

SFPT Report for Fromus Meadows, May 2017

Dry meadows

The small herd of British White cattle are lying down. Weather wise, I can't remember whether that is good or bad. Today is cold for early May, and as the drought grinds on, the meadows are very dry. The little Fromus river is reduced to long stretches of damp, gravelly stream-bed like a footpath, with occasional small pools. I photograph the Long Pond, with its ball of overhanging mistletoe: recently, a water sample was taken to obtain readings of temperature, dissolved oxygen and other factors crucial to aquatic life.

Despite the lack of rain, and munching cattle, there are a few plants in flower, and here they are. Herb Robert, bird's-eye speedwell, bugle, primrose, cowslip, false oxlip, ground ivy, bulbous buttercup, common mouse ear, Good Friday grass, wild arum, hedge garlic and white deadnettle. Hawthorn is flowering in the hedges, and in the meadow where the cattle are banned from grazing, I can see the rabbit-clipped leaves of southern marsh orchid: I count 15, but there are probably more. Last year, right at this spot, a single common spotted orchid was found – a 'first' for the reserve.

To me, today is chilly, grey and windy: a loud mewing above the reserve announces the arrival of a buzzard as it sails overhead. If you have got broad wings designed for soaring and circling for hours without a single wing beat, then this is a beautiful day.

To my eye, the meadows look colourless at the moment, because the cattle have done what cattle do in tasty meadows. The lack of rain in April has had an effect, and what the flora now needs is a long, steady soak. The cattle have avoided large clumps of marsh thistle.

On top of the medieval earthwork I photograph a fine false oxlip: in the depths of the shady Gorge — beside the river and out of reach of the cattle — are small patches of wood speedwell in flower, and the leaves of enchanter's nightshade. On my way home two hours later, I pass the herd in the exact same spot: still lying down, still chewing the cud and still mildly curious as I walk past.

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