

Craggers Annual Report 2020



Chair's Report

Let's do positives.

Amidst the fear and frustration there seems to have been an almost universal recognition of the importance of the natural world. More people than ever have been walking and cycling in our green spaces. During 'lockdown' we all appreciated the lack of pollution and the sound of birdsong. In Spring people were saying that we would never go back to our former destructive ways. Whether this is true or not we have all caught a glimpse of nature and what we can regain if the will is there.

Many of our members have had a hard time with a loss of income and having the 'joy' of children at home for six months. Those with enough energy have been getting out into the woods on a regular basis.

As far as outdoor activities go there is not much to report. We had our regular winter mountaineering trip to Scotland, but global warming dictated the agenda by unleashing its unseasonal weather.

It is hard to believe that the only other trip was a walk/bivi on the south downs. The walk was really well attended with 15 adults and children and a couple of large dogs. As I write this we have one more trip organised for the first week in November. As a BMC club on an outdoor activity we are exempt from the rule of 6 and can have up to 30 people taking part as long as we follow guidelines.

Behind the scenes we have still been working hard, sorting out memberships (a nightmare this year), keeping finances secure, creating a new website, keeping Facebook up to date, posting reports and making YouTube posts. We have also continued to make grant requests send in funding reports, answer emails and the general boring research which is a constant whether we are going out or not.

Our 21st. Annual Adventure Camp had to be cancelled as all the possible venues were closed to groups.

There you go. Positives and negatives. 2021 will be the year we get really creative and find new ways to enjoy Adventure with a capital A.

Reports

The reports in this Annual Report are rather thin but I hope they will bring back happy memories for members.

We only had three proper Craggers group events. But included here are also reports from individual members. Group email was abuzz with ideas, suggestion, and recipes. There are a few posts on our YouTube channel aimed at inspiring people to embrace nature during “Lockdown”. I hope you enjoy.

Winter Warmer Walk 2020

The post Xmas winter warmer walk has become a Craggers tradition. Shaking off the festive season torpor with a brisk walk through the Stanmer woods followed by a bowl of chips and a hot chocolate in the village café.

This year the weather was very kind and the kids had a great time running around the woods, petting the numerous dogs and enjoying the post walk treats. We hope to see even more of you next year.



Stormy Scotland February Half Term 2020



Weeks of trepidation; scouring the Scottish Avalanche Information Service (SAIS), Met Office, Mountain weather information service (MWIS) and Cairngorm Webcams sites.

Conditions would be great; plenty of snow with low avalanche hazard, followed the next day by an absence of snow. All very worrying.

As it turned out, storms Ciara and Denis ensured plenty of snow and the possibility of doing plenty of winter skills.

We obsessively checked SAIS, MWIS and the met office to ensure that we set out with enough knowledge to make informed choices on the conditions in any part of the mountain in order to travel safely. The mountain was closed on a couple of days due to weather conditions (125MPH winds and wind chill down to -25C)

Making it all as fun as possible to keep the kids enthused and building up the seriousness and complexity of the skills over the days. We started with ice axe arrests, fitting and walking in

crampons, movement on steep ground, cutting steps, emergency snow holes, using a rope to for emergencies – ascending and descending, abseiling using the South African method, bowline and improvised harness. We abseiled using a snow bollard as an anchor. We used axes to climb over a cornice and other skills.

We went on walks, did avalanche awareness, snowpack analysis and even had time to have fun using snow shovels as improvised toboggans.

A fantastic trip. I hope more members will train up for next year.

It's Spring

If you are going to self-isolate, why not do it in nature.

I had a lovely night in my hammock in Friston Forest on Sunday night and woke to a gloriously sunny morning.

Owl provided a lullaby and the dawn chorus my alarm clock.

Two woodpeckers in the trees above and a pair of blackbirds in a flurry of courtship inches away in a hedge.

Buds and blossom everywhere and foraging feasts, including a whole hillside crowded with Ransoms (*allium ursinum*), very tasty.

For lunch, I added a few garden greens to my salad - dandelion (*taraxicum officianale*) leaves and flowers and hairy bittercress (*cardamine hirsuta*).

As a spring tonic I had a really refreshing tea from the plucked tips of nettle *urtica dioica*) and young cleavers (*galium aparine*).

Please get out there and appreciate nature. Becci has suggested I make short videos for the group which I can post on our youtube channel. I could also send out more nature notes. Let me know if you would watch/read this stuff will it be useful will it inspire you?

Vernal Equinox

In a field, above the flooded Cuckmere Valley, new-born lambs run around. I hear but cannot see a buzzard; lambing time is feasting time for the buzzard. Afterbirth and still born lambs abound.

Through the kissing gate at the Seven Sister's Country Park Centre I spot Hemlock (poisonous) growing next to the very similar looking Cow parsley (edible). Make sure that your plant I.D. is good enough to tell the difference.

Westdean is a feast of colour with glorious primroses and daffodils. Primroses smell nice and are edible and tasty. Daffodils are poisonous apart from the petals which are fine to eat. Tasty alexanders are coming into flower now.

Walking up the hill and into the forest the blackthorn, which has been in blossom for some time now is starting to show its leaves. I was hoping to be able to nibble on hawthorn and beech leaves on my walk, but they are not quite ready yet.

You will need to get out quick if you want to practice your winter twig I.D. as the sycamore and elder leaves are bursting out.

My camp is surrounded by bracken fiddleheads, I taste one raw, it is good but rather strong tasting but I fill my pockets to take home, where I steam them, season with salt and pepper and drizzle with olive oil – delicious.

The morning is wet and windy. In Westdean rooks circle their rookery holding raucous conversations.

Get out and witness the glory of spring.

Hemlock at Seven sisters





My new hammock friend



Foraging in Peacehaven

Now is the time to get out into your neighbourhood to identify and forage the spring wild bounty.

Here, in Peacehaven, being by the sea, we have a varied range of edible and useful plants.

The chickweed is looking a bit old but everything else is at its peak. Three-cornered leek is really plentiful; leaves, stem, and flowers are all very tasty. Shepherd's purse and wood avens are both coming along. Comfrey plantain and yarrow are all available for your medical kit.

As I have mentioned before nettles and hairy bittercress are at their best but clavers are starting to get a bit tough. Hawthorn leaves are very tasty at the moment but that won't last long.

Closer to the sea you will find alexanders, wild cabbage, sea kale, sea carrot, and rock samphire.

Use your exercise time to forage and educate your kids.

A riot of sound and colour

In just a few short days the forest has transformed. The colours are startling, vibrant blues, sunny yellows, pearlescent whites, fiery reds and uncountable shades of green.

There is plenty to snack on, the tangy bite of hawthorn leaves, succulent beech leaves, pungent three-cornered leek.

Pale lilac Cuckoo Flowers crown their long stems. White, Wood Anemones wave a Spring greeting.

There are still primroses and violets in abundance but now they are joined by Bluebells, Speedwell, English Comfrey, Cowslip and in one part of the forest, a carpet of Wild Strawberries in flower.

The birds are no less visible, and audible. As well as the usual suspects I saw a Sparrow Hawk and a few Goldfinches. And maybe heard a Cuckoo.

The evening chorus was excellent, and the morning chorus is building up its crescendo, probably in a couple of weeks' time.

Get out and marvel.

Happy Earth Day

I hope you managed to get out into nature for Earth Day yesterday. Below is one of my highlights. English Bluebells and Campion.



Cuckoos, Orchids and Dawn Chorus

It is four weeks since I spent five days walking the High Weald, how things have changed. This three day walk on the Low Weald was truly magical.

Social responsibility at this time is vital. When I go for a walk, I am frequently miles away from the nearest other person. On the rare occasions when I see a runner or mountain biker, we always maintain social distancing.

First impression was that all the trees were in leaf – some more advanced than others. The first day walking through ancient woodlands I could still see Primroses, Wood Anemones and Cuckoo Flowers but now they were joined by Cowslips, Campions, and the gorgeous sight of masses of Early Purple Orchids.

There was plenty to eat, of course. Beech and Hawthorne leaves, Jack by the Hedge, Cowslip, Primroses, Ransoms, and now not just the leaves but flowers and buds as well. And everyone's favourite zesty treat Wood Sorrel.

The weather forecast predicted good weather so although I had brought my basha I decided not to use it, instead looking up at the swaying trees and later the stars.

Day two was long, over 30km., but most of it was flat, walking along the River Arun and the Wey and Arun Canal. There was a moment of surprise as a huge Heron flew past, low over the water, its enormous wings making a loud swooshing sound. Mallards flew to and fro and a Swan glided silently by.

There was a lot of Watercress growing in the canal. Most people know the dangers of eating wild Watercress. Its stem can harbour the Liver Fluke which passes through sheep and into the water. This cress was probably safe as there were no sheep around. It is worth noting that the leaves are safe and cooking (Watercress soup) kills the liver fluke. The banks were lined with Hemlock Water Dropwort, which is probably the most poisonous plant in the UK.

In the afternoon I heard my first Cuckoo of the year, several years, actually.

On the morning of the third day, Earth Day, I woke at five a.m. to the most magnificent Dawn Chorus I have ever heard. I was spellbound. Lying in my hammock, listening to calls of dozens of birds, many I couldn't identify. I watched tiny birds flitting from branch to branch as sunlight filtered through the canopy. A Deer barked, a Woodpecker pecked, and a Cuckoo did its thing. And I thought there is nowhere in the world I would rather be.

Walk, Trees and your stories

I had a lovely walk with the boys last weekend, largely on the South Downs Way and Weald Way. We were able to practice social distancing.

We hammocked in a fantastic spot in Friston Forest. The Forest can be quite bland, with lots of Beech plantations but we found an area with a great variety of trees and did a workout in a DIY outdoor gym.

As always, we had plenty of wild food to snack on. It was a great opportunity for teaching opportunities.

Share your stories

It would be great to hear the stories of other Craggers members. Have you been able to get out into nature? How are you keeping the kids motivated? Do you have any tips to share with other members?

Tree fun

The trees are looking beautiful with fresh leaves and magnificent blossom.

It is the perfect time to get outside – even if it's just to your local park. Here is an idea for engaging the kids. Take sheets of paper, pencils, crayons and sticky tape with you next time you go out. Draw and label pictures of trees, do bark rubbings, stick leaves to the pictures. Look up the Latin names for the trees. Find out what you can use individual trees for – fruit, nuts, cordage, fire drills, kindling, burning qualities etc. Share with the group and on our Facebook page (if you want and if you can be bothered).

Champagne and Fritters

In Peacehaven, the Elder trees are coming into flower. Why not make some refreshing Champagne or cordial, there are plenty of recipes on the net. Or, you could just dunk them in batter and fry them.

Later in the year when the berries are out, how about making Elderberry wine?

At the Adventure Camp, we often make whistles and bling from Elder twigs. The tree has so much myth associated with it, see below.

Mythology and folklore of elder trees

As everyone knows (or ought to know), the Faery Folk love music and merrymaking, and best of all they like the music from instruments made of elder wood. Wood from the elder tree lends itself well to the making of whistles, pipes, chanters and other musical instruments, as the branches contain a soft pithy core which is easily removed to create hollow pipes of a pale, hard, easily-polished wood. (Some of elder's many vernacular names include bour- or boretree). The most auspicious time to encounter faeries was under an elder bush on Midsummer's Eve, when the Faery King and Queen and their train could be seen passing.

There are many references in folklore advising against sleeping under an elder and it has been suspected that the strong smell of elder leaves may have mildly narcotic influences.

In common with other trees with white blossom, such as hawthorn and rowan, the elder had strong associations with Faery- and Goddess-centred mythology. Like rowan, the elder was thought of as being a protective tree, and it was auspicious if it was growing near one's dwelling, especially if it had seeded itself there. If the rowan's place was traditionally at the front of the house, the elder was at the back door, to keep evil spirits and other negative influences from entering the home. The aroma exuded by the elder's leaves has long been known to repel flies, so this folklore may have been borne out of the need to keep such insects, and the diseases that they carried, away from the kitchen and food. Bunches of leaves were hung by doorways, in livestock barns, and attached to horses' harnesses for the same reason. Elder was traditionally planted around dairies and it was thought to be efficacious in keeping the milk from 'turning'. Cheese cloths and other linen involved in dairying were hung out to dry on elder trees, and the smell they absorbed from the leaves may have contributed to hygiene in the dairy. Elder trees were also traditionally planted by bake houses as protection from the Devil (what with all those hellishly hot ovens within!) and loaves and cakes put out to cool under the elders. Any foods left out overnight under an elder however were considered a gift to the faeries.

The name elder may have been derived from Hylde-Moer the Scandinavian matriarchal tree spirit and deity associated with the elder, whose indwelling spirit was said to be the basis of the protective qualities of 'Mother Elder'. It has also been suggested that the name may derive from the Anglo-Saxon Aeld, meaning fire, possibly referring to the pithy core of the wood, which was used as tinder, or the hollowed-out branches used in bellows. Certainly, the wood itself makes a poor fuel, and the structure of the wood and its sap makes it scream and spit whilst burning. The belief that it was the Devil spitting from the heat of the fire further reinforced the taboo against burning the wood.

In common with many other native trees and plants with potent pagan associations, the elder subsequently had negative Christian legends associated with it, to suppress earlier beliefs. The elder was doubly cursed as being the tree from which Judas Iscariot hanged himself, as well as being one of several trees 'accused' of having supplied the wood for the Crucifixion Cross (oak and aspen being other popular culprits), though the small size of the elder trees and the fact that Jesus would not have struggled under the weight of a crossbar made of such a lightweight wood as elder make this highly unlikely.

Notwithstanding these negative beliefs, elder continued to be put to such a wide range of medicinal uses that the mediaeval herbalist John Evelyn called it "a kind of Catholicon against all Infirmities whatever". Washing her face in dew gathered from elderflowers was believed to enhance and preserve a woman's youthful beauty, and derivatives of elder continue to be used in skin cleansers such as Eau de Sureau, and eye lotions. Elderberry wine, elderflower cordial and dried elderflowers for infusion are all still commercially available. A couple of cups of hot elderflower tea before bedtime helps to bring on a cleansing sweat to combat cold and 'flu-like symptoms, and elderberry drinks were formerly prescribed to sooth throat complaints. A fine elderflower champagne can be made using the yeasts naturally present in the blossoms, which can also be dipped in a batter and eaten as fritters.

The elder is not a common tree across the Scottish Highlands, being confined to pockets of deeper, richer soils. Its Gaelic names, ruis or droman occur only rarely in Scottish place names, such as Strath Rusdale in Easter Ross and Barrach-an-droman on Mull. Droman may have given rise to the word dromanach which is a specialised wooden peg used to secure

thatch on roofs traditionally made from elder wood. Despite its relative scarcity, the parts of the tree used for dyeing were important to the Harris tweed industry, with blue and purple dyes being derived from the berries, yellow and green from the leaves and grey and black from the bark.

Nuts in May?

I'm sure many of you will know the nursery rhyme 'We'll go gathering nuts in May'. I'm also sure that you have not seen nuts growing in May, so, what is it all about? Well, another name for Hawthorn is May. At the moment Hawthorn is in bloom and when the weather is warm the scent of the blossom is almost overwhelming.

The rhyme was originally knots of May i.e. bunches of flowers. Used during the May Day pagan festivals.

Hawthorn has many colloquial names such as the May, May thorn, and thorn apple, and it typically produces its white flowers around May 1st. Interestingly enough, Maypoles were said to be made from hawthorn trees which are very fitting as those beautiful flowers pop just in time for May Day and Beltane celebrations.

The folklore behind the cutting of hawthorn is quite interesting. Some say that cutting down hawthorn branches may bring bad luck, especially if one brings the cut branches indoors. Conversely, leaving cut hawthorn branches laying outside was often thought to keep witches from entering the home. However, felled hawthorn branches are believed to have been made into powerful wands and brooms for witches.

Significant scientific evidence confirms Hawthorn's traditional use. It has been the subject of hundreds of research studies, including nine

double-blind, placebo-controlled human clinical trials. The results of this research show that Hawthorn strengthens the heart muscle, increases exercise tolerance and supports a normal heart rhythm. While Hawthorn leaf contains high levels of flavonoids, the berry is rich in oligomeric procyanidins. The current thinking is that Hawthorn's biological activity is not due to one group of constituents, but the interaction of various compounds. Experimental and human research indicates these compounds work together to reinforce the heart's pumping capacity, support coronary blood flow, and provide antioxidant protection to the heart.

Time on your hands?

This is a great time to have fun with your kids and get your kit and skills ready for when Craggers is up and running again.

We already talked about fun tree ID (drawing and labelling trees, bark rubbing, sticking leaves to paper – look for ways to preserve their freshness.) We can also do similar things with flowers and other plants – find out if they are useful (edible, medicinal, good tinder etc). Learning the Latin names is useful for being able to see what families the plants belong to.

Please post results on our Facebook page – this is for everyone, not just members.

How about sharpening all your bushcraft tools, repairing and cleaning clothing and outdoor kit.

I recommend Ben and Lois Orford for information on projects, sharpening, knife grips and much more. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIMEnHqmmxP3QRnMF4fAZdg>

Start that carving project you have been wanting to do.

I have been making stuff for my hammocks and bashas. Lots of splicing. I have used quite a few suggestions from Jeff Myers <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAZ1UxW6D40L-mYuZrMfhEg>

I have also been playing about with Kydex, great fun.

Practice knotwork for bushcraft and climbing. You Tube.

Do exercises to keep you fit and ready to start climbing again.

Try identifying birds from their song or their appearance.

Soak up as much nature as possible.



Yesterday's Project

I do get quite distracted and abandon projects I have barely started in order to commence a new one. That is the case with yesterday's project. Although I did 90% of the work yesterday, it was something I began months ago.

Working with Kydex is really easy. It is a thermoplastic which takes very little heat to become malleable. It becomes rigid when it cools and maintains the shape you have determined. I made a knife sheath and ferro rod holder for a rod I made last year.



Happy World Bee Day and Corvid Tales

I am a great fan of bees, and I am really pleased that they have their own day. I have had quite a few in the house recently. They usually leave if I open the windows, but a couple of exceptionally large, frantic bumble bees have had to be rescued. They readily climb on to my hand and seem to calm down. One of the bees was reluctant to leave my hand when I took it outside.

I am sure that you have all been having mini adventures during the 'lockdown'. It would be great if you could share them with the wider Craggers community.

Tell us about your visits to your nearest green space; what projects have you or your kids done; what do you plan to do; do you have any vegan recipes that we could use at the Adventure Camp; how have you been keeping fit; have you done any specific training for returning to climbing or other outdoor activities.

So, let's hear from Craggers members and visitors to our Facebook page

Our forest bathing adventure

Leaving behind the mobile phones and the stresses of the day, we walked into the woods to forest bathe...

Life's hurries melted away as we took the time to breathe in the woodland air, filled with cow parsley, elderflower, and warm rotting wood.

Birds were singing, and the dappled shade drew beautiful shapes on the sun baked earth.

Reminding Rowan to slow down, he bent forward and ran his fingers through the fine, silt like mud, and smiled.

Here and there we stopped to take in the marvel of nature, and sat awhile, in nook like spaces to appreciate the ley of the land and the joys surrounding us...

Rowan found a tree trunk he took rather a liking to, and whilst digging around in the earth filled crannies, to his delight, he found a millipede! He adores bug hunting!

Huge pieces of flint gave us moments to take in the shapes: some smooth and white, and sometimes sharp and shiny, and were really good to watch rolling down a hill!

Making contact with the trees felt great, as we ran our hands over rough bark, and leaned back to take in the majestic sight of the leafy canopy's.

All said and done, we had a wonderful adventure, enjoying sights, smells, textures and bugs! Being in the woods gave us that time to reconnect with nature, to rewild if you like, and there is absolutely nothing in life like it!



Outdoor Birthday and Solstice

My Birthday nuzzles close up to the Solstice, reminding me that summer is only a few days away.

Being outdoors has always been important to me. Now, in the time of Coronavirus, everyone seems to realize how important it is.

I sent my four boys off to the skatepark while I finished off our picnic. Becci and I joined them with picnic blankets and lots of food. I had made lots of vegan goodies; three flavours of humous (olive, pesto and sundried tomato) and a vegan cheesecake. George brought sundried tomato humous and a spicy dip with homemade tortilla chips (recipe on his youtube channel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T23dpZ7XP1k>). We had plenty to dip with - carrots, cucumber, and crisps. For the kids, juice. For the adults, espresso martini and organic, vegan cider.

Then it was off to the woods. A lovely walk from Friston Pond, picking wild food on the way including wild strawberries and cherries - delicious.

We discovered a fantastic site to hang our hammocks. We improvised an outdoor gym with balance beams, pull up bars, and bouncy things all from fallen trees. George doing a forward flip <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBTA06IAAnL1ToyoTH50dNBpu1DwqOcPKQDdqQA0/> With dinner, juice again for the kids and a flask full of cool Pina Colada for the adults. We had a lovely sleep. An orchestra of birdsong slightly marred, apparently, by my snoring. A relaxed breakfast and a gentle walk to the bus stop was a fine end to what was a perfect Birthday.

Lockdown legs on the move

21st/22nd. August

The yellow bar across the weather forecast was slightly ominous but it didn't deter the 15 adults and children (and two large dogs) from meeting at the Seven Sisters Park Centre.

We had opened up the route choice for suggestions. The consensus was a riverside walk and a forest bivi.

After months of Covid induced inactivity the first hill was a bit of a challenge (not for the kids though). It was steep; followed by an equally steep decent into the village of Westdean. We caught our breath at the pond and regrouped. The person leading for this leg lead off north following the acorn sign of the South Downs Way. A pleasant stroll through the forest before the steep downhill steps to Charleston Bottom. The next hill afforded views of the white horse carved into the chalk of an adjacent hillside.

<https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/litlington-white-horse>

The going was slow, not just because of the effort but because we spent time picking and devouring blackberries.

At the bottom of the hill was Littlington. We crossed the road, headed down a twithen and emerged at the riverside where we had lunch. A tranquil stroll along the river towards Alfriston was followed by a climb back up to the downs above the Long Man of Wilmington.

<https://sussexpast.co.uk/properties-to-discover/the-long-man>

We crossed a stile to have a look at the elongated figure with the two sticks, the strong winds justifying the weather warning, and went on our way heading back towards Friston forest via Lullington Heath Nature Reserve, arguably the best example of chalk heathland in Britain

file:///C:/Users/tony/AppData/Local/Temp/51546_NE%20NNR%20Lullington%20Heath%20DL%2012pp_TAGGED.pdf

Feet were starting to tire but it was our final decent before the last, punishing pull to the top of Snap Hill and where we would spend the night.

We quickly set up our bashas and hammocks before dinner, after which the kids played in the outdoor gym which is the forest.

Most of us had a really good sleep. After breakfast and packing away there was time for the children to play before we made the sort walk to Friston Pond and a bus back to Brighton.

