VALE BIODIVERSITY MATTERS

Issue No. 11

Welcome to the 11th issue of Vale Biodiversity Matters

Vale of Glamorgan Biodiversity Partnership

This newsletter is produced on behalf of the Vale of Glamorgan Biodiversity Partnership as a means of keeping everyone up to date on the latest biodiversity news across the Vale.

If you know of any people/organisations who would be interested to receive a copy/copies please contact the Vale Council's Ecology Team (details on back page). We would also welcome any feedback to help us improve the content or format of subsequent issues, as we would like the newsletter to reflect the views of the partnership.

A big thanks to all of you who have contributed articles/photographs/other material for this issue. We are already looking for material for the next one. If you would like to contribute anything for inclusion in the next newsletter, please contact us (details on back page).

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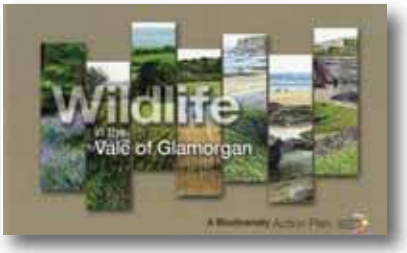
What's in the picture?

Can you guess what's in the picture? The answer is on the back page.

"Wildlife in the Vale of Glamorgan" is launched



The Vale of Glamorgan Biodiversity Partnership has launched its new booklet - **Wildlife in the Vale of Glamorgan** – which introduces the wildlife, habitats, conservation and enhancement actions within the Vale. The booklet is written and designed to be eye catching and informative giving a simple insight into what the Local Biodiversity Action Plan is. It celebrates the end of the LBAP review: we now have a fully updated species list, based on records in the area from the last ten years of priority species that are either locally or nationally rare or important. The structure of the LBAP is new too. It's based on broad habitat types each of which have priority habitats and species associated with them. Actions are often done with a specific species or type of habitat in mind but the conservation management work will still almost always aid the other species associated with that broad habitat.

Wildlife in the Vale of Glamorgan is available from council offices, libraries and by contacting the ecology team (details on back page).

This document is available in large print and other formats upon request. Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael mewn print bras a ffurfiau eraill os gofynnwch amdanynt.
This information is available in Welsh. Mae'r wybodaeth hon ar gael yn Saesneg

Aberthaw Biodiversity Day

Cleaning water channel

For the fourth year running, a day of conservation took place at the East Aberthaw Nature Reserve.

The reserve is managed in partnership between RWE npower Aberthaw Power Station and the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales. The day concentrates on key activities for preserving the area which has important Welsh habitats for a wide variety of flora and fauna, including a vegetated shingle bank, lagoon (one of only four in Wales) and sand dunes. Since the Wildlife Trust became involved in 2003, 1052 species have been formally recorded. Of these 62 appear on the Section 42 list of species of principal concern for the conservation of biodiversity in Wales. Held in October, the event aims to prepare the Reserve for Spring so there is some forward planning to the tasks although some are reactive. This year there were seven work focus areas. In conjunction with the conservation itself, a nature walk was held for pupils from Llanilltud Fawr Primary School – a chance to show the next generation the importance of the conservation work.

Path restoration, volunteers from Aberthaw Power Station and the MOD

Grass Cutting

The work areas were:

- **Clearing plastic and wooden stakes** from tree saplings that have now established on the ash mound. The trees were being harmed as they outgrow the plastic protectors.
- **Grass cutting** to encourage all flowering plants in this area, particularly orchids. This will hopefully attract bees too.
- **Path covering with wood chippings.** The path alongside the lagoon gets particularly muddy so wood chippings were chosen to improve safety and access for walkers.
- **Bridge repair.** Although small, the bridge and steps need a handrail. The existing one was vandalised.
- **Water channel cut back.** The water channel has been opened up for breeding dragonflies and other insects that provide food for birds. The channel is not cleared along the whole length because of water rail which prefer the cover further along the ditch.
- **Path clearance.** Blackthorn and hawthorn overgrowth covered a path so was cut back.
- **Beach clean.** Litter cleared off the beach to prevent harm to marine life.

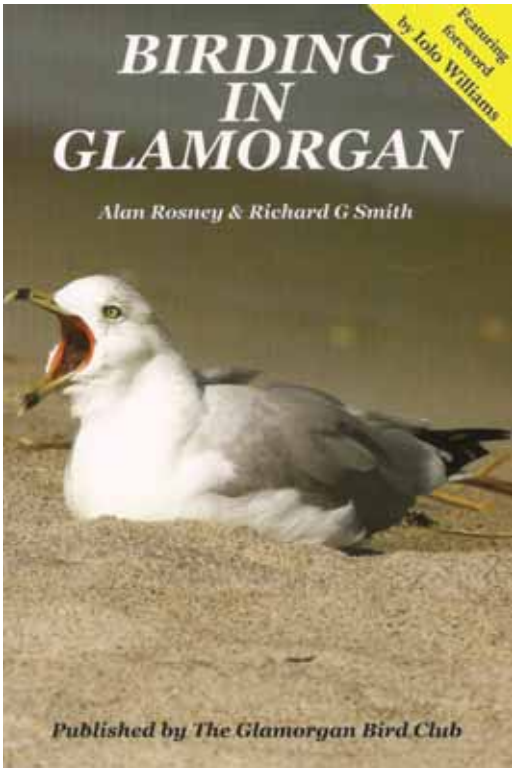
Volunteers on the day ranged from pupils from Bryn Hafren Comprehensive School, Dow Corning, Lafarge UK, 71 (Inspection and Repair) Squadron from St. Athan, Environment Agency, City Electric, power station staff and Wildlife Trust volunteers.
The event was supported by Brandon Hire.

Rachel Sampson

Bryn Hafren pupils during the beach clean

Birding in Glamorgan

The Glamorgan Bird Club has published a 'where to watch' guide to the birds of Glamorgan. Included are 53 site guides from right across the old county. Each has a sketch map, access details and a list of the species that are likely to be encountered along with a comprehensive table of where to see specific species and details on the rarities that have occurred in Glamorgan. Throughout the text are colour plates illustrating both species and habitats and a series of black and white vignettes from local artists. Copies are available from Alan Rosney (01443 841555).



Dartford Warblers in the Vale of Glamorgan

Life on the edge

The rapidity with which the distribution of certain bird species can change is a constant source of wonder. Most of us are familiar with the recent meteoric rise of the Little Egret in the UK; transforming from a rare vagrant to a relatively numerous breeding resident in just a couple of decades. A similar situation might also be occurring with Cattle Egret and Glossy Ibis; only time will tell.

Another bird exhibiting a rapid recent change in status also happens to be one of the Vale of Glamorgan's rarest breeders – the Dartford Warbler. This is essentially a species of Mediterranean climes, with a range extending into western France and southern Britain. It is largely resident, breeding and wintering mainly on lowland heath dominated by gorse and heathers. Gorse is predominantly favoured as it is richer in invertebrates than heather and provides some shelter from drifting snow. Many choose to remain close to their breeding areas all year, but a proportion of the population disperses after the nesting season. These are often youngsters and may turn up in coastal localities such as dunes, cliff top scrub or river valleys.

All bird photos are Paul Roberts, habitat photos are Paul Dunn

A typical view of a Dartford Warbler would be of a small, dark, strikingly long-tailed bird flying weakly over low vegetation, wings whirring and tail wagging. Despite a reputation as skulking, they can at times show remarkably well, especially singing males which tend to give their scratchy warble from the topmost sprig of a gorse bush, or during a seemingly ecstatic song-flight.

As a small insectivorous species on the edge of its range in Britain it is vulnerable to cold winters, showing marked fluctuations in numbers. The 19th century British population extended north to Oxfordshire (and Shropshire), and from Kent to Cornwall, but subsequently contracted to the southernmost counties of England in the first half of the 20th century. Following the severe winter of 1962-3 the population collapsed from 450 pairs to just 10. Numbers gradually recovered from this low point to 950 pairs in 1988-90, 1600 in 1994 and 3200 in 2006.

Despite the rapid colonisation in England it wasn't until 1999 that nesting was first proven in Wales; in Ebbw Vale, Gwent. This was perhaps not unexpected, given that the Devon population was then thriving and had expanded into Dartmoor, Exmoor and along the north coast from the strongholds of the southern commons and coastal belt.

Breeding was confirmed in the Vale of Glamorgan in 2000, when 2 pairs were found at a locality holding extensive areas of gorse, although anecdotal reports suggest birds were present there in 1999. This has remained the sole breeding site in the county and, with the Gower peninsula, is probably the most important area for the species in Wales.

Monitoring has shown that Dartford Warblers increased slowly in the county to a high point in 2008, when 9 pairs were identified. Unfortunately, the population has since crashed following the unusually cold winter of 2008-9; only 1 pair remained in 2009. This pair bred successfully and it is hoped that numbers will bounce back. It is clear, though, that the species currently has only a tenuous hold in our area. A decline has also been reported from other parts of the UK in 2009, although it is too early to know the extent and severity of this.

It should be noted that Dartford Warbler is classified on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981; as such it is illegal to recklessly disturb birds at or near an active nest, or with dependent young. It currently resides on the Amber List, due to its unfavourable conservation status in Europe (the large majority of the European population is found in Spain, where declines have been noted due to habitat loss) as well as its localised - and therefore susceptible - UK breeding population.

The future locally for this attractive little warbler remains uncertain. Efforts are being made to work with landowners to encourage the rotational management of gorse so that areas of suitable breeding habitat - dense stands of gorse, neither too short nor too rank - are continuously available. This should in turn benefit other heathland species such as Linnet and Stonechat. However, the small and fragmented nature of the Welsh heaths still hinders their persistence, as populations are vulnerable in their relative isolation. Perhaps future climatic amelioration might see Dartford Warblers take advantage of the Welsh uplands? What is certain is that their plight is intimately tied up with heaths that they inhabit. Given sufficient habitat and the likelihood of a long term trend to milder winters, there is a fair chance that Dartford Warblers will remain a feature of our local birdlife.

Paul Roberts

Dormouse and nest in nest box

The Vale of Glamorgan Dormouse Survey

Dormouse nest tube

The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales in partnership with the Vale of Glamorgan Local Biodiversity Action Plan (VoG LBAP) has been working with volunteers and landowners to undertake a survey for one of Wales' most elusive and endearing mammals, the Dormouse *(Muscardinus avellanarius).*

Dormouse waking from torpor

The Dormouse is an arboreal mammal, spending its spring and summer in trees, hedgerows and scrub, where it uses its prehensile tail to climb from branch to branch in search of insects, flowers and fruits. In autumn and winter the Dormouse hibernates in a small woven nest close to or on the ground, where it will stay until the following spring.

Nationally the Dormouse has declined drastically over the past decades, due to a number of factors but primarily to changes in woodland management and fragmentation of habitat, which result in small isolated populations. As a result of the decline, the Dormouse now has full legal protection and increased conservation concern in Wales.

The Vale of Glamorgan supports large areas of broadleaved woodland habitat, connected by long mature hedgerows all of which is ideal habitat for Dormouse. However, despite this only a few historic records of the animal exist.

To try and find our Dormice specially designed nest tubes and boxes were placed in several of the most suitable woodlands and hedgerows across the Vale of Glamorgan, in an attempt to encourage nest building. Dormice build characteristic woven nests from honeysuckle bark and fresh leaves and are quite unlike other small woodland rodents. In total over 300 nest tubes and boxes have been placed in 8 woodlands in 2008 and have been checked on a monthly basis since.

Another way to identify Dormice is by the way they open Hazel nuts (cobs). They do this by creating a small round hole in the shell, leaving very few gnawing marks, unlike wood mice and bank voles, which also eat hazel nuts.

To date the survey has been unable to find any new records of Dormouse, but it is hoped that with the continued support of volunteers and landowners, more woodlands can be surveyed and in time eventually lead to the discovery of the rare and often overlooked Dormouse.

In order to help in the survey the Wildlife Trust is asking for members of the public to report any potential sightings of Dormouse or their characteristically opened hazel nuts.

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Portuguese-Man-of-War

Although the 'Portuguese-Man-of-War' looks like a jellyfish it belongs to a very different group called the 'Siphonophores' – complicated colonial animals made up of many individuals or polyps modified to carry out different functions. Unlike the true jellyfish it cannot swim but drifts with the wind and current supported by a single polyp inflated by gas. The name refers to this triangular air-filled bag which resembles the sail of warships from the 15th century.

The mass of tentacles that may trail below the float for metres consists of three individual types of 'polyp' differently shaped according to their function.

Prey such as small fish are trapped and paralysed by the stinging polyps and interconnections between these are feeding polyps and other parts of the colony that enable nourishment, helping food reach all parts of the colony.

Warmer summers mean they can survive close to Welsh shores. This year there have been many more reports of Portuguese-man-of Wars around the country with over sixty sightings around Devon, Cornwall and Wales. Individuals have been seen as far north as the Isle of Man.

Belinda Ashong

St. Josephs RC Primary School - Class 1 winners. Hunting for bugs in the terrracotta garden

Lavernock Nature Reserve - Class 2 winner. Explaining the project to the judge

Awards for Wildlife

Are you helping wildlife in your garden or open space?

Do you put out bird feed or have you planted native plants for butterflies?

Have you managed to encourage frogs into your pond or bats into your roof?

Then you could win prizes for the hard work you've done!

Applications are now being taken for the Awards for Wildlife. The Vale Biodiversity Partnership is in its sixth year of running the scheme to reward groups for the work they do to help support and encourage biodiversity in the land around them.

There are two classes in the award: Class One is for schools, education centres or children's groups and Class Two for voluntary groups and town/community councils or industrial or commercial business, including farms. The winner of each class receives £100 with prizes of £50 and £20 for second and third places.

In 2009 St Josephs Primary school were winners of Class One; they had included a series of different features to support wildlife in their grounds. They had a pond for frogs and insects, bird feeder and nest boxes to provide food and shelter for birds and there was a nature trail with bug houses to let pupils explore the different areas. The judge commented on the commitment of both pupils and staff and the wide range of different ideas as well as the attention to detail. Previous winners were Llancarfan Primary School in 2008 and Wick and Marcross District playgroup in 2007. In Class Two, First Prize went to Lavernock Nature Reserve who have developed the site considerably over the past few years. Work from many volunteers had changed it from mostly scrub to a developing species rich meadows, with clever and sympathetic uses of all the different areas of the site including the World War II aircraft gun battery, and a coppiced woodland where the coppice is being actively harvested and passed on to other groups. Previous winners were D C Lewis & Sons farm, in Mynydd-y-Forest, Ystradowen in 2008 and Dow Corning Ltd for Cadoxton Pond Nature Reserve in 2007.

The closing date for applications is Friday 23rd April and a round of visits for short-listing may take place during the week beginning 26th April. Final judging will be carried out during the week beginning 17th May.

If you help to manage a site for wildlife in the Vale or know someone that does contact the Vale of Glamorgan biodiversity partnership c/o Liz Stewart (01446 704627/elstewart@valeofglamorgan.gov.uk) or visit www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk and search for 'Awards for Wildlife".

What's in the picture? (from front page)

By-the-wind-sailor, ***Velella velella***, was a second unusual sighting on the heritage coast this year. This is also a siphonophore, one of the ocean surface dwelling community alongside the Portuguese-Man-Of-War. With its small upright stiff sail and paper like float it travels thousands of miles, most likely from the Azores or western Atlantic, feeding at chance encounters on very small fish and large plankton.

They can be found at any time of the year and are most common in the autumn when Atlantic gales can blow them across in their millions to land all along the west and southwest coasts of Britain.

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