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NATURE RAMBLINGS (8) WINTER

Hi again to you all. Well, what a wet and muddy winter we have had so far. Along with the restrictions we are all under it is understandable why people find it difficult to be positive. However, continuing with our daily walks has certainly helped.

Winter doesn't throw up as many obvious natural features of flora and fauna to photograph but it does give us the chance to observe the changes to them and our landscape.

For instance, if you slow down on your walks you can take note of the differing types of mosses. Mosses are part of a group of plants known as bryophytes with over 1,000 found in the UK. They are important ecologically as one of the first colonisers of bare ground. They absorb huge quantities of water (they can't complain this winter!), helping to soak up rainfall and create a locally humid environment. They also act as an important home for other creatures. These are mainly invertebrates and include species like woodlice and slugs. Current conditions are ideal to spot different mosses. We have included just a couple within these notes.

As we near the end of winter, look out for crocuses pushing their way through the soil. Hawthorn leaves will start to appear and, of course lots of song thrushes, mistle thrushes, blackbirds and robins will be in full voice.

Our friends the herons in Dibbinsdale will, like rooks, begin building their nests before winter ends to get a head start on the seasons. Also, frogs will come out of hibernation. Generally, the land will start waking up and we can look forward to spring.

Don't forget that clocks go forward on 28th March giving us an extra hour of daylight as we approach spring. Happy walking!

Remember, you can click inside any of the photographs and 'drag' them to expand the picture.



Bold Street Gingerbread!!

It was quite hard to get into a festive mood at Christmas but did you see this gingerbread creation in the shop window of Ropes and Twines in Bold Street during December? It certainly helped lift the spirit.



Milestones

The Romans laid good metalled roads and they measured distance to aid timing and efficiency, possibly marking every thousandth double-step with a large cylindrical stone. The Latin for thousand was 'mille' and the distance was 1618 yards; the eventual British standard mile was 1760 yards.

'Milestone' is a generic term, including mileposts made of cast iron. Such waymarkers are fast disappearing, most were removed or defaced in World War II to baffle potential German invaders. Many have been demolished as roads have been widened, or have been victims of collision damage, or have been smashed by hedge-cutters or flails.

Nowadays, roadside milestones generally fall within the remit of the local Highways Authority or the Highways Agency and their contractors. This one is at the junction of Gourleys Lane, West Kirby, showing distances to Heswall and West Kirby; dated 1896, Cheshire County Council.



Holly

Another regular festive sight. A well-loved shrub that shelters birds and gives hedgehogs a cosy place to hibernate.

Holly branches have long been used to decorate homes in winter. The tree was seen as a fertility symbol and a charm against witches, goblins and the devil. It was thought to be unlucky to cut down a holly tree.



Thundersnow

Who had ever heard of thundersnow before its occurrence in Edinburgh on 4th December?

This rare phenomenon happens when thunderstorms develop in the winter and prompt a heavy downpour of snow.

The snow is accompanied by thunder and lightning like in a typical storm.



Cloud Formations

We couldn't help but notice some fantastic cloud formations on the sunnier days this winter.

Cirrus is a genus of atmospheric cloud generally characterized by thin, wispy strands, giving the type its name from the Latin word cirrus, meaning a ringlet or curling lock of hair.



Snowdrops

Snowdrops apparently, are one of the first signs that winter is drawing to an end. As a result, the flower has long been viewed as a symbol of hope for better times ahead.

However, we saw these on 28th January and plenty of others. They are also supposed to indicate that warmer weather is on the way. We suspect that these have been caught out by a milder winter.



Malus Floribunda (Japanese crab apple)

We saw these along Levers Causeway during December, still fruiting while the weather was still mild.

Birds will feed on the fruit, particularly robins, starlings, greenfinches and thrushes.



Hazel Catkins

The Common Hazel is easy to identify in winter because it bears male catkins which open to release pollen at any time between late December and late April. The pollen is wind dispersed.

The catkin turns yellow and looks like this when it is open to release pollen. If you flick the catkin with your finger it will release a yellow dust consisting of fine pollen grains. Each grain contains male DNA.

Hazel is often one of the earliest native trees to come into leaf and one of the last to drop its leaves in Autumn and perhaps the length of its growing season is one of the reasons why in Celtic mythology, Hazel was the Tree of Immortal Wisdom and in Ireland, the Tree of Knowledge.



Winter Jasmine

Winter jasmine is originally from China and Tibet, where it was 'discovered' by the Scottish plant hunter, Robert Fortune, in 1843.

Once in the UK, winter jasmine remained on China time, flowering from November to March.

Unlike many jasmines, winter-flowering jasmine has no scent. It is said to be a symbol of elegance and grace.



Arum Italicum (Lords and Ladies)

Arum italicum is a species of flowering herbaceous perennial plant, also known as Italian arum and Italian lords-and-ladies.

It grows 30–46 cm (1–1.5 ft) high, with equal spread. It blooms in spring with white flowers that turn to showy red fruit (see our Autumn nature notes).



Echinops Seed Head

This is the seed-head of the lovely lilac/blue echinops that we featured in nature notes 5.

In its winter form the derivation of its name becomes a bit more obvious: from the Greek words “echinos” (hedgehog) and “opis” (appearance).

It is a genus of flowering plants in the daisy family Asteraceae, commonly known as globe thistles.

The dried seed-heads of this plant are ideal for flower arranging.



Echinops continued

Whilst photographing the above, we disturbed some seed-heads thereby revealing some over-wintering ladybirds.

Echinops provide lots of nooks and crannies for various insects.



Erica

The Latin word erica means "heath" or "broom".

This plant has needle-like leaves and blooms from July to November. We saw this on Heswall dales back in November.

The 'bell' of this bell-heather is in fact four petals fused together.



Dog Fish Egg Case

Down from the dales and onto the beach we soon found many of these egg cases lying on the sand.

Commonly named 'Mermaid's Purses', they contain the eggs or young of the Lesser-spotted Dogfish lying amongst the debris on the tideline. These egg capsules that have been dislodged after being laid by the adult female dogfish are doomed to perish.

Folklore tells us that these charmingly-named curiosities are mislaid handbags, the lost personal belongings of mermaids.



Sea Beet

Sea beet is found round the coasts of England, Wales, Ireland and southern Scotland. It grows at the top of sand and pebble beaches, at the drift-line on saltmarshes, on sea-walls, coastal rocks and cliffs.

It is the wild ancestor of common vegetables such as beetroot, sugar beet, and Swiss chard. Its leaves have a pleasant texture and taste good served raw or cooked, and because of this, it is also known as wild spinach.



Silhouettes

Silhouettes are the dark shape and outline of someone or something visible in restricted light against a brighter background.



Silhouettes

Before the age of the photograph, the silhouette, either cut from paper or painted, was the most affordable portrait that could be made. The art enjoyed a golden age in the second half of the 18th and first half of the 19th centuries, when many people collected them.

Although silhouettes were well-loved, the man for whom they were named was not: Étienne de Silhouette was France's finance minister under Louis XV and was notorious for both his frugality and his hobby of making cut-paper shadow portraits. The phrase *à la Silhouette* came to mean "on the cheap," and portraits like the ones he produced were (satirically) bestowed with his name as well.



Silhouettes

With the early fading of sunlight during winter there have been some fantastic opportunities to see some great silhouettes around Wirral. Differing colours of skylight add to the backdrop.



Wood Ears Fungus

The wood ear looks just like an ear growing off decaying branches. Found in damp, shady conditions, on trees like elder and beech. We saw these in Storeton woods. Also known as 'Judas' ear' alluding to the fact that they appear mostly on elder – the tree that Judas hanged himself on after betraying Jesus to his executioners. The legend is that the 'ears' which emerge from elder wood represent his tormented soul.



Cracking Mud

After all the rain we have been having lately you will see plenty mud cracking examples.

Naturally forming mud cracks start as wet, muddy sediment which then dries up and contracts.

Naturally occurring mud cracks form in sediment that was once saturated with water. Mud cracks can also be indicative of a predominately sunny or shady environment. Rapid drying, which occurs in sunny environments, results in widely spaced, irregular mud cracks, while closer spaced, more regular mud cracks indicate that they were formed in a shady place.

Similar features also occur in frozen ground.



Mud

Sticking with mud (!!??) We hope that you have been reporting any boggy or impassable footpaths to Keith Morris, our footpaths officer. Keith is compiling a list of them to report onwards to Wirral Council in the hope that future improvements can be made.



Robin

This little fellow quite obligingly posed for us and we took several photos. He told us that this was his best side!

Robins have been associated with Christmas ever since Victorian times; Victorian postmen, who were known as 'Robin Red-breasts' because of their red waistcoats, are thought to be the inspiration for so many robins appearing on our Christmas cards.



Snow

The one thing we in Wirral have been spared so far is the large amount of snow other areas have been experiencing. We had a small fall during the night of 23rd January with further snow on the 24th. It lay on the ground just long enough to take some photos but quickly disappeared. We don't know about you, but we hope it stays away.

Snow comprises of individual ice crystals that grow while suspended in the atmosphere, usually within clouds and then fall, accumulating on the ground.

The seven most common English words for snow are snow, hail, sleet, ice, icicle, slush, and snowflake.



View from summit of Riverhill Park

We recently visited on a lovely sunny day. The park, which opened in 2014, provides visitors with a scenic waterfront and a variety of walks giving stunning views across the Mersey to Liverpool's waterfront. A section of wetland to the north of the site, along with River Mersey mud flats is an important site for large populations of water birds and is a site of special protection.



Swan's-neck thyme moss.

This is one of the most common mosses and is especially abundant in woodland. It can be found in clumps up to 4cm-tall growing on tree bases, rotting wood, peat and rock ledges in acidic conditions. We saw this example on a stone wall in Town Lane Bebington.



Common striated feather-moss

This fairly common moss forms cushions or mats that may cover a large area. It favours long-established woodland where it grows on the ground and around stones, particularly on base-rich soils, such as in ash woodlands. It also grows in hedge banks, rocky ground and on rock ledges as long as they are not exposed to full sun.



Sunsets

So, we will finish these notes with a photo of one of the lovely sunsets we have been gifted with this winter.

As it turns out, sunsets are, in fact, better during the colder months of the year according to a meteorologist. At sunset, light has to travel through a greater distance of atmosphere to reach our eyes so even more blue light, and even some green and yellow light, gets filtered out.



Congratulations to **Linda Starkey** whose caption was voted the winner of the previous competition with:

“Oops must have used the wrong stencil - wonder if anyone will notice?!!”

Well done Linda. Please let us know who you want us to donate your bottle of wine to 😊 Ha Ha!



Caption Competition.

WATERGATE – THE SEQUEL!!

Please think of a caption for this photograph and send it to me or Sue by March 28th. We will let you know the winning entry next time.



No, we haven't grown to eight foot! Low sun equals long shadows. Also, cold weather equals hats, coats and gloves, Brrr!!

We hope you enjoy reading these notes as much as we did putting them together. If you would like to send us a photo you take during the next couple of months for inclusion in our next effort, please do or send them via Sue.

Thanks for reading, until the next time....

All the best,

Helen and Gordon.