

WEATHER

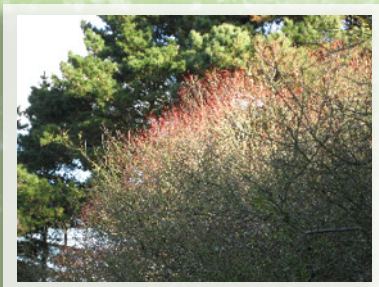
February started off very cold and windy, there were some days of wintery sunshine but the end of the month saw yet more heavy rain and the dam was again overflowing through the central arch.

USE & CONDITION OF THE WALK

Whatever the time of day there is usually somebody using the walk, either exercising a dog, jogging, bird-watching or just walking and enjoying the surroundings. The weekends are always busy and half term was very popular, the car park was often full and the voices of children could be heard echoing around the pine woods. The take-up of leaflets rose during the half-term break.

Towards the middle of the month the path was much improved and beginning to dry up well but as the rainfall increased, the walk was again very muddy and slippery in places. This doesn't appear to put people off using it judging by the number of footprints to be seen in the muddy sections and of course, this heavy usage churns up the path and makes conditions worse in the short term. Once the drier weather arrives it will quickly improve.

OBSERVATIONS



The weather has been far too cold for fungi and only old bracket-type fungi are still to be seen. It has also affected the flora and everything is later flowering when compared to last year. The first promise of spring was seen when the Snowdrops started to flower and pleasingly, although there are still only a few, their habitat seems to have spread since last year. By the end of the month Primroses were in flower and a field at the side of the walk was yellow with Daffodils, a very welcome sight.

Unfortunately the accessible ones lining the path never get to that stage as they are picked before they come into flower. Hopefully now that the number in bud is increasing there will be some left to brighten the path. Hairy Bittercress, Lesser Celandine, Daisies, Periwinkle, Red Campion, Hogweed and Gorse are also in flower. Rosettes of Bluebells and Foxgloves are starting to appear and spikes of Flag Iris give the promise of more colour to come in the next few months. One sunny day at the beginning of the month the new red shoots of a Lime tree (*above left*) made a very attractive picture in the sunshine.

The usual water birds are still in evidence, there are always Cormorants to be seen, usually on a reedbed pontoon. Coots and Mallards are everywhere and there appears to have been an increase in Moorhens recently. Little Grebes are to be heard calling and their favoured areas have increased; there may be more than one pair in residence. Tufted Ducks (*right*) have again been sighted on several occasions. Wigeon, a solitary Snipe and Grey Heron have also visited this month.



Gulls are always around on a pontoon or swimming around in the centre of the water. On closer inspection there were several species: as well as the usual Herring Gull and Great Black-Backed Gulls there were also some smaller gulls sporting bright red legs and beaks and a dark patch on their otherwise white head. These turned out to be Black Headed Gulls in their winter plumage. Four Lesser Black-backed Gulls were also spotted one morning.

On a sunny day birdsong is everywhere and flocks of Chaffinch and Great Tits are always in evidence, as are Robins, Blackbirds, Wrens, Greenfinches, Long-Tailed Tits and Woodpigeons. The number of Redwing and Fieldfare has decreased since last month but they were still in evidence until the very last days of February.

By the end of the month things were changing. There was a distinct lack of female Mallards around and the males are congregating together in groups - the arrival of new broods of ducklings can't be far off. A field along the roadside at the end of the walk has sheep grazing and a very newborn lamb was staying very close to its anxious mother – a welcome sign that spring is just around the corner.

Rhiannon Cook and Val Bloese