

Wild Things visit to Cali Heath May 2nd, 2022

Eleven of us visited this small and little-known reserve of sandy heath managed by Yorkshire Wildlife Trust. Like most of the lovely heathy, wooded reserves in the Vale of York its poor soils have saved it from habitat destruction. The name 'Cali' in fact is a shortened 'California', as so many of the locals emigrated there in the 19th century Goldrush for better land and prospects. The land had been granted to the locals as common land for grazing and forage. Now it's grazed by Hebridean sheep to preserve the habitat and prevent scrub takeover.



The soundtrack was of birdsong, such as blackcaps and chiffchaffs, though most remained hidden. It was quite cool and windy so the butterflies that fill this area in calmer sunny weather were absent.

This Green-veined White was photographed by David, and Sarah managed to carry it for a while on her hand until it warmed up enough to fly away.



Alder Leaf Beetles are having a good year, causing damage, though not fatal, to the leaves of several tree species, but providing plenty of bird food. This beetle was considered extinct in this country to 2004 but is clearly making a big comeback.

Marilyn found the remains of some large puffballs, species unknown.



There are many English Oaks on the site revealing their male catkins (left below) and tiny female red flowers (right below) hidden beneath the leaves.



We found some large Oak Apple Galls, caused by the larvae of the gall wasp *Biorhiza pallida*, and a large, old Bramble Gall which might be *Lasioptera rubi*, a gall midge which lays its eggs in the stem.





Many of the interesting plants on this site emerge later in the year, but we found plenty of Storksbill (above left) and speedwells, especially Thyme-leaved Speedwell (above right), growing on the poor soil.



St Mark's flies (left on Broom), are named after their emergence on and around St Mark's Day, April 25th in the old Julian calendar, 13 days behind our own. They're the big black flies that swarm with their legs hanging down.

They provide plenty of spring food for birds and spiders, such as the Cucumber Orbweaver below, not at all phased by the size difference. A quick, paralysing bite of venom before wrapping up the prey does the trick.



Centuries without ploughing or mowing have left mounds of Yellow Ants across the site. These ants are invisible as they feed underground by milking g aphids living on grass roots. The ants husband aphids much as we farm cattle. The ants can bring in eggs to the mounds to overwinter and redistribute them in the summer to the surrounding roots. There's even some evidence that the ants selectively breed aphids so the stronger clones survive. The honeydew from aphids, basically a glucose solution excreted after feeding on the plants, feeds the ants' young.

The Black Ants we saw crawling on the surface are unrelated and live in separate shallower and smaller colonies nearer the surface. They also milk aphids for honeydew but mainly on the stems of plants. You've probably seen them doing this in your garden

Tim King, ant writer and researcher, claims that if you get lost on a heath in the fog you can find your way by looking at the vegetation growing on these antheaps. On the north side you can find mosses, on the southern side denser vegetation and specialised flora. My picture below of one of the ant mounds at Cali does bear this out though I'm not about to try out his orientation theory. Watch his video below if you have an hour to spare and want to be astonished.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-Wj_xnzS8Q&t=6s



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Photos from David, Bev, Helen and Kath