

SFPT Orchid Glade report November 2015

Waiting for winter

November 17th, and luscious-looking red berries of black bryony dangle at the entrance gate to the Orchid Glade reserve. The weather is dull and damp: nothing unusual for November, but it feels unnaturally mild. If the experts are right, this may prove to be the warmest November in England since records began. It's not evidence of climate change, but just another reminder of the increasing unpredictability of our weather. Are we on the threshold of a non-winter like last year? One thing certainly hasn't changed as I look around: even a brief wet spell is enough to make the reserve very soggy, and I can see puddles of water glinting in the ruts. At this rate the pond will soon be brimming over, and then a shallow flood will saturate the surrounding grassland and enhance it for the southern marsh orchids, marsh thistles, square St. John's wort, common fleabane, marsh woundwort and all the sedges and rushes.

Two years ago, many tree saplings were felled to increase the area of the flower-rich grassland, but instead of being removed, the cut material was left in several large piles — an expedient move at the time. They resemble small beaver dams, and the flora beneath them is probably dead. Because the piles are now old enough to have become very good mini-habitats for small mammals, and also beetles and other recycling invertebrates that live in dead wood, it would be a mistake now to remove them. The piles are a reminder that in a nature reserve, the expedient thing may sometimes also be the wrong thing.

Fallow deer have been here recently, and I have photographed some of their distinctive slots cut deep into soft soil near the pond. Their steady, low-level browsing in the reserve is welcome, but we could do with more of them. Some of the pond-side willows have been felled, and the pond suddenly seems large. As the water level rises, it will get even larger. Floating drifts of fallen willow leaves fringe the pond edge, and beneath the surface I can see a carpet of dead leaves on the bottom. They are rotting — a process that removes oxygen from the water. The Trust is working to restore the pond as a healthy, vibrant habitat attractive to wildlife, and removal of the willows is an important first stage.

Spongy moss carpets the soggy soil, and myriad seedlings promise a bonanza of flowers for us to revel in next year: bristly ox tongue seems to be the sole plant actually flowering at the moment — all three of them! Bright red hips of dog rose glow on their tangled and thorny stems, and I have photographed strange, white fingers of a small fungus growing from old stumps. Neil Mahler, our fungi recorder, tells me they are candle snuffs, and commonly found on wood decaying in the soil.

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