

CARMARTHENSHIRE

Nature Notes

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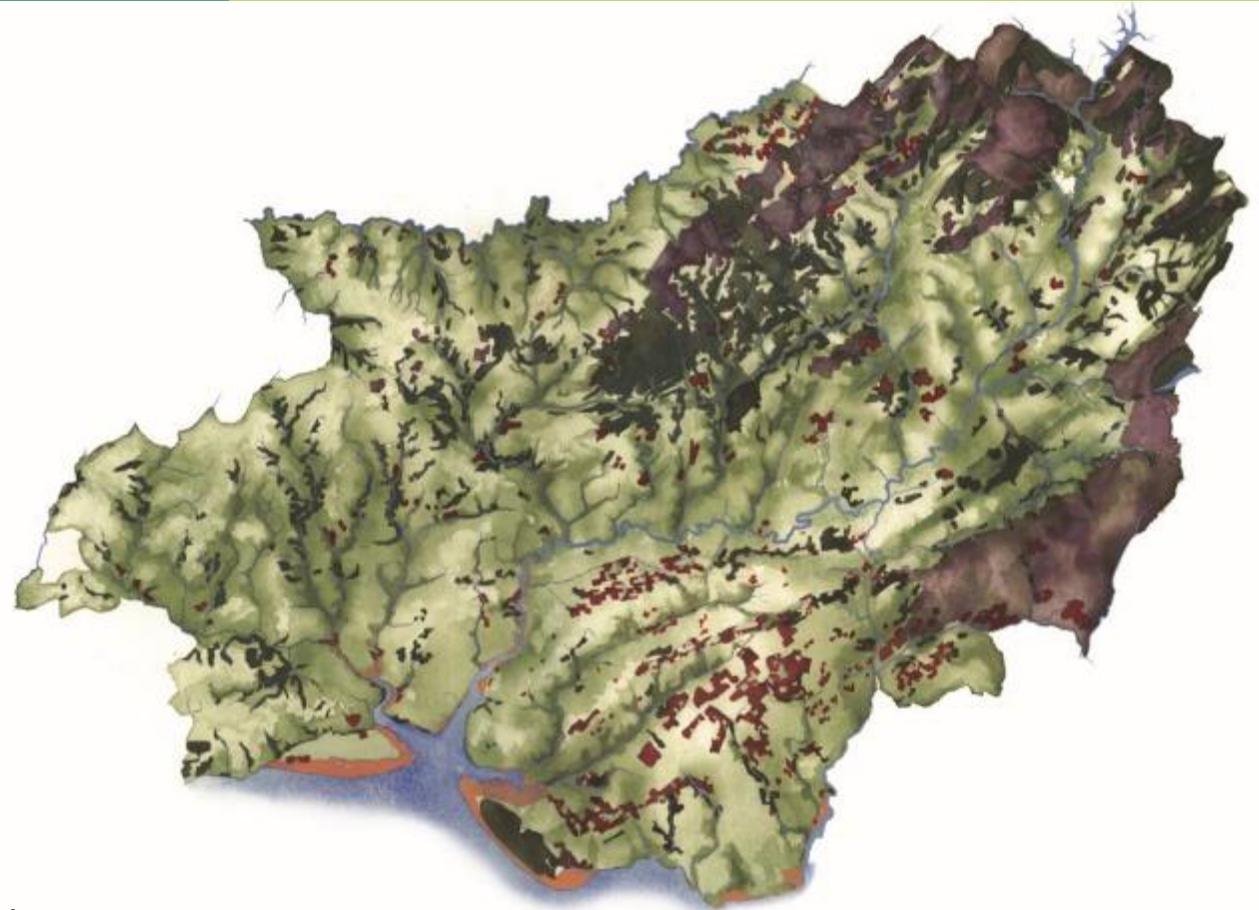
JANUARY-MARCH 2021

Carmarthenshire has some wonderful wildlife. These 'Nature Notes' are some highlights to encourage us all to take a closer look around us – even the common is special. Seen anything interesting – then why not send us a photo?



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For more information about nature in the county then read our Nature Recovery Plan:
carmarthenshire.gov.wales/biodiversity



Send your photos to: Biodiversity@carmarthenshire.gov.uk



Winter

During another lockdown winter might have seemed especially long this year. It's been very cold at times and most of the county has had some snow. However, in a cold winter landscape there is still plenty to see and hear.

Spiders can make webs all year round and one here has taken its chances. Light snow on has fallen on a web making it bow slightly and highlighting the delicacy of the web structure.

Hogweed helps wildlife all year round. In the autumn and winter its seeds are a food source for birds and its hollow stems can be hibernation sites for overwintering invertebrates. When we are out and about on a winter walk its frosted flowerheads decorate our roadsides.

A winter walk in woodlands can be revealing. With no leaves on the trees every sound is clearer, and you can see birds that you would never catch sight of in summer.



Left to right – squirrel, cat and deer footprints.

Footprints in the snow...

... can reveal to us the wildlife that has passed by in the quiet of a wintery landscape. By taking a closer look at footprints you can tell who has been active in the area (muddy footprints work as well!).

When you look at tracks think about the following:

- How many toes can you see? E.g. badgers have five toes on the back and front, where as foxes, cats and dogs have four. Some species such as rats, mice and squirrels have four toes on the front and five on the back.
- Is it a front or back foot?
- What size is the print? To help identification it's always useful, when photographing a footprint to put something next to it for scale.
- Can you see claws? Cats keep their claws withdrawn when walking (see above centre)
- Is the paw print symmetrical, e.g. fox.



Juniper haircap moss

This is likely to be Juniper haircap (*Polytrichum juniperinum*) moss. This moss grows in a variety of habitats but here it is growing on an exposed rocky tump. The male plants have very conspicuous, reddish-orange, modified leaves forming small terminal 'flowers' at the shoot ends. Juniper haircap moss has a well-developed system of tiny tubes for carrying water from the rhizoids (comparable to plant root hairs) to leaves that is not typical of mosses, more resembling the system that has evolved in vascular plants.



Hair ice

Hair ice is a type of ice that forms on dead wood and takes the shape of fine, silky hair. It forms, when the air is humid, on rotting wood with no bark from broadleaf trees in temperatures slightly below 0°C. In recent years scientists from Germany and Switzerland identified the fungus *Exidiopsis effusa* as key to the formation of hair ice. The fungus was found on every hair ice sample examined by the researchers, and disabling the fungus with fungicide or hot water prevented hair ice formation. All living, metabolising fungi produce carbon dioxide, this acts to push water out of wood which would then normally just freeze as a simple crust of ice, but *E. effusa* causes this water to freeze into thin hair-like strands. Find out more:

<https://bit.ly/3k3yRuy>



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Star jelly

Whilst putting up an owl box in a tree early in February a couple of branches had to be cut off and it was noticed that there was frog spawn on the top of one of the branches,

Obviously, frogs lay their spawn in water so how did it get at least 3 m up in the tree?

Birds such as buzzards and crows will eat frogs, sitting on a perch in a tree, but they avoid the ovaries because the spawn in them swell up massively in water. This would be enough to give anyone a stomachache, so when birds eat a frog, they leave the ovaries behind, which then expand and burst when they get wet, leaving a clump of spawn. This is often called 'star jelly'.



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Elf cup fungus

The brightly coloured elf cup fungus (*Sarcoscypha* species) can be found in winter in damp, shady places in woodland with plenty of moss-covered fallen wood.

Fungi belong to their own kingdom and get their nutrients and energy from organic matter, rather than photosynthesis like plants. Elf cups actively shoot their spores into the air, rather than dropping them through pores or gills like many other fungi. A subtle change in temperature can trigger many thousands of spores into being shot from the inner surface of the cup by pneumatic action.



There's life in death!

On the left is hairy curtain crust fungus (*Stereum hirsutum*), a common and, as you can see here on the dead trunk of a birch tree, conspicuous fungus. The fungus spend most of the year out of sight as a network of thread like filaments (hyphae) feeding on the dead wood and helping it decompose. When they do appear, this bracket fungus can be very variable in colour.

The leafy lichen above is *probably* *Platismatia glauca*. It is very common, especially in upland areas, frequently on the upper side of horizontal branches. The attractive pink colouration means all is not well – it is a lichenicolous fungus (i.e. a fungus that lives exclusively on lichens) that will eventually kill the lichen.



Signs of spring

Spring will eventually arrive though, and signs were already showing us the way in our gardens and verges when these photographs were taken in February.

Snowdrops appeared in our verges and gardens – introduced into the UK they are a vital food source for insects that emerge early. Their sap contains a form of anti-freeze.

The catkins (lamb's tails) of our native hazel (*Corylus avellana*) are a common sight in our hedgerows and woodlands. Catkins are the male flowers, but have you ever noticed the tiny female flowers with their red ribbon-like styles that collect the pollen blown from the catkins? Take a closer look when you are out and about. Despite being wind pollinated they will still be used by bees.

House sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) are early nesters. The noisy chirping around our houses by males proclaims their nest ownership and attracts females.

The lesser celandine (*Ficaria verna*) is an early messenger of spring – this one was recorded in flower on New Year's Day this year.





Winter

There is still plenty to see in Carmarthenshire during the winter months – we would love to see photos of what you see in your area



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