

SFPT Orchid Glade report for May 2017

May days

April showers bypassed our Orchid Glade reserve and most of England. Despite today's chilly, sunless weather, the flora of the reserve is shaping up well for what I think will be a wonderful display from June onwards. Big clumps of false wood brome grass are near the gate. Within a few feet of each other, I have photographed two plants that are new to reserve records — rat's tail plantain, and enchanter's nightshade. As always, I marvel at the colourful and imaginative English names that have been attached to plants and animals down through the centuries.

Overhead, a buzzard is sideslipping and twisting to avoid a pair of crows whose airspace he has entered. A blackcap is singing in a hawthorn that has burst into flower, and a wren is singing somewhere unseen. A single fallow deer has just decided I am too near for comfort and I got a brief glimpse of her rump and tail as she skipped away out of sight. The dried mud around the pond is deeply cut by deer tracks, and it will be interesting to see what images have been picked up by a camera positioned on a nearby tree.

In the centre of the pond, a submerged, dark green lawn is growing where the water is deepest, and through binoculars I can see it is one of the stoneworts – a freshwater algae. When you handle a stonewort it feels rough and brittle, because it is encrusted with calcium carbonate it has extracted from the water, hence its name. They are an indicator of good water quality. Apple trees are covered in pink and white blossom.

I have found the scene of an ambush. Close to a willow stump beside the pond, drifts of feathers mark the spot where a daydreaming pheasant failed to spot a fox flattened on the ground behind the stump. The musk scent hanging in the air was sprayed by the fox to probably mark his territory – or maybe to celebrate?

As always at the Orchid Glade, I wander at random trying to get a fix on the state of health of the orchid populations. As expected, I find southern marsh orchids in good numbers in the wet grassland around the pond, including the strapping, leopard-spotted form. There are also common twayblade orchids here and there. Moving away across the reserve, I am surprised to find twayblades in places I have not seen them before. Around them, small and low, are leaves that superficially resemble baby twayblades. They are adder's tongue ferns – they don't look anything like a fern – and a species indicator of old grassland. This is a good find: the fern has been recorded here before, in one's and two's, but it is possible that this year we may see very many indeed. The visit ends on another high, with bugle flowering near the pond, and bird's eye speedwell: two more new records for the reserve, and both blue and very beautiful.

Laurie Forsyth