



NEWSLETTER

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Things to spot this month



Great tit looking for nest site

Birds and their habitats

7.15pm Saturday 7 March 2013 Mackenzie Hall, Brockweir.

Everyone with even the slightest interest in natural history or the countryside seems to know something about birds. They are by far the most popular form of wildlife, perhaps because they are colourful, varied, lively and – unlike mammals – readily seen. Much of conservation revolves round the needs of birds, butterflies and wild flowers.



The PGP has laid great emphasis on wild flowers in the fields and has also held a meeting on butterflies, but we have never touched birds, as it were, save for a dusk trip to see



the Nightjars near Poors Allotment. In fact, the Hudnalls and its surroundings have a better-than-average suite of birds. Our bird feeders are likely to be visited by spotted woodpeckers, nuthatches, marsh tits, long-tailed tits and perhaps siskins, as well as the standard fare of blue tits, great tits and coal tits. Unlike some parts of England, we still have song thrushes and bullfinches. Buzzards are constantly circling over the trees and fields and ravens are seen and heard more often than carrion

crows. We can also see peregrines and goshawks occasionally. Out in the larger fields, it has until recently been possible to hear curlews and skylarks. We are also near enough to the fast-flowing streams of wooded valleys in Wales to find grey wagtails and dippers. And, we even attract visits from herons and mallards to our garden ponds.

Our aim with the meeting on 7 March is to hear more about our local birds from an expert and about the habitats they depend on. Blackbirds are as close to typical as one can get. They need trees and shrubs for cover and nesting, and are commonly seen in the deepest woods, especially when snow is deep elsewhere, but given the chance they seem to prefer searching for worms in grassland. It is the mixture of fields, hedges, boundary trees and woods that's ideal, and that also explains the general diversity of the local birdlife. Where habitats have been greatly reduced, as in much of the Midlands and eastern England, birds diversity has dived.



SUBSCRIPTIONS NOW DUE

Your subscriptions for 2013 are now due. The rate has been maintained, yet again, at £5 per household per year. This low rate equates for a couple to just under 5 pence per week. Your prompt payment would be very much appreciated. Please send your cheque/cash to:

Parish Grasslands Project, c/o Sally Secrett, Greystones House, Hewelsfield, GL15 6UZ

WOOD by Tony Eggar

On 13 October last year we held our Autumn Meeting with the subject of 'Wood'. The format was similar to the previous year's meeting 'Sward to Sweater', rather akin to a mini symposium, and attracted about 60 people. Five local speakers talked about their areas of expertise on local trees and their uses.

George Peterken spoke of how trees had been used and cultivated in the area over the last two hundred years or so and how many of the boundaries still contained trees from that era. Over this time the whole area had progressed from Medieval Common with wood-pasture and open heathy grassland, through extensive enclosure and settlement, to retreat of settlement after 1850 leading to scattered dwellings within a woodland zone and abandoned fields more recently being reclaimed by woodland.



John Josephi demonstrated why we needed trees for Fuel, Fencing, Building, Shelter, Fruit and Landscaping, and he expanded on which trees were most useful for each of these. In order to produce enough timber to be self-sufficient (ie timber for burning for heat) a landowner needed a minimum of 2.5 acres of land. The wood sources could be hedges/boundaries, woodland, orchards and specimen trees. He went on to cover coppicing and hedgelaying as well as fence posts and tool handles, all from your own home-grown wood. His *Pièce de résistance* was his Hudson Cordwood Clamp - a method of



holding small roundwood tightly to then cut to length efficiently with a chainsaw - which he demonstrated on the grass outside the hall to great admiration.

My subject was 'Tools of the trade' related to my own experience from the the 5 acres of sloping land that we have. I first described the tools I used for cutting and felling timber, going up from secateurs, through pruners, and handsaws to chainsaws. I moved on to logging and transporting, emphasising the different requirements when access was very difficult and slopes were great, which is a problem for most of us in this area. Having cut, logged and moved the timber I then showed a variety of tools for wood splitting prior to stacking. Finally I looked at what to do with all the brushwood that is left after taking the good sized wood. Apart from just burning it all, we try to use every possible part of the tree, so we spend much time cutting small twigs with secateurs and pruners to fill meal bags to use for starting our wood-burnings stove. Larger 'sticks' like hazel can be used as poles. We also use a shredder/chipper and, when feasible, build a dead hedge.



move them to the right place on the land. A separate specialist with a portable saw mill then came and cut the timber into planks for framing and cladding. The barn and garage were then constructed using part stone and blockwork and part timber framing with a slate roof. The finished buildings with local stone and timber grown on the land fit perfectly into the landscape.

Deborah Flint illustrated her experience of installing wood burning stoves and boilers. She emphasised the efficiency of some of the modern stoves, then described

Mike Topp gave us an excellent study in Building with Wood. Faced with a large Thuja plantation and too many Douglas Firs on his land and also the need to build a barn and garage, the plan emerged. Firstly a tree felling license had to be obtained, then a contractor was brought in to fell the trees, cut them to the right length for construction and



the pros and cons of log versus pellet fed boilers. She showed the large system that she has installed that only needs to be fed logs every few days and has vast hot water storage cylinders. The system requires a large amount of installation space and ease of access for the equipment. If you don't have sufficient quantity of wood growing on your land, buying it in bulk to get a beneficial price is important. You will also need plenty of good airy storage space.



After the five speakers there were demonstrations and discussions, which we combined with tea and lavish cakes. **Andrew Pyke**, who has had a lifetime of working with wood, showed a selection of his tools and products. **Bill Howard**, who has had a career in tropical forestry, demonstrated green woodworking. **Harry Verney** came from Ross on Wye to demonstrate how to maintain chain saws in good cutting order, and George brought along his exhibition of coppice craft products. All in all it was a very interesting and educational afternoon.

SHEPHERDING COURSES by Sarah Sawyer and Deborah Flint

A new initiative organised by the Parish Grasslands Project brought local people managing small fields access to four shepherding courses. The courses, run in conjunction with Gwent Wildlife Trust, calling on the expertise of Usk Vet Hilary Jones and Woolaston farmer David Martyn were supported by the Wye Valley AONB unit. These shepherding courses built upon the popular Sward to Sweater event that was held in 2011 in Brockweir, where amateur shepherds shared their sheep keeping experiences and local wool-craft folk mounted a display of their work. The meeting highlighted a skills gap in the amateur shepherds' knowledge base, and a need for bespoke training to be developed to match that need.



The first two sessions took place in October 2012 at the Gwent Wildlife Trust Reserve at Pentwyn Farm, and were facilitated by Tim Green, Farm Wildlife Development Officer for the Trust. The first covered the basic requirements of sheep keeping, from breed choice and pasture management to legal requirements. In



the afternoon the group explored the 11 hectare Pentwyn site and adjacent 42 acres at Wyewood Common, and were able to view the Trust's flock of forty Hebridean Sheep - a breed that has established a reputation for the management of delicate ecosystems. The Hebrideans' capacity to utilise a wide variety of forage of poor nutritional quality, coupled with their hardiness and strength makes them the ideal eco-tool. These qualities also make them a cost-efficient farm animal in many more intensive situations. Their dietary preferences are different from those of other breeds and this, coupled with their ability to thrive on vegetation with poor energy values, makes them a unique management tool. Tim explained how the addition of the livestock has eased the management of the site while adding a new dimension to work and skills at the trust.



The follow-up to the first course was led by Hilary Jones from Usk Vets, and is the subject of the Case Study later in this newsletter. There was a hugely positive response to the session, with requests coming from far and wide for more to be hosted.

Session three in February this year was on the subject of 'Lambing'. To the amusement of all who attended, vet Hilary brought a 'training ewe' made out of a water container, a real ewe's pelvic bone and a clear plastic bag. Participants



were able to try out what they'd been taught in class practically, by helping to 'birth' one of the two toy lambs, but in the warmth and comfort of the room above the Village Shop! Later, the group made a highly informative and much appreciated visit to David 'Piper' and Sally Martyn's farm in Woolaston where lambing was just getting underway.



The final of the four day-long sessions takes place on March 21st, and will include a talk by PGP's own George Peterken on Grasslands and a talk from the Rare Breeds Trust on Conservation Grazing. The PGP would like to thank all who have taken part in bringing about these highly acclaimed training sessions, but in particular, to thank Sarah Sawyer of the AONB for her time, effort and inspiration.

CASE STUDY: L-PLATES FOR LOCAL SHEPHERDS

High up on the hill above the Wye, but nestled below the village of St Briavels is a smallholding of 8 acres, the views from whose fields are among the most beautiful in Britain. The fields, hedgerows, wooded areas and streams on this land are rich with wild flowers, and are home to some of the grasses and rushes which make this area of special scientific interest as well as pleasing in aesthetic terms. It was therefore with some concern that newcomers to all things farming, Neil and Deborah Flint, moved into Cinderhill Farm along with their two characterful - but land-transforming - British Saddleback pigs and three British Toggenburg Goats just eighteen months ago.



The Flint's enquiries on care on how to care for their land and all it grows led them to the PGP, and within a month of moving in, to attending the PGP's Sward to Sweater half day seminar. The seminar convinced them shepherding was going to be an effective means of controlling the sward, with fringe benefits that might also be useful to them as smallholders. Based on the experience of other local smallholders and members of the PGP, Tony and Jane Eggar, they chose to keep Welsh Mountain Sheep and now have a main flock of 9 Black Welsh Mountain, and 5 White Welsh Mountain lambs that they are growing up.



Last autumn the PGP, in association with the AONB and two other local meadow conservation groups, began a course of four parts on Shepherding Skills for the new shepherd, which the Flints attended.

It was during the second session of the course that local vet, Hilary Jones, introduced attendees to some of the diseases and problems that can come with sheep, including a relatively new disease called CODD (that's C for *contagious* Ovine Digital Dermatitis). Other subjects such as foot trimming, inoculation, planning health care for the flock and selection for breeding were also covered. A highly entertaining session on handling sheep came at the end of the day, when everyone got the opportunity to turn a sheep, with the farm's wild (and horned!) Hebridean sheep accommodatingly letting the learners try their hand at the technique, and being treated to an ovine-style pedicure for their generosity.



The Flints returned home to the farm from the second session, and went immediately to see Nimbo Stratus - one of their young lambs - who they had been treating for foot rot. With the newly acquired skills and information from Hilary, they were able to check for and identify CODD, and to take the lamb to the vets for immediate treatment which led to her complete recovery. It is with great delight that the Flints reported at session three that Nimbo Stratus is back at work, keeping the sward of Cinderhill Farm at healthy levels.



There's just one session left now, focusing on conservation grazing, when the Flints hope to learn more about the whys and hows of conservations grazing to complete the programme. So, what's next? Well, a spinning and weaving course, maybe!