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NATURE RAMBLINGS (7) AUTUMN

Hi everyone. As Autumn reaches its end and birdsong ceases, we thought it would be good to reflect on it with some of the photographs we have taken during the time.

The dreaded lurgy struck again on October 14th when we in this district were placed under tier 3 restrictions to be followed by even more limitations with lockdown 2. Of course, these have had the effect of bursting our bubbles, so to speak, and once again curtailing our walks to local ones.

In comparison with the rest of the year, Autumn has been very wet, indeed, October 3rd was the wettest day UK-wide since records began in 1891. Certainly, it has meant a change in footwear!

Along with the colourful leaf displays you may have noticed an abundance of berries, acorns, conkers, cones and fruits of many types. Every few years, some species of trees and shrubs produce a bumper crop of their fruits or nuts. The collective term for these fruits and nuts is 'mast', so this is called a mast year.

We hope to put together a Winter version of Nature Notes based on our local walks (snow and blizzards allowing!) If you take any photographs during the next couple of months or so and would like us to include them, please forward them to us or via Sue.

Remember, you can click inside any of the photographs and 'drag' them to expand the picture.



Burton Marsh Sheep

We spotted this fellow on a recent walk going past the saltmarshes at Burton. These marshes are designated as a Special Area of Conservation. Sheep are used as tools for land management; helping maintain a desirable height of grasses, preventing it from becoming too dense or tall. Apparently, after lambing, the saltmarsh can hold up to 5000 sheep.



Cuckoo-pint (Lords & Ladies)

Grows in woodland areas and riversides. It can occasionally grow as a weed in partly shaded spots.

In autumn, the lower ring of (female) flowers forms a cluster of bright red berries which remain after the spathe (leaf covering) and other leaves have withered away. The attractive red to orange berries are extremely poisonous.

It has mythical links with serpents, death and creation. It is included in the first ever encyclopaedia and in the remedies of a Welsh healing family who say they were taught by the fairy folk. Legends tell of its power to rouse bears from hibernation and how its pollen glows at night giving it the name of 'fairy lamps'.



Solanum dulcamara – Woody Nightshade

This is a species of vine in the potato genus Solanum. Occurring in a wide range of habitats – woodlands, scrubland, hedges and marshes. The flowers are in loose clusters, star-shaped, with 5 purple petals, yellow stamens and style pointing forward.

In the Middle Ages the plant was thought to be effective against witchcraft, and was sometimes hung around the neck of cattle to protect them from the "evil eye"



Perennial Aster

The name Aster comes from the Ancient Greek word aster meaning "star", referring to the shape of the flower head.

Aster species are used as food plants by the larvae of a number of butterflies. Asters can grow in all hardiness zones but are also popular as garden plants because of their attractive and colourful flowers.



Fruit of the Horse Chestnut Tree

The horse chestnut's fruit is colloquially called a "conker" and refers to the shiny brown seed that is protected by a green spiny capsule. They are the very essence of autumn.

Victorians made conker flour. Seeds were shelled, ground and then leached to remove bitter flavours. It's not common practice today as conkers are mildly poisonous.



Brown Common Garden Slug

Slugs are similar to snails, but they have no shell. Instead they have a horny plate concealed under the mantle or saddle. Slugs are active only when the temperature is above 5 degrees C. In dry, cold weather they stay deep in the soil.

Slugs can be serious garden pests, eating seedlings, plants and fruit and vegetable crops. However they are eaten by a range of wildlife including hedgehogs, foxes, badgers, many birds and slow worms.



Grey Heron – Dibbinsdale

Finally, after a spring and early summer of trying to photograph a heron in Dibbinsdale we managed to take a few at the end of September.

Once a regular dish on the English medieval banqueting table: as the property of the crown, heavy fines were levied on anyone caught poaching the bird, while in Scotland the penalty was amputation of the right hand.



Wellies

The children at this school were well prepared for wet weather!

The Wellington boot was originally a type of leather boot adapted from Hessian boots. They were worn and popularised by Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington. The "Wellington" boot became a staple of practical footwear for the British aristocracy and middle class in the early 19th century. The name was subsequently given to waterproof boots made of rubber and they are no longer associated with a particular class. They are now used for a range of agricultural and outdoors pursuits.

Wellington boots are a commonly used form of waterproof footwear in the UK, and usually referred to as "Wellies". Wellington boots are particularly popular for small children when they want to jump in puddles.



Shaggy Inkcap (common name - Lawyers wig)

The shaggy ink cap is easily recognizable from its almost cylindrical cap which initially covers most of its stem. The cap is mostly white with shaggy scales, which are more pale brown at the apex. It is a common fungus often seen growing on lawns, along gravel roads and waste areas.

Shaggy inkcaps were used as ink and in the Boer War for sending secret messages.



Buff-tip Moth Caterpillar

This yellow and black caterpillar can be seen from July to early October. It is one of the most instantly recognisable moth species in the British Isles.

A common species found in most habitats containing some deciduous trees including urban gardens, woodland and more open countryside. This one was seen whilst walking up Rest Hill Road.



Honey Fungus (Boothia fungus)

Growing in large clusters on trunks, stumps or dead wood of many different trees but can also be found in grass as the rhizomorphs (root-like structures found in fungi) spread looking for more trees to infect.

This mushroom is responsible for killing many trees and the rhizomorphs or 'bootlaces' can usually be found under the clusters of fungi and surrounding bark. Unlike most mushrooms this fungus can live on its host tree alive or dead and can spread underground easily and ends up killing its host.

Honey fungus is regarded in Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Germany and other European countries as one of the best wild mushrooms. They are commonly ranked above morels and chanterelles and only the cep/porcini is more highly prized. However, honey fungus must be thoroughly cooked as they are mildly poisonous raw. One of the four UK species can cause sickness when ingested with alcohol.



Borage (also known as a starflower)

Borage is a fairly inconspicuous plant, often overlooked in the wild due to its similarities to Green Alkanet which tastes horrible!

Borage tastes just like cucumber. The young leaves and flowers are best. The flowers are a great addition to salads and summer drinks.

Borage symbolizes courage and power. Both Roman and Celtic warriors used Borage to give them courage in battle.



Sweet Chestnut Casings

After pollination by insects, female flowers develop into shiny, red-brown fruits wrapped in a green, spiky case. The trees begin to bear fruit when they are around 25 years old.

Introduced by the Romans and a roasted winter treat, these long-lived giants, with their prickly-husks and deeply grooved bark, give us our classic Christmas nut.



The White-lipped Snail

The White-lipped snail comes in different colour forms, but always has a white band around the opening of its shell. It prefers damp spots in wide range of habitats, from gardens to grasslands, woods to hedges. It can also be found in dry conditions tightly attached to tree trunks or fences.

The preferred food plants of this snail include Nettles, Ragwort and Hogweed. Although these snails possess both male and female organs, and are capable of self-reproduction, they usually mate with another snail between spring and autumn.

Did you know? In some parts of the world, snail eggs are eaten as 'snail caviar' or 'white caviar'.



Fruit and Leaves of Guelder-rose

Guelder rose grows in damp, neutral or chalky soils along riversides and in fens, scrub and old hedgerows. It is planted in parks and gardens, and plants which spread from these sites to the wild sometimes include yellow-fruited varieties.

The red berries are an important food source for birds, including bullfinch and mistle thrush. The shrub canopy provides shelter for other wildlife. The flowers are especially attractive to hoverflies.



Hart's Tongue Fern

The Hart's-Tongue fern is a medium-sized fern that can be found growing in damp, shady gorges and banks in woodlands, as well as on rocks, walls and mossy branches. It is a very simple fern: the frond is a single, glossy, green blade, with orange spores underneath.

It gets its name because it is thought to look like the tongue of a deer. The leaves are tongue-shaped, with pointy, curly tips.



Mare's Tail (Horsetail)

Mare's tail, is a prehistoric, pernicious, spreading, perennial weed which is commonly found in undisturbed ground, cracks in paving, walls, waste ground and if you are unlucky, in your garden. It is readily recognisable thanks to its upright, bright green, almost fir-tree-like stems that appear through the soil. These can grow up to 60cm (2ft) high.

It creates large clumps of upright stems that can smother and kill smaller plants and surround larger plants. The roots can grow in between those of cultivated plants, making them difficult to remove and control.

Its leaves have been used for dyeing a soft green colour; the stalks were used to make whistles to call spirits. Indians used it to polish wooden tools; in Japan horsetail is still used as a finest sandpaper to sand the wood before varnishing. It is also used in shampoos and cosmetics. However, horsetail is valued more for its health benefits due to the number of minerals and other nutrients it contains, giving anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, antimicrobial, antioxidant, coagulant, demulcent, diuretic and astringent properties.



Common Inkcap Mushroom

Common inkcap fungus grows in tufts from buried decaying wood, usually appearing after rain. It can be up to 17cm tall, with a conical cap and shaggy edge which often drips an inky liquid.

It grows in pastures, parks and gardens, and on tree stumps and pavements; in fact, wherever there is buried wood.

Historically common inkcap was used to make ink for important documents.



Cherry Blossom Autumn Leaves

You will remember the fantastic blossoming of cherry trees in spring when the pink and white blossom showered pavements everywhere.

In early autumn the same cherry blossom trees rewarded us again with wonderful displays of multi-coloured foliage before carpeting the pavements and verges once again with the falling of their leaves.

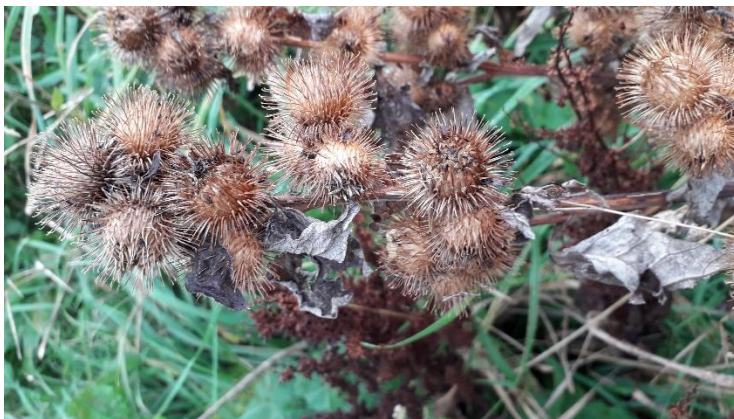


Traveller's Joy – Old Man's Beard

This woody member of the buttercup family is often seen scrambling over hedgerows.

Traveller's-joy is a climber with clematis-like leaves. It has clusters of creamy-white flowers in July and August, and feathery, wispy seed heads throughout the autumn and winter.

The flowers of this plant are visited by pollinating insects during the day, such as bees as well as hoverflies. Traveller's joy is also a food plant for moth species such as the pretty chalk carpet moth, the small waved umber, the small emerald, as well as others. The seed heads of this plant also provide a food source for birds, such as goldfinches.



Seed Heads of Burdock

Found in scrub, woodland and along roadside verges, Burdock is known to many of us as the brown, sticky seed heads that attach themselves to our clothing as we walk through the countryside. Burdock has large, downy, heart-shaped leaves with wavy margins. It produces egg-shaped, thistle-like flower heads that appear in loose clusters and eventually give rise to the familiar sticky burs with their large hooks.



Meadow

Perennial meadows thrive best on poor soils because the grasses compete less with the wildflowers. Annual meadows, usually of cornfield annuals, need rich soils.

Our own native wildflowers such as poppies, cornflowers and chamomile grow well in chalky soils.



Dry Stone Walling in progress

Building with dry stone is one of the earliest skills developed by humans. Dry stone walls are durable because they contain no mortar, but are held together by the weight of stone, and by the skill of the builder who selected and fitted the stones together.

Dry stone walling involves either stripping and rebuilding existing walls that have fallen into disrepair, or gapping – repairing gaps where the wall has collapsed.

The wall is built up in horizontal courses (lines of stones of even height) for ease of construction, strength and appearance.

The biggest stones are used for the bottom of the wall and the smallest in the top. This produces a stronger wall and is easier to build.

Dry stone walls dominate the rural landscape wherever stone is near the surface.



Completed section of a dry-stone wall with 'sheep creep'.

Sometimes the walls will contain special features like cripple holes, or sheep creeps as we call them, which allow wildlife and sheep to move from field to field. Other features are gaps called squeeze stiles, for walkers to pass through.



Tansy

Tansy is an aromatic plant of disturbed ground, rough grasslands, riverbanks and roadside verges. It has fern-like foliage and yellow flower heads that appear in clusters

Each leaf is divided into many leaflets, which are finely toothed, giving them a fern-like appearance. The yellow flower heads (consisting of lots of tiny flowers) look like small, rounded buttons and cluster together.



Wonder Web!

The largest spider in the world is the Giant Bird-eating spider. One that was found had a leg span of 28 cm (11 inches)!

We don't think it was one of those that weaved this web which we saw on some gorse around Storeton Woods.



Autumn Leaves

In autumn, hormones within trees begin to change. As days shorten and temperatures cool, hormone production starts to decrease. This triggers cellular elongation between the leaf stalk and the stem. The elongation of these cells creates fractures, allowing the leaf to break away from the plant. The leaf is finally blown off by the wind or falls from its own weight. Regardless, it is a remarkable season.



Caption Competition.

‘Don’t take offence!!’

Please think of a caption for this photograph and send it to me or Sue by January 11th. We will let you know the winning entry next time.



Just to get you in the mood!!!

We saw the first Christmas decorations being put up on 30th October.



So, seasons greetings in advance to all. We hope that you can make the most of the Christmas festivities, such as they will be, with your families.

Hopefully, 2021 will bring relief from the constraints we have borne this year.

We will be back in touch in the New Year with our reflections of winter.

All the best,

Helen and Gordon.