

August 2015 report for the Orchid Glade

Summer heat

August 10th, and the Orchid Glade is sweltering. The heat is exactly what the insects need, and before I have opened the gate, I can see a holly blue butterfly flitting amongst the ivy leaves tangled in the blackthorn. Definitely a good omen for my visit. The holly blue has two broods: caterpillars of the spring brood feed on holly, but the second brood needs ivy, and the butterfly I am watching is selecting ivy leaves for her eggs. Unlike the common blue, which also lives in the Orchid Glade, the holly blue flies high around shrubs and trees, and it is also a wanderer: the common blue doesn't stray far from bird's foot trefoil, its main caterpillar food plant. This seems to be a good year for the holly blue. It is a butterfly renowned for population cycles of boom, followed by bust. A small ichneumon wasp parasitises the caterpillar, and in some years their numbers are high enough to cause numbers of the holly blue to crash. The wasp is solely dependent upon holly blue caterpillars, so when this happens, the wasp population inevitably must crash as well, which allows the butterfly to recover for a few years.

Within a few minutes, I have seen peacock butterflies, and also gatekeeper, common blue, large white and meadow brown. Nectar — the sweet substance that plants use to attract pollinating insects to their flowers — is overflowing as a food resource today, and the Orchid Glade is just a huge café. Bees of several species, plus hoverflies, flower beetles, ladybirds and day-flying moths are busy in the sheets of common fleabane that are dotted with the equally yellow flowers of square-stemmed St John's wort, hoary ragwort and agrimony. I walk through the pink of common centaury and red bartsia, and the purple of knapweed and spear thistle. The level of the pond is sinking: evaporation must be high on a day like this. Fluffy willow seeds lie on the mirror-surface of the water, which catches the reflection of damselflies and dragonflies as they dart about. Deer have been drinking from the pond and I can see their slots in the drying mud around the edges.

The willows are not the only plants to cast their seeds to the wind in fluffy bundles. In the heat today, just touching the seeding heads of creeping thistle is enough to set the seeds off on their journey to find a nice, bare patch of earth in your flowerbeds. Corn mint is flowering near the pond. Its whorls of acrid-scented flowers are already seeding into the damp, shaded ground beneath the willows. Nearby — a single plant of compact rush, which is a species new to the reserve records.

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