

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Spring 2020



Strange Times

I hope you are all keeping well in these strange times. Like every other organisation VLHT has had to make changes to avoid unnecessary journeys and keep people safe during the Corona-virus 'lock-down'. We had to end all volunteer tasks (just when sites had finally dried up enough to get on to them) and limit staff time on reserves, only carrying out essential work such as repairing fences and tree guards where sheep are grazing. We will be reviewing what else we can do such as clearing flood-debris and watering young trees as more information becomes available. The priority is obviously staying safe and following Government guidance until normal service can be resumed. Thank you for your continued support.

Blossom Quiz

So, while I have a captive audience and as most of us will miss the blossom this year, let's start with a quiz. Below are pictures of fruit blossoms from hedgerow and orchards; how many can you name? (answers at the end of this newsletter).



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, so far, around 320 acres.

Pond Improvements for Newts

Earlier in the year we were approached by consultants looking for appropriate sites in our area where work could be done to create or enhance ponds to benefit Great Crested Newts. The scheme is part of Natural England's mitigation for habitats affected by development. Two of our sites have been chosen to receive funding for work to improve newt habitats; Ian's Wood and North Littleton Community Orchard (NLCO). NLCO will involve the creation of a pond so will take time to decide the most appropriate location. Ian's Wood already has two small overgrown ponds so work has been carried out to grade the sides of one of these ponds, clear vegetation that was shading it and create hibernacula for the newts and other amphibians. Ironically work to the second pond was held up because it requires planning permission and so will hopefully be done next winter. The ponds will be surveyed over the next few years to see if Great Crested Newts are breeding at the site.



DNA sheds light on Pear Mysteries

Wade Muggleton, March 2020

Developments in DNA testing are now being used to aid the identification of fruit varieties, which can be especially helpful in ancient orchards where incredibly old and decrepit trees either don't fruit or produce poor diseased specimens that can be hard to recognise. Apples, Pear and Cherries can now be submitted for DNA tests, cross referencing them against a national data base. That is to say the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale in Kent, as well as many regional fruit groups have all had their collections DNA'd, enabling samples to be cross referenced against every other variety DNA'd thus far.

This story concerns how two mystery pears in Worcestershire were sent in and what we learnt from the results.

There has been anecdotal evidence that there was a local county pear known as the Worcester Silk. It is not found in any books or catalogues by that name but there were stories of the previous generation of fruit growers being familiar with a pear of that name. So a tree in Ombersley parish where the owner said his father had always sworn the tree was a Worcester silk had samples collected in Summer 2019 and sent in for analysis. The result came back as a match for a pear

Worcestershire Silk Pears



Kyrewood Pears



Photos by Wade Muggleton

known as Autumn Bergamot, a once reasonably well-known variety that has largely disappeared now. So seemingly a case of a synonyms. Worcester Silk being a local name for Autumn Bergamot. Synonyms whereby the same fruit variety is known by different names in different parts of the country is common, particularly in apples.

The second story concerns an old pear tree on a farm at Kyrewood. The current owner's grandparents had lived at the farm so there is considerable continuity there. The pear (pictured) is a very hard culinary pear that would keep well into the winter, rather like the famous Worcester Black. The owner had wondered if it was a Black Pear, but observation of samples showed it was not, so samples were sent for DNA testing during summer 2019. In this case the result that came back was rather more interesting, The national collection at Brogdale said they had one in their collection that was a match and that whilst they had never given it a name it had been sent in to them in 1952 from a Mr Smith of Weston park in Shropshire and not knowing what it was they had grafted a couple to keep in their collection, now nearly 70 years later the Kyrewood one was the only match thus far.

The current owner is not aware of any connection between her farm at Kyrewood and Weston park and indeed there may not be one, but often with these rare varieties it turns out that an ownership, staff or itinerant labour connection explains how a variety moved from one place to another.

When it comes to pears there is the extraordinary statistic that in the mid 1800's Scotts Nursery of Merriott, Somerset had 1500 named varieties in their collection, today Brogdale only have 530, somewhere in the region of 1000 named varieties are unaccounted for today. The Kyrewood / Weston park pear may be one of them, but which one we may never know as the names in Scotts catalogue do not give enough detail to confirm an identification and obviously there was no DNA testing back then. So sadly, much pear history is rather lost in the mists of time and likely to remain so even with DNA techniques. In this case one query was answered but in the other more questions were raised.

Mill Bank Willows

Mill Bank Willows
before and after



There are many large Crack Willows along the boundary of Mill Bank Meadows, two of which were collapsing onto our fence and threatening to fall on the road and adjacent anglers' car park. So, two of our volunteers John and Sam coppiced the offending trees, which we can re-coppice in a few years before they become a problem again. It is amazing how much brash you are left with after tree work.



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 much land.



We now have a stack of willow logs and a large pile of branches to deal with. Many of the logs will be moved around this site and other sites as habitat while the branches will be chipped and composted by a local organic food producer. One of our volunteers Mike found another use for some of the timber creating creatures which local youngsters have been able to paint, keeping them occupied during 'lock-down'.



Meanwhile a pair of Blackbirds and Wrens have moved in and nested in the remaining pile so we will wait until later in the year before moving anything.

Pruning Workshop



In mid-March we held another very successful pruning workshop at Stocken Orchard. 15 people attended and were guided by John Edgeley and Richard Toft in this hands-on session. This gave people the confidence to have a go at pruning mature apple trees to improve fruit production. This was balanced by discussions about the importance of deadwood in the trees for insects (including many pollinators). A follow-up session was about to be planned when we had to stop volunteer activities.

Bird records at Lower Moor and Haines Meadows January – March 2020

Rob Prudden

Wet and windy weather prevailed throughout the period, with almost continuous flooding in the Severn and Avon valleys. Although wintering wildfowl were present daily, numbers remained relatively low with maximum counts of only 45 **Teal**, 130 **Wigeon** and just 2 pairs of **Shoveler**. With generally mild conditions birds started their journeys back to northerly breeding sites early with the last **Teal** seen on 13th March and **Wigeon** on 24th.

Lapwing numbers were only present on a handful of dates with the highest count of 110 on 5th February, the only **Golden Plover** was a single bird that flew over south on the same date. Conditions were not ideal for wintering **Snipe**, but in periods between heavy flooding birds returned and peaked at 44 on 30th January. A winter bird-feed crop alongside Haines Meadows attracted large numbers of seed eating birds with a constant flock of up to 450 **Stock Doves** and 150 **Linnets** daily.

The wintering population of **Chiffchaffs** around the small reedbed alongside the carpark at Lower Moor built up to around 20 birds and included 2 “Siberian” birds, and several **Goldcrests** were also present most days. A very smart **Cetti’s Warbler** was present in the same area from 12th-15th January, the bird was very difficult to locate and remained elusive throughout its short stay. A **Water Rail** was seen or heard around the reedbed most days throughout January.



Water Rail

The first sign of the approaching spring came on the early date of 4th January when a pair of **Shelduck** arrived. Both birds remained until the end of March, they were joined by other passage birds on several dates with highest count of 8 birds together from 20th-22nd March.

A pair of **Oystercatchers** were present from 1st March being joined by a second pair on 27th, this leading to prolonged and noisy confrontations before the interlopers were ousted from site.

A pair of **Curlew** arrived on 12th March and appeared to be prospecting for a nest site, but after the cold wet weather grass was probably too short and the birds moved off on 23rd. Other spring wading birds included a lone **Redshank** from 13th-20th March and a single **Little Ringed Plover** on 24th & 25th March. The **Ravens** that had been holding a breeding territory since December became very quiet during late February into March, presumably sitting on eggs, only giving their presence away when the noisy male would take to the air to escort a **Buzzard** away after it had strayed into airspace above the nest site. A noisy straggling line of c600 passage **Common Gulls** flew over heading towards breeding sites well to the north on 20th March. A freshly scuffled field alongside the river at Wick attracted an impressive 15 **Buzzards** to feast on newly exposed food items such as earthworms and beetle grubs. Scarcer birds included an immature female **Peregrine** on 12th March, **Corn Bunting** briefly on 14th February, **Great White Egret** on 10th March and single **Barn Owls** were seen hunting during daylight hours on several occasions.



Evesham Volunteer Centre
 Brick Kiln Street
 Evesham
 Worcestershire
 WR114AA
 07794 835 953
valetrust@outlook.com
<http://valetrust.weebly.com>

Answers to Quiz

A-Blackthorn. B-Pear. C-Apple. D-Damson. E-Plum. F-Peach. G-Cherry. H-Cherry Plum