

NEW FOREST NOTES - APRIL 1993

The Life-blood of the Forest

As the Forest braces itself for the onslaught of a new tourist season, there are two elements of the local community which greet the tourists with open arms. The first is, as one might expect, the tourist industry with its accommodation, souvenir goods, camping equipment and ice cream. The second is tiny, silent, does not need to advertise and is quite literally after the visitors blood. Vast numbers of ticks (*Ixodes ricinus*) inhabit the Forest woods and heaths waiting quietly to crawl onto any passing dog, visitor or deer in search of a meal of blood. They are minute spider like creatures with a life cycle in three stages -- larva, nymph and adult. To complete each stage of its development the tick needs a meal of blood. Peak activity is during April, May and June, but this year, perhaps due to mild whether, I have found ticks in every month including December and January.

To find out just how common these parasites are, it is only necessary to sit quietly on an inviting looking patch of dry bracken at this time of year. Within a few minutes you are likely to find one of two tiny black creatures progressing slowly across your boot or hand. I suspect that the average visitor is quite unaware of the problem and the first clue he will discover is in the bathroom on returning home when an unpleasant irritating bite is discovered (with or without a tick adhering). Usually the bite subsides after a few days, unless infected, but I did once suffer an attack under my watch strap which remained troublesome for several weeks. Worse still, the lightly clad holiday maker dozing on a sunny bank in the Forest may attract an entire colony of newly hatched ticks without being aware of the assault until too late. After its final feed, the adult female drops to the ground and can lay several thousand eggs before dying, although mass attacks are usually numbered in dozens of ticks rather than hundreds. Such invasions are by no means confined to the extremities of the victim and because of the small size and tenacious grips of the ticks, those affected will require some fairly intimate assistance to ensure complete eviction of the visitors. The New Forest District Council issues a useful leaflet describing precautions against tick attack in the Forest.

All this would be no more than a minor annoyance detracting from the pleasure of a day out in the Forest but for the fact that the tick can carry an extremely unpleasant bacterium called *Borrelia burgdorferi* which causes an illness known as Lyme disease. Up to 50% of the nymph and adult stages of the tick may carry the infection. and because the nymphs exist in the greater numbers, it is these which are most likely to infect humans.

Lyme disease is named after the place in Connecticut where it was first recognised in 1975 when a number of children developed arthritis. Many of those now infected in fact show no symptoms at all, but the first sign of the disease is often a rash. Other symptoms include feverishness, aches and pains and tiredness. More serious complications may follow. However, provided the disease is recognised for what it is, antibiotic treatment is usually very effective. Moreover, it is unlikely that bacteria from an infected tick will be passed on unless it has been attached to you for more than twenty four hours.

An awareness of the tick problem makes one consider that attractive picnic site in an entirely new light. Perhaps those visitors who choose to admire the beauties of the New Forest from the comfort of their car seats have the last laugh. However, while tick bites are very common for those who use the Forest (I am bitten at least a dozen times a year), recognised cases of Lyme disease are still rare, and the chances of infection can be further reduced by simple precautions. Having said this, I must admit that there is something almost malevolent about the crawl of this minute, virtually uncrushable parasite as it makes its way across my clothing in search of a meal at my expense.

Pounds

The recently published annual report of the New Forest Commoners Defence Association contains a delightful extract from the Forests records dealing with pounds and the appointment of agisters in the 1970s. The reference to pounds is intriguing since nine "ordinary" pounds are mentioned -- a figure which accords exactly with the evidence of the Lord Warden Steward (Thomas White) to a Select Committee in 1848. Today the Commoners drive their animals to small wooden enclosures carefully positioned in driftways or other convenient catching places. The Forest is now better supplied with such pounds than at any time in its history, and they are used not only by the Commoners, but also as a base for some of the forty pony drifts held each summer and autumn. However, it is clear that the "Forest pounds" of the 1840s were intended to operate on a very different scale, and may well have been of great antiquity. Three of them, Ipley, Canterton and Linwood, appear on a government survey of 1787, although surprisingly the Ipley and Canterton sites are not part of the Forest, but on manorial land within the Forest boundary. The old pound site at Linwood remains as a strange excrescence of Forest land into the fields of the village. At Canterton the rails of the pound at its entrances were still visible until a few years ago.

These old Forest pounds were an acre or so in extent, and this is perhaps accounted for by the old system of driving the entire Forest on one day in the third week of July. We know from David Stagg's research that this was supposed to have been done every three years (in addition to smaller annual drifts) in the mid sixteenth century. Every tenant in the Forest was required to attend, "taking for his labour meat and drink, but no money". By 1848 the drift was an annual event, but without the compulsion to attend on the local population. I suspect that such drifts must have been immensely inefficient and their objectives were very different from today. In those times the Forest officers were supposed to prevent non-commoners from depasturing stock. Animals not claimed at the drift were impounded in New Park at Brockenhurst, and the unfortunate owner had to pay 6d per day keep, 2/6d for the pound keeper and 1/6d office expenses. When asked what was done with animals belonging to persons without common rights, the Lord Wardens Steward replied that "our foresters are too cunning to be found out: if you charge them with it, they will declare that it is no such thing". A few of their descendants still survive in the Forest of today.