

SFPT September report for Fromus Meadows

Hedgerow larder

Our Fromus Meadows nature reserve is more than its name implies. Yes — there are several large meadows full of grass and flowers, but dividing them are some very fine, ancient hedgerows, and they are now the wildlife focus. This is partly because the cattle have grazed almost everything in the meadows, but also because the onset of autumn means that trees and shrubs in the hedgerows must now produce seed, berries, nuts and fruit that will ensure a new generation, and then close down for the winter and become dormant. Wildlife of all kinds are also preparing for winter. For millennia, birds, insects and small mammals have feasted on nature's larder in the autumn hedgerows. It helps them get into peak physical condition to survive the cold, dark days, or to migrate to a warmer climate, or to hibernate.

Today – the 19th of September – I photographed several 30-metre lengths of a single hedge, to get some idea of its age. Dr Max Hooper's simple but effective theory to estimate the age of a hedge requires you to count every species of woody shrub or tree in a 30-metre length. Roughly, a woody species will colonise a hedge every 100 years, so if you count five species, the hedge is 500 years old. My best count today:

oak
ash
field maple
crab apple
hornbeam
dog rose
bramble
blackthorn
dogwood

The hedge could be 900 years old, give or take a century or two, which takes us back to the Bigods and Magna Carta.

The Fromus river is flowing today, which means the Water Vole pond is fully topped up. The water has attracted a mixed flock of small birds. Long-tailed tits, blue tits, great tits and goldfinches are splashing in the water: overhead — a real surprise — a single whitethroat is flitting through the thickets. A squirrel is watching me from the safety of an oak trunk, and his jerking tail says he is not at all pleased to see me. A flash of white catches my eye as a jay flies from the ground up into an oak. He has probably buried an acorn, and he will bury hundreds more in the next few weeks to eat in the winter. Jays work hard, but their memory is poor, so buried acorns can grow into trees. In the grass around me I can see three tiny seedling oaks that were planted by a jay several years ago: their leaves are bright yellow, although the huge parent oak nearby still has green leaves.

The oaks may be green, but in the hedgerows the field maples are yellow. The dogwood foliage is now a rich, dark plum colour, and its small berries are glossy black: in addition to them, I have seen blackberries, sloes, bullaces, rosehips, haws, elderberries and crab apples. Seedpods are dangling from the hornbeams above the gorge, looking like small yellow pagodas. As I leave, a tractor is mowing the great Mere Meadow.

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