



Viva the Viviparous Lizard!

The common lizard, *Lacerta vivipara*, also known as the viviparous lizard because it gives birth to live young, unlike the much rarer egg-laying sand lizard, is the most common of our six reptiles. It is found throughout Britain, though not on the more remote islands such as Orkney and The Hebrides.



This one, a juvenile, was photographed by Sue Tatman during a botanical survey of our Cleaver Heath reserve on Wirral. Although heathland is perhaps its favourite habitat, it can also be found in grasslands, woodland clearings, hedge-banks and even gardens. A warmth-loving creature, it is usually spotted basking on south-facing banks, tree stumps, walls, logs or stones, and it is an agile climber when in search of sunshine or prey - mainly insects, spiders and other invertebrates. Females need to reach a critical temperature in order to breed, and they can adjust their breeding and gestation period if the weather is unsuitable when they reappear after winter hibernation, usually in April. The young will be born underground in burrows or other deep shelter, possibly where the adults also hibernated.

As for the dangers faced by lizards, habitat destruction is probably the biggest, together with uncontrolled heathland fires in Spring and Summer. As well as destroying heather and other plants, the invertebrates which depend on them, and the eggs and young of birds which nest in low cover, the lizards themselves may be destroyed if the fires are not dealt with quickly and burn down into roots and burrows.

When it comes to predation, though lizards can move very fast, torpid individuals trying to sun themselves in the open could be taken by kestrels, which commonly hunt over heathlands. In some areas snakes also predate lizards, though these are rare if not completely absent on Wirral.

Any records of lizards, their predation or snakes seen on Wirral would be very welcome.

So this is definitely a creature to look out for, the males variable in colour, often dark and brightly patterned on their backs but orange underneath, and the females a lighter, pale brown above and pale yellow on the underside. They tolerate walkers and passing traffic, and with care they can be observed close-up as this one was. It appeared at the side of path on a birch tree stump around which six people were sitting eating their sandwiches, and it tolerated close inspection as it was observed and photographed. A star performer.

Mike Maher

Fly Agaric

On October 4th my grandson came into the house to tell me he had found an interesting mushroom on my lawn. Sure enough there was a young fly agaric standing in the grass. Two days later the toadstool had matured into a handsome specimen. This was the most perfect example of the species that I have ever come across. The picture below shows it as it was on 4th and 6th October.

It has turned out to be a good autumn for fungi more generally. And apparently ours is not the only fly agaric to be seen. Schools in Wirral have been issued with a warning about its likely appearance in their grounds. The worry of course is that this is a very poisonous fungus and children need to be warned of the danger it presents. I explained the danger to my own grandchildren, and for safety's sake, after taking these photos, I destroyed our toadstool.

John R Gill



Fly Agaric. Photograph: John Gill

Managing Hay Meadows

In Britain, 98% of our species-rich traditional grasslands have been lost since 1945, largely because they do not fit with modern farming practices. Consequently managing the remainder sustainably is difficult. Meadows need to be cut annually; a recent newspaper dispute relating to Heswall Fields has been over the date of that cut. Before the 1980s it would have been cut in July, the date varying with the weather and other farm activities. I have found 2 botanical surveys of the Fields, dating from 1984 and 2004. Both are done differently to the survey I was part of in 2011, but there is no evidence for a decline in plant species richness in the Fields.

The arguments about cutting date centre around the effects on bee and other insects of loss of nectar source. These animals are mobile, moving around the landscape to find food, using woods in spring, meadows in early summer, marshes and heathlands later on, and gardens all season. The clifftop field at Heswall Fields has much black knapweed, a late-flowering perennial not normally found in hay meadows. It is the cause of the perceived problem, as it is still flowering at hay-cut time, although most other plant species present have seeded by then. There is considerable visual impact to it being cut in flower, but the loss of nectar to the insects is relatively small, at a time when other habitats are providing forage.

There are two ways of sustaining the habitat by keeping the Fields mown as a hay crop. One is the existing farm tenancy, which gets the field cut and baled, but must be done while there is still food value in the hay crop, otherwise it is unusable and unsaleable. This means cutting sometime in July, depending on weather. Alternatively pay a contractor to do it, which is equally dependant on weather and machinery availability, and if done after the end July, as has been demanded by some people would also entail paying to dispose of the arisings to commercial composting, as they would be worthless as hay. This could cost at least £1000 per annum. I consider the latter would be unsustainable in financial terms, does not produce significant benefit to insects, and is not justified in environmental terms, as it would lead to waste and a greater carbon footprint.

So it is my opinion that a small loss of nectar/pollen forage in August, when there are plenty of other sources locally, is an acceptable price for sustainable management of this grassland habitat. We have to think long-term and in landscape terms if we are to sustain even our existing wildlife in the coming difficulties wrought by global climate change. See www.cheshirewildlifetrust.org.uk about Landscape-scale nature conservation.

For more information about managing hay meadows see our online newsletter, or for wildlife friendly garden advice see the CWT website as above.

Hilary Ash

A Sunny, Noisy Summer

What a fantastic summer this year has been with some really hot spells from June through to October, interspersed with some rain. This has been beneficial to the insects that thrive within our meadows, hedges and woodlands. Meadow and Common Field Grasshoppers have been noticeably active, their 'song' or stridulation giving their location away. Each species has its own characteristic song. Read our online newsletter to find out how to locate them by the sounds they make as Paul Greenslade (Ranger, Royden Park and Heathlands) has explained how they make their sounds and how these can be used to identify them.

Hilbre Bird Observatory

Following a talk to the group in September, John Elliott has given us an update on bird observations there which can be read in our online newsletter.

Global warming

You may have heard publicity about the recent report issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and unfortunate comments by some politicians which showed they had not understood the science. To those of us who have followed this for debate for 30 years, there was little new, just even greater certainty. In our online newsletter is a brief summary of the situation and suggestions of where to find more information.

Global climate change is certainly happening: anyone over 40 who has spent much time outside will know that our weather has changed, and climate is just weather summed up over decades and large areas. So what do we do? There is advice in our online newsletter - and we can also nag our politicians to get their heads out of the sand and act.

Hilary Ash

One of Wirral's Rarest Flowers Makes a Welcome Comeback

Marsh gentian, a rare flower of damp heathlands, had not been seen in Wirral for around 10 years. We are delighted that it flowered again this year in its old haunt on Wirral Ladies Golf course. Maybe last year's appallingly wet weather had one benefit after all! Marsh gentian also used to grow on Thurstaston Common, but no-one has seen it there since about 1989, when an experimental re-introduction failed. There are no recent records for marsh gentian anywhere else in Cheshire. Damp heathland is a habitat that has suffered much destruction over the last century, by drainage, agriculture and development. However, the marsh gentian is obviously able to come back from seed in the soil, so keep your eyes open on wet bits of Thurstaston Common next summer.

Hilary Ash

Events Programme November 2013 - April 2014

November 10th and then the first Sunday of each month

Cleaver Heath Workday

Meet Oldfield Road, Heswall at 10 a.m.

Stout footwear and waterproofs recommended, and volunteers should bring a packed lunch if staying for the whole session, which ends between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. Further details and directions from Mike Maher - telephone 0151 342 4249.

Friday 8 November

'Re-introduction Programmes at Chester Zoo'
Room B, Heswall Hall, Heswall, 7.30 p.m.

A talk by Penny Rudd and Sarah Bird from Chester Zoo about the Zoo's work on reintroducing species such as harvest mice. Admission £3. All welcome.

Sunday 10th November

Bluebells For Remembrance

New Ferry Butterfly Park, 9.30 a.m. - 4 p.m.

We will be planting 500 bluebells bulbs on the embankment at the top of the Park. This will add a flash of spring colour for Merseyrail passengers as they pass the Park, useful nectar for adult butterflies emerging from their over-winter slumbers and for newly hatched adult orange tip butterflies. No charge. Bring packed lunch. Children welcome. Stout footwear and waterproofs recommended. Contact: Paul Loughnane - telephone 0151 645 8937.

Sunday 8th December

Hedgerow Planting

New Ferry Butterfly Park, 9.30 a.m. - 4 p.m.

A small grant from Voluntary & Community Action Wirral will enable volunteers at the park to plant 40 metres of butterfly-attractive hedgerow, including purging buckthorn to attract brimstone butterflies.

Hedgerows are still declining: here is your chance to create a new length of hedgerow. No charge. Bring packed lunch. Stout footwear and waterproofs recommended. Contact: Paul Loughnane - telephone 0151 645 8937.

Sunday 5th January 2014

Removal of Non Native Invasive Species

Thornton Wood, Clatterbridge

9.30 a.m. - 4 p.m.

In the southern tip of the wood volunteers will be grubbing up the last of beech saplings and making inroads into the removal of variegated yellow archangel, both of which threaten native ground flora. No charge. Bring packed lunch. Stout footwear and waterproofs recommended. Contact: Paul Loughnane - telephone 0151 645 8937.

Friday 10th January

'The State of Nature and Opportunities for Your Local Wildlife Trust'

Room B, Heswall Hall, Heswall, 7.30 p.m.

A talk by Charlotte Harris, Chief Executive, Cheshire Wildlife Trust

Admission £3. All welcome.

Friday 10th January

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Room B, Heswall Hall, Heswall, 7.30 p.m.

A talk by Charlotte Harris, Chief Executive, Cheshire Wildlife Trust

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Sunday 12th January

Keeping The Hedgerows In Trim

New Ferry Butterfly Park, 9.30 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Trimming the hedgerows, to maintain the diversity of shrubs, and collect some hedge stakes in the process to sustain hedge-laying projects.

No charge. Bring packed lunch.

Stout footwear and waterproofs recommended.

Public transport available - the Park is next to Bebington Train Station.

Contact: Paul Loughnane - telephone 0151 645 8937.

Friday 14th February

Room B, Heswall Hall, Heswall, 7.30 p.m.

Admission £3. All welcome.

Further details to be confirmed.

Friday 14th March

Room B, Heswall Hall, Heswall, 7.30 p.m.

'A Shorebird Summer'

Matt Thomas local Ranger and photographer

A talk about Matt's exploits in Norway and Iceland.

Admission £3. All welcome.

Friday 11th April

Room B, Heswall Hall, Heswall, 7.30 p.m.

'Butterflies of the Peak District'

An illustrated talk by Tony Pioli.

Admission £3. All welcome.

A Reply from Ruth

In our last newsletter we thanked Ruth Dann for over 30 years of volunteering with the group.

I would like to thank the whole team involved in fundraising with me, especially Barbara Greenwood who has been responsible for ordering all the stock. Without their reliable help we would not have been able to raise so much money for Cheshire Wildlife Trust.

Ruth Dann

Online Newsletter

If you have internet access you can opt to read your newsletters online, complete with extra articles and photographs. This will save paper and ensure that more of the money we raise goes directly into our conservation work. To opt out of a paper newsletter email us at info@wirralwildlife.org.uk giving your name and address.

New(t) Artworks Promote Park

New Ferry Butterfly Park's annual BBQ party in August was a great celebration day and an opportunity to thank all those who have contributed to the Park's continuing success.

Visitors were greatly impressed by the Park's art works, diverse wildlife-rich habitats, friendly atmosphere and broad range of activities such as games of jenga and boules, a community barbecue, homemade cakes, a fruit-picking workshop and the perennially popular pond dipping: the newts were getting a headache. There was a display of moths caught over night at the Park in the moth trap. With the favourable weather, the Park was keeping true to its name with 11 species of butterfly on the wing.

Two pieces of art work were premiered. Councillor Steve Niblock, a long time active supporter of the Park, was guest of honour and unveiled Pam Sullivan's great master piece - the new interactive welcoming board.

Pam's artwork is a huge painted picture of the Park with lots of interactive parts to it. There is 'guess how many newt larvae in the pond?' where the newt larvae are painted onto individual ping pong balls. How many are there? There are lots, as Pam has got a lot of dedication and persistence. The pond was ingeniously created from the window of a disused washing machine. It is amazing what can be recycled into beautiful objects. There are 'lift the flap' games, as well as an actual insect habitat, and a chalk board to add your comments to. There is a 'put your hand in if you dare' hole. After all this you can embark on the quest for the special brick, that lies somewhere further up the park.



Photograph: Linda Higginbottom

Andrea Basil produced a set of 16 vibrantly coloured wildlife illustrated dominoes on slates dotted along the Park.

These art works increase participation and observation skills and encourage visitors to explore the Park further and more deeply, and whilst they are looking hard for dominoes or the special brick, they observe much wildlife in the process.

These projects were supported by Wirral Council's 'derelict shop fund' grant and a 'Your Wirral' grant. Both grants have been successful in promoting community engagement at the park, which has seen a 50% increase in visitor numbers this year compared to last year. The park is now closed for the winter but will open again on Sunday afternoons from May 2014. Put it in your diary now!

Paul Loughnane

The Park has had 2,432 human visitors this year - a record! Butterfly populations were above average except for orange tip butterflies hit by the cool spring, the large skipper down for unknown reasons and meadow brown populations on a continuing general downward trend.

A Helping Hoof for Heather



Galloway cattle. Photograph: Hilary Ash

One regular job for the recording team each September is to monitor 12 fixed quadrats on Thurstaston Common SSSI, on behalf of the National Trust. These quadrats - squares 5m a side, marked by metal pegs in the ground - were set up by the Nature Conservancy Council around 20 years ago, so there is now a long-running data set on the changes in the heathland and how these relate to management.

Usually this is a pleasant job, sometimes frustrating when the pegs are hard to find. We now have a furry hazard to contend with: sometimes the Galloway cattle decide to take a look at what we are up to and have to be gently discouraged! The cattle are essential helpers in stopping trees taking over from heather, and breaking up dense grass so heather can germinate. They usually graze from June to September. Do admire them - they are friendly, not threatening. And should you notice a metal peg sticking out of the ground on Thurstaston Common - please leave it there for us!

Hilary Ash