



North Wales Habitats & Meadows Network Newsletter



November 2020

I'm sure you will enjoy reading news from members writing from across N. Wales including Anglesey, Flintshire, Gwynedd & Meirionnydd. Wildlife has benefited from a spring and summer with less human activity, noise and pollution - a compensation for events and people we have missed. Another plus is the amount of time people have spent studying and enjoying their local patch, which has led to an increased number of records sent to Cofnod, the North Wales Environmental Information Service. Cofnod now has a total of over 4 million records and it's not too late for you to add to this huge database. Plans for Network visits in 2021 will have to wait, but let's hope these will be possible.

Thank you to everyone for contributions, keeping in touch and to Mark Sheridan for putting this together.

Kate Gibbs

It's been an interesting year!

'The North Wales Wildlife Trust-managed and Plantlife-owned nature reserve (also Gwynedd's Coronation Meadow) Caeau Tan y Bwlch near Clynnog Fawr has had an interesting year to say the least. The spring drought over lockdown definitely had a negative impact on the amount of yellow rattle flowering in the meadows, it only



appeared in roughly 50% of our quadrats compared to the long-term average of 80 – 90%. However, it didn't seem to impact too much on the orchids, the second highest number



of greater butterfly orchids ever were counted - 5752. Our ongoing battle with bracken is paying dividends, thankfully small teams of volunteers were able to go out and pull, bash, and scythe the bracken in late May and June (see attached photos). The hay cut was done in late August by Kehoe Countryside Ltd., and green hay was used to seed road verge projects undertaken by the North and Mid Wales Trunk Road Agency.'

Rob Booth (NWWT Reserves Officer)

Much has happened in our field Tyn Llidiart, Cwm, Nannerch this year. After the prolonged dry period in spring, areas of the grass turned brown. My concern that overall growth would be affected proved unfounded. Given the dominance of native species their adaptation to the British weather enabled them to cope with variable rainfall. In the ten years I have managed the field, flowering was more abundant than ever.

It was alive with invertebrates including grasshoppers providing a regular soundtrack.





The mason bees filled numerous cells in the bee houses until a mysterious interloper began to dismantle the bamboo. At first, I thought badgers or squirrels. I repaired the damage several times until I realised a woodpecker was the culprit. While it is quite reasonable for the bird to use any resources available the degree of destruction was excessive. When the leaf cutter bees started laying later in the summer the woodpecker resumed its activity. I decided to construct a screen around the site. I am hoping the grade of the mesh will not obstruct the bees next year.

After discussions with Graham and Jill Wheeler we were delighted when they agreed to place two beehives in the field. To avoid scratching sheep from knocking over the hives later in the year we constructed a protective enclosure. Graham and Jill wanted to install the hives before the heather flowered on nearby Pen Y Cloddiau. The hives have been supplemented with fondant for overwintering.



I wanted to cut the grass as late as possible and after discussions with Laurence and Richard from Enfys it was agreed to commence work in late August. They were very sceptical whether it would be possible to make hay so late in the season. It seemed inevitable that after baling the hay would have to be dumped. However early September proved

unseasonably sunny and dry and they harvested 62 small round bales which were sold. Enfys have acquired new equipment including a small tractor and baler. The baler was given its first outing in our field and despite some early teething



problems, including breaks in the chain and problems with the binder, it performed well. A local farmer has loaned us 9 sheep which will graze for a while to complete the annual cycle.



Given the plant diversity we would be very happy to donate green hay next year if anyone is interested. We would need to enlist the help of Enfys for cutting, baling and transport, which would obviously incur some cost - however the hay would be donated.

Carys & Tim Biddle

As I write this, Storm Francis is sending rain horizontally across my still-uncut meadow. Sadly, there has not been a weather window for haymaking. It has been a strange year altogether. The drought in April and May stunted the grass growth and seems to have allowed yellow rattle and plantain to spread. I was delighted to finally confirm the identity of a marsh orchid on the edge of my pond as a southern marsh orchid, which is a recent colonist to Anglesey. My overall orchid count was down this year, and black knapweed has been very slow to grow and late to flower: I assume that both are in response to the dry spell.



By contrast a small patch of adder's-tongue fern in my lawn seemed to benefit from the reduced competition from grasses.

I took advantage of some free-time at the start of lockdown to transplant some cuckoo-flowers from frequently mown areas of lawn into the meadow, and was pleased to see that they took. I have also cheated a little by growing some ragged robin from local wild seed and have transplanted them out into two areas of the meadow to see if they will survive. The wet weather from June onwards has certainly helped there.

The RSPB did not allow us to do the usual bird survey work that takes up most of my spring mornings and so I had time to pay more attention to setting a light trap for moths in my garden, and to photograph some of them. I have seen over 480 species in the nine years or so that I have been moth-trapping here. Some are migrants or waifs and strays from neighbouring habitats, but some that are present because of the food provided by the meadow are shown below. From left to right, blood-vein, burnished brass, garden tiger, and the drinker - doing its best impression of Dumbo! Pride of place goes to the innocuous looking grass rivulet. This moth feeds on yellow rattle and so it has declined by 96% in the UK over the last few decades in parallel with similar losses of hay meadows, so I am pleased that a good number have colonised my meadow.



Small elephant hawkmoth was a new one for me, and it seemed to have an exceptional year during the warm dry May weather and was reported widely across Anglesey.

Many more moths are associated with the hedges and the ruderal plants around the meadow; bramble, the thorns, and sallow around the perimeter, and thistles and nettles on the margins, in particular support a wide-variety of moths including some of my favourites such as swallow-tailed moth, scorched wing, bordered beauty, and the bird poo mimic - chinese character, each pictured below from left to right.



The moths that I attract make the meadow all the more valuable to me.

Ian Hawkins

Forty legs and four wheels have been providing most of the meadow management this year. I'll start with the wheels. Out of the blue I was approached as the owner of a potential donor site who might be able to provide green hay for a meadow creation project. I contacted the redoubtable Kehoes, who arrived in late July with hay cutting and gathering kit and sculpted enclaves of short turf into the rank growth of the meadow. In late August the cut sward was sporting Eyebright where I had never seen it before, its neat perfection like handfuls of silver strewn across the grass. Less ostentatious than Yellow Rattle, it does the same job: it is a hemi-parasitic grass suppressant, but takes patience to establish

it, unlike Yellow Rattle, which can rampage across a field in a few seasons. As there are many Eyebright micro-species, it is best to obtain seed from a site close by, and as similar in character and soil type as possible. I'll come back to this point in a minute.

The owner seems to have done an excellent job preparing his site and I look forward to visiting it and seeing how well it has taken next summer. The action grabbed a short spell of fine weather, after which it turned very wet, and plans to take a hay crop came to nothing. No doubt a host of invertebrates will be thankful, but so will Hardhead and Bramble and other members of the plant mafia. This is where forty legs need to take the strain.

Work associated with a new line of 33KV electricity poles held up grazing plans, so eight young Welsh Blacks did not get their chance to shape a meadow until the latter part of September. Now they are making an impact and taking short forays into our wooded 'rough'. They have also squigged about in a field of wet grassland verging on marsh, but they are now excluded from it, for it has become the domain of the latest arrivals – the other eight legs, if you've been counting. These two fellows are well suited to the marsh, for they are Water Buffalos. They are, I am assured, softies, but their size, and the way they tilt their heads back, sniff the air, glare and head my way is more than a little scary. I enjoy contact with grazing animals, but I'm a little wary of getting too physical with these boys.



I'm lucky enough to look after meadows and other habitats which have escaped the pattern of intensive land use which

has eliminated so much wildlife and pleasure from around us. Meadows, though, owe their existence to agriculture, and norms of conservation need not apply here. Some of the best meadows in Meirionnydd, for example, owe their botanical richness to a history of liming, so this needs to continue. Knowledge is a wonderful thing, and it's a really good idea find out about your soils, get them tested for pH and so on, but this need not become a straightjacket: applications of lime or basic slag can be part of an appropriate meadow management regime especially if you are in the business of creating or enriching your meadow. An application of lime could find its way onto my job list for 2021, to mark my quarter century of messing about in a meadow.

James Robertson

We've had the meadow for a few years - previously it was a campsite. About three years ago we started completely keeping the sheep and goats out. Each year it has improved - and this summer was the best ever. We had many new species of meadow flowers and we've noticed a real increase in numbers of insects which seems to have resulted in more bats and birds. The number of nesting birds in particular has soared. It's been hard work but very much worth the effort. We're doing two cuts a year one in late August early Sept and one in October. Our lovely farmer neighbour has offered to come in and cut it with his machine next year. We thought about a scythe but a bit too old and it's a bit too big for us to do.

Penny Garnett

We have only been able to interest one farmer in our hay crop which he has fed to his cattle. Unfortunately, he is now in his seventies and has decided to buy in his hay, not wanting to spend the time with the work involved and worry of the weather in these parts. Other local farmers are not interested, since we have “too many reeds” or “too much yellow rattle”. However, to compensate, he has promised young cattle which he describes as “calves” to graze down the fields.



We obviously have mixed feelings, but it will be less of a shock for the insect life and other small creatures that live in the long grass. Our only concern is the

protection of our harebells and scabious that appear in the different areas of the fields. However, we think we will be able to protect them.

Our fields are on the wet side and we start off with marsh-marigolds and lady's smock. We continue with ragged-robin, etc. and consistently see a couple of orchids, although not necessarily in the same parts of the fields, but we have not seen our Broad-leaved Helleborine for a few years now.



John & Gill Cooke

Habitats & Meadows on YouTube

Online communication has really come into its own during these strange times. Here are links to the recordings of Zoom talks hosted by the NWWT relating to habitats & meadows.

Make Your Own Meadow with Anna Williams and Iwan Edwards

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdTKhq2gE_k

Magnificent Meadows (Cymru) with Tamsin Fretwell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4UwNnDPzIHM&t=145s>

Wildlife Gardening with Anna Williams

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8UnKMvDVxM>

Gardening for Wildlife with Jan Miller

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8F7AQsUi4k&t=92s>

Cofnod

Cofnod is your Local Environmental Records Centre that brings together wildlife data across North Wales. It really is worth logging into their website and entering your records. Wildlife records increase knowledge of our environment enabling more informed decisions to be made about its conservation. If not already registered find out more here <https://www.cofnod.org.uk/Home?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1>

