

BRENTOR COMMONS THROUGH THE YEAR



BARRY ALBRIGHTON



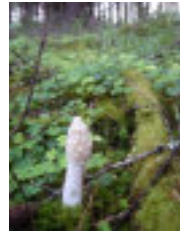
BRENTOR COMMONS - THROUGH THE YEAR

September 2018

After a few rather quiet walks around the common over the past month or so, it was a pleasure to see and hear a return to a much more active habitat. On parking my car I was greeted with a mixed flock of long tailed, blue and great tits being very mobile and calling continuously to each other. There may well have been other birds with them but they quickly moved away. On walking across to see the new heather planting I disturbed first one then another snipe. The second of these birds flew directly away, not zigzagging, and with no rasping "schaarp". This may have been a Jack Snipe, a close but smaller relative of the common snipe.

As I moved further along the common, a party of ten or so meadow pipits were moving from the telephone wires to the ground and back, a typical feeding

behaviour for meadow pipits. As I watched them a great spotted woodpecker flew up and across the common clearly showing its white wing bar and undulating flight.



Along the bridle path I came across a stinkhorn fungi pushing up through the leaf litter.

My attention was drawn to it by the swarm of flies that were clearly aware of its reputed smell of rotting flesh. I did not try to smell it.

There are still a good crop of sloes on the blackthorn and another bonanza of the glorious summer are the sweet chestnut fruit to be found on the ground under the trees at the end of the track to Burcombe farm. The trees are not that mature so it is good to see them producing fruit already.

They are not very big, but large enough to roast.

Finally, as I returned to my car, I saw a couple of butterflies taking advantage of the late afternoon sunshine. Poppy had enjoyed her exercise and I felt well rewarded with an interesting and busy perspective of our common.

August 2018

After the virility of spring and early summer, the lassitude of August is somewhat a disappointment. The energy expended by the nesting birds and flowering plants has been replaced by a period of rest and recovery with our flora and fauna getting ready for the winter to come. Our wildlife walk around the commons reflected this with birdsong eerily silent and the few flowering plants

swamped in a sea of green. We did however have a most pleasant stroll with sightings varying from a calling raven to an interesting variety of butterflies. Our visit to the pond on Liddaton common gave rise to a useful discussion of ways forward to make this area a more interesting and valuable environment.

The paths have been cut again and the bracken rolled. Walking around is now much more enjoyable with wide paths no longer crowded in with collapsing wet foliage. I am sure all of us dog walkers and dogs are feeling liberated with the extra space.





all. I am always surprised that the more blackberries are picked the better they are for the next collector. To find the best fruit just look to see where the bushes have been recently trampled. The apples in our gardens are also abundant so it is blackberry and apple pies all round for our Sunday lunch.

It is hard to imagine that our summer visitors will soon be departing. The swifts have gone already. Soon the overhead wires will be used by the swallows to gather in preparation for their incredible journeys to come.

July 2018

The hot dry weather has created an unfamiliar atmosphere. I have never known the paths to be so dusty and hard.

The grass across the main part of the common is so high that walking along the paths is rather like being in a tunnel but at least the grass is higher than the bracken, showing the effectiveness of our annual rolling programme. The grass is already turning yellow, though the bracken still seems to maintain its vivid green.

After the vibrancy of spring there is now little colour to see. There are small amounts of purple selfheal and knapweed with some yellow vetch and tormentil. The only abundance is patches of rose bay willow herb showing where the earth has been disturbed in the recent past. Convolvulus is a plant that I really dislike in the garden but climbing in a hawthorn bush it is more acceptable. Not as pleasing as my favourite climbing plant, honeysuckle, which for colour and smell is unbeatable.

The first few blackberries and the rowan berries turning red are signs of the seasons moving on.

Butterflies seem more abundant than for many years. Ringlet, gatekeeper, meadow brown and large whites are to be seen everywhere.

May 2018

What a year it has been for cow parsley. The roadside banks and hedges seem to be festooned with great swathes of white foliage, not only that but they are regularly enhanced by the bluebells, pink campions and buttercups giving the sensation of having been painted by Monet.

The whole of the common seems to have burst into life over the recent weeks. All of the trees are in full exuberant leaf with some such as the mountain ash and chestnut already in full bloom. The bluebells are again giving a wonderful display on Bowden and especially Liddaton. The area in the far southwest corner being particularly fine.

At last the paths on the common are now dry and in places even becoming a little dusty, what a change from the past six months.

Along the back path there had been a hatching of speckled yellow moths, their behaviour was very much that of butterflies. They were brightly coloured, settled with their wings open and were day flying. It took quite a bit of searching through our books to discover what species they were.

On checking the pond on Liddaton we found the tadpoles have come on very well. Many were already developing their hind legs and were very active creating quite a ripple across the surface.

That surface was looking rather unusual as it was covered in willow fluff almost as if it had had a light dusting of snow.



We have been pleased this month to host a visit from the Tavistock branch of the Devon Wildlife Trust. Will Walker Smith and Mike Whitfield led a party of eleven members around both commons. The history, ecology and wildlife of the area was explained and Pete Glanville from Tavistock was on hand to help with identification of various bird and plant species.

We are hoping that some of our visitors will be coming back in the future to help with such jobs as coppicing and scrub clearance.

Would there be an interest in such a guided walk amongst the local community? Please get in touch by phone, email or at coffee morning.



March 2018
In the heat of an unusual warm afternoon, a pair of buzzards soared languidly overhead. They traced invisible circles drifting across my field of view when I realised they were bisected by a pair of con trails. What a contrast between the silent and seemingly effortless gliding with the rectilinear power of modern technology. Straight lines against circles, silence against a vast roaring and energy free gliding against the insatiable thirst of four jet engines.

At last the birds are in full song. The common was alive again. There

were three pairs of yellowhammer, two pairs of bullfinch and several chiffchaffs in just a short length of the back path behind the big ash tree. It has been an unusual year for me with the chiffchaffs. They are inevitably the first summer visitor to arrive on the common and are brought to my attention by their easily recognisable onomatopoeic song. This year they are more than two weeks later than normal and though I have seen several, I have yet to hear their calls.

There is colour appearing in the hedge banks at last. At the base, the acid chrome yellow of the celandines contrasts well with the soft pastel yellow of the primroses. Everyone is saying that the primroses are putting on their best showing for many years. I think this is because the cold spring has held them back and when there was at last a little warmth they all came out together.

The few warm days that we have had even brought butterflies out of hibernation and I saw a pair of red admirals battling with each other, I assume to establish territory, with such energy as they swirled around my head in pursuit of each other, totally oblivious of my presence.

February 2018
On a bright crisp February morning it is a real pleasure to take a turn about the common. The chill in the air and the hard ground underfoot make me think what a difficult time wildlife must be enduring. The berries are largely gone and a lack of invertebrate life must mean a tough time for all birds and mammals. This is reflected in a general lack of birds around the common.

A starling was perched on top of an ash tree close to the signpost. It was in its striking winter plumage of speckled dots on a dark background and was a surprise as it was on its own. Starlings are a very gregarious bird and are almost always seen in large flocks, from hundreds in the local fields up to a million in the evening gatherings or murmurations for their roost.

The frogs have spawned in Liddaton pond and there are really huge amounts this year. Unfortunately the water level has dropped a little and some of the spawn has been stranded on the bank. I attempted to return some of it to the water but it is almost impossible to move as it slithered through my fingers each time I tried to grab it. Perhaps I will

go back with a small shovel.

At last the birds are starting to sing with chaffinch, hedge sparrow and song thrush all in good voice as I opened the car door to start our walk. The coming month will no doubt bring even more sounds as the birds pair up and establish their territories.

December 2017
As the year turns around, signs of change are becoming apparent. The moles are starting to get busy with rich dark soil heaped up at several sites. While the blackthorn appears still resolutely lifeless, there are catkins on the hazel and birch with small buds on the oaks, ash and willow.

The oak trees still retain their last few golden brown leaves, but the gales of the past weeks have stripped all other trees.

This time of year shows how the oak tree becomes dominant if the woodland is not managed. Around the base of each tree is an area that gradually loses the variety of plants, such as brambles, growing there. As the young trees grow eventually there is an inviting, perhaps secretive, grassy clearing under each one.

It was a surprise to see a party of fourteen well equipped and colourful hikers striding, with serious intent, along the bridle path and on down into the Lyd valley. This was rather a grim, January, Sunday morning with a strong Northwest wind.

Listen out for the distinctive sound of the great tit as it is very vocal at this time of year. It is a clear two note repeated tea-cher— tea-cher. This is the usual call but it can be quite varied. Bird watchers will often say “if you are not sure what it is it’s a great tit.”

I would like to encourage any walkers along the paths to bring secateurs to snip off the blackthorn suckers that will soon grow to be impassable bushes. Overhanging brambles and gorse can also be kept in check with regular



pruning. We must have had some help from escaped sheep judging by the amount of wool at the path edges.

November 2017
Winter has well and truly arrived. Today there is snow on Dartmoor and even a scattering on the north facing slopes of Brentor itself. One of our regular winter visitors, the snipe, was seen as it zig-zagged away from us along the path from next to the big ash tree calling with its dry rasping “schaap” call. This is a sighting I look forward to each year at this time.

Looking from the common out over the Lyd valley there was an aerial dogfight between a pair of ravens and a sparrow hawk. This represents the eternal enmity that exists between corvids (the crow family) and raptors (hawks, buzzards and falcons). The ravens would not allow the sparrow hawk to soar peacefully over the landscape until they had driven it from their territory. We usually see the sparrow hawk from our cars hurtling along the lane at ground level but they are just as often to be seen high above us, in a different hunting mode, rather like smaller, long tailed, short winged buzzards.

The brilliant yellow of the gorse is providing at least one splash of colour. The red bramble stems are also noticeable as they still support quite green leaves when all other shrubs have lost theirs. One other more subtle and rather subdued colour is the soft green of the lichen that hangs in curtains from the hazel bushes. It is always good to see lichen in any environment as it is a powerful indicator of clean air, not able to tolerate many of the industrial pollutants of our modern age.

October 2017
In many areas of the common small groups of silver birch trees have been planted or have established themselves naturally. The intricate filigree of their fine upper branches when seen against a bright sunny background has the quality of fine lace. Their silver trunks add further interest for our eyes when contrasted to the glorious gold of the autumnal oaks whose bronze and copper colours remind me of the brass ornaments around a blazing log fire.

We were surprised to see what almost looked like a large plastic bag in a distant tree, which, on inspection through binoculars,

turned out to be a very pale buzzard. The colour palette of buzzards varies from chocolate brown to almost cream. We all see them on the telegraph poles as we drive around and it is well worth giving them a second glance to appreciate the variety that is in the local area.

Our winter thrushes have well and truly arrived even though the berries of hawthorn and holly that they consume are rather sparse this year. Look out for the ragged flocks of redwings, slightly smaller than blackbirds, as they dash from bush to bush in their slightly chaotic way uttering quiet ‘seep seep’ calls. In contrast the larger fieldfares seem to like the tops of trees and fly between them with a characteristic harsh ‘tchack tchack’.

The only song we are likely to hear is the robin that will defend its territory throughout the year. They are very obliging and will usually sing their beautiful if rather mournful song from a conspicuous perch on top of a bush, post or building.

September 2017
An early morning walk showed us the common in a different light. A heavy mist and still

air created such a silent and peaceful atmosphere. The mist shrouded spider webs, especially on the gorse, were quite incredible in their density. Every branch had its own webs, perhaps up to fifty in each bush. There seemed to be two types of web present, the classic fairy tale orb and the three-dimensional ones; the water droplets on the latter, making them sink a little to resemble hammocks. Towards the end of the walk the heat of the sun was able to 'burn off' the mist and allow the blue sky to shine through. As this happened the area became alive with thrushes and blackbirds. They were charging around in considerable numbers, many more than the common would normally hold. I imagine that these were harbingers, probably from northern England or the near continent, of the fieldfares and redwing that will be arriving soon. Several red admirals were also on the wing even though the air temperature was still low.

Our pond clearing effort was a great success. We were able to start a fire to get rid of the rubbish that had been dumped there earlier in the year as well as the huge pile of 'brash' that we had piled up when

opening up the edge of the pond on our last clearing session. We saw frogs and toads much to the delight of our five-year-old helper.

There has been no further attempt to use the track that was cut into Liddaton Common. We hope that this is the last we will have to do anything about it and the ground can regenerate naturally.

August 2017
The seed cases on the broom plant behind the signpost are now hard and dry, ready to burst open with an audible snap when the sun is really hot again. As we walked around we saw the windblown seeds of willow herb, bird dispersed seeds of rowan, hawthorn and sloe and the ripening helicopters of sycamore.

The rowan do not seem to have a very heavy crop this year, but in some locations the sloes are so dense that I will get enough from just one plant for my sloe gin, whereas in other places the blackthorn bushes are quite empty. Perhaps the frost killed the blossom as it has done on most of our apple trees this year.

When walking around, I commented to Janet that it was so difficult to identify the birds from the briefest of views as they flit from one densely covered bush to another. However, a little later on as we reached the Burcombe gate I spotted a long tailed tit crossing the track. As we watched, it was followed by several more and also by blue tit, great tit, coal tit and willow warbler. This is characteristic of foraging tits at this time of year as they form loosely gathered mixed flocks. These groups are always interesting to watch and they can often contain rarer visitors such as goldcrest or firecrest.

The bracken has now been rolled flat and it is much more pleasant not to feel as if one is walking in a green canyon. If only we could have animals grazing the common, returning it to the lowland heath that it was thirty or more years ago. The grass was once short enough through the summer to picnic and perhaps play football over the whole area.

July 2017
Red Admiral butterfly
It seems that nationally it has been a successful year so far for

butterflies. On the common, even on a drizzly wet day, there were good numbers on the wing flitting along in front of us as we walked around. There were plentiful ringlets and meadow browns with the occasional red admiral. As well as butterflies there was a pair of golden banded dragonflies fiercely patrolling the top path, they settled regularly to give us time to make a good identification. The damp dewy weather also showed us the vast population of spiders as their webs were rendered visible by the droplets that had settled on them.

Hogweed

This month's umbelliferae are the hogweed and the creamy yellow billows of meadowsweet, again having completely replaced the hedge bank and roadside valerian of June. The meadowsweet is a real favourite of mine, the scent can be overwhelming, even competing with the honeysuckle's cloyingly narcotic smell. It is impossible to resist inhaling the scent as one walks past.

The vetches, relative of the pea family, can now be seen in purple, yellow and white varieties representing quite separate species.

Patches of reddish purple betony are all along the path edges providing pollen and nectar for the bumble bees so aptly named as they clumsily career from one flower head to the next.

After some work clearing the path to the pond on Liddaton, I saw, sitting adjacent to each other, two of the regular birds of that locality, the brilliant male yellowhammer and a linnet with lovely crisp reddish marking to its breast and forehead. The different postures of the two were striking with the slim erect linnet contrasting with the larger and stockier more horizontal perching of the yellowhammer.

June 2017
When walking around the common with some friends from Exeter, we were excited to see two red kites close to the signpost area. This is the first time I have seen them over Bowden although there was a sighting a couple of years ago. Circling around, they were at times less than fifty yards from us. Our visitors were most impressed but not being country people they were rather overwhelmed by the smell of the dung being spread on the fields nearby. Janet and I had hardly noticed it! If you are on the

common look out for their long angled wings and forked tails, very different from our regular Buzzards with their lazy gliding and soaring.

The grass over the main part of the common is now really luxurious. The years of bracken rolling and cutting are really starting to have a dramatic effect on the ecology of the common as we had hoped it would.

I have been trying to keep up with the changes to the roadside verges this year and have noticed that the cow parsley of the last two months has been superseded by Valerian which although largely white also has a hint of dusty pink about it.

May 2017
Bad news on the rabbit front, the bid for freedom seems to have come to an end as nobody has seen it for more than a week. Perhaps it has gone to the great burrow in the sky.

When driving past the same area of the common we saw a pair of linnets. It had been raining heavily and there were puddles at the roadside where they were bathing. There was a great commotion with splashes and much flapping of wings and we were able to sit in the car

and watch them for quite some time. An absolute delight.

As the seasons progress there is always a new tapestry of colour to maintain our interest. The largely white umbelliferae, the umbrella shaped flowers along the roadside, are always changing. The cow parsley is now fading and the pignut is the dominant one on the common. It is so called because below each flower is an edible small tuber. I suspect they were a favourite of pigs when they led a much more foraging life. The hedgerows are now at their best with the pink of the champions and the bluebells creating a back drop for many other summer flowers that are starting to bloom.

A tree we have noticed recently is the horse chestnut to the left of the big ash tree. It has been more obvious because of its white candelabra that have been apparent in recent weeks. This tree must have been planted there, but it was well before the plantings by the commons association. It would be interesting to know when this was done and by whom. There is also a grove of sweet chestnut in the northeast corner. These are youngish trees have quite smooth branches and stems, not the gnarled

and spiral bark of the mature tree.

April 2017
The good news is that the white and black rabbit is still present after two months. The possibility of a name has come up. Suggestions have included Flopsy, Michael de Rupe and of course Bunny Mc Bunface. Perhaps a competition is in order.

I have so enjoyed writing these articles. When reading my daily Guardian newspaper for the past thirty or more years, I have always turned first to the country diary. I was so pleased to see that Brentor's own Charlie Elder is now a contributor to this much loved and admired series.

As well as the rabbit, white seems to be a dominant colour this month. Stitchwort is abundant along the paths along with the blossom of the blackthorn and the heads of cow parsley. More white was seen in the shell of a pigeon's egg lying beside the path. Clearly they have hatched their squabs already.

This is the right time of year to attempt to learn the calls of a few

bird songs. As the foliage is still quite sparse it is easy to see some of the more common songsters and also to hear their very distinctive songs. These include the onomatopoeic repeated call of the chiff chaff and the liquid descending cascade of the willow warbler.

It was good to see a stunning male stonechat close to the old ash tree. The stonechat is so obliging as it almost always sits on top of a bush (typically gorse) and is not particularly timid. Under the bush, I saw a wren scuttling around, it's vibrant song belies its tiny size.

March 2017
What a surprise. As we were driving across the common we saw a white rabbit with black markings looking very much like an "Old English" breed. It was there a few days later, taking cover in the bramble patch as we approached it. How long it will last against the buzzards and foxes will be interesting to see. Here's hoping it will become an established feature for a while. When we first moved here we often saw jet black wild rabbits, but not in recent years.

When walking along the back path, I looked up to see a blackbird on the very top of the ash tree. It was extremely handsome with its glossy black feathers and bright yellow bill. It was still there when I finished my circuit twenty minutes later. As I watched it a great spotted woodpecker perched almost next to it. It was a contrast to see the woodpecker clinging to a vertical branch and the blackbird proudly perched as lord of all it surveyed.

The honeysuckle is in full leaf well ahead of other trees and shrubs with just the bramble leaves also starting to appear. Next month should produce foliage of many more varieties.

I looked for the frogspawn in Liddaton pond and was initially disappointed that it all seemed to have disappeared. On closer inspection I saw the surface of the water where it had been was a seething mass of tiny tadpoles crammed together in the same space that the frogspawn had been. As the month progresses they will spread over a much larger area.

The moles are starting to be active and their molehills are springing up in various places. Other mammals

seen included a herd of at least ten deer, the most I have seen, moving away from the common over Bawcombe farm fields. I was able to watch them for at least ten minutes.

February 2017
A still, warm day in February is always a pleasant surprise and it is good to see the wildlife is starting to herald the coming spring. There is a hint of freshness in the grass especially along the damp path edges. The sun was shining on distant Gibbet Hill and St. Michaels church is once again standing proud with the scaffolding and shroud gone.

We all like to see the snowdrops in our gardens and the few daffodils that have been planted around the base of the signpost on the common let us know that spring is on its way. The catkins of birch, hazel and willow are starting to put on a good show and most of the other shrubs and trees are developing their buds. It will be enjoyable to watch as they burst into leaf over the next few weeks. The willows in Liddaton pond are especially bright. Our newly created access paths are being well used and it is now easy to get down to the water's edge to see the masses of frogspawn. How many

generations of frogs have been breeding here?

Bird life is still rather scarce and only the usual suspects, chaffinch, robin, hedge sparrow etc. are singing regularly. I did however hear the high pitched zee zee zee of a goldcrest as it worked its way along the hedgerow in front of me as I walked. It seemed to be quite unconcerned about my presence and allowed me to approach quite closely.

January 2017
"I leant upon a coppice gate
When frost was spectre-gray,
And winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day."

These words of Thomas Hardy encapsulate the atmosphere of the common on one of our walks this month. In Hardy's poem the gloom is broken by the song of a 'darkling thrush,' giving hope for the future. We did not hear a thrush sing but the robin was in full and strident voice and the hedge sparrow's quieter sound raised our spirits in the chilly, damp air.

Most days, birds were few and far between, but one late evening walk revealed large numbers of redwing,

seeming to be charging around in the blackthorn along the back path. I suspect this is pre-settling down behaviour in a communal roosting area. It so reminded me of the times I spent as a youth ringing redwings at such a roost in Warwickshire.

The bare trees allow the 'witch's broomsticks' in the birch trees to be much more apparent in all parts of the common. One tree had seventeen. These growths are the reaction by the tree to a fungal infection in the same way that oak apples are to wasp eggs. Another eye catching phenomenon to the right of the track down to Bawcombe Farm is the line of vertical willow shoots that have formed along the line of a fallen trunk. It is hard to imagine that they were not planted there for some purpose.

December 2016
Winter has truly arrived. We have already had some really severe frosts, strong winds and heavy rains that have all left their mark on the common. There is a general sense of dormancy and battenning down the hatches to survive the next few months. There are, however, on closer examination, plenty of interest as we walk around.

There are tight catkins on the hazel, oak trees seem to keep some of their leaves (one small tree at the Burcombe end of the back track has a complete golden brown canopy) and the yellow of the gorse and some of the bramble leaves shine out with the slightest hint of sunshine. The banks and tree trunks are often well covered with a rich green coating of moss which itself merits much closer examination.

I was struck by the stark, bare branches of the thorny blackthorn, many have two types of lichen (an indicator of a good air quality) in complete contrast. One is like a soft green feathery seaweed frond and the other looked like little earlobes clustered along the stems. Perhaps they are, a little fancifully, listening for the first signs of the spring to come.

The winter bird population is now well established. We have seen the snipe again zig zagging as it flies away when disturbed and have also had a report of a woodcock (a first for the common). This is a bird that is virtually only ever seen in flight, it is considerably larger than a snipe and it flies away in a straight line. The winter thrushes are abundant this year. Loose flocks of redwing

scour the hedgerows for berries along with the larger fieldfares that seem to settle, often with a harsh chattering, in the tops of larger trees.

To finish my walk it was nice to hear the overhead crong of the raven, a quintessential winter bird of the Dartmoor area, along with the flash of a bright yellow male yellowhammer shining out in the evening gloom.

November 2016
Many thanks again to the local authority for cutting the rights of way on both Liddaton and Bowden. They have made a really good job of it with a wide path to see us through the winter. The chewed sticks and worn out balls along the paths attest to its regular use.

As I walked along the back path the strong wind created a cascade of falling leaves like a snowstorm of butterflies. The leaves were of blackthorn, birch and ash while the oak and hazel were almost unaffected. Although it is the end of October it was good to see several red admirals. One in particular was putting on a brilliant display, spreading its wings to catch the last

heat of the afternoon sun.

When waking along the top path we disturbed a rather fine fox. It scampered rapidly away from us to disappear into the undergrowth. The renowned country poet John Clare caught the atmosphere just right with his

“She sniffs and barks if any passes by
And swings her tail and prepares to fly”

There were much stronger winds higher up. The crows and a buzzard were being really buffeted about as they flew overhead but I was surprised to see that a passing wood pigeon seemed to fly arrow straight across the whole common, such was her strength and speed.

The plentiful red hawthorn berries that are already providing food for the winter visiting redwing and fieldfares provide some colour as does the bright yellow gorse. The old saying “When the gorse is out of bloom that’s when love is out of tune,” reminds us that it flowers in all months of the year.