

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Summer 2018



6-spot burnets on thistle

Thank you

Thank you to you all for responding to our General Data Protection Regulation request earlier in the year. We had a very positive response from the vast majority of our supporters and by the time you receive this newsletter I will have removed all data from our system except that which you have agreed for us to keep. It does mean that anyone who did not respond will have been removed from our Email list, so if you know of someone who wishes to receive our newsletters please ask them to get in touch.

Thank you also to our increasing number of 'Friends'. I can't contact you all separately but you can be sure that your donations are gratefully received and help VLHT to continue to grow.

Thank you also to our volunteers who continue to turn out in all weathers, even a few sessions of thistle-pulling in blistering sunshine failed to put them off!

All of this helps our organisation to continue to protect parts of the beautiful Vale.

Some like it hot OR every silver-lining has a cloud

It doesn't seem right that after a late start to the spring and since the snow, rain and winds finally ended we have been 'enjoying' wall to wall sunshine from mid-May through June and into July. This sudden change in temperature resulted in a terrific amount of vegetative growth in our grasslands with the coarser grasses towering over the finer meadow plants. It has been a contracted spring and early summer period with early flowering plants blooming at the same time as later flowering species. This was particularly noticeable at Hipton Hill with all four species of orchid in flower from early June and going over in just a couple of weeks. Grassland butterflies too seem to be having a bumper year with Ringlet, Marbled White and Meadow Brown on the wing in large numbers.

So it's good news, right? Well, yes and no; there's always a dark cloud even during bouts of glorious sunshine. Certainly the sunshine will have helped the insects which in turn will be pollinating our crops and flowers as well as providing food for the birds, but unfortunately the rapid grass growth and continued sunshine resulted in early hay cuts (making hay while the sun shines) which will have impacted on butterflies and grasshoppers and many, many more insects which did not have time to complete their life cycles.

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, just over 300 acres.

Ground nesting birds such as Skylarks and even Curlew are vulnerable to early hay cuts, removing their cover or directly killing the nestlings. Some of our sites have been cut after mid-June where we know there were no nesting birds. We leave wide, uncut margins for wildflowers and insects where possible and hold back cutting other areas as long as we can. This leaves us with the issue of invasive plants such as thistles, wild parsnip and ragwort, all of which are important plants for insects but not too popular with our neighbours. In this exceptional summer we will have to look at each site separately and work within our Stewardship agreements to deliver the best outcomes for wildlife while considering our neighbours.



Flower rich hay field margins at Littleton Meadows.

We have a site at North Littleton where we have been planting a new orchard and two new hedges over the last three winters and things were starting to look really good. That was until the prolonged hot spell and we started losing trees and hedgerow plants, including some from three winters ago which we thought were established. We have been taking water to site to keep the trees alive but on the hard-baked clay it is a struggle. Our Worcestershire Apple Collection at Naunton Beauchamp is faring better but is also requiring extra attention to keep the trees alive. The ground there is better having been permanent grassland for probably hundreds of years, so fingers crossed.

Our wetland at Lower Moor is also suffering and looked like a desert at the time of writing; the ground is bare and cracked like a scene from an African wildlife documentary. The hot weather has played the biggest part in this but our efforts to re-wet the site have been hindered by changes in ditch-management in neighbouring fields.



Lower Moor wetlands are far from wet at the moment.

There is some good news however, a cold glass of Stocken Orchard cider tastes fantastic in this hot weather!

More Barn Owl news

Barn Owls continue to receive special attention in the area with a couple of our volunteers making sure that these beautiful birds have places to roost and breed. Following on from the successes of previous years (as reported in the spring 2018 newsletter) they counted 14 more young Barn Owls this year. One of the nests containing three youngsters we suspect was found by Tawny Owls and the owlets went missing, one died in another nest but ten were looking good to fledge which is great

news. This brings the total to over 50 young Barn Owls ringed by the team in the Vale in just 5 years! Their work caught the attention of Welcome To Our Future (WTOF) who, through Severn Waste Environmental Fund have supplied more Barn Owl boxes to be installed on private land near our sites. They have also provided smaller bird boxes for us to install at sites where nesting holes are in short supply. Thank you to WTOF and Severn Waste Services for this generous donation helping us to help wild birds in the Vale.

South Littleton Nature Reserve

After 18 months of negotiating we are now the owners of a small parcel of scrubland in South Littleton. We have started surveying the site to see what lives there. Local residents along with our regular volunteers have made a start on managing the scrub. We now need to make sure that the bird nesting season is over before we can continue. Areas like this are all too often 'tidied up', clearing the scrub and weeds which wildlife needs. So we aim to manage the site sensitively and maybe create an area of wildflower meadow to increase the value of the site for wildlife and for the enjoyment of local people.



South Littleton Nature Reserve

Peter Bugg and Fladbury Community Orchard and Nature Reserve



Slow-worm: finding a home at Fladbury

Earlier in the year we received the sad news that Peter Bugg, a long-standing supporter and volunteer of VLHT had passed away. Peter had been ill for some time but remained active and continued to join our volunteer tasks including the planting of our Worcestershire Apple Collection. He also had a vision for a neglected area of land adjacent to Fladbury Community Orchard. This area had been planted with Christmas trees but Peter saw the potential for the site to

become a nature reserve with various habitats including wildflower meadow, rough grassland and wetland. A few weeks before he died Peter organised a meeting on site with local people, Worcestershire Wildlife Trust and VLHT to discuss his proposals and to draw up a plan for the site. Work started straightaway. The wildflower meadow has been sown, a small wetland area created and log piles and rubble piles put in appropriate positions. Wildlife moved in almost immediately and a quick survey of the site revealed it to be a haven for Slow-worms as well as a breeding site for several butterfly species including Brown Argus and Marbled White. This area will continue to develop thanks to the hard work of a few local volunteers and Peter's 'vision' is already becoming a reality.



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.

Plum Festival 2018

This year's Pershore Plum Festival is fast approaching and in celebration of this most English of fruit there is now a National Plum Day. The second Saturday in August is now a registered national day thanks to funding from the Three Counties Traditional Orchard Project. It is hoped that this will spread across the country and become as widely celebrated as National Apple Day is every year.

Prickly conundrum

Thistles are a common sight in the Vale as in most of the UK and one or two at a field edge add a splash of colour while providing food for insects at a time when many plants have finished flowering and meadows have been cut. However, these prickly customers have a habit of abusing our hospitality. This is the case on farmland in particular where the soil has been agriculturally improved, loaded with fertiliser and competition from a tight mat of permanent grass has been removed. Thistles thrive under these conditions and spread like wildfire. This leaves us with a conundrum, they are great for wildlife but not great for farmers so we have another balancing act to add to the already ballooning conservation circus-tent. We need to act responsibly and do what we can to prevent thistles from spreading on to adjacent land while maintaining a wildlife-friendly landscape. With each thistle producing thousands of fluffy seeds which blow freely in the wind it's not an easy task.

Our volunteers have spent a few sessions pulling thistles out from some of our sites but in the June heat it's not a pleasant task. When you stand in a patch of thistles covered in butterflies, moths, bumblebees, hoverflies and beetles it goes against the grain to remove these life-giving weeds. However, it is mainly one species of thistle which causes most of the trouble, giving all thistles a bad name. The Creeping Thistle is a recognised agricultural weed which benefits greatly from farming practices, spreading both by seed and by its creeping root systems. This is the species which we target and the other species can be kept under control when/if needed.

Know your thistles



Woolly

Wilted

Marsh

Creeping

Spear

There are six different species of thistle on VLHT's sites, some very common and others quite unusual. The commonest by far and the one which causes us the biggest headache is the Creeping Thistle *Cirsium arvense*. As its name suggests it has creeping stems and roots which allow it to spread rapidly forming large patches. This species has fairly small flower heads, bunched together and has bright green stems with few spines. The spines on the wavy leaves are very sharp and point in all directions.

The larger Spear Thistle *Cirsium vulgare* is another common agricultural weed but grows into multi-stemmed plants with larger spiny flower-heads and is less likely to form dense patches. The stem is winged with spines along the wings. The leaves are deeply lobed with a single strong spine at the tip of each lobe. Each leaf has a very long, sharp spine at the tip (the spear).

Marsh Thistle *Cirsium palustre*, as its name suggests prefers damper ground and is a very tall plant, reaching six feet and over with a single stem covered in wavy wings and many spines. The leaves are small and the flower buds are small and narrow, often purple-tinged. The whole plant can look purplish making it quite distinctive.

Wetted Thistle *Carduus crispus* is a fairly uncommon plant but can be found frequently along the Avon valley. It is similar to Marsh Thistle but paler and has almost continuous spine-covered wings along the stems and is a little more bushy. The flower buds have long spines.



Dwarf Thistle: Pic-nickers beware

The spectacular Woolly Thistle *Cirsium eriophorum* has golf-ball sized flower buds covered in a woolly material. It is an unmistakable plant found particularly on calcareous grassland banks which are not cut too frequently.

The last thistle that we have found on our sites is the Dwarf Thistle *Cirsium acaulon* and true to its name, it's not very big. In fact it is stalkless, with the flowerhead sitting directly on the leaf rosette flat on the ground. It is easily overlooked when not in flower and has earned itself the nickname of the Pic-nicker's Thistle as it is only discovered when someone sits on it!

There are two other species of thistle in the area which we have not yet found on our sites but are worth looking for. These are the nodding Musk Thistle *Cirsium nutans* and everlasting Carline Thistle *Carlina vulgaris*.

Thistle insects

Thistles provide an abundance of nectar for flying insects including bumblebees and butterflies at a time when many plants have finished flowering (this year especially). They also provide homes for an abundance of other invertebrates from spiders that feast on visiting insects to flies that breed inside the thistle stems and flower buds. There are a number of aphids which feed only on thistles which in turn provide food for ladybirds and hoverfly larvae. Look at a Creeping Thistle and you may see a thumb-nail sized swelling on the stem caused by the Thistle Fly *Urophora cardui*, a small but attractive picture-winged fly. It lays its eggs into the thistle where the larvae live and feed in a gall, protected by the spiny plant.



Thistle fly and gall containing its larvae

Other picture-winged flies lay their eggs in the flower buds of various thistles. If a leaf shows signs that something has been scraping away the surface it could be that a Thistle Tortoise Beetle *Cassida rubiginosa* has been feeding. This extraordinary insect is incredibly well camouflaged but its larvae use a different trick to avoid being eaten; they cover themselves in their own faeces!



Tortoise Beetle and larvae wearing unorthodox armour



Caterpillars of the Painted Lady feed on thistles



Golden-bloomed Grey Longhorn Beetle



Thistle-head Weevil

Look amongst the flower heads on a Spear Thistle and you might find the delicate Spear Thistle Lacebug *Tingis cardui* feeding there. The caterpillars of Painted Lady Butterflies *Vanessa cardui* feed on thistle leaves from within a silken web. A large uncommon beetle with the unnecessarily long name of the Golden-bloomed Grey Longhorn Beetle *Agapanthia villosoviridescens* has larvae which feed in the stems of thistles. Another beetle, the Thistle-head Weevil *Rhinocyllus conicus* is a native of Britain & Europe and has been imported into the USA as a biological pest control in the past, to help stop the spread of invasive thistles. Yet in Britain it is classed as a Notable A species, which means it is very rare despite its food plant being so common and it has been found on two of our sites.



Spear Thistle Lacebug

There are also various moths which lay their eggs on thistles and all of these insects help to control the plants. So leaving some thistles ensures that the natural weed controllers are around to help keep these prickly customers in check.

Hovels in the Vale

Becky Lashley (Worcestershire County Council)



Hovel at North Littleton in need of some TLC

Along with large-scale fruit growing, market gardening was a dominant force in shaping the character of the Vale of Evesham's landscape. In the late 1930s the growing of asparagus alone covered 1300 acres, centred on Evesham, Badsey and the Littletons, with typical market gardening plots comprising just 2-3 acres. This meant that virtually the entire population of some of the smaller villages was engaged in market gardening activity in some form, often with families working several different plots of land some distance apart. Places were required to store tools and harvested produce and also to eat meals and shelter during bad weather. An astonishing

number of market gardening buildings (known locally as hovels) were constructed, giving the Vale of Evesham its unique character. The 1910-1915 Land Valuation Survey of just one parish in the Vale refers to over 100 horticultural sheds and hovels. The hovels were built from wood, tin sheets or more rarely brick. They were built by the people working each plot and their appearance, method of construction and the materials used were as individual as the men and women who created them.

Many surviving but abandoned hovels can still be found at roadsides and in field corners and are a visual reminder of the once widespread, small-scale horticulture practices. The decline in traditional market gardening activity in favour of modern, mechanised horticulture led to the gradual abandonment of the hovels as purposeful buildings. Once no longer maintained they fell derelict and eventually collapsed or the materials would be repurposed. Some surviving examples are time capsules of information, their contents untouched since their last owner/occupier closed the door for the final time such as the one at Cleeve Prior Heritage Trust's orchard. VLHT own two derelict hovels at North Littleton Community Orchard where an orchard is being replanted.

To lose such an important part of the Vale's history completely would be a real shame, so we are working with partners to investigate the possibility of securing funding for a project to restore a few hovels, map the remaining ones and gather an oral history from people who built and used these structures in the past. We will develop a project plan and identify funding opportunities over the coming months and will then be looking for volunteers to help deliver the project. If you would like to get involved, please contact Gary at the VLHT office.

Birds at Lower Moor and Haines Meadows April, May and June 2018.

Rob Prudden

The cold and wet period in late March and early April led to a number of wintering birds remaining as the first spring migrants arrived from the south. At this time wintering wildfowl should be heading north but up to 29 **Teal** and 6 **Shoveler** were still present on 19th March. Other tardy winter visitors included 4 **Snipe** and 2 very late **Redwings** on 13th.

Early summer arrivals at this crossover period included, 3 **Sand Martins** on 14th March, then in April the first **Swallow** on 7th, **Curlew** and **Shelduck** on 9th and **House Martin** on 12th. From mid-April the main body of migrant species arrived, although worryingly in very poor numbers this year; these included **Cuckoo**, **Whitethroat**, **Lesser Whitethroat**, **Willow**, **Reed** and **Sedge Warblers**.

Successful breeding birds included a pair of **Oystercatchers** which had arrived on the last day of February and were then seen regularly with 3 fledged juveniles in early June. A pair of **Shelduck** that had been present since early March were sporting 10 ducklings on the river on 1st June. Other breeding birds included 4 pairs of **Skylarks**, **Yellow Wagtail**, 2 pairs of **Bullfinches**, 5 pairs of **Reed Buntings** and single pairs of both **Kestrel** and **Buzzard**. Up to 2 males and one female **Cuckoo** were present during the period and appeared to be utilising the nests of unsuspecting **Reed Warblers** breeding along the Lench Ditch to care for their eggs. A pair of **Grey Partridge** were seen on several dates, but did not appear to have produced a brood, while a pair of **Red Legged Partridge** were seen with an amazing twenty small chicks in tow!

Wader passage was very poor this year with a lone Little Ringed Plover from 22nd April – 11th May the only bird of note, then a pair of returning birds were present on 22nd and 23rd June. A pair of **Lapwings** remained throughout and were seen with a fledged juvenile on 20th June.

Scarce visitors were very poorly represented but included a pair of **Wheatears** on 19th April, 2 **Little Egrets** that feasted on tadpoles in a small mid field pool from 22nd – 30th April, a **Red Kite** circling over the river meadows on three separate dates, a late passage **Curlew** on 22nd June while a **Hobby** dashed through on 27th June. A **Barn Owl** was seen hunting over the meadows at dusk on 3 dates.

Signs of the changing seasons became apparent on 24th June when the first 4, presumed failed, breeding **Lapwings** arrived from sites further to the north, this number had risen to 24 by 27th. Post breeding **Redstarts** arrived on cue in late June, with a female and juvenile on 25th followed by a male on 27th.



Wheatear



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