



BRANCHLINE



ISSUE 45

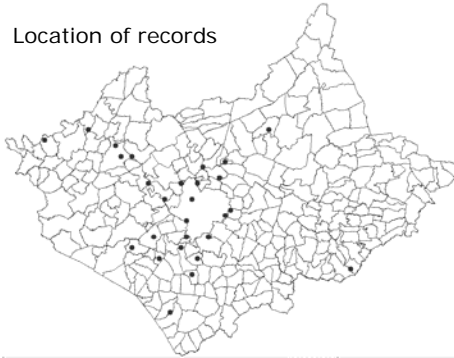
Spring 2006

Spotting Spawn

Spawn Spot was launched by the Community Heritage Initiative (CHI) in 2005 at the request of the Leicestershire Amphibian and Reptile Network. In just one year 40 survey forms were returned with 95 records from all districts of Leicestershire and Rutland.

Geographical distribution—The areas covered depended on the number and location of volunteer recorders. Low numbers of recorders meant that not every parish was covered.

Location of records



Frogspawn—The earliest sighting of frogspawn was the 19th February in Groby. The highest number of frogspawn clumps found was 58 at a site in Leicester on the 1st April.

Common Frog—Sightings of the common frog were recorded from the 1st February with 100 being the highest number recorded at a site in Coalville.



Common Toad—There were few sightings of toad spawn and toads, with three sites recording toad spawn, the earliest being 3rd March in Melton Mowbray. Four sites (including 2 which reported toad spawn) reported toads, the highest number being 30 at a site in Coalville.

What does it mean? - It is not possible to get a clear indication of the status of frog and toad populations due to the uneven

geographical coverage and low number of records. However, Spawn Spot does provide useful data on the earliest date frogspawn was recorded, information on where frog and toad populations are found in the two counties, and limited data on how many there are.



The low numbers of toad spawn and toads recorded is not surprising. They tend to be found in larger ponds, lakes and canals, rarely

breeding in garden ponds.

According to the County Recorder for Amphibians, frog populations are widespread in the western half of Leicestershire and in Rutland. Populations that have been monitored over a period of time are showing an increase in numbers. The common toad is as widespread as the common frog, but with more of a concentration in North West Leicestershire and Charnwood. There is no apparent evidence for a decline in common toad numbers, but the trend in population numbers is uncertain, possibly due to the fact that the species is not well recorded. BBC Spring Watch data on frogspawn showed the national average for first sighting of frogspawn as the 6th March 2005. The average for Leicestershire and Rutland, based on the records received, was 17th March. Factors including the weather have an effect on amphibian populations, e.g. the stop-start spring of 2005 (with a cold spell in Feb/early March) resulted in widespread sightings of frozen frogspawn.

More records are needed to get a fuller understanding of what is happening to our local amphibian populations, so contact the CHI team and join Spawn Spot today!

Community Heritage Initiative

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216 Birstall Road, Birstall, Leicestershire, LE4 4DG
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www.leics.gov.uk/celebrating_wildlife



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Who are you?

Leicestershire and Rutland Bat Group is a group of volunteers concerned about the plight of bats.

What are your areas of interest?

The group is interested in the conservation of native bats in Leicestershire and Rutland. Numbers of bats have declined by 70% in the last 25 years due to loss of their insect food, roosting sites and feeding areas, as well as changes to the countryside.

What do you do?

The group provides advice and assistance on any bat problem, informs people about bats and the need to conserve them, encourages bat-friendly practices in the timber treatment, building and arboricultural industries, and conducts bat research and surveys.

When/where do you meet?

The group meets at Brocks Hill Environment Centre, Oadby, and Holly Hayes Environment and Heritage Resources Centre, Birstall.

Do you have a newsletter?

Yes, it is published twice a year.

How can I contact you?

Contact the Bat Group at Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust, Brocks Hill Environment Centre, Washbrook Lane, Oadby, LE2 5JJ, 0116 2720444

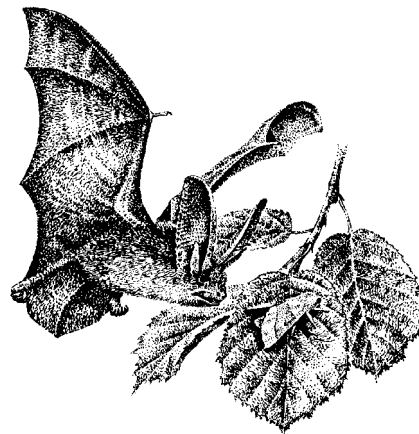
Do you have a website?

No, we hope to go online this year.

New bat project

An exciting new project is coming your way, aiming to make a big difference to bat conservation and provide great opportunities for you to get involved, learn about bats and carry out bat surveys in your neighbourhood.

Leicestershire and Rutland Bat Group is planning a programme of promotion, training and surveys throughout 2006. The Community Heritage Initiative is pleased to be able to provide support and assistance to the group, and collaborate on producing a bat survey that everyone can help with. The project aims to raise awareness of bat conservation issues with the public and professionals whose work brings them into contact with bats, to develop bat conservation skills of volunteers, collect data on bat population size and inform conservation plans.



Information on bat distribution is vital for conserving these intriguing mammals. You can help by recording where you see bats flying, whether it is over your garden, the churchyard, on a woodland edge or over the canal. You can also record bat roosts - buildings or trees



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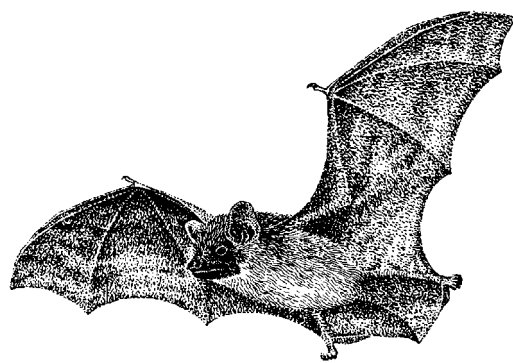
where you see bats emerging at dusk - and even count the number of bats you see. You can also look out for bat droppings in your local church or other old buildings, common roosting sites for bats.

Talks and training sessions will give you all the information you need to make a real difference to bat conservation and take part in these surveys, whether you want to spend just a couple of hours on it, or devote the whole summer to bat hunting. Look out for more information in future editions of Branchline, the Community Heritage Initiative website, and the local press. For more information about bat ecology and conservation, read the article elsewhere in this issue of Branchline.

The Community Heritage Initiative is working with Leicestershire and Rutland Bat Group as part of its programme to help natural history groups achieve their aims, and continue to make a vital contribution to nature conservation in our counties. The Bat Group approached the Community Heritage Initiative after hearing about how other groups have benefited. The group has been able to develop its plan for promotion of the group and bat issues, tap into the Community Heritage Initiative's facilities, and apply to Better Communities and the Ken Chamberlain Trust for funding to purchase equipment, produce displays and leaflets, and run training events.

Support for Groups

Natural history groups interested in exploring how the Community Heritage Initiative can help them should contact the team at the address below.



Bat facts

The scientific name for bats - Chiroptera - comes from two Greek words: *kheir* meaning hand and *pteron* meaning wing.

Bats are the only mammals capable of true flight.

The noctule bat can fly at up to 30 miles per hour.

There are 16 species of bat in the UK, and some have become very rare.

The smallest bat in the UK is the pipistrelle, weighing in at just 4 grams.

Only in the last few years have researchers found there are actually two types of pipistrelle bat in the UK, distinguished by the frequency of their call.

All bats in the UK feed on insects.

A pipistrelle bat can eat as many as 3,500 insects in one night.

Bats use echolocation to navigate and hunt at night. They emit a stream of sound pulses and listen for echoes, much like a driver uses headlights on a car and can see what lies ahead by the reflected light.

Bats roost in holes in trees, in caves, disused mines and similar places or in buildings.

All UK bats are protected by law.

Want to know more?

Contact the Leicestershire and Rutland Bat Group (see

Focus on...) or The Bat Conservation Trust: www.bats.org.uk, email enquiries@bats.org.uk, or call their Bat Helpline on 0845 1300 228 (local rate).

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Autumn Seasonwatch



Twenty volunteers (to date – Mid January 2006) have sent in to the Community Heritage Initiative (CHI) their records of the first signs of autumn 2005.

Why record the seasons?

By gathering information about the first signs of autumn and spring, CHI can begin to build a picture of how seasons are changing and the effects this has on our natural world. The data we receive is also exchanged with the national phenology network (www.phenology.org.uk)

Geographical coverage of records

The number of recorders participating in the autumn Seasonwatch project declined, partly because people are sending records direct to the national programme. We can however, compare the limited data we do have with previous years and with the national data received by the BBC Autumnwatch 2005 survey.

Autumn 2005 in Leicestershire and Rutland

The results are provisional at the time of writing this report as records are still being sent in. The warmer weather has led to the earlier ripening of blackberries with an average date of the 2nd August, which is similar to the national Autumnwatch 2005 results of blackberries ripening a week earlier than 2004. The average date of the first tinting of oak trees in Leicestershire and Rutland was the 6th October, with leaf fall being a lot later this year, occurring on average on the 2nd December. This compares to 1st October and 15th November in 2004.

The swift was last seen on the 19th

August and the swallow 20th September. This compares to 13th August and the 8th September in 2004.

Hawthorn also fruited early in the beginning of September, compared to mid September in 2004.

What does it all mean?

Blackberries and hawthorn berries fruiting earlier means that birds and animals which depend on stored energy from autumn fruits for hibernation and in preparation for a harsh winter will struggle.



In terms of the swift, this species will tend to leave earlier in warm years. This is because they are single brooded and once the young have fledged they will leave shortly after. As there is more food in warmer years, fledging will be quicker than in cooler years. So, late departure of swifts will be a response to that summer's weather, rather than a response to a late autumn.

More recorders please!

We need more people to get involved in recording seasonal changes in Leicestershire and Rutland so we can get a full picture of the effects of climate change. Survey forms can be downloaded at www.leics.gov.uk/celebrating_wildlife or are available from CHI on 0116 267 1377. CHI staff can give you guidance if required.



References

www.phenology.org.uk
www.the-woodland-trust.org.uk
Collinson, N.H., Sparks T.H. (2005) *Nature's Calendar. 2004 results from the UK Phenology Network. British Wildlife Vol. 16. No.4 251-256*

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Fear of the Countryside - a reflective pause for thought



Last year, a number of us from the CHI team attended a conference looking at encouraging children to explore the countryside. The keynote speaker stated that he felt the greatest barrier to raising more naturalists is that we now live in a fear

driven society. For example, we fear getting wet from rain in case we catch a chill, or fear accidents happening whilst we are out and about experiencing nature. This is often reinforced by a fear that all wildlife is dangerous, or that bad things will happen when outdoors. As a modern society, 30% of adults now have allergies, often caused by environmental conditions, or reactions to insect bites. This illustrates that our health responds to the changing world around us. However, does this mean we should shut ourselves away and not allow ourselves to be enchanted by nature?



So often we do not take the time to appreciate the natural world around us. In the past we gained our daily food and shelter directly from the natural environment, so had close

connections to wildlife and the changing seasons.

Enchantment comes when we are in tune with the natural world, for example when we are outdoors truly experiencing awe and wonder at the beauty of natural objects – even the rain! Many people have found that when they begin to make this reconnection they find new excitement in the places they live and the daily routes they might take, for example walking the dog. They suddenly notice the variety of wildlife and diversity of plants and flowers around them. So, next time you are out and about, for example enjoying the springtime beauty of a bluebell wood, or walking the dog, take a new look at the countryside environment and the wildlife it supports (perhaps make a note and start a diary) and see if you once again become enchanted with nature. ***If you want to know more about recording the countryside contact the CHI team!***

First Contact



People often say they can't get involved in studying wildlife as they don't know anything, and haven't had any contact with nature since they brought items for the nature table at primary school.

As children, many people collected objects linked to the natural world, such as shells from the beach, conkers, or fossils. The growing band of amateur naturalists in the two counties shows that this interest, often ignored or forgotten in adolescence when other things take priority, is still within us.



Whenever the CHI team talk to groups, one of the first slides is of a mallard duck. People look amazed and say: "But you work for a museum service! Why don't you show us slides of rare beetles, or plants with long complicated Latin names?" We then ask people to think of their "first contact" with nature and memories associated with it. Often it is digging worms in the garden, watching robins, or feeding ducks. This first encounter is often held in fond memory and all sorts of tales of childhood wildlife fascination abound. Ok, every now and then a member of the audience grew up somewhere exotic – but most often it is the common wildlife that we still see today, that has made the connection.

The Community Heritage Initiative is currently exploring what makes a naturalist! We want to hear from people who still study wildlife and find out what their formative wildlife experiences were that lead to a life of loving, and studying, the natural world. If you have strong memories, please write and tell the CHI team about them and if you like you could also tell us about what you are doing to record and help wildlife now.

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The Countryside of Mowsley

A report by Heritage Warden John Lacey on his work in and around the parish.

A large percentage of Mowsley and surrounding parishes is now under grass - with fields having recently been put down to grass. Crops are either maize, barley or rape, more recently I have noticed oats also being grown. One of the local farmers has a DEFRA stewardship and is particularly interested in wildlife and the countryside. The scheme incorporates a conservation area - a large part of which is wetland fed by deep springs. After a "taster" last year, I spent many hours this spring both hedge laying and setting - and hope to be doing the same this coming winter.

I have carried out a preliminary hedge survey with hedges being categorised 1790 (enclosure), post 1790 or pre 1790. The older hedges have generally been identified but not accurately dated, however some of them are of a considerable age. I am in the process of carrying out a detailed survey of the ridge and furrow including the layout and naming of the furlongs, the naming of the post enclosure fields and where possible the origin of the names.



Mammals

Badgers and foxes are prolific in the area. It is interesting that during recent

years foxes appear to have become more adventurous with the sighting of foxes during the day becoming a frequent occurrence. Early this year a badger became shut in a chicken coop and subsequently attacked the chickens!! Rabbits are fairly numerous - there is a warren in the conservation area - and we have a good population of hares. On the farms there are the usual voles, rats and mice. Grey squirrels appear to be more numerous but we rarely, if ever, see stoats or weasels. Muntjac are occasionally

spotted but sadly hedgehogs appear to be non-existent. There is a large colony of bats in the church - which are a perennial nuisance to the church cleaners and users - there appear to be several types of bat in residence and the sight of bats in Mowsley is not unusual.

Amphibians & Reptiles Common frogs and common toads are frequent visitors to the gardens and common newts exist in some ponds. A neighbour has had a nest of grass snakes in his compost heap but I have had no report of any other snake or lizard.

A number of ponds exist in the parish but many of them including the medieval fish ponds (which are to form part of the conservation area) are silted up. A new pond is planned in the conservation area.

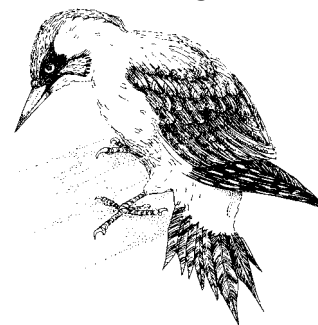
Birds There is a good variety of birds in the area, some of the more interesting ones being

treecreepers, lesser spotted flycatchers, greater spotted and green woodpeckers and the resident pair of buzzards. Other raptors include kestrels, sparrow hawks and owls. Although barn,

tawny and little owls have all been seen they are rarely heard calling and sadly are a rare sight. I have not seen a song thrush for some time and the cuckoo was heard calling on only a few occasions this spring. Recently a goldcrest made a rare visit to the garden.

Animals Killed on The Roads A dead badger on or at the side of the road is a common sight around here - there are almost as many badgers killed on the roads as there are rabbits. The only other animal that one sees killed is the fox.

Walks I have led two walks for the Rural Community Council - entitled 'The Landscapes of South Leicestershire' which proved to be a success in introducing a number of people to the countryside around here. I have also led walks around the village and am hoping to put together a village trail pamphlet.



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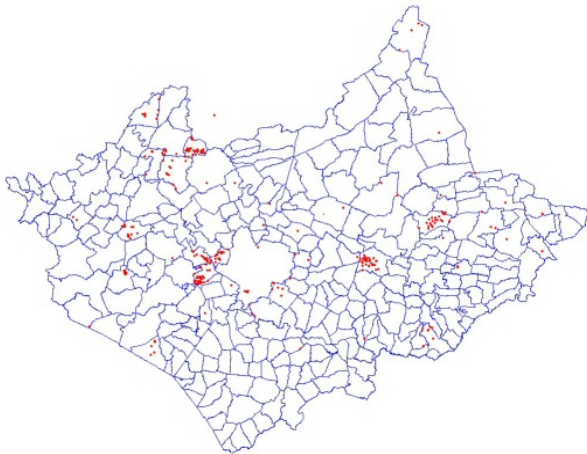


Valuing hedgerows

Community wildlife hedgerow surveys have been running since the early 1990's in Leicestershire and Rutland and records have been sent to Holly Hayes. Assessing these records shows the oldest hedge to be 1000 years old recorded in Burbage in 1996. The Community Heritage Initiative (CHI) has received fewer records between 2004-2006, and the oldest hedgerows recorded in this period are approximately 700 years old recorded in Empingham (2005) and Bottesford (2004).

Location of records

The map indicates those areas for which hedgerow records have been received, showing a low number from the more out-lying areas of the two districts.



Hedgerow features

The CHI survey found that some of the hedgerows had ditches and/or banks which are important as they provide habitat for frogs, toads, newts and reptiles.

Dead wood or old layers which can be found along at least 10% of a hedge were also recorded. This dead wood provides a rich source of food for insects.

The commonest type of hedgerow recorded was the dense, thick and tall hedge which is better for wildlife than the short, thin, gappy hedges.

The length and width of hedgerows varied with the longest being 390m in the Wanlip area, and the widest recorded as 4.5m in Bottesford. The tallest hedgerow was also recorded at Bottesford at 6-8m.

Species found in hedgerows

Some of the commonest species found in the CHI survey were: Ash, Blackthorn, Dog rose, Elder and hawthorn.

Species that occurred less frequently or not all included Crab Apple, Dogwood, Field maple, Guelder rose and Rowan.

The two ancient hedgerows recorded the most species as seven species on average per 30m section. Species rich hedgerows are those which have a minimum of five native woody species per 30m section. A hedgerow with a large variety of trees and shrubs will support more species, due to the different flowering and fruiting times providing food for wildlife over many months.

Why are hedgerows important?

Hedgerows are a primary habitat for 47 endangered species and help support an estimated 80% of woodland birds, up to 50% of British mammals and 30% of butterflies.

Hedgerows can provide substitute habitat and therefore are particularly important in Leicestershire and Rutland due to the low percentage of woodland cover.

Acting as wildlife corridors, hedgerows also link other habitats such as grassland and woodland enabling species to disperse and travel between habitats.

Hedgerow survey 2006

Please join in this year's survey and see how many species you can find and if you can discover the oldest hedgerow in Leicestershire and Rutland!

The hedgerow survey forms for 2006 are now available from CHI or can be downloaded at www.leics.gov.uk/celebrating_wildlife



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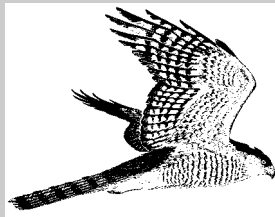


Feeding the Birds in Winter— Corvid Capers By Alan Hedger

The birds on my field like their morning tiffin at around eleven o'clock. I am not sure why, but they do. This is convenient for me in one way: as it allows time to replenish the various feeders and "tables". I try not to put seed on all of the feeding stations on every visit for two reasons: a) it forces the birds to search for the seed and b) it stops the Wily Crow from knowing exactly where the food will be.

This somewhat paranoid behaviour has been brought about by a long and bitter struggle between myself and the afore-mentioned avian bandit. In the beginning I erected conventional wooden seed-tables. High enough off the ground to discourage rats and close to the boundary hedge, where I park my car, to be able to watch the birds feeding. Thus enabling the birds to be safe from the attentions of our friendly local sparrowhawk, whilst allowing me to identify some of the species that I had managed to attract to my little nature reserve.

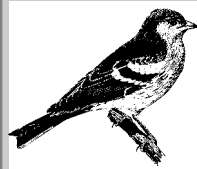
Everything in the reserve was splendid: starving rats; big fat songbirds; a fairly cross sparrowhawk. Then I noticed that the seed on the feeders was being gobbled-up suspiciously quickly. It transpired that the Wily Crow was perched in an old oak tree opposite and, when spotting me leave seed out, would swoop down and stuff itself to the brim with my birdseed. When I raced up to the feeder, waving my arms and shouting sternly, he



would flap away. Only to resume the second my back was turned.

I soon got bored with this and hatched a cunning plan. I would construct a MK2 feeder: which would still enable the small birds to feed but would keep the, by now truly enormous, crow away. Sadly the MK2 feeder soon turned into the MK10 feeder with no noticeable effect on the enemy's waistline. Even worse, the feeders were now so well fortified that I was having difficulty in dismantling them sufficiently to replenish the food.

Thus Plan B was born. This entailed sitting about 50 seed-tables, in reality old tin trays and plastic plant-pot saucers, all around the reserve. These are mainly on the wooden posts which hold up the rabbit fence, but quite a few are on posts erected within areas of rough grass in the forlorn hope that owls or kestrels might fancy a bit of perch hunting.



Nowadays, when I arrive and park my car, the chaffinch assigned to sentry-duty alerts everyone, and I mean everyone, that it is snack time.

There follows a period of muffled tweetings and flappings as the massed multitudes jostle for the best spots. I always put a little bit of seed on the table most convenient for WC first: allowing him to steal some seed and fly off, serene in the knowledge that he has gotten the better of me again. I then proceed to put the rest of the seed out.

My strategy seems to be working: not enough seed on each feeder to attract unwelcome guests but, added together, still quite a lot in total. Unless, of course, the crow is wiler than I thought.

ABOUT BRANCHLINE

Branchline is produced by Leicestershire County Council's Holly Hayes Environment & Heritage Resources Centre and is the newsletter for the Community Heritage Initiative (CHI), a project developed with support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and Rutland County Council. It aims to be a networking publication and used as an information source for Parishes, groups, and individuals interested in protecting and discovering more about the area's countryside and heritage. Mailings are free of charge as a service to the communities of Leicestershire and Rutland. If you have any articles that you would like to see in Branchline, drop us a line at Holly Hayes (details below), or e-mail them to chi@leics.gov.uk. Articles are welcome and **the deadline for the Summer 2006 Edition is May 1st 2006.**

The articles supplied do not necessarily reflect the views of Leicestershire County Council or the CHI partners.



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