CARDIFF NATURALISTS' SOCIETY

Founded 1867

NEWSLETTER NO.59

SEPTEMBER 2003

PRESIDENT: Dr. Joan Andrews VICE PRESIDENT: Tricia Wood

EDITOR: Brian Bond 22 Douglas Close Llandaff Cardiff CF52QT Tel: 029 20560835
Email: brian.bond@dtn.ntl.com

Charity No 1092496

PRESIDENTIAL AMBLINGS

Since the last newsletter we have heard the sad news of the sudden death of our immediate Past President. Mike Sullivan had had more than his share of illness in the last few years but had served our Society well. Only the previous week he had been cheerfully engaged at our barbecue. Some of us were able to attend the funeral and a full church testified to Mike's many friends. I wrote to Anita to express sympathy on behalf of the Society. Elsewhere in this newsletter, Jeff Curtis who shared many holidays with Mike writes his tribute.

This exceptional hot spell is still with us as I write but despite it, I've been able to enjoy some of our hills where there always seems to be a welcome breeze. In June a walk with my cousin along the South Downs Way introduced me to these low hills with long views out over the South coast. The chalk loving plants were at their best with banks of flowers - orchids including the Lady's Tresses. It was good to see a lot of field verges being left uncut with banks of red poppies in some cornfields – later in Pembroke we were to see corn marigolds spared by similar unmown field edges. The bird highlight on the Downs was that jangling song bird – I'd only previously heard in the Hebrides – yes - you've guessed – corn buntings. Twice lately I've had views of red kites – as they spread in to South Wales – once not far North of Chepstow and then last week above Talybont reservoir doing an aerial display with two buzzards.

Our new Season of Winter meetings starts with the AGM. Both Tricia Wood our Vice president, and I wonder if the Society should consider again the method of Presidential election. Both of us appreciate the honour the Society has done us but wonder whether arm twisting should be replaced with a more formal method of nomination. We would welcome your views.

I look forward to our new season and to seeing you all.

Joan Andrews

EDITORIAL

With the sad loss of our longstanding member and immediate past President Mike Sullivan it is a poignant reminder that the average age of the membership is increasing year upon year.

The CNS has had a few public walks - articles written about them appear elsewhere in the newsletter - which helps to promote the society, and hopefully attract new members. If anyone has friends or relations interested in natural history, why not take out a membership as a present for them, they possibly then may remain members for years to come.

Rosanne and I have made Alana our granddaughter a member, not yet 3yrs old she enjoys going on the easier walks, although on the last walk "looking for Bats" she fell asleep before the start and remained that way throughout the walk.

Attracting younger members as Mike was always promoting will help the CNS see another centenary.

.

Michael Sullivan

Many of you are aware of the sudden death of our Past President, Mike Sullivan, in June. Mike had a lifelong interest in birds and his only regret was that in his days in the Navy, when he travelled the World there were no Field Guides so he never knew what he saw. He was always ready to recount anecdotes of his experiences, ranging from watching rats consume an Army Field Hospital in India to listening to Tawny Owls in Whitchurch while on the beat as a policeman. In recent years his interest widened to include plants, moths and butterflies. He also made up for leaving school early by studying Geology, recently earning himself a Master of Science degree. With this knowledge he gave many hotels in different countries a geological summary of the area so that they could pass this on to other guests and local people.

His aim was always to interest people in CNS and in conservation, and on meeting people when birdwatching he would always try to convince them to join us.

An enthusiastic member of our Society he will be missed. Our condolences go to his family.

Jeff Curtis

Field Meetings September 2003 to January 2004.

Saturday 13th September. WWT reserve London Wetland Centre.
Start time 8.00 am(museum) Packed lunch or use WWT café.

The award winning London Wetland Centre is the first project of its kind in the world - more than 40 hectares of created wetlands in the heart of a capital city. Opened in May 2002, the SSSI designated reserve offers the chance to see rare and beautiful wetland wildlife just a stones throw from central London. An earlier than normal start and a later return (approximately 8pm back in Cardiff) will ensure we have the maximum time there. A guided tour of the reserve has been arranged. A number of spaces are left please contact Tricia if you wish to come, before September 5th please.

Saturday 27th September. Sker point- seashore.
Start time 12 midday. Early lunch or eat there!

An autumn seashore foray guided by the ever-enthusiastic Morton Jenkins. We shall meet at the main carpark at Kenfig nature reserve and take a quick stroll out to Sker Point to take advantage of the low tide.

Sunday 19th October. Fungus Foray- Bute Park.
Start time 10.00 am Packed lunch optional

Once again we shall be guided by Teifion Davies of the Glamorgan Fungus Group around our well known local site. Teifion does not expect to be out all day so an early afternoon finish is expected. However if the weather is good we may extend the day with a walk along the banks of the Taff so bring lunch if you wish to be out longer.
Meet at the National Museum steps.

Saturday 22nd November. Llandaff Cathedral.
Start time 10.00 am.

Steve Howe will be our guide looking mainly at the geology of building stones used for Llandaff Cathedral, the surrounding precinct and Llandaff Green areas. Meet at the Preaching Cross on the Cathedral Green, at the top of the path down to the cathedral. There is limited carparking around the Green alternatively there is a large carpark at the top of High Street opposite the Butchers Arms public house.

Sunday 11th January. Cardiff Birdwatch.
Start time 9.00 am. Packed lunch.

We will be starting with a stroll around Roath Park Lake again this year then onto further sites in the Cardiff area. Once again Rob Nottage has kindly agreed to be our guide. Our choice of site after Roath Park will be 'weather dependent' but please dress appropriately. Meet at Wild Gardens Road at the top of Roath Park Lake.

For all field trips it is expected that members will have read and agree to comply with the Field Meetings Safety Code.
It is useful to know who is coming on the trip especially if you are willing to give a lift to those without transport. Please contact me if you need a lift and hopefully I can arrange one. Contributions towards drivers' petrol is appreciated.

For coach trips acknowledgements will only be sent if an SAE is included. Refunds are not possible unless there is someone to take your place. Please contact me if you are unable to attend. Watts coaches will be used starting at Bonvilston, main pick up at the museum and outside the school at Whitchurch. Alternative pick up points can be arranged if reasonable.

Tricia Wood 20, Dryden Road, Penarth, CF64 2RT.

Telephone numbers 029 20701754 (home)
029 20494018 (work)
029 20450008(fax)
Email cardiff.pah@pdsa.org.uk

VOLUNTEER WANTED

With Corinne Renshaw taking a well earned rest as our Publicity Officer, we are looking for someone to take on this Post.
The Publicity Officer promotes the society in many ways, obtaining coverage in the local papers of our events and producing leaflets etc.
It would be an advantage to have IT experience and or press connections.
Anybody prepared to take on the role, or who knows of a likely person please let the secretary know.

Ed.

Bioamrywiaeth Cymru

Biodiversity Wales

GRANGEMORE PARC 18 June 2003

Instead of the balmy evening envisaged when CNS agreed to organise a public walk for Wales Biodiversity Week, we had to tolerate driving drizzle. Amazingly, 18 hardy folk, mainly stalwart members, assembled by the entrance at 7pm. After a brief introduction, an overview of the pools and, in the absence of flying dragonflies, the scrutiny of several exuviae (larval exoskeletons) collected on a previous visit we set off for a fairly brisk anticlockwise circuit of the site.

Because of the poor weather, it was decided not to climb to the summit viewpoint. However, Skylarks continued to sing despite the rain. We also enjoyed outpourings from Wren, Dunnock, Blackbird, Song Thrush and Blackcap. A Whitethroat performed his scratchy song-flight by the gasometer enclosure. Greenfinch, Goldfinch and a pair of Linnets were seen by some members of the party. A single Cormorant and a few Lesser Black-backed gulls and Swifts flew over us.

The only notable insects were 5-spot Burnet Moths sheltering in low vegetation by a patch of Creeping Thistle. We were able to admire these strikingly-marked moths, including a mated pair. When Rob and I made a reconnaissance visit a few days previously, at least 50 of the newly-emerged insects were present as well as other day-flying moths Burnet Companion and Mother Shipton. Eight species of dragon and damselflies had been on the wing then, including Emperors, Broad-bodied Chasers and a Banded Demoiselle on the riverbank.

We were able to point out many of the plants seen during our 'recce', particularly 3 flowering spikes of Bee Orchid, clumps of Common Valerian, Fennel and Pendulous Sedge as well as an abundance of leguminous plants. These members of the Pea family included Birds-foot Trefoil, Meadow Vetchling, Tufted Vetch and Hop trefoil in addition to Clover carpets. Self-heal, Centaury and St. John's Wort supplemented the colourful display. Grangemore Parc continues to develop a varied and interesting flora and fauna so it was a pity we didn't have better conditions in which to enjoy it.

Linda Nottage

That Blackbird

There was a shiny blackbird,
0n top of Jacksons bay,
Who sang his happy heart out,
Through the long and lonely day.

He sang his happy heart out,
As he looked towards the sea,
But a Sparrow Hawk dispatched him,
So he wasn't meant to be.

Though the Sparrow Hawk dispatched him,
From that bird I could not part,
It's art I'll turn him into then,
Death we will outsmart.

Blue Centaurea

CNS Barbecue Porthkerry June 15th

A fine evening - in all ways, the sun shone, good food and company, also some rare plants.
While the barbecue *was* being lit and the food prepared I led a short walk to show some of the botanical highlights of this part of the park.
First target was the stand of Greater Butterfly Orchids - over 100 in a small area. On route we examined a plant of Toothed Medick, (very rare in Glamorgan), not spectacular to look at except for its curiously curled seed pods.
Luckily one flower remained on the Purple Gromwell and the site of Sorbus domestica was pointed out. Bulbous Foxtail was found to be still abundant in the damp areas and numerous other plants were pointed out, including Rough Clover.
Two Mistle Thrushes searched for food on the Golf Course, but apart from a Swallow few other birds were seen.
After all the food was consumed the party dispersed. My thanks to those who organised everything.

Jeff Curtis

PLANTLIFE COUNTY FLOWERS PROJECT

The organisation Plantlife had the bright idea of raising the profile of wildflowers by promoting a scheme for members of the public to choose a representative species for each county. By mischance or mismanagement the two official choices for the County of Cardiff are now Wild Daffodil or Dune Gentian, neither of which grows in our area.

Wild Leeks, drawn by Lorna Gibson.

In collaboration with the Cardiff Biodiversity Action Forum members, CNS has decided to rectify this anomaly by swamping Plantlife with votes for **WILD LEEK** which grows on Flat Holm (how many other cities have their own island?) and is also a well-known symbol of Wales so is ideally suited to represent the capital city.

Please register your vote for **WILD LEEK** before 31st October, either by writing to:-
County Flowers (Cardiff), Plantlife, 21 Elizabeth Street, London SW1W 9RP

or email to ***CountyFlowers@plantlife.org.uk***
Indicate if you are a Cardiff resident because then your vote counts double!

The Other Side of Barry Island 15th July

On what was reputed to be the hottest day for eight years – some sixteen members with six visitors met in the car park by the old Harbour in Barry. Two of our visitors had joined us from New Zealand.

The name Barry may date from the time of St Baroc[i] - said to be buried in the small chapel above Jackson Bay. The island itself for centuries consisted of a single farm and rabbit warren and was part of the manor of Sully. The Old Harbour is first recorded as early as 1276 in the King's Assize, when a French sea captain was tried for illegal mooring, convicted and committed to Cardiff Castle. For many centuries this shallow bay saw active trade across the Severn and over to France – some legal and some less so[ii]. The harbour remained busy up till the late 1900's when the coming of the railway and new docks took over the trade.

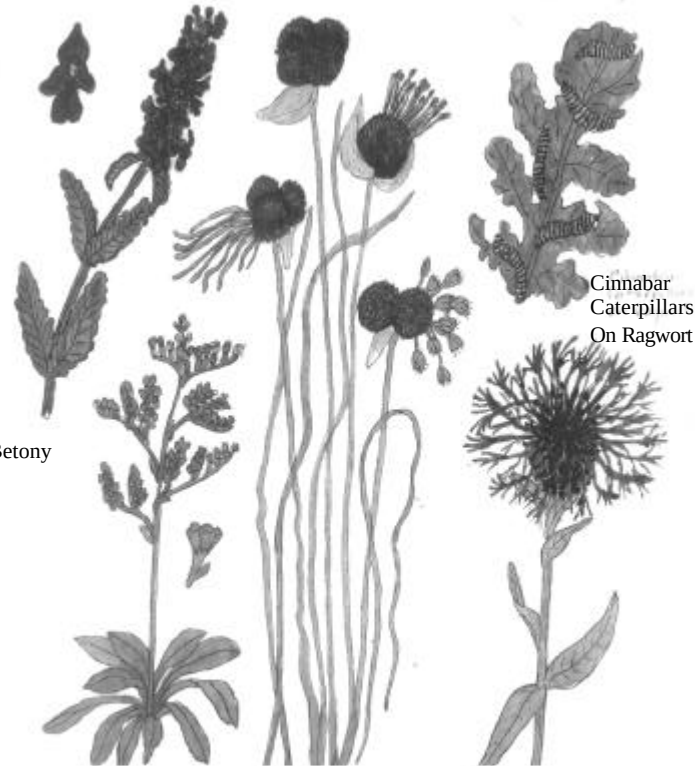
Ivy Broomrape

On our arrival the tide was two hours from high tide and the inlet was mud covered but by our return the speed and rise of the tide had covered the harbour. A gull roost of black-headed, herring and lesser black-backed gulls were the only birds seen by most of us - although a greater black-backed gull briefly visited.

Earlier in the day both meadow and rock pipits had been active with a solitary oystercatcher on the harbour rocks and turnstones on the headland.

Mary pointed out the spartina grass in the bay – a plant spreading along our coast. As we walked the path to the jetty - winter heliotrope and alexanders had gone over but there was plenty of ivy broomrape, the parasitic plant, here growing on ivy roots. Branches of the evergreen holm oak hung over the path. The end of the jetty was thronged with local kids diving and jumping in to the water. We made do with enjoying watching while Linda reviewed the rock plants – with golden samphire at its best, set off against bright lichens although here the sea thrift was almost over.

Friars Point Limestone headlands



Cinnabar Caterpillars On Ragwort

Betony

Rock Sea Lanender

Crow Garlick 1-4 heads of butbills

Rayed version of black Knapweed Cenraurea Nigra SSP Memoralis

As we turned towards Friars point we walked parallel to what must be one of the best cowslip sites in the area – while these were long gone there was a good showing of crow garlic – Mary pointing out the tiny bulbils on some. Wild carrot, yarrow, tufted vetch and hedge and field convolvulus made a good background display.

On the headland, despite the recent dry days, there were plenty of lime-loving plants to find. The hawkbit that had starred the turf in the morning sunshine was closed but Mary and Linda were both busy confirming our findings – including centaury, betony, Lady's bedstraw, greater and black knapweed, and common rockrose. Caterpillars of the cinnabar moth were seen on the ragwort as well as a few flying adults. Near the end of the headland were some stands of sea lavender and sea campion.

We had no geologist with us but the consensus was that the whole headland is carboniferous limestone. Phil managed to find some fossils for us - mainly crinoids or sea lilies, ancient animals related to sea urchins.

We dropped down to the near end of the beach to look at some inclusions of gypsum- the same soft pinkish mineral, calcium sulphate, present much more obviously at Penarth Head and widely used in modelling and pottery. A few drops of rain from the threatened thunderstorms deterred us from going further.

Our visit reminded us of our good fortune to have such an excellent, accessible local site – to be enjoyed by all ages and remarkably litter free.

Our thanks go to Mary for the excellent drawings and to both Mary and Linda for their usual expertise.

[i] John Jones, *History of Wales,* 1824, J Williams, London
[ii] Ed Stewart Williams, *South Glamorgan, a county history,* 1975, D Brown and Sons, Cowbridge

Joan Andrews

Mike Sullivan

The loss of Mike Sullivan was sudden news and I'm sure his loss is keenly felt by many of us. I'd just like to share with members a few thoughts

I first met Mike when I joined the CNS back about 14 years ago. We rapidly found that we had a keen interest in geology in common (Mike was studying for his first Open University degree at that time). This shared interest gave us things to discuss and debate, in an often-spirited way, and soon brought about a close friendship. We often worked together for the society, manning stands at Woodland Fairs and the like.

As I was a "single" man in the early years of our friendship he was always pointing out the young ladies for me! When, a few years later, I met Rhian and took her to a CNS trip to Oxwich Mike was the first to come up and ask who she was, where we'd met etc. His innate openness meant no messing and he soon found out she was a geologist so he told me in no uncertain way that I'd found a diamond and that I'd better "keep hold of her".

During my term as Presidency Mike was a constant supporter, acting as Secretary, and afterwards I know that he was honoured to be asked to serve himself in the same role. We had some interesting debates and discussions on our ways to and from meetings and I know that Mike's health prevented him from being as active during his Presidency as he would have liked, but we all thought he was on the mend and I like others was devastated by the new of his sudden passing.

He probably never thought of himself as being inspirational, but taking on an OU degree is something that I think of as significant now and taking on not just a BSc, but Higher Degrees as well in your retirement is something that tells us "young'uns" that it's never too late to get going.

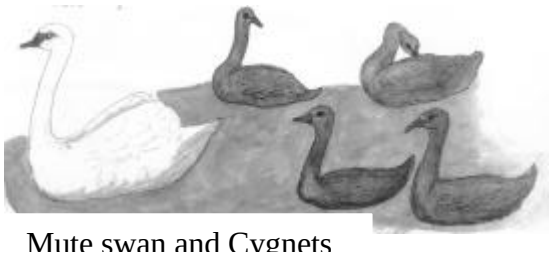
Mike was never one to dwell on the past, but I'm sure that he wouldn't mind me remembering him fondly once in a while.

Andy Kendall

THE NEW WINDSOR ESPLANADE RESERVE; CARDIFF BAY

By the beginning of July in 2003 the bulk of the area was a shaggy meadow dominated by sea-green sea couch - a relic from saltier times - and straw coloured Yorkshire fog grass. The anticipated board walk from the St. Davids Hotel carpark had materialized as a broad, ballast-covered track alongside a channel with marginal clumps of Typha bulrush,reed and reed canary grass.

To compete in that tall sward subordinates needed to be adequately robust. Commonest were prickly ox-tongue, prickly lettuce, with its vertically orientated leaves, dittander, evening primrose and tall melilot. Most unusual were mauve flowered goat's rue and Cyperus sedge with gracefully dangling fruit spikes. Survivors from the salt marsh were sea beet, halberd-leaved orache, the two saltmarsh spurreys and scurvy grass. Halfway species were best represented by celery-leaved buttercup.



Mute swan and Cygnets

The path culminates in a splendid zig zag board walk into open water towards the protective bund. This allowed aerial views of the aquatics: greater water plantain, yellow water cress and an almost complete cover in parts of Canadian pondweed. Large tracts were starred with Elodea's tiny tricom female flowers, unlikely to be located and fulfilled by the floating males, which seldom occur in Britain. Spreading ripples in open water were made by fingerling fish - this being a nursery for such as roach, gudgeon and chub.

Mallard were too numerous to count and their ducklings came in all sizes. The mute swans had produced three small cygnets, strung out in line between the pen and the cob. There were the unmistakable shapes of two great crested grebes and colours of shelduck, while a distinctively marked yet cryptic ringed plover pottered on a little shingle spit jutting from the nearby sward.

Lesser Egret

A lesser egret stood whitely-statuesque alongside marginal reeds until displaced by a grey heron, which sent it flapping out over the water. The air was full of swifts and house martins, but the ornithological highlight was the pair of coots that had built their untidy, twig-based nest in shallows quite close to the board walk.

Coot and Cootlings

Two of their three eggs had hatched and two tiny chicks were nestled against one of the parents on its top. The pale egg tooth on crimson beak savoured of newly hatched moorhens, but here also was a reddish pate and yellow neck ruff. Each time the foregoing parent got within a few yards of the nest one of the sharp eyed youngsters popped into the water and paddled out to meet it. After each beak to beak exchange it headed straight back to the nest, apparently unbidden by either parent. For a while it was the same chick behaving thus, but the other eventually got the idea and tumbled into the water ahead of it. The little family was quite unperturbed by the row of human faces closeby.

This nest-bound phase is quite short-lived. Two larger families of cootlings, each of six offspring, on Lamby Lake and the adjacent pool, were scurrying freely between patches of floating weed with both parents, although not appreciably bigger than the newly hatched ones.

All is not lost in the Bay. The big flocks of waders have gone but others are taking over. Vandals are the current villains, some having smashed the eggs of swans nesting on the other side of the water

MARY E. GILLHAM

A City Centre Wildlife Oasis

I work at Cardiff University in the Cathays Park area of Cardiff within easy walking distance of Bute Park. I regularly visit the park with colleagues during our lunch breaks and have therefore become used to seeing and probably taking for granted what is to be seen within walking distance of the City centre. Although not native there are fine displays of Crocuses and Daffodils, interspersed with our native Primrose, along the towpath of the old feeder canal in early spring, just about the time when the first Chiff Chaffs can be heard. Cuckoo flower or Lady's Smock begins to flower just before the Bluebells and down near the Canton Bridge entrance one can find the strange parasitic Toothwort. The Park also hosts an impressive Arboretum and there is a wonderful avenue of the ancient conifer Gingko biloba, but for me the most impressive tree(s) in the spring are the Paulownia's, or Empress Trees, the bare branches baring clusters of their large blue Foxglove like flowers, which indeed is what they are, the tree belonging to the Foxglove family. There are also some lovely Acers which are beautiful in the Spring and again in the Autumn just when some of the other Trees, in good years, give a wonderful display of colourful berries.

Going back to the feeder canal, besides the flowers that can be found along the banks there is also a good head and variety of fish that can often be clearly seen from the bank. Roach, Dace and in the last few years Grayling, a member of the Salmon family, have appeared. This latter species is not native to this region and has presumably been introduced into the Taf by anglers and has colonised the canal. Another relatively recent coloniser of the canal has been the Banded Demoiselle damselfly. This beautiful insect can be seen especially on sunny days when the males will often indulge in chasing each other over the water. The females are not so easily seen usually keeping to perches on bankside vegetation, until they are ready to oviposit when they are easily seen dipping their abdomens into the water as they 'lay' their eggs. Strangely this appears to be the dominant Dragonfly species on the canal with only the occasional Large Red Damselfly and Blue-Tailed damselfly observed. Other invertebrates to be seen include the metallic coloured Chrysomelid beetles which are often to be seen on canal side vegetation. Butterflies include Common Blue, Speckled Wood and Orange Tip amongst others. Bird life in the park is excellent, wintering Goosander are regularly seen on the river, Kingfishers occur on both the river and canal, and, since the barrage was closed Mute Swans are frequently seen. Dippers too, have been recorded in recent years. Nuthatches and Treecreepers are common in the park as are Jays, Magpies of course and not infrequently Ravens. The latter presumably being the birds that routinely nest in the City Hall clock tower. I believe Sparrowhawks also breed in the park but I've no proof of this; however they are regularly seen here. Goldcrests I have seen in winter feeding quite low down in bushes and Long Tailed, Blue and Great Tits are all residents in the park and this summer I've seen Green Woodpeckers for the first time.

However it is the river Taff that plays host to the best wildlife spectacular in Cardiff in my opinion, and that is the annual autumn run of Salmon. Large numbers returning from the sea can be seen attempting to leap Blackweir in an attempt to reach their breeding grounds upstream, a spectacular sight.

There is always something to see in this park, maybe nothing unusually rare or uncommon, but to see such a wealth of common wildlife within the city centre is surely a good sign of a relatively healthy environment.

Phill Blanning