

Belfast Naturalists'
Field Club

Field Reports
2023



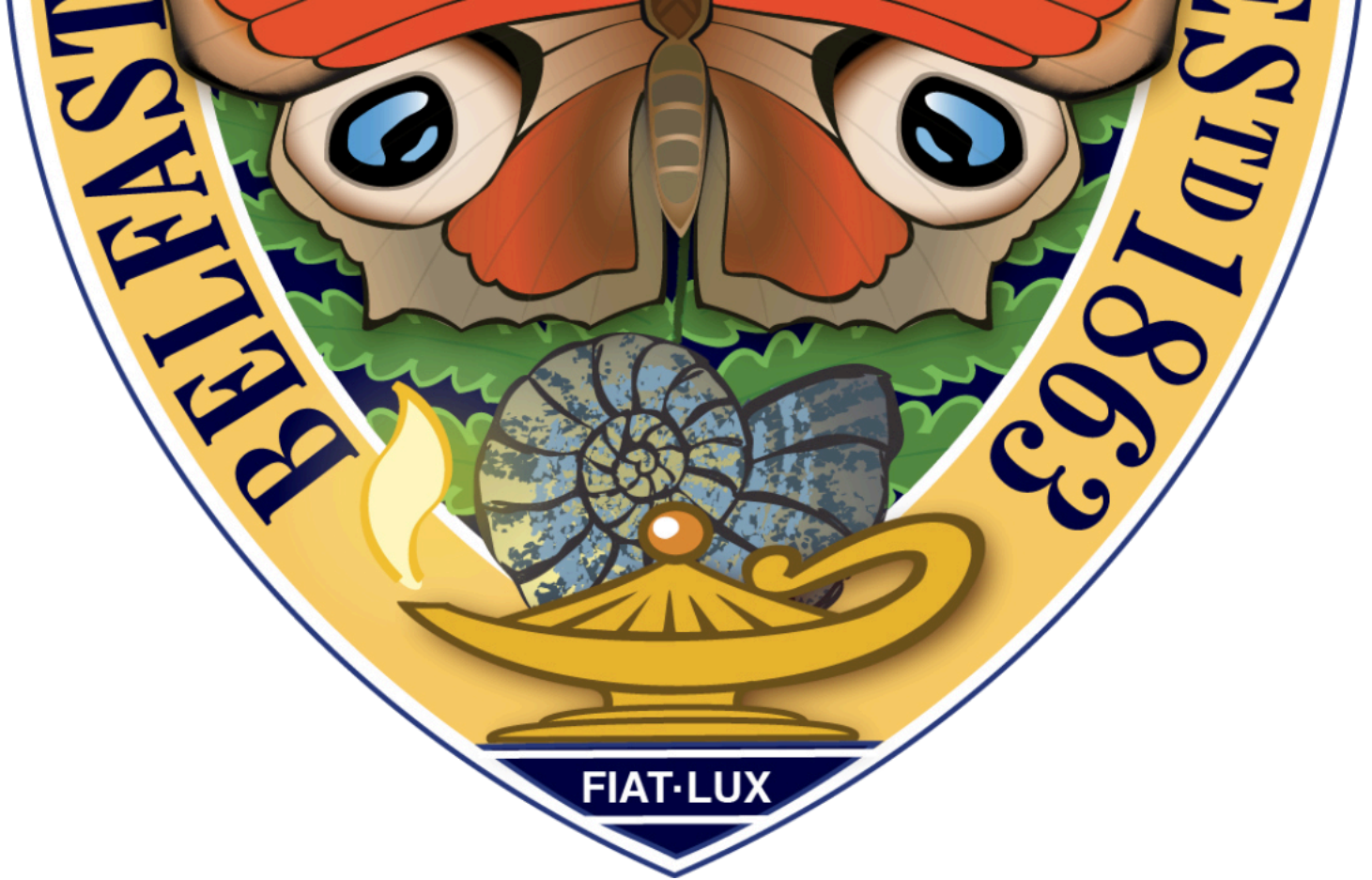


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The Building Stones of Lurgan

Leader - Mark Cooper
Geological Survey of Northern Ireland

9th May 2023

Geology

Our first summer field trip was an evening visit to **Lurgan** to examine the building stones of which there is quite a variety.



Brownlow House

Starting with **Brownlow House**, built with *Scottish Binny Sandstone* Mark Cooper pointed out the geological features on some of the building stone surfaces. Continuing our walk on the geological trail we saw examples of the use of locally sourced *black basalt* and a variety of different sandstones. These included *Scottish Lochasbriggs sandstone* from Dumfries.

The former Danske bank had impressive pillars of *black granite* from Norway. The Bank of Ireland is built from *Portland stone* and fossils were spotted in this limestone.

The spire and window and door surrounds in **St Peter's** are made with *Armagh limestone* and again we were able to spot the fossils. Thanks to Mark for conducting us around the geological trail and helping to focus our eyes on the finer geological details of the building stones.

It was a great start to our summer programme.

Joan Semple



Monasterboice and Mellifont Abbey

Leader - Mike King

Joint Field Trip with Dublin Naturalists Field Club

27th^h May 2023

History/Archaeology

The weather was excellent for this joint visit, which started with a tour of **Monasterboice** monastic site at 10.30am, under the guidance of Mike King. He described how the site was founded by *St Buite*, who died around 521. The tour included the impressive *Muiredach's Cross* and the *Tall Cross*, both known as scripture crosses, owing to the remarkable biblical scenes carved on the sides, which Mike interpreted for the group. Muiredach's Cross is probably named after an abbot, *Muiredach mac Domhnaill*, who died in 923. The two churches, round tower, a grave slab and the North Cross were also pointed out inside the present graveyard.



The visit to **Mellifont Abbey** was initially complicated by parking and access problems, but these were eventually overcome. Mellifont was the Anglo-Norman successor of Monasterboice and so was the natural site to visit next. Mike explained how it was the first Cistercian monastery in Ireland, founded by *St Malachy* in 1142 with the help of a small number of monks sent by *St Bernard from Clairvaux*. The extraordinary two-storey octagonal lavabo was the highpoint of the visit, where the monks washed their hands before meals.

The abbey became the model for other Cistercian abbeys built in Ireland, with its formal style of architecture imported from the abbeys of the same order in France. A circuit of the church, cloisters and a small chapel above the abbey were made, before the group set off for the Battle of the Boyne Centre for the afternoon's activities.

Leaders - Tom Minter and Charles Shier

Botany

The afternoon session was a botany and ecology walk taking in the *Battle of the Boyne* site, an overlooking ridge and a canal towpath. This was led by *Charles Shier* from DNFC who shared his botanical knowledge with us and introduced us to a range of habitats.

For me the highlight was the canal with its drinking place for deer, the remains of a sluice gate on a bridge and the plant life on the banks. The ice cream back at the Boyne Visitors' centre provided a perfect ending to a perfect day. Charles has provided below a list of the plants observed on the botany and ecological walk.



Monasterboice and Mellifont Abbey (contd)

1 - From the Start to Oldbridge Village (reconstructed) – **Yellow Route**

Large Sycamore tree *Acer pseudoplatanus*

The 'Battle Oak' *Quercus* spp.

2 - Crab Apple Walk – **Brown Route**

Young oak trees planted along the walk – not all of them have thrived

Crab Apple *Malus sylvestris*



Yellow Iris (*Iris pseudoacorus*)

3 - Along the Ridge to the Bird Hide – **Purple Route**

Ash *Fraxinus excelsior*

Beech *Fagus sylvatica*

Hornbeam *Carpinus betulus*

Rowan *Sorbus aucuparia*

Norway Maple *Acer platanoides*

4 - From the Bird Hide down to the Canal – **Purple Route**

Scots Pine *Pinus sylvestris*

European larch *Larix decidua*

Cedar of Lebanon *Cedrus libani*

Horse Chestnut *Aesculus hippocastanum*

Winter Heliotrope *Petasites fragrans*

5 - Along the canal Towpath – **Wine Route**

Ground Ivy *Glechoma hederacea*

Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*

Wild Raspberries *Rubus idaeus*

Snowberry *Symphoricarpos albus*

Wild Privet *Ligustrum vulgare*

Herb Robert *Geranium robertianum*

Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*

Lesser Burdock *Arctium minus* ssp. *minus*

Hartstongue *Asplenium scolopendrium*

Germander Speedwell *Veronica chamaedrys*

Valerian *Valeriana officinalis*

Hemp Agrimony *Eupatorium cannabinum*

Water Plantain *Alisma plantago-aquatica*

Yellow Iris *Iris pseudoacorus*

Cuckoo Flower *Cardamine pratensis*

Bugle *Ajuga reptans*

Bush Vetch *Vicia sepium*

Common Reed *Phragmites australis*

Common Meadow-rue *Thalictrum flavum*

Butterbur *Petasites hybridus*

Marsh Marigold *Caltha palustris*



Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*)



Herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*)

6 - From the gate back to the Car Park – **Wine Route**

Monterey Cypress *Cupressus macrocarpa*

Lawson's Cypress *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana*

Portuguese Laurel *Prunus lusitanica*

Silver Fir *Abies* spp.

Charles Shier



Castlewellan Forest Park

Leader - Alwyn Sinnamon

17th June 2023



The club members met in the large car park in Castlewellan Forest Park. *Newry Mourne and Down District Council* has assumed the management of recreation within the park under a lease from the Forest Service from January 2022 until 2045. This includes the council managing the *Bothy*, *Walled garden*, *Rhododendron wood* and *Gardener's house*.

The Forest service had operated the park since 1967 when it was purchased from the *Annesley* family. Under increasing funding pressure the walled garden, the Bothy yard and the glasshouses had become neglected, dilapidated and overgrown and without a gardener, relying on volunteers. Funding of around £5 million has now been secured from various sources to restore things.

We were met at the entrance to the 12.5 acre walled garden and were first shown the restored Bothy yard behind the glasshouses. The yard is used for offices, storage and to propagate and grow plants historically grown in the garden dating back over 100 years.

The head gardener **Alwyn Sinnamon** met us at the Bothy. He was able to tell us of an historic trip taken by the BNFC to the gardens in 1901. They were shown around by Lord Annesley's head gardener *Mr Tom Ryan*. The report on this visit talks about bananas and oranges growing "luxuriantly" and with "large clusters of fruit". It also mentions seeing many plants, trees and shrubs from far flung places like Japan, New Zealand, Chile and California.



Tom Ryan was the first head gardener in 1880s. He worked very closely with the *5th Earl Lord Hugh Annesley* who had an enormous interest in the garden, for 30 years. Tom Ryan died in 1910 aged 58, a year after the Earl died aged 78.

Sam Harrison was head gardener preceding *Alwyn Sinnamon*. He is now 87, continues to take an active interest in the garden and is appreciating its restoration.

The garden now contains 68 champion trees, a champion tree being the largest of its kind by height or girth in the UK. The soil is acid with a pH of around 5 and there is a metre of topsoil.

contd



Castlewellan Forest Park (contd)

Plants and other things of interest of note include the following:

Acradenia frankliniae

Rosa sericea from India is native to south-western China (Guizhou, Sichuan, Xizang, Yunnan), Bhutan, northern India (Sikkim), Nepal and Myanmar; it grows in mountains at altitudes of 2,000 – 4,400 m (6,600–14,400 feet)

Cornus kousa subspecies *chinensis*

Tropaeolum speciosum, the flame flower or flame nasturtium.

A species of flowering plant in the family *Tropaeolaceae*, native to Chile in South America.

Campanula sp.

Inula helenium, Elecampane

Cornus capitata, a Himalayan Strawberry Tree

Magnolia obovata from Japan

Cephalotaxus, Plum Yew

Nymphaea alba, White Water Lily

Dicksonia antarctica is a species of evergreen tree fern native to eastern Australia

Sequoia sempervirens, Californian Redwood with 19 trunks, one of 19 seedlings planted in 1856

Paeonia sp., Paeony

Kalmia latifolia in the heather family Ericaceae, that is native to the eastern United States.

Metasequoia glyptostroboides, Dawn Redwood 'Gold Rush'

Nothofagus fusca, is a species of southern beech, endemic to New Zealand, transported to Castlewellan in a Wardian Case

Pinus sylvestris, Scots Pine, formerly 'Aurea', now reverted to green

Rodgersia aesculifolia var. *henrici* 'Castlewellan'

Cercidiphyllum, a genus with two species of plants, both commonly called katsura

Pseudopanax sp.

Stewartia sp. bark

Drimys winteri, native to the Magellanic and Valdivian temperate forests of Chile and Argentina, where it is a dominant tree in the coastal evergreen forests

Stinkhorn fungus on Eucalyptus

Hilary Buchanan and Caroline Pannell



Strangford Lough

Leader - Mike King and David Thompson

24th June 2023

Zoology/History/Archaeology

The group met at 11.15am in *Portaferry* and boarded the *St Brendan*, a locally-built boat for the boat trip at 11.30. It was a very sunny day and there were perfect conditions for the expedition.

We headed south first to explore the *Narrows*, a fast-running tidal channel, 8 kilometres long, which closes to a width of just 500 metres.

The treacherous tides that flow here possibly inspired the Viking invaders to name the Lough the *Strangfjorthr*, meaning a place of strong currents. Mike King pointed out the various historical sites of interest, including *Castle Ward*, *Kilclief*, and *Audley's Castle*.



We then went north into the Lough, the largest sea lough in Ireland, covering 150 square kilometres from *Angus Rock* at its mouth to the vast inter-tidal flats at its northern end 33 kilometres away. The Lough is almost totally land-locked apart from its connection to the Irish Sea through the Strangford Narrows.

David Thompson pointed out seals and seabirds during the trip, amongst the lough's islands and pladdies in the Narrows and the southern area of the lough. Starting at low tide it was possible to see both *Grey* and *Harbour Seals* at their haul outs, and colonies of nesting *Gulls*, *Sandwich*, *Arctic* and *Common Terns*.

David also pointed out various wrecks and explained their history. We were very fortunate to be accompanied for part of our journey around the southern part of the lough by two dolphins, and many photographs were taken as they swam around and under the boat.



Mike pointed out the various islands, including *Dunnyneil*, where traces of a seventh century trading settlement were found during excavations 20 years ago.

A wonderful lunch was provided by *Celia Spouncer*, including crab and lobster open sandwiches, home-made bread, salads, early summer produce pudding and elderflower cordial. A vote of thanks was made to the boat owner, and David and Celia for their time and hospitality, before the group landed at Portaferry and dispersed at about 2pm.

Mike King





Carnlough

Leader - Karen Parks

22nd July 2023

Joint with Belfast Geology Society

Geology and Industrial History



Pouring rain did not deter members of BNFC and the Belfast Geological Society gathering in *Carnlough* to look at the geology and industrial history of the area.

We were very grateful to Karen Parks from BGC for stepping in for Ian Enlander and leading the group up the former mineral railway to the limestone quarry. There was a stop en route to look at a former *limestone kiln* which is now in a back garden.

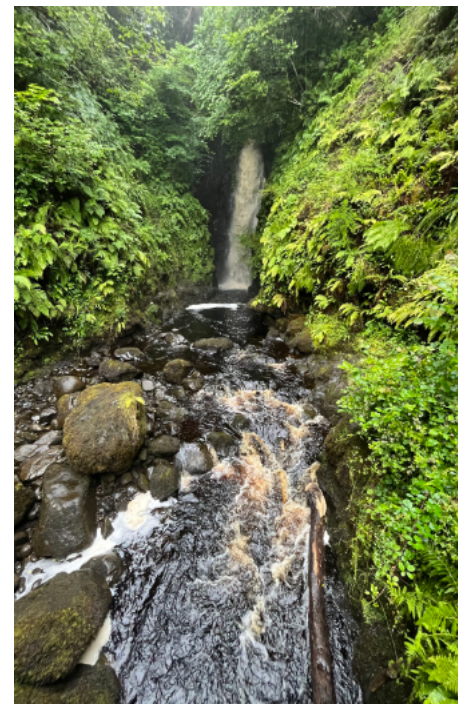
The rain made the possibility of a picnic lunch at *Cranny falls* unfeasible, so most people returned to the village where there were several places to eat.

After lunch we gathered in the *Heritage Hub* where one of the volunteers **Mary Watson** gave us a talk about the development of the village under *Lady Londonderry* and the setting up of the Heritage Hub. We had plenty of time to peruse the display boards and artefacts relating to the area.

Joan Semple



Limestone quarry



Cranny Falls



Connswater Community Greenway

Leader - Joan Semple

5th August 2023

Presidential Outing

Before setting out on our afternoon visit, Joan had the pleasure of conferring Honorary membership to Margaret Marshall to mark the occasion of a significant birthday and acknowledge the great contribution she has made to the field club over several decades.



Despite the dire weather forecast there was a good turnout of members for the presidential outing to Connswater and we were rewarded with a mainly dry morning and a sunny afternoon.

The morning session commenced with a fact-finding quiz around C.S. Lewis Square allowing the president to enjoy a coffee in peace!

We then walked along the Connswater towards Victoria Park hearing about locals James Ellis and Sam Thompson after whom two bridges are named.



The afternoon session was led by volunteers from the *Eastside Greenways Partnership* who told us about the industrial history of the area. We also heard about the restoration of the riverbanks to a more natural form improving their appearance and increasing biodiversity.

There was discussion about the involvement of the community in this highly urban area. It was a great introduction to an area that was unfamiliar to many of our members.





Carrickfergus, Museum and St Nicolas' Church

Leader - Mike King

9th September 2023

History and Archaeology



Carrickfergus Wall Trail



Interior of St Nicolas' Church

The group met at 11am in *Joymount Car Park* and began a walk along the *Carrickfergus Wall Trail* at 11.15. We followed the surviving walls of Carrickfergus, especially on the northern circuit, starting at the east end near the shore and finishing at the west end. Mike explained the history of the walls, dating to between 1608 and 1615. At least half of the Carrickfergus Town Walls were visible, often to the full height of 4m to the wall-walk. The wall extended from the castle north-west to *Irish Gate*, then north to *North Gate*, east to the rear of the Joymount property and south towards the water. We reached the North Gate (dated 1608) at the end of North Street, twice restored in the 20th century but with some 17th-century stones still visible in the arch. Mike explained that the wall top is narrow and defence could only be by musket. Despite this, when the town was besieged by *Schomberg's troops* in 1689 it was able to hold out for a week before yielding to a superior force. The town was besieged again in 1760 by a French army under *Thurot*. As it was *Doors Open Day* we were fortunate to get a special tour of *St Nicholas' Church*, dating back to 1182, before adjourning to *Castello Italia* for lunch.

After lunch at 2.15pm we were treated to a guided tour of *Carrickfergus Museum*, incorporated in the *Civic Centre*, by the Curator *Shirin Murphy*. Shirin showed us the finds on display, which provided a remarkable

glimpse into life in the town from the Medieval period to more recent times. The displays reflected the experiences of ordinary people and illustrated the dramatic and tumultuous events in the town's history. These collections were displayed and interpreted using a range of media, including audio-visual presentations and hands-on interactives. We were also fortunate to be visiting the Museum on the day of the launch of an exhibition on '*Re-imagining the Islandmagee Witches*', which included a range of interpretative experiences developed in tandem with a multi-disciplinary team from the University of Ulster.

The group dispersed at 4pm.



St Nicolas' Church



Peatlands Fungus Foray

30th September 2023

Leaders - Debbie Nelson and Chris Stretch

Northern Ireland Fungus Group

Botany/Zoology



The Northern Ireland Fungus Group (NIFG) had kindly invited members of the BNFC to join them for a joint fungal foray in Peatlands Park, County Armagh. Peatlands Park is a 266 hectares area established in 1990 and managed by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. It has been designated as an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) and is home to a particularly rich fauna and flora associated with peat bogs.



Brown Rollrim (*Paxillus involutus*)

Despite the forecast for heavy downpours and windy weather – we had a great turnout of over 20 members. With a steady drizzle, it was decided to have a longer morning walk in case there were some more serious rainfall after lunch.

Debbie led the way and straight away found a large cluster of Dog Stinkhorns (*Mutinus caninus*) beside the carpark path, not a common species in Northern Ireland compared to the Common Stinkhorn (*Phallus impudicus*). They depend entirely on insects for their reproduction and attract them by their smell of rotting flesh, unwitting flies carry off their sticky spores to the next Stinkhorn.



Shaggy Inkcap (*Coprinus comatus*)

As the group ventured further into the park – there were fungi absolutely everywhere – never far from the paths, and a rich variety of differing types, some of the finds include:

- * Growing on a dead branch were the tiny goblets of Green Elfcup (*Chlorociboria aeruginascens*). Wood infected with *Chlorociboria* fungi stains the grain a green colour and has long been used in such decorative furniture such as Tunbridgeware.
- * The deadly poisonous gilled fungus, Brown Rollrim (*Paxillus involutus*) associated with Birch.
- * Clustered Brittlestem (*Psathyrella multipedata*) - A really pretty gathering on the forest floor, the specific epithet, *multipedata*, means 'having many feet'.



Peatlands Fungus Foray (contd)



Dog Stinkhorns (*Mutinus caninus*)



Green Elfcup (*Chlorociboria aeruginascens*)



Contorted Pipeclub (*Macrotyphula fistulosa* var *contorta*)



Debbie Nelson with Snaketongue Truffleclub (*Tolypocladium ophioglossoides*)

- * It is always amazing at how Debbie can pick out these finds in the leaf litter, the Snaketongue Truffleclub, (*Tolypocladium ophioglossoides*) growing on the false truffle (*Elaphomyces muricatus*), a really fascinating relationship and a stunning find. The parasitic fungus grows out of a buried truffle-type species below.
- * There are many types of inkcaps in the UK and one of the more common ones that seem to always grow next to a path are the Shaggy Inkcap (*Coprinus comatus*). Indeed, they can be seen pushing up through tarmac! Edible when young and have the aliases of lawyers' wigs as is evident.
- * Peatlands is full of these Common Earthballs, (*Scleroderma citrinum*), inside the tough warty skin is a mass of dark brown spores, the skin will rupture to release the spores and the empty case can persist for a long time afterwards.
- * Another striking find was the Urchin Earthfan, (*Thelophora pencillata*), which can be deceptively well camouflaged on the leaf-littered floor. The rosette shaped coral like fungus has a rather beautiful coloured shape.
- * The pipe clubs belong to the clubs and corals types of fungi – it was a boost that we found some specimens of the Contorted pipeclub, (*Macrotyphula fistulosa* var *contorta*), this variation is a lot rarer than the normal pipeclub (which is scarce as it is)

I have highlighted a few of the finds of the day, Peatlands is an important site for an enormous variety of species of flora and fauna and is one of the many jewels in Northern Ireland's nature reserves – our combined group had a rewarding field trip with a great range of fungi.

Many thanks to NIFG and in particular, special thanks to Debbie Nelson for the finds and to Chris Stretch for compiling the species list below.

Matthew Porter

Species

Chlorociboria aeruginascens

Elaphomyces muricatus

Hymenoscyphus calyculus

Scutellinia scutellata

Taphrina betulina

Tolypocladium ophioglossoides

Xylaria hypoxylon

Amanita fulva *Betula*

Amanita rubescens

Cortinarius bolaris

Associated Species

Betula

Betula

Elaphomyces muricatus

Betula

Quercus



Peatlands Fungus Foray (contd)



Snaketongue Truffleclub



Urchin Earthfan (*Thelephora penicillata*)



Common Earthballs
(*Scleroderma citrinum*)



Clustered Brittlestem
(*Psathyrella multipedata*)

<i>Crepidotus mollis</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Gymnopus confluens</i>	
<i>Gymnopus dryophilus</i>	
<i>Inocybe geophylla</i> var. <i>geophylla</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Laccaria laccata</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Mycena tenerrima</i>	
<i>Mycena vitilis</i>	
<i>Paxillus involutus</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Psathyrella candolleana</i>	<i>Salix</i>
<i>Psathyrella multipedata</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Rickenella fibula</i>	<i>Musci</i>
<i>Russula claroflava</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Russula fragilis</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Russula sardonica</i>	<i>Pinus</i>
<i>Russula velenovskyi</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Scleroderma citrinum</i>	
<i>Tricholoma fulvum</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Tricholoma stiparophyllum</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Tricholoma sulphureum</i>	
<i>Tubaria dispersa</i>	<i>Crataegus monogyna</i>
<i>Bjerkandera adusta</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Boletus edulis</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Clavulina coralloides</i>	
<i>Fomitopsis betulina</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Leccinum scabrum</i>	<i>Betula</i>
<i>Mutinus caninus</i>	<i>Tilia</i>

Photo credits Matthew Porter and Debbie Nelson



Belfast Harbour Bird Watching

Leader - Ann Feltham

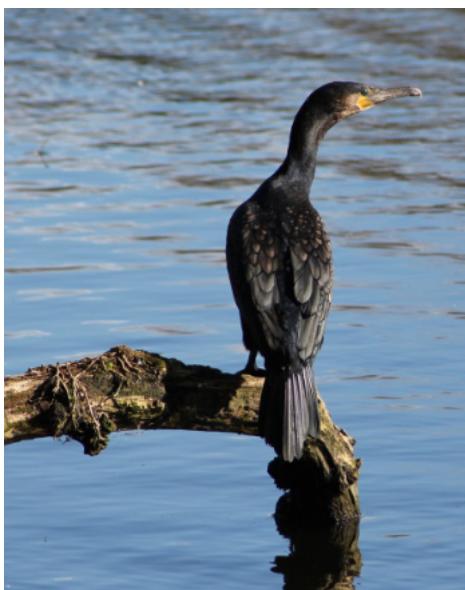
11th November 2023



Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*)



Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*)



Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)



Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*)

Over twenty-five members came on the morning's field trip which took place in beautiful sunny, calm weather. We started in the main observation room at the *Belfast RSPB Window on Wildlife centre*, where manager Tim talked of the history of the RSPB and of the reserve. There was concern when he mentioned that the adjoining land was being developed as a cruise ship terminal. It is currently a brownfield site that's become good for wildflowers, but the big question is the impact on the birds on the reserve, as well as those using the wider Belfast Lough, both during the development phase and when huge ships are entering the terminal.

Beginning our birdwatching, flocks of *Black-tailed Godwit*, *Lapwing* and *Teal* were visible on the freshwater lagoon from the centre itself. With the tide starting to go out, we moved on to *Kinnegar*, going past the old notices erroneously suggesting there is no entry. There's a pool on the right that is sometimes good for birds, but not on this occasion, especially as sun glare made viewing difficult. Gull enthusiasts can also search for rarities on the water treatment plant roof, but our group concentrated on the birds along the shore and on the lough. There were flocks of *Turnstone* and *Oystercatcher* on the beach and rocks, *Great-Crested Grebes* were scattered across the still water, while *Cormorants* spread their wings on the posts in the water.

The plan had been to return to the RSPB WoW and to look from the hides. However, a fellow birdwatcher at Kinnegar showed some of the group footage of a *Red-Throated Diver* he had just taken from the carpark between WoW and Kinnegar. While some of the group left at this point, the remainder went to look for the diver. It was found and all those still with us had excellent views through the telescopes. It became a lesson in winter (non-breeding) plumage. Not only was the diver minus its red-throat, but from this spot we also saw *Black Guillemots* and *Common Guillemots* in their duller winter plumages. A male *Red-breasted Merganser*, a sea duck which has much the same plumage all year, was also admired.

By now it was well into lunchtime so we dispersed, though some of us did go the hides at WoW to eat our sandwiches.

*Thanks to Tim and Brian of **Belfast RSPB** for their hospitality and to Paul Megahey (**NI Ornithologists Club**) and Alastair Rae for sharing their telescopes and expertise.*