

## Leven Canal visit Wild Things July 2025

Leven Canal: one of my favourite SSSIs and I love Gill's photo of reflections.



Today's soundtrack was birdsong unlike the frog chorus of last month's visit to Skerne. First Reed Warblers dominated and then Yellowhammers as the countryside opened out to farmland. We walked halfway along the canal to where it's funnelled over the Holderness Drain. Here was once an aqueduct during the short-lived career of the working canal but it's now grassed over and a great spot for observing birds, dragonflies and butterflies, the latter two only coming out when the sun does, as it did for us today.

David gave us an insight into the bird life of the canal, which he visits regularly. We didn't go far enough to see the Cattle Egrets which have bred at the River Hull end of the canal, and which David sees sitting on the backs of the grazing cattle there, enjoying their parasites. The group did see Little Egrets at the Carr Lane end of the canal, possibly having nested under the bridge of the Burshill and Barff Drain.

Walking along the canal at this time of year gives you a sense of what much of Holderness looked like before the great drainage programmes of the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It's a great spot for wetland flora, including White and Yellow Waterlilies, Purple and Yellow Loosestrifes, Marsh Woundwort, Marsh Valerian, Meadowsweet and rushes and reeds. Common Club-rush, known locally as 'Dumbles' was used for weaving baskets and mats and for stuffing, such as for seats and cassocks.



Dumbles (Club rush), White Water Lily and Marsh Woundwort.





Well-camouflaged Southern Hawker; Peacock;  
Red Admiral and Speckled Wood.

We saw more butterfly species today than we've seen on a trip all summer. I counted Peacock, Red Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell, Comma, Skippers, Large White, Speckled Wood, Meadow Brown and Ringlet. Many Brown Hawker dragonflies passed us hunting, and we saw a Darter, Southern Hawker, an Emperor, Common and Blue-tailed Damselflies, and by the Holderness Drain, some Banded Demoiselles.

What intrigued me most today was the behaviour of a swarm of Whirligig beetles on the canal, which I'd never seen before in such an aggregation. I assumed this was a mating frenzy, although there was no mating visibly going on, and I am wrong. I found this piece which showed detailed research into this phenomenon:

<https://www.northcountrypublicradio.org/news/story/6203/20180719/the-madcap-collective-behavior-of-whirligig-beetles>

Apparently, this is a group defence strategy, but a complicated one. The Whirligigs secrete noxious substances and trout have been seen spitting them out. So, safety in numbers will work as the predators will taste one then leave the rest alone. But the researcher, Bill Romey, went on to investigate further by marking the beetles and, presumably, later dissecting them. In the centre were females who had eaten, then outside males who had eaten, then outside that group beetles which had not eaten. It's tempting to think this makes sense in an evolutionary sense as the satiated female beetles will be more likely to breed successfully and will be safer on the inside. My entomologist friend Bill Dolling, who has examined a few beetles in his time, says there are at least two, possibly three species of Whirligig here, and was most sceptical of my hive-like 'selfish gene' theory, saying there is no evidence of this behaviour among Coleoptera, and that the beetles on the outside simply had a better chance of finding food. I never cease to be amazed by the habits and complexity of the insect world, not to mention of entomologists.



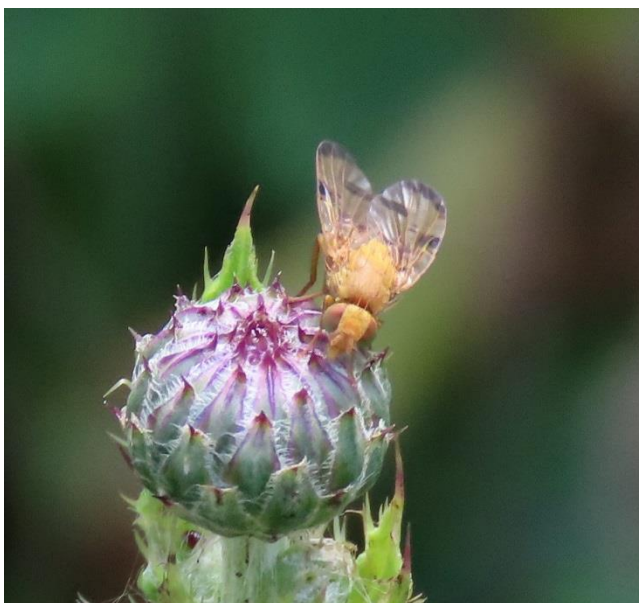
Afterwards we went to Chris's house nearby, where he'd kindly invited us to sit in his lovely garden, scoffing his cakes and drinks and admiring his pond. Another rewarding day out.



Comma Butterfly; Beehives by the canal; a Common Blue Damselfly; Garden Bumblebee on Creeping Thistle; a Soldier Fly; Ringlet Butterfly.







This is a Thistle Gall Fly. It lays its eggs in the thistle flowers, causing deformations. On the next page are Burdock Gall Flies, which do the same to Burdock flowers. Below them is a Robin's Pincushion Gall which is the deformation on the stem of a Dog Rose caused by a gall wasp. Inside will live not just the gall wasp larvae but 'inquilines', parasitcal fellow-travellers which use the shelter of the gall, and parasitoids, larvae usually of tiny wasps which will kill the hosts, or the inquilines, and there may even be hyperparasitoids, even tinier wasp larvae which parasitise and kill the parasitoids. Horror stories in a thing of beauty!





Yellow Loosestrife; Red Soldier Beetles (*Rhagonycha fulva*), (commonly known as 'Bonking Hogweed Beetles); Barbara on the canal path. Report HK. Photos from Chris, Gill, Helen and Paul.

