



**OLD MILVERTON & BLACKDOWN PARISH WALKS,
NR. ROYAL LEAMINGTON SPA,
WARWICKSHIRE.**

Biodiversity Audit

**Report to:
Rachel Pope, Old Milverton & Blackdown Parish Councillor**

Project number 2023/084 B

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QUALITY ASSURANCE

Title: Old Milverton and Blackdown Parish Walks, Nr. Royal Leamington Spa,
Warwickshire

- Winter Biodiversity Audit

Submitted to: Rachel Pope - Old Milverton & Blackdown Parish Councillor

Report number: 2023/084 B

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SUMMARY

In September 2023, Worcestershire Wildlife Consultancy was commissioned by Rachel Pope, Parish Councillor for Old Milverton and Blackdown Parish Council, near Royal Leamington Spa, Warwickshire to undertake a Winter Biodiversity Audit on four walks along public rights of way within the parish council boundaries.

The first biodiversity audit was undertaken in autumn 2023. Worcestershire Wildlife Consultancy (October 2023) Old Milverton & Blackdown Parish Walks Biodiversity Audit 2023/084 A. During the autumn biodiversity audit, the first walk took in the majority of Church Farm which is not on a main public footpath. For the second (winter) biodiversity audit in February 2024, it was decided to change the route of the first walk, to incorporate the public footpath leading from the Church of St. James The Great in Old Milverton down to Saxon Mill. This walk would also take in the River Avon and provide an audit of species observed during the winter months nearer to the public footpaths and the river. The return route was via Cliffe allotments and Manor Farm, returning to Old Milverton village through the churchyard of St. James The Great.

The appraisal was requested to inform the parish council as to the wildlife that members of the public might encounter along footpaths within the parish council boundaries. The parish council are intending to site information boards at the start of the walks and possibly at strategic points along the walks. The appraisal is also to inform the parish council about the species present on the land and especially if there are any protected species. The appraisal is in order to ensure compliance with National and European legislation.

DESCRIPTION OF WALK

Walk 1 – Circular walk from the Church of St. James The Great to the Saxon Mill bridge, along the banks of the River Avon to the Allotments and return to the churchyard via Manor Farm.

As the observers set off from Old Milverton Village Hall, a great tit (*Parus major*) hopped about the branches of a cherry tree. Greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*) were heard as the observers walked through the gate to the churchyard. The tinkling call of goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*) were also heard in the trees in the churchyard.

The observers then walked through another gate at the end of the churchyard and along a wide, muddy path that led across a large field with views of the flooded meadows by the River Avon below and Guy's Cliffe House on the opposite bank.

Woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus*) zipped across the open sky and landed in the trees by the River Avon. A skylark (*Alda arvensis*) took flight and could be heard singing high above the large field. Carrion crow (*Corvus corone corone*) flew around the ruins of Guy's Cliffe House. A song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) characteristically repeated its song three times from alder trees on the banks of the river.

The observers couldn't gain access to the path along to the bridge at Saxon Mill due to floodwaters. The floodwater at the gate was nearly over their wellington boots. A moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) was heard just by the path, in the flooded meadow. A blue tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) hopped about in some tree branches next to the observers.

Four black-headed gull (*Larus ridibundus*) flew over the flooded meadows and landed on the water. A male and female mallard duck (*Anas platyrhynchos*) were starting their courtship with a head bobbing routine. They were joined by a white farmyard duck.

The field where there are horse jumps was flooded and two pied wagtail (*Motacilla alba yarrellii*) were perched on one of the rails before they flew towards the observers.

On closer inspection of some of the trees usually lining the course of the river, several woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus*) were perched on branches. As the observers watched magpie (*Pica pica*) flying around the trees by Guy's Cliffe House, a large falcon flew from the direction of Guy's Cliffe. It landed in the outer branches of a dead tree in the large field and the observers were able to identify it as a peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*).

Jackdaw (*Coloeus monedula*) could still be heard chattering from within the ruins of Guy's Cliffe house. Another pair of mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) were out on the open water of the flooded horse paddock. A song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) could be heard singing on the opposite bank. More black-headed gull (*Larus ridibundus*), still in their winter plumage, joined the other gulls and flew over the river.

Close by, a party of approximately 12 long-tailed tit (*Aegithalos caudatus*) worked their way through the trees to the right of the observers, just before a small path led off into some scrub and trees on the right. This path was a little overgrown with brambles but within approximately ten metres of leaving the main path, the observers located an extensive badger sett.

There were many entrance holes, with flattened earth trackways running between them. There were several badger latrines with fresh droppings at the bottom of them. Unfortunately, due to the wet weather, most of the tracks around the holes were indistinct.

After emerging from the scrub and woodland the observers continued walking around the edge of the large field. Another skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) was singing above them.

The path headed towards a small valley with a bridge crossing the stream in the bottom. A song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) was singing away, perched in the top of a tall alder tree above the valley. A small flock of goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*) with their bouncy flight flew overhead.

The observers decided to follow a narrow path into the valley and within a few metres had found another extensive badger sett. There was fresh earth at the entrance to some of the tunnels along with areas of flattened vegetation, where the badgers had been active.

After returning to the main path around the field, the observers heard and saw a robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) in the hedge bordering the Cliffe allotments.

As the observers walked uphill towards a gate on the right-hand side of the field, a male blackbird (*Turdus merula*) appeared by the gate. A pair of carrion crow (*Corvus corone corone*) were strutting about on the field but flew off as the observers approached.

The observers walked past Manor Farm and another skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) flew approximately 20 metres above them, singing away.

To complete their circular walk, the observers went through the gate to the churchyard where they saw a carpet of snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*) in the churchyard. There were also some meadow saffron (*Colchicum autumnale*) in bud and the daffodils (*Narcissus sp.*) were emerging. There was a small clump of lesser celandine (*Ficaria verna*) by the gate.

The observers noticed that the possible blackbird's (*Turdus merula*) nest above the entrance to the church was still in situ from their previous visit. As they took shelter from the rain, the observers spotted a similar built nest tucked away under the roof of the lychgate at the entrance to the churchyard.

The final sighting of the morning were two goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*) flitting about the outer branches of a large conifer on the roadside just past the car turning circle by the entrance to the churchyard.

That concluded the morning's walk and due to the inclement weather, the remainder of the walks for that day were postponed.

OBSERVATIONS

- **Badgers** – During the main walk down to the bridge at Saxon Mill along the River Avon around Manor Farm, Old Milverton, badger (*Meles meles*) trails, setts and latrines were observed at a couple of locations within hedgerows and areas of scrub.
- **Bats** – As the survey was undertaken during daylight hours and in heavy rain, no observations of bats were made. However, anecdotal evidence from residents of Old Milverton, reported having seen bats over the gardens in the village and the fields. The MAGIC database contained data from surveys undertaken in 2012 and 2014 with records of common pipistrelle. As the footpaths around Old Milverton take in a variety of habitats including the river, species such as Daubenton's might be present. **A more up to date bat activity survey could be undertaken between the months of May – September, to determine which species frequent the area.**
- **Birds** - The areas surveyed comprised of field margins, established mixed species hedgerow, river, scrub and woodland and therefore offered the opportunity to observe a good diversity of species. Bird species in the order they were observed on walk 1: Great tit (*Parus major*), greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*), goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*), woodpigeon, (*Columba palumbus*), **skylark** (*Alauda arvensis*), carrion crow, (*Corvus corone*), song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*), moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*), blue tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*), black-headed gull (*Larus ridibundus*), mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), pied wagtail (*Motacilla alba yarrellii*), a white Farmhouse duck (*Anas platyrhynchos domesticus*), **peregrine falcon** (*Falco peregrinus*), jackdaw (*Coloeus monedula*), long-tailed tit (*Aegithalos caudatus*), robin (*Erithacus rubecula*), blackbird (*Turdus merula*), carrion crow (*Corvus corone corone*) and goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*). Anecdotal evidence from a member of the parish council reported recent sightings of **woodcock** (*Scolopax rusticola*), **common snipe** (*Gallinago gallinago*) and **fieldfare** (*Turdus pilaris*) in the fields around Old Milverton over the winter months.
- As nesting birds are legally protected, development operations should take care to avoid the risk of killing/ injuring birds and their nests, especially during the nesting season (generally considered to be late February to late August). Therefore, **removal and/or management of suitable nesting habitats, for example, the hedgerows, should be undertaken outside of the main nesting season and where this is not possible, a suitably qualified ecologist must be engaged to check for nesting birds prior to any works taking place** and to provide advice on the most appropriate way to proceed.
- **Dormice** – No dormice are thought to be present in this area of Warwickshire. As dormice favour continuous nature corridors along which to travel, the River Avon, surrounding main roads and the branch railway line all act as barriers. No

evidence of dormice (*Muscardinus avellanarius*) was observed and although the hedgerows along the side of the footpaths are well-established, as the paths border urban areas and are subject to disturbance from dogs, it is highly unlikely dormice are present.

- **Great crested newts** - There was no evidence of great crested newts (*Triturus cristatus*) during the ecological appraisal. The MAGIC.gov database did contain two records of great crested newt, either side of the branch railway line at SP296675 and SP309672. There is also anecdotal evidence from a local resident that they had seen great crested newt in their garden. There were several small ponds, around the agricultural fields, which would score high on a great crested newt Habitat Suitability Index, were one to be carried out. One of the footpaths crosses the main watercourse of the River Avon but as flowing water is not favourable to great crested newt (GCN), there is a lower likelihood of GCN by the river. Features such as log piles under which great crested newt would hibernate in the winter months were observed along the main footpath. Overall, the site is considered to be a medium likelihood for GCN's.
- **Water Voles** – The river environment appeared suitable for water vole but none were observed during the walk. On a previous visit, the observer suggested **siting a trail camera at a natural crossing point** (fallen tree) between the island and the field margin to see what wildlife could be observed.
- **No White-clawed crayfish** were observed during the appraisal, as the observer did not have access onto the riverbank due to the flooding.
- **Otter**- There was also no evidence of otter (*Lutra lutra*) on site but otter are known to frequent rivers such as the River Avon in Warwickshire and so its possible otter might be present. There are areas, such as the island, where they would go undisturbed. Again, the siting of the trail camera at the natural crossing point between the island and the field margin, might capture sightings. Anecdotal evidence from members of the parish council mentioned hearing of sightings of Otter along the River Avon and in the housing estate towards Blackdown where Otter were reported to be taking Koi Carp (*Cyprinus carpio* var. 'Koi') from a back garden in the housing estate.
- **Reptiles** – No evidence of reptiles was seen during the ecological appraisal. Due to the nature of the site, being very agricultural there is considered to be a very low likelihood that common lizard (*Zootoca vivipara*) or slow worm (*Anguis fragilis*) are present.
- As this survey was undertaken in February, wintering birds such as geese, swans, roving parties of fieldfare and redwing are in the countryside. Unfortunately, due to the weather conditions on the day of the survey, none of those species were observed on this occasion. It was decided to stop the walks on the 9th February due to the incessant rain. Despite re-scheduling the

remainder of the walks, heavy rain was forecast on the day of the repeat survey on the 21st February. It was agreed that a representative number of species had still been seen on the 9th February and so the observer will return in the spring, towards late April, to survey the species on four walks around Old Milverton and Blackdown.

- **Two further dedicated surveys are recommended** to observe wildlife along the footpaths at different times of year during spring and summer. Different species of vegetation, invertebrates, birds and mammals will also be seen during the different seasons.
- **It should be noted that if more than twelve months elapse between this appraisal and the commencement of any development then a further appraisal may need to be undertaken at an appropriate time to determine the status of any protected species which may have taken up residence during the intervening period.**

Appendix 1. Map of the Walk around Old Milverton

Map 1: Route of Walk 1 – The Church of St. James The Great in Old Milverton to Saxon Mill Bridge and along the footpath to the Allotments and return via Manor Farm and the churchyard



LAND AT OLD MILVERTON, ROYAL LEAMINGTON SPA, WARWICKSHIRE

BIODIVERSITY AUDIT – WINTER – ROUTE OF WALK 1



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Appendix 2. Images Taken On the Walk Around Old Milverton



Plate 1: Walk 1 - Footpath through St. James The Great churchyard in Old Milverton



Plate 2: Walk 1 - Footpath from the churchyard down towards the Saxon Mill bridge



Plate 3: Walk 1 - View back up the footpath towards the churchyard



Plate 4: Walk 1 - View across the flooded River Avon to the ruins of Guy's Cliffe House



Plate 5: Walk 1 - Peregrine falcon perched on the dead tree



Plate 6: Walk 1 - Footpath leading down to a bridge over a stream with housing estate in the background



Plate 7: Walk 1 - View to the Allotments at the far extent of the walk



Plate 8: Walk 1 – Carpet of Snowdrops in the churchyard of St. James The Great