

Our routine inspections are showing that the reserve is in good shape, with nest boxes occupied, meadowsweet spreading round the margins of the Hay Meadow, yellow rattle abundant and reeds(phragmites) developing well.

This is largely thanks to dedicated volunteers, with generally 15 to 20, from a pool of 40, turning up for a monthly session. The Associate Volunteer scheme running along side this is ideal for people who are able to take on tasks such as pruning hedges, planting saplings, but cannot commit on a regular basis. And, of course, we continue to need help in tackling ragwort. Special thanks go to the 8 members of the hedging team, who have expertly restored and laid the hedges along the Long Pads Path, improving its value to wildlife as well as making the path more accessible, and to Keith Taylor and David Elliot who have cared for the trees and mown the grass in the Orchard. Recently a small group led by Mick Short planted more reeds in Upper Sowerholme and also by the scrapes at the bottom of Flora Field.

After hay making this year we are hoping to reduce the area of rush in the wet areas, such as Big Meadow, to create a more open structure that encourages biodiversity and to increase the area of grass for grazing. Cutting will be followed by weed wiping with a permitted herbicide, a technique that allows the rushes to be treated without damage to other vegetation. Finally, there will be a second cut. Last winter we tried to control the rush with Fell Ponies, but because of the mild winter, they were able to eat grass in preference to rushes. The ponies were very popular and we are keeping our options open for future years.

The arable field has been sown with barley (much appreciated by the hare – see picture on the blog!), with a wildflower mix in some strips. We now use a farmer from Over Kellet who will also cut the wildflower margins and supplied us with the reeds.

An early wildflower survey of Pony Wood has shown a steady increase in the woodland flora, in particular bluebells and wild garlic. Several trees needed to be felled, but the saplings we planted are growing and will eventually create a more natural woodland with the range of heights needed for bird life. Unfortunately, the piles of brash left as habitats for invertebrates have been depleted for illegal bonfires. Look on the blog for the delightful picture of a tawny owl, taken at dawn at the north end of Pony Wood by Dan Heywood who does our breeding bird survey (which as well as the wildflower surveys will be on the website). He also spotted grey partridge, lapwing and stock dove so we are hoping that these vulnerable species are nesting

Last winter saw fewer over wintering migrants, probably due to weather conditions but the snipe were present in large numbers – 160 in the March flush count plus the rare water rail

