

# Friends of Markstakes Common



**NEWSLETTER AUTUMN 2016**

## From the Chairman

Welcome to our Autumn Newsletter.

The Summer and Autumn have been taken up with maintaining the areas cleared in prior years. This can be summarized as weeding out invasive Birch, Bramble and Bracken from the glades cleared in prior years. In the past this has felt like an uphill struggle with a handful of stalwarts struggling with the volume of work.

Twelve months ago a modest publicity drive was launched with posters pinned up in strategic locations inviting people to join the Monday morning volunteers and I am pleased to report that there was a good response. We now regularly have eight in attendance and the increased number have made a significant impact not only on what we can achieve but also on morale. It is definitely a case of the more the merrier.

While others take the lead in survey work I also get involved. This year in addition to the regular bird survey and butterfly survey we have repeated the reptile survey. This was in part a response to the lack of sightings of adders and concerns that they were finding life more difficult on Markstakes Common. Results from the survey so far are reassuring with sighting of both adults and juveniles near or under the survey mats. The story has been rather different with respect to butterflies with numbers down sharply this year. This may be consistent with national trends with wet June having had an adverse impact on numbers.

I am also sorry to report our first instances of Ash die back. This disease is having a devastating impact on ash trees throughout the country and it was saddening to see that Markstakes Common may also be affected. As yet, no remedy presents itself.

Rupert Hall

## Membership Matters

It is always good to know that our 'Friends' support us and we specially value the practical help which we receive on our Monday morning working party sessions..

We have the support of our Ranger Dan Fagan and the Assistant Ranger Thyone Outram and our Group Leader Rupert Hall guides us each week on the various tasks.

We look forward to seeing you.

William Coleman

## New Tool helps us.....

### Tree Poppers

Watching Spring Watch on BBC 1 this year I was impressed with a demonstration using a new tool called 'Tree Poppers' to remove invasive birch from heathland at the RSPB reserve at Minsmere in Suffolk.

Just what the Markstakes volunteers needed I thought.



Here we are with Alan demonstrating the new tool.



The glades we have created are quite high maintenance. Left alone they would quickly revert to woodland and so they need regular 'weeding' of birch, bracken and bramble. Sometimes we can't keep up and the birch can get beyond hand-weeding in what we call the Northern Bracken Field - a combination of volunteer and contractor effort has converted this area into a lovely area of acid grassland. The grasses include Yorkshire Fog, Common Bent and Velvet Bent and there are also patches of the white-flowered Heath Bedstraw and Heath Speedwell with its spikes of blue flowers. Heather has started to appear here too as well as the autumn-flowering Dwarf Gorse. However, the area is quite extensive compared with our other glades and in previous years it was cut by a contractor because there was not enough volunteer time to cope.

While this helped establish the grassland at the expense of the bracken it did mean that the birch seedlings were cut rather than removed and so in subsequent years they regrew from an ever-increasing root system.

We decided that cutting the area was not a good way to deal with birch and we spent a wet and muddy autumn last year digging up the birch with spades and trowels - a hard task.

Tree Poppers would seem to make the work a little easier.

A little internet research tracked down a supplier and Alan Martin of Nature Conservation Services came over to demonstrate three sizes of Tree Poppers to Rupert (FoM Chairman), William (FoM Treasurer), Thyone and Dan (from Lewes District Council) and me.

The demonstration convinced us all: the Friends of Markstokes bought one and Lewes District Council bought a second. Since then we have been using them with great effect and feel more confident that we can keep the invasive birch under control to the benefit of the grassland plants, insects and reptiles.



The tool is applied to the base of the birch sapling



Leverage is applied to the handle and the vice like action grips the sapling and pulls it from the ground.



## Yellow Club



Yellow Club (*Clavulinopsis helvola*) is common in late summer and autumn in grassland or woodland clearings.

We found several tufts this autumn among the grass while on our hands and knees weeding what we used to call the northern bracken field but perhaps should be renamed as the northern grassland.

## ‘Something to get up for on a Monday Morning’

I began my volunteer job on Markstakes Common just over a year ago in September 2015.

It seems like every Monday morning is full of sunshine ! Today there was a huge downpour about 7.30.a.m. and then the skies cleared.

I like being out of doors – and we are in the midst of nature. This morning we were pulling out birch saplings. There’s always something to find or discover – pretty apricot coloured fungi, yellow ‘worms’ like candlesnuff and a new heather plant seeded amongst the thick grass. A few months ago I found a child’s bicycle bell amongst the roots and branches !

My memories of last year were of us sliding about in ‘Chailey’ mud – of a special sticky quality – pulling along huge branches to make a fence around the pond, learning how to use a ‘Lazy Dog’ tool to dig up bramble roots or having a bonfire on a cold winter’s day. The smell of wood smoke - so powerful. It was less

fun in the swampy area known as ‘The Mire’.

My favourite place is the ‘Heather Glade’ – we lie or kneel to pull up the saplings with the smell of honey all around us.

I feel I have learnt new skills – like how to weave a natural fence or lift a reptile refuge mat slowly to discover a snake or slow worm. I think we share a quiet companionship and have a few laughs – like when the puppy Lurca kept running off with our kneeling mats in his mouth. Falling, sliding sideways in the mud which I think we all managed to do last winter at one time or other.

I enjoy the exercise and have increased my stamina and decreased my stress levels. It’s good to do something locally. My fellow volunteers report that they felt a real sense of achievement.

Thanks to Rupert especially for providing his support and the chocolate biscuits at coffee time!

Fiona Shore

( Volunteer at Markstakes for one year. )

## From our Ranger

The woods at Markstakes Common, like many in Sussex are particularly beautiful in the autumn with beech and field maple particularly showing wonderful colours. Ash too, in a good year spreads a lovely yellow through the woods.

We still have a number of healthy ash trees at Markstakes Common but there are also some that are dying. It seems likely that this is Ash Dieback disease. It is caused by a fungus whose spores are spread via fallen leaves. It causes the infected tree to lose its leaves and the crown of the tree to die back. This weakens the tree and many then die. It is unclear yet how many of our ash will actually die of the disease but in parts of Scandinavia 90% of the ash have been affected.

There is no chance of the disease spreading to other types of trees and it does not infect other wildlife so at Markstakes, we will only fell dead of



diseased ash if they are a safety risk. This leaves any dead trees at least as useful deadwood for beetles, woodpeckers, bats and any creatures that need some standing timber with holes and crevices in it.



Photo: The LDC and Eastbourne new Chief Executive Rob Cottrill (Left) and Head of Service, Ian Fitzpatrick (centre) were very taken with Markstakes Common when they were shown round by the rangers Thyone and Dan Fagan (right).



Photo. Friends of Markstakes Committee members from right, Rupert Hall, William Coleman, Jacqui Hutson and ranger Thyone Outram looking at the thriving heather.

Thyone Outram

## The Changing Scene



These pictures show the part of the Northern Bracken Field which we work on from time to time.

The first major clearance was in 2011 and, when the first picture was taken in the Spring 2012, we can see there is a fine show of bluebells and white blossom on the Hawthorn tree.

Since then, there has been the annual growth of the bracken and birch seedlings, which we have to clear from time to time.

The second picture here shows the summer growth in 2016



We are looking at the area to assess the plan of action.

The third picture below shows the scene again this time in January 2016 before the major growth starts and we are taking out the small bare saplings.



Always a challenge – always some work to do.

## **Dates for the Diary**

Monday Weekly (most Mondays)

This is our regular volunteer group time to meet.

We gather at the gate in the stone wall by Markstakes Lane at 9.30.a.m. and usually work until around 12.00. Tools are provided and suitable clothes and footwear are recommended according to the weather. We have a break so bring along light refreshments to keep you going.

If you have not been already, do come along and help us with this worthwhile and sensitive conservation work which is very rewarding and helps to keep you fit.

No phoning required, just come along and join us – we shall be pleased to see you.

Should the morning be cancelled we notify by telephone.

Email–  
markstakes@chaileyccommons.org.uk.