

Bulmers wildlife area, Lower House Orchard, Staunton-on-Wye

In 2007, pond survey and restoration work was undertaken at Lower House Orchard as part of the Pond Restoration and Celebration Project. This project was developed by Herefordshire Amphibian and Reptile Team (HART) and rolled out in partnership with Herefordshire Nature Trust. It was funded by Herefordshire Rivers LEADER+, SITA Trust and Wye Valley AONB.



Pond at Bulmers' wildlife site

P. King

History

Bulmers bought Lower House Farm orchard in 1973 and the network of ponds, rough grassland and woodland that makes up the wildlife area was developed in 1979. It was an area of wet grassland at the bottom of the orchard and on the edge of what is known as Letton Lakes, forming part of the River Wye flood plain and regularly becoming inundated.

Being quite wet and in a frost pocket, the land was considered suitable only for late fruiting varieties of apple, with the added difficulty of then harvesting them. Bulmers' orchard managers Rex Neame and Claude Morgan were instrumental in putting aside the area for wildlife and the pond network was designed by Sue Holland (from Herefordshire Nature Trust) and dug by a local firm. Volunteers planted the woodlands over the next couple of years.

The Bulmers orchard staff maintain the wildlife area in less busy times of the year, mowing paths and thinning the woodland. In the 1990s, volunteers on a BTCV (British Trust for Conservation Volunteers) holiday weekend would stay in the village hall and spend their days doing conservation work in the wildlife area.

Wildlife



Mud snails
P. King

This uncultivated area of woods, rough grassland, scrub and ponds is a great mosaic of habitats for wildlife.

In the early days a viewing platform was erected which apparently became the home of a barn owl for a period. It was taken down in 2007 because it had become unsafe. Lapwing were also a common sight in the lower orchard and wildlife area in the 1980s before the woodland grew up, and some scrapes were created for their benefit.

The pond surveys of 2005 and 2007 have shown the wildlife area to be rich in aquatic plants, amphibians and particularly invertebrates. Rarer species include great crested newts, medicinal leech, a mud snail and two water beetles. More common are frogs and smooth newts.

Medicinal leech (*Hirudo medicinalis*)



Medicinal leech
P. King

Leeches are a common find in ponds and streams, but the medicinal leech is a rarity in Herefordshire and is the one historically used for blood-letting. Eggs are laid in a cocoon on damp land and the young hatch and creep down to the water. When young they suck blood from worms, snails, fish and frogs but as they grow they prefer to feed from warm-blooded animals, often only taking one meal a year. An anti-coagulant in the leech's saliva keeps the blood flowing and one feed increases their weight 5 to 10 times!

Great crested newts (*Triturus cristatus*)



Male great crested newt

P. King

Great crested and smooth newts are found here, breeding in the ponds and foraging and overwintering in the tussocky grassland and woods. A network of ponds like this is ideal for a population of newts as the adults often remain faithful to one pond while the juveniles will disperse to others. It also means that if one pond dries out or becomes unsuitable habitat, there are others where the population may persist.

Unusually, here the newts are surviving in the ponds alongside sticklebacks. Fish will feed on newt tadpoles so survival rates can be low. However, if the pond occasionally dries out, the fish will die so that in following years the newt tadpoles will survive. It is likely that fish get marooned in the ponds following flooding from the River Wye, usually an annual event.

Birds and butterflies



Grey heron P. King

Some of the birds that have been noted here are:

Mallard, grey heron, buzzard, goldfinch, yellowhammer, wood pigeon, swallow, pheasant, coot, moorhen, wren, blackbird, magpie, great tit, willow warbler, bullfinch, blue tit, long-tailed tit, sparrow, song thrush, robin, pied flycatcher.

You may well hear the haunting call of the curlew on nearby fields.

Butterflies that have been recorded include small white, orange tip, brimstone, small tortoiseshell, red admiral, gatekeeper, meadow brown, small skipper

Management work



Creating a shallow margin before digging out bulrush
D. Hardy



Planting the re-profiled bank W. Watson.

In September 2007, restoration work was undertaken on Pond 7 because it was choked with bulrush (*Typha*) and surrounded by trees. The aim was to scrape out the pond completely to clear all the bulrush, clear trees on the southern side to let the light in, and create a shallow margin where water levels would fluctuate. A warm, shallow or muddy zone like this provides a different habitat to the pond itself and is very valuable for invertebrates.

Visit the site!

The wildlife area lies just off a public footpath, which can be linked with several running out of Staunton-on-Wye. A direct footpath starts from opposite the pub, the 'New Inn' and goes north from the village, over stiles and down through the orchards. This will take you into the wildlife area where you can walk freely around, but be warned, it's quite a disorientating place!

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to Bulmers and in particular the orchard manager for supporting us in the restoration work. Also to the local volunteers who came to events and helped with the work on-site.

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