

Hampshire & Wales Trip – June/July 2017

Part 2 – South Wales

It wasn't until 6.21pm that we finally went through the toll and started the last leg of the journey. I had to laugh when I saw that the 1 billion lanes to get in reduced to just 2 to get out. It was like the start of a F1 Grand Prix when the barrier went up and everybody raced off to get to the 2 lanes first!!



Severn Bridge Toll

Having never driven the road before I had no idea where I was going but when we finally turned off the motorway I found myself on yet more narrow, single-track roads that wound their way to our HQ :(. It was like Hampshire all over again and there didn't seem to be any shops anywhere either.....Aaarghhhh!

After our rather bumpy drive we rounded a corner only to see Pontescob Cottage sitting at the side of the road just like in the photos on the website....Phew!



Pontescob

I screeched to a halt outside in the layby at 7.01pm, so we let out a massive sigh and cheered that we'd finally made it before Tesco (unless they'd already been bang on 7pm!). Seriously though, the way things had panned out over the day we doubted that we'd get there on time.....if at all :P. Feeling lucky I reached up to the beam above the door, found the key and we let ourselves in. All of a sudden we didn't feel so lucky and the damp smell hit us straight away and Wendy was off.....Uh oh! Ignoring the major issues she set to work boiling up some broccoli for Lycas tea because her dinner was already 2hrs late. The first obstacle was that she couldn't find a microwave so had to do things old school and boil a kettle, get a pan and use the gas hob.



Kitchen

Lyca was absolutely starving and wolfed it down in record time and trotted off looking confused as to where she was going to eat her Dentastick. When she was sorted we could finally have a proper look around which was disappointing to say the least. It smelled damp, the walls were mouldy and flaky just like in Eastgate Cottage in Norfolk, which made us wonder if the river behind us was prone to flooding! The floorboards were so uneven they were dangerous, so there were rugs strewn around seemingly to cover up the worst bits.



Living room

This masterplan didn't work because when I stepped down into the living room the rug under my foot slipped and I nearly went flying! The spiral stairs up to the bedroom and bathroom were made of solid stone like something from Castle Rushen and were so narrow that you'd come a serious cropper if you slipped and the floorboards upstairs were worse than downstairs. It was pretty cold too but there were no radiators just plug in ones and log burners downstairs. It was freezing in the bathroom although it was really clean, as was the rest of the house to be fair. Tesco came at 7.45pm and the driver thanked me for the detailed directions although I was amazed he found the place at all, even with the OCD directions I gave. Wendy went off for a bath while I put the shopping away, or tried to because there were no free cupboards for any of our stuff. After we'd kind of moved in I made do with Beans on toast for my tea while Wendy was too busy trying to unpack and eventually had a Ritz Thin sarnie when she finally sat down to watch TV. Next she grabbed the phone, looking forward to being able to have a proper chat to her Mum but to her horror the phone line was totally dead :O! There was no mobile signal either so she had no way of letting her know that we'd arrived or anything.....Grrrrrr! I had to contact Andy to make arrangements to meet up in the morning too so ended up having to go out in my car to find a mobile signal. Unbelievably I had to drive 4 miles down the tiny country roads before I got one, which wasn't good if either of us fell over and broke our neck in that lethal house :(I also tried to phone the owners to let them know about the phone line but they didn't answer so I had to leave a message and hope for the best. The only good thing was that I saw a **Tawny Owl** flying over the road while I was out.

When I got back Lyca was happy enough and sleeping on the sofa through all of our dramas. Well, mostly Wendy's, I'm happy as long as there is a roof over my head. Having thought the internet in Hampshire was slow, I hadn't been prepared for it being even worse in Wales and Wendy wasn't happy having livestock in the field directly behind us. The internet speed was an amazing 0.1 mbps!!! I had a faster internet speed in the Isle of Man 20 years ago!! This was so slow it really was unusable and I couldn't even read a tweet, which are only 120 characters long! Uneven floorboards and damp smells I can handle but tech from the 90s when they advertised internet is a different kettle of fish!! :). I'd been so optimistic that Pontescob was going to be amazing that the reality was something that neither of us had bargained on.

It was freezing in the house all evening but looking at the weather it was a good night to put the moth trap out. I set it all up in the back garden and fed the cable through the kitchen window and Wendy switched it on. Within no time at all there were flies buzzing all around it as well as the window, which wasn't the best start. We instantly had flashbacks of getting up and finding 1million midgies in the house at Ord Cottage in Scotland and didn't fancy a rerun! We ended up having to jam a load of kitchen roll in all the gaps around the window created by the cable, so they couldn't get into the house. By 10.30pm we braved the cold and headed off to bed wishing that we'd brought the electric blanket. Surprisingly the bed was comfortable and just the job after a stressful day.

Saturday 1st July

It was 7.10am when we woke up and instead of feeling refreshed after a good night's sleep we felt absolutely knackered! There was no resting for the wicked though as we had a moth trap that needed emptying and a dog that wanted out for a wee. We also had to meet Andy at 11am and it was going to take us an hour to get there. I went out with Lyca and then back out to deal with the trap while Wendy cooked some broccoli for Lyca's tea and made sarnies for our lunch. The kitchen roll had successfully stopped any flies from getting into the kitchen, so we stuffed it on the ledge in case we needed to use it again. There were loads of Moths to deal with, far more than we'd had in Hampshire and I could see we had more than we could deal with before going out. I potted the ones I thought were interesting and put them in the fridge for later and let the others go making quick notes as I went. Worryingly though there were 4 Wasps in the trap and I also found several pairs of wings in the bottom of the trap, meaning the wasps had eaten some of the moths. That was not good. I dread the day when we're trapping in the UK and there's a Hornet in the trap but Wasps are annoying enough, especially to get out of the trap. After we'd had breakfast Wendy tried to get Lyca to eat hers but yet again she turned her nose up at it. There was nothing else for it than for Wendy to hand feed her again.....Urrghhhh! At least that was another job out of the way before we went out though. Wendy noticed that there was a slug trail on the living room rug, which was the icing on the cake for the cottage. The internet was still showing 0.1mb so my slight optimism that last night might have been a one off was destroyed, so after my hopes of finding places to go and visit in Wales in the evenings in Hampshire had fallen through I was now probably worse off! How was I going to find anywhere now? Wendy commented that she felt like she was in a Medieval Prison as she looked through the windows.



Imprisoned

We were ready to go at 9.57am and it felt quite chilly at just 16c compared to what we'd been used to in Hampshire but at least it was 100% sunny. The roads were busy but it was the weekend, so we expected that and there was apparently no shortage of **Buzzards**. We were in the middle of nowhere when Wendy announced that she needed a wee, so I ended up pulling over at the entrance to a field and she had to go there. You can't take her anywhere! I was very impressed by the A road that traverses East to West along South Wales. We seemingly only had to drive for 10 minutes from HQ to get on it, so nowhere would be that difficult to reach in the area I didn't think.

We arrived at Old Castle Down in the Allun Valley, which is in the Vale of Glamorgan and Andy was already sitting in his car waiting for us. It was 11.09am, so we were late as usual but only by 9mins....Ooops! It felt a bit windier than we wanted it to be considering we were there to try and find High Brown Fritillary! Andy had seen them there in the past, so it sounded promising as long as the sun shone and the wind didn't pick up even more. After we'd said, "Hello!" and called each other some suitably insulting names we followed Andy onto a path up a steep hill, which was hard work seeing as we felt so tired.



Andy is small but not that small. It's an optical illusion. Honest!

The hill was covered in bracken and we kicked a **Straw Dot Moth** up off the path as we climbed upwards. Andy was way ahead of us and got quite excited when he spotted a Fritillary, which was flying like the clappers and vanished over the top of the hill. At least we knew the Frits were out though. A **Raven** flew overhead calling as it went when we got to the top and we followed Andy along the path. The area was flat and covered in bracken and looked good for Whinchat and there was a quarry behind us that looked perfect for Peregrines.



Quarry

We walked along the path looking towards the bushes, as that's where the majority of the action was happening, probably due to it being slightly sheltered from the wind. We saw several Fritillaries but every time one landed it was always a Dark Green....Aarrghhhh!



Dark-green Fritillary

At the end of the path was an overgrown area of brambles and a hill down to a nice sheltered suntrap, so we all headed down.



Suntrap

Another Frit whizzed past us a few times but didn't slow down never mind land so we just couldn't get a view of it.....Grrrrr! It was still pretty windy too, so the odds were stacked against us. As the name suggested we were in a valley and on the other side were some big deciduous trees. As I was scanning around I saw a large bird launch out of the trees in front of us. I initially presumed it to be a big female Sprawk but it had a very different jizz about it. I suddenly realised it was much too big and bulky to be that and got Andy onto it because I didn't quite believe my own suspicions. I finally called it as a **Goshawk** and Andy agreed but Wendy was wandering around behind us and didn't see it before it vanished

behind the trees. I was over the moon but Andy was all chilled out as he said they do well in the area and he sees them quite often.....Cool! Wendy was obviously a bit annoyed that she hadn't seen it but that'll teach her to go wandering off :P. Wendy had however noticed some Butterflies going into the overgrown sheltered area where there were brambles in flower, so they were probably feeding on them. Andy decided to go in to explore so he started to wade his way through the undergrowth. Wendy decided to follow him knowing that he was the first in line to fall down a ditch or get stung by a Hornet or something. I decided against it as Lyca wouldn't be able to get through the brambles so stuck to the upper path so that all bases were covered. Wendy and Andy were chatting away when all of a sudden the biggest insect she'd ever seen with yellow and black stripes flew in and landed on her leg. It was facing upwards, so she could see its massive eyes looking straight up at her and she surprisingly calmly said, "Errrrrr, what the **** is that, a Hornet or something?" Andy looked at and as cool as a cucumber said, "No, it's the UK's largest Horsefly, do you mind just staying there while I get a photo?" While he started to fire some shots off she'd just processed what he said and started to wonder if she should be worried. "Do they bite?" she asked to which he replied with an unconvincing tone, "Errrr, I've been told they don't bite humans but....?" That was it, Wendy lost it and shrieked, "Arrghhhh, Andy, Andy get it off meeeeeee!" and ran for her life waving her arms around like child back up to where I was into the open.....Bahahahahaha! Andy got a record shot of it, which he sent me for prosperity :P.



:O!

We'd started to realize that we weren't going to see any High Browns but when I spotted another Frit whizz past on the wind my hopes were lifted. I followed it

as best I could but they were so quick! Eventually I got a view of it and my heart sank when I saw that it was just a **Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary** :(It was new for the trip though and we found another 2 before we decided to give up and head back. All the way back there were Frits flying at 100mph past us but none of them were landing.....Grrrrr! While Andy and I were chasing Butterflies Wendy had spotted a noisy family of **Peregrines** flying around the quarry.



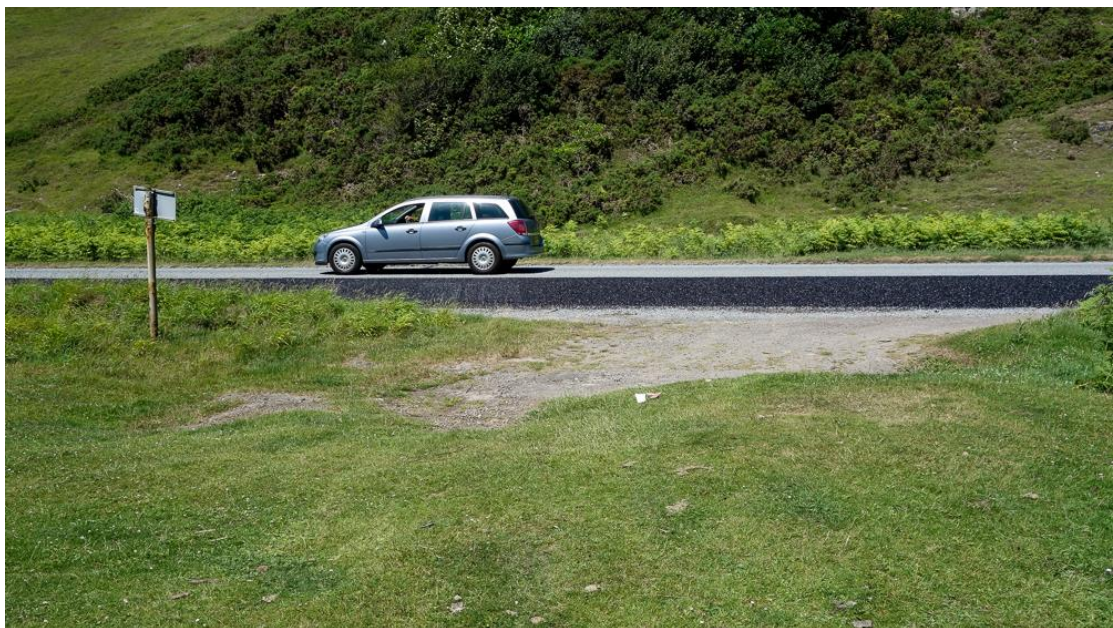
Heading back

When we got back to the car at 12.50pm we noticed a group of people heading towards the path next to the car park. It looked like a Butterfly group or something, so Andy went to investigate in the hope that they knew something we didn't. Wendy poured Lyca a drink, which she guzzled in no time and we started to eat our lunch. Andy returned empty handed apart from seeing another SPB Frit. In a moment of optimism I started to wonder if one the Butterflies had been a High Brown but when I checked my photos it was just a Dark Green :(I think the wind or the intense heat stopped us from getting to see a High Brown unfortunately. There was an old bloke kneeling down on the steep grassy hill over on the other side of the road. He had a camera and appeared to be sweeping a stick through the grass to kick something up. We have no idea what but it must've been something small!



Looking for something?

It was already 1.16pm but our side of the road had been freshly tarmacked while we'd been away and I wondered if it meant we couldn't get out for a while.



Errrrrrr?

Wendy said I was being silly again, so I pulled to the edge of the car park and waited for the traffic control bloke to give me the go ahead. He let us go, so there weren't any issues and we were free to go to the next place Andy had in store for us. Wendy spotted 2x **Lapwing** flying over some fields on the way and at 1.35pm we arrived at Kenfig NNR, which was the place Andy had bigged up and said we had to visit.

The first thing we noticed was the huge Visitor Centre with a hand painted Wildlife Mural all over it, which was very impressive.



Visitor Centre

Wendy and Andy needed to pay the WC's a visit before setting off, so off they went. Wendy went into the ladies and there was a woman with her kid in there washing their hands. When they started to talk to each other they spoke in the broadest Welsh accent she'd ever heard and she couldn't understand a word they were saying! There were a few people with Dogs running around off their leads, which I didn't like the look of after all the stress over the last week. Andy reassured me that most of them would only be walking to the pool so that the dog could go for a swim and that's about as far as they'd go. This pool is apparently the biggest in Wales! We walked the short distance to the pool, which was huge and just as Andy had said was where all the dogs were.



Biggest dog bath in Wales

It'd only taken us a few minutes to get there, so not an acceptable distance for any dog to be walked, not even a Chihuahua! Lyca doesn't know how lucky she is! We couldn't imagine there'd be anything on the pool with such a huge disturbance, but we headed straight to the hide anyway. The backdrop of the pool wasn't the nicest with it looking over the massive Port Talbot Steelworks.



Blot on the landscape

We carried on towards the Dunes and just before we got there we found a **Blue-tailed Damselfly** but that was it.

The Dunes were vast and reminded us of Winterton in Norfolk a bit only much deeper.



Dunes view

The view was stunning and stretched from Swansea Bay to the Gower. We followed Andy noticing a good number of **Six-spot Burnett Moths** flying around. Next we found some Butterfly wings on the path and stooped down to see what type it had been before becoming something's lunch. It was a Dark green Fritillary, so Wendy carefully scooped up the wings and put them in one of the pockets of her purse. Andy then said we should turn back and do a loop walk through the Dunes and past some more pools where he hoped we'd find some Dragonflies. We spotted some weird blobs on the grass stems and Andy said these were the larval cases of Six-spot Burnets.



Six-spot Burnett larval case

Walking through an overgrown area with loads of wildflowers I spotted some canes that had been put into the ground. My initial thought was, "Who on earth had been setting fireworks off miles out here?" as it looked like the remnants of a firework. I pointed them out to Andy and he said they were plant markers and that someone has probably been doing a survey. He thought for a minute then he decided to go over to have a nosey so we followed him. On first glances we couldn't see anything at all but then Wendy said, "There it is!" and pointed to the very boring looking green Orchid, which was just as unattractive as the Common Twayblades we get at Close Sartfield. When you think of Orchids you imagine their impressive and colourful heads of flowers especially on the likes of the Bee Orchid but this was just dull. Andy nearly pooped himself before he said, "These are **Fen Orchids**, I've been to Kenfig loads and never seen one." "They've gone over which is why they don't look that impressive." To me it looked like a couple of leaves and I couldn't muster up any excitement. As it was so rare Andy was all over it and Wendy helped out by trying to hold the grass that was growing in front of it away, so he could get some clear shots. I thought I'd better get some too, as I'm unlikely to get the chance again.



Fen Orchid

There were a few of the markers dotted around, so we checked them all to try and find the best specimen but they'd all gone past their best. Amongst them were also some **Southern Marsh Orchids**, so I grabbed some shots of them too just for the sake of completeness.



Southern marsh Orchid

After that Andy was off up the side of the Dunes, so we followed him up to the top. The views from there were impressive, ignoring the massive Steel works and gave us a sense of just how big the reserve was.



Vast

Andy said that before human development the Dunes used to stretch for miles up the coast, so what's left at Kenfig is just a tiny fraction of what used to be. Wendy had noticed some weird Blackberries, which were really low and compact and the fruits were matt black instead of shiny. She asked Andy what they were and

he picked one, ate it and said, "**Dewberries.**" Wendy having never tried a Dewberry followed suit and sampled one, which she said was, "OK." She tried to get me to try one but I was having none of it and didn't fancy feeling any more ill than I already did. My IBS was playing up for some reason and the only trigger I could think of was the stressful journey up to Wales the day before. Urrghhhh! Andy's not one to stay on the beaten track and had gone off roading, which I couldn't do due to having Lyca, so we stuck to the path on the way down. Andy was aiming for the Dragonfly pools he remembered from when he was last at Kenfig but when we got to them we were surprised to see that they were all dried up!



Dragonfly pools :P

There was no water in any of them, so we carried on back to the car park. I knew it was hot but I never thought it would be so hot it would dry all these pools out. Andy stopped to collect some **Cinnabar Caterpillars** for his daughter, so Wendy decided to give him a hand. It was harder than she thought it'd be because they have a kind of defence mechanism where they throw themselves off the Ragwort stems they're on and get buried amongst the middle of the plant.....Clever!

Back at the car it was 3.30pm and we were all boiling, so I reckoned I deserved an ice cream from the van that was parked up. Andy wanted one too and even Wendy was eyeballing the menu on the side of the van :O! I got some money out in preparation and said, "I'm going to get a Whippy 99 but I'll probably bottle it and just get a Magnum." Andy looked at me and started killing himself laughing but I knew what I meant. Andy and I headed off while Wendy was sorting a drink out for Lyca, so she shouted over, "Get me a small one but in a pot not a cone?" Was that even a thing? Arrghhhhh! The girl serving inside looked like a heroin addict but I didn't bottle it and even got Wendy hers even though it was very expensive. Andy took his time to decide what to get and decided to go all flash and got a 'Nightmare Ice Scream' (or something like that) which came with the most toppings. Back at the car we ate our ice creams but Andy was complaining about the lack of content in his for the price. I asked how much was it and amazingly he'd paid like £3.50 for his whereas my whippy 99, which had more ice cream in it was only £2.50! Hahahaha. Andy was not amused and contemplated going back to complain till I pointed out the girl serving probably

was backed up by an Eastern European gang so he was best to just enjoy his frugal amount of ice cream and the tiny drizzle of strawberry sauce :). After that we chatted for ages with Andy who was suggesting where we should go seeing as I hadn't been able to plan anything myself. Something caught my eye and looking out over the bay I could see some planes flying in that looked like The Red Arrows. It turned out that it was The Red Arrows and not far behind them was a Spitfire and a Hurricane. They seemed to be doing some kind of Air Show somewhere, so it was a bit of extra and unexpected entertainment. Andy invited us round to his for a takeaway, which I thought was a great idea but Wendy wasn't convinced. She pointed out that if we did we'd be really late getting back to HQ and poor Lyca would need her dinner way before then. Andy tried to think of a ways around but Wendy wouldn't budge and in the end I had to decline :(.

By 4.54pm it was well and truly time to head off so after arranging where and when to meet up tomorrow we went our separate ways.

Wendy needed to top up her mobile again so she could phone her Mum before we got to HQ, so we kept our eyes peeled for a shop. Luckily we spotted a garage, so I pulled in and she went in to buy another voucher. It was quite a long drive back to HQ and the mobile reception was patchy but she successfully managed to phone her Mum and tell her what we'd been up to. Hopefully our phone had been sorted while we'd been out, so that would be last time. Wendy still had to make something from scratch for her tea, so she was getting narky about how late it was getting. A **Stock Dove** flew over the road and I couldn't tell you the last time we'd seen of them was but it was probably when we were on holiday! I noticed we'd done 12,400 steps during the day and we saw the flash of a **Sparrowhawk** as it zoomed over and disappeared into some trees.

It was 6.18pm when we finally arrived back at HQ, not that we were looking forward to going in. There was a note from a bloke called Matt on the table by the door saying that he'd been round and checked the phone. He'd found that there was no battery but after replacing it had found that the line was still dead, so he'd now have to wait until Monday to contact BT! He'd also checked the internet and by his reckoning it was fine. Fine? What part of practically unusable did he consider fine? How backward is Wales? Wendy, who was already annoyed after reading the note, noticed that there was a slug trail on our bag of food in the kitchen and quickly moved it off the floor.....Yuk! She poured Lycas dinner into her bowl and then went to the fridge to get the broccoli she'd cooked the night before. Normally she'd give it a few seconds to warm it up before giving it to Lyca but then she remembered that there was no microwave! Uh Oh! All she could do was put it in her bowl cold and hope for the best. Lyca went over to it, sniffed it and turned around to look at Wendy as if to say, "What's this!" Wendy hadn't given Lyca the credit of having a discerning palate before and hadn't expected her turn her nose up at it especially as it was so late and she should've been starving! Lyca cautiously ate about ½ of it before running over to Wendy with her tail wagging and obviously looking for her Dentasick. Wendy tried to get her to eat the rest but gave up in the end and gave her it before she'd finished her tea. Weirdly, Lyca went back to her bowl and finished it after her Dentastick, which defied the whole point of her having it but was hopefully just a one off. Dogs! Wendy then had to rustle up some tea for herself and reckoned that a tomato, lentil and bean soup would be the quickest option. While she was busy making that I grabbed my ready meal from the fridge and then found that I had a challenge on my hands. When I came to set the temperature on the oven I

discovered that the all the numbers had been rubbed off, so I had to try my best to guess where 220c was.....Urrghhhh!



Guess the temperature!

The rice I buy is in a microwavable pouch and only takes 2mins but I'm no Jamie Oliver and without a microwave I was stumped....Doh! Wendy took it off me in the end and tipped the rice into a pan and added some boiling water. Sometimes the obvious escapes you.....Doh! Luckily my guesswork had been good and I didn't burn my sweet and sour chicken, which was handy seeing as I was starving by then. Wendy went upstairs for a bath and then it was my turn.....Nooooooooo!

When we were both back downstairs we thought we'd better start ID'ing the mornings Moths before it got dark. Some of them were quite tricky but our list is as follows (* = lifers):-

Marbled White Spot x1
Dark Arches x6
Magpie x2
Brimstone x1
Common Footman x1
Buff Arches x4
Coronet x4
Elephant Hawk-moth x2
Fan foot x1
Triple-spotted Clay x4
Spinach x2
Spectacle x1
Bright-line Brown-eye x4
Grey Arches x2 *
Beautiful Hook-tip x1 *
Burnished Brass x1
Swallow Prominent x1
Poplar Hawk-moth x1
Pinion-streaked Snout x1 *

Heart and Dart x17
Common Wainscot x3
The Flame x5
Flame shoulder x1
Foxglove Pug x1
Large yellow underwing x9
Buff Ermine x1
Rustic x2
Riband Wave x2
Willow Beauty x1
Mottled Beauty x2
Small Dotted Buff x1
Udea prunalis x1
Common White Wave x2
Yellow-tail x2
Emerald type x1 – flew off



Beautiful Hook-tip

Total = 91x moths (x35 sp)

We were quite happy with that although only 2 of them had been lifers. While I was letting them go out of the window Wendy found an Earwig on the cushion of the settee....Eeek! It was really cold by then and although she'd resorted to wearing her coat her teeth were chattering, so at 11pm we headed off to bed. We thought we'd put the electric blanket that was there on but it barely heated up at all, so was pointless. We could hear Tawny Owls calling and I remembered to tell Wendy that I was sure I kept hearing a Redstart outside HQ.

Sunday 2nd July

Unbelievably our trusty canine alarm clock failed to go off and we didn't wake up until 9am! Lyca usually wakes us up early but for some reason she'd managed to

sleep in.....Oooooops! We were really surprised that she'd slept for that long but she must've needed it. We didn't have a lot of time until we met Andy, so we got straight up and went downstairs. I took Lyca out for a wee while Wendy got her breakfast ready and started to make our sarnies. It was a nice sunny day and I could hear the **Common Redstart** singing again. When I was back inside I finally spotted it on our garden fence :O! That was a nice garden tick to have and was made even better when we noticed 2x juvs as well :). They must've bred somewhere in the grounds of the derelict house behind us.



Back garden view

Lyca was refusing her breakfast again, so Wendy gave it to me to see if I could coax her while she packed our lunch bag. The little madam turned her nose up at it again, so Wendy had a go and she ate it....fussy little ****! While she fed Lyca we sat looking out of the window and saw a **Grey Squirrel** in the garden, which Lyca didn't spot....Pheww!

By the time we were ready to go out it was 10.38am and we were supposed to be meeting Andy at 11am! The temperature was already 20.5c, so it was looking as though it was going to be a scorcher of a day. Luckily it wasn't such a long drive for us today, so we hoped we wouldn't be too late. Andy was taking us for a walk along the River Wye at a place called Dixton to see a little Gwent Wildlife Trust reserve that has White-legged Damselfly. Also that section of the Wye is where he'd had a Common Clubtail on his Kayak once, so we might've still had a chance after the washout in Sussex.

It was 11.09am when we pulled up alongside Andy, so we were fashionably late again. After apologizing for our lack of timekeeping skills we all headed off down a path, which led to a gate into some fields. Wendy wasn't too impressed with the next field, which had a herd of cows in it, ahead of us.



Mooooo

Andy's not fazed by anything (bar overpriced ice cream), so he went first and I picked Lyca up to save any unnecessary stress. Wendy used us a human sacrifices again and trotted behind us feeling anything but relaxed. When we'd cleared them we went through another gate into another field and followed the path, which ran alongside the River Wye.



River Wye

We instantly liked it there although I was already feeling too hot with the sun beating down on me. We hadn't walked far at all when we spotted a medium sized Dragonfly whizzing backwards and forwards across the river. We all stopped for a look and Wendy squealed that it appeared to have a very fat arse but although we were all pretty sure it was what we were after we needed to be 100% sure. It disappeared again and we stood watching the numerous Banded Demoiselles until it came back. After a while it reappeared so I tried to get some record shots but in all the panic they were all out of focus.....Nooooooooo! After a frustrating few minutes it eventually landed on some vegetation on the bank, so we all raised our bins to get a proper look. We were absolutely delighted to see

that it was indeed a **Common Clubtail** and a lifer for Wendy and I. Andy had only ever seen 1 before when he didn't have his camera with him. I went over with my camera to try for some shots.



Common Clubtail

Andy only had his macro lens with him so, feeling jolly because of seeing a Clubtail, I passed him my 300mm so he could get the extra reach to try and get decent shots of the Clubtail as it was just a bit too far out in the vegetation. The Clubtail then flew over us and landed in a tree perfect distance for the 300mm that Andy now had. He rattled off the shots whilst I stood there like a lemon thinking, "Why am I so generous?" :D. After Andy had had his fill he turned to give me my lens back so I could grab a nice one but just as he did it flew much further back into the tree....Arghhhh! Typical, but I decided not to worry about it, as I was sure we'd get another chance on the walk back. While we were busy Wendy called out, "**Kingfisher!**" which flew up the river and was the first she'd seen during our trip. We heard it but were so engrossed in trying to get shots of the Clubtail it seemed a small sacrifice to not actually see it. With us all having had good views of the Clubtail, we carried on and found at least 4 more whizzing around over the river. There were loads of people out on the water in canoes, kayaks and paddleboards, which looked like a very relaxing way to spend the day.



Nice

Next up we spotted a bigger Dragonfly and when the light caught it and we could see that it was brown it could only be one thing, a **Brown Hawker**.....Cool! Andy got quite excited when he called us over to see that he'd just found a nice **White-legged Damselfly**, which was another lifer for Wendy and I, so I had to get some shots of it.



White-legged Damselfly

An **Emperor Dragonfly** was next and then we found a Clubtail drowning in the middle of the river! Nooooo!! If I could've found a stick long enough I'd have rescued it but there was no way I was swimming across to save it, although Andy was seriously considering it! Wendy cursed loudly when she felt a sharp pain on her little finger and looked down to see she'd just been bitten by a horsefly.....Grrrr! It came up in red spot, which stayed there for about a week but didn't come to anything. When we found a steep sandy bank down to the river Lyca pulled me like mad to get down there. She was probably so hot that she

wanted to go for a paddle to cool off. We took her down and she went straight in wagging her tail high in the air and looking very pleased with herself.



Cooling off

Wendy tried to get her to go in deeper, so she threw stones that Lyca was happy to chase but had no chance of ever finding again. She went so far out that she was practically swimming at one point, which was quite something for Lyca! After letting her have her few minutes of fun we had to drag her away and continue on our walk, so hopefully she was wet enough to keep cool for a while. We found a Silver-washed Fritillary and then the path went into some woods, where it was shaded from the sun and nice and cool.....Phew! Andy found some **Giant Bell Flower**, so I took a photo of it.



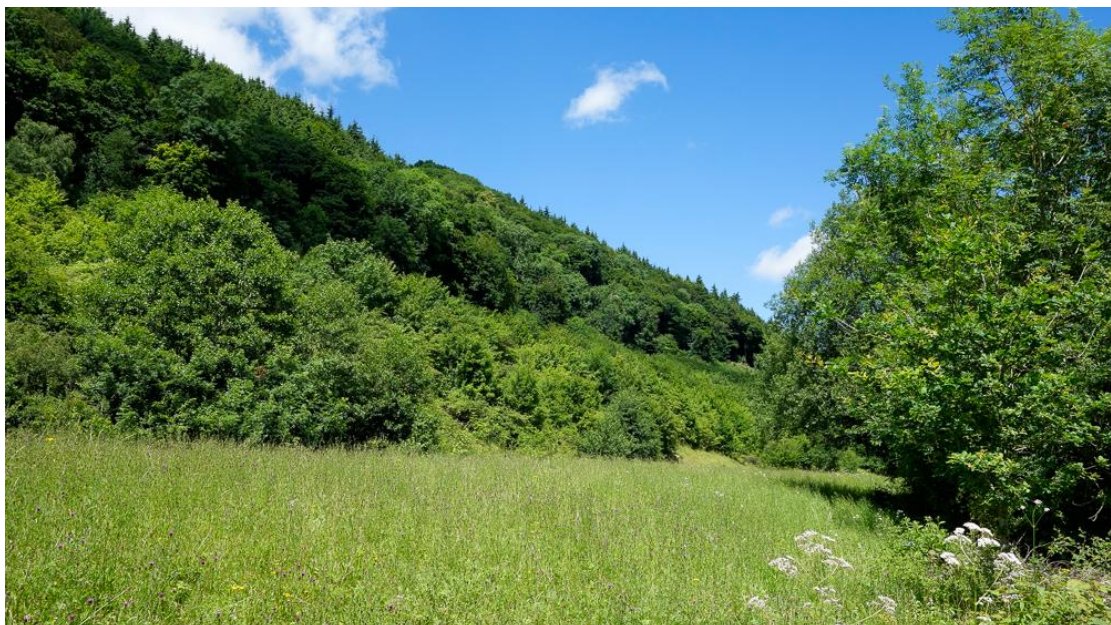
Giant Bell Flower

Wendy found a **Nettletap Moth** and after talking about it to Andy found out that her blue fields were Flax and the yellow flowers from Hampshire were Yellow Wort. If we'd been there on our own I reckon we'd have walked straight past Dixon Embankment, as there was no sign for it and the steep wooden steps up to it could easily have gone unnoticed. Luckily we were with Andy who knew where he was going and he led the way up.



Dixon Embankment steps

At the top of the steps was a field of wildflowers with a bank running all the way across the back of it. The Reserve is owned by Gwent Wildlife Trust (who Andy works for) and was just a bit of waste ground that was left after they built the main A road behind it. Interestingly the bottom end of the reserve is actually in England not Wales. Obviously the flowers are good for Butterflies but the bank had some sheets of corrugated metal scattered around on it, as it was also good for reptiles. Straight away we were seeing White-legged Damselflies flying around and loads of **Marbled White Butterflies** as we walked through the long grass towards the bank.



Dixon Embankment

Andy jumped across a ditch and onto the bank where he headed up toward the metal sheets to have a look at what was underneath them. With having Lyca we let him do his stuff and watched him turn them over one by one.



Checking for snakes

He was shouting out what he had, which was surprisingly little and nothing in some cases. He had a **Wood Mouse**, then a **Short-tailed Field Vole** and then finally some **Slow Worms**, which we really wanted to see. We legged it up the bank hoping to see it but it'd long gone by the time we got there and they didn't live up to their name! He turned the next one over and there was nothing nor was there under the next couple, so we started to regret not going with him at the start :(. When he got to the last one, which he told us was usually the best, we headed over so as not to miss anything. When he turned it over we couldn't believe it but there was not 1 but 4 Slow Worms under it, which slithered off pretty quickly but not before I got some record shots.....Yey! :).



Slow Worms

Having wanted to see a Slow Worm for years and only having seen a dead one at Allt Mhuic in Scotland we were chuffed with that. We carried on wandering around the field looking for anything that flew and Wendy was the next of us to spot something. She'd found a **Mother of Pearl Moth**, which she must've kicked up from the grass, and it landed up on the branch of a Hawthorn. Andy got some photos of it and I found a **Shaded Broad-bar Moth** in the grass in front of me. By then Wendy was getting worried that Lyca was too hot, as it was absolutely boiling in the sheltered spot we were in. She couldn't understand why I wasn't complaining because even she was sweating buckets! She took Lyca down the steps and into the shade of the woods, which was a nice relief for them both and gave her a drink of water. There wasn't much of it left so she'd have to be sparing with it so it'd last. I took the opportunity of being dog free for a few minutes to try and get some photos and video of the White-legged Damselflies.



White-legged Damselfly

All of a sudden and completely un-expected Andy shouted, "**White-letter Hairstreak!**" As soon as I heard him I shouted for Wendy several times as I legged it towards Andy. Luckily Wendy had just about heard Andy anyway and was on her way back already. She legged it as fast as she possibly could back up the steps into the reserve to where Andy and I were standing admiring the Butterfly. We couldn't believe it and Andy said there wasn't any records of White-letter Hairstreak at this reserve or anywhere near it. It was feeding down low on some flowers, which was amazing as they're usually really high up in the tree canopy. It was a great lifer for me and Wendy and a totally unexpected one at that! I didn't have time to switch to my 100mm macro so kept my 300mm on and stood back to get shots.



White-letter Hairstreak

Andy, having struggled with the Clubtails with his macro lens, on was now getting some absolute belters. After a quick chimp to make sure I had something sharp I went to change lenses but as I did there was a freak gust of wind and it flew! This sudden twist left me with mixed emotions. I was elated at seeing something so unexpected but also tinged with sadness at having missed what will probably be my best ever chance of getting a belting White-letter Hairstreak photo :(.

Next Andy shouted, "**Scarlet Tiger!**" and we looked round to see a flash of red as the Moth zoomed past. That was another lifer for us too! Crazy stuff! I could happily have stayed at that reserve for hours! We'd been very impressed with Dixon Embankment. Wendy quickly took Lyca back down to the Woods and waited in the shade until we'd packed up.

We'd started to head back along the river when we heard the high-pitched call we'd heard earlier. We looked at the river to see the Kingfisher whizz past and a couple of minutes later we saw it again only this time it had a fish....Cool :). This was great having not seen one for ages and we thought we'd already been lucky. It flew back up the river again and instead of clearing off it landed really high on the branch of a tree. It was strange seeing it all the way up there, as we always imagine them to perch much lower down. After a while it flew across to our side and sat on branch much lower down and closer to us. A 2nd bird flew out from the bank underneath where it was sitting, so we presumed it to be their nest site. We left them to it and carried on noticing that the Clubtails were still flying around but annoyingly none were coming to land on the vegetation anymore... Booo!

On the way back we hadn't seen the Churchyard we needed to walk through to get back to the cars yet and then we came across of a field of tee-pees which we hadn't seen on the way in, so we realized we had messed up somewhere and gone too far.



Tee-pees

Andy reckoned it was fine and took us through the next field until we got to a barbed wire fence, with no gate to get through. There was no way either of us was going to try getting over especially with Lyca but Andy, on the other hand, said that the cars were just over it so he was going to climb it. We left him to it and turned back on ourselves and walked back through the field and onto the path along the river where there were about 30 **Mute Swans** swimming around. The path seemed longer than we remembered it but eventually we found the Churchyard we'd somehow completely walked passed 15mins ago.....Doh!

It was the longer route but much more civilized than Andy's and when we got to the car at 2.45pm Wendy was more than ready for her lunch. Lyca was thirsty too and had a huge drink before we cracked open the lunch bag. I struggled with mine, as my IBS was still niggling and it was 25.5c outside so the car felt like an oven, so I only ate ½ of my sarnie and left the rest.

Since there was a bit of time left in the day we then scratched our heads working out what we could do next. Finally we settled on Andy's suggestion of a Gwent Wildlife Trust reserve, which was very close to our HQ and meant that Andy could even pop in afterwards to have a gander at the medieval structure.

When we left it was 3.07pm and all of sudden my IBS got the better of me and really started to kick off :(. Andy was desperate for a drink so we had to keep our eyes peeled for a shop. The closest thing we found was a small garage next to the Skirrid Inn near our HQ, so we all pulled up at the side of the road. We'd already learned that the shop situation was better than it'd been in Hampshire! Unfortunately it was closed and we didn't know of any others in the area, so Wendy suggested he went into the pub and bought a can of something. He wandered over and reappeared outside with a pint of what looked like water, which given his love for anything that's a bargain was totally possible! He quickly downed it then came over to my car and said that he'd been charged £2.95 for a pint of Lemonade and asked did we think that was expensive? We had to laugh, as that was a classic Andyism but at nearly £3 for some draught Lemonade we supposed it probably was. The reserve was nearby and called

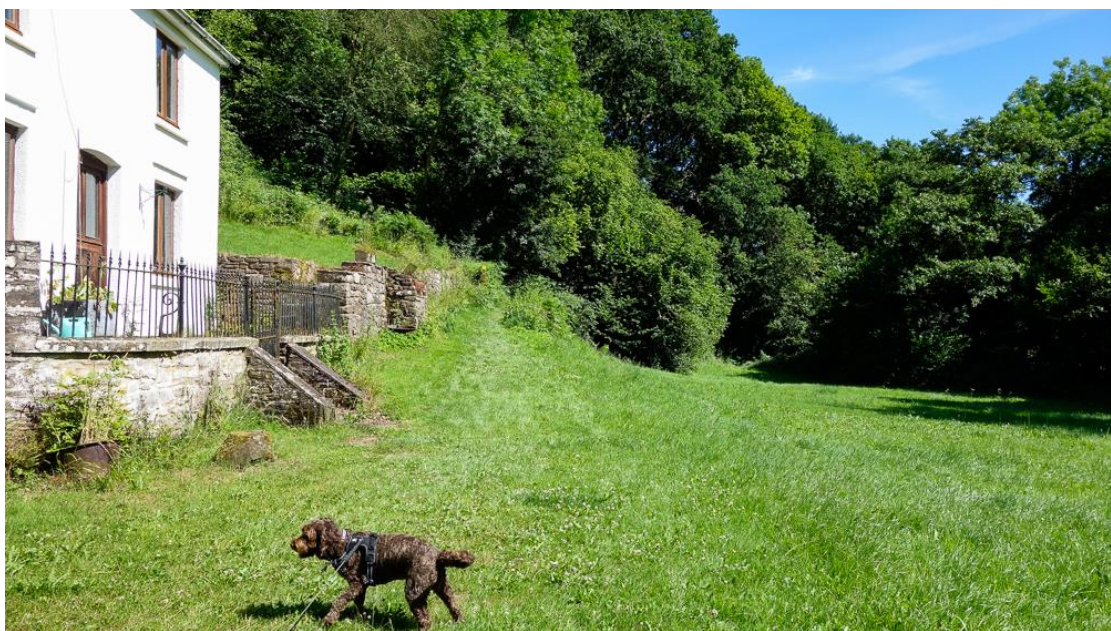
Strawberry Cottage Wood. It was meant to be good for breeding woodland birds like Pied Fly and Redstart, so sounded well worth checking out. The layby where we were hoping to park was currently the residence of someone in a campervan and there was only room for 1 car, so we had to drive past it and find somewhere else. We found another but it was much further away, so Wendy suggested Andy left his car there, jumped into the back seat with Lyca and I drove back up to park in the space by the camper.....Sorted!

We all bailed out at 3.42pm and set off into a wood and over a bridge.



Shady

As soon as we were out of the shade of the trees the heat of the sun hit us like a blowtorch! It was boiling! We entered a lovely field, which was again caked in wildflowers and Butterflies and we wandered down to an old cottage at the far end.



Hot dog

Wendy spotted a family of **Spotted Flycatchers** in the trees, so we scanned around to see if there was anything else. Apart from all the usual common birds there wasn't anything of note, so we carried on up a path through the woods. It was quite dark in there but it was much cooler, which I was very glad of. I was in so much pain with my IBS that the heat on top of it wasn't helping matters at all. I just hoped that keeping busy would take my mind of it for a bit. The path was steep and uneven and climbed up the side of a hill and it looked perfect for our target birds.



Strawberry Cottage Wood

By the time we'd got to the top we hadn't heard never mind seen any of them, in fact it was all very quiet in there as a whole. Maybe we were just too late in the season, so they were all done and dusted and had moved off already? At the top of the hill there was a bench, so Wendy and Andy sat down to chill out for a bit while I stood behind them bent over double in an attempt to relieve the searing pain I was in :(After we'd chatted for ages we reckoned it was time to get going, so we headed back down. Andy had agreed to go back to HQ with us so he could see the place for himself after hearing all about it.

When we came back out into the field there was a woman with a massive Bull Mastiff type dog, which was off its lead. I hung well back (approx. 100 yards) waiting to see where she was going to avoid Lyca causing any trouble but we noticed that she was glaring at us and shouting something. After doing a double take just to make sure I headed towards her without Lyca, so I could hear what she was saying. Imagine my surprise when I found out that she was really angry and shouting, "Are you scared of my dog or something?" in a very aggressive way. All I could think to say back was, "No, we're just waiting to see which way you're going." She looked really annoyed and threw us the evils and then stayed where she was until we'd gone past. She was obviously defensive of her dog probably due to people's reactions to it presuming it to be aggressive. It was probably a right softy but with narky Lyca around we didn't want to put it to the test. The only aggression we witnessed was from her, so maybe she needs to think about that? Back at the car it was 4.49pm and when we got in we were reminded that we still had 2x poo bags in the boot from earlier.....Poooooeeee!

Bleurrghhh! Apart from shops Wales was also lacking in dog poo bins! We drove back to Andy's car and he followed us back to HQ.

It was 4.45pm when we finally got back and we all went inside to give Andy a grand tour. He actually said he'd be happy staying there but I think Andy would be happy to stay in a cardboard to be honest :P. I then took him outside to show him the amazing garden. Down by the River Andy reckoned it looked good for Otters so he jumped the wall and had a look on the rocks for Spraint. The Farmers wife who was nearby instantly collared me. She informed us that the river was actually on their land and that the cottage website needs to amend the information regarding swimming in it.....Ooops! I played the innocent party, which seemed to calm her down pretty quickly! She didn't mean it in a bad way at all and went on to tell us all about the cows and sheep in the field behind us. The sheep were a rare breed called Raglan and she said that we have some of them back in the IOM! Some of them had even won awards at rare breed shows.....Haha! One of the cows was 15years old! Hopefully knowing this would put Wendy's mind at rest too. I then got her talking about the Wildlife in the area and she told us that they'd seen an Otter on the river last year but hadn't seen a Kingfisher for a while. Just then we heard a squeak and a Kingfisher whizzed past from under the bridge! We finally got away and when we went back inside I found that we had 2 wasps nests, one was right above the front door and the other was under the roof where the bedroom was.....Flipping heck!

Lycas tea and Dentastick were ancient history by the time we went inside and Andy stayed for a bit. We hatched a plan to meet up on Tuesday evening to go for some food somewhere. We also asked him if there was anywhere nearby where Wendy and I could go if we fancied it. He'd eaten at The Half Moon a while ago when he'd been camping in the area and said it was really nice, didn't know about The Skirrid but strongly advised against us going to The Queen's Head. Apparently the landlord was notoriously obnoxious and was prone to turning people away especially tourists :O. Hahaha!

After Andy had gone Wendy heated up some soup but I felt so bad I couldn't face anything and went to lie down in the living room. Wendy went off for a bath after that and discovered that she'd sat in some kind of animal poo along the line which was on the back of the only pair of trousers she'd brought....Doh! She brought them and the rest of the washing down and I took them out to the shed to put in the washing machine but surprise, surprise there was no washing powder! Wendy searched the kitchen for some and found an empty bottle of liquid under the sink, which was really handy....Not! I brought everything back in and she hand washed the patch on her trousers as best she could with washing up liquid and then hung them on the (just about) heated towel rail in the bathroom to dry. I made myself a crisp sarnie for my tea but regretted eating it straight afterwards. The lovely male Redstart was on the fence in the garden again and at one point it flew down and landed on the path outside the living room. Wendy was so sick of being cold all night that she got me to fire up the log burner. Luckily it was easy to light and we had a roaring fire and warm room in no time at all. It actually made the room feel more cosy and we began to feel more relaxed and at home there having started to get used to the buildings quirks.



Cosy

I went into the front room to lock up and as I turned the key I heard a weird scratching noise above my head and called Wendy to come and listen. She wasn't impressed at all and reckoned that it was the sounds coming from the wasp's nest above the door. We'd noticed some bits of kitchen roll that were tightly packed into some holes around the frame and now we knew why! That put us on back on edge again just after we'd started to relax.....Urrghhhhh! We'd done 15,000 steps over the day, which wasn't that much considering. I went out to put the camera trap out pointing at the river to maybe catch an Otter and quickly hurried back in because the farmers van was parked up outside and I could hear him and another bloke out in the sheep field shouting really loudly. There were some very strange noises coming from that field and we could still hear them when we went up to bed at 10.39pm. Very odd!

Monday 3rd July

It was 7.30am when we all woke up and the weather looked decidedly dodgy. It was pretty windy too, which wasn't a good start. I took Lyca out for a wee and then went into the living room to lie down because my IBS was still really bad :(Lyca wouldn't eat hers again but this time she wasn't even interested when Wendy tried to hand feed her, so she put cling film over it to bring out with us. When Wendy had eaten her breakfast and made our lunches she went upstairs to get changed. When she opened the curtains she found a Wasp buzzing around the window, so she quickly opened it to let it out. How had that got there? We didn't leave any windows or doors open at any time, so unless it'd been hiding in the room all along, it was a mystery. There was absolutely nothing on the trap camera, which was disappointing. I didn't bother with breakfast, as I didn't want to add fuel the fire in my guts and we headed off out at 9.52am.

As we were getting into the car I heard a **Nuthatch** calling from the trees along the river. We were going to finally spend some time in the Brecon Beacons and even with the dark ages internet I'd managed to find a reserve that had some ace Dragonfly pools where we hoped to find Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly, which would be another lifer. This reserve was the Information Centre for the Brecon Beacons as well so we should be able to pick up leaflets for more walks in the

area. Win win! Firstly though we were going to see if we could find us a Ring Ouzel at a place Andy had told us about. Apparently it was an easy walk and seeing the birds was pretty much nailed on.....Cool! We started to get our first glimpses of the Brecon Beacons as we approached Crickhowell where I stopped at a petrol station to fill my car up.



Crickhowell – I think?

I also got some washing powder, so Wendy could finally wash her trousers properly. We spotted 2 x Red Kites and then Wendy decided that she needed a wee, so my first stop turned into where I planned to go 2nd, so it was a good job they were both near to each other!

It was 10.53am when we got to the Brecon Beacons NP car park and Wendy went straight to the Visitor Centre to find the WC's. While she was gone I had a look at how much it was for a parking ticket and it was only £2.50 for the whole day, so I bought one ready for later. Due to there having been no shops she was still on the hunt for pressies, so she also went into the Visitor Centre shop for a look but came back empty handed. By then my stomach was rumbling having not had any breakfast but my IBS was really bad and I felt so bloated it was as if I'd eaten a 5-course meal! I realized that over the past 24hrs I'd only eaten ½ a sarnie for my lunch, a crisp sarnie and a biscuit for my tea, which wasn't exactly what you'd call nutritious :\. I hoped Andy was right about the walk we were just about to do being easy and we set off at 11.07am to find the place.

It was 11.14am when I found the layby Andy had told me to park in and it looked like there were rain clouds coming in. It was also windier than we'd expected but looking up at the hills it looked like a great place for Ring Ouzel as well as Whinchat.



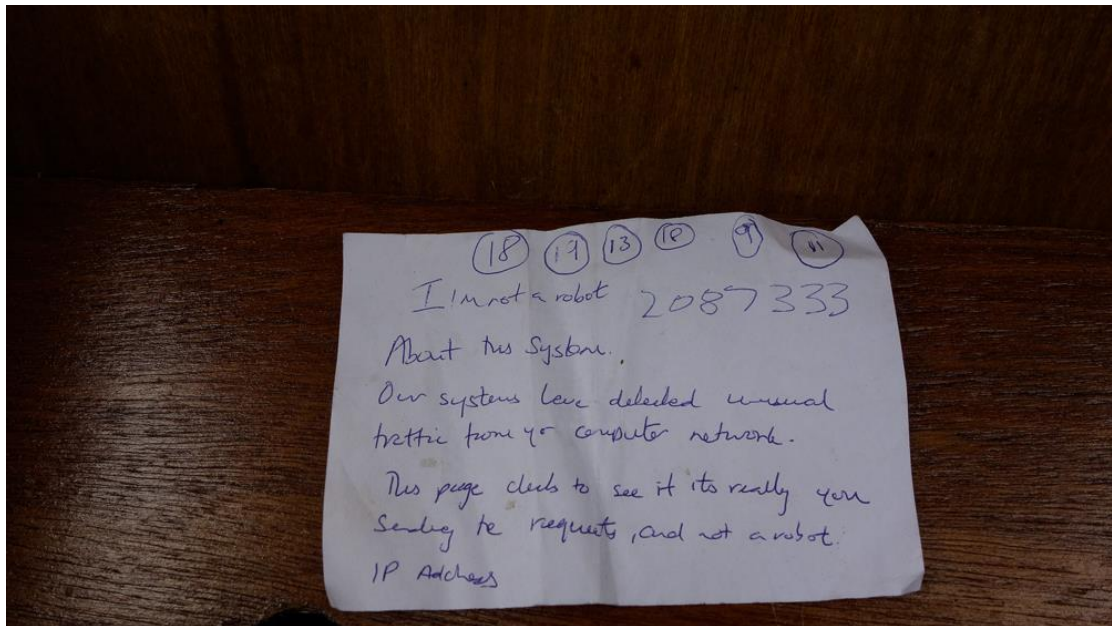
Looks promising

We wandered up the path to read the info board by the entrance gate and found a **Chevron Moth**.



Info

The path was steep from there but as we went through a gap in a stone wall, pretty much identical to a Manx stone wall, we found a wooden box. Wendy lifted the lid and inside it was this curious note!



Hmmmmmm?

What on earth was that! The only thing we can think of is maybe something to do with Geocaching possibly?

We came out into a flat area where there were a load of cows lying around that didn't seem as though they were moving for anything! We heard, then saw some **Redpoll** and a female Redstart flew up from the stream to our left and landed in a bush. The cows weren't budging from the path and they had calves, so we didn't want to stress them out. Wendy was freaking out, so I had to work out an off road route to get us round them as there was no way I was giving up before we'd even started! The bracken we had to wade through was thick, so Wendy was already pretty narky and was protesting behind me. Lyca didn't know what to make of it either and cautiously trotted behind me waiting for me to clear a path for her through it all. We heard a call coming from our right and looked round to see a nice **Whinchat** sitting on top of the bracken close by. We followed the path until we got to the bottom of a steep hill and I checked my phone map to see where to go next.



Steep!

Wendy was absolutely delighted (not :P) when I told her we were going up it and neither of us were feeling particularly energetic. I certainly wasn't but we weren't stopping now. We started the climb upwards and I found out later that the hill was called Fan Frynych and was 629m high. It was definitely steeper than I'd bargained on though but we scanned the sides as we went looking for our target bird. We stopped for a break when we got to a stone trig point type thing and took in the amazing scenery.



Cracking view

Wendy took some photos and then whatsapped one to her Mum and all we could hear was **Meadow Pipits** and **Skylarks** singing around us.



Even Lyca looks tired :P

We weren't at the top yet though, so when we'd got our breath back we carried on. The path, luckily for me, was quite a way from the cliff edge because I'd been a bit worried about that when I checked the route out on my OS map app. I don't have a very good head for heights and can't stand paths right next to cliff edges!



Nicely inland

When we eventually came out on the top we looked around and took in the view again. We saw Pen-y-Fan in the distance and looking through our bins we could see there were loads of people walking up it.



Pen-y-Fan

The path became confusing at this point and we didn't know whether we needed to take the outer path along the side of the edge of the cliff or the inner one through a field behind the stone wall. I scratched my head for a bit before deciding that the inner path looked like the safest of the two, so that was the one we'd take. We were still going uphill but it was nowhere near as steep as the climb up to that point....Phew! Things became a lot more pleasant from then on and we were chugging along quite nicely.....until we got to end of the path across the hill and looked at what was ahead of us! What goes up must come down but after our steep ascent we hadn't been prepared for just how steep our decent was going to be and it looked worse, much worse :O!

We stood at the top of the hill looking down at the field of sheep ahead of us trying to work out the best way to tackle it. We started to zig-zag our way sideways downhill, which was proving harder than we expected. Our knees were killing us in no time! We then realized that it was just too steep for even that, so Wendy reckoned we just went for it down the steepest side by the wall. I was looking at better options when something dark caught my eye down by some rocks. I looked down quite a way and a bird hopped out from behind a tuft of grass and my jaw nearly hit the ground. I excitedly called out, “**Ring Ouzel!**” to Wendy who got onto it quickly, which was a good job because it flew off straight away with food in its beak. Yey! After all that we’d finally been rewarded with the very thing we’d gone looking for :)! We reckoned that if it’d flown off with food then there was a good chance it’d back for more. We cautiously made our way down the ridiculously steep section to the rocks and sat down to rest our quivering knees for a while in the hope that it’d pop up on the wall but there was no sign of it. All we wanted was get back onto the flat and after we’d negotiated the rest of ‘Lethal Hill’ we breathed a sigh of relief when we finally got to the bottom. Looking back up at what we’d just come down it was ridiculously steep but as usual the photos don’t do it justice.



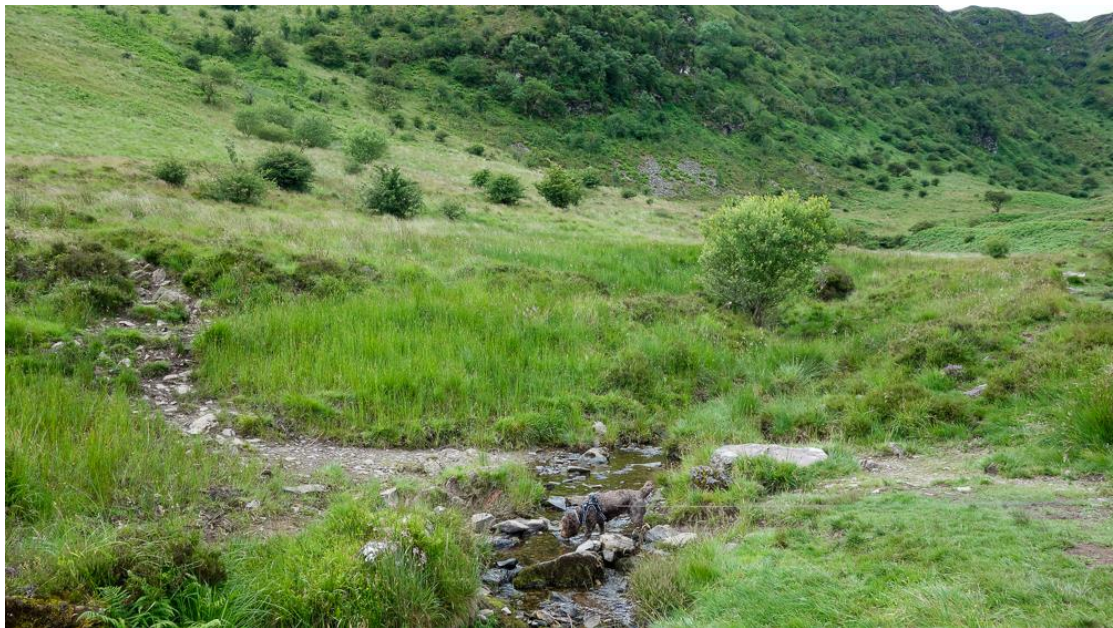
Easy walk he said!

Having thought it'd be all plain sailing from then on we were quickly brought down to earth with a bump. I could see where we needed to get to but there was a barbed wire fence in the way and no way through. Our only option was to continue down the field in the hope there was a stile somewhere. Near the bottom we were relieved to find one but it went straight into an overgrown boggy area! Just to rub salt into the wounds it looked as though we wouldn't have had this problem if we'd been on the other side of the wall and had walked down the hill on the scary path.....Urrghhhh! Wendy was instantly defeated and imagined us having to go back up 'Lethal Hill' and back down on the outer path but there was no way I was doing that, so I lifted Lyca over the stile and into the bog.



Great!

Testing the water I discovered that if I used the tufts of grass as steppingstones then it wasn't too bad, so Wendy reluctantly followed me. It wasn't easy but we did it and eventually set foot on some proper ground.....Phew!
Lyca celebrated by having a drink out of the mountain stream! :)



Yum yum

It'd been an eventful first walk of the day albeit slightly ambitious for me having had no food yet! I really need to stop believing Andy when he says a walk is easy! There were a few people around when we got back on track and a bloke sitting on the ground with some kids. One of the kids, who seemed a right little ****, made a smart arsed comment about my camera as when we walked past. I was too tired to burn the kid so I just faked laughter and carried on.

Back at the car it was 1.30pm and although I didn't feel like it I thought I'd better eat something. I struggled my way through my sarnie knowing that I'd pay for it later. We set off again at 1.52pm and Wendy pointed out some bins for our

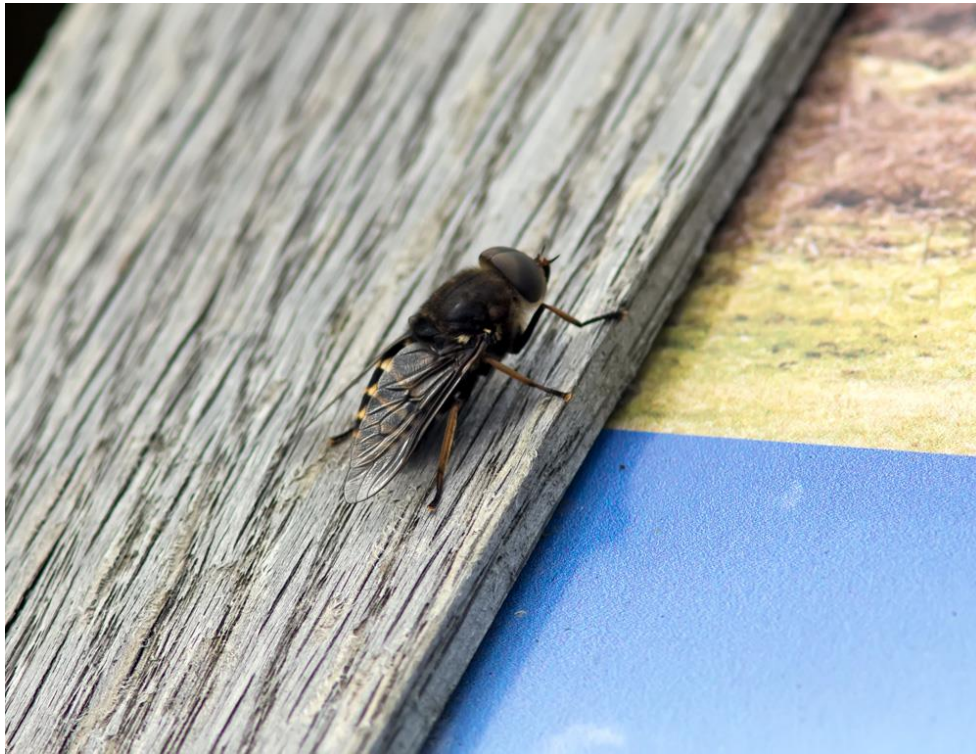
rubbish. All of a sudden I remembered that I'd left the poo bag in the layby, so I had to turn around and drive all the way back to get it.....Aaarrghhhh!

Back at the Brecon Beacons Visitor Centre at 2.03pm we noticed there were loads of dog walkers around and it was much busier than it'd been earlier. We left Lyca in the car and went over to use the WC's then nipped into the shop and finally bought some pressies.....Phew! Luckily the sun was out, so we at least had that on our side for trying to find ourselves a Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly. I'd also read that they'd recently found Southern Damselflies on the reserve as well, which was interesting. They'd both be lifers for us and our first ever chance of seeing either, so we got everything from the car and headed off towards the gate at the entrance. The first sign we came across said, "ALL DOGS ON LEADS, SHEEP HAVE LAMBS!" I was very pleased by that but as soon as we got onto the moorland the next sign said, "All dogs must be under close control." Arrghhh! That just gives bad dog owners the grey area they need to claim they have complete control over their dogs when they're off the lead when in fact they very rarely do. Sure enough within 50 yards there were two dogs off the lead even though there were sheep everywhere. We had a quick look at the info board and Wendy spotted another Giant Horsefly sitting on it.



Info

Somehow I managed to get a blurry shot of it. Even though it wasn't moving and was sitting on a solid object.....Skillzzz!



Monster Horsefly

We followed the footpath up a hill, which was covered in bracken until we reached the first pool that I'd spotted on google earth the night before.



First pool

We stopped for a scan to see what we could find and then noticed an old bloke approaching us with a big smile on his face. He very kindly asked us if we'd like him to take our photo and said he offered this to people daily. We don't know what he must've thought when Wendy laughed and said, "Ohhhhh no thanks, I'd much rather look at a photo of the lovely scenery, it's much more attractive!" Poor guy! The view was pretty awesome though but there was only an Emperor and some **Four-spotted Chasers** flying around. After giving it a while we started to notice some Damselflies appearing when the wind died down between gusts. I got a shot of one, which was an **Azure Damselfly**.



Azure Damselfly

This was all very nice and a bit more exciting than a Common but not what we were looking for. Other Damsels were tiny and definitely Blue-tails but were much too far away to get any decent views of. I got some record shots but even looking through our bins it was all very confusing not to mention frustrating. Just when they'd start flying the wind would pick up causing them all to disappear again.....Grrrrrr! They did look different from Blue-tailed, so I wasn't going to give up in a hurry and was prepared to give it as long as it took but then some people with 4 dogs started walking towards us. Wendy, who was already getting bored, was keen to just leave the pool and carry on but I wasn't going anywhere. I took Lyca to the far side of the pool while they ambled about doing very little, very slowly. After posing for photos they finally turned round and left but despite my best efforts I couldn't re-find any of the Damsels and Wendy was itching to go. I was sure one of the Blue-tails I had been getting pics of was a Scarce blue-tailed so spent a few minutes studying the photos I had got. Sure enough it had the telltale signs of a mainly dark S8 with narrow blue band at the end. It also had an entirely blue S9 with tiny black marks so we happily added **Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly** and another Dragonfly lifer to our growing list :).



Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly

We walked up to the 2nd pond, which was smaller and we could only see an Emperor and more 4-spots flying, so we continued up to the 3rd pond. This was of medium size and had the same types again but for whatever reason there was fewer.



Quiet pool

The view of the Brecon Beacons from up there was amazing and Wendy took some photos, which as usual didn't do it justice.



Stop the clock!

We could see just how vast they were and started to wish we'd been able to find a cottage somewhere nearby like my original plan months earlier. After Wendy had finished having one of her moments we started to head back down. It was 3.50pm when we got back to the car and after Lyca had been given a drink Wendy sat in the back with her and got her to finally eat her breakfast! I checked the Dragonfly book and 100% confirmed Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly, which I was really happy about. It was 18.5c when we left at 3.59pm and we'd done 15,100 steps over the day.

By the time we got to HQ at 4.49pm it was 23c, so it'd really started to heat up. I checked the phone line and was disappointed to find that it was still as dead as a Dodo....Grrrrrr! While Wendy was unpacking the stuff I looked at my receipt for the pressies from the Gift Shop and realized that I'd been overcharged by £9! I'd been charged for a book I hadn't bought but after having paid for it I really wished I had because it was a good book.....Grrrrrr! Annoyed by that I went out to the shed to finally put some washing on and noticed that the Redstart was back on the fence. I thought I'd better try to get some shots of it seeing as it was so obliging while Wendy sorted tea for herself and Lyca. I wasn't hungry and my IBS was still rumbling on, so this was a handy distraction. It gave me the run around and wasn't making things easy for me so I ended up going upstairs to try from the bedroom window instead. Eventually I got a few shots.



Common Redstart

Wendy made me tea while I was busy doing that, as I needed to eat something at least and then went off for a bath. Lyca was very tired all evening and hardly moved from her spot and while I flicked through the book I'd bought I saw something that made me chuckle. I showed it to Wendy who found it equally amusing and call us childish but Fan-y-Big is a funny name for a hill :P. When the washing was done Wendy had to hang her trousers outside in the sun so they stood a chance of being dry for the morning. She put them on a hanger and hung it from the ledge above the kitchen window and noticed another giant horse fly sitting on the wall. We didn't even know they existed until a couple of days ago and now they were popping up everywhere! Is it a Wales thing? She then discovered that she'd acquired a new T-shirt courtesy of the previous occupants who must've missed it when they emptied the washing machine. It had a couple of holes in it but was her size and made of organic bamboo, so with the attitude of waste not want not she was claiming it...Hahaha! After we'd watched TV and relaxed for a while we were tired and headed off to bed at 10.15pm.

Tuesday 4th July

I was woken up at 2.30am with raging IBS but managed to get back to sleep until I was woken up again at 3.30am. This time it was much worse and I just couldn't get back to sleep, so I contemplated going downstairs. Not really wanting to with the weird neighbours and the indoor wildlife roaming around I wasn't that enamored with that idea. Somehow, amazingly I finally managed to drift off again much later and none of us woke up again until 8.24am. It'd rained over night and was very overcast outside when I let Lyca out but the Redstart was back on the fence again. I rushed upstairs to try for some shots but it'd cleared off by then and didn't come back...Typical! It soon became apparent that I was going nowhere in a hurry and I retreated off into the living room to lie down. My IBS was so bad it was looking highly unlikely that we'd be meeting up with Andy for food later, which we'd both been looking forward to :(I decided to see how it went before I contacted him to cancel, not that I had any way of doing that from HQ, but I wasn't holding any hopes. It was a non-eventful morning of me being in pain, Lyca being lazy and Wendy being bored looking at the rain out the

window. Looking on the bright side though it was very handy that my worst IBS flare up was when it was raining :).



Zzzzzzzzz

Whatever happened Lyca still needed a walk, so I found what looked like an easy 2mile walk from the house that would enable us to visit Forest Coal Pit Farm NR. The Redstart kept popping back to the garden and this morning it brought a juvenile with it. Every time I'd get my camera ready they'd disappear, so it started to become frustrating and probably wasn't doing my IBS any favours. By lunchtime the rain had stopped and the sun was out, so Wendy was climbing the walls and after she'd eaten she went upstairs to wash her hair just in case we ended up going out later. She shouted down to me that the Redstarts were back, so I went up with my camera. I opened the window, pulled up a chair and sat waiting for it to come back. Needless to say they weren't playing and after only getting a few shots after waiting for ages I gave up in the end. I thought I'd better get myself ready to take Lyca out, crossing my fingers that keeping occupied and doing some exercise would help.



Common Redstart (juv)

By the time we left HQ it was 1.10am and we set off down the road hoping there wasn't going to be much traffic.



Quaint

At the end of the road we turned right and started heading uphill towards the fields. Wendy was by then sick to death of hills and craving a flat walk, so she didn't look very impressed. We walked across a field until we reached a stile and realized that it wasn't dog friendly at all.



Very green

There was no way that Lyca was going to be able to get herself over it, so I had no choice but to pick her up and lift her over. The field ahead of us was steep and the sun was beating down on us, so we were roasting in no time. When we got to the top we found another huge stile that I had to lift Lyca over again. Next we found ourselves walking up through a wood, which because of the recent rain was pretty muddy. When we got to the top we were very unsurprised to find yet another stile that I had to lift Lyca over but this time she had muddy paws, which ended up all over my coat. After traipsing up another field we came to yet another stile, which was the biggest of the lot! Up until then I hadn't asked Wendy to help, because of her back, but this time there was no option but for me to pass Lyca over to her. Wendy was ready on the other side and grabbed hold of her to make sure she was over but because I didn't want her lifting and bending down to put her on the ground I suggested she let Lyca jump down herself. This sounded perfect but Lyca didn't get a firm footing and promptly fell off and tumbled down into the side of the road.....Aarrghhhhh! We were now standing in the road next to a house, so we moved into a layby while I checked my map to see where to go next. Was this really a short 2 mile walk? We carried on along the road, passing a really old church, until the path started to climb upwards again.....Grrrrrrr!



Old Church

By then it was absolutely boiling and we were starting to wonder if we'd ever get home. It felt like we'd already done more than 2 miles and we still had quite a way to go yet! When we eventually got to Forest Coal Pit Farm there were Horseflies everywhere and they wouldn't leave us alone. Wendy successfully managed to wipe one out but after a while I completely forgot about them when I realized that I'd missed the left hand turn into the Nature Reserve.....Doh! We had to decide whether to go back the way we came or keep going and make a loop path and as I always prefer loop paths we plodded on. Unfortunately this meant we found ourselves climbing upwards again.....Grrrrrr! The footpath was lined with bracken, so it was really sheltered which was making it feel even hotter.



Sun trap

It was pretty overgrown too and we were still walking away from HQ. The path seemed endless and Wendy was getting a bit grumpy and was certain that I'd got us lost. I was confident that I knew where we were going though and it was just

a case of finding the next left hand path to start heading back. This sounded easy enough, so we carried on keeping our eyes peeled for anything of interest.



Not lost – honest!

The farm in the distance was getting a massive make over. I thought it might be something for Grand Designs but we found out from Andy later that the Welsh Government had given someone 4 million quid to renovate the farm, as it was Georgian or something like that. Seems a lot of money just for a few buildings that could've been given to a Wildlife organization to help protect environments but hey ho. All of a sudden something whizzed up the side of the footpath and landed in the bracken. We had a hunch as to what it was already and when we got our bins on it we weren't disappointed. We were totally surprised to see a **Golden-ringed Dragonfly** sitting there sunning itself, so I raised my camera in an attempt to get a shot. Unfortunately it was too quick and it flew off, so we carried on. Quite soon after that I realised that we'd missed the next left hand turning too! Hahaha....oops! It must've been so overgrown that we hadn't seen it and walked straight past, despite keeping an eye out so as not to make the same mistake again.....Doh! We walked back on ourselves and found a vague suggestion of an entrance but we'd have needed machetes to get through it, so we ignored it.

The path kept going until we finally started to go down hill towards a farm. There were some sheep lying around so I had keep Lyca on a short lead, so she didn't get too excited and eventually we were back on a road. The rest of the walk was on the road, which wasn't ideal but at least we were finally heading back to HQ! We ended up going past Strawberry Cottage Farm Reserve where Andy had taken us, which meant that we still had a bit of trek ahead of us. It was quite a busy little road and we had to let lorries and cars go past us but under the trees we were in the shade so, looking at it positively, we weren't as hot.....Phew! Eventually we found the reserve Andy had told us about and we went in for a look. It was an interesting little reserve called Coed-y-Cerrid NNR and is owned by the Countryside Council for Wales. Apparently it has some great trees and plants in it as well as breeding woodland birds. We wandered through it and although it looked like it had potential we didn't see or hear anything remotely interesting but it was probably too late in the season.



Coed-y-Cerrid

We were pretty relieved when the farm behind the house came into view and then I spotted a ladder against a pole and a BT van parked up in a layby. We got quite excited and presumed that they were there fixing the phone line, so Wendy was looking forward to being able to phone her Mum. I was also hoping I could phone Andy too because unfortunately I still didn't feel up to going out for food.

It was 3.25pm when we finally let ourselves into HQ and we'd done 11,600 steps. So much for a little 2 mile walk, it'd actually been 5miles! I checked the phone but the line was still completely dead...Uh oh! I went outside to see if the BT man was still there so I could go and see if he was fixing this line but he'd gone, so I reckoned I'd have to use the phone box over the road. My heart sank when I went in and found that it didn't accept cash and I needed a voucher to use it.....Useless! My IBS was killing me by then and I ended up back on the living room floor with Wendy stressing out about how I was going to contact Andy, which wasn't helping matters. Lyca finally ate her breakfast at 4pm and a Grey Squirrel paid the garden a visit. Wendy was gutted to find that she'd lost one of the lens caps on her bins. We reckon it must've been pulled off when she was helping Lyca over the stile earlier, so she was going to have to contact Leica when she got back home to see if they could replace it. She was so bored that she ironed some clothes upstairs to fill in some time before tea.

I eventually dragged myself up and went out in the car to get a mobile signal to phone Andy. Five miles away I was horrified to receive 2 texts that he'd sent earlier to see what was going on! I felt terrible and messaged him straight away to explain my predicament. From the sound of it he'd already given up on us anyway but it just goes to show how much we all take telecommunication for granted. We're totally used to staying in places with no mobile signal so we always try to book a cottage with a landline, which made me extra annoyed at the fact that ours still hadn't been fixed.....Grrrrr!

It'd been a weird kind of day and we'd already had tea and baths by 6.10pm, which said it all! I put the camera trap out in the hope of catching an Otter on the river again but by 10.10pm we'd had enough and went to bed. The farmer was

out shouting at sheep again, but we'd come to expect that by then, after all we were in Wales :P!

Wednesday 5th July

We were up and about at 7.17am and it was a lovely sunny day. Wendy instantly heard buzzing and then found another wasp at the window, which made her very uneasy. What if there was a hole somewhere that meant that the wasps from the nest could get into the house? Eek! I took Lyca out and brought the camera trap in but there was absolutely nothing on it again :(After we'd had breakfast we started to get ready to go out and with it being such a nice day we smothered ourselves in SPF50 and Smidge to cover all bases. Wendy had chosen to wear her acquired T-shirt and we headed out at 9.39am. Due to seeing the weather forecast we decided we would travel right out to Allun Valley again to give it one last go. Hopefully the lack of wind and blazing hot sun would be enough. When we got to the give way at Llan Conrhenny we noticed a group of 5 people in their 50s standing in a line with their arms folded looking very serious and wearing matching blue polo shirts. They were all staring at us but one woman in particular stood out, as she was glaring at us like we were Nazis or something! If looks could kill! Wendy found it very amusing and smiled at them as we drove past but the woman's expression didn't change. We saw her say, "Isle of Man" so she must've seen my car reg but judging by their faces we reckon they might have been members of the local Nettle Eating Group :P. It was already 20c and wasn't windy, which was just what we needed.

I parked up in the Old Castle Down layby at 10.50am by which point it was 23c, good for Butterflies but far too hot for my liking. We walked up the hill again, which felt like hard work, so we were starting to feel the strain of the past week and a half. I felt quite optimistic with it being so boiling and still but we only saw a couple of Frits flying and they didn't land once.



Scorchio

We found a **Pyrausta Despicata** Moth, which we get at home so even that wasn't exciting.



Pyrausta Despicata

When we got to the sheltered corner there was absolutely nothing flying and Wendy was feeling jumpy after the giant horsefly incident last time. The wind had bizarrely started to pick up even though it was only meant to be 3mph! We stood around waiting for a while and I found out that the group we'd seen there on Saturday was the Wales branch of Butterfly Conservation. We got bored and took a wander up the left hand path and found a Carpet type of Moth. We flushed another 2 off the path as we went but apart from that it was dead and even the Peregrines were nowhere to be seen. There was no point sticking around so we headed back down feeling deflated at having failed again.

Back at the car it was 12.18pm and there were horseflies everywhere! They were even swarming round the car, so we couldn't get in quick enough. It was still 22c when we left and after spotting a Mace store I pulled up so Wendy could nip in to get more water and some chocolate as a consolation prize. The woman behind the counter was the most miserable, unpleasant and unhelpful person she'd ever been served by. She was thoroughly horrible to the girl in front of her and made Wendy feel as though her trade was unwelcome and too much of an inconvenience. Wendy said that if that was her local shop then she'd move house :P! Looking at my phone OS map it looked like there was a place nearby where we could eat our lunch by the sea, so that was our next plan.

After driving for what seemed like far too long I realized that I'd missed the turn off and ended up driving miles away before there was anywhere I could turn around....Doh! By the time we were heading back in the right direction it was 12.48pm, so we'd wasted loads of time considering the place was so close to Old Castle Down! We drove past a Lamb lying on the pavement and a load of Sheep on the other side of the road, but that's probably normal for Wales. At 12.52pm we arrived at my selected lunch spot and the view from the car park down in a cove looked amazing, although Wendy didn't get a photo of that so this one will have to do :/.



Lunchtime views

It looked like I'd made a good choice until a bloke who was sitting at the side of the road came over to supposedly let us know that there was a dog ban on the beach. We said it didn't matter because we weren't planning on going on it anyway, to which he replied, "OK that's £5 please." Errrrrr.....£5 for the privilege of eating our lunch with a view? No thanks! I quickly told him that we weren't staying and were only turning round, so that was that plan knocked on the head. I drove back to the top of the hill where there was another car park but the only view from there was a stone wall. The car park was busy, which we weren't surprised at seeing as it didn't cost £5! It was a pay and display though (not sure how much) but as we weren't sticking around we chose to ignore that minor detail. We ate our lunch quickly because we were starving by then and when she'd finished Wendy took a wander over to the wall to see if she could get a photo of the view below us that she hadn't taken earlier. She found out that she couldn't and then chuckled to herself when she noticed a young bloke with no shoes on and long hair sitting playing a guitar out of the side of his campervan with a very well behaved Border Collie by his side.



Just chillin

She wondered what his story was while I wondered when the last time he had a bath was....Hahahahaha! He was probably the son of a millionaire who was just playing at it and goes home to his massive mansion when it rains or he needs his washing doing :P. Next up was a 'Barbus' which was a mobile Barber van adorned with 'Hipster' type blokes with beards and top knots on the outside.....of course. Good old Wales!!



Barbus

We left the strange neck of the woods at 1.15pm and the temperature was now a scorching 26c! My next plan was to try again for High Brown Fritillary at a reserve called Ogmore Common, which was on the other side of the valley from Allun Valley. My sat nav took me down another stupidly narrow single-track road and as we were still by the coast I stopped so that Wendy could take a photo of the river and dunes surrounding it.



Roadside Dunes

Further up the road I found a layby by the entrance to park in and we got out at 1.25pm. Just to really annoy us the first stretch of the walk was surprise, surprise up a hill....Aarrghhh! Lyca was narky when 3 horses came down the track and it looked as though it was heavily used by horse riders, judging by the amount of good quality manure all the way up it! It was absolutely boiling and we were sweating buckets by the time we got to top and came out on Ogmore Common.



Ogmore Common

The sun was beating down and it was, as Wendy so observantly said, "Like being on holiday!" Hahahaha :P. Wendy flushed a tiny Moth from the path and on first glances she shrieked in disbelief, "Pyrausta Sanguinalis?" I came over and we both stared at the colourful little Moth until I realized it was just another **Pyrausta Purpuralis**....Doh!

There were a lot of thistles on the common, which I believe High Browns favour as well as bracken clearance, so it looked really promising. We wandered around

with our eyes out on stalks but only saw 1 x Frit which definitely wasn't the one we wanted.....Booooo! We came to an area where there'd been some gorse clearance and the remaining bits had gone dry on the path in the heat. Suddenly a Frit flew very fast from the left of us right across and then..... over a hedge into a farm field. It never returned :(Why on earth would it prefer a sterile farm field to a wildflower and weed covered Common. Grrrr! I bet that was a High Brown as well! Lyca then started to limp, so Wendy picked her paw up and found that she had a huge spike in her pad, which she quickly removed. On the way down I got a bit confused as to which way to go but luckily Wendy put me right....Hahahahaha!

Back at the car it was 2.25pm and Lyca was so thirsty she guzzled her water down in no time. I now had no idea what to do as I hadn't expected us to have done both areas so quickly. Luckily enough I actually had a 3g signal, so quickly set about googling reserves in SE Wales. I was hoping to find one on the way home and somehow one appeared that looked perfect. It was called Parc Slip and wasn't very big but it had Dragonflies, birds and reptiles! We left straight away and weren't surprised to see that it was now 26.5c! We spotted a river under a bridge, so Wendy suggested I pulled into the layby so that we could let Lyca go for a paddle to cool down.



Perfect

There were 2x blokes who looked well dodgy heading that way, so we hung back until we knew they'd gone before we got out. Lyca went for a paddle and looked very pleased with herself as she stood in what must've been ice cold water.



Cooling off

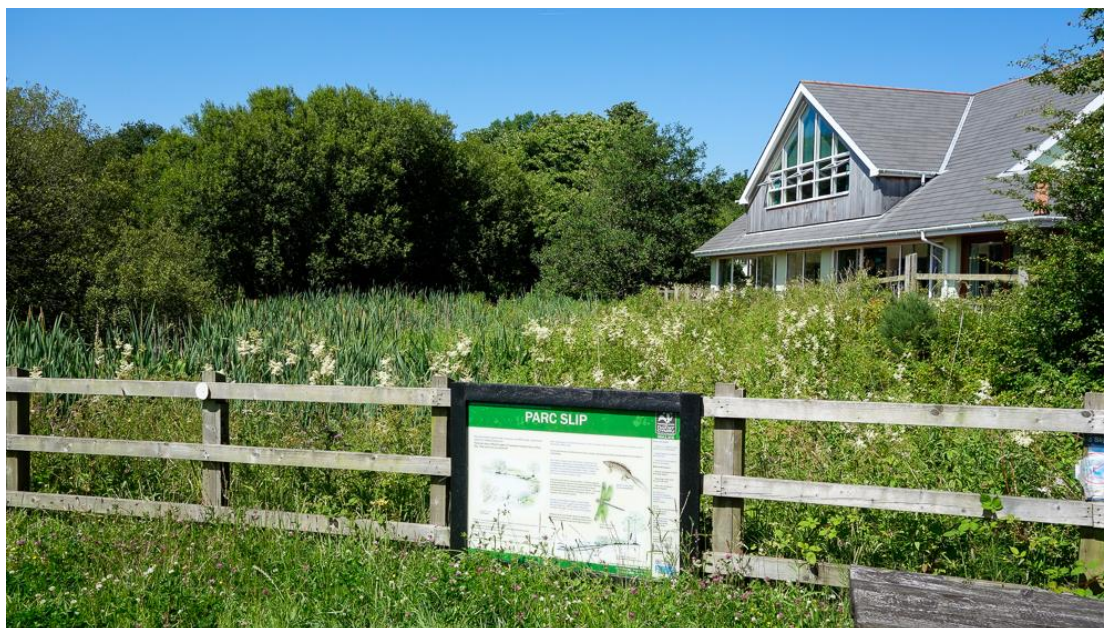
A white work van pulled up with 2 more dodgy looking blokes in it so we hurried back to the car and left. Further down the road Wendy spotted a sign for 'Uncle Sam's American Circus,' which was being set up in one of the fields. This, she reckoned, explained the dodgy looking blokes we'd seen down by the river, which sounded about right. Lyca wasn't happy and was panting heavily in the back when we ended up on more winding single-track roads. She's such a speed freak and is only happy when I'm driving fast on motorways! Typically there was a van in the road with some blokes cutting back the hedge, so obviously we had to stop. There was no room for even a toy car to get past, so we had no choice but to wait for the van to move.



Yawn

We crossed our fingers that they'd notice us and let us go past and luckily we didn't have to wait too long.....Phew!

It was 2.56pm when we arrived at Parc Slip NR and Wendy trotted over to the Visitor Centre to use the WC before we set off.



Parc Slip

It was so hot I was uncomfortable, so plastered myself in more SPF50, as did Wendy when she came back. I didn't know that much about the reserve and after a short walk up a path we came to a small unassuming looking pool that was more like a large puddle. It didn't look like anything much but there was a bench next to it, so I headed over.



Muddy puddle

The most obvious thing we noticed was an Emperor Dragonfly whizzing around but then we found a **Broad-bodied Chaser** and **Black-tailed Skimmer**.



Broad-bodied Chaser

When we spotted a Blue-tailed type Damselfly Wendy thought she'd better give it a second look in case it was something more interesting. I set about trying to get some video and while Wendy was scouring through the reeds trying to re-find the tiny Damselflies she spotted a Moth resting on one of them. She got me onto it too and neither of us recognized it at all, so I got a shot of it to ID but Wendy quickly chirped up with, "**Chocolate Tip!**" She checked her phone and sure enough it was a Chocolate Tip, which was a lifer for us :).



Chocolate Tip

I carried on taking some video and Wendy's persistence paid off when she found a Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly amongst the **Common Blue** and **Blue-tailed**

Damselflies. There was also an Azure Damselfly, so the small puddle we thought wouldn't come up with much had turned into one of the best pools we'd ever looked at! We continued down the path to another pool with a hide, so we went in. Luckily there was nobody else in there, which meant we could all go in together. Looking out at the pool it was dead bird wise and we were too high up for it to be any good for looking Dragonflies, so we didn't stick around. Just a bit further on we came to a proper pool but this one was too far out to spot anything on it.



Distant pool

I knew there was a loop path at this reserve but we ended up getting slightly lost, so looking at the map I reckoned we needed to be on the cycle path to get back. The path was a lot longer than it'd looked and it was so hot it was untrue.

On one section there was a nice wooden sculpture, which showed the various different stages of Parc Slip throughout the ages. The area was originally a Coalmine in the 1800s, eventually turning into an open cast coalmine up until the 1980s! It was amazing to see the difference now to what it must've looked like just over 30 years ago!



Very clever

Just when we thought Parc Slip couldn't get any better we spotted a **Golden-ringed Dragonfly** whizzing around at the side of the path :).



Golden-ringed Dragonfly

It was 4.40pm when we got back to the Visitor Centre and I wanted an ice cream or cold drink to cool me down but Wendy looked at it and reckoned it was closed. There was a volunteer outside locking up and all the shutters were down, so that was the end of that. Boooooo :(It was quite late and Wendy wanted to go out for food seeing as my IBS seemed to have abated, so while Wendy gave Lyca a drink I put the Half Moon Hotel into my sat nav. It gave us an eta of 6pm, which was perfect, so we set off. I'd really enjoyed Parc Slip and hopefully one day we can return. My car was reading 28.5c while I was driving with the windows down, so I dread to think what it'd been while we'd been out walking.

The pub was a bit further north past the cottage and we laughed when we drove past The Queen's Head and saw that there were no cars parked outside but there was a mini bus. Those poor unsuspecting people :P! It was 6pm on the dot when I parked up outside the Half Moon Hotel and Wendy instantly noticed that it was closed! Grrrrrr.....now what? The only other pub we knew of was The Skirrid Inn in the nearest hamlet to the cottage, so we thought we'd head back and give it a whirl even though the few times we'd driven past it looked well dodgy. By the time we got there it was 6.18pm, so I got my phone out to check online if it was dog friendly and had anything we could eat on the menu. Surprise, surprise there was no signal! Wendy said she'd go in and have a look but I couldn't stay where I was in the road and there was no sign of anywhere to park, so we had a scan around. Luckily we found a sign for the Beer garden and car park at the side of the building, so I followed it through an archway, which brought us out at the back of the pub. The sign also advertised the fact that it was the oldest Pub in Wales, which looked feasible even it wasn't true! I drove round the back, and parked up in the car park where luckily it looked a lot more friendly and more up my street than the front. Most of the benches were taken already, so it was busy, which was a sort of good start. Wendy went in and asked about dogs and had a look at the menu and came back out to tell me. We could sit outside with Lyca and the menu was surprisingly poncey, so there wasn't much for me apart from pork and leek sausages and mash but that'd have to do. We all went over and I grabbed a bench in the shade, as it was still boiling, while Wendy went in to get

some drinks and place our food order. Lyca looked thirsty and hadn't eaten her breakfast yet, so Wendy went back to the car to get her bowl and food. When she got there she found that her door had been left open from when she'd got out...Oooops! Luckily we were in the middle of nowhere and not Moss Side! Lyca guzzled her drink but needed a bit of persuasion to eat her breakfast and even then she left ¼ of it. There was a nice relaxing atmosphere there and our food was very nice, although neither of us could eat much because we were so hot and tired by then. It was 7.07pm when we left but at least we didn't have to cook when we got in.

When we got back to HQ it was 7.16pm and Lyca wolfed her dinner down and trotted off with Dentastick even though she'd just eaten her breakfast about ¾ hour ago! She was a very tired dog and slept for the rest of the evening while we both had to have baths and do the washing after our hot sweaty day. Wendy noticed that even though she'd plastered herself in SPF50 the back of her neck was quite badly burned, which must've been due to the strap of her bins rubbing it off, whereas I'd got away with it for a change :). We'd done 18,699 steps in that heat so no wonder we were all tired at the end of the day! It had been nice weather back at home too, so Tynwald Day would've been dry for a change :P. The boards had been removed from the windows of the derelict farmhouse in the field behind us and there were a couple of blokes in the field slashing and burning all the bushes from in and around it.



Progress?

They'd obviously bought it to develop and were hard at work all evening. We couldn't help but feel sad that yet another wild place was being destroyed and were glad we'd been there before it was residential and sterile. We watched TV until 10.30pm and then decided it was time for bed.

Just as we were drifting off we were alerted to the loud buzzing of a wasp, which was definitely in the bedroom somewhere :O! Noooooooooo! It was pitch black but Lyca started to frantically bite her paws and then leapt off the bed like a Jack-in-the-box, so we quickly turned the lights on to see what was going on. The buzzing had stopped and after checking Lyca we found that she was fine, so when our hearts had stopped pounding and we'd calmed down we turned the

lights off to try to go to sleep again. Unfortunately paranoia had set in and our heads were full of bad thoughts about 100's of wasps making a break from the nest and ending up in the bedroom, after all we'd been finding them in there all week. If they were angry then they could sting us and if we received multiple wasp stings then we could end up with anaphylaxis and with no phone or mobile signal we had no way of getting help, so we'd only be found dead and decomposed on Saturday when the cleaner came in.....Aarrghhhh! You can kind of get the gist of how it went...Urrghhhh!

Thursday 6th July

After a pretty rubbish nights sleep we woke up at 7.27am and were relieved to find everyone still intact and no wasp swarm in the room either.....Phew! I took Lyca out for a wee and although it was another sunny day it didn't feel as warm as yesterday. Lyca refused her breakfast again, so that got packed up to come out with us and before we left we caked ourselves in SPF50. Wendy made sure she had a T-shirt on that wasn't cut as low as the 'acquired' one she'd worn yesterday to cover up the burn and prevent further damage. The plan was to visit Newport Wetlands RSPB, as I'd found it yesterday when trying to find places to go. It looked like a great reserve to spend our last day ay, as it was pretty big and there was a walk dogs could go on. When we were loading up the car I noticed another wasps nest in the roof above the kitchen window, which made us both even more pleased that we only had to survive one more night in there. It was 20.5c when we left and as we travelled to our destination we noticed that it was really hazy, so there was potential for it to be another scorcher of a day!

We arrived at Newport Wetlands Centre at 10.36am and while I got the stuff ready Wendy wandered off to find the WC's at the Visitor Centre. It was surprisingly far away from the car park but she was happy to hear a **Sedge Warbler** singing from the reeds next to it after having only heard one in Sussex the week before.



Newport Wetlands RSPB

What's going on with Sedgies this year? They seemed very few and far between. She came back to the car park having already given the shop the once over and

we all headed back together. I reckoned a map would be helpful seeing as it was such a big reserve, so we went straight back to the Visitor Centre and Wendy went in to grab one. There was a bowl of water for dogs outside and while Lyca had a drink I noticed a big Moth on the wall by a light. Neither of us could place it and although Wendy reckoned we'd definitely seen one before I wasn't convinced, so I took a picture of it to help us to ID it. Wendy checked her phone app and found out that it was a **Drinker Moth**, which although pretty cool wasn't a lifer.



Drinker Moth

Looking at the map we had to go all the way back to the car park to get on the right path for dogs, which was a bit annoying. While we walked through the car park I caught a flash of red as something whizzed past us. It was a Scarlett Tiger Moth and shortly after we spotted another.....Cool! We'd seen our first ever Scarlett Tiger at Dixon Embankment a few days earlier, so this was great. We then saw a yellow Butterfly but we can't be 100% certain because it was so fast but it must've been a **Brimstone** because it was too pale to be a Clouded Yellow. We wandered down a footpath and found another Scarlett Tiger, which was kind enough to land, so I could get a shot of it.



Scarlett Tiger Moth

We passed a huge power station, which looked like it was coal fired but was surrounded by a reed bed tall enough to obscure most of the eyesore.



Eyesore

Walking under some pylons I spotted a bird flitting through some brambles growing on one of them. When it popped out we were pleased to see that it was a **Lesser Whitethroat**, which was new for the trip and always a nice bird to find. It was so sheltered on the path that we were sooooo hot and poor Lyca must've been feeling it too. When we rounded a corner we had our first glimpse of the Severn Estuary, which was vast. Lyca decided to start pulling but that would've been because she could smell the sea (even at that distance!) and wanted to go for a paddle.



Dream on Lyca!

The tide was miles out, so she was out of luck but we had a scan of the mud flats to see if there was anything about. All we came up with was a **Shelduck** and a **Curlew** so we carried on towards a small lighthouse.



Lighthouse

By then I thought I was going to melt and I know I'd been hoping for good weather for this trip but this was taking it a bit too far. I was well out of my comfort zone and I even had to resort to zipping my combo trouser legs off! Before turning back inland we took one last look at the Severn Estuary and across to what I think is Devon but could be Dorset?



Somewhere

The walk back was on a path lined with tall bushes and brambles, so it was a heat trap and there were horseflies everywhere.....Yuk! It didn't help when the path crossed a farm field crossing and there was a herd of cows blocking the way. Again Wendy freaked out, so I tried to scare them off by banging and making noise but they looked at me like I was mental.



Nosey cows

Eventually I suggested that I'd pick Lyca up and go across with Wendy staying right behind me, which worked a treat and we got across with no issues. Phew! Further up the path it then became more like we were in a wood. I relaxed for a second thinking there wouldn't be any horseflies in there but I was wrong! There were just as many if not more.....Arrghhhh!

There were **Wall Browns** everywhere, which up until then had been an unfamiliar sight. Lyca was panting heavily and when Wendy took a swig of her water she looked up her licking her lips. Poor Lyca had to make do with trying to get as much water as she could before it leaked through my cupped hands. We

thought we'd never get back and with Lyca having finished the rest of the water we were both getting very thirsty. As a timely distraction we spotted a nice **Southern Hawker**, so I stopped to get a shot of it and Wendy even had a go.



Southern Hawker

Finally back at the Visitor Centre I sat on the bench while Lyca had a drink and Wendy went in to get some cold drinks. When she came out she waved a bag under my nose containing a piece of Millionaires shortbread.....Get in! Om nom nom :). Just as we left we heard the blast of a **Cetti's Warbler**, which was the first of trip and again we wondered why? Back at the car it was 1.09pm and looking at my stats we'd done 10,700 steps already. Luckily I'd parked the car in the shade, so we were able to eat our lunch without the heat baking us. Lyca ended up eating her breakfast too, which wasn't before time even though Wendy had to hand feed her.....Grrrrr! We saw another Scarlett Tiger, so from having never seen one before arriving in Wales, apart from the first at Dixon Embankment, we'd tallied up a total of 13 just at Newport Wetlands! Wendy 100% confirmed Drinker Moth from earlier, which I was disappointed at, having hoped it was a lifer.

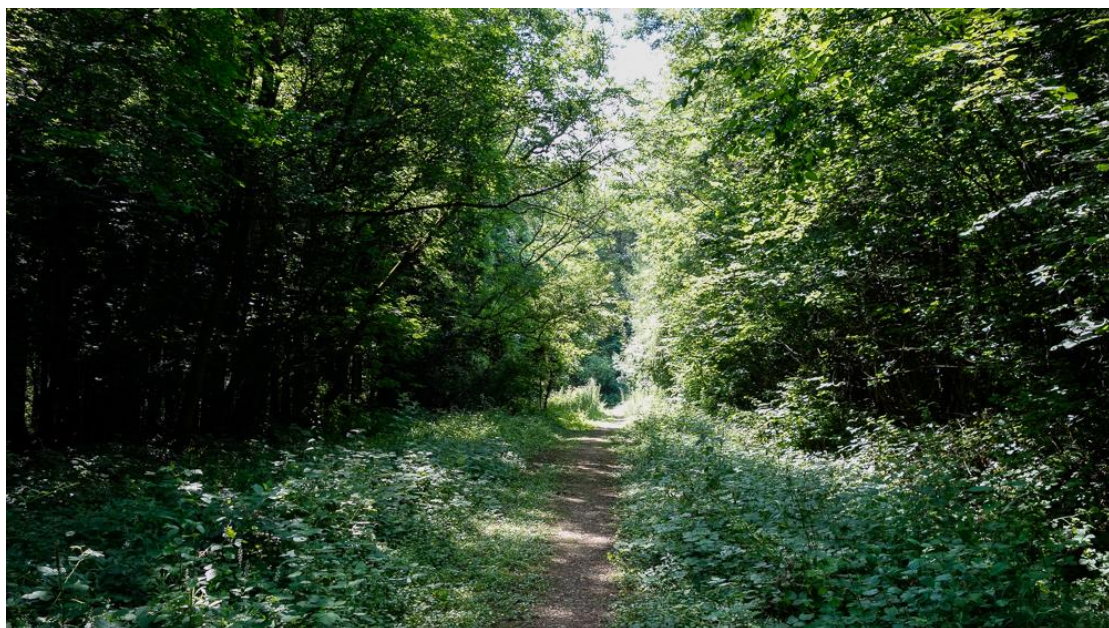
I hadn't been sure where to go after Newport Wetlands but the other day Andy had mentioned a place where his colleague had seen Hawfinches. We'd run out of plans, so this sounded like the nearest thing to one we were going to get in a hurry, so we headed straight there. When we left at 1.40pm it was 27.5c and by the time we reached Lower Minnets it was 28c but felt more like 100c to me!

It was 2.08pm when I parked up at Slade Woodlands car park and there was a GWT van parked up with a couple of blokes around it. I had a quick look at the interpretation board, which confirmed the presence of Hawfinch :).



Blurry info

Andy said we should've introduced ourselves to them but we obviously didn't....Hahahahaha! We'd been told by Andy to walk straight up the path through the Woods to where the path divided and then we'd find the Cherry Trees where the Hawfinches had been seen.



Slade Woodland

We followed his instructions, dodging some poo on the way and kept our ears pricked up for any calls that could be Hawfinch. When the path divided we walked up a bit further and found the Cherry trees but we hadn't had any hint that the birds were still around, so weren't surprised to find nothing. It was boiling out in the open and we stood waiting in the hope that at least we'd hear one call or in our dreams that they'd fly in and give us crippling views.....Hahahahaha! Obviously we had no such luck and there's only so long you can look at a Cherry tree for, so we carried on. There was a DG Fritillary flying up and down the hedge but after walking a bit further and realizing there was nothing about we gave up and headed back. Back at the Cherry tree we gave it

another few minutes and found a Spottfly but it was so hot, even in the shade, I'd had enough.

When we got back to the car it was 2.56pm and we were both absolutely knackered and way too hot. I took a minute to work out the best route to get us back to HQ via a petrol station and we left at 3pm. We saw 2x **Hobbies** flying over on the way and I stopped to fill my car up in preparation for tomorrow. It was 29c when we were going through a town on our approach to Abergavenny and when we got to the Skirrid Inn it was 29.5 :O! I'd told Wendy I'd stop to let her take a photo of the Pub to show how old it was but we completely forgot, so we don't have any.....Doh!

We pulled up outside HQ at 4.11pm and were relieved to get inside where it was, as usual, cold. If we hadn't had the log burner fired up at night we'd have had a much worse time there. I would hate to stay there in winter!! :O Wendy went upstairs and found a dead wasp on the windowsill, which must've been the one that totally freaked us out last night. Lyca had her tea at 5pm and then spent the rest of the evening crashed out in the living room. There was no sign of the Redstarts, which was unusual and made us wonder if the disturbance at the farmhouse had scared them off :(. We had our tea, baths and then started to pack as much stuff up as possible. Wendy made double sarnies to keep us going for the day ahead and we finally sat down to try and relax. The slashing and burning was still in full swing in the field behind us and we noticed not just the absence of the Redstarts but of all the birds that had visited us over the week. The garden was completely birdless, which was quite depressing after having been such a hive of activity up until then. I tried to plan something for tomorrow but I didn't have anything in mind apart from Arnside Knott in a desperate last ditch attempt for High Brown Fritillary but even if we went straight there it'd be getting pretty late in the day....Uh oh!

At 9.18pm something caught my eye out in the garden and I turned round to look. You're probably getting a bit excited by now and thinking that an Otter family had decided to pay us a visit on our last night and spent an hour frolicking in the garden just outside the door. We wouldn't have turned that down but unfortunately it wasn't remotely as exciting. There was a Border Collie running around the garden cocking its leg up over every bush available, like it owned the place.....What the? I quickly shut the curtains, so that Lyca wouldn't start barking, after all it was her garden this week and any intruder would be unwelcome. I got dressed and went outside to see what was going on and found the farmer just down the road. I asked him if the dog was his but he said he was from a farm 1 ½ miles up the road and that he'd been found in the next valley down as well, so it sounded like he was obviously used to roaming around. I asked him if he'd get home OK on his own but the farmer said he'd stick him in his van and deliver him back to make sure. It turned out that he was called Bodge and was very friendly, so I passed him through into the field to the farmer. Crazy! Lyca was blissfully unaware of everything that'd gone on when I went back inside....Phew! After that I went out with the Bat detector, seeing as we hadn't used it at all and had actually remembered to bring it for a change. It was surprisingly quiet Bat wise apart from one that I didn't recognize at all. We'd done 16,345 steps in total and coupled with the heat we'd out in we were really tired. Wendy had done most of the packing and apart from crossing our fingers that we'd be able to survive our last night without encountering Waspageddon we went to bed hoping to get a decent night's sleep at 10.30pm.

Friday 7th July

I was awake at 6.50am but remembering what a long day we had ahead of us I thought I'd better try to get some more sleep. The next thing I knew was that the alarm I'd set for 8am was going off and it was time to get up. We were very relieved to have not had any more wasp incidents and couldn't wait to get out of the house before we did! It was another really sunny day but it made no sense to stay in Wales for the day because we'd run out of ideas of where to go. The internet was so bad that there was no chance of finding anywhere and how the owners thought it was OK defied belief! Wendy picked up the note that we'd been given by Matt and unfolded it with a view to writing her own and discovered something interesting. There was a big long note from someone called Brenda apologizing for the dead phone line and explaining that it was an internal fault and an engineer needed to come in to fix it. It looked very much like she'd written that to someone else and Matt had used the same piece of paper but folded up into 4 for his note to us. Hmmm the plot thickens! So had they known about it the whole time and still hadn't managed to get it sorted. We breathed a sigh of relief that apart from letting Andy down and leaving him in lurch all day on Tuesday we hadn't needed to contact anyone urgently! While Wendy was packing upstairs she let another wasp out of the bedroom window, so they were definitely getting into the house from somewhere. There were so many holes everywhere that I'd hate to hazard a guess! Wendy had a quick clean and tidy round while I started to load the car up while Lyca was happy sleeping on the settee. While I was out there a group of about 10 teenagers with massive rucksacks came walking up the road. I assumed they were doing Duke of Edinburgh or something. They stopped and asked me where was some place in Welsh was, so I said, "Errrr?" and pointed them up the road but I didn't have a clue.

We left at 9.55am with 5minutes to spare and this time we weren't sad and wouldn't miss the cottage but we'd miss the area and garden.



Pontescob

Luckily we'd managed to overcome the initial disappointment and had even managed to get used to it but by then we were looking forward to getting home. It was 21c already and up the road we came across the group of kids I'd sent that way.....Uh oh. Fingers crossed I sent them the right way as it was all hills.....Whoops!



D of E kids

They didn't look happy at all and on such busy narrow roads in that heat and with all the flies neither of us were surprised. As we passed them we heard one of them say, "Oh great, another hill!" The temperature had gone up to 22c but we seemed to be heading into cloud already. We spotted a **Red Kite** flying over the fields and realized that it'd be a while until we saw one again. For some reason my phone wasn't charging and was only on 15% which was a bit of a problem considering I needed it for the sat nav. I started to panic and pulled over as quickly as possible to have a look and see what the problem was. When I pulled the charger out of the cigarette lighter I found that it'd broken and was in bits.....Uh oh! My phone was losing its charge really quickly and was only on 11% by then, so I fumbled around and somehow managed to get it back together. I held my breath as I plugged my phone back in and waited to see if it was still working. If it was totally broken then we were stuffed but luckily the bars started to go up, so I'd managed to fix it.....Phew! I set off again and the weather was getting worse rapidly, so we were worried that the days plans were all just a complete waste of time. Instead of driving East out of Wales to get on the M5/M6 I'd decided to go nearly straight North through Wales and only go across into England up near the Wirral so we would get some nice scenery on the way up. Driving through Builth-Wells Wendy spotted a building with a mural all over the side of it. It was like something from Belfast rather than mid Wales and was so different she grabbed a photo.



Mural

Next we drove through Llandrindod Wells, Powys, which was a weird historic spa town. The streets were lined with run down 3 story red brick town houses with dream catchers and holey looking throws instead of curtains in the windows. I estimated that it had a population of 12,000 but Wendy found out that it was just 5,309 in 2011. We'd seen 6 more Red Kites by the time we drove through a village that boasted it'd won 'Village of the year 1998!' We then got stuck behind a Penrith/Cumbria tours coach, so it was slow going all the way to Newtown, where we hoped it was going to stop, so we could make some progress. There was loads of traffic on the road including loads of huge lorries, which was probably why there was a bypass being built. Wendy spotted the WC's so got me stop and having worried that they'd be grim she came out pleasantly surprised as to how nice they were. It was 23c by then and Wendy pointed out a tramp walking towards us wearing wellies and a thick wooly jumper and hat all topped off with a coat! He must've been boiling surely? It was 11.58am when we set off again and after driving past a KFC and a McDonalds we got the impression it was a big town but couldn't work out why on earth it was there. Fortunately when we'd cleared the town we found ourselves on a much faster road, which was good apart from seeing a dead Buzzard in the verge. I drove through Welshpool and we were starting to get hungry and needed to find somewhere to stop to eat our lunch. Out of sheer desperation I pulled over into a layby at 12.42pm and we sat watching the traffic go by until it practically ground to a halt. It was now crawling, so there was obviously a problem somewhere and we were just about to have to join it....Grrrrrrr! After we'd eaten we didn't want to hang around so set off again at 12.57pm hoping we wouldn't be held up for too long.

Heading through the Chester area it was 23c but really cloudy and the scenery had changed for the worse. We were now looking at a sprawling mass of industrial concrete monstrosities that couldn't exactly be described as scenic. I assumed it was Ellesmere Port area on the Wirral? It was certainly a contrast to what we'd left behind that morning!



Lovely

By the time we got onto the M6 it was 1.49pm and it was really busy, so when we were warned of 45min delays between junctions 16-19 our hearts sank.....Urrghhhhh! We counted down the junctions until we came at 21 and had been totally unaffected by it....Phew! As we drove under a bridge we spotted a rather depressed looking woman leaning over it looking down at the motorway. She looked as though she was contemplating jumping but luckily we didn't hear anything on the news later. They say, "It's grim up north" which we always think is a bit unfair but on this occasion it was spot on! The sky was dark and cloudy and when we passed Lancaster Services the temperature had dropped to just 18.5c. This had been what we'd feared all along and made us wonder if we should've stuck around in Wales for a bit longer more than ever. We needed a bit a heat and the sun to be out for our last ditch attempt at High Brown Fritillary at a place we'd visited earlier in the year and had wanted to go back to in summer :(.

At 3pm I parked up at Arnside Knott and luckily it was still 18c, so there was still a bit of hope but there wasn't any sun at all :(.

Instead of walking up the hill we went through the gate and into the woods, which we'd avoided last time because it was far too wet and muddy. This was supposedly the way to go to find High Browns. We then took the Heathwaite Path and came out in an open area of wild flowers, which although wasn't a patch on Sussex, Hampshire or Wales looked pretty good for Butterflies.



Last chance saloon

It had become increasingly windy as well as overcast by then so there was nothing flying apart from **Ringlets** and **Meadow Browns** :(. The only thing of interest that we saw flying was 2x Tucanos, which are RAF pilot training planes....hmpf! We quickly got the impression that High Brown Fritillary was going to be one for next year as well as Marsh Fritillary, Scarce Chaser etc, etc, so we turned back. Ah well, it's a good excuse for another summer holiday if nothing else. We still had too much time on our hands, so Wendy suggested going up the hill again for the view over Arnside. Lyca was happy enough but we were starting to flag, so we told ourselves it'd be worth it when we got up there. Wendy took a photo of the roots of a fallen tree but that sort of thing is too poncy for me :P.



Poncy tree roots

When we got to the top the view didn't disappoint and looking down over the estuary we were reminded as to why we liked it so much there.



Arnside

We got back to the car at 4.06pm and Lyca still wouldn't eat her breakfast even when Wendy tried hand feeding her just to get rid of it. She suggested I had a look at the menu at the Albion because we'd always fancied eating there but were never early enough, so she thought this time we could go there for tea. It was either that or sarnie number 2 so I googled it and had a scan. There was something for us both, so that was our tea sorted even though we'd have to sit outside with Lyca. They didn't start serving food off the main menu until 5pm, so we had to find something to do in the meantime. My oil warning light was flashing meaning I needed to top up my oil, so Wendy suggested going to the garage in Milnthorpe first so at 4.10pm I headed off.

Driving alongside the estuary there were loads of **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** and a **Little Egret**, which was new for the trip. When we got to the garage it wasn't as we remembered it even though it'd been dark when we were last there. It seemed to have been totally rebuilt and now had a huge Spa shop there too. I went in and hunted down some oil, which I put into the car and then we sat there trying to kill more time before our 10min drive back to Arnside.

It was still only 4.45pm when I parked up at Arnside, so we had a scan out over the estuary to see what was about. As with all us Manxies (surely?) I was excited to see a proper train coming over the viaduct so got a photo :).



Novelty train

We added **Oystercatcher** and that was it, so Wendy decided to try Lyca with her food again. This time it was breakfast and tea with broccoli thrown in too, so surely she wouldn't turn her nose up at that? When Wendy got out she hit the car next to us with her door, which I wasn't too pleased about. While I checked it for any damage (which there wasn't luckily) I noticed that the Tax disc on the other car ran out in 2014! While Wendy was in the back, hand feeding Lyca, a bird flew by and I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I got my bins on it and sure enough it was an **Osprey** flying towards the sea.....What the? I called it out to Wendy who jumped out and grabbed her bins in time to watch it vanish into the distance. What was that doing apparently leaving in July or maybe it was going fishing on the estuary maybe? That was a bird we hadn't expected to see there in a million years!

After Lyca had finished her food we took a wander over the road to the Albion. I grabbed a table away from everyone and round a corner, so Lyca couldn't bark at the other dogs. Wendy went in to get some drinks and came back out with a menu, although I already knew what I was having. It was freezing out there and quite windy too, so we wished we could've sat inside. We couldn't even sit on the decking by the heaters because there was already 2x Border Collies there.....Urrghhhh! Wendy went back in to order the food and when she came back I went back to the car to get our fleeces to put on under our coats. The landlord came out and pulled a massive cover over the decking and fired the heaters on, so we were very jealous as we sat shivering in the wind. The food came really quickly and I'd ordered the southern fried chicken burger with chips and onion rings (no rabbit food, gherkin or coleslaw) and Wendy got the Turmeric chickpea fritters with salad and tzaziki off the starters menu (of course she did) with a view to nicking some of my chips. When it arrived there weren't many chips so her heart sank and the fritters were cold, so not what she'd expected although they were nice enough. Mine was OK but not as nice as the chicken burger I was used to getting back at home but the chips were pretty decent. Lyca had been really well behaved until the owners of the 2x Border Collies decided to leave and came round the corner and took her by surprise. Lyca went nuts and I nearly didn't grab her quickly enough because they took us by surprise too! A few minutes later a woman with what looked like a chocolate

Cockerpoo like Lyca came up the steps. Wendy admired the dog and got chatting to his owner who said that he was actually a Springerpoo. Lyca was fine with him as well as someone else with a Chihuahua and Jack Russell....Phew! Wendy had treated herself to a glass of Prosecco and just as she was getting near to finishing it she decided to inhale the fizz instead and started to choke, firing Prosecco everywhere and dribbling all over the table. You can't take her anywhere! When she was able to breathe again we headed back to the car.

We couldn't believe how dark it was when we got back at 6.22pm and it was really cold too. We still had loads of time before we had to be at the boat, so as it's traditional when we're away in summer, we headed to Leighton Moss. When we arrived in the car park it was 6.33pm and as I was parking up another car drove in but didn't stop and drove straight back out again. This unnerved me a bit and played on my mind as we walked over the road to the Visitor Centre WC's. I decided that it was better to be safe than sorry and went back to the car and got the rucksack, just in case. When I got back I still wasn't happy and eventually I went back again and moved the entire car to the Visitor Centre car park, which put my mind at rest. We'd learnt from last time that we could actually walk through the Visitor Centre for a bit to keep us off the road, which worked a treat. Although it didn't cut out all of the road walking it reduced it by loads and was a much better way to go. We came to the path onto the reserve and headed down it hoping to add some last minute new birds to our list. The Beardie area was dead, so we went straight to the Causeway Hide, which we had to ourselves.



Tranquil

Not long after sitting down we spotted a **Grey Heron**, 2x **Marsh Harriers** and a **Gadwall** so we were off to a good start. I started to get some shots of a **Great-crested Grebe** when a young one popped up just in front of us. The adult swam over to it and fed it a fish it'd just caught but it all happened so fast I totally missed the photo opportunity.....Doh! Wendy spotted a **Bearded Tit** flying between the reeds over on the other side, which was very handy because we didn't hear any. There were no Otters either, which was just typical of our luck. Everyone else seems to fill their boots with Otters at Leighton Moss now but we've never been as lucky. As we sat there wishing we could just hear a Bittern

booming I started to realize that we should've got the afternoon boat home. If we'd done that we'd probably have been home already and not sitting there filling in the hours before 2.15am :(We weren't to know that the weather would mess up what should've been a great day though. We walked down to the end of the path and then turned back. It's so annoying that you can't take a dog on a lead into the reserve on the left I mean it's miles out the way and well back from the Marshes but what do I know. As we wandered back up we kept our fingers crossed for a Bittern but we had no such luck. There were no other birders out on the reserve but all of a sudden we weren't alone when 3 young lads on pushbikes came peddling down the path. We had a bit of grumble about that but then realized that if we lived around there we'd probably have done the same at their age. Hopefully they're not causing too much of a disturbance.

It was 7.50pm when we got back to the car and there was a little **Vole** under the bird feeder, so I tried to get a shot of it. It was so quick and it was anyone's guess as to where it was going to pop up next, so it wasn't easy especially with it being dark under the bushes!



Vole

We were hoping for a Marsh Tit to put in a last minute appearance but all we got were baby **Blue Tits** and **Great Tits** and a male **Bullfinch**. We finally left at 8.25pm but it was still too early to go the pub, so I drove down the road to the Egret roost to see what was about, maybe a Great White Egret would come in? Hahahaha! I parked up and we counted 17 Little Egrets in the trees already.



Egret roost

More started to fly in and while we were counting them a Marsh Harrier flew over calling. A 2nd bird appeared and they did a food pass with the one that'd taken the food dropping down into the reeds and the other flying off again. It was interesting to watch and something you don't see every day. By then there were 27 Egrets at the roost and watching them bickering over perches was entertaining. Just when it looked as though they'd all settled for the night 4 of them flew back down and started feeding again. Two more birds joined the roost, then another 2 and another until we were at 32 birds and decided to give up with no sign of anything exciting in with them. The sun was starting to set and was just poking out from behind the clouds and lighting up the hill to our left. It looked really nice but the photo, as always, didn't do it justice.



Getting late

Looking at the clock it was 9.27pm and late enough to call it a day and retire to the pub.

When we arrived at the Silverdale Hotel it was 9.34pm and the sunset looked amazing, so I took a spin down the road to the shore. There were 2 lads sitting on a bench and a couple of girls who we'd seen leaving the pub were heading down to meet them. Obviously we didn't want to cramp their style, so I turned around, drove back up the road and parked up outside the pub. We all bailed out I opened the door to go in only to find a couple with a dog on their way out. Lyca was taken by surprise and got up on her back legs and started to dance and bark at the dog...Urrghhh! Fortunately the couple thought she was being cute, so we got away with it...Phew! Wendy spotted a Labrador in the nice quiet side room we usually go in, so we had to get a seat in the main bar. Luckily it was really quiet in there, which was a bit unusual but we weren't complaining. The people with the Lab got up to leave so we had to distract Lyca, so she wouldn't spot the dog and go nuts. It was slightly awkward when they decided to stop nearby and have a chat with the landlord but earwiggling in on the conversation did explain why it was so quiet. The landlord was annoyed because the Golf Club was holding a Beer Festival and everyone had gone there instead. We'd passed it on our way and it was so busy we'd presumed it was a wedding reception or something. Eventually they left without Lyca even noticing, so we sat back to relax. The wifi was fiber connection and at 60mbps, so I was very pleased to be back in the modern world again! As it was the first opportunity I'd had in 2 weeks to do a bird list to see what our total had ended on I knuckled down, while Wendy sat there feeling awkward. She went on facebook to make it look like she was busy too but something else had started to bug her. There was a woman talking behind us and although she had a voice to rival Joanna Lumley unfortunately the rest of her just didn't match. She talked nonstop 'at' her husband about interior design and how they were going to decorate the office while he just sat there and put up with it.....Yawn! Wendy got up and said she was going outside to phone her Mum and left me in the pub with Lyca. The beer garden was very nice and she just wished it was warm enough to sit out there.



Beer garden

Up until then Lyca had behaved herself but all of a sudden she decided to start barking and the entire contents of the pub all looked over and started commenting. How embarrassing! At least there were only a handful of people in there or else I'd probably have left! When Wendy came back she spotted a box of

RSPB pin badges and brought it over to have a root through to find the ones we didn't have. I tried to phone my Dad to see which ones he was short of but he didn't answer. The annoying woman and her husband left to go to their room so there was just us, 2 barflies and a couple in the restaurant remaining. Wendy nipped to the loo and when the couple in the restaurant got up and walked out the barmaid came over to me and said, "Do you have far to walk home?" I took this as a massive hint to clear off, so they could close and go home seeing as it wasn't really worth their while being open with everyone being at the beer festival. When Wendy got back I told her and we reckoned we'd killed enough time to be able to start heading to the boat anyway. As we got into the car the 2 barflies came out and the front door was locked up and we left at 11.25pm.

We got to Asda at 11.51pm and I filled my car up with petrol, as usual.

Saturday 8th July

It was 12.13am when we got to Heysham and after I'd parked up in the queue I noticed that I had a midgie bite under my eye, which was quite sore and swollen.....Grrrrr! It was busier than usual, which was strange and then we remembered that the southern 100 was on.....Doh! As usual we sat in the car waiting to board and we both felt quite awake for a change. At 12.55am the bikes started to board, footpassengers at 1.03am and finally the first cars started to move at 1.14am. We couldn't wait to get to the cabin and when everything ground to a halt we started to get impatient. The sheer volume of vehicles meant that it was taking ages to get all of them in! Eventually at 1.30am it was our turn.....Phew! It was a relief to get to the cabin but the floor felt really sticky, so we didn't think too much as to why. We cracked open the blankets, turned off the lights and settled down to sleep.....Zzzzzzzzz.



Bed hogger

Wendy was the first one to wake up with the vibrations of the boat when it was getting close to docking. She dozed until the announcement came that we'd arrived, which woke Lyca and I up. We all staggered down to the car and found it to be a lovely sunny day when we disembarked at 5.51am.



The sunny Isle of Man

After getting home at 5.57am Wendy unpacked the food bag and then she and Lyca went off to bed while I carried on and didn't go until 8am. After I'd got up again I checked the internet speed at home and had to laugh when I saw that it was 600 times faster than in South Wales :O!

It'd been an interesting couple of weeks exploring new places and seeing new insects. If the weather had been good in Hampshire it'd have been amazing but it was just too overcast and windy for us to be able to get the most out of it. Wales had been far too hot for my liking although that did help us see more stuff. I'd driven a total of 1,486 miles over the course of the 2 weeks away, so my car deserved a well-earned rest. We'd done 209,124 steps, which averaged out as 16,086 a day! We'd done 96,939 during our 6 days in Hampshire and 112,185 over the week in Wales, which given the fact that our first week was shorter and the weather wasn't as good didn't surprise us. We definitely think we have unfinished business in the South Downs or maybe we should go a bit further and see the New Forest next time? When we go to South Wales again I think we'll try right out on the Pembrokeshire coast, two weeks without being by the sea is too much :).

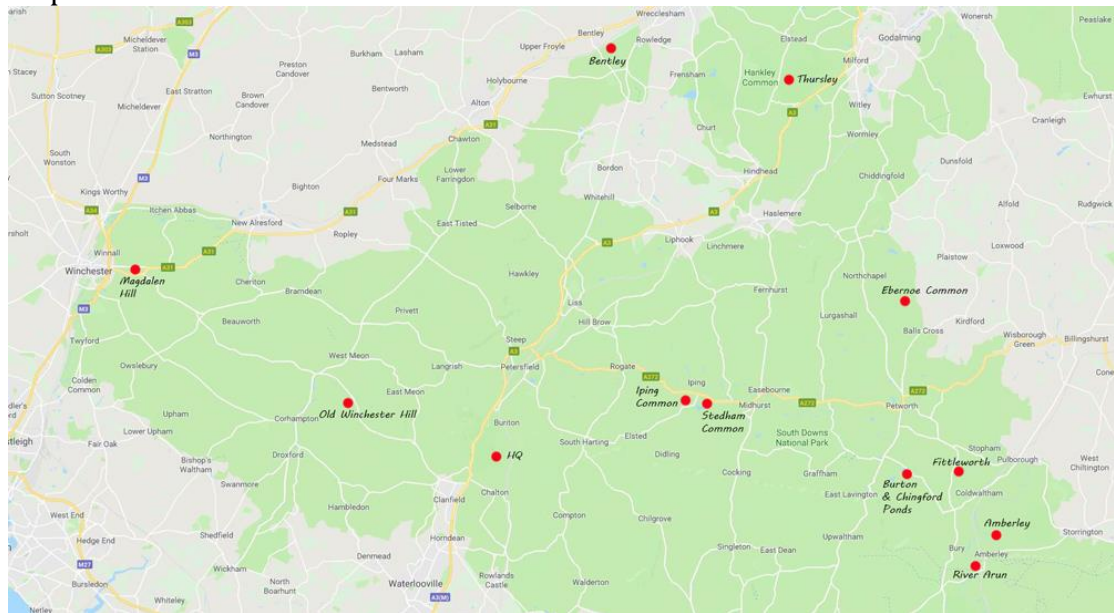
In the end we saw 7 Dragonfly lifers, 3 Butterfly lifers and lots of Moth lifers. Bird wise I didn't even do a list :).

Dragonflies	
Common Blue Damselfly	Emperor Dragonfly
Azure Damselfly	Banded Demoiselle
White-legged Damselfly	Beautiful Demoiselle
Blue-tailed Damselfly	Golden-ringed Damselfly
Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly	Downy Emerald
Large Red Damselfly	Common Clubtail
Small Red Damselfly	Broad-bodied Chaser
Emerald Damselfly	Four-spotted Chaser
Red-eyed Damselfly	Black-tailed Skimmer
Southern Hawker	Keeled Skimmer
Migrant Hawker	Common Darter

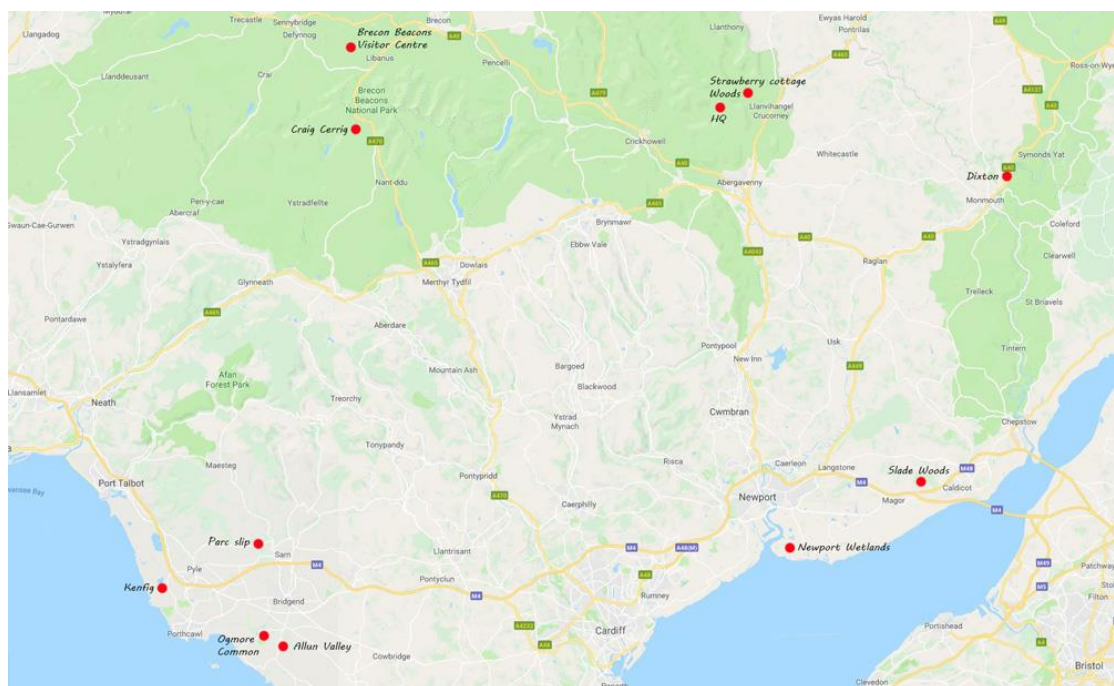
Butterflies

Small Skipper	Dark Green Fritillary
Large Skipper	White Admiral
Brimstone	Red Admiral
Large White	Comma
Green-veined White	Speckled Wood
White-letter Hairstreak	Marbled White
Small Copper	Grayling
Common Blue	Meadow Brown
Large Blue	Ringlet
Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary	

Maps



Hampshire



South Wales