

Plumpton & East Chiltington Wildlife Group

Meadow musings

Some of my earliest memories are of trips into the Essex countryside from our home in north London - transported in my grandfather's car and stopping on the way at one of the many nurseries to buy fragrant tomatoes for our picnic. For lunch we usually stopped in meadows full of flowers and the sounds and sight of multitudes of insects.

Such meadows are rare today because of changes in farming practice but some can still be found. For the last 15 years I have been part of a team of volunteers that survey meadows along the tributaries of the River Ouse. We identify and map those that are still flower-rich and produce lists of the wild plants that inhabit them as well as the relative abundances of each species. We analyse the results to determine which vegetation community the meadows belong to (using the National Vegetation Community classification scheme). Some of these meadows are still managed as traditional hay meadows and others are being restored by their owners to make them more diverse, using techniques such as seeding, plug planting and green hay spreading.

When we moved to Plumpton many years ago we had the opportunity to turn our front garden into a minimeadow. It already contained native wild species but had been cut regularly and so these were not allowed to flower. However, the management it had experienced obviously benefited one species - Autumn Lady's-tresses, a tiny orchid that needs low sward to flourish. We were excited to find one plant in our first autumn here. We have not seen it since in our garden but there used to be a swathe of them in the rectory lawn where summer fairs used to take place.

Our approach was to let the front grass grow and see what would happen. The flowers of Bugle, Cuckooflower, Meadow Buttercup and Common Spotted Orchid appeared as well as a good number of different species of native grasses, such as the early-flowering Meadow Foxtail and the hay-scented Sweet Vernal-grass. We wanted to reduce the vigour of the grasses so that more delicate flowering plants could thrive so sowed Yellow Rattle, a semi-parasite on grasses. This had the desired effect but also allowed the spread of Ribwort Plantain, which did not please my husband. Over the years the meadow has changed. It is fairly damp and suited to Fritillaries so we planted six plants from Wakehurst and these have spread until there are now hundreds. We grew cowslips and oxeye daisies from seed and while the former have done well the latter did not thrive - probably because it is too shady. Every autumn we (actually Tony) scythes it and we rake off the cuttings and keep it short over the winter.

Our back garden grass we keep fairly short for recreational use but it is drier and sunnier than the front garden so when flowers escape the mower they differ from those in the front. When I read about Plantlife's project NoMowMay, which is designed to increase the nectar and pollen available for insects in gardens, I thought I would try it in the back garden to see what happened. At the start of the month the grass was sprinkled with blue Germander Speedwell, Thyme-leaved Speedwell, Daisies, Common Mouse-ear and Bulbous Buttercups. Later came Red Clover,

Common Vetch, Bugle and Ragged-robin. Honey bees and bumble bees visited vetch, speedwells and Bugle. By the end of May there were spectacular clumps of Oxeye Daisy and Meadow Buttercups. I submitted the result to Plantlife and wondered whether to carry on with LetItBloom June and KneeHighJuly, but decided that wasn't for me. I couldn't access the vegetable and flower beds or even the compost bins. So I have compromised and decided to mow, just leaving a few clumps of wild flowers and those that invade the flower beds.

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