

Friends of Markstakes Common



**NEWSLETTER AUTUMN
2019**

From the Chairman

As in previous years, the summer is when we focus on clearing Bracken, Birch and Bramble from the areas we have cleared in previous years. Some of these areas have been cleared for nearly 10 years and the Heather is so dominant that the work can be completed fairly quickly. On other areas the Bracken is still recurring strongly. In addition, the long dry spell had hardened the soil and made clearing out birch and bramble very challenging.

The Corner glade shows the impact of our work very clearly. The original clearance is now a delightful mosaic of heather and Purple Moor Grass while an extension having been neglected for 3 years had returned to an impenetrable mass of Bramble and Bracken with Birch saplings. Over recent weeks the Monday volunteers have been attacking the bramble and popping out the birch saplings. We still have much to do and the area will look bare for a while.

We are supported by the Ranger bringing in a conservation volunteer group from Brighton to clear some of the areas. We rely on this group to keep the vegetation in the pond under control as they have the equipment and the know-how. The High Pond remains in good condition although some dog walkers still disregard the dead hedge to allow their dogs to get in the pond.

Some dog walkers are also still failing to act responsibly when it comes to cleaning up after their dogs. One of the least pleasant aspects of habitat clearance is a close encounter with dog faeces. If you walk your dog on the Common, please bring bags and ensure your dog leaves nothing behind.

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

From the Ranger

Markstakes Buzzing Heather

Though it might be a stretch to say there is a Heath at Markstakes Common, it has many of the important habitat features of a really rich heathland – heather is the main feature that distinguishes a heath from other habitats, but many other features are important in heaths. Some of these features we also have in small areas at Markstakes: wet areas including purple moor grass and sphagnum, silver birch and aspen both as scrub and mature trees, dwarf shrubs, dry acid grassland, pond and woodland edge, sunny and shady areas, bracken and bare ground.

Heather can live for up to 40 years and historically, has been used for many purposes, such as fuel, fodder, building materials, thatch, packing and ropes. It was also used to make brooms, which is how it got its Latin name – Calluna is derived from the Greek word meaning 'to brush'.

A study in France of heather in heathland found it particularly attractive for hoverflies and bees. This would fit with my experience of the Markstakes heather.

We have been protecting the new heather shoots around the site with cages until the heather plants are established. In Heather Glade, the plants no longer need protection from deer, so we moved the cages to the large northern glade. The heather had grown thickly through the cages and in order to disentangle them, we had to really get down inside the heather. I will not forget how bursting with insect life it was – bees and hoverflies galore – a loud continuous humming (which many of you may have heard yourselves when having a quiet moment at Markstakes) coming from the heather.



So if you are getting depressed that 50% of the world's wild animals have gone in the last 40 years and the world is currently heading towards ecological collapse, I would recommend a dose of watching and listening to the buzzing of the Markstakes summer heather to lift the spirits.

Wilding - A Book Review

Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm by Isabella Tree, Picador 2018

When Charlie Burrell, inherited the 3500-acre Knepp estate from his grandparents in 1987 it was not doing well. The estate was already losing money and trying to improve matters by adopting intensive arable farming methods on the heavy clay proved not to be profitable. Bankruptcy

threatened. Something had to change. Isabella Tree tells the story of how, in 2000, she and her husband made a life-changing decision to return the estate to nature. In that year they met Frans Vera, whose pioneering nature reserve near Amsterdam changed the way they thought about Knepp and inspired them to let nature take the lead in rewilding the estate. Their decision was also influenced by the sad state of much of the farmed countryside of England. Intensive agriculture, with its use of chemical fertilizers, heavy machinery, pesticides and herbicides had meant the disappearance of native flowers from grassland, compaction of the soil and destruction of wildlife habitat. Populations of many birds, small mammals and insects were all in decline.

Fencing the estate was a huge task but necessary before introducing the grazing, browsing and foraging animals: Fallow Deer in 2002, Longhorn cattle and Exmoor ponies in 2003, Tamworth pigs in 2004 and Red Deer in 2009. The project was not greeted with enthusiasm by local people - in fact most were disapproving and sceptical. Letting nature run wild, indeed! In August 2003 50 neighbouring farmers and landowners were invited to an afternoon of presentations to explain the project followed by supper. The presentations were met with stony silence and when Charlie stood up to show how he envisaged the landscape of Knepp changing into rampant scrub and wetland the room erupted into dissident murmuring and shaking of heads. It became apparent that the audience felt that it was an 'affront to the efforts of every self-respecting farmer, an immoral waste of land, an assault on Britishness itself'.

It must have been a disappointing reaction to say the least, but Charlie and Isabella

were undaunted. The recovery of wildlife has been spectacular. Turtle doves, whose numbers in Britain had declined steeply since the 1960s, are now breeding in good numbers in the estate. Knepp now holds the largest population of Purple Emperors in Britain. Nightingales and bats are abundant now as well as a host of small mammals, birds and invertebrates not to be seen on neighbouring farmland. These successes have made the project more acceptable to local people, but some responses have not been so welcome. Some dog walkers allow their pets to rampage off the footpaths, chasing free-roaming herds and putting up ground-nesting birds. Once a father and son on horseback chased the cattle at breakneck speed, their dogs snapping at the calves' heels. Poaching has occurred, snares set, and deer shot.

The book is such an honest account of the difficulties and the ways these have been overcome. But it is more than that - well written, entertaining, instructive, thoroughly researched. Who knew that there were 30 Sussex words for mud; for example - clodgy, a muddy field path after rain; gawn, sticky foul-smelling mud; gubber, black mud of rotting organic matter; ike, a muddy mess, and so on, or that green woodpeckers must store their long gluey tongues by coiling them behind the skull, over the eyes and into the right nostril when at rest. There are discussions about the health benefits of choosing pasture-fed cattle over grain-fed animals, the enormous capacity for carbon storage of soil that is better managed and the wisdom of questioning our ideas of the how the countryside should look. You will simply have to read this book. It is so inspiring.

Jacqui Hutson

New Fungal Record

A new fungal record for Markstakes. One of the old pollarded hornbeams on the southern part of the Common lost a large limb recently and in September it was adorned with the fruiting bodies of a fungus that we hadn't seen before.

I took a sample home and Tony Hutson searched our fungi field guides and came up with an identification of Splitgill *Schizophyllum commune*. Martin Allison, Fungi Recorder for Sussex, confirmed the identification.





The species occurs on dead wood of broad-leaved trees, typically on beech. It is usually found in small, overlapping groups. Its fan-shaped, irregularly wavy cap measures 1-4 cm and is initially densely covered with white velvety down and then becomes bristly with age. According to *Collins Fungi Guide* (Stefan Buczacki, 2012) It is said to be uncommon to occasional, but Martin says it is relatively common in our area. So, not a rare species but an interesting one and it is always good to add a new record for Markstakes.

Seasonal News

The work of the group on a Monday is rewarding when we can see the results of the efforts after a few hours labour.

Looking at the 'Corner Glade' the pictures show the clearance after a good 'tidy up'.

The first is at the start of the morning with the shadows long.



The second, after the weeding of the bracken and other bits, to leave the Molinia Grasses and the Heather showing clean again.



Now let's look at the 'Crescent Glade' on the north east side of the common.

Firstly, here it is after a good clean with the bracken pushed back and the paths cleared.



Now let's look when the springtime comes along. How lovely to see the beautiful show of bluebells and leaves on the trees.



Other areas which have received attention are the Mire, Heather Glade and Friends Glade.

Here are some pictures of plants growing well in the Mire.



Sneezewort *Achillea ptarmica*



Gypsywort *Lycopus europaeus*



Devil's bit Scabious *Succisa pratensis*



Common Fleabane *Pulicaria dysenterica*

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.