

## The FSC BioLinks Project

Supporting invertebrate recording in Worcestershire and across the West Midlands region.

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### What is the BioLinks Project?

FSC BioLinks is an exciting new biodiversity project for the Field Studies Council (FSC), funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, running from 2018 to 2022 inclusive.

BioLinks is all about invertebrate identification! It will bring together new and existing volunteers who have skills in invertebrate identification and recording. The aim is to build and strengthen the biological recording community by providing training, learning opportunities and digital tools for people involved in biological recording.



01. Networking.

The project focuses on eight invertebrate groups: arachnids, true flies, true bugs, beetles, freshwater invertebrates, soil invertebrates, slugs & snails and hymenoptera. We hope to offer something for everyone, whatever your current level of knowledge around invertebrates. Training opportunities are provided at all levels from beginner to expert, with a training pathway allowing people to progress and consolidate their skills and experience. The hope is that the project will increase the quality and quantity of invertebrate species data being submitted to our national biodiversity datasets and improve our understanding of those data.

A key aim of BioLinks is to remove barriers to becoming involved in invertebrate recording. Because of our funding from Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), our training courses can be offered at a highly subsidised rate - £5 for a day course and £50 for a weekend residential. This often also includes a copy of an ID resource to take away as well. A real bargain price for courses taught by regional and national experts!

The project is split between two regions – the West Midlands and the South East. In the West Midlands, Bishops Wood field centre (near Kidderminster) and Preston Montford field centre (Shrewsbury) are being further developed as hubs for this sort of invertebrate ID training. This development includes the purchase of some exciting new kit – for example, Bishops Wood has been equipped with 12 dissecting microscopes and 12 compound microscopes for use on our training courses, plus lots of other field equipment including hand lenses, sweep nets, collecting trays and pooters. I have also begun buying and curating a library of field guides, keys and other identification resources at Bishops Wood for use by volunteers and during our training events.

Training will also be provided at other non-FSC locations within West Midlands as opportunities arise, building new relationships between the FSC and various partners, as well as reaching new audiences. We've found that people new to recording often feel more comfortable attending a workshop at a local venue which is familiar to them, such as a village hall or community centre, rather than an official 'field centre'; so we're going on the road and bringing the training to them!

### Open Lab Days

Identifying and recording invertebrates often involves the use of both a microscope and identification books and keys, which can sometimes be a barrier to recorders due to the expense of purchasing such equipment. So, to complement our more formal training courses, we are also providing the opportunity for local invertebrate recorders to use our lab facilities and resources at our training hubs, including Bishops Wood.

These informal 'Open Lab Days' are for local invertebrate recorders of any level of experience to come together and work on their invertebrate ID skills, and/or catalogue and maintain their invertebrate collections. A classroom, microscopes, and a library of reference books will be available. These days are designed to be fun and sociable, with a chance to meet and work alongside other local entomologists. I will be on-hand to provide support and guidance and these Open Lab Days are free to attend - attendees are welcome to come for the full day, or drop in for part of the day.

### How did the first year go?

In the first year of the project in the West Midlands, 19 One-day Training Courses, four Weekend Residential Courses, eight Open Lab Days, one Collections Workshop, three Recorder Days and two Regional Recorder Conferences have been run or supported by the project. 254 places on training courses have been taken up, by 145 different individuals. Similar statistics have been achieved in the South East.

Our Digital Development Officer, Rich Burkmar, has been working on developing some brilliant digital tools to aid biological recording, as well as running training on using QGIS software for biological records. For more information on the digital elements of BioLinks, including the IdentiKit tool for creating your own online multi-access identification keys, please see our website: [www.fscbiodiversity.uk](http://www.fscbiodiversity.uk).

We've seen some fantastic species on our courses – some rare, some stunningly beautiful, some common as muck, but all completely fascinating. Over 860 records have been made on BioLinks training courses this year, of over 470 species.

An early highlight was the national notable jewel wasp *Chrysura radians*, which is classed as Nationally Scarce. This was found at the



Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre, South Shropshire, happily on a Learn To Love Wasps course! Nationally Scarce (also termed Nationally Notable) means the species has only been found in between 16 and 100 hectads (10x10km square).



02. *Phyllobius roboretanus* Small Green Nettle Weevil. Jean Young.

I'm continually astonished by the colours of even the tiniest invertebrate. The very sparkly small green nettle weevil *Phyllobius roboretanus* (02) was one of a number of stunning green weevils we found on the 'Field ID of Beetles' course at Bishops Wood, including *Polydrusus formosus*, another Nationally Notable species which has recently expanded its range in the UK.

One of the joys of fieldwork on a BioLinks course is the fact that everyone shares a love of nature in general and invertebrates in particular. However, this does mean that we can be easily distracted by non-target taxa! But for me, this adds to the whole experience. We never find one group of species in isolation, and once you acquire the habit of looking, you'll see more and more 'other stuff'.

We saw some fascinating spiders on our 'Learn To Love Spiders' and 'Field ID of Spiders' courses. This great photo of a female green crab spider *Diaea dorsata* (03) was taken by Jean Young on a course at Bishops Wood. On this same course we saw a tiny orb weaver, *Padiscura pallens*, unofficially termed the 'sputnik spider' due to the spiky shape of her egg sac. Look for them on the underside of oak leaves – the tiny spider is just a couple of mm long, so you're more likely to spot her relatively huge egg sac! What an investment of time, energy and silk it must be to create.



03. *Diaea dorsata* 07Jun18. Jean Young.

But the star of the season has to be some incredible hornet-mimic clearwing moths, called, un-originally, hornet moths *Sesia apiformis*! A sharp-eyed attendee on our Field ID of Flies course at

Bishops Wood, Worcestershire, spotted a mating pair near the base of a tree trunk. It is also classed as Nationally Scarce.



04. Hornet Moth July 2018. Neil Harris.

#### What's planned for 2019?

The 2019 BioLinks courses will be released for booking in early January. Courses which will be run at Bishops Wood in 2019 include: Learn To Love Slugs, Dragonfly Larvae and Exuviae Identification, Introduction to Weevils, Learn to Love Solitary Wasps, Field ID of Solitary Wasps, Field ID of Cryptic Ladybirds, Field ID of Hoverflies, Identification of Solitary Bees with Microscopes, Identifying Dolichopodid flies with Microscopes. These all fit in with the programme of BioLinks courses being run at venues across the region, so if there is a species group you're interested in you should be able to find the correct entry level course for you, then progress up the different levels.

If you're inspired to look more closely at the little things that make the world go round, check out for BioLinks courses here (courses will be added in early January): [www.fsbiodiversity.uk/courses](http://www.fsbiodiversity.uk/courses)

For the latest news and updates on the project, please sign up for the BioLinks Newsletter: [www.fsbiodiversity.uk/biolinks-signup](http://www.fsbiodiversity.uk/biolinks-signup).



05. Field ID of Damselflies at Bishops Wood.

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- 06. Biolinks logo.