

Species of the Month

February — Frogs and Spawn

Conservation Communities - Torrington to Hatherleigh

Help build up a picture of the wildlife in our area by telling

Devon Biodiversity Records Centre (www.dbrc.org.uk) about the species you have seen.



Frog or Toad

- Smooth skin
- A dark 'mask' behind the eye
- Long back legs, with dark bands
- Hops and jump
- Lays spawn in jelly-like clumps in shallow puddles or ponds. Spawn expands after it is laid and floats, forming a large mat of merged clumps.

- Olive-brown, warty skin
- Copper eyes
- Short back legs
- Walks rather than hops
- Lays its spawn in long strings around aquatic plants, with two rows of eggs per string. They breed in large, deep ponds.

You might think it's still a bit cold for frogs and toads, but frogspawn starts appearing in February. In fact, where it's been mild here in Devon, you may have even spotted some in January! Frogs and toads can be hard to spot as adults, so getting records of spawn is a great way of knowing where they are.

Did you know?

One clump of frogspawn can contain up to 2000 eggs but only one in 50 eggs will mature into an adult.

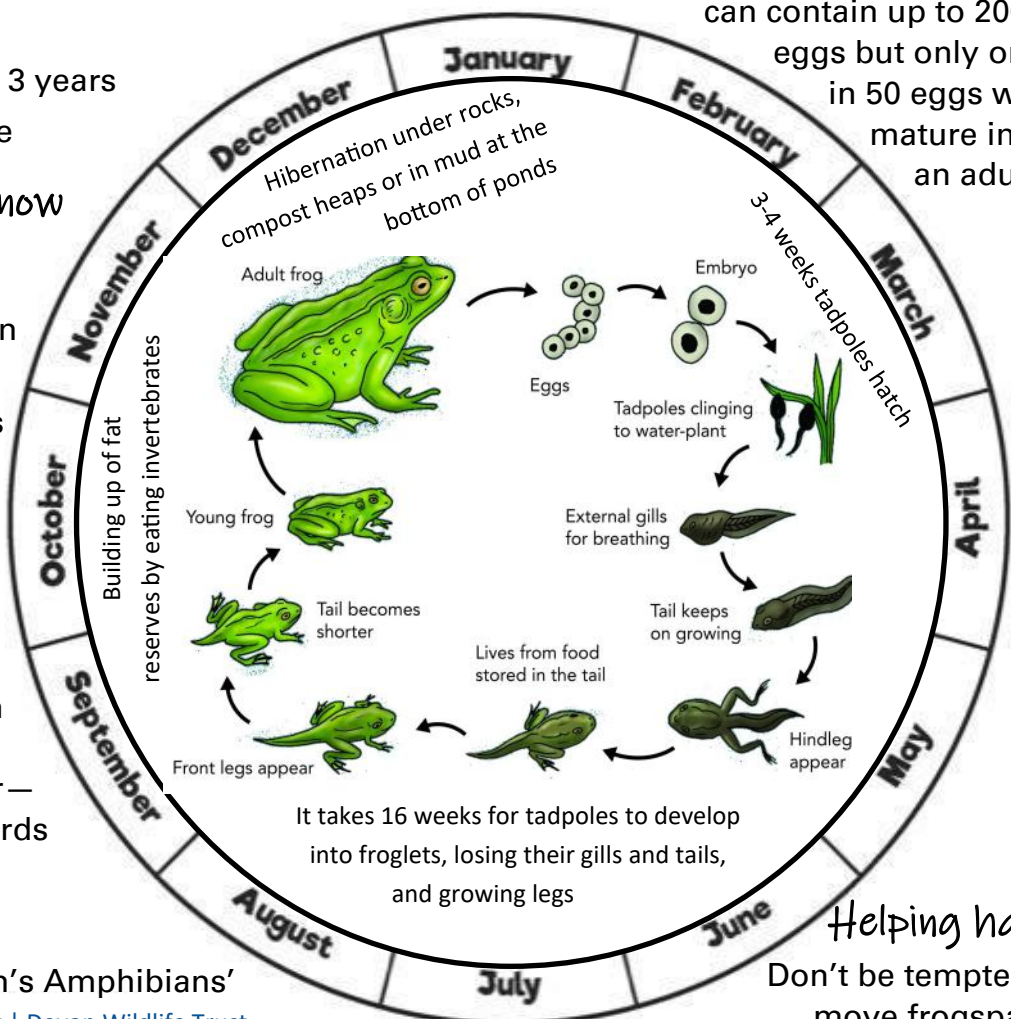
Did you know? It takes 3 years for frogs to reach full size

Why DBRC need to know about amphibians in

this area: The common frog is not necessarily common - in many areas they have disappeared due to agricultural pesticides, draining of wetland habitats and filling-in of small ponds. DBRC has very few records of amphibians in this area but we suspect there are a good number—help us to put these records right.

To find out more:

Watch 'Identifying Devon's Amphibians' [Conservation Communities Project | Devon Wildlife Trust](http://www.dbrc.org.uk)



Helping hand:

Don't be tempted to move frogspawn between ponds. This risks spreading disease.

Species of the Month

March — Brown Hare



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Hares and Rabbits

First introduced to Britain in Roman times, the brown hare is considered naturalised. It is a different species to the indigenous mountain hare, which isn't found in Devon.

They live in grassland and woodland edges, eating vegetation, the bark of young trees and arable crops.

Seen at dawn or dusk, out in the open fields. Hares are most easily spotted in spring when it's the breeding season and males seek out females. During his time they can be seen "boxing". If a male is chasing a female too much, in his attempt to mate, she might turn around and try to fend him off.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Golden brow fur• Average 50cm in length and 4kg• Long ears with black tips• Runs at high speed, when frightened they lower their tails• Solitary or live in small groups• Lives out in the open, hiding in vegetation or shallow depressions known as forms• Babies (leverets) are born above ground, fully furred, eyes open and ready to run! | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grey fur• Average 40cm in length and 2.5kg• Ears proportionally shorter than hares• When frightened, they expose a white underside of their tail• Live in large social groups• Live in warrens, a network of tunnels or burrows they dig into the soil• Young (kittens) are born underground, blind and naked |
|---|---|

Did you know?

- Hares can reach speeds of 45mph
- The female leaves the leverets all day, only returning at sunset to feed them. This reduces the risk of predation, particularly by foxes.

Why DBRC are asking for reports of hare sightings:

DBRC has very few records of hares in the Conservation Communities area, especially over the last 10 years—is this because they are no longer here?

It is thought that nationally their numbers are declining. We know that hares are quite rare in Devon as it is a county that favours pasture over arable crops.

They have little legal protection and are classed as game animals. They are listed as a species of principal conservation importance, under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act (2006).

To find out more:

Watch Meadow Mammals video at [Conservation Communities Project | Devon Wildlife Trust](http://ConservationCommunitiesProject.DevonWildlifeTrust)



Species of the Month

April — Hedgehogs

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Hedgehogs are one of our most distinctive mammals. They are generally nocturnal, spending the daytime resting somewhere safe.

Hedgehogs can live for up to 7 years and can be found in a variety of habitats, including suburban gardens, woodland, farmland and parks.

They are known for eating slugs and snails but this only makes up 5% of their diet. They prefer to eat; beetles, earwigs, earthworms and caterpillars.

Did you know?

- The 5,000 spines that cover the hedgehogs back are 2-3 cm long and made of keratin, the same stuff as our hair.
- Hedgehogs have relatively poor eyesight and rely on their sense of smell and hearing to get around and find food.

Why DBRC need to know about hedgehogs

in this area: Over the last 20 years, hedgehogs have suffered a serious decline, with up to a 50% loss in rural areas. Habitat loss and use of pesticides have affected the ability of hedgehogs to find shelter and food.

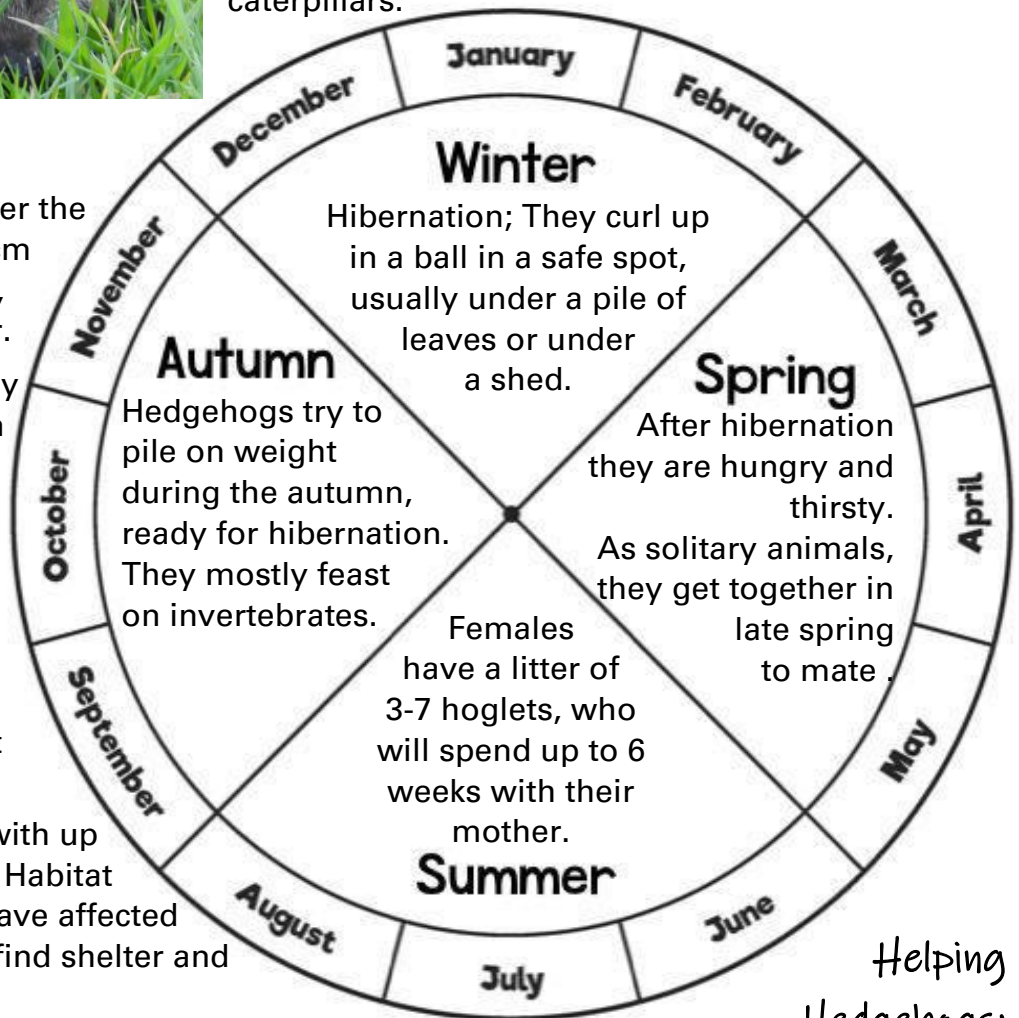
The majority of DBRCs hedgehog records are from the 1980s, we would like to get an up to date picture of the hedgehog numbers, please tell us if you have seen one.

To find out more: watch the Hedgehog Talk

[Conservation Communities Project | Devon Wildlife Trust](#)



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Helping Hedgehogs:

Ensure your garden is hedgehog friendly by creating small gaps in fences and providing shelter for them. By encouraging invertebrates, you will be helping hogs too.

To find out what you can do, visit DWT's Help the Hog page: <https://www.devonwildlifetrust.org/take-action/garden-wildlife/help-hog>

Species of the Month

May — Bluebells



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UK bluebell

Hyacinthoides non-scripta



Spanish bluebell

Hyacinthoides hispanica

- A native UK species
- Found in large swathes in woodland or Dartmoor
- A violet-blue colour
- All the flowers are on one side of the stem, which distinctly droops
- Flower petals curl back on themselves tightly
- Sweet smelling
- Narrow leaves (<1.5cm)
- Anthers and pollen cream-coloured

- Introduced to the UK by Victorian gardeners
- Often found in gardens, or in smaller patches.
- Paler blue than native plants
- Flowers are positioned around the stem, which is very upright
- Flowers are bell-shaped but the tips don't turn back so much.
- Very little odour
- Wider leaves (>1.5cm to 3cm)
- Anthers and pollen usually blue

Bluebells are one of our best known and well-loved flowers. Blooming in late spring they can form carpets of blue in and around our woodlands.

There are two types of bluebells commonly found in Devon – our native bluebell and the introduced Spanish bluebell. The two species also hybridise, so if you find flowers with a mixture of characteristics then you have a hybrid.

Did you know?

The UK's woodlands are home to almost 50% of the world's population of bluebell!

Why DBRC need to know about bluebells

in this area: Native bluebells can be used as an indicator of ancient woodlands, by finding out where native bluebell populations are thriving we can monitor this habitat. We can also gauge where this unique and irreplaceable species is under threat from habitat destruction and hybridisation.

Helping hands and feet!

Bluebells do not survive when their leaves are damaged, please tread carefully in bluebell habitats.

To find out more:

Watch our woodland plant identification video

[Conservation Communities Project](#) | [Devon Wildlife Trust](#)



Species of the Month

June — Swifts, Swallows & Martins



Conservation Communities -Torrington to Hatherleigh

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Swifts, swallows, house martins and sand martins are all fast-flying summer visitors to the UK. It's easy to tell the difference once you know how:

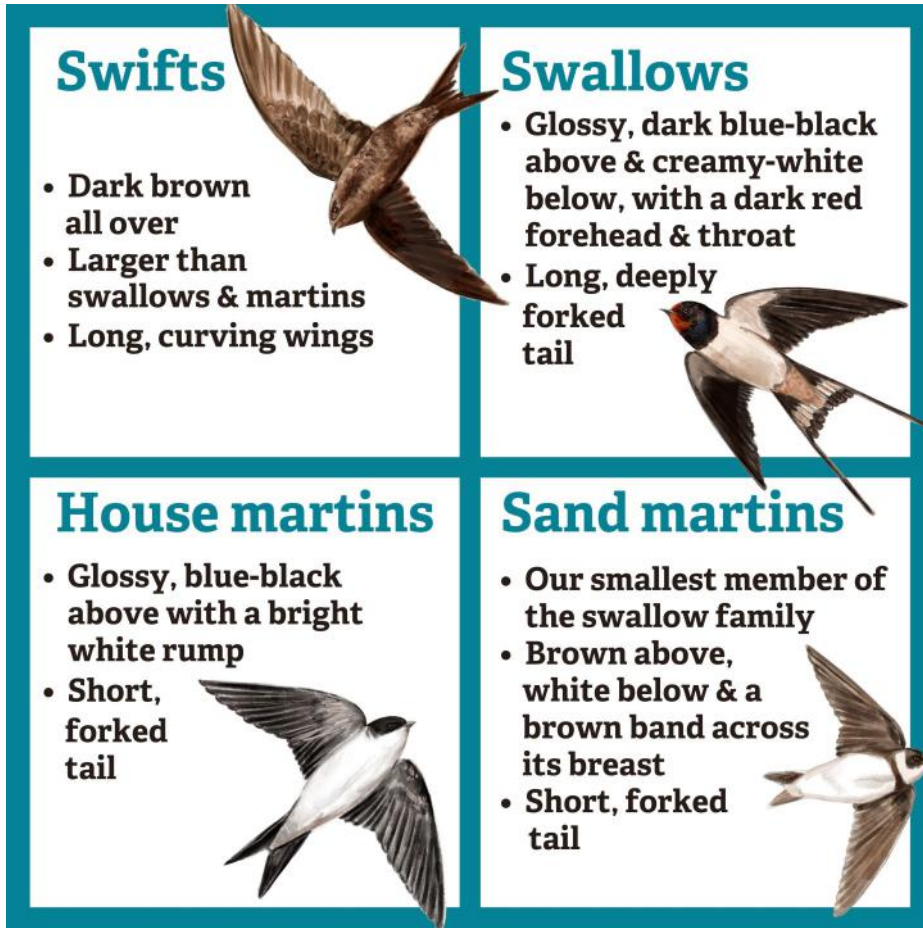


Image by Katy Frost

Swifts: Nest communally, high up. They are often heard in the early morning and just before dusk and can be spotted high in the sky catching insects. They very rarely come to the ground and spend most of their time on the wing.

Swallows: Build nests of mud and moss in cup shapes. They usually build these inside barns for extra protection.

House Martins: Nest communally in cup-shaped mud nests usually just below the eaves of a roof.

Did you know?

Sand Martins are the only species of these 4 that have shown an upward trend in numbers. This species, winters further north in Africa and nests in burrows here in the UK.

Why DBRC need to know about these birds:

Recently the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) updated the list of Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC). The red list is for birds deemed most in need of help. Both swifts and house martins have now been moved onto the red list. Both species have shown a population decline of over 50% between 1969 and 2018. Swallows are on the green list, but even these have declined by over 30%.

All these birds are migratory so understanding the causes of decline can be difficult, with factors affecting both their summer breeding grounds in the UK (such as loss of nesting sites) and in their wintering grounds in Africa.

Having as much information as we can about where these birds are, can help in their conservation, by keeping professional ecologists and our conservation partners informed.

Conservation Communities - Torrington to Hatherleigh

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Glow-worms are not a worm at all, but a beetle. The females are famous for emitting a greenish light from their bottoms, caused by a chemical reaction to attract males.



Male glow-worm (photo: C. Quinlin)

The smaller males look more like typical beetles. They scan the vegetation at night looking out for a glow that gives away a female's position. The males then fly over to her.

Female glow-worm (photo: S.Ellery)

Females are larger than the males and look like the larvae. They have no wings. After mating, a female will stop glowing. She will soon lay her eggs, then die.

Did you know?

- A glow-worm only lives as an adult for 2-3 weeks
- Males can glow too, but it's very rare.
- They feed on small slugs and snails.

Where to look: You can see them glowing between June and August, look just after it gets dark—they glow for a few hours.

They prefer open grassland or heaths, but can be found in gardens, railway embankments, cliffs and open woodland rides. You will see them at several of DWTs nature reserves, including Meeth Quarry. They are often found as larvae, look in fields with a diverse species of grasses and plants.

If you do find a glow-worm, don't move it. You can take a quick photo to send to us, but otherwise leave it be.



Glow-worm larva (photo: J.Higham)

Glow-worms stay as larvae for 2-3 years, the larvae also glow, but much more faintly.

Why DBRC need to know about glow worms in this area: Glow-worm numbers have been falling. It's not always clear why. Maybe habitat loss, or more lights in the countryside at night. Keeping track of sites with glow-worms is really important. And of course, they will be affected by the use of pesticides and herbicides.

Find out more: [Action for Insects](http://www.actionforinsects.org) campaign at www.devonwildlifetrust.org

Conservation Communities - Torrington to Hatherleigh

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Kestrels are one of the smaller birds of prey, slightly smaller than a pigeon. Females are brown, with dark bands on the tail. Whereas males have a grey head, a more ginger back with a paler underside.



Kestrels are most often observed hovering. They have the ability to keep their head totally still, even in strong winds. They have fantastic eyesight and use it to look for their prey – small mammals.



Did you know?

- Their favoured prey are field voles.
- They like to hunt over open countryside.
- Kestrels can see ultraviolet light, meaning they can detect urine trails of small mammals.
- Kestrels don't build a nest, but use holes in trees or cliffs.
- Their eyesight is excellent and can detect tiny movements whilst hovering 20m up in the air.

Decline in Numbers

Kestrels are on the birds of Conservation Concern Amber List. Their decline is thought to be due to changes in land use, amongst other factors. Kestrels have a high mortality rate. Of the 5 eggs usually laid, only one is likely to survive for 2 years, when it reaches breeding age. Starvation, collisions, poisoning and disease are factors.

Although the species had a small recovery when pesticide use reduced in the 1980s, there has been a decline over the last 15 years, the cause of which is unknown.

Why DBRC need to know about kestrels in this area:

By sending in your sightings of kestrels, you can help us put them on the map and contribute to our knowledge of where these birds are.

Having kestrels in the area can also tell us about other species. It's likely that there is a good population of small mammals in areas with kestrel records, which often suggests a diverse habitat.

September— Grass Snake

Conservation Communities - Torrington to Hatherleigh

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Photo: David Chamberlain

Grass snakes are the only UK snake to lay eggs, which are clumped together in groups of 10 - 40, one egg measures 2.5—3cm.

The eggs are laid in piles of rotting vegetation, a garden compost heap makes a perfect spot! The young hatch throughout August and September, looking much the same as the adults, but about the size of a pencil. You might spot some of these youngsters, out in the sun or tucked away beneath pots in the garden.



Did you know?

- Grass snakes are often found near water.
- Their favourite prey is amphibians, but they will also eat small mammals, birds and fish where they can.
- Next month, in October, they will start to prepare for hibernation, finding a sheltered, humid spot away from the cold. Here in the South West, where the weather is quite mild, hibernation can be delayed.



Photo: Mary Harper

Why DBRC need to know about grass snakes in this area:

There are very few records of reptiles within the Conservation Communities area, although grass snakes have been spotted throughout the summer. Send in your records to put this species on the map in your parish!

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What is a gall?

Galls occur on plants (usually trees and shrubs), they are produced as a response by the plant to insects feeding or laying eggs inside the leaves or branches (these insects and the galls cause little damage to the host plant). Although this activity usually happens in spring, it is often not until autumn, when the leaves fall, that galls become apparent.

Galls come in all sorts of shapes, colours and sizes.



Artichoke Gall



Oak Apple Gall



Robin's Pincushion



Knopper Gall

Here are three common types of gall that you may find on oak trees this autumn.



Photo: Amy Lewis

Oak marble gall is caused by the small wasp (just 2mm long), *Andricus kollari*. Clusters of these oak marble galls can be found on twigs of oak trees. They mature to a brown colour. Inside the gall, larvae feed on the host tissue. The adults emerge, leaving small circular holes in the gall. The empty gall remains, and it is these that we see in the autumn.



Photo: Graham Calow

Spangle galls are caused by the common gall wasp, *Neuroterus quercusbaccarum*. After mating, fertilised eggs are laid on the underside of oak leaves. The galls (which look slightly flattened) are formed by autumn and the wasp larvae remain inside the gall among the leaf litter, throughout winter, emerging in spring.



Photo: Brian Eversham



Photo: Graham Calow

Silk button galls are also found on the underside of oak leaves. These are caused by the wasp *Neuroterus numismalis*. The galls are raised, with a dent in the centre.

In each of these cases, these galls form only one part of the fascinating life cycle of these two species of gall wasps.

Did you know?

- There are around 70 different types of gall wasp for oak trees in the UK?
- Gall wasps have a complicated life cycle, often producing more than one type of gall on a tree.

Adult gall wasps are rarely seen, but their galls are easily spotted, especially in autumn. More information can be found on The Wildlife Trusts "[Wildlife Explorer](#)" webpages.

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Fungi are so diverse. From slime moulds and jellies, to amazing bushy lichens, they exist in a huge variety of forms. Fungi grow all year round as a network of hyphae out of sight, producing fruiting bodies in autumn which we can use to identify them. Here are three, quite distinctive fungi that we hope you might be able to find this autumn.

Did you know?

- There are 15,000 types of fungi in the UK!

Please don't eat fungi you find.

Experts are needed to help identify which species are edible and even then, edible fungi can cause tummy trouble the first time they are eaten.



Small stagshorn — *Calocera cornea*

This small, yellow fungus grows on decaying wood of broadleaf trees. It has yellow, finger-like fruiting bodies which taper to a blunt point and are slightly gelatinous in texture. They are small, reaching up to 2cm tall. Due to the small size they can easily be overlooked, although they are quite common. Take a close look at stumps and fallen logs in damp, shady places.



Honey fungus — *Armillaria mellea*

Often grows in large colonies on tree stumps from September - November. Each mushroom is about 14cm high and the cap can reach 15cm across. The caps are conical when young, flattening with age. They are a warm honey colour. Gills start white and darken with age. The gills are joined to the stem. The stem itself is usually bulbous at the base, although it can appear in a slender form. The stem has a skirt around it, usually quite high.



Candlesnuff fungus — *Xylaria hypoxylon*

This species is also known as "stag's horn" but is distinctive from the small stagshorn described above. It has an erect, black and white, fruiting body. They grow on stumps and fallen branches of trees. The base is black and appears hairy, tapering to a white powdery tip. The stem can appear round or flattened.

Why DBRC (www.dbrc.org.uk) need to know about fungi in this area:

Hundreds of species have been recorded in the Conservation Communities area, but most of these have only been recorded once. Help us keep our records up to date, by letting us know if you've spotted these or any other fungi (photos of your finds are always helpful).

Species of the Month

December — Redwing



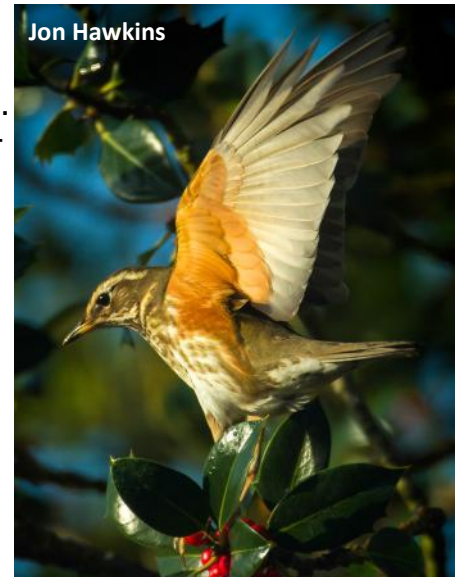
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Redwings seen in Devon over the winter are usually from Scandinavia or Russia. They migrate to the UK in autumn to feast on berries in hedgerows, favouring hawthorn and rowan. Once the berries have all gone, they can be seen searching for earthworms on the ground. They stay throughout the winter, heading back to their summer breeding grounds in spring.

Did you know?

- The redwing is the UK's smallest true thrush.
- They are often seen in large flocks, sometimes mixed with fieldfares or other thrushes.
- The migratory flight made twice a year, of 500 miles across the North Sea, is a dangerous journey for a small bird!
- 8.6 million redwings visit the UK in the winter.



Redwing and Fieldfare

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Redwings are our smallest true thrust, measuring 21cm from beak to tail. A similar size to a song thrush.• They have a distinctive creamy eye stripe (supercilium).• The rusty-red underwings help when identifying redwings. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fieldfares are bigger than redwings. Similar in size and shape to the mistle thrush.• They have a distinguishable grey head and back.• Fieldfares have a long, black tail, that you can spot, if looking at a mixed flock. |
|---|--|

Why DBRC (www.dbrc.org.uk) are asking you to tell them about redwings in this area: Redwings favour open countryside, but they will also venture into gardens, particularly if the weather is harsh. This makes it a great bird to try and spot over the winter as you may see them out of your window. With all migrating birds, keeping track of their numbers not only helps us keep track of the health of our local wildlife, but also helps to track changes across the planet.