



Gwent Wildlife Trust

Ymddiriedolaeth Natur Gwent



WILD ABOUT GWENT

AUGUST 2011

75 years of Blessings from Beacon Hill

Keith Allen, Volunteer Warden



Welsh mountain ponies grazing at Beacon Hill

Six in the morning and fifteen-year-olds Sid and Edna were up early on Beacon Hill, above Trellech, picking bilberries. After five hours hard work, they collected their full baskets (made themselves from the willows by Cleddon Bog), and walked down to Tintern Station. There they sold their baskets of fruit to the 'toffs' off the train, who'd come to picnic by Tintern Abbey. On a good day they made a pound between them, equivalent to £50 today.

This was the summer of 1936.

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Nestbox Scheme is Flying High

Val Jackson, Volunteer Coordinator

Three years ago, we launched our nestbox monitoring scheme, adopting nearly 300 nestboxes in several GWT reserves, previously monitored by GWT volunteer Rodney Morris for many years.

We asked for volunteers to check the occupants of the boxes annually, and got knocked down in the rush! After a training day, we dispatched 26 newly-recruited monitors in pairs. For eight weeks that spring, they dutifully emailed their reports, and these were collated at the end of the monitoring period. Chicks had fledged from 75% of the nestboxes – a good result.

One of the routes added in 2010 was not on GWT reserve, but in the Wye Valley woods near Kate Humble's home. You may have seen it on the Springwatch Easter Special. The results there have proved to be astonishing. Within two weeks of the boxes being put up, 25 of the 30 had nests in them. The blue tits must have queued outside the wood waiting for us to finish putting them up. 246 eggs were laid in the boxes, and from those 241 chicks fledged – an amazing 98% success rate.

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Redstart (Ray Armstrong)

Gwent Wildlife Trust, Seddon House, Dingestow, Monmouth NP25 4DY

Tel: 01600 740600 Fax: 01600 740299 Email: info@gwentwildlife.org Web: www.gwentwildlife.org

Reg Charity No: 242619 Limited Liability Company No: 812535



Strawberry Cottage Wood

Good Luck for Good Causes

The People's Postcode Lottery has donated a wonderful £11,000 to GWT as part of Wildlife Trusts Wales joining as the lottery's charity partner. The People's Postcode Lottery is the UK's largest community charity lottery. From every £2 ticket, 40p goes directly to charities like GWT.

There are five £30,000 draws a month – wonderful opportunities to win cash prizes while giving to a worthy cause. Just go to www.postcode lottery.com and sign up.

Keeping in Touch

We are always very keen to keep in touch with our membership, via our literature, facebook, twitter, emails and by telephone. In particular, if you would like to hear our latest news and events, please do get in touch with Rachael on rdaniels@gwentwildlife.org and let us know your email address. If you haven't received an email from us in June, then you're not on our list and are missing out on the latest information. We may also get in touch with you by telephone – if you would prefer NOT to receive phone calls from us, drop Rachael an email to let her know.



Beacon Hill ling heather

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In those days 'Wyeswood Common' extended from above Tintern right through to Penallt. It was wild open land, with just a scattering of woodland and cottages. The common itself was a remnant of the old 'Wentwood Forest' which a thousand years earlier covered most of the land between the Usk and Wye rivers. ('Forest' does not necessarily mean land covered in continuous dense trees. In this case, as in the New Forest, it can mean an area of copses and wood separated by commons and fields.) In the 1930s, the Forestry Commission, anxious to provide timber for pit props and other wartime requirements, planted conifers across most of the common. By the time the war ended, the conifers had taken over, the bilberries had virtually disappeared, and the young couple had moved away.

Now the Forestry Commission's priorities have changed. While they still need to manage the plantations for profit, the commission is working towards providing something all people can enjoy. So, when the conifers on Beacon Hill reached maturity, they were harvested and not replaced.

Five years on, GWT has taken over biodiversity management, and an oasis has appeared. In August each year, the two types of heather (bell and ling) make a fantastic spectacle, and large areas of bilberries have reappeared. There is gorse and bracken, being managed by the Forestry Commission Wales (FCW), and the young silver birches will be sold as a 'cash crop' – cut to make pea sticks. Four ponies graze there, and ponds have



Broom at Beacon Hill

been dug. Seemingly from nowhere, wildlife has returned – stonechats, tree pipits, even nightjars. GWT has put out 'reptile refuges' (square pieces of roofing felt) for snakes and lizards, maybe even the rare great crested newt. Several rare plants, including bee orchids, somehow survived the darkness under the conifers, and have reappeared.

I was brought up in Surrey, near Chobham Common, which is now a National Nature Reserve. I saw the trees disappearing to vandalism, 'trail bike' circuits, invasive wild flowers, gypsy encampments, film crews, 'accidental' fires, and even the M3 carved through it. While it has now been 'saved', it will never return to the wild place of my youth. Here in deepest Gwent however, in just five years, nature has largely reclaimed what had disappeared under the conifer plantations, and, with support from FCW and GWT, will thrive, without the population pressure of England's South East.

That elderly couple haven't returned to live in Trellech – I doubt if they could afford to! But I met them last summer on Beacon Hill, picking bilberries again. Their basket was probably made in the Philippines, and only Edna could bend enough to pick the berries. Yet the absolute joy they found picking bilberries again 75 years on is a marvellous testament to the policy of FCW.

Article 2 continued from page 1

This year we have expanded the project enormously. Five more routes have been adopted, making a total of 23 routes and 676 boxes, all monitored by a very dedicated team.

The vast majority are taken by blue tits and great tits. Last year we were thrilled to find a box occupied by a marsh tit. Nuthatches have also taken a few. Pied flycatchers have moved into 20 and redstarts, 11.

Recently, we have had some reports of dead chicks, maybe due to the dry weather making it difficult for their parents to collect food. Let's hope, as the seasons progress, the surviving chicks manage to fledge.

Finally, we're thrilled at the level of enthusiasm from our monitors. We held our annual get-together and invited Dr Anne Goodenough, from the University of Gloucestershire, to talk about nestbox schemes for conservation based on forty years of records gathered in the Forest of Dean. This gave everyone a view of what could also be achieved from GWT's records given time.

We will be publishing updates on this year's monitoring when the season is finished. If anyone would like to get involved in the nestbox monitoring scheme, just get in touch with Val Jackson at vjackson@gwentwildlife.org.



Sue at GWT

■ End of an Era

Rachael Daniels, Membership Development Officer

Last winter we celebrated the retirement of our longest standing staff member, Sue Hillard. Sue had been GWT's membership officer for many years and has seen the trust evolve into what it is today.

Sue joined GWT back in White Swan Court in Monmouth. In those days, it was just Sue and Jon Winder keeping the office going. Over the years, Sue has seen many changes – staff coming and going – and GWT growing from two staff then to over twenty today. She started as a general administration officer, pretty much doing everything, until finally taking on Membership Officer as her full role.

As membership grew, Sue has had to cope with the challenging, ever-changing world of IT. Today, the members total around 10,000 – most of whom have passed through Sue's hands and into our idiosyncratic database.

Sue put a lot of effort into the membership administration and did much for GWT, so her rest is well deserved. We hope that she is settling well into retirement (and not dreaming of membership forms and Watch packs!) and wish her all the best for the years to come.



Pied flycatcher
(northeastwildlife.co.uk)

Gwent Ecology

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www.gwentecology.co.uk



Trainee ringer Olly MacIver with tawny owl chicks

■ Preserving Monmouthshire's Natural Assets

Rebecca Price, Conservation Projects Officer

GWT's Wider Environment team is happy to announce new funding to help identify and support some of the best places for wildlife in Monmouthshire – known as 'Local Wildlife Sites'. GWT will be working with Monmouthshire County Council, who have secured the funding as part of the Rural Development Plan for Wales 2007–2013, launched by the Welsh Assembly Government and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

The project will build on our successful Gwent Grasslands Initiative and the joint work between GWT and MCC to identify and encourage appropriate management and appreciation of these Local Wildlife Sites. I can offer wildlife and management advice to Local Wildlife Site owners and land managers, and there will be a new grants scheme to help support wildlife-friendly site management. The project will run from late Summer 2011 until the end of 2013 and will include further survey work to help identify new Local Wildlife Sites which support locally important habitats. For more information please contact me at rprice@gwentwildlife.org.



Springdale nestbox with nuthatch



Nuthatch eggs

■ Our 7½ Minutes of Fame

Television presenter and GWT member Kate Humble has done much good work promoting GWT. Last year, the Forestry Commission allowed us to place thirty nesting boxes and two tawny owl boxes in the woodland surrounding her home in the Lower Wye Valley. In that first season, the boxes had more than 80% occupancy by blue tits. Kate was over the moon. This year, she was determined to share the value that boxes can have to wild birds with a wider audience, so she persuaded the Springwatch team to film on her local patch.

The crew spent nearly nine hours over two days in March and April to deliver a seven minute story. We found some lovely things including a dormouse food cache, and a woodmouse nest, complete with woodmouse.

There are some incredibly knowledgeable enthusiasts on the Springwatch team, including producer Stephen Moss, who has been a keen

Denis Jackson, People & Wildlife Manager

birder since childhood and has written many articles and books over the years.

The first day's highlight was hearing, not one ... but two lesser spotted woodpeckers drumming in the wood. Kate has asked us for help in placing special nesting boxes for the woodpeckers ready for next season. Woodpeckers like to create their own nesting holes, so these special boxes will need to be filled with something like sawdust for them to peck out. Just when we thought it couldn't get any better, we went back again the next day to check the tawny owl boxes and found three eggs in one of the boxes. And when we returned later in the season, we were delighted to be able to ring three fluffy tawny owl chicks.

We all want to thank Kate, Stephen, and the entire Springwatch team for allowing us to get our message out and, more importantly, bringing wildlife into people's homes.

Fundraising at GWT

Alison McGachy, Fundraising Manager

We want to give a warm welcome to our new Fundraising Manager, Alison McGachy. Alison is an ardent naturalist, who began her career as a fundraiser for Surrey Wildlife Trust in 1996 after working as a volunteer ranger for the National Park Service in Australia. She holds an MSc in Ecological Economics from Edinburgh University, and has worked in the charitable sector with the John Muir Trust, Edinburgh International Festival and most recently Autism Initiatives.

Alison tries to undertake at least one voluntary project during her holidays, from turtle conservation in Costa Rica to identifying whales and dolphins in South Africa and volunteering at an elephant sanctuary.

Many charities cut back on all aspects of fundraising and marketing during tough times. But now, more than ever, is the time to look for new and exciting ways to fundraise from the public as well as from members and supporters.

Grants from trusts and foundations, local authorities, lottery bodies and government tend to be for project-based work such as the purchase of Wyeswood Common or for the Environmental Resource Centre at Ebbw Vale. But there are crucial core

costs of running GWT that are rarely funded through project applications. Paying for the photocopier, finding IT help when a computer breaks down, filling the vehicles with petrol, or paying for telephone calls are all core costs. They are vital requirements which allow us to deliver all the conservation and educational work on our reserves every day.

So where does this core money come from? Well, your subscriptions help enormously with the running costs of the trust. Sponsorship from companies also funds our core work. So, if your employer has a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme or a Charity of the Year scheme, please let me know and we can approach them.

Leaving a legacy to the Trust is another way to help with our core work. It allows trustees and staff to use bequests for some of the most urgent tasks. Please let me know if you are making your will and would like to consider leaving a legacy to GWT.

If you can think of ways you can help raise funds and sponsorship, please email me at amcgachy@gwentwildlife.org or call 01600 740600.



Common spotted orchids and other meadow flowers

What is a Local Wildlife Site?

A Local Wildlife Site has particular conservation value locally and fulfils certain criteria. For example, a grassland needs at least eight well-distributed plant species from an agreed list of 'indicator' species. Woodlands, wetlands, ponds and other habitats all have their own list of species or features, a proportion of which must be represented if the site is to qualify.

A site is identified as a Local Wildlife Site with the full knowledge and co-operation of the owner. A panel of local wildlife experts discusses each site and approves its identification. Grants may be available to help with the site's management.



Wyeswood Common (Jane Corey)



Alison McGachy and friends



Fungi at Croes Robert Wood

LOCAL GROUP CONTACTS

Abergavenny Local Group

Keith White 01873 852036
keith.white@tesco.net

Blaenau Gwent Local Group

Rodney Morris 01495 308056
remorris66@mailshack.com

Chepstow Local Group

Hilary Lee 01291 689326
hilary-lee@tiscali.co.uk

GWT Office

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Monmouth Local Group

Alison Willott 01600 740286
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Usk Local Group

David Gale 01291 673141
david@gale4241.fsworld.co.uk

Wildlife in Newport Group

Roger James 01633 263374
smallranunculus@btinternet.com

For more information on our work tasks and any volunteering, see the GWT Yearbook 2011 or go to www.gwentwildlife.org.



Fox (northeastwildlife.co.uk)

August to December 2011

To book on any GWT event, contact GWT on 01600 740600 or info@gwentwildlife.org

Booking essential unless stated otherwise

■ AUGUST 2011

Nature Detectives for the Family

Tutor: Chris Hatch

Thursday 4th August, 10am – 12pm

Pentwyn Farm, near Monmouth

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: £5 members, £8 non-members

Green Skills Week

Tutor: Veronika Brannovic

Daily Wednesday 10th to Saturday 13th

August, 10am – 3pm

ERC, Ebbw Vale

Contact: ERC, 01495 307525

Cost: FREE entry but there may be a small charge for some activities

Drop in anytime during the day

Summer Funday

Tutor: Veronika Brannovic

Wednesday 17th August, 10.30am – 2.30pm

ERC, Ebbw Vale

Contact: ERC, 01495 307525

Cost: £1 adults, children FREE

No need to book

Dingestow Court Open Gardens

Host: Helen Bosanquet

Thursday 18th August, 11am – 4pm

Seddon House, Dingestow, near Monmouth

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: FREE but donations welcome

No need to book

An Introduction to Dragonflies

Tutor: Keith Noble

Saturday 20th August, 10am – 4pm

Magor Marsh, near Newport

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: £10 members, £15 non-members

Outdoor Living Skills

Tutor: Gavin Cornthwaite

Saturday 20th August, 10.30am – 3pm

ERC, Ebbw Vale

Contact: ERC, 01495 307525

Cost: £10 members, £15 non-members

Surveying for Dormice

Tutor: Jan Kinchington

Saturday 27th August, 10am – 1pm

Pentwyn Farm & Croes Robert, near Monmouth

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: £10 members, £15 non-members

The Changing Scenery of Magor Marsh – Summer

Tutor: Paul Cawley

Sunday 28th August, 2pm – 4.30pm

Magor Marsh

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: £5 members, £8 non-members

■ SEPTEMBER 2011

Bats and Moths

Tutor: Rodney Morris & Aislinn

Blackmore

Wednesday 7th September, 6pm – 8pm

ERC, Ebbw Vale

Contact: ERC, 01495 307525

Cost: FREE but donations always welcome

Introduction to Dormice

Tutor: Jan Kinchington

Saturday 10th September, 10am – 11.30pm

Croes Robert, near Monmouth

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: £3 members, £6 non-members

An Introduction to Spiders

Tutor: Mike Kilner

Saturday 10th September, 11am – 3pm

Magor Marsh, near Newport

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: £5 members, £8 non-members

Dry Stone Walling

Tutor: Terry Mead

Monday & Tuesday 12th & 13th

September, 9.30am – 4.30pm

Pentwyn Farm, near Monmouth

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: £50 members, £70 non-members

Amphibians and Reptiles on the Blorenge

Speaker: Frances Baines

Monday 19th September, 7.30pm

The Ballroom, Bridges Community Centre, Monmouth

Contact: Monmouth Local Group,

01600 740286

Cost: Recommended donation of £1.50 (minimum)

Feel free to bring a friend

Valleys' Wildlife

Tutor: Steve Williams

Wednesday 21st September, 6pm – 8pm

ERC, Ebbw Vale

Contact: ERC, 01495 307525

Cost: £3 members, £6 non-members

■ OCTOBER 2011

Gwent Wildlife Trust AGM

Including short presentations on the work of GWT by staff members

Wednesday 5th October, 7pm – 9pm

Glen yr Afon House Hotel, Usk

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

All welcome, tea & coffee provided

No need to book

The Magic of the Mushroom**Speaker: Dr Roger Evans****Tuesday 11th October, 7.30pm**

The Ballroom, Glen yr Afon House Hotel, Usk

Contact: Usk Local Group, 01291 673141

Cost: £2, children FREE

Gardening for Wildlife**Speaker: Veronika Brannovic****Monday 17th October, 7.30pm**

The Ballroom, Bridges Community Centre,

Monmouth

Contact: Monmouth Local Group,

01600 740286

Cost: Recommended donation of £1.50

(minimum)

Wildlife Works**Tutor: Veronika Brannovic****Daily Tuesday 18th to Saturday 22nd****October, between 10.30am – 3pm**

ERC, Ebbw Vale

Contact: ERC, 01495 307525

Cost: FREE but donations always welcome

Drop in anytime during the day

Bird Box Monitoring & British Birds**Speaker: Rodney Morris****Wednesday 19th October, 7.30pm**

Chepstow Leisure Centre, Chepstow

Contact: Chepstow Local Group,

01291 689326

Tea and coffee available

Brilliant Birds**Tutors: Kathy Barclay & Helen John****Saturday 22nd October, 12pm – 4pm**

Magor Marsh, near Newport

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: £1 children, adults FREE

No need to book

Hedge Laying**Tutor: Kevin Williams****Monday 24th October, 10am – 4.30pm**

Pentwyn Farm, near Monmouth

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: £25 members, £35 non-members

Autumn Funday**Tutor: Veronika Brannovic****Wednesday 26th October, 11am – 3pm**

ERC, Ebbw Vale

Contact: ERC, 01495 307525

Cost: £1 adults, children FREE

No need to book

Introduction to Dormice**Tutor: Jan Kinchington****Saturday 29th October, 10am – 11.30pm**

Croes Robert, near Monmouth

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: £3 members, £6 non-members

The Changing Scenery of Magor Marsh – Autumn**Tutor: Paul Cawley****Sunday 30th October, 2pm – 4.30pm**

Magor Marsh, near Newport

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: £5 members, £8 non-members

NOVEMBER 2011**All About Hedgehogs****Tutor: Keith Jones****Wednesday 2nd November, 6pm – 8pm**

ERC, Ebbw Vale

Contact: ERC, 01495 307525

Cost: £3 members, £6 non-members

No need to book

The Gwent Orchards Project**Speaker: Alice Rees****Tuesday 8th November, 7.30pm**

The Ballroom, Glen yr Afon House Hotel, Usk

Contact: Usk Local Group, 01291 673141

Cost: £2, children FREE

Wildlife of the Lower Wye Valley Tributaries**Speaker: Stephanie Tyler****Wednesday 16th November, 7.30pm**

Chepstow Leisure Centre, Chepstow

Contact: Chepstow Local Group,

01291 689326

Tea and coffee available

Winter Wildlife**Speaker: Chris Hatch****Monday 21st November, 7.30pm**

The Ballroom, Bridges Community Centre,

Monmouth

Contact: Monmouth Local Group,

01600 740286

Includes Christmas refreshments!

Cost: Recommended donation of £1.50

(minimum)

Feel free to bring a friend

DECEMBER 2011**Nature Detectives for Adults****Tutor: Chris Hatch****Wednesday 7th December, 10am – 12pm**

Magor Marsh, near Newport

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: £5 members, £8 non-members

Christmas Crafts at Magor Marsh**Tutors: Kathy Barclay & Helen John****Saturday 10th December, 2pm – 5pm**

Magor Marsh, near Newport

Contact: GWT, 01600 740600

Cost: £1 children, adults FREE

Winter Wonders**Tutor: Veronika Brannovic****Wednesday 21st December, 11am – 3pm**

ERC, Ebbw Vale

Contact: ERC, 01495 307525

Cost: £1 adults, children FREE

No need to book

Illustrated Talk – title TBC**Speaker: Steve Spode****Wednesday 21st December, 7.30pm**

Chepstow Leisure Centre, Chepstow

Contact: Chepstow Local Group,

01291 689326

Seasonal refreshments will be available

**Lesser horseshoe bat (JJ Kaczanow & Bat Conservation Trust)****John Charles Hines, Batman of Gwent****David Gale, Usk Local Group Chairman**

It is with great sadness I inform you of the passing of John Charles Hines on 18th May 2011 aged 89 years. He is survived by his wife Molly, his four children and four grandchildren.

John, former Chairman of GWT Usk Local Group, was raised in London in the early 1920's. His varied career began as a Post Office trainee engineer. During the war, he went to Scotland to train in mountain warfare and could not believe his luck to be posted to such a beautiful area. He then served in India. After the war, he became Welfare and Education Officer with the Post Office in Edinburgh and later moved to Cardiff to become Chief Welfare Officer.

John had a good sense of humour and enjoyed rock climbing, sailing and hill walking. He wrote many articles on wildlife subjects but his favourite topic was bats. He wrote a book on bats and also took part in a television documentary. Home owners, the MOD and official bodies were advised on the welfare and conservation of bats. Injured bats were rescued and adopted. One such bat named 'Selena', who loved to be hand-fed live mealworms, used to spend her holidays with us when John and Molly were away at their writing club, where John lectured from time to time.

Even after suffering a stroke six years ago, John carried on with his welfare of others setting up a support group for stroke victims at The Chepstow Community Centre.

John's ashes are to be scattered in his favourite glen in Scotland.



Silent Valley (Jane Corey)

Penallt Pastures Bloom after Baby Boom

Annette Murray, Wyeswood Common Project Officer

I am happy to report that this year's lambing was even better than last. We brushed up on our lambing delivery skills and had copious amounts of lubricant and gloves at the ready. Our girls did us proud and quietly got on with producing their little ones without us! The lambs – 26 in the end – were much stronger and healthier than last year and were turned out to graze quickly.

We were surprised by triplets that had escaped the scanner! Sadly one was dead and another so small and weak he only lived for a few days despite our best efforts. But the remaining lamb is growing strong and we can't tell her apart from the others now. We named her Blythe as she is such a happy little lamb, full of life.

We also had to supplement the feed of two twin ram lambs with the bottle, as their mum didn't have quite enough milk for both. They are now turned out with the rest of the flock and doing well.

Beechwood Beautiful

Tom Eyles, Silent Valley Reserves Officer

We'd like to introduce you to new Silent Valley Reserves Officer, Tom Eyles. Tom has always had a love of the outdoors. He's worked for various conservation projects throughout the UK, and as a ranger for nature reserves in Devon.

Tom tells us why Ebbw Vale's Silent Valley Local Nature Reserve, a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest, and the highest beech woodland in the UK, is magnificent in any season.

When I first visited Silent Valley on a blustery day in February, it seemed so bleak. But once I entered the woods and slowly wove my way up to the very top of the reserve, I was greeted by glorious sunshine and the slightly stunted high altitude beech trees covered in ice. It was an unusual sensation, warm in the morning sun, watching icicles melt from the trees, and skylarks singing in the air all around.

I couldn't think of a better place to be. Since being given the opportunity to become the new Reserves Officer for

this wonderful site, I have watched with great pleasure as it moved from its winter colours into spring and summer.

Silent Valley isn't so silent sometimes. The reserve's birds include redstart, cuckoo, jay, mistle and song thrush along with many warblers such as wood, willow, chiff chaff and blackcap.

The butterflies add a wonderful dash of colour wherever you look, represented strongly by the whites, such as the green-veined and large, and are joined by the more colourful common blue and small heath. The small pearl-bordered fritillary has found a home here as well.

Violets are visible along the short grass edges to the paths and bluebells carpet large areas interspersed by the bright white flowers of stitchwort. The yellow flowers of tormentil are visible all around.

Silent Valley covers fifty hectares and is a wonderful wild area to explore. We have a car park and a selection of walking routes to suit all, but please be aware that if you wish to see the whole reserve then sturdy boots and an ability to walk on difficult terrain will be required.



Our twins

Our thanks go to our volunteers shepherds who helped out during lambing and who continue to ensure on a daily basis that the flock is safe and healthy. Roll on lambing 2012!

Counting Sheep: Tails from a Volunteer Shepherd

Linda Smout, GWT Volunteer

Dreams.

That's what counting sheep is supposed to encourage. Well, I can tell you, whoever came up with that as a method of lulling themselves to sleep hasn't met GWT's Hebridean flock.

Maybe more docile breeds such as Suffolks or Leicesters behave differently. I bet they stand stock-still, refusing to bunch and hide behind each other until the counting and checks are finished. It's nice to dream. In contrast, Hebridean sheep are small, black, horned, and very naughty. They love to test and taunt their 'sheep checkers'.

I start my inspection by creeping up on their field trying to go unnoticed. Not a hope. Immediately, all grazing or snoozing stops. Suspicious heads turn my way and sheep communication begins. They leap up, huddle together, and frolic off to the far corner of the field. Their eyes never leave me as I begin my check.

I have to count to see if any are AWOL and wow, how they tease me! As they become a single black mass, I lose any sense of depth. Each sheep seems to have six or ten legs, two bodies and no head. Initially I count seventeen sheep. Then they slink around each other and become sixteen. Then fourteen, or fifteen, before taking pity on me, and transforming correctly into eighteen.

But recently, the counting has become even more challenging. This spring, I have to find twenty-six tiny, black lambs. Having been schooled by their parents in drama, the whole field becomes their stage. With ears pricked, long tails wriggling, they gaze cheekily at me before springing into action. They're off, bouncing about like Zebedee and gambolling around in constantly changing gangs. I count six lambs here, three there, seven along the fence, two – no wait – three behind some ewes, four or five by the wall, one peeping out of the nettles. But as I count, one group has merged with another and the gang by the fence have split into two. I recount again. . .
... and again ...and again.

Exhausted, I finish the rest of my duties by making sure the water trough is full, the perimeter fence is holding and the gates are closed. Sometimes I encounter more of their games, like getting their heads stuck through the wire fence. Other times, after being snared by thorny hedges, they may use bits of bramble, nettles and twigs as fetching sheep jewellery. The ewe with the longest bramble sticking out of her fleece wears it with pride.

More seriously, last year I found a dead ewe, far from the rest of the flock, with two dependent, distraught lambs nearby. This proved to me how important it is to keep a daily check on livestock.

So, if you want to experience the gloriously beautiful hillsides of Penallt, have a nice walk, admire the view, attempt to count sheep and take on an important responsibility – let our Wildlife Development Officer, Tim Green, know. And if you find any problems, just pass them on to one of the GWT's full timers who will take over and sort everything out in their wonderfully efficient way. Come join us!

Linda watches over GWT's Hebridean Sheep flock at Pentwyn Farm Reserve several times each month. She's just one of a dozen volunteer shepherds who check on the sheep each day, rain or shine.



Bee orchid at Dixon Embankment (Chris Deeney)

Waitrose Community Matters

Each month every branch of Waitrose donates £1,000 to local community projects. Having three Waitrose stores in the Gwent area, we are well placed to receive money for our core work. If you use, or are even passing the Waitrose stores in Abergavenny, Caldicot and Monmouth then please pick up the form and nominate GWT. And, of course, if we are lucky enough to be selected, don't forget to pick up your green token and add it to the GWT box!



A naughty lamb at Wyewood



Pyramidal orchid at Dixon Embankment

Dixon's Orchids

As every gardener and budding veggie plot owner knows, plants can be rather fussy about where they'll grow. The type of soil is an important factor in determining the plant community that will flourish on a particular site. And so the grassland wildflowers you'll see on the neutral soils of Pentwyn Farm and Newgrove Meadows are rather different to those inhabiting GWT's more calcareous grassland reserves.

Dixon Embankment was created from limestone spoil during the building of the A40. It offers a great place to see some of our calcareous grassland wildflowers, and it's been a good year for two of them. This season's orchid count has found 276 Pyramidal Orchids and 21 Bee Orchids!

The wonderful Pyramidal Orchid is so-called because of the obvious rounded-pyramid shape to the flowering spike, especially when young. The colour of the flowers is a beautiful deep pink and they are visited by moths and butterflies which feed on the nectar at the base of the long slender spur.

The Bee Orchid gets its name from the shape of the flowers. Each flower has three erect pink sepals, two small green petals and a lip, which is yellow and brown with a velvety texture. Although it looks like a bee it does not use them as its main method of pollination; the usual way is by self-pollination. It's a plant of open calcareous grassland and often colonises the bare ground of man-made sites such as spoil heaps and quarries.

Connecting with Dandelions

Sorrel Jones, Conservation Officer

When I began maternity leave, I thought I was swapping the world of wildlife for nappies, babygros, and mothers' groups. Working as a Conservation Officer at GWT, I had been immersed in nature conservation, helping to protect precious habitats and species, and encouraging others to do the same.

When motherhood arrived, in place of paperwork, surveys and campaigning, there was an exhausting blur of feeding, changing, crying and screaming. A quiet walk along the canal soon became part of our routine, not to see the wildlife, but to get out of the house and get my son to sleep.

But, soon, I was watching the wildlife again. I laughed when the pheasants tried to walk across the ice in the winter. I counted the ducklings in the spring. I've watched as the beech and chestnut leaves burst open and the bright yellow flag iris has flowered. I'm still thrilled if I see the resident kingfisher.

What's more, I've shared all this with my baby boy. I've crushed the wild garlic leaves for him to smell, and offered him feathers or pine cones to touch. Best of all, I've sat in our dishevelled garden and blown the dandelion clocks while he laughed and laughed.

Part of my job is to protect sites from development, and I often have to make an argument to show how 'valuable' a site is. Usually, this comes down to how many species are there, if any are rare, whether local people use it for recreation, whether it connects other habitats together and if it has any other function, such as screening a motorway from view.

The Welsh Assembly Government is now developing a framework that uses these values to guide their conservation policies, with GWT's input. Central to this is recognising the important services that our wildlife provides – pollination, stabilisation of our soil, income from tourism and recreation – not to mention clean air and water.

For me, any concept that helps to identify valuable wildlife and protect it is a good thing but, since having my baby, I do wonder about the

dandelions. They are great for insects, especially bees, and they are good colonisers of bare ground, helping to stabilise it. Dandelion genetics is so complicated that research is ongoing and we're still learning new things. It might be possible to put a value on all that, but how do we value the fun in blowing a dandelion clock?

Fortunately for my son, dandelions are not under threat, and he should enjoy many years of spreading their seeds. But I worry there might be other wildlife experiences out there that we have not yet discovered that may be disappearing. Are we putting enough value on the wildlife that doesn't seem valuable, until it makes us smile?

In nature conservation, as in other fields, we tend to count things and keep scores. How many sites are protected, how many trees have we planted, how many people come to our nature reserves, and so on. This is a good thing. How else would we know that we are making a difference? But sometimes, it's too easy to only see the numbers and not take any pleasure from the counting. When my maternity leave ends, I'll be back working as hard as I was before, writing reports and assessing planning proposals, but I've promised myself that I will stop once in a while to enjoy the dandelions.



Dandelions in flower
(northeastwildlife.co.uk)



Dandelion clock
(northeastwildlife.co.uk)

Woodland Works at Magor Marsh



Coppicing at Magor Marsh



Scarlet elf cup fungi



Coppiced land

Richard Bakere, Reserves Officer

Magor Marsh is GWT's oldest reserve and has a fascinating mix of intriguing habitats. Crisscrossing the site are the ancient ditches known as reens which support hungry giants like the fish-eating larvae of the great silver water beetle. Species-rich wet hay meadows host rarities including meadow thistle, a relative of common knapweed. Binding the site together is the wet woodland. These willow trees survive all that nature can throw at them – thriving even in winter floods!

Willow's near supernatural power to grow in these conditions is amazing. The challenge is in managing the woodland so that there is a good mix of trees of all ages without colonising the whole reserve. Last winter our work was given a boost when a team from the Environment Agency stepped in to help out by coppicing a substantial piece of the willow woodland.

This ancient form of woodland management involves cutting the tree back to ground level, allowing a window of a few years for dormant seeds to flourish while new growth from the willow stool shoots up. Traditionally this growth would have been used for basket making. A patchwork of varied growth ensures specialist plants, fungi and invertebrates can find their ideal niche. Even in late winter you can find new growth like the scarlet elf cup fungi vibrant on the woodland floor.

Next time you visit the reserve, look out for the different ages of the willow. After a year, shoots as thick as your finger will be three feet high. Within five years, the growth will be thicker than your arm. The support of all the volunteers who help out on the site is invaluable in keeping the reserve rich in wildlife.



NEWS IN BRIEF

Wyeswood Common marker

Find a New Way around Wyeswood

After focusing the initial work at Wyeswood Common on essential improvements to the site infrastructure, and of course prioritising habitat restoration, the reserve is also now visitor friendly. Several way-marked posts, displaying an oak leaf symbol, guide visitors around the reserve's new circular trail.

The route (approximately 1.5km long) takes visitors through grassland and woodland restoration projects and offers superb views over the Wye Valley. It is part of a raft of access improvements at Wyeswood Common, and GWT's adjacent reserve, Pentwyn Farm, which include new visitor information for both reserves and a new orchid trail around Pentwyn.



Wyeswood Common interpretation panel



A contraption to behold

On the Level

Rob Waller, Gwent Leveller

As usual, the Levellers volunteer group had a welcome cup of tea before setting out for the day's activities at Magor Marsh and we were intrigued when Richard said he had something new to show us.

We trooped outside to help unload a contraption from his trailer. It was an ancient farm gate, to which had been welded some even more ancient wheels and what looked like old metal shelving. Richard proudly announced his new fire trailer. To our amazement, it was hitched onto the quad bike and gingerly taken to where we had been coppicing the week before. To our even greater amazement, it worked! Not only did it not sink without trace into the bog, but we were able to burn a huge quantity of willow without scorching the soil. And so far we have managed not to set the whole reserve

ablaze, though some of us have come close to being singed. With its help, we have been able to push back the relentless growth of willow that threatens to squeeze out the precious marshland habitat. Similar, in a way, to our Seventeenth Century namesakes who (before the term Levellers was attached to a political movement) levelled the hedges on enclosed farmland.

And we use some of the same implements! The old railway carriage used as a store holds a variety of mediaeval tools such as slashers and hay cutters that we wield with varying amounts of dexterity to clear the reens of unwanted growth and the wet meadows of unwanted bramble. We must look an odd sight as we trudge back along the boardwalks, against the setting sun, ancient implements over our shoulders, weary after the day's work in the marsh.

WAGTales

Hemlock water dropwort is probably the most poisonous plant in the British Isles. Its poison has been used for both homicide and suicide – a very famous case being Socrates who was sentenced to death by drinking a mixture containing the poison hemlock.

Did you know that honey bees don't defend their nest from predatory insects by stinging them? Instead they surround the intruder in a tight ball and raise the temperature of the inner space by vibrating their muscles. This lethal temperature combined with increased carbon dioxide levels within the ball will kill the enemy. This technique is also used to rid a colony of an intruding or defective queen.



Badger (northeastwildlife.co.uk)

Did you know that badger is still a menu item in Russia, China and other Asian countries? In fact, it was even eaten in Britain during World War II and into the 1950s.



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GWT is most definitely moving with the times and our Facebook and Twitter accounts are flourishing. We have over 600 followers on Facebook and over 400 on Twitter. These are other easy ways to keep up to date with the goings on here at GWT. Come along to the Facebook page and have a go at our famous 'Guess the Critter'. No prizes for the right answer other than the warm glow that comes with knowing you were right!

