

Honeymoon Common, near Eaton Bishop

In 2007, pond survey and restoration work was undertaken on Honeymoon Common as part of the Pond Restoration and Celebration Project. This project was developed by Herefordshire Amphibian and Reptile Team (HART) and rolled out in partnership with Herefordshire Nature Trust. It was funded by Herefordshire Rivers LEADER+, SITA Trust and Wye Valley AONB.



Honeymoon Common: pond after restoration W. Watson

History

The Common is owned by the Church Commission and leased to the Parish Council, and there are 12 nearby homesteads with rights to use the Common. These rights lie with the property and are passed on to each new owner, whether they farm or not. The numbers of animals that each commoner is permitted to graze is different and written on the register. Some commoners can graze a reasonable number of stock, for example 10 cattle and 25 sheep, but others are less lucky and for example have the rights for only 1 sheep!

Commoners rights are strongly protected even today. Permanent fences are not allowed to be put up across a common although it is permitted to fence on the boundary with other land. In fact, permission to make permanent changes on the common needs to be received from the Secretary of State as well as the owner and all the Commoners. With the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, everybody now has a right to walk on our commons (though any other activity is still prohibited).

According to the deeds of Little Red House Farm, the big pond among the trees in the middle of the common was originally dug to extract brick clay for the building of The Red House Farm and a raised track is just discernible running from the pond to the house. The house was built for the Pulley widows, whose family was important in the area, and it became a farm later date.

In the 1960s, a group of Commoners shared the cost of digging ditches across the common in an attempt to drain it and improve the grazing. In the early 1990s, a ditch was dug along the edge of the road to prevent travellers moving onto the Common. In fact during the 2001 Foot and Mouth outbreak when stock movement was prohibited there were travellers' horses left there to graze.

Wildlife

The Common is a wet grassland habitat with several ponds, vegetated ditches, areas of encroaching scrub, some big oaks and a few anthills. Local people say that until recently there were barn owls hunting over the site and some years ago snipe frequently used to nest there. Swans previously nested on the island in the



big pond before the bulrush became too dense. Grass snakes have been seen in a garden nearby, and historically adders were present in the scrub on the common.

In 2007 the ponds were professionally surveyed for wildlife and smooth newts, common frogs and great crested newts were found. Amongst a wealth of water beetles, bugs and other invertebrates there was also a nationally rare beetle.

Great diving beetle P. King Unfortunately a less welcome species is the aquatic plant New Zealand pigmyweed (*Crassula helmsii*) which is an incredibly invasive garden escapee. It can rapidly form a dense mat shading out life underneath, as it has in the pond near the road on Honey Moor Common. It survives in both deep water or damp areas on the bank, and is able to grow through much of the year when other plants have died back. Worse still, tiny fragments will re-grow if they get broken off by trampling or attempted weeding. In fact it seems almost impossible to eradicate completely and is spreading through garden and wildlife ponds in Herefordshire. Please don't put garden plants into the wild!



Crassula helmsii

Management

In days gone by, the Commoners used to get together to manage the land for their animals, keeping the scrub at bay, paths open and ponds cleared. These days, those who still have stock are loathe to graze it because of the worry about them straying onto the busy roads. The common is largely abandoned agriculturally, and the Parish Council currently pay contractors to keep the footpaths open and the grazing cut once a year.



One of the scrapes

D. Hardy

In 2007 the big pond was partially cleared of its dense bulrush colony, leaving the rest to provide continuous habitat for pond creatures like the protected great crested newts. Some of the willows round the edge were coppiced to let more light in and encourage other vegetation to grow.

Local volunteers helped with the work, clearing scrub around the pond and building habitat piles with logs, brash and chippings. These will become refuges for frogs and newts, perhaps grass snakes, and other small mammals and invertebrates.

Shallow scrapes were dug out in the marshy area next to the big pond where bulrushes indicated

that small ponds used to exist. These will soon become vegetated, dry out temporarily in the summer and be a great habitat for water beetles and other invertebrates, being warm with plenty of cover to hide from predators.

The big pond was previously cleaned out in the early 1990s and the spoil placed around the edges. At that time there were few surrounding trees except the island of willows in the middle, which is the deepest part. A local lady may well have planted some of the willows and other trees around the common. While the digger was onsite it was decided to dig out a smaller pond near the road, which was then just a wet depression. There was very little depth of silt and the digger was soon on clay, so it remained a very shallow pond.

Great Crested Newts

The great crested (or 'warty') newts are our largest native newt and both they and their habitats are protected by British and European wildlife law. We are very lucky in Herefordshire that they are often

found in our ponds. They tend to breed in well-vegetated, sunny ponds but the rest of the year they forage and over-winter in rough grassland and woodland habitats. Honey Moor Common provides particularly good terrestrial habitat!

Great crested newts lay eggs on plants like water mint, willowherb and flote grass growing in the water, the female carefully folding the leaf over the egg to protect it. Newt tadpoles will largely feed on pond invertebrates until August or September when they emerge from the water as juveniles. Although they may be found in the water in following breeding seasons, young great crested newts often don't breed until their third or fourth year.



Male great crested newt P. King

Visit Honey Moor Common!

Taking the Abergavenny road out of Hereford, turn off on the Clehonger/Madley road (B4349). Between these two villages take the signposted right-hand turn to Eaton Bishop church. The unfenced area as you turn off is Honey Moor Common and parking is in the lay-by close to the junction. Being common land and therefore having open access, you are welcome to walk all round.

Acknowledgements

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