

SFPT Fromus reserve: April report

Spring comes to the meadows

Just a few weeks after doing a good impression of a river swollen into a foaming torrent by the deluges of February and March, on 6th April the Fromus river was back to its real self: a small stream burbling its way through the gorge and meandering through the lower meadow on its way to meet the Alde. If only the flow was constant, the stream would be full of aquatic life, but it is likely that by the late summer it will have dried up as it did last year.

I may come to wish I had not written those last words, and hope summer will not be anything like the summer of rain-lashed 2012. I have been wrong before, and as recently as March, when my report queried the apparent lack of ground flora in the gorge. (This is my first Fromus spring.) I take it all back, I was woefully wrong.

The meadow grasses are thrusting skywards, and meadow foxtail is abundant. I have never seen a Fromus summer either, but I can imagine how these pastures will look in a few weeks. The past winter has been perfect for grasses, and with barely any frost they have continued to slowly grow. Emerging from the green swards are the first signs of what will almost certainly be a great display of cuckoo flower (ladies smock.) It is a food plant of the handsome orange-tip butterfly. The damp grass is studded with the beautiful leaf rosettes of marsh thistle and – but unseen - many southern marsh orchids. I think the buttercup display - meadow, bulbous and creeping – will be spectacular. The fine-cut leaves of pignut are showing in many areas. It is a delicate white flower in the same family as cow parsley.

One of the most interesting sights is a primrose-studded small patch of sunlit grassland on the steep slope of the old dam. No farmer in his right mind would dream of attempting to fertilise (or 'improve') the grass on the slope, and consequently it is rich in wild, native flora, and the grass is sparse. Each side of the sunny patch, the flora fades away beneath the shade of oak and hornbeam: below the dam, the large pasture spreads where the fish lake once lapped. It has swards of verdant grass but few flowers, testifying to the nutrients in the lake-bed sediments and probable subsequent fertilisation.

Go soon – and enjoy the spectacle of the gorge decked in spring green, with a riot of flowers including dog violets, lesser celandine, primrose, cowslip and false oxlip. There is more than just the physical beauty of the flowers, the bird song and the sparkling stream: there is tranquillity too, the sort you often find in places of antiquity. Nature here is in balance and doing well, as it usually does when left to work on its own. Sheets of dog's mercury testify to the credentials of the gorge, hedgerows and meadows as being surviving fragments of a medieval landscape.

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