



The Tale of a Horsetail

In the mid-1970s, whilst on a ramble with her parents, Wirral teenager Marion Barker was intrigued with a horsetail growing at Red Rocks. Her parents in an effort to answer her questions came to the then Liverpool Museum (now World Museum, Liverpool). There was nothing quite like it in the collection although in some respects it resembled Variegated Horsetail (*Equisetum variegatum*). Specimens were sent to the referee for horsetails, Dr C.N. Page, then working at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh. He identified the plant as Mackay's Horsetail (*E. x trachyodon*), a hybrid between Variegated Horsetail and Rough Horsetail (*E. hyemale*). Marion was encouraged to write up her discovery and this was published in the *Fern Gazette* (vol. 12, pp.59-60 (1979)). Her paper was titled '*Equisetum x trachyodon* in Cheshire, new to the English flora'.

Until recently that is what the Red Rocks horsetail has been called and subsequently several further colonies of the same hybrid have been found along the coast between Hoylake and Wallasey with a further colony in Anglesey. More colonies of what were thought to be the same hybrid were found in Yorkshire, Cumberland and Northumberland.



Horsetail at Red Rocks. Photo: Eric Greenwood

Then a few years ago European botanists became interested in the English and Welsh records of *E. x trachyodon*. With the benefit of wider experience and improved identification techniques the story of the Wirral horsetail became more intriguing (the results of this work are published in Jepson, P., Lubienski, M., Llewellyn, P and Viane, R (2013). Hybrids within *Equisetum* subgenus *Hippochaete* in England and Wales. *New Journal of Botany*, 3: 47 – 58). It turns out that the Wirral and Anglesey plants are not Mackay's Horsetail after all, but another hybrid altogether, not hitherto found in Britain. This is *E. x meridionale* whose parents are Variegated Horsetail (as with *E. x trachyodon*) and Branched Horsetail (*E. ramosissimum*). This parent has never been found in Wirral but since 1947 there have been occasional records elsewhere in the country but all regarded as possible introductions. However and perhaps more interestingly, a specimen in the Sloane herbarium collected on Hounslow Heath, Middlesex in c. 1705 has recently come to light. Perhaps Branched Horsetail was a truly native British species and hybridized long ago with Variegated Horsetail on the Irish Sea coast. The idea is given credibility by the occurrence of the hybrid between Rough and Branched Horsetails (*E. x moorei*) on the Irish coasts of Co. Wexford and Co. Wicklow. Again Branched Horsetail has not been recorded in Ireland and the hybrid often occurs in the absence of the other parent as well.

The suggestion now is that Branched Horsetail once grew on our coast but a very long time ago. At some stage the hybrid *E. x meridionale* was formed but not discovered until the sharp eyes of a Wirral teenager found it at Hoylake. Therefore what we have been calling Mackay's Horsetail in Wirral for the last 40 years must now be called *Equisetum x meridionale*, which as yet has no common name.

For the record the Yorkshire, Cumberland and Northumberland records of Mackay's Horsetail have been confirmed as this and therefore distinct from the Wirral and Anglesey hybrid.

Eric Greenwood

New Ferry Butterfly Park, all in a flutter and flourishing

A record number of 550 visitors were drawn to New Ferry Butterfly Park's Open Day on May 5th which heralded the start of the public open season.

They were greeted by a golden host of 500 to 600 flowering cowslips on the lime grassland. The Deputy Mayor and Mayoress, Dave and Sue Mitchell, were kept busy as they unveiled the "Butterfly Hut", created by the Park's own artist in residence Carol Ramsay. Then the Deputy Mayoress planted some lavender in the herb garden and the Deputy Mayor unveiled the recently installed information lecterns. This was fitting as money for these projects came from a "Your Wirral Grant" from Wirral Council.

Pond dipping, making bat hats, barbecue, face painting and eating butterfly-themed homemade cakes went down a treat. Visitors were encouraged to select a plant and add it to the new herb garden. Herbs will be available to crop later in the year.

Several butterfly species, the ones that overwinter as imagos (adults), were on the wing. These included Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell, Comma and also a Brimstone butterfly, previously a rare visitor to the Park. The first of the Park's Orange Tip butterflies emerged on the Open Day. Spiderman Phil, recorded 40 species of spider giving another interesting dimension to our reserve.

Although the Park only hosts these festivities once a year, do come along this summer to see the wildlife that attracted all these visitors. You can follow the nature and art trails, watch out for native free-flying British butterflies and indulge in the ever popular pond dipping. The Park is open every Sunday 12 to 4 p.m. from now until mid-September. It can be found adjacent to Bebington Station's car park in New Ferry. Volunteer wardens are on hand to help you get the most out of your visit. What's more it's free!

Paul Loughnane

150 Miles of Sponsored Walking

I first tackled the Wirral Coastal Walk in 2002 and have just completed my tenth, all of them sponsored for Wirral Wildlife. Altogether, when 2013's contributions have been collected, I shall have raised over £1,850, so I owe my many sponsors a big vote of thanks. To this money can be added a substantial amount in gift-aid. So I do feel my efforts have been well rewarded. Here are a few reflections on those ten walks.

The Walk is held every year on a Sunday in May and raises huge sums of money for various charities. As treasurer of Wirral Wildlife I saw this as an opportunity to do what I enjoy (walking) and to raise some money for the Cheshire Wildlife Trust. It has been a rewarding experience and my only regret is that I have never succeeded in persuading anyone else to come with me to increase the amount raised for wildlife. But I haven't always walked alone: a few friends have come with me on occasion to raise money for other charities or simply to enjoy the day out; failing that I have taken my dog with me for company! And in any event you can never feel alone when hundreds of other walkers are in front of you, with you and behind you for every step of the way.

The walk starts at Seacombe Ferry where crowds of people turn up in a very cheerful mood to set off along the promenade towards New Brighton. At Fort Perch Rock the corner is turned and the long stretch of Wirral's north shore lies in front. Leasowe lighthouse is at first a distant landmark but eventually you reach it and pass it before coming to Meols promenade and on to Hoylake. At Red Rocks the path follows the shore past our Red Rocks Nature Reserve to reach West Kirby. You go beside the Marine Lake and join the Wirral Way in Caldy, finishing at the Thurstaston Country Park visitor centre, a total of 15 miles from the start at Seacombe.

While the presence of so many thousands of people is not calculated to give the best conditions for viewing wildlife there are nevertheless usually some good opportunities. I have sat enjoying my sandwich lunch on the grassy embankment beyond Leasowe Common watching lapwings with their chicks. Butterflies too are usually in evidence along that stretch. Between Egremont and New Brighton I have seen huge numbers of periwinkles clustered together on the rocky shore. At Red Rocks in the pools beside the path I have usually seen many tadpoles - could they be natterjacks, I wonder? Wild flowers are always a delight particularly along the Wirral Way.

Of course the most entertaining part of the walk has been seeing all the people. All ages are represented, but it is good to see so many young people taking part. The T-shirts usually tell you which charity people are supporting and most of the well-known names are featured - Claire House Children's Hospice, Age UK, Macmillan Nurses, the Clatterbridge Cancer Charity, the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation, to name but a few. Some of the walkers are brave enough to dress up for the occasion - I don't envy them walking 15 miles dressed up as a huge teddy bear!

I think I shall be ready for Coastal Walk number 11 in 2014. Anyone fancy coming with me?

John R Gill

Events Programme July - November 2013

Sunday 28th July, 8th September and 13th October

Scything To Success

New Ferry Butterfly Park

9.30 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Learn scything techniques, to maintain spring and summer time flowers. Lunch time BBQ, bring along a contribution. No charge. Stout footwear and waterproofs recommended.

Contact: Paul Loughnane - 0151 645 8937.

Saturday 3rd August

Get The Buzz - Wild Bee Identification and Biology Workshop, New Ferry

10 a.m. - 3 p.m.

For details of the full day's events see our website or contact Hilary. Cost: FREE. BOOKING ESSENTIAL - telephone Hilary Ash 0151 327 5923.

Sunday 11th August

Fruit Picking Workshop

New Ferry Butterfly Park

2 p.m. - 4 p.m.

Come and see what grows at the park and collect some fruit and other edibles. Family friendly. Stout footwear and waterproofs recommended.

Contact: Carol Ramsay - cazramsey@hotmail.com

Sunday 1st September, 6th October and 3rd November

Cleaver Heath Workdays

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 and 4 p.m.

Contact: Mike Maher, telephone 0151 342 4249.

Friday 13th September

'Hilbre Bird Observatory and the Birds of Wirral'

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

A talk by John Elliot, Hilbre Bird Observatory volunteer, about bird trapping and ringing.

Admission £3. All welcome.

Sunday 15th September

An Industrial Legacy To Butterfly Haven

New Ferry Butterfly Park

2 p.m. - 4 p.m.

Heritage Walk concentrating on the industrial history of the Park and how this has contributed to the wildlife diversity of the site. Stout footwear and waterproofs recommended.

Contact: Paul Loughnane 0151 645 8937.

Sunday 6th October

Apple Day at Eastham Country Park

1.30 p.m. - 4 p.m.

Apple tasting and fresh juice making. Activities for all the family.

**Friday 11th October
AGM and Wildlife Quiz**

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

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.

The 'State of Nature' Report

Scientists from 25 wildlife organisations, including the Wildlife Trusts, have done a stocktake of our native species and discovered that 60% of the species studied have declined over recent decades. The Report issued in May says more than one in ten of all the species assessed are under threat of disappearing altogether.

The habitats we have in Wirral (coast, saltmarsh, woodland, heath, farmland, ponds and urban areas) are all losing species due to development, changes in agriculture, habitat loss and fragmentation as well as climate change.

In his foreword to the report, Sir David Attenborough recognised the vital role of volunteer wildlife surveyors: "None of this work would have been possible without the army of volunteer wildlife enthusiasts who spend their spare time surveying species and recording their findings. Our knowledge of nature in the UK would be significantly poorer without these unsung heroes. And that knowledge is the most essential tool that conservationists have."

Our own Recording Officer, Edwin Samuels, recognises the efforts of our own Recording Team and says that "with a list of about 25 potential recorders we are able to keep updated records of the Sites Of Biological Interest (SBIs) within the Wirral district. We also recommend suitable management work as deemed appropriate. All collected data are filed and also sent to be collated by rECOrd, the local Biological Records Centre serving Cheshire, Halton, Warrington and Wirral."

Ed recently spotted a male goshawk over Cleaver Heath, a record which will be forwarded to Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society. "The majority of our recorders major on plants, but we have some specialists, e.g. for spiders, great-crested newts (licence needed) and small mammals. We keep close contact with Wirral Ranger Service and local specialist societies, e.g. Badger Group, Bat Group and RSPB."

If you have identification skills and can help to record wildlife please contact us via email info@wirralwildlife.co.uk or telephone the Newsletter Editor on 0151 342 1395.

Retiring from the committee after more than 30 years of volunteering

Ruth Dann joined Wirral Group of Cheshire Wildlife Trust in 1980 and joined the Social Sub Committee, organising events for members. Gradually this merged with the Fund-raising Committee, of which she became Chairman and a member of the main committee in 1986. She continued in this role until prevented by ill-health in 2012.



Ruth Dann receiving the Eric Thurston Award.
Photo: Hilary Ash

In the early days her team staffed a "wooden hut" at Eastham Country Park every summer Sunday, selling wildlife-themed goods such as cards, tea-towels and notebooks. The group started ordering its own goods for sale when CWT no longer did this, and Ruth delighted in demonstrating the quirky children's toys such as frogs with extending tongues and goggle-eyed glowing pencil toppers that were on sale. Ruth became one of a few people offering their garden for the annual Plant Sale until, as others had to drop out, it became an annual event at her delightful Caldly garden.

Ruth also manned stalls at fairs, sold goods at meetings, held Open Days at her house, and recruited friends to help. At one time Ruth had an annual croquet match on her lawn with participants instructed to donate to the Wildlife Trust.

We are not sure how much she raised over the years, as the older accounts do not differentiate, but between 1997 and 2010 we know she was responsible for raising £18,767! Ruth was backed up in all this by her husband, Bernard, who acted as chauffeur, porter and money-checker. She was presented with the Eric Thurston award in 2005.

Ruth has also hosted meetings of the Wirral committee since 1985, although she modestly claims it was for selfish reasons that she offered her room as she didn't drive. The committee is very grateful for her hospitality, large table - and the occasional entertainment, as when the fox trotted across the lawn to pick up its supper, left conveniently within sight of the window. We will miss her forthright common sense at our meetings, her sense of humour, and her small figure bustling around the sales table but know she will still be giving us her support.

Barbara Greenwood and Hilary Ash

Is Summer here?

In the first week of June the sun shone, summer arrived and both land and water warmed up - and dragonflies appeared above the pond at New Ferry Butterfly Park. On Sunday 2nd June eagle-eyed visitors spotted a female broad-bodied chaser on a bog bean leaf. It had just emerged and was drying out its wings in the sun. Then it took off and flew away into the long grass by the pond where it would spend 10 to 14 days maturing, in preparation for its short (3 to 4 week) adult life. It must have been one of many emerging because later in the week we watched as several groups of 3 and 4 of them flew over and around the pond.

On the Friday, it was the turn of a school group visiting the Park to admire another emergent insect. This time it was a damselfly drying its wings by the pond. After several hours of glorious sunshine the stone on which it was resting must have been warm indeed. It, too, eventually flew away into the long grass.

Lets hope these lovely creatures are just a foretaste of a wonderful summer of colourful insects to come!!

Margaret Jackson



Broad-bodied chaser. Photo: Margaret Jackson