

Fromus Reserve: May 2015 report

The meadows are alive again

It's May 5th, and the little river Fromus looks sprightly after last night's rain. It rushes through the low meadows and dives beneath the A12. In the meadows, the grasses are getting into their stride. Sweet vernal grass — the grass that releases that wonderful hayfield scent when it is cut — and meadow foxtail are leading the field, and they will be followed by Yorkshire fog, cocksfoot, Timothy and crested dog's tail. A dozen others will arise in the meadows and be part of our hay crop in July.

Before then though, the Fromus reserve meadows will be awash in a golden sea. Already, I have to watch my step to avoid crushing the first bulbous buttercups, and I can see the handsome, geranium-like leaves of meadow buttercup nestling in the grass sward. It is going to be a good year for cuckoo flowers, or lady's smock, or milkmaids, or whichever old country name you prefer. The botanical names for plants are essential for accuracy, but they are dry and colourless compared to the names that have come down to us from the past. Shepherds in the Bigod's Kelsale Park would have had names for all the wild flowers being munched by their flocks.

The bright blue spears of bugle show in the small meadow — the only colony we have, I think. Lusty false oxlips, primroses and cowslips are flowering beside a path that one of our Guardians has christened The Divine Path. It twists and turns through the trees in its struggle to follow the river running through the Gorge. Swathes of lesser celandine gleam in the half-shade cast by the young leaves overhead, and I can hear blackcap, wren, blackbird and song thrush singing. Beside the path is a small patch of wood speedwell. It too exists in just one place in the reserve: it has heart-shaped pale green leaves and small, lilac flowers. And here is perhaps the most beautiful of our speedwells — germander (or bird's eye) speedwell with its duller green leaves, but astonishingly bright blue flowers. Aquatic plants flourish in a variety of habitats. Pondweeds, branched bur-reed and water plantain abound in the circular pond, whilst thread-leaved water crowfoot is happy in a temporary puddle that may be doomed to dry out next week.

Management work to retain our full acreage of grassland and thus be eligible for future grants under Higher Level Stewardship unavoidably created disturbance in the winter. The bare ground is being rapidly recolonised. Usually, the species that quickly cover the ground are the same ones that lived there before, but seeds can lie buried in the soil and remain viable for a long time. Very often, surprises can occur, and we should all keep an eye on the bare ground in the hope of adding new species to our lists.

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