

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Summer 2021



Pyramidal orchid variation Hipton Hill 2021. Photo Nicki Farmer

Orchids

June and early July are the times to spot orchids, and this year was no exception. Pyramidal Orchids have had a particularly good year popping up on road verges and unsprayed grasslands all over the Vale. There were too many to count at Hipton Hill orchards and along with Common Spotted Orchids they formed pink flushes across the site. Pyramidals also flowered at South Littleton Nature Reserve and at North Littleton Community Orchard (NLCO), where they have increased from four or five when we bought the site to over 200 this year. Greater Butterfly Orchids didn't do so well though, possibly due to the weather with very dry spells, very wet spells and a month of frosts in April just when their big glossy leaves were starting to appear. Orchid numbers fluctuate greatly from year to year but the drop in Greater Butterfly Orchids was extreme; we counted nearly two thousand in two of the orchards at Hipton Hill a few years ago, but this year the same two orchards had just over one hundred in flower. There's no need to panic though as orchids can remain dormant in the ground feeding off stored food reserves in their root tubers. The name Orchid is derived from the word *Orchis* (Greek for testicle) referring to the shape of these tubers. Let's hope the conditions are just right next year and we get a display of thousands of Greater Butterfly Orchids again.



Author & orchid enthusiast
Sean Cole enjoying Hipton Hill Orchards

In June this year Hipton received a visit from Sean Cole, orchid enthusiast and author of *Britain's Orchids: A Field Guide to the Orchids of Great Britain and Ireland*. Sean had heard about the display of orchids and was very impressed with Hipton's show of these wonderful wildflowers. Having photographed all of Britain's orchid species he is now building up a photographic collection of orchid pollinators (including a honeybee at Hipton). Unlike most plants, orchids do not have masses of loose pollen, instead they have structures called pollinia which hold the pollen in a sticky ball. This is thought to reduce self-pollination and it also reduces the amount of pollen that

gets eaten by visiting insects or lost in transit. These structures stick to the face or tongues of visiting pollinators which then deliver the mass of pollen in one go to the next orchid of that species. Each pollinia can contain more than a million pollen grains, which are needed to fertilise the masses of seed that an individual orchid produces.



Honeybee with pollinia stuck to its face, on Common Spotted Orchid, Hipton Hill. Image courtesy of Sean Cole



Orchid pollinia
stuck to a
butterfly's tongue –
see opposite

Orchids produce millions of tiny seeds, each one capable of blowing in the breeze for many miles. This is possible because the seeds are not provisioned with food like most seeds, the plants produce masses of seed so that at least some will reach the ground and find the conditions they need; the right soil-type, bare ground with not too much competition from other plants and critically the right mycorrhizal fungi must be present to start to feed the developing seedling. As the orchid grows it repays the fungi by providing it with organic matter and moisture, and I'm not even going to pretend to understand how it all works.



Small Skipper with pollinia stuck to its tongue on Pyramidal Orchid, North Littleton Community Orchard

We were delighted to find a new species of orchid at Stocken Orchard this year; a single Green-winged Orchid was discovered growing there by one of our volunteers during a work party. This is not only new to Stocken but a first for any of our sites and an example of how the seeds spread far and wide. The Green-winged Orchid uses trickery to fool insects into pollinating it. It flowers early in the year, producing bright purple flowers to attract the attention of early-flying bumblebees at a time when few other plants are flowering. The bumblebees can't resist the flowers and land expecting a rewarding drink of nectar, but this orchid does not waste energy producing nectar and deposits a pollinia on the bees' tongue with no reward for the insect. This only works for a short time and soon the bees either 'learn' that the orchid is a fraud or other plants start to offer rewarding nectar and pollen. Like most orchids, the Green-winged opens its flowers from the bottom of the spike first so it is usually just these first flowers that get pollinated producing fertile seed in the few seed-pods at the bottom of each flowering-spike.



Green-winged Orchid
at Stocken Orchard

One species of orchid that has taken trickery to the extreme is the Bee Orchid which occurs on a few of our sites but never in large numbers. This beautiful little plant produces extraordinary flowers that mimic a furry female bee. This in turn attracts male bees to attempt to mate with the flower resulting in the male bees' embarrassment while the orchid deposits pollinia on the bee without the need to waste energy producing nectar. The bee flies off and makes the same mistake with another Bee Orchid, depositing the pollinia, pollinating the orchid while receiving no reward. Unfortunately, the Bee Orchid would appear to mimic a species of bee which doesn't occur here and so cross-pollination rarely occurs. It has had to find an alternative way of fertilising its seeds, which it does by producing its pollinia on treads which are the perfect length for being blown back in to the flowers, pollinating itself. Not ideal but it certainly works. Isn't nature wonderful!



Bee Orchid showing pollinia



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 of landscape heritage in the Vale



Mill Bank pond

Earlier this year we had a pond re-instated in a corner of Mill Bank Meadows. The area had been smothered by a few large Crack Willows that had collapsed and formed a thicket with little vegetation underneath. We spent last autumn and winter coppicing the willows and mowing the bramble and nettles too clear the area. Work was held up while we waited for permission from the Environment Agency and planning permission from the local authority for the pond, finally getting the go ahead in early May (12 months after the plans were drawn up!). Because of the time of year we had a few early mornings checking round for any signs of nesting birds before work could continue. As the area was already clear this proved not to be an issue and after three or four days the pond had been scraped out and profiled. We were able to add value to the project while the machines were on site and had a very narrow ditch reprofiled to create better habitat for invertebrates. The weather was dry for most of the work and then heavy rain fell which immediately filled the pond which has remained full since then.

During a quick look at the pond edges we recorded 22 species of plants colonising already, including Celery-leaved Buttercup and Brooklime. There have also been many dragonflies around and we noted several species egg laying during July including Blue-tailed and Azure Damselflies, Broad-bodied Chaser, Black-tailed Skimmer, Common Darter and Emperor Dragonflies. This just shows how important these field-corner ponds are for wildlife.

The pond work was carried out under a Water Environment Grant and all the paperwork including the various plans and permissions were dealt with by Dan Roberts from Worcestershire Wildlife Trust. We thank Dan for his inordinate amount of patience with this and for securing the funding. The extra ditch habitat work was funded by Severn Waste Services for which we are very grateful.



Mill Bank pond area



Mill Bank pond complete



Emperor Dragonfly laying eggs in our new pond

Noble Chafers 2021

This year we were again given pheromone traps to help monitor Noble Chafers. We had success last year at Hipton and Stocken so set traps in these two orchards this year. This nationally rare beetle spends most of its life inside the rotting fruit trees and only flies for a few weeks during hot weather in June and early July making them very difficult to monitor. The beetles were slow emerging this year but eventually one was seen next to Stocken Orchard feeding on Hogweed and then two or three were trapped in the orchard. The traps are checked once or twice a day by volunteers to make sure the beetles are released as soon as possible. We set traps in all of the orchards at Hipton with no success in the first couple of weeks. And



Noble Chafer at Hipton

then we found a female Noble Chafer in the same place as last year followed by a male in an area where we hadn't found one before. It's really good to know that this spectacular insect is still present in our old orchards.

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 320 acres.

Littleton Pastures drainage

The permissive route around our ridge and furrow field at Littleton Pastures gives people and their dogs the opportunity to enjoy our historic site without disturbing the grazing sheep and lambs. However the route had become a wetland over the last few winters and had become almost impassable. Some of the drainage pipes had broken and become blocked over the years resulting in the spring water rising to the surface before it entered our pond and ditch system. It has taken a while but we secured funding through the Landfill Communities Fund and found a land drainage expert who was able to help. Our ditch system is now flowing again and the permissive route is back to grass rather than mud!

Littleton Pastures Farm Lane field

We have been able to purchase a small piece of land between the ridge and furrow and Farm Lane, South Littleton. This small field lies in the floodplain of Littletons Brook and has secured our access to the ridge and furrow, hay meadow and grazing pastures for maintenance and the movement of farm machinery and livestock.

Caterpillar surprise



Emperor Moth caterpillar, NLCO

While working at North Littleton community I found a large green caterpillar. A quick look in the book confirmed it to be the larva of an Emperor Moth, one of our most spectacular moth species. This large day flying moth is a heathland specialist but is also found in scrubland and wetlands where the caterpillars will feed on a range of plants including Bramble and Meadowsweet. Here it appeared to be feeding on Blackthorn. This species is one of the silk-moths and its caterpillars make silken cocoons where they pupate, remaining dormant all winter before emerging the following May.

Pershore's Welcome Back Weekend

For the second year running the Pershore Plum Festival has been put on hold. We will hopefully be selling plums on Saturdays as previous years and a much smaller event for local people to enjoy is being planned for the last weekend in August. Check for details here – Pershore's Welcome Back Weekend - <http://www.pershoreplumfestival.org.uk/whats-on.htm>

Hovels signs and open day

The Market Gardening History Project (or Hovel Histories) is coming to an end this year. An awful lot has been achieved by the group, and our thanks go to Nina O'Hare and colleagues from Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service for keeping things on track, and to the many volunteers including u3a who have made this such a great success. As part of the project we have installed interpretation boards at North Littleton Community Orchard to help tell the story of market gardening in the Vale of Evesham and surround area.



NLCO tin hovel and interpretation panel

There will be an open day and celebration at Cleeve Prior Community Orchard on 21st August 2021. Lots more details about the project and open day can be found here: <https://www.explorethepast.co.uk/project/market-gardening-heritage/>

Website and social media

We continue to add information to our website, having updated all of our site information. If you haven't visited the website recently take a look at <http://valetrust.weebly.com>

Or if social media is your thing, Ben has taken over most of the posts on our Facebook page. It's easy to spot when Ben posts the details as he is far more enthusiastic than me and he uses something called Emojis, which look like badly drawn graphics to me but they are apparently quite acceptable. If you haven't checked our posts recently then please do, and don't forget to 'like' them (it keeps Ben happy). Butterfly, bumblebee, frog, smiley face!

Volunteers and Friends

Our thanks as always go to our wonderful bunch of volunteers who have continued to support us through the pandemic. We will continue to work safely and responsibly now that restrictions have been lifted. We have achieved a great deal with their help this year already but the easing of restrictions and improvements in the weather have meant that some of our tasks have felt like less Work and more Party!



Some of our wonderful volunteers
hard at work at Mill Bank



Volunteer work parties:
Less work, more party

We also thank our small but dedicated group of Friends who have supported us through the difficult period. Friends pay a regular donation towards the work of VLHT helping us to continue to grow and protect some of the special places in the Vale of Evesham and surrounding area. Thank You!

(mostly) Birds of Lower Moor & Haines Meadows, April – June 2021.

Rob Prudden

Cold, wet weather prevailed throughout the spring period, this led to some wintering wildfowl opting to suspend their northerly migration and were relatively late to leave. The last 2 **Wigeon** were still present on 8th April with double figures of **Teal** until the 26th. Up to 7 **Snipe** were seen daily until 19th April with a particularly late bird still present on 7th May. Surprisingly one of the Russian **White Fronted Geese** that had arrived in early December 2020 was still being seen regularly until the unusually late date of 12th May. This was an inexperienced first summer bird, whether it finally found its way to more typical summering areas in the far north of Europe & Asia may be in doubt. The neck ringed **Graylag Goose** that had arrived on 24th March, having been tagged at Lake Windermere, Cumbria, continued to be seen most days till 28th May.



Shelduck in flight

Seasonal visitors that arrived earlier in the year included two pairs of **Shelducks** that remained until 19th June, on several occasions they were joined by two other pairs from elsewhere, this led to feather flying skirmishes prior to the interlopers being escorted away off site. A single pair was still present at the end of June.

A pair of **Oystercatchers** were resident throughout the whole period. They nested at the leisure park and on 28th June arrived at the River Flash with two fledged juveniles. Here the adults were highly protective leading to noisy aerial confrontations with anything judged to be a threat to the youngsters, this included large Gulls, **Buzzards** and a **Red Kite**.



Oystercatcher

Continuous rain in April had led to high water levels on the meadows with little open muddy areas for passage wading birds. Single **Green Sandpipers** were seen on three dates in April, with **Common Sandpipers** on four dates, while a pair of **Curlew** were seen on 2nd April; the male then remaining alone from 3rd - 7th.

Avocets did find the conditions to their liking and were seen most days in varying numbers from the beginning of April through to the last single bird on 25th May, highest counts being 10 from 8th – 14th April. All birds tended to be in pairs and one of these laid two eggs on the back shoreline of the river flash, but unfortunately these had been taken by a predator within 24 hours.

Little Ringed Plovers also moved through in good numbers and were seen daily from 1st April – 11th May, high counts of 10 birds were present on several dates.

The first singing **Cuckoo** was heard on 20th April, this rising to 3 males & 2 females by mid-June, two then continued to sing till 25th.

A pleasing six pairs of **Lapwings** bred around the site with four of these having chicks of varying sizes by the first week of June. Territorial male passerines included 5 **Sedge Warblers**, 16 **Whitethroats**, one **Lesser Whitethroat**, 5 **Reed Warblers**, 2 **Garden Warblers**, 8 **Linnets**, 4 **Skylarks**, & 3 **Yellowhammers**. The resident **House Sparrows** appeared to have had a successful early breeding season with many family parties in the vicinity of Lower End Farm at Lower Moor on 7th June.

Linnets tend to breed in small loose colonies with their nests several feet above ground level in scrubby bushes, hedges or bramble breaks. Due to continuous frosty, cold & wet weather this spring potential nesting sites were lacking foliage by early April. Unexpectedly three pairs had overcome the problem by building their nests just above ground level in isolated clumps of Pendulous Sedge, a particularly unlikely nesting choice for this species.



Sedge Warbler

Barn Owls bred locally and were seen hunting at dusk & dawn over the area on numerous occasions. An unusual sight at dawn on 9th May was a **Barn Owl** attempting to hunt while being mobbed heavily by the resident pair of **Shelducks**. The mobbing went on for over half an hour until the owl gave up and left to try its luck elsewhere.

Scarcer birds in April included a single female **Yellow Wagtail** on 17th, **Red Kites** on 24th & 26th, three **Little Egrets** on 30th and a female **Mandarin** on 14th & 20th. In May three **Ringed Plovers** were present from 4th – 7th and were accompanied by a single **Dunlin**.

Two **Hobbies** were seen heading to roost at last light on 30th May, with three hunting over the river flash on 7th June, a single bird also flew straight through at dawn on 16th.

A **Grasshopper Warbler** was reeling near the river at dusk on 14th June.

Two more **Red Kites** drifted over north on 21st June with single birds on 26th & 29th.

A **Great White Egret** was seen going to roost on one of the small wetland areas late evening on 23rd May & was seen leaving down river at dawn next morning.

On 29th May at mid-day a distant brief call from somewhere near the River Flash was suspected to be a **Quail** but it was not heard again to confirm. The area was then staked out during the evening and at dusk it started singing well from deep tractor ruts and tall grass near the river. There is only one other record of this species at the site, this being a bird which flew over the area uttering a brief call at dusk on 4th June 2006.

Although not strictly on site, by far the rarest bird in the area during the period was an adult **Rose-coloured Starling** that visited a garden alongside the approach road to the river meadows at Lower Moor on 6th June.

The already changing season was apparent by the second week of June with small numbers of failed or non-breeding **Lapwings** starting to arrive from the 8th, numbers then grew daily reaching 80 by the months end.

Impending autumn passage proper was heralded by the first returning **Green Sandpiper** on mid summers day 21st June, this was followed by 2 more from 24th – 29th, with an adult **Little Ringed Plover** from 28th – 30th. The first four returning **Teal** arrived back overnight on 26th and were present on the river flash all day before moving on again in the evening.

An **Otter** was heard calling and then seen fishing on the river edge pre-dawn on 16th June. It was unaware of being watched for several minutes, when it finally sensed human presence, it dived with a large splash not to be seen again.

Deer numbers continue to rise with up to 15 **Roe Deer** seen regularly and small numbers of **Fallow Deer** and **Muntjac** occasionally.

Brown Hares had disappeared from the area in recent years but with protection on Trust land a small healthy population is now thriving around Haines Meadows.

Is it a wasp or what?

Many people have been noticing an increase in the number of small wasp-like flies visiting their gardens and flowery sites. This is not a wasp but actually a hoverfly called *Episyrphus balteatus* or the Marmalade Hoverfly. It might look a bit like a wasp but it is completely harmless. In fact, this attractive little fly is an important pollinator and its larvae feed on aphids, so it really is a friend of the farmer and gardener. This species is unusual amongst the hoverflies as it is one of very few species that overwinter as adults, it is also strongly migratory. In some years it reaches our shores in huge numbers and this appears to be one of those years. This is one of the only insects that I have seen in every month of the year.



Marmalade Hoverfly, appearing on a flower near you.



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