



## Swamp sploshing

Hidden beauty in secret Slapton



**Enthusiastic amateur botanists waded deep into the reed swamps of Slapton Ley in August to carry out an NVC survey of the National Nature Reserve (NNR) wetlands.**

Led by our Ros Bennett, this group helped provide an up-to-date comprehensive overview of the wetlands in the reserve which all helps the FSC continue to improve our understanding and management of the reserve.

The survey had its challenges... cutting a way through brambles, climbing

over tangled branches of growing and fallen willow and sploshing through pools of water and glutinous mud!

Preliminary results of quadrat data were surprising, suggesting that areas marked on the map as reed beds actually had more varied species and were tall herb fen (S26 – *Phragmites australis-Urtica dioica*). Areas known as

willow carr in reality had an understorey more typical of alder carr, despite willow being the dominant tree species across the reserve.

Landing the boat and traversing the floating islands in the Higher Ley proved very challenging, revealing a strange landscape of grey willow grown tall and sparse in the centre, allowing a tangled growth of bramble beneath. Slightly shadier areas around the edge were dominated by huge tussocks of sedge. As the wind blew, not only the canopy swayed but the land beneath as well! And still computer analysis suggested the team were in alder carr.

Further forays during the week finally found true reed beds at the southern end of the Higher Ley and in Ireland Bay, but willow carr communities continued to be elusive.

Well done Ros and the team. Next year she'll produce the final report and will run a swamp fen and carr course for anyone wanting to learn more!

## Steve chosen by the Beeb

**The BBC Countryfile calendar enjoys a long-established reputation for its collection of outstanding photographic images – and the standard of the 2009 issue has raised the bar to even greater heights... for the first time, it features a picture from Slapton Ley!**

Members of the public (amateur photographers only) submitted photographs in a photography competition with the theme *Animals in Action*. Our very own Steve Edmonds (assistant reserve officer) submitted a picture that will appear on the March page – that's pretty good, as there are around 40,000 entries!



Grass snake swimming in Lower Ley

Steve's photo captures a rare sighting of a grass snake swimming in the Lower Ley – even more amazing as it is clearly seen to be shedding its skin.

The BBC Countryfile calendar would grace any home and costs just £9.00 each.

With £4.00 of that going directly to the BBC Children in Need Appeal, you can support a great charity and at the same time acquire this delightful publication!

To buy a copy, visit [www.bbc.co.uk/sn/tvradio/programmes/countryfile/photogallery.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sn/tvradio/programmes/countryfile/photogallery.shtml)





*A view through the reed screen to the cleared area of reedbed*

# Thanks...

(you know who you are)

**N**ot for the first time we want to say a great big “thank you!” to those who give up their time to assist with the management of Slapton Ley reserve. Without this loyal group of volunteers, much of the wildlife found at Slapton would not now be enjoying the valuable habitats that have been created in the reed beds over the past year.

Cutting reed is a rarely seen practice these days, but just recently a few pockets of our BAP (Biodiversity Action Plan) habitat have been cleared, which has provided protection and secrecy for a number of species.

Also, two areas along the nature trail footpath have been opened up. The first area – just past the fishing hut – now incorporates a viewing screen constructed from reed and hazel, both sourced from the reserve itself. Within days Water Rail and Kingfisher were also spotted using these ‘reed-pools’. And several birds have taken advantage of the shelter... Coot, Mallard, Great Crested Grebe and Moorhen are all making themselves at home.

Another area has been cleared in the sanctuary area of the Higher Ley, and we’re hoping this site will provide perfect habitat for birds such as Bittern, Little Egret, Grey Heron and a good number of other waders.



*Volunteers building the reed screen*

So a big thank you again to our team of volunteers – and not just from the NNR staff, but also from the wildlife of Slapton Ley, both the species which are already here and will benefit from your hard work, and also those who may now be more inclined to stop by!

If you are interested in joining our volunteer team, there are various opportunities to help and you’ll always be welcome; call us on (01548) 580685.

## Vital research

**S**ome fascinating research issues – including bats, beach profiles and bird-ringing – delighted over 60 attendees to the Slapton Ley Annual Research Seminar in November.

As always, our speakers covering a wide spectrum of topics. Among them Emma Stone (Bristol University) described her pioneering research into the effects of street lighting on the commuting behaviour of Lesser Horseshoe bats.



*Research into street lighting and bats*

Amaia Alegria (Plymouth University) discussed a video monitoring technique to predict potential damage from storm events on changing beach profiles.



*Video monitoring of the beach at Slapton Ley*

Dr Neil Rose (University College London) explained his work with the OPAL (Open Air Laboratories) Project at Slapton Ley, part of a £12 million national initiative to stimulate interest and understanding of the natural environment.

Another seven speakers provided a fascinating insight into their respective subjects ranging from bird ringing to coastal management. Our special thanks to Alan Denbigh and the Slapton Line Partnership for kindly supporting this year’s event. It was free of charge and open to all, and even included a delicious buffet lunch by our excellent catering team! *Want to come next year?*



# Celebrating Start Bay Naming the great

**O**ver 500 people braved a very wet Saturday in August when we celebrated Start Bay at the Field Centre. We brought together businesses from the bay area to promote local produce and services – we also wanted to create an attraction for tourists in Start Bay and maintain awareness of the storm-fragility of Slapton Line.

Local entrepreneurs promoting their produce were as varied as Coltscombe Court Apple Juice, Beeson Farm Discovery Centre and Our Jigsaw.

Fascinating renewable energy displays included biomass, wind and solar energy from local sustainable energy companies such as Treco and Iris Energy. Outdoor activity providers demonstrated their boats and activities, while Endurance Life launched their Trail Blaze activities for runners and walkers to record their time travelling along Slapton Line.

Visitors ran through the rain to the various well-attended workshops including watercolours, willow weaving, pond dipping and alternative energy talks. Local story teller Clive Fairweather told tales of South Devon under cover in the barn. But it wasn't all rain – and during sunny intervals the samba band Crooked Tempo performed... and then came the belly dancers!

Cream teas and pasties went down well with everyone and together with the raffle raised over £300 for Devon Air Ambulance, a vital service to both visitors to the Field Centre and local residents.

So, in addition to our original aims some businesses sold a lot of produce, and local businesses talked to each other, shared ideas and made new contacts. The problem of what would happen if the A379 running across the Shingle Ridge was destroyed by the sea was not solved, but it did keep people together talking about the issues!

And despite the weather the day was a resounding success, so thanks to everyone who contributed including staff from the Slapton Line Partnership and Field Centre as well as everyone that brought and manned stalls. What shall we do next year? All suggestions and volunteers warmly welcomed!

We're grateful to the tremendous contribution made to the Centre, the NNR and the FSC by both Keith Chell (Head of Centre 1984-2005) and Ian Mercer (Head of Centre 1959-1968 and currently president of the FSC). So we were proud to name our new buildings after them. The new Chell Building was opened on 27th April 2008 by Lyndsay Chell and the Mercer Building was named by Ian himself.



Lyndsay Chell at the naming ceremony



Crooked Tempo in full swing



## Events programme

Just one event until our main spring and summer activities commence (full details in our next issue)...

### Coast Walk

Saturday 7th February 2009

The route between Start Point and Torcross, with its stunning coastline and beautiful scenery, is arguably one of the most impressive sections of the South Devon coastal footpath. On this walk, one of our geography tutors will explain the geomorphology and coastal processes which have shaped this particular coastline. The NNR team will be there to answer your natural history queries as this route often yields some interesting bird sightings (last year's event was graced with splendid views of a pair of Peregrine Falcons).



We leave the Centre by minibus at 10.00am. Allow up to 3 hours, dress up warm, bring a packed lunch and be prepared for some challenging bits!

Booking is essential. £5 adults, £3 under 13s. Children under 16 must be accompanied by an adult. Sorry no dogs.

Please contact Reserve Office on 01548 580685  
Email: [reserve.sl@field-studies-council.org](mailto:reserve.sl@field-studies-council.org)

# A year by the Ley and a bit of storm simulation

**E**nvironmental education, contributing to long term data sets, protecting specialised species, hydrology... all in a day's work for our Centre assistant James Collins!

James is a student at University of Plymouth studying Geography with Ocean Science – as part of his course he's on a placement year with FSC at Slapton Ley, working alongside the various teams which keep the Centre ticking over.

Some is observation; like the delivery of Geography and Biology courses and field work techniques such as methods to record downstream changes in rivers. But there's plenty of active involvement in data collection of beach profiles along Slapton Sands and Beesands.

He said: "On top of that I assist the National Nature Reserve team with management of the flora and fauna within the diverse landscapes of Slapton Ley and surrounding area. One example of this is monitoring of the UK's only population of *Corrigiola litoralis* (Strapwort)."

And he really gets his teeth into developing exciting new teaching resources at the Centre. One new resource was three storm simulation plots built from turf, concrete and soil top layers to replicate the three different land uses of pasture fields, urban landscapes and arable land. These enable students to investigate the effects of land use on flood risk. Flooding is a key issue in the management of river catchments and forms an integral part of what we teach at the Centre.

It's great fun for visiting students! They pour water into the gutter at the top of the plot; it follows a course through drilled holes in guttering before falling onto the respective land uses. Built on a



The storm simulation plots: a waters journey!

slope, the water naturally flows down the top layers and collects in a lower gutter, where it decants into a measuring cylinder. Discharge is calculated using the volume of water passing through the collection gutter every 15 seconds from the start of the storm simulation. This highlights the variation in the speed of water flow and the amount of storage within each of the different land uses.

What does it tell us? That the greatest discharge rate is on the urban land plot; it's almost instantaneous, supporting the idea that urban areas can increase the risk of flooding. In contrast, flow is much slower on the pasture and arable plots as these surfaces store the water. The students then use this data to draw storm hydrographs and suggest management strategies which could be used in river catchment areas. Good stuff!

James said: "Huge thanks to Jon Reed at Slapton Ley Field Centre for all his help and advice in constructing the storm simulation plots – and all the staff at Slapton Ley Field Centre for their endless support during my placement."

Slapton Ley National Nature Reserve (NNR) is owned by Whitley Wildlife Conservation Trust and managed by the Field Studies Council's (FSC) Slapton Ley Field Centre. Head of Centre: Andy Pratt. Reserve Manager: Nick Binnie.

Slapton Ley NNR is managed by the Field Studies Council in partnership with:

