

Centre News

Offwell Woodland & Wildlife Trust



Report from David Tilbury, Trustee - March 2009

It's your Centre – help manage it!

In previous issues we have described how we are gradually changing from an organisation employing a number of staff to one more dependent on volunteer help and support. This has taken place over the last year and is now beginning to show results. We are particularly grateful to Mike Manvill and Mike Banfield-Potter who come in on several days a week to carry out a range of tasks around the Centre; Debbie Ham who kindly volunteered to service our toilets and Wendy Graham who has given a great deal of her expert knowledge as we develop alternative strategies in the way we offer meaningful educational opportunities for students of all ages and abilities.

The Heritage Lottery funded “Action for Biodiversity” project continues to forge ahead thanks in no small part to Lucy Morton’s drive and enthusiasm. We have had many groups from a wide range of backgrounds all beavering away clearing and improving habitats. A good example of this is a recent planting along the Devon bank where a mixture of 500 native species (Quickthorn, Field Maple, Blackthorn, Hazel and Spindle) of hedging together with 100 plug plants (Primrose, Red Campion and Cuckoo flower) were planted. The cost of these being kindly donated by the Axe Vale and District Conservation Society and the work of planting carried out by a 15 strong party of the Bystock local group of Devon Wildlife Trust. Thanks to all concerned, but we still need more help! In particular we need a volunteer to understudy Lucy Morton, the Community Officer, with a view of taking on the role of organising the volunteers next year once the Action for Biodiversity project comes to an end. It is really important that the work that has been achieved over the last year is able to carry on into the future. We also need volunteers to help with office work and teaching assistance, but whatever your skills or interest, great or small, we can make use of them! If you think you would be interested please contact us so we can meet up and have a chat.

Please contact myself (01404 831143); Lucy or Dougal on 01404 83188.

Local residents who read EDDC’s booklet “Offwell & Cotleigh neighbourhood assessment” will probably be surprised to read that, despite their description of the Woodland Education Centre as “a major conservation and environmental education site” our application for funding under the EDDC’s Natural Environment Awareness Grant scheme was rejected. We had asked for funding to help purchase further equipment and other resources to enable us to substantially increase the number of primary schools we are able to accommodate but at the same time reduce the amount of staff time necessary for each visit.

The net result would have been a greater income at lower cost and a more sustainable future for the Centre. The view of the panel however was that “this project would not be sufficient development of the educational offer to successfully rejuvenate the centre’s well published financial difficulties”. Despite this setback we are forging ahead with plans to maximise the use of the facilities we have for schools from primary to tertiary and to promote these to schools more aggressively.

It is interesting to note that it is now 10 years since the Centre has received any financial help whatsoever from EDDC.

Of course as the Trust is non-political it is essential that I remain impartial in comments that I may write as a Trustee. However, by the time you read this we will be approaching the next County Council election and I think it perfectly fair to point out to our supporters how critical the result of these could be to the level of support the Centre might receive in the future. One of the seats likely to be hotly contested is that of Honiton St. Michael, the ward that includes Offwell. It is a matter of public record that we have had considerable financial support over the past few years from the County with a great deal of help coming from our current local County Councillor. It is important for the Centre that this level of support continues into the future and I do urge our supporters to consider carefully how much interest (or lack of!) each candidate has shown in the past about the Centre and hence the likelihood of future support.

At long last we are able to begin moving into the new extension to the Log cabin. This will act as the office for the work of the Trust at the Centre and will enable the Cabin to be “freed up” for use by schools and for meetings. Included too is an “all user” toilet which will help facilitate visits from wheel chair users. Thanks to Alcoa Foundation for their financial assistance with this project.



Charcoal making and Coppicing – Traditional woodland skills at the Centre

In February The Woodland Education Centre hosted a 2 day charcoal burning demonstration and workshop run by David Alderwick, a local charcoal producer. The event was part of the HLF Action for Biodiversity project but was also supported by the East Devon AONB Sustainable Development Fund. Over the 2 day event up to 15 members of the public and volunteers from the Centre came along to see the whole smoky, but fascinating process. The wood burned in the kiln was mainly rhododendron (as we have quite a lot of that particular resource on site!) with willow and some birch. The results can be unpredictable but the burns were successful and the attendees were able to take a bag of charcoal home for their summer barbeques!



The kiln is lit and allowed to burn until the smoke turns yellow. At this point the flues are all blocked and the charcoal making begins!



The finished product is sieved and put into bags.

In March a coppice training day was held at the Centre, this was also part of the A4B project and supported by the AONB's Sustainable Development Fund. Coppicing is a traditional woodland skill which produces firewood and wood for charcoal, hurdles, crooks for hedgelaying, thatching spars and bean sticks!

Martin Turner, from the Blackdown Hills Hedgelaying Association ran the day in the Centre's hazel area and if you go and have a look you will see a lot of small shelters that have been built, these are to protect the stools from being browsed by deer. Martin's experience and knowledge made the day really interesting and great fun. An added extra was his demonstration of how you can make artists charcoal out of willow in a biscuit tin on the fire!

I would like to thank Martin and David, all those who attended these 2 events for making them so enjoyable and interesting, and particularly Kimmo Evans, the Communications Officer for East Devon AONB for his continued support of the Centre.



Martin Turner demonstrates how to 'layer' the hazel to increase the density of stools.

Other work that has been going on in the last few months includes putting up 25 new bird boxes. They have been made by Lewis Bates who lives near Chard and who has made boxes for the Chard Reservoir Reserve. They are all made of hardwood, either oak or ash and are of various designs to attract different species, most of the holes are for tits, the open fronted ones are for robins, or spotted flycatchers. Putting up the boxes is great but it is very important to monitor them through the breeding season and we are delighted that Mike Hounscome has offered to look at the boxes as part of the BTO Breeding Bird Survey.

The Family Activity Days will be happening again every Wednesday in the summer holidays, including the Family Nut Hunt on the 26th August! Look out on our website for more details. For more information about how you can help by volunteering at the Centre please contact Lucy Morton, Community Officer, Mon - Wed on 01404 831881, offwell5@aol.com or Dougal Syers Mon - Fri 01404 831881 or offwell1@aol.com