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Nature Notes

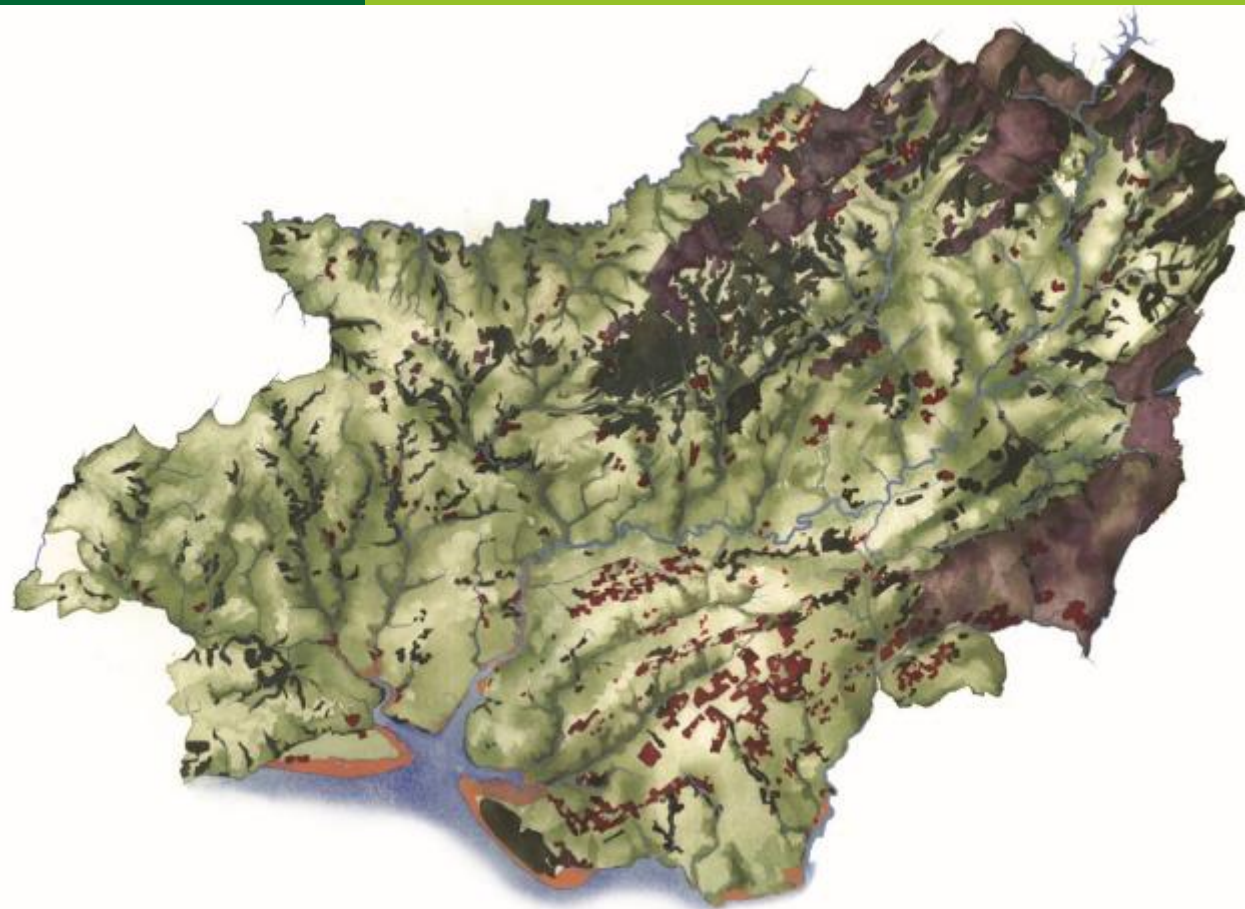
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Carmarthenshire has some wonderful wildlife. These 'Nature Notes' are some highlights to encourage us all to take a closer look around us – even the common is special. Seen anything interesting – then why not send us a photo?



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



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



Grass Snake

Grass snakes (*Natrix helvetica*) shed their skin, or moult, periodically to grow and remove parasites. The snake here was probably just about to moult (milky eyes). Male grass snakes shed twice a year, while females shed once a year before laying eggs. The snake will then rub its head against a rough object to tear open its skin. It will then crawl through tight spaces to slide out of its old skin, which will come off inside out. The process can take days to weeks.



Common Skate egg case

This large egg case may be one of a Common Skate (*Dipturus batis*). A skate egg case, also known as a "mermaid's purse", is a tough, leathery capsule that protects the eggs of skates as they develop. The common skate is also one of Britain's largest fish species. They live on sandy or muddy sea beds, down to depths of 600m. Whilst mostly feeding on crustaceans with their powerful jaws, Common Skate have the speed and manoeuvrability to species such as mackerel too. Genetic research has found that the common skate is actually two species: the Blue Skate and the Flapper Skate.



Carrion beetle

Carrion beetles (or burying beetles or sexton beetles) are important decomposers and recyclers. They bury dead and decaying animals, such as mice and small birds. The female lays her eggs on the buried body and the larvae eat the rotting corpse. Both males and females continue to care for the larvae after they hatch - feeding them from the corpse - unusual for beetles.

This distinctive specimen is either *Nicrophorus vespilloides* or *N. investigator* - the identifying antennae are not visible.



Footprints in the snow

After recent snow up on the hills this fox footprint gives away its presence. It had emerged from the adjacent forestry and could be tracked for some distance – probably looking for its next meal. Some of the best times to look for footprints are in the snow when you realise that places are much busier than you think and we share these places with a range of species.



Common Butterwort

The Common Butterwort (*Pinguicula vulgaris*) grows on damp heaths, acidic bogs and fens. It has a beautiful flower and a star-shaped rosette of cup-shaped leaves at its base. It is beautiful but deadly – the leaves secrete a sticky fluid from special glands on top of tiny hairs. When an insect lands, it cannot escape, and an additional set of glands produce digestive enzymes which break the insect down into a soup, leaving just the exoskeleton behind.



Green-brindled Crescent moth

This Green-brindled Crescent moth (*Allophyes oxyacanthae*) was trapped in November as part of the garden Moth scheme. It is listed as a priority species in Wales.

Although dull at first appearance, this moth has patches of metallic green scales giving it an attractive sheen as you can see here.

An autumn species, flying from September to November, it is fairly common in the county, occupying woodland, hedgerows and gardens. It feeds on ivy blossom - another reason to allow this late flowering plant to grow.

Overwintering as eggs, the caterpillars hatch in spring and feed on a variety of trees and bushes, including Hawthorn and Blackthorn.



Harvest Mice

This nest was found on a survey on a Council-owned site near St Clears. It is the summer nest of a Harvest Mouse, and you can see the neat circular entrance hole to the nest. An uncommon and likely under recorded species in the county this tiny mammal prefers habitats with long tussocky grass or reedbeds and hedgerows. They build a spherical nest of tightly woven grass high up in the tall grasses and the females can give birth to around 6 young and can produce several litters in a year.

The Harvest Mouse is the only British mammal to have a prehensile tail: it can use it like a fifth limb, holding on to grass stems with it.



Leaf decay

Leaf decay plays a vital role in soil production. Decomposing leaves add organic matter to the soil, which improves its structure and makes it a better environment for plant roots. Decomposition by microbes and fungi and invertebrates returns nutrients to the soil, feeding soil life such as earthworms and bacteria, which help create healthy soil and plants. The decomposition of leaves creates humus, a dark organic matter that is rich in nutrients and retains moisture in the soil. Autumn leaves are also fun to walk through!



Oak Bush-Cricket

The Oak Bush-Cricket (*Meconema thalassium*) is normally an arboreal species found in mature trees in woods, hedges and parks in summer. This one has ventured into a polytunnel. They are not often seen but does fly and can be found in moth traps They have a lime green body, with an orangey-brown strip running down the back.

This looks like a female with a long, ovipositor (egg-laying tube), visible at the end of the body. The female lays her eggs in tree bark in late summer and the nymphs emerge the following June.

Unlike other bush-crickets, the Oak Bush-Cricket is predominantly carnivorous, feeding on a variety of smaller invertebrates such as caterpillars and other larvae.



Rowan berries

Pine Martens (*Martes martes*) are opportunistic eaters, and Rowan berries can be a significant part of their summer diet. It can turn their scats (poo) red but here it looks like the berries have regurgitated. Pine martens leave their scat in prominent places, like on boulders or in the middle of trails, to mark their territory. Rowan berries are also a vital food source for many other species, especially during the colder months. They are eaten by many different birds, including fieldfares and redwings. Other animals that eat rowan berries include badgers and wood mice.



Cobalt Crust Fungus

This bright blue Cobalt Crust (*Terana coerulea*) was found on a Blackthorn twig among damp debris in a patch of wet scrub in Felingwm in October.

The Cobalt Crust is a saprophytic fungus, breaking down dead woody material. It is a 'white rot' fungus. This relates to how it breaks down the plant cell walls, including the lignin that gives woody plants their colour, leaving only the white cellulose.

It is an uncommon find in the county with only 32 records on the West Wales Biodiversity Information Centre database. Worth keeping an eye out for.



Greater Horseshoe bat

This Greater Horseshoe bat (*Rhinolophus ferrumequinum*) was recorded using a dedicated bat house, built to compensate for the loss of a bat roost in a demolished building.

In Wales the bat's status is currently listed as Near Threatened. In Carmarthenshire they are probably widespread but in low numbers, being mainly restricted to the southern half of the county but also known to occur up the Tywi Valley.

Formerly a cave-dweller, the Greater Horseshoe bat now tends to roost in old houses, churches and barns but overwintering in caves and mines.



Soprano Pipistrelle

This Soprano Pipistrelle bat (*Pipistrellus pygmaeus*) was found using a tree roost in October as part of a survey. This species will regularly roost in tree holes and crevices, as well as the many features associated with buildings, such as between roofing felt and tiles, in cavity walls, or behind soffit and barge boards.

Special care should be taken before felling trees that may have features suitable for use by bats - splits, cracks and loose bark and dense ivy can all be used by bats.



Bog restoration

Natural Resources Wales have recently completed restoration works to the peat bog at Llyn Llech Owain.

The work was carried out through October and into November and used Lidar technology and best practices for peatbog restoration using the natural contour lines of the land to help guide contractors to install contour peat bunds. The contractors used specialist equipment to access the fragile bog habitat, with the machinery tracks each having a weight of less than 1psi, less than a human footprint. Scrub was removed and then bunds created that will hold water within the bog – where we want it. There is a good population of the very important Sphagnum moss (peat forming moss) on site which can be "seeded" into any bare areas in the future.



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Autumn



Carmarthenshire Nature Partnership

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