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NATURE RAMBLINGS (11)

Hi to Mid-Summer 2022,

It is eight months since our last notes and, although we hoped to continue them on an ad-hoc basis, we seemed to have gone into a prolonged hibernation!

However, we were gently awoken by a request to produce some more, and this is our latest effort.

As mentioned in previous notes, the lockdowns allowed us to follow nature around Wirral for over a full year and therefore we covered a full cycle of flora and fauna.

Future notes will attempt not to repeat what we have produced previously and will be more observational; taken from whatever we see on walks, mainly around Wirral plus pertinent topics that crop up from various sources. As always, we welcome any input from other members.

These notes and photos are largely from our walks since November with some emphasis to reflect what has gone on during this period. Thankfully, we have been fairly unaffected by covid and were able to get out frequently.

August is upon us, and the evening walks programme will end with this year's final walk on the 30th. Why not try and join one or two of these walks before the evenings draw in. We may see you there.

All the best,

Helen and Gordon.



Storms

Arwen, Barra, Corrie, Dudley, Eunice, Franklin, we certainly took a battering from storms during winter last. Everywhere over Wirral the damage caused was obvious.

A storm is given a name when it has the potential to cause an amber or red weather warning. It is to help make communicating about storms easier, with human names being more memorable than a number or a date and time.



Munch

Another instance of pareidolia. Helen thought that this tree trunk was reminiscent of Edvard Munch's painting 'The Scream'.

The painting is autobiographical, an expressionistic construction based on Munch's actual experience of a scream piercing through nature while on a walk (I think we've all been on walks like that!).

The 1895 pastel-on-board version of the painting was sold at Sotheby's for a record US\$120 million at auction on 2 May 2012. Any offers for this one?



Robin

We've been accompanied by lots of robins this year. Always welcome.

The UK's favourite bird - with its bright red breast it is familiar throughout the year. They eat worms, seeds, fruits, insects and other invertebrates.

Robins sing nearly all year round and despite their cute appearance, they are aggressively territorial and are quick to drive away intruders. They will sing at night next to street lights.



Pigeon Loft

People have kept pigeons for at least 5,000 years in almost every part of the world. In that time, humans have substantially altered the morphology and the behaviour of the domesticated descendants of the rock dove to suit their needs for food, aesthetic satisfaction and entertainment.

Houses for pigeons are generally called lofts, sometimes referred to as "coops" although the word seems to have originally applied to the breeding pens inside the housing.

This example is near the grounds of Chester Cathedral.



Weathervane

Weathervanes were used as early as the first century B.C. in ancient Greece. Cockerels were commonly used as weathervanes on churches in both Europe and America for hundreds of years.

A weathervane is also called a wind vane or weathercock. This is a device used to show the direction from which the wind blows. Traditionally, weathervanes are mounted on taller structures, including houses and barns. The reason weathervanes are posted in high locations is to prevent interference and to catch the purest breezes.

Cockerels are useful as wind vanes because their tail is the perfect shape to catch the wind. Symbolically, the cockerel is the first to see the rising sun and announce the day. It represents the victory of light over darkness while warding off evil. Our example however, as you can see, is a ram! At Hargrave Farm, Keepers Lane, Storeton.



Dried out crops

A typical sight on our walks recently. The high temperatures and lack of rainfall has caused farmers anxiety with crops across large swathes of the country showing signs of drought-stress. Cereal yields can be dramatically affected. In turn, this causes higher prices for the consumer.

As we write, there has, at last, been some rain. Let's hope that it will help.



Field Maple – Acer Campestre

The Field Acer is the UK's only native maple. It is a fantastic looking deciduous tree. It is a pollution fighter and syrup maker. The field maple is a sturdy broadleaf which supports caterpillars, aphids, and all their predators, all whilst resisting air pollution.

An easy way to distinguish the field maple is by the leaves, which are much more rounded than those of the sycamore (see below).



Field Maple continued:

The leaves of the Field Maple are small, dark green and shiny, with five lobes and rounded teeth. They fade to a rich, golden yellow before falling in autumn.

The flowers appear to be hermaphrodite, meaning that both male and female reproductive parts are contained within one flower. The flowers are small, yellow-green, cup-shaped and hang in clusters.

After pollination by insects, flowers develop into large, winged fruits which are dispersed by wind.

Field maple produces the hardest timber of all European maples.



Blackthorn Hedging

We saw this fine example of Blackthorn hedging back in April. It is now a familiar sight all across the English countryside, as its long, prickly thorns have made it popular with farmers who want to create natural, stock-proof barriers. Blackthorns make dense, impenetrable hedges that carry pure white flowers on their bare branches in March, which are followed by bluish berries, known as sloes. (See also Nature notes no 9)



Millipede

Millipedes are cylindrical or slightly flattened invertebrates. They're not insects—they're actually more closely related to lobsters, shrimp, and crayfish. The word "millipede" translates to "a thousand feet"—but while millipedes have many feet, none of them quite have a thousand. Most species actually have fewer than a hundred. Millipede bodies are split into a number of segments, and each segment has two sets of legs that attach to the body's underside. Millipedes look very different from their centipede cousins, which have one set of legs per segment that stick out to the body's sides.

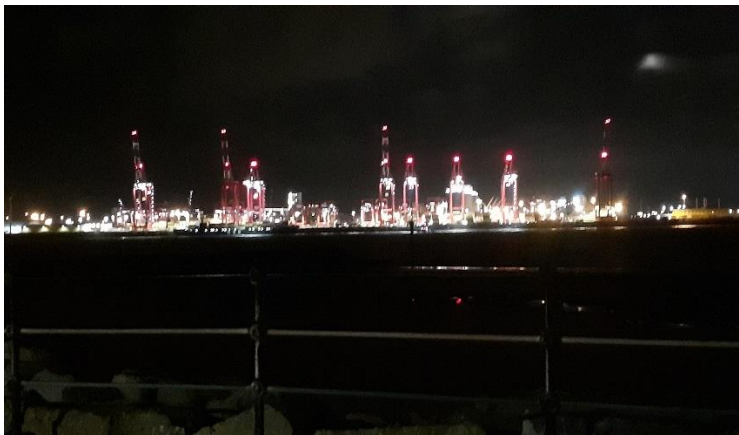


Bull

We saw this magnificent feature on a gate post whilst out walking recently. We wondered if it is an ornamental tether ring. What do you think, and have you seen it? Where is it? (* Answer at the bottom of these notes)

Tether rings would have been used to tie up small farm animals, such as sheep and goats, allowing them to graze unfenced areas. Of course, they are used for horses as well.

Another use for tether rings that you may come across are those for small boats and on canals. Often the ring is embedded in a large stone.



Mersey at night

Most of us will have seen these giant cranes across the River Mersey at Seaforth Dock's container terminal. They originally came from China 13,000 miles away. The cranes took 49 days to get to Liverpool. They set off from Nantong, near Shanghai passing India and Arabia and going through the Suez Canal on their journey to the Mersey.

They certainly make a striking spectacle on a clear night!



Pink Purslane (Candy Flower)

The plant was introduced into the United Kingdom by the 18th century, where it has become widespread.

It is found in moist woods, it has five white, candy-striped, or pink petals; flowering is typically between February and August, but some plants continue to bloom late into autumn.



China Plate Farm

This carving greets you when you visit China Plate Farm in Newton, West Kirby.

An adjacent plain brick farmhouse dated 1753, has a circular plate or medallion of Liverpool China set in the wall. The plate is designed with a crest, initials and date.

The China plate is a date stone which reads "T E I 1753" (for Thomas Johnson - Johnson was mayor of Liverpool in 1766).

There doesn't seem to be a lot written about this place in local history, but we recommend the sausages if you call in at their shop!!



Sawfly larvae on Solomon's Seal

Sawfly wasp larvae are plant eaters. Most resemble caterpillars in general appearance and also in damage.

Sawflies got their name from their ovipositor – the egg-laying apparatus at the end of the female's abdomen. When the female is ready to lay eggs she uses the ovipositor to saw a slit in a leaf, needle or stem. Eggs are then deposited into the slit.



Ivy flowering fruits with feeding wasps

Only mature plants produce flowers being yellowish green appearing in small, dome-shaped clusters (umbels). Nectar, pollen and berries of ivy are an essential food source for insects and birds during autumn and winter when little else is about. It provides shelter for insects, birds, bats and other small mammals. The high fat content of the berries is a nutritious food resource for many birds including thrushes, blackcaps, woodpigeons and blackbirds. Ivy is particularly important to many insects before they go into hibernation. Some of the insect species which forage on the nectar and pollen of ivy are bees, hoverflies and common wasps'



Rights of Way

Was it the weather causing these trees to fall across our path blocking the way or did the owner really not want to let us pass?

Whatever the reason, if you come across problems with accessing or using public rights of way please inform our footpaths officer.



Scarlet Waxcap

The Scarlet Waxcap is one of the smaller red waxcaps. It can grow in large numbers in the right conditions and can be found in several different environments.

Being fairly rare and small this beautiful mushroom, although edible, is better to admire and photograph than to pick for any reason unless found in very large numbers.

We saw these on a walk up to the Hospice in Grange Over Sands.



Primrose

The primrose is distinguished from other species of *Primula* by its pale-yellow flowers produced singly on long flower stalks which are covered in rather shaggy hairs. The flowers open flat rather than concave as in the case of the cowslip.

Both flowers and leaves are edible, the flavour ranging between mild lettuce and more bitter salad greens.



Germander Speedwell

Many speedwells such as the pale blue Slender Speedwell and Common Field Speedwell were brought over from Asia by the Victorians. Our most common native variety is the Germander Speedwell, also known as "Bird's Eye". Germander derives from the Greek word *chamandra* - meaning 'oak on the ground'.

Vernacular names for Germander speedwell include Cat's eye, Eye of the child Jesus, Farewell, Goodbye. In the 18th Century they also became known for curing gout and dried leaves were used for tea.

Travellers in years gone by appreciated its bright blue petals and in Ireland it was sewn into clothes as a charm to protect against accidents.



Canada Goose

The Canada goose is a large wild goose with a black head and neck, white cheeks, white under its chin, and a brown body.

Extremely adept at living in human-altered areas, Canada geese have established breeding colonies in urban and cultivated habitats, which provide food and few natural predators. Believe it or not, we saw this one and others at Bramley-Moore Dock next to the new Everton stadium development.



Rewilding

Wirral Borough Council has continued this year with its policy of rewilding and there is plenty of evidence of this. The idea is to provide opportunities to encourage wildflowers to grow and to protect and encourage insects, such as bees, butterflies and moths.

Along with this, their Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy provides for over 210,000 trees to be planted over 10 years. The trees that are planted will see Wirral's tree canopy cover doubled by the time they are fully grown.



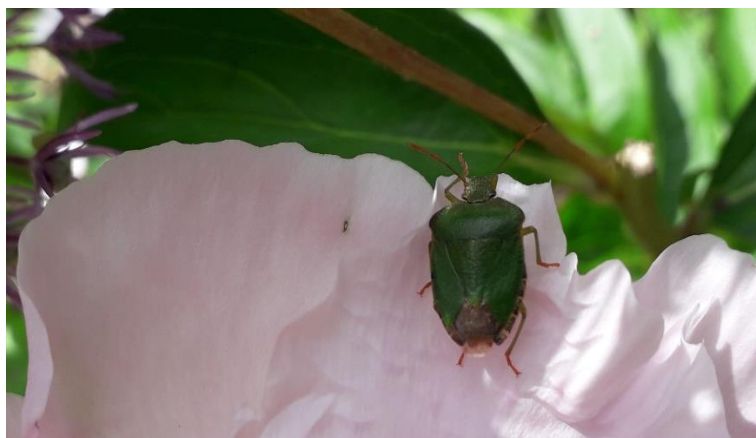
Hawthorn

Hawthorn is a very undemanding tree and grows almost anywhere, in rock crevices and other unreachable places. It is the most common tree or shrub planted in hedges.

Over 200 plant-eating insects depend on hawthorn. The ecological value of the tree is very high because it provides protection and food for many animals.

The flower is white and has a single pistil and 5 petals. It is similar to the wild cherry flower (they are from the same family). The fruit, or haw, is dark red with one seed. They remain on the branches until the following spring (unless they are eaten).

You may find many single hawthorns on farmland. Farmers sometimes won't cut them down. They believe it is bad luck to do this. These trees were under the protection of fairies and, if the 'fairy tree' was killed, the fairy might seek revenge.



Green Shield Bug on Peony

A Shield Bug is named after the shield-like shape of the adults. There are more than 40 species of shield bug in the UK, some of which are common in gardens. All shield bugs feed on plant sap although most cause no damage and are part of the garden ecosystem.

Green shield bugs are part of the natural diversity of gardens and should be encouraged. There's no need to get rid of them



Bouquet of wildflowers

From the dazzling bluebells that cover ancient woodland in the spring to the bright meadows bursting with buttercups in the summer, wildflowers are what make our woods so beautiful, while providing precious nectar for invertebrates.

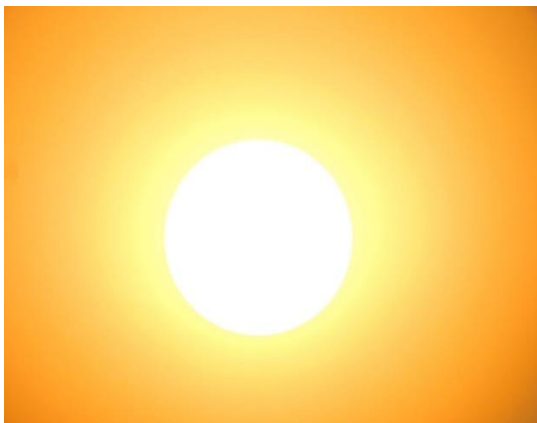


Beech Nuts

Hints of the approach of autumn are growing stronger by the day, none more so than the rapid swelling of mast.

'Mast' is a word with many shades of meaning. Essentially mast is an umbrella term to cover all of the fruits of the forests. Some people use the word to refer specifically to acorns and beech nuts; others broaden it to include other forest bounty like apples.

Beech mast is also known as beechnuts. The nuts are small in size, roughly triangular in shape and are edible. Each nut is contained in, and protected by, a spiny husk or burr. When the nut ripens it falls to the ground from its protective husk. It is edible and while rich in fat and oil it is bitter, even astringent, and unpleasant to human taste.



Temperatures

For the first time on record temperatures in the UK have exceeded 40°C. Great for walking!! A provisional temperature of 40.3°C was recorded at Coningsby, Lincolnshire on the 19th of July.

The increase in the frequency, duration, and intensity of these events over recent decades is clearly linked to the observed warming of the planet and can be attributed to human activity. The chances of seeing 40°C days in the UK could be as much as 10 times more likely in the current climate than under a natural climate unaffected by human influence..... Get those knotted hankies out!



Isn't that always the way!!



So, you have reached the end of our latest batch of nature notes.
Well done!

We will set about looking for candidates for the next edition and,
in the meantime, hope that you are all able to get out and about
and enjoy our unbeatable countryside.

Until the next time.

All the best,

Helen and Gordon.

*The bull is on the gatepost of one of the cottages in Brimstage Lane, Clatterbridge near Brimstage Village Day Nursery.