

Orchid Glade report February 2017

St. Valentine's Day

The Orchid Glade today seems to have the faintest wisp of springtime about it – or perhaps it is just the magic of February 14th at work. The place is in its default setting for February: squishy, oozing, soggy and just plain waterlogged. Like ponds everywhere, the pond is a focus for wildlife that breed, drink or bathe in its waters. Our pond though has a dual benefit, because in wet spells it spills into the surrounding grass and floods it. Perfect then, for the myriad wild flowers that need exactly those conditions – especially the southern marsh orchid that gives its name to the reserve. With a garden rake I have just removed some of the blanketing moss growing in the shallow water at the edge of the pond.



The central core of the Orchid Glade is much more open now, as a result of the felling and flailing of last autumn. Blackbirds and pheasants are busy feeding, and rabbits bounce away to safety as I approach. A robin is singing in a thicket, and several young hazels are luminous with dangling yellow catkins packed with male flowers. Hazel is wind-pollinated, and every microscopic pollen grain from every male flower wafts into the air with the sole purpose of finding a female flower to fertilise.



They are hard to discover – for me anyway: hopefully, the pollen grain finds it much easier. The female flowers open after the male flowers are mature, and they are borne singly on the bare twigs. Tiny, and scattered along the twig, they are a beautiful deep scarlet and look like miniature cactus flowers or even sea anemones. The little flowers are wide open: they catch the drifting pollen grain, and so a hazel nut is born. My camera is for flowers and landscapes, so my attempt to photograph the female flowers is sad, but I have tried. At my feet, bleached, drenched feathers mark the fox ambush where a pheasant had a fatal loss of concentration.



Lichens – yellow, grey, orange – are growing on the wet bark of hazel and alder, and that is an indicator of good air quality. I have just photographed the deep slots cut into the wet clay by passing fallow deer; also, a pile of logs rotting quietly beside the pond, and a dense pile of cut brushwood. Both are important dead wood habitats that will support invertebrates, hibernating small mammals, fungi and mosses.



Suddenly, feral greylag geese pass low overhead. Winging the length of the Orchid Glade, one gives a triple honk in recognition – not a greeting to me, but a warning to the flock of possible danger down below.

Laurie Forsyth