South Yorkshire Branch Newsletter Summer 2020

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Baby Robin – with the orange breast feathers just starting to grow in by D. Farrar

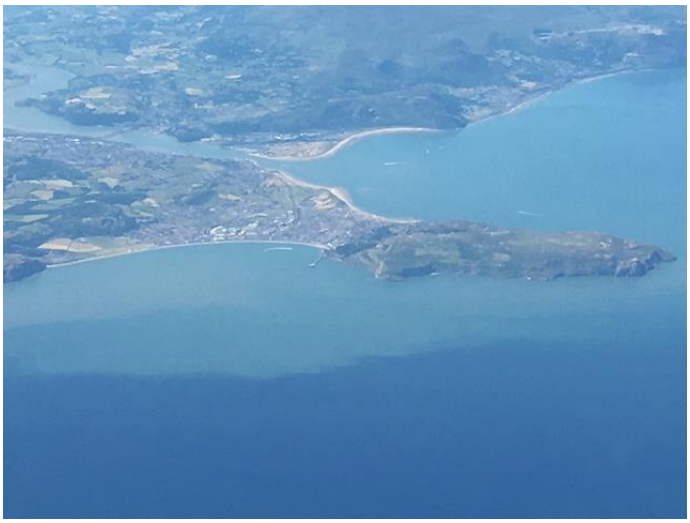
A Windy Weekend in North Wales

By David Swales

Note: I started to write this just before all the turmoil caused by the virus pandemic began and in all the recent upheaval it had got forgotten about but I still thought folk may be interested.

On the last weekend in February, Esther and I went on a coach trip to Llandudno for her Birthday and we were both excited at being off again on our first mini adventure of the year (little did we know it may be our last for a while).

Esther had been to Llandudno before but it was my first time and I was pleased to find it was a traditional seaside town that was seeing something of a renaissance, with many of the buildings looking newly renovated and ready for the season to come (again, little did any of us know).



Great Orme and Llandudno Courtesy of Wikipedia

I am sure a lot of you will know Llandudno well but for those who don't the town is situated on a peninsula on the north coast of Wales, which protrudes into the Irish Sea. The end of this peninsula is dominated by the 'Great Orme' which is a huge limestone headland rising some 680 feet above sea level and is famed for its flora, fauna and wild weather.

The north shore of the town is classic Victorian seaside and was popular with well to do folk as far back as the 1860's. With a gracefully curved bay stretching for a mile and a half, shallow shingle beach, broad promenade and grand hotels, my mind instantly thought of sepia photographs showing well-dressed ladies and gents taking the sea air, back in the resort's Victorian and Edwardian heyday.

Our arrival was less grand as the coach pulled up outside a 'well loved' two-star hotel and the driver informed us that the weather was 'set to be atrocious, but what do you expect for February'. We trooped into the lobby through wind and rain to be greeted by the manager and given our keys. Yes, the hotel was a little worn around the edges, but the rooms were clean and the staff looked after us really well; what more could you ask for.

By the time we got to bed the weather had turned into a full-on storm with howling wind and rain lashing at the windows; never mind we thought, see what tomorrow brings. Much to our surprise it brought clear blue skies and no rain; result! Breakfast, boots on and off we went on a very unexpected explore of Llandudno.

While the going was good, we thought we would head straight up the Great Orme to see what we could find. For all the weather was dry and clear it was still really windy and the going got tougher the higher we went. Towards the top you had to lay into the wind to make any headway and for the last few metres to the summit of the rocky promontory we were literally on hands and knees. Finally, we were able to cling onto the height marker and take in the view as the wind ripped around us and tried its hardest to blow us off the ridge.

With mission accomplished, view taken and wind burn setting in we came down from the exposed summit and headed for some much-needed shelter in the café a short walk away. It was heaven to be inside with a steaming mug of tea and a lump of flapjack in front of us. The arduous walk up was soon forgotten and we could at last enjoy the magnificent views out of the window.

At this point you are probably wondering when I am going to get around to some natural history; well have no fear it's on the way. The fierce wind on the Great Orme really did not lend itself to lingering too long but on top of a shattered stone wall just outside the café I did spot a tough little plant able to thrive in such wild coastal conditions, the English Stonecrop (*Sedum anglicum*).

English Stonecrop, (left) by D. Swales and (right) flowers by P. Rutherford

This succulent, evergreen perennial is well suited to the wild conditions having a creeping, mat forming habit keeping it low to the ground thus reducing its exposure. The word "succulent" comes from the Latin word sucus, meaning juice, or sap and the thick fleshy leaves help the plant hold on to as much moisture as it can, preventing it from drying out. This is a strategy used by succulents around the world, enabling them to exploit niches in arid climates and on poor soils where most other plants would find the conditions too difficult to grow. It is also why they make such good house plants, being able to tolerate the dry, warm air found in most centrally heated homes.

While making our way down off the Great Orme we crossed paths with some of the famous (and infamous) wild Llandudno goats. The nanny and two kids were browsing on a grass slope just above us and seemed unmoved by our presence. Another goat further down the hill was making a bid for freedom and was being chased by a park keeper. The goat seemed to quite like this game, and I got the feeling this was a regular battle of wits between the two of them. The Great Orme is home to about 200 wild Kashmiri goats, originally descended from a pair given by Queen Victoria to Lord Mostyn. The majority of the town as we know it today was laid out in 1849 by the Mostyn family.

(Ed's Note: these are the goats which took over the town centre in Llandudno, amusing residents with their antics and wandering down the deserted streets!)

One of the Great Orme's Kashmiri goat's

Eventually we found ourselves on the west shore at the opposite side of the peninsula. This side of town is more low-rise with domestic dwellings set back from the road and sporting large front windows to take in the views. As the weather was still playing ball, we decided to explore the deserted pebble beach and sand dunes for anything interesting.

The first thing that caught our eye on the beach strandline were some strange looking white balls about the size of your fist, on closer inspection we found these were the amazing papery structures of empty whelk eggs. We had no way of identifying the species but it was probably the Common Whelk (Buccinum undatum), which can be found all around the British coast.

Egg cases - Common Whelk by Sarah Smith
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 2.0

Mermaid's Purse by David Swales

Thornback Ray by Hans Hillewaert
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 2.0

These large, slow-moving carnivorous sea snails live on the seabed below the low tide mark where they feed on worms, other molluscs and any carrion they can scavenge. Its eggs are laid in a spongy mass on the seabed, and once hatched the balls of empty egg capsules often get washed up onto the beach, just like the ones we found.

A little further along the strandline on the same beach we came across the find of the day in the shape of a Mermaid's Purse. These wonderful alien looking objects are the tough leathery egg capsules of the shark and skate family which get washed up onto shore once empty.

Identification was tricky and we needed expert help, which came in the form of Conservation Officer Rebecca Gillham from The Shark Trust, who happily identified our egg case for us which turned out to be from a Thornback Ray (Raja clavate). The Shark Trust were really helpful and the only thing Rebecca asked for in return was for me to record my find on their 'Great Egg-case Hunt' web page help in the conservation of these beautiful creatures, and I would urge anyone else finding a similar egg case to do the same.
The Thornback Ray can be found all around the UK and throughout the northeast Atlantic, Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, western Baltic Sea and also off southern Africa where they live on mud, sand or gravel seabed's at depths between 10–60 metres (33–197 ft). Young Thornback's eat small crustaceans and bottom-living shrimps, while the adults feed on crabs, shrimps and small fish.
They can grow to be over a meter in length and are long lived (up to 15 years) but they mature late and only produce small numbers of young, making them vulnerable to fishing. Their population numbers are considered stable but unfortunately in 2000 they were categorized as "Near Threatened" (NT) on the IUCN Red List

On a more positive note, the Shark Trust are working hard to highlight the plight of apex marine predators and their important role in ocean ecosystems, while trying to bring about change in the fishing industry and I was delighted to help in their fight by recording my egg case.
By this time Esther and I were thoroughly windswept and interesting and both felt the need for a comfy chair and an open fire. We found both of these along with a fine pint of local real ale at the Cottage Loaf Inn back in town where we could chat about the day's adventures.

Cheers everyone and stay safe.

International Dawn Chorus Day 3rd May 2020

By Pauline Rutherford MBNA

Promoted by the Wild Life Trusts this annual event takes place on the first Sunday in May. The very first Dawn Chorus Day was started in the 1980s by broadcaster and environmentalist Chris Baines when he held his birthday party at 4am in the morning so all his guests could listen to the dawn chorus together. What began as a small annual event spread across the UK; it is even celebrated in Antarctica and the Caribbean, and in fact there are more than eighty countries take part!

It is a perfect way to hear the birds as they greet the sunrise and start singing. And is great if you want to learn the different bird songs because they all start singing at different times. The blackbird and robin are usually the first, followed by tits, sparrows and song thrush. The later songsters (those who like a bit of a lie in!) are the warblers and finches.

The birds gradually start singing, building to a crescendo of noise and because it is so early, there are no other background noises so the sweet sound from each performer is heard clear and true as you will never hear them again!

Many of you have been on a dawn chorus with Steve, with some saying the breakfast afterwards made getting up so early all worthwhile! This year because of Lockdown, the birds seem to realise things are different; as with all wildlife they are getting less disturbance from humans and are singing louder and stronger. So, the question I have to ask is "Did you get up at 4am on 3rd May and listen to the dawn chorus, from the comfort of your own gardens or conservatories?"

Entomology Corner

Steve Rutherford FBNA

As some of you will know, I have a fascination for plant galls. Those strange lumps and bumps on leaves, buds and twigs caused by a fly, aphid or wasp with others only there because of a fungi or bacteria; with strange life cycles that part may be on one plant or tree then another on a completely different tree. Most of the insects that cause galls are very small and don't live as adults for long making them difficult to study.

When I was given the Victorian cabinet of pinned insects I found that within the study the wasps of the marble gall had been hatched and the adults of that stage have been fixed to the gall to show how they would look in situ with a fascinating insight to a part of the live of these insects. I have, by accident, created a similar effect with a different wasp and here is the story of how it happened.

Within my gall study I look for galls that the host insect has left so I can cut them open to look at the chamber(s) that is left. I had, therefore, brought home a marble gall that had the typical large exit hole that is found when the wasp ***Andricus kollari*** has left. I left the gall in an open pot on the windowsill to work on the next day. When I went back, I saw five tiny insects on the window. Looking closer these insects had long ovipositors and were an iridescent green, and, as I watched I noticed others that looked about the same size but were black and without the ovipositor. Since looking them up I have found that they are ***Torymus auratus*** and are out of the marble galls but are not the causers of the galls; they are inquilines or lodgers in the galls bringing another dimension to this incredible and often hidden world of galls.

Torymus auratus and my prepared specimens on the gall photos by S. Rutherford

A View from a Comfy Chair from the Chairman

The slow worm colony at the Garden Centre is thriving; at least two young seen earlier this year, two pregnant and a big male. The most seen in one visit has been 9 individuals of different ages and sex. They are beautiful animals and the created habitat of the Long Grass Area seems to be right for them. The reptile mats have attracted black garden ants and this is good for the slow worms as they eat ant eggs as well as slugs and beetles. This could be a long-term study as slow worms can live to a good old age, some suggesting 30 years. They are also a protected species under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) making it illegal to kill, injure and sell this species. The green space surrounding the Long Grass Area goes beyond the boundaries of the Garden Centre and joins directly to the parks of the Wentworth Woodhouse that are now being managed with woodland rides, ponds, flower meadows and patches of copes spreading out uninterrupted to Greasbrough to the south and Wortley Road leading to Rotherham in the west. It is a massive green area. I will be asking the management at the Woodhouse if we can put some reptile refuge mats out on their side to see how widespread they are.

A Rather Unexpected Find

By David Hughes

Our church in Bamford doesn't have a problem with bats so it was a surprise to find one dead on the floor in the nave. It was early April, so the victim had presumably just come out of hibernation. There was no sign of any damage, so I suspect it had found a way into the church but not been able to find its way out and starved.

Never having handled a bat before it was a rather special experience to examine its anatomy closely with a key in hand. I think ID is probably easier with a bat detector! The key features were that it did not have a characteristic horseshoe nose-leaf which excludes the horseshoe bats. Its ears were widely spaced which eliminates the long-eared bats.

Now it gets interesting. The tail membrane has a lobe in many bats which is absent in Myotis bats. This specimen had that calcarial lobe so excluding them. It also had a small lobe in the entrance to its ear. This was rounded which gets us down to Serotine and Pipistrelles. That's as far as I could go with confidence. The distinction between Pips and Soprano Pips is based mostly on the frequency of their call but there is one tiny difference in their wing venation. I think I had a Soprano (Pipistrellus pygmaeus) but it would take an expert to confirm that. Other differences in colour depend are pretty variable.

Handling this tiny creature was a real thrill which I shared with one of our little village eco-warriors from the primary school- an experience I am sure we will both remember. The overwhelming impression was of a beautiful delicate little bundle of fur – not the scary creatures of myth and legend.

Oh, and one final thing – this was definitely a male – quite a little stud by the look of him!

Pipistrelle Bat by D. Hughes

Hoverflies in Lockdown

By Mark Dudley MBNA

With lockdown restricting one's movements this year, hover-fly identification has had to be kept local. So, a stretch of the Dearne valley from the Black Monks near Monk Bretton Priory to Horse Carr Wood near the Cudworth viaduct on the Trans Pennine trail has been where I have spent most of my days. Chilling out on a stretch of river connected with Yorkshire sewerage works I guess wouldn't appeal to most people as a daily exercise walk but for a bit of entomology this is a perfect place. It's full of vegetation that hoverflies like, so with my pots and net I packed my bag to see what I could find.

Large Tiger Hoverfly - *Helophilus trivittatus*. Most people will have come across a member of this tribe if they have a pond in their garden, this being *Helophilus pendulus*. Like this hoverfly it has a yellow face, but without its central black stripe, although sometimes it has a reddish-brown patch around the nose. Its thorax is striped like Hull City football shirts and its abdomen is pale yellow with a 'W' marking on Tergite 4 (abdominal segment) closest to the apex. This is the largest of the three Helophilus species common to the UK, and like its cousin is associated with ponds and ditches where its aquatic 'rat-tailed' larvae feeds on decaying matter.

Site of Hoverfly Sightings and *Helophilus trivittatus* by M. Dudley

Ransoms Hoverfly - *Portevinia maculata*. This hoverfly has been very elusive, and one strongly associated to wild garlic also known as Ransoms, where the larvae mine the bulbs and stem bases. This hoverfly has a black thorax and silver-grey abdominal markings, black legs and orange antennae. After many years of looking around ransom patches in Bradfield Woods, Sheffield Woods and Silkstone Wagonway the last place I expected to see it was down by the river where there were few ransoms. Especially since there is short window of opportunity for its season late April-May when the plant flowers. Most sightings of this species are of males sitting on leaves which this was doing, as females tend to stay low in the plants where they lay their eggs to develop into the next generation.

Bumblebee Hoverfly - V*olucella bombylans*. This is one of the 5 largest hoverflies and belongs to a tribe that includes the hornet mimics and the great pied fly, all super hoverflies to look for on a midsummer walk. This one is special as it is polymorphic, meaning it has several forms, the form shown in the picture below is black and yellow one resembling the white tailed bee (*Bombus lucorum*) but there is a form resembling the red tailed bee (*Bombus lapidarius*), and a much rarer form resembling the common carder (*Bombus pascorum*). Why bother to mimic a bee? Well that's the clever bit as its larva feeds on the nest debris of bees and

sometimes attacks the brood itself. Which might explain why in a field visit to a quarry in East Yorkshire I spent hours trying to catch one a few years back, as they are fast, luckily this one was found taking it easy and drinking nectar from a flower.

Small Burdock Cheilosia - *Cheilosia impressa*. A hoverfly that belongs to the largest group of hoverflies with 38 British species, also known as little black jobs. These are not a group of hoverflies for beginners, so a group I avoided identifying at first. However, I have since found that each species of this group can be identified with patience, by keying differences in characteristics such as wing and antennae colouration, leg and wing colouration, hairiness of the eyes and face, rather than the typical identification features of abdomen and thorax colouration. For Impressa its distinctiveness comes in the form of females, with eyes apart, having yellow bases to its wing see photo below. They are most likely confused with the slightly larger *Cheilosia albitarsis* which have orange legs instead of the *C. impressa's* black. For males, (eyes without gap) it's the very bright red eyes, which can be confused with the red eyes of *Chrysogater solstitialis* but Impressa's are hairy. *C. impressa* is typically found in damp riverside situations with trees and a supply of burdock where the larvae feed on the roots.

Volucella bombylans and *Cheilosia impressa* by M. Dudley

In total, I have in the four months of lockdown seen 40 species of hoverfly in the vicinity which indicates to me how vital brownfield sites can be especially if they have a mosaic of scrub and a river running through the site, surrounded by woods. This site can provide ecological niches for most of the 265 species of hoverflies the UK can offer so let's see how many more I can find before lockdown finishes.

References

Stubbs, A.E. and Falk, S.J. (2002) British Hoverflies an Illustrated Identification Guide. Pub. 1983

Stuart Ball and Roger Morris (2015) 2nd Edition: Britain's Hoverflies A field Guide

Helping the Birds

By Steven Rutherford FBNA

My next-door neighbour is a Siberian husky called Eski. Living in Yorkshire isn't anywhere near as cold as living within the Arctic Circle where the husky breed of dog still works, so Eski tends to get too hot through most of the year and moults huge amounts of hair from late spring through to the start of winter. Eski's friend Chloe collect this excess hair when she brushes him and bags it up for me. I then put this luxurious and heat retaining hair into a special container in the spring for the local birds to use in their nests. This heat retaining hair will, I hope, help the chicks to keep warm until it is safe to leave the nest with their fully formed feathers. The great tits and goldfinch love this.

The hair from Eski is very special with its exceptional heat retentive properties, however, other natural materials are used by birds in nestbuilding and could be put out in a safe place for your local birds to use; hair from cats or other breeds of dogs would do just as well. Moss is a very natural material that birds, especially long-tailed tits, use to build their nests. Chaffinches and robins tend to use a lot of moss to line their nests. Springy turf moss is in most lawns and can be collected by simply raking the lawn after it has been cut. Leave the moss collected in piles on the borders of the garden for the birds to find and that could help the eggs and then the baby birds to keep warm while they grow.



My Neighbour – Eski, providing bedding for great tits and goldfinch

<u>Message from Moira Beaumont</u>

I have this amazing plant in my garden which has been going for well over a month. It is called – *Lunaria annua* Chedglow. It is variety of Honesty and is a biennial. It is well over a metre tall and needs no staking. The wildlife love it!

Moira will be collecting seeds in the autumn to sell with proceeds going to SY BNA. If you want some get in touch with her.

Snippets of news about members

Your Chairman has his own Facebook page! Yes, Steve is joining the social media lot and posting his latest sightings. Follow him – and see what he has been doing during Lockdown!

Roy Stewart has been accepted as a Fellow of the Linnean Society. The Linnean Society is the world's oldest active biological society. Well done Roy!!

David Swales has completed his online Identiplant course (supported by BSBI & FSC), congratulations to David from us all.

Branch Meetings

The health and safety of members is very important to the BNA consequently all meetings continue to be cancelled for the near future.
Hopefully over the next few weeks we can start returning to normal and meeting up each month. This is dependent on Government advice and restrictions being lifted.
I will email you all as soon as this is possible.

Remember to keep up to date with us on Social Media
(you don't need a personal account for this just enter the name in your search)

Facebook – BNA South Yorkshire Twitter – @syorksbna @BNAscience