

Fromus meadows: June 2015 report

Flowers + grass = hay

June 9th, and there is a bright golden haze in the meadow. Swathes of buttercups are tossed by a wind that is so cold, it is hard to believe that Midsummer's Day is almost on us. The growth of grasses in the meadows has been intense since April. Although the weather has been chilly, we have had enough sun and rain to stimulate the 15 or more grasses that combine with wild flowers to make the hay that will be cut in July. One meadow is especially rich in meadow foxtails, which bow their elegant heads and long stems to every slight breeze. The swaying grasses and meadow buttercups are reaching for the sun, and beneath them the grass is decorated with the small white stars of lesser stitchwort, and the last flowers of cuckoo flower. Different species appear to dominate patches of grass in the meadows. Red fescue, crested dogstail, Yorkshire fog, meadow foxtail and sweet vernal grass form distinct patches of their own. The very first flowers of dog rose are already showing in the hedges. When I come again, it will be nearly time to cut the hay.

The frothy white clumps of cow parsley and pignut are fading before our eyes: in the seasonal succession of umbellifer flowers, now is the moment when rough chervil and common hogweed step onstage. The first is a fragile and refined version of cow parsley, whilst hogweed is a hefty thug, although fully redeemed by its enormous value to insects.

Just a few days without rain in summer are enough to stop the River Fromus dead in its bed, and it is now reduced to a series of pools. The water level in the long pond has also fallen, exposing mud that is already drying out. Overhead, I can hear a blackcap singing in the mistletoe'd field maple, and a common whitethroat is scratching out his brief song nearby. Great tits are combing the leaves of a large oak in search of caterpillars and spiders for their nestlings.

The circular pond in Moon Meadow is one of my regular stopping places. Several swallows swoop low over the water for insects as I watch, and the pond surface is dappled with shining leaves of a pondweed. Creeping thistles on the banks are adorned with cuckoo spit froth made by the larva of a frog-hopper insect. I can see clumps of spike rush, and a single, large hop sedge.

A small shallow puddle in a depression made by tractor wheels has several plants of pink water speedwell – already recorded here, but a new species for me. Amazingly, the green, hard sloes of blackthorn are already well formed. Bare soil that was scraped last year to remove scrub is now almost fully recarpeted with green: the work appears to have triggered a small invasion of a yellow-flowered rape-like plant that may turn out to be wild turnip. The field guide I am reading says it loves bare soil on a riverbank: we shall see.

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