Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Autumn 2016

As in previous years, this summer was plum-madness. With the wet weather earlier in the summer and then hot weather the plum crop was excellent, just in time for the Pershore Plum Festival. It was just as well the crop was good, as the sunshine brought out thousands of people on Bank Holiday Monday. It was probably the busiest Plum Festival ever and we met lots of people interested in our work and sold out of plums! Five coach tours stopped off at Hipton Hill at the end of August to pick plums and admire the view of the beautiful Vale. It was a very successful season and we thank our volunteers and friends again for helping to pick and sell the fruit. And to top it off, the Pershore Plum Festival won the Best Event and Festival Award (Community) in the 2016 Herefordshire and Worcestershire Awards for Excellence. Congratulations to all involved.

Plum Varieties

The favourite plum of the Vale is without doubt the Victoria. It is not only good to eat, it looks beautiful as it ripens on the tree. Other favoured varieties include the early Czar, mid-season Purple Pershore and the late season Marjories Seedling. The Yellow Egg or Yellow Pershore plum is a favourite cooking plum which makes great jam. All these varieties along with a few Warwickshire Droopers and Giant Prunes grow at our orchard at Hipton Hill. We intend to continue planting these and other heritage variety plums trees for future generations to enjoy a taste of the Vale. If you would like to donate a tree or help with tree planting please get in touch. Contact details are on the back page.

Volunteers

Volunteers Plum Picking

It's been another busy few months for our wonderful volunteers; weeding our new hedges at North Littleton Community Orchard; watering the new trees there and at Naunton Orchard; clearing a blocked ditch and adding an extra railway sleeper to the pedestrian bridge at Littleton Pastures; removing an old fence ready for new stock-proof fencing at Littleton Meadows; tidying up at Stocken ready for the apple harvest, and they spent several mornings picking plums. We also had some extra help with mowing the orchards and grasslands which was greatly appreciated. Our winter work programme will include tree planting, cutting back overgrown areas and moving fallen plum trees which will be cut up and made in to wood-piles for creepy crawlies. If you'd like to get involved contact us to find out more.

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

Natural Pest Controls

We do not use any sprays on our sites, relying on nature to look after things for us instead. This means we have an army of volunteer pest-controllers on hand in the autumn, the most noticeable being the spiders. These eight-legged creatures need places to build their webs, somewhere to shelter, and food, all three of which our sites offer in abundance. Hedges and scrub are great places to find spiders and we are actively managing areas to allow scattered scrub to develop as well as planting new hedges. Some spiders also hunt amongst the piles of dead wood that we leave.

Orb-web Spider with Cranefly (lunch)

The orb-web spiders are often quite large and they spin the large typical spider webs. The webs are spun low down in bushes, hedgerows and flower beds. Their main food items are craneflies which can be abundant in late summer and early autumn. The common cranefly starts life as a grub in the soil where they can be a pest, feeding on the roots of plants including cereal crops and lawns.

House Spider

One group of spiders find us as often as we find them. These are the house spiders, which actually live outside usually, hiding in damp places such as under piles of deadwood and in holes made by larger animal. It is usually the males that enter our houses in late summer as they go wandering looking for females. Unfortunately, all too often rather than finding love they find the sole of someone's shoe! It would be far better to scoop them up in a cup and put them back outside so they can continue on their quest. The house spiders build untidy webs across the surface of bare ground or wood and lie in wait for lunch. The webs become most obvious in outbuildings and sheds as they fill up with dust and the remains of various spider-lunches.

Ivy Spider

Ivy spiders are tiny green spiders which spin a sheet web across an Ivy leaf or other (usually) evergreen shrub. The spider then hides under the web where they are hidden from view of would be predators. The web includes strands which are laid along the leaf which lets the spider know when lunch has landed. For such a small spider this species can catch relatively large prey, several times its own body weight. Check out your local Ivy patch and look for the distinctive little sheet-webs and with patience you might find the spider underneath.

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

Events and Activities

Gardeners' World at Hipton

VLHT was back on the TV in September, this time for an episode of Gardeners' World. The cameras spent one and a half days at Hipton Hill to record a short feature on plums including an interview with local fruit-expert and VLHT volunteer, John Edgeley, as well as filming our volunteers plum picking.

Moth Trapping

We had a fascinating night on 29th September at Cleeve Prior Heritage Trust's orchard, looking for bats and moths. The evening was quite cool but there were still a few bats flying, filling their bellies with midges, moths and beetles as they get ready to hibernate. Meanwhile we were lucky to have two moth experts running light-traps. These traps attract moths and catch them for identification without harming them. Some of the moths caught were surprisingly beautiful with extraordinary names such as Red-Green Carpet, Brimstone, Barred Sallow and Setaceous Hebrew Character.

Pollinator

On Friday 14th October, Worcestershire County Council (WCC) are organising the Worcestershire Pollinators Conference at The Hive (it had to be) in Worcester. The conference will include talks from various groups including Buglife, the invertebrate conservation charity. VLHT will also be there to talk about pollinator diversity in our orchards. So this should be an excellent opportunity for us to promote VLHT and the work we do in the Vale of Evesham and surrounding area. Booking deadline is Friday 7th October 2016 so not much time. For more information contact WCC on 01905 846852 or email rlashley@worcestershire.gov.uk

Bryo-what?

Continuing with our biological surveys, we were lucky to have some visits from local Bryologists (that's people who study mosses). Mosses are an important part of many habitats, often the first plants to arrive on bare surfaces including tree trunks. These provide feeding areas for invertebrates and nesting material for birds and bumblebees. Soil particles build up in the mosses which allows other plants to grow. Mosses are almost everywhere, yet we rarely stop to look. Their miniature stems and leaf-like structures can be quite beautiful when viewed with a lens. They all have unique features that (with practice and patience) make them quite distinctive and with names such as Bird's-claw Beard-moss, Dotted Thyme-moss and Frizzled Pincushion, how will you resist looking closely next time you see a moss-covered tree or wall?

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, nearly 300 acres.

Birds at Lower Moor/Wick Wetlands July – September 2016. R.Prudden

JULY

As expected the first post breeding **Redstarts** arrived to spend time feeding in riverside hedges in the last week of June, until the last bird was seen on 3rd September.

A pair of **Oystercatchers** that had bred at the nearby Leisure Park were seen feeding at the River Flash with 3 fledged juveniles till the 19th when they were seen to fly off to the south. Other wading birds seen during the month included 2 **Redshanks**, 6 **Little Ringed Plovers**, 3 **Common Sandpipers**, 2 **Green Sandpipers** and a lone **Black-tailed Godwit**. Meanwhile a pair of **Kestrels** bred on site and were seen with 3 fledged juveniles all month. Other birds of prey included a pair of **Sparrowhawks** feeding 2 juveniles at a nest site, a single **Hobby** seen on two dates mid- month, while a **Red Kite** was hunting low over the meadows at Wick in the first week of the month.

Yellow Wagtails have become scarce of late so a family party of 5 birds was unexpected. While a bird which is becoming more frequent, the **Little Egret** fished along the river at the beginning of the month, as did a lone **Common Tern**. The outstanding bird of the month was a **White Stork** which had taken up temporary residence at the nearby Landfill Site and was seen soaring high over Lower Moor on 12th and 18th.

AUGUST

Up to 6 **Yellow Wagtails** continued to be seen during the first two weeks.

An adult **Hobby** and two juveniles were hawking large insects together against a clear blue sky, high up over Wick on 9th. Wading birds were again present in small numbers with 4 **Greenshanks**, 2 **Redshanks**, a **Green Sandpiper**, juvenile **Little Ringed Plover**, up to 10 **Snipe** and an unusually long staying juvenile **Dunlin** from 19th August – 10th September. A **Little Egret** flew over north on 12th while a juvenile **Shelduck** was present on 12th and 13th. Migrant chats are always a favourite so 2 juvenile **Whinchats** and a juvenile **Wheatear** on perimeter fences on 28th were good to see.

SEPTEMBER

The first few **Lapwings** had returned in late June and had slowly built up to a maximum of 74 mid-month, while the first **Golden Plover** was not seen until 14th September as expected, this was followed by a small flock of 13 over-head on 26th. Other wading birds included a **Greenshank** then 2 juvenile female **Ruff** from 3rd – 15th, they were then joined by a juvenile male from 11th – 16th. A surprisingly late **Oystercatcher** was seen briefly on 27th. Another 8 **Whinchats** were seen mid-month, presumably they have had a good breeding season. Four more **Wheatear** were also seen during this period. Highlight of the month came mid-afternoon on the 11th when an **Osprey** caused panic amongst loafing birds as it flew low over the river flash. It then flew to the Leisure Park where it was seen hovering to fish briefly before dropping out of sight.

A juvenile **Black Tern** with a juvenile **Arctic Tern** spent several days at the Leisure Park at the end of the month.

Throughout the 3 month period **Barn Owls**, **Little Owls** and **Kingfishers** were seen on several dates.

VALE LANDSCAPE HERITAGE TRUST

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