

New Ferry Butterfly Park Flying High

You may have read in the local press of the court case in June and the successful rebuttal of the landlord's notice to quit the New Ferry Butterfly Park. This was further reinforced by the Judge's refusal of leave to appeal. Judge David Hodges, said the landlord could apply for a new and valid notice to quit but they would be unsuccessful, as the only reason for the butterfly park to quit the site would be redevelopment. This appears unlikely given the nature of the park and necessary permissions required. Thanks go to Janel Fone, Chief Executive Officer of Cheshire Wildlife Trust, who represented the case in such an intelligent and creditable manner, and the Wildlife Trust's legal advisers. Thanks also to everyone for the support and perseverance in the two and a half year campaign to keep the Park for the benefit of wildlife and public. The campaign for the park is not yet over, as for long-term safety the Cheshire Wildlife Trust will seek ownership via negotiation, in light of this court case, or ultimately Wirral MBC may apply for a compulsory purchase order.

In the spring the park held an open day with Alison McGovern, MP for South Wirral, who is an avid supporter of the park. Alison opened the caravan-based visitor centre and planted Common Sorrel in the Park's mobile allotment. This opening event attracted 450 visitors, the largest number we have ever had on a single day. Visitor numbers have remained high throughout the summer season. At the time of writing, mid-July, we have attracted almost 1000 visitors, with the summer holidays yet to start.

Several male Brimstone butterflies have been spotted this year and, for the first time, a female Brimstone. We are hopeful they will add another breeding butterfly species to the Park, and will be examining both species of buckthorn bushes for the presence of Brimstone caterpillars. Brimstones are great to see in flight with a flash of yellow charging up and down the park. They are so fast it is hard to be sure if you have seen a new one or the same butterfly, as these strong flyers rapidly cover so much ground.

A new breeding species recorded this year was the appearance of caddis fly larvae in the lower pond. It has taken 15 years for an adult female to fly into the

park and find the pond and lay her eggs. Caddis flies are related to moths and the adults are nocturnal fliers. The larvae in the pond protect and camouflage their bodies by rolling up leaves. In the white pond-dipping examination tray they could be mistaken for a rolled up leaf, until movement and their projecting antennae give them away. The origin of the word Caddis is obscure but is thought to derive from caddice men, travelling vendors, who stuck samples of their wares on their coats, akin to caddis fly larvae sticking stones or leaves to themselves.

Paul Loughnane

Flowers Of The Field

Our recording teams have been busy all spring and summer, doing wildlife surveys on Wirral's SSSIs, Local Wildlife Sites (SBI's) and other areas rich in wildlife, and areas where we are asked to advise. A few highlights from this season are:

A second colony of pyramidal orchids on the sand dunes along the north coast.

White horehound re-found at a site near Burton.

Flixweed, an unusual crucifer (member of the Cabbage family) with fern-like leaves, at Wallasey Golf Course. The golf club has kindly allowed us to do a botanical survey 2010-11, and we can confirm that its sand dune flora is flourishing. We also heard at least 5 skylarks singing.

Taxonomic work (classification) is in progress on the hybrid horsetails we have in Wirral, which led us to check our colonies and supply material to the botanists concerned. As a result we now know that the colony at Red Rocks is flourishing, there are at least 2 good colonies on Wallasey Golf Course, but the colony on the cycleway adjacent to Hoylake Golf Course has vanished. This is very un-grateful of the plant, as we persuaded Wirral MBC not to cover it in tarmac when the cycleway was built, but to divert round it. It seems that the resulting lack of disturbance has allowed more vigorous species to smother it. We are asking WMBC to remove a small amount of fencing and clear some vegetation in the hope it may return from its underground roots. Fortunately, Chester Zoo took material from this colony a few years ago, and it is now growing in their sand lizard display as well as backstage.

The Tree Bumble-bee has reached Wirral. *Bombus hypnorum* is a distinctive bumble, with a black face, tawny thorax, black abdomen and white tail. The species is native to mainland Europe where it has been steadily expanding. It reached southern England in 2000, and since 2007 has spread rapidly north and west, reaching inland Cheshire last year, when one flew into the rECORd office to announce itself. It has been first recorded in Wirral in 2011, feeding on cotoneaster at Eastham, alder buckthorn at New Ferry Butterfly Park and ceanothus at West Kirby. It flies early (March onwards) and is a good pollinator of fruit trees - particularly welcome with the decline in domesticated honey bees. Adult queens may still be around in September, feeding before hibernation. It nests in holes in trees. Keep an eye open this autumn and next spring and let us know if you see one.

We are obviously careful about revealing exact locations for some plants - in spring some orchids were dug up from a site in Willaston. If you want to know more, we always welcome recruits to our recording team, and will help with training you to identify your chosen sort of wildlife. We particularly need people to take an interest in invertebrates and amphibians.

Hilary Ash

40 Years Of Change?

In our last newsletter Jim Gilmour wrote about the founding of Wirral Wildlife group and that it was our 40th Anniversary this year. We asked Barbara Greenwood, a long-standing and active member, to share her views on changes in that time.

In 1988 I was asked to write about 100 years of botanical change in Wirral for the Centenary of the Wirral Footpaths and Open Spaces Preservation Society. I commented on the steady loss of our native wildflowers but which had been balanced by the numbers of newly established alien species. Looking back now to 1988, the changes have been nothing like so dramatic. The damage had already been done! The loss of many of our sand dunes, unimproved grasslands and heathlands with their associated species had all occurred by the 1960s. Indeed it was in response to just such losses that led to the rapid expansion of the County Wildlife Trusts (or Conservation Trusts as they were mostly known) in the 1950s and 1960s.

Planning legislation and the recognition of biological sites (undoubtedly due in part in Wirral to the work of Wirral Wildlife) has meant there has been no large-scale loss of significant habitat. National legislation has given much better protection to our Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The Wildlife Trusts were part of the extensive lobbying to achieve that. Locally, recognition of the Sites of Biological Importance in the Unitary Development Plan has greatly reduced development threats to them. Now, lack of suitable management is often the greatest threat to wildlife on these sites.

That is not to say that habitat change is not still occurring. For instance our heaths are still drying out in spite of attempts to reverse this by the re-introduction of sheep and cattle grazing and removal of birch trees at Thurstaston Common. The saltmarsh grass, *Spartina anglica*, is still encroaching around the coast, but where it was dominant at the shore at Parkgate in 1971, it has now moved further out into the estuary, to be replaced by freshwater marsh species at the shore. New saltmarsh, developing at Red Rocks, is more diverse in species and also rapidly building sand dune.

In 1988 we still had a good number of field ponds, or marl pits. Regrettably for many, lack of management and changing agricultural practices have greatly reduced their biological interest. Conversely, just how good management can improve a site out of all recognition is shown at New Ferry Butterfly Park. In 1993 New Ferry Butterfly Park, an urban nature reserve, was initiated with an on-site tools store and the Park's own committee. Starting with existing invertebrate populations, much has been achieved in habitat management, especially from low fertility substrates from the industrial legacy. Many people have been engaged with wildlife by wardening the park, group visits and hosting corporate days.

Urban and industrial sites (and indeed marine sites) were not part of the conservation scene before the 1970s: nature conservation was mainly a rural activity. Biodiversity, a current buzzword, was unknown in 1971, as is the Trust's work towards creating a "Living Landscape". This means that whatever we are doing to safeguard the wildlife in Wirral in 2011, will hopefully help take it through future changes in agriculture, industry and climate change.

Mourning Gnats

These gnats are black all over – black wings, black head, thorax, legs. The mourning colouration is only relieved by the abdomen which is a brilliant yellow with just a narrow black line. The first time I saw them I was startled by what looked like yellow flowers on a tuft of purple moor grass. Closer inspection revealed that they were small flies – about the size of mosquitoes only rather fatter. And they were there in considerable numbers.

This was at Thurstaston Common in the summer of 2004. The flies were so numerous that every clump of purple moor grass seemed to hold several specimens. With the aid of the internet and an expert in Diptera (that is the Order of insects that includes all the two winged flies), I established that these were members of the species *Sciara hemerobioides*. They don't have an English name except that they belong to a group of species known as Fungus Gnats. I am sure there is a good reason for this name but it is not pretty. However the German name for them - Trauermücke - can be translated as Mourning Gnats, which to me is a much more attractive and appropriate name, so that is what

I call them. They are harmless insects so no need to fear you might get bitten.

In the summer of 2005 there were mourning gnats again at Thurstaston on the purple moor grass, but far fewer than in 2004. 2006 summer showed a further drastic reduction in their numbers so that they were hard to find at all. Then in subsequent years the number continued to fluctuate up and down. In 2010 there were very few indeed so, who knows?- this could be another bumper year.

Thurstaston Common seems to be a good place to see mourning gnats as they are regularly seen on the flowering stems of purple moor grass which does well there (unless the area has been recently grazed by sheep or cattle). I have also found them on our own Cleaver Heath reserve and in Heswall Dales, again associated with tufts of purple moor grass. So this summer, any time from July to September when the purple moor grass is flowering, keep your eyes peeled for little bright yellow spots and if you have indeed found mourning gnats then let us know where and when.

John R Gill

Shimmering Silver

Toward the end of June I took a cycle ride to Prees Heath Common Reserve, just out of Cheshire and into north Shropshire on the lookout for the Silver-studded Blue butterflies. The 60 hectare reserve is part of a registered common which lies two miles South of Whitchurch, where the A41 and A49 fork. Prees Heath Common Reserve is currently the most northerly location in England for the Silver-studded Blue butterfly. The weather was cool; my cycle companion Alistair Noakes was still wearing his fleece, so I was a little doubtful of success. In 1995 Alistair cycled from Land's End to John o' Groats on a butterfly quest as well as raising money for the acquisition of Prees Heath Common Reserve and funds for the development of New Ferry Butterfly Park. In 2006 there was a successful combined appeal from the Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Cheshire Wildlife Trust and Butterfly Conservation to purchase the site.

Within five minutes of arriving we had seen two freshly emerged Commas, a Tortoiseshell and a Red Admiral. Despite the large area of rabbit-cropped short turf there were a good number of nettle clumps. We spotted few Small Heaths butterflies but saw 30 Ringlets with their distinctive strong flight. These butterflies are almost black allowing them to readily absorb heat and fly on overcast days, such as it was. For some unknown reason they are rarely recorded in Cheshire. They use a broad range of common grasses which are found in Cheshire so some other undetermined factor or factors must limit their distribution.

We continued on to recent restoration areas. Here former potato fields have been deep ploughed to bring

up the infertile sandy sub soil from which the heathland was originally derived. This also buried the agriculturally fertile top soil putting it out of reach of the surface vegetation. These deep ploughed areas were then strewn with heather cut from the Long Mynd where the National Trust had been cutting fire breaks on the property there. The cut heather readily provided a seed source and we could see lots of regenerating heather. In a sheltered area we spotted 40 or so Silver-studded Blues - fantastic! We continued on to the edges of the old runway where the original vegetation of close cropped heather lay and we saw a host of silver shimmering butterflies, 6 or 7 per square metre, perhaps 500 in all, a tremendous butterfly moment. A few days later the reserve warden and a dozen volunteer recorders counted 3,257 Silver-studded Blues in one day! The Silver-studded Blue females utilise bell and ling heather and bird's foot trefoils for egg laying. Essential to the completion to their life cycle is the presence of ants that tend the caterpillar benefiting from the honey-like dew the caterpillar excretes. The chrysalis is formed underground in the safety of the chamber of an ants nest, mature chrysalides are hauled out of the nest by the ants so that the adult butterfly can emerge.

So if you are heading south along the A41 at the end of June to early August it may well be worth pulling over and stopping to view the reserve. To those of you who contributed to the appeal it has been a great success and money well spent.

Paul Loughnane

Chinese Lanterns

Recently a "Chinese lantern", still alight, landed in a farmer's barn near the Gowy. Two young bulls were inside, but were unharmed. Usually the barn contains dry straw which could easily have caught fire. Fortunately, on this occasion no harm was done, but "Chinese lanterns" are causing problems for airports, mountain rescue teams and coastguards as well as leaving litter. Please do what you can to discourage their use.

Volunteers

During the last 40 years the Wirral group has been run by volunteers. As well as committee members, individuals have given their time to a variety of tasks. Currently we have 44 people delivering newsletters which means 90% of them do not have to be posted. 34 Recorders work on a variety of sites, 4 volunteers work at Cleaver Heath, 6 at Red Rocks and 10 help with fund raising. New Ferry Butterfly Park has a team of 14 education leaders/wardens and 10 volunteers for practical winter workdays. They also host 2 or 3 Workdays a year for which Unilever provides 30 volunteers.

The 25 members of Wirral Countryside Volunteers also work at New Ferry Butterfly Park and Thornton Wood. To all these people A VERY BIG THANK YOU. However please don't think that we don't need extra help. The more volunteers we have the more we can do to make Wirral a better place for wildlife.

Opportunities

We really look forward to meeting old and new members and would encourage you to get more out of your membership by helping us to run your group. Volunteer opportunities can be found on our website but we are also in urgent need of someone to fill these two roles:

1. Co-ordinator for our winter programme of talks (Sept-April). This would involve contacting speakers and making practical arrangements. All meetings at Heswall Hall, on the 2nd Friday of the month. The Committee provide help with suggestions for speakers.

2. Fund Raiser. Someone is needed to help Ruth Dann to co-ordinate our fund-raising and find new fund-raising venues. We have an active fund-raising group with a good number of people involved to staff events, stalls, etc.

If you would be interested in helping please telephone our group Chairman, Stephen Ross, on 342 4185.

Online Newsletter

Many members enjoy receiving their newsletter through the door and like to collect them. However, we know that many of you are concerned about climate change and deforestation or would just like the money that the group raise to go directly into our conservation work instead of on printing costs.

If you have internet access you can opt to read your newsletters online complete with photographs. We will send you an email to let you know when a new newsletter is published. It is entirely optional, and we respect your decision either way, but to opt out of a paper newsletter simply email us at **members@wirralwildlife.co.uk** giving your name and address.

40th Anniversary Quiz

Our Treasurer has created another quiz and the prize is a £10 gift voucher. Sheets are available (price £1) from 1st September from our sales table or by post by sending a cheque and SAE to:

Wirral Wildlife Prize Quiz, Lindisfarne, 25 Park West, Heswall, CH60 9JE.

Closing date 31 January 2012.

Do have a go.

Wirral Wildlife Events Programme - September to November 2011

Friday 9th September Room B, Heswall Hall, 7.30 p.m.

“Does the Badger Have a Future?” a talk by Lesley Brockbank of the Wirral and Cheshire Badger group. Admission £2.

Saturday 1st October

Apple Day, Brimstage Hall, 2 - 4 p.m.

Taste a variety of locally grown apples and help to make juice using our traditional wooden press.

Sunday 2nd October

Apple Day, Eastham Country Park, 2 - 4 p.m.

Taste a variety of locally grown apples and help to make juice using our traditional wooden press.

Friday 14th October Room B, Heswall Hall, 7.30 p.m.

AGM followed by **“Freshwater Insects: How Do They Breathe Underwater?”** a talk from Ian Wallace of National Museums, Liverpool. Admission £2.

Saturday 5th November

Open Day, 10 a.m. - 12 and 2 - 4 p.m.

You will be very welcome to meet other members and friends at this event (telephone 625 557 for the address). Goods for sale and raffle. Admission £1 including refreshments.

Friday 11th November Room B, Heswall Hall, 7.30 p.m.

“All About Bees”, a talk by Carl Clee, Honorary Curator, World Museum, Liverpool. Admission £2.

Work Days are held at our reserves at Cleaver Heath, New Ferry Butterfly Park and Thornton Wood. Dates and further details can be found on our website **www.wirralwildlife.co.uk**