

The insects of Flora's Brockweir flower patch

George Peterken looks into a wildlife diary that stretches back 100 years

Both our project collecting information on glow worms as part of our “homes for wildlife” theme and the recent entomologist survey of Cutts Orchard we have commissioned have prompted me to look at the few insect observations in Flora Klickmann's manuscript diary. Her wildlife observations, which run intermittently from 1923 to 1950, suggest that glow worms were a familiar feature of life in “the flower patch” at Brockweir.

In 1923, on 1 July, she recorded: *We started with a bright light on my pillow at night – found it was a glow worm that had got into the shawl I had worn in the garden.* Then on 24 August she saw two glow worms from her bedroom window. On 13 July 1948 she records: *Glow worms now returning, as Mylsom does not do much cutting round the edges. There are three on the bank beneath big oaks. Very bright.* Ten days later she says: *We have been collecting glow worms from the sides of the fields where grass has not been cut. Quite a nice selection sparkle on the bank beneath the tall oak on the bank.*

Less welcome were *two suspicious looking insects, like huge grasshoppers*, seen on 11 August 1948, one on the verandah and one in the grass. She feared they might be *advance scouts from the locusts now in France.* And on

27 July 1947 she complained that *flies and other insects are the plague of our lives out doors now, owing to the shortage of birds* [brought about by the preceding very severe winter].

Flora also mentioned butterflies. On 27 August 1923 she walked over *the big square field* with her dog, Patch, after early mist had cleared. Patch raised *a real cloud of butterflies that had settled for the night on the grass.* She called 1929 a great year for butterflies, which were *now hibernating all over the house in cosy corners near the ceiling.* In August 1947 butterflies were everywhere: *she had never seen so many.* She put this down to a lack of birds. A month later Painted Ladies and Red Admirals, but not Peacocks, were all over the place. In fact *butterflies are a marvel this year – Clouded Yellow, as well as the common kinds, but cabbage plants have been eaten to skeletons by caterpillars.* Hibernating Painted Ladies were let out on March 9 next year, but their progeny were back indoors hibernating that winter. On 6 March 1950, *Peacock butterflies are about – on the date given by White of Selborne.*

What to make of all this? Glow worms are still here and so are the butterflies she mentions, though perhaps in smaller numbers, and we have escaped destruction by locusts. She does not mention the fritillaries and other species that have suffered from post-1945 habitat change, but they mostly emerge earlier in the summer when, perhaps, she was in London. Biting insects have probably declined, but otherwise there is a reassuring sense of continuity between then and now.

Tell us about your favourite trees

We are renewing our request for you to tell us about your favourite trees, as part of the PGP project to produce a leaflet guide to notable trees of the district. We asked for your suggestions earlier in the year, and received some splendid responses. But we need many more. The guide will include photographs of the individual trees with notes about their ecology and any special features, and a map showing their location. Once again we're asking for your nominations within the parishes of St Briavels and Hewelsfield & Brockweir.

Trees are a vital part of the environment that we live in. Apart from being beautiful they soak up carbon, provide homes for hundreds of wildlife species and are a frame of reference for us as they change through the seasons. So please let us know your nominations, and the reason for your choice. This could be because a tree is a particularly

fine example of an individual species, and we do want to include good examples of all the native species found locally. Equally a tree could be nominated because of its rarity, or its historical significance, the uses of its products or the number of other living things it supports. Or it might simply have some particular personal significance to you.

In the first instance send an email to parishgrasslands@gmail.com telling us about your chosen tree, including a description of where it is, and a photo if you have one. We would prefer the trees to be accessible from footpaths or lanes. If on private land they must be easily seen from public rights of way — we will not promote trees in a way that might encourage trespassing or voyeurism! Producing the guide will be a fairly lengthy process, but please send in your suggestions as soon as possible.



Issue 50

Autumn 2025

N E W S L E T T E R

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NATURE WATCH

What to look for now



Ink cap



Fieldfare

Citizen science on the trail of wild bees

Wild bees will be the subject of a talk hosted by the Parish Grasslands Project at 2.30pm on Saturday 25 October at the Mackenzie Hall. The speaker will be Ciaran Clark, project manager for the Monmouth-based international charity Bees for Development. Since March last year Ciaran has been leading the Bees of Monmouthshire Recording Project, which aims to fill in the gaps in existing knowledge and record the whole range of wild bee species in the county. This is not a task to be under-estimated, as there are about 275 wild bee species in the UK.

In an era of climate change and habitat loss, bees are finding it harder not only to find enough food to feed their young but also to find suitable nesting sites. Ciaran explained the purpose behind the project: “We hear so much about the need to protect pollinators, but protecting and creating habitats, like wildflower meadows, is only half of the battle. Bees need places to nest, as well as forage. We need to understand where the different bee species are abundant locally and which habitats are most important to them. If you don't know the species diversity before you intervene to ‘improve’ a certain habitat, it will be impossible to accurately assess whether your work has had any impact. This is where the citizen science of biological recording is vital.”

By this summer the project had amassed over 1,300 records and identified 135 different bee species — roughly half of all the UK species. A small team of volunteer



Looking for bees... Ciaran Clark

recorders has joined the project, taking on field, microscopy and recording work, and has already contributed over 500 records. Building a community of recorders is seen as vital for the lasting impact of the project which, as well as creating a source of knowledge about local bee diversity, connects people to their local wildlife. The project has been supported by Wye Valley National Landscape and the Welsh Government's Sustainable Development Fund.

Admission to the talk is free to all, PGP members and non-members alike, and afterwards tea, coffee and cake will be served. If you are not already a member it will be possible to join the PGP after the talk. Membership is £10 per household per year and if you sign up at the meeting you will be paid-up until the end of 2026.

Exploring a diverse mix of habitats

Gill Stott reports on a memorable visit to local nature reserves

On a warm July evening a group of about 15 PGP members met at Tidenham Chase car park to join a walk around Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust managed land, led by warden Kevin Caster. Kevin is reserves manager for the trust in the Forest of Dean and Wye Valley. He explained that we'd be visiting several areas, Poor's Allotment, Ridley Bottom, Simpson's Meadow and The Park, a diverse mix of heath, woodland and meadow habitats with different geology, history and management objectives. Kevin has been involved with the evolving development of these reserves for about 20 years, through which not only strategies have changed but the attitude and expectations of the locals and visiting public too.

The path through the wooded part of Poor's Allotment just over the road from the car park was our first stop. Kevin described this area as a clear example of secondary woodland, with no veteran trees save for three pines. The wood was dominated by silver birch with some bramble ground cover and little sign of differing broadleaf species becoming established due to canopy cover. Future management considerations would entail "halo" felling around some trees to enable more light to pass through and allow new growth.

Beyond this short section of woodland was the lowland heath area covering the majority of Poor's Allotment. An apple tree gave the opportunity for Kevin to explain that the history of Poor's Allotment developed after the enclosures of the 18th century. This area, considered of lower soil fertility, was given to the poor in the community to keep pigs and grow crops, and some apple trees survive to today.

There is one pond, fed by a spring. Here the highland cattle wallowed in the cool water, munching overhanging shrubs and trees while Kevin explained that the chief management tool for the site was the cattle. They were selective grazers that wandered across the heath, eating a range of plants while browsing and trampling the scrub. These hardy creatures help to develop a mosaic of different vegetation layers, which



Highland cattle wallow in the pond at Poor's Allotment

Photo: Gill Stott

in turn attracts wildlife. One of the rarer birds drawn to lowland scrub and heathland is the nightjar. Trip camera and tracking helped at least one ground nest to be found this year. Unfortunately we were too early in the evening to spot them in flight. The nesting birds can be easily disturbed by dogs off the lead.

Below the heathland we entered a more established, probably ancient woodland with older trees – an oak guessed at 150 years – and an understory of hazel. The outlet from the pond disappeared in a sinkhole at the bottom of a large depression as it crossed the geological boundary between sandstone and limestone. Tree canopy was dense, with talk of halo felling around veteran trees to allow them to grow and promote the shrub layer and allow more species. Continuing downhill towards the Severn we entered a more open heathland where bracken and bramble had encroached and required control. In spring the area was covered in bluebells. The bracken and bramble was controlled by cutting pathways with a flail mower at different heights. The cattle rarely ventured into this area. Lower down we walked through a spring-fed wetter area (dry during the visit due to drought) where marsh orchids were present.

We crossed Kelly's Lane to Ridley Bottom Nature Reserve. The woodland there, with small-leaved lime and herb paris, could be considered as a fragment of the ancient Wye Valley woodland. We walked through one of the three species-rich hay meadows –

all land bequeathed to GWT. The meadow was very diverse in flora: knapweed, hedge bedstraw, yellow rattle, agrimony and orchids attracting insects like grasshoppers, bush crickets and spiders.

Walking back to the main road we crossed to Simpson's Meadow. Bequeathed by a local nature-lover who cared for his fields, we walked through a meadow rich in yellow rattle, orchids and now familiar meadow species growing well. Funding for fencing had been provided by Wye Valley National Landscape to allow sheep grazing at certain times of the year. This field adds to the diversity of habitats and provides a link connecting the areas we had walked through.

The final area of the visit was The Park. This was formerly a conifer plantation, cleared about 30 years ago to restore the lowland heathland. It was quickly colonised by silver birch which has now been mostly controlled. Another small herd of highland cattle grazed here, allowing more closely cropped grasses for nightjars. Whilst discussing the control of silver birch we were reminded that lowland heath is very much a managed landscape where silver birch will colonise easily as a pioneer species.

We returned to the car park before dusk fell, some of us resolving to return to hear and possibly see the nightjars.

A longer version of Gill's article appears on the PGP website.

Youngsters put nature under the microscope

The 30th of June was the day of the annual Flower Hunt, and probably the hottest day in the first official heatwave of 2025. There were concerns that heat would be too demanding for the 38 children of the reception and year one class of St Briavels school — they were to walk from school the mile to Hollyside Farm, explore the meadow and then return to school — another mile.

But we need not have worried. Their excitement and energy were amazing. In the field, they collected butterflies, moths, grasshoppers, beetles and a brilliant green spider — many to be secured in the keep nets. In the water troughs a newt and many efts were fished out of the spring water.

This year an addition to our equipment was a microscope provided by Martin Morris, who had also set up the moth traps the previous evening. The microscope added a new dimension to the "Hollyside Experience" and intrigued many of the children.

After an hour-and-a-half of exploring, the children gathered in the shade of the walnut tree and Martin summarised "the catch!" Highlights were the Marbled White butterflies, a ghostly white Swallowtail moth and a vibrant pink and green Elephant Hawk moth. The children were an enthusiastic audience and quick to ask questions.

After their lunch, sitting on the hay bales in the barn, the children headed back to school before the intense afternoon heat. All made it safely back after an adventure which I know, having talked with previous participants of the Flower Hunt over the years, will remain an important and happy memory. As their teacher said: "This is the way to educate our children." Thanks, once again, to Jean Green for her preparation and hospitality.

URSULA WILLIAMS