Wetlands West

Annual Report 2009-2010

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

This report covers the period 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2010. I'll try and do it as though the succeeding six months had not happened, although of course recent events are dominant in people's minds.

In terms of Wetlands West's structure, the most important event of last year was the agreement to convert from a loose association of partners to a 'Not for Profit' company (travelling tentatively via a potential charity). Whilst this process is not yet complete, we are confident that it will enable the Partnership to continue doing what it currently does, but now lawfully!

Along the way we parted company with our Director, Tim Adkin. Tim's appointment had come via a review of the Partnership structure and activity, and how the Steering Group felt this should develop in the future. The experiment was not broadly successful in my view, although Tim did get very close to securing substantial funding from Zurich Insurance, with the recession coming just at the wrong time.

However Partners did continue to deliver through this period, and many have contributed reports to the summary below. Some of these successes were the result of Partners just doing what they do, without any recourse to Wetlands West resources. But others have had some input, from advice, funding for technical support, through to significant Wetland Vision funding channelled through Wetlands West. And the Partnership has widened partners' contacts, with Partners much more often talking directly to each other.

But the picture is less than entirely rosy. Whilst there have been significant wetland creations and restorations, we have not been able to deliver much within our socio-economic objectives. This was one of the fundamental issues that Tim as Director was meant to address, but like others before him this was not successful. We need to do so much more around the economic benefits of wetland restoration, outwith agri-environment payments, to secure gains in the longer term.

As a final note, the departure of Tim seriously reduced the capacity of Wetlands West to maintain activity. I am very grateful to the Steering Group for their help to keep things afloat in this period, and especially to Rachel Datlen, Colin Studholme and Colin Raven, without whom it would not have been possible.

Peter Holmes
Chair

Review of Partners' Activities

British Trust for Ornithology (Mike Smart)

Since 2002, surveys of breeding waders have been carried out most years in the Severn and Avon Vales in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire. In spring and summer 2009, most of the sites identified as being of importance in previous surveys were checked again, generally by the same group of volunteer observers.

In 2009, conditions for breeding waders appeared excellent: after winter flooding in January, the spring was dry, and there was no flooding from February onwards; in the last ten days of May and early June there was a near heat wave (temperatures reaching 30° C), allowing some grass to be cut for silage. This was followed by damp conditions for most of June, with another brief heat wave in late June and early July; damp conditions, with frequent rainy days and little sun, then set in again for the rest of July. Many of the hay meadows are now in some form of Stewardship agreement with DEFRA which means that hay cutting is delayed to encourage breeding by ground-nesting birds; partly because of these arrangements, partly because of the morose weather, little hay was cut in July, and the main cutting period was in mid-August when there was a fortnight of settled weather with no rain. A study carried out in June 2009 at Coombe Hill showed that densities of invertebrates and earthworms were lower there than would be expected for a lowland wet grassland, and suggested that the reason was either naturally low densities or the continuing effects of summer flooding in June/July 2007 and September 2008.

Species	Number of pairs attempting to nest		Number of successful pairs	
	Worcs	Glos	Worcs	Glos
Oystercatcher	6	9-10	4	3-4
Little Ringed Plover	13+	0	6	0
Lapwing	45-47	5(inland) 56 (estuary)	9+	3 (inland) 12+ (estuary)
Snipe	0	1 (?) (estuary)	0	0
Curlew	11-12	17-21	1+	7+
Redshank	8	1 (inland) 26-31 (estuary)	1+	Not known

- As in previous years, there was a major difference between waders nesting along the rivers inland and those nesting on the estuary. Numbers, especially of Lapwing and Redshank nesting in "Greenfield" situations, were much larger on the estuary
- Both inland and near the estuary, breeding success was heavily affected by predators, in particular crows, foxes and mink.
- 2009 was a particularly bad year inland, notably for Redshank and Lapwing, perhaps because of the effects of the summer floods of 2007 and 2008, which may have reduced available food items, notably earthworms.
- Curlew on the other hand did better in 2009 and an unusually high number of fledged chicks was seen on hayfields along the Severn and Avon. It may be that, if they escape predation and destruction during hay making operations, the normal time for fledging is late June rather than early or mid July, as was previously thought.
- Snipe fared badly inland though there were hopes of breeding near the estuary.

The preliminary summary report can be seen in **Appendix A**

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 B.**

Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), Gloucestershire

Longdon Marsh

Wetlands West have funded a part time project officer role, hosted with Gloucestershire FWAG, to deliver wetland restoration on and around Longdon Marsh through environmental stewardship, linked to the production of grass silage for a biomass facility recently granted planning permission at Blackmore Park, near Malvern. The biomass company are keen to ensure all farmers in the land resource partnership supplying the facility have high standards of environmental conservation, and as such are also contributing to the project officer's time in delivering both the land resource partnership and stewardship.

The project officer has been undertaking farm visits and scoping work to establish the potential for restoring wet grassland habitats for breeding and wintering waders, whilst enabling a commercially viable product to be delivered from the grassland in accordance with the later cutting dates set out in stewardship prescriptions. In addition to the restoration of wet grassland, the project will explore opportunities for enhancing the structure of the marshland habitats with scrapes and pools. Arable reversion and wet grassland creation may also contribute to flood mitigation in the area.

Ashleworth Ham SSSI

Ashleworth Ham SSSI is an important wetland area within the Severn Vale. It is designated a SSSI for its botanical interest and wintering wildfowl; breeding waders and ditch interest are also important. The SSSI is split into 3 units with differing ownership, one being favourable, one being unfavourable recovering and one being unfavourable declining so there is a genuine need to address management issues and move towards a favourable condition across the whole site.

In the past there have been various problems with management, including managing water levels and grazing regime. In partnership with Ali Swanson at Natural England (NE), the Lower Severn Internal Drainage Board (LSIDB) and Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust (GWT), Gloucestershire FWAG have been undertaking land owner liaison visits to try and identify problems and concerns and bring the local community of farmers and landowners into forming some constructive solutions. A particular focus of the consultation was to gain views on the water level management (WLM) and the potential to establish a grazing animals project (GAP) to try and get some cattle grazing, particularly on the GWT unit of the SSSI. Managing water levels for the SSSI will have direct impacts on the neighbouring land, so farmers in the area have been asked their views of management.

Much of the surrounding land is also under the old CSS schemes which will be expiring in the next few years, offering an opportunity for a revised management plan to be implemented under HLS. As a result future HLS options have been discussed with the landowners and an HLS application has been put together for land bordering the SSSI with some good MG4 grassland. Much of the general feedback from landowners has been useful and we are keen to keep the momentum of the project going.

More information on both projects in **Appendix C**

Gloucester City Council

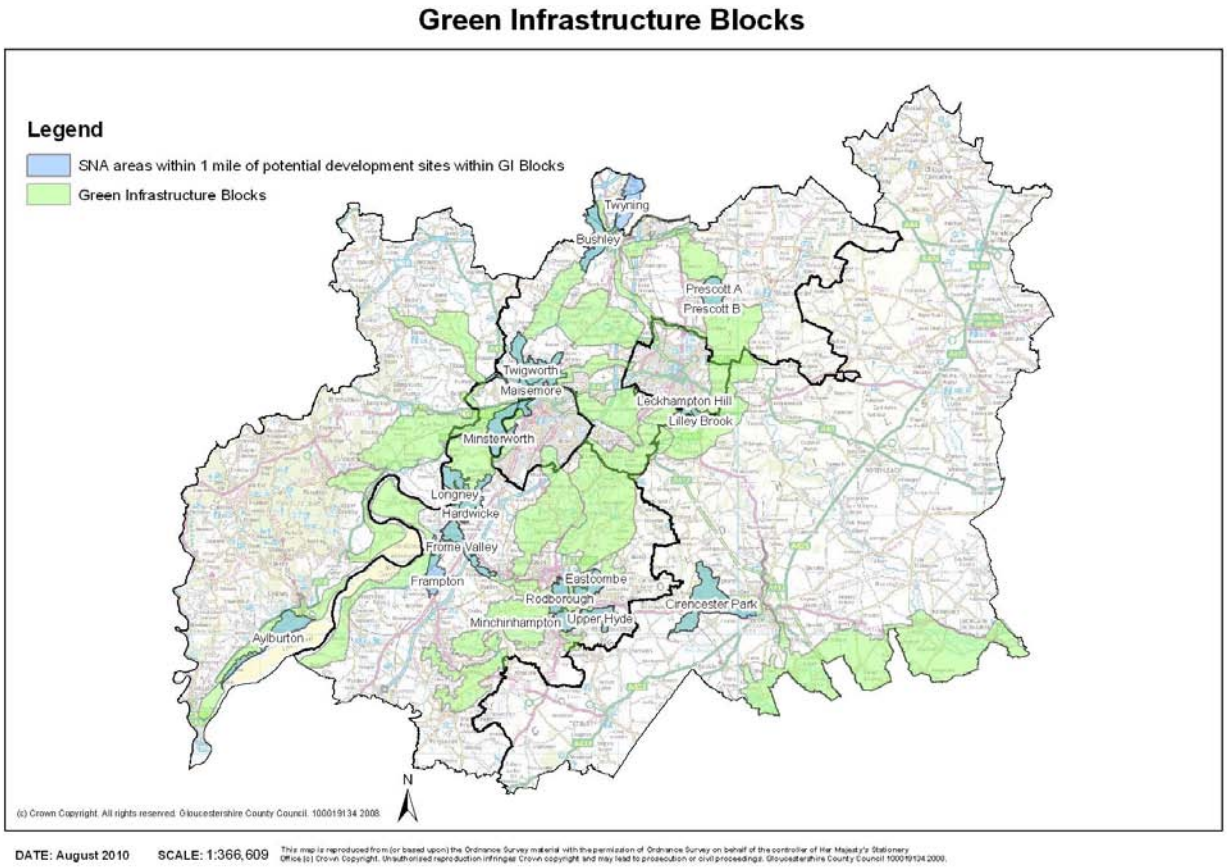
The Severnside Project established by the City Council in 2000 continues to manage and create wetland sites in the project area between the River Severn and the Sharpness Canal within the City of Gloucester. In January a length of ditch was reprofiled to improve water vole habitat on the Severn Trent Netheridge Reserve. The LSIDB carried out the main works to a brief by Middlemarch Consultants who had received Biffa Award funding. Severnside Project volunteers then seeded the area and planted plugs to aid establishment of a good variety of herb species. A *Typha* infested pond was cleared out at the same time, re-establishing open water with a reedbed edge.

Working with John Field, GWT Water Vole Officer and Severnside Project Volunteers, a comprehensive water vole survey was carried out on the ditch network on the STW reserve and the adjacent Netheridge Farm which is managed by the City Council. From this a rotational ditch management plan was drawn up which the LSIDB have agreed to follow.

On Netheridge Farm the Environment Agency funded and carried out works to create a network of pools and scrapes on a low-lying wet area. One deep pond is connected to the ditch network and should be of benefit to water voles and elvers. The other 5 pools will be developed with a reedbed fringe and are much shallower, almost drying out during the summer.

Gloucestershire County Council

A Draft Green Infrastructure network for Gloucestershire's biodiversity has been completed as part of phase 2 of the Gloucestershire Strategic Infrastructure Delivery Plan (SIDP) – most of the Severn Vale in the county is included as a biodiversity intervention zone.



A Wildlife Sites Partnership has been established in Gloucestershire with many of Wetland West partners represented. Data for Local Wildlife Sites in improved (good) biodiversity condition has now been compiled for the period April 2005 – March 2010. The National Indicator NI 197 has increased to about 40% largely due to more agri-environment scheme uptake across Gloucestershire including the Severn Vale.

Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust

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

The project area is the flood plain of the River Severn in Gloucestershire, between the county boundary with Worcestershire (overlapping slightly into it) and the South Gloucestershire boundary. Approximately 11,000 hectares split into 22 Lowland Wet Grassland (Coastal and Floodplain Grazing Marsh) and associated habitats (unimproved neutral grassland, fen & marsh, reedbed, wet woodland, and saltmarsh) 'Strategic Nature Areas' (SNAs) of approximately 500 hectares each. Some slight revisions to the SNA areas are currently in progress.
The main objectives of the 5 year project, started in December 2007, are to restore and create UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) habitat, as above, for BAP and GBAP species (otter, water vole, brown hare, skylark, reed bunting, corn bunting, bullfinch, turtle dove, true fox sedge, lapwing, curlew, redshank and snipe.), on a 'landscape scale'. Providing a connected mosaic of wetland and semi-natural habitats at a density (determined by the South West 'Rebuilding Biodiversity' methodology), that will enable species to move in the face of climate change and changing land management pressures. Also to develop a long term strategy for grazing management of restored wetlands, to ensure sustainability of these habitats, and to monitor biodiversity gains by using volunteers.

Summary of main achievements

1,280 hectares (47%) has been entered into Environmental Stewardship in the project area.

- 9 Environmental Stewardship applications live, 6 being processed.
- Outside of HLS: 4 scrapes created, 8 ponds restored, 5 otter holts constructed, 29 willows pollarded, 300 metres hedgerows restored.
- Baseline surveys carried out across project area for brown hare and otters, surveys carried out for water voles in conjunction with GWT water vole recovery officer, Phase One Habitat survey of Project area completed.
- Over 80 volunteers engaged, events held for funders and stakeholders, farmers and landowners, volunteers, SW Wildlife Trust Living Landscape Project Officers and community, information disseminated to over 300 stakeholders.
- Advice and ongoing support given to farmers both as part of HLS and as part of smaller projects.

See map of projects below

Severn Hams Nature Reserves
Coombe Hill

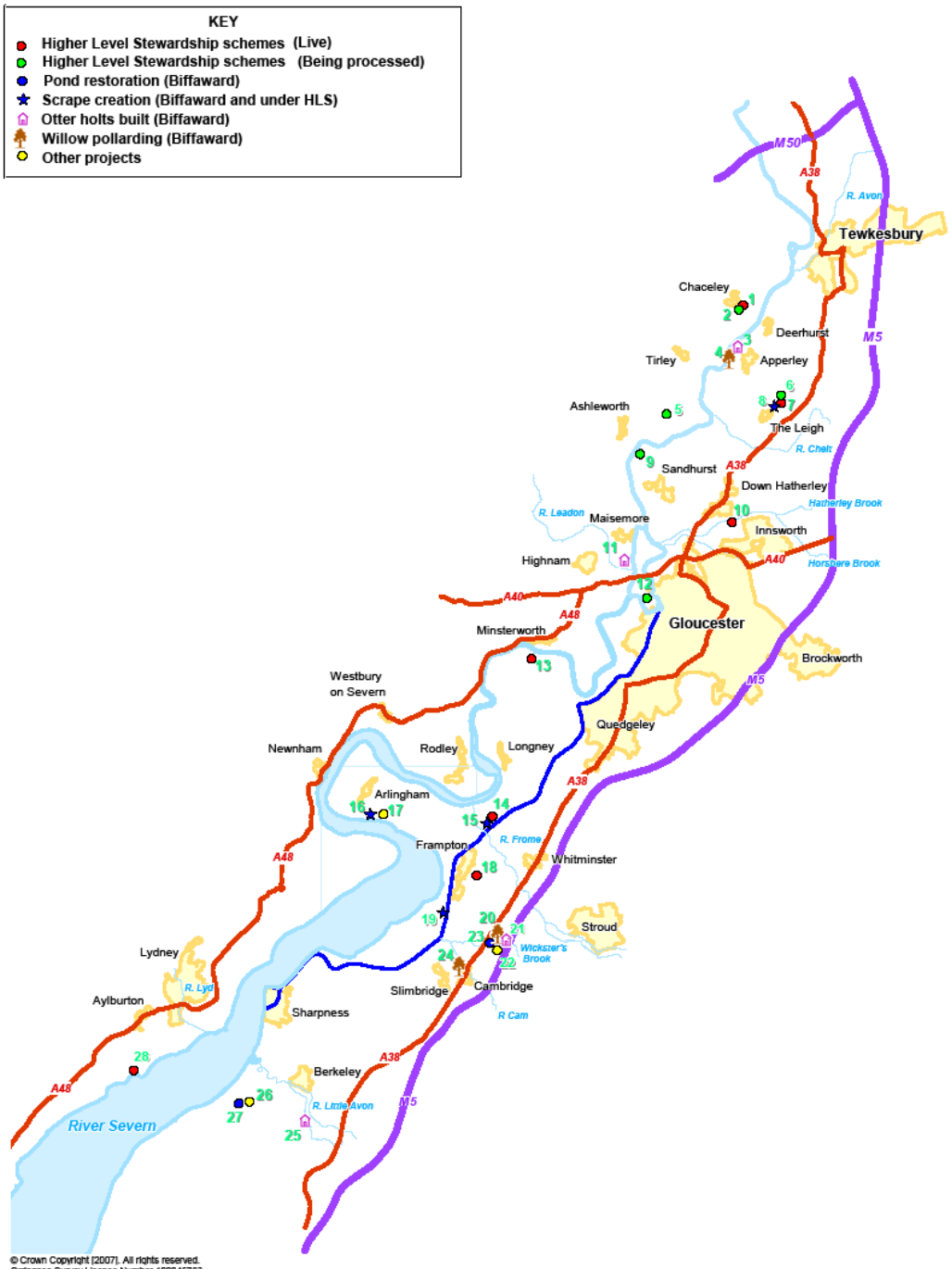
- 600 metres of scrub cleared along southern towpath.
- 3 new fields totalling 13 hectares purchased adjacent to the North Meadows.

Chaceley

- Ditches on north and east side de-silted

The full original report is in **Appendix D**

Severn Vale Living Landscape Projects - October 2010



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Gloucestershire Centre for Environmental Records

Berkeley Vale Water Vole Recovery Project (John Field)

The main aim of the project was to reconnect the existing isolated water vole populations and ultimately to encourage re-population of other historic sites within the project area. Having carried out a comprehensive base line survey, environmental assessment (site-based) surveys were carried out in 2008 and 2009 (Frome Valley SNA, River Cam Catchment, Little Avon Catchment & Netheridge/Hempsted Area).
Total survey length/area (excluding base-line): 69,675 m flowing water (38,225 m rivers/streams, plus 31,875 m IDB network) and 89.02 ha open water/wetland sites
Just over a fifth of all watercourses surveyed had evidence of surviving water vole populations, however, almost without exception all the water vole populations identified were isolated and of very low density. Sadly water voles were found to be absent from the Little Avon River, the Doverte Brook, the Newport Brook, the River Ewelme, the lower River Frome and the Stroudwater Canal.
The water vole surveying programme identified five key watercourses/areas for water voles in the project area:

i. Wickster's Brook (a tributary of the River Cam).
ii. River Cam.
iii. Ozleworth Brook (plus 2 minor tributaries).
iv. Drainage network in and around the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust at Slimbridge.
v. Drainage network in and around the Netheridge Reserve near Gloucester.

Mink Control

Following the summer flooding of 2007 we established a network of mink rafts throughout the project area ready for the spring 2008 breeding season. Since then we have continued to run 50-60 mink rafts on the Little Avon River (including the Ozleworth, Dyers & Kilcott Brooks), the adjoining Internal Drainage Board network of drainage ditches and the neighbouring river catchments of the River Cam and the lower River Frome. We have also continued to coordinate our mink control programme with the efforts of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust at Slimbridge and Gloucester City Council at the nearby Netheridge Reserve (a captive-bred water vole release site). In addition, we have continued our relationship with the Three Counties Mink Hunt, thereby enabling us to obtain their 'bag' records and monitor their activities on the Little Avon River to ensure that they continue to have very little disturbance impact on the resident otter population. 8 mink were culled in 2009. Wherever possible mink carcasses have been passed on to the Central Science Laboratory for research purposes.

Habitat Restoration/Creation Schemes

i. Acquisition of site of a former trout farm at Nind on the Ozleworth Brook (Key Wildlife Site for water voles) as a nature reserve for Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust. Management Committee being established in 2010 – responsibilities to include the management of the Ozleworth Brook downstream site (also a Key Wildlife Site for water voles).
ii. Acquisition of extension land to the Rackleaze Wetlands site on the River Cam for Stroud Valleys Project.
iii. Designation of the Severn Trent Water Netheridge Reserve (a captive-bred water vole release site), managed by Gloucester City Council's Severnside Project, as a Key Wildlife Site.
iv. Designation of a roadside wet ditch (Peter's Street – a tributary of the Wickster's Brook), which is home to a very isolated water vole population, as a Conservation Road Verge.

A huge number of capital works and habitat management have been carried out which are listed in the full report in **Appendix E**

Lower Severn Internal Drainage Board

1. Walmore Common SSSI, SPA, Ramsar WLMP.

1.1 The Board's Consultants are continuing with the final design for the proposed tilting weir structure to replace the existing sluice after a decision was reached on location. Once the final design has been completed, the work will be submitted for tender to construct the structure, during Spring 2011 depending on weather conditions.Replacing the structure Replacing the structure will provide a greater degree of water level control, quicker response and less prone to blockage.1.2 Working in conjunction with Natural England the perimeter ditch on the South Common was reinstated (approx 800m), a new access culvert over the low level carrier channel and the construction of two fords to provide access. The work was funded by Natural England, and will aid the management of the Common in the future.

Right: Reinstatement of perimeter ditch to aid water retention in the peat body.

Below: Culvert Construction

2. Ashleworth Hams SSSI

2.1 The Boards consultants part funded by Natural England are currently monitoring ground water levels using dip wells and ditch water levels using stage boards at the above site. The data is required to develop a functional Water Level Management Plan to replace the existing plan as the majority of the site is in unfavourable condition.

3. Neitheridge Treatment works Reserve, Hempsted, Glos

3.1 Re profiling adopted watercourse within the reserve to the specification stated by the Severnside project to create suitable habitat for the water vole.

3.2 Weed clearance undertaken to small pond as requested by Severnside project.

3.3 Agreed maintenance plan with Gloucestershire wildlife trust for the adopted water courses at Hempsted Meadows to benefit the water vole. (450m)

4. Wicksters Brook, Cambridge, Glos

4.1 Vegetation clearance undertaken on behalf of Gloucestershire wildlife trust to approximately 2000m of watercourse (Main River, E.A) to benefit the vole.

5. Tirley, North Gloucestershire

5.1 Carried out willow pollarding in the Tirley area to approximately 30 trees adjacent to the Boards adopted watercourses.

6. General maintenance

Carrying out vegetation control to adopted watercourses throughout the Severn Vale to provide a functioning network of drainage channels to alleviate flooding, manage water levels and to benefit nature conservation in accordance with the "Drainage Channel Biodiversity Manual" produced by the association of Drainage Authorities and Natural England.

Photo below: Ryalls Lane Cambridge, Sympathetic management of Drainage channel to benefit water Vole habitat.

Natural England

The financial year covered by this report was an excellent year for Environmental Stewardship. The money available for schemes was still on an upward curve, and spending this money was one of our highest objectives. So, despite a bit of a slow start whilst we persuaded owners that the scheme was worth applying for, a good number of agreements were entered into, both north and south of the regional border.

Within the Wetlands West project target areas, the Worcestershire team started seven new Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements, covering about 380 hectares. Whilst this area will include some bits out of the floodplain, the vast bulk will have been within it, with options supporting the restoration of wet grassland and other wet habitats, and breeding waders. In Gloucestershire it was eight agreements, covering 450 ha. So, over 8km^2 came in to re-creation and appropriate management.

As well as new agreements, we spent a lot of time amending existing agreements, especially old Countryside Stewardship Agreements, to further enhance the wetlands that had been created.

As well as this, Natural England contributed £30,000 towards work to create the John Bennett Reserve. This money came via an application for Wetland Vision money, but in fact it actually came from underspend from Natural England funds for more general BAP habitat creation.

RSPB

Our main input in the area has been via casework – the Severn Shoreline Management Plan, the Flood Risk Management Strategy and windfarm work in the Avonmouth area, and not least the proposed barrage for the Severn, which thanks to sustained effort from the conservation sector seems to have been quashed for the time being. We had a great day on the Somerset Levels with Mike Smart *et al* from Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, which provided an excellent opportunity to discuss the requirements of breeding waders on lowland grassland.

Warwickshire Wildlife Trust

Warwickshire Wildlife Trust is developing a Living Landscape approach to its work along the River Avon, working with the local community, landowners and partners to enhance habitat management along the river and its floodplain.

The Environment Agency has funded a number of projects with the aim of creating suitable habitat for wading birds, such as snipe and lapwing. At Hampton Wood Nature Reserve (Grid Reference: SP 258 600), 0.5 ha of wet grassland and open water were created on a species-poor meadow next to the River Avon, which had previously been drained and used for agriculture. A hydrology survey and wetland feasibility study was also commissioned by the Trust and produced by FWAG for land adjacent to the River Avon at the National Trust-owned Charlecote Park in Hampton Lucy (Grid Reference: SP 252 564).

An initial funding application and grant award of £8,000 from Stratford-on-Avon District Council and Vision for Stour was agreed in March 2010 to deliver the Stour Water Vole Project. The initial aim of the project is to train local people in surveying for riverside mammals, with the aim of then carrying out a comprehensive survey around the Shipston-on-Stour area. The project will also involve wetland habitat creation and enhancement in the area and will work closely with local landowners in order to initiate a mink monitoring programme.

Worcestershire County Council

Recent developments regarding quarrying/extraction in the Severn and Avon Vales include permission for a new phase of extraction recently given on appeal for the Church Farm South site at Grimley. This will eventually be restored to lakes.

There are two other workings that form part of the Church Farm complex: extraction is still underway at Church Farm West and will be for several years; restoration will be to agricultural land and woodland. The Church Farm East site is currently being restored to lakes. Elsewhere, part of Clifton Quarry is being restored to lakes alongside ongoing extraction; the restoration of Retreat Farm is soon to commence including the creation of lakes; Ripple Quarry is also presently active with restoration ongoing alongside to include lakes, reedbed, scrapes and wet grassland.

Further information is available in **Appendix F**

Part of the restored area at Clifton Quarry

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

An article about Wetlands West was written for Partnership Matters, the newsletter of the Worcestershire Partnership. The article is available in **Appendix G**

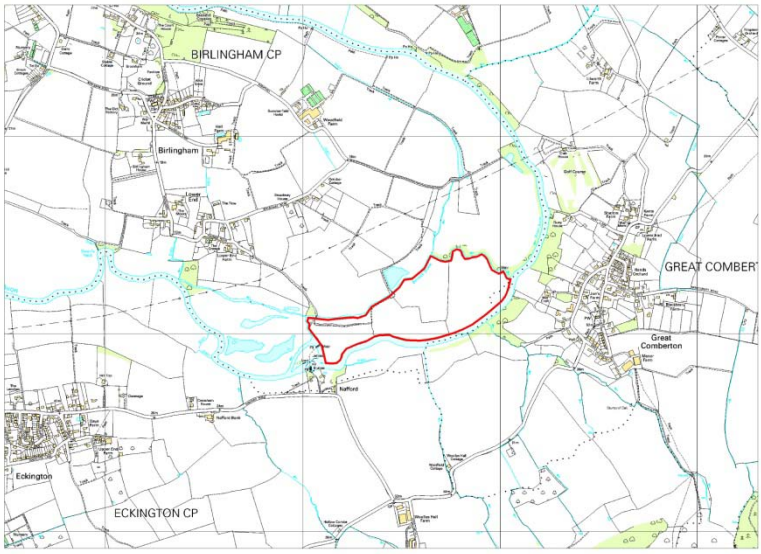
Worcestershire Wildlife Trust

'John Bennett' Wetland, Birlingham

Now after many months of planning, negotiation and ground work by the Worcestershire Wildlife trust and partners the John Bennett Reserve near Birlingham, Pershore is close to completion. The land was previously used for growing arable crops, but due to its regular flooding this was no longer economically viable. The opportunity to join Higher Level Stewardship and extend the wetland habitat along the River Avon appealed to the landowner.

Thanks to the vision and willingness of local landowner Wimpy Derbyshire and funding from the Wetlands West, the Environment Agency and Natural England there is now a new 24 hectare wetland upstream of Worcestershire Wildlife Trust's Gwen Finch Reserve.

Site Location
The site is situated entirely within the River Avon's floodplain and floods regularly. Its southern border is the River Avon, and the Berwick Brook borders the northern extent of the site.



The newly created wetland will comprise of reedbed, scrapes, deep water sections and grazing marsh aimed towards providing suitable habitat for use as a breeding site for waders and other wetland species. It also includes access and a bird hide.

Works to create the John Bennett Reserve have taken place during the spring/summer of 2010. The contractors finally leaving the site in mid September. The wind pump and hide are currently being installed. The project is managed by Worcestershire Wildlife Trust in partnership with the Environment Agency, who used the clay from the construction to build a new flood defence scheme for the town of Pershore. Clay from the deep scrapes was transported up the river via barge: this partnership was vital to the success of the project as there was no other suitable alternative for removal of material from the floodplain.

The site adds greatly to the Wetlands West programme aiming to link sites along the River Avon with the Gwen Finch Reserve next door and multiple other wetlands nearby

Through partnership with the Environment Agency, Natural England and Wetlands West this project has been made possible and we would like to extend our thanks to all involved, but particularly to the landowner, Wimpy Derbyshire.

Full report in **Appendix H**

Wychavon District Council

Avon Meadows Community Wetland, Pershore

The 24ha of riverside flood meadows and community wetland on the River Avon at Pershore, Worcestershire has continued to develop and establish over the past 12 months. The 4 ha reed bed planted by volunteers in the summer of 2009 has survived the dry winter and summer and the locally sourced reeds are now becoming a prolific feature of the site, playing host to a variety of wildlife and bird species not previously seen on the meadows.

The group of volunteers set up to help manage and maintain the site have formally constituted themselves as The Friends of Avon Meadows and have been active throughout the year undertaking a range of conservation work, wildlife monitoring and helping to improve the visitor experience.
Wychavon District Council, in partnership with the Friends and other local agencies are now exploring the opportunities for developing the project further; forging stronger linkages with the town centre and other sites along the Avon corridor and reaching out to local schools and the wider community.

Full report in **Appendix I**

Financial Overview

	Financial Statement - 01.04.2009 - 31.03.2010			
	Bank Balance - Opening			**134755.51**
	Income			
	Funding Contributions	57500.00		
	Bank Interest	211.89	57711.89	
	Expenditure			
	Project Funding	46395.00		
	Employment costs	25133.73		
	Website	454.25		
	Sundry	652.34	72635.32	
	Bank Balance - Closing			**119832.08**

Detailed financial report in **Appendix J**

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 K**

Contact details

Chair: Peter Holmes, Email: Peter.holmes@naturalengland.org.uk
Support Officer: Anna Jordan, Email: anna.jordan@gloucester.gov.uk

Appendices as separate files