

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Summer 2020



VLHT Summer newsletter 2020

Not sure where the three months went since the last newsletter but it has been a very busy time keeping things going during the lock-down. April-June is a busy period anyway, with end of year returns due for funders, stewardship agreement claims to be made, land maps to be checked and updated and a compliance review from ENTRUST the Landfill Tax auditors. Our ten-year stewardship agreement with Natural England comes to an end this year and we had to report on that. We are also looking at a new five-year agreement and hopefully by the time you read this I will have put an application together to get our newer sites into that scheme. It's not just office work, the sites still need attention and this newsletter is an update on our work during the strangest of times.

Watering

I can't say just how relieved I was when the clouds finally appeared and rain fell at the end of June. The hot dry spring has taken its toll on our young trees and it has taken up a lot of my time watering. Severn Waste Services funded the purchase of a bowser which has made things easier, making it possible for me to fill up and water multiple sites in one day. But with trees planted at Naunton, North Littleton, Hipton and Fladbury it was inevitable that we would lose some to the weather. So far we have managed to keep most of the young fruit trees alive and have succeeded in keeping about 70% of the hedge and trees at Mill Bank where most of the planting was in free-draining sandy ground. I'm lucky that my family stood in as honouree volunteers during the 'lock-down' or we would certainly have lost far more trees.



Watering at Mill Bank



Many of our projects are funded by Severn Waste Services through the Landfill Communities Fund. Without SWS, we could not protect anywhere near as much of the beautiful landscape of the Vale.



Noble Chafers

We put up lures for the rare Noble Chafers again this year at Hipton, Stocken and at a private remnant orchard belonging to one of our volunteers in Norton. Amazingly we caught Noble Chafer beetles at all three sites. Two were caught at Hipton and one at Norton, all females. We teamed up with Worcestershire Wildlife Trust (WWT) to carry out a more detailed survey at Stocken and WWT's old plum orchard at Tiddesley Wood. Any individuals caught were marked to see if there is any movement between the two orchards. The hot spring weather brought the chafers out early but then the mixed weather made things difficult for leaving the lures out. Nine Noble Chafers for caught; six in WWT's orchard and three in Stocken, eight of which were females and one male! There have been no recaptures of marked individuals. We will have to continue next year to see if we can gather any information about the movement of these beautiful but elusive beetles, but just confirming their continued presence is excellent news.



Noble Chafer at Hipton Hill

Flood debris



Flood debris at Haines Meadow



Cyldroiulus caeruleoinctus

The extreme winter floods left us with large amounts of debris at several of our sites which had to be cleared up before grazing or hay cutting. Most of the debris as usual consisted of pieces of wood, stems from wheat and maize and the inevitable plastic bags, boxes and bottles. This year though we were surprised to find a public-right-of-way marker post from Warwickshire, having wound its way along at least 15 miles of river. The debris is a nuisance but it also provides habitat for many invertebrates, so we leave some of the natural debris where it will not interfere with the hay-making and will not be hazardous to livestock. This year ten different species of woodlice have been found in the debris including some rarely if ever found in Worcestershire. We also found several species of millipede including a relatively large species with an unpronounceable name *Cyldroiulus caeruleoinctus* which looks like it is made of polished brass.

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 over 300 acres of the Vales historic landscape.

Grassland flowers

The extreme weather events have affected our grassland flora in different ways. Things seem to have flowered early and in many cases were scorched off quite quickly. Greater Butterfly Orchids did not fare well; far fewer appeared this year and many that did were caught out by the sharp frosts in May. Where we had counted around 3,000 of these delicate white orchids at Hipton in previous years, we were lucky to find 30 this year. Common Spotted Orchids were also flowering in smaller numbers and we only found one Bee Orchid across all of our sites. The orchid which has done well this year is the Pyramidal. They were generally smaller than usual but in good numbers at Hipton. This beautiful, bright pink orchid increased in numbers at North Littleton Community Orchard and appeared for the first time at our little nature reserve in South Littleton.

Of all the grassland flowers, Knapweed and Ladies Bedstraw have flowered best. At the end of June the ridge and furrow at Littleton Pastures turned yellow and with the high temperatures the fluffy yellow flowers of Ladies Bedstraw gave off a scent which carried well beyond the site boundaries. It is this rich scent combined with the soft foliage that made this so popular as a filler for ladies' pillows and mattresses in the past. At Mikes Meadow and Meadow Bank (part of Littleton Pastures) the Ladies Bedstraw was accompanied by a mass of purple Knapweed flowers. These in turn attracted hundreds of butterflies, most noticeably Marbled Whites and Meadow Browns, joined by at least two bright orange Dark Green Fritillaries at Meadow Bank. On a smaller scale at Naunton Court Orchard, last autumn our volunteers spread green hay donated from the adjacent SSSI and raked in Yellow Rattle seed. We fenced this area off from the sheep and this spring/summer the little patch of grassland has been full of wildflowers and is alive with insects.



Meadow Bank

Barn Owl boxes

A couple of our volunteers have continued monitoring the Barn Owl boxes that they put up around the Vale (mostly on private land next to our sites). They team up with a licensed ecologist to be able to check the health of any young owls they find and to ring them. This is to place a numbered ring on the leg of the bird which allows a record to be made of the location and date of birth and then any other information if they are caught by other ringers anywhere in the country. We have reported in the past about successes during the breeding season but sadly this year numbers are very low. Likely to be have been caused by the constant rain and flooding through the winter making hunting very difficult. They did have some success though, finding one box with nine eggs and two healthy adults and another box with two fluffy white owlets.



Barn owl chicks photos by Nicki Farmer

Moths

We've had a few interesting moth reports from our sites recently. Photos from Haines Meadows of caterpillars and a hawthorn bush covered in a thick web were sent to us. These turned out to be Small Eggar moth caterpillars which live communally in webs until large enough to move off before pupating. The Small Eggar is a nationally scarce moth but it is presently expanding its range. At Naunton Court Orchard we have lots of (possibly too much) Mistletoe and this year we found evidence of the Marbled Mistletoe Moth for the first time at any of our sites. This is another rare species which is expanding its range and its caterpillars live inside the leaves of Mistletoe creating 'mines' as they feed.

Meanwhile a couple of moth enthusiasts set up light traps at Mill Bank Meadows at the beginning of June to see what species they could find there. Amongst the moths caught were some really beautiful examples of the fact that moths are most certainly not all brown and ugly. These include Green Carpet, Blood-vein, Light Emerald, Setaceous Hebrew Character, The Flame and the striking Elephant Hawkmoth (pictured).



Elephant hawkmoth



Small Eggar Caterpillars and Web
Photo by Rob Prudden

Lower Moor fence

Our land at Lower Moor adjacent to the river is a really beautiful piece of Old England; the river flanked by grazing marsh and hay meadows and wetlands full of birdlife with Bredon Hill in the distance. During lockdown the site proved to be a magnet for people wishing to get out into nature and refresh themselves. This meant that the number of people using (and sadly, abusing) the site increased dramatically. Rubbish was left from pic-nics and people and their dogs were wandering across the fields, disturbing the wildlife including ground-nesting birds and increasing the risk of conflict between themselves and the grazing cattle. This left the options of either closing the site or fencing off the route along the river (which we would stress is a permissive route and not a public right of way). We didn't want to spoil the enjoyment of the many because of the actions of the few so we opted for a fence. It did draw some criticism but we have left a nice wide area all along the river bank for visitors to continue to enjoy. Keeping people and dogs off the fields and wetland area resulted in a very special visitor (see Rob's bird report).



Lower Moor Riverside Fence

Volunteers

Our volunteers finally returned on 10th June for ‘socially distant’ Wednesday tasks. We made a start clearing young hawthorn that has sprung up round the trees in the orchard. Hawthorn seems to be one of the few things that has grown really well this spring. After a couple of sessions at Hipton we moved to Mill Bank to clear competitive nettles and tussock grasses from round the young trees there. If you would like to help out on Wednesday mornings, get in touch.

Hipton’s Troubled Pears

Establishing trees is difficult, in the first few years they are susceptible to damage from wild animals and livestock; competition from grasses, bramble and hawthorn; lack of water in dry weather and more. So there is a lot of time, money and emotional investment in trees, particularly fruit trees which require appropriate pruning and protection. The guards themselves, put on to protect from animals can damage the trees especially on windy hillsides like Hipton resulting in the tops of the trees being literally sawn off by the action of the wind rubbing the tree trunk round the guard. It was particularly dis-heartening that this was happening to about 50 pear trees planted between five and ten years ago so we took the decision to remove the guards, hoping the trees were big and strong enough to survive. The very wet winter of 2019/2020 changed the behaviour of the resident sheep at Hipton and they turned from the rain-sodden grass to fresh, juicy tree bark, stripping everyone of the un-guarded trees, even pushing through dense bramble to get at them. We left some of the damaged trees to see if they would survive and coppiced others to encourage re-growth and yes, we put guards back on them. Some of the un-coppiced trees died but some appear to have survived the bark-stripping and have even produced fruit this year (we’ll see if they are still alive next spring). Most of the coppiced trees produced new growth, some will be from the root-stock which we will have to remove but they had generally responded well to coppicing. Then came the couple of hard spring frosts which took the growing tips out of the young growth.

One more attack on some of the young growth came in the form of the Hairy Pear Weevil *Involvulus caeruleus*. This beautiful little beetle lays its eggs in young dying twigs of pear and other fruit trees where the larvae feed. But if there are no dying twigs then the weevil cuts partly through healthy twigs to cause them to die, giving the alternative name of the Twig-cutting Weevil. On established trees this is not a problem but on our struggling coppiced pears it was just another example of how difficult it can be to establish trees, and how it is possible to take things just a little too personally!



Involvulus caeruleus at Hipton Hill

Birds of Lower Moor and Haines Meadows April – June 2020

Rob Prudden

The long wet winter finally subsided, with the last few winter visitors moving off in early April. **Jack Snipe** are scarce in the area so a single bird on 1st of the month was unexpected, while the last **Fieldfares** were seen flying high overhead in a northerly direction towards breeding areas in Scandinavia & northern Europe on 2nd, the last pair of **Wigeon** were also seen on this date. Three **Teal** were still present on 5th and finally 2 unusually late **Common Snipe** were flushed from a marshy area on the 26th.

The local breeding pair of **Ravens** already had a family of noisy juveniles in flight around the site by the last week of April and continued to be seen regularly throughout May, till the end of June. **Shelducks** were already on site prior to the start of April and remained through till 24th May, with the highest count of ten for a couple of weeks in mid-April.

Up to 5 **Little Ringed Plovers** were present from 1st April through till the end of June, with similar numbers of **Oystercatchers** during the same period.

The first **Cuckoo** was heard on 17th April, but numbers appeared low this year, peaking at probably just 2 males and a single female during the middle of May, a lone male was still singing on 26th June.

After works on the Lench Ditch sluices in 2019, it has now become easier to keep the River Flash wet and more suitable for passage wading birds. This spring has certainly been the best for this group of birds for many years, with the following recorded – pair of **Curlew** regularly throughout April, 7 **Redshank**, 7 **Black Tailed Godwits**, 1 **Bar Tailed Godwit**, 8 **Avocets**, female **Ruff**, 3 **Ringed Plovers**, 8 **Little Ringed Plovers**, 3 **Dunlin**, 3 **Green Sandpipers** and a single **Common Sandpiper**. **Wood Sandpipers** are scarce, elegant waders and a well sort after species, so four together on 5th May was an excellent record, unfortunately they were continually harassed by the local **Black Headed Gulls**, never looked settled and left to continue their northerly passage after just 45 minutes. Even more impressive than the Wood Sandpipers were a pair of **Curlew Sandpipers**, looking particularly smart in bright summer plumage on a wet and overcast 3rd June. This is a new species for the site, although anticipated keenly & well overdue after 38 years of constant coverage of the area.

Other scarce birds during the period included single **Red Kites** over the area on 8 separate dates, **Little Gulls** on 11th & 15th May, 3 **Mandarin Ducks**, 3 **Little Egrets**, **Peregrine Falcon**, 5 **Common Terns**, 3 **Hobbies** and 5 **Yellow Wagtails**.

Two pairs of **Lapwings** displayed over territories and probably laid eggs, but no juveniles had become apparent by the end of June. More Lapwings had started to arrive by 4th June and had built up to c70 by the end of the month.

The most popular bird during the period and certainly the rarest was a **Glossy Ibis** that arrived on 12th May and was then seen daily till the end of June. First located on a small stretch of remnant floodwater on the south side of the river, then as this dried out it relocated to the Lower Moor River Flash. The new river fence had been installed just in time to prevent disturbance and during its extended stay an estimated five hundred appreciative birders turned up to see this exotic and unexpected visitor.



Glossy Ibis at Lower Moor Photos by Ed Betteridge



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