

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Autumn and Winter 2018-19



2019 marks 20 years of VLHT caring for some of the special places in the beautiful Vale. We are still one of the Vale's best kept secrets but we have achieved a great deal over the years and are looking forward to the next 20 years.

Fruit trees

We continued to water our new fruit trees through September after a timely reminder from one of our supporters, newly planted trees often die in the early autumn if the weather remains mild and dry. We shall not know for sure until the new leaves appear in spring, but it looks like we kept nearly all of the trees alive that we have planted over the last couple of years. Thank you to the volunteers for helping with the tedious task of watering through 2018.

We have quite a few more trees to plant this winter at the new orchard at North Littleton as well as trying to complete our Worcestershire apple collection at Naunton Beauchamp. One of the apple varieties we have planted at Naunton, Gwendolin is so unusual there is not a photo of it in "The Apples and Orchards of Worcestershire". It is described on Walcot Organic Nursery's website as "A medium sized round conical dessert apple. Of very appealing flavour, said by some to have a hint of wine. First came to our attention in 1998 in Pershore, Worcs as a tree that had developed unnoticed from seed."



Gwendolin at Naunton

Pruning workshop

At the end of January we will be running a pruning workshop at Stocken Orchard. The response has been fantastic and the event was fully booked just a few days after advertising. If this goes well, we may be able to offer more training courses in the future. Let us know if you would be interested to hear about training days.

Heart of England Forest

In December we started planting a new orchard/agro-forestry scheme for the Heart of England Forest (HoEF) in Sheriffs Lench. Our volunteers planted 70 apple trees, mostly Worcestershire varieties funded by Three Counties Traditional Orchard Project at a site above our Hipton Hill Orchard. This was part of HoEF's vision "planting tomorrow's great native woodland, one tree at a time. A new broadleaf forest across the heart of the country that's for everyone to enjoy". The forest stretches across the heart of England – from the ancient Forest of Arden, south to the edge of the Vale of Evesham. When we found out that they had purchased a further 400 acres of land around our site in the Lenches we were keen to get involved. The agro-forestry scheme will add diversity to the planting and be more appropriate in a traditionally farmed landscape which includes orchards rather than a solid native woodland block.

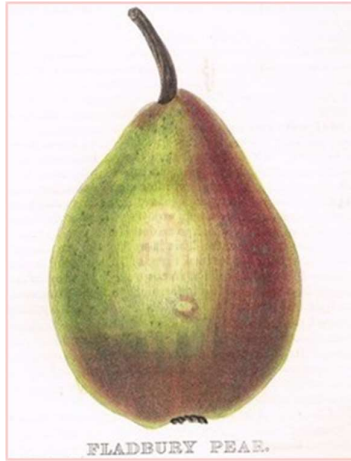


More details about HoEF can be found on their website - <https://www.heartofenglandforest.com/>

A Lost Pear of the Vale

Wade Muggleton (Three Counties Traditional Orchard Project)

Every now and again when researching orchards and fruit history one stumbles across a seemingly lost local variety and one such seems to be the Fladbury Pear. B. Maunds recorded in *The Fruitist* of 1843, as:



"... another of those locally known productions, heard of only in the vicinity of their origin. Although deserving of cultivation by everyone who wishes to possess a fruit of good and distinct character. For Knowledge of the Fladbury Pear we are indebted to our excellent pomological friend, John Williams Esq, of Pitmaston. He has cultivated it for several years, having first received grafts of it from a friend near Fladbury, Worcestershire, with information of its having been raised by a cottager in that parish, from seeds of a Swan's Egg. The Pears have a colour of greenish yellow, and on the exposed side tinged with red, sometimes assuming soft broken stripes; the whole surface finely specked with brownish green, having occasional patches of pale russet. Flesh is tender, juicy and sweet, somewhat gritty in the centre; slightly sub acid mingled with a mild astringency, peculiar to itself and highly grateful to most palates. The tree is of free healthy growth; and an abundant bearer, as a standard – the only mode of growth to which it ever has been submitted."

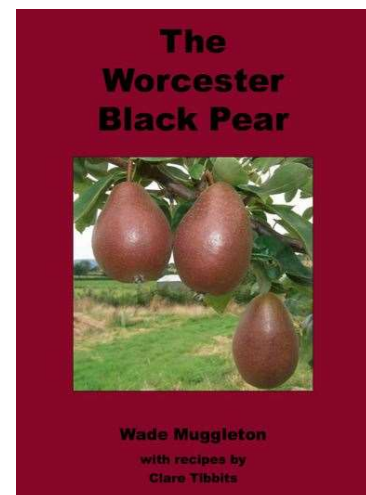
The Variety appears to be lost as it is not in the national collection at Brogdale who have over 500 different pear varieties and is seemingly not known elsewhere, so it may be extinct, or could there be the odd one hanging on as a forgotten ancient tree in the corner of a garden or farm?

A fuller version of the text and the whole of B. Maund's book can be viewed for free online at <https://archive.org/details/fruitisttreatise00maun>

The Worcester Black Pear book

This informative little book by author Wade Muggleton looks at the origins of the famous Worcester Black Pear; where it was originally grown and what uses there are for the fruit. It looks at the variety in detail and discusses the fact that there are actually two types of this pear but which is the true Worcester Black? We are very grateful to Wade because not only is this book a very interesting read, profits from its sale will be donated to VLHT.

Wade Muggleton is the author of "The Apples & Orchards of Worcestershire" and "The Worcester Black Pear"



Apple harvest



Harvesting cider apples at Stocken Orchard

Our apple harvest went well at Stocken Orchard this year. As mentioned in previous newsletters, this orchard crops bi-annually, producing hardly any apples one year and then a bumper crop the next. 2018 was a bumper year!

We supplied several local cider producers with both Somerset Redstreak and Dabinett apples and are looking forward to tasting the results. The sale of these apples helps us to continue to manage the site where we ensure that wildlife thrives alongside the fruit production.

Hovel histories

We were very pleased to hear that the Heritage Lottery bid has been accepted, to put the Vale's market gardening shelters (known locally as hovels) on the map. This was discussed in detail in our Summer 2018 newsletter. The lottery funding will mean that the group can train volunteers to record the locations and condition of the remaining hovels. As part of the project local people will be encouraged to tell their stories of market gardening in the Vale and the importance of the hovels in this unique landscape.

The last post

One of the jobs carried out at our new nature reserve in South Littleton was to remove a fence, marking the line of the public right of way (PRoW) across the corner of the site. This fence meant that the route was narrow and became very muddy, so removing it has given a much wider, more pleasant route. We left the fence posts in for a couple of days after removing the wire fencing because we did not want to leave holes in the ground that people or animals could put a foot down and we also needed to leave a few posts to mark the footpath. However, when we returned to remove them and fill in the holes we found that all but one of the posts had been stolen!

Volunteers

2018 was another busy year for our volunteers, tackling tasks from tree planting, watering and pruning to clearing fly tipping, repairing fences and creating butterfly habitat. Between them they carried out 67 tasks and put in 1,044 hours of volunteer time, which equates to about 130 days. Thank you all.

Mammals

Because many of our sites have limited access, they are quiet places where wildlife can thrive. Some of our bigger animals are seen quite frequently including Muntjac, Roe and Fallow Deer. Foxes and Badgers leave tracks and signs letting us know that they feed across many of our sites and smaller mammals including Field Voles and Wood Mice find homes under larger pieces of deadwood left on the ground. We have also found some rarer species in 2018, including Water Shrew at Naunton Orchard. In fact, this species was found under the same piece of corrugated iron where a Slow-worm had been seen a few weeks earlier. There was no further sign of the Slow-worm as I doubt it appreciated having the Water Shrew as a house mate. The next time the sheet was checked, Weasel droppings were discovered and not surprising there was no sign of the shrew. Possibly the most significant find in 2018 were Otter spraints at Lower Moor wetlands.



Roe Deer at Stocken Orchard

New pipes and troughs at Littleton Meadows

We finally have new pipes and livestock drinking-troughs in place at Littleton Meadows. By the end of January they should be connected up giving us opportunity to manage some of the grassland better to increase the flora and pollinator diversity on the site.



Many of our projects are funded by Severn Waste Services through the Landfill Communities Fund. Without SWS, VLHT could not own, or protect, anywhere near as many acres.



Brown Hairstreaks at Haines Meadows



Brown Hairstreak eggs at Haines Meadows

We joined up with volunteers from Butterfly Conservation to survey a couple of our sites hoping to discover Brown Hairstreak eggs. These tiny white eggs (shown on the left) are laid by the butterfly on Blackthorn twigs and are the best way of confirming if this most elusive butterfly is present at a site. After searching the Blackthorn scrub at Mike's Meadow without success, we moved onto Haines Meadows and found several eggs along one of the internal hedges. This is one of the most southerly records in Worcestershire for this rare butterfly. A bit of a management head-ache but a great find.

Birds at Lower Moor and Haines Meadows

July to September 2018

Rob Prudden

With unusually odd weather patterns in 2018, bird records here as elsewhere were affected hugely. Spring migrants were late arriving and in many species, numbers were much reduced. Due to constant very hot and dry weather during the summer period shallow marshy areas dried up. This was certainly the case at Lower Moor and Haines Meadows, with no water present, southerly bound wading birds disappointingly passed us by. Plans are now in place to alleviate the problem in the future. Hopefully next year it will be possible to maintain water on the meadows and attract more of these delightful birds to the area.

Cuckoos were scarce this year with two males and a single female present till the first week of July, with the last male still singing early morning on 7th. **Redstarts** were a little late arriving with the first two on 9th July, small numbers were then seen daily till the last bird on 10th September. Mid-summer hay cutting at Haines Meadows attracted an impressive spectacle of 70 **Swallows**, 60 **House Martins** and 40 **Sand Martins** to feast on disturbed insects. A pair of **Yellow Wagtails** also joined in the bonanza.

In mid-September single **Hobbies** were seen on six dates. This included a particularly showy bird hunting dragonflies low over the flash field for an hour before perching on nearby fence posts to devour its prey. Other scarce birds included a mobile juvenile **Black Tern** on 28th August with another juvenile from 10th – 21st September. A migrating **Osprey** circled low over the area on 9th September but was soon sent on its way by aggressive mobbing from local **Black-headed Gulls**. The only **Little Owl** of the year was heard calling from a derelict Ash tree near the river at the beginning of August. **Kingfishers** were seen along the river on several occasions, while a **Common Sandpiper** spent a week feeding along the river shorelines at the beginning of September.

At the beginning of September water was at last encroaching back on to the river flash, this quickly attracted incoming winter wildfowl to feast on seeds from the annual weeds that had sprung up in the area due to dry conditions during the summer period. By the end of September numbers included up to 400 **Canada & Greylag Geese**, a single **Barnacle Goose**, 80 **Mallard**, 70 **Teal**, 3 **Wigeon**, 10 **Snipe** & 65 **Lapwings**.

Due to the hot summer weather, Blackberries cropped well in the river meadow hedges, this attracted double figures of **Greenfinches** to feast on the fruits and seeds. At the same time a mobile flock of 50 **Goldfinches** fed on Willowherb seeds in several areas around the site. Late passage Warblers also took advantage of the bountiful crop and fine weather, with a **Garden Warbler**, **Whitethroat**, **Chiffchaffs** & numerous **Blackcaps** still present in the second week of September

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust (VLHT) is a registered charity, number 1080109. We work to protect and conserve the environment in and around the Vale of Evesham and Pershore. We work with volunteers, funders, farmers and the government to secure the future of over 300 acres.

Birds at Lower Moor and Haines Meadows October to December 2018

Rob Prudden

The dry conditions that prevailed through the summer period continued into the autumn, then through till the end of the year. The river flash had dried out mid-summer allowing a huge encroachment of annual weeds, following this the lack of water on the flash throughout the autumn passage period was disappointing. The early winter period brought good numbers of waterfowl to feast on the glut of weed seeds, numbers included maximums of 160 **Teal**, 90 **Mallard**, 10 **Wigeon**, 17 **Gadwall** & 6 **Shoveler**. Wintering waders also enjoyed the thick weedy habitat at this time with up to 25 **Snipe** & 450 **Lapwings** regularly seen, the latter being joined by c100 **Golden Plovers** seen above the site on the many occasions when a hunting **Sparrowhawk** had flushed all birds from the flash area. With the continually relatively dry conditions, unusually, **Meadows Pipits** were ever present with over 40 seen some days. A pair of **Stonechats** were seen daily, feeding on winter gnats & small invertebrates in the mild conditions.

Winter wild bird food crops adjacent to Haines Meadows proved attractive to good numbers of farmland seed eating birds with peaks of 150 **Chaffinches**, 450 **Linnets**, 65 **Reed Buntings**, 60 **Yellowhammers** & a single **Lesser Redpoll**. The large numbers of birds attracted a wintering female **Merlin** which was seen dashing through over the wetland on several occasions. Scarce birds during the period included a **Woodcock** flushed from a scrubby copse near the island and a male **Red-crested Pochard** on the river. A **Short-eared Owl** was hunting over Haines Meadows on 12th November, while a much rarer **Long-eared Owl** was just off site in a garden in Bridge Street Lower Moor on 9th November. **Skylarks** were regularly seen overhead with 60 on 19th December alone. Hedgerow berry crops were good this year with 250 **Fieldfares** and 200 **Redwings** present most days during October & November on Hawthorn while several **Mistle Thrushes** feasted on Mistletoe berries.



Mistle Thrush in Mistletoe

Lower Moor drainage update

Since our wetland was drained at Lower Moor we have been working with our neighbours and the Environment Agency to secure the future of this important wetland for the benefit of birds and other wildlife. We are hopeful that the relevant work will be completed before the spring to ensure conditions are right for passage birds as well as the resident species that depend on the site for their survival. And it's far more than birds that depend on the wetlands; rare insects and wildflowers thrive here in the damp grasslands.



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