

## **A Second Visit to Congresbury Moor – This Time, the Yellows**

A couple of weeks after our previous visit we went back to New Croft to see how things were developing. It wasn't such a pleasant walk beside the New Cut Rhyne, because the Internal Drainage Board (IDB) had keeched the rhyne. This involves cutting the bank or even both banks so that the driver of the very large machine can see where he is going and not topple in the ditch, and then he can set about removing vegetation from the water.



New Cut was built by the famous Victorian engineer, John Rennie, as part of the drainage of Congresbury Moor which went with Enclosure in about 1820. It is an interesting piece of engineering which uses a siphon to carry the water from the Moor under the tidal Congresbury Yeo to drain away. New Cut is not like the other drainage ditches on Biddle Street SSSI as it flows strongly at times with spring-fed water from Langford Brook. This can be seen in the variety of plants and animals. Keeching used to be done by a gang of men pulling a chain across the top of the water. The specialist machinery designed to do the job by one person in a fraction of the time has got bigger and bigger over the years.

In 2002 we hosted a biodiversity event ('Wet'n'Wild') managed by the Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre (BRERC) on Congresbury Moor. One of the BRERC staff busied himself with a survey of New Cut. He said, 'Almost all of the plants in there are Red Data Book species,' – that is to say they were rare, special, and part of the reason for the designation of a wetland SSSI on our doorstep. Unfortunately the IDB are not so interested in plants growing as in removing them from watercourses in case they impede the flow of water and cause flooding. The ever-increasing size of the machinery used and the 'efficiency' of the cleaning operation has hugely reduced the biodiversity of this watercourse in the last twenty years. The keeching is done in July, at the peak of the breeding season for aquatic insects including dragonflies - many of which lay their eggs in vegetation which is then lifted out and left to die on the bank. The banks are cut when the nettles are often feeding butterfly caterpillars. This ditch is a symbol of all that is wrong with the casual destruction of nature – albeit allegedly to save human lives.



By removing the natural vegetation, stirring up the silt on the bottom and holding back the nutrient-rich water from agricultural operations upstream, New Cut then fills with algae. Ironically, we mused, this may be just as likely to clog the sluices as the rare plants that used to flourish here.



Life holds on, and nature uses the impoverished resources we allow. We saw a common darter on the way to New Croft and a brown hawker patrolling the ugly waterway.



How long will the common darter remain common?

When we got to New Croft it was the turn of the yellows for our attention, although the purple of the knapweed was now augmented by large patches of tufted vetch. Vetches are in the pea family and very nutritious. Vetch grows its own nitrates and releases nitrogen back into the soil.



Tufted vetch, left, and meadow vetchling, right

The other yellow flowers included vast patches of greater birdsfoot trefoil, foodplant of the common blue butterfly caterpillar. There are both meadow and creeping buttercup in the field – the photo below shows the taller meadow buttercup rising above a sea of greater birdsfoot trefoil. There are also a few scattered plants of ragwort. We were disappointed not to see any caterpillars of the cinnabar moth feeding on the ragwort on this occasion, but the nectar-rich flowers are very much appreciated by flies, bees and wasps.







Ragwort on the edge of New Croft

As we continued our tour of the yellows, Tony stopped to photograph a beautiful yellow insect: one of the UK's largest hoverflies, *Helophilus trivittatus*. It is a scarce species of coastal meadows and ditch sides and we only saw the single specimen. Its larvae live in water and have a telescopic breathing tube reaching to the surface.



*Helophilus trivittatus* (translates marsh-loving three banded)



A male Common Blue butterfly was on the lookout for a mate. The female has duller markings, predominantly brown, and is less conspicuous. When she isn't feeding or egg-laying she stays out of sight waiting for her eggs to mature. The males are like little jewels floating about.



Most of the pepper saxifrage had gone to seed. This plant has gradually been spreading over the field and later, when the hay is cut, more of its seeds will be dropped into new locations in the field.



Pepper saxifrage seedheads ripening in the bright sunshine.



One large plant had evidently had a late start and was in full creamy-yellow flower.



It was warm and approaching lunchtime so we made our way back down the track, admiring the ripening guelder rose berries. YACWAG planted the hedge along the track back in 2004. It has mixed native species and gives our fields some shelter from the north winds and privacy from walkers. Guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*) is a native plant of marshy ground. Some grows naturally in Littlewood and elsewhere in the area.





We wanted to have a quick look in Phippens. This field was bought from Bill Phippen of Congresbury about 15 years ago and is managed largely by rough grazing. The ditches are exceptionally species rich. Last year we were surprised to find a new plant in the middle of the field: meadow rue. We knew this plant from Kenn Moor Road originally, where it used to grow along the roadside ditches together with the more often seen meadowsweet. It is very similar in appearance and can easily be missed. To our delight it had survived the dry weather – it grows in a dip where the only rushes in the field indicate a damper patch. It had expanded considerably but no flower heads were to be seen.



Meadowsweet along New Cut drove





Meadow rue leaves on the left. Glossier, slightly tinged with purple, more rounded than meadowsweet.

Below, meadow rue along Kenn Moor Road in 2014. The verge appeared to have been cut before they flowered this year. Time will tell if they can survive in this location. Meanwhile the plants at Littlewood are hanging on despite the dryness of the wood.



This year meadow rue has also appeared for the first time in YACWAG's Stowey Reserve. Our early August visit there is definitely an exciting tale for next time.

*Tony and Faith Moulin*