

The Weymouth Relief Road verges – an update

With the road verges of the relief road now approaching 10 years since the start of construction in 2009, it is time to reflect how their wildlife is faring. On the face of it all is well, and for those who travel past the Ridgeway slopes to and from work, or who spend time walking across them, the wildflower show every year from spring to late summer remains spectacular. In 2010 and 2011 I and others from the County Council sowed seed of just 26 species onto largely bare chalk and limestone. We then stood back to allow 'nature' to take over and we are now watching the slow process of natural succession. In decades to come we might actually achieve recognisable National Vegetation Classification communities, but in the meantime the slopes offer a joyful abundance of calcareous wildflowers and invertebrates throughout the growing season.

Bryan Edwards resurveyed the plants on the slopes in May this year, having done his first survey in June/July 2013. He found 141 species compared with 133 in 2013. The small difference in totals hides considerable changes, with 31 species added and 22 not refound. All the species sown in the seed mix have survived, with Horseshoe Vetch, Kidney Vetch and Oxeye Daisy continuing to be the most abundant. Others such Cowslip, Marjoram, Common Knapweed, Greater Knapweed and Rough Hawkbit are now well established and producing seedlings of their own. Bee and Pyramidal orchids are astonishingly abundant, in 1000s, on the cuttings just north of the laybys part way up the relief road from Littlemoor. Southern Marsh Orchid has established, with good numbers of spikes on the dry, eastern slope at Ridgeway. In a very few places the vegetation resembles a more semi-natural chalk grassland, with Sheep's Fescue is beginning to form an open sward with large patches of Horseshoe Vetch, along with indicators such as Wild Thyme, Yellow-wort, Dwarf Thistle, Mouse-ear Hawkweed, and the moss *Weissia brachycarpa* var. *obliqua*.

Butterfly populations also continue to thrive. A fully-fledged UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme transect walk has now been established, incorporating the route that has been walked by Butterfly Conservation volunteers since 2012. 30 species have now been recorded, over half the UK list, with the most recent to colonise being Chalkhill Blue, seen egg-laying at Ridgeway in 2018, and flying there again in 2019. It has taken several years for the population of Small Blue to expand since its colonisation in 2012, despite the abundance of its foodplant, Kidney Vetch, but in the past two summers it has been seen there in vast numbers. Adonis Blue is also doing well, and it is good to see there are at least small numbers of Wall and Small Heath in most years. These last two species are in rapid decline nationally. Moths are much less-well studied, but I am pleased that the day-flying Narrow-bordered 5-spot Burnet and 6-belted Clearwing are now thriving. I feel proud of what I helped to establish, but also relieved my confidence was well founded that the Dorset AONB would not end up with a big white scar!

Phil Sterling

Butterfly Conservation, Building Sites for Butterflies Programme Manager