

# RECORDERS' NEWSLETTER



## Recorders Newsletter 37 (January 2018)

Welcome to Recorders Newsletter 37, I must apologise for the delay in getting this produced. I can only thank everyone for their records and supreme patience and also ask you to please keep the thoughts and records coming, they are invaluable.

### Weather

For many years the weather records have proved one of the most popular bits of the Newsletter. For many years Marcus Middlehurst has maintained an outstanding weather record for Treherbert area and his meticulous records and lovely weather observations have helped enliven and define the Newsletter. It was therefore with immense sadness that we heard from his wife Maris that Marcus had passed away in December. Marcus and Maris have championed environmental and social issues in the Rhondda with energy, commitment and great humour. Marcus was a stalwart of the Recorders Newsletter and he will be hugely missed. Maris sent the following in an email and has allowed us to reproduce it as a loving and fitting tribute to Marcus;

*'Marcus lost his 15year battle with Myeloma on the 17th of December. I have lost my soulmate and my best friend. But being Marcus, I had to promise to feed the birds every morning, take the gauge readings then send you the results. He had completed October and November but due to his periods in Hospital ,never got around to sending the results. I have completed the year and set up 2018 so that I can continue his good work.*

*He came to the Rhondda in 1984, choosing this area because he fell in love with its outstanding natural beauty and wildlife. He was passionate about protecting the environment as you know, given our numerous appearances before the Planning Committee and the work we undertook when opposing the LDP. He took pleasure in the simple things in life, with a twinkle in his eye, a cheeky grin and an infectious laugh and he always had time for others who he thought needed a friend to help them cope with their problems. He was an inspiration to other Cancer sufferers and many people told me that he helped them more than all the Medical Profession, come to terms and fight these terrible diseases.*

*He has been described by many as a true Gentleman, and will be sadly missed by his family and the Community at large.'*

Despite ill health during 2017, Marcus (with Maris's help) maintained a daily weather record for Treherbert. It beautifully illustrated a year in which apart from April, (which was extremely dry) was remarkably even in its rainfall, with wet days never far away, but with very few extreme 'extremes'. Here is a summary;

**January** total rainfall 160mm (the second driest month in 2017) which although it had 15 days of measureable precipitation had a maximum of just 23 mm.

**February** total rainfall 273 mm, with 16 'wet' days and a max of 60 mm on the 25<sup>th</sup>

**March** total rainfall 347 mm, 21 'wet' days and 50mm on the 19<sup>th</sup>

**April**, and in Marcus's own words *'This is probably the most unique rainfall chart you will ever see! Strange to say after viewing streams of fine misty rain sweeping down (across) the Tynewydd mountainside but recording ZERO in the water gauge! I have frequently taken the dog for a walk and come back DAMP but again the gauge indicates no rain. But that is the way it goes! So for the whole of April we have only 3 days of rain proper 24mm TOTAL, highest 12mm on 30th - this must be a record!'*

Looking through Marcus's daily total it is amazing to see that between April 3<sup>rd</sup> and April 30<sup>th</sup> there was only 2mm of measureable precipitation. Given that Tynewydd, Treherbert lies in the wettest part of RCT, it is an indication of just how dry the rest of the County Borough must have been.

**May** had a total rainfall of 162 mm, with the first 10 days of May having just 1mm of rain, thereby extending the dry spring conditions. In the end there were 14 days of mainly light precipitation with half the May total coming on the 15<sup>th</sup>.

**June**, with 274mm of rain, June saw a return to our usual unsettled high summer weather, with 13 'wet' days and a maximum of 92 mm on the 5<sup>th</sup> (which made June 5<sup>th</sup> the wettest day of the year)

**July** total of 234 mm of rain, 17 'wet days' which made the second half of July particularly damp with a maximum of 47 mm on the 28<sup>th</sup>.

**August**, was a little drier than most recent Augusts' with a total of 200 mm of rain with a maximum of 35 mm on the 16<sup>th</sup>.

**September** did not see an Indian summer and indeed the weather set the trend for a largely damp autumn and early winter. There was 348 mm of rain, with 19 'wet' days and 43 mm on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

**October** had 337 mm and 17 'wet' ones with 54 mm on the 24<sup>th</sup>.

**November** gave Tynewydd 326 mm of precipitation, with the 21 'wet' days yielding a maximum of 59 mm on the 21<sup>st</sup>.

**December** was the wettest month of the year, although the 377 mm was no record breaker, there were 18 'wet' days and 68 mm on the 7<sup>th</sup>.

That gave Marcus's and Maris's rain gauge a grand total of 3062 mm of precipitation in 2017. How does that compare with previous years? I have looked back over emails and records Marcus has sent me and;

**2011** 2996 mm

**2012** (missing July and August) 3036.5 mm

**2013** 3138.5 mm

**2014** 3806.5 mm

**2015** 3518 mm

**2016** 3027.5 mm

So it is confirmed that 2017 was on the less wet side of things and fits in with 2011 and 2016 as being amongst the slightly drier years in this period. As Marcus

consistently showed Treherbert is one of the wettest places in south Wales (in fact southern Britain) and that wet, humid environment helps supports the unique environment which lies at the head of the Rhondda Fawr, its waterfalls, moss and lichen encrusted woodlands, wildflower rich flushes and marshes, sphagnum bogs and the clean flowing Rhondda Fawr. A beautiful and rich landscape that in Maris's words Marcus '*fell in love with*'.

When several years ago, I first compared Marcus's Treherebert records with Mark Evans Cwmbach data, I was really surprised at the differences in rainfall between the two places. Those differences, with half the rainfall in the Mark's bit of the Cynon Valley compared with the top end of the Rhondda, is maintained year on year. So to illustrate here is a summary of Mark's Cwmbach records;

**January** had a rainfall 93mm. Maximum temperature of 6.84 degree C and a low of -3.3 degrees with 14 nights with temperatures below zero.

**February** 141 mm of rain, but a milder month than January with a maximum temperature of 14 degree C on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and only one night's worth of frost.

**March** had 173.6 mm of precipitation, but a maximum temperature of 16 degrees on the 15<sup>th</sup> with just one night frost.

**April** was dry with 21mm of rain. There was a maximum temperature of 19.4 degree C on the 9<sup>th</sup>, but three nights of frost, the last a chilly -2.7 degrees on April 27<sup>th</sup>.

**May** had 86 mm of rain and a long warm late May produced a mini-heat wave and a maximum temperature of 25.7 degrees C on the 26<sup>th</sup>.

**June** produced 145 mm with a sweltering 30.9 degree C on the 21<sup>st</sup>.

**July** experienced 140 mm of rain with 25 degrees C on the 18<sup>th</sup>.

**August** had 97 mm with 23.6 degrees on the 28<sup>th</sup>.

**September** produced 165 mm with 20 degrees on the 5<sup>th</sup>.

**October's** total was 113 mm with 18.5 degrees on the 8<sup>th</sup>.

**November** had 133 mm and 13.3 degrees C on the 22<sup>nd</sup>

**December** provided 215 mm of precipitation with 11.9 degrees maximum on the 7<sup>th</sup>, with 11 nights of frost and a maximum of -6.7 degrees C on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

All of that left Mark with a 2017 total of 1521 mm of rain with 260 days with precipitation (223 with over 0.2 mm) and an average maximum daily temperature of 14.01 and average minimum of 6.31 degree C. All of which are beautifully indicative of a maritime climate. In the spring Paul Marshman also highlighted the very dry April in Llwynypia, with just 0.9 inches in the month (which I think is about 23 mm), however the weather broke in early June, and Paul had 60 mm of rain on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 30 mm on the 8<sup>th</sup>, but by June 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Paul recorded 33 degrees C of heat in his Llwynypia garden.

## Birds

In February 2017 Stuart Jones sent the following, '*thought you might be interested in a sighting of a female **hen harrier** just to the east of the summit of Mynydd Y Glyn last Tuesday. Just down from the trig point there was also a single **lapwing** amongst a flock of about 20 **golden plover**. It was also nice to see good numbers of the more 'common' birds on the way up from the Graig, with **bullfinches** in Gelliwion woods and a group of at least 20 **song thrushes** feeding in the fields where there had been recent muckspreading. Hen harriers are super birds and like **short-eared owls**, are birds to really look out for on a winter walk in the uplands. It was also great to hear*

that the flocks of golden plover still winter on the hills which lie between the Ely and Rhondda Valleys, it seems to be a traditional wintering spot for this close relative of the lapwing. It is heartening to know they still use it.

In mid January, during a freezing cold site visit to the Vale Retail Park, Talbot Green (with snow falling) I was amazed by a **kingfisher** which zapped past me and down a narrow, trolley filled drainage ditch. A few weeks later, as I drove up to Tonteg along the wooded road beyond the University of South Wales, I was equally amazed to see a kingfisher flying up the hill along the central white line of the carriageway. It carried on for over 100 metres, with me behind it (going at about 20 miles an hour) before it found a gap in the trees and dived off to the left and presumably down to the River Taff far below the road.

David Harry keeps a well stocked garden bird table which reaps its rewards. In late January 2017, David reeled off the recent signings including **bullfinches**, a **redpoll**, two **siskin**, 23 **goldfinches** (which David described as 'bossing' the bird table), 15 **chaffinches**, a **nuthatch** and 5 **house sparrows**, but only a single **greenfinch** (which illustrates their fall in numbers).

Mark Evans told me of a fantastic **barn owl** record, from the Cynon Valley, the location (for obvious reasons) we'll have to be vague about. As Mark was checking out an old quarry he '*decided to go and see if there were still owl pellets, in a section of quarry further along. I had found a number of them under a small tree, a year ago and although no owl was present, I decided that it was a tree used by tawny owl for digesting meals and coughing up pellets. Getting to the tree, which I first scanned for the presence of an owl, I found several fairly recent pellets and as I bent to pick one up, I heard wing beats and looking up, saw a barn owl fly from a deep cleft in the quarry face and into a tree, where it stayed, while I made a swift retreat to avoid further disturbance. Assuming the pellets I found in exactly the same place in Jan or Feb 2016 were barn owl rather than tawny owl, it would seem that the cleft is being used by at least one bird and possibly a pair.* In the east of England, barn owls do often nest in tree cavities, but over here in our damp maritime climate barn owls are dependent on buildings.

On February 7<sup>th</sup> 2017, Paul Marshman reported the return of **skylarks** to the tops around Gelli (a sure sign of the coming of spring). However, his finding (at the same time) of a **jack snipe** at the Lan showed that winter was still in charge. Jack snipe are winter visitors, and this one was sat tight on frozen 'rushy' ground until Paul was about to stand on it. I witnessed another hint of spring on February 8<sup>th</sup> when I watched a female **sparrowhawk** displaying over my head at Brynna Woods, Llanharan. It was climbing with slow flapping wing beats in a display that I have read of but never seen. In early March, Paul told me of a **little egret** that he had seen two days running at the Glynconel Lake : Paul saw the bird a total of four times in the month. By the 15<sup>th</sup> of March I had further evidence of spring with my first **chiffchaff** (two) singing in Pontypridd. On March 25<sup>th</sup> Paul saw a **wheatear** on the hills above Gelli, and there were **coot**, **mallard**, **Canada geese** and **cormorant** on Glynconel Lake, which in April resulted in young mallards and coot. On March 28<sup>th</sup> I saw my first **sand martin** of the year in Porth, with 10 in Pontypridd on the next day, Jeff Williams also saw them in Porth with **goosanders** and **dipper**. Paul Marshman heard his first **willow warblers** at Glynconel on March 31<sup>st</sup> on the same day I heard

**blackcap** at Coed yr Hendy and Cefn Hendy woods, Pontyclun and there were **house martins** buzzing around the 6<sup>th</sup> floor windows of Sardis House on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. On April 20<sup>th</sup> I saw several wheatears on the hillsides above Dare Valley Country Park and heard **grasshopper warblers** singing from the dense rush of the upland peat bogs. By April 24<sup>th</sup> Paul was reporting the first **cuckoos** and **wood warblers** of the year from Glyn cornel, with young **dippers** already fledged on the Rhondda Fawr at Ystrad. Paul also noted that he was seeing **goosanders** saying late into the spring, and that **red kites** were an increasingly frequent sight over Llwynypia (indeed 2017 was Paul's best year yet for red kites).

On May 5<sup>th</sup> **swifts** were everywhere feeding over Pontypridd, with up to 100 birds chasing and racing over the town. However all or most, were just passing through and breeding numbers are worryingly low. As part of Glamorgan Bird Club work to help re-enforce our beleaguered swift populations, Alan Rosney surveyed the nesting population in Tyfica Road, Pontypridd and recorded 20 swifts and 4 or 5 definite nest sites. This matches my observations that there appear to be 10 nesting pairs within a short section of that (and adjoining) streets. Alan has leafleted houses in the street raising the issue of swifts and offering to help residents conserve and encourage the birds. If you have swifts in your street, please let the Bird Club know (we can pass on information at your request).

In July Paul Marshman heard two 'churring' **nightjar** on the forestry above Glyn cornel Local Nature Reserve and he had excellent views of the male's display flight. Alan Rosney reported more nightjar from the Llanwanno Forestry with grasshopper warblers also present. In June Ben Williams saw a **goshawk** at Ger y Bont Hirwaun, and in the autumn I saw my first ever 100% definite goshawk at Dare Valley Country Park (I know it is embarrassing to admit it, but it has taken me 25 years of living in south Wales to finally see a 100% goshawk), it was a female, a hugely impressive sight and well worth the wait.

Therese and Eddie Charnock sent through a great summary of birds in their Miskin garden. They noted house sparrows, **dunnocks**, **nuthatch**, bullfinch, **great spotted woodpecker**, song and mistle thrushes and **redwings** all visiting their garden last winter. In February there were signings of **tree creeper**, **goldcrest** and a wintering blackcap which visited the ground feeder on a few occasions. As April arrived they had large numbers of **goldfinches** (9), territorial **robins** and **siskin** using the feeders. However on the downside they noted that '*we rarely see greenfinches on the garden now*'.

Tony Swann has once again provided his excellent accounts of bird life at the Brynna Woods Nature Reserve, Llanharan;

*'Monthly total number of bird species seen*

*January – 39 : February - 38 : March – 40*

*2<sup>nd</sup> January – first visit of a New Year and full of expectations. 20 redwing, 2 fieldfare and small group of siskin and lesser redpoll didn't disappoint.*

*The rest of January and most of February resulted in the normal winter regulars including the persistent rain.*

24<sup>th</sup> February – re-found the **yellow-browed warbler** whose feathers are getting very tatty especially the wing bars which are now very faint. Moulting cannot be far off before it disappears, but will it get back to Siberia?

1<sup>st</sup> March – **Pheasant** was seen to fly across railway line into Brynna Woods.

16<sup>th</sup> March yielded my first butterfly a **comma** and a high altitude flyover from south to north of a **goshawk**. First chiffchaffs of spring calling away, spring has arrived!

19<sup>th</sup> March – during a very wet afternoon, I watched a jack snipe flyover from the Woods towards Llanilid – never seen before at Llanharan Marsh.

28<sup>th</sup> March – 2 **great black-backed gulls** flying over, they were at tree level and enabled clear identification of the wider wings and slower flight action. Not the easiest to separate from **lesser black-backed gulls** when flying at altitude. I had suspected that they flew over as they can be seen at lake near to film studios on the Llanilid site which, bar for a couple of fields, is practically adjacent.

29<sup>th</sup> March – the first returning blackcap, a male in full voice.

Monthly total number of bird species seen

April – 38 : May - 37 : June – 36

4<sup>th</sup> April and the first returning willow warbler was both seen and heard.

8<sup>th</sup> April produced a juvenile cormorant flying west to east.

16<sup>th</sup> April and at last I managed to see 2 Canada geese flying in from NE towards Llanilid. I had heard them twice previously but failed to see them through the trees. Warblers have returned both in numbers and species. Today I managed to see first garden warbler and more surprising, 1 **lesser whitethroat** at the north side of the side and the first sighting at the site for a **barn swallow**.

May started off well with several firsts for the year. **Sand martin** on 3<sup>rd</sup>, common swift on 5<sup>th</sup> and a rook on 7<sup>th</sup>. 15<sup>th</sup> saw an evening flight of a female tawny owl calling.

3<sup>rd</sup> of June produced a green woodpecker flying south to north and this signified the end of new species for the quarter. By the end of the month avian activity was starting to wind down and the first of the tailless moulting **magpies** and **jackdaws** were seen.

The first 6 months had produced 60 different species and I am now left to ponder what further additions will be made in the next 6 months Llanharan Marsh and Brynna Woods.

Monthly total number of bird species seen

July – 32 : August - 34 : September – 35

July started off with a distinct quietness within the woods as birds became more secretive as the moulting commenced.

12<sup>th</sup> July – an unusual summer sighting of a solitary **grey wagtail**, which is normally a winter resident.

10<sup>th</sup> Aug – Grey wagtails remains present plus the first post breeding group of tits.

20<sup>th</sup> Aug – a migrating **spotted flycatcher** was a good find. A large flock of passerines feeding on oaks held the usual members of the tit family plus blackcaps and chiffchaffs. A lovely sighting was a tailless **bullfinch** in a family group.

28<sup>th</sup> Aug – fly over of adult and squawking juvenile **kestrel** heading over from Llanilid.

31<sup>st</sup> Aug – **Northern wheatear**, initially watched from back garden, rested up on house apex for some 30 minutes before flying south over towards Brynna Woods.

Another addition to the Brynna list – they frequent Llanilid in both spring and autumn

migration plus a few remain on the ridgeway throughout the summer, but I have never been able to see one over the site previously.

1<sup>st</sup> Sept – Common swift flying over – surely must be the last one I will see in the UK before next spring !

September remained totally uneventful until 25<sup>th</sup> when firstly a common kingfisher was noted flying from Ewenny Fach south through the housing estate towards Llanilid. The last time I saw this species in the area was early 2002. Soon afterwards the bird of the year was seen very briefly. A **barred warbler** wheeled through the old BMX track area, immediately south across the railway line from the reserve and then disappeared westward into a wooded area. Despite a long search following where it had flow through it could not be relocated. Big for a warbler, grey and stunning. Later on, 5 redwings were observed at the north edge of the site'.

Monthly total number of bird species seen

October – 28 : November - 35 : December – 40

15<sup>th</sup> Oct was my first visit of the month and bird life was very limited. The only 2 species of note were 3 **stock doves** and a green woodpecker.

Species recorded were much lower than previous years and I can only reflect that this was weather related.

12<sup>th</sup> Nov and the stormy weather produced an overflying **black-headed gull** heading westward – first sighting for the year.

13<sup>th</sup> November and a heavy frost overnight. The wood was alive with 27 species recorded in 3 ½ hours. The number of goldcrests was very high and 2 large tit flocks including treecreepers roamed in the more productive areas. 2 buzzards were in the trees overlooking the allotments hoping to have chicken on the menu !

25<sup>th</sup> November saw the first over wintering reed bunting return.

28<sup>th</sup> November was a good visit with 31 species recorded, only the second time this number has been seen on a visit. The highlight was a male green woodpecker having to resort to trees for food as ants are in short supply at this time of the year. Sections of the wood were alive as more food could be found here than the surrounding fields. The woodland is relatively young and thus has a variety of trees and bushes offering both food and abundant insect life compared to more established woodland which has more limited variation.

1<sup>st</sup> December and the cold dry weather continues. A pair of great spotted woodpeckers were chasing each other around the trees playfully, first sign of pair bonding this winter.

12<sup>th</sup> December was a very cold am with oddly a **common gull** at 0800 flying north east.

19<sup>th</sup> December – 2 **rooks** attempted to land on a tree with a few carrion crows but were driven off by the crows straightaway. Must have been the wrong type of cousin !

26<sup>th</sup> December – after a few days of rain, it was a surprise to see so many species about – redwing groups must have totalled nearly 100 in 3 groups with 4 fieldfares. Very few were ground feeding and the only berries now left are rock hard ivy.

The year ended with 67 species noted and I have reached 95 species in 18 years of recording for this site. Amongst that series of fantastic records, Tony's barred warbler stands out as a real find. This is a warbler which breeds in Eastern Europe and it shows what can turn up at migration time. Ben Williams had another fantastic migratory moment when on July 18<sup>th</sup> he emailed 'I went over to the Church Village

*Bypass fields this morning and had a walk around. I found some more balsam growing by the entrance gate to the second field and whilst pulling that up I saw a bird, which was rather reddish brown and grey fronted, fly out of the bushes in front of me. It landed in a tree and I got a good look at it but it flew away before I could pick it up in the binos. I'm sure it was a **nightingale** but I have never seen one in this area before and I don't know whether we get them here. I have seen them in Spain but not in Britain and I know we get them in southern England, but South Wales?' Nightingales are declining everywhere in Britain, and their range has shrunk back towards the south-eastern corner and the more continental climates of Suffolk and Kent. They seem to have always been rare in Wales, but for the first 30 years of the twentieth century they were relatively common and widespread across the Vale of Glamorgan, and just reached into the southerly parts of what is now RCT. Perhaps Nightingales Bush on the Glamorgan Canal in Pontypridd is a memory of that brief period when nightingales sang in our woodlands. A more usual visitor (but still hugely appreciated) was a male **brambling** Ben saw and photographed in his Tonteg garden in mid November.*

While the Pontypridd swifts had departed south by July 8<sup>th</sup>, Paul Marshman and Phil Bristow both reported swifts staying and passing through late into September. It was a really unusual and late year for swifts, with Paul seeing his last bird on September 14<sup>th</sup> (he had seen birds every day in September). On September 15<sup>th</sup> I didn't see any swifts but I did witness a big migration of house martins and swallows with hundreds of birds streaming south down the Taff Valley. By October 17<sup>th</sup> Paul recorded redwings in the Rhondda joined by fieldfare on the 18<sup>th</sup>. On November 27<sup>th</sup> I saw 5 goosanders, kingfisher, dipper, heron and cormorant all together on the River Taff at Pontypridd Park, which was bird watching made easy. In late November Phil Bristow passed on a report from Jacky Roberts of a **tawny owl** roosting every day in trees at the Council offices at Bronwydd, Porth. Apparently it sat all day in full view, so it was bird watching made even easier. Paul saw another kingfisher on Clydach Vale Lake on December 5<sup>th</sup> and reported the antics of a **treecreeper**, visiting his garden daily and feeding on the path, on a metal clothes post and disappearing under the ivy covering of an ash stump to hunt for spiders.

Mark Evans sent me his excellent Raven roost counts for the Cynon Valley roost. Mark has a seamless set of monthly counts going back to 2000 and set against that his 2017 records largely fitted the pattern of a late spring/early summer peak (with 401 in June, 330 July and 277 in May) trailing away to lower numbers in the winter. However 2017 was unusual in having a huge peak of 412 roosting birds on the November count. This was far and away the highest number for any November count. Standing high on the hillsides of the Cynon Valley at ungodly hours of the morning is undoubtedly a heroic effort, but it has its rewards. Mark is able to witness wildlife experiences that few of us manage. I always read Mark's wildlife comments attached to his monthly counts with great interest, and here are a few gems;

*5/2/17 'two **woodcocks** flew past close enough for me to hear the air rushing through the feathers of the first and the frantic fluttering as the second took evasive action to prevent itself colliding with me'.*

*6/3/17 'dawn chorus....was heard rolling uphill from down in the valley to the hilltop, over a couple of minutes'*



2/4/17 'a barn owl was seen quartering the hillside'.

3/5/17 'three cuckoos calling and two grasshopper warblers reeling'.

3/6/17 'a nightjar heard churring from lower down'

6/8/17 '**oystercatcher** was heard calling once overhead at 5:00'. This last record is amazing but it shows that seaside wading birds do migrate and move over dry land. I remember a radio item from Derby Cathedral (which is about as far from the sea as anywhere in Britain) where someone found the remains of wading birds in the building's peregrines nest.

## Plants

In the spring I monitored the **green winged orchid** population at Cefn Parc Cemetery, Llantrisant and found 11 flowering plants. So we still wait for this colony to grow in number. The grassland management is as good as we can make it (the flower rich hay meadow shows are superb and there are hundreds of common spotted orchids).

David Barden sent me an excellent species list for areas around the Royal Glamorgan Hospital. It certainly seems that there is a huge botanical potential within and around the hospital grounds, I promised David I would try and find someone to talk to about grass management at the hospital, so far I have failed, but I will try again. This autumn the Council has expanded its wildflower verge and hay meadow grassland management programme. The late summer hay cuts are proving really successful and encouraging a more diverse flora, and a more interesting habitat. The speed of the results have been remarkable and David noted how rapidly **black knapweed** has reacted along the verges of the A4119. So it is definitely worth doing. The removing of the cut grass is the key. While the Council wildflower verge management happens on wider verges (where the machine we use can operate) and where road safety allows, I have also been experimenting to see what can happen on smaller areas. So, on a slither of a verge next to my house I self consciously rake up the cut grass after the mowers have been through and I put the cut grass in my compost heap. I think the neighbours think I am mad, although they probably don't realise how embarrassed I feel doing it, but I tell myself it is all for science. That act of removing cut grass has again been encouraging, it has reduced the lushness of the grass and increased the diversity of wildflowers. Although this verge gets cut 5 or 6 times a year it is starting to have periods 'in between' the cuts where the wildflowers do flower. We've managed our front lawn like this for a decade and now that has become a very small, but very flower rich mini-meadow, complete with **yellow anthills** and a list of over 50 bee species. It is amazing what a bit of raking can achieve and I recommend it to anyone wanting to make their lawn or local verge more wildflower friendly.

Some of you may have seen the bracken bruising work in the Rhondda Valleys undertaken as part of the Healthy Hillside project (a partnership project involving the South Wales Fire Service, NRW, Wildlife trust, South Wales Police and RCT council) The bruising is undertaken by a specialist contractor and her superbly trained horses. The idea is to reduce the vigour of the bracken, to reduce the build up of dead bracken and thereby the fire risk and in doing so encourage the grassland flora

and fauna. In July, Emma Williams sent the following observation *'just to let you know that **devil's-bit scabious** has made a return, or at least a visible show on Penrhys Mountain! Use to be a good covering there (and lower section of Penrhys cemetery landscaped 25yrs ago for plot preparation), bracken rolling is in its second day, but benefits of last year's work are visible as fire didn't cause deep burning. It's brilliant to see horses at work! Any likelihood of extending the pilot to other areas, it would be good to reclaim some of our mountain paths'*. The answer to those questions is yes, it is hoped to expand the hillside management work of the Healthy Hillside project. The eventual aim is to introduce conservation grazing on sites and by doing so provide a sustainable way to prevent grass fires, while improving biodiversity and increasing path access.

The 'topsey turvey' weather confuses all of us and Paul had **barren strawberries** flowering in his garden in late December and both **common** and **western gorse** in flower at the same time (thus making the differentiation of these two species even more difficult).

### **Fungi**

The Glamorgan Fungus Group, held an excellent series of Forays and Events in 2017 including visits to the Smilog, Llantrisant Forest and Coed Draws Colliery Tips, Pontypridd. Starting at 11AM on April 21<sup>st</sup> 2018, the group will hold an informal AGM in the Discovery Room, at the Wildlife Trust's, Parc Slip Nature Reserve. There will be a talk by Pat O'Reilly author of 'Fascinated by Fungi' and 'First Nature website' and after tea and biscuits a mini foray of the Reserve. If you would like to attend please contact the group on [glamorganfungi@gmail.com](mailto:glamorganfungi@gmail.com).

We've reported before on the ground breaking fungi finds of our local experts. Mark Evans added to this, as he recounted his search for cramp ball (**Daldinia** species) fungi in the quarries of the Cynon Valley, *'I collect specimens of a Daldinia from burnt gorse. For years it was assumed that the burnt gorse Cramp Ball was **Daldinia vernicosa (fissa)**, but the discovery of another species (**D. caldariorum**) on burnt gorse somewhere in west Wales means that they can no longer be reliably recorded in the field and now require microscope work to be sure. I collected my specimens and on extracting and measuring the spores, that too turned out to be not **D. vernicosa**, but **D. caldariorum**. On the National Biodiversity Network Gateway, it shows two records for Cornwall/Devon and the record for Pembrokeshire. As time goes on and more specimens are examined, this apparently rare Daldinia, will probably prove to be just overlooked and under recorded'*.

### **Butterflies and Moths**

Therese and Eddie Charnnock saw two **red admirals** in their garden in early April. These were likely to have hibernated over the winter as adults. Although they used to try it, red admirals never used to survive our winters, now you are more likely to see a red admiral in March than a **small tortoiseshell**. How things have changed. Jeff Williams saw good number of **orange tips** and their food plant **lady's smock** at GlynCornel in late April. **Marsh fritillary** had a reasonably good year in 2017. Ben Williams found good numbers at Church Village (with some **small pearl bordered fritillary**) and Tonyrefail and the butterfly was found for the first time in many years at the Waun, Tonyrefail by Lucie Bromfield . Thanks to the hard work of himself, Paul Denning, George Tordorff, Ben and Lucie, Richard Smith was able to report 5

occupied sites in the Ely Valley metapopulation area in 2017: encouraging news. Paul Denning saw 4 small pearl-bordered fritillary at Llantrisant Common in late May.

Ben keeps his keen eye on **white letter hairstreaks** (WLH) as they deport themselves around the tops of wych elm. In early July he noted '*I went out this morning to have a look at WLHs. The trees alongside the northbound carriageway of the A470 at Cilfynydd were in good condition and I saw 14 butterflies in a 1 hour walk*'. Dutch elm disease still affects elm trees, and every summer I see new **wych elms** that have succumbed, so it was that Ben reported that '*I went down to Treforest Industrial Estate to see WLHs on my favourite indicator tree. I saw four individuals flying around despite the high wind. Sadly the tree has Dutch elm disease and probably will die in a few years so I will have to look elsewhere for another site*'.

On July 20<sup>th</sup> Paul Marsman reported watching a **female dark green fritillary** egg laying in the bracken and violets at the foot of the Gelli Tips. Paul also mentioned how **ringlets** have colonised the Rhondda in recent years, and compared this with the way **gatekeepers** colonised the Valley 20 or so years ago. Gatekeepers have now become one of the Rhondda's most common butterflies. Ringlets certainly seem to be doing well in our damp grasslands they are also one of the few butterflies that seem happy to fly around in drizzly weather, so they would seem to be perfectly adapted to an RCT summer.

### **Bees and other things**

A part of his work with RCT, Liam Olds has been looking at a variety of habitats. One is Y Graig common, Llantrisant. Y Graig is a superb south-west facing hillside, Llantrisant town grew up on its shallower shoulders and flanks, and latterly Talbot Green has emerged from its roots. The hill is one of the two Llantrisant Commons owned by the Llantrisant Town Trust, who working with the Council and other partners have gradually restored grazing management. So while at times the Common may still look to be a sea of bracken, when one gets up close you will find a remarkably diverse and species rich flora. On a third of the hill 'the fern' is now significantly thinned and open grassland predominates. We have long known that this is an important site for butterflies and moths. This year Gorge Tordoff saw 8 small pearl bordered fritillary on the hill (a species which has re-colonised since grazing was reintroduced) as well the rare black and white micro moth **Ananua funebris** (which feeds on goldenrod and which Richard Smith first found on the hill a decade or more ago) and now a second goldenrod specialist, the totrid moth **Eucosma aspidiscana** (which George tells me is a first county record). Therefore when Liam ventured onto the Y Graig to look for bees I was hopefully he would find something of interest. I was not disappointed. Latest counts were over 30 species and Liam confirmed that Y Graig is indeed very good for bees.

Liam has also been looking at some of the wildflower verges the Council is managing as wildflower grasslands. Amongst a wide variety of species he found a surprise one: **Lesne's earwig**. This rarely recorded earwig is usually associated with the wild clematis **Old Man's Beard**. Liam found the earwig on verges at Miskin where old man's beard cloaks and hangs down from the adjacent hedgerows. It is always nice to record a species with a specific habitat requirement, and just a little further along this wildflower verge Liam also found the long proboscises bug

***Metatropis rufescens***, a woodland species which lives on **enchanter's nightshade**. The wood is right next to the verge is full of enchanter's nightshade. All of this illustrates how species can use connected and linked habitats, and why habitat mosaic habitats often support rich biodiversity.

In late May I was glad to once again find the spectacular **long-horned bees** (***Eucera longicornis***) feeding on the grass verges of Miskin (it particularly likes **yellow vetchling**). I am sure it must occur elsewhere in RCT, so next May or June find a patch of sunny yellow vetching and just hang about a bit. If you see a honeybee like insect which has unfeasibly long antenna then you've struck gold. You can't mistake them for anything else. I also re-recorded the national very rare **small dark bee** (that's its English name) ***Stellis phaeoptera*** from my garden. At a certain magnification it does look small and rather dull, but under a land lens it is beautiful. It makes me wonder what else is out there to find. In late June I was glad to see my favourite bilberry or mountain bumblebee (***Bombus monticola***) on the flower rich grasslands of the Cwmaman land reclamation site.

### **Mammals**

Last February, James Burton set up a night camera (nightcam) on the River Cynon and got some fantastic footage of **otters**, with what looked like an adult female on one occasions and a cub on the second. NRW was delighted to receive such evidence. James also found a dead **water shrew** on the public tow path at Tirfounder Fields: a new site for the species. Ben Williams saw a live water shrew at Cwm Cadlan (north of Penderyn) and on returning home he found a dead one in his Tonteg garden which he reckoned '*one of the local moggies musty have killed. I had been finding some water snails eaten on the side of the pond but had put it down to birds. Water shrew are like buses, you don't see any for years and then two arrive together.*' Ben also found another **harvest mouse** nest in the rhos pasture along the Church village by-pass. David Harry had one or **two lesser horseshoe** bats roosting in his Llanharan coal shed during the winter of 2016/17 and Therese and Eddie Charnock had two **hedgehogs** (adult and young) in their Miskin garden in autumn 2016.

### **Amphibians and Reptiles**

It is just a bit late to report it, but Dave Kerr had the first **frog** spawn record of 2017 with two batches in a pond on his Rhondda patch on January 29<sup>th</sup>, which beat my report of frog spawn in my garden pond in Miskin on January 31<sup>st</sup>, with at least 10 spawning frogs by February 1<sup>st</sup>. At Glynconel Local Nature Reserve Paul Marshman saw his first spawn on February 5<sup>th</sup>. Paul also reported **toads** crossing the access road which leads to Glynconel House and making for the lake, some were unfortunately squashed by cars. On September 6<sup>th</sup> I found a toad and toadlets in the wild zones of Pontypridd Park.

I am bound to have missed records and report, but please keep your observations, thoughts and leads coming. I will get the next Newsletter out much sooner. As ever thanks to all.

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