

Troopers Hill – a winter's tale

To some people winter seems to be a time when nature goes to sleep but if you look closely some plants and trees are bursting into life while others, like the evergreen holm oak, seem unchanging, still covered with leaves.

In the hedge on the Greendown boundary of Troopers Hill the obvious signs of life are the catkins hanging from the hazels. These male flowers will soon become dusty with pollen which will drop and be blown by breezes into tiny pink female hazel flowers. To find the flowers look for small green buds on the branches of the hazel with dark pink to red “petals” (actually styles) bursting out of the tip. Hazels do not self-pollinate; the pollen has to land on another hazel's flowers for nuts to be able to form.



On the western side of the Hill you will see sallow buds starting to crack open to show white “fur”. You may know sallow better as “pussy willow”. These furry buds are the male sallow flowers. When they are fully exposed they will be covered in short grey hairs that feel silky to the touch, perhaps a little like a kitten's fur. Later golden stamens will sprout from the grey buds, covered in pollen. Like hazel, pollination of the female, green catkin flowers is by wind but, stand quietly under any sallow when pollen is ready; the branches will be full of buzzing insects including bees and bumble bees. The pollen is particularly useful for the appropriately named Early Bumblebee (*Bombus pratorum*). Many fruit bushes are pollinated by this rather small, short-tongued bumblebee.

With winter having stripped the leaves of many trees the holm oak, covered in dark, glossy almost holly-like leaves really stand out. These trees are a particularly threat to the important acid grassland and heathland habitats of Troopers Hill. Where their acorns land and take root, a tree will grow that will continually shade the ground around its base, kill the grasses, heathers and other plants in its shadow. Now the birds are not nesting, volunteers can push into some of the most overgrown spots on the Hill to remove holm oak. Time to do this is running out, only February to go and the birds will be breeding again, restricting the amount of conservation work that can be done on Troopers Hill. Anyone who can spare a couple of hours on Saturday 3rd February or Thursday 15th February would be very much welcomed by Friends of Troopers Hill. They meet at 10am by the red slide on Troopers Hill Field, providing gloves, guidance and a friendly welcome. Tools are downed at noon.

The birds coming back to breed, are of course, good news. For those of you who would like to learn more about the birds of Troopers Hill there is the opportunity to book places on a Dawn Chorus

Walk guided by bird expert and author of “Urban Peregrines” Ed Drewitt. This free event starts at 5.30am on Saturday 24th March. Places can be booked by visiting www.tinyurl.com/dawnchorus2018 or calling Susan on 0117 947 5037.

www.troopers-hill.org.uk



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