

Notes from Local Interest Group Visit to Llanbwchllyn Lake 28th June 2018

Present: Maureen Lloyd (ML), Wendy and Dainis Ozols, John and Margaret Price, Jeremy and Christine Rose, Jude Hurn, Gareth Jenkins, Margaret Warne, Evelyn Bally, Sue Boon, Richard Martin, Joan Lloyd, Neville Harley, Paul and Sue Buckingham, Judith Coles, Elaine Curtis, Grace Davies, Edwina Griffiths, Stephen and Judy Mullard

Apologies: Jenny Francis

ML welcomed everyone and introduced our guides for the evening, Stephen and Judy Mullard. Stephen is one of the trustees of the Radnorshire Wildlife Trust and he and Judy are the volunteer wardens for the Llanbwchllyn Lake reserve. (The Reserves Officer with the Radnorshire Wildlife Trust is Jonathan Stone – for reference.)

Stephen began by giving us some background information about the lake. It is the largest natural lake in Radnorshire, measuring nearly 30 acres, and was designated as a SSSI in 1956. Welsh Water (Dŵr Cymru) actually owns the site, but it has been managed by the Radnorshire Wildlife Trust since 2008. Welsh Water used to use the lake as a reserve reservoir and some pipes are still visible in places, but it has not been used for this purpose for some years now. The Radnorshire Wildlife Trust manages the reserve in order to enhance the area. There is public access from the main entrance (SO 114465). From this main entrance, a path takes you to the bird hide and it is possible to follow this all the way around the lake, but it is not recommended because there are parts which are very difficult to negotiate. In response to a question from Evelyn Bally about when the site was fenced, Stephen said that he was not sure but, since it is a Dŵr Cymru fence, it probably happened when the water company took over the lake.

The site was given SSSI status because of its special aquatic and marginal communities, including specialised water plants, some of which are very rare in Wales. There is one which is found only here and at another site on the Montgomery Canal. The area around the lake has some very high quality fen meadow and there are extensive reed beds, mostly on the northern side of the lake. The plant communities and insects associated with the lake are of high conservation value. The lake also attracts many water birds, especially in the winter. The only significant Wildlife Trust management of the site which is noticeable is the removal of about two thirds of the Red Western Cedar trees; these had been planted by Dŵr Cymru. A grant was given in 2011-2012 to fund this work and the long-term plan is to remove all of the trees, when further funding becomes available. The timber from the trees is very poor and they were contributing to the drying out of the fen, which was undesirable. Evelyn also asked whether the Trust has a grazing policy for the site. Stephen replied that there is a policy, but that the requirements of the graziers and Trust do not always coincide directly and that this fact makes it a little difficult for grazing to be arranged. Livestock owners obviously want their animals to be safely fenced in. In addition, the grazing regime needed to conserve areas like this for both plants and wildlife can be a little "picky" which also makes use of the meadows less attractive to graziers. However, the Trust is now in the third year of an arrangement with a local grazier to have four ponies grazing the site from the end of August until the end of November/beginning of December. This helps to keep the vegetation under control once the seeds of the plants have been dispersed.

We began our walk by going into one of the fen meadows to the north of the lake; this area is not normally open to visitors and so we were very lucky to be taken in here. The meadow we were in is one of four "field compartments" on this side of the lake. This first meadow has very long-lasting

floral interest. The earliest plants to flower are the bright yellow Marsh Marigolds, which are abundant in this area. There are also five species of Orchid at the far end of this meadow. They are:

- Southern Marsh and the Early Marsh, which are hard to tell apart.
- Heath Spotted and Common Spotted, which are very similar but can be distinguished by looking carefully at the lower lip of the flowers. Both plants have a three-lobed lip on their flowers. The Common Spotted has a pointed middle lobe on the flower whilst the Heath Spotted has three lobes of the same size.
- Hybrids. There are hybrids of the Common Spotted and Heath Spotted; hybrids of either the Common Spotted or Heath Spotted with one of the Marsh Orchids; and, hybrids of the Early Marsh and Southern Marsh Orchids.

The other fact about the Orchids which makes them harder to identify is that their colours can vary widely, especially those of the Early Marsh Orchids.



Walking through the fen meadow



Common Spotted Orchid

The grass and other plants in this meadow were very dense and also very high in places and we had to take care to trample as little as possible by staying in single file. Stephen pointed out a number of plants in flower as we went along. The large, white-flowered umbellifer was Hemlock Water Dropwort. The smaller white flowers that we saw were Marsh Bedstraw which is the wetland form of a closely related species, including the yellow Lady's Bedstraw. Also in this area were Marsh Willowherb and Marsh Thistle. Amongst the many yellow flowers was Lesser Spearwort, a member of the buttercup family. Deep down in the sedges and reeds, Stephen pointed out the lovely blue flower of the Common Skullcap. Another very obvious yellow flower belonged to the Greater Bird's-foot Trefoil. We could also see a large number of tall plants with pale pink flowers; this was Common Valerian, which has a very distinctive smell. Another plant which was fairly obvious because of its heads of frothy white flowers was Meadowsweet, which likes the wet ground; this plant is very common in Radnorshire. In amongst the vegetation, there was also some pretty purplish-pink Ragged Robin, another plant which likes damp places. On the far side of the meadow

we found some deep red flowers belonging to Marsh Cinquefoil and lots of Tormentil, with its small yellow flowers. There were also quite a large number of Common Spotted and Heath Spotted Orchids in this section, as well as many hybrids. We also found some Early Marsh Orchids which were going to seed. Stephen pointed out that he would normally expect to find a pretty white flower, Sneezewort, in this meadow but for some reason it is not flowering this year. Later in the year, the meadow has a lot of Wild Angelica, another umbellifer, which is a very tall plant (over 1m high) with hollow, rigid stems, branching towards the top, and often tinged with purple. The white/pink flowers form large umbels. The meadow also has a couple of stands of Globeflower, with lemon yellow flowers which curve inwards forming the globe-shape; it is a member of the Buttercup family. We could not see these because the flowering period is in May. This plant is rapidly disappearing from Radnorshire and so the Trust is very pleased to have it growing at Llanbwchlllyn.

As well as using the ponies to graze down the vegetation in this meadow, volunteers from the Trust coppice the willow surrounding the field every couple of years. Willow grows very quickly and without this work it would soon start to encroach.

Stephen asked us to look out for the butterflies which are often seen in this meadow, Ringlet, Meadow Brown and Large Skipper – all of which we saw. There are also a couple of day-flying moths which are regularly present, the Scarlet Tiger which is very spectacular and the Five Spot Burnet, which particularly likes wetland and marshes. In fact, we found quite a few of the Burnets flying around.



Hemlock Water Dropwort in the evening sun



Standing room only in the bird hide

From the fen meadow, we walked along the road and back to the main entrance. This is the most visited part of the reserve, open to the public, and there is a well-defined path leading down to the bird hide and beyond, alongside the lake. The bird hide was built in the 1990s and was rethatched 2/3 years ago, using Chinese water reed.

There are birds on and around the lake all year around, but there are fewer in the summer months. The lake is rich in fish, especially Perch and Pike. Glasbury Angling Club has the fishing rights on the lake. The Pike are particularly voracious and are known to take ducklings. Coot and Moorhen raise young every year and this year (2018) Teal have also bred successfully, which is unusual. Another bird which manages to breed successfully on the lake is the Great Crested Grebe; its young are less likely to be taken by the larger fish because they are carried on their parents' backs. Little Grebe can also be seen, as well as Tufted Duck in large numbers. The bird population is much larger in winter, especially the wildfowl, and Widgeon and Teal come in large numbers (30 or 40 individuals each

year). There may also be up to 20 Goosander; because these birds eat lots of fish they are not very popular with the anglers. Also unpopular because they like fish are the Cormorants and up to 15 or 20 may be seen at times. Rarer visitors are the Great Northern Diver (which has turned up once), Smew, Goldeneye and Garganey. Tufted Duck and Pochard are other winter visitors. For the last two autumns, there has been a Great White Egret at the lake. This bird is about the size of a Heron and it first turned up in Radnorshire in 2010-2011. The bird stays at the lake for about two or three weeks and may be the same bird that has been seen at Llangorse Lake over the last few years. Stephen told us that he has high hopes that at some time in the future Osprey might be seen at Llanbwchlyn; they have been seen recently at Llangorse and the Elan Valley so there is every chance that this might happen.

Stephen pointed out that during our visit he had heard Garden Warbler and that Reed Warblers are also quite common in the reed beds. Reed Buntings also reside in the reserve. In winter, when the reed beds have died back, it is possible to see Water Rail from the bird hide. Their call sounds a bit like a pig squealing! Winter is the best time to come to sit in the bird hide to watch the birds on and around the lake. The Great White Egret can be seen perching high in the trees on the far side, opposite the hide.

The path along the lake which we followed had secondary ancient woodland on the right and this is filled with Bluebells in the spring. Another plant which grows here is Goldilocks, a member of the Buttercup family, which is an indicator of ancient woodland and not found in many places. Tawny Owl, Flycatcher and Redstart are also found in this woodland.

In the lake, we could see a large number of both Yellow and White Water Lily. These do not hybridise. The lake's marginal flora here includes Greater Spearwort and Gypsywort. The lake has one outlet stream, at the south-west end, and this flows into the Bachawy. The water in the lake is monitored regularly and the quality is excellent.



One of the many toadlets to be seen

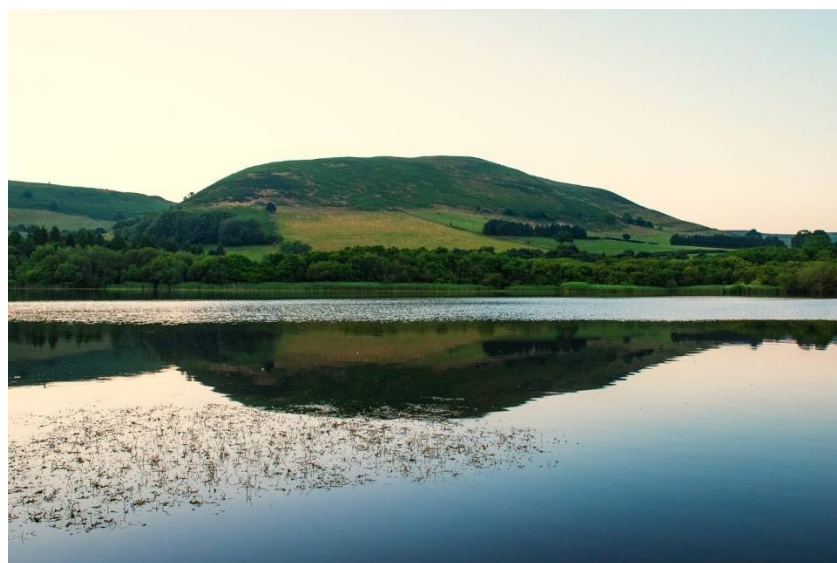


Southern Marsh Orchid

Just beyond the bird hide, Stephen showed us an area where, at this time of the year (late June), it is possible to see many toadlets. These are often found in extremely large numbers. Somewhere in the region of 10 000 toads head towards the lake to breed every year so there is the potential for many thousands of toadlets in early summer. Llanbwchllyn is of regional significance for its toad population, possibly even nationally (in Wales). This is because there are extensive areas of damp habitat and the water quality is very high. The wet woodland surrounding the lake, consisting mainly of Alder and Rusty Willow, offers the toads excellent cover, as does the fen meadow. Toads have ancestral breeding grounds and Llanbwchllyn is one of these. There is also a good frog population in the lake. Chris Rose asked whether there were any otters and Stephen said that there were, although he has not seen any himself. However, there are no known holts.

The last meadow that we saw, on the southern side of the lake, is known as "Orchid Meadow". This meadow has not been grazed for some time but the tall vegetation is cut and raked, and all of the cuttings removed, every September by volunteers from the Trust. This maintains a shorter turf than that which we saw in the fen meadow to the north of the lake and this is better for the orchids. In 2002, just twelve Marsh Orchids were seen here. By 2016, around 1000 Southern Marsh Orchids were counted here, a real success story. However, Orchids have their own set of rules and they are extremely fussy in their requirements. This means that whilst there are large numbers in some years, in others the numbers can be very low, and 2018 is one such year. Even so, we were able to see about 40-50 flower heads in one part of the meadow and these were impressive. Bracken can be a bit of an issue here and Stephen and Judy keep this under control in order to help the Orchids to flourish.

Another relatively rare and unusual plant found on this side of the lake, along the path in the lake-marginal woodland, is the Broad-leaved Helleborine, a member of the Orchid family. Stephen showed us some examples of this plant, which is due to flower later in July and is well worthwhile coming back to see. In this woodland, we also saw examples of Hedge Woundwort and Enchanter's Nightshade. At the end of the path that we had taken, we came to the lakeside and had a good view over the water to the northern side. Here we could see Amphibious Bistort growing in the water at the lake's edge, and there was evidence of Canada Geese. Stephen told us that these are not the only large wildfowl on the lake, there are also Mute Swans and this year there is a family with five cygnets. Another rarity which was seen this year (April 2018) is the Ferruginous Duck.



End of a lovely day at Llanbwchllyn Lake

At the end of the evening, ML thanked Stephen and Judy for an excellent and informative visit; it was extremely kind of them to give so generously of their time to show us around this beautiful and interesting reserve, one that many of the group had not visited before. The variety and number of wildflowers in the first meadow alone was amazing, and the weather played its part in making this an exceptionally enjoyable event. Many of the group said that they would like to come back to see the Helleborine in flower and also in winter to see all the visiting wildfowl.

The evening ended with refreshments at Llewetrog, kindly hosted by Carole and Mel Gibbs. Many thanks go to them too for their generous hospitality. Thank you to them for also allowing us to look around their very interesting home.