PNHS winter tree trail outing to Linwood Moss Community Woodland

Sunday 22nd January 2023

Rain jackets and woolly hats were the order of the day, to counter the cold and light drizzle on Sunday afternoon at Linwood Moss Community Woodland. It did not dampen the enthusiasm of the twelve people who assembled for our tree trail, downloaded identification guides in hand.

Judy Hayton, our leader, explained that we would do a short circuit of the woodland, picking out about a dozen common trees to study. We would look to identify them in their winter bareness mainly by twigs and emergent buds, distinctive bark of the trunks, and any leaf litter around the base of trees. She had sent out emails to participants, suggesting some helpful simple guides to buds and twigs, for people to download or print off*.

Our first stop, a young oak tree, was an easy one; oaks, we discovered, retain their leaves well into the winter months. They also have easily identified clusters of rich brown buds at the end of their branches. Luckily, there was a wild cherry tree close by, whose clustered buds we could compare with the oak, this being the only one with similar bud arrangement. Another key difference is the bark, oak having a grey ridged bark and cherry a smoother purplish brown bark with horizontal lines.

Next, we spotted a copse of birch trees with their distinctive white bark. These trees did not have the usual pendulous hanging branches of Silver Birch, which suggested that it was a hybrid species. Next, it was satisfying to distinguish clearly between the greenish-yellow catkins of the hazel and the darker variety on the alder trees. The alder also had cones remaining on the upper branches as clues.

How do you tell the difference between a hawthorn and wild rose in winter? Well, hawthorns have spines, and roses have hooked thorns, perpendicular to the branches; the remaining fruits, haws and rosehips, are another big clue! We hoped that there would be an ash tree, in spite of ash die-back having such a devastating effect in recent years. We did find one specimen, with its "screwdriver-like" black terminal buds, a very pleasing and easy one to identify.

Hazel bud

Ash buds

Elder buds

Judy had done her homework, visiting the woodland several days before, and had picked out two species for us to experiment with using the Field Studies Council guide* key to identifying winter trees from twigs and buds. She had brought along some print-outs of the key for everyone, and we soon identified the red branches of dogwood and the early emerging buds of the elder tree.

Altogether we studied fourteen species - oak, cherry, birch, willow, aspen, rose, hawthorn, dogwood, elder, ash, hazel, alder, maple and larch, before the short daylight of a January afternoon turned to dusk. We completed the pleasant circuit and thanked Judy for all her preparation and for sharing her knowledge and love of trees with us.

Anne Gray (photographs by Gordon Phillips and Kirsty Menzies)

*** ID guides used**

- Discover the Wild, *Winter Tree Buds* guide, one of a series of ID guides for download
- Woodland Classroom, *free winter tree ID guide* for download
- AIDGAP, *A guide to the identification of deciduous broad-leaved trees and shrubs in winter*, Field Studies Council 2012, £7
- Simplified two-page key for local species created from the AIDGAP guide