

Friends of Markstakes Common



NEWSLETTER AUTUMN 2015

From the Chairman

Welcome to our Autumn Newsletter.

The summer is the time when the attention of the Monday volunteers turns to maintaining areas that have been previously cleared. The task is to prevent the re-colonization of the glades by birch, bramble and bracken. Each of these species would, in the absence of control, result in the site returning to its overgrown state.



The work is painstaking and I admire the task diligence of the volunteers in this. It is also time consuming and we are still working on maintaining the glades and the rides as I write.

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. We have also been supported by the Brighton Conservation Volunteers, a group that operates throughout Sussex and have visited the site twice this year and made a significant impact on both occasions.

This summer has seen some of the clearest confirmation that our efforts are bearing fruit with the heather providing a spectacular blaze of purple, which shows really clearly in the picture of the heather glade below.

Other areas are also in good heart although the decision has been taken not to mow other parts of the common

annually to allow a more varied structure to the foliage to develop.



Jacqui has written about the additional plant species that have been noted this year. In addition to these species we have seen a grey wagtail on the Shallow Pond, which has not been recorded up until now.

Happily we have had a positive response to posters requesting additional volunteers and this has allowed us to cover ground more quickly. I am very grateful to the additional members of the team for giving up their time. There is always room for more!

Rupert Hall

Membership Matters

May I wish a warm welcome to the new Friends who have joined us during the year and I hope that you find the news of our progress both interesting and inspiring. Your help is most valuable if you have been out on Mondays with the working party and it really makes a difference. As you know you only have to come along when you can!

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

Surveys and Surveying

Recovering plants on Markstakes
Common



(Protective cage over plants)

In August we found two species of flowering plants (Bell Heather and Dwarf Gorse) that hadn't been recorded before on the Common, as far as we know, and one species (Saw-wort) that hadn't been seen since 1997.

The bright pink, bell-shaped flowers of Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*) graced Friend's Glade and Corner Glade in August, their vividly coloured flowers and glossy, dark-green foliage showing up well among the purple-flowered Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*).

The two glades, which are at either end of the east- west path that passes High Pond, are weeded thoroughly each summer to remove birch seedlings, bracken and bramble, so it is unlikely that we would have missed the bell heather in earlier years (at least if it had been flowering). Bell Heather likes well-drained soil, unlike its moisture-loving relative Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*), which has paler pink flowers and hairy leaves.

Dwarf Gorse (*Uex minor*) appeared in full flower in Heather Glade, adjacent to Friend's Glade. Like the Bell Heather, this single plant must have originated from the seed bank.

It occurs only on heathland in south-east England and the eastern coasts of

northern and western mainland Europe while its relative Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) is much more widely distributed.



(Dwarf gorse – *Ulex minor*)

These two species differ in the following characters: Gorse grows up to 2.5 m while Dwarf Gorse reaches only about 1.5 m.; the spines on the former species are very strong and deeply grooved while the spines of Dwarf Gorse are softer and weakly grooved; Gorse flowers mainly in winter and spring while its relative flowers in summer and autumn. There are other differences in the flowers (the sizes of the various parts) and you will need a ruler and a good plant identification book to help you here. Another tip that will help tell them apart: Gorse flowers smell of coconut while those of Dwarf Gorse do not. While the flowering seasons are more or less distinct there may be an overlap, in which case you will find that autumn flowers in Gorse are accompanied by many buds whereas those of Dwarf Gorse are accompanied by many withered ones.

Saw-wort (*Serratula tinctoria*) was last recorded in 1997 and we refound several plants this year in the northern bracken area. It may have been there all along and it was just chance that took us on that particular path at the right time of year.

It takes its generic name from its leaves that are 'somewhat snipt about the edges like a saw' (as John Gerard noted in his 1633 *Herbal*), a sign to early herbalists

that the plant was useful for healing wounds. Its specific name comes from the fact that it has been employed as a dye plant - leaves placed in a dye-bath with alum give a good green-yellow colour to wool. Plants are either male or female and pollinated by flies and long-tongued bees.



(Saw-wort - *Serratula tinctoria*)

Saw-wort was once abundant in UK grasslands, meadows and wet heaths but it has declined due to drainage, 'improvement' of pastures and the loss of grassland in woods and on wood margins.

For £25 one can adopt or gift the seed of this species for the Millennium Seedbank at Wakehurst. We shall try to ensure that it stays safe on the Common.

Jacqui Hutson

Moths

While we were weeding the heather glade towards the end of July we disturbed a resting moth from an oak tree.



We photographed it and later identified it, with the help of moth field guides and the internet, as the Rosy Footman *Miltochrista miniata*. It is a very attractive moth with a wingspan of about 25 mm, with orange forewings decorated with a black wavy line and elongated spots. The adults are on the wing in July and August; the caterpillars feed on lichens and overwinter among lichens on trees. It occurs in woodland in the southern half of Britain where it most common in the southern seaboard counties.

Mosses

While surveying the High Pond in July, we found that the moss *Sphagnum fimbriatum* (Fringed Bog-moss) was fruiting - covered in shiny black capsules. This is one of the two *Sphagnum* mosses we have recorded on the Common.



(Pictures from Jacqui Hutson)

From our Ranger

Activity at the High pond

Although we survey the pond once a year in the spring looking for newts, we rarely look formally at the other creatures present. This year Ian Hartle from the National Park helped us with a pond survey in July. Identifying dragonfly and damselfly larva to species level is quite tricky but we definitely found both types of larva as well as newt larvae (we know there are a lot of palmate newts that live in the pond) and a rather spectacular Great Diving Beetle. These are one of Britain's largest beetles - usually about 3cm long. These creatures have strong mandibles (jaws) and eat a variety of small creatures - even newt larvae and small fish. The one we saw had swum to the surface where they collect an air bubble under their wing cases before diving. The air is then slowly absorbed through the insect's spiracles (breathing holes). When it is used up, they must come to the surface for another.



Damselfly Larva



Dragonfly Larva



Pond surveying with Ian Hartle and the Friends of Markstakes Common.



Newt Larvae (probably Palmate) Newt



Removing pond vegetation with Brighton Conservation Volunteers



Great Diving Beetle

In September we remove some of the vegetation from the pond for the small population of Great Crested Newts which need some open water during their breeding season in spring. We were helped by the Brighton Conservation Volunteers with only one casualty who tried to move too fast in the mud, landed on his bum and got plenty of cold water in his waders. I suddenly realised why the Friends leave some jobs to external volunteer groups!

Thyone Outram

(Pictures from Thyone Outram)

THE CHANGING SCENE - CORNER GLADE

What a difference a few months can make.

Here we can see the view along the Corner Glade in the early part of the year.



(March 2015)

And now we can see the difference in summertime. There is a fallen branch across the middle from the exposed oak tree (since cleared), and most noticeable is the strong growth of the bracken to the side of the glade, but not where we have done intensive hand weeding to allow the heather and grasses to grow naturally - Interesting (and rewarding for our efforts)



(August 2015)

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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