

## Wyre Mammal Walk, 22 February 2014

GARY FARMER

### Mammal tracks and signs of spring (a very slow walk in Wyre).

This walk must surely hold some kind of record for the slowest walk ever. It was a good job that it wasn't a mollusc walk as we would never have caught up with any! So why such a slow walk? Well, Wyre is a magical place at anytime but on this particular day, after weeks of cloudy skies and rain, the sun was shining at last and the temperature was very mild; the birds were singing and insects were on the wing; in fact every mud bank in the brook, every fallen leaf and twig and every stone had a tale to tell and we were in the mood for listening.

We started the walk with a visit to the garden at Newalls on the edge of the forest where Longworth traps had been set the night before to capture small mammals. These traps are harmless to the animals and are provisioned with food and bedding to keep any detainee as comfortable as possible during their overnight stay. The first trap we opened revealed a Bank Vole which promptly ran up the authors arm and down his neck! This was quickly retrieved without any harm to either man nor beast. Another trap held a second Bank Vole and we were also lucky enough to find a Wood Mouse and a Yellow-necked Mouse in two of the other traps. Not a bad start to a mammal walk. After everyone had had a close view, the animals were released close to where each had been caught. Before leaving the garden we noted Snowdrops already in flower, some of which were infected by the fungus *Botrytus galanthina* which is specific to Snowdrops and most likely to appear after mild wet winters. An early

Buff-tailed Bumblebee queen buzzed past lazily while Honey Bees were seen feeding from *Mahonia* and one or two of their hoverfly mimic *Eristalis tenax* were sunning themselves on the warm house wall.

We left the garden and walked down a muddy track towards the brook noting a large leafy ball high up in a tree; the nest, or more correctly the drey of a Grey Squirrel. At the base of the hedge were shells of Hazel nuts. Some were cracked in half by the powerful jaws of a squirrel and others with roughly chewed round holes, the work of a Wood Mouse. The next sign of mammals came in the form of tracks in a mud bank adjacent to Dowles Brook. The most obvious were those made by a Brown Rat heading from underneath a small bridge. We crossed the bridge and made our way steadily (very steadily) along the edge of the brook. It wasn't long before fresh tracks and droppings were found and identified, a sure sign that Muntjac had passed by earlier. A little further on freshly dug soil was mounded up in small piles indicating that a Mole was busy catching worms under our feet. Overhead the evocative mewing of a Buzzard could be heard and in the forest the high pitched song of a Treecreeper rang out welcoming what was hopefully the start of spring.

Our cars were barely out of view at this point but it was already time for lunch. We sat to eat just as a Sparrowhawk dashed past, in search of its own lunch no doubt. Members of the group explored the leaf-litter and mossy stumps while we ate. A few invertebrates were found including a Tarnished Plant Bug *Lygus rugulipennis*, a species frequently found which feeds



Checking the small mammal traps in the Newalls garden, 22 February 2014

Rosemary Winnall





Dowles Brook with Hard Shield Fern in the bank, 22 February 2014

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on many common plants particularly nettle, dock and clovers; an Orange Ladybird *Halyzia 16-guttata*, which interestingly was once considered an ancient woodland indicator but is now frequently found on Sycamore where it feeds on mildews, although the newly arrived Harlequin Ladybird might be affecting these modern records; and a juvenile slug *Arion intermedius* which contracted showing its spine-like tubercles which give this slug its common name of Hedgehog Slug.

As we finished lunch and continued our woodland amble, a Red Admiral butterfly fluttered by in the sunshine. In the path ahead were prints of Fallow Deer and then the best tracks of the day were found on a muddy bank by the brook, the perfect footprints of an Otter and fresh spraints on rocks nearby. Further searching in the brook turned up a Bullhead fish, a mayfly dun of the Large Dark Olive *Baetis rhodani* which shed its final skin in the collecting tube, and a very large juicy crane fly larva, most likely *Tipula maxima*. A Satellite moth *Eupsilia transversa* was flushed from leaf litter at the edge of the brook, the larvae of which feed on the leaves of various deciduous trees but will also eat the larvae of other Lepidoptera. The golden yellow of a Lesser Celandine flower was peeping out of the leaf litter, another harbinger of Spring. Various fungi were noted including the greasy looking *Exidia glandulosa* or Witch's Butter, Smokey Bracket Fungus *Bjerkandera adusta*, *Hymenochaeta corrugata* referred to as Glue Fungus because of its habit of sticking twigs together from its host, often Hazel and Beech, and Tarcrust *Biscogniauxia nummularia* producing tar-like fruiting bodies on deadwood including Beech. While inspecting tree trunks and branches, a flake of bark

suddenly took to the air, flashing beautiful orange wings, a Comma butterfly with perfect underwing camouflage unseen until it took flight. Other smaller flakes of bark turned out to be the pupal cases of a micro-moth *Taleporia tubulosa*. We then started to notice that any smooth trunk had small spiders dashing around on them. These were so well camouflaged that when they stopped moving they virtually disappeared. These little spiders were identified as *Drapetisca socialis* a particularly interesting species because they spend their lives in social groups. They cover the bark with fine webbing which is unseen by all except the spider. This allows them to sense the presence of a prey item some distance away on the tree and although they appear to run on the surface of the trunk, they are actually running along their invisible mesh which allows for their unhindered rapid movement. We were briefly distracted from this invisible world by the piping call of a Dipper as it flew along the brook.

And so our walk continued with no stone left unturned during our slow progress through the trees. There were a few more interesting finds including the small but spectacular harvestman *Megabunus diadema* with its extraordinary crown; a Shining Black Ant *Lasius fuliginosus* was spotted with its heart-shaped head, and a couple of Staphalinid beetles including the colourful *Lordithon trinotatus*. We also checked out *Limax cinereoniger* the Ash-black Slug, an ancient woodland indicator, with its diagnostic black and white sole resembling a liquorice allsort.

We finished our walk looking forwards to the year ahead and perhaps the discovery of some more rarities.