

## 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.

### Contents

1. Chairman's update
2. Springs, Flushes, Marshes and Bogs.
3. Summer Picnic on Cleeve Common.
4. Hay Making 2008
5. Visit to Poland 2007
6. Surveying for the illusive brown banded carder bee

### Membership

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### Chairman's update.

By Stephanie Tyler

Spring and summer have been busy for MMG Committee members – organising the Open Day and the exhibit at Monmouth Show, applying for grants, carrying out numerous surveys, work tasks and hay-cutting. We have surveyed plants at the fields of 12 new members from Crickhowell to Caerphilly and found or were shown some gems – Greater Burnet, Dyer's Greenweed and Harebells at a site near Earlswood, Bitter Vetch and Betony on the Kymin, a wonderful area of Wild Daffodils at Llanishen, two areas of species-rich grassland at Glascoed and a field that is being restored from a bramble patch on Cwmcarn Hill that still has Meadow Saffron or Autumn Crocus. We have also re-surveyed plants at about 20 sites that were surveyed two to four

years ago. This was to see if the diversity of plants was still there. We were, in the main, pleasantly surprised with the repeat surveys. Good management had retained most, if not all the species recorded previously and in several instances we found, or the owner reported, new plants, for example Green-winged Orchids at a site on Cwmcarn Hill. At only one site was there a real deterioration, partly because of bracken encroachment but because an interesting wet depression had been infilled and its wetland plants ousted (please see the article on the importance of wetlands within grasslands in this newsletter). My thanks to Dave Green and Caroline Howard

sprayer but beware that it kills other ferns too so is best used only on dense stands of bracken. There will be a charge for spraying but costs may be claimed for from Flora Locale (please contact us for advice). Crushing, knocking and pulling remain the best options for small areas.

Some members have had the good fortune to have their fields surveyed for moths and butterflies by Martin Anthony and Roger James, for spiders and some other invertebrates by John Harper and for bumble-bees by Rob Bacon. John has found a number of county rarities and Rob has turned up at one site a rare bumble-bee *Bombus humilis*.



for helping me with surveys.  
**Bee Orchid. Cleeve Common.**

Bracken is still a problem at several sites but MMG has purchased a sprayer and a supply of Asulox, a herbicide that mainly kills only Bracken. This year two sites have been sprayed and next year we hope to do more. Please let us know if you need the

Our two ponies have had problems with becoming allergic to midge bites but Steph Poulter has spent hours giving them trial injections to try to overcome this problem. They have been put to good conservation use at sites around Trellech, at New Mills, at

the wet pasture at Tymawr Convent, on the Kymin and at Penallt. Because of rising costs of transporting them to sites, of insurance and foot-trimming, we are hoping that members who have them for a few weeks may make a donation towards these costs. Our thanks go to those who have already done so, to Jerry and Ann Kavanagh for some superb photos of them grazing their land, and to Alan and Steph Poulter for transporting them and overseeing their welfare.

The Open Day in June was a great success. New Grove Farm belonging to Peter & Pam Lloyd, fields at Northridge House, near Shirenewton, owned by Ann & Michael Robinson, Ida Dunn's lovely Greater Butterfly Orchid meadow at Maryland and the grounds at Penallt Old Church all offered much of interest. As well as showing meadows and their associated wildlife to members of the public and MMG members, we are helping draw attention to the importance of these sites as well as raising money for the Group's work from the modest entrance fees and from Pam Lloyd's welcome teas and cold drinks (yes, we did have hot, sunny weather for the Open Day). Thanks go to all the many people who manned stands on the day and to Maggie Biss for organising the leaflets and publicity. If you would like to help next year we will be glad to hear from you. Work tasks – at Tymawr, at Red House Farm, at Penallt Old Church and Trellech Barn field - have not unfortunately been very well-attended but next year we hope to advertise them better. They can be fun so do consider coming along and helping, even if only for an hour. The other social event was a wonderful afternoon and evening organised by Bill and Caroline Howard on Cleeve Common in Gloucestershire. Those few members who did come to this event were rewarded by lovely weather, superb

limestone grassland flowers and a great barbeque. Mention must be made too of our attendance at the Monmouth Show. Maggie Biss, Bill Howard and Pam Lloyd worked hard to come up with a splendid new banner for the Group and a new display. We are immensely grateful to Ray Armstrong for allowing us to use some of his excellent photos for the latter. Our stand at the show was well-attended and generated a lot of interest. Thanks to all who helped man the stall, notably Maggie Biss, Amanda Copp, Bill and Caroline Howard, Steph Poulter and Sue Hassell.

We have also been active in applying for grants to help us help you with management of your fields. Bill Howard has been the lead person on this as well as on trying to organise hay-cutting for member in what turned out to be another atrocious wet hay season. Bill and I also met Ivy Berkshire from Flora Locale to explore ways in which this national organisation with funds for meadow management could help our Group. Bracken control and spreading wild flower seed to re-establish species-rich grassland were their favoured options. If any member wants to apply directly then please do so, or where we have helped with bracken control, we could apply on your behalf. Finally the newsletters would not be created without members' contributions and the hard work put in by Jill Featherstone and Maggie Biss in editing and producing it.

**Springs, Flushes, Marshes and Bogs.**

By Steph Tyler

Some member of MMG are lucky enough to have spring lines, wet flushes (where water rich in minerals seeps to the surface) or marshy or boggy areas in your fields. (A marsh is mineral-rich whereas a bog occurs on acidic

soils). These wet areas are very valuable for plants and other wildlife and significantly add to the biodiversity of the fields. Plant-hunting in these wet patches is always rewarding. Plant such as Kingcup or Marsh Marigolds – a lovely sight in the spring, the attractive deep pink flowers of Ragged Robin, the vivid blue of Water Forget-me-not, the strange Marsh Pennywort and many sedges all may occur in these wet areas. The damp soil means that various invertebrates also flourish and then birds may feed there. The wet areas of a field are just where the adult Lapwings lead their chicks for food as well as for cover. So, if you have any wet area in your meadow, be glad of it and safeguard it. The odd wet hollow is exactly where you should not tip hardcore or other material and where you should not be tempted to make a pond. It already has much existing value.

**Summer Picnic on Cleeve Common.**  
By Caroline Howard

The meadows Group was invited to visit Wheelers SSSI a private meadow and woodland next to Cleeve Common in the Cotswolds above Cheltenham. Bill and I arrived, laden with food and drink, in the afternoon of a breezy, July Sunday. White cirrus were wheeling across the sky with Larks burbling as they dived above us. The first to join us were Katie Critchley and her two beautiful red-haired daughters, who live near Pershore. The girls immediately began to play the identification game, where they received a token for every correct answer, of which they gave so many that they eventually shared the prize. They were certainly able to distinguish between the scented, pyramidal and bee orchids with which this beautiful limestone SSSI abounds. Then the Woods, Tylers, and Allens (with boys)

arrived – and the identifications became more serious with this handful of brilliant botanists. Steph and Elsa soon disappeared over the horizon in search of the now increasingly rare Frog Orchid *Coeloglossum viride*. It was a very happy afternoon and at about 5, Lyns and Bill went down the hill to the wood, to light the cooking fire and crack the first bottle. They nobly grilled all the carefully marinated meat and vegetarian skewers, tossed the salads and opened enough bottles for everyone. When we all trooped down, the delicate scent of the fragrant orchids was replaced by the tantalising smells of food cooked over a well-managed ash wood fire. The evening ended with strawberries and cream and one of Elsa's magnificent rum and chocolate deserts. More rum, chocolate and skill than anything else. We are invited again next year. There are more plants to find and more prizes to be won. The generosity of the Adlard family who welcomed us to this wonderful place, is very gratefully acknowledged. It was a rare treat. Thank you.

### Hay Making 2008.

By Bill Howard

Eleven members signed the machinery hire form to get their hay cut. About 50% wanted the hay for their own animals or they had some contact who needed it and 50% wanted to sell the hay in order to defray expenses. We have involved four contractors, John Childs and the Alpine tractor managed by the Parish Grasslands Project, Ian Morgan the contractor at Llanishen that we used last year, Mark Prothero who has big machinery and a new contractor Vernon-Dier who is based near Raglan. The weather deteriorated from mid July with a small window in August which gave time to make haylage but not hay. There may

still be a chance of making hay in September. Apparently mixed species grassland can still make useful nutritious hay if cut late in the season.

At Monmouth show we advertised a hay database asking people who wanted to buy hay to let us know. The response has been encouraging with a demand for 530 bales from 9 respondents. Members may want to know what to do if they can't cut the hay and the answer is adopt one of the following courses:

- Leave it until next year
- Cut it and carry it off so as to avoid building up the fertility with a mulch of grass clippings
- Let animals in to graze it

Let us hope that next year we have better weather.

### Visit to Poland 2007.

By Ann Robinson

In June 2007 a party of MMG members and friends set off on a tour of Poland, organised by Anna Macaig.

We left Bristol early on a June morning in torrential rain. It was with enormous pleasure, and not a little relief from the start of a terrible summer, that we gathered in the bright sunshine of Krakow's main square for a lunch in the sun. After a short interlude of urban tourism in this most beautiful of cities, we set off for the Pieniny National Park. Poland has 22 National Parks, but in less than two weeks we were able to visit only three of them.

The Pieniny Park is a limestone area with beech woods similar to the Wye Valley and has some of the best hay meadows in Europe. We started with walks in the woods which are home to a wide variety of wild flowers including Martagon Lilies, many varieties of

orchid – including a very beautiful large dark red helleborine – yellow foxgloves, mountain larkspurs, campanulas and three different wintergreens. Next we climbed up to the ruined Niedzica castle. There we were lucky to see in flower the Yellow Treacle Mustard *Erysimum piennicum* which is endemic to this location. Having enjoyed the magnificent view over the Dunajec river to the distant Tatra mountains we later rafted down the gorge. At our destination we enjoyed a delicious lunch of local trout before departing for Zakopane, one of Poland's chief mountain resort centres for the Tatras.

From Zakopane we took several mountain expeditions starting in the lower areas used for grazing and hay made in the traditional fashion. The hay, once dry, is stacked on wooden poles with sticking out arms into smallish domed shapes held in place with plaited fibre. The stacks vary slightly in size and construction from area to area. The Poles have made the upper slopes of the mountains very accessible by creating well marked paths made up from huge stones. After an hour or two of these stones, however, one begins to long for something either smoother or more rugged as the stones are hard work. The locals were out in force, it being a major holiday period. But, as is usual in the mountains, the farther up you go the fewer the people you meet and the more delicate and rare is the flora.

One of our walks started with a horse drawn ride to a large mountain hut by a lake with a beautiful view. From this lake, 'the Eye of the Sea', we continued to the snowline at the 'Black Lake' below the highest summit of Rysy at 2655 meters. All the way up the wooded lower slope, we had passed great clumps of Willow Gentians *Gentiana asclepiadea* which must have been fantastic when in

flower later in the summer.. Around the lake fringes, among many different shrubs and plants, we saw Spotted Gentians *Gentiana punctata*, Variegated Monkshood *Aconitum variegatum*, Alpine Knotgrass *Polygonum alpinum*, a very pretty relative of Solomon's seal (*Streptopus amplexifolius*) and a false helleborine, not 'album' or 'nigrum' but *Veratrum toxicum*, which we were assured was extremely poisonous although very attractive! On the way down some of our party spotted a brown bear.

Following several days of mountain scenery, hay making and flowers in Zakopane, we took a train from Krakow to Warsaw from where we were driven to the Kampinos Park. It is the largest national park next to a city in Europe being only 20 minutes drive from the centre of Warsaw. Kampinos is quite different from the mountains being mostly flat but with sand dunes of several hundred metres. We stayed on a small farm which has been in the same family for three

generations. Johanna Grootings transformed it into the most successful private Polish Arab stud and then into an Agrotourism centre with accommodation in the eleven former stallion boxes, the rooms named after her Arab show champions and race winners and their full pedigree displayed on the walls.

The park has wonderful flowers and wild life. There are 1245 species of plants and animals include elk, lynx and beaver. We came upon one particularly beautiful area absolutely full of lily of the valley which, when out carpeting the forest floor in white and giving off a heavy scent, must have been a spectacular sight in bloom. To get to this part of the park we had walked through a little swamp where the rangers had kindly provided a boardwalk to make passage possible. It was at this point that some of our party spotted wild boar.

The weather was not so kind to us in Kampinos as it had been in

the mountains. We spent one day in the minibus as tourists and this proved of great interest. We visited the Radzwill's estate where the house and contents were miraculously preserved through German occupation and Soviet control. After this we went to Arkadia, which was established as a Polish equivalent to the English landscape garden on the Stowe model with follies dotted around a lake – an example of how the mania for this type of landscape penetrated far into Europe.

The morning of our last full day was spent in Warsaw where we did the tourist thing and visited the old town, entirely reconstructed from its second world war destruction. The castle contains a room full of 22 paintings by Bellotto which give a good idea of what the old city had looked like and proved invaluable to those engaged in its reconstruction. We took the train back to Krakow passing miles and miles of productive farmland. Farming in this central region is all done in large strip like fields – a great contrast to the smaller fields in the mountains.

Poland is poised between old style country ways with traditional haymaking and wildflower meadows and modern farming and construction – in some country areas one scarcely sees a house older than a few years. Wood is being replaced by concrete and tiles. But walk a few hours up the mountain or through the woods of the Kampinos and flowers and wild life are still there in profusion to delight the eye.



Hay Making in Poland

**Surveying for the illusive brown-banded carder bee**  
By Rob Bacon

For those of you who haven't met me this summer, I have been working for the Wye Valley AONB unit as part of a training scheme

paid for by the Heritage Lottery Fund. My responsibilities for this summer have been surveying the AONB for bumblebees and veteran trees.

Regular sightings of bumblebees in the garden are often misconstrued as indicating that bumblebees on the whole are maintaining their numbers. Sadly this is not the case and of the 22 species of bumblebee, only 6 are common. As with a lot of wildlife, the threats facing bumblebees are a result of agricultural intensification and urbanisation of the landscape, which has already seen the extinction of 2 species in the UK since the onset of the Second World War (a third species also went extinct in the UK in 1864).

Salisbury Plains and populations of *B. humilis* are now thought to be stabilising (Benton, 2006).

Locally, the brown-banded carder bee has been recorded in and around Llanfihangel Tor-Y-Mynydd churchyard at Star Hill and if you wish to see the species, workers can be found there from July through until mid-September. It bears a considerable resemblance to one of the common species of bumblebees *Bombus pascuorum* also known as the 'common carder bumblebee' however *B. humilis* has no black hairs in the abdomen unlike *B. pascuorum*.

During the course of my study I have also found other species including *Bombus terrestris*, *B.*

establish their nests above ground. Some suggest that the availability of suitable nesting habitat is possibly limiting the extent of bumblebees. A suitable nesting habitat for *B. humilis* is tall grassland with a relatively open sward exposed to the sun and an abundant supply of leaf litter and moss at ground level. Bumblebees also need a constant supply of foraging plants to establish and sustain the colony. *B. humilis* in particular requires flower rich grassland with continuous nectar and pollen sources from mid-May to the latter half of September (Benton, 2006). Being a long-tongued species, *B. humilis* likes flowering plants with a long corolla such as clovers and vetches.

I will be producing a full report on the survey and some management guidelines for landowners who wish to encourage *B. humilis* by December. However, if you are interested in learning more in the meantime please get in touch with me on 01600 710847 or at [robbacon@wyevalleyaonb.org.uk](mailto:robbacon@wyevalleyaonb.org.uk).



**Bombus pratorum**

There are currently five species of bumblebee on the UK Biodiversity Action Plan one of which is *Bombus humilis* also known as the 'brown-banded carder bee' due to a deep coloured band of ginger hairs in the thorax. In recent decades *B. humilis* has undergone a major decline in its distribution with most populations currently found on extensive regions of grassland along the southern and western coasts of England and Wales. There are however still some inland populations most notably on the

*lucorum*, *B. lapidarius*, *B. hortorum*, *B. pratorum*, *B. rupestris*, *B. campestris* and *B. vestalis* (the last three are cuckoo species which parasitize the nests of social bumblebees). The jewel in the crown was a specimen of *B. humilis* found in Penallt.

Bumblebees need suitable habitats for all phases of their lifecycles, namely; hibernation, nesting, foraging and mating. The carder bumblebees (including *B. humilis* and *B. pascuorum*)