

A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

Cowslips & Dukes

It has been a slow, cold spring but one encouraging thing has been the early growth put on by our Sainfoin. This ability to grow away despite the adverse conditions, is a further attribute of this remarkable legume that is not generally recognised. The Lucerne, in comparison, has scarcely moved.

It has been a difficult spring for dairy farmers but it must have tested insects to the limit. Torpid oil beetles lying on paths, bumblebee queens, often frozen to death after emerging from their prolonged hibernation. Others just still, waiting for some heat from a sun that just would not come out. It all goes to demonstrate the vital importance of early spring flowers as a nectar source.

It seems to me that off all the early flowering plants none are so valuable as the primrose. They started flowering here in late February and are still putting up fresh flowers. On one of those bitter days this April, I found crowds of bumblebee queens blundering over primroses, desperate to get their share of nectar.

The cowslips are now turning the fields yellow and will help to provide a continuity in this nectar harvest until the early summer plants start to flower.

This illustrates one of the major shortcomings of the countryside today. Intensive arable farming has destroyed the continuous availability of flowering plants for invertebrates. It is no wonder that bees are under threat and dying of stress related diseases; these no doubt aggravated by the plethora of herbicides and insecticides used on conventional farms. Our farms can be a refuge for threatened species and a few simple steps can increase their value for wildlife immeasurably.

The primrose is not only so important for bumblebees but also for a remarkable little butterfly called the Duke of Burgundy Fritillary. A grand name for a postage stamp sized butterfly. It has shining brown forewings with a lattice work of black lines and a glistening necklace of white pearls on the underside. But, it is a boisterous little insect, always taking on any much larger species that may enter its patch. It has simple requirements and yet has become very rare. Its larvae feed on primroses and cowslips. If you have a north facing slope, with a few patches of scrub and an isolated bush or two, you may have the perfect home for a Duke. Fence the bank off from cattle and plant up with primrose and cowslip plugs. They should soon seed across the area providing this wonderful early nectar and food plant for the Duke. A little sheep grazing in the winter and gentle scrub control is all the maintenance that is required. Simple steps like this can give us all greater pleasure in our farms and a valuable role as conservationists.

Henry Edmunds F.R.E.S.

May 2016