

SFPT Orchid Glade report for January 2016

Early signs

January 22nd, and the brief flurry of winter that lasted for just a few days is gone: it is warm and still. The Orchid Glade is sopping wet, and the sun is reflecting off the water trapped in ruts and waterlogged beds of moss. Once again, the pond is brimming over, and fallow deer that nightly visit the nature reserve have churned one of their regular tracks into mud. Glowing in the sun, the male catkins of one of the very few hazel trees in the reserve look like bunches of dangling yellow caterpillars. Now is the time when the flora begins to show. There are thousands of tiny, unidentifiable seedlings rooted in bare soil, and quite large leaf rosettes of marsh thistle. Yet again, I marvel at the astonishing density of young ash saplings growing in regiments around the nature reserve.

The ground is a carpet of vivid green moss. Moss has no roots, but its cells are able to absorb moisture directly from the wet soil by capillary action. Watered from within all the time by its cells, some moss grows upwards and piles on thick new growth. The bases of most of the trees in the Orchid Glade have a collar of green moss that grows higher as time passes. Looking at the trees, it seems that smooth-barked willow and young alder are harder for moss to climb than rough-barked birch and oak. A pile of willow logs beside the pond looks a fine home for anything that likes permanent moisture, shade and rot.

There are a few birds: a blackbird, a bedraggled cock pheasant and the usual woodcock that just exploded from the ground near my feet. A male fox has been this way, and the musk scent hanging in the air shows he was beating the bounds of his patch, and spray-marking his favourite trees and fence posts. I can see a hare ahead, slowly hopping out of my path. A very panicky rabbit scuttles into a hawthorn thicket, and near the gate a grey squirrel sits back on his tail to get a better look at me.

Laurie Forsyth