

The Nature of our Village

Report from November 2019 to January 2020



The team of botanists at work on the New Year Plant Hunt in Parc y Llyn

Introduction

This Winter we have been running our Mermaid's Purse Hunt for the Shark Trust for the fourth year in a row, with 6 hunts completed so far. We have been on 6 bird walks and discovered a very bizarre fungus! We ran a New Year Plant Hunt with a dozen botanists, discovered our Rusts and made a County First with a tiny Gall Midge. The RSPB Garden Bird Watch was carried out and we were delighted to receive some further funding for our project.

Birding together



4 of our group trying to see the gang of Curlew hiding in the rushes!

We are very lucky to have so many skilled birders in our group, with Naomi and Aline leading us on 6 walks between them. We saw some incredible sights, from Chough barrelling overhead, to a Little Egret hiding in a ditch, a field full of Curlew and a pool full of Teal. Birds which put in a rare appearance were the Snow Bunting and a Great-Crested Grebe out at sea. Naomi demonstrated the use of a telescope on a tripod to the group and those of us with quite basic binoculars were amazed at the quality of view we could get, as someone said, like sitting next to a bird which was 100ft away! We were also delighted to see the Greenfinches and the Goldcrest which have been

feeding near the back of a local supermarket, and this reminded members that even the smallest scrap of woodland can be host to some really fascinating birds.

Mermaid's Purse Hunt for the Shark Trust

A keen group of volunteers join us almost every week throughout the Winter season to scour our beaches for the eggcases of Sharks and Rays. These strange objects, looking a bit like black plastic, are what keep the juveniles safe whilst they mature. The stormy seas of Winter usually wash up empty cases on to our shoreline and we collect them, identify their species, and report to the Shark Trust how many we find. This information helps them to plot the distribution of our native species around Cardigan Bay and contributes to what is known internationally about Shark and Ray populations. We have been adding to this survey by carrying out regular litter picks on our beach, as we say "Hunting for Treasure, and Rubbish!" So far this season we have carried out 6 of these Eggcase hunts and have managed to record 492 cases. The species we find most commonly are Nursehounds, which appear to be using Cardigan Bay as a nursery ground, attaching their eggcases to the brown seaweeds known as Wracks.



2 Spotted Ray eggcases found on Tanybwlich beach.

What blooms in the Winter?

Not much, one might think! A gang of a dozen botanists joined us at the very start of January to show us that, amazingly, 18 different plant species were actually in flower on the 5th of January 2020. We took a group of volunteers out to Parc y Llyn and a bit of searching revealed Red campion and Winter heliotrope (both known for their long flowering seasons), but also Chickweed, Shepherd's-purse and Yarrow. Some grasses are also flowering at this time of year and we noticed Annual meadow-grass and False oat-grass with flowering heads. Thanks to the expertise of the lead botanist, Fay, we were also introduced to the diverse Lichen, Fungus and Plant Rust populations of the meadow and the woodland. Perhaps the most beautiful was a Rust that turns bramble leaves purple, called *Phragmidium violaceum*. Our Fungus community included pale grey Candlesnuff Fungus and the bright yellow Witches' Butter growing on dead gorse branches.



Phragmidium violaceum – a Plant Rust on bramble leaves.

Fabulous fungi!

We were amazed to find a very peculiar-looking fungus – called Devil’s Fingers (*Clathrus archeri*). This village first, (only the second time it has ever been found in the whole of Ceredigion) appeared on the southern boundary of Penparcau in early November 2019. It is a rare find in the UK, and is known in the USA as Octopus fungus, because it has scarlet “arms” like octopus tentacles, emerging from a white ball. It is known for producing a vile smell, although we did not notice this on the cold day we found it. First discovered in the UK in 1914, it is native to Australia and New Zealand. Arthur Chater noted “It is extraordinary that single specimens appear so very rarely and so far apart.” The County Plant Recorder Steve Chambers wrote “The aliens have landed.”! We shared this finding with the British Mycological Society on social media and were amazed to have 114 people like it and make 32 comments.



Devil’s Fingers!

Training sessions

Most of our training sessions are run earlier in the year, but we did run one Winter afternoon session on how to identify Plant Galls. These can be strange looking lumps and swellings on familiar plants, and you may be familiar with Oak Apples and perhaps the scarlet threads of Robin's Pincushion, which occurs on roses. They are often caused by an insect laying an egg into the leaf, bud, stem or flower of a plant or tree, which then alters the structure of its host, to create an ideal environment for the grub to grow. We discovered that an Artichoke Gall Parasitic wasp had laid an egg in to a leaf bud of one of our local Oak trees, meaning that instead of a leaf, an odd shape appeared, very like a 2cm long artichoke flower. We were also delighted to make a County First with a small swelling on a Willow leaf, which was made by *Iteomyia major*, a tiny gall midge. We would have a very slim chance of ever finding this midge in the wild, but by learning to identify our Plant Galls we can definitively say it is present!



The County First record of *Iteomyia major* we found in Penparcau.

Taking Action for Nature

In Winter we carried out 6 Litter Picks of Tanybwllch beach during our Mermaid's Purses surveys, and also organised a "Mass Litter Pick" in partnership with Greener Aberystwyth Group, Penparcau Community Forum, Aberystwyth Conservation Volunteers and Ceredigion County Council. Our plan was in particular to attract a large group of people from all walks of life and of all ages, in order that they could meet each other and have enjoyable conversations whilst improving the Parc y Llyn site for wildlife by removing all the rubbish.

This approach was highly successful and we managed to remove 50kg of litter. A large group of young people from the local University met and mingled with some of our older members, and many interesting chats ensued. Having a common purpose, to benefit wildlife, made it easier to find something to start off a conversation and we will definitely be running this again.

In other news

We were delighted to receive a further contribution to our funding from D'Oyly Carte, which will enable more survey work to be carried out in 2020. We also rediscovered a Water Shrew on Pen Dinas, which hasn't been recorded there since 2016, when one was discovered sheltering under a reptile refugium. It is an unusual find for our area and we were very pleased to know that, even though we haven't been able to see them for several years, they are still present.

We took to social media to encourage our group to take part in the RSPB's Big Garden Bird Watch, and locals shared which birds had visited their own gardens. We hope that our local contribution to this national Citizen Science project will help to give an accurate picture of how our wild birds are doing this Winter.

Thanks to all our funders

We'd like to express our thanks to all our funders who have kindly agreed to provide further funding for this project. We are sincerely grateful to all of you as we couldn't do

this vital work without you.

Chloe Griffiths - Penparcau Community Forum: The Nature of our Village Project.



The Banister Charitable Trust

