

## **Orchid Glade: April 2015 report**

### **Grazers, browsers and nibblers**

It's the 12<sup>th</sup> of April. The sun is beating down on the Orchid Glade, and much is happening on the reserve. Where to start? For me, as a plant recorder, two things really stand out — the density of the tightly packed carpet of plants that clothe the soggy ground all around the reserve, and the fact that there is an almost total absence of flowers. The sole exception is ground ivy, a handsome little flower in the mint family. It is rich in aromatic oils that taste bad to rabbits, and so they don't eat it. Their loss is the gain of the bee fly — a wonderful, furry little fly with transparent wings and a long proboscis that it uses in exactly the same way a hummingbird uses its bill: I watch it hover, and then probe for nectar deep into the throat of the ground-ivy flower.

Grazers, browsers and nibblers exert year-round pressure in the Orchid Glade. The reserve may resemble woodland, but I suspect it was once a meadow, and most of the plants are meadow species that overwinter as basal rosettes — a useful adaptation that protects foliage from hungry animals at a time when grazing pressure is high. In May, June and July, the plants develop the superb blaze of colour that we know so well.

Six fallow deer have just spotted me: they clear a four-foot barbed wire fence as only deer can, and are gone. All winter I have followed their 'slots' in the soft soil. They seem to have a real preference for young growth regenerating from the stumps of trees felled by the Trust. The small herd perambulates around the reserve, following the cleared strips adjacent to the new perimeter fence. This is excellent: scrub control on the hoof, and just what the reserve needs.

The numbers of young, self-sown ash saplings that grow in such astonishing density always staggers me. Their sheer numbers mean that in time, virtually all will die through overcrowding. Looking around, I see that many are dead on the ground: the casualty rate will accelerate as Ash Dieback disease tightens its grip in the thickets.

I see peacock butterflies, un-nameable hoverflies and bumblebees, seven-spot ladybird and — wow — a fox! He has a fine, bushy brush, and pads off in no hurry at all. Over at the pond, the water level laps the surrounding grasses and rushes, as it has all winter. Like drunken dodgem cars, whirligig beetles hurtle on the surface in crazy patterns, and I can see many unknown diving beetles cruising in the depths. No tadpoles: have ducks eaten all the frog spawn?

Young plants at my feet include the woolly rosettes of spear and marsh thistle, hairy St John's wort, and field forget me not: they are close to a patch of brilliant green moss. Today, three plants are new to reserve records: wood dog violet, hairy bittercress, common cat's ear.

*Laurie Forsyth*