

SFPT Simpson's Fromus Meadows August 2014 report

The River Fromus is alive and well after a summer of sun, rain, more sun and then more rain. The tall grasses in the Fromus meadows have been luxuriant for weeks, and on 18th August a couple of the smaller meadows had already been cut for hay and baled. By and large, the hay will consist mainly of grasses: the meadows in summer have a scarcity of flowering herb species, but in time, appropriate annual management by SFPT could succeed in restoring some of the wild flower diversity the meadows once had. If the weather holds and the rest of the hay is cut soon, the wildlife interest will shift from the shorn meadows to the fine, thick hedgerows that are a key feature of the reserve.

A bumper autumn lies ahead for all the wildlife that depends upon the huge variety of hedgerow blackberries, sloes, rose hips, haws, elderberries, nuts and seeds — the menu is long and delicious. Clumps of spear thistle and creeping thistle are capped with fluffy seedheads that will be irresistible to goldfinches. Many plants in flower on the edges of the meadows and in the oozy soil around the ponds include hogweed, yarrow, St John's wort, fleabane, herb Robert, water plantain, field bindweed and hundreds of statuesque marsh thistles: they provide nectar and pollen for butterflies, bees, beetles, hoverflies and moths. Some will be taken by dozens of darting, deadly dragonflies and damselflies, or by swallows skimming low gathering food to feed a ravenous late brood somewhere nearby. A pair of crows was instructing their fully-grown young on how to drive off a low-flying buzzard over the Mere Meadow, and several displaying pairs of speckled wood butterflies were in the woodland and scrub on the Dam.

Bittersweet — or woody nightshade — is a native wild, climbing *Solanum* that likes wet places. It grows in and around the long pond, and has scrambled through a nearby hawthorn to a height of eight feet. Purple and yellow, its flowers are eye-catching but sinister, and like many others in the same family its succulent red berries are poisonous. People who have eaten a berry and survived say the taste is incredibly bitter — but then sweet, hence the name. Close by, the twigs of dogwood and ash are encrusted with bright yellow lichen: hornbeams dangle their distinctive pagoda-shaped clusters of seed pods, and jays — invisible but noisy — screech and squawk as they plunder the hedgerow larder.

Ragwort is a valuable nectar source for insects. The light, fluffy seeds take to the air and will travel miles in warm weather, and as a result ragwort is very abundant in Suffolk. The plant is poisonous to some livestock, and as ragwort-free hay is important to the Trust, its removal from the meadows has been an annual management task. A few plants of common ragwort are now present in the Mere Meadow, and also hoary ragwort, which is a new record for the reserve.

Plants new to records for the Fromus reserve so far this year:

field bindweed, hedge bindweed, rough chervil, hoary willowherb, common St John's wort, square-stemmed St John's wort, early purple orchid, wood dock, hoary ragwort, charlock, least yellow trefoil, hop sedge, hairy sedge, false fox sedge, hairy brome, tufted hairgrass, meadow barley, compact rush.

Laurie Forsyth