



# Friends of Markstakes Common

## NEWSLETTER AUTUMN 2014

### **From the Chairman**

Welcome to our Autumn Newsletter.

When I first became involved with the management of Markstakes Common my first impression was that this was a delightful site with a lovely ambience but there probably wasn't much of wildlife interest on the site. How wrong I was! Over the years many species have been recorded, several of which are of high conservation value. This year there was a concerted effort on surveying bats the results of which are detailed later. The results confirm the presence of not only the Bechstein's bat but the Barbestelle as well which is very exciting news. Another first record for the Common was the Purple Emperor which observed by both Ian Seccombe and Ian Woolsey.

While we incorporate our survey results into planning our management work it should be remembered that populations will rise and fall. The spectacular Rose Chafer Beetle was seen one year but not since and the Dormice survey has failed to find Dormice in the last two years. The Painted Lady influx hasn't been repeated. I am very grateful to the recorders whose work ensures that we have a good chance of knowing what species are currently found on the site.

Another endangered species is the conservation volunteer. We have a small group who comes out on Mondays and does

invaluable work maintaining and extending the Mire and the glades. The process is painstaking and laborious but we have been very gratified by the results. Spending a morning on the common doing worthwhile work is one of the pleasantest and most rewarding parts of my week. Unfortunately the group has been getting smaller. If any of you can spare a Monday morning or know of someone who might be interested please get in touch. You would be most welcome

Rupert Hall

### **Membership Matters**

Another half year has gone by and I can hardly believe it. Personally I have been unable to help so much this year owing to health issues but thankfully I am recovering now and hope to rejoin my fellow volunteers soon. I know that the good work has continued and this wonderful site continues to benefit from everyone's efforts.

Thank you to our 'Friends' for your continued support again this year and we are grateful to Thyone and Dan, our Rangers from Lewes District Council, for their help and advice, and to others who have taken part during the year.

I do hope that you find the Newsletter interesting and informative, and if you would like to know more details, do let us know.

William Coleman

# Surveys and Surveying

## Plant surveys

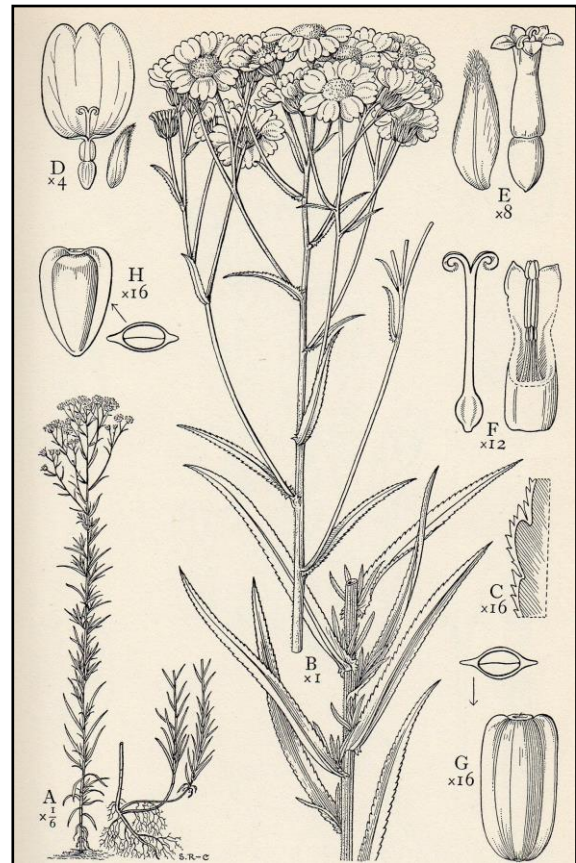
In 1989 the Rural Surveys Research Unit of the University of Central Wales at Aberystwyth carried out a biological survey of Common Land in Sussex. This included Markstakes Common. The report described it as oak-dominated woodland with areas of bracken and scrub and patches of acid grassland. The southern glade was notable for its remnant acid grassland along tracks with Purple Moor Grass, Saw-wort, Heath Bedstraw and Tormentil with scattered Gorse. Other notable species included Gipsywort and Sneezewort in an open area near the southern pond. The report's author wrote that a management priority should be to restore the ponds by cutting back overhanging scrub and deepening them. It also stated that the remaining acid grassland was likely to be lost to bracken and scrub and that some scrub clearance would be beneficial to maintain open areas.

When we started our conservation work on the Common in 2007 the acid grassland referred to in the 1989 survey had indeed been lost and the ponds were shady, heavily silted and overgrown. Our work since then, with the help of Lewes District Council, has resulted in restoration of the acid grassland by clearing substantial areas of birch, bracken and bramble. Lost grassland species, such as sneezewort, have returned. We first recorded this in 2013 as non-flowering plants and we were pleased to see its attractive-greenish-white flowers appear this autumn. It is not a common plant in Sussex, being confined to acid, damp soils by streams and in marshes. The dried, powdered leaves used to be used a sneezing powder to 'clear the head', also to alleviate toothache and to promote the flow of saliva. The rhizome can be chewed to help with flatulence and sluggish digestion.

The southern pond has also been restored, deepened and cleared of excessive vegetation - it contains some unusual and rare plants, such as Cyperus sedge, Marsh Pennywort,

Marsh Speedwell and Bog Pondweed, so care had been taken to not disturb these.

In all our recording efforts between 2011 and 2014 have resulted in a total of 190 species: 7 ferns, 14 grasses, 9 sedges, 5 rushes, 39 trees and shrubs and 116 other flowering plants.



This drawing of Sneezewort comes from *Drawings of British Plants* by Stella Ross-Craig published by G, Bell & Sons Ltd between 1948 and 1973.

Jacqui Hutson

# Bat Surveys

## Bats at Markstakes

In 2005 I thought I would try to trap some bats in Markstakes Common to start an inventory of what was there. The first bat I caught was a Bechstein's bat, one of our rarest and most carefully protected species. That it was a lactating female suggested that there was a breeding colony nearby. Since then we have made several excursions to add to the knowledge through odd nights of trapping or deployment of bat detectors. We have also been monitoring the bat boxes there, which comprise 22 wooden boxes made by children from the Chailey Commons Society and 14 woodcrete boxes provided by LDC. Despite our best intentions, this had all gone on in a rather unsystematic *ad hoc* way, but we had recorded six species and last year found our first bat box inhabitants (apart from a few dormice and lots of birds) in one of the newly erected woodcrete boxes (a group of four brown long-eared bats). And we never found another Bechstein's bat.



This year, a more systematic survey was carried out involving volunteers from the Sussex Bat Group and elsewhere, and with funding from a donation to the bat group from LDC. Firstly, the bat boxes were checked on 7 May. Brown long-eared bats were found in three boxes in groups of 10, 3 and 1; the first two in wooden boxes, the latter in a woodcrete box. We proposed to check again in the autumn, but for various reasons that didn't happen.

We also had three summer survey nights, involving two groups of people walking one of two transects around the common with bat detectors and recording the location and species of all bats they heard. A third group of people were trapping with a group of harp traps and mist nets set in different areas of the common on *each visit*. *The trapping resulted in 16 bats of 8 species caught*, including the last bat of the year being another adult female Bechstein's bat, reinforcing the idea that there is a breeding colony somewhere on the common. The transects were a little disappointing in that bats were not very numerous and only four species were recorded, but we will get some idea of their distribution around the common. Actually, there was a fifth species recorded: some observers are recording bat passes all the time that they are on the transect and one observer made a remarkable discovery when later analyzing the calls he had made on the last night. He found a few calls of Barbastelle bat, the other great



rarity that we had hoped (and to some extent expected) to find there. One species that we failed to record this year, but which we would expect to be there, and have recorded in the past, was Serotine bat.



So, in the end we have recorded 10 bat species including the two rarest species we could hope to find, and we will use this data to try to suggest how bats can best be integrated into the management plans for the common. It also gives us a big impetus for further work there.

Given the list of species we have for the common, there are two or three further species that will probably be found there in due course. Both the Bechstein's and Barbastelle bats will almost certainly be roosting in trees and one key plan for next year is to try to locate some of their roosting trees.

Tony Hutson

*(Pictures from Tony Hutson)*

## From our Ranger

### What's in the nest box? And other news.

We may not have been finding dormice in the dormouse boxes but we have finding all sorts of other creatures – slugs and sheltering moths are the most common, and there is always a healthy population of blue tits and great tits nesting.

We found plenty of yellow-necked mice - 11 over the course of the three dormouse box checks this year. But in September we found a box full of very tough material the consistency of wadding and so tough it was very hard to pull off the box. It was a box where we had had recorded tree bumble bees in the spring. This bumble bee species has spread over from the continent in the last 10 years. It nests in holes in trees but also often uses nest boxes.



*Tree bumble bees in a Sussex bird box*

The wadding was made, not made by the bee but by the bumble bee wax moth *Aphomia sociella* which builds tunnels to live in while it feeds and grows.



*Wax moth silk wadding in one of the Markstakes Common dormouse boxes.*



An adult moth sneaks into the bumble bee nest and lays eggs. The caterpillars hatch and feed on the old wax from the cells made by the bees, as well as detritus, pollen, nectar, and droppings and then move on to feeding on the young bee larvae themselves and dead adult bees found in the bottom of the nest. Sometimes the bees and caterpillars can live alongside each other but often the bees will abandon the nest when a moth infestation takes hold.

The annual vegetation and path cuts have been carried out by our contractors who also gave Balneath Track from Town Littleworth Road, a much-needed cut back. This allowed vehicle access to remove the large wood piles from the area that was coppiced in the winter. The glades have thrived over the summer especially Heather Glade and Corner Glade which have been looked after by the Friends; and heather was found for the first time in the Northern area.

The highways authority resurfaced Markstakes Lane and paved the lay-by next to the gate. This has made pulling of the road much easier. No more accidents with calf-deep puddles this winter!

Thyone Outram  
*(Pictures by Thyone Outram)*

## 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 12.30. Tools are provided and suitable clothes 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 keeps you fit.

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



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