



Downlands Trust Newsletter

AUTUMN 2022



From the Chairman Peter Wakeham

This has been a busy summer for the Trust and we have continued to give talks to local organisations about chalk grassland and our work, successfully attracting new members in the process. Together with the Downlands Partnership we have jointly manned a stand at several fetes and fairs and have enjoyed encouraging sales of native chalk plants grown at Old Lodge Farm by the Partnership. We will be holding our AGM on 18th October at the Banstead Centre and we hope that many of our members will be able to join us, details to follow.



This summer will be remembered for the record breaking hot, dry weather experienced during July that continued well into August. Many of our chalk grassland plants such as Marjoram, Eyebright and Thyme are well adapted to survive in such conditions and have fared well.

Butterfly transect records indicate that it has been a good year for some, but not all, species. Long periods of dry sunny weather have enabled many to complete their life cycle earlier than usual. However, there is concern for next year's population in that the caterpillars of many species hatch in July and feed on the new growth of their larval plants. The desiccation of many of these plants is likely to significantly affect caterpillar survival and hence the size of the 2023 population. Species experiencing difficulty this year include bumblebees which are relatively large and have furry coats that are an adaptation to living in

cool conditions. In very hot weather they will overheat and become unable to feed and this is likely to further exacerbate the well documented decline in their numbers that has occurred over recent decades.

We have relatively little open water on the chalk and many of the ponds with which I am familiar dried out completely, including Elmore Pond in Chipstead shown in the above photograph. I have watched dragonflies attempting to lay their eggs on bare mud and many other aquatic creatures are experiencing similar short term threats to their survival. A recent news item showed Environment Agency staff rescuing fish stranded in drying pools in the upper reaches of the River Mole.



Fire is a hazard that unfortunately and, usually avoidably, has accompanied this exceptional weather. A grass fire in Happy Valley (right) was quickly contained before it could spread too far, but extensive areas of rare lowland heath have been destroyed in the west of Surrey. This has resulted in the loss of substantial numbers of reptiles and the young of many ground nesting birds including Nightjars.

Most species are quite resilient to short term extremes of weather such as we have experienced this summer. Seeds produced by many plants will be stored in the soil seed bank, ready to germinate once conditions improve. However, if these extremes become the norm as a result of climate change then we can expect the composition of our local flora and fauna to change, quite significantly in some cases.

Summer fairs

Noreen Siba

The Trust attended four events this summer: Chipstead Village Flower Show and Fair; Old Coulsdon Rotary Fair; the Teddy Bears' Picnic in Nonsuch Park; and the EcoFair in Carshalton Park on Bank Holiday Monday. The wild flower plants grown by Jamie, Sean and Damien from the Downlands Partnership Plant Nursery, Old Lodge Farm, attracted many people to our stand which allowed us to engage with them about the projects we fund as well as generate some much needed income.



Alex helping set out the stall at Carshalton EcoFair



Chipstead

Great news from Fidelity International!

We were surprised and delighted when informed recently by Fidelity International that they will be extending their sponsorship of the Trust for another year until the end of December 2023.

Fidelity has been our principal sponsor since the beginning of 2019 and their support has made an enormous difference to the level and variety of grants that we have been able to award. The Downlands Partnership has been the main beneficiary, but we have also been able to help a variety of local conservation groups.

Most recently, Fidelity funded an operation to remove silt and invasive vegetation from Elmore Pond, Chipstead, a more detailed report on which will appear in the next issue of the newsletter.



Elsbeth and Peter with the sheep game at the Teddy Bears' Picnic

Calling all members and volunteers

We already have the dates below in 2023 when we want to advertise the work of the Downlands Trust and Partnership at local fairs. However, we cannot manage to man a stall all day as well as setting it up and dismantling it.

We need a rota of helpers on these dates who can assist for a couple of hours. If you are willing or know of anyone who is willing to help, please contact **Noreen on 07770 417 796**

- Saturday 1 July Old Coulsdon Rotary Fair
- Monday 28 August Carshalton EcoFair

Notice of AGM

Our Annual General Meeting will be held on Tuesday 18 October at the Banstead Centre, The Horseshoe, Banstead SM7 2BQ. Doors will be open from 7.30pm for a 7.45pm start.

There will be a talk afterwards on the Woodchip Conservation Volunteers' work in Banstead Woods.

All are welcome.

Thank you!

The Trustees would like to thank all those who have donated to the Trust over the last year which has contributed significantly to our ability to fund local groups in their conservation work. We have seen an increase in the number of applications for grants as many groups resume their work after the pandemic.

We would especially like to thank among others the Beavers of the 1st Tadworth (Invincible) Sea Scouts who raised £315 in a sponsored swim towards the cost of goats.

Of all our wildflowers none are more controversial or divisive than Common Ragwort (with Hoary Ragwort not far behind). Indeed, its removal from our fields has become a staple summer task of many conservation volunteers. On the one hand it is public enemy number one for many horse owners, whilst on the other hand it is an extremely important plant for environmentalists. So where does the truth lie?

Ragwort, with its mass of bright yellow flowers and ragged leaves on tall erect stalks, brings a welcome splash of gold to many uninspiring environments - roadside verges, railway embankments and patches of waste ground. Many a rural poet, such as John Clare, were quick to enshrine its virtues in verse. It is naturally a biennial plant, taking two years to mature to flowering. In its first year it forms a dense rosette of leaves growing close to the earth and is at its most poisonous. The leaves give off an unpleasant smell when bruised, hence local names such as 'Stinking Willie' and 'Mare's Fart'. It is its toxicity - that can cause irreversible liver damage in livestock, especially horses - that is at the root of its bad press.



Ragwort

As a general rule animals will not touch it in its fresh and bitter form – I have seen many instances of horses standing in fields full of untouched ragwort – but, dried in hay, it loses its bitterness but not its toxicity. It is deemed to be of sufficient threat that under the Weeds Act 1959 the Secretary of State can serve an enforcement notice on the occupier of land on which ragwort is growing, requiring them to take action to prevent its spread. It is also illegal to fail to remove it from a field that is cut for hay. And the subsequent Ragwort Control Act 2003 promotes the more efficient control of ragwort where it is deemed a threat to animal welfare. However, whilst not doubting its potential dangers or the need to remove it from a hay crop, the 'science' upon which its impact is based quickly falls apart upon even the most cursory scrutiny.



Inquisitive but not tempted

In 2002 the British Equestrian Veterinary Association (BEVA) published a claim that a staggering 6,500 horses die in the UK every year from ragwort poisoning – a claim that has since been held up, unchallenged, as proof of the need to rid the countryside of this toxic threat. This would no doubt have come as something of a surprise to the former Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF), whose 1990 report placed that figure at 10 horses per annum. So, why the massive difference?

In 2002 BEVA contacted all its members in relation to the impact of ragwort poisoning. Out of all its members 4% responded to say that they had seen, on average, 3 'suspected' (note – not 'confirmed') cases of ragwort poisoning. BEVA then simply multiplied the number of

suspected cases to cover their full membership, producing a total of 6,500. At no point did it appear to occur to anyone conducting the survey that 96% failed to respond because they had no cases to report. Indeed, I have heard of equestrian vets who have practiced for 30 years and have never encountered a single case of suspected ragwort poisoning. However, since its publication, the BEVA figure has developed an unquestionable life of its own.

It is interesting to consider that livestock has lived with ragwort for centuries. There are numerous other plants that are toxic to livestock – foxglove, black bryony, white bryony, cuckoo pint, bracken, yew and elder, to name just a few – yet none have been demonised in the manner of ragwort. It is also interesting to learn that, according to latest thinking, for it to be fatal an animal would have to eat a vast amount of it – estimates are a minimum of 5% of bodyweight (and possibly a lot higher) for horses and cattle and 125% of bodyweight for goats. Indeed, I have heard of instances of pregnant ewes making straight for it, probably instinctively knowing that the toxins will fight against parasites that could be harmful to the unborn lambs.

Ragwort thrives best in conditions where the ground has been disturbed (such as excessive trampling by livestock) and where there is little or no competing vegetation. It is therefore a common consequence of over-grazing. I have seen numerous instances of animals standing in a field of ragwort where the grass and wildflowers have been grazed right down to the ground. I have never understood how some horse owners, believing ragwort to be highly dangerous, can leave their animals in a field with nothing else to eat.

Another belief is that the plant is so toxic that the poison can be absorbed through the skin of anyone pulling it. However, there appears to be no scientific evidence to support this. Bees regularly take pollen and nectar from ragwort, but there has never been a claim of the resultant honey being poisonous. Personally, I would always wear gloves because of the noxious smell that would impregnate the hands.

Another claim is that it can spread at an alarming rate, the seeds being carried vast distances on the wind. However, the latest research indicated that 60% of seeds fall at the base of the plant, with lessening volumes being carried further away. However, it is only the lighter seeds – those less likely to be viable – that are dispersed at any distance.

However, claims of mass livestock deaths aside, there is a complete other side to the story of this plant. It is a British wildflower of significant importance to many insects and therefore has a major role to play in maintaining a healthy biodiversity and balance of nature. It is estimated to support around 120 different species of invertebrate – more than any other wildflower. Of these, 30 species, some rare or scarce, rely entirely upon it for their existence, including 7 beetles, 12 flies, 7 micro moths and 1 macro moth (the black and yellow-banded cinnabar moth caterpillar that turns the toxin to its own advantage to deter predators). Any eradication of the plant would therefore prove to be fatal for these populations. It ranks as one of the most visited plants by butterflies, moths, bees and hoverflies – a major source of nectar for at least 30 species of solitary bee, 18 species of solitary wasp and 40 species of nocturnal moth.



Cinnabar moth caterpillars

Another important characteristic of ragwort is its long flowering period, extending right through summer and well into autumn, even into the start of our increasingly milder winters – I have recorded ragwort in flower well into November. This means that it is often the lone food source long after all the other flowers have gone to seed and disappeared.

Personally, I think it makes sense to continue to remove ragwort from fields that are being cut for hay. However, its benefits far outweigh its disadvantages so, after more than a decade of spending my summers clearing it from field after field, I have reached the decision to leave it be for the benefit of wildlife.

Grants

Pam Mascall

Chestnut Fence Posts for the Grazing Team

As a result of the storms early this year, the Grazing Team used up all their stock of posts to repair damaged fencing. So back in April the Downlands Partnership received a grant of £587 to purchase more chestnut posts and strainers for emergency repairs.

Posts are not only required after storms and when fencing new areas but often have to be replaced such as when broken from excessive leaning or rubbing by animals when in a paddock. Other posts need replacement when old and rotted. Fencing repairs cannot wait where livestock is involved. A secure fence is needed both to keep livestock in and also dogs out.

The **photo** shows Joshua, a 'kickstarter' bashing in a new post at Hither Field on Chipstead Downs whilst working with Sean to gain experience in grazing.



Another 'Rambo' Shearing Machine for the Downlands Partnership's Grazing Team



In April the Grazing Team applied for a grant for another Rambo sheep shearing machine. Being portable, the machine enables the sheep to be sheared in the fields. This means less staff time as the sheep don't have to be moved and fewer disturbances to the animals. The Trust awarded a grant of £737 to cover the shearing machine and ancillary equipment.

The **photo** shows the Partnership's Grazing Assistant, Damien Laing, shearing one of the City of London sheep.



New Oak Benches, Way Marker Repair and Steps at Happy Valley

A grant of £1,055 was made to Dominic North, the Warden at Happy Valley, to improve the access and for more benches for visitors to the area. The work, which was carried out by Tom and the Downlands Partnership volunteers, was to make and install new benches, repair a way-marking post and construct more steps to improve access to the deep-sided chalk grassland slopes at Happy Valley. The new steps will help to protect the site from damage by erosion as they encourage visitors to use the designated footpaths and stepped access, thus helping to safeguard the area's important habitats.

Six more Electric Cattle Collars for the Downlands Partnership

Following the success of using electric cattle collars to control where the cows roam, the Grazing Team applied for a grant for six more collars for cattle grazing at Nork Park, Cuddington Meadows and Hooley Meadows.



These collars allow the cattle to graze without fencing. The Grazing Team mark out the area using an app on a smartphone which is sent wirelessly to collars around the animals' necks. An alarm sound is triggered if the livestock strays too near to the boundary of the area and the cattle soon learn to turn away when they hear the sound. These collars not only allow the Grazing Team to tailor where the grazing is needed most, but also mean less time and expense in erecting and repairing fencing. What is more, the collars enable the locations of the cattle to be monitored at all times.

A grant of £1,969 was made to the Downland Partnership for the purchase of these collars. The photo shows a steer getting used to a collar before being put out to graze.

More grants.....

Pam Mascall

Silky Blades for the Woodchips

As bird nesting season came to a close, the Woodchips Conservation Volunteers started preparing for their autumn program of tree work at Banstead Woods. Their main winter work is to remove ash trees that have either died or become diseased and dangerous through ash dieback, and to coppice hazel. There are many stands of hazel in Banstead Woods which can live for several hundred years if regularly coppiced. The Trust was pleased to award a grant of £345 to meet the cost of replacement silky blades to facilitate the Woodchips' work.



Goodbye to Connor

Elsbeth Pringle

After seven and a half years with the Downlands Partnership, Connor Harrison, the Grazing Assistant, is moving on to pastures new!



We are so happy for him as he embarks on this new chapter of his life. His new job is as Grazing Manager of a flock of sheep on a large vineyard in Kent!

It has been amazing to see his progression over the years, we all wish him the very best and thank him for all his hard work and many achievements!

Please enjoy some of his highlights!



Photos: courtesy of Downlands Partnership

Sutton Community Farm

Sonia Cropper

Improving Wellbeing and Enhancing Community Through People-Powered Food Production that is Good for People and Planet

Hidden within the Little Woodcote Estate there is an impressive 7 acre organic fruit and veg farm that is owned by, run by, and exists for the benefit of the community. Surrounded by other land-based businesses, Sutton Community Farm grows and delivers delicious fresh food that is eaten by over 400 households a week.

The farm was first started in 2010. It was set-up to localise the food system, reducing food miles and promoting seasonal diets. Alongside environmental benefits, various social benefits were embedded into the model, giving local people opportunities to meet others, learn new skills, and experience improvements in mental and physical health.



12 years after its creation, Sutton Community Farm is thriving. The farm regularly welcomes over 60 volunteers every week, with volunteer sessions occurring Monday through Thursday, and twice a month on Saturdays. Volunteers get involved in all areas of farm activities, and they represent the heart and soul of the farm. The farm also provides opportunities for adults with learning disabilities.

As a community enterprise, income is generated through online farm shop sales. Most customers order seasonal VegBoxes, alongside an extensive array of individual items that can be ordered and delivered to people's homes. The farm also supports other organic farmers by buying and selling

fruit and vegetables that are not grown on the farm.

This year the farm is set to produce more than 20 tonnes of fresh vegetables. Responsible land stewardship is core to how the farm is organised, with no chemicals used in production and a strong focus on boosting the health of the soil. Promoting biodiversity and wildlife through establishing ponds, wildflower strips and hedgerows, enables a more holistic ecosystem on the farm.



Sutton Community Farm is a wonderful example of the power of community in changing the food system, taking care of the land, and improving people's lives in the process! We are always looking for new volunteers and new customers, see our website for more information suttoncommunityfarm.org.uk

July was dominated by the hot dry weather with all-time highs of 40 degrees. The grass was scorched and the record temperatures further raised fears of the consequences of climate change. August saw four consecutive days of temperatures in the mid-thirties: Thursday 11th to Sunday 14th. Some rain did arrive on Tuesday 16th and Wednesday 17th but this did not allay fears about drought.

There have been comparisons with the summer of 1976 which did not have the record temperatures of this summer - but had eight weeks of drought following an already dry winter and spring with many days in the mid-30s: there were hosepipe bans, standpipes in the street, river and reservoir levels were at all-time lows.

Butterfly numbers were high in 1976 but crashed the following year - and to this day have never recovered to pre-1976 levels. The thinking is that the drought desiccated the larval food-plants, seriously affecting caterpillar survival. We will now have to wait to find out what the effect will be on butterflies in 2023; for instance, butterfly populations were relatively unaffected by the hot, dry summer in 2018. We will not know until monitoring begins next year but species whose larvae feed this autumn and winter are clearly the major concern.



Gatekeeper on Ragwort,
Hill Wood Field
Photo Graham Kenward

Long periods of dry sunny days have enabled butterfly species to complete their life cycle more quickly than would normally be the case and a lot of species are going over earlier than usual. Butterfly numbers in Surrey & South-west London appear to have peaked at 18,000 in the second week of July - a week before the start of the Big Butterfly Count, normally timed to coincide with the summer peak. This is a low number in comparison to other years.

As feared, the record temperatures has meant that butterflies finished their life cycles early. August felt like September and early returns from September transects show fewer numbers recorded than in April. All this suggests the possibility of an early finish to the season with few butterflies in September.

By the end of the year there will be returns from about 130 transects. Even so, numbers of butterflies recorded on routes are well down and I doubt will reach 160,000. By comparison 220,000 were recorded in 2018.

Meadow Browns - which normally bulk out the numbers - are very low this year. Fortunately **Gatekeepers** appear to be having a better year and took over when **Marbled White** and **Ringlet** numbers began to decline.

The hot, dry weather also seems to encourage **Small Tortoiseshells** and **Peacocks** into early hibernation and summer brood numbers on the wing are very low. Once in hibernation, Small Tortoiseshells appear to remain there until Spring. This may be less true of Peacocks but they are not at present being seen in anything like the numbers that we saw in April and May.

Nor, to continue with bad news, do I think it has been a good year for **Purple and White-letter Hairstreaks**, although I have no real evidence to back this up. I have seen both species in small numbers, but only a good display of White-letter Hairstreaks on one tree at Lower Kingswood. However, numbers of **Small and Essex Skippers** have been very high this year.



Dark Green Fritillary, Hill
Wood Field
Photo Graham Kenward

In June **Dark Green Fritillaries** had been the star butterfly of the year so far and this continued as they dispersed off the chalk. There has even been a first ever sighting at Headley Heath.



Chalkhill Blue on Marjoram,
Photo: Brian Gardner

Chalkhill Blue numbers have been good on the North Downs escarpment and other known sites. Both males and females have been found at Yew Tree Down, Polesden Lacey for the first time. As Horseshoe Vetch is growing here, there is every chance of a new colony developing.

The numbers of **Adonis Blue** have been decreasing for a number of years and the second brood numbers have been lamentable. The species is only reliably on five sites in Surrey and so is extremely vulnerable. The loss of this iconic species in our area is a distinct possibility. This is the reverse of the situation on the Dorset and the Wiltshire Downs where the Adonis is reported to be doing well and it is the Chalk Hill Blue which is in trouble.

Common Blue and **Brown Argus** have emerged again in better numbers than the poor Spring brood.

Numbers of adult **Brown Hairstreak** recorded on routes have been low in 2022. It is difficult however to gauge the abundance of this species from transects as it is so elusive. Egg counts give a better idea.

There was a sighting of a **Wall Brown** at **Hutchinson's Bank** as well as other favourable reports around the country. Could it be that this species which we had thought lost from this area will make a return?

Bill Downey is Vice-Chair, Transect and WCBS Coordinator, Butterfly Conservation, Surrey & SW London

Greater Yellow-rattle - the 'meadow maker'

Peter Wakeham

Our local chalk grassland supports several nationally rare plants, some of which are afforded statutory protection under Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). One such plant is Greater Yellow-rattle (*Rhinanthus angustifolius*). This species is not native and was first recorded in the wild in 1724, and on the North Downs only in 1966. When the seeds ripen and the pods are shaken a distinctive 'rattle' is heard, hence the common name.

Two species of Yellow-rattle occur in Britain, Greater Yellow-rattle and Yellow-rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*). Both are similar in appearance and are most easily differentiated according to their flower structure. Yellow-rattle is widespread throughout the country whereas Greater Yellow-rattle is found almost exclusively in our local area, Happy Valley and Farthing Downs being its stronghold. Prodigious numbers may be seen in flower here from late June onwards and, in the last decade or so, it has spread to many chalk grassland sites along the Surrey / Greater London border. Elsewhere in the country it is restricted to just a few localities in North Lincolnshire and Angus.

An attractive flower in its own right, Greater Yellow-rattle is often described as the 'meadow maker' by virtue of its ability to weaken vigorous grasses. As a semi-parasite it draws water and nutrients from the roots of these grasses, allowing a wide range of downland plants to flourish.

Greater Yellow-rattle is an annual and the ideal management regime is a late hay cut after the ripe seed has been shed. The seed has little longevity beyond the following spring and any break in the continuity of seed production will quickly lead to the loss of a population.



Banstead Wildlife Field

Anthea Smithies



This is a picture I took of the pond in the Wild Life Field on 11 August.

I thought the Bullrushes (and you can just see the Marsh Marigolds through the leaves), Purple Loosestrife and the fact that the pond still had water in the middle of August would be of interest to readers.

The field is located in Basing Road, off Bolters Lane, Banstead, SM7 2AH.



Tree Planting at All Saints Church in Warlingham

Sarah Clifford, Countryside Warden



On Saturday 14th May, there was a special event planned at All Saints Church, Warlingham to commemorate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. "National treasure" Dame Judi Dench together with the Right Reverend Christopher Chessun, Bishop of Southwark (both pictured left), attended to plant two Oak trees to mark this historic occasion. Dame Judi's passion for trees is widely known.

There was a history of the church and a graveyard walk with some stalls, a woodland trail, and a bug hunt for the local children arranged by myself. We were also able to promote the Downlands Project and Downland Trust with display boards.

The bug hunt saw an influx of families with children for the 10.30am start with mums, dads, grannies, and grandads armed ready for the bug hunt to begin. A brilliant morning was had by all, and some beauties were found on our adventures, like the beautiful Cucumber Spider.

Once all our insects and critters had been released, we headed over for a well-deserved drink and to collect a goodie bag to take home. Some families stayed for a picnic and to watch the planting of the Oak trees. The weather could not have been better for the day with over 350 people of all ages attending.

Many thanks Marian Harvard and Grace Kempster for arranging such a wonderful day.



From left: Pam Mascall, Grace Kempster Parish Councillor, Sarah Morrow, Simon Morrow, Chair of Tandridge District Council, Sarah Clifford

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DOWNLANDS TRUST MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION FORM

If you are not a member or if you know anyone who would like to support our valuable work in the countryside, we would be delighted to receive the following application form and subscription. Alternatively, you can join via our website.

TYPE OF MEMBERSHIP (please tick)

- Individual (**£10**)
 Senior /student /unwaged (**£5**) Please delete as applicable
 Family (**£15**)
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Please note: Memberships are due for renewal annually on 1st January. However, any memberships taken out after 1st September in any year are covered for membership for the following calendar year.

PAYMENT OPTIONS (please tick as applicable)

- I enclose a cheque for £..... to cover the subscription. You may like to add an additional donation to aid our work.
 I have made an online payment of £..... to your bank account, Downlands Trust 40-09-04 31439820. Please use your name as the reference so that we can connect the payment to your membership.

GIFT AID Please tick the box below if you are in a position to do so.

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