

# Beyond Ten Acres

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In 2002 we wrote an article for *Nature in Avon* in which we described the creation of a local conservation charity, Yatton and Congresbury Wildlife Action Group (YACWAG), and its acquisition of a ten-acre field on Biddle Street Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1999. Twenty-two years on it is interesting to re-visit the field and reflect on its development, and that of the charity. In the first ten years we were able to acquire more land and now own ten fields and a small wood.

The original article, written three years after the field had been purchased, commented on the changes that had already taken place to the flora and fauna. We mentioned ‘large flocks’ of hirundines feeding over the tall grass, and we have been surprised that we mentioned two or three Cuckoos (*Cuculus canorus*). These were short-lived pleasures as the numbers of Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*), Swifts (*Apus apus*) and House Martins (*Delichon urbicum*) have all declined in this area, as elsewhere, in the intervening 20 years, and the Cuckoo is now seldom heard or seen (although one was heard loud and clear during the Spring lockdown of 2020).

However, some of our other conclusions still stand. The field is rough and damp, with Buzzards (*Buteo buteo*) frequently overhead, Kestrels (*Falco tinnunculus*) breeding in most years, and Grey Herons (*Ardea cinerea*) continuing to spend time at the ditch edges and in the middle of the field.

## Barn Owls return to Congresbury

YACWAG’s flagship success in Ten Acres has been with Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) and Kestrels. These iconic raptors have rewarded our efforts to keep up a good supply of voles, and although the weather has sometimes frustrated their attempts to reproduce, we have in most years witnessed successful breeding and been able to ‘export’ owls into the wider countryside. Table 1 below shows the Barn Owl and Kestrel chicks reared in Ten Acres and YACWAG’s other nearby nestboxes. In 2014 both boxes in Ten Acres were occupied by breeding pairs.

The trend towards wetter and warmer winters has had a great impact on the availability of the Barn Owl’s preferred prey – the Short-tailed Field Vole (*Microtus agrestis*). This has affected breeding success in later years. The Kestrel had a five-year absence from 2013-2017 at a time when Barn Owls were most successful and when there was no shortage of nesting opportunities. It is tempting to think they had been out-competed by Barn Owls for their food. However this would not explain the Kestrel success in 2018-2020 when Barn Owls did not fare so well. Unknown factors are at play.

Year	Barn Owl	Kestrel	Other Fields on Congresbury Moor
2002	-	3	
2003	-	3	
2004	4	3	
2005	2	-	
2006	-	-	
2007	5	-	
2008	-	1	
2009	5	4	Kestrel (3) in Phippens
2010	4	1	
2011	-	5	Tawny Owl and Kestrel (3) Meakers
2012	-	1	
2013	-	-	
2014	4+5	-	Tawny Owl (2) in Nortons
2015	4	-	Barn Owl (3) Footmead
2016	4	-	Barn Owl (2) Footmead
2017	-	-	
2018	-	2	
2019	-	2	Barn Owl (3) Footmead
2020	-	2	
<b>TOTALS</b>	37	26	

Table 1: Annual Counts, Congresbury Moor 2002-2020  
Recorder: Trevor Riddle



Barn Owlet

## Snipe spend the Winter

Since 2012 we have monitored the over-wintering Snipe in Ten Acres and three of our other damp fields on Congresbury Moor. Under our Environmental Stewardship scheme we manage these fields for over-wintering waders by rough grazing during late summer and autumn. Our ‘super-ditch’, a new watercourse on the Moor, was constructed to attract wild fowl and waders, ironically thanks to the shooting experience of the contractor. Table 2 below shows the counts of Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) for the last nine years. YACWAG is very fortunate to have the help of Trevor Riddle, a founder member, and a seasoned bird recorder. Trevor has been monitoring birds on the North Somerset Levels and Moors for the past 25 years and for nine years has been recording Snipe on Congresbury Moor and at our Kenn Moor Reserve. The table below shows Snipe winter abundance on Congresbury Moor. They feed along the ditch margins and field grips, probing in the mud for food. Jack Snipe (*Lymnocryptes minimus*) are also occasionally seen.

Winter season	Total records	No. of surveys	Year Average
2012/2013	98	3	33
2013/2014	104	4	26
2014/2015	22	2	11
2015/2016	39	2	19
2016/2017	41	4	10
2017/2018	82	5	16
2018/2019	15	3	5
2019/2020	4	1	4
2020/2021	30	3	10
TOTALS	435	27	16

Table 2: Snipe Counts Congresbury Moor 2012-21  
Recorder: Trevor Riddle

The Snipe surveys have depended on element weather and in a number of years conditions were unfavourable. The table shows a decline in average counts in recent years. This could possibly be accounted for by the Moor becoming wetter in winter and could also be due to more extensive reed growth on ditch edges. Because of the wetter weather the birds can feed more widely in pasture that was previously sub-optimal.

## New Croft, an Ancient Hay Meadow

Once Ten Acres was under more relaxed management, we were approached by a farmer’s widow who owned adjacent land. She liked what we were doing on Congresbury Moor and sold us two more fields, New Croft and a small paddock we

called ‘Meakers’ after her. A trip to Somerset Records Office gave us the information that New Croft was an ancient meadow (croft meaning enclosure). It had been enclosed from the common more than 300 years ago, well before the rest of the fields had been created through 19<sup>th</sup> century Drainage Acts. It was owned at that time by Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Bristol, along with many other land-holdings in the Congresbury area, and cut annually for hay. In 2000 when we took possession, the field had not been cut for hay for years but was constantly grazed by cattle. A very wet winter had left the ground compacted with an extraordinary amount of surface water. We had no plan for its management but knew that it would be a good idea to cut hay annually and gradually reduce the fertility of the field.

A local man from Kingston Seymour who had his own rural museum and enjoyed tinkering with old machinery suggested that he would help us organise a demonstration of vintage equipment to cut the hay. This large-scale public event was a huge success. We laid on disabled access, put bridges over the rhynes, complemented the event with a display of rural crafts in a local village hall and had a lot of fun. The next year (2003) he also brought some shire horses and restored a hay cart found in a family member’s old barn. We decided not to make it an annual event. We had had two wonderful years in sunshine. It would be very optimistic to expect good weather for vintage hay-making every year.



Six-spot Burnet moth in New Croft

The unexpected result of this hay-cutting was the discovery of a couple of plants of Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*). In the following years we found the Knapweed patches spreading and augmenting the purple of the Tufted Vetch (*Vicia cracca*).



Swathes of Knapweed in New Croft 2020



Marbled White butterfly in New Croft

After a few years we noticed an unfamiliar umbellifer. It was Pepper Saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*), a plant of old meadows on clay soils. Repeated taking of hay and no input has weakened the grass and helped the wild flowers to thrive. Last year we counted around fifty Pepper Saxifrage plants. Another newcomer in the field is Corky-fruited Water Dropwort (*Oenanthe pimpinelloides*), once a common meadow plant. As these flowers appeared we noticed insect life increasing, including butterflies and moths. Marbled Whites (*Melanargia galathea*) and Six-spot Burnet moths (*Zygane stephensi*) have been a special delight, not seen elsewhere on the Moor. Both Large Skipper (*Ochlodes venata*) and Small Skipper (*Thymelicus sylvestris*) are seen in their season, and although the Small Skipper numbers have significantly declined in the last five years, a recent discovery has been the Essex Skipper (*Thymelicus lineola*).

In 2019 there was a new discovery. Thanks to Colin Higgins, a YACWAG member and keen amateur wildlife photographer, a rare horsefly was found in New Croft. He had taken a photograph two years before but had been unable to identify the species. Eventually, with help from Ray Barnett of Bristol Museum, the insect was identified as the Four-lined Horsefly (*Atylotus rusticus*). We were very excited about this discovery, particularly because the fly seemed to spend a lot of time peacefully nectaring on thistles and the Pepper Saxifrage umbels. It has been listed as Nationally Rare in the Natural England status review (Drake 2017). Nationally it has been a victim of 19<sup>th</sup> century drainage schemes as its larvae feed on the muddy margins of watercourses. Locally many rhynes are steep-sided, intensively managed and mostly unsuitable. The management of YACWAG's ditches has undoubtedly created suitable conditions for it. In 2018 over 100 individuals were counted.



Four-lined Horsefly on Pepper Saxifrage



In 2019 New Croft was visited by Jenny Greenwood, a botanist interested in plant communities in the former Avon area. She was surprised at the unusual diversity of plants in New Croft and said she would put the field on the national register for species-rich grassland communities. On the same visit we took Jenny to see our fields on the other side of Yatton, with the same astonishment from her and the same result.

Close to Congresbury Moor as the Barn Owl flies is an irregularly shaped field called Footmead. YACWAG was able to purchase this from the Bristol Society of Friends in 2007. This field also has potential to be as species-rich florally and has some of the best ditches surrounding it on the SSSI. The access is very poor, making management and survey visits very difficult. However, in 2016 children from Yatton Junior School were able to visit to see the Barn Owl chicks being ringed by Chris Sperring MBE from the Hawk and Owl Trust. The owl pellets we collect from our boxes enable us to go into local schools and other groups with a dissection and small mammal bone identification kit that always proves popular.



Yatton Junior School pupils in Footmead with Chris Sperring ringing the owlets (2016)

## Nature is your Neighbour

Yatton is built on a ridge of high ground with coastal floodplain marshes both to the north and south. Our fields on Congresbury Moor are on heavy alluvial clay, but on the north side of Yatton the moor has a thin layer of peat. This difference in geology makes for interesting study of the difference in flora and fauna. In 2006 YACWAG was able to purchase two fields on the north side of the village off Stowey Road, close to the primary school. These fields had been managed for 17 years as a private nature reserve and had 13 plants of Marsh Marigold (*Caltha palustris*) growing in the field drains (grips). A local farmer described Marsh Marigolds growing in his open fields around Yatton in about 1900, and a hundred years later these were probably the only fields left where the plant could still be seen. YACWAG's Vice Chair, Richard Croucher, has horticultural expertise and he began to collect seed from the Marsh Marigold plants and return to the field two years later with strong plants. There are now over 100 growing in the grips and seeding naturally.



Stowey Reserve with Marsh Marigolds in flower

We were also aware of Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and Ragged Robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*), but we were pleased when we bought the fields to see Yellow Loosestrife (*Lysimachia vulgaris*) on some of the ditch edges. Yellow Loosestrife has the local status 'scarce' according to the 2000 Flora of the Bristol Region. We knew it from one site locally – Court Lane, Clevedon, where it grows through the hedge by the roadside. We had first recorded it there in the early 1980s. It is still there. More remarkably we found in the Bristol Flora of 1912 that Court Lane



Clevedon was then given as a place to find it. Other strongholds were given as Nailsea Moor, Yatton and between Yatton and Kenn.

We were dimly aware that there was a bee called the Yellow Loosestrife Bee (*Macropis europaeus*) and using the extra time given by the Covid19 lockdown we decided to search for it on the Stowey Reserve at the right time of year. We knew very little about bees but there they were, right on cue, unmistakable little dark bees darting about from flower to flower – Yellow Loosestrife Bees on our Yellow Loosestrife plants. Our colleague Colin Higgins went to capture some good photos and once verified we went to the press and BBC Radio Bristol. We had tried press releases about the rare horsefly with disappointing results but found that bees have a much better image. The closest records were from the Somerset Levels – not surprising as that would be the nearest location of the plants they need to make their nests. They collect pollen from the Yellow Loosestrife plants and from it manufacture a waterproof oil to line their nest chambers underground, usually in a peaty bank.



Yellow Loosestrife Bee on Yellow Loosestrife, Stowey Reserve

We realised that if this field had been sold to a local farmer or horse-owner, the colony of this rare bee and its associated plant would have been unknown, unrecorded, unappreciated and probably destroyed. How much more is waiting to be discovered if management can just be relaxed slightly, allowing plants to flower and insects to complete their life-cycles? How vulnerable our wildlife is.

We also have pole nestboxes on our Stowey and Kenn Moor Reserves on the north side of the village. Barn Owls have successfully fledged chicks in our Stowey Reserve but so far the Kenn Moor box has only been used for roosting.

## **Kenn Moor Reserve**

It is hard to buy land now as Yatton is a boom-town for development and land sells for absurdly high prices. In 2006 local residents raised money for YACWAG to buy two fields near their homes in order to prevent development. These fields are on the edge of Yatton and part of the Nailsea, Tickenham and Kenn Moors SSSI, designated for aquatic plants and invertebrates. In YACWAG's ownership they will now be managed as a nature reserve in perpetuity.

Following a failed experiment with wild flowers in the smaller field, YACWAG has just planted fourteen traditional apple trees, inspired by a remnant orchard over the road which is threatened by development. In that old orchard one of the collapsing trees supports a very rare tooth fungus, so we hope in time that our new standard apple trees will be able to provide some continuity when the other orchard is lost. In the meantime orchards are good wildlife habitat and we have engaged the community, who will hopefully look after the planting and enjoy its presence in the landscape.

The larger field is wet pasture, rushy with damp flushes. To our surprise last summer we found some Yellow Loosestrife flowering on the banks of one of the ditches we have created. Management is fairly minimal with grazing by a small number of Dexter cattle (the preferred breed on all our fields) for six to twelve weeks, depending on the season.

## **Conclusion**

Buying Ten Acres, at the time an intensively managed 'improved' field, more than 20 years ago has inspired us to acquire more land around our two parishes. Each of the ten fields has proved to be unique. There are always surprises and delights to discover. Although YACWAG's fields do not form a single block, each is a beacon for wildlife. Our Barn Owls have shown us that these little oases are in fact connected by 'air corridors' as they hunt over each of them; for example, between Stowey Reserve and Kenn Moor Reserve is the mainline railway, but we know the owls hunt and roost on both sides.

With development swallowing up our local countryside at an alarming rate, and the pandemic giving increased opportunities for local exploration, residents are coming to realise the importance of some refuges for wildlife. Although YACWAG's land does not have public access, it can all be overseen from local footpaths or the Strawberry Line, giving appreciative people occasional views of Brown Hare (*Lepus europaeus*), Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), Barn Owl and that rare

beauty, long grass rippling in the wind. In 2019 we held a very successful Open Day at our Stowey Reserve, encouraging the people living very close by to discover that ‘Nature is Your Neighbour’. If money becomes available we will certainly hope to add to our landholding in the future - but it all began with one unloved ten acre field.

## **References**

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*All photos taken by Tony or Faith Moulin*