

# Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Spring 2023



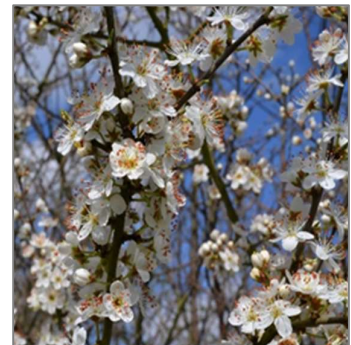
## VLHT Newsletter Spring 2023

As an Englishman I am obsessed with the weather and since our last newsletter we have certainly had plenty of it; hard prolonged frosts, snow, sunshine, very dry spells and very wet spells, and this affects the timing of the blossom. Our fruit trees have been blossoming (and fruiting) earlier year on year due to changes in the climate, but this year's very dull and wet March has slowed things down a bit. Cherry Plum has been and gone but the early Plums and Blackthorn blossom that normally follow-on have slipped back a week or two and at the end of March this was only just starting to show. The first Plum blossom is a sure sign that spring is here, it marks a transition from the dark winter days to the brighter spring days ahead. And as the blossom started to show at the start of April the first summer migrant birds were arriving, joining the resident species in a rehearsal for the spring dawn chorus. On 1st April I was listening to three Willow Warblers signing, fresh from their wintering grounds in Africa, and in a tree above was a flock of chattering Redwings, gathering to head off to their breeding grounds in Scandinavia. The sky was grey, the river in flood but the first delicate white Damson blossoms were piercing the gloom, and along with the Willow Warblers they were proclaiming the arrival of spring.

The *Prunus* trees are the first to blossom, Cherry Plum being the earliest, flowering in February/March. Their small white flowers are borne on green twigs with leaves just starting to show. Blackthorn usually flowers next and their flowers smother the dark, thorny shrubs ahead of their leaves in March/April. Early Plums such as Czar and Early Prolific blossom at this time, their creamy white buds bursting open as pure white, waxy-looking flowers. The delicate white blossom of Damsons can show in March, and in the Vale the Damson trees are covered in Witches-brooms (a twiggy gall caused by a fungus). Then comes the main crop of Plums which once upon a time would have turned the hillsides white for a few days around Pershore and Evesham. There are still old Plum orchards in the area including our Hipton Hill Orchards near Lenchwick. The spectacle is fleeting but this makes it all the more special. Pear is another early flowering crop, its white blooms are produced in clusters and can be seen on large veteran trees in hedgerows around the Vale in April. Then come Hawthorn which produces its leaves before it blooms, and Apple from late April through May. Apple blossom en-masse is surely one of nature's



Cherry Plum



Blackthorn



Plum

most beautiful sights. So, make the most of the brief blossoming time and get out and enjoy it, and when you stand near a blossom-covered Plum tree just imagine the sight and smell that would have stretched for miles around the beautiful Vale in the past.



Pear



Damson



Apple

And this year marks the 40th Anniversary of the Blossom Trail. This marked-trail snakes its way through the towns, villages and countryside of the Vale of Evesham and beyond. More details can be found at <https://valeandspa.co.uk/blossom/>

### **Volunteers**

Our volunteers have had a busy few months, carrying out a variety of tasks; clearing and planting at North Littleton, pruning Stocken Orchard, tending young fruit trees at Naunton Beauchamp and planting more trees and shrubs at Mill Bank Meadows. We meet on Wednesday mornings at 10am at one of our sites, working until 1pm at the latest. We stop for the all-important tea and cake break half way through. All of this work has helped to greatly improve our sites and to use the old cliché “we could not do it without them”. So, a very big thank you to all our volunteers and if you fancy joining in then let me know. The article below is a personal view from one of our volunteers.

### **How Volunteering for VLHT has benefited me.**

Mike Dunning

Many of us will remember driving in summer and how splattered our car windscreens, headlights and radiators were with insects by day and how spectacular it was to see moths in our headlights by night. This was a clear indication of how large our insect population was. Sadly, those days are long gone thanks to a combination of factors including pesticides and the loss of pollen-producing trees and wildflowers from the countryside. I haven't lived in this part of the country long enough to remember how extensive fruit and vegetable growing was in the Vale but I've heard stories about it and seen Pathe News videos about it on YouTube, and I must say it is sad to see the demise of our orchards and food crop growing industry. Farmers are turning their attention to more profitable ventures such as solar farms and biomass crops for power generating plants. Even in the relatively short time I have lived in the Vale (eight years) this change of emphasis from growing food to growing energy has been particularly evident especially in Fladbury. Here we were surrounded by Asparagus fields up to three years ago whereas now the only food crop in sight is onions and the rest is bio crop such as maize and fast-growing grasses. These crops can be a home for wildlife, but the harvesting of them is sadly too early for ground-nesting birds to have fledged. The only positive outcome from this is the raptors and crows seen to swoop down and feast on the exposed insects, small mammals and bird nests after the crop has been cut.

At this time of year we are all starting to see one of the main characteristics of the vale of Evesham, that of first blossom. This presents a welcome spring feast for our diminishing pollinating insect populations but only over a short period, so what about the rest of the year? Those of us who volunteer with VLHT get to see the spectacular blossom at Hipton Hill and Naunton Court orchard and soon to become a spectacle at the newly planted orchard at North Littleton. We also see how beneficial wild flowers are for pollinating insects and

other wildlife. Not only that, thanks to the expert knowledge of VLHT's entomology expert Gary Farmer we even get to know the names of many of the insects and creepy crawlies along with their life cycles. You have only got to shake a branch of a blossoming fruit tree into a white sheet or net to see not only flying insects but crawling wildlife too which are equally important pollinators. We have all seen "Blossom Trail" road signs in and around Evesham but how long will these be there I wonder, as we lose more and more of the old orchards?

One thing I am pretty certain of however is that as long as VLHT continue to manage their own orchards these road signs will still be valid. Valid that is as long as they get help to implement their management plans which includes the planting of new fruit trees to replace those whose life has expired (most of Hipton's trees being 80 years old or more for example) and to increase the diversity of wildflowers in their meadows. This is something we volunteers have been working very hard to create especially at Millbank Meadow in Fladbury. Not a textbook wildflower meadow in its own right but I can vouch for the fact that we are striving to create one, and I am pleased to say we have made good progress in the collection and spreading of seed such as Yellow Rattle and spreading green hay containing Knapweed and Ladies Bedstraw. This has not been easy thanks to the existence of Creeping Thistles and Ragwort but I can honestly say how rewarding it has been; even in the last three years we have seen fewer of both of these less desirable plants and more of those considered to be more desirable. Even thistles though provide food for butterflies and Ragwort is the main source of food for the Cinnabar moth and provides essential late nectar and pollen, but it is of course poisonous to grazing animals and both plants can spread to neighbouring fields if not controlled.

Plums grown at Hipton, once again thanks to volunteers picking them by hand, do generate some valuable income from selling throughout August in Pershore culminating in the Pershore Plum Festival. This income is not as great as it could be, as many plums go to waste partly due to the effort needed in picking, the lack of commercial outlets, and the fact that they ripen too early for the Plum Festival nowadays. This year I am hoping to explore two particular outlets for them myself together with the possibility of offering some to food banks, that is assuming they will accept perishable fruit.

So, has my experience of working with VLHT changed my perspective on what is happening around me? Indeed it has. I can see the benefits of managing old orchards and creating new orchards, collecting and spreading wild flower seed to increase the diversity of flowers in meadows, the creation of ponds and wetlands to benefit wildlife, the cutting and grazing of meadows and orchards to promote and control the vegetation, the creation of wildlife habitats such as a dead hedges and most importantly the social interaction with other enthusiastic volunteers all adding to our physical and mental health and indeed our knowledge of the countryside around us.

Not letting myself get carried away too much with my enthusiasm, my own contribution to nature has extended to my two allotments here in Fladbury where I have created my own orchard (defined as five trees or more), allocated over 200 square metres of land to a wildflower patch where a range of both annual and perennial wildflowers are grown. Insect habitats and bird boxes are deployed and our resident Kestrel is encouraged to control mice. The use of pesticides is avoided where possible often to the detriment of my produce! And what is wrong with letting the odd onion, carrot or parsnip go to flower, the insects certainly don't mind.

One final point regarding the existence of VLHT is that their ownership of land pretty much guarantees that land will not be developed and it is not their intention to raise assets from the sale of their land. This is very comforting for someone like me who lives in a village which is partly surrounded by VLHT owned sites and is a constant target for developers. As far as the future is concerned, I can only assume VLHT's purchase of land will continue thanks to generous support of Severn Waste Services and other grants and donations. This also comes with a maintenance burden which is where we as volunteers play a major role. Sadly none of us are getting any younger and we need new blood to run our pool of volunteers. Anyone with any spare time on their hands would be most welcome to join us.

*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, so far, over 320 acres.*

### Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The UK Government acknowledges that we need to do more to recover nature and increase the benefits it provides to our people and our economy. The gov.uk website states that “DEFRA and Natural England are bringing together partners, legislation, and funding to create the Nature Recovery Network (NRN). Together, we will deliver the Network by restoring and enhancing England’s wildlife-rich places. The NRN will be a national network of wildlife-rich places. Our aim is to expand, improve and connect these places across our cities, towns, countryside and coast”. As part of the information gathering stages, VLHT has been invited to contribute to Worcestershire’s Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) – this is part of a new, England-wide system of spatial strategies that will establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature’s recovery and provide wider environmental benefits. VLHT is a small organisation (two members of staff) but we are hopeful that we can feed into the county’s LNRS, to help provide details about our priorities including the importance of old orchards as wildlife habitat. Hopefully we can make time to be part of this important stage of the UK’s nature recovery.

### Tony’s Meadow

At the beginning of the year, we were really pleased to be able to purchase another small grassland site in Fladbury. This 3-acre field lies adjacent to Mill Bank Meadows and offers another opportunity to restore grassland to flower-rich meadow. Extending existing sites increases the area for biodiversity without adding greatly to the management burden. Grazing the area with sheep will continue while we decide the best way forward with the restoration project. We are very grateful to Severn Waste Services for making this purchase possible with a grant through the Landfill Communities Fund.

### North Littleton Community Orchard extension



North Littleton clearance

North Littleton Community Orchard and Nature Reserve (NLCO) holds a high vantage point up above the river Avon over-looking the Vale of Evesham. When VLHT purchased the land in 2013 it was unmanaged fallow land offering a blank canvas to create a new orchard and nature reserve. The orchard planting is focussing on local heritage varieties of apples, pears and plums on a wide traditional grid. The grassland is responding well, increasing the number of wildflowers and associated insects (including pollinators). A small area of land adjacent was being ‘abused’, used for ploughing-in unwanted vegetables including plastic wrappings, fly-tipping and bonfires, so when the opportunity arose to purchase the site we jumped at the chance. Over the last few months with the help of our wonderful volunteers and

some initial clearing by contractors, we have transformed this area of waste ground. We have planted about 500 native trees and shrubs along the boundary, and we have planted fruit trees to extend the tiny remnant orchard that remained onsite. An area of bramble has been left as winter bird roost and to provide habitat for nesting birds and we plan to spread wildflowers and grass seed and possibly sow winter bird forage to help the local farmland birds survive the winter months. We still have a lot of work to do, clearing rubble and we will be harvesting plastic for years to come, but the site is now protected and will begin to recover, improving the area for people while providing a home to wildlife.



*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.*



### **Friends**

We have a small but increasing number of Friends, who generously support our work through a regular donation. Although we produce fruit in our orchards and offer grazing licences for our grasslands, we manage all of our sites with wildlife as the main focus. This means that we do not bring in as much income as we would if we managed our land intensively. As uncertainty continues over farm payments we will need to find alternative forms of income. So please consider signing up as a Friend of VLHT, a standing order form can be downloaded from our website or if you would like a paper copy let me know and I will post you one.

### **Legacies**

Leaving a gift in your Will is one of the best ways you can help us ensure that the heritage and wildlife of the Vale of Evesham are protected, giving generations to come the chance to enjoy and benefit from a flourishing and diverse landscape full of wildlife.

No matter how big or small, every single gift counts particularly as we are a small charity meaning even a little gift can have a large, positive impact. All gifts will be used to directly support the work of the Trust. From the acquisition of new nature reserves so that we can provide a permanent haven for the wildlife that calls the Vale home, to funding the work required to care for these precious places, and the purchase of the tools and equipment that make it possible.

If you wish to leave us a Gift in your Will, all you will need to do is instruct your solicitor or professional Will writer to include us, and they will do the rest. They will need:

Full name: Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Registered Charity Number: 1080109

Address: Evesham Volunteer Centre, The Lodge, Brick Kiln Street, Evesham, Worcestershire, WR11 4AA

### **Online Giving**

Don't forget that we have an online donations page — Give as You Live. More details are available on our website <https://valetrust.weebly.com/donations—fundraising.html>

### **Facebook**

Our Facebook page is continuing to increase its reach. The number of 'likes' and 'shares' are increasing and this helps to get our name out to a much wider audience. So if you use social media please visit and 'like' our Facebook page and help spread the word.

### **Education**

We are now in a position to offer educational visits to our sites. We are hoping to engage with young people to teach them about orchards; their management, different types of fruit, wildlife of orchards etc. We have been busy putting safeguarding procedures in place and we are presently putting together a programme to offer to schools and colleges. This will need to be small scale to start with and will target some of our key priorities such as old orchards. Hopefully we can increase awareness of these special places and help to equip the next generation of orchard champions. If you would like to know more, or would like to arrange a session please get in touch.

### **Stocken pruning and Mistletoe**

We have been carrying out our annual pruning at Stocken Orchard. Each year we prune one quarter of the orchard aided by our volunteers to ensure the trees continue to produce apples while retaining some of the features essential for wildlife, such as dead twigs and branches. It is interesting to see how well the Mistletoe is increasing in the orchard now, so much so that we can't avoid cutting some out while pruning.



Stocken restored by volunteers

We found evidence of the leaf-mining Mistletoe Marble Moth *Celypha woodiana* in the orchard this year for the first time. The caterpillars of this little moth feed in mines in the Mistletoe leaves leaving quite a distinctive pattern which we found in a few leaves. According to the UK Moths website this is rare and local, confined to mature apple orchards in parts of southern England and the south Midlands. The larva feeds on Mistletoe from September, mining the leaves and forming large blotch or blister. When quite young, the larva overwinters in the mine, continuing its feeding in the spring. The adult moths are on the wing in July and August and can be found resting on trunks during the day. So hopefully we might see the actual moths later in the year.



*Celypha woodiana* leaf mine on mistletoe

### **Bird Records from Lower Moor & Haines Meadows November 2022 – March 2023**

Rob Prudden

Common wintering wildfowl remained throughout the period with highest counts of 135 **Wigeon**, 120 **Teal**, & 26 **Shoveler**. Other waterfowl included 6 **Goosanders** fishing along the river on several dates in late December & early January. A pair of Eurasian **Shelduck** on 26<sup>th</sup> December were an unusual mid-winter record for this species, while a much scarcer **Ruddy Shelduck** flew over with a small flock of **Canada Geese** at dusk on 3<sup>rd</sup> November. **Lapwings** were present in good numbers with c500 present daily at the turn of the year, heavy flooding on 24<sup>th</sup> December brought extra birds from elsewhere swelling the resident flock to an impressive c950. Up to c300 **Golden Plover** often associated with the mobile flock, a single **Dunlin** was more unexpected joining the throng on 22<sup>nd</sup> November. Other wintering waders included up to 25 **Snipe**, with three much scarcer and much more elusive **Jack Snipe** on 1<sup>st</sup> December.

A winter wild bird feed crop alongside Haines Meadows attracted a flock of up to 200 **Linnets**, 65 **Chaffinches**, 60 **Reed Buntings**, 20 **Greenfinches** & 30 **Goldfinches**. The concentration of small farmland birds inevitably attracted hunting raptors with up to 3 **Sparrowhawks** & a much scarcer female **Merlin** on 15<sup>th</sup> November & 1<sup>st</sup> January, then on 11<sup>th</sup> a male & female were hunting together. **Red Kites** become ever more regular visitors & were seen over the meadows on ten dates with **Buzzards** & **Kestrels** seen daily.

A **Great White Egret** was fishing in the shallows alongside the riverbank on 7<sup>th</sup> November, while another three flew over together in a south easterly direction early morning on 22<sup>nd</sup> January. **Cormorants** continued to day roost in a favoured tree alongside the island with up to an impressive 28 some days.

Although once just a summer visitor, **Chiffchaffs** now over winter in the UK in ever larger numbers; a favoured area for this species at Lower Moor is the reedbed alongside the anglers' carpark and birds were seen here daily. A ringing session on 20<sup>th</sup> January caught 24 different **Chiffchaffs** including an eastern race individual. On 22<sup>nd</sup> January 19 birds were caught, 14 of these new & un-ringed. Because most Chiffchaffs look alike it is easy to presume just a small number of wintering birds are present in the area, but these figures obviously disprove this. Also trapped here was a first winter female **Firecrest**, a very scarce bird and only the second record for the Lower Moor recording area, the first being as far back as 1<sup>st</sup> January 2000. During its stay it was very elusive but present from at least 2<sup>nd</sup> December – 3<sup>rd</sup> January, during this time it loosely associated with up to 3 **Goldcrests** and at times a flock of roaming **Long-tailed Tits**. At the end of December c650 **Black Headed Gulls** massed each night to roost on the river flash, on 26<sup>th</sup> December they were joined by an adult **Kittiwake**, a scarce bird at the site in recent years, small numbers of **Great Black Backed Gulls** also roosted around this time. Two **Water Rails** were resident along the Lench Ditch near the carpark, with **Grey Wagtails** also seen feeding on Winter Gnats here on several occasions. **Kingfishers** were noted on three dates, with a pair of wintering **Stonechats** on four dates.

During January & February a male **Tawny Owl** was calling to proclaim his chosen nesting territory alongside the island most evenings.

Small numbers of **Shelduck** were resident from the beginning of the year until the end of March with the highest count of six on 5<sup>th</sup> February. Large numbers of **Canada & Greylag Geese** are always present throughout the winter months, these at times decoy other more interesting passing birds down, this year an unusual **Canada/Barnacle Goose** hybrid was seen on several dates, while a wandering **Pink Footed Goose** was present just for the day on 6<sup>th</sup> March. Flooding on 16<sup>th</sup> March brought 18 **Shoveler** & a pair of **Pintail** to the River Flash while a male **Goosander** was at the leisure park on 14<sup>th</sup> March.



Canada Goose



Goosander

Spring visitors had started to arrive at the beginning of February with a pair of **Oystercatchers** on 6<sup>th</sup>, they were then seen daily throughout and by late March were keenly territorial at a breeding site at the leisure park. A **Green Sandpiper** was seen on 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> February, then again daily from 1<sup>st</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> March. A male **Curlew** was present from 20<sup>th</sup> - 23<sup>rd</sup> February, sadly although it sang & displayed over the site on numerous occasions it failed to attract a passing female, and what was presumably the same male was again alone on 29<sup>th</sup> March. The first **Avocet** of the year arrived early on 21<sup>st</sup> February & was then followed by five more on the more typical date of 3<sup>rd</sup> March, a pair were then

present from 15<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> March with two pairs daily from 18<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup>. A male **Mandarin Duck** flew over the River Flash towards the Leisure Park early morning on 27<sup>th</sup> March. The first **Swallow** is always keenly anticipated & this year occurred during very overcast wet weather on 28<sup>th</sup> March, amazing!

Small numbers of **Brown Hares** are resident on the south side of the river & during March up to six were regularly seen sparring or chasing each other around. **Otters** were noted along the river on five dates. Although elusive & shy, up to 10 **Roe Deer** are resident in the area and are best seen early mornings when feeding in small groups along the meadows.

Rob has been birdwatching around Lower Moor for 40 years and his observations were recently written up and published in Worcestershire Recorders' magazine (Worcestershire Record number 50). A re-print of Rob's article can be downloaded from VLHT's website <https://valetrust.weebly.com/wildlife.html>.

For more information about how to join Worcestershire Recorders and how to receive their magazine visit <https://www.wbrc.org.uk/WORCRECORDERS/>



## VALE LANDSCAPE HERITAGE TRUST

Evesham Volunteer Centre, Brick Kiln Street, Evesham, Worcestershire, WR11 4AA

[valetrust@outlook.com](mailto:valetrust@outlook.com)

<http://valetrust.weebly.com>

07794 835 953