

# Slapton Ley

2016 NEWSLETTER



Buntings Page 2



Otters Page 3



Events Page 4



Water quality Page 6



Volunteers Page 8





## Cirl Buntings at Slapton Ley – a success story



contain areas of rough grassland, ideal for grasshoppers, the main summer food source for chicks.

In 2005 we acquired a block of south facing grassland, part of Loworthy Farm adjoining our northern boundary. We earmarked a two hectare parcel of land as our contribution to the recovery programme, implementing the management measures described above. The winter stubbles now support a regular flock of around 18 Cirl Buntings, up from eight in 2009. A 2007 survey confirmed three breeding pairs on the site, all of which fledged young, mirroring the success of the project across other parts of the county. This population has proved stable with as many as four pairs in some years. Cirl Buntings are now expanding into their former ranges, with an estimated 862 breeding pairs recorded in South Devon in 2009, with at least 14 territories recorded on the reserve and around the village in 2015.

Nick Binnie, Reserve Officer

and seed from arable weeds. As the Cirl Bunting is highly sedentary (with a range of no more than 2 km), any loss of habitat causes immediate declines as the birds do not readily re-locate.

In 1989 the RSPB responded to the crisis by launching the Cirl Bunting Recovery Programme. The Countryside Stewardship scheme was introduced by DEFRA, making subsidies available to farmers for adopting Cirl Bunting friendly farming practices. This included measures such as leaving standing stubble fields over winter, the creation of field 'margins' and the restoration of hedgerows. Field margins

The Cirl Bunting (*Emberiza cirlus*) is a farmland bird so widespread in the 1930s that it was known locally as the Village Bunting. But the population crashed in the 1960s, and by the late 1980s it had become a UK rarity. In 1989 there were only 118 breeding pairs remaining, all confined to coastal South Devon.

The main reasons for this decline was a change in farming practice to autumn sowing for cereal crops, along with an increased use of herbicides and a loss of hedgerows for nesting sites. Cirl Buntings rely on stubble fields for food during the winter, feeding on spilt grain

## Our Otters are back!

Anyone gathering on Slapton Bridge on November evenings to experience the dramatic Starling roost in the reed bed were regularly treated to some close encounters with our usually elusive Otters (*Lutra lutra*).

On several occasions a family of a mother with three cubs passed under the bridge, sometimes with a dog Otter close by. The Otters have grown a little less wary of human presence; there was even a report of a dog Otter sunning itself on the pond dipping platform! One was even seen to haul itself out of the water onto a willow bough in full public view, and then eat a large eel. Otters across the UK suffered a major decline in the 1950s-'70s – largely due to pesticides and persecution. Although Slapton Ley is ideal Otter habitat with plenty of fish and secluded areas, back in 2000 sightings were so scarce you could almost be forgiven for thinking that they were mythical creatures.

In the Otters' absence a rather less welcome predator flourished. In the early 2000s there were almost daily sighting of American Mink (*Neovison vison*) on the Ley. These voracious predators were once bred commercially for their fur. From the 1960s they found their way into water courses either as escapees or through deliberate releases, and soon spread throughout southern England. In the ensuing years they wreaked havoc, leading to the Water Vole, for example, vanishing from the waterways of Devon and Cornwall.

Mink have recently been in decline, with no confirmed records at Slapton Ley for at least three years. The Mink's disappearance has been accompanied by a resurgence in Slapton's Otter population. It is now widely believed that the Otters have in fact been predated the Mink.

Hopefully seeing Otters will continue to be a regular feature on the NNR. It is wonderful that they have been able to make such a strong comeback. For a top predator to be doing so well is just reward for the efforts of those committed to improving water quality across the region.

Nick Binnie, Reserve Officer



## Beach Activity Trailer

2015 brought a refreshed Beach Activity Trailer to our shoreline. With new signs, brilliant sail flags and most of all a superb new location, there was no way you could miss us.

Since being set up in 2009 our pebble coated Beach Activity Trailer has become a familiar sight over the summer. However, over the last few years the numbers of visitors have started to dwindle. My challenge as the new Beach Warden has been to put it back on the map.

A range of new interpretation boards and activities were introduced as well as some old favourites to engage both adults and children. Our freshwater tank boasted a range of pond life from the Ley and children were entertained for hours with our buckets and spades, telescope, scavenger hunts and pebble

painting. Whilst some could be discovering where sharks are born or making their very own kite, others could be enjoying the view whilst seated in our fabulous new deck chairs.

The trailer is manned each year by a superb team of volunteers who come out to play whatever the weather. In 2015 our team expanded, allowing us to open every day and for longer hours. Thanks to our volunteers, the new central location, our new signage and the flags, 2875 people visited over 47 days which was more than a three-fold increase from the year before. We also tried staying open on wet days and surprisingly a few of these saw more visitors than some of the sunny days. However, when we tried opening during a wet easterly wind (the trailer faces east!) the rain came in the trailer

getting everything and everyone soaking wet! We decided not to do that again.

Our fold-out guides were popular at both the trailer and our free public events. We sold 101 with the most popular being *Bats*, *Freshwater name trail*, *Bugs on Bushes* and *Butterflies*. These are fantastic resources – very easy to use in the field and covering many different aspects of nature. If you are interested in buying any they are also sold all year round at the Field Centre in Slapton Village. We also have free postcard ID guides for our nature reserve available from various locations around the reserve and, of course, from the trailer too.



The only trouble now is making the Beach Activity Trailer even better for 2016 and beyond! This year we will have the same fantastic things to see and do plus hopefully lots more.

Early ideas include a collage made out of the marine litter we find on our beach as well as activities to run alongside, with the Marine Conservation Society.

The Beach Activity Trailer is for anyone and everyone, visitors, locals, adults, children and even dogs and most of all is totally FREE. We will be open for the May half term, weekends in July, the summer holidays and weekends in September, 11am-4pm. Please come and see us even if it just to say hi!

Alice Henderson, Beach Warden

# Free events

## March/April

**Wild Food Forage** Tuesday 29th March and 5th April 10.30am-12.30pm  
Taste your way through the National Nature Reserve on a wild-food themed walk, searching for edible plants of the hedgerow and woodland • Meet at Slapton Ley Field Centre • Sensible outdoor clothing and footwear essential • Bring a basket • Sorry, no dogs

**What Lurks Beneath?** Tuesday 5th April 1.30-3.30pm  
From scorpions to snails, and damselfly to dragons, there are lots of exciting creatures to discover pond dipping in Slapton Ley • Meet at the Beach Activity Trailer • Wellies recommended • Identification guides will be available for purchase

**Seashore Adventure** Wednesday 6th April 1.30-3.30pm  
Come on an exciting Seashore Adventure! Imagine being shipwrecked on an island and use your very best survival skills to stay alive. Design your island paradise, build a shelter and light a fire! • Meet at Strete Gate car park

**Survive in the Wild** Thursday 7th April 1.30-3.30pm  
Try out your bush craft skills, explore the woods for materials, build a shelter and maybe light a campfire • Meet at Strete Gate car park • Sensible outdoor clothing and footwear essential

**Rocky Shore** Friday 8th April 1-3pm  
Come on a rocktastic experience – search for animals living in rock pools, and discover adorable anemones, brave barnacles, cheeky crabs, lazy limpets and more! Find out about these creatures and what makes them so special • Meet at the Slapton Ley view point in Torcross car park • Wellies recommended • Identification guides will be available for you to purchase

**The Big Beach Clean** Saturday 23rd April 10am-1pm  
Join us to help clean up Slapton Sands, part of our beautiful coastline • Meet in Slapton Sands middle car park (free parking) • Gardening gloves useful • Sensible outdoor clothing and footwear recommended • **No booking required**

**Dawn Chorus** Saturday 30th April 6-8am  
Listen to the sound of birds waking at dawn on a quiet morning stroll around Slapton Ley. Afterwards you have the option to enjoy a wholesome breakfast at the Field Centre • Meet at Slapton Ley Field Centre • Sensible outdoor clothing and footwear essential • Binoculars useful but not essential • Breakfast provided at £5 per person (optional) • Sorry, no dogs

## May

**Birds of Slapton Ley** Saturday 14th May 10am-12pm  
Discover the birds of Slapton Ley on a guided walk along the nature trail, skirting the edge of Slapton Ley • Meet at Slapton Ley Field Centre • Sensible outdoor clothing and footwear essential • Binoculars useful but not essential • Sorry, no dogs

## May half-term holiday

**Beach Activity Trailer** Everyday in half-term 11am-4pm  
(See July/ August for details)

**Secret World of Wildlife** Monday 30th May 10am-12pm  
Lying under logs and hiding in bushes, join us to discover the best beetles, superb spiders and much more! • Meet at Strete Gate car park • Sensible outdoor clothing and footwear essential • Identification guides will be available for purchase

**Bat Watch** Monday 30th May and Thursday 2nd June.  
Times vary with sunset and will be confirmed on booking  
Explore the night-time world of these magical creatures. Watch them emerge from their roost, follow their foraging routes and use our bat detectors to hear their weird and wonderful calls.  
• Meet at Slapton Ley Field Centre • Sensible outdoor clothing and footwear recommended • A torch is advisable  
• Identification guides will be available for purchase

**Mammals and moths** Tuesday 31st May 9.30-11.30am  
See who is active whilst we are all asleep, as you locate traps set up to collect night-time creatures. Discover the amazing shapes and colours of moths, and see if you can spot a mouse or vole • Meet at Slapton Ley Field Centre • Sensible outdoor clothing and footwear recommended • Sorry, no dogs  
• Identification guides will be available for purchase

**What Lurks Beneath?** Tuesday 31st May 1.30-3.30pm  
See 5th April for details

**Seashore Adventure** Wednesday 1st June 1.30-3.30pm  
See 6th April for details

**Survive in the Wild** Thursday 2nd June 1.30-3.30pm  
See 7th April for details

**Wild Food Forage** Saturday 4th June 10.30am-12.30pm  
See 29th March for details

**Rocky Shore** Sunday 5th June 12-2pm  
See 8th April for details

## July/August

**Bird in the Hand** Saturday 30th July 8-10am  
Join us for a walk across adjoining farmland and through the Higher Ley sanctuary area before getting up close to some of our feathered friends. Then view the bird-ringing operation manned by the Slapton Bird Observatory Ringing Group and watch the birds take flight • Meet at Slapton Ley Field Centre • Sensible outdoor clothing and footwear recommended • Binoculars useful but not essential • Sorry, no dogs

**Celebrate Start Bay** Sunday 7th August 12-4pm  
A celebration of 'all that is good' about the Start Bay area showcasing local arts, crafts, food and the great outdoors. As well as stalls there will be a programme of activities and entertainment. To be held this year in the grounds of Stokeley Barton Farm shop.  
• Free entry • Contact us for more details • **No booking required**

**Beach Activity Trailer** Weekends in July and every day during the summer holidays 11am-4pm  
Discover more about Slapton Ley National Nature Reserve with fun activities, crafts and trails at our Beach Activity Trailer in the middle car park on Slapton Sands. Please contact us for more detailed information • Sensible outdoor clothing, sun cream and footwear recommended for all activities. • **No booking required**

**Wildlife Canoe Safari** **Premium event**  
Every Wednesday from 27th July until 24th August  
Join us for a rare opportunity to experience Slapton Ley from the water. You will be escorted on a 2 hour educational canoe trip, learning about its diverse wildlife and rich history along the way • Three 2 hour trips each day (call to confirm time, meeting point and what to bring) • No age restriction • £20 per person

## Summer holiday

**Secret World of Wildlife** Every Monday from 25th July until 22nd August 10am-12pm  
See 30th May for details

**Bat Watch** Every Monday and Thursday from 25th July until 25th August. Times vary with sunset and will be confirmed on booking  
See 30th May for details

**Mammals and moths** Every Tuesday from 26th July until 23rd August 9.30-11.30am  
See 31st May for details

**What Lurks Beneath?** Every Tuesday from 26th July until 23rd August 1.30-3.30pm  
See 5th April for details

**Seashore Adventure** Every Wednesday from 27th July until 24th August 1.30-3.30pm  
See 6th April for details

**Secretive Dormice** Every Thursday from 28th July until 25th August 10am-12pm  
Discover more about one of our most elusive mammals and hopefully catch a glimpse of one around the National Nature Reserve • Meet at the Beach Activity Trailer • Long trousers and sensible footwear are essential • Sorry, no dogs

**Survive in the Wild** Every Thursday from 28th July until 25th August 1.30-3.30pm  
See 7th April for details

**Rocky Shore** Sunday 31st July 10am-12pm and 21st August 2-4pm  
See 8th April for details

## September

**Beach Activity Trailer** Weekends in September 11am-4pm  
See July/ August for details

**The Big Beach Clean** Saturday 17th September 10am-1pm

Join us to help clean up Slapton Sands, part of our beautiful coastline. Meet in Slapton Sands middle car park (free parking) • Gardening gloves useful • Sensible outdoor clothing and footwear recommended • **No booking required**

**Booking is essential for all events unless stated.**  
For more information or to make a booking, call 07967 497 624.

After your event, visit our local pubs, cafes and restaurants...



seabreeze



## What's that?

You may have noticed a nondescript grey shape floating out near Ireland Bay on the lower Ley. This is a sensor raft developed by Valeport Ltd, a Totnes-based manufacturer of oceanographic, hydrographic and hydrometric sensors.

Valeport approached the FSC to see whether there was scope for installing sensors on the Ley to monitor water quality. This is a win-win project: for Valeport the Ley is a real-life test bed for its sensors, while we gain data about water quality parameters. It was managed by Jim Gardiner of Valeport and implemented by Luke Chinnock. The raft was installed in the summer and went live in August.

The raft is currently equipped with a chlorophyll fluorometer, an optical device which measures how much chlorophyll is in the water, and therefore gives information on levels of phytoplankton or algae. It is self-sufficient: a small solar PV panel and a battery enable it to run autonomously. Chlorophyll concentrations are recorded every 30 mins, 24 hrs/day and the data is uploaded daily at midday via a GPRS modem. Valeport has put the data in the public domain, with simple access free-of-charge on the port log website. Historic data is also available.

<https://valeport.port-log.net/Display.php?Site=VP06>

The graph below shows the variation in chlorophyll levels. The timescale can be set between hours and months in order to monitor short-term and long-term events. In high summer there was a daily fluctuation in chlorophyll levels – possibly due to algae migrating up and back down through the water column – whereas towards the end of the year, as days got shorter and colder, chlorophyll levels gradually decreased.

Valeport is extending its sensor network in order to field-test the sensors and obtain long-term datasets. As the data is



publicly available it could be useful to a variety of users. We hope to establish and build relationships with more academics working in the field. It is planned to install additional sensors as these become available. These include a blue-green algae sensor, which would help to monitor the development of harmful algae blooms; turbidity, a measure of the amount of suspended particles in the water which scatter light; and dissolved organic matter (CDOM/fDOM). This information will improve understanding of the Ley, the streams that feed it and various relationships (weather, storm events, sunlight, temperature, etc.). In this way Valeport hopes to help bring “Environmental Understanding to All”.

## Better water quality

In 2015 our new ‘Conservation Monitoring Volunteers’ group worked on a water monitoring project to collect data for the West Country Rivers Trust, AONB and Environment Agency.

The group have focussed on pollution by phosphates. This involves the release of pollutants from many small sources which on their own don't pose much of a threat, but which but can have significant effect at the catchment scale. Sources of phosphates might include modern detergents entering via waste water drainage systems and leaking septic tanks.

By addressing potential sources of excess nutrients entering the catchment, volunteers will have helped the project by reducing high loads of nutrients in downstream waters including the Ley.

Daniel Knott, University of Plymouth



## Slapton Research Seminar 2015

Last November 60 people gathered in Slapton village hall to discuss issues affecting the local environment.

Chaired by Paul Chanin, the seminar covered four main topics:

**Birds:** Nik Ward and Keith Grant gave an overview of the last five years of the constant effort site, a bird monitoring programme which provides insight into the numbers of adult and juvenile birds using the Nature Reserve. The success story of Cirl Buntings in south Devon (see page 2) was shared by Cath Jeffs (RSPB), local farmers and Graham Burton, who talked about the bird's population in and around the village.



Summer visitors on Slapton Ley.

**Marine and freshwater environments:** Paul Hart (Leicester University) gave an excellent overview of a project involving the South Devon crab fishery – helping to establish an important link between the land and the sea. The work focuses not only on modelling the ecology of the crabs and their foraging habits, but also on the lives of the fishermen. As an often overlooked industry in the South Hams, the conservation of the fishermen and their livelihoods appears to be tied up

with the conservation of the crabs which they hunt. David Hosking explored the links between water quality and macroinvertebrate diversity. Tracey Hamston (Paignton Zoo) discussed the conservation of Strapwort and its reintroduction at Loe Pool, something close to the hearts of the seminar regulars.



Slapton Ley and Loe Pool are the only UK sites for Strapwort, *Corrigiola litoralis*.

**Education:** Alun Morgan (Plymouth University) highlighted the importance of ‘place based’ learning, connecting students with landscapes to enhance their understanding of the ‘geobiocultural’ setting in which learning takes place. This came at a crucial time for the FSC tutors present, as ‘place’ is now a topic in A-level geography. Lewis Winks (Exeter University) gave an overview of the ‘Hand Model’, an experiential learning model developed as part of an FSC-supported European project, and discussed how this holistic approach to outdoor learning could be used with teaching groups.

Tim Burt introduced the recently relaunched *Field Studies Journal* – the FSC's own academic publication – and encouraged speakers to write articles.

**Data and monitoring:** Jack Hale (Plymouth University/FSC placement student) presented data on the energy use of the Centre and showed us the appliances responsible for consuming the most energy. This work is valuable to the Field Centre, identifying areas for energy efficiency improvement as well as providing a fascinating resource for teaching. Robin Sutton provided us with a glimpse of the data which the FSC is gathering across the whole UK



Elephant Hawk-moth *Deilephila elpenor*, 1 of the 92 species of moths recorded at Slapton in 2015.

on seasonal changes, winter thrush migrations and moths. The data told a sometimes shocking, and sometimes heartening story of environmental change, conservation and the ability of field centres to aggregate a huge amount of meaningful data – something the FSC will continue to do into the future.

Thank you to all who attended, the speakers and the fantastic FSC catering team for the impressive and creative vegetarian buffet lunch. We already have some suggestions for speakers for next year, please let us know if you have any ideas or want to be involved.

Lewis Winks, Exeter University



# Volunteering at Slapton Ley... why not get involved?

It's been a great year for volunteering at FSC Slapton. New working parties and action days have been created, new projects have been led by volunteer groups and lots of ideas are being discussed ready for 2016.

The new volunteer action group 'Conservation Monitoring Volunteers' have worked fabulously on a water monitoring project (see page 6). Our 'Volunteers' have created some great resources for the new curriculum, from gathering old photographs and census information to completing questionnaires.

As always the Nature Reserve volunteers have supported some amazing work on the nature reserve, and this year we were able to open the Beach Activity Trailer for seven days per week (see page 2).



We have had some lovely get togethers. Our pre-season meetings and 'Pizza Socials' were a good opportunity for feedback from everyone, and for new volunteers to meet our 'veterans'. This year's outing to local National Trust property Coleton Fishacre was great fun; the sun shone, the birds sang and there was delicious cake!

Here's some views from our volunteers...

Louise, Nick, Gill and Gail said: "It's great to be out contributing something and the cakes are brilliant!". Chrissie added: "I don't know what I expected when I joined but it has proved to be incredibly rewarding. I've learnt new skills and broadened my knowledge of my local environment... I intend to volunteer for as long as they'll have me".

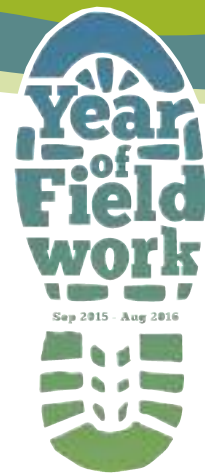
Looking forward to 2016, we'll be running a pre-season Beach Clean on Saturday 23 April and hope to enlist the support of local Schools (both Secondary and Primary), not only with the Beach Clean but also to help raise awareness about keeping our beaches clean.

Last year we held a trial run of Volunteer Action Days and are organising at least one every other month for 2016. On these days people will be supporting the work of the reserve volunteers on jobs such as Sycamore clearance that need to be tackled by large groups. We are also looking for support in other areas like admin, marketing, in the library and more general office-based roles.

We have a great team of people who support the work of the reserve and we are always interested in hearing from people who would like to get involved. Can you help? Then we would love to hear from you!

volunteer.sl@field-studies-council.org  
Telephone: 07734 781374

*Lizzy Mooney, Volunteer Co-ordinator*



## Celebrating outdoor learning

Launched last September, the Year of Fieldwork is a chance to celebrate all that is amazing about fieldwork and outdoor learning experiences. We are lucky enough to have the beautiful Slapton Ley National Nature Reserve on our doorstep, a great place to get outside and experience something; whether it's a formal learning activity at the Field Centre, a guided event or a stroll around the Ley with family.

We are trying to build up a real picture of our nation's favourite fieldwork spots and would like you to get involved by adding a pin to show your favourite fieldwork location on the map found at [www.fieldwork.org.uk/fieldwork-map-of-the-uk.aspx](http://www.fieldwork.org.uk/fieldwork-map-of-the-uk.aspx)

You could also use [#yearoffieldwork](https://twitter.com/yearoffieldwork) to tell us about your outdoor learning experiences, and follow us on Twitter.

The Field Studies Council have joined with ESRI UK, the Geographical Association, the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) and Ordnance Survey to provide opportunities to raise awareness of the value of fieldwork, encourage more outdoor learning and showcase good practice in both delivery of fieldwork and resources that support it. So, get outside and enjoy!

*Maryanne Wills, Tutor*

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: Andrew Pratt.

Reserve Officer: Nick Binnie.



**SLAPTON LEY**  
FIELD CENTRE & NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

in partnership with:

