

# **Kemerton Conservation Trust**

## **Report to the Governors from John Clarke**

**October 2011 to October 2012**

### **Summary**

*This has been another very successful year with a great deal achieved. I have to report the retirement of Alan Marsh, our warden, who will be greatly missed. His hard work, skills, enthusiasm and commitment to the Trust helped drive forward a number of projects.*

*A paper on the Mining Bee project has been published, Site Job Sheets produced for a number of sites and Recorder has undergone a major update with over 250 revisions to site names and details.*

*The Carrant Catchment Area Project has progressed steadily although we have experienced problems with the Environment Agency over timing.*

*Wildlife monitoring improved with Skylark and Yellowhammer surveys resuming and the Butterfly and Bumblebee surveys of ten years ago being repeated in what was disastrous summer weather.*

*I have announced my intention to cut back considerably my work for the Trust – restricting myself to the agreed ten hours per week. To that end I have relinquished my involvement in some projects and may have to reduce my input into others.*

*Pamela and I have been involved with Kemerton to some degree for 30 years now and I look forward to continuing to do so, albeit in a reduced role.*

### **Alan Marsh**

In late July Alan announced that he would be retiring from KCT and although I was aware that he did intend to retire soon it came as a shock. Alan and I have worked well together for about five years – first with him as a volunteer and then as our part-time Warden. He brought to the job his considerable engineering skills, a thirst for knowledge and an unrivalled enthusiasm. Over the past three years or so he has also given freely of extra time and costs to himself. I feel that together we have achieved a great deal and managed projects to a high standard. Alan worked extremely hard at all times. I miss his support and help and the wildlife of Kemerton will be adversely affected by his retirement. He will be very hard to replace. Fortunately, during his time with us I designed and produced Job Sheets for some of the conservation sites and this will form the basis for the new Job Description. I cannot thank Alan enough for the support that he has given me and KCT.

### **Health & Safety**

One of the Warden's jobs is to make regular Health & Safety checks around Kemerton Lake Nature Reserve. Before he left, Alan carried out regular checks of the safety equipment and notices, access gate area, main track, reception glade, footpath fences, woodland rides and both hides.

I keep records of visiting groups and work parties to the Trust's reserves and across Kemerton Estate. Visiting groups which I arrange are provided with a Risk Assessment and a Health & Safety Checklist. All groups are made aware of the day-to-day risks by either me, Kate Aubury or the Warden.

There have been very few incidents of vandalism this year.

## **Orchards**

On two occasions this year I have received compliments on how well-managed our orchards are. A few trees were planted last winter and a total of 16 are due to be planted this time – mostly under HLS. The trees are ordered and will need to be collected from Walcot Nurseries and heeled in at the walled garden until they can be planted out.

I continue to work with Kemerton Orchard Workers (KOW) to manage Daffurns Orchard, the Trust's community orchard nature reserve. KOW ran their usual Orchard Day, based at the village hall. I hope to have at least one young tree taken from cuttings off the veteran Perry pear tree in Daffurns available this year. The estate continues to cut the hedges for KOW.

As usual, several people asked to visit the orchards and take a few samples for their displays or photographs for a collection.

I may have discovered a rare variety of apple growing in Kemerton. For some years I have been searching for a variety called Nine Sides which I was told was quite common in the Eckington area about fifty years ago – indeed there is a new road there named after it. Nobody in Eckington knows of any surviving trees but there is a possibility that we have found one in Kemerton. I have taken graft wood from it and I hope to have a couple of young trees to plant out soon. Meanwhile, if the original veteran tree produces any fruit this year it would be good to send samples off for identification. This will be tricky as none of the ID experts have ever seen this variety before!

I am pleased to note that Grange Orchard has been grazed more regularly this year. I am hoping that this management will gradually reduce the coarse vegetation and competition for the young trees.

Approximately two-thirds of Upstones Meadow & Orchard has been included in HLS and is now primarily managed by the estate. This summer, Trust volunteers assisted the estate in making hay under the HLS Management Options, and the estate has undertaken to share its small supplementary payment due from HLS with the Trust (see following section).

The remaining third of Upstones is being incorporated into the woodland ride system with the aim of extending the grassland flora into the woodland.

I have almost completed the process of handing over my work in Kemerton orchards. David Semple, one of our volunteers, has agreed to take on the paperwork and some pruning while I assume the new warden will be responsible for all other work, liaising with Trust Governors.

I am no longer involved in the marketing of fruit, passing any enquiries on to Matthew.

## **Kemerton Estate HLS Schemes**

Kemerton Estate is in the Higher Level Stewardship scheme (HLS). It receives payments for managing certain sites in a particular way for the benefit of wildlife. Formerly, some of this management work was undertaken by KCT staff and volunteers. While KCT is no longer normally involved in the delivery of the management tasks prescribed by HLS, it still carries out other additional conservation tasks on HLS sites.

Occasionally, the Trust may carry out a prescribed management task for which the estate receives payment under the HLS Management Options. In these cases, the estate will pass on the financial benefit to the Trust.

There are three HLS Special Projects on the estate, two of which are on sites which have been leased to the Trust. Here, I have acted as an individual consultant to the estate (not in my KCT capacity) and written separate reports. None of this work is included here, though I am sure the estate would be happy to make these available to the Governors if they are interested.

## Kemerton Lake Nature Reserve

The reserve is an HLS Special Project site, and the estate has carried out some of its own habitat management here during the year.

Separate from the estate's HLS management, the Trust has also undertaken conservation work at the reserve. We cut and carried an area of *Juncus* and rough grass in front of the main hide and alongside the lake, stacking the spoil as habitat for snakes and amphibians. During one visit 3 basking grass snakes were seen within a 100 metre stretch.

The Mining Bee Habitat Project has continued. The number of breeding holes in the monitored areas this year was estimated to be 18,000. Geoff Trevis, the County Aculeate Recorder, has been working with me on the project for some years. This year we published a paper in the BWARS magazine (Bees, Wasps and Ants Recording Society) detailing 10 years of the study. In that time Geoff has recorded 102 species using the bare ground or associated habitats.

I am particularly concerned about the state of the arable area, which over a number of years has become increasingly dominated by Creeping Thistle and grasses. After cultivation last year we sowed seed from several rarer species but most failed to grow. I believe that ideally any sowing should take place immediately after autumn cultivation – i.e. September to mid-October. Similar trials which I have been involved with elsewhere have been successful.

We continue to work on controlling invading scrub in the scrapes, reed-beds and margins in line with BAP prescriptions. There is one conflict of interest here as Goat Willow, one of the invading species, produces large catkins in early spring which provide an early nectar source for a number of insects. I have struck a few cuttings and hope that we can find places to plant them away from the scrapes and lake side.

This spring and summer a Cetti's Warbler was resident and calling regularly. It was believed to be the only one of that species in Worcestershire in 2012.

I would like to agree management for the islands whereby at least one is kept clear of vegetation to provide safe roosting for waders. The other islands could be managed by cutting the invading scrub on rotation. This work would require a minimum of 2 people plus boat.

The problem of rotting sluice covers which I highlighted in last year's report has been addressed. All sluices required new covers and as all were of different sizes this became quite complex. The covers are made from a good quality exterior ply and have been coated with a preservative.

There is a huge problem of geese breeding and later congregating to moult on the reserve. The maximum count this summer was of 444 geese (198 Canada and 246 Greylag). The geese graze off almost anything which is planted on the arable area in spring, disturb other breeding birds and their huge numbers cause considerable pollution.

There are no records of mink on the reserve in Recorder. However, mink have been seen on several occasions this year with up to 2 animals being seen at a time. This is a worrying development especially in the light of the fact that the lake is now a crayfish ark site.

For the second year running the orchid Autumn Ladies Tresses was found by Adrian near the fence between the scrapes and meadow area and the rough grass/arable area. *Spiranthes spiralis* is rare in Worcestershire. This year two clumps appeared – of two and four spikes respectively. Whilst searching for them on an earlier occasion (and failing!) I noted that the area is being increasingly colonised by rough vegetation and bramble. Presumably, we should consider some appropriate management to protect the area in addition to the basic prescription under HLS.

## **Beggarboys**

Beggarboys is another HLS Special Project site lasting until 31<sup>st</sup> October 2014, and the estate has carried out some of its own habitat management here during the year.

Separate from the estate's HLS management, the Trust has also undertaken conservation work at the site. This included repairs to the monk weir – a civil engineering job – which only a man of Alan Marsh's skills could have carried out. The weir and an emergency overflow are now in full working order. The levels are set so that, as part of its management, the meadow area is flooded on occasions. Two silt traps have been dug on the feeder streams. The small meadow at the lower end of the site has been restored – this, the marsh, the sedge bed, and the two woodland glades will now be managed under the HLS Special Project. Work on restoring the sedge bed and a small area of woodland Carr was completed and will now require ongoing management under HLS. Once again we are grateful for the contributions made by Alan Marsh's team of volunteers, Kate Aubury's volunteers and the Gloucester Vale Conservation Volunteers.

I believe that Beggarboys would have qualified as an SSSI but wonder if it should not be at least given the status of 'Local Wildlife Site'. At the very least this status might help with any future funding applications (the estate only has funding to manage the site in the short term under HLS). I would welcome the Governors' thoughts on this.

## **The Bushes**

The Bushes is another HLS Special Project site, and the estate has carried out some of its own habitat management here during the year.

Separate from the estate's HLS management, the Trust has also undertaken conservation work at the site. That so much work in difficult conditions was achieved in the one year is due in no small part to the team of volunteers helping Alan on a daily basis, including both Kate Aubury's volunteers and the Gloucester Vale Conservation Volunteers. In all, 22 volunteers took part, contributing 202 volunteer hours to the success of the project. We were able to offer the tree surgery work to Stuart Worrell who some of you may remember was a volunteer for KCT for 2 years.

## **John Moore Reserve**

Since Alan left there have been no checks made or work done to mow the ride and to remove Himalayan Balsam which colonises the reserve from the neighbouring Old Garden woodland. We have found that pulling plants up in the soft soils is the most effective way of controlling the species in the reserve.

The nest-boxes were not checked for use by Marsh Tit.

The reserve is not used heavily by the public, but those that do love its wildness and tranquillity.

## **Lammas Meadows**

I have not visited any of the meadows and to date have received no wildlife records for them this year.

## **Greenhouse and Nursery Project**

I reported to the governors last year that the estate greenhouse was in a dangerous state and needed either expensive repairs or to be taken down. In the event all glass and the wooden framework were removed leaving the outer brick walls. I am hoping that the greenhouse will be replaced by a temporary polytunnel. I have been obliged to store Trust materials in my own shed and this is taking up considerable space. The plants that I was looking after in the old greenhouse spent the winter in the open and many died. Since then I have been unable to look after them properly except for watering and many requiring re-potting and weeding have also died. Once these young trees have been planted

out I will not be growing any more. However, there are one or two exceptions. I have been stratifying Hawthorn seed from The Bushes and this should be sown this winter/spring under HLS if the new greenhouse is available. Likewise, I have been stratifying Holly seed and this is also ready for sowing but it may be that Matthew and Adrian will no longer have use for that species within the woodlands.

I have been growing **Black Poplar** for a number of years and we have successfully planted out a number of trees across the estate which the warden monitors. The planting of Black Poplar will be one aspect of the Carrant Catchment Project – see later.

2012 has proved extremely successful for the **Arable Wildflower Project**. Pamela arranged volunteers to help us – the main volunteer was again Sue Chandler and we are extremely grateful for her help. This year she was assisted by Margaret Boulton whose enthusiasm and hard work was of great value. Sadly Margaret died suddenly this summer. The Trust has expressed its regrets to her husband and its gratitude for all her work. Pamela, Sue and I continued to harvest seed in what proved to be a bumper year – including Cornflower which I had brought here from a project that I have been involved in on a farm in the Cotswolds. Subsequently, after discussions with Natural England I provided 6 collections of seed from our arable wildflower stock for use in extending a trial that I had started on Overbury Estate into the Cotswolds. Although the Cornflower aspect of the trial originated from my work outwith the estate, the donation of the seed collections is attributed to KCT. It is regrettable that our attempts to bulk up the seed bank in arable conservation margins on the hill at Kemerton and at Kemerton Lake Nature Reserve failed. As part of my efforts to reduce my workload we aim to do a minimum amount of work on this project in 2013 with the possible exception of the Cornflower. Pamela will be making efforts to hand over most of the work – especially the harvesting of seed – to volunteers.

Under the **Woodland Shrubs & Wildflowers Project** we planted more shrubs last winter and have more to plant this winter and I need to liaise with Matthew and Adrian about where these should be planted. As part of my efforts to reduce my workload I have agreed with Adrian that I should give up this project which I understand will probably be taken over by Matthew.

The **Leaf Litter Trials** continued with both the open and enclosed areas being managed and monitored. There are plans to extend some of the exclosures to encourage the spread of plants. I understand that Matthew will be taking this on and have passed relevant information on to him.

### **Nest-boxes**

We continued to manage a large number of bird nest-boxes across the estate. The use of mirrors to deter Great-spotted Woodpecker has become standard practice. Unfortunately, the wrong glue was used on one batch and many of the mirrors have dropped off and will have to be re-fixed. Woodpecker damage to those fitted with mirrors is now minimal and uptake of boxes remains at a high level. When time permits I will write a short report on this trial.

In 2011 Alan put up several Little Owl boxes in hedgerows and orchards. They were checked again in spring this year and as previously, they were found to be used by grey squirrel - a comparatively recent phenomenon.

Last winter Alan increased the number of Tit nest-boxes in the vicinity of Bat boxes to attract the birds away from the latter. At several sites he also put up special boxes designed to attract Marsh Tit. Barn Owl has again been reported breeding in Pad Barn. This year we received reports of a particularly late brood.

Roy Cox, another volunteer, manages the nest-boxes at several sites. At my request he has put up some boxes in The Bushes SSSI targeting Redstart, which we believe has bred there in the past.

## **Recorder**

The work to update Recorder in line with changes in site names, amalgamation of sites and acquisition of new sites has taken much longer than estimated. Simon Wood from Worcestershire Biological Records Centre (WBRC) is an expert on Recorder having been involved since its inception. He has spent two days with me at Kemerton effecting the changes required which were at times somewhat complex. In all, information for around 250 sites has required adding or amending. WBRC normally charges £350 per day for this work but we are not being charged and I and KCT are extremely grateful to Simon for his patience and care in carrying out this work. Now that this aspect of this work is complete, Pamela and I are working on uploading data from 2011 and intend uploading information for 2012 in January 2013.

Unfortunately, Recorder has now crashed, and I have arranged to take the computer to Simon Wood who will try to resolve the problem.

This year, once again I have not been called upon to provide any information from our database.

## **Website**

I am no longer involved in any aspect of the Trust website but occasionally receive enquiries through it which I may or may not need to pass on. Jim Verrecchia has now given up the management of our website and I and the Trust are extremely grateful to him for so many years' dedication and co-operation. He continues to look after KCT's and my computer as his contribution to conservation.

## **Monitoring**

This year, with Pamela's help I managed to return to Skylark and Yellowhammer surveys on Kemerton Estate. To allow comparison with earlier years the surveys followed the same methodology. Wherever possible two visits were made, following set 'transects' or walks. Not all of the land is surveyed and crops not walked through. Therefore the numbers represent a snapshot to help assess the effects of agricultural changes on these species.

Since 1998 the numbers of Skylark located on the Kemerton Estate (not including Brookfield Farm) have averaged about 8 and this year we found 13 – the highest number since monitoring began. At Brookfield Farm, surveys began on part of the estate in 2004 and in the first few years numbers ranged between 3 and 6 pairs. This year, in the same area we found 8 pairs.

Numbers of Yellowhammer on the Kemerton Estate (not including Brookfield Farm) have fluctuated wildly. Between 1998 and 2003 the range was 19 to 32. Since then numbers have dropped and were averaging between 5 and 11. This year we found 8 pairs. At Brookfield Farm, between 2004 and 2006 the numbers of Yellowhammer ranged from 3 to 5 pairs and this year we found 5 pairs.

George Day has been monitoring butterflies (by species) and Bumblebees (in total) as part of a project to compare the present situation with what I found about ten years ago. Unfortunately George has had to contend with a disastrous spring and summer with few butterflies reported from anywhere. George and I will analyse his results and I hope to persuade him to repeat the surveys in 2013 in the hope that we get more typical conditions.

## **Site Job Sheets**

As agreed with Adrian, I completed Site Job Sheets for six specific sites plus one under the general heading of 'Other Orchards'. These job sheets provide information about the sites, their wildlife and their wildlife habitats - plus conservation aims and the main annual management work required. Alan Marsh trialled them and found them really useful. I hope that future wardens will base their work around these sheets.

## **Outreach**

I continue to be involved in the development of COCO (Conderton & Overbury Community Orchard) which has been a huge success.

I still act in an advisory capacity to the management committee of Beckford Lake Nature Reserve, making at least one visit per year.

Together with Adrian I have been supporting the Worcestershire Biological Action Partnership.

I maintain contacts with the Worcestershire Biological Records Centre and we contribute our wildlife records on an annual basis.

I continue to co-operate with the Marcher Apple Network and others about orchards.

My efforts to work with Buglife by providing it with an information board on which to display details of the crayfish project have not progressed. Apparently there is nobody 'in-house' who could design the information sheet. KCT have provided the main board and could get the sheet laminated and fitted.

I also attempted to get Buglife and The Peoples Trust for Endangered Species involved in the Carrant Catchment Area Project. The idea was to provide artificial deadwood sites (boxes of suitable material) to position across the valley between the two known rich sites for deadwood beetles such as the Violet Click Beetle. Although both organisations expressed strong interest – and may be able to offer advice – their plans to raise funding have, to my knowledge, not been put into action.

I continue to play a small part in RELIC the elm project which I helped to start. Avonbank Nurseries at Pershore College continue to work on the project. Despite interruptions and problems associated with a major move and restructuring of the nursery most of the 'nurse trees' survived and we still have young trees from the nine different original specimens to work from. This year the nursery resumed production and hopes to raise up to 500 trees per year if the demand is there. We need a volunteer to take over the database and resume contact with around 100 supporters, many of whom wish to buy trees. The volunteer would produce a newsletter and liaise with the nursery over marketing and promotion.

## **Carrant Catchment Area Project**

This project aims to enlist the help of landowners across the valley in co-operating in ventures to improve the river and smaller streams for wildlife and the environment. The loose, unofficial partnership also aims to replant Black Poplar and Elm, encourage the conservation of old orchards, field margins and the management of hedgerow trees – including the provision of habitat for deadwood beetles.

The Environment Agency (EA) raised funding for projects last year and the money was spent mainly on surveying the river bed and surrounding habitats as well as preparatory work to re-connect an old oxbow and clean out an on-stream pool on Kemerton Estate land. This year more funding was obtained and we are still hoping that these works will be completed. Meanwhile, as agreed with other leading partners I sought co-operation from other farms. I have been successful on one of the larger farms in getting their support in principle and in establishing a silt trap and reed bed on a small stream feeding into the Carrant. They have also established a larger wetland area, filtering water run-off from arable fields. I also have their broad agreement to establish a large wetland complex on another stream but we need quotes for preliminary work and surveys by the EA before we can proceed.

I have identified a larger 'flood alleviation' project involving two landowners and a local community but cannot take it further without some reasonable funding commitment. At least one other farmer has expressed an interest but we have not yet identified specific projects.

I am hoping that Adrian will contact the large estate across in Gloucestershire as it would make a major contribution to the project. It may be that I will make some contact there as I need to deliver two elm trees from our RELIC project.

A local nursery has agreed to take on the growing and distribution of Black Poplar trees.

The group have produced a small information leaflet, outlining the aims of the project and listing the main supporters.

### **Volunteer Work**

When Alan Marsh left so too did some of his volunteers and we will miss their contribution – particularly that from Mike Walton who gave us a great deal of his time and skills. We will miss the additional voluntary work and financial contribution that Alan also made.

Kate Aubury, her husband David and their other volunteers continue to provide a really important contribution to the Trust's work as well as a chance for the local community to get involved. David and Kate now manage KCT's website in addition to producing 'Kemerton Clippings'.

The Gloucester Vale Conservation Volunteers can send out a strong team of skilled people who, although they prefer hedge-laying, can turn their hands to any other habitat management work. They charge £5 per six-hour day per volunteer and have been invaluable in pushing forward some of our more demanding projects.

Kemerton Orchard Workers continue to help the Trust in the management of Daffurns Orchard. They raise sufficient funding to pay for almost all of the costs, with KCT contributing a little time from me and the warden.

Sue Chandler and the late Margaret Boulton helped manage the arable wildflower nursery.

Geoff Trevis, (aculeates), Rob Prudden (birds), George Day (butterflies and bumblebees) and Mike Averill (dragonflies) carried out regular surveys and contributed their records and comments. Harry Green and John Meiklejohn assisted with identifications.

John Cutler is always on hand to provide practical support while his son-in-law, Dave Semple, makes nest-boxes, is a voluntary warden at Upton-on-Severn and now has charge of monitoring and helping to manage our orchards.

Shelly Cutler and Charles Ellis grew some woodland shrubs from seed provided

Roy Cox continues to build and manage nest-boxes at Beggar Boys, Aldwick Wood and The Bushes.

Although he no longer runs our website, Jim Verrecchia still maintains the Trust's and my computers.

In all, I estimate that volunteers have contributed between 2,000 and 3,000 man-hours to the work of KCT.

Although I too have needed to contribute volunteer hours so that Trust business can function smoothly I will no longer be able to do so as I reduce my workload for the Trust.

### **Funding**

I am no longer involved in fund raising for the Trust although I still maintain a 'wish list' of items and projects.

I no longer monitor the contributions from sponsors of the Woodland Shrubs & Wildflower Project.



## **Acknowledgements**

I have already acknowledged the huge contribution that Alan Marsh made to the work of the Trust. Mike Walton, George Day, Clive Timlin and Richard Bennett were amongst several volunteers who supported his work.

I have also acknowledged the contribution made by Kate Aubury's volunteers and the Gloucester Vale Conservation Volunteers.

Once again Pamela Clarke has provided vital back-up for the work of KCT. Organising volunteers, helping in the office and in the greenhouse and nursery projects (while doing her best to prevent me from injury!). She also helped with monitoring and with Trust events. She is always trying to promote the work of KCT.

As always Peter Doble and his team have provided back-up and advice whenever needed. I share any frustration that Peter may feel over the EA project at the Oxbow and pool and hope that by the time this report is issued they will have taken advantage of the window of opportunity that Peter has kindly provided.