

CNS



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CARDIFF NATURALISTS' SOCIETY

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Welcome to the September 2015 Cardiff Naturalists' Society newsletter. We present details of our exciting Indoor Meetings Programme for 2015/16. Among the diverse topics addressed are hedgehogs, the seashore, the geology of the Colorado Plateau, brownfield sites, and tidal lagoon power. The season starts with our AGM and a presentation by Zoe Melvin, winner of the Bioscience Prize 2015.

The newsletter also includes three lively accounts of CNS Outdoor Meetings from earlier this summer, to the Ely River, Tortworth and Magor Marsh.

Outdoor Meetings 2015

The final Outdoor Meeting of 2015:

Saturday 5 September

Lavernock Point and Cosmeston Lakes

Jeff Curtis will lead this full-day walk around the Lavernock Point Nature Reserve (Wildlife Trust) and Cosmeston Lakes Country Park. Meet 10am at the gates of Lavernock Reserve (ST 181 681).

Deadline for submissions for next newsletter: 30 Nov 2015

Cover photo: Water vole by Eileen Riley

During 2012 and 2013, Gwent Wildlife Trust released water voles (*Arvicola amphibious*) into the Magor Marsh reserve, to re-introduce this species to the Gwent Levels (see pp. 20-22).

Indoor Meetings 2015/2016

Regular meetings will be held in Room 0.23, Cardiff School of Management, Metropolitan University, Llandaff Campus, Western Avenue, Cardiff CF5 2YB.

Joint meetings (12 November 2015, 25 February and 28 March 2016), with the Cardiff group of Wildlife Trust South and West Wales and the Cardiff University Student Wildlife Trust, will be held in The Wallace Lecture Theatre (0.13), Cardiff University, Park Place, Cardiff.

All meetings start at 7.30pm.

2015

Monday 28 September

AGM followed by **Zoe Melvin**

Zoe Melvin will be presented with the Bioscience Prize 2015, which is awarded annually in memory of Professor Ursula Henriques. She will then give a presentation on her 2nd year student fieldwork project, for which she won her award.

Monday 12 October

Erica Dixon: Hedgehog Rescue and Conservation

Depending on availability, a rescued hedgehog may be present. Hedgehog Helpline Rescue began in 1988, and became a Registered Charity in 1995. It takes in sick, injured and orphaned hedgehogs, with the aim of returning them to the wild, and promotes hedgehog conservation with a strong education element. The talk will provide an introduction to hedgehogs and will look at specific rehabilitation cases. It will also examine the alarming decline in hedgehog numbers in the UK and the conservation implications of this. By the end of the evening, you will know how to recognise a sick hedgehog, and when to call in the carers.

Please note that the hedgehog presentation contains some graphic photographs of injuries. The talk is suitable for children, but very sensitive children may find some of the pictures a bit upsetting. Please tell Hilary Wicks, who will contact Erica Dixon, if you would like these removed from the talk.

Monday 26 October

Cate Barrow: Autumn/Winter Wildlife from Finland

Photographs of wildlife in Finland during trips in Autumn and Winter, taken during two visits in 2014 and 2015. You can see examples of Cate Barrow's wildlife photography on her website: <http://www.catebarrow.co.uk/gallery.html>

Thursday 12 November

Jeanette Reis: Tidal Lagoons

This joint meeting, in the Wallace Lecture Theatre, will give an overview of the environmental challenges and the opportunities of tidal lagoon power. Dr Jeanette Reis is the Development Manager at Tidal Lagoon Swansea Bay.

Wednesday 25 November

Geraint Owen: Landscapes and Geology of the Colorado Plateau

The Colorado Plateau in the south-western USA is home to some of the best known and most dramatic landscapes on earth, including Zion National Park, Bryce Canyon, Arches National Park, Canyonlands and the Grand Canyon. These landscapes owe their origin to the underlying geology and the geological processes that have shaped them. This talk will aim to share some of the drama and beauty of the Colorado Plateau, while considering what defines and characterises the region. Dr Geraint Owen is a geologist in the Geography Department at Swansea University.

Wednesday 16 December

Xmas Bash

2016

Monday 18 January

Members' evening

CNS members' short illustrated presentations.

Thursday 28 January

Daniel Jenkins-Jones: A Year in the Life of RSPB Cymru

This talk will look at RSPB Cymru's work in 2015, including the latest news on its conservation work, the breeding success of protected bird species, and its political campaigning. There will also be exciting news about RSPB's new 'Giving Nature a Home in Cardiff' project.

Monday 15 February

Judith Oakley: Title TBC

Judith Oakley is the author of 'Seashore Safaris' and founder of Oakley Intertidal, a marine education consultancy.

Thursday 25 February

Neil Price: The Invertebrates of Brownfield Sites

In this joint meeting, in the Wallace Lecture Theatre, Dr Neil Price discusses research being done on brownfield sites in south Wales. Despite being "man-made", they can develop a rich biodiversity. The speaker, a Principal Ecologist at David Clements Ecology, talks about brownfield sites he has surveyed.

Wednesday 16 March

Helen Mills: Dunraven Park, Garden and Heritage Coast

Monday 28 March

Bioscience Prize 2016 award

Please look online for further information and for additions to the CNS Indoor and Outdoor Meetings programmes:
<http://cardiffnaturalists.blogspot.co.uk/p/programme.html>

Unknown Wales Conference

Saturday 3 October 2015: National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. The Unknown Wales Conference is a partnership between the National Museum Wales and the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales. It celebrates some of Wales' least known wildlife. Now in its fifth year, the Conference has previously included talks on a diverse range of topics, from fungi to a history of bird research, ancient trees to brown hares. To book your place, contact Rose Revera on 01656 724100 or email: r.revera@welshwildlife.org



Pysgodlyn Lake, Hensol Forest, Vale of Glamorgan

Photo: Stephen Nottingham

This SSSI is important for dragonfly and damselfly species, and the lake is home to one of only around 20 isolated populations of the rare medicinal leech (*Hirudo medicinalis*) in the UK.

Swanning around the Ely

Monday 25 May 2015

By Barbara Brown

For the late May Bank Holiday Rob and Linda Nottage led a walk along the River Ely, starting from just outside Peterson-super-Ely. Fourteen people joined them at 10am with the weather promising cool but fine. We saw a Dipper before leaving the car park, and shortly Spotted Flycatchers were spotted fluttering around a nest site. The roadside verges between the car park and the footpath yielded Dark Bush Cricket nymphs, the Kent Snail and Nettle Weevil.

The walk then passed through the National Trust's Lanlay Meadows, which are being restored through habitat management. Dock beetles were very plentiful here and we visited the adjoining Community Orchard which includes apples such as the Bardsey Beauty. The place was buzzing with bumblebees doing the rounds of the Russian Comfrey.

At the next field boundary we came across our first clump of Monkshood – a flower which is particularly linked to the Vale of Glamorgan (see photo on page 10).

The walk then progressed along the bank of the Ely, around two deeply incised swan's neck meanders, where we looked for Sand Martin holes in the freshly eroded banks. None were found, although they were both heard and seen twittering over the grazing fields.

On the way back, we explored the opposite side of the valley, along several sunken lanes, one with a Small-leaved Lime and several more stands of Monkshood. As we approached Peterson again we came through a wetter meadow with a substantial stand of reeds where a Reed Warbler was churring.

It was here we also found several Sailor Beetle (*Canthroais pul-lucida*). Finally, the pretty micro-moth *Abalonia geoffrela* was seen in a roadside cottage garden. With thanks to Rob & Linda for leading a very enjoyable walk.



River

Ely Walk

- by Lanlay Orchard. Photo: Linda Nottage.



Comfrey

(*Symphytum offic-*

inale). Photo: Andy Kendall.



Monkshood (*Aconite napellus*). Photo: Linda Nottage.

The first county record in Glamorgan for this species, considered as a native, was in 1892. The Vale of Glamorgan Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP, 2009) considered it “locally important” (ed.).



Bank of
Ely and
(*Iris pseudacorus*).
Photos: Andy Kendall

the River
Flag Iris

Tortworth Arboretum

Sunday 31 May 2015

By Bruce McDonald

Despite the dire forecast, the weather relented and we enjoyed a day at Tortworth's amazing arboretum, led by the irrepressible Tony Titchen, who was an ideal guide for this collection because he has been involved with the identification and cataloguing of the trees. We invited members of other groups and were delighted to be joined by representatives from Bristol Naturalists, Gloucester Naturalists and the Friends of Dyffryn Gardens.



The arboretum is in the grounds of Tortworth Court Hotel near Wotton under Edge, a 45 minute drive from Cardiff. There is plenty of history here, as Tony pointed out. As far back as Edward I's reign (1272-1307) the manor of Tortworth belonged to Sir Nicholas Kingston. The Veel family held it for 200 years, then the Throckmortons, and finally the Ducie family who owned it for 350 years.

The house itself was built between 1849 and 1853 by the 2nd Earl and was designed by Samuel Teulon. During WW2, the building was used by the Royal Navy as a training establishment ('HMS Cabbala') and then by American servicemen; it was at

this point that some of the trees were lost due to the spillage of vehicle oil. In 1991, the house was bought by Phillip Stubbs, but a disastrous fire caused widespread damage. The structure was then purchased by Four Pillars Hotels and their restoration is what you see today.



And now to the purpose of our visit: the arboretum itself. Whilst some mature trees predate the arboretum, it was the 3rd Earl who started planting in 1853 and created an arboretum which at the time was a rival to Westonbirt. Our tour started with a *Robinia pseudoacacia*, but this was the contorted form 'tortuosa' (photo above). Robinia originates in the Eastern and mid-Western USA, arriving in Europe in the 17th Century.

Then a Blue Cedar, *Cedrus atlantica*, the form 'glauca' of the Atlas Cedar from the Atlas mountains of Morocco and Algeria. Tony pointed out the characteristic short needles, which contrast this cedar with most others. And then a massive Southern European Plane, *Platanus hispanica*, often referred to as a London Plane. The girth was impressive although, as with many of us, the bulk had shifted downward in old age.

A Dawn Redwood, *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, followed, discovered in China as recently as 1941. This can be confused with the

Swamp cypress, *Taxodium distichum*, alongside which it is often planted, but a simple key is the opposite foliage of the Dawn Redwood and alternate of the Swamp Cypress.



The first Champion tree to grab our attention was a Nikko Maple, *Acer nikoense*, with distinctive trifoliate leaves. A Shagbark Hickory (above) followed, *Carya ovata*, from North America, and one of seven different species but distinguishing them can be tricky. However, it usually (but not exclusively!) has five leaflets whereas the Mockernut and Shell-bark Hickory - the other two with large leaves - usually have seven.



An Oriental Spruce, *Picea orientalis*, was obligingly sporting some cones (above): Tony reminded us to look out for the unusually short needles on this tree.

Many of the trees were supporting Mistletoe, including species which were quite unexpected such as the Red Oak *Quercus rubra*. A stream marked a valley fault line with acid soil to one side and the other alkaline, enabling a wide variety of tree species to flourish.



Although the rain held off, Tony marched us under the umbrella-like cover of a Crimean Pine, *Tilia euchlora*, making it a perfect place to shelter from adverse weather (above). A Common Walnut, *Juglans regia*, provided Tony with an opportunity to use his penknife test to reveal the interrupted pith in the twigs.

And a close relative of the familiar sycamore and similar in appearance was Van Volxem's Maple, *Acer velutinum* var. *vanvolxemii* - a rare tree coming from the Caucasus in the late 19th century. Under it were hundreds of small seedlings - a propagation opportunity if ever there was one. Another rarity followed, Chinese Zelkova, *Zelkova sinica*, with orange-pink bark.

Next, and sporting the largest leaves we were to see on a tree that day, was an American Lime, *Tilia americana*, and yet another rarity, although it was discovered in North America as far back as 1752. The photo (on the next page) illustrates the size of the leaves: the ruler held alongside was 30 cm (12 inches) long.



Tony took great pains to describe our next tree as the Tree of Juda, *Cercis siliquastrum*, and not the Judas Tree, although it is commonly called the latter. A tree originating in what might loosely be called Judaea is a more logical name than yet another of the many varieties of tree on which Judas is supposed to have hanged himself. Distinguishing this from the not dissimilar Katsura is helped by the fact that the Katsura has opposite leaves and the Tree of Juda alternate.

Sophora japonica was next in line with the common names of the Pagoda or Scholar's Tree. This has similarities with the Robinia that was the first tree on our quest, although the latter usually has spines and round-tipped leaflets. An American Blackjack Oak, *Quercus marilandica* (below), took us nicely up to lunch. With most of our brains and notebooks full to overflowing, how might we cope with the afternoon session?



After a brief pause, and cup of tea in the hotel for some, we assembled around what must be one of Tortworth's crowning glories: a mighty Caucasus Elm, *Zelkova carpinifolia*. The photo (below) was taken in December and shows the scores of stems twisting up from the ground. Another unusual feature was that the suckers around the base had been trained to form a protective hedge.



The umbrella form of a Pendulous Beech, *Fagus sylvatica* var. *pendula*, allowed ample scope for the whole group to assemble within its protective canopy, before we moved on to a smaller tree with prominent spines, *Aralia spinosa*, commonly known as the Devil's Walking Stick (below).



Next, an English Oak, *Quercus robur*, but an uncommon variety with variegated leaves. And as if we had not already encountered a plethora of rare trees, our next specimen the Chinese Cork Oak *Quercus variabilis* is described as “very rare” and has, as the name suggests, thick, corky bark.

Finally, a Corkscrew Hazel, *Corylus avellana* var. *contorta* (below), but different from those most of us will have encountered as it was an 'original'. The story goes that it was first discovered in a hedgerow in Gloucestershire and the 3rd Earl of Ducie was a recipient of one of a number of plants propagated from suckers and distributed to private collections. The Corkscrew Hazels available in garden centres at modest cost will all have been grafted, as the bush will not grow true from seed or cutting. It also has a popular name, Harry Lauder's Walking Stick, supposedly because the great music hall entertainer often appeared with a crooked walking stick.



We strolled back past a pets' cemetery, a tunnel of *Wisteria* and a pudding stone, to be greeted by a colourful and exuberant Indian wedding taking place at the hotel. Our thanks, as ever, to our guru for the day, Tony. Next year look out for a return trip to Pontypool Park with Tony.

Text and all Tortworth photos by Bruce McDonald.

An extended report with more photos can be found on the blog: <http://cardiffnaturalists.blogspot.co.uk/2015/06/tortworth-arboretum.html>

Magor Marsh
Saturday 13th June 2015
By Hilary Wicks and Peter Davies

The Magor Marsh SSSI site is just a mile from junction 23A on the M4. It is the last natural area of fenland on the Gwent Levels. Usually it lies above the water table, so it is unpolluted by water entering from the surrounding area.

At the Derek Upton Centre we met our guide Paul Cawley, who has lived on the Gwent Levels all his life. After a hot drink and a short introduction, the walk commenced from outside the centre. On the bridge over a reen (drainage ditch), Paul introduced “Oscar”, a Water Vole, sitting on a purpose-built float eating an apple (below).

Arriving earlier, we had seen a dispute between Oscar and a friend who had tried to take his piece of apple; the friend was seen off. Providing more information, Paul explained there had been a release of 250 young water voles into the waterway site to re-introduce the species into the Gwent Levels.



“Oscar”
vole. Photo: Eileen Riley.

the water

As we walked across the Broadwalk, a Kestrel hovered over a field to the left. Paul explained this was the second year a Kestrel had returned, having previously disappeared for a few years. He thought this was due to the absence of a Peregrine and a Goshawk, previously seen here.

Continuing on to the dipping platform, which is full of tadpoles in Spring, we saw Dace Minnows and Stickleback. Crossing the levels, we passed a Mallard with her three chicks.

Paul took us to the hay-meadow, with “the best hay in Gwent”. Continuing on we crossed an old path that is reputed to be the route taken from the local church/castle to a nearby pub.

We passed a humane trap used to control the mink population (below). The removal of mink protects the local otter population.



Mink trap being demonstrated by Paul Cawley.
Photo by Eileen Riley.

Next we visited the hide, where Paul explained Heron roosted overnight in the trees; they fly away early morning and return in the evening. A Swan seen earlier on the path was at the pond (below), along with a Heron who appeared to be sleeping though later stretched showing full plumage. A Little Grebe with chicks made an appearance just as we were leaving.

We completed our walk at the centre, after witnessing an aerial display of Swifts.

It is possible to visit the site at any time, but the guide recommended early morning for the birds.

Birds observed included: Water Rail, Little Grebe, Reed Warbler, Reed Bunting, Chifchaff, Cetti's Warbler, Kingfisher, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Shoveler, Teal, Moorhen, Little Egret, Coot.



Swan at Magor Marsh.
Photo by Eileen Riley.

Flowers seen at Magor Marsh included Flag Iris, Convolvulus, Meadowsweet, Rose Bramble, Ragged Robin, Teasels, Reed Mace, Marsh Marigold, Comfrey, Chickweed, Crack Willow, Sallow, Mistletoe, Yellow Thistle, Marsh Thistle, Valerian, Figwort.



Hemlock
wort (*Oenanthe crocata*).
Photo Mike Dean.

water drop-

This has been considered the most poisonous British plant species. Scientists in Italy have recently (2009) claimed that the plant was the one used in the ritual killing of elderly people in pre-Roman times in Sardinia, with the plant's neurotoxin being responsible for the characteristic "sardonic grin" (risus sardonicus) of the victims (ed.).

Dragonflies by the Forest Farm Country Park pond
Photos by Paul Bowden



Male Em-
onfly (*Anax imperator*).

peror Drag-



Male
bodied Chaser (*Libellula depressa*).

Broad-

The bird hide at this Nature Reserve in Whitchurch, Cardiff, is an ideal location for spotting a range of dragonfly species.



Typical Magor Marsh landscape (see pp. 20-22). Photo by Mike Dean .

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