Ledbury Naturalists Field Club

Field Survey 2011

Hill House Farm Cradley

November 2011

Acknowledgements

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Access: Mr. And Mrs. G. Caren

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Lorraine Weaver	Kate Wollen		

Validation of observations and checking of data:

John Meiklejohn, Gillian Davies, Cherry Greenway, HilaryWard

Checking the text : Hilary Ward

Introduction

The site chosen for the 2011 club survey was Hill House Farm in Cradley. This was suggested by Janet Lomas of FWAG as being a traditionally managed small holding with a variety of habitats where the owners would be interested in a survey. As it was only a small site the club also surveyed Putley Common which is reported elsewhere.

Background

The farm at SO 742477 is owned by Mr. and Mrs. Guy Caren who bought it in1976. They farmed a larger area initially but sold off about 150 acres when they retired in 1996 and now retain about 54 acres of pasture consisting of five fields and two orchards. The farm is now managed by a tenant farmer who grazes the pastures with sheep and cattle in the summer months though some hay is also taken off. The pastures have not been ploughed since 1976 and probably for a long time before that.

The large orchard with about 100 trees was planted before 1900 so is now very mature and starting to lose trees. The previous owner filled in some gaps but recently, dead trees have just been removed and it is getting quite patchy. The trees yield cider apples which are harvested by a local farmer who sells them on to a larger processing plant. There is a small orchard near the house which was not included in the survey.

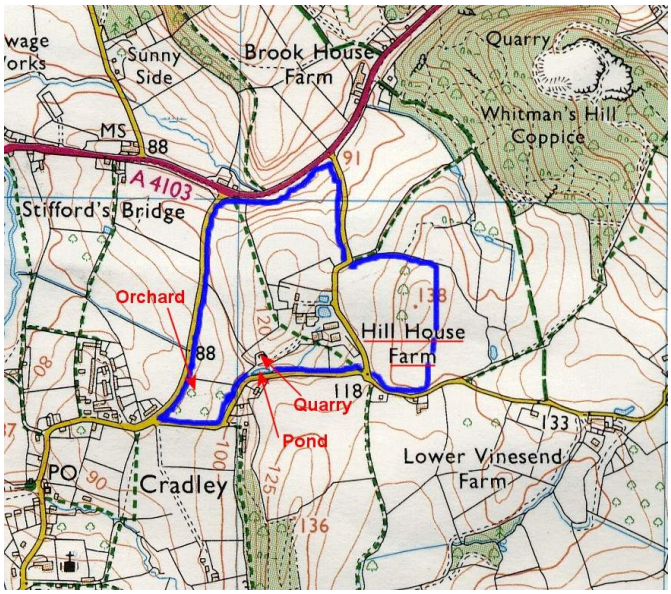
In front of the house is a sloping garden, mainly lawn, but with two big ponds which are fed by a spring rising nearer the Malverns and piped across the fields. They are home for about 60 Mallards and other passing wildfowl and have other wildlife potential. One pond dried up completely this summer but the other maintained some water. There is another larger pond near the orchard which is used by the grazing animals This one maintained some water all summer though the level dropped. Though the garden was not formally included in the survey, a few obvious species were added to the lists. There was also a good, small remnant of unimproved grassland by the drive entrance.

The whole farm is underlain by Silurian Limestone which outcrops in places. An old limestone quarry borders the track to the orchard. It was probably worked for lime in centuries past but has been long abandoned and now provides another good wildlife habitat. North of the quarry is a bank supporting unimproved limestone grassland and scattered scrub and a small area of woodland which has very sparse ground flora. Behind the farm buildings is an uncultivated area which is attractive to wildlife. On the land opposite the house, is another large field with a stony ridge which supports a small copse with a good range of spring flowers.

View east from house

The Survey Area

As the area was not too extensive, most of it was covered though the main areas of interest were the large orchard, the pond and quarry, the land behind the buildings, which this year was not grazed until early autumn, and the steeper rocky places which the animals could not access. The main meadows were of less interest having been semi-improved and thoroughly grazed.



The Survey Area

Conducting the Survey

Volunteers from Ledbury Naturalists' Field Club paid four visits to the site on alternate months in 2011 to carry out the survey. The dates of the meetings were March 21st May 16th, July 18th and September 19th. The weather was fine for each visit though dull and windy at times. The land became very dry towards the end of the year. On each occasion members spent about 3 hours in the afternoon walking around the site. All flowering plants, grasses, trees, fungi, mosses, ferns, birds, insects, and other invertebrates found along the way were recorded.

Hilary Ward supervised the botany whilst John Meiklejohn focussed on invertebrates. Cherry Greenway identified the fungi. Gillian Davies and Lorraine Weaver from the University of Worcester came to help with the moss records. The club is fortunate to have the support of these experts in their fields, and great trouble was taken to verify each record to ensure the reliability of the survey as far as possible. However the records are doubtless an underestimate of the species present due to the limited time spent and in some cases due to lack of expertise available for example with spiders and lichens.

Results and Comment

All species found were recorded. Complete details of the survey can be found in the Appendix.

In summary the following numbers of species were noted.

Flowers	Grasses Sedges Rushes	Trees	Fungi Mosses Ferns	Birds	Mammals	Insects and Invertebrates
123	20	29	41	37	6	54

Though no plants of great rarity were found there was a very pleasing list of 123 species as well as 20 species of grasses and rushes. No plant was in great abundance and some only found in small patches where grazing animals had missed them. Many more common plants were widespread, but some were only found in particular niches. Some of the more interesting were the patch of Crow Garlic above the quarry, a very tiny clump of Harebell nearby, Redshank by the pond, Goldilocks Buttercup, Goat's-beard and Rest Harrow. There was a range of common spring flowers such as Primrose, Bluebell, Cowslip and Wood Anemone. A small patch of Japanese Knotweed was seen in the garden but it has not changed for many years.

Area behind farm buildings

The most varied area was the plot behind the farm buildings which had a good range of plant species. It also had the most potential for reptiles as there were warm, undisturbed piles of old building materials. Though this survey did not encounter any in the limited time available, Adders and Grass Snakes have been seen often in the past and could well still be there amongst the masonry and it would warrant closer inspection.

Edge of quarry

The limestone quarry area had some lime-loving species such as Rock-rose, Thyme, Salad Burnet and Common Calamint, a species restricted to the southern half of Britain, which grew well there. In summer, the quarry base was overwhelmed with nettles due to enrichment by animal dung.

The main pond

The pond had some interesting species such as Starwort, Water Plantain, Watercress, Water Crowfoot and Toad Rush especially round the margins. As the pond did not dry out in the summer the plants were able to continue growing.

A total of 29 tree species was recorded. The hedgerows contained mainly Hawthorn, Maple, Dogwood, Hazel, Blackthorn and Elder. There was some Spindle in places and plenty of Brambles,Wild Roses and Traveller's Joy. There were a few notable Oaks of a good age, some with rot holes ideal for nest sites. On the stony ridge in the field opposite the house was a group of old established Wild Service trees. A range of old fruit trees grew in the patch behind the farm buildings and the orchard had many old cider apple trees, a high percentage of them supporting a good deal of Mistletoe. The orchard trees were a range of ages, the most elderly in a state of decay, ideal for wildlife exploitation. Some of the holes were searched for insect frass but nothing identifiable was found. However, there were many holes too high up for inspection but ideal for species such as the rare Noble Chafer Beetle. Many of the holes were used by Woodpeckers. The grass sward did not have anything of note though some fungi appeared in the autumn.

Veteran Oak

The Orchard

Hunting for frass

Apple tree with many holes

As the season was so dry only 16 fungi were found in September, several in the orchard. One of the big Oaks hosted a Beefsteak fungus. There were 18 species of moss identified mainly in the damp areas of the quarry, elsewhere being too dry. This also applied to the ferns, the walls behind the farm buildings hosting Wall Rue. The quarry supported Polypody but only Male Fern was found elsewhere.

The insect list was not extensive partly due to dull weather and lack of extensive patches of open flowers. However, 8 different butterflies were seen including a Common Blue and a Brimstone. There were 4 types of Ladybird including the Harlequin, 3 sorts of Bee and a Hornet as well as 2 Ants and 3 Grasshoppers and a selection of other invertebrates.

Thirty Seven species of birds were noted in the few hours spent at the site, including Sparrow Hawk, Hobby and Kestrel. There was both Green and Greater Spotted Woodpeckers and Tawny and Little Owls are seen regularly. Barn Owls have been seen in the past but not this year. Good to see was a colony of Swifts which nested under the house eaves and which have used this site for many years. The garden ponds attract a range of wildfowl throughout the winter and in the past have seen Swans, Kingfishers and a Snow Goose according to the owner. The pond also usually has many frogs though none were seen by the team this year.

Signs of mammals showed that Badgers, Squirrels, Moles and Rabbits are on the site and Mr. Caren confirmed that Roe Deer and Muntjac are regularly seen so have been added to the listings. The area is likely to provide feeding habitat for a number of bat species and possibly roosting sites in the old trees and buildings

Conclusions

This is an interesting site in a delightful corner of Herefordshire. It has a fair range of wildlife though limited to certain areas due to the extensive grazing of the grassland. The orchard in particular would benefit from further surveying as the trees have great wildlife potential. The area behind the farm buildings also has much scope and looks perfect for reptiles and amphibians as well as having the most diverse flora. It would be good to maintain the level of diversity if possible.

To enhance the wildlife value even further, the orchard would benefit from some management of the mistletoe and the old trees and further planting of new trees in the gaps. The veteran oaks should be retained as they are important habitats in their own right, supporting many species. Coppicing the trees overhanging the farm pond would allow more light in to enhance plant growth within the water and round the margins. Continuing to manage the areas of unimproved grassland without the use of artificial fertilizer will help to maintain the diversity of plant life which was found.

It is hoped that the farm continues to be a favoured site for wildlife in the future.

Distribution

1. Ledbury Naturalists' Field Club, survey team and committee members
2. Mr. and Mrs. Caren
3. Herefordshire Nature Trust.
4. Natural England.
5. Herefordshire Ornithological Club.
6. Herefordshire Biological Records Centre
7. Malvern Hills Conservators
8. Malvern Hills AONB
9. Ledbury Town Council
10. Ledbury Library
11. Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club
12. Janet Lomas

Appendix