



Newsletter

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www.yacwag.org.uk

Swift Action Required

Swifts are so amazing but they are under a huge amount of pressure. They only spend about three months of the year here in the UK and perhaps that is why we value their presence so much. Screaming parties of swifts overhead are part of our summer heritage and we really don't want to lose them from Yatton and Congresbury skies. Numbers have declined dramatically and it is known that once a colony has gone it is very difficult to get them to return to that community. YACWAG Trustee Meriel Harrison decided to do something about it.

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PLEASE SEND YOUR
PHOTOS, ARTICLES
AND INFORMATION
for the next newsletter to
contact@yacwag.org.uk



Common Swift in Yatton

Photo by Jon Thobroe

Save Our Swifts

For me, the arrival of the swifts in spring is one of those milestone moments in the natural calendar. It feels like a little piece of magic the first time you hear their screaming call overhead, and you look up to see them streaking through the skies. Sadly though, fewer and fewer swifts are returning to us every year. Across the UK, in communities including Yatton and Congresbury, over half of our swifts have disappeared in the past 25 years. Last year the screaming parties over my garden were often down to just two or three individual birds together.

While scientists are learning more all the time about the drivers of this decline, the primary culprits are thought to be the loss of nest sites as we modernise and renovate our roofs, and the huge declines in flying insects that are being recorded both here and internationally. Understanding this means that we can take positive actions to help our local swifts, and that's just what the YACWAG swift project aims to do. Through the project we want to increase knowledge about our swifts in our local area and inspire everyone to do something to help swifts.

Putting up swift nest boxes is an important part of the project, but far from the whole story. We want to see special swift bricks integrated into building projects and developments; we want our Parish and District councils to stop spraying insect-killing pesticides; and we want to improve our understanding of where swifts are still nesting in Yatton and Congresbury. Everyone can help, whether by talking to your neighbours when they are having their roof replaced; encouraging flying insects to thrive in your garden; or signing [this petition](#) to help make swift bricks a compulsory part of new developments.

There is a well-known saying that it takes a village to raise a child. It will take a village - or rather two - to save our swifts as well! YACWAG's swift project has been a real team effort from the start. Thanks are due to Edward Mayer of Swift Conservation for advising YACWAG and giving us a brilliant online talk; Rowan and his amazing fundraising that has paid for swift box materials; the skilled volunteers at Nailsea Sheddars who have built twenty boxes over the winter months; Mark Loader and Bryan Wall who are installing the boxes; and all the YACWAG members who have come forward as box hosts. The box hosts will be monitoring their boxes over the summer to see whether the swifts check them out and decide to move in.

Our education and events team are busy planning to bring lots of swift-themed fun and learning for all ages to Congresbury Fete and Yatton Carnival this summer, so do come along to these events for a 'swift' chat. In the meantime, you can find out more about the project and how to get involved at <https://yacwag.org.uk/wildlife-birds-swifts/> or email swifts@yacwag.org.uk



*Photo: Jonathan Pomroy
used by permission*



*Photo: Marc Guyt
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Meriel Harrison

Fundraising for YACWAG

The idea for fundraising for YACWAG first came about when I went on a work party with them in the summer. It seemed like a very good organisation because they were a friendly and enthusiastic group of people.

I fundraised for YACWAG because I had just become a member and they do some amazing work around the local area such as buying land to make into nature reserves, like the one I visited at Kenn Moor. They have been very successful here with attracting a large population of Snipe. I wanted to help them protect and support the nature around us.

To fundraise I held a raffle and got loads of prizes from local businesses. I worked with my head of house (at school) and some of my friends. What really helped was when we used an online payment platform which gave the chance for parents to also buy raffle tickets as well as the students. After five days of selling tickets our final total was £489.00. A huge success.

I was (and everyone who helped out) extremely pleased. I would definitely do it again, however nerve-racking it was at times, for great wildlife conservation charities.



Rowan Peters in his favourite Skomer Island cap,

Rowan Peters

The funds raised by Rowan have paid for 20 swift boxes to be made to launch our Swift Project, and the rest of the money raised will be used to buy at least one new barn owl nest box. YACWAG is very grateful to Rowan for his immense efforts on our behalf which will really make a difference for local wildlife.



Water at Cobthorn at Last

Tony Moulin and Graham Lovesey (left) had an exciting morning getting water flowing into the Cobthorn trough over the Easter weekend. The trough will save the graziers from having to carry water to the livestock and will provide water on site for watering new trees. The long and tedious process of getting water to the reserve has taken 23 months to complete and has cost several thousand pounds!

However, YACWAG is very grateful to Bristol Water, who have helped us with the cost of the works with a donation of £1000. We look forward to showing their representatives the Cobthorn Reserve soon.

Big Schools' Birdwatch at St Andrews



At the beginning of February YACWAG was delighted to be welcomed back, post-Covid, into St Andrew's Primary School, Congresbury. Trevor, Jon Thobroe and Sue Lovesey helped staff and Key Stage 2 children with RSPB Big Schools' Birdwatch, an activity which contributed towards Children's Mental Health Week.

A mild, still morning provided ideal conditions and 13 different species were seen. A Great Spotted Woodpecker was heard drumming and a Greenfinch calling. A highlight for many children was using either Trevor's or Jon's telescope to view the onsite rookery close-up but the greatest spectacle was seen by only the last group, just as they were about to return to class: a huge flock of about 80 jackdaws swirled and danced noisily overhead.

Birds make good use of the natural environment around the school with the maturing trees of Baker's Wood (planted towards the end of the last millennium) joining those in Jubilee Wood (over 60 trees provided by YACWAG in 2012) providing good habitat. The 13 nest boxes around the grounds were found to have housed nine nests last season.

It was a productive morning and fun watching the children demonstrate their whispering skills! Overall it was heartening to meet so many youngsters with such an interest in our local birds. Their awareness and knowledge is far greater now than when YACWAG first became involved more than 15 years ago.

Sue Lovesey

Join the City Nature Challenge West of England Region



From **Friday 28th April - Monday 1st May** over 400 cities across the globe will be participating in a challenge to record as much wildlife as possible over four days using the iNaturalist app. This challenge is being led by local charity The Natural History Consortium, <https://www.bnhc.org.uk/>. The challenge isn't just for experts either; anyone can download the app and help support conservation efforts by putting nature on the map.

For the purposes of the challenge, North Somerset and the rest of the former Avon county area are viewed as one West of England entity.. Last year in this region over 8,000 nature observations were recorded by 406 individuals. To support nature we need to know what exists and where it is located. All records submitted via iNaturalist during the challenge will be used by [Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre \(BRERC\)](#) for important monitoring.

Pollinators and Trees are this year's focus. Pollinators include bumblebees, honey bees, solitary bees, wasps, butterflies, moths, beetles and hoverflies. Trees we need to record include native species like oak, elder, hawthorn, hazel and ash. All you have to do is download the iNaturalist app <https://uk.inaturalist.org/> on your smartphone or tablet and use it to upload photos of wildlife you see during the period. The app will give you some handy suggestions and then an online community of scientists and wildlife enthusiasts will verify your sighting. It's a great way to learn about the wildlife around you and know that you are helping with local conservation work as well as joining a global effort.

Once you are on the app, join the iNaturalist '[City Nature Challenge 2023: West of England](#)' project page to see live updates.

If you decide to take part, any help recording species on the YACWAG walks on 28th April and 1st May would be greatly appreciated. If you find you like using the app and would like to do more recording of wildlife please email contact@yacwag.org.uk.



Orange-tip butterfly

People's Plan for Nature

The People's Plan for Nature is being created in collaboration with thousands of people across the UK. The Plan sets out a vision for the future of nature and the actions that we all need to take to protect and renew it. For more information and to read the summary document, please see here <https://peoplesplanfornature.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/PPFN-Executive-Summary-FINAL.pdf>

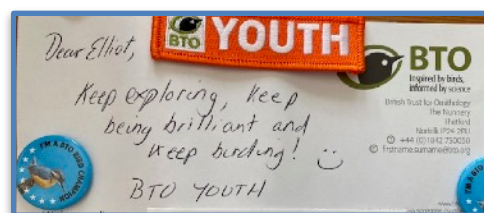
YACWAG's Youngest Birdwatcher?



YACWAG member Elliot, son of YACWAG volunteer Emily Lomas, likes birds. In fact he likes birds so much that he created a bird poster with pictures and facts that he had read up and sent it off to the BTO..

That was when he was nine, and a few months later the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) announced a competition for young birdwatchers to apply for pre owned binoculars and field guides that they had collected from members.

The trouble was that the competition was for 11-16 year olds and Elliot was under age, but the BTO liked his bird poster and agreed that he could fill in an application form giving some information about himself and why he wanted to be considered. He duly received a nice note of encouragement from the BTO telling him that he would be receiving a pair of binoculars and a field guide.



A parcel duly arrived for him with these gifts and at the end of March he helped with the Kenn Moor Snipe count with his mum, proudly wearing his binoculars.

I'm sure that he will put both the binoculars and field guide to good use and we look forward to seeing him on some future bird walks and surveys.

Trevor Riddle



The YACWAG Facebook group has now been made private. With over 700 members (over 400 of them in Yatton and Congresbury) this is a great place to share your sightings, photos and observations. The group is now more secure against unwanted interest.

Learning on the Job

Last year we moved to Yatton, and are lucky enough to own a glorious patch of wild nature reserve at the rear of our new home. One of its boundaries had originally been planted as hedgerow but over the years has grown into a spindly row of trees, blocking light but offering little cover for wildlife.

Faith and Tony from YACWAG suggested this vegetation would be suitable for laying, which would rejuvenate growth and create a denser habitat. Hedge laying has been used in the UK for hundreds of years, and remains an important technique today, helping maintain hedge health and creating livestock-proof barriers that are beneficial for wildlife. We were immediately keen and decided we'd like to do it ourselves. We enlisted Clive Bethell – expert hedge layer and vice chair of the National Hedgelaying Society – to teach us, and spent a day with him, learning the ways of the billhook and chainsaw, clearing the brash and carefully laying hazel, willow, blackthorn and hawthorn to create a hedge in the North Somerset style (each county has its own method of laying, but we kept it local!).

It was definitely a job for two – one to cut a section from the bottom of the tree and the other to help lower each tree into the structure and do the 'brashing' (cutting off excess twigs and branches to enable each trunk to lay comfortably within the hedge line).

It was surprising quite how much excess needed to be cut, and we ended up with mountains of brash. A wood chipper dealt with some, but much of it has been used to create a dead hedge: we knocked in some stakes and filled the space between them with the leftover branches and twigs. We are hoping this will provide a habitat for insects and other little creatures (and it's created an attractive natural screen for our collection of compost bins too!).

Hedge laying was a hugely satisfying skill to learn and it's wonderful seeing the blossom and leaves already starting to come out, and birds hopping about among the dense clusters of branches. Big thanks to YACWAG for helping encourage us – we'll keep you posted on how it grows...



Jenny Oldaker

Photo left shows the dead hedge created with the brash cut from the living hedge as it was being laid. Dead hedges provide niches for all kinds of invertebrates and also provide nesting sites for birds and small mammals.



Before



During



After



Blossom began to appear on the newly laid hedge

Know a Swift When You See One

The hirundines are a group of birds that can be confused with each other. Apart from occasional rare visitors from abroad, such as the Alpine Swift and the Pallid Swift, there are four main contenders.

1. House Martins were once a regular and very visible summer visitor. Their populations are stable in other parts of Europe but in the UK numbers have long been declining and they are on the Red List for birds giving most conservation concern. One of the main reasons is the lack of their insect food, which applies to all similar birds. House Martins have a conspicuous white rump and a shorter tail than a swallow. Adult House Martins have pure white underparts too. The nests they build are amazing structures made of mud. For more information visit housemartinconservation.com.



House Martins collecting mud for their nests in Chescombe Road, Yatton in 1986.

2. Sand Martins are smaller than house martins, with a less forked tail and brown upper parts. They have no white rump like the house martin. Sand Martins can be seen feeding over lakes where there are abundant insects when they arrive for their summer stay. These birds nest in the ground in sand cliffs or river banks and do not nest in our parishes.

3. Swallows generally used to nest in barns where they made a cup of mud and straw lined with feathers on a roof beam. They have adapted to making their nests on beams under bridges. Adult male Swallows have long tail streamers that are unmistakable, while the female's tail is shorter. Both sexes have a red throat. They are mainly black above and a creamy buff underneath.



Swallow on cable in Court Avenue, Yatton in autumn 1985

4. Common Swifts are one of the last migrants to arrive in the UK and one of the first to leave. They should begin to be seen in late April - mid May. Numbers of Common Swifts in Britain are in steep decline with 60 percent lost in the last 20 years. They are hard to survey and we can play our part in building up more knowledge, which is why YACWAG has launched its Swift Project. The Swift's dark sickle-shaped wings and screaming call, when it flies over on warm evenings in groups, make it an icon of summer. Although your other hirundine sightings are of value, and can be logged at birds@yacwag.org.uk to add to our body of knowledge, we are really very interested in your records of Swifts. Please add these to swiftmapper.org.uk and let us know at swifts@yacwag.org.uk.



Historic photos above by Tony Moulin.

Photos left: Swift detail from YACWAG's embroidered banner made by Shooey Maccall in 2000.



**Saturday 15th
April 9am**

SPRING BIRDSONG WALK COBTHORN RESERVE, CONGRESBURY

Join Trevor Riddle and Peter Grainger at Cobthorn Reserve to listen for our resident birds proclaiming their nesting territories. This should be particularly relevant to members wishing to learn the songs of local birds. Finish by 10.30am. In the event of rain or strong winds the walk will be rescheduled. More info: email birds@yacwag.org.uk.

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Become a member and hear about all our events and activities.



MARSH MARIGOLDS AND APPLE BLOSSOM

A guided walk led by Richard Croucher onto two of YACWAG's Reserves to see the beauty of Spring.

FRIDAY 28 APRIL 9.30 am.

MEET AT END OF HOUSING IN KENN MOOR ROAD by YACWAG
Kenn Moor Reserve. **STOUT BOOTS. NO DOGS.**

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EARLY MORNING BIRDSONG WALK

**BANK
HOLIDAY
1ST MAY**

Photo: Song Thrush
by Emily Lomas



7am

Meet at the Mosaic Seat on the Strawberry Line, Yatton (accessed from Chescombe Road) for a circular walk including YACWAG's Congresbury Moor Reserve. You should hear seven species of warbler singing along with other birds. Mark Savage and Trevor Riddle will lead, finishing around 9am with an optional post-walk breakfast in the Strawberry Line Cafe at Yatton station. The walk will be re-scheduled if wet or windy. More info: birds@yacwag.org.uk.

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FAMILY BAT WALK on CADBURY HILL

Friday
5 May
8.20pm



©Daniel Hargreaves

Meet in Henley Lane car park (not the Cricket Club) to learn and experience the wonderful world of bats using bat detectors. Led by Sarah Dale. Please bring a torch and wear stout boots and warm clothes.

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