



The Meadow

We have lived in our house for a bit over 20 years. It has a 2-acre field attached. I am not sure how the field was used and managed prior to our arrival, but when we landed in Plumpton, with all the zeal (and ignorance) for 'the unspoilt countryside' typical of those escaping London, the field wasn't a field, it was a *meadow*.

Of course we didn't actually know the difference between the two: perhaps 'meadows' had more flowers.....and featured in the books of Thomas Hardy? But a little idle research seemed to indicate that meadows thrive in impoverished soil conditions which under no circumstances should be 'improved'. So easy, cheap and with a positive outcome: just my kind of land management.

Of course, there is a proper definition for a meadow. It is a permanent grassland growing on soil neither very acid nor rich in calcium, made up of predominantly perennial plants that spread vegetatively for a number of years and require infrequent renewal via seed. They can be very old, and some, like ancient woodland, may 'never' have had their soil disturbed. Often, they are cut for hay, so from late spring livestock is kept away to allow the grass to grow tall for cutting usually in June or July, but as late as September if the weather is bad. This year it was June. When the grass has had the opportunity to recover, the sheep can go back on to graze the 'aftermath'.

So it is only at certain times of year that hay meadows look so distinctive. Come the winter, they will look similar to the bright green, sown grassland that makes up so much of our countryside. And this is probably one reason why some people are unaware of the loss of our meadows, and the biodiversity that goes with them.

In fact, an astonishing 97% of hay and wildflower meadows have been lost in the UK since the 1930's. And this has had a massive, negative impact on the flora and fauna we love and on which we rely.

To quote Dr Trevor Dines, a Botanical Specialist from the charity Plantlife: "The steady, quiet, and under-reported decline of our meadows is one of the biggest tragedies in the history of UK nature conservation; if over 97% of our woodland had been destroyed there'd be a national outcry. There exists a very real threat that we will lose our remaining meadows and the wealth of wildlife they underpin unless we learn to love, cherish and protect them."

A healthy wildflower meadow can be home to a concentrated and unique diversity of flowers – sometimes over 140 species. Many once wide-spread meadow and grassland flowers, such as quaking-grass, harebell, crosswort, wild strawberry, common rockrose, field scabious, hoary plantain, tormentil, ragged robin and devil's bit scabious are now on the Near Threatened list in England. (And surely another good reason to save these plants is to keep these fantastic names in circulation!)

But meadows are much more than just pretty flowers. They are unrivalled havens for wildlife; over 1,370 species of insects eat our most common meadow plants, along with an army of pollinating bees, butterflies and hoverflies and a soil pulsating with ants, fungi, worms and beetles. Many species of insect are inextricably linked to a specific plant for their survival: the Marsh fritillary butterfly will cease to exist without the devil's-bit scabious. Bird's-foot trefoil, another meadows mainstay experiencing decline, is, alone, a food plant for a staggering 160 species of insects.

To be honest, I cannot recognise the vast majority of plants that live in our meadow, but we seem to be blessed in Plumpton with experts in most things, botany no exception. A survey of the meadow was conducted on the 16th June and about 75 species were found, including two types of bird's foot trefoil, living in and around. And there were plenty of grasshoppers and crickets, butterflies and bumblebees accompanying said experts while they counted.

So next time you think to yourself 'where have all the insects, birds, bats...let alone flowers... gone', give a thought to the meadow.

With a lot of help from:

Margaret Pilkington's 'Wildflower Meadows' book
<http://papadakis.net/books/wildflower-meadows/>

The charity 'Plantlife' website: <http://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/our-work/campaigning-change/meadows>

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