

# Friends of Markstakes Common



**NEWSLETTER AUTUMN  
2018**

## **From the Chairman**

As we are all aware it has been a hot dry summer. In most years the volunteer groups are only held back from going out by rain or snow. This year the issue has been hot weather. The work can be physically demanding and much more so in the hot sun. In addition, the ground dried out and hardened making weeding tougher. Fortunately, we were able to identify one area of concern that required us to work in the shade.

The most significant boundary structure on the Common has been the Northern Wall between the Common and Markstakes lane. This plays a significant role in discourage inappropriate incursions onto the Common. Asides from some repair completed back in 2009 very little has been done to maintain the wall. A section of the wall on neighbouring land collapsed last year and the cost of rebuilding it would entail exorbitant expense.

We are keen to preserve as far as possible this important feature and so spent the hot parts of the summer clearing away ivy and other encroaching vegetation. The Council will now arrange tree works to remove some trees, which are pressing against the wall and will use a flint wall specialist to repair cracks and those patches where flints have fallen out. The wall looks in better shape now and with the additional work will look even better, reinforcing the impression that the Common is a site that is cared for.

Due to the time spent on this project other areas have not received as much attention as usual and as a result the bracken has been growing back strongly in other parts of the Common. Hopefully we will be able to reclaim these areas over the coming season. Once again, I would like to thank the small team of volunteers who come out each Monday. Without their efforts we wouldn't be able to maintain the progress we have achieved.

Rupert Hall

## **Membership Matters**

Our core group of 'Friends' support us, and we especially value the practical help which we receive on our Monday morning working party sessions. Sometimes the task ahead seems difficult, but after making a start we soon find that progress is made, and we can see the result after each session.

We are grateful for the support of our Rangers Thyone Outram and Kim Dawson and our Group Leader Rupert Hall. Teamwork makes it happen.

We look forward to seeing you.

William Coleman

## **Butterflies and the plants they need**

There is considerable concern for the future of the UK's butterflies because more than three-quarters have declined in the last 40 years. Butterfly populations fluctuate from year to year - their breeding success depending on weather conditions, food-plant and nectar availability, parasites and many other factors - some of which we do not understand. Butterfly Conservation's Big Butterfly Count this year has revealed that populations of some species of butterflies have plummeted this summer despite the hot, dry weather.

Red Admiral, Comma and Gatekeeper sightings were well down. The Small Tortoiseshell suffered its worst summer in the history of the Big Butterfly Count, with sightings falling by 32% compared with 2017. The population of this butterfly, once common and widespread, has collapsed by 75% since the 1970s. The reasons are being investigated, with climate change, pollution and parasites all possible causes. Some species have been seen in improved numbers including Small White, Large White, Green-veined White, Holly Blue and Common Blue.

It will be interesting to discover whether the results of the butterfly transects on Markstakes Common reflect the national trend this year. Looking at the results for each of the 26 species recorded on the Common between 2012 and 2017, no obvious pattern emerges for most species. By far the most numerous species is the Meadow Brown; there were 83 sightings in 2012 and numbers increased to 317 in 2017, with sightings fluctuating between 102 and 225 in the years between. This may well reflect the work the Friends have done to increase the open habitats on the Common by clearing bracken, birch and bramble, thus encouraging the establishment of the grasses on which the larvae of this butterfly feed.

Our work to establish and maintain glades in once dense tree cover in parts of the Common aims to provide habitat for butterflies and other invertebrates but it is an ongoing and enormous task to keep them from reverting to woodland. We are aware that we need to encourage the establishment of and conserve both larval food plants and nectar plants for adult butterflies. Not all adult butterflies feed on flowers but early in the year there is plenty of flowering pussy willow for those that do.

Some butterflies gain nourishment from minerals in animal dung (Green-veined Whites, Purple Emperor), muddy patches (Holly Blue), fermenting fruit (Red Admiral and Comma), Oak sap (Red Admiral) while the Large Skipper feeds at bird droppings. and the Speckled Wood and Purple Hairstreak feed on honeydew on tree leaves.

Generally, butterflies favour blue and purple flowers and the Common has plenty of Marsh Thistle and Devil's-bit Scabious as well as Bluebells earlier in the year. Marsh Thistles are biennials, existing as rosettes in their first year and then flowering and dying in the second. They need bare soil to germinate and our 'weeding' activity in the glades helps to ensure that there are suitable sites for them to seed. Brambles are a good supply

of nectar and fruit for many butterflies and when managing the glades, we leave good patches of these in full sun. Whatever management we do, it is bound to benefit some species but perhaps at the expense of others.

Jacqui Hutson

## New plant records

While 'weeding' birch and bracken from the northern bracken glade, which is now much more open, with a good diversity of plants, we found two new plant species, both flowering and within one metre of each other. They are Petty Whin *Genista anglica* and Dyer's greenweed *Genista tinctoria*. Both have sprays of yellow flowers and are members of the pea family Fabaceae. It is interesting that these two species are characteristic of different soils.



Dyer's Greenweed is typically found in unimproved pastures and meadows on heavier soils. *The Flora of Sussex* says it is occasional and locally frequent in East Sussex and has disappeared from many areas where it once occurred. While some populations have disappeared due to the loss of old grassland to agricultural improvement, cultivation and building development, some have disappeared as under-grazing and neglect have led to an increase in bracken and scrub. The latter cause was probably the case on Markstakes Common.



By contrast Petty Whin is found on heaths and sandy commons. It has declined steadily over the past 100 years and is listed as scarce and local in *The Flora of Sussex* and as Near Threatened on the Red Data List. It is still present on Chailey Common, but most colonies are small and its decline is largely due to lack of grazing leading to encroachment by bracken and scrub.



(drawing from Drawings of British Plants by Stella Ross-Craig, part VII, plate 2, G. Bell and Sons, London. 1954.)

This northern bracken field also has some small patches of heather establishing as well as dwarf gorse. In four other glades on the Common, where heather is already well established, Bell Heather, *Erica cinerea*, is making an appearance too, most recently on the newest clearing between Heather Glade and the Mire. Bell Heather is characteristic of dry heath and tolerates drier soil conditions than the more abundant Heather, *Calluna vulgaris*.

Another new species on the Common is Common Polypody *Polypodium vulgare*, which we found when clearing the flint wall this summer.

#### References

*The Flora of Sussex*, Sussex Botanical Recording Society, Pisces Publications, 2018.

*The Vascular Plant Red Data List for Great Britain* (C. M. Cheffings & L. Farrell, eds) Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough, 2005.

Jacqui Hutson

## Mosses on the wall by Markstakes Lane

As of the spring of 2018 we had recorded 67 species of mosses and liverworts on Markstakes Common. The 250-m-long flint wall that forms the northern boundary had not been searched for these little plants because it had been difficult to access because of encroaching vegetation and a dense covering of ivy.

The hot months of summer drove the little band of volunteers out of the open to the shade of the tree-lined wall where we worked to remove the vegetation to ascertain the extent of repairs needed. It has proved an ideal opportunity for me to survey the mosses and liverworts there.

Flat Neckera *Neckera complanata* was by far the most abundant bryophyte on the north face, forming an almost continuous curtain, although in places it was inevitably ripped a little in the process of removing ivy.



A clump of Fox-tail Feather-moss *Thamnobryum alopecurum* adorned a shadier section of wall side and I found the liverwort Wall Scalewort *Porella platyphylla* on the wall-top nearby.

Also, on a shady section was a large patch of dry shoots of Rambling Tail-moss *Anomodon viticulosus*.

## Bat Boxes



I couldn't resist spraying it to see the astonishing rapidity with which it transforms itself into starry looking branches.



On sunnier sections of the wall, Silky Wall Feather-moss *Homalothecium sericeum* was dominant leaving little space for other species but I found more tiny species when I took little samples home and examined them under the microscope. Altogether I added 12 new species of mosses and liverworts to the list for Markstakes Common, including one that is rather rare.

Jacqui Hutson  
(photos Jacqui Hutson)

Spearheaded by Tony Hutson, a group of four of us (including Michael Nailard - The Woodland, Flora and Fauna Group chairman and very much appreciated ladder-holder, alongside Laura Steuart - Sheffield Park, National Trust Ranger, and myself) completed the autumn bat box check at Markstakes on Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> September from 9.40 am to noon.

Weather was crisp and gloriously sunny, and as always, it was an absolute pleasure to tramp round the magnificent Markstakes woodland, with the hard work of the 'Friends of Group' not going unnoticed - helping to keep it as wonderful as ever.

We found a male Common Pipistrelle bat in the second woodcrete box checked and so were hopeful to find more, however, no other bats materialised. Last year's count of four Brown Long-eared were nowhere to be found! Humongous house spiders (or so they seemed when up the ladder face to face with them), earwigs, woodlouse, and a good number of old blue tit nests (including the odd tiny egg) were, however, discovered in the boxes.

Of the 36 boxes (14x woodcrete and 22x wooden), three of the wooden boxes had fallen from their trees, with two of the boxes rehung during the check, and one too rotten to rehang. Very mysteriously one of the woodcrete boxes was missing (AWOL) with no evidence of it on the floor around the tree, or of the nail in the tree it was attached to?

A real treat was the pied flycatcher and grey wagtail spotted while checking the boxes down by the pond. The pied flycatcher, fly catching as per its appellation. Sadly, there was no sign of last year's recorded cauliflower fungus *Sparassis spathulata*, although last year's check was at the beginning of October (3<sup>rd</sup>) and so there may still be time for it to emerge...so keep an eye out.

Thanks to Tony for organising, Michael and Laura for aiding.

Kim Dawson

## Two birds new for Markstakes Common

Structured bird surveys of the type reported in the Annual Report are the best way of tracking changes in populations and distribution of species but will always miss some records of interest. So, I report here on two species not previously recorded at Markstakes, both seen independently in the last week of September.

On Tuesday 25 September, four of us were doing a bat-box check. We had found one common pipistrelle by the time we reached High Pond, but here there was a lot of bird activity, including a lot of tits of various species, a grey wagtail (which itself seems to be rarely recorded here) and a very dull pied flycatcher, I suppose a juvenile. This woodland bird is really only seen in Sussex as a migrant, particularly in autumn and particularly on the coast, and this autumn does seem to have been good for records.

On Thursday 27 September, an old birding friend of mine, Frank Antram, currently living in Australia but over here at the moment, contacted me to say that that afternoon he had been to Markstakes, which I introduced him to a few years ago. Amongst his birds seen (and photographed) was a marsh tit. This too was with a mixed flock of birds by High Pond.

I went back on Saturday morning and saw nothing of note and again on Monday afternoon, with Frank, and again saw nothing of note.

I guess the flycatcher was just one of those chance encounters with a bird passing through, but I am curious about the marsh tit. I have hardly seen it in this area, but have been doing a monthly survey of birds in Wilding Wood, across the road from Markstakes, and here I have seen it three or four times and did wonder if they might be breeding there. And if they were established there, did they ever cross that little road and the flint wall into Markstakes? I've also seen it in a couple

of other places in the last year or two and wonder if it is spreading around here. Perhaps a bird worth looking out for?

Tony Hutson



Photo: Marsh tit at Markstakes Common (photo: Frank Antram)

## Dates for the Diary

Monday Weekly (most Mondays not Bank Holidays)

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.