Reverting to Nature
How the building of a new road can create a wildlife haven

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Introduction

When I first moved into my home in Duston, Northampton in 1991, I was told there would be a new bypass built at some point in the future. I really wanted this as the existing road ran straight outside the front of the house. However I had to wait nearly 20 years before the bypass was built. The new road, which is now called New Sandy Lane, was positioned further to the west, which moved it up to 100m away from the houses on the edge of the estate. It was built through farmland used primarily as sheep pasture, consisting of grass fields surrounded by hedgerows. On its southern end the new road dissects three fields, leaving a long thin section of land approximately 1 acre in size to the eastern side (Figure1). The original fields are shown on maps dating back to 1885 and have probably been grazed for hundreds of years (Note[1]).

Figure 1 Map of the site showing New Sandy Lane bypass on the edge of Duston, Northampton. The long thin strip of land alongside the bypass (shown here as a black-filled section) is approximately 1 acre in size, and the location of the study.

The original Sandy Lane was reduced in width by one half and converted to a cycle/foot path which runs along the eastern side of the site. Part of the road was dug out and replaced by soil and seeded with grass seed. The two original gates from Sandy Lane which provided access to the field now provide access from the cycle/foot path into the partitioned site.

As far as I am aware nothing has been done with the site since the building of the new road. It is thought that the land is now managed by Duston Parish Council, but due to the economic situation they have no money to do anything with the site, so it has been left to its own devices. The site is used by a few dog walkers, but otherwise is unused. The original fields were grazed or grown for silage; either way, the grass was managed and cut at least once per year. The hedgerows were also managed and cut down in the spring time. Since then the grassland and hedgerows have been allowed to grow unhindered (Figure 2). This article describes how nature is gradually claiming back the farmland.

Figure 2 The site.

My first visit

Although the site has been accessible for seven years, it was only in the summer of 2017 that I ventured onto the site. I have walked or cycled past the gateways literally hundreds of times but never gone in. My first encounter was primarily due to seeing numerous Marbled White butterflies along the verges outside of the site, a species I have never seen before in this area.

Flora and fauna

The site is predominantly grassland with a variety of meadow species. A full survey of the grasses has not been completed yet but the meadow is believed to comprise of a mixture of Cocksfoot (*Dactylis glomerata*), Meadow Foxtail (*Alopecurus pratensis*), Timothy Grass (*Phleum pratense*) and Yorkshire Fog (*Holcus lanatus*). Amongst the grasses, various wild flowers have been found, including Great Willowherb (*Epilobium hirsutum*), Ragwort (*Jacobaea vulgaris*), Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*), Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), various species of Plantain, Common Vetch (*Vicia sativa*) and Scarlet Pimpernel (*Anagallis arvensis*).

The meadow grasses support a wide variety of insects especially grasshoppers and crickets. During the summer months hundreds of Orthoptera can be found jumping around the meadow. The most common types are Meadow Grasshopper (*Chorthippus parallelus*) and Common Green Grasshopper (*Omocestus viridulus*); but look carefully (Figure 3) and you can find Long-winged Coneheads (*Conocephalus discolor*) or even the

Lesser Marsh Grasshopper (*Chorthippus albomarginatus*). This species was newly identified in this area by myself, and logged with identification confirmed by iRecord; id=5672354 (Note [2]).

Figure 3 Long-winged Conehead female (*Conocephalus discolor*).

A wide variety of meadow butterflies can also be found on the site. Species seen include: Marbled White (*Melanargia galathea*), Ringlet (*Aphantopus hyperantus*), Gatekeeper (*Pyronia tithonus*), Meadow Brown (*Maniola jurtina*), Small Skipper (*Thymelicus sylvestris*) and Large Skipper (*Ochlodes sylvanus*). Many of these species were seen mating and laying eggs in the meadow. Other common butterfly species include Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*), Comma (*Polygonia c-album*) and Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*). Caterpillars of the Cinnabar Moth (*Tyria jacobaeae*) were also seen feeding on their usual host plant of Ragwort (Figure 5). The original hedge row which borders the eastern side of the site has a variety of shrubs and trees including Common Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), Midland Hawthorn (*Crataegus laevigata*), Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) and Oak (*Quercus robur*).

Figure 4 Mating Marbled Whites.

Figure 5 Cinnabar Moth caterpillar on Ragwort.

Because the hedgerow is not cut back in spring anymore, the bushes are allowed to grow, bearing flowers and fruit. These provide nectar in spring and summer for insects such as Ringlets, Gatekeepers and Marbled Whites, and with fruit for birds and mammals through autumn and winter. In December 2017 there was a snow storm which saw an influx of Fieldfares (*Turdus pilaris*), Redwings (*Turdus iliacus*), Blackbirds (*Turdus merula*) and Song Thrushes (*Turdus philomelos*), all feasting on the crop of Hawthorn and Sloe berries. A large number of the male Blackbirds had dark beaks, rather than the common yellow beak, which suggests they may be winter visitors from Scandinavia. The hedgerow also supports a variety of more common species throughout the year such as Tits, Finches, Collared Dove, Wood Pigeon, Sparrows, Dunnocks, Wrens and Starlings.

The future

Although a new site in terms of its reversion to nature and its relatively small size, it supports a wide variety of flora and fauna. One thing is for certain, the site will change. Without any kind of management the mixture of flora will definitely change, and already hedgerow shrubs are gradually encroaching into the site. Small tree saplings are also starting to grow in the middle of the meadow. These will gradually reduce the amount of meadow, and the mix of flora and fauna. Will this be detrimental to the site? Not necessarily. It will be different, but will still be a site full of wildlife. I will continue to visit the site with interest and monitor its progress.

Bibliography All photographs © David Belton 2017.

https://www.orthoptera.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf/Common%20Bush-crickets%20and%20Grasshoppers.pdf

https://www.naturespot.org.uk/taxonomy/term/19680

https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/trees-woods-and-wildlife/british-trees/native-trees/

Notes

1.*https://maps.northamptonshire.gov.uk/#x=470763,y=262157,zoom=7,base=Historic,layers=,search=,fade=false,mX=0,mY=0*

2.Lesser Marsh Grasshopper(*Chorthippus albomarginatus*) identified & confirmed**:** *https://www.brc.ac.uk/irecord/record-details?occurrence_id=5672354*