



Biodiversity

iSpot

iSpot is a website, open to all, where you can upload photographs of organisms you've seen – animals, plants – and get help identifying what it is. And the reason we've created it is as part of a project called Open Air Laboratories, OPAL, which is funded by the Big Lottery Fund for England, and the general idea is to help create a new generation of naturalists, so in Britain we have a wonderful tradition of people being interested in natural history and recording it, both as amateurs and professionals.

What you can see in these photographs is pictures of things that people have seen and photographed, and uploaded in the last few hours, so I'm just going to click on the very latest one here – let's see what that is – somebody called Foxy has seen this, it's an Ichneumon Fly they think, so they, they reckon they know what it is. Down here they've given the name, this is the scientific name because this is actually probably a fly that doesn't have a common name, and the reason that names are so important, of course, is that actually in order to tell somebody about something it helps to have a name. If I tell you that I've seen a red and black butterfly, it's not as interesting, so I tell you I've seen a Red Admiral and then you can say, oh well, I've seen one of those and you can look it up in a book, you can Google it, you can do all sorts of things and actually learn about it, so putting names to things is fundamental in natural history, and iSpot is the place to go to get help with putting names to the things.

We have this thing called confidence. How certain are you that it is what you think it is, and again because, you know, this is a site for everybody and not everybody is an expert, in fact nobody is an expert on all species, that's for sure, when you enter the name you can select one of a choice of confidence levels and hear this person who said it's likely to be this but I can't be certain. The top level of certainty is I'm as sure as I can be. Another thing to see is that this user, Bill Riley, has got an Open University symbol there and if you hover over it you can see it says S159 Neighbourhood Nature, and what that refers to is the fact that this particular user is an Open University student studying our course called Neighbourhood Nature, and using the website as part of that course. So this website is used by students, it's used by members of the general public, and in fact it's also used by schoolchildren, just anybody who wishes to use it.

Let me show you something that a six year old found and posted on iSpot not long ago. This made the national press because it was a species new to Britain. Here's the news item on iSpot, '*A moth species new to Britain discovered*' – this is the observation itself. This was the photograph. I think it was taken by the little girl's dad. What happened was apparently she said to her mum, 'Mum, why is this moth so furry?' The photograph was posted on iSpot, an expert in iSpot, who works for us, noticed that this was something unusual, suggested it might be this thing called the Euonymus Leaf Notcher. Within forty-eight hours we had essentially established that indeed it was a species not seen in Britain before, and so you see here I can scroll through all the comments that people have made, 'so this is a very exciting find', and then somebody saying 'have you still got it? Make sure you keep it because we want to send it to the Natural History Museum where it will become part of their collections', and the girl's mum said 'yep, we will certainly send it to the Natural History Museum, but first it's going to school on Monday morning for a show and tell', so that's what happened.

You can also accumulate a kind of gallery of your own personal observations so here you have a whole load of different things that I have spotted in the last week or two, and by no means do I know what all these things are. Let me give you an example. I was growing some tomatoes in my greenhouse and I saw this thing, and I didn't know what it was, so I put the picture up, somebody helped me identify it, we then put the name in. It's this thing called the Tomato Moth, not so surprisingly perhaps. A couple of people said yep, that's what it is, and you can see here there are symbols by their names, so if you've got lots of butterflies that

means you know your butterflies and other insects. This symbol here means that that person is working for iSpot and is an expert on insects, so you can be fairly sure that if they say they agree with you they know what they're talking about. And then we've got a couple of nice features here. You see there's a link to that species on Encyclopaedia of Life, so you can actually see what the moth looks like. I found a caterpillar, that's what the moth looks like.

So now we have to go back to the home page, I'll just click on iSpot there, and right, there are a couple of new observations just come in. Those look like mallards to me. Indeed, somebody has identified them, and somebody else has come along and agreed with them. You can also see a map of the distribution of the species through the National Biodiversity Network and, not surprisingly, mallards are found all over Britain and Ireland.

We do know that biodiversity is under threat all over the world, in Britain as well, there are many species that are on the brink of extinction, we have a few in Britain ourselves. Why are we concerned? Well, one reason is because we actually enjoy nature, and iSpot is one place where you can go and enjoy, and learn about it and, of course, learning about it – that's the enjoyment. We have currently over four thousand observations that have been made here.

We'd love you to join and to make some observations yourself. We want everybody to tell their friends, in fact the message is already going around, and we're waiting for your observations. We'd love to see them.