



# NEWSLETTER

www.pari sh grasslands project . org . uk

## COMMITTEE

*Chairman:*  
George Peterken 01594 530452

*Secretary, Treasurer and Membership:*  
Jean Pitt 01594 530255

*Minutes Secretary:*  
Ursula Williams 01594 530247

*Committee Members:*  
John Childs  
Tony Eggar  
Jean Green  
Edward Hutchings  
John Josephi  
Sarah Sawyer  
Mike Topp

## FOOD FROM OUR FIELDS - October Meeting

We will be meeting at **7.30 pm Saturday 2nd October in the Mackenzie Hall** to taste and talk about Food from our Fields. This will follow on from the meeting last spring under the same title, but this time we plan to have real food and drink to sample. We envisage running this rather like a wine tasting, but the food and drink we will taste will be in some way connected to our fields and their surroundings. On the meat side, we hope to have rabbit, grey squirrel, pigeon, venison and Gloucester beef, but not badger hams, which are probably illegal and certainly difficult to catch. On the sweet side we hope to have food flavoured with rose hip jelly, elder flowers and berries, apples, blackberries, cherry plums and rowan berries. Savouries should include nettle soup, whatever fungi we can find and hazel nuts. At the time of writing we have no source of alcoholic drinks, and the meeting will be too early to include sloe gin nouveau, but we will certainly have apple juice and cider on the tables. Each of the items will be briefly introduced.

## CONTENTS

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Food from our fields                 | 1 |
| Biodiversity Survey                  | 1 |
| Deer Survey                          | 2 |
| Field Visit - John Josephi's orchard | 3 |
| Flower Hunt                          | 4 |

This will not add up to a square meal – these will be just tasters – but the aim is to remind us that we have around us a variety of Food for Free, in the words of Richard Mabey's book. We will not be selling tickets in advance, but, as for other PGP meetings, just hoping that enough people come through the door on the night, but it would help judge numbers if those who plan to come would let one of the organisers know: Jean Pitt (530255), Mike Topp (531496) or Jean Green (530955).



## BIODIVERSITY SURVEY

A national survey is being carried out by OPAL (Open Air Laboratories), part of the Open University, starting this month.

In a nutshell the Biodiversity Survey is a nationwide look at **Hedges** to ascertain their condition and see if some are better than others for wildlife. It involves a close study of just 3 metres (10 feet) of hedge describing how it looks, whether it is a source of food for wildlife, what invertebrates and other creatures are in or using the hedge, and finally, filling in a brief two page tick box survey form to return to OPAL or fill in on line.

Survey packs are free and can be obtained from <http://www.opalexplornature.org>

The pack can be downloaded from the website or they will send you a hard copy. PGP members with email will be sent the link and the downloadable pack.

This is an interesting and exciting project and it would be good if PGP members could all participate. Spread the word to friends and neighbours too!

## Flower of the month



Spear Thistle  
*Cirsium vulgare*

## Deer Survey by George Peterken and Tony Eggar



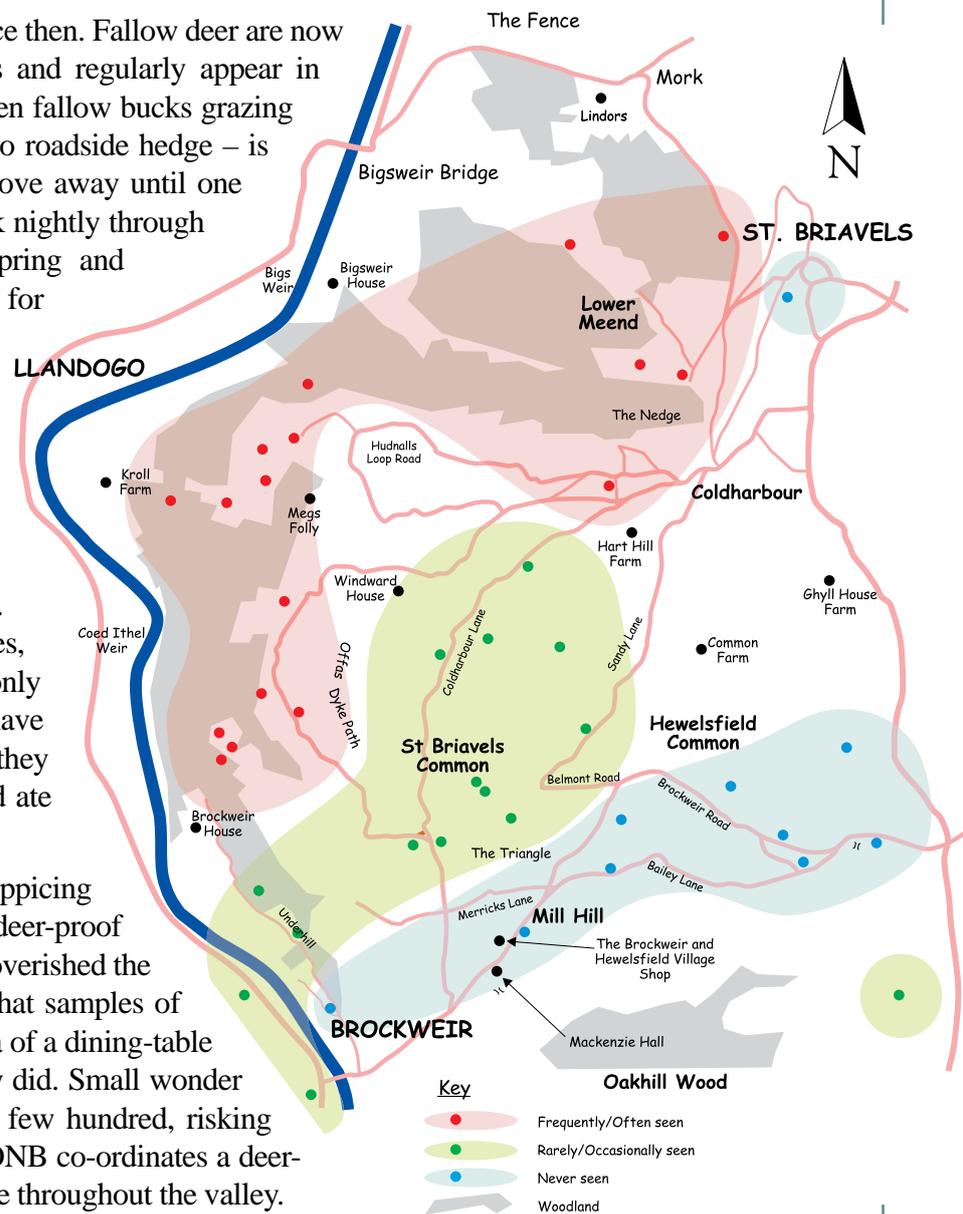
When we first moved to Beechwood House in 1993 we saw no deer in the nearby woods, and this was not just blindness on our part, for one of our early visitors was Dr Philip Ratcliffe, then the Forestry Commission's nature conservation officer and a specialist in deer and their biology, and he saw no signs of deer, neither deer slots in the soil, deer tracks through the underwood, nor browsed twigs on the shrubs and saplings. Deer were common enough not far away around Lindors Farm, but they did not seem to feel the need to come any nearer.

Much has changed since then. Fallow deer are now frequent in the woods and regularly appear in the adjacent fields. The sight of half a dozen fallow bucks grazing in Starvecrow field – the large one with no roadside hedge – is familiar, and they don't even bother to move away until one actually gets out of the car. They also walk nightly through our fields and garden, particularly in spring and summer. In the fields this hardly matters, for they seem to eat little more than the flower heads of hogweed and the new shoots on hazels in the hedges, but in the garden they are a serious menace. We have watched a fallow buck lazily eating the flowers off an ornamental cherry just outside the kitchen window, and any strawberries are grazed leafless just as the flowers start to show. Flower beds are stripped of columbines, pasque flowers and much else, leaving only the daffodils, spurge and other plants that have unpleasant or poisonous sap. This spring they even entered a half-glazed greenhouse and ate everything within.

Out in the Wye Valley woods they make coppicing and replanting almost impossible without deer-proof fencing. In the last 30 years they have impoverished the woodland ground flora to such a degree that samples of woodland ground vegetation about the area of a dining-table top now have half as many species as they did. Small wonder then that the Forestry Commission cull a few hundred, risking the wrath of the bambi faction, and the AONB co-ordinates a deer-management group designed to do the same throughout the valley.

Here on the Hudnalls we became aware the deer were not everywhere. Whilst some of us have long since given up trying to grow vegetables, others have no trouble. So, for a few weeks this summer, we placed a map in the village shop to collect deer sightings, and, thanks to 30 or so contributions, we now have a map showing where deer are most often seen. Deer are creatures of woodland margins that retreat into the shadows when they feel danger, but move out into the clearings when they want to graze, so we were not surprised to see that here, too, they concentrate along the fields closest to the woods. They are present in the common woods to the north and west of the Hudnalls, and in Oakhill Wood (Madgetts) to the south, so they are approaching from three points of the compass. Once in our fields, they find that many are small, ringed by trees and high hedges, and seem to have no inhibitions about ranging out towards Harthill, leaving only the village centres and a belt from around the Mackenzie Hall to the Hewelsfield cross-roads untouched.

What are the lessons? Amongst several that come to mind are: be careful where you buy a house if your



ambition is to have a colourful and productive garden; spend hours carefully protecting individual plants; learn to love deer and confine your gardening to spiny shrubs, spring bulbs and a few deer-proof herbs; or, face the need to cull deer in the woods and perhaps also some of the fields before they get any more numerous. Fencing is an obvious recourse, but fences need to be high and strong, and well pegged down at the base. Deer have a reputation for claustrophobia, so one might try to get away with lower fencing of small plots, but they are clearly more intelligent and less neurotic than that implies, for they still leaped into our fenced strawberry bed and ate the lot – twice – even though it was near the house.

So, our thanks to everyone who contributed. There are many gaps, so more observations are welcome. All we asked was how often you see deer close to your home or in the nearest fields. We would particularly like to know more about when you started to see deer near you; and from anyone whose observations contradict the general pattern shown on our map. And, if numbers change in future, we would like to know about that.

## Field Visit to John Josephi's Orchard by Jean Pitt

Sunday May 23rd was a beautiful, hot, sunny day – perfect weather for a relaxed walk around John Josephi's orchard on St. Briavels Common. Around two dozen people turned up to hear John start by explaining that he had inherited the land from his father, and was continuing to manage it under DEFRA's Countryside Stewardship scheme. Under this scheme DEFRA offers payment per hectare, plus a tariff of payments for various aspects of that management, such as hedging, walling, planting etc.



John's first objective had been to reduce the fertility of the soil, in order to bring back the wild flowers, and started by removing the dung produced by animals that had previously grazed the land.

Turning to look at an adjacent patch of woodland, he pointed out where he had thinned out trees to maximize growth of native species (holly not being one of them!). He reminded us that it was the trunk of a stumpy-growing oak that he had felled from this woodland that was now a central pillar in the village shop.

Leading us to where a 90-year-old felled oak lay in sections on the ground, John then proceeded, despite the tropical temperature, to split and trim a length of lower trunk, to illustrate how he made gate posts, stakes etc. In a novel arrangement of lengths of the thinner timber corralled in a tall stack between stakes, he showed us, using a chainsaw, how to slice down the stack in one stroke, producing the maximum heap of logs for the minimum of effort.

We next moved to his individual fruit trees – wrapped, staked and netted for maximum protection against voles, rabbits, deer etc.

Finally we walked through the woodland to see at closer range the effects of thinning, and on to his neighbours' property where the grass management here had consisted of cutting it and leaving it in situ. The difference between this and John's land was clearly noticeable. A professional grass management expert in the group said that research had shown that removing the cut grass was the preferable option – not least because leaving it in situ encourages slugs.



As we moved back up the orchard, John was able to show us where orchids were now appearing, after giving the patch of land a timely dose of Roundup, together with yellow rattle and lousewort.

To round off the visit, we retired to the welcome shade of an old pear tree for ginger beer and John's, now legendary, doughnuts. Our thanks are due to John for such an interesting, informative and hospitable afternoon. We may have even recruited some new members in the process!

## Wild Flower Hunt by Jean Green

Early in the year plans were made with St. Briavels Playgroup and Class 1 of St. Briavels school for children to attend a wild flower hunt, similar to one held two years ago, in a meadow at Hollyside Farm. This meadow was chosen as it is one of the special flower fields in the parishes of Brockweir, Heweisfield and St. Briavels. Intensive modern farming methods discourage biodiversity thus limiting the growth of wild flowers and herbs and the attendant species of bugs, beetles and butterflies. This field, however, has been traditionally managed over time - presently providing grazing for two Dexter cows, and is rich indeed in both flora and fauna.



Mid-summer day arrived, a beautiful, sunny summer day, ideal weather for a field visit but a quite unexpected complication arose - the County Council road men were working on resurfacing about 50 yards of the lane leading to the flower field! However, arrangements were made for mini bus and car parking a short distance away and soon after 1.00 pm, 27 four or five year old children arrived together with 16 adults (Playgroup leader and her helpers, school teacher and her assistants, RSPB representative, Jean James, mums and members of the Parish Grasslands Project) and made their way via a footpath and stile to the field.

George Peterken distributed the Hudnalls Flower Leaflet to the adults and the "Bird Lady" talked to the seated children and handed them each a special ball which they were to hold quietly and listen for sounds. The children went really quiet listening for a while and then they were asked what they had heard. One little girl said, "the sky" (she probably meant an aeroplane!), others said, the "trees" and "water" and one said, "the grass". The Bird Lady suggested it was grass hoppers in the grass and stood and demonstrated how grass hoppers made a noise by standing on one leg and rubbing the other leg against it. She then asked if the boys and girls would like to try what she had demonstrated, One quick response was a definite, "NO!", but they all stood and gave standing on one leg and rubbing with the other a slightly wobbly try.

The children were then formed into groups, with a net for each group to try to catch butterflies and other insects and to find different wild flowers. They ran around the field very enthusiastically, having their insect catches identified by the "Bird Lady" and showing the adults flowers they had picked; the flower checks were by colours rather than by name and the collection was very good. The sweep nets were a great success and the children particularly enjoyed the grass-hoppers which were easily caught and observed before being returned, unharmed, to the meadow with the other bugs and beetles. Before leaving the field there was a hunt for (plastic) birds and insects which had been hidden while the hunt for real insects and flowers was taking place.



The sun was beating down so it was time for very welcome drinks and the children were then able to see the two Dexter cows, Forest Flame and Cola, having their bowl feeds and carrots, before going back to school.

Happily during all the activities the roadmen had cleared a passage of lane so that the children could walk back up the lane to the parking area.

The minibus shuttled the children back to school, leaving the final two boys with a mother. The two boys decided to pick up dried grass lying around and put it into the "V" of a nearby tree in an effort to make a "birds nest". It kept them busy and happy until their transport returned.

The afternoon seemed to pass very quickly and everyone, children and adults, had a very enjoyable time.