



Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke

July 2019

Newsletter 55 – part one



I was just thinking that the November/January newsletter No. 54 was a rather long time ago, when the words turned into a tune, and there was Ol' Blue Eyes reminding me that "It's a long, long while from May to December" so I had better get on with this before the days grow short and we reach September, and while there is time for you to get to the Fleam Dyke and see the Chalkhill Blues male and female all busily following Frank Sinatra's advice.

This photo was taken at the Bedford Gap at about 11.0am on the 23rd July. Not long afterwards I was joined by Roger Lemon with pencil and clipboard, doing the Fleam Dyke Transect Count for Week 17. The top of the bank is listed as Section 6. The path and slope along the north east side is Section 7 as far as the big Ash tree, and the rest of the path and slope is section 8. On 23rd July Roger counted 254 Chalkhill Blues on the Fleam Dyke, either on the good grassland between the Disused Railway and Mutlow Hill, (Section 3), or on the section of the Dyke between the A11 and the Bedford Gap, especially at the southern end. These Butterfly Monitoring Transect Counts are made along an agreed route, as if the monitor was walking within a 2.5m box. Butterflies flying further down the slope on either side

are not recorded, so the grand total would be much larger. If you have not been able to come and see for yourself, then the photograph above will have to do, and you must imagine the continuous fluttering activity of numerous silver-blue males, along with lots of Gatekeepers, Meadow Browns, Small Whites and a few Large Whites with dozens of bees, hoverflies, flies and other insects.



In this photograph, taken on 6th June, you can see the large patches of Horseshoe Vetch, from which the Chalkhill Blues are now emerging in July. Close inspection of this would reveal the females, in protective brown camouflage, searching clumps of the food plant, or actually pausing long enough to lay the eggs of next year's generation.

I recently heard David Goulson, who founded the Bumble Bee Conservation Trust, talking about the way bees hover near a flower inspecting it as if they were choosing whether it contained nectar. His research showed that they can, in fact, sense whether the flower had already been visited by an earlier bee and therefore had no nectar left.

After watching female Green Veined Whites and Orange Tips on the Roman Road or in my garden, fluttering between a dozen Garlic Mustard plants, I have often wondered how they make their choice. We know butterflies can taste or smell with every part of their body. Are the female Chalkhill Blues searching the Horseshoe Vetch plants for some sort of scent marking which would indicate the presence of the eggs of another butterfly? Some small caterpillars will eat a competitor.



My thanks to Richard Lewington for this illustration

In a hymn of praise to Gardens and Gardeners, Rudyard Kipling wrote,

“Our England is a garden, and such gardens are not made
By singing “Oh how beautiful!” and sitting in the shade.

In the next photograph, Bernard Hunt’s assistants are coming to the end of the long and arduous task of cutting, treating and raking off the mass of shoots of brambles, briars and privet which had grown up along the length of the south west bank of the Dyke. As a group of shoots is cut, each cut end gets a dab of glyphosate coloured with red poster paint, so that almost no shoot is missed. The alternative to glyphosate would be to dig out each shoot. Since brambles, briars and privet spread for yards on buried roots, this would be prohibitively expensive and extremely destructive. Clearance of the upper part of the whole bank from the A11 to the Bedford Gap was paid for with £700 from your subscriptions and donations.



Clearance of Invasive Mahonia

In addition to this work, a very generous donation of £1,000 from **Butterfly Conservation** made it possible for the Hunt’s Wildlife team to clear and treat the Mahonia which had spread over a large area on the north east slope of the Dyke,





There was also a large patch of Mahonia on the south west slope, which was cleared and treated by the Hunt's Wildlife team. At the same time the opportunity was taken to clear the south west slope near the big ash tree. This was the area where two male Chalkhill Blues were first seen by Roger and Stella Wolfe in 2005, nectaring on Burdock. Presumably there were also females searching the Horseshoe Vetch plants. Numbers built up slowly from then. This clearance opened up access to the *fosse* or ditch, which was necessary for the next part of the plan....

Clearance of Scrub round the Junipers

Those of you who have walked along the southern section of the dyke will have noticed that the famous Junipers had once again become increasingly engulfed by scrub.

The threat of Brexit has caused many companies to reduce or withdraw funding to charities, including the local Wildlife Trust. Iain Webb has had to reduce the time he spent on the Fleam Dyke, and this winter he was not able to bring the Midweek Volunteers to the dyke at all. Instead, his time, energy and knowledge were put to good use in the development of Trumpington Meadows. An area seeded with Kidney Vetch attracted the Small Blue butterfly, thought to be virtually extinct in Cambridge. In theory they can't migrate more than 100 metres or so, but as Iain said when one landed on his shoe, "They haven't read the books."

At a public meeting called in 2018 to discuss plans for the A1307, I met some of the South Cambridgeshire Local Councillors and asked if they might have the odd crock of gold tucked away in the manner of the Staffordshire Treasure. Happily the answer was 'Yes'. It is called the Cambridge Community Chest. Our application for £1,000 met with success, and in due course Hunt's Wildlife cut and treated the scrub surrounding the junipers, and dug out the scrub nearest to the junipers in order to avoid the danger of glyphosate leaking into the juniper roots. This was an extremely prickly job, as you can imagine. The cut bushes were dragged down through the newly cleared area beneath the big ash, and were left to dry out in the ditch to be burned later in the year. This work cost £1,350, the difference being paid from our funds: your subscriptions and donations.



It is good to see this big bush clear of the scrub growing in among the branches, though the photo shows the bright green leaves of White Briony making the most of its opportunities. If any walker would like to reach in among the prickles and pull this plant up, please do so, but be sure to dispose of the remains deep into the bushes in the ditch. The substantial root bole will need to be dug out

Walkers will probably recognise this Juniper from the way it grows with branches spread up the bank. When I first came here in 2001, it was growing vertically, but in October of 2002 there was a very powerful gale during which the tall Juniper in the ditch snapped in half, and died. Sharon Hearle cut branches from which half a dozen cuttings were grown.



Junipers are known to continue to grow successfully in this position, with new bushes growing vertically from the branches, as has happened here. This recumbent bush is one of the three female Junipers. There are three good sized young Junipers within the wire netting enclosure, and other seedlings are found each year on the open ground.

Happy Birthday! 19 years old this summer

These three little bushes, now about 1.5 m high, are the survivors of the ten Juniper seedlings which were found by Sharon Hearle/Smith in 2,000, following major clearance work on the dyke. Seedlings are regularly found near the female Juniper bushes, and although many do not survive, others continue to grow protected from rabbits by tubes of wire-netting. The oldest of these is about 60cms tall.



However, as you can see from these photographs there is still a sort of wall of scrub further down the slope from the junipers. Martin Baker, Conservation Director for the Wildlife Trust BCN, along with Iain Webb, the Green Belt Officer is planning an application to the Wadlow Wind Farm Community Fund for funding to extend this clearance. I think most of us would prefer a landscape without these modern windmills, and those who live near them have to get used to an electrical whine, which must be difficult, but they have an elegance of line and a mysterious irregularity of movement, which has its charm. More to the point, the Wadlow Community Fund website states that the 26MW wind farm supplies the annual equivalent of 15,000 homes, or 29% of the houses in the South Cambridgeshire District.

In this newsletter I have written about the Conservation work that we have done on the south-east section of the Fleam Dyke. The extensive scrub clearance on the north east half of the Fleam Dyke, the Fulbourn end, is 'work in progress', or to put it brutally, a depressing sea of weeds and regrowth, but the picture will change as the subsequent management plan is implemented, with, it is to be hoped, a flock of 'Easy Care' sheep. This is not a nickname or a joke. They are easy to look after, and they positively like eating bramble regrowth.

Furthermore, a sea of weeds is not all bad. Butterflies, bees and other insects love it, and the Butterfly Monitors are reporting wonderful numbers of Meadow Browns, Gatekeepers, Small Whites, Large Whites, new season Brimstones, 44 Painted Ladies and 372 Chalkhill Blues, some in the area between the Disused Railway and Mutlow Hill and the rest south of the A11. Mike Gittos added a photograph to his report. He called **CHB Fest**.



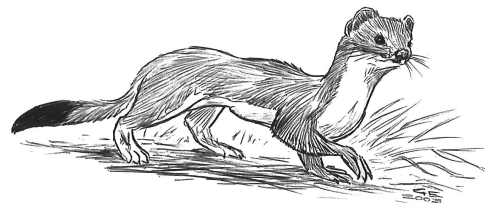
Before leaving this section of the Fleam Dyke and the newsletter, **I want to thank Andrew Crossley, the Farm Manager of the Thurlow Estate for taking a work party to the A11 end of the Fleam Dyke and clearing all the Hemlock that he and they could find, right through to the Juniper Triangle**, where the large triangular bushes formed a prickly barrier to progress. They pulled it up or dug it out and piled the plants in the ditch. This is a great relief as some huge plants were poised to spread further and further along the slopes of the Dyke. The worst of it is that the seeds are very long lived, and once established, Hemlock will re-emerge every year. I am glad to say that all the landlords on the Roman Road have collaborated to control Hemlock, except for the new tenant of Valley Farm, Charles Leadbetter of Somersham Farms, to whom I have written asking for help.

There is more positive news from the Roman Road, and other matters to report, but I will leave it to another email, which I will call Part Two.

With best wishes,

Julia Napier, July 30^h 2019

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This little stoat, drawn so beautifully by Graham Easy, is off to do all the things he should have done yesterday.