

Prees Heath Common Reserve - June 30th, 2022

The showery weather forecast for the day was a little disappointing, but 29 MFS members were eager to see this special reserve, renowned for being the only remaining sanctuary for the Silver-studded Blue butterfly, *Plebejus argus*, in the Midlands. This declining species is an emblem of lowland heath in Britain, and is rare outside southern English heathlands, but it can be found on the Reserve in large numbers during its flight season, which is usually mid-June to early July, so we were hopeful that our timing was good!

On first encountering Prees Heath, one gains the impression of a rather nondescript piece of edgeland. Confined as it is between the busy commercial arteries of the A41 and the A49, it might easily be overlooked. Fortunately, recently retired warden of the reserve, Stephen Lewis, was on hand to introduce us to the vast array of flora and fauna species which in fact thrive here, thanks to vision, dogged determination and the co-opting of relevant expertise, which have made the site what it is today.

We listened, enthralled, as he gradually revealed the site's fascinating story, which spans several centuries. As we looked across at a tiny patch of remnant lowland heath, with its heather, fine grasses, gorse and scrubby hawthorn, Stephen explained that the whole of Prees Heath would have looked like this a hundred or so years ago. But during the twentieth century, it experienced a whole series of changes, becoming an army training camp in WW1, and a training airfield with three runways in WW2.

For many years people use to come here for a day out and a picnic, or to enjoy its functions as a nine hole golf course and a horse training gallop. There was even an open air swimming pool on or near the A41/A49 junction! But there was also an abundance of wildlife, with hundreds of skylarks breeding and Silver-studded Blue butterflies seen all over the common.

After 1945 the main airfield runway was left in place and many local people learnt to drive here. In the 1970s the runway was hacked up and most of the concrete was removed, allowing the dormant heathland seeds to germinate. Around this time much of the rest of the common was let as agricultural tenancies and the heathland was ploughed up and used to grow crops. To feed the nutrient-poor land, thousands of tons of manures and fertilisers were applied, thereby destroying the habitat, and making it alkaline rich, and totally unsuitable for heathland species.

In the 1990s the then owners submitted a planning application to extract millions of tonnes of sand and gravel from the common. This galvanised the commoners, local residents, Shropshire and Cheshire Wildlife Trusts and Butterfly Conservation to form the 'Save Prees Heath Common Campaign Group' in order to oppose the application, which was duly rejected.

Thankfully, Prees Heath Common Reserve was purchased by Butterfly Conservation in 2006, and an ambitious, challenging and long term heathland re-creation project began on the areas that were previously in arable cultivation. The sandy desert-like land was acidified, by the spreading of elemental sulphur, and then the area was seeded quickly by spreading it with heather from Cannock Chase and later from the Long Mynd, in an effort to re-create heathland once more.

In 2014, this approach bore fruit, as the first Silver-studded Blue in many, many years was recorded here, and since then the numbers have risen hugely. We watched enthralled as clouds of butterflies flew around us, whilst others lay draped across the heather plants. Magnificent males, predominantly blue, were easily distinguished from the brown females, which only show a hint of blue in most cases. Some of us were even lucky enough to observe mating pairs. Stephen explained that the key to the success of this species is the presence of Black Ants, *Lasius niger*, and that after mating the female 'blues' lay their eggs close to an ants' nest. There is a symbiotic relationship between butterfly and ant, as the ants tend and protect each stage of the butterfly's life cycle in return for secretions of a sugary secretion produced by the Silver-studded Blue throughout its life stages.

As well as the Silver-studded Blue, the Reserve supports a vast array of butterfly species, moths, other invertebrates, birds, plants, mammals, reptiles and amphibians. A skylark delighted us with its song as it soared above us, and a yellowhammer sang its 'little bit of bread and no cheese' refrain from the topmost twig on a gorse bush close to the car park. There was much evidence of rabbits, although only a couple were seen, and the old control tower is apparently host to a bat roost, and hibernating butterflies and moths.

There are many species of flowering plants here, and we saw Mullein, Weld, Common Centaury and Musk Thistle amongst other more familiar plants. We were grateful to Stephen for showing us Heath Dog-violet (*Viola canina*), as it would have been very easy to miss, and he explained that this is its only confirmed site in Shropshire. One plant which foxed us for a while was Bugloss (*Anchusa arvensis*), an arable weed new to many of us.

Stephen's enthusiasm and all-round knowledge of the reserve made him the perfect guide, and he was kind enough to lead us on our tour of the site for over three hours! We were almost late for a very welcome and excellent tea at Wem Town Hall, which was a fitting end to a first-rate day.

(A full list of flora and fauna seen can be found in the central pages of this report)

Sue and Steve Southam