

**Birmingham
Natural History
Society**

Founded 1858

Registered Charity No 500819

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NEWSLETTER No 99 – December 2012

Lecture Programme 2013

Friends Meeting House, Selly Oak, starting at 7.30 pm

- 18 January 2013 **Roy Ledbury** – Where, when and how: opportunity and chance in natural history photography
- 15 February 2013 **Simon Atkinson** – The Birmingham and Black Country Living Landscape Nature Improvement Area
- 15 March 2013 **Mike Slater** - Trends in the landscape conservation of butterflies
- 19 April 2013 AGM followed by:
Dr Peter Jarvis – From porcupines to big cats: escaped mammals in the British countryside



The **Field Studies Council** (FSC) has recently launched its 2013 programme of Natural History courses. Members of this Society will know that the FSC is an environmental education charity with 70 years' experience of providing a huge range of training courses and fieldwork opportunities which take place across a network of UK Centres in stunning locations, from the Scottish Highlands to the south Devon coast. The nearest to Birmingham is at Preston Montford, near Shrewsbury.

To browse the courses visit:

www.field-studies-council.org/individuals-and-families/natural-history.aspx

Or to view the complete brochure go to:

view.digipage.net/?id=fsc-naturalhistory-brochure-2013

National Moth Recorders' Meeting

Dr Zoë Randle (Surveys Officer) writes:

The third National Moth Recorders' Meeting will be held on **Saturday 26th January 2013** at the Birmingham and Midland Institute, central Birmingham. We have a great line-up for the day which includes both amateur moth recorders and academic researchers. We are hoping to have some trade stalls in attendance, so bring your purses and wallets to stock up on moth-ing equipment and books.

The programme for the day will be available on the Moths Count website (www.mothscount.org) in due course. This year there is a £5 (per person) registration fee for attendees, payable on the day. This includes morning and afternoon tea/coffee and a buffet lunch, all subsidised from Butterfly Conservation budgets. **Advanced booking is essential, to book your place please contact info@butterfly-conservation.org or telephone 01929 400209.**

Yet more of our trees and wildlife hit by disease

Ash dieback

Chalara dieback of ash is a serious disease of ash trees caused by the fungus *Chalara fraxinea*, including its sexual stage, *Hymenoscyphus pseudoalbidus*. The disease causes leaf loss and crown dieback in affected trees, and usually leads to tree death. *Chalara* is being treated as a quarantine pest under national emergency measures, and suspected cases of the disease should be reported.



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In February 2012 it was found in a consignment of infected trees sent from a nursery in the Netherlands to a nursery in Buckinghamshire. In October 2012, scientists confirmed a small number of cases in East Anglia in ash trees at sites in the wider natural environment, including established woodland, which do not appear to have any association with recently supplied nursery stock.

The first record in Warwickshire was in mid-November when the government ordered a wholesale nursery near Rugby to destroy an entire batch of ash trees in a bid to stop the spread of the disease. Staff at the nursery were relieved that hundreds of other ash trees growing in a nearby field were spared. In Worcestershire, a week later, the Forestry Commission reported that a tree in a newly-planted area near Tenbury Wells was confirmed to have the disease, with two further suspected cases being investigated in Malvern. And in Shropshire, nearly 500 potentially infected trees were to be destroyed by the end of November.

In Birmingham and the Black Country, Wildlife Trust staff have been reassuring the public that changes in leaf colour followed by leaf-fall was most likely evidence of the season rather than the disease . . .

A continually-updated map of the spread of this disease in the UK is available at www.forestry.gov.uk/chalara . Government scientists have concluded that:

- the spores are unlikely to survive for more than a few days
- spore dispersal on the wind is possible from mainland Europe
- trees need a high dose of spores to become infected
- the spores are produced from infected dead leaves during June to September
- there is a low probability of dispersal on clothing or animals and birds
- the disease will attack any species of ash
- the disease becomes obvious in trees within months rather than years
- wood products would not spread the disease if treated properly
- once infected, trees can't be cured
- not all trees die of the infection, and some are likely to have genetic resistance

New strain of bird virus sweeps across Britain

A new strain of avian pox is taking its toll on garden birds in Britain. Avian pox has been recorded in species such as Dunnock, House Sparrow and Wood Pigeon for a number of years. However, the emergence of a new strain of this viral disease in Great Tits is now causing concern.

Wildlife vet Dr Becki Lawson has reported that *“infection leads to warty, tumour-like growths on different parts of a bird's body, particularly on the head around the eyes and beak. Although the disease can be relatively mild in some species, Great Tits suffer severe growths that can prevent them from feeding and increase their susceptibility to predation.”*



© C.Tomkinson@talkphotography (2012)

And Dr Shelly Lachish of the Edward Grey Institute at Oxford University has commented, *“Although recovery from infection can occur, our results show that this new strain of avian poxvirus significantly reduces the survival of wild Great Tits and has particularly large effects on the survival of juvenile birds.”*

Genetic studies on the virus show that it appears to be the same strain seen previously in Scandinavia and more recently in central Europe, and is unlikely to have originated within Great Britain. BTO data on bird movements confirms that great tits rarely migrate outside the country. The spread of the virus to Britain is, therefore, thought to have occurred through the arrival of an infected vector, such as a mosquito.



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Notice board at Cannock Chase

Impact of 2012's weather on birds

The legacy of the atrocious summer weather on Britain's wildlife is still much in evidence, and reports of reductions in invertebrate numbers, from bees to butterflies have been rife - but how did birds fare?

Latest results from British Trust for Ornithology surveys show that many bird species struggled to raise young during 2012. *"Caterpillars appear to have been in short supply during the cold, wet weather and many of the woodland birds dependent on them had a poor season,"* noted Carl Barimore, Nest Recording Survey Organiser. *"Blue Tit, Great Tit and Chaffinch fledged 13%, 18% and 58% fewer chicks respectively; this is the lowest productivity recorded for Chaffinch in almost 50 years and the second lowest for Great Tit over the same period. Rainfall may have made hunting difficult for raptor and owl species too, and Kestrel breeding success was also significantly lower than average."*

"There is no doubt that many fewer young birds fledged this year and current predictions of another cold winter suggest that survival rates over coming months may be low", explained Dr Dave Leech, a Senior Research Ecologist at BTO. *"This is likely to have a negative impact on abundance at the start of the 2013 season, but many of the smaller bird species are able to rapidly produce large numbers of young, and so have the potential to bounce back quickly after a single bad year. The worry is that the extreme conditions in 2012 were the result of a shift in the position of the jet stream and it is very difficult to predict how increasing global temperatures and melting of the Arctic ice will influence this in future. If these conditions become more frequent, they could have long-term consequences for Britain's bird populations."*



After the rains: bathing
Chaffinch

© John & Judith Rogers
2011

And woodland birds have been pouring into gardens this autumn amidst reports of patchy seed and nut availability in the countryside. Most striking has been the increase of species normally associated with woodland. Patchy seed availability in the countryside may be forcing these birds out of woodland, while bird foods such as sunflower hearts and nyjer seed are drawing them into gardens.

Other woodland species are also converging on garden feeders. These include Nuthatch, Jay and Coal Tit, all of which store food during autumn – caching – to ensure that they have sufficient reserves for the winter ahead. When natural seeds and nuts are scarce, it makes sense that these species spend more time in gardens storing food provided by householders.

Autumn 2012: garden bird winners (BTO Garden BirdWatch)

	Species	Increase this autumn %	Main autumn foods
1	Siskin	331	Seeds
2	Brambling	295	Seeds & nuts
3	Nuthatch	90	Seeds & nuts
4	Jay	85	Seeds & nuts
5	Great Spotted Woodpecker	66	Seeds & nuts
6	Coal Tit	62	Seeds & invertebrates
7	Goldcrest	56	Invertebrates
8	Jackdaw	53	Omnivorous
9	Redwing	51	Berries & invertebrates
10	Rook	39	Omnivorous
11	Blackcap	39	Berries
12	Fieldfare	38	Berries & invertebrates
13	Sparrowhawk	34	Other birds
14	Black-headed Gull	34	Omnivorous
15	Woodpigeon	29	Seeds & berries
16	Feral Pigeon	28	Seeds & scraps
17	Chaffinch	27	Seeds & nuts
18	Blackbird	26	Berries & invertebrates
19	Mistle Thrush	23	Berries & invertebrates
20	Great Tit	22	Seeds, nuts & invertebrates

Berries also appear to be thin on the ground in parts of the countryside this autumn. In gardens, however, different fruits and berries are available owing to the presence of many native and non-native trees and shrubs. Using these foods in unusually high numbers this autumn have been several members of the thrush family, most notably Blackbird, Mistle Thrush, Redwing and Fieldfare.

To contact the Hon Secretary or to provide copy for the next Newsletter:

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