

CARMARTHENSHIRE

# Nature Notes

JULY-SEPTEMBER 2021

*Partneriaeth Natur*  
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*Nature Partnership*

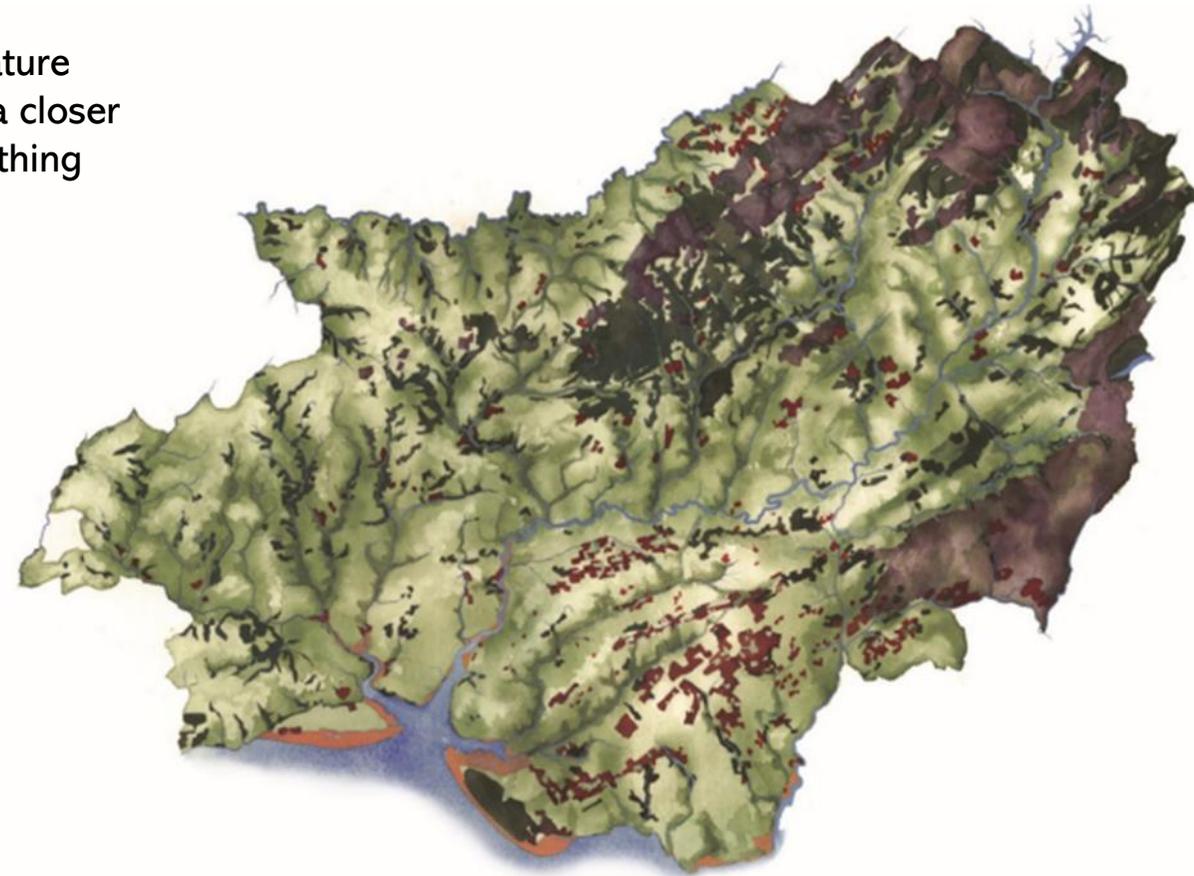


Carmarthenshire has some wonderful wildlife. These 'Nature Notes' are some highlights to encourage us all to take a closer look around us – even the common is special. Seen anything interesting – then why not send us a photo?



Bog asphodel

For more information about nature in the county then read our Nature Recovery Plan:  
[carmarthenshire.gov.wales/biodiversity](http://carmarthenshire.gov.wales/biodiversity)



Send your photos to: [Biodiversity@carmarthenshire.gov.uk](mailto:Biodiversity@carmarthenshire.gov.uk)



## Lichens

If you take a closer look at many artificial surfaces, nature has often found a way of colonising it. Lichens will grow on almost any surface, including trees, rocks, soil and artificial surfaces such as concrete, tarmac and metal – including on my car. Here these lichens (a partnership between a fungus and an alge or cynaobacteria) seem to be happy to grow on a metal bridge and road sign. You might wonder how they could survive here. Lichens absorb water from the atmosphere but have no means of retaining water within the lichen during dry spells. During these periods lichens come metabolically ‘inactive’. As soon as there is moisture in the air, the lichen absorbs water, and the algae within the lichen can begin photosynthesis within minutes.

## Feast or famine

Here is an artificial surface that does not appear to have been colonised by anything. The contrast is even more stark next to a verge that was full of primroses and daisies in the spring - and a small colony of ashy mining bees (*Andrena cineraria*), which have striking black and grey/white markings. The females excavate small tunnels in the earth to make their nests. Ironically some guidance for maintaining artificial turf is the use of moss, mould and weed killer!



## **Stag-headed oak**

Each spring this oak slowly emerges from winter dormancy back to life and it is always worth following this change as the seasons progress. It might look from first appearances not to be in such good health and but whilst pests and diseases can be an issue, we should perhaps be more optimistic.

Oaks can be very long-lived trees and after maturity can start a process of decline when their crowns start to die back because the root and vascular system is no longer able to maintain the large crown that developed. This is not the end for the tree though. The process allows light to reach the lower inner crown, which in turn stimulates dormant buds to grow, eventually creating a new smaller lower crown. The old branches which formed the original high crown die off, but these dead branches remain for decades, even centuries. This is what gives the tree its stag-headed appearance.

Standing dead wood is a valuable habitat for invertebrates and the birds that feed on them. A juvenile tawny owl also used this tree as a roost.



### Ragged-robin

Ragged-robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*) grows in damp places. Its distinctive pink ragged flowers stand out in the summer. It is a favoured larval food plant of moths like the champion (*Sideridis rivularis*) and the lychnis (*Hadena bicruris*). The roots contain a substance called saponin. Saponins can dissolve in water and are fat soluble, which makes them a useful soap substitute that can be used for washing clothes, etc. and can be extracted by boiling the roots in water.



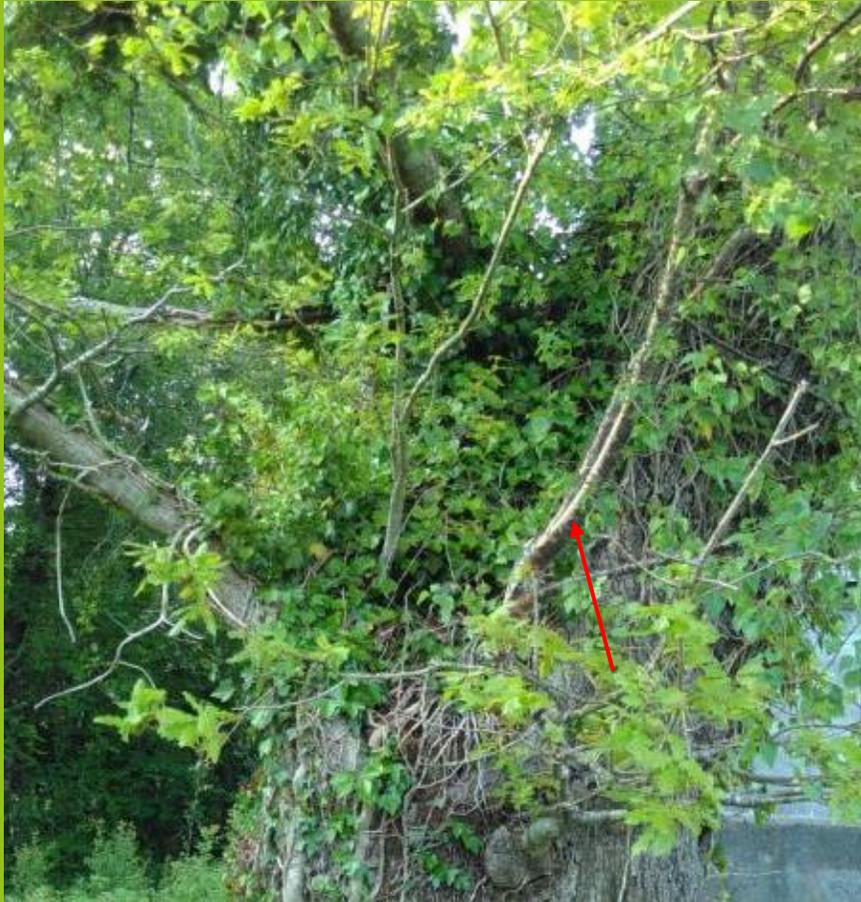
### Common sorrel

Common sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*) dioecious, meaning that male and female flowers are on separate plants. If you look closely female flowers turn into attractive reddish winged fruits, each containing the seed. It is a common plant of grasslands, woodland edges and roadside verges. It contains oxalic acid (which gives it its sharp taste) and was used to remove stains from linen.



### Robbing bees!

Foraging bees and other insects are attracted to flowers for food - nectar and pollen. However, sometimes the nectar is difficult to reach, especially for short-tongued bees. In this case, the bee may use its mandibles (jaws) to bite a hole at the base of the flower to get to the nectar (see red arrow). In this photo a bee was caught in the act! Now the anthers with the pollen are bypassed so the flower does not have the benefit of being pollinated. This is called nectar robbing. Other bees may take advantage of the same hole to feed on the replenished nectar source.



### Catching a ride

This might be hard to see but here a birch tree (red arrow) is hitching a ride on a mature oak and growing out of it. Seeds fall, blow, or drop into cracks or wounds of trees, and sometimes due to decay there is a soil-like environment that allows the seed to germinate and grow.



### Bearded tooth fungus

Volunteers at the National Botanic Garden Wales recently found this unusual fungus growing in a small area of woodland. It is the first record in Carmarthenshire of the bearded tooth fungus (*Hericium erinaceus*). This unusual 'toothed' fungus (with teeth instead of gills or pores) is native to Europe, Asia and North America but very rare in the UK. The fruiting bodies appear on damaged or felled trees usually in woodland.

The 'teeth' are dense clusters of spore-bearing spines that release vast numbers of spores into the air. They are probably long-lived species and at some sites fruiting bodies have been observed on the same tree for 20 years or more.

In the UK it is protected under Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Research has shown that it contains compounds that have medicinal properties, including being effective against memory loss and depression.



## Summer meadows

Here are photos of two wonderful flowery meadows taken in July.

Every meadow is different, even ones right next door to each other, and will have different species in flower through the summer, so they are worth revisiting throughout the summer.

We know that these habitats have declined drastically but we are lucky in Carmarthenshire that there are still areas where they are conserved and managed. This is both by organisations like the National Botanic Garden of Wales where the top photo was taken - full of meadow saxifrage, knapweed and betony – and by interested individuals in quiet corners of the county. The bottom photo is from the Amman Valley with a wet meadow full of whorled caraway and bird's foot trefoil.



Originally created to provide hay for animals, managed traditionally, meadow flowers are able to flourish and provide food for pollinators like bees, butterflies, moths and hoverflies and the provide grassland habitat for mammals and birds.

Importantly grasslands can store carbon below ground in the soil. Provided their soils remain undisturbed, species-rich grassland can store large amounts of carbon.



## Thrush anvil

Song thrushes (*Turdus philomelos*) look for suitable stones to shatter the shells of snails they are not able to break on their own. Because thrushes tend to frequently return to "their" stone, those thrush anvils can be recognized by the numerous broken shells, here mostly of banded snails lying around them.



## Golden-ringed dragonfly

The large golden-ringed dragonfly (*Cordulegaster boltonii*) are voracious predators – this one has caught a bumblebee. It is a distinctive, common species active from May to September. They are fast, agile and powerful flyers and favour acidic streams in moorland and heathland.



## Bilberry

A sign that summer is coming to an end is when you find the juicy dark berries of bilberry (aka whinberry or whortleberry - *Vaccinium myrtillus*) on moorland or in some woodlands. In the spring their delicate flowers support bees, and moth larvae feed on the leaves. In the autumn, the berries are a vital food source for birds and even the elusive pine marten. If you have the patience, they are lovely in a pie!



Sphagnum moss and sundew on Figyn common

## Late summer

There is still plenty to see in Carmarthenshire during late summer months – we would love to see photos of what you see in your area



## Carmarthenshire Nature Partnership



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