

NEWS AND STORIES FROM ABBEY FIELDS

Fungi | Winter work | CCSA meadows | Mowing Long Meadow | Big Butterfly Count | Park Lane update

September 2023

The start of September has seen a long spell of hot, humid weather, very unusual for this time of year, although the earlier rather wet weeks mean that the vegetation is still flourishing and more able to withstand the heat. The long summer grass on Long Meadow was cut very late this year due to the weather so we have been able to study the impact on the wildlife. This is helping us to understand what is the best time to mow the meadow in future so as to boost the spectacle of wildflowers.

In this update

Looking forward to autumn fungus forays and planning for winter work parties. Investigating the flora of the CCSA meadows. Long Meadow has been mown. The Big Butterfly Count results show a wide variety of species. The latest on the Park Lane horse chestnuts.



Photo by Jon Pavey

Fungi sprout forth!

In autumn 21/22 there were many fungi evident all over Croft Close Set-aside (CCSA); last year there were far fewer. (Could this be put down to last year's drought? There may be other reasons.)

In July this year the first fruiting bodies - the mushrooms - were already much in evidence and as we go through into September these are increasingly numerous. Maybe we are in for a good year!

Many fungi are in the grasslands, often close to trees and shrubs. They can also be found among the trees both at ground level and higher up.

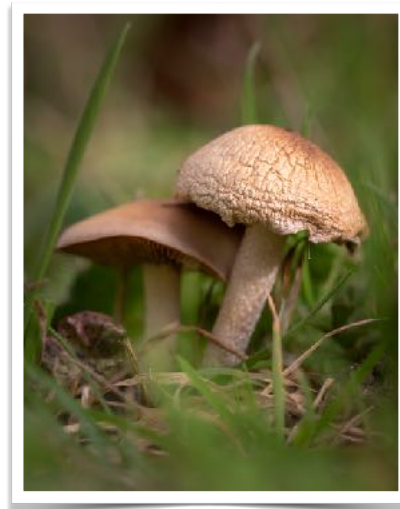


Photo by Penny Reeves



Photo by Penny Reeves

Mushrooms and toadstools (there is no clear distinction between the two) are important recyclers of the ecosystem, breaking down decaying material. But it seems their function goes well beyond that. One of their intriguing roles is aiding communication between trees (the Wood Wide Web), while without fungi, flora as we know it would not exist, such is their interdependence or “symbiotic” relationship. Moreover, they are now considered a major [global carbon sink](#).



Photo by Jon Pavey

Important as this is, many are also beautiful and should be appreciated just for that. Some have bizarre, outlandish forms and, of course, some are incredibly poisonous. So, a wildlife group not to be messed with; and unless a real expert **do not touch** (even slightly). Similarly, never rely on a phone app for identification: it is not worth the risk! (See <https://www.wildlifebcn.org/wildlife-explorer/fungi> for more information.)

But as autumn proceeds, do pause to take stock of these mysterious forms; many are worthy of a photograph and can provide subtle colour to the autumnal landscape.



Photos by Penny Reeves

Winter work parties

During the summer our splendid volunteer team have kept paths open at CCSA and prevented brambles from encroaching on the Park Lane footpath.

September through to February is when we do the bulk of the habitat management work; this avoids disturbing breeding birds and many other plants and creatures. (With the CCSA being a County Wildlife Site, this, of course, goes without saying!)

Each month October to February there will be a work party on the **second Saturday** and **third Tuesday** of the month, both starting at **2 pm**.

We meet at the main entrance to the Set-aside by the **gate on Croft Close**.

There is much to do so we will arrange other sessions – we plan to hold these at different times and days of the week in the hope that this will offer opportunities for everyone who wishes to join in.

What are we going to do?

Well, it is a mixture. It ranges from light pruning and removing brambles that are trying to establish in our grassland areas through to improving the drainage along the southern boundary which has become blocked over time. In selected areas we will cut back some of the scrub growth particularly where there has been heavy bramble growth. This includes restoring the width of the main paths which as summer ends have narrowed somewhat.



Photo by Penny Reeves



Photo by Penny Reeves

In short there is probably something for everyone.

All details will be posted on our calendar on our website: <https://abbeyfields.online/events-calendar> .

The meadows of Croft Close

For many of us, one of the pleasures of visiting the CCSA is the variety of habitats. You can walk through woody areas, or enjoy the open skies over the grasslands.

This year the flora team had several outings to look closer at the flora of these grasslands.

We have known for some time these harbour some of the site's most interesting species. The sheer variety in any 0.5m survey square however is also impressive - in some cases 15 or more species.

One of the best areas for this variety is the first open area you come to in the middle of the site, whether visiting from the main entrance (taking the path alongside the houses) or Gun's Lane.

This has also been a good spot for summer grassland butterflies, notably common blues and brown argus..



Photo by Penny Reeves



Brown argus, photo by Penny Reeves

One of our pleasing finds has been the small-flowered crane's-bill. Previously overlooked, the clue is in the name. This plant can be little more than 10cm or so high with very dainty lilac flowers (and is [very similar to the dove's-foot cranesbill](#), which is also present.)

Our meadows are dotted with bright yellow flowers. Somewhat resembling dandelions (which some are), these can be challenging, particularly where



Photo by Penny Reeves

grazing pressure from rabbits has turned a plant normally 0.5m tall into a wispy prostrate specimen with barely any leaves. Smooth tares, hawkweed-oxtongues, cat's-ears, together with two species of ragwort are all there to confuse - and enjoy!



Photo by Penny Reeves

Mowing Long Meadow

Long Meadow has for many years been mown for hay at the end of June. This year the cut was delayed. Why was this?

As many a farmer will tell you - it is all to do with the weather. Such has been the pattern of wet and dry days there hasn't been a 5-day window forecasted (needed to cut and dry a hay crop) until late August.

This will have affected the wildlife in different ways. Judging by the butterfly counts, Long Meadow supported more butterflies than in July last year, although it was clear that numbers were already dropping off by normal hay-cutting time at the end of June.

Grasshoppers and crickets (<https://www.countryfile.com/wildlife/insects-invertebrates/guide-to-grasshoppers-and-crickets-common-uk-species-and-how-to-identify/>) were also winners, making the most of the long grass in August.

However, it is too early to tell what impact there has been on the flora. In previous years after the hay cut plants like the germander



Photo by Guy Richardson



Roesel's bush cricket; photo by Jon Pavey

speedwell would put on a spurt of growth. These were still evident in the long grass but whether the competition for light and water has set them back is not known.

Suffice to say, our current plan is to mow the meadow next year earlier than this - but we will continue to monitor the impact of the cutting regime.

Results! Big Butterfly Count

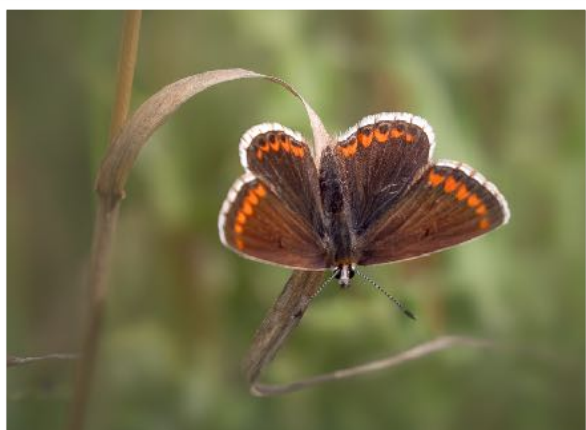
We played our part in the national Big Butterfly Count (<https://bigbutterflycount.butterfly-conservation.org/>), organised by Butterfly Conservation, by carrying out a series of counts at both the CCSA and Long Meadow.

Our 29 counters spanned 70-odd years in age and also varied in expertise. But it was great to see identification skills develop whilst having fun.

Our biggest challenge was telling apart the [brown argus](#) from the female [common blues](#). It is hard

enough to get a good sighting of these small butterflies and even when you do they look very similar.

In all we had 240 butterfly-observations at Long Meadow over 21 fifteen-minute periods and 360 butterfly-observations over 32 periods at the Set-aside (10 of which were after the national observation period ended).



Brown argus; photo by Penny Reeves

The clear winner was the [gatekeeper](#). Last year this was also the most recorded but then large whites were almost as plentiful. This year there were far fewer of these whites during the survey period but they have since been a little more numerous.



Gatekeeper; photo by Penny Reeves

The most interesting record was of a [small heath](#).



Brown argus;
photo by Penny Reeves



Essex skipper;
photo by Guy Richardson



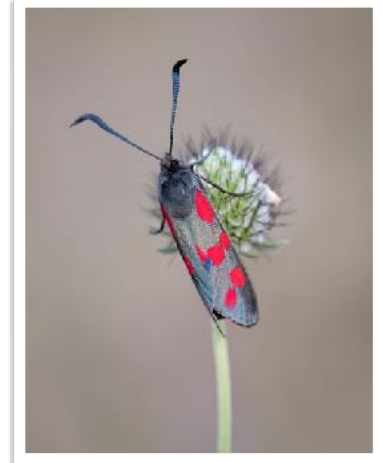
Male common blue;
photo by Penny Reeves



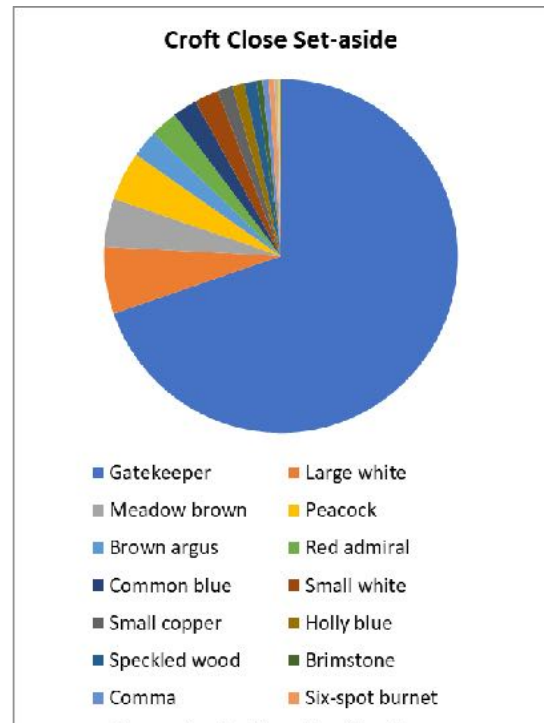
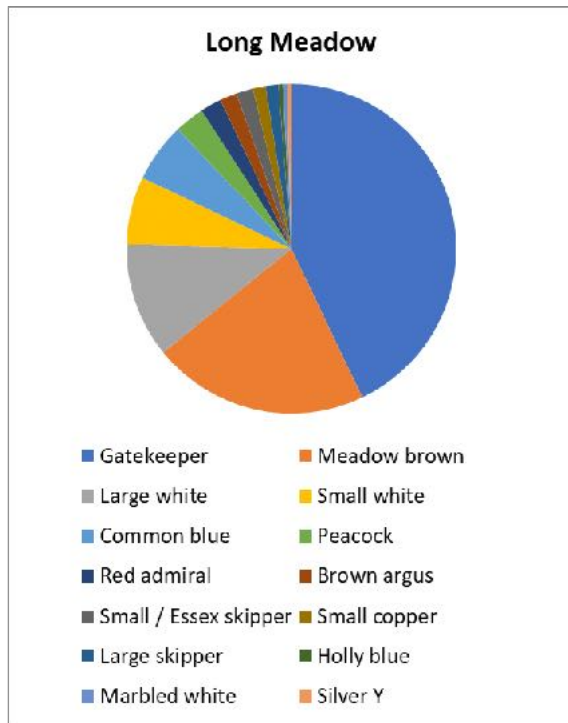
Small heath; photo by Penny Reeves

This butterfly, whose caterpillar feeds on fine grasses (fescues, poa and bents) is designated a Priority Species for conservation. This year a small heath was first seen in mid-June; finding another in August is a promising sign.

Note that in the charts here there are two day-flying moths: [silver-Y](#) and [six-spot burnet](#). Both are included in Butterfly Conservation's national survey.



Six-spot burnet moth; photo by Penny Reeves



Red admiral; photo by Penny Reeves



Speckled wood; photo by Penny Reeves

Park Lane avenue

We are hoping to plant two new trees (possibly three) in the Park Lane avenue this winter. We are finalising our planting plan but it is likely that over time we will plant three species which will eventually alternate (1-2-3-1-2-3) along the edge of Long Meadow.

That said, we want to keep the existing horse chestnuts for as long as possible while they are in good condition.

At the moment one of these in the middle of the group between Melvin and Pease Ways is suffering die-back in its crown. Over the winter the dead branches will be removed. A second horse chestnut is also causing concern due to a fungal attack to its roots. For that we sadly must take more drastic action given its position beside the road and take it down. This is the tree nearest the village centre.



Long Meadow horse chestnuts; photo by Penny Reeves

For this reason, we anticipate the first two trees in our replacement programme will be those at the east end of Long Meadow. We have sought advice from many quarters on suitable species for the replacement trees. With the uncertainties over both climate change and the impact of tree diseases all choices come with qualifications.

However, currently lime, oak and sweet chestnut are front runners. If anyone has information to share on the suitability of these, please let us know at sitemanagers@abbeyfields.online.

Can you help?

We are always looking to offer opportunities for assisting us with Histon & Impington Green Spaces' activities. The winter work parties are an obvious example.

But if your interests lie elsewhere there are other ways you can assist.

For example, as we learn more about the sites we are accumulating good data covering the wildlife and habitats; helping us analyse this can be done at a convenient time and would be highly valuable.

Equally valuable would be assisting with secretarial and bookkeeping functions. Again, this can generally be done at any time to fit in with other commitments.

If you have a little time you could offer, please contact us at hello@abbeyfields.online for general volunteering. If you are interested in joining a work party and want to know more email us at sitemanagers@abbeyfields.online.

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