



50th Anniversary

Yarner Wood NNR celebrates half a century

Alien pond invasion

How English Nature is helping to eradicate invasive species

A time to repeat

A look at peat restoration at Risley Moss LNR

Great Nut Hunt

A progress report on dormice

English Nature is the statutory body which achieves, enables and promotes nature conservation in England.

We do so by working in partnership with individuals and a wide range of organisations including Government, representative bodies, agencies and voluntary organisations.

English Nature Magazine is published six times a year to promote nature conservation in England and make people aware of the latest developments. The views expressed in it by individuals are not necessarily those of English Nature.

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We operate a number of other offices across the country, from where our staff deal with local nature conservation issues.

Details of your nearest office can be obtained by phoning Northminster House, or by requesting a copy of English Nature Facts and Figures Information guide, free from the Enquiry Service at Northminster House, Tel 01733 455100.

You can also learn more about us via the Internet. Our address is:
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Awarded for excellence

Cover picture



Cover photograph: P Wakely/English Nature

Yarner Wood – One of the first six sites to be designated a National Nature Reserve celebrates 50 years. See the full article starting on page 10.

English Nature magazine can now be read on the English Nature website at:
www.english-nature.org.uk/magazine

brief update

England's Garden of Eden



Bob Berry

Cornwall's spectacular Eden Project, in which English Nature is a partner, celebrated its first birthday in March, having welcomed over two million visitors since opening in 2001.

The £86 million Millennium attraction has two conservatories, or Biomes, housing 100,000 plants from three of the world's climate zones. Focusing on the relationship between mankind and plants,

Eden's Biomes - the largest is 55 metres high and could house the Tower of London.

Eden is a centre for education and entertainment as well as research.

Eden is working closely with English Nature on developing its Wild Cornwall exhibit. The exhibit - a representation of local landscape features - showcases Cornish hedges, lanes, pastures, Atlantic woodlands and wild plants. Its central

theme is the importance of local biodiversity in the global context. Wild Cornwall emphasises that people are intricately linked with biodiversity, not separate from it.

Senior Scientist at Eden, Pete Whitbread-Abrutat, said, "English Nature and the Eden Project are also developing opportunities for working together in the future by promoting biodiversity issues, highlighting the benefits of ecological restoration initiatives to biodiversity and people, and using Eden as a launch pad for encouraging visitors into the unique and stunning landscapes of Cornwall. It is hoped to support sustainable tourism initiatives in otherwise economically deprived rural areas."

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Bat mandate

The only building in England where inter-nationally rare barbastelle bats breed will be protected for the next 50 years thanks to English Nature.

The Paston Great Barn in Norfolk, home to a nationally important Site of Special Scientific Interest, is used as a maternity roost by the bats to rear their young. In a unique agreement with the owners, North Norfolk Historic Buildings Trust, in partnership with groups including English Heritage, English Nature has taken lease of the Barn until 2052.

The building, protected by both national and international wildlife law, is also a Grade II* Listed Building and Scheduled Ancient Monument. Its upkeep as a historical and wildlife treasure is now assured, whereas in the past



English Nature

Paston Great Barn.

the need to raise funds from visitors to maintain the Barn was not always compatible with the needs of a sensitive bat colony. All groups who have an interest in the Barn are involved in a management group to discuss the findings of bat research, how the complex is maintained and how the public is best informed about the site.

"The special circumstances at Paston Great Barn called for a special solution," said Dr Andy Brown, English Nature's Acting Chief Executive. "The Barn is one of only three places where barbastelle bats are known to breed in the UK, and the only one in a building. We now believe we have secured the future for both the bats and the Barn."

Europe must act for dolphins

English Nature is joining the Government in calling on the European Commission to make the English Channel a safer place for dolphins, whales and porpoises.

Already this year over 400 cetaceans have washed up dead on the south coast of England and the French coast, as a result of bass fishing in the Channel.

New dolphin-friendly trawl nets, developed through

funding from the Government, are already being used by the four Scottish vessels operating the winter bass fishery. Other fleets operating in the same fishery, however, have not introduced the nets, and have failed to monitor and prevent the incidental capture and death of cetaceans as required by the EU Habitats and Species Directive.

"We need fishery managers and fishermen to accept

that there is a problem that needs to be addressed immediately," said Paul Knapman, English Nature's Fisheries Policy Advisor.

"Until changes in fishing methods are introduced to significantly reduce the capture of cetaceans we want the European Commission to limit the scale of bass fishery either by significantly reducing the number of vessels or by closing areas to this form of fishing."

NEWS IN SHORT

Wildspace! awards a further £1 million

English Nature's Wildspace! grant scheme has awarded a further £1.3 million for Local Nature Reserves across England. This brings the total to over £3 million. The scheme aims to develop Local Nature Reserves for wildlife and to encourage more people to explore the nature on their doorsteps.

Sir Martin Doughty, Chair of English Nature, said, "We see Local Nature Reserves as fundamental to people's lives and well-being. Close contact with nature is essential to everyone's quality of life, not only in the countryside but also in our towns and cities.

"Wildspace! aims to make reserves accessible to everyone. We are particularly trying to reach people who have not yet had the chance to marvel at the wildlife around where they live."

All aboard!

Visitors to Stiperstones National Nature Reserve (NNR) in Shropshire will find it easier to get the grand tour from now until the end of October as a minibus service around the site has been launched.

English Nature, along with the Countryside Agency, Transport for Everyone in South Shropshire (TESS), the National Trust and Shropshire County Council, introduced the minibuses, known as the Stiperstones Shuttle, which will run four times a day every weekend and bank holiday.

As well as visiting the NNR, the minibuses will tour a 15-mile route through the Bog Field Centre, and several villages.

The new service links up with the existing Long Mynd Shuttle at Ratlinghope, making it possible for people to explore large areas of rolling countryside without using their cars.

NEWS IN SHORT

NNR events

Finding out about the walks and events taking place at your local National Nature Reserve (NNR) is easier now through the English Nature website. A wide range of activities at NNRs are listed, from bat box building at Cavenham Heath and delving into dung at Hartland Moor, to discovering the ancient Domesday history of Hatfield Forest. Check out what's going on at an NNR near you at www.english-nature.org.uk/news/events.asp

Award winners

English Nature magazine won the runner-up prize for The Public Service Magazine of the Year at the popcomm 2001 Charity and Public Service Publishing Awards.

Tree-mendous!

Chair of English Nature, Sir Martin Doughty, and Senior Woodland and Forestry Adviser for English Nature, Dr Keith Kirkby, are just two speakers who will take part in the In Praise of Trees Conference, as part of this year's Salisbury Festival.

The event takes place on June 6 and 7 and is a major celebration of trees, woodlands and wildlife and aims to help create a sustainable future for British woodlands. To book a place (£110), contact the Salisbury Festival office on 01772 332241 or visit www.inpraiseoftrees.co.uk

Out in the country

'Your countryside – you're welcome' is the message of a new Government campaign, supported by English Nature, to encourage people to enjoy the countryside in 2002. Almost 50 organisations are involved in the campaign including the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the Ramblers Association and the National Farmers Union, promoting the opportunities the English countryside has to offer. Visit the website at www.yourcountryside.info

Starfish surprise



Paul Keene/AVICO Ltd.

If you went down to the north Norfolk coast on March 18 you were sure of a big surprise. For a natural phenomenon occurred at Holkham when thousands of common starfish were washed up on the shoreline. Site Manager Ron Harold said, "We think it happened because there was a strong north-easterly wind which stirred up the seabed and carried the starfish inshore. This isn't a regular occurrence – it probably happens once or twice a year with different species, last year it was cuttlefish. We didn't do anything about them – it was a natural event and the starfish perished."

Our man in the Antipodes

Travelling half way around the world to get a new perspective on landscape restoration sounds like a long trip – but for Ian Davies, Project Manager for English Nature's Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage project in Cornwall, it has been a hugely rewarding one.

Through funding from a Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship and the support of English Nature, Ian set off in January for two-and-a-half months, visiting Queensland, Western Australia and New Zealand. His aim was to learn from experts how

they are restoring landscape devastated by mineral extraction there.

"We are doing some great things here, working with the china clay industry to re-create the landscape in mid-Cornwall, but in Australia and New Zealand they have been carrying out this kind of work for 20 years," Ian said.

"The big surprise for me was that our Cornwall project is right up there with the best in the world. Nationally I think we have a little more work to do, but I think that with the improved strategic co-operation between Mineral Planning Authorities, the

minerals industry and other groups like English Nature there will be substantial wildlife gain in the future, and I really think the UK can become the world leader on mining restoration."

While in Australia and New Zealand, Ian observed how scientists, practitioners and regulators are working together. "The key thing to come out of the trip was the importance of having a clear process that can be easily implemented – to have the end in mind before we even put one spade in the ground," Ian said.

English Nature backs pioneering report

One of English Nature's prime aims is to bring wildlife conservation and farming together to help create a sustainable future for England's countryside.

One example of this is a conservation report, supported by English Nature and believed to be the first of its kind, which has been recently completed by England's largest lowland farm, Elveden Farm, Suffolk.

While the farm has a long history of carrying out conservation work, 2001 saw the farm's first documentation of this work. The report includes a summary of the condition of the farm's three and a half thousand acres of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), which was carried out by English Nature's Nick Sibbett, Conservation Manager for north west Suffolk.

Nick's findings will help the farm's landowner, Lord

Wilde Street Meadow at Elveden Farm.



Nick Sibbett/English Nature

Iveagh, and Forestry and Conservation Officer, Jim Rudderham, identify which SSSIs need attention to reach 'favourable condition' before 2010, as specified by the Government. Nick concluded that most of the sites were already in favourable condition, with only two in the unfavourably declining category.

Nick said, "This project is a great example of how English Nature can work with farmers and landowners to help preserve wildlife in England. We will continue to assist farms like Elveden in any way we can in the future."

The report also included the results of the monitoring of

other wildlife and species on the farm, including its endangered stone-curlews.

Jim said, "The farm has an excellent relationship with English Nature. We have the attitude that farming and conservation can go hand in hand, and putting practices in place to preserve wildlife does not necessarily make farming more difficult. I think more landowners should take a more robust attitude in getting involved with conservation.

"I would also like to say a big thank you to members of the Elveden Conservation Group, which consists of workers and volunteers, for their contribution to this report."

Decision on white horse

English Nature is disappointed by the Government's decision to approve the carving of a white horse on the Folkestone to Etchinghill Escarpment, which is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

The site is also of European importance as a candidate

Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for its chalk grassland and early and late spider orchids.

English Nature will now work closely with owners of the SSSI and Shepway District Council to ensure the effects of the project are kept to a minimum and that future access is managed

appropriately so that the further deterioration of the SSSI and the internationally important wildlife site is limited. It will be vital to ensure the chalk grassland turves removed from the white horse are successfully translocated to a suitable site nearby and that this newly created grassland is properly managed.

NEWS IN SHORT

NNR community

Creating opportunities for people to get involved at Castle Eden Dene National Nature Reserve (NNR) is all part of the job for the new Community Liaison Officer, Melanie Hall. Melanie took up the role at the Dene, a 500 acre woodland on the urban fringe of Peterlee New Town in County Durham, in March this year.

"We want to increase people's knowledge and make them more aware of what we have here," Melanie said. "It is about getting people onto the site and using it, and hopefully stopping any misuse. We have a vibrant programme of events, including everything from dawn chorus walks, discovering mini-beasts and the really popular bat and moth evening. The main focus of all the events is fun, that's what makes people come back."

County flowers

Wild flowers are the jewels of the English countryside and a project to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrates their importance. The Plantlife 'County Flowers' project aims to get people out in the countryside and enjoying the natural beauty on offer. Everyone is invited to vote for their favourite wildflower that symbolises the county where they live and all those they visit in 2002. To register your vote go to the Plantlife website at www.plantlife.org.uk or write to Plantlife, 21 Elizabeth Street, London SW1W 9RP.

Summer events

English Nature will be attending the following events this summer: BBC Gardener's World from June 19 to 23 at the NEC in Birmingham (the stand will feature a wildlife-friendly pond), Royal Show at Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire, from July 1 to 4, CLA Game Fair at Broadlands Romsey, Hampshire, from July 26 to 28 and the British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water, Rutland, from August 16 to 18.

The alien threat to our freshwater habitats

Often fast growing, persistent and difficult to eradicate, alien aquatic species are proving a real threat to our freshwater habitats. The solution, however, means tackling more than just the invaders.

Despite a recent flurry of press coverage, the presence of invasive species in our inland waterways is nothing new. Introduced by enthusiastic gardeners over the years, they have escaped the boundaries of garden ponds into the natural environment, first colonising and then often overwhelming their surroundings to the detriment of native species. Perhaps the most infamous of them all, Australian swamp stonecrop *Crassula helmsii*, was first found naturalized in Essex as early as 1956. Estimates now suggest that it may have infested over 2,000 sites nationwide and has spread as far north as Inverness and the Orkneys.

“Simply put, invasive aquatic species grow to the exclusion of other less competitive organisms, which they shade out,” says Stewart Clarke, English

Nature Freshwater Ecologist. “A particular problem with the Australian swamp stonecrop is that it remains green throughout the year, so it gets a headstart on everything else. The build up of plant material becomes so great that it ultimately starts to die underneath, starving the water of oxygen and threatening the fish and invertebrates.”

The major concern in the Lake District is the arrival of Australian swamp stonecrop in Derwent Water and Bassenthwaite. These two sites were recently discovered to be harbouring the rare floating water-plantain *Luronium natans*, thought to be extinct in the Lake District, and all but gone from other natural sites in England. “A species listed under the Habitats Directive, there is a very real risk that it will be edged out by the Australian swamp stonecrop,” Stewart continues. Plans are now being devised to tackle the invader.

Another problem is that invaders often ‘creep’ from the water’s edge, removing important marginal habitat where many of our rare species are confined such as the starfruit *Damasonium alisma* and pillwort *Pilularia globulifera*.

Other aliens of real concern are the floating pennywort *Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*, currently causing concern in the Exminster Marshes and the Pevensey Levels, parrot’s feather *Myriophyllum aquaticum*, and water fern *Azolla filiculoides*.

“The growth of the problem is directly related to the popularity of garden ponds and more especially, garden pond experts on TV and radio,” adds Jonathan Newman, Head of the Centre for Aquatic Plant Management, an adviser to English Nature and the Environment Agency. “People have a taste for the exotic yet there is currently no requirement to assess the potential invasiveness of any horticultural import at all. Until there is some form of control over what we’re allowed to buy, these things will go on spreading.”

Jonathan Newman/Centre for Aquatic Plant Management



(Main picture and top left) Waterfern, currently under threat from pond invaders. Causing concern is floating pennywort (middle) and Australian swamp stonecrop (bottom).

of these species and arm people with the knowledge of how to remove an infestation safely if it has just started to take hold. A similar message will be promoted on the English Nature stand at June’s BBC Gardener’s World Live event along with general advice on wildlife pond creation.

It is the local teams, however, who are carrying out much of the work on the ground. Swanholme Lakes in Lincoln is one such example, a 54 ha SSSI with a serious swamp stonecrop problem. “This is a well established infestation and one that has to be treated now,” says Steve Clifton of English Nature’s East Midlands Team. “The lakes are fundamental to the special interest of the site and a habitat for species such as pillwort. English Nature has secured funding to carry out a two-year restoration project in partnership with the Environment Agency and Lincoln City Council. We’re currently devising a targeted programme of chemical treatment – the only way to effectively eradicate this infestation.”

English Nature is currently challenging the legal purchase of such species through the DEFRA Review of Non-Native Species Policy. This proposes to add the likes of Australian swamp stonecrop to Japanese knotweed and others, which are now illegal to sell.

“It’s a difficult pattern to model because you don’t know who’s bought what and from where,” adds Jonathan. “There are an estimated 20 million garden ponds in the UK and that is the potential number of sources of infection and infestation we have to contend with.”

Promoting the use of herbicide for certain cases isn’t a decision that has been taken lightly by English Nature. Clearance by hand, while an option,

“There are an estimated 20 million garden ponds in the UK and that is the potential number of sources of infection and infestation we have to contend with.”

With this in mind, the Centre for Aquatic Plant Management along with English Nature, the Environment Agency and British Waterways have produced a leaflet for the public to increase awareness of such plants. By distributing them through garden centres and the horticultural trade, the goal is to discourage the purchase

has to be done at regular intervals and there is the danger that a stray fragment of plant could infect another area. “We’re not saying that in every case, herbicide use is the only way forward,” continues Stewart. “We would encourage people to look at every site individually and decide the most appropriate method of control based

Web database will help ensnare invaders

A much-needed database and guide to alien invasive species is due to be launched on the English Nature website later this year.

Whether introduced deliberately or accidentally, a small proportion of foreign species are known to be dominating their habitats at the cost of native wildlife. Examples include the voracious predator, the North American bullfrog, which has been found breeding in southern England, and the Rhododendron and Australian swamp stonecrop, which have spread relentlessly throughout the UK.

Currently being developed by the University of Liverpool with funding from English Nature, the database is due to go live on the English Nature site in October and will be a useful resource in the fight to eradicate these invaders. A site is currently being tested at www.appliedvegetationdynamics.co.uk/iaapwebsite/ and visitors are being encouraged to provide feedback.

“The main rationale for this project is to bring together all current knowledge on invasive species into a single, accessible database,” says Dr John Huckle who’s leading the project at the University. “This way, conservation partners will be able to better co-ordinate their efforts, while staff on the ground will find it a useful toolkit if and when they encounter an alien species.”

on what the problem is at that site. But if an infestation isn’t dealt with properly, you may lose species of conservation interest because of the invader.”

Appropriately, English Nature is about to embark on a programme of experiments investigating different control methods. The hope is that over the next year, a number of treatment options will be identified that may be tailored to specific sites.

Chronology of lowland peatland restoration

- 1972**
Warrington Newtown Conservation group survey site and define conservation value and wildlife potential.
- 1978**
Restoration works commence, dams and sluices installed in order to prevent drainage of the site and raise water levels.
- 1980**
Risley Moss opens to the public. Bog flora starts to colonise flooded peat workings and other low-lying areas on the mossland surface.
- 1984**
Risley Moss is handed over to Cheshire County Council for ongoing management.
- 1986**
The site is notified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).
- 1990**
Cheshire County Council attempts to close the reserve, but protests from the local community and RIMAG are successful in fighting the closure.
- 1994**
First phase of bog surface re-contouring works goes ahead to increase the habitat potential for peat forming plants. The site becomes a Local Nature Reserve.
- 1998**
Risley Moss is handed over to Warrington Borough Council as part of changes in Local Government.
- 1999**
English Nature fund major scrub clearance work on the site. Bog Flora is colonising on the areas of re-contoured bog.

English Nature fund a second phase of re-wetting works.

Risley Moss is designated a candidate Special Area of Conservation.
- 2002**
A third and probably final phase of re-contouring work is planned.



Regeneration of bog flora at Risley Moss.

A time to repeat

Earlier this year English Nature announced the most significant step forward in restoring our peatlands – a £17 million deal securing 1,526 ha from a major peat extracting company.

But that is just the start of the story. Nearly 30 years of conservation work undertaken at Risley Moss Local Nature Reserve (LNR), Cheshire, shows what can be achieved.

Risley Moss is managed jointly by English Nature and Warrington Borough Council with the support of the Risley Moss Action Group (RIMAG) charity. It has been a fruitful partnership, which could see 75% coverage of bog flora at the site within the next 15 years.

“English Nature saw the opportunity to do an experiment with Risley, one of the first in Britain to have a re-wetting programme,” explained John Moorcroft, Area Countryside Ranger (ACR) at the LNR. John and fellow ACR Chas Purvis have 35 years’ experience working at the site between them.

“The work that has gone on here feeds into the wider lowland peat programme which English Nature is promoting through the country,” John said.

“What started off in 1972 as a dried out remnant of a bog which was turning into grassland with heath and birch woodland round the edges, we now hope to have 75% coverage of peat-forming vegetation in the next



A bird's eye view – re-wetting work at Risley Moss Local Nature Reserve.

10-15 years. We have been working to bring back flora, including a range of sphagnum species, cottongrass, and round-leaved sundew.”

Risley Moss is a candidate Special Area of Conservation, with one of the country’s largest sections of lowland raised mire. It is also home to a number of rare species, including 11 different species of breeding dragonflies, and six species of amphibians and reptiles - adder, slow worm, great crested newt, smooth newt, toad and common frog.

The third phase of work at the LNR is likely to be the last, and is set to end this year. “After that the only job will be to control the scrub within acceptable limits,” John said. “Hopefully our input over the years will decline as a more natural balance is achieved.”

Now is the time for... slime moulds

Continuing in our expert series, Carl Borges, the main contact for the Biodiversity Action Plan for fungi, fills us in on slime moulds.

“Slime moulds (otherwise known as myxomycetes) play a vitally important role in nature. They feed on bacteria, yeasts, algal cells and other microscopic organisms, and they recycle carbon, nitrogen and phosphate, making them available to living plants. Many small animals feed on slime moulds and some beetles need them to breed in.

Unfortunately slime moulds seem to go un-noticed even by naturalists. At best most may recognise only one or two of the larger and brightly coloured species. Most people would say they have never seen one, even though the more common species are abundant and widespread. Some are rare and may even be in danger of extinction. If we are to fulfil our commitment to biodiversity, our efforts must extend to the less well-known species, not just the big and the beautiful.

But what are slime moulds?

In the past the Jekyll and Hyde behaviour of slime moulds gave scientists a headache trying to decide what they are. For many years it was not even possible to decide which kingdom of life these strange organisms belong in. So far they have been classed as plants, animals, fungi, and protozoa. There is now some certainty that they belong to the last category.

Slime moulds spend the first part of their life as a shapeless mass called a plasmodium. With some species this is minute, others may grow to several times the size of a large cowpat. They creep over, under and through soil and vegetation consuming bacteria and other microscopic food. When conditions are right they prepare for the next stage in their life. The slime mould stops behaving like

Examples of different types of slime mould:

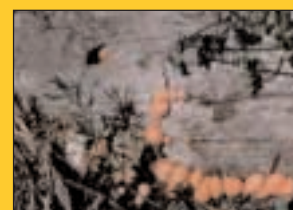
Lycogala terrestris

Comatricha tenerrima, found mostly in wetland habitats

Fuligo septica

Didymium squamulosum

Brefeldia maxima



some kind of strange primitive animal and metamorphosis begins. The plasmodium transforms into one or more spore bearing structures called sporocarps and the slime mould starts to behave like a fungus.

The sporocarps vary dramatically from species to species; some remain relatively shapeless whilst others are quite elaborate. Some are quite beautiful but a hand lens may be needed to fully appreciate the smaller ones. The spores are dispersed in a variety of different ways. If they are lucky enough to reach a suitably warm and moist surface the spore germinates and eventually forms a new plasmodium – thus completing the slime mould’s life-cycle.

Slime moulds have recently become more accessible to the enlightened naturalist with the publication of Bruce Ing’s *The Myxomycetes of Britain and Ireland – An Identification Handbook.*”

WHEN NATURE CALLS

By the time this article appears, it will be May – the brightest, fullest month. The dawn chorus is at its peak, hawthorn in full bloom and the bats have emerged from hibernation looking for places to roost and breed. By late May the swifts will have returned, a sign that summer is here.

Enquiries can be very varied now that the drama of frogs and spawn is over for another year. This spring seemed to have been a good one for frogs and we had numerous calls about ponds being full of spawn. We tell concerned enquirers that you can’t have too much spawn. Not every egg becomes a tadpole. Not every tadpole, a frog.

But as days become warmer the ponds will attract grass snakes to feed on froglets. If it’s a hot summer we will receive many calls about snakes. And it won’t be long before the first herring gull queries start. There was a lot of publicity about a problem in southern counties last year, so it will be interesting to see what happens this year.

We now have access to the internet and it’s proving very useful to be able to consult some terrific websites - not least English Nature’s! Others that have impressed me are Froglife, the Barn Owl Conservation Network and Plantlife. I hope this new addition to our resources will help us to improve our service to you.

By Dick Seamons
English Nature’s Enquiry Service

A lesson in social, cultural and natural history

This month marks the 50th anniversary of Yarner Wood National Nature Reserve (NNR) on Dartmoor, one of the first six sites to be designated in England. Visiting a 'spotlight' NNR such as this offers not just a valuable wildlife experience, but a chance to sample its important cultural and social history.

To mark the anniversary, English Nature has commissioned the Dartmoor's MED Theatre Company to prepare a stage adaptation of Eden Phillpotts' novel *The Forest on the Hill*. The novel is set in and around Yarner Wood on the eastern slopes of Dartmoor, and performances are taking place in local villages throughout May, culminating in two special performances in Yarner Wood itself. These will take place on the weekend of 18-19 May, the exact day of the golden anniversary.

An excellent example of internationally important western oakwood, the site was, until 1951, part of the Yarner Estate, when it was then sold to the Nature Conservancy. At this time, public access to the wood was strictly prohibited and this theme of seclusion runs throughout the book. "The importance of Philpott's novel is that it provides a bench-mark and some impression of the cultural milieu and social lives of not only the characters in the novel, but also the wildlife of Yarner Wood in the early 1900s," says Site Manager Phil Page.

Indeed, the eccentric characters that populate the work reflect Yarner's real inhabitants. One such was estate gamekeeper Leonard Evans, a larger-than-life character renowned for his socialist leanings and ideas above his station. It was he, who in 1922, promised his newlywed bride that their Yarner cottage had an indoor bathroom. When she asked where, he pointed to the stew pond opposite and retorted "There's yer bathroom!"

He was later succeeded in 1950 by Fred Toby who, by virtue of the subsequent NNR designation, became the first 'warden'. Later, despite his advancing years, Fred refused to retire, even though the strenuous labour became increasingly difficult. Told that he "...cannot hope to keep the rides in good condition using just a shovel and wheelbarrow...", he was finally given a Land Rover

in 1960. His eventual passing was the end of an era – not only had he worked at Yarner Wood before and after it became a NNR, but he had also witnessed the changeover from handtools to the power tools of the modern era.

A further significant change was the transition of the site from part of a closed private estate to what is now a spotlight reserve with excellent public facilities. Even after it was declared a NNR, it was felt that visitors would interfere with various research programmes underway at the site and access was strictly by permit. Indeed, the major reason for purchasing Yarner Wood was not for the acidic oak for which it is now highly valued, but to set up a large woodland 'laboratory' to carry out experimental management. Not until 1973 were the public allowed free rein of the woodland trails.

The site could have been lost to the public from the start, however. When it originally came up for sale, the Forestry Commission expressed an interest in felling the whole of Lot 24 (Yarner Wood), with the possible intention of planting conifers. Ironically, the organisation now supports management through its Woodland Grant Scheme.

Previously, Yarner's woodland management enjoyed a chequered history. It was used for charcoal making and coppicing in the 19th century and, after a period of neglect, was managed as a seasonal shooting venue in the 1920s and 30s. An early reserve programme then sought to change it into a 'vigorous and diverse woodland'. This resulted in the planting of non-native beech and Japanese larch, and the loss of a valuable moorland area.

Since the 1970s, management policy for Yarner Wood has aimed at building on the natural strengths of the site. Key species dependent on its particular properties include

Yarner Wood through the ages...

1964



Members of the Yarner Wood NNR management Team: (L-R) Mr Frazer, Jim Hemsley, Max Nicholson, Mr Elmhirst, Lord Hawick and Eric Roberts.

1983



1997



birds such as pied flycatcher, redstart, wood warbler, tree pipit and lesser-spotted woodpecker, plus ferns, bryophytes and lichens. The long-term aim is to establish a woodland that is self-perpetuating and to maintain at least 10 per cent as open space.

Now the site is part of a European Union candidate Special Area of Conservation because of its western acidic oakwood, as well as being a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a NNR. Adds Phil, "From being a neglected woodland in Philpotts *Forest on the Hill*, Yarner has become an internationally important site that is afforded the highest possible level of legal protection or as the closing lines of the novel state: 'Law reigned as ever round her'".

For further details of spotlight reserves, see English Nature's website at www.english-nature.org.uk.

WHAT'S ON? GUIDE

MAY

MAY 23

Butterflies

Viewing butterflies at Aston Rowant NNR

Contact: Heather Whetter, 01635 268881

MAY 25

Walk for All

A three-hour walk through Lathkill Dale, Derbyshire. Free, but booking essential.

Contact: The Peak District and Derbyshire Team, 01629 815095

MAY 26

Shapwick Heath NNR Open Day

Events such as guided walks and pond dipping

Contact: Melv Yeandle, 01458 860120

JUNE

JUN 2

Guided Walk

At Fenn's, Whixall & Bettisfield Moss NNR with Pete Boardman to celebrate National Environment Week.

Contact: Joan Daniels, 01948 880 362

JUN 7

Dorset World Oceans Day exploration

Join Victoria Copley and local coastal experts on a boat trip through Poole Harbour and along the Purbeck coastline.

Contact: 01929 557450

JUN 16

Give a helping hand

Help English Nature staff to improve habitats and wildlife in Cavenhap Heath NNR, Suffolk, from 9.30am to 12.30pm or between 1.30 and 4.30pm.

JUN 21

Farmer's Walk Wye NNR Kent

Lead by a neighbouring farmer who grazes part of the site in collaboration with the Kent Downs AONB and English Nature. Anyone welcome, starts at the site car park at 4pm.

JUN 22

June 22 and 23 – Midsummer night

A night of folklore around a solstice fire before watching the sun rise over Chobham Common NNR, Surrey.

Booking essential, call 01276 858291

JUN 28

June 28 to 30 – Conservation exhibition

At the East Anglian Garden and Flower Show, Bourn Airfield, near Cambridge. Over 20 exhibitors, including English Nature. Adults £6, concessions £5, children free.

JULY

JUL 3

Wildflower and butterfly ramble

Meet at Cressbrook Dale NNR Derbyshire at 10am.

Booking essential, call 01629 815095

JUL 7

Cavenham Heath NNR

The NNR is now 50 years old and we're still progressing. Meet a member of English Nature's staff to hear about and see some of the ideas for improving the heath from 2.30pm.

JUL 10

Wildlife Walk Charnwood Lodge NNR

A two-hour evening walk to learn about some of the reserve's wildlife, history and geology. Starts 7.00pm.

Contact: Katie Glenn, 0116 270 2999

For further details call the contact numbers printed or visit english-nature.org.uk

The average dormouse is around two to three inches long and adults weigh around the same as two £1 coins.

The Great Nut Hunt

A progress report

With 81 positive sightings, the 2001 Great Nut Hunt is proving to be a success in helping to ensure the survival of our endangered furry friends – the dormice. But you still have time to join in the search as the hunt has been extended until the end of summer.

Packets of chewed hazelnuts arrive daily at the London offices of the Mammals Trust UK, where the 'Chief Nutter' inspects them for signs of dormouse teeth marks. Since the launch last September, more than 330 completed forms have been returned, 81 of them positive, though the team is expecting a springtime rush.

Tony Mitchell-Jones, Senior Vertebrate Ecologist with English Nature, said, "A detailed analysis has yet to be done, but by and large the results confirm our knowledge of dormouse distribution, with positive sites confined largely to southern England and some of the more northerly sites being attributable to our

successful reintroduction programme. The number of negative sites across much of England and Wales demonstrates yet again the extent to which this once widespread species has declined and emphasises the importance of looking after and linking up our surviving woodland."

Why join the Great Nut Hunt?

Over the last century the number of dormice has dramatically declined. In fact, it has become extinct across half its original range in England during this time, and is now listed on the English Nature Species Recovery Programme. The reason? The continuing loss of ancient woodland, the splitting of big woods into smaller ones and unsympathetic woodland management.

To ensure the future of the dormouse, English Nature needs to find out exactly where it still survives and identify woodland areas where it could be brought back. Which is where the Great Nut Hunt comes in.

If you want to get involved, contact Oliver Bennett on 0207 498 5262 or visit the Great Nut Hunt website at www.greatnuthunt.org.uk

If you've already taken part, but haven't quite got around to returning the survey form, please put it in the post as soon as possible.



The red hotspots indicate where dormice have been spotted.

Hope for hen harrier

English Nature encouraged by spring sightings



English Nature has just launched its hen harrier project in the uplands with the encouraging news that 35 hen harriers – the most endangered bird of prey in England – have been seen across the moors of northern England in recent weeks.

Sir Martin Doughty, English Nature's Chair said, "This is very encouraging news as we launch our hen harrier project, and we hope that these birds will be able to successfully breed and produce chicks in safety. The hen harrier is one of England's most spectacular birds of prey and nothing can be more memorable than seeing males 'sky dancing' in front of prospective mates in their annual courtship displays."

English Nature has become increasingly concerned about the status of the hen harrier in England. Following a prolonged decline, the English population now consists of just a handful of breeding pairs and there is the very real danger that the species will become extinct as a breeding bird within the next few years. English Nature is committed to restoring

the English population and has set up a hen harrier project, which will run for at least three years. The project aims to:

- monitor the remaining hen harrier population in England and their breeding success;
- identify the factors that are currently restricting hen harrier numbers;
- take subsequent measures to increase the hen harrier population in England.

As part of the survey, English Nature would like to hear from anyone who has seen hen harriers in England this spring and summer. Please phone Richard Saunders, Hen Harrier Project Officer, English Nature Cumbria Team: telephone: 01539 792800.

Down, but not out

- The hen harrier was once a fairly common and widespread bird in Britain and there are breeding records from many English counties from the early 19th Century. Numbers declined mainly as a result of persecution by those seeking to protect poultry or game birds. By the end of the 19th century only a small population of birds survived in the Hebrides in western Scotland and on Orkney.
- After the Second World War, the hen harrier started to make a comeback, probably due to a reduction in the number of active gamekeepers and a corresponding drop in the intensity of the persecution. Northern England was recolonised in the mid-1960s and in the 1970s and 1980s up to 25 nesting attempts were made in each year in Cumbria, Derbyshire, Durham, Lancashire, Northumberland and Yorkshire. The population has not increased further and from the mid 1990s there has been a significant downturn in fortunes.
- Hen harriers arrive back on their breeding grounds in March and April. The males indulge in spectacular, aerobic display flights to attract females. The hen harrier has a strong association with heather in England and nests are almost always sited so that the surrounding heather bushes provide cover and protection. A clutch of 4-6 eggs is laid, in April or May, and incubated mainly by the female for about 30 days. The chicks then spend a further 30-40 days in the nest before making their first flight.