

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Summer (May to August) 2023



It's been a while since our last newsletter but we haven't been idling our time away, in fact it has been one of the busiest periods I have known at the Trust in my nine and a bit years here. We had our annual audit from ENTRUST, the organisation tasked with ensuring all the Landfill Communities Fund money is spent in accordance with the rules. I was very happy to be able to report back to our trustees that we came through with no issues and no actions required. We had our usual trip to the dark side with Basic Payment Scheme claims and another Countryside Stewardship application being approved. Or at least I thought it was until I was reminded to submit the application, which had already been submitted and approved. Enough said on that subject. Other than to report that we now have all of our available land under Countryside Stewardship agreements which brings in much needed funds to help us manage the sites. The future of this funding however is still as clear as mud.

On the subject of funding, we were over the moon with the response we received to our crowd funding appeal through Aviva's Save our Wild Isles Community Fund. For every pound donated, Aviva gave two pounds making it possible for us to reach our target of £2,000 in just two weeks!! This continued and we reached an amazing £3,328 by the closing date. Thank you very much for the generous donations and all the kind words left on the donations page, including:

"Well done to all at VLHT and thank you for all your hard work in the Vale"

"Please save Evesham's orchards, their blossom and fruit are wonderful"

"This Trust does wonderful work and creates and maintains beautiful wild spaces for locals and visitors to enjoy. I especially loved the abundant yellow rattle seen earlier this summer"

"I admire all the conservation work done and community events held by Vale Landscape Heritage Trust. They are truly an honest charity who teach us how to care for our environment and show us the beauty that surrounds us"

If you missed the Aviva fundraising challenge but still want to give, please visit our online donations page at - <https://donate.giveasyoulive.com/charity/vale-landscape-heritage-trust>

Thank You



Many of our projects are funded by Severn Waste Services through the Landfill Communities Fund. Without their support we could not care for so many acres of the Vale's heritage.



Volunteers



Not a bad view from the office. Volunteers at Hipton Hill

It is often said to the point of tedium that volunteers “are the lifeblood of the organisation” or “we couldn’t do what we do without our wonderful volunteers” but the simple truth is “they are” and “we couldn’t”. Our volunteers, sorry, our wonderful volunteers meet every Wednesday morning come rain or shine to carry out any tasks thrown at them, without so much as a grumble of disapproval (ok I’m stretching it now). Tasks typically last three hours and there is always

time for a cuppa, and very often cake. There is rarely any rush, preferring to do a job properly and safely but it’s surprising just what can be achieved. We recently had our annual “thank you” BBQ at Hipton Hill and 22 of our volunteers attended this year. Looking around at the gathering it struck me just how different their backgrounds are and that most of these people would never have met if it wasn’t for their shared interest in the natural world and the heritage of the Vale, coming together to give their time for a single cause; conserving some of the Vale’s most precious heritage and wildlife. One task we try to carry out every year is a count of Hipton Hill’s Greater Butterfly Orchids *Platanthera chlorantha*. This elegant, white orchid has suffered gradual but protracted decline across Britain and Ireland (BSBI Online Plant Atlas 2020), so Hipton offers a rare opportunity to see large numbers of this species. Counting in the orchard blocks where the orchid is most numerous gives us an idea of how well they are doing on site as a whole, but numbers can vary greatly from year to year. Three years ago we counted 300 spikes, which is quite impressive until you realise that there had been 2,000 the year before. We had started grazing with sheep over the winter starting the previous year so there was concern that the change in management could have had a serious detrimental effect. The grazing is needed to help reduce some of the dominant ‘less-desirable weeds’ such as Hogweed and Wild Parsnip, so we continued with the new management regime and were very relieved to see the orchids back in good numbers this year; we counted around 3,000 spikes! During the eight months of this year so far our volunteers have taken part in 31 Wednesday tasks with 259 ‘participants’ averaging three hours per task, totalling 777 hours. As well as this, they have helped at events selling cider, juice and plums while promoting the work of the Trust. Why not come along one Wednesday morning and give it a try.

Why I volunteer for Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Tony Stickland

I am from an agricultural background and feel that the diversity in agriculture and the countryside is being lost due to globalisation of food production. A healthy environment is a diverse environment with many different species and varieties of the crops grown alongside wildlife increasing biodiversity. Therefore, with that simple premise VLHT tick many of the boxes for me when looking to donate my time to a good cause. Maintaining and increasing diversity, both by preserving and increasing local fruit varieties and also conserving and increasing the wildlife that exists within the landscape.

It excites me that there are orchards containing old and rare varieties and wildflower meadows with species struggling to maintain a foothold in the vale, under VLHT stewardship that are being preserved and maintained for present and future generations. VLHT manage land in a way that provides oases of biodiversity across the Vale within the wider agricultural landscape. VLHT are providing a fantastic environmental and genetic resource to the Vale and further afield, that would otherwise be lost. This is why I wanted to try and help them in their quest by volunteering.

In addition to the above, I volunteer because I enjoy the countryside and being out in the open. It is great to experience the work of VLHT at close quarters, seeing the wildlife, the rare plants the places that I have never been to before. Highlights include seeing the Vale from Hipton Hill for the first time was a revelation, and marvelling at carpets of orchids that are so rarely seen these days and learning how to graft apple varieties onto root stocks. I enjoy volunteering because it is a great opportunity to meet likeminded people, also Gary and Ben are so knowledgeable I rarely leave a



Tony helping to sow wildflower seed at Mill Bank Meadows

volunteer day without learning something new. The work parties are an excellent way to dip your toe into the world of conservation which is not to say it is not hard work as it can be, but it is also very satisfying and life affirming to be part of such a positive process.

Volunteering is not all work and no play, and there is plenty of time to get to know the other volunteers who are very friendly and always welcoming to new members. So please do not give it a second thought, try something new, get a good breath of fresh air in your lungs and keep fit while enjoying the best that the countryside of the Vale has to offer!

Events

We have been trying to reach greater numbers of people in the local area to promote the work of the Trust this year. As part of the Blossom Trail's 40th Anniversary we were joined at Hipton Hill by journalists who helped us plant six Purple Pershore Plum trees. And these young trees were looking very healthy at the time of writing. We took part in the open days at Evesham Abbey Trust's wonderful gardens at the Abbey site. We held a series of walks at Hipton Hill and Fladbury to show off 'our' wildflowers and butterflies. We attended Bish-Bosh-Bash at Bishampton, the Littletons Fete, Fladbury Walk-a-bout, the Battle of Evesham, and joined the Evesham Rambling Festival to lead walkers around some of our sites. We also joined members of the Severn Waste Services team on a stand at the Three Counties Show. This three day event attracts thousands of visitors from all over the country (and beyond), so we were able to introduce VLHT to a whole new audience.

Then as August arrived came plum-madness. Picking from Hipton and Hampton we were able to sell plums in Pershore every Saturday through the month, culminating in the Bank Holiday weekend when Pershore goes plum-crazy. A very special thank you must go to our wonderful volunteers who helped at every stage, including answering a late night plea to "pick more plums" on a Sunday morning when we found our stock to be very low ahead of a sale day. A huge "congratulations" must also go to the organisers and volunteers of Pershore Plum Festival, a more dedicated bunch you will struggle to find.

Before the dust has settled after the plum season (not that there has been much dust this summer) we are turning our attentions to apples. Hopefully we will be picking from Naunton Court Orchard again to produce another batch of lovely apple juice, before collecting cider apples from Stocken to sell to local cider producers. I must thank Pershore Press for their help and support with our juice and cider endeavours.

Littleton Pastures drainage

Our lovely old medieval ridge and furrow site in the Littletons continues to have problems with drainage and flooded paths. We are waiting for specialist contractors to start work to re-connect the spring waters with the ditch where it used to flow. This will improve habitat while making the experience of walking round the site much more pleasant. We are very hopeful that this work will be done before the winter. Watch this space.

North Littleton Community Orchard extension update

In the Spring 2023 edition of this newsletter, we reported that VLHT had purchased an area of abused land adjacent to their North Littleton Community Orchard. The worst of the rubbish had been cleared by



contractors and so our volunteer set about clearing the remaining rubble and other rubbish. They then planted a new hedge and increased the orchard planting.

There is still quite a lot of work to be done and we need to take care not to be over-tidy as the many farmland birds in the area have benefitted from the weed seeds this year. The site is also alive with grasshoppers and other grassland insects which would have provided food for nestlings.

Welcome to our first intern

We are delighted to say that we have been joined by our very first intern. Amy will be with us for 12 months, helping with the general maintenance of the sites and she will also be setting up a survey, monitoring and recording project to help us better understand how our management is affecting the wildlife on our sites. And with 2024 marking VLHT's 25th anniversary and also marking 20 years of partnership working with Severn Waste Services, it's a perfect time to be able to report on our successes and to celebrate our achievements.

A musical interlude

Stocken Orchard was looking wonderful in early summer, with the blossom showing well and an abundance of Common Spotted Orchids along with other wildflowers blooming under the trees. So when we were contacted by a couple of musicians asking if we had a site they could record a video we didn't have to think very hard. The results can be found by following this link which takes you to their Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/thestringofroses/videos>
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=985140822506012>



The large, lanky lagomorph

Brown Hare *Lepus europaeus* is a widespread and locally common species. Most country folk will have seen a Hare or maybe a group of 'boxing' Hares. But this large, lanky, lagomorph has declined across the country due to persecution and changes to agricultural practices. So we are really pleased that we are seeing more Hares on a few of our sites. They remain vulnerable to disturbance and persecution but at least we are offering the right habitat for this handsome mammal. Did you know:



Brown Hares are occasionally seen at some of our sites

The Brown Hare is not native to Britain, but was introduced during the Iron Age which began around 750BC and lasted until the coming of the Romans in AD43 (University of Warwick website).

They can run at speeds up to 45mph (<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org> website).

Their young, known as leverets are born with fur and their eyes are open unlike Rabbits whose young are born helpless. This is because Hares don't dig burrows, but instead they give birth in a small depression in the ground known as a form, and so the young need to be mobile very soon after birth. Because of this they are often killed by farm machinery, especially where grass is cut several times for silage rather than being left for hay.

Hares prefer open fields with good hedgerows or areas of fallow land. The mixed farmlands in the past suited the species well, but modern monoculture does not provide areas for feeding and breeding. Many of our sites now have wide hedgerows or areas of tussock grasses and scrub which benefits the Hares and many other species of wildlife.

Hares are creatures of myth and were symbols of abundance, prosperity and good fortune. The Celts would not eat their flesh, and Celtic myths and legends often told of shapeshifting Hares who could transform into humans. The Welsh believed that Hares could transform from doe to buck and back. They were believed to be able to pass under moonlight from the human world to the realms of the Gods. This belief continued and Hares were thought to be witches' familiars or even witches themselves. Pagans believed that seeing a moon-gazing Hare would bring growth, re-birth, and abundance, new beginnings and good fortune. Hares were unlucky for sailors, as they were bringers of storms, although what a Hare would be doing out at sea I have no idea. Queen Boudicca is said to have prayed to a Hare Goddess before going into battle with the Romans.

Wherever Hares originated and whether they are shapeshifters or Easter Bunnies is not important, it is just wonderful to know that with a little help they can still call the Vale home.

Bird sightings at Lower Moor Wetlands April – August 2023.

Rob Prudden

April – June 2023 turned out to be a particularly rewarding period with several scarce birds turning up. It started well when heavy flooding across the meadows during the first week of April brought a **Cattle Egret** to the site on 1st. Although numbers of this species are increasing nationally this is only the second record for Lower Moor, the first being in June 2017.

Wintering waterfowl were late to leave this year with the last few **Teal** still around in the first week of May. Ten **Shoveler** were still present on 23rd April, they normally move away for the summer months so up to three birds seen occasionally throughout May & June were unusual. **Wigeon** are normally early to leave so a male on 23rd & 24th April was unexpected as were a pair of **Pintail** also on 23rd. Up to eight **Shelduck** were present from the beginning of April through to 12th May, a single pair then remained through until 18th June, but there was no evidence of breeding this year.

Most summer visitors were slow to arrive, held up by cold, wet conditions on the continent prior to their crossing of the channel. The first **Swallow** arrived on 6th April & was followed later in the month by **Whitethroat, Lesser Whitethroat, Reed Warbler, Willow Warbler & Sedge Warbler**. A single **Garden Warbler** sang continuously from willows alongside the Lench Ditch from 20th May – 11th June.

A male **Cuckoo** arrived on 23rd April it then sang daily until 30th June but worryingly no others appeared and it failed to find a mate.

Spring wader passage is always eagerly awaited, and this year did not disappoint with up to six **Avocets** present daily from 1st April – 3rd June, a single pair then remained until the end of the month.

A male **Curlew** was holding a territory and prospecting for a mate on the meadows between 1st & 24th April but unfortunately was unsuccessful. On 27th June a migrant pair from elsewhere flew over the area south-west, presumably heading for wintering sites around the Severn Estuary or beyond.

A pair of **Oystercatchers** nested at the leisure park, with off duty adult birds visiting the wetlands regularly to wash and brush up throughout April and May. From 27th May – 30th June the pair were seen most days at the river flash with two fledged juveniles.

Spring wader passage generally occurs within a very small window, normally during the last week of April & the first week of May. Passage birds tend to be in a hurry in the springtime staying at most for a couple of days, but often just a few hours. These stopovers are made to rest and feed up before continuing their arduous journeys, driven on by the need to reach their breeding areas, these migrations may involve several thousand miles. This year the passage period coincided with several days of easterlies, which normally brings a few surprises. Small numbers of **Little Ringed Plovers** were seen regularly with other brief visitors including a **Ringed Plover** from 26th – 28th April, three **Dunlin**, a **Redshank**, three **Greenshank**, a fly over **Whimbrel**, two **Common Sandpipers** and a female **Ruff**. Unexpected late passage migrants included a **Snipe** on 17th May, then a smart **Wood Sandpiper** and two *tundra* **Ringed Plovers** on 27th.

By far the rarest wader during the period was a **PECTORAL SANDPIPER** that arrived with two **Dunlin** mid-morning on 28th April, it was still present at dusk but as expected left overnight with no sign at dawn next morning. This species is a long-distance migrant, breeding around the Arctic coasts from Alaska to Hudson Bay in Canada, and on boggy tundra in Arctic Siberia. Very small numbers are seen in the UK each year, most of these in the autumn, with spring (particularly April) records being unusual.

Other interesting passage birds in April & early May included two 1st winter **Little Gulls**, 2 male **White Wagtails**, eight **Yellow Wagtails**, two male **Whinchats**, and two female **Wheatears**.

A pair of **Garganey** were present from 7th – 10th May, this being the first site record of this species for seventeen years & the first ever female.

Ravens breed annually at a traditional site in tall trees in an overgrown area alongside the meadows, this year the adults were feeding continuously to a noisy brood of four hungry near fledged juveniles by the end of April. **Red Kites** were seen on six dates while a male **Peregrine Falcon** circled over the site during a period of thunderstorms in mid-June. A **Hobby** dashed through high up over the site causing instant panic on 25th June, although relatively small, the general Peregrine-like-shape was enough to induce hysteria amongst most loafing birds on the flash. **Little Egrets** are not normally seen during the early summer months so two birds from 16th – 25th May were unusual. A male **Mandarin Duck** was bathing on the flash at dusk on 5th June. **Green Sandpipers** tend to be early southerly bound passage migrants so a bird on 9th & 10th June was not a total surprise but does represent the earliest southern bound bird ever to the site by two days, two more were present at the end of the month. More surprising was an early migrant **Greenshank** that flew south over the area in the hours of darkness at 22.00hrs on 16th June, instantly identified by its nocturnal flight call. Small numbers of post breeding **Lapwings** had started to arrive back in the second week of June, numbers then grew daily to reach just over a hundred by the end of the month. Although many of these early birds

will have been failed breeders from elsewhere some success was achieved locally on the wetlands with about six pairs nesting and fledging up to nine juveniles. A passage **Redshank** joined the **Lapwing** flock for a few hours on 12th June, while the first three wintering **Teal** were already back on 22nd June.



Caspian Tern at Lower Moor 26.06.23. Photos by Brian Stretch

An adult **CASPIAN TERN** was a surprise at the river flash from mid-day on 26th June. The nearest colonies of this the largest tern in the world are located around the Baltic & Black Seas. In the UK it is a very rare vagrant. After looking a little edgy when it first arrived it settled down & spent the rest of the day loafing on the muddy back shoreline with a small group of **Black Headed Gulls**. It was last seen flying off upstream of the river at 20.50hrs. This is only the second ever county record, the first being a bird at Upton Warren NR fifty-two years previously on 29th July 1971.

Roe Deer are resident around the meadows with double figures seen at times, **Fallow Deer** are much scarcer so a huge antlered stag with two hinds was more unusual. **Muntjacs** were also seen or heard regularly. Other mammals seen included three pairs of **Brown Hares** and the first **Stoat** for several years.

JULY & AUGUST.

After several scarce species had been seen during the spring & early summer period, as expected midsummer was a much quieter affair. The local breeding **Oystercatchers** remained with their two fledged juveniles until 26th July.

A flock of c160 post breeding **Lapwings** roosted & loafed daily throughout the whole period, while night roosting **Black Headed Gull** numbers rose daily to a peak of c285 by mid-August. Two **Common Terns** were seen fishing & carrying small fish off from the river from 10th – 22nd July, they were then seen daily with two newly fledged juveniles from 23rd – 12th August.

Other interesting birds during July included a hunting **Barn Owl** at dusk on two dates & two **Little Egrets**.

Passerine numbers were generally very poor but included a bedraggled migrant female **Whinchat** on a wet day at the end of the month, while worryingly just a single migrant **Redstart** was seen briefly on 10th August. Birds of prey during the period included a pair of **Kestrels** feeding three near fledged juveniles in a purpose-built box, a **Red Kite**, **Hobbies** on three dates and an adult male **Peregrine**.

Wader passage was unspectacular but as expected did pick up in August. Birds included two **Black Tailed Godwits** on 20th July followed by another eight on 3rd August, then two juveniles on 22nd, one of these finding the site to its liking, remaining from to 29th. Other August records included a juvenile **Curlew** that dropped in for a brief wash and brush-up on 3rd before leaving southwest. An early **Snipe** dropped into rank vegetation along the back shoreline of the River Flash on 4th with c10 present by the end of the month. Two **Dunlin** were seen, a juvenile on 8th followed by an adult the following day. A juvenile **Ruff** arrived mid-morning on 18th

finding suitable feeding conditions and remained until 21st. A lone and very mobile **Green Sandpiper** was around all day on 19th. A female **Yellow Wagtail** was seen on 3rd August, then as in previous years up to twelve post breeding birds fed on disturbed insects around the hooves of the herd of cattle from 12th – 26th August. A **Little Egret** flew down river alongside the island on 27th August with a **Kingfisher** in the same area early morning on 28th.

Read Rob's account of 40 years birding in the Vale (originally published in Worcestershire Record issue 50) available on our website - <https://valetrust.weebly.com/wildlife.html>.

Let's finish with a riddle to see if you have been paying attention:

Riddle, what am I?

by Jenny Hope

I lick my face from the plate of the moon,
come clean to reflect on the fleece-white glow.
I've not time for sleep, much to do. Livestock
ought a hex or two, perhaps a visit.

Sailors curse me. At sea I cause a storm,
whilst on land, if I hold straight, scare-wits
shiver. I speak with stark ungodly cry,
run long bones ragged, cut through the parish.

Another trick? I make chaste brides turn from church;
let stretched shadows hound me from my form.
For thirst I'll suck your cattle, bone and dry.
But to sup my flesh may snare both sorrow
and despair. Life furrows the old straight track
as I shift, from back to doe, buck and back.

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