

CARMARTHENSHIRE

Nature Notes

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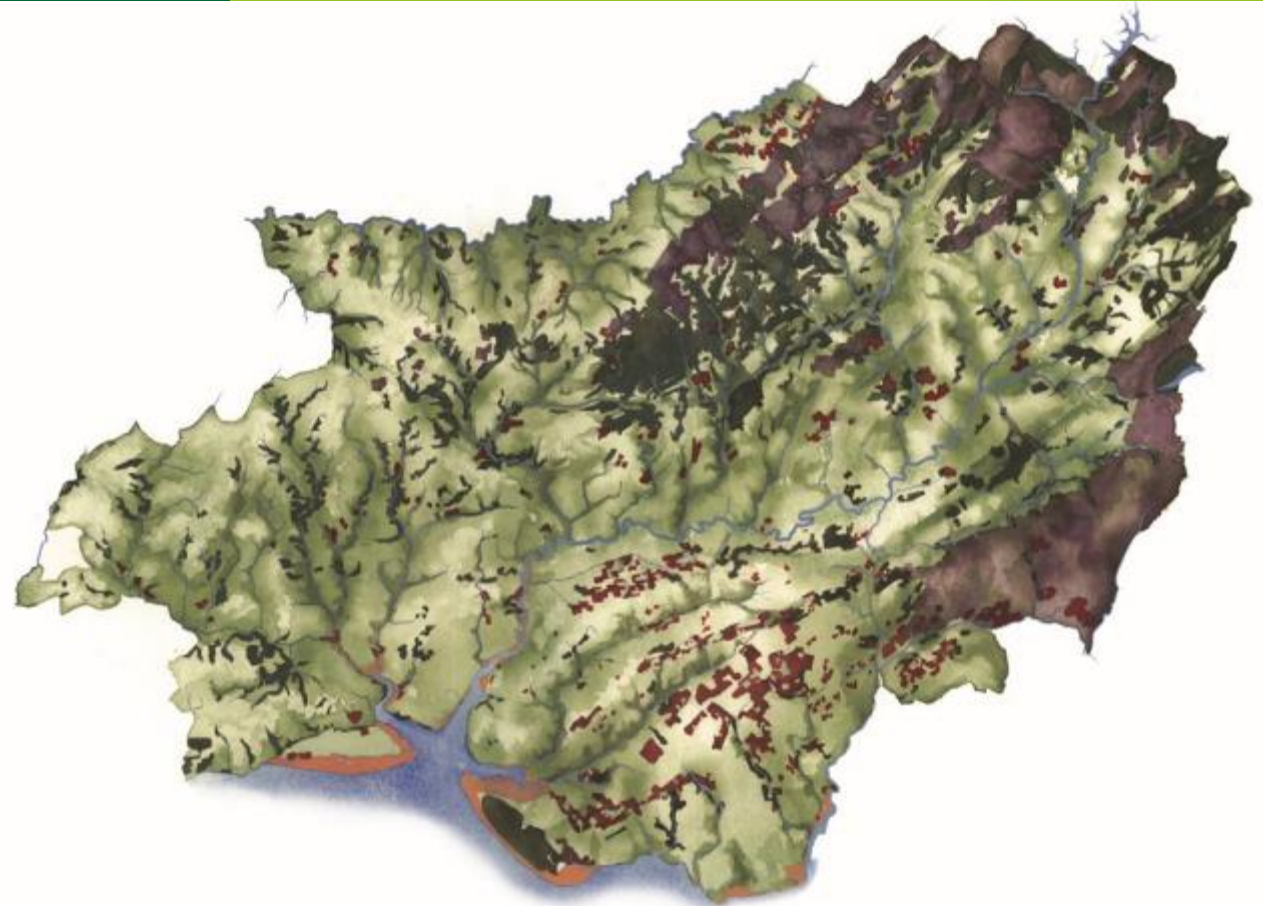


APRIL-JUNE 2023

Carmarthenshire has some wonderful wildlife. These 'Nature Notes' are some highlights to encourage us all to take a closer look around us – even the common is special. Seen anything interesting – then why not send us a photo?



For more information about nature in the county read our Nature Recovery Plan:
carmarthenshire.gov.wales/biodiversity



Send your photos to: Biodiversity@carmarthenshire.gov.uk



Bee-flies

Bee-flies at first glance, are easy to mistake for a bumblebee. They are in fact flies and they neither bite nor sting.

This Dark-edged Bee-fly (*Bombylius major*) is the most common and widespread in the UK (there are 4 UK Bee-fly species).

They have a fascinating life cycle – the larva is a parasitoid, meaning it is a parasite of (mainly) bees and wasps that end up killing its host.

The female ‘flicks’ her eggs in/close to a solitary bee’s nest, hoping the eggs will hatch near or in the nest. Eventually the larvae develop into another stage that eats the bee larva - quite the life!



Bilberry flowers

The flowers of the Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) are small and greenish–reddish in colour.

It is popular with pollinator insects, including the elusive Bilberry Bumblebee (*Bombus monticola*) which is scarce in the county – last recorded in July 2022 on Mynydd Llanllwni. It is typically found in upland mountain/heath areas over 300m, preferring areas with stands of bilberry and heather.

This bumblebee has been shown to have lower heat tolerance than species that inhabit lower altitudes. Habitat loss and degradation are causes for its decline but perhaps climate change is a factor as well?



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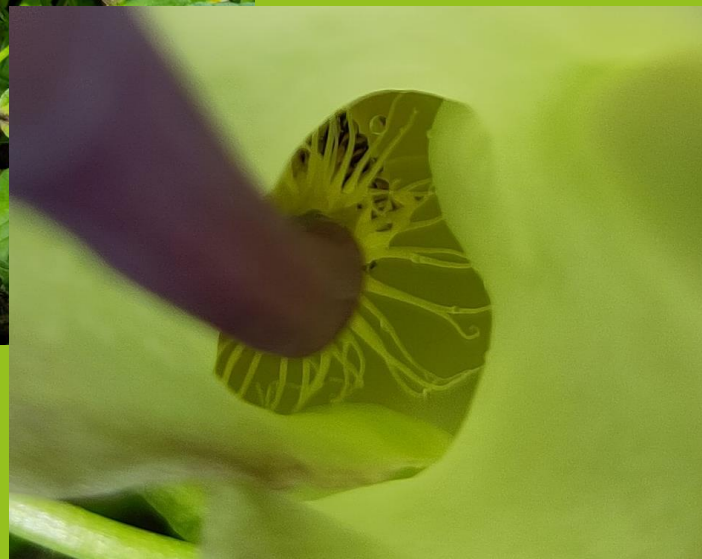
Tawny owl

This Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*) looks content in its nest box. These territorial owls are responsible for the most commonly heard owl sound, the classic, nocturnal ‘twit twoo’ call.

Tawny Owls are primarily a woodland species but have adapted to live almost anywhere there are trees, including city parks, wooded urban and suburban gardens and farmland hedgerows.

Their diet comprises predominantly of small mammals, but will take Rabbits, Moles, small birds, beetles, earthworms, frogs and even fish.

Tawny Owls prefer to nest in tree cavities if available but will readily use purpose-built nest boxes.



Lords-and-Ladies

The unusual flowers of Lords-and-Ladies (*Arum maculatum*) can be seen in woodlands/hedgerows in the early spring. A pale green sheath surrounds a spike (spadix) of tiny, yellow flowers, which eventually forms a stalk of striking red berries.

The flowers are hidden from sight, clustered at the base of the spadix with a ring of female flowers at the bottom and a ring of male flowers above them.

Above the male flowers is a ring of hairs forming an insect trap. Insects, are attracted to the spadix by its odour and become trapped beneath the hairs. Here they are dusted with pollen by the male flowers, before escaping when the hairs collapse and carrying the pollen to the spadices of other plants, where they pollinate the female flowers.

Small rodents appear to find the spadix particularly attractive, and they can be found partially eaten. The spadix produces heat and probably scent as the flowers mature, and this may attract the rodents.

The plant is propagated by birds dispersing the seeds by eating the berries.



Ribwort Plantain

One of the most common plants in the UK, Ribwort Plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*) is a plant of grasslands, field edges and verges. It grows from the base so can survive heavy grazing by animals (or cutting with a lawnmower!). Its short, oval flowerheads have many individual flowers.

Centuries-old games are played with this plant. In one, similar to conkers, stems are picked and the flower heads knocked together, in a battle to see whose head drops off the stem first.



Yellow Archangel

The striking flowers of Yellow Archangel (*Lamium galeobdolon*) often follow the flowering of bluebells in our woodlands and hedgerows. Although it is a plant from the dead-nettle family, it does not sting.

The spots and markings on the lower part of the flower guide bees towards the back of the flower and the nectar. As they collect the nectar, pollen is deposited on the stigma - leading to fertilisation.

The flowers, if bruised, give off an unpleasant smell – not very angelic!



Managing for pollinators

Sometimes all you have to do is stop. In this case cutting the grass. The Council is looking to see how it can reduce grass cutting in areas by either reducing the cut to 4-5 weeks or just twice a year. Here in Cross Hands the positive effects are immediate, with a range of flowering plants popping up – it looks great and is helping pollinators as well. It's always worth just seeing what is waiting to flower in your grass before you think take of using 'wildflower' seeds - you might be surprised.



Hairy Shieldbug

Hairy Shieldbugs (*Dolycoris baccarum*) can be seen in hedgerows, the edges of woodland, and also in parks and gardens. Yes, they are hairy - though you may have to look closely to spot the hairs! They also have a black-and-white chequered border at the rear of the body, and black-and-white antennae. Hairy Shieldbugs feed on the leaves, seeds and fruits of a range of plants, including using their piercing mouthparts to feed on the sloes of Blackthorn. [Shieldbugs](#) are also known as 'stink bugs' due to their ability to release a strong-smelling fluid when threatened.



© J. Bond

Dippers

A plump, chocolate-brown bird, with a white throat and chest, the Dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*) is often seen sitting on a stone in a river or stream, bobbing up and down. They walk under the water to feed on invertebrates, e.g. stonefly and caddisfly larvae.

Dippers have a third, transparent eyelid called a 'nictitating membrane' that they can close, enabling them to see under water.

They often nest under bridges and the Carmarthenshire Bird Club have a ringing project which helps monitor the birds' survival rates and collect information about their movements.



© L. Olds

Violet oil beetle

This spring in Llangynin a healthy population of Violet Oil Beetle (*Meloe violaceus*) was identified along a footpath. In fact, it is thought that this could be an important Welsh population for this declining species.

Juvenile Violet Oil Beetles are tiny, black creatures that emerge in spring and lie in wait on flowers for visiting solitary mining bees. These 'triungulins' hitch a lift on the bee's back, and then in the bee's nest, eat the food collected by the bee for its own young - the beetle equivalent of a cuckoo. This does mean though that Violet Oil Beetles are indicators of strong mining bee populations and of high-quality, wildflower-rich habitats.



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Harlequin ladybird

The Harlequin ladybird (*Harmonia axyridis*) is a very variable species - with variable numbers of spots on red, orange or black backgrounds. Originally from Asia, the Harlequin Ladybird first arrived in the UK in 2004 and has rapidly become one of the most common ladybirds in the country, particularly in towns and gardens. It is a voracious predator - able to out-compete our native species for their aphid prey and will also eat other ladybirds' eggs and larvae. It can have multiple broods throughout the spring, summer and autumn, which also gives it a competitive edge.



Horse Chestnut

The magnificent Horse Chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) is growing in Ffairfach. Mature trees can grow to a height of around 40 m and can live for up to 300 years.

The Horse Chestnut is native to the Balkan Peninsula and introduced to the UK from Turkey in the late 16th century. It is not often found in woodland, it is but far more common in parks and gardens or as street trees.

The flowers provide a rich source of nectar and pollen for insects, particularly bees and of playing with the conkers is a popular childhood pastime.

The caterpillars of the Horse Chestnut Leaf-Miner Moth (*Cameraria ohridella*) feed on the leaves and if 'infestations' build up the tree's leaves they can turn brown and shrivel. However, this does not appear to do any long-lasting damage – but we do get less conkers!



Carmarthenshire Nature Partnership



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