

I am getting more and more nervous about the flow down the brook. Although September's rainfall was close to average, so far this month it has been very dry and the total so far this year, as I write this in the middle of October, is only about three quarters of where we should be. Without a very wet 3 or 4 months I fear the brook is going to stop flowing. Bad news for the wildlife but if it follows the same pattern as 2012 the cress should bounce back.

Regarding the brook, we held a "Big Brook Event" in Benson on 9th October at which we extolled the value of the precious resource, showed villagers what we were doing to care for it, explained plans for improving it for wildlife and asked for opinions and ideas. We also offered some activities for children eg. making willow fishes and fishing for invertebrates in the water. Mustn't forget the bucket of non-native red clawed crayfish destined for the pot

I'm not sure if people are noticing more or if it is a sign of improvement but there have been many sightings of brown trout and several recent sightings of otter spraints on the brook.

Keep your eyes on social media and signs round the village as we are hoping to run another "Big Brook Event", this time in Ewelme.

As we enter autumn, changes are afoot in the wildlife to be seen on the watercress beds and surrounds. Most of the summer visitors have left us for warmer climes, though blackcaps and chiffchaffs are extending their stay in the mild weather. At this time of year, it is never obvious whether the ones we are seeing are our breeding birds or winter migrants, in the case of blackcaps coming over from Germany. Unfortunately, they don't have foreign accents.

My records from the watercress beds indicate a gap in recording blackcaps in weeks 45 and 46 (first half of November) which, although not conclusive, is a good indication of the changeover. Winter thrushes are beginning to arrive, and it probably won't be long before they discover local hawthorn berries and strip the bushes. It is also worth keeping your eyes open for some of the other winter visitors like siskin (on alders), brambling (usually associating with chaffinches) and if you are really lucky, the exotic waxwing (various berries, in particular rowan).

The surveying of butterflies has now been completed for 2022 and the results are somewhat of a curate's egg – good in parts. Highest ever totals of small skipper, brown argos and gatekeeper but totals of orange-tip, holly blue and small tortoiseshell were dire. Almost difficult to believe but in 23 surveys this year I have only seen 7 small tortoiseshell butterflies whereas back in 2014 I counted 241 in the same number of visits. I hope there are no climate change deniers reading this, but I suspect they are all in parliament. This decline follows the national trend, and a possible reason is the increasing presence of a particular parasitic fly, *Sturmia bella*, due to global warming. The fly lays its eggs on leaves of the foodplant, close to where larvae are feeding. The tiny eggs are then eaten whole by the caterpillar and the grubs that emerge feed on the insides of their host, avoiding the vital organs. The fly grub eventually kills its host and emerges from either the fully-grown larva or pupa before itself pupating. Although the fly attacks related species, such as the Peacock and Red Admiral, it is believed that the lifecycle of the Small Tortoiseshell is better synchronised with that of the fly, and it is therefore more prone to parasitism. Generally, in nature, some sort of balance occurs between the number of parasites and their host but the rapid change in the climate occurring at present seems to have upset that balance.

Guided walks continue on the first Sunday of the month (please come and keep us company – we get lonely) and work mornings are on the first Saturday and third Wednesday each month. Good for your health, good for the site and, I'm told worth it for the craic, whatever that is!

