



FRIENDS OF MARKSTAKES COMMON

NEWSLETTER NO 3 – AUTUMN 2010

From the Chairman - Rupert Hall

✍ Welcome to the Autumn Newsletter of the Friends of Markstakes Common. The group has been active over the spring and summer and I am pleased to see that our efforts are starting to achieve results. Another glade was added in the spring by clearing birch trees further along to the south-east of the pond where the path turns sharply to join the eastern path. In addition we have also been clearing a further glade this autumn by slashing bracken (see photos).



Before

And after.



On former bracken glades grasses and flowers have been slow to respond with most

new growth coming from bramble and birch seedlings but in the former birch thicket and the new glade we are seeing encouraging signs of heather seedlings, grasses and other flower species.

The Mire is an area where most trees have been cleared and grasses have come back strongly. Dr.Jacqui Hutson has been leading detailed surveying of this site which confirms that the number of flower species has increased very significantly in the two years since we started activity. One species that has benefited particularly from the removal of bramble has been the marsh thistle. The mire is sheltered and catches the sun which makes it a favoured location for insects. The thistles seem to be very popular with butterflies and Small copper and Common blue are two new butterfly species that have been recorded on the Common.

Jonathan Wood volunteered to look at the ponds on the site and confirmed the presence of Great Crested Newts on the high pond. The pond was in danger of becoming choked up and clearance of overhanging branches and partial dredging has halted further decline of the pond. Having looked a bit raw following the clearance work, broad leaved pond weed has recolonised the dredged areas restoring its former appeal.

Other ponds on the site have not been managed up to now but following recommendations from Jonathan Wood small ponds have been dug in the bed of the Shallow Pond which dries up over the summer and overhanging branches have been cut back. Some minor tree felling is planned this autumn. The new ponds filled up almost immediately and hopefully by extending the period before the ponds dry up

we can provide viable breeding grounds for amphibians.

Some of you may have noticed odd patches of roofing felt lying around the Common. These are attractive to reptiles being warm and sheltered and allow us to assess the population. We have found Slow Worms, Adders and Grass snakes, particularly juveniles which is encouraging as it confirms that reptiles are breeding on the site. We have also found a pair of viviparous lizards using one as a shelter which is the first record for several years.

Membership Matters

I am pleased to say that our number of Friends continues to grow and we welcome Robert Fost, Rosemary Fost and Linda and Katherine Scase.

This is our third Newsletter, which is being sent out electronically by email, which saves enormously on postage and I do hope that you enjoy it, and can print it if you so wish. If you don't have email, then a copy will reach you by post once again.

We thank you for your support and hopefully this Newsletter will keep you informed of the work being done by friends and volunteers, and also the progress being made in monitoring and recording in the wonderful pasture woodland. If you have not visited Markstakes lately, do go and have a walk around and see the progress which has been made. Our sensitive hand weeding and clearing is showing benefits already with new growth of the smaller plants in the glades. Come along on a Monday morning, or the third Sunday monthly, and you can meet the volunteers and ask questions.

We look forward to seeing you there.

SURVEYS and SURVEYING

In September we resurveyed vegetation on four permanent transects that we had set up in September 2009 to monitor the colonisation of areas cleared of birch in the winter of 2008/09. Along each transect we

record the percentage cover of each species by eye in a series of consecutive 1-metre squares. Two transects were in an area we call the Birch Glade in the southern part of the Common (it was indeed dense birch before we tackled it) and the other two were in an area we call the Mire. The latter does not always live up to its name in dry summers but the presence of purple moor-grass and *Sphagnum* mosses justifies its name.

The aim of clearing the birch in both areas was to create glades for insects to feed and breed. We hoped that the seed bank in the soil would be sufficient to clothe the ground with new 'glade' vegetation. In both areas we were very encouraged to see that we could rely on the soil seed bank. In Birch Glade tiny seedlings of heather appeared in the first year, survived the cold winter and were joined by more in the second year. Heather seeds can survive for 80 years at least under woodland conditions and will germinate when exposed to light. The heather has been joined by Yorkshire fog and velvet bent grasses as well as small amounts of tormentil, heath speedwell and trailing St-John's Wort. In the Mire the seed bank also has produced some encouraging results: plants characteristic of Britain's mire plant communities have appeared: bog stitchwort, lesser skullcap and lesser spearwort, for example.

The wide-spreading branches of many trees on the Common indicate that these trees grew up in more open conditions, with glades being maintained by grazing and browsing animals in the past. Now, having recreated these glades and in the absence of grazers, we have to maintain them by weeding out the birch, bramble and bracken. It is a real hands-and-knees job but any tedium is enlightened by discoveries of 'new' plants and of insects that we probably wouldn't spot otherwise. We have seen lots of spectacular beetles and some amazing tiny ground hoppers, which can leap enormous distances. It's a whole new world down there.

Jacqui Hutson

Notes from our Ranger – Thyone Outram

It's official – dormice are breeding at Markstakes Common. It is very exciting to discover we have this protected, endangered species breeding at Markstakes Common. We have erected dormouse boxes in the woods and a few have been used for summer nests including one which had a mother and three young dormice in it in September.

Compared to other small mammals, dormice live at low densities so we do not expect there to be very many on Markstakes Common. Most small mammals such as wood mice and voles survive using a strategy of producing large numbers of young each year which allows for plenty of 'wastage' – getting eaten by owls or kestrels, or not surviving a harsh winter. Dormice have a different strategy. They have fewer young, look after them for longer and generally only have one litter each year. Because of this, populations of dormice are often very fragile and vulnerable to local extinction, so we haven't publicised our dormouse population widely - we do not want them disturbed by people coming looking for them. If you see a dormouse box PLEASE do not disturb a dormouse by looking inside.

Dormice are famous for sleeping a lot (they were named dormice from the French 'dormir' which means 'to sleep'). They hibernate from when the frosts start – usually in October through to March or when there is enough food available to make it worthwhile waking up! Even through the summer, if it is raining or there is no food available they will descend back into torpor.

Unfortunately for us humans they only come out at night and they live in trees and bushes, rarely coming down to ground level. So the likelihood of coming across one in the wild is really very remote. I certainly never have.



Hazel Dormouse - *Muscardinus avellanarius*
(British Isles native)

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Friday January 14th 2011

Winter Tree Identification Walk

**Meet at Setford's Field Green Lane
South Chailey 10.00 a.m.**

Tuesday April 12th 2011 - 7.30.p.m.

**The AGM at the Horns Lodge Pub,
South Chailey**

**Followed by a Talk and informal
gathering**

Regular Working party

Monday mornings start 9.30.a.m.

***3rd Sunday monthly - practical work
morning – start 9.30.a.m.***

21st November

19th December

2011

16th January

20th February

**All meet at the gate in the Flint wall
Markstakes Lane South Chailey
Contact Rupert Hall**

email – markstakescommon@live.co.uk

Or 01825 722863