

Fromus Meadows October ramblings, 2017

Today is 19th October, and as I enter the inner gate at least fifty pheasants scatter to every point of the compass. After yesterday's downpour, the Fromus river is in fine shape. It is a still, overcast day, and the meadows stretch away into the distance, as green as green can be. The cattle eye me thoughtfully as I pass. Between them, they produce a prodigious number of cowpats, and I think that this addition to the other habitats in the reserve will be a benefit to beetles and other invertebrates. Meadows and cowpats go together like bats and belfries. On my last visit, parts of Mere Meadow were being mowed and baled. Today, bulky black bags dot the meadow, which has greened up after the mowing.

The old hedgerows may be medieval in age — they certainly have a great diversity of species — and they are a living demonstration of how nature orchestrates itself to provide maximum benefits for all, at exactly the right moment in the calendar. Trees and shrubs must propagate themselves to ensure the survival of species. They flower in the spring, and in the autumn their seed — in the form of edible fruits, nuts, berries and seed — is displayed as a smorgasbord at precisely the time wildlife must get into top physical condition to face winter, and when hordes of hungry migrants pour into our countryside from far-off places. On the lunchtime menu today: blackberries, sloes, rosehips, haws, hazelnuts, acorns, bullaces, guelder rose berries and seeds of ash, hornbeam and ivy.

I have just seen a toadstool — but only one. Autumn is their time, when conditions are usually damp, humid, and breezy — ideal in fact, for the dispersal of microscopic spores. Their apparent absence means nothing, because fungi are almost entirely invisible, in a web of thread-like strands that are the 'body' of a fungus, and which do all the recycling work. We see the pretty bits — the toadstools, mushrooms, brackets and cups that appear overnight, and which carry the spores of a new generation: they are the fungus equivalent of flowers, and have the same purpose. Fungi are at work beneath every inch of these old meadows and hedgerows. They are recycling material for use by future generations of plants and trees: more than that — it seems that most of the trees and plants actually have a symbiotic relationship with specific fungi — they need each other. It's all happening beneath my feet, and has been for a very long time — possibly, since the last glacial episode. As I leave the meadows, the cattle are all lying down, chewing the cud. Does this mean the sun is about to appear, or is it about to rain? Perhaps they are just tired.

Laurie Forsyth