

RECORDERS' NEWSLETTER

Recorders Newsletter 34 (Summer 2015)

Pollinator action to help pollinating insects is all the rage at the moment. The Welsh Government has produced a pollinator action plan which promotes the virtues of wildflowers as insect food. It is great that attention is being given to the importance of wildflower rich habitats and the insects they support. It is even more exciting in RCT, because wildflower rich grasslands are one of the things we are good at. We have a wealth of such habitats, which is not the case in most parts of Britain. Wildflower rich hay meadows and grazing pastures are amongst our finest botanical riches. These are home to a multitude of grasses and herbs, and an accompanying fauna of bees, and hoverflies, grasshoppers, butterflies and moths. Species-rich grasslands are still part of our biodiversity fabric, and something deserving of our highest attention. They occur in old fields, low-lying marshes, grass verges, parks, cemeteries, on colliery spoil heaps and random brownfield 'bits and pieces', and these wildflower rich communities have all come from the local natural seedbank: none of it is sown or planted. So, if you are interested in pollinator action in RCT, a good starting point is to get interested in our species rich grassland: the two go 'hand in glove'.

The main clue to finding important grasslands is to do a bit of botanising (which is much easier than it sounds). In broad terms our important grasslands can be split into two main types: dry and wet

grassland, these can be distinguished by their characteristic floras (as well as the degree to which your socks get wet).

In Rhondda Cynon Taf much of our dry species rich neutral grasslands belong to the National Vegetation Classification MG5 *Cynosurus cristatus-Centaurea nigra* neutral grassland, with U4 *Festuca ovina-Agrostis capillaris-Galium saxatile* acid grassland on the thinner acidic soils. The NVC categories involve the tinniest bit of Latin, but don't be put off, in essence MG5 is the classic flower rich meadow of children's books and plate mats. Instead of just **rye grass**, it is home to lots of different grass species, such as **red fescue, meadow fescue, sweet vernal grass, crested dog's-tail, yellow-oat grass, and common bent-grass**. You may not know the names, but go in high summer and look at the flower heads of the grasses, if you can spot six or seven different flowering grasses you might be in species-rich grassland. Of course, the easier clues are the herbs, or forbs, or flowers (depending on what you want to call the things that aren't grasses or sedges), which give flower rich meadows their characteristic 'flowery' appearance. So buy yourself a British flower guide (or borrow one from your local library) and using whatever method suits best (which is usually pictures first, reading descriptions next, and only in the most extreme circumstances resorting to the keys) look for **bird's-foot trefoil** and **common knapweed**. These are the two most characteristic flowers

of unimproved neutral grasslands, if you've got the low growing, yellow and red peas flowers of the trefoil, and the cornflower blue of knapweed then it's time to get excited. With a bit more effort you may find **red clover, rough and autumn hawkbit, self-heal, ox-eye daisy, meadow vetchling, hay rattle** and **common spotted orchid**. On limestone sites (with more alkalinity) species characteristic of more calcareous conditions, such as **quaking grass, cowslip, bee orchid, fairy flax, field scabious** and **greater knapweed** are mixed in, and on the more acidic valley sides the U4 grasslands have swards of **sheep's fescue, wavy hair grass, heath grass, tormentil, heath bedstraw, sheep's sorrel, heath milkwort** and **heath spotted orchid**.

Wet, and marshy grassland are one of our most characteristic and important habitats. As the name suggests these grasslands occur on wet soils, but these can occupy a variety of locations, including low-lying floodplains, 'perched' upland wetlands, or flushed hillside mires. All of our marshy grasslands are based on vegetation with a high proportion of either purple moor-grass and/or rush. These are commonly known locally as 'rhos pastures'. A Welsh name given to a habitat which is restricted to the Atlantic seaboard of Europe (somewhere I have a report called the Rhos Pastures of Galicia (Spain) – where unfortunately there isn't much left).

Purple moor grass (National Vegetation Classification M25) dominated marshy grasslands are perhaps the classic South Walian rhos pasture. They occur on moist, sometimes peaty soils and are dominated by purple moor-grass and **rushes**, but species-rich examples also include forbs such as **tormentil, devil's-bit scabious, saw-wort, lousewort, cross-leaved heath, heath spotted-orchid, bog asphodel, petty whin, marsh thistle** and **meadowsweet**. A feature of the purple moor-grass sites in RCT is the presence of localised base-rich springs and flushes which injects characteristic floristic diversity. These are purple moor-grass-meadow thistle fen-meadows (National

Vegetation Classification M24) where amongst the species described above there are often stands of the beautiful **meadow thistle, marsh valerian**, and **sedge-rich** vegetation. Rush dominated grasslands are also an important feature of the rhos pasture landscape. The typical soft/sharp-flowered rush-marsh bedstraw rush-pasture (National Vegetation Classification M23) is extremely variable in composition and species-richness. There is an obvious requirement for rushes (and often purple moor-grass and **Yorkshire fog**) and **marsh bedstraw** and **greater bird's-foot trefoil** are the typical indicator 'flowers'. There also is often a very good diversity of species, which may include **wild angelica, meadowsweet, ragged robin, cuckoo-flower, skullcap, lesser spearwort, southern marsh-orchids, marsh marigold**, and **marsh-thistle**.

The key to having species rich grassland is to have a nutrient poor soil, a local seedbank and appropriate management. The latter is dependent either on conservation grazing or taking hay cuts. With 'conservation hay cuts', the wildflower and grass are left to flower and seed before being cut in late summer/autumn with the hay being removed. Removing the cut grass is essential.

Much of the attention afforded to the Welsh Government Pollinator Plan is based on sowing nursery produced wildflower seed. This is not a model which suits the particular circumstances in RCT. For a series of fortuitous reasons RCT has a rich network of wildflower rich habitat. For us the key is realising the natural potential of sites through appropriate management. All the grassland types described above depend upon the natural seedbank, and it's that same seedbank which allows our fantastic brownfield grasslands to spring up when old industrial sites are abandoned.

So to realise positive pollinator action in RCT we can avoid the expense, carbon-foot print and ecological problems of sowing nursery produced wildflower seeds. From a biodiversity perspective our pollinator action will be much better served if we can focus

on grassland management and identifying areas where relaxed management can allow existing wildflowers to flower, and seed and to provide pollen and nectar sources for insects: in essence where can we change management to allow grass areas to become conservation hay meadows and not lawns? So if you are keen on pollinators, my advice is to do a bit of botanising. If you have a lawn, or you are responsible for a bit of grassland or amenity space have a look and see what you have, and how changed management might realise a wildflower rich display. If we trust in our fantastic natural seedbanks and put our efforts into management then we might realise some real biodiversity action which can benefit not only pollinators but much more besides.

Weather

Marcus Middlehurst sent through his excellent Treherbert precipitation totals. These beautifully pick up the theme of a wet mid winter grading into the long and dry late winter and spring.

Dec 2014, Total precipitation 459mm, max 85 on 18th and a grand precipitation total for 2014 of 3806.5mm with no measurable snow during calendar year.

Jan 2015, Total 551mm, highest 78mm on 1st with only 5 rain free days in the month

Feb 2015 Total 234mm, highest 50mm on the 22nd and no rain for 10 days (2nd to 11th).

March 2015 Total 133.5mm, highest on 30th at 33mm and average 4.31mm

April 2015 Total 39mm, highest on 28th at 14mm, next highest on 2nd at 13mm, average 1.26mm, With 26 rain free days in month and 13 consecutive dry days from 11th till 25th incl.

May 2015 Total 217mm, Highest 29mm on 30th.

Mark Evans commented on the same dry period, *'after the driest winter in the twenty two years I've been recording, April was also the driest for the same period. The total was 16.30mm for the whole month, the previous driest April being that of 2011, with 24.30,*

both of them well below the average for that month, which is 102.73mm'.

Mark Evans also sent through a fascinating account of the 2014 weather records. The bald figures of 2258.65 mm of measurable precipitation made it the second wettest winter in 20 years in Cwmbach (only 2000 was wetter). Compare and contrast with Marcus's 3806.5 mm for Treherbert (which again shows the significant west-east rainfall differences in the County Borough). A few comments in Mark's weather record showed the trend for 2014, on the 9/2/14 *'note this is now the wettest winter in 20 year* (Mark recorded 1300 mm of precipitation over the winter of 2013/14) and 16/2/14 *'after 66 days of measureable precipitation this was the first dry day in 2014'*. For 2014 Mark recorded that he had 252 days with some measureable precipitation and 232 days with 0.2 mm or more: it shows just what a moist climate we have. Mark also had the average max temperatures of 14.57 degrees C and average mean minimum of 6.25 degrees C: characteristics of a mild oceanic climate.

Spring

Margaret Harding enjoyed the cool, but generally sunny spring: *'well spring is definitely on its way the daffodils, celandines and primroses are everywhere. Even the butterflies are out in force there is a field next to the fire station in Talbot Green where I saw 2 male brimstone it was the middle of the day and they would not settle so no photos but there were peacocks and a much slower comma which I managed to capture. Maralyn my next door neighbour even had frog spawn at the end of February which is the earliest it has been'*.

Mark Evans sent some thoughts on the late spring on April 20th: *'Martin Bevan and I did our Breeding Bird Survey early visits on Saturday and Sunday. The most remarkable thing about them was the weather, which was more like winter, especially on the upland squares, on Mynydd Merthyr, yesterday. The old country folk had a name for it: the "Sloe Winter." In most years, when*

***blackthorn** is in bloom, we get a short cold snap, just to remind us that winter isn't that far behind us and is still close enough to give us a playful flick with its finger. Despite the cold, 'on my way down from Mynydd Merthyr, I saw my first couple of **green tiger beetles**'.*

Birds

I missed out a report from Neville Davies of house martin migration last summer 'during a dawn survey in the Rhondda Cynon Taff area on August 18th there was a good movement of **house martins** going south. 147 were recorded in the first movement at 0615hrs followed by a group of 47 at 0650hrs.' Neville forward a great picture of migration in process. From June 28th 2014, from near the Llantrisant Business Park, Neville also reported a **common snipe** flushed from marshy ground and male **hobby**. The snipe might just have been breeding; they used to be common, while the hobby is a really nice record.

Mark Evans sent a summary of his 2014 **raven** counts (monthly counts), with an average 204 with a high of 426 in June and low of 74 in December (when many of the adults would have been busy setting up breeding territories). On the 27th March Mark 'went to see the **great grey shrike**, which has been reported in the forest by Bwlch-y-Lladron, above Hirwaun and as I was walking past Tarren-y-Bwllfa and heading up onto Mynydd Bwllfa, it was great to find the air full of the song and display flights of **skylarks** and **meadow pipits**'.

Jonathan Barratt was 'out last week (January) in Maerdy between the two reservoirs, Maerdy and Lluest Wen when I spotted what I am very confident were two **hen harriers**. One was sat on a fence post and the other on an old stone wall about 200m apart. It is possible they were Juvenile birds but I was able to get very close to the one on the wall. Not sure if we get many hen harriers around here but it was a first for me'. A great record, and while we don't get many hen harriers, those that we do are mainly winter visitors to our uplands: Maerdy

Mountain in January is as good a place as any to see them.

Paul Marshman saw a **jack snipe** in the perched peat bog above Llwynypia on Jan 8th, while David Harry had male and female **blackcap** in his garden in late January plus a **white wagtail**. Jack snipe are tiny snipe that winter with us but breed in the far north. Our winter blackcaps come from central European, the birds choosing to fly west for the winter, whereas our summer (breeding) blackcaps clear off south. Hazel Penthelby saw two **red kites** over Llantrisant in February around the same time that Vivian Anderson saw a red kite over Aberdare Mountain.

One of the earliest signs of spring is the return of skylarks to our upland tops. This year Paul Marshman reported skylarks back on the highest ground above Llwynypia by mid February. Ray Edwards heard a **chiffchaff** singing on March 16th 2015 in the Treforest Industrial estate, while Mark Evans saw his first **swallow** on April 3rd, on the 8th of April I saw **sand martins** over Pontypridd Town and by the 13th there were 10 over Rhondda at Hopkinstown and two swallows heading west in Pontypridd. The spring flood gates were half open and on the 15th **willow warblers** and chiffchaffs were singing in Pontypridd: one near identical leaf warbler running through its repeating reels of descending verse, the other resolutely 'chiffchaffing'.

In mid April excitement rippled through the local bird watching world and was relayed to me by Graham Powell with the report that a **great spotted cuckoo** was present and raucously calling at Cwm Cadlan, Penderyn on April 17th. The bird had overshot from its Spanish breeding grounds and was sizing up the local magpies (in Spain it parasites magpies and azure magpies). For a few days it was seen, together with an early **cuckoo**, before clearing off to pastures new (perhaps it re-orientated and flew south). Hot on the heels of that came, on April 19th an equally fantastic report from Hazel and David Penthelby of two **cranes** passing over

their Erw Hir, Llantrisant home, and heading south. They have seen cranes in Europe and they both saw and heard the birds calling to each other. Hazel later told me that a friend had seen them In Llantwit Fardre. Cranes have colonised Norfolk (after many centuries absence) and are being reintroduced to the Somerset Levels. Perhaps we can assume these birds had floated across the Bristol Channel: if they successfully colonise the Somerset Levels we may see more of them in the future. Casting my mind back I am pretty sure Tony Swann saw cranes at Llanharan Marsh a few years ago (Tony is that right?)

By April 21st Paul Marshman heard his first cuckoo of the year on Ysrad Tips, with **wood warbler** and **whitethroat** in Glyn cornel. Ben Williams and Richard Smith (independently) heard cuckoos in the Tonyrefail and Trebanog area, and Ben's wife heard one a week later at Pontypridd Golf Club. In early May Mark Evans noted that in the Cynon Valley '*conspicuous by its absence was the cuckoo, or cuckoos. So far this year, the only Cuckoo I've seen and heard was at Bodwigiad, whereas by now, I have usually had them at a few of their usual haunts*'. A little later Mark did confirm that cuckoos had arrived. Mark Evans passed on spring count news for the ravens '*I counted them this morning, before work, the total being 322, which may turn out to be the highest for May*'.

On April 23rd I saw my first **swifts** of the year over Pontypridd with sand matins, house martins and swallows. The swifts didn't stay long and I assume they were passing through: Pontypridd's resident swifts were back when I returned from the bank holiday on May 5th (I assume they came in that weekend). Mark Evans saw his first swift on May 4th '*as it headed up the valley and with a brief visit to the Merthyr tunnel area, between jobs, I heard and saw my first wood warbler of the year*'.

On April 27th Paul heard a **garden warbler** singing in Llwynypia. Blackcaps are now a really common summer visitor and you can

hear their song throughout the spring and early summer months. It's beautiful warbling song, with high fluting notes that has given it renown as the 'northern nightingale', which given that we are now (unfortunately) well to west of the western edge of the nightingales ever declining UK range, must mean that for us it is the 'western nightingale'. Anyway the point is, garden warbler's song is very like the blackcaps but is a softer uninterrupted rambling warbler that goes on and on. If you become accustomed to the blackcaps song, then it's worth checking out any unusual sounding blackcaps. A quick glimpse of a uniformly grey-brown warbler and you may have a garden warbler.

Glyn Hughes reported an '*immature swan which seems to have taken a liking to a stretch of the Taff between the Machine bridge and Trefforest weir*'. As Glyn noted it's the '*first time I've seen one this high up the river and it's been there at least 2 days running now*'. Mute swans are a decidedly uncommon species in RCT. There was still a male and female **goosander** on the River Taff in Pontypridd Park on April 30th, Paul Marshman saw a male goosander on his patch on May 20th and I saw a bird flying over Pontypridd on June 9th. They are the most magnificent species of duck, and they are only here because our rivers have become cleaner and fish populations have recovered. They are indicators of just how good the Taff and Rhondda and Cynon, and Ely have become. It would have been unthinkable 40 years ago.

I was pleased to see a **kestrel** on Cilfynydd Common in early June. Kestrels are an increasingly uncommon sight these days. Paul Marshman reported possibly the last 'cuckoo-ing' cuckoo of the year with a male calling twice from the Gelli Tips on June 15th and in Mid May Sarah Illsely '*saw a red kite on my way to work this morning. It was flying west over the A4119 at Thomastown*'.

Jonathan Barrett emailed in June with '*a great view of a merlin again up near Lluest Wen Res*' and whilst out with Lee Clarke at the very top tip above Maerdy on June 8th

they both 'spotted a very large raptor about 100 metres away. We could not see what it was but it was very big. As we made our way towards it, the bird took off and landed on a fence post. We managed to get within about 20-30 metres. It was a very large bird mainly brown in colour but it had a very (almost pure) white chest, which I would describe as striking. Lee said what is it as he had never seen anything like it. To be honest I was a bit perplexed and said it could be a honey buzzard or maybe a hen harrier. I had my field guide to spotting and identifying birds so we got it out and looked at the two aforementioned birds and neither looked anything like the bird in front of us. We started going through all the pictures and we came to one and we both said "that's it". We both believe that the bird before us was an **osprey**. We searched for more pictures of ospreys on the net on our phones and we are both certain that the bird we could see was an osprey. We watched it for about ten minutes with every time we tried to get closer it flew to another fence post'. That is a great record, and ospreys do pass over RCT every spring heading north (and returning in the autumn), so the osprey record sounds really plausible. I assume the bird was attracted to the environs of the Maerdy Reservoir and the prospect of a fishy meal. However, June 8th seems a little late for migration. Watching Springwatch this year they were talking about how different ospreys fight over nesting sites, and how the vanquished ones have to clear off (somewhere). There are now two breeding sites in Wales and perhaps failed birds are beginning to roam about a bit in a slightly forlorn hope of finding a mate and somewhere to nest. In which case, Jonathan's osprey might be a disappointed north Walian looking for some solace in Maerdy.

Bids from Brynna Woods

Tony Swann sent through his excellent summaries of birds on the Brynna Woods/Llanharan Marsh Wildlife Trust Nature reserve;

12th October 2014 saw the 'first large tit flocks of autumn observed with 19 **long-tailed tits** plus **blue** and **great tits**'.

22nd November 2014 was '**goldcrest** day' with 8 seen.

8th December 2014 'a cold bright afternoon with the delight of watching a pair of **great spotted woodpeckers** pair bonding. The male would fly onto the trunk occupied by the female, either below or at the same height, but always on the opposite side. He would then move himself round the trunk as if going to say 'Boo' to the female. She would then fly off but no more than 10 foot away onto another trunk and the male would repeat his actions and sometimes fly to a nearby dead limb and call or drum. I watched these antics for some 20 minutes before moving on.

Later on the walk I came across a female reed bunting – quite a sighting rarity at this location'.

30th December 2014 '3 **fieldfares** disturbed by horses were the first time I have seen them in the woods this year. A rare species for this location as they prefer more open areas with scattered trees. Two day earlier I recorded 28 species and today only 20. The only real difference was today was much warmer and the frost covering on adjacent fields was minimal. This illustrates the different feeding patterns adopted to combat the weather vagaries'

Tony also Reported 400 to 500 **chaffinches**, and some **bramblings** (their northern cousins) feeding on beechmast in Llantrisant Forest in early January 2015

9th January 2015 'Raptor Day, red kite circling towards north east and a flyover from east to west by a **peregrine falcon**. I had to go back to 2009 for the last record for this site of a peregrine'.

13th January 2015 'a very tame male **pheasant** – if I had seed I reckon it would have come to within a few feet. Single **chiffchaff** but against the light I couldn't tell whether it was common or Siberian as the bird didn't call.'

21st January 2015 '21 **fieldfares**, with a few **redwing**, in the field southwest of the

railway, was a brilliant sight. In the east area of the wood were a small group of 4 **lesser redpolls** feeding on alder. A small group of both male and female **reed bunting** were present from late February until mid-March prior to dispersal before breeding'.

18th March 'the return of the chiffchaffing chiffchaff as the herald of spring and much more unusual was a single **willow tit** near a residential feeding station. The first **brimstone** was seen on 6th March and it was not until the 21st March that I noted a **peacock**. In between these date I had a **small tortoiseshell** in the garden visiting the flowering heather'.

Monthly total number of bird species seen
January – 39 February – 38 March – 41

Of the many highlights of Tony's report the willow tit stands out. These are now very rare birds in RCT. If you've not been, the Brynna Woods Nature Reserve is well worth a visit. Amongst the fantastic wood and scrub habitats there is a superb (long unmanaged) floodplain mire part of which is now being summer grazed by beautiful highland cows.

Mammals

In January, Jonathan Barrett saw '3 **foxes** all in the daytime and all in the Llanwonno area over the past fortnight. It seems they are like buses'.

David Harry had one **lesser horseshoe bat** in his Llanharry wood shed in January, which just goes to show how bats can be active in the winter. They don't necessarily spend all winter in deep frozen hibernation, depending on the ambient temperature, they can shift roosting sites, and if the winter midges are out they may even do a bit of feeding.

Liam Olds saw a **brown hare** on the Coedely Tip at Coedely. This is the first brown hare record for some time and it was very welcome news. This was closely followed by an email from Jonathan Barrett 'I saw a hare up by Old Smokey (Tylorstown

Tip) near to Llanwonno. I also saw in Llanwonno last week a animal that I could not identify as I only saw it for a couple of seconds whilst it was crossing a track in front of me. It was a medium sized ferret like animal coloured light brown'. The hare record is very encouraging, as for the ferret I wonder if it was sandy coloured? In which case, it could have been a **domestic ferret**, but medium sized sounds a bit big for a ferret. Ten or so years ago we had a spate of possible (but none confirmed) **pine martin** reports (including one from the Llanwanno forestry), pine martins are a bit more medium sized and in certain lights might look light brown.

I was amazed to hear on Springwatch that **hedgehog** numbers have crashed from an estimated 30 million or so, a few decades ago, to just one million today. Local extinctions seem a decided possibility. In my travels I continue to see poor 'run over' hedgehogs - two on the main road between Mountain Ash and Aberdare, and then another two on the A473 around Talbot Green. Run over hedgehogs do at least prove they are still around. My garden still has hedgehog 'poo' in it most mornings and my daughter watched one sprinting along the verge the other evening. My guess would be that hedgehogs would still find a good home in RCT.

Butterflies and Moths

In the winter Mark Evans and Mike Hogan counted hibernating 65 **herald moths** in their tunnel site in the Cynon Valley. The cool spring was late for butterflies, although Gareth Henson reported lots of brimstones and small tortoiseshells on the Graig Pontypridd on April 14th. **Orange tips** were out in good numbers in the sunny weather in the wet grasslands at Station Terrace, Church Village and on the 16th with Liam Olds and Ben Rowsen I saw orange tips, brimstone, peacocks and small tortoiseshells in Dare Valley Country Park.

In early May Paul Marshman reported **painted lady** from Penrhiwfer Road, and I have since seen the odd painted lady here

and there. The suggestion is an early spring migration, which, if the weather suited and breeding ensued might lead to good numbers in a few weeks time: watch out for them.

I was very pleased to see a **hummingbird hawk moth** feeding on my garden **red valerian** in early June and on **bird's-foot trefoil** on the Community Route of the Church Village By-pass on May 12. On the latter occasion it was together with two **dingy skippers** (a new dingy skipper site) and on June 3rd I had a bonanza dingy skipper day. In short time I found a population along the grass verges of the Hirwaun industrial Estate next to Blaen Cynon Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and two other Sites on and around Hirwaun ponds area (again close to the SAC): all sites had masses of bird's-foot trefoil, which is the butterflies foodplant. On all these sites **common blues** and **small heath** butterflies and **burnet companion** moths were common. At Penywaun, on the RCT owned part of the new SSSI grassland I again saw the **chimney sweep** moth. In recent early springs, most dingy skippers would be gone or very tatty by early June: the fact that I found lots of pristine butterflies shows the lateness of the spring. The impression of a late spring was re-enforced by Mark Powell's record of male orange tip at Dare Valley on June 4th.

Ben Williams found **green hairstreaks** on the hillside between Tonyrefail and Trebanog and he *'went over to another site behind Trefyrig School and found 19 green hairstreaks there along with 6 brimstones'*: Ben commented that both brimstones and green hairstreaks did really well this spring. He also saw big numbers of **small pearl-bordered fritillary** from Clydach Vale, where the sheltered micro-climate led to an emergence well in advance of elsewhere. Paul Marshman saw 'small pearls' on his Llwynypia patch, and I recorded them on Llantrisant Common and near Treorchy Cemetery in June (where I also saw the beautiful mountain bumblebee **Bombus monticola** feeding on **tormentil**). Paul also

reported a friend's sighting of a **dark green fritillary** at Ynyshir in mid June.

In late May, Ben went back to the Clydach Vale and *'saw 5 small pearls, all fresh new males, 2 dingy skippers and a green hairstreak, flying about at about 90 mph.*

The violets on the site are really doing well and that bodes well for next year's figures so long as the weather behaves. I think the cutting we did last winter has paid off. I was on the site for half an hour'. Ben and the Tidy Towns have undertaken some butterfly habitat management at Clydach Vale and that seems to be really reaping its rewards. Clydach vale is turning out to be an important butterfly site. All the wildflowers at Clydach Vale have sprung up from the local seedbanks, or blown in on the prevailing westerly's (carrying as they do seed for the various sand dune plants that flourish in the Site's 'pseudo dune slacks'). The dynamic ecology is fascinating and much, much more important than if it had been sown from a bag of seed. The art now, is to try and do little bits of constructive habitat management to keep the superb habitat mosaic.

Marsh fritillary butterflies seem to have done well in the North of the County Borough, with particularly large numbers at Bryncarnau Grasslands SSSI (near Llwydcoed) from where the butterfly appears to have spilt out to re-colonise sites in Merthyr (from where it had been extinct for a number of years). At Tonyrefail, Richard Smith, Ben Williams and Paul Denning have seen small populations. We wait in hope for a population boom that can mirror that which has happened on the northern sites in the last two years.

Colliery Spoil Invertebrates

Liam Olds, who is a local naturalist, has been employed by the National Museum to undertake some invertebrate surveying of colliery spoil sites in south Wales. This is really exciting project. Other than butterflies, some moths and tiger beetles we really don't know how important colliery spoil is for other invertebrate groups. So whatever Liam finds will be of greatest interest. In May he

sent me an email about the Gelli Tips, 'it's an amazing site - I love it! It seems to be really good for bumblebees - they're everywhere. Recorded *Bombus monticola* there today (first time I've ever seen one) so I'm up to 6 bumblebee species there at the moment'.

Bryophytes (Mosses and Liverworts)

Mark Evans sent the following: 'Back in September, George Tordoff emailed me to ask if I had ever seen the stunningly beautiful moss, **Schistostegia pennata** (**goblin gold**, or **luminous moss**) anywhere in Glamorgan, as he had just found it (on the 23rd September 2014) in the gloom, under a sandstone outcrop, above Troedyrhiw, Merthyr Tydfil and Sam Bosanquet had made the first discovery of it in Glamorgan, at a sandstone outcrop, just south of Craig y Llyn, on the 4th September 2013. I had previously seen it only on a couple of occasions in Cornwall, both times, growing on the vertical faces of granite, once in an Iron age Fogou, and the other just inside a mine adit. I was absolutely captivated by its apparently luminous golden green glow, when light struck it. The first time I saw it, I wasn't sure what it could be, but by the time I saw it again a year later, I had found out and read up about it in "British Mosses and Liverworts" by E.V. Watson, but no amount of technical knowledge of it could rob me of the awe I felt when on shining my torch inside the entrance to a small adit, alongside the coast path, the gloom, lit up with patches of glowing golden green light.

For a year or two after that, I searched in vain for it around the Cynon and Taff valleys, but lack of success, coupled with ever reducing free time, in which to search, meant that I eventually almost gave up looking. Even when the excellent book by the British Bryological Society "Mosses and Liverworts of Britain and Ireland, a Field Guide" came out, I only searched for it in a desultory way. I am no bryologist, but when I had more time to do such things, I dabbled a little with the mosses (this is no false modesty) and *Schistostegia pennata* has always been a bit of a holy grail for me, so

news that it was indeed to be found around these here parts, spurred me into action. My first opportunity for an outing fell in early October and on a walk along a forest ride that climbs steeply up the side of the Fforchaman valley, I searched the gloom beneath an overhang and found a couple of tiny patches, shining beguilingly in my torch light.

I searched similar looking sites in a few places after that, but all proved to be too wet for it: the field guide states that it has a preference for dark places, in dry, crumbly earth. However, in late November, I was having a general exploration of Craig Abercwmboi and found myself on the sandstone outcrop above Miskin, Mountain Ash, called Daranlas. I had never been up there before, but could see the nooks and recesses of the outcrop held the possibility of finding *Schistostegia pennata*, so torch in hand, I started searching all the dark places I could find, without success, until deep inside a narrow vertical cleft, a glint of gold in my torch beam caught my attention. It was too far inside for me to get close to, but it seemed to be *S. pennata*, not an imposter, such as a leafy liverwort covered in water droplets, which can also reflect back light with a greenish colour. Initially elated by the find, I later had my doubts, so a week later I returned, armed with a monopod, on which I intended mounting my compact camera, set to self timer mode, to try and get a close up photo of it. This proved to be more difficult than I expected and ultimately failed. Taking a break from that frustration, I wandered about and discovered a very narrow, vertical cleft, just 50-75mm wide, that I had previously overlooked. I shone my torch into it and there was a patch of gorgeous gold, the size of my hand, shining back at me and as it was closer to the entrance of the cleft, I was able to obtain a reasonable photo of it.

I've since looked a couple of other, promising looking sites, but with no success. Looking at all four of the Glamorgan sites, they seem to share a similar aspect; in outcrops or overhangs that face somewhere

between North and East, so are not facing the sun, apart from early morning in the summer months. The two sites I checked that proved negative, both faced S. West. As more sites are found for this species, in the valleys, it will be interesting to see if a significant proportion shares this aspect.

On my way back down, alongside the forest road, running water had washed the soil off a section of the sandstone bedrock, revealing a polished and striated surface, courtesy of the glacier that carved out the valley here. The striations were 150 metres above the present valley floor and goodness knows how much higher up the top surface of the glacier was'.

Mark sent me a picture of 'Fforchaman's goblin gold' and it is a marvellous looking thing.

Plants

The **green winged orchid** population at Cefn Y Parc Cemetery continues to yo-yo, I found flowering 18 spikes. The interesting thing is that some of the flowers do shift around a bit from year to year (well they don't physically shift, but the location of flowering spikes does sometimes alter from year to year). Perhaps they don't all flower in one year, in which case perhaps the population is larger than the yearly counts suggest. Margaret Harding also visited the Cemetery, *'It is that time of year to check on our green winged orchids so pleased to find 14 in the main area two were much further over than usual the one being a pink so that is definitely new. In the other meadow I could only find two at the top but very strong looking. Another thing I noticed was the cowslips were only just coming through and the dandelions had gone to seed'*

Cefn Y Parc Cemetery grasslands is looking superb, on a recent visit the carpets of bird's-foot trefoil were interspersed with hundreds of common spotted orchids, the seed heads of cowslips, and the soon to flower black knapweeds and common

scabious. The huge population of common blue butterflies was great to see.

In a couple of places at Hirwaun I found the **lady mantle *Alchemilla glabra***. It looks (as all lady's mantles do) a bit like the common garden lady mantles, but I have pulled up enough of that invasive garden thug to know that the lady mantle I was looking at was different. On checking it at home, the larger hairless leaves keyed out to *glabra*. Looking it up in the Flora of Glamorgan (Wade et al) I see that it only occurs in the very northern edge of Glamorgan, in the foothills of the Brecon Beacons: which describes Hirwaun's location. Elsewhere on the Hirwaun industrial state I re-found (I'd seen it there before) the beautiful **dyers greenweed**: a yellow flowered dwarf shrub of the pea family. Again checking its distribution in the Flora of Glamorgan I found this time that dyers greenweed is decidedly rare (indeed absent) from the northern half of Glamorgan. It is certainly the only site I know in RCT. Also in June, Margaret Harding found 3 **bee orchids** at Cwm Colliery

Lichens

Mark Evans and Mike Hogan *'found **Terana caerulea (cobalt crust)** growing on a tangled mix of fallen dead branches and bramble. Amongst the species on which it was growing was larch. I have never before seen it growing on larch, nor have I heard of it doing so'.*

Dr Paul Smith of Bristol University sent through a very exciting report of a lichen found in the Cynon Valley: *'one of my MSc students (Emma Burak) found the specimen shown below on a hawthorn on coal waste. It has gone off for confirmation but, subject to that, I believe it to be **goldeneye lichen *Teloschistes chrysothalmus***. A few days late Sam Bosanquet, who is a Welsh and UK lichen expert issued the following;*

'Goldeneye has arrived in Wales!

I have just had an email from Janet Simkin at the British Lichen Society passing on a

photograph of goldeneye lichen (Teloschistes chrysophthalmus) taken in Glamorgan a few days ago.

This is one of the most spectacular British lichens and also one of the rarest. It was thought to be extinct in Britain for about 30 years until a patch was found on an orchard tree in Herefordshire in 2007, since when there have been 2 or 3 records from southern England. Recent surveys in Co Cork revealed strong populations on Hawthorn by two estuaries, but I have looked for it in similar estuary-side habitats Pembrokeshire and Glamorgan without success. It has been suggested that recent warmer, wetter conditions may somehow benefit Goldeneye lichen and that it could be increasing, although it may have just remained undetected by southwestern estuaries for decades, with these colonies giving rise to occasional spore-grown tufts further north-east.

The new for Wales colony was photographed by MSc student Emma Burak, who is studying the ecology of coal tips. Its identification was confirmed by freelance ecologist Dr Paul Smith, and subsequently by British Lichen Society experts. The photograph was taken on a coal tip near Aberdare. This lichen is protected on Schedule 8 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act because of concerns that it might be the target of collectors. As the single photographed tuft represents the entire known Welsh population of the species, and because this is particularly striking-looking lichen, some secrecy around the precise location is considered necessary.'

So given concerns over the vulnerability of the lichen it means that its exact location is being kept secret, but if you look up goldeneye lichen on the internet you will see just what a spectacular (if tiny) thing it is. As I understand it there is nothing necessarily special about the hawthorn bush it has been found on. So if in your wanderings in RCT and you happen to pass hawthorn bushes, it is worth (particularly in the winter when the leaves have gone) keeping an eye out for

the goldeneye lichen: who knows you may just find another site for it.

In keeping with the detective work (that is part of lichenology) , Mark Evans sent the following lichen related news '*following the exciting news about the discovery of the rare lichen Teloschistes chrysophthalmus, I have paid far more attention to the foliose lichens on trees here about. Although I haven't seen T. chrysophthalmus locally, I was fortunate enough to discover it on a Dorset Wildlife Trust reserve, near Dorchester, in early March, so I now know what it looks like in the field. Casually searching (can you casually search?) for it on various species of trees, with nutrient enriched bark, I have become all the more appreciative of the beauty of many of those foliose lichens and a few of the crustose ones too. One thing that I really began to notice was that in a group of trees of the same species, of around the same age and mode of growth, there always seemed to be certain individuals which bore a much larger population and diversity of lichens than their neighbours. In some groups the differences are really marked, with the bulk of the lichen flora being concentrated on a small proportion of individual trees in the group. This must be due to the degree of nutrient enrichment of those individuals*

Fungi

Mark steer has continued to expand the list of local fungi (particular for Llanharan). His list for February 2015 – November 2014 is as follows;

Sulphur tuft *Hypholoma fasciculare* var. *fasculare* (caps to 4cm at the moment, specimens with Cardiff University for ongoing research project)

Sulphur tuft *Hypholoma fasciculare* var. *pusillum* (small variety caps to 2cm fairly flat and thin, specimens with Cardiff University)

Bleeding broadleaf crust *Stereum rugosum*

Holly speckle *Trochila ilicina* (less than 1mm only on upper surface of dead leaves)

Phacidium multivalve (similar to Holly Speckle but more than 1mm and on both sides of dead Holly leaves)

Oak pin *Cudoniella acicularis*

Oyster mushroom *Pleurotus* (not sure if *P.ostreatus* or *P.cornucopiaea*, in centre of Talbot Green on a live tree)

Silver leaf fungus *Chondrostereum purpureum*

Elf Cup *Sarcoscypha* species (previous specimens in the Woods have been confirmed as *S.austrica* but you need to go to microscope to be sure of species)

Turkeytail *Trametes versicolor*

Fool's conecap *Conocybe filaris* (my garden, often in potting compost and very poisonous!)

Common bonnet *Mycena galericulata*

Trooping funnel *Clitocybe geotropa*

Smoky bracket *Bjerkandra adusta*

Cobalt crust *Terana caerulea* (said to be uncommon but seems to be frequent in Glamorgan VC41)

Firerug inkcap *Coprinellus domesticus*

(quite similar to Glistening Inkcap *C.micaceus* species need to go to microscope to separate)

Shaggy calycap *Pholiota squarrosa*

Split gill *Schizophyllum commune*

(Llanharan Station car park).

Mark is also bravely venturing into the World of the mysterious **slime mould**. In his own words: *'firstly I would like to say that I am not an expert on these but find them fascinating creatures! Slime moulds in the past were thought to be fungi but now they are classified in the Kingdom 'Protista'. Over the past 2 years I have come across a few slime moulds in Brynna Woods including false puffball *Reticularia lycoperdon* and feathers of tan *Fuligo septica* (sometimes erroneously named dog's vomit which is *Mucilago crustacea*). These are fairly obvious due to their size and form. However as with all slime moulds they go through a number of stages.*

*Recently I have come across 2 more examples which are less obvious due to their size. These are **Badhamia urticularis** and **Hemitrichia clavulata** (sorry no English*

names!). These were identified with help from Lee Johnson formerly with Gwent Fungus Group but now in Orkney. Specimens were looked at by Lee under the microscope – essential to confirm identifications but unfortunately beyond my capabilities. Often you will find slime moulds on the underside of logs in damp shady places. If you would like to learn more about slime moulds I would recommend this website as a starting point: www.hiddenforest.co.nz/slime/

Then recently Mark sent the following *'not sure if too late for next edition but I have found another slime mould in Brynna Woods - **Metatrachia floriformis**. I'm pretty sure on identification as I have seen it and had reliably id'd elsewhere. First time in the woods though. It was on underside of dead elder which had plenty of jelly ear on top'*.

In terms of slim mould hunting Mark offers some excellent advice *'I'm sure that there are many more slime moulds lurking out there! It's just a matter of turning over logs to find them - plenty of odd looks from walkers!'* Thanks to Mark we now know at least 500% more about the slim moulds of RCT than we did before.

In early May, Mark Evans emailed the following, *'on my way home from work, this afternoon, I popped up to the Merthyr tunnel area of Cwmbach, hoping I might find an early wood warbler present, but no luck there. As I hung around admiring the violets, my eye was caught by some bright golden yellow blobs, a little way off, in the drainage ditch alongside the track. I hoped they might turn out to be the strange, semi aquatic fungus '**bog beacon**' (*Mitrula paludosa*) and I was thrilled to find that they were just that. There were around a hundred of the small, brightly coloured fruiting bodies emerging from the shallow water of the ditch, all within a two metre stretch. There are no records of it in Glamorgan, on the National Biodiversity Network Gateway (NBN web site) and the nearest other record to here is in a wood, near Libanus.'* Mark sent me a picture and bog beacons are

spectacular things, he also recalled that with Martin Bevan he *'noticed a colony of it in a ditch, alongside the Hirwaun to Penderyn mineral line, ten or so years ago. I nipped up there today to check and yes it is still there. It also seems that there are records of it on MapMate, but for some reason, these haven't made it onto the NBN.'*

Finally on Fungi, Mark Steer reminded me of a fungi foray in September: the *'Llantrisant Common Fungi Foray is Saturday 26th September 2015 - we are limited to maximum 20 attendees by NRW so booking with Mike Bright glamorganfungi@gmail.com necessary.* Llantrisant Common is a wonderful place for many wonderful things, I suspect grassland fungi will prove to be one of those wonders.

National Plant Monitoring Scheme-request for surveyors in Wales

We had a flier about the following , which we pass on *'The National Plant Monitoring Scheme (NPMS) is a new habitat-based plant monitoring scheme designed by the Botanical Society of the British Isles, Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, Plantlife and Joint Nature Conservancy Committee. The aim is to collect data to provide an annual indication of changes in plant abundance and diversity. The scheme is reliant on volunteers to gather the data in pre-determined 1km squares which you can sign up for and training material and advice is available once you sign up. So if you would like to adopt a square and contribute, please sign up so we achieve good coverage and get the best data possible for Wales.*

For further details and to register visit the [NPMS website](#)'

Daerwynno Pollinator Blitz and Pollinators for People

Daerwynno Field Centre is a fantastic place in the heart of the Llanwanno forestry with the potential for all sorts of solitary bees and wasps, fritillary butterflies, day flying moths

and beetles. SewBrec working with the Centre are running two events there in July looking for pollinators. Details are set out below.

Pollinators for People is a project that South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre (SEWBReC) is delivering on behalf of NRW as part of its new area-based work in the Rhondda catchment. The project is aiming to inform people about the importance of plants and pollinators for people and the environment, to inspire people to engage with wildlife in publicly accessible spaces in the Rhondda and to report their wildlife sightings via a recording card or a simple web portal that are being developed.

The short project will include two events, both taking place at Daerwynno Field Centre, Llanwonno Forest:

Monday 6th July 10:30am-3:00pm: Pollinators for People: Introduction to Biological Recording Training session for leaders and members of local environmental and community groups. The session will introduce the Pollinators for People resources and survey forms and will provide a beginners' introduction to biological recording. Support and assistance will be given to allow group leaders to deliver follow-up training sessions to their own groups. Potential participants should contact Adam Rowe at SEWBReC via adam.rowe@sewbrec.org.uk by Wednesday 1st July.

Saturday 25th July 10:00am-4:00pm: Pollinators for People Biodiversity Blitz: A chance to learn species identification skills and to help record wildlife (pollinators, wild-flowers and anything else of interest) at the Daerwynno Field Centre and in the surrounding NRW forestry estate. Anyone interested in attending either as an expert leader or general participant should contact Charlene Davies at SEWBReC via charlene.davies@sewbrec.org.uk

Further details of both events will be published on www.sewbrec.org.uk as they

are confirmed.

Anyway that will probably do. I must have missed reports and records and I apologise (in advance) for those I have. We have moved office to Sardis House, Pontypridd where the 6th Floor offers great views of sand martins, and herons.

As ever thanks for the records, and words and thoughts, please keep them coming and enjoy the summer.

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