

Droeways: ancient wildlife corridors (cont...)



In the September issue I paused my description of the Droeway walk when I reached the Bevern because I had reached the word limit. The stony bottom of the stream here provides a home for Bullheads (also known as Miller's Thumb). These fish have relatively large, broad and flattened heads, large fins and tapering bodies. They are active at night, feeding on insect larvae and shrimps, but shelter under stones during the day. The eggs are laid in pits under stones and the male guards them for 3-4 weeks until they hatch. The rather attractive, pink-flowered Indian balsam clothes the stream banks, but it is not welcome because this alien species is very invasive and spreads readily, shooting seeds from its exploding seed pods, to form dense stands that smother the native vegetation and clog up the stream. You might be lucky to see a kingfisher zoom up the stream, because they breed not far from here.

A more welcome sight is a Field Maple adorned with the delicate grey sprays of a lichen (*Evernia prunastri*) looking like miniature deer antlers. Also known as oakmoss, it is harvested commercially in Central-Southern Europe and exported to the Grasse region of France, where its fragrant compounds are extracted and used as base notes in perfumes. That use seems to be changing though, because some people are sensitive to those compounds.

Under the railway bridge and on to a damp, shady path, where my boots crush Water Mint and release its delightful scent, and out into a meadow where more strawberry clover struggles among the rather rank grasses. The density and vigour of the grass means that only a few wild flowers can survive here but it is probably a good habitat for voles and a good hunting ground for barn owls. It may not be a meadow for much longer though, because native Pedunculate Oaks have been planted here and are now about 12 ft high. The branches are low enough for me to see that some of the acorns have been attacked by a tiny wasp that causes knopper galls by laying its eggs in the flower buds. The chemical that the developing larva secretes distorts the growing acorn into a mass of ridged tissue. The acorn of

course is no longer viable. For the gall wasp to complete its life cycle, it needs to produce a second generation on the Turkey Oak, which was introduced to Britain in 1735. The knoppers haven't been here as long as that - they were first recorded in Britain in the 1960s but are now widespread throughout England, Wales and Scotland.

At the southern end of the meadow, the driveway enters a strip of woodland and it must have been a wide track once but now encroaching trees and shrubs have made the path narrow and deep in mud in places. There are some fine old ash and oak trees on the edges, which the wildlife group recorded in our survey of ancient trees in the parish some years ago. Emerging from the wood the way ahead to join Streat Lane at Duck Bridge is across a field whose grass crop has been cut and baled in white plastic. Instead of retracing my steps, I decide to walk south a little along the lane and then take a footpath across four fields to the west. Two of these fields are flower-rich, with Yarrow, Knapweed, Bird's-foot-trefoil and Red Bartsia (the latter being a partially parasite on the roots of grasses). I then join another driveway, which runs north past The Plantation, The Gallops, North America Farm and alongside West Wood. It is labelled as Kent's Lane on the 1879 OS map. I don't walk all the way - it is getting late - but follow it to the Plantation to the east of Blackbrook Wood. The Plantation is interesting in that the trees planted there sometime in the past are Horse-chestnuts - an unusual choice for a plantation tree - and I wonder whether the then landowner thought he was ordering Sweet Chestnuts instead. We shall never know.

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