

SFPT Fromus report for August 2017

A work in progress

I have just re-read my report for the Fromus Meadows in August 2015. Then, the hay had just been cut, and the air was full of the scent of newly cut flowers and grasses: butterflies, dragonflies, grasshoppers and beetles were active wherever the grass remained uncut on the perimeter of the meadows. Following a change of circumstances, that system of management has been altered. We are now ending the first year of an alternative regime that entails a small number of rare breed cattle grazing selected areas in rotation. The floristically less important grass of Mere Meade has been reserved for a late cut, to provide feed for the cattle when they move off the reserve to their winter grounds.

This management system follows the requirement of Natural England's Higher Level environmental scheme, and is intended to promote growth of a diverse meadow flora by reducing the density and height of the grass. The benefits of the altered management will be evaluated in future seasons and it is possible that new plant species may respond to the trampling of soft ground beside the Fromus River and around the ponds.

Jerry Bowdrey has found more water vole burrows around the little pond that forms when the river ceases to flow. The voles are new to our records, so maybe Water Vole Pond would be a good name for the pond — it's better than 'the hole in the riverbed' that I have used so far. Tall marsh thistles are abundant in the meadows, and there are good clumps of greater willowherb flowering in damp corners. Eight collared doves have just flown from beneath the field maple that overhangs the Long Pond, where they were drinking and bathing. Nearby, water mint is flowering beside the dried-up river. The first blackberries taste wonderful.

Square-stemmed St John's wort is in flower on the bank of the river, and teasels are beginning to flower in their usual place: the cattle don't touch them, which is no surprise. Perhaps the most striking feature today — apart from the lack of flowers and insects — is the abundance of seeding thistles. Creeping

thistle, spear thistle and marsh thistle are launching their tiny seeds skyward with every light waft of air: their little parachutes may land a few yards away, or miles away in your flowerbeds.

I have just seen a remarkable and beautiful sight on the still surface of the Water Vole Pond. A gust of wind stripped the fluff from an overhanging thistle, and all the parachutes landed on the water and formed a great piece of natural art. It deserves several photographs. Thistles disperse their seeds by air, but these seeds are about to set out on a river voyage down the Fromus, to wherever the current takes them. All they need is rain to kick the river into motion. As I leave, I notice an early sign of autumn — the fruiting stem of wild arum, or lords and ladies, capped with brilliant red berries. The hard green fruit of several bullace trees dangle overhead: next month, they will be soft, golden and irresistible.

Laurie Forsyth