

Orchid Glade: February 2015 report

More signs of spring

February 8th, and in places the Orchid Glade resembles a riverside water meadow. The pond overflows after every rainfall, and water spreads across the swards of mosses and sedges. One week ago this standing water was ice, and any exposed soil was frozen hard. Today, the sun reflects off brimming ruts and puddles, and the Reserve is squishy from end to end. Peering into puddles, it is plain that the myriad seedlings and new leaves below the surface are in good shape: down there, they can develop in the sunlight through the clear water, and they are safe from nibbling deer, rabbits and hares. Just as important, they are insulated from the lethal effects of frost that would kill the tender new leaves. I can see new leaves of St John's wort, and corn mint.

The dangling catkins of alder are moving in the breeze. They are wind-pollinated, so they can flower early in the year, long before most insects are on the wing. The catkins of alders, hazel, poplars and birch trail down from the twigs, and in this vertical position the wind will easily waft their pollen into the air. I wish I knew more about mosses. The reserve in its present semi-flooded state is clearly paradise for them, and we know that at least 40 species are present, on the strength of a single survey last year by Richard Fisk. Ferns however appear to be almost absent from the Orchid Glade. Their main needs are woodland shade, moisture and humidity, and although the reserve has plenty of trees, the sole fern in the reserve appears to be the adder's tongue that Julia McLean showed me last year. This fern is a reliable indicator of old, undisturbed grassland. To find it in the Orchid Glade makes a telling point about the probable origins of the Reserve: once, it was probably an open pasture or hay

meadow. The young trees that throng the site at the moment are recent, and perhaps do not yet provide the humidity and shady woodland habitat that ferns require.

A cock pheasant just exploded into the air and made me jump. Wing-whirring, violent action and loud calls of alarm are apparently its aggressive defence ploy: the bird wants to intimidate an intruder by the hullabaloo, and it definitely works! A woodcock silently flies up and away — its plumage looks like a carpet of dead leaves as it jinks and zigzags away through the trees and out of danger. A different bird, and a different defence plan.

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