Nature Notes

Ancient Grassland on Upgate Common



Barn owl



Neolithic axe head found on Upgate Common



Kestrel

A neolithic flint axe head made approx. 3500 BC and dug up when an electricity cable was buried on Upgate Common, may have been used by ancestral "Upgaters" to fell part of the ancient forests that covered East Anglia since the last Ice age 10,000 years ago.

Just as there are now only a few fragments of the ancient forests which once covered Great Britain left, so also are there only a few pieces of "ancient" grassland that have never been ploughed or improved with fertiliser or pesticides. Common land, pieces of land allocated by feudal landlords for "commoners" to graze their own stock, are amongst the few examples of these.

Such patches of ancient grassland can form what are now called "biodiversity hotspots" (places where there are lots of species! My compost heap has lots of species of fungi and bacteria but apparently that does not count!). The corner of Upgate Common nearest the road is, however, a real "biodiversity hotspot", as in the grassland there are 2-5 times as many species of plant, invertebrates and small mammals as there are in either the scrub or woodland further down the Common. Seeds from the plants provide food for three species of mice: house mice, wood mice and the harvest mouse (which nests in the tall sward), while both short tailed voles and bank voles also feed on the leaves and stems of plants. All five British insectivores have also been recorded there: water, common and pygmy shrews, moles and hedgehogs. The smaller mammals form food for the barn owl, often seen silently quartering above this patch of grassland and for the kestrel watching intently from the telegraph wires for the slightest movement below.



Short-tailed vole



Harvest mouse

Unless grazed or mown, grasslands rapidly turn into scrub and then woodland. This has happened dramatically on the common since horses have no longer been herded there, as they were before World War II and myxomatosis killed most of the rabbits in the 1950s. The Parish Council would like this piece of "ancient "grassland to be grazed again, but in the absence of suitable stock, is mowing it in rotation, starting with where the thistles are thickest and also in some of the wetter parts to encourage the orchids which flower there. They are leaving areas with lots of knapweed, which birds such as goldfinches like to feed on, and patches of flowers such as the vivid yellow stands of bird's foot trefoil and fleabane.



Water shrew

A big **thank you** to John, Chris and Audrey for their help in "bringing home the "harvest" of cut grass.

If anyone else would like to join in with the conservation volunteers who regularly help us with tasks needed to manage the Commons, please contact Steve Williams, the Commons Representative on the Parish Council (01603 861300).

Mark

Editor's note: coloured versions of these photographs can be seen on-line at www.swannington-news.org