

A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

Arable Plants & Farmland Birds

Cereal fields that carried, what a conventional farmer would consider, an appalling weed population, are now a sea of filling heads of spring barley and winter oats. The Charlock, Red Dead Nettle, Chickweed and Speedwells have completed their annual cycle, have seeded and died off. They sheltered the crop in the harshest months and have provided pollen and nectar for a host of bees and other insects and will now give seed for many foraging farmland birds like the Linnet, Goldfinch and Yellowhammer.

Chemical intervention to control these weeds, as is normal over vast swathes of the British countryside is just too effective. Not only does it destroy all unwanted plants growing in the crop but also many very rare and unaggressive species that would never have adversely affected the crop in the first place. I think of some of the beautiful plants that we are fortunate enough to have growing here, Night Flowering Catchfly, Martin's Rampion Fumitory and Shepherd's Needle – all names that reflect a historical cultural significance to country people.

The destruction of these plants also obliterates the very foundation of the food chain and is therefore directly responsible for the crash in insect and bird populations which we are experiencing nationally today.

Last week I walked into a field of oats, now over 5 feet tall and flourishing, with no hint of disease and every leaf from the bottom one up, green and working to fill the hanging grain. In the spring, this was carpeted in Red Dead Nettle, now there is no trace of them and the oats have grown tall and thick.

Corn Buntings and Yellowhammers are singing in the hedges and a Quail bubbled somewhere in the rustling crop as it swayed to a gentle breeze. The sky was studded with hovering larks who high as high poured a chorus of beautiful musicality upon all those that had the good fortune to stand, just for a minute to listen.

The butterflies had a difficult and slow spring, but now numbers are good with dappled Marbled Whites slowly flopping in all areas of rough grass whilst the Meadow Browns skitter among them. There was a small immigration of Painted Ladies in June. Their larvae feed on thistles, so with luck, there should be a good emergence of adults in the autumn.

Field margins are so valuable for butterflies; it is very unusual to see butterflies flying in and around arable crops, but here I can, because their larvae are not being killed by drifting insecticide.

Organic farming stands for a living diverse environment and we all must do more to ensure that this is better appreciated by the public.

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