

July

Weather Report

At the end of July the Meteorological Office announced that England and Wales had experienced the wettest early summer (May, June, July) ever recorded. As a direct result of the Jet Stream not being as far north as it should normally have been at this time of year, some places received more than three times the expected average rainfall and consequently suffered severe flooding particularly on the 19th, 20th and 21st. We were grateful in the southeast of England to have only been subjected to double the expected rainfall, making it the wettest May/ June/ July since 1903 and the least sunny since 1954.

Our total rainfall for the month locally was 99mm, but due to the nature of the thundery showers, this figure varied almost from village to village.

By the last week in July the main ride between the new Wolf clearing and the Picnic Site was so puddled, wet and slippery that I was unable to walk on it and the stream was full of very muddy water.



Extracts from Rodney's Diary

1st July

Quick visit between showers spent tidying odd bits and cutting shelter timbers. First cross piece successfully cut and fitted and next pieces cut to length ready for next visit with tractor to tow into position and lift up into place. Ground very wet after recent rain with large puddles along main track.

4th July

Risked the forecast showers and took tractor to the wood to move logs around and add more to the shelter.

Ground very wet and muddy after long wet spell -

tractor coped with no trouble but needed a good hose down at the end of the day. Second row of logs cut in to finished position and third row lifted into place on eastern end before lack of fuel stopped play with the chainsaw. Sparrow hawk spotted swooping across new clearing.



9th July

Three more crane bags of rubble taken to the wood to be used for gully filling. Two more trunks cut in and fitted to log shelter. Survey made of remaining felled trees to sort out suitable trunks for further layers. Ground still puddled along track, desperately needs widening to let in more sun and wind - this winter's job.

19th July

Took four more 3metre lengths of plastic drain channel to wood and fitted first in gully immediately above caravan, filled in with rubble topped with sandy soil dug from around old uprooted stumps. Cleared a patch of brambles north of gully, so now have a continuation of the entrance track going all the way to the

northern field boundary. Plan now to take track close to boundary and follow right round wood, forming our own version of the M25.

24th July

Tractor left at home again after recent wet weather. Next gully clockwise around the M25 fitted with drainage pipe and filled in with rubble topped with soil taken from old uprooted tree.

Elusive Inhabitants

Long Wood is teeming with wildlife.

We are aware that even before we unlock the padlock and let the chain rattle and clank against the gate, numerous pairs of eyes are watching, ears pricked, nostrils and whiskers twitching, muscles tensed. As we venture up the entrance slope branches sway, leaves rustle, twigs snap, there are squawks and the flapping of wings, a white tail bobs through the undergrowth, a flash of cinnamon coloured fur occasionally catches our eye between the trunks.



Then, whilst we organise ourselves to carry out our tasks, we are left with the sound of the wind as it teases or forces its way through the foliage, the high pitched twittering of tiny birds way above our heads and depending on the season, the buzzing of insects. Normally the residents prefer to stay hidden for the duration their landlords visit. The few actual encounters and sightings of mammals and birds have either involved an element of surprise or been the reward for patiently lurking in the shadows.

On 9th May 2006, after slicing down the length of an old tree shelter that had been encasing a young tree for far too many years, Rodney peeled back the faded pink plastic to release the trunk together with an accumulated mound of woodland debris. We stared in astonishment as a small, apricot coloured ball of fur then rolled out and the huge, round, black eyes of a very startled dormouse blinked in the late afternoon sunshine.

All we knew at the time was that these small animals were supposedly rare and nocturnal. Rodney carefully scooped the mouse up, replaced it at the base of the tree and as best we could we fashioned a nest from surrounding vegetation interspersed with small twigs, to hopefully provide adequate protection until darkness fell. This unexpected contact encouraged us to seek out information regarding the habits and requirements of these charming, small, native mammals, making us aware in the process that if Long Wood was managed to provide a suitable habitat for dormice, then everything else would thrive in the same environment. Quite by chance we had learnt a valuable lesson and can only trust that the mouse didn't suffer any lasting ill effects unlike the tree, which had already died.

On another occasion I was wandering quietly through the south-eastern section of the wood carrying out a plant survey, when further over towards the boundary a fox trotted past carrying a freshly killed rabbit in its jaws. I stood motionless, watching as it crossed the stream then disappeared amongst the greenery to be greeted with excited squeals and yaps, almost immediately re-emerging to follow its familiar track close to the field fence – or so I assumed. Instead it made a sharp left turn to saunter slowly down the path alongside the stream, coming to a halt no more than a metre away from me, staring intently with unblinking, amber eyes. Wary of domestic dogs after being attacked and bitten by two Great Danes during childhood, I have developed the habit of averting my eyes to the ground in their presence whilst fighting hard to suppress rising panic, but I felt no apprehension at the advance of the fox. This small, sleek, vivid orange carnivore adopted a relaxed stance and just looked. As if I was living through a bizarre episode in a fairy story, I half expected the animal to speak to me, then it just turned quietly and walked away. Subsequent sightings have



resulted in no more than a cursory glance, although I always call out a greeting.

Over time I have come to recognise two other resident foxes that are prepared to continue their routine activities in spite of our presence, albeit at a distance from us. 'Central' is larger, browner and faster. 'Wolf' is a rugged character with distinctive jet-black socks and ear tips who skulks and creeps amongst the conifers.

Until experience has helped to distinguish between normal, everyday noises made by the inhabitants and sounds that might require our attention, on a secluded, isolated site such as Long Wood, distant and distinct from our home environment, it is easy to let the imagination conjure up potentially terrifying scenarios. When contemplative silence was suddenly broken one morning by crashing, branch trampling, thundering feet rapidly approaching through the trees, it was difficult not to panic momentarily. Pulse racing, heart thumping, breaking into a sweat, I dived behind the nearest hazel. The only protection I had was my camouflage and walking stick. Wild pigs perhaps? As the frightening racket drew ever closer I nervously peered between the coppiced poles to witness three fallow deer race past in the direction of the caravan! We purchased a set of walkie-talkies before our next outing.

The fallow deer are the largest mammals to spend time in our wood, though exactly how much time, we have no idea. Roe deer also frequent the site; smaller and quieter, they have been spotted on several occasions trip-trapping through the shadows, white rumps disappearing towards the western boundary. Arriving early one summer morning, we witnessed a young animal accompanied by its mother emerging from the undergrowth beside the stream to cross the track close to our gate. The kid disappeared into the mass of thistles and lesser burdock at the corner of the 'Bean Field', whilst the adult stood watching our approach over its shoulder until we were too close for comfort.



Another set of sounds that initially caused some consternation but now often ignored are made by much smaller animals. It was quite disconcerting

in the first instance when I became aware of random jumping, dropping, scrabbling noises in the leaf litter, accompanied by what could be best described as peculiar little coughs and sneezes. Eventually a troupe of grey squirrels came into view and bounced on by. Until this episode, I had been unaware that these agile, immigrant rodents produced any vocal sound at all.



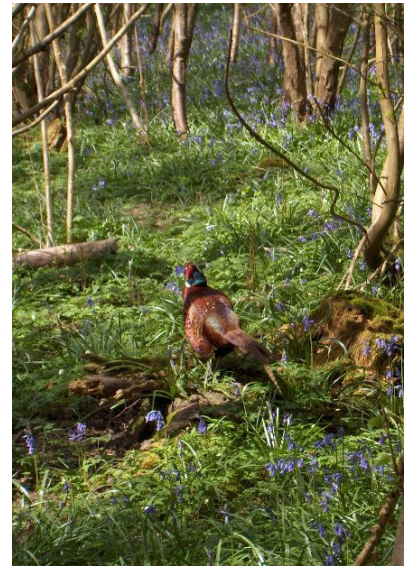
Squirrel

.On days when we have still been in the wood after sunset anywhere in close proximity to the pond, we have been able to hear the heavy-footed emergence of badgers from their ancient sett.



There has never been any doubt as to the origin of the loud crunching, twig snapping, rooting and scraping because of the location and extent of the animals' system of tunnels right along the back of the steep eastern bank of the ironstone mining pit. One evening when the picnic site was downwind from the sett, Rodney crept around the rim of the pond and hid behind a tree giving him an excellent view of several tunnel entrances. A few minutes patience was rewarded when a long black and white face poked out from a hole, the animal continuously sniffing as it crept cautiously into the open, but the badger must have become aware of the presence of a rather hot, sweaty human nearby because instead of lumbering off along its well defined track, it suddenly turned and disappeared back beneath the earth.

A feathered inhabitant of Long Wood that generally keeps clear of us during daylight hours, manages to make it quite plain we have overstayed our welcome when darkness begins to fall and it is time to roost. The pheasants have a routine that they do not like to be interrupted. At dusk they begin to converge on their home territory, strutting along the field boundaries, lining up on the track across the 'Bean Field', becoming increasingly impatient when it seems as if we are dawdling on our exit. Eventually they are unable to wait a minute longer and fly in very low, skimming the tops of our heads, emitting rasping squawks as they land on their chosen branches in the 'Wolf End' compartment.



Early spring is the only other time the male pheasants lose their inhibitions, strutting confidently between the trees, pausing intermittently to emit an ear-splitting squawk accompanied by a strange little jump and flapping of wings. With his iridescent green head plumage, prominent feather 'ears', cherry red eye patches, white collar and a metallic sheen to his copper and black patterned body, how could any female resist the invitation to become a member of his harem?



Song thrush eggs

Occasionally a robin perches and warbles on a pile of logs at the edge of the picnic site, blue-tits fly across the clearing, a blackbird sings melodiously in a treetop at the end of the day and twice we have been fortunate enough, sitting quietly

munching our sandwiches, to witness a greater spotted woodpecker drumming away at the trunk of a Douglas fir. During our wanderings in the wood, we have also caught glimpses of grass snakes around 'Hazel Corner' as they have slithered off the track into the brambles and seen flashes of the rich, chestnut brown coats of bank voles darting through the wild flowers and dewberries.



A woodpecker has pecked a circular nest hole in standing dead chestnut

Over a period of eighteen months though, these encounters hardly seem to verify my earlier statement that 'Long Wood' is teeming with wildlife'; for that I have to rely not on actual sightings to confirm the animals presence, but the evidence they leave as they move about their territory carrying out their normal routines. Tracks and trails, footprints, dung, nibbling, bodies, bones, nests and dens litter the entire thirteen and a half acres that we own. Entrances to homes vary from solitary holes just over a centimetre wide to



A newly dug rabbit hole, measuring 15cm across, under a chestnut tree on the northern boundary. The occupant helpfully left several small, round droppings in the ejected soil

those in excess of thirty centimetres arranged in vast complexes, making some areas along the south western ghyll bank and western boundary too hazardous to walk across. It is going to take considerably more research, observation and experience before I am able to positively attribute a name to every abode, but meanwhile a number of obliging creatures have left a series of signs with clues to aid identification and further our understanding of what they do and where they do it.

Badgers are responsible for the greatest number of indicators, not only because

there is more than one long established sett comprising over twenty holes, but also because they habitually cover quite a distance during their nightly foraging expeditions, over the years wearing a pattern of very well defined pathways, criss-crossing the entire wood. We collected some excellent tips and informative literature from the Kent Badger Groups whilst at the County Show in July detailing exactly how to determine the activities of our native



A busy stretch of muddy track used by many, including badgers. The characteristic large, wide, interdigital pad behind the toes is clearly visible.

omnivores. I have photographed what I have been able to find, but unfortunately not the two small skulls we discovered and lay to rest on a pile

of logs. After their subsequent disappearance, we learnt during a conversation with local children that they had recently added a badger skull to their treasured collection of wildlife remains, so they had gone to a good home.



Fallow deer track



Roe deer track

The next most substantial body of evidence is left by the roe and fallow deer whose tracks can be traced running generally from east to west through Long Wood, milling around the perimeter of the pond and crossing the stream both into and from the wood adjoining our land. The animals' presence appears to peak and wane throughout the year so that at times there are numerous indicators of their activities but at others, very few. Fresh trails and droppings will suddenly appear, the tips of young tree growth and plants, especially pendulous sedge, are torn off, bark bitten, and patches of the woodland floor become flattened with hairs left amongst the leaf litter or stuck to the soil. At the end of April extensive swathes of bluebells along the western boundary were crushed - the odour of deer overpowering the subtle scent of the flowers in the vicinity.



Skull of male roe deer

Amongst the tangle of undergrowth just to the west of the old shed we discovered the partial remains of a skull, which judging by its size and the shape of the features, we believe to be from a male roe deer.

A scramble through the mass of brambles and fallen branches south of the old shed revealed the most exciting evidence of roe deer activity; a circle, approximately two and a half metres in diameter, of tracks around a large rotting log. The animals had completed so many circuits that the damp ground had become churned and muddy. Research informed us of the habit these small, native deer have of running around in circles especially during



The rutting ring path

the rutting season in July and August, when the male walks round and round a tree chasing a female, eventually forming a 'rutting ring path'.

It will take many years of watching, listening, recording and researching before I am able to say with any confidence that I understand the routines, habits and daily movements

of the wildlife that either resides in or visits Long Wood. Meanwhile I have made a start on deciphering the enormous volume of information, realising in the process that the more I discover, the more fascinating the environment of our woodland becomes.



A scratching post close to the pond with vertical gouges all the way round

More evidence of badgers –



A snuffle hole where a badger has been digging for worms. There are deep claw marks on the sides.

More hidden wildlife.....a rabbit, a toad and a great crested newt

