

CARMARTHENSHIRE

Nature Notes

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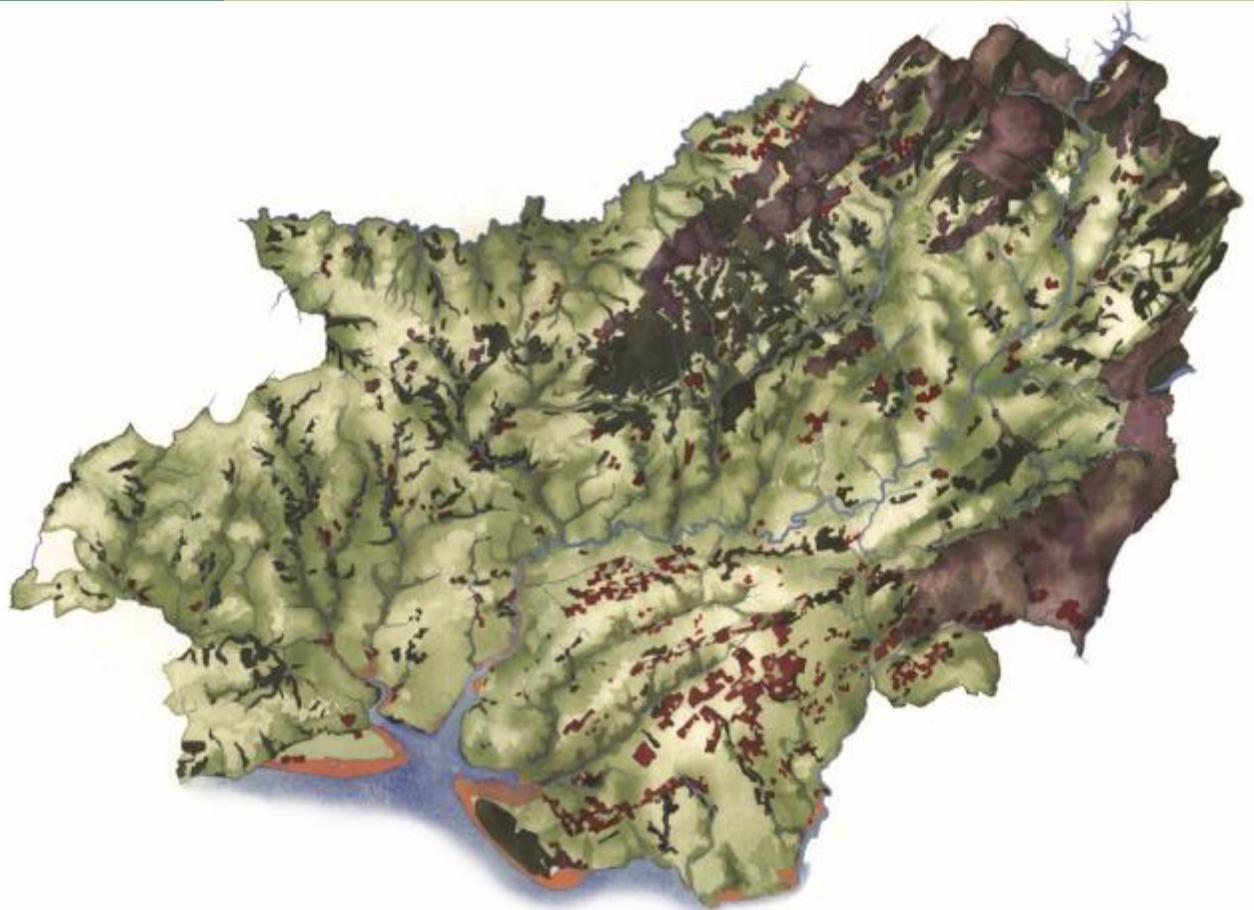


JANUARY-MARCH 2022

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?



© L. Wilberforce



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



Holly leaves

Take a closer look at a holly tree (*Ilex aquifolium*) and you might be surprised to see that leaves growing at the top have no prickles. Holly is well known for its variation in leaf forms in a single tree, known as heterophylly.

An increasing number of studies support the idea that the presence of prickles is a response to grazing by animals – the higher-up leaves, which have no prickles, are above the height of grazing animals so don't need the deterrent of prickly leaves. Where there are no grazing animals the response might be a reaction to flailing and cutting of trees and hedges.



Wet woodland

Wet Woodlands are damp and mysterious. Alder, birch and willows are common trees found in wet woodland. They can grow in places where they don't mind getting their feet wet!

The wet ground and plentiful, saturated, dead wood can be home to lots of wildlife, e.g. mosses, ferns and invertebrates. Wet woodland can also provide cover for otters and feeding sites for flocks of birds flitting through the trees. Willow supports more species of moths and other insects than any other British tree, except oak. In Wales the timber from wet alder woodlands was often used to make clogs.



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Spring usher moth

You might be surprised that moths are active during the winter but a variety of species can be found then. The spring usher (*Agriopsis leucophaearia*) is usually found in oak woodland. The female moth is very different - they are wingless, and of course flightless.

The adults emerge in February and March sometimes as early as January. The females climb up tree trunks and the males fly to them and are also attracted to light. The spring usher overwinters as a pupa underground.



© Brian Briggs



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Early dog-violet

Whilst its cousin, the common dog-violet traditionally flowers in April, the early dog-violet (*Viola reichenbachiana*) pops up in March, or earlier if the local climate has been unseasonably mild. The unscented flowers of both violets are similar, but the early dog-violet has a darker purple spur behind the petals. Sometimes anomalies occur and here is a photo of patch of white early dog violets.



Hazel flower

Hazel has male and female flowers on the same tree. They appear on the plant in autumn and winter and may open as early as January, long before the leaves emerge. The familiar male flower is the long catkin. The female flower, however, is much smaller and red. Hard to spot, unless you take a close look, they are visible only as red 'styles' protruding from a small bud-like structure.

They are wind-pollinated – the wind carries pollen from the male flower to the female flower. The female flowers develop into the familiar nut in the autumn.



© Rebecca Killa

Snowdrops

Snowdrops have a traditional link to churches. Snowdrops were the symbol of Candlemas, which takes place on February 2nd. They appear between January and March. They are an extremely hardy plant. Even when there's snow on the ground, clumps of snowdrops still manage to push their way up, protected by a tough leafy layer, called a spathe, which covers the tip of each flowering stem. Snowdrops have their own built-in antifreeze which stops them from being damaged by frost. Snowdrops were first recorded in Britain in 1597, and it is thought they spread across Britain because they were grown in monastery gardens.



Fallen trees

Recent storms have left fallen trees throughout the county. Some trees have to be cleared from roads and gardens but where suitable, and safe to do so, they could be left where they have fallen. The decaying wood of fallen trees and branches is essential for saproxylic species - plants, fungi and animals that depend on dead wood for all or part of their life cycle. In addition, when a fallen tree has lifted its root plate it provides valuable habitat. When located in warm, sunny and dry conditions these can be very valuable for ground-nesting bees.



Molehills

The European mole (*Talpa europae*) is found throughout mainland Britain. It is a highly adaptable species and can thrive at elevations up to 1000m, wherever the soil is well-drained and deep enough for tunnelling.

Moles spend almost their entire lives in tunnels, which can vary be just below the surface to 70 cm or more. Loose soil is pushed up a shaft to the surface, forming a molehill. These tunnel systems create a giant underground trap for invertebrates, so once a mole has set up a territory, it does not need to dig many more new tunnels, unless they are searching for the opposite sex in the spring. They are territorial and so will not share their tunnel system with another mole.



Sandy Water Park

In the 1980s the old Duport Steelworks in Llanelli was demolished. The site was used to create Sandy Water Park, which involved the creation of a 6 ha lake (the base of which was created using pulverised demolition material). Without much intervention this site has become an established site for wildlife, and as well as providing a site for people to visit, and enjoy and is well visited by bird watchers. In amongst the usual mix of gulls (mainly black-headed and herring gulls) some more unusual species have been recorded including Mediterranean, yellow-legged and glaucous gulls. It's worth taking time to have a good look at the gulls there – you might see more than you expect.



Pond/dune slack

Pembrey Burrows Local Nature Reserve includes some impressive dunes. In more recent times, these dunes and the delicate flora that live on them have become threatened by increasing levels of vegetation, which have stabilised the sand. Coastal marram grass, and the invasive species sea buckthorn have spread, changing the habitat and making it harder for sand dune-adapted plant and insect species to survive. In addition, the damp areas and seasonal pools are no-longer available for the plants and amphibians that normally live there. Rare species such as the fen orchid and the tiny petalwort (*Petalophyllum ralfsi*) liverwort have already been lost from the landscape. The Dynamic Dunescapes project in Carmarthenshire (funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund, the EU LIFE Programme, Plantlife and Natural Resources Wales) is working to restore the sand dunes to their natural state. One of the projects has been to create a large dune slack which will have permanent water at one end and be seasonally wet at the other.



Red squirrel



Pine marten



Woodcock

Red squirrels

After a mountain biker spotted a red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) at Cwm Rhaeadr woods near Llandovery, the Mid Wales Red Squirrel Partnership took a closer look and found distinctively chewed conifer cones, which indicated where the red squirrels might have been feeding. They then put up carefully placed camera traps and waited. A local volunteer has been checking the cameras and the good news is that red squirrels have been recorded where the cameras were put out.

In addition, there have been some other surprises caught on camera, including the elusive pine marten (*Martes martes*) passing by at night. Between 2015 and 2017, 51 pine martens were released into forestry in mid Wales. The pine martens have steadily increased their range across the rest of Wales and are now breeding successfully – evidently they have arrived in the upper Tywi Valley.

Another good record was of a woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*), a woodland bird, most active at dawn and dusk. It feeds by probing its bill into damp ground, eating mainly earthworms and beetles.

Finally a great spotted woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*) brought a lovely splash of colour to the recordings. So, in addition to providing information as to the number of squirrels that might be using the wood, we are learning more about some of the other animals that use the site.



Great spotted woodpecker



Late winter

In February the storms certainly made it feel like winter. However, this song thrush, singing high in the branches early one morning had spring on its mind...



Carmarthenshire Nature Partnership

