

Embracing the Darkness in Buriton

An excellent audience in the village hall in March enjoyed a wonderfully informative and well-illustrated talk celebrating one of the parish's most special natural assets: our dark skies and the remarkable wildlife that depends upon them.

The speaker was Elinor Newman of the South Downs National Park Authority, whose enthusiasm for the night has earned her the unofficial title of "Queen of Darkness."

Her talk combined science, conservation, local pride and plenty of memorable wildlife stories, leaving everyone both entertained and better informed.

Elinor began by reminding us that the South Downs National Park became an International Dark Sky Reserve in May 2016 and is now celebrating its 10th anniversary.

Buriton occupies a special place in the Reserve, boasting two Dark Sky Discovery Sites and some of the finest opportunities in the area for stargazing.

On clear nights, residents are lucky enough to enjoy the best free light show there is: skies filled with twinkling stars, bright planets and the occasional whizzing shooting star.

But the evening was about far more than stars alone.

Elinor explored the hidden world of nocturnal wildlife, introducing the audience to the many creatures that come alive after sunset and are so rarely seen by

most of us. These included bats, owls and other birds, moths and other insects, glow worms, hedgehogs, frogs, toads and many more.

Her fascinating facts about these species both entertained and surprised the audience. We were reminded, for example, that moths are not only beautiful but are also important pollinators, playing a vital role in local ecosystems. Glow worms, too, are among the many species whose life cycles depend on genuine darkness.

A central theme of the talk was why darkness matters so much.

Artificial light at night can have serious consequences for wildlife. It can interrupt feeding and foraging, cut important movement corridors, interfere with mating behaviour and migration routes, and disrupt natural life cycles.

Many nocturnal animals rely on darkness for safety and survival, and even relatively small amounts of unnecessary lighting can cause significant harm.

Importantly, Elinor explained that the effects are not limited to creatures of the night. Daytime wildlife can also suffer, as excessive night-time illumination can disturb sleep patterns and deprive animals of vital rest and energy.

With populations of many species already declining, these impacts can ripple far beyond individual animals. Because so many species are linked through the food chain, the wider ecological consequences may be extensive.

The South Downs National Park Authority works hard to protect and enhance our dark skies, although Elinor noted that its formal powers are limited. Much of its work therefore focuses on education, awareness and encouragement.

This includes the annual Dark Skies Festival, special events across the National Park, an astrophotography competition, a dedicated dark skies section on the National Park website, and an “Embrace the Darkness” podcast, all of which help residents and visitors better understand why dark skies are so valuable.

Perhaps the most encouraging message of the evening was that everyone can make a meaningful difference through a few simple actions at home.

Indoors: closing curtains and switching lights off when they are no longer needed can reduce the amount of light spilling outside.

Outdoors: lighting should only shine where it is needed, ideally directed downwards and shielded so it does not spill into neighbouring gardens,

hedgerows or homes. It should also only be used when it is genuinely required. Unfortunately many lights remain on long after anyone needs them.

Elinor also stressed the importance of sensible brightness levels, noting that a 40W light is perfectly adequate for the average driveway or garden.

By the end of the evening, the audience had not only learned a great deal about Buriton’s night-time wildlife but also gone home with practical ideas for improving conditions for these often unseen but hugely important species.

For those wishing to explore further, more tips on wildlife-friendly lighting and local stargazing can be found in Buriton’s special leaflet “Explore the Dark Side of Buriton” which can be found on the Community Website.

The talk was an inspiring reminder that protecting darkness is not about losing light, but about using it wisely — so that both people and wildlife can continue to enjoy the magic of Buriton after sunset.

