

# CARDIFF NATURALISTS' SOCIETY

Founded 1867

## NEWSLETTER N0.64

## DECEMBER 2004

Charity No 1092496

## Presidential Amblings

I'm sure someone would be able to tell me who said 'Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. So I find myself penning my first editorial as CNS president also continuing my role as Field Meetings Secretary (for the next year at least). Thankfully for those who now feels themselves to be members of a dictatorial society I can assure you I am heavily influenced by the other council members who do a lot of the background 'slog'- some of whom have formal titles and some who do not. And I couldn't do this without them!

On a much lighter note after our barbecue last summer we successfully found some glow worms and some were wondering how the light is generated by these insects.

I have discovered the light organs consist of a transparent cuticle under which the light producing chemical luciferin is stored. Behind the luciferin is a layer of dense tissue which acts as a reflector. The light production is an oxidative process similar to respiration in which enzyme action in the presence of oxygen releases energy in the form of light. So now we know!

Patricia Wood.

## INDOOR MEETINGS – Spring 2005

Another year will start with our first indoor meeting of 2005 on Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> January when Stephen Howe, a former President and long-term member, will give us a talk on the Emirate of Oman. He has visited Sharjah several times since 1995 in the course of his work for the Museum and has travelled widely in the little known Emirate. His talk will range over the natural history and geography of the area, as well as the local culture.

On Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> January the annual Members' Evening will no doubt provide a variety of contributions to illustrate some of our members' wildlife interests and encounters far and near. The event has always produced an entertaining and informative mixture and we can again look forward to an evening to enjoy.

### **NOTE CHANGE OF DATE**

Maureen Ponting's talk on the Wild Flowers of Bhutan will be on Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> February, not on the 1<sup>st</sup> as printed on the programme card. Maureen is experienced and knowledgeable about the plants of many parts of the world and has often led trips exploring botany and wildlife. Her talk on Bhutan will introduce us to a little-known region that few of us will have had the chance to visit.

On Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> February we have the opportunity to hear about the work of the Environment Agency in Wales. Marlynne Good is a member of the Agency's staff and will be giving us an illustration of its work especially in nature conservation.

Many of us will remember the visit a few years ago by Keith Offord, when he gave a fascinating talk on a British woodland through the seasons. He lives in the hills near the Welsh Border where he manages 16 acres of hill stream, disused quarry and mature woodland for the resident wildlife. His talk on Tuesday 1st March on 'Life over 1000 feet' will give us his experience of the wildlife of British uplands.

On Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> March our Indoor Meetings programme will be brought to a close for this season, when Richard Marks is coming to show us aspects of some 50 years of wildlife photography. Some of us will remember the fascinating talk he gave us on his local area in the Alun Valley.

Margaret Leishman  
Indoor Meetings Secretary

OGMORE-BY-SEA AND THE HINTERLAND  
SUNDAY 5TH SEPTEMBER 2004

The last Sunday of the school holidays started, as forecast, with clear blue sky, bright sunshine and uncanny calm - a glorious late summer morning. The car park below Ogmores-by-Sea was already filling up with family cars depositing the mums and dads with their children onto the beach for the last time that holiday. The tide was rolling into the estuary with deep, wide, white crested waves that broke and rippled over the sand. A dozen black rubber sheathed surfers plied their sport beyond the bounds of the paddlers.

Large numbers of tiny pale snail shells lay in the car park grass. Sixteen members signed Tricia's Field Meetings Safety Book and we moved off south keeping off the beach by staying on the close cropped coastal sward. This was liberally strewn with shining yellow hawkbit 'blooms. Whether autumn, rough or lesser I cannot say. I could not remember the differences between them, other than those implicit in their names, and I had left my flower identification book and my hand lens at home. So I did not kneel for a closer look. A pied wagtail stared at us.

On the seaward side of the grass we studied the triassic breccia containing angular pieces of carboniferous limestone then trained our binoculars on the rocks nearer the water's edge. Here we saw black-headed gulls and a solitary common gull, turnstones, oystercatchers, and, believe it or not, a brace of knots.

We continued walking south concentrating on the gorse scrub to our left spotting stonechat, linnet, jackdaw, wheatear and a special - a Dartford warbler. Also a non-flying rabbit. Amongst the vegetation nodding thistle, stork's bill, swine-cress, Carline thistle, betony, and tormentil.

Reaching a short steep gully above the Black Rocks (is this Pant y Slade? see later!) we scaled its eastern slope to gain the top of the lower liassic rocks - Southerndown beds overlaying Sutton Stone - which form the high cliffs to the west of Seamouth. Away to the east a pair of ravens were flying and calling while to the west a lone cormorant skimmed the sparkling sea. The main points of interest in this stretch to the car park above Seamouth were Linda's finding a patch of yellow staining mushroom and myself a blow hole inactive under the prevailing wind and tide conditions. Yarrow, bird's-foot-trefoil, lady's bedstraw and hound's tongue were seen, the last named in shrivelling mode. Not many butterflies had been seen - mainly small whites, which of course, are easier to notice at a distance, some common blue and a common darter dragonfly.

We descended to Seamouth beach and stopped for lunch at the picnic tables there. The car park was full and the number of people enjoying the beautiful day even exceeded the number of wasps coveting our sandwiches. A brief visit was made to the Heritage Coast Centre (is this in Pant y Slade?). Then at high noon GMT we set out NE along the woodland edge (a gatekeeper flitting ahead) and across wheat fields and cattle pasture to Pitcot Pool, passing mallow and hawkweed oxtongue. It was very hot.

At Pitcot Pool a sow wallowed in the mud on the far side to us and a shoveler duck drifted slowly, a painted lady settled near the roadside. We skirted St. Brides to reach Beacons Down and made our way via the sandy Pant Mari Flanders and Pant y Cwteri to Portobello. On the way we saw some magnificent large parasol fungi, two fully open pancake style and others in the early egg shaped state, also a "fairy" ring of much smaller

fungi. Thyme and self heal were the most noticeable flowers with wall rue on the stonework shielding the Mari Flanders well. Someone saw a green woodpecker.

We walked beside river Ogmore on the bank, still wet from the last tide, viewing the gulls - lesser black-backed, black-headed and herring. A kingfisher, perched on a branch of an outward leaning tree on the far bank, was seen by some but remained invisible to most of us.

For the last few hundred yards we followed a higher up path through the bracken and noticed a few white horehound plants.

My thanks to Tricia for organising this walk and my apologies to those whose sightings have not been mentioned here. We were spread out at times and my memory is a bit weak.

Now we come to my postscript - what is the correct location of Pant y Slade? This puzzled me sometime ago and, as I am writing about the area, I thought I would pose the question.

Is it A - the short steep gully coming up from the black rocks or

Is it B - the flatter valley containing the Heritage Coast Centre?

In Glamorgan Heritage Coast - A Guide to its Geology (published in 1975 and reprinted several times since) sketch maps, diagrams and the text all indicate location A and this is continued in our own Mary Gillham's Coastal Downs with diagram 1 on page 3 being particularly clear. However this is credited to the Geological Quarterly so, excuse the pun, is this a geological fault?

My O.S. Pathfinder map printed 1988 and my Explorer map of 1998 both clearly show B. Also Slade Wood and Slade House are nearer B than A. When we visited the Centre I asked a member of the staff, she said the Centre was in Slade but was not aware of the duplication. Later I phoned the head warden, Paul Dunn, He was aware of the two sites and normally thinks of his place of work being in plain Slade with Pant y Slade a geological site.

Comments from readers would be welcome. I am making further inquiries and have so far discovered an O.S. map dated 1899 Based on the 1877 survey shows both sites as Pant y Slade.

Harold G. Boudier

## ORNITHO- LOGICAL



I was gazing up at the power lines the other day and I noticed that a dozen (not a bakers dozen) different coloured but otherwise identical birds were evenly spaced along the cable. I noted the colours of each individual bird and after collating the results (on a large spread sheet) I ended up with the following information :-

One third of the birds had red heads, half of the remainder had black heads, two had green heads and the rest had pale heads.

Half the red-heads plus half the pale-heads had blue/grey wings, half the black heads plus half the green-heads had black wings, one pale-head plus one black-head plus one red-head had red wings and the rest had fawn wings.

All those with no black or red feathers had pale feet, half the remainder had orange feet, and these all have some or all black feathers.

Of the remainder, those with no blue/grey feathers had pale feet and the rest had red feet.

**HOW MANY BIRDS HAD NO RED AT ALL ?**

Graham Duff

Stranding of Velella spirans 'By-the-wind sailors' in September. 2004

Following strong SW gales, large numbers of velellae were washed up on our "beach at Monknash on Wednesday 22nd and in lesser quantities until the end of the week. These were all living specimens conspicuous by their dark blue colour. On the rare past occasions when these jellyfish-like oceanic creatures have been washed up they were putrescent or in the form of glassy skeletons. In fact drifts of the skeletons followed on the Saturday sticking to the rocks like plucked feathers.

Most of the live specimens were quite large, three to three-and-a-half inches long by one and three-quarters wide. The soft side and under-parts were deep ultramarine blue and the crest or sail (vela) was on some individuals edged in pink. The undersides were fringed with short tentacles like those of sea anemones only much finer surrounding a lengthwise mouth.

The slightest puff of wind sent the creatures scudding to the lee side of any pool in the rocks or on the sands. Amongst them were occasional clumps of pelagic buoy barnacles lepas fascicularis whose feather mouthparts pulsed in and out filtering the water.

Velellae may be creatures of extreme antiquity. I am told that P. J. Jell has found fossil forms of an identical glassy skeleton in the Ediacaran rocks of Western Australia.

R.B.Hubbard,

Blaen-y-cwm, Monknash, CF71 7QQ

Tel.01656-890 204

Note

This local observation proved to be part of an immense invasion of the creatures extending from the Devonshire coast round into the Bristol Channel and up the Welsh coast as far as Anglesey. A picture of the millions of *velellae* on Sker beach was front-page news on the Western Mail on 25 September 2004. The story was also shown on television.

## The Fungal Foray at Dyffryn Gardens Saturday November 6<sup>th</sup>

This joint meeting of the society with the Glamorgan Fungus Society, was lead by Teifion Davies with his Swansea colleague, Mervyn Howells, providing technical support.

There were about 30 of us searching in the short grass of the lawns in front of the house. This year autumn was warm and wet and so- favourable for fungal growth, Happily for us, the rain held off.

The majority of our finds could all be classified as *Basidiomycetes*- (gill fungi or toadstools). There are however hundreds of other kinds which are seldom collected in the field (eg *Penioillium notatum* ). Perhaps we should rename the “Fungal Foray” to “toadstool trips” or “Basidiomycete Bash”.

After a mornings search the party scattered and ate their picnic lunches near to the tea rooms (available for hot drinks)n the afternoon we all wandered off independently, taking full advantage of our free entry in to the gardens, for which we were grateful.



## OUR LIVING RIVER

How many wildlife lovers would travel long distances to see an otter in daylight? Perhaps we should look closer to home.

On page 116 of *The Natural History of Cardiff, Exploring along the River Taff*, I wrote "Passing through the Tongwynlais kissing gate to the riverside path, I was afforded one of those magical moments that come but rarely in this busy world."

That was in 2001 of two dippers fishing just beyond a pair of tail flicking grey wagtails and a pristine giant sulphur bracket on a Taffside oak. In late November 2003 I took a bird watching friend to see the dipper site - and the dippers were there, on cue, along with the grey wagtails. That was remarkable enough on our lowland reach of the river, for two birds so much more closely associated with mountain streams, but the magical moment this time came a few minutes later.

The sleek grey head of an otter was moving through the river under the Morganstown bank, leaving a neat triangular wake on water hurrying down in spate after the recent rains. It rolled over, the flood rippling past wet for, flipped its tail and was gone, to reappear further downstream before disappearing from whence it came.

Usually these noble fishers, most often spotted on Scottish sea lochs, lie up by day, or surface to breathe under overhanging bank vegetation, which ours might well have done when we saw it no more. It was a misty morning with mizzling rain, perhaps the animal was treating it as dusk or dawn. Our sighting was brief. How many such, I wonder, do we miss.

As we entered this stretch goldcrest and tree creeper were busy on the Ivy House Farm trees. Some thirty redwings were flighting over the grassland and feeding along the hedges, with some of the influx of dark-beaked blackbirds from overseas. Half a dozen pied or white wagtails were frog-hopping up from the cattle pasture to snap at insects hovering over the dung and the sound of a great spotted woodpecker came wafting north from the Taff Trail.

A riverside alder, draped from top to toe with whiskery old man's beard, was alive with goldfinches, prettiest of all their tribe, and the ones most often visiting my garden a little further up the valley. With them were the odd chaffinch, greenfinch and great tit.

I was rash enough to say that I often saw a kingfisher when crossing the Iron Bridge that carried the mineral railway line past Gelynys PYO Farm from the Pentyrch Iron Works to the Melingriffith Tin Works. This too, came in on cue, shooting up the bank and settling, to allow a good look at the dazzling blue and orange before passing on. It was my friend's first visit to this corner of Cardiff and I think he was duly impressed.

Idling on the river, diving sporadically, were two couples of little grebes -delightful powder puff birds, and another pair within a stone's throw of the motorway crossing. A young moorhen skulked along the Radyr shore, not venturing out into the turbulence where some drake mallard were bobbing along unconcernedly.

Wrens, like the troglodytes that they are, potted in and out of cavelets in the stone revetments and robins lingered to see if we raised any useful insects in passing. A flock of wood pigeons settled in a tall riverside tree and a jay shrieked from another. We were surprised to see a buzzard aloft on such a day, but flushed a second one soon after from the woodland edge. No less than four grey squirrels were feasting on windfall apples at Gelynys.

A flurry of black and white upstream on our return left us momentarily puzzled, but proved to be a squadron of muscovy ducks from the farmyard. They were gathered under the near bank on a green raft of floating vegetation, gazing up at us with interest. Would that wildlings would be so confiding.

Today's only fungus was a clump of common inkcaps (*Coprinus atramentarius*), and almost the only flower a sprig of pink centaury. The red and purple leaves had been blown from their tentative hold on dogwood and guelder rose and few berries remained apart from colourful clusters of trailing black bryony.

MARY E. GILLHAM

## CARDIFF NATURALISTS' SOCIETY WALK ROUND LISVANE AND LLANISHEN RESERVOIRS

Led by Richard Cowie, 6th November, 2004

We started well with peregrine falcon and sparrow hawk flying over the boathouse. Later on a buzzard burst from the trees and flapped low over the sixty acres of Llanishen water, where a group of Canada geese idled. A female goldeneye had joined the pochard and tufted ducks on the twenty acres of Lisvane Reservoir. Great crested and little grebes were present, and cormorants posing with spread wings on the tiny islets of sticks where the great crested had nested. With all eyes directed groundwards, looking for fungi, few woodland birds were sighted apart from a jay.

Despite the late date, eighteen plant species were still flowering. Queen among them was the reservoir border of Mexican fleabane, massed with pink, mauve and purple daisy flowers - a botanical highlight here for many decades before it started spreading round the city from other masonry at Llandaff. Ox-eye daisies and corn feverfew, *Bellis*, yarrow, knapweed and various yellow composites were others of this family. Summer leftovers included devil's bit and field scabious, *Angelica* and burnet saxifrage, meadow buttercup and red clover.

Although not billed as such, this was a fungus foray, yielding more than the society's official fungus foray in the tamed habitat of Dyffryn Gardens a month earlier. The unfertilised reservoir banks have recently hit the headlines as Cardiff's principal waxcap site - these earning more merit on the biodiversity front than the waterfowl, for which part of the site had been designated as an SSSI. Dyffryn had yielded mostly hard to identify LBJs (little brown jobs). Today's problems were BYJs (bright yellow jobs).

During Richard's introductory talk we learned that rare red data species are awarded points. Thirty points imply a national rarity, forty four an international rarity. Thirty nine had been earned by the reservoir's waxcaps to date - species almost unheard of during past decades when almost the only permit holders able to enter were ornithologists. Only one more to go!

Twenty species have been identified here and we encountered no less than eighteen of these on our round - plus sundry other fungi. We set off, shuffling through wet grass along the edge of the northern wood, where kingcups would be blooming in four to five months' time, but which now held an extensive sheet of open water. Members with digital cameras and mini tripods captured most species on film and there were many wet knees and elbows as well as feet ere long.

Almost the first waxcap encountered was said to be the rarest of them all, a European red data species, the oily waxcap (*Hygrocybe quieta*), a conical yellow creation said to smell of engine oil. Our engineer disagreed. More like rancid cooking oil. The actual first was yellow butter waxcap (*H. ceracea*), orange when young, with waxy stipe and cap and slightly decurrent gills.

Next was blackening waxcap, formerly conical waxcap (*H. nigrescens* to *H. conica*). These appear as neat orange cones, turning black as they mature, first the cap and then the stipe. How many more will merge as the pundits become more experienced, I wonder. Some of the many, perhaps, that can be yellow or orange, depending on their state of well being.

Scarlet hood waxcap (*H. coccinea*), a very intense deep red, could surely be relied upon to conform, but no. "That's orange." "No, that's washed out red, like the one with red peak to the yellow cone." Oh dear! Crimson waxcap (*H. punicea*) romping along the top and bottom of the bank, was recognisable for its robust size and intense colour, this best described as brownish-red-orange, darker than crimson in youth, but fading. Don't we all!

Meadow waxcap (*H. pratensis*), a rather indeterminate biscuit colour, was also best recognised on its large size, also decurrent gills. This can be used as an indicator of a really good waxcap site - short grass, no fertiliser or herbicide. Spangle waxcap (*H. insipida*), a slimy bright orange, was far from insipid, with peach coloured gills and stipe reddening upwards. It might be new and was 'bagged' for identification.

Slimy was a fit epithet for many, including the golden waxcap (*H. chlorophana*), an elegantly yellow species. Yellow, orange or beige but with an unmistakable green tinge, was the parrot waxcap (*H. psittacinus*). An undistinguished pale fawn one rejoicing in the name of cedarwood waxcap (*H. russocoriacea*), is said to smell of Russian leather, if you happen to be familiar with that.

Snowy waxcap (*H. virginea* or *H. nivea*) with decurrent gills, was white, as would be expected with such a name. Earthy waxcap (*H. fornicata*) was a dirty clay colour and had earned itself a less pure name. The pink waxcap (*H. calyptraeformis*), a rarity much publicised at the height of the local waxcap furor in 2002, was by no means rare here, although not present in large gatherings. As the only pink one it was unmistakable, also because of the shape, a ragged pyramid, severely split almost before it emerged.

Another rarity is one of the many slimy ones picked out to be called just that, the slimy waxcap (*H. irrigata*). Large, with somewhat undulant cap, it is a nebulous brown, the inside of the broken stipe changing from white to red when exposed to the air. It smells vaguely of nitric acid. Heath waxcap (*H. laeta*) is butterscotch colour, shiny with a viscid edge.

Honey waxcap (*H. reidii*) is one of the many orange species. Toasted waxcap (*H. colmanniana*) is dry capped with no stickiness. The gills are more branched than most and run farther down the stipe. Seventeen; I seem to have left one out. How could I be so inattentive?

Needless to say, there were others, including three fairy clubs pushing up through short wet grass and all formerly in the genus *Clavaria*. Meadow coral (*Clavulinopsis corniculata*) is bright orange and generously branched. Yellow club (*Clavulinopsis helvola*), also bright orange, takes the form of a rather wobbly unbranched column. Apricot club (*Clavulinopsis luteo-alba*) is also here but not seen. Our third was mealy white crowded clusters of smoky spindles (*Clavaria fumosa*).

The yellow field cap or cow pat fungus (*Bolbitius vitellinus*), said to favour rotting straw or livestock manure, appeared, true to form, on flattened patches of yellowed grass pierced by mouse-sized burrows and had to make do with rodent dung for the fruitier part of its diet.

The number of these neatly lined rodent holes, some floored with delicate green liverworts, was phenomenal. Hundreds penetrated mown turf and the thick moss carpets covering the pitched stone facing of the upper reservoir walls, leading into crevices. They were suspected to belong to bank voles, but no live trapping has been done as far as I know. Would that the fewer larger ones had been those of water voles and not the much more likely brown rats.

Mauve tinged wood blewits (*Lepista nuda*) were highly gregarious in a few places. The Nottages had eaten some the day before and still looked very fit! "Boiled, not fried. There's so much water in them." Other large, crowded toadstools were trooping funnels (*Clitocybe geotropa*), cohabiting with the rodents which appeared to have been nibbling them.

Delicate metallic, blue-grey umbrellas proved to be pleated inkcaps (*Coprinus plicatilis*). The paper-thin top expanded from a peaky elfin cap to an elfin porridge bowl, flat with uprolled margin and full of rain water, which remained in situ, even when tilted. There are fifty seven species of *Psathyrella*, so ours may or may not have been the brown brittlestem (*Psathyrella campanulata*). The little yellow bonnet toadstool by the seasonal eastern pond was one of the many *Mycenas*.

MARY E. GILLHAM