

## ***Birds, Myths and Legends, Welsh Wildlife Breaks, 21<sup>st</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2011***

*From Holyhead to Happy Valley, a round trip of north west Wales – 3 days discovering the wildlife, myths and legends of north west Wales in late spring.*

### **Day 1 - Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> May**

Arriving at Holyhead ferry terminal building around 11am on a blustery morning, we jumped into our comfortable Zafira and headed directly up to South Stack to see wonderful scenery and seabirds. 5 minutes later, we were scrambling out of the car with our holiday well and truly begun. The views from the RSPB car park were spectacular,



*View from South Stack*



*Elin's Tower*

and we rushed down to Elin's Tower to catch our first glimpse of the seabirds on the cliffs. We weren't disappointed! From the cliff top through our spotting scope we all got excellent views of the razorbills and guillemots crammed in cheek-by-jowl, as well as the beautiful and dainty kittiwakes, small gulls that we could hear between the gusts of wind calling "*kitti-waaake, kitti-waaake*". Inside the tower, we had a comfortable bird's-eye view from the live nestcams of chough chicks in a crevice in the cliff – wonderful charismatic birds with their downturned red bills and bright red legs, and long nasal "*chaaaaaa*" call on the wind. We got excellent views too of puffins on the cliff from the webcam – about 12 pairs nest on South Stack.



*Guillemots on a ledge at South Stack*



*Puffin on the rocks at South Stack*

Scrambling up the cliff paths, the wind had risen and smaller summer visitors, like the stonechat, that abound on



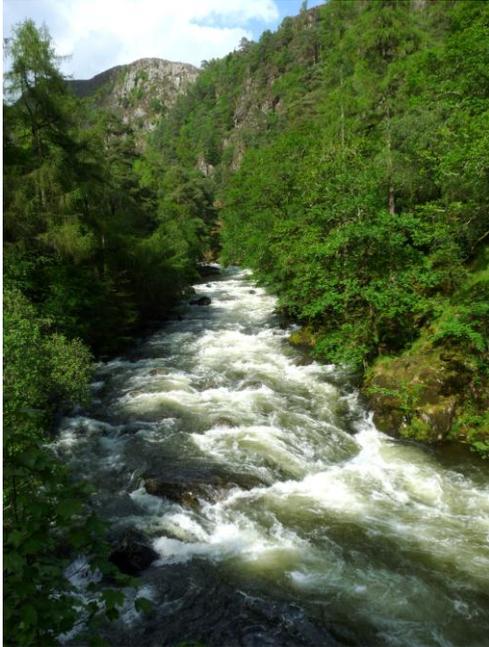
*Stonechat at South Stack*

*Race to the top at South Stack*



coastal heathlands were keeping out of the wind – unlike the cyclists we met on the road, out for a day’s orienteering . They were valiantly heading straight into it, so we gave them a cheer as they set off! We scrambled up to the top of the hill for an even better view, as it was too windy to go far down the steps to the lighthouse. As we headed, exhilarated, back to the car we were accompanied by several choughs, calling and playing on the wind. After some well-earned Bara Brith (Welsh fruit bread) we set off across Anglesey for Snowdonia and our lunch.

We had a great view along the Menai Straits as we crossed onto the mainland, and made our way south to the bottom of the Snowdon Ranger’s Path next to Llyn Cwellyn by the Welsh Highland steam railway. Despite rain setting in, we made short work of our picnic and welcome hot chocolate, with cover provided by a shelter at the car park. We continued on to the village of Beddgelert (Gelert’s Grave), and heard the tale of the misjudged dog of that name, who saved his master’s baby son from the jaws of a wicked wolf. We decided the story needed a happier ending, so in our version everyone lived happily ever after! Through Beddgelert, we drove along the Aberglaslyn Pass, spectacular in full spate after the recent rain, and made our way to RSPB Pont Croesor, one of only two sites in



*Aberglaslyn Pass, with river in full spate*

Wales where ospreys nest. This year, 3 eggs had been laid and all three chicks had hatched in the 2 weeks prior to our visit. We took a look at the nesting site from the hide, then went to look at the live nestcam, where we were rewarded by seeing chicks emerge from underneath their mother, in front of our very eyes!



*Picture of Pont Croesor osprey and chicks, taken from live nestcam*

Leaving Pont Croesor, we made a brief visit to nearby Porthmadog with its picturesque harbour, and partook of some of the famous Cadwalader’s ice cream. We then headed south to our base in the old slate-quarrying village of Abergynolwyn, listening to an exciting edge-of-the-seat rugby match en route! Having settled in, and with a delicious hot home-cooked meal inside us, we had an early night after a fantastic first day.

### **Day 2 - Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> May**

Refreshed after a good night’s sleep in our cosy accommodation, we set off on an early morning exploration of Abergynolwyn and surroundings. Setting off along the river, and up the hill along one of the myriad of local footpaths, there were superb views down over the village and surrounding countryside with its original slate fences. Back to Abergynolwyn for a hearty breakfast, the children replenished the garden bird feeders and set out on a garden birdwatch. They counted over 10 species in as many minutes, from the house martins nesting over the front door to siskins, goldfinches, chaffinches and a great spotted woodpecker, all within 3 metres of their bedroom window – as well as hearing the cuckoo up on the hill.



### ***Garden Birds in Abergynolwyn***

*Left to right:*

*Male siskin  
Female chaffinch  
Goldfinch*

After breakfast, and with our bird species list still growing, we made our way to King Arthur's Labyrinth and Corris Craft Centre, set in a huge old quarry near the slate mining village of Corris. As we went into the centre, we heard the squealing cry of a peregrine, which often nests in the old quarry.

With excitement mounting, we donned our hard hats ready for our mystical tour deep underground. Following the hooded boatman, we sailed into the depths of the hill, through the great waterfall, and deep inside the spectacular caverns of the Labyrinth, far back in time. Disembarking from the boat, we walked through tunnels and vast caverns, while we watched scenes of King Arthur and other ancient Welsh legends unfold before us - stories of dragons, of giants, of swords and battles and many more, until buzzing with the history of the hills, we followed the underground trail back to the boat and emerged into the light again. "Was it all true?" asked the children, excitedly. "Truth isn't always as it seems" we answered enigmatically, while promising to go in search of King Arthur's exploits at secret and magical Llyn Barfog (the Bearded Lake) later that afternoon.



*Fire-breathing dragon at Corris*



*Waiting for the whistle to blow*

After a delicious lunch and more garden birdwatching in Abergynolwyn, we took a quick trip to see the roaring torrents of Dolgoch Falls after the rain, under the mighty viaduct that we were about to steam over on the Talyllyn Railway. Back at Abergynolwyn Station, we took in the sight, smell and steam of the engine waiting to take us down the valley to Tywyn, feeling again as if we'd stepped back in time. We got into our carriage, waiting for the whistle to blow..... and yes! we were off, steaming into the sunshine along wooded steep-sided valleys that suddenly opened out into the coastal plain – following in the track of tons of Abergynolwyn slate, as it once had headed to its onward destination, shipped out across the waves and depths of Cardigan Bay.

Arriving at Tywyn Wharf to a glorious sunny afternoon, we stopped briefly in the playground with the children, before making our way to the mysterious and isolated Cwm Maethlon, or Happy Valley, in search of the legend-steeped Llyn Barfog. Here were stories of a monster, slain by King Arthur, with a nearby hoof-print of King Arthur's steed as proof. Going up the steep hill, we heard pipits in the reeds all around, larks over the sheep-cropped turf, and ravens calling "kronk kronk" and performing acrobatics, soaring and turning upside down as they played high above us in the wind. Reaching the top, and across the stile, we found Llyn Barfog, with its beard of waterlilies. Finding a sheltered spot, we sat down and enjoyed a cream tea overlooking the lake – but with no signs of the monster or King Arthur! Exploring a little further with courage from our cream tea, we finally began our descent back to the car past grazing sheep and cattle, in beautiful early evening sunlight.



*In search of King Arthur at Llyn Barfog*



*The way back from Llyn Barfog*

We wended our way back along Cwm Maethlon, golden in the evening light, and along the Dysynni Valley towards Cadair Idris and the famous Craig yr Aderyn, or Bird Rock. Craig yr Aderyn used to stand tall above the sea, thousands of years ago – and as the sea receded, the cormorants that used to nest on the cliff still returned, travelling further and further up the valley to breed. Now, over 5 miles from the sea, the lofty rock is still the nesting site of up to 70 pairs of cormorants that still return to the ledges, along with gulls, chough, peregrines, ravens and kestrels. We stopped at the base, listening hard as the light faded. And yes, we could hear the mewling cry of young cormorants, and the harsh “gorrk-gorrk-gorrk” as adult cormorants soared overhead and approached their nests.

Finally getting back to Abergynolwyn, we were tired and happy after a packed and fulfilling day. After another great hot home-cooked meal, we went straight to bed ready for our last day.

### **Day 3 – Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> May**

Our final day dawned a little grey and blustery, with time for some more garden birdwatching. We revised our schedule in order to catch an earlier ferry from Holyhead, due to the wind, and packed a late picnic lunch for the crossing. After a good breakfast, we drove northwards. We went past the Harlech dome, hearing stories about the Roman Steps, then back through Beddgelert, already feeling a happier place since our re-drafting of the legend of Gelert! As we approached the Menai Straits, the weather started to brighten, and we could see clear blue skies across Anglesey. Over the bridge, we came off the main road and headed to Pili Palas by Menai Bridge, Anglesey’s well known butterfly and minibeast palace.



*Butterfly at Pili Palas*



*Kestrel hovering at Craig yr Aderyn*

We entered a steamy world full of lush vegetation, waterfalls and flowers, with enormous butterflies fluttering all around us, almost landing, then fluttering on. Away from the butterflies and jungle we found the insects and minibeasts – giant spiders and insects from around the globe. Coming back out into the shop after exploring this rainforest environment, we checked to make sure we didn’t have any stowaway butterflies on us!

We headed back up to Holyhead in bright sunshine, keeping an eye out for more birds on the way. We weren’t disappointed, as kestrels - or ‘windhoverers’ - were hovering tantalisingly close above the roadside verges, and a grey heron lazily flapped its huge wings as it crossed above the road ahead of us. Arriving at the ferry terminal in good time, we said our goodbyes, not believing we had experienced so much in such a short time. But it was agreed that we’d only just scratched the surface of the secrets of north west Wales, so easy to get to from Dublin, and that a return trip was definitely in order!

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