

### Offering An Alternative To Culling Badgers

In October some farmers in Gloucestershire and Somerset were preparing to shoot badgers on their land. TB in English cattle is an increasing problem but killing one third of the national badger population is not a proven way to reduce it. Even the current government chief scientist Professor Sir John Beddington does not think that culling badgers will reduce bovine TB.

You may have been one of the 150,000 people who signed the government e-petition to try and stop the cull. The Wildlife Trusts have an alternative plan and Cheshire Wildlife Trust recently vaccinated 12 badgers with the BCG vaccine.

The Wildlife Trusts believe that creating immunity to TB in local badger populations will create a firewall to stop a potential northerly spread of bovine TB. The project is supported by Chester Zoo and is being carried out in partnership with Shropshire Wildlife Trust and the Wirral & Cheshire Badger Group.

The vaccination programme will be continuing for another four years. Along with increased bio-security and improvements to cattle movement monitoring, the Trusts believe that vaccination offers an alternative to culling of badgers as a method of tackling TB in cattle.

For more details of how the trapping is carried out see our online newsletter: [www.wirralwildlife.co.uk](http://www.wirralwildlife.co.uk)



Badger *Meles meles*

### New Ferry Butterfly Park

Readers will remember the saga of trying to protect New Ferry Butterfly Park from being closed by its landowner. In July 2011, Cheshire Wildlife Trust won a court case, which has given us a measure of security, so the Park is very much up and running. After a year of lawyers' wrangling, the court costs were finally agreed this summer. The landowner had to pay over half CWT's costs, and generous donations from people associated with the Park have met the rest. A particular Thank You to the Wirral Society for their support.

Hilary Ash

### The Impact Of Wet Weather

Weekly counts of butterflies have been done at the Butterfly Park since 2002, so we are now building up a detailed picture of how numbers vary from year to year. A run of poor late summers (July - August) has been bad for the summer-flying butterflies like meadow brown, gatekeeper and peacock. The migrant butterflies, especially painted lady, largely failed to make it to here this June. Painted lady is a favourite for rearing from kits in schools and at home; occasional sightings may come from released adults. This year we are also concerned for the spring-flying butterflies. Orange tips came out in that warm March, but then had a cold wet flight time through April, and are likely to be in low numbers next year. Keep your eyes peeled next spring and let us know if you see any.

The weather has also been bad for moths, bees, hoverflies and other flying insects, and those species which feed on them, especially bats. Our commoner bumble bees, such as the red-tailed and buff-tailed, started reasonably, but were hit by the very heavy downpours in June-July, which probably flooded many of their underground nests.

However, there are always some winners, and slugs, snails and amphibians have had a very good year, following a couple of dry springs with poor breeding. Natterjack Toads were found breeding in the new pools on the new Green Beach between Red Rocks and West Kirby, and Common Toad, Frog and Newts have all had good seasons. Hopefully they will help eat up next year's slugs.

Hilary Ash

## The Long Drop To Niffy Bay

Cape Farewell is an arts foundation that pioneers a cultural response to climate change by bringing together scientists, artists and communicators to stimulate art based on the science of climate change. Recently I had the pleasure of accompanying them to Hilbre where we had a discussion on the value of coastal landscapes to visitors, artists and scientists.

There is an ongoing study into the monetary worth of coastal habitats. Believe it or not people are attempting to put a "dollar value" on our coast. Not the infrastructure though, this is about something more ephemeral. How much is the smell of the sea worth to a day tripper? What price for the feel of sand between a toddler's toes for the first time? What should a birdwatcher pay to see 10,000 Knot flying over mudflats? Would they get a refund if the Knot didn't show? Could, or should, we pay for the "experiences" of a seaside visit? How do we quantify, rank and monetise different interests and activities on coastal environments?

How will climate change affect our coast and will this alter its value? As an example of negative climate change I suggested the loss of Whimbrel and other shorebirds as breeding birds in this country due to the northward drift of habitats caused by rising temperatures. A devil's advocate said "So what?" Does it matter if these migratory shorebirds no longer nest on remote Scottish islands? Why spend scarce funds on conserving small populations of birds?

My answer is to spend some time with the wading birds of Hilbre, watch them, see what they do and how they live. Then you should know if, and how much, you value them. I pick my way down the cliffs, making the long drop to Hilbre's Niffy Bay and the birds. Camera in hand I lie down and wriggle towards the birds. The sandstone is damp and smells faintly of fish (not entirely pleasant, I wouldn't pay much for this aroma!). Grains of soft rock come away as I crawl over it. A Periwinkle shell becomes caught in my shirt and gets dragged along. It scrapes a calcium white line across the reef. As I get closer to the birds I become aware that I'm enjoying this. I feel privileged to be in such proximity to them, but how much would I pay for this opportunity? Could I even afford it?

The sun, a rare commodity this summer, is hot on my back. Four Ringed Plovers are in a line that cuts diagonally across my field of view, a dot-to-dot of arctic shorebirds. Shared sun is warming their backs too. Others are mindful of the rest of their migration and are preening. While watching this process I see the care and precision taken over every feather. Each one stroked and teased back into perfect place with the dexterity of a thousand knitting grandmothers. However, it's not all peaceful sunbathing; two boisterous males are having a noisy dispute. It isn't clear what it's over, but it seems to matter very much to them.

They yip and skip with furious anger, and while it might be an important spat for the protagonists, it's pure entertainment for me. This furore has gone unnoticed by the sleeping Dunlin. I'm close enough to see the ragged feathers of their wings, worn by huge flights from high latitudes; they use Hilbre to moult into winter plumage.

So I sit, watching and photographing them, just as I recommended to the "so-whatters" in our losing-a-breeding-bird debate. What do I feel? In a word, respect. I look at them and I don't just see several brown birds on some rocks. I see travels over oceans, across huge skies, from breeding tundra to wintering quarters and every place in between. I hope as a race we don't pull the climatic rug from under them.

My over-riding impressions were dignity and respect. Not what I expected at the start. These birds take no more than they need, just what will sustain them and their young. They work hard but expect no reward. They quietly go about the business of enduring. My world would be poorer without them.

Now I have to decide what this is worth. The taste of salt on my lips, a gentle breeze felt on sun reddened cheeks, sounds of screeching terns and the sight of the birds just.... being.

I arrive at a figure. £0. Nothing, not because I think it's priceless, we aren't the only stake holders here. Dunlins, Ringed Plovers and Whimbrels own these islands too.

Quite simply, they aren't ours to sell.

Matt Thomas, Coastal Ranger

## Small Mammal Trapping

The small mammal trapping and survey event held at New Ferry Butterfly Park on 7th October was primarily intended to show how to undertake a simple survey using Longworth Traps. We focused on the actual practical trapping process itself, looking at how the traps work and the preparation that needs to start three or four days before the traps are actually set to capture. We also had a go at processing any caught animals and data recording.

Rather disappointingly we only caught Wood Mice *Apodemus sylvaticus*, no house mice, voles or shrews. It was interesting to note that of the eleven we caught nine were quite small and probably juveniles. A further study early next year may be interesting to see how the population has changed over the winter.

Ron Warne

For more information, read Ron's full report on our website - [www.wirralwildlife.co.uk](http://www.wirralwildlife.co.uk)

## Comma Project Goes Into Hibernation

In the last 3 months the Comma Project unit in New Ferry has had four artists in residence and a series of workshops open to all. There was a wide choice from moss painting, fake taxidermy and quilling to painting on wood and pebbles. The interior resembled at various times a home for giant bugs, a miniature Brazilian shanty town and an ecosystem made from found wood and parts from a washing machine.

The interest and participation from local residents made this a most worthwhile project and helped to publicise New Ferry Butterfly Park. There is hope that the Project may emerge again next year - so watch this space!

### Landscape Wardens (Especially For Our Ellesmere Port members)

Cheshire Landscape Trust have set up the Landscape Warden Project to encourage people to help look after the diverse landscapes of Cheshire. The initial Pilot Project will be based in Ellesmere Port and Broxton. It will train volunteers to survey, report on and improve their local landscape. Cheshire Landscape Trust will provide training opportunities for Wardens to undertake surveys, draw up Management Plans for their parish, keep records and liaise with local landowners and local authorities.

If you want to get involved, read the longer article in our online newsletter or contact Katie Lowe, Chief Executive, Cheshire Landscape Trust.  
tel: **01928 518018**, email: [cltoffice@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:cltoffice@tiscali.co.uk)

### Online Newsletter

If you have internet access you can opt to read your newsletters online, complete with extra articles and photographs. The online Autumn newsletter contains reports on water quality in the rivers Clatter and Dibbin, wild flower planting at Dawpool, our Apple Day at Eastham Country Park, local planning applications affecting wildlife and the recent Year of Coast and Countryside visit to Leasowe Lighthouse.

Reading the newsletter online will save paper and ensure that more of the money we raise goes directly into our conservation work instead of on printing costs.

To opt out of a paper newsletter simply email us at [members@wirralwildlife.co.uk](mailto:members@wirralwildlife.co.uk) giving your name and address. We will send you an email to let you know when a new newsletter is published.

## Events Programme November 2012 to April 2013

### Friday 9th November 2012

Room B, Heswall Hall, 7.30 p.m.

#### 'Nature Conservation on the Sefton Coast'

A talk by Andrew Brockbank, North Merseyside National Trust.

Admission £3. All welcome.

### Friday 11th January 2013

Room B, Heswall Hall, 7.30 p.m.

#### 'Artery of Life'

A talk by Anthony Brandreth from Halton Council about the Artery of Life Project involving local communities on the upper Mersey estuary.

Admission £3. All welcome.

### Friday 8th February 2013

Room B, Heswall Hall, 7.30 p.m.

#### 'Introducing Art to New Ferry Butterfly Park'

A talk by Carol Ramsay, artist-in-residence and Comma Project manager.

Admission £3. All welcome.

### Friday 1st March 2013

Room B, Heswall Hall, 7.30 p.m.

#### 'Biological Recording and Local Record Centres'

A talk by Eric Fletcher, manager of rECOrd and Managing Director of Environmental Record Centres.

Admission £3. All welcome.

### Friday 12th April 2013

Room B, Heswall Hall, 7.30 p.m.

#### 'Heathland Flora and Fauna and its Management'

A talk by Paul Greenslade, Wirral Ranger at Royden Park and Thurstaston.

Admission £3. All welcome.

## Quiz

Wirral Wildlife is celebrating the fiftieth birthday of the Cheshire Wildlife Trust. As part of the celebration, the annual Wirral Wildlife Prize Quiz has fifty questions this year. All money raised by selling quiz sheets (£1 each) will go to Wirral Wildlife.

The quiz questions and instructions are available at our events or to download via our website:  
[www.wirralwildlife.co.uk](http://www.wirralwildlife.co.uk)

## Ragwort - Truth and Myths



Ragwort *Jacobaea vulgaris*. Photo: John Gill

During July and August the countryside is blessed with the rich golden colours of ragwort, a very common wildflower that grows in some profusion in many a neglected piece of land. This resembles nothing so much as a stand of vegetables in someone's garden or allotment, except that instead of green heads, the plants are a wonderful golden yellow. The flowers are a very important source of nectar and pollen for many species of insects including bees, butterflies and hoverflies. Furthermore the leaves are the only food plant for cinnabar moth caterpillars – black and yellow caterpillars that sometimes strip the leaves of a ragwort plant to nothing.

But ragwort, for all its beauty and its importance for wildlife, has a sinister reputation. It has become a widespread belief that ragwort poses a serious health hazard to humans and animals, especially horses. Why? And is it true? Should we be doing something about it?

First the facts. Ragwort is poisonous, both to humans and animals. It contains an alkaloid that when digested and metabolised in the body will cause liver damage. But it is not unique in this respect, as the same alkaloid occurs in many other plants, including for example comfrey and butterbur. But the quantity of ragwort that must be eaten to poison you or your horse is quite large. A single mouthful will not do any serious harm. And handling the plant is not dangerous at all.

So why have the dangers of ragwort become so widely overstated? Undoubtedly there have been cases of horses dying from eating ragwort. But they won't touch the plant in its green state unless they are seriously short of food. So the danger comes from hay containing ragwort, or from grazing in fields where ragwort has been left to wither: as the bottom leaves age and die, and the whole plant dies off above-ground in autumn, then these dead parts can be eaten, and are still poisonous. The poison is cumulative so a small drip-feed from poor horse fields can eventually cause death. By the time symptoms show, nothing can be done to save the animal.

So all that needs to be done about ragwort's poisonous nature is firstly, to ensure that we do not harvest hay that contains a significant amount of the plant, and secondly to remove any ragwort growing in fields where horses are to graze. Ragwort growing on roadside verges or along footpaths should be left to be enjoyed by both people and wildlife; and remember that pulling up any wild plant without the landowner's permission is illegal.

For further reading try [www.ragwortfacts.com](http://www.ragwortfacts.com) and [www.ragwort.org.uk](http://www.ragwort.org.uk) and, for help in identifying your ragwort, contact Wirral Wildlife for advice.

John Gill

## Cheshire Wildlife Trust's 50th Birthday & Wirral's Year of Coast and Countryside

Our anniversary year is nearing its end. In Wirral, we organised 9 walks and 5 wild flower plantings in conjunction with Wirral BC Tourism Dept, who had made this their Year of Coast and Countryside. Wirral BC kindly funded most of the wild flowers through a small grant. The plants have been very well watered in and are thriving! If this reaches you in time, do not forget the last planting, of 500 native bluebell bulbs, at New Ferry Butterfly Park, 2 p.m. on 11th November.

Thank you to our 17 event leaders who all gave their time for free. Some events did suffer from the wet and cold weather, but all went ahead - see our blog for photos and reviews. Having been privileged to go on all of them, I have enjoyed some unexpected aspects of rock-pooling at New Brighton, human as well as natural history in Dibbinsdale and on Thurstaston Common, the fascinating geology of Thurstaston Cliffs, climbed Leasowe Lighthouse, and had 9 walks with knowledgeable people. Keep an eye on our events in 2013 for a repeat of a few of them. To start with, a May bluebell walk looks very likely as part of a proposed walking festival. Roll on spring!

Hilary Ash



Thurstaston geology walk. Photo: Hilary Ash