Land Snail Identification Course Report

On the 4th October 2013 sixteen attendees gathered at Treborth Botanic Gardens, Bangor to learn about our British land snails. The rainy weather was certainly suitable for our molluscan friends, but fortunately the morning was spent indoors.

Ben Rowson from the National Museum Wales, and a past student of Bangor University, led the course. He gave us an interesting overview of the British fauna, noting that the presence of snail shells in soil deposits helped establish which species were native, and which had been introduced by man. It was a surprise to many that the common garden snail falls into the non-native category.

Habitat preferences of various species were described and the point made that suitable habitats can change through time (e.g. open screes favoured by one particular group can rapidly change to a scrub/woodland fauna).

Ben then explained how to go about looking for snail specimens. A nested set of different mesh-size sieves was used to sort a litter sample into various grades. Attendees then honed their microscope skills by picking out the often tiny shells contained within the samples. With Ben's guidance many of these specimens were identified by working through helpful identification keys.

A break in the weather allowed the group to disperse through the gardens looking for fresh snail samples. We gathered an impressive haul of 16 snail and 9 slug species. One of the more brightly coloured *Arion rufus* slugs put on a prolonged 'rocking dance' for an interested audience! An interesting find was that of *Hawaiia minuscula*, a small glasshouse snail which is apparently a new Welsh record.

Hearts sank when Ben announced that the course would finish with a short exam to test what we'd learnt during the day! However, initial apprehension soon turned to silent, enthusiastic study as attendees worked through various unnamed test specimens. We were all pleased to discover that we had indeed learnt how to identify many of the less tricky British land snails. Ben tells us that his new Aidgap key to slugs will be published next year, so perhaps a course devoted to slugs is on the cards.