A VISIT TO CORBETTS MEADOW …

”February Jewels” by Brett Westwood.

The Group was delighted that local naturalist Brett Westwood agreed to lend his support to our campaign by casting his expert eye over the meadow. Brett is an enthusiastic field naturalist, never happier than when he’s holding a sweep net and/or a pair of binoculars, ready for a day out on his local north Worcestershire patch. He’s also a great fan of urban wildlife and has a special interest in how wildlife in our towns and cities is changing. Between 1998 and 2014 he was a radio producer with the BBC Natural History Unit. He has presented several series on BBC Radio 4 including The Living World, Nature, World on the Move, Saving Species and Natural Histories. Brett has written nearly 400 scripts for Radio 4’s Tweet of the Day, a series about birdsong which began in May 2013. Since 2014 he has been consultant to Springwatch and has also presented many of the Red Button live shows, giving viewers a sneak preview of the action from the live cameras.
A precis of Brett’s comprehensive report follows:

"My first impression was incredulity - how had this gem survived intact for so long in a built-up area? Far from being the typical flat, sports-pitch urban green space, this relatively small area was wonderfully contoured and featured marshy hollows, a steep scarp, two willow-lined pools and many mature trees, survivors of its parkland past. Seeing this mosaic of habitats for the first time, I was reminded of the horse-pastures on the north side of the Clent Hills where old hedges surround steep fields rich in species such as Pignut and Red Clover. Needless to say, these features are in very short supply within Dudley Borough.
On the highest parts of the meadow, I was keen to inspect the veteran Hawthorns that appeared to follow an old hedge-line. For over a decade, I’ve been recording a nationally scarce and local insect, the Hawthorn Jewel beetle, which only breeds in old and wizened hawthorns. It’s not called a jewel for nothing: this beautiful bullet-shaped beetle is a metallic coppery-violet colour and emerges in midsummer from the thinner branches where its grub has fed on dead wood. A bitterly cold February morning wouldn’t seem the best time to look for them but Hawthorn Jewel Beetles leave clues. The adult beetle is rounded on top and flat underneath and so it creates an unmistakeable D-shaped exit-hole when it emerges in July. I’d never seen them in Stourbridge before or indeed anywhere in the Dudley Borough. Really old hawthorns are pretty scarce and the adult beetles are notoriously hard to find. But we will be looking out for them this summer at Corbett’s Meadow because Helen and I were delighted to find several exit-holes in these venerable trees; a real bonus.
I think that was my strongest impression of the meadow - that it is one of the most important ecological lynchpins in the Stourbridge area. It connects surrounding open spaces such as the allotments and the sports-pitch, with local gardens and parks. It acts as a reservoir for local wildlife especially those species which need more than a strip of road-verge or canal-bank.
Take away this reservoir and the richness disappears. Connectivity of habitats in any area is important for many species from Butterflies to Newts and Toads and at a time when more of us are noticing and appreciating the wildlife on our doorsteps, it would be an unforgiveable loss if we allow the meadow to disappear. Planting a few saplings or sowing a patch of wildflowers is no substitute for a rich and varied ecosystem that has taken so long to develop and which is a unique product of geology, local history and management.

Corbett's Meadow is not just another piece of grassland: for many of its species, whether they are Palmate Newts or Small Heath Butterflies, it is a life-raft out of the past and its loss would be nothing short of a tragedy not only for local wildlife, but also for the future generations who I hope will be able to enjoy it and explore its history and natural history."
Brett Westwood
February 14th 2021