

Blean Woods National Nature Reserve

Mid-December 2024 to mid-January 2025

At the time of writing we're in the middle of an exceptionally cold spell, with daytime temperatures only a little above freezing, then falling at night to -2 or -3C. These conditions, especially when prolonged, can be very detrimental to some woodland birds, as ground feeders have difficulty locating food in the hardened soil, and smaller species like goldcrest and wren suffer great night-time heat loss that can lead to death. Nevertheless, I have occasionally been taken by surprise when I have felt some definite wintry warmth on my back, which gives me the chance to introduce apricity. This is a new word for me, and I have been waiting for the right moment to slot it into my writing. From the Latin, meaning 'warmed by the sun', it is more specifically used to describe the unexpected warmth of a winter's sun. How long before I am able to lightly drop this obscure word into conversation, I wonder? The answer probably depends on how keen I am to keep my friends!

Setting off from the car park, one of the first habitats you come to is an area of birch woodland. This is the very first area I managed, way back in the winter of 1982-3. At the time it was a stretch of sweet chestnut coppice with a smattering of birch mixed in, an abundant habitat in the wood, but one that supported little wildlife. I therefore set about trying to improve it by cutting all the chestnut and killing many of the stumps, as this introduced species is known to support a reduced array of insects, and its dense foliage shades out the ground flora. At the same time I coppiced the birch, while retaining any decent stems that might grow on into respectable trees, rather than just spindly coppice. That was 42 years ago, so what developments have there been? Well, you can see that the birches I rescued from the chainsaw are now fairly substantial trees, with rugged white-and-black patterned trunks, while the many birches that I coppiced have regrown, but are markedly smaller and thinner than the ones I saved, so there are two definite generations, which immediately makes for a more diverse woodland. Additionally, there are a few pre-existing semi-mature oaks that have become a little sturdier, but for me there has been an overwhelming sense of just how slowly everything happens in a wood compared to, say, a saltmarsh where a newly-excavated scrape just looks a terrible miry mess on Day 1, but a year later will support all manner of wetland plants, in addition to interesting numbers of waders and duck. The habitat still doesn't look like what I would call mature woodland and, of course, there is a dearth of dead wood. To make matters worse, there is remarkably sparse ground vegetation, the extra light flooding in after the chestnut element was removed having made little impact on what would grow in the field layer. So, while this may all seem rather disappointing, as Fred Streeter would have said on Gardeners' Question Time many years ago, "The answer lies in the soil". Never was a truer word spoken, as the rooting medium for all the trees and other plants in this part of the wood is an acidic, infertile, stony soil that will never support a wide array of attractive plants beneath a canopy of fast-growing trees. Here everything happens much more slowly and with far less flamboyance. A consequence of all this is that the bird population hasn't responded markedly to the management effort put into this patch of the wood; it is still a fairly quiet area, and the single tree creeper that I saw there some years ago was never found again! No doubt there will be improvements as the short-lived birches start to collapse, providing habitat for insects and nest-holes for birds, but the lesson to be learnt from all this is to lower your expectations and have infinite patience!

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