



# Newsletter

Volume 22 Issue 1

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## Hands up, who has found solace in Nature during the past year?

At the worst times of personal despair and disappointment Nature has been there to sustain us and remind us that things do regenerate, that life does continue and that after every winter comes the spring.

Nature has given people hope when things around them felt hopeless. Science has felt the need to prove, over and over again, that being out in a natural environment, or even looking out of the window onto a tree, is good for body, mind and spirit. Many people have newly experienced that for themselves, or renewed that connection.

One of our members, Owen Foord, has found comfort in writing and has kindly given us permission to reproduce his poem about leaves in this issue.

We all need hope in the dark times and Nature can give, and has given, us that hope. Now is a good time to turn the tables and think in return about how we can help Nature during its own dark times.

*Faith Moulin*

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## What's in this issue?

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Jelly Fungus, Strawberry Line

## Birds in Our Hands

Winter provides a challenge to all our garden wildlife. Insects have different strategies to cope with the lack of food and of sun. Butterflies, for example, may overwinter in an egg, larval or adult stage dependent on the species. The adult peacock butterfly will seek out a safe place to shelter at a constant temperature in a shed or a tree crevice. Incredibly it will convert some of its blood into glycerol as a sort of antifreeze to survive the cold of winter. Imagine as

humans being able to do the same and live on reduced energy bills! Birds, however are more akin to us and have to carry on their lives come rain, wind, cold or shine throughout the bleakness of winter.



It is the presence of birds at this time of year that gives much pleasure and provides a symbol of nature's reassuring continuity despite all that humankind throws at it. The lockdown in Spring 2020 brought about an increased interest in nature and particularly garden birds. If there was a positive to be taken from that time it was the stillness and quiet resulting from a lighter touch on the planet. Last spring we could hear bird song in a new melodious tone providing us with a special and intimate closeness to nature.

In our garden, sparrows and blue tits are investigating nest boxes and a great tit is calling. Starlings are also investigating nest boxes for the first time for us and are bathing in our new pond. I feel a deep inner satisfaction as I watch and listen.

Despite another lockdown we can still look forward to the hope that comes with a new spring and a new chorus resounding above the rooftops. We can also play a part beyond feeding the birds and consider how to make our gardens a friendlier place – for example by providing space for birds to shelter, bath, drink, nest and feed their young. This much is in our hands. Let's make a start - it's not too late for New Year resolutions!

*Tony Moulin*

**COMING SOON !**  
**- a new YACWAG Book -**  
**'Brilliant Birds of Yatton and Congresbury'**  
**by Trevor Riddle**  
**More in the next newsletter!**

## Observations on YACWAG's Christmas Bird Survey 2013-2020

YACWAG first started collecting data on the number of birds visiting gardens at Christmas 2013 so seven years on it is possible to calculate and reflect on the changes that have occurred in that time.

For many species the numbers of birds are too low to give any meaningful statistic and the numbers of more common species recorded have been extrapolated to reflect the numbers per 100 gardens to compensate for the fact that we received 80 surveys in 2013 and 130 in 2020.

The majority of the large increases and declines will come as no surprise to members who watch their garden birds on any sort of regular basis. The loss of Greenfinches has been well documented but the broadly similar reduction in Chaffinches is perhaps more shocking. Chaffinches also suffer from the Trichomoniasis disease but it is generally thought to a lesser extent than Chaffinches. Probably more of our winter Chaffinches are migrants from the north and milder winters have enabled to spend their winters further north. Certainly the number of Chaffinches in the local countryside has declined in recent years. The inexorable rise in Goldfinches in our gardens is well known.

It is encouraging to report positive news and a 41 percent increase in House Sparrows is very welcome. The local Jackdaw population continues to thrive and these birds together with Magpies appear to be gaining ever more confidence to come into our gardens. The local Magpie population is not increasing so our figures suggest that they are using gardens more.



Woodpigeon is another species that never used to come near a garden and as they have multiplied in gardens so Collared Doves have gone the other way. Are these two factors linked? The answer is that I don't know but being much bigger birds Woodpigeons dominate their smaller relatives which do seem to be more prone to predation by Sparrowhawks.

I am surprised by the reduction in Great Tits, but Long Tailed Tits and Wrens have certainly benefited from a run of mild winters.

*Trevor Riddle*



**Trevor's Working Document** (*I thought some readers would enjoy the 'old-school' presentation - Ed*)

# YACWAG CHRISTMAS BIRD SURVEY CHANGE 2013 - 2020

SPECIES	2013 BIRDS PER 100 GARDENS	2020 BIRDS PER 100 GARDENS	% CHANGE
BLACKBIRD	259	275	+ 6
BLACKCAP	38	26	- 32
CHAFFINCH	165	40	-76
COLLARED DOVE	156	45	-70
DUNNOCK	61	54	- 9
GOLDFINCH	194	347	+ 80
G.S. WOODPECKER	20	25	+ 25
GREENFINCH	126	22	- 80
HOUSE SPARROW	348	492	+ 41
JACKDAW	165	284	+ 72
JAY	17	10	- 40
MAGPIE	120	177	+ 47
PIED WAGTAIL	20	28	+ 40
WOOD PIGEON	148	282	+ 47
ROBIN	114	163	+ 43
SPARROWHAWK	5	13	+ 160
STARLING	317	307	- 3
SONG THRUSH	14	8	- 43
BLUE TIT	256	300	+ 17
GREAT TIT	266	173	- 35
L.T. TIT	127	267	+ 110
WREN	32	52	+ 63

A blackbird with a bright yellow beak and a small yellow patch around its eye is perched on a thin, light-colored branch. The bird is facing right, and its dark feathers are clearly visible against a blurred background.

© Somerset Wildlife Photography

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## The Cycle of Life

November signals the dancing leaves  
They have in life fulfilled the trees  
Soon to tire to the ground the drop  
They fall for the worms and then to rot

A canopy all summer long  
The birds to sit and sing their song  
This is the time they have been at best  
Their shade a welcome source for rest

They had a purpose, they had their role  
From forest glade to gardens whole  
In removing carbon dioxide from the air  
Giving life to oxygen for us all to share

Their endless production from the branch  
Year after year they just advance  
For eyes to see and ears to hear,  
Yes, they flourish each and every year.

*Owen Foord*





# YACWAG's Apple Orchard Project

In December YACWAG created a new apple orchard in the small field off Kenn Moor Road. 14 apple trees were planted along with a hedge of fruit bushes. The project included fencing the area so that cattle can still be off-loaded to graze the larger part of the reserve. YACWAG's Vice-Chairperson, Richard Croucher, pictured right, has long experience working in fruit orchards and will be making sure the trees have every opportunity to thrive. YACWAG is grateful for the help of Andrew and Joe Hunt with the fencing and James Brine and Colin Higgins with the planting. Unfortunately, due to Covid19 restrictions, volunteers could not be involved in the tree-planting, but it is hoped that members will enjoy watering and looking after the trees as the year goes on.



## VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

If you would like to be put on a rota to tend the trees in dry spells in the spring and summer, please contact Faith through the YACWAG website and she will give you full instructions when the time comes. The trees will be valuable to the environment in terms of supporting wildlife, and also to sequester carbon, so helping get them established will be a worthwhile job.

# A New Oak for Harry's Plot



YACWAG was also able to plant another tree during National Tree Week 2020 thanks to the help of Andrew and Joe Hunt who erected the steel tree guard and planted the tree. Harry's Plot is one-seventh of a large field that is managed by local residents. It was left to YACWAG by the late Harry Hailes and the co-owning residents had agreed that, in accordance with Harry's wishes, a third oak tree could be planted in the field. There are already two mature oaks and the new one has been planted in between them at an equal distance. A public footpath passes close by and it is hoped that YACWAG members can be invited to see the new tree later this year.

YACWAG was able to fund the purchase because of a generous donation in memory of two life-long friends, the late Bobby MacArthur and Joan Rees.

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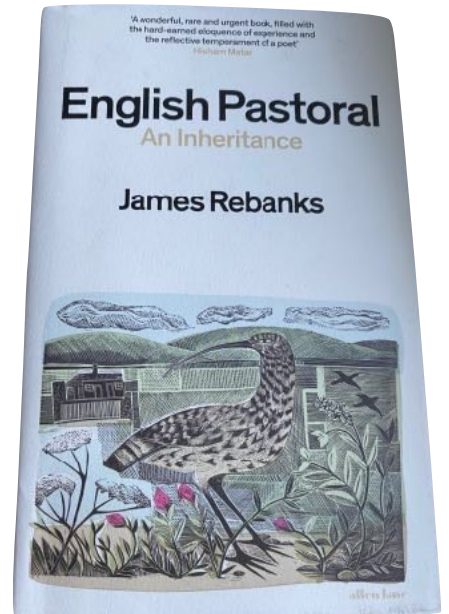
## **HELP YACWAG BY SHARING YOUR THOUGHTS AND IDEAS**

YACWAG hasn't had a membership survey for several years, and it would be great to know what you think. A survey link will be emailed to you soon. Please take the time to answer the questions and submit any other thoughts or ideas you have. Your answers are essential to help the development of a new 5 year plan which will aim to make the charity resilient and sustainable. Full report in the next newsletter.



## BOOK REVIEW

I have just read *English Pastoral* by James Rebanks. It is about his life growing up on the family farms and then struggling to make a living from those farms as an adult; about his gradual realisation that sometimes the old ways are best. I love his honesty. He accepts that we can't feed the planet farming like this and he accepts that we can't just walk away from vast areas and expect them to wild because now there is an absence of large herbivores and their predators. He understands that we need to pay for his kind of farming (probably through taxes) if we want to preserve our countryside and everything that lives in it. His book makes me want to find a way for YACWAG to significantly increase its land holding to do everything we can do for our local environment. I would recommend this book to anyone, it's so inspiring.



*Richard Croucher*

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## YACWAGger Profile - Mark Savage

*Trevor Riddle first got to know Mark Savage about ten years ago when he used to bump into him on the Strawberry Line on fine evenings looking for the Barn Owls. When Mark retired nearly three years ago he almost immediately began assisting Trevor with bird box maintenance and the Spring 2018 Breeding Bird Surveys. He is also pretty handy at repairing nest boxes and is a keen bird photographer.*

### How long have you been interested in nature?

I didn't actually have any interest in nature at all until I moved to Yatton from Northampton in 2001. We had a visit from a good friend shortly afterwards and he said, 'You've got a lot of interesting birds in your garden.' I had no idea, and probably couldn't even identify a blue tit at that time, but I gradually became interested in identifying the birds I saw in my garden out of the window. I didn't go bird-watching to start with but eventually I got myself a pair of binoculars and joined the RSPB. My interest in birds has driven more interest in nature generally.

### What does YACWAG mean to you?

I joined YACWAG quite early on in my interest as I realised that belonging to national organisations was useful on one level but joining a local organisation is very important as you then have some influence on your local environment. I love the fact that I can go out and see a barn owl and I know that if YACWAG didn't





own and manage its fields appropriately for voles there would be no barn owls in the area. There can be no birds without insects - and although I am not particularly interested in insects I know that they are part of a vital 'network of goodness' without which nature cannot thrive. Our surrounding countryside is not as abundant in wildlife as you might think and as I have learnt more from talking to experienced people like Trevor Riddle, I understand more and more how important it is for wildlife to have a refuge in YACWAG's fields.

### **What do you enjoy most about your interest in nature?**

I have always liked walking - a treat for me on holiday is to be dropped off at a coastal footpath and be picked up some hours later along the coast. Now I have more pleasure in those walks. There is more to interest me, more to notice. Birdwatching has added a new dimension to my walks and I believe it has in a deep subconscious way changed my senses and my awareness of what is around me. I think it has made me more at one with the world.

### **What have you learnt?**

I have visited more places around the locality - mainly in Somerset on the Levels reserves where there is so much to see, so much I still don't know. I now know that what we do as human beings has an effect on wildlife. We cannot have abundant birds without the right environment, and sadly a lot of the environment we have created is not good for them.

One tip for beginner birdwatchers is that I have learnt to always assume that the bird I am hearing or seeing is the most common one it could be. Don't assume that sparrow looks a bit different so it is an Arctic bunting. Start with assuming it is a sparrow. That saves a lot of disappointment! There is always something to interest me now. It is a great hobby.

### **What do you think YACWAG should be doing?**

I realise there are constraints on small organisations. YACWAG can only work within the income it has. In any small organisation activity depends on a small number of people. With a finite income YACWAG must remain within its budget. I know that the National Trust, for example, only takes on new property with an endowment for its maintenance.

I know that YACWAG's reserves support wildlife that does not occur elsewhere. One of the sad things I have noticed is the increase in dogs whose owners think it is OK to let their dogs run over the reserves disturbing wildlife when YACWAG intends those fields to be a refuge.

I think it would be great if YACWAG could get hold of more land, particularly if they could acquire a bigger block of land rather than the small fields they have in a patchwork. That would really make an even bigger difference.



# Littlewood Fungus Survey

YACWAG has been fortunate last year to make contact with the North Somerset and Bristol Fungus Group and they have made half a dozen visits to YACWAG's Littlewood Reserve to survey the fungi there. They have found the wood very interesting with a different range of fungi from other woods in the area. Those 120 species so far identified represent really good examples of the mycoflora expected in alder woods, and fungi obviously benefit from the abundant dead and dying wood and thick litter layer beneath the trees. Some of the species found are known to be specific to alder.

YACWAG will continue its management policy of as little human intervention as possible at Littlewood so that nature, including fungi, can thrive there with minimal disturbance.

On a more negative note, the Fungus Group's John and Doreen Bailey, along with Phil Gascoigne on some occasions, following Covid restrictions as necessary, found that many of the ash trees within the wood exhibited extensive damage caused by the Ash Dieback Fungus. They found examples of the actual fruiting bodies of *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus* on small twigs below the trees, which is a strong indication that the disease is well established and will probably wipe out most of the ash trees in the wood during the next few years. Dead ash trees will be left standing at Littlewood and will provide a valuable habitat - which is likely to become a rare habitat as there will be great pressure to fell dead ash elsewhere for safety and commercial reasons. YACWAG's policy of non-intervention does make the wood a dangerous place, especially in windy weather, which is a secondary reason for the necessity of limited public access.

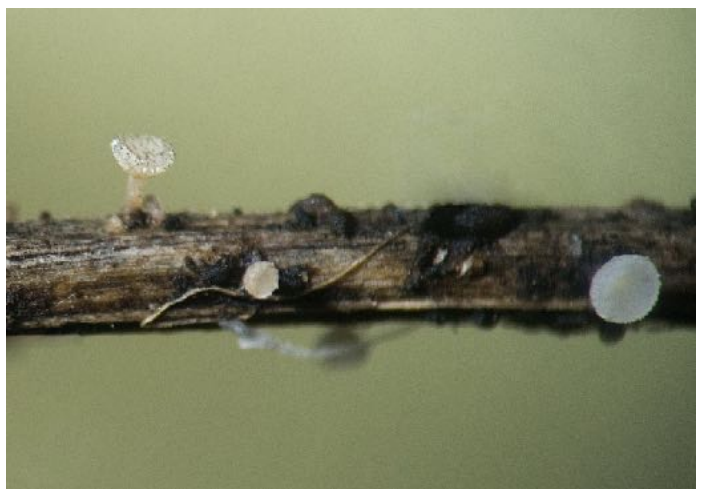
If any member is particularly interested in fungi (not for foraging), please ask for the species list and full report.



*Xanthoporia radiata* - Alder Bracket on fallen branch



*Laccaria purpureobadia*, specific to Alder, growing in leaf litter



*Hymenoscyphus fraxineus* - Ash Dieback Fungus



## Wetland Habitat Created on the Strawberry Line



*Work on an existing pondling.*



*The finished job. Reeds will soon recolonise.*

YACWAG has been working along the Strawberry Line in partnership with Natural England for 20 years. Anyone walking the Yatton-Congresbury section recently will have noticed the areas where excavation and clearance has taken place.

This work on the Site of Special Scientific Interest is done on the advice of Natural England to maintain the water in the ditches for the benefit of aquatic wildlife. Although it looks devastating it does help the whole eco-system, including birds and small mammals. Some of the features - which we call 'pondlings' - provide more open water that is not shaded by trees and scrub. This helps provide a more varied mosaic of niches for wildlife.

The ditches along the railway were originally very narrow and YACWAG has over the years gradually widened and deepened the water in most places. As a result of this work there are now long stretches of reeds which have been good for reed warblers and harvest mice. The clearance, drastic as it may seem, will help with rejuvenation of these reed beds. The work is done gradually over years to avoid too much disturbance all at once. All the work is done to an agreed management plan which ensures scrub and trees are also retained.



*These wide ditches help with drainage and create new reedbeds.*



*One of six newly-created 'pondlings'.*