

SFPT Orchid Glade June 2016 report

June is bustin' out

After the chilly and grey days of late May, summer has suddenly broken out today (8th June) at our Orchid Glade nature reserve. Marsh thistles are thrusting skywards, but generally, most of the flora is still less than knee-high — and that is good, because it makes spotting orchids a lot easier. The spikes of southern marsh orchid are still forming, but even if they have just a couple of flowers on the spike that wonderful rich colour can be easily seen from yards away. I have seen scores this morning, so across the entire reserve there are probably hundreds unseen. There was excitement two years ago when the 'leopard' spotted leaf variant was found: Today, I have seen at least twenty. Much harder to spot are the spikes of the common twayblade orchid. Straw coloured, slender and fragile, they are scarce in the reserve compared to the marsh orchids. The plant has just two leaves.

It is hot: strange then that so few butterflies are on the wing, until you recall the recent cold, sunless and windy days that seemed to go on forever. Insects that need the sun and its warmth to fly, feed and breed paid the price for that unseasonal weather, and the result is all around me. A flicker of movement pinpoints a cinnabar moth, handsome in its black and red warning colours that tell birds that it is not at all a good idea to eat it. Those colours enable the moth to fly without fear during the day. The caterpillar of the cinnabar moth feeds on the hoary ragwort that is abundant in the reserve. The plant is poisonous, the caterpillar becomes poisonous when it absorbs the toxins from the plant, and the adult moth when it flies is also poisonous — and free from predators.

There is a lot happening in and around the pond. In shallow water at its edge I can see common spike rush — a new record for the reserve — with compact rush. In the water there are diving beetles, water boatmen but — strangely — no smooth newts rising to the surface to take a breath of air. Dragonflies and damselflies hold the airspace above the pond. Spectacular male broad-bodied chaser dragonflies are

zooming up and down the pond on their high-speed territorial missions. Their chunky bodies are powder blue. Females are dipping their abdomens into the water to lay their eggs, and blue-tailed damselflies are flying in tandem as they mate in the air. It is humbling to recall that ancestors of these creatures are known to be among the first life forms ever to take to the air. A few years ago I found a single plant of false fox sedge near the pond: today I have found whole clumps of the sedge in many places, together with wood sedge. The winter floods must have assisted or hindered several plants in their distribution in the Orchid Glade. A small area that was coppiced last year is bursting with new plant life — some good, some not so good. Two species of St John's wort are looking vigorous, but so are the cut tree stumps, which are about to grow into lusty bushes.

Laurie Forsyth