



Some clever farmer tried marketing it as 'summer gold', and to be fair it is a striking flower, quite bold and glittery in the sunlight adorning the meadow like a bit of bling. However, here I am pulling it up by the armful only to then discard it off the field. This is ragwort, public enemy No1 to horse owners, who would wish to exterminate it on sight. Yet, it's a very valuable plant for wildlife. One obvious beneficiary is the black and amber 'woolly jumpered' cinnabar moth caterpillar, which depends on it as their food plant.



Cinnabar Moth caterpillar
© NevDavies@ecoloav-cvmru

The leaves of ragwort contain an alkaloid poison which can remain in plants that have been dried with hay. The field is no threat to horses as they do not graze the meadow, but of course the meadow is soon to be cut and turned into hay bales to be fed to animals over the winter. In this condition it is eaten unnoticed by horses and farm livestock, the poison destroys their livers over time.

Incredibly the cinnabar moth caterpillar is able to feed entirely on the Ragwort and in the process store the poisons in its skin, this makes it unpalatable to its predators. It advertises the fact, through its bright black and amber warning colours.

It is therefore necessary to ensure the hay is free of ragwort. Fortunately, enough of the cinnabar caterpillars have been able to complete their growth to safe guard the next generation.

As I sighted the last clump of gold, I overheard two women making admiring comments regarding another pretty patch of flowers. Their cameras were aimed at a gorgeous splash of blue on a palate board of colour that only a late



summer meadow can provide. Harebell is one of the most delicately beautiful of our wildflowers.

A hundred or more 'fairy bells' were dancing before us, hanging on their fine stems, a summer magic moment to encounter before the mowing flails arrive to end the floral show.



Harebell

This season's display from May until August has been a wonderful solace to the continuing tribulations to the corona virus restrictions. However, look out for the local farmer when he comes in to bale, weather permitting of course, and a change in nature's pattern as we head into the autumn.

Hopefully, my 7 month corona hair-do will also be flailed to a No 5 cut by the end of the month.

Kerry

Countryside Ranger