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Events

**** Work parties:** Meet at The Scout Hall, Greens Farm Lane at 10.30. Tools/gloves provided – wear old clothing and wellies or water proof boots

Saturday 11th July: Butterfly Walk – meet at 10:30 am Scout hut

Saturday 8th August: Work Party – meet at 10:30 am Scout hut

August: the popular Bat and Moth evening
- date to be confirmed

Saturday 12th September: Work Party

Saturday 10th October: Work Party

Saturday 14th November: Our popular family event – the Fungus Foray. Look for waxcaps and other species and get them identified by an expert

Chairmans Report

The Red Poll cattle command much of our attention again this summer. We were given a light-hearted and informative talk by Ray Bowler, the Secretary of the Red Poll Society, at our AGM this year. And at the time of writing we have 23 heifers or calves on the Meadows which are checked daily by volunteers on our rota. We have increased the number of checkers by 3 but we can always use more in case of future retirements so if you want to be an 'apprentice' this year and join one of our checkers occasionally please get in touch.

During my recent Sunday check the usual transition into mid-summer was evident. Bird song was much reduced, being the occasional blast from a Song Thrush, Blackcap, or Whitethroat, a handful of Swifts hawked overhead but butterflies were much more evident (see Chris's report, below).

Vandalism

One of the sadder aspects of summer trends is the slight increase in vandalism and litter. The iconic Marked Trail post in Cumborrow needs replacing now and the warm weather seems to have encouraged an overnight party with all material being left, including a discarded tent.

Mill Meadows is intended for quiet recreation which, in my definition, doesn't include parties. However we don't want to stop young people getting together in the outdoors –quite the opposite. We just want them to leave The Meadows as they found it and not break posts or rip branches off trees and we want them to take their litter home. If you know any people that do gather on Mill Meadows please could you politely ask them to do that. And also that they please don't throw things at the cattle or tease them, which has happened on a few occasions recently.

If you do witness any acts of vandalism it should be reported to Essex Police on 101 unless there is a serious incident e.g. a fire in which case use the emergency number.

Ponds and Tadpoles

We have had superb numbers of tadpoles this year in the ponds. So much so that one member of the public reported a concern that many were dying as the pond next to The Scout Hall dried out.

Ponds do dry out in their natural state, in some years more quickly than others. In some ponds the timing of spawn laying and the rate of drying out will allow a high survival, in others it won't. Natural selection will mean that frogs will avoid ponds that have a propensity to dry out earlier or better still will lay the spawn earlier in those ponds. A good year for tadpoles will mean higher mortality rates. This does create more food for



animals higher up the food chain. I am not suggesting we deliberately let the pond dry out. But embedded within wildlife conservation is a stimulation of species lower down the chain. For example we coppice hedges to increase invertebrates which are food for birds, reptiles and small mammals, and in the wider countryside we try to promote long grass to increase the vole population that in turn boosts owl and kestrel numbers.

I admit to topping up my garden pond but in a nature reserve we do tend to let nature take its course. But if you are passing a pond with tadpoles struggling in a small pool of water please feel free to net some of the tadpoles and translocate them to another pond on the Meadows. At the Scout Hall, the one on the north side of the fence retains its water longer so the tadpoles will have higher chance of survival – as long as they can avoid the Grass Snakes!

Neil Sumner, Neilsumner123@aol.com

Rangers Report – Spring 2015

As it's now too warm outside for my liking, it's probably appropriate to call this my 'summer report' (some people are never happy!). Nevertheless, with the cattle now back in the meadows and regular butterfly transect walks being conducted, it's probably not inappropriate, and I'm sure I'll change my tune come February.

There are currently (as the cattle counters know) 23 animals of various sizes grazing the 'non-SSSI' parts of the reserve, where they will be staying until at least mid-July, when we'll assess the situation in conjunction with the grazier. I'd like the cattle to remain outside the SSSI for a while after that, so the later flowering plants get a chance to do their stuff, but I have to be conscious of the need to reduce the sward height sufficiently by the end of the season, and also that the cattle put on sufficient weight to keep the grazier happy.

Butterfly numbers are just beginning to increase again after the late spring quiet period, with

summer species like Meadow Brown and Ringlet beginning to emerge. Overall, numbers do seem to be down this year. By week 13 (end of June) last year we had recorded 389 butterflies, whereas this year the total is only 129 (there are a couple of weeks left to report on though). By the same time last year we had recorded 15 species, against the 12 so far this year. The missing ones are Large Skipper, Ringlet and Painted Lady, the first two of which only started to be recorded in week 12 last year, so may just be a little late, and there are reported to be unusually high numbers of Painted Lady in southern Europe, from where the spread to Britain during the summer, so we could be in for good numbers of them shortly.

We had a successful wild flower walk (despite the weather) a couple of weeks ago. Sightings included the beginnings of the show of Heath spotted-orchids (now probably at their peak), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil, Oxeye Daisy, and the occasional Meadow Vetchling, along with several examples of the marvellously named Corky-fruited Water-dropwort. I've also been trying to keep an eye on some of the species we have that are significant in Essex, to make sure we manage for them appropriately. For Mill Meadows these are mostly later flowering species, but as well as the orchids and water-dropwort, I've managed to locate Ivy-leaved Water-crowfoot and Water whorl grass, both of which seem to be doing OK in their known location, right next to each other in the muddy 'pond' in Oakfield, so that's an area we need to keep an eye on.

You may have noticed some tree work taking place on some of the trees around the reserve. This is as the result of a safety survey I had done, and is now almost complete. Incidentally, the tree surgeon who did the work says the ash in the corner of Bottom Mead, is the biggest ash he has ever climbed, so we clearly have a notable example there. There are also a number of bench and fence repairs to be done, and I'm hoping to organise a work party to sort these out shortly. There may be a bit of a delay on the replacement benches though, until the tree safety work I need to get done at Norsey Wood produces material of a suitable size.



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Many thanks for your continued support. Enjoy the rest of the summer!

Chris Huggins

June 2015

Countryside Ranger, Basildon Council

Plantlife is a national charity and is campaigning about the management of roadside grass verges for wildlife. Basildon Council already has many sites throughout the borough where mowing is sympathetic to wildlife. However if you know an area that might benefit with a change to the existing mowing regime then visit the website for more details -

<http://www.plantlife.org.uk/roadvergecampaign>

Benches in Mill Meadows

The Mill Meadows management committee reviewed the location and condition of each of the current benches. As mentioned in the rangers report 4 new benches will be installed. Two are replacing existing benches in unsatisfactory condition and two will be new locations. Some rarely used benches will not be replaced.



(picture by Peter Croot)

High Force by Ken Williamson

During a recent holiday in North Yorks I took the opportunity to visit High Force, Teesdale in neighbouring County Durham. I remember visiting the waterfall during my geography A level field trip in the 1960s but the details, understandably were a bit vague. We parked at the Bowlees visitor centre and then started on the 2 to 3 kilometre walk through the edge of hay meadows with the sound of rushing water a constant reminder of what lay ahead.

The landscape of the river course is defined by the beds of soft limestone and sandstone and the much harder igneous whin-sill formed when molten rocks solidified underground. Glaciers, glacial meltwater and modern rivers have carved valleys exposing the rock layers but when reaching the hard sill layers the pace of erosion is checked. The first dramatic example was at Low Force, a series of small waterfalls. The next section of the walk the meadows produced a glorious display of wildflowers and indeed the area is renowned for the plants usually associated with alpine meadows. I was lucky to see 3 types of orchid, globe flowers, a mimulus hybrid, water avens, shrubby cinquefoil, watermint, (alpine?) bistort, lousewort and mountain pansy. Stopping to look around at the birdlife I wished I had my binoculars as curlews were calling overhead, lapwings were nearby in the meadow, wagtails and dippers were feeding in the river. Later an oyster catcher and plover were added to the list. Finally we left the river behind to climb to the road and then descend the entrance path to the falls. High Force is still and impressive sight and a fitting finale to a brilliant walk that I recommend if you are in the area.

The return journey was just as pleasurable and was followed by hot soup in the visitor centre where we checked our sightings and noted other records for ring-ouzel, short-eared owl, sandpiper, lesser redpoll, snipe and redstarts. Suitably refreshed we looked out over the dales and moor land and the white-washed field barns, then curtains of rain began to sweep across the valley -time to return to the car park.



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Greens Farm as recalled by Betty Jacobsen.

This farm was the home of Philip and Ada Watts and their family from the 1930's until 1970 and the land now forms part of the Mill Meadows reserve. They were tenant farmers, the owners being the Ward family who lived in Lockers Hall, which still stands at the top of Bell Hill. The land was eventually held by Metropolitan Railway Company with a view to development. Betty is the grand-daughter of Philip and Ada, and though her parents had moved out by the time she was born, she recalls visiting the family home "I can remember a few cows for milk, pens of young cattle, and pigs and chickens". The farmhouse was originally a pair of weather boarded semis that eventually became one house with a pebble-dashed finish. Upstairs each property had a main bedroom with an adjoining bedroom down a step. There were no mains facilities, only an outhouse with a board, and a bucket underneath! Water had to be drawn from the well (which is still there to this day) and oil lamps were the only means of light. Enquiries regarding supplying electricity to the farmhouse proved too costly. Betty remembers not wanting to use the outhouse (for obvious reasons!) but choosing to walk to the public toilets in Chapel Street instead!



The pictures show the vandalised remains of Greens Farm prior to it being demolished.



The neighbouring farms were Hurlocks Farm, run by George Butcher and his son Norman, who was the local milkman for many years, and Snails Hall Farm, on whose land the Zeppelin crashed in WW1. Both these farms still exist, Hurlocks farmhouse stands opposite the chapel in Greens Farm Lane, and Snails Hall farmhouse is at the junction of Greens Farm Lane and Outwood Common Road. There was a milestone in Greens Farm Lane (then part of Jacksons Lane) and the adjacent field was called Milestone Meadow (now the Birds estate) which the local children abbreviated to Milly Meadows.



The corky-fruited water dropwort -see rangers report.



The ivy-leaved water-crowfoot.

Redpoll Beef for Sale

The Red Poll Cattle on Mill Meadows are managed by The Red Poll Society and owned by The Essex Grazing Project within Essex County Council. The Project are now selling their own beef.

Details about when and where you can buy it can be found on

<http://www.essexgrazing.org.uk/beef>

where you can also read about the wider aims of the project: conserving scarce grassland wildlife, training young apprentices and offering volunteering opportunities to local communities.

The local butcher who sells the beef it is: **PM Andrews**, 5 Downham Road Ramsden Heath. CM11 1PU 01268 710453. Email the chairman for a price list.

Our Ranger, Chris, is considering organising the following training course, depending on demand:

- *Wildflower Identification for Beginners*

looking at basic flower structure, introduction to some botanical terms and using this to use identification keys.

- *Introduction to Woodland Management*

an overview of different methods, how a coppice woodland can be managed with biodiversity in mind.

If you are interested please contact Chris

- Which course
- If a weekday or Saturday would suit you best
- Day or half day
- Any aspects of either you are particularly interested in



Damselflies and Dragonflies ¹

July, the height of summer, is a good time to see damselflies and dragonflies. There is an aspect of wonder with these creatures, life-forms that evolved so successfully in ancient times that they have hardly changed since. These colourful insects haunt ponds and rivers but also roam across country. The damselflies disperse more by how the breeze takes them, but the dragonfly's powerful flight takes them several kilometres away from where they emerged, as they search for mates and other water bodies. On the way they snatch gnats and flies out of the air by arranging their six legs as a 'catching basket' and transferring the tasty morsel to their jaws whilst on the wing!

Garden ponds are good to give you close-up views and to study their life history. The damselfly emerges after spending one or two years under water bottom feeding on the tiny aquatic mini-beasties that sail past them. But some dragonflies can remain as a larvae for up to five years before emerging. During that time the larva is a ferocious predator of tadpoles and newtlets. Once emerged, they may only live for six weeks.

A garden pond will need to be around 5x3 metres to attract breeding dragonflies but as little as 1 metre square to host breeding damselflies. They need vegetation bordering the pond so when they emerge at night as larvae they have something to climb to undergo a metamorphosis into adulthood. This stage is rarely witnessed, but the dried skins on the vegetation can often be seen after the event. It is amazing how the adult is so much larger than the envelope it has emerged from!

In the British Isles we have around 42 species of damsel and dragonflies but probably 20 within our part of Essex. Generally, they are on the wing from mid-May to early October with some

colonizer species appearing first and then others emerging as summer progresses



. Damselflies and dragonflies are effectively powered by the sun and become more active when the temperature is very warm and there is little breeze about.

Typical species of damselfly for our area on still water are Azure Damselfly, Large Red Damselfly (see picture), Red-eyed Damselfly and Blue-tailed



Damselfly. Over slow moving rivers the Banded Demoiselle is a joy and can occur in great numbers throughout June and July. The typical dragonflies are Four-spotted Chaser, Broad-bodied Chaser, Emperor, Southern Hawker (see picture), Common and Ruddy Darter. Since a couple of years ago, the Migrant Hawker has invaded from the continent and is now a regular breeder, often swarming above woodland clearings in significant numbers.

If you want to know more about these insects, there are several excellent field guides available. Close focusing binoculars are also recommended to sort out the small details of the differences between some species.

John Smart

¹ This article appeared in this month's *AroundTown* magazine and should have been credited to John Smart!



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