

Nature Recovering

Driving along the A34 Newbury Bypass in Berkshire you see barriers, bridges, trees and the glimpse of shrubby wastelands. Sometimes you may come across swathes of daisies or poppies, which gladden the heart briefly as you pass by, but take time to look deeper and more closely and a whole new world opens up in front of you.



A poppy with the road in the background

Between the Kennet and Avon Canal and a spur of the Lambourn Valley Way is a footpath that I found myself walking quite regularly, as it gave me a nice circular route from home. As long as you can switch off from the traffic thundering past it gives nice views of shrubby banks leading down to woodland. With my interest in photography I was soon taking pictures of flowers and insects that caught my eye. This caused me to take more interest in this "dead land".

It does not appear to be managed in any way (unusual in this day and age) and is therefore just bumbling along in nature's own way. What amazed me was the sheer variety of different plants that have taken hold in the few years that the land has had to recover from the devastation of the road building.

I decided to combine the pictures I was taking and put them up on a website, simply because I enjoyed taking them and wanted to do something with the images.

That was when the trouble started. I had just been photographing what caught my eye, paying no heed to its name or history. Now I needed to name them I began to realise the variety of differing flowers that were growing there, and how difficult it can be to identify them.

I also began to learn more about them, some of their history and also why some of them are not seen so often. For instance Ragwort, so beloved of the Cinnabar moth caterpillars, is poisonous. The caterpillars therefore become poisonous and advertise this with their bright colours, but it also means that



A shieldbug on a Dandelion clock



Fleabane flowers

Ragwort is bad news to livestock and farmers. Cattle and horses will avoid it when it is growing, but if it gets into hay it can cause a lot of problems. So it will tend to be cleared from any grazing land.

Fleabane, now one of my favourite wild flowers, was dried in the past and used to repel fleas and other small vermin. It does a good job of attracting hover flies though.

There are swathes of wild Mint and Marjoram growing in the dips, many varieties of Thistle, different types of Vetch, Knapweeds, red and white Campions, Clovers, Poppies, Daisies even Mallows and Sweet Peas.



A Ragwort, very popular with Hover flies, but not haymakers

This great variety of plants attracts a plethora of insects living in, on and around them. Once you get down low to photograph something that catches your eye a whole new world opens up. Early one Sunday morning I was lucky enough to catch a hatch of the red and black Burnet Moths. Watching them crawl from their cocoons, unfurling and drying their wings, 10 feet from cars and lorries whizzing past was a slightly surreal experience, but also very uplifting.

That is perhaps the attraction for me, these banks of wild life have grown and are flourishing despite human efforts. The road cut through some beautiful countryside, but it seems that nature will always recover in some way. Left alone plants, animals and insects will carry on their struggle for life as they always have done. And this year I will be back again to record and more importantly to enjoy it.

It will be interesting to see how the new M4 A34 access roadsides regrow over the next few years, and how many more Wild flower books I will need.

Last years images can be seen at www.theimageroad.com, and I hope to update it with more this year, with new techniques and equipment to help me.

Adrian Hutchinson