

## SUMMER NEWSLETTER SPECIAL July 2020

### A Visit to New Croft

In 2000 after a year watching what we were doing in Ten Acres, our neighbouring landowner on Congresbury Moor, Mrs Meaker, had decided she would like to sell her two fields to us. One of the fields we now call Meakers, after her, and the other we found named on the map of 1736 as New Croft. Croft means 'enclosure' and we found out from the deeds that Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Bristol had bought and kept this field for hay. It had been enclosed from the grazed moor at an early date – probably from the sixteenth century, and animals were excluded from it so that the hay it produced could be used to feed livestock in the winter. This would have contributed to an income for the Hospital. They owned significant lands around Congresbury.



Knapweed and greater birdsfoot trefoil in New Croft July 2020

Normally in early July we lead a walk for members to New Croft to see the summer grassland butterflies and wild flowers. This year unfortunately we have not been able to do that but we have still been keeping an eye on the wildlife on our land and thought we would share with you our recent visit.

When YACWAG bought the field it had been let out as permanent pasture. Cattle were permanently in the field and the grass was very, very short. The wet winter of that year on top of the compaction by large fat bullocks had left it like a shallow lake.

In its first year New Croft was allowed to recover, then we began to commission a late hay cut every year. This is the way we have reduced the soil fertility. The hay is cut just once, as late as possible – at least after 16th July to allow insects to complete their life cycle and ground nesting birds to finish nesting. Occasionally some livestock have been put in to eat the 'aftermath' but we don't want to have too much dung in this field. We leave wide margins as a refuge for wildlife.

In 2002 we held a 'Field Day' in New Croft, inviting local farmers with old machinery to come and cut the hay for us on a day open to the public. The weather was beautiful, the setting idyllic, and the day was a huge success. In 2003, thanks to the hard work and support of the late Gerald Harris and his family from Kingston Seymour, we held a second public hay cut and the Harrises repaired and brought along their vintage family hay cart. When the hay was being cut, Mark Britten noticed a patch of knapweed. Our excitement was out of all proportion! Each year the knapweed has spread and is now very well established.







In the last ten years other wild flowers have slowly been turning New Croft back into the wild flower meadow it had always been for centuries. An early arrival (or had it always been there?) was pepper saxifrage, a creamy-flowered umbellifer that grows in old hay meadows on clay. As the grass has got weaker and weaker, the flowers have grown stronger and stronger. Last year we discovered corky-fruited water dropwort. This year there were more. The flowers have been better than ever, the dry spring weather having held the grass back, so that without competition the flowers have been able to excel.



The inconspicuous flowers of pepper saxifrage above the grass, and above right a close-up.





Looking south across the field, the knapweed patches joining up.  
Left, male and female marbled white butterflies. Right, a five-spot burnet moth.

One of the highlights is the cloud of grassland butterflies and burnet moths fluttering over the tops of the flowers. Marbled white butterflies lay their eggs by dropping them like bombs as they fly over the grass. The caterpillars depend on a variety of grasses so she is particular about where to drop her eggs and generally does not move far from where she was herself hatched. As the caterpillars grow they move from fine grasses onto coarser grass stems and tuck themselves down at ground level to hibernate until the spring when they resume eating. In the last week of June or the first week of July, like clockwork, the

butterflies will hatch and mate and start again. Clearly the timing of operations like hay cutting is critical to the butterfly. If YACWAG adopted modern farming practice and cut twice during the summer we would remove the caterpillars along with the silage. It is the same story for meadow brown butterflies, also grass feeders, and day-flying burnet moths.

The common blue butterfly caterpillars feed on birdsfoot trefoil. This is another plant that has taken over large areas of the field. We were very pleased to see a common blue on our visit, along with many small or Essex skippers. The Essex skipper seems to be spreading from its geographical home in the east of the country and has been found in New Croft for some years. The details that distinguish them from small skippers are not easy to see so we always spend some time staring at the tips of the antennae to see whether they look as if they have been dipped in ink, or whether the orange colouration goes just down one side. These are the ways to while away an hour or so and we need to visit the field to monitor its biodiversity and see new species previously unnoticed.



Greater birdsfoot trefoil in New Croft



Small skipper or Essex skipper? The answer lies in the antennae. Tony takes a closer look.

One of these species has had its story eloquently told by Higgy. He had photographed a type of horsefly in New Croft that he could not identify. A year later he found it again and took some better photographs. This led to a field visit by Bristol Museum's curator and entomologist, Ray Barnet and an article in an academic invertebrate journal as the four-lined horsefly is extremely uncommon.





Four-lined horsefly. Higgy shows Ray Barnet where to look, July 2019.

Some of YACWAG's older members will remember in 2001 having a work party in New Croft to construct tree guards for two tiny cuttings of black poplar which I had raised on my kitchen windowsill. These had been taken from a tree on Kenn Moor planted by 'the greatest tree planter in England' – John Hugh Smyth-Piggot of Brockley Hall, who was said to have planted one million trees during his lifetime. There was some debate as to whether the tree providing the cuttings was a true native black poplar, which is now rare, or a hybrid. It turned out to be a hybrid, but the cuttings have done well and are now set to provide shelter and habitat on the other side of Yatton in Congresbury. They are part of a group of black poplars in the area adjoining New Croft.



The two black poplars July 2020

One of the highlights of 2019 was taking a botanist from an Avon Wildlife Trust Project to see our fields. She was very excited to see New Croft and when Tony suggested the fields were unique in the area, she said she had not seen any fields with such exceptional plant communities in the whole of 'Avon'. Her survey has led to New Croft being designated as 'species-rich grassland' in YACWAG's new agri-environment scheme award. To witness this change over a period of twenty years is one of the most rewarding experiences of our lives and is certainly one of YACWAG's best and most enduring achievements.

*Tony and Faith Moulin*



New Croft July 2020 with the poplar trees at the northern end.