

# Amman Valley Wildlife Update Number 32 (August 2022)

Photo: Lizzie Wilberforce

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CADWRAETH NATUR CYMRU



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Thank you to Ellyn, our Species Monitoring Officer, who has been helping us this month at the wildlife garden, and with Marsh Fritillary larval web surveys and other wildlife recording. She will be returning to the University of Exeter in September to continue her studies in Biology.

Photo: Ellyn Baker

While working at INCC, Ellyn also had the opportunity to spend a week on Skokholm Island to help the Wildlife Trust with building a new puffin hide. Dug into the ground, and with one-way glass, this hide will be the first of its kind, and will allow visitors and researchers alike to see into the puffin burrows without disturbing them.



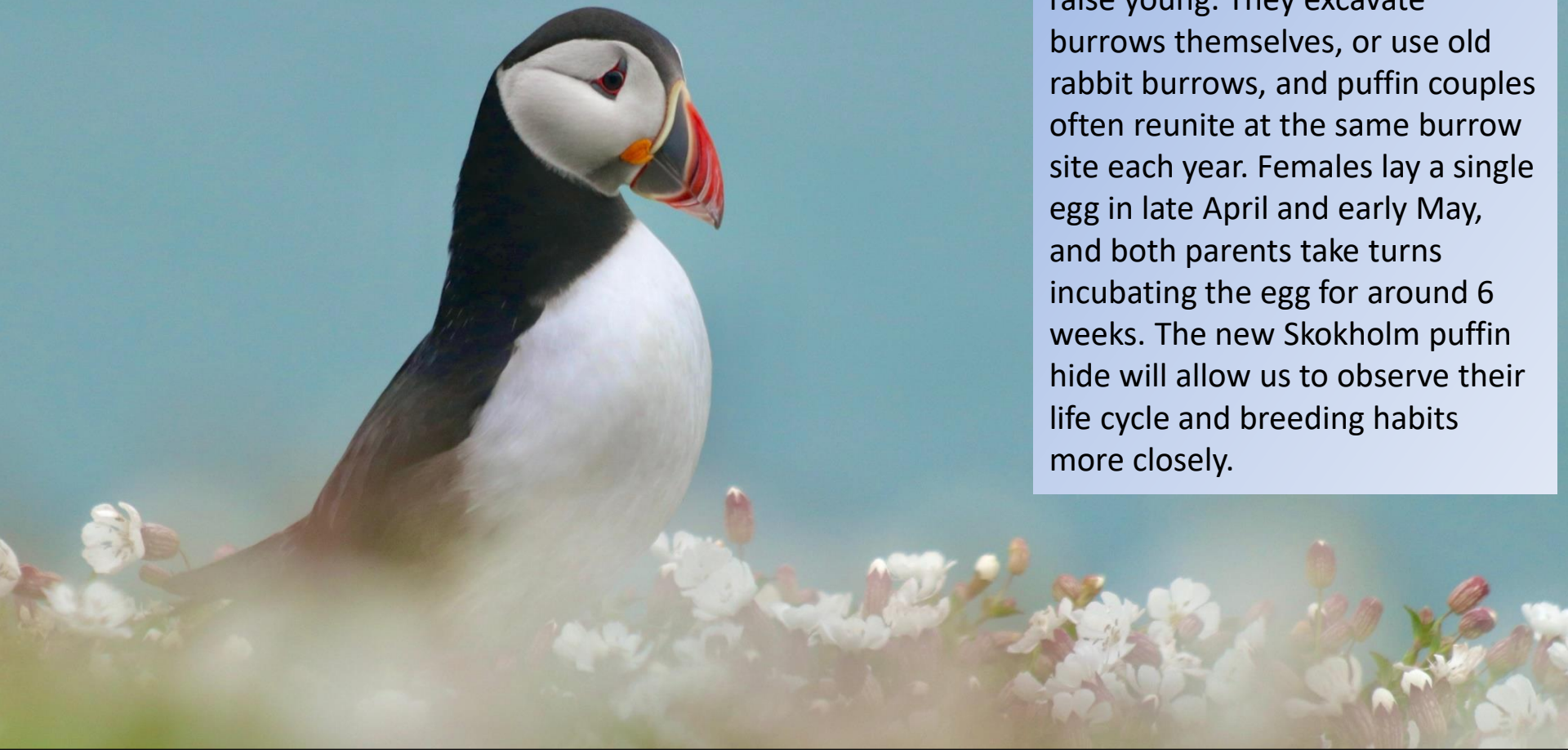
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Photo: Ellyn Baker

Puffins (*Fratercula arctica*) spend most of their lives at sea, resting on waves and diving for fish, but they return to land for a few months each year to breed and raise young. They excavate burrows themselves, or use old rabbit burrows, and puffin couples often reunite at the same burrow site each year. Females lay a single egg in late April and early May, and both parents take turns incubating the egg for around 6 weeks. The new Skokholm puffin hide will allow us to observe their life cycle and breeding habits more closely.



The grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) on the island were also very inquisitive and curious, and some young, white pups could also be seen on beaches on the mainland on the boat journey over to the island.



The wildlife garden has been welcoming many visitors over the past few weeks, who come to enjoy the garden and re-connect with nature. The garden is teeming with life at the moment, full of birds, flowers and all kinds of insects!



Photo: Ellyn Baker



We found this group of Buff-tip moth (*Phalera bucephala*) caterpillars munching their way through hazel leaves at the wildlife garden.

Photo: Ellyn Baker

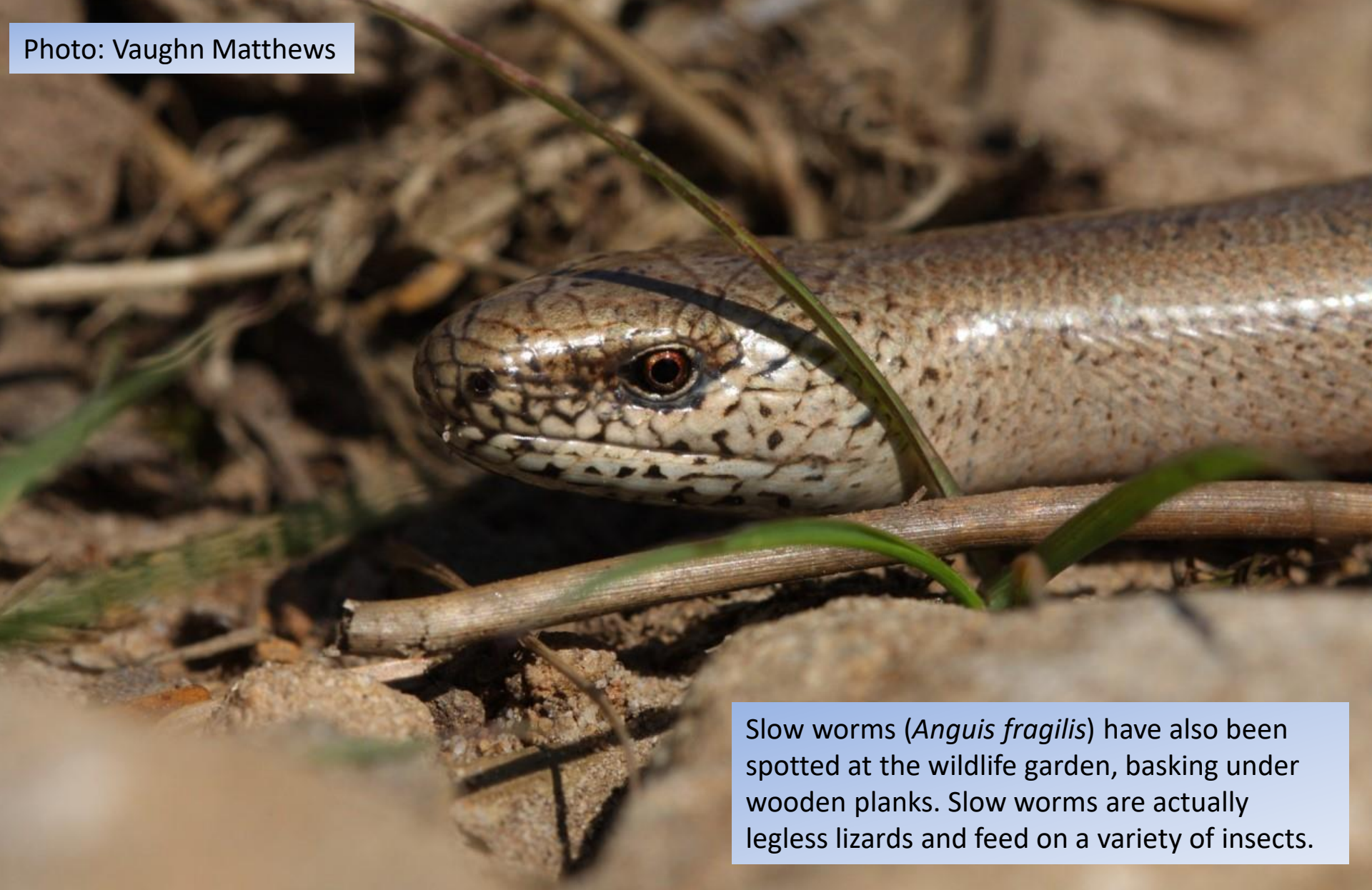
A few weeks later and the caterpillars have over doubled in size and stripped bare quite a few branches of the hazel tree.



This is the adult buff-tip moth.  
They are perfectly camouflaged  
to look like a piece of dead stick.



Photo: Vaughn Matthews



Slow worms (*Anguis fragilis*) have also been spotted at the wildlife garden, basking under wooden planks. Slow worms are actually legless lizards and feed on a variety of insects.

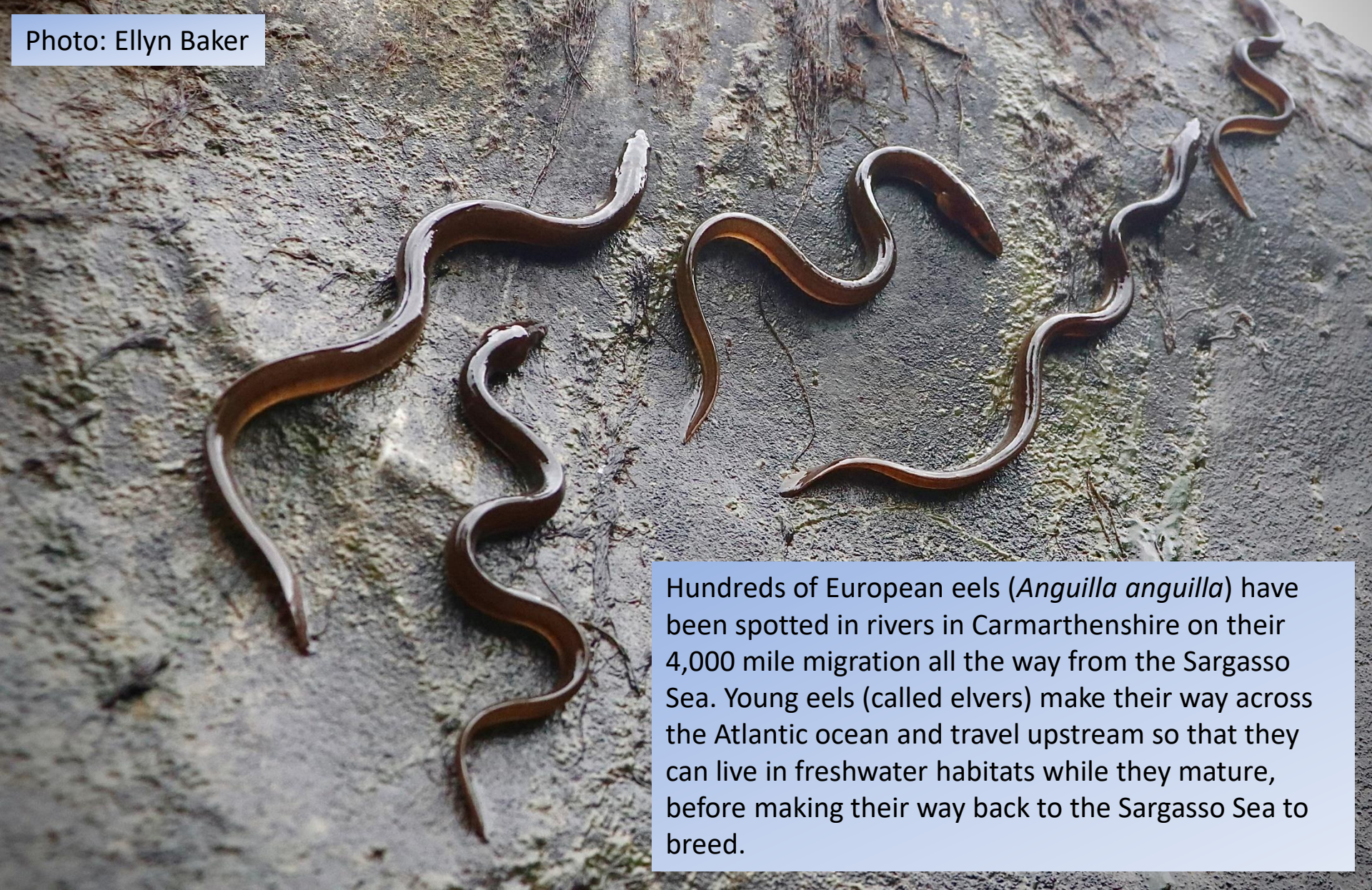
Some amphibians have also been taking refuge underneath the wooden planks in the wildlife garden. Providing refuges, such as wooden planks and logs in our gardens can go a long way to helping all sorts of creatures, seeking shelter and moisture, especially in the hot weather that we've been having recently.



The staff and volunteers at INCC were invited to play a game of bowls with our neighbours (Cwmaman Bowls Club) at the wildlife garden. After a few practice rounds, the game became more competitive as we split into teams. It was a bit of fun for the afternoon, but some staff members will need to practice a bit more before venturing on to the bowling green again...



Photo: Ellyn Baker



Hundreds of European eels (*Anguilla anguilla*) have been spotted in rivers in Carmarthenshire on their 4,000 mile migration all the way from the Sargasso Sea. Young eels (called elvers) make their way across the Atlantic ocean and travel upstream so that they can live in freshwater habitats while they mature, before making their way back to the Sargasso Sea to breed.

Photo: Ellyn Baker



The European eel population has declined by 98% since 1980, and are now critically endangered. But, the exact causes of their decline is still poorly understood – it's likely due to a combination of habitat loss and degradation, dam construction, reduced water quality, overfishing and climate change.

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Photo: Vaughn Matthews



INCC, with Brecon Beacons National Park and Carmarthenshire Nature Partnership, have been busy harvesting wildflower seed and spreading it on nearby sites to create and restore wildflower meadows in the area. The seed is harvested using a brush harvester, which collects the seed using rotating brushes, without cutting the grass itself.

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Photo: Rob Parry

The meadow seed is then spread by hand on nearby fields, and will hopefully grow to produce lovely wildflower meadows next spring and summer. Restoring wildflower meadows is not only great for pollinators and other wildlife, they also stabilise the soil, preventing erosion and store carbon and rainwater.

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Fleabane (*Pulicaria dysenterica*) is a common plant that inhabits damp soil such as ditches, road verges and marshy grassland. It tends to flower towards the end of the season, in August and September.

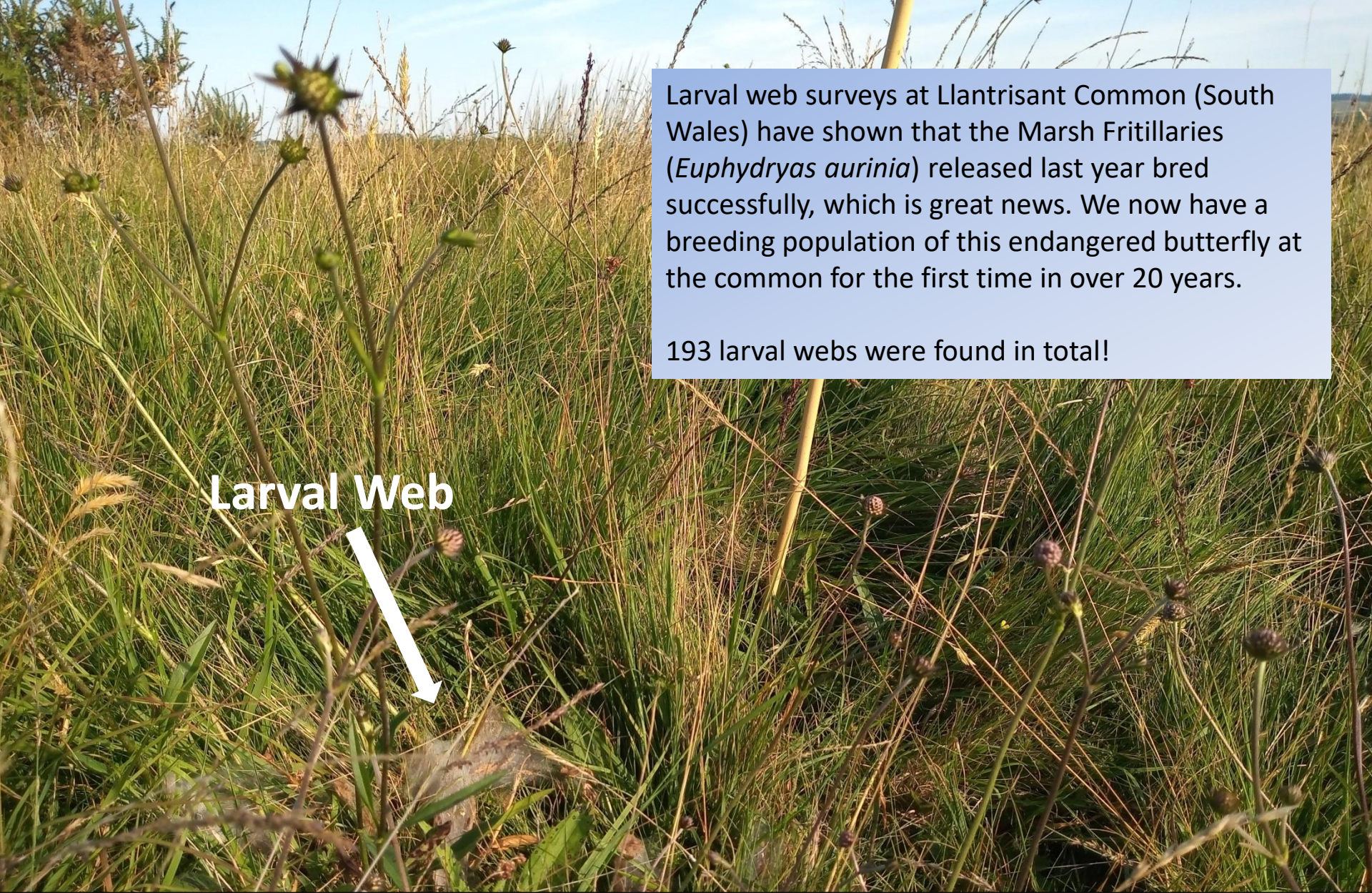
This makes fleabane an important nectar source for all sorts of insects at this time of year, when many other plants have finished flowering.



Marsh Fritillaries, and all other butterflies and moths, are in the order Lepidoptera meaning 'scale wing'. Looking at the wings of this marsh fritillary under a microscope, we can really see why – their wings are covered in hundreds of tiny scales that make up the beautiful and intricate patterns that we can see with our eyes.

Photo: Ellyn Baker



A photograph of a field of tall grass and wildflowers. In the foreground, a plant with several green, unopened flower buds is visible. A white arrow points from the text 'Larval Web' to a small, delicate web spun between two leaves on a lower plant. The background shows more of the field under a clear sky.

Larval web surveys at Llantrisant Common (South Wales) have shown that the Marsh Fritillaries (*Euphydryas aurinia*) released last year bred successfully, which is great news. We now have a breeding population of this endangered butterfly at the common for the first time in over 20 years.

193 larval webs were found in total!

Larval Web

Photo: Ellyn Baker



A few wasp spiders (*Argiope bruennichi*) were also found at Llantrisant Common. As recent arrivals to the UK from the continent, it is unlikely that you will find one in the Amman Valley. However, they are spreading northwards, so it is always worth keeping an eye out!

Photo: Ellyn Baker

A spider that you are very likely to come across is if you go walking through long vegetation at this time of year is the four-spotted orbweb spider (*Araneus quadratus*). This is the UK's heaviest spider, and they make the classic orb webs that can often be seen at this time of year, covered in morning dew droplets.



As the vegetation dies down, keep a look out for harvest mouse nests, which look like little bundles of dried grass. These tiny mice weave together blades of grass to build a spherical nest high up in tall grasses, in which the female will give birth.

Photo: Vaughn Matthews

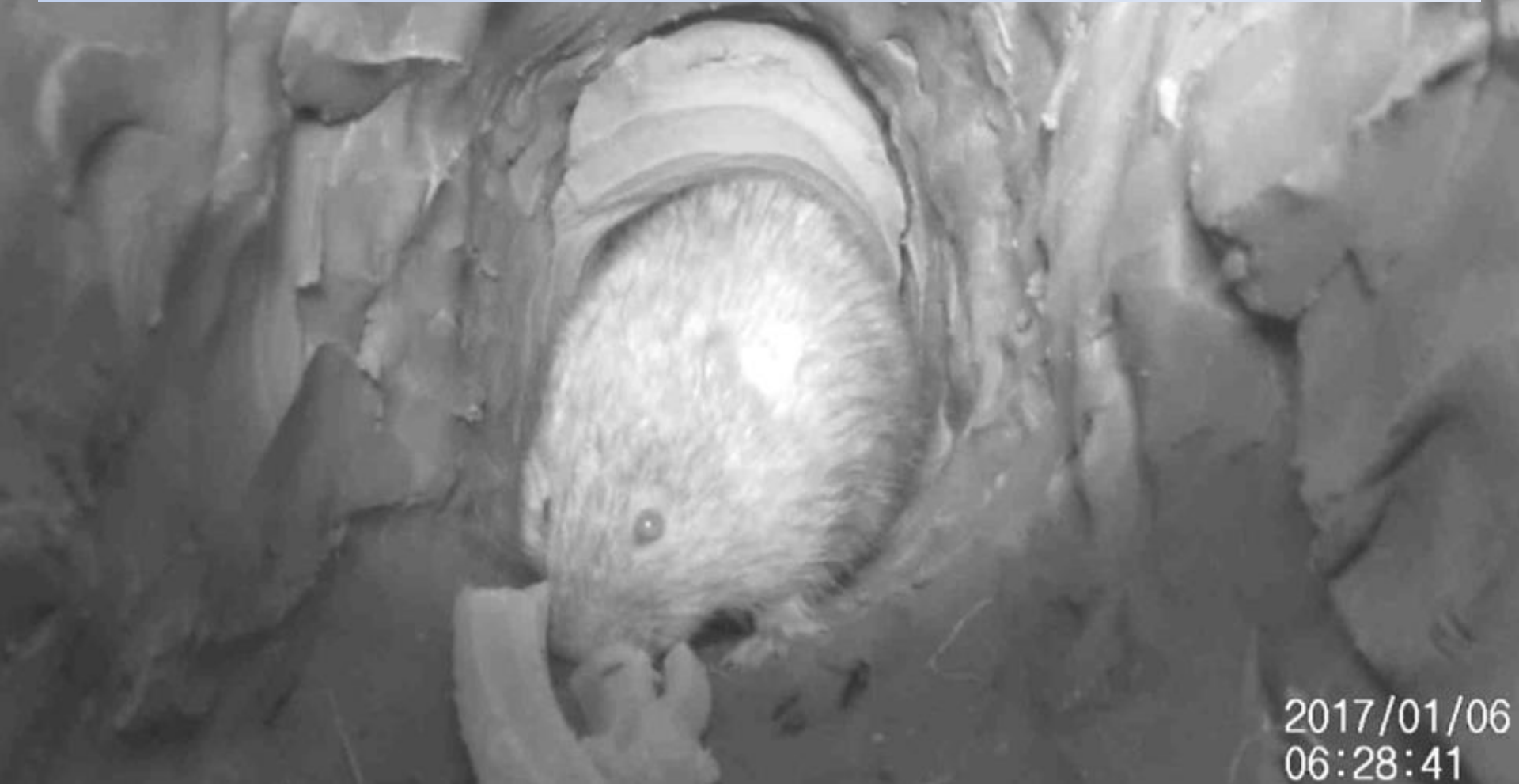


Adult harvest mice are very small, and can weigh as little as a 2p piece, and is the only mammal in the UK to have a prehensile tail that can be used for grasping and holding.

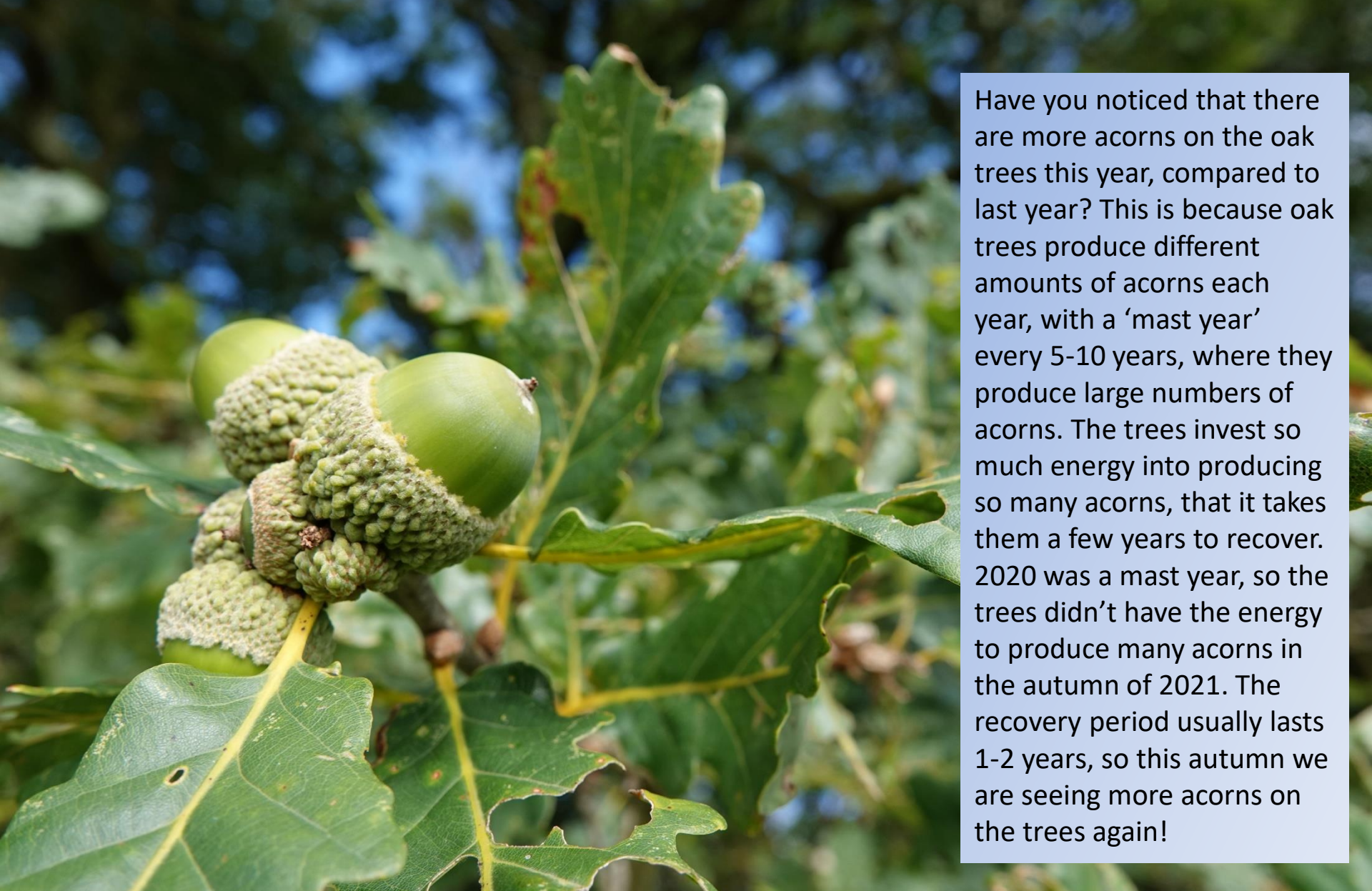
Volunteers at Amman Valley MakerSpace have been helping to make water vole monitoring stations that will be used to help find new upland water vole colonies across Wales.



Water voles (*Arvicola amphibius*) are the UK's fastest declining mammal, under threat from habitat and predation from the non-native American mink. Our Welsh uplands might be the key to preventing water vole extinction in Wales, so these monitoring boxes will help us learn more about their distribution and ecology in order to implement effective conservation measures.



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Have you noticed that there are more acorns on the oak trees this year, compared to last year? This is because oak trees produce different amounts of acorns each year, with a 'mast year' every 5-10 years, where they produce large numbers of acorns. The trees invest so much energy into producing so many acorns, that it takes them a few years to recover. 2020 was a mast year, so the trees didn't have the energy to produce many acorns in the autumn of 2021. The recovery period usually lasts 1-2 years, so this autumn we are seeing more acorns on the trees again!

Photo: Jennifer Thomas



Also spotted in the Amman Valley in August was this young green woodpecker (*Picus viridis*) sent in by Jennifer Thomas. This is the largest of the three species of woodpecker that breed in the UK, and are very distinctive with its green wings and red crown. They are often seen in grasslands hunting for ants.

A redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*) was also spotted in Jennifers garden.

This is a female, the males have a pinkish chest.



Photo: Jenifer Thomas



Thankfully, recent walks up the mountain overlooking the Amman Valley shows that not all the heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) was destroyed during the spring fires.



Thank You  
Ellyn & Rob  
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Thank you for all the positive feedback and for sending through all your photos and wildlife accounts. Please do keep sending them through as we go into Autumn.

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