



Bristol Naturalists' Society

Registered Charity No. 235494

Wildlife News: Week 32 – August 11th 2008

Weather .

In the past five years this has been the hottest week of the year, but not this year, or last. The average was 20.1C, cooler than last year, and average temperature of the year so far, at 14.3C, is minutely lower than any of the previous five years. The last twelve months figure is the same at 14.29C. The cause has been a succession of low pressure systems sweeping across from the Atlantic, just as if it were October.

It has also been another wet week with 26mm rain falling, bringing the Augusts total to 56mm, cf the average for the whole month of 85.mm. Thus we have had 170mm more than average for this date and the total for the past twelve months is 1021mm. All reservoirs are full.

Flowers and fruit on the Downs.

94 species were in flower on Sunday, eleven fewer than last week- the numbers never quite add up as each week I often find plants in flower that I missed the previous week. This week I found Betony, which seems to have just come out, and a wild Snapdragon on the cliffs that I had not previously noticed. They are often in flower most of the year, but this year I have not found one before. Three new species have ripened- Laurel, Elder and Leycesteria, about a fortnight later than last year, despite the fact that the weather in July was warmer than in 2007.

The pace of change is noticeably slowing as the amount of daylight shrinks- it is now less than fifteen hours a day, and falling by four minutes a day, almost half an hour a week. This, and cool and wet conditions, allows all species to slow their development, and extend their flowering season for as long as possible. On average the whole flowering season for all 200 species can vary by three weeks from year to year, but an individual species can easily vary by 18 weeks, and the greatest variation I have recorded on the Downs, for Oxford Ragwort, is 23 weeks. Such differences will have a considerable impact on the amount of seed produced, and hence, for annuals at least, the number of plants the following year. Over time it will also affect the complex patterns of distribution of perennials. The Downs is best looked upon as a vast and complex battleground in which over 200 species (and I don't include the grasses) are locked in warfare to dominate the area as far as they can. Not only is each species pitted against the other, they are all pitted against the environment itself, and against the hand of man who is constantly tidying up, and introducing new and strange elements into the scene, sometimes knowingly, sometimes unwittingly. The battle has been fought for ten thousand years or so, and the winners and losers differ in every generation. Every year there are new plants that turn up, and others that vanish, sometimes for good apparently. It all looks so unchanging and permanent, but fixed point photography will reveal the constant process of change.

Trees.

A Bristol tree forum has been established to try to improve liaison between the Council's arboricultural team and the citizens. People are very ambivalent about trees in the city- on the one hand they value them hugely for their beauty, for softening the harsh urban landscape, for absorbing noise, carbon dioxide, and PM10s, and for the other wildlife that they support. On the other hand they resent it when they cut out the light from windows and gardens, when they force walls to fall, or undermine foundations by sucking water from the soil in summer, when branches fall on cars, when the exudations of aphids cover cars in

sugar, or when roosting pigeons drop even more unpleasant mess, and worst of all when in a storm they fall and block the road. The City is responsible for about 100,000 trees, and is working on a system for ensuring that appropriate information is provided, and consultation takes place, when work on “high-value” trees is proposed. Their problem is that years of under-funding has meant that many trees now pose a potential and unacceptable risk to the public, and that in many cases the only alternative to felling is unacceptable costs in future. As BNS representative on the forum I have been encouraging consultation, and also seeking to ensure wider public education. We need a city wide network of volunteers with sound knowledge who can respond at a local level to proposals, and offer practical support. The tree officers objective is to increase tree planting, both of street trees, and amenity trees, but they work to tight budgets, and are too frequently seen as simply risk averse, and ready to fell too often. Anyone interested in becoming a Tree Warden for their area should contact me. This is a national scheme to provide volunteers with the skills and information they need.

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