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CARDIFF NATURALISTS' SOCIETY

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PRESIDENTIAL RAMBLINGS - June 2009

Before I launch into my introduction to the June Newsletter may I make a heartfelt appeal to our membership for one of us to help out by filling the post of Indoor Meetings Secretary and letting Margaret enjoy the retirement which she richly deserves. If we can arrange for the position (unpaid but immensely satisfying) to be taken up soon, a smooth transition can be effected and the maximum support offered. The office of Indoor Meetings Secretary largely centres around assembly of the coming year's Indoor Programme following an "ideas meeting" of the Council which is normally held sometime during April. Substantial assistance with contact details is always freely given and members of the Council (and others) will spend as much time as needed supporting the preparation of the Programme. **As metioned, the duties primarily involve programme preparation and it is not necessary for the Indoor Secretary to be present at each evening meeting. I or a member of Council will be happy to open the lecture theatre and "meet and greet" the speaker.** This is an important post and the Society relies upon its Indoor Programme to provide a varied and interesting selection of relevant topics and speakers which members can enjoy during the winter season.

Please will anyone interested contact either me or any member of the Council; I am sure that Margaret will be happy to discuss informally, the demands of the job with any prospective applicants.

It is good so see the nights drawing out and to be able to enjoy an early evenings walk across the fields. In the past few days, no doubt with the assistance of the usual damp weather, the hedgerows have been bursting with new growth; at this time of year I always think that the pristine, unweathered colours are remarkably vibrant. A few days ago I witnessed from our house the sight of a pair of barn owls flying off in the late afternoon, no doubt for some pre nocturnal tryst. It is with great pleasure that these magnificent creatures seem to be appearing locally with much greater frequency than in the past; long may it continue.

Roger Milton

Saturday 4th July
Start time 10am

Southerndown
Full day, packed lunch

A geology walk with Tom Sharpe of the National Museum, Wales, looking at the geology and landforms between Southerndown and Nash Point. Distance will depend on the weather and what we find but could be 7 miles. Some walking will be on rocks so stout shoes advisable. Meet outside the Glamorgan Heritage Visitor Centre, Dunraven Bay, at 10am. Car park charges apply.

Sunday 5th July
Start time 9.30am

Wenvoe, Grasses course
Full day, packed lunch

Just a few places remain on this course led by botanist Libby Houston giving attendees an introduction to the identification of our more common grasses. Complete enclosed form – the final few places will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.

Thurs 9th July
Start time 6.30pm

Cleddon Bog SSSI
Evening

A joint meeting with Bristol Naturalists Society who have organised this event.

Situated on the Trelleck Plateau west of the River Wye, Cleddon Bog SSSI is an example of an unusual habitat in this area. Its main feature is lowland valley mire (the only example for many miles). Although drier than is desirable the site still supports a good many plants characteristic of bogs such as Hare's-tail Cottongrass, Bog Ashphodel, Sphagnum species, Crowberry, and it is the only site in Monmouthshire for Cranberry. Other habitats found here include heath, sedge swamp and wet woodland. The very localised Bramble /Rubus Trelleckensis has been recorded here, but not recently. Meet at the Ninewells Wood car park (SO 515 038), just east of the hamlet of Cleddon. Parking is very limited so please lift-share wherever possible. Welly boots essential. Contact: Nick Hudson 07768 822340 if you have any queries about this event.

Sunday 12th July
Start time 10am

Merthyr Mawr
Full day, packed lunch

A day spent amongst the dunes of Merthyr Mawr, a national nature reserve and SSSI of interest to entomologists and botanists but always with some other wildlife thrown in. We aim to locate the substantial stand of Birthwort. Meet in the car park at Candleston – car parking fee applies.

Sunday 19th July
Start time 10am

Wenvoe, Insects
Full day, packed lunch

A day focused on invertebrates but you don't have to be an expert – this is a good opportunity to find out more about them. Led by Ray Barnett of Bristol University and Bristol Naturalists Society we shall be looking at whatever insects turn up in the fields, meadows and woods around Wenvoe and, if time permits, going on to see what Dyffryn Gardens has to offer. Meet outside the Community Centre/Village Hall at the T junction in the middle of Wenvoe.

Thursday 23rd July
Start time 6.30pm.

Hailey Park
Evening

The second year in which we are leading a public event around Hailey Park near Whitchurch in Cardiff in the company of the Friends of Hailey Park. One of Cardiff's less well-known wildlife areas alongside the Taff and another chance to promote Cardiff Naturalists' Society to potential new members. Meet at the car park on the park at the top of Radyr Road.

Saturday 8th August
Start time 10am

Clydach Vale Country Park
Full day, packed lunch

A day at Clydach Vale in the company of Rob and Linda Nottage. A 5km stroll through this country park in the Rhondda Valley on a reclaimed colliery site which has a few surprising botanical specialities and a variety of bird and insect life. The paths are steep and stony in places.

Meet in the car park near the Cambrian Sky Blues Cafe at the east end of

the park (grid ref SS 983 927). Clydach Vale is signposted from the A4119 Tonypanyd bypass at the roundabout on the hill where the main road bends sharply. Take the road westward following signs for Rhondda Cynon Taff Council Offices. Continue straight on past the sports grounds. The car park is on the right just before the Industrial Estate sign. There is a car park at the head of the valley approached through the Clydach Vale village for those wanting only a short walk to see the special plants. Meet there about an hour later.

Thursday 13th August
Start time 6.30pm

East Moors
Evening

This area of waste ground at East Moors, Cardiff, is an unlikely venue for those who like to stride across the plains of the Serengeti but hopefully it will have a few surprises in store. Last year, Cardiff Nats member, Teresa Goss, found Broad-leaved Helleborine and we went on to locate several plants of Autumn Ladies Tresses. Meet at the top of Glass Avenue at the junction with Ocean Way at ST 205 755. Glass Avenue is on the south side of Ocean Way, off a mini-roundabout and opposite Portmanmoor Road.

Saturday 22nd August
Start time 10am

Oxwich, Rockpool ramble
All day, packed lunch

This event was cancelled last year owing to abysmal weather so we hope for better this year. An ideal event for young, old and marine specialists in the company of Moreton Jenkins as we delve into the rockpools at Oxwich. Children must be accompanied by an adult. Meet at the entrance to Oxwich Bay car park for which there is a charge.

NOTE: if an event is cancelled it will be notified on the Cardiff Naturalists' Society website.

Bruce Mc Donald

CARDIFF BAY BIRDING 12th MARCH 2009

Our car had to be left for its annual service on Penarth Road so we decided to walk to the Taff Embankment and follow the river down to Hamadryad Park and thence to the Cardiff Bay Wetlands. From the St. Davids Hotel we retraced our steps to the Clarence Road bridge and followed a path around the western side of the Bay as far as we could go – the new ice-rink. Once the footbridge across the River Ely is built from the Sports Village, a full circuit of Cardiff Bay is an inviting prospect.

Early morning drizzle persisted all day despite a more encouraging weather forecast but our spirits were lifted by some exciting finds among the 37 species of birds we encountered. Gulls provided the major thrills. We had heard about these on the grape-vine but searching through hundreds of Black-headed Gulls provided a real sense of achievement when we finally picked out the rarities. First to show was a Mediterranean Gull in smart winter plumage, wings all white apart from tiny black spots at the tip. Dark underwings and diminutive size identified an adult winter-plumaged Little Gull fluttering over the Taff.

However the greatest ‘prize’ was a North American vagrant Bonaparte’s Gull*. Slightly smaller and daintier and with a shorter all-black bill than the Black-headed hordes surrounding it, this special bird was busily pecking at surface morsels washed down the River Taff. The feature which distinguished it most readily from the common winter-plumaged small gulls was the grey colouring of its mantle extending up the back of its head. We had our best views of this attractive bird from Hamadryad Park but spotted it again later from the Channel View side of the river.

Seven Gull species in one day is quite unusual for us. Other highlights included imperfect views of a Lesser Scaup feeding in the Bay with Tufted Ducks (perhaps 50 of these in total) and a chasing pair of Kingfishers near the Hotel. Territorial aggression by Mute Swans led to an attempted drowning but the unfortunate victim escaped with ruffled feathers. A nest-building coot was another sign that spring was on its way.

A few days later we heard reports of another scarce gull and were lucky enough to have good views of a second-winter Iceland Gull on the Ogmore Estuary. Similar in size to the nearby Herring Gulls, its all-white plumage (interspersed with some pale sandy feathers) enabled easy identification both at rest and in flight because of its lack of black wing-tips.

Linda Nottage

* Bonaparte's Gull is named after Charles, the nephew of Napoleon. Born in Paris in 1803, he spent part of his childhood in Worcestershire but lived the early part of his married life in Philadelphia where he befriended Audubon. He became a distinguished and well-travelled ornithologist leading to a glowing obituary in the Proceedings of the Linnean Society. 'Biographies for Birdwatchers' by Barbara and Richard Mearns contains more fascinating details about him.



**COPY FOR SEPTEMBER NEWSLETTER BY
17TH AUGUST PLEASE Ed**

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GIANTS



Green Hellebore

Goram, Vincent, Celestine, Wilmott and Hutchinsia – a heady mixture but they might give a clue as to what several Cardiff Naturalists members were up to in late March. Easily accessible from Cardiff, the Avon Gorge has a plethora of interesting features for both geologists and naturalists including several species that are unique to the area.

In 2007, a Cardiff Naturalists' Field Trip took us to Leigh Woods which in addition to the trees that we were looking at in the company of our guide, Tony Titchen, (Newsletter Issue 76, December 2007) has several other items of botanical interest including Green-flowered Helleborine, *Epipactis phyllanthes*, Lady Orchid, *Orchis purpurea* and Fly Orchid, *Ophrys insectifera*. The photo of Green Hellebore, *helleborus viridis*, shown here was also taken in Leigh Woods. However, on the opposite side of the gorge is a narrow valley, unknown to many despite its proximity to Clifton Downs, which reveals a variety of floral secrets.

But to begin at the beginning. The Avon Gorge cuts through a ridge of, principally, limestone with a smattering of sandstone and stretches for around a mile and a half. The dating is Carboniferous but views differ on what exactly caused the River Avon to cut through the Gorge rather than take an easier route south-west towards Weston. Whether glaciation was a contributory factor or not, the result is spectacular with a width of over 200 metres and depth of just under 100. Favoured by tourist and Peregrine alike, the Gorge has also been attributed to the bitter rivalry between two giant brothers, Vincent and Goram, with (to cut a somewhat meandering tale short) Vincent digging out the Gorge to win the affections of Avona, a young lady from Wiltshire. In a fit of pique, Goram hurls himself into the Severn, turning to stone and leaving visible his head and shoulder which you can now see as Flat Holm and Steep Holm. (And I bet you thought there was a geological background to the two islands).

The area has probably been inhabited since the Iron Age with three forts

from that era including Stokeleigh. Later, mining took place for limestone, iron and lead and another mineral, called calamine at the time but subsequently known as zinc. Celestine (or Celestite) was also found nearby and by the 1900s around 90% of the world's supply was produced here. The name of this naturally-occurring crystal of Strontium Sulphate derives from caelestis, Latin for 'of the sky', referring to its occasional delicate blue colour.

Anyway, the wildflower walk was organised by the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project and led by Libby Houston who is taking our Grasses course in the Summer. From Sea Walls on the edge of Clifton Downs we headed towards the woods, noting as we passed Bristol Rock Cress, *Arabis scabra*, which is exclusive to the Gorge and classified as Very Rare. Also of interest were the various *Alliums*. Wild Onion or Crow Garlic, *Allium vineale* with its hollow stems grew alongside Field Garlic, *Allium oleraceum*, but the real rarity was the Bristol Onion or Round-headed Leek, *Allium sphaerocephalon*, again unique to the area with some introductions



Bristol Rock Cress



Dwarf Mouse-ear

elsewhere. A return in early summer would be needed to see them in bloom.



Honewort

Dropping down into a ravine our next find was Dwarf Mouse-ear,

Cerastium pumilum, classified as 'scarce' and similar to but less common than Little Mouse-ear, *Cerastium semidecandrum*. More Bristol Rock Cress and then some young plants of Honewort, *Trinia glauca*, classified as 'endangered'. Common in the 17th century, Nicholas Culpeper



Fingered Sedge

recommended it for use against St Anthony's fire or cataplasms, noting that it grew frequently in corn fields and thick hedges. William Turner, dean of Wells first reported it growing here in 1562. 'Hone' is an old word for swelling. These days it is restricted to the Bristol area and Mendips and then the Devon coast in areas such as Berry Head. Grasses also do well in the ravine with some examples

of Fingered Sedge, *Carex digitata*, another plant that is not widely distributed. Also a solitary example of Hutchinsia, *Hornungia petraea*, classified as 'scarce'.

The Gorge is also notable for its Whitebeams. The Leigh Woods Whitebeam, occupies, unsurprisingly, Leigh Woods where around 100 specimens have been found. The Bristol Whitebeam and Wilmott's Whitebeam are two other local rarities and the Houston Whitebeam is named after none other than our leader, Libby, which she first discovered in the Gorge in 2005.

Anyone wanting to participate in organised wildlife events in the area should contact Mandy Leivers who is the Avon Gorge and Downs Biodiversity Officer, the website being <http://www.avongorge.org.uk>

Bruce McDonald

Photos by Bruce McDonald

Low Water Discovery

In February this year a friend sent us a photograph of an unusual Starfish he'd come across while beach combing in the Barry area. He identified it as a Sunstar, *Crossaster papposus*, a species not previously known to occur locally. He took Linda and I to see if we could re-discover them on a low tide in March on the strand line... and find them we did. We came across seven without really trying, so presumably there were more. The specimen in the picture has 12 arms but we also found them with 11 and 13.



A final find was a type of Limpet similar to a Slit-Limpet with its apex curved backwards.

Phill Blanning & Linda Morris

FIELD TRIP TO CRAIG CERRIG-GLEISIAD

Saturday, April 18th 2009

The National Nature Reserve of Craig Cerrig-gleisiad shelters to the south-east of the modest (by central Beacons standards) peak of Fan Frynych and a little to the north of Storey Arms. A good turnout of Cardiff Naturalists was complemented by a contingent of the Bristol Naturalists' Botany section and within minutes of heading into the cwm a rapid fly-past by Ring Ouzels had the party pirouetting to catch a glimpse of them.



Purple Saxifrage

The landscape is dramatic. The cwm or corrie is north-facing and the cliffs are sheer in places, allowing it to support a range of arctic-alpine flora, inaccessible to the nibbling sheep. But it is also varied with the cliffs, moraines and landslips mixed with acid grassland, wet flushes and peat bog.

As we headed into the cwm on gently undulating ground, the birders were treated to a sighting of Red Kite with grumbling Raven in attendance and a continuous aerial display by the resident Peregrines. Later sighting of Buzzard and Kestrel helped to boost the tally of raptors and further glimpses of Ring Ouzel and the call of a cuckoo heard by one member was an added bonus.



Green Spleenwort

However, our main quarry for the day were the plants that one would normally find to the north, around Snowdon and beyond. From the gentle lower slopes we started the

precarious ascent through birch and larch of a ravine which looked suitably intimidating. Sure enough, after toiling upwards on progressively steeper terrain and now only some 100 metres from the summit we found the first clumps of Purple Saxifrage, *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, still in bloom and at its most southerly location in



Lunch on the Mountainside

Britain. Other plants of interest included Green Spleenwort, *Asplenium viride*, and Mossy Saxifrage, *Saxifraga hypnoides*. Lunch was taken here before we gingerly started the descent, having concluded that bouldering and rock-climbing to the summit were beneath our dignity, not to mention beyond our capabilities.

As we reached the lower slopes, Marsh Valerian, *Valeriana dioica*, could be found, about to bloom and following the damper watercourses. A rolled-up ball of what might have been a Woodlouse turned out to be a Pill Millipede which is asymmetrical compared with the regular symmetry of the former. Then on to a small peat bog dominated by



The Gentle Ascent

Heather, *Calluna vulgaris*, and Purple Moor Grass, *Molinia caerulea*. Another member of the *Ericaceae* was Cross-leaved Heath, *Erica tetralix*, with its distinctive whorls of four leaves and Bog Asphodel, *Northecium ossifragum*, not due to flower until later in the summer. Various species of Sphagnum were found

alongside two Cottongrasses, the slightly purple-red leaves of Common Cottongrass, *Eriophorum angustifolium*, and the dark-green leaves of Hare's-tail Cottongrass, *Eriophorum vaginatum*.



Uloa brucei

Now working our way up a more gentle route to the summit we passed a lichen-draped Hawthorn with distinctive balls of moss, see photo,



Fir Clubmoss

subsequently identified by Sam Bosanquet as *Uloa brucei*. Near the top a brief debate about whether to take the softer option, a route to the east, with limited wildlife interest or the path skirting the tops of the cliffs, resulted in the inevitable decision to take the more challenging route. Stunning views both down into the reserve as well as across the slopes of Pen-y-Fan were matched

by further sightings of Peregrine and Purple Saxifrage. Well-hidden in the grass was another first for the day, Fir Clubmoss, *Huperzia selago*.

We noted some examples of Dandelion but without the required botanical expertise were unable to pin down the precise species. A very rare Welsh endemic found in Craig Cerrig-gleisiad is Riddeldells' Hawkweed, *Hieracium riddeldellii*, first found in 1899 and with a total population from three sites in Wales of 870 plants in 2006, (see *Watsoniana*, **26**, 139-144).

Another precarious descent brought us back to the car park – the weather had been kind and the day productive.

Bruce McDonald

Photos by Bruce McDonald