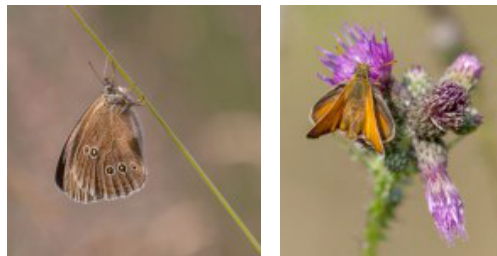


SFPT report for Fromus Valley meadows, July 2016

The dog days of summer

Two buzzards are soaring above the Fromus Valley meadows nature reserve when I arrive, and that is a good sign for today's visit. It is 7th July, and hot: the buzzards are riding thermals of warm air rising from the farmland, and wheel in slow circles above my head. There has been no rain for some time, and the Fromus river is at a standstill. Ringlet butterflies are abundant, and I have seen many large skippers and also six-spot burnet moths. Where the river runs through the lower meadows opposite the Long Pond, there is a circular area where the banks have been widened on both sides to form a circular pool, with the river running in on one side, and out on the other. Today, it is just a landlocked pool. I am astonished to see a small, furry mammal in the pool that instantly dived and was not seen again. I think it was feeding on floating grass stems in the water. Can it be a water vole?



Later, I creep up to the pond: no sign of the animal, but — again — I am astonished to see a male banded-demoiselle damselfly, which to my eye is the most handsome damselfly in the country. The (possible) water vole and the demoiselle are new records for the Fromus reserve. The southern marsh orchids have been very good this year, and the spikes are now carrying seedpods. Markers have been placed around them so that the haycutters can avoid them later this month, allowing the orchids to drop their seeds. The buzzard good omen is working hard this morning: a few yards on from the marsh orchids there is a single common spotted orchid — yet another new record for the meadows. A stately southern marsh orchid is still in full flower in Mere Meadow — the first time this orchid has been recorded in this part of the reserve.



Trudging the meadows, I can see that several plant species are doing exceptionally well in this erratic summer. Teasels and rushes are increasing in damp soils: the meadow grasses are tall and luxuriant following the rains, and in their depths lesser yellow trefoil is abundant. The white stars of lesser stitchwort sprawl through the grass, and I can that tufted vetch is also rapidly spreading. This is the showiest of all the pea flower family at Fromus, and the purple patches are a visual treat. Common and greater birdsfoot trefoil are both flourishing. On an eroding bank near the 'vole' pond, I find least trefoil, the smallest of the pea flower family. This is a tiny plant that simply cannot exist in the jungle of taller species that dominates 99.9% of the nature reserve. It can survive here though, on these few square inches of eroding soil.



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