



Newsletter

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www.yacwag.org.uk

YACWAG Buys Another Field for Nature!

YACWAG's last survey of members showed how important it is for us to acquire land to manage as nature reserves. Sixty-nine percent of respondents said it was their top priority. We are therefore proud and pleased to announce our purchase of a three acre field in Congresbury which adjoins our Cobthorn Reserve. Like the original field given to us by Strongvox through the planning process, the three acres are within Zone A of the North Somerset and Mendips Bat Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

Members will be able to visit the field after the business at our 23rd AGM to be held on 28th June at 7.30pm at Middlecombe Nursery, Wrington Road, Congresbury.

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PLEASE SEND YOUR
PHOTOS, ARTICLES
AND INFORMATION
for the next newsletter to
contact@yacwag.org.uk



Tony Moulin (right) receives the key to the access gate from former owner Chris Hiles

Why Extend Cobthorn Reserve?

Cobthorn Reserve, as most members will know, was gifted to YACWAG through the planning process. The intention was to compensate the bats for taking away part of their foraging area. Greater Horseshoe bats are rare in Europe and England is a stronghold of the European population. Evidence is also coming in that they may be in decline so YACWAG wants to work hard to provide enough food for the young that are raised nearby in one of only a dozen maternity roosts in the UK.



Dung beetle



Cockchafer



Smoky wainscot moth

One of the most important foodstuffs of the Greater Horseshoe bat is dung beetles. That is why it is so important for the land to be grazed with cattle and sheep that are not treated with insecticides (worming medicine) in an inappropriate or routine way. There are many species of dung beetle and the different kinds of livestock produce a variety of beetles to give the bats different sizes and types of beetle spread out over the season.

Other important foods are crane flies (daddy-long-legs) and cockchafers (also known as May bugs), both of whom have larvae that feed underground on the roots of plants. Night-flying moths are also important food. They have no chewing mouth-parts themselves and feed like butterflies by sucking up nectar from flowers through a tube-like tongue. YACWAG is looking to provide a range of flowering plants at Cobthorn Reserve to feed moths and other insects that bats like to eat.

Apart from the hedgerows, which include honeysuckle, a climber especially attractive to moths, it is difficult to create a flowery field and have year-round grazing. Sheep, in particular, are very fond of flowers! We are learning how many animals Cobthorn can sustain. The developers put in hedges and fences to divide the field into three and make it easier to graze. Our graziers are moving the animals round from one compartment to another, the aim being to leave one of the sections to flower and rest during the winter. The bats don't benefit from the overwintering insects in the long grass of course because they are hibernating, but the birds do - the ungrazed section of the field had many meadow pipits feeding on them last winter, for example.

It is a very difficult balancing act: grazing enough but not too much, letting plants set seed, leaving some long grass over the winter, providing cover and shelter, and it is very hard to achieve with three compartments in about five acres. The new adjacent extension will give the graziers more options.

On old Ordnance Survey maps which you can view at <https://www.kypwest.org.uk>, it is clear that until the 1960s the new field was divided into two, and going further back it was three small paddocks. These are generically known on the deeds as Cobthorn Paddocks, and so we will continue with that name. It is hoped to plant a dividing hedge in the autumn to return the field to its former configuration. Greater Horseshoe bats love hedges and trees and research shows they need a feature in their flight path at least every 39 metres, not liking to cross big open spaces, so it is hoped that they will approve of the changes.

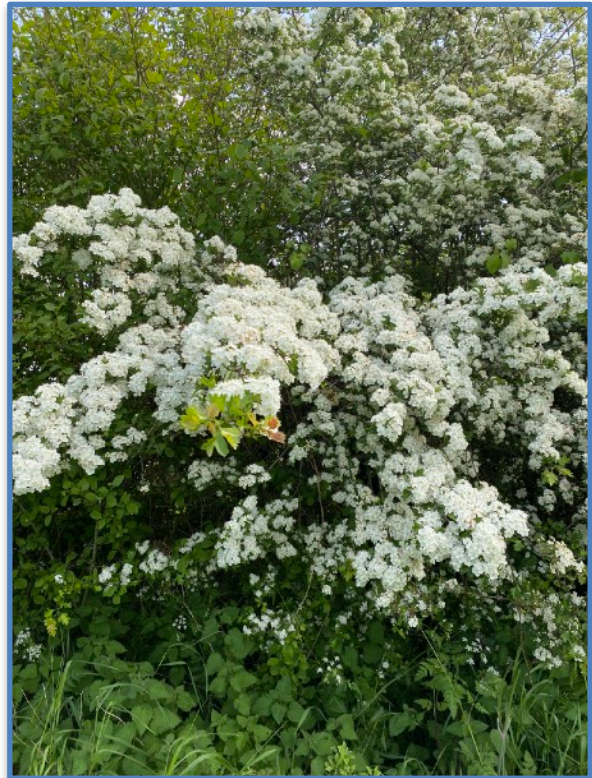
Cobthorn Paddocks' Heavenly Hedges

The first thing I noticed when I visited the newly acquired field was the hedges. I am a bit of a hedgerow enthusiast and the new field is exciting because none of YACWAG's other fields have old hedges. Either they have scraps of hawthorn and elder which have planted themselves in the past 50 years, or others have young mixed native hedging that YACWAG has planted to increase diversity.

The name Cobthorn itself makes me think. Perhaps it is an old name. Was the field renowned for its impressive cobs (hazel nuts) and thorns? Both plants are impressive!



Hazel in hedgerow with catkins in March



Hawthorn blossom in April

Hedges can be very old. In North Wootton in Somerset there is a hedge which was described as 'old hedge' in 816. The Romans planted hedges around their boundaries but also wrote about the wonders of hedge-laying practised in Britain to create a barrier as sound as a wall for defensive purposes. By the Middle Ages hedges were growing all over the managed countryside. They either sprang up of their own accord, planted by birds, or they were deliberately planted. The Enclosure Acts added more in the 18th and 19th centuries. There is also a third way for hedges to have been created and I immediately thought of Oliver Rackham's wonderful book '*The History of the Countryside*' when I first saw small-leaved lime trees growing in the Cobthorn hedgerow.

Small-leaved limes are not trees that naturally make hedging, he explained, and where they occur they are vestiges of the 'wildwood' - 'ghost hedges' made by leaving trees on the edge of newly cleared areas ('field' has the same root as 'felled'). Kings Wood above Wrington Road on the hill has plenty of small leaved lime but it does not spread by seed and hasn't done so since the last Ice Age. The diversity and combination of species, with undergrowth of woodland species like bluebell and dogs mercury also point to the interesting fact that the hedges at Cobthorn Paddocks are therefore centuries old.

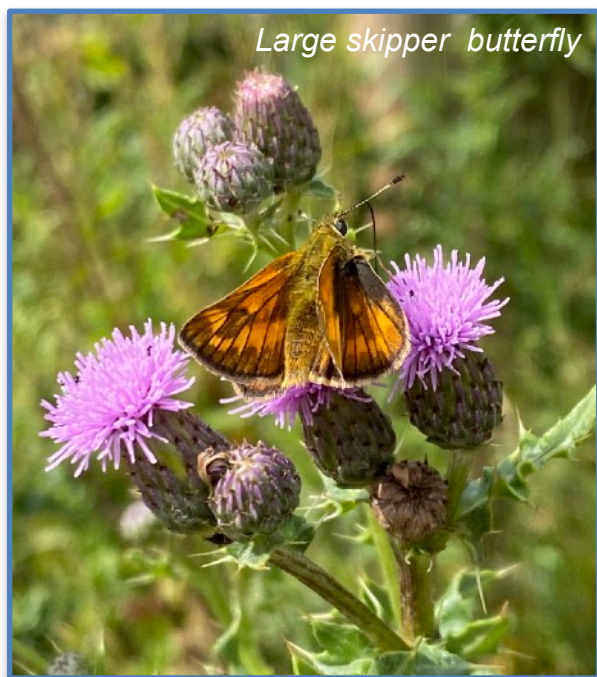
Faith Moulin

How Cobthorn Paddocks Were Bought

YACWAG's ability to purchase Cobthorn Paddocks and extend our Cobthorn Reserve is entirely thanks to the generosity of a Yatton resident who left YACWAG a quarter of her estate in her will. Her name was Irmgard Owen and she knew of YACWAG's work through the purchase of Kenn Moor Reserve close to her house, and because she liked to walk her West Highland White terrier along the Strawberry Line and appreciated that barn owls could be seen hunting nearby.

YACWAG is very grateful to Mrs Owen for her legacy which will help safeguard another local space for nature for ever.

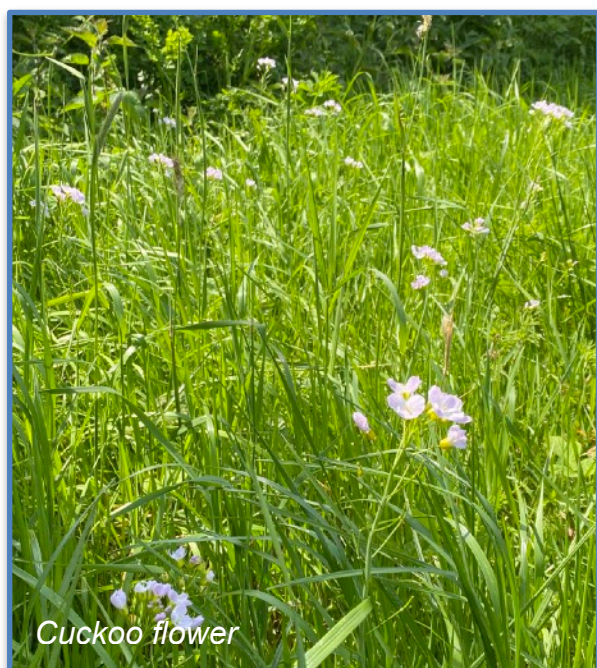
Members can visit the new field after the YACWAG AGM on 28th June. Here is a small selection to whet your appetite.



Large skipper butterfly



Thick-legged flower beetle on field bindweed



Cuckoo flower



Ringlet butterfly

Rewilding – Knepp, food for thought

Sue Lovesey writes about her trip to the Knepp estate, the inspirational birthplace of ‘rewilding’.

How far would you go to hear nightingales and a cuckoo, to see nesting storks, fallow deer, and a Tamworth pig all roaming freely? Such abundant biodiversity is, of course, not local and Graham and I travelled in excess of 130 miles to the Knepp Estate in West Sussex, having been gifted a three-hour guided walk there. We experienced all this whilst immersed in unforgettable birdsong, one morning in early May.

Our informative and personable guide, Adam, told us that the land at Knepp, 3,500 acres, had once been intensively farmed and when Charlie Burrell inherited the Estate in 1983 he continued the farming tradition. However, the heavy Low Weald clay means the soil sets rock hard in summer and resembles Glastonbury mud in winter. He was unable to compete with larger farms on better soils and the financial losses mounted. So, in 2000, the dairy herds and agricultural machinery were sold and a radical approach to land use began to take shape, putting nature in the driving seat. This idea is now more generally known as “rewilding.”

The term “rewilding” indicates the return of an area of land and its associated ecosystem to what it once was, but this would be impossible to achieve. Today at Knepp extinct aurochs and tarpan have been substituted with 100 head of English Longhorn cattle and a herd of Exmoor ponies, the wild boar with five Tamworth pigs. Alongside three species of deer (roe, fallow and red) these large mammals graze and browse, trample and root, snap branches and debark trees. They also spread nutrients and disperse seeds thus giving rise to a mosaic of habitats. Numbers are controlled by culling without which the area would become entirely grassland.

In just five years the southern block of 1,000 acres at Knepp has evolved into a dynamic wood pasture landscape where islands of thorny scrub sit in grazed rough pasture. Hawthorn and blackthorn, natural deer guards, allow saplings to get going and mature into larger trees; as medieval foresters said, “the thorn is the mother of the oak.” Over time, trees shade out the scrub and the cycle begins again.

The huge debt has now been cleared and today the Knepp Estate is a profitable concern providing fifty full-time posts as well as employment opportunities for freelance guides and volunteers. This profitability has been achieved largely through tourism (a range of on-site accommodation and guided tours) and the sale of its high-quality organic beef, venison and pork. A small market garden supplies veg boxes locally.

Research features highly at Knepp with annual surveys of wildlife and vegetation cover to monitor change. An experimental walled garden looks at how our gardens might be rewilded; how best can they function as a dynamic ecosystem providing a mosaic of habitats giving opportunities for insects, birds and other wildlife? A variety of soil structures in the kitchen garden allows examination of sustainable food production and the impact of climate change on edible and useful plants.



White Stork on its nest at Knepp, one of Sue’s highlights



Dynamic wood pasture at Knepp

The Knepp Wildland Foundation takes the rewilding message of nature recovery into the wider community. By bringing farmers, land managers and conservation partners together it is facilitating the creation of wildlife corridors across Sussex and the restoration of stretches of the river Adur to a more natural state.

At the end of a memorable morning Graham and I were left with many questions: Is the Knepp model the way forward regarding land management, where areas unsuitable for intensive food production are left for nature to take the lead? Biodiversity has increased massively at Knepp with many species across the animal kingdom thriving in the pesticide and herbicide free environment, but actual food production is low. Should those areas more suited to food production be those that are more intensively farmed? Or perhaps the use to which land is put should be determined by the number of people who benefit; shooting estates and golf courses take up large areas but benefit few, whereas intensive agriculture feeds many, albeit often to the detriment of the natural world. Maybe we should eat less meat thus freeing up the many thousands of acres that provide food only for livestock? It is a complex situation to which there is no easy answer but, surely somehow, conserving species for the future should be in the mix because all species - including our own - depend upon it.

Sue Lovesey

From the jacket of Isabella Tree's amazing book, *Wilding*, published in 2018:
'*The story of rewilding Knepp challenges conventional ideas about our past and present landscape and points the way to a wilder, richer future - a countryside that benefits farming, nature and us.*'

North Somerset libraries have many copies of *Wilding* available which can be reserved, or some YACWAG members have copies they would be happy to lend. Please ask through contact@yacwag.org.uk in the first instance.

Hooray! Bat Work is Back!

The enthusiastic volunteers who made up YACWAG's bat group have been unable to meet, firstly due to restrictions brought in during the pandemic, and more recently due to the vacancy for a co-ordinator.

It is very exciting to be able to share the news that Amanda Boyd has volunteered to arrange a meet-up this summer for all members with an interest in bats. The aim of the meeting will be to discuss ideas and activities, find out when people are available and what training might be needed. The locations of YACWAG bat boxes also need to be re-evaluated, and the group might need to consider new equipment for surveying and recording. A key purpose of the group will be education, and Amanda would like to get the wider public closer to nature through garden surveys and bat walks.

In the first instance Amanda would love to hear from any member, experienced or not, who would like to be part of the group helping to shape YACWAG's future bat work. Please email her on bats@yacwag.org.uk.



May Bank Holiday Monday Birdsong Walk

A dull but thankfully calm morning greeted 25 attendees - the event has never been so popular. The walk is Mark Savage's local patch so he led the group, looking and listening. A very strident Song Thrush was singing by the start point along with Blackcap and Chiffchaff.



Male blackcap singing
Photo: Emily Lomas

The walk south along the Strawberry Line section from the Chescombe Road entrance produced Reed Warblers, Cetti's Warblers and a Sedge Warbler and to break the warbler domination a nice Reed Bunting. We proceeded along Moor Drove by YACWAG's Congresbury Moor Reserve where first Common Whitethroat obliged followed by a Lesser Whitethroat, the latter recently arrived from its wintering area in East Africa.

A Heron flew over probably feeding its young at the Cleeve heronry then one of our resident Kestrels put in an appearance. Good views of another Sedge Warbler and an unusually showy Reed Warbler were had before most of the group repaired to the the Strawberry Line Cafe for a very welcome breakfast.

Trevor Riddle



Trevor's Bird Blog is available on the YACWAG website at the beginning of each month. Please submit your sightings or enquiries about birds to birds@yacwag.org.uk

Swift Project Update

Thanks to the much appreciated ladder-work volunteered by Mark Loader and Brian Wall, YACWAG put up twenty swift boxes which had been handmade by Nailsea Shedders. The boxes have gone to hosts who live close to existing nesting swifts in Yatton, Claverham and Congresbury. Some members have also been prompted to put up their own boxes.

As swifts nest in the roof of a house close to Horsecastle Chapel, YACWAG asked if we could provide a box on the chapel wall. Thanks to the success of Rowan Peters' fundraising at Nailsea School, we were able to buy a four-berth box in fibreglass and resin from Impeckable, a British company making a range of long-lasting boxes. This box is guaranteed for 50 years! Hopefully some of this year's young swifts will like the look of it for next year.

The picture on the right shows Mark fixing the box at the chapel on 10th June and below the Swift Migration game played by young and old at Yatton Schools Carnival and Congresbury Village Fete. Children also made Swift bopper headbands and adults spent time reading the information on a very factual display.

Raising awareness about the plight of swifts has been a key part of the project and there is so much to learn! Those with more experience pointed out the mistake in the last YACWAG newsletter, which wrongly suggested that Swifts are hirundines like Swallows and Martins. We apologise for the error, but we are all learning together and that is one of the joys and strengths of YACWAG.

Swifts are unique; they are mysterious birds - there are still quite a lot of facts that are unknown about their lifestyle. Research is ongoing into the catastrophic decline in numbers, particularly in the UK, but the use of pesticides is thought to be a cause of decline in their insect food, as it is for other insectivorous birds and bats. One way you can help is to ask your local councils to stop using weedkiller and to press for the inclusion of swift bricks in new buildings. We are fortunate that in some of the new developments in our villages swift bricks have been included - although it remains to be seen whether they are being used. Please record local swifts on swiftmapper.org.uk.



Swifts rest in seven countries on their 6500 mile journey to and from the UK. Swift beanbags did their best to make all the right landings on their journeys.

Don't Miss YACWAG's 23rd AGM

at Middlecombe Nursery, Wrington Road, Congresbury on Wednesday 28th June
Cuppa Cafe open from 7pm. Business starts at 7.30pm



The business will be followed by a walk to see Cobthorn Paddocks in midsummer glory

Those intending to come on the walk please note that the ground may be uneven; there is long grass and there may be biting insects and stinging nettles.

Spring Birdsong Walk, Cobthorn Reserve, Saturday 15th April 2023.

This walk was a new venture for YACWAG and it was blessed with a glorious sunny morning. People started to arrive and just kept coming until there were 20 of us, a very encouraging turnout.

Trevor Riddle introduced Peter Grainger who was co leading with Graham and Sue Lovesey. Graham then explained the somewhat complex acquisition of Cobthorn Reserve, which started with the Furnace Way housing planning application in 2014, and resulted in YACWAG ownership only a year ago. He went on to say that the main raison d'être of the Reserve was to provide mitigation for the nearby roosts of Greater Horseshoe Bats, whose habitat loss was caused by the housing development. However, the existing hedges and in time the newly planted hedges should also provide a good home for hedgerow birds. Diversity has been further extended by the construction of three hibernacula for the benefit of Slow worms.

The visitors were able to see a couple of Dexter cows which graze the fields to produce dung and encourage dung beetles for the benefit of the bats, as well as the recently planted trees in their stock proof enclosures. This is an exciting project for YACWAG.



Greenfinch - photo by Jon Thobroe

We were serenaded by Greenfinches and Wrens during much of our walk and the resident male Kestrel posed obligingly on the electricity pole - he is used to passing humans and was unfazed by 20 people staring at him. A Green Woodpecker called distantly and a Blackbird serenaded us. Chiffchaffs were calling and then a Willow Warbler started to sing somewhat hesitantly, he had probably only arrived overnight from his long journey from south of the Sahara.

The walk continued along public footpaths, visiting very different habitats that local residents may not even be aware of. A male Sparrowhawk shot across the field adjacent to the Millennium Green, only just above the grass, then I heard a strange song that I couldn't identify. It took a couple of minutes to recall the old advice propounded by Bill Oddie many years ago - 'if you can't recognise the song it's probably a Great Tit'.

Bill was right: the Great Tit started to sing 'properly'. Great Tits mimic other bird's songs but I couldn't say what it was mimicking! A couple more Chiffchaffs rounded off a very pleasant walk.

Graham Lovesey and Trevor Riddle

Midsummer Walks at Kingston Seymour

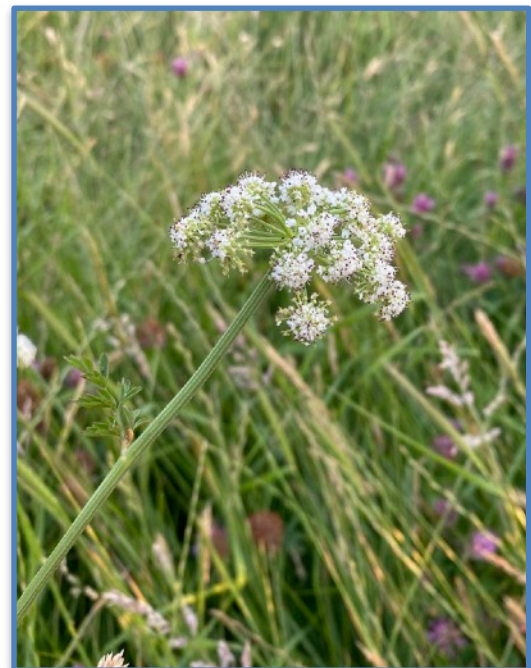
Roland and Franky Griffin led two evening walks in June to see their hay meadows and tree plantation. Roland owns land near the motorway as well as fields going towards Phipps Bridge. Twenty years ago he created a plantation, mainly of ash as he wanted to have more wood he could use on the farm, but also of other species. The plantation now includes an avenue of lime trees which were a gift to Roland for a special birthday. The damp alluvial clay suits the trees very well. National Grid have also added a further 6000 trees on Roland's land, part of their mitigation work for the new Hinkley Point nuclear power station.

Roland's hay fields are especially diverse in grasses. He told us he is noticing a change every year since fertiliser use has been reduced. Wild flowers have begun to compete with the grass and the patches of native red clover are increasing. In the photo above on the right Roland is showing the walkers red clover and explaining that, although some Americans claim red clover came from their agricultural improvement schemes, in fact red clover is a native British plant that has 'always' been in the fields. The Americans just bred it to be bigger.

At Roland's feet can be seen an umbellifer that was first noticed in YACWAG's New Croft around four years ago. As Roland has discovered on his land, so YACWAG has discovered in its own fields: 'new' plants trickle in when management is more sympathetic to nature. This umbellifer with a long-winded name grows in damp meadows and other moist grassy places, especially on clay. It is *Oenanthe pimpinelloides* aka Corky-fruited Water-Dropwort.

Tucked away in the corner of the fields are two barn owl boxes, which Trevor monitors under licence. Roland has been successful in previous years in supporting breeding owls as well as a good range of song birds.

YACWAG is very grateful to Roland and Franky for their ongoing hospitality which is always a treat for members. It is inspiring to visit farmland that welcomes nature and where abundant wildlife can be seen. It was especially encouraging to see so many insects - even if they were mainly mosquitoes glad to be visited by so many people with exposed skin! Sitting on a balmy evening in Roland's garden with a farmhouse supper and a glass of home-made cider really brought home what a wonderful area we live in and what lovely people YACWAG members are.



Please Can You Spare One Hour a Week?

YACWAG has a pressing need for support with membership. Would you like to get behind the scenes and help YACWAG be more effective? Are you organised and methodical, tech-savvy (without being an expert) ? Could you spare an hour a week?

Here's the Deal:

YACWAG's Treasurer and Secretary have been operating a manual membership system for the last year. At present there are only about 200 members but we would love to be in a position to expand and recruit more.

If someone comes on board to help with membership it would take perhaps an hour a week (at any time to suit you) to pick up new members who have joined via the website plus any membership queries, send out prepared standard welcome emails, renewal reminders, etc until we are able to switch to an automated digital system like membermojo, which you would help get in place. There is no need to handle cash - membership payments are made using Paypal through the YACWAG website, or by direct bank transfer.

YACWAG can offer help, support and guidance to anyone volunteering to take on the role of Membership Secretary. We would also meet any expenses you might incur. It's a great way of getting to know people and you would be at the heart of our membership and part of a friendly committed team, having the satisfaction of knowing that you are making a valuable contribution. Ultimately your work would improve matters for local wildlife and the well-being of the community, because we are wanting to reach everyone with the message that 'Nature Is Our Neighbour'.

Can you help?

If you would like an initial chat, please get in touch through contact@yacwag.org.uk.

Would You Like to Try Moth Trapping?

Moth trapping in your own garden can bring you very close to some beautiful creatures you never knew were there and is great fun. It uses a strong light to attract moths which can then be identified, recorded and released unharmed.

YACWAG has a few simple moth traps which can be borrowed by members to have a go in their own gardens. We can also lend you an identification book to help work out which species you have found. YACWAG has several members with the expertise to help you confirm any tricky identification too.

If you would like to borrow a moth trap for a weekend or longer this summer please get in touch in the first instance via contact@yacwag.org.uk. The traps come with full instructions and we have a simple instructional video made by YACWAG Chair Tony Moulin, who has been moth-trapping for over 30 years. Why not give it a try?

