

What am I?

In the last issue, the 'What am I?' was Autumn Lady's Tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*). The first correct answer we received was from Mrs B. Gray - many thanks to everyone who sent in an answer.

Autumn Lady's Tresses is in the Orchidaceae family. The species favours dry chalk or sandy grassland and sometimes old sand dunes and coastal grassland - in Kent it is one of the more frequently seen orchids and given the right location and soil conditions can be locally common. It has bluish green leaves which form a flat rosette in autumn which then wither before the flower spike emerges. The



Autumn Lady's Tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*)
© S. Smith

flower spike has this unmistakable twisting spiral of flowers which have a strong scent of honey on warm evenings. Many sites have been lost, as like many orchids this species requires a sympathetic management regime (through mowing/grazing) - short turf is essential for it to flourish. 50 or so species of orchid grow in Britain and evoke much passion amongst botanists and amateurs alike. When recording orchids please only take photographs and

What am I?

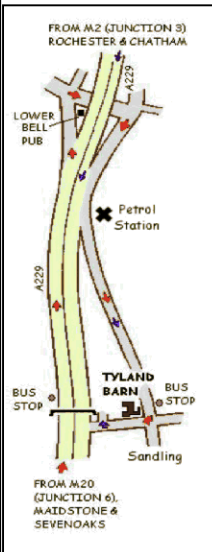


© S. Smith

be careful not to trample too much as there are usually more than one! For more information please see: www.britainorchids.fieldguide.co.uk/

We are looking forward to receiving your suggestions for the above photo (see 'contact us' below for details). All suggestions are very much appreciated. *All species in 'What am I?' can be found in Kent.*

Contact Us



If you have any news or success stories about species seen in your garden or elsewhere, we'd love to hear from you! If you would like more information about the Records Centre or other wildlife groups and organisations in Kent, feel free to contact us:

KMBRC

Tyland Barn

Sandling

Maidstone

ME14 3BD

Telephone: 01622 685646 or

01622 685780

(Editor R. Childs)

- If you are interested in becoming a volunteer or require more recording forms please call Ruth on 01622 685780 or email ruth.childs@kmbrc.org.uk
- If you would like to send in photographs for identification or have general queries, please email info@kmbrc.org.uk
- If you know of any local publications which may be interested in including an article from us please contact Ruth at the above number or email ruth.childs@kmbrc.org.uk
- Additional information and detail can be found on our website: www.kmbrc.org.uk
- We are also available to give talks or presentations to interested local groups about the Records Centre and/or Kent's wildlife.
- We offer training in recording and the use of

Our Partners

We are very grateful to the following partners for providing funding and resources.



December 2006 Issue 10 **Kent's Brownfields – havens for invertebrates** Greg Hitchcock



With the loss of wildlife habitats owing to development and the 'improvement' of arable fields with fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides rendering much of the countryside devoid of wildlife, the areas in which invertebrates can survive are getting smaller, fewer and increasingly fragmented. As a result of this, the sites that are left are now more important than ever.

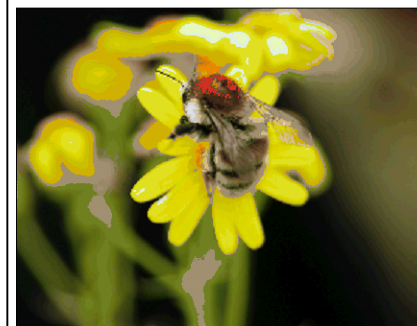
Of particular value to invertebrates, especially in urban areas, are previously developed or 'brownfield' sites. Being the most densely populated area in the country, the south-east has a large combined area of brownfield and a significant proportion of these sites are wildlife-rich – especially in the Thames Gateway.

There are a number of reasons why brownfield sites have the potential to support large numbers of invertebrates. Man-made surfaces such as concrete can break down to produce a nutrient poor substrate that may mimic a chalk or limestone substrate and support flower-rich areas; open areas of bare ground can provide a nesting area for bees and wasps and a sunny spot for insects to warm up in; and a wide range of habitats can develop. Whatever the reason – and no two sites are the same – brownfields can support as many scarce and rare species as ancient woodland.

The flower-rich areas on some brownfield sites are arguably the most important wildlife habitats in urban areas – especially for insects. When combined with a habitat mosaic that includes bare ground and seasonally wet areas the numbers of different species that can be supported can be immense. The national populations of UK Biodiversity Action Plan species the Brown-banded carder bee, *Bombus humilis*, and the Shril carder-bee, *B. sylvarum*, rely heavily on brownfield sites in the Thames Gateway, including a number of sites in north Kent. Solitary wasps such as *Cerceris quinquefasciata* and *C. quadricincta* rely upon weevils caught in flower-rich areas to provision their nests, dug in exposed earth, and so are also associated with brownfield sites.



(*Cerceris quinquefasciata*)
© Mike Edwards/Buglife



Brown-banded Carder Bee (*Bombus humilis*)
© Sam Ashfield/Buglife

It's not just bees and wasps, however. Many scarce flies and beetles are found on brownfield sites, and the Distinguished Jumper, *Sitticus distinguendus*, is a spider known from only two sites in the UK – one in Essex and one in Kent – both brownfield sites and both under threat from development (the Essex site has already received planning permission).

It's a common misconception that brownfield sites are not good for wildlife. If you know a safe, accessible brownfield site near you that looks interesting, take a look around – you may be pleasantly surprised! Remember to get the landowner's permission, or alternatively visit a 'brownfield' reserve, such as Leybourne Lakes Country Park (old gravel pits), Berengrave Local Nature Reserve (old chalk pit in Gillingham) or Holborough Marshes near Snodland (site of old tramway and wharf for cement works).

Greg Hitchcock is Brownfield Conservation Officer for Buglife - The Invertebrate Conservation Trust. For more information on 'All of a Buzz in the Thames Gateway', Buglife's brownfield biodiversity project, go to: www.buglife.org.uk

Lizard King of the Compost - Making Compost Count for Slow-Worms - Gareth Matthes

Originally published in *Growing Heap*, Issue 37, Community Composting Network

The slow-worm is an extraordinarily secretive animal. Although allotment holders may be familiar with the slow-worm, ecologists know surprisingly little about its ecology. Slow-worms spend most of their lives underground or deep under the vegetation. We are most likely to find them in compost heaps, or when they are warming up under bits of old wood, polythene sheeting or corrugated iron. However, the few animals we see are usually just the tip of the iceberg as most slow-worms are below the surface and rarely observed. In suitable locations slow-worms can occur in considerable numbers, with over 1,000 per hectare recorded in parts of Southern England.

As with many other species in Britain, the slow-worm has suffered dramatic declines in recent decades, mainly due to habitat loss and intensive land-use. So the populations remaining in allotments and gardens could be of particular importance to the survival of this species, especially in urban areas. In order to help understand more about slow-worms and their use of compost heaps, ecologist Gareth Matthes is undertaking a national survey, *Making Compost Count for Slow-worms* (a survey form is enclosed with this issue).



Creature Features

Despite its snake-like appearance, the slow-worm is in fact a legless lizard. Its body is cylindrical and its colour is usually a shiny, metallic grey or brown. Closer inspection reveals differences in coloration and shape between sexes, individuals and animals of different ages.

Female slow-worms tend to have dark flanks and a thin, dark stripe down the back. They also have relatively smaller heads than males. Males tend to be a uniform grey colour, lacking the longitudinal stripe and often have a scattering of blue spots. Older slow-worms tend to have a duller appearance and are often battle scarred. Slow-worms give birth to 'live' young. Newly hatched slow-worms are like



miniature versions of adult females, with dark sides and stripe along the back, contrasting with a striking yellow, gold or copper background.

Adult slow-worms can grow up to 50 cm in total length, whereas the newly-born young are 7 to 10 cm long. In common with other species of lizard, the slow-worm is distinguishable from snakes by the visible eyelids (you may see them blink) and the ability to 'shed' its tail. Shedding the tail is a defence response to help escape from predators by providing a distraction. All the bones in the tail (vertebrae) have a plane of weakness in them. When caught by a predator, the slow-worm is able to contract muscles in its tail that break one of the vertebrae in half, and detach the tail. The shed tail continues to wriggle and squirm for quite some time and, hopefully, distracts the predator long enough to escape. The tail does eventually re-grow, but the replacement is never as good as the original and it is easy to spot a re-grown tail.

Distribution and habitat preferences

The slow-worm occurs throughout most of Europe, including all of Great Britain, although they tend to be most abundant in the southern counties. Slow-worms are the reptile reported most commonly from urban areas, where they often occur in gardens, parks, allotments and derelict or brownfield land. They need long grass and overgrown areas; therefore they tend to favour unkempt areas of gardens and allotments. Of our native reptiles, the slow-worm seems to be the happiest to live in close proximity to humans, provided its habitat is not disturbed too dramatically.

There are fears that the species may still be in a worrying decline, primarily due to the loss of its semi-natural habitats such as rough grassland, woodland/field edges, hedgerows, heathland, scrub and through intensive agricultural practises. Like all our reptiles, the slow-worm is protected from killing and injury, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Private Life of the Slow-worm

Slow-worms hibernate throughout the winter months, sometimes sharing hibernation sites with other animals. In spring, males often fight, presumably to see off potential rivals for mates. Even mating itself can be quite aggressive, with amorous males holding females tightly in their jaws. Despite these conflicts slow-worms are harmless and would not bite a person.

A brood of young is produced in September to October. Each baby is born in a transparent membrane, from which it emerges almost immediately. Slow-worms are long-lived: 20 years or more in the wild, and over 50 years recorded in captivity. In urban areas, many older animals tend to have lost their tails, often due to cats.

How Can You Help Conserve Slow-worms

Slow-worms are a welcome component of the compost ecosystem, the king of the food-chain, feeding on pests such as garden slugs, snails and perhaps the New Zealand Flatworm. By joining in with *Making Compost Count for Slow-worms* you can help us to understand more about slow-worm ecology and just how important composting is to this secretive animal.

Kent Reptile and



KRAG

Amphibian Group

If you're interested in learning more about reptiles and amphibians in Kent and how you can get involved in monitoring and conserving them go to:

www.kentarg.org

Is Brown the New Green?

What is a Brownfield Site?

A brownfield site can be described as any site which has been altered by the activities of man, it isn't necessarily a huge derelict power station, it can also include quarries or small brick pits as well as disused railway lines.

Brownfield sites can be found in urban settings, but also they can be out in the countryside, far away from any other development.

Typical habitat networks within a brownfield site could include, open patches of bare earth or rock, areas of scrub - usually colonised after sites become neglected, and open grassland, often rich in flora.

However, in this article I'm also going to talk about allotments, local parks, gardens and neglected sites in urban areas - so I'm including a much wider variety of habitats when I talk about *urban* brownfield sites in this newsletter.

What flora and fauna do they support?

Brownfield sites are most commonly associated with diverse invertebrate populations. They are also excellent habitats for herpetofauna (reptiles and amphibians) and small mammals.



2-spot ladybird (*Adalia 2-punctata* F. *sexpustulata*) © Ruth Childs

Not all creatures thrive when undisturbed, in fact many of the rare species found on brownfield sites are there because of the disturbed nature of the site, regular exposure to fresh rock and soil for instance provides new nesting and foraging opportunities for some insects.

Site management is vital - whether you know you're doing it or not! However, species like the 2 spot

ladybird are adaptable and can be found in a variety of habitats.

Why record on Brownfield Sites?

Brownfield sites can provide you with an opportunity to observe specialist species, you may not see during your Sunday walk in the woods or along the river. For this very reason (a specialist lifestyle) many brownfield species are endangered, "The north lagoon of West Thurrock Marshes is home to almost one thousand invertebrates, birds and reptiles. The site is nationally important for rare and endangered invertebrates; including 36 Red Data Book species. Only one other site in the UK is known to hold more rare species" - this is a quote taken from the Buglife website describing a threatened brownfield site in Essex.



Slug (*Arion ater*) © P. Fox

Record closer to home

Allotments, gardens and local parks in towns and villages can provide homes for surprising numbers of species. Leaving part of your garden alone can mimic the conditions found on some brownfield sites and encourage new species to take up residence. Why not have a go at recording in your garden or allotment, as ever we can help with

species identification, if provided with a photo.

Pests Garden pests, although not always welcome still provide us with useful records, molluscs (slugs and snails) are one of our most poorly recorded groups, allotments and shady areas left alone in the garden can provide great habitats for slugs - an important food source for frogs, toads, slow-worms and thrushes.