Simpson's Fromus Valley Reserve Report for July 2014

High summer in the meadows

Tall grasses ripple in the breeze, and hidden beneath them are all the orchids, lady's smock, buttercups and other springtime flowers that excited that's just a few weeks ago. Seed is being set wherever you look, and flowers are now comparatively scarce, although selfheal and the tall marsh thistles will continue to flower for ages yet. You sense the rampant flood of growth has peaked and already the meadows are now thinking about next year. The wonderful thick hedgerows have lots of dense bramble that is in flower — an important source of nectar for insects — and hard green blackberries, hawthorn haws and dog rose hips promise good Autumn days around the corner for birds, insects and small mammals.

High summer signals the peak of insect activity. They rely on warmth — their bodies require a minimum temperature to function — otherwise they can't fly, feed all breed. Butterfly numbers are way below what you would expect on this hot day in July, but the slow recovery from the 2012 weather catastrophe is still on track.

Species flitting through the meadows now — meadow brown, gatekeeper, comma, peacock, skippers, ringlet, red admiral and the whites — benefitted from the superb late Summer of last year. So things look promising, as they do for the small tortoiseshell that seems to be recovering from its long decline: a scarcity of its nettle food-plant in the meadows may restrict its numbers. Butterflies comprise only a small part of the lepidoptera insect group. For every species of butterfly, there are perhaps 50 moth species, and Matthew Deans, SFPT's lepidoptera recorder, is confident after just one or two exploratory night-time surveys that the meadows are rich in moths. Moth and butterfly species are dependent upon specific plants as caterpillar food-plants, or as nectar sources for the adults to feed: if a flora is rich, it is very likely that the lepidoptera will also be rich.

A recent SFPT blog has described the "hissing meadows" — the sound produced by thousand upon thousands of grasshoppers and crickets singing in the grasses. It has been a long time since my ears could hear them, but my every step sends grasshoppers leaping and whirring into the air. That is an increasingly rare sight. Hoverflies, solitary mining bees, bumblebees and other important pollinators are busy on the purple heads of the marsh thistles and the white bramble flowers. Dragonflies and damselflies skim through the hot air above the ponds, and in the shallow water at the end of the Long Pond are flowering watermint, woody nightshade, thread-leaved crowsfoot (an aquatic white buttercup) and tufted forget-me-not.

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