

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Autumn 2020



Thank you

I must start by saying a big “thank you” for your continued interest and support. It has been the strangest of years but we have managed to make necessary adjustment to how we work and have been able to keep going without any major problems. It is thanks to the work of our wonderful volunteers, the support of our dedicated trustees and the continued financial support of our Friends that this has been possible. The year has also seen further funding from Severn Waste Services towards equipment and vehicle costs as well as support for volunteer management. If you would like to find out more about volunteering, becoming a Friend or joining our board of trustees then please get in touch.

Grassland Enhancements at Mill Bank on the BBC

On 5th August Bob Hockenull from BBC Midlands Today visited Lower Moor and Mill Bank Meadows to find out about our work and film a short article about wildflower meadows and why it is so important to protect them. As part of the enhancement work at Mill Bank, our volunteers were filmed spreading green hay collected from the adjacent Mikes Meadow. It is hoped that the wildflower seed in the fresh hay will grow in the floodplain at Mill Bank and so extend the area of wildflower meadow in that part of the Vale. Wildflower meadows are not only beautiful but they provide habitat vital for many insects (including pollinators) as well as birds and mammals. Floodplain flowers such as Great Burnet were a common sight along the Avon in the past but have now all but disappeared. These precious meadows can be destroyed almost overnight but will take decades to replace, so the enhancement work at Mill Bank is just the start of a long process to recreate a floodplain wildflower meadow. We have reintroduced appropriate, traditional management of late-summer hay cutting and aftermath grazing to allow the wildflowers to set seed while keeping coarser grasses under control.



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 around 320 acres.

A Trick in the Tail

Beetles are the most species-rich group of animals on earth with between 350,000-400,000 species described so far (depending on which references you use) and many more not yet identified.

This led J.B.S. Haldane, a British geneticist and evolutionary biologist, to conclude that the Creator must have had “an inordinate fondness for beetles.”

Beetles belong to the Order Coleoptera meaning ‘sheath-wing’. This refers to their hardened outer wings (elytra) which protect the body, and most species have flight-wings tucked away under the elytra. They range in size from less than half a millimetre to over 150 mm (6 inches).

In the UK there are over 4,000 species.

Beetles recycle dung, feed on garden and orchard pests, pollinate our fruit, eat deadwood (including in our homes) in fact there are beetles almost everywhere feeding on almost anything.

Many beetles are camouflaged, hiding from sight but some are brightly coloured warning that they might taste bad while others mimic wasps to fool predators.

There are many adaptations among the beetles and three quite different species that are found in the Vale have highly specialised posteriors. The first of these is the large, black Devil’s Coach-horse beetle. This is a common species that usually hides away during the day, coming out at night to hunt various invertebrates including slugs, caterpillars and woodlice. In late summer and early autumn though they are often encountered out and about in daylight, even sometimes entering buildings. If threatened, this impressive beetle will raise its tail end up over its body like a scorpion. This is all bluff as the tail is harmless but is often enough to dive away predators (and curious people). If this fails and predators or the curious get too close then the beetle will reach up and deliver a painful bite with its powerful jaws.



Devils Coach Horse Beetle
Photograph by N J Farmer

The second is the Glow-worm. An uncommon insect in our area nowadays and almost certainly continuing to decline due to increasing light pollution, loss of habitat and use of chemicals which kill snails, the Glow-worm’s main food. Glow-worms are most often found as larvae, living under rocks or fallen branches especially on chalk or limestone in grassland, scrub and woodland rides. This beetle is best known for the fact that females emit a bright green light from their tail end. The light attracts males which look more like regular beetles. There are presumably other reasons for the light as larvae also produce the same green glow and apparently they will even glow within the egg before hatching! There are still a few of these fascinating beetles found glowing in June or July around the Littletons.



Glow Worm Larvae, Day and Night

The third and arguably most impressive beetle bottom-belongs to the Bombardier beetle. This fairly small blue and orange beetle has a hidden weapon; a chemical cannon used for firing a stinky burning-hot liquid from its rear end. This chemical can kill other insects, or repel would be predators and can even burn human skin. Apparently the caustic spray can reach temperatures of around 100°C and sprays out at speeds of over 20 miles per hour! This is still a rare beetle in our area but is expanding its range slowly and a colony is known to exist at our North Littleton Community Orchard.



Bombardier Beetle

Plum sales 2020

With the Pershore Plum Festival being cancelled in 2020 due to the Covid outbreak, it was looking like we had little chance of selling plums this year. It was particularly unfortunate as the Victorias were abundant, to the point that branches were breaking under the weight of the fruit.

The Plum Festival committee were keen to have a presence in Pershore during August so VLHT were invited to set up a stall and sell plums on Saturday mornings during August. Taking all appropriate precautions we were able to attend and sold out each Saturday. Some plums were also picked by a few companies for juicing, jams and plum cider which meant that they didn't all go to waste and it brought in a little income to help with the ongoing management of our beautiful old orchard in the Lenches.



Plum Sales Lockdown Style

Apple harvest

At the end of September we harvested our Somerset Redstreak apples at Stocken Orchard. This should have been a good year for the fruit as the orchard produces apples every-other-year and 2020 was due to be a productive year. Unfortunately, the early flowering Redstreaks were caught by cooler weather and a couple of late frosts at blossom time leaving many trees with no apples. We just managed to gather about 5 tonnes of apples to fulfil orders for Pershore College, Caney's Cider and the Lenches Cider Co. Our other variety at Stocken is the later flowering Dabinett which missed the frosts and this year the trees are loaded. If you would like to buy cider apples, a few bags or a few tonnes then please get in touch. We will be harvesting these at the end of October and all money raised goes towards the ongoing management of the site.

Out of season blossom



Blackthorn Blossom, Mill Bank
4th September

I always find it interesting when I see something early or late in a season but this year a couple of very late flowers took me by surprise. On 4th September at Mill Bank I found a small Blackthorn plant in blossom. This shrub should flower in March to April. Then on 15th September in our North Littleton Community Orchard I noticed a young apple tree in blossom, something which should have finished in May.



Apple Blossom, NLCO
15th September



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.



Lower Moor & Haines Meadows July – September 2020.

Rob Prudden

The **Glossy Ibis** that had been present since 12th May continued to be seen daily till 20th July. On its final day it was happily feeding as normal from first light till 06.45 when it flew high south west, it was then relocated at Coombe Hill Meadows in Gloucestershire at 08.30.

The late summer build-up of post breeding **Lapwings** remained around 80 through July & August rising to just over 100 in late August. Two pairs bred at Haines Meadows with one of these pairs going on to fledge 2 juveniles. Other wading birds during July included 3 resident **Oystercatchers**, 4 **Green Sandpipers**, up to 8 **Little Ringed Plovers** including several juveniles, 8 **Avocets**, 4 **Black Tailed Godwits**, 3 **Dunlin** and single **Greenshank** and **Common Sandpiper**. The first returning **Snipe** appeared on the last day of July, with small numbers then present & building to c15 by the end of September. A juvenile female **Ruff** was present from 28th August till 6th September while 3 **Green Sandpipers** were also seen during August. The scarcest wader during the period was a smart and unexpected **Turnstone** that circled over the meadows while calling noisily, after a couple of circuits of the area it left high to the south west. This is only the second record of this species for the site, the first being 16 years ago on 12th May 2004.



Turnstone

A **Little Egret** was fishing along the edge of the river on 30th July, while a surprisingly approachable **Great White Egret** was in the same area all morning on 21st August.

Birds of prey were represented by single **Red Kites** on four separate dates with two birds together on 10th July. Pairs of **Kestrels** & **Sparrowhawks** both bred successfully, while a **Peregrine Falcon** was hunting over the area on a single date in mid-July, **Hobbies** were seen hunting dragonflies and juvenile **Swallows** on five dates. Two **Mandarin Ducks** flew down river on 28th August and appeared to drop down somewhere near Osier Island.

Three pairs of **Yellow Wagtails** bred successfully on arable land at Wick with small numbers visiting the wetlands regularly in July & August. **Grey Wagtails** also bred successfully adjacent to the Lower Moor anglers' car park, this leading to up to six birds being seen regularly around the same time.

Two migratory **Whinchats** were a nice find on top of tall arable weeds amongst a brassica crop just east of the Lower Moor Wetland for a couple of days at the end of July. Post breeding **Redstarts** were a couple of weeks later arriving than usual, with the first four birds not seen till 10th July, small numbers were then present in ancient river meadow hedges daily till 1st September.

Black Headed Gulls now breed annually at the nearby Leisure Park, this year over forty adults & thirty juveniles were present on the River Flash most days in late July.

The morning of 16th August was damp & humid after heavy thunderstorms during the previous 24 hours, this had led to a large fall of migratory Warblers, with the river meadow hedgerows alive with birds. Many of the birds were juveniles and included c50 **Chiff Chaffs**, 15 **Common Whitethroats**, 8 **Lesser Whitethroats**, 15 **Blackcaps**, 2 **Garden Warblers**, 4 **Willow Warblers** & 3 **Reed Warblers**.

Unexpected site management issues required us to lower the water level on the flash field at the end of August this year. This meant that September bird records were heavily compromised by having a dry site and really shows the importance of retaining wetlands along the river, especially during passage times.

It was difficult to believe that a lack of water had been an issue as heavy rain caused the Avon to burst its banks on 3rd October and the Lower Moor site was flooded!

Our flood meadows at Lower Moor were certainly living up to their name at the beginning of October. The annual flood waters from the Avon help to fertilize the grassland but it does cause problems for our graziers. This year the unexpected flooding left cattle stranded for a couple of days on a small patch of higher ground. Many thanks to Rob for his efforts in making sure the cattle remained fed and safe during the wet spell. As much of a nuisance as these floods are, it is this that makes Lower Moor river meadows so special, attracting all kinds of wildlife especially birds (see Rob's report above).



The same gateway at Lower Moor river meadows before and after the prolonged rain at the beginning of October

October is the crossover period between summer and winter. It marks the end of our mowing and harvesting and the beginning of planting trees and pruning. It is also an interesting time to get out and look for the 'first and last' sightings of the year. Here are just a few things worth looking out for:



Bumblebees including the brown Common Carder Bee (*Bombus pascuorum*) are still active at this time of year.



Listen for Tawny Owls calling in the day time. This is apparently a very British-thing, as their continental cousins only call at night.



Search for the nests of Harvest Mice. About the size of a tennis ball, woven low down amongst vegetation.



Look in hedgerows to find the gaudy pink and orange berries of Spindle. The oddest of colour combinations.



Listen at night for the high-pitched whistle of migrating Redwings.



Look out for Grass Snakes as they search for somewhere to hibernate.



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