

TREVOR BEER'S NATURE WATCH 3

Trevor Beer

Trevor Beer's love of wildlife becomes obvious when you read his articles and books, and look closely at his superb drawings and paintings. Trevor began writing in the 1960s for the *North Devon Snail*, a local magazine, and moved on to newspapers and wider circulation magazines from there. Passionate about our British countryside, there is no doubting Trevor's expertise when it comes to wildlife subjects, and alongside his writings he has worked for the BBC Natural History Unit finding film locations for their wildlife programmes. Natural History is his hobby, work, and therefore his way of life.

Among the many prestigious awards for his work in conservation, he was awarded an MBE in the Queen's New Year's Honours List for Services to the Environment and Journalism in 2002. *Nature Watch 3* marks Trevor's 20th year of writing his 'Nature Watch' column six days a week for the *Western Morning News*, for which he has never missed a day. Among the paper's most popular columns, reader's letters and queries still flood in through Trevor's letterbox, a tribute to the author's natural ability to paint word pictures.

Simon Butler, The Publisher of Halsgrove says:
"Trevor's dedication to wildlife over so many years, along with his books and paintings, have made him a local treasure."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

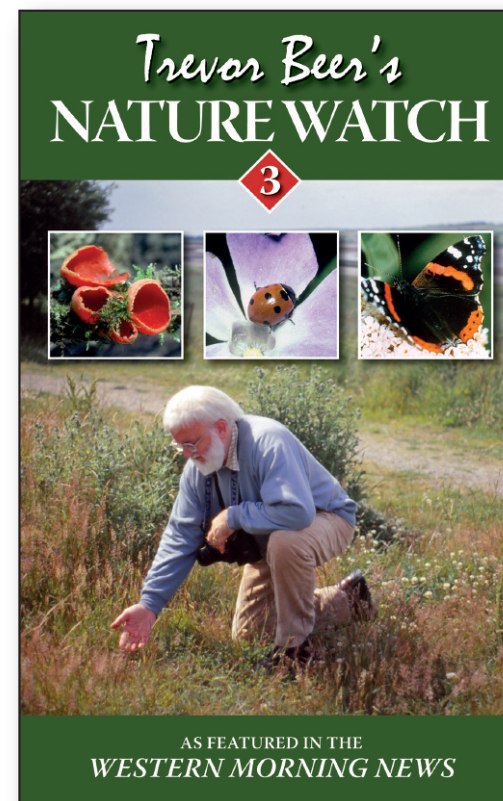
Trevor Beer, author and naturalist, is known to thousands through his regular Nature Watch column. From his home in Barnstaple Trevor has devoted much of his life exploring the natural history of the region, working tirelessly for the conservation and protection of flora and fauna. In 2002 he received the MBE for his contribution to wildlife conservation.

HALSGROVE CATALOGUE

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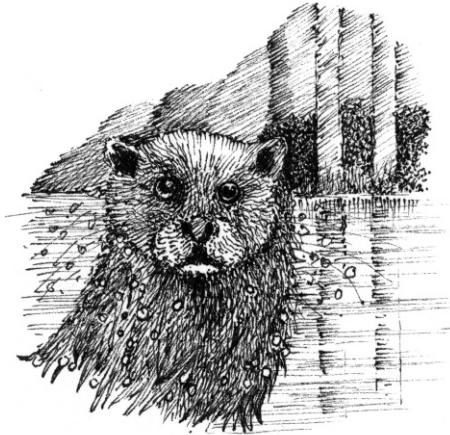
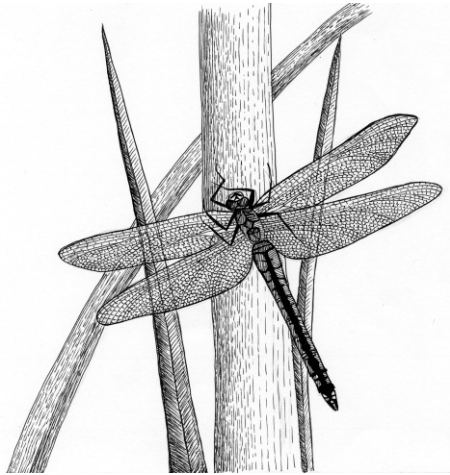


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the truth will out as it always does, and all will be well.

Viper's bugloss, a lovely wildflower, with names such as Blueweed, Blue Thistle, Our Saviour's Flannel and Wild Borage. It is a plant thought to cure snakebite and I have actually seen it used to do so, and help an old friend bitten by an adder! Absolutely true. When you see it work, it works.

What a walk! Just minutes from home and a peregrine falcon flew over, low and easy into a westward wind, in full sunlight so low I could make out the moustachial streak with ease. A couple have been hunting the estuary all winter but so many of the waders have left already that I doubt we will see the falcons here now. They'll be off to the coast for the breeding season. Or some inland quarry. Or a church tower or two.

Then within minutes a kingfisher, perched on a branch left by the tide to span a gully it often fishes. It did not stay long, just stared down into the water, saw its timing was wrong for fish and with a shrill 'peep' was off across the Taw to the mouth of the Yeo River. It can often be seen over there perched on the sterns of boats and doing a bit of fishing.

So I thought for the rest of this week I'll take you on a walk from the river back to my place. Coltsfoot has suddenly bloomed in abundance and we are finding it has spread remarkably swiftly, even up in the woods by the Dripping Well. I wonder how many people think it is a dandelion and walk on by with nary a second glance?

But less obvious still, in bloom, is the tiny Shepherd's Purse, its white flowers barely visible so small is the whole plant. The plants here are in the heart of the wood so hardly the 'persistent weed' it is known as when it pops up in our lawns.

The seeds look like leather purses, hence the English name. It is visited by insects but is self pollinated and is said to have distinctive variations in particular localities, something I must check out.

Saw a bit of a barney going on at the edge of a rough grass field with squeaking much louder than the size of the two adversaries suggested. It was a traditional battle twist two field voles, their short tails helping identification as did the yellow-brown colouring. The 'battle' such as it was, was more of a squeaking flurry of belligerence than physical and I could see no damage to either combatant. Had they not been so involved when I arrived I doubt if I would have seen them at all, though their runs through the grass are numerous if you know what to look for.

The fact, too, that barn owls hunt over this field at evening time tells of the presence of prey species. No prey, no predators about for long, is the rule.

The field vole's main food is grass, the succulent lower stems being favoured. The little creature will also take bulbs, roots and tree bark at ground level. Field voles are about 4ins (10cms) head and body length, with



a 1½ins (40mm) tail. Damp, tussocky grassland is the favoured habitat, a vole nesting in a conspicuous tussock and having runs among the grass stems in individual but small territories.

Stand still and quiet in such a field, maybe by a hedge and you may hear the loud squeaks and chatterings of field voles going about their business. They are not nocturnal but have 'shifts' of a few hours on and off duty, so to speak.

With normal life span of only a year or so they have to get on with living and young females are ready to mate at six weeks of age. I find nests beneath logs at the Sanctuary at times as I always leave fallen trees lying.

It was raining steadily at 10am but that did not deter the pair of blackbirds building a nest in the garden. As I glanced out of the kitchen window, waiting for the kettle to boil, there was the male with an ivy leaf and a length of dead grass, on the path and looking for more material. This pair are building in the leylandii arch, a popular, well-sheltered early spring location. The nest is in the curve of the arch, at the 'shoulder' as it were. In the front garden another pair have chosen the ledge of a stone wall behind a dense curtain of ivy and a fuchsia bush.



Elf Cup fungi



Brimstone Butterfly