

RECORDERS' NEWSLETTER



Recorders' Newsletter No. 28 (Autumn 2012)

This last September, the Wales Biodiversity Conference was held in Pontypridd and for some reason I was asked to talk about Local biodiversity Action Plans. I have no memory of what I actually said, but attached is a summary of what I said, I would say (and what I hope I sort of did): *'in the far distance past, when Local Biodiversity Action Planning were first mooted, the 'how to do' guidance notes emphasised and re-emphasised the importance of 'local'. Local was key: bottom-up was good: Local Agenda 21 and LBAP were joined at the hip. At the time it posed the question as to what 'local' meant. So what 'locally' have we really achieved? What locally is the LBAPS greatest success?*

Rhondda Cynon Taf sits in the middle of the south Wales Valleys. An area, which in 1997 was considered to be derelict and devoid of biodiversity. Local naturalists knew better (but no one asked them) and few visited from outside: the area was largely discounted as a biodiversity hole, a place to be driven around, or quickly through. In the 1990s, the CCW Phase I Habitat Survey produced multi-coloured maps, which started to open eyes, but as the first tentative LBAP steps were being 'toddled', biodiversity expectations were low. Biodiversity was expressed in generic 'could be anywhere' words.

Today we have a much clearer, colourful and exciting picture of the County Borough's biodiversity. It has been

gradual, slow, somewhat piece-meal and patient, and perhaps (as a result) 'sustainable'. It is based on local recorders, local reports, planning application information, with CCW's and others data. It hopefully will never be complete, and the story we can now tell is increasingly one about RCT and not 'any old where LBAP land'. We can now talk about the locally distinctiveness which makes up the County Borough's wealth of biodiversity and makes RCT special for its own special reasons. Over the years the LBAP has encouraged, engaged, observed, debated, collated and collected the pieces of information which have wafted past and we can now talk about the place and the places within it. So in amongst management projects, planning delivery, biodiversity events, awareness raising and the rest, the greatest success has been the understanding of RCT's biodiversity which has emerged. An understanding which increasingly underpins the LBAP's objectives and the opportunities that are pursued'.

I seem to recall that I said that 15 years ago we could have perhaps managed to write an 'eye spy book' of RCT's biodiversity, while today I reckoned we could manage a half decent first draft of a 'New Naturalist': which for those of you like me (of a certain age and outlook) is really something. The information gleaned from the Recorders Newsletter has provided half the chapters for that first draft.

Ffridd

The most interesting thing I came across in the Conference was the possibility of Wales recognising **Ffridd** as a stand-alone habitat in the Welsh Section 45 list of habitats of conservation significance. Our LBAP describes Ffridd as '*the uncultivated valley side, the zone between the upland sheep walks (and modern day conifer plantations) and the Valley bottom* (which in RCT is often defined by the back lane of the highest terrace street). *In RCT the ffridd can be characterised as an intricate mosaic of heath, bracken, acid grassland, woodland, coal spoil and flushed rhos pasture. It is a particularly important and characteristic feature of the south Wales valleys, forming continuous mosaics of semi-natural habitat along the length of river valleys*'. In my opinion the Ffridd is the most important habitat in RCT, it is the biodiversity glue, which keeps it all going, a reservoir of species and habitat and the conduit through and along which much of our wildlife can move: it is proper habitat connectivity.

Weather

We now have three weather stations (Tynewydd/Treherbert, Llwynypia and Cwmbach) and below the sorry tale of our 'lost' summer is set out in that most British of treatments, both inches and millimetres;

From Marcus Middlehurst in Tynewydd; Jan Total 284mm rain (max 88 mm on 2nd Jan)
Feb Total 142mm rain max 38 on 22nd Feb
Mar Total 62mm max 28 on 6th
April Total 398mm (max 40mm on 9th.) – which as Marcus says '*beat the figures that Derek Brockway quoted on the news by some margin!*'
May total rain 186mm (max 75mm on 9th)
June total rain 498mm (max of 133 mm on 7th and 75 mm on the 15th), and a September total of 170mm (highest estimated as 20mm for the 23rd and 45mm for 24th).

Just a few miles down the Rhondda in Llwynypia, Paul Marshman had the following highlights;

9.6 inches (243.84mm) of rain in April (which compares well with the wettest Aprils Paul has recorded, although interestingly his three wettest Aprils were all of 10 inches or more and occurred in the 3 years between April 1998 through to 2000: a very damp sequence.

There was 120mm of rain in Paul's garden between June 6th and 7th (60 mm on each day) which added up to 13.9 inches (353.06 mm) of rain (equalling his雨iest ever June in 1998). However, it was a warm month with average maximum temperature of 19.9 degree C. This compared to Paul's coolest June of 1991 at just 16.8 degree C average maximum and also a soggy 8.8 inches of rain: so looking on the bright side June 2012 was much better than the miserable June of 1991. Paul also reported 60 mm of rain between the 22nd and 23rd of September.

Paul's conclusion about wettest April's was mirrored in observations from Mark Evan's Cwmbach records, '*the Met Office are currently going on about how this April was the wettest, nationally, in 100 years. Although it has been a dire month here, I was convinced that it wasn't the wettest April I've recorded in my garden, so having trawled through all my weather records, I compiled a list and It turns out that this April was only the third wettest, the year 2000 taking the honours there with 1998 being second wettest*'.

Mark's rainfall records for the first eight months of 2012, nicely mirror the trends from Marcus and Paul, but interesting they suggest that the Cynon Valley is a significantly less wet (I was going to say drier, but less wet is more accurate) Valley than the Rhondda;

January Total 162.70 mm
February Total 56.75 mm
March Total 27.50 mm

April Total 200.60 mm
May Total 135.75 mm
June Total 286.85 mm
July Total 119.45 mm
August Total 218.50 mm

Phenology

Spring was late, high summer was late and Mark Evans noticed the tardiness of the season in Mid May when he '*paid the Werfa colliery site (in Abernant) a flying visit. The thing that really struck home immediately was how retarded is the leaf development on the trees. I was at the site on almost the same day last year and took several photos of moth caterpillars, I'd found on the trees and in those photos, the leaves are fully developed, even on the oaks..... whereas this year, the sallow is sparsely leaved and the oaks are still in the process of bursting but, the only leaves showing are still in the shrivelled yellow stage. The late and slow leafing up of our trees is as good an indication (if we needed one) of how unusually poor the spring has been.*'

Mammals

This autumn, there seems to have been an incredible number of run-over **grey squirrels**, which I had assumed relates to a particularly good breeding season and lots of dispersing young animals. This theory was backed up with an observation that Jonathan Barrett sent me '*The biggest thing I have noticed is the amount of squirrels that I am seeing, both dead ones on the road and live ones in the forests. I have never seen so many as in the last couple of months. An unusually high number.*'

Back in June, Ben Williams 'saw that a mammal had been run over on the Church Village bypass on Thursday morning and it appeared to be a **polecat**, a **mink** or perhaps a **ferret** but I haven't had time to go back and have a good look', but 'On Saturday 28th July I was driving passed Cross Inn on the Byepass and found a

*dead Polecat in the roadway. I risked life and limb to identify it and was definitely a Polecat but damaged too much to tell if it was a male or female.' I suspect the same animal was also picked up by Jo Bates but by then (and I apologise for the grizzly picture) she found that '*only two feet and part of the pelt were left*', however these were sent for analysis and Jo was able to further report that the polecat was 100% polecat '*it has been confirmed now by... DNA analyses*'.*

Liz Dean met a walker who reported seeing **hares** on Cilfynydd Common in the last year (a new location). While Sonia Knowles passed on a report from friends, that had watched a family of five **otters** on the Taff by the Machine Bridge in Pontypridd. It was after midnight but the road lights of the A470 illuminated the animals beautifully.

There was good news from Adrian Williams (and the Valleys Bat Group), the important **lesser horseshoe** bat maternity roost in the south-west of the Borough had good numbers (200 ish) this summer. This is a relief because the summer weather must have pushed bats hard.

In the summer Dave Batten saw a **stoat** on the Council's Ynys Fields site in Aberdare and Liz Dean saw a **weasel** in the wild zone in Ynysangharad Park, Pontypridd (we get very few stoat or weasel records), while Bryan Morris reported a **vixen** using his Aberdare garden. Mr and Mrs Charnock had **hedgehogs** in their Miskin, Pontyclun garden and we have had regular hedgehogs in our garden this summer. Marcus Middlehurst note that 'we have "acquired" a family of cute **rats**.... not everyone's cup of tea, but they get up to all the antics that squirrels do but apart from stealing the bird food, they seem harmless and there appears to be one adult and two youngsters.'

Amphibians and Reptiles

Mrs and Mrs Charnock sent the following from Miskin ‘whilst trying to show my grandson our two resident **frogs**, we both spotted a **newt** swimming around in one of our three ponds at the bottom of the garden. I have not seen it since but we both believe there are some baby newts in the pond’.

This was certainly a summer for amphibians and having dug a garden pond this spring, within a few days’ frogs had already taken up residence. I look forward to the first smooth or palmate newts pitching up.

Mark Evans sent a fantastic picture of a camouflaged grass snake from Abernant, ‘just before leaving this great site, I spotted something in the undergrowth and litter, below some gorse, what I took to be a scrap of snakeskin patterned rubbish and it took me several seconds to work out that it was actually a real Grass Snake, which was keeping a wary eye on me’.

Terry Hourihan sent a great little summary of records for the hills above Treforest and ‘**lizards, frogs, toads, newts, slow worm and adders are common**’: The adder record being particularly welcomed.

On October 4th I visited the Council managed Nant Celyn site in Efail Isaf, and next to a purpose built reptile refuge I saw two **grass snake** basking in very weak autumn sunshine and Ben Williams saw one on Llantrisant Common in May. A report to the Wildlife Trust of a snake stuck in a fence led to a ‘Rhys to the rescue’ moment in the Aberdare area. The grass snake was released and may be making a TV appearance.

Birds

Jonathan Barrett sent a great sighting from the Lluest Wen Res in April ‘I saw what I believe was a **merlin**. I have seen

one a few years ago at the same location and am pretty sure it was the same. Unfortunately I did not have time to get the camera out. I did however a couple of weeks ago get me camera out for a **red kite** at the same location and this time I got a good picture’.

Last year the BTO satellite tagged **cuckoos** and followed their migration to central Africa and back, this they have added some Welsh birds. A surprising thing is just how early in the summer these birds clear off to pastures new to start their slow wandering south. Adult birds are only in Britain for a matter of a few weeks. After the earlier records from Mountain Ash reported in the last Newsletter, we had further records from Mark Evans for the Cynon Valley ‘first cuckoo of the year, on the 11th April on the hillside above Bryngolwg farm, Miskin, Mountain Ash’ plus ‘the Cefnpennar cuckoo was heard and seen for the first time, yesterday, the 15th’ and in the same locality ‘David Gordon also heard it at various points through the day’. Cuckoos returned to the Valleys around Llwynypia/Gelli by April 2nd and then off and on through May (a series of reports from Paul Marshman), a bird was present in Cwm Cadlan, Penderyn (Kevin Oates 7th May) while there were reports from Clydach Vale from Gareth Henson and Ben Williams, who also emailed me with ‘Oh! I heard another cuckoo in Clydach Vale so our numbers appear to be rising’, he also fostered hopes that cuckoos may have pushed a bit further south this year with ‘my wife and her friends were listening to a cuckoo calling on Saturday up at Pontypridd Golf Club and we had one calling at the back of our house (Tonteg) today’. Mark Steer who reported a cuckoo calling in Brynna Woods, which backed up a little hopeful scenario that cuckoos might actually have had a better year in the South.

On April 29th ‘Martin Bevan flushed a **short eared owl** from the rhos above Abernant ponds, on the southern flank of Mynydd Aberdar. He watched it hunting on Tuesday and Mike Hogan saw it again yesterday evening’ (Mark Evans). This might have been the same bird reported to me by Paul Marshman in May who had another report of a new **barn owl** nest site in the southwest of the Borough. Further spring reports included a **common sandpiper** from Glyncornel Lake seen by Paul Marshman (PM) on May 3rd, while early in early May, Paul also had 7 juvenile **siskin** in his garden rising to 14 (mostly juveniles) by June 6th, together with a **redpoll** with a bird ring (we wondered if this could have come from Glyncornel Woods where the Glamorgan Bird Club have now started to ring birds). There were also two female **goosanders** on the Rhondda in Llwynypia on June 12th (PM) perhaps hinting at nesting somewhere close? Paul let me know about a sighting of a male **yellow wagtail** in early May (this is a very rare bird in RCT) and at about the same time **spotted flycatchers** returned (once again) to Glyncornel House (PM). **Wood warblers** were in small numbers in Glyncornel and Cwm Bodwenarth (Llwynypia) by late May (PM). I also had the pleasure of watching a ‘fly catching’ spotted flycatcher and singing **garden warbler** at Parc Nant Celyn, Efail Isaf.

Spring briefly promised much and I had the following from Mark Evans from the Cynon at Cwmbach ‘On the 22nd April, I found myself at upper Tirfounder Fields, with an hour or so to spare, and hoped to see my first **reed and sedge warblers** of the year. I could hear at least three reed warblers singing, plus a beautiful male **reed bunting**, but completely failed to see or hear sedge warbler. Walking up along the river Cynon, I found myself trying to locate a singing **blackcap**, when I saw my first **sand martin** of the year: I always

seem to be the last person in Glamorgan to see sand martin each year.
A little way further up the Cynon, I stopped to scan ahead, up the river, hoping for **Kingfisher**, when I noticed something moving on the riverbank opposite. Giving it my full attention, I saw the low vegetation moving, then suddenly up popped a **mink**, standing on hind legs, the body erect, head turning this way and that, with those shiny, emotionless, black beady eyes, so typical of a lot of the Mustelids. It was a magnificent animal and such a pity that they are so destructive to our native wildlife. After looking around for a minute or so, and totally failing to see me, it dropped to all fours and darted a metre or so to a hole in the bank, beneath a tree root, and entered what I assume was its nest hole. A couple of hundred metres farther up the river, I came across a pair of goosander, preening on a shoal, on the opposite side of the river’. Also, ‘while doing my BBS square SO0500, I had my first **tree pipit** of the year, at the upper edge of the wood, covering Caegarw tip. I had my first tree pipit in exactly the same place while doing the square, last year’.

James Burton also bird watches on Tirfounder Field and sent the following excellent list of 45 species seen between March and May 2012; **blackbird**, **blackcap**, **blue tit**, **bullfinch**, **chaffinch**, **Canada goose**, **carrion crow**, **chiffchaff**, **coot**, **dipper**, **dunnock**, **garden warbler**, **grasshopper warbler**, **goldfinch**, **great tit**, **greenfinch**, **grey heron**, **grey wagtail**, **greylag goose**, **house martin**, **house sparrow**, **jackdaw**, **kingfisher**, **little grebe**, **long tailed tit**, **magpie**, **mallard**, **moorhen**, **pied wagtail**, **reed bunting**, **reed warbler**, **robin**, **sedge warbler**, **snipe**, **song thrush**, **swallow**, **swift**, **teal**, **treecreeper**, **willow warbler**, **willow tit**, **whitethroat**, **woodpigeon**, and **wren** plus unconfirmed records for **water rail**, **pied flycatcher**, **common sandpiper**, **otter**, **mink**, **goosander**,

pintail, goldeneye, lesser whitethroat.

Tirfounder Fields is a fantastic wetland site and it figures in the Glamorgan Bird Club publication **Birding in Glamorgan** (Alan Rosney and Richard Smith) as one of the six RCT sites described in the book.

Tony Swann reported from Brynna Woods '*a relatively quiet period, certainly not helped by the wet weather. Some months ago, a couple had told me they had seen a dipper in the Ewenny Fach near the footbridge. At last, I caught up with it, or possibly two. As I was crossing the footbridge at the southwest end, a dipper flew under the bridge and continued upstream out of sight. If you look upstream from the wood end of the bridge, there are some stones on the right hand side, and 15 minutes later one flew on to these and started to feed. After a while, it climbs onto the largest and rested. The stones are only visible when the river level is normal, as any inclement weather, raises the river level and covers them. For some 30 years, I have wondered why they haven't used the river and now; let's hope, they will be seen on a regular basis. I guess until autumn approaches and then a short distance migration as food stock depletes*'. One of the great advantages of long term recording (as Tony has done for Brynna Woods) is the context it gives and Tony noted how woodland warblers like chiffchaff and blackcap are doing very well in Brynna woods, but because the open marsh hasn't been grazed for many years, the resulting '*unchecked sapling growth has seen an absence of common whitethroat and sedge warbler*'.' The good news is that the Wildlife Trust are actively looking at re-instating some grazing of the main marsh area of the Reserve and if that can succeed we should see the recovery of the species-rich marsh and species like whitethroat and sedge warbler, and lots beside.

Terry Hourihan sent an excellent summary of wildlife sightings from the hills above Treforest; '*The area has a resident population of green woodpeckers and recently greater spotted woodpeckers have been in the area, tree creepers are about, usually have skylarks (not apparent this year), both barn and tawny owls, last year we had cuckoos (used to be regular but previously heard in 2010) – lots of wrens, robins, thrush, blackbirds, sparrows, jays, various members of the tit family, sparrowhawks and LBT (little brown things – my bird naming skills are not the best)*'. Marcus Middlehurst sent me an excellent little summary from his Ty Newydd patch '*blue, great, coal and long tail tits, dunnock, robin, sparrow, greenfinches, goldfinch, song thrush, blackbird, magpie, jay, nuthatch, siskin, wren, greater spotted and green woodpecker, sparrowhawk, buzzard, heron, ducks and crows*'.

Jonathan Barrett reported '*large amounts of goldfinches around the old Maerdy Colliery Site and Lluest Wen Res. I also saw a tawny owl a couple of days ago at 1100 in the morning. That was seen just outside Ynysybwl*'.

Kevin Huish lives in the alpine slopes of Ferndale and amongst the greenfinches, chaffinches, house sparrows, robins and coal, long great and blue tits visiting their garden, his wife saw a **meadow pipit**, which is not a typical garden bird, unless of course you live in alpine Ferndale). Kevin also saw **kestrel** circling over Ferndale. Mark Steer '*recently saw a pheasant on the lane into Miskin Manor Hotel in the middle of the afternoon. Early on the same morning I had seen a fox at the same spot!*'

Mr and Mrs Charnock sent me an update of the wildlife in their Miskin (Pontyclun) garden. They reported large numbers of birds '*especially very young ones. Daily visitors include great spotted woodpecker, two, sometimes three, a nuthatch, three*

goldfinches, a pair of bullfinches and two pairs of greenfinches'. Bryan Morris's wife reported a pure white, albino blackbird from near her Aberdare home.

The **phytophthora** (a tree disease which seems to particularly like to kill larch trees) outbreaks are having significant impacts on the commercial forestry areas of South Wales. In most cases the only treatment for diseased stands is clear felling. Mark Evans has been trying to assess the possible implications for his Cynon Valley raven roost. As a result he sent me the following; '*As far as the raven roost is concerned, the impact is unknown (but I'm working on that) because although there is a strip of Larch along the front of the roost and a large area of fairly mature large behind the roost, after all these years of counting them, I'm still not sure just where in the general area of forest I loosely call 'the roost' they actually do roost. I see them flying from the S. Western border of the forest, which is a narrow band of Larch, backed by and slightly broader band of ropey Lodgepole Pine, this being backed in turn by a sizeable block of Sitka Spruce. I have in the past, assumed that they roosted in the Lodgepole pine, flying out over the Larch, often perching briefly in the Larch as they do so. However, over the past couple of years I realised that there seemed to be a lot of flight calls coming from much further back in the roost, which made me wonder whether some or all of the roost was actually in the block of Sitka and I always planned to one morning go up there, not to count them, but instead to watch the area behind the Lodgepole Pine, to see what happens. As things always seem to go, these days, I never got the opportunity to do so, but this threat to the roost fired a new determination to get this job done, so while I was up there counting the ravens on Monday morning (in case you are wondering, my car has been in the garage for repairs for most of this week) and having recorded 427 birds leaving; my*

largest ever total, I made plans to go back, this coming weekend. As it happens, the car had to go back in to the garage yesterday, so taking advantage of another enforced day off, I went up there and got some inconclusive results, but also some food for thought.

The first calls were from the resident pair, who are always at or near the front of the Larches, but this was followed by calling from the rest of the roost and it all seemed to be coming from the band of Lodgepole Pine and Larch, none of it coming from the Sitka. After a few minutes, flight calls could be heard as the first wave of Ravens started leaving the roost and flying to Bryn Pica. These calls also seemed to be coming from the Larch/Pine part of the roost, then suddenly I heard flight calls coming from the direction of the Spruce, but instead of what I'd expected to see; birds flying from the Spruce, West to the front of the Larch/Pine part of the roost, the opposite was happening and birds were flying from the Pines over the Spruce and heading out East, across the Merthyr valley, towards Trecati tip. This one flock alone numbered 80 and it is likely that other flocks followed after this, as the fly out progressed, but unfortunately I had to get off home. I intend going back up there on the weekend and viewing the scene from the opposite side and this time staying for the whole fly out, counting the birds that fly East.

It will be interesting to see if that exodus of birds heading East is repeated and if it is, then it raises the possibility or even the probability that over the years I have been under counting the number of Ravens using that roost by an unknown figure, but based on my total of 427 birds heading out of the Western side of the roost on Monday, the flock of 80 I saw heading East on Wednesday equated to another 20% or so. Could the Blaencanaid Raven roost be a much larger thing than

*I'd previously suspected and those distant flight calls actually been of birds flying out of the roost and heading East? If so there is absolutely no way that one person could count it all: it would take at least two to do that. A possible solution would be to have several of counts by two people at once; one counting *Bryn pica* bound birds and the other birds headed for Trecati and if the percentage of birds heading east is the approximately the same, then an approximate total size of the roost could then be estimated by adding that percentage on to each count of birds headed for *Bryn Pica*.'* The type of analytical considerations Mark has given to the raven roost is only possible after years of study, which (as in all things) not only allows you to clearly consider the issues, but ultimately throws up a whole series of new questions: it is all part of the fun.

As autumn draws on, the summer migrants have nearly all slipped away: and nearly all of these seem to melt away without us noticing. However **swallows** and **house martins** are different. This autumn has been noteworthy for the reports of late nesting by both species, with young still in some nests into October. This protracted breeding season is thought to be the reaction to the lousy summer, in which many birds lost earlier broods, and the late nesting was an attempt to salvage something. The other noteworthy phenomenon has been the long protracted movements of birds, which may people noticed over the last 10 days of September and first 10 days of October. Throughout that period there seemed a steady stream of small groups of house martins and swallows heading southeast. In some of the heavy rains in Pontypridd groups of 50 plus house martins congregated over the Taff, feeding in the wooded hillsides in lee of the winds. These movements of birds are difficult to pick up in flat landscapes, but in the Valleys birds are channelled and as a

result we get to witness one of the natural wonders of autumn. Even as late as October 11th I was able to watch large groups of house martins taking their lunch break over the Taff in Pontypridd. With the leaving of the last summer migrants, the winter migrants arrive. Paul Marshman saw his first **redwing** flocks on October 7th, with **fieldfare** (plus redwing and house martin) on October 11th and four goosanders were back on the Rhondda on October 9th. Also, Paul noted that the roof of the new Llwynypia Hospital supports a **pied wagtail** roost, with up to 40 birds. On October 11th Paul also saw a red kite over Cwm Bodwenallt, Llwynypia.

Plants

Some plants come up in the same location every year, year on year, and decade upon decade: becoming old friends. On the Nant Celyn Estate in Efail Isaf, there is a grass verge where a small patch of **meadow thistle** has persisted for at least 20 years. They never flower, but live their 'rosetted' lives in the base-flushed remnants of their old marshy grassland home. However, others plants seem to suddenly appear and from nothing proliferate. **Himalayan balsam** is the extreme example of recent years (see below), but Paul Marshman had reported how **lesser burdock** has appeared from somewhere and is now flourishing in Llwynypia. Orchids can appear because of their powder like seed, which disperse for miles on the slightest breeze: still they need nice unimproved grassland in which to germinate and grow. Just such a place is the grass verge in Llwynypia on the right hand side by the MacDonalds. Here Geoff Williams told me of **bee orchids** which the Rhondda grass cutters kept an eye on and allowed to flower and seed.

Margaret Harding (and friends) visited 'Cwm Colliery twice as the **southern marsh orchids** are spectacular it was really wet especially on the 17th June when we were wading round ponds (that

is Wendy, Maralyn and myself). The Common Spotteds were a lot better than on Llantrisant Common. Still no sign of the butterflies very poor this year'. Plus **monk's hood** on the River Clun and in late June 'been to Clydach today in search of orchids. The southern marsh are really good this year but the Common Spotted has been affected by the weather I think'.

Sticking with orchids Mark Evans told me of a discovery by Martin Bevan, of 'a small colony of **pyramidal orchids** in an open grassy area, within the forestry (FC), north of Llwydcoed'. Mark sent me a fantastic picture of the orchid and counted 37 of them in flower. This is the only pyramid orchid I know of in RCT. He also reported that 'a little to the northwest, on a shallow embankment of basic slag, left over from the surfacing of the forest roads, there are scattered plants of **kidney vetch** which has a colony of **small blue** butterflies breeding on it. In parts, the place feels a little like chalk or limestone down, an impression bolstered during my brief visit by the sighting of a **marbled white butterfly**'.

Mark also told me more about 'the site of the former Werfa colliery, which is situated between Cwmbach and the top of Abernant. As a child I played there occasionally and remember it as barren coal spoil, with a few ponds, the aftermath of tip washing. Now the site is, as these sites often are, a wonderful mosaic of habitats; mainly scrub (wet and dry) with more open areas, around which are plants such as **yellow loosestrife** (not the garden one) and **broad-leaved helleborine**. I counted eleven in flower in one area of the site, during the summer'

Our uplands are under recorded, which made Paul Denning's visit to some of our glacial crags very welcome; 'I've been up to Craig Y Llyn, Graig Fawr & Graig Fach looking at the flora. The only saxifrage I

found was a pink/purple one that was on a ledge at Graig Fach. As it was growing on a north facing ledge at one of the highest most exposed points in Glamorgan I had high hopes it was **purple saxifrage**. Unfortunately when Julian Woodman and I climbed down to it, we were disappointed to find it was a cultivated garden type of mossy saxifrage, which from a distance did a good impression of purple saxifrage! I didn't see any **mossy saxifrage** at Craig Y Llyn, but other rare plants seen there include **roseroot**, **common butterwort**, **filmy-ferns**, **fir clubmoss** and **lesser meadow rue**'.

Paul added that 'Incidentally the bee orchids at Talbot green roundabout are looking pretty good I haven't had a chance to count them yet, but when I do I will let you know'. These orchids are left uncut by the Council's Parks Department as a pilot project. I was grateful to Paul and also Jo Bates for complimenting the Park's boys on their work. They had had some criticism from other members of the public for not cutting the grass earlier and the compliments helped balance things out. Paul also recorded at Beddau the spiky, low growing shrub **butchers broom**, 'with its tiny flowers'.

Perhaps the least desirable botanical phenomenon of recent years has been the explosion of Himalayan balsam. The recent string of wet summers has seen the plant's colonisation of many hillside sites. Terry Hourihan painted a picture of the hillsides around the Graig, which I suspect is familiar to many of us 'a more recent longer walk along PROW 99 to the junction with PROW 96, 97 and 98 identified a considerable patch of the weed at this junction and to the south side of the "Forest Uchaf Bungalow" Gravity taking its toll and spreading the weed down the bank towards the flat wetland / marsh area known locally as "The Feathers". The Balsam is rapidly

descending onto this environment, which being damp etc will provide an ideal spreading ground and so on to affect the grazing areas of Dan Y Bryn farm and further south to Coed Fforest-isaf and the grounds of the University'. As many of us have, Terry mused on what can be done 'a programme of strimming to take the weed out before it seeds (especially as the balsam area is quite self contained at the moment) – maybe some posters so walkers can identify and pull up the stray plants and if some active control can be taken on the path by the bungalow – it could be possible for this wetland area maintain its biodiversity.'

Fungi

Mark Steer has been looking for fungi in Brynna Woods, Llanharan and reported **jelly ear** *Auricularia auricularia-judae*, **dryad's saddle** *Polyporus squamosus*, and **stinkhorn** *Phallus impudicus*.

Butterflies and moths

2012 was one of the most disappointing Lepidoptera years that I can remember: whereas 2010 and 2011 had long wet periods, they did both start and finish well and my memory is of lots of **orange tips** and lots and lots of **common blue** butterflies. In 2012 I saw perhaps three common blues all summer. Still it doesn't do to dwell on such things and this year I saw more **small tortoiseshells** than in the previous ten, which gives me hope that this, the most beautiful of all our butterflies, may become common once again.

In May, Ben Williams reported 'I went over to Llantrisant Common this afternoon. I saw three orange tips; four **green veined whites**; four **brimstones** and one **peacock** but no **small pearl-bordered fritillary** (see below). Overall the sightings were pretty poor but when you look around the first thing you notice is the absence of flowers especially the preferred nectaring varieties. However I

did see a small **grass snake** so that lifted the day somewhat. After the Common I decided to have another look at Clydach Vale, thinking that if they are flying up there they should be flying elsewhere. There, my luck was in and I saw four small pearl-bordered fritillary, all newly hatched and males. Up there, the situation was the same with few nectaring plants and the butterflies squabbling over the few flowers that were yielding any'.

On a beautiful (if breezy) May 8th, I saw orange tips, green veined white, peacock, **speckled wood** and several small tortoiseshell at Nant Celyn, Efail Isaf and another orange tip at Parc Dowlais, Llantwit Fardre.

On May 28th Paul Marshman reported small pearl-bordered fritillary (SPBF) with **small heaths** on Llwynypia Slopes near the old Llwynypia Hospital Site: a site which seems to have supported a small fritillary colony for years. On June 12th I saw 6 SPBFs at Parc Eirin, Tonyrefail, while a sunny morning on June 13th allowed me to see 10 SPBFs at Clydach Vale, 14 at the new Council Reserve at Cwm Fields, Beddau and 6 on Llantrisant Common. On all sites small heaths were doing well: another bright note for 2012. On the 18th June **large skipper** and the first **meadow browns** were about at Nant Celyn (Efail Isaf) and most pleasingly 4 small tortoiseshells. Small skippers appeared on Llantrisant Common by June 27th and on the 27th of July on the Rhondda Tributaries high above Blaenrhondda I saw 4 or 5 **dark green fritillary** and 2 worn SPBFs together with small heaths and meadow browns.

Proof that a management and partnership working works, was amply illustrated by an email from Richard Smith at the Graig Common, Llantrisant 'yesterday, I carried out a habitat survey of Y Graig. Very good news. In a nutshell, in 5 years the amount of good high brown fritillary habitat on Y

Graig has increased by 12 fold from 0.11 hectares to 1.27 hectares, thanks to all of the various successful partner inputs, not least the commoners' cattle & ponies'. This is really encouraging.

Richard Smith, Ben Williams and others manfully looked for **marsh fritillary** butterflies (MF) butterflies in the gathering gloom of June, but never downhearted and ever positive Richard reported in mid June '*I did find one MF today on a different part (Paul Denning's usual spot) of Tonyrefail NE to where Scott & Nick found them a couple of weeks back, so they've been seen in three parts of this site. Habitat is looking great with bog ashodel just starting to flower*'. As reported above, Mark's marbled white was another highlight of the butterfly year.

Mark Steer reported the **chimney sweep** moth from Brynna Woods, Llanharan. This day-flying, soot brown moth is quite an uncommon species. I was lucky (in mid June) to have a **hummingbird hawk moth** visit the red valerian in my front garden. The valerian grows immediately outside the front room window and the family was able to watch the hummingbird from a few inches. In the autumn the same windows allow close views of the Michaelmas daisies, and this year amongst the hosts of hoverflies and bees, there were several small tortoiseshells, red admirals and commas.

Dragonflies

On a sunny warm morning on June 13th I saw **four-spotted chaser** and **emperor dragonfly** at Cwm Fields, Beddau, **golden-ringed dragonfly** at Llantrisant Common and **azure blue** and **common blue** damselflies at Clydach Vale. The newly dug garden pond was very quickly colonised by **large red damsselfies**, and many eggs were laid. This shows how opportunistic some species are and how rapidly new breeding sites can be used. Every spring **beautiful demoiselles** flutter

through the gardens of Miskin, having emerged from the River Ely. For someone brought up on the slow, sluggish rivers of Hertfordshire these are exotic things and I never tire of the thrill of the iridescence flicker of a passing beautiful demoiselle.

Other invertebrates

Mrs Charnock sent me a picture of a homemade bug hotel her husband Eddie has made and put up and which is now attracting invertebrate interest. A few years ago I drilled various holes in a couple of bits of old wood and stuck them in sunny locations in my garden: these were quickly used by solitary bees and wasps, the mud plugged holes showing where they laid their eggs. I tend to go on and on about bees and wasps in my garden and this year I had a really 'red letter day' (or days). In June (and despite the weather) I saw on three separate occasions the spectacular and totally unmistakeable male version of the **long-horned bee (*Eucera longicornis*)** in my garden. I say unmistakeable, because although it is about the size of a honeybee the antennae are incredible long (nearly as long as the bee itself) and hence the horned bit of its name. Two years ago I fleetingly saw one in the garden, feeding on wood bitter vetch (a really good bee plant), but this year a male (or males) were attracted by the cranesbills and the broad bean flowers and I had fantastic views (although never with a camera or net in hand). The long-horned bee is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan species (BAP), much reduced in its UK distribution and dependent on old flower rich meadows and bare ground on banks (in which it makes its nest burrows). Miskin has flower-rich old grasslands (as many parts of RCT have) and old (or new) banks with bare ground: somewhere nearby there must be a colony of long-horned bees. I didn't find the colony this year, but I will try again next year. We now have another BAP species to consider. They are very fond of pea flowers and

apparently **meadow vetchling** (which is a fairly common meadow plant in RCT) is a real favourite.

In Mid June, at the other end of the County Borough I was also lucky to come across another totally unmistakable bee, the **ash mining bee (*Andrena cineraria*)** feeding on **tormentil** flowers in rhos pasture in Hirwaun. This is a big, black and white 'pied' bee and looks like nothing else. Its one of those that I have seen in books and thought I'd like to see that: it didn't disappoint. Apparently it is spreading its range in the UK and looking at distribution maps it seems to be well established in the Brecon Beacons (although fewer records from further south). It is another one to add to our LBAP roll of honour.

Rolf Brown has sent the following excellent account from Aberdare '*Please see below my garden insect list from last year as I said I would ages ago now!! As you can tell I didn't use a microscope!!'*

*Bees - *Bombus hortorum*, *Bombus lucorum*, *Bombus lapidarius*, *Bombus pratorum*, *Bombus hypnorum*, *Bombus pascorum*, *Adrena haemorrhoa*,
Beetles- *Adala bipunctata* (2spot ladybird), *Calvia 14-guttata* (Cream-spot ladybird), Sawfly - *Cephus pygmaeus* (sawfly), *Nematis ribesii*,
Hoverfly Leucozona lucorum (hoverfly), *Eristalis tenax*, *Melantsoma* sp., *Scaeva* sp. *Syrphus ribesii*, *Neoascia podagraria*, *Episyrphus balteatus*,
Anits - *Lasius niger* and *Lasius flavus*
Spiders - *Dysdera crocota*, *Araneus diadematus*, *Pisaura mirabilis*, *Pholcus phalangoides*
Centipede - *Lithobius* sp, and *Scutigerella immaculata*
Galerucella lineola (leaf beetle), *Cantharis rustica* (soldier beetle)
Mordon equestris (narcissus fly), *Algais urtica* (small tortoiseshell)*

Ouropteryx sambucaria (swallowtailed moth), *Otiorhynchus clavipes* (weevil) *Armadillidium vulgare* (pill woodlouse) and *Chorthippus brunneus* (field grasshopper).

Also Aberdare Park Oak Woodland has rapidly improved since mowing reduced around 3 years or so ago... a lone Southern Marsh orchid has found its way in and lots of oak regeneration at last (sorely needed)

Mark Steer has been recording beetles at Brynna Woods and saw **violet oil beetle *Meloe violaceus*** and **bloody nosed beetle *Timarcha tenebricosa***.

Anyway sorry for the super long newsletter, I should have done one in July, but you know how things go. Anyway thanks for all the records and apologies for any I have missed.

Richard Wistow, Ecologist
Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC
Llwyncastan
Library Road
Pontypridd, CF37 2YA
Richard.j.wistow@rctcbc.gov.uk