



Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

36 Thunder Lane, Thorpe St Andrew, Norwich NR7 0PX

Telephone: 01603 300552

www.honeyguide.co.uk E-mail: chris@honeyguide.co.uk



The Lizard, Cornwall
27 September – 3 October 2021

Participants

Peter and Sue Burge
David and Steph Bennett
Caroline and Peter Chamberlain
Rob Carr (part)

Leader

David Collins, who wrote this report.

Cover photos by Rob Carr.

Main photo: choughs at Mullion Golf Course.

Below: pied wagtail, Helston Boating Pool; kestrel and stonechat at Church Cove, Gunwalloe.

Other photos by Rob Carr (RC), David Collins (DC) and David Bennett (DB).



Group members on the rock where the fringed rupturewort was seen (DC, see 1 October).

Itinerary

Our holiday was based at Trengilly Wartha Inn near Constantine www.trengilly.co.uk

Monday 27 September – participants arrived for the welcome meal
Tuesday 28 September – Tremayne Wood (Helford River) and Housel Bay
Wednesday 29 September – Kynance Gate and Grochall/Lizard Downs
Thursday 30 September – Gillan Creek and Helston Museum
Friday 1 October – Gunwalloe and Lizard Point area
Saturday 2 October – free morning, then Trebah Gardens
Sunday 3 October – Loe Pool and Constantine



Britain's most southerly café at Lizard Point (RC).

Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays always tries to put something into nature conservation where we visit, and a donation of £40 per person for Cornwall Wildlife Trust was our way of contributing this time. With the addition of Gift Aid through the Honeyguide Charitable Trust, we were able to give £350 to CWT. Rowan Hartgroves from Cornwall Wildlife Trust wrote: 'Thank you so much for your generous donation It is very much appreciated as we work to reverse the decline of nature in Cornwall and we welcome your support.'

Daily diary

Monday 27 September: welcome meal

Six of the participants arrived during the day (all except Rob Carr, who joined us later in the week). We gathered in the evening for a welcome drink and our first meal at the comfortable Trengilly Wartha Inn. The inn nestles at the bottom of a rather remote wooded valley below the village of Constantine

Tuesday 28 September: Tremayne Wood and Housel Bay

After weeks of dry weather, the forecast for today was for blustery winds and heavy rain! Suitably prepared we settled into the minibus and drove down the narrow Cornish lanes towards the sheltered woodlands at Tremayne on the south shore of the Helford River. Just after leaving the inn, we passed a field where several little egrets were feeding. Or at least some of them were little egrets, but three of them proved to be cattle egrets, which are still quite rare in these parts. Although the field forms part of a dairy farm there were no cattle in it. Cattle egrets do look a bit out of place without cattle, and I explained that the little egrets feed with the cattle here all winter – so the presence of cattle is not a failsafe way of identifying white egrets.

The woodlands at Tremayne form part of the extensive ancient sessile oak forest that covers the steep hillsides on either side of the Helford River. The 'river' is actually a ria, a valley flooded by the sea after the ice age. The woodlands themselves were a favourite haunt of the ancient woodland expert Oliver Rackham.

We navigated the steep, narrow lane that leads into the Tremayne valley and parked at the start of the walk. Unfortunately, the rain was particularly heavy at this point, but the rear door of the van opened upwards to form a useful shelter from which I could dash out and collect parts of fronds for an outdoor session on fern identification. By the time we had compared the characteristics of male fern, lady fern, broad buckler fern and soft shield fern, the rain had thankfully eased off enough for us to start our walk down through the wood.

By the side of the track, we noted other common ferns including hard fern with its different shaped fertile and sterile fronds, scaly male fern (black dots at base of pinnules) and abundant hart's-tongue fern. Much more surprising was a large, luxuriant fern that is usually encountered only in gardens – a young Australian tree fern. This led to a discussion about the composition of the Cornish flora with its numerous, long established archaeophytes (plants introduced long ago) and neophytes, or newly introduced species. The exotic gardens of Cornwall include many plants that are able to grow wild. Some, such as the admittedly attractive montbretia, have become nuisance weeds in Cornwall's mild climate. Tree ferns have not yet become widespread, but this individual in the middle of a densely wooded valley, is miles from its parent. With global warming, will Cornish woodlands have an understorey of tree ferns in the future?



Lloyds Signal Station at Bass Point (DB).

Other plants beside the woodland track included golden rod in flower here and there, and both bilberry and heather.

Further down the valley we came to Tremayne Creek and then the main Helford Creek itself. The tide was fairly high but we saw redshank, cormorant, grey heron and great black-backed gull. We also heard both goldcrest and firecrest calling in the trees high above us, but unfortunately neither showed. Nuthatch and marsh tit were also heard, but the weather was not conducive to woodland bird watching.

We then drove south to Lizard village – the most southerly settlement in England, where we lunched in a café. Despite atrocious weather, we had a very blustery walk along the sea cliffs at Housel Bay where gannets were making light of the strong winds against a fine seascape. We noted a range of maritime plants including tree mallow, sea campion and sea radish, identified by its distinctive, inflated pods. But the weather eventually defeated us and we cut short the afternoon walk and retreated to the comfort of Trengilly Wartha.

Wednesday 29 September: Kynance Gate and Grochall/Lizard Downs

Glorious sunshine this morning, and we determined to make the most of it. The cattle egrets were still in the field by the lane just above the inn as we drove out towards Lizard. From the busy car park at Kynance Cove we headed inland across the heath. Uniquely, the common heath on the Lizard is Cornish heath, a relatively tall species of *Erica* with two forms – pink flowered and white flowered. Although abundant on the Lizard, it

grows nowhere else in the UK, and is probably the most abundant rarity in the country. It is in full flower at this time of the year, as is the accompanying western gorse – a low growing, more compact species than common gorse. In among the Cornish heath were the very different flowers of bell heather, and with some searching we also found both ling and cross-leaved heath.

On the side of the stony track, we paused to note the diminutive fruiting spikes of autumn lady's tresses orchids among the stones, although sadly none were flowering. Betony was still in flower here and there and we compared sheep's-bit and devil's-bit scabious with their somewhat similar blue flowers but very different leaves. Descending to a small stream (the Kynance stream) we noted one of Cornwall's only colonies of saw-sedge, and on the damp track we found marsh arrow-grass and the uncommon few-flowered clubrush.



A very obliging wheatear (DC); wall brown butterfly (DB), both on 29 September.

On the heathland beyond the stream we had good views of several stonechats beside the path as we walked to the iron age settlement at Kynance Gate, where the remains of hut circles are clearly visible among the heather and gorse. We walked over lawns of wild camomile, detectable both by the white flowers and the lovely scent. It was now warm enough for a few butterflies to be about, mainly speckled woods and red admirals, but also a freshly emerged wall that posed quite well for photographs.

After lunch in the sunshine outside the pub in Lizard we drove a couple of miles north for a walk out over farmland and heathland around the abandoned settlement of Grochall. Walking down the lane with willow scrub on either side we were surprised to see a wheatear just in front of us. It was the most confiding wheatear any of us had ever seen, hopping around virtually at our feet like a robin. Great for the photographers among us and a real highlight of the week.



Field gentian and pale butterwort (DC).

Beyond Grochall we emerged on to the heath with its rutted tracks that are a haven for many species of rare plants. Many of the plants are spring flowering, but not all. The first track that we followed led to the last significant remaining colony of field gentian in Cornwall. I hadn't told the group what we were looking for, so

they were surprised and delighted when I pointed one out. This one was white, as were most of the ones we subsequently found, but there were several lovely, blue-flowered plants too. Not surprisingly the photographers concentrated on the blue ones!

Retracing our steps, we then followed another track heading out over the heath towards the old windmill. In sodden ground beside the track I pointed out the whitish flowers of the minute pale butterwort. This plant is more typical of NW Scotland, but can be found in a number of places on the Lizard heaths. Finding them is tricky first time round as they are nothing like the common butterwort to look at – they are only about an inch high with almost invisible grey-green leaves. So you have to look for the tiny white flowers rather than the spreading leaves that make common butterwort so obvious.

We followed the track into the upper part of the shallow Kynance Valley, then on to the dryer heath where we spotted two golden plovers quite close by. They showed no inclination to fly. Rather, they tried to hide among the short grasses, but not well enough to prevent us from taking photos. There were fruiting spikes of heath spotted orchids and the leaves of lousewort among other typical heathland plants. We returned to the van through the flower-rich fields that form part of Windmill Farm Nature Reserve, noting lots of late flowering yellow bartsia.

Thursday 30 September: Gillan Creek and Helston

Sadly it was a return to poor weather today, but the forecast for the morning was for quite strong winds but not much rain, so we drove to the sheltered Gillan Creek. As it turned out the rain held off until lunchtime, and given that we were in a sheltered area the wind wasn't a problem. Like the rest of the Helford River, this large side-creek is surrounded by woodland and there is a lane running along the north side leading to the tiny village of St Anthony. On the way out we saw common sandpiper and redshank, plus a greenshank that we had good views of through the telescope. Plants that we noted included polypody fern growing both on walls and epiphytically on trees, the attractive, pink-flowered garden escape lesser knotweed, and lots of leaves of winter heliotrope, another of Cornwall's neophytes that has become very common.

At St Anthony, with the aid of the telescope we spotted a couple of Mediterranean gulls among the black-headed and herring gulls and there were shags feeding in the bay. Less expected were no less than three glorious old Austin 7s parked by the church, together with a slightly less venerable Austin Healey. A gentleman who came out to check on them explained that this gathering was an annual holiday. The owners gather at St Anthony for a couple of weeks every year at this time to drive around the Cornish Lanes. On our way back to the van the convoy of cars passed us and we all waved cheerily. It was all very Enid Blyton.



Ferruginous duck at Helston Boating Lake; common sandpiper at Gillan Creek (RC).

Towards the head of the creek a common sandpiper posed beautifully for us close to the lane. Thankfully, the rain held off until we got back to the van.

As the forecast for the afternoon was for heavy rain, we planned to visit Helston Museum. Our first stop, though, was at Helston Boating Lake, where we had lunch in the café. The lake can be a good place to see wildfowl and gulls when the weather is poor. The long-staying ferruginous duck of unknown origin was observed at close quarters, and other ducks included a single shoveler.

Helston's interesting museum has the usual archaeological artefacts, a good display of minerals derived from the local tin/copper mines, several absolutely enormous old cider presses and, in particular, rather a lot of things that we were all familiar with in our youth. I was particularly taken with the large selection of toys and games which seemed to include most of the things I had as a child.

Friday 1 October: Gunwalloe and Lizard Point

A welcome return to excellent autumn weather today. We spent the morning halfway down the west side of the Lizard peninsula around the lovely Gunwalloe Cove. There were no birds of note in the churchyard, and no waders on the beach, but a series of shallow pools in the shingle where the stream flows to the sea were being used by a constant stream of small birds for drinking and bathing in the warm sunshine. They included both grey and pied wagtails, meadow and rock pipits, and linnets. They were evidently used to people being around so were fairly approachable and gave close views for observers and photographers alike. For the botanists among us, plants growing on the shingle included sea holly in full bloom, sea carrot and the rare (if not spectacular) sea knotgrass.



Rock, pipit, meadow pipit and grey wagtail, all at Gunwalloe Cove (RC).

We had hoped to see choughs here, and sure enough there were several flying around and even over us, giving their characteristic calls. We admired their wonderfully skilful, acrobatic flight, but disappointingly none settled in view. Much more cooperative was a kestrel hunting low over the shingle banks for rodents. It repeatedly hovered close to us, allowing us to get some great photos. Behind the cove there is an extensive reedbed, and we could hear a couple of the resident Cetti's warblers singing from within it, although they were as elusive as ever.

To finish the morning, we had a short stroll along the coast-path between the edge of Mullion Golf Course and the cliffs. On the way back to Gunwalloe Cove we struck lucky. A party of six choughs was feeding on a golf tee next to the path and we had prolonged close views of them feeding and interacting with jackdaws. Just perfect.



Lanceolate spleenwort, 'characteristically scruffy looking'. Two succulents: the larger leaved plant is Hottentot fig, and the smaller one is purple dew-plant (DC).

For the afternoon we returned to Lizard village and walked the coast path from Housel Bay to Lizard Point, the most southerly part of the British mainland. Just below the lighthouse we paused for a short rest and Sue sat on a rock. She wondered what the odd plant was at her feet: it was a patch of fringed rapturewort. In the UK this inconspicuous plant is found only on the Lizard peninsula, where it is common enough on very shallow rocky soils. At the point itself we noted the carpets of succulents that clothe the cliffs, smothering out all native plants.

On the way back into Lizard village, growing from the rocky walls beside the lane was another fern – black spleenwort.

Saturday 2 October: Trebah Garden

Due to the terrible forecast, we decided against a walk during the morning, so this was a free half-day. We spent the afternoon at the wonderful valley garden at nearby Trebah. There are many exotic gardens in Cornwall but for me this is one of the very best. After lunch in the café, we headed down past a mass of aeoniums, agaves and other succulents, tree ferns, bamboos and exotic trees to the valley bottom with its huge beds of gunnera and hydrangeas. We noted that one of the ponds was entirely covered by the invasive water fern. Firecrests were heard but not seen.

Sunday 3 October: Loe Pool and Constantine

In the morning we walked down through parkland to Loe Pool. The 'pool' is in fact a large lake that is dammed by a substantial shingle ridge, picturesquely sighted among parkland and mature woodland. We hoped to see an osprey that had been seen on and off for several weeks. When we arrived in the right area, I crept down to the water's edge to get a view of the tree it has been seen in, and there it was in full view. I re-joined the group and set up the telescope. It had gone! Like me, Rob managed a brief view but sadly the rest of the group missed it. Tantalisingly, firecrests were heard but not seen, yet again, in the surrounding woodland. The lake itself was pretty quiet except for a few great crested grebes and cormorants.

The Trengilly Wartha Inn doesn't do evening meals on Sundays, but they do an excellent roast dinner. So from Loe Pool we headed back for a leisurely Sunday lunch. The plan was to then walk up through the wooded valley to our house in Constantine for cream tea. However, most of the group opted for a bit of a rest after the roast, so Rob joined my wife Eiluned and I on the walk and I picked up the rest of the group in the minibus later on.

Prior to having tea, we provided an escorted visit first round our own relatively small garden, then through our neighbour's much larger and very impressive garden. In addition to our collection of ferns and succulents, I pointed out two fairly rare native plants that grow on our walls – the attractive hairy bird's-foot trefoil with its small orange flowers, and the characteristically scruffy looking lanceolate spleenwort. The spleenwort was our 14th species of wild or naturalised fern for the week.

While we were wandering among our neighbour's exotic shrubs and flower beds, a high pitched call alerted us to the presence of yet another firecrest. Unlike all the ones we had heard previously, this one was low down in a small evergreen shrub, and at last we managed to see it flitting around unconcernedly just a few metres above our heads. Then it was back to the house for the promised cream tea and a bag of goodies in place of an evening meal. And somehow we had come to the end of the holiday.



Sea knotgrass (1 October, DC); peacock butterfly (29 September, DB).