A visit from the cows

My first attempt at grazing without fences almost went to plan, says **George Peterken**

Throughout November and December, five of Alex Crawley's Herefords lived in our three lower fields. The herd consisted of a mother and son, a robust and fairly inquisitive male, and two smaller and subordinate females who hung around like two nervous teenagers at a party. The mother was in charge, every so often making this clear by butting the others.

This, my first direct experience of grazing without fences, almost went to plan. Their collars with transmitters looked like cow bells from a distance. It was only when a visitor wondered what was tinkling that I realised they emitted any sound. Hearing that, the cows were meant to realise that they had reached their 'fence', defined by Alex on his smartphone while working at his kitchen table, but they occasionally pushed on, in which case they got a thick ear, electronically speaking. By this means they kept within bounds, they ate down all the grass, smashed the bramble patches and trimmed back the boundary shrubs. The fields now look great, just the right condition to grow back into flowery meadows next spring.

Watching how the cows used the fields it was easy to see them as the forest glade animals they originally were. They moved as a herd; retreated to marginal shade and shelter when wind, rain and snow appeared; never quite static, but constantly shifting between open grass and shady scrub; drinking in the pond when the bowser froze. They had their favourite corner for spending the nights and preferred sunny, south-facing margins on frosty days. A rectangular field with rail fences would not have given them this variety.

Towards the end I thought they might be getting short of fodder, so I took them branches of mature ivy. By then they were used to my presence, but with ivy in hand they eyed me steadily for 15 seconds, then trotted over en masse, knocking me and each other around as they tried to hog the goodies. The peck order became very clear at these moments, but the two 'teenagers' were enterprising opportunists and, once in possession of ivy, fought valiantly to keep it.

Did the satellite-controlled fences work? Yes ... but. One day I came back from Brockweir to find all five cows in the garden, avidly eating the lawn and shrubs and in danger of destroying our fruit cage or falling into the swimming pool. If I rounded them up, they would sprint as a herd to another part of the garden. Eventually they departed down the drive, then turned towards the fields. Four went conventionally, but one jumped over a drystone wall into scrub. As this was a five foot drop, I feared the worst, but he landed well and sprinted across the field with the others. Much the same happened when three of us tried to round them up for departure. They kept breaking away, pounding round the garden, leaping up a four-foot high wall, then getting lost in our wood. Once found, they sprinted over a boulder field and hurdled the fence back into their field. They were having a great time ….. I miss them.

What's new in JJ's toolshed

With apologies for gatecrashing Phil's Toolshed, I offer a gadget that has helped me when splitting logs. It holds the main log in place as the axe descends, ensuring that the pieces fall into a waiting wheelbarrow or basket and not onto the ground.

It involves a softwood log stood on end on the ground, with a hollow carved out of its top with a chainsaw. The log needs to be 3ft high and with a diameter of at least 2ft. The hollow should be 4 inches deep, creating a holding rim of that depth; 33% of the rim is then cut away, leaving a gap for the split logs to ping into the waiting barrow or basket.

Phil Powles and I spent many hours of Research and Development on this project. Sally Secrett kindly provided the raw materials.

Ideal Softwoods for the block are Lawsons Cypress or Western Red Cedar such as a tree surgeon may be asked to dismantle in your garden.

Since the operation of this gadget

puts me in mind of executing "les Aristos" during the French revolution I call it Dr Guillotin.

JOHN JOSEPHI

Issue 45

Spring 2023

NEWSLETTER

www.parishgrasslandsproject.org.uk

COMMITTEE

CONTENTS

NATURE WATCH
What to look for now

Comma butterfly

Lesser celandine

A group of Alex Crawley's Herefords, wearing geo-collars, in one of George Peterken's fields. Find out more on page 4. ***Photo: George Peterken***

From compost to rural crime via hedge-laying

Broad range of topics at our March meeting

We have a varied array of speakers lined up for our annual general meeting, which will be held at the Mackenzie Hall at 7.30pm on Thursday March 23. It will be a "members' meeting", in that all of the speakers are members of the PGP. And a rich and varied group they are, reflecting the wide diversity of our membership.

There will be five short talks: a smallholder will provide an account of events during the last 12 months on her busy patch; a forensic scientist will report on the recent marked increase in the volume of work on rural and animal crime being dealt with by her lab; a composting super-fan will share some of the secrets of creating wormeries and explain how to use local food waste to produce top-notch worm compost; there will be a detailed report on the results of the Brockweir bioblitz last summer; and a step-by-step illustrated account of a hedge-laying operation that took place locally in recent weeks.

During the evening we will hold the formal business of the annual general meeting, including chair and treasurer's reports and election of the committee. There will be the normal break for tea, coffee and cake, with the opportunity to catch up with old friends and make new ones. Everyone is welcome, members and non-members alike. We will be giving details of activities planned for this year, including the imminent resumption of our Signs of Spring walks, Sunday morning outings where we brush up on our wildflower identification skills.






Andy Stott reports on findings of the Brockw

Cutt's Orchard secret

On the hottest day of last year, and possibly the hottest day ever, the Parish Grasslands Project held its first bioblitz in Brockweir. A bioblitz is an intensive survey of all wild species undertaken in a small area over 24 hours. Ours was a modest effort with local experts looking at butterflies and moths, grasshoppers and crickets, plants and bats at Cutt's Orchard – a mixed area of grassland and woodland on the lower slopes of Madgetts Hill.

First up were the moths. We'd set the two special light traps the evening before in the woods near the stream. Early in the morning we went down to see what we had caught. We were amazed by the number and variety of moths attracted by the lights, many had hunkered down on nearby shrubs without going into the trap. We tried to take photos before they flew away. The traps were retrieved to the Mackenzie Hall car park where Roger Gaunt set up a stall in the shade to identify each one. In total Roger identified 57 species from the two traps, many with several individuals. Once identified they were released back to the woods.

What a variety of colours and designs, many evolved to mimic the shapes and colours of the plants in the woods – dead leaves, green leaves, twigs and bark. Most of the moths were widely occurring in Gloucestershire and Southern England and Wales – typical of woodlands and field margins with alder, birch, hazel, oak, brambles, nettles and long grasses. A few were less common, having been recorded at relatively few sites in Gloucestershire the previous year (2021): Dingy Shell (3 sites), Triple Spotted Clay (5), Satin Lutestring (12), Slender Brindle (13), Mocha (21), Clouded Bordered Brindle (21) – wonderful, evocative names.

Among these the Mocha, which relies on Field Maple as a food plant, has lost a third of its range in Britain in the last ten years. On the other hand, one of the other moths we trapped, a Buff Footman, is a species that has hugely extended its range northwards from Gloucestershire in 2000 as far as Perthshire in 2016, in response to a warming climate. It was a great delight to find this diversity of life, with fascinating stories, living, largely unnoticed on our doorstep.

Next up, in the heat of the midday sun, were the butterflies, crickets and grasshoppers. Steve, Edward and Saskia Banner repeated their previous find of a Long Winged Conehead Bush

A small selcetion from the 57 moth species identified by Roger Gaunt (right). From left, top row: Early Thorn, August Thorn, Black Arches, Buff Ermine; second row: Peach Blossom, Rosy Footman, Scalloped Oak, Small Fan-footed Wave

Photos: Andy Stott

eir bioblitz

ts revealed

Cricket, another species that has been extending its range north and was first found in the Wye Valley by Saskia a few years ago. They also found Roesel's, Dark and Speckled Bush Crickets and Meadow, Field and Common Green Grasshoppers. They made a new record for the site of a Common Groundhopper. All are species that depend on long and tussocky grasses. George Peterken spotted a Silver Washed Fritillary Butterfly – another new find. Their caterpillars feed on Common Dog-violet, especially in oak woodlands. Later several adults were seen rapidly fluttering around the sunny woodland edges.

Finally, as the dusk and cool descended late in the evening, a party of intrepid explorers gathered in the Mackenzie Hall car park to go on a bat and owl hunt with local expert David Priddis. David had brought bat detectors that tuned into the sonar echo location calls used by bats to fly at night and catch their prey. The bats, that were clearly visible in the dusk sky and swooping over the stream, were identified as Common Pipistrelle, Soprano Pipistrelle, Myotis and Noctule.

David explained that Lesser Horseshoe Bats were probably present but were more difficult to detect because of the narrow beams of sonar that they emitted. We ventured up to the barn and some of the more agile were rewarded by sight of the Barn Owls making a hasty exit. Some days before we'd been delighted to see two adults shepherding and calling to their two fledglings. The barn has a good accumulation of owl pellets filled with the undigested fur and bones of field voles!

It had been a long, hot day but we learned a lot about the local wildlife and ecology – many thanks to our local experts. The key messages for me were, first, the sheer diversity of wildlife reflecting the diversity of micro habitats and whilst some of these – like patches of nettles, brambles, bracken, thistles and tussocks – may not be the favourite choice of graziers, grassland managers and gardeners, they are essential for our biodiversity. And second, on such a hot day, it was all too evident that climate change is happening.

Whilst the more mobile bugs are heading north and west not all the species in complex ecological networks can adapt as quickly and those that can't may eventually frizzle, dry and die out where they are, unless we all act now to reduce our emissions.