

Friends of Markstokes Common



**NEWSLETTER AUTUMN
2023**



'FRIENDS' WEBSITE

From the Chair

Dear All

The past six months has continued volunteer activity across the site although we have been obliged to call off a few mornings due to the rain. We all know it has been a very wet summer, but September has been surprisingly warm, and we have relocated to shadier areas of the Common. There is always more to do than we have capacity for, and we are grateful for the contribution that the Council provides.

There were considerably more visitors during the Bluebell season and for the first time, serious issues with parking. More people are walking their dogs with resulting deposits increasing in volume. We are looking into signage and the council is assessing the viability of a dog waste bin. In the meantime, please encourage dog walkers to take their waste home with them.

One of the benefits of spending time on the Common is coming across wildlife and with the widespread use of smartphones, apps can help you identify what you see. I have been trying out two Apps in particular. The first is **Merlin**, an app that can identify birdsong. It is sometimes uncanny and at other times a bit frustrating. I spent some time pointing my phone at a warbler calling in a bush while the app only reported a woodpigeon calling in the distance. The other app is **Obsidentify** which I use mainly for bugs. It relies on you taking a photo with the location function switched on and then comes up with either a certain identification or a guess with a likelihood attached. I find it enhances my experience of the Common and generates data which is always helpful in informing the management of the Common. It does require the insect to sit still, and they don't always cooperate!

No butterfly surveys were completed this year, but we have seen several species including both the White Admiral, a flagship species for the site, Silver Washed Fritillary, Small Copper and Holly Blue. On several occasions we noted the presence of Common Lizards although Adders have not been seen for several years, no doubt part of the overall decline in the UK.

Rupert Hall

Membership Matters

Thank you once again to our members and volunteers – it is always good to have your support and we look forward to seeing you at Markstakes.

Our team of regulars have made progress again doing the clearance and tidying as usual. The Heather Glade is looking magnificent and has received worthwhile maintenance at the edges. Currently we are tackling the Shallow Pond area, and this could take a while!

If you have not already paid your subscription, hopefully you would like to do so. Some have already paid either directly to me or by standing order so thank you for that. Bank transfers to Santander Bank 09-01-29 06750439 and just £2. Account – Friends of Markstakes. Thanks.

We look forward to seeing you.

William Coleman

Habitat News

The Corner Glade

This area had received a good deal of clearance but is now resting as we are busy elsewhere.

The Mire

After another year's growth this valuable habitat area is looking even more interesting. The Devil's bit scabious is showing well amongst the Molinia Purple Moor grass and the brambles have spread but are in mounds of growth thus providing flowers and then fruits for the wildlife.

In the late summer and autumn, the blue-violet flowers of Devil's-bit Scabious, *Succisa pratensis*, are scattered throughout the tussocks of Purple Moor-grass, *Molinia caerulea*, and Tufted Hair-grass, *Deschampsia cespitosa*. A few white flowers of Sneezewort, *Achillea ptarmica*, stand out among the rushes but the plant is struggling among the dense vegetation, and it would benefit from some 'weeding.' The dried, powdered leaf used to be used as a sneezing powder to 'clear the head' and also to alleviate toothache and to promote the flow of saliva. Devil's-bit Scabious has even more medicinal uses, both traditional and modern. It is said to get its name from its truncated rootstock, which looks as if it has been bitten off. Legend has it that the Devil was the culprit, out of spite for the good that the plant was doing for people.

During a field meeting of the Sussex Botanical Recording Society in the spring members were interested to find several individuals of the upright form of Creeping Willow, *Salix repens*. This dwarf willow is characteristic of damp heathland and acid grassland and is declining in the county so is a nice find. One of the benefits of visits to the Common by people with botanical expertise is that they sometimes find plant species that we have failed to spot.



MOLINIA - PURPLE MOOR GRASS AND DEVILS BIT SCABIOUS GROWTH IN THE MIRE

In summer the whole area is dry and covered by grasses, brambles and flowering plants.

In winter, especially the wetter months, there is standing water and we are looking at creating a pond at the lower end with the help of a suggestion from the Newt Conservation Partnership.

Our Specialist Advisor from the Lewes DC has met with one of their project officers and the idea is to create a network of restored/created ponds for Great Crested Newts across some Lewes DC sites in the area.

Shallow Pond

This is our current area (September) for working and it is proving to be quite a challenge as the brambles have had some time to take a strong foothold. However, we are doing our best and taking them out by the roots along with many little tree seedlings.

While clearing bramble from Shallow Pond we recorded six species of ferns. As well as Bracken, *Pteridium aquilinum*, which is widespread on the Common, we found Lady-fern, *Athyrium filix-femina*, Soft Shield-fern, *Polystichum setiferum*, Male-fern, *Dryopteris flix-mas*, Golden-scaled Male-fern, *Dryopteris affinis*, and Broad Buckler-fern, *Dryopteris dilatata*. Both Soft Shield-fern and Golden-scaled Male-fern are Ancient Woodland Indicators in Sussex.



Lady-fern

The Heather Glade

Looking great after yet another tidy up. Our efforts are always rewarded in the summer by the heather display and when the few remaining bits of bracken and birch have been removed it really looks at its best. A far cry from the original dense birch growth which greeted us all those years ago! We concentrate on keeping the edges trimmed back as this keeps the area clear.



The Ride

This small extension of Heather Glade is notable in that two new grasses have appeared here in recent years: Wavy Hair-grass, *Deschampsia flexuosa*, and Heath-grass, *Danthonia decumbens*. We have not found them elsewhere on the Common and both are indicators of well-drained, acid soils. It is likely that Wavy Hair-grass came in on someone's boots because its seeds germinate soon after they have been shed and do not persist in the soil. Heath-grass could have also been transported by people's footwear, but it has a persistent seed bank so could have appeared as a result of soil disturbance.

The Azulox Glade

The clump of Wood Small-reed, *Calamagrostis epigejos*, is expanding. This species does not set fertile seed unless cross-pollinated so unless another plant appears nearby the spread will be limited to vegetative means. It is rare in East Sussex (listed in *The Sussex Rare Plant Register*) and another Ancient Woodland Indicator.

Northern Bracken Field

Still looking fairly open but the bracken keeps on growing so further attention is needed.

We are delighted that a few new species have been found here.

Dyer's Greenweed, *Genista tinctoria*, flowered abundantly this year and is spreading well. This plant is typical of old meadows on heavier soils but declined greatly through the 20th century. We also found some young seedlings of Creeping Willow. This area also has some other plants of acid grassland, such as Trailing St John's-wort, *Hypericum humifusum*, and Heath Bedstraw, *Galium saxatile*. These ground hugging plants depend on our vigorous raking to prevent more dominant plant to outcompete them.



The Crescent Glade

When we first cleared Crescent Glade many years ago patches of bare soil allowed Little Mouse-ear, *Cerastium semidecandrum*, to establish. There is now little bare soil here now and the species has disappeared. This emphasises the need to monitor and adapt our management activities to conserve plant species diversity on the Common. Bare soil is important for some species of plants and also for some insects and reptiles.



Just north of Crescent Glade, by the side of a path that crosses from west to east, is a patch of Saw-wort, *Serratula tinctoria*. This is a declining species in Sussex and the only place on the Common where it has been recorded and we are trying to ensure its survival by clearing invasive bracken and tree seedlings.

Veteran Tree Register

It is a while since this has been done and a review would be appropriate, especially as the high winds of the past year have wrought some serious devastation in parts.

Of the 34 trees recognised in 2010, two are long dead (Beech no.7 and Silver Birch no.34). One's stem has entirely broken off at around 3m (Beech no.9) but is showing hope of recovery, while another has lost its major stem of two: (Beech No.31)



Beech No.7



Silver Birch 34



Artist's conk (*Ganoderma*) in the trunk of long fallen notable beech no.7.

Large fungi were noted in one major stem of beech no.7 in 2010, and it would appear that this was its downfall, that and a south-westerly gale maybe 10 years ago. The large artist's conks (*Ganoderma*) are a significant feature in the rotting trunk, while

the tree itself is a rotting log, entangled in brambles with an open canopy above, slowly transforming the surrounding trees and inviting pioneers to exploit the opportunity.



Beech no.9 may have broken only in the last few years as significant new growth is apparent - last year this growth died off, but this year, with more rain and moisture available throughout summer new shoots have appeared and look healthy. On the other hand, a young companion beech growing close to the trunk has now died. With its main feature lost, does the remains of this tree warrant continuing on the notables register? A question that could also be asked of the next tree.



Beech No.31 is now a single stem, rather than two, the largest and most significant of the stems having fallen some years ago - maybe as long ago as eight years, given the size of a couple of offshoots that have since emerged from this fallen stem that are now successfully established and reaching into the open canopy.

The magnificent veteran hornbeam No.5 increasingly has the form of a huge wooden chalice, with only a few of the central stems showing significant life



while the well decayed parts of the lower trunk are host to a variety of fungi including porcelain, dead men's fingers, and slime mould.



One of the coppiced hornbeams to the southeast of the Common (no.25) has lost a stem or two, while the ash here (no.24) looks depleted and in a state of decay.

Of note, are two of the hornbeams (32, 33) which have both successfully self-propagated along long, trailing stems.



Two stem oak and five stem beech companion(s)

Through noting, recognising 'ancient' or 'veteran' features and coming to understand what is meant by these definitions it is possible that a further six or so trees could be added to the notable register: for example, a significant oak just inside the southern boundary which lost a large stem last year; a hard to reach beech with a dense understory of holly: several possible hornbeam candidates - another fallen, but thriving by all accounts, and a silver birch or two as well as a wonderful three stem oak companioned with 5 stems of beech which collectively create quite a mass of growth and a significant trunk girth if it could all be counted as one, this in the slither of forgotten land north of Markstakes Lane opposite the entrance gate there.

Of the remaining notable, veteran and ancient trees, some appear barely changed in 13 years, while others have lost a bough. For example, our magnificent ancient oak no.13 has dropped a large north-reaching bough from its canopy.

Noting all of 34 trees, visiting them regularly, photographing and drawing them across the seasons has proven an interesting exercise.

Jonathan Vernon

Fungus update

Autumn brings surprises. Here are a couple of seasonal treasures.

Firstly, *Beefsteak fungus* (*Fistulina hepatica*) Sticky and gruesome, beefsteak is a woodland fungus with the disconcerting appearance of a raw cut of meat. It even oozes a blood-like substance when cut!

We have watched it develop over a four-week period as follows:



Secondly, and in complete contrast, found on a dead bramble stem (fingers for scale).

Marasmiellis ramealis - (Twig parachute)

A small fungus. The cap is usually no more than 1 cm across.



Dates for the Diary

Our Volunteer Group meets most Mondays - not Bank Holidays – 9.30.a.m until around midday