

Fenn's, Whixall and Bettisfield Mosses
National Nature Reserve
9 June 2016
Organizer Maureen Preen

The best laid plans ... with the Ellesmere to Welshampton road closed for 4 weeks, a route through Wem was devised, thanks to my next door neighbour, Peter Bowyer, who is Warden at the Moss. So, with most of us travelling there from far afield, I was relieved when all 27 of us arrived, in time to have a picnic lunch at the NNR Base where all facilities were provided. Our guides - Barry Probin and Joanna Langfield - introduced us to the place and offered suggestions for how the day should proceed.

The weather was sunny and the wide peat tracks were dry underfoot making walking a pleasure. In between the tracks there are ponds, bogs and hidden waterways, some deep enough to disappear in so we were advised not to stray from the tracks. Wise words as this site is vast, the whole complex covers more than 2000 acres - big enough to be seen from space and being flat in every direction it is quite disorientating.

I had hoped to see Britain's largest spider - the raft spider, but none showed up; however we learned to identify Brimstone caterpillars laying singly along the midrib of Alder buckthorn leaves, perfectly camouflaged. We spent a long time watching the mosses' rare dragonfly- the White-faced Darter. The males are yellow and black at first, then toughen up within 48 hours and become red and black. The presence of exuviae (moulted outer skins) is proof that they breed here; the females lay their eggs in bog moss (sphagnum) but the larvae emerge not far above the water's surface and some tend to bend over backwards and drown. They are found in only 3 or 4 places nationally and are on the GB Red Data List. Since they are breeding successfully at Whixall Moss some larvae are being re-introduced to the Delamere forest.

The mosses are home to birds like kingfisher, ducks and the rare hobby which some members spotted. Two other members had a wonderful sighting of curlew flying round and round calling and finally their young emerged from the bracken to join the adults after half an hour's encouragement.

We thanked our guides and were delighted to learn that Barry Probin, who specialises in studying and photographing dragonflies will be giving a talk in Welshpool in March 2017, named "Wings over Whixall". An excellent spread awaited us at The Sun in Welshampton. The staff gave us directions to avoid the official Diversion signs and we set off home. The heavens opened but as is so often the case with the MFS, we had been blessed with fine weather for our outing.

Maureen Preen