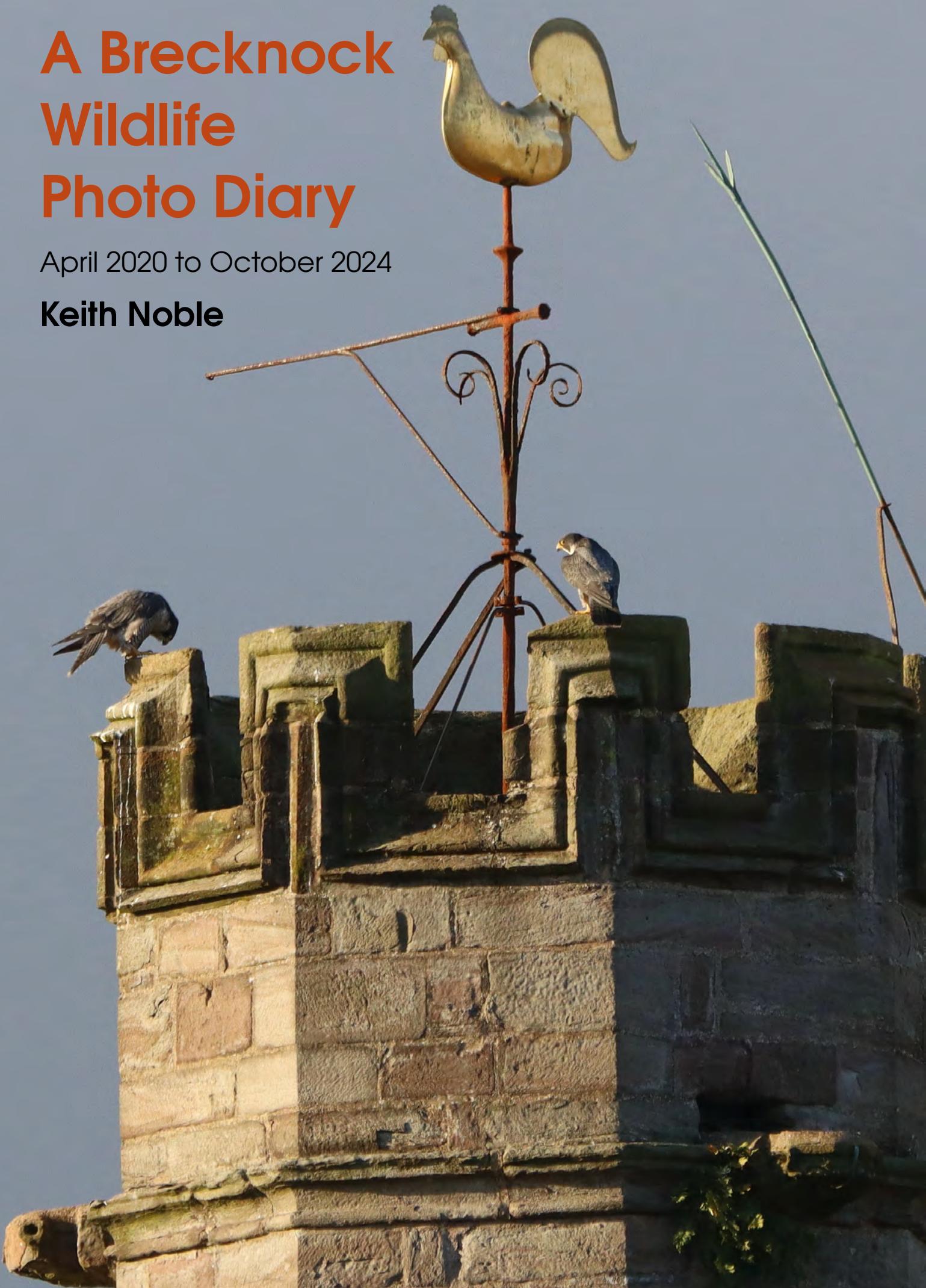


A Brecknock Wildlife Photo Diary

April 2020 to October 2024

Keith Noble



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Collated by Robert Noble

First edition, 2025

Two Scare Chaser photographs: Copyright © Mark Waldron, used here with the photographer's permission

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Foreword

Between April 2020 and October 2024, my father Keith Noble maintained an irregular email correspondence with fellow nature lovers, sharing his superb photographs of wildlife in and around the town of Brecon, mid Wales. The thirty-three instalments collated here contain nearly 200 of his images with the original commentary.

Over the years, as the mailing list grew, the messages became less frequent but more expansive. Keith shared his expert knowledge of the life history, behaviour, and ecology of the featured species. He offered tips on finding, identifying, and supporting birds and insects, and he encouraged his readers to report their own sightings online. He peppered his prose with references to favourite books and memories. Above all, he showed what treasures are to be found in any patch of ground if one simply takes the time to look. As his celebrated predecessor Gilbert White put it, “all nature is so full that that district produces the greatest variety which is the most examined”.

The geographical range here is not unlike that of White’s Hampshire parish. Due to Covid restrictions, the early observations were largely confined to my parents’ modestly sized town garden. The scope then expanded to three primary sites: Brecon and its immediate environs; Llangorse Lake and Common (five miles to the east); and Mynydd Illtyd Common (five miles west). A dispatch from Pant y Llyn – eleven miles north of Brecon – and a couple of holiday snaps are the only outliers.

The stars of this photo diary are birds and flying insects. This taxonomic bias for things with wings reflects both my father’s taste and the local ecology. During his boyhood in Essex and in later life near the West Sussex coast, he most loved watching waders skitter over mudflats. Upon retiring to landlocked Powys, with more time on his hands and fewer vagrant birds around, he deepened his interest and expertise in entomology. He found hoverflies, damselflies, moths and wasps that had seldom if ever before been seen in the region. He became County Dragonfly Recorder for Breconshire and contributed to numerous surveys and reports.

This book is then not only a collection of beautiful wildlife photography but also a testament to the rewards of careful observation, and a seasonal guide to exploring the wonders of your own backyard.

If you enjoy the book then please consider donating to the Velindre Cancer Centre via velindrefundraising.com.

Robert Noble
January, 2025

“If the writer should at all appear to have induced any of his readers to pay a more ready attention to the wonders of the Creation, too frequently overlooked as common occurrences . . . his purpose will be fully answered. But if he should not have been successful in any of these his intentions, yet there remains this consolation behind – that these his pursuits, by keeping the body and mind employed, have, under Providence, contributed to much health and cheerfulness of spirits, even to old age”

Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*
Advertisement to original edition

“While sorting Small Quakers from Common Quakers in my moth trap, it struck me that birds are called ‘Little’ and moths are called ‘Small’. The dictionary says ‘little is used with affectionate or emotional overtones . . . not implied by small’. You might ask whether this denotes differences between ornithologists and entomologists, but I know that both are among the kindest of people.”

Keith Noble
10th April, 2022



Otters

22nd January 2022

I was looking for ducks, walking beside the Usk through the Brecon Show Field for the Wetland Bird Survey. Like some 3,500 other volunteers I count all the waterbirds in my patch once a month between September and March. Ty Mawr Pool at Llanfryncach held only three Moorhens, two each of Mute Swan and Coot, one Canada Goose and a flock of gulls. Along the river from Brynich Lock I had counted 20 Mallard, a pair of Goosanders, a Heron, a Moorhen and more gulls – a quiet morning. But now, obscured by water-side bushes, I could see movement and circles of disturbed water. A head appeared, then a rounded back slipped back under, and I realised I was watching an Otter. With clearer views I could see there were more than one, and they were gently drifting downstream towards me. Three came along together and I was able to keep up with them and take photos. When I checked the pictures on the computer I had taken 174 in 13 minutes. Here are a few.

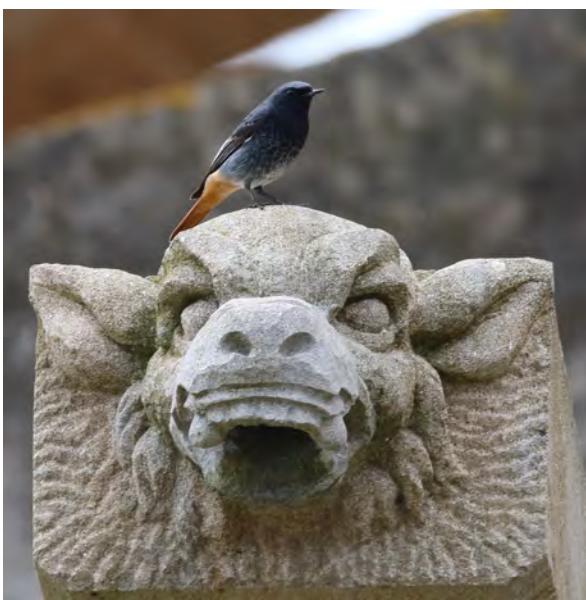


Wee sleekit

16th February 2021

I had been wondering if it was the same mouse that appeared each early morning, until today when two looked out of the hole. They emerged in the half-light to collect sunflower kernels. Instead of using on-camera flash, producing a bright dot in the mouse's eye, I am now setting high ISO for natural light which gives a reflection of the whole house, like an Escher print of a crystal ball.

The goldcrest has been back to search the miniature conifer, and a wren. Blue tits are visiting a nest box, and I have had to move feeders to stop him chasing away the siskins. Crocuses and snowdrops opened in brief sunshine today – bees by the weekend?



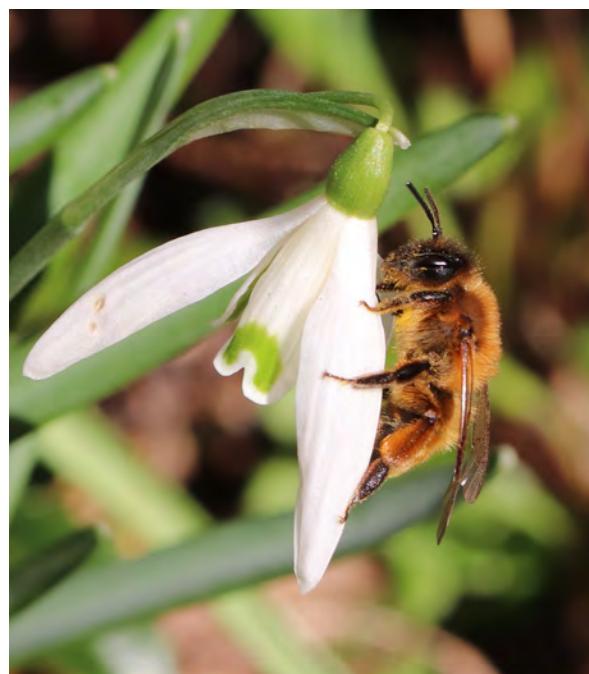
Red and black

28th February 2023

In Brecon on Boxing Day she posed for a picture on a parking sign at St. Mary's church. Next day she was hanging around recycling bins, and then by the corpse of a Woodcock dropped by one of the tower-top Peregrines. Perhaps there were maggots or flies to eat. Since then she has stayed in the town centre within fifty yards of those first sightings, usually on a rooftop – a perky Robin-shaped bird with a quivering tail.

Black Redstarts are rarely seen in this part of Wales. Occasionally a pair has nested in a quarry, but they turn up from time to time out of season in towns. In London they first became established on bomb-sites, and about 65 pairs now breed in Britain, many in industrial parts of cities. More birds appear on the coast as passage migrants.

On the continent they are more common and widespread. While the Brecon female is attractive with her big eyes and soft colours, males are more strikingly marked like the one I photographed on another St Mary's at Castro Urdiales in northern Spain (bottom row).



Butterfly and bees

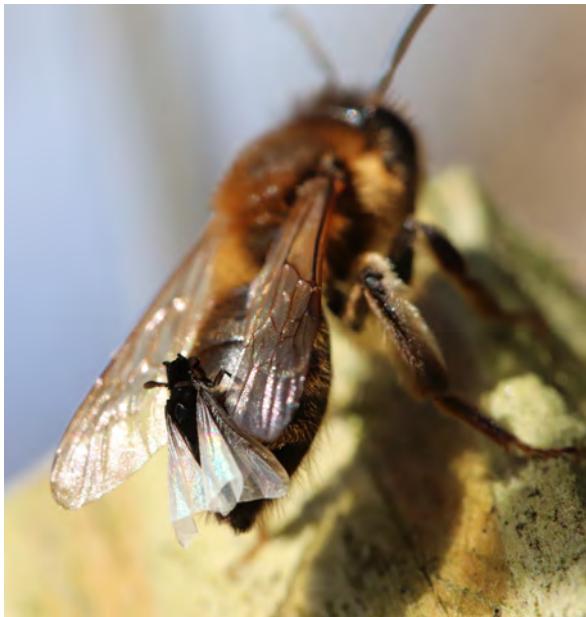
9th March 2021

The first butterfly of Spring is always welcome and today's Small Tortoiseshell was a smart one – sometimes after hibernation they look faded and ragged. It was shivering to warm up and I took some pictures with a slow shutter speed to show this. Where fritillaries are pearl-bordered, tortoiseshells are sapphire-beaded.

I saw my first Honey Bees eleven days ago, getting right down into crocuses for nectar (middle left) and shaking pollen from erica flowers. Another bee of similar size on a snowdrop puzzled me. Instead of the orange pollen baskets which are special to Honey Bees, it had brushes on its hind legs and a furry thorax. I sent photos to the Recorder for Bees and Wasps in Breconshire and Radnorshire, Janice Vincett, who identified it as *Andrena nigroaenea*, the Buffish Mining Bee (middle right; bottom left). I have seen a few other sorts of miners in our garden and sometimes traced one back to what looked like a tiny volcano in a flower bed. With 67 of the 270-plus species, they are the largest genus of bees in Britain and Ireland.

On Sunday I was reading on Janice's excellent website about the bumble bees she has seen recently. She wrote that other bees had already been noted, and we should look on Lungwort for *Anthophora plumipes*, the wonderfully-named Hairy-footed Flower Bee. And yesterday I did that and found one (bottom right). Males are tubby like a small bumble bee, buff-coloured and very quick flyers. Females come out a bit later, black with orange hind legs. BWARS, the Bees, Wasps and Ants Recording Society has a survey asking for records of this species, see www.bwars.com.

Janice Vincett's website is www.midwalesbeesandwasps.com



Alien

22nd March 2021

A warning to the curious (M.R. James). What follows is less All things bright and beautiful (Mrs C.F. Alexander), more Nature red in tooth and claw (Alfred, Lord Tennyson).

Yesterday I was photographing a bee in the garden to check its identity when I realised that it was carrying what looked like a fly. The bee was *Andrena scotica*, the Chocolate Mining Bee (to coat honeycomb for Crunchie bars), and the other insect was a male *Stylops*. He would have hatched from a pupa in the body of a bee to go searching for a female pupa in another bee. That is how I first saw *Stylops* last year as a tiny head peeping out between the tergites – segments – of a mining bee. He will inject sperm through the head end of the female from where it travels along a canal to fertilise her eggs. These hatch into larvae which drop off onto flower heads and wait for another bee to carry them to her nest. There they penetrate bee grubs and live in their developing hosts, pupating inside the adult bee (which is rendered sterile and intersex). Some *Stylops* then hatch out as winged males, others remain inside as females and so the cycle continues.

Apparently few people have seen a male *Stylops*, but more know its appearance for it figures as the emblem on the official seal and logo of the Royal Entomological Society. Does this tell us something about entomologists, and does their majestic Patron know the insect's life history?

I also attach two pictures of a predatory Moorhen on the pond behind Brecon Leisure Centre.

Aye, aye, that's yer lot (Jimmy Wheeler).



Little things please

10th April 2022

On Friday I watched Little Egrets in ‘Rushy Field’, on the right after crossing the bridge from Llangorse Common. They were fishing in the shallow flood. One stopped to shake its plumes – aigrettes. I wondered if its feet were turning a deeper egg-yolk yellow for the breeding season.

In October 2007 when we moved from Sussex to Brecon I saw a Little Egret fly across Llangorse Lake. It was the only one reported there that year. In the latest Breconshire Bird Report for 2020, Little Egrets are recorded as present in every month with a peak of eight in August. During the past winter there have often been more than twenty.

On 26 March I photographed two Little Ringed Plovers feeding around puddles in a Llangorse field, and four on 1 April. They are among our earliest summer migrants and attempt to breed on the shingle Point at Llangasty. Other Breconshire sites are in quarries. The excellent new book, ‘The Birds of Wales’, reckons that the Welsh population is now in the order of 150-200 pairs with the greatest number on shingle banks along the Tywi and its tributaries. The first pair in Britain bred in 1938, and my best childhood friend showed me chicks on a rubbish dump beside a sewage works on the London/Essex border in the late 1950s. Kenneth Allsop’s novel of 1949, ‘Adventure Lit Their Star’, about protecting these rare birds from an egg collector, is a good read.

While sorting Small Quakers from Common Quakers in my moth trap, it struck me that birds are called ‘Little’ and moths are called ‘Small’. In books I found 15 birds with Little in their names, and 34 moths with Small. There was just one exception, the Little Thorn moth. The dictionary says “*little* is used with affectionate or emotional overtones . . . not implied by *small*”. You might ask whether this denotes differences between ornithologists and entomologists, but I know that both are among the kindest of people. My little mind – I try not to be small-minded – has wandered into etymology. Enough.



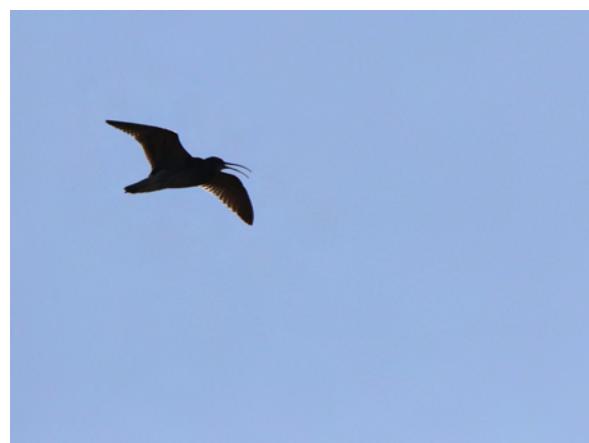
Colours

16th April 2021

Against a green background the colours of our garden are yellow, white and blue. Any specks of red and orange catch the eye, an Orange-tip on grape hyacinth or a Tawny Mining Bee on cherry blossom. A vivid Lily Beetle is less welcome and I crush it after taking its picture. You must be quick or the beetle drops to the ground, flipping upside down to become invisibly black. They can do a lot of damage to our lilies, and the damp patch of fritillaries by the pond, on which they probably arrived from a garden centre. And their grubs are disgusting.

Ladybirds are out now, and we received a picture this week of grandson Thomas learning numbers by counting spots on an identification chart. Some are easy like this Seven-spot, but one of the smartest I saw last summer with four scarlet blotches on black was a form of Two-spot, and the yellow Fourteen-spot looks pixellated. I saw more Seven-spots on reeds at Llangorse Lake while looking for emerging damselflies. No success yet but I expect to see some soon, Variable and Common Blue there, and Large Red in the garden.

Yesterday I stumbled upon three Yellow Wagtails feeding in wet tractor ruts by the Llynfi stream at Llangorse Common. They actually walked closer, perhaps treating me like one of the ponies they feed among here, or the cattle and goats of their African winter. White Wagtails are also passing through on their way to Iceland. Some Wheatears travel even further, and unlike a pair we saw in a likely nesting spot on Mynydd Illtyd, longer-winged birds will reach Greenland and Arctic Canada, an amazing journey for such a small bird. (Flight Lines by Mike Toms of the BTO, illustrated by members of the Society of Wildlife Artists, is a beautiful book about bird migration).



At Pant y Llyn

19th April 2021

The lake was bright blue under a cloudless sky. While I was looking at Wheatears, Alison watched a mini-whirlwind spin across the water, raising bubbles as it went like an Aero advert. On hills to the west stood the rectangular evergreen blocks and straight hedges of the Training Area, like troop squares and lines on a battle diorama. The view north was quite different over rolling green farmland around and way beyond Builth Wells. On our Saturday morning stroll we had this grand landscape all to ourselves. A Heron stood in the swamp behind the lake, a place I shall visit again this summer for its dragonflies, and a pair of Curlews flew over, singing. We found two pairs of Wheatears on AOTs – Apparently Occupied Territories – where nests could be tucked under rock ledges. One male stood guard on a crag like a climber posing on a summit. Our drive home started down the track to Erwood and a browse around the recently re-opened Craft Centre.

We have seen more Wheatears and Curlews about the western slopes of Mynydd Illtyd. This Wednesday, 21 April, is World Curlew Day. The Welsh Ornithological Society is asking for records of Curlews to guide efforts to reverse the sad decline of this key species in our countryside. Information about the Day, and a simple Curlew recording form, are at www.birdsin.wales.



Greener-yallery

3rd May 2021

The Bank Holiday rain is gusting near-horizontal this afternoon, so I'm sorting photos from some better days last week. At Llangorse, half a dozen Yellow Wagtails chased flies around the feet of sheep and ponies. They are a lovely treat when they pass through in Spring and Autumn. In 1990 Martin Peers and Mike Shrubb wrote in 'Birds of Breconshire' that there were concentrations after breeding of 50-60 birds at Llangorse Lake and in the Wye valley near Glasbury, and a county population of perhaps 35 to 40 pairs. But in the 2019 Breconshire Birds Annual Report (www.brecknockbirds.co.uk), Andy King noted only 7 as the best count in autumn, and 3 breeding pairs. The UK population has plummeted and the species is Red Listed.

For a different reason Greenfinch numbers have halved, hit by the parasitic disease trichomonosis. On Saturday morning I spent a couple of hours around the north-east part of Brecon, one of eight sections of the town now being surveyed to see how the species is managing here. Coming home after a fruitless search I found a female and two males at our sunflower seed feeders, one of them sang from the top of the hedge. We still have up to eight Siskins at the feeders, and coming to drink at the corner of the pond that is free of the netting we installed to stop a rogue Blackbird catching newts. He's still looking but I hope we have him beaten.

I think our Blue Tits in the box on the summer house have eggs now. He is courtship-feeding, giving her morsels of Wilko's wildly tasty peanut butter with mealworm.



On finding a first Kitten in Spring

7th May 2020

Last night I caught a kitten – a Sallow Kitten in my moth trap. The three British kittens are named after their caterpillars' chief food plants, Sallow, Alder and Poplar. They are closely related to the Puss Moth. In 'Emperors, Admirals and Chimney Sweepers, the weird and wonderful names of butterflies and moths', Peter Marren writes "The Puss Moth is famous, but which is the pussy, the moth or its fantastical caterpillar? The former is as fluffy as a white Persian cat, but perhaps it is the caterpillar that really deserves the palm with its cartoon-like 'face' (Tom in Tom and Jerry) and its angrily waving tail". Kitten caterpillars are similar in miniature, and their twin 'tails' earn the group's Latin name *Furcula* – fork. As I had never caught a kitten before, I checked its status on the Brecknock Moth Group website, bmgs.b-i-s.org/moths, and found a map with all the details of 101 previous records, among the amazing 255,000 which County Moth Recorder, Norman Lowe, has verified and collated. Asleep in an egg box, it is a very pretty moth.



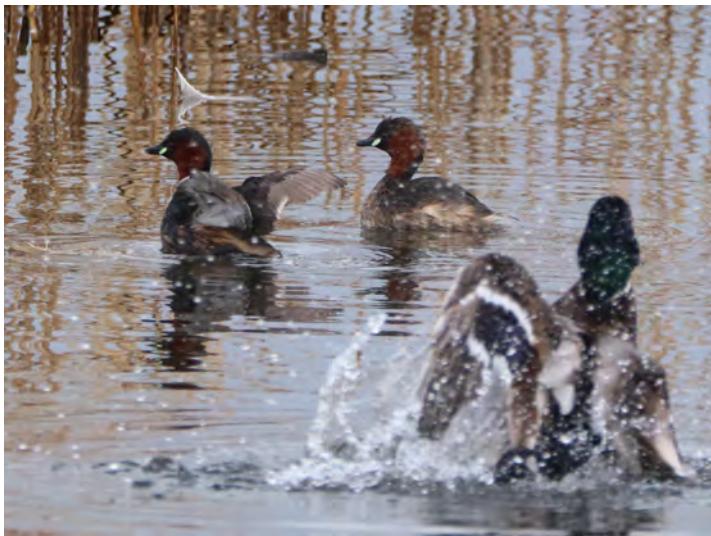
Two moths and a bird

13th May 2020

As a child, my favourite presents and rewards were Observer's books and I can well remember choosing the Larger British Moths when it first appeared nearly seventy years ago. First in the book is the Lime Hawk-moth and I was very pleased to catch one recently. It reminds me of the futuristic swept-back shape of the Victor bomber, aeroplanes being another of my early interests.

On warm mornings now Longhorn moths flutter and flirt on sunlit oak leaves. Males have longer antennae than females, (do they select the males with the longest horns?). Some of the scientific names of small moths celebrate great naturalists. This one, *Adela reaumurella*, was named by Linnaeus in 1758 to honour the memory of the French scientist, René de Réaumur. If he is remembered here it is probably for the thermometer scale he invented, although he became a Fellow of our Royal Society for many achievements in physics and entomology; he produced six volumes describing all the known insects except beetles. Paris commemorates him in the name of a Metro station.

When we are having breakfast this Robin is likely to appear at the window, and it has even come indoors. It usually eats one suet nibble and takes one away.



Big Bill again

20th May 2023

The path from the Hide to the jetty at Llangorse Lake has been under water for much of the past winter, giving fine views of Great White Egrets and glimpses of furtive Water Rails. On a recent visit I watched a Heron fly in and stand, for a while on two legs, then on one. A pair of Little Grebes swam past. Eventually it crept along the edge of the path, stretching its neck to peer into the reeds. After the stealth came the grab, wings spread for balance, and out it came with a fine catch, (a Rudd?). It held the flapping fish for a while before swallowing it, gradually and with some difficulty, and then resumed its standing still as a plastic model.

Summer Time starts on Sunday, and summer visitors are already here. I saw Chiffchaffs on Friday, a Blackcap on Saturday and, most surprisingly, a Hummingbird Hawkmoth flying through our garden yesterday. The Brecknockbirds website also records recent Sand Martins, Wheatears and a Little Ringed Plover.

Andrew King and I will be showing the dragonflies, birds and butterflies of spring and summer at Llangorse lake, in the Llangorse Community Centre next Monday 27th at 7.30. If you're not reading this abroad in England, Scotland, the Netherlands or Australia, and are close enough to come along you will be most welcome.



Damsels

23rd May 2023

The warm weather of the last ten days had brought out damselflies in thousands at Llangorse Lake. On Sunday 14th there were so many erupting from bramble patches and iris clumps that they looked like swarms of giant midges. About 99% are Variable Damselflies (top row; middle left), with a sprinkling of Blue-tailed (middle right), and one or two Common Blue. Variable is usually the earliest to emerge at the Lake, but is around for only a few weeks; Common Blue appears soon after and takes over as the commonest for most of the summer. Many of the damselflies now are in dull shades of pink and black before they mature to blue.

Today a few Red-eyed Damselflies (bottom left) were out on lily pads or patches of blanket weed in the bay beside Llangasty car park. In flight they looked a bit bigger and more solid than the other damsels and flew fast and low. Two or three Emperors were cruising around and a male Hairy Dragonfly (bottom right) basked in the hedge at the far end of that field.

I was with Nicky Hodges, who is working for a Masters at University of South Wales. For her dissertation she will be surveying dragonflies and craneflies at the peat restoration areas on Waun Fach in the Black Mountains above Grwyne Fawr. If any of my readers might be interested in helping Nicky, please contact her.

I have also had a request from Steve Preddy, the Dragonfly Recorder for Monmouthshire. Steve has produced maps of all the dragons and damsels of his county – see the link on the British Dragonfly Society website british-dragonflies.org.uk. He plans to complete the Atlas by 2030 and is keen to fill gaps in the coverage, especially in the Black Mountains. Steve and I will be very pleased to receive sightings from the Monmouthshire and Breconshire parts of this under-recorded area. Please let me know if you think you could contribute and I'll put you in touch with Steve.

My thanks to the people who have let me know what they have seen recently, including Beautiful Demoiselles, Large Red and Azure Damselflies and Broad-bodied Chaser.



Four minute seconds

6th June 2020

These moths are tiny, and when I found them in our garden four of them had only one previous record on the Brecknock Moth Group's excellent website, bmgb-i-s.org. So they are four minute seconds. The other pictured here, *Grapholita compositella* (top), was a third in 2017, and has appeared every summer since on Red Clover in our mini-meadow. (Some of the smallest moths have the longest names; from my rusty memories of Latin and Greek I reckon this one refers to the print-like markings).

On the hot afternoon of 1 June I thought I had glimpsed this one again, but a photo proved it carried a crescent moon, hence *G. lunulana* (middle left), only previously recorded in the county in 1992. I then checked our leylandii hedge for *Argyresthia trifasciata* (middle right) which I first saw here in 2016, hardly bigger than a whitefly with three bars on its gold wings. Instead I found *A. cupressella*, the Cypress Tip Moth (bottom left). These two species, whose caterpillars live inside the leaves and shoots of Cypress, are aliens which presumably arrived in imported plants and are spreading north and west. *Trifasciata* was first seen in Britain in 1982, *cupressella* from North America in 1997, reaching Wales in 2009.

Back by the meadow, I followed another little UFO which turned out to be *Metalampra italica* (bottom right), first noted in Britain in 2003, whose caterpillar feeds under the bark of dead trees and shrubs – my third second in one afternoon. Our 1,600-plus species of micro-moths are easily overlooked but can become fascinating.



Birds and a Bee

8th June 2020

Called in from the garden for an afternoon cuppa, I showed Alison the first of these photos and asked “What is it?” – “A bee” – “What sort?” – “I’d call that a long-horned bee” – “You’re right”. Of all Britain’s 270+ bees this might be the easiest to name. As usual when I find something new I consulted Aderyn, aderyn.lercwales.org.uk. Via Distribution Maps, Species-Wildcard, Scientific Name, I reached a map of the 103 records in Wales of *Eucera longicornis*, all in the south, apart from six at Radnorshire Wildlife Trust’s Gilfach reserve. Breconshire was blank, I had found a county first. I sent a note and photos to the Bee Recorder for Brecks and Rads, Janice Vincett (who spoke to U3A’s Wildlife Group early this year and has helped me to identify some bees I was unsure of).

On a morning walk, I was pleased to see that two pairs of House Martins are at last repairing past years’ nests on the old Brecon High School. It looked as if one pair was taking back to its own cup fresh-laid mud from the other one round the corner, and one thief was caught and dangled by a resident. The final picture might be a kiss, courtship-feeding, or a mud-pass?



Beware of moths

27th June 2023

Breconshire Moth Recorder, Norman Lowe has provided traps and lures for nine species of clearwing moths to twenty-one surveyors around Breconshire. He has emailed regular news about their successes, and the number of people who have so far caught each species is: Yellow-legged 11, Lunar Hornet 7, Currant 5, White-barred 3, Red-tipped 3, Red-belted 2. The survey is greatly increasing our knowledge of this group which has rarely been recorded here until now. Adults fly by day but are elusive and caterpillars live under the bark of particular trees (or stems in the case of Currant Clearwing). All have transparent wings and colours and patterns which mimic wasps. I have attached a picture of Yellow-legged Clearwing from a previous summer. You can find all the species on the UK Moths website, ukmoths.org.uk/species.

Clearwing moths pretend, but the bright colours of burnet moths indicate real danger. All stages of their life cycle can produce hydrogen cyanide as a deterrent against predators. They derive it from the foodplant, Birds-foot Trefoil and can produce more themselves. Adults may also emit toxins to complement pheromones in attracting the opposite sex, and transmit them in mating – there is a good account on the Natural History Museum website, nhm.ac.uk. Last week I found dozens of Six-spot Burnets (middle left) in the field above Camden Crescent, Brecon, and some Five-spots (middle right) near Tredomen. On sunny days now there should be many whizzing about or nectaring on Knapweed flowers in the Ty-mawr meadows at Llangorse Lake.

I also spent several hours last week after dragonflies by the slipway and along the Llynfi outflow at Llangorse Lakeside. On the Saturday we had held a Dragonfly Hotspot event with British Dragonfly Society, and a Biodiversity Information Service walk. Helped by enthusiastic children we found many damselflies and various minibeasts. Bob Dennison, the Dragonfly Recorder for Radnorshire was with us and returned next day with some of his local naturalists. They found species we had missed including Black-tailed Skimmer and Hairy Dragonfly. And four of them watched for two or three minutes at close range a hawker with a plain brown body and colourless wings. Bob's description eliminates the large dragonflies we usually find here and fits Norfolk Hawker, a remarkable find in Wales so far from its expanding base in eastern England. National expert Adrian Parr commented that Norfolk Hawker has been doing amazing things in the last three or four years, setting up breeding colonies along the south coast of England, with recent wanderers reaching south Devon, North Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. I tried hard on following days, saw Emperors, Broad-bodied Chasers (bottom) and Banded Demoiselles but the rare one eluded me.



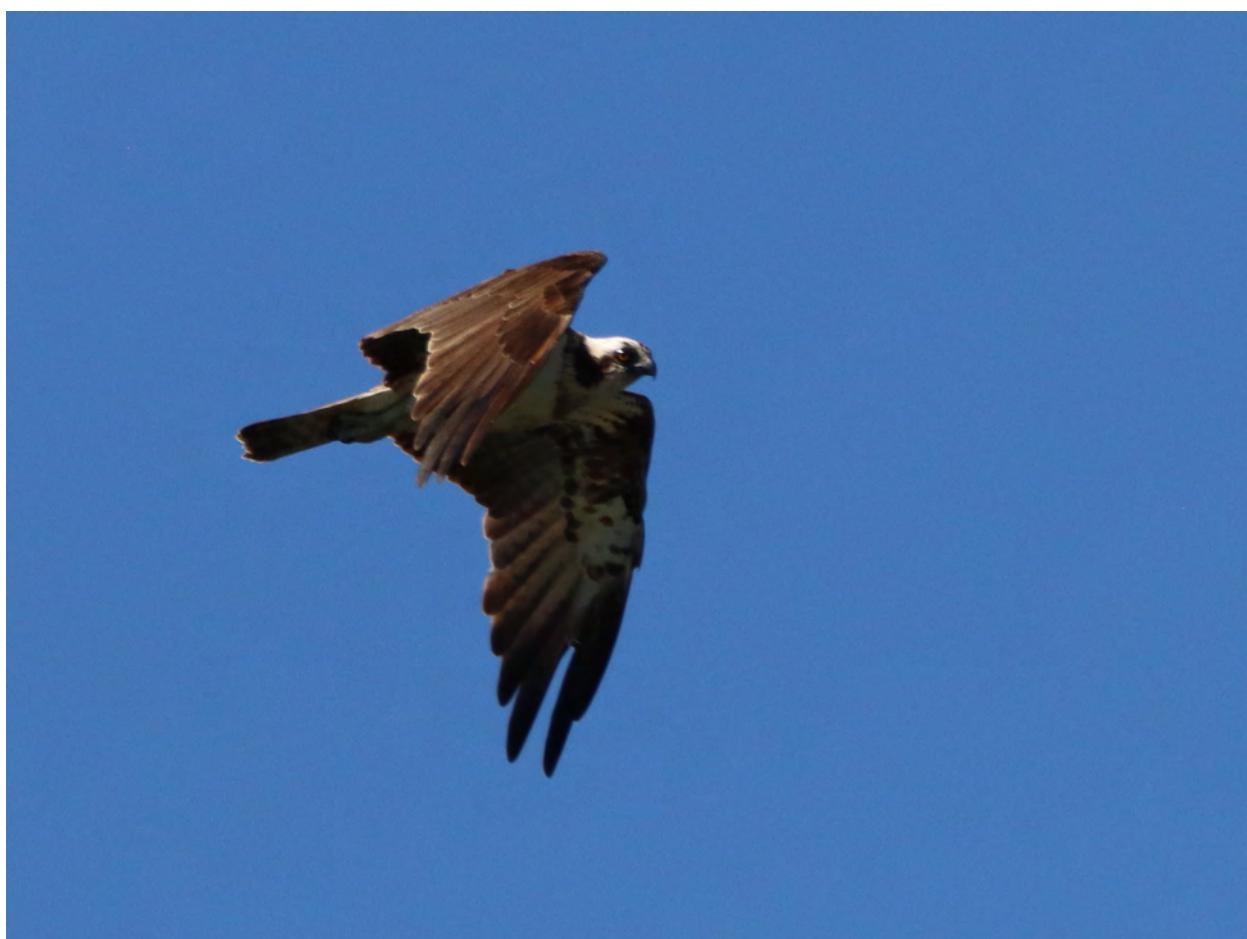
A new Powys dragon

28th June 2020

On Thursday 24 June, Mark Waldron and his family visited Llangorse Lakeside for a picnic. Mark, as usual, went looking for wildlife and found two Scarce Chaser dragonflies. A couple of his fine photos are attached and they prove not only presence but also evidence of breeding. The blue male has smudges on his abdomen where the clasping legs of a female have rubbed off some of his pruinescence – bloom – during mating, as demonstrated by the pair of Black-tailed Skimmers (bottom right). Immatures and female Scarce Chasers are usually orange but this female is dusky with old age.

The Scarce Chaser is a Red Data (Near Threatened) Species which has been spreading west from southern England. Its map on the Aderyn website (aderyn.lercwales.org.uk) shows four previous records in Wales, Mark's are the first for Powys. More information about this and other dragonflies is at british-dragonflies.org.uk.

Other recent reports have included early sightings by Mike Tompkinson at Sarnau of Emerald Damselfly on 16 June and Southern Hawker on 23rd, and from Ann Payne – Banded Demoiselles at Jubilee Bridge near Merthyr Cynog on 27th.

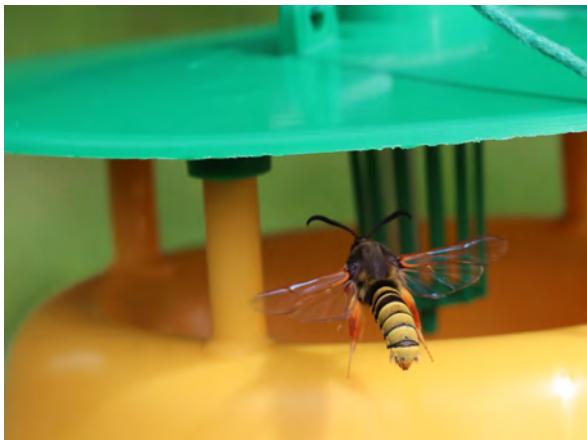


H is for ...

14th July 2022

... hiatus and hotchpotch. It has been a while since I sent out one of my occasional emails, and one or two people have kindly mentioned that they have been missing them. So here is a mixed batch of recent observations and pictures.

... hawk, not goshawk but fish-hawk. On Sunday, before joining botanist John Crellin and his group to look at plants from Llangorse Lakeside, I stopped in the little car park below Llangasty church to look for birds. An Osprey flew past, I grabbed some shots against the light and watched it dive for fish. During a fascinating outing as far as the lovely Ty-mawr meadows, I learned many things including that the thousands of yellow dandelion-looking flowers were Catsears, not hawkbits or hawksbeards or hawkweeds as I thought they might be. In 'The Illustrated Plant Lore', (£1 from Powys Library withdrawn stock), Josephine Addison writes of hawkweeds, "Older writers claim that ... birds of prey were believed to strengthen their eyesight on this genus of plants". Our own eyes frequently turned from the plants on the ground to an Osprey overhead, and then two calling as they circled together. Back at Llangasty in the afternoon I was able to take some more pictures of the same bird I had first seen, with a distinctive gap from a missing or broken primary feather in its left wing. As the number of breeding pairs in Wales gradually grows we might look forward to their nesting locally.



... and also for ...

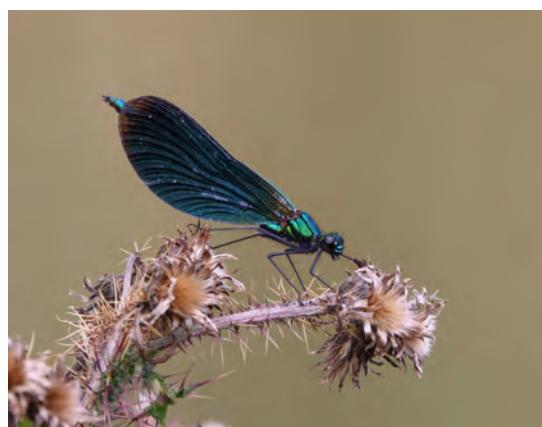
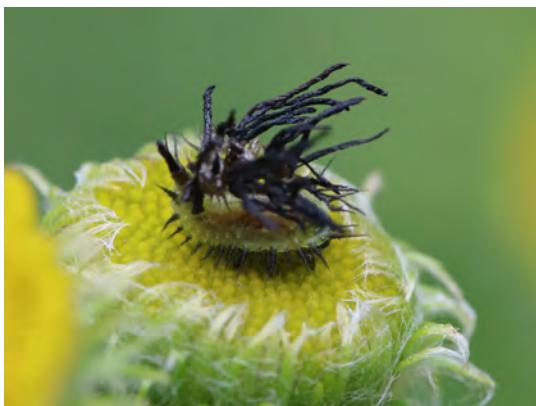
14th July 2022

... hornet, or rather, Lunar Hornet Moth. Norman Lowe has acquired and shared among a small group of moth-ers, some traps and pheromone lures for various clearwing moths. These handsome insects, quite unlike the common image of moths, are rarely seen when they emerge from the trunks of their preferred trees, but this project has now caught and released unharmed all its target species. Much the biggest and the only common species is the Lunar Hornet Moth. I was very pleased to take some photos of three lured to willows in Island Field, Brecon. Unlike some other mimics such as the Hornet Hoverfly *Volucella zonaria* whose larvae scavenge in hornet nests, the moth's only connection is its appearance.

... *Hylaeus hyalinatus*, Hairy Yellow-face Bee. These tiny bees, a little bigger than an ant, occupy two old sheep skulls among the stonecrops on the small green roof over our recycling boxes. The males of the twelve British species can be separated by the shape of the face and its yellow markings. And if you use a macro lens at closest focus, you can see that *H. hyalinatus* really is hirsute. The bees sit looking out of small holes in the tops of the skulls which I suspect lead into the brain cavities, where presumably they nest. Elsewhere one of our bee hotels, with many bamboo tubes already filled with mud or masticated plant material by Red, Blue and Orange-vented Mason Bees, is now being occupied by Willughby's Leafcutter Bee, (named in honour of Francis Willughby 1635-72, a first edition of whose Ornithology published posthumously by John Ray is now on sale for £5,673. I shall buy Tim Birkhead's biography 'The Great Mr. Willughby' for £4.99).

... Hedgehog. Instead of only making an appearance after dark, detected on a trail camera among images of various cats, our hedgehog now comes out in the late afternoon. It is becoming less wary and yesterday evening came up to sniff my slippers while I was watering plant pots. I have been advised that dried mealworms can cause metabolic bone disease in hedgehogs. Sunflower kernels which we feed to the birds and are dropped under the feeders can be similarly harmful. Best to provide water and a properly balanced hedgehog food.

... Hotspot, not a reference to the current weather but a designation awarded by the British Dragonfly Society. On Saturday 16th, Llangorse Lake will become the first Dragonfly Hotspot in Wales, recognising the site as a top place for dragonflies and for people to appreciate them. Between 10.00 and 4.00, staff and volunteers from BDS and supporting organisations will be at Lakeside to unveil a new information board and offer free dragonfly-related activities. I hope to see some of you there.



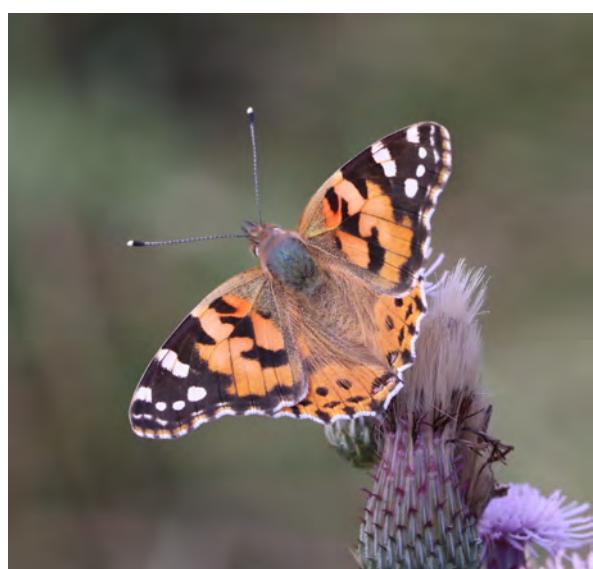
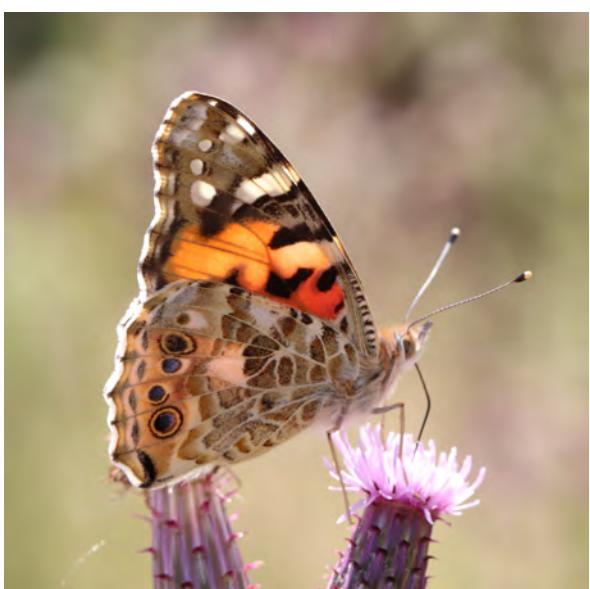
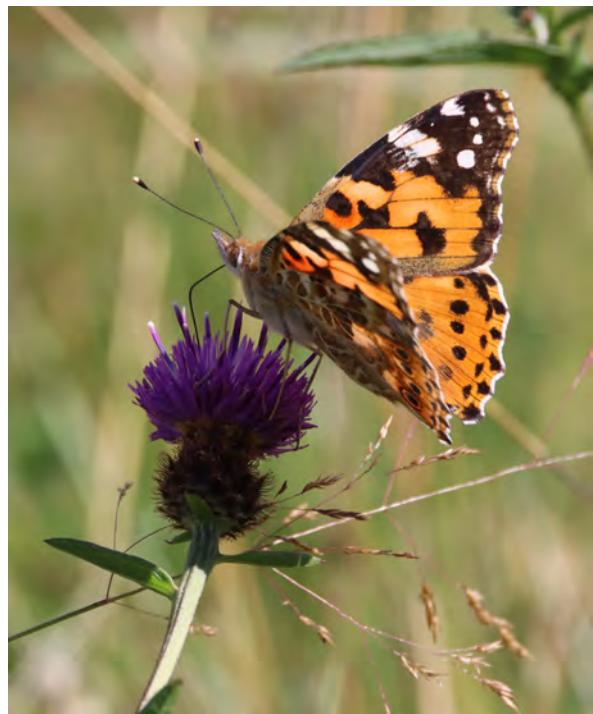
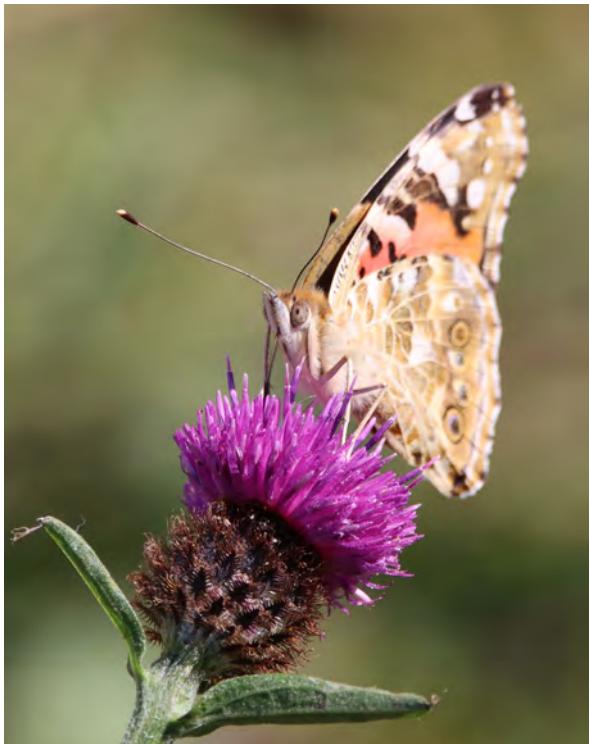
Bugs and beetles

5th August 2021

I am browsing a big new book with more than 2,600 pictures. The WILDGuide ‘Britain’s Insects’ covers 1,653 of our almost 25,000 species which include nearly 2,000 bugs and (as Haldane remarked), an inordinate number of beetles, more than 4,000. I am still (or again) childishly fascinated by small strange things. A few years ago at Llangorse Lake I first noticed orange Fleabane Tortoise Beetles, *Cassida murraea* (top left). Since then I have seen green less mature adults (top right) and weird larvae (second row) which chew holes out of the leaves. As a sort of disguise and defence they carry their shed skins on tail-spikes over their backs.

This summer I found green Thistle Tortoise Beetles, *Cassida rubiginosa* (third row, left), in our garden’s wild patch where they scrape off the outer layer of Knapweed leaves. The larvae carry and sometimes wiggle a lump of their own faeces. However, a Red-spotted Plant Bug, *Deraeocoris ruber* (bottom left), was not deterred and used its rostrum, a sort of piercing straw which is the defining feature of a bug, to suck out a victim’s juices.

On Mynydd Illtyd yesterday I noted a dozen Odonata species – Beautiful Demoiselle, Azure, Large Red, Scarce Blue-tailed and Emerald Damselflies, Southern and Common Hawkers, Golden-ringed Dragonfly, Keeled Skimmer, Four-spotted Chaser, Common and Black Darters. I photographed a Darter and the Demoiselle, Black and Beautiful. A new booklet about Mynydd Illtyd is now on sale at the National Park Visitor Centre and Brecon Tourist Information Office – see www.blfhs.co.uk.



Painted Lady

5th August 2022

I made two more 15-minute Butterfly Counts yesterday. The first was in a field by Llangorse Common, very promising with Meadowsweet, Marsh Ragwort, Water Mint and thistles, but I found only one Large and seven Green-veined Whites. The second at the other end of the Lake Trail at Llangasty, where the field was bright with purple heads of Knapweed, produced five Meadow Browns, a Small Copper and a Painted Lady. Butterfly Conservation says that low or even nil counts all help towards the survey.

A mother and child came along and asked, as people do when they see my binoculars and camera, if I had seen anything interesting. I showed them the Painted Lady, open-winged sunning itself on a patch of bare earth. The little girl asked “Why is it called a Painted Lady?”. I said it is pretty and brightly coloured, and told them about the great northward migration out of Africa. “Why is it called a lady?”. “Ladies are pretty. Do you know there is another butterfly called the Red Admiral. An Admiral is in charge of a fleet of ships. Perhaps the Painted Lady is the Red Admiral’s friend”. They continued their walk and I took more photos.

In ‘Bugs Britannica’ and ‘Emperors, Admirals and Chimney Sweepers’, Peter Marren writes that many of our current English names for butterflies were first published by James Petiver in 1717, including the Painted Lady. “The allusion is to the cosmetics used by fashionable ladies who painted their faces with rouge, kohl and white lead”, their eyes outlined like the markings on the butterfly’s wings. This is a butterfly whose underside looks as good as its upper, especially when viewed glowing against the light.

In 2009 there was a huge invasion of millions of Painted Ladies and on 30 May I took part in a weekend survey to help assess their numbers and movements. For two hours I sat on Slwch Hill, Brecon and counted all the butterflies that passed within ten metres. They were flying north, precisely fifty in the first hour and fifty in the second. I submitted my results with the feeling that there would be a strong suspicion that I had estimated or rounded the numbers. I hope you believe me.



Blues

8th August 2023

Last Friday I carried out a Big Butterfly Count in one of the Ty-Mawr meadows at Llangorse Lake. In fifteen minutes along about 200 yards of the Trail I noted 21 Common Blues (top two rows), 17 Meadow Browns and a Peacock. I couldn't remember when I last saw so many Blues, and felt it worth reporting to the County Butterfly Recorder, Andy King.

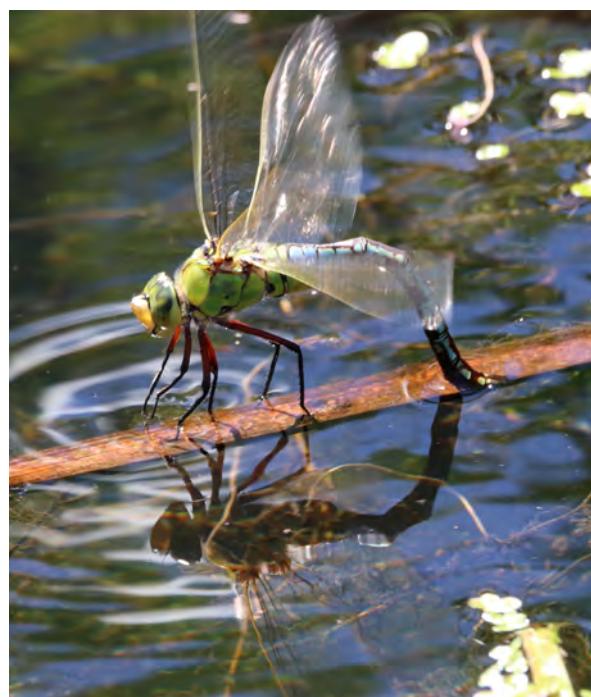
On Sunday I made a second Count, about 180 yards beside the hedge between the two meadows and this total was remarkable: 60 Common Blues, with 50 Meadow Browns, 3 Large Whites, 2 Small Coppers and a Ringlet. When the sun was out there were blues fluttering everywhere across the meadows and I reckon there must have been hundreds.

Why so many now? This Spring small caterpillars, which had overwintered after hatching from eggs laid at this time last year, fattened up and pupated. Adults flew in May/June and the butterflies I saw recently were their offspring, a second brood freshly-emerged and looking very smart. Were the exceptional numbers due perhaps to high caterpillar survival through the winter, or fine weather for the first adults in early summer? Clearly plenty of pupae came through wet July to emerge now.

Whatever the reasons, they were a pleasure to see and photograph, and a credit to the traditional management of these remaining hay meadows, with plenty of Bird's-foot Trefoil, the caterpillars' preferred food plant. I like the colours of dusky purple-sheened females as much as the bright blue of males, and the undersides are beautifully marked.

Fleabane is now flowering elsewhere at the Lake, attracting many visiting insects. Among them were more Common Blues, and also Holly Blues (bottom row) with their chalky underwings. They generally keep their wings shut or half-open like the female which I photographed showing her dark-bordered upperside.

If the forecast is right there could be some sunshine and butterflies here by Thursday.

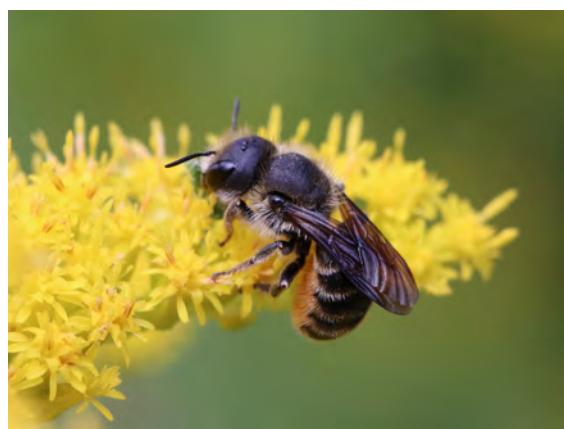


Friday at the Lake

10th August 2020

The morning was hot and clear, ideal for searching the Devil's-bit Scabious now starting to open its flowers and turn large parts of the meadows as blue as Llangorse Lake. My target was a tiny shiny moth for which this is the caterpillar's food plant; I had seen two nearby a week before and wanted better pictures. In the course of about an hour I found six females ovipositing into the flower buds of Devil's-bit. I thought they were all *Nemophora cupriacella* but checking my 137 photos turned up one *Nemophora minimella*. These similar species are very local and in Wales *N. cupriacella*, also known as Coppery Long-horn, has been recorded only a few times, see its Distribution Map at aderyn.lercwales.org.uk. It is unusual in being parthenogenetic – no males are known or required. *N. minimella*, however, does have males, with particularly long horns as in this shot (middle left) from a 2018 bioblitz at the Wildlife Trust's Cae Lynden reserve. This used to be the football field of Cwm Wanderers but is now Rhos pasture with Devil's-bit, one of the sites around Ystradgynlais important for the Marsh Fritillary butterfly.

On my two recent visits to the Lake I kept a note of dragonflies: Emperor (three photos), Golden-ringed, Southern, Migrant and Brown Hawkers, Black-tailed Skimmer, Common Darter, Banded Demoiselle, Common Blue, Emerald and Blue-tailed Damselflies. The birds included single Great and Little Egrets, Kingfisher and Common Sandpiper.



Raiders of the Bee Hotels

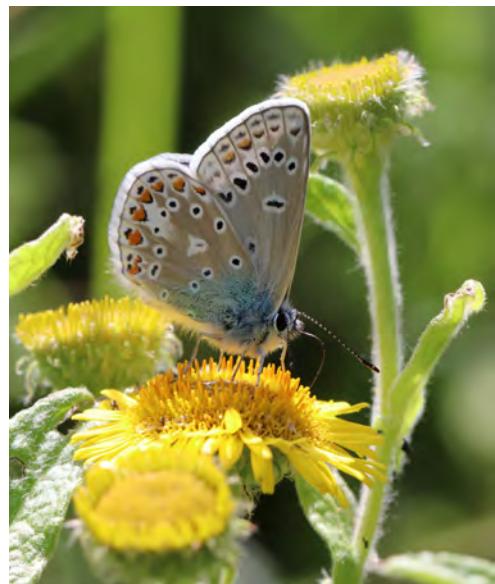
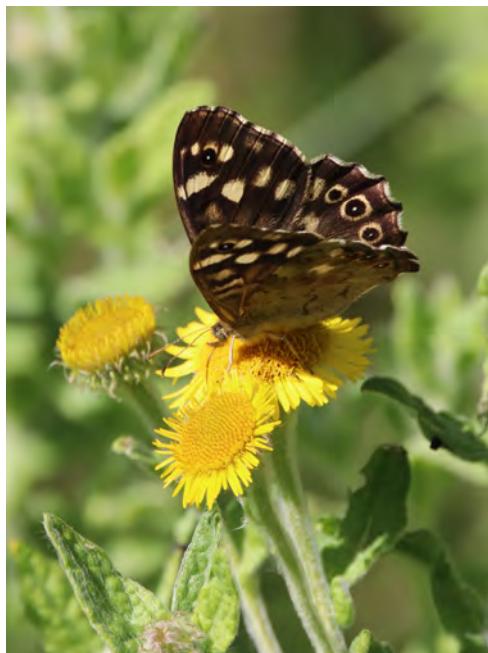
18th August 2023

Orange-vented Mason Bees, *Osmia leaiana*, have been busily filling the tubes in our bee hotels for some weeks now. She lines the bamboo with mastic – chewed plant matter – and uses the same stuff to seal a series of cells, each containing an egg and a food supply of pollen and nectar. The ends of the full tubes, green fading to brown, can easily be told from those filled earlier by Red Mason Bees, *Osmia bicornis*, which use mud instead.

Many bees, wasps, hoverflies and other insects are now on the flowerheads of Canadian Goldenrod, *Solidago canadensis*, and among them strange ‘long-tailed’ Javelin Wasps, *Gasteruption jaculator* (middle left; bottom left). Last week I saw one in action at a Mason Bee Hotel. After a look around, and using her hind legs to pick up sound vibrations which help to find an occupied nest, she inserted her long ovipositor into a bamboo tube, leaving the white-tipped sheath outside. Hatching from an egg injected into a bee cell, a *Gasteruption* larva is thought to eat the bee’s egg and food store.

The previous day I had watched another raider lay eggs at the same hotel – the Bee Darwin Wasp, *Ephialtes manifestator* (middle right; bottom right), an ichneumon with orange legs and an ovipositor longer than the rest of her body. Her larvae will eat those of the Mason Bee.

Gasteruption jaculator is easy to identify. *Ephialtes manifestator* needs more care and I checked my identification against the Natural History Museum website’s Beginners Guide to Ichneumons, (there are about 2,500 species in Britain). I have seen *Gasteruption* in our garden for three summers now, but *Ephialtes* on 24 June and again a week ago was new. Neither is common in Wales and according to the Distribution Maps on Aderyn – aderyn.lercwales.org.uk – they have not been recorded elsewhere in Breconshire. Could they be in your garden?



Twitchers

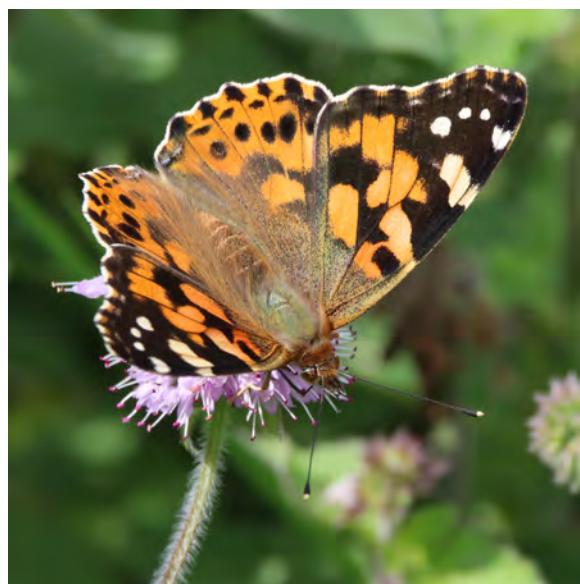
22nd August 2022

Where the fields at Llangorse Lake are lightly grazed there are now lovely large spreads of blue, yellow and lilac from flowering Devil's-bit Scabious, Fleabane and Water Mints. Butterfly numbers there have not been great so far, but I have noted a dozen species this month.

Many smaller insects are attracted to the nectar, or eat the plants, some on just one type. Fleabane is food for its own orange Tortoise Beetle, larvae of the Dusky Plume and a decasyllabic micro-moth, *Digitivalva pulicariae*. On Friday I found another tiny moth which I had never seen before. It moved around one flower-head probing florets with a long tongue. Taking sharp photos was tricky as the flower too was moving in the breeze, so I knelt down, set the macro lens to manual minimum focus, waited for brief moments of stillness and took many pictures.

A few turned out well and I was able to identify *Tebenna micalis* (bottom two rows), a migrant first found in Britain in the 1980s, which has sometimes remained to breed on Fleabane in the south. The Distribution Map on Aderyn, aderyn.lercwales.org.uk, shows no previous records in mid-Wales, but 25 elsewhere, mostly around the coast and islands. On the NBN Atlas I discovered that it has another name, the Vagrant Twitcher. This name would refer to its wanderings and its jerky movements.

Twitcher is also used to denote birders who go to great lengths to see rare birds and add them to their lists. It is also often misused to refer to anyone with some interest in or affection for birds, from Professor Swarovski splitting species by their DNA, to Iris Peeby who puts out peanuts for Blue Tits. The origin of the word was settled by Bob Emmett writing in 'British Birds', August 1983. He told how, in the 1950s, his friend Howard Medhurst would ride pillion on Bob's Matchless; "on arrival at some distant destination, Howard would totter off the back of my machine and shiveringly, light up a cigarette. This performance was repeated so regularly up and down the country that it became synonymous with good birds, and, as we all felt a slight nervous excitement at the uncertainty in seeing a particular bird, it became a standing joke, and John and I would act out a nervous twitch to match Howard's shiverings. This led us to describe a trip to see a rare bird as 'Being on a twitch'. Inevitably this led to the term 'twitcher'." The word came into popular use, replacing 'ticker', applied when I was a teenager to birdwatchers who kept their tally by ticking the list in the Peterson Field Guide.



Tigers

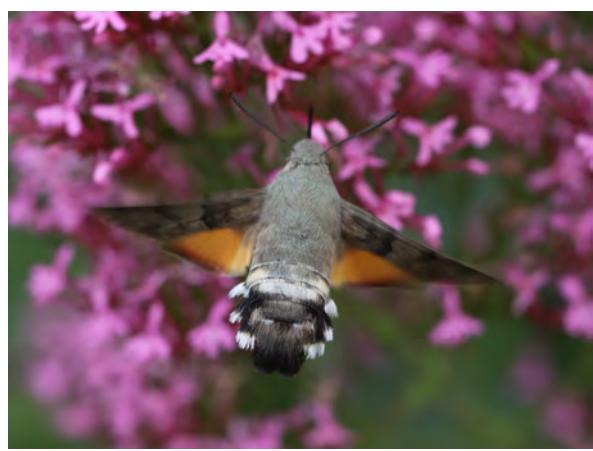
24th August 2021

I am watching a clump of Canadian Goldenrod in our garden. It is a bit more than a metre square and the flowers are at head height, ideal for observation and photography. At times there must be more than a hundred insects on the flowers, mostly Honey bees and *Eristalis* hoverflies including the Drone Fly *E. tenax*. The total number of species – bees, wasps and flies, a Common Blue butterfly and a Common Carpet moth – is about twenty.

Yesterday I took pictures of single *Helophilus* hoverflies, *H. trivittatus* in the morning (top left), *H. hybridus* early afternoon (top right) and *H. pendulus* at teatime (middle left). The WILDGuide ‘Britain’s Hoverflies’ sticks to the scientific names with a few well-known exceptions, saying “Common names catch on because they sum up some aspect of the species’ appearance, behaviour or habitat in a way that is memorable. Contrived names seldom manage this and often end up being no more memorable than the scientific name they try to replace”. However, I discovered that these three have been given English names, respectively Large Tiger Hoverfly, Marsh Tiger Hoverfly and Tiger Hoverfly. The new WILDGuide ‘Britain’s Insects’ uses English names for all species, explaining on page 5 that “Popular groups, including butterflies, larger macro moths and dragonflies have long-standing English names that are in widespread usage. For those ... that do not have English names, these have been created for the purposes of this book ...”. Discuss.

Helophilus means marsh-loving, and the larvae are rat-tailed maggots, the ‘tail’ being a breathing-tube. They filter-feed on micro-organisms that decompose rotting vegetation in ponds, ditches and other wet places. The adults range widely and *trivittatus* is known to migrate here from the Continent. They visit flowers to eat pollen. *H. pendulus* is very common and widespread, frequent in our garden, but until yesterday I had seen *trivittatus* and *hybridus* only at Llangorse Lake. Maps in Aderyn show 3,700 records of *pendulus* in Wales, only 411 for *trivittatus* and 249 for *hybridus*, mostly around the coast (www.aderyn.lercwales.org.uk/public/distribution).

Since my recent moan about the lack of butterflies I had a better day at Llangorse, so here are Painted Lady, Common Blue and Small Copper.



Merrylee-dance-a-pole

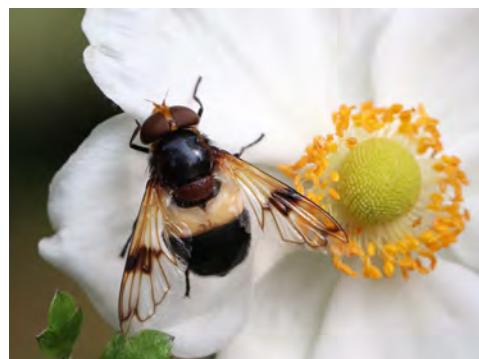
14th September 2022

“Only on the hottest and longest of summer days did the radiant being delight our eyes; to have seen it conferred high honour and distinction on the fortunate beholder. We regarded it with mingled awe and joy, and followed its erratic and rapid flight with ecstasy. It was soft and warm and brown, fluffy and golden, too, and created in our infantile minds an indescribable impression of glory, brilliance, aloofness, elusiveness. We thought it a being from some other world . . . and I longed to be a Merrylee-dance-a-pole myself to fly off to unheard-of, unthought-of, undreamed-of beautiful flowery lands.” W.H. Hudson, in *The Book of a Naturalist*, 1919, quoting from a letter he had received.

On a Monday morning many years ago at my RSPB desk, I took a call from a lady who had been at a wedding that weekend and had been amazed to see a hummingbird hover at the bride’s bouquet as she left the church. When I gently explained that what she had seen was a Hummingbird Hawkmoth, she was at first incredulous and then seemed disappointed. I felt almost guilty for disillusioning her.

Since October 1959 when I sketched it in my first nature notebook, I have always enjoyed seeing this insect and now take photos whenever I have the chance. It is chiefly a summer immigrant, in varying numbers each year, and a few may hibernate here. For a few years in Sussex our small front lawn grew Lady’s Bedstraw instead of grass; one summer I found caterpillars of Small Elephant Hawkmoth, and in the next one Hummingbird Hawkmoth.

The long proboscis probes tubular flowers. I have recently watched them at verbena, valerian, agapanthus and buddleia. (Last year another hawkmoth was recognised as a full species, Wallace’s Sphinx, *Xanthopan praedicta*. In the 1860s Darwin and Wallace predicted that the Madagascar star orchid, for pollination, would need a hawkmoth with an extremely long proboscis to reach the flower’s nectar. The moth was found in 1902. Its proboscis is up to one foot/30 cm long.)



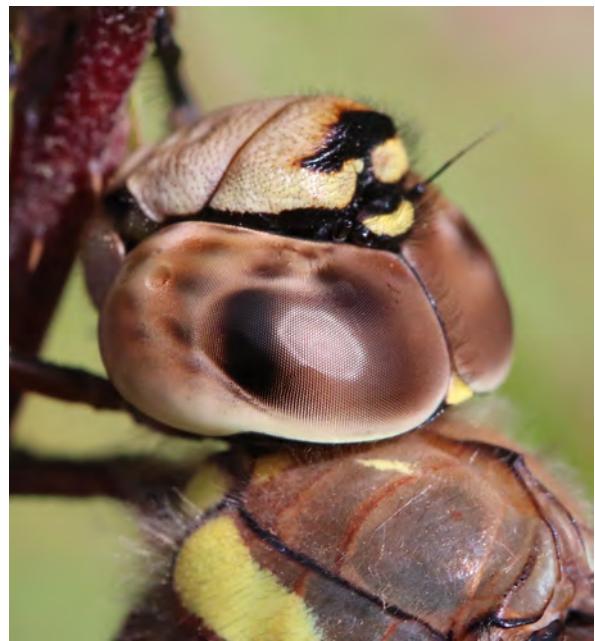
Mimics

15th September 2021

Volucella zonaria is the largest of Britain's hoverflies. This week one is visiting our Buddleia, slowly spiralling a panicle and probing for nectar, flower by flower (top row; second row, left). It is also known as the Hornet Hoverfly, not only looking rather like a Hornet but laying eggs in the tree-hole nests of that and other social wasps, where its larvae scavenge for dead grubs, dropped food and other matter among the debris in the bottom of the cavity. The Hornets are surely not deceived by the similarity but they allow entry, as also to the very different Great Pied Hoverfly, *Volucella pellucens* (second row, right) which has a similar life history. Perhaps the hoverfly larvae earn their tolerance by helping to keep the nest hygienic. However, resembling a dangerous or poisonous insect can be a defence against predators – Batesian mimicry, first described by Henry Walter Bates in butterflies on his return from eleven years up the Amazon. (His companion explorer, Alfred Russel Wallace, set off for home after five years, only to lose all his collected specimens and nearly his life when the ship went down in flames. He had more adventures with better fortune in the Malay Archipelago, whence, as every Welsh schoolchild should know, he shared his ideas about natural selection with Charles Darwin.)

There are other black and yellow hoverflies out now on Buddleia, Ice Plant and Japanese Anemones. Here are *Myathropa florea* (third row, left), known as the Batman Hoverfly from the dark mark on its thorax, *Sericomyia silentis* (third row, right), *Episyrphus balteatus* (bottom left) – the Marmalade Fly from its appearance not its diet, and *Dasyphorus albostriatus* (bottom right). I have recorded about 35 species in our garden, keeping to those which are not too hard to recognise, and taking pictures to check details. The WILDGuide 'Britain's Hoverflies' has helpful symbols to indicate the level of difficulty in identifying 165 of the total 281 species. Distribution maps on Aderyn, aderyn.lercwales.org.uk/public/distribution suggest that *Volucella zonaria* and other hoverflies are under-recorded. Sightings, ideally with photos, can be entered through WiReD at bis.org.uk.

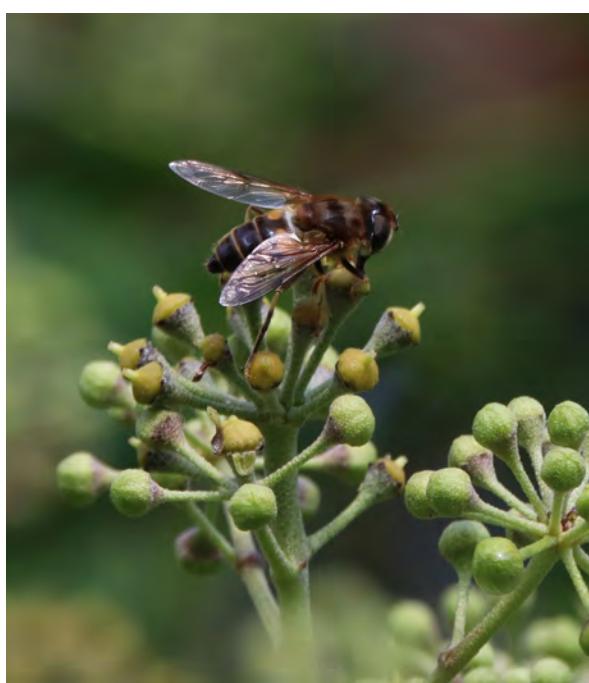
The Breconshire and Radnorshire Bee Recorder, Janice Vincett, now has a recording page and blog which you can find at midwalesbeesandwasps.com – have a look.



Dragons

29th September 2020

Walking from the small car park below Llangasty church on Saturday morning, I found Migrant Hawkers (top row; middle left) in the hedges, still warming up after a clear cool night. One female allowed me to hold the camera six inches away and photograph the many thousands of lenses in her compound eyes. I have not counted these but read that one American dragonfly has 28,000 lenses in each eye, brilliant equipment for an aerial hunter. I kept a count of ones and twos on my way round the Lake to Llangorse Common, and on my way back in the warm afternoon many more were active, including about 30 flying together in the sheltered part of the meadow east of the Hide. Some were paired. A total of 84 Migrants was my highest ever but surely only a sample of the true numbers around the whole site. Among them I picked out two Southern Hawkers (middle right; bottom left), longer and greener, with large ‘headlights’ on the thorax. A few Common Darters included a pair in tandem (bottom right), frequently dipping to the water for the female to lay an egg. They were too quick for me to catch the moment of ovipositing, but I was pleased to keep a few flight shots among many blurred failures. This one, taken at 1/800 of a second, shows how fast the wings move. Each wing is controlled separately and can twist and flex for aerobatic mastery.



On ivy

2nd October 2021

Ivy flowers provide food for insects after most other sources are finished. Birds feed on the berries well into the following Spring. This afternoon two blocks of ivy growing up trees in our garden were alive with hundreds of insects. More than half were wasps. There were many flies including Bluebottles and hoverflies – *Eristalis* (middle left), *Syrphus* and *Myathropa*. The activity looked frantic with lots of pushing and barging. I saw only two Honey Bees, one attacked by a wasp which I think killed and carried it off. Best were half a dozen Ivy Bees (top right with wasp; bottom right). Similar in size to Honey Bees, Ivy Bees have short buff ‘fur’ on the thorax and bright bands on the abdomen. They emerge in September, later than other bees, in time for the flowering of ivy, and will be around into early November.

The Ivy Bee, *Colletes hederae*, was new to science in 1993, described from southern Europe. It reached Dorset in 2001 and has spread north through Britain, tracked by the Bees, Wasps and Ants Recording Society, BWARS. An account of the survey, with a map of distribution up to 2016 is under Maps and Records on its website [ww.bwars.com](http://www.bwars.com). I first saw one on Hogweed near Brecon in 2017, and then noted a few on ivy in our garden and elsewhere around the town last autumn. Sites included a large block of ivy on the warehouse opposite the Job Centre, and I saw a few again there yesterday. There is an opportunity here to help record the spread of a new British insect, either at BWARS or through WiReD at bis.org.uk.



Peregrines

16th October 2020

Both Peregrines were up in the sun yesterday morning on the top turret of St.Mary's, Brecon. When they were not preening, with contortions to reach awkward areas, they did very little. "Sometimes I sits and thinks, and then again I just sits". I wonder if Peregrines do think and dream, and about what? If they have hunted successfully at dawn there is little they need do for the rest of the day.

The pair is on the church tower for most of the year apart from a few weeks in early summer when they go somewhere more private to nest. The tower is their place to spend the night and much of the day, choosing perches out of hot sun or hard rain (although they seem to like a gentle shower). It provides a fine view over the town and its pigeons, Jackdaws and Starlings – but they catch a great range of other birds. More than a hundred prey species are known to have been taken in south Wales. Breconshire Birds Annual Report 2019 mentions Lapwing, Woodcock, Common Tern, Kingfisher and Redwing. The Report should be available in a few weeks; look out for a notice as well as the latest sightings and photos on www.brecknockbirds.co.uk.

The Visit Brecon tourist office and St. Mary's have a leaflet about these birds, printed by the Town Council.



Egrets and Swans

22nd October 2020

At Llangorse Lake on Tuesday I took pictures of two of my favourite subjects, Little and Great White Egrets. They are now regular at the Lake outside the breeding season, and often seen by the Usk and Wye, and at other watery places. The latest annual Breconshire Bird Report records totals of seven Little along the Wye between October and December, and six Great White at Llangorse in November. Birds that were unknown here when Martin Peers and Mike Shrubb wrote Birds of Breconshire in 1990 have become familiar, and although there is no evidence yet of breeding in our county, 147 Little Egret nests were noted elsewhere in Wales in 2017.

On a previous visit ten days ago I watched a pair of swans flying towards me, thought they might make a good picture and raised my camera. As they came closer I realised that they were making short musical calls – not Mute Swans but Whoopers. They circled the Lake calling for a few minutes before heading away south. Perhaps the sailing race put them off joining the seventy Mute Swans on the water. Just a few Whoopers turn up occasionally in Breconshire; a better place to look for them is the Tywi valley west of Llandeilo. Most of about 25,000 which are arriving in Britain now from Iceland, after a sea crossing of roughly 1,000 kilometres, winter in Scotland, northern England, and Ireland where their music is the source of legends and poetry.

With lockdown imminent I can see that most of my natural history will be garden-based for some time. So I am pleased that finches are coming to Vine House Farm sunflower seed. With up to 15 Goldfinches we have a few Chaffinches, Greenfinches and Siskins. Yesterday and today a male Brambling joined them.



Humbug

23rd December 2020

Head-on, a Coal Tit can look like a badger, a humbug or a bullseye. (Can you still buy clove balls and winter mixture, are gobstoppers as big as they used to be, and is there honey still for tea? Do these comfort-eating thoughts come from the season, the dismal weather, receiving a big box of Lindor for our recent wedding anniversary or watching the Vicar of Dibley's repeated Crunchie bar hangover?)

But back to the birds. Coal Tits are doing better than most woodland species. Their fine bills are adapted to pick seeds from cones, and insects and spiders from bark. They benefited from the increase of conifer plantations, and feeding in gardens helps them through the winter. They often take away a seed or piece of peanut to hide or cache. A study has shown that their memory of where they hid the food lasts for less than six weeks, but they continue to find some as they focus their foraging on likely areas.

In the new Breconshire Birds Annual Report for 2019 there are records of winter flocks of up to 20 Coal Tits in favoured woodlands. The first year of a survey to locate the rarer Willow Tit by playing calls and songs to encourage responses produced many more records than usual, and Marsh Tits responded too. As well as details of 176 species and sub-species seen last year, the best total for a long time, contents include a paper on the increasing number of breeding Barnacle Geese and the Llangorse Lake Ringing Report – 2,477 birds ringed of 47 species.

We have two Coal Tits in our garden every day now. They are often here at the same time but seem not to pay much attention to each other. Being so small they are dominated by other birds, including two quarrelsome Robins. If the Robin's song is really a fierce territorial challenge, it can still sound sweet to us and brighten mid-winter days. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.



Sprawlk

29th December 2020

I am sitting at the kitchen window with a fresh cup of tea and the Beethoven Violin Concerto about to start when he flies into the magnolia. So quickly upstairs, kneel down, open the window slowly just enough to rest the big lens hood. I am lucky, he usually leaves before I am ready. The light is poor but he stands out against the background of the cream hospital wall across the road. The first pictures are spoiled by the twig right in front of his eyes and I will him to relax or lean forward. I feel trebly free to wait – I am retired, isolating and it is a Bank Holiday. I can admire the intricate barring of his underparts and note the white blotches on his coverts. His eyes are big and bright, forward-facing, his stare intense and piercing. When finches return to the branches above he watches them but does not hunt. I think he has eaten recently, his crop looks bulgy. It is forty minutes with tea and music finished before he stretches and takes off looking straight at me. A close encounter of the bird kind. That was good.

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Keith Noble (1946-2025) developed his love of birdwatching in the fields around his childhood home in Essex and, when he had his own transport, studying the waders on Rainham Marshes on the north shore of the Thames. He spent three decades working for the RSPB, first at the society's headquarters at The Lodge and then presenting film and slide shows and supporting youth and volunteer groups from the charity's South East office on the Sussex coast. In 2007 he and his wife Alison retired to Brecon, near where she had grown up.

In retirement, Keith became heavily involved in Welsh wildlife organisations. He was a Trustee of Brecknock Wildlife Trust for six years, including a term as Chairman. He was also a Trustee of the Welsh Ornithological Society for six years and an active member for many more. He was Director of the Biodiversity Information Service for Powys and Bannau Brycheiniog National Park, a member of the Advisory Group for Llangorse Lake, and a member of Brecon Swift Group. He presented his wildlife photography in hundreds of talks to local groups and the public.

As a valued member of the British Trust for Ornithology, Keith contributed thousands of bird observations to the Wetland Bird Survey, Breeding Bird Survey, and the Bird Atlas 2007-11. He also recorded bees, wasps, moths and other invertebrates, including many first or second sightings for Powys. His records of dragonflies and damselflies at Llangorse Lake resulted in the area being declared a Dragonfly Hotspot in 2022 – the first such site in Wales. His expertise also led to him being appointed Dragonfly Recorder for Breconshire. He always said it was not the insects that were rare, but the individuals with the time and inclination to search them out.

