



January 2012 Issue 12

**NEWSLETTER
of the
Medlock & Tame Valley
Conservation Association**
(Registered Charity Number: 504558)



Welcome to our first newsletter of 2012

A VERY HAPPY NEW YEAR TO YOU ALL!

Winter is reported to arrive in January with heavy snowfalls and plummeting temperatures. The hats, scarves and gloves will be coming out and we will all, (finally) relent to turning up the heat!

It is hard to believe another year has dawned and our first event of 2012 (A Winter Walk) is advertised further on into the newsletter. We do hope you can join us for that.

Much needed work on the back wall of the house is required this winter and it will be our main outdoor project. The problem is that the rendering at various parts of the wall has cracked exposing many damaged bricks through which water has leaked. We cannot go through another winter without having this work done and we are currently receiving quotations for the work. Scaffolding will have to be erected and the existing plaster needs to be chipped away; damaged bricks removed and replaced; the wall repointed/replastered and painted. It is no small fete but is absolutely necessary so that the integrity of the building is preserved.

Once the work is finished, we can proceed with the redecoration of rooms which, upon completion, will be a very welcome sight!

A final reminder to all who have not renewed their membership. Now, more than ever, we need your support and help to advance the work of MTVCA.

PREPARING YOUR GARDEN FOR WINTER

Gardens can look a bit dull in winter, but they don't have to. As well as providing habitats for a host of overwintering residents, a good wildlife garden will attract flocks of birds. In fact, the harsher the weather and the less food there is in the countryside, the more important gardens become for our feathered friends. Feeding birds throughout the winter is important, because it increases their

breeding success the following year. So start preparing now.

Gardens don't need to be messy to offer a variety of wildlife habitats in winter. Natural foods for birds often look attractive – brightly-coloured berries on trees, windfall apples and pears, ivy berries and seeds of all kinds work well.

But as winter progresses, birds will become more dependent on the food you put out. This is when they use feeders most heavily, so hygiene is important: clean your feeders and tables now by soaking them in sterilising fluid, and get into the routine of washing them regularly.

The onset of winter is also an ideal opportunity to clean out your pond and remove old nests from nest boxes. Scalding the box with hot water will kill parasites. Don't forget to carry out any necessary repairs and check the boxes are still firmly attached, replacing dilapidated ones.

WILDLIFE IN YOUR GARDEN IN WINTER

- Peacock butterflies and small tortoiseshells hide in shed corners during the winter. Try to avoid disturbing them.
- Toads and newts like to spend the cold winter months in greenhouses or under pots or piles of bricks. Frogs are more likely to be seen in piles of leaf litter, while some males will hide at the bottom of ponds.
- Violet ground beetles are one of the few insects that remain active throughout the winter. They can be seen out hunting for worms and other prey in leaf litter and flowerbeds.
- Ladybirds gather in large clusters to overwinter on dead plant stems, particularly in more sheltered parts of the garden.
- Wrens can lose up to 10 per cent of their body weight on cold nights. They conserve heat by roosting communally, often in empty nestboxes.
- Patchwork leaf-cutter bees use holes in dead wood as nest chambers, as do several other insects. Help them by drilling holes in a log or a block of wood left over from your DIY.
- Dragonfly larvae stay active even in midwinter, so always clean your pond with care. They are ferocious predators.
- Spiders often overwinter as eggs. Avoid digging your beds except when necessary.
- Moths survive the winter in the soil as larvae or pupae (a prime example is the angle shades moth, a common species in gardens).

PONDS IN WINTER

This is a bleak time for amphibians because of ice cover in ponds.

Reports received by Pond Conservation over the past few weeks suggest this winter's been a pretty grim time for our amphibians. "Discover Wildlife's" Jeremy Biggs estimates that "tens or hundreds of thousands" of frogs have died in the UK.

Amphibian numbers are collapsing all over the world. They are the most threatened category of animal, so any more pressure on them can hardly be a good thing. Is there anything more we can do this winter?

Firstly, go to the experts and find out how to look after your ponds in winter. For example:

- The most important task is to keep the water free from decaying vegetation. Remove dead and dying foliage regularly and prune back excess growth of submerged plants. Place netting over the pond where practicable as this can help autumn maintenance by keeping leaves and debris from falling in and fouling the water.
- During the winter months ice may form, trapping methane gas which is released from submerged decaying vegetation and is potentially lethal to fish. Ice also exerts excess pressure on the sides of concrete ponds, often causing them to crack. Ensure that the pond remains free of ice by floating a ping pong ball or some broken pieces of polystyrene on the pond's surface, or use an electric pool heater. This gives out just enough heat to maintain a small area of open water.

Secondly, the charity "Pond Conservation" is always on the look out for data to improve the advice they offer. So if you have a pond tell them about its condition this winter in their Big Pond Thaw Survey. <http://www.pondconservation.org.uk/>



(Pond in winter in the garden of Burlinson House)

REPORT ON OUR DAY OUT WITH THE RSPB on Sunday 27th November 2011

Seven of us arrived for the RSPB guided tour at Dovestones Reservoir on Sunday 27th to hear about the work they were doing there, in association with United Utilities.

It was a cold and very windy day but we weren't deterred. Suitably clad with anoraks, hats, binoculars and cameras we proceeded to follow Rachel's lead around the pathways in the areas of woodland where RSPB had undertaken their various tasks. They had around 30 volunteers who helped plant up a hedgerow along the border of one field of some 50 plus small trees. It will be some years before a substantial hedge has grown but it will be well worth the trouble in, not only defining the field, but providing shelter and habitat to small mammals and insects. Other volunteers have undertaken some stone wall building to mark out another border in the same field. Superb work.

Further along we came upon a pond of about 6 foot diameter. This area will attract insects for the various bat species in Dovestones as well as dragonflies. RSPB continue to work with the Woodland Trust/United Utilities and Forestry Commission to thin out the many trees that have been planted many years ago and which, now fully grown, are blocking light to other main parts of the woodland. They are, of course, very careful to maintain many breeds of existing trees but their strategy is to manage the land so that a diverse eco system is produced. Bird boxes have also been erected on many of the trees in this area. RSPB are heavily dependent on volunteers to help them undertake all of their projects.

The peregrine falcons which they have been monitoring have failed to produce young this year and so are being watched carefully in expectation of a brood next Spring.

Many smaller birds also benefit from the feeders which the RSPB have put up in various wooded areas of Dovestones and it is hoped we can return in Spring to see Siskins, Blue tits, Finches, Swallows and many more of our favourite birds as the woods once again come to life.

As well as bird boxes, RSPB have been working with the Lancashire Bat Group and have several bat boxes up in various trees. Their strategy is to work together with local wildlife group and develop a coordinated approach to the flora and fauna in Dovestones.

It was a really excellent tour and we all felt invigorated and the better for it before once again starting out on a busy week.

SICK SYCAMORES



As many of us will remember, the vast majority of the UK's 20 million Elm trees were wiped out by the catastrophic and preventable introduction of Dutch Elm Disease. Then, last year, a crisis centre for dealing with sudden Oak death was set up at the Forestry Commission in

Scotland's headquarters in Edinburgh, to safeguard the Oak woodlands of Western Scotland.

Now the Arboriculture Advisory and Information Service (AAIS) has sent out a warning that Britain's sycamore trees are at risk of Sooty Bark Disease (SBD).

Last year's hot, dry and late summer has caused abnormal stress to many of the country's Oaks, leaving them more susceptible to pathogens which have a better chance of success on weakened trees.

If climate change warnings are borne out and the UK continues to experience the early arrival of spring followed by a prolonged hot summers and mild winters, the number of sycamore trees may be significantly reduced, according to the AAIS.

Dr Jean Webber, a tree pathologist with the Forestry Research, (an agency of the Forestry Commission) said: "This fungus is what we call a latent pathogen - it can sit within the wood of a perfectly healthy tree for many years, still alive but not active. Then, when the tree is under a period of stress, particularly after we have a severe drought, it is able to gain the ascendancy and bring the tree into a state of decline. When it manages to do that it is able to fruit, and we are able to see the nature of the disease on the bark, which it kills and causes large amounts to fall off."

Experts say that the number of sycamore trees that will die from SBD will depend on this year's weather. If this summer is hot and dry, the more advanced stages of the disease will become visible: as well as dead bark, the crowns of infected trees start wilting and the leaves will fall off before autumn.

SBD typically enters a tree through damaged bark or a break in a leaf stem. There is no treatment, making SBD impossible to prevent.

Dr Webber added: "**The main recommendation is that if you are planting sycamore then you need to make sure it is mixed with other species so if you do lose them you don't lose a whole tract of them in one area.** It is really a case of accepting that this is something we will see with a hot summer, and, of course, if we are moving towards climate change with warmer summers, it may become more of an issue. People may then want to consider how much sycamore they want to plant in this country. It is about balancing the trees that we plant. Nowadays, no-one would think of planting a lot of Elms."

Source: <http://www.scotsman.com/news/sci-tech>



MTVCA FIRST EVENT OF 2012 – WINTER WALK

SUNDAY 8 JANUARY 2012 - 10.30 am at Oldham Road end of Oaken Clough.

Destination: Hartshead Pike

Length: Maximum 5 miles (return)

Route: Bardsley Vale-Footpath to Fennyfield Bridge-Waggon Road-Alt Hill Lane-Footpath to Rocher Valley-Footpath past Colt Hays Farm/Fields Farm back onto Alt Hill Lane-Cross Lees New Road-Twirl Hill Lane-Footpath to Hartshead Pike via Wyngate-Broadcarr Lane to Mossley Road-

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Footpath past Tongue Bottom Farm-Past Crossleys Farm onto Lily Lanes-North along Lees New Road-Left onto Alt Hill Lane-left on footpath to Limehurst Farm-Oldham Road.

Conditions: Made roads, footpaths, swampy areas, steep climbs, stiles, exposed moorland.

Requirements: Walking boots, waterproofs, warm clothing, food, hot drinks.

Depending on weather conditions we may want to terminate walk at any point and return by shortest route to Oaken Clough.

Please let us know if you intend going on the walk so that we can inform you of cancellation if adverse weather conditions develop.

IN THE BLEAK MID-WINTER (An up-to-date report on our energy projects)

Alternative energy projects are continuing in the cellar workshop. In the last article I described small scale wind turbines which can be constructed from recycled materials including discarded tin cans. Tests on the first prototype developed enough power to charge an AA battery suitable for use in calculators, remote controls etc. This first device used a small electric motor recovered from an old cassette player. In an effort to improve power output we have been experimenting converting larger motors, such as those obtained from discarded vacuum cleaners, into electric dynamos. Hopefully this approach will be sufficiently powerful to provide the power plant for the 2 metre wind turbine. Lee has built a temporary stand for this machine so it can be tested outdoors and a rev counter and a device to record wind direction have been added so that we can monitor how well it performs. The plan is to monitor the metrics from these devices by computer control.

Because of the intermittent nature of alternative energy there has to be some way to store the energy for use when the sun is not shining and the wind is not blowing. One possible solution is to use the electricity to generate hydrogen by the electrolysis of water. Hydrogen can be stored for later use and burned as a fuel without generating any greenhouse gasses. Alternatively a device called a hydrogen fuel cell can convert hydrogen back into electricity. It has been suggested that hydrogen may be the fuel to replace fossil fuels in a future hydrogen economy.

Earlier this year we had a visit from Mike Koefman of Planet Hydrogen [www.planet-hydrogen.org] who promotes this idea. Mike gave us some useful information on the hydrogen economy and hydrogen fuel cells. Following this we have obtained a hydrogen fuel cell kit from the alternative energy shop at Hebden Bridge. We have been constructing an electrolysis kit which should be able to make hydrogen using the electricity from the small wind turbines described in the last article. The plan is to use this to make a table top demonstration of hydrogen generation from alternative sources and the use of fuel cells.

The onset of winter and colder weather has prompted us to look at the ways of heating the workshop as we intend to work there most Sundays during the winter months. We have been looking into installing a wood burning stove to provide heating from renewable fuel sources. It is possible to generate electricity from a heat engine running on this kind of heat source, which is another angle we want to explore. Combined with solar panels and a functioning wind turbine this could provide enough power for low-voltage lighting in the workshop itself and a source of energy for rechargeable power tools, which will provide the goal for the coming year.

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Finally, thank you to those of you who have helped us by providing equipment which has broken so that we can salvage some of the electronics from them. This has been appreciated. We are still, however, in need of small solar panels such as those which are on garden lights. If the lights have become damaged and you don't have further use for them, please let us have these for use in our energy projects.

(Carl Borrell)

USEFUL CONTACT USEFUL CONTACT NUMBERS



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It's always good to hear from our members. If you have a photograph, article or poem which you would like to contribute to the newsletter, then please email Susan (Secretary) at mtvca@yahoo.co.uk or write to Susan at 5 Oaken Clough Terrace, Ashton under Lyne OL7 9NY.

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