

Bio Blog – March 2021

This is the first in a series of monthly blogs which aims to show the seasonal, dynamic changes happening in our woodlands. We will be looking at some of the more common flora and how they occupy the herb layer, highlighting how light, structure and species impact on the woodland ecology whilst discovering some of the rarer ancient woodland indicator species for which this habitat provides a sanctuary. We will also look at our more traditional woodland management methods in action and their future importance for biodiversity.

After the freezing couple of weeks where snow came and went and spring suddenly feels just around the corner, it's a great time to explore our woodlands. With buds still dormant, it is a good time to discover which woodland plants get ahead of the game before trees burst into leaf. It's also a great opportunity to put the ID skills to the test as young leaves are not always easy to distinguish from one another.



Rotational hazel coppice

My local ancient woodland was one of Oliver Rackham's favourite places, featured significantly within his "magnum opus", *Ancient Woodlands* along with Hayley Wood in Cambridgeshire, both highly researched and studied.

The woodland has been actively and continually managed under a traditional coppice and standards structure for 1000 years and has a rich assemblage of flora, with a particular abundance of bluebells and wild garlic which are just starting to appear within the woodland floor. In between are scattered spikes of darker green *Arum* distinctively clustered in pockets of light through the coppice coupes. A native aroid, it contains oxalate crystals that can cause intense burning on ingestion, so best well left alone!



Clusters of wild garlic which will fill the woodland floor.

Walking along rides before bud burst to see the woodland floor come alive reminds us of the importance of actively and purposefully managed woodlands and in particular coppice. With the exception of ride edges and open glades, younger coppiced areas are host to some of the most diverse floristic communities in the woodland and also some of the most rewarding sights in Spring. On my walk today, the distinctively heavily spotted leaves of early purple orchids stood out amongst the mossy patchworks. Often found within ancient woodlands on chalky clay they will flower from April producing tall purple flower spikes. A very distinct sight at this time of year.



Early Purple orchids – distinct leaves in early Spring

Oxlip are mainly found within Eastern counties, Cambridgeshire and Suffolk especially. Another ancient woodland indicator species, it has a fairly localised distribution and a fond favourite of deer. Often confused with cowslip, its leaves are flatter in profile and flowers more like a primrose, open and lighter yellow without the orange markings of cowslip. They are a rare find, but worth the search and here again, found within hazel coppice clusters. As with many ancient woodland indicator species, they do not readily colonise other habitats beyond the woodland edge.



Oxlip leaves emerging from the coppice area

The Geums and barren strawberry are growing rapidly. The Geums (Water and Wood Avens) rapidly colonise areas and an important nectar source for hoverflies and bees. Water avens are often found on damp woodland rides. They have basal leaves in pairs, can be mistaken for barren strawberry, which is a low creeping perennial and (as the name would suggest) does not produce fruit unlike our wild strawberry. It does possess more attractive flowers however!

Wood spurge is abundant within this woodland with its characteristic red stems and retained leaves. Wood spurge is an ancient indicator species which produces a toxic milky sap which has been used for poison arrow tips. Abundant Deschampsia, (“hacksaw grass”) is a tussocky covering often found in poorly drained clay soils and associated coppiced areas.



Wood spurge – often associated with hazel coppice

A great resource to find out what may be lurking within your local ancient woodlands and wider habitat is the National Biodiversity Network, which is a public register of biodiversity data and well worth seeking out:

[National Biodiversity Network \(nbn.org.uk\)](http://nbn.org.uk)

Our woodlands are an important refuge for many distinct plants. In the coming months, I will hopefully show you how light and structure can help to improve species diversity and support many of our most important pollinator species and invertebrates.