

SFPT Fromus Valley Meadows report for September

Hay crop blues

Twelfth September, and our Fromus Valley Meadows reserve is baking beneath a hot blue sky. Once again, a promised belt of rain petered out before it got to east Suffolk, and the meadows are looking a little like the Serengeti, but without the lions. It is easy to recall the prolonged wetness of late spring and early summer, when the lush grasses and meadow flora grew thick and high, and we seemed set for a good crop of hay. Market forces of supply and demand were at work though, and with a surplus of hay for sale at low prices, it was not worth the cost of cutting.



For the wildlife of the meadows, every time the hay is cut, an important habitat is temporarily lost. Insects lose a source of nectar; newts, frogs and toads lose their damp and shady home, and small, scurrying voles, mice and shrews are forced to live just at the edges of the meadows where we leave the grass untouched. The population of small mammals can increase sharply in a good summer, and that may explain the presence of the barn owl that floated from the depths of one of the hedges and beat away across the meadow to find a quieter daytime roost. I looked beneath its tree, hoping to find some regurgitated pellets that would give a clue as to its diet, but found just a single, gossamer-fragile white feather.



The Fromus riverbed is a crunchy bed of dry stones: it makes a nice, shaded path through the Gorge. On 17th August, I found a handful of tiny fish expiring in a dying puddle in the riverbed, and they have been in my mind ever since. The river regularly ceases to flow, but if fish are present, maybe the situation for aquatic life is not quite as catastrophic as I thought. How did they get here — have they swum up the river from much lower down its course? To my eye, the dry river is a fishy Armageddon — but maybe some survive, somehow. In the Gorge riverbed,

a small tree collapsed years ago, creating a hole where its roots ripped from the ground. The hole holds six inches of water. Downstream in the sunny lower meadow, the course of the dry river is entirely hidden in growth, all except for the odd, circular pool where I saw a water vole and the banded demoiselle damselfly in the spring. The water level has fallen a lot, and I can now see the pool is below the level of the riverbed: it is another hole — probably excavated — with two feet of water in it still. Life-saving holes like these may be how fish survive the bad times. Pondering the hole, I realise I am looking at a single plant of gypsywort on its bank, which is a new record for the reserve.



Comma and red admiral butterflies are sipping the juice of blackberries, and two speckled woods are twirling overhead in their courting ritual. The hawthorn berries and dog rose hips are red surprisingly early: countless downy seeds of thistles and willowherbs are whisked away by warm breezes, and the crab apples are already falling. Southern marsh orchid capsules have swelled, split and released their microscopic seed into the air. In the water tank, bright green stonewort — an algae — has reached the surface and can be photographed: stark and prickly, statuesque dead teasels rear out of the grasses near the dry river.



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