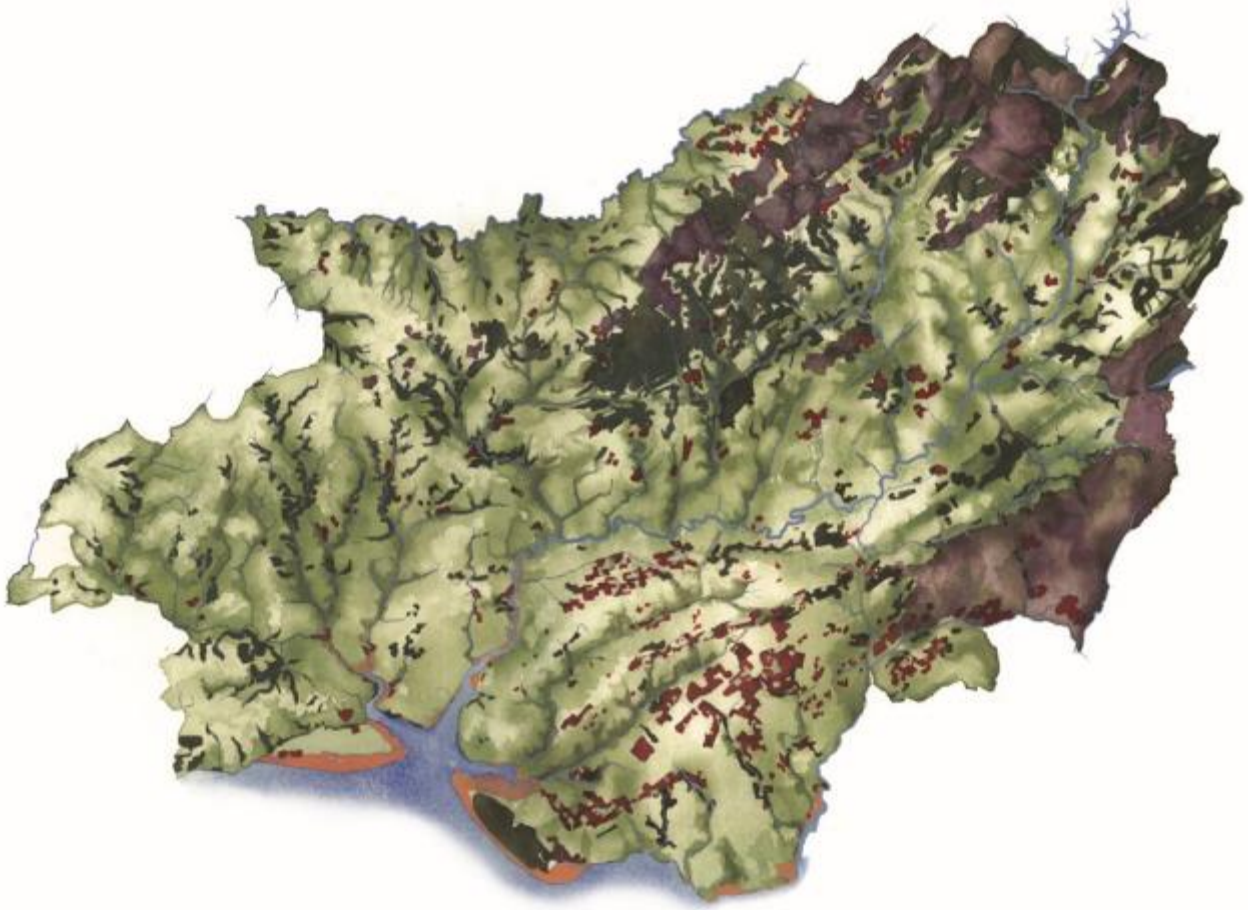
CARMARTHENSHIRE

Nature Notes

Partneriaeth Natur
SIR GÂR • CARMARTHENSHIRE
Nature Partnership

JANUARY-MARCH 2023

Carmarthenshire has some wonderful wildlife. These 'Nature Notes' are some highlights to encourage us all to take a closer look around us – even the common is special. Seen anything interesting – then why not send us a photo?



For more information about nature in the county read our Nature Recovery Plan:
carmarthenshire.gov.wales/biodiversity

Send your photos to: Biodiversity@carmarthenshire.gov.uk

Hare form

Brown Hares (*Lepus europaeus*) live in open habitats, relying on sharp senses and fast speeds (they can run at up to 70kph/45mph) to evade predators. Unlike rabbits, they do not use burrows, but make a small depression in the ground among long grass – this is known as a form. Spending most of the day on or near the form, unless disturbed like the hare here was – it shot out and across the field – they move out to feed in the open at night.

Split-gill fungus

This is the Split-gill fungus (*Schizophyllum commune*), which is found increasingly commonly on plastic-wrapped silage bales. It is also commonly found on deadwood, where it breaks down lignin. It has a global distribution, occurring anywhere with a suitable habitat, from the tropics to the Arctic. It also has unusual gills from which its name derives – they' are split, although this only becomes visible as the fruit body dries out. This is some sort of protective mechanism, which helps the fungus survive varying amounts of heat and humidity in the diverse climatic conditions where it exists.

Common Gorse

A member of the pea family, Common Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) grows in a variety of habitats, from heathlands and uplands to coastal areas and disturbed ground. It generally flowers from January to June (although it may flower sporadically throughout the year); other gorse species such as Western Gorse flower later, from July into the winter. It has sharp leaves and its distinctive flowers smell of coconut. It provides shelter and food for many insects and birds.

Tree branching

The profile of trees in winter are fascinating – the pattern of the branches and twigs can be clearly seen. But why do the branches form this way? There are many factors – internal and external, and above and below ground.

Once the tree is in leaf in spring it starts photosynthesizing – using sunlight to help generate energy for more growth each year. Tree branches will grow to maximise the number of leaves getting most light. Externally, other factors will affect the way branches grow. Gravity pulls the branches downward and the tree also needs to make a compromise between gathering light and staying stable in strong winds and also competing for space with nearby trees – not an issue for this oak. And these are just the external factors…

Mammal tunnels

New roads can cause a particular risk for wildlife as a barrier to their movement. A new road near Cross Hands has had tunnels built underneath it as part of the road construction. Evidence of success is through monitoring with wildlife cameras and here we can see that badgers are using the tunnel. Foxes and a polecat have also been recorded. Tunnels with fences to guide the animals through are an effective means of mitigating the impacts of new roads on species such as badgers, hopefully decreasing the chance of them being killed crossing the road.

Hair ice

Featured previously, but well worth highlighting again, hair ice is a type of ice that forms on dead wood and takes the shape of fine, silky hair. It forms on rotting wood, with no bark, when the air is humid, in temperatures slightly below 0°C.

In recent years scientists from Germany and Switzerland identified the fungus *Exidiopsis effusa* as key to the formation of hair ice. The fungus was found on every hair ice sample examined by the researchers and disabling the fungus with fungicide or hot water prevented hair ice formation. All living, metabolising fungi produce carbon dioxide and here this acts to push water out of wood, which would then normally just freeze as a simple crust of ice, but *E. effusa* causes this water to freeze into thin hair-like strands. Find out more: https://bit.ly/3k3yRuy

Lesser Celandine

In February the mottled dark-green, heart-shaped leaves of the Lesser Celandine (*Ficaria verna*) herald the oncoming on spring. The plant's glossy yellow flowers are one of the first to bloom in our woodlands and hedge banks.

The Lesser Celandine is a perennial plant. After flowering the leaves die back but the roots continue to live and grow under the ground. These include small tubers, which store the plant's energy until the next year.

Whilst the sight of a celandine lifts our spirits in the early spring, in parts of the USA and Canada it is listed as an invasive species – an introduced plant that harms their natural environment – not such a welcome sight!

Kidwelly Quay

Without management most ponds will eventually silt up. This is what happened here at Kidwelly Quay. In 2022, with funding from Welsh Government's Local Places for Nature grant, work was carried out to restore an area of pond. A botanical survey informed the project, and this meant that the original area to be restored was moved as it had botanical interest. Now we have an area of open water again, with a retained area of diverse, tall fen vegetation with species such as the wonderfully named Lesser Water-parsnip (*Berula erecta*), Pink Water-speedwell (*Veronica catenate*) and Celery-leaved Buttercup (*Ranunculus sceleratus*) – all wetland plants. In addition, a small area of bank was cut back and the shallow, open slope created here will encourage colonisation of plants. This mosaic of habitats should help support a wider range of wildlife.

Lungwort

Lungwort (*Pulmonaria officinalis*) is not a native species but has become naturalised and is found in lowland habitats. It is often an escapee from our gardens. Here it is growing out of a wall and providing an excellent early nectar source for bees at a time when there may be little else for them to forage on.

Grey Heron

Still and statue like this Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) is waiting patiently for prey to be in reach of its spear-like bill. Solitary birds, they spend most of their time alone, and feed on a range of prey such as fish, amphibians, reptiles, insects and small mammals. They give up their solitary life to nest together in heronries with nests clustered trees. Sometimes these can be used for many years by generations of birds. If you know of one please let us know.

Woodlice

There are about 40 species of woodlice found naturally in the UK. They are crustaceans, more closely allied to shrimps and crabs, than to insects. They are characterised by their seven pairs of walking legs. Woodlice are detritivores and make a significant contribution to decomposition and nutrient recycling. They chew decaying vegetation into small pieces. This allows rapid colonisation and decomposition by bacteria and micro-fungi – thereby indirectly speeding up the recycling of nutrients back into the soil.

Teasel

Here the tall prickly stem and conical head of the Teasel plant (*Dipsacus fullonum*) stands erect throughout winter, providing valuable food for birds, such as goldfinches. The seed heads persist long after the plants themselves have died back. The plants flower between July and August with rings of purple flowers – a magnet for bees. Found from grassland to wasteland, they also make excellent garden plants – if their ability to spread is carefully managed.

Lichens

The stone on the top of this wall is white from a layer of 'crustose' lichen which has grown radially to cover the stone. Where it has 'met' another lichen species in what looks like an open patch (yes, that is another lichen!) it has grown round it.

Crustose lichens in particular grow extremely slowly. Many grow less than 0.5mm a year, with the zone of growth restricted to the margin of the 'colony'. The nutrients essential for lichen growth come from the rock itself, and substances dissolved in rainwater.

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