

Backwell Environment Trust

Bulletin 24 - Summer 2012

www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org



A very warm welcome to our latest summer bulletin

Well it's safe to say that this summer will probably be one of the wettest ever but at least the abundant rain has done wonders for our wildflower meadows as well as the thousands of ferns along 'The Fern Way'. The BET volunteers have been busy (as ever!) completing the first stage of our 'Community Trail', replacing large sections of old fencing as well as drawing up exciting plans for refurbishing the BET cabin.

To help you find your way around our action-packed bulletin the contents are listed below :

The Chairman's Jottings

Woodland Report

BET's Jubilee Celebrations

Green Woodworking

Notes by a Naturalist

The BET Website

The BET Cabin

The BET Walk

Dormouse Update



The Chairman's Jottings



Membership Most of our members are long-standing and renew each year. Of course it's not compulsory to join and we understand if your interests and commitments have gone in other directions. However in case this is just an oversight and you would like to re-join we have delivered a form with this Bulletin. Please ignore this if you have already re-joined. If you are unsure of your renewal you can send me an e-mail on bill.charnock@btinternet.com and I will check the records.

If there is no change in your circumstances you don't need to fill out the whole form; simply write in "No Change".

Some of our members are now renewing electronically and the sort code and account number are given on the membership form should you prefer this method. Space on the reference part of the transfer is often limited so please use the code "GAYES" if you are eligible for Gift aid and "GANO" otherwise.

Jubilee Celebration Days

Didn't Backwell do well over the Jubilee holiday? We managed to pick the two best days to celebrate. The Parish Council's 'Picnic in the Park' on the Saturday was a huge success with the Fair Trade Cafe selling over four hundred cups of coffee, tea and squash and with reasonably warm and dry weather thrown in. BET was present with its own stall showing members and Backwellians generally what we are up to.

BET was similarly fortunate on the sunny Monday afternoon when it hosted the blessing of the new inscription on the Jubilee Stone by Rector Margi Campbell. Hymns were sung to the accompaniment of a lone guitar played by Doug Neilson. Trustee Jenny Greenslade wrote an excellent account of the event for the North Somerset Times who didn't get around to publishing it. Never mind. It is excellent and is printed in this bulletin along with some photos by Ian Chambers.

Many thanks to all the volunteers for mowing grass, erecting the marquee loaned by trustee Michael Marks, providing cakes and serving tea and coffee. Especial thanks to trustee Amanda Swannell who bore the brunt of the catering preparations.

Dormice

Every month Gill Brown, member and licensed Dormouse handler, accompanied by Reserve Warden Ian Chambers, inspects the numerous dormouse boxes installed in Jubilee Stone and Badgers woods. It's a labour of love which can take many hours to complete as each box has to be opened and inspected.

Other animals such as yellow-necked mice and wood-mice also use the boxes and can give a nasty nip. If a dormouse is in occupation in spring and autumn it's usually in a deep torpor (ie fast asleep!) and relatively easy to handle. Each specimen is weighed, sexed (not an easy task!), recorded and then returned to its slumber. In June I took the opportunity to accompany Gill and Ian and was deeply impressed with the whole process and their dedication.



**A Very Sleepy
Dormouse**

Neighbourhood Plan

The plan which goes under the title 'Backwell Future' is developing fast and I urge all members to take an interest and attend one of the open meetings that the Parish Council is organising. It covers all aspects of the future of the village such as new housing and commercial development, employment and open green spaces. Eventually it has to be approved by a planning inspector the acid test being that it must contain a reasonable amount of opportunity for sustainable development. It will also have to be approved by a referendum of the village and if it passes this test it should give Backwell a strong voice in supporting or opposing any proposed development over the next 15 years.

Philip Chapman

Congratulations to member Philip Chapman who graduated from Oxford University this summer with first class honours in Biological Sciences. Members will recall that Philip has led a number of ornithological walks for BET and given us three lectures on his various natural history research activities in Costa Rica (turtles), Israel (vultures) and Borneo (Tropical Forest Ecology).

Philip starts a Masters degree at the university of East Anglia in the autumn and we wish him well in his future endeavours.



Volunteers

All hail once again to the indefatigable BET volunteers. Recently they have completed a comprehensive refurbishment of the fences preventing members of public getting near to the dangerous cliffs above Cole's Quarry. They are also creating a new permissive path in Badgers Wood which will eventually connect the back of the Junior School to a pond or cistern in Cheston Combe. This doesn't involve very much steep climbing so could be of interest to the not so fit. All this and more routine chores such as bracken pulling have been carried out in spite of the unconducive weather.



Backwell Cave

We were expecting some momentous changes in this area with the much anticipated Planning application for the development of Cole's Quarry. This still hasn't materialised although it was due before Christmas last and the owners have made presentations to the Parish Council. I think we have stopped holding our breath now and are taking the line that whether or not Coles Quarry is developed there is a reasonable chance that at some time the cave and surrounding woodland area will come to us.

Happy holidays to all our members, supporters and readers.

Bill Charnock



Woodland Report

Well I know it's a bit of a cliché for the British to bang on about the weather but as I write this it's, (yes you've guessed it!) raining, cloudy and cool. As ever in the countryside, there are winners and losers when our summers turn out this way; our fast restoring wildflower meadows are doing well with many new seedlings germinating in the constantly damp soil and of course, the thousands of ferns along 'The Fern Way' are having a whale of a time. Insects are probably having the hardest time of all which has a knock on effect for all the many predators that depend on them for food. Not surprisingly, butterfly numbers are well down on last year but at least with all the new wildflowers germinating, there should be more nectar for them when the sun does eventually shine. Cool and damp weather is not that great for our dormice either and we've found during our monthly surveys that they are often sleepy or 'torpid' as they attempt to save energy when food is scarce.



Reserve Management Changes

Since we increased the number of projects and activity mornings that the trusty BET volunteers are involved in, not surprisingly the work load in everything we do on our nature reserves has increased considerably. So, after much discussion, we have decided to change the way we manage things which has led to a few changes taking place.

- ❖ The number of volunteer leaders has been increased from one to four.
- ❖ The Thursday activity morning has been taken off the programme.
- ❖ The roles and responsibilities of the BET trustees with regard to all practical working on our reserves have now been much more clearly defined.
- ❖ Current and proposed future work projects have been laid out and time estimates given.

These changes will not only spread the ever-increasing work load out more evenly but also help us move forward, better equipped to handle all the exciting projects we have planned in the future.

Spring/Summer Tasks

Fencing

Some of the fencing surrounding the old Coles Quarry in Badgers Wood has not been replaced for many years so after a full survey by BET volunteers, we have now established a programme of replacement and repair. Numerous fence posts as well as 100s of metres of both sheep fencing and barbed wire have been put in place which will securely protect everyone from the sheer cliff faces of the quarry.

Bracken Removal

Bracken has been pulled once again, some in Jubilee Stone Wood but mainly in the fledgling wildflower meadows of Badgers Wood, where it would shade out the regenerating flora.

Benches

A new bench has been constructed in the lower sections of Jubilee Stone Wood, next to the loop path that winds its way through the reserve's best displays of spring flowers. The design of this particular bench has used three upright living tree stumps so over time, these should re-grow around the seat which will make it literally part of the landscape.

The 'Community' & 'Geology' Trails

Undeniably, the newly constructed 'Fern Way' leads you through some of the most beautiful, untouched landscapes in the whole of Badgers Wood. But if it does have one slight drawback, it is the fact that the trail has to rise up through the woodland which has necessitated the construction of numerous steps along its length. So for those of you who would prefer a more level path, a 'Community Trail' has now been constructed. This trail starts close to the Church Town/Cheston Combe Road intersection, winds you through the woodland to reach the 'pond' and then returns on the Fern Way. This trail is also being extended to enable walkers to avoid the very narrow and dangerous section of Church Town that carries on down to the recycling centre. After that, we are proposing to build a 350 metre long 'Geology Trail' high above the 'Fern Way' which will enable visitors to walk along the base of the stunning limestone cliffs. These three trails have been carefully designed to make them disappear into the woodland landscape so that all important 'natural feel' will not be lost.

Wildflower Meadow Progress

The three newly-restored meadows at the top of Badgers Wood and the lower one known as 'The Layers' are now in their second year of growth and I'm pleased to report that the number of species of wildflowers is now increasing dramatically. Most are flowers that you might well expect to find on dry, limestone grasslands such as Common Spotted Orchid, St John's-wort, Oxeye Daisies, Rockrose, Scabious, Common Centaury, etc but they're already looking pretty impressive this summer and will only get better as the years go by.



Common Spotted Orchid

Jan Chambers



BET's Jubilee Celebrations

On Monday 4th June, over 150 people gathered in the afternoon sunshine by the Jubilee Stone, Backwell to see the Reverend Margi Campbell bless its newly-cut inscription, commemorating Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond



Jubilee, after her 60 years on the throne. The Stone was originally put up in 1897 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Jubilee, and it has remained a

prominent feature on the hillside for 115 years, a perfect spot from which to admire the magnificent views across the gentle countryside towards distant Wales.



The Celebration itself was a typically low-key, English affair, with a hymn, short prayers and the Blessing, after which tea and cakes were served in the marquee. There were short



guided walks around the woodland, pond-dipping for the children, and BET member Peter Speight brought along his pole lathe, demonstrating green woodworking to a fascinated audience. On display were chairs and other items turned from ash logs which came from the BET woods. Many people just sat and relaxed in the warm sun, members and their families, church-goers, and many friends. It was an afternoon that people will remember for some time, merely one of many events held all over the country to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012.

Jenny Greenslade



Green Woodworking

In the last bulletin I looked at how we split or 'cleaved' fresh ash logs to make rustic benches in the BET woods. This article looks at the traditional tools used to make countryside and household items such as handles, rakes, and chairs from fresh green timber logs.

The log is split lengthways into halves and quarters using an axe or a froe as we saw last time. The workpiece is then shaped using a drawknife whilst being held securely on a shaving horse.

The shaving horse is a wonderfully useful and simple foot-operated vice that allows you to hold a piece of wood while having both hands free to work. The shaving horse gets its clamping power from your legs. There is a foot 'treadle' at the bottom of a swinging arm that you push on, clamping the wood on top of the horse. The horse is highly adjustable to the user and the workpiece which can be released and repositioned in an instant.



The precise origins of the shaving horse are not known, but illustrations going back to the 15th century show different designs being used in various crafts, including making rakes, longbows, chair legs, staves for barrels, walking sticks, and many more.

The traditional continental style of shaving horse was hewn from an oak log and was large and very heavy. It had three or four legs made from tapered branches set into tapered holes drilled at the ends of the log. A post pivoted through the centre of the

log with a dumbhead on top as the head of the vice. The challenging part of making a horse to this design is cutting the slot in the log for the swinging arm.

A more modern and portable version of the English twin-arm design was developed by Mike Abbott, a renowned leader in green woodworking; this uses lengths of 4x2 timber from the local builders' merchant! For plans see:

www.living-wood.co.uk/lumberhorse.html

This shaving horse is easy to build and is incredibly useful in the workshop—and not just for green woodworking.



The drawknife is used to shave the workpiece along the grain, gradually rounding and shaping the wood to the required profile. It needs to be kept very sharp and can remove a lot of material or very delicate shavings.



Final shaping can also be done with a spokeshave, which is like a small carpenter's plane with two side handles and takes very fine shavings.



This picture shows some items that were all shaped on the shaving horse: kitchen spatulas, a hay rake, chair legs and rails, and an adze handle. I continue to be amazed at the lovely smooth finish one can get shaving fresh green ash.

Items cleaved from a log and shaved tend to show the natural lines and subtle curves of the original piece of wood. This contrasts with the more regular shapes created on the traditional 'polelathe' used by the chair-leg maker or 'bodger' to turn legs and spindles, which I will look at next time.

If you are interested in finding out more about green woodworking, have a look at www.bodgers.co.uk. This website is packed with fascinating articles and advice, together with links to local groups and events, including the Somerset Branch of the Association of Polelathe Turners and Green Woodworkers, which meets monthly near Bristol.

Peter Speight



Notes by a Naturalist: Gilbert White's Journals

Queen Elizabeth's recent Diamond Jubilee Celebrations may have brought back happy memories for some people when they saw pictures from the 1950s, 1960s, and life seemed simpler, and far more relaxed than today. If one goes even further back to the 1750s, (over 250 years ago) it would probably have seemed like another world entirely, but one thing never changes - the uncertainty of the English weather - hot or cold, wet or dry, early or late summers, and freezing winters and snow.

Details of the daily weather, along with observations of birds, animals and plants were recorded in journals by naturalist Gilbert White (1720 - 1793), a parish priest



who lived in Selborne, Hampshire most of his life. In addition to parish business like baptisms, marriages and funerals, he had 11 acres of garden, vegetable beds and an orchard to look after, but still found time to bottle plums, make jam, wine, and brew beer. A 'summer-weeding' woman, Goody Hampton helped him (he wrote), and could have been a man, but she wore petticoats and now and then had a child!

Selborne village in White's day was a close community of 670 people, comprising scattered houses, small farms and the hamlet of Oakhanger. Many were poor, but most were sober and industrious, living in good stone or brick cottages with glazed windows. They kept pigs, which each autumn foraged for acorns in the nearby forest, owned by Lord Stawel, who also provided free fuel for their fires. Opposite The Wakes (White's House), on the narrow 'cart-way' were the shops of John Carpenter the Carpenter, George Tanner the saddler and shoemaker, grocer John Burley, and John Hale the butcher/slaughterer, with a blacksmith's forge nearby.

White was the first person to discuss birds and animals as if they lived in the same world as human beings, and thought every creature had a richness and rhythm of their own. Explorers of the time were sending back exotic plants and animals, and most naturalists studied these dead specimens - good for science, but they explained nothing about relationships between living creatures. Even house-flies interested White, and he was pleased to see them basking on the hot chimney when the fire was lit, then sipping wine and sampling the sugar on baked apples, this helping extend their short lives.

A friend kept a tame bat which took flies out of people's hands, after placing its wings around and in front of its mouth, hovering and hiding its head like a bird of prey. 'It was worthy of observation and pleased me much', he later wrote. His own pet was Timothy the Iberian tortoise,

(30 years old when White inherited him from an aunt), who hibernated underground from November to April, emerging with a huge appetite for lettuce, dandelions and thistles. Twice a year he was carried to the grocers to be weighed ...'am placed on the scales on my back where I sprawl about, to the great diversion of the shopkeeper's children'. His shell is in the Natural History Museum.

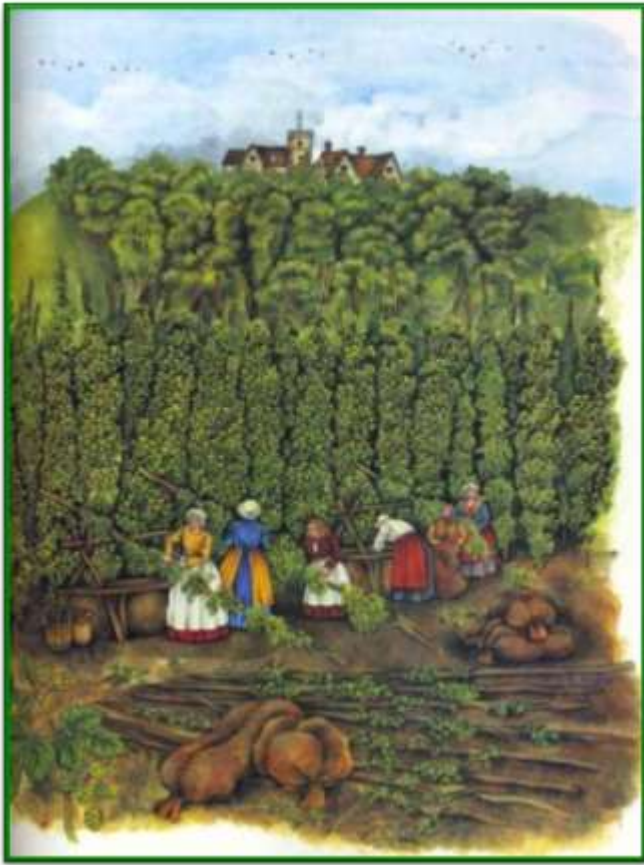
Under the eaves of St Mary's Church lived a pair of white (barn) owls which 'snored and hissed in an intimidating manner', often screaming horribly as they flew along. This scared the villagers who imagined the churchyard full of goblins and spectres (ghosts). When the brown (tawny) owls hooted, 'their throats swelled as big as a hen's egg ... they flew with legs stretched out behind them to balance their heavy heads'. White was delighted when his godson found a baby cuckoo in a nearby nest in the yew hedge, but



the nest was barely big enough, being built by hedge-sparrows, who were desperately trying to



keep it fed. The baby was very fierce, striking at people's fingers, heaving up and menacing, trying to intimidate them. There was a drought in April 1776, with heath fires, and 'birds silent for want



of showers ... no rain since early March', and summers of 1781 and 1783 were also unusually hot and dry. That of 1783 was full of 'horrible phenomena, with alarming meteors and tremendous thunderstorms' in addition to the peculiar haze, or smoky fog which hung over Britain and Europe from June 23rd - July 20th, with earthquakes in Italy and a volcano erupting in Norway. 'The sun at noon was blank as a cloudy moon, but lurid and blood-coloured when rising or setting'. The heat was so intense that freshly-killed butchers meat had to be eaten next day, or it rotted, flies swarmed in the lanes and drove the horses frantic. This 'phenomena' was caused by the eruption of the volcano Skaptar-Jokull in Iceland, one of the most cataclysmic in modern times.

On June 5th, 1784, when the noon temperature was 70 degrees, a 'sulphur-smelling' blue mist appeared, followed by a gathering of clouds. At 2.15pm the storm began, with huge drops of rain, then hailstones, then convex pieces of ice 3 inches in

diameter. This hailstorm was localized but still broke some of White's windows, and all his cold-frames, costing £2.5.10d to replace (a brick-layer's salary was 10s a week). The torrents of rain caused flash floods, moved heavy rocks and caused froth and spray on ponds to rise 3 feet in the air. Despite destroying some crops, the September hop harvest was very good as the hail had broken off the tops, causing side-shoots to grow, thus dramatically increasing the yield.

Luckily for us, White always carried his notebook to write down any items of interest. He had identified the harvest mouse (unknown before then), and a hundred years before Darwin, realised the crucial role played by worms in the formation of soil, besides being one of the first naturalists to understand the significance of songs and territory to birds. Some things he wrote about can be seen today, like the two lime trees he planted outside the butchers shop to hide the blood on the pavement. Swifts still arrive on May 1st and fly around the Church, whilst the golden saxifrage flourishes in damp ditches along the lanes. Through his careful observations and copious notes over the years, Gilbert White helped transform the way we now look at the fascinating natural world around us.



Through his careful observations and copious notes over the years, Gilbert White helped transform the way we now look at the fascinating natural world around us.

The Wakes, White's house and gardens can be visited at: www.gilbertwhiteshouse.org.uk/

Jenny Greenslade





The New BET Website



The BET website is looking stunning after its recent revamp by our computer specialist Chris Hault and is a great place to go to find out about BET, what we have been up to and what we have planned for the coming months. So don't forget to put www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org into your computer's 'favourites' listings!



The BET Cabin

In the most northerly corner of Badgers Wood is an old building that appears to be one of the most neglected in the district! It looks like an old barn, but it has two windows. It could have been a cottage, but it has no chimney, so just what could it have been?



The answer is that it once was a garage belonging to Quarry House and although it does not look like the 'Rolls Royce' of garages now, it was actually built to house one such vehicle. Along with Badgers Wood it is now the property of Backwell Environment Trust and plans are afoot to restore it to its former glory.

The thick walls of the building are of local stone and are in reasonably good condition for their age. They will require re-pointing

externally and a bit of rebuilding at the top of the rear wall and at the top of one corner. The front wall presents a bigger problem as it simply does not exist - there is just a timber clad frame where the original garage doors were, but there is plenty of stone in the woods with which to build a wall.

The main problem however is the roof, which is currently held up by a locally sourced trunk of an ash tree. Various suggestions for a replacement roof have been made, such as a turf roof, a pitched roof clad with wooden shingles or slate or simply to replace the existing curved, corrugated iron one with a new one. A like-for-like replacement roof has the clear advantage of not needing any planning consents and a company in the Midlands is able to roll the roofing sheets to the required curvature we would need. New, locally sourced, roof timbers will also be added to prevent the sheets sagging, which has been one of the main problems affecting the present roof. Designs are still at an early stage but we'll keep you updated on our progress.



Movement in the Upper Walls

Gerald Wilcox

Barrow Common and Freeman's Quarry Walk

This is a walk of about 3 miles which takes you across Barrow Common and around the perimeter of Freeman's Quarry. Although a working quarry, there are substantial peripheral areas that are no longer in cultivation and are rapidly becoming a rich habitat for wildlife.

Starting from the top of the Jubilee Stone Wood Nature Reserve, turn right onto Hyatt's Wood or Backwell Hill Road, then very soon, left onto the bridleway that takes you away from the road. Follow the track for about a mile to Watercatch Farm. Continue on the bridleway straight on through the metal gate. On reaching Barrow Common bear right, then left through the gate, and follow the right hand side of the wood. You will pass Barrow Jubilee Stone, which when originally erected, would have enjoyed a panoramic view over the city of Bristol - there is a glimpse from just beyond the far corner of the wood! Leave the Common through a gate that joins a tarmac track/road.

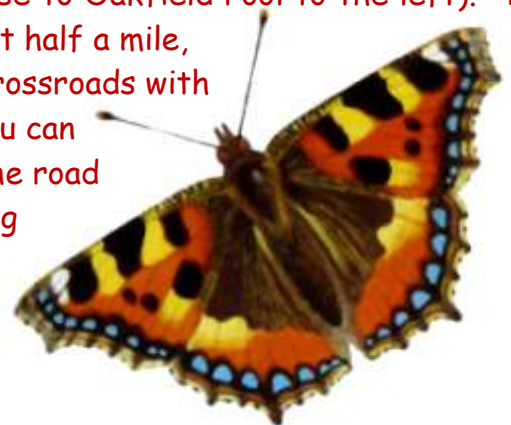


Just past Freeman's Farm on the left (interesting plasterwork on the end wall and nice pigs), a stile on the right leads onto a footpath which passes a couple of small pools. The path joins a farm track which bears round to the right (great spot for butterflies on sunny days). Go into the field on the right, and keeping to the hedge on the right, eventually go over a stile in the corner into a small spinney of trees.



The path soon emerges at the top of some steps which descend to cross the road at the quarry entrance. Steps on the other side join the footpath which follows the quarry's boundary fence. You will encounter one more stile about half way round. The path is clearly marked but some parts have recently been diverted so are not yet too well trodden. Eventually you come out on Tinker's Lane bridleway, (quite close to Oakfield Pool to the left). Turn right and after about half a mile,

turn left onto Long Lane and continue until you reach the crossroads with Hyatt's Wood Lane / Backwell Hill Road. At this point you can choose whether to take the bridleway that runs parallel to the road to return to your starting point, or to cross and continue along Long Lane and descend to the village by one of the many other footpaths.



Carrie Riches



Dormouse Update

Every month from March to November, BET's forty dormouse boxes are inspected for signs of dormouse activity - however this year may be turning out to be a bit tricky for them....

Of all the dormice we have recorded since March, only one has been active, whilst all the others have been in a 'torpid' (a deep sleep-like) state.

The dormouse is a nocturnal mammal that lives mainly in deciduous woodlands and scrub where it feeds often high up in the canopy. Except for hibernation, it rarely descends to the ground and is reluctant to cross open spaces. It feeds on a wide variety of foods including flowers (nectar and pollen), fruits (berries and nuts) and some insects (especially aphids and caterpillars). In the autumn there is abundant food in the form of berries and nuts - but these are not generally ripe until August at the earliest. So in the early summer, dormice must move from one tree species to another as their different tree flowers become available. However, there can be a problem when these flowers are over but the autumn fruits are not yet ready and it is at this time that insects can become their main source of food.

So this may be the problem this year. The very poor summer weather with cool temperatures and high rainfall has almost certainly reduced the insect populations in our woodlands leading to food shortages. In these circumstances, dormice can go torpid to save energy, curling up into a ball whilst allowing their body temperature to cool to just above the ambient. Whilst this is undeniably a good survival strategy, it does mean that breeding has to be delayed until better times resume. So let's hope that the British summer does finally come through and continues on for as long as possible into the autumn to give BET's cutest mammal the best chance of survival.



There is some good news though. Last winter we took the difficult decision to coppice some of the larger ash trees in Jubilee Stone Wood in an attempt to extend the dormouse habitat further down into the woodland. Felling trees can often be an emotive issue, but I'm pleased to report that it appears to have been successful as two dormice were recorded for the very first time in the mid to lower sections of the woodland.

In Badgers Wood we also have another 'first' to report. We have found a hibernating dormouse in the woodland but never an active one - until this year. In July we recorded our first active female (and possibly pregnant) dormouse next to the coppice coupe we created last year. We've yet to record any young, but you never know we may be able to report the patter of tiny paws in our next bulletin!

Ian Chambers