

Monitoring changes in plant populations



When, a couple of years ago, I heard that a new nation-wide plant monitoring scheme was looking for volunteers, it took me a while to decide whether to participate. I was already recording plants for the Sussex Botanical Recording Society, recording mosses and liverworts for the British Bryological Society, carrying out conservation work on Markstakes Common and participating in woodland and meadow surveys for the River Ouse Project. Did I really have time for more? I couldn't resist in the end - always keen for a challenge and for more opportunities to get out and do something useful in our lovely Sussex countryside.

So, I signed up to the National Plant Monitoring Scheme (NPMS) in 2015, its first year of operation. It is a habitat-based plant monitoring scheme designed by the Botanical Society of the British Isles, the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Plantlife and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. The aim is to collect information on how plant populations are changing. Thanks to volunteers throughout Britain, there is a good understanding of changes in populations of birds, butterflies, bats and other animal groups, but this is not the case for plants.

Each volunteer is allocated a randomly selected 1km square and asked to survey five plots within it, in different habitats. I visited the website to select a square and found that the nearest available one was at Lower Standean, north of Brighton. I didn't know it very well, although had walked through it occasionally on visits to the Indian War Memorial at the Chattri. On my first visit, I met the farmer, by chance, who was very welcoming and said I could go anywhere to select my plots. It being mostly downland, I had little choice in habitat selection, but found three grassland plots on different slopes and with different aspects, an arable field edge and a hedgerow. I used photographs and sketch maps, and fence posts and other permanent features to mark the plots, so that I could be sure to refind them each time.

I have now surveyed each of my five plots four times (twice a year for two years) and have thoroughly enjoyed the experience. The farm supports a beef herd and it has been delightful to see the cows with their calves graze freely on the slopes. Cattle can be inquisitive and I did wonder whether they might come and investigate me as I scrambled about on my hands and knees, but they kept their distance; presumably they were more interested in protecting their young. The plots seem to be fairly stable in terms of the vegetation and land use, but it is a long-term study and changes may occur in future. The only dramatic change has been on the arable field margin, which in the first year supported a handsome array of arable weed species, including poppies, field pansies, sun spurge, speedwells and scarlet pimpernel on the edge of the rape crop, but there were very few of these plants in the second year, when wheat was grown.

Jacqui Hutson

Fast forward to 2017, and a new set of 1km squares was released, including one in Plumpton. Spurred on by Jacqui, I applied for this square on behalf of the Wildlife Group. Given that the area includes Plumpton College and its associated farm, we have approached the Countryside Management team at the college to see if their students wish to be involved with the twice-yearly surveys. Unfortunately, much of the designated 1km square is taken up by college buildings, but we have identified five possible habitats to survey: a woodland plot beside Streat Bostall, a grassland plot on the steep north scarp facing the college, an ancient hedgerow north of the college, the roadside verge alongside Streat Lane and the edge of the College Bostall, and are now looking for survey dates that will fit in with student exams and our other commitments. The three levels of participation - Wildflower Level, just recording plants from a short list; Indicator Level, recording plants from a longer list; or, more ambitiously, recording all the plants present in each plot - will provide students of all levels a chance to get involved.

Jacqui Hutson and Kate Gold