

There's life on the edge

Many roadside verges are vital refuges for plants and insects.

George Peterken has been taking a closer look at some of them

Roadside verges have long been recognised as refuges for wild flora that cannot survive in fields that are regularly ploughed, drained or fertilised. Some remain flower-rich, but in recent decades many have been impoverished because they have become overgrown or, more often, have become over-fertile because fertiliser drifts in from adjacent fields and the annual mowings are left on the ground. This year, a small team from Dean Meadows Group, Dean Forest Beekeepers and the PGP has been updating information about some of the verges that 20 years ago



Twayblade

were known to have a varied flora. The hope is that we might find ways to improve the management of our verges to encourage not only wild plants but also the pollinating insects that depend on them. As part of this I have listed all the plant species I could find beside the main road between the Bearce and the parish boundary with Tidenham, though not the verges within the limits of St Briavels village. Cursing the traffic and the litter, but with help from Mike Topp, I walked the length on both sides, listing what I found.

The result? A total of 161 species found in 2022, or just over 30% of all the species found wild in our parishes in recent years. To these we can add the Pyramidal Orchid and Early Purple Orchid, both of which were seen recently, though not in 2022. No doubt a few more remain to be found, so let's say 170 species inhabit these verges.

Like so many verges, the most abundant grasses are the vigorous Cock's-foot and False Oat-grass, but 16 other grasses survive amongst them, including the locally-rare Quaking Grass. Verges are forms of grassland, but even so 20 species of tree and shrub were found, and this does not include those in the adjacent hedges. Most were saplings of native species trying to turn the verges into woodland. They were accompanied by three ferns that are usually



Betony

found in woodland, Male-fern, Hart's-tongue and Soft Shield-fern, as well as Bracken, which counts as a de facto woodland to low-growing herbs.

Clusters of Primroses, Anemones, Bluebells and Common Violets can be seen at several points, along with some of the characteristic herbs of the small meadows on the Hudnalls, including Meadow Buttercup, Cuckoo Flower, Knapweed, Bird's-foot Trefoil and Sorrel. We also found a few of the Common Spotted Orchids that are still widespread in the Hudnalls.

Welcome though all these are, it's the rare and uncommon species that attract my attention. The Pyramidal Orchid and Early Purple Orchid have appeared only once, to my knowledge, but Twayblade flowers regularly near the Tidenham end of the parishes. In addition to the Quaking-grass, the locally rare species include a large patch of Betony, several patches of Zigzag Clover (a magenta-flowered form of Red Clover), Field Scabious, Centaury, Yellow-wort, Goat's-beard and several clusters of Cowslips and Lady's Bedstraw.



Yellow-wort

The best verges are near the Hewelsfield crossroads; near the bends where the road enters the woods towards Tidenham; and towards the Bearce. These are some of the richest grasslands in the parishes. They will stay that way if they are mown only after mid-summer and the clippings are removed. Neglect, leaving the clippings on the ground or mowing them in May or June will impoverish them.



NEWSLETTER

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NATURE WATCH

What to spot now



Crab apples



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Biodiversity and a grazing revolution

Local speakers will address two key topics at our autumn meeting

We have two fascinating talks lined up for the PGP autumn meeting at 2.30pm on Saturday October 22 at the Mackenzie Hall. Both speakers are members of the local community: Andy Stott will give us a preview of the UN Biodiversity Summit to be held in Montreal in December and Alex Crawley will talk about the no-fence conservation grazing enterprise he has set up based at his home in the Hudnalls.

Given that biodiversity is a central topic in so much of our activity in the PGP, many members will be keen to hear more about the UN summit. Andy Stott, one of our committee members, is a long-standing Defra adviser and a member of the team representing the UK in the summit negotiations. Andy will be able to provide fascinating insights into the preparations for the meeting and what it means for us. He will be speaking in a personal capacity and not as a representative of the government.

Governments and ministers from around the world will come together to try to agree a new set of goals to guide global actions to protect and restore nature up to 2050. It is vital that they succeed because our planet is experiencing the largest loss of life since the extinction of the dinosaurs. Scientists say the way we mine, pollute, hunt, farm, build and travel is putting at least one million species at risk of extinction – an echo of Dave Gouslon’s warning of an insect apocalypse at his talk last month. The summit has ambitions on a global scale, and for all countries in the world, but it is also an opportunity to consider the implications for us at a local level.



One of Alex Crawley’s Herefords, with its geo-collar

The revolutionary feature of Alex Crawley’s conservation grazing scheme is that his cattle can be used in areas where there is no effective fencing. He has a small herd of traditional Herefords and Belted Galloways. They wear geo-collars which are linked to software which can be used to define exactly where they are allowed to graze. This is a real breakthrough, as it is often areas with no or inadequate fencing which most need the grazing. Alex will provide a detailed explanation of how the system works.

A fascinating meeting is promised, plus the usual break for refreshments. There will be no charge for entry – all are welcome, members and non-members alike.



The flower hunters

For many years one of the most reliably regular features of the PGP year has been the Flower Hunt, a mid-summer visit to Jean Green's meadow by local children, organised by Jean, ably assisted by Ursula Williams. Following an unavoidable interruption the event was back this year, with children again given the chance to discover the delights of the natural world. Here is Jean's account of Flower Hunt 2022, with photographs by Mr Gazzard, the St Briavels School reception class teacher

After a two year break due to Covid 19 restrictions, children were once again able to visit the flower meadow at Hollyside Farm and children from St Briavels School and Llandogo play group came to enjoy seeing the flowers on two sunny summer days.

On the 21st June 17 children from the reception class at St Briavels school walked the mile with their teachers to Hollyside Farm flower meadow. The children looked very smart, walking in pairs and wearing their yellow day-glow jackets. (As they walked along a dead mouse was found. It was brought along and placed on the side of the drinks table, where some of the children were keen to stroke it!) There was a brief stop for them to have a drink, sitting on straw bales in the open barn, and then out they went to the meadow. Large and small nets were provided to be shared and the children were soon running among the flowers and grasses intent on catching insects, mainly butterflies and grasshoppers, and bringing them back to a special netted container. Joyful noises were heard by neighbours as about 30 butterflies, a few moths and some grasshoppers were caught and

placed in the container (a few butterflies managed to escape as others were being contained!) One young boy, when observing the mottled markings on a moth, commented, "It's all about camouflage, you know!" One little girl brought back and presented a little bunch of wild flowers. At about midday, as the children were returning to the barn for their picnic lunch, a count was made for the release of all the insects and the children watched the butterflies fly back to the flowers and the grasshoppers hopped away. A little queue then formed near the barn for washing of hands, in an improvised hand basin, before they each found their places on the straw bales and sat to enjoy their picnic lunches and soft drinks. When appetites were sated the children again donned their day-glow jackets for the return walk with their teachers to St Briavels School.

Two days later 16 pre-school children, two to four years of age, arrived in a mini-bus from Llandogo. These children also went to roam among the flowers and grasses with nets and were keen to catch the butterflies and other insects. They had obviously been learning about the lifecycle of butterflies and explained to us older folk that butterflies, "started off as caterpillars and then changed into pupas before coming out as butterflies!" As the visit to the meadow area ended a countdown from ten to one was led, which all the children joined for the release of the butterflies and other insects, before going to sit on straw bales in the barn for soft drinks and then back into the mini-coach for their return to Llandogo.

These happy events were enjoyed by us all.



How many of our trees will survive Ash dieback?

It's now about two years since we started to see the widespread effects of Ash dieback (*Hymenoscyphus Fraxineus*). Since then this pathogen, which enters through the leaves, has wreaked havoc with our Ash. Many trees have died. However, local tree surgeon Mark Harris of TrunkArb says he has observed many trees showing some signs of recovery. It remains to be seen whether this will continue. Colin Last, former head arborist at Peterborough Borough Council, says that he feels that although the tree fights back, year on year the infection will probably kill the tree. However, as with Covid, Ash dieback is full of uncertainties. Unlike Covid state intervention has perhaps thankfully remained minimal. This is probably wise as nothing can really be done with a widespread wind-borne pathogen. It would be a logistical nightmare to treat individual trees. According to the Wye Valley AONB's technical officers' working party, 85 per cent of infected Ash trees will die.

What is most interesting is that we may see several trees together, some with many dead branches and other adjacent trees with no sign of infection. I asked Colin Last whether some were better protected by not being so water stressed or root compacted. Trees on tracks and roads suffer from passing traffic in this regard. He said the overwhelming factor was genetic. That is some trees were just more resistant than others.

Mark Harris rightly points out rotten and dying trees should only be dealt with by professionals. A number of firms are now investing in MEWPS (mobile elevated work platforms) so their operatives reduce the risk of climbing dangerous trees. Not all trees can be reached by these hydraulic machines.

The uncertainty of Ash dieback is perhaps the only certainty. We don't know how many trees will survive. If you have land with diseased, dead or dangerous trees you may consider:

- a) where you can, rake up and burn leaf litter from under infected Ash trees. This is obviously impractical in woodland areas.
- b) consider calling in a professional tree surgeon or tree inspector.
- c) Location of trees is of great importance. You may consider the following important criteria as to the risk posed by diseased tree(s) to you and the public.

Major roads based on speed and usage - high risk; Car parks, minor roads, permanently occupied sites, such as housing, high use public recreational facilities and major public rights of way, such as promotional or national trails -medium risk; Public rights of way that have medium or low usage and permissive paths - low risk; Areas with no defined public footpaths or bridleways but with no public access - very low risk.

However bear in mind that there are limits to the extent to which risks can be generalised. Each case needs to be carefully and individually assessed.

GWION TREFGARNE

