

Countryside File

SEPTEMBER 2023

The rumours of an early September heat-wave have come true – 7 days of consistently high temperatures, some days up to 30 degrees have been officially classed as a heat-wave. It's humid too, especially at night, but with the prospect of Winter eventually looming, we're happy to take this 'Indian Summer'.

9th September

Another hot humid day and we're out for a walk early while the temperature is reasonable.

There are lots of fat blackberries to graze on as we walk, and the hawthorn and rose hips are ripening fast. It looks like a good berry year, but there seem very few acorns, probably to compensate for the massive acorn crop we had in 2022. However, under 2 of our oak trees there are lots of oak galls on the ground, the ones on the road already leaking a dark brown tannin stain. These are the very knobbly Knopper galls. Unlike the smooth Oak Marble galls and Oak-apples, these are formed when the specific tiny gall wasp attacks an acorn. In summer, the females of this species lay eggs on



developing acorns and a strange transformation is triggered when the larvae hatch.

Responding to a chemical signal released by the larvae, the oak tree is persuaded to sculpt its tissue into knobbly Knopper Galls in place of normal acorns. The result is a protective casing that shelters the wasp larvae as they feed and grow. It means that no affected acorns can grow into new oak trees and they're probably not much use as a food source for squirrels and pigeons, so these tiny wasps do have an impact. Late at night there's an amazing light show from the massive thunderstorm towards the South West. The sky is constantly flashing, but the resulting thunder seems quite a distance away and there's no rain. When it does rain the downpour is intense and very localised.



14th September Message from David in Sykehouse today. "Good Morning Jane, Not much Bee activity at the moment, but the ones returning to the hive from foraging are covered in what appears to be white coloured pollen. Been for a bike ride on the canal towpath this morning and my suspicions were confirmed when I saw some foraging on Himalayan Balsam growing at the side of the canal. It's an invasive species of plant, I know, but at least the bees seem to like it. There's not much pollen or nectar at the moment so it will allow them to add to their stores for winter"

. The bees do indeed like it, and covered in pure white pollen they take on a 'ghostly' appearance at this time of year in areas where there's lots of balsam. The Victorians introduced it to their gardens as it's a very attractive flower, but its method of propagation – the spring-loaded pods that hurl seeds far and wide when they're disturbed, means it's become a major problem in wet areas and on river banks. Its tall vigorous growth tends to block out light and prevent native wild flowers getting a toe-hold.



18th September

There was no wind or lightening last night, but for some unknown reason 2 trees within a couple of miles of each other have collapsed. One is a massive old willow with a trunk diameter of 3-4 ft – probably an ancient pollarded tree but in full leaf. It snapped off at ground level and fell precisely along the line of some new post and rail fencing that had just been erected to fill a gap at Lowlands Farm! It now

forms a barrier 100 times more effective than the wooden fence, but its massive boughs will need a lot of work to tidy up. The other is a huge bough from a very healthy oak which fell out of the wood, visible from our kitchen window. Paul has been looking for some fire wood for the Winter, so with the help of our neighbour, a tractor and forklift it's now sitting in our field to be cut up. Incidentally a massive willow branch also fell off a tree and into the water at the edge of Askern Lake around the same time.

19th September

Every night I take Dolly for a last potter round the garden about 10.30pm and of course switch on the outside light or use a torch. As soon as there's a light there's a loud, sometimes double 'hissing' from the oak tree that houses the barn owl box. I guessed it must be an owl of some sort, so I tried out the free Merlin App on my phone. This records any sounds and in a few seconds lists the birds it can hear – straight away it said Barn Owl. This is great news as it means the barn owls that bred earlier are still around. There's nothing to see in the branches with the torch so I assume they're sitting inside the box, complaining about the light!



24th September

The ground and atmosphere's very damp this morning and every year at this time I'm amazed at how many spiders there must be, given the sheer quantity of webs that are highlighted with dew. There are garden spider's webs the size of dinner plates this morning, scattered all through the long grass like lost handkerchiefs. The early sun is catching the dewdrops, making them sparkle with all the colours of the rainbow. The warm wet weather has made everything in

the garden grow lush. The golden hop has made a spectacular show by the front door and a massive tobacco plant (*N. glauca*) has popped up next to the pond – I haven't grown this variety for several years, but this single seed must have been reactivated by the great growing weather. Looks like Paul will still be cutting the grass well into next month.

