Gilfach Nature Reserve, Radnorshire Wildlife Trust 2/9/26

Organisers: Julie Pearce and Jane Phillips

September's outing gave members a chance to venture beyond Montgomeryshire, by slipping just over the border into Radnorshire to visit a nature reserve that many members had either visited a long time ago or always wanted to visit.

Once a working hill farm in the beautiful Marteg Valley near Rhaeadr, Gilfach is now a spectacular Nature Reserve, covering 166 hectares and managed by Radnorshire Wildlife Trust. The variety of habitat it contains - grassland, woodland, wetlands and heathland - make it home to an enormous variety of wildlife and way-marked trails allow easy access throughout the Reserve.

Over 30 members attended the trip, arriving very promptly at the Gateway carpark just off the A470 in order to get into as few cars as possible for the final trip deep into the reserve. By the time we parked at the Old Farmyard we were already a world away from the busy road and it felt like a step back in time. Glimpses of old farming equipment scattered around the yard brought back memories for many members.

We were met at the byre by Rhodri Blakeway (Radnorshire Wildlife Trust) who gave us an introduction to the site and showed us clips of Pine Martens from his camera traps. Videos by Iolo Williams and Ray Woods were also available in the longhouse, which dates back to the 16th century. Members ate lunch in the dry before venturing out on the trails. The weather wasn't particularly promising, but we were still able to enjoy the spectacular views and the special atmosphere of the valley.

Most of the group headed along the Oak Wood walk, a short circular trail, which took us through moss and lichen clad woodland. One member pointed out a badger trail crossing the path, and its claw marks in the moss at the bottom of a tree. We saw lots of interesting fungi on dead wood – one looked like liquorice/Pontefract cakes and turned out to be Black Bulgar (Bulgaria inquinans). Rhodri had told us that the wildlife trust was attempting to veteranise some of the trees in the woodland. The Rowan trees were covered in berries, and very tall & thin in places as they competed with the tall oaks. We also spotted a froglet, and heard a Greater Spotted Woodpecker and Goldcrests.

Many members also followed the trail down by the River Marteg, to enjoy the waterfalls and marvel at the shapes the water had created in the mudstone[i]. It was hard to believe that the Mid Wales Railway used to run through this valley on its journey from Llanidloes to Brecon – with the railway bridge by the dipper hide one of the signs left in the landscape. In the meadows only a few flowers were left after the hot summer, but it was nice to see Bird's Foot Trefoil, Greater Knapweed and Harebells along the way. Mark Thomas & Dave Chester-Master walked along the trail of the old railway track south of the Marteg and saw a roe deer, field mushrooms and Common mallow.

On the walk back up to the Old Farmyard, we spotted a Robin, Chaffinch and Great tit, and there were Goldfinches crossing the fields. On the side of the steep lane there was also a very old looking Silver Birch with interesting holes in the bark near the base. Mature trees are targeted by the Welsh Clearwing moth whose caterpillars feed inside the living wood of older silver birch trees. The fields were dotted with ant hills, home to thousands of yellow meadow ants, and there were brief glimpses of moths and butterflies, with a possible Clouded Yellow from the viewpoint behind the Old Farmyard.

Tea was enjoyed at the Village Tea Rooms in Llangurig, who provided plentiful food and drink and a space to dry out and share our experiences of the day. Everyone was very keen to return to Gilfach again in different seasons

Many thanks to Radnorshire Wildlife Trust for hosting us (a donation was made on behalf of MFS), Mark Thomas and Dave Chester-Master for their help with signs & parking, and to everyone that came, despite the weather, and was so good-natured about car-sharing.

Report by Julie Pearce

i*If you are interested in finding out more about river potholes, the river man Dewi Roberts is co-author of a wonderful book full of amazing pictures: River and the Rock, The River Potholes of Wales, by Dewi Roberts, Hywel Griffiths & Stephen Tooth (also available in Welsh).*