

SFPT report for Fromus Valley, August 2016

Bone-dry river

The sun is beating down on tawny grasslands that once were green. It is 17th August, and the meadows in our Fromus valley reserve are very dry. Hogweed, teasels, willowherbs and the grasses are all seeding, and a swirling breeze sends thistle seeds off on travels that might end in the next ploughed field, or your flowerbed. The little Fromus river is at a standstill, and to escape the heat I have walked along the stony, crunching riverbed in the cool depths of the shaded Gorge. The deep slots of fallow deer are cut into the damp sediment — if they came here for a drink last night they will have been disappointed. The river is dry, and yet I find a tiny, 12-inch puddle — just a couple of pints of muddy water. Stooping to photograph it, I am amazed when the surface erupts. There are FISH in the puddle!



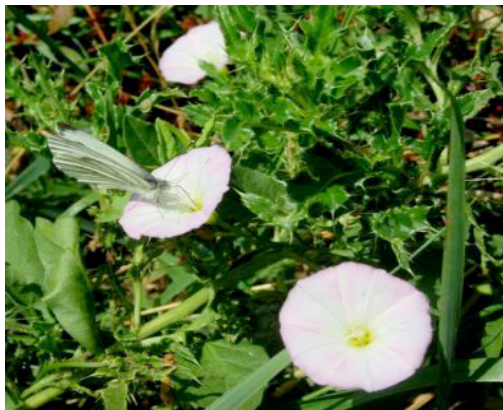
Some are one and a half inches long, but there are also much smaller fry. Having seen the Fromus like this several times since 2013, I have said before that the river cannot support fish. Once more though, Nature has proved me wrong. This fishy Armageddon has probably happened in dry summers for as long as the river has run, but life will always find a way if it is remotely possible. Intermittent rivers like the Fromus may be precarious for aquatic life, but life persists. These tiny fish will die, but maybe eggs or fry buried in the mud will survive.

The water level is falling in the Long Pond. Water mint is flowering on the banks, and the purple and yellow flowers of woody nightshade trail from overhanging bramble. A great spotted woodpecker is tapping and picking his way up the trunk of a dead tree beside the pond: he perches at the top so that I can take his photograph. From his off-white breast plumage, short bill and tame behaviour, I think he is a puzzled juvenile still learning how to be a woodpecker. A robin is singing in an ash: nearby, the winged seeds of field maple are almost fully formed, and the ancient oaks have many new acorns. Here and there in the meadows

are patches of common bird's-foot trefoil, and greater bird's-foot trefoil is flowering beside the Long Pond. These are food plants of the caterpillar of the common blue butterfly, and I see a male — mint condition, and a pristine blue — flitting across the path mown for the recent Open Day.



A small patch of fleabane has attracted a dozen gatekeepers and some worn meadow browns: later, I encounter small whites, speckled woods and a green-veined white feeding on the flowers of field bindweed and knapweed. Myxomatosis often flares up in hot weather, and I have seen one rabbit carcass, and a rabbit about to die. As usual, I check on the water tank near the cowshed where common stonewort grows: it has almost filled the tank with new growth. Stoneworts are green, fresh-water algae, and some species become brittle and hard to the touch because they accumulate calcium carbonate from the water.



Laurie Forsyth