

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Winter newsletter
January 2015

Apple Harvest at Stocken – we did it

As reported in our last newsletter we were planning to harvest the apples at Stocken and after many problems with machinery, ground conditions and access we managed our first ever cider apple harvest – about 15 tonnes! This went to various customers including Wrenbury Cider who came all the way from Cheshire, Pershore College, who will be producing some cider of our own (which we need after the problems) and the bulk went to Bulmers. The money raised will help us to manage the orchard, to improve it for the fruit harvest and the wildlife it supports. It was not without problems. The early variety of apples, Somerset Redstreak, ripened before we were ready and the main variety Dabinette, were ripe while fencing was being installed and we were having work carried out to improve drainage and access. Our new harvester got stuck in the mud and the tree shaker sank into the mud while being fitted to the tractor. The main haulier couldn't access the site for collection due to a large overhanging willow and the lorry was too high for our harvester to load. But we got by with a little help from our friends and we must thank Pattenden Machines for their help and support, Jeffery Transport for their patience and Richard Icke for coming to the rescue with the loading. Hopefully we have ironed out all of the problems in 2014 and look forward to the 2015 harvest.



We have now started pruning the trees in the orchard to increase the apples that are produced while making sure the orchard is still wildlife-friendly. In March we will have a horse logger working in the orchard to help with the management of the site. More about that in our next newsletter.

Apple Orchards in Winter

We only really notice apple orchards in spring when the blossom covers the trees or in autumn when the glossy red apples hang ripe for picking, but these man-made habitats provide a vital winter refuge for wildlife. They are often left undisturbed for much of the winter apart from some pruning or tidying up, so wildlife can

make the most of any missed apples on the trees or on the orchard floor. This is particularly important for wintering birds such as Fieldfares and Redwings which migrate to Britain from Scandinavia and Russia. Fieldfares are the larger of the two and are smart looking members of the thrush family. They are slightly larger than a Blackbird and have a brown back, buff coloured speckled breast and a grey head and lower back (rump). The Redwing is slightly smaller and is overall more plain coloured but with a speckled breast. The feature which gives the birds their name is a bright orange/red patch underneath their wings which is just visible when at rest. Their calls are also quite distinctive; Redwings have a high-pitched short whistle which can often be heard as they migrate overhead at night, and Fieldfares make a loud 'chuck-chuck-chuck' cackle. So if you are near an old apple orchard this winter listen out for these birds and think about the distance that they have travelled to be with us and the fact that they need to feed well to be able to return home in spring.



Fieldfare

Honeybees

Honeybees are familiar insects known as honey-producers as well as important pollinators of our crops and flowers. There can be thousands in a colony, mostly female workers which are the ones most of us see. The workers look after the colony; collecting food, keeping the nest clean, feeding the young bees, tending the queen, and providing defence against predators and robbers. The colony is run by a single Queen bee. She lays all of the eggs that produce the next generation of bees, and produces chemicals that control the behaviour of the worker bees.

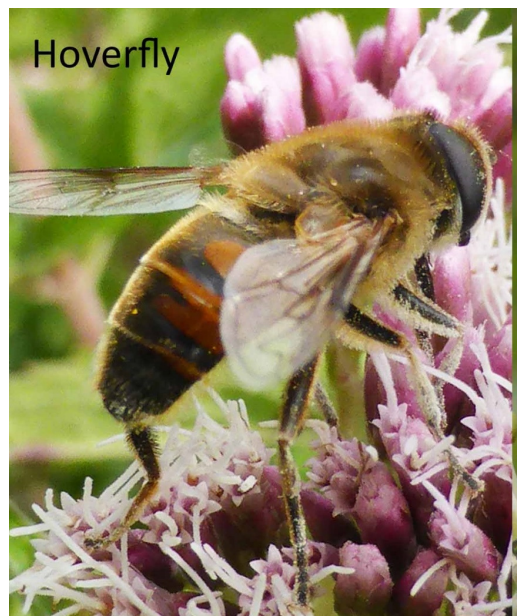
There are also a few male bees in a Honeybee colony and these are known as drones. At the end of the summer, the Males leave the colony in search of new Queens to form a new colony.

Honeybees live on stored honey which is a mixture of nectar from flowers and enzymes from the bees. Unlike all other British bees, a Honeybee colony must survive the winter without hibernating so they need to produce and store large amounts of honey and it is this ability that has made them popular with humans.



Did you know?

- Honeybees belong to a large group of insects which includes solitary bees, bumblebees, wasps and even ants.
- Bees have two stomachs; one for feeding themselves and one for storing and processing nectar to produce honey.
- There are probably no true 'wild' Honeybees left in Britain (although domesticated Honeybee colonies can sometimes survive in the wild).
- It is only the female bees that can sting.
- Many defenceless insects (including various hoverflies) mimic Honeybees to fool would-be predators.
- Honeybees collect pollen in special 'baskets' on their legs which is taken to the hive to feed the larvae.
- Beekeepers have several hives at our Hipton Hill orchard to help with the pollination of our fruit.



Volunteers

Our Wednesday volunteer sessions continue to be well supported (if you want to join us please see the end of this newsletter for contact details). We have been managing the scrub at Hipton this winter, clearing from around some of the old plum trees. This is good for the tree and also benefits some of the deadwood bugs that live in the trees, particularly the rare Noble Chafer beetle which we hope will colonise Hipton one day. Clearing the scrub also opens up the grassland which benefits the many wildflowers which provide food for the pollinators which in turn help to ensure a good fruit crop. We keep as much of the brash (brush wood) as we can and put it along the edges of the orchards as habitat for birds and other animals. We have also started this winter's fruit tree planting at Hipton to ensure that the orchard remains a prominent landscape feature for future generations to enjoy.

In Ian's Wood, our attractive plantation of broad-leaf trees near Bishampton, we have continued to thin out some of the crowded trees to let others grow better and also to allow woodland flowers to colonise. We are lucky to have had Pershore College students helping us this winter, practising their chainsaw use while carrying out essential management of the trees. There are a few Norway Maples in the plantation, which can spread rapidly, and there are already carpets of seedlings in some areas. We have been clearing the seedlings before they outcompete the native trees and wildflowers. This site is developing very nicely and we will continue to manage it as a native woodland which will attract even more wildlife into the area.



The Trust continues to grow

It is thanks again to the generous support of Severn Waste Services that we have purchased another field as part of our site adjacent to the Avon at Wick. We already own several fields on both sides of the river; Haines Meadows on the Wick side and the flood meadows at Lower Moor. This combined area is important for migrating birds, particularly waders (see report) as well as being an important landscape feature. There is no public access to the Wick site but there is a permissive path on the Lower Moor side of the river, giving fine views of this little piece of old England.

Three Counties Traditional Orchard Project

The Heritage Lottery will be funding a three-year project, managed, on behalf of a wide range of partners, by the Malvern Hills AONB. We are delighted that the project has been approved and can now go ahead. The project is aiming to restore some of the traditional orchards across the Three Counties - Gloucestershire, Worcestershire and Herefordshire – by helping local volunteers to help look after traditional orchards in their area. VLHT will be acting as a 'hub' for the project in Worcestershire, providing help, support and training for project volunteers. We are hoping that this will lead to more orchards being cared for across the area including sites in the Vale.

If you would like to get involved let us know or contact Malvern Hills AONB for further details.

Malvern Hills AONB Partnership: Email aonb@worcestershire.gov.uk or phone 01684 560616.



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.

Lower Moor Birds October to December 2014

The last sign of a disappearing summer was represented by a late Swallow on 9th October.

Stonechats have been scarce everywhere for the last few years due to several cold and wet winters devastating their numbers, so a female on 6th October and a pair from 9th November till the end of the year were very welcome, and signs of a good breeding season.

Golden Plover peaked at 81 in October dropping to 42 in November and rose to a peak of 420 in December before all moving further south by the end of the year.

Snipe numbers were generally low although a decent count of 46 in November bucked that trend.

Feral Geese were attracted to the area in large numbers to feed on a partially harvested maize crop, before loafing on the river meadows throughout the day time hours. Canada Geese peaked at a new site record of 1246 in the first week of November, with Greylags at 320.

Winter visiting ducks built up over the period with maximums of 180 Teal and 60 Wigeon resident.

A male Red Crested Pochard stayed in the area from 9th-18th November. It probably came from the feral breeding population at the Cotswold Water Park, from where small numbers tend to roam post-breeding.

Up to 6 Water Rails frequented river meadow ditches throughout.

Winter Thrushes continued to pass through at the beginning of the period, stopping to feast on hedgerow hawthorn berries and peaked at 900 Fieldfares and 700 Redwings in mid-November. Up to 8 Mistle Thrushes were also present around this time with Mistletoe berries being their food of choice.

Large numbers of Starlings feed at the nearby Landfill Site during the day time and on 3rd November about 10,500 chose to perform spectacularly for ten minutes over the river meadows late afternoon after leaving landfill and en-route to a roost site further south near Eckington.

A male Peregrine Falcon was seen attacking the Teal flock on two dates in late November, although its attempts did seem only half-hearted.

The warm early winter period enticed small numbers of Chiffchaffs to remain along the ditches and hedges. A cold snap in late December concentrated numbers in the area around the small reed bed near the car park. Here presumably heat from the STWs outfall had maintained a rich food source.

Through December, again probably due to the mild conditions, up to four male Tawny Owls could be heard calling in the area most evenings proclaiming their territories.

Up to four Bullfinches remained in the rough copse area alongside the Lench Ditch.

A Redshank with a flock of Lapwings on 19th November was an unseasonal record for this species as were two Green Sandpipers that found the unfrozen ground to their liking in late December.

Merlin have become scarce in recent years so a female dashing across the meadows heading to open arable land at Wick on 28th December was a good record to round off the year.



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Friends of VLHT

Friends of VLHT pay a regular amount each month or each year, which supports the important work saving and renovating old orchards and hay meadows and woodlands. For more details, please contact Gary Farmer at the office.

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 250 acres.