

## Notes from Local Interest Group 25<sup>th</sup> May 2017

**Present:** Maureen Lloyd (ML), Dainis and Wendy Ozols, Roy (RL) and Avryl Lloyd, Lisa Lloyd (LL), Bruce and Iwan Evans, Neville and Pat Harley, Grace Davies, Geoff and Mollie Moore, Celia Price, Edwina Griffiths, Ginny Guy, Margaret and John Price (Hay), Evelyn Bally, Christine and Jeremy Rose, Sue levers, Gareth Jenkins, Richard Thomas and Richard Martin.

ML welcomed everyone and said how great it was to have so many attendees on what was such a perfect evening for our first field trip of the year. She introduced our guest expert, Ray Woods, and explained that he and Roy Lloyd would be guiding us on our tour around RL's land at Lower Pentre.

### **Tour of the meadows at Lower Pentre**

We started our tour by the large pond which had been created about 10 years ago. Ray pointed out that there were different species of willow growing here. The one with the big leaves was Goat Willow and the smaller leaved one Grey or Rusty Willow (it has grey hairs on the leaves that turn a rusty brown later in the year). He told us that you can tell the difference if you peel back the bark; the material beneath the bark will be smooth if it is the Goat Willow and ridged if it is the Rusty Willow. He went on to say that willows do hybridise. Roy Lloyd (RL) confirmed that all of the willows around the pond had self-seeded. Ray suggested that the best time to select willows for planting is the Spring when they are flowering. This enables one to tell the difference between the male trees, which have male catkins, and the female ones which bear a cottony fluff. However, it is better to take cuttings late in the year, although they could be taken at any time and will usually root. Whilst we were by the pond, RL pointed out the nesting moorhens with their chicks which he sees here every year.

We then moved into the first meadow and Ray pointed out that this had an interesting hedge, containing a good range of species, including Hazel, Blackthorn, Rusty Willow, Wych Elm, Hawthorn, Ash and Field Maple. This range would seem to indicate a fairly old hedge. An English naturalist, Max Dorien Hooper, devised a rule for dating hedgerows, based on the number of woody species in a 30 yard stretch of hedge (multiplied by 110 years). This does not work in Wales, sadly. Ray said that there are very few records of hedges from before 1600 and this has led to problems in recording how long they have been in existence. Beneath the hedge, there was also a good range of plants including Hemlock Water Dropwort. This has very toxic roots and some people, especially the Dutch, have been poisoned by it because they have eaten it thinking it was a Water Parsnip, with which it can be easily confused. It does not appear to affect stock as they only feed on the foliage, not the roots. However, care should be taken as the leaves are poisonous to humans. Also beneath the hedge, Ray pointed out Brooklime, Hedge Woundwort and Marshwort, the latter of which has unusual white marks on its stems and a very distinctive smell. Lisa Lloyd (LL) told us that she has seen Himalayan Balsam on this land. Ray explained to us that the Field Maple in the hedge is at the edge of its range here and that less is found in the north of Radnorshire.

We then moved on to the second meadow where Ray pointed out Spear-plume Thistle and he said that this should be cut in July in order to stop it from seeding and spreading. (Creeping Thistle should be cut earlier in the year.) He mentioned that local names for plants are few in this area, possibly because of the loss of the Welsh names. He also told us that children are no longer taught the names for wild flowers and that one children's dictionary has even taken out the names of some

very common plants, such as Daisy. Knowledge of plant names is becoming a "lost skill". In the wetter parts of this meadow, there are many rushes, including Jointed Rush (you can feel the small compartments in the stem if you run your fingers down it); there is also Soft Rush in this meadow – this has no compartments in the stem. The Soft Rush is also larger and was once burned in rush lights. The Jointed Rush is usually found on better quality sites and so Ray said that it was a good sign that it is growing on RL's land. In amongst the rushes, Ray indicated some Sweet Vernal Grass, which contains a substance called coumarin, which gives the distinctive smell that you get in hay. It has a bitter taste and so animals avoid it. The grass in this meadow was in full flower and we could see the stigmas quite clearly as they were protruding out from the flowers. Ray pointed out some Lady's Smock (Cuckoo Flower) – quite common in RL's meadows – and told us that this is the county flower of Breconshire.

We then crossed over an area down by the Bachawy between two meadows, and here Ray showed us Red Campion, Hedge Parsley, Jack-by-the-Hedge (which has a smell like garlic), *Stellaria alsine* (Bog Stitchwort) and *Barbaria vulgaris* (Yellow Cress) on a tree trunk in the river.

In the meadow by the river, we saw Burdock and Pignut. Ray also showed us a wild Crab Apple and said that we could tell that it was a true wild apple because there were no hairs on the underside of the leaves. He also pointed out a Crack Willow, which is a hybrid and is thought to have been introduced a long time ago. This gets its name from the fact that the branches snap cleanly, with a crack, later in the year. This tree, probably originating in central Europe, is being killed by a combination of new diseases and has now been lost from the Thames and Avon valleys. Since it does not set viable seed, it has to be propagated from cuttings. In this meadow, we saw some Creeping Thistle which had been attacked by a fungus, which makes the plant secrete a honey-like substance, which we could easily smell. Also in this field were Meadow Buttercup, Meadow Foxtail (a tall grass), Stitchwort and Bugle, Elder in the hedgerow and more Hemlock Water Dropwort in the river.

The next meadow also had a variety of plants including Kingcup, Bitter Vetch, Bugle and Meadowsweet. We moved into another field which contained quite a large amount of Lousewort. Ray explained that this got its name because it tends to be found in fields which are nutritionally poor and so the animals which grazed there in the past were not always very healthy. We also saw Tormentil, Purple Moor Grass and more Bitter Vetch. Ray explained that these wet fields are a rare and important habitat and far too many have been lost. They are an important habitat for Curlew, Lapwing and Golden Plover, and all of these birds are in decline. There has also been a drop in the number of swallows and this has resulted from the lack of insects, also associated with the loss of such meadows. Ray praised RL for maintaining this habitat and said that the meadow was particularly lovely and of a type that is becoming increasingly rare in Wales. He indicated some Lamb's Tongued Plantain which has very deep roots and so is able to withstand drought. He went on to say that in a wet year agriculturally this would be a "problem field", but in a dry year it would be "salvation". Ray explained that, in a habitat such as this, if one plant gets damaged the other plants will work together to overcome the problem and that fungi are particularly important in this self-regulating system. It is impossible for humans to recreate this relationship and so maintaining these habitats is very important. The numbers of both moths and butterflies have been decreasing. Climate change has resulted in plants having fewer breathing pores or stomata (because of the increase in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere) and so less water is "lost" into the air. With less water passing through the plant, fewer nutrients are being taken up by plants and this could lead to a reduction in quality of food for moths and butterflies. Whatever one believes about the causes of climate change, it is a reality and it is happening quickly and so living things cannot adapt rapidly enough to keep up with the changes. The meadow had a great variety of plants, including the rare

Marsh Valerian, Devil's Bit Scabious, Pignut, Betony, Common Knapweed, Lesser Spearwort, Greater Bird's-foot Trefoil, Red Clover, Mouse-eared Chickweed, Meadow Buttercup, Ragged Robin, Float Grass, Rough-stalked Meadow Grass, Tussock Grass, Oval Sedge, Water Horsetail and Wood Rush. RL said that this field was unusually dry, probably because of the very dry spring that we have had. He does put sheep on this field in autumn, but they are not there for long. LL told us that two mountain ponies graze this meadow in winter. RL does not cut these wet meadows.

Ray pointed out the very interesting wet woodland (alder carr) on the edge of this field, which he said was excellent and asked RL how long it had been wooded; RL replied that it had always been like that in his memory. Ray said that the birch trees in the woodland were Iberian White Birch; you can easily recognise this species because it has trapezoid leaves with lots of small teeth and few large ones. They also have hairs and resin glands on the young stems. The bark of this tree does not develop the black "plates" that the Silver Birch has. Ray was pleased to see this tree here in Radnorshire.

The last meadow that we went into was yellow with Buttercups and Ray said that three varieties were found here – Meadow Buttercup, Bulbous Buttercup and Creeping Buttercup. In amongst them there were Creeping Thistle, Cuckoo Flower and wild Red Clover.

At the end, ML thanked Ray Woods for a most informative and interesting evening, adding that, "An evening with Ray Woods will certainly attract a crowd". She thanked him for giving so generously of his time to come to give us the benefit of his seemingly endless knowledge of all things natural – and more. She went on to thank Roy Lloyd for letting us see his wonderful meadows and, at this point, Ray Woods added that Roy is "the model for the future" and that his stewardship of these lovely meadows is a model that others would do well to copy.

The field trip ended with delicious refreshments, generously provided by Roy and Avryl Lloyd, which we enjoyed on an amazing evening in the fading sunshine and warmth. Margaret Price had made some delicious cakes so that we could celebrate Mo Lloyd's and Grace Davies' birthdays. A wonderful evening was had by all.