

SFPT Orchid Glade report for August 2017

Wild flower fiesta

Early August, and the Orchid Glade is awash with colour. Fleabane, hoary ragwort, agrimony, hairy St John's wort and lesser hawkbit have created a sea of yellow that laps the edges of the glade. The plants ensure pollination and the next generation by providing this annual explosion of colour, scent, nectar and pollen, and the insects are making the most of it. Tomorrow — the 5th — is the final day of the national Butterfly Count, and SFPT and Butterfly Conservation will be here to see just how many species of butterfly and moth they can find in 15 minutes – and how many of each. If the weather holds, the counters will be delighted.

In my last report, I thought the Orchid Glade flora was the best I have seen here in July since 2013, despite our management difficulties, and looking around today, I am delighted. It has been an especially good year for southern marsh orchid, twayblade orchid, adder's tongue fern, marsh woundwort and hoary ragwort, false fox sedge and knapweed. Difficult to spot, because it is low to the ground — and yellow in a carpet of yellow — I find common birds foot trefoil, the caterpillar foodplant of the common blue butterfly. I have seen many of them today: as they jink amongst the flowers the males are as blue as the sky. I have also seen many gatekeepers, meadow browns and peacocks, plus several each of comma and small white, and singleton brimstone, small skipper, small white and large white.

Although the level of the pond is dropping, there is a lot of egg-laying activity from the dragonflies and damselflies. Recently, broad-leaved pondweed has begun to colonise the otherwise bare water surface, and this is a definite boost for aquatic invertebrates — especially dragonfly larvae that need plant stems to climb out of the water, to assist their miraculous transformation into flying insects. I am startled by a thirsty swallow that slices the air, dips its bill, and is gone. Pondering the widening ripples that are the only evidence of what just happened, I imagine the same bird next February dipping into a drying African waterhole ringed by zebra and buffalo.

Nestled in fleabane a few feet from the edge of the pond, I find a young, freshly dead badger. How? Why? Only two animals have the power to kill a young badger: a fox, or another badger — both for territorial reasons. Foxes bred in the reserve last year, and I have just caught the distinctive musk scent sprayed by a fox last night to mark its territory. Badgers however are my bet: they do not have a sett actually in the Orchid Glade, but their clan territory can be large. They are extremely powerful, and aggressively territorial towards 'outside' badgers that enter their patch — but badgers eat many things: there is a possibility that this one feasted in a local garden upon slugs or snails killed by poison pellets.

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