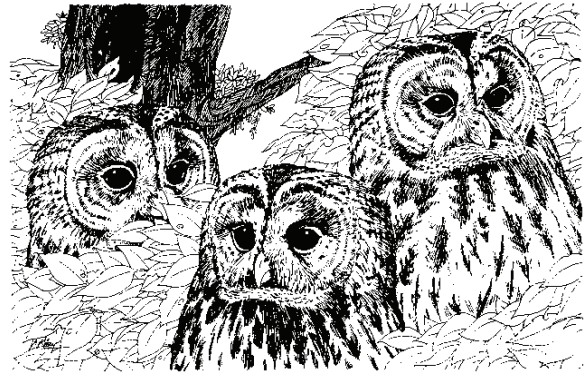


Three Owls Newsletter

Report by Nigel Fowler

Winter 2016/2017



Great to be back

Well, time has rushed by since the last newsletter, and though many subscribers have kept in regular touch, I have to admit to feeling a little guilty that you have had to wait a little longer than usual for the next printed edition.

Such a lot has happened some good ... some not so good... but in true *Three Owls* fashion, we will battle through and come out the other side.

I must firstly say a huge thank you to our other two Trustees; David and Stewart, who have both kept the charity running smoothly during the past 18 months whilst I have been so ill. Thankfully, with careful management and lots of support, I am now making steady progress thanks to a low carb high fat (LCHF) lifestyle and my health is improving – long may it continue! (It makes a change to be on the TV for something other than *Three Owls*!) David in particular has kept up with all the mowing at Three Owls Wood in Tarleton; an intensive yet therapeutic task which is ever-so important in the young woodland.

Alas in September 2015 our much revered website suffered a huge attack by a multi-national group of hackers, and eventually they broke through the security and caused a huge amount of damage to the site. Our webmaster has tried to repair what he can, though there are some areas (including the news section) which are irreparably damaged and we are faced with having to redesign the site from scratch. The launch of the new site 'should' coincide with you receiving this newsletter, so fingers crossed! It has been a great pity that not all of the visitors to the site proved to be genuine people, but rather a consequence of the attacks. However it is STILL a very busy site and the feedback from it proves it continues to save lives every week.

Catching up

Well, we have a fair bit to get through in this edition, so I'd best not hang around. I've relied mainly on David's regular reports from the Three Owls Wood and the Meadow Reserve for most of 2015, as I was very much on 'limited service' for a lot of that time.

Starting off the New Year in 2015, during **January** the reconstruction of the new sandbank for the sand martins on our Watermeadow Reserve at Wigton was getting underway. Of course other wildlife will use the sandbank too, and Emma at Knoxwood keeps me regularly updated with their progress on our two reserves up there.

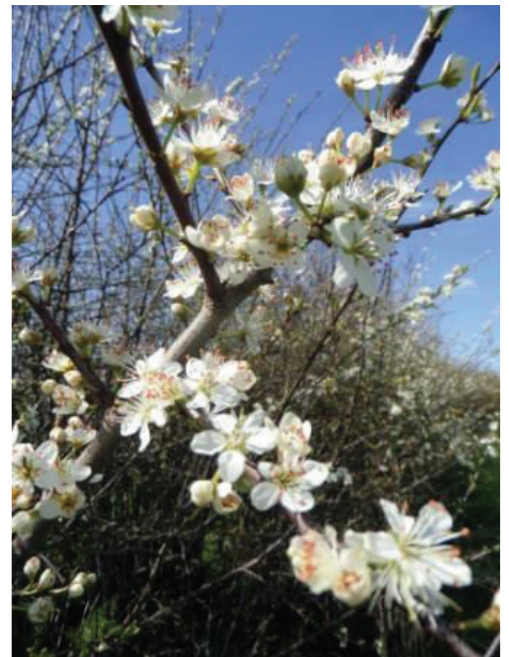


In **February** we planted a fruit tree orchard alongside the stables at Three Owls Wood, and also planted up the land surrounding the new pond with wildflower seeds ready for this years' season (always plan ahead).

In **March** we were able to issue grants totalling £26,000 to four established organisations helping wild birds. This years' new applicant was South West Lancashire Ringing Group, and their grant would enable them to have a joiner construct and site a Barn Owl nesting box, and to cover their ringing fees for the whole of 2015.

April of that year saw further works to the Watermeadow Reserve; this time grading back the banking on the beck to allow part of the field to flood during the wetter weather, which also included the removal of some of the underground field drains. It was a lovely month too for the blossom to announce the arrival of Spring – always a welcome sight.

During **May**, one of David's regular reports told us the new orchard at Three Owls Wood was growing well, and that his moth studies at the Wood and the Field Reserve had found an impressive Ermine Moth;

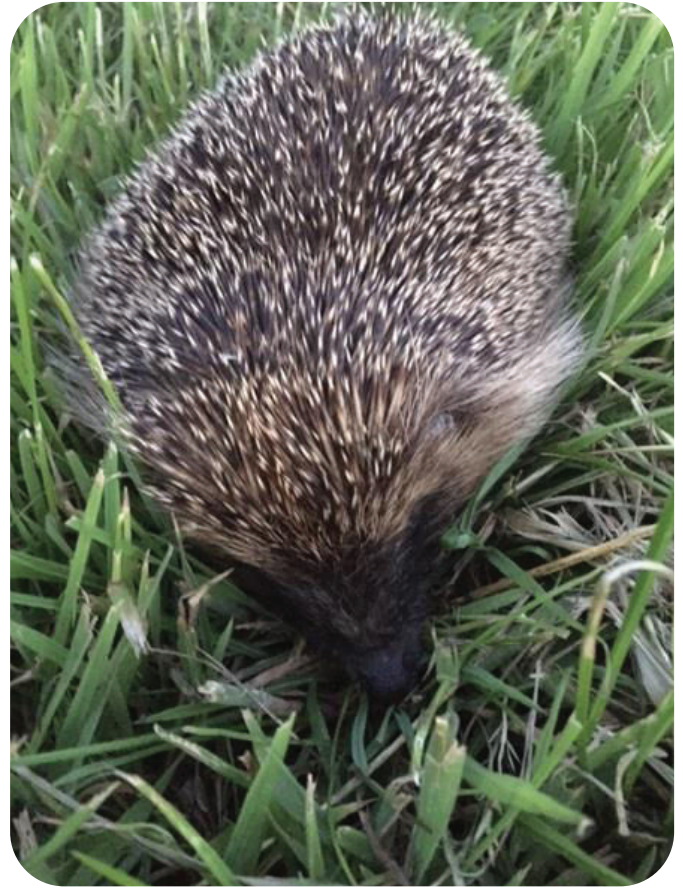


Also in May, the Home Reserve floor was a beautiful sea of Wild Garlic; the picture below shows the sanctuary founders' (Mrs Eileen Watkinson MBE) grave, encapsulated in the Home Reserves' glory. You can just make out the stone owls at the head and foot of the grave. I know she would have been very pleased with all that Three Owls has achieved since her passing in 1995, and continues to do on a daily basis.



June of 2015 was busy as usual; our popular website passed the 3 millionth visitor mark, and there was plenty going on at the Three Owls Wood reserve;





In **July** John Thorpe once more peddled all the way from Manchester to Blackpool to raise funds for Three Owls. This was his most profitable ride ever, and thanks to a huge amount of support he raised a magnificent £635. This was his 26th consecutive ride, and he worked out that over that time he has peddled a total of 2,121 miles, reckoning that if he'd kept going, then he'd be a long way away by now!





David also sent a splendid picture of an Elephant Hawk moth during the same month, from the Meadow Reserve at Banks;

For anyone wondering why we take such an interest in the moths; you don't just create nature reserves solely for the birds! Plus, they are a natural diet for many birds.



In **August** it was frustratingly bad news we were reporting, when the website received a vast amount of attacks from a multi-national hacking group - whose sole aim seemed to be to attack websites (often educational ones), for the hideous pleasure of trying to get them to crash and break down, whilst displaying their gruesome tally on their own hackers website.

We managed to fight off several attacks, but eventually the damage was too severe and we had to take the website offline for several weeks whilst we tried to effect repairs and get it back up and running again.

It was also during August that we first looked at a further Nature Reserve for Three Owls; this one being mature woodland being auctioned off by Lancashire County Council. However, following a Trustees onsite meeting, we came to the conclusion that this first one was not quite right, as it had a busy road down the majority of one side of the woodland, and the idea put on the back burner for a while. This potential purchase was to have been made possible by a generous legacy, and the family were pleased as to how we were looking to invest the funds to benefit wildlife on an ongoing basis.

In **September** we returned the website to the public, although some areas of it such as the news section and scrolling pictures were too badly damaged to repair and these were left with limited functionality until we have the time and funds to re-write and replace the site entirely. To read the news items fully at present, you need to click the 'read all' link at the bottom of that section.

October took us over to Tarleton where the fruit tree orchard at the Wood had come on in leaps and bounds over the course of the year. Fruit trees attract insects, and they in turn feed the birds – all part of the cycle of life.



November was an exciting month, as we had a further trustees meeting to discuss another possibility of purchasing a 4.7 acre mature woodland – made possible through the aforementioned legacy. An onsite meeting at the wood proved it was just what we had been looking for, and now we had to see whether we could win it – as it would be an auction purchase this time as it was part of a larger woodland that Lancashire County Council were selling off. We would have to wait until December to see how things went....

November also saw the installation of the new hedge at the Field Reserve in Wigton. This not only delineates the boundary of our land, but also will provide food, shelter, and nesting sites for a variety of birds and wildlife.



The first photo shows the bank of old hay bedding used to create a hedge breast.

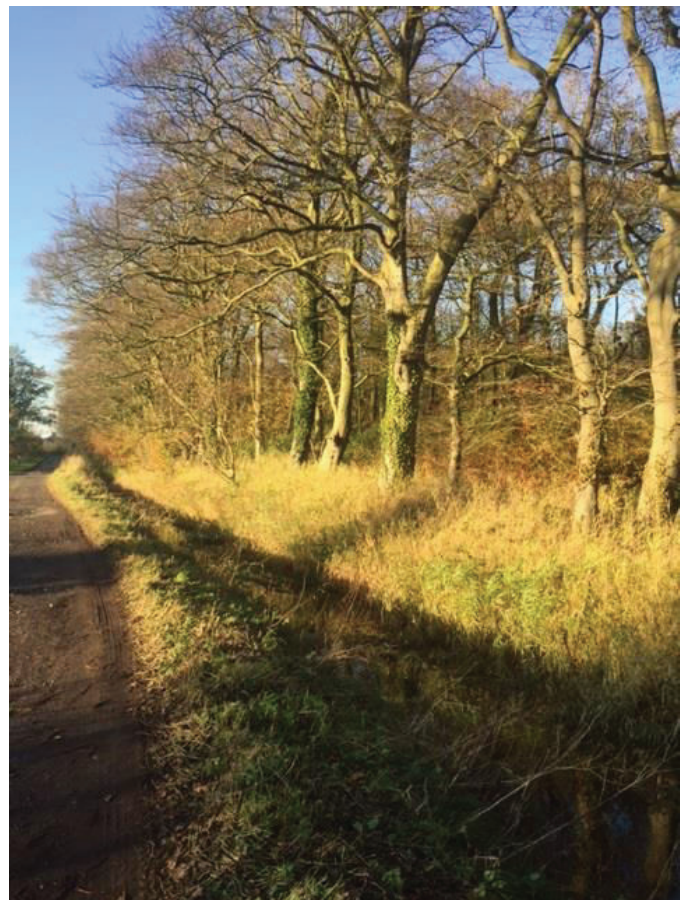
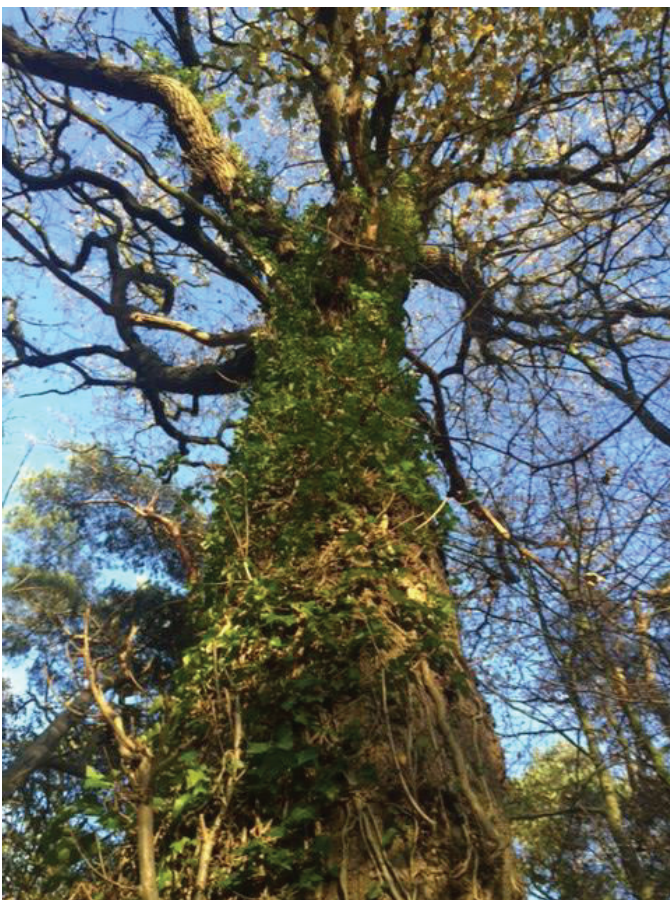
The second is a small selection of the vast number of hedging plants, bushes and small trees which will form the hedge.



The third shows what you have to do to stop the geese helping themselves to your tasty newly-planted hedge!

Well, **December** always arrives eventually, and this was the month of the mature wood auction. Now car auctions I've been to and these are pretty swift affairs. However this was a property auction and things go at a much slower pace – don't believe everything you see on the TV!

After some early bids against us, the Wood at last was ours, and much cheaper than some of the other sites we have purchased for reserves – by their very nature, mature woodlands are worth a lot less than other areas of open land, which may be either of agricultural or building use. However, this was perfect and with added covenants preventing *any* of the four woodland lots being used for anything *other* than woodland for the next 20 years; this further protects the site from outside intrusion or disturbance. The woodland is a SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) which again will help prevent any disruption from the surrounding areas in the future. It is also classed as a biological heritage site. All good for the conservation work we will be undertaking on it.



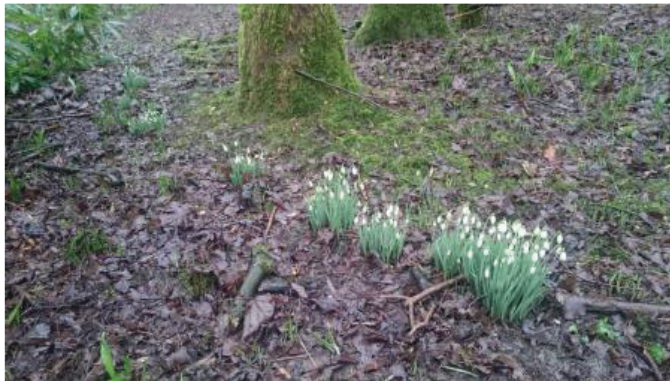
After a very wet Boxing Day, leading to large areas of the town being flooded, we ended up being without electric for a number of days. Fortunately, we are equipped with wood burning stoves, and a generator was rigged up to provide some power and lighting, this also gave us back the internet for those emergency helpline emails as the landline phone still worked. Consequently, we were able to provide not only ourselves, but also some of the neighbours who came round, with a supply of warmth, lighting and hot food and refreshments. The New Year finally brought some drier weather...

Well, we had to have some of the white stuff eventually, and by mid-**January** 2016 there was a fair covering. I thought my pictures of the Home Reserve in the snow were quite good – but David's shots of the Barn Owls on the Meadow Reserve are absolutely stunning....





Into **February** and the earlier than usual mild weather has brought Mother Nature forward again. The herons on the Home Reserve are all sitting tight on their eggs (clutches of 4, and 5), and while the snowdrops may not be too unusual, it IS very early for the daffodils to be so far on.



Keeping on the same level, we should not have been surprised to find the first heron egg hatching on 19th March (the earliest ever we have recorded). Just two days later the 2nd chick arrived. The end of the month we had frosts again, and this is a picture from the Three Owls Wood showing a very frozen pond;



There will be no need to mow between the trees from now on as the Wood is well-established. However the rides and pathways will still need to be tended to on a monthly basis.

In **April** we reported that Spring had arrived on the Watermeadow Reserve; the newly-planted Willows were coming into bud, and the Gorse that was planted at the head of the Sand Martin bank (to stop any animals/people falling over the edge), had taken really well and was growing strongly.



Also in April, we launched the *Barn Owl Initiative* scheme. Having observed how the local barn owls really benefit from tussocky grass (as per Barn Owl Trust guidelines) we have approached a local farmer to rent us a 24m x 300m strip of land, initially for two years. This strip is adjacent to a ditch already hunted by owls, and the idea is to sow tussocky rye grass as ideal field vole habitat to give the existing birds an improved chance of survival. Healthy well-fed birds will self-populate the surrounding area, and this is one way to make a year-on-year difference to the wild barn owl population. Also the same habitat assists Kestrels, Partridges, Water Voles and many invertebrates. We can also provide nesting boxes as required for these schemes.

We had a minor maintenance day with six of our trusty volunteers on the Home Reserve at Rochdale on 8th **May**, and we were blessed with a beautiful sunny day - which always helps with the reserve work. Accompanied all day by the wonderful song of the swallows all around - quite how they have such energy having flown all the way from North Africa is beyond me! They really are the acrobats of the skies.

The whole reserve is alive with birds just now, with the flies now plentiful, we have cut right back on the seed feeding stations. Many blackbirds and thrushes have young in the nests, and several more species such as the sparrows, jackdaws, and moorhen and mallards are busy building their nests or incubating their eggs, hence natural food is best.

It was while clearing the drain we came across a trio of newts; all in great health and I managed to get a photo of one before all three were returned back to the water. These are the Common Newt, and I was pleased to see the ponds so well-stocked with wildlife. Let us hope they have a good long life and aren't noticed by the herons!

We have been given a lot of nest-boxes in kit form following my earlier appeal, and John Thorpe has offered to build them up for us. We will get these installed throughout the reserve soon, in order they can be in use and give our tit / finch / robin families a helping hand.



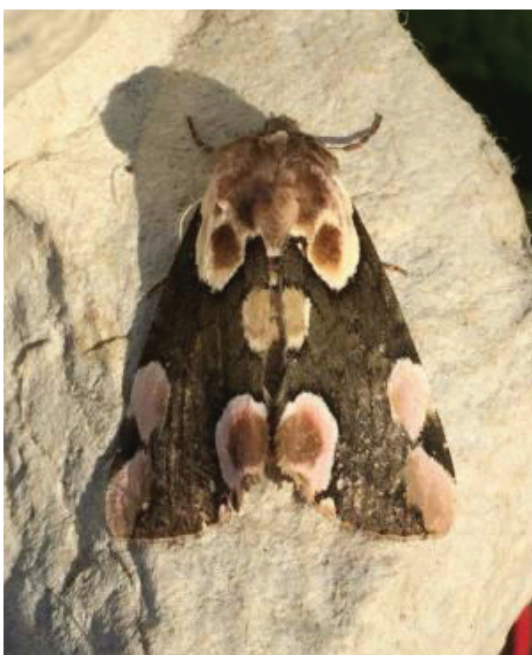
Still in May, I received via the website a request for owl pellets to study the moth larvae. The usual requests for owl pellets have come from students wishing to dissect them to see what the wild owls have been eating. This was a little different and took some explaining as I hadn't heard of this before, though David (our moth expert) had.

The picture on the right is of one of the barn owl pellets complete with brown moth chrysalis;

Interestingly, one of the owl pellet moths has turned out to be rarity for this area; 227 *Monopsis laevigella* (Skin moth). This is only the second time it has been recorded in our SD square.



In **June** we assisted our new neighbour with the construction of a new bridge over the ditch to access our latest reserve; Old Beech Wood. The existing footbridge was in a dangerous condition, and this new installation will make it safer for all.



We also racked up another species of moth (over 140 so far) in the moth survey on the Meadow Reserve; this is the Peach Blossom Moth.

In July, John Thorpe completed his 27th consecutive Sponsored Bike Ride from Manchester to Blackpool. Alas with this being a double issue newsletter, we haven't got the room to put his full write-up in this edition. I have looked at possibly shortening it but this wouldn't be fair as you need to read it in its entirety; hence, if you are able, please visit our website and read it online. To date, John's ride this year has brought in a wonderful £503 in sponsorship, just shy of last years' all-time record of £635. I'm sure you will join me in congratulating him on such a marvellous effort, and you may consider increasing this figure for him? Just note your donation as 'Bike Ride' and we will sort them out. He is pictured below with the 'Voice of the Ride'.



The following post-mow photo shows the pond at the Three Owls Wood at Tarleton. It really is quite incredible as to how this really now IS a young woodland, and is now home to so many different birds and animals.



The good thing about the design of the pond is that it rises and falls with the seasons. Here in August it is at its shallowest, whereas in mid-winter it will be full to the brim. Allowing it to 'operate' in this fashion greatly benefits the wildlife, and avoids any issues with it silting up.

In **September**, David wrote an article about the Barn Owls on the Meadow Reserve;

Much ado about Barn Owls: How we developed the Three Owls Meadow Reserve

Three years ago it was just a close cropped 2 acre field. There were occasional Barn Owl sightings, perhaps every few weeks. Since then we have taken advice from the Barn Owl Trust in the form of a helpful leaflet 'How to manage land for Barn Owls'. The results have amazed us, only yesterday a pair were on the field on and off most of the day –just resting for a few hours in the middle of the day. Close observation showed why when we witnessed each owl kill a field vole within an hour.

It turns out Barn Owl care is really about field vole care!



'Grass that's allowed to grow tall in the summer and not cut or grazed, will collapse by the autumn. Fresh green blades of grass will then grow up through it and by the following summer most of the first-year's growth will have died-back and formed a "litter layer". A good litter layer is about 70mm deep – you can approximate its depth using the length of your index finger.

A litter layer provides Field Voles with the cover they need for their tunnels and nests. From November to March you should be able to spot small holes (about 40mm in diameter) through which the voles emerge to graze. The litter-layer also provides cover for Common Shrews and Wood Mice and together, these three species make up 82% of what Barn Owls eat in the UK. Whereas crops and hay fields are only good for Barn Owls at certain times, permanent rough grassland provides them with food all year round.

With a good 70mm litter layer, rough grassland can contain up to 400 Field Voles per hectare! (A hectare is 100 metres x 100 metres).'

We noticed the difference within the first year of just leaving the tussocky grass to grow. Our cat started bringing field voles into the house on a daily basis! Before long other predators noticed too so a kestrel was seen most days and then at last the owls arrived, a pair!!



The Barn Owls are seen nearly every day. Watching them hunt we noticed a pattern; they quarter the field preferring to fly into the wind about ten feet above the ground staring down intently. After watching for six months we observed they liked to rest on a fence post every fifteen minutes or so and began to wonder if they would like a post in the middle of the field rather than near traffic at the edge? We banged in a 4 foot fence post and they love it!! Encouraged we put in a second so that sometimes we have two owls resting at the same time now.

A year on and we have noticed a new hunting technique; they conserve energy by just sitting on their post, looking down and listening carefully –then just jumping down on the hapless (and very surprised) vole.



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In the middle of September we were hit with a huge electrical storm, which knocked out ALL our communications for a time. Thankfully within 2 days we were back 'open for business' as they say!

The storm was pretty severe, even by our standards, culminating in a lightning strike to the metal telephone pole which feeds the Sanctuary office.

(This went off with one heck of a bang!)

This unfortunately fried everything that the broadband used; amazingly the landline survived the experience.

Top marks to Plusnet, who had everything replaced within 24 hours of me informing them.

There are ongoing issues however with the Helpline, and despite O2 working on the transmitter for some months now, the signal is very hit and miss whilst I'm in and around the Home Reserve. They assure me they are continuing to work on it. O2 have at least provided an App to run on the phone, which uses the Wi-Fi signal from the office to enable calls and text whilst we have no phone signal - that is a big help when inside, but no use on the reserve.

Often people ask me; "how do the wild birds survive such a big storm?". Well, simply put - they are much better prepared than us humans, and well before the storm reaches us, they will be safely sheltered away, often in a conifer tree where there is a protective column of warm air up the centre. As such, if you look around at the start of a storm, there will be a complete absence of birds, yet within a few minutes of it passing; the place will be alive with them again.

Also in September, Knoxwood reintroduced a covey of young English Grey Partridge onto the large Watermeadow Reserve. It is hoped they will settle and make the reserve their new home.



In **October**, at the end of our contract, we finally had to call it a day with O2 as we had 'no signal' more than we had one at all. Hence, the Advice Helpline is now served by the '3' network. The phone handset has been changed too, though thankfully I am now used to a touchscreen phone. The number of course, remains the same as always.

Eventually, autumn arrived and the leaves began to fall from the trees in earnest during October. This was also when the trees at Three Owls Wood were absolutely loaded with berries. David managed to get a couple of photos before the birds gobbled them all up!



It is **November** as I write this, and hope to get it printed and out to you early in December. We have just endured some of the loudest (worst) fireworks I have ever heard, and it has been a job and a half stopping the rescued animals we have here from panicking. Each year it is mooted that these excessively loud fireworks will be banned / licensed, however they still seem to be available to all and sundry.

We have had some wonderful donations this month; A huge Thank You to two of our lovely supporters for their recent gifts; Sheila from Heywood donated 8kg of sunflower seeds (that's a huge sack!), and Gill from Royton donated two big bags of peanuts. These have been split between the reserves at Wigton and Rochdale.

Often I am asked how best to help Three Owls and birds in general - well this is one way to help ALL birds get through the now-upon- us winter weather. We also buy the wild bird seed and fatballs from Aldi when available, as the birds all love them. Do please remember that it is vital that birds have fresh lean water to drink daily – but don't be tempted to put any form of antifreeze in it as this will kill them! Instead, a small ball bobbing in the dish will help stop it freezing completely.



Winter dawn breaking
over the
Home Reserve.

Christmas gifts

Stuck for a gift idea? Don't forget we still have a selection of Three Owls goods for sale. Postage is included in the prices, so the figure you see is the price you pay. We will endeavour to despatch the next day following receipt of your payment. If time is short before Christmas for those unexpected / forgotten presents, you can always order via our website where payment can be made instantly online – hence less delay.



PVC Apron
£8.00



PVC Tote Bag
£8.00



100% Cotton Tea Towel
£5.00

If you are ordering anything online please don't forget to use the **easyfundraising.org.uk** website; which will generate a donation to Three Owls from a huge number of suppliers. As I write, £660.55 has been raised this way; it costs you NOTHING extra, but a few minutes to initially register on the site and select Three Owls as your chosen charity.

Three Owls Bird Sanctuary and Reserve

(Affiliated to the Jean Sainsbury Animal Welfare Trust)

Wolstenholme Fold, Norden, Rochdale, Lancs. OL11 5UD

Tel: 07973 819389 (Advice Helpline)

Website: www.threeowls.co.uk Email: info@threeowls.co.uk

Registered Charity No: 298352



**ALL I NEED IS A BIT OF
UNDERSTANDING.**

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