

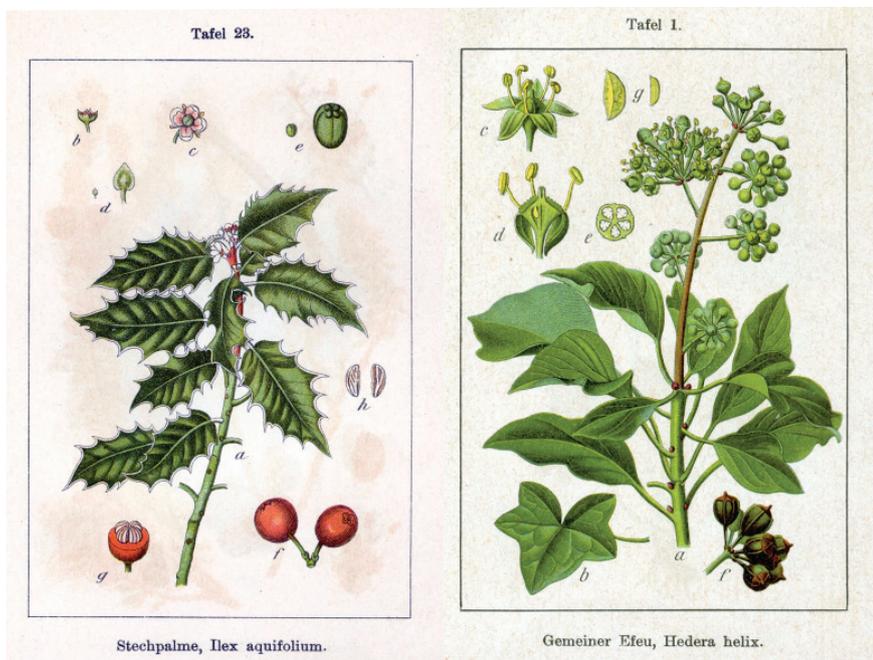


LRC Matters

Issue 6 - December 2014

All the latest news
from around the
LRC community

Happy Christmas from ALERC



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I Fought the Law...

Tom Hunt - ALERC National Coordinator

In some respects, wildlife law is one of the main reasons Local Environmental Records Centres (LERCs) exist. Although the need to provide a central repository of information for the benefit of recorders and public alike ought to be enough to justify their existence, it is actually the need for people to have access to information to assist them in complying with wildlife laws that actually means LERCs receive the support from the range of partners that they do. Therefore, the opportunity to learn more about these laws was something that I was eager to take up when I was offered a place on a wildlife law course. There were two questions that I had in mind when I approached the course; are there any ways in which LERC services could be better used to assist people to comply with the law, and would this course be of use generally to LERC people as a group?

Hosted by Chester Zoo, and spread over one and a half days, the course explained the major pieces of wildlife law. Course leader, Penny Simpson of Freeths LLP, took a group of about thirty or so people from different NGOs through the Wildlife and Countryside Act, the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations, the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act and the Protection of Badgers Act. These laws, like the natural environment they try to protect, are complex and un-picking them can be a difficult task.

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For example the whole of the first morning of the course was spent looking at how the Wildlife and Countryside Act treats birds separately from other animals, which in turn are dealt with differently from plants. Not only are different sets of species treated differently within the same legislation, they are also treated differently across different laws. For instance, someone considering whether harm to wildlife may constitute an offence needs to take into account the fact that the Conservation Regulations offer stricter wording on the definition of "harm" than the Wildlife and Countryside act does. They also need to look at the fact that protected species licences (which permit actions such as capturing and moving protected species) can be available under the Conservation Regulations for development work, whereas this is not the case for Wildlife and Countryside Act. By providing hypothetical examples for the course attendees to work through in groups, the course was able to deal with difficult and complex subjects such as these in a lively and engaging way.

Having spent the first day looking at species related issues, both protected and invasive, the second day concentrated on the duties for public authorities and on designated sites. In my opinion, this was the more interesting material from the point of view of ALERC. People in LERCs will be aware that the NERC Act places a responsibility on public authorities to at least take biodiversity into account saying "every public authority must, in exercising its functions, have regard ... to the purpose of conserving biodiversity". I learned that this is seen by many, including course leader Penny, as relatively weak and apparently has only been interpreted loosely by the courts. However, it should also be noted that this does mean that local authorities should avail themselves of the necessary information when considering whether planning applications may cause an offence to be committed under one of the other laws (e.g. WCA or Conservation Regs). This principle has actually been tested in the High Court, in a case originating in Cheshire East.

The session on the duties for public authorities continued, covering aspects such as the circumstances that would require developers to apply for protected species licences, and the circumstances by which Local Planning Authorities should request an Environmental Impact Assessment. In order to carry out these duties diligently, local authorities should make use of the necessary information, including habitat and species records. However, it was suggested that Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) only get pulled up on this as and when people object to developments and try and cite wildlife issues as a reason for objecting. It occurred to me therefore that there could be thousands of planning applications where LPAs are not making use of all the necessary wildlife information because nobody is making objections. This could be because people are unaware of the applications, or unaware that it could affect their local wildlife, or actually be in favour of the development and therefore not wish to object. Put simply, if we are relying on objectors to planning applications to ensure wildlife is taken into account, then wildlife is not likely to be taken into account very often.

The session moved on to look at protected sites. Most people working in Local Environmental Records Centres will already be aware of the varying degrees of protection afforded to sites. The course content focussed largely on those types of sites that are protected by law such as Special Areas of Conservation and Special Sites of Scientific Interest. One piece of information that the course brought to light that I hadn't considered before is the fact that impacts to species using protected sites should be considered as impacts to the site itself, even if the physical area of the site is not directly disturbed. For example, mobile species such as birds and bats might roost or feed on a protected site, but then return somewhere else. Therefore, a development that inhibits their access to the site, but doesn't actually affect the site itself, should be considered as impacting the site. A developer would then be required to consider how this impact can be mitigated. The implication therefore, is that species records surrounding a site could be of as much importance as records from within the site boundary itself.

This was the last section of a course that was on the whole very interesting. By no means was the entirety of the two days directly relevant to the work of LERCs, and for some topics (particularly the species protection on day one) the most useful thing was to confirm already existing knowledge. However, I was able to ask Penny after the course whether or not she thought it could be adapted to be more directly relevant to LERCs, in the future, specifically by the inclusion of the Environmental Information Regulations. These are important to LERCs as they are laws that relate to access to environmental information and impact on aspects of work such as INSPIRE compliance. Penny suggested that it would be possible to revise the course content to include this topic.

Overall the course was good, well-run and informative, although it could be better tailored to LERCs if there is interest in providing it to a group of LERC staff. Eric Fletcher, the manager of RECORD, and who also attended the course, said "the course is excellent for gaining a greater

***The National Federation for
Biological Recorders is holding its
annual conference on 23rd - 25th
April 2015 in Sheffield.
Visit www.nfbr.org.uk for more
details.***

understanding of UK wildlife law and how the legislation fits together. It was interesting learning about the sections of UK legislation that have the most impact in protecting our natural environment. In some ways the training highlighted how much conservation is at a disadvantage; the costs involved in bringing cases to court are considerable and the consequences of losing a case in court are dire for almost any UK conservation organisation.” He also remarked, in relation to the NERC act, which stipulates that public authorities must “have regard for biodiversity”, “I wonder what would happen if we had to “have regard” for the speed limit?”



Report: NBN Conference 2014

Bob Foreman - Sussex Biological Records Centre

Having spent the day before participating in an NBN workshop at The Natural History Museum, brainstorming the future of the NBN Gateway, the NBN conference on the Friday promised a more relaxed, but no less stimulating day. The hoped for relaxation took a little while to achieve thanks to a slightly delayed train into Victoria followed by a hopeless underestimation of the walking time to The Royal Society on Carlton Terrace which left me breathless and unable to assimilate much of Professor Michael Hassell’s introductory talk. However, I am glad to say that I had managed to compose myself in time for the keynote address which was given by Professor Ian Boyd, Chief Scientific Advisor at Defra. His talk emphasised the importance of the NBN’s data and how it is being used in various ground-breaking research projects such as the one to demonstrate the response of *Campanula glomerata* to nitrogen pollution. He also gave us some fascinating insights into the future of habitat monitoring using space based technology. I thought drones were the future but now I’m wondering whether we should have our own satellite at the SxBRC.

Katie Winney from The National Trust (NT) followed with

a talk describing the National Trust’s database of species records and the challenge of, and solutions to, a wider public engagement in biodiversity recording on NT property. Although the 450,000 records they have in their database seemed a lot, I was left with the feeling that it wasn’t as many as I would have thought. I suspect that there are many records which, despite being from NT land, never make it back to them and are passed directly to LERCs or national recording schemes. Katie was able to demonstrate some pretty impressive data showing how the habitat management that the NT carries out has a positive impact on butterfly abundance when compared to non-NT land. Katie was also justly proud of the NT being the source of the NBN’s 100 millionth record – a two spot ladybird. Peter Kirby, the recorder, was later presented with an award commemorating this landmark record.

Matt Davies from Greenspace Information for Greater London (GiGL) was up next with an eye-watering presentation of GiGL’s work and the innovative uses to which GiGL are putting their data, everything from major national scale projects, such as the 2012 Olympics, to providing interactive maps of wildlife-related crime in the London area. He also gave us an insight into a project that GiGL is undertaking to investigate the extent to which London’s gardens are being paved over. It was all very inspiring and really showed the way that raw data can be utilised to best effect.

I didn’t manage to get out of the room during the coffee break – too busy chatting. Next up was the presentations of Honorary Memberships to Dr Jim Mumford and Val Burton as well as Peter Kirby’s award, mentioned earlier.

We now had the pleasure of listening to Peter Doherty talk about The Atlas of Living Australia, a remarkable project that allows the user to access all of Australia’s biological records online. The entire project was built from scratch and the open source tools that were developed in this process are available for others to use in similar projects elsewhere.

Peter’s talk was followed by four 5 minute “speed talks”, all of which were very different but also tantalisingly brief. John Tweddle from the NHM introduced a project to train graduates in the finer details of biological recording with a view to them then becoming trainers themselves; Lori Lawson from The University of Hull spoke about the molecular revolution and potential for eDNA as a recording tool; Chris Raper gave us an update on his efforts to streamline the UK species inventory and finally the SxBRC’s very own ideation guru, Charles Roper, preached the gospel of open data and how inevitably it will be the future. I think we should have been able to vote on which one of these we could have had the “full-length” version, I’m afraid I would have had to have been disloyal and voted for Lori Lawson (sorry Charles!).



Lunch provided the opportunity to see rNBN in action, an online system that allows statistical analysis of NBN data. Based on R, a programming language specifically for data visualisation and analysis, it's only limitation seemed to be the imagination of the user and it's something I would definitely like to find the time to look deeper into.

Fed and watered, we embarked on the afternoon session, kicking off with Professor Chris Thomas's brilliant lecture: "Biodiversity Change and Conservation in the Anthropocene". Highly thought provoking, he explained that all the World's plant communities have been affected in some way by human influence, going on to question the true nature of alien invasive species and gave a detailed insight into how species distributions will be affected by climate change. Professor Thomas's delivery was so polished and entertaining I almost forgot that I was watching "live", it felt more like a television production.

Dave Goulson from The University of Sussex followed with an equally thought provoking talk on pollinators and specifically bumblebees and how they are affected by environmental changes such as changes in agricultural practice and climate change. He showed how distributions of some species had changed over time and demonstrated how this distribution data could be used to infer population declines. He finished by expressing the need for more information and ways in which this can be gathered (and how much it would all cost).

Savita Custead of the Bristol Natural History Consortium then extolled the value of BioBlitzes as a way of engaging a wider audience in biological recording. She showed what a great way these events are to enthuse people of all ages in nature, the key to this I guess, is to maintain this enthusiasm beyond the BioBlitz to a more disciplined engagement with recording.

Continuing the day's theme: "Climate, collaboration and collection" Richard Pywell from CEH explained how biological recording helps in the understanding of the effects of climate change on all taxonomic groups while emphasising the need for the recording of less charismatic taxa and a need for closer collaboration between the research and recording communities to produce a more structured recording framework.

The day was closed by John Sawyer, NBN Chief Executive outlining the pathway the NBN will be following in the future as a result of the ongoing "Strategy Refresh". He highlighted the view of the NBN as a community of which we are all a part and summed it up succinctly: "Ask not what NBN will do for you, but what, together, we can do for the NBN".

Identification Trainers for the Future: Inspiring the Next generation of British Wildlife Experts

Stephanie West and John Tweddle - Natural History Museum

As we all know, our knowledge of the distribution and abundance of species and habitats, and of how and why these are changing, relies fundamentally on reliable biological recording. In order to document, monitor and understand changes in biodiversity, we need to support development of survey and sampling skills, the ability to accurately identify species, and (for many groups of organisms) techniques for the handling and preservation of reference specimens. The question therefore of the decline of species identification skills, particularly for certain groups which perhaps are less accessible or more complicated, is a crucial one for the future not only of biological recording, but of conservation in the UK.

As well as being a major collections infrastructure and visitor attraction, the Natural History Museum is a world-leading scientific research institute. The Angela Marmont Centre for UK Biodiversity provides a focus for much of our UK natural history research, engagement and training activity. With our expertise in UK species identification, scientific communication and education delivery, and a focus on enhancing and supporting development of UK biodiversity understanding, we find ourselves in a unique position to tackle the skills-decline that is highlighted above.

To this end, the Heritage Lottery Funds Skills for the Future programme has generously sponsored a new 3 ½ year project named Identification Trainers for the Future. Over the next 3 years we will be offering 15 committed, aspiring professionals the opportunity to undertake a 12-month long work-based training placement at the Natural History Museum. Training and work-place experience will also be provided by project partners the Field Studies Council and the National Biodiversity Network Trust, and to cover their living costs, trainees will receive a £16,500, tax-exempt, bursary.

Our trainees will undertake an intensive training programme that will equip them with the knowledge to identify a broad range of UK taxonomic groups, and the skills to survey and monitor wildlife in the field. They will however spend three months working exclusively within a particular curatorial team which will immerse them in their chosen specialist area. While within the scope of a 12-month placement of course complete expertise cannot be created, that as we all know is the product of years of dedicated study, however the traineeship will give them the kick-start towards that route. In addition to identification skills, the programme will impart museum curatorial skills relating to the handling and storage of reference specimens, as well as interpretation and public engagement skills. Crucially, it will also develop the communications and training skills

**Send your stories to
tom.hunt@alerc.org.uk**

that will allow our trainees to pass on the skills they have learnt to others.

Alongside the placements, the project will also create a wide range of freely available identification resources which we will be publicising through our website as the project develops. We are also hoping to use this as an opportunity to encourage dialogue and forge stronger practical links across the UK biodiversity sector, so that we can tackle this issue together.

Our first round of five trainees will start in March 2015 and we are accepting applications until the 12th December this year. For more information on the project, the placements, or for an application pack please see our website www.nhm.ac.uk/idtrainers or email us at IDtrainers@nhm.ac.uk. You can also keep up-to-date with the latest developments with the project, including reports on our trainees progress, via our website and the Natural History Museums social media feeds.

Report: ALERC Conference 2014

Steve Whitbread Northamptonshire Biodiversity Records Centre and National Forum for Biodiversity Recording

Late to arrive to what was my first ALERC conference, I sat on one of the benches at the back of what was a well-packed meeting room whilst Tony Gent, Chief Exec of Amphibian and Reptile Conservation treated us to a tour de force. His presentation highlighting not only how data (and gaps in it) can be used to map distribution and plan surveys, but also to identify hotspots, opportunity areas and underpin real world, bigger-better-more and more joined up approaches, in pursuit of effective and lasting conservation outcomes whilst taking account of a rapidly changing climate.

From one perspective (as Secretary of the National Forum for Biological Recording), it's exactly the sort of thing I'd like to see more organisations pursue, utilising available information to best effect and conducting targeted surveys and structured sampling and surveillance to yield data of the quantity and quality to present strong and convincing



arguments, facilitated by use of tools that really help get the message across. And, as a records centre manager, it's just the sort of thing I'd like to be able to do locally with our database. The reality for the majority of record centres, including ours is rather different, although it's worth bearing in mind that any such generalisations tend to fall down simply because of the huge variation in LERC origin, situation, capacity and stage of development (to name but a few factors). It's amazing what many have achieved in different ways (often in spite of everything).

John Sawyer is the new CEO of the NBN Trust. He's been very active even since before actually taking over from Jim Munford, so you might well have met or seen him already, perhaps at one of the NBN's strategy refresh workshops. John's presentation initially highlighted the benefits of reverse brainstorming, pretty much identifying all the things that act against biological recording working s well as it should/could in the UK. Then he told us that LERCs were vital partners in the National Biodiversity Network Partnership and what he would do if he was 'our CEO'.

What this entailed was the detailing of some of the things which he'd heard from other unspecified parties – some of whom who don't like LERCs - and without saying why exactly or what he – or those he'd spoken with – thought was the right number that there were too many LERCs and other things he/they would like to change. Audience responses ranged from highlighting inaccuracies and over-generalisations to acceptance of much of what he had characterised.

It shouldn't be expected that the new NBN CEO, recently returned to the UK from New Zealand, would know all the ins and outs of the local recording sector after a few months. His intention was clearly to get LERCs to think about their role within the wider recording community and how things might work better. It's fair to say that there are a whole lot of things that could work better in relation to biological recording in the UK. It's also fair to say that some of those involve areas where LERCs have a role. However, the vast majority of those are areas where those working for or with LERCs recognise the need for and would dearly like to see improvements, yet are held back by issues of capacity/ resources, who else has a say over what happens with LERCs, the records supplied to them, the information they are able to share and the extent to which they can support local recording – all whilst ensuring that the books balance and individual people continue to be employed and enthused.

Given the NBN Strategy refresh and the willingness of the NBN Trust management to listen, learn and build effective partnerships for the future there is a real opportunity for LERCs and ALERC to work closely together with the NBNT over the coming months to jointly identify where the adoption of new, more standardised approaches might avoid repetition of effort and enable time to be spent more effectively e.g. in targeting obstacles such as the funding model for UK LERCs.

A slight programme re-arrangement gave Gary Lewis the

chance to talk about how the accreditation process might evolve and accelerate before the Soapbox Sessions. An 'enthraling' advert for next April's NFBR conference (Fie upon PowerPoint!) was followed by Lizzie Peat outlining how Living Record lets HBIC monitor record verification, with Tom Hunt then talking about future conference formats. Finally, Charles Roper expanded our mutual Open Data Consciousness, well beyond the end of his and the next speaker's 5 minutes (Simon Pickles graciously withdrew), taking us on to an excellent lunch and a chance for some quality networking.

Returning to Tom's queries about format: Charles could easily have filled 15+ minutes; open data and the factors that encourage/ discourage it are hugely important issues., it would be a good thing to encourage more members who have something of interest to say to do so and give them adequate time for this rather than constraining them to five minutes.

The post-lunch AGM pretty much covered everything you'd expect. The key points were (1) the suggestion that – whilst keeping their own names - LRCs consider rebranding as a group e.g. as Local Environmental Record Centres. Whilst it would be a small change, it might be very important as regards (under)standing in the wider world (rather than having anyone throw money at us). Point (2) is decidedly important in the short-term. ALERC is now using its reserves to pay the National Coordinator's wages. Unless things change, there will be no National Coordinator in 6 months time. Perhaps there is a serendipitous and synergistically symbiotic opportunity for ALERC and the NBNT in relation to some suitable, jointly developed project?

The remaining ALERC subgroups reported on the website (Mark Wills) and communications (Maria Longley). It's apparent that, like a swan or iceberg, there's an awful lot going on under the surface at ALERC –involving a good proportion of the membership which says a lot about its health and commitment to what it exists for. Although a good number of LERC staff were present, it would be good to see a larger number of centres represented next time. Overall, it was a great mix of presentations and a chance to speak out on issues of importance to us all. Although this newsletter won't see the light of day for some weeks after, it'll be worth your while catching up with the discussions it has prompted on the ALERC Forum. Roll on 2015.

Editor's note:

Notes and presentations from the conference are now available via the ALERC website on the Conference 2014 page.

News in Brief

New Map of Accessible Greenspace

Ordnance Survey are to make a new map, aimed at walkers, available free of charge. The map will apparently use both OS data and data from other sources and will allow people to find out quickly where their nearest park is. More information can be found on the OS website <http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/about/news/2014/deputy-pm-announces-plans-for-new-map-of-accessible-green-space-using-os-data.html>.

New BCT Planning Project

Bat Conservation Trust have been awarded money from Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to work with ALERC members and other organisations to explore new ways of providing biodiversity information to local planning authorities. The project will look at how GIS can be used to display things like core sustainable zones and how specific species related guidance can be provided in a concise and useful manner.

Information from ALERC Members

ALERC member LERCs will have received a spreadsheet this summer to complete in order to update the overall figures for LERCs. If you haven't sent yours back, please do so as soon as possible.

Reader Survey

In order to keep *LRC Matters* relevant, it is important to find out what the readers think of it. Therefore, it would be appreciated if you could take the time to complete the very short survey here:

<http://goo.gl/forms/p5Yt2PaGJa>

(please copy and paste the link into your browser).