Going Wild in the Wyre: End of Project Summary Report by the Wyre Community Land Trust

JENNY JOY

In June 2023 the Wyre Community Land Trust launched a new project **'Going Wild in the Wyre'** after successfully receiving £9942 from the National Lottery Community Fund. The main aim of the project was to provide training and support for a group of volunteers who would go on to become our '**Wildlife Champions**' and help us record and monitor the wildlife present in Ruskin Land. Since its launch we have organised and run courses with the help of experts in their fields to cover a wide range of species. The courses have been very well attended with 229 course attendees (Figure 1,) from the local community attending various events over the course program (although some of these people came to more than one event – so this equates to 108 people).

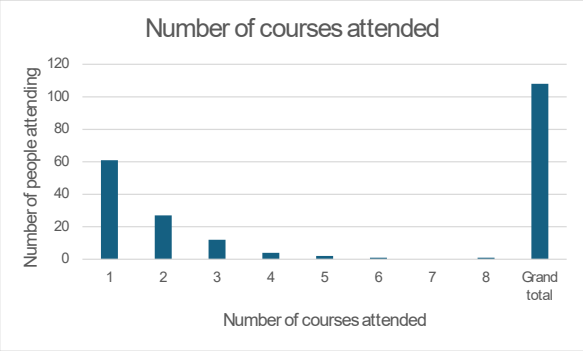


Figure 1. Number of course attended.

Out of the course participants, most of them (95/108 or 89%) were new to the Wyre Community Land Trust and had not visited us before. This shows there is a lot more scope to involve many more people in this sort of work locally.

Going Wild in the Wyre – Course Program

- Butterflies of the Wyre Forest
- An Introduction to Birds of the Wyre Forest
- Bats of the Wyre
- Getting closer to Wildflowers
- Reptiles of the Wyre Forest
- An Introduction to Small Mammals - Dormice
- Frogspawn – training session
- Beginners' Bumblebee identification
- Wildflowers – identifying butterfly foodplants of the Wyre

Courses were advertised in the 'Bewdley Bridge' magazine, on our Facebook site and other social media pages and emailed out to our large database of followers.

Butterflies

Our courses were led by Mike Williams and Jenny Joy of West Midlands Butterfly Conservation and timed with the potential to see all the Wyre forest's butterfly species. We also ran two shorter courses focused on further upskilling those that are actively helping us survey the butterfly species found in Ruskin Land. A total of 40 people attended the butterfly workshops.

After the initial courses, with the help of Jenny Joy we set up our 'Ruskin Land' butterfly transect (Figure 2) that is now regularly surveyed by our wildlife champions, between the start of April to the end of September as part of the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (UKBMS). All data collected is uploaded onto the UKBMS website. The UKBMS is one of the longest running insect monitoring schemes in the world. The scheme began in 1976 and now records data on over 3,000 sites per year; incorporating traditional butterfly transects, Wider Countryside Butterfly Survey (WCBS), and targeted surveys. The resulting UKBMS dataset is one of the most important resources for understanding changes in insect populations.



Figure 2. Butterfly transect route. Jenny Joy

The transect starts at St George's Farm and takes the route shown in Figure 2.

Butterflies recorded on this transect in 2023 and 2024 include Silver-washed Fritillary, Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Small Heath (the latter three species all being significant in the Wyre Forest context).

Table 1 shows a brief comparison between the two recording years. 2024 was a very poor year for butterflies which is why nearly double the number of walks resulted in only a few more sightings.

Table 1. Comparison of butterfly counts in 2023 and 2024.

Statistic	2023	2024
Number of recorders in team	6	6
Number of transect walks undertaken	8	15
Total number of butterflies recorded	331	344
Total number of species recorded	16	21
Most common butterfly	Gatekeeper	Gatekeeper

These are great results and are hugely improving our knowledge of butterflies in this part of the forest. We plan to continue with this transect in the future and to help to increase the monitoring levels elsewhere in the forest especially on other land we manage.

Birds

Our bird courses were the most popular courses of the project, filling up very quickly and all having waiting lists. We originally had two courses booked in with local expert and Worcestershire County Bird Recorder, Craig Reed, to cover the winter visiting species and breeding bird species that can be found in the Wyre, but due to the very high demand we added in an extra course. Craig has helped us set up two line transects on Ruskin Land (Figure 3) as well as a series of point counts to cover the majority of the site and habitats that can be found on Ruskin Land. A total of 56 people attended the bird workshops, 43 individuals including 13 who came to more than one workshop (Figure 4).

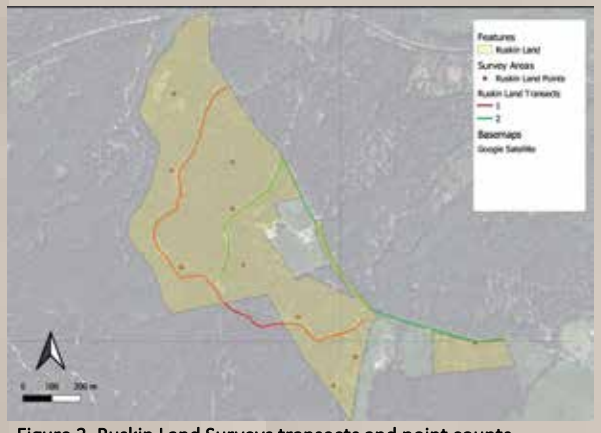


Figure 3. Ruskin Land Surveys transects and point counts. Google/Craig Reed

Only one volunteer signed up for the bird recording either on the transect or the fixed-point recording which was disappointing but from the feedback forms this was because people felt they didn't have the confidence or expertise to go out and record on their own. In our next project it would therefore be useful to be able to take out small groups of those keen to record and concentrate on the key bird species of the Wyre Forest. Another possibility to run in conjunction with the small groups could be having a nest box scheme where we allocate volunteers to existing nest boxes in the forest and they identify if they are occupied and if so, by which species. These would both be less daunting tasks and may encourage more volunteers to come forward. These ideas for a future project are based on feedback from the three bird courses.



Figure 4. Craig Reed leading the bird workshop in Unclly's Farm studio. Kate Quinton

Bats

We worked alongside Matthew Terry, chair of the Worcestershire Bat group for the bat course. The course covered the bat species that can be found in the Wyre and their ecology as well as a walk around Ruskin Land to look and listen for bats. He also led three 'Come and support a survey' walks in the forest to give those that were interested in further training an opportunity to learn more and get more training in using the bat detectors. The walks were led towards the end of the season for bats in 2023. A total of 32 people attended the walks which comprised of 24 individuals with eight people attending more than one session.

Bats identified

There was a good level of bat activity on the Dry Mill Lane and WCLT walks. Virtually no bat activity was noted on the Visitor Centre walk, but this

element of the forest is predominantly conifer plantation. This confirmed our starting hypothesis and we recommend that other areas of the forest are prioritised in future.

On the other two walks, the following bat species were recorded:

- Common Pipistrelle
- Soprano Pipistrelle
- Noctule
- *Myotis* sp. (precise species not determined)
- Daubenton's
- Barbastelle

Records from the WCLT walk were submitted to iRecord.

An example of where these species were recorded in the Town Coppice area is shown in Figure 5.

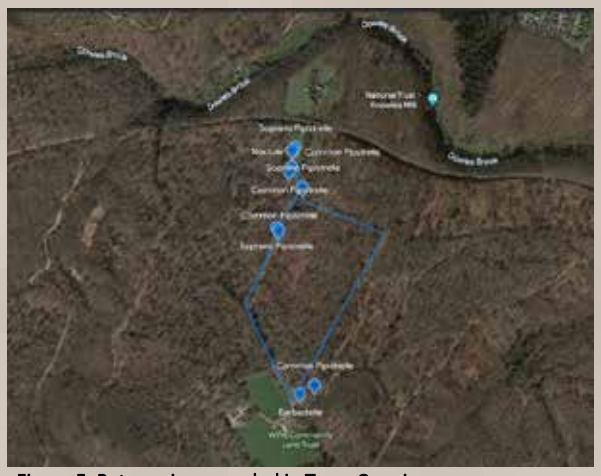


Figure 5. Bat species recorded in Town Coppice.
Google/Matthew Terry

Next steps

The discovery of Barbastelle bats on three separate occasions – two of which were close to the WCLT offices – is of particular interest and deserves further investigation.

Barbastelles are very rare in the UK and the Wyre Forest is located towards the most northern parts of their known range (Figure 6).

The Worcestershire Bat Group would like to work with WCLT again in 2025 to expand the knowledge of Barbastelle activity in the Wyre Forest.

Based on the experience of 2023, the Bat Group have proposed an alternative approach using passive bat detectors as a means of recording Barbastelle activity. These detectors can be left *in situ* to record for days or weeks on end, with the recordings later being collected and analysed.

This approach has several benefits:

- We know from last year's surveys and wider research that Barbastelles tend to forage in dark wooded areas which are likely to be away from the major footpaths in the forest,
- It avoids the need for volunteers to be in remote parts of the forest late into the night,
- It eliminates the problem of extraneous noise – on previous survey walks the noise of people walking on the footpaths caused quite a lot of interference on the recordings,
- We can focus volunteer development on the analysis of recordings and the formal submission of records,
- We may also pick up other interesting species – the recorders scan the full range of potential bat calls, and
- Worcestershire Bat Group has been exploring the potential of passive bat detectors in 2024 and has the knowledge to support such a project.



Figure 6. Barbastelle range in the UK. Bat Conservation Trust

While we could focus on the Barbastelle, as proposed by the Bat Group, with our volunteers in the future, we could also aim to train them in modern bat recording techniques which can identify species of bat more easily and increase their confidence and ability to record bats in the wider forest in general.

Wildflowers

We have held two courses covering wildflowers as part of the project. The first, led by Lynn and Paul of Peter the Bee and Friends and the second led by John Handley of CH Ecology who has led courses for us in the past (Figure 7).

21 people attended the first course in August 2023.

15 people attended the second day in June 2024.

A total of 36 people including two who attended more than one.



Figure 7. John Handley leading a wildflower field session at Uncllys Farm, 13th June 2024. Lucy Morton

While no formal surveys have been carried out as a result of these two workshops, we have learnt a lot in terms of what we need to do in our next project. Future work could be much more targeted at learning to identify small groups of plant species e.g. those that are good for pollinators, good indicators of habitat quality, the larval foodplants of butterflies and day-flying moths, or Wyre Forest specialities such as the Narrow-leaved Helleborine. Focussing on a smaller number of species that are easy to identify would give volunteers more confidence that they can quickly contribute to valuable data sets without needing detailed knowledge. These ideas are based on the feedback from these two wildflower sessions.

Frogspawn

Frogspawn surveys have been carried out in the forest since 1988. However, since 2021 much of the survey work has stopped for a variety of reasons. One of the original surveyors and member of the 'Going Wild in the Wyre' steering group, Rosemary Winnall, thought the project would be a great opportunity to try and get some of the surveys back up and running. In February 2024 with the help of Linda Iles (who still surveys the ponds near the farm) we held a frogspawn morning where we did a training session, then went out looking for frogspawn in known ponds. Subsequent to this session we also put together some notes to help volunteers locate a few of the ponds in the wider area to encourage course participants to undertake some pond surveys themselves. This was successful with five volunteers searching 18 ponds (with Linda undertaking 11 of these) and frogspawn being seen in seven of the ponds.

There is a real need to standardise the names of all the ponds across the forest (as there are at least two maps with different numbering system). All remaining ponds could then be resurveyed and photographed with the aim of a) determining if they still exist; b) whether or not they still contain spawn; c) writing easy directions for finding them (especially for ponds which could be allocated to new volunteers); and d) whether any work is needed on them. We also aim to run a number of frogspawn count training sessions during this work with the idea of recruiting a number of recorders who could then be allocated specific ponds to search each year. The plan would be to work closely with Forestry England, Natural England, and the Wyre Forest Study Group throughout the course of this work.

Reptiles

Our 2024 course entitled the 'Reptiles of the Wyre Forest' was led by local expert Nigel Hand who has surveyed the reptiles in the Wyre Forest and UK for many years. The course covered the four reptile species that can be found in the Wyre, their ecology and survey techniques. During the course Nigel gave advice on some good locations on Ruskin Land to start surveying (Figure 8). Using his advice and what was learnt on the course we set up 12 reptile refuges (Figure 9) in four different locations, three of which were on Ruskin Land and the other on a site we manage called Tanners Hill Farm. Of the 14 people that attended the reptile workshop, nine offered to be on the list to carry out the refuge checks. In the event eight people carried out nine of these checks over the summer. During these checks five Slow-worms (Figure 10) were recorded on one heathland area on Ruskin Land, and two Common Lizard and one female Slow-worm were recorded at St George's Farm.

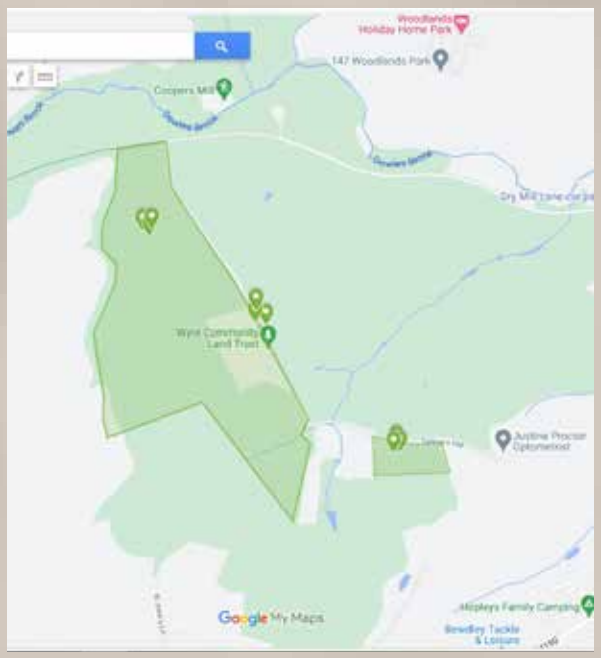


Figure 8. Map showing distribution of reptile refugia.
Google/Nigel Hand



Figure 9. Reptile refuge. Sally Pendergast



Figure 10. Slow-worm 2024. Penny Wadley

This was a very successful part of this project which we would like to continue with and extend in any new project.

Small Mammals - Dormice

Two small mammal workshop sessions were run in 2024 and attended by 26 people. The workshops were led by Andy Bucklitch and Catherine Jarvis from Worcestershire Wildlife Trust (Figures 11 and 12). The first day was an introduction to dormouse ecology, habitat and management and in the afternoon the group assembled 50 footprint tubes then placed them in scrub on woodland rides and in one of the fenced off coppice coupes on Ruskin Land. At the second workshop volunteers were shown how to survey the tunnels by checking the paper for footprints. After these two events the plan was to check then re-ink the tunnels every two weeks. Twelve people offered to help with the rechecking of the tunnels which was carried out nine times (and usually involved two people).



Figure 11. Andy Bucklitch introducing dormouse ecology. Lucy Morton



Figure 12. Assembling the footprint tubes. Lucy Morton

The second session, two weeks later, was an afternoon looking for and checking the paper in the tubes for footprints (Figures 13 and 14).



Figure 13. Andy placing the first tube. Lucy Morton



Figure 14. Checking the paper after two weeks. Lucy Morton

Dormouse prints were found in three tubes on the main track and once in a coppice coupe all on Ruskin Land from June-August 2024. This is the first time that Dormouse has been recorded in this part of the forest (Figures 15 and 16).

This was a hugely successful part of this project which we could continue and extend in the next project and also possibly include Dormouse nesting boxes as well as footprint tunnels.



Figure 15. Adult Dormouse. Andy Bucklitch



Figure 16. Copice coupe. Lucy Morton

Bumblebees

One beginner's course was run in 2024 and led by the Bumblebee Conservation Trust's Science Manager, Dr Richard Comont. The course provided training (Figures 17 and 18) on bumblebee ecology and how to identify the eight most common species of bumblebee. Richard also described the BeeWalk scheme set up by Bumblebee Conservation. This is a national recording scheme to monitor the abundance of bumblebees on transects across the country. It involves identifying and counting the bumblebees seen on a monthly walk along a set route from March to October (so similar to a butterfly transect).

While there was great enthusiasm for this course which was attended by 18 people, no volunteers

felt they were capable of setting up and monitoring a BeeWalk as a result of it.

Any new project needs to develop this part of the project much further given the huge decline in the number of bees and other insects seen nationally in 2024.



Figure 17. Dr Richard Comont, bumblebee workshop, 11th June 2024. Lucy Morton



Figure 18. Dr Richard Comont, Bumblebee workshop, 11th June 2024. Lucy Morton

Conclusions

The **'Going Wild in the Wyre'** project has been a huge success in terms the number of people who have shown an interest in booking and attending the workshops. Equally successful has been the number of people involved in all sorts of monitoring projects on both **Ruskin Land** and elsewhere in the forest that have come out of these workshops/sessions (31 volunteers). These are our **'Wildlife Champions'** that are helping us to record and monitor the wildlife both here at Ruskin Land and in the wider area.

A lot of the wildlife we have recorded during this project is along the butterfly transect route. This route is now effectively our **'Ruskin Wildlife Trail'** where we will continue to encourage people to come to record and enjoy.

We are currently using what we have learnt during this 'trial' project to form the basis for a larger three-year project. We are very grateful to everybody who has contributed to this project in any way.

Lucy Morton/Kate Quinton Project Manager

Dr Jenny Joy	**Steering Group Chair**
Sally Pendergast	**Project Team**

Acknowledgements

All the volunteers who contributed time and effort to learn about the wildlife of the Wyre Forest.

Steering Group:

George Vyvyan:	Natural England
Rosemary Winnall:	Wyre Forest Study Group

For their help with targeted wildlife surveys:

Rosemary Winnall:	Wyre Forest Study Group
Linda Iles:	Uncllys Farm
Phil Rudlin:	Forestry England

The Tutors on the Wildlife Courses:

Bat Recording Walks:	Matthew Terry, WBG
Frogspawn and ponds:	Linda Iles
Reptile workshop:	Nigel Hand
Birds:	Craig Reed
Wildflowers:	Lynn Yendell and Paul Gibson
Wildflowers for Butterflies:	John Handley
Butterfly ID:	Mike Williams & Jenny Joy
Bumblebee Bees:	Dr Richard Comont,
Small Mammals:	Andy Bucklitch & Catherine Jarvis

Landowners:

The Guild of St George, Forestry England and Natural England