

Green Action

Implications of Monastic Life for the Ecology & Wildlife at Holy Cross

Our interest and concern for the natural world and for a balanced ecology, of which we ourselves are only a part, is rooted in the monastic ideal and in the Benedictine ethos. At our previous home in Rempstone we consistently pursued policies that are based on care of the land and environment and the maintenance and increase of the indigenous flora and fauna.

Before beginning the work at Costock we consulted with a wide range of wildlife and ecological groups, national and local. We hope to provide an attractive and tranquil setting within the existing landscape and ecological system, for ourselves and for those that visit us for Retreats and Quiet Days.

Conservation Species

Among the reptiles and amphibians we ourselves have recorded is Slow Worm, which is a Conservation Species, also Grass Snake, Toad, and Frog. The Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust are currently conducting a reptile and amphibian survey on our land to record the variety and frequency of species and to detect breeding colonies. We are also part of their Hedgehog survey, studying differing types of hedgehog habitat in the light of the recent decline in numbers of that species.

Already we have recorded 75 species of birds on our 26 acres, the latest 2 being a Hobby which was chasing the House Martins in early September and a Black Redstart in the garden in November. There are also a number of Conservation Bird Species present. Among them are Barn Owl, Grey Partridge, Lapwing, Cuckoo, Skylark, Tree sparrow, Linnet, Yellowhammer. Among the mammals present are Brown Hare, Fox, Field Vole, Wood Mouse, Mole, Stoat and Roe Deer.

Habitats & Management

Hares' Half Furlong is a semi improved grass meadow to the South of the buildings, previously grazed. This is now mown in early spring and late summer. This and the Old Orchard are the Barn Owl and Kestrel's favourite hunting ground.

Field Margins. We have 9 acres of arable land, (half and half wheat and oilseed rape), with very wide grass margins. These areas, together with other rough grass, are very good vole and other small mammal habitat.

Nectar & Pollen Meadow. This is on the North side of Intake Wood and it too has wide grass margins. It is two acres of flowering plants including Red Clover, Vetch, Phacelia, fescues, and trefoils. These form a good feeding place for Butterflies, Hoverflies, Bees, Dragonflies and other insects, thus also creating more food for the birds.

The Old Orchard The grassland on which the 3.5 acre Orchard stands is a medieval ridge and furrow strip-farming site. This means that it has not been ploughed or sown, probably for several hundred years, and has never received any agricultural pesticides. It will therefore hold a good population of insects and invertebrates. These together with the slow worms and grass snakes make the Orchard a very rich conservation area. The trees are mostly apple, 100 years old and need remedial pruning but are still producing much good fruit. We have introduced a mowing programme, a bit labour intensive as the arisings have to be raked off by hand. On an area of nearly 4 acres that is a mammoth task.

New Hedges & Ditch

200 metres of new hedge was planted in 2009; 75% hawthorn and blackthorn with field maple, hazel, crab apple, wild pear and wild damson. These are all part of what is called the South Notts Farmland character. A hedge is a good habitat for many species of insects, birds and small mammals, and bats in particular use them as hunting corridors.

On the north side of the hedge is a new drainage ditch which, as part of an extensive drainage system required by the land, will hopefully encourage reptiles and amphibians and possibly even Water Voles.

Intake Wood Management

Our part of this existing oak and ash woodland is c4 of a 15 acre wood on medieval ridge and furrow land. It was clear felled in the 1930's and most of it now is regeneration from the old stools. The actual age of the original wood is unknown. Until recently it has been grazed.

The wild flowers so far noted include Wood Anemone, Lesser Celandine, Bluebell and Dog's Mercury.

A management programme will be developed. There is some Wild Rose, Hawthorn and Field Maple and we may allow some further under-storey to grow in some areas to benefit insects, invertebrates and birds. Other ideas being considered are: Thin some trees to let in more light to the floor. Ring-bark a few to create more standing deadwood. Coppice a few mature Hawthorn.

New Wood

At just under 2 acres it is too small to attract Forestry Authority grants. Planting has begun with local woodland species, some grown from seed by ourselves at Rempstone, Oak, Ash, Wild Cherry, Birch, Hornbeam, Holly; some sourced locally: Wych Hazel, Sweet Chestnut, Spindle, Alder, Bird Cherry, Rowan, Wild Pear, Crab Apple together with a few arboretum species to add visual interest for our visitors such as Red Oak.

Planting is at 3x3 metres spacing, ie for wildlife rather than timber. We hope to plant some under-storey ie Field Maple, Hazel, Hawthorn, also collect acorns, ash keys, hawthorn berries, hips, hazel nuts etc and scatter them on the ground to germinate. A three metre field margin surrounds the wood and there are grassy paths within it for easy visitor access.

Action on Individual Species:

Barn Owl Boxes

The terrain of wide rough grass margins on all the fields is ideal Barn Owl habitat. A Barn Owl box was erected by Rushcliffe Barn Owl Project in December 2009. It was used as a roost early on and in July 2010 there were 4 chicks which were ringed by the Project. In 2011 another four chicks were fledged. Monitoring by RBP will continue.

House Martin Nesting Sites

We put up 9 boxes for House Martins on the Farmhouse as soon as we purchased the site in April 2009. These were all occupied that year and again in 2011 and several new nests were also built on the Convent giving us a total of 17 nests.

Swallow Nesting Sites

The Swallows continued to use the old boiler house in Highfields House in 2009 and 2010 and a room with a broken window. The new Convent has 8 open porch areas and also a number of overhanging eaves. We hope the swallows will discover them as good sites. There is one swallow box that will be put up in a suitable area. The Workshop was finished towards the end of 2011. It has access through the apex of a roof into the loft area.

Swift Nesting Sites

At present there is one swift nest box under the eaves on the highest part of the new build. More boxes need to be made and erected close by.

Tree Sparrows

Tree sparrows are present and 4 nest boxes were put up in the garden of Highfields House. They were not used so more investigation needs to be done to meet their needs.

Bee Hives

The Sisters have an arrangement with the Monks at nearby Mount St Bernard Abbey for the Monks to keep a number of bee hives on site. This is excellent for pollination of the fruit trees and wild flowers.

Bat boxes

2 summer-roost bat boxes were put up on the outside of a chimney on Holy Cross Cottage. There is also bat access in the roof tiles of the Workshop.

All as at February 2012. To be continued.