

# **PRESS RELEASE**

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## **CELEBRATING THE COMPUTERISATION OF TWO MILLION BIOLOGICAL RECORDS FOR CORNWALL**

Cornwall is a very special place in terms of its natural environment. It supports a very rich and varied suite of plants and animals and is a refuge for hundreds of the rarest species known to occur in Britain. We know this thanks to many dedicated naturalists who have kept records over many years and who have made those data available for the greater good.

As a result, on Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> January 2010, the two millionth biological record will be computerised at Allet Chapel room. This celebration will, in particular, honour the immense contribution made by volunteers who, over a 20 year period, have helped computerise this vast resource for Cornwall, which has become the largest and most comprehensive computerised natural history database of any region in Britain. The two million records cover 25,000 different species, with data provided by over 13,000 people and extracted from nearly 15,000 published sources, as well as innumerable surveys. A tremendous achievement indeed!

The first million was computerised by the Cornish Biological Records Unit. The second million has been computerised thanks to the enormous efforts of a dedicated small band of volunteers working from home and is doubly satisfying!

### **THE CORNISH BIOLOGICAL RECORDS UNIT (CBRU)**

The CBRU was started in 1972 by Dr. Frank and Mrs Stella Turk as part of the University of Exeter. It was based in Murdoch House in Redruth and was set up to record “everything that lives or has lived in Cornwall – on land, in freshwater, or at sea”. The Unit quietly beavered away gathering records of Cornish wildlife, extracting them from published sources, undertaking surveys and creating a network of individuals and organisations that supplied data. The records themselves were transferred onto a card index. By the early 1980s the CBRU had amassed the largest databank of any Local Records Centre in Britain and was widely regarded as the foremost LRC. However, Murdoch House was bursting at the seams and the card index, with hundreds of thousands of records on it, was becoming unwieldy and was reaching the efficiency limits of that technology. The solution was to move the CBRU to larger premises and to computerise it. So in 1987 the CBRU moved in with the Institute of Cornish Studies at Trevenon House, on the Cornwall College Campus, and the ERICA computerisation project was begun.

### **ERICA Project (Environmental Recording In Cornwall Automated)**

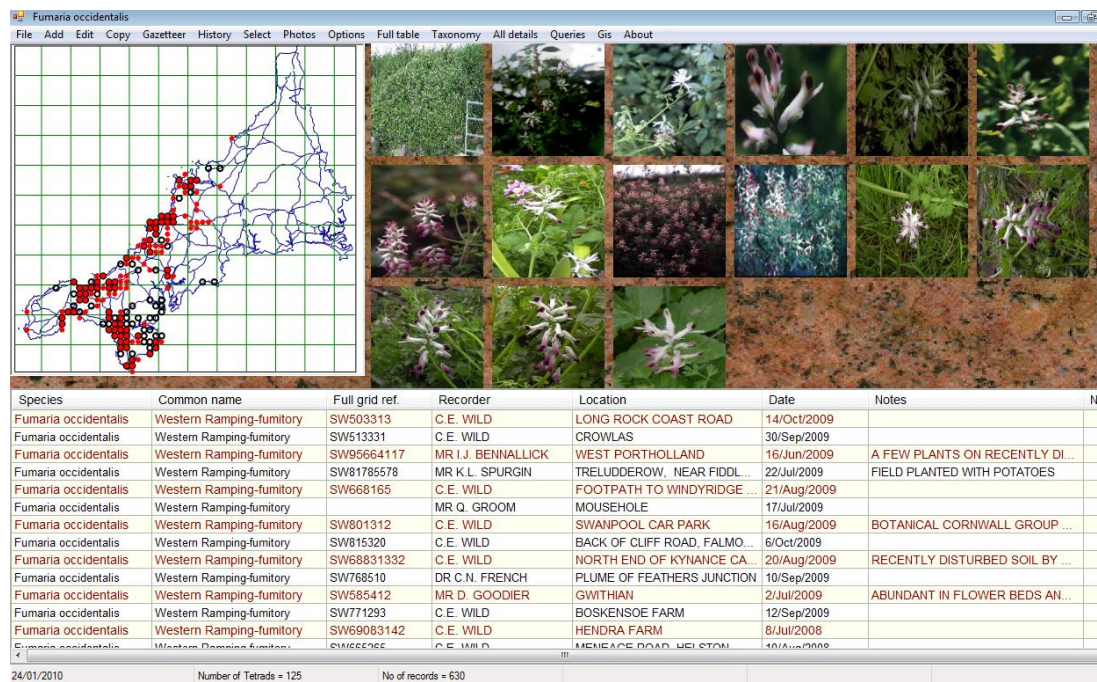
In 1987, Dr. Colin French was initially employed for nine months to develop a prototype database to determine whether the CBRU could be computerised. It was not known whether such a large and complex databank could be computerised without losing any of the information that had been so diligently extracted. At the end of the nine months the ERICA database was successfully demonstrated at a series of road-shows and funding was sought. The sheer volume of records was far beyond the capabilities of the available PC computers requiring a mini computer to undertake the ERICA Project. PRIME computers, a manufacturer of mini computers, gave the Project one of their computers and other sponsors, such as BT, funded the remaining computer equipment. The CBRU moved again to larger premises, elsewhere on the Cornwall College Campus, was kitted out with state-of-the-art connections, via the Camborne School of Mines, to the mini-computer housed at Exeter University. The ERICA Project became a reality. Inaugurated in 1989, the gargantuan task of computerising the records began, using CBRU staff, members of various Government training schemes and volunteers to process the data. Soon it was realised that the CBRU had a much larger capacity for processing records than could be supplied purely by the existing archives and so a project was set up to systematically survey the Flora of the whole of Cornwall with the intention of publishing an Atlas. This and other initiatives generated large amounts of fresh data. The CBRU also developed the very first Cornish website giving it a presence far beyond Cornwall’s shores. In the ensuing years the ERICA Project met all its targets and in the spring of 1996 the CBRU was able to celebrate the computerisation of the millionth biological record, making ERICA the largest online natural history database in the world at that time.

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Six months later the Unit faced a financial crisis and was closed down, with the paper records of the CBRU transferring to the Cornwall Wildlife Trust, who set up the Environmental Records Centre for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly (ERCCIS) to house them. The closure of the CBRU effectively left the ERICA database fossilised and unmanaged, and the biological recording community in a state of limbo, no longer able to access the data they had provided and relied upon. The immediate response was the setting up of CISFBR (Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Federation for Biological Recorders) which lobbied on behalf of the recording community and the development of a PC version of the ERICA database. As a result, within weeks of the closure of the CBRU, a new system of biological recording had been established, run by a handful of volunteers working from home. Each had a copy of the entire database on their home PC to which they added their own records. Periodically these were amalgamated with the main database, managed by Colin French, and the updated whole returned to the volunteers. Thus everyone benefitted from the collective efforts of each other and, for those involved, biological recording in Cornwall was functional again. This meant the botanical survey of Cornwall could continue; culminating in 1999 by the publication of the *Flora of Cornwall* both as a book and as a multimedia CD-ROM – another first for Cornwall. The CD-ROM enabled the user to interrogate the database, map the distribution of the records, view photographs of the plants and read the text of the book.

## ERICA FOR WINDOWS

Eventually the PC version of the ERICA database outgrew the existing software's capabilities and a new windows-based system had to be developed. This was unveiled at a Botanical Society of the British Isles conference, held at Cornwall College, in 2003. Since then ERICA for Windows has grown in size and sophistication and today is the largest and most comprehensive computerised natural history databank of any region in Britain, with more plant records than are held for the whole of Scotland. As such it assists many members of the biological recording community in Cornwall and beyond, and is, by far, the largest source of biological records for ERCCIS and through them serves many other organisations such as Cornwall Council, the National Trust, the Environment Agency and Natural England. It has also been instrumental in the production of various publications such as the aforementioned *Flora of Cornwall*, *A Cornwall Butterfly Atlas* (2003) and the *Red Data Book for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly* (2009) and has assisted with a MSC Project at the Cornwall Campus, Tremough. Furthermore, the Flora of Cornwall is being surveyed again by the Botanical Cornwall Group and all those data are being entered into Erica for Windows.



A screen shot of ERICA for Windows showing the distribution of Western Ramping-fumitory before 2000 (red dots) and since (black circles). Western Ramping-fumitory only grows in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

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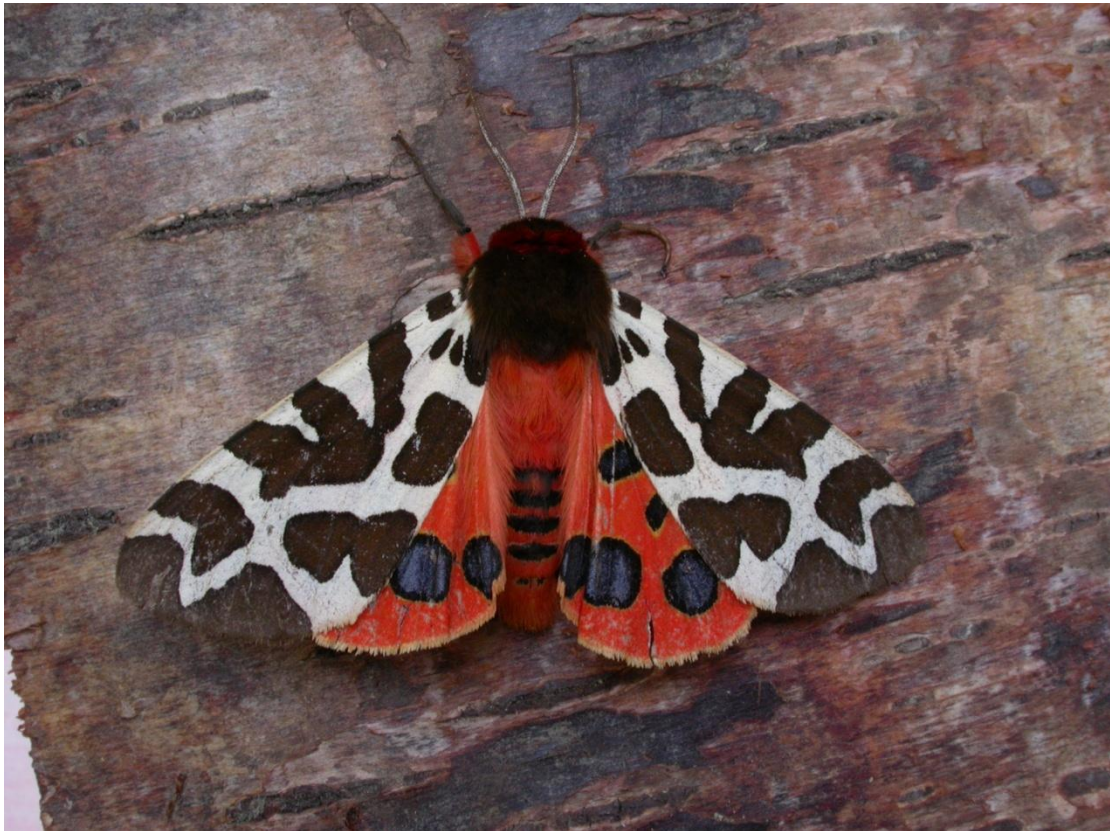
## SUMMARY

On Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> January 2010, a celebration will be held at Allet Chapel when the two millionth biological record for Cornwall will be computerised. This achievement marks more than 20 years of computerising records of wild plants and animals in Cornwall and will express appreciation for the volunteers who, working from home, entered the last million records and supplied most of the data.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

What is a biological record?

A biological record is an individual record of a plant or animal and as a minimum should answer the questions – What was it?, Where was it?, When was it? and Who saw it? Many records, however, have much more detail such as number or organisms, the habitat, the stage, what it was doing, frequency, etc. and the information recorded varies greatly from organism to organism – stranded dolphins for example often have their dimensions noted whereas for otters often their presence is only known from footprints or droppings.



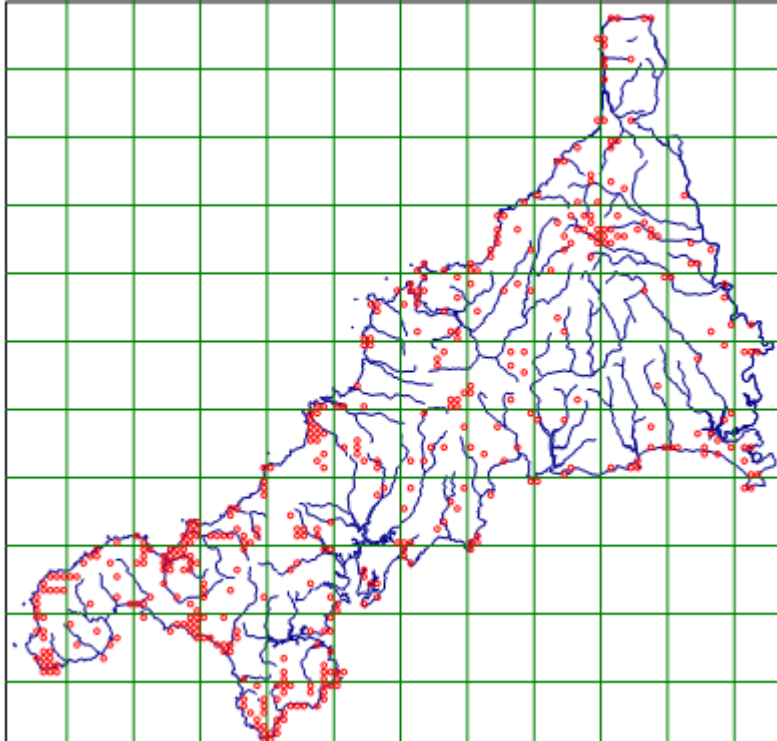
The Garden Tiger Moth (*Arctia caja*) one of the most striking moths to be seen in Cornwall.

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The Field Grasshopper (*Chorthippus brunneus*) photographed above and mapped below.



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African Hemp (*Sparmannia Africana*) one of the many exotic species that has become naturalised in Cornwall.

## CONTACT DETAILS

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