



Penallta Yafflings

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A seasonal newsletter about the wildlife at Parc Penallta

We might not have had much sign of snow this winter but we have definitely had a lot of rain!

Despite being wet it has been a relatively mild winter for the most part and this has been reflected in the numbers of birds we have seen visiting our feeding station at the education centre. The mild weather, coupled with a good year for seed production has meant that many species have been able to find plenty of natural food out in the surrounding countryside and haven't needed the extra boost provided by the sunflower hearts that we put out for them. Winter visitors such as siskin and redpoll have been conspicuous by their absence, but despite this many of the common resident species have been keeping us entertained. Our star visitors have been the bullfinches, a normally secretive bird of hedgerows and woodland, they have become quite confident and often visit for 5 minutes at a time chasing all the other birds away!



Scarlet Elf Cap

Although February can be one of the starkest months of the year there are still a few little jewels to spot if you look closely. Scarlet elf cap fungi can be found amongst the leaf litter, sprouting from old decaying twigs and bringing a splash of colour to even the darkest winter's day.

Now is also a great time to take a close look at one of our commonest tree species, the hazel. We are all familiar with the pale green 'lambs' tail' catkins which are the male flowers of the hazel but few people take the time to spot the tiny red female flower growing from the tip of a new bud. Hazel relies on the wind to shake the pollen loose



Female hazel flowers

from the male catkins and transport it to the female flowers of another tree. Watch out on bright days in spring and you may see the yellow pollen drifting away on the breeze. Once a female flower has been pollinated it will begin to develop into a nut ready for picking in the autumn.

We can easily forget how finely balanced the natural world is and how slight changes can have big consequences. This was clearly evident just after Christmas when we saw an outbreak of Purple Sulphur Bacteria (PSB) in one of the parks ponds. This is a naturally occurring bacteria that thrives in nutrient rich, low oxygen environments. Although it poses no long-term problems for the wildlife, it looks unsightly and can smell like rotten eggs. Thankfully it cannot survive in more oxygenated conditions and appears to be decreasing as we improve the flow of water through the pond. But every (purple) cloud has a silver lining! While spending time around the pond collecting water samples and clearing out the inlet stream, we encountered one of Penallta's most elusive residents – the water rail. This brown and grey wading bird loves hiding in reedbeds and is very rarely seen though its call, a bit like a squealing pig, is quite distinctive!

The natural balance of the UK's woodlands is also in turmoil at the moment as a number of tree diseases spread across the country. *Phytophthora ramorum* which attacks larch trees has decimated forestry plantations across the nation. Consequently, many larch woods, particularly across south wales are being felled and replanted with other species not susceptible to the disease. Over the coming years we will be looking to reduce the amount of larch here at Penallta and we have been fortunate enough to secure funding to start this over the next month. Timber generated by this first wave of felling will be used in a number of local building projects and the area will then be replanted with mixed broadleaf species.



Earth Hour Tiger lantern by Ben Sands

Spring is almost with us and as the days lengthen and the temperature rises make the most of this fantastic time of year. Watch out too for our Earth Hour celebration at the end of March and join us for an evening of art, stories and lanterns and watch out for the tiger!