

VOLUNTEERING AT MILHAM FORD NATURE PARK – AUTUMN 2011

WORK DATES:

SUNDAY, 20 November from 1.30 pm

Planting out wildflowers on the bank, sowing of wildflower seeds in bare areas of meadow grassland and chopping back the Goat and other Willows. Possibly planting of pot-grown Silverweed and Mouse-ear Hawkweed on sculptural seat, if soil wet enough.

You might need: gloves, rake and a trowel. (Saws and loppers provided)

Additional date: SUNDAY, 11 December from 1.30 pm

Tree work. Possibly planting a young tree and moving two others. Lots of checking of tree-protectors and tree ties to make sure young trees are not being strangled. Some re-staking of young trees and installing protection against strimmers. Some light pruning to shape young trees/lifting of canopies to facilitate mowing. Further work on willows, as required.

Weather dependent! (Not if snow and ice) Warm clothes, gloves, secateurs, sharp penknife.

DETAILS OF WORK TO BE DONE – INFORMATION PROVIDED BY DR JUDY WEBB:



The first thing to say is that activities have been delayed while I have waited for a second cut of the grass with hay removal (completed on 17 October 2011). This is to mimic the aftermath grazing by stock that hay meadow areas normally have and it will help light get down to the soil to stimulate seed germination in the spring.



Previously, with only one cut in midsummer, grass in some areas on site had been allowed to grow too tall and rank in the autumn. This meant that in the rankest areas we were not getting any flower regeneration, due to grass-shading of any young seedlings of plants like oxeye daisies and cowslips emerging in the spring.

The other good thing about a second cut with hay removal is that it lowers the nutrient status of the soil (nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus are taken away in the hay). **A lower nutrient status favours attractive flowers over rank grasses.** This also goes some way to reducing the effect of nutrient enrichment from the dog urine and faeces the site is receiving. A lot of dog owners pick up faeces after their dogs but there are still a significant few who do not - and there can be no picking up of urine!

Now all we need is a week or so of gentle rain to get the grass re-growing a bit and soften the soil ready for planting.



As last year, the plan for meadow area flower enhancement is to weed-kill patches in areas of low diversity (just grass), wait until the grass dies, rake off the dead grass and disturb the soil surface, then sprinkle on our own collected wildflower seed (oxeye daisy, cowslip, knapweed, red clover, great burnet, yellow rattle, lady's bedstraw, etc). Then rake the seed in.

Hope you would like to help with this! (*Photo taken in 2010*)

The seed gets a good cold treatment over the winter, which stimulates the seedlings to come up like mustard and cress in the spring. Some plants flower within one year, some take two years to get going. Then there will be more nectar and pollen sources for all insects on the site, plus a much more attractive flower-rich area to look at in the summer.

This is the last year I plan to do this, as it should be possible to keep the diversity we have encouraged by the cut-and-collect hay management happening twice a year rather than only once. From our patches the plants will be able to successfully spread out by seed into other, less diverse, areas. In addition, the first cut in July-August will be only of the rankest low diversity areas. The flower and seed heads in the most diverse areas will be left standing into the autumn to allow for the completion of life cycles of insects that develop late and/or pupate in seed heads.

Additionally, I have pot-grown plants of knapweed, spiny restharrow (pretty little pink pea-flower) and betony (sprays of purple flowers) for planting out when the soil is damp enough this autumn. These are from nearby local-source seed and are chosen to be excellent for bees, butterflies and other insects. They are also real toughies, meaning that they can survive dry periods such as we seem to have been having over the last few years. Once established they are deep-rooted, long-lived, perennials and should live through whatever a changing climate is going to give us.



Knapweed



One additional planting we would like to try is re-greening the sculptural seat. So many children have loved to walk up the 'tail of the snail' that they have worn away the turf.

We have pot-grown some mouse ear hawkweed and silverweed plants, all ready to put in, to see if they can grow in the place of the turf and cope with a little trampling to keep the sculpture green as it should be. These are tough creeping plants with attractive silvery leaves.

Other things that will need attention on site include small-scale cutting-back of the usual suspects, mostly bramble and willow.

The willow 'climbing tree' near the ponds will need some light pruning to keep it safe. It is an unwanted female willow and is being slowly removed.

The problem has been that it sheds thousands of unwanted seeds – giving us willow sapling problems everywhere.

As willows are very valuable to spring insects, the female will be replaced by young male willows, which are at the moment waiting in pots.

Male willows have catkins that produce nectar AND pollen, female willow catkins produce only nectar.

Male Willow catkins shown in photo

Pollen is a very important protein source for spring bees to feed to developing larvae so they are a much better choice AND they don't make seeds!

