



Newsletter

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2022 - A Bumper Year for Barn Owls



*One of our home-bred barn owl chicks reared in 2022 on YACWAG land.
This year's owlets bring our total to date up to over 100!
Thanks to YACWAG member Jon Thobroe for the lovely photo.*

Over 100 Barn Owls in 18 Years!

My wife and I moved to Yatton in 1981 and it took me 22 years to see a Barn Owl in the parish. This was because there was little suitable habitat, few nesting sites and hence no Barn Owls.

YACWAG was founded in 1999 and its first land acquisition on Congresbury Moor was soon followed by Barn Owl boxes on poles being erected. The grass was allowed to grow and Kestrels arrived and nested in one of the boxes in 2002. Then in winter 2003/04 the late Mike Wallington spotted a (our first?) Barn Owl. A pair nested in one of the boxes in 2004 and produced four Owlets. Since then a further 83 have fledged from boxes on our Reserves. This year we had three breeding pairs on our reserves and three more owlets have fledged from a YACWAG box on private land at Wemberham. There was also breeding success with five young in one of the boxes on our member Roland Griffin's land at Kingston Seymour. These owlets took Roland's total to 12 so overall 'our' owlets have just passed the century with a score of 102.

Once the habitat and the nesting boxes are in place the other requirement is field voles and lots of them. Analysis of pellets that are cast by our owls has revealed that over 90 percent of their prey items are short-tailed field voles. Some years there are lots of voles and in other years hardly any. This boom and bust in the population isn't really understood although weather conditions are likely to be a major factor. Theories that their numbers are cyclic (like Lemmings) haven't been borne out in practice. Anyway lots of voles equals lots of nesting attempts whereas years with few voles means that nesting is abandoned for the season.

Barn Owls aren't very long lived birds, even after discounting juvenile mortality most Barn Owls' life span only averages about three years. They are accident prone: I was recently told of a captive Barn Owl that lived to 28!

This year was a good year with two nests on Congresbury Moor, one at Stowey and the aforementioned nests at Wemberham and Kingston Seymour. The pair at Stowey lost at least three, perhaps four of their five young, perhaps one of the breeding pair died or maybe there wasn't sufficient prey in their territory.

We are now looking to replace some of our boxes with durable recycled plastic ones and if possible move them into the shade of nearby hedges. At least one Owlet fell out of the box and had to be rescued (I said that they were accident prone) so we are also looking at ensuring that the entrance hole is half way up the box and providing a big ledge with sides for safe exercise.

Our three Owl watches were well attended by members but the young owls are dispersing now so I anticipate that the adults will soon return to their nocturnal lifestyle.



*Barn Owl, Congresbury Moor
Photo: Mark Savage*



Photo shows a new box being erected in Nortons in 2012. Many of our boxes have been erected in open fields as there are just not enough mature trees on our land in which to put them. These pole boxes are very exposed and vulnerable to the weather. This was not such a problem until this summer when the intense heat inside the boxes may have driven the young owls to look for fresh air outside the box before they were ready to leave the nest. We have been advised to try to move boxes into trees or into more sheltered locations.

Trevor Riddle

Don't miss Trevor's monthly bird blog on www.yacwag.org.uk.

**Volunteering Opportunities also available
If you would like to help with bird box maintenance or bird
surveys please get in touch via birds@yacwag.org.uk.**

 Trevor is always pleased to hear of your bird sightings.



Beautiful Badgers

Badgers are mainly active at night so to most of us they are mysterious and seldom seen. We more often see the evidence they leave behind - their latrines (messy poo pits), their setts (underground burrows) and distinctive footprints in the mud. In woodlands with setts their well-beaten paths are clearly visible.

The main food of badgers is the earthworm, although they eat any other invertebrates that come their way. This year in many parts of Yatton grass verges were ripped up by the local badgers in search of worms and leather-jackets (the larvae of crane flies). They also eat fruit in the autumn and some mammals, particularly young rabbits. Badgers are also partial to wasp and bee nests which they dig out. Near the sett badgers use trees with rough bark (especially elder) to sharpen and clean their claws. Elder trees and nettles often grow near setts because of the enriched soil. A scratching tree can be recognised by parallel scratch marks about 8 mm apart.

In autumn badgers get ready for the winter by laying down a lot of fat under their skin. They can gain up to 60 percent in weight. They don't hibernate but from about mid December until mid February they are not so active and live mainly off their fat.

Badgers and tuberculosis

In 1971 it was discovered that a dead badger in Gloucestershire was infected with the bacteria that cause bovine tuberculosis (bTB). The disease spreads rapidly among badgers and it is estimated that up to 20 percent of badgers may have tuberculosis at any one time. Infected cattle also spread bTB from animal to animal. Despite attempts to eliminate bTB in cows by persecuting badgers, it has persisted and is particularly prevalent in the south-west.. From 1975-1982 badger setts were gassed in an attempt to stamp out bovine TB but it proved ineffective as well as inhumane.

A ten-year trial in the south-west led to badger culling in licensed areas outside the main badger breeding season as part of the UK Government's strategy for controlling bTB in the 'high-risk area' in England. In March 2022 a report was published in Vet Record which gave detailed analysis based on DEFRA data using a variety of statistical methodologies. The report concluded that there was no suggestion that badger culling affected herd bTB incidence or prevalence over the study period (2010-2020). In nine out of ten counties bTB incidence peaked and began to fall before badger culling started. By the end of 2020 badger culling had resulted in the deaths of approximately 140,000 badgers across England, 129,000 of them within the so-called high risk area.

Badgering Badgers

YACWAG members are involved in work to protect badgers in our area from authorised killing. They have written this article to help us understand what is happening in the countryside around Yatton and Congresbury.

What does September mean to you? Children back to school after the long summer holiday; apples ripe for the picking; nights starting to draw in more noticeably?

For my small group, September heralds the restart of the six-week long Badger Cull. Since 2013, the government has licensed 'shooters' to kill the nation's badgers, and at the last count (2021-22), a staggering 177,000 badgers have been slaughtered in a misguided attempt to prevent the spread of bovine Tuberculosis bacterium (bTB, or *M. bovis*) in cattle. Badgers, like many other mammals, (including humans) can carry, transmit and become ill if in contact with *M. bovis* as it is similar to human TB and can cross species boundaries. While spending millions in tax payers' money to fund the cull, the government has not been so fast out of the starting blocks in producing an accurate test for *M. bovis*, nor to produce an effective vaccine against it.

I, like many other concerned citizens, have been opposed to the cull of badgers since 2013 when it was first rolled out as a four year 'trial' in two zones: in West Somerset and Gloucestershire. People travelled across the country that year to protect those badgers, guarding access to fields from dusk till dawn, and driving around the countryside looking for the shooters paid to kill them.

After only two years, the government began to increase the size of the cull area and there are now 61 active culling zones across the country. In 2020 the shooting came to North Somerset for the first time, including to our own doorstep: Kingston Seymour, Kenn Moor, Claverham Moor, Nailsea Moor, Backwell, Tickenham, Long Ashton and many other places in the 'Avon' area. Surprisingly, some of these zones are areas where badger vaccination programmes had already been running for a few years.

Shooters are in breach of their licences if they do not vacate an area where people are present. So during September and October, badger patrollers (sometimes in a vehicle, often on foot) spend our evenings out and about, showing shooters and their spotters that we're around and obliging them to move on. Some patrollers like to sit in their vehicle by the entrance to a track, drove or footpath where badgers are known to feed. Others, including the high-viz wearing Wounded Badger Patrol, walk roads and footpaths, carrying bright torches.

The more pairs of people we have located across the area, the more foraging badgers we can protect.

Seeing shooters having to vacate an area where we know badgers will be out snuffling through hedgerows and fields is a satisfying experience. But patrolling is also a fine way to spend these early autumn nights, using thermal imagers to watch owls, hares, foxes, deer, bats and of course badgers, while walking under the moonlight, listening to the sounds of nature. We will never know how many times a shooter will have been deterred by our presence, but we do know that we are doing all we can to help our badgers survive.

Badgers have had a hard time recently with housing estates being built on their homes, being evicted, and having to create new setts in an ever-shrinking habitat. Being highly territorial, this leads to fights which cause injury and can be fatal. The succession of long, hot, dry weather has had a disastrous effect on all our wildlife, including badgers, whose main diet is invertebrates that live in the soil. Dry weather makes these creatures recede deeper and deeper into the earth, while the top soil sets hard like rock. This makes digging for food extremely difficult, even for the powerful badger.

The constant stress of food shortage, inclement weather, sett disruption and persecution causes greater susceptibility to disease, just as it does to us when we are stressed. We need to look after our badgers so that they stand some chance of survival in the coming climate crisis.



A badger cull took place in the South West during a 10-year trial from 1997-2007. It was led by Professor John Krebs, now Lord Krebs, who concluded that badger culling was an ineffective means of controlling *M. bovis* in cattle. When informed of government plans to implement another cull, he said, "The scientific case is as clear as it can be: this cull is not the answer to TB in cattle. The government is cherry-picking the data to support its case." (theguardian.com/environment/2012/oct/13/badger-cull-mindless)

Scientific voices have increasingly questioned the continuation of this cull as peer reviewed analysis shows it is not responsible for bTB reduction in cattle.

Until we have a government prepared to listen to this evidence, the badgers are relying on regular wildlife observers who are willing to spend their autumn evenings protecting them.

Badgers Up Close and Personal

Daniel and Rachel Evans are pleased as punch with their garden visitors and kindly agreed to tell us about them..

Having badgers visit our garden has been lovely. We discovered we had them during the first lockdown, three little mischievous strawberry thieving cubs at first. Since then they and the rest of the clan have thrilled us with their nightly visits and we have enjoyed their antics and their company. We have watched them from cub to adult, sharing in their warmth and gentleness, through to squabbles. We have enjoyed learning about them and are now 'Badger Scholars', consuming all information on what is still a relatively mysterious animal. We have learnt their personalities and idioms and with careful observation can identify them. We have been nose to nose with feeding badgers, we have had our toes sniffed.



Our garden is very much a wildlife garden and we have learned to garden with badgers in mind; this includes such things as not planting on an established badger path -- they are creatures of habit and will promptly move anything in their way, and don't try to grow strawberries where badgers can get to them (next year they are going on the wall!) But one of the advantages is a lack of slugs and snails and the joy of sitting down with a cup of tea in the evening and guessing how many naughty cubs we will have each spring. They have added a whole new aspect to our lives and we are that much richer for it. We feel privileged to have their unfailing nightly visits along with foxes and hedgehogs and hope they feel safe and welcome in our garden.



Photos by Rachel Evans

If like us you are lucky enough to have a badger approved garden (or any wildlife approved for that matter) embrace them and support them as our wildlife needs all the friends they can get; your support will repay you and your garden a hundred times over.

Daniel and Rachel Evans



The Great Big Green Week from 24th September - 2nd October 2022 is the UK's biggest ever celebration of community action to tackle climate change and protect nature.

In Yatton Library and Children's Centre in Yatton High Street there will be a Climate and Nature Exhibition. Upstairs you will find local artist and YACWAG member Steven Kinsella's beautiful and challenging paintings about climate change. Do drop in and have a look when the library is open during the week.

There is also an exhibition showing the importance of our green spaces which links to a self-guided walking tour around Yatton, as well as children's green activities. In the exhibition YACWAG's Stowey Reserve is used as an example of an important local habitat (wetland) and you can find out more about why our wetlands are so vital to help us fight climate change.

On Sunday 25th September 10.30-12 Tony and Faith Moulin will lead a walk and talk about wetland nature on your doorstep at Stowey Reserve. Please email yacwag@gmail.com if you would like to come along.

Otters in Britain have been brought back from the brink. They are now protected and are showing signs that their population is growing.

In 100 years UK has lost 90% of its wetland

It takes 1000 years for 1 metre of peat to form, trapping carbon. Most of Yatton's wetland has been ploughed and the peat has shrunk and released CO2 in the air.

If we doubled the amount of carbon stored in wetlands it would do more than taking 1,000,000 cars off the road.

If you can't get to the exhibition, Steve Kinsella's paintings can be found on his website in the section on climate change at sjkart.co.uk.

For more information about Great Big Green Week and other events going on locally and nationally please visit the website at greatbiggreenweek.com.

Learn More About Littlewood's Fungi

In 2020 when we all had a bit more time on our hands, YACWAG made the acquaintance of John and Doreen Bailey, fungi enthusiasts from the North Somerset and Bristol Fungi Group.

John and Doreen were pleased to be introduced to Littlewood, where to our mutual benefit they, sometimes accompanied by their colleague Paul Gascoigne, have been able to learn more about the fungi in this uncommon alder wood. Littlewood was a new plantation in 1820 and it is believed that some of the veteran alders date from at least that time. There are also ash, oak, guelder rose, hawthorn, blackthorn, various willows, purging and alder buckthorn shrubs and redcurrant.

Since 2020 there have been dozens of visits throughout the seasons and a species list of more than 300 fungi has emerged, from tiny microscopic moulds to spectacularly large and beautiful bracket fungi.

Join a guided walk and/or an illustrated talk to find out more.



The Fungi of Littlewood an illustrated talk by John Bailey via Zoom

**Wednesday 12th October 2022
7.30pm**

**Zoom link will be emailed to all
members nearer the time.**

A VISIT TO LITTLEWOOD

YACWAG'S woodland nature reserve on Kenn Moor, with John and Doreen Bailey, to look at fungi.

10.30am WEDNESDAY 2ND NOVEMBER. Booking essential via
yacwag@gmail.com.

Wellness Wildlife Walks

Thanks to funding from WeSport, via Sport England Together, YACWAG has been running a programme of Wellness Wildlife Walks around Yatton and Congresbury. The programme continues until next March.



Wellness walkers in Cadbury Hill car park before the Bat Walk in July.

The walks are open to anyone who feels they would benefit. They are designed to help reduce the negative impact of Covid-19 and the inequalities in physical activity and sports. Those who have been feeling socially isolated are particularly welcome.

The walks are led by an expert ecologist and a community nurse who is available for any information discussions. Walking in natural environments has been shown to have a positive effect on stress relief, reducing blood pressure, reducing feelings of depression or low mood and supporting weight management. It can also help with the management of long-term conditions like arthritis or diabetes.

Please email yacwagwww@gmail.com for more information or to book a place on one of the walks detailed below.

Friday 7th October 13.00-15.00 **Autumnal Trees** Meet Cadbury Hill car park, Yatton
Friday 21st October 10.00-13.00 **Dormouse walk** Meet The Star car park, Congresbury
Friday 11th November 13.00-15.00 **Fungi Walk** Meet The Star car park, Congresbury
Friday 9th December 13.00-15.00 **Fungi Walk** Meet Cadbury Hill car park, Yatton
Friday 6th January 15.00-17.30 **Somerset Starlings**. Ham Wall. Meet Yatton precinct

VOLUNTEERS REQUIRED

YACWAG has a number of vacancies for volunteers. Please get in touch if you can spare any time to get involved. The more people who are doing things, the more we can do!