

It's been a busy summer of events here at Aylesbeare Common. Following on from the success of 'The Big Wild Sleep Out' we hosted the RSPB South West Site Managers meeting which saw work continuing on the Iron-aged roundhouse and a very soggy Bioblitz of the reserve identifying as many species of insects, flora and fauna as possible.

One of our most enthusiastic participants of 'The Big Wild Sleep Out' loved the building experience so much he kindly came and worked on the roundhouse for a week in August. The main structure is now complete and is awaiting reed for thatching from RSPB's Ham Wall reserve in Somerset once they have carried out their annual reed cut in winter. The walls will be daubed in a traditional method using a mixture of clay, straw and dung so if you fancy getting your hands dirty and helping us then we are holding two daubing days on Oct 26th and Nov 23rd. If you are interesting in joining us for this free event please call our Exeter Office on 01392 432691 for more information and to book your place.

The 20th annual Heath Week at the end of July started with a fun open day in the sunshine at Woodbury Castle. The event was a collaboration between East Devon's charities, organisations and land owners and offered visitors nature themed activities such as tractor rides across the heathland, wildlife rambles, storytelling, willow weaving, constructing bird boxes and a charcoal making demonstration. Aylesbeare Common hosted pond dipping and guided walks throughout the week, finishing with a 'Dawn till Dusk' day on the reserve. Those who made the effort to get up early for the dawn chorus walk were rewarded with views of Dartford warblers, stonechats, adders, grass snakes and slow worms followed by an al fresco bbq breakfast.

Reserve work this summer has focussed on amendments to the stock fencing around the reserve. You may have noticed the changes to the new fenceline, this has been in response to local concerns over the use of solely barbed wire in its construction. We have taken these concerns on board and it was decided to change to a plain wire with just a single strand of barbed on top. It has been a summer long project which is now complete and we appreciate your patience with the work. The Dartmoor ponies and Galloway cattle have been oblivious to the changes and continue to enjoy their free ranging, a little too much as they are often tricky to find! Otherwise work on the reserve has been the usual pulling of ragwort and control of birch saplings and bracken. This work is essential in maintaining the dominance of heather and gorse providing ideal conditions for those insects and birds that specialise on our heathland habitat.

One of these specialists, the iconic Dartford warbler, did particularly well this year having analysed our breeding bird surveys with an increase in territories up from 8 in 2013 to 11 this year. This continues their recovery from the harsh winter of 2010 which saw them down to just 3 pairs on the reserve. Unfortunately nightjar territories are down to 21 from 27 last year, however this figure is still within our target. The adult nightjars will have migrated back to Africa in August with the juveniles waiting until September or even into October before they make this incredible journey for the first time.

Numbers of the rare and protected Southern damselfly were significantly down on last year (peak count of 15 down from 57 in 2013). However numbers in all other local populations are also low, so seen in this light Aylesbeare's numbers are actually fairly good. Butterflies fared much better however with both and small pearl-bordered fritillary making a return to the reserve after a 4 year and 12 year break respectively. The silver-studded blues were found on a new location within the reserve that has been managed specifically for invertebrates by scraping off the top soil.