

Friends of Markstakes Common



NEWSLETTER AUTUMN 2017

From the Chairman

Welcome to our Autumn Newsletter.

The focus during the summer months is the maintenance of the cleared open areas. In ecological terms the cleared areas represent an interrupted succession, as without our intervention the areas would revert to bracken, bramble and birch. Our work during summer months is therefore to control bracken, bramble and birch and we have found that the most effective way of completing this is by hand weeding. Hand weeding minimizes disturbance to the plants we value and is the only effective way of getting invasive plants out by the roots. This is painstaking work and time consuming and it has felt at times that we were going backwards.

One remedy has been to focus on bracken during the summer when it is growing most rapidly and tackle birch and bramble during the winter. This has been effective at opening the up the soil to sunlight and we have seen a continued colonization of heather and other flowering plants in areas formerly dominated by bracken.

Opening up the site has made the Common far more popular with dog walkers and an increase in the mess they leave behind. The most unpleasant aspect of working closely to the ground is the regular encounters with dog deposits. Dog droppings have reached level where they detract from the natural beauty and present a health hazard. If you walk your dog on the Common please take your dog mess home with you and encourage others to do so.

In addition to the efforts of the Monday group we have had the ongoing surveying by Ian Woolsey and Ian Seccombe for butterflies and birds and Dan Rolt has been helping out with the reptile survey; a challenging task when bracken growth is rampant and covering the mats.

The site has been transformed over the last 8 years and our progress would not be possible without the continued support of the Lewis District Council. Notwithstanding the continual

reorganisations at local government level Thyone Outram and her assistant still manage to maintain their activities bringing volunteers onto the site and engaging contractors where necessary. Long may it continue

Rupert Hall

Membership Matters

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

We have the support of our 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

The Changing Scene

We often go to the common and set about our work and just don't notice how things have changed. There are many examples of this and the really change is at the top of the common where the heather is now so prolific. The area was an absolute forest of young birch when we first went there and it has taken all these years to sort it out.



This picture shows the Heather Glade in the final stages of clearance during the winter of 2008/9.

This next picture shows the glade as it has become in August 2017. What a difference and what a reward for all our hard work.



Another area to look at is the patch known as the Azulox Glade (from when it was sprayed) and it used to be a bracken forest but has now been tamed.



Here it is shown as cleared and below is the regrowth but ready to be cleared. Notice the young Oak tree on the left hand side and how it has grown



Autumn fungi

Common puffball (*Lycoperdon perlatum*). This puffball occurs in small groups in summer and autumn. It is white to start with but it soon turns brown and is covered with conical warts. It is worth eating when it is young, firm and white but as it matures the gleba (inner spore-bearing part) becomes brown and powdery; the spores are released through an apical pore.



Sulphur tuft (*Hypholoma fasciculare*). This fungus occurs throughout the year in dense clusters on the decaying stumps of trees.



The gills are yellow at first, turning olive green and, eventually, dark brown. It has a strong, bitter taste and is inedible.

The growth is very strong and can run up the tree trunk if it is dead. It starts off at the base and moved from there.



Notes from a volunteer

Autumn is my favourite season. It comes in a variety of colours, smells and weather. Always at its own pace. Changes are everywhere on Markstakes Common.

Today we are not going out as it was pouring with rain at eight o'clock this morning. This as I write this has settled into a misty drizzle. Rupert our Volunteer Boss called in to cancel. I can't help contrasting today with Sunday's glorious blue sky, sunshine and heat.

Last Monday walking through the woods the leaves were falling, the heather in the glade was red-purple and the bracken very tall in the open spaces.

Our job was to "pull" the bracken to weaken it and see what was left. We only had an hour but you could really see the difference.

I spotted a Southern Hawker dragonfly, flying fast, hunting and coming close to look at us. For a while it was quiet and peaceful. Then Poppy the dog was yelping joyfully at the arrival of a new puppy onto our team. She looks like a little brown shaggy lamb and was very good and didn't run off with our kneeling mats like the other one last year.

So what's good about being in the fresh air?

We have a laugh, lose our bad moods, find companionship, feel part of a team and have satisfaction in knowing you are needed and make a difference if only for a

few months before everything grows up again.

It's quite hard repetitive work but it's exciting when someone spots a rare wildflower or mysterious fungi.

Every Monday is different. As I leave my job as a Senior Paediatric Physiotherapist into fulltime retirement this week I know there will always be "something to get up for" on a Monday morning.

from Fiona Shore

More Fungi News

A rare cauliflower fungus

During a check of the bat boxes at Markstakes Common on 3 October 2017, we found three clumps of a strange fungus growing on the bare ground near the base of a tree. It looked like a cauliflower fungus (or brain fungus), *Sparassis* sp., but didn't look quite like the one I had seen a year ago elsewhere, which was *S. crispa* and which grows at the base of conifers. Martin Allison, Sussex Fungus Recorder, is happy that it was in fact *S. spathulata*, the cauliflower fungus that occurs on deciduous trees such as sweet chestnut, beech and oak, but I confess we didn't record what at the time. In the UK this is very much rarer than *S. crispa*, indeed this is only the third recent record for Sussex.



The other Sussex records are from Woolmer Forest (1913), nr Midhurst, and Wisborough Green (2012), nr Billingshurst, in West Sussex, and Bixley

Wood (2004), near Rye in East Sussex, pretty well as far from Chailey as you can get in either direction and still be in Sussex. It grows on the roots of the tree and can cause a cubical rot; I gather usually at the base of the tree, but in this



case at about 750mm and 1.5m from the trunk.

I went back on 14 October to see if I could find it again and check the host tree, which is an oak. I am told that these fungi do not last long and so I suppose it was no surprise to find that they had almost withered away. Perhaps, like me, it starts out with a growth resembling a brain, which then turns to something more like a cauliflower and then disappears altogether.

But I will certainly be on the lookout for it next year.

Tony Hutson

Butterfly News

A great spot by our Butterfly researcher and surveyor – well done Ian.

Some exciting butterfly news from Markstakes - there are brown hairstreak eggs in the south facing side of the blackthorn hedge on Markstakes Lane.



The Brown Hairstreak is our largest hairstreak species. It's very beautiful but very elusive. The males and females are slightly different in coloration – indeed they were once thought to be different species.

West Sussex is a stronghold for this species and the adults are on the wing from late July. The Brown Hairstreak overwinters in the egg stage. Eggs are predominately laid on Blackthorn and also Wild Plum in August and September. On Blackthorn the white pin-sized eggs are relatively easy to see.



The Brown Hairstreak occurs where there is Blackthorn especially on clay and also chalk but diminishes significantly where there is greensand. It is found up to the Hampshire and Surrey borders but diminishes dramatically to the east of Plumpton / Streat in East Sussex.

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. We have a break so bring along light refreshments to keep you going. Come along if you can.