

RECORDERS' NEWSLETTER



Recorders Newsletter 32 (Winter 2014)

Crachaan?

In the last Newsletter I raised the issue of the small fish that used to dwell in the colliery silt of our rivers. Despite my inability to spell its name properly, there was enough there to have triggered some interesting discussion. Rob Jones sent me the following *'regarding your crachadons as boys we used to catch them in the river behind Gelli Park they were anything from olive to a blackish colour, we also caught what we called **bullheads** or **tom thumbs** as we called them, a small fish with a large head, I also caught a salt water version of these in the rock pools at Rest Bay'*. Wynford Price remembered them as the **sticklebacks** of his youth. From Vic Doyle *"I think they are referring to **stone loach**, which is definitely still around in the Rhondda Fach at the whirly pool in Blaenllechau'*. Vic sent me a fine sunlit picture of him paddling in the whirly pool of Blaenllechau in his newly constructed coracle, which (as an aside) he believes *'is the first recorded coracle used in the Rhondda Fach'* and that further *'no fish were harmed in the launching of the boat!'*

At a talk to the Rhondda Civic Society in Treorchy, the consensus was firmly in favour of the stone loach. In the same meeting an experienced local angler described how stone loach were once much more common in the Rhondda, even in the days of coal silt, and how their numbers have crashed in recent decades. Now what could be the cause of that? Surely the water quality and clarity is better today, so what factor might be affecting stone loaches? As a new aside, the same angler told me about (wait for it, wait for it) *'Boingees'* (here we go again), a Rhondda name for bullheads!! I fear my phonetic Welsh spelling has now travelled unacceptably far from any semblance of a safe pathcan anyone help !!

Weather

Marcus Middlehurst' weather reports charted a dry September with a total rainfall of just 112mm of which 40mm came on the 12th (Paul Marshman recorded 2 inches over the same 24 hours from his Llwynypia rain gauge), this was followed by a damper October with 477mm (and 77mm on 21st) and *'only 5 rain free days in the month!'*, and then a return to dry (but colder) conditions in

November with 270mm (and 61 mm on the 6th) and the first snow of winter on 18th although *'this was with rain as well.'* However, December saw a resolute return to westerly Atlantic airflows with 684 mm of rain (highest 81mm on the 29th, 70mm on the 15th and 23rd) and *'having moored up the dingy, removed the waders and souwester - and that was just to get to the rain gauge!* Marcus' January total was 592.5mm, with a maximum of 66 mm on 3rd. It goes to show how stoic Marcus is, when with nearly 600 mm for the month he mentioned that January's total was *'NOT as high as I expected, considering that it is wet nearly every day'*. A little further down the Rhondda, Paul Marshman recorded 17 inches in January (which I think is about 435 mm of rain) in Llwynypia.

Marcus's 2013 rainfall total was 3138.5mm, which included 450mm of snow. Marcus also sent me his rainfall totals for Treherbert for the last four years; Just to put that in context that makes 2013 considerably less wet than 2012, but wetter than all the other years since and including 2009 (2009 total rainfall 2553.3 mm, 2010 - 2085.38 mm, 2011 - 2996 mm and 2012 - 3966.5 mm).

Mark Evans sent me a summary of 2013 weather in Cwmbach;
January – 226.75 mm rainfall: max average temp 6.02, min average temp 1.36
February – 78.35 mm:
average max temp 5.61, min temp 0.30
March - 129.45 mm:
average max temp 5.98, min 0.29
April 65.20mm:
average max 11.06, min 2.65
May 136.86mm:
average max 15.30, min 4.88
June 77.35 mm:
average max 18.96, min 8.95
July 72.55 mm:
average max 24.97, min 12.17
August 139.00 mm:
average max 20.85, min 10.85

September 76.50 mm:
average max 17.95, min 8.12
October 361.75 mm:
average max 14.81, min 8.54
November 136.65 mm:
average max 9.26, min 1.91
December 443.10 mm:
average max 8:77, min 2.71

Total 1943.45 mm of rain, average max temp 13.29 and average min temp 5.18

Mark's records succinctly highlight the long cold spring of 2013, and the mild long autumn. Again the contrasts in total rainfall between Cwmbach and Treherbert are surely due to altitude and the relation of high ground to the prevailing wind directions.

Autumn Surprise

In early autumn Mark Evans sent me the following, it was, as Mark describes, a real autumn surprise (with some amazing photographs) *'On Saturday I decided to carry out a "Winter walk" visit to my BTO Winter Thrush Survey core square, on the edge of Llanwynno forest. Walking up to the square from the car, I was struck by the sheer abundance of fungi gracing both the coniferous and beech plantations; the beech plantations I pass through during the survey being particularly rich in both variety and quantity. It was all I could manage to keep my mind on the survey and save the fungi until after I'd finished the business in hand.*

*It still seems strange to spend hours in the forestry and not see or even hear a **Crossbill**. The thrushes were almost as scarce, but I did at least record four **blackbirds** and three **song thrushes**.*

As I was on the final 100 metres of transect, I stopped to scan and listen for thrushes. My back was to a mature spruce plantation and in front of me was a drystone wall, beyond

which was coniferous replant maybe seven or eight years old. As I stood there, I noticed movement on a broken down section of the wall, near me and realised instantly that it was a pair of smallish mammals tail-chasing. I instantly gave them my full attention, expecting to see a pair of weasels or stoats, but instead was presented with brown, black and white stripes. On seeing me the mammals stopped their chase and sat watching me and I in return stood there amazed at the sight of a pair of unmistakable **chipmunks**.

I watched them for a couple of minutes, then realising that no one would believe me, I slowly, carefully reached into my pocket for my phone and took a few photos. Having secured those and as the chipmunks had stayed put, I thought I'd chance the much more difficult and disruptive task of freeing my DSLR from its bag and get some more photos. Although they were curious and inquisitive enough to stay in view, they were also wary of being approached too closely and as I didn't have a telephoto lens, I knew I'd have to crop the photos, so despite the poor light (we were in the shade of the spruce plantation) I couldn't use a high ISO. I got a few shots, then left them and got on with finishing my survey. I had to return that way, so I stopped there to get a GPS fix and possibly a few more photos. One of them was sitting on top of the wall, to the left of me, next to a stunted oak so I got some more photos of it, then scanned the wall to my right and about 15 metres away I saw the other one, also sitting on the wall, washing itself. As I watched it, I realised there was another one a few metres further away, so I checked the one to my left was still there, which it was, making a total of three chipmunks. I noted the GPS fix then checked the one to my left again (still there), then looked down the wall to my right and there were three chipmunks sitting happily on top. I didn't see more than those four and left them in peace shortly after that. Obviously, these were there as a result of a

deliberate release, but how many were originally released and when? Were all four of them released or was it just a pair, which has bred. At least one of them looked younger than the two I originally saw. How many are actually up there anyway and what, if anything, should be done about it'.

Marks's report came as an incredible surprise. I have seen chipmunks for sale in pet shops and by all accounts they don't make particularly happy pets. A bit of research revealed that chipmunks have been established in large colonies in Belgium, although there are no recorded colonies from Wales. They are incredibly photogenic and Mark's photos were fantastic, but as voracious predators of ground nesting birds they will spell trouble if they do establish a population. Mark has contacted Natural Resource Wales and undertaken a site visit to show them the locality. If anyone sees chipmunks please let NRW (or myself) know. We must wait to see if a viable colony has become established.

Birds

The **swallow** and **house martin** autumn migration seemed earlier this year. I watched parties flying through Miskin over the last week of September and on the 29th at Llantwit Major I saw a huge movement with several thousand swallows and house martins migrating eastwards (into a considerable headwind) along the coast. Paul Marshman had groups of 30 house martins over his house on the 23rd of September and there were odd ones and twos in Pontypridd up to October 1st, but nothing much after that. In the Cynon Valley Mark Evans also noted the slipping away of the last summer migrant when in early October he noted '*last week there were flocks and flocks of hirundines passing down the valley, but now there are just a few stragglers. Chiffchaffs are still passing*

*through, as well as the odd **blackcap***. The autumn swallow and martin migration seemed to end ten days earlier than last year.

However, the biggest surprise came in October when a near neighbour Chris Lindley rang me to say his dog had caught a **quail** in his back garden in Miskin. He had rescued the bird and it was in a box. I called round and indeed he had a female or juvenile quail. Despite its adventures, it appeared healthy and Chris later released it: hopefully (as we speak) it is sunning itself somewhere in the Atlas Mountains. In recent years quail have been reported from the old Llanilid opencast site at Llanharan, maybe this bird originated from there. It was certainly the first quail I have ever seen.

Mark Evans Cynon/Merthyr **raven** count for early October realised a total of 183, *'which is the third highest October total'*. Mark also forwarded a fascinating summary of 49 survey visits he has made to the raven roost in recent years. There are some big fluctuations in numbers with 425 the largest ever count in September 2012, but a consistent pattern (beautifully illustrated by averaged monthly count 'bar charts') which shows that numbers peak in August (at nearly 250) before gradually declining to 100 or so birds from November to March and then gradually climbing back to an August maximum. All this fits perfectly with the raven breeding season, with paired adult birds holding territories and raising chicks from winter through to March, and then communally roosting over the summer. As Mark points out there seems to be a floating (non breeding) population of a hundred or so birds which communally roost throughout the year. He also wondered how far these birds are being drawn to the roost. By all accounts there is an enormous amount of information being relayed between birds in these roosts: evidence suggests that birds are (in some way) sharing knowledge of

food sources, which could be vital to survival, and therefore perhaps worth lengthy daily commutes. Soon after Mark's report Strinda Davies told me that she had seen 7 raven's (flying in ones and twos) flying south over the Church Village By-pass early one morning in January. Had these birds come from Mark's roost?

The 49 survey descriptions also came with some short, but telling observations: Proving that an early rise is needed to count raven on the 6/10/2013 Mark noted *"three meteors seen in the Gemini area"* while he waiting for the ravens to wake up, and on the 12/6/2011 *'late start. Very protracted fly out. Skylark singing at 3am. Pair of cuckoo heard'*. On the 2/3/2012 there was *'only desultory calling. Very dark at start of count, lots of to-ing and fro-ing making count difficult. Dawn chorus rolling up the valley to roost'*. As for the downs, the 3/2/2013 just said *"painfully cold"*, while a different problem was experienced in April 2012 *"midges troublesome. Repellant stopped them biting, but they continued to get in my eyes"*.

As ever the winter visitors came in on the shirt tails of the departing summer migrants and early **redwings** were recorded on October 12th by Paul Marshman, who also had a **brambling** in his garden on the 13th and 14th. Paul also witnessed a **goshawk** harassing a migrating flock of redwing on the 20th of October. Paul saw a **kingfisher** on Rhondda at Llwynypia at the end of September, and Jenny O'Hara-Jackaway reported a dead kingfisher in her Porth backgarden early in the New Year. The **trichomanes** parasitic disease of garden birds seems to have calmed down a bit, but Paul still report both **chaffinch** and **bullfinch** with signs of the disease in his garden this autumn/winter.

Geoff Williams saw 9 **goosander** on Rhondda in early September, plus **house sparrows** and **nuthatches** in his garden.

Kevin Oates saw a female **goosander** in the early autumn from the Marks and Spencer bridge in Pontypridd while Strinda Davies reported a male goosander from a similar bit of the Taff, She also saw a male on the same stretch of river on January 7th, close to where Kevin Oates saw 6 on the 27th.

Kestrel are no longer the common bird they once were, but again this winter birds have been regularly seem hunting over the wide marshy grassland verges of the Church Village By-pass and Kevin Oates saw a bird hunting over Blaenllechau In January. Kevin also passed on a report from Angharad Morgan of a lot of **tawny owl** activity at Cilfynydd, while with Ray Edwards, Kevin saw a **wigeon** on Nant Cae Dudwg at Cilfynydd. We don't get many records of wigeon.

Green woodpeckers are a species which might be on the cusp of a population decline (they seem to be retreating eastwards from West Wales and may perhaps start to retreat from our area soon), but Jonathan Barratt's observations suggest a brighter local picture *'just a word on woodpeckers, over the past few weeks I have seen more green woodpeckers than I have in the last couple of years. Most spotted in Maerdy near the old colliery site or up near the Brynffynnon Pub in Llanwonno. I also saw this week a greater spotted woodpecker on the old Parish Road between Llanwonno and Tylorstown.*

I have a decidedly downbeat view of **pheasants**, which are bred and released in huge numbers in eastern England. I am afraid I think of them as long tailed chickens, but until recently they were undoubtedly a rare sight in RCT. However they have started turning up in Dare Valley and in mid December Kevin Oates saw of a cock pheasant at Parc Nant Celyn, Efail Isaf, near a newly dug wildlife pond. This all suggests

that someone may have been releasing them in the vicinity.

In late January from Stuart Jones we had *'you might be interested in a sighting of a **red Kite** over Treforest ten minutes ago. I was looking out of my office window at the University and it was coming across the valley from the direction of Caerphilly mountain. It's the first one I've seen in the area'*.

The RSP Big Garden Bird watch happened on the weekend of January 25th and David Harry sent me his summary of 20 species seen in his garden on the day. Highlights included 30 chaffinches, 14 goldfinches, 7 house sparrows and 20 plus siskins and a redpoll. David also noted the decline in greenfinches and the note that *'they seem to be diseased - going fat and disappearing'*: it all sounds like another case of the trichomanes parasite.

As part of the annual heralding of spring, Paul Marshman recorded the return of **skylark** to the highest ground above Llwynypia on February 15th when he saw 15 birds. In RCT the highest upland grasslands seem to represent prime skylark habitat and for a male a successfully breeding season may depend upon staking a very early claim to the top of the tops.

Mammals

A new South Wales Mammal Group has been set up. Mark Steer sent me the following from Chairman Mike Brown, which I in turn pass on;

'A small group of mammal enthusiasts are currently trying to kick start a South Wales Mammal Group. We have been meeting and discussing this concept with Rob Strachan (Mammal Ecologist / NRW Biodiversity Technical Specialist). Rob is fully supportive

of the group and is advising us from his experiences of setting up and running Snowdonia Mammal Group. We are keen to engage everyone already involved with mammal conservation in the South Wales area (not wanting to step on any toes!), and also anyone new to the field. For now the group will mirror the area covered by SEWBRc. The main focus of the group is to undertake surveying and fill the gaps in our area for the upcoming National Mammal Atlas.

We really need interested individuals from all over, whether you just wish to know what's going on or wish to help out with events in your area. There is a facebook page which you can 'like' - <https://www.facebook.com/southwalesmammalgroup> . We have also set up an email address, please contact southwalesmammalgroup@gmail.com so we can add you to our mailing list, 'membership' is free. The group is already affiliated to the Mammal Society and we are working closely with their MaMoNet Project (http://www.mammal.org.uk/mamonet_wales), Wildlife Trust of S&W Wales, Vincent Wildlife Trust and Sea Watch Foundation. At the moment we are pulling together dates for events/surveys over the coming year, but we need your help!

In terms of reports, Kevin Oates passed on a record from Clive Stanley Williams of a **mink** seen this winter on the Aberdare Canal, Cwmbach. That record fits in nicely with a request from the Lorna Baggett of the Wildlife Trust:

*'It is well known that the **water vole** (*Arvicola amphibius*) is in decline and that there are few places in Wales supporting water vole populations. However, what is currently little known is how many invasive **American mink** (*Neovison vison*) are likely to be in Wales, and how widespread they are. For a species with such a destructive impact on our native species, and which is*

likely to play a large part in the fall of water vole numbers, it is under recorded. For these reasons the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales (WTSWW), working in partnership with Natural Resources Wales (NRW), has this year taken on the task of trying to collate information from across Wales on the abundance and location of American Mink. To do this we need as many people as possible to share their records of sightings and trappings of Mink. If you have seen a mink and would like to help, you can let Lorna Baggett know the location and the date that you saw it on the following email address and telephone number: field.assistant@welshwildlife.org 01656 724100'.

Ben Williams and colleagues have been undertaking habitat management work for marsh fritillary butterflies in and around Tonyrefail. In the late autumn they found 'two **harvest mice** nests so far (one each day) in fields to the north of Tonyrefail (Penrhifer Road area), both were in the areas where the long grass and the bramble mix, at the edge of the bramble thickets, and were old nests. I think it shows that there is a sizeable population there and we will take care not to damage those areas'. These records further support our assumption that harvest mice are well established in the rhos pastures of Tonyrefail and probably elsewhere (although as yet we have no records elsewhere).

In south-west of the County Borough, we have the fantastic opportunity to monitor how **lesser horseshoe bats** use a summer roost sites. David Harry is very lucky to have a lesser horseshoe bat roost in his beautiful, stone built wood shed. Through careful observation he has recorded the gradual shift of bats from his summer roost to their winter hibernation sites (the locations of which has still to be confirmed, although we have our suspicions). So on September 21st 2013 David still had 20 lesser horseshoes in

his shed, that had dropped to 8 on October 23rd, and 3 torpid bats on November 6th and 2 on November 14th, and then on November 26th there were none (which I recall was probably during some of the colder weather we have had this winter). Rather excitingly David then reported the return of a lesser horseshoe on February 20th 2014. I would imagine that is a surprisingly early date and surely linked to the mildness of the winter we have had. Although we may not all be lucky enough to have lesser horseshoe bats in our sheds, this clearly shows how important our own personal observations can be in helping to understand species and habitat in our own local context. This is all ground breaking stuff.

Our knowledge of bats has increased enormously with the advent of more sophisticated bat detectors. The application of technology can be very helpful for other species. For reasons which will become obvious, I won't be specific about locations, but I had the following from Dr Steven Murray in late January: *'My wife bought me a camera trap. I have set it up at an abandon badger sett. I say abandoned as most holes have caved in and so have a couple of tunnels. I thought a fox might have moved in as bones were in evidence around one of the holes. I was surprised to find badgers still in residence. Have looked for footprints, hairs and latrines in the past and found nothing. I have attached an image from Sunday the 12th of January, early evening 19:30. Will be setting the camera back up today trying to ascertain which holes are in use and numbers of badgers'*.

Fungi

Mark Evans visited a council owned field at Aberdare, which also happens to be part of an SSSI, as he described *'last week I paid a flying visit, between jobs, to the field between the Aberdare bypass, the tramroad,*

by the Gamlyn weir adit and Nant-yr-hwch. I wanted to check the goldenrod for the larvae of bleached pug. I didn't find any of that species, but I did find two larvae of goldenrod pug, plus a dock bug and a common green shieldbug. As I was leaving, I came across some unusual looking fungi on the hedge bank that bounds the lower edge of the field and photographed them. Using Phillips when I got home, I identified them as Pseudocraterellus undulatus, which he reckons is on the red data list. Is that right? Looking at the picture that Mark sent I reckon he was right

In addition to the new Mammal Group there are also plans to set up a new **Glamorgan Fungi Group**. In January Mark Steer passed on a message from Rich Wright regarding a meeting being held in January in which the details of the new Group were being discussed. I am not sure how far this has progressed, but when a programme of events is in place we will endeavour to inform you all via the Newsletter.

Mark Steer is steadily building up an impressive fungi list for Brynna Woods, Llanharan. He confirmed that it has been a very good year for Fungi;

January 2014: Purple Jelly Disc *Ascocoryne sarcoides* or *A. cyclinium* (needs microscopic work to distinguish species), Turkeytail *Trametes versicolor*, Velvet Shank *Flammulina veluptis*, Scurfy Twiglet *Turbaria furfuracea* (in Woods and on Allotments) and Common Jellyspot *Dacrymyces stillatus*.

December 2013: Clouded Funnel/Agaric *Clitocybe nebularis* (lots in the Woods this year), White Brain Fungus *Exidia thuretiana*, Oysterling *Crepidotus variabilis* or *C. cesatii* – ('upside down fungi' but not possible to determine which without microscope examination), Elder Whitewash *Hyphodontia*

sambuci, Jelly Ear *Auricularia auricula-judae*, Silverleaf Fungus *Chronroterum purpureum* (on tree stump by Brynna Recreation Ground), and Cobalt Crust *Terana caerulea* (lots in Brynna Woods mainly on dead Hazel but also live Hawthorn).

November 2013: Tawney Funnel *Lepista flaccida*, Blackfoot Polypore *Polyporus leptocephalus*, Cinnamon Porecrust *Phellinus ferrus* or *P. ferruginosus*, Wood Blewit *Lepista nuda*, Coral Spot *Nectria cinnabarina*, and Scarlet Caterpillarclub *Cordyceps militaris* (outside of RCT on Coity Wallia Common).

October 2013: Common Bird's Nest *Crucibulum leave*, Parasitic Bolete *Pseudoboletus parasiticus* on Common Earthball *Scleroderma citrinum* (outside of RCT in Allty Rhiw Woods), Grey Coral *Clavulina cinerea*, and Stump Puffball *Lycoperdon pyriforme*.

September 2013: The Deceiver *Laccaria laccata*, Beefsteak Fungus *Fistulina hepatica*, Sulphur Knight *Tricholma sulphureum*, Brown Birch Bolete *Leccinum scabrum*, Bark Bonnet *Mycena speirea*, Birch Polypore *Piptoporus betulinus*, Common Bonnet *Mycena galericulata*, Blushing Bracket *Daedaleopsis confragosa*, Bolete Mould *Hypomyces chrysospermus* (makes identifying Boletes and allied Genera impossible!), and Aniseed Cockleshell *Lentinellus cochleatus*.

In addition Mark also noted 'Star Jelly *Nostoc commune*', which is 'a *Cyanobacterium* very prevalent in South Wales due to the rainfall! Grows on, but not attached to tarmac, bricks etc. Often thought to be Jelly fungus or Alga'.

Mark Evans has pulled together all his records of **colbalt crust** *Pulcherucium caeruleum* onto a distribution the map which

shows that the 'Cynon valley is filling up nicely'. Just to prove a point in a five minute walk in Ynysangharad Park Mark found the first Pontypridd record for colbalt crust.

Amphibians and Reptiles

Paul Marshman had the first **frog spawn** records of the year, with spawn in cart track pools on January 30th near Cwm Bodwenarth. His first records of 2013 were for January 30th from the very same cart tracks. By February 15th Paul was able to report frog spawn from 3 sites on his patch all above 1,000 feet, while there was still no spawn in the sheltered woodland ponds at Glyn cornel. As we have said before Valleys frogs are nothing if not hardy. However, at least three weeks earlier than 2013, the frogs returned to my lowland garden pond in Miskin, Pontyclun on February 16th and at the time of writing the pond is filling up with spawn.

Invertebrates

It seems a long, long time ago, but we had a really good late butterfly season in the autumn. **Small tortoiseshells** and **red admirals** seemed to be everywhere. On September 25th with Sue Westwood I had the fortune to see several dozen small tortoiseshells feeding from the sheets of purple devil-bit scabious flowering on the rhos pastures of Llantwit Fardre Marsh where there was also a male **brimstone** and a **clouded yellow**.

Botany

In the autumn I had a report of a really exciting find from high in the forestry of Pen-Y-Cymoedd. It came from Charles Hipkin who reported a healthy **field gentian** (*Gentianella campestris*) population by the

side of the main forestry road NPT/RCT border. The record is fascinating. According to my old copy of the Flora of Glamorgan field gentian is a very scarce species although '*once fairly frequent in pastures and sand-dune grassland*'.

If field gentian, a sand dune species, is starting to find a home in our uplands, it won't be the first sand dune coloniser to do so. Wintergreens are proving to be very mobile sand dune adventurers. Mark Evans reminded me that '*you may have heard that Martin Bevan has found **round-leaved wintergreen** alongside a small pond, in the forestry below Craig-y-Llyn. He emailed some photos of the flowers (he didn't photograph the leaves) which I forwarded to Julian Woodman, who confirmed Martin's identification. As Julian said "it's getting around a bit"*'.

Devil's bit scabious *Succisa pratensis* is one of the most characteristic plants of our rhos pastures. However, it is rarely found in the upper parts of the Rhondda Valleys. Paul Marshman has shown me a couple of places, but it is rather mysteriously scarce. It was therefore great news when Mrs Middlehurst showed me some pictures of flowering *Succisa* from the valleyside grasslands at Blaencwm. Apparently it is not just one or two plants. I will look out for it in the summer.

Mark Steer sent a report from his Brynna allotment of that most classic of allotment exotics, the **thorn apple** *Datura stramonium*. As Mark says, '*this only seems to appear when we have a hot summer. Very poisonous but seeds seem to be an ingredient in bird seed mixes. Grown for this purpose in SE Europe but I think it originates from the Americas*'.

Well that probably enough for now. As ever thanks for the records and apologies if I have missed anything. If you would like a

Welsh language version of the Newsletter then please let us know.

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