

Wetlands West

Annual Report 2010-2011

The Severn and Avon Vales Wetland Partnership

The Partnership's Vision:

The planned recovery of the wetland resource of the Severn and Avon Vales



Foreword from Chair

As predicted last year, this was a quiet year for Wetlands West. However as the various Partner reports below demonstrate, despite the economic position and cutbacks in staff and project money in so many of the Wetlands West Partners, delivery still continues.

The Partnership became a 'Not for Profit' company at the end of the year. We now need to look to Partners to stump up the cash to become members of the company. But I'm hoping that, even in these straitened times, most Partners will be able to afford the required £1.

The 10 year review project has made painfully slow progress, due to a combination of factors. One major difficulty has been putting together data on agri-environment schemes. Particular problems have arisen from the change from CSS to HLS, and particularly the gaps that have occurred between schemes. On top of that extraction of data has thrown up significant anomalies, some of which we have not been able to get to the bottom of. It is likely that we will not achieve a completely 'clean' dataset, so that in particular estimates of economic benefit will be lower than the real position. But the review will help us formulate our future strategy, and give us a baseline against which to measure further delivery.

Because this annual report covers last financial year, more recent developments do not figure. I am awaiting the result of our bid to be one of the 12 'Nature Improvement Areas', expected before the end of October. There will be 20 projects shortlisted, with up to 12 supported. My understanding is that there were 75 applications, including key projects in areas around ours. STOP PRESS – unfortunately we were not successful, but other funding opportunities may open up.

Looking forward, a key year on the horizon is 2014, when the revised ERDP comes in to existence. Negotiations around this are ongoing, but at present I am hearing reasonably optimistic noises around the continuation of a high level agri-environment scheme.

I expect the current year to continue to pose problems for Partners, and the difficulties being played out in one of our key delivery Partners show how fragile the current position can be. I hope the position for our colleagues in FWAG resolves well for them, both as an organisation and as friends we work with.

Peter Holmes
Chair
19 November 2011

Review of Partners' Activities

British Trust for Ornithology (Mike Smart- birdwatcher)

Recent studies of Curlew and conservation activities on their behalf by Wetlands West partners have generally related to birds breeding in the Severn and Avon Vales. Thus a national survey of 'Breeding Waders of Wet Meadows' in 2002 has been followed up by annual repeat surveys, and a larger scale study, covering many regions of UK, was organised by RSPB in summer 2010. Detailed analysis of the 2010 survey is still in progress, but about 50 pairs of Curlew still regularly attempt to breed every year in hay meadows of Gloucestershire and Worcestershire, with varying success as some chicks fall a prey to predators such as mink, fox, crows and gulls. Fieldwork for the national BTO Bird Atlas has also found Curlews nesting in small numbers in the Forest of Dean, on the Cotswolds and in the headwaters of the Thames. In recent years, agri-environmental schemes in the Severn and Avon Vales have focussed on many (though not yet all) fields where Curlew breed, and subsidies have been provided to farmers and land-owners who cut their hay late and/or avoid use of herbicides.

It has long been known that these breeding Curlew leave their breeding area by July or August, and congregate in winter on coastal estuaries in UK and western Europe. The Severn Estuary (on the SSSI and SPA including the English shore as far as Bridgewater Bay and the Welsh shore as far as Cardiff Bay) regularly holds over 3,000 Curlews in winter, but little is known of the make-up of these flocks (local breeding birds? birds from further afield? adults or juveniles?). In September 2010 therefore, with the permission of the local landowner and of Natural England, a cannon-netting operation was carried out at Wibdon Warth between Lydney and Chepstow, with the aim of marking Curlews with colour rings, so that individuals could be identified in the field and their movements tracked; in particular, the aim was to measure 'turnover' i.e. whether the same birds were present all winter, or whether the estuary was in fact playing host to a constantly changing group of individuals. 66 birds were caught and colour-ringed; they included three birds already ringed, one from Finland, one from The Netherlands and one from UK; 65 of the birds were adults, so locally bred juveniles were clearly not staying locally.

In the period up to July 2011, 26 of the 66 were re-sighted (one was found dead, killed by a predator), most of them in winter 2010/11 on the Severn estuary, but one in the Severn Hams in March /April (not certain whether it was a breeding bird or passing migrant), one on breeding territory in The Netherlands, one on breeding grounds in Finland. In August and early September 2011, more intensive observations were made on the Severn estuary, and no less than 58 of the remaining 65 were seen either near the ringing site or at Slimbridge; these were adult birds which had probably returned from their breeding grounds and were in full moult of their wing feathers; they are clearly very site-faithful at this time of year. Further observations are planned in the coming winter, and it is hoped to make another catch (of about the same number) in late September or October 2011 at Wibdon.

Environment Agency

The Environment Agency has worked with many partners to achieve a large number of outputs over the project area. These are listed in **Appendix A**.

Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), Gloucestershire

Full information in **Appendix B**.

Gloucester City Council

PLOCK COURT WETLAND AREA

Gloucester City Council secured a grant from the Environment Agency for flood relief and environmental improvements in the Plock Court area. This area is often water logged and floods regularly. It is being transformed into a wetland area, providing wildlife habitats, an educational resource and a pleasant area for quiet recreation.

During April of this year two small wetland scrapes were excavated. These will be left to colonise naturally with aquatic plants, by seeds blown in from the surrounding area. A post and rail fence has been erected to define the wetland area and surrounding meadow. The grass with-in the fence will be left to grow longer allowing wild flowers to flourish, a hay cut will be taken later on in the year.



NEXT STAGE

The area around the scrapes was sprayed off in preparation for sowing with meadow seed mixes.



Unfortunately this Spring was unusually dry and the seeding has been delayed until September. These will not flower until 2013, how-ever an annual mix is being over sown in some areas to give a splash of colour during 2012.

Two picnic tables and two benches will be installed after the seeding has taken place.

During the autumn a hedge of native shrubs will be planted on the boundary with the A40 and Tewkesbury Road. Standard oak, cherry, hawthorn, river birch and silver birch trees will be planted with-in the

fenced area.

SEVERNSIDE PROJECT

The Severnside Project established by the City Council in 2000 continues to manage wetland sites in the project area between the River Severn and the Sharpness Canal within the City of Gloucester.

Work towards a management agreement on the Severn Trent Nature Reserve has been going ahead with a view to applying for funding to maintain the water vole population on the site. Weekly surveying of mink rafts and vegetation control around ditches have been ongoing to ensure there is plenty of suitable habitat and no mink on the site.



On Alney Island a large scrape has been created to improve habitat and to aid flow of floodwaters across the site. A large area of willow was cleared and other areas are being put into a 3 year coppice rotation. A row of large willows have been pollarded and several ditches enlarged and extended to provide water of varying depth to increase habitat.

Gloucestershire County Council

A new Conservation Road Verge Register was published by the County Council with the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust in 2011 which includes up to 15 road verges in the Wetlands West area that will be sensitively managed. The County Council is also once more collecting evidence on Key Wildlife Sites in Gloucestershire to reveal which are in good management for the benefit of biodiversity. Around 40 of these locally important sites are situated in the Severn catchment. This Single Data requirement for Defra is relevant to all county councils in the Wetland West area who need to report on this matter by the end of September 2011.

The County Council is also looking ahead to a period of necessary change following the publication of the Natural Environment White Paper in June 2011. This includes working with some Wetland West and other partners on the potential formation of new Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) and Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) across the region. LNPs and NIAs will be very likely to influence and potentially become an opportunity for the business of Wetlands West in 2011/2012.

Flood alleviation scheme at Brockworth.

The £1.5m scheme is designed to prevent c. 350 properties from flooding caused by the Horsbere Brook and will hold c. 150,000m³ of water in extreme rainfall events. This is a joint scheme funded by the Environment Agency and GCC. The flood storage area is relatively shallow and so for most part of the year will be free from flood water. It presented an ideal opportunity to create 15 hectares of biodiversity habitat with improved public access on the outskirts of the city. The City Council has agreed to take on the management of the wetlands and local schools will be involved with its design.



Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust

Severn Vale Living Landscapes Project (Karen Lloyd/Del Jones)

1 Completed capital projects

- **2 scrape creation projects** (one involving the restoration of the old, defunct River Cam channel) on the Frampton Court Estate, totaling 2625 m² which will hold water and increase the water holding capacity of the surrounding land, as well as providing habitat for wading birds, overwintering wildfowl and (on the linear scrape) water vole. One of the scrapes includes water control structures which will allow careful control of water levels and hence flooding events. This was a large project, requiring negotiations with several partners: Frampton Estate, Berkeley Estate, the Environment Agency (EA) who provided labour and machinery free of charge, Natural England (NE) who funded 80% of the capital works through a special project in Higher Level Stewardship, the Internal Drainage Board, and the ground works contractor.
- **6 pond restoration projects** 6 on the Frampton Estate have been completed, to enhance habitat for great crested newts and other aquatic species.
- **Back channel of the River Cam** has been restored in partnership with the Environment Agency primarily for water vole. This will also allow free passage between the pond and the adjacent River Cam for otter, eels and fish; otter spraint has recently been spotted on a monitoring raft in the back channel.
- **25 willows have been pollarded** 14 at Rosie's Wood, adjacent to willows pollarded there last year, and to complement the work done above on the River Cam, to allow light to reach banks of watercourses to enhance conditions for plant growth in order to provide food and cover for water voles. 11 were pollarded on Pegmore Farm, to reduce height next to an area known to contain breeding wader sites; this reduces perching posts for corvid predators of eggs and chicks.
- **2 log pile otter holts** have been constructed, from sustainable, locally sourced timber and brash, **with the assistance of volunteers**, on sites where surveys have shown otters to be present. In addition, a man-made otter holt was installed on the River Leadon, in partnership with Natural England and volunteers from the local parish.
- **600m of hedgerow restored** in total. 300m by a mixture of coppicing, planting and gapping up (as appropriate) alongside the Cape Hall Brook for the benefit of water vole; this work continues the hedgerow restoration along the same stretch of the Cape Hall Brook carried out last year. 100m planted around ponds for refugia, and 200m of new hedgerow planted to enhance habitat for hedgerow birds and increase connectivity of semi-natural habitat.
- **1018m of fencing** has been installed in total. 818m to protect vegetation from grazing, poaching and nutrient pollution alongside watercourses, hedgerows and ponds mentioned above. 200m (in partnership with the EA) installed alongside the Gloucester and Sharpness canal where a new population of water voles was discovered.
- **5.96 ha of traditional orchard restoration** entered under 2 Higher Level Stewardship agreements.

2 Higher Level Stewardship

Four applications have gone live and a further two submitted.

3 Survey & monitoring

- **Phase One Habitat Survey of whole Project area.** Two 'Graduate Challenge' students were recruited and trained to carry out a Phase One survey across the Project area over 4 months. Data is dependant on resources to be digitised.
- **Brown hare.** 17 volunteers carried out a 'vantage point' spring survey for brown hare this year.
- **Otters.** Volunteers continue to survey for otters over more than 80 sites in the Project area. This enables us to target habitat work to benefit them.



Lower Severn Internal Drainage Board

Projects are currently ongoing :

- 1) Walmore Common Sluice construction is due to commence on site on the 12th of September.
- 2) Ashleworth Ham Water Level Management is currently in draft and out for consultation.

There will be a submission on these projects next year when they have been completed.

Natural England

Following the Comprehensive Spending Review on 20th October 2010, an immediate moratorium was placed on all new Higher Level Stewardship delivery. This included everything that was not a Live agreement, even down to agreements that had been offered. All were deferred to 2011-12.

The result was that only five new wetland HLS agreements started in this reporting year, two in Worcestershire and three in Gloucestershire. However over 200 ha of land was involved, the majority of which was floodplain restoration options. In total over the 10 years of these agreements, including all aspects (whether wetland or other habitats), will bring in over £1 million in capital works and management payments.

The upside of last year's moratorium is that when we come to report on the current year (11-12), it should look pretty good!

Warwickshire Wildlife Trust

Warwickshire Wildlife Trust is continuing to develop a Living Landscape approach to its work along the River Avon, working with local communities, landowners and partners to create and enhance habitat along the river and its floodplain.

The Trust was awarded £8,000 from the Vision for Stour Group of Stratford-on-Avon District Council to develop and deliver the Stour Water Vole Project over a one year period, beginning in the summer of 2010. The project initially involved training local volunteers in how to survey for wetland mammals. With this achieved, and with the help of the newly formed Stour Valley Wildlife Action Group, it was then possible to conduct a comprehensive survey for water voles, American mink and the Eurasian otter throughout much of the Warwickshire Stour catchment.

Almost 40 different locations were surveyed within a 15km radius of Shipston-on-Stour – these were on the main River Stour and its tributaries (and those of the River Avon nearby), and along ditches and ponds. Sites that were previously known to be positive were also re-checked. The results showed that both mink and otter were present along the River Stour and tributaries, such as the Knee Brook on the Warwickshire – Gloucestershire border.

Unfortunately, water voles were found to have disappeared from sites where they were known to be present back in 2002, and survey results indicated that water voles may now be extinct from much of the Warwickshire Stour catchment. On a more positive note, several strong water vole colonies were identified in the Long Marston – Lower Quinton area, situated to the north-west edge of the Stour catchment and on a tributary of the Marchfont Brook, itself a tributary of the River Avon. Although the Long Marston Storage Depot was already known to have water voles, surveys showed that the size and extent of water vole populations nearby were larger than expected. The results also suggested that, without mink control, water voles are only surviving in remote and unassuming habitat such as drainage ditches and small ponds, and consequently threatened by human activity (i.e. poor ditch maintenance and rodenticide use as a result of mistaken identification).

The project has engaged with approximately 20 local landowners and has benefited from support from organisations that include the Environment Agency, Natural England, FWAG and both the District and local Parish Council. The project has also advised local flood risk teams about appropriate ditch management, as well as the site management and ecological consultant at the Long Marston Storage Depot regarding mink monitoring and control. A mink monitoring programme has been set up to protect existing water vole populations and to encourage their expansion back onto tributaries of the River Stour. Ten mink rafts have been constructed and work is ongoing with local landowners to locate these in suitable areas and to ensure that the approach is as effective and sustainable as possible.

Several otter holts will be installed in the catchment in summer 2011, and a number of ponds and scrapes will also be created on the floodplain to restore an area of wetland, enhancing biodiversity and potentially reducing flood risk.

In other work, the Trust received a sum of money from Natural England to progress work related to the Wye, Severn and Avon Vales Integrated Biodiversity Delivery Area (IBDA). This involved researching land ownership along the stretch of the River Avon between Warwick and Bidford-on-Avon and landowner

liaison in order to progress potential wetland creation, for example for breeding waders at the National Trust's Charlecote Park.



Photo: Phill Clayton



Photo: Fosseway Photography

Worcestershire County Council

The Countryside Service manages several picnic places along the Avon where we provide interpretation on the river and its associated habitats as well as manage circular walks leading into the wider countryside, including neighbouring wetland areas. These sites include Pershore Bridges Picnic Place, Eckington Wharf Picnic Place and Jubilee Bridge Picnic Place. More information is available on the website:

<http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/cms/environment-and-planning/countryside/explore-the-countryside/countryside-service-sites/list-of-countryside-sites.aspx>

Worcestershire Wildlife Trust

The John Bennett reserve at Birlingham capital works were completed at the end of last year with the installation of a tower bird hide allowing good views across the wetland and a wind pump ensuring that the water level can be maintained on a year round basis. Both funded through an HLS agreement. At the same time there were opportunities to carry out small scale improvements to the adjacent Gwen Finch wetland reserve site which would also benefit new reserve. With funding from the Environment Agency the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust was able to undertake a lagoon clearance project on the Gwen Finch wetland of approximately 0.25ha in size and use the reeds removed from site to kick start the reedbeds on the new reserve.



The Gwen Finch Wetland has always suffered from the risk of flooding hence the reason for it being a wetland however, this has made the site difficult to graze on a year round basis – one of the first areas to become inundated with water has been the gateway making it difficult for a grazier to remove cattle in a hurry. With £12380 funding support from the SITA Trust we have been able to relocate the gateway and install a culvert, corral and cattle handling system enabling year round access to the reserve.

Wychavon District Council

The Friends of Avon Meadows (local community volunteer group) are continuing to flourish and through a series of small funding successes, have equipped themselves with tools and equipment to enable them to manage the area for the benefit of the wildlife and public. We have also developed a relationship with Worcester University to enable students on their environmental science course to use the wetland as a resource for water quality monitoring and other aspects of their coursework.

Financial Overview

Wetlands West - Financial Statement 2010/11						
Financial Statement for the period 01.04.10 - 31.03.11						
Bank Balance - Opening						119832.08
Income						
	Partner Contributions			10000.00		
	Bank Interest			214.57	10214.57	
Expenditure						
	Project Funding			5923.98		
	Employment costs			450.00		
	Website			1860.00		
	Sundry			530.18	8764.16	
Bank Balance - Closing						121282.49
It should be noted that there remains an outstanding liability of £30,000.00 which is owed to the Environment Agency for project works at Birlingham. An income of £30,000.00 was received in the previous year for this project from The Wetland Vision Fund.						

Acknowledgements

Wetlands West would like to thank all the representatives of partner organisations who attend meetings, and to funding partners without whom the work of the Partnership would be difficult. A list of partners and contact details is available in **Appendix C**

Contact details

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Appendices as separate files