

Belfast Naturalists'
Field Club

Field Reports
2020



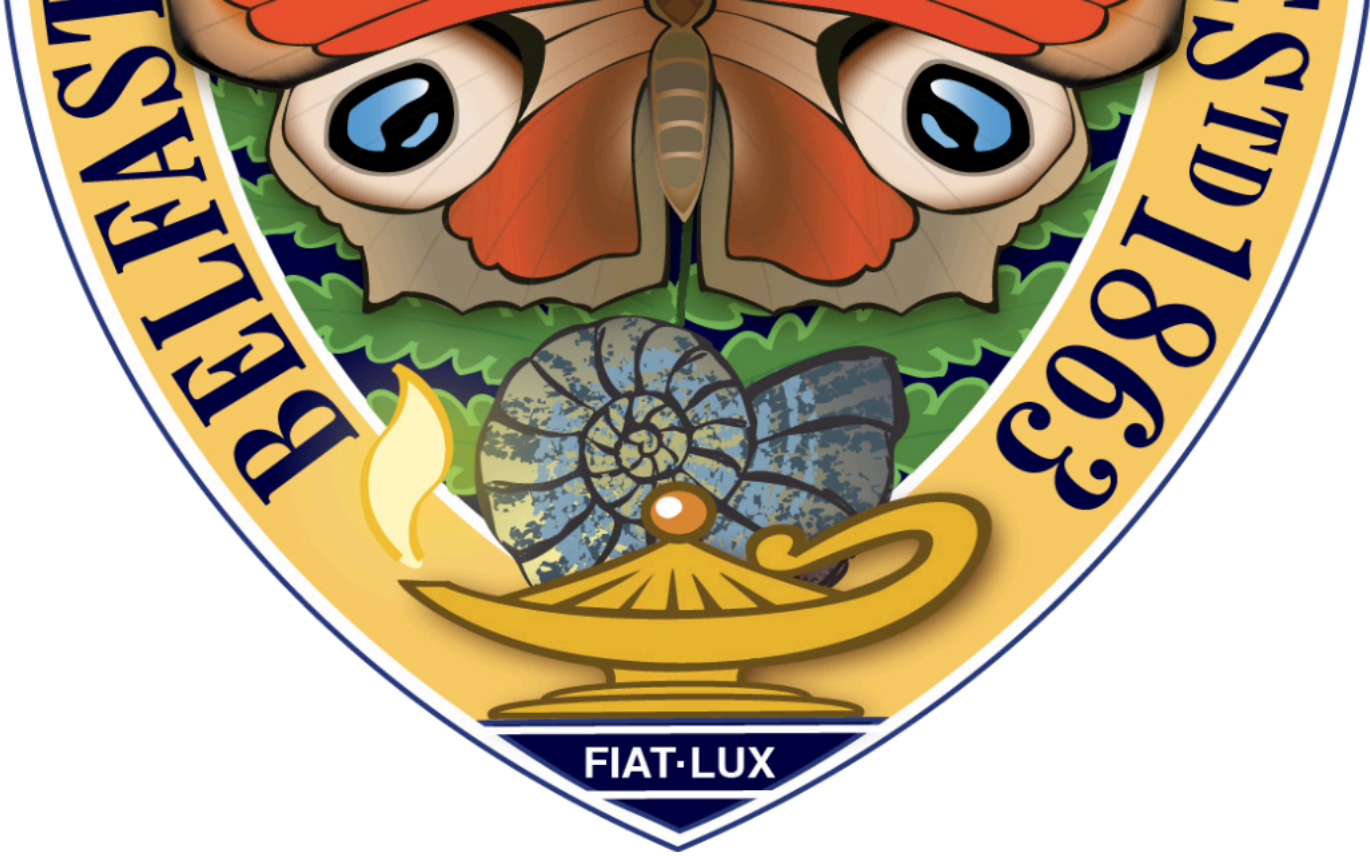


Table of contents 2020

Background to Summer programme 2020	3
Belvoir Forest Fungus Foray	6
Conversazione.....	8



Background to Summer programme 2020

2020 was a summer of discontent – as the whole world learned of the growing pandemic caused by the coronavirus variously known as SARS-Co-V2 and COVID-19

After being discovered in China, the first UK case was reported on 31 January 2020, but its seriousness was still not fully appreciated when BNFC Committee were discussing the Summer Programme at their meeting on February 25th.

Then on 5 March, the first death from COVID-19 (within the UK), a woman in her 70s, was reported in Reading. It was becoming apparent that a serious situation was developing, but at this time the Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland said *"Our health service is well used to dealing with such infections and I want to reassure the public that we are prepared"*.

With this reassurance, we decided after sober discussion that the risks from COVID-19 were not sufficient to cancel the last lecture of the Winter session, which was given by Professor Dan Bradley on March 10th. His excellent talk on Ancient Irish DNA is summarised below.

"The science of genetics is really the science of inheritance and provides a wealth of information about ourselves and our ancestry. Using a technique called whole genome analysis, the team examined the remains of a stone-age woman farmer, one of the first farmers in Ireland, who was buried over 5,000 years ago in Ballynahatty near Belfast and those of three men buried in Rathlin Island during the bronze age – between 3,000 and 4,000 years ago. The results give a fascinating glimpse into where we came from who we are and what characteristics we share as a people".

Among many fascinating observations Prof. Bradley illustrated how early Irish farmers were similar to southern Europeans. It also appears that with the advent of the Bronze Age genetic patterns changed quite dramatically as newcomers from the Black Sea area of eastern Europe settled in Ireland. Prof. Bradley also observed that Ireland has the world's highest frequencies of genetic variations pertaining to lactase persistence – the ability to drink milk into adulthood – and certain genetic diseases, including one of excessive iron retention called *haemochromatosis*. This appears to have resulted from the Bronze Age migration which eventually arrived on Irish shores.

[Thanks to Maghera Heritage Society for this summary]

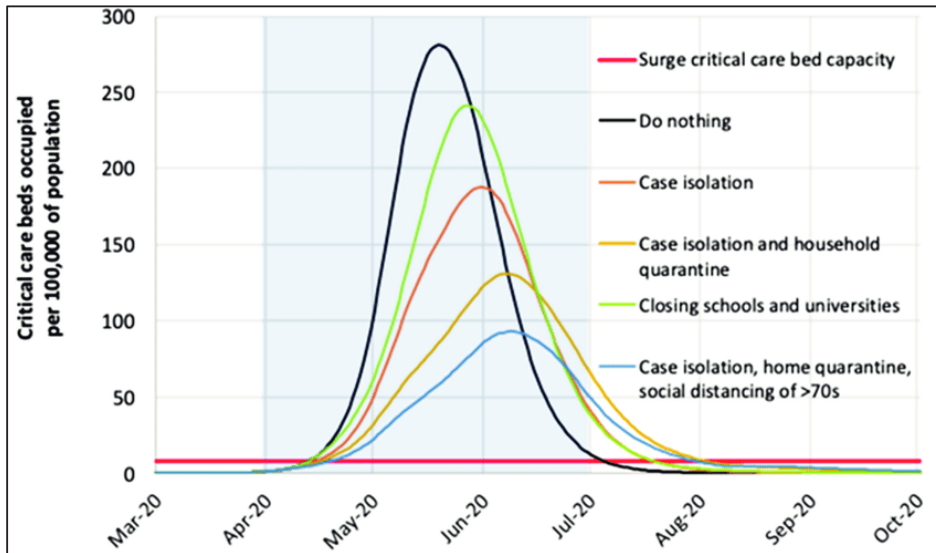
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Background to Summer 2020

After this date, the situation in the country developed rapidly.

On March 16th the Prime Minister advised people to avoid non-essential contact and travel; on 19th he expressed confidence that the UK could “turn the tide of coronavirus in 12 weeks”, but on 23rd March 2020, the UK went into lockdown.



Ferguson et al, 'Impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) to reduce COVID-19 mortality and healthcare demand.' Imperial College COVID-19 Response Team (16 March 2020)

A projection by Imperial College gave an alarming forecast of the spread of the virus with and without mitigation strategies.

With lockdown, all Club activities were cancelled or put on hold. The March Committee meeting and the Annual General meeting were cancelled. However Committee arranged to continue to meet, virtually, using the “Zoom” software. A short extract from the April Committee meeting is below.

MINUTES OF THE 1st MEETING OF THE 2020-2021 COMMITTEE

Held by ‘Zoom’ teleconference on Tuesday 28th April 2020 at 8 pm

This was the first meeting of the 2020–21 Committee. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the March Committee meeting and the AGM were cancelled. The decision was made (to be confirmed at this meeting) that as elections could not be held, the committee membership would remain unchanged (with some co-options) for the 2020-21 year.

Dates and venues for Committee and Lectures 2020-2021.

- These were agreed on the usual dates, with the addition of a Committee meeting on the fourth Tuesday of May. Lecture dates will be booked with the Museum, in the knowledge that some of these may have to be cancelled if Covid-19 precautions are still in force.

FIFC Short outing 30-31 May 2020

- This has been cancelled, along with other planned outings up to the end of June, due to Covid restrictions.

Long Outings to Jersey and to West Cork

- Hilary Buchanan and Joan Semple had planned to go on a reconnaissance trip to Jersey at the end of June this year, staying in the proposed base hotel. This is not possible, and it is not possible to forecast the situation a year ahead (and airfares may rise significantly), so this plan will be postponed indefinitely. Westport was mentioned as a possible alternative, as we may in practice be confined to the island of Ireland for some time.
- We will hope to reschedule the cancelled 2020 outing to West Cork to be held at a similar time in 2021.

continued



Background to Summer 2020

Although the lockdown eased in stages from June on, the continuing rules limiting numbers attending meetings and other restrictions meant that the vast majority of planned Field Trips were cancelled. In the end only two were planned to go ahead, the (mainly) geological trip to **Bentra and Whitehead**, led by Alastair Ruffell and the **Fungus Foray** led by Richard O'Hanlon. The first of these had then to be cancelled at 48 hours notice when the leader developed symptoms suggestive of Covid – happily testing negative, but too late to hold the Field Trip. Thus the only Field Trip which took place in Summer 2020 was the Fungus Foray – the report is below.

The provisional Programme for 2020 is given below- this was of course as it was planned before Covid brought everything to a standstill.

May 5th - Members' Night, in the Grainger Room

May 16th - Montalto (*Botany*) with Graham Day

May 23rd - Copelands (*Zoology*) – Backup in case of bad weather, Orlock point

May 30th-31st - FIFC Meeting in the Ards Peninsula

Saturday - Portaferry / Kearney

Sunday - Greyabbey / Mountstewart

June 6th - Knockdhu (*Archaeology and Botany*)

June 8th-13th - BNFC Long Outing to West Cork

June 27th - Ladybird Training Day

July 4th - Magilligan (*Zoology and Botany*) [Joint with BCNI] with Adam Mantel

August 1st - Milford Cutting and Gosford Forest Park (*Botany and Zoology*)

Joint with BCNI

August 4th - "Not the Giant's Ring" (*Archaeology / History*)

Joint with Archaeologists

August 8th - Cargan/Iron Hills (*Archaeology and History*)

August 18th - Urban Geology of Lurgan (*Geology*)

Joint with Geologists

September 26th - Geology on the foreshore, Whiteabbey with Alastair Ruffell

October 3rd - Fungus Foray (*Date confirmed with Richard O'Hanlon*)

continued



Belvoir Forest Fungus Foray

Leader: Dr Richard O'Hanlon

Saturday 3rd October 2020



Sulphur Tuft



Witches Broom



Yellow Stagshorn



Woodwart

This was to be our first (and only) physical non-virtual outing for 2020! The global pandemic caused by the Coronavirus had meant that BNFC had to cancel all field meetings from the announcement of a full lockdown in March, 2020. Restrictions partially eased and it was permissible for groups of 15 to meet outside while maintaining social distancing. It was definitely strange and genuinely uplifting to meet our fellow members in the field again.

(25 September – A further 273 cases of COVID-19 are confirmed in Northern Ireland, taking the total number of people diagnosed with the virus past 10,000 to 10,223) [as of January 2021 it now exceeds 100,000 in the UK].

It was good of Richard to lead our foray once again. Dr Richard O'Hanlon is the *Principal Plant Pathologist in Grassland and Plant Science Branch at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)*. We were also joined by BNFC member and microfungi expert, *Roy Anderson*, who added commentaries on what we found.

Belvoir Forest opened in 1961 and covers 75 hectares along the south bank of the *River Lagan*. It is unusual in that it is a working forest within a city and is managed by *Forest Service NI*.

Richard introduced the group to the world of fungi and mycology with an overview of the different types, the "spore shooters" and the "spore-droppers". Key aspects of identification include smelling (and sometimes tasting – as in the case of some *Milkcap's*, latex-like droplets), shape, size and proximity to certain types of trees where they form symbiotic relationships – they can be host-specific. An article on the BBC website discusses that research has shown that beneath every forest and wood there is a complex underground web of roots, fungi and bacteria helping to connect trees and plants to one another. This subterranean social network, nearly 500 million years old, has become known as the "*wood wide web*".

So, armed with guide books, hand lenses and wicker baskets we headed down through the forest paths finding different species along the way.

First up was the common Sulphur Tuft (*Hypholoma fasciculare*) also called a Clustered Woodlover, a saprophytic fungus which means they feed off decaying organic matter, this helps breaking down the cellulose of dead wood and plays an important part in the cycles of a forest's life.

Roy spotted a "Witches' egg", the developing fruiting body of the aptly named Stinkhorn (*Phallus impudicus*). The fully developed phallic shaped fungus will emit a strong stench to imitate rotting flesh to attract flies who will unwittingly carry the sticky spores to spread them far and wide.

Joan found a Collared Earthstar (*Gaeastrum triplex*) and demonstrated the clouds of spores that they emit. (It was perhaps analogous to the hazards of airborne droplets of covid-19!) Blowing on them can make them puff spores as do raindrops hitting the spore-sac. Always a delight to find these gems in the woods.

continued



Fungus Foray in Belvoir Forest (contd)

Saturday 3rd October 2020



Above and below: Collared Earthstar



A dead piece of wood was covered in Hazel Woodward (*Hypoxylon fuscum*), a member of the *Xylariaceae* which covers the snuffs, fingers and woodwarts. As the name suggests it is woody and warty and can be found on dead hazel and alder twigs – not the most photogenic but all part of the enormous variety of fungal types.

Large clumps of the coral fungus, Yellow Stagshorn (*Calocera viscosa*) festooned the forest floor. A jelly fungus, they brighten up the rotting carpet of fallen leaves

A gregarious species next, the Tawny Funnel (*Lepista flaccida*), my book puts it the top 100 common species, *Lepista* meaning wine pitcher or a goblet and *flaccida* meaning slack or flaccid – the concave shape of the cap can be technically called *infundibuliform*!

At the base of a magnificent oak tree was a magnificent Giant Polypore (*Meripilus giganteus*), one of largest fungi – it can cause white rot in broad-leaved trees. Edible when young it is said, but I would imagine it has the same palatability as chipboard!

Looking up into a birch tree we saw the tangled bird's nest structures that are Witch's Broom (*Taphrina betulina*), testament to the many forms and weird shapes that fungi occur.



Giant Polypore

Lastly, we found some rubbery specimens of Jelly Ear (*Auricularia auricula-judae*) which are generally found on dead elder wood. *Auricularia* is a Latin word meaning ear and alludes to Judas, the betrayer of Jesus who hanged himself on an apocryphal elder tree with the ears being visible reminders of his tormented soul. They feel clammy and cold and very flesh like! I have eaten them in a mixed starter of wild mushrooms and found them delicious.



Jelly Ear

A relatively short outing in the end but great to see all the members actually in the flesh so to speak. An interesting and enjoyable day with interesting finds that rewarded us with all the different hues and shapes of this magical kingdom.

Many thanks again to Richard for conducting our fungus foray today.

Matthew Porter 3rd February, 2021





Conversazione

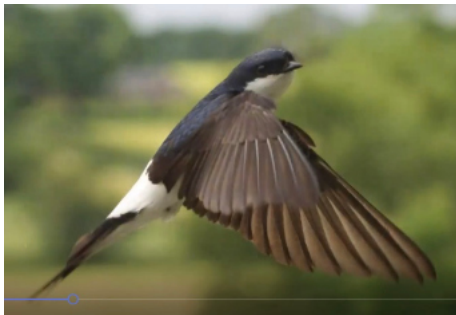
Tuesday 6th October 2020



Barrie Hartwell with axeheads

The Summer Programme concluded with the Conversazione, held as a virtual meeting, where members showed a wide variety of subjects and different approaches to their presentations.

Barrie Hartwell gave an interesting brief history of the development of the Axe, from the earliest stone tools and weapons to very sophisticated and beautiful bronze pieces, illustrated by a fine collection of axes



House Martin

Liam McCaughey told a story of the House Martins which nest on the house each year. In 2020, they arrived as usual, began building their nests, and then activity stopped. There was a sudden realisation that they were dependent for mud on a nearby puddle, which had dried up in the drought this spring. Restoring the puddle immediately led to fevered mud-puddling and nest building and eventually new martin families.

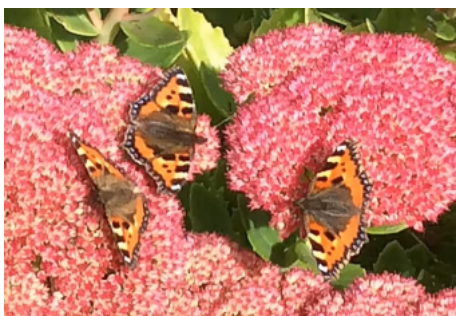
Joan McCaughey's subject was wildlife seen from then kitchen window, ranging from the welcome small birds and pollinators such as bees and butterflies to the less welcome family of pheasants who like to pick the heads from flowers, and rabbits with similar habits, and of course the alien grey squirrel sampling a tulip.



Grey Squirrel sampling a tulip

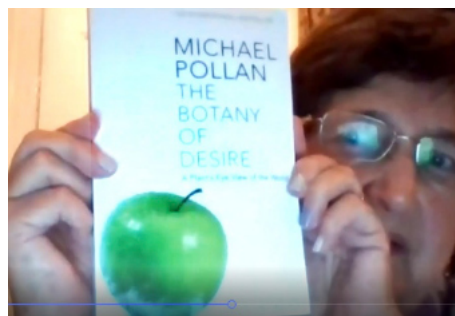
Margaret Marshall also observed what was happening in her own garden - a count which she made in her wildflower area revealed 92 species. Most of these had arisen spontaneously, and some had been sown using Debbie Gillies "True Harvest Seeds".

Marion Allen told of the new skills pursued during lockdown, which included making real coffee, unravelling old sweaters and reinventing them with the help of Kaffe Fassett, finding new books like 'Rewild yourself' by Simon Barnes, 'Meadowland' by John Lewis Stemper and in particular 'The Botany of Desire' by Michael Pollan.

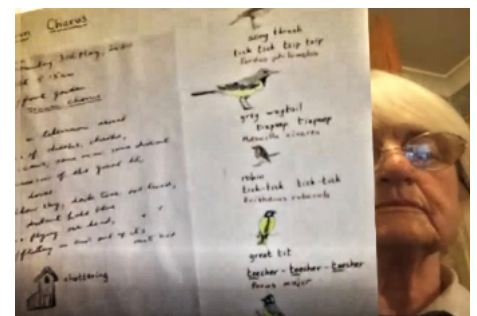


Small Tortoiseshells on Sedum

Veronica Browne read a lyrical and poetic description of listening to the dawn chorus in her garden, illustrated by pencil and crayon drawings of the singers.



Marion Allen and her current reading



Veronica Browne and her illustrated poetry

continued



Conversazione

Tuesday 6th October 2020



Digger wasp and Hoverfly

Matthew Porter discovered traces of sawdust beneath an old stump used as a chopping block, at his back door. This led to finding nests of the digger wasp in the rotting wood. These are predatory wasps which catch insects, usually hoverflies, and paralyse them before inserting an egg and storing the fly in their nest in the stump as fresh food for the developing wasp larva.

Henrietta Price spoke about finds on the beach, firstly a skull – probably a seal, found at Ballyquintin, and then on the subject of pollution. She had picked up a message in a tube on the Essex coast, which contained a message from a French professor who is studying the sources of pollution – the message had originated at Le Havre.

In November we were sad to hear of the death of one of our active members, **Helen Madden**, from Covid-19.

Liam McCaughey



Henrietta Price and seal skull found at Ballyquintin