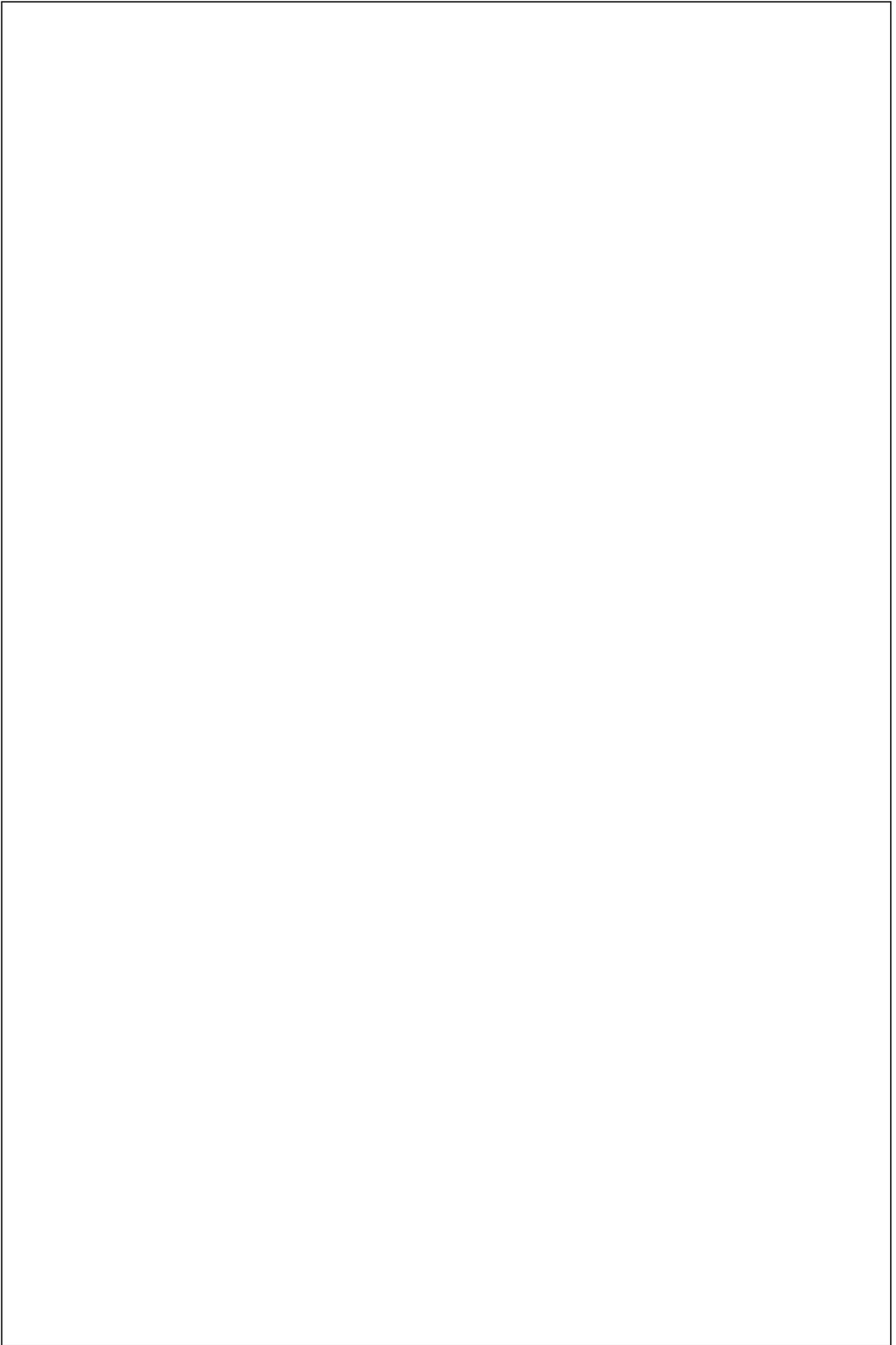




May Cottage Wildlife Report





This report was prepared by John Hudson Ecological Consultancy and Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority as part of the 'Naturally Connected' project. The project was funded by the Welsh Government's Sustainable Development Fund.

This is a pilot project so we would love to receive your feedback on this information pack. You can send your comments to sarahme@pembrokeshirecoast.org.uk or leave your comments in the visitor book.

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Pembrokeshire Coast National Park

Welcome to Pembrokeshire Coast National Park!

Pembrokeshire lies at the south west extreme of Wales and is surrounded on three sides by the sea. Pembrokeshire's marine and terrestrial environments are strongly influenced by the Gulf Stream and the National Park supports species found in both warmer, southern areas as well as those from colder, northern regions.

Pembrokeshire is internationally important for many of its coastal, marine and lowland heath habitats as well as ancient, semi-natural oak woodland in the North of the park. These habitats support some of our most iconic species including choughs, puffins and seals.

The high wildlife value of the Park is reflected by its nature conservation designations which include:

- 13 Special Areas of Conservation (3 Marine SACs overlap about 75% of the Park coastline and account for about 60% of the inshore area).
- 5 Special Protection Areas.
- 1 Marine Nature Reserve (Skomer) – one of three in the UK.
- 7 National Nature Reserves.
- 60 Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

With miles of rugged coastline, sandy beaches, farmland, valleys, hills and woodlands to explore, we hope this short guide will help you experience some of the fabulous wildlife our National Park has to offer.



May Cottage

May Cottage is situated on Hendre Farm to the north east of St. David's within the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. The cottage and barns are all Grade II listed buildings and the land is used for grazing and crop growing. Much of the farm is managed in a way that benefits wildlife, with rough grazing on the damp pastures and plenty of wet willow woods and areas of scrub that create perfect conditions in which a diverse range of plants, animals and birds can thrive. Among these wilder parts the owners have created a network of walks to take you all around the farm - but remember your wellies, some of the fields and paths can be quite wet! Dog owners will find May Cottage welcoming with plenty of space to roam and plenty of farm trails to follow.

1 Barn Owls

Hendre is lucky enough to have its own pair of resident barn owls which breed each year in the farm outbuildings (Point 1 on the map). The best time to see them is at dawn or dusk especially during the breeding season when they are busy feeding their young. In winter they can often be seen on fine days in the late afternoon, just as the light begins to fail. Barn owls hunt small mammals, particularly field voles which are abundant in the surrounding marshy

grasslands and heaths. They are stealth predators, hunting by sight and sound. Their feathers are very soft which means they are capable of slow, silent flight and they can hover on the slightest updraught, listening out for their prey. Their characteristic dish shaped face collects and directs sound towards their sensitive ears which are tuned to the high frequency sounds made by their prey. Barn Owls can therefore hunt in total darkness, but they also use their eyes which are about twice as light sensitive as human eyes.



Barn Owl



Owlets - Paddy Jenks

Barn owl courtship behaviour includes pair bonding activities such as cheek rubbing and preening. After mating the female lays a clutch of 4-6 eggs in April and she will gradually spend more time at the nest while the male hunts and brings her food. The eggs hatch at different times so it is common to see a nest containing very different sized owlets. This helps to spread the food demand over a long period

and allows the parents keep up with demand. Three weeks after hatching the owlets can swallow a whole shrew or mouse and they become very active and quite noisy, begging for food, hissing and clicking. By weeks 7-10 they get their adult plumage and start practising their flying skills, eventually moving outside to test their hunting skills. At about 13 weeks after hatching they will start to disperse.

2 Birds of prey

Even leaving aside the barn owls, Hendre is a wonderful place to watch birds of prey. There is a kestrel nest box on site which is used on and off for breeding and kestrels can



Kestrel

regularly be seen hovering over the rough pastures and heaths. Buzzard, peregrine and red kite are often seen high overhead and you may catch a glimpse of a sparrowhawk hunting among the trees or even a merlin, the UK's smallest bird of prey swooping over the fields. Winter is a great time to see the birds of prey at Hendre - there is a roost of hen harriers on nearby Dowrog

common and short-eared owls are also often seen, even in the daylight, quatering over the heaths. If you are very lucky you might even see a marsh harrier, a very rare winter visitor to Pembrokeshire.

3 Farmland and woodland birds

Throughout the year Hendre is home for a range of common birds such as blue and great tits, chaffinches, hedge sparrow, wrens, thrushes and many more. In spring and summer other birds begin to appear and an early morning walker in spring will be rewarded with a wonderful dawn chorus. Swallows and house martins swoop over the farm ponds and the sound of the cuckoo drifts across from the nearby heaths. Stonechats, meadow and tree pipits, wheatears and a host of other "farmland" birds can all be seen.

In autumn and winter snipe feed on the wet pastures and woodcock shelter among the willow woods.



Snipe

The plateau of the St David's Peninsula may appear an unlikely place to see some of Britain's rarest plants, and yet this most westerly part of Wales is a rich botanical hotspot. The peninsula is recognised as an "Important Plant Area", having been identified as being of the highest botanical importance for a number of nationally rare plants including three-lobed water crowfoot, pillwort and yellow centaury as well as nationally scarce species such as chamomile, wild chives and pale dog-violet as well as other rarities, such as hairy greenweed which can be abundant along the cliffs.

Chamomile grows around the main pond (Point 2 on the map) at Hendre and at just a handful of other sites across Pembrokeshire. Chamomile was however once fairly common across much of the UK but has declined significantly due mainly to agricultural improvement of grasslands, the decline of grazing on commons and the loss of pasture to arable land.

Chamomile belongs to the same family as the familiar common daisy but has sharply divided, feathery leaves with a beautiful fragrance. The flower is similar in general appearance to the daisy – a central yellow disc surrounded by long white petals. Its qualities have been exploited by gardeners in the past through the creation of chamomile lawns and seats. Chamomile has also been used for centuries in teas as a mild, relaxing sleep aid, treatment for fevers, colds, stomach ailments, and as an anti-inflammatory, to name but a few of its therapeutic uses. But please don't pick it – remember it is present at only a handful of sites in the county.



Chamomile. Bob Gibbons/Plantlife

Three-lobed water crowfoot (pictured below) is a real speciality of the St. David's Peninsula, growing in the many pools, ditches and gateways on the heaths and along the ancient tracks that criss-cross the commons. These tracks were once used by cattle drovers to drive their stock to distant markets and are usually flooded in winter but dry out in summer. Trampling by cattle and horses creates the very conditions



Three-lobed Water-crowfoot

required three-lobed water crowfoot and a range of other nationally rare plants including, pillwort and yellow centaury.

At Hendre over 200 plants of three-lobed water crowfoot have been recorded and suitable habitats now occur along footpaths, ditches and the rutted tracks used by farm vehicles (Point 4 on the map). This is a plant that relies on disturbance to maintain its favourite habitats so it is always worth keeping an eye out for its distinctive leaves in these places – it can spread to new locations on vehicle tyres and on walkers feet!

5 Ponds

The ponds (Point 2 on the map) on the farm have very clean, clear water and are surrounded by willow trees and bulrushes and other tall emergent vegetation. This makes them perfect for amphibians such as frogs, toads and newts as well as for invertebrates such as diving beetles, whirligig beetles and pond skaters. Dragonflies and damselflies may also be seen basking on bankside vegetation.



Common blue damselfly



Common Darter

Dragonflies (a common darter is pictured left) hold their wings outspread when resting and have large bodies. Damselflies (a common blue is pictured above) are more delicate than dragonflies and hold their wings together when at rest - look out for their bright red or blue “matchstick” bodies amongst the vegetation.

Some of the smaller ponds further away from the cottage are occasionally visited by otters who come to hunt the many amphibians and fish.

6 Willow wood and scrub

Large parts of Hendre farm and the surrounding commons used to be more open in the past but have scrubbed over with willow woodland in recent decades (Point 4 on the map) . Therefore cutting down some of the willows not only provides a renewable energy source for the farm but it also helps maintain open glades in the woods where wet heath can survive. These glades (Point 5 on the map) contain some of the best habitats on the farm, places where plants such as heather, cross leaved heath, sphagnum mosses and bog pimpernel grow in abundance along with fleabane and St. Johns wort and a myriad of others. Along the tracks, the deep ruts created by firewood extraction provide perfect

conditions for Three-lobed water crowfoot to spread and thrive, particularly in the wet “slops” where streams cross the tracks.

Lichens are very noticeable in the woods and among the patches of scrub, growing on the trunks and twigs. Lichens are part fungus and part algae. The fungus provides the structure or the “home” and the algae provides food, by photosynthesis. Lichens grow in three different forms, “crustose” or crust like, “foliose” or leaf like and “fruticose” which are bushy or beard like. Lichens absorb nutrients from the air and, as they have no control over what they absorb, they are very sensitive to pollutants such as sulphur dioxide and nitrogen - their abundance here at Hendre Farm is an indicator of good air quality. Many of the birds that nest among the trees and bushes also use lichens to line their nests!



Lichen

7 Grasslands

Most of the grasslands at Hendre Farm (Points 3 on the map) have been agriculturally improved in the past and are consequently relatively species-poor. However, because they are beginning to revert to more natural swards some flowers are present, particularly in the wetter areas where plants such as ragged robin, angelica, greater birds-foot trefoil and fleabane can be plentiful, providing a nectar source for butterflies and other pollinators. The tussocky grass is also home to a multitude of small mammals such as



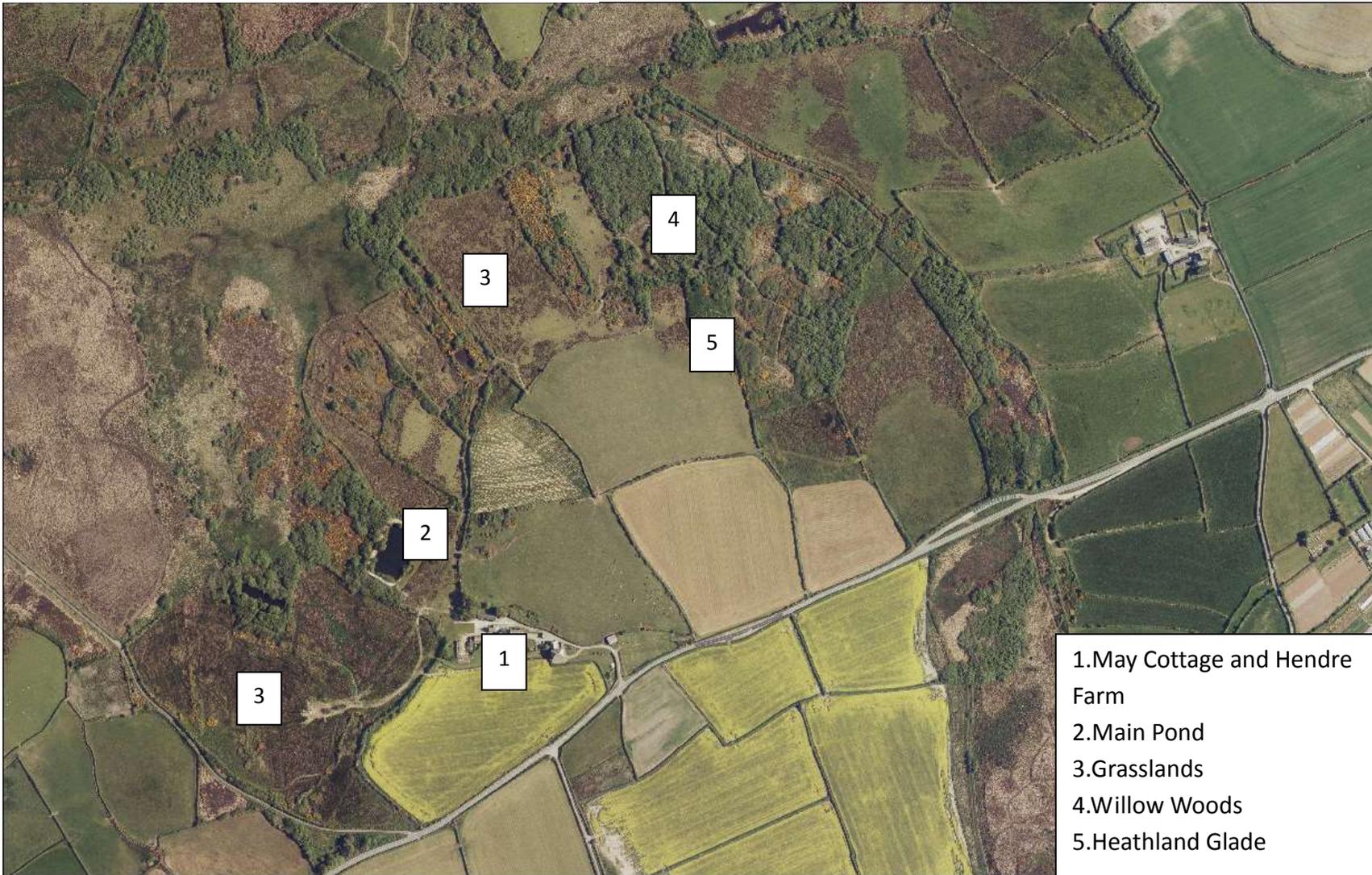
Fleabane



Ragged Robin

mice and voles making the grasslands ideal hunting grounds for the barn owls. The soft, damp soils also mean that birds such as snipe and woodcock can easily probe them for food. Foxes, badgers and weasels are just some of the mammals present at Hendre that may be seen hunting in the grasslands.

Map of May Cottage and Hendre Farm



Further Afield

There is a lot of wildlife to explore in North-west Pembrokeshire, here are a few ideas for places to go to help you experience some of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park's iconic species and habitats.

1 Birds

The peninsula is a great place to see both spring and autumn migrants. Southerly winds bring some of our earliest migrants such as wheatears, swallows and martins. Whitesands Bay hosts visiting flocks of Sandwich terns who stop on migration to feed there. During summer, the whole area is alive with birds, and Dartford Warblers have recently appeared and are now regular breeders. Thousands upon thousands of Manx Shearwater can be seen off the coast on summer evenings as they return to the offshore islands after spending the day feeding at sea. The autumn migration can turn up real rarities such as hobby, wryneck, ring ouzel, black redstart. There really is always something to see here!



Wheatear

2 The North-west Pembrokeshire Commons

Whilst staying at May Cottage you are fortunate enough to be surrounded by the great expanses of the North-west Pembrokeshire Commons, a group of ancient common lands once the property of the Bishops of St. David's. These commons are wild places, open access land where one can roam in solitude in the company of a host of rare plants, birds and animals. Here you will find acres of heathlands, marshy grasslands and wetlands grazed by cattle and ponies. The commons are all designated as Special areas of Conservation, recognised as being of international importance. These diverse sites are known to support well over 350 species of flowering plants including rarities such as Lesser Butterfly Orchid and lesser water plantain. The commons also support a diverse range of invertebrates including the Marsh Fritillary butterfly, Scarlet Tiger moth, Small Red Damselfly, Hairy Dragonfly and Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly. Wintering wildfowl and birds of prey are plentiful. Hen Harriers roost on Dowrog Common, and Short-eared Owls on the St. David's Airfield Heaths.



Marsh Fritillary

Merlin I is a regular winter visitor too. Bewick's and Whooper Swans, Teal, Wigeon, Shoveler and Mallard can all be seen in winter at Dowrog Pool and on Trefeiddan Moor along with Snipe, Water Rail, Coot and Moorhen. The wetlands are also home to breeding Grasshopper Warblers, Reed Buntings and Sedge Warblers. Otters and Water Shrews have also been recorded, particularly along the River Alun that flows through Dowrog Common. In late summer and early autumn the commons come alive in a blaze of purple and yellow as the heather and gorse flower together in a glorious display.



Heather and gorse in flower

3 St David's Head

St. David's Head, or Penmaen Dewi in Welsh, epitomises all that's best about the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park – a remote, western location, sheer ancient cliffs, secluded golden bays, heather-clad hillsides and a wealth of wildlife. St. David's Head is great place to see a wide variety of birds, so make sure you bring along your binoculars! The bird to look out for here is the chough, the rarest member of the



Chough

crow family with a distinctive curved red bill and red legs. Choughs can be seen throughout the year flying as flocks or in small family groups. They have a distinctive call



Sea Thrift

and they are often heard before they are seen. In Pembrokeshire there about 60 breeding pairs nesting along the cliffs. This represents almost half of the UK breeding population. Other birds occurring here include: peregrines, kestrels, ravens, gulls and gannets (Around 39,000 pairs of gannets nest on Grassholm island). Many songbirds find a home here too including wheatears, stonchats, linnets and whitethroats. The

Dartford warbler is a real rarity, but one that has become a regular breeding bird on Pembrokeshire's coastal heaths.

Just to the east of the headland lies the Coetan Arthur, a megalithic chambered tomb, dating back to the late Neolithic period, whilst right on the tip of the headland lie the remains of an Iron Age fort.

4 Rocky Shores

No trip to Pembrokeshire would be complete without time spent exploring our rocky shores. Close to Hendre Farm both Caerfai Bay and Aberieddy are good options. The shore is a tough place to live and species at the top of the shore have to cope with extremes of temperature and exposure whereas those on the lower shore need to be capable of withstanding long periods submerged in salty water. Life on the rocky shore arranges itself in zones from high to low water according to how well the organism is adapted to living in those conditions. If you look at the cliffs you can see distinct colour banding where species only survive in the conditions specific to that height on the shore.



Starfish



Anemone

Look out for classic rocky shore creatures such as periwinkles, barnacles, limpets and mussels as well as several types of sea anemone (pictured left), sponges and starfish (pictured above). Brown seaweeds such as bladder wrack and serrated wrack dominate the middle shore, but look more closely to see more delicate bright green sea lettuce and delicate pink frosted coralline algae.

Remember don't pull anything off the rocks and if you turn over a rock, put it carefully back in the same place. Return the animals back where you found them, crabs back under the seaweed, prawns back in their pools.

5 Woodlands

There is one habitat that is really not present on the St. David's peninsula and that is mature woodland. However, just a short distance away lie the the Gwaun and Nevern valleys in a heavily wooded part of the National Park. Stunted oak woodlands cling to the poor thin acid soils on the valley side. The woodlands are dominated by oaks which grow with lesser amounts of ash, hazel, birch, alder and willow. These woodlands have wonderful displays of spring flowers including bluebell, wood anemone, wood sorrel and

wild garlic. They are also very important for lichens, the most recognisable of which is the striking string of sausages lichen.

Ty Canol National Nature Reserve is a truly unique and wonderful place where you can experience the magical atmosphere of an upland oakwood with stunted, gnarled old trees with branches dripping with lichens and huge mossy boulders. These “Atlantic oakwoods” are restricted to the western, Atlantic coastal fringes of Britain that have a damp, humid climate with high rainfall and acidic soils. They have not been much altered by human activity and are recognised as Britain's “temperate rainforest”.



Ty Canol Woods

You can also visit other National Park owned woodlands in the Gwaun Valley, including Sychpant, Pontfaen and Kilkiffeth which all have parking and walking trails.

6 The Preseli Hills and Carn Ingli

The Preseli Hills and Carn Ingli are the most prominent features of the landscape of North Pembrokeshire and are a world away from the delights of the coast. On a clear day, a walk to the tops will be rewarded with spectacular views across much of Pembrokeshire.



A variety of birds of prey can be seen including kestrel, hen harrier and buzzard. The song of the skylark is the soundtrack to a warm summer day and linnets and stonechats can be seen perching on the tops of gorse bushes.

In the late summer and autumn the heathland comes alive as the heather and gorse bloom purple and yellow. In winter thousands of Golden Plover roost on Carn Ingli when high tides bring a temporary halt to feeding on the nearby Nevern estuary.



Stonechat



Linnet