

# Wyre Forest Study Group

## Personal Observations on the Natural History of the Forest of Wyre, in the counties of Worcester and Salop, during 35 years residence at Far Forest Vicarage (from the year 1854 to 1889)

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"Wyre Forest" is mentioned in *Domesday Book*<sup>1</sup>. How far it extended at that time it is impossible to say, but in these days there remains a large extent of woodland, equalling many thousands of acres, partly in Worcestershire, anciently known as Vigorn; the majority in Shropshire. There is a brook called Dowles brook that divides the counties, and in that brook are found *Cray-fish*; it runs from west to east. I should say that the acreage of *the forest* in Worcestershire would be about 2,000 acres, and in Shropshire about 3,000. But *where* does it begin, and *where* does it end? If you begin at the river Severn below Ribbesford (near Bewdley) and only make allowances for the woodland being intersected by roads, (highways and byeways), you would have *in toto* about 5,000 acres, as set down above. The nature of the soil naturally varies. In some places it is clay, in others stony, but very little loam in any part. It also varies in the aspect of the country, hill and dale being the general rule; in some parts there is an amount of level ground. There are many small rivulets or rills, chiefly running into Dowles brook, or into the Severn. The forest cannot boast of many fine trees, but consists mainly of poles, varying from eighteen to forty years' growth, and saplings. Most of these go into the "Black" country for props in coal pits, and the smaller into the "Potteries" for "crate" wood. That fine oak trees have existed, and would grow, is shown by the very few large oaks that were standing until lately. Tradition has it that when iron smelting furnaces existed on Dowles Brook at "Furnace Mill," about 1640, wood was used instead of coal (which was hardly procurable then), and all the large oak trees were cut down for that purpose while the iron smelting lasted, and subsequently all successive large trees, in their generations, were cut down for bark and timber. Until 1870 there were about 1,400 acres of woodland belonging to the Crown, but in that year all the Crown Lands which lay in Worcestershire were sold by the Commissioners of Woods and Forests, amounting *in toto* to about 3,000 acres, and were bought by various individuals. The Crown had no lands or woods adjoining thereto in Shropshire.

To those who are unacquainted with this locality, I would say, take train from Bewdley to Cleobury Mortimer, passing by Wyre Forest Station, and then they would have a very good idea of what the Forest of Wyre is like.

*The Hawk Tribe.* I have never known but one instance where the Merlin bred in this neighbourhood. I was fishing in the brook with my brother, when we found the body of a male merlin severed from the head, which we never found, and which must have been cut clean off by the telegraph wires; and the impetus of the flight of the bird must have carried it onwards to where I found it, a distance of over sixty yards. There was no external mark on the body of the bird having been shot or otherwise injured. I know of many instances of woodcocks having been killed in the same way. The hawk tribe, consisting here chiefly of the Sparrow hawk and Kestrel, are fast disappearing. One anecdote connected with the female sparrow hawk deserves particular notice. In November, 1871, I was returning home through the middle of the Forest with my old friend, Mr. R. Kennet Dawson; we were in a low "fall," it being dusk, when two birds flew close over his head, and settled on the ground. He called to the man who was carrying his gun to give it him; he then fired on the ground where he thought he had seen the birds alight. No sooner had he fired than up flew a bird, but, being dusk, he was obliged to let it get well into the air, when he again fired and killed it. This bird proved to be a female sparrow hawk; the *other*, shot on the ground, turned out to be a woodcock. The fact of a hawk seeking after its prey at dusk is by no means common, yet has been occasionally noticed. The hawk I now have in my possession. The Hawfinch<sup>2</sup>, though common in some parts of England, I have only seen in three out of thirty-five winters. It is an exceedingly handsome bird. The birds that chiefly exist in these regions are common to most parts of the country, certainly the Midland Counties, therefore they need not be particularized. Two anecdotes about birds' nesting:- In 1878, my son, with a servant, went birds' nesting. About ten feet up in a haw-thorn tree, they saw what at first they imagined to be a squirrel, and as soon as the animal saw them, it went into a nest which was in the tree, about a foot above it, and supposed to be a squirrel's nest. They then shook the tree, out came the animal, and descended the tree, whereupon my son, perceiving that it was not a squirrel, fired at it,



Sign at Welch Gate, Bewdley, 2015

Rosemary Winnall



Singled Oak, Rock Coppice, 1980s

Rosemary Winnall

and brought it down. It proved to be a large male stoat. The first time I ever knew the stoat as a *tree climber*. In 1878, I found a blackbirds' nest with five eggs, on the ground, under a small bush of gorse, in a little coppice, by no means a common thing.

*Pheasants.* That they will eat very small adders or blind worms has been proved by the craws of certain pheasants containing them when dissected. I have in my possession the male and female hybrid, between the black game and the pheasant, both shot in the Forest. The male bird was shot by an old friend. Specimens of the male bird may be seen in the South Kensington Museum, and in a few private collections; but I have not yet seen, save in a case in my own possession, an instance of the male and female hybrid<sup>3</sup>. The hen hybrid has the feathers on the breast like those of the female pheasant. This bird I killed myself.

*Wood Ants.* One day I noticed, in walking through the woods, an unusually large ant-hill, with thousands of little busy-bodies around. I spied a large caterpillar not far off, in my cruelty I took it up, and placed it about five feet or so from their camp. I retired some distance, placed my back against a tree, lighted a pipe, and determined to watch the result. After about ten minutes had elapsed, some two score ants approached, but not close to it. They retired, and in a few minutes there came a stronger relay. These also took stock of it and they retired. Then came a stronger number; these again came closer than the two previous lots, but they also returned to their camp. Then, after several minutes, came a host of them. Numbers appeared to increase

their boldness, and they at once attacked the caterpillar, literally covering it. The poor thing, after about five minutes, began to feel the effect of their stings, and twisted over and over, and must have suffered intense pain. This went on for half an hour, when it was quite dead. What now, thought I, will happen? A lot of them returned, and brought back a second host; partly to relieve the wearied and tired, and partly to haul the caterpillar to their camp. They then set to work, and slowly and surely dragged it little by little to their camp, and then I left them. Here is more than mere instinct, for evidently there was a scouting party, then relays, until they felt powerful enough to commence an attack, and secure a victory. What better generalship? Who shall define the boundary line between instinct and reason. These observations lasted for three hours. I will bring forward another anecdote bearing upon this latter point of instinct and reason. In a deer park in this neighbourhood, I was told by a son of the proprietor that in the severe winter of 1880 and 1881 all the deer slept on the ice of the river, which was covered with snow, instead of on the ground, which was also covered with snow. Now, however strange it may seem, did not their instinct teach them that it was really drier on the hard ice covered with snow than on the ground as it then was?

*Adders.* For thirty-five years I have endeavoured to determine whether the dark grey and the copper-coloured adder were male and female or distinct species. Year after year I have examined many in order to solve this problem. I dissected about fifty specimens in 1888 of the respective colours, with the same result, namely, that invariably in the copper-coloured ones I have found eggs in the spring; some larger, some smaller, and young ones later on. In no instance that I can remember have any eggs or young been found inside the dark grey, and we must remember that the adder is ovoviviparous. Perhaps it may not be out of place to mention a few anecdotes connected with this reptile. Years ago, in an apple tree, in an open field, was a bird's nest, about ten feet from the ground. A boy climbed up to examine the nest for eggs, but when about to put his hand into the nest he fancied he heard a hissing noise, and caught sight of an adder's head peeping out. He came down, got some clay, and stopped up the hole where the nest was, leaving the adder to its fate. What is the effect of an adder's bite upon dogs and other animals? This depends in a measure upon the state of the weather, and where they are bitten, as the hotter it is the greater the amount of virus injected. On one occasion, on August 20th, years ago, I was with a friend in search of black game. I came to an old coal-hearth, where charcoal had been burnt; a young woodcock came by me, when I fired. On putting

the stock of my gun on the ground to re-load (breech-loaders not being then invented), I saw five adders in different directions. The report of my gun brought up two pointer dogs; one passed close by a large adder, which bit it in the leg. In five minutes the dog's leg had become so swollen that it could not walk, but had to be carried home. The dog did not recover until six weeks had elapsed, the remedy used on that occasion being ash-buds with skim-milk. In 1870, a man at Kingswood, on the borders of the Forest, lost a cow in the spring of two consecutive years. The tongue of each animal was very much inflamed. They could not eat, and died in a short time. These cows, while grazing on the hedge-bank, had doubtless been bitten in the tongue by an adder, or adders, which was the cause of their death. In the following spring, on the same bank, there were four adders killed in one spot, coiled up together. Do adders swallow their young? I have never been able yet to ascertain a well-authenticated case of it. I see not why, up to a certain size, they should not do so, seeing that the young are born inside them. In the case of one copper-coloured adder being examined some few years ago, there were found fourteen young ones inside her, about seven inches in length, which had the appearance of having been out, and in again; if so, they could only have managed this through the mouth. I myself believe that it is not impossible. The length of adders varies; the dark grey ones measure equally as much as the copper-coloured ones. Among the many adders that I have preserved in large bottles I have some with their sloughs on, and others after they have cast them. The colour of both, after their great coat is off, is brilliant. The average length of 500 adders would be about twenty-two inches. The largest one in my possession is 30 and a half inches; the largest ever seen or known. In dissecting the poison-bag at the root of the fang, it will be found that there are *about* four drops of virus there, which fills up by degrees, after any of the poison has been emitted through the hollow part that lies *inside* the fangs.



Bloody Cranesbill *Geranium sanguineum* Rosemary Winnall

*Flowers.* People may remember the celebrated "Witty pear-tree" (*Pyrus domestica*). I saw it some years before it was burnt down. It had the bark of a pear tree, the leaves of the mountain ash, the fruit, between the medlar and common "Haw" berry. It was burnt down from pure mischief about 1862. A graft from the original tree is now growing in the garden of Arley Castle. Efforts have been made to propagate it from seed, but it invariably reverts to the common mountain ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*). *Who* can explain this in a *satisfactory* manner? The word "witty" is a corruption of "witchen," or "wicken," or "wigen," which words bear allusion to the power it was once supposed to possess of counteracting *witchcraft*. The flowers that exist in the Forest of Wyre are too numerous to mention, but I think the two rarest specimens are *Geranium Sanguineum* and *Pyrola Media*. In one bog "cotton grass" (*Eriophorum*) exists, and also the "bog pimpernel" (*Anagallis tenella*). Three varieties of the *Polygala* - blue, pink, and white exist. Among the orchids, there is only one that is sweet-scented to be found in the woods, which is *Gymnadenia Conopsea*; it is very fragrant, and the spur is slender. Of *shrubs* we have the "buck thorn" (*Rhamnus*), and the "dog wood" or the wild cornel (*Cornus*) and one solitary instance of the white beam (*Pyrus Aria*). Of *Ferns* there are only the common sorts. There are a few spots where the lilies of the valley grow wild.

I cannot end these matters, which to me are very interesting, without mentioning the following particulars. At a place called Kingswood, on the borders of the Forest, in Shropshire, there are the remains of an extensive moat, where, I presume, there must have been a castle of considerable size in those early days, when border warfare was carried on to a very great extent, as the Severn was originally the boundary between England and Wales<sup>4</sup>. *When* and *by whom* it was destroyed, we have no means of ascertaining; whether in earlier days than the Civil Wars, we cannot tell, but both before and after the battle of Worcester there was a continual passing and re-passing of troops of both parties between Worcester and Shrewsbury, and so there may have taken place many a slight, or still more important siege and battle, unrecorded by any historian. Some twenty years ago, I was repairing a house in a small strath in the Forest about one mile from Kingswood, belonging to me, when we discovered two bullets in the mortar of the old chimney. How did they get there? Did they tell their own tale or did they not? I have always considered that that chimney belonged to a house, pillaged and burnt in those sad times, and the bullets themselves had that history attached to them. I have in my possession several silver pennies that were coined in the reigns of the three Edwards; they were

discovered in the following manner:- A small coppice on the borders of the Forest was cut down, stocked up, and then ploughed. The plough share in one spot struck against an old jar, which contained a great number of the said silver pennies. Evidently they had been buried there for safety's sake in those troublous times. In the time of Elizabeth, the Forest of Wyre is mentioned in the Survey:- "Burgess', freeholders, etc. of Cleobury ought to have 'commoning' in the Heath of 'Wyre' & 'Strike' (from 'streiken' to ramble) in the Forest: & to have hog & swine fed in the Forest of 'Wyre' & to pay 2/- a hog." "Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur ab illis." Some few years ago, a man wrote an article in *Macmillan's Magazine*, asserting that there were the remains of an old Roman villa in the Forest of Wyre, mentioning the particular locality, which was adjoining the spot where the old "Witty" Pear-tree once grew. I tried, and tried, but in vain, to find any such remains, and on writing to the Editor for the name of the individual who wrote the article, and on subsequently corresponding with him, I had the unsatisfactory reply that the source from whence he derived his information was unfortunately lost or burnt; so it existed, I am afraid, only in the imagination. My

favourite quotation, after anything I have attempted to say or write (howsoever imperfect), is the following:-  
*"Si quid novisti rectius istis, candidus imperti"*

1. "Domesday tells us nothing of these Forest-lands, neither of their state in Saxon times nor of their assignment under the Normans." *Eyton Antiq.* IV., 276.

"Bewdley Forest, under its more ancient appellation of Wyre, was a district so vast as that a whole county got its name therefrom; for Wyre-ceastre, (Worcester), was a Roman station in this Forest, and becoming the chief city of the district, that district was called Worcestershire." *Ibid.* Vol. I. 2nd S.

2. The HAWFINCH, (*Coccothraustes vulgaris*), now breeds freely in most parts of Shropshire. A young bird that had only recently left the nest was killed a few summers ago, in the garden at Neen Savage Rectory near Cleobury Mortimer. - Note by Mr. W. E. Beckwith. [Ed.]

3. In YARRELL'S *British Birds*, Vol. II., p. 357, there is a figure of a female hybrid, between the Cock Pheasant and Gray Hen, which was killed at Merrington, near Shrewsbury, and passed into the possession of the late T. C. Eyton, of Eyton. - Note by Mr. W. E. Beckwith. [Ed.]

4. The river Severn ceased to be the boundary in King Offa's time. [Ed.]

#### Editor's note:

According to current taxonomy, the 3 British species of Fragrant-orchids that were previously thought to be varieties of *Gymnadenia conopsea* (mentioned in this article) are now considered to be 3 species, 2 of which have been recorded from Wyre. The Marsh Fragrant-orchid *Gymnadenia densiflora* (as seen below left) has been recorded in alkaline wet flushes within the forest, and the Heath Fragrant-orchid *Gymnadenia borealis* (below) may be found in unimproved grassland.



*Gymnadenia densiflora*, Park Brook  
10 July 1997

Rosemary Winnall



*Gymnadenia borealis*, Bell Coppice meadow  
1 June 2011

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