

RSPB Aylesbeare Common Reserve November 2014 newsletter



The glorious weather at the beginning of September meant that the grass in our fields could finally be turned to hay with the whole team at hand collecting the hay bales- now stashed away in the barn. Immediately it was adopted as home by a black cat with a family of four kittens! So if anyone has lost a cherished family pet...

With the sun behind us and the cold well and truly kicked in the winter work has begun. The chainsaws are busy and the fires have been roaring with our usual gorse coppicing and scrub clearance. The cattle numbers are slowly decreasing as they return to their wintering abodes and our hardy Dartmoor and Exmoor ponies will enjoy having the reserve for themselves whilst the cows are gone.

During that sunny September the swallows seemed reluctant to move on to their warm winters abroad- no idea why! The last few to leave were the nestlings from our own barn, as autumn arrived. How do they find the way for their first trip across the Sahara? I must find someone to ask, but apparently they can follow the earth's magnetic field and just "know" what direction to go, but not necessarily how far...

The nightjars left us in September, and they have been replaced with our winter migrants: the beginning of the survey season has greeted us with sightings of the skylark, fieldfares, snipe, meadow pipits and an abundance of our resident wood pigeons with the Dartford warblers still bobbing about in the gorse scrub. It is also time to look out for the hen harriers as they move to the heathland areas until spring arrives.

Chestnut splitting has become a new task. We hope to use chestnut that was felled last year in Kent as permanent fencing, replacing the current electric one, around a small piece of woodland near the A3052 (knewon to us as YOC wood) to ensure that the dormice are protected from our eagerly grazing animals. But first we have to gain the permission of the Planning Inspectorate to alter our permanent fencing plan.

The firewood business began early with people preparing for the winter, thus the team have also been busy collecting logs and creating the firewood with the more efficient processor which we share with our reserve at Arne in Dorset. Our supplies are higher than last year so, if you would like any firewood, please contact the reserve office on 01395 233655.

Although the purple haze of the flowering heather has disappeared, the reserves are now flourishing in fungi of all shapes, colour and sizes; the cows seemingly enjoy munching on those fly agarics. A few butterflies still seem to appear every time the sun comes out, even in this cold weather: a red admiral flexing its wings on a stone in the sun is a lovely sight. But I think I'm with the dormice, as they now prepare to snuggle away to hibernate for the chill ahead.