



Preparing Melwood for Winter 2023

At the last work party in August, we made a start in returning the Meadow to a shorter turf. Some areas that were still showing significant bloom were left uncut at that time and these now need to be reduced to the same level as the rest of the field. The whole area will need at least one more cut before winter. The shortened grass will be seeded with *Yellow Rattle*, a semi-parasitic plant that can reduce the vigour of coarse grasses and help establish a more varied flora. It is recommended that invasive species such as nettle should be sprayed out before the Yellow Rattle is sown and that, for its part, must be seeded in time to allow it to experience a period of cold / freezing temperatures in order to germinate.

It was disappointing to see a large bivouac had been constructed in a back corner of the wood. The bivvy is not a great problem in its own right, but the damage caused in its construction was another matter. Much of the wood used was stripped from a dead hedge, constructed to mark the edge of the reserve. Small shrubs were trampled down in the process and green foliage used in construction was cut or pulled from nearby trees, including one planted as a commemorative tree. Noise and litter has also occurred at that site and the stripping of bark from 2 trees looks like simple vandalism. More recently it seems that some of the late night revellers have taken to using a bit of the wood near the bivvy as a toilet and used tissues are building up, creating an unsightly health hazard. Perhaps the arrival of winter will sort the problem but I'm not sure we can wait that long in light of the hazard now posed.

The generally warm late summer weather has had some positive effects, as a beautiful moth once restricted to a limited area of the south coast, now seems to be established in the area. I first



encountered the Jersey Tiger Moth in Meldreth about 4 years ago and had only ever seen 2 specimens since then, until this year. It flies by day and night and has been in my garden moth trap most nights during August. During the day, it has been seen in many places in Melbourn and Meldreth, including Melwood. Its caterpillars feed on nettle, Hemp Agrimony and sometimes other small plants. Nettle is common in Melwood and Hemp Agrimony can be found along the river Mel and especially in land adjacent to Melwood. We need to remove nettle in Melwood only from areas where it is a real problem. This adds to a growing list of species spreading north with the benefit of global warming.

But the news is not all good. Many species that were once common in my garden have been absent for 10 years or more. Have they moved further north to cooler climates or is their loss down to the loss of countryside caused by ever-expanding development? It is not easy to tell which but the nationwide recording and mapping being conducted by conservation charities like Butterfly Conservation make such interpretations much more likely to be reliable. Some pests are also doing well and those villagers concerned with the possible damage to their Box hedging may need to be especially vigilant, as numbers of Box-tree Moth have really exploded this summer.

There will be plenty of work to keep the Melwood volunteers busy within coming months, as the floor of the wood will need cutting, nest boxes will need cleaning and possibly repairing and seedling sycamore and ivy brought under control. The Yew hedge along the river edge of the meadow needs reducing in height and width but this will have to wait until the future of the meadow is finally decided.

Anyone interested in joining the conservation group can easily do so via "contact" page of the website.

Jim Reid

Melwood Conservation Group

Website : www.melwood.org.uk This article was published in 'Meldreth Matters', October 2023