

Presented to UK-MAB Urban Forum 7 Sept 2005. Gerald Dawe.

**Gillham, M.E.**(2002). *A Natural History of Cardiff: Exploring Along the River Taff. Being an Account of the Animal and Plant Life In and Around Our Capital City*. Lazy Cat Publishing, Caerphilly. ISBN 0 9537707 03. pp. xii + 545.

The book consists of four parts containing 29 (or 28, read on) Chapters, as follows:

Part I is entitled 'Catchment, Tributaries, and East Bank to Tongwynlais'. Chapter 1: 'The Eastern Catchment and Coastal Plain', deals predominantly with the solid and drift geology of Cardiff. Chapter 2: 'Forest Fawr, Castell Coch and Nant-Y-Fforest', describes the presence of such species as herb paris, moschatel and yellow birdsnest. Chapter 3: 'Natural Regeneration in Old Limestone Quarries' mentions a particular heritage of the Cardiff region. Here, species include *Pisaura mirabilis* spiders, helleborine orchids and figwort weevil on a knotted figwort. Chapter 4: 'Upper Cwym Nofydd and the Wenallt' describes sanicle, wood melick and other features of interest. Chapter 5: 'Lower Cwm Noffdd and Whitchurch Brook' continues to describe the area. Chapter 6: 'Corytun Roundabout: Junction 32 on the M4' describes the somewhat remarkable flora and fauna to be found on this site, including the long-winged coneheads (bush crickets) *Conocephalus discolor*. Chapter 7: 'Greenmeadow Wood and the East Bank to Tongwynlais' describes the Taff gorge together with various species such as the beautiful demoiselle, and common dormouse. Chapter 8: 'From Open Ploughland to Woodland in 25 Years' describes natural succession, and includes anecdotes of species mixtures, and variants of native species, introduced to the area (for example, an extremely spiny variant of hawthorn originating in nearby dunes).

Part II: 'Forest Farm and the Old Glamorgan Canal' consists of the following: Chapter 9: 'The Taff –To the Base of Radyr Scarp' describes more of the River Taff. Chapter 10: 'The Glamorgan Canal Nature Reserve' deals with the aquatic and can-side vegetation of this region. Chapter 11: 'Canal Nature Reserve, The Early Years' continues the theme. Chapter 12: 'New Wetlands in Forest Farm Country Park' concerns itself with other wetland communities. Chapter 13: 'Forest, Farm and Field in the Country Park' has observations, among other things, of hybrid black poplars. Chapter 14: 'Melingriffith and Llandaff North' is another account of regional natural history.

Part III: 'West Bank, Radyr, And to the City Centre' includes eight chapters. Chapter 15: 'Radyr and the Old Railway Marshalling Yards' is an account of interesting species associated with the former yards, including zig-zag clover, lesser broomrape, and thornapple. Chapter 16: 'Radyr Wood Community Nature Area' gives further accounts. Chapter 17: 'Llandaff: Riverside'; and Chapter 18: 'Llandaff: Cathedral Precincts and Insole Court' deal with inner-urban, somewhat more intensively managed, habitats. Chapter 20 (Chapter 19 is absent, this is probably a typographical error) 'Llandaff Fields, Pontcanna Fields, Sophia Gardens, and Platurton Gardens in Winter' is concerned with managed open space, and mentions treecreepers and tulip trees. Chapter 21 'Gabalfa and Bute Park: Riverside and Arboretum' mentions ducks, and various exotic trees. Chapter 22: 'City Centre: Birds, Blackweir, Fish, Docks Feeder, Castle Moat and Grounds, Greyfriars, Boulevard de Nantes, and Gorsedd Gardens' mentions salmon smoults, great spotted woodpecker and lime trees. Chapter 23: 'City Centre: Eastern Outliers, Alexandra Garden, Maindy Stadium, and Cathays Cemetery' describes strawberry tree, yew and monkey-puzzle trees, among others.

Part IV: 'Taff-Ely Estuary: Cardiff Bay' deals with the natural history surrounding the controversial Cardiff Bay development. Chapter 24: 'The Lower Taff, Glamorgan Canal, and the Hamadryad Salt Marsh' has a complement of maritime species such as greater sea spurrey and sea arrowgrass. Chapter 25: 'Windsor Esplanade Marsh, Bute Harbour and Dockland' continues the theme, with descriptions of great crested grebe and sea milkwort. Chapter 26: 'Cardiff Foreshore: Waders and Waterfowl' has an interesting range of species including purple-red fern grass, dunlin and oystercatcher. Chapter 27: 'Other Changes in the Bay' continues by describing cormorants, bootlace worm and other facets of the area. Chapter 28: 'Grangetown on the West Bank; Old and New' mentions alsike clover and three-coloured sweet pea. Chapter 29: 'Penarth Docks and the Lower Ely' describes sea celery and scurvy grass.

Throughout, the book is illustrated with useful maps, drawings and the occasional colour plate. What is striking about it is the remarkably acute observations of species, both common and rare, combined with an utterly unsentimental look back over the past few decades of development in Cardiff, and invaluable observations on how this has affected both flora and fauna.