

Forum Report - Wild Flower Group

Bruce Shepherd

Trees in Winter

Despite the name of our group, we occasionally stray into other aspects of the natural environment. Hence in the past, we have covered various subjects including lichens, fungi and trees (both in leaf and without). The subject of our first outing of the year on 19 February, was 'Trees in Winter'. A group of 14 of us met at Cotherstone and walked to the Friends Meeting House, situated in a field a short distance from the village.

In the absence of leaves, the aim was to identify different trees by bark, branches and emerging buds. We also sought to identify mature trees (at distance) by observing their shape as seen against the sky. Out of a total of 17 trees, the most exotic was later identified as a Corsican pine, growing in the grounds of the Friends Meeting House.

Drawing on information taken from two books 'The Long, Long Life of Trees' by Fiona Stafford and 'The Hidden Life of Trees' by Peter Wohlleben, the leader of the group pointed out various facts and folklore, for example:

- one of the oldest trees on earth, a spruce in Sweden, is more than 9500 years old, that's 115 times longer than the average human lifetime;
- one of holly's traditional roles (in the Middle Ages) was that of a defender against evil spirits - and on the same theme, farmers in East Sussex would leave intermittent holly trees to grow tall above the rest of the hedge line, so as to prevent witches from running along the top;
- the bark of the willow contains salicin, the active ingredient in aspirin;
- the most travelled seeds in the world are the distinctive propeller-like seeds of the sycamore - when Apollo 14 blasted off in 1971, one of the astronauts took some of the seeds with him, on a mission to see how they would be affected by going into space - after orbiting the moon 34 times, the seeds landed back on earth, where they were planted and are now flourishing in Washington DC;
- as many as 2,000 mature oaks would be needed to build a large vessel, such as Nelson's flagship HMS Victory, hence they were in particular demand whenever the country was preparing for war;
- Dutch Elm disease did not originate in Holland - its name comes from research spearheaded by Dutch scientists, following a severe outbreak in the 1920s (in fact, it arrived on infected timber from North America).

Our next walks, all starting at 2pm, are:

Wednesday 24 April Eggleston Abbey car park - meadow and woodland flowers;

Thursday 9 May Bowlees Quarry - early flowering orchids;

Tuesday 14 May Cow Green - spring gentians and bird's eye primrose.