

SFPT Fromus report for December 2015

Can this be winter?

In their long history, Fromus meadows have seen climate change come and go several times. Some episodes have been short-term blips, but one has gone into the history books as The Little Ice Age, and it lasted for nearly two hundred years. Cool, wet summers and long, severe winters affected the farmers on the land that is now our nature reserve. They will have groaned when their crops were poor, and when the springtime grass was slow to grow in the pastures for their livestock, and their hay crops were sodden at harvest time. They must have wondered what happened to the seasons they used to have. The strange weather we are experiencing now is not direct proof of climate change, but it confirms what the meteorologists are telling us: unpredictable and occasional extreme weather may lie ahead.

The mid-winter sun will be at its lowest at noon on 21st December, and the day will be the shortest of the year. Yet today — 7th December — the sky is as blue as it gets in winter, and the sun is warm. The meadow grasses are already growing: only frost will slow them down, although there wasn't one worthy of the name last winter. A single early — or late — dandelion is in flower, but it is almost lost in the sea of grass. In the hawthorn that hangs above the brimming Long Pond I can see a round ball of mistletoe glowing in the sun. Moles are busy in the meadows, and their earthy hillocks suggest that there are lots of earthworms beneath my feet. Teasel heads, dry, brown and prickly, rear up from beside the Fromus as reminders of summer.

Blackbirds and a few redwings are taking the last of the berries in the hedgerows, and a kestrel hangs in the air, facing head-on into the wind like a feathered weather vane. Pheasants are all about me, exploding from beneath the hedges and trees, and whirring away downwind. The strange, unappetising black berries of ivy are always an attraction to wood pigeons, and the chunky birds flap and scramble among the dense growths of ivy on the trees. The large owl nest box on an oak is a great idea: the reserve looks very good for tawny and little owl, and in Summer the tall meadow grasses shelter small mammals like wood mice, bank voles and shrews — all of great interest to a hunting barn owl.

The first leaves of primrose are rapidly forming, and are a reminder of how fine the twisty path through the secluded Gorge will look in the spring. Overhead, a buzzard is silently wheeling in the breeze. Thick hedges, time worn oaks and old meadows with a small but ancient river running through them — once again, I am caught by the aura of this place, and not even the muted roar of the A12 can break it — and so another year in the long life of Fromus Meadows comes to a close.

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