

The long, hot, dry summer

by Nigel Jackman

What a summer! It sizzled, baked and boiled, but mercifully our tinder dry Park never combusted. Preceded by a prolonged cold winter and a generally mild, wet spring, punctuated by the 'Beast from the East', there were no early predictions for the sunny, hot and dry conditions of June and July when temperatures regularly soared into the high twenties and low thirties.



Looking back, the Park benefited in the early weeks from sustained sunshine and warmth, everything growing strongly and healthily. Later, broad swathes of golden yellow grasses were daubed across much of the landscape, broken only by great splashes of early ripening bracken and strands of green woodland.

It is still too early to tell what, if any, long-term impact the hot summer has had on tree health. Some shallow-rooted trees such as beech and birch, suffered significant browning and early leaf fall. A few trees already in very poor health deteriorated further and are unlikely to recover. Oak seems to have coped reasonably well and vigorous lammas growth (the second flush of growth which usually

appears in mid/late summer) was noted earlier than usual on many of them.

The Park's contractors and the gardeners in Isabella Plantation and Pembroke Lodge gardens did an excellent job keeping up with the increased demand for watering, successfully keeping many vulnerable plants alive.

Many of the Park's smaller ponds dried up or shrank, limiting drinking water for mammals and birds, and impacting on water-dependent invertebrates and dragonflies, but banded demoiselles thrived on Beverley Brook. However, at the end of July, hundreds of dead fish were seen here, the result of a storm and heavy rain causing low dissolved oxygen levels, exacerbated by pollution from road run-off and sewage and a rapid change in water temperature. The following month, pumps were introduced at the Pen Ponds to oxygenate the water for wildlife and to combat algae.

The red and fallow deer seemed to cope well despite poorer foraging. Badgers probably struggled more with worms not coming to the surface in the dry conditions.

Some butterfly species flew and finished early but others fared well. Flies, bees, grasshoppers, crickets and other insects were plentiful, too. As the hot, dry weather continued however, concerns surfaced that essential nectaring and larval food plants may have dried and burnt out. 2019 may tell a clearer story of the impact.

Photo by Nigel Jackman