



Hilbre Island and MCZs

The seas and coast around our shores are home to some of the best marine wildlife in Europe, with over 8,000 different species, many of national and European importance. This wildlife-rich environment also provides us with a variety of other things including food, recreation opportunities, transport, forms of energy, potential carbon capture and pollution control. All this is coming under pressure from unsustainable human activity. Only by protecting our marine environment now, can we ensure that our seas will continue to contribute to our society for generations to come.

With this in mind, the Marine and Coastal Access Act of November 2009 made provision for the creation of Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) - sites selected to protect not just the rare and threatened, but the range of marine wildlife, while at the same time allowing sustainable activity to continue.

During a two-year consultation, costing over £8.8 million, the Wildlife Trusts and other stakeholders such as fishermen, the aggregates industry, divers and boat-users tried to identify suitable zones.

In September 2012, Defra published details of a network of 127 proposed MCZs designed to ensure that the wide range of marine habitats found in UK seas are protected. Being part of a network, sites are less likely to end up isolated and vulnerable, and benefits can be more effectively achieved.

However, just 31 of these 127 sites are being considered for inclusion in the first stage of implementation. Of these, one is very local to us, the 'Hilbre Island Group' zone. It is the smallest proposed MCZ in the Irish Sea, covering just under 5km² and surrounds the three tidal islands Little Eye, Middle Eye and Hilbre, which are owned by Wirral Borough Council.

Hilbre Island and the surrounding areas have much of value. The flowers of the Islands are magnificent and the seals of the Hoyle Bank draw many visitors each year. But Hilbre is, perhaps most famous for its birdlife, for which the surrounding shore and mudflats with their teeming wildlife provides an ample food supply.

Close to the islands, in the proposed MCZ, are areas of exposed peat and clay, home to various seaweeds, crabs, barnacles, winkles and burrowing clams called piddocks. Beds of blue mussel provide a stable, hard surface and support a varied biological community. These have all been damaged by various activities in recent years and the conservation objective in designating the Islands as an MCZ is to return them to a favourable condition by 2020 and then to maintain their diversity, natural communities and environmental quality in good condition for the future.

This is good news for Hilbre but what of the other 96 proposed sites? And what about the network? Just 31 sites cannot provide the ecologically coherent network that is needed, and there are only vague references to extending designation to more of the recommended sites.

Make your views known - both to ensure that designation for MCZs in the first stage (including Hilbre Islands Zone) goes ahead and that the other sites are scheduled for designation in the near future. You can find more details on what the Wildlife Trusts are doing, and how you might help at www.wildlifetrusts.org/MCZFriends. They have a web page, with campaigner resources, full of information on how to make your individual response to these proposals.

You can also respond directly to Defra at either mcz@defra.gsi.gov.uk or MCZ Team, c/o Post Room, Nobel House, 7 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3JR

Responses should be received by 31 March 2013. Don't forget a special mention for Hilbre.

Margaret Jackson



Hoylake Beach - "Grass" Or Not?

The issue of council budget cuts has brought the future management of our beaches into prominence, especially at Hoylake. During the last Ice Age, Wirral was under a thick layer of ice, which gouged out the Dee Estuary making it much larger than the river needs, and pressed down our bit of the Earth's crust. Since the ice melted about 10,000 years ago, the Dee Estuary has been slowly filling up with sediment. This sand and mud comes mostly from the sea and sea levels have fluctuated widely in that time and are currently rising as a result of increasing sea temperatures. Our bit of crust is slowly coming up again since the weight of ice was removed, so the net sea level rise at Liverpool is currently about 5mm p.a. - which does not sound much until it is looked at over a century or so. So our coasts are always changing. The problem is what we do about that change. For the last century many coasts have been "frozen" in place by coastal defences. Can and should this be continued?

The national government has put in place a Shoreline Management Plan (SMP) that is now being translated into local decisions by the Wirral Coastal Strategy. Unfortunately we still cannot accurately predict the future from the past.

So what about Hoylake? The SMP decision for North Wirral is to "hold the line" and maintain the existing hard defences for at least 50 years. After that defences may be removed at Leasowe Bay and natural sand dunes encouraged to take over. The SMP principle is to work with nature - but Liverpool Bay is not entirely natural, being affected by the canalisation of the Dee and the dredging for the Liverpool Port approaches. At Hoylake, energy of the water and supply of sediment are the key. The Hoyle Lake used to trap sediment but is now full. Hilbre and the East Hoyle Bank break some of the energy of the waves, tides and currents. So sand/mud is being deposited on Hoylake beach, raising its levels, and the colonisation by salt marsh grasses is the result. At Parkgate, well up the Dee where energy levels are much less, mud was deposited, leading to permanent salt marsh. At Red Rocks, at the end of the Dee, where our reserve has been allowed to develop fairly naturally for the last dozen years, a new salt marsh is rapidly turning into sand dune on the landward side, and has been colonised by a range of plants, at least one rare moth (Sandhill Rustic) and the Natterjack Toads. In Sefton, from Birkdale to Marshside, similar coastal accretion has formed new habitats except where the Southport amenity beach is kept clear. In 2000, a report on Hoylake foreshore judged the continued removal of vegetation to be "unsustainable" on ecological and financial grounds, and recommended various trials to see what would happen if the management was changed. These were not carried out by Wirral BC for "financial reasons". Now we have to consider again.

North Wirral foreshore is internationally important for wintering birds, with many thousands there this year. How would development of salt marsh and sand dune affect them? Less feeding ground but more roosting ground? Money is tight - is the money best spent spraying grass with herbicide and removing sand from roads and drains, or could it be used to manage the natural accretion, e.g. to keep open sand where an amenity beach is needed and access for RNLI and Hoylake Sailing Club? What effect would salt marsh and sand dune have on visitors and residents using the beach? Is the first step to fund some trials to see what would actually form?

And look ahead 50 to 100 years. Rising sea level will eventually wash away whatever accretion happens. Marsh/dunes would protect the sea wall until washed away. What would people living here in a century want us to do? What do members think? Let us know by email info@wirralwildlife.co.uk or phone 325 5923.

Hilary Ash (with many thanks to coastal geomorphologist Dr Paul Rooney, of Hope University and the UK Sand and Shingle Network)

See the online newsletter for some website addresses providing more information. Remember you can access these at any library .

You Don't Know What You Are Missing ...

if you rely on the printed newsletter as your source of information about what goes on in Wirral Wildlife.

I did just that until November 2012 when I thought I should have a look at the online newsletter: **www.wirralwildlife.co.uk/news_1.html**

I was quite amazed at how much extra news, pictures and indeed whole articles, were included on the website. If you haven't done so already you really should visit the website and "Read All About It!"

The committee have realised that the costs of producing printed newsletters for so many of our members are increasing rapidly. As membership has increased printing and postage costs have gone up. Something had to give.

It has been decided that all members for whom we have email addresses will receive an email alert giving a link to the online publication. Printed newsletters will only be distributed to those who do not have access to the internet. The savings in cost will be put to good use in our main function of caring for wildlife in Wirral.

If we do not have your email address and you want to opt out of a paper newsletter simply email us at **members@wirralwildlife.co.uk** giving your name and address.

John Gill

2012 - The Wettest Year On Record For England And Wales

What were the effects on wildlife? As the national recording schemes are published, our local impressions are confirmed. A bad year for butterflies except for those with grass-eating caterpillars - so meadow brown and speckled wood did well.

Loss of butterflies and moths and other invertebrates such as wasps and bees, have impacts up the food chain on birds and bats, and on pollination of plants to produce fruit. Think how bad the apple crops were in 2012! So birds had a mixed year in 2012, affected by shortage of invertebrate food and some by fluctuating water levels. Bats did badly. So did water voles and otters.

The winners? Amphibians such as Great Crested Newts had their best breeding season for several years. Slugs and snails thrived to the annoyance of many gardeners. Dragonflies did well, finding enough sun between the rain for the flying stage. And there was the best orchid flowering for years. Grass, shrubs and trees grew well, as you may have noticed in your garden.

So what for 2013? Invertebrates, bats and some birds will all start from very low populations, and need a couple of decent years to recover. Please garden with wildlife in mind (there is lots of advice on www.cheshirewildlifetrust.org.uk). And please take what action you can (including lobbying our politicians) to reduce climate change.

Hilary Ash

Quiz

The winner of the Wirral Wildlife Prize Quiz 2012 was Shirley Miller of Neston. She will receive a gift voucher for £10. Thanks to our ever-ingenious treasurer John Gill for another brain-teaser.

The answers:

1. adder 2. ant 3. bass 4. blackbirds 5. butterfly 6. cat 7. cockle 8. cod 9. cricket 10. daffodil 11. daisy 12. eel 13. elder 14. elm 15. flea 16. fly 19. frog 20. godwit 21. grebe 22. grouse 23. hedgehog 24. kestrel 25. lily 26. lizard 27. mint 28. mole 29. moss 30. moth 31. mouse 32. mushroom 33. newt 34. nightingale 35. otter 36. oyster 37. perch 38. pine 39. poplar 40. quetzal 41. scorpion 42. shark 43. snail 44. snake 45. spider 46. tiger 47. trout 48. turtle 49. violet 50. yarrow

Apologies that questions number 17 & 18 got lost somewhere! For a full explanation of the answers to the clues see the online newsletter.

Events Programme April to June 2013

Friday 12th April 'Heathland Flora and Fauna and its Management'

Room B, Heswall Hall, 7.30 p.m.
A talk by Paul Greenslade, Senior Wirral Ranger,
at Royden Park and Thurstaston.
Admission £3. All welcome.

Saturday 4th May Thurstaston Common walk

Meet at Royden Park car park at 10.00 a.m. then
stroll over the Common. Finish around 12.30 p.m.
at the Tea Servery where the Greasby Scouts will
be operating this facility.

Sunday 5th May Dawn Chorus

Starting at 4.30 a.m. and finishing at
approximately 7.30 a.m.
We should hear a wide range of both our resident
birds and returning migrants, and there should be
plenty to interest those who can already identify
birds by call and song, as well as those absolute
beginners who want to make a start.
Booking essential on 342 4249, but sorry no dogs.
Meet at Cleaver Heath on Oldfield Road.

Sunday 5th May New Ferry Butterfly Park Open Day

11 a.m. - 4 p.m.
An ideal event for all the family with pond
dipping, art trail, craft activities, cake sale, plant
sale, tombola and BBQ.
Free admission.

Saturday 11th May Ancient Woodland Walk

10 a.m. start
Enjoy a walk through Dibbinsdale Local Nature
Reserve looking for Bluebells, Wood Anemones
and other plants associated with our ancient
woodlands, as well as discovering more about the
local history of the area.
No need to book. Meet at Bromborough Rake
Station.
For further information, telephone 0151 648 4371.

Saturday 22nd June Rock Pooling on New Brighton beach

2 p.m.
Meet outside the Floral Pavilion foyer, to explore
the rock pools on the shore as the tide goes down.
Find and identify the animals that live in the
pools, including where the legs of the pier used to
stand. Wellington boots or other tough footwear
needed!

There lay a blue in which no ship could swim... nor shadow ever showed

John Masefield, who was poet laureate from 1937 to his death in 1967, is remembered in New Ferry with a road and a public house named after him. He went to sea when he was 13 and spent 1891-1893 on HMS Conway moored in the River Mersey. Here he gained a great passion for sea lore and the telling of stories, the first steps to his most famous poem 'Sea Fever'. Even when in a gentle woodland setting he is still thinking of the sea when he describes the wonder of a flowering bluebell carpet:

There lay a blue in which no ship could swim,
Within whose peace no water ever flowed.
Within that pool no shadow ever showed;
Tideless was all that mystery of blue.

In 1998 at New Ferry Butterfly Park we removed an area of vigorous bramble replacing it with a hazel coppice. To celebrate 50 years of the Cheshire Wildlife Trust and the Wirral Council's Year of Coast and Countryside it was decided to establish a bluebell carpet under the hazel. Five hundred native bluebell bulbs, generously funded by a 'Your Wirral Grant' from Wirral Council, were planted with the help of 15 people.



Some of the busy bluebell planters. Photo: Hilary Ash

The bluebells will provide a visual attraction to the park in late April/early May and be a spring nectar source for bees and butterflies. Perhaps the area can be extended in the future onto the steeper railway embankment part of the park, so Merseyrail passengers can appreciate a dash of blue on their commute to work.

Paul Loughnane

Declining Moth Numbers

Britain's larger (macro) moths of over 900 species are now found in smaller numbers. This is based on a study by Butterfly Conservation who have collated data collected by hundreds of moth-trappers across the country. Moth traps set in over 500 sites have captured 9 million moths over a 40 year period (it should be stressed that they are released safely!). Two thirds of common and widespread macro moths have declined in numbers over this period, many of them by as much as 75%.

Major losses have been in the southern part of England with numbers in northern England and Scotland holding up reasonably well. Human activity is the basic cause: urbanisation, more intensive use of pesticides, destruction of hedges, the loss of sunlight and ground flora in neglected woodlands and even increased light pollution (bats, for instance, learn to hunt moths by street light). Also increased nitrogen pollution - car emissions, fertilisers - can lead to more widespread nettle growth, crowding out some plants on which moth caterpillars may depend. (To be fair, nettles are essential for the larvae of some butterflies, but their natural occurrence is sufficient for this).

You might say "so what? After all they are only moths!" However, many insect populations including bees, flies, wasps, beetles and indeed micro-moths are being affected; we just don't have as much data on these. Without all of these insects a lot of the ecosystem services that we rely on - such as pollination - will start to fail. Also the general food-chain in nature. As noted above bats rely on moths as part of their diet, but a highly important area is the food supply for birds. Moths lay very large numbers of eggs which in turn grow into the caterpillars which are essential food for birds and, especially, their growing chicks (yes - nature gets the timing right). Indeed many species of birds have shown marked declines for various reasons, but further declines in moth species would accelerate this even more for some of them. A well-known TV naturalist has correctly said "people may not notice the loss of moths but they would notice the loss of birds."

As a footnote, it's not quite all gloom and doom; some species are slowly spreading into Britain from the Continent and others (usually micro moths) have been accidentally imported and made themselves at home here.

Edwin Samuels

Editor - We have just bought two moth traps for New Ferry Butterfly Park and can only hope for a better summer this year! Check our events page on the website for possible moth trapping events during the coming months.