

RECORDERS' NEWSLETTER



Recorders Newsletter 31 (Summer 2013)

I recently gave a talk to the Treorchy Senior Citizens Club. As usually happens at such events, I picked up invaluable nuggets of local information which simply don't appear in any book. On this occasion I was waxing lyrical about the recovery of the water quality in the Rhondda and the return of stoneflies and dippers and sea trout and otter and I was told about the 'crachadon' (I asked several times, but with my poor Anglo Saxon ear and even poorer Welsh spelling, that was as close as I got). The ladies described the crachadon as the small black fish they used to find (as children) in the coal spoil silt of the Rhondda. To me it sounds like something out of the Lord of the Rings. What species of fish the crachadon actually is, or was, is hard to say. Perhaps was it just any minnow or stickleback that managed to survive in the coal black mirk, but I would love to know more. Does any of this ring a bell with anyone? It sounds like a folk tale that shouldn't be lost and the existence (and perhaps disappearance) of the crachadon stands as testimony to the change in the environment of Rhondda River; a change which has happened in much less than a lifetime.

Weather

Our weather has continued to do what our weather is supposed to do, and therefore act erratically and without obvious pattern. After Christmas the dry cold winter continued into a dry cold spring, with grassland sites looking distinctly mid-winter even in May. This was followed by a hot blast in July and then (as opposed to recent years) a surprising pleasant August. All of this may have had short term (and perhaps longer) implications for our biodiversity, but exactly what those are, we will have to wait and see. However, clues may be present in the reports and records you have sent in;

As ever Marcus Middlehurst has provided meticulous rainfall records for Treherbert;
January - Total 337mm highest 81mm on 29th there was 365mm snow. 6 dry days.
February - Total 139mm highest 60mm on 13th there was 35mm snow. 14 dry days.
March - Total 178mm highest 43mm on 15th 45 on 21st there was 50mm snow. 15 dry days.
April - Total 130.5mm highest 37mm on 13th with 16 dry days.
May - Total 249mm highest 53mm on 14th. 14 dry days.

In May, Marcus noted, that I added the dry days because I had the data and it had been unusually dry for us since January!

June - Total rainfall 176mm. Highest 32mm on 12th June.

July – Total rainfall 118mm highest 37mm on 28th. It rained on only 9 days in total.

August - Total rainfall 268mm. Highest rainfall 115mm on 4th.

As the July heat wave waned, Paul Marshman gave me some headline figures; This July was Paul's warmest in over 40 years of weather recording at Llwynypia with the temperature in the 'low 30s' on many days in the month. There were only 68 mm of rain in the whole of July which was exceeded on just two days in August when Paul had 60 mm on the 4th and 50 mm on the 5th.

Birds

The cold weather meant that our winter visitors held on late this year, and Paul Marshman saw a male **goosander** on the Rhondda on the late date of May 2nd. The Spring was very late and I didn't hear my first **chiffchaffs** (2 singing males Craig Yr Hesg LNR) until the incredibly late date of April 11th (nearly a month later than I usual first hear 'chiff-chaffing') the next day there were singing **willow warblers** and chiffchaffs at Pantgraigwen, Pontypridd (normally there is at least a fortnight between the first dates for hearing those two).

Swallows were also later, Paul Marshman saw his first in the week of April 8th, with 15 swallow and 10 **sand martin** over the river in Llwynypia on the 14th. My first swallow was on the 15th when I saw groups at Aberdare and in Pontypridd. Paul mentioned how (this spring) swallows arrived in flocks (unlike their usual solitary appearances), suggesting birds have been held up by the cold weather (probably somewhere in France or Spain) before being released en masse when some better weather finally broke the icy grip. There were also groups of 6 **wheatears** back on the hills of Llwynypia on the 14th instead of the ones and twos that usually start appearing in March. On April 16th, Paul had 7 chiffchaff, 3 willow warbler but only one **blackcap** on his Llwynypia beat, however he had blackcap in his garden for a week or so before that: here a bird defended his bird feeder against all comers, suggesting that the newly arrived birds were too hungry to sing. Paul also mentioned that **reed buntings** regularly visited his garden over the last few hungry months of late winter and early spring. He could watch them fly back up the valley to their rushy territories, however they never stayed long and soon returned to his garden: again this was first hand evidence of the long late winter, the fact that birds had found every last seed on the mountainside and were being forced down into gardens. Paul had **whitethroat** in his garden in early May and six finch species were still visiting his bird feeders. Like our medieval ancestors, birds find the early spring the hungriest time of all and particularly so after a long late winter. However, to buck the trend Paul's first **cuckoo** arrived on April 16th, equalling his earliest ever (1974). The trend was even more bucked, when Mark Evans reported that his mate Gordon heard one on the 14th in Cefnpennar. Paul Marshman reckoned the spring of 2013 was the best for a few years for cuckoos (with much more calling by local birds than in recent springs) and birds heard on every transect walk. Paul Denning confirmed a general feeling that '*cuckoos also seem to be doing very well*': all of which makes the fact that I didn't hear a single 'cuck-oo' this spring even more annoying !!

Despite the late spring, we had some encouraging news on **wood warblers** in the last newsletter and now there is more from Paul Denning *'last May I had at least 3 male wood warblers singing in Gelli-wion woods (Pontypridd), and I saw a male redstart'* Paul sent me a superb picture of a wood warbler caught in mid 'shivering' song . Wood warblers were also back in Glynconel Local Nature Reserve where Paul Marshman heard three singing males. In April I was very pleased to find a **tree pipit** territory at the Council managed Nant Celyn Grassland Site at Efail Isaf. Around the same time Peter Harris told about some of the birds in his Tylorstown's back garden, I was most envious of the visits he gets from **linnets** (in this day and age you are really lucky to have your garden used by linnets) and **marsh/willow tit**, both (or either) of which are now really scarce birds in RCT. Peter also told me about the albino **blackbird** that frequents his mother-in-laws Tylorstown garden, partial albino-ism in blackbirds is quite common, but you rarely see a full albino.

In April, and combining two of my favourite animals, Paul Carson sent the following *'I thought that you might be interested that have just observed 10 jackdaws pulling hair off the back of my highland bull, presumably for nesting material. Our bull stood perfectly still, obviously enjoying what was happening'*. Which actually fits quite nicely into Marcus's 'Wildlife Incidents' (see below).

Penrhos Cutting Key Countryside Site, Nantgarw, is a great site, a place where old railwaylines and sidings now support woodland gorges, with cycle paths instead of streams. Ideal habitat for low level **sparrowhawk** forays, and Kevin Oates and Gareth Henson witness just such an avian strafing in April. Angharad Morgan (via Kevin Oates) passed on the following sightings for Ynysybwl, which included a couple of **house martin** nests (always good to know) and **masonry** bees (one of my favourites) on her mum's house.

Again in April, Jonathan Barrett sent me some fantastic **tawny owl** pictures, as he explained *'I went back to Maerdy today and a slow drive up along the river. I watched a sparrow hawk (I think) out hunting and then just along from Castel Nos I came across a tawny owl. I was able to get the camera out and get about twenty stunning pictures (one attached). Lots of other birds but sadly*

*I am also positive I saw a **crossbill** again today in Llanwonno as well as quite a few **brown trout** in the small pond at the top of the old reservoir in Llanwonno'*. I had reports that crossbill numbers may have fallen in our area this year (they roam the forests of Wales breeding where the plantations are seeding), so Jonathan's report was most welcome. Jonathan sees a lot of our upland forestry plantations and in May he also reported two (separate) **green woodpeckers** and **greater spotted woodpecker** in Llanwonno, and near the Brynfynnon Pub he heard a **cuckoo**. He also reported **goldfinches** in Maerdy and **yellow finches** in Llanwonno: the latter was a tantalising report – they probably were siskin, but perhaps Jonathan saw long **yellowhammers**? While Jonathan's record of a **merlin** *'just above Lluest Wen reservoir, Maerdy'* is welcome confirmation that this beautiful falcon is still in the area.

Mark Evans went **nightjar**-ing in Cefnpennar area in June, and *'although the ambient temperatures were in the low double figures, last night, the easterly breeze made things decidedly chilly up there . One male was heard churring in the distance, somewhere over in the easterly section of the site. The only other nightjar was another male (presumably) in the*

western section, which shot past me, at a range of a couple of metres, calling as it went. There was no nightjar food flying about up there, the only insect I noticed being a crane fly, so that last male was heading down to warmer climes in the Cynon valley, as fast as its wings could carry it. I think that area will improve vastly once the spruce re-plant has put on a few of years more growth and the ground vegetation increases, encouraging the population of flying insects..... On my way back down, the Gwaun Helen male was churring and wing clapping. Before I went home, I went to the car park on top of Craig-y-llyn, to check the northern sky for noctilucent cloud and could hear another nightjar churring in the felled area to the south east of Llyn Fawr.' Which all goes to show that nightjar populations are still doing OK in RCT, and with the massive larch clearances (and therefore creation of open breeding areas) in the forestry plantations, one would anticipate numbers to keep rising for a few years yet.

Many years ago, in Bonneygrove Primary School library, I leafed through a tatty, black and white paperback on bird watching and found a photograph of a **treecreeper** squeezing into a bark split treecreeper nest. Since then I have always wanted to see (but haven't yet) a real life treecreeper nest, but Gary Welsby has, and he sent me a report of one in our own Parc Dowlais Key Countryside Site in Llantwit Fardre: I was momentarily envious. I did however see (with Gary) a **red kite** over Nant Celyn, Efail Isaf on June 5th. Also in June Paul Marshman report **spotted flycatchers** from both Glyn cornel and Tyntyla Farm in his bit of the Rhondda and in July he had four male **bullfinches**, two females and a juvenile feeding on ash seeds.

In September Jonathan Barrett, *'was on the Tylorstown river walk on Wednesday of this week with PCSO Lee Clarke when we saw a **kingfisher**. The location was approximately just below the Tylorstown Sports Centre. On the same river between Tylorstown and Lluest Wen Reservoir we see **herons** on almost every occasion that we are there.'*

Seeing something for the first time is always thrilling, especially something iconic, as Mike Steers related *'I was with Tony Swann when he saw red kite, first time I have seen one. They are fantastic birds.'* A sentiment we can all agree with.

Tony sent me six features of late summer from Llanharan/Brynna;

- 1. 1st August – Brynna Woods – near bridge over Ewenny Fach, a spotted flycatcher carrying food, couldn't find where it went but must be nesting locally. First sighting for many years of the species that breeds locally elsewhere but favours higher areas with more open grassy areas.*
- 2. 8th August – Brynna Woods, first mixed flock of tits after breeding and summer moult comprising of **long-tailed tit, great, blue and one coal tit***
- 3. 12th August – At Home (Oakbrook Estate), last sightings of **common swifts** fledgling in front of house finally left the nest, possibly two broods this year. Will miss the screaming of a good dozen swifts, both morning and evening. This year they appeared to fly lower and, if I didn't know better, take delight in teasing my cat, but do I know better !*

BTO web site contains details of winter migration movement. Mozambique for Xmas and the New Year sounds good !

*Locally, swifts have adapted to use gaps provided when UPVC guttering and facing boards have been installed. Just enough gaps appear to provide an ideal nest sight (Tony sent me a photo of same, his observations are important because one of the concerns that we have for house nesting birds is that our ever more weather proof roofs exclude them, and might be part of the reason for their declines. From Tony's obs it sounds like swifts have started to cope, but I am less sure about **house sparrows** ability)*

- 4. A single swift showed up on 16th August evening and visited at least two of the nest sites that evening, next morning and repeated the visits the following evening and subsequent morning – not seen afterwards. I have wondered whether swifts will feed other young, as the nests in my house were visited, when chicks are in nest by up to 4 birds. Pardon the pun, 'swift procession', especially in the first few hours after dawn and again during evening feeding time. Could this stray swift have been a nestling last year!*
- 5. The onset of autumn combined with the end of the summer moult has seen sightings increase in later September, but the mild weather has resulted in no visible inward movement of winter visitors, yet. Other years have seen relatively early arrival of **thrushes** augmenting the established birds and creating more territorial guardianship of berry bearing trees and shrubs.*
- 6. The latter part of the summer provided excellent weather for additional broods and currently 2 pairs of **nuthatches** are still feeding fledglings. Oddly I have seen them carrying **sloes** – one at a beak full time'. Tony's report of nuthatches feeding young with sloe's, is (I am sure) a rarely observed event, one assume that the normal breeding season for nuthatches doesn't coincide with evenly remotely ripe sloes. I wonder if they are after the flesh of the sloe or the stone inside or both?*

*Good news came from the Cynon/Merthyr **raven** roost in August from Mark Evans 'yesterday morning, I counted the raven roost and had a total of 351, which is the largest ever August count for that roost'.*

As I write the swallows and house martins are moving out and through: Strinda Davies saw well over one hundred house martins feeding low over the Taff in Pontypridd in dreadful rain on September 19th. Were they were local birds with young still in the nest, or migrants sheltering from the weather, or perhaps a mixture of both?

Since 1997, Mark Evans and Martin Bevan have undertake a BTO Breeding Bird Survey transect at SO 0501 (Cwmbach). Mark has summarised some of the raw data into bar charts, which are food for thought. 2013 contained the lowest number of bird species recorded on the transect in the 17 seasons, and was one of the three lowest for total number of individual birds (of all species) recorded in any year. It is snap shot and the results could be due to all sorts of variables, but there has been much talk about the loss of birds from the environment in recent decades: as reflected in the shear numbers of our commonest 20 or so species. The evidence does point to both a loss of vulnerable (uncommon) species populations and a continued 'thinning out' of the populations of many common species. Only long-term monitoring and assessment can thrash these issues out, so we are lucky to have BBS tetrads

in RCT (and people willing to survey them) to ensure that the national data-set does have representation from RCT.

Mammals

In response to the request for more mammal records, Mike Shrewing has provided the following for his bit of the Rhondda. These include a **weasel** from Blaencwm (SN 92795 00198) in 2008, probable **Natterers** and **whiskered bats**, together with **common pipistrelle** and **soprano pipistrelle** in Maindy Woodlands, Pentre (SS 96488 95507) in 2009, with common, and soprano pipistrelle and **Daubenton's** at Black Bridge, Pentre (SS 96684 95856), pipistrelles at Windsor Street bridge, Treorchy (SS 95454 96922) and at Glyncornel Lake, Daubenton's, common, and soprano pipistrelle (SS 99384 93728).

I have been discussing the bats of Llanharan with David Harry, and armed with a bat detector (and access to bat call frequencies on the internet), an excellent piece of local biodiversity action is developing. David has been checking bat movements in his locality and lending the bat detector to neighbours he has encouraged the interest of others. It is early days, and interpreting the clicks and burps of a bat detector is never easy, but a picture of how bats are using and moving around the local neighbourhood is starting to emerge.

The established **lesser horseshoe bat** roost in the South West of the County has had another good year and excitingly a smaller maternity has been discovered (by the householder) nearby. Now we need to figure out how those two roosts interact.

Again, helping to fill in local knowledge, Mark Steers reports '*plenty of **grey squirrels** in Brynna Woods, **moles** seem to be very active this year with lots of molehills on roadside verges in April and also in Brynna Woods and for the first time in 11 years in my garden, which backs onto the Woods. Wildlife Trust reports **otter** signs along Ewenny Fach. Regarding **mink**, local people have suggested present along Ewenny Fach not sure how recent and unconfirmed. **Red fox** plenty in the woods and around. I heard them calling in February quite a lot. **Rabbit** 10 years ago they were in 'Small Meadow' but no signs now. I have seen 2 in the last year in south west area of the Woods'. Mark also relayed some evidence of **badger** activity in the local area, but evidence of a sett.*

In the Mammal Newsletter we suggested that **brown hares** are restricted to the south-west of the Borough, however it looks like Jonathan Barrett has found other new sites, with a hare on the road near Rhiwsaeson (LLantrisant) and

*' a second hare last week on the old Parish Road on the edge of Llanwonno forest'. In Llanwonno, it looks like rabbits are doing well (at the moment) with Jonathan seeing lots inside the forest as well as the Council offices near Williamstown. A decade (or so) ago we had a little spate of possible **pine martin** and **red squirrel** reports, so Jonathan's possible sighting of a pine marten in Llanwonno forest is tantalising: 'I was on a banking watching some bikes when my attention was drawn to what I at first thought was a red squirrel crossing the main fire road (Route 47) in Llanwonno, however I soon thought it was too long for a squirrel and then just before it disappeared into the undergrowth I realised what it was'.*

Wynford and Jill Price saw a live (as opposed to the usual run-over version) **polecat** crossing the Ynysybwl Road in Pontypridd in early May, while I had three reports of run-over **mink**. Janine Bridge sent the following *'as I was travelling to work this morning on the Ely valley road (from Coedely to Royal Glamorgan hospital) I saw a dead mink on the road. The mink was half way down and on the right hand side travelling down'*. While Jonathan Barrett sent me a picture of a dead mink he found on the A473 between Talbot Green and Llanharan. Mink are tenacious and voracious, Wayne Davies told me about the animal that was (at the time) steadily working its way through the goldfish in his Aberaman garden pond (returning at regular intervals) and in the process outwitting a 2 inch square galvanised metal mesh placed over the pond.

Unrecorded Tetrad Report

SewBrec (South East Wales Biological Records Centre) have a regularly thing in which they identify a tetrad square (4 km²) which has few biodiversity records and ask local naturalists to rectify. This spring they chose SS9592 which occupies land at the top of the Clydach Vale valley, partially in RCT and partially in Bridgend. Rob and Linda Nottage responded to the call on the 6th of May, and Linda describes their findings *'walking up the rough track from Clydach Vale Countryside Park and found one or two plants of both **fir** and **stag's-horn clubmoss** beside the forest track (soon after passing the spoil tip at roughly SS959922). Thought you might be interested since these are uncommon in Glamorgan. Also in that square we found a **common frog** and lots of **tadpoles** in small forest track-side pools, and a couple of **green tiger beetles** on the track to Garn Fawr. The rough grassland west of Mynydd William Meyrick had singing **skylarks** and **meadow pipits** and a male **wheatear**. Birds in the forest were rather sparse. The wind turbines up there were a surprise – not on our map!*

*There was more bird-life in the adjacent square SS9692 with plenty of singing willow warblers and **tree pipits** and a **whitethroat**, and a pair of **grey wagtails** by the upper lake. Insects included more green tiger beetles, a **greater bee-fly**, **green-veined white**, **orange-tip** and **peacock butterflies**.*

Aberdare Mountains

After my rambling diatribe in the last Newsletter about the Kenyan Aberdare Mountains Mark Evans emailed *'I forgot to mention that yesterday, one of my customers gave me a cup of Aberdare tea, grown in the Aberdare range. How's that for a coincidence?'*

Fungi

Mark Steer sent through an excellent account of fungi in the Brynna Woods Wildlife Trust Reserve at Llanharan. His list includes **birch polypore**, **clouded agaric**, **deceiver**, **artist's fungus**, **King Alfred's cakes**, **honey fungus**, **glistening ink cap**, **common and/or leopard earthball**, **suphur tuft**, **yellow fairy-cup**, **candle snuff fungus**, **colbalt crust**, **scarlet elf cap**, **white brain** and **yellow curtain crust**.

Mark followed up that impressive list with more, including some very useful words on the difficulties of identifying some fungi groups; *'the main bolete I am seeing may be **Xerocomellus engelii** but I am finding it difficult to find information on this species. I have also found what is possibly **suede bolete (Boletus submentosus)**. Again this year the Boletes are covered with a white mould possibly **Hypomyces chrysosperus**. This makes*

finding boletes much easier but impossible to identify! iSpot is useful but there are many observations of Fungi with very limited information and I wonder how some id's are made! iSpot have a problem with lack of Experts to help with Fungi id's.'

*'Further recent observations included; **purple russula (Russula atropurpea), blushing bracket (Daedaleopsis confragosa), poplar fieldcap (Agrocybe cylindracea)** - under hybrid black poplar near to old Hendrewen Farm, the charmingly named slime mould **dog's vomit (Fuligo septica), fairy inkcap (Coprinellus disseminatus), pale staghorn (Calocera pallidospathulata), tar-spot fungus (Rhytisma acerinum), chicken of the woods (Polyporus sulphureus** inside cavity of an old oak), **tuberous polypore (Polyporus tuberaster** can be mistaken for dryad's saddle but usually single), **turkeytail (Trametes versicolor), Exida plana** (on 100 year old concrete), **dryad's saddle (Polyporus squamosus** good year for this species) and **deer shield (Pluteus cervinus).**'*

In Mark's words *'I am seeing a lot more Fungi but unable to give identifications. As I have said before I am not an expert. The more I know the more I realise I don't know!'* The last bit is the universal true-ism of natural history, some times, it is part of the frustration, but ultimately it is the root of the fascination.

Inspired by Mark's efforts, I visited Cefn Parc Cemetery for 20 minutes in mid September and found at least 5 different waxcap fungi, using the Aberystwyth University waxcap key (check their web site) these included **golden waxcap (Hygrocybe chlorophora)** in my mind much more a citrus yellow than the golden suggests), the red flushed **fibrous waxap (Hygrocybe intermedia)** and **meadow waxcap (Hygrocybe pratensis)**.

Amphibians and Reptiles

I was in the ideal position to see how long it takes **frog spawn** to hatch, when the two clumps 'laid' in my garden pond on March 7th hatched (if hatched is in any way an appropriate term) on April 9th - so virtually a month.

Kevin Huish passed on a very exciting report from Ian Norris of two **adders** in long-grass on the edge of Taff Well Park. While, inspecting (on a very hot day) an old tip near Ty Rhiw (Taffs Well) in July, Brian Webb saw four adders. Brian describes the sites as *'generally overgrown with numerous stables and a nearby manure heap'*: the site is on private land and Brian has seen adders at the same location before.

Ben Williams had something of a bumper year in his Tonteg garden with 5 frogs, 28 **palmate newts** and 1 **slow worm**.

Invertebrates

We worry about our native ladybirds and the implications of the new voracious **harlequin ladybird** (two of which Sonia Knowles found on top of the rubbish bins outside our Llwyn Castan offices in Pontypridd). I have seen more 7 spot ladybirds this year (which is good) and

Mark Evans sent me following; *'regarding the **Kidney-spot Ladybird**, I found and photographed one in a willow, near the bat hibernaculum, in DVCP. There is a site where any sightings of ladybirds can be reported and from which can be downloaded two useful PDF guides to ladybird adults and larvae. The Ladybird Survey can be found at: <http://www.ladybird-survey.org/default.aspx>'. So if you find a ladybird hibernating in your house, why not try looking it up.*

The cold spring did significantly reduce early spring and early summer butterflies. However, many of these delayed their emergence times and in June there were still large numbers of **orange tips** flying (Taffs Well Park (Kevin Huish), Parc Nant Celyn etc). Instead of the February **brimstones**, this spring brimstones emerged from hibernation, blinking into the full sun of June. Despite the cool, Strinda Davies saw a **holly blue** in the Goods Yard Car Park Pontypridd on May 3rd. Paul Marshman saw a **green hairstreak butterfly** at Cwm Bodwenarth, Gelli in early June with **small heaths**, **peacock** and **speckled wood**. Also and very pleasingly **small tortoiseshells** seem to have a much better year this year. This July I stood in the field behind my house, waist deep in creeping thistles and surrounded by 50 or 60 freshly emerged small tortoiseshells: it was a scene from the July's of the 1970s when small tortoiseshells were so common I just ignored them: I however no longer ignore this most beautiful of all our butterflies and always pause to admire them. **Ringlets** also seemed to have a very good summer, with lots of these superb chocolate brown butterflies 'jinking' their drunken way around the July countryside.

A couple of years ago Ben Williams recorded a string of colonies of the **white letter hairstreak butterfly** along RCT's bit of the River Taff. Last year was a damp squib for most butterflies, but Ben alerted me to good numbers once again emerging this summer. Further evidence of their good year came from Paul Denning who contacted Ben with "*I thought you may be interested to know that a friend of mine (Adrian Meredith) has seen and photographed two white letter hairstreaks in strange places recently. The first one was seen on the ground outside Tonypany Library (nearest Elm tree 50 metres away) and the second was seen nectaring on bramble at Penrhiwfer (no Elm tree in area)*". For my part I have seen these charming, tree top dwelling butterflies in Miskin, Pontyclun again this year. While Martin Bevan and Mark Evans saw lots in the Cynon Valley; I'll let Mark explain '*On the 14th July, Martin Bevan emailed me to tell me that he'd seen 8 White-letter Hairstreaks at the same site, in Robertstown, as in 2011. The week before, he'd seen a **Bee Beetle** (which is a marvellous looking thing) there, too.*

*Spurred on by that email, on the 18th July I checked the **wych elms**, along the river Cynon, in Penderyn. It was around nine in the morning and sunny. After a few minutes of watching the tree tops, I saw a white letter hairstreak flutter up from the top of one and in the following half hour saw individuals in brief flight and a pair fluttering around each other. Those trees are at 230m above sea level and as Martin said, "For you to find them up there, they must be all through the valley."*

On the 19th July, I paid a brief visit to some wych elms I knew of, alongside the Cynon, in Cwmbach and after the initial dismay at seeing several of them dying from Dutch elm disease, I was pleased to see a small greyish butterfly fly from my side of the river to the dying elms on

the other. Shortly after, I saw another, briefly, as it flitted around the outer branches of the small healthy elm, under which I stood and after a short period of watching, I saw a female, land on a leaf, around 5m away. She landed on the upper surface, then immediately crawled to the edge and around to the underside of the leaf. She then proceeded down the petiole to the twig and started dabbing the tip of her abdomen on the twig around the node, where the leaf petiole joins the twig. She was obviously laying eggs and although I couldn't see the eggs, even through my binoculars, she dabbed the tip of her abdomen five or six times in that one small area, before wandering off further along the twig, checking out the other nodes. Before I left to go back to work, I checked a large, healthy elm and saw a single white-letter hairstreak flutter around the sunny side of the crown. Based on Martin's and my observations, plus Ben's of course, it seems likely that there are colonies wherever groups of wych elms occur throughout the valleys'. These will all be new white letter hairstreak colonies for the national butterfly atlas.

In July I came across a **marbled white** butterfly on the Cae Fardre Housing Estate in Llantwit Fardre. I let Ben Williams and Paul Denning know and Paul sent the following '*I know that Marbled Whites are known as migrants, and are often seen at coastal sites - Lavernock point, Cardiff Heliport etc. I'm aware that they breed at Parc cwm Darran near Bargoed, but I can't see them dispersing as far as Llantwit Fardre. I suspect there may be a small breeding population of Marbled Whites somewhere in the area. On July 15th I went on the Glamorgan Botany group walk at Parc Cefn Onn, Cardiff. Just north of the park we saw and photographed a Marbled white in some grassland. As we reached the old quarry at the top (overlooking Caerphilly) we saw another one!*'. Even if you only have the mildest interest in butterflies, marbled whites are very obvious and distinctive: they are after all largish black and white butterflies. The only thing you might mistake them for is a **Magpie** moth, which coincidentally Margaret Harding sent me a photo of from her Beddau garden.

The new Church Village By-pass has road verges full of wildflowers, all of which have come from natural colonisation. It is lesson in giving nature a chance and the results are better than any seed mixes would have given us. Also all, the flowers are coming from local seed and are genuinely part of our biodiversity. I urge anyone wanting wildflower areas, to try and work with nature and not get too seduced by expensive seed mixes. Anyway Ben offered the following butterfly and moth experiences from the By-pass in August; '*My wife dragged me out for a walk along the bypass today and I was amazed to see how the flowers have progressed. The site was a great nectaring area and there were plenty of butterflies to see. I saw 15 male **common blues** and three females. I also saw one **brown argus** (never seen one of them there before – and I think a new RCT species). There were large numbers of **large, small and green veined whites**, peacocks a plenty and a few small tortoiseshells as well as a smattering of **meadow browns, gatekeepers** and speckled woods. But to cap it all I found **four eyed hawk moth caterpillars** feeding on Sallows. Three of them were about 3inches long and in their last instar but one was quite small and still had some growing to do. There were also a small colony of **buff tips moths** also feeding on Sallow further along and they too were in various stages of development. The Marsh grasslands look fantastic and the **devil's bit scabious** is all set to start flowering. I really must pay more attention to what's on my doorstep! Talking of devil's-bit scabious Alex Brown report a new site (well an extension to*

a know Site) from the edges of the Brecon Beacons and an additional area for marsh fritillary butterflies to try and use.

Marsh fritillary butterflies seem to have had a good year in the north (around Hirwaun) but were disappointing in the Tonyrefail area. August and September are the months when marsh fritillary caterpillar webs appear on devil's-bit scabious, often half hidden, in tussocks of purple moor-grass. A couple of hours of staring at your feet, as you struggle through marshy grassland, develops a particular stiffening of the neck and dull throb in the temples that only marsh fritillary web monitoring can provide; but it is all worth it when you finally stumble across a web of tiny caterpillars. Ben Williams (who has had some very gratifying web finds this autumn) was driven to verse;

*I went over to Ton yr Efail this afternoon and
I wandered about on my own for hours
Rummaging through those bloody flowers
I was getting quite despondent
Until at last quite resplendent
Three larval webs of Euphydryas aurinia
Tucked away nicely amongst the molinia*

It may not quite be Poet Laureate stuff, but for sheer feeling it is all there, and I know only too well that curious mix of pain, despondency and final triumph that only marsh fritillary monitoring delivers.

I was at Clydach Vale on July 22nd and saw 5 or 6 **dark green fritillaries** of which two were egg laying females, one on the south side of the top lake and the other on the side valley which runs up from the Top Lakes north bank. They were laying in typical sparse grassland with occasional patches of violets. Referring to Richard Smith's excellent "Frits about" newsletter (which co-ordinates all sightings of fritillary butterflies in Wales – let me know if you would like more info), I find that I reported **small pearl bordered fritillary** from Llantrisant Common (although not in the numbers of recent years) although I was glad to read that Paul Denning saw up to ten on the Common earlier in June. I also found this superb butterfly at Llantwit Fardre Marsh in June, where I hadn't seen it for over a decade. I also saw good numbers at the Council's field at Parc Eirin (Tonyrefail) and Ben and Richard S. saw butterflies at various other places in and around Tonyrefail.

Wasps can get a bad press (the 'what's the point of wasps' question) and when bored workers start to loaf around the garden in late summer and delight in harassing ice cream eaters, you can see why they have a PR problem. However for most of their lives, wasps assiduously collect grubs and larvae and are one of the famous 'gardeners friends'. Their loutish-ness in later life is one of the strange evolutionary twists of an otherwise strictly programmed social life. Anyway earlier in the summer, Marcus Middlehurst sent the following wasp related incident '*I have 2 wasp nests in the roof of my bird table and today they decided to emerge - got nice photos of the two nests each about 50mm diameter. The roof space they used was designed as 2 bird boxes but I think the wasp got there first as I watched a small bird trying to improve the access before the wasp took over*'.

Marks Steers sent some very nice invertebrate records from Brynna Woods; including '**violet oil beetle** (*Meloe violaceus*) in South Meadow near to main railway line (I have seen these for last few years and id confirmed at Cardiff Museum). **Chimney sweep moth** (*Odiezia atrata*) in South Meadow where there is plenty of **pignut** and **bloody-nosed beetle** (*Timarcha tenbricosa*). Finding this on concrete steps footpath by Maywood. Found last year in exactly the same place and id'd by Museum.

Whilst photographing dragonflies on the lake at Cwm Colliery, Paul Denning 'saw (and photographed) **scarce blue-tailed damselflies** on a pool. I'm not sure of their status in RCT, but I know they are rare in the rest of Glamorgan'. Many years ago, when I lived in Llantwit Fardre (about half a mile from Cwm) I caught a scarce tailed blue in my tiny back garden, at that time I assumed it must have wandered from Cwm Tips, where shallow pools and runnels are ideal habitat. The scarce blue-tailed damselfly is an exquisitely dainty damselfly, even more fragile looking than its much more common relative the **blue-tailed**. In south Wales, it is another one of those species, associated with colliery sites, and another indication of how old industrial Sites can provide habitat conditions which mimic the natural homes of a number of species; the irony being that for many species those natural homes are now rare.

In July I found a male **keeled skimmer** (*Orthetrum coerulescens*) , a bog pool specialist at Pant-y-Brad, Tonyrefail with more on Llantrisant Common

Wildlife Incidents

Marcus Middlehurst has had a suggestion for the newsletter, that may be popular, in Marcus's own words;

'I have over the years seen and heard of instances of humour, great intelligence and mutual co-operation between animals and birds and would be interested to hear other readers' anecdotes - to kick off, I offer the following examples:-

- 1) A **rat** seen lying on it's back securely and safely gripping a hens egg, whilst it's companion rat drags the first one by it's tail to the burrow!
- 2) Two **gulls** (sometimes more) harassing a **heron** who is carrying a fish in it's mouth, one gull flies below the heron and catches the discarded fish when the heron eventually gives in! Quite commonly seen.
- 3) Three **magpies** dancing on my birdhouse roof to make it swing on it's slender pole, this causes the food on the tray to spill on the floor and they dive down to eat it!
- 4) Sheep at Llwynypia Hospital and elsewhere seen crossing the cattle grid on the hill by lying down and ROLLING over the bars of the grid!
- 5) Horses in the stables being let out of their stables by other horses who are tethered nearby but who can reach the bolts!

I am sure many readers may have similar stories, so let us share them!

Disease in Whinberry

Mark Evans has been watching (with dismay) a disease affecting whinberry (bilberry) on a section of hillside above Cwmbach. Mark describes the symptoms and it would be interesting to know if anyone has seen similar elsewhere in the Borough; *'the leaf spot on bilberry seems not to cause defoliation, though the spotting is often so severe that most of the leaf and stem becomes red, with areas of dead tissue and very little if any green photosynthesising leaf surface is left to function normally. In addition to this, the spotting on the stems may be having an effect on the vascular system.*

Over the decades, I have spent a lot of time in these heathy areas and when I found this in 2010, it was the first time I'd ever seen anything like this on Vaccinium (whinberry/bilberry) and I've never previously seen the sort of widespread death of Vaccinium shoots and plants that are now occurring annually'.

Botany

Martin Bevan has been monitoring the authorities only **pyramidal orchid** colony in Forestry Commission (I should say NRW) plantations above Llwydcoed, this July he counted 48 flower heads.

While in the East Anglia, **bluebells** lives in bluebell woods, here in the west they nowhere near as fussy. One of the splendours of Valley's life is to stand at any bus stop of your choice in May, and admire the bluebell haze on the mountainside. This year seems to have had a particularly good bluebell year: Paul Marshman described 'a sea of blue' at Glyn cornel in early June (bluebells are always late, but spectacular in Glyn cornel) and Jonathan Barrett noted *'I have been surprised this year as to the high amount of Bluebells in RCT. I can never remember seeing them on this scale before. They are everywhere'.*

Margaret Harding sent me photos of a new location for **round-leaved wintergreen (Pyrola rotundifolia subsp maritime)** from Cwm Tips at Beddau. With the help of Wendy Carruthers and her husband Robert, She was able to pinpoint its location as ST 06536 86430 at an elevation 131m on Monday 15th July 2013. Round-leaved wintergreen is a dune slack species (e.g. the wet bits between the dunes at Kenfig), but wet colliery spoil seems to suit them fine. Margaret's finding is at least the fourth report I have had for the species in RCT (all on colliery spoil). The seeds have somehow found their way in from the coast and these inland coal slacks are obviously to their liking.

Mark Steers has noticed that the multi-daisy flowered **Shaggy Soldier (Galingosa ciliate)** is rampant in Brynna Allotments. Looking at the Flora of Glamorgan (Wade et al) Shaggy Soldier is listed as a rather uncommon, introduced species: an 'adventive' of disturbed ground and as such an allotment would seem an ideal place.

Paul Denning send me a really intriguing email *'Are you aware of the **Orpine** growing in the very old lanes north of Church Village? It is quite a rare plant in Glamorgan, and the Church village population was found in 2012 by a local botanist called David Barden. He found it growing (it's quite well hidden in the hedgerows) at four sites. It is still a couple of weeks away*

from flowering, and looks quite native where it's growing. I'll photograph when it does flower.' Orpine is a native stonecrop, paraphrasing from Francis Rose's Wildflower Key, it includes the following characteristic features; succulent, waxy-leaved, 20-60 cm tall with red-purple flowers in dense umbel-like heads; So if you get it see, it is no shrinking violet. It is native species of old hedge banks and lanes and like Paul I can't see any reason why the ancient hedge banked lined lanes around Church Village aren't a perfectly natural location.

The roller coaster fortunes of the **green winged orchids** at Cefn Parc Cemetery, Llantrisant leave me scratching my head. With hay meadow management benefiting all the other fantastic array of grassland flora at the Cemetery, the stubborn exception is the green winged orchid (who should love our management) but refuses to proliferate. After two or three years of gradually increases in flowering numbers (up to 40 plus a couple of years ago), numbers crashed in the dreadful weather of 2012 (just 13) and this year numbers only barely made that total. On positive side they now are occurring in two locations in the larger area of hay meadow, which is where we really want to encourage them. The late spring of 2013 after the washout of 2012 surely didn't help flowering as Margaret Harding noticed in May '*I was determined to see if our orchids at Cefn Parc had been delayed by our bad weather..... the orchids are out just, 8 I counted in the usual spot and the 1 in the other meadow right at the top*'. All we can do is hope for better next spring.

In July, Paul Marshman picked out four plants that were 'showing well' on the Llwynypia's wet, flushed hillsides; **square stalked St John's-worts, marsh pennywort, ivy-leaved bellflower** and **bog asphodel**. He also described how a few plants of **heath groundsel** has re-appeared between the St. Mary's Well and the old Llwynypia Hospital Site after many years of absent, and in response to some recent ground disturbance on ditch sides. However that was eclipsed on the other side of the Valley, where Paul has found thousands of the plants on the Gelli Tips, an area where gorse had been recently burnt (and ground therefore disturbed). Heath Groundsel is described in the Flora of Glamorgan as '*very local: most frequent in acid cliff-heath in Gower and on acid dunes in Gower and the Vale*': so definite a very interesting record for the Rhondda.

As ever, thanks for the records and apologies if I have missed anything. Remember if you are moving house or changing your email address, would prefer paper or email or Welsh, please don't forget to let us know.

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