

Friends of Markstakes Common

NEWSLETTER SPRING 2020

From the Chair

In view of the national emergency we have had to postpone the AGM which was due to be held in April.

The current emergency is overshadowing everything, but it was only a few weeks ago that we were dealing with one of the wettest Februarys on record. The heavy rainfall affected the number of days that the Monday morning volunteers were able to go out and it felt like every other Monday morning I was phoning round to advise that the group's activities were cancelled. Despite the challenges we still managed to achieve a lot of good clearing birch bracken and bramble.

This was confirmed on the 20th March when William Coleman and I walked around the site with Community Ranger, Thyone Outram identifying areas requiring attention over the coming months. Wood anemone were making an appearance, trees were starting to bud, and the bluebells were putting up shoots. The overall impression was that although there were things for the volunteers to do, the site is in good condition and remains a magical place.

The Government announcement three days later meant that the group's activities had to be cancelled until further notice. It also required the postponement of the Annual General meeting.

While it seems to me that the national situation is likely to be severe for several months, history suggests that it will pass eventually, and we can get back to maintaining the site.

In the meantime, until government guidelines change the Common is a delightful natural setting for exercise outdoors with wide paths and open areas making it easy to keep 2 metres distant from other visitors.

Rupert Hall

NOTICE OF 11th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

THE 'FRIENDS OF MARKSTAKES COMMON'

11th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

This meeting has been postponed

New date to be advised

Membership Matters

Our team of volunteer members has been doing a great job with the many tasks that we become involved with. There haven't been any new members joining us for a while, but work has been going on with excellent and inspiring results.

The very modest membership amount of £2 will be due at our Annual General Meeting in due course and thank you also if you send in a cheque or pay by bank transfer. Donations are always most useful so thank you if you have done this.

Hopefully we will continue our sensitive and careful clearing and maintenance of this lovely place.

Thank you for your support.

William Coleman

News from Markstakes.....

Recent finds on the Common Bryophytes, boreholes, a bug and a slime mould

On 1 March I led a meeting of the South East Group of the British Bryological Society on the Common. After months of rain we were lucky to have a more or less dry day, with only a brief shower dampening us. Ten people came and for some of them it was their first bryological field meeting so there was a lot of interest in even the common mosses and liverworts. The Common already had a good list of 66 mosses and liverworts but I was sure that with 10 pairs of eyes we could find more of these tiny plants. Sure enough, we added 7 and now the total for the Common is up to 73. One of the more interesting new finds was a lovely moss *Pleurozium schreberi* whose bright red stems are a very distinctive feature. It avoids calcareous or base-rich habitats and is most often found among grass and heather on heathlands and in open heathy woods as well as in bogs.

There is just one patch of it in the grassland of what we call The Mire (formerly an old clay pit). This area was overgrown with birch, willow and bramble and almost impenetrable when the Friends started management work there 10 years ago and now it is one of the most interesting places on the Common with many grassland and marsh plants having colonised.

There were many other mosses to capture the interest of the participants. One of the old beech trees was covered in sheets of a tiny moss called *Zygodon viridissimus* (Green Yoke-moss) whose leaves are only 1.5 mm long.



Some of the keen photographers (see picture above) spend some time trying to capture close-up images of this minute species.



Red stemmed feather moss *Pleurozium schreberi*

Mosses weren't the only attraction for keen photographers. Michael Funnell sent me this shot of a bug on an oak tree.



Tremulicerus vitreus
(photograph: Michael Funnell).

He sought some help with identification after the meeting and found that it was *Tremulicerus vitreus* (another name for it is *Idiocerus vitreus*).

It is a leafhopper (about 5 mm long) and is associated with poplars and willows. The adults are said to overwinter on conifers. Quite near where this was photographed is a group of Sitka Spruce, which may be where this adult came from.

A highlight of the day was finding 30 rosettes of Early Purple Orchid (*Orchis mascula*).



Some weeks previously when the Friends were engaged in 'weeding' what we call the Crescent Glade in the northern part of the Common we were drawn to a young oak tree with rows of regular small holes and I suggested that they were made by a woodpecker after the sap (something that the late Oliver Rackham had told me on a course he was running years ago). But we weren't that convinced.

So, I took the opportunity of asking my fellow bryologists for their ideas. No definitive answers

arose, with suggestions ranging from bird activity to insect damage.



Oak with horizontal rows of holes probably drilled by a Great spotted woodpecker.

After the meeting I looked up woodpeckers in Oliver Rackham's *Woodlands* (Collins New Naturalist series, 2006). He wrote that a 'now familiar sight is a small tree trunk with horizontal rows round the circumference, sometimes repeated from top to bottom. Americans recognise these as the work of sapsuckers, a genus of woodpecker-like birds that peck holes in trees and then come back and lick up the exuding sap. Sapsuckers, however, are absent from Europe'. He went on to say that the trees most affected are young specimens of lime, elm and oak with a nearly smooth bark and that the holes are soon overgrown by new annual rings, but scars persist for many years. He suggests that the damage is caused by the great spotted woodpecker and that it is curious that such a conspicuous activity was not noticed in bird or forestry books down the centuries. He himself first noticed it in the 1970s but there are records in the 1930s from Central Europe. He wondered if woodpeckers in Britain had only recently taken to sapsucking.

The holes generated a good deal of email correspondence after the meeting with Nevil Hutchinson sending me a link to a book by the RSPB (*Spotlight Woodpeckers*), which stated that, although great spotted woodpeckers in mainland

Europe drill holes to sip sap, it is unlikely this happens in Britain. But then David Streeter alerted me to page 860 in Volume IV of *Handbook of the Birds of Europe, The Middle East and North Africa: The Birds of the Western Palearctic, Terns to Woodpeckers*. In the section on the feeding habits of the great spotted woodpecker, they drill rings of holes round trees (ringing) to drink sap oozing out, or possibly also to eat exposed cambium.

This habit is stated to be rare in Britain. Ringing starts in early March and goes on until April and sporadically after. At first the bird drills low down on the trunk, later higher up as sap rises, and drinks the sap as it runs into the lower mandible. It visits old holes before drilling new ones.

Chosen trees are usually young but older trees are also used. In the latter case rings may not go all the way round the trunk but are concentrated on the sunny side where sap rises fastest.

So, I think we can be sure that this is happening on Markstakes Common and it will be interesting if we find other trees with evidence of this activity.



On a recent work-party day on Markstakes we found this slime mould on a standing dead wood.

It is *Reticularia lycoperdon* (alternative name *Enteridium lycoperdon*). Slime

moulds (Myxomycetes) belonging to a primitive group of fungi, most of which live on dead or rotting wood. This photograph shows the vegetative stage (about 10 cm in diameter). It will eventually break down to reveal a reddishbrown spore mass.

Jacqui Hutson.

HAWTHORNS

Crataegus monogyna

The Common Hawthorn is usually recognisable by its more upright growth forming a twiggy mass of stiff branches and the leaves being deeply lobed, with spreading lobes, and many small flowers having just one style, and producing one stone, more rounded than the Midland Hawthorn.

The common hawthorn is a shrub or small tree 5–14 metres (15 to 45 feet) tall, with a dense crown. The bark is dull brown with vertical orange cracks. It is widespread in Britain – not well adapted to shade.



The younger stems bear sharp thorns. The leaves are 20 to 40 mm (1 to 1½ inches) long, obovate and deeply lobed, at least half-way to the midrib, with the lobes spreading at a wide angle, and toothed at the tips. The upper surface is dark green above and paler underneath.

Crataegus laevigata

The Midland Hawthorn is a large shrub or small tree, smaller and bushy in the wild but in parks can be as large as the Common. The leaves are slightly less glossy, lobed to less than half-way to the midrib and the main vein curves upward.



There are fewer but larger flowers and flowers earlier in the Spring. There are two styles producing two stones/fruit and the fruit is more oval than the Common.

The Midland is less common in Britain, often on heavier soil. It is found mostly in woodland – being more shade tolerant and will grow under trees.

The two species can hybridise.

William Coleman

From our Specialist Advisor Lewes DC and Eastbourne BC

In the current situation, with the very important emphasis on staying in and social distancing, can I remind everyone how important the daily exercise aspect of the government guidance is. A connection with nature including walking or other exercise in natural places has been shown in numerous studies to be good for health especially mental health. You do not have to go to Markstakes Common to experience nature. The RSPB are running ‘#breakfast birdwatch’ on twitter where people are telling each other what they can see in their gardens or on their daily exercise outing in the morning.

If this takes you to Markstakes Common, could you report anything untoward to me please. There are no longer site visits by Lewes District Council staff except in response to reports of health and safety,

crime or animal welfare issues. You should not drive somewhere to exercise if there is somewhere within walking distance. I imagine most of the Friends, being local to the Chailey/Newick area, have places to safely get outdoors within walking distance so you should only go to Markstakes Common if it is within walking distance or it is unsafe to exercise nearer your home

I am also interested in interesting wildlife sightings at Markstakes Common. So, I would love to receive those to by email too.

Email: thyone.outram@lewes-easbourne.gov.uk
Mobile: 07966 645048

And a final reminder: when walking in the countryside remember that a lot of people touch the gates and stiles. Please take care not to transmit Covid 19 though this route.

Thyone Outram

*Specialist Advisor (Downland and Nature Reserves)
Lewes District Council and Eastbourne Borough
Council*

Dates for the Diary

Monday Weekly (most Mondays)

This is our regular volunteer group time to meet.

Please do not come along at the present time (April 2020) but wait until the current government restrictions for COVID – 19 are over.

Email – markstakes@chaileycommons.org.uk

