

Too wild to keep to the woods

Woodland plants that are quite at home in meadows

However hard we try, wild plants refuse to be pigeon-holed as “grassland plants”, “woodland plants” or whatever. Some, like primrose, prefer edges and hedges, whilst others blithely cross habitat boundaries. Dandelions, for example, when they are not invading flower borders, are grassland species, surely, but I find them frequently in deep woodland, even flowering occasionally under heavy shade.

In the same spirit, some of the flowers most strongly associated with woodland can also be found in grassland. Take bluebell as an example. One of the few wild species that perform better in Britain than elsewhere, bluebells en masse are the highlight of spring, carpeting woods in blue just before the buds burst on the trees. Pick the right fortnight, and one can see hillsides in Wales and valleys on Dartmoor turn blue where bracken will soon smother the slopes, and for much the same reason: bluebells make use of sunny springs before the bracken shades out potential competitors. But it's not just a matter of bracken substituting for trees: the further west one travels, the more likely one is to find bluebells in meadows, growing happily amongst the grass, casting their seed long before the grass is mown. Even on the Hudnalls, they often venture out from hedges into the body of fields.

Much the same can be said about anemone. So strongly is it associated with woodland that we know it as “wood anemone”, so it comes as a surprise to find it growing just as happily, albeit in small numbers, in the meadows in the Thames floodplain above Oxford, the moorland of the Cairngorms and the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust's meadow a Ridley Bottom. However, if one were to explore mainland Europe, one would find it as a common and widespread flower on the remaining less fertile grasslands of the lower hill slopes, but rather less in woodland itself. In effect, the species changes its character from one part of Europe to the next, and we are at one end of the continuum. Other species do the same: some of the rare woodland plants of Britain are common meadow plants in distant parts of Europe (meadow clary, oxlip, spreading bellflower).

Wild daffodil is another cross-habitat species, but we can see this for ourselves hereabouts. Quite capable of



Anemone, bluebell, wild daffodil, pignut

carpeting woodlands, it can also be seen in grasslands and orchards around Newent and on the embankment of the M50. Locally, they are found in the Whitebrook valley: in fact, there is a reserve devoted to them half way up on the south side. In fields, they tend to grow in tight clusters, the product of a single bulb multiplying each year, but in woods they seem to be more spread out. Why? Do they seed more often in woods, but live longer in grassland?

There are many others. It is, for example, easy to find our most characteristic meadow plant, sweet vernal grass, growing under oak woods on the less fertile soils of the western Welsh hillsides. Another that may be more easily recognised is pignut, a small, dainty umbellifer with feathery leaves, which grows on well-drained, light soils, but does so equally in the middle of our fields and in the woods along the Wye. How do they do it? After all, they have to cope somehow with light intensity in the depths of a woodland being less than 5% of the intensity in a field. In practice, most put in their main growth spurt in spring before the trees are fully in leaf, which means they take advantage of the best-lit moment of the whole year. And they also have to do this if they want to prosper in meadows, for most do not grow tall and would be swamped by taller species if they left their growth until later in the season. This also explains why, when they do grow in grassland, they prefer the less productive swards – its a lot less competitive than in deep shade at the bottom of a fertile meadow.

George Peterken



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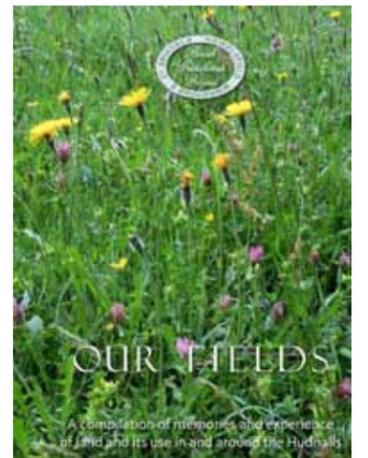


Blackthorn; Wheatear;
Sweet violet; Wild daffodil

Our Fields open day

Bad weather may make myopes of us all. Buffeted by Storms Abigail through Imogen, we can barely see the fields for rain, let alone envisage a day when they'll be knee-high in bees and flower heads again. In anticipation of such far-off times, though, we are planning an Open Day. This now is the moment to reach for your dog-eared copy of *Our Fields: a compilation of memories and experience of land and its use in and around the Hudnalls* and blow the dust from its generously subtitled covers (If you don't have a copy, they are on sale at the Village Shop and the Pantry in St Briavels for a modest £5). Our idea is as follows. On Saturday 4 June, between the hours of 11am and 4pm, we will throw open the gates of a selection of the featured properties. The owners will be on hand to talk you through their land-management practices, their works-in-progress, their hard earned 'dos and don'ts'. There will be wildlife ponds to peer into... beehives and livestock to view... forestry advice... haymaking. Maybe walking-guides, to help you navigate the shortcuts between lanes? Designated parking areas? Retail opportunities? Refreshments? As you can see, there is still much to be organised and further details will be announced, nearer the time, both on our website and in the Village News. But for anyone thinking of creating a wild-flower meadow for themselves, anyone who simply delights in the profusion of local flower-rich fields, anyone looking to lay a hedge, make a fedge or build a dry-stone wall, this is your chance to chat up those who are doing it already, to pick their brains and raid their Contacts List and find out what might work for you, from the grandest to the smallest scale and all points in-between. Now we just must hope Storm Wendy plays ball...

Alice Hogge



FUNGI, FORAGING AND THE AGM

Our Annual General Meeting takes place at the Mackenzie Hall on Thursday March 31 at the Mackenzie Hall, Brockweir. We have two excellent speakers lined up to talk about fungi and foraging. Full details on Page 2



Wye Valley Waxcaps: from left, Honey Waxcap, Parrot Waxcap, Splendid Waxcap

Fungi and foraging

Another fascinating line-up for our AGM

Fungi and foraging will be the twin themes of our annual general meeting at the Mackenzie Hall at 7.30pm on Thursday March 31. After the AGM business, Jon Dunkelman of Monmouthshire Meadows Group will give a talk about fungi, particularly waxcaps, that are found in grassland of the Lower Wye Valley. Jon is compiling a guide book on the subject, and will show some stunning slides of many of the varieties he and his team have located so far. After our customary break for drinks and cake we will be given a wide-ranging talk by the celebrated local forager Raoul Van Den Broucke. He supplies some of the top restaurants with food that he finds in the wild, and has promised to share some of his secrets with us. Admission is free to members, and



Forager at work: Raoul Van Den Broucke

non-members are very welcome to attend, in return for a small donation. It is also possible to join the project (or simply pay this year's subscription) at the meeting. Membership is £5 per household per year.

Work in progress - one man's continuing battle with the dreaded knotweed

Last summer I boasted to Neil and Deborah Flint at Cinderhill Farm that I could rid them of a persistent patch of Japanese Knotweed that has occupied a corner of one of their fields for some years.

My method would be to cut the full grown weed, wait for it to regrow and then, before it grows

too tall, to hit it with Roundup. Ideally this can be accomplished within one growing season.

The sequence: Summer 2015: Cut the "crop" when it is head high and leave to disintegrate on site.

September 2015: Before the first frosts the regrowth had appeared and had changed from red shoots to green leaves at c. 18 inches high. I have knapsack sprayed this regrowth with Roundup at a ratio of 1 fl oz per gallon.

The Future: Summer 2016: I intend to revisit the site, hoping to find that less than 10% of the roots are sending up shoots. These survivors will be treated like the last year's regrowth, as will any future pockets of resistance in future years. "Eternal vigilance!" is the cry!

John Josephi

Book now for our summer scything course

Places are limited so don't miss this chance to learn about a dying country craft

Following a number of successful training courses in recent years – on subjects including shepherding, shearing and green woodworking – this year the Parish Grasslands Project will roll out a course on scything. This is a follow up to our meeting last October, when the main attraction was Simon Fairlie, the agricultural campaigner and author, who has launched a one-man campaign to revive use of that once essential grassland implement, the scythe.

We were unable to obtain Simon's services for our scything course. When the grass is ready he is very busy running courses near his home in Dorset. But we have been most fortunate to sign up as our tutor another very experienced scyther and teacher of scything, Andrea Gilpin, national project manager of Caring for God's Acre. That is the organisation that champions the conservation of churchyards and burial sites across Britain, from its base in the diocese of Hereford.

Our course will run on Saturday July 2, which is also

National Meadows Day. It will be an all-day affair, with sessions in the morning and afternoon. Precise timings and location (within our two parishes) will be available later. And we have teamed up for the event with the Wye Valley AONB Youth Rangers. Their members will be in attendance and will help with raking etc. To enable proper and safe tuition to take place we will limit the number of students to eight, and the fee for the day will be £25. Participants will be asked to bring a packed lunch.

Because of the relatively small number of places available, initially we are circulating details of the course only to the Parish Grasslands Project membership, and limiting places to one per household. We will also ask for the £25 fee in advance, by April 30. If there are still places available after that date we will relax the one-per-household rule, and if places still remain we will advertise the course in the Village News.

We believe this will be a very popular course, and to make matters as fair as possible to the wider PGP membership, committee members have agreed that they will not apply for places before April 31. To book a place, please contact me, preferably by email (mike.topp@yahoo.co.uk) or on 01594 531496. Remember, places are limited and it's first come first served, so please form an orderly queue!

Mike Topp



Time to spray that knotweed? From left, A bit late?... Too early... Just right!