

March on Hothfield Heathlands

Fresh air, russet bracken, springy emerald grass, spears of bluebell leaves, the tracery of bare branches turning hazy as buds burst, and fine views of the North Downs await you at Hothfield Heathlands. The brightest green through the winter has been the mosses, which grow faster at cold temperatures than grass. Now the willow stems are purple with rising sap. Blackthorn was out by mid-February, an important early source of pollen and nectar for insects and honeysuckle is always first to come into leaf.

The gorse has flowered through the winter, and close up you catch the scent of coconut and vanilla. Gorse is a traditional plant of commonland, grown deliberately for fuel – it burns hot - and for cattle fodder, there used to be rules in place to prevent over-cutting in any one year. Rich in protein, it had to be milled or bruised to make it palatable. Here gorse provides safe nesting for yellowhammers, shelter for small mammals, pollen or early insects and food for moths as well as grazing animals.

The eastern ridge nearest the car park is clearly visible from nearby higher ground and distinguishable from other folds of wooded skyline by a few conifers that rise over the main canopy. These are a scattering of stately Wellingtonias or Giant Redwoods, *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, only introduced to Britain from California in 1853, probably planted here by Lord Hothfield. The trunks are highly huggable, with thick red spongy bark to protect them from fire. The narrow scale-like foliage is pendulous and elegant, aromatic when crushed. My tree book describes the cones as 'disappointing'! To find them take the first main path on the left from the car park entrance. Redwoods in the British Isles have their own website www.redwoodworld.co.uk.

There's a myriad of paths to choose from to explore the varied habitats of the Heathland. There are dog bins in and near the car park to help everyone enjoys a clean walk. There are information boards with maps at entrances and at various points on the common. The board just down the slope from the main car park lists recent sightings and the location of grazing cattle and sheep. Some areas are fenced but have gates so you can walk through. The Heathland does get boggy and muddy in parts, but with the footwear children of all ages will enjoy the puddles and the wide causeway over the main bog provides a space to just stand and observe this very remarkable habitat.

As the spring clear-up continues in gardens, bear in mind that there will be invertebrates and insects hibernating in sheltered corners, under piles of leaves or in seedheads. If you leave some corners untidy, and put the dead biomass on the compost heap or a heap at the back of the garden the hibernators will wake up in their own good time or crawl to safer spot. You may not want gorse in your garden but there are small cultivars of broom (cytisus) to choose from that are pollen and nectar rich and garden-worthy.

Margery Thomas