

Nature Notes 22 The Valley Bottom Fen on Uppgate Common: Fighting off the Invaders

Terry's moving poem "Visiting Uppgate Fen" in the September Pilgrim clearly demonstrates why so much effort has been invested over the last forty-five years in preventing the fen on Uppgate Common from becoming overgrown and turning into woodland.

The valley bottom fen is often considered the "jewel in the crown" of Swannington's biodiversity. It is a mosaic of microhabitats reflecting differences in the chemistry in the range of ground water springs that feed it. Each microhabitat has different associations of plants. Valley bottom fens, such as this one are extremely rare. There are only 27 such fens in the whole of the UK and only another 12 on mainland Europe. This means that we in Swannington are custodians of 2.6 % of all the valley bottom fens on the whole planet



The valley bottom fen

Picture for a moment David Attenborough standing on Dead Man's Hill with the fen behind him saying to camera "Standing here we can see one of the rarest habitats in the country and indeed in the world, but it is very fragile, and could disappear very rapidly. The threat is not due to pollution, nor due to climate change, nor to being drained for agricultural use. This fen is at risk of being lost due to an insidious invasion. An invasion of native trees which, unless they are eaten off when very young seedlings, will grow, in less than 25 years, to become mature trees that shade out the beautiful array

of flowers that make this such a wonderful sight in spring and early summer"

Historically this fen was kept clear of trees by the commoner's grazing stock, nibbling trees off as seedlings while only a few inches high.

The most effective way of managing the fen now is to try and replicate that historic management using ruminant grazers (cows, sheep and/or goats) which can digest fibrous tissues in their four compartment stomachs, so can keep the invaders at bay. Ponies and horses, while a lot better than having no grazers, are not as effective at this job because they have straight through guts that do not digest fibre so thoroughly. They are therefore more reluctant to eat woody plants, preferring the softer tissues of fen specialist plants, some of which they have declined markedly as a result.



The crimson flower of marsh cinquefoil (gardenia.net)



Tussock sedge, the ponies appear to find it so tasty it has almost disappeared from the fen (Pinelandsnursery.org)

For thirty years the NWT grazed their "flying Flock" of hardy breeds of sheep on the fen to help repel the invaders. The Council is currently working very hard to fight back the woody plants so that future generations will, like Terry, be able enjoy a picnic on the slopes of Dead Man's Hill and obtain peace of mind from the sight of the mosaic of wildflowers with dragonflies darting above, perhaps some being nimbly caught in midair by a visiting hobby.

As someone said "Swannington commons are the best place I know to experience mindfulness". One benefit of the Covid pandemic is that the government now more clearly recognizes the importance of being able to retreat to the tranquility and peace of a wilderness experience, as Terry described so moving in his poem.

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