

## Wild Things at Allerthorpe Common October 2024

The evidence is building and building: being in nature is not only good for our mental health, but also our physical health, intelligence and creativity. What could be better therapy than a walk in the woods?

Allerthorpe Common is an area of wooded heath, mainly of Scots Pine and Birch, with a YWT reserve at its centre famous for adders, and wide rides easy to follow through the woods. The day was bright as we set off, soon stopping to wander off the path into a patch of Birch and Scots Pine, two of the best trees for mycorrhizal fungi. Within seconds we had all gone from seeing only autumn leaves on the forest floor to spotting myriad small mushrooms hiding amongst them. I think this was a great example of 'attention restoration theory'. Instead of directing our thoughts top-down, brain first, as in busy everyday life, when we're in nature we can reverse the process and open our minds to let the outside in. This is called 'soft fascination', which feels as good as it sounds, both rewarding and calming.



We found a host of orange False Chanterelles, saprobic mushrooms, rotters of dead matter, in this case the pine leaf litter (above). We all loved the tiny Conifer caps, which only live on the cones of pine (next page). There were plenty of scattered Brittle gills too, known as Russula, of several species including those mycorrhizal with Birch and Oak. Russula have white stems and gills but colourful pink, yellow or purple caps (next page, a pink Russula growing in the moss on a birch). There were



Milkcaps are another mycorrhizal genus, exuding white fluid which you can taste to distinguish the species, but most of the group didn't fancy that. Paul found a Bay Bolete, edible if you get there before the slugs, and for a real trip to remember (in more sense than one), we discovered a patch of giant Fly Agarics, some still with spots on left by the veil which covers the emerging fruiting body. We didn't make it far onto the YWT reserve as it was just too rough going, but we still managed to spot some Common Darter Dragonflies, venturing away from the ponds.

Page 3: Marilyn takes a sniff of a milkcap but declines a taste; a Birch Milkcap, its milk turning yellow when squeezed, tasting acrid and then hot. Page 4: Common Puffball and Fly Agaric. Page 5: Shirley finds a Fly Agaric and Diane a Birch Brittlegill; Bay Bolete, cap and bluing underside; Butter Cap and Coral fungus, in soil by the path.







The best find of the day for me was a single plant of the Broad-leaved Helleborine (below and over) by the main ride . This is a late-flowering orchid and not a common find, although it's quite hard to spot even though it's tall and likes disturbed ground by woodland rides. Orchids are cunning at attracting pollinators. This one uses the wasps that bother our picnics, desperate for nectar now the nests are finished and the larvae no longer producing sugary rewards for the workers. Interestingly, the Broad-leaved Helleborine's nectar is slightly alcoholic. Here's a quote from the London Wildlife Trust website which might explain this: *It's not uncommon to find wasted wasps flailing around hopelessly beneath the orchid. The reason the plant produces these chemicals is unclear but one theory suggests the mind-altering effects reduce the wasps' ability to remove the orchid's pollen packets from their heads so maximising the pollination potential of the orchid.* You can see the pollinia which stick themselves to the wasps' heads in the flowers on my photo overleaf. Or have the orchids just adapted to attract the doomed end-of-season wasps that prefer to die happy, like those on rotting apples?





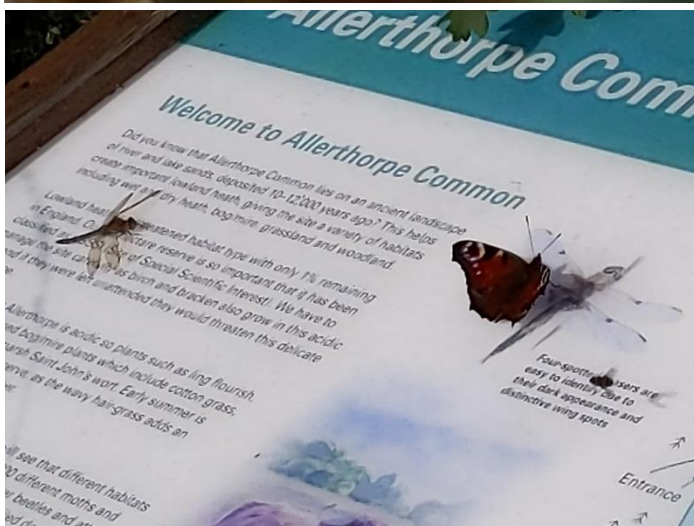
Another late flowering plant at Allertorpe is the Devil's-bit Scabious, its plentiful nectar being drunk here by a late-flying hoverfly, which I think is the Long-winged Duskyface *Melanostoma scalare*.

Here's what the Wildlife Trusts website has to say about the origin of the flower's name:

*'Devil's-bit scabious gets its Latin name - 'Scabere', meaning to scratch - from its*

traditional use as a treatment for skin conditions, such as scabies and the sores of bubonic plague. Its common name arises from the fact that its roots look truncated, as if bitten off, legend has it, by the Devil.'

An intriguing but frustrating find for me was a group of fungi growing under bracken beside Scots Pine. These were webcaps of the tricky Cortinariu s genus, named from the web-like remnants of the veil left around the emerging caps, as you can see in the photo. However, I made a cardinal error here of not using all my senses, and not giving them a good sniff, as I had previously told the group they should always do with fungi. Had I done this I would probably have known whether this was the Frosty Webcap or the more common Pelargonium Webcap (yes, from its scent). The spore print didn't give much away, so I'll never know.



Two of the locals welcomed us to the YWT reserve: A Common Darter and a Peacock butterfly.

Report and photos HK October 2024