

SFPT Fromus Meadows October report

Autumn in the meadows

October 21st, and the Fromus meadows are sparkling beneath a bright blue sky. I have seen few flowers today, and it is the hedges that now provide colour. Juicy golden bullace fruits hang overhead, and colourful leaves of field maple are reflected in the Long Pond. Autumn is the time when you can really grasp the importance of the dense, broad hedgerows to birds, insects and mammals. We know they are very old. In the countryside 'old' usually equates to something that is of considerable value to wildlife, be it a single veteran oak, a disused farm pond, a hay meadow or a hedgerow, so our Fromus nature reserve scores highly right across the board. Today, as if to emphasise the point, the hedges are alive with birds drawn to the oak acorns, ash 'keys', blackberries, rose hips, hawthorn berries, sloes, honeysuckle berries, and the seeds and nuts of several other trees and shrubs. This year we have recorded nineteen tree/shrub species — testament to the age of the hedgerows where, as a rule of thumb, one species colonises a 30-metre length of hedge each century. Our oldest hedge could be close to 800 years old.

A good hedgerow for wildlife is three-dimensional, and its height, width and breadth all contribute to its value to wildlife. As a bonus, our Fromus hedges are also long, and they interconnect, which provides a corridor for birds, mammals and insects to move around the reserve. Some also link with farm hedges on adjacent land outside the reserve, so a two-way traffic is going on that must benefit genetic diversity in the Fromus meadows. A wildlife island with poor contact with the outside will eventually lose species and become less diverse. At Fromus meadows you can see one of the best wildlife corridors in Suffolk, where the dense hedges either side of the River Fromus in the lower meadows move upstream and open out into the shaded woodland habitat of the Gorge, where they merge with other hedges. Not surprisingly, this linear feature of the reserve is where I have seen red deer, muntjac, badger, grey squirrel and very many bird species. Today — joy! — I have just seen a male bullfinch. Glowing pink and perched on the topmost twig of a hawthorn, he is my first for several years.

A fleeting wildlife boost like the bullfinch can raise your spirits for hours — and it does — but it can't quite overcome the nagging question in my mind about the flock of twenty or so birds seen earlier that suddenly burst from the short grass of one of the lower meadows and then flew out of sight. Short, damp grass is a good feeding habitat for many birds — thrushes, blackbirds, rooks, crows, starlings — but their grey appearance, size, wing beat and overall 'jzzz' suggest golden plover. We'll never know.

Laurie Forsyth