a long time – up to 21 years. This is one of the things that sets them apart from other birds of their size. It is also one of the things that makes their lives fragile. A poor breeding season soon takes its toll on the overall population size.

In Britain there has been a 60 percent decline in insects in the last 20 years, largely due to agricultural spraying. Our fields are often sterile, lacking in birds because there are no longer any insects for them to feed on. Swifts are declining at the rate of about five percent a year, mirroring that 60 percent decline in their insect food. They return to the nest sites where they were born and sometimes they find their little hole in the roof has been mended, or their nestbox has fallen off the wall, or the house itself has been demolished or re-roofed.

They fly around looking for alternatives but often there aren't any. Modern buildings don't suit them: roofs are sealed, renovations exclude wildlife. It is estimated that 20,000 former swift nest sites are lost each year. That is 20,000 swifts flying around looking for somewhere to lay their eggs.

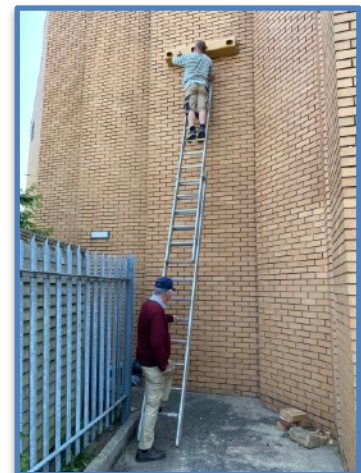
Swifts as Canaries

In my title I compared swifts to canaries in the coal mine. Canaries are small finches native to the Canary Islands. Because of their lovely song and the male's bright feathers the birds were first bred in captivity in the 17th century. At first only rich people could afford canaries but over time they became cheaper and popular among cottagers who liked to keep a song bird indoors to brighten up dark days. From the 18th to the 20th century canaries began to be used in mines as a 'sentinel species'. They were sensitive to carbon monoxide and other poisonous gases that miners themselves could not detect. When the gas built up in canaries' bodies they would fall off the perch unconscious and could be revived in a special cage designed for the purpose. After they had been poisoned and revived three times they were 'retired'. Miners became fond of canaries being underground; they would whistle to the birds and encourage them to sing. Deep underground in the dark, miners enjoyed that contact with nature for their well-being. When the canaries stopped singing they hot-footed it out of the mine. Canaries were still in use until 1986 when an electronic device was invented to take their place.

The image of canaries in a coal mine has been frequently used as a symbol of all not being well with the environment and it does provide a warning to us with regard to swifts. These amazing summer visitors are metaphorically falling off their perches. In their case, they are literally dropping out of the sky. Their decline is a warning to us that we are breathing an invisible poison.

What Are We Doing to Help?

More and more local swift groups are springing up as awareness grows about the steep decline in swifts, and the actions that communities can take to help the birds. We are keen to learn together with other local groups in North Somerset, and Meriel Harrison on behalf of YACWAG recently gave a presentation about our own Swift Project at a packed event organised by Clevedon Swifts. Attendees were very keen to help get more nest boxes and swift bricks into local buildings, and to monitor swift numbers in the summer months. We also plan to work together with other local groups to encourage North Somerset Council to develop and adopt a model planning condition so that provision would need to be made for swifts in all new developments. To add a 'swift brick' at the construction stage is much cheaper, long-lasting and more effective than adding boxes to a house that already exists.



Three-chambered swift box being put on Horsecastle Chapel, Yatton, spring 2023.

Swifts are our canaries in the coal mine. We should heed their decline, listen to their fading screams and take appropriate action: more boxes, more swift bricks; less insecticide and less silence about the environment we care about. If you would like to help with YACWAG's Swift Project in any way in the coming year, please get in touch via swifts@yacwag.org.uk.

Congresbury Station Work Party Success



Photos by Steve Rea

Volunteers waded into the reedbed this winter next to the Congresbury Station site on the Strawberry Line. Thanks to all the enthusiastic volunteers who helped, the project has not just cleared invasive shrubs, exposed the station platforms and put up bird boxes, it has moved on to support aquatic life in the overgrown reedbed. Some areas of open water have been restored and the bank cut to allow more light to get in and other plants to flourish. This will help recreate a mosaic of different habitats for wildlife. YACWAG member Steve Rea has co-ordinated and led the project for the last two winters.

If you would like to help Steve in any way, or could run a similar project elsewhere in the parishes, please let us know on congresburystation@outlook.com. YACWAG has the tools and can arrange training for anyone who would like to become a work party leader.

Would You Like to Get More Involved?

YACWAG volunteers can visit the reserves, learn more about wildlife and learn from each other. Sometimes people hang back because they don't like to put themselves forward, or they think other people know more or can do something better because they have more experience. If you would like to get more involved, don't hang back! There is a place for you in the team and you will be made very welcome. We need people to take on a regular role as well as people who can do a small task as a one-off, indoors or out. The more people involved the more we can achieve and the better we can do things.



If you have management or financial skills you may be interested in becoming a Trustee and helping to steer the charity during a critical period of its life. Please email contact@yacwag.org.uk.