

A Walk in the Woods

Sometimes it's just good to stand in a wood. And for this I go to Odell. There's a Great Wood there with an interesting mix of relatively old deciduous trees and several public footpaths (if you can find them) and it's wonderfully cool on a hot summer's day. It requires a bit of a plod to get there but once inside everything slows down and one is forced to focus close at hand. And so stillness descends both inside and out. It can also be very boggy which is another incentive to slow down and keep one's eyes peeled.

Showers are still passing but gradually the sun wins out and the insects begin to emerge. First I'm buzzed by a Southern Aeshna dragonfly – large and threatening but perfectly harmless to humans. And then, as one's perception adjusts, other insects come into view: a minute Diamond- back moth sitting out the showers on a leaf of Spear Thistle; a well-camouflaged froghopper on the leaf of a tree, several startlingly blue male Azure damselflies and a few duller females and several teneral specimens, not yet in full colour.

Ringlets are resting on the overhanging vegetation – near the end of their lives now, and then a splendid Speckled Wood- a butterfly doing relatively well, appearing further north every year. Large Skippers suddenly fill a patch of sunlight with their aerial acrobatics. And then a magnificent spike of Broad-leaved Helleborine separates itself out from the mass of green. It's a good two to three foot high with several dozen subtly-coloured flowers, some open, some not. A Buzzard flies along the ride seemingly oblivious to my presence.

And so the contemplative walk brings one into an open field bordered with vivid yellow hawkweeds and a change in insect personnel. Now it's the turn of a host of hoverflies and both Large and Small White butterflies, visited in their turn by the largest of British dragonflies, the Brown Aeshna - a blur of brown wings.

The path peters out on the edge of Santa Pod Airfield. This was formerly a wonderful area for breeding Lapwing and Yellow Wagtails but is now being developed as a solar farm and what looks to be an extension to the Santa Pod parking. But there's a tiny patch of Field beans to one side and a family of Yellow Wagtails is calling insistently from its centre while several Skylarks still sing nearby. By the main runway two hares box out of season.

I return to the wood via one of the large concrete 'parking bays' and suddenly it's all action once again as I'm buzzed by a horsefly with patterned wings and iridescent green eyes. A Sparrowhawk glides past overhead and a White Admiral flits by at knee level on flat wings. I'm desperate to get a picture of the horsefly but I needn't have worried as it follows me wherever I go, perching first on my haversack and then on my knee, begging to be photographed. At home the books tell me that it's of local distribution and fond of muddy margins and easily recognisable by the brownish-yellow colour of its middle tibia. It's *Chrysops relictus* for those who would like a better view.

And so for a fast exit through the central ride, contemplation over and girded now for another day back at the office, but not before a final glimpse of a Swallow mobbing a Fox.

Br. John

