

SOUTH DOWNS NEWS

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SOUTH DOWNS
NATIONAL PARK

WORK AND PLAY IN YOUR NATIONAL PARK

This month:

- **Gnawsome news!** Find out about the reintroduction of beavers to help create a new wildlife haven and support waterways at a farm in the National Park.
- **Three cheers for 15 years!** Discover wildlife success stories as the National Park turns 15.
- **Improving access** Learn more about a route that joins urban areas to heart of South Downs.
- **Win free museum tickets!** Win free entry to one of the National Park's best heritage venues.

As always, please send your comments and ideas to us at newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk

Beavers about! Boost for wetland in National Park

A pair of beavers have been reintroduced to a South Downs stream to help restore waterways and create a flourishing wildlife haven.

Europe's largest rodent, known as an "ecosystem engineer" for its remarkable ability to increase biodiversity, would once have been widespread across the UK but was hunted to extinction around 400 years ago.

Now a groundbreaking project, led by Meonside Farm and working with the University of Southampton and the National Park Authority, has reintroduced the charismatic creatures to a rare chalk stream near Petersfield, Hampshire.

The Beaver Trust has helped to relocate two beavers from Scotland to the contained two-hectare site, where scientists will now study the ecological and geographical changes in the habitat over the coming years. Since the



reintroduction in December, the pair are progressing well at the site and are being monitored by a wildlife cam.

The planting-eating mammal is a keystone species and one of nature's most incredible ecological engineers. Through building dams, digging canals, and creating dead wood, "busy" beavers help maintain



habitats where a large diversity of life can thrive, including many mammal, bird, fish, amphibian and insect species.

Beavers also improve river health by preventing soil from surrounding fields being washed out to sea. With the trapping of carbon and nutrients, water quality is improved downstream and flooding can potentially be reduced.

Farmer Will Atkinson, who is leading the reintroduction, said: "This project is a great example of how landowners and farmers who work so hard to produce the nation's food can also contribute to species recovery whilst protecting our precious watercourses."

The University's School of Geography and Environmental Science, supported by funding from the Sustainability

Research Institute, will be carrying out research into how the habitat and its topography change over time.

The scientists will be sampling “Environmental DNA” – or eDNA – to build up an accurate picture of all forms of life on the site. All animals and plants leave some form of DNA imprint on an environment – whether it be a hair, saliva, mucus, skin fragment or a seed, for example. With new sophisticated DNA sequencing technology, researchers can now build up a profile of every species in a habitat simply by taking a small water or soil sample, rather than just relying on surveys by sight.

As well as the DNA sampling, the University’s team will be conducting detailed topographical surveys and testing changes in water flow and quality. The research will help inform other reintroduction programmes of the beaver across Europe.

Working with the National Park’s Western Ranger team, fencing has been installed to create a perimeter enclosure around the site, which also contains an old duck pond and vegetation. The type of fencing is specifically engineered to keep beavers in.

Extensive consultation has taken place with the local community, with widespread support for the project. There will be opportunities for volunteers to get involved with various activities, including regular fence checks, habitat monitoring and photography.

Jan Knowlson, Biodiversity Officer for the National Park, said: “Beavers are an amazing animal that were once an integral part of British wildlife and it’s wonderful to see a family setting up home in the South Downs National Park, where boosting biodiversity is one of our primary objectives.

“We’re looking forward to seeing how this project progresses and what changes are seen in the habitat. Beavers have not lived in the South Downs for over 400 years, so we’re taking ‘baby steps’ in terms of any reintroductions and still learning lots about their impact on ecosystems. Water is a key aspect of the National Park’s nature recovery ambitions, so this project dovetails with so much of our wider work around improving and restoring wetlands and increasing awareness about the importance of water.”



Farmers Will and Oliver Atkinson reintroduce the beavers

Happy 15th Birthday! Biodiversity success stories



Did you know the South Downs National Park was created to help conserve and enhance biodiversity?

The 16,000km² National Park was designated as a haven for nature with some of the rarest habitats in the world – reptile-rich heathlands, chalk grasslands brimming with blue butterflies, wildlife-rich wetlands and woodlands full of bird song.

But, like so much of Britain in the 20th century, nature had been marginalised in some parts, often just about surviving in isolated “island” habitats, leaving some species in danger of local extinction.

The creation of the South Downs National Park has started to turn the tide on that biodiversity loss, with concerted efforts over the past 15 years to create bigger, better and more joined-up habitats where animals and plants can thrive.

As the National Park celebrates its 15th birthday on 31 March, 15 biodiversity success stories are being shared:

Habitat area bigger than Portsmouth now thriving

Four years ago the South Downs National Park set a goal of transforming 13,000 hectares – or over 20,000 football pitches – into habitat for wildlife by 2030.

Under the **ReNature initiative**, a total of 6,082 hectares – an area bigger than Worthing or Portsmouth – has now been created or improved to help nature thrive. The work has included planting over 70,000 trees to help woodland birds such as the great-spotted woodpecker and blue tit, as well as adding over 100 hectares of wildflowers to help pollinators like bees and butterflies.

“Ratty’s” remarkable return

A recent ecological report showed that the animal made famous by *The Wind in the Willows* is making a strong comeback. A re-introduction programme started in 2013 and has seen the release of over 2,800 water voles. The report concluded that the furry mammals are indeed thriving, and busily breeding, on the river.



The otter has also returned to the River Meon, with evidence there may be three breeding females.

The Round-Headed Rampion and the Pyramidal Orchid

The Round-Headed Rampion, also known as the 'Pride of Sussex', can be found throughout the Sussex and Hampshire Downs. Scrub removal followed by sheep grazing has allowed this chalk grassland specialist to flourish. Meanwhile, scrub management in the winter months has helped to increase numbers of the beautiful Pyramidal Orchid.



Duke of Burgundy butterfly

The nationally declining and threatened Duke of Burgundy butterfly has responded spectacularly to habitat management work performed as part of the South Downs Way Ahead Nature Improvement Area (NIA), recovering from the brink of extinction and extending its territory.

Supercharging private investment into nature recovery

Last year the South Downs became the first National Park to launch a Voluntary Biodiversity Credits initiative.

The voluntary scheme allows businesses of all sizes to invest in nature recovery and has gained significant interest since its launch last May. Under the voluntary scheme, more than biodiversity units have so far been purchased to help create new habitat.

Two iconic cricket species

The South Downs remains the last bastion in the UK for the iconic field cricket. Thirty years ago the species was isolated to just one site of 100 field crickets in West Sussex. But a concerted effort has helped to establish six colonies at heathland sites in Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire. Meanwhile, the wart-biter bush cricket has bounced back in the South Downs. One of the UK's most endangered insects, its quirky name come from the ancient Swedish medical practice of using them to eat skin warts.



Farmland birds

Over 70 per cent of the National Park is farmland and a big effort has been made to help wildlife, including important farmland bird species such as the grey partridge, lapwing, yellowhammer and skylark.

Dragonflies

Ten dew ponds have been restored across the National Park to help species such as dragonfly.

The National Park has set a target of restoring 100 of the ponds to help insects, amphibians and birds.

Wild Trout

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The Rother Revival project, with support from The Sussex Lund grant programme, is under way and focuses on restoring and enhancing a stretch of the western Rother in Hampshire and West Sussex.

The work is helping to reduce erosion and sedimentation – something that will benefit spawning wild trout, which need clear well-oxygenated water to lay their eggs.

"Rewigging" the Cockshut Stream

The restoration of the Cockshut Stream to create a wetland has seen the area quickly become an oasis for nature, with herons, kingfishers, egret and snipe among the many birds to be found, while toads, sticklebacks, eels and newts can be spotted in the ponds.

Heathland conservation

A £2m initiative called Heathlands Reunited successfully conserved and enhanced 23,825 hectares of lowland heath – which is a reptile-rich habitat as rare as the rainforest.



An independent scientific assessment revealed the initiative has been "significant" in restoring the ecological condition of the habitat.

Securing the future of Seven Sisters Country Park



In 2021 the National Park Authority took over Seven Sisters Country Park, ensuring 280 hectares of chalk cliffs, meandering river valley and open chalk grassland remains in public ownership. The green shoots of nature recovery are being seen at the

Country Park, thanks to more investment and careful landscape management, including the introduction of Sussex Breed cattle and Shetland ponies

Barn owls

Hundreds of barn owl boxes have been installed across the National Park with support from local ranger teams. As an apex predator, barn owls are a good indicator of the health of landscape. As a general rule the more barn owls we have, the healthier the ecosystem is!

Dormice

Dormice continue to be on the brink across the UK, but the National Park has been working hard to help this struggling mammal. Dormice love a well-managed hedge and hundreds of metres of hedges have been laid in recent years, together with extra training for volunteers and community groups on how to maintain wildlife-rich hedges. Careful woodland management, together with more volunteer dormouse surveyors, means things are looking more hopeful for this elusive creature.

A new network of wetlands

An exciting £1.7m project called "Downs to the Sea" recently got under way to restore and create a network of "blue spaces" in the landscape. The project will help hundreds of wetland bird species such as the curlew, redshank, wagtail, little egret and oystercatcher.

Somewhere over the rainbow lies the South Downs...



A dreamy image of golden fields at the end of a rainbow has won one storm-chasing photographer the "People's Choice" crown in the National Park's photo competition.

Almost 800 people voted for their favourite shot from a shortlist of 30, with Jamie Fielding's "Over The Rainbow" emerging a clear winner.

The photograph captures a balmy, humid August evening in the National Park as harvest time approaches.

Jamie took the picture near Meonstoke, in Hampshire.

Jamie, who lives in Angmering, West Sussex, and wins £75, said: "I decided to do a bit of storm chasing this particular evening as there had been a lot of thunderstorms popping up and figured there could be some nice moody skies to shoot.

"Just as I got to the location the skies clear behind me and the sun created this lovely rainbow out in front. I'm delighted to have won the People's Choice, especially as I was up against so many equally deserving photographers.

"Having grown up in and around the South Downs, it's a place that really feels like home to me.

"I love exploring the rolling hills, heathlands and forests or kayaking up the River Arun or Adur taking in the stunning scenery and wildlife.

"I feel very lucky to have this special place on my doorstep."

The photo competition will return in April with an exciting new theme.

Details will be revealed at www.southdowns.gov.uk

Astrophotography and Dark Skies

Thank you to all who came and enjoyed our Dark Skies Festival last month. We hope you're inspired by the dark skies and will give some stargazing a go!

Our astrophotography People's Choice vote is still open until 24 March. **[Cast your vote here!](#)**

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY Improving access to the National Park from urban areas



An after shot of the Egrets Way following path refurbishment

Around 9km of the Egrets Way has now been delivered to improve access to the National Park.

The project officially began in 2011 with the ambition of creating a shared path following the course of the River Ouse and connecting the villages between Newhaven and Lewes.

It takes its name from the little egret wading bird that you may be lucky enough to see along the route.

The latest phase was completed last autumn, delivering just over 3km of path between Lewes and Southease.

Work on the seventh, and final, phase of the project has now begun, with efforts under way to develop a new shared-used 800m path to connect the existing Egrets Way at Deans Farm and Piddinghoe village High Street.

The project has been led by the National Park Authority, Sustrans and the Egrets Way Community Group.

Alister Linton-Crook, Cycling Project Officer for the South Downs National Park, said: "It's exciting to be embarking on the final phase of the Egrets Way as the National Park marks its 15th birthday.

"The route provides a safe way for walkers, cyclists, wheelchair-users, mobility scooters and equestrians to get right into the heart of the National Park and experience stunning views and beautiful destinations. It's part of our wider focus of connecting the National Park to busy urban areas and encouraging more people to be able to experience its health and wellbeing benefits."



A before shot of the land that became Egrets Way

Deadline approaching for planning consultation



People are being urged to have their say as the clock counts down to the deadline for a major public consultation on the future of the National Park.

The Local Plan Review will decide how and where development takes place in the National Park, as well as addressing important issues such as nature recovery, climate change, affordable housing and helping local communities thrive.

Well over 600 comments have been received from the public so far, including more than 400 through the online consultation platform and a further 200 via email or post.

More than 800 people have attended consultation events at venues across Sussex and Hampshire throughout January and February.

The consultation runs until midnight on **Monday, 17 March**.

Claire Tester, Planning Policy Manager for the National Park Authority, said: "We've had a really good response to the consultation and I'd like to thank everyone who has taken the time to give their feedback.

"This is the main opportunity for people to help shape the final Plan, so it's really important that if you care about the future of the National Park that you take part in the consultation.

"Probably the easiest way to submit comments is through the online platform, so we encourage everyone, both inside and outside the National Park, to have their say if they can."

Responses to the consultation can be made in the following ways:

- Online: Using the consultation platform and give feedback on the draft revised Local Plan at <https://sdnpalocalplanreview.commonplace.is/>
- Email: planningpolicy@southdowns.gov.uk
- In writing: Planning Policy Team, South Downs National Park Authority, North Street, Midhurst, West Sussex, GU29 9DH

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY Makeover for South Downs Way



A horse-stile that prevented wheelchair users, mobility scooters and families with buggies from using a section of the South Downs Way has been removed.

The refurbishments at Washington, West Sussex, have been completed in time for the spring as hundreds of people venture out to explore the 5,000-year-old route that stretches for 100 miles along the South Downs ridge.

The work was part of the final tranche of funding from **Miles Without Stiles**, which has been supported by Gatwick Airport. Over the past eight years, seven routes have been created in the National Park that are ideal for a wide range of people with different mobility levels and families with pushchairs. Path surfaces have been improved and stiles have been removed to improve access.

At Washington, large wooden sleepers that formed part of an old horse-stile were barriers to mobility scooters and prams. These have now been removed and replaced with an easy latch bridleway gate, new post and rail fencing and improved surface around the gate way.

Ben Bessant, National Trails and Countryside Access Officer, said: "This is a significant improvement to the South Downs Way and it's great to see this section looking so smart.

"As we mark Disabled Access Day in March, it's important to always recognise that everyone, regardless of their mobility or fitness levels, should be able to enjoy National Parks and that's why Miles Without Stiles is so important."

The National Park Authority has produced walk guides and helpful videos about each of the routes: **Bramber; Ditchling Beacon and the Chattri; Iping and Stedham Commons; Seaford Head; Seven Sisters; Mill Hill** and **West Walk, Forest of Bere**.



Kev's South Downs challenge



Many people choose to walk the South Downs Way in sections – and this is what we advise to get the most pleasurable experience!

However, intrepid Kevin Green is planning to walk the entire 100 miles – without stopping – to help raise awareness for cancer and the struggles people face.

It comes after a close family friend battled breast cancer and was recently given the all-clear.

"Jennie is a wife and mother, and was diagnosed at the age of 39," explained Kevin, who lives in Worthing.

"She's been through hell and back with the breast cancer diagnosis and treatment, but she's not the only one.

"Fortunately, with an incredible attitude and desire to beat breast cancer, she had the news just before her 40th birthday that she was cancer-free, which inspired me to try to raise money for Breast Cancer UK.



"No sleeping, no stopping, but it'll be a great adventure! It will take me about 38 hours.

"It's one of the hardest things I've ever tried, including the four marathons I've done in the past."

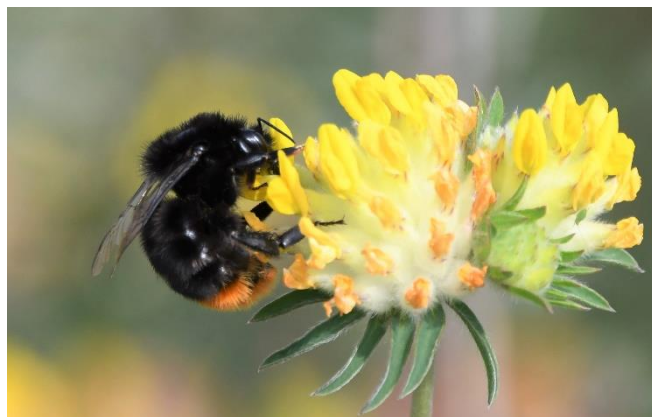
Kevin will start the walk from Winchester at about four o'clock on the morning of the summer solstice (20-21 June) to give him the maximum of amount of daytime walking.

Family, friends and work colleagues plan to meet him along the way. For part of the walk, one of his companions will include Monty, the family's two-year-old Hungarian Vizsla.

You can support Kevin's walk [here](#).

For ideas about walking or cycling the South Downs Way visit this [webpage](#).

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY Boost for National Park's bees



Efforts to create new areas of wildflowers to help bees and butterflies have received a huge boost.

UK National Parks has announced a two-year partnership with Howdens, a leading trade kitchen supplier, to support nature recovery.

In the South Downs, Howdens will support the Bee Lines project, which is creating new networks of wildflowers to help pollinators move through the landscape.

Over 100 hectares, or 160 football pitches, of wildflower meadow has so far been created – with more on the way thanks to the support of Howdens.

The project is helping iconic species such as the bumblebee and Adonis blue.

Jan Knowlson, Biodiversity Officer for the South Downs National Park, said: "Bees are essential to healthy ecosystems and by pollinating flowers they create food for other wildlife and, of course, humans.

"In fact, one out of every three mouthfuls of our food depends on pollinators such as bees.

"Bees have been on the decline across the UK for many years, so it's wonderful to receive this support from Howdens which will mean we can help nature bounce back by creating even more wildflower habitats."

Meanwhile, Howdens will also be supporting "GrubsUp" in the North York Moors National Park, helping to create 'insect super-highways' by restoring habitats.

Spanning 10 per cent of Great Britain's land area, the 15 National Parks are crucial to sustaining biodiversity, protecting wildlife, and combating climate change. By teaming up with like-minded businesses such as Howdens, the National Parks can take immediate action to protect and restore these vital landscapes.

Claire Toomey, Programme Lead for Howdens, said: "We are committed to achieving net zero and want to continue to support the management of natural resources as part of our road to zero initiative. We have chosen to support National Parks due to its national reach but with targeted projects at a local level."

Bee Lines is run the South Downs Trust, the official charity of the National Park. To donate visit this [webpage](#).

Luke finds new joy in the Downs



As the National Park Authority's Digital and Social Media Officer you may think I'm terminally online.

And you would be correct.

However, I recognise it's not healthy to stay plugged in the

whole time. Sure, there's an element of FOMO but, on the whole, it's just purely down to bad habits.

I've decided to do something about it.

Like most dogs, my beautiful boy Riley enjoys nothing more than a saunter on the South Downs and to really stretch his legs on those climbs.

Our favourite walk is a 9km loop that takes us from our home in Broadwater in Worthing up a little track called Charmandean Lane. The name refers to the old manor house that used to dominate the area on the site of one of the few hills in Worthing.

This track is a mix of gravel, chalk and flint, taking users past the adjacent houses of the now Longlands Estate, up past the eastern edge of Hill Barn Golf Club, and to the top of the hill, where users either choose to go right towards the Sompting Estate or go left to meet with the track Hill Barn track to the top of Cissbury Ring, home of the second largest hillfort in England. We normally, neigh always, go left.

With Riley with me, I used these walks to catch-up on podcasts or shove my Spotify playlist on Shuffle, paying very little attention to what was going on around me, other than checking behind me every now and again in case a peloton of mountain bikers would go full pelt up the hill.

Recently, I've acquired a new addition to my dog walks. The arrival last December of my first born – a little baby boy – was a pretty sizeable change. Over the past couple of weeks, with the little tyke just that tiny bit bigger, I've strapped on the baby harness, tucked him in, and ventured out together to take Riley for his morning walk.

Now, when you've got a baby strapped to the front of you, you want to take every precaution you can not to put them in danger. Headphones on with music blaring through is a definite 'no no' for someone as risk averse as me.

What was incredibly noticeable on that first walk was the cacophony of sound. Sure, I could still hear the roar of traffic on the busy A27 at the bottom of the hill but my ears started to become far more accustomed to twills and shrieks coming from the hedgerows and line of hazel, hawthorn and gorse bushes that line the track.

To my shame, despite working for a National Park, I've never been much of a birder. I'm more of a 'hey look, a pretty sunrise' or a 'wow, the frost on that branch is incredible' kind of person.

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But, with my baby boy strapped to my chest I thought 'wouldn't it be nice to tell him what we're hearing exactly.'

Right then I pulled out my phone, went to the Play Store, and typed in 'bird sound identifier.' Whilst there are lots of options available, I saw an app called 'Merlin Bird ID', produced by Cornell University. 'Cornell', I thought, 'isn't that the college Andy went to?' (any fans of the US version of *The Office* would get this reference immediately).

I downloaded Merlin, gave it access to my location and my phone's media (always done with a bit of trepidation) and hit the button that said 'Sound ID.'

Immediately, the app started to detect the bird song, every time it heard a tune it would flash up with the bird 'Song Thrush', 'European Robin', 'Eurasian Magpie', 'Long-tailed tit', 'European Greenfinch.'

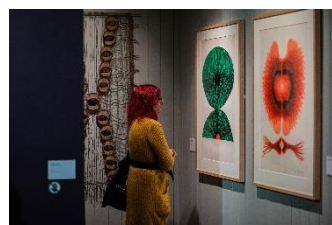
Suddenly, just like that, I was able to hear the song, look at my phone and tell my baby boy what we just heard. I was now a birder!

The most amazing thing over the past few days has been hearing the growing chorus of birds, participating, perhaps competing, but adding their song to this symphony of sound that is now part of my early morning mix.

The spring dawn chorus is well and truly rising, and I cannot wait for what we may hear next.



Win tickets to amazing museum!



The National Park has teamed up with the very wonderful Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft to offer free entry for two people.

It comes as the museum recently unveiled its latest exhibition celebrating the work of Tadek Beutlich MBE (1922–2011), who was a visionary textile artist, printmaker and teacher.

Polish-born Beutlich, who lived in Ditchling in the late 60s and early 70s, was renowned for his extraordinary tapestries, textile constructions and large vivid relief prints.

Strikingly large works created in his Ditchling studio take centre stage in "On and off the loom", including *Dream Revealed* (1968), an eight-foot-tall weaving created using unspun jute, mohair and horsehair that has not been seen since it was shown in Switzerland at the Lausanne Textile Biennale in 1969.

People signing up to the newsletter during March will be automatically entered into the draw to win the ticket. Those who are already signed up can email "winged insect" to newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk before midnight on 31 March. Sign up to the newsletter [here](#) and see competition T&Cs [here](#).

Things to do in the South Downs this March

Please follow the links as booking may be necessary. Find these and more events across the National Park and submit your own events at southdowns.gov.uk/events/



Daffodils at sunset at Mill Hill by Vicki Booth

- Are you interested in calligraphy? On 14 March you can join Jodie Rose, a calligraphy expert, for an introduction to pointed pen modern calligraphy in the beautiful setting of [Stansted House's Blue Drawing Room](#).
- Enjoy a visit to [Denmans Garden](#), Fontwell, on 16 March. Created by Joyce Robinson, a horticulturalist and pioneer in gravel gardening, the venue is the former home of influential landscape designer, John Brookes MBE. Denmans is a Grade II registered post-war garden renowned for its curvilinear layout and complex plantings.
- Head to [Gilbert White's House and Garden](#), Selborne, on 19 March for their Open Greenhouse Day. The greenhouse will be busy as the propagating team prepare plants for this season's planting and sales. Meet the team, find out about our plant production operation, watch the system in action and ask questions. Free with admission.
- From 22 March to October, [Arundel Museum](#) will be holding a new exhibition on the history of Arundel Castle Gardens. Uncovering the changes from the Victorian gardens through to the transformation of a visitor car park into today's wonderful Collector Earl's Garden and the renewal of the medieval Stew Ponds.
- Head to Langham's Brewery, at Lodsworth, on 22 March for the [South Downs Festival of Food, Fizz and Firkins](#). The festival will have a diverse array of local produce available to buy and sample – all from within a 50-mile radius of Lodsworth.
- Coming up over the Easter holidays is a [Youth Action Day at Seven Sisters Country Park](#). If you're aged between 16 and 25 and love nature this is for you! The free event on 12 April will be a chance to immerse yourself in the landscape and wildlife at Seven Sisters Country Park. Experienced guides will share their knowledge about the local flora and fauna. You will be able to marvel at the breathtaking views of the iconic Seven Sisters cliffs and breathe in the fresh coastal air.

Pic credits

P2 right John Lauper (little egret); P2 right Dick Hawkes (water vole); P3 left Piers Fearick (yellowhammer); P3 right Peter Brooks (short-eared owl); P5 left Harting by Chris Gorman; P6 right Red-tailed Bumblebee by Tim Squire.