

Editorial

Welcome to the Spring 2009 edition of 'Undergrowth'. So much has happened at Foxglove Covert since the last issue that it is difficult knowing where to begin.

The Wet Meadow is complete and is greening over nicely. The hide is finished, the hedges are in, the boardwalk and viewing platform are ready, and some new species are already in residence. Lapwing chicks hatched on May 24th. Tony has provided an update on this project.

On the moorland area, the two hedge lines have been replanted, and Helen Burdon, Defence Estates Estate Surveyor has provided us with a piece outlining the reasons behind this.

Due to the above two projects, it was necessary to re-route the moorland path. A new gate was built by Len Porter Fencing, and this can be seen in the picture that accompanies the article written by Helen.



Work has resumed on the workshop. The photograph, taken on May 21st, shows the roof under construction. It should be finished very soon.

An 'Otter Training Day' was held on May 9th, and Sophie has provided a report. The organisers of this event confirmed that we have Otter on the reserve.

On May 11th, we held an 'Invertebrates Day'. In the photograph we can see entomologist Roy Crossley examining his net for insects.

Various guided walks have taken place. Sophie provided an 'Easter Day Walk', on Easter Sunday, and Marion looked for 'Signs of Spring', on April 19th. More recently, Tom Dewdney has taken groups around to check bird boxes which they had sponsored



On May 22nd, the bees in the Visitor Centre required attention. The hive was becoming very crowded and the bees were getting ready to swarm. David and Peter from Richmondshire Beekeeping Society came to remove about a third of the bees to free up some space in the hive. The Queen bee was re-marked in white as we can see in the photograph.

Fund raising is a perennial issue for any charity. On May 14th, we held a 'Coffee Morning' in the Town Hall, Richmond. Although it was much quieter than last year, we still managed to raise around

£160. Just over a week later we had a huge stall at the 'Car Boot Sale', in Bedale. It was hard work getting everything ready, and getting there for 6 am, but it was very worth while. In total we made £532.67, which is brilliant. The photograph shows part of the stall, with Emma on the left, and Richard next to her. We would like to thank everyone who helped to make these events so successful.



Ray Harper

Wet Meadow Project - Latest Update

In May 2008 what is now our new wet meadows area was almost indistinguishable from the remainder of the training area. Looking back at photographs taken at the time it is a mass of 'leggy' gorse and undulating moorland. Much of this original habitat remains but now it is outside our fence and contrasts well with the wetland we have established within which offers us the best of both worlds.

Less than six months on from the completion of the ground works much of what we had hoped for has been realised. The hide is finished to a very reasonable specification, the phragmites and the 'Harper hedge' are developing slowly, and the species we had targeted and hoped for have been attracted to our reserve. Records of what have been seen feature routinely on the blog but



without doubt the whole project has followed the conservation aims of our constitution and has added substantially to the wildlife seen regularly at Foxglove. Once the vegetation has been fully re-established and the connecting pathways are complete, the additional package will be seen as a major achievement providing yet another area of special interest for our visitors.

My personal thanks go to all those who have contributed in so many different ways to what effectively is a superb facility. It will be interesting to see what additional observations we make as the year progresses.

Tony Crease

The Chairman in the Congo



I have now been here over three weeks and I have to admit, that every time I think I am coming to terms with the problems of the Congo, something crops up which reminds me that I am no where near understanding the plight of the country. To cut a very long story short, the problems of Rwanda in 1994 are still simmering here in the Eastern Congo and will not be solved quickly. And it is not just a humanitarian disaster, but an environmental one as well.

The Eastern Congo is actually a fabulous place. It has magnificent mineral wealth, a difficult but manageable climate and thoroughly decent people who are prepared to work hard. Almost anything grows in the rich soil, so there should be few who are starving. But 15 years of fighting after Mobuto's lack of investment has taken its toll. The biggest problem is refugees, and that of course

leads to other problems.

My headquarters is in Goma, on the edge of Lake Kivu just 20 miles from the second oldest national park in the world after Yellowstone. But I cannot get there.

Once Virunga National Park was (a little like Foxglove Covert) famed for its diversity. Most famous are the mountain gorillas, but not so long ago it had everything you can think of. The plight of the hippopotamuses is the most sobering example of the problems that civil war can bring to a UNESCO world heritage site. There were something in the order of 30,000 about 5 years ago and now there are almost none. On one particular occasion, rebels literally went on a killing spree and overnight decimated the population, and the story is not dissimilar for elephants. If it were just for food, that would be understandable, but it is not even as simple as that.

Remarkably the gorilla population has grown and there are something like 400 mountain gorillas in the park – half the world's population... And that is because of a truly extraordinary organisation called the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN), which employs truly dedicated – and armed – park rangers. And they fight -when necessary -with the rebels to protect the reserve. Many people think they are the most reliable and disciplined government armed force in the country. There are not many of them and their work carries huge risk. Their headquarters was recently attacked and burnt down by rebels and it is just a question of time until the rebels attack again. Rangers do die in the course of their duty and their families are continually at risk.

Why? Because the rangers are trying to stop the rebels destroy the park. Although there have been some gorillas killed recently, this is not the biggest problem. Charcoal is. Charcoal is the principle fuel for the Congolese, and Goma, just 20 kms south of the park has a population of perhaps 800,000 all of whom need to cook. The trade is run and controlled by the rebels and corrupt officials and it comes straight out of the reserve. The risk to the reserve cannot be over emphasised: unless the trade is stopped, the forest will disappear and that will be that. Some estimates say it could be as little as 10 years from now unless things change.

The Rangers have a plan: They have launched a programme to replace charcoal with briquettes. These are compressed vegetable matter that are dried and are almost as good as charcoal but cheaper. And they employ the locals to harvest renewable vegetation and create the briquettes. The briquettes work well enough for almost all uses, and are undercutting the rebels, so over time the need for charcoal might diminish. However, if it does, the rebels' profits will fall and this will lead to more trouble, so there is no easy answer, and the ICCN is ready for whatever the rebels throw at them! (So much for our problems in Catterick!)

So apart from that - and the rebels themselves of course – The Congo is a charming place. I sit by the edge of Lake Kivu watching the pied kingfishers and bulbuls flitting about, and think how good this place could be. However, if I then glance across the

lake there is a reminder that no one can ever be complacent in Goma. The lower level of the lake itself is dissolved methane. And just behind where I am sitting is the world's most dangerous volcano!

Nyiragongo sits brooding above me and has one of the world's largest lava lakes bubbling away and producing smoke as if it were a cartoon volcano. But it is no joke. Goma was cut in half in 2002 by a river of lava which reached the lake but did not cause the methane in the lake to erupt as well. But one day it probably will!

So how is life at Foxglove!!! I follow the blog every day so I feel in touch. I am glad to see that the workshop is coming along well and was very impressed by the success of the car boot sale – well done everyone.

Guy Deacon

Foxglove Covert 'Starry Supper'

The Foxglove 'Starry Supper' held on 28th February, was the first event of its kind, and an undoubted success. The guest speaker was John Harper (no relation!) of Scarborough and Ryedale Astronomical Society, or SARAS in short.



John is an expert in 'all things celestial', having first become interested as a young boy and his absolute passion about the subject came across clearly, as he spoke. We had all hoped to be able

to view the planets and stars that evening, but unfortunately the local weather being what it often is, (ie.very cloudy) we were unable to see anything at all.

This did not, however prevent us from listening, completely enthralled, to a description of the planets in our solar system. John used the 'Stellarium' programme to guide us on our journey through space. Stellarium is a free 'open source planetarium for computers. It shows a realistic sky in 3D as you would see it with the naked eye, binoculars or telescope' respectively. It was also amazing to see the telescope that John had brought with him, a magnificent Newton Reflector, with a magnification of 250.

We took a break for the delicious supper of curry, and then John continued with his talk. As an absolute novice in the 'sky at night', I was extremely interested to hear the facts that John divulged to us all. For instance, Mars, the Red Planet is closer in temperature to the Earth than any other planet. It is possible that primitive life could survive near the surface of Mars. John explained that sometime in the future it could even be feasible that the atmosphere of Mars could be changed to make it habitable to man. I have since found out via the internet, that NASA has

planned a nine month trip to Mars to search for signs of life. It makes the idea of 'Martians' as 'little green men', seem especially amusing.

All too soon, it was time to leave. However we are looking forward to John's return in the near future, for Starry Supper part 2.

Sue Harper

Otter Training Day

The Otter surveying skills training day was well attended. Many volunteers from the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust travelled a long distance to Foxglove to hone their surveying techniques. A handful of Foxglove volunteers joined in, too. The day was run by Jon Traill and Claire Jackson of The Yorkshire Wildlife Trust.



The morning was spent in the classroom learning about mammals such as Otter, Mink and Water Voles and how to identify their presence in their natural habitats. As well as a slide show, Jon brought with him several items of interest. These included a stuffed Otter, Mink and Water Vole and models of artificial Otter holts.

After lunch the group walked down to Risedale Beck in the non-intervention area, and Jon gave us a short talk at the gabions. The group then split in two, one group with Claire and one with Jon. Jon's group immediately discovered some large prints in the sand and were delighted to learn that they were definitely fresh Otter prints! Claire's group soon made an exciting discovery too, some fresh Otter spraint. This was found on a large rock, as the Otters like to mark out their territory with their droppings. The groups then swapped areas so that everyone could see all of these signs. Other highlights included finding Bullhead fish eggs and Mayflies and checking under large stones for Crayfish.

Risedale Beck is the perfect habitat for Otters and Jon pointed out likely Dens and places where they may lay out for example in a hollow tree that is lying on its side, or within the root system of a large tree. We plan to survey the beck 3 times a year for signs of Otter and look forward to a spotting one of these most beautiful yet elusive mammals.

Sophie Benaiges.

Easter Day Walk

Easter Sunday Weather forecast anything from heavy rain to lovely sunshine, and bit of wind thrown in for good measure! Marion made the decision to hang up the bunnies and the Easter eggs on Saturday afternoon. She placed them very carefully around the trail: 10 bunnies; 10 Easter eggs; a centipede; and a snail, who really enjoyed themselves in the pile of wood chippings during the day! There were various questions to answer as well as finding all the bunnies and eggs as the children followed the route around, mainly on the Discovery Trail.

Sunday dawned bright and sunny and not too windy, Sophie and I checked that everything was in place. (We had to go out later to add the photos of the birds to the feeding station.) There were about 25 children who followed the trail, found the bunnies and eggs and answered the questions. The children and their parents enjoyed the trail and on completion the children chose two small prizes.

Elizabeth Dickinson

Birdsong Breakfast

We had an exceptional turnout for the Birdsong Breakfast on the 2nd May with around 37 people arriving at the Field Centre for a 04.30 am start, of which six were children.

Tony did a quick briefing in the Centre on Birdsong and Calls; the group was then split up into three smaller groups led by John Bell, Tom Dewdney and Tony.



The weather was very kind to us all being a clear, dry morning. The birds didn't disappoint either as we were greeted with numerous Tawny Owls calling, Woodcock displaying and calling outside the centre, and the haunting eerie calls of Curlew in the distance.

As dawn broke the passerines found their voices with migrants leading the forefront: Chiffchaffs, Willow Warblers, Garden

Warblers, Blackcap and a Cuckoo all making an appearance as well as many resident species.

In all, over 30 species were recorded on the reserve in the first hour. Tony then led at least twenty members of the group onto the M.O.D. ranges to observe a Black Grouse Lek. Again the birds put up a fine performance, with at least five Cock birds being sighted. We were also very fortunate to see a Cuckoo calling from the top of some firs, which then flew straight over the group.

During the morning, we recorded a further 15 species including Meadow Pipit, Wheatear, Skylark and Mistle Thrush. The whole group then met at Wathgill Barracks for what was an exceptional breakfast.

A great big thankyou to everyone that attended and supported this event. I hope that you all enjoyed the event as much as I did.

Paul Welsh

Moorland Hedges

Over the winter months the ancient field boundaries on the moorland edge have been re-instated. Historically this area of land would have been farmed as the in-bye grass fields associated with Foxglove Farm, the ruins of which can still be seen just west of the reserve.

The hedges would originally have been planted to create individual in-bye fields to allow the land to be managed for hay crops during the summer, to provide winter feed, and grazing by ewes and their



new lambs in the spring.

Approximately 225m of hedge has been planted following the lines of a few scattered remnant hawthorn trees which were the only remaining signs of the previous field system.

The new hedges contain a variety of species including hazel, field maple, holly, crab apple and wild cherry which in future years will not only enhance the overall landscape of the area but also provide important wildlife habitat and movement corridors for species moving between the reserve and training area.

Helen Burdon, Defence Estates Estate Surveyor