

# MEADOWS NEWS

## Conserving and Restoring Wildflower-rich Grasslands in Monmouthshire

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Scarlet Waxcap/J Dunkelman



Late instar nymph Dock Bug on Yellow Rattle seed head/C Adamson

## Welcome

Welcome to the MMG Autumn newsletter!

The weather this summer has been much commented upon - long periods of sunshine and high temperatures but also the resulting drought-like conditions. It was a bumper season for insect life with abundant early blossoms and floriferous meadows and so there appeared to be many more butterflies, bees and other pollinators whizzing about. But with prolonged heat the grasses in later summer were sparse, resulting in reduced hay and grazing, and no doubt much wildlife suffered due to lack of moisture.

And yet, despite the heatwave, MMG Open Meadows Day in June was a pleasant 19c and slightly overcast making it an ideal day to explore three very special meadows (see page 7).

Whilst Open Meadows is a one-day public showcase of our members' constant care and hard work in their meadows, all year the MMG Committee is working behind the scenes: championing our precious meadows and supporting our membership. We are a small, dedicated group and if you are interested in helping then please get in touch (see page 15).

## From our Chair



It has been a busy year for the trustees of the Meadows Group. We bid farewell to long-term trustees Steph Poulter, Pam Manfield, and Dick Coates. Steph and her husband Alan have been familiar faces at our meetings organising the raffle, and Pam did a sterling job on taking minutes for our meetings. Dick continues as a volunteer warden for our Wet Meadow reserve. Since the AGM, Maggie Hamlen has also retired; she has used her administrative skills to help with membership tasks as well as helping at many events. They will all be missed. We welcome our newest trustee Saran Allott-Davey, who has a strong finance and governance background. The trustees have renewed our focus on strategy and governance, and made some significant changes to our reserves management.

Many of you will have fond memories of the MMG ponies Jacinth and Jemima, now with GWT, who were looked after by Steph and Alan Poulter. These ponies, along with machinery funded by the group, were one of the key ways in which the group supported members to manage their meadows. As time has gone by, the capacity of the committee for hands-on work has reduced, but we still have frequent requests for help and advice from members. We don't have all the answers, but a good place to start is the Contractors and Suppliers page on our [website](#). Members can also post on our [Facebook page](#) to share advice and contacts.

It has been an exceptional year weather-wise; those of you who were able to make hay this year will no doubt find a buoyant market for it come winter. Hay-making is one of the key issues facing members with small fields who can find it difficult to find a contractor to cut and bale for them. We are continually looking into alternatives, such as cut-and collect mowing contractors, and will share these with you on our website as we are able to confirm their details. This year the hay crop from our Kingcoed reserve will be going to a local regenerative farmer. The hay is strewn on the pasture for the cattle to feed on, thus providing plenty of opportunity for wildflower seeds from Kingcoed to germinate and enhance the wildflower mix on the donor pasture.

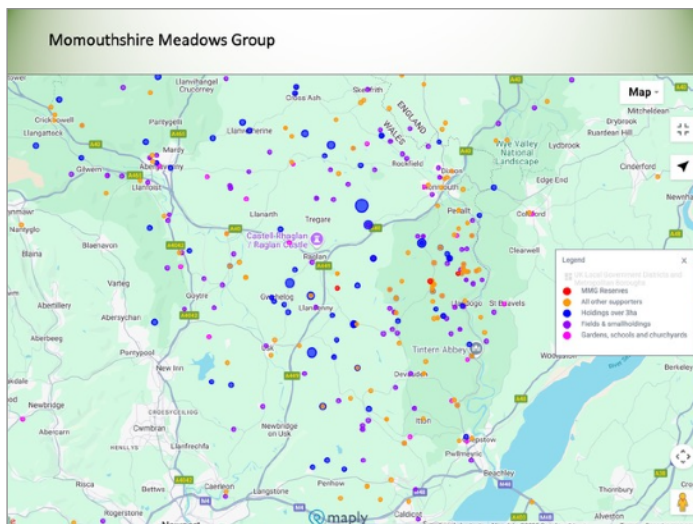
On Wet Meadow we have introduced cattle, managed by Grazing Management, to improve the habitat for wildflowers, invertebrates and bird life. We are already seeing positive results in terms of grazing down more vigorous species such as Water Mint and Meadowsweet, to enable Devil's-bit Scabious and Dyer's Greenweed to thrive.

As part of our governance review, we are updating policies on investments, complaints, privacy, lone working and safeguarding. We have agreed our Reserves objectives to ensure that they are in line with our charitable objectives; and we are in the process of updating our reserves management plans and risk registers.

We have initiated a mapping project to assist with our aim to improve connectivity across the landscape wherever possible. The image shows the position at April 2025.

Our autumn meeting will focus on Connectivity across the landscape, with some ideas on how our members can work together to enhance their local community for biodiversity. We look forward to seeing you at Gwehelog village hall at 2pm on Sunday 9th November.

Sally Jones





## MMG Autumn Meeting

**Wildlife Corridors in the Community** is the subject of our 2025 **Autumn Meeting**. It will be held at Gwehelog Village Hall on Sunday 9 November, 2pm to 4.30pm.

The theme of the meeting is *connectivity*, that is how we can link up areas to allow wildlife to thrive. Speakers include well-known ecologist Dr Stephanie Tyler MBE and three local meadow owners.



Cake/C Adamson

Doors open at 1.30; tea, coffee and cake will be served in the break when there will be an opportunity to socialise and chat to other meadows enthusiasts.

Parking at the hall and in the lay-by is very limited. We will be organising car sharing or a shuttle. If you intend to arrive by car, please follow the instructions on our website and complete the [booking form](#).

Gwehelog Village Hall, Old Raglan Road, Gwehelog, Usk NP15 1RB ([what3words.com/eyelid.cries.tiling](http://what3words.com/eyelid.cries.tiling)).

This is a free event (although donations are appreciated).

## MMG Spring Meeting



Clare Whittle ([dungbeetlesforfarmers.co.uk](http://dungbeetlesforfarmers.co.uk)) gave an excellent talk on Dung Beetles at our AGM in April. Claire is a vet whose special interest is the positive impact of regenerative agriculture on animal health and welfare.

She really brought home the importance of these little guys. They don't just break down dung and facilitate nutrient recycling. They contribute to maintaining healthy cattle, for example by reducing parasites. Their tunnelling helps to aerate the soil, allowing water to soak through and reducing run-off as well as assisting with carbon sequestration. These useful little creatures are highly endangered by the usual suspects: habitat loss, climate change, pesticides, and other modern farming practices. Keeping animals housed inside means there is no dung for beetles to eat over winter, and anti-parasitic treatments given to farm animals are lethal to dung beetles.

There are hopeful signs that more sustainable solutions can be found to the latter: read more at [www.cattleparasites.org.uk](http://www.cattleparasites.org.uk) and [www.scops.org.uk](http://www.scops.org.uk)



## Review of Events

Every year we run events primarily for our members, but also to raise awareness generally about the importance of species-rich grasslands.



Our season starts with our AGM and Spring Social, held this year on 10 April at Llanarth Village Hall, featuring an excellent talk by Clare Whittle on dung beetles. The annual report, presented by our chair Sally Jones, is [available to view on our web site](#).

Our season gets really busy in June, and this year there was something happening almost every week. Steph Tyler ran her always popular **Meadow Plant Identification Course**, this time at our Kingcoed reserve. We managed to dodge the rain (except yours truly, emerging dripping when Jon finally arrived to collect me). I think all our members will know what a privilege it is to have Steph as our lead on matters botanical and if you haven't put your name down for one of her courses, let me know now as there are always more people than we can accommodate wanting to come.

The following week we took our gazebo to **Monmouth Bee Festival** – one of my favourite events of the year. It's always a friendly day and a chance to network with other groups, including the organisers: Bees for Development) and Gwent Wildlife Trust.

The main annual event is, of course, our **Open Meadows Day**. This year, rather ambitiously, we chose three sites in the far north of the county and just over the border in Powys. (See page 7.)

The last events of the summer were the **Scything Courses**. We've been holding these for some years now, with trainer Andrea Gilpin, and we get excellent feedback from people who attend. This year there were two courses at Ty Mawr Convent near Trellech, in their beautiful orchard meadow, and we are very grateful to the sisters for welcoming us to their home, and to Vijay, their head gardener, for helping to organise it. MMG subsidises the courses for our members to encourage the use of scything, which is by far the most environmentally friendly way of cutting grassland and for clearing areas of docks, thistles, bracken and suchlike. We don't know yet if we will be able to run the course next year but if you are thinking of learning, or taking a refresher course, it helps to let me know now so we can gauge interest. Anyone on the waiting list will be given a chance to book before it is opened up to the wider membership.

*Marilyn Dunkelman*



## Plant Surveys and Visits 2025

MMG botanists – Steph Tyler, Wendy Tyler-Batt, Tim Oliver and Sheelagh Kerry were busy surveying in the spring and summer. (Unfortunately, Elsa Wood could not help this year because of ill health). Between us we visited 26 new members and their grasslands and re-visited land belonging to four members. The visits are important for three main reasons. Firstly, to meet the members and to hear of their plans and wishes for their land whether it is a small patch in a garden or 50 acres of farmland. Then the plant surveys carried out usually with the owner(s) are also crucial as they provide a base line against which future changes can be monitored and show the owner what is of particular interest. Thirdly, we can provide advice on sympathetic management and grazing or contractor options.

We have seen some wonderful sites this year with at least 12 of them meeting the criteria for Local Wildlife Site (LWS) designation or in several cases, already LWSs. Even those not yet up to this standard are progressing in the right direction. Of particular note, were areas belonging to two members near Itton – 10 acres in three fields and a field of six acres of beautiful flower-rich grassland, a field on Far Hill with locally abundant Dyer's Greenweed and Tormentil amongst many other plants and also a large area of 40 acres of horse pastures and hay meadows near Trellech. At this last site at least 18 Green-winged Orchids were found scattered in at least four different fields the spring; later, in June numerous Spotted Orchids and 80+ Southern Marsh Orchids were noted in the hay fields. Other sites near Grosmont, at Parkhouse, at Dawn of Day, near Llangwm, near Llanelly Church, near Penrhos and two sites near Earlswood were also memorable for their range of species.

The new owners of Northridge House have joined the Group. This was where MMG supporter and Committee member Anne Robinson lived with her husband Michael and where we held our 10th anniversary celebrations. It was good to see that the wonderful field that Anne cared so much about, was in good heart and is being managed well.

Garden meadows are not without their interest too with a lovely species-rich meadow on a lawn at Llanwenarth Lodge where after my visit a Southern Marsh Orchid appeared and a superb lawn meadow near Cleddon where the owners, John and June Foster, allowed the Botany Group to pay a visit too.

It is a real privilege to be able to visit these privately owned fields and gardens and it is perhaps wrong to single out a few especially rich sites as all the grassland areas that we saw had some interest and we must not forget the importance of grassland for grasshoppers and crickets, spiders, beetles and caterpillars of moths and butterflies plus of course, small mammals. All this life gives food too to birds such as Goldfinches and Swallows and larger mammals as Hedgehogs and Badgers.

We have also advised Monmouth School on creating a meadow and met on site to delineate an area of the playing fields that was allowed to grow. We continue to take an interest on Gilwern Common where local resident Andrew Baker persuaded the council to let part of the common become a meadow. MMG carried out an initial survey and found the meadow to already have much of interest and the local school have been involved sowing Yellow Rattle seed. There have been some problems as at least one member of the Community Council thinks it looks untidy and should have more colour – he mentioned poppies which have no place in a meadow! Anyway, following a meeting between the County Council, Community Council, local residents and me it was agreed, after some heated debate, that the Common should continue to be managed as a meadow.

*Dr Stephanie J Tyler MBE  
Joint BSBI Vice County Recorder, Monmouthshire*

## Wet Meadow Survey

Although no new species were found in 2025, some of the less common are doing very well.

Dyer's Greenweed was protected from the cattle and has spread to the Western bog edge whilst Burnet Saxifrage, a lovely summer flowering delicate umbellifer, has also spread and is faring particularly well in Brewery Paddock alongside plentiful Tormentil, Betony and Devil's-bit Scabious. Southern Marsh and both Common and Heath Spotted Orchids were numerous, but diminutive owing to the drought.



Small Skipper/Dick Coates

Results of the invertebrate surveys at Wet Meadow (and at Kingcoed Meadow) are awaited but our surveyor, Christian Owen, reported a good population of Tiger Beetles by the new pond. (See page 8 for more information.)

Bumble Bees were surveyed following a bumble bee training session. Amongst the species found was the rare *Bombus ruderarius*, Red Shanked Carder Bee.

Steph Tyler

## Wet Meadow



Belted Galloway

Welsh White

Wet Meadow Cattle/Dick Coates

Wet Meadow is becoming a show case of best practice in wild flower meadows, as well as trialling new systems of management. The latest is employing Grazing Management Ltd to summer graze the pastures with 10 beef steers for two years controlling the grazing areas with *Nofence*; made viable with a large grant from Wye Valley AONB.

The volunteer cattle checking is going really well. There are plenty of volunteers and we each only have to do 3 or 4 checks a month. Every day a volunteer visits, counts and checks the cattle for any problems.

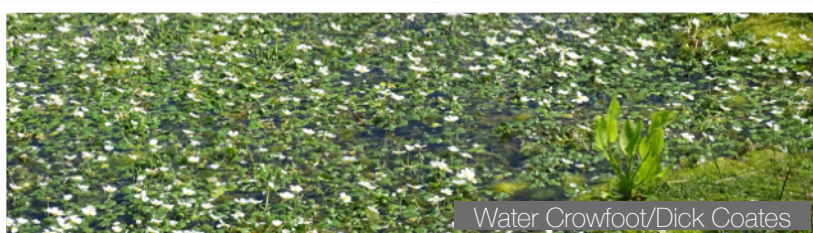
The cattle are so benign. When they get too close to where I am working my terrier, Isca, shoos them away. They have done an excellent job in trampling and grazing the rough area in Dyers Field, but they do like to create 'nests' in dark places inside the internal hedgerows, being much bothered by the excessive quantity of flies.

Invertebrate life in the Dyer's pond has come to a halt due to the drought and cattle; in contrast to the abundance of berries, nuts, crab apples & acorns.

These old hill cattle breeds are such heavy browsers; not that it matters about the scrub willow, but they are also partial to oak and beech. Protection of young saplings is a challenge.

On July 14th our contractor came in to cut and cart away the bracken. Baling it gives the grass sward and wild flowers light and time to develop. Last winter we also tried rotavating a small area of dense bracken with limited success. Time will tell.

Dick Coates, Wet Meadow Warden



Water Crowfoot/Dick Coates



## Open Meadows Day

MMG's main annual event is, of course, our Open Meadows Day. This year, rather ambitiously, we chose three sites in the far north of the county and just over the border in Powys. It was very remote and despite the planning that went into managing visitors' cars in the narrow roads and limited parking spots, not everyone managed to reach all the sites as they intended. But goodness, the trip was worth it! Such stunning scenery, and the meadows were incredible.

I was based at Box Bush Farm in Capel-y-ffin, where Harry Marshall is managing his 38 acres, including Box Bush Meadow, a designated SSSI with a wide range of species on view including.

Other MMG volunteers helped out at Nant-y-Bedd, which many will know as the gardens run by Ian and Sue Mabberley in the Grwyn Fawr valley. (If you missed our event, do visit the garden when they are open: <https://nantybedd.com/>). And Ty Major near Fforest Coalpit, the home of Sheelagh Kerry and Peter Smith was also open. (You may know Sheelagh as part of our botany team that undertakes surveys of members' land.) We had over 70 visitors in all and we can't thank the hosts and volunteers enough for making it possible.

*Marilyn Dunkelman*

### Open Meadows at Box Bush



Box Bush Meadow/Jeremy Harris



MMG on the hunt/CA



Box Bush Meadow/CA



Evebright & Orchid/CA



Fragrant Orchid/R Duncan



Greater Butterfly Orchid/CA



Steph T & Orchid/H Marshall



Box Bush Meadow/Jeremy Harris



## Fungi

It's been an odd season for Waxcaps. The early species that normally fruit here at The Beeches in summer – Dingy, Citrine and Fibrous Waxcaps – didn't show up. In fact we had no Waxcaps fruiting here until the end of September. But October has made up for that, with greater numbers of Waxcaps than ever before. This is all weather related. The dry, hot summer was not conducive to the earlier species, but heat combined with autumn rain has produced a fungi bonanza.

Waxcaps are the stars of grassland fungi with their range of bright colours, making them easy to spot and identify, and the way the number of species gradually increases over decades and centuries if land is managed appropriately, avoiding fertiliser, pesticides and ploughing.

Gwent Wildlife Trust and MMG held what has become an annual Fungi Walk on 23 October at GWT's New Grove Meadows, organised by Andy Karran. As usual the event was fully booked. The showing of Waxcaps was spectacular: we recorded sixteen species in just two hours, including the impressive Crimson Waxcap display for which the meadows are renowned; there were numerous species of Pinkgills too.

Meanwhile back at The Beeches we have reached twenty one Waxcap species so far this year. The latest was Blushing Waxcap, one of the less common species. At first it looks quite dark and dowdy but it has the helpful identification feature of bruising quickly, showing as bright red when any part of the specimen is handled.

A couple of my favourites have also been fruiting. Firstly, the magnificent Splendid Waxcap, a bright red species that is much less common than the similarly coloured but less robust Scarlet Waxcap.

The other is the Papillate Waxcap, a significant find when I first found it here in 2023 as it was last recorded locally over twenty years ago in Herefordshire. I think the lack of records is because it is small and not easy to identify, although it often has a small central pimple which helps to distinguish it.

If you are interested in Waxcaps, Plantlife has a Facebook Group and an app they are encouraging people to use: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/320585099005268>

There is also, of course, our book, now in its third edition, and the proceeds all go to MMG.

Buy direct from [nhbs.com](https://www.nhbs.com) or order through your bookshop  
Retail price £24.99 ISBN 978-0-9576424-3-0



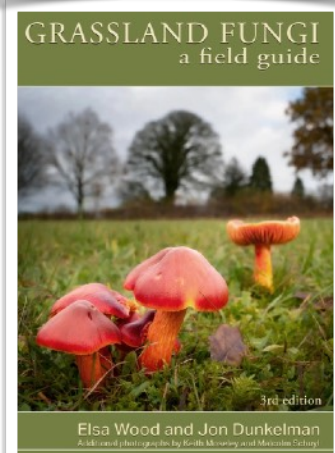
Blushing Waxcap/J Dunkelman



Splendid Waxcap/J Dunkelman



Papillate Waxcap/J Dunkelman



Jon Dunkelman



## Flower Facts

### *Succisa pratensis*

Commonly known as the Devil's-bit Scabious, it is a tall plant with deep blue-purple pincushion-type flowers which float above the foliage in late summer and early autumn. It is a member of the teasel family, all of which have dense heads of tiny flowers which are a fantastic source of nectar for pollinators.

John Gerarde's herbal of 1597 states the name arose because the root appears to have been bitten off by the devil, out of spite and to prevent humankind from benefitting from the many purported beneficial uses!

It is a plant of damp meadows and woodlands, and can be found on MMG's Wet Meadow reserve. It is the food plant of the increasingly rare Marsh fritillary butterfly.

When propagating *Succisa pratensis* only fresh seed should be used, since it ceases to be viable after its first season. The seeds need cold stratification, so must be sown in the autumn and will germinate the following spring. Because of its limited seed viability and short dispersal distance, it is an indicator of continuity, and therefore a good indicator of ancient meadows.

Sally Jones



Devil's-bit Scabious/C Adamson

## Invertebrate surveys at MMG reserves

We have excellent information about the plants on our reserves at Wet Meadow and Kingcoed and management is basically to ensure the plant diversity is maintained.

Our grasslands are much more though than just the plants – they harbour a myriad of insects and other invertebrates – spiders, grasshoppers and crickets, beetles, bees and flies of all sorts from hoverflies to robberflies. However, we know rather little about the species on our reserves and members' grasslands.

There have been butterfly surveys and in a few instances we have data on moths from moth-trapping. Some of you may have been lucky to have had visits by Roger Ruston and/or Ciaran Clarke to look for bumble-bees and solitary bees on your land, but generally we need to know more about what our grasslands support. This is of interest from a distribution point of view as so many species are moving their ranges because of climate change and new species are appearing in South Wales. It is also important so that we can take account of their requirements in managing the land. For example, a hay cut can be a devastating operation for invertebrates and small mammals unless some refuge areas are retained. Slow grazing by cattle seemed a better option at Wet Meadow – hence our trials with Grazing Management and their 10 cattle at Wet Meadow since May.

The trustees decided last year to ask a good entomologist to pay monthly visits to Wet Meadow and Kingcoed reserves to establish what was there. I asked Liam Olds of Buglife, who has done pioneering work on invertebrates on the coalfields in particular, if he could do this but he was fully booked for 2025. However, he suggested that I ask Christian Owen. Liam wrote : 'I consider Christian as one of the UK's best entomologists/invertebrate ecologists, so you'll be in great hands there'. I did contact Christian and he agreed to carry out the monthly visits. We look forward to the reports of his finds in the winter.

Steph Tyler



Six-spot Burnet moth on Plantain/C Adamson

## A One Acre Oasis

At just under an acre our meadow isn't big but we have watched it develop with consistent management over 22 years and have come to realise what an important little habitat it is.

On moving here in 2002 we inherited a field full of thistles as part of our two and half acre plot between Usk and Abergavenny.

Alongside my professional Garden Design and Gardening practice, a busy young family and a partner working long hours I developed the garden, ultimately opening it for the NGS charity for several years from 2019. Budget and manpower constraints dictated that we didn't push the garden out into the meadow at the time and that has proved a blessing. It is now separated from the more formal garden by a tall hedge and a wide mown path. It has remained unfenced both by design and to allow us to get haymaking equipment into the small space, so grazing has not been an option. Our annual management regime has been 2 or 3 winter and spring close cuts with a ride-on mower with removal of cuttings, then growing on through late April to about the middle of August when the hay is made and baled. I immediately decided not to introduce any seed or plug plants but to see what would develop from the natural seed-bank. There is no record of the land ever having been ploughed and I thought this would be an interesting exercise. It had been grazed by horses so there were plenty of coarse grasses in the first years, although the thistles were more or less eliminated by a severe cut during our first winter. An interesting exercise it certainly has been. A survey last year by Andy Karran of Gwent Wildlife Trust found 69 species of plant including many indicators of good quality Neutral Grassland and Marshy Grassland and we are now a designated Local Wildlife Site. From March there is a succession of dandelion, cardamine, cowslip, primula, bluebell and buttercup. Over 22 years, coarse grasses have given way to fines and in June the orchids, oxeye daisies, yellow rattle, speedwell, vetches, lady's bedstraw and many other wildflowers take over and are the most beautiful sight, wafting in the sunshine and buzzing with insects and butterflies amongst the sparkling grasses. A late hay cut allows orchid, daisy and rattle seed to develop and fall and prolongs the nectar season with knapweed and pilosella amongst others, and then we try and spot fungi in the mown sward, more and more every year.

I call our patch an oasis because the fields surrounding us are close grazed all year or cut for silage several times throughout the summer. There is no hint of a flowering plant. No wonder the insects and birds come and find us. Watching this transformation whilst becoming an absolutely key part of it has been our farming neighbour Mr Carver – Farmer John – who has expertly managed the hay making for us since the beginning and now knows there was method in the madness of the late cut! It's not ideal to have to use a huge heavy tractor and a savage one-off cut but so be it - we couldn't do it on our own.

In addition, we have now installed a robot mower in the garden proper – my new best friend – and deliberately left wide margins of between 2 and 5 metres along the bottom of a big mixed hedge where the mower doesn't venture. We manage this and other wilder areas of the garden with an Austrian scythe on rotation so there are varied lengths of sward available to wildlife through the year. It's very plain to see the birds, small rodents, ground dwelling bees, other insects and particularly our cat seeking out and enjoying these habitats. We are on a small scale but I believe we are making an important contribution to diversity in our area and we will continue to do that and to spread the word.

We don't open the garden officially now but MMG members are very welcome to visit.

*Guin Vaughan*



## Marbled White *Melanargia galathea*

Our member Jacqui Hill mentioned to us how the population of Marbled White butterflies has grown since she started managing her field 'correctly' three years ago.

Jacqui's field is full of Knapweed and Bird's-foot Trefoil, and it is known that Marbled Whites are often seen on purple flowers such as Knapweed and Thistle.

They are one of the classic species of unimproved grassland, easily recognisable with their beautiful mosaic patterned wings. Despite their name they are actually more closely related to the brown butterflies. Their eggs are dropped into the sward, and the caterpillars feed on various grasses over winter until they eventually pupate, generally in May. They emerge as butterflies, and lay more eggs, during a short period between June and August.

The Marbled Whites prefer the warmer climes of southern England and South Wales, but their range is gradually extending north, probably due to the changing climate.



## A One Acre Oasis

photos by Guin Vaughan



## The Mystery of the Missing Orchids

Numbers of various wildflower species in our fields have always fluctuated and I have often wondered what affects the mix so much from year to year. Yellow Rattle, Eyebright and Lousewort, for example, show great fluctuations, sometimes dominant in a field or part of a field and sometimes just a small part of the mix.

We have been managing our six acres of meadows here at The Beeches for 14 years now, and overall I'm very pleased with our success. The fields are managed by cutting over a period of eight weeks to give the late flowering species a better chance to seed. In autumn and winter they are grazed by a few of our neighbour's Jacob sheep, as well as by the constantly present rabbits and, increasingly, fallow deer. All was going according to plan with orchid numbers (largely Common Spotted-orchids) increasing year on year – until last year when, as you can see from the graph, the number plummeted.

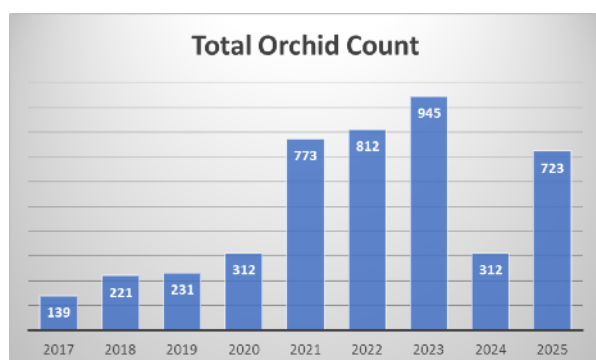
Since we moved here, the rabbit population has varied, while fallow deer have increased significantly. Both species seem to affect orchid numbers adversely by eating and crushing. (Twenty sleeping deer can squash a lot of orchids!) For ten years I have been protecting emerging orchids with small cages, and more recently I have constructed two larger rabbit and deer-proof enclosures, 10m x 5m, the first in early spring 2023 and the second in 2024. I assumed that all this protective action was facilitating the increase in orchid numbers – in which case why did numbers drop so much in 2024?

Of course weather would be a major factor but how much was due to rabbits and deer? For that I thought I had some data – the results from inside the two enclosures.

(In fact the rabbit population peaked in 2024 – we were overrun with them - then crashed over winter so we have only a small percentage of the rabbits in 2025 that we had the year before.)

I did some analysis:

- In 2023 the number of orchids in the first enclosed area doubled while overall orchid numbers increased by just 16%. So far, so clear.
- In 2024 the orchids in the first enclosure dropped 50% whereas overall numbers decreased by 70%, again apparently showing its efficacy in protecting orchids from rabbits and deer.
- Inside the second enclosure in 2024, its first year of operation, 13 orchids appeared.
- In 2025, however, there were 55 orchids in the second enclosure – an increase of over 300% - while overall numbers rose 132% from the year before. The pattern seemed to be holding – the enclosures were working.
- But in the first enclosure the opposite happened. The number of orchids fell again, by over 30%, with no obvious explanation.



At this point I realised that I am only seeing part of the picture. There must be some longer term effects going on here and that brought me back to my original observation that different species wax and wane often in mysterious ways, or so it appears to me as someone with no formal training in botany. Weather and climate, seed dispersal, reductions in grasses (for those semi-parasitic flowers), fungi availability (for orchid germination) - all may play a part.

I will leave my enclosures up for another year to see what happens next . . .



## Hidden House

Eight years ago, we chanced on this rather special part of the country and seven unloved acres on a Monmouthshire hillside. A top field that had been used for grazing, sat above four acres of ancient woodland and below that, looking out to the Black Mountains, sat an uninspiring tumble-down barn. It had very little going for it but the view and the woodland made us do, what at the time, made very little sense. We took a deep breath and bought it.

Working first with the Woodland Trust, we planted 800 metres of native hedging and removed the sheep that had grazed the woodland. They'd kept down the bracken and brambles but also managed to eat any saplings that dared to look upwards to the sky.

We joined MMG and had the first of several inspiring visits from the wonderful Steph Tyler. We were keen to turn the top field back to a wildflower meadow. Walking though what I saw as a boring field of rye, docks and dandelions, Steph stopped every few metres, pointing out signs of hope and diversity and so the long journey of conversion began. Mowing and removing twice a year and introducing yellow rattle seed in the Autumn, we sat back and expected wonderful magic things to happen. That was almost eight years ago and as I wander through that field you might expect me to start poetically listing the wildflowers, perhaps even an orchid, but no. The field, to my novice's eye at least, looks pretty similar to when we started. Every now and then, amongst the grasses, I'll spot a patch of yellow rattle but aside from that, nettles, docks and dandelions still thrive, indicating land still rich in nutrients.

Down below, it's a different story. The woods have started to recover. Oak, hazel and hawthorn saplings are all thriving and filling gaps where brambles and bracken still thrive. In time these saplings will provide a shaded canopy and the forest floor will have a chance to regain its balance. In Spring, for the first time since our arrival, bluebells carpeted the understory, leaving the air filled with scent. And around the barn, something magical has happened. The hedges, with those awful plastic spiral guards removed, have begun to take shape and provide valuable habitat and food for birds. In the process of our build, we excavated tonnes of nutrient poor subsoil. Piles of it, surrounded us. This would have been a pain in conventional landscaping necessitating burying and hiding, along with the import of lorry loads of topsoil. Instead, once the build was complete, we simply spread this uninspiring medium around the barn, pulling out handfuls of rocks as we went and sowed it with native seed from Emorsgate. Year one, oxeyes were prolific, giving us an instant show but from then on, other flowers have elbowed their way out, giving us a riot of colour accompanied with the buzz of insects and pollinators. It's a wonderous sight and you would have no idea that just a few years before it was a muddy, miserable building site.

As for that field up top, perhaps an encouraging reappraisal from Steph is needed, or is it just a reminder, that nature, even with a little nudge from us, will often do just what it wants and we should just enjoy watching and waiting to see what show it chooses to put on.

Ian Blandford



## Dogs, Fleas and Water Wildlife

Our dogs love to splash around in the water - but if we treat them with certain anti-flea chemicals, evidence shows that we are damaging aquatic wildlife – a dreadful unintended consequence.

Recent surveys by the Environment Agency have detected these synthetic chemicals in river water samples from around the UK, with 99% of samples containing fipronil and 66% containing imidacloprid. Concentrations commonly exceeded what are deemed to be safe limits by most experts.

A report from the Broads Authority in Norfolk<sup>(1)</sup> explains the problem: "Powerful insecticides that are banned in farming due to their harm to the environment are contained in "spot-on" products used on cats and dogs. The chemicals pose "significant risks" to aquatic wildlife, whether from a dog swimming in the water or indirectly when washing hands or pet bedding (another major source of river pollution)".<sup>(2)</sup>

At particular risk are insects such as dragonflies, damselflies and freshwater beetles - all essential species for a healthy wetland system, the Broads Authority said. They spend much of their life underwater and provide food for fish, birds, and other wildlife, and are "extremely sensitive" to pollution. Studies have also shown that nests lined by birds with treated animal fur have a greater number of unhatched eggs or dead chicks.

What a depressing picture! WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Stop dogs from entering rivers, lakes, ponds or ditches if they have been recently treated with spot-on treatments. The insecticides persist on a pet's coat for a week and the chemicals can remain active for up to 90 days, even though they kill fleas within 24-36 hours.

To quote Prof Dave Goulson, at the University of Sussex <sup>(3)</sup>:

- "We need to make sure we are choosing the right treatment so it is appropriate for that animal and their environment".

"Around 86% of dogs and 91% of cats are treated for fleas at least once a year, whether fleas are present or not. The most common active ingredients in these treatments are called imidacloprid (an insecticide linked to bee declines) and fipronil, another potent insecticide that can harm the nervous systems of animals and humans.

- "In my opinion, preventative flea treatment is neither necessary nor desirable in most cases. Most dogs and cats don't have fleas. Indoor cats are unlikely to catch fleas. Non-chemical methods such as flea traps, regular hot washing of the animal's bedding to kill larval fleas and hoovering are effective. Regular flea combing helps detect and remove fleas".

Or, if you must treat, consider less-toxic flea and tick treatments, such as those containing dimethicone, which work by physically immobilising parasites rather than poisoning them. To do the least harm, please take Dave Goulson's advice, or discuss options with your vet.

References:

1. The Broad Authority 03 August 25

2. Sussex University and Imperial College London 02 Feb 24

3. Prof Dave Goulson, University of Sussex, in *The Conversation* 08 August 24



Dog & River Wye/ Clare Adamson



### Brycheiniog Meadows

If you're interested in this new group and staying up to date with what's happening and when the next meeting will be held, please follow the Facebook link below:

Brycheiniog Meadows Group | Facebook

Their contact is Kate Dufton [kate7ways@outlook.com](mailto:kate7ways@outlook.com) and you can join their Facebook page here.

### BBC Farming Awards

**Grazing Management**, who are currently using their cattle to restore MMG's Wet Meadow, featured on BBC R4's [On Your Farm](#). Alex and Emily Crawley, who set up Grazing Management in 2018 in the Forest of Dean, are finalists in the Farming for the Future category of the BBC *Food and Farming Awards 2025*. The winners will be announced on 18 November.

### Square Farm Fire

Many of you will know the organic and regenerative farm at Mitcheltroy with its beautiful wild flower meadows. On 17 October, a devastating fire broke out at Square Farm. No people or animals were hurt, but the main building, tools and equipment were lost.

They have launched a [Crowdfunder](#) to help recovery and create something positive: a new dual-purpose building that replaces what was lost and adds an educational and community space for the future.

Please support if you can.

## Are you passionate about wildflower meadows?

*Would you like to help us to make a difference here in Monmouthshire?*

Monmouthshire Meadows Group is inviting expressions of interest to join our small friendly committee as a trustee. As a CIO registered with the Charity Commission we are dedicated to promoting the conservation of meadows in Monmouthshire so as to restore the diversity of native plant and animal species.

We manage three small reserves for biodiversity, and support our members with advice on meadow management.

We are looking for an enthusiastic team member who can commit to attend at least four meetings per year and to support us with our objectives.

Good computer skills are essential; knowledge of meadow management is desirable but not essential.

Interested? To learn more please contact our President Dr. Steph Tyler or our Chair Dr. Sally Jones for an informal chat.

Steph: [steph\\_tyler2001@hotmail.com](mailto:steph_tyler2001@hotmail.com)

Sally: [monmeadowsgroupchair@gmail.com](mailto:monmeadowsgroupchair@gmail.com)

### Contact MMG

- ♦ The MMG Newsletter is semi-annual, with Spring and Autumn editions. We welcome contributions and photos from our members. Email the editor: [news.monmeadows@gmail.com](mailto:news.monmeadows@gmail.com)
- ♦ If you are new to MMG and would like to become a member, you will find details on how to join on our website: [monmouthshiremeadows.org.uk](http://monmouthshiremeadows.org.uk)
- ♦ Follow us on social media: Facebook and Instagram



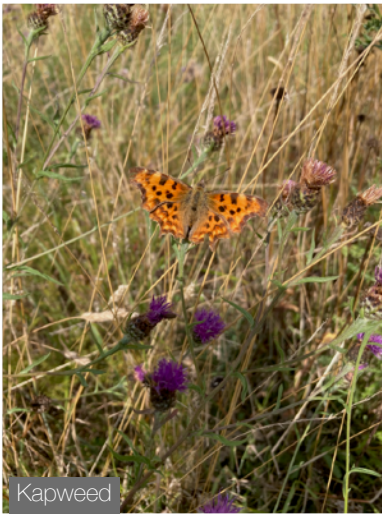




Bird's-foot Trefoil at Wet Meadow/ Dick Coates



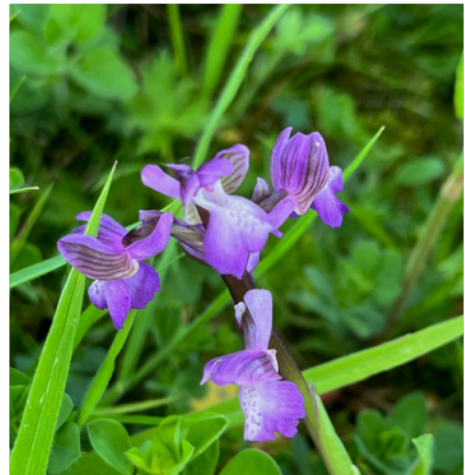
Hedgehog / Annette Langlois



Kapweed



Sundew at Box Bush/ Antonin



Green-winged Orchid/Rhian Williams-Flew



Hay turning/ Clare Adamson



Cat's-ear/Clare Adamson



Cowslips / Steve Howselitz



Devil's-bit Scabious/Sally Jones