

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Winter 2021-22



A cup of beans

2022 already. Not sure where 2021 went or what happened during the year, it just went in a blur and many would say “good riddance”. Despite the continued problems caused by the pandemic, we kept calm and carried on. We entered more of our sites into a Mid-tier Countryside Stewardship scheme. This has been far from straightforward and has not gone smoothly, but this will bring in some vital funds over the next few years to help keep us afloat (even if it felt at times like we had had an encounter with Dementors, draining any remaining trace of joy from our bodies). We continued to receive very generous support from Severn Waste Services (SWS) allowing us to continue to run our vehicles and manage our land. SWS also funded the purchase of the old onion-packing field next to our community orchard at North Littleton, and with the help of volunteers we have made a start clearing and tidying up. We have received some very kind words of support from residents of the Vale for the work we are doing. We are especially grateful to a couple of new Friends who have started paying regular donations to help with our work. Our volunteers have continued to be a great help, supporting us through lockdowns and semi-lockdowns and in all weathers. Working on our sites has not only been of great value to the Trust, it has also been important for the volunteers (and staff). People from very different backgrounds come together on a Wednesday morning every week to share stories, enjoy each other’s company, drink tea and eat cake, oh yes, and to carry out important and varied tasks making a real difference to our little part of the beautiful Vale.

So if you give: a regular donation, a morning a week helping in a nature reserve, time as a trustee to steer the charity, time to help create a newsletter, or a cup full of beans, every small act of kindness matters and they all add up to *something really quite special*.

Thank you all

Still growing

Our biggest recent change came right at the end of 2021 when we made Ben’s role a full-time post. It had become obvious that the Trust had grown too big to continue with just one and a bit members of staff, with an increase in the amount of land in our care and an increase in time required to manage our funding through Countryside Stewardship, Landfill Communities Fund and fruit sales etc. Ben will continue to do sterling work with the physical management of the sites and will also be looking at other funding streams, as well as increasing our presence in the ‘virtual world’ and promoting VLHT at events amongst many other things.



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



Ten from Ben

Ben Rees

For the last two year I have held the part-time position of Assistant to the Land Manger/Gary's Minion here at VLHT. However, at the Start of 2022 the role expanded into full-time position of Deputy Land and Development Manger! I am hugely excited about this opportunity to contribute further to the amazing work the Trust does in the Vale, and am so far loving the work!

Gary asked me to write down ten things that inspire me to do what I do. So in the words of the song "*these are a few of my favourite things*":

Tree: Hornbeam. Although I love trees in general, I am particularly fond of the Hornbeam. It was one of the first trees I leaned to identify, and the distinctive, twisted trunk (which to me looks almost muscular) beautiful furrowed leaves and the green, winged fruit really make it stand out! The wood from the tree is also extremely hard and is rather useful for things like wood turning!

Invertebrate: Dragonflies (all of them!). Although I am not great at identifying them, I think they are AMAZING! I love the way they move and skim over the water, and the unmistakable sound of their wings as they fly past your ear! I have also had a few land on my finger which was very cool!

Mammal: Badger. In a previous life I was an ecological consultant who specialised in Badgers! As part of this I conducted badger surveys and got to work in and around their setts! I even built a few artificial setts too! I also love how industrious they are and love to find active setts! Finally, as daft as it sounds, I think they look like they would be polite, with their little striped faces!



It's a ten from Ben –
Common Darter Dragonfly

VLHT nature reserve: eeeerrrrm Milk Bank? This is almost impossible to answer as I am sure I would give a different reply depending on which site I was currently standing on! I love them all for different reasons, whether it is because I have had the privilege of seeing a particularly rare species, or for the diversity of habitats or because it is just a beautiful site. However, Mill Bank was bought around the same time that I started with VLHT and was a bit of a blank canvas, so I have been able to help shape the site and in my extended role will have more input, so it holds a special place in my heart.

Bit of kit: The petrol post driver! That machine is THE BEST! I am not sure how I would have coped without it given the number of posts I have had to knock in (Although I may grumble when I have to carry it across uneven or water-logged fields!).

Season: Autumn, particularly the end of autumn when you can get the cold, crisp mornings where the colours of the trees really pop! I also love the smells of autumn and seeing the changes in activity such as the birds preparing to migrate and the invertebrates taking advantage of late flowering plants such as Ivy! Plus, you get to see some really cool fungi!

Hedgerow snack: Blackberry. Especially in a good year, they are big, juicy and tasty! Plus, they are difficult to confuse with anything and go amazingly with apple in a crumble!

VLHT fruit: Dependant on the form it takes! If it is in liquid form then it would have to be the cider apples. I am particularly keen on the Red Streaks we grow in Stockton Orchard. However, nothing beats a ripe purple egg plum from Hipton on a warm summer day (after repairing a few tree guards!!).

Task: Scrub management. Although scrub is a very valuable habitat, there comes a point when its value for wildlife begins to decline! Therefore, I love being able to cut back sections to open up patches of tussock grasses and allow Bramble and Hawthorn to re-grow creating structure in the scrub, ideal for birds, insects and small mammals (and blackberry picking!).

Bird: Corvids, particularly Magpies. Although they are among the more common birds (and not necessarily popular with some folk), I love that at first sight they appear a simple black and white, but if you catch them in the right light they have a stunning iridescent sheen of purple, green and blue! They are also really intelligent and I like watching them investigate anything new that they find!

Grassland engineers

The winter can reveal ancient landscapes as the low sun produces shadows on sometimes indistinct land features. Ridge and furrow can be very obvious at sites like Little Pastures at Middle Littleton but in other places this is less obvious. Over time ridge and furrow can become quite shallow due to more modern farming practices, but the low winter sun can sometimes show this up. At our old orchard at Naunton Beauchamp the ridge and furrow is easily overlooked because of the long grass and old fruit trees planted on the ridges. However on a crisp winter morning the ridges stand out, casting shadows across the furrows. These landscape features were engineered deliberately many hundreds of years ago through the preparation of agricultural land. If you find an old ridge and furrow site that has not been ploughed or over grazed and fertilised, you might be lucky to find that other engineers have been at work; Yellow Meadow Ants create mounds on top of the drier ridges. These mounds have been created by thousands of tiny ants carrying individual grains of soil from deep underground. This creates a home under ground for the colony of ants and also provides micro-habitats for flowering plants above ground. Trefoils, bedstraws, speedwells and violets are just some of the wildflowers that you might find growing on ant hills. But how do the plants get there? Well, certain plants produce a sugary 'capsule' on their seeds. This tempts the ants to collect the seeds to take them back to their nests. There the ants eat the sugary snack and discard the unharmed seed outside the nest where they may germinate. Isn't nature wonderful!



Ridge & furrow showing well in the low winter sun at Naunton Court Orchard



Frosty ant hills at Naunton Court Orchard

Pruning Orchards

Pruning is a vital part of orchard management, keeping the trees in good health and shaping them to allow sunlight in to set the fruit. We also have to balance this with the importance of the trees for wildlife, which means leaving some deadwood on the trees. At Stocken Orchard our volunteers have been helping with the ongoing pruning of the cider apple trees. With so many trees in the orchard it is important to keep the trees pruned. Under the watchful eye of John Edgeley we continue to shape the trees conical like a Christmas tree. This maximises the amount of light falling on to the trees and also allows the sunlight to reach the ground, ensuring that the wildflowers continue to thrive.



A lesson in fruit tree pruning at Stocken

Meanwhile at Naunton Court Orchard we have been carrying out some restoration pruning. Many of the old trees have started to fall apart due to a combination of age and lack of care in the past. This winter we have concentrated on trying to balance the canopies of some of the trees. By cutting back some of the bigger branches to reduce the weight in the lopsided canopies we should hopefully reduce the risk of further damage to the trees. It is especially important here that we leave some dead branches in the trees and pile up cut branches in the orchard. We have also thinned some of the Mistletoe especially in the top of the canopy. We recognise the importance of this wonderful parasitic plant but this work will prevent wind damage and reduce stress to the trees which could ultimately lead to the death of both host-tree and the Mistletoe.

Ditchwork at Mill Bank

Following on from the very successful pond creation at Mill Bank we have continued to improve the ditch habitat. The main spring-fed ditch has been cleared and the bank has been graded rather than having steep sheer sides. A shelf has been left at normal water level to allow wetland plants to establish providing feeding and breeding opportunities for insects and birds. Sloping the sides will also give greater holding capacity during heavy rain and will slow down and filter water running into the Avon. We made sure we left plenty of existing vegetation on one bank. Towards one end of the meadows is the original spring that fed the Oxtan Ditch when it was first dug out. The 'bowl' at this point had become overgrown so we have scraped the top soil out of the bowl and it will re-establish as an area of wet grassland where the ground water will settle and gradually feed into the ditch as it has for many years. This enhancement work has been made possible by FWAG-SW.



Grigging and other orchard traditions



Many of you will have been Wassailing in orchards. For some it's an opportunity to drink cider and make a noise but for others it has greater importance. Traditionally celebrated on Old Twelfth Night (17th January), toasting the trees three times with a large drink of cider was the way to ensure a good harvest. In the past some believed that the trees would not bear fruit at all if they were not wassailed. Orchard folk gathered, throwing cider on to the tree and leaving cider-soaked toast for the orchard spirit. Banging pots and pans to make a noise to wake the buds, even firing a shotgun through the branches at times (cider and shotguns - what could possibly go wrong?!).

Wassailing is becoming more popular again (without the shotguns), bringing communities together in celebration of the apple. Huzza!

When should you start picking apples? Well an old saying goes:

*"Till St Swithin's Day has past,
The apples are not fit to taste".*

Picking apples before they were ripe would also be risky as the orchards are protected by 'Awd Goggle' the bogeyman and he is not happy if the apples are picked unripe. You have been warned.

How many of you have ever been 'grigging' or 'scraggling' in an orchard? Children in the West Country were encouraged to go grigging, this was the act of stealing the small apples left on the trees after harvest. Also known as scraggling in Oxfordshire where the children were allowed to gather the leftover fruit as long as they didn't 'dub' (throw sticks to knock the apples down). As we know, these little apples should really be left on the trees as they are the Piskies harvest and we don't want to upset *them*.

I'd be interested to know if there are any old orchard words and ways from the Vale.

Lower Moor and Haines Meadows bird report – October – December 2021

Rob Prudden

The last few summer visitors were seen at the beginning of October with 2 **Swallows** on 1st, **Hobby** on 4th then a **Black Tailed Godwit** & **Wheatear** on 9th. Around the same time early winter visitors had started to arrive although **Redwings** & **Fieldfares** were relatively late this year with larger numbers not seen till mid-November. Due to mild conditions and a lack of winter floods waterfowl numbers remained relatively low during most of the period, with by far the highest counts of 320 **Teal**, 72 **Wigeon** & up to 12 **Shoveler** not seen till the end of the year after persistent rain brought flooding to the meadows from 26th-31st December.



Grey Wagtail at Lower Moor

The most unexpected bird of the period was an adult **Dark Bellied Brent Goose** found late afternoon on 29th December. Although elusive it remained in the area till the end of the year roosting at the wetlands each night, this is only the second site record of this species.

On 30th December, a family party of 2 adult and 3 juvenile **Bewick's Swans** were at the River Flash pre-dawn before leaving southwest at first light. Scarcer ducks included a male & 2 female **Mandarins** on the river on 22nd October, a single female **Pintail** on 1st November followed by a pair together on 23rd.

Four female **Goosanders** were seen along the river or in flight over the meadows on several occasions from 20th-31st December. Up to 4 **Water Rails** were resident along river meadow ditches from 29th October till the end of the year. **Common Snipe** numbers stayed constant at around 20 while a scarcer diminutive **Jack Snipe** was present from 15th October to 8th December being joined by a second bird on the latter date.

The only larger flocks of **Lapwings** were 78 on 6th & 28th October, 210 on 30th November & 520 around flood water from 27-30th December.

Golden Plovers were scarce with the only records being 5 on 13th November, 10 on 17th December, 1 high up over floodwater on 26th, then 120 in flight over the area on 29th December. Three **Dunlin** were with the **Lapwing** flock from 26-30th December.

A **little Egret** was feeding around river meadow flooding on 29th December.

Birds of prey included **Red Kites** overhead on five dates, both male & female **Sparrowhawks**, male **Peregrine** on 12th November & a female **Merlin** causing panic to a large flock of Linnets on 22nd October & 6th November.

Barn Owls were seen at dusk & dawn on 6 dates while two male **Tawny Owls** were already proclaiming breeding territories by mid-November.

A wild bird feed crop adjacent to Haines Meadows attracted good numbers of small farmland birds with 280 **Linnets**, 65 **Reed Buntings** & 80 **Chaffinches** present on many dates.

A pair of wintering **Stonecats** were seen regularly throughout as was a single **Grey Wagtail**, 3 **Lesser Redpolls** were feeding in the tops of tall Silver Birches alongside the Lench Ditch on 26th October.

Kingfishers were seen dashing along the river regularly while up to four **Goldcrests** were often to be seen around the fisherman's carpark.

Please consider becoming a 'Friend' of Vale Landscape Heritage Trust. Paying a regular amount (whatever you can afford) will help us continue our work in the future. Contact us for more details or check our website: <https://valetrust.weebly.com/friends.html>
Thank you.

Stocken Orchard bird-ringing report 2021

Peter Holmes

Birds caught, Stocken, 2021	Ringed	Recaptures
Green Woodpecker	1	0
Fieldfare	32	0
Redwing	14	0
Mistle Thrush	2	0
Blackcap	2	0
Goldcrest	16	4
Long-tailed Tit	7	4
Coal Tit	2	2
Blue Tit	48	16
Great Tit	27	10
Treecreeper	1	0
Jay	3	0
Chaffinch	14	0
Goldfinch	14	1
Lesser Redpoll	6	0
Total:	189	37

In 2021 I caught birds at Stocken Orchard for checking, ringing and releasing. This helps to build up a picture of how far birds move from year to year, how long they live and shows the importance of orchards for birds. I am particularly interested in the large numbers of Fieldfares present at Stocken Orchard; they are generally quite hard to catch. Cold days are best for catching Fieldfares in mist nets as they come into the orchard in search of apples.

The table shows the species and numbers of birds caught in 2021. You will notice that Blue Tits and Great Tits are far more likely to be recaptured than other species. This is because they are generally resident birds, and fly through the orchard at branch (and mist net) height looking for over-wintering insects. The larger thrushes drop in to feed on the apples, especially when frozen ground conditions mean they can't capture soil-borne invertebrates in surrounding agricultural land.

The frosty morning on Wednesday 5th January 2022 was only forecast at short notice, but I managed to take advantage! I caught 29 Fieldfares, including one from winter 2021 - this is unusual for Fieldfares as they are not known to be winter-site faithful. I also caught 5 Redwings, 5 Chaffinches, a Woodpigeon, a Jay (always a painful experience for the ringer!), 3 Blue Tits (2 recaptures) and a recapture Goldcrest.

If we get a prolonged cold spell soon it could get very interesting!

Winter twigs

Winter is a great time of year for getting to know a tree or two. Spend a bit of time looking at the bark, notice how it differs from young twigs to older branches and the trunk. Look at the buds on the twigs, how are they positioned and what shape are they?



Cherry



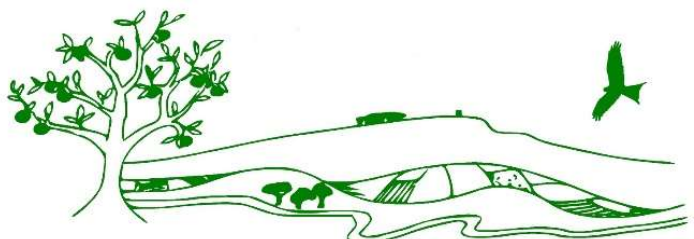
Plum



Pear



Apple



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