

## **SFPT Fromus Meadows reserve report, July 2017**

### **Hard times in the river**

It is early July, and the sun is parching the exposed riverbed of the Fromus in the lower meadow nearest the A12. The river has stopped flowing. It happens every year — sometimes several times, depending on the rainfall. Nobody knows why or how, but a large circular hole sits in the riverbed: usually it is full of water, but at the moment it is half full. I have just photographed what appears to be a water vole burrow, dug into the side of the hole. Fresh green leaves protrude from the burrow, and there are tracks and droppings scattered about. Upstream and downstream, all is dried mud. The hole is normally part of the flowing river, but at times like these it becomes an isolated pond. It may well be a feature that allows aquatic life to survive when the river becomes uninhabitable. Last year, as I crept up to it, there was a distinct ‘plop’ and I wondered ‘water vole?’. On another day last year, I trudged 150 yards up the dry riverbed, and came across a small puddle containing several tiny fish that were almost dead. How could they have got there? Could they have survived in the hole during the last drought and then swum upstream, finally to be stranded? Dragonflies are zipping around the pond: a pair of four-spotted chasers, and a pair of broad-bodied chasers mating in tandem.

July — and that means hogweed is in flower on every Suffolk field boundary and road verge. It is a dramatic plant in summer when seen with its wide umbels of small white flowers, and just as striking in winter when its stark skeletal shape is often glittering with frost. Hedge bindweed has large white trumpet flowers, and is scrambling up bramble whose small pink flowers are attracting bees and hoverflies. Grasshoppers leap from the long grass at my feet as I head for the medieval dam. In the meadow at the foot of the dam where some 30 southern marsh orchids flowered a few weeks ago, I photograph a tall seeding orchid stem: soon, the pods will release clouds of dust-like orchid seeds into the breeze. A large yellow patch nearby is common birdsfoot trefoil — the foodplant of the common blue butterfly. Almost hidden by grasses, I find seedling oak trees, with just four leaves. Planted by squirrels last autumn — I saw them — the young oaks will mature and turn the meadow into woodland, if we let nature take its course.

Walking through the deep cut that bisects the dam, Mere Meadow stretches ahead in a mist of pinkish blue. Where the waters impounded by the dam once formed a huge 12<sup>th</sup> century lake/fishpond, there is now a sea of creeping thistle. In the shimmering heat, butterflies are having a feast on the nectar held in the sweetly-scented thistle flowers: ringlet, meadow brown, gatekeeper, small tortoiseshell, large white, small white, red admiral, small skipper and comma. It is a sight to see, given the awful crash in the population of several of these species in recent years. Adult butterflies need nectar to survive: just as vital though, if not more so, are the plants needed by their caterpillars. Nearly all of these species rely on grasses, and stinging nettle. Fromus Meadows reserve has plenty!

On the perimeter of the meadow I spot clusters of crab apples on an ancient tree at the foot of the dam: nearby, a clump of purple tufted vetch merges into the thistles. An insect wafts overhead: fixing it with binoculars, I am astonished to see it has long tail streamers, and shimmering, clear wings. Soon, I see others, rising from the thistles and drifting with the breeze. Jerry Bowdrey has since told me they are probably mayflies — and very hard to identify!

*Laurie Forsyth*