

## A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

Miscellanea January 2017

Last month, I wrote a brief review of various types of tree that members might consider planting on their farms. I managed to miss out three particularly important species. They are favourites of mine being tolerant of the very chalky conditions that prevail here.

The Beech reaches a greater size here than any other deciduous tree. The 'mast' is a valuable feed source for game birds and the chaffinch like Brambling that seeks refuge here from the Scandinavian winter. Unfortunately, Beeches are very prone to attack from Grey Squirrels which strip the bark from trees when they grow to something over 12 feet. It is a tragedy to see a plantation killed off by these introduced rodents. For this reason I now use Beech as a hedging plant for which it is eminently suited, producing a thick hedge that retains its leaves during the winter. The Beech saplings can be interspersed with Holly or Box to make what is known as a 'tapestry' hedge.

Hornbeam are slower growing than Beech, tolerant of a wide range of soils with seeds much loved by the Hawfinch. Again, if not grown as a standard, this makes a marvellous hedging tree retaining its pale toffee coloured leaves over the winter period.

The Walnut – this tree, with its whitey grey corrugated bark and aromatic leaves has always been popular with my family. I first planted some when I was 16 years old and now have a grove which must be over 30 feet tall. They produce a good crop of walnuts most years; these can either be gathered before St. Stephen's Day for pickling or left on the tree for nuts in the late autumn.

Yesterday, driving my Landrover slowly across a Red Clover ley, I watched a flock of 50 or so Redwing flying towards me. A Sparrowhawk was evidently doing the same and erupting from the hedge to my left was amongst them in a second, where it took one in mid-air in a puff of feathers. There was a brief aerial struggle but the hawk was unfazed and made off with its capture to the other side of the field. Being a witness to such an event always leaves me with mixed emotions. I really don't want to see any species killing another. However, nature does operate in perfect balance and unless man interferes, there is no evidence that natural predation by any species will lead to prey extinction. In the UK we have interfered for centuries. By removing all the natural predators of the Fox – Lynx, Wolf and Wolverine – we have allowed the Fox population to increase to such an extent that they do pose a serious threat to the future of many species of ground nesting birds. There is a good case for the re-introduction of the Lynx into lowland Britain; to control fox and deer populations.

The Lynx is a solitary and very discreet animal which will not tolerate foxes in its extended territory. An apex predator such as this will, by controlling minor predators, allow ground nesting birds and their young to have far better odds in the survival stakes.

Recent research by the University of Sussex and Professor D. Goulson has profound implications for the future of all wildlife. By taking pollen and nectar samples from Bumble and Honey bees, they have demonstrated substantial contamination by fungicides and neonicotinoides. This is hardly surprising given

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the saturation spraying that we all witness in our travels about the country. What is of enormous concern is that of the neonicotinoides being brought into hives, 97% was in the nectar and pollen of a wide range of wild flowers including Hawthorn blossom; despite the fact that treated Oil Seed Rape was flowering at the same time. This implies that wild flowers are taking up these noxious pesticides from contaminated soil. Thus demonstrating, as with past agricultural chemicals, these substances are water soluble and are being accumulated by non-target species and will eventually enter our streams and rivers to who knows what consequences.

This all highlights the great importance of conservation work on organic farms. By turning our back on these 'technological developments' we give wildlife a haven in an otherwise hostile landscape. Let us hope that our work will be eventually recognised in the form of continued and increased support in a post Brexit world.

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