A report on the Natural Devon wildlife conference, 6th July 2019

**Introduction.**I attended this conference, which was held in Chagford on Saturday 6th July, in my role as Ashford Parish wildlife warden. The conference was organised and run by Natural Devon. The conference was well attended by over 200 delegates, most of whom were either associated with the various wildlife organisations represented by Natural Devon, or were representatives of Parish Councils county-wide.

Natural Devon is the name given to Devon’s Local Nature Partnership (LNP). Devon was given LNP status by the UK Government in 2012. The LNP provides a forum for over 70 groups, societies and organisations in the county, all of whom have a ‘hands on’ interest in wildlife. The scope includes large organisations such as the Local Authorities, AONB’s and the North Devon Biosphere Reserve, as well as specific interest groups supporting particular aspects of the wildlife found in our county. More information about Natural Devon can be found on their website at [www.naturaldevon.org.uk](http://www.naturaldevon.org.uk)

The stated aim of the conference was to provide ‘bottom up’ support for local groups who wish to promote wildlife in their communities. Devon has declared a ‘biodiversity crisis’ and recognises that support at community level, through parishes and local groups, is an essential step in reversing the declining trends show in much of our wildlife.

**Conference topics.**I have attached the agenda for the day-long conference, which shows the range of topics presented and discussed. As well as the presentations there were a number of workshops available, delegates having been invited beforehand to select the two which they would like to attend. I chose ‘gardens, habitats and beauty’ for the morning workshop and ‘managing road verges for wildlife’ in the afternoon, as I believed they would both be of value and interest to the residents of Ashford.

The main thrust in many of the presentations was the need to restore and preserve wildlife habitat. In order to keep this report reasonably brief, I will not attempt to repeat all that was said. Below are what I considered to be some of the highlight facts from the various presentations. I will be happy to discuss any of them in greater detail.

* Through the eyes of birds.  
  A wonderful account of Sacha Dench’s 7000 km journey by paraglider, flying with Bewick swans on their annual migration from the Russian Arctic tundra to the UK, in an attempt to understand population declines.  
  Look online for ‘Flight of the swans’.
* Some suggested reasons for loss of habitat**.**  
  Climate change, building density, light pollution, felling of trees, removal of hedges, pesticides, intensive farming techniques, fragmentation of habitat for pollinators, changes in management of meadows (cutting too early or too frequently).  
  However, the presentation ‘What’s special about Devon?’ emphasised to everyone what a wonderful wildlife county we live in.  
  See [www.moormeadows.org.uk](http://www.moormeadows.org.uk) if you want to see how you can turn a field or part of your garden into a wildflower meadow.
* Devon living churchyard project.  
  England has circa 16,000 churches with circa 10,000 churchyards. Devon has circa 500 churchyards, each with an average size of 1 acre (presenters figures, not mine!).
* North Devon Biosphere reserve.  
  We are winning battles, but losing the war. Voluntary community action is essential.
* Community woodlands.  
  Discussed the importance of woodland, for commercial value, mental health, habitat and converting CO2 into breathable oxygen. We need more trees in Devon.

**Conclusion.**This was a very interesting and informative day, emphasising the fact that the efforts of small local groups can and do make a positive impact on the bigger wildlife picture. If any residents want further information on any of these topics I will be pleased to help.

Michael Moss   
9th July 2019.