

SFPT March report for the Orchid Glade

Winter is on its way out

How much wetter can the Orchid Glade get? 'Squishy, waterlogged, boggy, saturated' — I have now run out of words to describe wet grassland, and may soon have to resort to 'submerged' or 'inundated'. March 8th, and a glance at the reserve after a wet Winter tells us all we need to know about the water-holding ability of the sticky Boulder Clay that underlies the Orchid Glade, and also about the nature of the flora that flourishes there. Basically, from the viewpoint of the flora, it's been a lovely winter. Despite having some leaves eaten by deer, rabbits and hares, I feel sure the flowers in the reserve will be as spectacular as ever by mid to late Summer.

The key features in the winter are an impressive carpet of moss, and many sedges, with clumps of rushes grouped around the pond. All are specialists at living in heavy, poorly drained soil. The central core of the reserve is a large grass clearing where most of the flower diversity of the reserve is concentrated. Grass, sedges, and herbs alike are grazed hard in the winter months. Species unable to tolerate the constant removal of leaves have gone from the reserve, and we are left with a group of plants hardened to grazing pressures, which usually have their early leaves arranged in a rosette pattern, flat on the ground where they are less likely to be eaten. Marsh thistle produces large and very beautiful basal leaf rosettes.

The pond today is as large as it is physically possible for it to be, although I think I have said this several times in the past and been wrong. Looking at its bareness now, I can imagine how useful to wildlife — and attractive to the eye — it would be if its perimeter was a rampant, vibrant habitat full of pond-edge plants and humming with insects. It is not an idle dream: it can be done, and the Trust has already made the first steps. The heron that surprised me in February at the barren pond is obviously a glass-half-full optimist: white splashes beside the pond are proof that he visits fairly often.

The deep, slotted hoof prints of fallow deer are abundant, and the sun is glinting off the saturated carpets of moss and all the water-filled ruts: the Arctic tundra must look something like this when the ice and frost melts. Sheltered from frosts, the early leaves of many plants lie beneath the surface of the pools of clear rainwater: fleabane, willowherbs, St John's worts, corn mint, centaury, sow thistles, marsh woundwort and many more. Hidden in the moss, unseen new leaves of southern marsh orchid and twayblade orchid are unfurling.

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