

MONMOUTHSHIRE MEADOWS GROUP

Aim - To conserve and enhance the landscape by enabling members to maintain, manage and restore their semi-natural grasslands and associated features.

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Membership

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Chairman's farewell.

By Diana Bevan

It is hard to believe that 5 years have passed since the inception of the society in early 2003. Suffice to say we have been very lucky in the people who helped to start the society and the committee, which has worked very effectively together throughout this period. We have learnt a lot in that time and have been helped by numerous bodies including Gwent Wildlife Trust, AONB and particularly the Parish Grassland Project who inspired us at the outset.

It has been a privilege to have worked with so many professional and amateur botanists on the committee, including Caroline Howard, Steph Tyler, Adrian Wood, Dave Green, Gemma Bodé, Stephanie Poulter and Maggie Biss. I was also delighted when Trevor Evans agreed to be our president. Behind the scenes

would also like to thank Bill Howard's efforts as treasurer and manager of the hay-making GWT arrangements and Jill Featherstone's work helping Maggie to put the newsletters together. I have enjoyed meeting our members at the Meadows

remain static so I am resigning. Stephanie Tyler is your new chairman and I am sure she will enjoy the job as much as I have. It has been a privilege to have been chairman for these first exciting years and I leave the committee with some regret, but I



Wyewood project

Group meetings, at surveys and work parties and have been grateful to the speakers who have given such lively talks at our AGM and autumn meetings.

At the start of the Meadows Group, I had no idea how far we might go and was amazed by the public response to the Open Days. The fact that we have featured in numerous publications, hosted the launch by Carwen Jones, (Assembly Member for the Environment), of a book about sustainable projects and been featured on the TV programme, The Nature of Britain, all highlight the success we have achieved.

I have been chairman for five years and we have agreed that it is not good for a committee to

am confident that the new team will do a great job.

Chairman's Update.

By Stephanie Tyler

It is with some trepidation that I agreed to take on the Chair of the Meadows Group. Until the last AGM Diana had been at the helm since the Group's formation and had worked hard to make the Group a success. We have over 60 members with over 400 acres of land, much of it of great conservation importance, and we have helped many of you with advice, with surveys of your plants, with hay-cutting or with acquiring grants to fence land so that grazing can be resumed, to lay hedges or to cut bracken or

hay. There are however, challenges ahead – we must maintain membership, raise funds but first and foremost continue to help members manage their fields sympathetically for plants, insects, birds and other wildlife. Last year we did have some problems meeting members' aspirations at hay-cutting time, largely because of the wet summer. We aim to do better this year.

John Harper's report in this newsletter about our ignoring invertebrates' needs when managing for wildflowers is very timely. We must strive to manage our fields for the whole range of biodiversity from ants to orchids. That odd rough patch doesn't matter – it is an excellent refuge for spiders and other small creatures. The surveys of moths and butterflies and other invertebrates that we have organised on some fields will help highlight the importance of grassland for these groups and show what their management needs are.

While we are focussed on maintaining and improving known species rich meadows there is another approach: to take a large area of agricultural land and slowly restore it to richness and to create important corridors between wildlife sites.

Consequently for me, the best news in recent months was the successful acquisition of the former Glyn Farm land (now known as Wyewood Common) at Penallt by the Gwent Wildlife Trust. Over time the wildlife interest of this former agriculturally improved dairy farm will gradually improve and we will eventually see a diversity of grassland flowers, birds and insects on what is now a rye-grass monoculture. The adjacent wonderful hay meadows of the GWT Pentwyn Farm Reserve next door will help speed up the process by providing an important source of seed.

We hope to be contacting many of you over the coming weeks to arrange repeat visits to see how

the plants in your fields are faring and to find out if you have any particular problems that still need resolving.

Wyewood Common

By Gemma Bodé

Many of you will know of Gwent Wildlife Trust's campaign to try and raise the money to buy just over 100 acres of land being sold by Glyn Farm, Penallt. Since a Public Meeting was held in Pelham Hall back in October to discuss our aspirations, we have been very busy fundraising. We are thrilled to announce our successful acquisition of the land. We have a vision to re-create Wyewood Common, which will contrast with, yet also complement, the ancient field system on our existing nature reserve of Pentwyn Farm, right next door.

This great achievement for Gwent Wildlife Trust is thanks to the help of so many people, including many from the local community in Penallt. We have even attracted support from two high-profile conservationists, Bill Oddie and Iolo Williams. As well as donations from hundreds of individuals, we have also had substantial grants from a range of funding bodies, including the Wye Valley AONB, Countryside Council for Wales and the Tubney Charitable Trust.

We now have to work hard over the long-term to create wildlife habitat on this land. For our wildlife to survive in a changing climate there needs to be a strong network of wildlife habitat stretching from the uplands of Gwent, through the Usk Valley and across to the Wye Valley and the Forest of Dean beyond. Wyewood Common will be an important part of this network. We hope our work will eventually prove even more important in stimulating habitat creation throughout the rest of the area.

Gwent Wildlife Trust's vision for Wyewood Common is of a species-rich wood-pasture landscape, awash with flowers, insects, birds and bats. This wood-pasture landscape hung on widely across the Trellech Ridge from prehistoric times, but it was finally lost to agricultural enclosure or commercial conifer planting in the last 250 years. The purchase connects the wildflower meadows of Pentwyn Farm to the nearby Wye Valley woodland, allowing species the space to move and thrive.

We have a detailed plan for the future of the site with a framework for habitat creation mapped out for decades to come. The change will be slow at first, but we will continue to farm the land, with organic conversion planned. This year and next, we need a grazier or tenant to take silage cuts, and with preferably organic stock, to help start the process of reducing the soil fertility to natural levels which will support more wildflowers. We also hope to sow a wild bird cover crop, and some areas of organic cereals. We expect to start the main tree-planting in selected parts of the site in winter 2009/10, and eventually we would like to see about a fifth of the site being woodland.

Species that we hope will benefit include many of Britain's rarest and most threatened species, such as the green-winged orchid, spreading bellflower, lesser horseshoe bat, dormouse, harvest mouse, hawfinch, spotted flycatcher, rugged oil-beetle and the wood white butterfly.

Gwent Wildlife Trust is planning an event for the local community at Wyewood Common in the Summer. In the meantime, if you are keen to be involved in this exciting project we are looking for voluntary site wardens that can give a little bit of time to help with a range of tasks, from practical management to looking out for wildlife. If you are interested, or

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have any questions, please contact Lauri MacLean at Gwent Wildlife Trust on 01600 740600.

Manitoba tall grass prairie

By Ann Robinson

We set off in late September for a month in Manitoba. Winnipeg, the capital, sits just beyond the Canadian shield and at the start of the endless prairies. It is a long way from anywhere much.

Near our son's house we explored Assiniboine Forest, a 700 acre semi wild area of aspen forest in the suburbs. Here we saw the remnants (11 acres) of 'Tall Grass Prairie'. We were intrigued and longed to learn more about this type of meadow. We were determined to set out from the suburbs to explore.

In one of our guide books there was a short and cryptic reference to 'The Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve' near the US border at Tolstoi. On a fall day so typical of Canada, crisp, sunny, dark blue sky with powder puffs of little clouds we set out, armed with plenty of sandwiches and water, since we did not expect to find any facilities for the next couple of hours as we drove through vast farmlands.

Tolstoi is very small, just a cluster of tumble down houses. The only building of note is the magnificent St. Michael's Ukrainian church, a silver palace with fairy turrets glinting in the bright sun. Tolstoi had been settled by Ukrainians at the end of the 19th century, but they found the land rough and difficult. Fields are littered with the enormous stones which proved barriers to effective large scale farming and the drainage was poor. The bad luck of the Ukrainians has turned into the good luck for the Tall Grass Prairie.

We turned onto a dirt road and found a parking lot which looked as though it must be the entry to

the preserve. There was one car in the lot and we guessed it might be a ranger. We saw no one. After eating our lunch we set out on the 'trail' which was well marked. Although all the flowers were long dead by October the neat little labels clearly showed that the meadows through which we wandered had been a riot of colour in July. The prairie is rich



Manitoba tall grass prairie

in species – it is not just long waving grass. In fact it is about 75% grass cover and 25% forbs or wildflowers. There are approximately 30 species of grass and over 300 different wildflowers.

The Tall Grass Prairie is very special, but only about 0.5% of it remains today. Man has done a good job of habitat destruction in Canada. The Tall Grass Prairie appears where the Canadian shield ends and the flat prairie land begins. As the prairie stretches westward towards the Rockies the composition of the flora changes, the grasses becoming progressively shorter. The main range of Tall Grass is in the Red River valley. The preserve in the Tolstoi region is strictly speaking Tall Grass Aspen Parkland.

The striking thing about the Tall Grass Prairie is the presence of the Big Blue Stem (*Andropogon*

gerardii), which grows up to 1-2 metres above ground and has a mesh like root system which can be up to 4 metres deep. Some sources claim that the roots extend 7 metres during a period of drought. The extensive root system enables the grass to withstand both drought and fire. Other rare grasses supplement the sward. There are also rare

plants including the Western Prairie. Fringed Orchid; a population of some 1,000 of which is found near Tolstoi. It is the largest population in North America. One year over 20,000 flowering plants were counted. This orchid is pollinated by the Hawk Moth, which has a large enough proboscis to enter the flowers. Animals include deer, elk, moose, bear, some wolves and even the occasional cougar.

The preserve now comprises about 8,000 acres. Management is undertaken by two biological staff and one ranger, with some student help. The meadows are constantly threatened by the encroachment of trees and by invasive non-native plants. The main management tools are controlled burns and some grazing. There is little in the way of volunteer labour but once a year the Manitoba Naturalists Society comes out to pull out

leafy spurge. Some help is also provided by the US Nature Conservancy, which assists with the large-scale burns which, ideally, are done on each area every three to five years.

As we walked around we saw no signs of human activity. We concluded that the ranger must be far away. We were wrong. As we left we wrote our names in the visitors books and added the MMG website address. Some weeks later Laura Reeves (one of the biologists) e-mailed Maggie. Laura had been sitting under a tree writing her newsletter and listening to our musings about the difficulties of managing such a large enterprise. We had thought that bison were the key to keeping an open prairie, but this area is rather boggy and they would have been infrequent visitors. We also have since learned more about the management of this wonderful enterprise, which allows Manitobans, and the world, to get some idea of what the earliest settlers saw, and destroyed.

When you see pictures of Canada as a tourist destination, you might be forgiven for thinking that it is a huge wilderness, untouched by human presence. Yet the most dreadful destruction of natural habitats has marked all but the most remote areas and continues without cease – the drilling of the Alberta oil sands being one of the most outstanding current issues. Over the past few years in Manitoba valiant efforts have been made to restore and preserve one of the most remarkable habitats in the world. The meadows, which were so easily cut down by the early settlers, once more blaze with flowers and grasses in the summer and shelter a wide range of fauna. We hope to return to Manitoba in 2008 when the floral display is at its peak.

Spiders and other 'creepy-crawlies' in your fields.

By Stephanie Tyler

As members will know John Harper is carrying out surveys of invertebrates at some of your meadows and pastures. He started in the winter months when he looked at slugs and snails, woodlice, millipedes, centipedes and arachnids - harvestmen, pseudoscorpions and spiders. He will also look at arachnids during the coming summer and insects such as click beetles, shield bugs, hoverflies and ants. The time spread is to allow different groups to be sampled most effectively since they can be recorded more easily at particular seasons. The reasons include:

- a) some aestivate and hide if the weather is hot, dry or frosty - eg. slugs and snails are best searched for in autumn, winter and spring;
- b) some must be mature adults in order to be identified - eg. winter-maturing millipedes and spiders; spring/summer-maturing millipedes and spiders; autumn-maturing harvestmen.
- c) some overwinter as eggs, larvae or pupae so the identifiable imagos need to be seen in the warmer months - eg. hover flies and most other flying insects;

John wrote in an interim report to the MMG:

"Essentially the meadows and pastures are managed for the herb layer and are devoid of shrubs and trees. This restricts the variety of invertebrates to those that can cope with the seasonal management, exposure to the weather during the winter and predators. The sparseness of cover was painfully evident during the winter searches at some sites. The vast majority of habitat management for wildlife is transfixed upon botanical interest (or tidiness!) with fields being shorn from edge to edge, leaving

few patches of rougher vegetation. Little thought is given to invertebrates and the cover that would offer some protection during the winter against adverse weather and marauding flocks of Starlings, thrushes and corvids. More frequent patches of rough vegetation would benefit invertebrates, small mammals and their avian predators."

"Since invertebrates are mobile to a varying extent, many can move to the field edges, and back again to whichever habitat is most favourable at a particular season. Thus the edges of fields (woodland edges, hedge-banks, stones, logs, etc.) have been included as well. Winged adults that may feed in meadows on nectar and pollen (eg. hoverflies) in the summer may well spend their larval stages in quite a different habitat on the edge of the field, nearby or some distance away."

In his report based upon winter observations only, John found that fields did have a few stones and logs around the edges, but noted that many more would be beneficial to increase the habitat for invertebrates, if only to make finding them more productive!

The highlights of the winter survey are noted below.

At a pasture in Lone Lane, Penallt two **money spiders**, sucked from the few small patches of matted grass, are of interest:

Lepthyphantes cristatus has previously very few county records while *Ceratinopsis stativa* is known from only one or two previous county records.

At Ty Mawr Convent, Lydart the cut and raked grassland under apple trees provided no surprises - the site should be more interesting in warmer weather when there are flowers to attract feeding hoverflies.

The wet rough pasture at Ty Mawr in the upper end of the Whitebrook Valley did produce

two interesting **money spiders**, sucked from the tangled herb-rich vegetation. There are few previous county records for *Pocadicnemis juncea* while *Sintula corniger* has only one or two previous records.

At a steep south-facing pasture at New Mills in the Whitebrook Valley much of the grassland was shorn but there were sufficient patches of matted grass around the ant mounds to suck from. This produced perhaps the most exciting find of a **harvestman** *Homalenotus quadridentatus* **new to the county and only the second for Wales**. The first had been found by the surveyor in the Black Mountains a few years ago. This is a short-legged species (unlike the more typical long-legged beasts of the autumn) that lives in the basal litter of grassland. It has four backwards-pointing spikes at the rear of the abdomen - hence the scientific name! The species is normally found in limestone grassland (commonly in the Cotswolds for example) and doesn't normally occur in the more acid grassland on sandstone as on the Trellech Plateau or in the Black Mountains.

At the hay meadows at Four Acres in Maryland much of the grassland was shorn but there were sufficient patches of matted grass in irregular depressions from which to obtain a few specimens. The **money spider** *Milleriana inerrans* has very few previous records from the county (whether the finder originally named it in error or whether it is errant in some other way is not known). A supply of stones and logs provided habitat for a rare, small and rather insignificant **ant** *Stenammas* sp. The two *Stenammas* species are difficult to identify but both are rare and there are no Welsh records plotted on the National Biodiversity Network website but this is known to be out of date. One would not normally associate hay meadows with water beetles

but seasonally flooded depressions provided a niche for three common opportunistic species.

Finally, at grazed pastures at Lower Glyn Farm, Far End, Llanishen there is a good supply of stone and log microhabitats. The find of interest was an immature **orb-web spider** *Mangora acalypha*. It is generally rare in Wales but common in the adjacent Forest of Dean. Over southern Britain as a whole it is remarkably local in distribution with dense patches shown as dots in the Spider Atlas for the Forest of Dean, the New Forest and just south-west of London but with large blank spaces in between. Heathland seems to be the common feature.

A full list of species found so far is with the MMG. If anyone wants to see this, please contact Steph Tyler (email: steph_tyler2001@hotmail.com)

Butterfly and moths survey.

Lepidoptera experts Dr Martin Anthony and Roger James will also be looking for moths and butterflies on some of your fields this spring and summer. If you believe that you have uncommon species such as Dingy Skipper or unusual moths, please contact Steph Tyler and she will try to arrange for Martin and Roger to visit your patch.

An apologia.

By Caroline Howard

The heavy, un-seasonal, rain of last August, coupled with reduced availability of the Alpine tractor, owned jointly with the Parish Grasslands scheme and operated by them, led to considerable difficulty in getting all our fields cut.

We were extremely fortunate that Ian Morgan who owns his own Alpine Tractor, came forward and

was able to make most of our hay. Unfortunately we had to prioritise and worked first in the fields where owners wanted hay made, this left one or two of our members who simply wanted grass cleared and taken away with a very late cut. We are extremely sorry.

This year Ian Morgan will be responsible for most of our hay making. We have renegotiated with Parish Grasslands, who are training a new tractor driver, and will do the work on fields closest to their side of the Wye. A wet May may lead to a fine August. Please make sure you send in completed management request forms, in good time. Caroline Howard

Dates for your diary

Open Day - June 8th, see attached leaflet.

Teona Dorrien-Smith – **Sunday, June 22nd** - visit to view her project, work party and picnic.

A fun visit to Cleeve Hill, Cheltenham - **Sunday June 29th** - see interesting limestone flora, spectacular views and have a fund raising picnic

A lunchtime picnic and visit to Northridge House meadows, Usk Road, Shirenewton - **Sunday July 8th** – please note it has a stream which is fun for the children.

Ty Mawr Convent - **Sunday 20th July** – work party to clear bottom pasture.

GWT newly acquired Wyeswood Common - Open Days will be on - **10th, 17th, 24th May and 4th June** at 2.30pm each day.

Hope you can come to some of these great events!
Telephone Maggie on 01989 750740 for more information