

# Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Winter 2020-21



## Let's hear it for Hawthorn

Hawthorn is a major landscape feature, forming hedges and thickets and growing as standard trees across the country. Many people have an emotional connection to hawthorn; one of our volunteers remembers “*there was one just by the gate of my childhood home. I rued that I couldn't climb it, but seeing it meant I was home and it felt good*”. Hawthorn has been used as food and medicine for centuries and has many alternative names including May-tree, Whitethorn, White-May, Thorn-bush, Quick-thorn and May Queen, yet we hardly ever give it a second thought, a typical case of ignoring the commonplace.

I have searched books and the internet to find interesting snippets and this is in celebration of hawthorns everywhere.

Hawthorns belongs to a large family of plants known as the *Rosaceae* which, apart from the roses also includes plums, pears and apples. Our native hawthorns belong to the genus *Crataegus* which includes about 200 species of deciduous trees and shrubs around the world. The name *Crataegus* is said to derive from Dioscorides (a Greek physician and pharmacologist from the first century AD) who called it krátaios, from the Greek krátys meaning hard or strong, in reference to its hard wood. It has an alternative origin which associates the name with kratos, meaning ‘always having been here’<sup>1</sup> and it is hard to imagine the English landscape without hawthorn. The ubiquitous, single-species hawthorn hedge did not become a common feature of the landscape until the parliamentary enclosures of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. During this time around 200,000 miles of hawthorn hedges were planted<sup>2</sup>.

There are actually two species of Hawthorn growing wild in England:

Common Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* – ‘*monogyna*’ refers to the single stigma and ovary in each flower which produce a single seed in each berry. It occurs naturally or has been planted as hedgerows across the whole of the UK.

Midland Hawthorn or *Crataegus laevigata* – ‘*laevigata*’ means smooth or polished presumably referring to the bright shiny leaves and berries. It usually produces two or more seeds in each berry. Their distribution is centred around the Midlands and the south east of England but it has a scattered distribution throughout England, into Wales and a few records for Scotland and Ireland<sup>3</sup>. It appears to be more tolerant of shade than Common Hawthorn.



Midland Hawthorn



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.



The Glastonbury Thorn is a variety of Common Hawthorn with the unusual habit of flowering twice; once in the spring around Easter, and a second time around Christmas. The 'holy thorn' as it is also named is thought to originate from three thorn trees known to have been growing on Wearyall Hill (sometimes known as Wirral Hill) about 1km south-west of Glastonbury around 1530. In the Civil Wars of the 17th century Puritan soldiers cut down the last remaining of these three thorns because they saw it as an object of superstition. However, local people had grown cuttings and it is from these that the thorn now growing in the abbey grounds is believed to descend.

According to the story of Joseph of Arimathea, when he arrived in Glastonbury he climbed Wearyall Hill, and planted his staff in the ground whilst he rested. The following morning the staff had taken root, and it grew into the miraculous thorn tree<sup>4</sup>. The Glastonbury Thorn was featured on British 12p and 13p Christmas postage stamps in 1986.



There are a few hawthorns in our hedges in North Littleton that have this same habit of flowering around Christmas, so could they be the same variety of Common Hawthorn as the Glastonbury Thorn?

As well as the obvious stock-proof hedging, hawthorn has many uses; it is an excellent timber for turning and was used for veneer, boxes, tool handles, walking sticks, rake teeth, mill-wheel teeth, mallets and the ribs of small boats. It also makes excellent firewood and charcoal and is said to burn at the highest temperature of any wood<sup>5</sup>. The leaves of hawthorn are edible and they were known as bread and cheese, not because of their taste which is said to be rather nutty, but more that it was a basic foodstuff (the name bread and cheese was given to many young wild plant leaves that were eaten raw). The berries or haws are used for making hawthorn jelly, as well as wines and sauces (but the berries should not be eaten raw). The flowers are also used to make a variety of wines and liqueurs.

Hawthorns are also bound in myth and magic being associated with the faerie world<sup>6</sup> and a lone hawthorn tree, growing on a hill could be a portal to the faerie world and so to damage or fell such a tree would seriously anger the faerie folk (you have been warned). Hawthorn wood is popular with wand-makers and these wands are believed to be particularly suited to healing-magic and are also said to be effective against malevolent spirits. The wand should be cut green in order that the bark will peel easily<sup>7</sup> and of course, you must remember to ask permission of the tree before cutting the branch. You must also leave a suitable gift for the faerie who defends the tree to avoid upsetting them. Apparently, a piece of silver twine or ribbon is quite acceptable.



Hawthorn wand

Hawthorn and the heart have been closely linked through history; in folklore and magic, hawthorn is believed to open the heart and it is used in herbal medicines to help with heart problems being full of complex flavonoids that work together to support the circulatory system<sup>8</sup>.



Hawthorn blossom North Littleton  
Christmas 2020

Hawthorn is associated with magic, healing, the heart, protection and food so it seems odd that it is considered bad luck to bring hawthorn blossom inside a house. One reason could be that the scent of the blossom was likened to the "stench of the great plague". This is due to the chemical trimethylamine which has been found to occur in hawthorn scent and is naturally occurring in the human body, being released in bodily fluids (of which there would have been plenty during the plague!). This probably accounts for an alternative name for hawthorn 'Mother-die' and the belief if the blossoms are brought into the home then the consequences would be dire. Indeed, a Welsh name for hawthorn is "Blodau marw mam" which literally translates as Flowers-death-mother. However, there is hope as it is a tradition for a sprig from a Glastonbury Thorn to be presented to the Queen at Christmas to decorate her breakfast table<sup>9</sup> and she hasn't done too badly.

As well as being steeped in myths, magic, cultural and landscape history, hawthorn is incredibly important for wildlife. The thick, thorny hedges provide nesting and roosting sites for birds and small mammals while the leaves are eaten by a large number of insects and mammals. The berries are eaten by birds, mammals and insects and the blossom provides valuable early year nectar and pollen for a whole host of beetles, bees, flies and bugs. Southwood recorded 149 species of insects that are associated with hawthorn<sup>10</sup>. These are just a few found in our area:



Hawthorn Shieldbug on Hawthorn



Mother Shipton Moth on Hawthorn



Vapouror Moth  
Male & Female with Eggs



Apple Fruit Weevil  
on Hawthorn Blossom



Hawthorn Jewell Beetle & Exit Hole  
Photo by B Westwood



Longhorn Beetle  
on Hawthorn blossom

The Hawthorn Shieldbug *Acanthosoma haemorrhoidale* is a large green and red bug that feeds on hawthorn and is well camouflaged amongst the green foliage and red berries. Butterflies and moths take nectar from hawthorn including the day-flying Mother Shipton *Callistege mi* named after the witches faces seen on their open wings. The Hawthorn Moth *Scythropia crataegella* has caterpillars that feed within a communal web on hawthorn. Caterpillars of the Vapourer Moth *Orgyia antiqua* feed on a range of trees and shrubs and are particularly common on hawthorn. The male moth is bright orange/brown and flies during the daytime but the female is wingless, resembling a very fat, furry caterpillar.

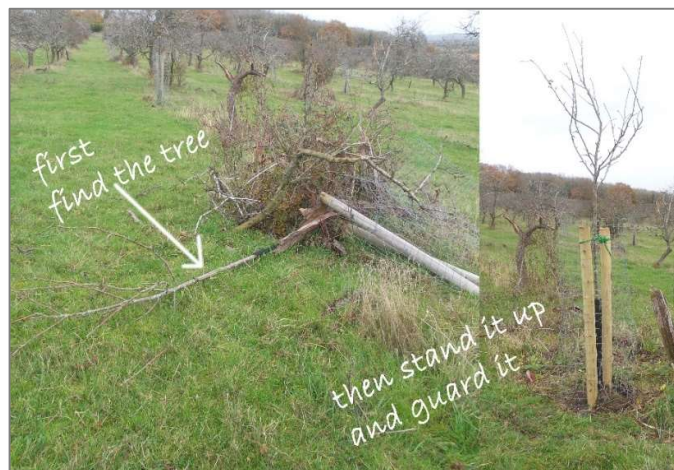
Hawthorn Leaf Beetle *Lochmaea crataegi* feeds on hawthorn leaves while the beautiful Hawthorn Jewel Beetle *Agrilus sinuatus* feeds under the bark of large old hawthorns. The beetles are rarely seen but their presence is given away by the distinctive, D-shaped holes made when the adults exit the tree. The Apple-fruit Weevil *Neocoenorrhinus aequatus* is far more likely to be found in hawthorn blossom than it is in apple. This little red and black hairy weevil is very common but its small size and habit of hiding deep in blossom make it difficult to find. There are many other beetles to be found on the blossom including some of our most spectacular insects, the longhorn beetles. It is important for our orchards as the insects that pollinate our fruit need hawthorn to feed from when the fruit trees are not in flower.

### Hawthorn References

- <sup>1</sup>. <https://www.avogel.com/plant-encyclopaedia/crataegus.php>
- <sup>2</sup>. Mabey, R. 1996. *Flora Britannica*. Sinclair-Stevenson, Reed International Books Ltd, London.
- <sup>3</sup>. Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland (BSBI) Plant Atlas – <https://www.brc.ac.uk/plantatlas>
- <sup>4</sup>. <https://www.glastonburyabbey.com/holy-thorn.php>
- <sup>5</sup>. [https://www.forestryengland.uk/sites/default/files/documents/WyreForest\\_Hawthorn.pdf](https://www.forestryengland.uk/sites/default/files/documents/WyreForest_Hawthorn.pdf)
- <sup>6</sup>. <https://thepracticalherbalist.com/advanced-herbalism/hawthorn-myth-and-magic>
- <sup>7</sup>. [http://www.ecoenchancements.co.uk/myogham\\_hawthornpage.html](http://www.ecoenchancements.co.uk/myogham_hawthornpage.html)
- <sup>8</sup>. <https://thepracticalherbalist.com/advanced-herbalism/hawthorn-the-heart-healer>
- <sup>9</sup>. <https://treesforlife.org.uk/into-the-forest/trees-plants-animals/trees/hawthorn>
- <sup>10</sup>. Southwood, T.R.E. 1961. The Number of Species of Insect Associated with Various Trees. *Journal of Animal Ecology* Vol. 30, No. 1 pp. 1-8.

### Volunteers

Despite waxing lyrically about hawthorn, this quick growing spiny tree can be a bit of a pain (literally). Hawthorn will seed freely (assisted by the local bird population) so at places like Hipton Hill orchard if it's not controlled it will quickly take over a site. Much of our volunteers' time during the winter has been spent clearing hawthorn and bramble to rescue the fruit trees in the orchard. Once the invading shrubs have been cut back it is hoped that the sheep will graze off most of the regrowth helping to keep the orchard trees alive. Some of the young trees were lost in the hawthorn thicket and have required a lot of work to give them a chance to grow. Once again, I have to thank our wonderful bunch of volunteers for turning out in all weathers and sticking to strict guidelines during Covid restrictions.



Hipton tree rescue

Volunteer tasks are on-hold at the start of January because of the Christmas Covid-spike and new lock-down restrictions but hopefully we can get back to Wednesday work parties soon as the pruning and planting needs to be done during the winter.

### Fox in a log

I often talk about the importance of dead wood for wildlife especially the myriad of mini-beasts that live and feed in and under fallen branches and in decaying tree stumps. One regular visitor to our site between South and Middle Littleton was surprised to see something a little larger than the usual beetles and woodlice that was benefitting from a large fallen tree. A Fox was soaking up some early winter sun, sheltered in the hollow tree trunk!



Spot the Fox



Fox in a tree

Let us know if you've seen something of interest in our area.

### Website update

Our website has been updated recently with lots more photos and information about our sites.

If you haven't looked at our web site for a while have a look at <http://valetrust.weebly.com>



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## Birds of Lower Moor & Haines River Meadows October to December 2020

Rob Prudden

With relatively mild conditions, wildfowl numbers were slow to build with by far the highest counts occurring during December. **Teal** peaked at c160 and were accompanied by up to 65 **Wigeon** most days. Other duck species during the period were scarce but did include a nice mobile group of 22 **Shoveler** which were seen on several dates and a single male **Pintail** on 29th & 30th November.

Up to 25 **Common Snipe** were in marshy areas at Lower Moor, while a much scarcer, diminutive **Jack Snipe** was seen on four separate occasions but may have all related to a single wintering bird.

The wintering **Lapwing** flock at Wick was present throughout, peaking at c250 in November & December. They were often accompanied by just a handful of closely related **Golden Plovers**, then an influx in mid-November swelled numbers to an impressive c260 for just a few days.

Shooting activities on surrounding land normally disperses feral geese from the wetlands during the early winter period. This year with Covid restrictions curbing sporting activities, shooting was much reduced or non-existent, this led to a mobile flock of up to c650 Geese contentedly feeding on short grassy areas on both sides of the river throughout November & December.

Large flocks of feral Geese do on occasions attract stragglers of other scarcer species and on 5th December, the flock was joined by 21 Russian **White Fronted Geese**, these on passage from breeding grounds in Arctic Russia or north west Siberia and presumably heading for wintering areas around the Severn Estuary. They apparently found the feeding and company on the meadows to their liking with 15 of the original flock then being seen daily from 6th – 28<sup>th</sup>. On 29<sup>th</sup> it became apparent the number had risen to 30, this represents the first record of this species at the river meadows for nine years and by far the largest flock for at least 40 years.

A pair of **Egyptian Geese** were present from 22<sup>nd</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> December, although an African species, a feral resident population now thrives in southern England, but they are still relatively scarce in Worcestershire. Constant rain all day on 23<sup>rd</sup> December left the meadows in full flood.

Next morning (24<sup>th</sup>) at dawn a juvenile Russian **Dark Bellied Brent Goose** was located with other roosting geese, it chose not to linger, leaving the area alone to the west as the sun broke the horizon. This is the first record of this species in the recording area.

Three wintering **Stonechats** seen in the first week of October then remained throughout the period, although they roamed freely and could be elusive.

Three **Little Egrets** flew over the River Flash in a southerly direction on 9<sup>th</sup> October choosing not to linger.

Apart from Snipe, wading birds are scarce at the wetland during the winter months, so three **Green Sandpipers** seen briefly on 29th November were unexpected and even more so a **Redshank** which called loudly as it circled the river meadows on 12<sup>th</sup> December.

The reedbed alongside the anglers' carpark maintains its own small micro-climate during the winter months, normally being a few degrees warmer than the surrounding countryside. This leads to regular hatches of Winter Gnats etc, these then attract insect feeding birds. Although once considered to be just a summer visitor, due to a general move to milder winters **Chiffchaffs** now winter in the UK in relatively small numbers. The abundance of insect life in and around our reedbed acts like a magnet and invariably attracts small numbers of this small Warbler to the area with c10 present here during December this year.

A family group of locally bred **Grey Wagtails** were also seen alongside the reedbed most days, while a much rarer **Cetti's Warbler** was present on 12<sup>th</sup> November but could not be relocated subsequently.

Two **Water Rails** were also resident in the same reedbed, although very secretive they were seen on several occasions, but more often just heard giving their presence away by typical loud squealing calls.



Kingfisher

**Kingfishers** were seen either fishing from an overhanging branch on the riverbank or dashing along over the river on four separate dates.

On 5<sup>th</sup> October with flooding on the meadows it became necessary to supplementary feed hay to the summering Cattle. While carrying out this task in complete darkness, a **Barn Owl** was picked up in tractor headlights, the bird was very mobile, perching on fence posts alongside the riverbank to hunt unfortunate rodents caught up in the deluge and attempting to swim to the safety of higher ground. Two male **Tawny Owls** were also heard calling on the same evening.

Scarce birds of prey during the period included an immature female **Peregrine** that slowly drifted through high up over the site on 23<sup>rd</sup> October. A hunting male **Merlin** on 10<sup>th</sup> December was a much more spectacular affair as it flushed large numbers of panicking winter thrushes in every direction from tall Willows as it flashed through over the river from Wick to Lower Moor.

An unexpected sight occurred on 26<sup>th</sup> December when 4 **Great White Egrets** & a single **Little Egret** flew high overhead upriver together over heavy flooding. The Little Egret looked tiny alongside its huge close cousins and appeared to be struggling to keep up. Prior to this there have only been 3 sightings of single Great White Egrets at the site.

A large overnight Gull roost (1,500 birds) had formed on floodwater at the end of December and from 25<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> the night-time gathering had been joined by a juvenile **Iceland Gull** and 15+ **Great Black Backed Gulls**.

**Goosanders** are scarce in the area so a female over deep water on the meadows on 27<sup>th</sup> December was unusual, the bird had presumably been forced off its usual haunts by the widespread flooding.



Female Goosander

*Vale Landscape Heritage Trust (VLHT) is a registered charity, number 1080109. We work to protect and preserve 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, so far, 320 acres.*