

SFPT Fromus Meadows April report

Buzzards and blackthorn

Today, 19th April, meadow foxtail is the first of the meadow grasses to flower in our Fromus meadows reserve, and it forms an important part of the hay crop. Although on the cold side, April so far has been a mixture of frequent sun and rain – perfect for grass growth. Yet again I have to admire the poetic observations of the naturalists and country people in past centuries who coined the common names we use today for our wildlife: they knew exactly what the head of this grass reminded them of. Low in the grass sward I can see the strange sedge-like field woodrush, and the leaves of pignut. The showy dandelion flowers are getting into their stride: if they were rare, people would fight to buy them at a plant nursery. Bumblebees love dandelions, and the flowers I am looking at have lots of tiny black beetles feeding on their pollen. The old hedgerows are a blizzard of blackthorn flowers. Overhead, two buzzards sail downwind, and I can smell the musky odour left by a fox that has sprayed his personal scent to mark his territory. Catkins of hornbeam sway in the breeze.

With the Fromus river running through it beneath the arching boughs of hornbeam and oak, the Gorge has the look and feel of a long, linear woodland. Many plants are in flower here: ground ivy, dog's mercury, primrose, lesser celandine, clustered mouse ear, field woodrush and wood dog violet clothe the undulating slopes, and it will get even better as spring unfurls. Unlike our Orchid Glade nature reserve, these plants are all woodland species that hurry to flower and set seed in the spring before the leaf canopy closes and the sunlight is gone until autumn. Apart from gentle browsing from passing deer, there is little grazing of the flora in the Gorge. Unidentifiable small animal tracks wander across one of the small beaches of silt left when the river rises.

Hooray! — one of those moments that plant hunters enjoy so much! At the head of the Gorge, a large hornbeam bough has bridged the river, and close to it is a colony of wood goldilocks buttercups. They could have been recorded some time back, but they are a first for me. It is an interesting plant, because it is actively evolving. The books say it has five golden petals, and that is true, sometimes. Usually, you find plants where the flowers appear misshapen, because they have only two, three or four petals — sometimes none. It is likely wood goldilocks will eventually do away with petals altogether. Its topmost leaves are long and thin, which is odd for a buttercup, although the lower leaves look 'normal'. It is not at all photogenic, and I took ten minutes to produce a poor photograph.

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