

## Exploring Treasures of Irish Nature ...

Recently on a dark December evening, the Chair of WWEN, Helen Lawless welcomed thirty WWEN members and guests to Valleymount in Wicklow to hear a fascinating talk by Anja Murray, broadcaster, podcaster and writer.

A native of Valleymount, Anja told us she was ‘delighted to be back’ and remembers fondly spending ‘all my pocket money on sweets in the local shop.’ She also developed her love of nature from growing up in the area.

Here are just some of the highlights from her talk.

### Woodland

Wicklow is the most wooded county in Ireland. There is a lot of Sitka spruce, but we do have ‘some beautiful woods,’ Anja says. In Tomnafinnoge Woods, an ancient woodland in Tinahely, Anja has been known to engage in, as she calls it, the ‘not sensible adult behaviour’ of ‘sitting and looking’.

It's then she sees the wondrous detail of nature, like the Tree Creeper bird poking around in the tree crevices for invertebrates, or the beautiful blossom of wild garlic, the lichens and the bugs crawling about.

‘There are so many fascinating things in the natural world,’ she says, often in ‘very ordinary things, like frogs and lichen’.

Anja reminds us ‘we often dismiss the Hazel tree but it’s one of the longest living trees in Ireland as it keeps regenerating itself. It kind of lives forever,’ and for Anja it demonstrates that ‘sometimes smaller species are amazing.’ Hazel’s catkins also provide an amazing resource of pollen for early emerging insects, and the tree supports such wonders as Hazel Glue Fungus which catches falling branches, when they stick to the fungus. The fungus then absorbs the nutrients from the branch.

Real native woodland is ‘wet, marshy, muddy and often inaccessible’ – not what we picture as woodland at all, Anja says. ‘We have very little of it left unfortunately. From a high of 80% tree cover after the ice age, to 1% in 1925.’ The figure has improved a bit since, with an estimated 6-11% coverage today. However, native woodland is only 1.2% of this.

Our woodlands are ‘ecologically not in a good state.’ Most woodlands, she says ‘are over grazed by deer, goats and sheep.’ As there are no wolves to act as top predator, ‘we need to be the wolf,’ she says. ‘We need to cull and to control the deer population.’

Invasive species such as rhododendron and cherry laurel also need to be controlled, as a priority.

### Hedgerows

As so much of the natural world has been degraded by man, hedgerows, a manmade habitat now play a vital role as a ‘surrogate’ habitat for native species. Ireland’s hedgerows are often

made up of native thorny species and provide good shelter for birds. Hedge banks are also important, providing a home to ground nesting bees and invertebrates.

Anja told us ivy is 'not a pariah' anymore. It's evergreen and provides shelter right through winter. Its late flowers are a crucial source for late roaming bees and butterflies. Ivy 'fills the gap'.

Scabious, a flower of our hedgerow, has a little caterpillar, that produces a moth, that bats feed off. Did you know that different bat species have different bat signals? This allows them to communicate with their own kind when out on a hunt.

## Grassland Habitats

Our native Irish grasslands are unique to this country. They are species rich. For example, the cuckoo flower comes out when the cuckoo comes back. Orange Tipped butterflies lay eggs on the cuckoo flower, one egg per plant. This demonstrates the 'thousands of relationships in nature that have evolved over long time periods,' Anja says. Relationships between flowers, butterflies, soil types, orchids, fungi and more.

Anja mentions the Lapwing, which is the national bird of Ireland. It nests in marginal wet fields (as does the Curlew), but this land has been seen as 'not very productive and lost to drainage and forestry.' The Lapwing has declined by 96% in the last 20 years, and the Curlew is down to 100 breeding pairs. Basically, both bird species are on the verge of collapse although they are now protected.

## Waterways

Salmon are a wondrous species, Anja tells us, migrating over 30,000km to get back to their spawning ground. In the river estuary they adapt to fresh water. They stop eating at this stage. Then they 'jump weirs and waterfalls to navigate to gravel beds where they were born.' It is thought they use smell to find their way.

Salmon is seen as a keystone species, which means it has a big impact on its ecosystem and if it disappears the ecosystem can change dramatically. However, salmon face threats. Our water quality is poor, but our government has asked for a derogation to the Nitrates Directive. This 'should not be sought,' says Anja.

## Bogland

Anja remembers for the first time seeing a bog from up above, and the 'amazing pattern in the bog, a fractal pattern almost.' There is no normal recycling in a bog, the soil is acidic and waterlogged – that's what turf is, things can't break down. But there are also some amazing adapted species on the bogs such as carnivorous Sundews which have sticky tentacles to catch their prey. Other insects are exclusive to the bogs such as the butterfly the March Fritillary.

## Oceans

Ireland is a hot spot for sharks, Anya tells us. There are 39 species in our waters. Amazing creatures who have an extra sense, an electro receptor which helps them detect the heartbeat of potential prey. We also have deep water coral reefs, only discovered 15 years ago.

## Eco-anxiety & questions from the audience

What can we do about our eco-anxiety? Anja's response is quite simple:

Get a good pair of waterproof pants and spend time in natural wild habitats. It will lower stress.

- Doing anything with a team or community helps. This is proven, she says.
- Do actions 'that make you feel good.'
- Look up into the canopy of a tree and notice the texture, the light and the sound.
- Inform yourself about the natural world.

But what can we do on a macro level, one audience member asked? How can we make a real difference?

'We are all part of nature, we must start with the love of nature and have that connection,' says Anja. But the best thing to do is 'Do whatever you're good at!' Anja has found *her* place in communicating about nature. But we all have our own set of skills. Perhaps another person could be useful in contacting our TDs, Councillors and so on. 'Tell them what it means to us, to our families.' It is a societal issue, she says.

Helen Lawless drew the evening to a close by exhorting the audience 'to get involved. You can gain a voice. You have agency. Small actions can lead to bigger.'

Anyone who has heard Anja speak about the natural world will come away with a smile on their face. She speaks with a passion and a knowledge which engages the audience. We were lucky to hear her once again. We were all uplifted.

Anja Murray is a well-known host of *Nature File* on RTE's Lyric FM. You can also hear her on the podcasts: *Feather & Flock* and *Root & Branch*. She has written two books: *Wild Embrace* and her latest ***Frog Routes, Polka-Dot Newt***, (Gill Books 2025) is available now in all good bookshops.

For more information about West Wicklow Environmental Network please visit our website [westwicklowen.ie](http://westwicklowen.ie)

### Thanks

Valleymount Hall made us welcome with cheerful Christmas lights and the use of their lovely café area. The chat was lively, and the tea warmed us up.

Thanks to Rory Adams for his musical contribution on the night. It was most welcome.