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CARDIFF NATURALISTS' SOCIETY

Founded 1867

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PRESIDENTIAL RAMBLINGS - NOVEMBER 2008

Advances in our attempts to understand aspects of the natural world will never cease to amaze; I was reading in the Times only very recently of attempts to learn more about the health of whales. It was reported that scientists from the Royal Zoological Society (of London) in collaboration with the National Polytechnic University of Mexico, were capturing the breath of both blue and sperm whales (other species to be sampled later in the programme) using remotely controlled helicopters.

The helicopters are fitted with sterilized Petri dishes which "capture" the expelled moisture from the cetation's blow hole and the resulting analysis can give a remarkable insight into the whale's health. It must be an interesting exercise predicting where, after possibly 40 minutes, the pod of whales will surface and at the same time, controlling a toy helicopter probably in strong gusty winds at the correct bearing and height to coincide with this.

Whale breath can have a peculiarly disgusting smell which no doubt adds to the joy of this pioneering activity. I would imagine that skills such as those possessed by the field research workers would be in great demand by the military at this time !! I met one or two members of the Society at the National Museum a few days ago for a regional meeting of the Conchological Society of Great Britain and Ireland. We received some interesting lectures and I will never again view the gardeners' worst enemy in quite the same light !

As winter approaches I am unable to recall a wetter approach to the cold season, normally well drained fields in my locality have been almost waterlogged and I am daily traipsing through muddy pastures from which stock has only just, reluctantly, been withdrawn. This must have effects on the local flora and fauna, whilst the temperature is mild, the continued unseasonable dampness must have a deleterious effect on many native species. Celandines have been in full vibrant flower in our locality since early November. I have noticed in recent days the return of many absent friends to our bird table.

Christmas is coming up very quickly and I would like to remind

everybody that our regular “Christmas Special” meeting will be held on Tuesday December 9th where in addition to the traditional mouthwatering Xmas fare provided by the participants we hope to present a short selection of Member’s slides.

Hope to see you there !

Roger Milton

Obituary

Professor Ursula Henriques

Sadly Dr. Ursula Henriques, one of our longest standing members, passed away during the last week of November, 2008, in her ninety second year. A historian by calling, in the University of Wales in Cardiff, she was a natural history lover too, and a faithful attender at Cardiff Naturalists' Society lectures and field trips from the early 1960s.

She had a great, and sometimes caustic, sense of humour, occasionally expressed in witty little rhymes, these at variance with her learned historical treatises which were highly regarded. In addition, she was willing to compose letters pointing out the error of their ways to any in authority who fell short of expectations in backing some worthy cause. She will be remembered as a good companion 'in the field' and an ardent cat lover.

Unable to attend meetings during her last few years, she will still be missed by those who knew her.

Mary E. Gillham

INDOOR MEETINGS SPRING 2009

Our new year opens on Monday 12th January with a visit from Dr Dan Forman of Swansea University who will talk on a special interest of his in Otter Ecology and Behaviour. We hope he can confirm that there is indeed a recovery taking place in the population of otters in South Wales.

Wednesday 21st January brings our annual Members' evening, with a selection of offerings by our members illustrating their wildlife experiences. As usual we may rely on Graham to co-ordinate contributions. Please let him know if you are willing to present a short talk (no more than seven minutes).

We can expect something special on Monday 9th February when Professor Anthony Campbell, Professor in Medical Biochemistry at Cardiff University, and a Director of the Darwin Centre, will share his interest in Charles Darwin in this the naturalist's centenary year.

Something of major interest to the geologists and to all of us will be the visit on Wednesday 25th February by Adrian Humpage of the British Geological Survey to tell us something of the work of developing a Geotourism structure across Wales.

Graham Duff who is well known to all of us has promised to share his experiences from several visits he and Margaret have made over the years to the Gambia in West Africa. His talk will be on Tuesday 10th March when we can look forward to seeing superb photographs of the region.

Our final meeting of the season on Thursday 19th March has now been confirmed. Richard May, Ecologist with the Vale of Glamorgan Council, has a talk of interest to many of us on Gardening for Wildlife.

Margaret Leishman, Indoor Meetings Secretary.

Field Meetings January to April 2009

Sun January 11th

Start time 9am

Cardiff Birdwatch

Packed lunch

This regular event led by Rob and Linda Nottage starts with a stroll around Roath Park and then moves on to other sites in the Cardiff area. Meet at Wild Gardens Road at the north end of Roath Park.

Sat January 31st

Start time 10am

Building stones of Llandaff

Steve Howe of the National Museum of Wales will be guiding us around Llandaff looking at the different types of building stone that have been used in the past and how these link in to the local geology. We shall be finished by lunchtime. Meet at the preaching cross on Cathedral Green, Llandaff. There is car parking around the Green or in the public car park off High Street.

Sun February 8th

Start time 10am

East Aberthaw Survey

Packed lunch (see below)

Cardiff Naturalists' Society plans to produce a leaflet on wildlife walks and the first one will cover the area around East Aberthaw. On this first visit we aim to look at the history, geology, bird and marine life with a later visit in the summer to check out wildflowers, insects and trees. Meet at the car park in East Aberthaw opposite the Blue Anchor Inn. We should be finished in 2-3 hours so only bring a packed lunch if you intend to stay longer.

Saturday April 18th

Start time 10am

Craig Cerrig Gleisiad

Packed lunch

A walk around this notable nature reserve in the Brecon Beacons in the company of Jon Wohlgemuth, Reserves Manager CCW. The highlight should be seeing Purple Saxifrage, an Arctic plant at its southernmost location in Britain but the reserve is also home to Raven, Peregrine and Ring Ouzel. Access to the Purple Saxifrage may well be over uneven

ground and with steep gradients so would not be suitable for those with mobility problems. Meet at the Craig Cerrig Gleisiad lay-by on the left of the A 470 between Storey Arms and Libanus at SN 971222.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

The Introduction to Grasses course will now be held on Sunday 5th July, 2009. This event is bookable and places will be limited.

The Invertebrate day with Ray Barnett of Bristol Museum will be on Sunday 19th July, 2009.

The Rockpool Ramble with Moreton Jenkins will be on Saturday 22nd August, 2009, not Sunday as shown on the yellow card.

FIELD TRIP TO PENTWYN FARM AND CROES ROBERT WOOD Saturday, July 26th

It was on one of 2008's few decent summer days when we assembled at



View from Pentwyn Meadows

Pentwyn Farm near Monmouth. In the care of Gwent Wildlife Trust this farm covers 27 acres and consists mainly of unimproved grassland meadows which constitute an SSSI and associated hedgerows. The site boasts fine views over the Wye Valley AONB and from the nearby Trellech Ridge both the Black Mountains and Central Brecon Beacons can be seen.

Our guide for the day was Janice Kinchington from GWT and she described some of the plants we would have seen on the meadows earlier in the year including Early Purple Orchid, *Orchis mascula*, and Cowslip, *Primula veris*, followed by Green-winged, *Orchis morio*, Greater Butterfly, *Platanthera*



Eyebright



Birch Gall

chlorantha and Common Spotted, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* orchids along with Common Twayblade, *Listera ovata*. For us, the meadows showed up large quantities of Yellow Rattle, *Rhinanthus minor* and Knapweed species along with a good selection of grass species supporting, in turn, a wide variety of insects. Eyebright, *Euphrasia nemorosa* was abundant but there were also less obvious items such as the leaf gall on Birch.



Pentwyn Orchard

A small orchard completed the morning tour, planted with some traditional fruit trees and including a Medlar which can be found closer to home and fruiting well most years in



Medlar

Roath Park. The Medlar originated in Persia and was grown by both ancient Greeks and Romans and it may have been the latter who introduced it to Britain where it was popular from mediaeval times through to the Victorian era. The fruit is acidic and hard so was left on the tree until the first frosts 'bletted' it, that is, speeded up



Lunch at the Barn

the process of decay and fermentation. Other fruits that were bletted included the Wild Service Tree discussed in Issue 76 of the Newsletter. Medlars were then used to make jellies and wine along with a Medlar version of Lemon Curd. There were also 26 varieties of Apple from Carlisle Codlins to Peasgood Nonsuch, 2 varieties of Perry Pear, a Plum and a Walnut. Lunch was taken in the tastefully converted old barn, known to date

back to around 1400 and close by was an ancient well.



Hazelnut gnawed by Dormouse



Dormouse nest material

Once fed and watered we headed on with Jan to Croes Robert Wood, an ancient semi-natural woodland with extensive areas of hazel coppice. The wood contains three essential ingredients; hazel, honeysuckle and bramble – essential that is for the beast that we were hunting, *Muscardinus avellanarius*. Whilst the woodland is good for a wide variety of wildlife, including butterflies such as White-letter Hairstreak, *Strymonidia walbum*, Silver-washed Fritillary, *Argynnis paphia* and White Admiral, *Ladoga Camilla*, it was our quarry that we were intent on tracking down and it was not long before

we found evidence of its presence – the distinctive toothmarks on a hazelnut as seen in the photo. A licence is needed to handle these denizens so Jan went off to



Dormouse



Beesnest after Badger invasion

inspect their lairs whilst we waited on the path. The first box was empty but the second produced the creature that reduced the hard-bitten naturalists present to a chorus of ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’. Once also known as The Sleeper, our Dormouse was quite alert and unfazed by all the attention. Jan pointed out the dried shreds of Honeysuckle lining the nest box.



Charcoal Burning area

From there we wandered on through the woods, Jan pointing out a bees nest which had been excavated by badgers, some of the bees still flying in and out of the hole more from habit than with any sense of purpose. Then on to the charcoal-burning area where wood from the woodland is converted into charcoal in large metal containers and sold in local shops and garages. You can help

the work of the Trust by purchasing their charcoal which you will see packaged up with GWT labelling and logo. Then back to the cars at the end of an excellent day of varied wildlife-watching with thanks to the Gwent Wildlife Trust and Jan in particular.



The Virtuous Well

To round off the day some members visited the nearby village of Trellech which has much of interest in itself. The name of the village literally means ‘three stones’ and this derives from Harold’s Stones, three Bronze Age standing stones made of pudding stone. Then there is Tump Turret, Norman remains of what might have been a castle and finally The Virtuous Well, once

known as St. Anne’s Well. Unlike many wells in South Wales which are at best neglected and at worst depositaries for litter, the Virtuous Well is immaculate and still used for its curative properties, evidenced by the small but personal offerings in niches around the well and the many recent strips of cloth traditionally hung from the surrounding trees.

Bruce McDonald
Photographs by Bruce McDonald

Field Trip to Forest of Dean

Sunday October 19th



Tricia's Rabbit

Where else could you find out how to clear your head of lice naturally, sing along with Laurel and Hardy and share a delicacy of the Pehuenche Indians? Why, with Tony Titchen of course in the company of whom an innocuous stroll through the woods becomes a journey of discovery. We have had some unusual guests on Cardiff Naturalists outings and our celebrity on this occasion was a rabbit, courtesy of Tricia.

We met at the Cyril Hart Arboretum in the Forest of Dean, close to the Speech House. Cyril Hart was a local forester and historian and the arboretum has a varied collection of some 400 trees some grown on from the collections of the plant-hunter, E H Wilson. Starting with a handsome specimen of Wellingtonia or Giant Sequoia, *Sequoiadendron giganteum* at well over 100 foot, Tony then pointed out a Cilician Fir, *Abies cilicica* which is a UK champion, i.e. the biggest in Britain. Next some Latin as Tony explained how it often provides descriptive aspects of a tree's appearance such as *Macrophylla*, 'with large leaves' and '*campanulata*', bell-shaped.



In the Arboretum

Walking up to some fine examples of the Monkey Puzzle tree, *Araucaria araucana*, we noticed that a female tree was carrying large cones and the ground beneath was covered with the nuts. These made up the staple diet of the Pehuenche Indians of central Chile and are supposedly best eaten



Monkey Puzzle seed

roasted. A more general term for these people is the Arauco Indians, hence the Latin name of the tree. The tree was first introduced to Britain by the Scottish botanist, Archibald Menzies, who was served some seeds in a dessert by the Governor of Chile. Pocketing some seeds, Menzies managed to germinate them and had five healthy plants by the time he returned back to England. Interestingly, pre-Ice Age pollen records show that they were once native to the British Isles.

Passing some Lawsons Cypresses, *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana*, growing next to some Leylandii, *Cupressocyparis leylandii*, Tony pointed out that the distinctive droop on the leaders of the Lawsons was a useful distinguishing feature between the two. It also became clear why, after finding the Earth Star under Monterey Cypress, *Cupressus macrocarpa* (macrocarpa = large-fruited) on our previous field trip to Bute Park we were told to look out for it under Leylandii as the Monterey is one of the parents of the hybrid Leylandii.



Scots Pine avenue

Next we came to an avenue of Scots Pine, *Pinus sylvestris*. These were the variant ‘*scotica*’, found naturally in the Scottish highlands where the top of the tree has a rounded appearance but less common than the standard European version. Alongside was a Red Oak,

Quercus rubra,

and we noted that the leaf



Red Oak leaf

vein tends to continue through the end of the leaf, a useful clue for identification. Spindle, *Euonymous europaeus*, was common in the understorey, the straight and hard twigs being used for skewers and spindles. Another name for this was Lousewood, stemming from the use of the baked and powdered berries to remove lice from the hair of children.



Pinus pungens cone

We were then shown a pine cone of *Pinus pungens*, which has a number of common names, the Table Mountain Pine, Mountain Pine or Hickory Pine. The cone is distinguished by projecting sharp spines and the tree is the 'Lonesome Pine' which Laurel and Hardy sang about in the film 'Way out West':

*On the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia
On the Trail of the Lonesome Pine*

From the Arboretum we moved on to Symonds Yat to gaze down on the Peregrines, to note the numbers of Wild Service Trees, *Sorbus torminalis*, and to see the seed-head remains of the uncommon Birds Nest Orchid, *Neottia nidus-avis*. The weather remained dry if somewhat chilly on what had been a most informative and varied day.

Bruce McDonald
Photographs by Bruce McDonald



Birds Nest Orchid

Field Trip to Brandon Marsh Nature Reserve

Sunday, 28th September



Guelder Rose at Brandon
Marsh

From the 19th century when this was enclosed farmland, the area was radically altered first by coal mining at nearby Binley Colliery and then sand and gravel extraction which continued until 1989. The resulting shallow wetlands are particularly attractive to wildlife and include Warwickshire's largest reedbed.

This was a first visit for most of us to the Brandon Marsh Reserve, a joint trip with the RSPB. The 200 acre nature reserve is near the village of Brandon and in the care of the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, with 228 acres of pools, open water, reed beds and grassland. The wildlife tally is impressive with 220 bird species recorded and 60 of these nesting, 460 plant species, 508 fungi species and insects in excess of 1000 species. Good facilities including shop and café made it an excellent base for the day and with reasonable weather everyone found something of interest.



View across East Marsh Pool



What is this bird?

Leaving the Visitor Centre we headed past Goose Pool, surrounded by Lombardy Poplars with bat boxes

occupied mainly by Pipistrelles. Swallow Pool revealed a good number of Coot, Moorhen and Mallard but Tufted Duck were also in evidence, diving energetically. The main area of open water is East Marsh Pool where a number of hides provided fine views of the resident bird population. A large number of Lapwing were stationary, perfectly aligned and facing into the prevailing wind until a squabble would break out and most would take to the air to sort out their differences before returning to earth. Gadwall, Teal and Cormorant were there in smaller numbers along with several Snipe, Widgeon and some Black-tailed Godwit. Meanwhile Siskin pottered about the Alders surrounding the pools.



Small Copper

But there was plenty to see of other wildlife with Common Darters, *Sympetrum striolatum*, in tandem having a final fling of the season whilst larger Hawkers patrolled the waterways. A few butterflies were on the wing including the Small Copper, *Lycaena phlaeas*. There was still a surprising range of flora

about with the yellows of Ragwort, *Senecio jacobaea*, Mullein sp.,

Tutsan, *Hypericum androsaemum* and Nipplewort, *Lapsana communis*, contrasting with the reds of Storksbill, *Erodium cicutarium*, Scarlet Pimpernel, *Anagallis arvensis*, Red Bartsia, *Odontites vernus*, Common Centaury, *Centaurium erythraea*, and the diminutive Field Madder, *Sherardia arvensis*. White Deadnettle, *Lamium album* was ubiquitous and Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris* loitered diffidently in the background. An unobtrusive plant, more common in the east of the country was Amaranth, *Amaranthus retroflexus* also known as Pigweed and a small clump of Trailing St Johns Wort, *Hypericum humifusum* added interest to the potpourri.



Tutsan,



Amaranth,



Creeping St John's Wort

Early Autumn is a good time to look out for galls. These are growths, mainly found on plants but also on fungi, which can be shaped very unusually and be highly colourful. The one that most people will have encountered is the Oak Apple although these are actually likely to be Marble Galls. The cause of the growth is usually a mite or insect but other causes are viruses, bacteria, fungi or nematodes. These interfere with the normal growth pattern of the plant to create the gall and provide food for whatever might be inside the gall. Identification of many of the galls can be relatively straightforward because of their distinctive shape and colouring and the fact that they are often specific to individual plants although with the hundreds of types of gall to be found in Britain some will prove difficult to pin down.



Artichoke Gall



Cherry Gall



Knopper Gall

quercusfolii, along with the Artichoke Gall, *Andricus fecundator*, Knopper Gall, *Andricus quercusalicis* and The Silk Button Gall, *Neuroterus numismalis*. The Knopper Gall, which can be relied on comprehensively to infest the Oak near the glasshouse in Roath Park, has two phases in its life cycle needing the presence of both

Pedunculate Oak, *Quercus robur* and Turkey Oak, *Quercus cerris*, to complete it. ‘Knopper’ derives from ‘knop’, a protuberance like a knob, tassel or stud. Close by were a few examples of *Diplolepis rosae* more commonly known as the Bedeguar Gall or Robins Pincushion which can frequently be found on wild roses with their colourful and striking

And so back to Brandon Marsh where galls were to be found in abundance. Oaks are a good host to start with as they support many different types which can be found on roots, trunks, branches, twigs, buds, leaves, catkins and acorns. One tree by the Swallow Pool displayed the colourful Cherry Gall, *Cynips*



Silk Button Gall



Dasineura on Meadowsweet



Dasineura species on Meadowsweet

appearance. Even Meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria*, was sporting various buttons, swellings and conical projections of different *Dasineura* species.

A light shower towards the end of the day encouraged us to sample the delights of the café and then, back to Cardiff. And, finally, for those still struggling to identify the upended duck at the beginning, here is the Shoveller in full view.



Shoveler

Bruce McDonald

Photos by Bruce McDonald

The Society for the History of Natural History (SHNH) is holding a two day meeting on the 27/28th March 2009 at the National Museum Wales entitled *Darwin's Legacy: exploring diversity and evolution in the history of field biology*.

Members of the Cardiff Naturalists' Society have been invited.

For further information please contact

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Dr Mary Gillham has let me know she is almost certain the mystery Larva on the last page of September's Newsletter is that of a Glow-worm - though some times the lateral spotting is more marked on those.

Mary also mentioned that a Dormouse has been found in the Howardian Reserve.

COPY FOR THE MARCH NEWSLETTER
BY 15TH FEBRUARY PLEASE Ed

Following a recent Committee Meeting and in preparation for the next year's Programme of Events it was decided to seek the views of Members as to the content and timings of forthcoming events organised by the Society.

If you have any strong views on the type of events (for both Outdoor and Indoor Meetings) which you would like to see in our Programme for 2009/10, it would be helpful if you could communicate your suggestions to any member of the Committee.

We attempt to arrange our Indoor Meetings on different evenings throughout the week so as to reduce regular conflicts with Members' other routine activities (evening classes and other Societies etc) to a minimum.

Outdoor Meetings tend to be held over the weekends when it is felt most Members are least busy.

Any suggestions would be most welcome.