

# Wildlife News



Wildlife news and features from the British Wildlife Centre

*Issue 9 - December 2006*

## **Welcome!**

Welcome to the latest edition of our newsletter covering life at the British Wildlife Centre. Read on to get up to date with the latest news from the Centre.

## **Pine martens**

Earlier this year, Buttons the pine marten came to us from Wildwood in Kent. The pine marten is a large tree-living member of the weasel or Mustelid family. Its arrival makes up the full complement of the family here; the other wild Mustelids being the otter, badger, polecat, mink, stoat and weasel.



*Buttons the pine marten*

We are now delighted to say that two more pine martens have joined Buttons here. Bonnie, another female, is less timid than Buttons and will often emerge to see visitors. We also have an adult male called Comrie, who we are planning to mate with one of the females next year.

## **Badgers**

Lots of work has been going on to improve opportunities to see our badgers. We've been unfortunate of late, that a number of our badgers

were quite old and have passed away. A smaller group of badgers has meant less activity from them, making them difficult to see during daylight hours. At night however, it's another story, as they all venture out to forage in their space in the Copse.



*Toby the badger*

Now, in addition to the undercover viewing area where you can see them sleep (newly reopened for visitors), we have just finished changes to the outdoor space they use and hope to tempt them out in the late afternoon for visitors.

## **New Membership Scheme**

Many visitors come several times a year. In fact a few come so often they probably know the place as well as we do! So, replacing the season ticket scheme we have run for the past couple of years, is the new annual Membership scheme.

Members of the *Friends of the British Wildlife Centre* will get a number of extra benefits in addition to entry as many times as you like during 12 months. You will receive this quarterly newsletter, advance notice of special events and talks - plus discounted entry to these. Each year in the summer, we will also be running a special free



*Become a Member and visit Milo as often as you like!*

Members' Day. We'll announce the date and more about the event itself in the spring. It will only be open to Members and will be an opportunity to meet and talk to us, and to see and learn more than is normally available to day visitors. Best of all, it will be completely free of charge.

If you would like to join as Member, do give us a call, visit the web site to download an application form or join up when you next visit!

### ***Otters on TV***

Otters seem to be flavour of the month at the moment. Many of you will have seen the item on BBC London News in October. In it, Minnie, one of our female otters, had taken up residence in an experimental new design for an otter home, or 'holt', made from recycled plastic boards. We reported on this back in our June newsletter, and it has been used by Minnie as her preferred home ever since.

The design was developed by Surrey Wildlife Trust and trialed here, and it is hoped that the design can be further improved with Minnie's feedback! To date, otter holts built in the wild have been large and



*Minnie - a star in her large pond and the small screen!*

costly affairs, and the evidence from this trial suggests that far smaller holts in this more flexible material could prove beneficial for re-establishing otter populations in the wild.

Our otters have also been filmed for two other programmes. One brief piece was on Channel Four last month, and they feature again in the new year in a series where comedian Sean Hughes investigates some surprising additions to our urban wildlife.

If you missed the BBC News item, the film is still on the BBC's web site (search for Surrey otter holt).

### ***Pelican sighting***

For a couple of days near the end of September, our nature reserve had a very unusual visitor - a white pelican! Certainly not a resident in this country, we initially suspected an escape from captivity, but with no reported escapes and no sign of rings on its legs, it is most likely to be a wild bird blown off course.



*Pelican in an oak tree [Photo: Edward Daniells]*

In the wild, these pelicans are usually found on the Croatian coast and in the eastern Mediterranean. We're a long way from its usual home!

News-hounds may have read about the hungry pelican in a London park - local pigeons will be glad to hear that this would not have been one of those birds, although what such a large bird would find to eat in Surrey is in some doubt! Fish is their usual diet, and although many tiddlers swim in our nature reserve ponds, there's not enough for a pelican.

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## ***Photographic Day Gift Vouchers***

We design our enclosures primarily with the needs and welfare of the animals in mind, making them as natural looking as possible. The happy result of this for visitors is the variety of opportunities this offers for wildlife photography. You can get some great pictures through, round and over the fences, but fences we still must have or all the residents would be off doing their own thing in the Surrey countryside!



On days when we are not open to the public, our special Photographic Days offer photographers (of any standard) the opportunity to photograph the animals in peace and quiet, plus the chance to go inside some of the enclosures for some great shots!

You can spend all day here if you wish and don't have to be an expert - although many professional photographers visit us time and time again.

You can also buy a Photographic Day as a gift voucher that can be redeemed any time in the next twelve months. Give us a call to buy one and solve your last minute Christmas gift dilemmas! Photographic Days cost £49 (with a £5 discount for Members). There's also more information on Photographic Days on our web site.

## ***Photographic courses by Heather Angel***

We are also in the process of developing a number of one day digital photography courses run by internationally renowned wildlife photographer Heather Angel. The courses will cover both the art and practice of photography together with some tuition in the use of digital image editing tools. More details will be released in the new year.

## ***Feeding winter birds***

Not everyone agrees that feeding wild birds should be encouraged. Some argue that it makes birds reliant on artificial feeding and can unfairly favour the species that we find easiest to feed - those that visit seed and peanut feeders in gardens - to the detriment of those that don't. However, when you consider the importance of gardens as wildlife habitats - far larger in total area than all the nature reserves in the country, it is clear they can be havens for wildlife. Our country is a congested one. Even though there are large areas of countryside outside urban areas, there is almost no part of the country that is truly natural - untouched by human activities.

Despite the increasing efforts of farm owners and other land managers, agricultural land still exists primarily to feed us, with wildlife's needs as secondary. Your own garden could be one of those places where wildlife comes first. By making a few changes to benefit wildlife, you can enhance both your life and theirs. Providing additional food for wild birds is just one way you can help.



*Robin*

The greater variety of food sources you can provide the better. And remember to value all of the wildlife in your garden in equal measure. We are often asked how to prevent magpies, crows and birds of prey from killing birds in people's gardens. However, consider a different viewpoint - the majestic lion stalking the plains of Africa must hunt antelopes to survive - do we scorn it for doing so? Certainly not; and neither should we condemn the sparrowhawk

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and other magnificent birds that visit our gardens for simply hunting to survive. So, sit back, enjoy all the wildlife in your garden and the spectacle that nature creates on a daily basis.



*Winter is the right time to put up nest boxes.*

Winter is also the best time to put up nest boxes. It's a good idea to clean out existing ones, as last spring's nesting material may provide a breeding ground for parasites that could harm birds and their young. Most wild nest sites are more exposed to the elements and reduce this risk. Do check before you evict the contents that your nest box has not been occupied by wood mice for a cosy winter home!

### ***Hibernation***

There are many misconceptions about hibernation. It is a natural response by a number of animals to winter's lower temperatures and food supplies.

In Britain, most mammals do not hibernate, although many are less active and less visible to us. Dormice, hedgehogs and bats do hibernate, along with native reptiles and amphibians. These creatures have the ability to slow their heart rate and breathing considerably. With their bodily functions slowed, they require far less energy to run them, so they are able to survive on their own reserves of body fat.

Hibernation is not the same or for the same length of time for all creatures. Hedgehogs will sometimes emerge on milder nights in the winter to forage for extra food, often returning to a different spot to continue hibernation. Whilst juvenile mammals would not survive hibernation and so must reach a normal adult body weight, young frogs and snakes many times smaller than adults successfully hibernate. One of the innate advantages reptiles and amphibians have in being cold-blooded, is that they require far less energy (i.e. food) in relation to their body weight than mammals. Despite this, many reptiles and amphibians, as well as hibernating mammals, do not survive the winter, although later autumns and milder winters may help.



*The common frog hibernates at the bottom of your pond during the winter.*

### ***Opening times 2007***

We're open just after Christmas - every day from Wednesday 27 December to Sunday 7 January 2007.

Then we close again until February school half term, which is two weeks next year, from Saturday 10 to Sunday 25 February. We're then open every weekend until the end of October, with the Easter holiday starting on 31 March.

Happy Christmas to all our readers and visitors!

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## ***British Wildlife Centre***

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Open to visitors every Saturday, Sunday and public holiday from March to October and during all school holidays  
Call us, or go online, for information on school visits, private tours and special access for photography and film