



Spring Walks - Spring sprang so early this year that we decided to add an extra walk to our programme - our Spring Walk on Sunday 13th April. This proved to be perfectly timed to see the Bluebells looking splendid and the eleven attendees were also remarkably lucky to catch a glimpse of our famous White Squirrel in the usual haunt in Langford's Way. Unusually for Bluebell time, the Anemones were also still in full flower carpeting the northern paths and the warm spring sunshine made for a walk much enjoyed by all. A full account is published on the Walks page of our website.

The difference in timing of the spring flowering between this year and last has been very striking. This year our first Bluebell was spotted on 19th March but last year the first one did not peep through until 24th April. The annual Bluebell Walk on 28th April 2013 thus became a largely futile 'Hunt the Bluebell' walk and so this year we planned it for a later date - **Saturday 3rd May at 2pm**. The recent cool wet weather has ensured that the Bluebells are still looking good and I am sure there will be many other spring sights and sounds to enjoy. We also have a second walk this month on **Sunday 18th May at 11am** on the theme of '**Spring Birds & Flowers**' and our annual **Charcoal Making Weekend** will be from **May 24th - 26th**. See the website or phone us for details of all these events.

The Oak and the Ash - Last month we had a focus on the smallest and most humble plants in our wood - the mosses. This month we go to the other extreme to take a look at two of the largest - the Oak and the Ash trees. These two trees are common and widespread in Selsdon Wood although the Oak, the dominant tree species, outnumbers the Ash by more than 10:1. The most dramatic Ash tree stands alone in the middle of The Gorses (right). This shows the typical fan shape of the Ash in contrast to the more rounded profile of the Oak typified by the one behind the bench in the Great Field (left). Both photographs were taken in midsummer.



The Oak has a longer lifespan than the Ash and some of the specimens of Oaks in the wood may be centuries old. A rough estimation of age may be gained by measuring the girth of the trunk and that of the one in the Great Field is 255cm, which suggests that it is well over 100 years old.

In winter the stout twigs of the Ash are tipped with black buds that burst into knobby purple lumps in the springtime. From these first come the flowers - purply-green and fluffy - which give a mauve tinge to the trees when viewed from a distance. Later come the leaves formed of 4 - 7 pairs of leaflets with a terminal one at the end (below right). The flowers of the Oak are green catkins and these appear at the same time as the new leaves which have a recognisable wavy outline (below left).



Oak



The Oak and Ash are amongst the last trees to come into leaf and according to folk law:

*If the Oak comes out before the Ash then the summer will be a splash.
If the Ash comes out before the Oak then the summer will be a soak.*



Ash



You will be delighted to hear that this year the Oak came out well before the Ash☺ This spring I made a note of when the leaf buds opened on most of the trees in our wood. The first to show was the Hawthorn, closely followed by the Elder - both in the first week of March. A month later on 5th April I spotted the first Oak leaves (see the small photo above far left) and by this time almost all other species of trees were showing some green. The exception was the Ash which did not open its buds until 21st April (see photo far right) and even now at the start of May, many of the larger trees are still bare and standing out skeletally against the skyline.

(Actually there are three species of Oak in Selsdon Wood - but that is a tale for another time.)

The Yellow Meadow Ant - from Tony Flecchia - The Yellow Meadow Ant (*Lasius flavus*) is a widely distributed species on chalk downlands, present in all those areas in our district. Recently there has been a huge increase in the population of Yellow Meadow Ants on the sunny eastern flank of David's Crook where a count now shows a total of sixty-seven ground nests and anthills. Originally concentrated around a single anthill by the entrance to Bluebell Grove (see photo taken in May 2012), the expansion means the total population must now run into the millions.



One of our most common species, Yellow Meadow Ants are far more peaceful than most ants. They are primarily livestock farmers, keeping herds of aphids underground feeding on the roots of the plants, hence the expanding bare patches in the grass over the nests due to the plant damage caused. Spending most of their life underground, the ants primarily feed on the sweet sticky secretions that the aphids exude, but they have occasional forays for the wireworms, woodlice and various insect larvae and pupae which they also eat. In the depths of winter when plant growth stops, the ants eat the aphids, restocking the next Spring. The workers average around three millimetres long with queens larger at five millimetres. This photograph is of a worker - taken on 11th April this year.



Yellow Meadow Ants have a special relationship with a particular Southern England species of butterfly, the increasingly rare Chalkhill Blue. When they happen upon its larvae or pupae on grass or the ground, they protect them and will often take them underground into their nests. This behaviour is prompted by the smell of a pheromone emitted by the larvae and pupae which also, like the aphids, produce sweet secretions for the ants to feed on. Even when a butterfly larva eats the ant larvae as can happen, the ants will allow that and still protect it. The Chalkhill Blue larvae will often pupate underground and when a butterfly hatches out, it is protected by the ants as it breaks out through the soil and climbs a grass stalk to pump up and dry its wings ready for flight.

The underground section of the ants' nest can extend to a metre or more below ground, but that often will be limited in our area by the depth of soil over the chalk underlay. Together with earthworms, they make a valuable contribution to soil health by rotating and aerating the soil. Whether a nest grows upwards into an anthill depends on the ground being relatively undisturbed. Hence the walked-over grass of the eastern margin of David's Crook only has flat ground nests, while the scrub behind has anthills. The anthills most commonly rise to around twenty centimetres but occasionally taller. Two of our scrub margin ones now extend to over thirty centimetres high as well as stretching deep underground.

In addition to the symbiosis with the Chalkhill Blue butterfly, the ants prove useful to some creatures wishing to rid themselves of parasites. Jays and rabbits in particular will dig into anthills to prompt the ants to defend by spraying their formic acid, which serves to rid feathers or fur of ticks, lice, fleas and other pests. They obviously find the benefits outweigh the pain of the bites received. An anthill in the scrub on the right of the Bluebell Grove entrance shows typical rabbit digging damage on the side, jay damage when it occurs being on top of the anthill.

FSW Annual Photographic Competition Don't forget our 2014 Photo Competition! Please send in up to 6 of your favourite photographs taken in Selsdon Woods between 1st September 2013 and 20th August 2014. Details of how to submit your photographs can be found on the website.

Open Day 2014 We are already planning the 2014 Open Day to be held on Sunday September 7th. If you know of any hobbyists or craftspeople who might wish to display their wares do please get in touch with us and we are always open to offers of items for prizes or for our white elephant stall.

Do we have your email address? If you have received this Newsletter by hand delivery of a printed version that is because we do not have a current email address for you. If you do have email we would prefer to send the newsletter electronically so do please get in touch with us (address below) and let us know.

We wish you joy of the woods this spring and would love to see you on our workdays or walks☺