

NEWS AND STORIES FROM ABBHEY FIELDS

Long Meadow planting | CCSA mosses | Winter insects | CCSA habitat work | Members' afternoon

January 2024

The year has turned at last and the days are getting longer. The first signs of Spring are appearing: bulbs are coming up, wild arums are unfolding their leaves and early snowdrops are flowering. Winter visitors such as fieldfares and redwings are still with us, but things are starting to change for our residents. Robins sing throughout the year, defending their territories loudly and fiercely, but now they're being joined in song by other birds such as song thrushes, dunnocks and great tits. And listen out for the distinctive sound of a great spotted woodpecker drumming on a tree to announce its presence and mark its patch.

In this update

Two saplings have been planted in Long Meadow to regenerate the avenue; mosses thrive in the CCSA woodland; several insect species can be seen even in winter; work parties target scrub preservation; HIGS members' afternoon.



Photo by Jon Pavey

Trees planted at Long Meadow

In December 2023 we planted two saplings marking the first stage of our plan to reinstate the avenue of large mature trees alongside Park Lane. A grant from the Histon Feast paid for this, for which we are very grateful.

For both saplings we cleared away a large patch of brambles and in doing so uncovered the decaying stump of the tree being replaced. We are planting the new trees slightly further from the road compared with the existing trees. This should make for easier maintenance in the long term.

At the east (village) end of the Meadow we have planted a small-leaved lime. Next to this, looking towards Oakington, we have extracted a couple of large oak saplings from a bramble blanket. Possibly one of these may be retained in situ.

The second sapling, an oak, has been planted further up the Meadow.

Both new saplings have been provided with a protective fence, to keep back grazing deer. The initial, temporary fences are currently being replaced by more robust barriers.



Photo by Jon Pavey

Mosses of the Set-aside woodlands

Last winter Dave Dives had a close look at some of the mosses found at Croft Close Set-aside. Ten species were recorded, most of which occurred on the rabbit-grazed lawns. The latter are described in [last June's newsletter](#).



Common feathermoss; photo by Dave Dives

Walk through the woodland areas on a winter's day and it is clear that mosses thrive here too.

One can't fail to notice common feathermoss on the ground and wrapped around the bases of young trees. With a hand lens the key feature of this moss is easily seen - the leaves of the central shoot are twice the size of the leaves on the side shoots. (Hint: if you don't have a lens enlarge a picture taken on your phone!)

Along the north boundaries of Croft Close some of the young oaks have wood bristle-moss growing on their trunks and branches, especially in the forks where most damp. This is an example of an 'epiphyte', or 'air plant'.



Wood bristle-moss; photos by Dave Dives

Completing the trio is common smoothcap found along one of the woodland paths growing below bramble and hawthorn bushes. This moss is scarce in Cambridgeshire and is a new record for our hectad (10km by 10km grid square). This is a large growing moss and can easily be identified without use of a microscope unlike many others. You might see some of it on a shady path passing from the fairy walks towards the old oak and can easily recognise it from its undulating wavy and toothed leaf edges, which are just visible in these photos.



Common smoothcap; photo by Dave Dives



Common smoothcap with common feathermoss; photo by Dave Dives

In the photo on the left the moss tangled with common smoothcap is common feathermoss – so often mosses occur in a tangled confusion!

Mosses are best observed in late winter when they are at their finest with least competition from the higher plants. So this is the time to have a look for these beautiful, but often minute flora. Mosses together with liverworts and hornworts are collectively known as bryophytes. We don't expect to see any hornworts at the Set-aside but had hoped for one or two liverworts. Maybe this winter?

Insects in winter

With the cold and damp of winter it is easy to simply assume that invertebrates are absent from the winter scene. In part this is true, but only to the extent that there are far fewer adults active. Nevertheless, there are some adult insect species which can be found on a winter's day.

The occasional queen bumblebee could be seen in the village last December. Whilst most of a bumblebee colony may die at the end of the summer, queen bumblebees will hibernate - which may be disrupted by unseasonal weather. In recent years, however, buff-tailed bumblebees have changed behaviour and started to nest in late autumn. This development is attributed to climate change.



Photo by Penny Reeves



Tawny mining bee; photo by Penny Reeves

Solitary bees, like the tawny mining bees (which can be seen in summer at the Set-aside) also hibernate, but in cocoons.

The aptly named "winter moth" is one of a group of species adapted to the season with a flight period November through to January. This common UK resident feeds on a range of broadleaved trees. Its eggs, stuck to bark, might well be predated in winter by hungry long-tailed tits whilst its caterpillars can be an important food source for breeding great and blue tits.

Overwintering adult peacock butterflies can often be found hibernating tucked away in a quiet spot in a shed. Other butterflies, like the marbled whites we occasional see at Abbey Fields, hibernate as caterpillars. Indeed these particular caterpillars hibernate immediately after emerging from the egg at the end of the summer, to emerge months later in spring.

A twinkling mass of tiny insects, dancing in a vertical swarm can often be seen in winter, especially in woods. These are likely to be winter gnats engaged in a courtship dance. As with caterpillar eggs, these can make a welcome meal for some birds.

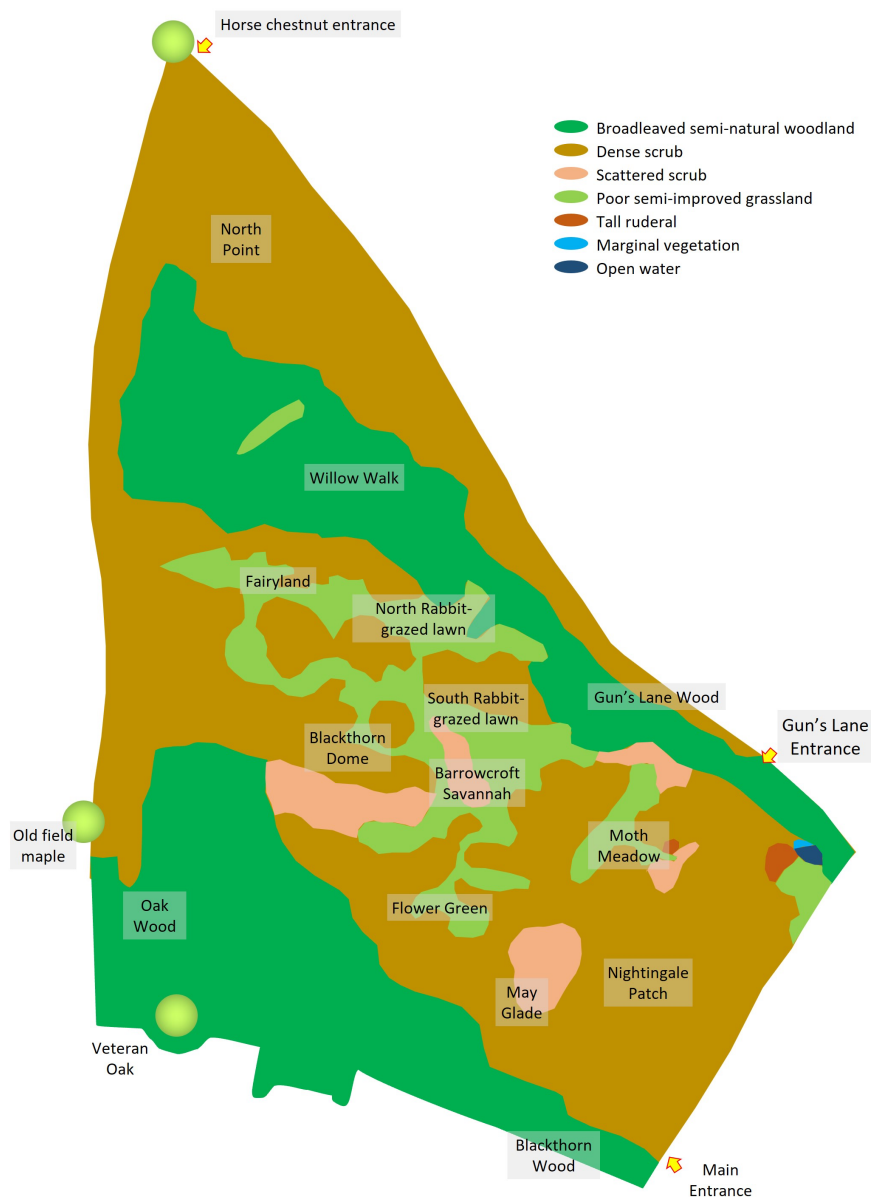


Peacock butterfly; photo by Penny Reeves

Habitat management at Croft Close

Croft Close Set-aside is a County Wildlife Site, selected for its significant area of scrub. This is a much-maligned habitat but one which is ideal for many wildlife species, both flora and fauna. This scrub provides a refuge for many traditional farmland species that find many modern agricultural practices hostile. Accordingly, the scrub is one of the key draws for the turtle dove which we believe bred successfully last summer as well as for a variety of other species.

This winter's work parties have targeted ensuring this important habitat is in good condition. The overriding aim is to retain scrub of mixed age. For this reason, when selecting the Set-aside for County Wildlife Site status, the Wildlife Trust recommended cutting back blocks of scrub vegetation on a 12 to 15-year cycle. This has guided our planning.



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In several areas we have cut back brambles and other bushy vegetation to ground level as part of this rotational management. We will monitor regrowth over the summer; in some locations we might trim back the regrowth in the autumn.

A second, equally important activity is cutting back brambles that are colonising the grassy areas. The Set-aside's grasslands are remarkably rich in flora; we are keen these areas continue to thrive. One lesson from the past year is we could probably do more of this over the summer months without adversely affecting breeding birds or other wildlife.



Photo by Alison Stuck

We have also coppiced some trees across the site. In Willow Walk this is part of a planned programme of regular re-coppicing with the aim of creating a vibrant mix of trees in different stages of growth. It is interesting to see how well the two trees coppiced last winter have responded - and indeed the return of ground flora to the tree's former footprint.

Elsewhere we are also undertaking selective coppicing, again with the aim of retaining diversity in the scrub areas.

The fourth component to this winter's work is cutting back vegetation alongside some of the footpaths. Again the aim is to retain the site's essential character and at the same time provide a good start for the Path Adopters who keep the network free from intruding vegetation during the growing season.



Photo by Jon Pavey

Members' afternoon

Histon & Impington Green Spaces is inviting all members, and others interested in the charity's activities at Abbey Fields and elsewhere in the community to join them at the St Andrew's Centre on Saturday 16th March at 2pm.

This is an opportunity to hear about HIGS' plans, to meet with other members, and to explore how you can help look after our wild green spaces.

The afternoon will include the charity's Annual General Meeting and an informal participatory workshop sharing information about the wildlife in our community.

This workshop will explore what is known about our wildlife, where it occurs and what more we can do to allow this to thrive.



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