

July 2015 report for the Orchid Glade

It's a great summer for plantlife

Recent spells of hot sun and abrupt rainstorms have done wonders for the ground flora of the Orchid Glade since I was last here. It is July 7th, and nearly all the southern marsh orchids and common twayblade orchids are seeding and all but invisible in the welter of vigorous growth surrounding them.

The slender yellow flower spikes of common agrimony are piercing the green carpet, and corn sowthistle is displaying its sunburst yellow disks. Square-stemmed St John's wort, hairy St John's wort, nipplewort and common bird's-foot trefoil are also in flower: all these species are early precursors of the wave of yellow that will engulf the nature reserve in August, when fleabane and hoary ragwort get into their stride. It would be interesting to know whether the variety of insects in the Orchid Glade is influenced by, or attributable to, the super-abundance of yellow in summer. Grey, biting flies called clegs are homing in on me.

Insects are active today in warm, windless areas of the reserve. Bramble grows on the large clay mound beside the pond, and many butterflies are attracted to the white flowers. Ringlet, meadow brown, gatekeeper and large skipper butterflies flit among the tall grasses and arching bramble stems, and shimmering damselflies lay eggs into the pond. There are several fine plants of marsh woundwort visible – just – among the brambles: it would be best if the Trust cleared the enveloping bramble off the mound as it is likely to suppress the woundwort, and also southern marsh orchids.

Given the marsh-like nature of parts of the Orchid Glade, it is not surprising that mosses and sedges are so abundant. Wood sedge continues to spread near the pond, and also false fox sedge. Hard rush is producing tussocky clumps in the wet clay beside the pond. A strange-looking plant with stems clothed in soft grey down is hoary willowherb. Another willowherb nearby has a stem that is red, not grey: a quick dip into the field guide – it is square-stemmed willowherb, and a new record for the reserve.

Corn mint –recognisable by its acrid scent – has flower buds yet to open, but common centaury and selfheal are in full flower. Patches of white clover flowers are a’buzz with bumblebees. Scattered here and there is black medick, with its clusters of bright yellow peaflowers. Red bartsia is flowering in patches of bare clay where there is little competition. It is an attractive plant in its understated way, and interesting too, because it prefers soil with low fertility, and it is semi-parasitic. What nutrients it can’t find in the soil it will take from its neighbours, via their root systems. As usual, marsh thistles will eventually grow to overtop the other plants here, and draw insects from all over the Orchid Glade.

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