

## MONMOUTHSHIRE MEADOWS

**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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### From the Chair.

By Stephanie Tyler

There is not a lot to report on activities since the last newsletter except for our great success in raising funds – see below – and your committee being busy organising the spring meeting and the summer Open Day.

**The Open Day on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> June** will include six widespread sites. For a change we are not including any meadows on the Trellech Plateau; instead we are looking at sites mainly to the north and west of Monmouth. Two farms sympathetic to wildlife - Red House Farm west of The Hendre and Little Mill Farm near Newcastle - will be open to visitors thanks to Teona Diorien-Smith and Ann Eggleton. Jill Featherstone's interesting field at

Llanvapley, Glynis Law's meadow alongside the drive to the house, Jill & Dave Pollock's small bank in their garden at Mitchel Troy Common and Jeremy Harris's and Clare Adamson's wildflower meadow and orchard and their newly acquired field at Hollow Ash near Broadoak are the other sites. Tea will be available. We have produced a leaflet for the Open Day which Maggie Biss has designed and seen through the printing process.



*Hollow Ash meadow – photo J Harris*

**Fund-raising** this winter has been very successful. We reported in the last newsletter on our successful application to the Countryside Council for Wales for tractor and trailer repairs and a new cutter, thanks to Bill Howard. Since then Tidy Local Communities through Monmouthshire County Council has awarded us £1,010 for website development, printing costs of posters and leaflets for the Open Day and for some hand tools. This body did not give us the money we needed for training volunteers to drive the tractor but Bill Howard applied to Tidy Towns

for this training money and that funding has now been secured. Well done Bill.

**Work tasks.** The first of three work tasks was scheduled for 21<sup>st</sup> February in the Whitebrook Valley, clearing brambles from remnant grassland in an overgrown pasture recently bought by Sarah Cheese and family. Unfortunately fresh snow and ice deterred all but one volunteer. Bill Howard and Sarah worked for several hours cutting back brambles and eventually I managed to drive our car up Lone Lane to briefly join them. Earlier attempts had failed.

At the time of my writing this, we completed two more work tasks scheduled at Ty Mawr and Sarah Cheese's despite dodging the weather.

Thanks to Flora Locale we have £250 for bramble-cutting on members' fields this winter. That is equivalent to one day's work by a contractor. The work was to have been carried out on 16<sup>th</sup> February at three sites but of course it snowed again that day making access hazardous. Thankfully, Ian Morgan has now managed to complete all three sites.

### **Website**

Thanks to Jerry Kavanagh we now have our own website and Amanda Copp and Maggie Biss have been busy putting material onto the site. Do take a look at it. If you sign up you can place messages on the Forum. See Amanda's article below.

**Hay Making 2010**

By Bill Howard

In December we purchased a mower, which gives us a complete set of equipment for hay making. We will not be able to cut hay on steep slopes with this tractor. The tractor and the hay making equipment are kept at the Gwent Wildlife Trust's barn at Pentwyn. Tim Green, GWT's Farm and Wildlife Development Officer, is in day-to-day charge of the tractor. He will use it for topping and hay making on the Trust's fields and will help us with our hay making programme. In addition we are training three tractor drivers at Usk college.

Over the last three months we have obtained money from CCW (£2793), Tidy Local Communities (£1010) and Keep Wales Tidy (£600). With the CCW we bought the mower, repaired the tractor and a GWT trailer; with the Tidy Local Communities money we have purchased hand tools for hay making: scythes, rakes and pitch forks, paid for the development of a website and for printing leaflets and posters for the open day. With the Keep Wales Tidy money we will train three people in tractor driving. As well as the tractor, bailer and tedder, Parish Grasslands Project have given us £845 from the machinery ring account as severance money to compensate us for not having use of the alpine tractor.

This year we plan to cut hay on about 10 members' fields using our tractor. We will be charging the current rates for this. With the development of the web site and use of the trailer we should be able to help members defray their expenses by selling hay. If you want us to cut your hay or top your field please get in touch with me

**Bug Life Walk at Penallt**

By Steph Tyler

Last winter Ivy Berkshire of Flora Locale, a Welsh conservation group concerned with safeguarding flower-rich grassland, contacted the Meadows Group to ask if we could 'supply' a site for a Buglife walk in May. Buglife is a charity aimed at raising the profile of and conserving the huge range of invertebrates in Britain. In the event, Buglife held the meeting on a beautiful hot, sunny May afternoon at a six acre pasture owned by Stephanie & Lindsay Tyler at Penallt. About 20 people came - individuals with an interest in invertebrates and other people from a range of conservation organisations and local councils. A moth trap had been set the previous night so that there were plenty of different species of moth to look at as people first arrived. Then Matt Shardlow, Buglife's Director, led everyone up into the field, armed with nets and pooters to suck up small insects. Among the many species that were caught and identified, there were three Biodiversity Action Plan species - Dinky Skipper which was already known to be present on the south-facing pasture, the Brown-banded Bumblebee *Bombus humilis* of which a single specimen had been caught by Rob Bacon in 2007 in the pasture and another rare bumble-bee, the Red-shanked Bumblebee *Bombus ruderarius*.

Several other very scarce species were also found. The Leaden Weevil *Attactogenus plumbeus*, formerly *Cneorhinus plumbeus* was found in good numbers. Adrian Fowles, a Welsh invertebrate expert wrote to Matt after the walk 'Attactogenus was recorded from 'near Monmouth' by T. Parry (record published in 1863) and Peter Skidmore had it at Skenfrith in 2000. There are no other VC35 records. There are only four modern records of

*Attactogenus* from Wales in addition to this latest one so it is an uncommon beast - or at least difficult to find! It turned out that the weevil had also been caught at Pentwyn Farm two years before by Jeff Kirby, another expert on invertebrates. Matt reported that the Bitter Crab-spider *Xysticus acerbus* which was swept by Dolores Byrne is very rarely encountered. There appears to be only two previous Welsh records and one of these was pre 1950. It is usually an open grassland species that has been found on calcareous grassland and coastal cliffs, but also heathland and sand dunes. A particularly beautiful insect that was caught by several people was a Tortoise Beetle *Cassida vibex*. Other invertebrates captured on 30 May 2009 included Small Red Damselfly, White-legged Damselfly, the cuckoo-bee *Psithyrus campestris* that parasitizes the Common Carder Bee *Bombus pascuorum*, interesting flies such as the Picture-wing fly, Notch-horned Cleg fly and Snipe fly, many beetles - sailor beetles, cardinal beetles, a Variable Longhorn Beetle *Stenocorus meridianus*, Garden Chafers and Bracken Chafers and various leaf beetles, a lovely green weevil *Phyllobius pomaceus*, a nettle weevil, an Assassin Bug, Common Crab Spiders *Xysticus cristatus* and various other spiders. All that in just an hour or two in one afternoon! It shows just how many invertebrates may live in our fields through the year.



Ringlet on Clover - photo - J Harris

### Shirenewton Meadows

By Julian Branscombe  
Ex - Chief Executive,  
Gwent Wildlife Trust

The work of the Shirenewton & Mynyddbach Fields Association is the most exciting community-led conservation project that I've seen. Wonderful benefits to the local community have been secured by saving this superb wildlife habitat, next to the primary school and between the two villages. Beyond the enormous value of the work which will be done to engage local people with local wildlife, I want to stress the wildlife value of this land, and its place in the wider landscape.

The fields are a good example of flower-rich grassland. 150 years ago, fields full of cowslips, knapweed and orchids were found throughout the countryside, within walking distance of every village and farmhouse. The drive for more food-productivity combined with the advent of the tractor and chemical herbicides and pesticides led to the loss of over 95% of these grasslands in the 40 years after the Second World War. These losses have continued since, thanks to building development, further agricultural intensification and – in some instances – a lack of management where traditional extensive grazing or hay-cutting has stopped, leading to coarse grasses and scrub coming to dominate.

Flower-rich meadows such as those between Shirenewton and Mynyddbach are a priority habitat in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. These fields also deserve protection as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. They are nationally important. However, that designation has not been secured, so the work of the Association in securing community ownership and good management of these fields is absolutely vital.

The fields teem with wild-flowers. The diversity of plants, birds, insects and other wildlife is especially high, given the diversity of habitat in this small area. There are fantastic areas of dry flower-rich grassland, which merges into areas of damp rushy and sedgy grassland, full of ragged robin and yellow iris. The fields have got the second highest total of butterflies for any site in Gwent, and now that the land is owned by the Association, naturalists are queuing up to study and list the moths, freshwater-life, small mammals and all other aspects of its biodiversity.

The land is priceless in itself as a wildlife asset. It is even more important when considered as a part of a Living Landscape. The land is one of the headwaters of the Mouton Brook – species such as otters will hunt up and down the length of the brook, favouring areas such as this where there is cover and food such as frogs alongside the streams. The thick hedges may well be home to dormice – Gwent Wildlife Trust volunteer, Keith Allen, is to conduct a survey for dormice with the local schoolchildren this summer. Gwent is a stronghold of the dormouse, and areas like this with good scrubby cover in field corners and along hedges are the secret to their continuing success across our countryside. Furthermore, the grassland habitat itself forms one of a series of stepping stones of wildlife habitat across Monmouthshire, along with Gwent Wildlife Trust nature reserves, roadside verges, green lanes, private nature reserves and areas of extensively managed farmland.

Together, these wildlife assets are what make Monmouthshire special in its current state. GWT, along with other organisations like Woodland Trust, individual landowners and community groups, are developing an Usk to Wye project, to maintain and

enhance this wildlife network. Existing habitat needs conserved and new blocks of habitat and wildlife corridors need created. The work of the Shirenewton & Mynyddbach Fields Association is central to this effort. The result will be a reversal of habitat fragmentation, creating extensive networks of habitat across Monmouthshire, offering the hope of survival for our native wildlife in the scope of a changing climate.

Shirenewton & Mynyddbach Fields Association – and the many local people who have brought this about – are all to be congratulated. What is being achieved is truly inspirational, and dramatically impressive, and vital to the future of our wildlife, and the relationship between local people and the countryside.

### 2010 MMG AGM and Dinner.

By Caroline Howard

The 2010 MMG AGM and Dinner will be held on March 25 at Llanishen village Hall at 7pm. This year we are extremely fortunate in that Jerry Tallowin has accepted our invitation to talk. He has, for some time been directing the North Wyke Research experiments at Pentwyn, and will use the analysis and information generated from that research to describe optimal management for biodiversity in our local MG5 meadows.

His talk is entitled **PLEASURE AND PROFIT IN BIODIVERSITY**, the pleasures, we know, are visual, tactile and gastronomic. The profits are environmental on a local and global scale and potentially locally financial as members including Amanda and Peter Copp, Jilly Featherstone and Sandra and John Lee have shown in the production of their wonderful lamb, pork and beef. Grazing will not be central to Jerry's talk but he has said that he will be delighted to answer any

questions. He has been involved with Research at Bristol University on flavour in meat raised on biodiverse grasslands, and is a great fan of the Long Horn.

This is, of course, a speciality product, although the market may well increase as we learn and publicise more about the quality, health and environmental benefits of this wonderful meat.

Recent research at Aberystwyth has shown that such meat has very high levels of essential fatty acids including Omegas 3 and 6, and conjugated linoleic acid (CLA well known to all trying to lose excess weight). It also has an extremely low carbon footprint with no ploughing, seeding or fertilisation of the sward required. Unfortunately methane production from cattle eating these diverse species is still very high, and cannot compare favourably with the lower levels produced by stock eating recently bred rye-grasses with high sugar levels.

Following this you are all invited to the MMG's delicious dinner with traditionally reared meat. Cost this year £10, to include a welcome glass of wine. Non-members £12.00.

For members wishing to attend the talk and not eat there will be no charge. Wine will be available from the bar.

We look forward very much to seeing you.

#### **BRAND NEW - MMG WEBSITE** By Amanda Copp

We are delighted to have been given a £350 grant by Monmouthshire County Council through Tidy Local Communities; this is a Project funded by the Welsh Assembly Government 'Tidy Towns' initiative and delivered in partnership with Keep Wales Tidy. The grant was to develop a website for Monmouthshire Meadows Group and this has funded the design and hosting of a new website for

us by a local website designer and member of MMG, Jerry Kavanagh.

The website is in its very early stages but can be viewed at [www.monmouthshiremeadows.co.uk](http://www.monmouthshiremeadows.co.uk) – this is open to everyone but there is also a members area for (paid up!) members of MMG. To access the members area, where you can post comments, advertise items for sale, see the latest newsletter, etc, - you can either request a password direct from the website or contact [amandacopp@monmouthshiremeadows.co.uk](mailto:amandacopp@monmouthshiremeadows.co.uk)

We would very much like feedback on the sort of information members would like to see on the website and especially how easy it was to use – please be honest – we promise not to take offence. Give the website a rating out of 10 and suggestions for improvement and we'll do our best.

If you search for Monmouthshire Meadows through Google, this search engine will still bring up the Greenweb site. Our new website will run alongside the Monmouthshire Meadows Greenweb site which will have a link to it.

#### **What should I be doing now?**

By Steph Tyler

Spring is a quiet time in grassland management provided that you cut or grazed your land last summer. All you need to do is enjoy the flowers and insects until July although brambles may need some control.

Cutting back any encroaching brambles and any work on hedges should be done before birds start nesting and do watch out for Dormice nesting in the brambles. This year many birds may nest late because of the cold weather but some Robins, thrushes and Blackbirds will be on eggs in March. Hedges need not be cut every year; try cutting

your hedge every two or three years so that there is better habitat and more food for insects and birds.

Mole-hills always raise heated discussions. If you have your field cut for hay then you do need to flatten the mole-hills before the tractor comes in. In a grazed pasture though, mole-hills are not a big problem. Cowslips and other plants germinate readily in the soil in the hills. You can always rake them off if they offend you but moles are part of the diversity of life in your grassland. The soil on the mole-hills can also be collected and used for germinating seeds in your greenhouse or garden.

If you have some uncut or ungrazed grassland then it would be worth 'knocking' the grass back by having some livestock graze in the early spring. If you cannot persuade a friendly farmer adjacent to your land to put on sheep or cattle, do contact the Meadows Group to borrow our two Exmoor Ponies. You will need to have a source of water and securely fenced land. If creating new species-rich grassland, you will need to rotivate or turn over the soil and then rake and level it before sowing seed. The Meadows Group and GWT still have a small amount of mixed wildflower seed and hay rattle seed for sale. Hay rattle seed can be scattered directly onto a raked area of grassland.



*Our Exmoors with Anne Kavanagh-  
photo J Kavanagh*

**Ty Mawr Meadow**

By Martin Suter

I took over management of this beautiful area along with all the Convent garden in 1986. The fields surrounding have been let for farming use for many years and have little of interest growing in them so the meadow in the Convent garden is even more of a gem. The species list is long but I do not have access to it at present.

Apple trees had been planted in the late 60's and received mineral fertilizer and winter wash and other sprays until about 1995. Each tree had a ring of enhanced growth round it until this was discontinued.

Earlier management had emphasised tidiness and this had resulted in cutting the vegetation too early – as soon as possible after the beginning of June. Cowslips and Hay Rattle were rare and I only knew of one plant of Rest Harrow. There was one stem of Early Purple Orchid.

Later cuts were gradually introduced from 1987 and the Cowslips and Hay Rattle prospered to become really common; the orchid has not spread but began to put up multiple stems. Early on, I noticed Twayblade growing just down the road on the verge and I brought up a seed head or two and spread the seeds; I cannot say for sure that it was not growing in the meadow before that but it seems to like it here.

Work at the Yew Tree Lydart produced the offer of some Purple Spotted Orchid plants each in its own little clod. These have settled in and become really common mainly at the east end of the Meadow.

I ceased management in about 2002 and since then a tendency has crept in to mow bits earlier - probably because by mid-July it is much less visually attractive to humans. The more I know of life the more I am convinced that tidiness is the enemy of life – except at home of course!

Leaving the vegetation to grow has resulted in a garden where the 'lawn' in May and June has better flowers than the flower beds; the whole garden looks like one mass of beauty.

**Work task at Ty Mawr Wet Pasture**  
By Steph Tyler

Despite a terrible forecast the afternoon of 28 February was mild and fine. Bill Howard turned up for the work task with a range of our new hand tools and Lindsay and Steph Tyler joined him to cut back young trees, scrub and bramble encroaching onto the wet pasture. We cleared a reasonably large patch but if only we had had three times the number of volunteers the area cleared would have been really worthwhile.



Work party at Whitebrook - photo L Tyler



Work party at Ty Mawr - photo L Tyler

**Dates for your diary**

**Spring meeting and AGM on 25<sup>th</sup> March** – 7.00pm start in Llanishen Village Hall. **Our Open Day on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> June** – leaflets out soon – we will ask you to distribute them to friends.