

SFPT Fromus Valley report for May 2016

Green grow the grasses

Make of it what you will, but the ash is far behind the oak in leafing up this year at our Fromus Valley meadows reserve. Today is 11th May, and after yesterday's soaking the grasses are almost visibly growing. Sweet vernal grass and meadow foxtail are not only up, but they are flowering as well: both are key components in the hay crop we shall take in July. Swifts are ripping the air above me as only they can, and I can hear blackcap, chaffinch and blackbirds singing in the hedges.

There is a very strong musky scent hanging in the air, and I have just found a dismembered pheasant: putting two and two together, I think the bird was killed by a fox, who then sprayed his personal marker on the carcass to warn off anyone tempted to steal his property. Mole hills trace subterranean goings on in one of the meadows: this rich, loamy soil in the lower meadows must be full of earthworms.

The sun is shining — very briefly — and the warmth is enough to get orange tip butterflies airborne: two males; and a female is inspecting lady's smock with a view to laying eggs. This takes place a few yards downhill from the cowshed, and I am really pleased that this meadow at least has a good variety of wild flowers mixed with the grasses. I think, with careful management involving hay cutting and grazing by cattle, that several meadows could regain the rich flora they once possessed.

At my feet, bulbous buttercup and bird's eye speedwell are flowering side by side. Next, I visit one of my favourites spots — a muddy puddle made by tractor wheels that today is frothing with the small white flowers of thread-leaved crowfoot. I photograph grey sedge, and lady's

smock flowering next to the Circular Pond, and then a spectacular colony of vivid blue bugle. Suddenly, the sun is gone, and mist comes from nowhere to blot out the distant trees. Heading back, I wander through the Gorge, and have a look at the ramson's garlic that is flowering close to the river. It is a beautiful plant. I assume the river gifted it to us a few years ago, but I can see its progeny farther downstream, and knowing its reputation, I reflect that perhaps we should stop admiring it, and begin pulling.

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