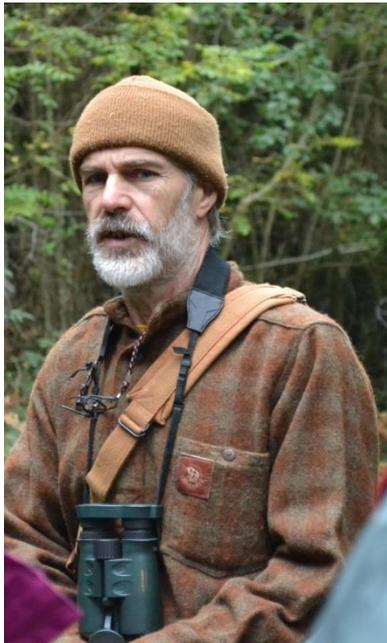


## Stradbally Trip – Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> October.

*'If you go down to the woods today...W.N.F.C. are having a picnic'*

Our intrepid group met at the car park of the wild life sanctuary, bright and early on Saturday morning and headed to the midlands on a walking tour of a 'Mixed Broad Leaf' woodland in the beautiful countryside of County Laois. We were blessed with lazy autumn sunshine and stopped on the way for a short 'morning coffee' break in the Talbot Hotel, in Carlow.



Eoin Donnelly

When we reached our destination around noon, Eoin Donnelly was there to greet us at the entrance. Eoin is passionate about trees. He is a 5<sup>th</sup> generation woodsman and his father came from County Tyrone. Eoin grew up in the Chilterns and spent his childhood exploring his local natural woodland habitat. We parked up the coach and donned walking boots and outdoor gear and began our tour in high spirits. Eoin explained that there have been no grey squirrels sighted in the park during the past 6 years but there are numerous badger sets and there was plenty of evidence of digging along the woodland trail. Pine martins are in residence and there are several boxes occupied which probably accounts for the absence of grey squirrels. There are also woodcock and we were serenaded by Buzzards hunting for woodland rabbit, their preferred diet. I was thrilled to spot a buzzard directly

above the canopy. Brian was our bird recorder and noted woodpigeon, robin, blackbird, wren, coal tit, blue tit, hooded crow, jay and bullfinch. With regards to moths, it was Simon who spotted the Silver-Y.

The oak plantation dates back to 1800 – 1840. There are also ash, sweet chestnut, yew, hazel, cherry, silver birch, Elder, Scotch pine, Douglas fir (over 300' tall), holly, spindle and also native boxwood in this mixed woodland. There was also a beautiful specimen of a European Larch. Bramble and Ash are prolific and feature prominently in increasing the presence of broadleaf species. There is no advantage in sycamore and they are regularly felled but they do provide support and shelter for young trees so no clear felling takes place as this would disturb the fine balance within the habitat. Jays are the heroes of the woodland as they are natural planters of acorns. Every 8/9 years a mast year occurs as part of natural re-generation. A small amount of planting is necessary but it can be swamped by bramble or killed off by frost. Native from seed is ideal. New oak and Ash are needed to re-rejuvenate the woodland. Halo thinning is the preferred method of thinning as this allows for new ground flora and wild life to thrive. There are also extensive areas of coppicing which enriches the habitat for wild life and provides the raw material for charcoal burning and helps to produce excellent timber for craft and other commercial uses. If there was a 'closed gate' policy with no management then the cycle of life would die.

Pencil straight Cherry is native and fast growing and used in wood-turning. Hazel is one of the hottest burning woods and makes brilliant charcoal. Ash is used for crafts and boxwood is very valuable and sells for around €25 a cubic foot and is used in the making of beautifully crafted small items like tobacco pipes. For the woods to be a sustainable habitat they are carefully managed in order to be economically viable. Nature and wildlife are always a primary consideration in Eoin's view. To maintain the fine balance in the woods a 50 -50 distribution of ash and oak is ideal. This provides more light and sustains healthy undergrowth. There are primrose, violets, spotted orchids, bluebells, wild strawberry, wild parsley, bracken, sedge, woundwort, to name but a few of the species dotted throughout the woodland along with many species of fern and fungi and honey fungus was present in abundance during our visit. At one point Eoin even had a seven-spotted ladybird resting on his shirt pocket. There are also several varieties of butterflies and moths that thrive in these woodlands. There was a beech mast this summer and great harvest of beech nuts for those who like to forage for wild food.

We stopped for lunch in what was once a deer park. This area is now re-generated with a variety of native trees and was magical for our picnic. We sat around on logs and Tim and I enjoyed piping hot tea from our new flask. There was a portion of moist "Foley" apple cake for all of us explorers, simply delicious. The clearing was bathed in lots of natural light and this is where, Eoin told us, he demonstrates the art of coppicing to a dozen or so students at a time interested in craft based industries. The intensive 4 day course is very popular. Students spend 2 days in the classroom and 2 days in the woodlands. GMIT

in Galway now include this course as part of the forestry degree. Eoin is also a member of Muintir na Coille a group of people dedicated to the protection and preservation of native woodland here in Ireland. Eoin told us that Raheen in County Clare is the location of one of Ireland's oldest oak woods, some 800 years old. He also explained that there were stag head oaks in the woods and that a myriad of insects thrive on these old trees. Also as the sycamore are felled



that first the briars take hold and then later the hazel grows taller and the briars die down in a continuous cycle of life. There was also leaf miner signs on the chestnut, and tunnelling injuries were evident, but Eoin explained that nature had found a way to balance this infestation and that 'blue tits' now happily feed on the insects, which preserves the trees from destruction. Eoin also informed us that any Laurel spotted is pulled up by the roots and there were no rhododendrons present in the woods which is a blessing.

We then went on to see where charcoal burning or 'cooking' takes place. There are charcoal kilns in the woods and they form part of the cyclical nature of woodland life. Eoin camps out for 2 nights on a regular basis to carefully monitor the process. This is a delicate process, too hot and the results are ash, and not hot enough and the wood is not cooked to the point where the moisture is extracted. There are 4 chimneys, and 4

boots, all needing judicious tending throughout the 2 day process. When the white smoke turns blue the wood is cooked and all the system is shut down immediately by Eoin in order to retain the integrity of the charcoal. Eoin places a smaller kiln in the centre of the burn with willow, which makes the charcoal that artists use in their drawings. This is quite a lucrative earner for the woods and 3 ton of BBQ charcoal sells for €600 euro and the artists charcoal is even more expensive.

Another hidden gem deep in the woodland is a Lime Kiln fire place. Here they roasted and cooked lime stone from the local lime quarry. Slack lime, lump lime and slate lime were produced and the old road is still there buried beneath the undergrowth. Eoin hopes to uncover the road at some stage in the future. This lime was used as a fertilizer and also in mortar as lime is naturally flexible and makes an excellent bond in stone work. The enormous brick fireplace is still standing and Eoin hopes to restore the area to its former glory.



Pine Martin Box

The final site on our woodland adventure was hidden high up above valley. A small folly built back in the early 1800, but unfortunately now in ruin. It was built sometime after 1754 and originally had a slate roof. The walls still show the remains of stucco, which would have been part of the decorative panelling. Much of the ruin is still intact due to the flexibility of the lime in the mortar. There were also the ruins of a cook house and stables and the folly was situated about a mile from the main house.

Thanks to Martin our driver for his kindness and patience and Eoin our guide for a truly fascinating outing. Thanks also to Mary for her many e-mails and reminders and for making all the necessary arrangements. Much appreciated. I have to say this was a very successful outing and we all had a fun, informative and enjoyable day.

Ruth Allen.