Wildlife Changes in Wyre over the last 50 years

JOHN BINGHAM

Having reached the age when I can remember back 50 years or more you just realise how things have changed. It's not all bad news as the love of conifers has gone and Forestry England have a program to revert back most of the Wyre to native broadleaf. The National Nature Reserve is larger, at least in name, and the forest's importance for wildlife is finally being realised, possibly due to a book published by the Wyre Forest Study Group? There are some good habitats appearing - a more open forest with wood pasture, clearings and coppice.

One down side is that recreation has increased beyond belief, it used to be a forest where hardly anyone ever visited. In the 1970s you could walk from Callow Hill to Button Oak and not see a single person, even on a fine sunny weekend. Most pathways were narrow and overgrown and only a few existed compared with today. Mountain bikes? What mountain bikes, not even a cyclist ventured into the forest. A horse rider was the most likely person to be seen, or a group of bird watchers along Dowles Brook. The only people I saw regularly were Albert Link and Arthur Cheadle, Forestry Commission workers who were also just as surprised to see anyone!

Many areas of woodland had recently stored coppice oak with several thin stems to each stool, giving many areas of the woodland a scrubby look. The beech plantations were thick and difficult to walk through with side hanging branches. So, the general appearance of the woodlands today is much more open with mature singled oak and beech. There were numerous areas of young conifer plantations back in the 1970- 80s. Now, they are mature trees, the good vistas over the forest that were possible when these plantations were only a few years old, nearly all of those views are now lost. More mature conifer had rides that were narrow and shaded, the concept of having open rides for wildlife habitat was not really considered back then. Many of the forest rides were grass dominated and herb rich, with species like Common Spotted and Heath Spotted orchids being quite common. Simple trampling by people using grassy rides has had a negative effect on the flora; sensitive plants just disappear, the Elan valley pipe track is a good example. Bare ground trackways were uncommon but any forestry operations produced vast amounts of mud, some tracks became mud baths something that does not seem to happen to such an extent today.



Wimperhill Track looking towards Longdon - 1980s John Bingham

Deer numbers were increasing in the 1970s and their impact was quite noticeable by the 1980s. There were more deer back then but only Fallow were seen, although there were the occasional reports of Roe or Muntjac.

In spring the oak leaves of Wyre Forest were often attacked by caterpillars of various moths, typically Oak Leaf Roller moth, *Tortrix viridana* and Winter Moth, *Operophtera brumata*. Trees would become defoliated until they appeared nearly bare, like during winter, and silk from the caterpillars would hang down like curtains in some cases. A constant rain of caterpillar frass could be heard descending from the canopy. I can't recall the last time this happened, perhaps it was back in the 1990s, or maybe earlier. What impact this has had on other species dependant on this former caterpillar bonanza- who can guess?

High summer would bring out swarms of flies, mostly Muscid flies, they would swarm over your head and constantly annoy you. We used bracken fronds to swipe away the flies to little avail. Annoying as these swarms of flies were, they provided the insect food biomass for other species. The dreaded Clegg fly was another painful species that constantly attracted the unwary, especially in damper areas or on sultry days. Walking in the forest today, flies are hardly noticeable and Clegg bites so rare as to be forgotten about. In general, the numbers of insects to be found on leaves has vanished. Almost any oak or birch branch could provide numerous species to ponder over. Tap a branch into a tray and a dozen species would be present, weevils, caterpillars, bugs, and flies. Try that today and you may get nothing!

The number of moths spotted in car headlights was considerable, Mike Taylor and I used car headlights to illuminate the railway line and used nets to the catch moths. Several dozen species could be found in this way. I recall using a Tilly light one early spring 'sallowing' along a ride and having numerous moths swarming around the light. It was difficult not to swallow moths that were flying around your face. The smell of burning moths that hit the hot light was noticeable and embarrassing that we were inadvertently killing them. In spring any large puddle of water was a good place to find trapped moths, especially Carpet moths, as well as beetles and other insects that had fallen in. I barely see anything in puddles today. Moths resting on tree trunks were not uncommon, especially in spring, but despite looking I now rarely find any. Despite searching I never found Kentish Glory. It probably disappeared in the early 1970s just as I started to visit the woodlands.

Wood Warbler was a common bird in Wyre. A slow walk through the oak woods would reveal singing birds every few hundred yards. I took them for granted and never really counted how many were seen or heard but it would have been dozens in less than an hour's slow walk. Most of the woodland birds have decreased considerably, Redstart, Pied Flycatcher and Grasshopper Warbler *etc*. I could add dozens…! Although we have gained Raven, Buzzard and now Red Kite, never seen in 1970.

Adders, *Vipera berus* could often be discovered at new locations throughout the woods in the 1970s. Heathy glades or ride edges were favourite places, sometimes just an open sunny bank in a conifer area would do. I knew over 40 sites that had adders regularly. In the adder glade in New Parks over a dozen adders could be found on every visit each spring. Most places would have at least 4-6 adders basking out, often in a coiled 'adder mass' that needed heads to be counted to tell how many were present. Sites were often only a few dozen yards apart, so an area could have 10-20 adders present. Today, adders are hard to locate. New sites are rarely found despite plenty of suitable new habitat, the numbers are just not there anymore. Some parts of the forest now seem devoid of any adders, or reptiles of any sort, despite having suitable habitat.

In the 1970 - 80s the forest was more enclosed by conifer but rides were still rich and flowery, with Grizzled and Dingy Skipper quite common. But some areas were just too shady, lacking open rides. Despite the shade then, butterfly numbers today are just a shadow of that of the 1970s. Pearl-bordered Fritillary occurred along most open rides where bugle could be found flowering. In July, bramble bushes would swarm with dozens of Silver-washed Fritillary and other species. No need to wander to find them just wait and keep a camera ready, a never-ending stream of butterflies. Even in the 1970s High Brown Fritillary were scarce, but a patch of thistles would have several mixed together with the Silver-washed. By the 1990s they were only found along the meadows by Dowles Brook



Anthills in Lodge Hill Meadow - Winter 1981 John Bingham



Lodge Hill Meadow - 1985 John Bingham

and disappeared soon after then. I don't recall seeing Dark Green Fritillary but they were reported to the west of the forest. Small Tortoiseshell were sometimes abundant, I recall one year the flowering heather was alive with dozens of them. Conversely Holly Blue was uncommon or even scarce and Red Admiral hardly even seen. Wood White was occasionally seen along the old railway or the trackways near Dowles Brook but White Admiral was rare, perhaps two in 20 years!

The verges of the main forest roads were species-rich. Coltsfoots, for example, were abundant in spring, a nectar source for finding early insects. Much of this diverse flora is now replaced by Bracken and coarse grasses which have taken over most verges. The main reason would appear to be the regular management of the road verges where the turf is scraped off and dumped into the surrounding woodland. This is now coupled with regular swiping of nearly all the rides every winter. Today we have many more open rides but the species-richness is sadly lacking. Generally, the forest is becoming far too neat and tidy!

The ploughing up and re-seeding of several of the 'deer lawns' in the 1970s destroyed what was an herb-rich woodland glade flora. In New Parks the deer lawn had numerous woodland plants including Sword-leaved Helleborine, *Cephalanthera longifolia* that were destroyed. Even worse, fertiliser was added to provide 'sweet-grass' for the deer, these sites have never recovered the former rich flora. Some species of plant are now apparently lost, such as Marsh Fragrant Orchid that flowered in 1978 and for a few years on a flush along Park Brook. Heath Cudweed in the early 1980s was common along the forestry road verge at Wimperhill Wood but has declined and now seems to have disappeared from all its former sites. Losses are few, but abundance of plant species is worrying. Many are now maintained by just a few individual plants and once common species are now hard to find. The diversity of the forest is largely based on a few marginal habitats, open glades, rides, wet flushes, brook margins and scrub.

Heather was more common and much more rank in some areas, but over time it goes through a cycle and is naturally lost. Some areas change so much and former tall heather glades now have no heather. Several species-rich grasslands I can remember were apparently cultivated during the war years, but not fertilised, and since then reverted back to excellent habitat in the 1970s, but by 2010 they became less interesting and species-poor. Dramatic disturbance can lead to interesting habitats!

The old blue coloured OS 1:25 000 maps give some idea of the number of old orchards around the forest. Some had been lost before I visited the forest but many disappeared in the 1970- 90s and they are still slowly vanishing. Even today as a Biodiversity Action Plan habitat they have little protection. One thing obvious is the old Cherry trees, most of which are in a poor state, with decay and unlikely to be here in another 50 years.

Dowles Brook was a clear, stony stream in 1975. The black stones gave rise to the name 'Dulas' meaning black, they were very obvious features. Native Freshwater Crayfish could be found with ease by lifting up larger stones. Most streams had Crayfish until their sudden demise in the 1980s. It only took a year to reduce the population to near extinction. Sediment loads today are so excessive that the brook looks coffee-coloured in winter, silt and algal growth cover the black stones, Dowles is no longer the 'Black Brook'. One addition has been the appearance of the Golden-ringed Dragonfly that was virtually absent in the forest in 1970. On the downside has been the decrease in numbers of the two Demoiselle species. Dipper was a common bird with perhaps 10 pairs along the brooks now reduced to a few.

I now think, when I first visited Wyre Forest, I was seeing the demise of traditional management that had persisted until the end of the Second World War. It had only been 25 years, so the changes that have now taken place were yet to fully impact the forest back then. Grassland and orchard management is now so different to what had gone before. Improvement and modern fertilisers were new in 1970 and were only slowly being used in the more traditional smallholding landscape. In 1975 careful horse grazing was still used on many grasslands and by moving stock around, smallholders kept the sward species-rich. In woodland, coppicing had taken place quite recently, small scale operations were still in place and conversion of oak woodland to conifer plantations was still occurring in the 1970s. The decline in woodland species really happened in the 1980s and 1990s when, what I consider, the 'dark ages' occurred. Growing conifer shaded out the woodland flora and glades and rides. Conservation management had yet to occur on any scale, such as coppicing or opening of rides.

Now, of course, we have other issues: Climate Change, Pollution, Run-off of fertiliser, Insecticide, Fungicide, Atmospheric enrichment, Human disturbance … *etc*. Perhaps the biggest impact to the forest has been by the change from traditional management coupled with the increase in personal leisure time and the quest for outdoor recreation?

John Bingham has lived in Kidderminster for over 70 years and has been visiting the Wyre Forest since the early 1970s. His main interests are botany and fungi but latterly more focused on insects, especially Coleoptera. He worked for English Nature/Natural England for over 20 years until 2010, now retired he can follow wildlife photography, a particular passion.