

# Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Spring 2021



## VLHT Newsletter Spring 2021

Lambs, blossom, snow – it must be Spring!



Plum blossom on Hipton Hill  
31<sup>st</sup> March 2021

The unseasonal high temperatures of up to 24°C at the end of March 2021 brought a spectacular display of plum blossom all of a sudden. The main season Victorias and Yellow Egg flowered at the same time as early varieties such as Czar, covering Hipton Hill in a blanket of white. But no sooner had the blossom burst, the temperatures tumbled with frosts and even snow. What will this all mean for the plum crop this year? Plums are notoriously variable with cropping densities and timing so it is difficult to say, but it is likely to be an early crop. Many plum varieties are partly self-fertile so will produce some fruit even if it's too cold for the pollinating insects, but cross pollination will result in a more productive crop, and with the low temperatures we are likely to see a low yield. The structure of plum flowers, with the stigma and anthers protruding well out of the

petals, suggests that there may be some wind-pollination but I have been unable to find any more information about this. However, the pollen of plum appears to be quite dense (and so relatively heavy) whereas willows which are 'ambophilous' meaning they use both wind and insect pollination, have pollen which appears to be less dense, being more likely to blow in the wind.

Images of pollen can be found on the internet, for example:

Plum pollen –

<https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/710468/view>

Willow pollen–

<https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/816586/view/weeping-willow-pollen-salix-babylonica-sem>

Of course, frosts and snow at blossom time are nothing new and over the years various techniques have been used to protect the blossom. A YouTube video was brought to our attention showing the lighting of hundreds of fires between the rows of fruit trees in the 1940s. A practice which continues today to protect blossom in some countries.

One of our volunteers, fruit and orchard consultant John Edgeley remembers "my great uncle used these when he worked for Justin Brookes, Suffolk during the 1950 & 60s, and I have used them as a student at college in the early 1970s. Smudge pots, barrels of sand soaked in diesel, were also used particularly on sloping orchards where they would be positioned at the bottom of the slope. They would give off a warm, dense smoke that drifted uphill enveloping



Bloomin' Lovely –  
Hipton volunteers freezing under plum blossom 7<sup>th</sup> April 2021

the trees and so protecting the blossom. Nowadays large candles are used which were the salvation of UK vineyards last spring, wind machines are used to mix the lower cold air with the warmer air above, We used overhead sprinklers to protect a research orchard whilst teaching at Writtle College, Essex. The water coats the trees giving off 'latent heat' as it cools. But the sprinklers would sometimes freeze and would need to be freed by climbing a step ladder whilst wearing water proofs and whacking the sprinkler with a stout bamboo cane!"

### Owl Pellet investigation

I think it was the comedian Dave Allen who posed the question "What's the difference between a bad marksman and an owl?" giving the answer "A bad marksman shoots but can't hit", he left the audience to work out the rest. Although the missing part of the answer isn't quite biologically correct, it is very close; some owls do hoot and owls swallow small mammals whole, digesting all the goodness before coughing up (rather than passing through) the undigestible fur and bones. These regurgitated remains are ejected as a neat package that we call a pellet. By dissecting these pellets, we can identify the prey items from the well-preserved bones, giving us an insight to the owl's feeding habits and prey preferences.

In January 2021 I was given a bag containing 25 Barn Owl pellets so I set about dissecting them to add to our knowledge of the local owl and rodent populations. After taking over the dining table for a couple of days while I teased out bones from fur (I have a very understanding family), I was able to identify several species of small mammal amongst other things.

From 25 pellets I extracted the bones of at least 74 small mammals and the remains of one large dung beetle.

The majority of skulls belonged to Field Voles (by far the most popular choice of food for Barn Owls), and there were also several Bank Vole skulls and jaw bones present. There were a few Common Shrews and three Pygmy Shrews, their tiny skulls hardly bigger than the dung beetle's head. There were also the remains of 10 Wood Mice and 2 House Mice.

I also noticed that there were lots of grub-like larvae present which I presumed to be some kind of beetle larvae. So I kept some of the pellet-sludge in a pot with some of the larvae and eventually they pupated and hatched, not into beetles but into moths, lots of them!



Dung beetle head & Pygmy Shrew skull



Larvae in owl pellet



*Monopis laevigella*  
micro-moth from owl pellets



Jaw bones from top left;  
Field Vole, Bank Vole  
Wood Mouse, House Mouse  
Common Shrew, Pygmy Shrew

*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 about 320 acres.*

## Birds of Lower Moor and Haines Meadows January – March 2021

Rob Prudden

The Russian **White Fronted Geese** that had arrived in early December 2020 moved with the large flock of **Greylag Geese** to Salford Priors gravel pits just over the county border in Warwickshire on 28<sup>th</sup>. On the 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2021, 14 of the birds were back on the meadows at Lower Moor, then from 3<sup>rd</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> just a single juvenile remained. None were then seen until 2 adults reappeared from 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> February, with 1 of these then being seen intermittently from 12<sup>th</sup> February until the unusually late date of 31<sup>st</sup> March. A pair of **Egyptian Geese** were present from 5<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> January, then again on 22<sup>nd</sup> & 23<sup>rd</sup>. A male **Mandarin** flew downstream along the river on 23<sup>rd</sup> January and may have been the same bird that was then seen on 25<sup>th</sup> March. A pair of **Goosanders** flew high over the flooded river meadows and off to the south west on 31<sup>st</sup> January. Other wintering wildfowl included resident flocks of up to 85 **Wigeon** and 120 **Teal** with small numbers of up to 14 **Shoveler**, while a single male **Pintail** was present from 12<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> January followed by a flock of 12 high up over the flooded meadows on 22<sup>nd</sup>.



Mandarin

The first pair of **Shelduck** arrived on the early date of 23<sup>rd</sup> January, they were then seen daily until 1<sup>st</sup> February when 5 were present, these then remained and engaged in daily territorial skirmishes through until the end of March. The feral Geese ever present in the area are normally presumed to be born and bred locally, but this was disproved when a bird fitted with a Darvic neck ring was present from 24<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> March. Enquiries showed it had been tagged at Rayrigg Hall, Lake Windermere, Cumbria on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2019. A Darvic ring is an individually numbered plastic ring fitted to a bird's neck (usually geese or swans) which can be read in the field without the need to catch or disturb the bird.



Shelduck

A **Little Egret** fed on the rich pickings around the edges of high floodwater on 29<sup>th</sup> January.

Large numbers of wintering Gulls roosted on floodwater nightly throughout January and included a juvenile **Iceland Gull** from 1<sup>st</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup>. **Great Black Backed Gulls** are relatively scarce in the area so 15 from 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> of January was a good site count. An adult **Mediterranean Gull** was in with the Black Headed Gull pre roost on 25<sup>th</sup> February.

Wading birds included wintering **Snipe** throughout the period with the highest count being just a modest 40 birds, while a single **Woodcock** was seen dropping into a wet wooded area at dawn on 17<sup>th</sup> January. Good numbers of **Lapwings** were present at the beginning of the year, with the highest count of 520 in mid-February, just two pairs remained to hold breeding territories in March. **Golden Plovers** were again scarce this winter only being seen on four dates with the largest flock numbering just 35 birds. The first **Oystercatcher** arrived on 19<sup>th</sup> January, with a pair then seen from 2<sup>nd</sup> February through to the end of March. During an icy cold spell in February, 2 **Dunlin** were unexpected visitors from 10<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup>, single birds were also seen on 17<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup>. Three migrant male **Curlews** paused briefly on 23<sup>rd</sup> February before leaving north, then a semi resident pair were seen regularly from 24<sup>th</sup> February – 17<sup>th</sup> March.

More typical wader passage began in March with an early Little Ringed Plover on 9<sup>th</sup> being joined by a mate from 25<sup>th</sup> until the end of the month. A **Dunlin** was present on 19<sup>th</sup> followed by a **Redshank** and a winter plumaged **Black Tailed Godwit** on 22<sup>nd</sup>.

Three pairs of **Avocets** fed avidly around the River Flash on 25<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup> then rising to 7 from 27<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> & then by far the highest site record of 10 on 1<sup>st</sup> April. A single **Green Sandpiper** and a **Redshank** were also present on the 29<sup>th</sup>, as was the first **Swallow** of the spring, seen dashing through over the river meadows. Wintering **Water Rails** were regularly heard squealing from river meadow ditches but appeared to have moved on by the middle of March.



Avocets

Birds of Prey were represented by regular sightings of **Kestrels** & **Sparrowhawks**, while a tiny male **Merlin** sped through high up above the meadows on 26<sup>th</sup> January, this followed by an immature female **Peregrine** half-heartedly mock attacking the **Teal** flock on 2<sup>nd</sup> February. **Barn Owls** were seen hunting at dusk on three dates followed by one perched on a fence post in full sun mid-afternoon in early March, this presumably due to difficulties in finding prey items, often the case at this time of year.

Two early **Sand Martins** were feeding low down over the wet meadows on 8<sup>th</sup> March. The secretive, almost silent, **Cetti's Warbler** first seen at the end of 2020 was still present around the reedbed alongside the angler's car park but was seen on just 3 dates during January & February. Up to 20 wintering **Chiffchaffs** were in the same area & included an eastern individual, these birds breed in Siberia, east of the Pechora River with their preferred wintering areas in the lower Himalayas, a true long-distance migrant. **Lesser Redpolls** have been scarce this winter, with just a single female seen in a tall Hawthorn hedge alongside the reedbed. Three **Stonechats** wintered around the meadows but were mobile and elusive.

Wintering **Cormorants** are a regular sight, feeding along the river or on local water bodies. Since their favoured daytime roost tree fell, they now favor a tall Ash tree near the island. During February up to 25 birds gathered daily, perching equally spaced around the tree to digest catches and dry their wings in its upper branches.

### An unexpected sighting

Rob Prudden

On 15th January an Otter was in the river opposite Lower Moor river meadows, and from a couple of hundred yards away it appeared to be wrestling with a large, very bright looking fish in shallow water. It then spent ten minutes struggling to get the fish up onto the bank. At this point another Otter appeared and there was a bit of a skirmish before they both swam off down river and out of sight.

I then approached the area and was surprised to see the fish was in fact a very large (30cm in length) Goldfish, probably weighing approximately 3.5lbs. As I understand it when living in the wild Goldfish revert to olive-green or brown, this fish was very bright orange all over so presumably a recent escape or introduction to the river.



Next morning amazingly only the head and spine of the fish remained, so presumably the Otters had returned but they may of course have had a helping hand (or paw) from a Fox or Badger.



Many of our projects are funded by Severn Waste Services through the Landfill Communities Fund. Without the support of SWS, VLHT could not own, or protect, anywhere near as much heritage land.



## Volunteers

Our volunteers continued to support our work through the early part of 2021. We planted 300metres of native trees and shrubs at North Littleton Community orchard to create a wildlife-friendly hedge, joining two existing hedges on the site. This will provide food, shelter and nesting areas for birds, small mammals and insects, as well as giving some protection to our young orchard on what can be a cold, windy site. We also finished pruning this year's quarter of Stocken Orchard and cleared up many large, fallen branches from Naunton Court Orchard. We also found time to repair some of the fences at Gore Meadows near Fladbury and clear more of the bramble and young hawthorn from round the fruit trees at Hipton. The volunteers enjoyed the sunshine and warm temperatures one week and endured the freezing temperatures and wintery showers the next, they worked through four seasons in four weeks.

## Naunton Court Orchard restoration pruning

With the help of volunteers, we started some restoration pruning of the old fruit trees at Naunton Court Orchard. This beautiful old orchard had not been managed for many years resulting in large branches hanging from the trees, over-abundance of Mistletoe and trees dying. We have spent the last few years planting many new trees but it is time to start the careful job of pruning the old trees. As always we need to balance the needs of wildlife with the restoration of the trees. We will be leaving some deadwood on the trees, leaving plenty of Mistletoe, creating habitat piles with the fallen and pruned deadwood. If we do nothing the orchard will continue to die which will be of little benefit to landscape or wildlife. This summer we will be planning which trees to prune and the extent of pruning, hopefully tying in with a Stewardship agreement over the next 5 years.



Starting restoration pruning at Stocken



One of our volunteers, Mike gave new life to some of the deadwood, creating some wonderfully natural nest boxes to be installed in other places which lack old trees.

## Hovels update

Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service's (WAAS) Market Gardening Heritage Project has continued to record the history of the market gardening community in the Vale. Volunteers have surveyed the 200 hovels that remain, from 1,500 that were originally built in the area. They have recorded local memories, including 17 oral and written histories. Three hovels are being restored as mini visitor centres (including two on our land at North Littleton), with information panels, as a permanent reminder of their place in history. An article in the Vale Magazine (April 2021, issue No. 249) records the work carried out so far, with details of the discovery of the Cleeve Prior 'time capsule' left behind by Edgar Wheeler. This has been a fascinating project, bringing to life such an important part of the Vale's history.

Lots more information can be found on the Explore the Past website:  
<https://www.explorethepast.co.uk/project/market-gardening-heritage/>



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