

New Forest Notes – September 1995

Ponies in the Drought

Somewhere in the forest, six ponies have been found dead beside an empty water hole. This preposterous story, and no doubt others like it, has been circulating over the last few weeks as the Forest continues in the grip of the worst drought for twenty years. The tale was so patently ridiculous that I tried to discover its origin, but entirely without success. A farmer in Bramshaw area had the misfortune to lose several cows from an unknown cause, but that would have taken some twisting to evolve into an equine massacre by thirst. The truth is, of course, that with one or two exceptions, all parts of the Forest continue to provide adequate water supplies for the stock, just as they did throughout the great drought of 1976.

It is not difficult to understand how those with only a passing knowledge of the Forest imagine the ponies engaged in a continuous and desperate for water. The main stream beds are largely dry or contain unpleasant pools of stagnant water. Many of the well-known hilltop ponds have become no more than baked and cracked depressions, although Janesmoor (dry by this time in 1976) still contains water. No doubt these well-meaning people assume that if the lower reaches of a stream are dry, the whole thing must inevitably be dry from its source to the point at which it leaves the Forest. In this assumption they are quite wrong.

Many of the streams in the Forest have their origins in hillside springs or seepage lines at the point of junction between the gravel capping of the ridges and the underlying clays. Under normal circumstances, the output of these springs, combined with rainfall runoff, forms a continuous flow in the valley bottoms. However, the effects of drought conditions, including low rainfall and exceptional; evaporation, lead to the drying up of the streams while the source springs continue to flow.

In 1976, a survey of natural water supplies was undertaken throughout much of the Forest and published by the New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club. Over the last week or so I have been re-examining many of the springs which were then reported to remain sound and an almost exactly similar pattern has been revealed. In some instances, such as the brooks which rise on the south slope of Hampton Ridge near Crock Hill, the first half mile or so of flow is clear and strong, while the main stream which they feed, Latchmore Brook, is quite devoid of running water over much of its length. All across the great expanse of apparently parched heath in the North of the Forest, the high level springs contain abundant supplies of good water. An outstanding example is Black Gutter, dry throughout most of its length, while at the very head of the valley is a large is a large spring fed pond filled to overflowing. To judge from the well-worn paths radiating from it (some of them evidently new), the local stock has had no difficulty in locating this water source.

So far I have noted only one major departure from the 1976 pattern and this is at a place known as Hobsons Spring on Hale Purlieu. This continued to supply throughout the earlier drought, but this time cannot contend with the demands being made upon it. Perhaps there are more cattle in the area. This is an exceptional case and the Verderers are very grateful to local residents who have been providing temporary alternatives.

Throughout the Forest the Verderers also maintain numerous cattle troughs. These were installed as a convenience for stock rather than as a necessity. Sometimes they were movement to limit animal along of across dangerous roads. One remarkable drought phenomenon was first recorded by the antiquary Heywood Sumner studying the lower course of Latchmore Brook near his South Gorley home. He found that, on occasions, a dry tributary from Brogenslade filled with running water just before the drought broke. This he attributed to the falling pressure releasing increased flows from the source springs. I have seen the same thing on a smaller scale in my part of the Forest. As to feed supplies, the reseeded areas and some other improved grassland is, like most every farmer's field, badly burnt by the drought. It is in such conditions that the huge reserves of feed in the bogs come into their own. In many bogs the purple moor grass is still six to nine inches long and there is no shortage in prospect. However, in some parts of the Forest where there are a few bogs, the picture less encouraging. This combined with a threatened heavy mast crop may lead to a large number of ponies and cattle dying from acorn poisoning in the weeks to come. Meanwhile, there can be a few farmers who are not having to dip into scarce reserves of winter feed to supply any animals not on the Forest. Prices of hay already reflect the serious shortage and they will no doubt have a knock-on effect on the pony and other livestock trade as the autumn progress.

Bloodthirsty killer at the New Forest Committee

There is a striking contrast between the accommodation occupied by the two branches of the Forest Management. The Forestry Commission operates from the Queen's House, a beautiful largely Stuart mansion, dominating the top of Lyndhurst High Street. The Verderers, on the other hand occupy two small but comfortable rooms in an outbuilding in the garden, variously described as the Caretaker's Cottage or the Falconry. The latter name relates to the time when Deputy Surveyor Lascelles kept falcons there (he lived in Queen 's House) and delighted visitors and residents when he allowed his birds to exercise around the adjoining church tower. As an inhabitant of the outhouse, I naturally believe that the value of the Verderers and the Forestry Commission is in inverse proportion to the quality of their accommodation.

Sandwiched between these extremes of opulence and poverty are the offices of the New Forest Committee. That organisation also is an inmate of the outbuilding, but what might be described as the genteel end of it overlooking the immaculate gardens of Queen's House. Those gardens and adjoining paddocks, steadily eroded over the years by development, remains as an island of tranquillity trapped within the one-way system of Lyndhurst and

surrounded by housing. As a wildlife reserve, I would not have expected them to be outstanding. However, at lunchtime on a busy August weekday, I encountered a weasel standing outside the Committee offices as though expecting service. This "bloodthirsty killer" (so described by my elementary wildlife book) hopped quietly away across the garden and disappeared into a flower bed. Perhaps naturalists will tell me that weasels and stoats are very common, but despite being in the Forest every day, I see them less frequently than any other of our animals. They launch periodic nocturnal raids on my aviary and I see occasional weasels from my kitchen window, but that is the extent of our encounters. To find one lounging about the sub-urban seat of New Forest government seems remarkable.

The flower beds of the Queens House conceal other secrets apart from animal terrorists. Before they received their recent liberal coating of wood chip mulch, it was possible to find tiny fragments of grey green slate within the exposed earth. Their significance was not appreciated until historians and archaeologists began to discover the 13th Century royal hunting lodges of the Forest were largely roofed with this material. It now seems fairly certain that the original queens house was an impressive timber framed building on or near the present site, and roofed with Cornish slate. All that now remains is the scatter of grey fragments, as the earliest part of the existing structure is probably Tudor in origin.

Twitchers

Back in the spring, a rare bird decided to nest on a remote Forest hillside. It was said that this was the first time it had done so for a quarter of a century. After one false start in which the nest was robbed by two or four legged predators, the birds settled down to incubate their eggs. For weeks they were guarded day and night from a safe distance by keepers and volunteers. Eventually the eggs were successfully hatched. Local people, aware of what was going on, kept well away from the protected area so that the birds and their guards should be left in peace. It was a very different matter with the bird watchers, the very people from whom one might have expected the greatest pains to protect the unfortunate celebrities. Every day the numbers of verge parked cars increased, while the disused gravel pit from which the guarding operations were run, began to look like an observation platform for a review of the fleet with rows of people and telescopes. It was immediately obvious to even the most unobservant passer-by that something exciting was going on -- something well worth a return visit with the family and the dogs to have a good root around.

Eventually the Montagu's Harriers made it to the television screen with clearly identifiable backgrounds, so I suspect that the chances of an unmolested return visit next year are nil. Rumours of the cost of the guarding (no doubt greatly exaggerated) vary from twenty to sixty thousand pounds.