

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Winter 2017/18



Trees are a major feature of the British landscape, especially old veteran trees of hedgerow and parkland. A landscape with ancient trees is indeed a very British thing and the Woodland Trust have noted that the number of ancient trees in the UK is “exceptional compared with elsewhere in northern Europe”. Worcestershire’s Ancient Tree Register was set up to record these historic trees in the county and it has been found in South Worcestershire that Oak is the commonest ancient tree with Ash next and Beech is scarce. At Middle Littleton Pastures we have three old trees standing proud in the centre of the ridge and furrow field; two Ash and one Oak. Or at least, we did have until storm Eleanor swept across the country at the beginning of 2018. Sadly, the larger of the two Ash trees, with a girth of 4.02 metres was uprooted by the strong winds. It is estimated that the tree was 150 – 200 years old and was one of the older Ash trees on VLHT’s land.



To put it into perspective, the tree was growing around the time when Stevenson designed his steam train, petrol engines were still to be invented, electricity was in its infancy and the tree saw the coming of the light bulb, gramophones, electric engines, the radio and even the telephone (yes, there was life before the phone!). Our tree might have just missed the Battle of Trafalgar but it lived through two World Wars and even saw the British Parliament banish slavery. The tree saw eight British Monarchs; its life probably started during the reign of George IV and ended during the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. So not a bad innings and in some ways it’s just the beginning, because the tree will be home to thousands of invertebrates, many of them important pollinators such as hoverflies and beetles. Much of the tree will remain in situ and will take decades to break down, providing habitat for generations of birds, small mammals and invertebrates. In fact, there can be more life in a dead tree than in a living one, so as someone might have said “the tree is dead – long live the tree”!



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.

Orchard Planting



It's been a busy period, planning the planting of fruit trees at our orchards. Deciding the varieties, and where they will be planted, organising the materials for the guards and arranging the planting is all quite time-consuming. But it's worth putting the time in as these trees will be here for generations to enjoy, so we want to get it right.

Sixty-two more trees will be planted at North Littleton Community Orchard this winter which will leave just a few gaps for planting with appropriate varieties next winter. This orchard will include all the varieties of plums grown in the area in the past as well as various apples and pears.

The Worcestershire apple collection which we are hoping to establish at our old orchard at Naunton Beauchamp has taken one very big step forward. The Three Counties Traditional Orchard Project has offered to fund the purchase of the trees which is brilliant news and work has already started; in November 2017 we were joined by a team of five Environment Agency staff who planted ten Worcestershire trees. There are 32 recognised Worcestershire apple varieties and we will have planted two each of most of these by the end of this winter, leaving the remaining varieties for next winter when we have located appropriate stock. We will also plant any Worcestershire pear varieties that have been identified.

If you want to get involved with planting fruit trees, please get in touch.

Protecting Biodiversity in Worcestershire

In 2018 Worcestershire's Biodiversity Partnership will update and re-launch the Worcestershire Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP). VLHT have been invited to get involved with workshops covering various plans including species such as farmland birds and the Grizzled Skipper butterfly and habitats including traditional orchards and wet grasslands. At this time of change in the way our countryside will be funded it is vital that we promote the importance of landscape and wildlife and this is another opportunity for VLHT to get involved. The Biodiversity Partnership state, "there is overwhelming evidence that Worcestershire, in common with the rest of the UK, has suffered huge losses of habitats and species. One of the main aims of the Worcestershire Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) is to assess how the limited resources available can best be used to protect and enhance what remains".

There are 47 Action Plans within the Worcestershire Local BAP: 19 habitats, 25 species and three generic action plans covering the themes of 'Biological recording and information', 'Biodiversity education, awareness and involvement', and 'Policy, grants and legislation'.

These can be found at <http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk> and then enter BAP into the search bar.

Trustee Changes

2018 sees changes at VLHT with one trustee standing down and one new trustee appointed.

Poppy Morris is leaving the Trust and we are very grateful for the time, guidance and support she has given to VLHT.

Phil Hooper is joining the trustees after a period volunteering with us. Phil moved from Solihull to Evesham in 2014 to be closer to the countryside and discovered VLHT. His management background will be of real benefit to the Trust & he hopes to further VLHT's important contribution in protecting the local countryside & wildlife. If you want to find out more about our trustees visit our website or get in touch.

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 320 acres.

Brodie's Meadow

We are very pleased to be able to tell you that we have secured the future of another slice of Avon flood-plain meadow; a ten-acre field on the east bank of the river below Cleeve Hill in North Littleton. This site has been managed as a hay meadow for many years and still has Great Burnet, Dropwort and Lady's-bedstraw; these are all wildflowers which have disappeared from much of the Avon flood plain. We will be surveying the meadow this year to inform the future management of the site. The meadow was purchased with a generous donation from Severn Waste Services through the Landfill Communities Fund.



Great Burnet

What Are Galls?

Galls are familiar to anyone who has looked at an Oak, the tree is home to a myriad of different galls on leaf, bud or twig. Galls can be large and twiggy, round and smooth, deformed and knobbly, thin and antler-shaped, tiny and doughnut shaped and everything in between. Galls develop on plants when a gall-causing parasite tricks the host-plant into producing extra or larger cells which then provide a home and food for the growing parasites within. Galls are caused by a wide variety of organisms from fungi, bacteria and viruses to invertebrates including wasps, aphids, midges and mites. Because the gall-causers are so diverse the galls themselves vary greatly. Oaks host the widest variety of galls but our fruit trees are also susceptible to certain galls. The most obvious is unusual in that it is a plant; Mistletoe causes a gall on apple and other trees but rather than living within the gall as most gall-causers do, it feeds from it but grows out of it. The witches-broom is another conspicuous gall which seems to have infected every old damson tree in the Vale. These football-sized tangle of twigs and leaves are caused by the fungus *Taphrina insititiae*. This can be seen in old orchards and hedgerows across the Vale but is not so common elsewhere in Worcestershire. This might be down to the local climate or might simply be due to there being a concentration of old damson trees here.



Pear leaf gall
Gymnosporangium sabinae

A close relative of this fungus is responsible for a completely different gall. The fungus *Taphrina pruni* causes a strange distortion of plums and sloes and is known as pocket plum. The fruit develops distorted and bent and lacks the plum colouration which has given the gall various names including bent-banana disease and bladder plums. It is occasionally seen in the Vale and seems to be more prolific after a cool, damp spring.



Pocket Plum

Another fungus gall in our orchards is a bright orange rust on the leaves of pears produced by *Gymnosporangium sabinae* and is relatively new into Britain. Harry Green first reported that this fungus had reached Worcestershire in 2005/2006 and it is now widespread across the county. Interestingly this fungus requires two completely different hosts; pear and juniper. Galls formed on pear produce spores which travel in the air and infect juniper and these galls produce spores which re-infect pear. Isn't nature marvellous!

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 more details, please contact Gary Farmer at the office.

Bird Highlights at Lower Moor and Haines Meadows October – December 2017.

Rob Prudden

Easterly winds in September had led to good numbers of juvenile **Ruff** to arrive at Lower Moor river flash, this then continued into October with up to 5 birds seen daily till the end of the month.

Lapwings found the wetland to their liking throughout the period, with numbers peaking at 339 at the beginning of December. The flock was often joined by varying numbers of their close relative the **Golden Plover**, with the first single bird over the site on 3rd October with numbers then rising daily to a peak of 368 in mid-November. **Snipe** numbers continue to drop, with a maximum of only 15 birds present during the period. A single **Jack Snipe** was located on the edge of the river flash on 17th November.



Stonechat numbers had dropped dramatically after several cold and wet winters, but now appear to be back to a healthy sized population. This was reflected on site with up to 3 pairs around throughout. On 4th October an **Osprey** drifted over Lower Moor meadows then heading to the Leisure Park to fish, although this was promptly curtailed by continuous mobbing by local **Black Headed Gulls**.

Other scarce records included a **Little Gull** on 22nd October, with a late migrant juvenile **Redshank** next day, while a pair of **Goosander** flew high south over the site on 28th.

During November a **Merlin** dashed through on 3rd followed by a **Peregrine** on 17th. A very late and unexpected **Garden Warbler** was trapped and ringed on 11th, as was a male **Brambling** on the same date.

The rarest bird of the period was a **Great White Egret** from 14th- 20th November. The bird spent its days fishing along the river, then dropping in at the river flash to wash and brush up at dusk each evening before flying over to the Leisure Park to roost. This represents the first site record for this species.

On 16th November a **Short Eared Owl** spent twenty minutes circling the river meadows looking to hunt, but was mobbed continuously by Corvids and Gulls till being escorted off the site to the north. **Black Tailed Godwits** are normally well to the south of our area by the end of September, so a juvenile on 17th November was quite unusual.

Seed eating farmland birds have seen their numbers drop dramatically in the last twenty years. This winter after two large areas of winter wild bird seed crop had been grown on land adjacent to Haines Meadows, good numbers of finches and Buntings were present, utilising the hedges and taller trees on the trusts land to escape when disturbed by avian predators. Good numbers were present throughout the period with maximums of 1200 **Linnets**, 165 **Reed Buntings**, 220 **Chaffinches** and 400 **Yellowhammers** during a period of cold weather with deep snow cover at the beginning of December.

Volunteers

2017 was an exceptionally busy year for our volunteers with a total of 1,290 hours put in at our practical tasks alone. This doesn't take into account the work at Hampton Orchard, time put in keeping an eye on our sites, putting newsletters together and all the time our trustees give as volunteers.



Tasks for the rest of this winter will include tree planting, scrub and woodland management and fruit tree pruning. As always, a really big "thank you" to all who give their time and if you want to get involved please get in touch.

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