

RECORDERS' NEWSLETTER



Recorders Newsletter 40 (February 2020)

A belated happy new year, and thanks for all the 2019 records. We are hoping to get back on track and produce more frequent, shorter newsletters from now on.

Wildflower Management

This year as part of our biodiversity duty, RCT Council is launching a big wildflower grassland initiative across the County Borough. Using special 'cut and collect' machinery something like 70 hectares (think 70 rugby pitches) of wildflower verge and other grasslands will be managed as wildflower rich 'hay meadows'. Picking up the cut grass is essential for wildflower management and it is the difficult bit of the process, and you need the right machines to do it. There will be another 50 or so hectares of habitat under conservation grazing (at the right, low levels of grazing, cows and ponies do a perfect job of biodiversity grassland management). So we think there may be as much as 120 hectares of managed wildflower habitat on Council land this summer. This is something we are very excited about and we'd be really grateful for any reports or records or comments about wildflower management in the areas in which you live or record. The initiative with details of where and what is being managed will be launched in the Spring with we hope a RCT website link, we will keep you all informed.

One of the initiatives that we are looking to develop in 2020 is 'grab a rake'. In places where bank steepness or trees means we can't use 'cut and collect machinery' the only way to pick up cut grass is by hand raking. The first 'grab a rake' verge is at Brynsadler (Pontyclun) where in September volunteers from the Pontyclun Environment group once again spent an hour or two one afternoon raking up the grass from a verge which has hundreds of **common spotted orchids** and a few rare **pyramidal orchids**. The Council had 'strim' cut the verge the day before, and the 49 bags of raked grass were collected by the Council's green waste collection. We are hoping to try and develop a couple more 'grab a rake' sites in 2020. It is a great community action, which can deliver the essential management needed for fantastic wildflower results. You can also try it on your garden lawns!!

LNP and introducing Rose

Another really exciting innovation is the new Local Nature Partnerships (LNP) focus, which builds on the long standing Local Biodiversity Action Plan partnerships (which you may not have realised, but by reading and contributing to this newsletter you dear reader are a part – hope you don't mind.....). Rose Revera is our LNP co-

ordinator and I'll leave it to Rose to explain, *'The LNP Cymru project, funded by Welsh Government, aims to increase the capability of LNPs across Wales by supporting local LNP's in all their functions. The project allows all Local Authority and National Park areas in Wales to employ an LNP Coordinator to help the partnership to develop and deliver activities in the area. Some of the aims of the project are to allow actions towards the nature recovery action plan to be facilitated as a result of LNP membership, support practical activities, hold events to highlight nature in the region and help to coordinate the review of the local nature recovery action plan.*

My name is Rose Revera and I am the new LNP Coordinator, shared between Neath Port Talbot and Rhondda Cynon Taff. So far in RCT I have been busy getting to know the area and doing activities such as visiting schools to advise on biodiversity with Richard and scrub clearance at Pant Marsh. I know many people through my past role with the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales and look forward to meeting others from the Local Nature Partnership in the coming months.

RCT luckily already has a vibrant LNP and through the LNP project we now have a small budget each quarter for nature-based actions. There are no conditions to this budget except that they benefit nature, which is music to our ears! Projects that could be funded could, for example, be bird/ bat boxes for sites, engagement materials, surveys or tools to complete practical works. To start us off, we are building a wish list of equipment that could be owned and used by the LNP, such as bat detectors, binoculars and a camera. Any ideas for projects or equipment that you think could be useful for the functioning of the LNP, please do let me know!

Any queries, get in contact with me on r.revera@npt.gov.uk.

Weather

We didn't summaries the 2018 weather results in the last Newsletter. Despite the long-hot summer of 2018, Mark Evans pithily described the rainfall in his Cwmbach garden as being *'fairly average year, precipitation-wise. The summer rainfall was below average and the autumn was above, so it all evened out, as it usually does'*. Looking at Mark's excellent bar chart summaries from 1994 to the present, the following stand out. The springs of both 2018 and 2019 were wetter than average, the 2018 summer was drier (although still with 190 mm of rain), while summer 2019 was an averagely wet summer, both autumns were on the higher side of average, while the winter of 2018 was relatively dry. In total Mark had 1767 mm of rain in 2018, and 2079.25 in 2019: so not much difference between the two.

Maris Middlehurst has continued to send through fantastic rainfall records from Treherbert, which is surely the wettest town in RCT. In 2019, monthly totals were;

January- 207mm, with 41mm on 19th,

February- 286mm and 68mm on 8th

March- 487mm and a soggy 72mm on a single day

April- 153mm, with 25mm on 26th

May- 87mm, 37mm on 7th

June- 191mm, 35mm on 12th

July - 110mm, 35mm on 19th

August - 461mm, 73mm on 9th

September - 581mm, and a drenching 102mm on 28th

The February of 2020 has been extraordinarily stormy and wet, with the terrible flooding of homes and businesses in RCT. Rainfall figures are still being collated, but as an indication Paul Marshman's Llwynypia rain gauge had over 6 inches of rain over the horrendous weekend of the 15th and 16th of February, by the 26th had already recorded 16 inches for February 2020.

Birds

The spring of 2019 brought a number of very welcome **willow tit** records. I saw one in Dare Valley Country park on January 26th, while Richard Morgan saw more (and found evidence of nest excavation) at both Dare Valley and Brownydd Park, Porth, where he also had evidence of the equally uncommon (and very similar) **marsh tit**. These species have both declined drastically in recent decades, but RCT with its woodlands, and wet 'carrs' should be ideal for both. The willow tit is the only *Parus* species that excavates a nest hole, and to do so it needs damp, rotten stumps that are soft enough to hollow out. In the late winter David Harry had a female **merlin** in his Llanharan garden. Where David lives, a narrow river valley runs up onto the uplands above the village, and in the past merlin have been seen hunting over those hills. So for a merlin it is just a quick dash down that Valley to be in the heart of Llanharan. In the winter of 2019 I regularly saw large flocks (60) of **Canada geese** moving west every morning over the Church village By-pass, while Lily Woolrich reported a **red kite** over Brynna in late March, and a colleagues of hers reported a pair over Llanharan a week later. In February Ben Williams saw a **short-eared owl** (which are fantastic things to watch) hunting over Llantwit Fardre Marshy Grassland, where he also found a dead **barn owl**.

Blackcaps were back in Glyncornel Local Nature Reserve by March 29th 2019 (Paul Marshman). By April 24th there were swallows at the Hepworth Industrial Estate, Pontyclun (and they stayed to rear broods in empty storage units), with **willow warblers** and **chiffchaffs** singing in Pontyclun. In mid-May there were **stonechats**, **little grebe**, **skylarks**, **linnets**, and **whitethroats** at Llanild, Llanharan. Louisa-Jayne Gillet told me of a **hoopoe** that turned up in an Aberdare garden in May, which is a very special thing to have on your lawn. In July I saw 6 **swifts** in Llanharan near the primary school, they were nesting in nearby houses. There was a pair nesting in Pontyclun and up to 10 in Pontypridd. These are important swift populations that we need to find a way to encourage.

Paul Marshman mentioned that **greenfinch** numbers are up in his Llwynypia garden, which is a hopeful sign that they may be recovering from the recent collapses in population because of disease. Regular cleaning of bird feeders is suggested as a

way to prevent spread of trichomanes which plagues all finches, but greenfinches most of all. In October, David Harry had over 30 **house sparrows** using his garden. In the summer James Lewis saw a **goshawk** and **buzzards** close to his Church Village home.

On September 9th Paul Marshman noted the return of **goosanders** to the Rhondda, a sure sign of the end of summer. While also in September at Tirfounder Fields, Cwmbach, I spent a happy five minutes watching a **kingfisher** hunting in one of the reed mace fringed lagoons, while a pair of **mute swans** flew in on creaking wingbeats and splashed down, and a **water rail** squealed (very pig like) from deep in the reed swamp. I could have been at RSPB Minsmere, but no, I was just on a public right of way in the Cynon Valley.

Tony Swann sent through his excellent 2019 report highlights for Brynna Woods/Llanharan Marsh. Some fantastic highlights, but I think the black kite tops the list. *On January the 23rd a Wildlife Trust walk was very well attended with 10 visitors. 20 species seen in 2 hours with the highlight being a solitary **lesser redpoll**. In early February 2 **red kites** circling low over the marsh part and a **treecreeper** on the thinnest of branches as opposed to normal sighting on a thick tree trunk. 30+ **redwings** at the east end of the site with many of the birds ground feeding in the leaf litter plus a day later a flyover of 3 Common Rooks. In mid-February as the weather improves winter thrushes have all moved on but the first **reed bunting** of this winter was seen near the railway line. On February 16th a solitary **greylag goose** flew west over the wood in the late afternoon. On March 5th a fly over by **sand martin** was the highlight. Resident species getting ready for the spring with many species singing and quite a few sightings of paired up birds. The 7th had an early morning fly over by 2 cackling **Canada geese** and by the 20th the first **chiffchaff** of spring calling out its name, and on the 31st 4 singing males and first male **blackcap** noted.*

*By early April, the newly arrived blackcaps were numerous and in song providing a challenge for the chiffchaffs. First **willow warbler** of the year recorded. On April 10th, 28 species recorded with many of the resident species in full song. Highlights were a pair of **common linnets**, very unusual sighting for this site. A flyby peregrine falcon and 1 **garden warbler** in the same stunted tree as 3 male **blackcaps** all in full song. By the 18th the warmer weather and full of bird song. A pair of mating **sparrowhawks** were flying around together. **Green and great spotted woodpeckers** were heard but not seen. On the 23rd of April, whilst in the village shopping I notice a large raptor flying west to east of the wood and then over the village. Initial reaction was a red kite but as it got nearer it was much darker and with minimal tail movement. A **black kite** and me with no bins or camera! On May 4th first **house martin** of the year passing through to the west, by the 7th, 3 low flying **common swifts** appearing to be looking for nest sites in adjacent houses, and on the 14th first **barn swallow** of the year. This years' most numerous migrant must be the blackcap. There are everywhere nearly outstripping the resident **blackbirds**. Variety is lower when compared with previous May annual records.*

On May 23rd, a very good 3 ½ hours which resulted in 30 species. Highest number in a visit this year. The first good bird was a **lesser whitethroat** and then, up near Brynna School, a **common redstart**. First site record for me – they breed locally but I have never enjoyed one in Brynna Woods before. June 1st, at 1700 a male **cuckoo** was calling and visible from the park at the north east end of the site and by the 6th lots of family groups especially **long-tailed tits** and **great tits** indicate a good breeding year. Delighted to see and hear a male **common whitethroat** sing and give a display flight from a large bush in the cattle field.

By 27th July species numbers very low as the moult appears to be in full swing, however by 20th August the first of the post breeding tit flocks was seen plus a very bright yellow willow warbler. On October 19th a fly over by 16 **redwings** in the early afternoon was a nice surprise, with on the 24th November 2 **fieldfares** (which were the first sighting of this species for 2019). On the 28th November the surprise sighting was an east to west flyover by 6 **mute swans**. This was a year first and only the second time they have been seen by me from Brynna Woods in the last 20 years. 1st December, a lovely sunny morning for a welcome change and species numbers reflected the improvement in the weather with 25 been sighted and a party of cronking and playing **ravens** flying south towards Llanilid. The surprise sighting for the day was a pristine **brimstone** sunning itself near the railway crossing. 30th December 2019 concluded with 61 different species being sighted.

In January 2020, Tony Swann emailed to let me know that a **great northern diver** had turned up at Bishops Pool, Mwyndy: the great northern driver is the famous **loon** of Canada !! While Jeff Williams saw 12 **crossbills** in the forestry above Hirwaun in January 2020.

Mammals

David Harry reported that in the winter of 2019 two **lesser horseshoe bats** hibernated in his garden woodshed in Llanharan and in October, two bats were still using the building. Mark Powell saw a **brown hare** on the Hirwaun Industrial estate in January 2019, the latest of a number of reports of brown hare in the Hirwaun area. This is a rare mammal in RCT, and Hirwaun seems to be an important place.

Also in January 2019 there were repeated sightings of **otter** on the Rhondda between the Trehafod Bypass and Pontypridd. Lots of people got to see otters in action, which was great, although it made me jealous. Despite years of always looking into any rivers I cross or walking along, I've never yet seen a real live otter!!! By coincidence in January 2019 Siraj Vaghari and Oliver Jefferies of RCT Highways departments emailed to say they had seen 3 otters in the River Ely under the bridge between Pontyclun and Brynsadler. As Siraj said, 'when I first noticed the otters, I called the boys over to look, but of course by the time they popped over, the otters were gone, but when under the bridge, one popped up next to us, and swam away'.

News of the **water vole** population which has been found using the upland peat bogs and forestry land above the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys just gets more

exciting. Further checks suggest that these colonies extend across a considerable area of upland RCT. It looks like they might be one huge 'meta-population' with animals living at low density across a massive, connected upland landscape. It is a significant national discovery for a species which has disappeared from all our lowland rivers.

Hot on the heels of the first **roe deer** record for RCT in 2018, David Hampton saw in July 2019, while walking with his grandson in Coed Trecasell (Tyla Garw), a **muntjac deer**. As David reported the '*deer crossed the path, looked at us and ran back into the undergrowth. I've never seen any deer in RCT previously*'. Then in January 2020 Jeff Williams told me of a stage **red deer** feeding with sheep on fields to the side of the Rhigos Mountain Road, Hirwaun. I get the feeling that deer may soon become a much more common sight in RCT.

Butterflies and Moths

In May and June 2019, **dingy skipper** were recorded from both Llanilid (Llanharan), and in the Rhondda next to the Penrhys. Paul Marshman also reported dingy skipper from nearby in Llwynypia. This is a butterfly which has colonised the Valleys in recent years. It loves brownfield and colliery spoil grasslands, with open turf, lots of bird's-foot trefoil, and (when the sun shines) a warm microclimate. It is a success story for a butterfly which is in decline nationally. Ben Williams found **Marsh fritillary** larvae sunning themselves in February at Llantwit Fardre Marsh and in early June butterflies emerged, although disappointingly numbers didn't build up as we would have hoped. However Carys Romney and Paul Denning had the exciting news of seeing three in marshy grassland at Gwaun Miskin, Beddau (a new site for the butterfly), where Paul also saw a **white letter hairstreak**. Also a marsh fritillary turned up in the Rhondda Fawr, a long way from its nearest known colony. In their Hirwaun stronghold marsh fritillary had a good flight season in 2019 and turned up on more new sites!! Using the same rhos pastures as the Marsh Frits, 2019 was a bumper year for **narrow bordered bee hawk** moths. Richard Smith, Ben Williams and Paul Denning all mentioned them to me. Most were seen in the Brecon Beacons part of RCT, but a few were seen at Hirwaun. They are a spectacular 'bee mimicking' day flying moth, and they are very rare. Ben Williams found further white letter hairstreak colonies using elms trees at Taffs Well and Cilfynydd. Returning to marsh fritillary butterflies, the Pant School is growing devil's bit scabious seeds to plant up an areas of wildflower rich marshy grassland that is being managed as 'rhos pasture' habitat in the school grounds. Butterfly Conservation and Tidy Towns once again did superb work cutting back scrub on marsh fritillary habitats in RCT and NRW also provided a huge help when they came out and did an invaluable voluntary day clearing willow scrub from Llantwit Fardre Marsh. In the autumn/winter of 2019/20 the Wildlife Trust have undertaken further essential management work at key butterfly sites at Parc Eirin and Llanharry Quarry, and with students from Pencoed college undertook heroic management at Pant Marsh, Pontyclun.

On June 27th, whilst looking for areas of wildflower meadow to manage in Blaenrhondda Park, Hwyl Bebb and I came across a superb area of anthill rich grassland with lots of **devil's-bit scabious**, **greater burnet**, and **marsh violets**, and

a colony (at least 6) of green **forester moths**. It turns out this is a very rare colony of this beautiful day flying moth and perhaps only the second extant colony in the whole of Glamorgan!! We now want to see if we can manage this area with a late summer grass clip, and perhaps get some helping hand raking up the 'cut grass' (see 'grab a rake'). Later that morning I wandered up the Rhondda Fach onto the old Fernhill Colliery site. It was a sunny but windy day, but down on the riverbank it was sheltered, and amongst the **heather**, **devil's-bit scabious** and **dog violets** I was delighted to see 20 dazzlingly fresh **small pearl bordered fritillaries**, similar numbers of even fresher **dark green fritillaries**, and good numbers of **small heaths**, **large skipper**, **common blues**, **meadow browns** and one **painted lady**.

In July Richard Smith saw lots of painted lady at Tonyrefail, a sign of a summer influx of this most migratory of butterflies. However Margaret Harding reported a poor butterfly year from her Beddau garden, with a few **large whites**, **meadow browns**, **speckled woods**, one **small tortoiseshell**, but finally on August 3 **painted ladies**, and a few **red admirals** and **peacocks**. I was lucky to see a **humming-bird hawk moth** (another migrant) in my garden feeding in expert hummingbird fashion from red valerian flowers. In early July on a visit to Cefn Parc Cemetery, Llantrisant, I lost count at the numbers of **6 spot burnet moths** (I estimated at least 400) buzzing around the wildflower rich cemetery grassland, it was an amazing sight.

As part of the Glamorgan Fungi Group visit to **Aberffrwd Cemetery**, Rob and Linda Nottage collated a great list including **shield bug** species (**dock**, **hairy**, **green**, **spiked**, **bronze** and on greater burnet the **common tortoise shield bug**), 4 gall species, 2 grasshopper species and 9 butterflies.

Mark Evans sent the following in January 2020 *'last Wednesday, Mike Hogan and I counted the hibernating **herald moths** in the Cefnglas tunnel. As you can see from the attached spreadsheet, we had three fewer than last year (32 seen) , but we had the bonus of a **peacock** and a **long-eared bat**. The peacock was only the second hibernating butterfly we have ever found in the railway tunnels. There are probably a few using them each year, but unlike the heralds, which are bright enough to be seen by torchlight, even when on the tunnel roof, peacocks and small tortoiseshells are well camouflaged against the soot encrusted brickwork. George Tordoff plotted a trend for the heralds in the two tunnels and found that although there is an often marked variation from year to year, the actual population trend is a flat line.*

Other Invertebrates

Richard Morgan reported seeing **wool carder bees** in Porth, and in I saw one in Treforest, this very distinctive and (in the male) big bee is really nice one to look out for. To see it in your garden trying growing lambs ear – the females collect the downy hairs from the leaves to line their nests (hence carder bee) and the males lurk around the plant waiting for the females to turn up. In late June there were lots of **broad bodied chaser** dragonflies, chasing lots other broad bodied chasers on pools at the Fernhill Colliery at Blaenrhondda.

Liam Olds saw **violet oil beetles** on wildflower grassland at Clydach Vale Countryside Park in the Rhondda, Mark Steer reported them again from Brynna

Woods, Llanharan and I had one walking across my lawn in Miskin, Pontyclun. These nationally scarce beetles parasite mining bee nests, and you only get them when you get lots of mining bees, and you only get those where you've lots of wildflower rich grasslands: there is a reason why they occur in RCT and not many other places. Liam also saw a series of rare bees at Clydach Vale and reported that this '*must be one of the best spots for bees in the Rhondda!!*'. This year was the best yet for the rare **long-horned bee** in my garden. I have encouraged a big patch of **yellow vetchling** to grow in my lawn and in late June and early July I had at least two females foraging avidly on the vetchling flowers, while two or three long, long antenna wielding males buzzed around and around the lawn, looking for unmated females. Periodically the foraging females would disappear to fly to their nests somewhere on a bank nearby and provision the eggs cells with pollen.

Reptiles and Amphibians

Karen and Andy Wilkinson found an **adder** hibernacula on Llantrisant Common in late February 2019, with 2 adders and a **grass snake**: a fantastic report.

In 2019 I had **frogs** spawning in my garden pond on February 7th, with a second peak of spawning on the 15th. This year frog spawning seems to have been earlier. I think Carys Romney won the prize for the earliest frog spawn in 2020, they started spawning in my pond on January 26th 2020, and by the 28th there were 5 clumps of spawn. This I assume equates to 5 females? Every time I looked there was a gang 6 or 7 hopeful males lurking in the pond, waiting for females to arrive. As in 2019, there was a second little peak of frog spawn in Mid-February. In 2020 all spawning took place in mild(ish) weather, but always after or during heavy rain. Paul Marshman saw loads of spawn in the ponds at Glyncornel Local Nature Reserve in late January/early February.

Fungi

In the autumn (and as a result of all the good work of Emma Williams, Mark Steer and Mark Evans in find rare and wonderful fungi on colliery spoil sites) the British Mycological Society visited Maerdy Tips and recorded 83 species, and were apparently very impressed. Emma Williams found another excellent waxcap fungi site at Penrhys Cemetery and we hope in 2020 to see how we can better manage that area for the waxcaps. Mark Steer also sent through a nice list of 10 species, mainly rusts and mildews found on the visit to Aberffrwyd Cemetery in September 2019.

Plants

On January 1st 2019 Paul Marshman recorded flowering herb robert, blackthorn, prickly sow thistle, yarrow, ox-eye daisy and by the 12th of the month opposite leaved golden saxifrage and cherries. Day length is just one of the factors that trigger flowering and frost free mild winters can fool plants into thinking an early spring has arrived. We are all familiar with gorse, but there are actually two species of gorse in RCT: the **common gorse** *Ulex europaeus* and **western gorse** *Ulex galli*. The latter is a true heathland indicator (so a very useful species), and is very much one of

the oceanic west. The easiest way (read lazy) to tell the difference between them is their different flowering times (*europaeus* in the winter to early summer, and *galli* in late summer and autumn), however in October 2019, Paul saw them both flowering together on the hills around Penrhys. As a lazy botanist that was an unwelcome discovery because now I will need to concentrate on the size of the bracts on the flowers, which means remembering to take my glasses with me!!

Paul Denning saw **wild currant** and **marsh valerian** in the wet woodlands at Gwaun Miskin, Beddau. I found more **toothwort** sites in Tyla Garw and Miskin, both parasitizing old hazel coppice stools. In Pontypridd there were 580 flowering 'naturalised' **snakes-head fritillary** in the wet, wildflower rich wildzones in Pontypridd Park. While in May there were 5 **early purple orchids** at Llanharry Quarry along with 40 plus **twaybaldes**, there was also an **early purple orchid** on the verge at Miskin. However the **green winged orchids**, in the otherwise outstanding hay meadows of Cefn Parc Cemetery, only numbered 7 flowering spikes in 2019. Sue Thomas reported **bee orchids** on wildflower verges at Miskin, Pontyclun, where there were up to 30 flowering in early July, while Carys Romney and Paul Denning saw at least a hundred at Cwm Colliery, Beddau !! In May Paul recorded **field madder** and **cut-leaved cranesbill** on the riverbank in Llwynypia. Mark Evans also found field madder on the edge of a car park in Beddau.

James Lewis has found some fantastic rhos pasture habitat in the fields around his home in Upper Church Village, he sent photos (and descriptions) of classic Rhos, with a mosaic of marshy and drier grassland, with **devil's-bit scabious**, **lousewort**, **marsh, heath and common spotted orchids**, **bird's foot trefoil**, **ragged robin** and **yellow rattle**.

As part of an autumn visit by the Glamorgan Fungi Group to Aberffrwyd Cemetery. Mountain Ash, Sue Wistow collated a list of 92 plant species including the Cynon Valley specialist **greater burnet**, the woodland orchid **broad leaved hellebore** and **burnet saxifrage** which is a genuine lime loving calcicole..

Jeff Williams noticed how the very showy, but very invasive **Himalayan honeysuckle** has started to appear in various places in the Rhondda. The mixed up seasons had **dandelions** flowering in Jeff's garden in early December 2019.

Ravens

Mark Evans sent the following, it is too information and anecdote full to not reproduce in full. It is a summary of the experience of monitoring monthly a raven roost high on the afforested mountain top that divides the Cynon and Taff Valleys. In 2019 the highest number of birds recorded was 295 in August (with a 2019 monthly average of 147 birds) with the all-time monthly record count an amazing 577 birds in July 2016. It is therefore a story of a huge raven roost, in a forestry, on a mountain, subject to a long uphill trudge at hideously early hours in all weathers.

'The Raven count I made at the beginning of December 2019, marks a significant personal milestone, as it was the 250th solo count of the Ravens, since I first discovered the presence of the roost, in 2000. Having then been excluded from it for most of 2001, I began monitoring it in earnest in 2002. To mark the occasion, here

are some rambling reminiscences, related to the counts, but not really about the Ravens themselves.

*I described them as solo counts, for on four occasions I was accompanied by my friend and avid monitor of breeding and passage birds at Rhaslas Pond, Mike Hogan. It was with the help of Mike that I confirmed my suspicion that at times, a significant number (up to 20%) of the roost's population were leaving the roost to the east, completely unseen and uncounted by me. On one occasion, when I was away, Mike also completed a solo count for me and although this count and the ones made jointly with him are included in the ever growing set of data for the roost, it is the personal tally of solo counts that I am marking here. Thank you Mike, for your invaluable help and good company on those counts we did together. I'll always be grateful: such a pity you never saw the hoped for **woodcocks**.*

As with many projects or undertakings such as this, it didn't start out as one. When I first noticed a large group of Ravens suddenly fly out of a plantation, one morning, I was instantly curious, so returned in the evening to see if there was a roost there. I watched the birds return, but their playful aerobatics and general toing and froing, while entertaining, made counting them impossible, so a few days later, I made my first dawn visit and found that a very important number were using the roost. I decided to count them every fortnight for a year, to see if there was a pattern to the roost's population. Foot and Mouth outbreak closed the forestry for over half a year, so I had to delay the start of the monitoring year. In 2002, I counted them each fortnight, as planned and when the year ended, I found myself wondering whether there would be an appreciable difference in the population in 2003, so I just carried on with the fortnightly counts right through 2003 and 2004. I had become addicted by this point; not just to the need to see what the Raven population would do next, but by the whole slightly surreal and definitely magical experience of being out in the pre-dawn darkness and the dawn itself.

*If it hadn't been for sitting up there at dawn, I would never have realised that the dawn chorus begins down in the valley and then over a few minutes gradually rolls up the slope to the hill top. I've heard it do that enough times to be sure that it is a genuine phenomenon. When I began the counts, I could not drive, so had to walk the three and a half miles from my house, in the darkness, over the hill tops to the roost and then back again in daylight, after the count was over. In winter, although not particularly early in the morning, it often meant a long trudge through mud, snow and ice in the darkness, while in the summer, it meant getting up at 02:00, in order to get to the roost before the pre-dawn twilight began. Over the years, to preserve my dark adaptation, those yomps, in the early hours were made as mostly without any artificial light and produced some interesting highlights, such as meteor showers, displays of noctilucent cloud and the Aurora Borealis. I recall one winter's morning, almost stepping on a **jack snipe**, which bobbed up and down alongside my foot for a couple of seconds, before flying off to another spot a couple of metres away. Perhaps the strangest incident occurred as I was walking over to meet up with Mike, for a joint count. It was Sunday the 5th of December 2005 and as I walked across an open area of hill top between conifer plantations, I suddenly heard a strange rumbling boom, which came from the south east. It was obviously the sound of an explosion, or several, but it was about twenty past six in the morning, so couldn't have been blasting in a quarry and the sound came from the wrong direction for it to*

have been artillery fire, on the Senni ranges. The mystery was solved when I got home, after the count and the TV news was reporting the huge explosion at the Buncefield fuel depot, in Hertfordshire; 128 miles away, as the crow flies.

One notable morning, in a very wet August, I had arrived at the spot, from which I would count the ravens and as I began setting up my chair, I noticed my footprints glowing pale blue, in the pre-dawn darkness. Looking closer, I could see that within each footprint, in the short, wet turf, even in the ones which within shallow puddles, there were many tiny specks of intense blue light; like miniature LEDs. Some were even on the toes of my wellies. I had no idea what was causing this bioluminescence and as I didn't have reading glasses with me, my attempted close inspection proved fruitless. I did collect as specimen of vegetation with a couple of glowing specks, but when I examined them at home, nothing could be found to account for the phenomenon. I was later in contact with Roy Perry, who suggested that it may have been caused by nematodes.

Of the winter counts, one of the more uncomfortable, but beautiful occasions was in early February 2012. There had been a heavy fall of snow, followed by a prolonged severe freeze and as there was no hope of getting my car out of the street, I walked to the roost, through knee deep snow, on top of which was a thin frozen crust. As I trudged through it, each step was accompanied by lots of tinkling; like bridle bells. The prolonged freeze had caused masses of beautiful blade-like hexagonal ice crystals, up to 10-15mm across to form over the surface of the snow, each standing on edge. As I walked, I sent them scattering in all directions, tinkling as they went. The count that followed was less magical, as it involved sitting still for 90 minutes in temperatures around -14 C!

As for the counting itself, I have had, over the years, had to move my counting spot three times, in response to the evolving nature of the roost; changes which altered the flight paths from the roost. Due to the often very poor light when they first begin flying out, I have to find a counting spot, from where I can see all of them against a background of sky, for in that early pre-dawn twilight, they are invisible against a background of the land.

Until fairly recently, the counting spots have been close to the roost, which really connected me to the birds. It was a magical experience, sitting in the darkness, watching the first glimmerings of twilight begin to appear in the sky and then hear the first calls from the senior pair in the roost. Ravens have individual and often recognisable voices, so it was obvious that it was the same pair each time, which would begin the calling and then be joined after a minute or two, by the rest of the roost in a chorus, which typically lasted ten minutes and at the end of which, the first groups would fly out. The senior pair would continue calling throughout the time it took for the roost to empty (typically one hour) and then would be the last to leave. Sometimes they remained in the roost, with no intention of leaving.

*In that former counting place, the winter counts would be further enlivened by a trickle of **woodcock** flying in from wherever they had been feeding, overnight, to roost in the forest plantation behind where I sat. There were never large numbers, but it was entertaining to try spotting them coming in, fast and low, while the ravens were flying out and thrilling when they occasionally flew past so close that the wind in*

*their feathers could be heard. Once during a summer count a female **nightjar** passed so close in front of me, that in the still air I could smell its feathers.*

Over the years; particularly the ones when I used to walk to the roost, I had a few hair-raising moments. I don't believe in the supernatural, but that does not prevent ancestral instinctive reactions kicking in, when confronted by a sudden and unexplained sight or sound. Trudging down a dark forest ride, one winter morning, I suddenly heard a loud, hoarse cry repeated over and over and coming up fast from behind. I quickly realised that it was a freaked out woodcock flying up the ride and over my head, but not before the fight or flight instinct had kicked in and although and although 21st century man knew it was just a frightened bird, my ancestral instincts insisted on raising the hair on my neck, quickening the heart rate and pricking sweat on my forehead.

Along the same ride, on a different morning, at a place where the ride opened up onto a clear-fell area; the paler gap between black conifers suddenly sprouted a small forest of horns. I switched on my torch, to reveal a herd of cattle completely filling the ride. Luckily, they moved aside to let me pass through. The weirdest apparition occurred one dark winter morning. I was walking the ride through a clear-felled area, near the roost, when on the slope above the ride I noticed something white. As the ride took me closer, I was a little perturbed to see that it seemed to be a figure, with longish, pear shaped body, a head and two legs, but no arms, standing motionless. Ancestral man had taken over by this point and although I knew there was a rational and possibly laughable explanation for the figure, that didn't prevent the inevitable raised hair, sweat and pounding heart. I kept walking and watching it as I drew level with it and closer to it and suddenly it sprouted two more legs and a pair of pointy ears. It was a white horse and had been standing facing me square-on, its white coat illuminated by the street light glow from Merthyr.

How long will I be able to continue counting the Ravens? Well, things are changing and I can foresee an end to the roost. The first potential reason for the end to my counting will come fairly soon, when the NRW Forestry fell the plantation it is currently in. That won't be the end to the roost, which will almost certainly move to another plantation nearby. Whether I will be able to count them leaving the new roost site remains to be seen. The other reason and the one that may cause the roost to eventually decline (it is already declining) and fizzle out is that the roost is where it is because of the nearby refuse tip and almost no food waste is now finding its way onto that tip. As RCT encourages more food waste recycling and the domestic refuse is no longer taken to the tip, the core, non-breeding population of the roost will find it far less attractive and the roost may eventually disperse. Whatever happens, I am not getting any younger, so it is extremely unlikely that I will ever reach my 500th count'.

Thanks and please keep sending in your records for the next one.

Richard Wistow

Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC, Unit 7c, Hepworth Industrial Estate, Coedcae Lane,
Pontyclun CF72 9DX

RecordersNewsletter@rctcbc.gov.uk

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