

Fromus Meadows: July 2015 report

It's almost time to cut the hay

The meadows are a sea of tall grass. It is July 8th, and if this weather holds the hay crop will soon be cut. How many summers have seen haymaking on these old meadows — and how many hay-makers? For centuries, seed, soil, sun and rain have yielded hay crops here, and the essence of summer is locked within the wild flowers and grasses in the meadows. No two summers have been identical. This month, meadow foxtail, Yorkshire fog, cocksfoot, meadow barley, yellow oatgrass, red fescue, false oatgrass, crested dogstail, southern marsh orchids, cuckoo flowers, ragged robin and all the buttercups will be reduced to stalks — a stubble that holds memories of the Summer of 2015. Dark clouds loom overhead, so fingers are crossed.

Invertebrates — especially insects — have to be warm to function, so butterflies and moths are happy today. I have seen ringlet, speckled wood, small tortoiseshells and a pair of mating meadow browns. Several large skippers are flitting amongst the stems of meadow foxtail, and five-spot burnet moths are lumbering from one thistle flower to the next. They are handsome in red and black, and poisonous to birds: their colours are a warning, so they can fly during the day without risk of being eaten. Immunity from predation may even explain their poor flight performance: perhaps they just fly no better than they need to. The caterpillars of burnet moths feed on bird's-foot trefoil, whilst the adult moths feed on the nectar of thistles, knapweed and daisies.

Grasshoppers, small spiders and unknown small moths are active in tufted vetch, which is entangled with the grasses. A male thick-knee flower beetle clammers inside a dog rose flower in search of pollen. Creeping thistle, prickly sowthistle, dock and nettle cover the disturbed ground where machines scraped the riverbank and cleared scrub last year. They are all valuable to insects, but the Trust will need to prevent these invasive species from moving into the adjacent hay crops. Nearby, statuesque teasels rear above the grasses. Where each pair of opposite leaves join the stem there is a watertight seal where small pools of rainwater and dew accumulate. Often, insects tumble into the pools and drown: when you peer closely, you can see the water is cloudy — soup-like in fact. Does the teasel absorb the nutritious brew? It seems not, say

experts, although the plant makes it easier for insects to drown by somehow reducing the water surface tension in its little pools.

The water level in the ponds is falling. A blue/green species of hawk dragonfly is laying eggs directly into the water of the Long Pond by dipping her abdomen, and many pairs of mating damselflies are flying 'in tandem.' In Moon Meadow, four species of rush are flowering in the Round Pond. Tall stems of tufted hair-grass are shimmering in the sun — this is a magnificent grass — and the purple flowers of marsh thistle are attracting hoverflies and flower beetles. Species new to reserve records today are ox-eye daisy, amphibious bistort, fool's watercress, celery-leaved buttercup, wild oat, reed canary grass, marsh foxtail and yellow oatgrass. It's been a good day, capped by a gift from above — a feather dropped by a passing kestrel.

Laurie Forsyth