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SOME THOUGHTS ON FIELDWORK

I still find that people are surprised that museum naturalists actually do fieldwork, yet for most of us this is an essential aspect of our work if we are to record, acquire specimens and gain a working knowledge of our area. However, it is potentially very expensive in time and money, and in recent years we have been examining more critically the aims and methods of the fieldwork which we undertake.

Broadly, our fieldwork falls into two main categories. Firstly, unplanned visits in response to an enquiry which cannot be dealt with over the telephone, or a specimen to be collected. By their nature these visits are largely unavoidable and include calls to summer bat roosts in houses, temporary geological sections and picking up reported specimens for the collections. The second are planned visits within a framework of a particular survey. By careful planning this second category can be made more cost effective.

Circumstances obviously play a major part in determining the types and levels of surveys in different counties. In Norfolk we are dealing with a large, highly agricultural county covering some 2,000 square miles and seventy 10 km. grid squares or parts. Despite the intensive farming it is still very rich biologically with about fifty nature reserves (at the last count) covering some 30,000 acres, plus other sites of SSSI status. However, despite having the regional offices of the Nature Conservancy Council, the R.S.P.B., a Naturalists Trust, a County Naturalists Society and the University of East Anglia, the county is not as well surveyed as some others. (I sometimes wonder what we all do!). Areas like the Breckland and the North Norfolk coast are fairly well known. Broadland has been so well surveyed that it might be considered as another reason for its decline. However, the agricultural heartland probably has still quite a few gems yet to be discovered; for instance, one potentially grade 1 site was found last year. Informal discussions with the various organisations led to a set of priorities and we have been concentrating on these. The priorities were determined by two main criteria: the lack of knowledge about particular habitats or groups and the demands from planners and others about certain areas. As a result we have been involved with work on river valleys where there are still areas of unimproved meadow and the demands for gravel extraction are greatest. So far, we have surveyed two rivers and have liaised with organisations like the Otter Trust and the N.C.C. on several more. With the help of the Naturalists Society we are surveying several long sections of disused railway which are to be used for recreation. In collaboration with the industrial archaeologists we have visited underground structures such as lime kilns and ice houses in search of hibernating bats. Endangered dragonflies have been the subject of a joint N.C.C., museum and amateur survey. The latest venture is a survey of churchyards with the help of the W.I. The launching of this scheme, incidentally, gave the writer his one and only chance to appear on the stage of the Theatre Royal in front of an audience of 400 women.

We hope for records of various ferns and other plants as a result. So far we have resisted a field by field survey, although we did undertake a pilot survey of one 10 km. square to test such a scheme. This is because at present we feel it is best to concentrate on areas of greatest need.

In planning our surveys we have had much help on techniques from various members of the N. C. C. and it is quite clear that methods are becoming increasingly sophisticated. A recent survey of Norfolk woodlands, for instance, was a model of its kind. We do not expect to match their expertise but by keeping abreast of these developments we can at least take them into account and use them where practical.

Norfolk is not, of course, unique in being involved in activities of this kind. Museums in many parts of the country are engaged in such work yet before the war this would have been considered unusual. It is perhaps an area of our work which has changed more than most.

Peter W. Lambley

WOULD YOU BELIEVE IT ?

No doubt there are many of you who anticipate with pleasure the chance to read an account of how in 1856 Rear Admiral Sir Marmalade Brittlethrop, R.N. (retired and deceased), brought back the first specimen of Pavolv's Dribbling Shrew (Sorex slobberychops) into this country. That the specimen was a stowaway in an erotic West African gourd is no discredit to Brittlethrop. (His collection of erotic gourds in another matter).

The shrew was found by Brittlethrop's butler who, being an intelligent and good-natured fellow, fed it to his cat. Unfortunately the cat was sleeping at the time and the shrew, upon hearing a dinner bell, proceeded to eat most of the cat's nose. This proved too much for the butler who gently stamped it to death and took the specimen to the museum. The curator at that time was not a taxidermist, nor was he studying for the Museums Diploma, so the shrew was put on display without preparation. After a few days' hectic visiting (you know how it is), the public lost interest in the exhibit and no more seems to be recorded about the shrew itself. However, a few weeks later, several blue bottles (Calliphora sp.) were found flying around inside the showcase. One of these was pinned and placed in the General and Municipal Insects Cabinet, where it lay as the only material evidence of Brittlethrop's shrew.