

Kemerton Conservation Trust

Report to the Governors

John Clarke with Pamela Clarke

October 2015 to October 2016

Summary

The past twelve months have proved to be one of the most exciting periods for many years. In December 2015 we were presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Farming and Wildlife Group (FWAG). The award itself was important to us but we felt even more honoured by the number of people who were there with whom we have worked closely over the past twenty years or so.

Most importantly for wildlife though was the news in September 2016 that the Carrant Catchment Area Restoration Project (CCARP) had finally received the go-ahead, together with the funding that we had requested. Due to problems created by Brexit the decision was delayed by months. Money from the 'Facilitation Fund' will allow us to employ the services of Jenny Phelps from FWAG (see later).

While waiting for the news on funding we have not stood still. The local Environment Agency, which also supports the project, has pressed ahead with some of the works which we had together identified for their 'wish list' as funds become available. Two research students have begun work on their projects, local volunteers have carried out a baseline survey of water quality (nitrates and phosphates), we have commenced trials into re-establishing wild flowers in local road verges and produced a report on skylark and meadow pipit nesting in rough grassland.

Despite spending a lot of our time on the CCARP we continued some work at Kemerton. Dealing with enquiries from the public, liaising with Kemerton Orchard Workers (KOW) and Conderton and Overbury Community Orchard (COCO) group, enquiries from people wanting grafting scions or fruit from our orchards for display, continued management of the wild flower nursery and tree nursery, responding to enquiries via email and telephone, uploading data onto Recorder - and a few site visits.

We were privileged to be asked to help with a project to help conserve Upright Goosefoot. Three organisations were asked to help. One failed to grow any plants of this species which is now extinct in the wild. However, we were more successful – see later.

While looking around one of the CCARP farms I was shown a large elm tree which had clearly survived Dutch Elm Disease. We arranged to take material from what turned out to be two trees. Avonbank Nurseries (part of Pershore College) took 50 cuttings from each. This brings the total number of trees in RELIC (Restoring Elms into the Countryside) to eleven (see later).

The Carrant Catchment Area Restoration Project (CCARP)

I worked closely with Jenny Phelps when she compiled our application to the Facilitation Fund managed by Natural England. Despite the frustrating delay after Brexit, our bid for European funding was finally accepted in mid-September. Aside from increasing the number of farmers signed-up to the project we will be looking at ways of helping wildlife conservation and diversity through farmer-led initiatives. Some of the projects may be enabled by modifying existing HLS plans but at other times it may be necessary to seek help from elsewhere – via extra funding or via works proposed by our partners such as the Environment Agency. We already have funding from the Worcestershire County Council for road verge trials. Cotswold Agricultural Merchants became our first local sponsors.

Where practical we will seek ways of involving the local public through volunteering, look at exchanging knowledge amongst the group and offering educational opportunities to young people. Other ways of keeping the public informed may occur as part of Farm Open Days and other local events.

We are aiming to produce just three species of tree to plant along the catchment – Black Poplar in the valley bottom, Elm on the intermediate ground and Whitebeam on the hill. KCT already has a stock of cuttings from Black Poplar and Avonbank Nurseries can supply elm. This Autumn we collected seed from Whitebeam on Bredon Hill and KCT plus others will now try to propagate trees.

As part of the educational requirements of the project students from local colleges may get the opportunity to carry out research. We already have one PhD student looking into water quality and water and silt run-off. The baseline survey of nitrates and phosphates on land already in the CCARP will also feed into his work. Another student has been working for his Master's Degree via a project to re-visit surveys for HLS which we carried out a few years ago. I have a few ideas for other research.

One of the farmers has been using trail cameras to track and record Otter along the local brooks. His work suggests that we have one pair that breeds here. We may look at creating more holts along the brook using material from restoration work on pollard willows.

We will look to form a 'Steering Committee' to guide the group and oversee projects such as the newsletter which I have proposed – initially as a one-off. This would appear in paper form as well as on the KCT and Overbury websites and be approved by the steering committee. At other times it may be necessary to prioritise work for Jenny Phelps – and indeed for Pamela and myself.

Orchards

I arranged for Stephen Ware from Weobly to collect grafting scions from our apple trees to increase his collection of British varieties. We also gave him some arable wild flower seed to trial in his arable margins.

I arranged for AJM Apples to collect samples which they use for display at various events each year. This year they were delighted to find over 100 varieties. I received a letter of

thanks and congratulations for the work that we have done in promoting orchards and for supporting their work.

I gave a morning's training session to COCO volunteers (Conderton and Overbury Community Orchard). I received a letter from COCO thanking me for my support and advice since the inception of their orchard.

Kemerton Orchard Workers keep me informed about Daffurn's Orchard (our local community orchard). They hope to hold an Apple Day on 15th October and I will be offering advice when they carry out the annual pruning of the trees. The grass was cut again this autumn and John Threadingham kindly removed the spoil. Although they regularly get a good turn-out of volunteers on these days they could always do with a few more. Anyone interested in supporting our community orchard should contact Neil and Olivia Chance or Steve and Anna Fletcher. The work would probably take up less than ten hours per year.

The Nursery Project

For some years, Pamela, together with up to three volunteers has been managing the wild flower nursery. However, due to ill-health, grandchildren and other reasons two have now had to give up. Despite the fact that we have donated seed to other sites we still have a good stock which is held in a fridge in the KCT office. I have been wondering if we should continue to invest as much effort into producing the seed. Perhaps we should discuss what we might do in the short and medium term? We could continue as normal, carry out minimum management and harvest a few seeds annually or we could abandon the site altogether? Pamela has completed an inventory of seed in stock which at present stands at: Shepherd's Needle 607g, Corn Buttercup 449g, Cornflower 64g, Night-flowering Catchfly 322g, Rough Poppy 239g, Long-headed Poppy 37g, and Prickly Poppy 600g.

I still produce a stock of trees and shrubs such as Holly, Box and Black Poplar. There are also a few Hawthorn whips from seed ex The Bushes SSSI.

I was honoured when The People's Trust for Endangered Species contacted me via their Archaeophytes Project to ask if we would take part in a trial to see if we could grow Upright Goosefoot (*Chenopodium urbicum*). Apparently the species is now extinct in the wild in the UK so the seed would be provided from a museum collection. Three groups were selected to take part in the trial. Of these, one failed to get any seed to germinate. There was no advice available on what to do but from the tiny amount of seed provided we grew about 75 plants. From these we harvested the miniscule seed and eventually collected just over 100 grammes. We hope to begin trying to grow Upright Goosefoot in an arable wildflower field margin next year.

Butterfly/Bumblebee survey

Volunteer George Day has continued this long-term project which involves surveying four transects three times per year. George is one of our most reliable volunteers and without his help we could not continue some of the monitoring work. (see also Swan Mussels)

Birds

This spring seemed the best in many years for breeding skylark and yellowhammer. We produced a report on how we were able to increase greatly the numbers of breeding skylark and meadow pipit – in sites on Bredon Hill and at Naunton Quarry in the Cotswolds. At the time of writing we are in discussions as to where and how we might get it published.

2016 seems to have been a wonderful year for many breeding species with some appearing to rear three broods. Song thrush, blackbird and wren all fledged young during the last few days in July. Three or four pairs of swallow nested in the barn to the rear of Ivy Cottage and in Stable Yard, with most rearing at least two broods.

For the first time in over thirty years we recorded house martin nesting on the estate. I watched for several minutes as the adults brought food in to their young. However, two days later the nest and contents had disappeared.

Swan Mussels

I asked George Day to clear two areas of predated Swan Mussel shells and then to monitor (if possible using Trail Cameras) when they reappeared. One site was in woodland, the other in open grassland. He has been making weekly visits for almost a year now with no sign of further predation. I contacted Radnorshire Wildlife Trust to see if they were any further forward in solving the mystery as they were experiencing the same thing. They were not.

Other Surveys

George Day carried out the baseline water quality testing for the CCARP in eight sites across the estate.

He also carried out the annual counts of butterflies and bumblebees along four transects.

George made regular checks for otter spraint along the brooks.

George plays an invaluable role in supporting our work and without him some projects might have to be abandoned.

I believe that John Threadingham carried out the annual check and cleaning of bird nest boxes in several sites.

I arranged a visit to Beggarboys by the Worcestershire Bryophyte Group, led by Dr Ann Hill. We will be adding their records to the Trust's database.

Staff from the Environment Agency carried out checks on the Crayfish in the lake at KLNK.

RELIC

Discovering that there were two more, apparently disease-resistant elms on Bredon Hill came as a great surprise. We arranged with the farmer and Avonbank Nursery at Pershore College to obtain cuttings. On the day, Ollie, a nephew of the farmer came along. At sixteen he had a keen interest in plants and in particular, in taking cuttings. With his help we took material from both trees and rushed it over to Pershore as once cut, elm wilts extremely quickly. At the nursery a team of volunteers was waiting and began to strike cuttings for the mist propagator. Ollie joined in and we left him there with the team. Later we learned that they were so impressed with him that he spent the entire school summer holidays working with them. I report this as an example of one of the aims of CCARP - to encourage people like Ollie.

Recorder

We continue to upload wildlife records onto the Trust database. We believe that the total number of wildlife records is approaching 80,000. As always, our updated records are transferred onto the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust Records Office database and from there to the national records centre. KCT is one of WWT's largest contributors.

Site Visits

Work requirements for the CCARP meant that we could make far fewer site visits at Kemerton. There were also problems over transport. However, whenever we did I produced a Site Visit Report to help with current management. In the John Moore and the Old Garden I noted several plants of Himalayan Balsam. We almost succeeded in eliminating it in the past but it has re-appeared. The lake woodlands look really well but it would be beneficial to much of the wildlife if more piles of brushwood, stacks of logs (beetle lodges) and stands of deadwood (beetle wigwams) could be provided.

We noted that both the Carrant Brook and Squitter Brook – and also the pond in Cheltenham Road field - are badly overgrown so that virtually no light is reaching the water. The value to wildlife of these aquatic habitats could be greatly improved if the encroaching bramble and shrubs were controlled.

I was unable to visit The Bushes, where I was keen to check on certain management trials that had started some years ago and to carry out a breeding bird survey.

Other Work

I attended a lecture - 'Natural Flood management: Letting Nature do what Nature Does' – by Chris Short, senior research fellow at University of Gloucester. The Environment Agency (EA) had a large presence there. The value of Oxbows, wet woodland, woody debris and seasonal scrapes were all described and discussed.

I attended the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust Entomology Day and took along specimens which required identification. There I discussed the CCARP with Roger Umpelby who offered help wherever possible.

I attended the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust Recorders AGM.

I discussed arable wild flowers with Malcolm Smith who is writing a book about farming and wildlife...likely title 'Ploughing a New Furrow'. It will review the enormous impact on wildlife of farming practices in the context of farming history in Britain, summarising the decline of very many species and the habitats that once supported them. It will also tackle some controversial issues such as badgers and bovine TB. But much of the book will be devoted to how wildlife and farming can be better balanced - taking examples from around the UK where farmers have changed practices or modified their management to cater better for wildlife. Later he visited and I showed him our plant nursery and some local arable margins.

I continue to work closely with Giles Mathews of the EA. Giles has a wishlist of works which the EA would be keen to carry out along the Carrant as and when funding becomes available.

We were pleased to note that Breedon Aggregates has taken the lease on the sands and gravel plant at Aston-on-Carrant. BA took over Huntsmans – the company which excavated and landscaped the Kemerton Lake site. The new management has asked us to continue our monitoring and advisory work at the Naunton Quarry, where we have also greatly increased the number of breeding skylark – and corn bunting. BA is very supportive of our plans for the CCARP and has offered practical help where possible. We will be trialling an artificial sand martin nesting site using quarry materials in 2017.

I refreshed some public notice boards including completely replacing the damaged information board in Quarry Field.