

Amberley Wildbrooks

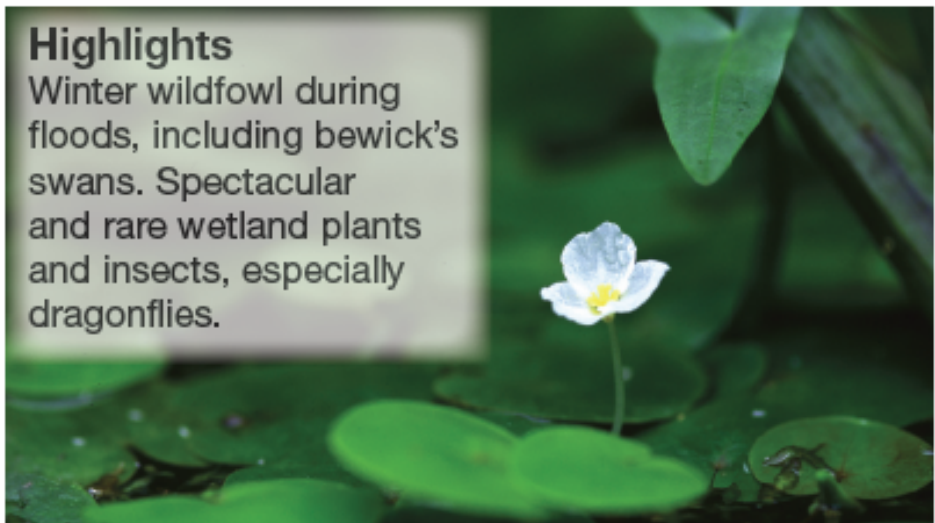
Grazing marsh and ditches in a former floodplain important for birds and plants

From the South Downs at Amberley Mount there is a stunning view of the Wildbrooks. The River Arun traces a serpentine path across an extensive flat area of grassland, bounded on the horizon by hills and woods. The grassland itself is dissected by numerous ditches, mostly dug in the 1800s to assist drainage, but now supporting a fantastic array of wetland plants and insects. Here and there rushes add a darker tone to the fields revealing damper conditions; elsewhere dark green patches of willow and alder have formed miniature wet woodlands.

Sometimes in winter the scene is completely altered to one of a giant silvery lake, with only the trees and bushes poking through like cracks in a mirror. This used to be a common occurrence, but has become less so since the banks of the river were raised and sluices installed to speed up the exodus of the water from the fields. During flood times

Highlights

Winter wildfowl during floods, including bewick's swans. Spectacular and rare wetland plants and insects, especially dragonflies.



hundreds of wigeon, pintail, teal and mallard seek refuge and food on the water, as well as large numbers of bewick's swans that like to graze the submerged grass and thousands of lapwing which feed on the damp edges alongside snipe and other waders.

In summertime the hydrology becomes somewhat more complex: feeder ditches carry water from nearby chalk springs, and underground water percolates out through peat forming a derelict raised bog. This mixture of influences is one reason why such an amazing variety of plants is found here — over half of all the British aquatic species. The ditches in particular are incredibly lush with different layers of plant life — fully submerged species, such as the insectivorous bladderwort, and many that are of special interest to botanists like the stoneworts and pondweeds. There are also those plants that have floating leaves such as frogbit, and all five of the British species of duckweed, and those that emerge from the water, including the water-cresses, greater

water-parsnip and the pink flowering rush. Away from the water itself the peaty area sports towering clumps of tussock sedge, and rather unexpectedly the climbing corydalis — more usually a woodland plant.

These underwater forests are home to many specialist insects and other invertebrates. The huge silver diving beetle bludgeons its bulky mass through the weed, having spent its young larval life feeding exclusively on snails. There is the water stick insect, looking like a loose jumble of twigs waiting to catch prey with



bewicks swan

Damian Waters

mantis-like legs, and its relative — the water scorpion. Hundreds of damselflies and dragonflies hawk relentlessly up and down the ditches, including the scarce chaser, the hairy dragonfly, and the downy emerald. There are 26 different species of aquatic molluscs, some of which are nationally rare, slithering their way through the rich ditch vegetation.

No wonder then that the Wildbrooks hold a suite of designations in recognition of its superb wildlife value: Site of Special Scientific Interest, Special Protection Area and Ramsar site. The situation looked bleak in the early 1970s when the site was threatened with being drained and ploughed to grow crops. However, the Trust and others managed to prevent this at a landmark public inquiry — the first time that such an agriculture ‘improvement’ scheme was turned down on conservation grounds. A compromise was reached and now the Trust has an 82 hectare reserve in the western part of the Brooks, large enough to enable some control over the water levels so that ditches remain full and the fields and meadows stay damp into the spring. Birds, such as redshank and snipe are once again breeding and all the



branched bur-reed

David Plummer

specialised plants and insects have an assured future. Traditional management, such as seasonal grazing and occasional ditch clearance have been reinstated. The site is managed in partnership with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, who recently secured a further large part of the Wildbrooks, so that a strategic approach can be made to the whole valley that ties in with the RSPB's reserve at Pulborough Brooks.

However, it is perhaps one more official designation that is most telling. Early on a summer morning, when cotton wool strips of mist hang over the ditches, and the sun peeps over the Downs to stir the dragonflies, when the frogbit opens its three white petals to accept the warmth of the rays, and the redshank pipes his reveille across the marsh – it is easy to see why this is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.



David Plummer



Dingwal Wildlife Explorers



Mark Monk-Tery

Clockwise four spotted chaser, water mint, great diving beetle