

Friends of Markstakes Common



**NEWSLETTER AUTUMN
2021**

From the Chair

Dear All

The last six months have been challenging with the unwinding of COVID restrictions allowing the volunteers to resume their work on Mondays but struggling to catch up after the prolonged period of absence. Further to that the weather has been favourable for rapid plant growth as the gardeners amongst you will no doubt be aware. In the past we have relied on additional specialist work to be organised by the Council for tasks that are beyond the capability of the volunteers. So far, no work has been carried out by the Council this year. This was due to the departure of Thyone Outram as the Community Ranger and another local government reorganisation.

The good news is that two ecologists have now been recruited and they joined the Council in September. We were due to meet on the 28th of that month but unfortunately the petrol station situation meant that they couldn't make the meeting. The meeting has been rescheduled for later in October.

On a more positive note, Ian Seccombe spotted a specimen of the extremely rare Large Tortoiseshell butterfly when out on his regular survey. This is an amazing, rare sighting and a reminder of how getting out in nature can yield unexpected delights. A photograph of the same butterfly was obtained from Polly Mair and can be seen later in this Newsletter.

Due to COVID 19 the Annual General Meeting which normally takes place in April was postponed. The Committee decided to cancel it for 2021 and to hold the meeting at the normal time in 2022. That will make it a three-year gap since

the last AGM. If any of the members wish to raise any issues in the meantime, please feel free to contact us.

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.

Our team of regulars have made progress again after having been absent for a long time and it is good to do the clearance and tidying in the areas of special focus.

Subscriptions for this year have not all been paid up to date, so, if you have not already paid, hopefully you would like to do so. Some have already paid either directly to me or by standing order so thank you for that. Thanks.

Your continued support is much appreciated as it does enable us to keep our tools etc. up to date for our working party mornings so thank you.

We look forward to seeing you.

William Coleman

Butterfly News

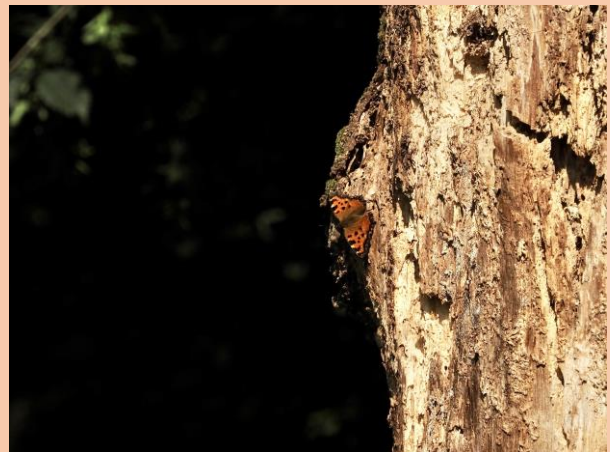
A LITTLE TWIST OF FATE

The morning of the 18th July 2021 was very hot and still as I walked my weekly butterfly transect in Markstakes for the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme. I had just arrived at the Corner Glade, hoping that I might see a Purple Emperor, when a fairly large orange and brown butterfly flew past me powerfully skimming over the bracken tops as it headed back along the Butterfly Glade. My first thought was Silver-washed Fritillary, but no the colour was all wrong, this was reddish orange. By now I was hurriedly re-tracing my steps back up the muddy path trying to keep up with the butterfly which I could now see looked like a Small Tortoiseshell, but it was larger and slightly duller. Surely it couldn't be a Large Tortoiseshell? By this time, I had my camera out, but the butterfly had disappeared before I could even get the lens cap off. I hung around the area for a good twenty minutes but this most elusive of butterflies never returned.

The Large Tortoiseshell, which is about the same size as the Peacock, has officially been extinct in Britain since the 1950s and in most years only a handful of people, at best, will get to see this very rare migrant. To put that in a local context, during the five year (2010 to 2014) recording period for the *Butterflies of Sussex Atlas* only one Large Tortoiseshell was reported.

With the lack of photographic proof, I started to doubt what I had seen. Aren't the records all from or near to the coast? Perhaps it was just a Small Tortoiseshell? Imagine my delight when I received a Facebook message from Polly Mair, who had visited Markstakes from Seaford the

very next day and thought she had seen a Large Tortoiseshell in more or less the same spot. What's more she had a photograph of it on the trunk of the large oak in Corner Glade. Polly sent her photograph to the Sussex Branch of Butterfly Conservation who confirmed it was indeed a Large Tortoiseshell. The only other record of a Large Tortoiseshell in Sussex this year comes from Clayton on 1st August.



Picture - Polly Mair

We can't rule out the possibility that this was a clandestine release of a captive-bred butterfly, but it seems more likely to be a migrant that had crossed the English Channel from France and made its way up the Ouse valley. The Large Tortoiseshell brings the number of butterfly species I have recorded in Markstakes up to 28, although it's one we are not likely to see again. As Patrick Barkham writes in his book *The Butterfly Isles* "Scarce migrants are little twists of fate... You cannot choose to find them; they find you, once in a lifetime."

Ian Seccombe

Habitat News

NEW GRASS RECORD FOR THE COMMON

In October 2020, while clearing bracken from a glade adjacent to the mire, we were struck by a tall grass in flower, which was unfamiliar to us all. We certainly hadn't seen it here before because it was too tall to miss. I took a sample home and identified it as Wood Small-Reed *Calamagrostis epigejos*.

This is a first record for the common and for the 2 km square (tetrad). Tom Cope and Alan Gray in *Grasses of the British Isles* (BSBI Handbook No. 13, 2009) state that it occurs throughout the British Isles but is common only in south and east England.

It seems to occur in two quite distinct types of semi-natural habitat: either damp shady woodland and wood margins, ditches and fens on heavy soils, or open grassland, usually ungrazed, on or near sand-dunes and sea cliffs, mostly on light sandy soils. The soils on which it grows can be heavy clays or almost pure sands and range in pH from 3.7 to 7.4. *The Flora of Sussex* (Sussex Botanical Recording Society, 2018) states that it is rare, occurring in open damp woodland, heath and sandy soils as well as in a range of other habitats.

There are very few records from East Sussex and in this region of Britain it is regarded as an ancient woodland indicator.

It is not known how it has suddenly appeared on the Common. Maybe it was transported on a boot or horse-hoof, or even by a bird. It spreads both vegetatively and by seed, being free-

flowering and setting viable seed by cross pollination.

The species is reportedly self-incompatible so if the seed is viable (and we can test this) there must be another individual nearby. It is apparently very susceptible to grazing or mowing.

Jacqui Hutson



Picture – William Coleman

Beetle News

LONGHORN BEETLE

We found this longhorn beetle *Stenocorus meridianus* in shady woodland in the northern part of the common, not far from the gate in the flint wall. It is about 25 mm long and a clumsy flier but reportedly keen on feeding on flowers of the Apiaceae family (e.g. Hogweed).

This individual had perhaps just emerged from its pupal stage because it didn't seem keen to move on despite our attentions. The larvae develop in damaged timber of diseased deciduous trees.

Jacqui Hutson



Picture Jacqui Hutson

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 light refreshments to keep you going. Come along if you can.

From the Archives



2010 'MIRE' CLEARANCE



2010 TREES MUST GO



2010 IT WAS HARD WORK!