

## MFS outing to Pont Llogel, 3rd October 2016

It was a great relief to see the sun shining on the morning of 3rd October, as the previous day had been very wet and much cooler than of late. 33 members, including two joining us for the first time, met at the car-park in the tiny hamlet of Pont Llogel, in the Dyfnant Forest, about three miles north of Llangadfan and south-east of Lake Vyrnwy. We picnicked in the sunshine beside the River Vyrnwy, surrounded by its prettily wooded valley which has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest due to its wide range of interesting plants.

We were very pleased to be able to welcome back Neville Thomas, who has for several years led autumn fungus forays for the Society. It was also good to have bryologist Mark Lawley with us, as well as a newcomer to our outings, Dewi Roberts, whose passion for the geomorphology and ecology of the river was very much in evidence during our visit.

With a choice of walks and areas of interest there was certainly something for everyone - in fact some of us found it difficult to decide what to look at first as there was so much to learn from our various 'leaders'. The riverside path towards Pontrobert forms part of the Ann Griffiths Way, and includes sections of exposed rocks along the way, which are particularly interesting botanically. Kate Thorne led a group of us eager to see a few of Montgomeryshire's rarer plants, which included Mountain Melick (*Melica nutans*) with its 'fat spikelets' containing more than one floret, growing on the rock face, and a good stand of Lesser Meadow-Rue (*Thalictrum minus*) beneath the outcrop. As Kate has previously made detailed records of the flora of this monad, she then headed to the other side of the road with Gill Foulkes to record the less well-recorded area south and south-west of Pont Llogel, where they made impressive lists of the flora they found.

The same base-rich cliff beside the path was also the most interesting habitat bryologically, and amongst other mosses, Mark found lush green cushions of Mougeot's Amphidium Moss (*Amphidium mougeotii*), as well as much Frizzled Crisp-moss (*Tortella tortuosa*), Variable Crisp-moss (*Trichostomum brachydontium*) and Curly Crisp-moss (*T. crispulum*). Four species of liverworts were also observed. Interestingly, the stream also produced mosses and liverworts, including the aquatic species Long-beaked Water Feathermoss (*Platyhypnidium riparioides*) and Snakeskin Liverwort (*Conocephalum conicum*).

Neville was accompanied by an enthusiastic group of fungus hunters, and was delighted with what they found, declaring this 'one of the best places for fungi I've seen'. As well as the more familiar species such as the aptly named Candle-snuff (*Xylaria hypoxylon*), Sulphur Tuft (*Hypholoma fasciculare*) and the bracket Turkeytail (*Coriolus versicolor*), he introduced us to several species new to us, including the spectacular and rare Blood-red Webcap (*Cortinarius sanguineus*). It was fascinating watching him use his sense of smell to aid identification, and we all agreed that the False Deathcap (*Amanita citrina*) certainly does smell of raw potato! Another Amanita we spotted can be identified by eye alone - the wart-covered, scarlet-capped Fly Agaric (*A. muscaria*), reminiscent of childhood story books, and well known as a poisonous species. However, it is apparently used as a hallucinogen and intoxicant by the Lapps, who dry it and then swallow it without chewing, before experiencing dizziness, a death-like sleep and vivid hallucinations. It is said that they may have picked up the habit through observing the effects of the fungus on reindeer, which are similarly affected! It's certainly safer to stick to species such as the Cep or Penny Bun (*Boletus edulis*), which as its name suggests is perfect for eating, and is often on sale in continental markets. The large specimen we found had certainly been nibbled, but presumably by a much smaller mammal than us.

Several members, particularly the birdwatchers, ventured further along the river towards Dolanog, and between them recorded 29 species. Among the more unusual was a cormorant, and another sought-after water bird, the dipper. A pair of grey wagtails performed their characteristic undulating flight, as they flitted up and down the river sporting their soft blue-grey backs and their yellowish rumps, and bobbing their tails as they landed. Unfortunately, although kingfishers are seen regularly here they didn't oblige on this occasion. Probably the most unexpected sighting was the two redwings seen by Michael, which turned out to be the first records for the county this autumn, and were soon to be posted as such on the Montgomeryshire Bird Blog.

A group of eager members followed Dewi enthusiastically as he walked the riverside path, describing the features of the river as we came across them. It was interesting to note the differences in the channel, which proved a mixture of bedrock and alluvial deposits, each area supporting different flora and fauna according to their needs. He explained that a lot of nutrients pass down the river, termed 'drift', and that these are vital for filter-feeders such as blackfly larvae. We later observed these larvae, attached to rocks by patches of spun silk which act as anchors from which the larvae can loop to feed. The confluence of Nant Llwydiarth and the River Vyrnwy proved an excellent spot for observing all aspects of the river. An alluvial fan provided us with an ideal platform from which to peer into the water - the variety of easily visible fauna was surprising, and in a few minutes, we had recorded river skaters, water measurers, water beetles, swimming mayfly nymphs, freshwater shrimps, flattened mayfly nymphs, cased caddis fly larvae, annelids, bull-heads and even a pair of adult caddis-flies mating on one of our group's wellies! Venturing a little way up Nant Llwydiarth, Dewi taught us the technique of kick-sampling, which involves placing a long-handled net downstream of a suitably stony area in the stream, and then kicking the stones to dislodge any creatures which are then carried into the net. At least, that is the theory! It was certainly entertaining trying to perfect the art, and after several tries, and varying success, most of us had something to show for our efforts. Armed with white plastic trays, margarine tubs, spoons and identification sheets, we found most of the creatures already listed. Several caddis fly larvae were identified, displaying a variety of cases made from stone, sticks or leaves glued together with a silk secreted from glands around the mouth. On turning over a large stone, Dewi revealed the next stage in the life cycle of the caddis fly - a pupation shelter, made of larger stones than the larval cases.

As we headed back for a welcome tea at Llwydiarth Church Hall, we were surprised to see that river levels and flow had increased dramatically, and there was no sign of the alluvial fan we'd been standing on only an hour or so earlier. This was first hand evidence of the way in which, as Dewi had explained, the channel is constantly changing, sometimes very quickly.

Even back at the hall, there was more to record - Mark noticed a patch of the common moss, *Barbula sardoa* on a mortared wall, whilst indoors the displays of fungi we'd collected plus an assortment of books relating to aquatic invertebrates enabled us to share our findings, as we enjoyed a seemingly endless supply of tea, sandwiches and cakes kindly provided by the ladies of Llwydiarth W.I.

Sue Southam

