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Cover photo Harris Hawk by Bruce McDonald

PRESIDENTIAL RAMBLINGS - February 2009

Having just returned from the depths of the northern Hungarian winter where the temperatures frequently dropped below -20C it was pleasant to return to the damp, wet climate of South Wales. It was fascinating whilst trekking in the mountains of Austria and the hills of Hungary to see the tracks in the deep snow of birds and beasts and try to imagine which creatures made them and what they were doing at the time. Not infrequently signs of struggles could be seen leaving their indelible marks deep into the crisp pristine whiteness. Some sites bore the unmistakable tell tale signs of death; fur, feathers and blood often stained the forest floor. I followed one set of bloodied tracks deep into the forest and after a careful, stealthy approach of several hundred tortuous metres came upon a scene of the kill. The forest floor for a spread of some ten metres in diameter was dashed with blood and gore. A large animal at least the size of a mature wild boar or very large deer had been torn apart, probably the previous evening. Large and small tracks leading to and from the scene indicated a feeding frenzy with prized blooded morsels being dragged to all points of the compass. All that was left were a few frozen remains; presumably the less desirable parts, awaiting the Spring thaw and subsequent "distribution". This was a grim reminder of the savagery of nature. A judicious and stealthy exit from the scene was thought prudent.

I am always amazed at the pace of "new discoveries" being made; it is said that we know more about what is on the surface of the moon than we do about the oceans of our planet. Recently a trawl of the Tonga Trench (Southern Pacific) revealed a rare brownsnout spookfish which was collected for scientific examination. First

discovered over a hundred years ago but seldom seen, it was found to be the only known backboned creature to have evolved mirrors rather than lenses to get images into focus. Effectively the fish has four eyes; upward (normal eyes) and downward (mirrored). The downward eyes appear to be more effective at operating at depth and reflect more light, essential when you are living in virtual darkness at a depth of 800m.

Spring is, hopefully, on its way and I am looking forward to getting out and about locally and seeing you all on one of our next few events.

Roger Milton

Field Meetings April to June 2009

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.

Saturday May 16th
Start time 10am

Around Margam
Full day

The original intention of this field trip had been to re-enact a field trip taken by Cardiff Naturalists Society in late Victorian times. Unfortunately (were they made of sterner stuff?) they walked over 19 miles, inspected numerous archaeological sites and had a civic reception

en route. We shall take a more modest option from Margam Park with an 8 mile stroll around Mynydd Margam and over to Langynwydd. Start from Margam Park car park, signposted from A 48 and at SS 801860.

Anyone interested in doing the full 19 mile version should contact Bruce – if there is sufficient interest we shall walk it during the summer.

Sunday June 7th

Start time 10am

East Aberthaw walk

Half or full day (packed lunch)

Part 2 of our East Aberthaw programme for 2009 started as a survey but has now become a public walk which will be advertised as part of Biodiversity week for the Vale of Glamorgan. We shall probably use the morning to cover the public walk and then venture further afield in the afternoon if the weather is favourable. Meet at the car park in East Aberthaw opposite the Blue Anchor Inn.

Sunday June 14th

Start time 10am

Crumlyn Burrows

Full day

Looking at this section of sand dune and coast with Charles Hipkins of Swansea University. More on this field trip in the next issue of the newsletter or contact Bruce for further detail. Starting place has yet to be decided as the road system has changed with the Amazon site development.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Cardiff Nats (by popular demand) will be returning to the Coryton roundabout for a public walk to look at the orchids and other plants growing on the roundabout. The date is Thursday 11th June, starting point being Longwood Drive just past the Asda entrance. We start at 7pm. The walk will be advertised as part of Biodiversity Week.

The Introduction to Grasses course will now be held on Sunday 5th July, 2009. This event is bookable and places will be limited. There will be a charge of £5 for members of the Cardiff Naturalists' Society; £10 for non-members.

Cardiff Nats is again leading a public walk around Hailey Park, this year on Thursday 23rd July at 6.30pm. Meeting place will be the car park on the park at the top of Radyr Road. More details in next newsletter.

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.

Also sometime in August there will be an evening stroll in Tremorfa on waste ground which in 2008 had good numbers of Autumn Ladies Tresses.

FIELD TRIP TO SHAPWICK HEATH AND HAM WALL
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 30th 2008

Our joint trip with the RSPB took us to an area collectively known as the Avalon Marshes in Somerset. With the brooding presence of Glastonbury Tor not far away, this area was once marshes, lakes and meres but has been inhabited since Neolithic times as settlers created small communities on isolated islands. Today's landscape was created at the end of the 18th century as ditches were dug to create enclosures and clay spread on the peaty soil along with silt from the rhynes (pronounced 'reens'). The field patterns have continued in some places to this day whereas other parts have been altered by extensive peat extraction.



Dusk at Ham Wall as the Starlings roost

The habitats are very varied with grazing marsh, wet woodland and fen matched by reedbed and open water. The area is a stronghold of the otter and some of us were fortunate enough to glimpse one in open water. We started at Shapwick

Heath, a National Nature Reserve in the care of English Nature which is

also the site of the Sweet Track, the oldest man-made routeway in Britain. This elevated footpath is some 6,000 years old and ran for 2 kilometres across the swamps using poles of Oak, Ash and Lime. And why was it so called? Its rediscovery in 1970 was by a peat worker, Ray Sweet.

Our party soon split up to explore the many paths and bird hides scattered over the area and a good selection of birds revealed themselves as the list below indicates. From there a short walk brought us to Ham



Wall, another National Nature Reserve, this time in the care of the RSPB and it is here that many gather to see the famous starling roost. It was bitterly cold as we waited for the performance to begin but we were not disappointed as flocks of starlings started arriving from different directions and putting on their spectacular acrobatic displays,

Starlings arriving in their thousands inhibited possibly only by the presence of several raptors.

Bruce McDonald

Birds seen at Shapwick Heath and Ham Wall

List provided by Marie Makepeace

- | | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| Blackbird | Black-headed Gull | Blue Tit |
| Buzzard | Canada Goose | Carrion Crow |
| Cetti's Warbler | Chaffinch | Coot |
| Cormorant | Dunnock | Gadwall |
| Goldcrest | Great Spotted Woodpecker | Great Tit |
| Grey Heron | Hen Harrier | Little Egret |
| Long-tailed Tit | Mallard | Moorhen |
| Mute Swan | Pochard | Redpoll |
| Redwing | Robin | Shelduck |
| Shoveler | Siskin | Snipe |
| Sparrowhawk | Starling | Stonechat |
| Teal | Tufted Duck | Widgeon |
| Woodpigeon | | |

FIELD TRIP TO ROATH PARK AND FOREST FARM SUNDAY, JANUARY 11th 2009

Leader – Jeff Curtis



Roath Pake lake

Now established as an annual event, our bird watch started at Roath Park with a good turn-out including members from RSPB and Wildlife Trust groups. Jeff Curtis was standing in for Rob and Linda Nottage who had family commitments and the weather was fair but cold. Very cold conditions earlier in the week had left parts of the lake still frozen and the

Mute Swans in particular were having the greatest difficulty in maintaining their dignity and equilibrium. As usual, the gulls were there in abundance with the main challenge being spotting the odd Common Gull.

After circumnavigating Roath Lake we headed into the Wild Gardens area. At first, little appeared to be around but soon there were sightings of Nuthatches working their way down the trees as Treecreepers headed up. Magpies scolded raucously in the background. A total of 31 species rounded off our ramble around Roath Park whereupon we headed on to Forest Farm for the second phase.



Struggling on the lake

With significant numbers of walkers (and dogs) on the canal towpath we had little expectation of sighting many birds but technology came to our rescue. Tony Messinger had brought his recording of Water Rails calling and started to play these, directing the sound into the wetland area. We did not have to wait long for a response and our best estimate was that there were at least 8 individuals calling in the next hour. The pattern was consistent. After the recording was played there would be a pause of 15 to 20 seconds before the resident birds would start responding. Some worked their way towards us through the vegetation and we had good

sightings of a couple of them. Also, a Snipe was spotted which then uncharacteristically ran away – as Jeff observed, you will normally see Snipe standing still or flying but seldom running.

As we walked along the paths there was a consistent stream of sightings of different species with Goldcrest very much in evidence, a quick flash of Kingfisher along the canal and Siskin in amongst the Alders. The bird hide also proved fruitful with Teal and Mallard on the water, a Water Rail wandering around the perimeter, Reed Buntings perching in the reeds and the grassy area covered in assorted finches, not least a resplendent Bullfinch. A Green Woodpecker was calling but remained



Goosander Territory

invisible whilst a Great Spotted Woodpecker put in a brief cameo appearance. A Buzzard and a Sparrowhawk ensured that raptors were not under-recorded.

Finally, on to the River Taff which had Cormorants but failed to offer up any Dippers although compensation came in the form of

Goosanders, paddling steadily in the direction of Castell Coch. Our thanks to Jeff and Tony for making it such a successful day with a total species count of 54.

Bruce McDonald

Photos by Bruce McDonald

Bird List supplied by Tony Messinger

Roath Park Species

Mallard, Black Swan, Pochard, Coot, Black-headed Gull, Robin, Feral Pigeon, Woodpigeon, Greylag Geese, Redwing, Mute Swan, Shoveller, Tufted Duck, Little Grebe, Canada Geese, Moorhen, Cormorant, Magpie, Common Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Nuthatch, Jay, Grey Wagtail, Crow, Goldcrest, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Blackbird, Long-tailed Tit, Treecreeper.

Forest Farm Species

Magpie, Robin, Great Tit, Crow, Blackbird, Mallard, Jay, Goldcrest, Woodpigeon, Chaffinch, Water Rail, Snipe, Greenfinch, Long-tailed Tit, Dunnock, Heron, Moorhen, Starlings, Nuthatch, Siskin, Coal Tit, Reed Bunting, Kingfisher, Teal, Bullfinch, Little Grebe, Song Thrush, Goldfinch, Sparrowhawk, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Grey Wagtail, Treecreeper, Sparrow, Green Woodpecker, Pied Wagtail, Buzzard, Black-headed Gull, Lesser Blackbacked Gull, Goosander, Cormorant.

WEATHER REPORT 2008

MONTH	MEAN TEMPERATURE			RAINFALL		BAROMETER	
	09.00GMT	MAX	MIN	TOTAL		RAIN-DAYS	MILLI-BARS
	°C	°C	°C	INCHES	MM	0.1"OR MORE	
JANUARY	5.6	8.4	3.7	8.74	221.5	25	1009
FEBURARY	4.0	9.0	2.0	2.29	57.0	10	1020
MARCH	6.4	10.0	3.6	5.26	133.0	18	1006
APRIL	8.9	13.2	5.0	3.49	84.0	21	1008
MAY	14.1	19.4	10.2	4.36	110.5	15	1015
JUNE	16.4	21.0	11.2	3.73	93.5	10	1019
JULY	16.8	21.6	12.2	5.69	143.5	14	1013
AUGUST	16.2	20.1	13.0	9.97	252.5	22	1010
SEPTEMBER	13.1	17.4	10.2	9.27	234.0	14	1015
OCTOBER	9.3	13.6	5.8	5.97	152.0	21	1012
NOVEMBER	7.3	10.2	4.9	4.27	106.0	16	1012
DECEMBER	2.0	6.0	-0.6	3.11	76.5	15	1011
AVE'/TOTAL	10.0	14.2	6.8	66.15	1664.0	201	1012

Rain was the predominant feature in January and set the pattern for much of the remainder of the year. In the usually drier months of June to September more than 28.5" of rain was recorded. Overall it was the third wettest year since I began my readings in 1992 and on average it was the coolest year since that time.

After a dry start nearly an inch of rain fell on 4th January and every day thereafter was wet until the 23rd with a total of over 8" of rain by that day. During a period of continuous rain on the 14th and 15th amounting to 2.23"

barometric pressure dropped to 976 millibars but recovered to reach 1032 millibars during a dry spell after the 23rd. February was a more settled month with a continuous dry spell from the 7th to the 19th. During this period frost was recorded on eight occasions. An unusual recording on 15th March was a barometric pressure of 958 millibars, the lowest I have recorded. A little further afield a reading of 940 millibars was taken on Rockall. Later in the month it was much colder with strong winds and snow showers but milder weather returned during the last week.

During a calm, warm day on 3rd April the temperature reached 18°C. However, the rain soon returned, mostly in small amounts and including hail and snow showers towards the end of the first week. Temperatures rapidly improved in May and 26.5°C was recorded on the 11th. From the middle of the month cooler conditions returned and there was rain most days of the final week. There is not a great deal I can report about June having spent two weeks on Lake Garda in temperatures up to 35°C. Suffice to say that it was much cooler at home with temperatures failing to get above 20°C on several days and enough rain to make it the fourth wettest June since 1992.

Wet, wet, wet is the best way to describe the months of July to September with nearly 25" of rain and 50 rain days. A dry spell towards the end of July produced a run of warm days and the highest temperature of the year, at 28.5°C, was recorded on 28th. August was the wettest month of the year with a total rainfall of 9.97" and September was not far behind with 9.27".

There was less rain in total in October but there were twenty-one days when some rain was recorded. Colder weather came in towards the end of the month and temperatures dropped to 1.0°C on two of the last five nights and to 0.0°C on the other three. November was generally mild and in spite of continuing rainfall there was a good number of fine or mainly fine days. The outcome was a brilliant display of autumn colours around the countryside. An even more spectacular event occurred on 2nd December when the new moon appeared to be resting on the planet Venus with Jupiter looking on. The year ended with cold and frosty conditions and minimum temperatures at or below freezing for most of the month. On the night of 9th December the temperature dropped to

-5°C. The cold weather was general throughout the country and the Met Office reported that the country had experienced its coldest start to the winter for more than 30 years.

To summarise:-

The lowest pressure at 0900 GMT was 958 millibars on 10th March and the highest was 1038 on 16th February. Gales were noted on 18th January and 10th, 11th and 12th March. Thunder was heard on 10th May, 2nd, 24th and 28th July, 11th August and 12th September. There was rainfall in excess of 1" on 14th January, 15th March, 9th July, 2nd and 9th August, 1st, 3rd and 5th September and 4th and 29th October.

Snow fell on 2nd February and 22nd March and there was frost on 5th January, 1st, 9th and 10th, 12th and 13th, 16th – 19th and 24th February, 5th March, 7th and 15th April, 29th October and 1st – 3rd, 5th and 6th, 8th, 10th and 11th, 14th, 15th and 31st December.

STAN JONES

EAST ABERTHAW SURVEY
Sunday February 8th 2009



Lime Kiln Aberthaw

Kilderkins, little thieves and Audubon's close friend were all topics to intrigue us on our preliminary wander around East Aberthaw. From the car park we headed left and then left again, down under the railway bridge before heading right along a narrow track assumed to have been the course of an old railway. With little out of the ordinary other than an isolated clump of Gooseberry, we reached

the remains of a quarry which features a good selection of orchids in

Summer but offered only limited interest on this cool February day. Rob and Linda Nottage showed us a pool they had discovered with a path to it newly hacked through the undergrowth and from there we emerged opposite the massive ash tip of Aberthaw power station. Although Song



LBJ alert

Thrushes were not seen there was plenty of evidence of their presence with piles of snail shells around several ‘anvils’.

Much of what was once part of the village has disappeared but Aberthaw was an important port with the road running from Culverhouse Cross and called the Port Road referring to the port of Aberthaw, not Barry. A lively export trade operated from this and other local

ports including wool, animals, grain, coal, lead and butter with sugar, salt, pottery and wine coming back on the return journey. Butter was often measured in kilderkins, around half a barrel or two firkins or, possibly more meaningful, 18 gallons, kilderkin being Dutch for a small cask. It is



Coot on ice

also believed that the bigger ships sailing out of Aberthaw could have been involved in the slave trade as they brought goods back from the West Indies.

Now heading towards the sea on a path parallel to the first, the remains of summer orchids could be seen, particularly on the side of the ash tip. But the main area of interest was the brackish pools, one of only two saline lagoons in Wales. 7 Little Grebe were

counted along with other wildfowl. Tantalising glimpses of Snipe on one of the islands held our attention while Buzzards and Kestrels wheeled and hovered overhead. Part of the pool was still frozen which considerably reduced the territorial posturing abilities of the Coots.

Somewhat surprising were the activities of some of the few people about which were more appropriate to times-gone-by than the twenty-first century. Not one, but two, men were exercising Harris Hawks, “see cover

photo Ed.” so-called by the great Audubon after his close friend Edward Harris. A group of men and boys hunted rabbits with a mixed pack of Lurchers and Jack Russels and another was sending a ferret down the rabbit holes to flush them out. The word ferret derives from the Latin, Furritus, meaning ‘little thief’ supposedly because of its alleged habit of storing away small items.

Near the seawall a Stonechat perched on prominent scraps of vegetation and Ringed Plover were visible on the beach. In the distance, just offshore, what might have been Wigeon bobbed about in the surf although they were too far distant to be positively identified. A chill wind off the sea did not encourage us to loiter so we worked our way round to the limekilns.



Lime Kiln Interior

The Aberthaw Pebble Limekilns were opened on the 22nd December, 1888. The building consisted originally of two vertical potdraw kilns with a capacity of 300 tons each and with a total output of 40 tons of burnt lime per day. The main structure is of local limestone with firebricks lining the kilns. To the right of the building as you face it was a tramway ramp which allowed

pebbles, measuring 3 - 4 inches in diameter, to be conveyed to the top of the building and then into the kilns. The burnt lime was conveyed to a Blake's stone-breaker which reduced the lime to walnut-sized pieces and this was followed by pulverisation by millstone to a fine powder which was then bagged. Two more pot kilns were added later to the north of the building. The central arched passageway was where the burnt lime was removed before crushing and the smaller archways led to a gallery surrounding each kiln.

A tramway approached from the Rhoose direction and passed either side of the winch house which was situated just to the right of the building. Smeaton is reported to have used Aberthaw limestone in the construction of the Eddystone lighthouse but whilst he tested the limestone for suitability and found it effective, he actually used limestone from Watchet. The works closed in 1926 when the Aberthaw cement works started large-scale production of lime.

A useful first visit to East Aberthaw – we return in June when the orchids should be in full bloom.

Birds seen.

Little Grebe,	Mute Swan,	Shelduck,	Wigeon,
Gadwall,	Mallard,	Buzzard,	Kestrel,
Moorhen,	Coot,	Ringed Plover,	Snipe,
Black-headed Gull,	Herring Gull,	Great Black-backed Gull,	
Feral Pigeon,	Woodpigeon,	Collared Dove	Pied Wagtail,
Duncock,	Robin,	Stonechat,	Blackbird,
Song Thrush,	Coal Tit,	Blue Tit,	Magpie,
Crow,	House Sparrow,	Chaffinch,	Greenfinch,
Harris Hawk.			

Bruce McDonald

Photos by Bruce McDonald

Bird list provided by Marie Makepeace

Once again we are grateful to Bruce for his contributions to the newsletter without Bruce we would have difficulty in filling the newsletter. We are pleased also to have our annual weather report from Stan, and the regular presidents comments. Whilst I'm expressing our gratitude it would not go amiss to thank Margaret Leishman who regularly proof reads the newsletter. We would love to see articles from other members or readers on any related subject to give your newsletter more variety.

Copy for the June Newsletter by May 17th please

Ed

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